Candle, Cup, and Casket

by Desiderii

Summary

In some far distant future, Arthur heir Pendragon, Captain of the galley-class Kilgharrah and Prince of the Camelot, answers a distress call from the alien-besieged Ealdor. There, he finds Merlin, a plausibly-deniable sorcerer with an irresistible grin. This is the story of how the terraformation of planet Albion was threatened by the prejudices of the past, of finding solid ground and taking a stand, and of giving yourself reasons to trust.

A phantasmagorical space opera, high fantasy in a science fiction setting, this work includes cyborg Arthur, fighter-pilot Morgana, spectral dragons, Lovecraftian horrors, sentient spaceships, and a little bit of that kissing stuff.

Notes
My artist, aku_rin (AkumuBlack on Ao3), is absolutely the most awesome at art and in general and I don't think I can stress how much her encouragement made my experience writing this fic kind of amazing and I kind of want to keep her forever. Her art for this can be found both in her LJ Art Masterpost as well as on AO3. Please go shower her with praise for being brilliant.

My betas, kartoonkrazy, dragonflyMerri, and percygranger are brilliant, and are the only reason this piece is not riddled with errors. Any typos or other oddness left over after their attention are all my fault.

Many thanks to the_muppet for running PaperLegends so that I had a place for this idea even as it took on massive new dimensions, to my cheerleader ureshiiichigo for letting me rage at her until my plot kinks worked themselves out, to marlowe_tops for feeding me because I always forget, and to my boyo for his unflagging support and our conversations on interstellar radiation and the plausibility of my biotechnological solutions.

Nothing would have been possible without any of them.

This story is firmly rooted in the tradition of epic space adventures of the 70s and 80s, so I promise that everything will turn out all right in the end. Names and places are all from both the show and Arthurian legend, though in a few cases I took a great deal of liberty.

Individual chapters will have content warnings where applicable.

UI made me a sweet, sweet youtube playlist, which you can find here, if you're so inclined: Candle, Cup, and Casket Playlist.

Without further ado, I present Candle, Cup, and Casket.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Arc One
Candle, Cup and Casket

Story by Desiderii

Art by Aku-rin
Citizens and crew flowed past Merlin, scrambling for their pods and sealing in. Within the span of thirty seconds (A record for a drill! Merlin’s memory informed him helpfully, except this wasn’t a drill), almost everyone had gained the dubious protection of suspended animation, their shouts replaced by gas hissing on all sides.

His mother grabbed his hand as he turned away from his open pod toward the sound of rending metal. She clung, desperate. “Merlin, dearheart, I meant to tell you sooner.”

The lights flickered and dimmed, and the Ealdor’s core stepped to a higher pitch. The ship reported the first hull breach with a wail of sirens.

They were in the dark for a brief moment before the emergency lights came on, glowing pale red through the flesh of the bulkheads. It illuminated the three of them still standing exposed after everyone else had sensibly cocooned themselves. Merlin, his mother, and Will. The scent of antiseptic and rotting plant matter filled the long, low chamber.

“Sooner. Later. Doesn’t matter now, does it?” Merlin snapped, pulling free of his mother’s grasp. Potential began to gather beneath his skin. Cursing, he lifted his hands, palms out, to warn her away. Another ragged, wet rip filled the air and all three of them flinched.

Recovering first, Merlin said, “My father’s on the bridge. I have to go.”

Merlin shook his head at his mother’s outstretched hand, shoving down a bubble of fear that threatened his fragile control. The engines whined, their distress telegraphing into a cyclical thump that shuddered through the ship.

Hunith cursed under her breath, steadied by Will’s hand on her elbow. “Will, say something.”

“The ship’s breaking up already and we don’t know how long it’ll be until they’ve eaten their fill. Explosive decompression’s not a good look on anyone, mate.”

Merlin couldn’t keep the snarl out of his voice. “This isn’t a discussion. We don’t have time for a discussion.”

Will, being Will, rocked forward and grabbed onto Merlin’s arm. The pod bay echoed with the rumble of magic just barely under control. Both of them flinched, but Will hung on. “Leash it before it gets away from you.”

Magic skittered beneath Merlin’s skin like heat-lightning. Growling low in his throat, an inhuman warning that Will ignored completely, he shook Will off and backed away from both of them. He had to get out of here before he lost it completely and his power flayed flesh from tech.

“You’ll finish what they started,” his mother said. “You’d hate yourself if that happened.”

Dragging his fingers through his hair in frustration, Merlin paced away, halting just before the
airlock. He couldn’t stay here and risk losing control. He also couldn’t leave the two of them, not with the void rushing in every time one of the attacking ships tore another strip from the hull. He was so frustrated he was seriously, seriously contemplating hoisting both of them into their pods and locking them in just so he didn’t have to deal with this when his father was on the bridge. “I’ll be fine.”

Without warning, artificial gravity gave out. In one smooth, reflexive motion, Merlin turned and grabbed his mother’s hand, directing the power beneath his skin downward. His feet remained firmly on deck. Everyone and everything else drifted upward, weightless.

All around them, tools and cargo shifted in their nets. The pods groaned in their cradles. The Ealdor’s core whined again, distress shading into pain. When the ship rocked under another assault, Merlin was the only one to feel the shockwave that travelled through the floor.

His grip tightened on his mother’s hand as he dragged her down, trying to ignore the look she was giving him. Her hair was just turning grey, the lines around her eyes a mixture of laughter and sorrow and her coveralls were loose, the sign of too much weight lost too quickly. Worry painted across her expression, she looked older, frailer.

Her silent pleading made his stomach writhe. He let out his breath and looked away, anchoring her boots to the deck.

She was right. He knew she was right. Knowing who and where his father was changed nothing. The man had been dead for him yesterday. He’d be dead for him tomorrow. The pods were the best chance of survival.

Even so. Looking back at her, he shook his head. Her eyes teared and she gave him a small nod, squeezing his hand before she released him. Without further protest, she busied herself in activating her pod, flipping switches and checking gauges before moving to Will’s and repeating the process.

Will spun near the ceiling, less graceful in zero-g than Hunith. Merlin stretched out his hand and caught him with a momentary arc of raw power. Golden lightning crackled visibly across his friend’s skin and reported every implant and embedded technology with a spark of corresponding pinpricks against Merlin’s palm. Will winced, feeling his own version of the same pain.

Merlin’s control faltered.

Before it could break, he yanked Will to the floor. His friend landed hard and went down on one knee, glancing apprehensively at the other pods. Merlin nearly snarled again to tell Will to cut the protectiveness shtick. The pods were all closed, their occupants suspended. No-one had seen Merlin’s magic and right now it didn’t matter if they had. Eighteen years of (sort-of) secrecy would be pretty pointless when the wretched Glatissant finished pulling the Ealdor apart and cracked the pods for their juicy, human contents.

Will staggered upright and seized him, digging his fingers into Merlin’s wrist. “Don’t be an ass.” Will spoke low, glancing over his shoulder at Hunith as she performed the final check for two pods. “How would your mum go losing both of you?”

It was a low blow. Merlin did snarl, then, and the pods shivered in their cradles.

Will’s grip tightened. Merlin winced at his strength. They were no longer the same height, Merlin passing Will only a handful of years ago, but they had grown up a matched set. They had raced through busy corridors, climbed the trellises in the biosphere, and counted the minutes between each beat of the Ealdor’s living heart while they ate stolen sweets from the commissary. It was for the
desperate worry in Will’s eyes that Merlin tried to explain as he peeled his wrist free. “Right now, my father could still be alive. Don’t I have a responsibility to do whatever I can to help? I don’t want to—” The hull breach siren started up again, louder than before. Merlin’s voice roughened with frustration. “I don’t want to just go to sleep and know that I could have done something.”

They stared at each other until the shockwave of a distant explosion almost dislodged them both.

“Sod off, then,” Will said, finally, though his heart wasn’t in it. He tried again, rasping out a, “You’re wasting time.” His attempt at gruff was undermined by the squeak he gave when Hunith pulled him into a tight hug and shoved him towards his pod.

“Love you too, Will,” Merlin said, following his progress, waiting until the seal on his friend’s pod lit with the sequence that said he was safe for now.

Hunith wrapped Merlin in a hug that lasted just long enough for her to brush a kiss to his temple before she shoved him at the door. “Get going. You ran out of time long past. Don’t get bitten.”

Merlin ran.

Out of the pod room and down the corridor, Merlin ran. He gave his magic rein, fastening himself to the deck and keeping floating debris from hitting him in the head. His control was as fragile as ever, threatened by panic and instability, but as he ran across ichor-slick decks where the green fluid made footing treacherous, he found himself on the very edge of laughter. Scrambling past gaping holes in the bulkheads that sparked and spat oil, protected within a solid bubble of his own power, a small part of him was horrified that he could enjoy anything while the Ealdor was destroyed around him. As the magic that lived beneath his skin flooded into the bulkheads, however, the greater part of him revelled. He allowed himself a feral grin and loosed his magic to the very edge of his control.

Clambering through a half-blocked airlock, Merlin sunk his power deep into the metal and protein framework that surrounded him to stabilise his flight and give him a sense of how much time he had left. He could feel the interwoven biotech as a wash of pain sharp and sweet enough to be pleasure. Shrugging off the sensation, he felt for the hull breaches. As he did, the vast, warm presence of the Ealdor’s ghost filled his senses.

The ghost was too concerned with protecting his human cargo to register the pain Merlin’s magic was causing them both. He did not acknowledge Merlin, concentrating instead on fending a Glatissant devourer - half carrier ship, half hungry leviathan - from his hull with a wash of acid. Merlin didn’t expect him to respond, not really. For all the time that he’d spent working on the Ealdor as he learnt how to repair him, they had never become friends.

Merlin, extending his senses as far as he could and holding them there, felt something unlock within his chest as he sought a safe route upwards. It was a painful tearing, ripping sensation, and he stumbled, knees hitting the deck hard enough to bruise, hand sinking into the skin of the bulkhead. The Ealdor was overwarm beneath his palm, the wall sticky with sweat.

“Hang on, hang on,” Merlin muttered to the wall, clambering to his feet and throwing himself forward almost before he found his balance. The pain of keeping his magic spread throughout the ship retreated until his skin merely tingled, like a limb waking after too long asleep.

He had a clear shot to the bridge, but only just. The Glatissant devourers had latched on to the Ealdor near its stern, half a ship away from where the Captain and her officers were making their last stand, but the breaches had been widened and filled with swarming, alien beasts. The Glatissant soldiers’ eerie calls rattled down the corridors, the overlapped armour of their exoskeletons rubbing together. They sounded like nothing so much as a pack of hounds barking and snarling as it tracked its prey.
Dragging himself upwards in the increasing heat, Merlin began to fear the cold that would mean he’d get to figure out just how well magic did against the vacuum of space. Every bark and scrape that echoed towards him caused his magic to flare. Even his extended senses could not get an accurate count of the Glatissant, but each that registered against his magic meant another set of jaws, another chance to be bitten without hope of recovery. He found himself trailing a goodly number of sharp or heavy objects, all floating at the ready, as the distant baying of the Glatissant became a little less distant.

The Ealdor screamed blue murder into Merlin’s mind just as he reached the door to the bridge, a wordless cry that only increased in volume as he felt the ship rock. It flooded his thoughts, nearly sent him to his knees, and the pain in it had him near-tears in sympathy. The Glatissant had latched another devourer onto the Ealdor and ripped through the bow. There were too many devourers for a normal swarm just counting the ones he could feel already feeding.

Merlin clapped his hands over his ears and hit the activation panel for the bridge door with his elbow. Nothing happened.

Even the sudden howl of air bleeding down broken corridors and into space was no match for the keen of a dying ghost. Covering his ears was pointless. Merlin dropped his hands and stared at the door. Basic operating procedure trickled back to him past the noise of the ghost in his head.

Hostiles in the ship: the door would seal.

A hull breach: the door would seal.

The Ealdor’s pain projected to anyone with an ounce of magic ability within half a lightyear: the door would seal.

The last was not, perhaps, basic operating procedure, but wrapping his mind around the obstacle was harder than it should be. His magic flared and failed to do anything useful with the Ealdor’s cries scrambling his wits. He was just about to try knocking to see if anyone would let him in when the rattle-bark of one of the Glatissant creatures heralded its appearance around a bend in the corridor. It halted when it ‘saw’ Merlin and his cloud of impromptu weaponry floating just behind.

The Bestes Glatissant were armoured creatures with slick exoskeletons of brilliant acid yellow spotted with black, violet, and blood red. In a group, the spots would make their numbers harder to determine. Alone - like this one - it made the creature look like an artist on a bad trip’s idea of an absolutely massive spotted cat. It had a hood that it flared when it drew near, its gripping claws ripping easily into the sweating deck. Welling ichor resolved into small floating globules that clung to its exoskeleton.

Merlin took a step back and had a moment to wonder why the floating ichor was suddenly sucked down the hallway before he felt the cold. He beat back a flare of panic and drew his magic outward to sheath his body, preserving heat and air. Half his collected projectiles went the way of the ichor as decompression caught up with him. His heart skipped a beat when he attempted to breathe just as the spell took hold. He tasted the void upon his lips along with his stuttering lungful of oxygen.

The Glatissant remained unmoved both by the rush of air and the debris that bounced from its spotted exoskeleton. It began to approach, claws sinking into the deck, giving it the semblance of gravity. It’s teeth glinted red, reflecting the emergency lights.

Merlin didn’t hesitate, not with the jaws of death assured stalking toward him. Fear eliminating whatever finesse he might have had, he threw his entire floating collection at the creature in one
speeding mass. He held little hope for the tactic; the debris flying past on all sides did not seemed to slow it. Panic spiked again even as he let his collected mass of metal and bone fly at his target.

He stayed in the corridor only long enough to hear a crunch and an alien shriek of pain before he threw himself bodily through the closed bridge door.
The tingle of metal and bone passing through his body startled Merlin badly enough that when the
door released him into the bridge, he lost all hold on the magic that had allowed him the feat in the
first place. His magic whipped around him, severing the instinctive spells he’d cast to protect him
from vacuum and lack of gravity. He floated forward with a gasp.

There was air here, at least, though the familiar scent of the ship was overlaid with thick, metallic
scent of blood. Merlin tried not to choke as the smell and taste wiped out even the acridity of
damaged electronics.

A film of skin covered a nasty hole in the outer hull and the bodies of three dead Glatissant twitched
where they had been pushed against the consoles. Merlin flailed a hand, trying not to float in that
particular direction, but the other direction proved no better. Feeling a little ill, he averted his eyes
from where the Captain and the other officers had been reduced to a mangled cluster of limbs
floating in a corner. The only person left alive on the bridge was Balinor, the man who Merlin has
previously known only as the new junior communications officer who had joined for the Ealdor’s
rendezvous with it’s parent ship.

That was who Merlin focused on. Balinor, who Hunith had only just told Merlin was his father.
Balinor, whose eyes were burning fiercely gold as he strode across the deck to grasp Merlin’s arm,
ignoring the lack of gravity and the seeping cold already starting to make Merlin shiver. The man’s
proof of magic made Merlin go a little lightheaded.

“Merlin?” Astonished, he planted Merlin’s feet on the ground and peered into his son’s eyes.
Whatever he saw there made him frown. “Hunith told you.”

“And you didn’t. Why didn’t you?” The words popped forth before Merlin could stop them. He
clapped his hands over his mouth and shook his head vehemently, trying to erase both the question
and the stricken look on Balinor’s face. “No- doesn’t matter. The Glatissant-”

“Haven’t reached the pods.” Balinor said, recovering enough to reassure them both. “Ealdor, though-
he’s not going to be able to help for much longer. I set the distress beacon, but- Merlin. You should
have stayed below.”

This wasn’t an argument that they were going to have now, not with a Glatissant scraping at the door
and the Ealdor’s ghost wailing in his head. “Couldn’t stay.” Merlin said, swallowing hard.

Balinor dragged his fingers through his hair. It wasn’t a particularly notable mannerism, but Merlin
could hardly breathe when he recognised it for his own. Merlin was slender and sharp-jawed, all
gawkish limbs and exaggerated features; Balinor was broad-shouldered and bearded, looking well-
able to use the sword sheathed at his waist. They barely resembled each other, but Merlin couldn’t
shake the sudden hunger for any connection whatsoever-small or large.

More than just simple gestures, though, Balinor had magic. Powerful enough to kill Glatissant, to use the strength of Ealdor’s ghost to seal a hull breach however temporarily, to give them grip on the torn and bloody deck without the benefit of gravity.

It was all Merlin could do not to reach out and touch him, to make sure Balinor was real and not conjured through some dying wish. He wanted so badly for them to somehow survive this, to somehow fix things.

Except now was not the time for father-son bonding. Merlin kept circling back to the whole ‘magic’ thing.

His restraint broken by fear and the beginnings of panic, Merlin’s magic pulled bits of bone out of the deck. The surface buckled with a nasty snipping noise and small chunks of flesh floated free to join newly-shredded wires and circuits as Merlin’s magic reverted to an unchecked force of violent entropy. Nearby panels began to peel apart, breaking down into base components as if they hadn’t been grown as one technological organism. Every pulse, timed to the rapid beat of his heart, felt like burning alive. Horror skittered across his nerves.

There was a reason magic users were hunted.

Merlin flailed for some handle, some flicker of anything familiar he could use to pull himself back together before he dismantled the bridge and them both. If he couldn’t stop it, his magic would take apart the most complex hybrids of sinew and circuitry, then start working its way through his surroundings on order of complexity, most to least. The resulting destruction would be more complete and more thorough than any weapon designed by man, leaving nothing but atoms. His magic would only stop when it lost cohesion due to dissolving the body that housed it.

Heart in his throat, Merlin repeated, “Couldn’t stay below. Had to help.”

With a glance at the door, at the barely-repaired breach above them, and then at their crumbling surroundings, Balinor’s expression tightened. The flesh of the door bulged beneath the claws of the assaulting Glatissant. Merlin’s magic abraded the sealed iris from the inside. Balinor made a frustrated noise, his hand going to his sword, his stance widening as he focused away from Merlin toward the greater threat. “You’re helping them in. Control yourself.”

Hope and fear tangled in Merlin’s belly as he tried again. And again. And again.

“Can’t.” Merlin wasn’t panicking. He wasn’t, but this was the other reason why he’d fled the pod bay. A claustrophobic pod was the absolute last place Merlin ever wanted to be pried out of by a hungry predator. When his magic began to rip his surroundings apart, the other pods would have fared about as well as any Glatissant that managed to slip Merlin’s control.

Trying now to regain control was like trying to grip sand as it poured between the gaps in his fingers; the harder he gripped the less he held. He repeated himself half an octave higher, forcing the word out. “Can’t.”

“You’re untrained.”

Balinor’s blatant disbelief irritated Merlin.

“Who would have taught me?”

“You’re untrained.” Balinor repeated himself more softly, looking from Merlin to the door. “But you
passed through—"

“Reflex.” Merlin cut him off, really not interested in whatever was causing Balinor to eye him with a strange mixture of caution and awe. The deck bucked again and an alarming creaking noise sounded from the beams beneath. “What do I do?”

He gasped as Balinor gripped his shoulders and knocked their foreheads together. Their eyes locked. Merlin’s world narrowed to the words projected into his mind. He set aside marvelling at the very notion of honest-to-goodness telepathic communication and concentrated so that even the Ealdor’s cries faded into mental inaudibility.

_Breathe. Pause. Release. Pause. Reach… now! Don’t try to force it. Let it come back around. It will come back around. You can trust me on that. It will always come back around._ Balinor’s mental voice was warm, steady, and reassuring. It felt familiar, like Merlin had grown up knowing it. **I’m sorry. I didn’t know I had a son or I would have been back to see to you properly. Breathe. Pause. Release. Reach!**

Merlin’s magic was a wild thing, shy and angry and mistrustful, the source a golden glow behind his heart that flung sheets and waves of magic in all directions. The magic he had loosed to extend his senses gathered and flexed like a vast liquid sphere in his mind’s eye, both gold and colourless. Unwilling to heed his will, it began to concentrate down onto him, onto the bridge and his immediate surroundings, too much magic in too little space under too little control. He could taste fresh copper on the back of his tongue as he reached again and again to direct the spread and flow of his magic’s forces. It refused his commands, flirting just beyond his control, all of his attempts to master his magic merely making his power less cooperative.

The spark of his father’s magic burnt close by, steady and unwavering even in the unseen maelstrom that Merlin’s concentrating magic was creating. As Merlin scrabbled for control, Balinor added his own skill. There was a frisson of static down Merlin’s spine and an audible crackle, and then every mote of his magic was back where it belonged beneath his skin. He reeled, staggering backwards, only his father’s grip on his arms keeping him upright.

The dizziness passed almost as quickly as it set in, but the odd sense of shock Balinor had left in the wake of his apology remained. What-ifs crowded Merlin’s mind that were neither relevant nor useful. Merlin shook his head to clear it, clenching his teeth against the sudden impulse to cry. He blamed his pricking tears on the Ealdor’s ghost sobbing loudly in his head.

Balinor pulled away and clapped Merlin on the shoulder to squeeze him in wordless reassurance. **“Brutal method. Gives you nightmares even when done right. It’s all we had time for.”** Neither of them mentioned that nightmares probably wouldn’t matter much after the bridge fell to the Glatissant, but they were both thinking it.

The door started to give, flexing inward as something large shoved against the thinning membrane. They turned as one to face it, side by side. Merlin flexed his locked-down magic. He could no longer sense the Ealdor, but his magic was firmly his again. What he had previously spread throughout ship was packaged and cramped beneath his skin once more. He felt like he could burst if he sneezed too hard.

He heard Balinor chuckle, and he looked from the door to his father in askance. Balinor shook his head. **“Keep them busy, whatever the cost,”** he said. Merlin nodded his understanding. The bridge held no true strategic value for the swarm, but the invaders weren’t interested in technicalities. These weren’t the reasoning sorts of beasts. Their criteria for attack appeared only that breathing, human prey was contained behind a barrier.
When the door finally broke, without the expected rush of escaping air, there were far more of the beasts than just the one Merlin had evaded. The combined noise of their scraping exoskeletons was nothing so much as hounds on the hunt and it filled the bridge, vibrating the film over the hull breach. On the heels of the adrenaline flooding his system as the creatures poured inside, Merlin felt a flash of satisfaction. The first creature that prowled through the door, hood flared, had an oozing hole in its side.

“Blōdsēothan!” Balinor shouted at the creatures, throwing the spell forward with an exaggerated hand movement. Drawing his short-sword with the other hand, he dropped into a defensive stance and stepped in front of Merlin.

The spell sank through the Glatissant’s exoskeleton. With a bubbling noise precursor to a sickening pop, the creature’s armour plating flared outward to release weightless goo into the air. Whatever held the creature to the deck released and it floated into the path of the onrushing swarm. It was a much better notion than the spell Merlin had been contemplating. Raw elemental power was his forte, but spaceships did poorly with fire.

Without pausing to think, Merlin mimicked the word and the gesture. He felt his power surge and rush through his outstretched hand and wrap around and through one of the beasts. The sensation was vastly different than his usual use of magic, like the word had opened a small hole in the new barrier. It was a desperately uncomfortable way to cast, and Merlin resisted the urge to spit to clear the taste of bile that rose in its wake.

The Glatissant he’d targeted lurched, popped, and then it, too, fell. “Reflex!” Balinor shouted, half-laughing as he struck out with his sword and returned to a low guard. “I locked your power and you’re still half-again as strong as me. I wish I could see you trained.”

“You will.” Merlin said, pausing only for breath before he cast again, pointing at a second target.

The battle joined, there was little time for thought, let alone speech. The only words that broke through the clamour of dying beasts and the wailing ghost were Balinor’s reassurances that the alien invaders had not yet found the pods.

Not yet. Not yet. Merlin repeated the words to himself like a mantra. He was under no illusions that he and his father were anything but a distraction for the main force of the swarm. Still, he was doing something and not just waiting to die in suspended animation.

Actually… He’d gotten to stretch his magical muscles for once, felt the scope of the ghost that haunted the living ship, and met his father. Considering the fact he that was now dodging the jaws of an alien creature before it ripped off a limb or two, or gave him its fatal bite, it had still been a pretty good day.

Balinor hacked, slashed, and every so often grunted with exertion. Merlin’s voice quickly became hoarse, unfamiliar syllables ripping through his vocal chords. His stomach churned. His power was very firmly trapped beneath his skin, leaving him unable to extend his senses, and each spell was like trying to force an entire bucketful of water through a pinhole. He was almost more tired from not being able to wield his full power as from retreating and dodging bites and claws. He earned a handful of scratches getting too close to particularly large Glatissant. It became hard to breathe, but adrenaline kept him from feeling the pain as more than a momentary sting.

The Ealdor’s cries abruptly cut off and both of them staggered at the sudden silence.

“Ealdor.” Balinor brought his sword up in a block, visibly slower than when they’d first started. “I- I promised to stay with him.”
“I’ll-” Merlin began, lifting his hands again. His fingers weighed tonnes, each fingernail the rough equivalent of an anvil. Already his concentration was fraying.

Despite the haze of trying to force himself to keep fighting, Merlin’s battle focus widened enough for him to sense a disturbance in the hallway. The tooth-grinding sound of sonic pistols cut through the barks of the Glatissant onslaught, and soon the so-very-welcome ring of sword on exoskeleton gave Merlin a second wind. “The distress beacon?”

“Must be.” The sword fell from Balinor’s hand as he slumped to his knees. Merlin scrambled for it, scooping it from the floor. Before he could get a proper grip, he was forced to swing it up to prevent a heavy paw from slicing into his father’s neck.

He nearly dropped the sword as shock travelled up his arm, ripping a snarl from his throat. Recovering, thankful that the beast was wary enough of his magic to hesitate while he readied himself, he stood over Balinor and awkwardly mimicked a defensive stance.

The eerie quiet of the Ealdor’s ghost was distracting. Locked away as he was, Merlin couldn’t feel how much of the ship’s ghost was still there. “Don’t- don’t let him die alone.”

Balinor said nothing. Merlin couldn’t take his eyes off the last handful of Glatissant to find out why.

Using magic and sword both, Merlin struggled to keep the creatures from ripping them apart. More than once he felt the brush of teeth against the exposed skin of his arms. One bite was all it would take. Whoever was wielding pistols should have been here by now. Merlin parried and nearly got a paw to the face, distracted by the knowledge that help was just far enough away to be no help at all. He was starting to see the little grey fuzzies at the edges of his vision that meant he’d overtaxed himself with his magic.

Their rescuers stamped in just as Merlin stabbed up and through the throat of the last Glatissant on the bridge, using the word from Balinor to add a little extra oomph. The creature’s exoskeleton released foul-smelling blood into the air to float in a gruesome halo around its head, and it stilled. As soon as it did, Merlin looked the way of his rescuers and slid the sword free of the corpse.

The troops, wielding pistols and longswords, were dressed in distinctive red and black vacuum armour, the gold dragon of Camelot emblazoned across their chestpieces easily visible in the light filtering through the hole in the hull. Their face plates were down and they walked with the awkward, deliberate kick-lift of magnetic soles.

They looked imposing, competent, and so very, very welcome that Merlin sat down hard on the deck and released his hold on his magic. Exhaustion pressed in close, no longer staved off by the electric euphoria of holding a spell at the ready. The sick feeling of casting through a barrier faded.

Merlin choked on his words. “You’re here.”

The filtered voice that came through the lead Knight’s helm said only, “Sorcerers,” by way of wary greeting.

Merlin’s pleasure fled and his brain caught up. Knights. Camelot. Sorcerers. Uther. Of all of the Captain and Kings to be discovered by, Uther was quite possibly the worst.

“You’re here.” Merlin began, nausea returning.

“He’s no sorcerer.” Balinor cut off whatever Merlin was going to say, his voice wavering on the word ‘sorcerer’. “That would be me.”
Merlin dropped the sword and scrambled across the slick deck to Balinor’s side. His father’s face was bloodless. He curled around his side, arm slung low to protect his bite wound. Panicking, Merlin checked his pulse - thready and weak - and rocked back on his heels, trying to remember every bit of battlefield medicine he’d ever been taught.

Except it was a bite; there was nothing to be done. Balinor’s hand groped for Merlin’s.

“Father,” Merlin whispered, half because the Knights would be able to hear him otherwise.

“The Ealdor’s at peace,” Balinor reassured him, patting Merlin on the cheek. His eyes blazed gold. “There are soldiers on the lower decks and fighters destroying the devourers. They never reached the pods.”

“You’re supposed to train me.”

Balinor laughed. “Don’t let them hear that. I’m giving you a chance, boy. Take it.”

Merlin shook his head.

Balinor’s death was an exhale without an inhale to follow.

When the light went out of his eyes, the spell he’d cast to keep them stuck to the deck released and they both floated into the air. Merlin flailed to keep upright, failed, and performed a slow somersault as he clutched at Balinor’s limp hand.

The Knights had remained at a respectful distance, but now that the sorcerer was dead, they approached. Still cautious, the lies of sorcerers well-known, they stabbed at the floating alien corpses though none so much as twitched. Merlin resented their caution, dizzy from the fight and furious that they would doubt Balinor, when his father had been the one defending the bridge with nothing but a notched sword and a word.

The lead Knight picked up the fallen sword and offered it, hilt first, to Merlin. To take it, Merlin had to let go of Balinor. It took effort for Merlin to uncurl his fingers from his father and grasp the pommel.

The Knight held out his gauntleted hand.

After a long moment, Merlin nodded and grasped the hand to steady himself, floating nearly horizontal. Relying on instinct to cast left him feeling helpless now. Grief made his magic rage beneath his skin, but he had no spell to open Balinor’s barrier. The price of control was limit, however temporary.

Merlin hoped it was temporary. His eyes burned with tears. “Thank you,” he said.

The Knight nodded. With a twist, his faceplate retracted and Merlin got a good look at his rescuer. Pinpoint lights twinkled along the ridge of his eyebrows. Dark metal gleamed where pale flesh should have been around the socket of his left eye and the line of left cheekbone. He wore what passed for a sympathetic smile on a soldier. “Ignoring a distress call is dereliction of duty,” he said.

Merlin stared. Unbidden, tears filled his eyes and rage clawed at the inside of his chest. He had no idea where it came from. On the surface, he was exhausted, mourning, and so damned relieved he didn’t know what to do with himself. Deep in the place of nightmares and the core of his magic, he was so fucking furious that he gripped the Knight’s glove until the metal bit into his skin.

He had no idea who this man was.
“Where were you?” The words were certainly not those that Merlin would have chosen to say if he had any control over himself.

As soon as he’d said them, he was horrified at how rude they sounded. Angry, betrayed tears floated free from his cheeks to join the blood and ichor drifting between them.

“How here? Why now? I waited for you and you never came,” Merlin ranted, cursing into the stunned silence that followed. He squeezed his eyes shut against his tears, and he wasn’t sure if it was the delirium speaking or if he were cursing himself for not being able to stop the words that poured forth. It felt the same either way. Opening his eyes once more, he focused squarely on the lead Knight and demanded, “Where were you? Where were you?”

“I’m- I’m here? I came?” the Knight said, looking as confused as Merlin felt. “There is no way I could have gotten here faster.”

Another Knight standing behind the pair, his faceplate still down, said, “He’s probably in shock, Captain. I suggest getting him to the ship and letting Gaius look at him.”

The captain nodded, still holding Merlin in place by their clasped hands. “You’re safe now.”

As suddenly as the anger had arrived, it dissipated, leaving Merlin weak, the exhaustion of the fight catching up all at once. If he hadn’t been floating he would have fallen. Merlin scrubbed at his eyes with the back of his sword hand, the point swinging dangerously close to the captain’s exposed face. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Thank you. I’m just-”

“It’s fine,” the captain cut him off. “It’s fine. Just come with us.”

Merlin nodded his acquiescence, tired down to his bones and struggling to stay conscious.

When the captain tried to hand him off to one of the others, however, Merlin couldn’t make himself let go. “Please.” He didn’t know what he was asking for or why.

The captain hesitated. “Fine.” He performed a series of complicated single-hand gestures that sent all the other Knights off but one. “To the Kilgharrah.”

As Merlin let the captain tow him toward the bridge airlock, he rather thought that the name ‘Kilgharrah’ sounded awfully familiar. The Prince of Camelot was the Captain of some k-word warship with a name like a mouthful of rocks. The world blurred with static and black around the edges, worsening rapidly. The airlock door seemed to get further and further away, receding down a grey tunnel.

“Arthur?” he asked. His voice echoed in his skull.

“Not now, Merlin,” was the not-unkind response. Merlin didn’t even have a chance to wonder at the familiarity of the reply or how the fuck the prince knew his name before everything went dark.
Arthur blinked at Leon before he reactivated his helm and the faceplate snapped shut. It flooded with canned air and he took a deep, grateful breath. The faint taste of isopropyl alcohol and charcoal on the back of his tongue was far preferable to the scent of offal that filled the bridge. That, and lowering his faceplate meant he could hide his expression.

“Merlin?” Leon asked, tone dry. “You know him?”

Shaking his head slowly, Arthur stared at the young man floating beside him, clinging to his hand with a grip that had yet to relax even in unconsciousness. “I have never seen him before in my life.”

The pale young man had a mop of dark hair, matted with blood and who knew what else. He was practically skin and bones, and he had the largest ears of anyone Arthur had ever met. Goofy-looking as he was, Arthur had never had such a visceral reaction to anyone in his life. It wasn’t recognition, nor was it exclusively attraction. Arthur was man enough to admit when he found someone attractive. Even with sunken eyes, chin covered in dark stubble, and him wobbling impossibly on his feet (via *magic*), something about the raw defiance on the youth’s face when the Knights had entered seared straight to Arthur’s lizard brain.

Except it wasn’t *only* attraction. There was something else. A pain at his temples, beneath his implants where the nerves had been deadened for years. Perhaps magic. If anything felt like magic it was having a response to the young man naming him roll from his tongue without conscious thought.

Arthur’s conviction that he’d named the young man aright pointed with a giant flaming arrow straight at magic, making the hairs on the back of Arthur’s neck stand and a shiver run down his spine. The rational (rationalising?) part of his brain attributed everything to residual magic. He needed it to be residual magic, otherwise he’d need to investigate this Merlin and it seemed wrong, somehow, to do so after rescuing him in the first place.

Arthur shook his head more violently, dispelling his thoughts.

Leon dropped to one knee and swung his pack and shield from his back. He looked up, hands stilled on the access flaps, and asked, “And you called him that because…?”

*It’s his name.* Arthur didn’t answer. Instead, he tugged the floating body closer to check for internal injuries, his vision washing blue as the he initiated the scan. The young man was bleeding heavily from a torso wound, ugly slashes across his shirt soaked until they were almost black.

While he waited for the scan to finish, Arthur asked, “Do you have an extra re-breather or cocoon somewhere in that tin can of yours? He’s bleeding.”
Leon nodded. The scan was taking a ridiculously long time. Arthur tried to gather the young man closer, wrestling with both dead weight and the lack of gravity. The sword floated away despite Arthur’s best efforts and he was grateful for the ability to mute his audio pickup, otherwise Leon and the rest of his troops would have been treated to a tirade. Half of his curses were directed at himself when he pulled the young man’s hand free of his gauntlet, adding more blood to the mess on the bridge. He was here to rescue, not injure his rescuee further.

Leon passed up a mask with an attached canister and a red human-length sack emblazoned with a golden dragon.

“A bodybag?” Arthur asked. “We can’t put him in a bodybag.”

“A half-eaten ship either has everyone in their pods or a lot of bodies in need of bags. It’ll work. It seals.”

Arthur wasn’t in the mood to be reasonable. He cursed again, not bothering to mute his pickup, and scowled at the inside of his faceplate when Leon chuckled.

They didn’t have a lot of other options, though, not unless they wanted to babysit the youth until someone brought a stretcher. Waiting any longer would mean gambling on the flimsy film over the hull breach above them staying intact. Worse still would be leaving him behind among the still-warm bodies of the fallen bridge crew.

Arthur didn’t want to chance him waking up to that alone. Or not waking up at all. The bodybag would protect him from the vacuum between here and the ship, and he didn’t want to let the injured, potential-sorcerer out of his sight.

The young man had looked so angry, enough that Arthur’s thoughts kept returning to his repeated question of ‘Where were you?’ There had even been tears, which baffled him. Morgana was the only one Arthur knew who cried when angry, and he knew just how angry she needed to be for that to happen. To spark that strong of an emotional response…

Arthur couldn’t shake the feeling that his skin was too tight over his bones, or that his armour had become suddenly ill-fitting and unwieldy. He’d been here, where he’d always been, with his Knights and his ship, but he was pretty sure that wasn’t the answer the young man had been looking for.

The scan popped at last, with an artificial chirrup inside his head and scrolling text across Arthur’s field of vision. And the young man’s name was: pure gobbledygook.

Arthur’s implant couldn’t read the chip, or at least not its biographical data. However, the scan did report deep slashes across his chest. Just how deep it couldn’t seem to decide. “We need to hurry.”

He helped Leon tuck limbs into the bodybag. The re-breather’s mask made his hair stick up around the straps, the canister elongating his face and accentuating his cheekbones. He looked slight and empty as they sealed him in, but at least he would be able to breathe while they carted him around. If his lungs were still working. One of the scan’s ambiguous warnings suggested ripped lung tissue. At least he wasn’t bubbling when he wheezed.

Arthur blamed the ancient chip for throwing the scan off and confusing his ocular implants.

“Do they feed anyone on this ship?” Arthur asked, helping Leon resettle the pack and retrieving the young man’s sword from where it floated across the room.

“It’s one of Essetir’s,” Leon snorted. “Probably not.”
There was nothing to be done about the rest of the bodies. They’d have to hope the seal on the breach held long enough or they’d be sending their fighters out to retrieve as much of every corpse as they could find. Those were the sorts of scavenger hunts Arthur hated. They always fucked with his pilots’ morale.

Arthur fastened the bag’s lead to one of the snaps on his weapons belt, checking to make sure it wouldn’t tangle with his sword or pistol in case he needed to draw. Testing the lead, he lingered over the clip, hesitating for long enough to get Leon’s attention before he asked, “Do you think the older one was the only sorcerer?”

“What if he wasn’t?” Leon asked, drawing his sword and pumping the grip of his pistol until the tip glowed green.

Arthur didn’t respond right away. He led them into the hall, kicking past the floating legs of a dismembered alien, wary of claws as sharp now in death as they had been in life.

The pair of them marched in silence down the blasted corridor, passing through a vestibule and an emergency pressure lock into the cold, clear starlight. Their boots sucked at the deck, magnets keeping them grounded despite the frozen fluids that clung to the surface. Crystals floated past, ichor and water from where the aft devourer had breached the Ealdor’s water storage.

The arc of the asteroid belt spun by above them, light from the distant solar centre glinting off the ice. The Kilgharrah was tethered to the shattered frame of the Ealdor, matching the larger ship’s drift enough that the lines hung slack and the airlock extension remained only half expanded. Arthur stared up at his ship.

He knew what he would do if his men and the ship under his protection were threatened.

“There are only two ways to fend off the Glatissant,” Arthur said, making sure that he was on a tight channel, speaking only to Leon. “Overwhelming firepower, or magic. Did you believe him? That he was the only sorcerer on that bridge?”

Leon answered quietly. “No.”

Arthur nodded to himself. “They would have brought protection. Essetir never sends escorts, even when Lot’s the one to request the rendezvous.” He turned to tend the bodybag trailing him. Together, he and Leon manoeuvred it through a tangle of debris without running its occupant into anything. After, Arthur continued, “Early warning, at the very least. There’s only so much one man can do against a larger-than-average swarm.”

“Three devourers is a fuck of a lot, Captain.” Leon kept his tone carefully neutral.

“He was holding the sword when we got in. The spells fell when the officer died,” Arthur said.

Leon remained silent.

Arthur didn’t notice. “And we’re a long way from Camelot.”

Leon shrugged, armour creaking in the cold. “Those two may have been the only reason the swarm hadn’t found the pods yet. As distractions go—”

“I know.” Arthur was tired. The carnage on the bridge had already blurred in his memory, fading into just another one of the catalogue of starship carcasses that he and his Knights had searched and cleared.
If he were to be perfectly honest with himself, he was too tired to care that the Ealdor had been
harbouring magic users. His ambivalence felt a little like treason, a betrayal of all his father stood for.
The rogue sorcerer that had damaged the Camelot so badly all those years ago was proof of the
danger. He owed it to his father, to the people of the Camelot, to be fully aware of any ticking time-
bombs he might be thinking of bringing home.

He looked at Leon, one of his father’s Knights who had resisted promotion so that he might join the
crew on the Kilgharrah. He could hear the man’s breathing over his pickup, the slight crackle of a
locked channel with increased gain and the click of Leon’s tongue mod as he tapped it against his
teeth. Leon played sounding board more often than any of the others, both steadfast and trustworthy.
If Arthur were manning the bridge in the face of invasion or ambush, Leon would be at his right
hand.

Uther didn’t live out on the fringes, far from assistance, where the difference between another year of
supplies and your ship being cracked like an egg could rest on the shoulders of one man. Here, you
weighed your risks and you protected your crew any way you could. It could easily have been Leon
or Lance or Gwaine in pieces. Arthur couldn’t fault the Ealdor’s now-dead Captain for her choices.

Free of the collapsed corridors, Arthur still gripped the edges of the bodybag unnecessarily tight. The
red looked gaudy and over-bright as they brought it forth from the corpse of the broken ship.

There was no reason to follow up on his suspicions. Not until the young man proved himself a
danger. Unlike Uther, he did not feel compelled to drown puppies when a nursing bitch bit.

A policy of plausible deniability came in awfully useful in the fringe systems.

Finally, he said, “We’ll deal with it if it becomes a problem.”

“After Gaius’s verdict, I’ll noise the official story about with the men. One sorcerer. One lucky boy.”

Arthur smiled. “Good. Thanks.”

“Think nothing of it, my prince.”

Topic settled, they tromped up the extension and shoved the bodybag through the airlock and onto
the Kilgharrah.

Gaius was waiting just inside, his caterpillar eyebrows climbing his forehead in surprise when the
two Knights made their appearance. The artificial gravity on the Kilgharrah worked just fine, but
Arthur still worried that the bag felt too light to contain a person, like they’d left something of its
occupant on the bridge.

“Have you brought me a patient or a corpse? If it’s the latter, I can tell you right now how he died,”
Gaius said. “Gwaine told me you were bringing in one of the rare few who has faced Glatissant and
avoided their bite.”

“I didn’t want to wait for a stretcher or a cocoon.” Arthur retracted his faceplate and grimaced at
Gaius’s idea of humour. “I recommend getting him out before he wakes up.”

Gaius’s lopsided smile gave way to concern. “Very good, Captain.”

Movements taking on new urgency, Gaius beckoned them towards his infirmary, cracking the seal
on the bag and releasing the stench of dead Glatissant and ship ichor. The lurid red of the bag painted
the young man’s face in glare. Despite the colour Arthur worried over how bloodless he looked.
Even if his chest wound hadn’t damaged his internal organs, it was still deep. Gaius pulled the re-
breather free and placed his fingers on the side of the youth’s neck. He was shivering. Arthur could feel the tremors as he carried his shoulders.

Gaius frowned. “He’s too cold.”

“If I could have found him an extra blanket, I would have.”

“If he fainted from shock, you would have been well to.” Gaius didn’t quite reprimand his captain. Leon tried and failed to hide a smile.

Arthur sighed, hefting the bag and its occupant. “We’re in space, Gaius. It’s cold in space.”

“Then wait for a cocoon.”

“Then command the patch over a five-foot breach to hold long enough for one to get there.”

Gaius pursed his lips and levelled a flat look at Arthur before ushering them all through the door into the infirmary. “He’ll warm up, but let us hope it did not do him any great harm.” They placed the young man on an empty bed. Gaius disappeared and reappeared with a thermal blanket.

Dispatching Leon to help with cleanup, Arthur busied himself by playing assistant to Gaius even though there was no reason for him to remain. Gaius was well able to look after an unconscious patient, even a badly injured one. Arthur’s men needed him if not for direction, then for coordination. There were colonists to tally, people who would want to meet the captain of the ship that saved them. He needed to be part of the effort, counting heads and shaking hands when they moved the Kilgharrah and opened the pods.

Arthur handed Gaius a subdermal spray that would have taken the old man two steps to get himself. The look he got for that made him admit that he was hovering, but he didn’t want to leave until at last Gaius’s movements slowed and he abandoned the uncertain haste that had been the precursor to too many deaths.

Arthur felt himself relax as well. “Will he recover?”

“Yes, yes-” Gaius waved the question away. He pulled down one of the old, massive scanners that he hadn’t managed to break no matter how hard he tried. Flipping several switches and pressing the activation light, he asked, “Did you get his name?”

Shaking his head, Arthur avoided mention of his odd moment. “I scanned him, but the result was garbage. His chip is too old for my implants to interpret.”

“Probably. Cenred wouldn’t have wasted resources on replacing what wasn’t broken, and Lot would never think of it. His chip is probably as old as he is.” Gaius chuckled. “You are not backwards compatible, I’m sorry to say.”

Arthur leaned against an empty bed, folding his arms across his chest. “That assumes he’s even in the central database. The Ealdor doesn’t strike me as having enough contact with much of anyone to do a proper synchronisation.”

Gaius acknowledged the point with a dip of his chin, then turned to thump the side of his archaic scanner. He grumbled, making a show of ringing the casing and examining the screen. “This barely understands anything younger than you are. It’s hardly advanced enough to read this boy, let alone the junk you’ve got under your skin.”

“A refit of your infirmary would cost enough to get me accused of nepotism.” Arthur pinched the
bridge of his nose with a gauntleted hand, but the old argument nevertheless reassured him. If Gaius was complaining about his equipment, it meant that he wasn’t worried. “They work. Are you complaining?”

“They’re slow. I could read his chip faster with a magnet and a box of-” Gaius squinted at the screen, then fumbled for the reading glasses he kept on a bit of string about his neck. Perching them on his nose, he peered at the scrolling text. “Ah! Merlin Emrys. Eighteen. Son of Hunith of Ealdor, Essetir. No secondary parent recorded?” He sounded surprised at the last part, muttering something else to himself that Arthur did not catch.

“Merlin.” Arthur rolled the name around on this tongue. The confirmation tasted of magic, bitter and sharp.

Arthur grimaced, torn between satisfaction and annoyance. He did not want to launch an investigation, not on a youth who arguably had saved everyone on his ship by being bait long enough for real help to arrive, but sorcery was just what he needed on the Kilgharrah when they were heading straight for Camelot as soon as the Ealdorians were aboard.

Gaius nodded at the screen before letting his glasses drop and bludgeoning the scanner back into its bay above the bed. “Seems so. A single registered parent means he was likely part of a population increase program. If the Ealdor was forced to such measures so recent as eighteen years, I worry what sort of incursion we face now. The Glatissant breed faster than we do.”

Arthur cut off further speculation with a quelling, “Thank you, Gaius,” but he didn’t leave. Instead, he watched Merlin sleep, pleased to see that the thermal blanket Gaius had covered him with had stopped the shivering.

He was less pleased about the old medic’s words. Arthur acknowledged that accident and attack had a way of forcing colony ships to compensate for sudden dips in population. There were more than just the Glatissant in fringe space that fed on humans and their biomechanical ships.

However, eighteen was near enough to twenty-one, and twenty-one years ago the human population across all vessels had taken a substantial hit. Many of the smaller ships had set up programs not in the wake of alien attack, but in response to his father’s purges. The Sorcerer’s War had claimed more than anyone could accurately count. Arthur had seen the estimated numbers. There were thousands of shipbred teens coming of age now who filled the berths and roster slots of sorcerers, druids, and anyone unlucky enough to have been caught in the crossfire.

Leon would make sure the men understood that the dead hero had been the only sorcerer on that bridge. It didn’t matter if they believed the story, only that they knew it was the official one, and it was not Gaius’s fault Arthur was second-guessing himself. He just wished he knew what he’d accepted responsibility for.

“Gaius.” Arthur broke out of his reverie. “Alert me when he wakes. I- debriefing. Or- not debriefing, but- Just let me know.”

Gaius raised his eyebrows at the command, but did not comment. “Very good.”

Arthur straightened and checked the seals on his armour. “I’ll take my leave. I’m needed,” he declared, yet he hesitated in putting his faceplate down. Merlin would sleep, hopefully heal, and wake on his own schedule. There was no reason for Arthur to linger by his sickbed. There was no reason to feel guilty for leaving. Except- there had been a desperate quality to the demands of ‘where were you?’ that made Arthur certain that Merlin would be looking for him when he awoke.
He repeated, “I’m needed,” and left, ignoring the bemused smile on Gaius’s face.
The cafe was lit by Christmas lights, though it was very firmly August. The warm, damp night was kept out by floor-to-ceiling stained glass windows whose patterns swam in front of Merlin’s eyes as he stared off into space, deep in the throes of composition. He was missing something and even the glass of wine, the faint WWII era jazz, and the half-empty notebook weren’t doing him any good.

Merlin cursed to himself, loud enough draw a knowing glance from the barista before she hunched back over her tablet and resumed playing Angry Birds.

None of the other regulars bothered to look up from their tasks. A dignified old man with salt-and-pepper hair scrawled across loose leaf paper with a fountain pen. A woman with a rich, deep voice and a fey cast to her features murmured notes into her phone as she read from a folder emblazoned ‘Shropshire Kinetics Fourth Quarter.’ An elegant man in a business suit scratched at a ragged book of crossword puzzles, every so often clicking his mechanical pencil for more lead.

Pulling off his glasses, Merlin cleaned them on his scarf and looked around at the other creatives. They were unwinding or creating or catching up, and he felt a spark of jealousy. They were doing, being, living. Even the sweet barista, with her calculus textbook lying ignored next to her on the counter in favour of exploding avians, had something she could be doing.

He, on the other hand, was waiting.

His entire damn life had been made of waiting. It wasn’t just the words for the next line - the next paragraph - that he was missing. It was like he had a roadmap and he was following it, but everyone else ignored map, street signs, right of way, and dead ends and they were still happy.

Whatever it was that he wanted, he’d already missed it. It hollowed out his heart.

The tiny candle on his table guttered, the wick burning too long until it folded on itself and doused the flame in hot wax. Merlin, replacing his glasses, leaned over and coaxed the wick upright. He breathed a minor spell. Warmth rippled beneath his skin, and the candle relit.

Only the barista acknowledged the bit of magic, looking up again from her game and meeting his eyes. There was awe there alongside contentment. She’d told him more than once that he was her favourite customer. He was part of her life here, brought her pleasure simply by coming in and saying hello.

Life should be good. Life was good, but Merlin had a tiny empty hole in his chest that became all he could think about on nights like this that felt so familiar and so foreign at the same time.

Standing, Merlin abandoned his notebook and went to lean on the counter. The barista turned shy
after a look at his face, tucking her hair behind her ear and ducking her head. Merlin smiled and asked, “When do you get off work?”

There were still things to want. Even if he was having a bad night. Even if his brain was lying to him. Even if it was the depression, or the anxiety, or the fear that he was wasting destiny, or the chemical cocktail he swallowed every morning to keep himself upright... even if any or all of them were sending him into an existential spiral, there were still things to want. They may not be the thing, but they were not bad things.

Sometimes they were even good things.

“Nine,” she said, a slow smile on her lips. “You don’t usually stay that late.”

“I could start.”

“Are you starting tonight?”

“As a matter of fact I am.”

“Are you asking me out?”

“In a roundabout sort of fashion. Care to join me for a late bite?”

She blushed, nodding her acquiescence. “Nine, then, but I still have to close up.”

“Nine.”

Smiling to himself, Merlin returned to his table. There was still something missing, a feeling he couldn’t shake and probably never would, but he could live with that.

The world was full of good things, even on a bad night.
Chapter 5

Merlin awoke with a pair of gentle, calloused hands rested on either of his cheeks. He could hear a young woman talking above him, saying, “You really don’t even need me here. He’s completely unmodified. Nothing beneath the skin, no replacements. Why did you-?”

The reply was an indistinguishable rumble to Merlin’s ears and, for a moment, he thought he was still dreaming. The woman’s voice was nearly identical to the one in his dream, different only in accent.

He heard her laugh and say, “Illegal subdermals? Like the box in your skull? He’s hardly the type.” Another rumble answered her. “Oh, Gaius, your face is friendly enough.”

The dream clung to him, sending tendrils of despair to take root deep within his mind.

The girl had smiled, Merlin had written something he felt sure was quite good - even though he could remember not a word of it - and the elderly gentleman had bought him a muffin and thanked him for providing a small, sweet distraction from the tedious business of writing a manuscript. Even as the details flowed through his waking mind, one image after another, the dream slipped away and left only the sucking sensation of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

His father had warned about nightmares. Merlin had dreamt real seeming dreams before, had shared one once with Will, but they had never been like this. The intensity was new, as was the lingering sense of wrong screaming through his half-waking thoughts that things were not how they were supposed to be, that he was missing something, that he couldn’t trust his own mind. It was a slow death of desperate unhappiness and Merlin could feel his heart pounding in his chest, bruised and aching.

Merlin opened his eyes to see who was holding his face. Though the voice was similar, the face was very different. The young woman was still looking toward the far side of the room, and Merlin could see only the dark curve of her jaw and the mass of rich brown curls that formed a halo about her head. She must have felt him move, eyelashes against her fingers, because she looked down, her expression filled with concern.

“He’s awake! You’re awake,” she said, a smile lighting her face as she removed her hands. “How do you feel?”

Thoughts still trapped within the cloying remnants of the fading nightmare, Merlin could hardly wrap his mind around words. “Mum?”

She looked up and away from him without answering. “Gaius. He wants his mum. Is she-?”

Merlin felt his heart beat harder at her hesitation.
“Tell him-” The low rumble resolved into the voice of an elderly gentleman who came to peer down at Merlin as well. “She’s fine. All colonists save the bridge crew are accounted for, living and unharmed. They’re to remain suspended until the ship moves, but they’re fine.”

The relief almost sent him back into unconsciousness. “Arthur?”

The pair’s reaction puzzled him. The two of them shared a quick glance - part surprise, part something else - and Gaius stepped back. The young woman put her hand back on Merlin’s cheek to give him a reassuring pat. “He’s coordinating the mop-up. He’s fine, too.”

All useful questions asked, Merlin let himself relax. He could worry about the less useful questions later.

“I’m Gwen,” the young woman introduced herself, “Chief Cybernetics Engineer of the Kilgharrah. Gaius is the Chief Medical Officer. You, I understand, are Merlin Emrys.”

Her smile was infectious and he found himself trying to grin back, though his face felt odd and his skin around his mouth stung when he did. He asked, “If you’re chiefs, why are you here with me?”

“The Kilgharrah’s not particularly large as warships go,” Gaius said, sitting down across the bed from Gwen. His face sagged with age, one of his eyes wandering off to the side on business of its own, and his shoulders sloped as though too many years of artificial gravity had finally won. He wasn’t smiling, but his expression rested naturally somewhere between tolerance and amusement.

“And you’re a hero. The captain brought you in personally. Even if we had assistants-” Gwen giggled into her hand. Gaius pursed his lips. “We’d still want to take a look at you.”

“Being head of a division of one means I can be as curious as I want and it’s all official.” Gwen transferred her touch from his cheek to take gentle hold of Merlin’s hand. The warmth of her palm grounded him. The dream had left him chilled, though the thermal blanket draped across him made sure it wasn’t a physical cold. She asked, “Do you feel strong enough to sit up? Hurt anywhere? Anything we can do to help?”

Merlin took stock before he answered, wiggling his fingers and toes until Gwen smiled and squeezed his hand. He hurt like he’d overextended himself, a familiar enough sensation from adventures with Will that he wasn’t too worried. There were bandages across his bare chest that pulled when he tested them, shocking him with more pain than he expected, making it hard to breathe, and his hand not being held was wrapped lightly in gauze. Chest wound aside, however, he’d come out of the battle with the Glatissant miraculously whole.

Closing his eyes so that he might not give himself away, Merlin then used what little knowledge he had to check on the state of his magic.

What he found made him grit his teeth. When it wasn’t half-wild and angry, his magic was a pool lying just below the surface of his skin, waiting for him to dip his fingers. Now there was a thick film across the top that prevented him from doing much of anything. Balinor’s barrier spell was made of power that felt foreign, rubber and slime that was very slowly burning away, but not swiftly enough to give him access anytime soon.

Turning outward, he made an attempt to extend his senses and failed. Behind the barrier, his magic was weak, bruised, and there was a shadow across it like the one that heralded a migraine, promising future agony. He strained. Failed again.

Like the anger at his rescuer on the bridge, the sensation of being trapped came from nowhere and overwhelmed him. He scrabbled at the artificial constraints on his magic, clawing for holes in
Balinor’s barrier spell, claustrophobic even with his limbs free and room to breathe.

Nothing. He fought himself, unaware that he was straining to move until he half fell off the bed, feet hitting the deck. Gwen lunged at him, hands closing around his upper arms to keep him from pitching headfirst.

His awareness touched the deck and it was an immediate comfort. This ship was alive as the Ealdor had been alive, the deck a mixture of plastics, metals and proteins. Keratin- and calcium-sheathed steel formed the framework. Ichor flowed through the walls around with an almost inaudible susurration.

The Kilgharrah was biomechanical, like all Five Kingdom ships, but even with just his bare feet against the floor, Merlin could sense how much more vital the ship felt than his old home. The Kilgharrah was well tended. New materials mixed with old, and upgrades to the structure and its makeup flickered tentatively - a light wash of needles - against his mental touch. The Ealdor had been quiet, a stately and unwieldy craft. This warship felt more alive than any ship Merlin had ever come in contact with. It soothed him.

The Ealdor’s ghost had also been old and somewhat grumpy. He’d existed for generations, through most of the trip across the Meredor sector to Albion, one of the first ships built by the Essetir. He’d all but ignored Merlin.

Even so, Merlin had comforted himself by leaning against the warm, silent presence of the ancient ghost hundreds of times. The Ealdor had permitted that, but had never tried to be friends. He had barely spoken. When Merlin touched the deck of the Kilgharrah, intending to take strength from the ship and squelch his panic, he had not expected to be immediately remarked upon.

Emrys.

The ship’s ghost had a voice with the rattling, husky quality of a massive creature speaking down a long metal tube. Merlin let Gwen push him back onto the bed, popping his eyes open to find his two minders on alert, their hands out in case he threw himself from the bed again.

“Are you-?” Gwen asked, concerned.

“Ribs.” The explanation flew from his mouth before he thought about it, causing Gwen to frown and glance down at the bandages.

Merlin’s thoughts raced. The Ealdor had been safe partially because he had been silent. Hearing the voices of ghosts was one of the ways that sorcerer hunters found their quarries, though Merlin had always wondered how a ghost unable to be heard by the non-magical could possibly reveal anyone. He let out his breath, not entirely pleased to have an answer. The Kilgharrah’s ghost sounded dangerously alert and interested.

Merlin scrambled to explain. He curled his bandaged hand over his lower chest for effect. “My ribs- I don’t even remember being hurt.” Which had caused him to flail right off the bed. Right.

“Ripped into the muscle. You’re on bed rest until further notice,” Gaius said, a tiny crease appearing between his eyebrows as he studied Merlin. “But we’ve stitched you up. Let’s get you propped.”

There was enough time for Merlin to compose himself during the fuss of getting the bed angled and him re-situated. To calm his racing pulse, he distracted himself by looking around.

The room he was in had only a handful of permanent beds, all unoccupied save his. It was clean, but cluttered. Every square inch of the ceiling and walls were covered with small pouches and nets that
held enough supplies to physick a fighting force twice the size of what could fit on any warship Merlin had studied. There was even one small section of the ceiling, off in a corner, that appeared to have wooden boxes and paper packets filled with nothing that would have ever come standard issue. There were more supplies jammed into this little room than Merlin had ever seen in the Ealdor’s admittedly sparse infirmary, even if he added every supply run together in all the years he’d lived on the colony ship.

As the two fussed and he stared about in no small wonder, the intercom came on to summon Gaius to the bridge. Gwen brought Merlin a small squeeze packet of water as Gaius excused himself and shuffled out the door.

“Afraid the gravity will go out?” he joked, sucking on the packet. “Even with our crap generator, we used cups on the Ealdor.”

Gwen wrinkled her nose and resettled herself on a stool next to Merlin’s bed, folding his hand into her hers once more. The return of human contact left Merlin feeling pathetically grateful that Gwen hadn’t left with Gaius. She was an ally and a comfort he had never expected to find and wasn’t quite sure he deserved.

She explained once she was seated. “Arthur enforces battle-ready procedures as soon as we leave Camelot space. ‘Just in case Olaf decides I’ve been a bit too friendly with his daughter,’ he says. It’s because we come out here, though.”

“Swarms.” Merlin said, his humour draining away. He half-choked trying to finish his packet and clutched the empty plastic to his chest.

“And micro-comet clusters,” Gwen was quick to say. “Pirates. Ships beholden to other kingdoms who don’t respect fleet peace. Solar flares. It’s not-”

Merlin stopped her. “It’s alright. I’m…” He trailed off, not quite looking at Gwen.

He wanted answers that she couldn’t give him: about his father, about the fight, about the death of the Ealdor’s ghost. He couldn’t say anything, not without letting her know a great deal more about himself than he knew was safe.

Gwen was silent for a long moment, then said, “I install and repair artificial body parts for a living. Usually that means the original parts have somehow been lost.” She stroked Merlin’s fingers, never looking away even though Merlin kept his face averted. “However the ‘losing’ part happened, it’s usually a story that people aren’t ready to tell. Not when I’m working on them. You don’t have to say anything. You just woke up.”

Tightening his grip on Gwen’s hand, Merlin nodded. After a pause during which Gwen gave him the impression that she was prepared to sit for as long as necessary for him to find his words, he asked, “What’s going to happen now? The Ealdor’s-” “dead” “-broken. Is it even possible to go back?”

“No,” Gwen said, unhesitating. She did not try to soften her words, but they sounded more matter-of-fact than harsh. “No. Arthur was very clear about that. The Ealdor’s too far gone to repair without a major overhaul, already dying. The hull’s splitting. The only place that might be able to help with rejuvenation of a ship that size is one of the Kingdoms. The Kilgharrah can’t tow it, so Essetir’s going to have to come get it.”

Merlin huffed a laugh, though it wasn’t funny. “Like that will happen.”
Gwen shrugged one shoulder and favoured him with a gentle smile. “No, no probably not. That’s why we’re going to take you all back to Camelot with us.”

The breath froze in Merlin’s lungs mid-laugh. Camelot was where the Purges had begun, was King Uther’s realm entirely. Merlin had had a hard enough time keeping unobtrusive and in control on the Ealdor, and retaining control had only gotten harder since his power had begun to strengthen. Trying to keep himself alive on the Camelot would be an entire order of magnitude more dangerous. Feeling a little lightheaded, he forced himself to take a ragged breath. The water packet fluttered to the floor. “Camelot,” he repeated.

“Are you alright?” Gwen started to stand up.

He gripped her hand to keep her from leaving and choked out, “All of us?”

“All of you,” she confirmed, concern written across her face. She chafed his hand, warming it with hers, a reminder that she had hold of him if he needed her. He fought to come to grips with how much more complicated his life had just become and it was not lost on him that Gwen was right there, helping without needing to know what she was helping with.

Merlin tried to control his racing heartbeat. “On the Kilgharrah?”

“You’ll fit. We can handle you for just long enough to get back.”

“I’ve never been off the Ealdor.” He could think of nothing better to say, and it gave a reason for his panic other than *magic + Uther = death*.

Gwen sympathy almost hurt. “Oh- oh it’ll be alright, I swear. The Kilgharrah’s built to make crowded trips bearable and there is plenty of space on the Camelot for when we get there. Uther’s much better about providing for his subjects than Lot, and if Arthur says you’re all Camelot’s, then Uther will back him up.”

They would all become Camelot’s. Merlin’s brain gibbered. Lot and the Essetir would never come for the Ealdor; it would float, derelict, until it got caught in something’s gravity well. It happened, with some kingdoms more than others, but entire populations were passed back and forth like so much rubbish. Since they were all technically fleet and if the ship was irreparable as Gwen said, the Essetir would likely just transfer their personnel files and wash their hands of them. After that, only salvage missions would bring him home. The Ealdor had been an ancient colony ship without an export industry, more likely to require increasing resources for repair than benefit its progenitor kingdom. Lot wouldn’t weep over its loss.

It seemed safest to comment on something that did not touch on being a refugee at all. Merlin said, deliberately changing the subject, “You don’t say ‘captain’ or ‘king’ or ‘prince’. I thought warships, being military, kept to titles?”

Gwen blushed.

“Oh,” Merlin said. He didn’t know whether or not to be disappointed, considering he’d only met the prince once and had, at the time, been covered in several different sorts of blood and half-delirious with exhaustion. “You are.”

“‘We were’ might be more accurate? It’s… complicated. Between us. But it does mean that I’m out of practice of thinking of Arthur as prince or captain when I’m not on active duty. We only stand on ceremony on the Camelot.” Gwen twisted her lips into a wry smile. “I should probably not forget so much with a whole bunch of unknown quantities on the ship.”
“Is it a secret?” Merlin asked.

“Well…” Gwen drew out the word until it contained several syllables. “No. No it’s not. Not on the Kilgharrah, at least. The King, though- let’s just say he has plans for Arthur and it doesn’t include the sort of attachments as form on the fringes, so we don’t flaunt it.”

Merlin blinked a few times, then his eyes widened. “Oh, I am so, so sorry. I didn’t mean to pry- It’s none of my business and it certainly isn’t”

Laughing, Gwen cut him off. “You’re sweet, but you’re going to be surprised at how very little privacy there is on as small a ship as this.”

Relaxing back against the angled bed, Merlin let his head drop onto the pillow. If that was the case- 

He might as well ask all of his ridiculous questions. He didn’t want to think about any of the hard ones, or the scary ones, and he certainly didn’t want to think about how he was going to hide what he was from a ship full of people who had known him from the time he was small and careless. He had zero real control over his burgeoning abilities, and the son of the greatest threat to his person had brought him on board to join an entire contingent of well-trained Knights who likely had loads of experience hunting his kind.

Merlin pretty much just wanted to talk about Gwen’s love life. About Arthur. He could cope with that.

If he’d been able to get to the Essetir like he should have, his mother had planned on contacting the Druids on the Hallowcay to see if they’d take him. He would have gotten trained, could have returned to the Ealdor to be early-warning in the unspoken way that junior communications officers were usually early-warning. He’d have had a place where he could protect his friends and family, be useful and save lives, and have only the remotest chance to bring death and destruction down upon all he held dear.

Making up his mind that they were friends, Merlin slid a glance at Gwen and teased, “Does that mean Arthur’s single? Do you think I have a chance?”

Gwen swatted him, but her eyes glittered in amusement. “You’re going to steal him away, are you?”

The note of sympathy in her words made his breath catch and he stumbled, trying to smile and hold on to even an ounce of levity. “Might be thinking about it.” As jokes went, it fell flat. He cringed to hear himself. He hadn’t meant for it to sound like a confession. Trying again was worse. Everything he said came out quiet and almost shy. “He’s fit and you said you ‘were’ rather than ‘are’.”

Squeezing his hand, Gwen said, “It’s up to him. He’s a big boy and can make his own decisions. It might even be good for him if you tried.”

Merlin blinked at her. That was not the response he’d been expecting.

She gave him an exasperated smile. “He’s just too stubborn for his own good.”

He opened his mouth to say, ‘he always was’ and closed it before anything came out. As signs that his magic was out of control went, this weird deja vu made his skin crawl the most. He changed the subject. “I don’t want to leave the Ealdor.”

“You grew up there.” Gwen took the subject change in stride, making Merlin wonder just how many occupational hats she wore besides Chief Cybernetics Engineer. “It was home.”
“It was home.” Merlin repeated. This wasn’t a safe topic, not entirely. Though the Ealdor’s ghost had been cranky and unfriendly, Merlin had known him far better and for far longer than the father he’d lost in the same battle. It seemed right, somehow, saying the words.

Gwen said, “Tell me stories of home.”

With a nod, Merlin began with the first thing that came to mind, “I spent a lot of time in the biosphere, me and Will. Will’s my best mate and we had a spot-”

Letting him talk, Gwen nodded in all the right places, even though Merlin didn’t even know if he was making sense. The wrong-place-wrong-time sensation from his nightmare was starting to creep out from his subconscious. The longer he talked, the more he felt like he was hanging on to Gwen’s hand as if it were a lifeline.

No matter how tight he gripped, Gwen neither flinched nor pulled away.
Arthur sat in his command chair on the bridge and leaned on his knees, chin on his fist, staring out at the wreckage of the Ealdor. He had given Leon the bridge and then hadn’t moved, staring instead at the forward viewscreen as Leon gave the orders to manoeuvre the ship so they could load directly from the under-hull bay.

From here he could see the gaping hole in the side where one of the three devourers had made short work of most of the engines and a great deal of the life support systems. The biosphere in the centre had been cracked open and lumps of frozen dirt and greenery drifted in the open space. Whatever pets and livestock that had once lived within the biosphere were now beyond hope of rescue, though Arthur saw no corpses.

Broken beams jutted from the hole like ribs - which they were. Biomechanical ships might not be exactly sentient, but they were alive, after a fashion. The ship’s spine was fractured, its ribs shattered, its belly leaking debris. Already, the flesh along the inside corridors was freezing and drying, the entire ship’s mangled body juddering and thrashing whenever another structural support snapped under strain it had never been designed to take.

Sunlight glinted off a partial quadron of fighters as they patrolled the wreckage. They hadn’t picked up any more Glatissant on the scans, but Arthur’s ship had been surprised more than once by the creatures. Three devourers was odd for a normal swarm. Then again, a normal swarm would never have tried to attack a demesne-class ship. It was too large. If the Ealdor hadn’t been beholden to the Essetir, they might have even had the firepower to make a fight of it. His ship was a galley-class vessel, the largest pure-combat military class in the fleet, could take on a swarm on its own and win, and it was still dwarfed by the Ealdor. He could probably fit the Kilgharrah into the hole the Glatissant had torn and not even scratch his hull. If all their gun turrets had been up and working, or if the devourers hadn’t found their way to the propulsion systems through a faulty airlock…

If. If. If. The more Arthur found out about the state of the Ealdor and the command decisions that had brought it to ruin, the worse his opinion of Lot became. The Ealdor should never have been ordered this far out onto the fringes, nor should the recall have specified such a dangerous route. It was as if the Captain and King of the Essetir had been trying to get these people eaten.

“Squad leader to command. Permission to sweep the near asteroids.” The feminine voice that crackled over the comms carried a hint of strain.

“Granted.” Leon said, glancing briefly at Arthur, who ignored him. “We need as large a net as you can manage without leaving anyone vulnerable.”

“Copy that. Relaying to the boys.”
“Careful out there, ‘Lena. We’ve only accounted for a swarm and a half.’”

“Worry ‘bout Gwaine, not me. He’s the one that needs flight basic all over again.”

There were a few scattered chuckles from around the bridge. Kay, on Nav, snorted loudly. Leon let their reactions die out before he responded, “Give us the all-clear and we’ll sign him up.”

“He’ll love that,” Elena drawled. There were a few seconds of silence and then, “Orders relayed. Net established. It’ll take us thirty minutes or so. We’ll keep you posted, Command.”

“Don’t find anything. Good luck.”

“Right back ‘atcha. Hatch us some pretty ones. I’m tired of Gwaine’s face.”

The trio of fighters Arthur had been watching streaked away, flashing their red underbellies at the Kilgharrah as they banked. On his peripheral, four more fighters peeled from the Ealdor and sped toward the asteroid belt. One passed close to a dead devourer where it still clung to the ship. It had been barely attached to the hull when the Kilgharrah had found it, the spine-covered tentacles it normally used to tear great chunks off of its chosen prey melted. At least the acid defences had been maintained. In the end, though, even acid had not been enough. Arthur had taken great pleasure in firing off the Kilgharrah’s primary array and punching a hole through the massive alien’s exoskeleton.

Sitting and brooding in his chair while Leon gave the orders was earning Arthur some raised eyebrows, mostly from Bedivere at the helm. He ignored him, too. He wasn’t inclined to move, not unless Leon kicked him off the bridge, and Leon knew him too well to bother.

The asteroid belt he could see just over the curve of the Ealdor’s hull worried him. The fringes held environmental hazards, unexpected anomalies of rock and radiation that could short out his electrical systems or breach his hull. Forces of nature. Crazy random happenstance. They were unthinking hazards and while they were unpredictable, a mixture of luck and common sense determined whether or not you ran afoul of them.

What Arthur hated more was his father’s theory of ‘predators and competitors’. The asteroid belt was the perfect place to hide a swarm, the route designed for ambush. Even creatures with as little intelligence as the Bestes Glatissant could learn if Lot had been sending ship after ship through here. It was technically a shortcut, but if it hadn’t been Glatissant it could have been pirates. Or some of the buccaneers that Captain Saruum of the Amata wouldn’t admit that he was paying. The Ealdor being here was either gross incompetence or deliberate malice.

It would be a tight fit aboard the Kilgharrah for the week it took to get back to the Camelot, but leaving everyone in the corpse in front of him was out of the question, pods or not. The Ealdor was, for all its size, small for a colony ship. He’d already told Gwen that he planned to fold the entire population into the Camelot. Maybe the influx of refugees would make the kingdom-class ship seem less empty.

“The captain wanted to see me?” He heard Gaius ask Leon.

Swivelling in his chair, Arthur began, “No, I’” when he caught Leon’s eye. With a wave, he stood and directed Gaius towards the door. “Yes, actually. Walk with me.” Leon would never kick him off the bridge, no, but he wasn’t above encouraging Arthur to leave. It was hard to miss Bedivere’s relief when Arthur relinquished the captain’s chair.

Gaius turned with him and, once free of the bridge, they began to amble down the hallway together.
“You’ve tended to the Ealdor’s bridge crew?” Arthur asked almost before the door irised shut behind them.

“I have your men who brought them in sorting them out. They’ll be given to their shipmates for whatever last rites are customary.”

Arthur grimaced. Sorting which arm belonged to which victim was probably his least favourite part of clearing up after a Glatissant attack. “They’re heroes and should be treated accordingly.”

“I’m sure our new guests will feel the same.”

“You’ll be on hand to welcome them,” Arthur said. “We’re tethering now and the only way we’ll get everyone on board is if we wake them in stages. Since they all made it to suspension, I doubt you’ll need to deal with much more than scrapes and bruises.”

“No. Probably not.”

Gaius was humouring him. Arthur pulled to a stop and scrubbed his hands over his face. The old physician had been part of the fleet’s active military since long before Arthur was born. “Let me guess, you already have a triage station established in the forward bay, and you’ve stolen Lance and Elyan to help.”

“I’m afraid so, Captain. Both I and Guinevere will need their assistance for the foreseeable future. There are a great deal many more people aboard a colony ship than a warship, even if it’s a small colony ship.”

Taking a deep breath, Arthur gave up pretence and asked, “How’s Merlin?”

The answer did not come right away. Gaius started forward, forcing Arthur to catch up. When he did, Gaius said, “His chest muscles needed extensive repair, but that was a simple enough matter. If he stays off his feet, he should recover enough to walk onto the Camelot under his own power. Beyond that, he has scratches. Bruises. The cold didn’t seem to harm him, but his ordeal seems to have affected him mentally.”

“He woke?”

“He was awake and speaking when I left, but I recommend he remain under observation.”

Arthur didn’t like the sound of that. “He’s-”

“Coherent, which is more than I had hoped for.”

“You didn’t leave him alone.”

“Of course not. Gwen is with him.”

“Good.” Arthur was satisfied with that answer, though Gaius’s assessment concerned him. He tapped the side of his head. “Is he stable? Up here?”

“I think so,” Gaius said. “So far there have only been short lapses of attention and small emotional episodes without an external stimulus. It’s perfectly normal. From what I’ve seen of the bodies you brought back from the bridge, I daresay it’s expected.”

Expected, perhaps, but Arthur was still worried about safe. “What do you know about sorcerers?”

Gaius stopped, turned, and studied Arthur, a speculative light in his eyes. “In what respect?”
“In the respect of why we have none on my ship. They’re dangerous.”

“They are dangerous,” Gaius agreed, folding his arm and starting them forward again, down the sloped corridor as it began to curve in descent. “Magic has always had a tumultuous relationship with the physical world, but with proper training it can be harnessed, taught to cooperate, and even form symbiotic relationships with complex organisms. It’s no more dangerous than a star or a wormhole, Captain.”

“You’re comparing a man to a celestial body. Forgive me if I seem sceptical.”

“Ah- but a man has one distinct advantage over a celestial body.” Gaius said, looking amused.

Arthur gestured impatiently.

Gaius dipped his chin and continued, “A man is a thinking creature and has a choice in where to direct his power.”

“You know that the Ealdor was harbouring a sorcerer, then.” Arthur spoke on the heels of Gaius’s response, images of his home and the scars it still bore heavy on his mind. The Ealdor’s corpse had borne only incidental resemblance to the Camelot, but it was enough to keep the dangers of sorcery at the forefront of his mind. All of this talk of ‘symbiosis’ and ‘harnessing’ did a fat lot of good if mistakes were that devastating. “He was their junior communications officer.”

“I was told, yes, when his body was brought to me,” Gaius said, eyeing Arthur as they walked down through the ship.

Well, Arthur was being overly suspicious and cagey. It was small wonder that Gaius noticed.

There was something off about this Merlin, and part of it was Arthur’s discomfort at knowing the man’s name before there was any reasonable way he could have. Coming right out and asking ‘do you have a sorcerer in the infirmary and is he going to snap and kill us all’ was out of the question, however. He couldn’t officially know one way or the other or he might be forced to make a decision that would be ill-informed at best.

He needed information. There was no way he could have Merlin on his ship without knowing all the risks of what could happen on the remote chance that the young man harboured a penchant for spell-casting.

Remote. Arthur tried to relax his clenched jaw.* And I’m the Queen of the Nemeth. *

He couldn’t very well execute one of his refugees. There was little else on the fringe that would turn a population against a Captain faster than exercising the authority of a distant King at the expense of one of their own.

As unworthy an idea as it was, he couldn’t help but think that this would not even be a problem if the Glatissant had killed everyone on the bridge.

A wash of horror swamped him and he shied away from that particular thought.

Feeling ill and oddly guilty, he asked, “What sort of trauma would it take to disturb a sorcerer enough that we’d risk another Camelot?”

Gaius pursed his lips, mulling it over. He was a clever man, however, and it didn’t take long for it to occur to him why Arthur would be asking. His eyes widened. “Ah. Yes.” The surprise was brief. His expression grew thoughtful. No instant panic, only a slight ‘huh’ beneath his breath.
“A disaster of the magnitude of Camelot would most likely require a pitched battle, with wild magic on one side and warhead detonations on the other. If the sorcerer feels threatened to the point of losing conscious control of their magic - which is, I understand, what happened with the Lake woman - then only the degree of post-traumatic stress the patient is inflicted with would determine how likely an incident is. In short: how threatened does the sorcerer feel?”

“Could one cause that sort of damage deliberately?”

“Yes.” Gaius didn’t sugarcoat his response. “Absolutely. But loosing that sort of destructive power is equally as likely to rebound upon the sorcerer themselves. Nobody wins in that scenario.’’

“So I depend wholly on the self-preservation instincts of a threatened sorcerer?” Arthur asked, dissatisfied with the answer. He caught Gaius raising his eyebrows at him and added belatedly, “Hypothetically.”

“Hypothetically,” Gaius agreed. “Captain, if I may, leave Merlin with Gwen and I in the infirmary for as long as possible. He’s still recovering and Gwen has the training to help untangle whatever snarls yet remain within his mind.”

“Gwen will be needed—”

“—for Merlin. Captain.”

“Are you concerned?” Arthur was, for Merlin as well as Gwen. She was Chief of Cybernetics, but she was also their only counsellor until Arthur found someone for her to train up properly.

“He’ll recover if tended, but he needs to be tended.”

“Are you sure you’re not better suited to the tending?” Arthur asked, well aware that he was skirting dangerously close to knowing about the dark corner of the infirmary filled with potions and reagents.

Luckily, Arthur already had a rationale. If he could prepare for meteor showers, he could prepare for the nymphs that played among the solar winds. Even so, his father was not above stripping Arthur of command and relegating him to helping Geoffrey scrub the archives for the rest of the foreseeable future if he found evidence that Arthur was being practical. He trusted Gaius enough to handle the sorcery that they came across. It was up to him to turn a blind eye to just how he handled them.

“I have yet to make an assessment.” Gaius paused, then added, “I knew Hunith, his mother, though we have long since lost touch. It will be good to sit down with her and catch up. I didn’t even know she had a son.”

Arthur nodded and drew to a halt in front of the infirmary door, frowning at the panels. He didn’t remember directing their steps.

His personal commlink clicked to life inside his brain, the smooth voice of his communication’s officer on the bridge piping directly into his auditory interpretation centres. “Captain. I was asked to inform you that the first batch of pods has been loaded into the forward bay.”

“Thank you.” Arthur said, not bothering to subvocalise. “Gaius, the pods—”

“Yes, yes. Griff linked me in. I’ll tend to them.” Gaius tipped his head toward the infirmary door in invitation. “It will be a good ten, fifteen minutes before the first Ealdorian is awake enough to come out of suspension. In the meantime, did you want to see him for yourself?”

Arthur gave Gaius a perfunctory smile-and-nod and toggled the door. The green flesh irised open,
allowing him to step through as Gaius trundled off down the corridor, heading for the bay and the influx of refugees needing his expertise.

The scent of the infirmary slapped Arthur as he entered and he wrinkled his nose, the rich familiarity of the Kilgharrah overlaid with astringent and the faint green smell of crushed herbs. Merlin was propped up, his bed angled, and Gwen was curled close at his side, her chin resting on her arm as she listened to him talk with a faint smile on her face. Arthur couldn’t make sense of what they were talking about - something about losing a spanner in one of the primary engine conduits and having to wade through an active ichor exchange to retrieve it - but anyone who could put that fond look on Gwen couldn’t be entirely bad.

Merlin spoke with his hands, though he would wince whenever the gesture got too big. He was lying back and telling the story to the ceiling, his free (and bandaged, fuck, Arthur had done that) hand filling in words when his thoughts outran his mouth. His other hand clung to Gwen’s, white knuckles visible from where Arthur stood, but she didn’t seem to mind. Merlin’s eyes were sunken, dark circles against his pale skin, his collarbone prominent above the top edge of the thermal blanket that covered him from chest down.

It took Arthur about thirty seconds of standing silent just inside the door to realise he was waiting for something mystical to happen, something to justify his interest in a young man who also represented the largest unsolvable problem Arthur had encountered in his life.

Nothing.

There was no magic to explain his sustained attraction, and now that Arthur had seen Merlin again he had to accept that he was interested despite everything.

They were ignoring him. Arthur was forced to clear his throat to get their attention.

Gwen and Merlin’s eyes snapped to him and Arthur almost stepped right back out of the infirmary, for all that he was supposed to be the Captain. Gwen’s smile faltered and she blushed, of all things, ducking her head and retrieving her hand from Merlin’s. Merlin, for his part, simply stared, eyes wide and guileless, frozen with hand half-raised. Gwen reminded him to lower it with a touch.

Suppressing a grimace, Arthur lingered near the doorway. “Gaius tells me you’re well on your way to recovery.” It was all Arthur could do not to stride forward to rest his hand on Merlin’s ankle, prompted by a mixture of curiosity, fascination, and a completely baffling desire to claim interest in Merlin in front of Gwen.

Gwen recovered her equilibrium. “Captain.”

“Cybernetics.”

“You’ve met Merlin, I take it?” She asked, hiding a smile. Poorly.

Arthur nodded. “Briefly.”

Gwen looked up at Merlin. He was staring at Arthur, face blank. Her expression clouded. “Merlin?”

“Arthur?” Merlin asked, lost, his voice barely audible. “I don’t-”

“Captain Arthur heir Pendragon.” Gwen said quickly, taking Merlin’s hand again and looking between the two of them with confusion. “Of the Kilgharrah, galley-class. Heir Camelot and… Merlin?”
She left out four or five of his other titles, but from the glazed look that Merlin had acquired, he wasn’t hearing any of them in the first place. Arthur opened his mouth, but Gwen shot him a sharp look and waved him silent.

“I’m fine,” Merlin said, but he didn’t sound fine. In the space between telling his story and noticing Arthur’s arrival, his voice has gone quiet and raspy. He swallowed audibly. “Fine.”

Gwen stroked Merlin’s arm. Arthur started to back away, but she shook her head. “Merlin.” She said, keeping her voice gentle. “Do you want me to chase him out?”

“No.” The word came out without hesitation, for all that Merlin wore fear and confusion on his face. “No. I wanted to—” He wet his lips, then winced and brought his free hand to his ribs, hand pressing against the blanket.

Arthur took a step forward before he knew what he was doing and stopped only when Gwen stood and laid a hand on Merlin’s upper chest.

With her back to him, Arthur could see her mods rippling and shifting over the top of her half-tunic uniform, the inlaid ‘wings’ of her toolbox stretched across the back of her shoulders flickering to life. Their tattoo-like surface shimmered between a brown that matched her skin tone and opalescent black as she flexed. The broad ‘feathers’ separated slightly, retracting into her skin so she might be able to access the handles of her tools that peeked through the gaps. Arthur’d seen the motion enough times, each of the brightly-coloured instruments having pulled him apart more than once.

She did not reach for any of her tools though she readied them. She just leaned in to speak quietly with Merlin, their faces within inches. He remained curled around his ribs, hand just below Gwen’s, breathing hard enough to worry Arthur with thoughts of sorcerers and what their powers could do to his ship.

Merlin stared somewhere in the vicinity of Gwen’s shoulder, focusing on her voice more than on her proximity. Arthur missed her words, but their effect could be measured in the sudden drop of Merlin’s shoulders and the faint thud of his head on the headrest as he let her push him back. Arthur rolled his shoulders in relief, trying to shed his tension, and ran a swift diagnostics on his right shoulder and arm mods to comfort himself with the flicker of COPACETIC and NOMINAL on his retinas as all of his systems checks came back clear.

He then initiated a check on his torso mods, each new line of text across his vision fighting against his impulse to flee. Gwen and Merlin were posed, stock still, with their hands on Merlin’s chest as he panted at the ceiling. Her restless wings clicked and whirred.

The infirmary door irised open behind him with a whisper of skin on skin and a moment later a warm hand found its familiar place against the small of Arthur’s back.

“Lance.” Arthur turned his head just enough to see his friend in his periphery. “We’re on duty.”

Lance brushed his lips against Arthur’s metal shoulder in a brief kiss and stepped to the side. “I’m here for Gwen.”

“Trouble?”

“Shock, mostly, or Gaius would take care of it. Though we did find the one cleverboots who jammed his entire arm through an activation panel and overloaded it to melt. Gwen’s going to want to take a look at his stump and see if we can rig something functional before we get back to Camelot and a proper workshop.”
“The more I hear about the Ealdor’s residents…” Arthur said.

“I know.” Lance was watching Gwen and Merlin curiously. “Is that-?”

“The hero of the day?” Arthur watched Lance in turn. The other man did not look harried, though he would have to be to even consider being physically affectionate while they were both in uniform. For all that Lance’s dark mop of hair was in disarray, his workaday jumpsuit was uniform-crisp. The minor mods in his legs, bared by the custom tailoring that every off-duty uniform on the Kilgharrah was subject to, cycled between the warm and cool colours of unstressed function. “Merlin Emrys of the Ealdor.”

“Merlin.” Lance flicked a warm smile at Arthur before turning his full attention forward and stepping in close to the foot of the bed. “Merlin Emrys,” he said by way of greeting.

Merlin jerked his head up to look at Lance, eyes wide and fingers digging into the blanket over his chest once more. Arthur had to start his diagnostics over, trying to concentrate on the soothing results. His discussion with Gaius had only raised questions and fears. Merlin being jumpy was making him jumpy.

“Lancelot, Knight.” Lance stuck out his hand even as Gwen backed away from Merlin to place a hand on Lance’s shoulder in warning. “Call me Lance. Welcome to the Kilgharrah.”

“Merlin, but you know that. And - ah, thanks?” Merlin pressed hard against his chest and breathed, his face going a bit red. Arthur couldn’t decide if it were exertion or embarrassment.

“He’s already overwhelmed, Lance,” Gwen cautioned, pushing Lance’s hand down.

“Arthur’s a little overwhelming.” Lance said, sounding for all the world as if he were simply commenting on the weather. Arthur’s jaw tightened. He began diagnostics again.

HEATSINK SYSTEM: NOMINAL.
INTERIOR PRESSURE: NOMINAL.
ANTERIOR FLEX: COPACETIC.
BLOOD OXYGENATION EXCHANGE SYSTEM: NOMINAL.

Lance curled a hand around Gwen’s arm, his thumb stroking the inside of her elbow. Their exchange was rapid, words tumbling over each other as they spoke.

“I can’t leave Merlin alone, Lance. He’s just woken up.”

“We need you down in the forward bay. Arthur can watch him.”

“You just said he was overwhelming.”

“We can send someone up. Arthur in small doses isn’t as bad.”

“Owain?”

“Leon’s got him on the bridge playing second banana while he’s wearing the Captain’s hat.”

“He would. I need Elyan helping me. Percival?”

“I wanted him on crowd control. Sefa.”
They both paused, mulling over the suggestion. Lance raised his eyebrows. Arthur fought down a surge of envy for the moment when Gwen nodded to herself and they reached a wordless accord.

Gwen let out her breath. “Sefa would do.”

Turning towards Merlin, they found him staring at them in bemusement. His hand rested gingerly on his chest, but his breathing was even.


“Nothing.” A big, stupid smile spread across Merlin’s face and Arthur dragged himself to a stop short of crowding in with everyone else around the bed. Merlin continued, “Just - I don’t need a minder. I’m fine.”

“This is non-negotiable~” Gwen began.

“You’re to remain in the infirmary until we reach Camelot,” Arthur cut in. He ignored Gwen’s frown when she turned to him in surprise.

“Gaius~” she tried again.

“I spoke with him in the hall. I don’t want to risk Merlin.” Arthur said, “A week will hardly be enough time for him to heal as it is.”

“Really.” Gwen’s flat tone should have been a warning. “Gaius said.”

“He did. Infirmary. Watched at all times.”

“So I’m a prisoner?” Merlin asked, colour rising to his cheeks, ugly red blotches on skin still bloodless pale and damp.

Arthur blinked at him. “Of course not. You just can’t be wandering about in your condition.”

“I’m allowed visitors?”

The sarcasm was so thick in Merlin’s words that Arthur frowned.

“Why wouldn’t you be?”

“I should be healed before the week is out. I’ve been in enough scrapes to know how fast accelerators can patch me up,” Merlin said, “Even the strictest medico would boot me before we got into Albion space.”

Arthur refused to look at either Lance or Gwen, because they both knew him far too well. “I want to make sure. Everyone reacts differently to Glatissant scratches, if they’re lucky enough to come away without a bite. Our sample size is small enough that I refuse to take chances. For all that you’re healing now, your skin could slough off and Gwen would have to patch you with metal.”

The soft snort could only have come from Gwen; Lance was too polite to call him on his bullshit in front of others.

Eyes narrowed, Merlin pursed his lips and flared his nostrils, projecting displeasure in waves. His jaw worked and Arther braced himself for some sort of outburst. Instead, Merlin tipped his head and bit out, “Captain’s orders.” His hand pressed harder against his chest, the thermal blanket crinkling.

The glance Arthur risked at Lance earned him a puzzled headshake. Gwen ran a finger down
Merlin’s jaw, rasping the dark stubble, and smiled to distract him. When she had her patient’s attention, she said, “I need to go down to greet and tend the others from Ealdor.”


“I will.” Gwen promised, then pulled away, Lance at her elbow.

The two of them headed for the door, hips brushing every few steps. The casual intimacy with which they slipped in and out of each other’s personal space was more telling of their relationship than any explanation Arthur could have managed. Lance’s fingers danced over the tops of Gwen’s shoulders, skirting the very edges of her still-open wings and their illuminated contents. She tapped his side in wordless notice and scooped up her axillary repair kit from beside the door.

Arthur ran his diagnostics again as they left, trying to order his thoughts as he ordered his mods. NOMINAL. NOMINAL. COPACETIC. NOMINAL. Seeing the two of them and how well they worked together without him threw him unexpectedly off his stride.

He couldn’t afford to have his romantic entanglements affecting his judgement. He needed to be focusing on Merlin and the threat he posed.

Arthur pinched the bridge of his nose to stave off a headache. The door irised open and guilt slammed into his gut as they stepped through, making it hard to think about much else.

Gwen and Lance were his fringe lovers, an established pairing who had invited him into their lives and beds as if it were no more trouble for them to include Arthur than for him to invite a friend to share a drink. The whole arrangement had baffled him from the start, so very different from the way life worked on the Camelot or the other Kingdoms closer to Albion. Relationships weren’t nearly as fluid there as they were on the fringe, where every breath could easily be your last.

While Lance and Gwen were good to him - good for him, truth be told - it wasn’t fair to them to have his fears and worries brought into their lives, no matter how supportive they were. Gwen was the only one on his ship trained as a Counsellor, and venting to her while naked in the quiet after sex, hearing the note of professional detachment in her voice as Lance traced circles on Arthur’s stomach had only added to his conviction that he was doing everything wrong. He’d only made the mistake of saying so once, and the absolute horror on Gwen’s face had been enough for him to never mention it again, though she’d tried to get him to explain.

Gwen had respected his withdrawal, backing off entirely and allowing Arthur to choose their liaisons. Lance gave no sign that he’d noticed anything amiss, though Arthur held no illusions that Gwen had not told him everything. They seemed content to let him sort himself out, each of them showing in their own way that they would accept whatever he decided.

Life obeyed very few rules out on the fringes. Arthur could hardly stand it, sometimes. The worst was that he could feel himself leaving them as easily as he’d joined them.

The door shut behind them with a hiss of hydraulics.

“Gwen said it was complicated,” Merlin volunteered.

Arthur came back to himself off-balance. Stomach-chewing guilt or no, he really should not have forgotten why he was here. Without conscious thought, he bristled and said, “I don’t see how that’s any of your business.”

“I was just observing.” Merlin held up his hands. The gesture looked like it was supposed to be appeasing, but his hands were trembling. “No need to get tetchy.”
“You wake up and the first thing you do is gossip?” Arthur did not particularly appreciate his relationship status being the subject of idle speculation, nor did he like the fact that Merlin was visibly weakening. Weak meant vulnerable and the last thing Arthur wanted was a sorcerer feeling vulnerable.

Merlin stared at him for a few seconds, then looked away without answering, folding his arms across his chest. Arthur squelched the impulse to apologise, especially when he had no idea what he would be apologising for.

After long enough that the silence turned from brittle to awkward, he opened his mouth to speak. It would be wise not to ask how he’d known Merlin’s name, but the question burned in his throat.

Just as the words were about to leave his mouth, however, Merlin turned back and asked, “If I’m such a hero, why are you confining me to the infirmary?”

Arthur’s question died on his lips, because the answer to both his and Merlin’s were the same. Instead, he said, “I’m doing you a favour. The forward bay will be packed with refugees. You would be hard-pressed to find anywhere to sit, let alone finish your recuperation. I don’t want to put any more stress on you than is required.”

“Because I’m a hero.” There was an edge to Merlin’s words, a challenge. He was too skinny for his apparent age, with shadows beneath his eyes and a smile on his face that faded nearly as swiftly as it had appeared. Yet here Merlin was, daring him to contradict his words.

Arthur gave him an easy smile, full of confidence he didn’t quite feel, and met his eyes. “Because you’re a hero.”

It was all he could do to keep himself from looking away. Tension, like a misfiring servo, made the back of his neck tingle.

The door opening made both of them jump and Arthur’s relief at not losing their staring contest made him turn and speak more sharply than he had intended. “That was fast.”

Sefa was one of the Kilgharrah’s mechanics, servicing the destrier-class fighters when they were docked in either of the bays. The jumpsuit she currently wore was on-duty cut with full coverage over her mods. It was stained and scorched enough that Arthur frowned at her. She halted just inside the infirmary, one hand on the wall next to the door as she looked between Arthur and Merlin. “Um,” she said, carefully stepping forward so the door could close. “Gwen passed me on her way to the bay? I just got off shift. Captain.”

“That’s fine,” Arthur said, waving her in. “You’re to tend Merlin, here. Keep him company. Talk to him.”

“I’m right here.”

Arthur ignored Merlin’s complaint and instead took hold of Sefa’s shoulder as she approached and steered her toward the bed. “Sefa, this is Merlin. Merlin, Sefa. She’s got a knack for anticipating wear and breakage, which makes her one of the best mechanics on board for destriers. My squadron leader swears by her.”

Sefa blushed under the praise, which made Arthur feel a bit better about laying it on so thick. She stuck out her hand for Merlin to shake. He did, and halfway through the motion his breath hitched and he paled.

“Oh- Oh no. I’m so sorry.” She dropped his hand and was at his side in a flash, feeling his forehead
as if that would tell her anything. “Did I hurt you? Are you tired?”

“Yeah. A bit.”

“Let him rest, but don’t leave him,” Arthur said, standing back as Sefa sorted out how to adjust the bed’s angle. Sefa glanced over at him and blew some of her hair out of her eyes.

He shook his head at her worried expression and said, “Glatissant scratch.”

Sefa nodded, gave him a small smile, and ventured, “At least it wasn’t a bite.” She turned to Merlin as she lowered the bed. “You were lucky, you. I heard Captain brought you in.”

“I don’t know if I call that luck,” Merlin said, his rasp more pronounced.

“I meant not getting bitten,” she clarified. Arthur threw her a sharp look, but there was no hint of humour on her face, just an earnest smile. “That’s usually the first thing one of those nasties does, just to make sure you don’t run too far.”

Merlin winced, hand pressing to his ribs, and his expression clouded with pain.

“Sefa,” Arthur interjected. “He doesn’t need to be reminded.”

“Oh. Oh! Yes.” She covered her mouth with her hand as she nodded. “I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

Arthur came to stand by the bed, the closest he’d gotten to Merlin since wrangling him into a bodybag and hauling him on board. After his discussion with Gaius, he didn’t know if he wanted to be quite so close. If a creature like Merlin was the one to have done so much damage to the Camelot, he certainly did not want to be the one to set him snarling like a fox in a trap, like to chew his own leg off to escape.

It was just - he didn’t look dangerous. There was nothing in his outward appearance that would suggest anything like the danger Arthur knew magic users posed. If Arthur hadn’t seen him on the bridge, last man standing, sword in hand and looking like he barely knew how to use it even with all the dead aliens at his feet, he would have sworn up and down that there was absolutely no way that this man could ever be a sorcerer.

Merlin was watching him, an unreadable expression on his face. Arthur gave him a tight smile.

“S’fine,” Merlin said, rocking his head to the side to smile up at Sefa. “I just-”

“Rest,” Arthur interrupted.

“I just twinged,” Merlin finished firmly, rocking his head back to glare at Arthur. “I plan on resting.”

Arthur shifted his gaze to pin Sefa with a look. “Make sure he doesn’t go anywhere. I don’t want him ‘twinging’ anything else.”

Sefa saluted, then plopped down in the bedside stool Gwen had been using before looking to Arthur for approval. He nodded.

“It was nice to get a chance to talk to you,” Arthur said to Merlin, feeling the same ripple of tension as before in how formal he sounded.

“And you,” Merlin breathed, his eyelids fluttering closed. As soon as they were shut, he quirked a smile and said, “Captains orders.”
Arthur didn’t bother to dignify the mockery with a response. He directed his words to Sefa. “Mechanic,” he said, nodding farewell.

He left without fanfare. It felt an awful lot like running away.
Merlin fell asleep, even though that had not been his original plan. Sefa anticipated his needs readily enough - another water packet, a pillow to augment the headrest - but it was efficiency rather than kindness. Their conversation was stilted and awkward, and she held him in awe enough that he ended up falling asleep just to get out of her attempts at being sociable. For all that Lance and Gwen had agreed that she would be the best to look after him, she seemed naturally quiet and was not the easiest person in the world to talk to.

He woke with a start to a dimly lit, empty infirmary. All around him the ship hummed with life, the faint pulse of a distant heart overlaid with the thrum of engines. Across the room, a bank of small monitors bleeped and flashed, colour changing as he shoved himself up onto his elbows. His ribs hurt like fuck, though the pain had a dull veil over it that told him he’d been given something to help. Next time he’d ask for a higher dose.

There was no sign of Sefa. Rather than question his luck, Merlin wasted no time. Even though he couldn’t go anywhere - not if he was falling asleep randomly, in pain enough to conquer the painkillers he’d been given, and wearing only a thermal blanket and infirmary-issue underoos - he did have one thing he really needed to do while unobserved. Or, well, as unobserved as he was ever going to get on a ship. He would just have to hope nobody decided to go back over the video feeds for the infirmary anytime soon.

Sitting up was a lot harder than it sounded, and Merlin had to rest, panting, on the side of the bed before he could even think of stepping down. Even when he had his breath back, and was no longer hissing through his teeth every time he stretched his barely-mended muscles, he hesitated. He could almost hear Will scolding him for cowardice. *C’mon, Merlin, old boy. It’s just a ghost. You’ve never been afraid of a ghost in your life.*

He took a deep breath, regretted it, and had to wait until he recovered again before he placed one bare foot firmly on the infirmary floor. The moment his skin touched the warm, dry flesh of the Ealdor’s deck, his magic rose to the surface. It stopped short at Balinor’s barrier, but seemed content for the moment.

The Kilgharrah’s ghost was waiting for him.

*Emrys.*

The echoing voice behind his name made Merlin lift his foot reflexively, severing his contact with the ship. He would never have thought he’d feel grateful for the limitations on his magic.

He put his foot down again and was rewarded with a dry chuckle that rang through his bones. *I would not have expected you to be shy, Emrys.*
“I’m-” He really had no idea how to make this a silent conversation, aware that everything on every
dragon-ranked military ship was scrupulously recorded, but he couldn’t risk delaying his introduction
to the ship’s ghost. With only the old, tired, and unhappy Ealdor to compare against, the Kilgharrah
felt like a supernova or a massive cat, vastly more powerful and vastly more curious. The ghost’s
entire attention was fixed on Merlin. Through their link, he could feel the distant impact flares as the
outer hull was struck by Ealdor’s flotsam, but other than a running tally of the number of pods
accepted into and ejected from the forward bay, the Kilgharrah was distressingly focused.

Merlin snorted. The Kilgharrah was a powerful ghost, yes, but Merlin had trained for years to take a
ship apart and put it back together. He could handle a ghost, powerful or no. “I’m not shy.”

My mistake. The ghost prodded at him with eldritch senses, the floor growing warmer beneath
Merlin’s toes. The curiosity in the connection shifted to cautious pleasure. Welcome to - ah - me.

“Thanks?”

You were wounded.

“Scratched. I thought you would have seen the diagnostics?”

Does not mean I cannot be concerned. It is rare that I host a warlock and a scion of such an
illustrious lineage.

Merlin placed his other foot on the floor and leaned back against the bed. Sweat broke out across his
shoulders and he cursed the accelerators under his breath for not working nearly fast enough in
patching him up to make standing less painful. “You knew my-” He began, then cut himself off. As
much as he wanted to know about his ‘lineage’, he needed to prioritise information that would
protect him from the ship. “You’re very awake.”

Am I indeed? The Kilgharrah was amused. The light in the infirmary red-shifted, pores in the fixtures
contracting. Merlin misliked how much control the ghost had over the ship. It seemed irresponsible,
somehow, that a ghost with the ability to control even minor sympathetic reactions would be without
someone to balance that power.

The ghost continued after a moment of thought, I suppose I am. There is a great deal to be awake
for, especially today.

“Are you always awake like you are today?”

Of course?

The infirmary’s light quality returned to its white-green normal. Merlin sighed internally. Time to ask
a stupid question: “Do you have a… junior communications officer?” He asked, bracing himself
against the response. Only after he asked did it occur to him that the ghost might not understand the
euphemism.

But the ghost did, and Merlin was well to ready himself. The Kilgharrah’s laughter caught him up
like gravity fluctuation, dropping the bottom straight out of his stomach as he fought for balance. The
perfectly flat deck of the ship felt like it was rolling beneath his feet as the force of the ghost’s
personality slammed into him. Merlin clutched the edge of the bed and swallowed hard against
sudden nausea.

Do I have a junior communications officer?! The Kilgharrah repeated at a volume that shuddered
through Merlin’s magic. His (and the ghost was decidedly male; one couldn’t take a detail like that
for granted) howl of amusement reminded Merlin uncomfortably of Ealdor’s last moments. Once
more, the light went red. Several of the quietly beeping machines began to screech, their electronics emitting raw chirrups that lengthened to bleed into one another. Merlin winced.

Young warlock, this is heir Pendragon’s ship. I have only minor talents to keep me company, most of them require the edge of sleep to hear me, and Uther’s son might destroy any such that brought attention to themselves. Do I have a JCO indeed. What sort of question is that?

“A logical one.” Merlin wobbled a bit and lifted a hand to rub his eyes. The machines quieted, though the light remained red. If he had to pick a worst-case scenario, it would be to be trapped on a ship with a ghost with no sense of control and no-one else to talk to. One who ‘laughed’ by fucking with ship systems. Merlin would never be able to tell his best jokes or he’d be discovered immediately. “Shit.”

Something the matter?

“You have more ship control than the Ealdor did.”

Ealdor was an ill-maintained demesne-class. I am a well-maintained galley-class.

“Maintenance?”

I… The light shifted back to normal. The whir of machinery dampened, then surged.

At the Kilgharrah’s hesitation, Merlin took a chance and tried to prod the ghost with his magic. He could not extend his senses at all, but his bare feet allowed him to brush magic across the skin of the deck. The sensation tingled across his own skin, but with the barrier in place it didn’t hurt like he’d expected the contact to.

The Kilgharrah, however, responded with a yelp that caught Merlin off-guard. Merlin staggered, gripping the bed, and tried to apologise, “I’m sorry- I didn’t think-”

It has been long since I have interacted with a warlock.

“Oh,” Merlin said, then prompted, “You were going to say-?”

I was going to say… Again the hesitation. I have never withdrawn.

“Why would-”

I have never withdrawn because I have never been connected to a magic user when they died.

“Oh.” Merlin breathed shallowly, tears prickling. “And the Ealdor-”

Was an ancient ship with a population he watched grow and thrive for generations. I cannot say what I would do if I were drawing from a warlock at the moment of death, but a great many vessels from the time of the Purge have diminished themselves because of it. If they did not die outright.

Merlin was silent for a full minute, staring at his feet and the white speckles scattered across the skin of the deck. The Kilgharrah offered no further comment.

As they sat in silence together, however, the ghost ventured to lean on Merlin’s mind and magic. It was a tentative pressure, uncertain, so unlike the blast of laughter or the summons of Merlin’s name that it felt strange, but also strangely comforting.

“You would have needed a JCO to fight. They believed in ghosts then.”
Some, yes, but I have always been the Pendragon ship. Uther never believed a ship built in his youth would have a ghost when so many do not. Then, I was too weak to make him believe. Now, I would not sentence a witch or warlock to death at the hands of his son.

Merlin’s nausea returned. “Is Arthur really so bad as all that?”

He is honourable, and his father’s son.

Merlin wanted to lie back down, but did not yet want to sever his connection with the Kilgharrah. The ship was still ‘leaning’ on him, which surprised him. There was a thread, an undercurrent to the connection that suggested that for all Kilgharrah’s power, having a warlock on board meant a great deal more than just bragging rights. “You know what that means, right?”

“…?"

“You can… liaise with me, or whatever it is that ghosts do with their JCOs. I don’t know anything about it, but I’m willing to figure something out for the duration of this trip if you promise - promise me - that you will make an effort not to reveal me to the Captain or anyone else.”

The Kilgharrah was silent, the pressure withdrew, and the deck cooled noticeably beneath Merlin’s feet.

I would not deliberately reveal you, or myself.

“I didn’t think you would do it deliberately.”

There was a pause. The young Pendragon is not a bad sort.

“He’d just kill me out of duty to his father,” Merlin sounded more bitter than he intended.

He has always been good to me. Uther was never as conscientious about my maintenance schedule.

And- that was rather a suspicious point so close on the heels of ‘but he’ll totally kill you if he finds out’. “What are you trying to do?”

If you act as my JCO, you must interact with the Captain. That is my requirement.

“You want me… to pass notes to the Captain. Really? I’m trying not to reveal myself.”

Your chip scans says you finished your first-stage engineer training. It would not be completely out of the question to participate in onboard duties.

“Except that I’m confined to the infirmary until further notice.”

You will be required. The Kilgharrah was projecting ‘smug’. My assigned engineers are all modded.

Merlin did not like the sound of that. “What are you going to do?”

The Kilgharrah answered question with question. Why are you not modded?

“Ah, because mods hurt?” Merlin said, not quite sure if he’d just agreed to something or not.

They hurt? The Kilgharrah sounded surprised. Do they really? How curious.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”
You are about to fall over.

“I hadn’t noticed,” Merlin said, accepting the abrupt topic change because he really was just about to fall over. He needed to find a loo, too. “Look- or, well, just- promise me you’ll be discreet and I’ll help you.”

The Kilgharrah didn’t ask ‘help with what’ like Merlin expected. It is agreed, young warlock.

“Great. Fantastic. I’m just going to use the head and get back to sleep, yeah?”

I have wiped the recording of our conversation and looped it with footage of you sleeping. You will now descend from the bed and head directly to the head. There is a seam, but it cannot be helped.

“Oh.” Merlin was dumbfounded. “You can do that?”

If I draw from you, I can do a great deal more.

Merlin let out his breath all at once, hissing as he shoved himself upright, one hand going to his ribs. He didn’t have the energy to question the ghost’s statement. “Good then. I’ll- goodnight?”

Goodnight, young warlock.

As nonsensical as the farewell was, the Kilgharrah respected it, pulling his focus away from Merlin and redistributing it to the warship’s other concerns. Merlin breathed a sigh of relief. He almost fell mid-infirmary, making it back to the bed by force of will. When he finally collapsed back against the headrest and pulled the thermal blanket up over his chest again, he let himself think he might be alright. He could have done worse than make friends with the ship.

Mercifully, for both him and Sefa, he fell asleep again before she returned.
Chapter 8

The door shut with a hiss of hydraulics. Every surface gleamed with raw, exposed metal and the ceiling was only a fraction of a meter above his head. He felt like he was going to knock himself out on the low supports. He held a hand up just in case they decided to rip the house from its foundations, impatient with their old-fashioned raid. In the hallway, he could hear raised voices protesting the intrusion.

Leaning against the door behind him, he hiccupped and fought desperately not to cry.

The voices cut off with a crackle of electrical static. He slid to the floor, hands clapped tight over his mouth. If there was anyone left to pray to, he would be babbling prayers that he would be overlooked, but every house had a panic room and no goddess would heed him. The door he leaned against strained beneath assault. The rich sizzle of weaponry could be heard through the door.

He shoved himself to his feet to stand in the centre of the tiny room between the stacks of emergency rations that lined the walls and readied himself. Hands out, palms facing the door, he chanted under his breath. Potential gathered, small glowing balls of light held by a slender thread of will.

The door tore from its seating, its hydraulics spitting steam and dark water across the interlopers. The clouds cleared only enough for them to see him with his hands extended before they opened fire, lightning arching from their weapons, the scent of ozone filling the tiny space.

As the first pulse hit his chest and collapsed one of his lungs, his spells released, the first leaping forward to sear through the faceplate of the foremost attacker. The green-suited form went down smoking. The second ball skittered harmlessly across the curve of a shield. He did not even have the breath to curse.

In his final moment, he reached out for the presence that had haunted him his entire life. Just once he wanted something there, but his hand gripped air. His senses found only metal and burning protein packs. Nothing there where there should be something, someone.

Fury made the edges of his vision crackle and dim. The haunt’s betrayal stung on a level that had nothing to do with the inevitably of the numbness that spread from shoulder to hip.

He died raging at the hands of remorseless soldiers, amidst smoke and the arc of blue fire.
Merlin woke screaming, clutching his lower chest as pain flared across his ribcage and down his spine. He was drenched in sweat, terrified and disoriented. Unlike before, this was a proper nightmare—except he’d always thought that you were supposed to wake up before you died in dreams, before hitting the ground or being eaten by aliens. He could still feel the clawing darkness at the edges of his vision.

The muscles in his legs twitched at random, contracting impulses going haywire in the aftermath of being electrocuted to death. Remembered pain overlaid his current wounds. The lingering scent of ozone and the taste of blood on the back of his tongue were real enough, as was the sensation of controlled magic pouring from his hands, power he never thought himself capable of wielding.

His mind could not shake free of sleep, and the panic room he’d just died in mixed with the ship he awoke to, pulling elements from the dream and overlaying everything with such veracity that when he touched his nose his hand came away bloody. Each of his fears redoubled, brought to the fore, and he felt weak with them. For all the power he controlled, magic hadn’t been enough. Nor bravery, guile, or simple strength. He would not be able to keep his family safe, to keep everyone alive, and if he reached for Arthur, he wouldn’t be there.

Nothing he could do would be enough.

Despair ripped through him, almost as fierce as the pain that lit his nerves. He keened as he stared at his bloody fingers.

Will sounded impossibly distant when he said, “Shit! I’ve got you. Calm the fuck down.”

Will’s familiar voice was Merlin’s only anchor. He squeezed his eyes shut, curling forward over his aching ribs and trying to take shallow breaths to calm his pounding heart. Blood oozed from his nose, wet and warm, only to be wiped away by Will’s trembling hands. The stiff, crackling noise of the second thermal blanket draped about his shoulders made Merlin flinch, but when Will asked what was wrong, he could not respond. Not yet.

Too slowly, the nightmare released him, pain and despair ebbing. Instead of ozone there was only the thick, clean scent of the ship.

“Fuck,” Merlin groaned, finally lifting a hand to wipe at his nose again, eyes still screwed shut.

“What the fuck.”

“You’re gonna make a mess.” Hands grasped his wrists to keep him from touching his face. “You okay?”

Merlin shook his head. “Give me a second.”

Breathing sucked. He didn’t know how long he’d been asleep. Long enough to dream, at the very least, and the accelerators hadn’t made much progress since he’d woken to speak with the
Kilgharrah’s ghost. Even with the lack of deathwounds, being awake felt worse than before.

“Fuck,” he said again, finally opening his eyes to find Will half-hanging over him and holding his wrists to keep his bloody hands still. They stared at each other for a long moment.

With a nod, Will finally released him and handed him a small towel. It smelled like the Kilgharrah, a mixture of animal scent and unfamiliar soaps. Merlin felt a pang of homesickness.

Will remained quiet, watching anxiously and eschewing the stool that still had the imprint of his arse on the cushion. He’d seen Merlin dream with the intensity of reality before. When Merlin passed him the stained towel, he stared at the bright red splotches for a long moment. “That was worse, wasn’t it?”

“A billion, trillion times worse,” Merlin said, pulling his knees towards his chest and wrapping his arms around them. Either adrenaline or rest had given him the energy to move at least that much. “Just- fuck.”

“Yeah.” Will agreed, words failing him in a similar fashion. It took him twice to ask, “What happened?”

Merlin opened his mouth to tell Will everything and got as far as, “They killed my little brother and sister,” before he had to stop as horror clogged his throat. Will pulled his shoulders up to his ears and sat back on his stool, eyes wide. The whir of machines was nearly drowned out by Merlin’s loud, hitched breathing.

Will offered a hand. Taking it gratefully, Merlin concentrated on easing the pain in his chest for a long minute. All the explanations of the dream that had come to him were part of the assumption, the logical reality of a nightmare that gave the whole thing its cohesion. They were things he knew with certainty, like the identity of every green-masked soldier who had come for him. A murdered family, a government contract, a planet far from here home to factions in total war. The wrong side chosen because there had never been a right side.

Ultimately, none of that was important. Merlin had shared one of his real-feeling dreams with Will once without knowing, by reflex. He had never been able to repeat the experience, but after that Will knew what ‘worse’ meant.

“Where’s Sefa?” Merlin asked, wiping at his nose again. He was no longer bleeding.

“Not her shift.”

“I fell asleep on her.”

Will hesitated. “*On her* on her? You get all the luck,” he joked, but it was forced.

“Don’t you even, you lech,” Merlin responded quietly. Both of them fell silent. Merlin could not bring himself to continue their usual banter. Will’s offer stood open until Merlin shook his head and squeezed his hand.

Will gave him a half-shrug. “I tried.”

He had, but the nightmare was still too real, the taste of mortality oddly familiar, both welcome and unwelcome.

“They chased me into a box and shot me,” Merlin said.
“Shit.”

Will’s response drew a despairing laugh from Merlin. Perhaps he had not shed as much of the nightmare as he had thought. His magic still crawled beneath his skin, beneath the barrier that kept it under control. Not free of it yet. Neither his magic, nor the nightmare. “Yeah.” Merlin rested his forehead on his knees. “I don’t like getting shot.”

“It’s not- it’s not prophetic.” Will said, but it was also a question. “You’re just worried.”

“We’re on Captain and King Uther Pendragon’s son’s ship. Yeah. No kidding I’m worried.”

“Shut up, you know what I mean.”

Merlin grunted, then gave him an honest answer. “Not prophetic. Everything was different down to the name of my mum and how I’d never even seen orbit before. Getting shot, it’s a crap way to die.”

“I’ll take your word for it, mate.”

After a long silence, Merlin changed the subject.

“I saw my da, Will,” he said, keeping his voice low. “He got bit.”

“But you got to see him, didn’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Brilliant.”

Merlin smiled in spite of himself. “Yeah.” He wiggled his fingers and side-eyed his friend. “Also not going to go critical for a while ‘cause of him.”

Will’s eyebrows rose.

Merlin was going to find humour where he could. “I know you were worried.”

“Fuck,” Will said, throwing his head back and heaving a melodramatic sigh. “You couldn’t leash it.”

Merlin leaned forward and beckoned Will to do the same. They ended up nearly nose to nose for the whispered explanation. No audio pickup yet invented would have been able to hear Merlin share the details of the fight and his father and almost losing control.

And the warning about nightmares.

“There’s going to be more of these?” Will asked, still holding tightly to Merlin’s hand.

“Probably. Yes. No. I don’t know. It might last until I’m…” He rubbed his chest with his free hand, “Healed. Or, you know, not… trapped. We didn’t exactly have time to exchange instructions. I don’t even know if I’m supposed to do something to speed the whole process up.” Frustration pulled his volume down to a low growl.

“Hey- hey-” Will snapped his fingers in front of Merlin’s nose to get his attention. “Buck up. You’re alive, aren’t you? You have a chance to recover, yeah? Unless your nightmares kill you-”

“They won’t.”

“-then you’re set.”
Merlin stewed. Not having access to his magic was like suffering angry needles along a phantom limb instead of getting the cybernetic replacement. Being stuck in weird can’t-use-my-magic-can’t-not-use-my-magic limbo was driving him mad, but if he kept waking up screaming, it was probably best for everyone if he couldn’t unleash his terror. He- well, he didn’t know if he liked the Kilgharrah just yet, but he certainly didn’t want to kill the ship and everyone on board.

“You’re right. Shut up. Mum?”

“’Course I’m right. She’s keeping everyone sorted or she’d be the one whose arse was going numb waitin’ for you to wake up. The ones who knew their tits from their toes were all on the bridge.”

Merlin winced at the morbid reminder, but nodded. “Good on her, then.”

“She wanted to visit as soon as she knew you were awake.”

“Don’t call her yet,” Merlin said, easing his legs back flat and letting his head drop onto his pillow. Neither of them let go of the other’s hand. “Won’t be awake by the time she gets here.”

“You do look like shit,” Will offered.

“Thanks.”

“Gotta keep you humble.”

“Really. Thanks.”

“No trouble, no trouble.”

They grinned at each other. Merlin finally relaxed. Waking, injured and vulnerable, in a strange place surrounded by strange - and possibly hostile - people had put him so far on edge he didn’t wonder that it was affecting his subconscious. Even just having Will there was enough to reassure him that the Ealdorians were safe. He’d seen his friend’s pod close with his own eyes. With the Ealdor dead, the only way that he could be here holding his hand was because they had all been rescued.

“How long was I out?”

“Long enough for them to crack most of us out of our pods. I think they’re already prepping to leave the system.”

He had lost more time than he’d thought. The accelerators weren’t working nearly as swiftly as they should, but then he had never forced them to try and fix him while every mote of his magic was sharing skin, trapped beneath Balinor’s barrier spell. That was bound to screw something up. He was still exhausted, too. Now that his adrenaline was crashing, he was having a hard time keeping his eyes open.


“Arth- you meant the Captain?” Will sounded confused. “Shook hands. He seemed friendly enough. Taller than I expected. He’s almost as tall as you are.”

“Is he?” Merlin wheezed out a faint laugh. “Haven’t had two feet on the ground either time we’ve chatted.”

“Probably good. You loom.”

“I don’t loom.”
“You kind of loom.”

“He’d deserve it.”

“He’s the Captain.”

“He’s a prat.”

“You’ve met him twice.”

“And the second time he confined me to the infirmary for the duration of the trip. Like some sort of prisoner. He said it was for my own safety, my own comfort, of all things, but he ordered me watched at all times. While I’m really glad that you’re here I kind of resent the idea that I need to be guarded. I’m not—” Merlin huffed. “I’m dangerous but I’m not dangerous.”

“Do you think he knows about- ?”

“If he did, then I’d probably be summarily executed.”

“I’m not guarding you.”

“I know you’re not guarding me. Sefa was guarding me. Gwen was guarding me, sort of. Whoever is up here that’s not you or mum is guarding me. I’m being guarded.”

Will pulled a face, twitching his lips into a grimace. “Being guarded means he might know.”

“Did you miss the part where he’s the heir Pendragon?” Merlin, exasperated, pulled his hand free of Will’s and gestured vaguely toward the front of the ship. “It’s family tradition that if he knows… I’m paste. I’m so much meat. I’ll be spaced right out the nearest airlock.”

Snorting at Merlin’s dramatics, Will backpedaled. “Okay. Fine. So we’ll make sure he doesn’t find out.”

“Then shut up.”

“You shut up.”

“I’m not staying cooped up in the infirmary the entire time I’m on this ship.” Merlin protested, steering away from an argument that could reveal him to the infirmary’s surveillance. He didn’t know how often he could ask the Kilgharrah to bail him out.

“So- don’t stay in the infirmary.”

Merlin wanted to howl. Will was not helpful. Will was the opposite of helpful.

“Don’t sulk.” Will was best at being completely unsympathetic. “If you don’t want to stay in the infirmary, how is he going to stop you? No- seriously. Listen. You walk out. You explore. You find out what’s going on on the ship and you make it clear that you’re a guest and you’re not going to take his shit.”

Whenever Will got all logical on him, Merlin had to object on principle. “He’s the Captain.”

“Make up your mind!”

Frustrated as Merlin was, his underlying anger at Arthur was feeding his side of the argument. It was just… anger, so much like the lingering wisps of his nightmare. It was simply present, tasting the
same as that from his deathdream, as the anger he’d felt on the bridge. It baffled him, but if that’s where his mood was coming from and he couldn’t justify his fear enough to use it as an excuse, then he should be listening. He took a deep breath, hated himself for the sudden jolt of pain it caused, and tried to give Will’s suggestion due consideration.


“You’re a cat.” Will put on a falsetto and said, “‘Oh no, Will, it was totally my idea, Will, I’ll just wander around, Will, and explore and it has nothing to do with your suggestion at all.’”

Laughing, Merlin wheezed and protested, one hand on his lower ribs, “Shut up!”

“You’re hopeless,” Will said. “Go to sleep.”

Merlin felt himself slipping back into his painkiller haze, thinking absently that he should probably get up to use the loo soon. There would be dreams - nightmares - assuredly, but Merlin couldn’t stay awake even if he wanted to.

Just before Merlin was beyond hearing, at the point where random images flickered across the insides of his eyelids, Will asked, “How’s he ‘Arthur’?”

Popping his eyes open again and slurring his words, Merlin asked, “Arthur?”

“You’ve never been casual about titles before. Something about how they’re earned. How is he already Arthur?”

“He’s just…” Merlin groped for an answer - any answer. He was groggy and not entirely coherent. “He’s my friend.”

“You’ve met him twice.” Will sounded worried.

“You said that.”

“Then how do you know?”

At his question, Merlin tried to pull himself close enough to waking to give him a proper answer. “You have to have met someone who is… they’re an arse but there’s something…” Merlin said, “Like when I met you.”

“Thanks for that.”

“No, no. You shoved me into a wall, but then you punched-” Merlin yawned. “And then we were friends. It’s like that only backwards. Punching first, wall second, except with an alien rescue for ‘punching a bully in the face’ and then imprisonment in an infirmary for ‘shoving me into a wall like a prat’.” He frowned over his own words, “Only we’re not friends yet, I guess. We just… could be.”

Will was silent for long enough that Merlin was almost asleep when he said, “You have a crap taste in friends.”

“But I’m friends with you.” Merlin wasn’t entirely sure he was speaking words and not just slurring syllables together, but that’s what he intended to say.

Will apparently figured it out. The last thing Merlin heard before his went under was him snorting and saying, “Exactly.” Nightmares reached up and grabbed Merlin. Between his exhaustion and the
drugs in his system, he found it impossible to shake free.

He backed out of the bedroom, satisfaction buzzing through his bones. His tie hung loose, shirt unbuttoned, and the skin of his chest was reddened with kisses. Hat on and coat slung over his elbow, he grinned at the sprawled form tangled in the sheets, listened for the even breathing that had signalled to him that it was time to go. The door squeaked as it closed and he winced, but the bed’s occupant did not stir at the sound. Reason enough to be smug.

Fiddling with his buttons, he turned and startled. In the doorway of the kitchen stood Li, watching him escape from her husband’s room. She was the melting pot personified with dawn-gold hair and almond-shaped eyes, but her hair was unkempt, curls untended, and her eyes glistened with unshed tears. She stood tense and unmoving, holding two broken halves of a plate in her hands. She tracked his features, her gaze intense, not sparing a glance for his state of undress or the bruises Morgan had sucked into his collarbone.

He put a hand on the doorknob without looking, debated sliding past her into the hall and out the front door. Her face, her distress - he didn’t know what it meant or how to deal with it and she simply stood, saying nothing.

A half-smile wasn’t much, but it was all he could manage, all of his prior pleasure reduced to a dull, distant warmth. Her breath caught in her throat. She smiled back. Sad. Broken. He couldn’t leave her behind this unhappy.

Discarding his coat on the floor, he held out his hands, beckoning her forward. She shook her head, holding out the broken plate in return.

Ah. Yes. He came to stand in front of her, slid one hand down her arm so she would lift the pieces for him and placed his fingers on the fissure. Her tears finally fell when the two halves sealed back together beneath his touch. Her hands trembled.

“Li, Lili, Leona, love, you’re not crying over a plate. I’ve broken half a dozen and every time you laugh,” he said.

She inspected the repaired plate, taking a step back and holding it up to the light. Not coincidentally, she took herself out of his reach. Only then did she look up, eyes meeting his across a too-wide expanse of linoleum.

Wracking his brain for something, anything that he could say to reassure her, he tried, “He loves you.”

Li closed her eyes and let the plate slip from her fingers. He tracked its fall. Neither of them flinched when it shattered. Pieces skittered beneath the table and washed against the cabinets in a wave of porcelain.
He could still fix it if he gathered all the shards, but it would be a tedious puzzle and, in the end, there would still be pieces too small to return to the whole. Lost in the dust or crushed underfoot.

“Wrong thing to say, I guess.” He rubbed a hand over his mouth.

“If he loves me so much, why does he need you?” The words fell bitterly between them and she refused to look his way. She spoke to the broken pieces, eyes on the floor. “I give him everything I have, everything I am, and he still doesn’t want me, not like he wants you.”

*Oh, Morgan. You need to hear her,* he thought, doing up his shirt buttons and straightening his cuffs. *It should be you out here listening, not me.*

“I-” he faltered. Everything he could say sounded like a hollow platitude. “That’s not fair.”

She looked up, her expression shifting. “Excuse you?”

“It’s not fair.” He groped for words, comparing his tie tails. “Both of you. He needs to tell you what is going on inside his head and you need to know that you’re pouring water into a bucket with a hole in it. Don’t give more than you have in the first place.”

Concerned with his tie, focused on dressing himself so he would not have to see her reaction to his words, he heard the scrape of the kitchen chair. He finished to find her sitting with her face in her hands.

“He loves you, Li.” He said again, using her name to get her to look up at him. “He - him, Morgan, you *know* him - told everyone he knew that you two were in it together. Talk to him.”

“We’re supposed to be each other’s everything.”

“You know that’s impossible.”

Li laughed, and if it was bitter and rueful and a little bit hollow, he wasn’t going to judge. “Fairy thinking, am I? Knowing that he’s off and odd and will never desire me? I know who I married.” With a small smirk of self-awareness, she focused on him, then, “But do you truly believe that? That there is not someone who can be your everything?”

His hesitation only made her laugh again. Feeling oddly defensive, he turned the answer he would have made around. “You are more than just who you are with him, whatever your reasons to stay.”

“I stay because I love him and he loves me.” Her tone was flippant and she let sarcasm pool in her words. “Or we wouldn’t have married. I knew what I was getting into, but I am human and prone to emotion. But you- I worry for you. Are you so vast that there is none out there who can encompass you?”

“Yes.” His response came before thought. A short laugh and he held forth a hand limned with a flicker of blue and white for the span of a heartbeat. His tone grew sharper, whetted by a long-buried anger. “None living. Perhaps none dead.”

She watched him with a mixture of pity and compassion. He straightened his tie under her scrutiny. He doffed his hat and tidied his hair with his fingers. He found his discarded shoes and bent to tie the laces. Still she said nothing.

“I don’t want an everything,” he said at last, ready to leave and unwilling to let his last words stand unexplained. “I want my complement.”
Too-knowing, she said, “and who could ever exist to complement you. Or would want to.”

A cool hand and the murmur of a mother’s voice calmed Merlin enough to sleep somewhere beyond nightmares.
Arthur returned to the bridge briefly to check on Leon, Owain and the rest of the bridge crew. Leon took one look at him and gave him a sympathetic smile. Arthur waved him off and went to peer over Griff’s shoulder where he sat at the comms.

Griff glanced up and murmured a, “Captain.”

“Has the squadron checked in yet?” Arthur asked quietly.

“Only one quad,” Griff replied. “Bertrand’s.”

“Elena’s?”

“They had the longer patrol.” He looked up again, humming a scrap of something cheerful under his breath. Arthur didn’t recognise it. “No news is good news in this, Captain.”

“Let me know.”

“Of course.”

Arthur turned. “Owain.” He summoned Leon’s Officer-in-training to his side. “How much longer before the Ealdor’s too dangerous to remain tethered to?”

Asking Leon would probably be quicker, but he was busy at the Nav console with Kay. One screen was splashed with hundreds of tiny dots and Kay was pointing out routes through the system that avoided most of them. By the time all of the refugees had been de-podded, anything he’d planned now would be eighty-five percent obsolete or irrelevant, but in the end all they needed was one clear route out of the system. Everything else was a contingency.

Owain looked to Leon as well, though for what Arthur had no idea. Arthur suppressed a snort. Owain got the message to hurry up after one look at Arthur’s face and managed not to stumble over himself when he said, “The Ealdor is on a drift course that will take it within range of the asteroid belt within twenty-four hours. At the rate its citizens are coming aboard, we should be done within eight. If the fighters can be sorted out, we’ll be long gone before anything impacts either ship.”

Owain kept his tone precise and careful, all but saluting when he was done. Arthur tried not to let his irritation show on his face.

“Engineering’s working on the fighter issue,” Arthur said. With the forward bay commandeered and converted, half of their squadron had nowhere to berth. “Lucan sent suited mechanics to set up external rigging. The ships will be vulnerable to strikes, but there will be shielding. If the Kilgharrah’s cooperative, Engineering’ll be done growing the necessary warts by the time the civilians are all aboard.”
Kay called across the bridge, “Sooner not later, Captain.” Leon was rubbing his forehead between his eyes with a thumb when Arthur turned to look at the two of them.

Owain’s expression tightened as he stared up at Arthur, resolutely not looking at the source of the comment. “The twenty-four hour estimate is already conservative.”

Arthur beckoned Owain with him to Nav. “Is twenty-four hours too long, Kay?”

“Even assuming we’re tracking all asteroids. We’re not. And I don’t expect the big ones—” Kay stabbed at his console with a finger, the impact point lighting a nasty-looking specimen in red, “-like this fucker, to play polite with our models. Sooner we leave, less likely the ‘theory’ part of the theoretical belt boundary will bite our arses.”

Leon shook his head at Arthur over Kay’s shoulder. Arthur nodded. “We’ve had longer estimates when well over the boundary.”

A humourless grin split Kay’s face. “You assume the Ealdor’s going to stay in one piece long enough to get everyone out.”

“Do you know something we don’t?” Owain’s sharp response surprised Arthur.

“You use computers too much.” Kay said, pointing out the windows. Everyone listening turned to watch the Ealdor shudder as another structural support gave way. “Computer says some of that skeleton is capable of handling twenty times the pressures currently present. Computer doesn’t say anything about that acid wash Bedivere was commenting on half an hour ago.”

At the helm, Bedivere flinched. “Aye,” he said, quiet, uncomfortable beneath scrutiny. “The devourer we passed had half its jaws melted clean through. Pock all over the exposed metal around it.”

“Acid plays poorly with bone and steel.” Kay was off again, carefully not looking at Owain. “And that’s bone and steel never meant to be exposed. I give you five, maybe six hours before the ship snaps in half and all our timetables need accelerating.”

Arthur gestured low at his side. Leon nodded and stepped away to take care of moving their plans up. The gesture, however, had not been for either Kay or Owain, so when Leon gave Arthur a sharp nod and left them, they both looked to Arthur in surprise.

“Kay-” Arthur frowned at his Nav officer. “Did you wait to tell me?” Kay hesitated long enough in answering that he didn’t need to say anything. With a sigh, Arthur resisted the urge to run diagnostics to give him patience. “Oh, for- Leon and Owain are perfectly capable of listening to you.”

At his side, Owain grew very still. Arthur suspected he was holding his breath.

“Captain,” Kay said, acknowledging the rebuke with ill-grace.

“Just- keep updating our escape vectors.” Nothing Arthur ever said made Kay any more tractable. Repetition was the only thing that would make him warm to officers who weren’t Arthur. Even Uther couldn’t get cooperation out of the man, and he was King and Captain of Camelot. “And talk to Owain unless you want me to order you to talk only to Owain.”

“I don’t think-” Owain began as Kay pulled a face. Arthur clamped his modded hand down on Owain’s shoulder, the metal grip biting into the fabric of his uniform.

“Think very hard about how you’re going to finish that sentence,” Arthur said, steering the young
officer away from Kay and as out of earshot as they could get on the cramped bridge. “You can’t ignore him just because he doesn’t like you.”

Kay was giving them both a sour, considering look. At Arthur’s annoyed frown, however, he turned back to Nav and his fingers began to dance across his consoles.

“Captain,” Owain said, sounding more than a little frustrated. “It’s not on my end.”

“No. It’s not,” Arthur agreed.

“We used to get along.”

Arthur’s lip twitched, but Owain would probably take it the wrong way if he laughed. “Congratulations on your promotion.”

“He has to be able to work with other officers.”

There was no chance to reply, because Griff rerouted the returning squad’s all clear over the comms.

“Command! Alpha patrol reporting all clear.”

Grateful, Arthur shot Griff a grin, then spoke up. “Squad Leader, report on swarm sign.”

“Is that you, Captain? Did you miss us?” Elena sounded as cheerful as she had when she’d left, which was a good sign. She launched into her abbreviated report without waiting for an answer. “There were scattered Glatissant corpses enough for us to find their entry vector. Nothing hiding behind any rocks that we found - at least nothing living. As far as I can tell, they came right through from the far edge, lurked a bit, and then popped out to chew the Ealdor to death, poor bastard.”

“No… extra?”

“It’s a swarm and a half. All of our scanners agree. Sorry, Captain.”

Arthur cursed under his breath. “Keep your eyes on the black, just in case. Split the squad, I’m going to want destriers on patrol at all time. Pairs. Keep yourselves fresh. You’ve got the aft bay only, so plan accordingly.”

“And we’re putting down where now?” Elena sounded amused, but she would. The forward bay was the larger of the two and usually held the majority of the squad. The aft bay would be nose-to-tail with barely room to wiggle between.

“Leon,” Arthur said.

Without a pause, Leon pulled himself away from his conversation with Engineering and said, “Follow the flags waved in your direction to where the under-turrets usually are. We’re making barnacles of you.”

“Aww, you shouldn’t have,” she drawled. That was as much displeasure as they’d get out of her. The static of their connection silenced for about ten seconds as she relayed. When she came back on, she was all business. “Give us twenty. I’ll debrief squad and we’ll set up a rotation after we crawl through the airlock.”

“Lucan’s mechanics will be waiting for you,” Leon said. “If you need any further orientation, just look for the warts they’re coaxing from our hull.”

“Can do. And Captain-” Elena hesitated.
“Squad Leader?”

“See you at the airlock,” she finished, then severed the connection. A moment later, he saw the destrier-class fighters streak past the bridge from the far side of the Ealdor, heading toward the aft rigs.

Arthur shared a look with Leon. If Elena was worried enough to want to speak to him in person, then he needed to be there when her half of the squadron piled in. “You have the bridge.”

“Captain-” Owain began.

Halting halfway off the bridge, Arthur raised his eyebrows.

Owain powered ahead, “What should I-” He pointed a chin at Kay, who was very deliberately focused on his consoles.

Arthur thought about that for a moment, studying his first officer in training. The man held tension in his shoulders that had nothing to do with the altercation with Kay. This was his first patrol in his new position and nothing had gone as planned. Arthur asked, “Have you ever won any sort of argument with my sister?”

Owain hesitated, then shook his head. “What does that have to do with…”

“Find me when Leon rotates you out. Wear a mouthguard.”

At the helm, Bedivere laughed. Arthur left behind a very confused Owain looking again to Leon to explain.

By the time his pilots were back on board, Arthur was seated in the aft bay among the packed destrier-class ships from Bertrand’s patrol. His fingers twitched as he scrolled through communiques from Camelot on his visual overlay. Most of it was bad news, or at the very least disappointing.

Despite his father’s promises, the repairs hadn’t gotten any further. There was a manhunt for an agitator sorcerer ongoing between Camelot and Mercia, but no one had made any progress. The sorcerer was calling for reparations for the deaths of his family, and of course Morgause had promised retribution from her organisation of magic-wielding terrorists should anything happen to him. Uther had called in mercenaries. There was talk of unwrapping some of the outlawed warheads.

A particularly malicious and gleeful newsblurt was talking about Uther’s current physical frailty. That one was so over-the-top that Arthur couldn’t believe that his father had declined anywhere near as much in the months he’d been on the fringe.

The one bright spot in all the gloom, however, was that the terraform’s final date had moved up. In less than a year, if everything went to plan, the Kingdom ships would be sending down their first colonists to Albion. If Albion was to be populated, as heir Camelot, Arthur wouldn’t be sent to fringes again until colony life had been established. It would be nice to be home for a while even if the stay promised to be interesting in all sorts of ways.

A shriek echoed through the bay from the direction of the airlock. Arthur waved his display away and stood in time to see Elena trip on nothing and nearly take a header into the deck. When Elena wasn’t behind the yoke of her destrier, the term ‘accident prone’ was an understatement. Forcing her helmet off, Elena pushed her floppy centre stripe of blonde hair out of her eyes. The glint of her skullplate mods caught in the greenish light of the bay.

She leaned on Gwaine, laughing, as he helped her upright again. Their other quad-mate, Derian,
stood a step behind, frowning up at the packed-in fighters and their overlapping wings. Snuggled into a tight cluster, the ships were content with the arrangement (and likely pleased. Destriers preferred close quarters), but servicing them would be a nightmare.

The smaller ships were sleek ovoids with beetle-black hulls crisscrossed with flagella that draped, inert, like fringe. Each had a double pair of wings and dozens of tiny hybrid propulsors tucked in the gaps between. They were ugly, lumpy, and wept ichor whenever they rested inside the warmth of the bays. Elena patted one on the side as she stood up, absently wiping a hand on her trouser leg.

The moment Gwaine saw Arthur his face split into a grin and he called, “Captain!”

Arthur’s lips twitched and he lifted his hand to wave to the trio.

Only Derian waved back, polite as ever, pulling his attention from the ships. His head almost brushed the underside of the wings. Larger even than Percival, if Arthur didn’t know better he would have said he was too large to squeeze into a destrier.

Gwaine knelt when Elena swatted his shoulder and after a moment of a laughter-filled exchange that Arthur couldn’t hear, she climbed pickaback onto Gwaine, letting her feet stick straight out in front of him as he carried her forward. Derian trailed behind, a subdued smile on his lopsided face.

The three halted in front of Arthur. Elena saluted using Gwaine’s forehead as a proxy. “Captain.” She was all smiles, breathless, her arms wrapped tight about Gwaine’s shoulders. “No welcoming committee?”

“I’m it,” he said. “You asked me to meet you.”

“Yeah.” Elena’s smile faltered, eyes sliding away. “And not just to ask you not to enroll Gwaine here in basic pilot again.”

Gwaine hefted her on his back, startling a squeak and a breathless laugh from her. “Derian and I have a pact,” he said, “I go, he goes. Elena doesn’t want to start an inter-Kingdom incident with Annis’s prize pilot.”

“Much obliged,” Arthur told her dryly.

“Gwaine,” Elena said to him, knocking the side of her head into his. He (very) uncharacteristically quieted. “Capt- Arthur… This is unofficial in all senses of the word.”

Arthur felt a tingle of foreboding. He dropped his rigid-spine stance of authority and studied their somber faces. Gwaine had creases between his eyebrows, Derian had shoved his hands into his flightsuit pockets and was staring at his feet, and Elena was wide-eyed and fiddling with one of the external switches on her skull. He said, “Go on. I’ve got you.”

“I didn’t want this to get to Griff. I know he’s good on secrets, but- I don’t know what to think, Arthur, I really don’t. We found corpses, yeah? Glatissant ones, right?”

Gesturing for her to go on, Arthur nodded, not wanted to interrupt.

Even so, it took Elena several moments and a couple of deep breaths to continue. Gwaine squeezed her forearms in reassurance. She said, “They were- burnt right through. Not the usual dumped ones. Burnt. Like- fire burnt.”

“Burnt.” Arthur couldn’t quite wrap his head around that, though the other two were nodding along with her words. “Burnt?”
“That’s what I said when I did the prelims. The patrol wouldn’t have taken as long if I didn’t make both of these jokers run their own scans to make sure I wasn’t going nuts.”

“That makes no sense,” Arthur said.

“I know.” Elena put her chin on Gwaine’s shoulder.

All three of them were looking to him now, faces full of worry. Arthur had nothing he could say that would help ease their minds. The Glatissant were supposed to be predictable. Until now, they had been. They left gut-empty corpses in the void when the heat and press in the damp insides of their devourers killed off the smaller soldier-beasts. They stayed in consistent-sized swarms. They learnt, if slowly, and it took decades for major shifts in behaviour to force humans to modify their precautions. Burnt, though, was next to impossible. There was nothing inside a devourer that was dry enough to burn, and hardly any combustibles to fuel flames. It would be a great deal easier to kill the massive ship-destroyers if there were.

Arthur shook his head. “I can’t tell you what’s going on.”

“But you see why I didn’t want to spread it about?”

“Yeah.” Arthur twitched his modded arm, pulling the constantly updating data pouring through the ship’s computers from each of the Knight’s suits as they debriefed into his field of vision. His artificial intelligence algorithms sorted for things Arthur had flagged as important or - even worse - anomalous. More and more anomalies were showing up… like evidence that Glatissant had given up on one of the doors to reroute past the bridge. Another impossibility. “Yes. You found nothing of the other half-swarm probably still out there?”

This time it was Gwaine that answered for them. “Nothing.”

“Then this stays with us,” Arthur decided. “The whole ship is on as high alert as we can be, and I will not risk panicking the civilians we’ve taken on.” Fixing each of them with a look, he said, “Relax. You’ve spoken up. It’ll be dealt with.”

Elena broke into a relieved smile. “Thanks, Arthur.”

Only Gwaine still looked doubtful, but when Arthur quirked an eyebrow, he shook his head.

Arthur straightened, firmly shoving the worrying datafeed into his periphery. “Set your rotations for the pilots. I want at least two at the edge of our scan range at all times.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.” Elena tossed off another salute from Gwaine’s hairline, her good humour returned.

Disallowing them, Arthur sent a private message to Leon, warning him that the Glatissant were - from this moment on - to be considered capable of breaking every known rule in their effort to destroy them and their human cargo. He finished with a firm ‘plan accordingly.’

AFFIRMATIVE came Leon’s reply, the low-level protocol bypassing everything else on Arthur’s oculars.

His diagnostics came up with soothing greens and blues when Arthur ran them, flexing his arm to hear the whirl of properly-functioning servos. The destriers clicked and popped as their hulls warmed to the Kilgharrah’s body temperature, their wings rattling against their neighbours. Arthur stood cursing the Glatissant under his breath until he had a hold of himself before turning to swing by the forward bay to shake a few hands and kiss a few babies.
Chapter 10

Gwen stood before him, holding out a hurricane lantern, her feet unshod. The wick had been trimmed, the glass wiped, the reservoir filled. She wore a pale blue dress and her curls bound back. She left a trail of bloody footprints from the door to his chair.

This was a dream Merlin knew was a dream because he’d dreamed it before.

“Nobody believes anymore,” he told her.

“He won’t be able to find his way back if you do not light this.”

He was aware, too, that this dream had never made sense, no matter how many versions of Gwen it featured. This Gwen was an old Gwen, a wrinkled and stooped Gwen with a brilliant smile and an optimism that made the hollow behind his heart ache. This time they were old and he had held her fragile hand on her deathbed in lieu of any of her husbands, because he was the only one left alive.

The dream had always before been part of the fabric of the life, but one thing never changed. She always stood with the lantern outstretched and the smell of kerosene filling his nose. Even when no one used kerosene any longer.

“The blood is more like to lead him home.”

“Blood or light, it makes no matter.” Gwen was practical even when she was being romantic. “He needs to know you’re waiting.”

Fear stole over him like a lengthening shadow. “I’ve lit that lantern a thousand thousand times. More nights than are in a lifetime. More nights than in a dozen lifetimes.”

“If you don’t light it tonight, you’ll forever wonder if tonight was the night he might have seen it.”

That was the same. Old words on a new tongue. Each dream before, he lit the lantern.

He knew it was a dream.

He knew it.

Still, his heart leapt to see the lantern already burning.
Chapter 11

The accelerators finally kicked in, coming to terms with his trapped magic, and within the space of twenty-four hours they made up for lost time. His nightmares - nightmares in which he was always him, always different, and always lonely and angry by turns - held the electric pain of rapid healing. His magic roiled, turned his stomach, and pushed him to the very edge of waking even as the accelerators kept him unconscious and ostensibly anaesthetised.

As claustrophobic as Balinor’s barrier was, Merlin was glad he could not lash out while within his dreams.

It took several days of waking and sleeping after the torture of ‘accelerators plus magic equals trapped in agonising limbo’ for Merlin to be capable of more than wobbling somewhere to relieve himself and having his minder drag him back to bed. The most embarrassing of those were the ones where Sefa tended him.

Gwen had a warm, professional demeanour, chivying him and petting him and laughing at all his terrible jokes until he would have sworn up and down they had been friends for lifetimes. Gaius never watched on his own, though he was often present when Merlin resurfaced, ready with nutrient needlesprays, liquids and questions on how Merlin was feeling. Will was Will. His mother made a brief appearance to tweak his nose and update him on all the Ealdor gossip from the forward bay. There was a great deal, what with the whole contents of the Ealdor jammed into an itty-bitty living space.

Sefa, however, was sweet-faced and solemn, determined to do right by him. She was tiny, too, and the head of height he had on her made supporting him awkward as he staggered to and from the loo. He made it more awkward than it needed to be by trying not to lean on her. Their impasse broke when he finally overbalanced, ended sprawled face-down on the floor, and she had a very polite meltdown that had him trying to calm her while seated on the Kilgharrah’s speckled deck.

Three days of sporadic consciousness passed before Merlin recovered enough protest his confinement. The moment that Merlin woke, ran his fingers over the sore new skin of his Glatissant scars, and found himself restless, Will declared that they needed to investigate the ship.

“You can’t let the Captain order you around like that,” Will said.

Merlin, revelling in the ability to breathe without searing pain, gave him a look. “I’m pretty sure that’s exactly what I’m supposed to let the Captain do.”

Snorting, Will shrugged, said, “Sod that,” and dragged Merlin out of bed and onto his feet. Within short order, Merlin had a shirt and a pair of stretchy-waist trousers that did not even reach his ankles to accompany him on his excursion. Will scooped up the stool that had been his perch of choice
while watching Merlin dress and tucked it under his arm. “Just down the hall and back, yeah? Maybe to the mess? You hungry?”

“Well, now I am.” Merlin grinned. With his feet on the floor, the Kilgharrah’s voice flooded his senses, steadying him.

You seem well.

Merlin chuckled. “I am well.” He caught Will’s look. “Er-”

“The ship-” Will leaned in close, “-has a ghost?”

“You have no idea.”

“Careful, mate.”

Sobering, Merlin nodded. He had made his deal with the Kilgharrah in order to be careful. Just because he had Will to hide him talking to himself, caution would not be amiss. “Noted.”

They made their way to the corridor with only a few minor wobbles. Stepping out of the infirmary with arms linked, Merlin took note of all the little differences between Ealdor and Kilgharrah. The corridor they were in was smaller than the ones on the colony ship, the skin of the bulkheads a darker green with red undertones. They curved, too, and Merlin had to resist ducking as the strange geometry made the ceiling seem lower than it was.

There was more apparent hardware, newer and flashier, and there were no metallic echoes of the internal drives. The rushrushrush sensation of ichor through conduits tingled the soles of Merlin’s feet.

“Weird, eh?” Will asked, pointing toward an inset panel next to the infirmary’s door as it irised shut. The panel’s tiny viewscreen was dark, a single flickering light on the side signalling its activated status. “Those are all over. Voice activated, too. Tell it where you want to go and it’ll map the ship quick as you please.”

If the power and engagement of the Kilgharrah’s ghost hadn’t told him how young the ship was, all of the top-of-the-line hardware would have.

Nodding, Merlin went to peer at the panel. “Food?” He asked it.

The Kilgharrah’s chuckle rumbled through his toes. The screen displayed a refinement protocol, its natural language processors unable to narrow intent from a single word. Merlin skimmed the text and opened his mouth to adjust his query when the screen flickered and glitched.

As clever as my mundane systems are- Kilgharrah said, sounding amused.

Merlin snorted. True artificial intelligence was a pipe dream, though Merlin’s studies had never clarified whether that was because they had risen and fallen sometime in the distant past or because ghosts had eliminated the need. He did know that it was King Uther’s vicious propaganda blitz that had painted sorcerers as the source of a ship’s sentience. Without sorcerers, there were no ‘ghosts’, and without ghosts there was no ship intelligence - artificial or no.

Indicted as charlatans performing slight of hand for nefarious purposes, magic users had stood little chance against the misinformation. How that particular party line meshed with the ‘sorcerers are all mad and hear voices, burn them burn them’, Merlin had never been able to reconcile. In the end it didn’t matter which version someone had heard if the magic user ended up just as dead because of it.
The screen resolved itself into a map, complete with tiny blinking dots and an animated ‘You are here!’ in bright blue lettering. Merlin was hard-pressed not to shiver at the ghost’s display of control, even though he was speaking directly with him as he worked. Will grabbed his elbow.

“A ghost can take over systems?” he asked, voice low and nervous.

“Always could,” Merlin said. “If they want.”

“Even the Ealdor?”

“The Ealdor never wanted to.” Merlin knew he sounded strained and Will tightened his grip on his elbow, but that was the truth. The Ealdor had withdrawn.

*Now is not the time for might-have-beens, young warlock.*

Merlin huffed out a laugh. No, it really wasn’t, though he couldn’t help but wonder what would be different if the Ealdor had been willing to involve himself. It was a wistful thought, edged in grief.

Understandably alarmed by Merlin’s words, Will pressed, “They could just—take over?”

*What does he mean by that?* Kilgharrah asked, puzzled.

Merlin sighed at both of them. “Kilgharrah is the ship.” He flapped his free hand and tried to pry his elbow loose before Will gave him bruises. “Saying he could take over is like saying… your brain could take over your body. It’s nonsense.”

“I don’t have tiny faeries behind my eyes controlling my bowels.”

“You could do, for all the sense you’re making right now. He’s a machine like any other, he just also has a healthy sense of self-preservation.”

*What is he implying?*

“Don’t get offended.” Merlin addressed the console for lack of anywhere else to focus.

“He’s offended?” Will sounded horrified.

*I’m not offended.*

“He’s not offended,” Merlin repeated. “And he’s not implying anything.”

Will’s face went white. “I was implying something?”

“Oh shut it, both of you.” At this rate they’d never get to the mess and Merlin would have put on trousers for nothing. “No, no, and no. Whatever your question is, the answer is no. Will - it’s just… not like that.” The very idea of a ship hostile to its own crew was something for horror stories and fiction. The operative word being *fiction.* “That would be a ghost committing suicide.”

Kilgharrah’s presence stilled. *The very idea.*

Merlin sighed. *Now* the ghost was offended.

At his side, Will nodded slowly. “So this map…”

“Is the Kilgharrah being helpful.” Merlin said. “See? Directions to the mess via the shortest route. He was just telling me that his usual interface took too long.”
He was met with resounding silence on all sides.

Taking a deep breath, he spoke to both of them, carefully couching his words for the ghost’s benefit as well as Will’s. “They don’t think like we do. Unless something is seriously, seriously wrong, a ghost will do what it thinks is best for its occupants and - by extension - itself.” No reaction. “Look - the Ealdor’s the one who told me that, so don’t take it from me, take it from him.”

It wasn’t quite a lie. The Ealdor had never told him in so many words of his nature, but Merlin did not doubt his certainty. His old home had told him through action and consistency, through care and worry.

Merlin caught himself mourning. He let the moment pass.

Will was speaking, “Point taken. Sorry. Sorry!” The second apology was spoken overloud at the console on the wall. Merlin winced.

*It is good to remember that I have concerns beyond humanity,* the Kilgharrah allowed. *Your young friend is forgiven. You and I, however, need to have an extended discussion.*

“Apology accepted.” Merlin relayed. He wasn’t looking forward to that discussion at all. “We can talk later. Can I eat now?”

His plaintive question roused Will, who straightened and began to drag Merlin down the hall at a faster clip that was probably wise. Only Merlin’s panted protests caused him to slow. The Kilgharrah lapsed into ruminative silence until something pulled his attention elsewhere and his focus left the two of them.

The mess was just far enough away that Will’s stool came in handy twice, but Merlin would not hear of going back. He wanted actual food in his belly. Nutrients via spray might keep him functioning, but his stomach did not understand why it was being ignored. The entrance to the mess was an unassuming portal with dark green striations. As they approached, it opened and the sound of laughter poured forth.

It had not occurred to Merlin to question what time it was and whether the mess would be occupied.

“Will-” Merlin began.

“Uh-uh, no way. You can’t chicken out on me now. You’d have to rest before we went back and someone would come out and see you sitting out here instead of in there were all the food is and it would be worse. Come on.”

The mess was big enough to contain several large tables, though none of them were full at the moment. A full-complement warship ran on shifts, so it wasn’t like they needed the banquet hall that the Ealdor has sported. The only things bigger than the mess were the fighter bays. There was a dispensary set into the wall furthest from the door they had entered through and a bored technician in an on-duty uniform sat next to the module in a chair set into the wall.

“No biosphere. They use mixes. Pastes.” Merlin said before he could help himself, disappointed that there was nothing even remotely fresh to eat. Sure his complaint would earn him glares, Merlin flushed, but no one else appeared to have heard. Not for the first time, he felt out of his depth.

The volume level in the room barely dipped when he appeared, though the curious glances thrown his way were hard to miss. Will escorted him to the dispensers, nodded at the tech whose eyes were glowing the pale blue of active oculars (He was probably reading. Babysitting industrial-strength food prep machinery was not the most exciting job in the world), and helped Merlin to a table with a
plate sparsely scattered with bricks of protein and a few off-colour pastes.

“Pace yourself, eh?” Will said as he helped Merlin get seated. “You know how you get on accelerators.”

The thought crossed Merlin’s mind that he should probably be self-conscious about wearing infirmary-issue, too-small clothing and wandering about barefoot. The entire rest of the mess was filled with uniformed crew, only the cuts declaring who was closer to their shift than not. There was a lot of light and metal mixed in with the flesh, people modded like Will was.

The retinal flashes of those with ocular implants made him nervous, though none flashed gold. It was too close to the hallmarks of magic and he wasn’t used to seeing lit irises anywhere outside of his mirror. Almost no one on the Ealdor had been able to spare resources for either the procedure or the hardware.

He wiggled his toes against the warm skin of the desk. Ultimately, he couldn’t really bring himself to care about being self-conscious. He had survived something unsurvivable, Will was there to play mother hen and warn him about eating too fast on a shaky stomach, and he’d found Arthur. Fucking finally, he thought, hiding a sudden grin.

Will raised his eyebrows and it took Merlin a moment to figure out Will was waiting for him to dig in like he usually did. Snapping back to reality, it also occurred to him to ask himself, Why ‘finally’? ‘Finally’ had no place in his thoughts since he’d never met, nor wanted to meet, the heir Pendragon. It was like him opening his eyes to hear Gwen talking, sounding so familiar but looking so different from the women (women, plural) in his dreams. Or nightmares. If he were less of an idiot, he wouldn’t be so damned curious about their Captain.

He picked up his fork to appease Will, who sat back and nodded approvingly. Will waited until he’d shovelled a few forkfuls of gooey lavender mush into his mouth before asking, “You going to be okay to get back?”

“With a couple of rests,” Merlin said. Now that he had snapped out of his muse, he tried not to shove everything on his plate into his face all in one go. He took the time to chew the lumps of Something in the paste. It was probably supplementary protein. It tasted a little like seaweed. Purple seaweed. He pointed to his food. “Did you try this?”

“Luxury, innit?” Will grinned. “Apparently being an heir has its perks.”

Merlin laughed and wished he had remembered to grab a spoon. He was just about to try and convince Will to get him one when a handsome, stubble-cheeked man slid into the chair across from him and set down his plate. Merlin looked to Will for some sort of clue as to what was going on, but Will was wearing the constipated look he reserved for fit men hitting on Merlin. Not that there had been much chance for that to happen aboard the Ealdor, but it was a familiar expression nevertheless.

“Gwaine,” Will said, managing to sound both disapproving and grudgingly pleased to see the man. That was interesting enough to make Merlin put down his fork.

Gwaine grinned and gestured ostentatiously at Merlin.

“This is Merlin,” Will said. He didn’t sound happy about it.

A once-over of the newcomer revealed his rank (Knight, pilot specialization, destrier-class), that he was off-duty (his left collarbone was bared to show off the decorative chroming on his diagnostic panel, sign of both an internal organ upgrade as well as a streak of vanity), and that he favoured the
red goop. Merlin did a double-take of his plate. That really was a great deal of red goop.

“Hello.” Merlin stuck out his hand.

Gwaine shook and sat down, offering a grin. Once seated, he tilted his head to the side and said, “Will didn’t tell me you were a looker, even if you are a bit death-warmed-over.”

Merlin blinked a few times. He glanced at Will who was rolling his eyes so hard that Merlin practically heard them creak. “Uh, thank you?” Still, not very many people had ever called him ‘a looker’ with quite so much sincerity. He pointed at Gwaine’s collarbone mods. “Your designs are very pretty.” There was a faint thump from Will’s direction.

“You like them? I think they make me look like a pirate.”

He paused. They both appraised his mod decorations, all shiny curlicues studded with semi-precious stones.

“Maybe if you squint?” Merlin said at last.

Gwaine let out a startled bark of laughter. “Will! Can I keep him?”

Will had his forehead on the table and was refusing to look at either of them. He was honest-to-goodness counting to ten. Or maybe twenty. This was a new and alarming development. Merlin had never seen him so exasperated with one person who hadn’t subsequently been treated to the caustic side of Will’s tongue.

Bemusedly, Merlin used his chin to indicate his friend. “What’d you do to him?”

“Never mind him,” Gwaine said, and his grin promised a great deal of mischief that Merlin was almost sorry he’d missed. “Heard you got chewed up.”

“Wouldn’t be standing here if I had. Just a scratch.” Merlin didn’t even think about it, he just lifted his shirt right up to show his shiny new scars.

Gwaine whistled. “Some scratch.”

“Could have been worse,” Merlin began. He didn’t get far before it all came crashing back in a wave of residual horror. He pressed his soles hard against the deck and was rewarded by the return of the Kilgharrah’s reassuring awareness. If he counted stumbling to the head, he had only been awake a handful of hours total since the battle. His fingertips tingled.

Will was at his side, even though Merlin hadn’t said anything, hadn’t done anything that he thought might worry his friend. He rubbed circles in the centre of Merlin’s back.

“Been down to the forward bay yet?” Gwaine asked, his tone casual, unphased but not unsympathetic. “Your family there?”

It took Merlin a bit to focus on the question, but he nodded. “My mum, but she’s been coming up to see me.”

“Bit of a muggy mess, if you ask me,” Gwaine said.

Will snapped, “No one did.”

“Will.” Merlin frowned at his friend.
Gwaine shrugged as Will glowered over Merlin’s shoulder at him. “Truth’s truth, mate. You’ve got luxury quarters up where you’re sleeping. I bet you a bite of this pudding that Will’s been crashing on one of the other infirmary beds.”

Wiggling his eyebrows, Gwaine nudged some of his red goop forward on his plate. It drew a smile from Merlin in spite of himself and he turned to Will. “Don’t tell me you’ve been using me for my accommodations all this time,” Merlin teased. The scowl on Will’s face was expected. The blush wasn’t. Merlin huffed, mock-scandalised. “It’s true! How could you. I trusted you.”

Will thumped him on the back, but lightly, and Merlin laughed.

Emrys-

The Kilgharrah interrupted him mid-laugh and Merlin had to fake a cough to cover his surprise. This was probably the worst place on the ship, barring directly in front of the Captain himself, to be getting messages from the ghost. It wasn’t like he could ask what he wanted.

The Captain readies an all-crew announcement. The news is-

A chill skittered down Merlin’s spine when the ghost stopped. His limbs grew heavy, numb, as the Kilgharrah’s emotions swamped Merlin through his contact with the deck. Where laughter had nearly knocked him over, grief sapped the warmth from his chest.

Prepare yourself, young warlock.

“Fuck.” Merlin felt cold all over. “Will-”

Captain Arthur heir Pendragon’s likeness found its way to the surface of every table. Several of the other diners straightened, eyes focused in the near distance as their ocular mods received the same broadcast. Arthur looked regal in his uniform. More than a Captain. Not quite a King.

He also looked very, very tired. Merlin stared at the tabletop in front of him with foreboding, tracing the lines etched in Arthur’s face that weren’t there the last time he’d seen him.

“As you are no doubt aware, there has been a manhunt for one sorcerer Edwin Muriden that has been part of regular reports for the last several months. I have just received word that the hunt has-” Here Arthur paused for long enough for Merlin to realise everyone was holding their breath. “Ended.”

There were no cheers. Merlin had expected cheers, had braced himself for cheers. There had been something in the hardness of Arthur’s final word that staved off celebration.

With no one to interrupt him, Arthur continued, “Muriden was traced to the Adolebat, out of Gawant. The decision was made to confront him before the freighter docked at a kingdom.”

Merlin closed his eyes. He could feel his magic pressing against the inside of his skin, against the back of his eyes. He tried to control his breathing, to not give too much away. Will’s hand was still on his back. If Balinor’s spell wasn’t keeping Merlin’s magic tame, Will would be sitting too close to be safe.

“Before authorities could take Muriden into custody, he- You all will know what I mean when I say that the damage was above and beyond what happened to the Camelot.”

There was an indrawn breath somewhere to his right.
“It was an intensity twelve catastrophe. There were no survivors.”

His words hung crystal in the air of the mess. Across the room someone choked off a sob. There was a rushing in Merlin’s ears as he hugged himself, barely hearing Arthur’s perfunctory closing and sign-off. There were details. Arthur had already spoken with those with kin on the Adolebat. Gwen would be acting Counsellor until further notice. Further information available as a report through doc-req, but as yet Morgause had not declared where her retaliatory strike would occur. Tidy things, practical things in the wake of news of someone just like Merlin who had caused the deaths of a great many innocents.

There was sound now, a great deal of it. Merlin did not open his eyes. A freighter. Caravan-class, then, and of a size with the Kilgharrah, if not larger. His thoughts chased themselves, unable to settle. He felt trapped, claustrophobic in his own skin as well as sitting in the mess surrounded by people. When he tried to stand up, though, he staggered and Will had to catch him before he knocked all of his food from his plate. Nausea threatened him with a colourful review of his meal, forcing him to swallow hard.

No wonder the Kilgharrah had been so unhappy. Why he’d warned Merlin to brace himself. That Merlin could not honestly tell himself that he would have been able to keep control of his magic at the news without the help of his father’s spell scared him cold all over again.

“Not hungry.” He answered Will’s question. He didn’t know what the question had been, but ‘not hungry’ covered most.

The realisation hit him hard. The bridge of the Ealdor had buckled beneath him when his magic had been loosed. He had nearly done the same thing the Glatissant had threatened to, that this Muriden had done to the people on the Adolebat.

*No survivors.*

He could so easily see how it would happen. The thought of imprisonment, of the King’s Justice, had always hung over his head, the danger increasing as his powers had grown. He had always used his gift by reflex. If he was cornered and facing down Camelot’s Knights, he could not honestly say he would not do the same. Panic had released his hold once. There was nothing to say it would not again.

Will was close at his side, holding him upright. Their plates were gone, along with Gwaine, and the mess had emptied. Everyone had their own grieving to do.

Merlin spoke for Will’s ears alone. “I don’t want to do that to you.”

“You’re an idiot to think you could.” Will said, supremely unimpressed. As comforting as it was, Merlin thought Will’s faith rather misplaced. He hadn’t been on the bridge to see Merlin lose it.

“I could,” Merlin said.

He felt edgy, unstable, grateful to his father and half-tempted to find out how the nearest airlock worked just to make sure he never would. At the same time, he was frustrated with himself. This wasn’t him. He had never feared himself and what he could do. Starting now would be stupid. It was like his brain was pulling him in three different directions without giving him time to decide if he were coming or going. He hated it. He wanted to be awake for long enough to deal.

“Freak out about it back at the infirmary,” Will said. “Can you walk?”

Merlin tried to stand again, but his legs were shaking too badly for him to even straighten. He sat
back down hard and grimaced.

“I’ll take that as a no.”

There was a clatter of plates and the sound of footsteps from behind them and then Gwaine came back into view. Merlin peered up at him, puzzled and a little embarrassed.

“What are you doing here?” Merlin asked. He knew he sounded rude. His brain-to-mouth filter was completely malfunctioning, but he was too tired to care.

“Pretty sure I’m helping Will get you back to the infirmary,” Gwaine said.

“You might be skinny, but you’re dense, bigger’n me, and they’ve got their grav set at full,” Will said. “I’m not carrying you.”

Merlin spread his fingers out flat on the table, steadying himself. “Why?” he asked Gwaine. Will he could lean on, could be sick all over, and could trust his offer of help. This man was a pilot, a Knight of Camelot, and a stranger.

In response, Gwaine laughed and came around the table to offer a hand up. “This might not be a battlefield, or even so much as a bar brawl, but I can’t let someone fighting the good fight go it without me.” When Merlin did not accept his hand, he let several beats of silence pass - in which Will miraculously refrained from snark - and added, “You’re not a soldier, and you haven’t figured it out yet, but more than just your mate there has your back. Those who’ve seen what we have need to stick together.”

The words hurt unexpectedly. Merlin felt like a charlatan, like everything that sorcerers were known for had crept up to him and smeared him. He wasn’t a soldier, no, but Gwaine didn’t know who - or what - he was offering a hand to. None of what he said applied to Merlin.

Only it did. He stared at Gwaine’s hand and struggled to accept that maybe he had a point. The carnage on the Ealdor’s bridge was all tied up with his fears that he would go nova. In his mind’s eye, he didn’t see the stardust and atoms that his magic would reduce everyone to, but limbs and globules of floating blood coming too close and clinging to his skin.

It made sense why Will had said nothing. Seeing a recording of an attack from years and systems away was not preparation. Gwaine was telling them both that he’d been there, standing where Merlin was standing, and that the demons were conquerable. Pilot or no, he was still a Knight, had still gone out and seen things. If Will thought he was full of it, well, he had never been afraid to contradict someone he felt was wrong. Maybe Gwaine didn’t even need to know the details to metaphorically offer his sword into service.

It was Will’s nudge to his shoulder as much as Gwaine’s still-extended hand that made Merlin finally accept the assistance. Gwaine pulled him to his feet in one smooth motion, showing off his augmented strength. Ducking under Merlin’s arm, Will steadied him. He fought the urge to swat them away so he could stand, but the impulse faded the moment his legs began to tremble and twitch. Brilliant. He’d managed to over-extend himself sitting still. He needed all the help he could get.

“Thanks,” Merlin said, giving Gwaine a genuinely grateful smile.

The grin Gwaine returned was roguish and borderline inappropriate, but his shoulder was solid beneath Merlin’s and he balanced Will well enough that they made the trip back to the infirmary far swifter than Merlin’s earlier stagger.
The irony that the lie that might end his life did not touch upon his magic did not escape him. He stood opposite Will, hands in his pockets. Will held the gun. Will’s wide, terrified eyes told him to run, run for his fucking life if he knew what was good for him. He didn’t run. He could, though, because making Will shoot him would make him the worst dick on the planet.

He made a choice that wasn’t a choice at all.

The lie had been a nice lie, a comfortable lie, a lie that said he didn’t care and never would, that he’d follow orders and put his brain to sleep. *Sleep, perchance to suffocate.* The lie said he would slot his will into another man’s hands to be wielded poorly. It was a stupid lie, but it had worked for a while. Had felt nice. He had gotten the right rush out of it at the beginning. The shiny newness, the pure bliss of novelty, had made it worth it.

But only for a while. A weapon got tired of being pointed in all the wrong directions.

“Will,” he greeted, lifting his chin.

Will whispered. Leaned forward. They weren’t on the same side. “What are you doing here?” His voice quavered. Shooting was the last thing he wanted to do, all bluster, no bite.

The script said ‘I should ask you the same question’. Or maybe ‘fucking up your little buddies’. Something tritely badass. His wielder would expect it, but the man - the *Asshole*, proper noun - was a shadow of an imitation of what he was looking for, minus all of the trust and with a heaping shitload of domineering assholery to make it even less worth his while.

“Lying my ass off,” he said, instead of anything expected. It felt good. Brilliant.

The lie had been bindings, ropes and chains, a sarcophagus mortared shut. It felt fucking amazing to see the surprise on the *Asshole’s* face, for the man to come to the sudden and very unfortunate realisation that one of them had been under the mistaken impression that the other had been telling the truth.

When he’d said ‘I want this’, the untruth of the statement had coiled in his belly.

“Lying my fucking ass off,” he repeated, turning to face the man he’d lied to, away from Will. He didn’t want his one friend to see the lie without knowing it for one. “We’re through. I’m not doing anything to my mate because of you. Keep the fucking gun up, Will.” He sliced a look at his friend when the muzzle dipped.

The *Asshole*, though, thought he still had a leash on him. That he held him still. That the meagre drippings of affection meant something to either of them. That the awkward fumblings and false,
painful playacting satisfied the coiled want deep in the hollows behind his weapon’s heart. That he hadn’t abused the trust offered. That he hadn’t failed so hard at being what was needed that he had done active harm.

The Asshole thought all that.

“You’re staying.” And it was an order, as if the negotiations still stood. “You’re taking care of this shite rabble.”

“I am, am I?” he said, rolling his shoulder and loosening his arms. “I don’t think I am.”

Not a flash of betrayal on the Asshole’s face. The surprise, it seemed, had been for the now, not the eventuality.

*I am a fucking terrible liar.*

“If you don’t…” There was a gun pointed at Will, too.

Will in danger gave him pause. Not that he hadn’t been in danger before.

The pause gave him an idea.

“Doesn’t matter,” he said and he lifted his hands.

Time froze as the hammers fell.

The bar stank of piss, barley, and peanut butter. She hated peanut butter. It made her sick to her stomach and reminded her of the one time she’d eaten a packet of peanuts and an eraser and horked up both not half an hour later. She had a food aversion for peanuts.

For erasers, too, but she didn’t have to smell them as on the regular.

Nobody told you that you were going to get as pissed mourning the end of a beautiful friendship, the kind they said ‘this looks like the start of a beautiful friendship’ about, as you would mourning a breakup of the more sexual/romantic sort.

“I fucked it up.” She spoke into the bar, her lips on the wood. She was pretty sure that bars didn’t get up and wander about, so she pretty much knew where it had been, so she was alright with snogging it. Tongue even. Her muscle coordination being shite at the moment was solely responsible for her over-affectionate contact with the bartop.

“You fucked it up,” Gwaine agreed, knocking back the rest of his pint and twitching his fingers for another round. Servos whirred and a vaguely humanoid barkeep poured for them both.

“She hates me forever,” she said, wallowing. This was absolutely wallowing. In misery. In alcohol.
Not in sick, though. She drew the line at sick. That’s why Gwaine was there, to drag her off home and hold her hair back if ‘sick’ became an issue.

“She hates you forever,” Gwaine agreed.

She lifted her head and glowered. “You’re not supposed to fucking agree with everything I say.”

“But when you’re right, you’re right.”

“Fuck, Gwaine. Just… just fuck.”

“It’s her deal. I’m just here to make sure you don’t die of alcohol poisoning.”

“I can’t fix it!” she wailed.

Gwaine looked surprisingly sober, though he had been matching her drink for drink. Maybe. She thought he’d been matching her drink for drink, but Gwaine was a sneaky one. She had also had an awful lot of the little crappy single-shots and her coherency had flown off. Like Morgana had flown off in a big, shiny, metal spaceship to a colony far, far away after she’d promised she would never write.

“You can’t fix it.”

“Why not?” Not pouting. Not making out with the bar. She propped herself up and angled herself at Gwaine.

“Because-” And Gwaine had been preparing, because he launched right into his little speech, “Because she’s Morgana and you’re Merlin and you drive each other fucking insane and unless one or both of you changes you’ll get along like cats in a small bag for the rest of your unnatural lives.”

Sniffling, she protested, “but I love her.”

Gwaine patted her on the back.

“Platonically,” she added, because that was the worst bit. They weren’t fucking. They both had other people who joyously partook in naked time with them. Separately. They had only kissed once and it still gave her the heebie-jeebies just thinking about it. She’d blocked it out of her mind for being way too traumatic. “So the fuck did she leave me for? Left me. With a ‘we’re breaking up’ speech.”

Gwaine became very wise when he was drunk. “Because you’re both too stubborn to be good for each other.”

She thought about it for a moment. “That’s true.” The bar still smelt like peanut butter. Someone was eating peanuts somewhere. She eyed the shells scattered across the bar in front of Gwaine. Traitor. She wrinkled her nose. “I don’t have to like it, though.”

Slinging one arm over her shoulders, Gwaine gave her a squeeze. “Nope. But you know what I say?”

She might as well make the best of Wise Gwaine. “What do they say?”

“If not in this life, then perhaps in the next!”

“Nobody says that.” She laughed, despite the peanut butter. Peanuts. If you leaned on a peanut it became butter. She almost spilt her drink as she tried to scrape the offending legume from her sleeve. Fucking Gwaine. He knew better. Peanuts.
“I do. You never know what fortune may bring! Never say never! Don’t stick your arse out an airlock!”

She laughed hard enough to give her hiccoughs. “Stop, stop, I’ll die.”

Gwaine kissed her square on the forehead. “Don’t die.”

“Okay,” she agreed. “Maybe next time we can start over. Morgana and me.”

Gwaine knew as well as she did that colony ships colonised. He said, “next time,” anyway.
The forward bay smelled of sweat and aluminium. Merlin wrinkled his nose as he stepped through the portal, Will at his elbow. The vaulted space was packed with people, his friends and neighbours from the Ealdor. They were five days out from the Ealdor, there were two more days until the earliest estimated arrival at Camelot, and Gwaine had been right. The bay was muggy, hot, and the walls were gasping faintly as the ship’s ventilation system tried to circulate enough air to keep it from being entirely unbearable.

His mother waved him down, trotting over to the portal before he had taken a handful of steps and halted him with a hug. “Dearheart! I didn’t think you’d be up and about this soon after all that trouble with your meds. Everyone’s been taking bets that you’d sleep until Camelot.”

“Wanted to see everyone.” Merlin extracted himself from her embrace and let his gaze skim the small kin-groupings and clusters. There wasn’t a lot of room to spread out. The drop pits for servicing the destriers had been turned into service centres, the tubes and dispensers designed to carry ichor and nutrients to the fighters modified to deliver water and other necessaries. Big signs above each pit declared what it contained and which lever to pull to make things go.

Stacks of padding and blankets, maybe half as much as required for the current population of the bay, stood against the far walls. Some of the Ealdorians would be sleeping straight on the ichor-stained skin of the deck, warmed only by the body heat of the ship. A long dog that had survived being smuggled into someone’s pod yipped and was silenced. One man was bent over a white cat that dozed in his lap, it’s fur patchy with stress and suspension burn from the chemical mixes meant for much larger mammals. There was a palpable sense of grief that hung over the seated groups, the sounds of conversation rivalling the drone of the unbuffered engines.

From where he was, Merlin could see dozens of small vigil shrines for both the Adolebat and the Ealdor.

A gaggle of children stampeded past, androgynous in far-too-big coveralls. Their laughter echoed in the space. Merlin could feel the Kilgharrah’s focus following them as they ran about chasing a small diagnostic orb that flew charting the magnetic field inside of the bay. Much to Merlin’s amusement, the ghost was manipulating the field to send their ball careening off walls at speed, causing the thing’s rudimentary trajectory calculators to chirrup in alarm at the instability. Its flashing lights caused shrieks and more laughter, in sharp contrast to the subdued sense of ‘waiting’ that Merlin got from the rest of refugees.

Still, Merlin had to admit that as cramped and inconvenient it was now, it could be a whole lot worse. They could all be dead, or their rescuers unfriendly. Even the ridiculously muscular Knight, standing uniformed at the far end of the bay was less guard than assistance.
“Here we are, in all our glory.” His mother looked tired as she smiled at him. When she gestured widely to indicate the Ealdorians at large, a few people waved.

He waved back, but no one came up to check on him personally. He wasn’t surprised. As tight-knit as the colonists were, and for all that his mother had delivered their well-wishes when she had tended him, he was the odd one out and always had been. Affectionately tolerated, perhaps, but all of the people who cared had already visited him in the infirmary. His surviving the bridge probably only reminded them of the others that hadn’t.

Merlin turned from their lukewarm welcome to his mother, who was watching him with a sympathetic smile.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

Will took that moment to slip away, heading toward a small stack of unoccupied chairs leaning together far enough away that he’d give them a little bit of privacy. They both watched him go.

When Will got to the chairs and began ostentatiously sorting through them for precisely the right one, Merlin said, “It’s fine. We’ll be there soon.”

“It’s not fine,” she said. “I wish everything had been different. That I had told you sooner. That I had told him sooner.”

“It’s-” And, okay, Merlin had had a few minutes to sit and think about this and he wasn’t really fine with it yet, but his fears loomed larger in his mind than his anger. “It’s no use wishing.”

“I screwed up and for that I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t. I mean- I’m not.” Merlin’s words failed him.

The preternatural intuition that came with parenthood shoved his mother’s guilt and apologies to the side, replacing them with concern. “What’s wrong?”

Quickly and as quietly as he could, Merlin filled her in on what Balinor had done to his magic and how vivid his nightmares had become, finishing with, “-and I’m still afraid I’ll go- go nova.”

“Sweetie.” His mother pulled him down into a tight hug, careful of his ribs, though his scars were sealed and he no longer hurt. “You won’t. Even if you do…”

She might have been trying for reassuring, but when she couldn’t finish the sentence, Merlin laughed into her shoulder. “We’ll all be beyond caring if I do, so I guess it doesn’t matter.”

“Stop being morbid.” She frowned up at him.

“I don’t know if I can control anything when the barrier drops. If it drops.” He pulled away and scrubbed his face with both hands. “The nightmares aren’t improving. I have no idea if there’s something I should be doing to make them go away.”

“I wish I could take them from you with the snap of my fingers.” She reached up to run her fingers over his hair and tweak one of his ears affectionately. “I hate seeing my baby boy in pain.”

“Muuuum,” Merlin complained, reassured in spite of himself.

Suddenly, she leaned in and spoke in a low voice. “I might have something - or someone - to help? I had hoped to send you to study aboard the Hallowcay, but I think I might have found the next best
thing. If I had known what ship he was stationed on, I would have sent you to him to begin with.”

Merlin blinked at her. “A teacher?”

“Yes,” she said, pleased with herself. “Gaius.”

“Gaius?!“ Merlin’s volume rose and Will started hurrying back over, dragging a chair behind him.

“Hush, hush, boy, you’ll set the whole bay to gossipping. Yes, Gaius.” A little put out that Merlin
did not share her enthusiasm, she frowned as Will set the chair down next to Merlin and gave them
both a pointed look. Merlin sat. She continued, “During the Purge, he and I helped shuttle magic
users off ships beholden to Camelot and out of harm’s way. We lost touch, more’s the pity, but…
darling, are you alright?”

Merlin might have been staring at her like she was mad. “You’re trying to tell me that Gaius, the
medic that has been tending me for almost a week, is your choice of tutor above anyone?”

“Well. Yes. You liked him well enough, didn’t you?” she asked. “I thought you’d be pleased.”

“Like doesn’t mean anything. Are you sure he’s safe?”

“Perfectly safe. Are you sure you’re alright?”

Merlin sat back in his chair and looked up at Will standing behind him. Will smirked down. Merlin
asked him, “Did you know about this?”

“Know about what?” Will asked like the arsehole he was.

Giving up on recruiting Will, Merlin tried to get his mum to see why he might be a teensy bit
concerned about entrusting his secrets to this particular man. “But he lives on the Kilgharrah. He’s a
citizen of Camelot. He serves the prince. Directly.”

“He also knew your father and was a talented - if minor - practitioner before he swore to King Uther.
He is discreet and knows more about magic than probably anyone outside of the Hallowcay.” She
grimaced, folding her arms across her chest. “I would rather you not be associated with the druids.”

“Were you going to tell me that before?”

“Why would I? The Hallowcay was the best place for you to be trained. I’m not going to put you at
risk in a big way just because you might be put at risk in a smaller way. The ship doesn’t openly
harbour druids, or the King would never let Lady Morgana include it in her tours of duty.”

“You don’t think he’s changed? Gaius?” Merlin asked.

His question gave her pause. “No,” she said slowly, “If there is anything more binding than risking
your lives to save others, I don’t know what it is.” Merlin let out his breath in a rush, almost willing
to accept that. His mother’s lips twitched into a faint smile. “I also could blackmail the shite out of
him with all the things the King doesn’t know. Before or after his oaths.”

Behind him, Will snorted. Merlin stared at his mother.

She laughed at his expression and added matter-of-factly, “I won’t need to, but I can if necessary. If I
tell him you’re willing to learn, can you sort yourself out from there? I think it’s best I not know
details. Just in case.”

“Nobody’s going to torture you, mum.” Merlin scrubbed as his face with his hands again. “I’m pretty
sure not even the King goes in for that sort of thing.”

“You’re a sweet boy,” was all his mother said.

Before Merlin could recover enough to answer that, the door behind them groaned open and he felt a touch on his shoulder. Looking up, he found Gwen standing next to Will with a smile on her face.

“You’re feeling better!” Gwen looked tired even if she sounded chipper. Her hair was coming out of her braids, and the dark circles under her eyes told him how long her shifts had been. Thinking about it, he hadn’t seen her since just before the shipwide announcement on the Adolebat. The reminder made him feel obscurely guilty, though he couldn’t decide for what.

Her smile was infectious. He grinned back. Then she said, “Excellent. I’m taking Will.”

“You are not,” Will objected. Merlin had to crane his neck around to see. “I’m tending Merlin. Then I’m taking a nap until we get to the Camelot.”

Merlin’s mother covered her mouth. Almost none of her laughter leaked past her hand. Will glowered at her anyway.

“Now that the accelerators have finished the job, I’ll be back to normal within twenty-four hours, according to Gaius,” Merlin said helpfully. “If Gwen needs you, I can manage.”

Will transferred his glare to Merlin, then finally to Gwen. “You don’t need me for anything.”

“I kind of do, otherwise I wouldn’t be stealing you,” Gwen said. Her voice remained gentle, but exhaustion dragged at her syllables. “Your taking care of Merlin means that I know your abilities, which in turn means I can trust you with minor Counsellor duties.”

The chair Merlin sat in creaked as Will leaned hard on the back with both hands. Merlin twisted to get a better look. Eyes closed, Will suddenly appeared as exhausted as Gwen did, something Merlin had not noticed. He was very obviously wan, his shoulders slumped, and Merlin wondered how he’d missed the tiny vertical lines that had appeared between his eyebrows.

Coming to his defence, Merlin said, “Counsellor might not be the best idea. Will has a bit of a tongue and a temper on him. He’s just too tired to use it.”

“And too worried,” Merlin’s mum added.

Gwen blinked at both of them, then turned to Will. “Would you accept a position as an apprentice Counsellor for the duration of the voyage?”

Surprising Merlin, Will lifted his gaze, nodded, and said, “Fuck me. Why not.”

“Thank you,” Gwen said. “If you don’t mind, you should come with me now.”

“Brilliant.”

Gwen breathed a laugh. “Don’t worry, you’ll be briefed sitting down.”

“Even better.” Will rapped Merlin on the head with his knuckles. “You be alright, yeah? If you relapse or sommat while I’m not there to watch you, I’m never forgiving you.”

Rubbing his head, Merlin said, “Don’t scar anyone too badly.”

“I’ll be a smashing Counsellor. Clever. Silver tongued.”
“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Merlin said. He told Gwen, “Don’t let him talk to anyone.”

“I’ll send Sefa to help Merlin back when he’s ready,” Gwen said to his mum.

Everything sorted, his mum escorted Gwen and Will to the portal and out. When she returned to Merlin in his chair, she raised her eyebrows. “Do you need help?”

“Not mostly. I wasn’t kidding when I said the accelerators had kicked in all proper-like. Took a bit.”

“I worry about you. Was it your-” She waved her hand in the air near her head.

“Maybe?” He shrugged. “They just weren’t working. Then they were. Then they slowed down. Now they’re sped up again to the point I can feel them working. It’s a bit mad. I don’t think it will take nearly as long as Gaius said until I’m me again. If Will hadn’t brought me this chair, I’d probably be alright to be standing about.”

She smoothed his hair down and then dropped a kiss on the top of his head. “Take care of yourself, dearheart.”

There was a small kerfluffle near one of the drop pits labelled WATER and someone shouted, “Hunith!”

Merlin’s mum straightened and sighed before shouting back, “One minute!” She dropped her voice and closed her eyes. “I’m glad we’re almost there. For love of mercy, give me strength.”

“Running you ragged?” Merlin’s teasing tone had her opening her eyes and smiling.

“I’ve become arbiter and advocate. You caught me in a lull, but with the chain of command dead, we’ve had to sort out who is now in charge of what.” She paused. “Mostly it’s me.”

Grinning up at his mum all proud-like, Merlin said, “Just what you’ve always wanted. ‘If you want something done right, you better do it yourself.’”

“Bite your tongue,” his mum said, then laughed. “The only reason that I’m not as ragged as your young friend is I know how to take sleep where I can get it. Experience and all, though it’s been years. You know it’s funny-”

She stopped and brought her hand to her mouth. Her expression changed briefly to a grimace and she released a half-sob, half-laugh. Directing a sad, fond look toward the refugees beyond them, she shook her head.

Merlin shoved himself to his feet and folded her into a hug, resting his cheek on the side of her head. She let his hug last for the span of one deep breath before she gently disengaged and waved him off with another laugh, genuine enough for all it was breathy and faint.

“Ah, dearheart, it’s nothing so bad. It’s just this whole thing reminds me of the Purge. Every skill I never wanted to use again is suddenly vital. It’s horrible and hilarious, and none of them dare ask how I know how to coax ship systems into providing for us. Especially when these young mechanics scratch their heads over the very possibility.”

“Mum…” Merlin didn’t know what to say, so he just squeezed her shoulders and stepped back.

“Don’t worry about me. Memories are merely memories. Good or bad it makes no difference.” She patted his cheek. “Though if I stay here telling you all of them, I might have a mutiny on my hands.”
“They’ll need you when we reach the Camelot,” Merlin said. “Arbiter and Advocate. It’s practically a title.”

“We’ll see if they think so.”

His mum’s name was called again, higher pitched and with greater urgency.

“Coming!” she shouted back before turning back one last time to reach up to tweak Merlin’s chin. “You’re going to wait for the Sefa girl?”

Merlin took a deep breath, feeling his scars stretch, and shook his head.

She snorted, patted his cheek, and then turned toward the bay and the knot of Ealdorians who had been calling her name. Striding toward them, she raised her voice. “What now? Simmons, I swear to you-”

Suppressing a grin, Merlin turned toward the door dragging his chair. He did not envy his mother trying to get them all to cooperate.
When Arthur issued a command, he expected it to be obeyed, whether he was on the Kilgharrah or
on the Camelot. On the Kilgharrah he was Captain, the next best thing to a supreme authority or
some sort of deity. On the Camelot he was his father’s son, heir to the ship and the greater Kingdom,
well-within his rights to expect obedience. Finding Merlin meandering down the corridor, barefoot
and barely dressed, breaking two of his express orders, all he could do was stop and stare.

Not only was the basic shirt they had found for Merlin too short, riding up at the bottom to expose
his midriff, the drawstring pants cut off above his ankles. He looked like a skinny giant, one hand
raised above his head to keep him from bumping into any irregularities in the ceiling, much like
Arthur did when he was striding about in armour on an unstable deck.

On one hand, it was brilliant that he looked hale and whole - if pale and a little unsteady. There was
height and substance to him again, vitality returned. Arthur flexed his hands, a shiver running up his
spine at the memory of the eerie lightness of the bodybag. On the other, Arthur distinctly
remembered confining him to the infirmary and assigning him an unofficial guard.

Merlin spotted him and halted mid-stride, his blue eyes widening in surprise. Again, Arthur found
himself waiting for a repeat of the name incident, but there was nothing, not even a tickle at the back
of his mind.

“What are you doing here?” Arthur demanded the moment he recalled his wits.

“Going from the forward bay to the infirmary?” Merlin’s breathing grew shorter and he glanced over
his shoulder as if he might run. Arthur really did not want that at all and circled sideways to both give
Merlin the illusion he could go either forward or backward and Arthur a chance to catch up if he did
decide to bolt.

“Where’s-” Arthur couldn’t remember the rotation and didn’t pause to look up the assignments,
bullring ahead with, “Whoever was supposed to be watching you?”

Instead of answering, Merlin planted his feet, raised his chin, and said, “I don’t need a minder. I told
you. I’m practically better.”

Arthur put his hand on the corridor bulkhead and tried to control his temper.

Merlin backed himself against the opposite wall, both hands splayed against the skin and panelling,
his shoulders pressed against the curve that began near the ceiling. Gaius’s words cornered and
defensive applied, but beyond marching away and pretending he hadn’t seen the big-eared, blue-
eyed liability waltzing around the ship unescorted, Arthur had no idea how to soothe him. He wasn’t
used to dealing with the skittish.
"You do remember you’re talking to the Captain, do you not?" Arthur asked, amping up his arrogance, licking his lips, and staying carefully the width of the corridor away from Merlin.

There was a flicker of a smile across Merlin’s face, so fast that Arthur nearly missed it, and then his eyes settled on Arthur’s arm. With a faint frown, Arthur followed the gaze, then let out a snort. He’d put on an off-duty uniform so Elyan could service his mods. He was missing a sleeve and most of the fabric on his torso, revealing the panels set into his chest replacing most of his musculature. He looked back up at Merlin and shrugged, knowing that it would set off a dozen small flickering lights as his integrated circuitry responded to his intent.

A look of fascination crept into Merlin’s expression, but then he wouldn’t have seen any heavily modded individuals unless he’d spent time on ships that weren’t owned by the Essetir. The really impressive cyborgs lived on the Nemeth, and their systems put Arthur’s to shame.

“How’s your hand?” Arthur hadn’t meant to ask.

“Oh, um.” The hand held out for inspection was crisscrossed with tiny pink lines, the result of bandages and after-the-fact accelerators. “It was alright before anything else.”

Arthur stepped forward to grasp the outstretched hand, curling his metal palm beneath Merlin’s knuckles and grasping his wrist with the other. He brushed his thumb lightly over the fading scratches. Some of the guilt at the damage he’d caused lifted. No scars. Not like the ones that peeked out from beneath Merlin’s shirt, down past his ribcage and onto his abdominal muscles. They were shiny, pink, and striated with faint white that shifted as he breathed.

His eyes drifted up to meet Merlin’s and he saw a wariness there, as well as the faint flicker of anger. And a challenge.

It was the challenge that made Arthur bristle. He thinned his lips and clipped out. “Even though you’re healed, I don’t want you roaming around outside of the infirmary. You were given orders.”

“I’ll go mad.” Merlin’s whipcrack response was just this side of insolent.

Like a rank recruit, Arthur winced and dropped Merlin’s hand to take a step back. Staring at Merlin, he controlled his breathing, calling up his blood oxygenation stats on his ocular display to make sure that the strangling sensation was all in his head.

He flexed his modded arm. He’d given himself away. He wasn’t prepared to handle a man that he hadn’t made a decision about yet.

Merlin’s eyes widened. “Metaphorically. Metaphorically entirely. I wouldn’t really go mad, ‘mad is bad on-ship, save mad for the kingdoms’, isn’t that what they say? You won’t need to lock me in the brig, not at all. I’m sure I can find something to do that is infirmary-bound, but I really did want to see my mum, who is Hunith, who is supposed to have been Ealdor’s advocate so you probably maybe might know her, don’t you-”

“That’s part of why I assigned someone to keep you company.” Arthur spoke over him.

Merlin halted his distracting babble, his wariness redoubling. He curled his shoulders forward defensively, shifting one forward and glancing down each branch of the hall again. He did not look afraid, necessarily, but definitely jumpy and… frustrated. With himself or with Arthur, Arthur couldn’t decide.

“That is appreciated,” Merlin said. “But I wasn’t roaming.”
“I don’t want you near my crew, either.”

“I’m not going to-” Merlin stopped, staring at Arthur. “What do you think I’m going to do?”

That was a question that Arthur couldn’t answer.

Merlin answered for him. “Is it because of how you found me on the bridge with- with the sorcerer?”

“Yes,” Arthur said, because it was true, and because he sounded like an idiot when he threw out other very logical explanations that had only the barest relationship with reality. “It is. I don’t know how you’ve kept alive for so long.”

When Merlin opened his mouth to say something inconvenient, Arthur ruthlessly cut him off. “No. I don’t want to know. I can’t know.”

The word ‘can’t’ lingered between them until Merlin got it and his expression hooded. “Because sorcery is illegal.”

“I would rather you recover without an official inquiry. Even residual spellcraft requires in-depth scrutiny of an individual and all of those the individual has registered relationships with.” Arthur paused to swallow and spelled it out. “Parent-to-child. Pseudo-sibling. Caretakers in injury.”

There was no mistaking Arthur’s threat, even though all he was doing was quoting chapter and verse.

“You fucking arsehole,” Merlin said, flat and furious.

The heat beneath Merlin’s words made Arthur draw himself up, lift his chin and call upon every diplomatic pissing match he’d ever been forced to endure at his father’s side. A scrap of a boy from a dead colony ship did not get to speak to him like that, not when he was doing him a fucking favour and warning him.

“If I get reports from my crew of oddities happening around you, the lingering effects of the spells the… hero Balinor cast upon you,” Arthur matched Merlin’s angry stare, then turned up the lumen output on his implants so that he could see the reflection of blue off Merlin’s pale face. “Then I will be forced to investigate.”

The ocular flare had no impact. Instead, Merlin balled his fists and worked his jaw, flushing. Then - a small smile snuck onto his face.

“So you don’t want to investigate,” he said.

“Rather not.”

“May I ask why?”

“Because-” Arthur began before he caught himself. He studied Merlin and the calculating look he wore.

After a brief hesitation, measured helpfully by his internal systems to be ‘just long enough for a conversational partner to notice’ according to statistical feedback, Arthur changed his answer. “Because the Glatissant were after the sorcerer. Which- I know it’s mad, that Glatissant don’t think like that, but it’s the only explanation that makes everything fit together.”

All of the blood in Merlin’s face drained away and he staggered forward. Reacting without thought,
Arthur caught him, his stomach sinking in dread. He hadn’t thought his words through. Arthur had been accused of being dense before, but that was Morgana and even he could perform simple addition. This little detail was making an impact, which meant he knew something. “Merlin—”

Merlin’s fingers dug into the flesh of Arthur’s left arm and scraped across the metal of his right. “They were after…”

Arthur held him upright and spoke low into Merlin’s ear, hoping to seed trust with trust. “The sorcerer. Glatissant don’t turn away from doors when they reach them, and they don’t pour their entire force into a single fight for no reason, no matter how distracting. The official story is that everyone on the bridge put up a brilliant fight, and that if we wanted our ‘one tactic change’ for the day, it would be that you pissed them off by providing a challenge. But that wasn’t the only change, and they don’t learn that quickly. They were after the sorcerer.”

Subdued, Merlin asked, “Who knows about this?”

“Me. You. Others have suspicions but not the whole picture.”

“Why tell me?”

Internally, Arthur cursed him for asking all the questions that he couldn’t answer, like he was going down a checklist. *Because you might actually be able to do something with the information, unlike the rest of us* wasn’t exactly a sane response on Arthur’s part, no matter how certain he was now of its truth. He gave him a sideways explanation instead. “What if they can smell you? Sense the spells cast on you? Every other person on that bridge is dead.”

It was a dirty tactic and Arthur knew it, but he wasn’t above using it, not if it kept Merlin from thinking too hard about his crap reasoning to notice the undercurrent of fear.

“Why did you even bring me on board?”

“We don’t leave people behind and, might I remind you, that the Kilgharrah is a first-rate, functional warship.”

“Accelerators are resource-expensive.”

“They’re for injuries. You were injured.”

“You’re taking the word of a dead sorcerer on faith.”

Merlin’s words were a little too close to making everything twenty times more complicated for Arthur’s liking. He snapped, “Why are you pushing? Do you want me to say that I made a mistake?”

Silence. Then, “No.”

They still had their hands on each other’s shoulders. Merlin had his feet under him again, but neither of them let go. For all that his voice was steady, Merlin was shivering, though his stupid getup was probably to blame for that. He wasn’t even wearing shoes. The ship’s bodyheat was usually comfortable enough for humans, but it was calibrated for humans wearing clothing.

“Then don’t be an idiot,” Arthur said. “Go to the infirmary, find a thermal, and keep out of harm’s way.”

Eventually, Merlin nodded and started to laugh. Arthur had to resist the urge to shake him and ask what the fuck was so funny. It was just a little bit of a laugh, quiet and under his breath, but it still
threw Arthur enough that when Leon’s voice came over his internal comm, he startled and earned a funny look.

“Leon, go ahead.” Arthur said aloud at Merlin’s puzzled expression.

Merlin’s confusion cleared and he nodded, dropping his hands from Arthur’s arms and stepping away.

“Captain.” Leon’s words echoed inside of Arthur’s skull, though the phenomena was purely psychosomatic. He sounded worried. “There has been an incident on six. Could you-”

Leon halted. The connection was still active, but he wasn’t speaking.

Arthur glanced at Merlin, then went to stand several paces away to subvocalise at his first officer. “Spit it out.”

“Could you collect the Emrys boy from the infirmary?” came Leon’s question.


“According to our records- and I double and triple checked - he might be the only one we have aboard that can help.”
Chapter 15

The Kilgharrah had given Merlin no warning, so when Arthur grabbed his hand and said, “Change of plans,” and began to yank him in the exact opposite direction from the infirmary, hedragged his feet to give himself time to ask questions. The pertinent ones like, ‘Where are we going?’ and ‘After all that, I don’t even get to lie down?’ and ‘Can I at least grab a thermal?’ were all thoroughly ignored by the Captain.

He did get an answer to ‘what’s wrong?’. It was not at all comforting.

“There’s been an incident several decks down,” Arthur said, once more entirely Captain except for the part where he held Merlin’s hand to tug him along. He didn’t even seem to realise he was doing it, not that Merlin wanted to object. Even odder was that the deep angry bits of Merlin that he hadn’t quite sorted out yet were mollified by the gesture.

Merlin was having trouble deciding about Arthur. He was mad at him, that was certain, and not in the least because he was giving him ten different answers to every question. Trite ‘for your safety’ and ‘for the safety of my crew’. Residual spellcasting. The lingering scent of magic. Every bit of it was bullshit and a half. All of his answers were nothing more than excuses for the fact that Arthur was fucking with him - out of fear or arrogance or because he wasn’t used to being called on his shit. Merlin had no idea the root cause, but he didn’t like it.

In a way, though, he was almost grateful. At least he’d been warned. Warned and threatened and given a glimpse of Arthur puffed up with bravado.

It helped not at all that Merlin was out of his depth too. He was pretty sure that only Balinor’s spell had kept him from doing something very regretful to the Captain. Out of reflex. To do something to get Arthur away and perhaps out of sight. The way things had been going, that would have probably meant a kinetic pulse to fling him down the corridor or something that would messily shove him through the nearest bulkhead while Merlin fled.

But that was old panic. He’d already been freaking out about that his every waking moment since the Ealdor’s death. It was the threat in Arthur’s words, worse than the impulse to lash out, that called up a fear that was as ancient as the dreams he kept having.

‘I will not choose you.’ It hadn’t been said it in so many words, but it was clear enough. ‘I will not choose you, so do not put it to the test.’

The implication was worse than the worry that he, being magic, would draw the Glatissant down upon them. He was very glad now that he had decided to join his father. If the Glatissant had been after Balinor or just ‘magic’ in general, learning that staying with the pods would have been absolutely the wrong choice had been a shock, but a welcome one. The only welcome part of their
entire conversation.

For all the warmth of Arthur’s hand in his (how like the man to want to control his fears), a chill settled in Merlin’s bones.

Arthur spoke over his shoulder. “Leon’s turned off the emergency alert system so as not to panic your people. You were volunteered to assist.”

Further questions were met with a shake of Arthur’s head. Merlin was just along for the ride. Halfway there, Kilgharrah’s focus caught up with them and settled into the back of Merlin’s mind, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

*How do you feel about wading?*

“Fuck me,” Merlin muttered under his breath.

Arthur did not give any indication that he’d heard, but Merlin did not intend to carry on a conversation with the ghost while attached.

With the Kilgharrah so pleased with himself, Merlin was pretty sure that the ghost had done something stupid. He really hadn’t wanted his tenure as the ghost’s liaison to start with a panic. The way the back Arthur’s neck flushed and the urgency with which they made their way down through the spiralling corridors told Merlin that the ghost had done something extremely worrisome for it to have been routed directly to the Captain.

*Brilliant. Thanks, Kilgharrah,* Merlin thought as hard as he could in the ghost’s direction. Since the Kilgharrah did not respond, Merlin probably needed to figure out how to project before he tried again.

He began to compare his surroundings to the schematics he’d memorised even before his apprenticeship. Galley-class Kilgharrah out of the Camelot. Siblings in design with the Avalon and the Southron. He had never thought to use any of his carefully hoarded (usually useless) trivia on Camelot warships, especially since it had not been the Kilgharrah itself that he had studied. The Avalon’s ‘never launched’ status had captured his imagination, especially as no further details had been available no matter how many ships they docked and swapped data with. He had studied the Avalon extensively, down to picking out which bunk would be his in the engineer’s quarters.

If sibling ships were built along the same schematic line, then…

Merlin sighed. They were heading down to the ichor exchanges below engineering, right into the hot, sticky belly of the ship where the interaction between the engines and the heart of the beast were synchronised. It was an overwhelming emergency if something was wrong down here in the normal course of operation. With the Kilgharrah controlling the damage, however, it was probably more like him holding his breath and setting off all the warning bells. Automatic biotechnological systems really did not like ghosts instigating anomalous behaviour.

This sort of thing shouldn’t need Merlin.

The heat increased as they took a shortcut down not two dozen meters from a lift access. Merlin didn’t ask. When they reached level six, Arthur paused. Before Merlin could process what he was trying to do, Arthur manoeuvred Merlin to the fore and began to push him onward from behind, a hand on either shoulder. Facing down the empty hall, the hairs on the back of Merlin’s neck rose as Arthur leaned in to speak.

“If I didn’t know better,” Arthur said, “I would say that it was highly convenient for you to be our
only solution to fix this quickly.”

Merlin swallowed hard, wishing he could turn and see Arthur’s expression. “Highly convenient.” His words came out strangled, though it was less because of the implicit threat and more because Arthur’s thumbs were resting on either side of his spine, his fingers curled along the slope of his shoulders. He became very aware that Arthur’s mods were top quality and bleeding edge technology. Metal though one of his thumbs was, they were equally warm and putting equal pressure on the back of Merlin’s neck.

When he’d been asking Gwen if he could hit on Arthur, he had been only half in earnest, trying to take his mind off of everything else. Now he was just glad that he’d asked.

“They’re waiting for us,” Arthur said, marching Merlin forward.

‘They’ turned out to be half a dozen mechanical engineers in their reflective vacuum-suits, the head of Engineering himself, and Gwaine. The pilot grinned at Merlin, then touched the butt of the sword at his hip to indicate he was here in a Knight’s capacity. He wiggled his eyebrows in reassurance before his eyes slid to Arthur and he sobered.

Merlin’s shoulders must have relaxed when he grinned back at Gwaine. Arthur’s grip tightened for a moment before he released him.

“Engineering, report,” Arthur commanded as he stepped forward and away from Merlin. “Leon made it sound dire.”

Between the six mechanics in their shiny suits, they had plugged into anything and everything, pulling rubbery panels from the bulkheads and exposing a mixture of conduits and electrical ports. Half of the components they were jacked into pulsed, the other half hummed beneath the powerful electric field generated so close to the engines. Normally, most of that would be dampened. Merlin narrowed his eyes at the panels. Worse than the hum were the slack, dark conduits that should be bioluminescent as they shed the static caused by ichor flow. That wasn’t good.

The man addressed as ‘Engineering’ let out his breath, then chuckled ruefully. “It’s a complete mystery. I’m waiting for a couple of diagnostics to finish before I can give you much detail, so- is this our candidate?”

He grinned at Merlin and extended a hand to shake with the confidence of a man in his own domain, even if his domain wasn’t being particularly cooperative at the moment. “Lucan,” he introduced himself. “Chief of Engineering.”

He looked alert enough, though he had circles beneath his eyes - to be fair, most of the crew did - and a faint shadow of a beard too long between tendings on his already dark jaw. His brilliant smile rivalled Gwaine’s, though Gwaine had one hundred percent more hair on his head. He caught Merlin staring at his bald scalp, winked, and said, “Lost it all in an unfortunate acid accident.”

Merlin had no idea what was going on, so he tried to smile back. “That’s terrible.”

“Maybe, but it means I don’t have to get it cut as often to stay within regulations.” Lucan deadpanned. Shifting his attention with the efficiency of a man well used to wrangling minions and assimilating a great deal of data in very little time, Lucan plucked a data relay from the outstretched palm of one of his mechanics and held it up. His eyes lit amber as his ocular mods activated. The relay glowed in sympathy.

“I put in a request for Cybernetics to tend to the one who discovered the issue,” Lucan said without
segue. He tucked the relay into one of his belt pockets to focus on Arthur. “Tyr - poor bastard - had that new toolbox of his fried nearly out of his arm.”

“Fried?” Arthur asked, frowning.

Lucan folded his arms and snorted. “Fried. We have a localised field of unknown origin that overloads the majority of biomods. Trips their circuitry. Shorts them out. If you go ten steps that way-” he jerked his thumb over his shoulder, “Your pretty arm would be so much dead weight. Tingles my eyeballs if I even get close.”

“Fuck.” Merlin smacked his forehead with his palm and held it there, closing his eyes. This ghost was going to give him an aneurysm.

One of the mechanics looked up and met his eyes curiously, but she was the only one paying attention to him at the moment. Now that she wasn’t face-first in her work, he recognised Sefa. Apparently she didn’t just work on the destriers. He gave her a half-smile that she returned in commiseration. At least the field explained why nobody had ventured further down the hall to the exchanges to figure out why not all of the pumps were working. And why the magnetic dampeners were malfunctioning.

The Kilgharrah had manufactured an actual emergency. Merlin was both impressed and seriously, seriously concerned.

“Do you have any conjectures? Transfer me?” Arthur’s eyes lit pale blue to match the amber of Lucan’s as the data flowed from one to the other.

“I’m still trying to figure out how it’s possible,” Lucan said dryly, “Shouldn’t be. Obviously is. Those three are chasing down rabbit holes that might let me know the how.” The three indicated each lifted a hand and waved before going back about their tasks. “Right now, I’m almost more interested in what they’ll find than really worried about the breakdown. We have leeway. All of our redundant systems are functional, but - obviously - the primaries are more efficient. These other three are tracing the point of failure remotely, mocking up alternative repair options and possible instructions in case we need to fall back to an unskilled modless team, and Sefa- Sefa was getting me everything she knew about Merlin here.”

All attention once more turned to Merlin when Lucan mentioned him. Arthur in particular had a speculative look on his face.

“So I’m here because I have no mods,” Merlin said. Arthur snorted.

Of the other mechanics, four of them had eyes that glowed amber or grey or blue under tiny pinpoints of light set into the edges of their eye-sockets. Several had built-in toolboxes, much like Gwen’s wings, but set into panels in an arm or thigh or the side of their ribs. Only one of them had embellished themselves with decorative tattooing that shifted as they worked diagnostics. They were all modded to some extent or the other. Useful, practical mods all, but mods nevertheless.

“Got it in one,” Lucan said.

“Are all your mechanics modded?” Merlin was surprised and not surprised. The Kilgharrah was beholden to the Camelot, the Ealdor to the Essetir. Essetir would never spare so many resources. Camelot would probably not even blink at the expenditure.

Lucan bobbed his head, his eyes drifting off to the side as he thought the question over. “Our youngest got her first about six months ago. A simple magnetic field reader, sure, but those are the
sort that hurt the worst when they fry. You, however, are not modded all. You were about to be assigned as a mechanic, were you not?"

“Uh-” Technically. Hallowcay and JCO plans notwithstanding, “Yes?”

“How familiar are you with warships? I know you were trained almost entirely on a demense.”

Here, Merlin had to laugh. “I’ve had the printouts for the Avalon plastered on my ceiling since I was eight.” Several of the mechanics chuckled at the admission. “You could say I’m familiar.”

“Brilliant! Sefa. Escort Merlin to the edge of the field and paint a demarcation. Merlin - take what tools you need, we have an array of mundane ones that should remain unaffected by the field - and let us know if you have any issues.”

Sefa came to take Merlin’s elbow. Her hand was sweaty. Small wonder, too. Of all of them, only Merlin was dressed appropriately for the heat. The full duty uniforms of the mechanics and Gwaine meant they all had damp temples and drooping collars. Both Arthur and Lucan were holding up better, but Arthur had the benefit of his bared torso and - from the looks of it - artificial cooling systems that serviced his chest mods. Merlin glanced down at his shirt and trousers and sighed. If Kilgharrah hadn’t been pulling his leg about wading…

“The exchange right down the hall - it’s not pumping. Could you-” Merlin grasped his hem and pulled his shirt up over his head, balling it up and throwing it at Gwaine. “Could you bring me new trousers for when I’m done?” He might as well get this over with. At least the mod-frying field would give him a chance to take the Kilgharrah to task in peace.

When he did not get an immediate answer from any of them, Merlin glanced around to see them all staring at his chest. Ah. The Glatissant scratches had healed, yes, but they had left behind wide scars, still shiny and raw-looking. Merlin wiped his hand down his chest to feel the ridges. Definitely scars. Surely they’d seen damage like this before, if not by beast then by mechanical accident. The pause lengthened and Merlin began to feel self-conscious.

Arthur looked thoughtful. His regard made Merlin want to blush. Even Lucan looked nonplussed. Merlin turned to Gwaine for help and found blatant appreciation in the man’s expression.

Still, at Merlin’s silent plea, Gwaine broke the silence, “One pair of not-completely-soaked-in-ichor trousers coming right up. I’m sure we’ll have rustled something up before you get back.”

“Yes,” Lucan recovered, “The exchange is probably the best place to start. Tools. Yes, hand them to- excellent. Good luck.”

Loaded down with a closed carrier full of heavy metal that clanked when Merlin hefted it, he followed Sefa down the hall and left everyone behind. He could feel eyes on his bare shoulders as he walked and forced himself not to hunch.

Sefa led him around a curve and out of line of sight before pulling her hair bandanna loose and mopping her face with it. “Bit jealous,” she said, indicating his lack of clothing with her chin. The motion was casual; she’d seen every bit of him during the recovery. “Broiling down here at the best of times. I swear back and forth that it’s twice as hot, even though cooling is supposedly still up.”

“Could be. The exchanges regulate pressure and flow and pull away a great deal of heat just through basic circulation.” Merlin said absently, putting one hand to the wall and feeling the eerie sensation of a static panel. None of the conduits beneath were carrying anything they should. The lack of the ship’s constant motion was enough to send a thrill of adrenaline through Merlin’s system, even
though he knew that the Kilgharrah wouldn’t do anything to jeopardise his crew.

“I know all that.” Sefa sounded annoyed, her words muffled for a moment as she resettled her bandanna. “It’s just the difference between theory and practice.”

“Sorry.” He offered an apologetic smile, dipping his head to look down at her. “Still used to parroting everything I know ad nauseam.”

She shook her head, eyes rolling. “Apprentices.”

Another few steps and she threw a hand up halt them, pulling a small blush painter from her uniform. Very carefully, she traced what Merlin assumed was the edge of the field with the painter, the device coaxing plastic and fibres into a raised line, causing the ship to ‘blush’ for her. He idled, resisting the urge to complain to her that the toolbox had way more in it than he would ever possibly need and it was just weighing them down. He had to keep up appearances.

She pointed at the line when she was done. “Beyond that, you’re on your own. We’ve still got manuals and schematics if you need them, and if you hit anything tricky, I can set team on it. At worst, we can have you set up a remote system. Just- be careful.”

“I will.” Merlin said, offering his palm. They shook hands and he grinned. “Back soon. Don’t wait up.”

“This shit is weird.”

“Full report when I get back,” he promised.

Sefa kept her eyes on him until he disappeared around another curve in the corridor leading to the exchange. Above him, conduits looped through panels and access points. The light dimmed as the overheads grew fewer and further between. Little status lights winked at him from every wall. He had never been alone this deep inside a ship, always paired, and it was like he was eight all over again, lost and turned around, trying to fight the sense of pressure and weight crushing in on all sides in the gloom.

The access passageway narrowed the closer Merlin got until the point where even his shoulders, as skinny as he was, were touching the flesh of either wall. The heat increased. The light faded. The musty scent of the ship itself grew to overwhelming.

Finally, Merlin judged himself out of earshot even if his words were to echo. “The fuck, Kilgharrah? Frying mods? What did you do to that Tyr fellow?”

_Fate only, I am afraid. He was the first to find my field._

“So you fried his toolbox?”

_An acceptable sacrifice. The Lady Guinevere is a talented cyberengineer. The child will be fully functional as soon as she is done with him._

“So what makes it okay to damage your crew? Was I wrong to defend you to Will?”

_Of course not._

“Then this is not okay. I didn’t know you had the power to do this. If I had I would have told you to find some other way.”
The Kilgharrah’s smugness faded and Merlin could feel the ghost’s conflict through the soles of his feet. Merlin’s magic buzzed beneath his skin, the first spike of activity he’d felt from it since he’d awoken.

*I will not harm crew, even for the greater good.*

Merlin padded to a stop in front of the closed portal where the hall ended. He abandoned the (heavy, stupid) toolbox and furrowed his brow. “You don’t sound convinced.”

*You are Emrys. Who am I to disagree?*

“A warship. With turrets. And, apparently, the ability to fry people’s mods. Don’t do that shit, okay? Keep it as a defensive tactic only,” Merlin said, shaking his head and wondering at the renewed surge of his magic against Balinor’s spell barrier.

*As you say.*

Merlin, however, had more pressing things to do than try and figure out the odd note in Kilgharrah’s mental voice. The ghost had manufactured an actual emergency and while Lucan had mentioned the redundant systems were all functioning normally, this entire section of the ship was going to grow hotter and hotter until other things started to fail. So. Portal.

The portal was not an iris. Instead, Merlin had to manually open the door by removing the thick bar across the front from its clamps and twisting the interlocking seal clasps free of the frame. When he pulled the door open, it swung outward on actual hinges. A blast of wet heat slapped him in the face. It smelled of rot and algae and clotting chemicals, and his heart sank. He coughed and held his hands over his nose, trying not to sneeze or gag, and peered inside.

The exchange reservoir began half a meter below the bottom of the door. Thick emerald sludge filled it, bubbling slightly from gas pockets released from conduits not supposed to be empty. Merlin stared at the ichor and really, really did not want to get in. The smell reminded him of the bleeding Ealdor as it died and that was enough to turn his stomach and force him to sit down.

At least this exchange wasn’t active. Merlin clung to the memory he had shared with Gwen, of his and Will’s mistakes leading to wading through the ship’s lifeblood, looking for fallen tools with their toes. That, at least, was a happy association. Even so, it took Merlin several minutes of increasing heat before he could even think about climbing in. The Kilgharrah said nothing.

The ichor was slimy and blood-warm against his bare toes. At the first touch he grimaced. “I hate you so much right now you don’t even know.”

*Ah- The smugness returned to the ghost’s thoughts. But I do, young warlock. You are projecting.*

Merlin snarled several expletives and slid into the exchange’s reservoir. His feet did not touch bottom until the ichor reached his ribs. If Sefa had tried to take a dip, it would have probably come up past her shoulders. The ichor closed around him, soaking through his trousers and clinging to his skin in globules that felt neither hot nor cold on his skin. The core temperature of a ship was slightly lower than that of a human, and the ichor was just thick enough to make wading unpleasant.

The far wall of the reservoir held all of the interesting knobs and valves, so Merlin headed there. At first glance, nothing appeared amiss. Nothing connected to the magnetic dampeners, nothing that led to the ichor scrubbers, nothing that would tell him why the pumps were off. No blinking red lights said ‘this thing is busted and needs to be turned back on’. The engine this particular reservoir served was probably already starting to run dirty and despite the alarms going off elsewhere on the ship,
everything in here was reporting that it was working just fine, thanks.

The Kilgharrah did not volunteer any information whatsoever and since Merlin couldn’t extend his senses to check for badness in the magical way, Merlin sighed and started a basic troubleshooting algorithm, one of the first repair methods he’d learnt back in his introductory engineering course. Start at the left, check for blockage, check for stress, check for- the list went on and on, repeated for every do-hickey and whatchamacallit that did anything beyond sit there and look pretty.

He was only a third of the way through his diagnostic when his fingers found a large lump beneath the fleshy wall. Merlin frowned. The lump was bizarre, frankly, because it suggested a growth. Or maybe the lump that a contracted muscle would make beneath skin.

Merlin closed his eyes. “I don’t even want to deal with you. You are breaking every sodding rule I’ve ever heard of. This is an actively damaging tangle, and it’s not something you’d be able to undo yourself if something happened.” The ghost, if anything, grew even more deeply self-satisfied. “This is dangerous. What if I can’t repair it?”

No reply.

Putting one hand firmly on the wall next to the lump, Merlin brushed his fingers across the top. The ships were living creatures with bones and metal supports to give them shape and form, yes, but they were not static living creatures. Their bodies were malleable, and those humans who would work and live on them learnt how to coax the creature-ships to shift and change. On the small scale, this meant drawing lines on the skin of the walls and helping the ship repair damage. On the grand scale, more than one ancient ship had been refurbished to contain an entirely new internal configuration, one square foot at a time.

The Kilgharrah had managed to induce a system tangle, all of the various criss-crossing conduits and wires all interfering with one another. Merlin repeated the light, encouraging motion until the lump started to relax back into place. It was like soothing a skittish cat or barking dog: slow movements easily read as non-threatening.

This was taking too long. The Kilgharrah wasn’t a dumb beast. He really did not need to use the training that assumed ships were without ghosts.

With both hands, Merlin changed tactics. He wriggled his fingers rapidly across the surface of the lump, wishing he had his magic free to just order it back into place rather than having to suggest everything and wait until the underlying machinery responded. The backlash might sting them both, but he would trade momentary pain for standing in congealing green glop any day.

The wall rippled and the lump vanished. A moment later, the entire ship lurched alarmingly, causing the ichor Merlin stood in to slosh him into the wall. He hit hard. The thick walls of the reservoir muffled his grunt. The door swung half-closed. When the ichor sloshed back in other direction it swept Merlin off his feet and he had to flail to keep his head above the sludge, as fond of breathing as he was.

The Kilgharrah complained, You could have warned me you were ignoring standard technique.

“You could have warned me you were ticklish.” Merlin spat out a mouthful of ichor, but it was too late. The green chemical taste clung to his tongue.

All around him, systems gurgled to life. Merlin floated on his back, enjoying the squeaks of the pumps and the thrum of refilling conduits all around him. He closed his eyes, content just to be warm and healed enough that he was not yet exhausted even though he’d been dragged all over the ship.
The melodic announcement music drifted in through the partially-closed door to the exchange. In the distance, Merlin heard a bridge officer apparently named Owain - he introduced himself for the benefit of the Ealdorians - say, “Please do not be alarmed. In very rare cases, routine integration procedures sometimes ‘cause ripples through the system aboard the Kilgharrah. This is not unexpected, though it is - I repeat - rare. Thank you for your time and have a nice day.” The Owain fellow rushed the tail end of the announcement.

Merlin chuckled. He doubted anyone on the bridge had any idea what had just happened.

He waited for Engineering to look in on him now that everything was functional. When no-one came down the corridor for a full minute while Merlin let the ichor buoy him, he splashed upright and frowned at the door. “Was the mod-frying field you put up separate?”

Oh.

The ghost paused.

Yes.

Then Merlin heard the sound of heavy footfalls as what sounded like an entire complement of Knights stampeded down the access hallway.

Arthur was the first to peer through the door, shoving it open again. Merlin waved, flicking ichor across the reservoir. The relief in Arthur’s eyes prompted Merlin to grin. “I’m alright, swear. Just a sub-dermal tangle.”

“The ship jumped. Actually jumped.” Arthur held out a hand to grasp Merlin’s when he waded close enough. “Knocked down half of the mechanics.”

“Yeah, well, your ship is melodramatic.”

My feedback systems are fine-tuned to provide relevant and appropriate information. The Kilgharrah sounded amused. You poke me, I twitch.

Arthur hoisted Merlin free of the reservoir with one arm to set him on the deck. Thickened ichor dripped from Merlin’s everything and thanks to his assistance, Arthur’s side and arm were coated with green slime as well. The rest of them took one look at Merlin to make sure he was alright and backed out to where the corridor widened. Lucan shot him a salute.

Trying to shake his hands free of ichor and mostly just making a mess, Merlin beamed and asked before thought too hard about it, “Am I still confined to the infirmary?”

The pause where Arthur considered the question, spent wiping his hand clean on his uniform trouser leg, stretched long enough to make Merlin nervous. Looking down at himself, he grimaced at the sagging waistband of his former trousers. They were soaked through and barely keeping him decent. It was almost like being naked in front of The Captain (the definite article), which was definitely in ‘reoccurring nightmare’ territory.

Unless it was maybe this Captain and the naked was in a completely different category. Merlin didn’t even bother to blush at the thought. He was covered in drippy green goo, anyways. It would have been easier to blush before when Arthur had been staring at his scars.

“No,” Arthur said, rubbing at the spot between his eyes where his facial mods melded with his skin. His response interrupted Merlin’s muse about whether or not he cared in any meaningful way about how much of a fool he looked. That answer was also no. Arthur echoing his thoughts threw him off.

“Do the question!” Arthur exasperated, threw his hands in the air. “No, I am not going
confine you to the infirmary. Lucan convinced me while you were wallowing that we might need you again. He apparently hates wasting talent, though I don’t know if ‘talent’ really suits you.”

Arthur raked his gaze up Merlin’s slender form. He smirked. “Green, though, rather does.”

The smirk didn’t last long. Merlin held up his ooze-covered hands and wiggled his fingers.

“What are you-?”

Before Arthur could finish, Merlin planted both palms on Arthur’s modded chest and smeared the ichor around. It was a mad impulse and, for a moment Merlin thought he had made a mistake.

Arthur stilled, his jaw dropping as he stared at Merlin in disbelief. His first response was clear outrage that had Merlin pulling his hands back and opening his mouth to apologise. Before he could do more than stammer, however, the lights running down the side of Arthur’s head rippled in sequence.

That was the only warning Merlin got before Arthur laughed and wrapped his arm around Merlin’s shoulders, tugging him down so that he could ruffle Merlin’s hair and smear the ichor clinging to the strands all over his face. Sputtering, Merlin retaliated by planting his feet and shoving, trying to both fight free and thrust his goopy hair into Arthur’s face through sheer force of leverage.

For a moment the two of them were boys again, roughhousing in the access corridor until they both slipped on thickening ichor and stumbled backward into the wall. Arthur tripped over the toolbox.

The heavy clang of Arthur’s shoulder against a protruding pipe brought them both back to the present. Merlin was half-falling over, braced against Arthur, whose arm was still wrapped around Merlin’s shoulders. The miracle was that Arthur was holding them both up, one foot braced on the opposite wall to keep them from ending up in a pile on the floor. Merlin would be hard-pressed to claim he was still the one more covered in ooze.

“Sorry-” Merlin panted out, still trying to catch his breath, grinning kind of stupidly at the face hardly a hand-span from his. His grin died as he watched the humour drain out of Arthur’s expression to be replaced by a neutral mask. Merlin’s heart sunk. “Sorry,” he repeated, trying to extract himself from Arthur’s hold and slipping. He sagged harder against Arthur and winced. Flailing about would only entangle them further.

Arthur wasn’t even breathing hard. Carefully, he righted Merlin and stood. He once more wore his Captain’s decorum around him like a mantle, a cloak of authority that warned Merlin and his impulses away. Merlin backed off, cautious, sure he had overstepped his bounds, but not sure how the Captain (as opposed to the glimpsed Arthur) would react.

The reaction proved anti-climatic. Arthur stared at the metal of his right bicep for a handful of seconds, an inscrutable expression on his now green-smeared face, and then looked up at Merlin. When they locked eyes, Merlin thought he looked confused and tired more than anything.

Turning, Arthur led them up the twisty, spiralling access corridor and back to where it widened enough for the others to be waiting in a cluster. Lucan sighed when they came into view, then craned his neck around to peer down the hall behind them. The majority of the mechanics had left to perform other tasks, which left Sefa there standing next to Gwaine. Each of them held the business end of a suction tube that snaked back into the bulkhead through an unscrewed panel.

Arthur pulled to a halt to nod at Lucan and Merlin rambled forward to stand by his side. The vents were blowing air once more and now that the cooling components of this section were working again, the temperature was steadily returning to normal. Merlin folded his arms across his chest.
Covered in ichor that was rapidly drying, he was beginning to get cold.

Gwaine looked them up and down and his face split into a grin. “I’ll get Merlin,” he said, wiggling the suction tube. Sefa rolled her eyes and shifted to help Arthur.

They did not get a chance to start. Lucan waved them off and came to stand before Merlin and Arthur. He flicked off a tiny salute in his Captain’s direction and then focused on Merlin. “What was it?”

“Sub-dermal tangle,” Merlin reported. “In the worst possible place.”

“Inside an exchange at a confluence point. Of course it would be.” Eyed him speculatively, Lucan then reached out and asked, “May I?” He pointed at Merlin’s chest.

Merlin looked at Arthur, who was watching impassively. Addressing Lucan, not sure what the engineer was after, he ventured a, “Yes?”

Lucan wiped away the ichor that was hiding Merlin’s scars to study them. Merlin lifted his folded arms to let Lucan see their full glory: three ragged raised scars, the damage going from scratches at the collarbone to wide divots across his ribs and trailing shallow scoop-marks along the top of his belly. Merlin had no idea what Lucan was looking for.

“The Captain agreed that you are to be assigned to me,” Lucan said finally, gesturing for Merlin that he could relax. “He gave me conditions. You are not to damage yourself through over-extension, you are to report to me and will fall under my direct supervision, and you are to spend as much time otherwise resting in the infirmary.”

Merlin met Arthur’s eyes over Lucan’s shoulder and raised an eyebrow. It sounded like he was still confined to the infirmary and under watch. Arthur nodded along with Lucan, the muscles in his jaw twitching. When he saw Merlin watching, he gave him a look that said, ‘Well?’

Not confined anymore his ass. Merlin tried not to sulk, because then Arthur would win. Technically he wasn’t confined and would now have the ear of Head of Engineering himself in case the Kilgharrah decided to exercise their deal, but in practice it would be much the same. Arthur probably wasn’t even going to get rid of the ‘watch Merlin’ rotation like he’d hoped.

“Yessir.” Merlin offered a lop-sided smile to go with his agreement. On the other side of Lucan, Arthur relaxed. Unable to ask Arthur what that was all about, he asked Lucan, “Does this mean I’m part of the crew?”

Lucan laughed. “Yes. Gwaine! Sefa! Clothes. Suction. Get them cleaned up and fit to walk through my ship.” He swung a lazy smile in Arthur’s direction at the mention of ‘his’ ship. Arthur just shook his head in amusement. Lucan redirected his attention back to Merlin, his smile fading as he turned serious. “We’re not home yet, and until we’re within sight of the Camelot, we’re as vulnerable as any ship if it breaks down. Fringe space is not the only area where attacks or disasters can occur. Whatever that field was puts us at a disadvantage. Until we learn how to counter the phenomena, I need your help.”

It took Merlin a solid ten seconds for him to figure out why Lucan was giving him a recruitment speech. He had to shake himself when he sorted it, lost in the shivers caused by drying ichor. A recruitment speech would make sense if Merlin was what he appeared to be: a wounded civilian being told that the ship was passing through dangerous territory, who might be unsure as to whether or not he could really help. Not laughing took a great deal of effort, but Merlin managed an earnest nod. “You can count on me.” He figured a salute would be overdoing it, so he just ducked his head.
to put himself on eye-level with Lucan (and, incidentally, with Arthur behind him), and grinned.

“Good man.” Lucan clapped Merlin on the shoulder. “I’ll send someone to mop up around the exchange and collect my tools.” Even as he turned away to let Gwaine get to Merlin, he was subvocalising rapid orders into some communication implant or other.

“Hold still,” Gwaine ordered him, thumbing the switch for the suction tube to ‘on’ and placing the hose right up in Merlin’s face.

Merlin wrinkled his nose as the vacuum pulled strings of thickening ichor off of his cheeks. With liberal sarcasm, he squinted down at Gwaine and said, “Thanks.” Unfolding his arms, he squeezed his hands through his hair, sending a cascade of green ooze down his shoulders to be sucked away by Gwaine’s extreme helpfulness. “I pretty much went swimming.”

Gwaine stuck the tube into Merlin’s hair and the vacuum sounded like Will slurping his soup. Merlin wondered what sort of special he would need to be on a warship to be granted a towel. Probably pretty special, if saving the day (well, conspiring to ruin the day and then subsequently save it) did not earn him one of the big, fluffy ones that he knew were somewhere. Every ship had a handful, even warships.

For all that Gwaine’s ministrations were accompanied by a steady litany of admiring hums, Merlin was forced to admit that Gwaine was efficient. He also noticed that Gwaine was all business when he needed to suction away ichor from any place potentially embarrassing. He even averted his eyes politely when Merlin had to strip his ruined trousers. Merlin did not consider himself particularly concerned with modesty - only officers and rulers had that luxury - but he appreciated the gesture.

Across the corridor, Arthur was getting the same treatment from Sefa, though their low conversation sounded far more prosaic than Gwaine’s idea of putting Merlin at ease. They had left Arthur’s uniform as-is, slightly green and damp, but then he hadn’t been steeping in the stuff like Merlin had.

They left the sopping puddle of ruined trousers for one of Lucan’s mechanics to take care of. Gwaine made a face and shrugged when Merlin asked what they were supposed to do with it otherwise. It didn’t strike him as very nice just to leave the fabric bleeding all over the deck, but he certainly had no idea what to do with them.

Once Merlin pulled his clean trousers on, Gwaine handed him his shirt. It caught on Merlin’s ears as he wiggled back into it, too-short and too-small, but the new trousers brushed the deck even with Merlin’s height. The waist, on the other hand, swamped him. The cuffs needed rolling up - not much, but some. He cinched the waistband adjusters to their smallest setting and still worried that they’d drop off his hips and expose him to anyone who happened to be walking by.

“This is going to sound rude,” Merlin said, holding on to the waistband just to make sure he was done with wandering around starkers, “but are my only two choices really ’short and skinny’ and ‘tall and wide’?”

Turning from where he was tucking the suction tube back into its wall niche, Gwaine chuckled. “I had then steal those from Percy. They’re clean, don’t worry, it’s just been a bit of a scrounge to get everyone a change, what with the Ealdorians and all.”

Merlin sighed. “I’ll just hold these, then.”

“They’re not that bad, are they?”

To demonstrate, Merlin let go. The trousers started to slither down his hips before he caught them.
“Hrm,” Gwaine mused. “You need-”

“What he needs is a clip of some sort.” Arthur elbowed his way into the conversation, coming to stand between the two of them. He placed a hand on Merlin’s elbow, curling his fingers around the bend. Gwaine’s eyes flicked to the contact and back to Arthur’s face. An understanding passed between them, a shift that Merlin could not quite identify.

Even though Merlin was warming up now that he wasn’t trying to dry, he was feeling the effects of his dip in the exchange reservoir. He was tired from being awake and about for the longest stretch since his injury, still chilly even though the corridor was still warm compared to usual, and his chest was starting to ache. The assistance, little as it was, was welcome. He leaned into the touch. Arthur put off heat like a furnace, a side effect of his extensive mods. Even just standing next to him was almost better than being wrapped in a thermal, not that Merlin would say no to a nice thermal.

That Arthur had been watching for long enough to hear Merlin whine about his clothes made him wrinkle his nose. He didn’t mean to sound ungrateful. The trousers were comfortable enough. It was just - hips. He didn’t have any.

“Gwaine,” Arthur said, holding out his hand. “Pistol fastener.”

The words held all the hallmarks of an order, but Gwaine just boggled at his Captain instead of complying. Arthur frowned and snapped the fingers of his outstretched hand.

Gwaine shook his head in disbelief, but waved off Arthur’s impatience with a, “Captain,” and went fishing among the accoutrements fastened to his weapon’s belt. Arthur, off-duty, wasn’t wearing one and it looked like he was regretting the fact. To get to the fastener in question, Gwaine had to unsnap half a dozen tiny loops, unfasten his pistol holster from the side of his uniform, and pull it around to the front to jiggle it free. He handed the fastener over with eyebrows raised, making it very clear that he was judging Arthur for the order.

“Thank you for your noble sacrifice,” Arthur said graciously, ignoring Gwaine’s amused snort. Turning, he wiggled the fastener at Merlin. “Solution. At least you’ll be able to get back to the infirmary. Those-” Arthur pointed to the gooey pile of fabric at their side, “-will need a cleanse.”

He paused and his eyes unfocused for a moment, the activity of his oculars brightening his eyes. “And we just raided the rest of the infirmary’s supplies as of half an hour ago. What you’re wearing is what you’ve got.”

Merlin nodded, shifting his hold on his trousers so that the folds were on the side Arthur could get to. At least there were only two days left. Resigned, he said, “Go for it. At least my bits’ll be covered.”

Rather than offer the fastener to Merlin, Arthur startled him by placing his human hand on Merlin’s hip to hold him steady. He bent down to fuss with the waistband, tucking and clipping and reclipping several times in a row to get it to hold properly.

If Merlin hadn’t been glad to have already cleared himself with Gwen before, he was glad now. Having Arthur fussing with his waistband was a special sort of torture that gave him gooseflesh. Beneath his skin, his magic began to test the barrier that held it back. The touch of Arthur’s hands would have been enough to embarrass Merlin quite thoroughly if the sudden restlessness of his magic hadn’t scared any hard-on he might have managed far, far away. He had no idea what his magic was doing, especially not with Arthur right there. Impeccable timing. He really just wanted to enjoy the attention, except…

Merlin met Gwaine’s eyes over Arthur’s head. Gwaine looked as baffled as Merlin felt. He made a
gesture that Merlin interpreted as ‘do you want me to smack him over the head to get him off you?’

Shaking his head no and trying to prod his magic back into some semblance of ‘less terrifying’, he looked down at the blond head almost-but-not-quite about to smack him in the chin. This was the Captain who had, not so very long ago, told him he was a danger to the entire ship and that he needed to be both watched and confined because of it. Now he was ‘helping’ Merlin with his trousers, his fingers distressingly warm as they brushed across the skin of his hip.

Merlin swallowed. Mixed signals. Mixed. Signals. His magic surged again for absolutely no reason at all (Ha. Ha ha. Fuck), dragging sharp claws down Merlin’s spine that hurt nearly as much as trying to slide his magic through the ship did. He shivered. Arthur pulled away to look up at him.

They stared at each other for a heartbeat. Arthur dusted his hands together and backed off entirely.

“Better,” Arthur declared.

All three of them inspected Arthur’s handiwork.

“Better,” Merlin agreed. He sure as fuck wasn’t going to disagree, not with his magic starting to act up again. Balinor’s spell felt as solid as ever, but there was something about the cruel way his magic was raging within its confines that made him think he shouldn’t chance it.

As if he didn’t have enough on his mind, the fluctuations had bled him of what little heat he had manage to soak up from Arthur. He was freezing. “You wouldn’t happen to have a thermal hiding anywhere, would you?” he asked, hugging himself.

Gwaine opened his mouth, but it was Lucan who responded by handing the thermal blanket past him. Merlin pulled it around his shoulders gratefully, hoping it would help him fight off the strange chill that seemed to have burrowed its way into his bones. He peered around the small cluster of men to see Sefa holding a second thermal and giving her Captain a puzzled look.

“Hate to interrupt,” she said, “But I need Chief here, and he won’t leave until he’s had a chance to speak to the Captain.”

With her words, Lucan and Arthur offered the rest of them a perfunctory farewell and put their heads together, heading down the hall in discussion. Sefa watched them go, shaking her head, then trotted up to Merlin and Gwaine.

“The rest of the mechanics are on the way here. If I were you, I’d clear out before they start cursing about the mess you left behind.” She looked between the two of them, then craned her neck over her shoulder to catch a glimpse of her retreating superior officers. “I will never understand.”

Merlin, still bemused from Arthur’s abrupt leave-taking, blinked and frowned at her. “Understand what?”

Sefa just smiled. “Knight Gwaine will escort you, won’t you?”

“C’mon, Merlin.” Gwaine said, accepting the other thermal from Sefa and wrapping it around Merlin’s shoulders. The two blankets crinkled against one another. They helped enough that the shivers calmed and Merlin began to feel the heat of the lower decks as he should.

A pair of blankets, however, could not settle his magic, and it was his magic that was freezing him from the inside out. He gritted his teeth, bade farewell to Sefa as her team arrived, and followed Gwaine down the corridor.
They made it a handful of steps before Gwaine dropped back to walk by Merlin’s side and asked, “You doing alright?”

“Fine.” Merlin pulled his thermals closer around his shoulders. The fastener that held his trousers up chafed against the skin of his hip with each step. “Better.”

“Not just from now.”

“Ah-” Merlin thought about the question, pushing aside his current inability to regulate his own temperature and Arthur being fucking confusing. Gwaine had put him to bed a long nap and a short adventure ago while Merlin had been in the throes of accelerator exhaustion. Everything was crowded in his mind, leaving only the most recent as the most pressing, underlaid by the constant fear that Balinor’s spell would fail. Merlin let himself sound as tired as he was when he replied. “I don’t know.”

“That’s honest.”

“That’s true.”

The two of them began to make their way up out of the deep decks, steps slowed to Merlin’s pace. Even his long legs did not make up for the lingering toll of his artificially boosted recovery. Gaius had said he’d be at his customary energy levels within twenty-four. Merlin hoped his swim in the exchange reservoir had not set him back.

Gwaine allowed Merlin a few minutes and two decks worth of thinking time before he added, “I’ve got your back, you know.”

“I know.” Merlin gave him a grateful smile. Gwaine was a pilot and a Knight, not a Counsellor. That he was trying at all to help astonished Merlin to the point that he hardly knew how to respond. “I just don’t know what to think. Everything - literally everything - is different and there’s no going back. I still can’t even believe the Ealdor is - and, ah, the others are - dead, let alone that I’m going to be in Camelot in a couple of days. What am I supposed to do when I get there? What if the Kilgharrah does its new trick again? What the fuck is going on with the Captain?”

Gwaine laughed, then apologised immediately. “No, sorry, I am not- I’m sorry, mate, for all of it. I’ve been there and it’s rough, and you’re doing brilliant, you are, better’n me. I just- the Captain is an emotionally constipated arsehole. That’s what the fuck is going on with him.”

Blinking at Gwaine, Merlin rambled to a stop and stared down at him. “He what?”

“He’s Kingdom-bred.” Gwaine tapped the side of his nose as he said it, like he was letting Merlin in on a secret. At Merlin’s blank stare, he tried to elaborate. “Us from the fringes touch each other when we talk. Compared to them, we’re handsy. And don’t laugh, it’s not just me. It’s all of us. I just get swatted more often. Those from the ships right around Albion, with their bloodlines and Kings and ceremonies? They don’t touch. Arthur’s a bit better since Gwen and Lance, but he’s been on fringe patrols for over a year. Still - for him, every touch is a choice.”

“A choice,” Merlin repeated. Not that he thought Gwaine was wrong, necessarily, but Kingdom-bred Arthur he was describing did not resemble the Arthur who had held him upright while demanding he ‘keep safe’ by staying put in the infirmary. Nor the Arthur that had left their hands clasped as they navigated to deck six, nor the one whose hands directed Merlin with his thumbs brushing his spine.

“We know him.” Gwaine twirled his finger to indicate the ship and its occupants. “He doesn’t
choose contact.”

“He was fixing my trousers.”

Gwaine grinned. “I think you can draw your own conclusions.”

The conclusions Merlin drew led nowhere, no matter how pleased with himself Gwaine looked. Merlin shook his head, both in negation and disbelief. Concluding that Arthur had the emotional maturity of a little boy with a crush was all well and good, but he couldn’t reconcile that with the Captain who had manoeuvred him into assisting with Engineering while retaining the spirit of his earlier demands on Merlin. Who had as much said, ‘I won’t choose you, so don’t push the choice.’

Merlin started walking. “Your Captain is rubbish at showing interest.”

“I really don’t think he’s had much practice.” Gwaine said after a moment’s thought. “He’s heir Pendragon. He is very good at polite rejection.”

“You know from experience?”

“It’s like you know me.” Gwaine accepted the teasing in good grace. “He’s just a very good heir. Should be, too. He’s his father’s son.”

The phrasing caught Merlin’s attention and he frowned over it. The Kilgharrah had said much the same. Rather than dwell, Merlin focused on the truly important part of Gwaine’s revelations. “You’ve spent time on the kingdom ships?”

At Gwaine’s affirmation, Merlin began to ply him with questions on which and where and how long and what were they like. Some of the questions were too technical for a pilot to answer, but the discussion lasted until Gwen met them in the hall outside of the infirmary escorting a slightly-groggy, but fully-repaired, Tyr out the door. Once Gwaine had charmed her out of her concern over Merlin still clutching his dual thermals around his shoulders, she invited him inside to keep her company while Merlin slept.

*These accelerators have to let me go eventually,* Merlin thought groggily as he listened to Gwen and Gwaine argue who was going to play what colour while they set up a diagnostic screen with a game of chess. He drifted off to sleep after Gwen declared she was red this time, her tone exasperated but fond. Their voices were comforting. Life continued even while his magic still would not settle, would not behave, would not let him warm up. He had to ask for another couple of thermal blankets to even think about sleep. He drifted off between Gwaine declaring check and Gwen explaining to him that palfrey-class pieces could not capture head on.
Arthur leaned heavily on the arm of his captain’s chair and stared into the middle distance. Ostensibly, he was listening to Kay at Nav rant about their route. In reality, he was stewing over his first real-time contact with his father since he’d deployed for the fringe.

He had gotten the last of the ichor from Merlin’s hands out of the facing of his torso mods, and he had been cranky, shirtless, and holding the tiny swab from his repair kit still covered in dried green crusties when his father had called wanting a report. Answering voice-only - especially when answering his father - always made him feel guilty, like he was shirking even when he was supposed to be off-duty.

A report. Not a ‘how are you, son’, or even a ‘how is my old ship treating you’. That would be far too familiar for official channels, even though the last time they had spoken was at the extension of his last patrol. Instead, Uther acted every inch the Pendragon, Commander of the Fleet.

Arthur had been short with him, tired of the litany of titles that his father hid behind. There was no news of when Morgana’s stint with the Essetir’s fighting force would end, nothing about his stepmum, and nothing at all about how Uther himself was doing. The lack of news worried Arthur, as did the insistence on protocols. When the King had ordered him and the Kilgharrah on another patrol, Arthur had taken great, great pleasure in telling him about the imminent influx of fringe-bred to his father’s beloved Camelot.

His father had accepted the news with eerie aplomb. He would back Arthur’s decision and make the necessary arrangements. The strange relief in his voice as he agreed to take care of the arrival preparations had put Arthur on edge. With Uther refusing to budge from his Fleet Commander persona, there had been no way to ask what was wrong.

Recalling himself to the present, Arthur frowned at the big board. Kay had thrown his Nav display up onto the forward viewscreen. Every time he jabbed his fingers at something, it flared with angry reds and oranges.

The ship, thirty-nine hours out of Camelot, was passing through the zone considered not-quite-fringe, but not-quite-core. The systems closest to Albion’s were patrolled with regularity. In theory, the fleet patrolled under command of the Pendragon. In practice, individual Kingdoms fronted their own fighting forces. Some days Arthur thought that ‘patrol of the fringe’ meant ‘Arthur wanders about with his Knights’ and little more. Truly ‘fleet’ ships were few and far between, allies even fewer.

The between-fringe-and-core zone often proved even less friendly. Systems filled with anomalies, magic or otherwise, bred pirates and parasites.

Their original course would take them through the Broceliande system, with its minimal ambush
points and a clear path to Albion. By their calculations and the encrypted datasquirt that had accompanied Uther’s contact, they also had the timetables for a couple of the Gawant’s patrols. With Elena on board, Arthur might be able to lean on their honour to escort their Captain’s daughter even if a direct order from the heir Pendragon would be unwise.

The Broceliande system sprawled across the viewscreen in glorious purples and whites, colour-shifted to contrast so Kay could make his point. What Arthur saw was a star-field that should have represented safe passage if they were quick and clever. Instead of the unimpeded trip through Broceliande’s gravity well, however, there were nasty-looking swirls and jagged pinpoints of light that Arthur had no recollection of ever seeing on a chart before.

“You’re advocating for a course correction?” Arthur cut Kay off after a new number appeared above a pulsing point illuminated red. “Anything we do at this point will add twenty-four, if not more, hours to the return.”

Kay turned from his screens at Nav and folded his arms across his chest. “Broceliande is a no-go.”

“Because - solar winds? A storm? We’ve weathered storms before. The Kilgharrah has always handled beautifully.”

“Not a storm,” Kay said, planting his feet and jutting out his chin. Arthur suppressed a sigh when he recognised all the signs of Kay preparing to fight. “That—” he jabbed his finger at the large screen, “is full Sigan-Bruta intensity twelve. If the scale went higher, I’d use bigger numbers.”

That announcement made Arthur sit up. “You’re joking.”

The bridge fell silent. Only Helm, Nav, and Comm were on duty. Kay had waited until only the bare minimum would hear his concerns - as per usual. Only the steady heartbeat of the engines could be heard.

Arthur addressed the link Griff had opened to Lucan. “Did you get that, Engineering? Confirmation?”

“As ludicrous as a cat twelve is,” Lucan said, sounding thoughtful, “especially in Broceliande, which has never shown any anomaly of greater than seven, which the Kilgharrah is more than capable of navigating-” There was a pause and the link picked up the staccato of half a dozen queries and responses before Lucan came back on the comm. “Catastrophic’ is a good word for it. Broceliande is an empty system, Captain. This is the sort of storm that eats planets for lunch. There are no concrete images I can show you of its magnitude because there’s nothing left to destroy.”

Arthur returned his gaze to the viewscreen and its chaotic overlay. Based on Kay’s scans, the system harboured a solar-scale anomaly that contained enough natural sorcery to flay planets to their atoms. The disaster on the Camelot had only been a ten, though Arthur thought that had more to do with the limited radius of the Lake woman’s spell. Within that radius, it was a twelve. A twelve described the intensity of destruction out of the Muriden man on the Adolebat, too. For the entirety of the Broceliande system to be under assault from that sort of power…

“It hardly looks half as dangerous,” Arthur said, resigned now to the inevitable addition of another day to their estimate.

“Nav mapped the eddies for me, Captain,” Lucan said, mistaking Arthur’s comment for doubt. “We don’t have tech, bio or otherwise, that can see on the spectrum where most of the action is happening. It’s a treacherous system.”
Would the Ealdor have been able to avoid the Broceliande system without having to course correct so late? They’d had that Balinor fellow, after all.

Arthur made the logical leap. He directed his attention downward in the vague direction of the infirmary and beat back a surge of guilt.

At least his bridge crew was in top form or the Kilgharrah would have blundered into the Broceliande system and straight into the storm. Rubbing his knuckles across his lips, Arthur frowned at the viewscreen and the deceptively pretty display of raw elemental destruction. “Kay, do you have a suggestion for an alternative route?”

Kay flung a handful of system signatures to the viewscreen - five solid options and one maybe - ranked by time, occupancy, and frequency of pirate attacks within the last year. After they were all up, he said, “If you want a suggestion, this one.”

A tiny system filled the screen, shoving the other options out of the way. With a handful of planets and one of the widest asteroid belts that Arthur had ever seen, it was a compact little thing with a small, bright star.

“This is Spelandor,” Kay said, sliding a look from Arthur to Bedivere at helm, who had one boot up on his console and was watching the screen with interest. “Come in at an angle to the elliptic, we skip over most of the ambushes.”

Lucan’s voice filled the bridge. “You’re going to have to decide on whether the risk comes internally or externally. Our resources are already stretched thin, Captain, but I would also recommend avoiding a firefight while we’re carrying civilians. Without them aboard - the Spelandor system would be well within our transit and defensive capabilities otherwise.”

“And you’d recommend another system?” Arthur asked, watching Kay make a face and turn back to his displays.

“Lloegyr, maybe, but it would take longer than a day to traverse. Anything further out will be as safe as or worse. With Broceliande closed to us we’ve got the choice of a bad lot. Spelandor, at least, has the benefit of being a known quantity. Bayard of Mercia uses it for shipping. It’s not patrolled, and that means the scum have made themselves at home there, but there won’t be any surprises in the route itself. We have the anomaly maps in our database, updated as part of the squirt from earlier.”

If they were going to be forced to add time, Arthur wanted to add as little of it as possible. They would just have to risk it. From the assessments that sprawled across his screen, the system would be at least as safe as the one the Ealdor had been eaten in. Small comfort, but at least it was no more risky.

If the system had a gravity well within tolerances for the Kilgharrah to safely leap the void between stars, maybe a smaller system would benefit them. The shorter time to get across the well and set up for the next jump would offset the additional hours it was going to take to correct their course away from Broceliande. “Then we’re going through Spelandor. Give the corrections to Bedivere so he can get us pointed in the right direction.”

Now that the decision was made, the tension on the bridge eased. They were still going to be heading in the wrong direction for long enough to add nearly a day to their trip, but they had precautions they could take to keep things as pirate-free as possible.

Orders given, Arthur relaxed back into his chair. Kay returned the primary viewscreen to a view of the stars in front of them, Bedivere busied himself by jabbing his console as the corrections came.
through, and Griff relayed orders for those not part of the bridge watch.

“Still there, Lucan?” Arthur asked. When he got an affirmative, he asked, “Any more weirdness down below?”

“Not so far. I plan to borrow our modless wonder for some basic maintenance, see how he does. Do we get the right of first refusal on the Ealdorians?”

“You want to recruit him?” Arthur asked, surprised.

“Unless you do.”

Lucan’s tone held all of his curiosity over Arthur’s behaviour from earlier, enough that Bedivere twisted around to raise his eyebrows at his Captain. Sometimes Arthur regretted recruiting siblings, but at least he got to keep the quiet one on the bridge. He shook his head at his helmsman and turned to find Griff giving him a similar look. Siblings and their cousin. Right.

Arthur looked to Kay, but Kay wasn’t related and in any case he didn’t care. He was metaphorically elbow-deep in new calculations that flitted across his screen like the ephemera of the storm they had watched boiling in the Broceliande system.

“I already have a first officer, and a first officer in training.”

“I didn’t say first officer.”

“Don’t you have better things to do?” Arthur groused, shooing the other two back to their tasks with a glower.

Chuckling, Lucan dropped the link. Arthur had enough time to rub at the bridge of his nose and wonder what the fuck had gotten into everyone before the door irised open and Owain strode in.

Arthur called the scheduled rotation up on his oculars. “Where’s Leon?”

“We swapped. He thought it was a good idea if I were here when it was quiet and, er, while Kay was on duty,” Owain said, throwing a glance in Kay’s direction and ducking his head. His and Arthur’s sparring session had ended up as something that would have been better handled by a Counsellor. Arthur didn’t blame him at all for being embarrassed to have vented to his superior officer.

Arthur beckoned him to stand next to the Captain’s chair. “How does it feel to have baby’s first bullshit announcement under your belt?”

Owain picked his way to Arthur’s side and held out his hands for inspection. “I was trembling the whole time. We had no idea what was going on, just that Lucan was working on it and that after that- everything came up nominal. Even the alarms we shut down reset. Not a peep from anything. I had to say something.”

“Leon made you take the comm,” Arthur said, amused.

“’No time like the present to learn the fine art of reassurance.’” Owain pitched his voice to mimic Leon’s tenor.

Arthur laughed outright. “Since there was no riot report from the forward bay, I’d say you did a good job.”
Owain looked uncertain at the praise, his eyes shifting away from Arthur’s to alight on the viewscreen, the conduit-crossed ceiling, and the Nav station. He changed the subject. “Kay—”

“-is a man of actions.” Arthur cut in, pointing to the man in question who was paying studious attention to his console. Kay’s spine was rigid and if Arthur let Owain say much more, Kay would do himself a damage from the strain of forcing himself silent.

Arthur dropped into his most grandiose voice of authority and made a spectacle of saying, “You can’t convince him you’re competent, trustworthy, or worthy of respect through words. Prove all those things through deeds. He won’t believe you otherwise.”

Owain had heard Arthur say this all before. Arthur’s attention was on Nav. Kay, still staring as his console, nodded to himself after Arthur finished speaking. Message received. Let Owain prove himself and don’t be an arse about it.

Arthur returned his attention to Owain to find the man frowning at him and Kay in turn, his eyebrows drawn low in confusion.

“I’ve said something to him,” Arthur said, which was technically true now. He’d grown up with Kay; they had an understanding. “Just show Leon and me we’re not wrong and Kay’ll come around.”

“Ah,” Owain said, nonplussed. He offered Arthur one more baffled look, then said, “Thank you?” He might not have meant to make it a question.

“Take your seat,” Arthur dismissed him. “As soon as we have the final time estimates, I’ll model how to give bad news to a ship full of people who won’t appreciate it.”

Griff spoke up the moment Owain moved off, swivelling in his chair in front of comm to face the rest of the bridge. “Just found something interesting in the squirt from earlier,” he said, his singer’s voice pitched high with enthusiasm. He continued after Arthur acknowledged he’d heard. “The White Hart is in the Spelandor system as we speak and will be until further notice.”

“What’s Mithian doing there?” Arthur asked, eyes going to the screen as if he could see their way through their current system and the next.

“Highly classified, apparently. The base report gets a bit political since Nemeth didn’t send them, the Pendragon did. Justifying why Captain Rodor is letting your father send his daughter out on patrol, as if he’s not commander of the fleet. It’s a bit bland and very passive-aggressive. Someone expects someone to object. The *why*, however - the crypt on the why is for your eyes only. Curiouser and curiouser, wouldn’t you agree?” Griff flung the message to Arthur’s ocular implants, humming a snippet of the Lookingglass aria.

The packet bounced in Arthur’s periphery for a long moment until he located the key for the encryption. Arthur expected to need a high-level military decryption algorithm. To his surprise, when Griff had said ‘for your eyes only’ he meant literally Arthur’s eyes. The crypt used the internal system synchronisations of Arthur’s mods as their rosetta. The *why*, as Griff called it, came directly from Uther to his son.

Arthur read the terse message as soon as it unlocked and swore loudly enough to startle Bedivere half out of his seat. As much as he trusted his crew, he did not want this particular *why* getting out. “She’s hunting bandits,” he said aloud, and that was truth enough to give her presence legitimacy. Bandit and would-be warlord Kanen in the Villain’s Smile had a long-standing bounty on his head that his warship’s guns had prevented anyone from claiming for years. The White Hart and the
Villain’s Smile would be a match, but only just.

Worse was why a top-of-the-line ship, Captained by Nemeth’s heir, was off chasing a relatively small-time bandit through unpatrolled space. If he was honest with himself, Arthur acknowledged that his father’s crusade against the power that had maimed the Camelot had never truly ended. Uther had rumour of Morgause’s hand in Kanen’s current notoriety, and the King had never been entirely reasonable about his stepdaughter and her sorcerous associations.

With the faint scent of magic connected with Kanen’s name, Mithian had orders to spend as long as necessary hunting spectres across half of the sector. Uther’s paranoia would keep Mithian chasing her tail after rumours and hearsay until someone recalled her. Her father wouldn’t, Captain and King though he was, because they were Uther’s orders, and Arthur himself couldn’t recall her until he returned home and rebuilt his reputation as heir Pendragon without causing a nasty political incident.

“Put in a call to the White Hart,” Arthur ordered. “If Mithian’s already dredging Spelandor, we have an ally in the system.” If they were in range for a real-time link with the Camelot, they were in range for one with the White Hart.

Mithian’s face and bridge flooded the viewscreen the moment Griff’s hail went through. Her surprise evident, she greeted him with an, “Arthur! I thought you were trapped on the fringe for ages yet.”

She was sprawled gracefully across her elevated Captain’s chair, eyes glittering as her bridge crew threw figures coming over Arthur’s connection to her oculars for rapid review. Arthur grinned to see her eyebrows rise when she registered his location. “You’re closer than you’ve any right to be.”

Even reclining, she possessed a hunter’s poise and the sleek solidity of a coursing hound. Her ship might be one of the older warships, full of curves and columns pulsing with ichor and light that turned her face a little orange and a little green, but it retained the practical, meat-cleaver and bastard-sword sense of utility that Arthur always associated with the first few generations of galleys. As always, watching Mithian among her crew, Arthur thought she and her ship suited one another.

The bridge of the White Hart was far busier than the Kilgharrah’s. In addition to her essential crew, Mithian had half a dozen ensigns and mechanics bustling to and fro in the background. Her bridge was set on several levels connected by sloping ramps, and all her consoles were filled with personnel watching the rapidly-shifting displays.

The bustle drove home how much newer the Kilgharrah was, where processes were automated and required far fewer consoles. Arthur thought it efficient, but Mithian swore by the White Hart’s systems, saying that Arthur was mad to leave so much of the ship’s systems without oversight. She’d cited the creature-nature of the ship and the biological recovery systems that could play havoc with even simple tech. When she’d begun to throw around phrases like, ‘evolutionary rapid-propagation cascade failures’ and ‘report-nominal critical failures’, they had agreed to disagree.

Then again, no one had caught the tangle Merlin had taken care of before it had reached emergency status. It could have taken out one of the Kilgharrah’s engines. If Mithian ever brought up the topic of over-automation again, they might actually have a different argument for once.

Mithian had a birds-eye-view of the proceedings on the bridge and, once she transferred Arthur’s call from her ship’s viewscreen to the one in her personal aerie, so did he. The difference between their two ships’ generations gave Mithian the advantage of having old-fashioned dominance ploys built into the layout.

“Headed back with a bellyfull of refugees,” Arthur explained, glancing to Griff for the nod that they were military encrypted, which should be good enough now that she’d pulled their conversation
down to her personal screen. “The Glatissant ate one of Essetir’s demesnes and Camelot’s reaping the spoils.”

“Oof.” She winced. “Casualties?”

“Their bridge crew. A sorcerer.”

“Really now,” Mithian said, sounding thoughtful. “My condolences to all aboard.”

“So I’m in the neighbourhood, heading back to Camelot. Broceliande is too stormy to brave, so we’re cutting through Spelandor.”

“No pleasantries?” Mithian teased him.

“Is there a reason not to get right to the point?”

Instead of answering that, Mithian made a show of scanning her screen and huffing in disapproval. “Is that your skeleton crew or your regular crew?”

“Are you questioning my command decisions?” Arthur teased her back, leaving any bite out of the familiar question. They had lasted exactly one week on the same ship during training before their command figured out they got along famously, brilliantly, and above all explosively.

“You’re nearly home,” Mithian said, a smile ghosting across her lips. “That has to count for something.”

“Still have to cross Spelandor.”

Mithian pulled a face, nose wrinkling. “Well, that’s where I am, though if you’re calling me now I suppose you got a datasquirt that I didn’t. Who knows if the bandits I’m supposed to be chasing are even here. Worse, I can’t leave until I get the say-so from your father.”

“My condolences.”

“Don’t be cute. He’s becoming a menace, Arthur. I mean it. His commands have been dodgier than usual without you to check him. And - AND - Daddy won’t do anything about this folly of an assignment because he’s Camelot and ‘we owe you’. Ancient history gives Daddy the excuse to suck your father’s cock, as if he needed one.” Mithian’s lip curled.

If Arthur had thought to wonder if she was annoyed at being sent after will-o-wisps, he wondered no longer. “I know.”

She snorted. “Of course you know. Old news. I wouldn’t be half surprised if daddy told Uther to send me off on a wild goose chase as punishment for telling him as much to his face.”

Arthur tried to distract her with a prod to her ego, “Contentious as usual.”

“ Fucking too right I am,” she said, remembering to keep her voice lower so that the sound of her bridge would cover her words. “Arthur, seriously, we need our fleet’s Pendragon to have the best interests of the entire fleet at heart. Uther’s becoming a liability. The other Captains are restless.”

Ah- and there it was. Arthur let out his breath in a slow hiss. Mithian just waited, expectant and knowing. She had treed him often enough that she knew he’d give her some sort of response eventually.

The men on Arthur’s bridge stayed very quiet, which Arthur supposed was for the best. At least he
was confident that his men were loyal and discrete. They would be the ones backing him if he were to act as Mithian obviously thought he should.

“I’m worried.” Mithian said, subdued. Her tone was enough at odds with her previous brashness that Arthur frowned at his viewscreen. “You’ve been on fringe patrols for most of your Captaincy, and you’ve got half a dozen heirs of as many major ships aboard. You’ve got favoured personnel from all over tucked in your barracks, and I know Queen Annis has been cursing Uther for stealing Derian from her forces no matter how smoothly his transfer went. I know you like having people like Elena and Derian and Sefa aboard, but did you ever wonder? We’re usually spread thinner. I’m surprised you don’t have Morgana with you, too, or Vivian. And if Sophia hadn’t already taken command of the Tir-Mor, you know she’d be out there with you.”

“Vivian would hate it. Not enough people on the fringe to admire her.” Arthur gave a weak laugh, but the joke fell far short of humorous. Or tactful. Mithian said nothing. He pressed his lips together to suppress a surge of anger. “You’re implying that I’m holding them hostage.”

“Be practical. As heir to the whole fucking fleet, you take orders directly from Uther. He controls the others through you. Like Elena. Wouldn’t Godwyn of the Gawant go to great lengths for your father if Elena were thrown into the pot to sweeten the deal? Or worse, if she were threatened?”

“She’s a pilot, not a poker chip.”

“She’s a pawn,” Mithian snapped. “Godwyn’s a King and Captain of a kingdom-class vessel. You think she’s not aware of that little fact?”

Arthur bristled, wanting desperately to defend his pilots, Knights, and crew. Instead, he took a deep breath.

Mithian was hardly the enemy, but to be accused of indirectly exploiting his crew for his father’s gain simply by obeying orders…

He felt ill.

It was plausible. It was very plausible. He could tick off name after name from his mental roster of crew whose parent, sibling, or other close relation held some important position or another in either the military or the civilian part of the fleet. There were more than there should be, especially if - by current convention - they should be assigned to forces commanded by the kingdom ship that they pledged their loyalty to upon their majority.

“Fuck,” he said, rubbing his face. His fingers skittered over his facial mods, his right hand drawing forth alarming shrieks of metal against metal. He didn’t dare start up a diagnostic. Mithian would notice his shift in attention and mock him, which would spoil any positive effect he might gain from it in the first place.

He almost wished he’d moved this conversation somewhere without an audience. Even just staring at the back of Bedivere’s head, Arthur could almost see the gears whirring as Mithian’s words sank in. He did not need to command them to silence, but if they knew, then he would need to tell the rest of his crew sooner rather than later.

“Mithian-” Arthur said, yanking his head up to glower at the screen.

“Don’t shoot the messenger,” she cut him off. Unrepentant, she flicked her fingers to dismiss his anger. “Just think about how you want things to change. I’m pretty sure Uther won’t, not as long as he’s got my father on his knees and you with all of that delightful leverage floating around out of
reach of anyone but him. I’m just telling you what everyone else with a kid on your ship figured out while you were gone. Uther’s been losing power as Pendragon. Is it any wonder he’s making decisions to preserve what little he has?”

“Then I’m heading back into a storm.”

“The important part is that you’re heading back at all. I am sorry for the casualties the - Ealdor?” Mithian checked her display, then nodded. “Ealdor suffered. I am. If they weren’t on your ship, though, the Camelot wouldn’t be your destination. I would bet you half my ship that it wouldn’t.”

Arthur sighed.

Mithian’s interest piqued. “You already got your extension.”

“With the datasquirt that told me where you were. I declined because of the Ealdorians.”

“I knew it!”

“Sound too smug and I’ll accuse you of taking lessons from Morgana.”

“I wish.” Mithian grinned. “She, unlike you, has been recalled. Last I heard she’d had a grand farewell on the Essetir and is already back on the Camelot getting her fighter refitted.”

“At least one of us is home.” Arthur leaned his elbows on his knees and put his head in his hands. “Didn’t expect a call to you to be anything more than a request to keep an eye out for us in Spelandor.”

“Sorry.” She wasn’t. “I guess I could give you an update so you know what you’re in for, though. I think I’ve scared off all the petty scum from their bases along the shipping lanes. You should be pretty safe on your way through. My scanners haven’t picked up anything even remotely interesting and I’ve got probes as far out as the asteroid field. I’ll keep you updated.”

“Much appreciated.”

“When are you hitting the system?”

“Actually - Bedivere?” Arthur asked his helmsman, who had finished poking at his console halfway through their conversation. Kay would be the one to have come up with the estimates, but he was also less likely to want to try and explain himself to a viewscreen.

Bedivere looked up and smiled at Mithian. “Captain.” He tipped an imaginary cap. She nodded back in bemusement. “Nav estimated we’d be home in fifty-three, up from thirty-nine. We’re twenty-eight from the edge of Spelandor, give or take a few minutes.”

“Twenty-eight. Acknowledged. We’ll be waiting, if we can.”

Arthur leaned back in his chair, trying to capture the same insouciance with which Mithian relaxed back into her aerie. “Thanks.” He couldn’t tell if he was as sincere as he could be, not with the news she’d given him, but he was grateful to have the White Hart in a position to play lookout, however unnecessary.

“Anytime, Arthur. Don’t be a stranger.”

She severed the comm-link with a wave of her hand and the viewscreen reverted to the starfield in front of them.
“You can tell Lucan,” Arthur said, making Bedivere swivel in his chair. “For now, though, Mithian’s theories and what I might do about them stay with us.”

Their agreement did not erase the tension that had settled in Arthur’s shoulders, but now that Mithian was no longer staring at him he could run diagnostics. The green words that flicked across his periphery, however, did less than usual to unknot his muscles or ease his growing tension headache. What he wanted was a moment of laughter, like the one that had resulted in him being half-covered in ichor.

The moment had startled him. Even after brooding over the incident while trying to get every bit of crust from the shielding over his chest, he still couldn’t remember the last time he had acted spontaneously. He had fun, obviously, but not the kind of fun that allowed him to forget his mantel of responsibility for even so long as their tussle had.

It made him want to keep Merlin by his side, just in case something like that might happen again. Keep his hands on Merlin’s skin and their legs entangled, and he really shouldn’t be thinking about this sort of thing when Merlin was the biggest problem on his ship.

He must be mad if he was seriously going to take Merlin onto the Camelot. Lucan might want to keep him on the Kilgharrah, which would solve that problem well enough for some value of ‘solve’, but Arthur couldn’t justify letting Merlin become someone else’s responsibility when it had been his choice to let the dying sorcerer’s words stand as truth.

At least Merlin was now part of the crew, had allies among Arthur’s people. That should help. ‘Should’ being the operative word.

He sighed loudly enough that both Kay and Owain looked over at him. They noticed the other’s gaze at the same time and looked away. Arthur couldn’t even bring himself to laugh. He still had hours left on his shift before Leon came to take over so he could get some sleep. Hours of idle watch during which his thoughts could chase each other around the inside of his skull and he ran diagnostics over and over to keep himself focused and calm.

Placing his head in his hands, he closed his eyes and fought the urge to open up the video feed to the infirmary with his oculars.
Chapter 17


Guess that was it, then.

He hummed. The radio silence confirmed that he was finally out of communication range, too deep for even a flicker of human contact to reach. The thrill of excitement, of discovery, of being utterly alone with miles of ocean above his head, made him grin. He took a snapshot of himself to send to the newsfeeds that would be clamouring for pictures of him breaking records and exploring the depths.

In the darkness, strange fish floated past his cameras to be scanned and displayed in thrilling holographic 3D. Eldritch creatures described in light joined him inside of his little metal coffin, his glorified diving bell with no windows and barely enough air. All he lacked was the air-tubes snaking up to the Chivalry, but neither he nor Lance had had enough money to even think about shelling out for miles upon miles of tubing. More practically, neither of them knew what would get between the Riven Oak and the Chivalry.

He passed his fingers through the hologram of a particularly gnarly specimen with growths and globula and teeth where there shouldn’t be teeth. His pressure-proof box felt suddenly restrictive. He wanted to pop the hatch and swim out among the creatures of nightmare, no matter that the pressure would crush his ribcage in half a moment. Lance had warned against the impulse, the same sort that took spacers sometimes and lured them out airlocks.

He would be fine, though. He could handle depths and silence and the terror of being unable to orient by touch.

His submersible was too small.

He began to keep record for Lance, speaking aloud in the close, thick air. “I wish I could bring some of these up, but they’d just fall apart before I got them halfway there.” He brushed the representation of an elongated flatfish, all cilia and tiny ventricles that rippled. “Reached loss of radio without incident, continuing deeper. Glad you made me promise not to get out, you never really understand what it is to be entombed in metal until you’re more than deep enough to meet creatures who have never been touched by sunlight.”

That Lance was somewhere above him on a little boat, waiting for him to resurface when the dive was done, steadied him. He’d offered to go down in the Riven Oak instead, but he knew more about sailing and people and there was just no way.

The creatures that began to fill the catalogue were different altogether. Lance would be lost. He was
lost, and he’d been studying deep-sea biology for decades. Things that swam in front of his camera lacked eyes and bones, hearts and skeletons, were intact only because of the massive pressure of the water above them, and created their own light to entice or warn. Even if Lance had not been offering because of the spectre of a panic attack, missing this would have killed him.

A low vibration rattled his instruments, something that crawled and rippled through his submersible and sounded like Gaia herself was groaning in her sleep.

“I know it sounds like a bad horror film, but I’m not alone down here,” he said, talking to release nerves, to calm his heart. More than just tightness, closeness, and so very little air that could send him over the edge. “Not alone. Just heard the call of something big. Or something big shifted. I don’t even know what would make that sort of sound, not even a little.”

“You know they still haven’t classified that thing they brought up last year? I know you don’t follow journals, but until they come up with a scientific name they’re calling them-”

He cut off. The cameras picked up a shape on a collision course.

“Oh, fuck,” he breathed. “They call them krakens.”

He flipped on three more cameras as fast as thought.

“Fuck.”

“It’s huge, Lance.”

The holograph projector sputtered, then showed the ribbed curve of a single tentacle. He shut it off and desperately wished he had a window or something - anything - to look out with his own eyes and see.

“It’s a kraken.” And if he spoke in hushed tones, it was out of reverence.

He choked on his own breath, on the sudden pressure in his lungs, on the awe and sudden realisation that he was so very small. So very, very tiny.

“It doesn’t notice me. Oh- fuck, it doesn’t notice me, Lance. It’s right there and alive and…”

“It’s beautiful.”

“I wish I could touch…”

He cried. He pressed his cheek to the metal shell of his little box.

“I don’t want to come back up.”

“I’m the only one who has ever seen it. You have to watch the logs, you have to.”

“This is better than the stars.”

Silence. Only the groan of the creature’s calls and the scrape of its side against the submersible.

“Lovecraft,” he finally said. “He had the right idea.”

His chest hurt, he could barely breathe, and he had one hand tight against the sealed hatch.

“It could kill me. I’d be happy.”
“It might see me.”

Silence again. The creature moved on. Too much silence.

“Still here. Hatch closed.”

“Still here. Hatch closed.”

He set an alarm to beep every minute. After every beep.

“Still here. Hatch closed.”

He fought his own mind. The space grew no bigger nor smaller.

“Still here. Hatch closed.”

Lance would be so proud.

Lance had known this would happen.

The first oxygen threshold warning alerted him.

“Continuing catalogue,” he said at last. “I’m going to delete this record.”

He pressed buttons, restarted the projector, found his notebook, rustled pages.

“I’m not deleting this record.”

“I’m going to follow.”
The ferry was too full and he couldn’t move. The crowd smelled of hot, wet wool. The stacks belched coalsmoke into the sky. The man on his left - suspenders, handlebar moustache, too many buttons - jostled him with an elbow to the ribs. He wheezed and blinked against the drifting smoke as the ferry got underway.

He stood with the working schlubs, cheek by jowl, though he was tall enough to avoid most of the foul breath of the others. The odour of unwashed bodies, however, rose with the heat, baked out by the early morning sun. It would be worse at noon. He did not want to think about how hot the factories would get.

Above and to his right, away from his mustachioed assaulter, the ladies stood. Why they were up this early, he had no idea, had never any idea, but they were there in finery that dripped with lace and pearls and semi-precious stones. They still wore gloves and carried parasols, clinging to fashion of
longer skirts and coiffured hair when he was certain that rising hemlines and cloche-curved bobs were the order of the day. But then he was a heathen and a stiff and what did he know of proper ladies.

It weren’t the ladies that caught his eye, though, but a blond man with broad shoulders facing the railing. Besuited and holding his hat in his hand, the man was looking exactly the wrong direction.

He wanted to call out, though he didn’t exactly have a name to call out. Instead, he fought his way through the sweating crowd, using elbows and knees where he needed to. Bony limbs came in handy when there were places to be. He opened his mouth to shout, but he had no words to shout.

They wouldn’t let him up the stairs to the upper deck, not even when he begged. Definitely not when he cursed. He had to wait until disembarkation.

The ferry pulled to dock, its mooring lines thrown to shore by half a dozen hands that he resented being able to jump off the side. There were too many people and he couldn’t see the man he thought he recognised.

The drone of flies along the waterfront and the conversation of the workers blended together, making it hard to hear, hard to think, hard to stay awake though it was still morning and he’d had his coffee. When he finally saw the man, it was like wading through molasses to get to him.

The people in his way parted only when they saw his face and he chased the man down the quay. He caught him half a step before the man caught his cab, plucking at his sleeve and making the horse and driver wait.

The man turned.

His face was unfamiliar.

“I’m sorry,” the man said, smiling politely over a hooked nose and rich brown eyes. Wrong all wrong. “Do I know you?”

No account could be taken for why his heart plummeted, his stomach roiled, and his breath caught in his chest. He did not know many blonds, and certainly none with swordsman shoulders. The eyes were all wrong. After the chase, his hand had closed on nothing.

“No.” He shook his head. “No, I thought you were someone else.”

Merlin buried his nose in the crook of his elbow and tried to take shallow breaths. The lack of oxygen was already making him sleepy, the transparent cockpit already frosting over. The slow pulse of the mayday light matched his own sluggish heartbeat.

He admired the view. Below him, a forest moon spun gently by. Above, a bilious green and brown gas giant held both of them in orbit. His was decaying, his trajectory giving him about a week before he hit the stormclouds of his largest neighbour and they ate through his hull. Since it was very likely
he’d have died of oxygen starvation long before that, the prospect was not really as alarming as it might have been.

All the lights on the console were out, silent and cold, except for the one. Merlin pulled his jacket closer around his shoulders with one hand, trying not to move too much. He wished he had a coldsleep pod (His ship wasn’t big enough to warrant one.) or could put himself into a trance (Hah. Magic. Wouldn’t it be nice if it were useful?), that might somehow allow him to survive without having to depend on a single flickering candle in an infinite night. The mayday wouldn’t reach anyone, he didn’t think.

Maybe Gwaine? Gwaine was good for a rescue or two. His massive scrapper would be able to scoop up Merlin’s little courier vessel with room to spare.

A bitty blinky light was a fool thing to put his faith in, Merlin knew, but it was a bitty blinky light or nothing, and he hated the idea of nothing. At least he knew there was someone out there that would hear him, eventually, though they might follow the distress signal propagation back and find empty space. Or cold, dead Merlin and a sad blinking light.

He mused on the light, for lack of anything better to do. He was good at waiting. In space there was a lot of waiting. A lot of hoping. A lot of trying to avoid that one in a great many chance that he would be struck by space junk that his onboard didn’t notice. Could happen to anyone.

The waiting or the getting smacked by someone’s poorly-disposed-of waste. Anyone. These things just happened.

Merlin was going to kill Gwaine next time he saw him, if only because the scrapper was the only one who came out this far besides Merlin. Not much out here but relay stations and busted ships. He should leave a nasty note for Gwaine to find.

The blinky light was steadier than Merlin’s breathing, which seemed somehow unfair, but he regarded the signal with a fond smile anyway. It said, ‘I’m out here. Someone hear me,’ and wasn’t that a familiar sentiment?

He cast his eyes to the stars he could just see beyond the curve of the gas giant. He said, “Am out here. Come find me.”
Merlin lay very still, trying to keep his breathing smooth and even. He didn’t move until Gaius returned to the infirmary and announced, “Done. The loop should hold under cursory scrutiny. Any more attention than that and we’re probably in a bit of trouble besides. But - everything’s routed. We should be able to talk.”

Propping himself up on his elbows, Merlin sought the tiny camera nodes and their bitty blinking lights among the supplies netted to the ceiling of the infirmary. “And you know how to do that how?”

“How does anyone know anything? I learnt,” Gaius said, trundling back over to help Merlin sit up. “Though your mother could teach you more. There was a great deal of minor espionage that a great many otherwise normal people got up to during the Purge. Childhood tricks might be simple, but they are effective, or fewer of us would have such exciting stories to tell.” He patted Merlin on the back and leaned to peer into his face. “You’re well.”

“More or less,” Merlin said, tugging his shirt up to rub one hand over his scars. Sometime during his nightmares, the accelerators had released their grip. He felt alert and awake and his limbs tingled with nervous energy. Part of the energy was his magic, trapped with no sign of being released, but the majority of it had more to do with wanting to be up and about after his recovery. All of his injuries had been reduced to faint lines on his skin, and the scratches on his hand already faded away. All that was left of the battering he’d taken were the three almost parallel ridges of puckered, shiny tissue. He prodded at his new scars. “Almost back to normal. Except for these.”

“If I neglected to mention it, you were very lucky,” Gaius said, his bushy eyebrows meeting when he frowned. “Glatissant scratches are not universally fatal, not like a bite, but-”

Merlin let his shirt fall back down and nodded. “I know, I do.” He also knew he needed to stop putting off talking about his training. Gaius’s camera loop would only hold for so long. Opening his mouth to say something relevant to his magic, to ask for help, he began to ask instead, “Gwen is-”

“Asleep, if there is any mercy on this ship. She took my offer to watch you with a gratitude I haven’t seen since her training days.” Gaius answered Merlin’s question with unhurried unconcern.

Merlin fidgeted. Gaius waited.

Finally, Merlin tried, “My mother…” He trailed off and hated that this was so hard.

His mum knew. Will knew. But they already knew, meaning that Merlin had never had to say things out loud, discuss them with anyone. Hunith might have recommended Gaius above other teachers, but the fact remained that he was still tantamount to a stranger. He might have trusted his mum to
recommend Gaius, but Merlin wasn’t feeling particularly charitable towards her at the moment.

Gaius bobbed his head, taking Merlin’s false start as a complete thought. Probably wise, or they’d never get anywhere. “She spoke to me, yes. Briefly. Very briefly. I knew your father, you know.”

Merlin’s throat closed. He nodded.

“Good man, though troubled. When I first read your chip, I wondered why Hunith would refuse to register your paternity. She always struck me as the kind of woman who acknowledged the truth of the situation though it pained her dearly. Got her into trouble more than once.” Gaius found the stool that Will had been using and pulled it over. “Magic, however, often travels in hereditary lines. You would have been suspect from the first.”

Merlin swallowed and found his voice. “Never been un-suspect.”

“Perhaps not on the Ealdor, but my scanner did not pull up any flags at all for you when your identity was flashed against our database. It was cleverly done. No doubt there was a population program on the Ealdor at the same time so no one would question it.”

Blinking at Gaius, Merlin nodded slowly. No one had questioned the lack, true - at least, not that Merlin could remember. But that was because it hadn’t been a lack. Dozens of other children at the time had had one parent, even if fringe-tradition dictated two or more, and a great many of them were birthed by insemination, surrogation, or even decantation. His mother had used the upheaval of the Purge that marked his generation to her advantage.

Still, he wasn’t quite ready to forgive her for keeping his father a secret until the last possible moment.

Merlin looked away and stared down at his bare toes and exposed ankles. He had put on his smaller trousers as soon as they were ichor-free. They made him feel five years old again, outgrowing his clothing every week and a half, but it was better than being self-conscious in trousers that reminded him of Arthur.

Messing up his hair with his hands, Merlin shook his head, then looked to Gaius to clarify. “So you’re saying she knew when I was born. About- magic. And me. She never said.”

“I daresay she suspected you might take after your father. Precautions are just that. The capabilities of a particular child are not often known until they grow old enough to concentrate on and recite spells. Some of those capable of magic never find out, for lack of access or lack of curiosity, or simply because of overwhelming fear or danger. I’m not surprised that you would be one to overcome those obstacles, especially with your bloodline. I daresay you would be drawn to the practice, and probably young. The simplest spells can be performed by small children.”

“But I don’t know any spells?”

Busy feeling sorry for himself and angry at pretty much everyone, he almost missed Gaius choking on his own surprise.

“No spells,” Gaius said, boggling at Merlin. He had a very effective boggle.

Merlin was taken aback. “Well- one?”

Gaius waited. When Merlin was not forthcoming, Gaius prompted, “Which one?”

“Oh, um-” Merlin mumbled the syllables, spaced far enough apart to remove all intent.
Gaius turned pale and his eyes went wide. He leaned hard on the worktable bolted next to the bed. “Where did you learn that?”

“… my father? Is something wrong?”

“That’s the only spell you know?”

“And where would I have found other spells? Ealdor isn’t, wasn’t-” Merlin waved one hand in the air in a vague gesture, half-irritated and half-worried by Gaius’s reaction. “We were out at the edge of the fringe for most of my life and nobody thought to bring a how-to on basic magic. It’s not like I could search the databases for that kind of thing.”

“Well.” Gaius pushed himself upright. He eyed Merlin, assessing. “Be that as it may, it’s not a first spell I would have chosen for you.”

“I didn’t have much choice.”

“It’s also very dangerous.”

Merlin gave Gaius a flat look. “I think it’s supposed to be.”

“No-” Gaius laughed without humour. “I mean that it’s dangerous for you. It is a tightly-packaged spell, subtle in design if not in nature. Without a foundational knowledge of how to cast something so intricate, I wonder that it did not rebound upon you.”

“Oh.” Merlin said. That sounded… bad. “I didn’t know it could.”

“I think I see why your mother wished you to have training. Why you wish to train.” Gaius rubbed his chin, pulling a thoughtful face. “She made it sound as though you were an accomplished minor caster.”

“I can do magic,” Merlin said, “Just not spells.”

For the second time in as many minutes, Gaius eyebrows crawled up his forehead in shock. This time, however, he recovered much more quickly. Merlin almost laughed at the bright academic interest that lit his face. Gaius leaned forward and asked, “And by ‘magic without spells’, what sort of things do you mean?”

“Things.” Merlin said, and he had to take a moment to squint into the near distance before he could answer. When his magic cooperated, things simply happened. For Gaius to ask ‘what sort of things can you do with your magic’ meant about as much as saying, ‘what sort of things can you do with your hands.’

Momentarily inspired, Merlin stuck out his hands to demonstrate, flexing them and matching motion to words. “I can grab things, move things, hold things and stick things to things, mostly. Every once and a while I can put things through things, and sometimes make things. I can break things, and see things…”

Gaius was shaking his head, but not in negation. When he spoke he sounded bemused. “That list contains a great many improbable tasks. And you can simply will things as you wish?”

“Mostly it’s reflex,” Merlin admitted.

“Reflex?” Gaius said, intrigued.
His open curiosity did more to put Merlin at ease than anything he might have said in reassurance.

Gaius sucked at his teeth thoughtfully. “Explain.”

Merlin curled his fingers to his palms. “Reflex. Like—” He made a frustrated noise, looking around the room as if something would help him with words. “Reflex. Like how you put your hands out when you trip.”

“Ah. Reflex,” Gaius said, as if Merlin had explained everything. “Yes. I see.”

“Easiest thing is catching things before they fall,” Merlin said, aware that he could not even do that now, not without words or a spell of some sort to coerce the barrier spell open. “I don’t think I’ve ever broken a dish in my life.”

A dozen memories flooded him even as he said the words, of broken crockery and chipped cups, from a score or more times and places. He blinked back a swell of angry tears and tried to control his expression so Gaius wouldn’t ask.

“Would you care to demonstrate?” Gaius asked. “We are as assured of privacy as we can be.”

Merlin nodded. He would love to demonstrate. Maybe actual reflex would succeed where his sad attempts at shoving power through the barrier spell had not. “I—” Merlin began, then shook his head, “I can’t anticipate it.”

“Ah,” Gaius said. Then he swept his arm across the worktable at his side, throwing a large metal plate and six or seven smaller implements clattering across the floor.

It should have worked. Merlin threw his hands out to ‘catch’ them before they could break. He could feel the power to arrest every piece mid-flight, to keep them from noise or damage, boil to his very fingertips and then stop, unable to go further. He had been closer to unleashing his magic when Arthur was toying with his waistband, when his magic had grown sharp edges.

They both stared at the overturned platter and the scattered tools. Merlin dropped his hands to his lap, then curled over on himself and rubbed at his eyes with his fists. In a small, childish way, Merlin had wanted to show off, to be different - better - than anyone else Gaius might have taught.

Gaius hrmphed, then peered at Merlin. “What’s wrong?”

“Spell,” Merlin muttered. “My father cast it on me so I wouldn’t destroy the Ealdor, then taught me another so I could kill Glatissant. I can’t do anything with my magic. Not one thing. At least not how I usually do. It’s like having both my hands tied behind my back.”

“A spell that hinders natural magic…” Gaius chewed on the inside of his cheek as he thought. “Describe?”

Merlin did. He described the nightmares, the feeling that he was trapped within his own skin, and the opening that his one-and-only spell made through the barrier spell. Gaius was appropriately sympathetic to the description of how oily and thick the barrier spell felt, how foreign and artificial. When Merlin was done, Gaius held up one finger to his lips and murmured that he would be right back.

Merlin nodded. Gaius proceeded to close his eyes and stay precisely where he was.

After about two or so minutes, Merlin started to fidget. Gaius’s breathing evened, his features slackened, and if he hadn’t been still sitting upright, Merlin might have thought he’d dropped off to
sleep. Some people could sleep sitting up, though, so that maybe didn’t tell him anything.

Eventually he couldn’t stand it any longer. “What are you doing?”

Gaius startled, rocking back on his stool and catching Merlin’s arm when he reached out to steady himself. He blinked at the lights.

“I found it,” Gaius said, adjusting his seat on the stool and patting Merlin. “Though I do wish you hadn’t interrupted me, I was still reading.”

“Reading…” Merlin said, “You have a memory mod?”

“My library, yes.”

“Doesn’t it hurt?” While the brain itself didn’t have any pain receptors, it was a different sort of pain to hit a mod with magic. Everything hurt.

“Ah, not usually? I only activate it when I need it. The rest of the time it remains inert.”

“But when it’s active-”

“Merlin-” Gaius halted him with a raised hand. When Merlin had quieted, he continued carefully. “Pain only occurs when active magic hits an active mod, and even then there are steps you can take to integrate the two.”

Merlin made a small sound of disbelief and eyed Gaius.

“Is that why you don’t have mods?” Gaius asked.

“Obviously. I wouldn’t be able to think.”

Gaius let out a disbelieving huff of his own, then stood. “We need to start you at theory.”

“But the barrier spell-?”

“Ah, yes.” Gaius paused mid-turn. “The barrier spell. According to my notes it wears away gradually, to give a student time enough to master their magic through controlled casting. It is designed, more or less, to dampen the effects of cast spells.”

“That’s not what it’s doing for me,” Merlin pointed out.

“Not as such, no.”

He really didn’t want to ask, but he needed to know. “How long is ‘gradually’?”

“Years,” Gaius said shortly, then stepped to his corner. The ceiling there was covered with glass bottles, dried herbs in boxes, and other sundries that looked out of place in the otherwise plastic-metal-and-flesh infirmary. From the safety of the other side of the room, he said, “It is meant to last an entire apprenticeship.”

Merlin’s stomach roiled. “Years of nightmares.”

“The nightmares don’t last, only the barrier does.” Gaius trundled back holding a small wooden object. “And the barrier is designed to hold against a certain standard of spells. A progression. It’s not designed for however you work. It could fail tomorrow, unexpectedly, and we might have no warning.”
“That’s comforting.” Merlin leaned heavy on the sarcasm, then ducked his head at Gaius’s unamused expression. “Sorry.”

“I will see if I can find anything else in my library, but it may be that we simply have to experiment.”

With how much Merlin had been asleep, that meant they didn’t have much time. “We’ll be there in a little more than a day.”

“A little more than two,” Gaius said.

Merlin snapped his head up. “Something changed?”

“Nothing to be alarmed about. A course correction. With it, we won’t be back for upwards of forty hours.” Gaius gave a dry chuckle, “There was almost mutiny among the Ealdorians.”

“So, not quite two days.” Merlin scrubbed at his face again. He didn’t know when he’d shifted from ‘do not want to be trapped on board with the heir Pendragon’ to ‘wants nothing more than to remain curled on the Kilgharrah for the rest of forever’ with an added dash of ‘maybe I can see Arthur every once and a while’. Strange relief helped him breathe a little easier. “I doubt it will be enough to sort me out.”

“You expect to stay aboard the Camelot, then?”

“Where else am I going to go?”

“Here.” Merlin’s blank stare made Gaius laugh outright. “On the Kilgharrah, obviously. I had a short chat with Lucan and the thought had crossed his mind to put in a request for you once everything settles down. Said that the Captain let the crew know they get right of first refusal on the Ealdor’s skilled. Lucan said you were efficient, if unconventional.” Gaius raised a curious eyebrow.

“It’s a long story.”

“I have no doubt,” Gaius said, looking expectant.

“What’s that?” Merlin pointed at the thing Gaius had gone to retrieve, not wanting to even start trying to explain what had happened, magic teacher or no magic teacher.

Even though the change of subject was both blatant and obvious, Gaius just smiled and shook his head. He placed the bit of carven wood in Merlin’s hands. At Merlin’s look of askance, he said, “It’s a triskelion.”

It was a carving of three identical spirals arranged in a triangle that all met in the centre. Merlin traced the spirals with his finger. It was a simple figure, and the wood was polished and dark, smooth and oiled by the touch of generations’ worth of humanity. One side was curved, carved with a faint leaf motif, while the other side was flat. He looked up to find Gaius seating himself once again, hiding a smile at Merlin’s fascination.

“What does it mean?” Merlin asked, curling his long fingers around it, comforted by the age and wisdom that called to his magic. It was an inanimate thing that felt alive, though there was no trace of anything but wood to Merlin’s senses.

“Balance,” Gaius said. “Harmony. Synergy. It is a symbol of intellect, magic, and flesh. Of technology, biomatter, and lifeforce. It represents our ships, our bodies, and our reality. It tells us that each side seeks balance with the other two.”
Gaius shifted to point at a small loop of leather half-hidden in one of the coils. “This one is designed to be hung so each spiral curls deiseil, representing the positive.”

The carvings tingled beneath Merlin’s fingers. It was not quite pain, but it burned like spice on the tongue and Merlin relaxed into the sensation, finding himself tracing each spiral again and again. His magic wanted to flood the symbol only to be stymied by the barrier spell. He let his senses skitter across its surface where it tugged at his mind, focusing upon itself. Its nature was written in the ancient carvings, old and venerable and as much a tool as a spanner or a wrench. “It’s pretty,” he said.

“A triskelion is a reminder that when the balance is thrown off, nature will correct it. At times, the consequences of imbalance are dire.”

“Like too much magic,” Merlin said.

“Like too much magic,” Gaius agreed sombrely. “The Adolebat and Muriden were victims of such a radical imbalance.”

“And that’s why my father cast the barrier spell.”

“That’s what the barrier spell is for, yes.”

Merlin clung to the triskelion. “I need to learn.”

“You do. You must. I think with all that you have told me, it’s too dangerous to leave you untrained. I could have been able to get away with never learning, my talents are meagre and the result of long study, and many others - even druids - could remain untaught, but you-” Gaius shook his head. “It would be a great loss and a great injustice.”

Merlin didn’t know if he would go as far as ‘injustice’, but he would much rather not have to worry about destroying everything he loved. “So where do we start?”

“Well. I think we should save the candle-lighting spell for a ship that has a biosphere, preferably one with a full forest. Open flames and warships do poorly together.”

Merlin flushed hot and cold, clinging harder to the triskelion until the tense, nightmarish sensation passed. He beat back the thunder of memory of tiny flames and vast darkness, glad that the nightmares would not go on forever. “No fire.”

“Simple remote kinesis?”

“Sounds useful.” Merlin managed a slight grin.

“Very. And I daresay it falls under the ‘grab things and move things and hold things’ category of your natural expressions.”

Merlin’s grin broadened into something more genuine. “Sounds like it.” He held out the triskelion, intending to return it, but Gaius drew back.

“No, no, it’s yours.”

“I can’t,” he protested. Though even as he said it, he clutched the triskelion tighter.

“It’s a focus, a tool. It does no one any good hiding among my things. It might even help you learn the simple spells.”
Gaius slid off the stool once more to gather the fallen tools and replace them. Reseating himself, he brought out a tiny ball of fluff from one of his side drawers. He placed it in the palm of his hand and held it up.

“It’s so… massless,” Merlin said, not bother to hide his scepticism. He had held himself to the deck with his own power, his mum and Will, too. A bit of a puff seemed almost insulting.

“Indeed. You expect to be moving a great deal of mass without practice? This allows you to learn what forces act upon a body on a scale where they’re easier to overcome.”

“And the spell?”

“Simply **sciftan**.”

“Doesn’t seem too hard to remember.”

“The foundation of a cast spell is focus and intent. You find your focus and the word encapsulates your intent.” Gaius repeated the syllables, then held out the fluff. “Go ahead.”

“**Sciftan,**” Merlin said, directing one finger at Gaius’s outstretched hand. Nothing happened. The ball of fluff rocked more from the force of Merlin’s breath in speaking than from any magic that might have squeezed forth.

His magic took interest in the word, however, and abandoned its attempts to coil around the triskelion. It flowed to where Merlin thought it should and halted at the edge of the barrier spell. Merlin set the triskelion aside so he could glower at his hands. He wiggled his fingers. It should have worked, it felt like it worked— or, rather, it felt quite similar to the feel of his magic when he’d tried to catch things by reflex.

“The pronunciation is unique to every caster, for it is their intent it must reflect exclusively. Hence why practice is such a large part of using magic,” Gaius said mildly.

Merlin tried again and again, adjusting the word to fit his mouth and his mind in stages. Each time something sounded ‘right’ to him, his magic gave a little jump of excitement.

Yet the bitty ball of fluff stayed where it was until Merlin was pretty sure that Gaius was getting tired of holding it out. He did not complain, though, only made suggestions about which direction to take the word until it bore only passing resemblance to the word they had begun with.

It was odd to feel fatigued, nauseous from trying to cast through the barrier, and no small amount of frustrated by his own magic. Merlin was annoyed, restless, and just wanted the spell to **work** how his magic was supposed to work, how he was used to it working.

Irritated with himself for not being able to accomplish even this small thing, he imagined himself setting the word ablaze before he spoke and tossed it in the direction of the bit of fluff.

The fluff promptly lit on fire.

Merlin yelped and Gaius clapped his hands together to snuff it before any alarms went off or explosions happened.

“I thought we said no fire.” Gaius did not sound particularly upset, for which Merlin was grateful. He just held out his ash-stained hands for their mutual inspection and waited.

“I- nothing was moving. So I burned the spell,” Merlin said, rubbing the tips of his fingers together
self-consciously. The magic had whipped out from beneath the barrier spell along the lines of his fingers, electrifying his bones and spreading a pinprickling tingle across the surface of his skin. “Is that normal?”

“I have a suspicion that trying to teach you anything is never going to be normal.” Gaius dusted his hands off, “No. The spell is designed to encapsulate your intent in a way that natural forces understand. Even with as much pronunciation modification we introduced, it’s still the ‘move things’ spell.”

“Not ‘burn things’.”

“Not so much.”

Merlin spat a curse that made Gaius blink. He thought about apologising. Instead, he pulled his legs up onto the bed, rested his heels on the edge and wrapped his arms around his knees. “So I basically broke magic.”

“More or less.” Gaius sounded… pleased. Merlin stared at him.

“And you’re okay with that?”

“I am a healer, yes, but I am also a scholar.” Gaius tapped the side of his head. “What sort of scholar would I be if I was not deeply interested in how your magic works? Your will seems a great deal stronger than a formal framework expects.”

“Brilliant.” And maybe Merlin was feeling a bit sulky, but he had just set his fluff on fire when he’d only been trying to push it about a bit. He took a deep breath and sought the triskelion with one hand, pulling it to his chest. He didn’t need to be frustrated at Gaius. “Sorry. Thank you.” The wooden symbol was warm in his hands. He rubbed a thumb over the carvings.

“The loop is probably getting stale, and we should best halt this for another time. I would tell you to practice, but we do not have the benefit of a forested biosphere or a haven ship. I will say, ‘try not to get caught’.” Gaius gave Merlin a knowing look, complete with an eyebrow raise. Merlin offered him a grudging grin.

Gaius began to clean up, the lesson over.

However, one topic in particular had been plaguing Merlin since he’d come aboard and he couldn’t let the opportunity pass to ask. “Gaius-” he ventured. “Do you believe in ghosts?”

“You’re asking if I think ghosts are a manifestation of a sorcerer’s ego? A lie told to Captains to earn promotions and a place to exercise their power?”

“You’re asking if I think ghosts are a manifestation of a sorcerer’s ego? A lie told to Captains to earn promotions and a place to exercise their power?”

Merlin nodded.

“Of course I believe in ghosts.” Gaius snorted. “They’ve been around since… oh, since Bruta’s time and the launch of the Kingdoms. Before that. Don’t tell me you’ve believed Uther’s nonsense?”

“You just didn’t mention and-”

“And the Kilgharrah is speaking to you, I have no doubt. He is a very powerful ghost.” Gaius gave him a reassuring smile. He reordered the worksurface next to the bed, saying, “I’m afraid it slipped my mind entirely. I do not have the innate ability to hear without a spell, so I am limited in my communications.”
Merlin let out his breath. “So I’m not going mad.”

Gaius hummed to himself. “I don’t know about that, but if it’s ghosts you’re worried about, hopefully I’ve put your mind at ease.”

Blinking at Gaius and his response, it took Merlin a few moments to gather his wits. “Until you said that.”

Gaius chuckled and trundled off toward the far end of the infirmary to release his lock on the visual pickups.
She stumbled, and her plasma launcher bounced away across the forest floor to get caught in the undergrowth. Swearing, she scrambled to her feet and dove for the weapon. Crashes through the foliage behind her told her she was not alone.

She had the launcher up and pointed back the way she came before she realised it was Gavaine calling, “Merle! Get back here, you lazy asshole, and help with this fucking-”

Gavaine nearly ran right over her hiding place.

Reaching out, she grabbed Gavaine’s ankle as she threw herself past shrieking blue murder, and pulled her over a log and down into the detritus. Not a moment later, one of the great bipedal lizards thundered by after her.

While Gavaine panted beside her, Merle kept her eyes fixed on the false trail she was laying. The creature chased the motion into the brush and she thanked her lucky stars that the reptiloids all had a crap sense of smell. Five days in the same fatigues on a strange planet and she and Gavaine were smelling mighty ripe.

“I owe you one,” Gavaine said, unshouldering her own plasma launcher and starting a basic stability check. She indicated it with a disgusted wrinkle of her nose. “Damn thing jammed.”

“Can’t have that.”

Gavaine glowered at her, then tugged at Merle’s short military cut, interrupting her concentration. The magic dissipated and the false trail petered out. The creature took two hundred meters to stop after it lost its quarry. “Like yours never jams.”

“It’s jammed now.”

“Fuck.” Gavaine pieced out her launcher, then reassembled it. The ‘ready to go’ window still glowed an angry red. “Fuck. The fuck are we going to do? Two days and six clicks ‘til rendezvous and we’ve got T-Rex out there bound and determined to find out what ‘human’ tastes like.”
Merle flopped back against the massive log that shielded them from view and tried to catch her breath. She grinned at Gavaine. “You’re the one who picked the assignment, so don’t blame me. I’m the one carrying the payload.”

“I thought you dropped it!”

“It’s the only reason we’re on this fucking planet, of course I didn’t drop it.”

“Then what—”

“That was all our other supplies.”

“I could kill you, Merle.”

She thumbed over her shoulder at the shuddering trees as the massive lizard backtracked, looking for them. “Get in line.”

They both peered over the top of the log to see the creature poke its nose out of a tangle of vines and sniff. It wouldn’t take it long to find them, even with its crappy olfactories. Merle did not envy Gavaine sitting downwind of them both.

Huddled with their useless plasma launchers, they stared at each other for a long moment, each breathing hard and on the edge of laughter. Gavaine had a smudge on her nose, blood or dirt, and her dark hair had come out of its tieback. She had a reckless look in her eye that Merle absolutely did not trust one bit.

She kept hold of Merle’s gaze, her smile broadening as she pulled a small bundle of fuse-detonated explosives from her belt and held it up between them.

“Oh no—” Merle protested.

“Oh, fuck yes.”

“This is the worst idea.”

“How do you feel about roast dinosaur? I’m pretty sure Rexy will keep us fed for a couple of days.”

Merle covered her mouth, trying desperately not to laugh. “We are going to die.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Gavaine said cheerfully, pointing at the fuse with a flourish. “Light me up?”

“We are going to die,” Merle repeated, but touched one finger to the fuse and called her magic.

Before she lit it, she said, “Last chance.”

Gavaine peeked over the log again just as the creature swung its head around. She squeaked and dropped back below cover. “Just fucking do it. I think it spotted me.”

They both startled as the fuse caught, flickering and sputtering. Neither of them moved for a long heartbeat as the flame licked up the waxed cord.

“Shit,” Gavaine said, dragging them both back to reality. The sound of heavy footsteps headed their way. She stood, flicking at one of Merle’s ears for luck. “C’mon!”

Payload firmly tied around her middle, Merle unfolded herself from their hiding place and launched herself over the log, straight at the creature. Hands up, she threw her power at its dozens of beady
little eyes. It roared.

It kept roaring as it charged.

“Three-two-one-duck!” Gavaine shouted from behind.

Merle ducked.

The world went white.

He pulled the dishtowel away from his face and leaned back against the sink. The thump and churn of the industrial-strength washers came through the wall from the restaurant next door. He grinned. Their little restaurant might not get as much volume, but he could wash dishes every bit as swiftly as any monstrous machine, even if he had to cheat a little. Lance never minded if he cheated a little, and he owned the place.

The sound of the lunch rush was winding down, quieting into the lull between businessmen grabbing whatever they could inside of their half-hour and families on the hunt for old-fashioned comfort food. He had a great many dishes to wash, pudding-spattered and gravy-encrusted. He slipped into a doze as he methodically made his way through his stack, losing himself in the repetitive motion and letting his mind sleep.

Most everything was put away soon enough, and he hadn’t even used a lick of magic to help, only to reach for his coffee in its cheerful bumblebee mug on the sideboard.

Someone had chipped it. He took a drink and the jagged porcelain sliced his lip. Dropping the mug, he watched the handle break off as time slowed around him, too surprised to even think about catching it.

Too surprised and no longer there. The coffee pooling next to his toes, the two pieces of his favourite mug lying side by side, and he was thrown. He wiped his lip with his fingers, felt the sting, but his mind was away.

Coffee mixed with blood as it spilt from the shattered mug, more blood than any one human could supply. Scattered around the tiny room were two, three bodies. He didn’t count them. He could only stare at what once had been a breakroom for a small office full of blinking computers and ringing phones. One rang in the distance, sublimely unaware of the dust and the ringing already in his ears.

The roof caved, forcing him back and he swore long and loud even though no one could hear him, his comms dead. He knew now why. Sacrificial lamb. Civilians. They weren’t supposed to have been civilians, innocents. He had sparks between his fingers and a tattered uniform around his shoulders. Each body wore business casual. He wanted to answer the phone and wipe up the coffee. He should. He already had blood on his hands.

“Merlin-"
The dead couldn’t speak, which meant he was elsewhere. Away was happening with less frequency, but sometimes-

He looked down at Gwen holding tight to his shoulders, staring up at him with wide eyes and repeating his name until he recognised her. Lance stood in the doorway, ready to help, but Gwen wasn’t afraid. She should be. Lashing out was expected.

But this was Gwen.

When he came back to himself he staggered, his feet crunching down on porcelain. The last set of dishes drying on the racks now dried on the floor. He brushed a thumb across his lip and it came away bloody. He hadn’t been out long enough for it to clot.

He sagged. Gwen wrapped herself around him and he buried his face in her neck, curling in and down until he felt like she was supporting his whole weight. She might be. She was solid and he kept forgetting to eat. And sleep.

He couldn’t let himself be tired, but right now he was so tired.

Peripherally, he saw Lance nod to himself and pick his way across the treacherous floor to brush a hand across his wife’s back as he passed them to head further back.

“It sounded bad,” she said.

“It always is.” He didn’t know how much longer Lance would let him stay if this kept happening.

As always, anger turned inward boiled just beneath the surface. Before was lost to him. He extracted himself from Gwen’s hold so she would not sense his returning tension, so she would not try to talk when he just wanted to forget.

Lance handed him the broom and he was grateful for the task.

“Take it out of my paycheque, yeah?” he asked, which he always asked.

Lance let him stay, even though he shouldn’t. He wasn’t getting any better.

He asked why, which he never asked. “Why let me stay?”

Gwen swatted him on the shoulder. Not hard, just enough to let him know she didn’t appreciate the question. Just enough to let him know she didn’t think he was fragile, even though he was. “You’re ours,” she said. “Don’t be an idiot.”

The insult, mild and familiar - though not from her lips - comforted him, a small shard of a larger missing piece.

He swept and mourned his bumblebee mug, wondering if he knew a spell that could mend it.
Coughing, he threw his hands out to the side. He flailed. Dirt filled his mouth, sat heavy in his throat, and he barely got an arm in front of his nose before the loose earth above him shifted and more fell. They had buried him without a box, no pine barrier to give him the illusion of respectability. A pauper’s grave, then, and shallow, sensing light and air above him even if his hands met only dirt.

He refused to panic. He’d known this might happen. He’d been too injured, too stupid not to put himself into the trance he needed to heal. Even a locked door and a quiet house could not protect him while unconscious in a way that looked a great deal like death and left a rune emblazoned upon his chest for all and sundry to mark him a creature of evil.

He wasn’t. Wasn’t a creature of evil.

He was, however, in a hastily-dug hole beyond the wrought iron at the edge of the churchyard.

Still not panicking.

He tried to drag in a breath and… dirt. So much dirt.
Panicking a little.

Enclosed, unable to move, he tried to wiggle and could feel earth shifting above him to fill in each and every space his movements generated. Entombed. Trapped. Breathing difficult with the weight of soil upon his chest, still weak from his healing sleep. Adrenaline coursed his veins and he fought to keep from thrashing, from miring himself, from running out of air.

His magic could do little, sapped and quiescent and healing itself, but he was alive. He could not take the gift of survival for granted.

He wondered if they’d burnt his home. He would have to move in any case.

The arm not covering his face - not awkwardly pressing against his mouth and wrenching his shoulder as dirt and more dirt pressed down upon it - twitched. He couldn’t move. He could almost move. He was panicking and couldn’t because he’d use up his air. He whimpered and couldn’t help it because he was stuck and his surroundings were quite absolutely literally closing in on him.

He breathed through his nose.

After longer than he thought possible, he dug himself sitting upright. He was still shivering and terrified and buried alive, but the dirt was loose and the grave was shallow.

When his fingers hit air, he howled his joy into the surrounding soil, crumbling in and down as he fought up and up and up. He had magic enough now - conserved and reserved - to push him faster, faster than digging with fingers and toes, and he had his elbows on either side of the hole he’d made himself in a moment. He was breathing air. Air and not dirt.

The light from his eyes shone on the spade of the shovel not two inches from his nose, liming the metal in brilliant gold. He froze. So did the spade.

Letting his magic loose, he peered up into the darkness, afraid of what he would find.

“Gaius.” Relief left him boneless, held upright only by the dirt that embraced him. “You came for me.”

The shovel pulled back and his old friend’s creased face came close to peer at him. “You looked a demon for certain. Be glad I was the one watching.”

“Watching?”

“Or helping you rise from the dead, if you prefer.” Gaius slid his shovel into the grave dirt and helped.
Will snored face-down on the infirmary bed opposite Merlin’s. Merlin covered him with a thermal blanket and patted him on the back, more than willing to let him sleep.

In actually training Will as a Counsellor, Gwen was running him ragged with hours and hours of study to cram every bit of relevant information she could think of into his brain so he could be of use to her. The way Will told it, she was already training him on-the-job by shoving him at her shipmates while she used her skill on the Ealdorians. Will seemed to be taking to the responsibilities. Merlin suspected it was because he secretly enjoyed talking to people other than Merlin.

With Will out cold, Merlin slipped into the hallway to have a bit of a chat with the ghost, who had been quiet and expectant since he’d woken up.

“Kilgharrah?” He ventured, looking both ways along the corridor as the portal to the infirmary irised shut behind him. Empty. “We can talk, if you want. I don’t want to wake Will.”

He needs the sleep.

“Let me know if anyone comes down?”

As you wish.

Merlin let out his breath and leaned back against the wall next to the information panel by the door. “Your grand plan got me precisely nowhere.”

My grand plan brought you to the attention of Engineering.

“I thought—” Merlin began, then stopped. Coming to Lucan’s attention was probably as good of a result as he would have been likely to get with any plan. “That was your goal? I thought you wanted me to speak to the Captain on your behalf?”

Attaching you to Engineering is more efficient. If he asks to keep you on after we reach my berth on the Camelot, you will have more flexibility in keeping our agreement. Kilgharrah paused. The Captain—

There was something in how Kilgharrah cut off that made Merlin fold his arms and glare at the far wall. “Yes?”

I look forward to your future interactions.

“What do you know?”
You suit one another. If you believed in destiny, I would probably say something melodramatic. The ghost’s attention sharpened and humour flooded through their connection. Do you believe in destiny?

Merlin hesitated. He didn’t, not really, but his nightmares made him wonder what the ghost would say if he said yes. “Yes.”

Then I would say you are two sides of the same coin.

Merlin, incredulous, said, “I’ve only just met him. You’ve only just met me.”

I did warn you, young warlock, that I was going to say something melodramatic.

Despite Merlin’s protest, however, the phrase caused a twinge of recognition. “How would you even know something like that?”

Magic.

“But you’re a ghost.”

And what do you think ghosts are?

The Kilgharrah had him there, and talk that even hinted at a predetermined future made him uneasy. He changed the subject. “You promised me an extended discussion.”

Something shifted between them and the Kilgharrah’s presence withdrew enough to cool the floor beneath Merlin’s bare toes. I did say we needed to chat, did I not.

“You did. I offended you.”

You said that a ghost would harm its crew, its lifeblood. A ghost does not suicide. To even think it possible is—

The Kilgharrah was at a loss for words, though his emotions flooded through their connection: appalled, angry, frustrated.

Merlin dropped his chin to his chest and sighed. “That’s what I was telling Will. I was explaining to him that if you did anything like that—”

There is no IF. The Kilgharrah overrode Merlin’s words with a roar. I would never—

“You hurt that mechanic, wossname, Tyr!” Merlin shouted back, throwing his hands in the air. No ‘if’ his arse. “You hurt him! Burned out his mods! What’s that, then? You tell me it’s not possible for you to even think of harming us and you turn right around and do that? What am I supposed to think? I defended you to Will and then I get Gwen telling me how you left burns, how she needed to order him parts because you slagged half of his toolbox.”

You needed to be given to Lucan.

“And that made it ‘necessary’ to damage one of your crew. Sure, yeah, okay. I’m not saying you’re going mad, but you have a great deal of flexibility in what you mean by ‘harm’.” The Ealdor had never been half as scary or contrary as the sodding machine beneath his feet. “Don’t you dare get offended at me, not when you’re both willing and capable of something like that.”

I am not human.

“No, you’re not.”

Do not expect me to be human.
Merlin dug his fingers into his scalp and clutched at his hair. He wanted to rail at the Kilgharrah, stomp a bit on the deck and make demands, be anything but the only one who could hear the ghost let alone argue with him.

Then the import of the Kilgharrah’s words hit him blindside as part of the source of his uneasiness became clear. “Oh. Fuck. No, you’re not human at all.”

*I do what is best for myself and my crew. Your approval of my means is not a priority, only your commands. I do not ask you to trust me, merely work with me.*

Merlin was listening, he was, but he waved a hand to dismiss the topic and asked, “Then what are you?”

*I-*

The Kilgharrah halted. Merlin could feel the impulse of wanting to explain himself further, to make it very clear why Merlin was wrong. He was caught off-guard by the question. *What?*

“What are you? You’re not human. Obviously. Neither was the Ealdor, right? But the Ealdor felt human. You don’t.” The Ealdor feeling human was part of the reason that the Kilgharrah made him wary. The shape of his thoughts weren’t human in the least.

*Let me draw from you and I shall show you.*

That sounded like a change in subject. “You keep saying draw.”

The Kilgharrah responded to the implied question with a, *When your father was much, much younger, he would let ghosts draw from him, dragon rank and otherwise, and we named him a dragonlord. I fought him once after I was first commissioned and I yet envy the ghost he paired with. I wish to know what it is like.*

“But what is it?”

*Your power, like your father’s before you, can be drawn to give something like me form.*

Merlin had agreed to help without asking the details even when he had known better. Rubbing his forehead, he tried to make sense of what the ghost was saying. “If it gives you form? Why didn’t- My father- The Ealdor- We could have used something like that.”

The Kilgharrah did not answer. Instead, the deck became too hot to stand on. Merlin couldn’t move and the sensation changed to needles digging into his heels and something sharp and not-entirely-trustworthy stabbing hard at his soles. He clapped his hands over his mouth so he wouldn’t howl and bring every crewmember on his level running.

For the first time that Merlin could remember, the touch of a ghost was not comforting but alien, inhuman in a way that did not concern itself with the petty doings of the mortals that trod its corridors. Merlin had been right. Having a magic user aboard meant a great deal more to Kilgharrah than convivial conversation. There was a howling, horrifying *hunger* that clawed its way to the fore.

He got it. He did. A ghost was in no way, shape, or form human. It was *magic* and power beyond flesh, intellect, and - right now - sanity. Merlin didn’t need the lesson branded into him.

“Stop,” Merlin hissed between his fingers. Whatever the ghost was doing hurt like a sonovabitch and pain was stealing his wits. The hunger and focus and intensity of the ghost swamped him, made it hard to breathe, made him feel disconnected, like he was going mad and becoming very, very sane simultaneously. All Merlin could do was sway in place. Their disparate definitions of ‘harm’ had never been so relevant. “Fuck. Just stop.”
The ghost released Merlin as soon as the command was issued. Merlin staggered and fell back against the wall.

*I cannot draw from you.*


*Acknowledged. Why can I not draw from you?*

Merlin would laugh at the Kilgharrah’s bewilderment if he wasn’t so fucking pissed off. “Because I’m blocked,” He snapped. “Surprise.”

The ghost pulled back, his presence coiling around the corridor, conveying frustration at being thwarted. He responded instead by answering Merlin’s earlier question. *The Ealdor would not draw from a dragonlord, even if Balinor had willed it. It is not a subtle act.*

The hunger remained and the lying-in-wait sensation still tingled up Merlin’s spine. The ghost was no longer hiding what he was for Merlin’s sake. Frustration faded from the connection on the Kilgharrah’s side, replaced by raw patience.

Merlin’s anger faded as well, and he regarded the wall warily. It was inconvenient not to have a face to speak to.

The strangest part was that even with all the subterfuge stripped away, the Kilgharrah was still as familiar as ever. On some level, Merlin found he knew, felt kinship, with the ghost’s hunger - because Merlin had that same howling maelstrom of need/want/desire clamouring for an outlet. It was the nightmare curiosity that made him want to know what his will could do. It was the elation of power. It was the thing that had made him want to laugh running through the Ealdor while the ship died around him.

The Kilgharrah might be alien to Merlin’s mind, strange and eldritch and horrifying once his facade was stripped away, but Merlin understood. His recognition of the clawing, consuming want, more than anything, dissolved his anger. At least Merlin could cast spells, in theory, and could affect the world around him and exercise his nature. A ghost was confined to itself.

Unless, it seemed, the ghost found a willing dragonlord.

The spell barrier itched and flared, responding to the Kilgharrah’s attempt to punch through. Merlin cursed under his breath. He didn’t get to find out what the Kilgharrah had had in mind. The simple fact that his father had allowed ghosts to draw from him piqued Merlin’s curiosity. Surely there was a way to accomplish the task without mind-blanking pain.

“Next time ask,” he said after a long silence. The ship around him thrummed in agreement, though the ghost said nothing.

The Kilgharrah’s presence felt like coils of warmth, making the corridor too hot. This was the most present the ghost had been since Merlin had set foot on the ship. He found himself trying to map the shape of the ghost. With him so close to the walls, the surface, Merlin’s muted ability to probe was finally able to give him a clearer picture. He linked his senses with the Kilgharrah’s and found the ghost’s image of himself near the surface. Hopeful. Thwarted. Unwilling to be subsumed within the ship’s physical form again even with Merlin uncooperative.

Mixed with the sudden flood of biological information - the sense of the ship’s heartbeat, a deep thud that rattled Merlin’s bones, the stretch of muscle and steel as the bridge sent instructions to manipulate his engines, and the plucking, severing sensation of two tiny destrier-sized fighters
unlinking from his hull to take up patrol - was the ghost’s own perceptions. He was vast, dangerous, with teeth and claws that glimmered in the back of Merlin’s mind like ivory in torchlight. The everyday sounds of the living ship, creaks and groans and faint, wet organic pops and clicks translated into the flap of leather and the scrape of scale on stone.

Merlin gently thumped his forehead with his closed fist. “You’re a dragon. Dragonlord. Dragon rank.” He could feel the ghost’s laughter and wanted to punch the wall. “Military ships are dragon rank. Pendragon is the one who commands them.”

The Kilgharrah was amused enough for both of them.

Fuck. No wonder the Kilgharrah did not ‘feel’ even remotely human, more-so than any ghost (in his admittedly limited experience) had before. Then a thought occurred to him that made his eyes widen, “But the Pendragon’s not a dragonlord-”

Absolutely not. The amusement evaporated. The title of dragonlord is reserved for those who can communicate with my kind directly who are also capable of allowing us to draw from them. The Pendragon should be a dragonlord. Uther is a usurper.

“Probably why he’s trying to kill us all, then. If he’s not and should be.” Merlin said. Fuck. “Your form is a dragon.”

It is. The Kilgharrah’s smirk returned, overlaid on top of the alien feel of his mind that Merlin was rapidly (and somewhat alarmingly) growing used to. Military ships are more like to take dragon form. A paired warlock and ghost is a formidable opponent and the spectacle sticks in human minds. If civilian ships had ghosts anywhere near as impressive as I, you might well be called a maidenlord.

The ghost chuckled at his own joke. Merlin was too busy absorbing the implications to bother. “The Ealdor was human.”

Most maiden rank ships are.

“But-”

As much as I enjoy teaching you the very basics of your nature, you have company.

For what it was worth, the Kilgharrah sounded apologetic. A voice - a very solid, very human voice - came from terrifyingly near. “Merlin?”

Merlin just about jumped out of his own skin. Lancelot stood before the nearest bend wearing an off-duty uniform and as much as Merlin wanted him to be a hallucination, he looked scruffy and awfully solid. He felt solid too, standing square on the deck, weight distributed. He breathed and the Kilgharrah’s sensors detected no change in heart rate or breathing pattern, just an increase in neural activity and a conscious adjustment to several internal mods that didn’t have visible plating.

“Fuck.” Merlin tried to gather his wits, to unlink his mind from the Kilgharrah’s senses. He didn’t need to feel the man’s weight on his skin, phantom bootheels that dug into his calf as his brain frantically tried to fit sensory input into something that would not break Merlin’s mind. Pulling back to himself, releasing the Kilgharrah (or the Kilgharrah releasing him), Merlin grounded himself in memory. A flicker of the man before him kissing Arthur on the shoulder, of Gwen’s rhapsodies over the man she loved, and then a profusion of images from dozens and dozens of nightmares. Detached, confused by his own recall, Merlin blinked. “Lance?”
“Were you talking to the wall?” Lance asked. He wasn’t frowning, wasn’t freaking out. He just sounded curious. That backed up what the Kilgharrah’s sensors had picked up.

“No?”

Lance offered a slow smile. “Was that a question?”

“Yes,” Merlin said, his fight-or-flight kicking in as memory faded into the here and now. Since he didn’t want to fight Lance (who was shorter than him, yes, but also a Knight and full of muscles and mods made for doing Knightly sorts of things like wield swords and get in bar fights), running down the corridor in the opposite direction sounded like a brilliant idea. Merlin tried not to hyperventilate as he edged away.

Not that there was anywhere to go on the ship that someone wouldn’t find him. His ID chip would show up on the map no matter where he hid. Maybe he could ask the Kilgharrah to shield him, scramble the signal or something. Lance had seen him talking to no one and nothing, the first sign even the bittiest children learnt to mark sorcerers.

His life was flashing before his eyes, it really was. Arthur would make good on his threats and everything would be horrible forever.

He might also get dead.

Lance held his hands up in front of him, his shoulders still relaxed and his smile edging toward compassion. Merlin had no idea what to think of that, but Lance wasn’t trying to stab him with the sword at his hip. The mad thought that Arthur had ordered even off-duty armed because of their earlier run-in cause a giggle to slip loose. He was not doing himself any favours in the ‘don’t look dangerous’ department by laughing to himself.

“Look—” Lance said, hands still out as he made ‘calm down’ motions, “I found you defending a dying man against a horde of ravenous aliens.”

“You’re a Knight,” Merlin said, trying to sort out whether he was hearing what he thought he was hearing. Lance had seen him, heard him. Merlin could be mad at best, a sorcerer at worst and should be reported either way. “I was talking to the wall.”

“Both of those things are true, yes,” Lance said, easing himself forward slowly so Merlin wouldn’t bolt. Merlin rather thought he was offended to be treated like a skittish animal, but fuck if it wasn’t working.

Half-turned and trying to judge whether or not Lance was now too close to allow him to run, Merlin tried to concentrate. “But— I’m—”

“Someone a great deal like those who’ve kept me alive more than once, and someone who I’ve already seen protecting the weak,” Lance cut in. “I’m as fringe as you are, and further out junior communications officers are not as much of a rarity as King Uther wishes you to believe.” He stood directly in front of Merlin now, tilting his head back to look up at him. His smile never faltered even though Merlin was having a meltdown.

Too late to run. If Lance wanted to grab him, he wouldn’t be able to go two steps.

Dying and dying and dying.

Nightmares. Every one a nightmare.

But this Lance had mods that his off-duty uniform bared. His legs had gravity-compensators, tarnished and practical. Merlin seized upon that tiny detail to try and make sense of what this Lance was telling him.

“You’re a Knight.”

“You mentioned.”

Gwen spoke ridiculously highly of her lover, and Lance wasn’t running Merlin through or dragging him off. Instead, he stood with hands visible and body-language telling Merlin’s instincts that he did not intend harm.

Forcing himself to breathe, to calm himself and the onslaught of remembered nightmares, Merlin stayed half-ready to run. Lance tucked his hands in his pockets and leaned casually on the wall by Merlin’s side, waiting for him to get himself under control.

Merlin couldn’t stop himself from asking again, “I just- why?” His voice didn’t crack at all.

“If you need a better reason to stop panicking than ‘I grew up around magic users’, then how about ‘Gwen likes you and I trust her judgement?’”

“That can’t be all of it,” Merlin said, rather desperately. Lance’s reasons were slowly sinking in, leaving Merlin now more confused than fearful.

Lance just smiled. It was not a smarmy smile. He had all the power here, but his smile was only a little concerned and a little sad, maybe, and genuine enough for all of that. It reached his eyes.

Merlin really wanted to believe him. “You won’t tell?”

“No, not if you won’t,” he said, as if they were sharing the secret. It reminded Merlin strongly of Will (who was going to kill him), and that, more than anything, made him lean back against the wall and accept that maybe Lance really wasn’t going to turn him in.

“I’m sorry.” Merlin scrubbed at his face, trying to take deep breaths. “You shouldn’t have to go against…”

“Friends. The whole works.” Lance offered his hand without hesitation. After Merlin shook it gingerly, Lance nodded in satisfaction. “Good. That’s settled. On to other topics, then?”

And that was it. That was all he was going to say. Merlin felt a spike of outrage. He had very nearly flipped his shit and Lance was moving on like it didn’t even matter. Not that Merlin could do anything but talk to walls at the moment, but Lance had no reason to know that. Merlin worked his jaw, trying to decide if shouting, ‘nothing is settled!’ would appropriately illustrate his dissatisfaction with Lance’s easy discovery and dismissal of Merlin’s biggest secret.

Pride stung, young warlock?

The Kilgharrah was an arsehole. Merlin scrubbed at his face again to cover his grimace and tried to avoid Lance’s eyes. Unintentionally getting caught talking to the ship ones one thing, bringing attention to the fact that he could hear its voice was quite another.
Still, the ghost had a point. Merlin was getting what he wanted. His magic posed no threat - at the moment, at least, and never if he had anything to do about it. Having someone find out he was magic did not need to be a big deal.

Not a big deal. Yes. Good. Now that he agreed with himself, he could move on.

Tired of repeating the word ‘why’ over and over, he dropped his hands, raised his eyebrows, and said, “Lay it on me.”

“It’s about Arthur.”

Merlin shifted, sliding his gaze away from Lance’s face. “What about him?”

“He likes you.” And the way Lance said it made it clear that he was using ‘like’ as in ‘like like’ as in ‘sexually attracted.’

“Oh for- does the whole ship know?”

“It’s not a very big ship. Also, Gwaine thought Gwen and I should be apprised.”

The reminder of Arthur’s previous attachments snapped Merlin’s jaw shut. “Oh. Right. Um-”

“No, no- you have my approval.”

Of all the things that Lance could have said, that was furthest from any that Merlin expected. He was at a loss, able only to stare at the earnest openness on Lance’s unfairly handsome face.

“I wanted to make sure you knew that,” Lance continued, frowning slightly. “That’s why I came to find you.”

Merlin recovered his voice, prompted in part by Kilgharrah snickering in the back of his mind. He resisted the urge to hush the ghost, because that really wouldn’t help his case. “But you, Arthur… Gwen?”

“Gwen gave hers, didn’t she?”

“Well- more or less.” Merlin folded his arms across his chest and tucked his chin to his shoulder. “She said ‘it might be good for him’ or something like that. I wasn’t really asking.” At the time he’d seen Arthur’s face all of once. Enough to plant the seed, enough to be attracted, but not enough for much more than a first impression.

“Then it should ease your mind to know it’s a mutual parting. We actually had The Talk with Arthur today.”

Merlin pulled his shoulders up around his ears, obscurely guilty. He hadn’t wanted to ruin something good for Arthur, even though his guilt made no sense any way he thought about it. He was not responsible for Arthur’s attention and he certainly hadn’t thrown himself at the Captain even if he was starting to think that he might really (really) want to.

Actually- now that he thought about it, he’d shown no outward attraction at all. The only way that Lance would even know that he had expressed interest was through Gwen and that had been only half in earnest. Lance was here just in case. On the off-chance that Merlin wanted to pursue something, Lance was making sure he knew he could. Somehow that made Merlin feel even worse.

“It wasn’t bad,” Lance said, and he was being so fucking reassuring that it made Merlin want to
crawl into a hole. He didn’t deserve this, not from Lance, who had just broken off a relationship with the guy he was trying to foist off on Merlin. Who had just discovered that he was a fucking sorcerer and had ignored that fact and gone on to say that ‘hey, my old lover’s free and I think he likes you.’

Lance didn’t seem to notice that Merlin had his eyes squeezed shut. He rambled on like they were chatting over pints. “He knew it was coming, though I don’t think he expected us to take the initiative. He’s a good man, but he takes more time than he has to figure out what he wants.”

With a deep breath, Merlin uncurled and opened his eyes to find Lance watching him with sympathy. “Are you sure this was the best time to be-” He waved his hands vaguely in the air.

“Dissolving a relationship? No, but any other time would be no better. He’s been pulling away from us for weeks, but with you here we couldn’t wait. He needs the freedom to make decisions.” Lance half-shrugged. “We love him, want him happy, so it was time.”

Before Merlin could respond to that, Lance grinned and said, “And he likes you, even if he will inevitably be kind of a prat about it. Hence me being here.”

“How are you real?” Merlin asked, baffled.

He’d witnessed his share of messy relationship explosions. Fluidity and impermanence might have been characteristic of the fringe, but self-awareness and civility were rare no matter where the relationship took place or what conventions it supposedly followed. It didn’t surprise Merlin that fringe lovers would part, just that they would do so- so- so amicably. None of Will’s had ever ended like this, and all Merlin had for experience were one- or two-offs that followed a whole different set of rules.

“How are you real?” Merlin asked. He winked.

“That doesn’t even make sense,” Merlin complained. “How are you not furious?”

Lance was taken aback. He had to think about the question. Actually think about it. Merlin leaned against the wall next to him while he thought. Eventually, “Is there a reason I should be furious? Arthur was drifting, we had an arrangement, and it was time for the arrangement to end?”

“You were lovers, and he’s leaving you.” Merlin was pretty sure he would not be taking things nearly as calmly, having grown up on the fringe notwithstanding. “Doesn’t that mean anything?”

“We’re letting him go?” Lance asked like he was expecting a trap. “He wants to go. He’s already moved on.” They regarded each other in mutual incomprehension until Lance caught on. “Oh- no, it hurt when he started to drift, if that’s what you mean, but- when I say it was time, I mean we’ve all already grieved for it and then never had a reason to make an end of it.”

“So I’m a reason.” Fuck. Merlin passed a hand over his face, rubbing at his eyes.

“No-” Lance cut him off. “No, that’s alright.” He opened his mouth again, then grimaced.

Lance quieted, the concern never leaving his expression while he waited for Merlin to spit out what he wanted to say.
He couldn’t tell Lance that there was something about Arthur that he couldn’t put into words that made him want to plaster himself to Arthur’s side in whatever capacity he would have him. It was a promise of contentment. It was a desperate mixture of terror and curiosity and ‘finally’ that left him in knots.

However, his magic was a huge fucking point of contention. Merlin simply said, “I’m interested. Just- not quite sure where I stand.”

Lance relaxed. “Understandable. Anything I can do to help?”

“Don’t tell anyone.” Merlin couldn’t meet Lance’s eyes. “Don’t let Arthur know, yet.”

“Done and done.”

The portal next to them irised open and Will staggered out, still wrapped in his thermal. He eyed them both. Merlin pushed himself away from the wall a beat after Lance did.

“You didn’t wake me up,” Will accused.

“You were tired.”

“Of course I was tired! That’s why I fell asleep.”

Merlin had no response to that, so he turned to Lance and introduced them. “Lance, Will. Will, Lance.”

“We’ve met.” Lance wore a small smile.

Will scrunched his nose. “Gwen’s been making me practice on Lance,” he explained, then pointed at Lance. “You’re a bloody terrible actor, you arsehole, and are too fucking well-adjusted.”

Lance half-shrugged. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

Laughing, Merlin waved Will back into the infirmary. “I’ll come keep you company. Can’t promise to wake you up if you fall asleep again.”

The door irised shut once he’d gone back and Merlin slanted a look at Lance. “Gwen’s going to put in a request for him, isn’t she?”

“If she has her way, he’ll be official crew before we dock at the Camelot. Once crew, we don’t usually let you go without a fight. Arthur especially.”

Merlin’s amusement fled. He looked away, then waved his hand so the door would open again. “Thank you.”

“Think nothing of it.” Lance threw Merlin a casual salute. They parted and Lance headed back the way he came.

Before he went inside, the Kilgharrah snorted at him and said, *A warlock should be on good terms with their Captain. Especially a dragonlord.*

He let the door shut again. He heard Will protest, but he sounded mostly asleep. “Because I’m the one enabling you to do all the scary things?”

*More that the Captain knows the people, while you will know the ship.*
“If I were a cynical bastard, I might say that you had an ulterior motive for calling us two sides of the same coin.”

*It’s not in my best interests to see you reassigned.*

Merlin closed his eyes and cursed under his breath. No, it wouldn’t be in the ghost’s best interests to let slip someone he could draw from. Of course not. That would be silly, especially since Merlin had never heard of dragonlords before. So, no. The ghost’s lurking hunger made it very clear that he was not about to let Merlin go anytime soon.

Even though Merlin was curious about what the Kilgharrah was on about with dragonlords - and he was more than a little interested in what Arthur wanted - he hated the idea of having the ghost arrange things for him, hated his previous insinuation that there was something about future events that made them inevitable. It stank of ‘fate’ and ‘destiny’ and all the words that people tried to use when they really meant trapped and choice-less. It made Merlin’s skin crawl and earned a sympathetic resonance from the barrier spell.

It brought back the taste of every nightmare that clung to his mind where he fought cages of words, cages of people, and the captivity of physical walls, bars, and chains.

“Don’t- Don’t arrange things, Kilgharrah. Just don’t.”

The ghost was silent for a long moment. *I will obey, but I suggest you rescind your order.*

Merlin pinched the bridge of his nose. “Is following my orders something special, or do you respond to all magic users like this?”

The Kilgharrah hesitated. Merlin could feel the ghost turn cagey, editing his answer. He finally said, *Dragonlords, in the name of balance, but that means you.*

“No a lot of dragonlords left?” Merlin asked. The Kilgharrah was leaving something out.

*You.*

Merlin did nothing more than sigh. Last dragonlord, then. Lovely. “Then I’m not taking back my order. Don’t make me resent being here for you.”

*I meant what I said about you and the Captain.*

“Stop.” Merlin didn’t want to hear it. “I want a choice in the matter.”

The Kilgharrah’s presence retreated. *The choice will always be yours.* He sounded put-out.

Merlin found he didn’t care. He folded his arms. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

*You are matched, yes, but the future is malleable.*

“Matched.” Merlin’s flat tone caused the Kilgharrah to wince. The lights in the corridor dimmed.

*You suit.* His frustration buzzed through the soles of Merlin’s feet. *I have seen it. You are each other’s destiny.*

“Fuck destiny.” His restraint loosened by his conversation with Lance, Merlin punched the wall. His vision washed with red. The word ‘destiny’ in the dragon’s voice drew forth snippets of the worst of his nightmares, the ones that left him helpless, grasping at something that wasn’t there.
Words poured fourth from the dark, sleeping place he couldn’t quite reach with his conscious mind. “Destiny has fucked me over so many times. I’m sick and fucking tired of destiny.” He placed his hand on the wall where he’d bruised it, digging his fingers into the flesh and holding on to steady himself. Breathing hard, he tried to let the anger pass.

He boiled with rootless conviction. This was the anger he’d felt when he’d seen Arthur’s face, the anger that simmered at the source of his magic.

The Kilgharrah’s presence fled. Merlin would do no harm to the ghost even if he could, but it was probably for the best. Shoulder slumping, he went to tuck Will in again, his friend already fast asleep from waiting for Merlin to come back.

Shaking his head, he turned down the lights. Will really did need sleep.

At loose ends but not wanting to range too far from Will, Merlin fixed on Gaius’s odd corner. The sound of renewed snores accompanied Merlin as he poked about, looking for anything of interest.

To his surprise, he found a book to read. A real, honest-to-paper-and-leather handwritten book. He took it carefully from its netting, holding the well-oiled leather gently as he pulled it free. The paper crackled as he flipped the cover open and read the bookplate. A hundred-year-old book could be just the thing to help him forget his anger. He propped himself next to the bank of medical machinery that cast enough light to brighten his pages.

The book turned out to be a simple history of the Five Kingdoms from the time of Bruta, but the tantalising glimpses of how magic used to be pervasive and assumed absorbed Merlin. Will’s snores receded to background noise.

He relaxed, curled against the warm wall that beeped quietly in his periphery, letting the body heat of the ship loosen his muscles. He had nowhere to be, nothing to do, and the book suggested that those like Merlin had been valued once, even if ‘once’ was long ago. Slowly, very slowly, his anger bled away, along with his worries over Arthur and his frustration with the Kilgharrah. With the half-dark to shield him and his book, he let himself forget where he was.

Merlin didn’t look up when the door opened once more.
Chapter 21

Arthur’s duties as Captain had never felt so full of tedious crises as his current rotation. Because of the Ealdorians, they were having widespread supply issues, Lucan was fretting about whether or not their destriers would be able to be fully rotated through maintenance before they arrived in the Spelandor system, and Arthur and his men were starting to get pings from all over Kingdom space. Messages, well-wishes, and warnings.

He leaned on the arm of his Captain’s chair, put his chin on his fist, and frowned at everything that required his attention. Leon kept shooting him worried looks. Arthur tried to ignore him, but he was right. Even hours and another short sleep cycle away from the Spelandor system, he needed to focus. His distraction did not mean his duties were any less important, and he knew better than to let his personal life interfere. In between supply reallocation and hunting down the acting quartermaster while Pellinore was off-duty, however, Arthur could not help but brood over Gwen and Lance.

For the most part, he was relieved. He no longer had to face the uncertainty of trying to be part of what his lovers already shared. It was over, the decision made, he was done having to worry about it. Except - a tiny part of him that he could not completely squash was angry. He hated that tiny, angry part, since all three of them had known the true end was coming for weeks.

His anger wasn’t even rational, because when it came down to it, he wanted them to have fought for… for whatever they’d had. He hadn’t wanted it anymore, had wanted it to gently disappear, no hard feelings, but he still wanted them to have fought to keep it.

He tried to focus on the route calculations that Bedivere threw onto the screen for their automated systems to vet while Kay was off-duty and still his attention wandered. Not even running diagnostics was helping.

Eventually, Arthur gave up on personal diagnostics and plugged himself into the captain’s chair to start a shipwide. During a brief lull between calls to the bridge, he signalled Leon that he was going to be a bit distracted for a minute.

The wires snaked to ports in his torso - ports that he wasn’t sure were entirely free of dried ichor, come to think of it - and he snapped his arm to the chair. Technical data flooded his ocular mods, numbers flying past as he dumped all of the information collected during sleep cycle through his personal algorithms. Flagged chunks began popping up: Unexpected temperature fluctuations on several decks. Engine hiccoughs outside of parameters. Several impossible failure-and-recovery routines that should never be hit through the normal course of operation. In dealing with biomechanicals, some slight variation was to be expected, but by the end of his shipwide diagnostic, he had a bundle of more flags than he’d seen within an eight-hour period for the entirety of their tour of the fringe.
Rather the opposite of calming, his shipwide diagnostic also took a great deal longer than his usual peek through the datastream did. When he snapped out of it and sought Leon, he found his first officer standing by with one hand on the chair behind Arthur’s shoulder.

Leon sounded concerned. “Your rotation is nearly over. What is it?”

“Anomalies,” Arthur said, detaching himself from his chair with a handful of slick pops and the hiss of released gas. Ichor mixed with blood welled in his chest ports. “More than usual. Ship’s more ‘alive’. The technical systems are struggling to compensate.”

“No failures?”

“Nothing that’s not handled, thankfully. I don’t like it, though.”

Leon stepped back. “Lucan hasn’t brought it up.”

“He doesn’t look at the aggregate data unless he needs to, and he hasn’t had time. I don’t even think he’s been sleeping.” He shared a weary grin with Leon. “The mechanics are probably just quietly taking care of each instance individually. Nothing unusual.”

“Is it a problem?” Leon asked.

“Worrying, yes. Problem, no. Let Lucan know.”

Leon nodded his agreement and then another call from Percival, on Knight duty again for the Ealdorians, claimed their attention and they dropped the subject.

The one good thing about the ship acting up was that his brooding shifted away from his failed triad and toward his responsibilities. He was used to brooding over responsibilities. Responsibilities made sense and had rules, even if his ship was just a little bit too organic to follow them as well it ought.

Half an hour later, Owain stepped onto the bridge and looked to the ensign on Nav before greeting everyone else. Arthur bounced out of his chair, his interminable rotation coming to an end, and passed acting Captain to Leon without waiting for Owain to say more than hello. Soon enough, he would rotate back into his chair to give Leon a chance to catch some shuteye, but for now he had time to visit Merlin.

Neither Gwen nor Lance had mentioned Merlin during their last conversation. Neither had Arthur. Not that Arthur was sure that there was a reason they might, but he had kept expecting it. They had always known him better than anyone.

Arthur stamped hard on his sudden spark of malcontent and turned his thoughts forward toward the infirmary.

Lucan had declared Merlin crew, and now he fit more snugly into Arthur’s worldview. More than responsible for Merlin’s actions, which he had been from the moment he zipped him into the bodybag and carted him back to the Kilgharrah, Arthur was now also responsible for his safety. Not that he wasn’t concerned with keeping him safe before, but the difference between refugee and crew was the difference between escorting an uncertainly friendly ship and defending his own.

With the clarity of viewing bulk data at a distance, Arthur feared that everything he had tried so far to keep his ship and crew safe would cause the very problems he was trying to solve. As mutually protective as isolation might be, Arthur was not so dense as to see that ordering Merlin confined might have been a mistake. Merlin’s shift in mood between Arthur trying to delineate the ship’s rules as they applied to Merlin and Lucan’s approval of whatever he’d done with the ship spoke to that.
More telling, his confinement was distressing enough to be a sticking point in every conversation they’d had to date.

If Gaius was right, then the greatest danger with sorcerers was a lack of survival options and nothing to lose. The watch rotation was probably the only thing in this mess that Arthur had gotten right. Merlin had bonded with Gwen, Sefa, and - surprisingly - Gaius himself. Arthur hoped making friends, even in a stilted, artificial atmosphere, would make ‘being cornered’ a great deal less likely.

Even a sorcerer should think twice about jeopardising newly established ties and would deserve his beheading if he could befriend Gwen and still put her life in danger.

Arthur let out his breath and it was in no way a sigh. *Hypothetical* sorcerer. Or - Arthur could be realistic when it suited him - a plausibly deniable sorcerer.

Arthur had seen tiny, tiny hiccoughs in the video feeds in and around the infirmary each time he’d scrubbed through the Kilgharrah’s aggregate data looking for patterns. There were more than usual since Merlin had come aboard un-bitten, alive, and terrible with a sword. Uther’s - and Camelot’s - laws were clear, but here Arthur was, visiting Merlin during the one, brief break he had before they entered the Spelandor system.

The infirmary door irised shut and left him in semi-darkness. Arthur halted. On one of the beds, Merlin’s ‘watcher’ snored loudly enough to cover the sound of the door opening and closing. The others on Merlin-rotation were either female or Gaius, so that would be Will, then. Arthur wasn’t sure he agreed with Gwen’s decision to take him on as Counsellor-in-training, but it meant he was crew now, too. If Merlin was willing to dim the lights and cover him in a thermal, Arthur found himself willing to welcome Will as another crewmember to tie Merlin to the Kilgharrah.

Merlin sat curled next to the bank of beeping machinery, reading one of Gaius’s books by their light. He leaned against the wall, book propped on one knee, surrounded by thick organic cords and electrical conduits. He wore the too-short trousers and too-small shirt again and the dim light from the screens left him hardly more than a silhouette. Cold, muted colours flickered across his exposed skin.

It struck Arthur how relaxed he looked, one arm draped over a half-bent leg as he leaned in close to track the words.

He was all awkward angles and half-finished curves in brighter light, too coltish and too fey by turns. Limned in blue and green, nestled among the pulsing conduits of the ship, he looked *right*.

Merlin shifted and the light played over the sharp planes of his face, across the hollows of his cheeks beneath prominent cheekbones. In his focus, in the dance of his eyes across the page and the way he licked his thumb before he turned each leaf, there laid something voidspawned, nameless and vast. It had to be a trick of the light that pulsed through the walls, but it was a trick that triggered something sharp and possessive in Arthur.

Stepping forward, Arthur did not announce his presence.

Merlin sensed him regardless. “Arthur?” he asked, looking up from his book and blinking muzzily into the gloom. Eyes half-lidded, a tiny line appeared between his eyebrows.

“Captain.” Arthur corrected automatically, then winced.

Fortunately, his response didn’t seem to matter. “I know what you are.” Merlin said, his voice remaining low and smooth and content. The faint frown, however, stayed as well.

Arthur’s oxygen warning flashed in his periphery reminding him to breathe. His mods creaked with
his sudden inhalation. Closing his book, Merlin tucked it beneath his thigh. He regarded Arthur for a long moment like he was trying to place him.

His expression cleared. “You’re not in any of my nightmares.”

“You’re not in any of my nightmares?” Arthur asked, unmoving. “You’re having nightmares?”


Arthur hesitated only a moment before sitting on Merlin’s right, leaving a bare inch of space between them. The gap warmed and the hairs on Arthur arms stood as the air crackled with their proximity. He resisted the urge to touch Merlin, no longer certain of anything, let alone his welcome. He’d thought Merlin a kitten, all too-large limbs and open curiosity. This dark-voiced, lazy confidence bore little resemblance. “Like who?”

“Not sure who Morgana is,” Merlin mused.

Dry-mouthed and not entirely sure that Merlin was really awake or this was the most elaborate somnambulatory episode he’d ever witnessed, Arthur managed, “My sister.”

“That figures.” The gap between them disappeared as Merlin bumped his shoulder against Arthur’s. The companionable gesture startled Arthur almost as badly as hearing Morgana’s name from Merlin’s lips. “Every person I’ve ever met or heard of seems to be making a cameo appearance in my dreams. If she’s your sister, then it makes more sense.”

“If you’re dreaming about everyone,” Arthur said, leaning against Merlin and trying not to think about doing anything else. Beyond them, outside the reach of the light from the machinery, Will hiccupped and flailed in his sleep. Arthur glanced his direction, then lowered his voice to tease, “Then why not me?”

“I think that’s probably why they’re nightmares.”

He sounded so matter-of-fact about it that it took Arthur a moment, and even then he wasn’t sure he’d heard aright. “Merlin?”

As if Arthur saying his name snapped him out of his reverie, Merlin’s entire body language changed. His shoulders tensed, his breathing quickened, and he became once more an unwieldy collection of spindly spare parts. He shed his grace with a stuttered breath and turned to Arthur with a baffled, “What are you doing here?”

Merlin looked down at where their shoulders were pressed together and back up, his expression wary.

Arthur had no idea what he was doing, here or otherwise. Dressed in his on-duty Captains uniform, complete with rank insignia and stained with ichor and blood along the flaps that gave access to his chest panels, he had no business being down here at all. “Checking on you.”

Whatever his words meant to Merlin, they prompted a smile that Arthur returned, bewildered by its appearance.

“Just reading. One of Gaius’s.”

“I didn’t know you could read.”
“Just because I don’t pipe text directly into my eyeballs,” Merlin retorted and he followed his words by leaning against Arthur, letting his weight rest against him as he closed his eyes.

Arthur didn’t want to even twitch, just in case it prompted Merlin to move. This time when his oxygen warning went off, he let his internals click over to scrubber status, activating artificial respiration. He froze, itching to wrap an arm around the bony shoulders tucked to his side and unable to bring himself to try. The glimpse of the other side of Merlin left him cautious and wanting, but wanting what was an entirely new question.

The best he could do was return the pressure and wonder what the fuck he was even doing. He half-convinced himself that pulling Merlin closer would be wildly inappropriate, not to mention dangerous. Uther would kill him and find a new heir, straight up strangle him and dump his body out an airlock.

Arthur watched the shallow, rapid rise and fall of Merlin’s chest, trying to decipher what either of them wanted. Sorting his own thoughts proved as difficult as reading Merlin’s.

“Are you breathing?” Merlin asked, opening his eyes to stare at Arthur.

Fuck. “Fuck-” he said, or tried to. He didn’t have enough air in his lungs to shape the sound.

Merlin rested his chin on Arthur’s shoulder, ear cocked to listen to the whirr of tiny servos in Arthur’s chest as he kicked up his organic respiratory system again. Neither of them commented.

After a long pause in which they both listened to Arthur breathe properly, Merlin said, “I thought you didn’t want me near your crew.”

“If I’m not mistaken, you’ve joined my crew.”

“It seems I did.”

“That changes things.”

“Does it?” Merlin looked thoughtful, pulling away from Arthur.

“I want you on bridge when we reach the Spelandor system.”

Merlin’s eyes widened. “Why?”

Because I don’t want you out of my sight for a dozen and more reasons. “Because I want an Ealdorian representative there, one who can be in contact with your acting head and let her know how the system transit is going.”

As soon as the words left his mouth, Arthur’s jaw tightened. Such a task would fall to a subordinate of Griff’s. A junior communications officer. Merlin’s expression blanked, making the connection as soon as Arthur had, and just as fast Arthur broke their fragile truce.

Merlin looked away. “Yes, alright,” he said, casual and dismissive.

Breathing a curse, Arthur raised his voice. “That was an order, not a suggestion.”

“And I agreed with you.”

“Despite this,” Arthur gestured to both of them - at their touching shoulders, at the way his uniform did nothing to cover his interest - and tamped down his frustration. “I’m still Captain.”
“Doing an admirable job, sir.”

Merlin pulled away, and not just physically. He picked up his book, tucked it under his arm, and made to stand up. Arthur caught his arm. Merlin glowered at his hand and shot glances at Will, like he’d much rather slap Arthur away and was resisting only because too much noise would wake his friend.

“Don’t go.” The words left Arthur as less an order and more a plea.

“Let me go.”

“I didn’t mean-” Arthur cut himself off, unable to finish.

“You can’t say what you didn’t mean, so how about we drop it?”

Knowledge crackled between them, along with Merlin’s anger. Arthur dropped his arm.

“The Ealdorians will appreciate it,” Arthur said, unsure of what else he could do but apologise, but apologising would mean he’d have to acknowledge things he couldn’t acknowledge. Not yet. Decisions and reassurances now would be nothing but empty words. Arthur had too many others to think of, too many lives within his care, to make promises there were no guarantees he could keep. However much he might want, that was chemistry, measurable in enzymes and endorphins, the precise volumetrics ready to scroll across his oculars if he wanted to know how much of an effect Merlin had on him. He still didn’t know if Merlin’s nature would put Arthur’s people at risk, and Arthur never gambled with lives not his own.

“Mum will, I know that much.”

Arthur shoved himself to his feet and strode after Merlin in the dark. Merlin was all clumsy, sharp angles and two left feet as he stumbled away. Arthur cupped his elbow, steadying him as he tripped over the floor.

“What do you want from me?” Merlin said, turning to face him and shaking him loose.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing. Really.” And there was that challenge again.

Warmth pooled low in Arthur’s belly. He grinned. “Something.”

“Nonspecific. Try again.”

“You,” Arthur said.

Both of them stilled.

Arthur had only meant to respond to the implicit challenge in Merlin’s words. Another mistake, clearly, since his answer only made Merlin angrier. Arthur didn’t back away from the truth, and he wasn’t going to start now.

“You fucker,” Merlin said and slammed his book against Arthur’s chest, making him grunt. He held it there as he shoved forward to jam his lips hard against Arthur’s.

The kiss was fierce, bruising, and triumphant, and Arthur could not say which of them was the more demanding. Not found wanting though he had been judged, Arthur’s fear eased.
Halfway through, just when Merlin gathered a fistful of uniform at Arthur’s hip and Arthur threaded metal fingers through Merlin’s hair, he got an incoming call from Leon. He broke the kiss with a half-breathed curse. Merlin retreated, panting, taking his book and his fury and putting himself at arm’s length.

“Leon,” Arthur snapped, by way of explanation, activating the link.

Merlin said nothing, eyes wide in the dark.

The commlink activated an ocular visual feed and his view of Leon’s face quickly turned into a message from Mithian.

“Arthur, I promised I’d keep you informed and, fuck me, if this isn’t the last message you’re going to get for a while. Found the Villain’s Smile, or rather signs of its passing, and it’s worrying the fuck out of me. He’s cloaked in a way we can’t identify - and you know what that means - and fuck all if we don’t have to run silent to try and track him down.”

Mithian’s tiny portrait grimaced. “I can’t fucking find him, but now that we know he’s here, we have a chance. I’ll try and send you a message when you hit Spelandor, but I make no promises if it will break our cloak. Kanen is worse than we anticipated. This is not the crap assignment I thought it was.”

She paused and looked straight at the visual pickup. “Stay safe, Arthur.”

The message doused Arthur’s arousal as effectively as a cold shower. He cursed again. Mithian had taken special care to say ‘stay safe’, as close to ‘goodbye’ as either would admit. If she thought it was that bad, he’d do well to heed her warnings.

“Fuck,” he said, well aware that he was being loud. Let Will wake. With the pissed-off set to Merlin’s shoulders, he would welcome the distraction. “We’re heading into an unsafe system.”

The anger in Merlin’s expression turned to uncertainty. He narrowed his eyes.

This time it was Arthur’s turn to issue the challenge. He gave Merlin a lazy, arrogant smile. Merlin shifted, warily pulling his weight back and lowering his centre of gravity.

“You’re going to be on the bridge with me,” he said, daring Merlin to treat this order as casually as he had the last. A tiny, hopeful part of him wanted Merlin to see the order as an opportunity, rather than an onus.

Arthur had only mundane defences. Lasers. Acid. A few illegal, morally dubious warheads that his father would eviscerate him for possessing. He would be stupid not to pull in every plausibly deniable (and maybe massively-destructive and uncertainly reliable) resource he had to help fend off magic-using bandits if it came to that. There were too many people depending on him to feel comfortable with letting Merlin out of his sight. If that made him a hypocrite, so be it.


Arthur hesitated, half-extending an arm before letting it drop. “I have to get back.” Merlin drew no closer, just clutched his book to his chest and kept his head high. He was still breathing hard and Arthur resisted his impulse to cross the space between them and pick up where they’d left off.

“You’ll be-

“See you when we reach Spelandor.”
Arthur could feel Merlin’s eyes on him as he left, chased out by Will’s uninterrupted snores.
He should never have come here, where strangers were suspect and an Ordeal by Water was the preferred method of dealing with ‘creatures like him’. Tears coursed down his cheeks. Cold-eyed, blank-faced strangers watched him from the riverbank. With truth his last, desperate hope, he had extended his trust to be met with unforgiving conviction. The exercise of power ruled where he’d hoped for compassion.

The confirmation of lifetimes of fears.

The nonsense that witches could not cry did not help him; his swallowed hiccoughs and salt tears made no impact on the gathered. Bits of crockery flew to hit him on his exposed shoulders, cutting his skin, nicking his chin. Mob hate, mob anger, mob fear: all scared him more than drowning. He dreamed of drowning, sometimes.

He held little faith in the rope about his waist, ostensibly there to keep his innocent soul from truly drowning if he sank, but the river was spring-swollen, running fast and high. If he hoped for a gentle trip to the bottom and a rescue via rope, he knew that a thorough braining upon downstream rocks a more likely outcome.

If it were ever a time for wishes, prayers, and miracles - and it was a time for wishes, prayers, and miracles - he wanted a stone to stand upon. A simple stone in river’s centre upon which he could plant his feet, raise his arms to the heavens, and know that it would not roll away, sink, or turn treacherous no matter what power he called forth. A stone was not too much of a miracle. A rock a simple thing. He could put faith in the elements like he could not put faith in man.

They threw him in and nature reclaimed him. Arms bound, he could not swim. Too thin from travelling, he did not float. The cold stole his breath and his first struggled inhalation found him more water than air. The rope slid from chilled fingers, true to his predictions, and he was released to the river. Too late, the mob became human once more. They splashed for him. Small comfort, but it was something.

His stone did not appear until he hit it neck-first with a crunch.
“Hold my belt.” Merlin gave Gwaine little time to comply before half-throwing himself over the edge of the cliff. He had a moment to worry that Gwaine would be too slow in his clunky metal armour before fingers dug firmly into the small of his back and his forward flight halted. “It’s gorgeous.”

“Really? Shall I just let you go, then?” Gwaine batted at a frond of some sort that snuck into his mouth when he opened it.

“You have to see this.”

“If I look, you’ll fall.”

“Let me-” Merlin swatted at Gwaine’s hands, then dropped to his knees at the edge, clinging for dear life as his vertigo tried to tip him over. He nearly overbalanced Gwaine when he knelt.

“And you didn’t do that in the first place why?”

“Didn’t know how solid the edge was.”

Gwaine dropped to his own hands and knees and crawled to the edge. “That’s a stupi- oh.”

The cliff edge fell away before them with a crumble of stone, the bulk held in place by the miracle of roots and not much more. The trees crowded close and the undergrowth clung with damp leaves and tiny creepers, refusing to relinquish them to the sunlight above the cove. The water below - very far below - was brilliant turquoise and blue, accented by the dark specks of waterbirds wheeling between cliff and sea. Their piping calls made Merlin grin at Gwaine, elbowing him in the ribs.

“Glad you came with me, then?” Merlin asked.

“Can’t never go back.”

“Regret it?”

“Absolutely not,” Gwaine said, laughing, dragging himself back from the edge and pulling his helmet off. He rapped the metal shell and then chucked it over his shoulder. Starting in on his buckles, he began to pull every bit of steel and boiled leather away and pile it behind him. “Hate wearing Spanish plate.”

“I’m safer here than I ever was in Europe.”

“Don’t have to convince me, mate.”

“I think I’m convincing me.”

Gwaine startled a squeak from Merlin by slinging one arm about his shoulders and pulling him in tight, thwacking his last greave against Merlin’s bony chest. “New World, yah? New World. New
rules. New people. Who knows?”

“New to us.” Merlin rubbed his sternum, his attention going to the thin curl of smoke further into the interior. “New to them. You think they’ll get along alright without us?”

Gwaine snorted. “No,” he said, unrepentant. “Arseholes, every one. Serves them right to be eaten by whatever beasties they have here. Or the natives. Feed a family of eight, the big one will.”

Merlin made a face, then grabbed Gwaine’s hand when he went to pull away. “Two of us don’t have much chance.”

“You’re wanting to go back and recruit?”

“Wanting to go on and… trade.”

“Ah, Merlin, fearless magus with the power of the celestial sphere at his beck and call. First act of freedom after months in the company of hostile Spaniards with only Trusty Gwaine for loyal - and extremely dashing - companionship: find a new friend, maybe invite them to tea.”

“Sod off.” Merlin laughed, shoving at Gwaine’s face as Gwaine tried to smooch him on the cheek. “Maybe I’m worried, yeah?”

“We’ll be fine.” Gwaine stopped pestering Merlin and leaned back on his palms. He turned serious, “You’ll be fine.”

“I’m not made for hermitage. I’ll get lonely.”

“Should have thought of that before deserting is what I think.”

A quick smile flicked across Merlin’s lips. “Do you think they’ll hate magic here?”

Gwaine shrugged. “Don’t know. Might? Might not. Blowhard back there says they eat people, and what does he know, eh? We know nothing about anyone who lives here. Maybe they do, maybe they don’t, and maybe they have magic, too.”

“Would be nice.”

“Would be brilliant,” Gwaine corrected, shoving himself upright and dusting his hands together. “As it is, I have to depend on you to light our soggy firewood and good luck to that.”

Merlin laughed. “I’m not going to wait on you hand and foot.”

This time, when Gwaine leaned over to peck him on the cheek, Merlin let him. Gwaine said, “We need to be miles away before nightfall.”

They clambered to their feet. Merlin held the trunk of a slender tree and peered through the foliage again to see the cove. Gwaine jostled him out of his reverie. Looking from him to the pile of armour, Merlin sighed. “We’ll need the metal.”

They split the load and headed north.
Awareness and dream-certainty: To bury one’s King was to bury one’s heart. When the first death arrived, there was hope upon a promise made. After a dozen, a score, thrice that - hope became ritual, the reason forgotten. Like a lapsed practitioner going through the motions for comfort, belief became half fear that maybe, just maybe, a promise oh-so-many years and lifetimes ago held a kernel of truth.
The winds howled and snapped at the buckles on Merlin’s pack and drove snow into every seam of his parka. He shivered, cold and unhappy and wondering what the fuck he’d been thinking to plan this. Ahead of him, he could barely see Lance, and they were attached with a rope tied to their belts. Unwise, perhaps, but Lance had insisted. Behind him, more from their party trudged along the trail in the broken crust that their Sherpa had left for them.

The mountain rose before the group and Merlin couldn’t see more than two feet ahead. He just hoped that their day at the top would be clear, so that he’d know that he made it, could look down on the rest of the world from the highest mountain on planet Earth and know that he’d conquered it.

No time more than when he was trying to keep feeling in his toes and resist simply setting himself on fire to get warm did he understand ‘because it was there.’ The mountain called to him, a suicide that sang of courage and valour and pig-headed obstinance. He wanted this climb on a level that he couldn’t explain, and even if it killed him, then he would have died trying.

He couldn’t bear not to at least try. This wasn’t exactly man versus mountain, because the mountain, the stone, the sheer elemental nature of their surroundings had always been a part of him. He could never explain himself even to himself, even when his convictions made life look awfully short.

They still had another acclimatisation camp to reach and there were signs of storms.

Nobody was going to die.

If Lance died, Merlin would never forgive himself.

He didn’t think the climb would ever end. Not truly. He would be climbing forever, one frost-bitten foot in front of the other ad-infinitum. He didn’t even know if he’d be content even if he did reach the top - and at this point a summit was an if. They had long passed the point of when. The spirit was willing, but the flesh was weak, the elements were out to get them and if Merlin never had another reason to use the spirit and flesh adage, he’d be all too happy.

He kept climbing.

There was nothing else he could do. He was going to see this through to whatever conclusion it held for him. He just hoped that conclusion wouldn’t be as a memorial corpse for future climbers to greet and pass.
The shrine was filled with warm, flickering light. Hundreds of candles threw their illumination on the massive friezes on every wall, catching their curves and planes and creating shadows that made the portrayed dancers come alive - if only metaphorically. Merlin stood blocking the doorway and holding his unlit offering until Elena elbowed him in the ribs and pushed past.

She, too, stopped short and stared. Candlelight softened her features and lent an air of gravity to the wonder painted across her face. “Oh, Merlin, look-” she breathed, pointing.

Merlin looked, moving up beside her and resting his chin on her shoulder to sight down her arm. He caught his breath.

The two men she pointed at were locked together, one arm thrown about the other’s shoulder, their faces turned toward each other. They had been decorated with gold leaf and inlaid with ruby and lapis lazuli, but Merlin was drawn to their carven expressions and their entwined limbs. There was camaraderie there, yes, but also breathless laughter, joy, and a gratefulness that scraped at Merlin’s insides. The pair of them were easily masterwork, hidden in the depths of a tiny shrine in the middle of no-where, their chiselled limbs and faces looking ready to pull forth from the wall if he so much as blinked.

Gwaine bumped into Merlin from behind, then nudged him over so he might see where Elena was pointing. “Oh, God, Merlin.”

“That’s what I said,” Elena whispered.

“Don’t,” Merlin told them both, pulling away. “Both of you just- can you drop it?”

“They’re gorgeous and if-”

Merlin lit his candle, silencing them. “We’re here for a reason.” The flame danced on his palm before it caught the wick. The other two held out their candles to be lit.

Clapping Merlin on the back as he stepped by, Gwaine halted at the scaled-and-clawed feet of the massive central statue. “Hey,” he said, ever casual even when surrounded by the trappings of divinity. “This is for forgiveness, because we all need a healthy dose of it right about now.”

Merlin snorted under his breath and shook his head when Gwaine shot a grin over his shoulder.

Elena was next and when she spoke her words were too loud for the small space. “For cleansing anger,” she said, keeping her chin up as she backed away from the statue. Her candle flared. “Because it’s okay to be pissed right the fuck off if you’ve been wronged.”

“Elena,” Merlin said, his heart giving a painful thump.

“Sorry,” she apologised, but she didn’t sound particularly apologetic. “Your turn.”
He set his candle down on the ledge carved for the purpose and looked at both of his friends’ candles. What he wanted-

“This is for forgetfulness, because I can’t do this anymore.”

Elena made a small noise. Merlin hunched his shoulders, unwilling to turn. A touch on his elbow startled him and he snapped around to look straight into Mordred’s eyes.

“Forgetfulness?” Mordred said, low and concerned. “Is it that bad?”

Merlin couldn’t answer.

Mordred lit his candle himself and Merlin’s wits fled. The spark of magic was rare enough that he stared at the candle until long after Mordred had placed it in offering. He hadn’t known. Mordred had never said.

Instead of the usual words, Mordred lifted both hands in benediction and said, “Grant them all.”

Gwaine pulled Merlin back and away from the statue when all the candles flared. He and Elena folded Merlin into their arms, using him as shield and security both as the candles blazed high and showed no signs of burning out. The living friezes began their dance in earnest, the two that Elena had pointed out before laughing and laughing, their silent voices filling the space.

Merlin stared at Mordred. A priest. They’d made the mistake of coming here with a priest.

“Grant them all,” Mordred said again. Then he turned and smiled at the three of them, looking like the Mordred they’d known and loved in his t-shirt and jeans and leather bracelets stamped with pop culture and lyrics. When they said nothing to him, he turned shy and awkward. He shoved his hands in his pockets and looked at his feet. “It’s done.”
Merlin surreptitiously kicked off his boots and tugged off his socks, hoping nobody on the bridge noticed and that the rolls of his too-long trouser cuffs would hide most of his visible skin. Thankfully, the others were fully occupied with the last jump toward Spelandor. Nav was frowning at his readouts, and Comms’ fingers were flying through his inputs, typing something to someone while he rattled off information to the lower decks. Helm looked tense, his shoulders pulled back and his jaw clenched, his hands on the Kilgharrah’s controls even though they were still in the midst of transit and wouldn’t need his skills until they fell back into subspace.

‘We’re going in hot, plan accordingly,’ Arthur had said. Every system Merlin could name and some few the Ealdor had not possessed were online and active for the duration of the jump. The Kilgharrah thumped with leashed energy. When Merlin put his bare feet on the deck, the ghost rose up to meet him with barely-contained nerves, the chemicals pumped into his system by Engineering keeping him too alert, partway to overload.

*Almost there.*

The warship’s heartbeat thudded through the deck. There was a wild edge to the pattern that Merlin recognised as half excitement and half induced drug-high. The ghost’s mood was affecting his own. His cheeks warmed and he half-covered his mouth to keep his words from carrying. “Settle down. You’re making me nervous.”

*I’m not. He is.*

Merlin glanced at Arthur and then away, self-conscious. He plucked at the collar of his borrowed uniform. Gwaine had assured him that Percival wouldn’t mind, as long as they remembered to wash it and shove it back under his bunk before anyone noticed. The uniform was too wide, made for more muscles in the chest and a significantly bigger ribcage. Gwaine had grinned at him when he’d handed it over, saying something lecherous about pistol fasteners, then pointed out that only Percy and one of the other pilots had the height Merlin needed to make sure his dainty ankles were covered. Will had demanded an explanation for the lechery and everything had gone straight to innuendo from there. Merlin had tried to weather their banter as he’d buckled his father’s sword about his waist and holstered his own pistol, but Will could be loud and crude enough for an entire barracks when he wanted to be.

He felt the tips of his ears heat just thinking about it. It didn’t help that Arthur kept looking at him, frowning, and then looking away. A short, quiet panic attack later, Merlin caught on. Arthur’s eyes roved from him directly to Griff at the next station, then onto Kay at Nav. His mouth moved slightly each time.

“What’s he doing?” he asked the Kilgharrah under his breath.
Arthur counted in sequence. Merlin, Nav, Comms, Helm, and then First Officer and… Owain. Merlin wasn’t entirely sure why Owain was on the bridge, but considering that the Kilgharrah had all of five people at his controls normally - adding Owain made Merlin feel a little less out of place. The viewscreen showed only noise, the riot of colours and light that confused the sensors and spat out nonsense in a futile attempt to remain functional as the ship jumped through its own personal rip in spacetime. Another operational system that the Ealdor wouldn’t have been able to afford to leave on, even if there was nothing to see.

The air of waiting thickened as Griff lapsed into silence. A chime sounded and a countdown clock appeared in the corner of the viewscreen. That was Merlin’s cue. He jabbed at a handful of symbols on his communications panel and opened a channel to his mum.

“Forward bay, this is Bridge,” Merlin said, trying not to hunch in on himself. He could feel the looks of the other bridge crew. He swore he heard someone chuckle.

“Merlin, sweetie,” his mum said, the smile in her voice enough to kill him with embarrassment. Plucking the headset off its hook, he linked into the channel and settled the warm metal against his ears.

“Mum, are you broadcasting?”

“What? No, of course not. It’s just me. I have my own little chair and headset for this. Everyone’s watching, but they can’t hear you. We figured an intermediary in case something goes wrong would be for the best.”

Merlin let out his breath. “I’m supposed to be informing you that we’re in final countdown. Mostly I just want to ask how everyone is.”

“Fine.” She paused. “Mostly fine. The ship is running awfully heavy and we can hear the engines trying to whine to drown out the heartbeat. It’s making some of the Ealdor’s maintenance crew concerned.”

“I don’t-” Merlin glanced to either side, but no-one was watching him anymore, and Griff was speaking quietly into his console. “The Captain said we’re running hot.”

His mum was silent for several moments. “Oh, dear. Is he expecting trouble?”

Merlin swallowed. “Yeah.”

“I thought it was odd to have you on the bridge now, for just this particular system entrance,” she mused. His mum was brilliant at math, she really was. “It’s a nice gesture to keep us in the loop.”

“I’m being a JCO.”

She made a soothing noise, picking up on his fear. “You’ll do a fine job at it.”

“I really don’t belong up here, not just relaying info. You could get the same effect if they set up a screen down there.”

“No resources for a screen, believe me. And-”

“I don’t, do I. Belong.”
“Lots of bridges have perfectly mundane JCOs, Merlin.”

“He won’t acknowledge me, mum, but he wants me with him.”

A beat of silence and then she ventured, “Dearheart, are we talking about JCOs or are we talking about your crush on Arthur?”

Merlin sputtered. “Mum- you can’t just-” He was desperately grateful for the headset. “Who told you?”

“Will, just a bit ago, right before he was stolen away by that nice young woman. He was telling me about all the colours you turned when some Knight brought you your uniform.”

A quick look over Merlin’s shoulder told him that the only one watching him was Arthur, and his gaze moved on after a beat. Counting again. Merlin was free to die of mortification in peace. He couldn’t even use the usual ‘and you believed him?!’ deflection, because she’d know he was trying not to admit it was true.

“So far he seems to be a good Captain,” she said, reading Merlin’s silence as a need for motherly reassurance. “I’m sure he has his reasons for wanting you on the bridge.”

“What if I do something and he has to chop my head off?”

“He is Uther’s son,” she said slowly, “but I don’t think he’d try and trick you like that.”

“You don’t think?”

“I certainly don’t know, if that’s what you’re asking. I’ve been stuck down here with Simmons and his eternal complaints. All I have is gossip and Will to go on, and gossip is the more reliable of the two. Does he like you back?”

“Yeah.” Merlin rubbed at his forehead. “You could say that.”

“Then maybe he has enough of the fringe in him to make a difference. Just be careful, alright, love?”

Merlin was not entirely reassured, but he’d agreed to be here. If there was even the slimmest hint of danger in crossing Spelandor, Merlin wouldn’t be able to tolerate being trapped in the lower decks. He’d end up on the bridge anyway the moment something happened. At least this way he could relay from Kilgharrah to Captain. His head would be a small price to pay if he could make a difference.

“No one else has made the JCO connection?”

“Nobody stupid enough to say anything. Relax. Despite your fears, transit might go just fine.”

That drew a chuckle from him. “I want to feel really stupid for being so worried when we jump out of here. Thirty seconds.” He did have an actual job to do. His mum murmured her assent and relayed the message.

The Kilgharrah was too keyed up to speak, his attention focused forward. When Bedivere pulled them back into subspace at the edge of the Spelandor system, it took several seconds for the noise to process out of the sensor system. The screen gradually cleared.

“Scan complete,” Griff said, “Nothing but the black. Relaying deploy orders to the fighters.”

“Free and clear, Command.” Elena sounded cautious, her voice piped over the bridge’s speakers.
“We’re away. Perimeter set. Our net’s cast as far as we can throw it. You’ll know as soon as we do.”

Arthur said nothing. The screen showed their target star smack in the centre. Small pop-up tags began appearing on visible features. Planets. Large asteroids. Comets of note. Hulks and wrecks. Kay’s fingers danced over the Nav panel as he labelled everything the scanners picked up. Leon and Owain began to move about the bridge, checking in at automated stations, filling ten roles apiece, their conversation clipped.

“On course,” Bedivere said, his quiet voice barely audible even with the bridge so subdued. “Estimating we’ll be ready for the next hop in ten. Eight if Kay-”

“Eight,” Kay cut in. “Just call it eight.”

Arthur stirred. “Good. Stay alert.”

A tiny dot appeared on the screen among the asteroids they were heading for. Kay quickly tagged it with ‘Knight Derian’, but not soon enough to make it any less of a surprise. Everyone on the bridge stirred uneasily. Merlin tried to breathe against the surge of adrenaline their own patrol had caused.

“Merlin?” his mum asked. He jumped.

“We’re here. Sorry, yeah, we’re here.” If nothing else, being up on the bridge would prove him rubbish at JCO. “Nothing too terrifying is showing up on screen.”

“Thanks for that,” his mum said, her tone dry. “You’re doing fine. Don’t forget to breathe.”

Merlin couldn’t help it. He cracked up. He swallowed his laughter by covering his mouth with both hands and tried not to wheeze too obviously. The Kilgharrah, of all creatures, sent reassurance through his soles. Almost as soon as he did, his focus shifted again and darted away and aft.

There’s something… The ghost’s frustration came through loud and clear. Merlin was debating whether he should say anything when the chime of an incoming message caught their attention.

“Patch it in,” Arthur commanded.

The viewscreen showed a birds-eye view of a bridge very different from the one that Merlin currently occupied. It was full of people, for one, and full of ichor columns and strange orange light, for another. A scowling woman wearing a Captain’s insignia filled the screen. She had a black eye already purpling around the socket and there was dried blood on her cheekbone.

“Don’t fucking ask,” she began, not seeing fit to introduce herself. Arthur shoved himself to the edge of his Captain’s chair, as far forward as the plug and connections he’d made to his arm would let him get. “We found Kanen and - surprise, surprise! - he’s using cloaking tech that’s not tech.”

Arthur swore. The prerecorded message kept going.

“We gave him a good thrashing, but- something was wrong with his ship. We couldn’t get him out of cloak, not with only biomech to help, so I can’t give you details. The fight logs are piggybacked onto this squirt. Maybe you can find something we couldn’t. The fight logs are piggybacked onto this squirt. Maybe you can find something we couldn’t. We’re-” She swore loudly as something above her head popped and a spatter of green smudged the lens of her camera. She rubbed at the ichor, but only succeeded in smearing it around. After another perfunctory swipe, she gave up and continued. “We’re not going to last another attack and now that he knows we’re wounded, he’s stalking us. Get across Spelandor as quick as you can. If you can’t be quick, turn around.”
She looked off-screen, nodded at a murmured comment, and looked back. “When I say wrong, I mean wrong. He’s done something to the Villain’s Smile that’s fucking with our sensors and making half my crew queasy. If we could even fucking see him with our naked eyeballs, I would have more for you than I do.”

Alarms blared behind her and her expression hardened. “He’s shown up on sensors. Stay safe, Arthur.”

The message ended. Merlin could not tear his eyes from Arthur as her last words rang through the bridge. Arthur rubbed his hand across his mouth, eyes narrowed at the screen that once more showed the wide asteroid belt before them and the starfield beyond. “Is there anything else?”

Griff grunted his ‘no’ and Arthur swore.

Arthur asked, “Can’t open a link?”

The question was met with hesitance on Griff’s part. He shook his head. “No link to open.”

“Fuck.” Merlin said, only remembering that he had an open channel to his mum after it was already too late.

“Is it bad?” she asked.

“Yeah. Another warship in the system was attacked by bandits.” Merlin didn’t want to add anything, but this was his mum. “It sounds like the bandits won.”

“Ah, fuck. Okay, yes. Not relaying that.”

“Sorry,” he apologised, not quite sure how he felt about being the one responsible for making his mum curse.

Arthur beckoned his first officer to his side and gave him orders in a low voice. The bridge became even quieter. Resettling himself in his chair, Arthur checked his connections to the ship and adjusted several of the conduits on his chest.

“Stay alert,” he said again. “Griff, let the destriers know that we’re trying to spot a magically-invisible galley before it pounces us. Also- apologise to Elena for me. I know she doesn’t have anything she can use to help with her scans.”

The words ‘magically-invisible’ nearly made Merlin fall out of his chair, drawing a curious look from the first officer as he passed on his way to an inset console ten feet beyond. Now that Arthur had said something, the Captain in the message couldn’t have been talking about anything else. The unsafe-system that Arthur had talked about, citing bandits and territory, became something else entirely. Bandits using magic. No wonder Arthur wanted him on the bridge.

Too bad he was next to useless with the barrier spell still intact. His ability to spread his magic and focus his mind’s eye to look for threats went no further than the Kilgharrah’s shared senses would allow.

He closed his end of the channel, clicking off his pickup, and started talking. “Can you feel anything?”

Nothing.

The console Leon occupied folded out into a full gunnery array, the central hub for all of the
automated weapons systems. That would probably explain why Merlin had yet to meet a gunner on the Kilgharrah. Leon poked and prodded at his console, lighting everything to brilliant reds and oranges where maybe half of the colours had been green and blue.

Leon caught Arthur’s attention. At his Captain’s nod, Leon jabbed an unassuming button and then turned to face the screen.

Curious, Merlin turned in time to see the detonation, a small implosion followed by a ripple across the starfield. The Kilgharrah hissed and took up muttering in the back of Merlin’s mind.

He knew he was gawping, but he couldn’t help himself. Warheads were as illegal as sorcery and for much the same reasons. He was the only one surprised.

“Anything?” Arthur asked. The ripples flared into brilliant colours as the force met various types of environmental magic, sounding the depths of space.

Kay shook his head. “Disruptive anomalies all over the fucking asteroid field. Expanding gasses tweaked two. Flagged them harmless. How many do we have to launch?”

“Enough.” Arthur did not elaborate.

The heir Pendragon had warheads. How he’d gotten hold of them was anyone’s guess, especially since Merlin had seen old newshurts during his apprenticeship that had shown King Uther personally dismantling as many of them as he could get his hands on. The good, law-abiding, son-of-the-reason-they-were-outlawed Captain had a stash of ‘enough’. Any would get him drummed out of the fleet. ‘Enough’ would be like sitting on an unexploded nova. Merlin bit his lip.

“Enough for cover fire?” Kay mused.

Arthur snorted and shook his head. “Enough to supplement the patrols.”

The Kilgharrah muttered and complained. *They itch when they detonate.*

A piece of raw tech that was powerful enough to make a ghost feel something external blew Merlin’s mind.

“Do you think they’ll help?” he asked, quietly enough that he didn’t think Leon heard him. He covered the ‘mute’ indicator light with one hand, just in case anyone questioned why he was speaking without the connection active on his end.

Should, the ghost said after a moment, begrudging his answer. *Magic responds to them quite outside their destructive force. There was a reason they used them on the Lake woman, however terrible an idea that turned out to be.*

Merlin felt a thrill of terror. “They’d be able to take you out entirely.”

*Likely. But so can you.*

He had no response to that, so he just clicked his mute off and told his mum about the warheads.

She swore for a second time and said, “I’m not telling anyone about those, either.”

Staying on extended alert took its toll. After the first hour, Merlin started to fidget. Fidgeting made his swordbelt slip. Then he had to fuss with it to become comfortable again. Nobody commented on his lack of shoes, but he kept his feet out of sight beneath his console. Griff and Bedivere would get
up every half hour for a quick loop around the bridge. He couldn’t do the same unless he put his boots back on, and the Kilgharrah had protested the first time he’d made to try.

Arthur remained seated, hooked into the ship, his eyes focused somewhere in the middle distance.

“Can’t you talk to him through his hookup?” Merlin asked eventually, “Isn’t that what it’s there for?”

*I would be required to hijack sensitive technological and biological systems. Upon release, there would be no guarantee they would function properly.*

“You modified my map to the mess.”

*That system never works properly, so there was no risk.*

Merlin snorted at that. “But really, you must have tried at least once.”

*The last time I tried to speak to the heir Pendragon, my entire communications subsystem was ripped out and replaced for unspecified faults.*

Something about the Kilgharrah’s flat tone made Merlin’s stomach churn. “You don’t damage systems when you use them.”

*No.*

Merlin looked over his shoulder at Arthur and worried. If he hadn’t believed Kilgharrah when the ghost tried to communicate with him, Merlin might have little chance against any of his other inculcated beliefs. He was his father’s son, as the Kilgharrah oft repeated, and Uther was the source of the Purge.

Nothing made sense. Arthur’s last visit to the infirmary left Merlin confused, half-hopeful, and not entirely sure he knew what was going on. He hated not having the confidence of trust, of knowing that he could take a stand and the deck beneath him would remain solid. Arthur offered no such assurances. He’d threatened him and his family with an inquiry, had as much said that in a choice between Merlin and his father’s laws he had every intention of being the model of a law-abiding citizen of Camelot, and - to add insult to injury - had invited Merlin onto the bridge as an actual JCO.

But he’d kissed Merlin. Or, rather, had kissed back when Merlin had-

Only his ironclad will allowed Merlin to resist putting his head in his hands. That, and Leon’s proximity at the weapon’s console, where he was still periodically launching warheads. Each time he did, the Kilgharrah complained loudly inside Merlin’s mind and Kay flagged new anomalies as harmless. Until he announced his final count, no one on the bridge could relax.

After one such detonation, the Kilgharrah rumbled restlessly beneath Merlin’s feet. *If I could draw from you, we could search without all this noise.*

“I could search.”

*We could search. I also wouldn’t feel so- The wash of unease took Merlin by surprise and he had to swallow hard as his stomach lurched. The Kilgharrah’s presence was powerful enough to impress nausea along with his anxiety. -vulnerable. We have not fought magic since the Purge.*

Two hours on, Kay frowned at his screen after a missile launch. All eyes snapped to him. He didn’t hesitate. “Found something.”
They had not yet cleared the asteroid belt, the detritus of four or five of the outer planets that had gone through some cataclysm and failed to survive. Hundreds of asteroids, large and small, drifted past. They had come in at an angle to the elliptic, but there were still massive clusters to pass through during their traversal if they were to keep on schedule. Ahead of them floated a particularly nasty knot of heavy metal asteroids with a small entourage of lighter obstacles that gave Bedivere fits as he manoeuvred through. Kay flagged an empty point in space on the shadow side of a monstrous hunk of stone near large enough to be called a planetoid.

Arthur swivelled to look at Leon.

“Launching now,” Leon said, anticipating him. “Retargeting.”

“Griff, let Elena know to shift pattern,” Arthur order, swinging to point at finger at Owain. “Inform Engineering.”

Merlin clicked off his mute to tell his mum that they’d found something. “It might be bad.”

“This, I’ll tell them. Focus on… Just focus, okay?”

He had no idea what he’d be able to do, but he assented anyway while watching Leon’s missile jet forward to the flagged location. It detonated with the same destructive grace as the others.

Even with Kay’s forewarning, nothing prepared them to see the impact’s shockwave peel away the ship’s cloak like so much tissue. Within milliseconds, alarms began to sound all over the bridge as the sensors picked up what magic had been hiding. The ship was heading their way, their long-range visuals showing the lumpy shape of the warship nose on. Its vital statistics splashed across the bottom of the viewscreen, and Owain muttered over the scanner console as the ship’s computer identified the threat and sought to propagate the knowledge across the rest of its automated systems.

“It’s too heavy,” Arthur said, his eyes lighting cold, mechanical blue. “Can we get a closer mass estimate? A tighter visual? Anything. Owain?”

“Working on it.”

“We can’t wait,” Arthur said. The tubules connecting him to the ship lit up, vibrant in greens and purples. Merlin could feel the sudden heat of the Captain’s chair all the way at the edge of the bridge as its integrated biotech groaned under the sudden processor load.

Merlin’s eyed widened. “What is he-?”

Seizing weaponry. Targeting. Half a dozen other subsystems.

“Why didn’t he-?”

Short term only. System set to lock him out after a timer expires.

The Kilgharrah surged against the barrier spell with a quick slam of pain that left Merlin gasping. Merlin couldn’t take him to task, not just because of the company but also that it had not been a true attempt to draw magic from him. Reflex. The ghost was riding high on chemicals pumped into his system to keep him running at peak for as long as necessary. The Kilgharrah poured his thoughts and emotions through their connection and the reason for the fluctuation became obvious.

They’re here.

Over the horizon of half a dozen small, nearby asteroids, the swarm appeared. With their brilliant
yellows and scattered reds against dull rock, they were hard to miss. Owain and Kay tagged as many targets and approach vectors as they could, desperately trying to keep up with the appearance of the Glatissant, but they fell further behind with each wave.

There was a muted ping and every marked target registered in an eyeblink. Hundreds of Glatissant. A tally appeared. As the asteroids kept turning, the count continued to increase.

Merlin’s attention went to Arthur and the pulsing chair. Arthur’s eyes were blank, empty of colour and sense. His head lolled. Staring at the cybernetic husk, Merlin suddenly had a very good idea of what sort of dangers the ship might pose to the modded. Arthur wasn’t breathing. Even seeing him do the same earlier - Merlin flushed at the memory, quickly shoving it away because aliens and Not The Time - he didn’t know how long biotech could sustain a vacated vessel.

The bridge speakers crackled and Griff backed away from his console, hands in the air. Arthur’s voice filled the bridge as a single, massive Glatissant devourer came into view. “Elena’s calling formations. Lucan has his mechanics stationed. The Knights are standing by in case we’re boarded.” There was a pause. “Gwaine is complaining that you were aiming for him specifically, Leon.”

“Always,” Leon said.

At Nav, Kay snorted and slapped a palm against one of his displays. The devourer’s stats displayed. It was one ugly fucker, nearly as big as the Kilgharrah, slick black and covered with pustules likely filled with hundreds of skittering Glatissant soldiers. Streaks of violent yellow, red, and purple striped its entire length, catching sunlight as the angle of its asteroid changed.

“Because I know you’re all wondering.” Arthur said, “-here’s a close-up of Kanen’s ship.”

The visual came on the screen. Merlin deflated. He could hardly comprehend what he was seeing. Neither could the others, apparently, because silence descended on the bridge but for the crackle of Arthur’s control over the speaker.

“Or rather what’s left of it.” Arthur’s disembodied voice still carried enough humanity to sound wry.

He displayed a close-up of the Villain’s Smile as well as several off-sides recordings pulled from Elena’s destriers. He had cobbled together extrapolations and a shoddy wireframe that wrapped around a three-dimensional mockup of the ship. The model spun. Merlin covered his mouth so he wouldn’t voice any of the embarrassing squeaks his brain was gibbering to release.

The Captain from the warning message had been spot on. The Villain’s Smile was wrong on so many different levels that Merlin could feel the Kilgharrah - a seasoned warship and a fucking dragon - gathering himself, half-ready to run instead of fight. Merlin had a suspicion that it would only take a thought from the ghost to override Helm and get them the fuck out of there. He poured reassurance through his connection, but the chemical buzz affecting the Kilgharrah made it hard to tell if he was helping.

The ship had been mangled. What once had been a standard-issue fleet galley had been butchered and grafted with a Glatissant devourer. The devourer’s exoskeleton had been peeled back and wrapped around the hull of the warship, sealing them together. The seams between them looked lumpy, melted, and the devourer’s spiked tentacles twitched aimlessly. For all of that, the Villain’s Smile still maintained propulsion and lights shone from what few viewports had not been covered by shards of exoskeleton.

“They can’t do that,” Owain protested. “Can they?”

The Kilgharrah was muttering to himself, loud and frantic, as the first of the smaller soldier-beasts began to scrabble against his hull. He began funneling sensory information through his connection with Merlin. The grasping limbs of the Glatissant made Merlin’s skin crawl. He scrubbed at one arm in a panic, yanking his sleeve up and scratching furiously before he realised what the Kilgharrah was doing. Tiny creepy-crawlies were starting to burrow into his skin with tiny jabs of pain.

“Minor hull breach, aft,” Arthur announced over the speakers. “Displaying.”

Dozens of tagged Glatissant clustered loosely around one of the warts that engineering had grown to protect the destriers, ripping into the hull with their claws, their jaws shut tight against the vacuum of space. Merlin fidgeted in his seat, trying to fight the itching sensation that Kilgharrah was feeding him, reflecting the movement of the creatures on screen. The screen grew cluttered with information, to the point where Arthur started to cycle through elements, throwing some to minor displays near his Captain’s chair. A tiny countdown in the corner marked his time until he was locked out of the system.

The devourer that had appeared with the swarm shuddered beneath a volley of smaller missiles, launched by Arthur if his whoop for the direct hit meant anything. Leon’s fingers danced across the weapon’s console, manually queueing missiles and priming lasers for his Captain. At Nav, Kay had half a dozen prospective escape vectors mapped out in brilliant, blinking red and he was still cursing and trying to map incoming asteroids as the belt around them continued in its orbit.

Fancy flying wasn’t helping Bedivere, though he did manage to rotate the ship while the devourer was distracted so that it wouldn’t punch straight into the forward bay when it landed. There was no room to manoeuvre. They were hemmed in by asteroids and clusters of the enemy, the battlefield chosen to be far better for the ambusher than the ambushee.

The devourer shrugged off Arthur’s volley and extended its grabbers, boneless, tentacular approximations of the clawed, paw-like forelegs that the smaller creatures sported. Where suckers would be on a terrestrial cephalopod, a devourer had massive, wicked spikes.

The Kilgharrah was made for ship-to-ship combat, not for evading predators nearly as large as itself. Their lasers scored the devourers’ surface. One of them punctured a hole in one of the pustules, releasing a small cloud of un-anchored Glatissant that righted themselves and started swimming their way.

The Kilgharrah was busy fending off smaller groups, offloading all of the most unpleasant sensations of his hull being peeled back straight to Merlin. The fuckers were burrowing, deadening the flesh of the hull and digging chunks off to float off into space. Slapping his communications console’s alert button, Merlin toggled his mute and bit out, “Glatissant.”

His mum swore a third time. “Affirmative,” He could hear her relay the message and the silence that followed, a hush that blanked out the murmur of background voices he now noticed only in their absence. When she came back to her microphone, she said, “We don’t have pods this time.”

“I don’t know what I can do.”

“I don’t know either, but I need to go. They weren’t prepared for this.”

The Glatissant had widened the breach enough that bulkheads were dropping to isolate the corridors they were about to gain. “Mum—”
“Love you too, sweetie,” she said, signing off with a swift click.

Merlin yanked his headset from his ears and dragged his fingernails down his ribcage. His uniform was getting in the way, the fabric only making the itch worse. The Kilgharrah was sending everything. “Stop it, fuck. Just-”

The Kilgharrah didn’t hear him.

At weapons, Leon called a warhead.

The Villain’s Smile drew closer. It was acting more like a devourer than a warship. The hybrid beast’s grasping tentacles reached for them.

Arthur launched Leon’s missile straight into the central bulk of the non-hybrid devourer. The detonation was prettier and a great deal messier than any of the prior launches. The blast ripped through the creature’s exoskeleton, sending shards spinning in all directions. The rapidly expanding cloud of gasses and debris vaporised the nearest smaller creatures and sent those further out tumbling uncontrolled.

None of the other warheads had detonated so near the Kilgharrah. This one Merlin felt in his bones. The ripple passed through the bridge as a reaction to debris impacts, but his connection with Kilgharrah translated the propagation into a shiver that travelled from his head to his bare toes.

Merlin pulled his feet from the deck and wrapped his arms around his knees, curling into his chair, breathing hard.

His senses were his own again, but he was disoriented, his skin no longer crawling with creatures trying to burrow in to devour him inside out. He knew he was upright and sitting still, but it took a good handful of seconds for him to reacquaint himself with his surroundings.

Owain gave them a damage report, both for the Kilgharrah and the devourer that had taken the full brunt of a warhead in the chest. The devourer fared worse.

“Even with that... thing, Captain, I think we can handle the swarm. Queueing up another missile,” Leon said, his brow furrowed as he frowned at the weapons console.

Guilt set in. Merlin rubbed at his ankles. The memory of all of the little creatures crawling across his skin made him shudder, but he was the ghost’s only touchstone. Without Merlin, the Kilgharrah had to fight alone.

Taking a deep breath, he put his feet back on the deck and the Kilgharrah overwhelmed his senses once more. He could smell the alien blood of Glatissant taken down by the Knights after the beasts crawled through the now-major hull breach on his flank. The Kilgharrah was boosting Arthur’s efforts: acid across the hull (like the Ealdor), but also out-spec boosts to the lasers to push their power above and beyond what technology alone could accomplish. He was helping the best he could, even though one out of every ten complaints were that Arthur was mucking about in his systems and he couldn’t try to modify them while they were already occupied.

“Sorry,” Merlin said, unable to put enough breath behind the word for it to sound. He was apologising for leaving the Kilgharrah to fight without him, yes, but also that the ghost didn’t have full control of his own systems, and that Merlin was incapable of helping him the way a dragonlord should.

The Kilgharrah acknowledged Merlin and turned to other things. A dismissal. A moment later, he came roaring back into Merlin’s mind to snarl, *Behind me. Behind me!*
Merlin’s eyes went to the main viewscreen, then he rapidly pulled up the aft view of the proceedings. There was nothing there that Merlin could see, that any of the filters or sensors he ran through the data for could see. There was nothing there. The barrier spell held Merlin’s magic trapped so he couldn’t look for himself. Turning in his chair, he looked to the ceiling - because where else would he face to try and talk to a disembodied Arthur - and shouted, “There’s something.”

The ship groaned and shuddered and Arthur brought the aft view to the viewscreen in time for them to see a second cloak peel away from a third devourer. It sunk its spikes deep into the Kilgharrah, leaving lines of fire down Merlin’s calves. He had to bite his lip not to cry out or sever the connection again.

Arthur’s countdown clock gave a quiet warning beep.

“There is no such thing,” Arthur said, pulling up views of each of the three devourers. A beat later, pictures of the dead Glatissant they had fought away from the Ealdor appeared to match them. With each devourer next to its sibling, the pairs were easy to see. “As half a swarm. At least there is one dependable thing in this universe.”

The Kilgharrah shuddered again, twitching away from the hull-breach on its flank. Merlin’s nerves lit up with the pain of electrocution, tightening all his muscles and leaving him sitting rigid in his chair, unable to pull his feet free even if he wanted to. Someone pushed the view of the hybrid ship to everyone’s individual console so they could watch the lightning arc from the tips of its graspers and strike the side of their ship.

“Magic,” Arthur spat. The speakers crackled and popped.

The lightning winked out, leaving half a dozen fried Glatissant soldiers floating free of the hull breach, and Merlin could breathe again.

“The fuck?” Kay demanded.

Merlin stared at the hybrid on his screen, bracing himself against the next electric attack. Despite all of their defences, the Villain’s Smile was now close enough to activate its cutting beams, the first sign they had that it truly was a hybrid and not just a slow-digesting devourer. It drew precise lines around the already-cleared breach and cut away enough of the Kilgharrah’s hull for its devourer’s head to shove itself inside. The beams felt like knives on Merlin’s skin. He was determined not to pull away from the Kilgharrah, not now that he could feel the Glatissant being disgorged from the devourer’s maw directly into the ship’s corridors, but it was a near thing.

The Glatissant were met by the Knights, but there were so many of them. Now that they were inside, the bridge could no longer help. The Kilgharrah didn’t have the internal defence systems of the Kingdom ships, no lasers to help pistol and sword repel the invaders.

From the weapon’s console, Leon spoke up, his unflappable calm a tiny bit flapped, “The missile bay I was going to use to shoot the fucker off of us is overloaded. I can’t get it back online. The discharge from the Villain’s Smile took every scrap of tech offline where it hit.”

“Now we know why Kanen’s been such a successful bandit, don’t we?” Arthur said, sounding strained. His timer began to flash. “Everything’s down for the entire sector. I can’t access any of it.”

Another spell blasted the ship, another volley of lightning that made Merlin go rigid and squeak as he tried to breathe. This couldn’t go on. The spells were paralysing the both of them, taking out huge chunks of their defence systems. The Kilgharrah was overwhelmed and panicking, trying his best to fight off attacks from every vector. There was only so much he could do.
When the crackle of phantom electricity faded from his skin, Merlin bounced out of his chair. Leon blinked at him in wary confusion.

The countdown hit zero and from the Captain’s chair came Arthur’s hiss of frustration, followed by a series of hacking coughs.

Merlin looked back at Arthur, then forward to Leon and the door just past him. He put one hand on his father’s sword, the other on the butt of his sonic pistol. He didn’t know how helpful they’d be, but they were better than nothing.

He said, “Don’t let them follow me,” and didn’t wait for the Kilgharrah to respond before he took off at a dead run past Leon, through the portal, and down the corridor.
Gradually, Arthur’s vision cleared as he reorganised his thoughts back into ‘tiny human’ mode. All of the systems he had taken control of reverted to automated systems, or back to the consoles that his bridge crew bustled between. The sound of Owain and Leon calling back and forth, coordinating their efforts, filtered in through the haze of sudden sensory reboot. Even Bedivere was speaking, keeping up a litany of ever-increasingly-creative foul language directed toward the devourers that had hold of them and removed all of his manoeuvrability.

He was starting to regain feeling in his extremities as his brain remapped itself to his physical body. Taking control meant interfacing with technical systems on the level of ‘left arm’ to ‘trajectory’ and ‘right eyelid’ to ‘fire at will’. Coming back was a tedious process of remembering to twitch muscles instead of launch missiles. The flex of servos in his chest was welcome and familiar, though, and he was grateful for the feeling of being alone within his own frame. The Kilgharrah was alive - as much as any biotech ship was alive - and it always felt uncannily like jacking in to someone else’s mods whenever he needed to seize subsystems.

Arthur coughed hard, reintroducing his lungs to a silly little thing called breathing, and looked up just in time to see Merlin dash from the bridge. He found himself halfway out of his chair before he was yanked back down by his chest and arm connections and had to fight to toggle the releases and pull the conduits free. “Where the fuck is he going?” he demanded. “What’s going on?”

It was Kay who answered. “Went crazy. Jumping around, twitching. Soon as the big fucker stuck through the breach, he took off.”

Everything slowed as the bottom dropped out of his stomach. He distantly catalogued the details of Merlin’s abandoned console. The connection with the Ealdorians had been shut down and the screens showed close-up views of the hybrid monstrosity tearing into the Kilgharrah. His headset lay on the floor. He had left his boots beneath his console, his socks sticking out where they’d been wadded and discarded.

Merlin was running barefoot and armed through the ship, and getting further and further from where Arthur could keep an eye on him and make sure he didn’t- “Oh- oh, fuck,” Arthur said. He looked at the forward viewscreen and its chaotic record of how royally fucked by the swarm-and-a-half-plus-magic-plus-warship they were. “I have to go after him.”

Every member of his bridge crew turned to gape for a moment before alerts and warnings from their consoles called them back to their duties.

Only Leon said anything. “We need you here.”

Arthur disentangled himself from his chair and strode towards his first officer. Not that he didn’t trust
his bridge crew, but he closed on Leon, taking him by the shoulder to say, “You do. But I’m locked out of the system for longer than it will take to decide this battle. And- you were there. You know the official story is just that. Look me in the eye and tell me that those aliens, for all their horror, outweigh the danger of an intensity twelve.” Leon said nothing. Arthur pressed, “If anyone’s going to be responsible for another Adolebat, another Camelot, I want it to be me and no one else.”

Leon flexed his jaw.

“Elena-” Griff broke in, unaware of their impasse and still focused on his console, his fingers a blur over his inputs, “-says they’re getting overwhelmed and that dogfighting might lose us Gwaine. She’s setting up a strafing pattern.”

Arthur and Leon looked at Griff, then back at each other.

“I brought him on board, Leon,” Arthur said quietly. “I can’t ask anyone else.”

At last, Leon nodded. “I had your armour moved to the near outfitter.”

“Good. Thank you.” Arthur released his grip on Leon’s shoulder. “You have the bridge.” He didn’t bother to explain further. He was abandoning them mid-battle; no matter what he said it would sound suspect. There was nothing they could do about a rogue sorcerer who was possibly also mad, and he needed them to focus.

“Engineering here.” Lucan sounded harried over the speakers. The connection popped several times, Griff swearing at his console, before it evened out. “We have a problem. Good news, bad news.”

Arthur sighed, eyeing the door as Leon went back to tending their weaponry. “Worse than Glatissant inside the ship? Bad news.”

“The bad news is those anti-mod fields are up again. The good news is my kludged detector is working perfectly.”

“You have got to be kidding.”

“Fields all over. Not just one. They’re blocking access to nonessential systems- and the bridge.”

“I can’t get off the bridge?” Arthur asked, checking his weapon’s belt. His jaw ached from clenching. Only the steady regulation of his mods kept his breathing even. Merlin was getting further and further away the longer he stayed on the bridge.

Lucan sounded like he was gargling into his subvocal audio pickup for a beat before he said, “I’m sending Sefa with a… thingy.”

“That a technical term?”

“Call it whatever you want. I didn’t exactly have time to paint a name on the side.”

“Fine.” Arthur pinched the bridge of his nose, his fingers clicking against the metal arcs of his oculars. “What’s the thingy do?”

“May or may not neutralise those anti-mod fields.”

“ETA?”

“Thirty seconds. She’s taking the quick way.”
Arthur marched to the portal off the bridge and waited the impatient second it took to iris open. 
Lucan had been right. Anti-mod fields made his eyes sting. He could feel the anti-mod field like he 
could feel a magnetic field, minute forces working against him that he could ignore - if he wanted to 
do himself damage. He sent a command to the ship via uplink and froze the door open. He was about 
to turn away when he noticed that angry red spots on the floor and walls several paces beyond the 
portal looked to be about where his sense of self-preservation told him the field stood.

“It’s raising a blush, Lucan. Just thought you’d like to know.”

“Is it now?” Lucan sounded intrigued. “Didn’t do that before.”

“Curiouser and curiouser, I know. You and Griff. I need to get out, Lucan.”

“Fifteen. She has to key in stupidly long codes and whose idea was that?”

From Nav, Kay shouted over his shoulder. “Massive rogue asteroid coming in on a not-quite 
collision course, Captain.” After a beep and a chime, their viewscreen grew more cluttered with an 
image of the incoming rock.

Owain spoke up before anyone else could. “We have boost power again, no thanks to that zap. 
Bedivere, can you use it?”

“I can try,” Bedivere said. “The boost’ll at least let me wiggle around.”

Across the bridge, Kay turned to meet Arthur’s gaze and grimaced.

Arthur couldn’t help himself. He wiggled his eyebrows and then tilted his head to indicate Owain.

A grudging smile spread across Kay’s face and he shrugged one shoulder before going back to his 
console. It was a start, at least.

“You’re going to do fine,” Arthur told Leon, watching another volley of tiny trash missiles streaked 
from their bay and scattered a knot of Glatissant soldiers trying to work another hole in the hull. 
Elena’s red-bellied fighters flashed by one of their visual pickups, strafing the devourer clinging to 
their stern. The devourer raised its head and gave every impression of roaring, all but opening its 
jaws. If either of the other two devourers managed to rip through, they were going to have serious 
trouble flying, let alone surviving. Their defences and their fighters were keeping them off, but only 
barely. Arthur ground his teeth. “But I might not. Where the fuck is Sefa?”

A rhythmic pounding noise came from just outside the door. Arthur moved to look just as a panel in 
the floor ripped open with the wet sound of tearing skin. Grabbing onto Sefa’s hands, Arthur pulled 
her free from the access tunnel. Her uniform was dirty, covered in blackened ichor and ripped in half 
a dozen places. The smell from the tunnel carried the whiff of rot and decay, the organic scent of the 
ship’s natural processes multiplied by the small space. The edges of the hatch bled. Arthur was pretty 
sure he had known about this access tunnel. Once upon a time, at least.

“The quick way?” Arthur asked.

She dusted herself off and looked up at him, a crooked smile on her face. “Straight up, as fast as I 
can climb.”

He looked from her to the dark, narrow passageway and raised his eyebrows. “You fit?”

“Not quite.” Sefa winced, rubbing her hip, her hand coming away bloody. Before Arthur could 
comment, she pulled a face, wiped her hand on an intact bit of her uniform, and tugged a small
contraption from her belt. It looked like a cross between a taser, a sonic pistol, and an angry porcupine. “Field disruptor. You just press here and-” She demonstrated, fiddling with one of the buttons until it depressed. She then pointed the end with the prongs and the hole between them toward the corridor and waited.

Arthur tapped his foot, too agitated to remain still. “Is it doing anything?”

“Yes?” Sefa said, watching the walls. Without warning, she started forward. Arthur reflexively caught her shoulder to keep her from stepping onto the field. She grinned up at him and pointed at the fading red spots. “Safe now.”

From the bridge behind them, Lucan announced, “Field’s moved. Keep watch for them. Looks like turning off one turns on another.”

Arthur closed his eyes for a moment to take a deep breath, then looked down at Sefa. “Keep alert and that field disruptor at the ready. You’re coming with me.”

The outfitter was ten steps beyond the last fading splotches of the anti-mod field, and Arthur threw himself inside already disrobing, leaving Sefa in the hall. He stepped up onto the platform and punched in the number for his armour, unbuckling his swordbelt with his free hand. Impatient, he finished stripping his bridge boots and uniform and stood in the centre of the outfitter’s forest of arms and graspers before they even started to twitch.

The machinery began to whir. His armour built around him, as fast or faster than he could do it by hand, but it was still too slow.

Arthur rubbed at his chest and sighed. Everything still tingled from forcing his way into the ship’s subsystems, and it probably would for hours yet. The technology was new, less than a decade old, and still had enough kinks in it that - despite inconvenience and possible disaster - he was grateful for the max time limit. The mild disassociation got worse the longer he stayed in the system. At least the feeling of interloping had already faded to mere memory. He concentrated on breathing, trying to keep his mind away from the many possible scenarios in which he might find Merlin, and what he might have to do when he reached him. His fingers twitched for his sword.

A minute passed before the last arm came down and sealed his helmet to the collar of his suit. There were hisses, clicks, and the gurgle of retreating hydraulic fluid as Arthur flexed his fingers. His mods hooked into his suit and displayed their initial diagnostics splashed across his oculars. He was now two full minutes behind Merlin, and that was more than he was comfortable with.

The Kilgharrah’s deck bucked beneath his feet and he staggered off the platform. No sirens sounded, no hull breach warnings. There was only a quick message from Leon in the form of a small clip of the incoming asteroid’s impact. It had hit the aft Glatissant, nearly knocking it free. Another pass from Elena’s fighters distracted it.

They weren’t winning, not exactly, but every minute something wasn’t succeeding in chewing holes in them, the more respectable their chances became. The Kilgharrah was built for staying power, not just firepower.

Retracting his faceplate and rebuckling his weapon’s belt onto his armour, he strode into the hall and used his helmet’s pickup to ask Lucan to patch him into the chip tracking system. Sefa fell into step, the field disruptor primed, ready, and pointed straight ahead, as they started down the corridor away from the bridge. Without comment from Lucan, the vital statistics and locations for every person on board the Kilgharrah began to scroll up his oculars.
He found Merlin’s ID chip location quick enough only to be interrupted by Leon’s whoop that sounded on his internal auditory link. They’d managed to crack the exterior of the forward devourer. It was too wounded to continue to try and chew through the hull, though it wouldn’t let go of them.

Arthur just hoped they could continue to not lose for long enough for him to make sure that Merlin wasn’t going to kill everyone and everything on board. He tried to walk faster, but his bulky armour made going slow. Each field lost them a good fifteen seconds. Sefa had to stop him more than once before he stomped into an anti-mod field that lay smack across the corridor.

He unintentionally left bruises on her arm when he could not halt his armour in time to keep himself from running into her. The strange buzzing the field sent up behind his eyes no longer registered. Merlin could be anywhere, doing anything. The ship was still intact, but there was no way to know for how much longer. The field disruptor hissed and fizzed alarmingly. Sefa swore at it, but it continued to work. By the time they came to a cross-corridor following the path that Merlin had taken, it had been another full minute.

They passed their first Glatissant corpse.

Now that they were in boarded territory, he couldn’t justify charging into battle with only Sefa to guard his flank. The ID map of ship’s occupants showed clusters of Knights in nearby lower corridors, guarding the Ealdorians or fighting the Glatissant, respectively. He pinged the two nearest Knights and ordered them to accompany him into the battle zone. Halting to wait for reinforcements before he put Sefa into any more danger, he puzzled over the trail Merlin had left.

The madman was running into the thick of the Glatissant. Every step that Arthur took to follow him led closer to the hull breach and the hybrid. Merlin’s behaviour made no sense. The creeping fear that Arthur had been very, very wrong to even give him a chance made him feel strangely hollow.

Precious seconds ticked by until two armoured Knights came clanking into view. They both retracted their faceplates and Arthur had to take a moment to stare at the ceiling. Gwen was going to fucking kill him with a rusty pipe. If anything happened to either Elyan or Lancelot, she would murder him in his sleep. Gwen’s brother and Gwen’s lover, respectively, each threw him a precise salute.

Arthur didn’t have time to swap them out, so they would have to do. “We’re going after Merlin,” he said. Lance’s eyes widened, which was odd in and of itself, but they were wasting time. Snapping his faceplate down, he pointed them down the path of the tracer report.

Almost immediately, Glatissant attacked. Arthur’s stomach churned to see the creatures inside of his ship. Lance’s and Elyan’s pistols brought down singleton soldiers as they fought their way forward. Every curve of the corridor brought the danger that they would meet the bulk of the swarm. Arthur sliced off the heads of each Glatissant they passed, just in case.

There were more anti-mod fields. Sefa got rid of them as swiftly as she could, thumping the field disruptor with her fist when it sputtered and emitted light and smoke it wasn’t supposed to, but it was slow going. Glatissant clawed their way across the decks and through the fields unaffected.

The bridge reported the second hull breach and another sustained spell that knocked out their aft defences just as Arthur reached the first Glatissant hull breach. With the devourer nearly as large as the Kilgharrah itself, it had ground through the ceiling and the deck, leaving them all with uncertain footing as they clambered over debris. It’s maw dripped sticky fluid, a disgusting, bubbling mixture that sealed the creature to the Kilgharrah and allowed it to open its mouth without losing internal pressure.

The hybrid devourer was panting, breathing wet, foul air into the corridor. There were no living
Knights at the breach, only a pair of dead ones interspersed with dozens of Glatissant corpses. The battle had moved on and the corridor was still too dangerous for Lucan to send anyone to attempt to repair it.

There weren’t very many hiding places.

Halting, Arthur ordered them to search around. This was the last recorded location of Merlin’s ID chip, but the computer had glitched out, somehow, and was no longer reporting its presence. Even a corpse produced signal enough that the Kilgharrah should be able to pinpoint its location. The other two Knights poked bodies with their swords, but there were only the two armoured men who had fallen. No other crew, and certainly no other humans.

Arthur arranged the Knights where they had fallen, giving them as much respect as he could muster, knowing he would mourn in the quiet before sleep. If any of them survived that long. He had just laid one of the Knights arms at their sides when Elyan called out with a discovery. They converged on one of the waist-high ‘teeth’ of the devourer to see his find.

The devourer had vomited up a whole contingent of Glatissant directly into the hull breach. Snagged on the tooth was a scrap of uniform, Knight colours. Lance rubbed the fabric between two fingers of his gauntlet, more outwardly concerned than any of them. His faceplate up and mouth set in a worried frown, he put one booted foot past the line of teeth and onto the squishy surface inside.

The maw heaved, causing all four of them to flinch back from its jagged edge. Arthur had no idea what to think. What possible reason could a barefoot noncombatant have to climb into the gullet of a devourer? He felt a flare of anger that Merlin would put himself in danger, tempered by the first stirring of hope. Enough, at least, to ease the knots in his stomach.

“We’re going after him,” Arthur said. When Elyan made a disbelieving sound while staring up into the dark, he added, “He’s crew.” *He’s mine.*

Elyan knew better than to argue that.

The moment Sefa heard his words, however, she didn’t wait for him to assign an escort. She saluted, said, “Chief Lucan needs me, Captain,” and took her anti-mod field disruptor to run back the way they had come.

Arthur shouted after her, but it was just as well. They could hear the strange barks of the Glatissant from further into the ship, and there were access tunnels she could slip through that would bring her to safety far sooner than a fully armed and armoured escort.

Arthur sent a quick message to Leon on the bridge and severed the connection before he could protest the plan. He hoped this wasn’t as stupid as it felt, no matter that he had no idea if this were a hunt or a rescue or something else entirely. Lance was a heartbeat behind him when the three of them leapt past the teeth and began to climb up the slippery interior of the hybrid gullet.

Before they had gone a dozen steps, the devourer snapped its teeth shut and enveloped them in darkness.
Merlin heaved on his sword, drawing it out of the dead Glatissant in front of him. The blade rang against the creature’s exoskeleton, catching for a heart-stopping instant before he pulled it free and leaned back against the dull, fleshy bulkhead of the Villain’s Smile. He panted, fingers nervously flexing on the butt of his pistol. The stench of char and foul Glatissant blood clung to what was left of his uniform. It was all distressingly familiar, down to the alarming lack of people and the red-shifted light. This time, though, Merlin was armed and had a pretty good idea where to stab one of the creatures before it bit him. That and he had useful magic.

If he was going to know one spell, then he could have learnt a worse one. Another Glatissant slunk down the corridor at him, its hooded head brushing the ceiling, and bared its fangs. Merlin didn’t give it a chance to lunge, speaking the word and boiling the bastard’s blood within it shell. The skin beneath its exoskeleton crackled, burnt, and peeled back, spilling super-heated offal through the cracks as it collapsed. He hid his nose in the elbow of his sword arm and tried not to breathe the smoke, taking his pistol from his belt and shooting the creature in the head for good measure. The sonic pistol pulped its braincase.

Once sure it was dead, Merlin hid again to catch his breath and fight down his nausea at casting through the barrier spell. What should have been a relief for his magic felt greasy and wrong, instead. He could hear other Glatissant roving the halls, and it was only his ability to run like mad that had prevented him from meeting two at the same time and getting his arse handed to him. He curled his fingers around his ribcage, wincing. All around him, the walls of the biotech ship had taken on the black and violent crimson of a devourer’s exoskeleton, hardening into chitinous plates that clicked when the ship shifted.

There were no people. No sorcerer that Merlin had come to find and confront with his one spell, but also no crew. He dug his bare toes into the deck and gathered his courage to dash down another section of corridor, heading for the bow of the ship and the bridge.

Hopefully the bridge.

He didn’t recognise this type of warship. It was newer, shinier than the Kilgharrah, but the lightning had originated from somewhere further forward than where the devourer joined with the Villain’s Smile.

A ship like this should have a crew of hundreds. Only Glatissant came out to greet him.

Beneath his bare feet, his other senses also met eerie silence, making him wish he hadn’t come. He’d left the Kilgharrah alone, fighting for his life, to come to a ship devoid of magic on a dubious mission at best. The ship wasn’t dead, the pulsing walls and the distant heartbeat proved that well enough, but it wasn’t really alive, either. It felt like a solid wall of flesh and steel, with no room for anything
The ship had no ghost. Even with his limited sensory range of feet-on-deck, he felt the imbalance. There was nothing about the ship that spoke to the sort of sentience that the Kilgharrah represented. Or the Ealdor.

Merlin hated it. For the first time in his life, the ship he occupied felt hostile to both him and his magic. The barrier spell might hold his power quiescent, but right now it need hold nothing. His magic felt subdued, unhappy, and decidedly unwilling to come out even with a spell behind it.

Dashing forward again, he was forced to kill another Glatissant, and this one was harder to dispatch. His spell missed and he caught the creature’s swipe with his sword. Its weight flattened him to the ground. His breath knocked out, unable to speak to throw another spell, he scrabbled at his belt. His sword bit into the creature’s paw, and the Glatissant’s long claws curved around the metal.

He placed the muzzle of his pistol where the creature’s hood met its jaw and pulled the trigger. The discharge was muffled in the fleshy chink in its armour, but it was still too loud and too close. Wincing away, he knocked his head back against the floor and made himself momentarily dizzy.

The Glatissant were converging. Merlin could hear them, even though the corridors held unfamiliar echos bouncing from newly-hardened walls. He struggled out from beneath the Glatissant, trying to avoid its teeth, and staggered to his feet.

A new echo added itself to the otherwise deadened silence - the snap and crackle of a massive electrical discharge. It had to be a spell. He was heading in the right direction. He couldn’t let magic be the reason everyone died. He tucked his pistol away again, and took a good two-handed grip on his sword.

Rounding another corner, he found himself face-to-teeth with four Glatissant. They were standing sentinel, silent and unmoving, until he appeared. Then they focused. Four. Even if he was able to hold one off with his sword while he boiled another, the other two would chomp him to bits.

Merlin turned and ran.

The Glatissant leapt after him, the rub of their exoskeletons mimicking the baying of hounds that had caught a scent. Half-remembered fear from his nightmares lent wings to Merlin’s feet, allowing him to pull away until he had to dodge around a corner. He slipped in blood and ichor, sliding hard against the wall.

He recovered, took off again, but he’d lost too much of his lead. The Glatissant following him took the corner by bounding off the wall. It took one swipe from the leader to knock Merlin off his feet.

Sliding, flipping over to face the Glatissant, and scrambling to back himself into a corner so he’d have to face fewer, Merlin stared up at the four (four!) Glatissant stalking forward. One bite was all it would take to end him, and he was pretty sure they weren’t going to stop with one bite. He raised his hand, palm out, and spread his fingers, readying the last spell he’d get a chance to cast. The foremost creature lunged and Merlin sucked in his breath to shout.

Shiny red, gold, and black armour interposed itself between him and his attackers. The Glatissant came down hard on the Knight’s forearm, boots sliding back several inches closer to Merlin’s corner. It scrabbled against the sword that laid flush against the Knight’s vambraces, armour and tempered steel offering protection from its claws. When it went to bite at the faceplate inches from its teeth, the Knight heaved upward, throwing the creature back and flourishing the freed weapon. Spinning the blade, the Knight thrust straight up into the descending Glatissant’s throat.
The Knight roared, twisting his shoulders and dragging his sword through the creature’s neck, severing its head. The exoskeleton parted grudgingly, but part it did, and the beast’s head fell at Merlin’s feet as the Knight kicked the main body away and pulled his pistol.

Merlin’s awareness expanded to include the other three, now dead, Glatissant. Two other Knights stood in the corridor, their pistols up and swords at the ready. The other creatures that Merlin’s rescuer had not taken care of had been dispatched by rapid fire.

All three Knights dripped with the clear jelly that coated the inside of the devourer’s guts that had soaked into the fabric of Merlin’s uniform. If his sense of smell hadn’t been thoroughly deadened, he would have been gagging at their combined stench.

Merlin dropped his hand and leaned back against the wall.

“What were you thinking?” His rescuer retracted his faceplate and glowered down at Merlin.

“Arthur,” Merlin said, desperately relieved. Arthur had come for him, and he couldn’t help the goofy grin he knew spread across his face. He extended his hand. Arthur caught it, helping him up.

He was halfway standing when his higher thought processes kicked in and identified the second emotion on Arthur’s face besides anger. Fear. He dropped Arthur’s hand and fell back against the wall. “What are you doing here?”

“Coming after you.” Arthur backed away a step, eyes still on Merlin, searching. “I should think that would be obvious even to one of your limited comprehension.”

“But the battle-the…” Merlin pushed himself upright, but stayed with his back against the wall. Arthur had come for him, yes, but in what capacity? He looked down at his exposed toes and the ragged, outsized, once-uniform he wore. What little exposed skin he could see was streaked with green and black and red.

The red made him frown. He didn’t remember bleeding. He looked back up at Arthur, wary and suddenly afraid. The Captain could be judge, jury, and executioner for any member of his crew. Each of the Knights held their sword at the ready, including Arthur.

Arthur looked at his gauntlet, wet with blood and ichor, then back at Merlin. His jaw tightened. “You’re coming back with us. This is madness.”

“Come on, Merlin, it’s too dangerous over here.” One of the other Knights spoke, retracting his own faceplate. Lancelot. The last one was Elyan, who smiled encouragingly at Merlin. “How you’re not dead, I have no idea.”

“Blind, fool luck.” Arthur said, holding out his hand again for Merlin to take. “We’re going.”

“But the battle-”

“But you’re crew-” Arthur mimicked Merlin’s tone, then dropped into his commanding voice. “Crew doesn’t get left behind, even if they’re deficient in both ‘self preservation’ and ‘sense.’”

Merlin let out his breath. It was a very nice sentiment, but he wasn’t leaving until he’d accomplished the task he’d set himself. He owed Kilgharrah that much. “That’s not what I- Fuck. No-” He pointed at the empty corridor that the Glatissant sentinels had chased him. “The sorcerer who has been casting on the ship is that way.”

“Sorcerer.” Arthur narrowed his eyes. “You came over here to do what exactly?”
Arthur didn’t even flinch when Merlin gave him the ‘that was a phenomenally stupid question that I can’t even believe you asked me so I’m going to ignore it’ look. Merlin was impressed. Unfortunately, Arthur also didn’t budge.

After casting about for a suitable explanation, Merlin fixed on the sword he’d dropped at his feet. He hefted it, then looked at Arthur. “My father died because of this swarm, and that sorcerer was controlling it. You said they were hunting him.” He realised he’s said ‘my father’ only when Arthur’s huffed a laugh and shook his head.

“You didn’t crawl through the belly of a devourer for simple revenge.”

“Didn’t I?” Merlin asked, annoyed now. Arthur didn’t get to decide why he’d come. Then again, he also couldn’t very well shout, *What do you want from me? I’m here for you, you arsehole, because no one else can do what I can do. You put me on the bridge in the first place. If there’s no right answer for you, just cut off my head and be done with it.* “Arthur-” Arthur flinched at his name, something that Merlin didn’t want to dwell on. “Is my mum alright?”

Arthur met his eyes, then looked away. “The forward bay is not compromised.”

“Yet,” Merlin said.

Arthur conceded the addition with a nod. The other two Knights lowered their faceplates, the faint sound of their seals engaging almost immediately drowned out by the nearby noise of another lighting spell being released.

“The sorcerer is right there.” Merlin felt time pressing in on all sides. One hull breach. One Glatissant among the Ealdorians and his mum could die. If the spells killing the Kilgharrah systems were allowed to continue, the Kilgharrah could be torn apart, and Arthur, and everyone else. They didn’t have time for- for whatever was going on in Arthur’s head. “You can hear them.”

The hand signal was subtle enough that Lance and Elyan tromping past to scout the corridor toward the bridge startled him. He looked to Arthur in askance.

Arthur wore a crooked smile. “As long as we’re here…” He sobered quickly enough. “You’re not armoured. Don’t take unnecessary risks.”

“You weren’t going to just leave with the sorcerer alive,” Merlin said, not quite sure whether or not he wanted to make it a question.

“I was going to come back and deal with it myself.”

“That’s madness,” Merlin scoffed.

Arthur was silent as they crept down the corridor toward the bridge. The four Glatissant had been the last rank of defenders and they halted just outside the last portal to listen, waiting for the crackle and roar of powerful magic to subside before they burst in. Elyan was ordered to guard the door, Lance beckoned to follow. Once orders had been passed, however, Arthur crouched by Merlin and said, “I didn’t know what I’d find here. Once I’d gotten through the devourer, I expected you dead.”

“I’m surprisingly resilient.”

“Also- I didn’t know if I’d have to kill you,” Arthur said, not looking at Merlin.

Merlin swallowed hard. “That’s honest.”
Arthur closed his eyes and said, “Don’t give me a reason,” sounding as if the words hurt him to say.

“Never,” Merlin said firmly. It came out like a promise. Which, he supposed, it rather was. “I’d never work against you.”


Merlin was saved from coming up with an answer by the sudden cessation of the spell from on the bridge.

“Let’s go,” Arthur commanded. Leaving Elyan in the corridor, the other three burst through the portal, swords up and - except for Merlin - pistols at the ready. The door irised shut behind them.

The bridge was empty but for a single man standing near a knobbly bit of blackened wall. He turned to face them, staggering as he did so. He had once been a bigger man, but now his skin hung slack over sunken cheeks. Where he used to have muscles, he had wrinkles and bags of wasting flesh beneath a workman’s leather tunic and thick canvas pants. Below his hollow gaze he wore a toothy smile, his lips pulled back in rictus.

Each of his fingers sported a thick silver ring that crackled with residual electricity. He took one look at the three of them and spread his hands, levelling his fingers at them. Arthur stepped in front of Merlin, blocking his view, and squeezed off a pistol shot.

Merlin’s heart leapt to his throat, choking off whatever spell he might have cast to save them. He needed Arthur out of the way. Shoving forward, he was in time to see the shot hit the railing in front of the man. Arthur’s intended target didn’t bother to flinch out of the way, his hands still raised.

Even when Arthur and Lance both shot again - and missed? Somehow? - lightning still didn’t come. The man spat a curse and flatted his palm against an iron medallion that lay against his chest.

“He’s not a sorcerer,” Merlin said, watching the other man’s eyes: dead and cold and decidedly unlit. He had mods, but their visible facing looked blackened. More than one had bloody furrows around the edges where it looked like he’d tried to claw them out with his bare hands.

Arthur spared Merlin a single eye-roll. “What do you call that then?” He gestured at the magic that danced up the man’s arms, gathering slowly into a blue light that shone from each ring.

“The rings.” Merlin pointed with his sword.

Arthur snorted, sceptical. “Magic rings?”

“I don’t know! You have a better idea?”

“He’s a sorcerer,” Arthur said, beginning to stalk forward.

“Oh, for-” Merlin followed, sticking close to Arthur while trying not to foul his sword arm. “Fine. Sorcerer. But he probably wasn’t a sorcerer until… rings.”

That made Arthur halt and Merlin almost ran him right over before he stopped. Lance, flanking Arthur on the other side, halted as well. “Kanen?” Arthur asked.

The man’s grin didn’t look like it could dim. He nodded, fingers rattling on the medallion around his neck, his teeth gnashing in what looked like they could, possibly, be word-like configurations. When those stopped, the man hissed, “Yes.” His lips barely moved and the affirmation sounded warped.
The glow in his rings grew brighter. He made no other move, no attempt to approach, cast, or anything else.

Lance and Arthur exchanged glances. They lifted their pistols at the same time and fired again, the dual report making Merlin clap his hands over his ears, narrowly avoiding smacking himself in the head with his sword. This time, Merlin could see the ripples in whatever distortion field that Kanen had in place to protect himself from sonic weaponry.

At the door, Elyan shouted. They whirled to find the portal still closed, Elyan on the other side. The sound of fighting was muffled. There was also a great gaping hole in the deck several feet to the left with Glatissant pouring through, bypassing the corridor, and Elyan, entirely.

Merlin flexed his hand and felt the familiar buzz of magic at the ready, just behind the barrier spell and waiting for him to loose his power. There was no way he could justify not using every tool at his disposal, even with Arthur standing right there. This wasn’t the time to be shy, not with more Glatissant than he could accurately count - with their black spots and acid yellow carapaces - scrabbling up from below.

_Hesitate and Arthur dies._ He took a deep breath and fell into step with Arthur and Lance as they faced the threat.

With magic and sword, he tried to keep them alive. The creepy-thing-formerly-known-as-Kanen was laughing through his teeth as Merlin whispered his only spell over and over again. Sick to his stomach from the interaction of barrier spell and boiling spell, he didn’t dare look at Arthur. That some of the creatures fell before Merlin buried his sword through their exoskeletons wasn’t something that a trained Knight would miss.

His attention remained half on Kanen and his rings, but the ersatz sorcerer did not come out from behind the railing. His rings were brilliant points of light in the ruined bridge. Merlin feared that any moment would allow Kanen to unleash the destructive force that could knock out the systems for half of a warship upon their tiny defence. Merlin would be able to do nothing. Not as he was. Maybe not even with full control of his magic.

He cast his boiling spell on Kanen the moment he had breath enough to face him, but it fizzled and dissipated against the same shield that had protected him from their pistols.

Arthur cried out. Merlin’s attention snapped to him.

Arthur was down on one knee, sword half-way across the bridge from where he knelt, and a Glatissant had its claws sunken through the metal of his chestplate. Lance was too far away to help, and Merlin would be too late. He was three steps away, but the creature was already in motion.

Horrified, Merlin watched the Glatissant swing its jaws open. Its teeth flashed and descended on Arthur’s upraised arm.

“ARTHUR!” Merlin flung his hand out. His will overrode the meaning and replaced it with intent. Arthur’s name became a spell in its own right.

Pain seared down Merlin’s spine, cruel and sharp and familiar. Time slowed as the barrier spell tore loose, freeing all of the power that Balinor had used to keep him safe. He drove the barrier spell’s slimy, numbing, nullifying power onward with a wave of his own magic and slammed it into Arthur.

The Glatissant snapped its jaws shut on Arthur’s forearm. Metal shrieked and twisted. The creature shook its head, worrying its prey and jerking Arthur up into a half-crouch. Arthur, bitten or not,
punched the creature in the side of the jaw until it released him. The Glatissant staggered back as Lance shot it several times in rapid succession. It died messily.

Merlin was at Arthur’s side in an instant, catching him as he sagged. The armour on Arthur’s arm was ruined, mangled, all sharp pieces that caught the brilliant silver light of Kanen’s rings as their radiance began to burn. He couldn’t tell what was blood and what wasn’t, and trying to check earned Merlin cuts on his fingers. All he knew was it was Arthur’s human arm, not his metal one. He tore off Arthur’s faceplate and was greeted with an expression of dazed disbelief. It made Arthur look very young. Lance backed his way to them, keeping off several Glatissant and giving Merlin a window of opportunity.

Power pulsed around Merlin. Sick now with worry as well as the effects of the barrier spell, terrified that he had come so fucking close to having what he’d waited for millennia upon millennia - if only in his nightmares. His reality mixed with his dreams, burning in his thoughts, and he despaired to have Arthur slip through his fingers. He turned his fear upon Kanen and his rings.

Kanen grinned at him and wiggled his fingers. It hurt to look in his direction, rings too bright. Merlin clutched Arthur’s shoulders, holding him half in his lap, and squinted. Compared to the thrum of energy in Merlin’s veins, Kane’s shield looked like so much tissue, but this wasn’t something he could do by reflex. His entire life, his reflexes had never done harm to another living creature. Even with his magic loose and waiting and afraid, ready to lash out at the slightest provocation, he did not know how to make it attack like he needed to.

Good thing his father had taught him a spell.

The first crackle of lightning sounded loud in the bridge as it roared towards them, pouring unnaturally slow from Kanen’s hands. Merlin’s own spell was lost in the sound. Without the barrier spell to keep his magic in check, to dole out only what the spell needed, it descended upon Kanen in a nimbus of blazing gold, shredding his shields and swallowing him.

The lightning cut off to leave the bridge in almost darkness. Emergency lights glowed red through the flesh of the Villain’s Smile.

It was a simple enough spell. Once cast, there was no need to feed it power. Merlin watched, vindictive, as Kanen boiled alive from the inside. Skin burst and he collapsed, blood bubbling and hissing in a steaming cascade as it gushed outward through cracking tissues. When he fell, the Glatissant staggered. They barked at each other, confused for only a moment, then resumed their attack.

Merlin laughed, manic. It would have been too much to ask for to have the Glatissant stop. Guided or not, they would always attack. Lance was doing well, holding his own, but there were too many of them, and not enough swords. Trying to help and hold Arthur at the same time, he directed his attention to an approaching Glatissant.

With the barrier gone and his anger tapped, Merlin found himself with a problem. He still had no control over his own magic. He tried to cast his spell on the creature and succeeded in making it explode. Violently.

The explosion took with it the last vestiges of Merlin’s control. He scrabbled to keep hold of his magic as the walls began to peel from their moorings and the deck to buckle beneath him. Arthur’s armour began to lose its outer coating as the magic that clung to Merlin began to chew through his surroundings. His skin burned and his guts writhed, active magic hitting active technology.

Panic skittered through him and he clutched at Arthur. He refused to be the author of another
disaster, whether or not Arthur was still alive. Arthur’s eyes were closed and he wasn’t breathing, but that could mean anything at this point. Breathing didn’t mean anything.

Merlin wiped his eyes and did the only thing he could think of. Gaius had shown him the triskelion, had told him that it was imbalance that cause disaster. Instead of trying to keep so tight a hold of his magic that it ate itself and everything it touched in an attempt to seek balance, Merlin slammed it into the outer curve of the bridge and let it go.

The hull blew out.

Released, Merlin’s magic fled in a torrent, stripping the outer hull to its skeletal frame. Exposed steel and the ivory of bone glinted in the starlight before they too were eaten. Within an eyeblink, a wide, irregular hole appeared in the side of the ship. What biological and technological matter had barred the way was reduced to atoms and the expanding cloud quickly dissipated.

It was destruction in its purest form, the combined power of every one of Merlin’s living seconds condensed and poured into fragile reality. He could feel the shape of each hour as it slipped from him, feel the echoes of his nightmares and the ebb of time. It tasted of loss and empty waiting and sex and unwanted clarity, thickening on his tongue and clogging his throat with copper and iron. His magic showed itself as it rushed outward, and it was vast and angry and uncontrolled but for a vector pointing it away from everything Merlin found important.

Lance’s magnets engaged before he flew out of the breach, his faceplate already down and his Knight’s armour vacuum-sturdy, but Merlin had no such assistance. He did, however, remember what he’d done before to stay put and breathing. He scrabbled at his magic that was escaping with all of their air and the remaining Glatissant, and fastened himself and Arthur to the deck.

The void filled the bridge as a thin barrier sprung into shape around Arthur and him, keeping away the cold and giving himself - if not Arthur - something to breathe. The task felt trivial, less reflex than sense-memory, but he could barely scrape together the power to accomplish it. He felt empty, drained, his senses bruised. His magic was the barest glow deep within his core where it rested behind his heart.

The Glatissant drifted, nudged free if any successfully caught hold of something with their claws but otherwise no longer his immediate problem, and Merlin needed to fix the breach. The artificial gravity remained functioning, but air still howled through the ragged hole in the bridge deck and plucked at his weakening shields. He had nothing left to use, only the barest whisper of his magic still at his disposal, memories too stubborn to desert him.

His father had given him the solution to this, too, and even a not-quite-alive ship like this one could be coaxed. A thin film of skin began to form over the breach as he poked and prodded. He used the dregs of his magic and every ounce of his mechanics’ knowledge, and it almost was not enough.

The ship was stubborn, unreceptive to the faint breath of power that was all he could summon, but it sealed. Barely, but it sealed. With the bridge once more intact, Merlin spat blood and half-collapsed, curling around Arthur’s shoulders, pressing their foreheads together, and closing his eyes.

With the return of air, hissing through the hole in the deck, the portal to the bridge opened. Elyan hopped through, looking battered and panicky, but alive. “They’re gone- everything’s dead quiet out there,” he said, then halted. He looked from the breach to Merlin to Lance, who had just made it to Arthur’s side and was relieving him of his helmet.

Elyan was kneeling next to them in an instant. “Is Arthur…?” Elyan swallowed, leaving his question unfinished.
“I don’t know,” Lance said, looking as lost as Merlin felt. He put two fingers against Arthur’s neck, feeling for a pulse.
Arthur didn’t know precisely how long it took a Glatissant bite to kill, but according to his internal
timekeeper, he should be dead by now. Something was wrong. His mods were coming back online,
once more responding to his reinitialisation commands. The moment enough of them came back up,
he started diagnostics to find out what he could about his continued existence, but it was his fully
human arm that had born the bite. He had no way to tell how badly he had been damaged without
external sensory input. With the reinitialisation, he was having sense-nightmares. Phantom teeth
scraped against his skin as the creature bit through his armour like so much foil.

Except nothing was failing his diagnostics. All of his mods were functioning perfectly well, if slow
to recover, and all of his monitoring equipment showed his biological systems still in working order.
The last block of green text appeared on his oculars. Everything showed up as nominal and
copacetic, except where he had battle damage and strain - which was to be expected.

Then something jabbed him in the neck and he gasped, eyes flying open. Lance pulled back,
confused, his fingers still held like he was about to take Arthur’s pulse. Arthur’s lungs objected to
their renewed workload and he coughed, batting Lance’s hand away and waiting for his oculars to
finish their focusing procedures. His blurred and dual-image surroundings gradually resolved
themselves so he could take a good look at the worried faces leaning over him. Lance. Elyan. Merlin.

He had never been so glad to count to three. They were all alive. He hadn’t failed in that.

It was Merlin that claimed his attention, however, pale and sunken-cheeked. His face was close, ear
cocked to listen to Arthur’s lungs kick back up to full capacity. Arthur could feel his radiating
warmth on his bare cheeks. Merlin’s eyes held fading gold - fuck fuck fuck - and he clung to
Arthur’s armour with visible tremors. Arthur wasn’t quite sure how he felt about awaking to find
himself propped upright in Merlin’s lap. “I’m not dead?”

A breathy laugh with a worrisome hint of mania drew all their eyes. “No, you’re not.” Merlin said,
wiping his mouth on his sleeve to leave a streak of black and looking like he was about to start
crying.

Arthur fought his way to a sitting position. The full reinitialisation left him feeling stiff and woozy,
and he wasn’t fully reintegrated with his armour just yet. Eventually, Merlin just shoved him upright
and sat back, pulling his hands away with reluctance.

“How long was I out?” Arthur asked, absorbing the changes on the bridge since he’d last taken
stock. Damage, smears of ichor, broken consoles. Notable: there were no bodies. No Glatissant. No
Kanen. Only scorch marks originating from where Kanen had been standing and a bloody great rip in the hull that had been covered by a temporary seal. Arthur grunted, flexing his modded shoulder and feeling the relief that his servos were once more responding. Three guesses where the bodies had gone, and the first two didn’t count.

Lance replied, “A minute. A little more.” He and Merlin shared a look that made Arthur want to wave his hands and say ‘I’m right here’. He continued, pinning Arthur with a concerned look, “No internal failures? Necrosis? Neural damage?”

“No,” Arthur wondered if he sounded as confused as he felt. “Nothing. I’m fighting fit. Literally.”

“Your armour’s not,” Elyan pointed out, rocking back on his heels.

At their silent urging, Arthur unlocked his mangled vambrace and pulled it away from his forearm so they could look at the damage. He shook particulate from his punctured suit loose and wiped a hand across the bite zone to clear away the worst of the ichor.

Unbroken skin greeted them. What few tiny scratches bled under their scrutiny matched the ones on Merlin’s fingers when he held them out to compare.

The sound of the temporary seal creaking and the distant barks of Glatissant roused them from their disbelieving silence. Elyan slapped Arthur on the back in congratulations, stood, and went back to the door once more. Elyan’s return to his duties reminded Arthur of his own. When he’d gone under, there had been a battle going on.

Struggling to his feet, Arthur shrugged Merlin’s assistance off and leaned heavily on Lance until he managed to get himself vertical. He took a calming breath that caused him to cough again, hand on his chest. His lungs were always the first to go, the last to recover.

He carefully didn’t look at Merlin. His peripheral vision was enough to tell him the man was still kneeling, hands still raised to help.

The instant before Arthur had been bitten, he’d heard his name and then felt all of his nerves firing at the same time in pure, undifferentiated sensation. He’d thought it was shock, or adrenaline, or his own systems protecting him from what was about to happen, because when the Glatissant had bitten down there had been no pain.

He’d had a moment to be grateful for the reprieve. Then his systems had started shutting down.

Arthur felt lopsided wearing only one vambrace. He shed his gloves and armour from both arms, dropping them to the floor with more force than strictly necessary. “Kilgharrah Command. Command. Bridge. Leon.” Arthur said, hoping that his suit’s pickups were still working. “Status report.”

Leon’s voice came through loud and clear over Arthur’s auditory bypass; everyone else was going to have the privilege of half a conversation. “You’re alive!”

Behind him, Lance moved to tend to Merlin, crouching and putting a hand between his shoulders.

Arthur’s lips twitched into an involuntary smile. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

It took a moment and a few rapid clicks over the comms, but Leon said, “Yes, Captain.” His grin was audible. “We saw the bridge on the Villain’s Smile breach and dozens of those beasts fly out. Maybe half recovered enough to start attacking. You might be glad to know that Derian picked ‘em off. We thought that meant the end of you.”
He flexed his fragile, human hand, then clenched it into a fist. “Still kicking.”

“So are the devourers, but they’re uncoordinated. Even so, we’re wounded. We can’t take another hit from whatever magic was killing our systems and expect to come out of this. Is it too much to hope-?”

“Magic won’t be a problem. Kanen’s dead.” Arthur glanced at Lance, who nodded confirmation and gestured in the direction of the hull breach with his chin. Arthur dipped his head in acknowledgement. He asked Leon, “The devourers are too close to use warheads?”

Leon hummed in agreement. “Not all three are structural threats, however. One can’t grasp and… whatever you did to the hybrid made it stop attacking, leaving only the one on our aft. It’s far enough away from the Ealdorians that we might be able to take care of it, given time, but Elena’s squad is starting to make mistakes and Lucan has had Glatissant loose in the Engineering decks for long enough to make a mess.”

Arthur winced. His crew. He couldn’t bring himself to ask about casualties. “Forward bay still uncompromised?” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Merlin look up at the question.

“For now. There’s an attempt at a hull-breach by the external doors, though, and we don’t have enough suits for all of them in the event of-?”

“Uncompromised for now, then. Acknowledged.” Arthur said, carefully not looking at the others. “Do you have any more good news?”

Leon hesitated. “Your sister might need to find a new pet? I think Kay and Owain need a double bunk.”

That particular news caught Arthur off guard. He started to laugh, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. The ship shuddered beneath their feet and he had to windmill to stay upright, which only made him laugh harder. Lance watched him like he’d lost his mind and Merlin - stupid, beautiful Merlin - was looking between him and Lance to see if there was a joke he was missing.

Regaining his balance, still chuckling, Arthur said, “Fuck. I needed that. Tell them to wait until after for the thank-fuck-we’re-alive sex.”

In the background - Leon must be using a console pickup for audio - Arthur heard Kay shout something rude.

Leon snorted into his pickup. “If there’s an after. That’s all my good news, sir. It’s going to come down to numbers and attrition, and while the Ealdorians are prepared to defend themselves, they’re unarmed and unarmoured. The Glatissant wouldn’t have to work too hard to finish what they started with their ship.”

The report sobered him, though he felt better for the moment of levity. He rubbed at his facial mods, fingers catching on the external casing. There was no way they could protect a large, dense civilian population when they had no resources, no numbers, and only limited defensive capabilities while their enemy were inside the ship.

The Villain’s Smile rocked beneath their feet again and the artificial gravity fluctuated. One of the consoles on the ruined bridge blew out in a shower of sparks and ichor. All of the devourers were too close for warheads, and none of the Kilgarrah’s weapons would be able to pack that much punch with a little distance. “What was that?” Arthur demanded, bracing for it to happen again.

No one was speaking to him, and all he could glean from Leon’s open connection was ‘new
incoming’ and ‘try to open a channel.’

“Leon, report!”

Instead of Leon, Arthur’s eyes lit from the inside with a tight-comm private call from a source he didn’t quite believe he was seeing. “Mithian?”

“I don’t call this staying safe, Arthur.” Mithian’s image splashed across his field of view in full colour. “Fucking glory hound. Kanen was my hunt, you arse.”

“Kanen didn’t catch you.”

“Arthur. Darling. I run the White Hart. I didn’t name her that for the irony.”

“Pardon me for giving a fuck. You made your damage sound- enough.”

“Well I would, wouldn’t I?” Mithian drawled. “He and his fucking monster ship chased us halfway across the system. When he broke off pursuit, we took it as a chance to lick our wounds. I came as soon as I could. Sorry I couldn’t come sooner.”

There was another shudder through the mass of conjoined ships beneath Arthur’s feet and she became all business, her crew in the background redoubling their activity. “Deploying fighters. Anywhere I can dock? Nemeth’s Knights might not be of Camelot’s calibre, but I owe you my crew’s lives.”

“Clear the hull by the forward bay and lock there. Patch into Leon and let him know you’re ready to assist.”

Mithian, battered and bruised, grinned fiercely. “We’ll get that devourer off your tail. You can thank me later.”

Her image winked out and Leon’s voice reverberated in Arthur’s skull, loud enough to make sure he knew it was not the first time Leon had tried to raise him. “White Hart has appeared on our-”

“It’s fine, Leon,” Arthur cut in. “Mithian’s here to augment our forces. She’s going to pour Knights through the forward bay.”

For a moment, Leon dropped his professional demeanour. “Thank fuck.”

Leon relayed enough of Mithian’s reinforcement numbers for Arthur to know they had a chance, with or without him. With the addition of Mithian and her Knights and her destriers… they definitely had a chance. Which meant he needed to start making decisions.

“I’m going to secure the Villain’s Smile,” Arthur said, then clicked off his comms entirely, overriding Leon’s half-voiced protest. The bridge wasn’t very big, and most of the consoles and automated systems were on the fritz, but it wasn’t the ship he needed to be sure of. He took a deep breath. It did nothing to bring the calm he sought.

He couldn’t find his sword, but he found Merlin’s embedded in a console with a spreading pool of ichor dripping from the screen. He freed it with a yank and ordered over his shoulder, “Lance. Out.”

Hefting the sword, feeling its weight, Arthur turned and strode toward Merlin.

Merlin, still sitting in the middle of the bridge, took one look at Arthur and bowed his head. He wobbled in Lance’s hold, but didn’t try to run, plead, or even speak.
“Arthur, what?” Lance asked, releasing Merlin to stand and interpose himself between them. He eyed the sword. “Explosive decompression can explain anything we don’t want examined too closely.”

Incredulous, Arthur pointed his sword from Lance to the door. “That was an order.”

Still Lance didn’t move, one hand on the pommel of his own sword. Chin raised, shoulders squared, Lance looked every inch a Knight of Camelot and with his faceplate retracted, he wore an expression that Arthur had seen a hundred times or more. He was readying himself to fight.

Arthur didn’t want to deal with Lance, didn’t want to explain himself, didn’t want to admit that he was hurt that Lance trusted him so little that he considered Arthur the threat.

Resolved to wait him out, Arthur made a small sound of annoyance and proceeded to ignore him. He filled the time by cleaning Merlin’s blade as best he could. Merlin’s father’s blade. A sorcerer’s blade, though it was a serviceable and mundane as any weapon the Kilgharrah held in its armouries.

Lance faltered as Arthur gave him time to think. “You- you can’t.” In Lance’s words lay the man who used to be his lover, questioning a decision that Arthur hadn’t even made yet with a concern that was not at all warranted.

Merlin caught at the back of Lance’s trouser leg and said quietly, “It’s alright.”

At Merlin’s words, Lance moved away, still primed to defend someone who didn’t need defending. The sting of betrayed loyalty kept Arthur’s mouth shut as Lance made his way to the door. Mithian’s bombardment made the bridge shift and rock. Lance walked with the deliberate high-step of active magnetic soles. Arthur watched him go, impassive.

His hand hovering over the door toggle, Lance said, “Don’t do something you’ll regret.”

When Arthur said nothing, he left the bridge. Elyan greeted Lance in high spirits. The door irised shut, leaving Arthur alone with a sorcerer.

In a step, Arthur was at Merlin’s side and yanking him to his knees, metal palm tight against around the back of his neck. He slid the sword across Merlin’s shoulder, nestling the keen edge to his pulse where it thumped visibly beneath the steel.

Merlin arched his back against the treatment, hands coming up ready to grab at Arthur’s extended arm, his face twisted in the anticipation of pain. The motion was more reflex than any true defence, however, and he curled his fingers to his palms rather than touch Arthur. He kept his eyes shut. His skinny chest rose and fell in quick pants. The dirty uniform hung from him, rips and tears showing his prominent collarbone and hundreds of scratches - some of which would be deep enough to scar.

Arthur tightened his grip, well aware that he didn’t need the sword. He held more than enough power in his hand to crush a spine. He studied Merlin, holding tight, sword at the ready, and waited for him to say something, to start casting spells, to give Arthur some sort of direction as to what he was supposed to do with a starveling sorcerer intent on making his life so much more complicated.

None of those things happened, leaving him with only Merlin, tired, dirty, and afraid. Afraid of Arthur. Guilt caused him to ease the sword away from Merlin’s neck, letting it rest heavy on his shoulder. There was a smear of dark blood at the corner of Merlin’s lips, its presence screaming to Arthur that Merlin was hurt - damaged, and did not deserve a sword at his throat.

His instincts warred with logic, and neither seemed able to pick which side they were on. He couldn’t let go.
Gradually, Merlin relaxed in Arthur’s hold. His spine was awkwardly arched, his head pulled back to expose his throat, but the lines faded from his face and he dropped his hands to his side. His eyes fluttered open and he looked on Arthur’s bare, synthetic arm with faint wonder. The expression stirred the same possessive spark that had kindled in Arthur in the infirmary.

Arthur, however, could not dismiss his anger. Nor his terror. He was no small amount of terrified by the kind of power it would take to literally turn him off. “You shut me down,” he accused.

Merlin met Arthur’s eyes. “I saved your life.”

*Point.* Arthur pulled the sword away and jabbed it toward the fragile seal over the breach. “You used sorcery to kill a man. Don’t tell me that was caused by a rogue missile.”

There was a faint glow of gold in Merlin’s irises as he nodded in Arthur’s grip. He spoke with an edge. “You would have used your sword and regretted it as much as I do.”

Arthur swore, dropping the sword. He pulled Merlin half off his knees, not letting him regain his feet, and brought their faces inches apart. Merlin wrapped his hands around Arthur’s arm, keeping himself steady as he hung from Arthur’s hold. “Why me?” Arthur demanded, “The only one who would ensure a swifter death is my father.”

Face falling, Merlin said, “And you’re your father’s son.”

Arthur got the distinct, uncomfortable feeling he was disappointing Merlin, somehow. For a mad moment, he wanted to protest. He wasn’t his father’s son; there was no reason for fear, or disappointment. But it was neither the time nor the place and Merlin would have no way of knowing. It was a nonsense statement in the first place. All men were their father’s sons, even when they tried not to be.

He asked again, “Why me?”

“I want to trust you. Am I wrong?”

It was another challenge, another question that asked more of Arthur than he knew how to give. He set Merlin on his knees and eased his grip, but did not let go. “I can’t trust you. Over and over again, your kind has betrayed my family, my Kingdom. I have known you for days. Days. Why should I trust you?”

With the question, something changed.

“I don’t know.” Merlin leaned into Arthur’s hold, fingers still curled around his metal forearm, and his words were uncomfortably honest. Arthur didn’t know what to do with an honest sorcerer.

Releasing his hold, Arthur instead rested his hand against Merlin’s cheek and sighed. He couldn’t tell if he’d been compromised, if he was making decisions based on attraction rather than logic. Now that he had the confirmation of sorcery he had been dreading, it left him with the same choice as before. Do something, or do nothing. This time he couldn’t do nothing.

He could not repay service with death, but as grand a gesture as saving his life was, it was only a gesture. A simple act that could only engender as much trust as Arthur chose to bestow. Now that he was here, staring at a sorcerer who had acted in his interest, he found that he could not even trust deeds to show him the measure of a man’s sincerity.

“I can’t trust you,” Arthur said at last. “But I can use you.”
Merlin pulled away, no longer held. A tiny line appeared between his eyebrows as he looked up in askance.


“You ask me to trust you and offer no trust in return.” Merlin sat back onto the floor, frowning up at Arthur.

“I ask you to follow me, like any of my Knights. Like any of my crew. I trust that they will do the tasks I set them.”

“Wasn’t that what I was doing? I was crew and that seemed to make you happy. If that was good enough we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

There was no point in arguing with Merlin, because he was right. Crew wasn’t good enough, even if it should have been. Arthur had thought it would be. It should have been.

Frustration came through loud and clear as Merlin snorted and said, “I might as well swear fealty and have done with it.”

Arthur didn’t even think before he said, “What good would that do? Sorcerers are oathbreakers.”

The ship rocked. Gravity fluctuated. The seal made a whistling noise that stopped suddenly. When they had both recovered, Merlin said, “I’m a warlock.” His words were low, rough, and held the barest hint of an inhuman growl. “I can keep an oath.” Gold glimmered at the edges of his irises.

Scooping up the sword again and sheathing it, Arthur gave himself time to dwell on the implication. Oaths were not trivial promises or reassurances. They glued the Five Kingdoms together, would give Arthur his power if he became Captain and King in Uther’s wake. If Merlin were willing to take one - an oath was a powerful thing. The idea had merit.

“Swear, then,” Arthur said.

Merlin muttered impolite things about Arthur that he chose not to hear, then said, “Even though ‘sorcerers are oathbreakers’? Are you having me on?”

Arthur couldn’t help but smile at that. “Sorcerers, yes, but you’re a warlock.”

Merlin blinked at him. “You’re serious.”

“Deadly.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re going to swear to me and none other. No Kingdom. No ship. Not even Albion.”

They stared at each other for a long moment, then Merlin pushed himself back to his knees. He moved cautiously, like he was waiting for Arthur to tell him it was all a joke, a mistake. Spine straight, he bowed his head and spoke to the floor. “You don’t have your sword.”

“Forget the sword.”

“Forget the sword, remember the words?” Merlin asked, amusement colouring his tone. “Stop fidgeting. This is solemn.”

Arthur’s heart was beating record fast, and his auxiliary oxygen scrubbers kicked in when he refused
to speed his breathing to keep up. Oaths didn’t make him nervous. “I’m not fidgeting. Now swear.”

Merlin was old enough to know his oaths by heart, to have said them to Lot of the Essetir - or, considering their aborted rendezvous, about to have said them. He required no direction, merely started speaking.

“I promise, upon what power I possess, that I will in the future be faithful to Arthur, never cause him harm, and will observe my homage to him completely against all persons in good faith and without deceit.” He looked up, and his eyes blazed brilliant gold. “So be my promise sealed.”

Unprompted, Arthur reached out his hand to clasp Merlin’s and watched his eyes flare. There was a tentative question that tingled up his arm, a curious touch at his thoughts that sought his agreement. A spell. Magic. Asking permission.

He was mad to accept a spell along with the oath. For all he knew, he would be ensuring the Camelot’s destruction, not to mention his own.

The spell’s question lingered in his mind for two seconds, ten.


Arthur felt like a hypocrite - in one breath decrying all sorcerers as untrustworthy, as liars, the next seriously considering whatever this was. A sly, traitorous thought he couldn’t quite quash gave him an explanation: because Merlin was Merlin. His judgement was compromised. This was only confirmation.

An oath worked both ways. Merlin had sworn upon his power. It was only mete that Arthur accept upon it as well.

The consequences would be his own.

The spell seized upon his acquiescence.

Arthur felt the binding settle in loops about their wrists, in bright points that tingled at forehead, chest, and groin. The oath became a tangible thing, backed by magic that Arthur neither trusted nor understood. The solid, benign warmth of the spell eased some of Arthur’s doubts. Not all of them, not enough to trust, but enough for him to feel like he’d had a tool placed firmly in his palm rather than a knife in his breast.

He released Merlin’s hand and rubbed at the centre of his chest. The binding felt like it had taken root deep within his mods. He wondered idly if it would matter if he had to replace something, if he’d need to have the oath again.

He coughed experimentally. Nothing hurt, but the oath sat oddly. It made him uncomfortable, like he’d let too much of Merlin in, too fast.

Merlin watched him, biting his lip and looking torn between sympathy and laughter. His eyes were blue once more. “Feel better?”

“Some,” Arthur said, tempted to return the smile. When he did not, Merlin’s face fell.

“It wasn’t enough.”

Arthur spread his hand across his breastplate and closed his eyes. “No.” He beckoned Merlin up. They needed to return to the Kilgharrah. “But- thank you. For the oath. For saving me.”
“You have my words, and my deeds,” Merlin said, pushing himself to his feet. “What more could you possibly want?”

So help him, Arthur’s answer to that question hadn’t changed since the last time Merlin had asked. Despite everything. Because of everything. A single word rested on the tip of his tongue until he swallowed it away, unwilling to make that kind of statement here, now, when so much was still so uncertain.

Accompanied by the distinct feeling that he was doing everything backwards, wrong-wards, and upside-down, Arthur could only laugh at himself. Merlin wobbled unsteadily. Arthur stepped forward to catch him, shaking his head.

Chapter End Notes

End of Arc One.
Chapter 27

The White Hart looked a great deal like the Kilgharrah on the inside. They were both working warships - though Captain Mithian’s ship was a little bit more working at the moment - and the ship beneath his feet was still running with the same thunderous heartbeat of a galley on full alert. Merlin had no idea if there were also small briefing rooms with convenient screen-topped tables somewhere near the Kilgharrah’s bridge, but the White Hart had one. The chairs were bolted to the deck and lacked any sort of padding.

Merlin pulled his feet up into his seat and wrapped his arms around his legs, trying to stifle a yawn. From down the table, Arthur shot him a frown, but Merlin just let his forehead hit his knees. He was drained. Whatever he’d done while making his oath to Arthur had hollowed him out. He would have sworn then that he’d had nothing left to give, no magic capable of a binding oath, but when he’d said the words they’d ripped a spell from him. It had been electric and distressingly final.

Now, he couldn’t even feel the ship beneath him. When the barrier spell had been keeping his magic in line, he’d still been able to sense magic via touch, but now he couldn’t tell if the White Hart had a ghost and he wasn’t able to speak with her, or if the ship was like the Villain’s Smile and living-but-not-sentient. He had asked the ship - surreptitiously, of course - but if the ship was capable of answering, he couldn’t hear her.

His attempt to do a teeny bit of a magic to clean his father’s sword properly when Arthur had handed it back had been met with an echoing silence where his magic should have been. He had tried several times with increasing levels of uncertainty by the time Mithian’s escorts had shown up to rescue them from the Villain’s Smile.

He wanted to curl up somewhere far from people, sleep for a week, and worry about the lack later. Instead, Arthur had dragged him into a meeting with Mithian, her first officer - an older woman who wore a great many scars on her face - and Leon. They all settled in their chairs, the table before them turning black and lighting with a star-map of their immediate vicinity. Small red dots representing the remaining live Glatissant flickered on as a group, then out one by one.

Leon looked uncomfortable. He sat between Merlin and Arthur, and he kept throwing glances as if Merlin would leap from his chair and start chewing on the furniture. Merlin contemplated sticking his tongue out, or baring his teeth and growling, but that probably wouldn’t win him any points. At any
rate, it wasn’t an ‘I know’ look, but more of an ‘I’m uncertain of what you did for my prince to land you in that chair with this company’ look. It was a very eloquent look.

Moving his legs called Mithian’s attention to him.

She took in Merlin’s dirty, ripped uniform and bloody scratches and said, “Are we doing this all official-like and matching our delegations? Do I need to bring in one of my wounded, untended, and obviously exhausted combatants to sit with us?”

“No.” Arthur chewed on his thumbnail. Her criticism sailed right past him. His eyes were on Merlin, but he wasn’t seeing him. The table below them flickered and flashed with information that only Leon was paying attention to. “No, that won’t be necessary. The less of this discussion is official, the better I think it will be.”

Mithian was forced to be blunt. “Then what is he doing here?”

“Who- Merlin?” Arthur sounded so surprised that Merlin thumped his head against his knees. Oath or no, Merlin was ready to question Arthur himself. He already felt awkward in the company of four people who outranked him so ridiculously and he was pretty sure he smelled just awful. He didn’t want to have his injuries tended until those worse hurt had been looked at, didn’t want anyone touching him while he retained the memory of the Glatissant burrowing through his skin, but a couple of his deep scratches were still seeping. He had no business being here at all. He was nobody, really, not counting ‘warlock’ (and he wasn’t much of a warlock at the moment), but unless Arthur was willing to tell Mithian that, her question was entirely reasonable.

Arthur gestured vaguely. “For the Ealdorians. He’s their representative.”

“Is that so?”

“His mother’s their interim leader until we can get to Camelot and figure out how to integrate them.”

“That’s very nice.”

Arthur gave Mithian a sour look. “Can we just get on with things?”

Mithian held up her hands in surrender, giving Merlin another odd look. She shook her head at Arthur. “Far be it from me to question you, your highness.”

Ignoring her, Arthur said, “This was a targeted attack, but not on the Kilgharrah. The three Glatissant devourers accompanying Kanen’s ship were part of a split swarm that originally attacked the Ealdor on its way to rendezvous with the Essetir.”

“We have confirmation of the swarm’s makeup. The sibling ships share all of the genetic markers required, if their colours didn’t make it obvious,” Leon added, tapping the tabletop for the information. Without the power to spare for a three-dimensional projection, flattened images of the Glatissant ships and their markings sprawled across the horizontal screen. “We sent across our files, if you wanted to see.”

“No such thing as half a swarm’ just never gets any less true, does it? I’ll go over it later.” Mithian leaned back in her chair and shared a look with her first officer. “The Ealdor was going back for oaths and trade, correct?”

“As far as I know,” Arthur said. Merlin nodded in confirmation.

Mithian rubbed her mouth. “Odd, that, because we’re getting awfully close to planetfall. The recall
All three men sat straighter in their chairs. Planetfall. Merlin had known academically that it would happen in his lifetime, that the colonists would finally be able to occupy Albion as their ancestors had dreamt so long ago, but if the recall was already starting…

“We’re that close?” Arthur asked.

“The furthest ships have already been summoned. The Ealdor should have been one of them, if Lot was doing his job at all. The last stage is ready sooner than anyone expected.” Mithian frowned. “Did your father not say anything?”

Arthur was silent for a long moment. “Nothing.”

“Arthur-” Mithian began.

“The point is that the occupants of the Ealdor were the target, not the ship, not even my ship. It was blind, stupid luck that the Kilgharrah came to their rescue. It could have been you, or anyone else who followed their mayday.”

Mithian accepted the deflection. “Some luck. Who did you lose?”

“None of the Ealdorians.” A fleeting smile crossed his face as he indicated Merlin, but then he sobered. “A handful of mechanics. Several Knights. All good men and women. A chunk of my ship. I did not escape unscathed.”

“Any idea what Kanen wanted?”

Merlin tensed, squeezing his legs to his chest.

“No,” Arthur lied. “The entire population of the Ealdor minus a handful were on my ship. Whatever they wanted could be among them and I would never know.”

“Or maybe the entire population was the target. Glatissant don’t leave survivors, and to set up a rendezvous without letting them know about the recall- that’s heinous,” Mithian said. “I-” she started, then hesitated for long enough to draw all eyes to her. “I don’t know how to put this delicately.”

“So don’t.” Arthur said. “It’s just you, me, our first officers, and Merlin. Nothing will leave this room without your say-so.”

“Fine.” Mithian let out her breath. “Did you lose anyone important?”

Sure he had not heard her correctly, Merlin looked to each of the four officers to confirm. He found grim eyes and thinned lips, and he shifted, ready to object.

Arthur spoke first. “You mean anyone who might cause a Fleet- or Kingdom-wide incident should their deaths be reported? And by a magic-sourced threat, no less?” he said, hand nearest to Merlin twitching in his direction.

Having Leon sit between them had maybe been a mistake. Merlin was magicless, exhausted, and rather not okay with having Mithian dismiss deaths with a callous ‘anyone important?’ He wanted to lean against Arthur for the reassuring heat of his mods, if nothing else. He wasn’t cold in his ruined uniform, not with the White Hart exerting herself, but Merlin was still half-convinced that the Glatissant’s bite had landed. The creeping sensation of insects skittering up his sides made him shiver.
“Yes, yes, fine,” Mithian agreed with a dismissive gesture, “Did you?”

Arthur’s tone was cold. “No. None of my fallen were titled or influential, or were the children of either.”

“I had to ask.” Mithian waved at her first officer. “Enid. Tell them.”

The other woman was much older than Mithian and carried herself like career military. Her greying hair was tucked into a small cap that perched on the crown of her head, stuck through with half a dozen long, slender needles. When she spoke, her voice was sweet and firm. “I will make this brief,” she said, commanding their attention, her speech accompanied by the movement of her brown, expressive hands. “We intercepted a datasquirt. Scrambled origin. The content, however, touches on both Kanen and Camelot.

“The encryption was- not entirely breakable. There was a handful of ‘for your eyes only’-“ she tipped her head at both Arthur and Mithian as the only ones in the room with ocular implants, “-and several small sections that were, if I were to guess, spelled. Since even spell-based encryption merely requires a key - and the White Hart has in no way developed cantrips to discover those keys - we were able to recover fragments. They point to Morgause’s involvement.”

“We knew Morgause was involved. The presence of sorcery makes that obvious,” Arthur said, unimpressed.

Mithian waved her first officer quiet at Arthur’s words and looked pointedly at Enid, Leon, and Merlin in turn.

“I trust my men,” Arthur said.

“Fine. And I trust Enid. Just- you know what? Nevermind. Yes,” she said, “We knew Morgause was involved with Kanen. The sorcerous cloak he was using was proof enough of that. It’s the mention of Camelot that has me worried. Enid?”

Enid picked up where Mithian had left off. “Camelot was mentioned in three places. The first referenced your imminent return. Innocuous enough on its own.”

Arthur frowned.

“The second was a reference to Elena. Specifically, Elena in context as heir of the Gawant, daughter of Godwyn, next in line to be Captain and Queen, however valuable Captaincy will be after planetfall. The reference was sinister,” Enid said, looking somber. “It suggested that Godwyn’s loyalties would shift away from Camelot and King Uther should a particular unnamed plot come to fruition.”

Arthur held up his hand to forestall Enid. Enid looked to Mithian.

“You-” Mithian said, exasperated, “-are flying a ship full of hostages. The fuck did you think would happen?”

“I have only the best of the best for my crew,” Arthur said, clipped. His discontent came through loud and clear. For the second time, Merlin wondered at his hearing and really, really questioned his inclusion in their discussion. He kept his head down on his knees and tried not to call attention to himself.

Mithian was unimpressed. “You didn’t question that your ‘best’ came from every Kingdom in spite of convention. You didn’t question that your ‘best’ had connections, influence, titles, and generally
came from backgrounds rooted in the higher ranks of every ship out there. If by ‘best’ you mean–"

“Don’t, Mith.”

“Nothing leaves this room. I can say whatever I want. Isn’t that what you said?”

“I’ve already heard this from you.”

“But it didn’t fucking sink in, did it?”

Arthur remained silent.

Mithian slammed her fist on the table, making Merlin jump, and her oculars glowed amber. “Arthur.”

“It sunk in,” Arthur said quietly. “There is no way for me to win this, Mithian. If I stay on the fringe, father can use my crew as leverage like he has for years. If I return to Camelot, I’m taking them to where they can be targeted and used against their families and Kingdoms. Where are they safer? Do I brave politics and sorcery or aliens and anomalies? Even if I go back and… change things, it will still take time, and now that the recall has started, it’s time I don’t have. So, tell me, what would you rather me do? At this point I’m open to any suggestion that has all the words in an intelligible order.”

“I want you to listen to me, because there’s something wrong on the Camelot,” Mithian said. At her side, Enid nodded slowly, adding her agreement if not her voice. “Nothing overtly sorcerous. Your father has acted within character, but- your uncle died. Tristan de Bois. He’s dead. Agravaine was called in to be Uther’s right hand.”

Arthur’s jaw tightened, but he didn’t say anything.

“He didn’t tell you anything while you were on the fringe, did he?” Mithian sounded both sympathetic and unsurprised. “You’ve a new uncle doing the same job as the old uncle, surprise! He’s good, titled Communications rather than Quartermaster, but- you were slated to return to the Camelot before Agravaine was called in. I don’t know who was in charge of sending you back out, but you were supposed to be home nearly a year ago.”

“Agravaine would have been the only logical choice to replace Tristan, you know that,” Arthur said. “Both of them being de Bois is incidental.”

“That they hate you and everything you stand for is just a minor detail, then?” Mithian asked.

“Common knowledge.”

Mithian pursed her lips and flared her nostrils, then leaned over the tabletop, one hand coming down on a spinning asteroid. There was momentary movement, a splash of statistics. She started speaking with low intensity. “Then how about this? The Camelot has not had a successful repair since two months after you left for the fringe. Not one. Planetfall was accelerated across all the Kingdoms, but it originated with Camelot. Your father has also started making deals with other Kingdoms - and Demesnes, even - and trading entire populations from the Nemeth. From the Gawant. From the Mercia. Lot hasn’t been asked, and Annis won’t come to the table. These Ealdorians? Not the first taken in. Not all the ships supply peacetime personnel, either. Camelot feels occupied again, but the corridors echo with sounds that imply Uther is preparing to bloody someone’s nose.”

The room was silent for a beat. Leon spoke up. “We can’t afford a war if the recall has already started.”

Mithian tipped her chin, acknowledging his point. “Camelot shows every sign of outfitting soldiers.”
“Is the Nemeth?” Arthur asked, steepling his fingers. “What are we trading your father for these populations? And if we’re recruiting from the entire fleet and the fleet is providing—”

Merlin spoke before he considered how much attention he would garner. “Then who are we fighting?” he asked. It was half a whisper, but every head turned to him. He ducked his face into his knees.

Arthur rescued Merlin from having to explain himself, speaking loudly into the pensive quiet. “That’s the question, isn’t it?” The ship gurgled around them, the conduits in the walls suffering Glatissant-induced airbubbles working their way out. The tabletop showed the Spelandor system nearly clear of alien stragglers. Most of the moving points were now either asteroid or destrier, and the squadrons were clustered close to the White Hart, docking. Merlin picked out the names ‘Gwaine’ and ‘Elena’ and ‘Derian’.

“You know better than all of us,” Mithian said when no one appeared inclined to answer Arthur’s question. “And all of our options for enemy are various flavors of bad.”

“This is my father we’re speaking of.”

The flat tone Arthur used meant something more to Mithian than it did to Merlin.

“Precisely,” Mithian said. “We’re going to have an entire planet to populate soon.”

“Even if he’s mustering… no. He wouldn’t. He knows as well as I do that too many valuable genetic lines ended during the last Purge.”

Mithian snorted. “Sorcerous lines. Lines steeped in madness. The voidlost and the power hungry. Genetic garbage. A line that, by definition, is riddled with birth defects, if you count sorcery an undesirable mutation. He’d finish what he’d started if he had the resources or the support.”

“He’s more practical than that.”

“Have you ever asked him and been treated to his views?”

“He’ll do what’s best for Albion.”

“Arthur, darling, you’re the only one in this room who believes that.”

That Arthur did not look for opinions after her statement told Merlin a great deal. Arthur just let out his breath and told Mithian, “You are going to claim the Villain’s Smile as your kill and help me repair so I can return to Camelot with only Glatissant wounds. No sorcery, only aliens. Father doesn’t need more ammunition. Leon’s right. We can’t afford a war. The Purge left our population in tatters.”

“That- I can do that,” Mithian mused. “My reports will mention Kanen. Yours Glatissant. People can make their own assumptions.”

“Precisely,” Arthur said. Merlin looked up to find Arthur’s eyes on him for no reason that he could discern. He shifted in his seat, uncertain. Peeling his gaze away, Arthur said, “And you’re going to tell me the third thing.”

Enid didn’t wait for Mithian’s signal. “Several deaths aboard both Camelot- and Mercia-beholden ships have been attributed to Morgause’s retaliations for sorcerer Muriden. Magic was involved in all cases, and Morgause has publicly stated more than once that Uther will pay in blood for the death of who she says was supposed to be her, and I quote, ‘Ambassador to Camelot.’ Believe what you will
after the death toll from that series of fires aboard the Mercia, but that’s her issued statement. It looks like she’s trying to spin it that Muriden was a good-faith attempt to get Uther to treat with her, only for the King to spurn the gesture and chase the man down. Since then, she’s been matching violence for violence.” Enid paused. “That’s not the third thing, though. The third thing is that Morgana was linked with Morgause’s current actions.”

Where Arthur had kept his temper under control while speaking treason, of plotting against his father and worrying over his crew, Enid’s pronouncement broke his control. He swung his chair away from the table and was on his feet in an instant, pacing to the far edge of the room - which wasn’t particularly far. When he got there, he slammed his fist into the wall, the metal of his knuckles bruising the mottled flesh. He left divots that leaked ichor, adding a chemical scent to an already tense atmosphere.

Merlin was on his feet, one hand on the back of his chair, when he stopped. No one else had moved.

“Any more damage and you owe me for repairs,” Mithian told him mildly.

Without facing the rest of them, Arthur straightened and pulled his shoulders back. He put his human hand on the wall atop the damage and sighed. He spoke to the wall. “Morgana’s loyal to Camelot.”

“Would you stake your life on that?” Mithian asked, putting her elbows on the table. Where each touched, the starfield flared. The small smile she wore worried Merlin as she pointed first at Leon and then at him. “Would you stake Leon’s life? Or Merlin’s?” She spaced each word with calculated care, so that both she and Merlin witnessed Arthur’s flinch at the latter name. Mithian nodded, but kept her conclusions to herself.

Arthur executed a precise military turn and stamped back to his chair, throwing himself into it with enough force that the bolts attaching it to the floor shrieked. “Thank you for the warning.”

Trying to stay out of the centre of attention, Merlin eased himself back into his seat and put his forehead on the tabletop. Flickering lights fled across the tabletop when his skin touched the surface, a decent approximation of the headache he was developing. None of the others appeared inclined to pursue the topic of Morgana. Merlin had questions that burned on the tip of his tongue he didn’t feel up to asking.

It was Enid who changed the subject. “Knight Elyan reported you wounded.”


“I didn’t ask.” Mithian frowned at him. “But you didn’t mention.”

“Your medics have better things to do than tend me.”

Merlin, head still down, couldn’t contradict Arthur’s self-assessment without revealing the bite, even though he needed attention as much as Merlin did. More than finding him treatment for scratches and bruises, however, Merlin wanted to sit at Arthur’s side and leave his hand on his pulse. He needed to convince himself that he hadn’t made a mistake, that Arthur wasn’t living on borrowed time. Some part of him did not believe he had averted the bite and was just waiting for Arthur to collapse.

There was polite tap on the door and Mithian called, ‘come in’.

Merlin sat up as Gwaine came in, some of his I-am-out-of-place worries alleviated by the friendly face. Gwaine greeted them all with a pilot’s salute and, without fanfare, dropped a bag in the centre of the table with a jangling thump. He took up a position behind Merlin’s chair, resting his hand on the back. His fingers brushed Merlin’s shoulder and Merlin leaned back into the contact, glad for the
Shooting Gwaine a disgruntled look, Arthur emptied the bag upon the tabletop. A great many little silver rings rang across the surface. So did a slender ivory cylinder inscribed with symbols, a long-stemmed piercing stud capped with a black jewel, and an iron medallion that did not so much ring as clonk against the plastic and keratin of the table.

“You found him?” Merlin asked quietly enough that the others remained focused on the contents of the bag.

Gwaine shifted his hand to Merlin’s shoulder and squeezed. “We found something. Didn’t look human anymore, but it was definitely dead.”

Rubbing at his face, Merlin nodded, relieved.

“Elena is where?” Leon asked as Arthur poked at the rings.

Gwaine put his hand back on the chair when Arthur looked up to hear his answer and his expression darkened to a glower. The faint huff of amusement Gwaine gave was for Merlin’s ears only, and when he spoke he only sounded exhausted. “Currently coordinating with Captain Mithian’s pilots, begging the lady’s pardon.” There was a rustle as Gwaine saluted again.

Waving him off, Mithian nudged at the iron medallion with her knuckle. “What are these?”

“Kanen was wearing them when he was spaced,” Arthur said, preempting any explanation that Gwaine might have. Gwaine took the hint and remained silent. “The rings would glow and release a great deal of electrical energy. The others- I don’t know.”

Enid lifted one of the rings and held it up to the light. “They’re inscribed with a great many pre-Purge runes. This one has several that look similar to the thunderstorm warning symbology that the biospheres used to use before either of you were born.”

“Merlin.” Arthur flicked his fingers in Merlin’s direction. Merlin had a moment to panic, but Arthur merely said, “The Purge’s influence on the fringe was not as great as its influence on Albion space. Recognise anything from the Ealdor? Enid? Anything more pre-Purge?”

Merlin tried to calm his sudden nerves and offered Enid a smile before collecting one of the rings and the ivory rod. He had no magic to probe things, no knowledge of the sorts of runes that might hold power in an object.

He stared at the rod for a good thirty seconds with Gwaine peering over his shoulder, trying not to hyperventilate. These were magic things, patently magic things, and he couldn’t feel them. His senses remained deadened, numb to even the faint glow of silver light that shone from the ring that Enid put on her thumb.

“You okay?” Gwaine asked, leaning down. “Have they let you rest?”

“Not yet.” Merlin closed his eyes and set the ivory rod carefully on the tabletop.

“Do you need me to get you out of here?”

Merlin sought Arthur, who was watching him speak with Gwaine. Their eyes met. “No- I can…” He held the ring up to the light and examined the runes that marched around the outer surface. “Actually - some of these are familiar.”
His mind engaged as he studied the ring and each of the other objects in turn. Some of his fatigue fell away as his curiosity grew. The others receded into his periphery. He didn’t need magic to know something of each item, because these runes had been scattered across the Ealdor. He’d grown up surrounded by them, though no one had ever admitted to him what they might mean.

Laying the rod, the medallion, the stud, and one of the rings out in front of him all in a line, he looked up at the others to find them watching him curiously. “Ah-?” Merlin said, suddenly shy. “They’re descriptive. I don’t know if that’s what makes them useful to someone like Kanen, but most of these I’ve seen before. The Ealdor was an old ship.”

Enid made a small noise of agreement. “Ancient ship. Most of demesnes that make their way out on the fringe are first or second generation. They’re many hundreds of years old, back from Bruta’s time. Ships steeped in magic.”

Arthur and Mithian exchanged looks.

“This one-” Merlin held up the rod, “Has the symbols that I usually saw on our combustibles. Warnings and the like. ‘Careful, this one burns’ and ‘Warning, unshielded laser contained within.’ That’s what I was told, at least.” For all he knew, the runes kept things from exploding. Which would explain a great deal about why the Ealdor hadn’t scrubbed the runes when the Purge came through. “The ring is similar. Enid said ‘thunderstorm warning’. They were all over the electrical systems connected to the engines. Don’t know what they did, but part of my training was learning to recognise which symbols went with which sort of wire or bundle. This one’s ‘brown bundle with orange bits’. Not sure what it says, but that’s what I always associated it with.”

“Fire. Electricity- well, we knew electricity,” Arthur said. “The others?”

Merlin was suddenly very aware that the others were Kingdom-bred. Rather than his status as warlock, being fringe-bred was enough to justify his presence. That and Gwaine standing next to him and bobbing his head as if he had any idea what Merlin was talking about gave him an odd sort of confidence.

“The stud is- it doesn’t have a lot of symbols I recognise, just the one we had outside the creche. ‘Silence.’ And this thing-” He tapped the ugly lump of iron with it’s ragged runes. “I don’t understand a lot on this one, either, but there’s several directional runes, like the ones we had at corridor junctions, and we used to have an early-warning alarm with this symbol: ‘alien’. It might be more specific, but I can’t tell you. And this big one in the middle…”

He paused and his enthusiasm dimmed. He rather wished he didn’t know the last one. “This one’s means ‘Serve’. As a command.”

“So, not a sorcerer,” Arthur said, almost to himself. The hairs on Merlin’s arms stood up, but he kept his eyes on the objects. When the rest of them (sans Merlin) looked at Arthur in askance, he shrugged. “The ‘sorcerer’ you were chasing is right here on this table. Kanen was a man. A bandit, an oathbreaker, and a miserable excuse for human by the end, but as mundane as you or I.”

“But a man with backing.” Mithian picked up a ring and threw it hard at the wall. It bounced off with a clink and rolled beneath the table. “Magical backing. Fuck.”

“Magical backing with a focus on the occupants of the Ealdor, which did not get recalled, but instead ambushed by eat-all-the-traces aliens,” Arthur said. He laughed without much humour, lifting the stud and spinning it between his fingers so that the jewel caught the light. “Where’d this come from, Gwaine?”
Gwaine pointed into his mouth. “Tongue.”

“Anyone could use them,” Leon said. He rolled his tongue mod noisily across his teeth and caught one of the rings, slipping it onto his pinky to watch it glow. Still nothing on Merlin’s senses, but the faint light had Gwaine swearing behind him.

“Lock them away,” Arthur told him, standing. “Mithian- we’re coordinating reports.”

“Bossy,” Mithian said, overbright, her tone at odds with her expression. She looked ill at ease with the objects before her, most especially with the blue glow of the ring on Leon’s finger. Enid, however, looked speculative. “But for once, you’re right. Every detail needs to match.”

Rubbing at his forehead with one hand, his fingers clicking against the mods across his brow, Arthur let out his breath. His eyes began to glow with faint blue and he made a tossing gesture at Mithian as he leaned over the table. Her eyes, in turn, lit with a dull amber that matched the dark brown of her irises. They began to speak in half-sentences, finishing thoughts out-loud, nodding halfway through words and cutting off, speaking staccato nonsense that earned rapid, echoed agreement from each of them. It sounded like another language, one that Merlin could almost understand if only he were not so tired.

With Arthur occupied and both first officers busy gathering the items that had caused Kanen to become such a threat, Gwaine crouched down besides Merlin’s chair and flicked at the collar of his borrowed uniform.

“I don’t think Perce’s getting that back,” Gwaine said. “Or we can wash it, slide it back into his kit, and blame the laundry.”

As intended, Merlin smiled. “You can tell him I didn’t mean it.”

“He might only threaten you a little,” Gwaine said, and Merlin couldn’t tell whether or not he was teasing. His eyes dropped to Merlin’s shoulders and the criss-crossing gouges there. He plucked the collar away from Merlin’s throat and observed, “You need someone to see to those.”

Even though Gwaine had pitched his voice deliberately neutral, Merlin felt himself grow defensive. “Haven’t had a chance.”

“Lance and Elyan were sent to the infirmary the moment they set foot on the White Hart and you’re worse off than either of them. They’re Knights. Wearing armour. You have Percy’s pyjamas. I don’t think that’s entirely fair.”

Merlin blinked several times. “How do you even know that?”

“That he sleeps in uniform?”

“That the others went to see the medics.”

“Ah, that,” Gwaine nodded, trying to look wise. “Unlike some, I talk to people.”

“I saw you land, when did you have time?” Merlin poked at the tabletop, which flared beneath his finger. “Not five minutes ago.”

“Because they tried to convince me to go to the infirmary when I landed. Did Arthur just glare them away from you?”

The implied criticism of Arthur made Merlin more truthful than he would be otherwise. “I wouldn’t
“let them touch me.”

“Merlin.”

“I couldn’t, I can’t,” Merlin said. “I just can’t.”

“You’re going to scar.” Gwaine brought a finger close to Merlin’s collarbone. Merlin couldn’t help it, he twitched away in anticipation of a touch too much like tiny legs on his skin for comfort.

Merlin laughed to cover his embarrassment, his hand going to his chest. “Adding to the collection.”

“Infection. You’ll lose your whole shoulder.”

“Now you’re just being ridiculous.”

“At least see Gaius?”

“I-” Merlin took a gulp of air. “I’ll see Gaius.”

Gwaine rested an elbow on the arm of the chair and put his chin on his fist. “Is it very bad?” He didn’t mean the visible injuries.

“You were out there as much as I was, can I ask you the same?”

Not looking in the least put out by Merlin’s response, Gwaine nodded easily. “It was bad. But I know bad. I also don’t get down in the blood and the guts with nothing but a sword to keep me company. Give me a destrier kitted out with lasers and missiles, where things I shoot pop and float off. You’re a civilian.”

“Fringe.” Merlin felt compelled to correct him. “I’m fringe. We’re tougher.”

“You’re adorable and too brave for your own good, that’s what you are,” Gwaine said, tone solemn but eyes sparkling with amusement. “Can I point out, though, that just because you’re wearing a Knight’s uniform and are accompanied by three Knights, that you yourself are still kind of squishy? That whole ‘no armour’ thing?”

“I held my own.”

Gwaine snorted. “You’re not bleeding out, I’ll give you that.”

“I don’t need to be coddled just because I’m not a Knight,” Merlin objected. “I’m not a puppy, either.”

“But I adopted you. How do you explain that?” Gwaine teased, then his eyes slid from Merlin’s face to a point well above his head.

Rocking back on his heels, Gwaine’s entire body language changed from ‘teasingly overprotective’ to very nearly respectful. A hand curled around the back of Merlin’s neck.

The surprise touch made him jump, and for a moment, he was swamped with the crawling sensation that made Merlin rather want to peel his skin off to make go away. When the hand moved no further, did nothing more than rest, his nervous reflex ease. He didn’t shake the hand off, not needing to turn around to know it was Arthur. The residual skin-crawly feeling aside, he wanted Arthur within touching distance. As long as Arthur was still functioning, he’d still be putting off heat; the warmth of Arthur’s hand soothed Merlin’s disbelief.
Gwaine flipped his hair out of his eyes and smiled, standing. He didn’t salute, but his stance was a
great deal closer to parade rest than Merlin would have guessed he could get.

“You will return to Elena,” Arthur said, stroking the side of Merlin’s neck with his thumb. Merlin
hugged himself, suppressing shivers.

Gwaine looked from Arthur to Merlin and back. He dipped his head in Arthur’s direction. “Captain.
Non-disclosure?”

“She needs to know. Tell her she gets to decide whether the information goes further.”

“My Prince.” Gwaine dipped his head again. Arthur’s fingers tightened perceptibly at Gwaine’s
words. There was a moment of tension between the two and then - at some signal that Merlin missed
or didn’t know how to read - it broke. Arthur relaxed. His hand slid to the curve of Merlin’s shoulder
and he leaned one leg against the back of the chair.

This time when Arthur spoke, he sounded a great deal friendlier. “Get out of here. Take first sleep
shift.”

“Aye, aye.” Gwaine tossed off a casual salute to both Arthur and Merlin in turn before backing away
and slapping the activation for the door.

Leon approached with the refilled sack and hefted it. “Everything’s ready.”

That was the signal for leaving. Mithian and Enid stood next to the rent Arthur had made in the wall,
disagreeing in low voices. Arthur stepped away and, dragging himself from his chair, Merlin stood to
follow. As they headed toward the portal, he fell back from Arthur just enough for Mithian to catch
his sleeve.

“I don’t let him get away with his shit,” she said without preamble, her eyes on Arthur when she
spoke. “Gwaine threw their pissing match, which means he thinks Arthur’s serious about getting
involved with you. If he does, make him work for it. He’s an entitled arsehole who thinks he’s
always right. He’s not. You let him know.”

It was all Merlin could do to keep from laughing in her face. He hiccupped - and it was a proper
despairing hiccup - and did not laugh, but it was a near thing. “I think you might have gotten the
wrong idea.”

“He doesn’t bring just anyone into his confidences.” Mithian’s breath tickled his ear. “And he
doesn’t trust easily.”

Even though she had misconstrued the reason why Merlin was here in the first place, through no
fault of her own, Merlin could hardly disagree with her. “No, he doesn’t.”

“Don’t hurt him,” she said and it was a warning though she had a smile on her face. “But also don’t
let him hurt you.”

There must be something about him that made him a magnet for confusing relationship advice from
near-strangers. It had never happened before, granted, but then again he’d never been around
someone like Arthur before. The men and women surrounding the man were the most interfering and
solicitous people he’d ever had the dubious pleasure of becoming involved with, and he was friends
with Will.

Still, he let out his breath and nodded. “I’ll try not. Either of them.”
Arthur stopped in the corridor and turned to wait for him and Leon. When he saw Mithian and Merlin with their heads together, he made a show of folding his arms and tapping his toe.

“This is hilarious. He so rarely gets jealous,” Mithian whispered, lifting a hand and wiggling her fingers in a mocking wave. “He’s still trying to figure out how you work, I think, and where he can stake his territory. Once he knows where he stands with you, he won’t get jealous, but until then—this is way too funny.”

Merlin summoned a smile that he didn’t quite feel. “You don’t really think he’s jealous.”

“Just look at him.” Mithian linked her arm with Merlin. “He doesn’t know what to do. Morgana is going to die laughing when she sees you two.”

From where Merlin was standing, Arthur looked more worried for Mithian than jealous of her attention. Their oath was too new, had yet to be tested, and there was no way for Arthur to know that Merlin was a wobbly shell of a warlock, no more danger to Mithian than a wet kitten. To be honest, Merlin was mostly surprised that Arthur hadn’t tucked him away in a corner for safekeeping, separating him from both his and Mithian’s crew entirely, prisoner in all but name now that he was a confirmed ‘sorcerer’.

Instead, Merlin was here in the presence of others. And not just any others, but captains and heirs and their first officers, outranked only by the rulers of the fleet.

“He looks hungry to me,” Merlin said.

Mithian laughed and released him. “Go get fed and don’t forget to tell him he’s a prat when he needs to hear it.”

A genuine smile snuck onto Merlin’s face. “I don’t think that will be a problem.”
Chapter 28

The infirmary on the Kilgharrah was overfull and when Merlin entered, Gaius took one look at him and directed him toward the wall to wait. He looked haggard, his wispy hair standing upright, streaked with oil or blood or both, and he moved gingerly between occupied beds and the dozens of pallets scattered wherever there was room.

Two Knights and a couple of Ealdorian medics also moved among the injured, setting bones and tending burns. There were more mechanics uniforms than Merlin had feared and his stomach flopped when he recognised Sefa’s face within the chaos. She was sitting up when he spotted her, and after one of the tending Knights moved out of the way he could see that she wasn’t the patient. All of her focus was on another of the mechanics lying on the pallet at her side, their hands clasped until her knuckles went white.

Merlin put his back to the wall and slid down into a crouch. Head in hands, he tried not to look any closer at the injured. He couldn’t escape the raised voices and sounds of pain, but he also couldn’t stand to look around and see the deep scratches that looked so much like his. If he looked, he would remember that Glatissant fought with their teeth, too, and that no one who had been bitten would be in here now.

The spectre of Sefa’s face prodded at him to get up, to throw himself into helping, to carry and fetch and comfort. He had the practice to stand ready with a needlespray or a water packet, but it was like his brain had forgotten how to move his legs. The echo of freezing horror coiled up his spine.

He didn’t know how long he stayed crouched, his eyes on the floor, wondering if the Kilgharrah was trying to speak to him. Their connection was gone, his bare soles pressed against the fleshy deck with none of the presence beneath coming to greet him. He was sure Lucan and his cohort of mechanics and engineers were repairing what they could already, but the last time Kilgharrah had spoken to him he’d been snarling and in pain.

Like the Ealdor had at the end.

The chill fear of his current magicless state was nothing next to the possibility that the ghost might have not survived the fight. His chest ached and the skin around his scars tingled. The Kilgharrah’s sensory overload still lingered. The claustrophobia of being trapped within the barrier spell had returned with his return to the infirmary, but now it was accompanied by moments where he felt flayed open, his muscles and veins exposed to the open air.

A hand tapped him on the top of his head and he startled, twitching back to bang his elbow hard against the bulkhead. Rubbing the new bruise, he looked up to see a uniformed Lance frowning down at him.
“You didn’t go see Mithian’s people.”

“No.”

Lance seated himself on the deck, folding his legs in front of him, and gestured for Merlin to sit as well. Opening the pack hanging from his shoulder, Lance pulled out the supplies he needed to treat Merlin’s scratches. “Should have,” Lance said, leaning forward to daub at one of the deeper gouges with an antiseptic-seeped cloth.

Twitching away, Merlin covered the scratch with his hand. He tried to get his reaction to being touched under control. “Don’t you get rest?”

“Shift’s not over,” Lance said, waiting until Merlin took his breaths and uncovered the scratch. “The rotation’s in shambles, but a good chunk of the crew is asleep. The rest of us have work to do.”

“I can help.”

There was a sharp noise a couple of inches in front of his face and Merlin focused to find Lance snapping his fingers to get Merlin’s attention. Once Lance was sure he had it, he said, “We’re sitting down.”

Merlin nodded slowly. “Yes?”

“Because you were about to fall over. You were injured not a week ago, alright? Stamina is the last to come back.”

He had forgotten. Merlin rubbed at his scars through his grubby uniform. It felt like far, far longer than week since he’d gotten them. His nightmares had made sure of that. Maybe Lance was right. His body could very well give out if he pushed himself much further.

Lance held up the antiseptic cloth again. “Can I touch you?”

It took Merlin longer than he thought it would to say yes. He hugged himself, running his hands over the lingering spots where the Kilgharrah had mapped his hull breaches to Merlin’s skin, willing the touch to convince his brain that he still had flesh there. The urge to sleep crept up on him as he stared hard at the cloth and tried to remember what Lance had asked.

He couldn’t sleep anyways. His bed was occupied. “Yes. Go ahead.”

With slow, deliberate movements, Lance cleaned Merlin’s scratches, making sure Merlin was paying attention when he started on a new area. One of the gouges on Merlin’s shoulder needed a couple of stitches and the needlespray Lance used to administer local anaesthetic was cold against his skin. Neither of them tried to speak until the Lance tied off the last stitch and sat back.

“I’m glad you’re still with us,” Lance said, keeping his voice low. His words were nearly drowned out by the chaos of the rest of the infirmary. “And- I’m glad you’re on our side. Thank you.”

Merlin closed his eyes and let his head thump back against the wall. “He almost killed me.”

“I shouldn’t have left you alone with him,” Lance said, frustration in his voice. Merlin could hear him packing up his medical kit. From the sound, he was using rather more force than necessary.

“Didn’t-” Merlin cracked one eye open. “Didn’t you used to sleep with him?”

Lance stopped packing and sighed. “That’s why I left you alone with him. I’m sorry.”
“You couldn’t very well disobey him. Insubordination. Treason. Something.”

“I very well could when someone who has done no true wrong is in danger,” Lance said seriously. “If I had misjudged him, it would not have been me who suffered. What-” Lance halted. Merlin could barely hear him when he continued. “What happened?”

The oath, Merlin found, was not something he wanted to share. “We came to an understanding.”

Lance breathed a chuckle. “So it seems. Do you need my help?”

He just wanted to sleep and deal with Arthur later. Merlin shook his head at the same time that a feminine voice cut through the hubbub calling, “Lance!”

On his feet in an instant, Lance turned just in time for Gwen throw herself into his arms and slam him back against the wall. It didn’t seem to matter that they were on duty. She kissed him hard for long enough that they gained an audience that applauded when she dropped back on her heels and pulled away. Merlin was pretty sure someone whistled. The atmosphere in the infirmary relaxed enough for even Merlin to notice.

Lance stood with one hand firmly on Gwen’s shoulder. They were doing little more than looking at each other, communicating without words. Gwen gave Lance a tight smile and pushed the wisps of hair that had escaped from her bun back behind her ears. Her shoulder blade toolboxes rested open, her ‘wings’ in full flight. Her tool handles were ragged pinions, streaks of grease and ichor staining her back and uniform where she had replaced them without wiping them off.

After one final nod at Lance, Gwen turned her attention to Merlin, heedless or oblivious to the faces still turned in their direction. She said, “You’re sleeping in our bed.”

“I am?”

“Yes, you are.” She turned and beckoned Will forward.

It was a measure of how loopy Merlin was that he hadn’t noticed Will standing behind her. His slumped shoulders made him look less like Will, though, as did the dark circles beneath his eyes and the ugly cut across his temple. It, too, had been cleaned and stitched and while Will was standing square and wore his familiar smirk, he was too pale.

Merlin staggered to his feet. He’d thought Will safe as one of the Ealdorians. He reached out and caught Will’s arm, reassuring himself of his friend’s reality, too tired to do more than cling and stare at Will’s stitches.

“I’m fine,” Will muttered under his breath.

“You and Will are going to get some sleep, and since you’ve been staying in the infirmary the entire time you’ve been on this ship, Lance and I are volunteering our cabin. So. Go.”

“I’m to mind you,” Will said a little too loudly as he wrapped one arm around Merlin’s shoulders to hold him up. They listed against each other. He muttered, “Also, I’ve been declared unfit for duty.”

Merlin snorted.

Loading them down with changes of clothes, Gwen shooed them out. The sound of the busy infirmary followed them to the corridor, not entirely muffled by the closed portal. Will led the way toward the rear of the ship.
Gwen’s cabin was, Will informed him, in the officer’s corridor. As Chief Cybernetics Engineer and unofficial Counsellor, she ranked her own cabin. It was a matter of crew pride that she shared it with Lance, since they weren’t in any of the official registrars in any Kingdom database. Knowing Will, Merlin wondered how much of that was true.

The cabin door irised opened to reveal a tiny room with a bed just big enough for two. Will and Merlin eyed each other. Will lifted one of Merlin’s arms and sniffed ostentatiously at his tattered sleeve.

When they returned to the room clean and changed from the showers down the hall, Merlin dropped his ruined uniform in the middle of the floor and flopped face down onto the bed.

Will, being Will, poked around Gwen and Lance’s personal possessions and sparse decoration. He exclaimed over a tiny golden trophy (“Camelot’s 1,812th Launchday Celebration, first place three legged race,” he said, “Bloody of course.”), a small drawing of what looked almost like a horse, and a rather squashed looking paper crown in brilliant red.

Merlin tried not to drool on the bed, already drowsing even though Will didn’t seem all that inclined toward slumber. “This is brilliant,” he muttered, interrupting Will when he tried to speculate about the paper crown. Paper. That was almost marvel enough in itself.

“What is?” Will turned from his invasion of privacy and sat down on the corner of the bed with a sigh.

“Mattress,” Merlin said as he sprawled out, taking up as much space as he could. “You lost out. All mine.”

Will laughed. “Shove over, then. I’m supposed to be sleeping, too.”

The playful poke in the side Will gave him startled Merlin badly enough that he twitched into a ball with a yelp.

“What’s wrong?”

Merlin opened his eyes to find Will watching him with concern. He almost didn’t answer. “I can talk to ghosts?” Trying to relax, to take deep breaths, to loosen his muscles even a little, it took him a bit to continue. “I can also feel what they feel, sometimes. The Kilgharrah did that during the battle.”

Will swore.

“My brain’s still not sure what is Will being an arsehole and what’s Glatissant on the hull,” Merlin said, shivering.

“I didn’t know.”

“It’ll go away, hopefully after sleep.” Merlin sat up, then fought with the blankets on the bunk until he could curl into them. Will perched on the edge of the bed, uncertain, until Merlin yanked him off balance and toppled him onto the mattress with him.

Will made himself comfortable, though his expression remained worried. “You sure you’ll be okay?”

“You caught me by surprise, is all. Now hold still, I’m cold.” Merlin shoved his face into Will’s side, curling up against him and resting his cheek on Will’s ribs. Will threw his arm around Merlin’s shoulders and squeezed. They curled together like two puppies. Will’s warmth was reassuringly
“You know,” Will said into the quiet, barely letting Merlin get settled. “We’re going to be on the Camelot.”

The statement seemed like the kind that Merlin could safely ignore. Will liked to ramble when he was trying to fall asleep.

“You know what else used to be on the Camelot?”

Will poked Merlin when he didn’t answer. Merlin begrudgingly cracked an eyelid. “Nope.”

“The Avalon.”

The name made Merlin blink and stir, unwilling to uncurl from Will’s side, but equally as unwilling to let mention of the Avalon go unremarked. “That’s true.”

“I know how much you used to love that ship.”

“Still do.” He eyed Will. “Which you very well know. Is risking me going on and on your way of saying sorry for startling me?”

“I’m just saying I’ll ask around when we get there. Find out things. Maybe solve the mystery. I’m a right detective, I’ll have you know.”

Merlin laughed and thumped his forehead against Will’s ribs. “You’re forgiven. You’re also lucky I’m too tired to torture you with the Avalon’s specs.”

“Good, then.” Will patted him. “My backup plan was to point to my stitches and plead a headache.”

With a bit of a flail, Merlin tried to shove himself upright and asked, alarmed, “You going to be okay?”

“I told you, I’m fine. Not even a concussion. I can also now safely admit that it doesn’t even hurt.”

After a beat, Merlin began, “So the Avalon-” He stopped when Will started to laugh. Settling back down once more, he declared, “I’m sleeping.”

“Funny, that, so am I.”

Exhaustion swept over Merlin again, and this time he didn’t try to fight it. The sound of Will’s breathing overlaid the thrum of the Kilgharrah’s engines. Merlin let his thoughts drift.

“It doesn’t hurt?” Will asked suddenly, just as Merlin was about to drop off completely.

Words escaped him, but Merlin’s grunt must have sounded enough like a question that Will elaborated. “My mods?”

“Magic broken,” Merlin said.

He was too far gone to register Will’s worried response or the shake Will gave his shoulders to try and wake him. He fell asleep tucked close, glad that his friend was no worse off than a bump on the head.
He had fucked up.

Arthur lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling of his cabin, naked to the waist. The last fifteen hours had been the busiest he could remember, but they had completed repairs and made the jump out of the Spelandor system without further disaster. His mods had kept him upright and had given him the superhuman stamina that kept him alert and sharp in the way that only deeply modded individuals were capable. He would be good for another day or so before his performance would start to degrade.

However, now that they were one system closer to Albion and far enough away from Kanen’s ambush that he could pull in his destriers, Gaius had sent him to bed. Medic’s orders. There was no substitute for natural sleep. Even Arthur could agree to that.

His bitten arm didn’t hurt, not even from the scratches his mangled armour had left on his skin. He ran his fingers over the spot where the teeth should have gone in and ordered his mods to do a complete system flush. There was still too much adrenaline in his veins.

If he hadn’t been ordered to bed, he’d still be upright and working to keep everything running smoothly. The repairs to his ship had had the usual setbacks. Nutrient vats hooked up to the wrong conduits, one of the exchanges switching on- and off-line at random until Lucan tracked down the faulty circuit himself, and the ship being uncooperative when suited mechanics tried to coax it to seal the hull breaches.

Handling crises, however, meant that Arthur didn’t have to confront mistakes he didn’t know how to fix. Arthur knew how to prepare bad news for next of kin even though it ate at his conscience. He knew how to repair a ship, to set plans and traps. He could recover from setbacks, could adapt to his changing circumstances, but when he’d tried to confront a sorcerer who had saved his life, Arthur had panicked. On an empty bridge smeared with blood, he’d panicked.

He hated panicking. All of his higher thought processes shut down to ‘what needs destroying so what I care for will be safe?’ No matter how much he thought he was using his brain, was staying calm, his calculations always came down to that simple question.

He dropped his arm over his eyes. He could do better. Had to do better.

Drumming his fingers on his stomach, he tuned his oculars to watch his chemical levels drop as he prepared himself for sleep, the sinking numbers an odd sort of relaxing quite apart from the biochemical changes they represented. The heartbeat of the warship came through his bedframe, comforting once more now that it had dropped back to resting speed as they traversed what should be a slightly safer system, and Mithian’s escort helped him convince himself to calm. A swarm (or a
sorcerer) would have to be pretty powerful to take on two galleys, injured or no.

He couldn’t sleep. His mistakes with Merlin nibbled at his waking mind like a school of eager piranha.

Part of the problem was that Merlin was both crew (his) and threat. It was a conundrum that his basic decision-making algorithms could not classify; taking care of the threat would harm what was his.

Merlin had become something more than a simple sorcerer at the very first when they’d clasped hands on the ruined Ealdor bridge. Arthur’d been fucked from the get-go, because everything he did to contain and control meant he was violating his own code to do so.

The faint lights from his chest mods and the reddish glow from behind the walls kept the room from being completely dark, leaving more than enough light for Arthur’s oculars to pick out the lines he’d drawn on the ceiling, making constellations of the mottled splotches on the Kilgharrah’s skin.

He hadn’t lied to Merlin back on the bridge, that words were not enough, but they might be something. The oath he’d made Merlin swear had clarified them. For all they were just words, Merlin had sworn to him without fanfare, without hesitation. The oath he’d used was more tightly binding than the one Arthur had given to the Camelot. After the oath had left Merlin’s lips, Arthur didn’t have to guess what side Merlin was supposed to be on.

It wasn’t all he wanted, wasn’t all he’d be willing to accept from Merlin, but now that the spell had settled beneath his skin, he was more comfortable with both oath and spell than he had been with anything that happened so far.

Rubbing at the centre of his chest, he wondered at the spell. What it was supposed to do.

He’d told Merlin he could use him, which was probably as far from the person Arthur wanted to be as he could possibly get. He prided himself on his honesty, on the reciprocal nature of his leadership. He wanted- He-

Fuck if he knew what he wanted.

He wanted his ship and crew safe, and he wanted the Ealdorians to integrate with Camelot’s population without any of the objections he was dreading. He wanted his sister to have never heard of Morgause, for Kanen to not have used magic to disable the Kilgharrah, and for the Glatissant to not be susceptible to magical control. He wanted his father to turn out to not be using Arthur to tend his hostages, and he wanted the de Bois faction to miraculously lose power so they might not cause a divide on the eve of planetfall.

Most of all, though, he wanted to be sure of Merlin, for the oath to mean as much to him as it did to Arthur, for there to be some way that Arthur could trust in either words or deeds when everything he’d ever learnt told him that magic was more dangerous than a warhead and that practitioners were power-mad, manipulative liars. He wanted Merlin, full stop.

Everything spiralled back to Merlin and the possibilities that both the warlock and the man presented. With the warlock, Arthur had a secret weapon tucked into his pocket. He wouldn’t have to get close to him in anything more than proximity. He could give orders and expect results like he did from any of his Knights.

The possibilities presented by the man, however… Arthur didn’t know what was worse. That the most illogical, most intense attraction he’d felt in his life was to the one person it was most dangerous for him to get close to, or that Merlin had kissed him first.
Merlin found himself on the bridge wearing another of Percival’s ‘donated’ uniforms, courtesy of Gwaine, and standing near the door with a handful of other crew. The primary bridge crew sat at their stations, ignoring the jostling spectators that had invaded for the final approach to Camelot. At helm, Bedivere was just pulling them out of the jump to Albion space, as far into the gravity well as they could get before the calculations became too complex for their computers to crunch safely.

Stars once more lit the viewscreen, the sensor chaos of travel replaced by their brilliance as they formed into configurations that had Kay humming to himself at Nav. The subspace engines fired and the ship’s heart beat faster. Even wearing boots, Merlin could feel it. They weren’t running hot, but they were wary. Albion space was as safe as any in the universe and still Arthur was taking no chances.

An arm linking through his made him jump. He looked down at Gwen, who grinned at him and leaned into his side. She asked, “You’ve been to the Albion system?”

“We show up anytime we’re called by the Essetir,” Merlin said. “King Cenred called us less than Lot has.”

“I thought this was the first time King Lot called you back.” She gave him the side-eye.

Merlin nodded, fighting a smile.

“Truly?”

“We show up every few years to have people take their oaths, but we’ve never been ordered back,” Merlin said. They passed one of the outer planets, a gas giant of brilliant blue, and settled into an approach that would take them to the fourth planet without running into any of the Five Kingdom’s sprawled militaries. “So- four times. Always straight at the Essetir and back out to the fringe.”

Gwen made a small, thoughtful noise in the back of her throat and patted Merlin’s arm. “As a King, Lot is a rubbish one. Though Cenred was arguably worse.”

“Arguably.” Merlin snorted loud enough to cause the others in their little delegation to turn and look at him.

Arthur had chosen Merlin to represent Ealdor, though there had been a measure of grumbling about that before his mum had shut the other Ealdorians down with the argument that if Merlin didn’t go at the Captain’s behest, she’d be forced to pick someone else to stand before Uther to set forth their petition. Not even old man Simmons had objected after that. Most of the Ealdorians had stood before a Queen or King precisely once in their lives. Most were also not keen to repeat the experience,
especially when they might have to formally transfer their loyalties from the Essetir to the Camelot on their knees.

Merlin shook his head at Gaius’s querying look. He shrugged a shoulder at Gwen. “King Cenred tried to start an inter-fleet war. Hard to argue with that.”

“True.” Gwen squeezed his arm. “But- I don’t want you to be nervous.”

“Why would I be nervous?” As if Merlin would admit any such thing no matter how tense he felt. “I’m not nervous, who said I was nervous? Are you trying to make me nervous?”

Gwen laughed. “Just- going before the King.”

“I’ve got you, yeah?” Merlin then pointed a thumb over his shoulder. “And Lance as escort.”

Standing just off to the side of their little group was Lance in his black and red armour, his sword resting in a decorative scabbard very different from those Merlin had seen on any Knight since he’d boarded the galley. The addition of a flowing red cloak made it even more obvious that they were going to be somewhere where appearances mattered. Even the golden dragon across his chest had been repainted.

“Arth- The Captain picked the delegation,” Gwen said in a low voice. “I was wondering why we would be missing Pellinore, or including me. We all have ‘chief’ somewhere in our title, but- Arthur could give the damage report as well as Lucan. The only two really necessary are you and Gaius - you to petition and Gaius to report on the health of the Ealdorians - and not that I’m not fond of Lance, but we have never used an honour guard before.”

“You’ve convinced me. Now I’m nervous.” Merlin had no illusions. All of the changes likely had to do with him. “Why, though?” Gwen gave a small shake of her head, then looked toward the captain’s chair.

Merlin followed her gaze to where Arthur stood, armoured and cloaked with one hand resting on his sword. The scabbard was even more elaborate than Lance’s, solid gold and ruby accented with tiny chips of jet, threaded through with circuitry that emitted a soften golden glow and probably reported on the sharpness of the blade if it did anything at all. In his armour, his helmet tucked under his arm, he looked every inch the untouchable prince - broad shouldered, arrogant, and far more handsome than he had any right to be.

His cloak’s hem was tailored to fall just above the floor and it flowed with his movements. It was just fabric, but it was also another indication of just how far removed Arthur’s world was from Merlin’s. That something so fine could be found at all, that it would be wasted on something completely useless as a cloak upon combat armour, was the detail that drove home that the Kingdom ships had their own standard of normal far removed from Merlin’s fringe upbringing. He was half convinced he would get his head lopped off for a breach of etiquette long before anyone discovered his magic.

Being a cyborg might account for some of it, but the way Arthur looked now - so comfortable and confident in his elaborate, impractical getup - it was as if he’d been built to frustrate Merlin. The mask of heir Pendragon was too perfect, too much the facade except for where his blond hair stuck to the back of his neck, damp with sweat or the remnants of a shower. It was a tiny bit of humanity, an imperfection in the otherwise pristine image. It made Merlin want to put his lips there, his fingertips, to touch the very real, very human part of Arthur.

Will would have told him to go for it and fuck the consequences. When Merlin had filled him in on Arthur’s discovery of Merlin’s magic and his reaction - everything except maybe the sword bit, and
the oath - Will had waved the complicated (dire, extremely concerning) bits away and gleefully informed him that he was sure it would work out. In addition to being a hopeless romantic, he was also brilliant at fake snoring. Merlin hadn’t punched him for being a dirty voyeur, but it had been a near thing.

Still, Merlin despaired, even with Will’s encouragements and reassurances that he would personally sock Arthur in the face if he dared hurt Merlin. Or take bloody revenge if he did more than that. It made Merlin glad he didn’t mention the sword.

Arthur and his trust had never looked more unattainable.

With Arthur in ceremonial dress, Leon occupied the Captain’s chair, his attention split between his captain and their destination. The forward viewscreen displayed the inner system, including the young star at the centre shining abnormally white. The White Hart came into view at the edge of the screen, then dropped back out of sight of the forward pickups. The bridge speakers chirruped and a small reticule flashed onscreen with the label ‘Albion 4.’

“Home Sweet Home,” Kay said.

Behind Merlin, Lucan muttered, “Not a moment too soon.” From the low conversation Gaius and Lucan had been having, it sounded like Engineering had been cannibalising nonessential systems. Silicates were silicates and proteins were proteins when it came right down to it. Merlin still had normal, non-magical nightmares about the week during his apprenticeship where they had ripped out some of the old personnel cabins and fed the material back to the ship.

Slinging the ship across a system would normally take hours, but this was Albion. The technology for rapid transit was still in its fledgling stages, required months and sometimes years of construction to establish usable tether outposts, and was ridiculously resource-expensive, but Albion was the heart of the fleet. Merlin watched the little white speck labelled ‘Albion 4’ grow larger in increments. The stars smeared into new configurations as they performed tiny tethered jumps, pausing only long enough between for Bedivere and Kay to confer and determine they were not going to smack into anything at their next destination.

There was no sensation of movement, only the thud of the ship’s heart and the whine of the engines.

The last jump brought them within Kingdom radius. Albion 4 hung large on the screen before them, striated white and black with swirling clouds as the planet cooled beneath. Merlin held his breath as he watched it spin. It remained untouched, too hot and too dangerous for any human to set foot on its surface yet, but this was the final stage. The recall had started. When the clouds cleared - coaxed by the kingdom ships in orbit - they’d make their final preparations for planetfall.

Kay’s helpful labels declared that the nearest Kingdom ship visible on their approach was the Caerleon. It was a huge, dark orb, a city of hundreds of thousands waiting for the day they could spread across Albion and make the newborn planet theirs. In the distant past, someone had tattooed the outside of the Kingdom with the images of massive creatures - a rampant lion in fading gold, a tiger still barely visible, and a rich brown hunting hound - and the three white crenellated towers that Queen Annis had taken as her personal crest.

Other Kingdom ships were labelled as well, their tattoos invisible at this distance. The Gawant lurked near the northern pole. The Mercia and the Nemeth were both visible near the horizon.

The Camelot was still hidden by the curve of the planet, but it was the planet that captured Merlin’s heart. He nodded at Gwen when she slipped her arm free and stepped away, but he didn’t pay attention to what she said.
Albion was gorgeous. He imagined he could see the blue of oceans reflecting light from beneath the cloud cover. As much as the ships of the fleet were home for him, able to speak to and comfort him, he was still bound by bulkheads and hulls. He felt a sense of awe and a wisp of fading dreams that told him of open sky, of being able to sink his toes into dirt that had not been stagnating in an overgrown terrarium for centuries. There was a place down there, somewhere, where he could plant his feet, spread his arms, and send his magic into the bones of the earth.

Something stirred in his chest, a small spark of sensation that could not be entirely accounted for by his surfeit of emotion.

Enthralled by the sight of the planet, Merlin only became aware that Arthur had moved to his side when he placed a hand on the small of his back. One moment he had been speaking with Leon and the next he was within Merlin’s space, the soles of his armoured boots giving him enough height that he could look down at Merlin. He had taken off his gauntlet and stuffed it in his helmet, and the warmth of his hand soaked through Merlin’s borrowed uniform. When Merlin looked up at him, he wore a faint smile. The cloak brushed Merlin’s side when Arthur shifted.

“I wanted you to see this,” Arthur said, indicating the screen with his chin. His words dropped in register and he spoke for Merlin’s ears only. He spoke with an intensity that Merlin swore vibrated down the arm on his back and made him shiver. “That’s what I’m fighting for.”


When Merlin stopped, Arthur prompted him. “To?”

“To make it real.”

“It is real,” Arthur said, and the smile faded from his lips. He searched Merlin’s face. Merlin averted his eyes, turning them back to the planet still growing as they dropped into lower orbit and made for the horizon.

“But it’s not finished,” Merlin said.

“No.”

Merlin leaned into Arthur’s hand. “The next bit is the most delicate.”

“Camelot is supposed to lead the final stage of the terraform at planetfall,” Arthur said. The others in the delegation started to brush each other off, preparing themselves to leave the bridge and take themselves before the King. Gwen straightened Lance’s cloak. He tucked a loose curl behind her ear. Gaius was the only one wearing robes, but he shook out the hem with a loud rustle of fabric.

Merlin turned and lifted his head to meet Arthur’s eyes. “I meant my oath. Seeing Albion only tells me I was right to give it.”

“Tell me, then, do you still trust Camelot with your beloved planet?”

Puzzled, Merlin began to respond, but Arthur hushed him with a shake of his head and pointed at the viewscreen.

The Camelot appeared at last, veiled by the haze of the atmosphere and just far enough away that Merlin squinted at its strange shape. It was only seeing the exposed bones and steel supports silhouetted against the clouds as they made their approach that allowed him to understand Arthur’s question.
The ship had never healed. Where the other Kingdom ships were plump spheres emblazoned with ancient heraldry, the Camelot was broken. An entire upper quadrant of the ship rotating into view had been gouged away by the combined force of powerful destructive magic and elemental explosives.

Covering his mouth, Merlin fought tears.

The Camelot had tattoos as well. A vast golden dragon, largely intact, raged across the skin of its outer hull. Where the detonation had scarred the ship, there remained a fraction of the image of a chalice, only an outline to indicate what else might have been there. There were no pictures that could have prepared him to see the oldest, most powerful ship in the fleet broken and hollow. The edges of the scar had frozen melted outward, and the massive interlocking ribs were burnt and bowed where they weren’t shattered into spikes and spires. The outer lattice was warped, the skin at the edges crinkled into crisp waves, and there were shadows inside of the ship where there shouldn’t be shadows.

The others in the delegation had fallen into a reverential silence. This was the ship that had created their own, had spawned the Kilgharrah and dozens upon dozens of others in the centuries since Bruta had first launched the fleet. The ancient creature deserved their respect, Merlin was certain of that, but he did not wonder at Arthur’s question.

The ship looked vulnerable, almost fragile, with the soap-bubble film that protected its biosphere exposed to the void. It also looked dangerously alien, its pulsing guts visible, riddled with strange lights that glowed from deep within the scar, like it had tried to heal and had mutated instead. Arthur began to rub tiny, comforting circles on Merlin’s back.

Wiping his eyes, Merlin tried to take deep breaths. He couldn’t even imagine how many people the blast had claimed. None of his lessons had given numbers any more than they had included accurate images. “I’m sorry,” he told Arthur.

Arthur did not respond for a long moment, though his hand stilled on Merlin’s back, thumb centred along Merlin’s spine. Eventually, he said, “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

If he were going to say anything else, it was cut off by Lucan’s approach and question about some of the more solemn arrangements that needed to be made for the fallen among his mechanics. Out of the Kilgharrah’s crew, Lucan had lost the most personnel. His proximity to Arthur and Merlin seemed to signal the others that they, too, could step closer. Gwen snuck up on Merlin’s other side and touched him briefly on the shoulder to offer him her handkerchief.

Nearing the Camelot, the Kilgharrah aimed for one of the lower quadrants where a docking bay stood open and prepared for the galleys. Ranged around the outer hull of the Camelot were external rigs and cradles, but both the Kilgharrah and the White Hart needed extensive repairs completed more swiftly than besuited mechanics could accomplish.

A chime sounded and they passed the outer perimeter of Camelot space, shown onscreen as a mesh of red blinking dots. As soon as they did, a single destrier flashed across their field of view. Instead of the red underbelly of the Kilgharrah’s fighters, this one was black with white edging, picked with accents the brilliant scarlet of fresh-spilt blood. It stood out stark and visible against the glow of Albion beyond and matched no fighter configuration that Merlin had ever seen. Either it was very, very new, or very, very old. Griff, at Comm, snorted.

Spinning a finger in the air, Arthur nodded at Griff. When he got a nod in return, Arthur shouted, “Escort!”
“Arthur!” came the response, matching tone for tone. The speakers did not even crackle, though there was no way for the connection between their ships to be so good. The woman laughed sharp, throaty, and genuine. “I’m allowed to escort my long-lost brother home, aren’t I?”

“Morgana-” Arthur’s expression was a mixture of relief and pleasure with a hint of stress across his forehead.

“Just let me keep the mean, nasty caravan freighters away from you. I think I see one now.”

The screen divided to track the destrier as it spiralled around the bulk of the Kilgharrah, spinning between him and the White Hart. She performed a series of tight manoeuvres, cleaving close enough to both of galleys’ hulls to make Lucan rub his hand across his eyes.

Her ship was more savage than the fighters Merlin had studied, with smoother lines and sharper angles. The design piqued his curiosity, especially with Morgana flaunting its capabilities. Instead of the clunky, serviceable destriers that the Kilgharrah held, with their two pairs of wings and weeping propulsion nozzles, Morgana’s ship looked almost elegant. It was still ovoid, still had the flagella, but they were arranged around a single pair of wings that changed shape and position as she took it through its paces for her captive audience. A new ship, then, because that sort of technology was reserved for experimental fighters and test pilots.

“You’ve done work on her,” Arthur said to Morgana, softer, his eyes on her ship. Something about the way he spoke made Merlin suspect he had forgotten their audience. The destrier flared to an unnatural stop at the Kilgarrah’s side, its wings and flagella doing something that look precise and complicated that made the mechanic in Merlin drool. He wondered what kind of weapons the underwing ports hid.

“She looks brilliant,” Arthur continued, “Healthy.”

“She’s still not sure how she feels about her new drives, but they give her a little get-up-and-go she didn’t have before.” Morgana paused. When she spoke again, there was an odd, edged amusement in her voice. “She says she missed you too.”

The quality of the comm connection changed and Mithian’s voice filled the bridge. “Morgana, I swear I will rip your throat out with my bare teeth if you lay even one scratch on my ship.”

“Mithian!” Morgana sounded both delighted and unrepentant. “Welcome back, sweetie. Glad to hear you alive and well.”

“With my teeth,” Mithian growled.

At his side, Arthur chuckled and raised his voice, “Any particular reason we’ve got an escort?”

“Cabin fever.” Morgana sounded almost joking, but Merlin had the proof of how serious Arthur was taking her words in the weight of his touch. He wasn’t exactly leaning on Merlin, or tugging him closer, but his fingers flexed and pulled at Merlin’s uniform. Merlin had to plant his feet to keep his balance, but he didn’t move away. He didn’t think Arthur noticed what he was doing.

Morgana continued, “The Essetir was rather loathe to release me.”

Mithian made a rude noise. “You should have picked Caerleon this year. At least the Queen would have let you out to fly, even if she’s wary of your ship. Lot’s an ass.”

“Annis refused.” Morgana clipped her words. “I do have another reason for being out here, though. I’m to land with you and escort your delegation directly to Uther.”
“You didn’t need to bring out Aithusa for that.” There was an undercurrent of worry in Arthur’s voice that Merlin couldn’t attribute to fears for Morgana’s loyalty.

“She was-” Morgana halted. “She wanted to see the Kilgharrah and make sure he was in one piece.”

“I’m not dead, Morgs.”

“Excuse me for wanting to make sure. You’ve got a bloody great lot of new hull.”

Arthur sighed. After a moment, he took a fortifying breath and stepped away from Merlin to replace his gauntlet. His eyes glowed blue as he rubbed the ridge of circuitry that spilled down the side of his left eye-socket. “Sending diagnostic.” He paused. The lights on his brows flashed in a rapid, indecipherable pattern. “Happy?”

“Very.” Morgana’s audible grin shaded smug. “Don’t suppose I can get you to send me yours, Mith?”

Mithian’s dry, “I’m touched,” had Morgana laughing again.

Merlin shuffled back a step to hand Gwen her kerchief and give her a confused look.

Gwen took pity on him. “Transmission using an encryption and communication implant I give only rarely that piggybacks on his heavier duty auditory-visual and textual centres.” Gwen said, pointing at the screen, “Super short range. Super low power. She’s tucked against the hull above us. It’s the only way she’d ever convince him to send his statistics. The kind of diagnostics Arthur runs are…” Gwen trailed off, groping for the word she wanted.

“Intense?” Merlin suggested.

“Comprehensive.”

Merlin dropped his voice to barely above a whisper, “I take it he doesn’t send the results to just anyone.”

“He shouldn’t. Someone who knows how to read them can find security gaps. I do my best to prevent them, but biotech is notorious for spontaneous mutation.” Gwen curled her hand around Merlin’s elbow, frowning at their Captain. “Even the best cybernetics are at the mercy of their organic components.”

“You would know,” Merlin said, nudging her with his elbow and earning a snort. He kept his eyes on the screen and the tiny, oddly-designed Aithusa.

Mission apparently accomplished, Morgana peeled away from the Kilgharrah and led the two galleys towards the bay entrance that loomed before them. Without her blocking the comms, they lit up and Griff began a constant relay of procedural instructions. The atmosphere on the bridge grew strained. Kay stopped tracking Morgana’s odd destrier. No one commented.

Docking took ages. The bridge crew brought them in with a stream of curses from quiet Bedivere that had Merlin re-evaluating the man entirely. By the time the ship was properly seated in its cradle, the White Hart alongside, Merlin’s feet hurt in his borrowed boots and the rest of the delegation was tense and jumpy where they leaned against blank walls and inert consoles. Arthur and Lance stood tall and square, but they were the only two, and even Lance looked a bit worn around the edges.

When Bedivere called the final lock, the bridge let out a collective breath. Bedivere’s face shone with sweat.
The inside of the bay, or what they could see of it, was dark and mottled, the details lost as their external visual sensor’s fidelity tapered off with the lack of light. Merlin could make out rows upon rows of massive lenses set into the curve of the bay. Worklights, if Merlin recognised the dim orange worms glowing at their centres aright. The White Hart locking into her own cradle sent a tremor through the ship.

Merlin thought he could hear a whisper of thought on its heels, but then the bay sealed itself and air came pouring into the cavernous space. Griff ever-so-helpfully turned on the external audio feed so they could enjoy the ping and creak of the two warming warships that punctuated the roar of air that trembled through the bay. Whatever faint words Merlin might have been able to hear from the ship’s ghost were lost.

Arthur bobbed his head at Griff as the last of the instructions came down the line and collected his tiny delegation. He led them off the bridge, through wide, twisting corridors, and down an offshoot to the primary airlock. Leaving the inner door ajar, Arthur punched in the overrides when the systems objected to disregarding airlock procedure.

The outer door fwished open. The cold, dry air of the now-habitable bay made Merlin’s cheeks tingle. It smelled of loam, metal and compression. The air inside the Kilgharrah, warm and wet, breathed out around them as the pressure between ship and bay began to equalise.

Pausing at the gap while the gangplank extended, Arthur listened to something only he could hear and kept one hand on the airlock controls. He waved the others past, shaking his head when Gaius queried him.

Mithian had disembarked already and met them at the base of the gangplank. Her bruises had already faded to ugly yellow, the cuts from the battle with Kanen shiny with new skin where they had not scarred. Accelerators working properly. Merlin grinned at her. She greeted him with a sympathetic smile and slapped Lance on the back when he passed her to take up his position as honour guard for the whole group. Gwen gave her a delighted, though brief, hug. Lucan and Gaius both received handshakes when they stepped down.

Last off the gangplank, Merlin put his boot to the bay deck and nearly collapsed.

The Kilgharrah might not have been able to speak to him, but now that Merlin was where the ghost very certainly was not, the difference became clear. The sudden spike of hope that Merlin felt - that the warship’s ghost was alive and well, even though they were incommunicado, and that his magic just needed a bit of time to recover - was counterbalanced by just how different the Camelot felt to his senses.

Worse than the Villain’s Smile, which felt like so much meat and electricity, the Camelot felt empty. There was so great an absence of power, of solidity, that it sucked at the core of his magic and called attention to its fragile recovery by highlighting the fact that it was present and whatever balance of magic that had once resided within the Camelot was not. The emptiness was familiar. He tasted death, loss, and copper on the back of his tongue.

Covering his mouth, he fought nausea. When Gaius put a hand on his shoulder and steadied him, he found everyone else watching him curiously as he swayed on his feet.

Before he could think of a suitable excuse, Gaius patted him and said, “You’ll get used to it.”

Merlin began to protest, confused that Gaius would be trying to comfort him over the Kingdom’s radical magical imbalance in full view of the others, when Gwen said, “The air. It has additives that prevent disease. They pump them in to all repair bays.”
Blinking at both of them, Merlin shot a look at Lance. The Knight nodded solemnly, though he was watching Merlin with concern.

Gaius leaned in, “You’re looking peaky.”

“Later,” Merlin said, drawing a deep breath. The empty Camelot could only affect him if he let it. Hopefully it would only affect him if he let it. He’d just been surprised. Louder, he said, “Must be the air.”

Arthur came down the gangplank and halted at his side. “I’d rather we kept the King waiting as little as possible.” He gestured Lance forward, greeted Mithian with a nod, and opened his mouth as he turned toward Merlin.

He stopped before he said whatever he was going to say, frowned, and asked instead, “Are you well?”

“Do I really look that terrible?” Merlin returned, annoyed.

Their eyes met and Merlin almost took a step forward. Arthur brought his chin up and huffed out a laugh, “If you’re well enough to complain, you’re well enough march.”

The delegation headed for the inner bay doors. The sound of their boots echoed in the vast space, a sound multiplied by the Camelot’s mechanics as they started to pour out of the smaller portals that lined the walls. By the time the delegation reached the far wall, the final shutdown surges had filled the bay with the keens of stressed engines followed by silence, and preparations were well under way for the disembarkation of the crew. A handful of uniformed personnel wearing gold and red were setting up for the Ealdorians by raising lines on the deck with a blush marker to form paths toward another side door.

The bay doors irised open to reveal Morgana waiting for them. Her dark hair fell in coils and waves past her shoulders and Merlin couldn’t help but marvel that that much hair could even fit beneath the helmet that dangled from her fingers. She watched them approach with a sharp smile on sharper features.

A wave of deja vu hit Merlin, a slippery sensation connected with nightmares that felt almost like memories. Part of it was how she stood, arms folded across her chest, helmet in hand, in a suit of black armour flecked with crimson and white that mimicked her ship’s colouration. She herself was bleached-parchment white - her skin lighter than Merlin’s, less golden than her brother’s - and the pale curves of her face were interrupted only by dark metal along her eye sockets, the slope of her jaw, and sweep of her neck.

At Merlin’s side, Arthur shifted as if he was going to try and put a hand on Merlin’s back. Morgana tracked the motion and he halted. The rest of the delegation crowded past, Mithian leading the charge, murmuring something beneath her breath as she passed that Merlin did not catch.

Morgana, never taking her eyes from her brother, gave Mithian a kiss on the cheek that was quickly returned. Lucan got a handshake, Gaius an abstracted nod. As Merlin watched her study Arthur, the hard lines around her eyes eased. When Gwen stepped in front of her and tilted her chin up, Morgana allowed herself to be distracted, planting a solid kiss on Gwen’s lips and entangling herself in a fierce hug. Lance tugged Gwen away with a tolerant smile, directing everyone down the corridor.

Since Arthur wasn’t moving, Merlin didn’t either. Even with the others rapidly rounding a corner that took them out of sight, neither sibling appeared inclined to follow. Morgana tilted her head and
shifted her evaluation to Merlin. The weight of her gaze made him want to fidget.

An itching in the centre of his chest caught him by surprise. His magic, a lonely flame in the emptiness of the Camelot, was responding to another’s power. The light in Morgana’s eyes grew to an inner glow and Merlin started to panic. Gold. Her irises glowed gold.

He looked over - and very slightly up, fucking armoured boots - at Arthur, who was glowering at his sister impatiently. His reaction made no sense. Then Merlin registered the metal embedded in Morgana’s face with its tiny blinking lights very similar to Arthur’s.

“Ocular implants?” Merlin was too surprised to mind his manners. “But they’re gold.”

He felt Arthur shift his weight, but Morgana just laughed. The gold did not dim, the lights continued to blink, and Merlin could feel the magic behind the glow. It was a faint prickling sensation, noticeable only because the Camelot held no ambient magic. Everything echoed.

“Vanity colours,” Arthur said, his expression tight.

Morgana offered Merlin a lazy one-shouldered shrug. “The cybernetics development team has used the tech since. I don’t know why he’s still so upset about it.”

There were so many questions that he wanted to ask. Morgana was at least a little bit magic, and was modded at least as heavily as Arthur was, and that was only counting the mods visible outside of their respective armours. Arthur had to know about his sister, but it seemed like something he’d mention if he did.

Seizing Merlin’s hand, Morgana’s greeting took the form of an old-fashioned handshake. Her fingers were slim and delicate looking, but her grip was strong and she kept a hold of him when he would have dropped back. The buzz of her magic put his teeth on edge. It poked and prodded at his own, encouraging it to wake, and part of the contact was sharing the needlesharp pain of her active mods.

“And who is this?” Morgana asked Arthur over Merlin’s shoulder. There was no recognition in her eyes, nothing to say that she had discovered him. Unless Morgana was a consummate actress, whatever sympathetic resonance Merlin was feeling, he alone was feeling it.

“Merlin,” Arthur said shortly.

Merlin, trapped where he was by Morgana pins-and-needles handshake, heard Arthur step forward to loom.

Eyes widening briefly as she released Merlin’s hand, her sharp smile returned when Arthur remained in looming position. Her irises flashed gold. “Ealdorian. Son of Hunith.Awaiting a journeyman mechanic position? Really? And a commendation from Lucan. That was fast.” Her smile grew more speculative. “He’s quite a catch, though his ID implant is almost older than he is. But- that’s nothing that can’t be upgraded. Nothing but top-of-the-line toys for you, my dearest brother.”

“We’re not doing this here.” Arthur shoved Merlin behind him in a swirl of cloak. “He’s the refugees’ representative. For my delegation.”

“Which is leaving without you.”

Arthur made to step past her, but she shifted into his way. He tried another direction and she moved again to halt him. Her smile never wavered.

With a long-suffering sigh, Arthur spread his arms to either side. Merlin had to back up or risk being
hit with the spikes on the back of his gauntlets. Without warning, Arthur tossed his helmet back, but Merlin still caught it before it hit the ground.

“That’s better,” Morgana said, throwing herself into the hug. She squeezed hard, their armour scraping and creaking. Arthur tucked her head into the crook of his shoulder and held on.

Merlin fidgeted with the helmet, feeling like an intruder.

Stepping back, Morgana threw a quick punch that rang metallic from Arthur’s shoulder. “Fuck you for nearly getting killed.”

“Wasn’t my idea, believe me,” Arthur said, “Are you going to accompany us?”

Curling her lip, Morgana shook her head. “Uther and I are on the outs again.”

“Again?”

“I might have lied to Mithian. Essetir relieved me of my ambassador duties earlier than Uther anticipated.”

“You didn’t have anything to do with that?”

“Nothing.” Morgana accompanied her response with a faux-innocent smile which Merlin thought looked a lot like her regular smile. Arthur shook his head and beckoned her to come with them as they started down the corridor.

Merlin fell into step with Arthur, putting the bulk of Arthur’s armour between him and Morgana. He clutched the helm and wondered what he was supposed to do now. They had been warned about Morgana, and Arthur had shown no signs, had mentioned nothing before this, that would give any indication that he had known she was a magic user. A witch? A sorceress? Merlin had no idea what to even call her.

A threat, maybe. He could call her a threat. He walked a little closer to Arthur, who glanced at him curiously but said nothing.

They reached a portal where the rest of the delegation stood in various states of impatience.

Mithian gave Morgana a look that held annoyance and understanding in equal measure. “Are you quite finished? I give you my word he’s in one piece.”

“You make it sound like I hold some sort of affection for the man,” Morgana said. The two women shared a grin.

Arthur moved past them toward the door, plucking his helm from Merlin’s hands as he did. Morgana crowded into Merlin’s space, tilting her chin up to study his face. Her irises remained faded green, the lights on her oculars unlit, but she was evaluating him.

He leaned away from her until she caught his sleeve, the helmet in her hand jostling against his arm, and prevented his escape. “What?” he asked.

“I know you,” she said, mostly under her breath. “And you know me.”

“Morgan le Fay?” he ventured, because it suited her. The ‘why’ slipped through his fingers.

She shook her head. “That’s not one of my names anymore. Perhaps in the past, but not now.”
Merlin’s sense of impending danger started to set off alarms inside his skull. “You know that is a really creepy thing to say, right?”

“Yes.” She dragged the back of one finger down the side of his face. He was in full fight-or-flight, heart hammering, and he tried to pry her fingers from his uniform. He thought her grasp on both her helm and his sleeve would give him the advantage, but she merely tsked at him and shook her head. “Conversations with me have a habit of that. You’re different.”

“M’not different.”

“I daresay you are. Different enough that you circle my brother, and he you, like you’ve just had an awkward shag and don’t know how to talk about what happened.”

The rest of the delegation disappeared through the door, leaving him and Morgana alone in the corridor. He found himself unwilling to call for help. His curiosity began to counterbalance his moment of panic.

“We haven’t,” he said. “Not that I would mind, minus the awkward part.”

Morgana laughed, the same open and slightly terrifying laugh he’d heard over the comms. “Arthur has that effect on people.” She released him and let him reclaim his personal space, but he didn’t go far. “You’re fringe through and through, aren’t you?”

“I can count the times I’ve been to Albion space on one hand.”

“And never on the Camelot, because the Ealdor was beholden to Essetir.” Morgana nodded along, half talking to herself. She certainly didn’t look like she expected him to correct her. Not that he could when she was right. “Then how do I know you?”

Merlin gave the question thought, rather than simply protesting the impossible. “I- I don’t think you do,” he finally ventured, “Any more than I know you.”

“Just because it’s not one of my names now doesn’t mean you’re wrong,” she said, “Which makes me think we don’t know each other in exactly the same way.”

Trying to piece together her words into something he could understand, Merlin eventually had to give up, “Was that supposed to make sense?”

“No.”

“Oh, good.” Merlin’s skin was crawling again and he didn’t think it was the echo of the Kilgharrah’s fight.

Morgana circled him. “What do you want from my brother?”

“Nothing.”

“Everyone wants something. You stand too close, my very innocent intimidations earn his full defensive response, and yet he tried to evade me when I wanted to find out more about you. You are not as you seem, so what do you want?”

Merlin resisted the urge to back away. “Is ‘him’ an acceptable answer?”

“No.”

“It’s the truth.” Merlin folded his arms across his chest.
“Truth or no, it’s a fatuous answer.” She paused when she saw the look on his face. “Foolish. Silly. Self-satisfied. You can’t just tell me you’re here for him and him alone when you are going in to meet his father - who is the fleet’s Pendragon, not to mention Captain and King of Camelot. I don’t trust you. I will destroy you if I think you are harming my brother, for whatever reason.”

“None of this is making me want to trust you, either,” Merlin said. “I don’t go about just threatening everyone who even looks twice at my siblings.”

“But he’s not just my sibling, is he? And you’re an only child.”

“That’s- accessing my entry is cheating, for one. And two, that’s beside the point. It’s the principle.”

“I don’t need you to trust me.” Morgana’s eyes began to glow gold, the lights on her mods only belatedly starting to flicker. The echo of whatever she was trying to do reached out to his magic. “You just need to know I am watching you. Uther will be watching you. Planetfall approaches, and now that Arthur’s returned he is going to come under scrutiny, especially with regards to his dalliances with an unknown fringe boy. Uther is an excellent example of how the spouses and partners of our powerful often come into power themselves. You are putting yourself into a position to be evaluated.

“So, no, you don’t need to trust me. You need to take this as a warning. Expecting me to accept infatuation as enough of an answer is naive at best, idiotic at worst, and my brother doesn’t need an idiot by his side when the fleet starts to fall apart. No matter whether or not he pulls his head out of his arse for long enough to see how you look at him - don’t you fucking dare deny it, you looked at him for answers every time I opened my mouth - you don’t get to be stupid about this.”

If Morgana was right, then Arthur’s insistence that Merlin stay at his side was going to bring a great deal of unwanted attention onto them both, which was the exact opposite of what Merlin had hoped would happen when he arrived. He didn’t know why he’d expected otherwise, that tying himself to Arthur would give him any measure of protection at all. He didn’t even know if his oath would protect him from Arthur as long as he didn’t quite trust that Merlin would keep his word. For all he knew, Arthur’s fears would get Merlin killed anyway.

Merlin’s eye-sockets ached just from watching Morgana spin whatever spell she intended to lay upon him. He couldn’t stop himself from asking, “Do your mods hurt when you do that?”

Whatever she’d been about to cast dissipated before it reached him. She stared at him in disbelief. “Do what?” Her stance changed, wariness replacing confidence. Her eyes narrowed.

He hadn’t been thinking. Like she said, he couldn’t afford to be stupid. “I didn’t know,” he answered her instead. “About the interest others would have. And certainly not why.”

“Now you do.” She didn’t drop her wary stance, letting him explain himself.

“It doesn’t change my answer.”

“It should.”

He’d already made his choice. An uncertain choice, too soon and too fragile and he had no idea where his feet were going to come down at the end of every step he took in pursuit, but it was a decision he could not bring himself to regret. *I swore to him after he had a sword at my throat. Pretty sure I know what my answer is. “I stay for him.”*

“You can’t know that. You’ve had, what- a week? Power is seductive, corruptive, and he is surrounded by it.”
Merlin almost laughed. “Power isn’t that seductive.”

She drew away from him, her expression once more speculative. “How very idealistic. And young.”

“Because I’m not after Arthur for his position?” Merlin’s voice took on an edge, his previous panic gone. This wasn’t his home, he didn’t know the people or whether or not he’d survive the week, but he’d given his oath. With it, he found himself realising as he squared off against Morgana, he’d also given himself some of the solid ground he needed, whether or not Arthur believed him. He offered Morgana a toothy grin. “How very cynical.” He paused for a beat, then raised his eyebrows.

Morgana’s expression became hard to read, but Merlin thought she looked almost approving. She folded her arms to mirror his and tipped her head to acknowledge his unspoken insult. “Maybe you’ll do.”

The portal the others had gone through irised open and Mithian stuck her head through. “Let him the fuck go - I can only give so many excuses to the King before he starts to wonder where this mythical Ealdorian is supposed to be. Scare him shitless on your own time.”

Looking down her nose at him - a feat when she was at least a hand shorter than he even in her armoured boots - Morgana nodded once. “You are dismissed.”

“Thank fuck,” Mithian said, coming out to retrieve him. She clapped a hand on his shoulder and steered him through the door. Morgana watched them go, arms still folded. Her eyes had begun to glow again and Merlin’s magic stayed quiet and shy. She watched him until the closing door blocked his vision and Mithian shoved him toward the front of the room. She spoke low and into his ear, “Our Morgana’s a bit off, and if you’d asked me earlier I’d have said her heart was in the right place. Now I’m seriously wondering if Gwen moved it last time she did work.”

There was no way for Merlin to answer, not when Mithian was propelling him to where Arthur waited by a short dais and a massive chair. The chair’s occupant was hooked into the Camelot via more conduits, wires, and plugs than Merlin had assumed a human body could support. In the centre of all of the hardware sat Uther. As a man, he was grey-haired and smooth cheeked. As a machine, he was more heavily modded than the son who stood by his side. As a King, his ‘crown’ was an external neural interface that socketed into the outside of his skull, wires snaking down from the low ceiling.

Merlin looked to Arthur, who shook his head and beckoned him forward. Mithian moved off to stand with the rest of the delegation.

When Merlin reached a point that he considered ‘close enough’, Arthur held up a hand. Merlin halted, rubbing sweaty palms on his thighs and hoping no one would notice. Or, if they did, that no one would comment.

Arthur took a breath and intoned: “Uther, Captain of the Camelot, King of the sons and daughters of Camelot’s flesh strewn across the stars, Pendragon of the fleet.” He paused, waiting. Merlin stared at him until Arthur mimed an abbreviated salute.

“Oh, yes - Um,” Merlin stumbled over his words. Neither Ealdor’s Captain nor Arthur had stood on much ceremony, and he’d never actually met the Captain and King of the Essetir. “It is an honour, Captain- King! Pendragon, sir.”

Arthur let out his breath. “Merlin, from the Ealdor out of Essetir.”

For the first time since Merlin had entered the room, Uther moved, nodding. The forest of cords and
conduits twitched and danced as he leaned forward. “A commendation from Chief of Engineering, a recommendation from Chief Medical Officer, and a character endorsement from Chief Cybernetics Engineer all in one short week. A week during which you illustrated exceptional bravery in participating in not one but two Glatissant attacks. All while recovering from grievous injuries.”

The chair was pulsing, a greenish glow from the inside distracting Merlin so that it took him a beat longer than it should have for him to respond. “Yes, sir.” Then he realised what he’d just agreed to. “I mean, no, sir. I was merely present. I don’t think that counts as bravery. The injured bit is right, though.”

Arthur hissed a bit beneath his breath, but Uther just laughed. He said, “Arthur here says that you’re here on behalf of the Ealdorians to request formal transfer to the Camelot.”

“Yes, sir.”

Uther’s eyes glowed a dusty green, half of his face covered in metal and dotted with light. “My son also says he wishes you to be assigned to him and the Kilgharrah indefinitely, though he was a bit unforthcoming on what capacity you would serve.”

Arthur looked like he had eaten something that disagreed with him, but when he tried to speak, Uther waved a hand to quiet him. The cords rustled.

“I’m a mechanic, sir. I—” Merlin’s brain wasn’t giving him anything to tell the King but: ‘I fancy your son’ and ‘I’m a bit magic and Arthur wants a pocket wizard’ and ‘My best chance of survival is proving my loyalty’. None of those answers were going to be particularly acceptable - and that last was rather more mercenary than he liked to admit.

He decided on something simpler. “I grew up admiring the galleys of Kilgharrah’s type. They’re the reason I joined my apprenticeship, sir. Camelot’s designs are—brilliant. Brilliant. It was my request to—stay on. When the Captain asked what he could do by reward, I mean.” He lowered his eyes and stared hard at the King’s feet, unwilling to look at Arthur and see what he thought of the lie.

“Miserable work in the belly of a warship is your reward?” Uther’s amusement did not ease the fears that jostled for Merlin’s attention. His hands were still sweating and he could feel beads trickling down the back of his neck, but he felt cold standing before the man who had hunted and destroyed his own people. There was something remote in the King’s faint laugh.

Uther was telling Lucan ‘no offence’, and teasing his son for using a mechanic’s boy for an ambassador, no matter who his mother was, if he was going to be this earnest and shy.

The Camelot’s need for magic was a hungry vacuum and what little of Merlin’s own had recovered was spreading further and with less interference than he’d ever experienced. The spread was frictionless; there was nothing inhabiting the shell of the Camelot that might give him resistance. The others in the room grew to warm pulses of humanity against his senses, except for the King on his living throne.

The King felt like empty death.

Uther was still speaking. “He can’t very well do that if he’s beholden to the Essetir.” He began to unplug.

“Father?” Arthur queried, tilting his head in askance as wires popped from their sockets with the wet sound of releasing suction.

Uther made an impatient noise and beckoned him to help, “If I’m going to stand, I can’t be all
hooked in."

The more plugs came out, the more alive Uther became to Merlin’s senses, a phenomena distracting enough that it was only the distinctive slide of sword from sheath that snapped him back to reality. The King stood, sword in hand, his Captain’s uniform streaked with the Camelot’s ichor.

“Kneel,” Uther ordered.

Merlin was overwhelmed with the mad desire to flee for his life. The naked steel of the blade glinted green and the keen edge looked sharp enough to part skin with a thought. His fingers tingled, his magic - barely enough for sensing - trying to awaken enough to protect him. It was all he could do to remind himself that Uther had been laughing only moments ago and there was nothing in his stance now that suggested an attack.

It did little good. There was nothing rational about the way his heart rabbited in his chest. The childhood spectre of Uther lying in wait for him to appear had looked like this, though the smile then had been bloodthirsty and cruel, a far cry from the fatherly amusement the man wore now. Any moment, the Camelot’s internal defences would activate and he’d be fried to a laser crisp.

He heard the others behind him speaking in confused half-sentences, and he was grateful for the reminder that he wasn’t alone.

Arthur planted himself square in front of the throne.

“What are you doing?” Arthur asked, the bulk of his armour, the width of his person between the King and Merlin.

“Asking forgiveness, rather than permission, I should think that obvious.” The same speculative light that Morgana had regarded him with lit in Uther’s eyes as he looked from Arthur to where Merlin was trying to stand at attention. He used the flat of the blade to guide his son out of the way and beckoned Merlin forward. “Swear on my sword to the Camelot, young Merlin of the Ealdor.”

Arthur’s eyes glowed a faint blue and his jaw worked, but he moved without further protest.

At least Arthur’s interposition had given Merlin the distance he needed to step back from his reaction, to take first one breath, then another, and unfreeze his limbs. Morgana was right. He couldn’t afford to be stupid. Turning and running from a simple ceremony that he had indirectly asked the King to perform would be foolish at best. As would announcing he’d sworn to Arthur, which would inevitably raise the question of ‘why’.

All awkward limbs and uncertainty, Merlin dropped to one knee before the King. Uther’s sword hit the deck in front of him, point gouging into the flesh of the dais. Ichor welled, loosing its sharp, antiseptic scent.

Merlin put out his hand to lay the flat of his palm against the sword and halted a hairsbreadth away from the steel. It was an old sword, well-maintained, and Merlin had the horrible thought that it was old enough to have partaken in the Purge, when Uther had struck the heads off of countless of Merlin’s kind.

He couldn’t afford to hesitate. Pressing his hand against the metal, he held his breath for a handful of heartbeats before he let it go. It was just a sword. His returning senses detected nothing special, and the width of it was cool beneath his hand. Even if it were old enough, had drunk the blood of so-called sorcerers, it retained nothing of their power and none of their memories.

“Repeat after me,” Uther said, and began the oath of fealty that Merlin would have said to Lot’s
Merlin spoke after him, keeping his voice steady, repeated everything until he would have to say the word ‘Camelot’, binding his will to the broken, empty ship. A surge of pain stopped him, originating from the centre of his chest, and he gasped for breath. He leaned forward to steady himself, never taking his hand off the sword even as he dug at his uniform with the other.

“Sorry- sorry,” he wheezed. Gaius was at his side, fingers on his pulse, but he tried to bat him away. “Almost done.”

“I thought you said he’d recovered?” Uther said somewhere above him.

“Glatissant wounds, sire, are notorious for uneven healing. He’s lucky to be alive at all.”

It would be suspicious if he couldn’t finish, wouldn’t it? Merlin righted himself, rubbing at his chest and mouthing the word Camelot. He barely breathed the syllables, but they caused another flare of pain and a wash of wrongness.

He wasn’t going to be able to swear. His magic was determined to prevent any further oath he might conceive to give. “Sorry-” he wheezed again, not looking at the King for fear he’d give himself away. He could feel the burn and press of his magic against the back of his eyelids. He hoped the heat in his neck and ears would be mistaken for embarrassment.

Gaius asked him what the matter was and Merlin could only shake his head. The one he needed to speak to was Arthur. He whispered as much to Gaius.

“Are you sure?”

Merlin took another strangled breath and nodded. Whatever magic he’d syphoned into the oath itself was not powerful enough to do more than force him not to speak, but it was enough.

As Gaius stepped back, Arthur knelt at Merlin’s side, head tilted to look up into his face. “What’s wrong?” Arthur asked, gripping Merlin’s upper arm to steady him.

There was no way of knowing how good the King’s auditory pickups were, or whether or not there was interference by the crown that he still wore that connected him to the ship. He spoke as quietly as he could. Arthur had to lean in close to hear. “Can’t swear. Seal on your oath choking me.”

Merlin gripped Arthur’s armoured wrist. “Can’t now. Can’t later.”

Eyes widening only slightly, Arthur caught on swiftly enough. He kept a firm grip on Merlin’s arm and spoke up to the assembled. “Can Gaius check him over more thoroughly? He can swear later - the Glatissant caught him right across the chest.”

Uther snorted, sheathing his sword in one smooth motion. “Care for him. He’s obviously still recovering.” He waved Gaius forward again. “Since he seems rather attached to you, Arthur, you get him sworn. As soon as he takes his oaths, he’s yours.”

Merlin tensed as Uther stepped from the dais. Only Arthur’s grip on his arm prevented him from jerking backwards. He’d thought Uther was still attached to the ship.

Clearing his throat, Uther said, “You did well, Merlin of the Ealdor. I wish you a speedy recovery and welcome you to the Camelot on behalf of us all.”

Merlin didn’t trust himself to speak, anger and relief as well as magic clogging his windpipe. He kept his head bowed and heard Arthur thanking his father on his behalf.
“Dip into another round of accelerators if necessary, Gaius,” Uther ordered as he strode toward the door. “The rest of you, with me. Honour guard, Knight Lancelot? My son has spared no ceremony, I see. We can walk and talk. I want the Ealdorians sworn to Camelot the instant they set foot on our deck. We should make it in time for the first unloading if we leave now—”

Gwen replied with something Merlin didn’t hear, then Gaius was on his other side and helping Merlin stand.

Uther paused in the doorway as it irised open, quirking his lips into something that wasn’t quite a smile, but that made Arthur squeeze Merlin’s arm tight enough to hurt. The creases in his gauntlet bit into Merlin’s uniform.

“If you value you him-” Uther tilted his head in Merlin’s direction, “-keep him away from Morgana in the future.”

Everyone but Arthur and Gaius filed out after their King. When the door shut, Merlin sagged, then extricated himself from their grip to stalk to the opposite side of the room, as far from the dais and its still-pulsing throne as he could get without leaving and meeting the King in the corridor.

“He heard everything Morgana said to me, didn’t he?” Merlin demanded, his voice a rasp. Massaging his chest as the pain of the interrupted oath faded, he tried not to pace, but he couldn’t stand still.

“Very likely,” Arthur said, alternatively frowning at Merlin and the door. Every so often he’d include Gaius for good measure. “They think alike, which makes him wary.”

Merlin tried to think if anything from his and Morgana’s conversation could be construed as suspicious, but that only reminded him why he was angry in the first place. He halted, and clenched his fists at his sides. “He didn’t care.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Arthur and Gaius exchange glances. “Care about what?” Gaius ventured.

“I’m a mess - I couldn’t even say a handful of basic words you learn when you’re six - and he wasn’t at all suspicious.”

“He will be if you keep talking before I can jam the room’s auditory recording.” Arthur warned, his oculars strobing blue. When they dimmed again, he eyed Gaius only to find Gaius was watching him with equal consternation. Arthur pursed his lips. “Really, Gaius? Really? You too?”

Merlin was too busy ranting to care about Arthur’s tetchiness. “Where’s the paranoia? Where is the terrifying spectre of authoritative retribution? I hid under my bed because of that man, and he didn’t even care. His sword is just a sword. He’s a man, made of meat and metal and plugs into the Camelot the same way as anyone would. Where’s his omnipotence? His piercing gaze that will sort me first thing? He just handed me to you and walked off. I was promised a villain and I got someone who was worried that I was coughing.”

“Shut up, Merlin,” Arthur said, “I could remind you that you’re talking about my father. And Gaius-”

“Knows.”

“I gathered that, but you’re not helping. My father hates sorcery, but he’s not looking for it in a skinny refugee surrounded by people who would vouch for him - each of whom have filed official
recommendations for you, you’re welcome - while his own medic says that you’re odd because you were injured. Grievously injured. Grievous. The kind that makes you mourn at the end of a non-recovery. A century ago, we’d have already spaced you because you’d be dead.”

Clicking his mouth shut, Merlin turned to Gaius for confirmation.

“Medical history isn’t a popular subject in fringe education, I understand, but he’s not entirely wrong.” Gaius shrugged one shoulder. “You had gone into shock already from wounds that went deeper into your chest cavity than the muscles that gave us the most trouble, yet I don’t know if you would have died. You were…” He slid a look at Arthur and offered him an apologetic smile. “- repairing. Not as fast as you might with the accelerators, but enough to indicate you might have a gift for it if you were fully trained.”

Arthur rubbed the bridge of his nose and muttered imprecations under his breath. “Is he completely untrained?”

Gaius hesitated and Merlin wasn’t about to volunteer that sort of information here of all places, recording turned off or not.

Arthur swore again. “Brilliant. Just brilliant. Does that make you more or less dangerous?” He asked like he suspected it was a stupid question.

Gaius wasn’t going to answer that one, either. He just shifted his gaze to Merlin and waited. So did Arthur. Hunching in on himself, Merlin said, “More.”

Letting out his breath, Arthur rubbed his gauntlet over his mouth. “Well, at least you’re not dead. Are you done?”

Merlin couldn’t quite meet Arthur’s eyes, but he nodded.

“Good, because my father has always been ‘just a man’,” Arthur said, the muscles in his jaw jumping. “Whatever cruel and capricious cyborg mastermind you’ve concocted in that foolish head of yours has never been the reality. Your side lost the war. Is it any wonder they created a creature in my father’s image whose overwhelming horror meant losing stung less?”

“My prince,” Gaius said, putting out a hand. Arthur stepped away, breathing hard.

Merlin felt betrayed, somehow, by Uther being Arthur’s father, however little sense the emotion made. “I’m sorry, then,” he clipped out, unable to keep his sarcasm contained. “Sorry ‘my side’ didn’t have Kingdom resources or armies at the tips of their fingers. Or warheads.”

At the last two words, Arthur clenched his jaw and a stripe of bloodless white appeared on either side of his nose.

Merlin’s drabble of recovered magic let him feel the change in Arthur. Snapping his magic back, he coiled it into a tight ball within his chest. A cold sensation stole down his spine that he might have said too much, gone too far. He felt ill. “Arthur-”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” Arthur’s expression had shut down.

Dragging his hands through his hair, halfway tempted to just yank it out so he could feel something beyond the frozen pit in his stomach and the renewed crawling of his skin, Merlin snapped. Words poured from him that he wouldn’t dam even if he could.

“No, I don’t even fucking know. I grew up on the fringe. The fringe. That means the furthest I could
possibly get from Albion, from the Kingdoms, from everything you know and take for granted. My father got his ass handed to him by Purge Knights and had to flee for his life. I didn’t even know I wasn’t mixed in a tube until a week ago, so thinking of the King as ‘just a man’ is fucking horrifying.”

He couldn’t help the faint rumble in his throat, which really wasn’t going to help him if he released it. Merlin swallowed his snarl and spat, “I don’t know what I’m talking about. You’re right. I have no idea. Never did. Never will.”

Gaius was following their argument, brows drawn together and his lips a grim line, but made no move to interrupt again. Arthur rested his free hand on the hilt of his sword, flexing around the grip.

“We’re done here,” Arthur said.

“Because you say so?”

He watched Arthur take a series of deep breaths. When he spoke again, his tone was subdued. “Because this isn’t the place.”

“Fuck,” Merlin said, putting a hand over his eyes, pressing his fingers into the corners and shoving down his sudden urge toward angry tears. Will always said he knew when Merlin meant it because he’d start to bawl while he was shouting. “Fuck. You’re right.” Merlin didn’t react when Gaius put a hand on his shoulder and led him toward the door.

Gaius asked, “Shall I take him to give his oaths with the Ealdorians?”

“No, I- no,” Arthur stood stock-still in the centre of the room before the dais, staring down at Uther’s throne and the abandoned crown on the seat. Conduits and wires trailed from ceiling to crown and they danced when Arthur brushed his fingers across them. He didn’t look back at the other two. “Let father see him in the vicinity, then make sure he has quarters. I’ll take care of his oaths.” Merlin didn’t need to see his face to read the wry twist in his words.

It wasn’t even worth it to protest that he was present and didn’t like Arthur talking past him. He didn’t feel much like talking to Arthur just now either. Gaius offered all the proper pleasantries and steered Merlin out. When the portal irised shut behind them, Arthur was still standing in front of the throne, his cloak dragging the floor as he stood slump-shouldered, head in his hands.
Five huge faces loomed upon the massive screen of the Camelot’s council chamber. Arthur stood at his father’s right hand, still in his armour and cloak, helmet under his arm, while Uther smiled a predator’s smile and leaned back in his chair. Arthur’s uncle - not the one he’d left at Uther’s side when he began his tour of the fringe, but Agravaine - stood on Uther’s left, his cloak black and his rank insignia declaring him Chief of Communications. It was certainly a change. Tristan had been taller, a fighter rather than a former ship’s captain, and Quartermaster. Despite the title change, as far as Arthur’s information went, they were performing roughly the same job.

The council chamber wasn’t very large, and the design of arcs and curves that served as a backdrop for the occupant of the centre chair matched that of the chambers on each of the other ships. Each Kingdom Captain was framed by interlocking circles, and when they were displayed side by side, the curves met to give the illusion of a unified motif. Only the colours in the backgrounds, reflecting the coat of arms each of the rulers had adopted, suggested that they weren’t all seated in the same room.

Arthur was glad they weren’t, because Uther had spent the first part of their meeting taunting Lot. From the look on the other man’s face, if there weren’t a screen and the void of space between them, he’d have launched from his chair and wrapped his hands around Uther’s throat.

Between their exchange and the Camelot’s council chamber’s red light, Arthur was developing a headache. He almost wished that he could be sitting with Bayard on the Mercia, if only because his colours were predominantly blue. At least that would be easier on the eyes.

“So you thought you’d just steal them away? Without so much as a by-your-leave? The Ealdor was beholden to me. It was part of my Kingdom. Its adults were sworn to me.”

“And now they’re sworn to me,” Uther said, “with a transfer oath.”

“Transfer oaths are utter shit, and you know it. You’ve made them oathbreakers.”

“It’s perfectly legal.”

“You stole them, bold as you please.”

“You knew refugees were coming into the system. The Ealdor’s destruction has been part of every transmission for the last week. You could have contacted me.”

“You never struck me as the greedy type, Uther.”

“Greedy? The Essetir is at capacity and then some, if you are not inflating your census totals. The Camelot is, patently, not. Our repopulation programs have never been successful.”
“Because you’re fucking cursed, Pendragon.”

“Is that so?”

“What else does twenty-odd years of low birthrates and high miscarriages mean?”

“Bad luck.”

“Bad luck,” Lot repeated with a sneer.

Arthur stifled a sigh and shifted his attention to the other rulers. Bayard of Mercia looked bored, Godwyn of the Gawant and Rodor of the Nemeth both looked pensive. Annis of Caerleon looked like she was waiting for a particularly tedious squabble between children to end so they could get on with business.

Of all of them, Arthur was most worried about Rodor. The Nemeth’s status among the Kingdoms left it vulnerable, no matter how sovereign their laws had declared it. If Rodor became nervous about Uther’s high-handed approach to the situation - and his treatment of Lot - it was entirely conceivable that he would find another patron. Mithian’s assessment of her father’s cocksucking proclivities aside, the Nemeth was tied to the Camelot by tradition and mutual interests, both of which meant only as much as Rodor decided they did.

“Bad luck.” Uther’s smile dropped. “You think I haven’t had teams of scientists working on the issue the entire time? I need warm bodies—living, breathing people on the Camelot if we’re going to hit every milestone we need to make planetfall a reality. The Ealdorians kept their first generation demesne in better than working order despite your attempts to undersupply the thing. My reports tell me it almost fought off a swarm on its own. The people have every indication of being hard workers, and they no longer have a ship to call their own. You lost your claim to them when they lost the ship birthed by the Essetir.”

“Is that why you’ve been signing for soldiers, Uther?” Annis cut in. Her question could have concerned the weather in his biosphere for all the inflection she gave it.

Lot jerked, and the other three men had the grace to look various shades of guilty. Bayard especially, which Arthur supposed made sense. He was the one who had transferred one of his barrack demesnes. Arthur had stared at the transfer list for a very long time after he’d read that. The troops were a drop in a mostly-empty bucket, the Camelot had more than enough room, but they were explicitly fighters and Mercia gave the same sort of training that Uther gave his own forces - anti-sorcery training.

Annis’s false amusement cut through Arthur’s thoughts. “Oh, didn’t you know, Lot? Uther has been recruiting the able-bodied for… reasons, I’m sure. Are there reasons, dear Uther?”

“Planetfall. I thought I just said that. How well I’m listened to. With the terraform’s accelerated timetable, I need all hands to help with preparations. Without the small populations so graciously transferred to the Camelot by my friends.” Uther nodded vaguely toward the others. Lot couldn’t tell who he was gesturing to, so had to settle for a more general glower of discontent. “I want to claim Albion as much as the rest of you, and I can’t do it without resources.”

“So you don’t plan to fight them?” Annis asked.

Uther gave her a small smile that made Arthur’s shoulders twitch. “Who would I fight?”

“Who indeed. A question for the ages. Are you worried no one would answer your summons if you called the fleet, Pendragon?”
“Is that a threat?” Sitting up straighter in his chair, Uther focused on Annis.

“It was a question, but I suppose you just answered it.”

Uther sat back to lean on the arm of his chair and press his fist to his lips. He said nothing, just shook his head and waited while the other rulers cleared their throats awkwardly (in Rodor and Godwyn’s cases), snorted (Bayard), and glowered (Lot).

Annis, for all she had sounded sharp, wore a worried expression, and that concerned Arthur more than anything. He swallowed another sigh. The Queen of Caerleon did not suffer what she considered ‘foolish behaviour’ gladly, and her idea of ‘foolish behaviour’ was broad and varied. Always before, Arthur had stood as a united front with his father in front of the council, but with Mithian’s vulgarity-laden words at the forefront of his mind (and his harsh words with Merlin leaving him off-balance), Arthur found himself answering the questions his father wouldn’t in the privacy of his own thoughts.

He misliked his conclusions.

The real worry wasn’t that Annis was at odds with Uther - the only one who challenged Uther more on as regular a basis was Morgana and at least Annis was supposedly on the same side - but instead her avenue of attack. When Arthur had left for the fringe, his father had been more than just a figurehead of the fleet, if only just.

As Uther and Annis both tried to out-wait one another, Arthur put in a data request to the Camelot as heir Pendragon, accessing military records that he technically shouldn’t be allowed to read just yet. The relevant numbers flashed across Arthur’s oculars. The results made him a little ill. Uther wasn’t a figurehead, not exactly, but the position that had been established to be as powerful as any of the Kingdom rulers had become almost irrelevant.

The raw data painted a bleak picture. Each Kingdom had solidified tradition into policy, putting their own sworn onto their own ships almost to exclusion. The result was a fractured military that paid more attention to their Kingdom’s head than the ostensible leader of the fleet forces.

Arthur couldn’t think of a more blatant example of non-confidence. Now it wasn’t just odd that Arthur had so many crew from different Kingdoms, it was downright anomalous. Only Mithian’s White Hart held a slim fraction of crew that were not beholden to the Nemeth, and he knew from late nights wrangling over pints - picking and choosing the best in the fleet - that she had tried to tailor her roster. Her status as Rodor’s heir had granted her more leeway than any other Captain, but her percentage of other-Kingdom crew was still abysmal.

His father was conferring with Agravaine, but when Arthur tried to listen in, Annis gave up trying to out-stubborn the man. Exasperated, she said, “Now that you have the Ealdorians and whatever nonsense you’ve gained from my fellow rulers, I want my sworn back.”

Holding up his hand to prevent Arthur from stepping forward, Uther raised his eyebrows. “That’s an interesting request. Do you have a reason?”

“You’ve concentrated the fleet’s greatest talent under your son’s command. Why do you think? Reassign every one of my mechanics and Knight Derian to my ships, Pendragon. Maybe you’ll be good for that, at least.”

Arthur didn’t remember his father ever turning quite so vivid a shade of purple, but before Uther could answer her, it was Godwyn who spoke up. “Send me my Elena.” He said it almost quietly, his eyes flicking from one side to the other as he watched the faces towering over his own council
“Does that mean Mithian gets assigned back?” Rodor asked, looking faintly lost. “She has her own ship, and it’s my ship, so that’s probably alright, isn’t it?”

“Oh, fuck off, Rodor,” Bayard said pleasantly.

“He has some of my mechanics, too,” Rodor protested, “That Chief Lucan of his put in requests for the top of every instruction across the entire fleet for almost two years. That’s a whole generation, practically, gone to Arthur’s command. If Annis gets Derian and Godwyn gets Elena, the least as I should do is get my mechanics.”

Everyone began to talk over one another, demanding their sworn back with an accuracy that made Arthur wonder just how closely they had read his roster and marked of each of ‘their’ beholden. Each and every name was spoken without any difficulty of recall. Only Lot remained silent. This time it was Arthur who wanted to stride across the vacuum to the Essetir and punch the smug smile right off his face. Preferably with his gauntlets on.

Uther stood, interrupting the raised voices and sliced his hand through the air. “Absolutely not.”

“Silence.”

“And why is that?” Annis asked.

“It is in the best interests of Albion, the fleet, and every one of your Kingdoms that the heir Pendragon’s crew stays intact, especially during the next few months as the terraform nears completion. His warship is one of the top-performing ships in the entire fleet, and forcing him to retrain his crew during a vulnerable time merely to satisfy some sort of warped Kingdom-centric rhetoric is foolish,” Uther said. He wore a fixed smile. “And - might I remind you, the Pendragon of the fleet still has final say on all reassignments.”

Annis pursed her lips. “So he does.”

“At least give me back everyone from Ealdor,” Lot broke in, “They’re mine - or were, until you poached them - and I need them for planetfall.”

That was the last straw for Arthur. Speaking up for the first time since greetings and introductions what seemed like hours ago, he said, “I’m sorry. Is this the same ship you neglected to recall?”

All attention shifted to Lot with expressions ranging from incredulous to unimpressed (Bayard. Nothing impressed Bayard). The King of the Essetir hunched his shoulders and darted his eyes to the side, avoiding the other’s looks. Licking his lips, he said, “They were returning.”

“For their every-few-year rendezvous that is non-optional, even for you. There was no recall. None of the Ealdorians I spoke to knew anything about it.” Not that Arthur had known about it either. He could direct his ire at his father just as easily as at Lot, but for now the thought of finding Merlin bleeding out and shivering upon the Ealdor’s bridge was enough to focus his anger. “So don’t tell me that you forgot. The Kilgharrah ripped their databanks before we left the system, and they followed their predetermined route directly into the jaws of a swarm of Glatissant. A predetermined rendezvous route, not a recall route.”

Arthur’s words were news to everyone but Lot, and they all started talking at once. For a long minute, there was a chaos of cross-conversation until Annis eventually waved everyone silent and gestured to Bayard.
Bayard had been waiting to speak. “I’ll put out a recall to all fringe ships, mine or not, within twenty-
four hours, just in case there are any others that have been somehow overlooked. I’m not going to
deck.” He said it in a way that Arthur took as ‘I am going to judge very, very hard’ and not all of his
annoyance was directed at Lot, “but it’s something that I should have thought to do sooner. Like
Uther says, we can’t afford to stop working together with planetfall so soon. The only way the
terraform will finish at all, let alone within any of our lifetimes, is to remain focused and watch each
other’s backs.”

“As like to stick a knife in as guard it,” Lot muttered. Everyone ignored him.

Godwyn huffed out a breath before he spoke up. “Albion space is going to be awfully crowded once
the recalled ships start arriving in earnest. Can we- can I at least request that Arth- that heir
Pendragon’s ship remain in-system until planetfall? As a gesture of solidarity?”

Arthur spoke up before Uther could say no. “Elena will have leave, if we do. As well as the rest of
my pilots and any nonessential personnel. What they choose to do with it is their business as long as
they report back for duty. I don’t intend to replace a single one them.” Arthur let some of his pride in
his crew flood into his words and was rewarded by the slight smile on Annis’s face. Rodor looked
confused, but Godwyn and even Lot were nodding. Bayard just snorted. Arthur didn’t blame him.
He was being about as subtle as a supernova.

There was a long pause, then Uther grimaced. “Very well. The Kilgharrah remains in system after its
repairs, estimated at somewhere near two weeks. What leave Arthur grants his crew will be up to
him.”

After that, the meeting ended rapidly. Rodor, looking startled, signed off without saying farewell.
The others dropped, one by one, until Annis was the only one still connected.

“Uther-” she began, her gaze sliding to the side where Agravaine stood before she continued, “I will
offer what assistance I can to help with the terraform, but I can’t trade away any of my population. If
you ask again, you know what my answer will be.”

“It’s fine. We’ll manage.” Uther waved her off. She gave him a curt nod and, finally, the screen went
dim.

Immediately, Agravaine leaned in. “There would not be conflict over fleet if you would just
reassign-”

“Do you want them to mutiny? If I mixed the fleet as it should be, as it has been for the majority of
our history, I would be lucky to remain King of Camelot, let alone Pendragon. Whatever tricks my
brother had to awe the Kingdoms into docility died with him. I have no leverage, Agravaine, and
unless you have any suggestions where I might acquire some that would make a lick of difference to
any of them, I’d be grateful to hear.”

Shaking his head at Agravaine’s suggestion, Arthur said, “We can’t afford the turmoil now, but it
might be possible after planetfall. We’ll need to send out patrols again, occupy the fringe with
military. We’ll still have a duty to protect those who choose to remain there, and there are claims and
outposts scattered halfway across the Meredor sector that will belong to Albion and not any one
Kingdom. We would do better to wait.”

“You’ll only continue to lose your grip.” Agravaine folded his arms across his chest, raising his
eyebrows at Arthur over Uther’s head.

Uther flicked his fingers towards Agravaine, attention on Arthur as well. “He’s not wrong, son.”
“I know he’s not wrong,” Arthur said, unable to keep the frustration from his tone. “I know you’re not wrong, Uncle. I just don’t think that someone like Lot is going to be willing to compromise on anything until he has his hands full of dirt and irrigation problems that he can’t solve by spacing soil. He was willing to send the Ealdor to be eaten rather than give them the resources they need to last them until the terraform is done. You did pick up on that, didn’t you?”

“I’m certain there were extenuating circumstances,” Agravaine said. “Essetir is overpopulated. A small oversight - recall versus rendezvous - was bound to happen to at least one of the fringe ships.”

“Camelot is our concern,” Uther said, “Camelot and taking the next step forward toward Albion’s habitable future. That’s more important than trying to demand respect as Pendragon. I would sound like a stroppy child at best without a stick big enough to encourage reunification.”

“The Purge was a stick?” Arthur asked before he could catch himself.

Uther gave him a sour look. “It certainly wasn’t a carrot. Albion is our carrot, and you’ll notice how well that particular incentive is working with our illustrious counterparts. You got to keep your crew. One galley in the entire fleet, and they demanded you be kept in-system just in case that changed. I don’t count that as a victory so much as an example of how the power of the Pendragon has waned.”

When Arthur merely stared, Uther sighed and explained, almost off-hand. He certainly didn’t expect argument. “They’re looking ahead to their territories on Albion when they won’t need the fleet to do more than shoot aliens that venture too close, and we have automated sentries for that. You’ll be Captain and King someday, and Pendragon if there is such a thing, but as a King you’re going to have to be as self-interested as any of the others. There is no one else who can look after the Camelot if you’re too concerned with ruling the other rulers.”

Speechless, Arthur rocked back on his heels and met Agravaine’s eyes over his father’s head. His Uncle gave him an encouraging smile.

“I-” Arthur had no response. None. “I have tasks.”

Waving a hand, Uther dismissed him. “Complete them. You may go.”

Arthur turned on his heel, feeling a bit dazed.

“Oh - did you get that boy sworn?” Uther asked before he had gone far.

“Yes.” Arthur said, turning, cautious, but there was nothing in Uther’s expression but curiosity. “He’s said his oaths.”

Uther nodded in satisfaction. “Good. Carry on.”

Inclining his head, Arthur said his farewells and escaped to the corridor. Uneasy, not at all sure any more that he knew what the fuck was even going on, he sought Merlin. If nothing else, having him within sight - within touch - would ease some of his more nebulous fears.
Gaius began tests the moment they reached the Camelot’s infirmary. Scars: pink and intact; Lungs: clear; Magic: returning ever-so-slowly on the heels of precursor tingles that were distracting more than anything. Eventually, Merlin begged off further prodding, not about to tell him of the oath. Gaius let him go with one last lesson on how to soothe the prickle of angered magic.

Standing in the corridor outside of the infirmary, his chest and throat sore, Merlin halted. For the first time since the disaster, he didn’t have anyone keeping track of him.

Of course, the first thing he decided to do was hunt down the familiar.

He found the Ealdorians getting their quarter assignments. His mum stood at the head of the line, a flexiscreen in her hands, passing out numbers and letters and units with hardly a pause for breath. None of the Kilgharrah’s crew were anywhere to be seen except for the massive Knight who had been guarding the forward bay for most of the trip. Merlin caught his eye in passing and was rewarded with a solemn nod and a wink. At Merlin’s subsequent puzzlement, the Knight gestured at his torso.

It took Merlin a moment before it clicked. Knight Percival, whose uniform Merlin was currently wearing. Gwaine hadn’t said that Percival knew. In fact, he’d implied exactly the opposite. Merlin didn’t know if that was better or worse, so he just blushed, ducked his head, and made a sort of ‘thank you’ gesture that the Knight accepted with a small return salute.

There was nothing for him to help with. When he asked his mum, she kissed him on the cheek and shooed him off to rest with absent affection. He’d done the important part in talking to the King for them, and everything was moving so much faster than they had anticipated. She had hundreds to get settled and supplied and wouldn’t he feel so much better after a nap? By the time Merlin escaped in the direction he thought his quarters were in, he was feeling rather superfluous.

He eventually found Will staggering beneath a load of once-folded uniforms and bed linens. Merlin did not manage to rescue the top of the pile before it hit the ground. Will, delighted to see him, promptly foisted half of his linens off on Merlin and dragged him off to assist in bed-making in his new cabin.

The Ealdorians had been separated, mixed thoroughly into the population. According to Will’s constant stream of moderately-to-very useful information, the Captain and King had made sure that assignments were made by profession, family unit, and social grouping according to some sort of fancy algorithm. Will was near the Kilgharrah’s crew’s main off-duty social area. Hunith was somewhere several decks away with a cluster of Ealdorian elders and Camelot’s administrative personnel, including - Will offered the tidbit with a knowing nod - the Lady Consort of Camelot, Vivienne Gorlois.
Merlin didn’t even have a chance to comment before Will continued on, leaving Merlin wondering why Arthur had never mentioned the King’s Consort. Not that he’d had time. A tiny worm of guilt wriggled in Merlin’s belly, part for the shouting and part for maybe breaking the tentative something that had started to develop between them.

Will, font of news that he was, talked the entire time they tucked sheet corners and fluffed pillows. Merlin gathered, half-listening, that he needed to visit one of the Quartermaster’s outposts for some sort of requisition something or something, that the Camelot operated on an only partially functional organisational structure that was a hybrid of military and civilian, and that Will had checked that they had shoes in Merlin’s size waiting for him. (They did.) Will was convinced someone had called ahead, because Merlin’s feet were a sight - all gnarled and skinny and ten-times too long for any normal person - and deserved to be hidden for the betterment of the entire Kingdom.

Will always had been jealous of Merlin’s magnificent toes.

“And you’ll be able to get out of a uniform that looks like you shrunk,” Will finished. “Where’s your bunk, anyhow?”

Merlin sat on Will’s newly-made bed with a huff. “Over and down a deck? Maybe a bit towards the centre? I haven’t had a chance to find it yet.”

“This whole section is usually reserved for the Kilgharrah’s crew.” Will dropped on the bed next to him and glowered at the pile of clothing in the centre of the room. Every single uniform, off-duty and on, and all of the civilian clothes someone had guessed for Will were unfolded and starting to wrinkle. Will gave Merlin a ‘have at it’ gesture. Neither of them moved.

“Gwen was fielding dust complaints when I was dismissed,” Will said. “Guess nobody’s lived in this section for a while. Which - maybe you’re going to be assigned, yeah? Warship looks just like the Avalon, and I know how mad you were about her.”

“Kilgharrah’s not quite the same. Not in the least because I’ve actually met him.”

“Isn’t sticking with him kind of your thing, though?” Will asked. He waved his hands in a way that could have meant anything from ‘towing salvage’ to ‘snogging in the biosphere.’ “As, ah, the next best thing to royalty?”

“I don’t think that’s what dragonlord implies,” Merlin said, giving Will an amused look and dropping his voice a little. Pickups in the private cabins were notoriously fuzzy all across the fleet, but it would be just Merlin’s luck to be caught by the one set of auditory inputs that weren’t.

When he’d given Will the entire story, he hadn’t expected that Will would fixate on the one bit that had ‘lord’ in it somewhere. Will had yet to make up his mind if it ‘dragonlord’ was a disease that needed to be mocked out of him or a rare opportunity to give Kingdom-bred fops the what-for by foisting Merlin onto them.

If he were fussing at Merlin about his heritage, though, it meant he wasn’t asking intrusive questions about their Captain. Things with Arthur were complicated enough.

Will kicked his feet out in front of him and nudged at the pile of clothing. “Dragonlord could do. Imply that. You wouldn’t do half bad a job in charge of something.”

That made Merlin laugh. “Better job than you, you mean? That’s a bit of a low bar.”

“Very funny. But really, they could make you a Captain. Bet talking to your ship and having it talk back would make you the best of the best.”
“That’s-” Merlin shook his head and lapsed into silence. He only continued when Will poked him in the ribs. “Not Captain. Something else maybe. A Captain needs to be prepared to sacrifice—innocents, threats, and those innocents who might become threats. “—just, sacrifice. If it came to that choice, I don’t think I could, yeah? Not knowing my orders would hurt the ship.”

“You could make sure they were only the most necessary orders. No better hands than yours, right? You knowing what you do?”

Merlin shook his head again. “Just think it would be a bad idea, is all.”

Sprawling across the bed, Will shrugged and said, “Worth a try. I’d end up being a dragonlord’s first officer, yeah? Anyone in the system would look twice with that kind of title.”

“You? My first officer?”

“You got another friend as brilliant and talented as me?”

Merlin chuckled. “Nobody I know even comes remotely close.”

Will squinted at him suspiciously, but couldn’t fault Merlin’s wording. “Fine, fine. You going to stay and nap? Welcome to. I don’t have to report to Gwen until tomorrow and I’m going to take advantage of every minute. Preferably unconscious.”

“Don’t think I could,” Merlin said, batting away Will’s hand as he gave him the Puppy Eyes of Extreme Pleading. “No. I need to swap out my clothes. My own bed. Find—” He sighed and flopped back to stare up at the ceiling. “But- excuses. Truth is, I can’t hardly sit still. This place is so empty. I’m afraid it’ll bring back my nightmares.”

“I thought they were gone?” Will propped himself up on an elbow. “All the more reason to sleep here with me. No nightmares when Future Dragonlord First Officer Will’s on patrol!”

Will’s bluster made Merlin blink. “Are you scared of being alone on the Camelot? You?”


And, really, how could Merlin say no to that? “I’ll sit with you until you fall asleep, how about?”

After a moment, Will nodded, ordered the lights off and shifted to use Merlin’s stomach as a pillow. “Don’t go until I’m well and truly out.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

Merlin folded his arms behind his head and followed the faintly-glowing, faintly-pulsing ceiling conduits with his eyes. The Camelot was not exactly healthy, but he couldn’t fault its care. Everything he’d seen so far said that Uther’s crew were tending it as best they could, but it just wasn’t thriving. The skin of the bulkhead next to him was paler green and lighter red than the curved bulkheads of Ealdor had been. Even if his memory was already faulty and he was being influenced by the emptiness, his professional opinion was that the walls looked bloodless. Not dead, exactly, but not alive, either.

He didn’t blame Will for not wanting to sleep alone, because neither did he. If he thought he’d be able to drop off even a little, he’d stay.

Will wasn’t snoring yet. Merlin waited. His friend would need to fill the silence before too long.
“Still doesn’t hurt?” Will queried after several minutes, ignoring Merlin’s subsequent snort. “Still broken?”

Laying a hand on Will’s forehead and avoiding the still-healing head wound, Merlin extended his senses towards his friend. A tendril of his magic brushed across one of Will’s many mods and Merlin yanked his hand back from the contact with a grunt and a curse. “Not still broken.” He rubbed his stung hand. He rubbed at Will’s scalp for good measure, too, though Will just grunted. His head was hard enough that it probably didn’t sting too much. “It’s coming back slow. Are they trying to convince you to take another upgrade?”

“Sorry. Didn’t think you’d snap yourself,” Will said, sounding drowsy. “Don’t have to do much convincing. Gwen’s going to send me to her da. I’m going to get an uplink, and maybe a memory mod to start. It’ll be brilliant.” He yawned. “I’ll end up almost as much metal as your fella, if they let me.”

“Not sure you could call him my ‘fella’. What does that even mean?” Merlin teased. Sleep-deprived Will - who really oughtn’t go more than maybe half a day without a good nap to keep him from being really obnoxious, in Merlin’s humble opinion - gathered himself for a serious and probably deeply embarrassing answer. Merlin cut him off with a different question. “How’d you end up bunking alone?”

It took a moment for Will to switch gears. “Gwen made sure. Mental health, she said. Counsellors need downtime.”

“She’s keeping you on.” Merlin rested a hand on Will’s forehead. “I don’t think I knew that.”

“Already started training me. Said it shouldn’t go to waste.” He yawned again. “M’not terrible at it.”

“Didn’t say you were.”

Will’s coherency dropped off before he did, and Merlin was treated to mostly-unintelligible babble before he finally started to snore. Merlin was rather glad to not be able to understand most of it. Will started to give him advice on how to deal with Arthur. Merlin never wanted to hear the words ‘closet of opportunity’ in references to getting himself or anyone else off ever again. Merlin wondered where his life had gone wrong that he found himself preferring the awkward interference of complete strangers to the completely inappropriate - and anatomically impossible - suggestions of his best mate.

It had been a brilliant idea to give Will his own room, in Merlin’s estimation. The noises that came out of his friend’s face while he slept would drive anyone mad. As soon as Will was snoring in earnest, Merlin leaned over his face and asked, “You really asleep? You’re not practising like a dirty voyeur again?”

There was a mutter that sounded vaguely like, “M’not a cockblock,” but Merlin couldn’t be sure. Either way, Will was asleep.

Extracting himself and tiptoeing out, Merlin dithered in the corridor, still not quite sure what to do with himself. After occupying himself by reading names on doors for long enough to say hello to three uniformed crew members he’d never met, he decided he might as well get himself settled in.

He picked up his newly-requisitioned clothing from the depot Will had mentioned and made his way to his new room. It matched Will’s. A single, simple bed with a surprisingly comfortable mattress (using some sort of material that Merlin didn’t think the Ealdor had ever heard of) was shoved against one wall. A small closet and a small chest for his things accompanied a single desk and chair
bolted to the deck. No water closet - but then, Will’s room hadn’t had one either.

Merlin breathed a sigh of relief that he didn’t have to share, then busied himself tucking away all of his new uniforms. He had to laugh at the off-duty ones they’d given him. They had all been hastily modified to cover up mod cutouts. The stitching alone told him that they had been adjusted to his dimensions from several someones who’d had - variously - a shoulder-cap mod, a belly mod, and some pretty extensive leg mods. If he pulled the stitching out on the last one, he wondered if anyone would object to him wandering about in short pants.

At least Merlin was able to change out of his borrowed uniform and into civilian clothes that, more or less, fit him. Having the shirt cling properly to his torso and his trousers be both long and fit him around the middle was enough to make his day a little brighter.

Once he’d put everything away and made his bed, he sat on the corner of his mattress and stared into space. The reason he didn’t want to be alone and unoccupied nibbled at his mind. Without something to claim his attention, the hungry, sucking sensation he could feel in the walls surrounding him began to grow. The mindless quality of the Camelot’s hunger bothered him. The Kilgharrah had revealed himself as alien, certainly, and not entirely benign, but the Kilgharrah’s hunger was unsettling in an understandable way. A dragon was a predator as much as a warship was designed to be, and the darker hours of Merlin’s magic responded to that with recognition. What he did not have was any frame of reference for the Camelot’s disturbing phenomena.

With a sigh, he extended his senses again. He was gratified to feel his range still expanding, even though when it hit the walls of his room it zapped him with a jolt of static down his limbs. Without a ghost to be harming, however, Merlin didn’t bother to retract his tendrils. The prickle and burn of the contact increased the longer he held himself alert.

The not-quite-pain told him that he was no longer trapped; he couldn’t help but think it glorious. It felt like he was reclaiming his own skin, searing away the crawl of the Glatissant’s assault on the Kilgharrah. The pins-and-needles feel of a waking limb grew until he could no longer stand the contact and pulled his senses in.

He opened his eyes and examined his hands as his magic relaxed. Flexing his fingers, he wondered at the fading tingle of sensation. Always before he had characterised magic-meets-biotech as pain. Always pain. Just now, that... hadn’t been pain. Not exactly. And it said something for his recent experiences that he could tell the difference. The longer he had pushed himself, the more it felt like a barrier, like a residual of the barrier spell that Merlin was absolutely sure was gone. Only this barrier bit back when threatened.

Merlin went to test his new theory, spreading his magic again to see if he couldn’t find the edges, but his senses snagged on his desk drawer. Curious, he investigated to find a package with his name on it. Flat and wide, it said ‘personal effects’ on the cloth wrapping in Gaius’s handwriting, a crabbed scrawl that Merlin had seen him write onto his screens often enough.

It took Merlin a moment to gather the courage to open it, even though he already knew what it was. The Ealdorians hadn’t managed to grab much in the way of personal effects, and the Kilgharrah hadn’t had much to offer: just a few awkward changes of clothes and makeshift toys that the more crafty and nimble-fingered of Arthur’s crew had created for the children. He didn’t deserve this gift. He was grateful for it all the same.

Merlin unwrapped the package to reveal the triskelion that Gaius had given him and sighed. With the symbol sitting in his lap, the faint, awakening bits of his magic were overjoyed to finally be able to touch it, to fill in the carven whorls with pale gleaming gold as whatever residual peace it held soaked into him in return.
Just holding it helped him feel centred. Balanced. A little less paranoid and lost, and more like he was secure in his place above the dark hunger of the Camelot, not simply poised to fall.

He debated with himself for several minutes before deciding to hang it on the wall like it wanted. Putting aside the fabric it had been wrapped in, he tried to fasten it to the wall with a daub of reflexive magic. For the first time since, well, *since*, it responded.

For ten whole seconds, Merlin was able to admire the triskelion where it hung, its leather loop hooked over nothing but his magic. Then the ship ate the spell. The triskelion crashed to the floor behind the desk and Merlin, panicked that he’d broken it, lunged forward to fish it out from the gap. Until it was in his hands again and his magic was coiled protectively around the tiny symbol, he didn’t even bother to control his ragged breathing. Only once he was sure it was still intact did he calm.

“The fuck?” he asked the ship. He received nothing but echoes in reply.

The droplet of magic he had used was gone. It was neither on the wall, nor on the triskelion. Not even residue remained.

Ships didn’t just *eat* magic.

He’d used the same stick’um trick on his Avalon schematics when he was boy and the Ealdor had tolerated the spell until—well, for all Merlin knew, they were still stuck to his ceiling. Spells faded, they didn’t just… He could see where the spell had been. A splotch of angry green on the bulkhead, brighter than the surrounding skin, proved that Merlin had not hallucinated himself casting.

This time he hung the triskelion by coaxing a spur from the wall and shaping it into a small hook. Even that was slow going. There was nothing in the Camelot that responded to Merlin, magic or mundane. Even the Villain’s Smile, ghostless and mechanical as it had been, had responded to him.

Stepping back to admire his handiwork when it was finally hung, he grabbed at the wrappings to dispose of them. His fingers met something small and metallic. When he pulled it free, it proved to be a holster fastener.

Merlin sat down on the bed, clutching the fastener. He’d returned it to Gwaine. Or he thought he’d returned it, at least. He pressed his fist to his lips. As ‘personal effects’ went, it was a stupid thing to feel attached to, but Arthur had been so careful in making sure that Merlin’s trousers had been fastened just-so. He clenched his fist around the fastener until it threatened to bite into his palm.

He didn’t want to try to test the new barrier he’d found, not now that he knew that the Camelot was actively hostile. He shivered. He’d been touching the deck, the walls, and hadn’t imagined the sucking sensation.

He wanted to sleep even less than he had before.

Merlin clipped the holster fastener firmly to his waistband. As the cool metal began to warm against his skin, he fled his room for the one place that he could feel grounded without the triskelion and not feel hemmed in by the unwelcoming flesh of the Camelot.

He didn’t know how he found his way, exactly, but soon enough the Camelot’s biosphere opened up before him as he ascended a set of stairs through the forest floor. The stairwell disgorged him into a small clearing surrounded by towering oaks. Merlin let the scent of rotting leaves and fresh-turned loam fill his nostrils and he took a deep, calming breath. He shed his shoes to swing them over his shoulder and moved further in.
The dirt provided a buffer between him and the Camelot, and it was filled with growing and wriggling things, a complete ecosystem in as close-to-perfect balance as any nature-based endeavour could get. Some of the trees had been saplings in the time of Bruta and they towered up past the centre of the massive sphere. The air was moist, but not close, and the dirt between Merlin’s toes soothed him like not even a ghost’s presence could. *Imagine a whole planet of this*, he told himself. It felt impossible and thrilling, both.

The foliage rustled as he sped through the biosphere, small creatures fleeing his approach. Far overhead, near the centre of the sphere, the great beating heart of the Camelot floated, exempt from artificial gravity and held in place by massive conduits with diameters as large as Merlin was tall. He caught glimpses through the leaves only, of the heart and the vaulted upper hemisphere, but he could feel the beats as they shuddered through the ship. This close, they weren’t hidden by the vibrations of individual engines or the faster, hummingbird heartbeats of the relay pumps.

The Camelot’s biosphere was four times again the size of the Ealdor’s and he could hear the babble of a small creek somewhere in the distance through the trees. Some of the oldest of the growth showed sign of light- and gravity-flux with tortured above-ground root systems that dove into the soil after a confusion of false turns. He passed a small patch of flowering strawberries not quite ready to bear fruit. A whinny in the distance spoke of more domesticated creatures; the Pre-Colonial Research and Development enclave would have a stable in anticipation of planetfall. A dog barked soon after, the first sign since he’d disembarked that the Camelot had pets like the rest of the fleet.

He hadn’t known where he was going until he arrived. Leaning hard against a rowan, he looked up past its branches to marvel at the inner shell of the biosphere. The section above his head was milky white, the only part of the biosphere’s walls that deviated from the generic pale green and gold of the inner skin of the ship. He knew that beyond the wounded curve was the Camelot’s scar, open to the stars, but the skin of the biosphere was opaque. There was nothing to see but the occlusion itself.

It was mind-boggling that the entire biosphere hadn’t cracked open like an egg, spilling old growth and creature occupants into the vacuum. The heart beat, a shudder through the forest that rattled leaves and set some of the tallest trees to creaking, and he looked up at the source only to drop his jaw. The side of the heart held jagged, never-healed scars, weeping gouges that added a shushing noise to the beat, one he thought had been wind or water or something less than damage to the ship’s central circulatory system. He stopped and stared, disbelief sending a chill down his spine. *How-*

Merlin slid down the trunk of the rowan to take advantage of its shade, still staring up at the heart scars. If there had been a breach, there wouldn’t have been anything left of the biosphere. His mum had said that’s what had happened to the Ealdor.

Merlin wrapped his arms around his legs and buried his face in his knees. A breeze rustled the leaves around him. Whatever was wrong with the Camelot couldn’t reach him here, not among the trees and the birdsong where everything was alive. He shivered again. The Camelot was supposed to be alive. Humans couldn’t live on it if it weren’t - the decay would be too much to retain a pressure seal. The ship would rot and collapse if it weren’t alive.

The shiver turned into a sob he forced himself to swallow, unwilling to mar the natural calm of the forest. Just breathing in air that had been scrubbed by trees and not by machine made him feel better, somehow. Not that it was better in itself - Will would go on and on about the purification processes if Merlin forgot himself and made a comment - but just that trees didn’t hurt when he touched them with magic. Rotting leaves didn’t. Sparrows didn’t. Strawberry plants didn’t.

His muscles began to unknot, the tension he’d been carrying in his shoulders easing away as he slumped back against his chosen tree. If anyone wanted to find him here, they’d have to make an
effort. Just tracking his ID chip would tell them very little.

The impulse to cry eased as well. Merlin pulled the holster fastener free and folded it into both his hands before he closed his eyes. Without the Camelot tugging at his magic and feeding his unusual insomnia, he was exhausted. The slow thud of the Camelot’s heart marked the time as he fell into a light sleep, and his magic drifted out in all directions to expand the range of his senses. He was as safe here in the biosphere as he was anywhere on the Camelot. Except maybe at Arthur’s side.

Merlin wasn’t sure how long he had dozed when he was awoken by raised voices. Jolting at a sudden nearby shout, he nearly fell over and had to scrabble at the leaf mold to keep himself upright. The holster fastener nipped at his palm before he recalled that he was still holding it.

Tucking it away, he began to creep toward the voices, trying to remain undetected. He found that sneaking up, even among a crackling, uncertain underbrush, was a great deal easier when no one was paying any attention whatsoever to their surroundings.

Morgana paced in front of a second woman who stood with her arms crossed, watching her. Every line in Morgana’s body screamed fury and her eyes blazed a gold that rivalled Merlin’s on his best day. Even with his senses pulled in, his magic tight within his skin, she roared like a wildfire that made his magic want to rage with her.

“If you can’t even tell me what’s wrong, I’m not going to be able to help,” the other woman said, unimpressed by Morgana’s fury. Merlin had no idea how she could be so blase about someone who was obviously a magic user ready to unleash her pent up anger in what felt like a fireball lurking at her fingertips. He watched Morgana clench and unclench her fists repeatedly.

Maybe it wasn’t the best idea to be eavesdropping on someone who could roast him with a thought. He didn’t think he was quite recovered enough to protect more than his big toe if it came to defending himself from an attack by magic.

The other woman was blonde-haired and dark-eyed, and the inner ring of her irises shone faint gold in the dim of the forest. Her face was familiar enough that he kept trying to place her even as his eyes were drawn to her garments. Astonishingly, she was in a dress. A dress. In close, ever-changing corridors they caught on anything and everything, proved more a hindrance than a help in zero gravity, and had largely drifted into ceremonial wardrobes because they made a blatant statement. Alongside cloaks, they said: ‘I’m not expecting trouble.’ Also, ‘I can waste fabric on drape.’

She looked so relaxed that Merlin tried to discover her secret with a gentle investigative touch of his senses before he could stop himself. Half in a panic that with her obvious magic she’d feel the probe and discover him, he pulled back too late. His senses brushed her anyway.

He had to clamp both of his hands over his mouth to keep from gasping. The other woman wasn’t there. She was merely an image, and one powered entirely by magic. A bowl at her feet thrummed with magic that Merlin had originally attributed to the woman herself.

Morgana pulled up short at the far end of her pace and turned on her heel to face the image. “You almost killed him.” Accusation and horror made her sharper than she’d been when talking to him. “Killed him. That was never part of the deal.”

“There is such a thing as collateral damage.”

“My brother,” Morgana snapped, “is off limits. Next time, call off your creatures before they even sneeze in his direction.”
“You’re going to have to deal with him sooner or later.”

“His death would have served you no purpose.”

“His death would have been handled.”

“Turned to your advantage, you mean.”

“Just so.”

“I don’t want to be Queen with his blood on my hands. I’d be a hollow Queen if the position came at his expense.”

“So melodramatic, sister.” The woman dropped her chin to her chest, the only movement from her arms-folded stance that Merlin had seen beyond the movement of her lips. She took a deep breath before she looked up again. “The target’s death needed to be confirmed without even a whisper of a doubt.”

“Morgause-”

Morgause?! Merlin’s jaw dropped and he made very, very sure that he was well-hidden in his bush. Morgana wasn’t looking his way just yet, but even if she did- He desperately hoped that Morgana was using the term sister in a purely metaphorical sense, but the familiarity that Merlin had found in Morgause’s face made the hope a very thin straw to grasp indeed.

Pinching the bridge of her nose in a gesture so like Arthur that Merlin’s brain stuttered, Morgana continued, “If you had bestirred yourself for even a half a second to check the first transmission of the deceased list, you’d have seen Balinor’s name. I won’t have your laziness be the reason I no longer have a brother.”

Feeling a little ill, Merlin kept his hands firmly over his mouth and tried to breathe shallowly.

“Lazy?” Morgause drawled in blatant challenge.

“Not lazy, then.” Morgana’s eyes narrowed. “Lazy isn’t like you. Which means Kanen loosed himself from your command.”

“Your affection for Arthur makes you slow-witted.”

“How could you let him get loose?”

Morgause declined to answer, instead quirking an eyebrow and asking, “And how would you solve that little problem?”

Despite Morgause’s patronising tone, Morgana replied, “Mark the next one.”

“That was my thought.” Morguase nodded in approval, teacher to student. “He has been marked and is on his way. Tend him when he arrives, but any further participation on your part is not required.”

“This doesn’t make me any less angry with you.”

“It’s not intended to. We’re continuing with the plan. How soon is planetfall?”

Morgana closed her eyes. After a moment, she nodded to herself. “With the resources currently being shunted to the returned galleys - thank you, sister dearest, for the gift of an inopportune delay - a month at the soonest. The warships will need to be launched, obviously, before the Camelot is
“brought down.”

“And the final catalyst stage?”

“Three weeks. Again, Arthur’s ship will push it back.”

“Then we have three weeks.” Morgause smiled.

“Is the marked boy-”

“He will do what is required. It is up to you to manage the succession.”

Standing in front of Morgause’s image, Morgana folded her arms to mirror her sister’s. “As I see fit?”

“Reverse the Purge laws and I don’t care if you sell every ship you rule over to Bayard and leave yourself alone with that rotting sphere you call home. Yes, as you see fit.”

Nodding sharply, Morgana stepped away to pace once more. “The other rulers will object. We’re not going to be giving them incentive to see things our way.”

“Not diplomatically perhaps, no, but we’ll have the leverage of a successful coup.”

“They won’t want to legitimise us.”

“You overestimate the strength of that objection. With the Camelot ours - yours, of course - they will be driven more by fear than reason.”

Morgana turned her dissatisfied expression toward the forest, giving Merlin a clear view of how little she thought of that idea. She spoke away from the image of Morgause, her tone controlled. “Perhaps it is not I who is related to Uther. That is a well-known tactic of his.”

The image did not waver. Morgause sounded unperturbed by the implication. “It is a tactic, nothing more. Your rulership will be as ridiculously precious as you wish it, but do not forget the circumstances upon which our cause is founded. Blood. Fire. The death of hundreds of thousands across the Meredor sector. Our kind has been feared since Bruta launched the Camelot and began construction of the Nemeth, and some fear is healthy - like that of a child for an asp. They should fear retaliation if anything like the Purge were to happen again.”

Merlin barely breathed. Morgana was staring at the forest somewhere above his head, hands still flexing, her expression unhappy. The gold in her eyes had dimmed to a glow. “I will not be insulted for wishing my rule stable. I have worked too hard to want my throne so precarious.”

“Some consequences are to be feared, sister.”

Morgana closed her eyes and did not respond. The severe lines of her face softened as she let out her breath, but regaining her composure did not take her long. When she turned once more toward the image, every calculated tension and accentuated angle had returned to her performance.

Pausing before she turned to put her back to him, she smoothed the pain lines from her forehead as the lights on the curve of her neck lit and faded. He couldn’t even imagine what her mods were doing to her.

Her face was turned away, but she sounded amused when she said, “Some consequences are to be feared? I am of consequence. Does the same apply?”

Morgause laughed and did not answer, only made her farewells. The set of Morgana’s shoulders and
the rigidity of her spine never wavered, even though she responded to Morgause with apparent affection. At last, her sister’s image unfolded her arms and sliced her hand through the air, a symbolic gesture of severing. The conjuration collapsed in upon itself in a swirl of mist and falling rain, dappling the detritus surrounding the bowl.

For a long time - Merlin tried to count his own heartbeats, but the pace would jump every time Morgana twitched a shoulder. Eventually, he gave up and started counting the Camelot’s. He reached at least four - Morgana stood with head bowed in the clearing, the bowl at her feet. “You did not promise me that no harm would come to him,” she said. She spoke low enough that Merlin leaned forward out of instinct, rustling the bushes. He froze.

Morgana sought the source of the sound with a slow glance over her shoulder, her eyes glowing faint gold. Merlin held his breath. Except she did not activate her oculars or send out sensing tendrils, she simply dismissed the sound and picked up the bowl. Flabbergasted, Merlin watched her empty the water out into the dirt and stamp away into the undergrowth on the far side of the clearing.

Merlin waited for another count of five - Camelot’s heartbeats, not his - before he relaxed enough to even think about moving. To the limited range of his senses, she was long gone.

“Fuck,” he told himself. “This is bad. This is very, very bad.”

He paused.

“You have to tell Arthur.”

Quickly dusting his feet off, he shoved his boots back on and took off through the forest in the vague direction he’d come from, using the scarred side of the heart to orient himself. He tripped more than once in his haste and by the time he’d found one of the stairwells leading out and down, his lungs were burning and the muscles beneath his chest scars ached. Only when the seals engaged when the door irised shut behind him, shutting out the smell of dirt and growing things, did he realise that he hadn’t the foggiest where Arthur was. He couldn’t ask the ship - which was already nibbling at his magic now that he was back within its reach - and he hadn’t seen any of the terminals that had been aboard the Kilgharrah.

Even better, as soon as he set off in the direction he thought the Kilgharrah crew decks would be, he found that he was lost. In the end, he had to ask a friendly looking mechanic with a scarred lip and impressive facial tattoo for directions. She pointed him back the way he’d come. Two more helpful individuals later and he wheezed to a halt in front of a door like any other door that lined the corridor, except that this one had Arthur’s name scarred into the wall beside the frame.

Of course Arthur wouldn’t answer when he knocked. Fucking of course. Merlin pounded on the door loud and long enough to make one of Arthur’s neighbours stick his head out to tell him to shut up and go away. Backing away, Merlin set off down the corridor, picking a random direction.

Arthur’s door had disappeared around the curve of the deck before it occurred to Merlin that one of the Kilgharrah’s crew might have a better idea of where he’d gotten off to. He had just turned around to go pound on a different door when he heard a puzzled, “Merlin?” from behind him.

“Arthur!” Merlin spun in place and launched himself at the other man only to trip over his own feet and nearly sprawl into Arthur’s arms. “I was looking for you.”

“I can see that.” Arthur gripped Merlin’s upper arms, holding him steady and frowning as he set him upright. At some point, he’d changed out of his armour and ceremonial cloak and into one of his off-duty uniforms that exposed most of his chest and arms, but Merlin didn’t really have it in him appreciate it properly. Arthur, still frowning, examined Merlin’s face. “What’s wrong?”
“Morgana’s in charge of the succession.” Merlin blurted. He clutched at Arthur’s biceps and tried to shake Arthur for emphasis. It didn’t work, but he tried. “Morgause was in a bowl.”

Arthur’s expression went blank. “Not here,” he said, turning Merlin around and pointing off down the corridor. “March.”

“Where-?”

“March.”
Instead of stopping at Arthur’s room like Merlin thought they would, they continued onward in a spiralling route that had him completely lost inside of ten minutes. Eventually, the temperature dropped enough to feel it, and Merlin guessed they were heading toward the outer hull. The entire trip, Arthur said nothing. Every time Merlin opened his mouth he was shushed.

The corridors started to look more skeletal after a while. Raw beams and bones showed through the skin of the ship, and the heady rushing sound of conduits in constant use died the further Arthur led. The silent march was familiar enough, though this time Arthur didn’t have his hand on the back of Merlin’s neck. He merely gripped Merlin’s upper arm and directed him by angling his shoulders through half-sealed doors. The lack of proper doors sent a chill down Merlin’s spine. It was evidence enough to tell him that they were travelling through little-used decks - or empty decks. A single breach in the entire section would rip the air from every one of the abandoned corridors and spell death for anyone stupid enough to be here without a suit.

Merlin slid a glance at Arthur and mentioned the suit business. Politely. Without implying anything about Arthur’s intelligence.

“We’re in an inner pocket.” Arthur said, stepping over a strange growth on the deck that caused Merlin no small concern. “Repairs went outwards-in towards the habitable sections.”

They left civilisation far behind. At last they passed through a door in much, much better repair and Merlin felt a bit better. The ship in this direction looked more taken care of, more, well, not exactly alive, but closer to it than the strangely emaciated section they had just traversed. Arthur halted him in front of a sealed iris and took a deep breath before activating the door and stepping them through.

Where Merlin had expected another corridor was a small room. A shrine. The far wall was entirely windows, thick and transparent, same as the wall on either side, the ceiling, and the floor. Only the bulkhead holding the door was the opaque of Camelot’s natural skin. It was covered with names and images, smothered by tacked-up bits of plastic and paper and metal. There were hundreds upon hundreds of names. The bottom dropped out of his stomach.

They were at the very edge of the Camelot’s devastation. From their vantage Merlin could see into the roiling depth of the scar. The clear wart they stood within cast wavering shadows on tangles of bone and steel in all directions, but the light faded far more quickly than it should, leaving the depths of the exposed structure lit only by starlight and the glow that filtered up from somewhere Merlin couldn’t see. From here he had a clear view of the white curve of the biosphere’s damaged skin, as well as the sunlit clouds of Albion Four that near to blinded him when he looked in their direction. Something moved in the deep where no light penetrated.

“What is it?” he whispered.
“Mutation.” Arthur stood in front of the shrine wall, his hand covering one of the pictures. “Overgrown cilia, like on the destriers.”

Something twitched in the dark below them and Merlin flinched back. “Are they dangerous?”

“We don’t know.”

Merlin stared down at the eerie glow. “The light?”

“Bioluminescence? Radiation? Both? Can’t remote scan - too much interference - and instrumentation gives up, dissolving in your hand the further inward you go. There’s no effect if you’re on the other side of the wall from it, standing on the deck and putting your hand against the Camelot’s skin, but if you can avoid the cilia and try to approach from this side you get to play the ‘how long will my suit last’ game.”

“That’s not a fun game.”

“It’s really not.” Arthur turned from the wall. “This entire section is surveillance free. It was never a priority to replace the damaged systems elsewhere - and it felt disrespectful to put anything in here. So. Talk.”

Dragging his attention from the depths of the Camelot’s scar, Merlin wavered at the outer curve of the wart. He wanted to go to Arthur and reassure himself with the confidence of touch that he was alive and well. The anger that Morgana had directed at her sister had carried an undercurrent of fear that felt very familiar, renewing all of Merlin’s deepest terror that he was still dreaming - that this was going to be the worst of all his nightmares but the first. (That was an odd thought, but Merlin was having trouble pinpointing why.) Arthur, however, stood aloof, his expression neutral. The images and offerings on the wall behind had small embedded lights that silhouetted Arthur with a multicoloured glow.

Merlin didn’t think Arthur would accept a touch any more than he thought Arthur would be pleased with what Merlin had to tell him. He remained silent.

Arthur snapped his fingers and gestured for Merlin to speak. “The succession. Morgana. Morgause. Ring any bells? Are you going to say something or just stare at me?”

Now that he’d been given time to think, Merlin didn’t know how to begin. It felt wrong to blurt out Morgana’s status as a magic user, especially considering she’d hidden it so much more effectively than he had. He dropped his gaze from Arthur’s and stared at his toes. “Morgana-” The place where his oath sat in his chest warmed as the thought of omitting her status crossed his mind. It was a tiny detail, but important. The reminder of his pledge to Arthur gave him resolve. He steadied himself and looked up again.

He still couldn’t find the right words.

“What does she want?” Arthur prompted him.

That, Merlin could answer. “To be Queen.”

Arthur sucked in his breath, but nodded. “She can’t. She’s not even in line.”

The whole ‘no blurring it out’ thing flew straight out of his thoughts. Arthur needed to know the full threat. “She has magic,” Merlin said, letting the words drop heavy between them. “I don’t think lineage matters at this point.”
Merlin watched Arthur’s face pale. He wavered on his feet. Merlin stepped forward as soon as he did, ready to be squashed by his metal bulk if he tipped over because Merlin certainly didn’t think he could catch him. He’d try anyway, obviously, but squashing was definitely more likely. Luckily for Merlin, such a noble sacrifice turned out to be unnecessary. Arthur sat down using the shrine wall to steady himself.

Merlin was crouched at his side in an instant. “I’m sorry, sorry-” Arthur had a horrible, empty expression on his face.


Merlin drew away, rocking back on his heels and dropping his hand from Arthur’s arm. “Yeah. Certain sure.”

“Tell me.”

Seating himself with their shoulders touching, Merlin told him everything he could remember, from Morgause’s dress and her water-filled bowl to Morgana’s anger. Arthur didn’t ask many questions and his oculars began to glow a faint blue as they spoke.

When Merlin finished, he tugged his knees up to his chin and waited. The moving things down in the scar below them twitched and spasmed. With the transparent floor, it made Merlin feel vulnerable, like the wart they sat in would drop straight off the side of the ship and deposit them into the pit. His magic quivered uneasily, warning him away from trying to sense their surroundings. This place was haunted, the mindless hunger amplified.

Arthur startled Merlin out of his reverie by saying, “Morgana will need to get rid of me as Camelot’s heir before she can be Queen.”

“She really didn’t sound like she wanted to kill you, though.” Merlin pointed this out in an effort to be fair. Arthur hadn’t seen how close to roasting her own sister with her temper Morgana had come. He might not be the best judge of character in the Albion system, no, but he didn’t think terrifying, murderous rage was something easy to fake.

“It doesn’t matter and - no offence - but Morgana is more likely angry it wouldn’t have been her putting me down than that she holds any affection for me. The lines of succession are clear. The other rulers depend on the stability of the inheritance system for their own power. She can’t displace me without proving me unfit, changing my status, or killing me outright or she’ll risk an unstable rule.” Arthur paused for long enough that Merlin thought he was waiting for him to speak. Then Arthur took a deep breath and said, “It goes without saying that she’s trying to kill my father.”

“I got that impression, yeah.”

“Fuck,” Arthur summed up Merlin’s feelings on the subject in one breathy expletive.

Before courage deserted him, Merlin ventured to ask, “You believe me?”

“Yes.”

*That was prompt.* Merlin blinked. The last time they’d seen each other they’d fought, and Arthur hadn’t shown any sign that his attitude toward Merlin had shifted appreciably. “But-”

“You’re a sor- warlock. Yes, I know. But- tell me a lie.”

“What?”
“Tell me a lie.”

“Um - I hate trees.” Merlin said, the first deliberate lie that came to mind. As lies went, it was pretty pathetic, but his oath flared into a white-hot core of agony in his chest and he gasped. When the edges of his vision cleared, he saw Arthur rubbing his own chest ruefully.

“‘Without deceit’,” Arthur said dryly. “I am remembering those words very distinctly at the moment.”

“Oh, oh- fuck.” Not that Merlin anticipated lying to Arthur, but - how smart was the spell he’d put on himself? Would it understand intention? Did it only count for blatant falsehoods or did lies by omission count? Had he made a mistake in casting the spell? For all his bluster at Morgana, did he regret this? He might regret this. Fuck. Fuck-fuck. What had been the wording? What was the oath he had sworn? What were oaths? What-?

Arthur bumped Merlin’s shoulder with his own and spoke to the source of his panic. “Harmless, faithful, and honest, and I get only the best of your intentions. My goals and my person get set above in any conflict. That’s it.”

Taking a series of deep breaths, Merlin nodded and let the feeling of claustrophobia fade. It almost helped, almost, that they were only a thick width of metal and plastic away from the whole of the vacuum of space. Even having it be Arthur and an oath to Arthur, and for it to sound so simple and what he was planning to do anyway when Arthur summarised it for him, being bound felt a little too much like the destiny bullshit that the Kilgharrah had been spouting. He thought he had lanced that anger, understood it - though the reason for the understanding kept sliding from his mind each time he tried to grasp it. It was a trap either way: forced loyalty or some arbitrary alignment of stars.

He’d given his oath of his own free will, but this spell felt uncomfortably like he’d negated that freedom. That choice. His skin felt too tight.

Not because he didn’t want to tell Arthur the truth or that he had any intention of going on a magical rampage, but because he’d sealed the oath on his power, with a spell that was making no secret of its intention to force him to keep his word. He didn’t want to fear the consequences of the binding he’d naively set, to obey it out of fear of backlash. He wanted it to be his choice to tell Arthur the truth, to stand by him, protect him.

The frustration of worrying how much of what he wanted to do for Arthur were his own intentions and how much was oath and destiny mixed together was going to bury him.

“How did you-” Merlin choked on the question.

Arthur huffed, partially in amusement. “You almost passed out when my father tried to get you to replace your oath. I had a sneaking suspicion you would be about as successful in breaking it another way.”

“It’s not that I want to lie to you,” Merlin said, trying to swallow his unhappiness. Explaining to Arthur was more than he could handle at the moment. Still, he tried. It sounded worse when it came out of his mouth. “I never want to, I just hate that I can’t.”

Merlin pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes, wishing he could take the words back as soon as they’d been said.

But Arthur simply said, “I know,” like he did.

They sat, shoulders touching, and stared out across the scar. The artificial gravity didn’t stop at the
edge of the crater. As they watched, a small chunk of debris broke free of the structure near the hull and floated inward. When it passed some invisible line, it caught and plummeted down into the blackness below. Merlin could have sworn he saw the impact as a flare of light. Lavender, like an afterimage of a far brighter flash.

“I didn’t bring you here just because of the lack of auditory pickups,” Arthur said into the silence. “We fought.”

Merlin winced. “We did. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t...” Arthur picked up Merlin’s hand and folded it into his own. Merlin froze as Arthur entangled their fingers, human hand into human hand. Arthur stroked Merlin’s knuckles with the metal of his sword hand. “You didn’t know and what you- not said, but what you yelled at me made me send out queries. Queries because when I figured out that it was the spell and the oath that made it impossible for you to swear, it was a short leap to the whole ‘can’t lie’ thing. And queries because you’re fringe, because he’s my father. So. Queries. There are no records where there should be records, but there were a few classified over my head that I shouldn’t have had access to.”

Arthur paused to take a calming breath. “He’s still my father, Merlin.”

Merlin licked his lips and squeezed Arthur’s hand. He didn’t want to agree.

“I grew up with this,” Arthur said, sweeping his other arm out to encompass the scar and the disaster and the pulsing, writhing anomaly. “Over and over again, I’d hear it blamed on sorcery. It’s not technically an intensity twelve, but it’s still a catastrophic magical disaster no matter where on the Sigan-Bruta scale it officially falls. Unable to be healed or cleaned. One that killed my mum, my uncle, and claimed so many lives.”

The pictures on the wall behind them felt like they were pressing on Merlin’s senses, judgemental and reproachful.

Arthur ran his thumb across the lines in Merlin’s palm, a gesture too intimate for the subject matter. Merlin wanted to pull away, to put distance between himself and Arthur, himself and the faces on the shrine behind him. When he tried, Arthur tightened his grip and something in his eyes made Merlin halt.

A secret. A vulnerability. Merlin couldn’t abandon him to a lack of contact with that in his eyes.

“You don’t know the story,” Arthur said.

Merlin shook his head even though it wasn’t a question.

“No one knows the story. Not really. My father, maybe. What I was told was this:”

Arthur spoke quietly with a grip on Merlin’s hand that turned his hand blue.

“Her full name was Nimueh Lake and she was... powerful. Now they call her the Lake woman, because naming her would be respect. My father has never been straightforward with me, and I suppose it doesn’t matter now, but something happened and Queen Igraine of the Camelot was struck down by some sort of terrible spell upon the event of my birth.”

“Your mum.”

“My mum. Both my father and my Uncle went after the Lake woman. Blaming her for what he thought was my and my mum’s deaths. They had the power for it, even with my father just barely
our Captain and King. Uncle Ambrosius was Pendragon at the time.”

Merlin’s small noise of surprise made Arthur chuckle.

“They said he could bring his ships to life beneath his touch, so brilliant was he at command,” Arthur said.

“He was a dragonlord.” Merlin tilted his head at Arthur. Uncle wasn’t so far a relation with respect to magic.

Arthur slid him a sideways look, but didn’t ask him to define the term. “Not according to my father. That would be sorcery and madness, not something to accuse his brother of.”

At a loss as how to respond to that, Merlin swallowed hard.

“Somehow - no one knows who to blame - warheads were launched at the Camelot and in the confrontation, both the Lake woman and my uncle were killed. And not just them, but also an eighth of the Camelot.” Arthur gestured at the scar before them. “You would know that much, but you wouldn’t know my father was - is - a brilliant tactical commander. Made for war, I think sometimes. So he claimed both King and Pendragon in the chaos after the attack and started one, against magic and the weapons that stole his family from him.”

“Warheads. Fuck. Arthur, I’m sorry. I’m - and- and all these people.” That’s what got Merlin. He scooted closer to Arthur, wrapping himself into his space until their hips touched and Arthur’s arm rested against his chest. He rested his chin on Arthur’s shoulder.

Arthur shook his head in negation, but said, “Yes. And no. The way he talks about it - it’s personal for him. It’s about me. It’s about Igraine. He was barely King, had only just begun to Captain the Camelot when this happened. He didn’t even know if I’d live long enough to become heir, if he should claim the throne as Regent or rewrite the succession entirely. For both positions, since my uncle died without heirs.

“That’s what you need to know,” Arthur said with an intensity that matched the grip he had on Merlin’s hand. “He didn’t start a war with these names and faces haunting his nights; he used them to justify himself. My mother died first. My mother died before everything happened. Not during. That’s not really - it’s obvious, isn’t it, because I’m here? But she’s lumped in with the other deaths. She’s on the wall behind me, her name and her face with all the others. You would have been told she died in the disaster.

“I wasn’t. Maybe I should have been. Can’t blame myself for killing her if it goes against the official story, can I?”

Merlin wanted the twisted look on Arthur’s face to go away. He squeezed their clasped hands. “I’m sorry.”

“The files I shouldn’t be able to see imply - they don’t outright say, but it’s there if you have fucking eyes - that the Purge had begun the moment my mother died. It was going to go forward before they knew what happens to a cornered sorcerer. But look out there. Just- just look. We can’t even fix the damage and we’ve been trying my entire life. As justification goes-” Arthur cut himself off. “Could you do this?”

A chill went through Merlin. He wanted to close his eyes, pull away, to not have look at Arthur when he gave his answer. All of his fears bubbled to the surface. Of losing control. Of the absence of Balinor’s barrier spell. Of what might happen when his magic recovered if he didn’t know how to
control it, especially now that he was in a place that could mean his death in so many different ways. And not just his.

But Arthur didn’t deserve to be oathbound to a coward. Merlin lifted his chin from Arthur’s shoulder when he turned his head and met his eyes steadily.

“Yes,” he said, because they both knew he wasn’t about to lie. “I could.”

It didn’t matter that he never wanted to, that his magic wasn’t for this. Arthur had only asked him if he was capable.

Arthur merely nodded and said, “I’m not- I wasn’t- It’s not a matter of just being stubborn. About your magic.” There was an odd note in his tone that Merlin couldn’t quite place. “I’m sorry.”

“I never said- you- this. This.” Merlin pointed down into the pit below them, past the milky cataract of the biosphere’s shell into the lower depths that twitched as if acknowledging their regard. “I’m scared of me. I’m more scared of me than you are, because I know the kind of loss of self, of control it takes to do this and I don’t know if I have the control to not. The only thing I know, and I know I can’t make you believe this, but I don’t ever want this to happen because of me. Not ever. I’ll do anything to keep myself from doing something like this.”

Before Merlin could react, Arthur released his hand and moved his arm from front to back to wrap around Merlin’s shoulders, pulling him in to plant a kiss on the side of his head. It was a solid, affectionate buss of Arthur’s lips against Merlin’s hair, and it took him entirely by surprise. Arthur tugged his head down, and Merlin rested his cheek on Arthur’s shoulder. What just happened?

“Thank you,” Arthur said. When Merlin went to speak, Arthur clarified, “For hearing me out.”

“You heard me out, though?”

“I brought you to a place that’s evidence of everything I believe that you challenge. It was supposed to be proof.” The small laugh Arthur gave contained only the barest hint of mirth. “Justification. To shove in your face. That’s cruel. It’s cruel. I’m sorry.”

Even more bewildered than before, Merlin flailed his way back upright and boggled at Arthur. “It’s- what? I would have- I wanted to see this. I needed to see this. The shrine. The scar. Everything. Even whatever that is.” Merlin disentangled himself from Arthur’s arm and shoved himself to his feet to pace to the far curve of the wart and stare down. “I brought you news that your sister is trying to kill you and your father. I-”

Arthur caught his sleeve, once more on his feet and crowding into Merlin’s space. Merlin hadn’t seen heard him move. Arthur said, “You also just told me you never want it to be you, and you can’t lie to me.”

“Yeah, but-“ Merlin couldn’t back away. Unlike being accosted in the corridor of the Kilgharrah, he found that he didn’t want to. “Even if this will never be me, it’s still you. Part of you.”

He saw Arthur swallow against that knowledge.

Shaking his head, Arthur put a hand on the transparent curve of the wart behind Merlin. “What kind of person uses a disaster like this to give him the right to say whatever he wants? Do whatever he wants? It doesn’t remove the need for rational thought, logic, or even an ounce of fucking compassion.”

“What kind of person doesn’t let a disaster like this affect him?” Merlin responded, tentatively raising
a hand to reach out and rest his fingers on Arthur’s arm. “I shouldn’t have shouted at you. I didn’t know.”

Snorting, Arthur said, “I think you would have shouted at me anyway.”

They had both been picking at scars. Merlin gave him a wobbly smile. “You’re probably right.”

“I’m always right.”

They stared at each other after Arthur’s declaration. Merlin wasn’t even going to dignify that with a response. The longer Merlin stared, the softer Arthur’s expression became and this time he gave Merlin plenty of warning when he went in for a kiss, curling one hand around Merlin’s elbow, the other around his hip, and leaning in with his chin tilted up.

Merlin had another question, though, and put up a hand between them. “What does this change?” Arthur tilted his head to the side, so Merlin gestured from one of them to the other.

“Ah-” Arthur breathed, but he didn’t back away. “How far do you have to trust someone to kiss them? To want to kiss them?”

“I don’t know?”

A ghost of a smirk appeared on Arthur’s lips. “Neither do I.”

Okay, fair, and maybe Merlin had one more question, “But what are we going to do about-”

“We’ll plan.” Arthur cut him off, loosening his hold and talking half a step back. “I won’t kiss you if you don’t want me to.”

“Oh, no, I didn’t mean…” Merlin let his protest - his not-protest? - trail away because Arthur was studying him. Okay, yes, he was stalling, badly and obviously. All he knew is that the tingly feeling across his skin had returned and it really wasn’t the nice kind like it should be. If he was going to get a proper snog from Arthur, he wanted to be able to experience the full glory of the event and not be distracted by the Camelot’s creepy pit creature.

With a strange sense of relief that he didn’t have to hide his response to the Camelot because it was related to his magic, he let his nerves show like he hadn’t wanted to while Arthur needed him. “Can we not do this here? Because I don’t know if I mentioned, but I think that thing down there wants to eat me. Don’t even laugh- no, don’t. It’s true.”

Caught between a chuckle and Merlin’s serious tone, Arthur halted. “Not really?”

“There’s something wrong with the Camelot,” was the best explanation that Merlin had at the moment. When Arthur snorted and looked pointedly out toward the still-gaping scar, Merlin huffed in annoyance. “Something magic wrong.”

At that, Arthur frowned. “Is it bad?”

“It’s worse here?” Merlin said, curling his fingers around Arthur’s biceps, letting his worry pour into the small shrine while his magic hid beneath the surface of his skin. “It’s like- like I’m lighting a candle in a vast empty room even though I know there’s something in there with me who wants to devour the flame.”

A flicker of emotion that Merlin couldn’t place crossed Arthur’s face before he shut it down.
“Do you think it’s magic that has been preventing the scar from being healed?” Arthur asked and Merlin could practically see the gears spinning inside of Arthur’s skull. He could certainly hear them. The little lights on Arthur’s oculars blinked more rapidly.

“Yes,” Merlin said. Of course, he wasn’t sure, but it was not a big leap. When he saw Arthur’s expression grow dark with anger, he realised how his answer could be taken. “No. Yes, magic, but no, not like that? It’s not- not a curse or a spell. It feels like magic was broken here as much as everything else.”

That arrested Arthur’s rising anger and he froze, fingers tightening on Merlin. “Damaging magic can do something like this?”

Merlin stared, because - oh, fuck. “Yes,” he said. Arthur would have always seen magic as a threat, wouldn’t he? “It’s - it’s part of the natural world. You can’t damage magic as such, but- you can break how it moves through a closed system. Like- electricity. Or water. Breaking its flow is bad and eliminating it entirely is… bad bad. It makes things bad, Arthur.”

“‘Bad’ and ‘bad bad’. Is that technical terminology?” Arthur said, but his snark was half-hearted at best. His attention on the scar outside, he asked quietly, “What did my father do?”

Merlin wasn’t sure he’d been meant to hear the last bit, but he responded anyway. “I’ll find out.”

That dragged Arthur’s attention back to Merlin. “I didn’t just mean here,” he said, a slight smile on his face. “But- thank you for the offer. How do you propose to find out, especially if you think it wants to eat you?”

With all the confidence and cockiness he could shove in his tone, Merlin answered, “I have no idea.”

Arthur blinked a few times, then threw his head back and laughed. Merlin let him, throwing glances over his shoulder. Whatever it was that lurked down there hadn’t moved since they’d arrived. It probably hadn’t moved since the disaster over two decades ago, but it still made Merlin nervous.

“Can we get out of here?” Merlin asked when it looked like Arthur had his senses back. “Please?”

“I could kiss you right now.”

Merlin grinned at that. “If that’s true and you’re not just being an arse, then somewhere not here.”

With one last look at the scar, Arthur turned to lead them back to civilisation. He paused with one foot through the door when Merlin stopped in front of the shrine wall to place his hand over the same picture Arthur had.

“Coming?” Arthur demanded, carefully not looking at the shrine or what picture Merlin had stopped to study.

As demands went, it fell short, but Merlin didn’t dare tease him about it, not when he had his fingers on an image of young Captain and Queen Igraine. He’d seen her before, dressed as Queen in pre-Purge visual newsblurs, but her public persona had been scrubbed, and the fringe had never been privy to this side of her. The image had faded, the precise lines blurring because whoever had created the shrine hadn’t used plastics or indelible inks. Still, despite the blurring, her resemblance to Arthur was clear. Hair up and mods polished to a gleam visible even in ultraviolet-damaged print, she was more handsome than beautiful and the insignia on her uniform spoke of a decorated career as heir even before she’d gone on to rule.

Everything Merlin knew about Arthur shifted. Everything he’d been told. All of the warnings. After
seeing this picture here and the look Arthur had had on his face as he paid his respects to the shrine, there was no doubt in Merlin’s mind who Arthur took after.

Or whose legacy he was trying to live up to.

Merlin looked over at Arthur and bit his lip. Arthur couldn’t quite meet his eyes.

“We are our mothers’ sons as much as our fathers’. I think people forget that,” Arthur said, holding out his hand. “It’s against regulation to leave portals open this long.”

“Arthur-” He had the urge to apologise, on behalf of himself and everyone else.

“Don’t.”

“But-”

“Drop it. We’re leaving. You wanted to leave.”

“Uther-” Merlin said. He immediately regretted it, because Arthur dropped his hand to his side and drew up straight.

“I’m measured against the man who began a war. The Purge. A massacre. A crusade. Whatever you call it, my everyday reality is overshadowed by the simple fact that I have Uther’s blood running through my veins, that half of my genetic code can be attributed to him. My mother may have been beloved, but my father is infamous. I don’t make the mistake of forgetting that just because his is not my ideal. No one else will forget.” Arthur met Merlin’s eyes. “You didn’t. So just- don’t. It doesn’t matter and it’s none of your business.”

Arthur had pulled his shoulders back and his head up, arrogance in the flex of his jaw, and the stance was familiar. Merlin had seen before when he’d been trying to defend his crew from, well, Merlin. The only thing missing this time was an ocular flare in blue.

Hands up, palms out, Merlin stepped away from the shrine wall and toward the door. “Sorry.”

“It’s-” Arthur hesitated. He closed his eyes and took a breath. “It’s fine. Let’s go.”

Merlin didn’t so much slink up to Arthur as sidled up to him. He wasn’t feeling quite enough guilt for a proper slink, but it was a near thing. “I ruined the mood, didn’t I?”

Arthur looked torn between smacking Merlin upside the head in exasperation or agreeing with him, so of course he did neither. “Ruined, no. Made this the very last place I ever want to try and stick my hands in your pants? Yes.”

“Oops?” Merlin offered an apologetic grin.

“It would be disrespectful at best, anyway. C’mon.” Arthur wrapped his hand around the back of Merlin’s neck - and it was far more welcome that Merlin thought it would be - and directed them both out of the shrine, finally letting the portal close behind them.
Arthur steered Merlin through the door to his quarters and breathed a sigh of relief when it closed behind them. Only then did he release his hold on Merlin and step away, retreating toward his bed. He pulled himself up short. Merlin bumped into him, half a step behind. He bounced. Arthur was half metal and solid on his feet.

“Sorry,” Merlin apologised, stepping around Arthur to take in the confines of Arthur’s tiny cabin. Arthur followed his gaze. Bed. Desk. Storages. Water closet. Hardly enough room to move around, but it had been his since childhood. Even so, his surfaces contained few mementos, all his sentimentality locked away from prying eyes rarely invited. What personalisations were visible were written above their heads in scar tissue and mineral deposits.

The tracery on the ceiling fascinated Merlin. He reached out one hand to trail from Arthur’s shoulder to his wrist. Eyes directed upward, he asked, “Do they mean anything?”

Catching Merlin’s hand before he stepped too far away, Arthur replied, “No. They’re just familiar. Like the stars of Albion.”

Merlin flashed Arthur a smile and toed off his boots. “Must be nice to have a home system.”

“Albion’s your…”

“Fringe, remember?” Merlin said, shaking himself free of Arthur’s grip and going to peer into the water closet. The layout for ninety percent of the cabins in the fleet didn’t include them. Merlin’s curiosity pulled him out of Arthur’s reach.

Arthur reined in his impulse to chase after him. Left standing by the door, he wondered if he were foolish for not capturing Merlin’s attention the moment they walked in, or if the decision to bring him back here in the first place was the foolish one. If Arthur’s experience with Gwen and Lance had taught him anything, it was that he was playing with a whole different set of expectations. Fringe expectations. Standing in his room, his slender bunk tucked and turned down and everything so familiar except the physical reality of having another man in his haven, the lessons he had learnt aboard the Kilgharrah seemed very, very far away.

All of his other entanglements had been Kingdom-side, short and passionate, but with the understanding that things would soon dissolve as ships parted and lives continued. It had been different on the fringe in ways he had never anticipated, and he had found himself voicing words of possession to his lovers only to be met with sadness, silence, and quiet words of reassurance and
correction. If he were to be honest, Gwen and Lance’s responses had given him knowledge of the end. Loose ties - in sex or affection or friendship - were not what he wanted. When the fading of whatever they had had begun, none of the three of them had been surprised.

There was no blame in that, but Merlin was cut from the same cloth as Gwen and Lance. The Kingdom ships and Albion system were no more his home than the fringe was Arthur’s. He didn’t think he could survive another fringe lover slipping though his fingers while he was desperate to hold on.

Merlin’s face came into focus inches from Arthur’s own, curiosity in his wide blue eyes. Arthur was hard-pressed not to lean away in surprise. The moment Arthur looked up at his face, Merlin asked, “Did you have a short?”

“A short?”


“You did not.”

“Did,” Merlin said, lips twitching. “Not a short?”

“Not a short.” Arthur replied. Sure enough, a quick replay of the last minute of his sensory-input buffer revealed two separate instances of Merlin trying to get Arthur’s attention. He’d even snapped his fingers, which Arthur figured he could let pass, since it hadn’t had any effect whatsoever.

Merlin stepped back, easing out of Arthur’s space, taking his warmth and the comfort of his presence with him. “Second thoughts?”

“Why would I be having second thoughts?” Arthur asked, thoroughly baffled by the question. They were in his room, weren’t they? He was well-versed in the art of chucking the unwanted from his bed.

“It was a rather long walk.”

Arthur was concerned by this turn in the conversation. “Are you having second thoughts?”

The little line between Merlin’s eyebrows appeared again as he drew them together. “If you are, I can leave.” He paused, “But you’d have to move.”

“Move?” A quick look told him what he needed to know. He’d pressed himself against the door, one hand splayed over the access panel. ‘Second thoughts’ was a legitimate interpretation, given the evidence. “No- I don’t want you to leave.” An answer to inspire confidence.

Merlin’s expression warred between dubious and pained. “So you’re blocking the door?”

“Not consciously.” Arthur stepped forward, once more placing himself within the other man’s space and reaching up for the curve of Merlin’s cheek.

Merlin accepted the touch with a puzzled look.

Arthur brushed the backs of his fingers down Merlin’s jawline, the line of his arm, the angle of his hip. All of Arthur’s thoughts wrapped back down to the simple truth that he’d claimed Merlin as his own in half a dozen ways and still didn’t know whether he needed to protect his heart as well as his
“How casual did you want this?”

“How casual?” Merlin parroted his words back at him, looking for all the world like the question made absolutely no sense whatsoever.

Arthur tried not to smile. He nodded. “I’d like to take you as a lover. Isn’t that something people ask?”

“Where would someone ask that?”

“On the fringe.”

Merlin leaned back and squinted at Arthur. “Have you been getting advice from, I don’t know, Gwaine or something?”

“It’s a legitimate question,” Arthur said, dropping back as well. He sounded defensive and he knew it.

“I know it’s a legitimate question.” Merlin folded his arms across his chest. “I just didn’t think you’d ask something like that.”

Mirroring Merlin’s stance, Arthur asked - he did ask, he didn’t demand in the slightest, “Why not?”

“Because you’re- you. You grew up here. That’s a question that doesn’t assume we’re following a Kingdom script.”

“There’s a script?”

“Don’t give me- yes, there’s a script. The ‘hello how are you let us sex’ that leads to ‘we have done the sex we must now be official things’ to ‘official things done be together for the rest of your natural lives go forth.’ I mean, it’s- that’s not casual at all.”

“That’s not always how it’s done.”

“Well, it’s not always swapping lovers out on the fringe.” Merlin matched Arthur’s indignation.

“I know!” Arthur couldn’t help it. His volume rose.

Merlin threw his hands in the air. “And I know!”

Arthur had absolutely no idea how they’d gotten to the point of shouting at each other. He pinched the bridge of his nose. Regardless of how irritated he was becoming, he was not going to run diagnostics. No matter how soothing it would be. “I’m not- I’m not judging you on it.”

“Good.”

“Just-” Arthur began.

“You have official Consorts and successions and bloodlines and everything has to be just so, as if everything would fall apart otherwise,” Merlin spoke right over the top of him and not even a glower was getting him to stop.

“All that, it’s practical,” Arthur pointed out. “Things would get a lot more complicated if we didn’t have that sort of thing.”

“-that sounds an awful lot like things falling apart-”
“-and it sounds like you’re judging me, rather than visa versa.”

Merlin clamped his jaw shut. Arthur had somehow scored a point, though it didn’t make him feel all that much better.

“Look,” Arthur sighed, “I just- I need to know now before I do something stupid.”

“About what sort of casual I want?” Merlin sounded… bitter. Arthur had no idea how to read that.

“I was trying to be sensitive.”

“I know that, I know,” Merlin said, beginning to pace. “You just took me by surprise, is all. I don’t know if I have to be on my guard around you, or if I do then how much, or whether or not this fucking oath is messing with my emotions. I’m tied to you, Arthur. I can’t lie to you, I’m incapable of going against you. Does that extend to this?”

“Oh.” Arthur said, the bottom of his stomach dropping out as he registered what Merlin was implying. “I would never- The oath doesn’t-”

“The oath doesn’t and the spell shouldn’t, but I don’t even know anymore. It’s not like I cast it on purpose. I don’t even know what it does, though I’m pretty sure it won’t break unless one of us fucking dies.”

Arthur filed that disturbing little comment away for later and stated, quite reasonably, “You kissed me before.”

“Before, yeah. Before being the operative word.” Merlin raked his hands through his hair. There wasn’t much room for him to pace and he was trying to stay out of Arthur’s reach. A few short steps and he’d spin on his heel. “I don’t want fucking casual, but I’m trapped and I hate it.”

The worst part was that Arthur understood. Tucking away the tiny bubble of hope that Merlin’s words gave him, he said, “I won’t push.” He dropped his arms to his sides and curled his hands into fists. He wouldn’t push. He wanted to make his claim on Merlin absolute, but he knew what it was like to suffocate. “I won’t push, but that doesn’t mean you can’t.”

Merlin halted in the middle of the room to study Arthur.

“I don’t have to take all the initiative,” Arthur said, tone dry. “It’s probably better if I don’t. I already own your ass. Captain’s abuse of power.”

“Or oathbound’s.”

There was something unreadable in Merlin’s eyes. That, along with his complete lack of objection to Arthur’s half-serious claim of ownership, made Arthur breathe a little harder, his heart beat a little faster.

“It doesn’t take away your free will, for the love of- Merlin. It doesn’t.”

“It’s not supposed to, no,” Merlin agreed. He remained standing in the middle of the room, no longer inclined to pace. He mulled it over for long enough that Arthur had to call on his superior powers of standing the fuck still to keep from fidgeting. It was easy enough to tell when Merlin came to a decision, at least; a portion of his usual grin lit his face. “I didn’t think you’d be willing to be pushed.”

Arthur grinned in response, and if he was feeling a bit of both relief and anticipation, he figured he
was due. “I’ve been known to allow that privilege in the past.”

“A man of many surprises,” Merlin murmured just loudly enough for Arthur’s augmented hearing to pick it up. Louder, he said, “I’m going to kiss you.”

_Fucking finally_, was all Arthur could think as Merlin stalked forward. It was only a handful of steps, but each one sharpened Merlin’s focus, bringing the lazy predator of the night in the infirmary back to the surface.

Merlin hesitated a handspan away and Arthur almost swore. Some of the intent dropped from his expression as he searched Arthur’s eyes. “I’m allowed? You’re not scared of me?”

_Terrified, but that’s part of the thrill._ Arthur didn’t think that answer would go over so well, so he just said, “Yes. No. I mean- you can’t hurt me, right?”

The sharp look was returning. “Depends on the oath’s definition of ‘hurt’, now doesn’t it?”

And wasn’t that another layer of anticipation to add to the whole experience? It would have been a shame if Arthur had had to do all of the pushing just because Merlin assumed that’s what he wanted. “Do you need me to spell it out?” Arthur dropped back onto arrogance to help him out-bluster the spike of lust that had him balling his fists. If he didn’t, he’d grab for Merlin and shake him to hurry up. “You’re allowed. A-L-L-O-”

Arthur’s chest mods adjusted his centre of mass high even for a man, so it was a trivial task for Merlin - skinny and underfed as he was - to plant the heels of his palms below Arthur’s shoulders and shove him backwards into the door. The edges of each iris section bit into the skin of Arthur’s back as Merlin bracketed Arthur’s head with his forearms, fingers digging into the flesh of the door behind them, wrists brushing Arthur’s ears.

For a heartbeat, Merlin looked as startled as Arthur felt, but his expression swiftly shifted as he brought his face in close. Arthur braced for a repeat of the bruising, hurried kiss that they’d shared before, but Merlin paused with his lips a hairbreadth from Arthur’s. Close enough to feel the warmth and the tingle of contact, but eluding actual touch. Arthur froze, and when he took a breath to ready himself to close what little gap remained, Merlin spoke.

“This might hurt.” His lips brushed Arthur’s, too lightly to be a proper kiss before Merlin pulled away again. “Fair warning.”

Merlin pressed their lips together, warm and slow. Arthur’s heart thundered in his chest, the servos in his torso creaking as he held himself upright between Merlin’s braced arms. For a closed-mouth kiss it was anything but chaste, and Arthur had only a moment to wonder why Merlin seemed content to simply vary the pressure of his lips as he relaxed into the contact when the warning caught up with him.

His body lit as with electricity and he stiffened beneath Merlin’s lips. He felt more than heard Merlin mouth ‘sorry’ against him.

He didn’t break away. Neither did Merlin.

It felt like a cascade of light rushing from the back of his skull down his spine, tingling and prickling in pure sensation that wasn’t quite pain and wasn’t quite pleasure. The muscles in his neck tensed and relaxed, the back of his head hit the door, and he brought his hands up to curl around Merlin’s forearms so he wouldn’t slide to the floor. As the rush flooded through him and down his torso, it limned each of his mods - internal and external - with fire that lit his nerves, overloading them with
static. He had never been more aware of how much metal he was made of.

Whatever it was travelled from the point where his lips met Merlin’s down to his toes, and when it hit the pads of feet within his boots the shivery not-quite-pain began to fade. Gradually, it left all the warmth behind and none of the burn. Arthur’s fingers dug into Merlin’s arms and even if he was leaving bruises he didn’t know if he could let go.

Merlin broke away with a quiet curse and buried his face in the crook of Arthur’s shoulder, breathing heavily. It took time for the gold wash over Arthur’s vision to fade. His muscles were liquid and loose and it took him several tries to get his tongue working to ask, “The everliving fuck was that?”

“Part of the reason I didn’t want to kiss you after.” Merlin spoke into the skin of Arthur’s neck, voice muffled as it rumbled through his skull. “Active mod meets active magic equals pain.”

“That, uh, wasn’t pain,” Arthur said, still trying to fucking breathe. At least Merlin looked like he was feeling about as steady on his feet. “And whatever spell you cast on me before really didn’t feel like that either.” He paused. “At all.” He let out his breath. “Definitely not pain.”

It took Arthur a second to identify Merlin’s faint snorts as laughter.

“Excuse you,” Arthur grumbled. He did not appreciate being laughed at while he was half hard and extremely confused.

“Sorry.” Merlin lifted his head and grinned at Arthur, their faces inches apart. “Would you believe me if I told you that’s never happened before?”

“I bet you tell that to all the girls.”

Merlin’s faint chuckles were loose, deep, and held an untethered quality, his eyes unfocused as he knocked his forehead against Arthur’s. Arthur felt the warmth of Merlin’s skin seep through the metal arcs across his brows, the faint tingle of magic crackling across them like it was leaking from the warlock’s body now that he’d let it loose once. They were wrapped up in each other, sharing breath and heat and magic, and all Arthur could think was, **Mine. This is mine.**

“I have no idea what that was,” Merlin said once their breathing had returned to some semblance of normal. “Absolutely zero fucking clue. I didn’t damage you, did I?”

The question took Arthur by surprise. “Why would you—” he began, following Merlin’s gaze down to his hands, his arms, to where the glow that Merlin’s magic had left on his skin was fading. He kicked up a diagnostic run almost before he thought about it.

He looked up into Merlin’s eyes as the results came back, splashing tiny green and blue letters across his field of vision. Merlin watched as if he could read them himself, waiting for anything to come back red.

“Nothing broken,” Arthur said as his diagnostics spun down and he dismissed the last COPACETIC from his ocular display. The tips of his fingers still tingled, but the faint golden light was gone. “Maybe Gwen jacked up my pain centres when she rewired me the last time.”

“She isn’t the type to make mistakes that big,” Merlin said, amusement clear. “More likely you’re a masochist—”

“Plausible, plausible,” Arthur agreed. Not that he’d had experience with anything of the sort.

“-but somehow I don’t think that’s it either,” Merlin finished.
After a moment of thought, Arthur suggested, “Ask Gaius.”

“You’re not serious?”

“Whyever not? He’s been chief medic of the Camelot and the Kilgharrah since… I actually don’t know since when. It might be literally forever. I am sure he has heard every story out there and then some.”

Merlin’s cheeks began to turn red. “I should have known. You’re not going to chop my head off, you’re going to kill me with embarrassment.”

“Magic users have fucked the modded since Bruta loaded up the Camelot and shoved off from good old Terra Firma. I’m pretty sure that Gaius will know something of how they did it without damaging themselves.” Arthur was only being reasonable, though the blush that spread across the bridge of Merlin’s nose and the tips of his ears was an excellent side effect. “Maybe that was what happens when a boy and a boy really like one anothers—”

Merlin trapped Arthur’s lips with his own so no further stupidity would come out, but this time the kiss was short and the moment the first hint of a similar rush began Merlin pulled away and dropped his head to Arthur’s shoulder again. “One, shut up. Two, I can’t do that again. Not right now.”

“Don’t worry, the refractory period for someone your age should only be a few more mi—”

Thumping his forehead against Arthur’s shoulder he cut him off with a, “You are the biggest fucking—”

“I’ll stop, I’ll stop,” Arthur said, laughing. “Are you going to let me go?”

“Thinking no, right about now, because you are the biggest prat in existence and keeping you away from people is a public service.”

“I can stand here until my next rotation, but I don’t think you can.”

“Just,” Merlin let out his breath, humour draining with it along with all of the tension in his limbs. He lifted his head and let his arms rest on Arthur’s shoulders, all of his fire and energy leaving in an instant like someone had cut his puppet strings. Arthur’s concern found a whole new level of ‘oh, shit’ when Merlin continued with a quiet, “Help me sleep?”

“What’s wrong?”

Merlin’s lip twitched. “If I tell you I want you to keep away the monster that’s trying to eat me, do you still want to sleep with me?”

“Yes, obviously,” Arthur didn’t hesitate. “The same ‘monster’ from the scar?”

Bemused, Merlin nodded, lips quirked to the side. “I think so.”

“It reaches here?”

“It’s the whole ship, Arthur. It was just worse nearest the scar.”

“Nearest the source.”

“Probably.”

“Fuck,” Arthur swore, but it was perfunctory at best. He had enough information now from a few
short conversations with Merlin to draw conclusions he would need to give himself time to feel guilty about later. *I am so sorry, Morgana.* “Let me go?”

Merlin leaned back, boneless, and allowed Arthur to gather him into the loose circle of his arms. His forehead was creased and he squinted at Arthur, deep in thought as Arthur steered him toward the bed. The narrow, not-really-for-two-people bed. Somehow Arthur’d neglected to take advantage of the privileges of being a dual heir. He should at least have a bed here as large as his one on the Kilgharrah.

Depositing Merlin on the mattress, Arthur asked, “What makes you think I can help?”

“You’re warm and real and I kind of want to shag you until you cry and since I can’t I want to use you as a security blanket.” Merlin peered up at him, rubbing the back of his neck. As if he hadn’t just blindsided Arthur with the most blunt statement of attraction he’d ever heard, Merlin continued, “I’m making things up as I go along, Arthur, but just- or it might be too dangerous and I can sleep in the biosphere.” He paused. “I’ll sleep in the biosphere.” He started wriggle in an attempt to hop off the bed. To what purpose, Arthur had no idea. All of the nerves and anxiety that had been keeping Merlin upright were gone, replaced by exhaustion that made him fumble at the edge of the bed frame, unable to give himself proper leverage. Merlin probably wouldn’t even make it to the biosphere without falling asleep on his feet.

Arthur halted Merlin with his fingers in the centre of his chest, blinking. He resisted the urge to replay the last half-minute of Merlin speaking to see if he’d said what Arthur thought he’d said. “You could- but I’d prefer you where I can see you.” Arthur prodded Merlin to arrange himself.

“Dangerous doesn’t scare me.”

Merlin shrugged and tucked his feet up beneath him. “Did I mention I do a lot of magic by reflex? Because I do a lot of magic by reflex.” He thought about that for a moment. “You’ll probably be fine. Very probably fine.”

“Probably,” Arthur repeated. As far as Arthur was concerned, his responsibility for Merlin had expanded to encompass ‘protect him from weird magic things’ even as Merlin’s had expanded to the same. “Good enough.” He chucked his boots in the corner.

It took a good deal of wriggling for the two of them to get comfortable. Arthur was wide and Merlin was bony, and Arthur narrowly avoided getting jabbed in the groin twice. He was starting to rethink sharing a bed with someone with such sharp elbows when Merlin dropped into a comfortable position like a puzzle piece falling into place.

Arthur relaxed, a little bit awed at how willing Merlin was to make himself at home wrapped around Arthur without any of the other sorts of intimacy that Arthur was used to. Not as awed as for Merlin finally finding a position that didn’t stab him anywhere important, but awed nevertheless.

Merlin hummed to himself, prodding Arthur’s human shoulder with his bony fingers until Arthur caught them. “I’m sorry if you get zapped while I’m out. I- don’t have the best control. You should be fine, I should be fine. I usually have to loosen my grip for it to mess with anyone not-me and their mods, but - sleeping. Unconscious. I don’t know.”

“Reassuring,” Arthur said, smoothing down Merlin’s hair and wrapping his palm around his shoulder. “Sleep.”

Putting his head down, Merlin was silent.

After a long moment, he said quietly, “Thank you. For letting me stay. For not pushing.”
Arthur gave him a puzzled, “You’re welcome?”

“You didn’t have to let me stay.”

“I want you to stay,” Arthur said, not entirely comfortable with being thanked for something he thought of as baseline decent. “And I’d rather you not worry that I’m going to push when you’re doubting. Doubting the oath or whether or not I’m going to keel over if you kiss me or anything else.”

“Still.”

Arthur sighed and stroked Merlin’s arm with his fingers. “Go to sleep.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Arthur saw Merlin bite his lip, but he didn’t say anything further. He just stayed wrapped around Arthur, his muscles relaxing one by one, until his breathing evened and his slack weight against Arthur had stopped twitching as he dropped off.

Arthur propped himself up on an arm and watched Merlin sleep for several minutes in silence, but nothing bad happened or appeared like it was about to happen. Satisfied for now that he’d done as asked and it seemed to help, Arthur settled back down and stared at his ceiling.

It was funny, in a way. Showing Merlin the Camelot’s scar had been little about making a point to Merlin. If anything, it had been a last gasp attempt to remind himself of his own objections. Their little visit had only become an acknowledgement that he’d drifted so far out onto the fringe that he couldn’t look at the destruction of his childhood home in the same way as he had before he’d gone.

He blamed Merlin for the shift, obviously.

Just having Merlin in his room overnight, asking him to be his lover, hearing what came out of Merlin’s mouth when he wasn’t paying attention… It was all just another sign that he was emotionally compromised. Had been since he’d hovered at Merlin’s sickbed after dragging him on board in a body bag. He’d known then that he was harbouring a sorcerer, even if it had taken him time and mistake after mistake to get used to the idea.

If his waking hours all ended with the warm contentment of Merlin curled around him and the knowledge that he didn’t have to fight whatever was coming for them alone, then, just maybe, he could stand to be a little bit compromised. He rested his cheek on Merlin’s hair and let his mods purge his system of anything and everything keeping him awake. Internal alarm set, with a little bit of help from his circulatory scrubbers, sleep claimed him nearly as fast as it had Merlin.

Chapter End Notes

For anyone interested in scientifically hard-to-investigate phenomena, Arthur’s response to Merlin’s magic is based off of ASMR (Automatic Sensory Meridian Response). Good luck trying to induce a response. Never let it be said I’ve never given you anything.
Chapter 35

Arthur’s duty rotation started far too soon for his liking, and disentangling from Merlin proved more difficult than he had anticipated. Even after firmly planting Merlin’s hands on his own chest and waiting for him to curl back into a ball in the middle of the bed, Arthur found Merlin’s fingers catching at his pantleg, his sleeve, his bootlaces. Merlin didn’t seem to be at all awake, but he was doing his best to keep Arthur within close proximity regardless. Each time, Arthur shoved him back into bed, marvelling at how even someone as scrawny as Merlin could be enough dead weight to make Arthur engage some of his mods to move him around.

His bedmate was as quiet as he was clingy, so that when Arthur turned back for one last look when he opened the door to his cabin, he was surprised to find Merlin’s eyes open and watching. He had grabbed Arthur’s pillow and curled around it at some point when Arthur hadn’t been paying attention, and now rested his chin on his arm. Loose, relaxed, and eyes half-lidded, Merlin didn’t look like he was going to be moving anytime in the near future. He was all limbs and rumpled clothing that Arthur hadn’t even thought to get him out of, not when his own off-duty uniform was akin to sleeping in just his pants.

“You- going to be alright?” Arthur asked, letting the door close again. “I didn’t wake up with a shock.”

“Nope,” Merlin agreed, a small smile creeping across his face as he tracked Arthur’s movements from door to the edge of the bed. He didn’t laugh, but Arthur got the impression that he wanted to. Arthur asked, “What is it?”

“Do you feel okay?” Merlin asked in return.

He couldn’t leave just yet, not with Merlin looking alert and soft. (The soft was a lie, obviously. Arthur had first-hand knowledge that Merlin was made of all sharp and stabby bits. It was good he didn’t bruise easily.) Sitting down on the edge of the bed, Arthur stroked Merlin’s spine with the back of his knuckles. Merlin arched like a cat, rolling his shoulders before curling back around the pillow.

Torn between wary and amused, Arthur asked, “Am I not supposed to?”

“I’m not sure,” Merlin said, taking the question seriously. “I was half expecting me kissing you last night to shut down your mods again. So that didn’t happen. Bonus there. You must have gone offline for some other reason.”

“Thank you so much for warning me.”
“You’re welcome. Also was expecting your biotech to do a hard reject of the magic I flooded you with. Also didn’t happen. Another bonus. That could have been really messy. Localised Sigan-Bruta of ten, maybe? eight? Would have left enough to identify the bodies.”

“Bundle of sunshine, you are. You have no idea what you’re doing, do you?”

“None at all. Doesn’t seem to have affected you poorly, at least?” Merlin’s grin said he was laughing on the inside again. “But I’m not sure how eager I am to try again with me at full power.”

Arthur rubbed one of Merlin’s shoulders, enjoying his lax warmth and wondering if he wanted to chance some sort of magical disaster or being late for shift to curl back up in bed. If he hadn’t promised he wouldn’t be the one to push, he might have given the idea more merit. “If you’re underpowered now, what’s a proper snog with a proper warlock going to do to us?”

Merlin snorted and buried his face in the pillow, leaning into Arthur’s touch. “I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“Pillows don’t make for very good communication devices.”

“I’m not talking to you.”

“It doesn’t sound like you’re not talking to me.”

Tugging himself free of Arthur’s hand, Merlin rolled so he could peer up at him. “Does this make any sense to you? That you’re… balanced? Like a little ship full of all the right sorts of machinery?”

Arthur shook his head slowly, trying to give the idea a chance, but he had no context. “Is this some sort of strange euphemism I’m not getting?”

“If you don’t get it, I don’t get it either.” Merlin looked frustrated, his dishevelled hair falling into his face. “That’s just how it feels. What I don’t understand is why the feeling is so familiar, and from where. I feel like if I could remember where I’d felt it before, I’d understand the secrets of the universe. I mean, it’s almost like from when I was practising in my cabin—”

“Are you sure this is something I should hear about?”

“Prat. I’m not trying for innuendo.”

“You’re doing a brilliant job at it, though.”

Merlin settled his chin on his arm again, chewing on his lip. Now that he was back within range, Arthur pushed Merlin’s hair out of his eyes and returned to stroking his back while he thought. After a minute of contemplation, Merlin sighed. “I need more data.”

“I need to go do Captain things,” Arthur told him. “Can’t stay here all day.”


“Might be. It’s all very complicated.”

“The Kilgharrah’s docked, though, you can be late.” Merlin rolled onto his back and captured Arthur’s hand, halting his movement and tugging him down closer. Mischief glittered in his eyes.

Arthur chuckled, freeing and forcing himself up out of the bed and toward the door. “The Kilgharrah was turned inside out. My crew is all over the Camelot and all the ones who would normally be kept
properly occupied by their duties are now at loose ends. You can’t tell me that you want Gwaine off and about without instruction aboard a ship this size.”

“If the story Will told me of their little adventure was typical, I’m going to have to say no.” Merlin’s grin made it very hard for Arthur to hit the door activation. That sounded like a story that Arthur was very interested in, but as Captain should never, ever hear.

“Then needs must,” Arthur said, but he couldn’t leave just yet. He let the door slide shut again. “Let me know when you want to be put into rotation. Lucan reminded me, pointedly, that he was still interested in your skills. It might be best to keep you as a mechanic.”

“And not a junior communications officer?”

With a snort, Arthur shook his head. “We do know what that means on the fringe, even here.”

“Unless you can come up with a better title than ‘pocket warlock’, I could do with mechanic. Personal mechanic?”

Arthur ignored the suggestive wiggle of Merlin’s eyebrows. “Nothing in your entry says anything about cybernetics training, so I’m going to go with no. You’d probably rewire my sword arm and I’d end up losing all my muscle memory.”

“Magic’s not in the entry either.”

“And as far as I can tell, you’re about as adept with it as you are at cybernetics.”

“Excuse you,” Merlin said, indignant. Arthur had to duck a flying pillow. “I’ll have you know I’m brilliant.”

“Sore spot?” he teased, then faltered as he registered the raw edge to Merlin’s indignation, far less playful than their banter thus far this morning.

“Get out of here before I- I turn you into a toad or something I don’t know how to reverse.”

Scooping up the pillow, Arthur brought it back to the bed and Merlin. He knelt by the edge and tickled at the side of Merlin’s neck until he looked up. There was a mixture of hurt and humour in his eyes that knocked the breath from Arthur’s lungs when he saw it. Arthur curled his fingers beneath Merlin’s chin and repeated, “Sore spot.”

Merlin bit his lip to hold back his response. When he finally managed to work up to speaking, the words fell from his lips in a jumbled rush. “I don’t even know if I can protect you from myself.”

“I’ll help,” Arthur said, pressing their lips together in a quick kiss. He poured as much affection as he could into the brief touch and broke off as soon as his lips started to tingle. When he pulled away, he was rewarded by Merlin’s slow, surprised blink as he reopened his eyes accompanied by a small smile.

“I thought you had Captain things?”


Merlin was watching him with disbelief and no small amount of confusion, but before Arthur could ask why, his internal comm lit up and Lucan was asking him if he could nip into Engineering on the Kilgharrah before he went off to meet with Pellinore. He couldn’t justify remaining with Merlin any
longer, not when his crew needed him.

Tilting his head, Merlin asked, “Summoned?”

“How did you-?”

“You went all glaze-y and nodded along to nothing,” Merlin said. “Go. I’ll be fine. I’ll go find Will and Gwen and- just go.”

Arthur went, leaving Merlin drowsing, wrapped around a pillow.

Engineering on the Kilgharrah was chaos. Lucan was coordinating with the White Hart’s chief engineer as well as the Camelot’s shift supervisor, and there were new systems that had been developed for a captain who could jack in to their ship during the months while the Kilgharrah had been out on the fringe. The simple question, “Which new systems do you want?” as asked by Lucan turned into an hour-long discussion about how they could be installed during the repairs and what kind of extension the additional systems would require for their timeline. Arthur couldn’t pull himself away from Engineering until his quartermaster stumped through and dragged him away for their prearranged meeting.

Quartermaster Pellinore led the way to the temporary staging area for supplies and construction material that lay stacked in a gravity cage in the centre of the repair bay. Arthur trailed behind, trying not to out-stride the man who was probably half his height and limping on an ancient leg mod. All of the Kilgharrah’s quartermaster’s extensive modding aside, he’d never replaced that one, citing it as ‘his favourite leg’. It wasn’t a story that Pellinore told when drunk, so the reasons why it was favoured were varied, elaborate, and not a one of them true.

He halted in front of his mountain of crates, beckoning Arthur forward, and began throwing cargo manifests from his oculars to Arthur’s almost faster than Arthur could read them. He was also speaking as he shifted massive crates without apparent effort, and Arthur had to amplify his auditory inputs to pick up what he was saying as soon as he realised. It was hard to see Pellinore’s lips move, his ridiculous grey beard obscuring most of his dark face, and the manifests flicking past took up most of Arthur’s attention. It was only replaying what Pellinore had been saying after he’d absorbed the aggregate data that he could answer his questions.

“We’re sharing resources with the White Hart, which is why we have about two and a half times what we need, yes. I’m sure Mithian will be down to speak with you soon. Hopefully. Her rotation was offset from mine so we could cover more of the day. I assume you spoke with Leon?”

The rumbled response required Arthur to boost his pickups again, but after that the question and response flowed, and Arthur began to help shift cargo for something to do other than simply stand around and chat. Pellinore gave him a grunt of approval, and they settled into an easy rhythm of shifting and unpacking. Other assistants began to trickle in after an hour, during which Arthur gave the rundown on the new systems that Lucan was hoping to install, and what sort of supplies they were going to need to requisition for them. During a lull while they waited for the Camelot’s cargo crew to flip gravity in the cage so they could move some of the larger pieces, Arthur told him in a low voice that he was replacing some of the more ‘delicate’ munitions they’d expended and to expect their arrival under a flagged manifest.

Pellinore chuckled at that. “Next you’ll ask me to service a ballistic-based pistol,” he quipped. Arthur snorted over him as Pellinore said, “What would your father say?”

“He’d probably space me himself,” Arthur said, “Though more for using bullets aboard a biomechanical ship than acquiring warheads, if we’re going to come right down to it.”
“Who am I inviting round for tea?”

Arthur caught one of the near crates as the gravity loosened and it started to drift up. “The pilots of the Tyntagel.”

“Those two scofflaws?” Pellinore rumbled. “As best declare to Uther that you’re smuggling. Is subtlety perhaps a foreign concept?”

Raising an eyebrow, Arthur waited.

“Captain,” Pellinore tacked on the appellative only after he felt he’d made his point. “How’d you get them on such short notice?”

The question, and tacit approval behind it, made Arthur laugh. “Old friends of my mother from her fleet days as heir. I think father knows them too, but that’s a story I’ve never convinced him to tell.”

“Any story featuring Isolde and Tristan is probably not something that a King should repeat, especially to his son.”

That made Arthur laugh again, and he stepped back to let Pellinore order around his stevedore minions while the gravity cage was active. It was the last moment of rest he was able to catch for the next several hours.

Soon enough, Arthur was pulled in half a dozen directions by twice as many people, all needing him to somehow coordinate their work with everyone else’s. He had Counsellors from the Camelot coming to him about the temporary integration of his crew into their scheduled social events, Lucan dragging him back down to Engineering to rant that Mithian had stolen some of his specialists for her repairs and how was he going to keep schedule if she kept it up, Gaius’s reports on how the injured were healing in Camelot’s infirmary, and one of his mess-hall machine operatives practically bouncing down the corridor at him to shove a neon green goop in his face to taste. The Camelot’s agricultural geneticists had come up with a new fruit, and the synthesised paste from it had the man in raptures.

There were fuckups and miscommunications, delegation of burial tasks and Camelot-coordinated cleaning crews, not to mention that when Mithian showed up for her rotation she kept in constant contact as she relayed tidbits gathered from the chattier of her crew to paint a picture of the current climate among the citizens living on the Camelot. Mithian’s ocular-to-ocular text squirts informed him of the composition of newer populations his father had transferred, that they hadn’t used the housing algorithm on half of them, and that the White Hart was healing a lot faster than the Kilgharrah. Not that she was bragging, of course. Or that it was a contest.

The highlight of Arthur’s day was signing his approval on the marriage documentation between two of his mechanics. After that, though, he had to jack into his chair on the bridge and comb through the Kilgharrah’s aggregate data for the last two full days. He came out tense and worried about the progress of the repairs. His ship was anxious as much as something without a mind could be anxious, and when his timer expired and he was ejected from the systems after a second, closer look, that sense of being on edge lingered long after he stood to make his meeting with his fighter pilots.

He found his Knights in a briefing room off the end of one of the destrier bays. None of his pilots were seated. They clustered around the podium at the base of the small auditorium where Elena was sitting cross-legged on the floor. She leaned back against the podium, regaling her squadron with a story that included a great many grand gestures. When Arthur got close enough to hear, however, she stopped and tilted to the side, peering through legs at his approach.
“Arthur!”

The squadron came to attention at that, whirling and snapping their heels together so they could salute him.

Arthur dipped his head in acknowledgement, saying, “Knights,” and flicking his fingers to set them back at ease. They were all dressed in civilian clothes, except for Elena, and she was as dressed-down as it was possible to be and still be fit to fly. Her faux-hawk flopped into her eyes, and her duty uniform was well on its way to becoming an off-duty uniform if she had to make too many more repairs of the flaps and fasteners that covered her mods.

Her salute was crisp and precise for all that she remained on the floor. “Did you want me to stand, Captain, sir?”

“Unnecessary,” Arthur said, pointing the rest of his pilot Knights to their seats in the tiered audience of the briefing room. “But you might want to be sitting somewhere you’re not staring at my arse the entire time.”

Elena shrugged. “It’s a nice arse.”

“Thank you. Derian?” Arthur asked, beckoning to the massive pilot.

“She’s right. It is a nice arse.”

Arthur blinked, nonplussed. “I- I wasn’t asking for a second opinion. I want you to throw Elena into a chair.”

“Mind if I just set her?”

“Whatever you think is best,” Arthur said, bemused, pointing to a seat in the front row and then getting out of the larger man’s way. Elena’s war with gravity must be worse today than usual; she didn’t swat her fellow Knight away when he leaned down to collect her.

Derian scooped Elena from the floor just as Gwaine threw his arm around Arthur’s shoulder. “Captain,” Gwaine drawled, tipping his head down to look up at Arthur through his lashes. “Scuttlebutt is that you didn’t sleep alone last night.”

“Just because Elena gets to be casual,” Arthur said, removing Gwaine’s arm, grasping him by the shoulders, and spinning him around to shove him toward the audience. “We’ll talk after.”

Gwaine flashed him a grin over his shoulder and sat down on Elena’s other side as she settled in. He mouthed ‘later’ and wiggled his eyebrows.

Ignoring Gwaine, Arthur surveyed his pilots as they arranged themselves in their chairs. In addition to Elena and her two escorts, also present was the other half of the squadron under Bertrand - Ewan, Montague, and Radnor. The rest of the Kilgharrah’s Knight complement stayed out of the destriers, leaving him the seven best that Mithian hadn’t managed to steal from him behind the yoke of his fighters.

His seven best were also his seven cockiest and, in Gwaine’s case, most annoying when they decided to start posturing. It behoved him to make this quick.


The news was met with some small celebration. Gwaine whooped, and Radnor quietly bumped xir
fist against Ewan’s. The older pilots both frowned. Elena and Derian exchanged looks.

“Der and me, too, Captain?” Elena said, leaning forward to plant her elbows her on her knees. “Because I’ve heard-”

“I can guess at what you’ve heard.” Arthur didn’t want her speculating aloud. “The fact of the matter is that we’re at least two weeks out from launching the Kilgharrah again, and you have all been on the fringe long enough without leave that I’m in violation of fleet protocol.”

“How long’s leave?” Trust Gwaine to ask the important questions.

“Half of the projected repair time. A week.”

Elena was still studying him. “I have leave to return to the Gawant?” she asked carefully.

Arthur gave her a flat look, then sighed. He could bribe Gwaine to silence if he really needed to. “What do you know, Elena?”

“Derian received a private comm call before we landed asking if he knew about his transfer.”

“He’s not being transferred.”

“I know he’s not. I’m just saying.”

“And you?”

“Daddy sends his regards. He might also have complained about the Pendragon refusing to give me back, even though I belong to the Gawant by oath.”

Oaths and his father’s current disdain of Pendragon duties were going to kill him. Arthur swore loudly and creatively and unprofessionally enough that when he paused for air he spotted Radnor taking notes.

Venting his anger didn’t help, either. It accomplished precisely nothing, and made him sound younger than he was, but he was the only one in uniform; if he couldn’t curse around his pilots in civvies, then he couldn’t curse anywhere. At least his two older pilots had relaxed when he started, their frowns easing.

“None of that information leaves this room,” Arthur said, pointing at Gwaine who widened his eyes and mouthed ‘who me?’ Radnor jumped in xir chair and looked guilty.

Rubbing at the bridge of his nose, Arthur just sighed at Radnor. “The information about Elena and Derian. Not- not the cursing. That can- that’s fine.” He was not going to start a diagnostic run just because his pilots were trying his patience.

“They want to finish segregating the fleet, don’t they?” Elena asked, leaning against Derian’s broad arm and drumming her fingers on his wrist thoughtfully.

“Yes,” Arthur said.

“So if I leave I might not be able to get back.”

“Yes.” That was the risk he was taking in granting off-ship leave. “And you will most likely not get to take your destrier with you.”

Elena winced. Hers was one of the more heavily customised of the Kilgharrah’s fighters, working
around and with her condition, and she doted on the creature. The prospect of leaving it behind would be akin to Arthur contemplating ripping off his sword arm and charging into battle without it. If circumstances prevented her from coming back to the Camelot, she was still the best pilot in the fleet, but she’d be at a serious disadvantage.

Arthur sympathised. He continued, “I will offer what protections I can, but my hands are tied. Your father requested you home. And Queen Annis requested you be allowed to visit your family, Derian. As for the rest of you, I’m sorry for involving you in these discussions, feel free to head out. Report back in a week for your regular shift.”

Everyone but Elena began to stir until a voice drew their attention to the doorway. “If I had been any later I would have missed you all entirely,” Morgana said, striding into the room with her head held high. “You just sent them off on leave?”

“I was about to,” Arthur said, resisting the urge to step back as she approached. He resettled his weight and stared her down. “What did you want? Off-ship leave as well? Are you joining my crew for the vacation perks?”

Morgana ignored his words, stopping short of the podium and looking him up and down. “Why, Arthur, you’re positively glowing today.” The corners of her lips turned up. “What is your secret?”

If Gwaine hadn’t let out a loud guffaw and slapped his hands over his mouth, Arthur would have thought no more of the comment beyond it being an obvious jab at whatever gossip was circulating about him and his choice of overnight guests. Instead, Arthur stiffened and glanced at the choking Gwaine and wondered if the glow Merlin’s kiss had prompted somehow lingered.

Quick as thought, Arthur accessed the visual feeds for the briefing room and pulled up a third-person view of the podium with him standing in front of it. Not until he’d dragged a second and third perspective from the walls was he satisfied that Morgana was just trying to get a rise out of him.

His reaction was too many seconds too slow, so that Morgana’s eyebrows rose as she looked between Arthur and the dying-of-laughter Gwaine. “Point to me, then.” His Knights, the traitors, chuckled among themselves. So much for denying Gwaine’s rumormongering. If they hadn’t known about Merlin sleeping in his cabin before, they’d probably hunt down the nearest informed citizen for details immediately. He hoped he and Merlin hadn’t been loud enough to make people get creative.

Arthur ignored her, since any other recovery would only leave him scrambling to explain or deflect. “You’re here why?”

Her eyes flashed gold as she turned and Arthur’s lungs stopped working. His oxygen scrubbers kicked on almost before he thought about it and he clenched his jaw tight. The little lights on her oculars may have been flashing, but they began flashing only a beat after her eyes had lit. Merlin’s news came roaring back from where he’d shoved it to the back of his mind to deal with it later. Her magic was written on her face, and he’d missed it.

All the signs had been there. Her behaviour with Aithusa, treating the ship as if she were an independent entity, should have been a clue, even though Morgana had always sworn up and down that she’d never heard voices. He wanted to kick himself. There was no wonder in him now that she’d become friendlier with her sister to the point that their names would be linked in conspiracy.

If it would have helped, Arthur might have started venting his anger at volume again, but giving voice to his frustration that she would sully her name with the blood on Morgause’s hands would only make it worse. Morgana was a sorceress, magic and dangerous, and confronting her in front of witnesses loyal first to him could be enough to trigger retaliation. He wanted to be the only one
caught by any spell she might cast if he could at all help it.

But- he could not blame her for not telling him. Arthur suspected that he might never have found out even about Merlin’s magic, if only because Uther’s shadow loomed over Arthur’s life no matter how far from the Camelot he flew. Morgana and he had been close, however. They had claimed each other as siblings after their parents had married. He wondered what he had done to be unworthy of her trust when he’d never once lost his faith in her.

Where he thought he should feel betrayal, he felt only tired, a desire for answers and the taste of failure on his tongue.

He didn’t bother to restart his breathing until Morgana returned from the hallway with a very young Knight in tow and he needed air in order to speak. Morgana pushed the boy gently before her until he was standing in front of Arthur, looking up at him with a wide-eyed, open expression. She looked more than pleased with herself at her offering. Arthur gave her a sour look. The boy didn’t appear to be more than fifteen, his cherubic face without stubble and his shiny Knight’s armour newly smithed.

The other Knights watched with interest while Arthur studied the boy. He stood at attention to be inspected and Morgana’s hand hovered just between his shoulder blades. She wore a faint, fond expression as he’d never seen on her before.

“Replaced Owain with a puppy?” Arthur quipped to her, studying the twitch of the boy’s lips as he fought a scowl at the crude jest.

“You can be as rude as you want- but Mordred here is your eighth pilot, by order of the Pendragon.” Morgana stepped back from the boy. “Fresh out of training and every bit as good as your veterans here.”

Arthur ignored his other pilots as they laughed at the arrogance in her bold statement. “Is that so?” he asked, giving this Mordred boy another look. “Where are you from?”

“Hallowcay, bastion-class beholden to the Nemeth,” he said. His voice was strong and clear and Arthur suppressed a smile. Mordred hadn’t quite perfected his projection of confidence, so when he finished his shoulders twitched like he wanted to look over his shoulder at Morgana for approval. When he noticed that Arthur had noticed, a blush rose across his cheeks. Arthur met Morgana’s eyes over the boy’s head and for a moment it was as if nothing was wrong between them.

“I do need an eighth to flesh out Elena’s quad, but- Nemeth?” Arthur frowned and looked over the Knight’s regalia that Mordred had come attired in. He hadn’t gone so far as to don a cloak, but his armour had been crafted black with Arthur’s - Camelot’s - gold dragon emblazoned on the chestpiece. “I didn’t think Nemeth was offering any more pilots.” Behind him, he heard Derian’s deep rumble as he spoke into Elena’s ear.

Morgana’s smile grew a little bit more smug, her expression proprietary. “They weren’t.” Except something was a little off. A tightness around her eyes, perhaps, that said she was not as pleased as she was trying to lead him to believe.

“Chief of Communications Agravaine arranged it, Captain,” Mordred said. While he spoke, Arthur linked into the Camelot to pull Mordred’s entry and commenced a scan of his newest Knight’s ID chip. “I’ve admired the Knights of Camelot since I was a boy,” Mordred’s cheeks stayed brilliant pink, “And I belong behind the yoke of a destrier.”

Nodding absently, Arthur let Mordred’s file scroll across his field of view along with his vitals. The boy - or, rather, young man - had accolades and awards from flight training up and down his file. He
was good and if his reaction, stamina, and brain activity statistics were at all accurate, he was better than most of Arthur’s current pilots. Barring Elena, of course, and perhaps on his best day, Gwaine. Hallowcay had surrendered Mordred periodically over the last decade to the Nemeth, interspersing his Knight’s training with extended periods where he remained upon his birth ship.

There were notes all over Mordred’s file, little personalisations from various commanders that said Mordred was personable as well as talented. The most recent of was stamped with Uther’s personal encryption. Arthur broke the seal and read it then and there, well aware that he was standing rigid, staring into space, while his oculars cast their faint blue light to show that he was occupied.

Uther’s note simply said that Agravaine had suggested putting pressure on the Nemeth to provide a pilot. Arthur was a bit sceptical of the reasoning. Working to re-establish the power of the Pendragon using his Camelot allies first, Uther had made the transfer arrangements through Agravaine before informing Rodor that he was reassigning Mordred to the Kilgharrah in the interest of further friendship. It was, in Arthur’s estimation, a rubbish ploy with backwards logic, as like to make Rodor resent Uther as to reinforce his status as fleet commander. He could not, however, argue with the results.

Before him stood a pilot who appeared to be both in top form and brilliant shape. Arthur’s scan only reported recent chest scarring, as like to have occurred in a communal shower as during active training. He was fully kitted out in Camelot armour and had the eager look of a rookie on his first assignment.

What more could Arthur ask for? “You’re escorting him why, Morgana?” he asked, finally.

Neither Mordred nor Morgana had anticipated that question. Mordred’s expression collapsed into confusion and he couldn’t help himself: he looked over his shoulder for help.

“I’m a familiar face from the Hallowcay from my rounds as ambassador. Even I would not be so cold-hearted and contrary to abandon Mordred simply because Uther was the one to give the order to bring him.”

Mordred turned back to Arthur and nodded. “I know her from home.”

“Curiosity sated, then. Welcome to the squadron.” Arthur waited for the mixed complaints and celebration from the rest of the pilots to quiet down.

Morgana ruffled Mordred’s hair so that he laughed and batted her away. The gesture took Arthur by surprise. She rarely showed that much affection even toward Accolon, her longest-standing lover, and this was a far cry from the kind of displays she indulged in with him. Mordred was neither mere acquaintance nor lover, then, but a friend. They were of an age, too. Mordred only looked younger because Morgana’s extensive facial mods gave her an air of maturity - warranted or not.

Arthur tilted his head to study the pair of them again. Morgana didn’t have many friends. She looked tense and a little unhappy at surrendering Mordred to Arthur’s care, but that was all beneath a puffed-chest pride that Arthur had so rarely seen directed at anything - anyone, he mentally corrected himself - outside of Aithusa.

“Thank you, Captain,” Mordred said when he’d regained his composure. His grin was sweet and broad and made his apparent age drop from fifteen to about twelve, but it was as infectious as Merlin’s.

Arthur clapped him on the shoulder and spun him toward the still-seated Knights. None of them had gone anywhere while they had the opportunity to eavesdrop on as momentous an occasion as a new
pilot. “Mordred, Kilgharrah’s best. Bertrand and his pilots Ewan, Rodor, and Montague. Derian’s the big one. Gwaine’s the one making highly inappropriate kissy faces - Gwaine, let him settle in before you try to seduce him - and your squad leader, Elena, heir Gawant.”

“Lady Elena-” Mordred managed to infuse her name with the sort of reverential awe that Arthur usually reserved for genius works of art and really good food. “It’s an honour.”

“You’ve heard of me, then.” Elena dimpled, giving him a bright smile.

Behind him, Morgana snickered and whispered, knowing that Arthur would be able to pick it up, “He has the biggest crush on her ship, I swear. Ever time another one of her customisations was published, he’d rave until we shoved him up a tree to be rid of him. Make sure Elena knows he’s likely to transfer his puppy love to its pilot.”

Arthur choked and coughed to cover his sudden urge to laugh, then turned and quirked an eyebrow to let Morgana know he’d heard. Her lips curled up into a genuine smile and Arthur felt a pang of heartsickness. He’d missed her while he’d been out on the fringe.

In charge of the succession, Merlin had said, and Merlin couldn’t lie to him.

Her brows furrowed and she tilted her head at him in query. He shook his head. He needed more information before he could do much more besides confront her with questions.

“You did full sword training as well as a pilot specialisation, did you not?” Arthur asked. At Mordred’s nod, he continued, “I think I’ll assign you to the Ealdorians for the week. Percival could use the help. Radnor will escort you. Xe can tell you about drills while you walk. We’ll get you integrated as swiftly as possible.”

Mordred’s thanks were profuse and emphatic, to the point where Arthur wondered what he’d gotten into. He reflexively looked to Morgana for commiseration only to find her watching Mordred with a small, exasperated smile.

Dismissing his pilots again, Arthur foisted Mordred off on Radnor and shooed them out the door. The others left in ones and twos until it was just Morgana, Elena, Gwaine, and Derian. He wanted to speak with Elena and he couldn’t very well do that while Morgana was here.

“Thank you,” he said, turning to where Morgana leaned against the podium surveying the tiers of seats. He approached and pitched his voice so it wouldn’t carry. Elena might be able to hear it with her cranial modding, but otherwise the conversation was as private as any aboard a Kingdom ship.

“For what?” Morgana asked, lazily tilting her head back to peer up at him with eyes a faint gold.

“Bringing the boy,” Arthur said, “He looked like he could use the support. He’s… young.”

“No younger than I am.”

“But I’ve known you longer. Trust you more.”

They regarded each other during the moment that stretched between them. He hadn’t been there to see Morgana get her subvocalisation mod with its shiny plates that wrapped her trachea. Hadn’t been there to watch her finish flight training and claim Aithusa as her official Knight’s destrier. He’d missed the first time she and one of her lovers had called things off, had missed how she and her sister had improved their oftentimes rocky relationship, had missed the fact that she had bloody, fucking magic and that Camelot was actively dangerous for her because of his own father. Was that why she was betraying him? Because he hadn’t been there when she needed him?
“Don’t thank me, Arthur,” she said, so quietly that he almost didn’t hear her.

He wanted to demand his ‘whys’, but he had his pilots to think about and the rest of a rotation filled with decision-making that he really couldn’t shirk even on account of having his face burnt off.

“It’s still proof that my sister has a heart,” he said. He didn’t wait to see how she reacted to that, pivoting on his heel and striding over to where Elena and her boys were having some sort of animated discussion that involved the words ‘no’, ‘Mordred’, and ‘deliciously curly’ at volume.

In his periphery, he saw Morgana pause for a long moment before making her way to the door and out.

Arthur frowned down at Elena. “I’ve two pieces of information for you. Up to you whether or not you want these two idiots privy to them.”

“Topics?” she asked, resting her elbows on the arms of her chair and letting her head fall back against the seat. “Informed decisions and all, you know.”

“First is gossip. Second concerns the Gawant.”

“Ah,” Elena said, then rolled her head to look at Derian. “How’s my favourite Caerleon spy?”

“Good with waiting in the hall,” Derian said, deadpan.

Arthur chuckled, then hooked his thumb in the same direction. “With him,” he told Gwaine.

Popping up out of his seat, Gwaine hooked an arm around Arthur’s shoulders and leaned in close. “Glowing, Princess? Must have been a good night.”

“Out,” Arthur said, not bothering to rise to the bait. Gwaine just laughed and followed Derian out the door.

Once he and Elena were as alone as they were going to get he sat next to her and asked, “Where do you want to start?”

“Gossip first.”

“Mordred’s in love with your ship.”

Elena, braced for bad news, was startled into laughter. “It says that in his file?” she wheezed.

“A little bird might have whispered it in my ear. He was nearly coming in his pants at meeting the pilot of the ship of his dreams.”

“Ah, Morgana,” Elena trailed off into giggles, “She knew him from off ship, she said? Are you suggesting that his wanking to my experimental biotech might be the start of a beautiful obsession with me?”

“Fair warning.”

“He’ll learn soon enough.” Elena looked amused. She tapped her chin in exaggerated thought. “Do you think if I left him alone in the destrier bay I could get some good blackmail material?”

“Try not to give him mental scars.”

“A few good mental scars are tradition.”
“Try not to give me mental scars.”

“I won’t send you anything you don’t ask for,” Elena said, covering her smile with a hand. “I was surprised at him, though. I swear he winked back at Gwaine.”

“Gossip.”

Elena laughed again. “That made my morning.”

Arthur’s laugh wasn’t quite as enthusiastic, but he tried. “Good,” he said, sobering as she paused to catch her breath. “Because I’ve got other news.”


“More specifically, your father.”

“Daddy?” she shoved herself upright in her chair, inhaling sharply. “What’s wrong with him?”

“Nothing- no, sorry, no. Nothing’s wrong with your father. Fuck.” Arthur shook his head in sharp denial. Panicking Elena was the last thing he wanted to do. “Let me start over. Breathe. No, nothing’s happened yet. I wanted to give you a less-benign warning. One of my sources has pointed at you as possible victim in a plot to force your father into action against his will. The source was less than clear on the precise nature of the danger to your person, just that your status as heir Gawant might make you a target.”

Elena, who had been watching him wide-eyed as he spoke, let out her held breath and slumped back. “Oh, is that all.”

“Oh, is-” Arthur was dumbfounded. “‘Oh, is that all’?”

“I’m more worried about that new boy of ours having an awkward crush on my ship, though with any luck Gwaine will cure him of that.”

“This could mean you’re in danger-”

“Arthur, sweetheart,” Elena cut him off. “Thank you for the forewarning. I do mean that, but I also want you to understand that I know.”

“You know,” Arthur said flatly.

“Background radiation of my life as heir. I don’t have the backing of a command like you or Mithian or, fuck, even Sophia, and she will probably never even finish her fleet training. I’m not important enough to cause an incident if something were to happen to me, but my daddy still loves me enough that he might do something terrible for the bad guys if he thought I might get hurt.

“I’m your best pilot - you better smile and nod or I’m coming after you - maybe the best pilot in the fleet, but I’m more accessible and more vulnerable than any other heir you can name and if I’m having a bad day when someone comes after me I might not even be able to run away. So, yeah. I kind of know. Wouldn’t be the first time. Won’t be the last.”

“Oh,” Arthur felt a bit thick. “Fuck.”

“Yeah. ‘Oh, fuck’ is right.”

“What do you need, then?” Arthur asked, tossing out a whole slew of his prior calculations based on the slim intelligence that Mithian’s decoded datasquirt had offered. It was all irrelevant if Elena
already had protections in place.

“To stay on the Kilgharrah, ideally. Everything’s set up just so and the ship has always liked me. Barring that, to stay on the Camelot on the assigned Kilgharrah crew decks. Off-ship leave in this climate? No, thanks. We already know daddy’s inclined to keep me from coming back, and that’s just out of disdain for your father’s decisions as Pendragon. Who knows what he’d do if he had confirmation of some sort of plot.”

Arthur flexed his jaw. He hated to say it, but, “That is not within my power to grant.”

“Fuck.” Elena blew her hair out of her eyes. “So off-ship isn’t a suggestion.”

“Your father was adamant he got to see you in person. I traded your leave and staying in-system until after planetfall for what little guarantee I could get that my crew wouldn’t be portioned back out to the Kingdoms you’re beholden to.” He pinched the bridge of his nose, metal knocking against metal. Put like that, he was no better than his father or the ‘bad guys’ she’d cited. Not a pilot, but a pawn.

Elena either hadn’t heard that part or had interpreted it in an entirely different way, because what she picked up on instead was, “Planetfall?!”

Trust Elena to only go after the important details. Arthur huffed out a laugh. “Less than two months from now, apparently, if the Kilgharrah’s repairs don’t hold it up for too long. I guess I need to make an announcement. Pretty sure everyone knows but us.”

“Yes, yes you do,” Elena grinned. “Planetfall, fuck. *Fuck. Will I still be able to fly?* I mean- we’re not all going to become dirthuggers, right? I don’t think-”

“You’re still assigned to the Kilgharrah. Just because we have a planet doesn’t mean we don’t need patrols.”

She relaxed, the tension easing from her shoulders. “I wouldn’t want to leave my ship.”

“I’ll try and make sure that you don’t have to. That might be all I can do. Do you want an escort to the Gawant? A larger escort?”

“I don’t think they get much larger than Derian.” She flashed him a smile. “Ewan and Montague also offered, if it makes you feel better. A little pilots’ night out if Ewan brings Radnor and Bertrand decides to tag along. If we stick together they’re less likely to be able to nab any of us, for whatever reason they might. I don’t think it would be amiss if we took our leave together.”

Arthur nodded, relieved. “I’ll give you all proper leave after planetfall.”

“You’re not the only Kingdom heir who has had to deal with personal threats, Arthur. I may not have a command, but I’m as knee deep in this as you are.”

And while it wasn’t exactly one less worry for him, the knowledge that his pilots were treating this whole clusterfuck seriously took a load off of his mind. There was one name she hadn’t mentioned, however. He frowned.

“Gwaine’s staying with you,” Elena said before he could open his mouth. “He’s worried about something and won’t tell me why.”

“He’s worried about me?”

“Or the stray you picked up.”
“Gwaine…” Arthur leaned forward in his chair to put his elbows on his knees, and he let out his breath in a noisy sigh. Not that Gwaine wasn’t right to worry, but he was so idiosyncratic in who he attached to and how strongly that Arthur had long given up on trying to interfere. Not that he would have wanted to with Merlin, not when he had been (still was) worried about giving Merlin every reason to want to stay on their side, oath or no oath.

He had already seen Gwaine do the bristly, protective thing over Merlin at the meeting on the White Hart. That should have clued him in if nothing else. Especially when Gwaine had followed it up by acknowledging Arthur’s title.

“Is it any wonder?” Elena asked gently.

“None at all.”

“He’ll miss us.”

“I’ll keep him busy.”

“Make sure he eats,” Elena said, “Or, better yet, find someone he wants to feed.”

“Just my luck, I’ve an underfed Ealdorian in need of a minder.”

Elena grinned at him, eyebrows raised. “You have, have you?” Before he could protest her insinuation, she held up her hands. “I won’t speculate. I’ve got troubles enough of my own.”

“Nothing we can’t handle,” Arthur tried to infuse his tone with as much confidence as he could muster. Elena rewarded him with another grin. He made to stand and asked, “Need help out?”

After a brief pause where she tipped her head back and forth, wiggled her ankles and, presumably, her toes, she said, “I’ve got it. You go ahead. Just send the boys back in and I should be fine.”

Arthur poked his head into the corridor where Gwaine and Derian were leaning against the bulkhead. “We’re done.”

“About time,” Gwaine said, pushing himself away from the wall. His gaze travelled from Arthur’s face to a spot over his shoulder. “I’m getting hungry.”

Looking back, Arthur found Elena unexpectedly close behind. He tipped his head in Gwaine’s direction and gave her a significant look. She rolled her eyes.

Gwaine didn’t miss the exchange. He raised his eyebrows at them.

“Come find me if you get bored while you’re on leave,” Arthur told him, ignoring the eyebrows.

“Leave,” Gwaine drawled, “means I don’t have to be ordered around by you.”

“It’s not an order if I say ‘if’.” When Gwaine looked dubious, Arthur said, “That’s in the manual.”

Snorting, Gwaine wiggled his fingers at the other two pilots. “What manual? Raise your hand if you’ve ever read the manual. Nobody. Thought not. See, Arthur, nobody cares that you want to pretend it wasn’t an order.”

“You can still ignore it. Can’t do that with an order.”

“I plan to. I’m not going to wait until I get bored to grace you with my presence.”
Arthur laughed, even though he didn’t mean to. Laughing only encouraged Gwaine’s ego.

“C’mon, you two.” Elena looped one arm around Gwaine’s waist and tugged on Derian’s elbow. “We’ve got packing to do and I have super-secret instructions for Gwaine from his squad leader. Not for the ears of anyone named Arthur. Shoo. Go away. Don’t you have Captain things to do?” She gave him a pointed look.

“As a matter of fact, I do,” Arthur said, drawing himself up and lifting his chin in a very dignified manner. He was going to have to tell Merlin that he wasn’t the only one who referred to what he did as ‘Captain things’ and therefore he was brilliant. He didn’t know quite how the logic followed, but it seemed like something Merlin should know.

With him in uniform, Elena, Gwaine, and Derian saluted him before they moved off. Arthur watched them go. Elena’s steps were steady enough at the moment, and Gwaine would make sure they all went to the mess before she took her squad off to the Gawant. He was just going to have to hope for the best. Unless he wanted to take the risk of having his not-really-at-all trained warlock cast something to keep his pilots safe, there was nothing he could do.

He looked down at his own uniform, then pulled up his cuff on his human arm. Not glowing. Even if he almost felt like he should be. He sighed.

Duty called. He had support crews to coordinate with maintenance and no doubt Lucan had hit another snag that would require Pellinore and Agravaine’s assistance in finding parts, personnel, and raw material. There were only two weeks of this, at least, and then the Kilgharrah would be vacuum ready again and he could leave the chaos of the Camelot behind. He could do two weeks.
Chapter 36

The best part about the Camelot’s mess, besides how big it was and how few elbows Merlin found stabbing into his personal space, was that they were serving fresh fruits and vegetables alongside their protein pastes. He’d never had whatever this particular leafy, crunchy, green thing was, but it was cooked into a dish with something tangy and something that smelled like fermented bean curds. It made the generic, bland orange protein glop more passable simply by being present.

The crowd of lunch goers surrounding him sounded lively enough, if the sporadic laughter was anything to go on, but their voices were muted in the haze that Merlin had been carrying with him since he woke wrapped around Arthur. He still felt warm and relaxed from knowing that nothing he feared could come to pass while curled in Arthur’s bed, and it was making concentration difficult. His plate was about as far as he could think and the food… well, the Ealdor hadn’t had nearly the production facilities that the Camelot had, and the difference showed in the food.

Only the holster fastener digging into his hip had given him enough incentive to get up and out of bed before it ended up permanently embedded in his skin. Merlin had availed himself of Arthur’s private shower, tried to sort through the jumbled confusion of his thoughts and failed, and had given up on getting anything done until after he’d filled his belly. He was never going to get over the novelty of a resource-rich ship.

Merlin was savouring the existence of tiny purple berries that tasted a little like vanilla sugar and a little like sheer pleasure, when Will plopped his plate across the table from him and threw himself into a chair with a grunt. “Too fucking early.”

Behind him stood Gwen, suppressing a grin. She stepped around a uniformed woman who didn’t seem to see her, slid into a seat next to Merlin, and let her grin bloom. “He’s just complaining because I actually had to wake him up even though he got something upwards of sixteen hours of sleep. This isn’t even the early shift.”

She bumped her shoulder against Merlin’s and he grinned back, helpless in the face of her good humour.

“You missed breakfast,” Merlin told Will, pointing at his plate with his fork. “That’s definitely not breakfast food.”

Will yawned and scraped up some of his orange goo only to let it fall back to his plate with a plop. “This mess never serves breakfast. That’s not even an argument. I needed my beauty sleep.”

“Shouldn’t have woken him up, Gwen.” Merlin shook his head. “It looks like he needs at least three more weeks of sleep before he’ll be fit for polite company.”
“Oh, well that’s good then,” Gwen said. “We’re not polite company.”

“Both you sod off,” Will grumbled, glowering at them and tucking into his meal.

Merlin leaned to stage whisper into Gwen’s ear. “He’s a right terror when he first wakes up. The longer he sleeps, the worse he gets. You sure you still want to train him?”

Will jabbed his fork in their direction while Gwen dissolved into giggles. “Oi, fuck you. I am a treasure.”

“I’m happy to report he’s doing very well, actually.” Gwen started into her meal as well, eating a great deal slower than Will. At the first bite of whatever the berries were, she closed her eyes and made a small sound of pleasure. “And- Will also has news for you that he thought you might enjoy. So be nice to him.”

“I’m always nice to him,” Merlin protested. Will snorted. “I am!”

“See if I tell you anything about the Avalon, then. Making fun of a man when he can’t defend himself.”

“The very idea, Merlin,” Gwen said. She accompanied her mock-reproachful tone with a sad shake of her head.

“Avalon?” Merlin seized upon the word. For the first time since Arthur had kissed him and left for his shift, he felt the haze begin to burn away. “What about the Avalon?”

Will gave Gwen an ‘I-told-you-so’ look. “Ah, mate, I don’t know. Is that any way to treat someone you haven’t seen for nearly a whole day?”

“Sorry, sorry,” Merlin whipped out the apology without giving Will the shit he deserved, because Gwen’s grin had returned and they both looked like they were waiting for him to open an especially anticipated gift. “You’re brilliant and handsome and good in bed. Avalon, though. What about the Avalon?”

“Gwen,” Will gestured to her. She had covered her mouth with her hand so she wouldn’t disturb the rest of the mess with her laughter. “Said that when you were talking to the King that you mentioned something about the Avalon.”

Gwen dropped her hand and clarified, “Not so much the Avalon specifically, but you said, let’s see, something about admiring the Kilgarrah’s ‘type’, I think? The design, and not the ship itself. My specialisation is in cybernetics, obviously, but I took basic mechanical biotech like everyone else so even I know that when you say ‘Kilgharrah’s type’ you’re only referring to three galleys in the entire fleet.”

Will took over, holding up three fingers, “The Pendragon’s Kilgarrah. Captain Helios’s Southron.”

“-and the Avalon,” Gwen finished. “So I asked Will what you’d meant.”

“I didn’t know she had a reason for asking, mind,” Will said, “but I did remember that I owed you a bit of detective work. So I started tell her all about your obsession with the thing. The posters above your bed - really, Gwen, I had nudies above my bed, so you know he had it bad.”

“I didn’t want to know that, I really didn’t,” Gwen told him. Will mouthed ‘it’s true’ and she rolled her eyes, shifting her attention back to Merlin. “Anyway, he told me all about how you could probably draw the schematics by hand for every deck and every system if given the challenge.”
“Have, even,” Will corrected. “Have drawn. Took ages, but you said it was the best way to memorise anything. With your hands.” Will wiggled his fingers. “Memorising.”

Merlin was fully alert now, his worries about Arthur shoved aside for the moment, and he was ready to strangle them both. “Is there a point to all this?” he broke in, exasperated.

“Getting there,” Will said. “Hold your arsecheeks.”

“So I asked him,” Gwen was enjoying this. She really was, Merlin was sure. He wouldn’t have pegged her for a sadist, but that was clearly what she was. “If he’d heard any of the stories surrounding the ship. Not just the rocky construction process, but all of the ghost stories.”

Merlin blinked at Gwen. His excitement over whatever news she might have quadrupled. “The ship never launched.”

“Oh, well-” Gwen blushed, “No, it didn’t. The ghost stories are from beforehand. It was haunted.”

“It was haunted,” Merlin repeated.

“That’s not why it wasn’t launched, though, and it’s something that’s unofficial knowledge, really. I figure since you’re technically one of us now, I can give you all the gory details.”

“Yes, please.” Merlin’s heart was beginning to pound. To Will’s credit, he didn’t say anything.

“Right, yes.” Flustered by Merlin’s intensity, Gwen glanced at Will. Will just shrugged and wiggled his hands for her to go on. “So, yes. It wasn’t launched because it was caught in the Camelot’s disaster. Official records don’t even say it was destroyed, they just stop showing data and no launch was ever set. That was a deliberate omission, I think, because technically the Avalon survived. At first I suspect they just wanted to avoid having to explain what happened to it, because it doesn’t-”

Gwen cut herself off and tried again. “Half the Avalon melted, fused with the deck of the bay where it was being constructed. The Camelot ate most of the rest of the ships that were caught that way, chewed them right up as if they were recycling, but not this one. It began to eat it, but stopped.”

“What stopped it?” Merlin demanded the moment she paused.

“The Avalon couldn’t be eaten because it was haunted. It was slated to be assigned to-” Gwen suddenly stopped and leaned in, dropping her voice so that it was barely a whisper. “Nimueh Lake. Nimueh wasn’t going to be the Captain, mind, but it was going to be Lake’s Avalon all the same.

“But there were little signs that Nimueh was mad, even before she broke the Camelot. She was a sorceress, for one, but she’d talk to the ship. Speak with a ‘woman in the walls’ to the point where the construction crew started to call the spook she talked to Lake’s Lady. And- it makes you believe in ghosts, it really does - but even with Nimueh wasn’t around, the ship would light up, systems would repair themselves, progress would have happened over dead shifts when no one had been assigned. So. Haunted, so that even the Camelot wasn’t going to try. The woman might have been touched, but so was the ship.”

Merlin felt a little sick to his stomach. Gwen was describing a ghost - a real ghost, not a spectre of the dead, a haunt or a wight. Maybe it was the residual haze that had plagued his entire day, but he didn’t want to hear Gwen, of all people, speaking about either a ghost or the woman who could speak to it as if she were automatically dangerous-mad for the simple fact of magic.

Will was half-leanering over the table to hear their words. Merlin gave him no warnings of his intentions.
“She wasn’t mad,” Merlin said.

“Merlin-” Will began, but Merlin shushed him. He wanted Gwen to know. Hated hearing regurgitated nonsense about ‘madness’ and the assumption that ghosts weren’t real, that ships didn’t sometimes come with consciousnesses that thought and felt as much as humans did. She deserved to know.

Looking between the two of them with some consternation, Gwen hummed softly in inquiry.

“Not mad. She was- She- Please don’t let this be a bad idea,” Merlin took a breath. “I know what you’re describing, and she wasn’t mad. At least, that’s not a sign that she was, since she obviously- Crater. There’s a crater out there with her name on it, but the ship part, the ghost. I’m magic and I can talk to ghosts. That’s what I’m trying to say. Magic. Ghosts. Please don’t- please don’t hate me.” Merlin finished breathless and hoarse and not entirely sure he had made any logical sense, his eyes on Gwen’s and hoping he hadn’t judged wrong.

It was testament to Gwen’s excellent training that she didn’t pull away, didn’t make any sudden moves when confronted with Merlin’s babble, but instead merely blinked at him. The mess hall was still busy, still full of people, so even though the emotions that played across her face were intense and varied, she didn’t call attention to them. This really wasn’t the best place to have told her.

Her eyes narrowed. Not a good sign.

Then Gwen surprised him by leaning forward and gripping his arm. “I might not be fringe like you, but Lance is,” was all she said. “I should know better than to repeat anything I learnt in Kingdom space without thinking.”

Merlin folded his hand over hers and reeled, light-headed enough that Gwen’s grip on his arm was the only thing keeping him upright until he took a proper breath.

“This is why Lance is worried about you, isn’t it?” she asked, bringing up her other hand to smooth his hair back from his temple. Her look was searching, but she wasn’t leaping to her feet to run off and tell the King. Maybe he could have chosen another way to correct her assumptions, a way that didn’t involve him blurtting out his most dangerous of secrets to a woman he’d known barely more than a week.

But she’d held his hand when he’d just woken up when she didn’t have to, and he’d fallen in love with her for it. She had stayed at his side when she could while he’d been recovering, had seen him in pain while his magic fought his accelerators, had gone through his recovery with him even though she had no official reason to do so, no matter which occupational hat she had on. She’d been too busy to justify ‘guard’, and now ‘guard’ felt a little bit false even to him.

Merlin leaned into her touch with a sigh. “Lance is worried about me?”

“He wouldn’t tell me why.”

“That- that might be it, then. Why, that is.”

She thought about that for a moment, her thumb stroking his cheek. It was comforting. A tiny point of contact that reassured him that she wasn’t scared to touch him, wasn’t disgusted by what he represented.

Gwen said, “Lance likes you.”

Merlin had to laugh. “That’s what he said about you.”
“Ah, well,” Gwen laughed too, but softly. “That’s also true. Now I want to-” She halted, biting her lip.

Merlin raised an eyebrow at her and she patted his cheek.

“See some,” she finished. “Magic.”

That was easy enough. He didn’t even have to do anything. With a glance at Will, the brilliant scarlet of whose cheeks made him look like he was suffering apoplexy, Merlin let some of the magic that had come trickling back to him overnight rise to his eyes and burn there. Gwen’s expression turned to wonder and she smoothed her fingers over the ridge of his eyebrows, the arch of his cheekbone.

“Light but no metal,” she murmured. “Magic indeed.”

Will coughed to get their attention. When he was sure they were both looking, he clapped his hands over his chest and wheezed. “You are going to kill me. Both of you. People are looking.”

Gwen sat back and let her hands fall from Merlin’s face, shifting her regard to Will. “You can keep a secret.”

Setting his head gently on the table, Merlin closed his eyes. He couldn’t keep staring at the purple berries still left on his plate while his guts were still in turmoil.

“Wasn’t my secret to tell,” Will said. He made it sound obvious, like nobody in the world could be a better secret-keeper than him.

Gwen ran a hand over Merlin’s hair. “That makes me less worried about training you,” she told Will.

Merlin came to Will’s defence. “He knows when to keep his mouth shut.” It was an important distinction, especially when it came to Will. “He’s just not shy when he opens it.”

“I apologise for my doubts.” Gwen sounded amused.

“You doubt,” Will said with a flourish, “because I’m good at secrets.”

“You were good at keeping this one from me, certainly,” she said. Her cool fingers brushed across Merlin’s forehead again and he opened his eyes to find her leaning in close. “You’ve shown me no sign that you’re a danger to me and mine, and that’s all I care about.”

Merlin sat up and rubbed his face, raking his fingers through his shower-wet hair and drying them on his trousers. “I am dangerous, though. All of us kind of are.” Merlin trailed off, pulling his shoulders up to his ears. “Just look at Muriden. I don’t even know if he intended to be dangerous before he destroyed the Adolebat. And I don’t exactly have a lot of role models, but maybe that will send me mad. I’m not yet.” He threw a look at Will, who shrugged. How reassuring. “At least, I don’t think so.”

“Mad doesn’t mean dangerous any more than dangerous means mad,” Gwen said, her tone tart. “Every Counsellor worth their salt know that. Take notes, Will. And you could very well be mad and dangerous and still not be likely to kill us all, depending.” She paused, expression turning thoughtful. “And yet… even Nimueh seemed to go mad at the end and she was the most celebrated sorceress of her generation.”

Will grimaced at her. “I don’t think implying that some sort of horrible end being inevitable is helpful. This is Merlin we’re talking about.”

“Oh- no, no, sorry. That wasn’t me trying to conflate the two. I just- I- oh… no, you’re right, that’s
what it sounded like, didn’t it.” Gwen sighed. “Sorry. That’s the sort of logic I’d expect out of
Arthur, if only because of how rabid the King is about sorcery being mad and dangerous combined.”


Gwen’s ‘are you kidding me’ look made Merlin scoot away and hunch again. “You told him before
you told me?” she asked. “Arthur? We’re talking about the same Arthur, right? Son of Uther
Pendragon? I know you like him, and gossip says you stayed with him last night, but—”

“I didn’t exactly tell him so much as,” Merlin said, wiggling his fingers. “There were Glatissant
and…” He was a bit distracted by the fact that Gwen knew about the sleeping-in-Arthur’s-cabin
thing already and that Will hadn’t found the time to mock him for it yet, but he got the message
across.

“Oh, no.” Gwen covered her mouth, her eyes sympathetic. “Lance wouldn’t tell me what happened
aboard the Villain’s Smile.”

Merlin let out his breath in a rush and nodded.

“I’m going to have words with Lance after our rotations.”

“Don’t be hard on him,” Merlin protested.

Gwen blinked at him. “Why would I be hard on him when he didn’t do anything wrong? We’re
going to conspire now that we’ve been bumped up to the same level of classified information.” She
grinned at him, looking altogether too pleased.

He grinned back. Her pleasure turned thoughtful.

“Now, Merlin.” Gwen reoriented. “Merlin, Merlin, Merlin. You interrupted us when we were telling
you something and now that I know what I know it’s even more of something
you
should know.”
She levelled a finger at him and his eyebrows rose. “Remember how I said that the reason the
Camelot didn’t eat the Avalon was because it was haunted? Well- what I meant is that the Camelot
still hasn’t eaten the Avalon because it’s still haunted.”

It took a full thirty seconds of Merlin trying to figure out what she meant by that before he gasped.
“Still?” He looked from Gwen to Will to find Will grinning and wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

Nodding, Gwen said, “The Avalon is accessible if you’re willing to take a bit of risk. It’s haunted
and creepy and the Camelot could finish it off at any moment, but you can get into it. That’s what the
surprise was. Will wanted you to know where to find it so you could go say hello. Although if
there’s a ghost that’s an actual ghost, I guess saying hello is a little more literal now.”

“Fuck. Fuck fuck.” Merlin stood, almost knocking his plate to the floor. “Where is it?”

“Hold on,” Gwen said, grasping his sleeve and pulling him back down into his seat. “It’s in a
restricted zone.”

“Get me in. I’ll do anything.”

This time Will didn’t bother to pretend he wasn’t an arse. “I told you so, didn’t I, Gwen. It’s love.”

Gwen huffed at him and shook her head, then turned back to Merlin with a smile. “He did tell me.
So—” She reached down the back of her uniform collar and he heard the snick of her wing mods
engage and pop open. When she pulled her hand back out, she held a small strip of plastic.
“Temporary pass. I’m not adept at messing with the system programmatically, so I had to go for a physical solution. This isn’t technically against any rule, because the pass system was phased out of use about five hundred years ago. This’ll use the system as a back door to grant your ID chip access to the correct corridor. I tried to make it indefinite permission, but it might assign you an expiration, and if it does come back and I’ll give you a new one.”

“This is brilliant,” Merlin said, taking the slender strip and curling his hands around the precious thing. He was going to get to see the Avalon and the Avalon had a ghost. The haze from his odd morning had been entirely replaced by electric anticipation. “Can I go now?”

“Let him go, Gwen. I’ll keep you company,” Will said.

She gave Will an exasperated look, said, “You have to keep me company, you’re my apprentice,” but nodded anyway and began to give Merlin instructions on how to get where he so desperately wanted to go.

The instructions were simple enough. The Kilgharrah crew decks were just above the access corridor that he needed to take to get to the bottom of the scar. Based on her explanation, it was a single, curved corridor that stretched for a good portion of the interior of the ship. Even with how long it was, the route would take him significantly less time than it had taken Arthur and him to climb up to the shrine on the upper curve.

Before she let him go, however, Gwen cautioned him to be careful. “It’s not restricted because of secrets or shame or anything like that, it’s restricted because it’s actively dangerous. That part of the ship has been slightly unstable for upwards of twenty years. The Avalon could, quite literally, be eaten at any moment and we would never find your body. Don’t end up incorporated into the ship before you have to be.” Gwen grabbed his hand and held on, lowering her voice to make her point. “I know you’re excited to go, but just keep that in mind.”

Will leaned across the table. “Even if the ship goes while he’s inside, he’ll be fine. He’s survived vacuum, Glatissant, and a night with Arthur.”

“All three in the same risky category, I know,” Gwen said, patting Merlin on the cheek with her other hand before releasing him. “But out of all of them, the Camelot is most likely to ‘accidentally’ eat one of your limbs. I’ve replaced enough to know.”

Despite his excitement, her comment made Merlin pause. “The Camelot is hungry.”

“That’s what I’m trying to say, yes.”

“The Avalon is down near the bottom of the scar.”

Gwen looked up at him, her head tilted to the side and eyes narrowed, but she nodded.

Fuck. “I’ll be careful,” he said. He needed to visit the Avalon, especially if both ship and ghost were still there. Getting any closer to the presence in the bottom of the scar might have been too much risk for even something that had shaped his life like the ship in question, but he couldn’t abandon a ghost.

This time Gwen bid him farewell and let him leave without any further warnings. As he walked away, he heard her scraping the berries from his plate onto hers and telling Will to, “Tell me everything you know about ghosts, starting with why you know they’re real.”

It only took him a fraction of the time to find the correct access door to the restricted sector as it had to find entrance to the biosphere. The door was massive, shored up by extra bolts sunk deep into the flesh around the frame. Painted across the front was a warning threatening death, dismemberment,
and zero oversight beyond. The little plastic strip went into a tiny aperture in the wall next to the
door. He fed the strip and waited, twitchy now that he knew the Avalon was somewhere beyond.

The ship made alarming shredding and grinding noises for long enough that Merlin started to look
over his shoulder in case anyone heard and came to investigate. The strip finished processing with a

Merlin fidgeted from foot to foot, shifting his weight and eyeing the lump of a laser turret by the
upper edge of the door. Even though the Kingdom’s internal defence systems needed to be actively
operated, the turret made him nervous.

He could pull apart the access panel if necessary. Gwen’s idea was a good one, but the longer the
wait stretched, the less confidence Merlin had in Gwen’s bypass.

At last there was a loud, mechanical clonk and the portal irised open. Merlin clambered through
before it had even finished. The corridor felt different, his magic responding oddly before he’d taken
a dozen steps, so that when the impulse to run caught him, he flung himself forward.

Mottled grey walls blurred past as he ran around curves and down a long, slow incline. This section
wasn’t as emaciated as the one Arthur had taken him through. Instead, it was run down and
somewhat grimy and every so often his boots would slip on loose, dry skin. The care that the
denizens of the Camelot seemed to take of the rest of the ship was little in appearance here. Like
running through the Ealdor on the wings of his own magic, he could feel what little that he had
recovered start to spread from him. He tried to claw it back beneath his skin, concentrating more on
that than not tripping.

It wasn’t safe here. He could feel the emptiness of the Camelot nipping harder and harder at the
edges of his power. The corridor stretched before him, disused and musty. The further he ran, the
fewer lights remained active. It got darker and darker.

Merlin was either lucky or Gwen was right about how restricted the area was, because he reached
the final door leading to the Avalon without meeting anyone else on the way. Bending at the waist,
hands on his knees and panting, Merlin felt his magic try to slip from him and sink into the deck and
bulkheads. It was all he could do to keep it under control.

If he let it go now, he felt certain that it wouldn’t come back. That the *something* would sink claws
into his mind and chew out that part of him that was magic. He was too close to whatever he had
seen in the bottom of the pit and it weighed at the back of his mind like a neutron star.

He shouldn’t have run, running had only made his magic itch to free itself from where it normally
slept, but his instinct told him that he couldn’t have taken his time. The thing in the pit didn’t feel
sentient at all, but it was orienting on him the longer he stood in the corridor trying to catch his
breath.

The door to the construction bay where the Avalon rested had a manual access panel that spat out
dissonant chords when he tried to toggle it open. Merlin stared at the panel. He was not going to be
balked by a door. Its red ‘no access’ lights were the brightest lights for ten paces in either direction.
The overheads flickered fitfully, and the curved bulkheads had skin that had actually ripped in some
places, exposing conduits and steel.

The mechanic in him sobbed as he shoved his fingers into the flesh above the panel and yanked it
free. The previous door had eaten the strip that Gwen gave him and he wasn’t waiting around for the
Camelot’s ancient systems to catch up with the central database.
He silently apologised to Gwen as he stripped out wires and rerouted electricity, shoving aside muscle and conduits to do so. She had been trying to get him in and out in a way that wouldn’t get all of them into trouble. An innocent loophole for an innocent visit. Physically manipulating a panel to grant him access was one hundred percent guaranteed to find him in the brig if anyone found out. He should wait, let Gwen’s bypass propagate, but he couldn’t. He already felt diminished, like his magic was leaking through his metaphorical fingers and being sucked away. His brief attempt to use it to open the door proved a repeat of trying to stick his triskelion to the wall. He didn’t want to waste magic while he was still recovering.

The door chimed with a cheerful major chord. Merlin had a moment of horror as it opened. He had no idea what kind of vacuum seal the bay beyond had if there were only half a ship inside. He braced himself and scrambled for his magic, trying to mimic or recast or anything his ‘Do Not Explosively Decompress’ spell before something terrible happened.

Instead of Merlin being yanked into space, (which was a terrifying thought to have at the last minute and he was never going to be so stupid again) he was slapped in the face the wet scents of mildew and heated embalming fluid. The half-cast spell fled his grasp. He stepped through the door and the pressure differential when it irised shut made his ears pop.

Seeing the Avalon up close was everything he’d wanted and more. She and the Kilgharrah had been built along the same lines, sleek galleys bristling with weaponry, but what drew his attention were the customisations that made the Avalon unique. She had grappers, flexible tentacle-like limbs that reminded him uncomfortably of Glatissant devourers, engines large and powerful enough that the galley had required a bastion-class circulatory system to keep up with their cooling, and a tiny biosphere just large enough to store samples tucked at her centre of mass that made her thicker about the middle than the other two of her type. She was designed for xenobiological exploration. She had the firepower to fight off any angry subjects who objected to being explored as well as the speed to get the fuck out in a hurry.

She was made for the fringe and Merlin loved her dearly. The Kilgharrah had been modified over the years in different directions - external rigs for destrier maintenance, expanded holding cells, and stripped-down systems so that they could be run via computer and a man who was mostly metal - but he had never been intended for the fringe. He’d been intended to live among the civilian population, a ship tailored for a Kingdom-bred captain. A Pendragon.

The Avalon just looked vicious, helped in part by the ragged beginnings of her tattoos. He’d heard they had tried to resurrect the practice, but looking at the half-inked island tower and the start of a single black bat- (or dragon-?) wing, he didn’t wonder that superstition might keep them from trying again.

The bay she had been constructed in ended abruptly in a lumpy green wall covered in ugly blackish splatters. There was evidence everywhere of just how much ichor she had lost. It had pooled and congealed over two decades ago and turned rotten, leaving the deck textured with clots and clumps of pale green turned almost clear as it dried. The Camelot had sent strings and streamers of flesh to attach to the hull of the Avalon to give every appearance of the ship being pulled into the truncated wall of the bay. The Avalon’s grappers had sunk deep into the opposite walls, the massive tentacles wrapped around the exposed steel and bone skeleton of the larger ship. The creak of sinew in the grappers completed the illusion of constant tension that Merlin wasn’t entirely sure was an illusion.

Tentatively, he approached, trying to find a hatch or airlock that he could open and let himself in. The Avalon’s heartbeat, out of proportion for its size four-fold and more now that she was only half a ship, thundered through the soles of his shoes. He had to climb over great, snaking conduits that had been ripped from the floor and shoved into makeshift ports on the side of her hull. Nutrient
conduits to keep her alive. Embalming conduits for when she inevitably died.

With his magic fighting his hold, it was no surprise to him when it came into contact with the ship while he was still half a dozen feet away with no sign of an entrance. The Avalon’s ghost had been watching him.

Who are you?

Her voice was a harsh whisper, guarded as she touched his mind briefly and retreated.

Halting, he said, “Merlin,” in as clear a voice as he could.

The Avalon did not touch his mind for a full minute. He gave up standing still when he could continue his attempt to find a way to board. He had just found an airlock that looked like he might be able to rewire to grant him access when her mind overwhelmed his. She skipped straight past superficial communication and hijacked his senses like the Kilgharrah had during battle.

Merlin staggered as his brain tried to interpret brand new signals that told him he did not exist from the bottom of his ribcage down. He leaned against the airlock and struggled to fill his lungs.

Warlock. Dragonlord. Scion of Balinor! At full volume her voice was a cutting soprano. Emrys.

He grinned at the door and pushed himself upright. She sounded as happy to see him as he was to finally get a chance to see her. “Avalon.”

Freya, she corrected. She picked up on his confusion before he could speak to ask. My name is Freya, Lake’s Lady, Ghost of the Avalon.

“She named you.”

She helped me come into being, and she taught me to discover names such as yours.

Freya settled heavily in Merlin’s thoughts to rummage. No polite chit-chat, no foreplay whatsoever, she laid into him with a relentless, destructive curiosity and hunger for experience. Memories of his family and past swirled around her touch and he had to force himself to concentrate on standing and breathing while she dragged his last images of his father to the fore. He found his eyes watering and took a ragged breath.

He found himself hard-pressed to begrudge her, though, because when he closed his eyes and rested his forehead on the door in her hull, he found her recollections at the surface, waiting for him.

There was Nimueh, the insignia of biologist and xenobiologist prominent on the shoulder of her uniform, stroking the half-finished Avalon’s hull with a proprietary air. Young, professional, she had only the faint glow of gold in her eye to say that she was renowned for other reasons. She did not look much older than Arthur. For some reason that surprised Merlin, that she would look so young after being infamous for his entire life.

There was the image of the Avalon engaging her engines for the first time accompanied by the tingle of power and thwarted acceleration, of Nimueh sitting on an overturned crate with a flexiscreen in hand as she spun stories and drew pictures for the new-formed ghost. One showed Nimueh connecting Freya to her databases, giving her knowledge and background to understand the humans that would soon inhabit her.

The databases were no longer connected. They had been housed somewhere near his hip in memory. They were numb with shared sensation in the present.
If he had any more magic at his disposal, he would be worried about how little control he had over it. He was reaching the point where Balinor had cast his barrier spell. Even with as little as he had at the moment, he might do some damage before it all got sucked away into the void.

*I remember Balinor,* she said, a faint note of awe in her voice. *The Southron was to be his. How I envied her her dragonlord.*

“I didn’t know he was going to be given a ship.” Merlin, sweating, clutched at his magic and swore at himself.

*Not to Captain, but- are you well?* Freya halted her investigations of the inside of Merlin’s head.

“Not really,” Merlin managed.

At first the Avalon’s touch had made the Camelot’s hunger recede as though he were protected in her presence, but the creeping, grasping sensation had returned to send a thrill of almost-pain down his spine. He’d stayed too close to whatever was in the scar for too long, and as slow as it was, it had finally caught up with him.

*He is trying to claim your magic.*

Her disgust barely registered, but the sound of the airlock unsealing got his attention well enough. He fell inside, sprawling onto the floor of the tiny chamber to lie staring at the ceiling. The difference between standing outside and being inside was immediate, disconcerting, and very welcome.

The Camelot’s devouring void was replaced by the simpler, sharper hunger of experience-starved Freya. Merlin relaxed into the hold she had on his mind.

*I’ve got you.*

Merlin kicked the airlock closed, sealing off the last of the Camelot’s influence.

Released from the force drawing it in, his magic snapped back beneath his skin. For the first time since he’d stepped off the gangplank onto the deck of the Camelot, he didn’t feel like he was in imminent danger of becoming an ex-warlock. The inner door irised open, granting him access to the Avalon’s corridors if he could scrape himself from the deck and get his legs functioning again. Getting up seemed like a lot of effort.

Freya hovered in the background, a palpable presence in the walls and beneath his weight on her deck. It didn’t surprise Merlin at all that she had as much control over her systems as the Kilgharrah had over his.

“You’re strong. A strong ghost,” Merlin said, still lying face-up. He was considering moving, he really was.

*I have travelled around the star you call Albion almost twenty-one times. I grow in strength with age.*

Merlin sat up and shucked his boots and socks. With his feet bare, he could feel the warmth of Freya’s regard through his soles. There was something to be said for requiring skin contact to be able to speak with a ghost. Skin told him mood in a way that not even her sensation-sharing connection could manage.

“The Kilgharrah never mentioned you.”
The ship creaked and shuddered so that, at first, Merlin thought that she was angry with him for his comment, but the heat had gone from beneath his feet even though her thoughts had not left his mind. He pulled himself up the wall and peered out the porthole set in the airlock door.

His arms ached and - beyond the door - he could see the Avalon’s grapplers tense and flex. It felt like his arms had always ached.

*He desires what power you hold. You should not have come here.*

“I had to come.”

*Why is that?*

“Because you’re here alone.”

The ache did not dim, nor the struggle abate, but Freya returned her attention to Merlin. The airlock warmed and a small red light came on in the upper corner. *That is so. But I am trapped and abandoned, which means alone. I do not understand why this would prompt you to visit me.*

Merlin was at a loss for words.

The ship heaved beneath him and he clung to the outer airlock door to remain standing. There was fleshy ripping noise accompanied by the snap and twang of cable and ligament. The Avalon relaxed beneath him and Freya heaved a sigh.

*His persistence is unusual.*

“Who is he?” Merlin asked, rather than try to explain why he didn’t think any ghost should have to go through life alone.

The disgust in her tone became pronounced. *Sigan. Cornelius Sigan.* She caught Merlin’s mental query and her huff of annoyance was the creak of the inner airlock door reminding him that he should probably move further inside. As he left his shoes behind and climbed through into the Avalon proper, she explained in the clipped tones of one so unutterably irritated with the subject in question that she was doing him a favour by subjecting herself to it once more. *Sigan was the Camelot’s ghost. Ancient. A hero. His death kept the Camelot from collapsing in upon itself. His power shielded and healed the Camelot so the damage caused by my creator and the elemental explosives she was destroyed with were contained as well as might be.*

Merlin stopped in the corridor beyond the airlock. “Sigan was the ghost of the Camelot? The ship didn’t- A ship dies when the ghost does, and the Camelot’s not dead.”

Except that it was and it wasn’t. The too-pale walls, the scarred heart, the unhealed damage even after all these years.

*He died. Collapsed inward, glutted with power as he held it from cracking your biosphere again. In his last moments he made sure that the ship and its people would not follow him into death. Made sure I would not follow him.*

“Half of my engineering texts cite him as a fundamental author,” Merlin said, placing one hand on the bulkhead to steady himself. The book that he’d found of Gaius’s, ink on paper that had suggested a time when magic users had been an integral part of the fleet- how many times had he read the name Cornelius Sigan in that book and never once had him connected with the ghost of the Camelot?

It hadn’t needed to be recorded, because it had been known.
“They had to have Purged all mention of him as a ghost or I would have found it.”

*I have been subject to no such purge, nor do I retain databases to purge. All I know resides within my own memory.*

“Sigan. *Cornelius Sigan* is trying to *eat me.*”

*He is a mindless thing. An anomaly. A void. He is the unconsumed core of a catastrophe ongoing. If given the chance, he will devour me, and you, and every ghost and magic user who comes too close, magic first and flesh besides.*

After everything that he’d told Arthur, he had come willingly into Sigan’s domain like an idiot.

*But he is mindless and cannot move. Only those creatures aboard the Camelot are at risk,* Freya said. She spoke flippantly, as if her imminent death if her grapplers ever failed was nothing to mention. He felt the phantom brush of leathery wings, a reassurance of a sort. The false sensation only served to reinforce Freya’s inhumanity.

“What happens at planetfall?” Merlin asked quietly.

Freya paused. *That is not soon.*

“What cannot happen. Sigan’s hunger only grows.*

Merlin scrubbed his hands across his face and leaned against the bulkhead. “So what you’re telling me is that when Camelot impacts Albion, that it’s going to release a mindless horror upon the surface and we’re all fucked?”

*See that it does not come to pass.*

“No pressure;” Merlin muttered. He slid down the wall to sit and curl his arms around his legs. He would rather know about imminent doom than not know, that was true, but he barely had any power to speak of after blasting and burning most of it trying to save the Kilgharrah.

Planetfall was within a month, Arthur was a complication that he couldn’t even deal with right now, and he was on the Camelot where people frowned heavily on magic (frowned with swords and chopping and even Arthur hadn’t been amused). The terraform might not even finish because of Morgause and Morgana, which would make Sigan’s threat a bit moot.

Merlin wished that wanting to kiss Arthur safely, figuring out if the kissing meant that he wasn’t going to chop his head off at the first mistake, and finding out what Arthur would do if it came down to a choice was the most pressing of his concerns. But no. Head-choppy-offy came lower on the list than the many ways that Albion could end up destroyed.

He needed time to recover. Time to sort things out with Arthur. Maybe - and he knew this was entirely wishful thinking - time to plan.

Resting his forehead on his knees, he sighed. “Any suggestions?”

*Did the Kilgharrah truly not mention my existence?*

“I’m sorry,” Merlin said, squeezing his eyes shut. “He didn’t.

*I suppose that is only fair. I was never connected to the fleet, so he would never have met me even*
from afar. He is older than I and has been among the fleet for as long as I have not, Freya mused aloud. Ask him about Sigan. My cage has stunted my growth. What ideas I have require more power than I possess.

“I’ll ask him.” Merlin gave the far wall of the corridor a wan smile. At least now he knew that he could hear ghosts again, wasn’t so burnt out that the background buzz of a ship’s magic could drown out a ghost’s voice. If the Kilgharrah didn’t answer him when he spoke now, he would know that it wasn’t because he was still broken. “Thanks.”

If his thanks sounded a little wry, then maybe she could forgive him.

*You can thank me by performing your dragonlord duties,* Freya said, her hunger sharpening. The mostly-broken lights in the corridor dimmed to pale white.

Wary, he clambered back to his feet. “Duties?”

*Allow me to draw from you. I can taste the potential in your blood and I have never had the pleasure.*

Merlin’s curiosity warred with his caution. “I don’t have a lot of power right now or anything. There’s only a little—”

*It will be enough. Do you grant me your permission, dragonlord?*

Licking his lips, Merlin nodded. The sense of her impatience prompted him to quickly add, “Yes. Yes, granted.”

Apparently her words had been a formal request that required a formal answer. The tips of his fingers began to tingle and he straightened, adjusting his stance against whatever drawing was going to take from him. He put one hand upon the bulkhead behind him, just in case.

Freya did not slam up against his soles like Kilgharrah had. She rested a weight above his heart and began a long, gentle draw that turned the weight into the press of a paw, unvelveted claws pricking the skin of his chest. Power flowed from him and down her limbs, solidifying her form one swirl of gold particles at a time as she manifested in light and conjured matter.

She wasn’t a dragon. Merlin had braced himself for a dragon.

A great black cat blinked at him with gold-tinged eyes. She was sleek and massive, an echo of the Avalon, with a heavy jaw full of carnivore’s teeth and paws the size of his face. Her form translucent, he could see the wall behind her even as she gave herself weight and solidity.

Her breath was heavy on his face, her claws sharp through his shirt, and her pelt took on a rich black sheen underlaid with spots of darker black.

She pressed him back against the wall and only his knowledge that he could revoke her permission to draw kept his knees from giving way. Warships were predators, were designed to be predators no matter what other modifications had been made. With her teeth so very close to his face, her whiskers tickling his cheeks, his instincts told him to stay very, very still.

On a level below his human prey response, however, his magic objected. He was more like her, like the Kilgharrah, like the Ealdor, than he was like Arthur or Will or Gwen. There was kinship in their existences, magic housed in flesh and bounded by technology.

Neither of them were prey here, but something entirely other.
He grinned at her, fear melting into wonder as he adjusted to the feel of his magic flowing from him as if through a conduit he could neither see nor touch. She rumbled at him in warning. Without pausing for thought, Merlin returned the warning with a single harsh syllable that scraped his throat raw to speak. Her surprise was a short-lived snarl, replaced by an odd sense of satisfaction as she released him from her pin and dropped to all fours.

Her wings filled out last, batwings with span enough to drive her airborne without the benefit of magic. She folded and unfolded them, her semi-solid form clipping through the ceiling and bulkheads without apparent care for how dense she had become or how constrained her surroundings. Her draw from him slowed to a trickle, leaving only a single tether to sustain her as she sat back on her haunches and blinked up at him.

Not very far up, though, because she was massive. She tilted her head at him, triumph thrumming across the surface of Merlin’s skin as she poured emotion through their connection. *It is done.*

Merlin rubbed at his throat and cleared it, not entirely sure what language he’d been speaking. “Two questions,” he said, rasping out the words and swallowing. He was really going to have to invest in a water pouch or bottle or something. “Why are you a cat? And what did I say to you?”

Her smug contentment did not dim as she answered, indicating herself with a dip of her head, *Bastet, cousin to dragons. You did not think that all dragon-rank ships would manifest similarly, did you? There is as much variation among us as among maiden-rank, though we rarely manifest as humans. The rank is named for the predominant form.*

The shifting light on Freya’s pelt showed gold-rimmed scales set where her translucent fur would be thinnest. Merlin put out his hand. It was his magic that sketched her out into reality and suggested wings, tails and teeth, and the smaller, faster shadow of her true heartbeat. To touch a ghost would be a wondrous thing.

Standing at his unspoken behest, Freya fuzzed the line of her jaw against Merlin’s fingers. Merlin was mesmerised by the sensation. Her coarse longer fur covered a soft underlayer, and he could both touch the strands as well as see his skin through them. Added to the feel of fur was the crackle of his magic as it skittered back up his arm, returning to the source. Touching the side of her head was like caressing electricity in a bottle. Magic arched to his fingers and exploded into small starbursts at each point of contact.

*You told me to ‘back off’. Not in so many words, mind you. It was a combination of ‘calm’, ‘away’, and ‘now’. It is… quite an experience to hear words that I know only through instinct. The gifts of your birthright are impressive.*

“It’s not so kind to my vocal chords.” He coughed again. The sparks on her fur from where he had touched her dimmed as he pulled his hand away. She returned to uniform translucence.

*You’re not supposed to use your vocal chords to speak it, fragile warlock,* Freya bared her teeth in a mockery of anthropomorphic mirth. Her canines were as long as his hand.

“Very funny,” Merlin said, rubbing his chest.

Her tether was barely any weight at all now that she herself had backed away. She had drawn as much of his magic as she could and left him with enough to talk to her and maintain the connection, but no more. Evaluating what little magic remained behind, he found he was nearly back to what he was able to sense after burning himself out for his oath. “Whose vocal chords am I supposed to use?”
Those granted by your birthright.

When no further words of wisdom were forthcoming and Freya seemed content to sit with her eyes half-lidded, flexing her wings through the walls, Merlin sighed. “Alright, then- next question. You drew everything I had. If I had more-?”

I do not know for certain, Freya said thoughtfully. She stared at him and he realised that, alone in her manifestation, only her eyes were solid. The gold of his magic remained opaque, and when her vertical pupils grew rounder as the lights flickered and the floor rocked, the darkness inside of them was solid as well. I am not what I could be, my size and strength have been feeding Sigan for all of my days, but this is the manifestation that your magic and my power together can sustain.

Merlin figured that Freya’s shoulder was level with his midriff, maybe a bit higher and she was more than a mere suggestion of a bastet. Her teeth looked sharp and the sting of tiny scratches on his chest could vouch for her claws. If this was what he could do with barely any power to speak of, he couldn’t fathom what a larger draw would even look like.

“How long does it last?”

Not much longer.

Merlin wasn’t sure whether to be disappointed or relieved. She was impressive - magnificent, even - but returning to a state where he couldn’t cast and could barely sense was starting to make him nervous. He scrubbed at the skin of his arms against a faint crawling sensation that Freya wasn’t sending and he had no other source for.

Freya head-butted him, dragging her shoulder along his side until he staggered in the direction she wanted him to go. He could feel her intent to cling to her physical form as long as possible.* Walk with me. I’ll give you a tour.*

The memory of the posters above his bed on the Ealdor, possibly manipulated to the front of his thoughts by a sly bastet named Freya, washed away his nerves in a wave of enthusiasm firmly rooted in being eight years old and absolutely obsessed. “That’s cheating.”

Do you deny that they are your very own thoughts?

“I am supposed to be worrying about Sigan and Albion, trying to find Arthur. I shouldn’t stay. It seems wrong, somehow, to forget everything else.”

Consider this a favour to me, then, if it eases your guilt.

Merlin winced.

It is not your fault that I have been forsaken.

“I’ll figure out how to free you,” Merlin told her.

I am half a ship. Without the wall of the Camelot to brace me, I cannot even hold out the vacuum. There is no freedom for me. No rescue. If I am pulled from this bay I will likely die immediately.

“That’s not right. You never even got a chance to fly. To connect to the fleet. To meet your sibling ships.”

It doesn’t have to be right. It is true.
“There has to be-”

*Do not spoil our tour with bemoaning the unfairness of the universe. I will show you my customisations. The recorded schematics do not contain some of my bridge system modifications. Come with me.*

Merlin lapsed into silence and followed Freya as she padded down the corridor. He’d think of something. He might as well, after all. What was one more impossible task among many?

Freya’s wings skimmed through the bulkheads as they walked, leaving spiralling trails of magic. Her claws left scratches in the skin of the deck that leaked ichor, showing her as real though her appearance suggested she was a spectre. Merlin couldn’t help the grin that crept across his face.

He was on the *Avalon* and the Avalon’s ghost was giving him a *tour*. This was the best surprise *ever* and he was pretty sure that it was worth every risk.

Before they went too far, however, Merlin had to ask, “Any ideas on how I’m going to get back to relative safety after I leave?”

*Only one*, Freya said. *I suggest you run.*
Rotation over (he was never really off duty, he just got people to stop bothering him while he tried to
sleep), Arthur was exhausted. A second round of plugging into the Kilgharrah and skimming the
aggregate data from a long day of intensive repairs had left him with a pounding headache and
thinning patience. This meant, of course, that Morgana chose to corner him on his way to find
Merlin. She put her hand on his arm, smiled politely up at him, and steered him through the nearest
door.

She’d chosen her ambush well. The room was an officer’s hidey-hole, a little room with four
squashy chairs bolted down in a cluster and a tiny cupboard filled with alcohol. If Gwaine ever
finagled access to the place, no doubt there would be significantly less alcohol waiting for them, but
as it was, the room was empty and the netted shelves held an appropriately large mixture of packets
and shatter-proof bottles. The upholstery was a soothing green. Arthur’s headache appreciated the
green.

Arthur dropped into a chair and closed his eyes. “What do you want, Morgana? I’m not really in the
mood.”

“They keep actual cups in here, don’t they? It’s not all drinking straws and spill-proof nonsense,
surely. Are all officers truly this barbaric?”

A small smile snuck onto his face, and he popped one eye open to watch Morgana move about the
tiny room. Everything else aside, she was his sister by choice. He didn’t know why they had grown
close; he didn’t have nearly the same attitude toward Morgause, nor she toward him.

She handed him an ugly purple cup with a plastic lid and a straw. He stared at it, unhappy with
himself for the impulse to check it for poisons.

Hooking her feet over the arm of the chair next to his, she wriggled down into the cushion and raised
her glass - a proper glass - in toast to him before she took a sip. She watched him over the rim,
breathing out through her nose as whatever amber liquid she’d chosen for herself burned down her
throat. Her long black curls were incongruous with her pilot insignia, and he’d always privately
thought it was a little bit magic that she could fit her hair under her helmet.

Little had he known. He closed his eyes again and asked, lifting the cup, “What’s this?”

“Water.”

He shot her a look of surprise.

“You have that ginger look like you’re favouring your head. I’m not going to waste any of the good
stuff on you when you need fluids.” She gave him a smug smile. “You can thank me now.”

“Thanks,” he said. Getting rid of him was going to have to be done a little less blatantly than poisoning him alone in a tiny room, so he took a sip and sighed. He had kept his mods running hot for his entire rotation, and he already felt like he had a hangover. He couldn’t even introduce painkillers into his system, not when they might also hide the early warnings his mods might throw, and after a day like today where he’d done more manual labour than in his entire tour on the fringe combined, he couldn’t chance it. “Long day.”

There were beeps and buzzes along his private comms that he ignored and several messages that came up on his oculars that he couldn’t bring himself to handle. He shut off all of his uplinks and quieted his mods, taking him effectively out of contact. He hoped Leon wouldn’t mind the sudden uptick in urgent decision-making he needed to perform.

“You should be able to keep yourself going a bit longer than a single rotation,” Morgana said, lifting her eyebrows. “That’s what you designed yourself to do, wasn’t it?”

“I jacked into the Kilgharrah twice today, checking system integration.” Arthur made a face. “They’re integrating. Yay.”

“Two is too many. Any is too many.”

“I don’t have a lot of choice. It’s that or take hours we don’t have trying to calibrate manually. I can just pop in and let my systems do the work. We only have two weeks and that’s it, or Camelot will miss its planetfall window completely.”

“Be that as it may, it’s vulgar. Drink your water.”

Arthur obediently took a sip. “Vulgar or not - dehydration or not - it’s necessary.”

“For planetfall? You talk like the Camelot is going to be ready. Two weeks. Ten weeks. It doesn’t matter.”

“You know something I don’t know?” Arthur couldn’t help it, he straightened in his chair and dropped the veneer of easy banter.

“Oh- now he’s interested in why we’re here.”

“Morgana-” he warned.

She cut him off. “Mithian.”

“I think I know what my own sister looks like.”

“Don’t start with me.” She narrowed her eyes. “I have a vested interest in the Camelot, so where she might not bring you news, I find myself obligated.”

Arthur rubbed the bridge of his nose and sucked on his straw to buy himself time to get his temper under control. It was galling that Mithian had a better information network aboard the Camelot than he did - had a better information network period, across the entire fleet - but their friendship had always before allowed Arthur access. He had come to expect it, and Morgana’s suggestion that Mithian might not pass him intelligence bothered him more than he wanted to admit.

Unspoken beneath Morgana’s words was the implication that she, too, had a better grasp of the Camelot’s goings-on than he did. He set his cup on the arm of his chair and said, “So what has she
heard that she’s not going to tell me?”

“Access transcript number six-three-eight-two-seven.”

“If I link back up to the Camelot I will start to feel guilty I’m not responding and I won’t be able to talk with you.”

“Fine. Short range transmission. Open.”

Her eyes flickered faint gold, the lights on her oculars synced in time with the pulses. She flicked her fingers, a tossing gesture that caught him off guard. Her mods were mostly new - the oldest installed barely three years ago - and the gold oculars newest of the bunch. He’d never sat down with Morgana to have an ocular-integrated conversation. Where he would not have thought twice of the finger-flick coming from Mithian, throwing data or synchronisations, the gesture was too much how he imagined a sorceress might cast a spell on him that he couldn’t suppress a flinch. Morgana quirked her lips, but did not comment on his reaction.

“Run verification on that as soon as you relink. I’m not going to suffer through your misguided attempts to tell me that I’ve tampered with the thing.”

“Bad news, then. Gotcha.”

The transcript unfurled to his oculars and he skimmed the names and log data. “Father? Agravaine? How did you access this?” He felt a chill. This was from a private room set aside for royal use only, the logs to which should be accessible only by Chief of Communications and the participants. And Agravaine was Chief of Communications.

“Just read.”

He read. The conversation boiled down to: “The Camelot’s not structurally stable enough to survive planetfall,” Arthur said. He closed his eyes, but the letters remained, stark against the black of his inner eyelid. “They stopped trying to repair over a year ago. They knew about this.”

“And we have to go through with it,” Morgana said. “The odds are poor that there will be a Camelot on Albion’s surface when it’s done. The ship, I mean, not the concept of Camelot. There will still be people to rule, of course.”

“And leaving it in orbit will - might? - cause the terraform to fail. Is there confirmation that even if the Camelot does not survive planetfall that the terraform will still run through to completion? Or if they left it in space? A Kingdom ship could come in useful to a colony world.” He opened his eyes to give her a hopeful look.

Morgana shrugged one shoulder and took another sip from her glass.

Arthur swore. “If they’re going through with it, then I guess that answers my questions. Fuck.”

Unsympathetic, Morgana just said, “Transcript one-five-six-zero-zero. Here.”

He began to read the second transcript the moment it appeared. After he did, he leaned his elbows on his knees and but his face in his hands. “Agravaine isn’t behind the recruitment, but he’s behind the idea that we’ll need to fight for resources on the planet’s surface.” Bad news was so far of an understatement that Arthur’s headache got worse just thinking about it.

Things had deteriorated further than Arthur had imagined. It hadn’t seemed bad during the last meeting, but Agravaine’s encouragements recorded in the transcript made his father’s little speech
scolding Arthur for not being concerned enough about the Camelot take on a whole different character.

For as long as Arthur could remember, his father had floundered with the ruler’s council. As brilliant a tactician as Uther was, having won the Sorcerer’s War, from the time Arthur was small he had always had Arthur standing behind him at diplomatic events to keep the other rulers tractable. If it wasn’t a conflict, Uther didn’t know how to respond, so everything became a conflict. Arthur scrubbed his face. His father had been built for war.

Agravaine was feeding Uther’s paranoia, feeding his fears of the other rulers turning on him when they found his Kingdom weak and failing, if or when the Camelot was destroyed during planetfall. It was bad, getting worse, and only the fact that the Camelot was as well maintained as it possibly could be under the circumstances reassured Arthur that his father wasn’t as bad a ruler as Agravaine’s unspoken criticism implied and outspoken influence showed.

Arthur had treated the Pendragon title seriously for his entire life, had grown up with the idea that he’d have both a kingdom and a fleet to take care of, one that his father had pulled together with his bare hands to dispose of the greatest threat they had faced since the time of Bruta in defence of the glorious planet below. Uther was a hero, had been a hero, and now he was starting to look a lot like what Arthur had told Merlin his father was: just a man, and a fallible man at that. Stubborn and prideful and paranoid.

It felt uncomfortably like he’d just pulled his head out of a great bucket of sand. Sorcery? Instead of hunting sorcerers, Arthur had magic on his side in the form of Merlin whose sincerity he literally could not doubt. Albion? He didn’t know if he’d live to see Albion a reality, thanks to a disaster that had happened when he was just baby. Heir Camelot and heir Pendragon? He certainly had no assurances that he was going to rule anything from anywhere if his own sister had anything to say with it.

Pendragon, a name he’d taken pride in his entire life, was crumbling into irrelevance before his very eyes. His father was playing a dangerous game, recruiting from the other Kingdoms under pretence of… sorcerous resurgence, most likely, since that’s what Arthur and Mithian had assumed. A private army for the King to be used against his own allies. Recruited with Agravine’s oversight. To be placed under Morgana’s control once she became Sorcerer Queen. Arthur took his head out of his hands.

Morgana watched him coolly from her chair. She tilted her head in query.

Arthur called up the section of transcript that worried him most.

Line 48 - CHIEF OF COMMUNICATIONS AGRAVAINE: *It’s not Morgause you have to worry about, sire. Your Lady Consort has two daughters, does she not?*

Line 49 - KING UTHER: *I am worried about the sorceress more than I am Morgana.*

Line 50 - CHIEF OF COMMUNICATIONS AGRAVAINE: *Ah, yes. You would know best, of course. A sorceress is a true threat.*

One short blip in the transcript. Innocuous out of context. Innocuous in context. But something about Agravaine pushing for information, testing Uther on his suspicions made Arthur, in turn, suspicious. It could still be a completely innocent comment, calling Morgause a sorceress and a true threat, but something about how he used ‘a’ sorceress. Not ‘the’ sorceress.

Arthur didn’t trust Agravaine, didn’t know him, had never met him before shaking hands with him.
before the meeting the other day. But he’d ‘coincidentally’ earned Uther’s ear at about the same time that Uther had decided it was best that the Kilgharrah stay on the fringe for an extended tour, and for that alone Arthur was willing to believe the worst of him.

De Bois treachery was to become indispensable and then use that indispensability as a form of power. Tristan, the Black Knight, had done it, mourning his sister and pushing his agendas that were often polar opposite of Uther’s. It had been one of his mother’s favourite tactics during her time as heir Camelot, while she was in fleet.

But that hadn’t been treachery, only common sense, and his mother had been - Arthur shook his head to clear it.

That wasn’t what Agravaine was doing. Arthur’s uncle was isolating his father from what allies he had in his former rulers. Isolating him from his son. Appealing to his pride and his obstinacy. That wasn’t indispensability, that was blatant manipulation.

But that was Agravaine.

Morgana, on the other hand, was bringing him news of Uther’s imminent missteps. So he could prepare, which made no sense if she were going to exploit his father’s carefully cultivated weaknesses. She had to be preparing, too, but to do what? And when? And above all - what was in it for her?

If he wanted to get into his shouting match with her, confront her on her plan to off him and his father and take over the Camelot, he could. This was the room for it. No one would hear but the Camelot itself and he could lock down those recordings until they were keyed only to him. The idea had merit, but he had another thought.

Arthur was pretty sure that Morgana hadn’t meant him to pick up on Agravaine’s treachery, if that was truly what it was. Even he could agree that a simple switch away from a definite article was slim as far as evidence went - but the isolation… that was something Arthur could readily see, and he didn’t like it. Even if Agravaine wasn’t working with Morgana, he was a poor choice as adviser for that alone.

Morgana smiled at him and said, “Mithian is loyal first and foremost to the Nemeth. Her father may worship the ground Uther walks on, but Mithian knows she’s going to be ruling in the dirt with the rest of you.”

“She would have told me. About the problems with the terraform and Camelot.” Arthur didn’t want to believe any different. Mithian and he were friends, had history together, had fought together.

“She might have told you. That’s a risk I was unwilling to take.” Morgana’s expression softened. “She’s heir Nemeth, and though you go by only one of your titles, you’re heir Camelot, too. Like it or not, you’re rivals.”

“But she wouldn’t want our first act on Albion to be war any more than I do. Why would she not tell me?”

Tipping her head in his direction, she said, “Maybe she thinks you already know.”

“I just got back from a year and a half on the fringe, how am I supposed to know how my father intends to recover from destroying the Camelot? How could she think that I agree with war on Albion?”

“You’re your father’s son. Why wouldn’t you?”
“You know me better than that,” Arthur spat, jaw tightening. He seized his ugly purple cup and ripped off the lid, downing his water in a handful of gulps just for something to do besides rage at her. She knew better than to say that to him. She knew what she was doing when she did.

“Do I?”

“I’d let her know. If our situations were reversed.”

“She’s Nemeth. You’re Camelot. Rodor is mustering behind the scenes. Do you really think that she’d tell you that? She’s protecting herself.”

Arthur slumped back. “It’s going to be a fight.”

“Most likely.”

“You don’t seem all that bothered,” Arthur said, tone sour.

“I know what I would do. Whether or not Uther hits on the idea on his own is an entirely different matter.”

“What you’d do?” Arthur snorted, derision thick when he said, “If you were Queen?”

He caught himself only after the words had left his mouth and snapped his gaze to Morgana in time to see her eyes widen, almost imperceptibly. Her lips thinned. “If I were Queen,” she said, words clipped, watching his face, “I would be finding some way to compensate for an inevitability, not fight to preserve a status that will no longer be quo. It would be only sensible.”

“It would be only sensible,” Arthur agreed, uncertain. He’d tipped his hand because she was still Morgana and snipping at her was second nature. She returned to her drink, holding it in front of her lips to hide what she might be thinking in case it should show on her face.

He had been gone a year and a half. She wouldn’t know how the fringe had changed him. Wouldn’t know that while he was wary of her magic, he was willing to speak with her, to understand what she wanted him to understand. Wouldn’t know that he was having notions that Uther would disapprove of. Mithian had wanted him to do something about Uther, had as much said that she would help him if he decided on a course of treason and betrayal himself. Now he was starting to think that it would not be so much betrayal as a kindness, if only to get his father away from Agravaine’s insidious influence.

Telling Morgana he knew about her magic was out of the question, at least at the moment. She was plotting against him. Giving her a reason to want to be rid of him would be a stupid risk even for him.

“We used to joke about you being Queen just a few years ago,” Arthur said, because he couldn’t leave well enough alone.

“You used to joke,” Morgana corrected quietly. “A Consort’s offspring have no legal rights to the throne unless they are direct progeny of the ruler, or are designated heir or adopted. I was very aware that Uther never truly adopted me. Not legally.”

“He tried to be family.”

“I had a father,” Morgana said. “He was trying to take his place.”

“I adopted you,” Arthur said somewhat desperately. He didn’t like this Morgana. This whisper-
sharp, bitter Morgana who held something implacable in her heart against Uther. “That has to count for something.”

That made her smile. A small smile, barely there beyond the lip of her glass, but a smile nevertheless. “Since when has anything you’ve ever done counted?”

Arthur let out his breath. That was a barb he knew well, and coming from Morgana it was as good as an olive branch. “I sang to you, you know.”

Surprise, genuine surprise, flashed across her face and she lowered her glass. “You have never sung to me in your life. And if you did, my ears would probably bleed.”

“I sang precisely once and I was too embarrassed to ever do it again.”

“As well you should have been. When was this?”

“After the flight training that left you grounded, the week before you found Aithusa. When you were under. I sang to keep you company.”

The blood drained from Morgana’s face, leaving her pale skin nearly translucent. “You didn’t.”

He met her eyes. “I did.”

Morgana was silent for a long moment, then she finished off her drink in one long gulp. She swallowed hard, squeezing her eyes shut against the tears that it prompted. A prolonged inhale and a short, heavy exhale later, she opened her eyes to examine the empty glass. “You were the only one who believed I’d get Aithusa to fly, did you know that? Out of everyone.”

“You told me you would.”

“If I told you I would be Queen, then?” Her gaze found his. There was knowledge there, and challenge, and a little bit of heartbreak.

Arthur met her eyes steadily. “Then I would believe you.”

Her eyes glimmered gold and she looked away, swiping her thumb across the bottom of each as she stared at the far wall.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“I’m sorry, too.”

Morgana stood. “I have to go.” Her glass and Arthur’s ugly cup went into a hatch next to the cupboard. She didn’t look at him until she was at the door and ready to leave. “I remember you singing, you know.”

“You said something about hearing everything that was said while you were under, I think. I didn’t want to clarify.”

“It helped. Thank you.”

Arthur’s head pounded, but he swallowed and nodded. “I didn’t do it for thanks.”

“I know,” Morgana said, activating the door. “Get a good night’s sleep.” She breezed out, leaving Arthur alone in his squishy green chair. He didn’t move for a long time.
He didn’t want her apologies. He wanted to know what was going on so he could do something about it. He wanted to help or compromise or something, anything, that didn’t end in bodies strewn across the Camelot’s decks.

He wondered how long he had left.
Running all the way from the Avalon to the Kilgharrah was probably not Merlin’s best idea. He got to the repair bay out of breath, his shoulder bruised from where his boots had hung and banged into him repeatedly, and feeling light-headed from trying to outrun an eldritch horror’s creeping attention span. His magic burbled beneath his skin, somewhat diminished from Freya’s draw, but he’d gotten a respectable amount back. He didn’t feel the same hollow and empty like he had when he’d burnt himself out, so that was a plus.

His tour of the Avalon had been brilliant, absolutely brilliant. He didn’t think he’d be able to describe to even Will just how utterly magnificent of a ship she was, nor how much it hurt him in his heart of hearts to know that she would never be able to fly. It was a fucking tragedy that she was stuck down there, fighting Sigan at every turn, and if Merlin could figure out anything - no matter how risky - he was going to try and get her out.

Of course, he hadn’t mentioned that part to her. She didn’t need a rescue and might have shown her disapproval of the idea by politely ripping his face off with her claws to discourage him. It would be rectification if he could figure something out, not rescue. Surely she would agree to allow him to set things right if he came up with a way to do it. An apology for the mistakes of his kind that had resulted in horrible consequences for hers.

The Kilgharrah and the White Hart both were crawling with engineers and mechanics, even though it was past the end of the ‘daytime’ shift. The worklights that lined the bay walls blazed, eliminating shadows and painting the slowly-closing gaps in the hull of the Kilgharrah in stark white light. The hull breaches had been reopened, the emergency patches and scar tissue excised so that solid hull could be regrown.

Strips of tissue that they’d peeled away hung down from the ship and a small recycling vat had been set up nearby. The stench of the rendering fluids clogged Merlin’s nose. He sneezed, eyes watering, and moved quickly upwind where the air circulation system in the bay wasn’t pushing the odour of melting fats and ozone.

Merlin slowed as he approached the gangplank. In the harsh light of the bay, the hull gaps looked raw and ugly, the edges too pale. He could see Lucan standing atop the ship and gesticulating with both hands. The sound of his shouts drifted all the way down to where Merlin stood. Even from here, Merlin could guess at what he was saying. The Kilgharrah wasn’t healing properly. They should have been fighting proud flesh as Kilgharrah rebuilt himself faster than they could guide the repairs, not struggling to coax him.

Taking a deep breath, and coughing a little because, fuck, he’d aggravated his chest by running, he climbed the ramp to set his bare feet on the Kilgharrah’s deck just inside his airlock. There was a sense of diminishment of the Camelot’s hunger, but nothing more. Rubbing his chest scars, he waited
for the heat and warmth of the ghost’s attention.

Nothing came. He wiggled his toes for good measure and stepped through into the corridor. He could feel the ship’s heartbeat, slow and steady as it supported repairs. He worried that it could go no faster, that it was mimicking the desperately slow beat of the Camelot.

A quick glance over his shoulder and Merlin ventured, “Kilgharrah?”

Still nothing. Merlin broke out into a cold sweat, his shoulderblades prickling. Merlin hadn’t been there for him. He put out his hand, bracing himself against the wall, and tried to fight a resurgence of dizziness.

“I’m so sorry,” he told the wall, not even caring that the middle of the hall was probably not the best place to break down.

For what?

Merlin closed his eyes and took a series of deep breaths. “You’re not dead.” The breathing didn’t help. Merlin sat down on the floor in the middle of the corridor and hoped that nobody tripped over him. “Fuck. You’re not dead.”

It’s good to see you too, the Kilgharrah said.

“I didn’t mean—”

I know. I can feel.

The Kilgharrah’s senses coiled up through Merlin’s body, a slow, hesitant connection that said more about how the ghost was feeling than anything he might say. There was power behind his thoughts, his words, but his contact with Merlin was careful. And it was maddening. Merlin had to resist the urge to itch, but Kilgharrah took his time and made the connection with deliberate slowness, letting the feel of having a weeping hole in the side of his hull/ribcage seep into Merlin’s conscious mind.

Merlin folded his hand over the new ‘hole’ in his side. Worry and relief warred for dominance. He was grateful that he couldn’t feel the sense of the engineer’s boots on the hull, that the ripping and crawling did not come back even in memory. The Kilgharrah seemed to agree. There was the faint sense of acknowledgement and the corridor warmed around Merlin, the skin flushing to a healthier green.

Without warning, the Kilgharrah stretched. The ship groaned around Merlin, deck and bulkheads flexing. Metal and plastic squeaked, bones creaked, and Merlin took some amusement in the alarmed shouts that he could hear coming through the open airlock. It was a good half a minute before the Kilgharrah settled with an inaudible sigh. Attuned after Freya to the feel of a ghost’s manifested shape, Merlin could almost see the Kilgharrah resettling his wings along his back. The phantom scent of dragon hit him in the face, familiar echoes of the musk of the ship itself, and the flap and flutter of folding leather made Merlin duck involuntarily.

I feared you would not return.

“I was scared you’d died.”

A premature assessment.

The way Kilgharrah said ‘premature’ made Merlin frown and push himself back to his feet. “You’re not healing.”
I am healing… but slowly. The immobilisation spell affected me a great deal.

“Immobil- the lightning?”

*The lightning*, Kilgharrah confirmed. *I feel more empty shell than dragon at the moment.*

“Can I help?”

The Kilgharrah did not hesitate. *Assist with my repairs.*

“You have plenty of mechan-”

*I have only one warlock.*

Ah. “You mean assistance.”

*My repairs would go faster.*

“Wouldn’t it be a little suspicious?”

Speaking of- Merlin started to walk, keeping an eye before and behind him in case anyone came around a curve. He tried to remember if there was a door coming up that would lead him somewhere unlikely to be stumbled upon, but his first trip through the airlock had been unconscious, the second distracted.

The Kilgharrah rumbled through his toes.* I would call in my favour - but you would do this willingly without.*

Merlin lifted his hand to protest, pointing at the wall in indignation, just as a harried-looking mechanic rounded the bend ahead. Visions of Lance catching him mid-conversation made him snap his mouth shut and wait for her to pass. She shot him an odd look, but her hands were full of sectioned conduit that were dripping ichor on the floor and she had no time to stop and question his behaviour.

He kept a stupid grin on his face until she disappeared around the next curve, then relaxed back against the bulkhead to rub his eyes with one hand. “First off, it is kind of a favour for me to risk discovery in using any sort of magic to help with repairs. Second,” and this time Merlin did point at the wall. “Fuck you.”

Ghosts were truly insufferable when they were smug. *I’m right.*

“Of course you’re right. I’m not going to claim it as a favour when I am going to help anyway.”

*Then I still retain the favour you bargained for.*

Merlin grimaced, starting down the corridor again. There had to be at least one useful door coming up. “Fat lot of the good our bargain did me.”

*I did not reveal you to anyone. You revealed yourself. Technically, our bargain is still in effect. I have no intention of breaking my promise to cause you to become known even while you assist with repairs. I aim to prioritise your secrecy over all but the most dire necessity.* Kilgharrah sounded reasonable enough, and then he had to go and ruin it with, *You still owe me a favour of my choosing.*

“It was a rubbish bargain to begin with,” Merlin groused.

*Be that as it may.*
The corridor ended at a t-junction. “Which way to the nearest place we can talk?”

The Kilgharrah directed him left and within half a dozen steps Merlin found a skinny little portal that led to a maintenance closet. Merlin palmed the door activation, and when nothing happened the Kilgharrah overrode the system to let him in. The whole process took about ten seconds and the door irised open with significantly less effort on Merlin’s part than peeling the access panel away and trying to hotwire it. There was something to be said for a ship having a living ghost.

There appeared to be barely enough room in the closet for its contents, let alone a body as tall and lanky as Merlin’s. When he levered himself inside and around the end of a bank of softly pulsing machinery, however, he found more than enough room to seat himself on the floor beneath the conduits that trailed from their convex faces. The light in the closet rose to a dim red.

“So.”

So, young warlock. I yet live.

“And I’m grateful,” Merlin said, “You have no idea how grateful. And I will help fix you. I’ll go to Lucan tomorrow. Arthur said that he’d find a place for me. I’ll be able to do whatever you need me to do.”

Good, the Kilgharrah said, dropping pretence. His mental voice became rough, edged with exhaustion, and contained all of the sluggishness that had marked the ghost’s attempt to connect with Merlin. Good.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here.”

It could have been no different if we all were to survive.

“I, well, I don’t know what I could have done, but I could have done something.”

You could not even hear me, so I doubt very much you would have been of any use at all. It took a moment for Merlin to realise that the Kilgharrah was teasing him. Relief made Merlin smile. If the Kilgharrah was in good enough humour to tease him despite all of his injuries, there was hope.

“I can now, though. Hear you. And even more - I let Freya draw from me,” Merlin said, staring up at the dull red light that came from a source he couldn’t see. “So that has to count for something.”

There was a wash of confusion mixed with interest that rippled beneath Merlin’s skin. The machines in the closet whined. Freya?

“The Avalon’s ghost. Nimueh named her Freya.”

You are capable of being drawn from? The ghost’s interest sharpened.

The Kilgharrah’s omnipresent hunger pressed to the fore of their connection. The sense of Freya’s hunger was cleaner, more straightforward, when compared to the Kilgharrah’s complex mass of conflicting cravings. It was the difference between clarified oil and pitch crude: one refined to its essence through the extended process of survival, the other opaqued by a dozen upon dozen experiences that had only whetted his appetite for more. Foremost, however, was the itch to taste Merlin’s magic, to draw from him himself now that he knew it was possible.

Merlin covered his mouth so that his laugh wouldn’t escape, but the Kilgharrah felt his amusement anyways.
This is no laughing matter.

“Of course not,” Merlin agreed. “I just find it funny that ‘the Avalon is still alive’ ranks somewhere below ‘I can use your magic’, that’s all.”

*The Avalon*—*The Avalon does not have… It does not concern me.*

“She.” Merlin’s eyebrows twitched together. The Kilgharrah was deflecting. “You knew.”

The Kilgharrah did not respond, but an upwelling of inarticulate thoughts stole Merlin’s ability to pull air into his lungs. Sorrow, impotence, a measure of rage. Frustration, despair, and the deliberate choice to set the whole situation out of his mind. The Avalon was trapped, mangled and irreparable, and Kilgharrah resented Merlin for telling him her name. When she was nameless, her plight had held less heartache.

Merlin responded instinctively, reversing the connection to pour reassurance and simple faith through the link. “Her name is Freya, and I will help her, somehow. Free her.”

The Kilgharrah snorted, a full ship reaction that caused Merlin to thump against the wall when the deck rocked beneath him. *If you free her, free me as well.*

“You’ll fly soon enough,” Merlin said. “I don’t think you need to worry about that.”

*Free me. Not repair me.*

Merlin frowned. There was something in the distinction that he wasn’t getting. He shook his head.

_Fancy on my part only. Unmooring a ghost from their ship. An impossible task._

‘Impossible’ sounded a lot like ‘casting by reflex’ to Merlin, which for him was an area where rules were just sort of… strong suggestions. Like those of physics. Or reality. “Impossible why?”

A ghost is born to fill the gap in the technological-biomaterial-magical triad once a biotechnological ship is sufficiently advanced. Taking a ghost from his ship would be like peeling the working innards from an arthropod.

“‘So please don’t’, is that what you’re saying?”

_I would have a care you do not kill that which you are attempting to free._ The Kilgharrah’s thoughts turned inward and quieted to pensive, retreating from Merlin as his concerns for the Avalon faded once more into the background. *It would be quite a thing to discover Albion with my own senses. If there was one favour I would ask of you, it would be to discover a way to allow me to do so.*

Merlin huffed a laugh. “It would be a thing, wouldn’t it,” he said. He took a deep breath - and coughed. The closet was musty and his lungs were still twinging. Recovering, he jumped right into it, “Sigan. He’s at the bottom of the scar. As an eat-everything-magical-disaster-waiting-to-happen. Freya says that when the Camelot goes through planetfall, that it will release Sigan on Albion.”

The ghost’s reaction was immediate and violent. Merlin clapped his hand over his ribs where the Kilgharrah had shared his hull breach as he convulsed, his hull/chest creaking under the sudden assault. This time Merlin did feel the boots of engineers scrambling for safety topside. The Kilgharrah accompanied the outburst with a sharp, *No!* followed immediately by a wash of pure fury as he strained against the clamps keeping him fastened to his docking cradle. _Sigan does not get Albion._
Squeezing his eyes shut, Merlin kept back tears of pain from the Kilgharrah’s thrashing. “He’s going to ‘get Albion’ if we don’t do something about it.” Merlin managed as soon as the ghost dropped back from furious to fuming.

**Albion is Arthur’s.**

“Cryptic. Loyal, maybe. Not helpful,” Merlin said, trying to send another burst of reassurance through their link and feeling it bounce off the Kilgharrah’s disproportionately vehement anger. “What’s wrong?”

This time when the Kilgharrah spoke he had shunted his exhaustion aside and the strength in his voice rattled Merlin’s teeth. **The creature that Sigan has become is an abomination. An affront.** A surge of raw destructive impulse stained Merlin’s vision red. **He is what is antithesis and must be eliminated.**

Merlin’s calming vibes were doing pretty much nothing. The Kilgharrah’s response was instinctive. Visceral. It made Merlin feel sick to his stomach as he fought down adrenaline that had nothing to do with his own circumstances. “Just when I forget you’re not very human,” Merlin said, trying for humour and unable to summon up enough levity to make it anything but hoarse and wobbly.

**You will need something intrinsically inhuman to destroy Sigan.**

“You?”

**Perhaps.**

The ship’s heartbeat thundered through Merlin’s soles, the conduits running through the wall at his back pulsing. Merlin put a hand on the wall, for all the good it would do. The low whoop of an alarm sounded somewhere in the distance. The Kilgharrah was going to shake himself apart if he couldn’t control his response and Merlin didn’t have a barrier spell to help. He forged ahead, hoping that making the ghost think would help where soothing failed. “Freya said that she did not have the power, even combined with mine, to do more than contain him until planetfall. She said you might be capable of more.” He spoke as fast as he could, then held his breath.

One long pause later, the pressure on the inside of Merlin’s skull eased and some of the tension went out of the ship around him. The Kilgharrah repeated, **Perhaps,** and asked, **May I draw from you, dragonlord?**

The closet was really not that big. “Here?”

**Assessment purposes only.**

Whatever that meant. Whatever he wanted, however, had given him something to focus on besides raging himself into pieces and setting back his repairs. Merlin thought it best to say, “Granted, then.”

The Kilgharrah’s draw of choice was through the bottoms of Merlin’s feet, and Merlin felt the prickle of scales against his soles. Beyond that… nothing. A creature of his word, the ghost merely assessed Merlin’s draw capabilities. The sense-sharing link that Freya and the Kilgharrah were becoming increasingly fond of with him, the one that granted memory and a whole range of liberties that Merlin still didn’t know the extent of had nothing on this. This felt like the Kilgharrah wasn’t dragging claws through his mind, or even through his skin, but through his magic. Testing the waters. Merlin shivered. The Kilgharrah’s driving hunger was centred around power, and while Merlin understood the ghost, he didn’t exactly trust him.

**You have great potential, but are currently weak.**
“I could have told you that.”

_Ah- but your potential suggests that you have the kind of power that would allow me to draw fully. Did the Aval- Freya? Did Freya draw from you to her full capacity?_

“She was still see-through when she was holding everything I had,” Merlin said, shaking his head. The pressure on his soles was still there, the promise of a draw without the reality of one. It itched and tingled and Merlin was left frustrated with the anticipation of it. He severed the draw and the pressure disappeared.

The Kilgharrah sent the sense of faint amusement, but did not comment. At least he was calming. The ghost’s anger was ebbing away. _Perhaps with a full draw I might be able to contest that which was once Sigan and win. The risk would be great, but I might succeed in preserving myself and destroying him._

“’I’d need more of my magic back,” Merlin said. “’Potential’ and what I’ve got now isn’t going to cut it.”

_In time it will return. Magic is your birthright, the stuff of which you are made._

“But- time. Do we have enough time?”

The Kilgharrah did not answer right away. _I do not know._

Merlin hissed in frustration and dragged his fingers hard through his hair. “You’re also weakened.”

_But I shall be repaired. I have it on good faith._

The Kilgharrah was teasing him again. The danger of Kilgharrah damaging himself in his furor had passed. Merlin relaxed and said, “First thing, prime shift, I’ll visit Lucan and get started.”

_Thank you._

“I need to—” Merlin halted and bit his lip. He didn’t want Arthur left in the dark about the current threat, but he’d already told Arthur about Morgana’s magic against his own sense of rightness. He couldn’t do the same for the Kilgharrah. “Can- can I tell Arthur about you?”

_I thought you would have already. He sounded surprised._

“He’s your Captain.”

_He is yours, too._

Merlin hesitated before he said, “He is,” and closed his eyes. Not being able to see his surroundings didn’t help him avoid the Kilgharrah’s interested regard at Merlin’s unexpected reaction. His sharp curiosity jabbed through Merlin’s thoughts.

_Tell me of your Captain. You seemed on fair terms when you left me together._

“I don’t have words for this,” Merlin deflected. He would much rather be explaining himself about feeling guilty for revealing Morgana. Even if she was trying to kill Arthur and Arthur needed to know, it was still going to hurt her in the long run. It had hurt Arthur to know. “Can’t I just—”

_Try._

Merlin let out his breath. “I don’t know why you want to hear.”
You are disquiet, and your disquiet becomes my disquiet when we are like this.

The truth of the Kilgharrah’s words made Merlin feel guilty for a whole new list of reasons. “You’re hurt, I shouldn’t be affecting you like this. You have enough to deal with without hearing about Arthur and me.”

You brought me news I needed to hear. Tell me of your Captain.

He wasn’t getting out of this, then. Maybe it was only fair. He’d sent the Kilgharrah off by telling him of Sigan. It was only fair that Merlin go off about Arthur.

Taking a deep breath, Merlin started with, “I- I hate this, a little. I feel like I’m caught in a vortex, and that’s fine, I can cope, but it all centres on Arthur. Everything comes back to Arthur. Everything. And I want to come to him on my own terms and - fuck you, you asked - I want to snog him senseless, but I can’t trust myself or my decisions around him. I waited.”

Merlin hiccupped on the word ‘waited’, eyes widening, because memory resolved itself. Clarity returned. His nightmares. His magic. There was his reason for the anger and that distant sense of failure.

Memories flooded his mind and he swallowed against the bile that rose in his throat. Again and again he’d died, looking behind him for something he couldn’t quite name or reaching for something he couldn’t quite touch. First knowing, always knowing, even when the memories began to fade beyond a veil of time for him to suffer their resurgence when the time was right, or wrong, or maybe just when destiny wanted him to know it hated him.

Then forgetting.

Knowing was worse. He wished knowing wasn’t tied to his magic, that he didn’t remember everything that had happened or how destiny had fucked with him throughout the millennia. It was easier when he didn’t know.

The tiny closet gave Merlin no room to lash out. His skin crawled with the frustration of being squeezed between bulkhead and machinery and his memories resonated with the feeling of being trapped. More and more of the past filled the tiny space, crowding him in, pressing him down, crushing him beneath the echo of ancient claustrophobia. He flexed his fingers, tried to calm his tremors.

He took a long breath, could feel the heat behind his eyes and see the glare of gold reflecting from the machinery in front of him.

The memories should have flattened him to the deck, dragging at his mind and his heart with a weight he could hardly bear. Washing through them, however, was a sustaining fury that burnt away the weight and left him breathing hard. Along with the memories themselves was how he had dealt with them before, how they had slotted into who he was. There were more, far more than he had ever thought he would experience, but they were familiar and tasted only faintly of the despair he’d lived them with.

More important for now than the memories themselves was the promise destiny had made and never delivered upon. Destiny had never had any mercy for him. He had never understood why.

His voiced anger matched Kilgharrah’s for Sigan and he felt not one ounce of shame for it. “I waited for long enough that I feel like I don’t even know that I want what destiny says I should want and it pisses me the fuck off. I want to choose to fall for him, to stay with him, to be by his side
without anyone like you, or past you, or the rest of his fucking crew, telling me that we were designed for each other. Why can’t I choose?”

*Be careful what you wish for,* the Kilgharrah said, taking the whole ‘past you’ comment in stride. Merlin honestly didn’t think he cared. Certainly nothing in the connection said otherwise.

Merlin rubbed his face, breathing through his nose to bleed away some of his anger. “Ha. Ha ha. Very funny.”

The Kilgharrah snorted. *I have nothing wise for you to hear. Your circumstances are such that choosing to part ways with the young Pendragon is a great risk.*

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

*Choose what form your association takes. Accept nothing else.*

His words were certainly different, if something that Merlin would have come up with on his own given enough time and a bit of a think. Merlin tucked his chin and rubbed a hand over his heart, massaging his sternum. “I can’t lie to him.”

*You don’t have to.*

“I mean- I want to be on the other side of the universe and in his bed all at the same time. I don’t want anything to do with destiny ever again, and here it is giving me everything I’ve ever wanted. I want to run just… just out of spite. How do I say that and mean it all at the same time without lying?”

*You open your mouth and make words come out.*

“You are the least helpful dragon I’ve ever met.”

*Have you met many?*

“None. Freya’s a bastet.”

*Then there you are. I am also the most helpful dragon you’ve ever met.*

Merlin couldn’t help it. He laughed. “I don’t think that’s saying much.”

*I should allow my mechanics back to their work,* the Kilgharrah said, changing the subject, which only made Merlin laugh again.

“And I need to go find Gaius before I speak with Arthur. I’ll- do you think he’ll be angry with me?”

*Gaius is rarely angry, only disapproving.*

“Arthur. Arthur, not Gaius, obviously. I just mean that part of what the King has always said has been that… sorcerers make up ghosts to gain power over the ships, that it’s a grand delusion of madness. What if that’s the last thing Arthur needs? The last proof I’m too dangerous?”

*What are you going to Gaius for?* the Kilgharrah asked pointedly.

Merlin blushed. “Ah- to ask him how I might be able to be with Arthur without hurting him? Since he’s a cyborg and half metal and I can’t turn off my magic?”

*Place those two statements together and ask me again if you think that one might not affect the other.*
“In which direction?” Merlin said, frowning.

The Kilgharrah’s exasperation rippled through the ship as a slight tremor in the deck. *I have no desire to answer that question. I’m a party interested in my dragonlord getting along with my Captain, not a matchmaker.*

“Sorry.” The Kilgharrah hadn’t said anything explicitly reassuring, but Merlin felt reassured nevertheless. He ventured a smile. The dim red light flickered once, but otherwise the Kilgharrah ignored him. “I should go, though. Just- try to relax? I’m sure Lucan and his engineers and mechanics are working as hard as they can to get you back into shape.”

*As they should.* Hunger bubbled beneath the Kilgharrah’s thoughts as he focused on Merlin’s reciprocal encouragements. *Do not tarry after you take your rest. I wish to return to fighting fit as swiftly as possible. I fear we will need all of our combined strength no matter what course we ultimately take.*

“Noted,” Merlin said. He wriggled himself to his feet, pulling himself up the side of the machinery and trying not to dislodge any of the conduits. “See you then, then.”

The door to the closet irised open and Merlin stepped through only to pull up short, a flare of panic in his guts. Gwaine stood leaning against the far wall, legs crossed and arms folded. He watched Merlin with a blank expression.

Self-conscious, Merlin bent to dust dried flakes of shed skin from the legs of his trousers. That done, he looked up again at Gwaine. No change. Merlin pulled his shoulders up around his ears and gave him a hopeful smile.

Gwaine tilted his head and threw out an arm. He curved it to fit shoulders and gave Merlin a patient look. When Merlin didn’t immediately get it, he gestured with his head for Merlin to step away from the wall and under his arm. With a start, Merlin did, and Gwaine let his arm drop across Merlin’s shoulders. Gwaine was shorter, so it was a bit of a stretch, but the arrangement worked well enough when Merlin bent at the waist to accommodate him.

They began to walk and Gwaine let Merlin point them both toward the airlock when they passed the corridor junction.

Merlin didn’t know what to say and Gwaine didn’t seem inclined to speak. Trying to walk at Gwaine’s pace with his arm slung awkwardly across Merlin’s shoulders didn’t help matters. His stomach tied itself in knots. There was no way that Gwaine had been loitering alone in a random corridor of the Kilgharrah and was only coincidentally there when Merlin let himself out. He hadn’t being kept his voice down, hadn’t checked to see if anyone might be listening.

Sneaking glances at Gwaine’s face told him nothing. Gwaine’s usual smile was gone and there was tension in his arm. Still, he held Merlin loosely. It wasn’t a bundle-Merlin-up-and-toss-him-in-the-brig-for-the-King hold. It was almost friendly, even if all of Gwaine’s levity had deserted him.

“So-” Merlin ventured.

“Doesn’t change anything,” Gwaine cut him off. He halted a few paces from the airlock and squeezed Merlin’s shoulders. “Just don’t turn me into a frog, yeah?”

Gwaine made as if to continue forward, but Merlin was too stupefied to go with him. A joke. Gwaine had just made a joke and then started to walk off as if nothing had happened. Merlin couldn’t bring himself to take another step. Gwaine took half a step and was yanked back by his
looped arm. He turned, frowning at Merlin in confusion.

“That’s it?” Merlin said and, yeah, okay, he was indignant. The Kilgharrah was laughing at him as his presence and the connection slipped away. At least there were no snippy comments about stung pride this time. “How much did you hear?”

“Enough to know that you’re a mite out of the ordinary.”

“And you’re fine with that?”

“Give me a reason to not be fine with that.”

“That’s- no, that’s not.” Merlin sputtered.

Gwaine nodded as if that was only expected. “Then we’re fine.”

Merlin couldn’t wrap his head around Gwaine’s response. “It’s not supposed to be that easy!”

“Why not?”

“It’s just- not.”

“Too bad.” Gwaine dropped his hand from Merlin’s shoulders to his back and his elbow brushed the holster clip that Merlin had hooked into his waistband. The look Gwaine gave him was far too knowing. Gwaine said, “Besides- I hear that sorcerers are into all sorts of things that us mere mortals will never get to try. If you ever get tired of Arthur-” He wiggled his eyebrows.

Merlin didn’t know whether to be appalled or mortified. “That’s the first place your mind went? Magic sex?”

“I’m taking you to Gaius, aren’t I?”

Which meant he’d heard that bit and fuck everything. “You are never allowed to say anything to anyone ever,” Merlin warned. When Gwaine just started to laugh, he repeated, “Ever!”

“Lips are sealed.”

Merlin covered his face with his hands. He was certain that everything from the neck up was bright red. “Seriously, though? Propositioning me?”

“It got you to stop worrying about some stupid decree, didn’t it? Crew and my friends are my highest allegiance, before Kingdom and certainly before anything declared to be law by jumped-up royalty.”

“I see why you and Will get along,” Merlin said. Jumped-up royalty was just the sort of thing that Will would rail about if he got the chance.

“Get along is kind of a strong word. Besides- what kind of man would I be if I offered only my conditional support?” Gwaine paused. “Don’t answer that, it was rhetorical.”

“Can we just go?” Merlin said, embarrassed and grateful and a little baffled that Gwaine would throw his lot in with him at all, let alone now.

“Of course,” Gwaine said graciously, pulling his arm from around Merlin to gesture toward the door. “After you.”

Merlin took a handful of steps and then stopped. “Are you really taking me all the way to Gaius?”
“You have a lot of very important questions to ask him,” Gwaine said seriously, ignoring Merlin when he started to giggle. “If I’m any friend at all, I am obligated to see you get there safely.”

Hand over his mouth to contain his amusement, Merlin just nodded. He needed to be way more careful about where he used his magic, how, and what ships he was talking to when he did. At some point, he was going to run out of luck and the wrong person was going to find out. The two of them set off down the gangplank, Merlin steeling himself to fend off the cold fingers of the Camelot’s sucking void when their feet hit the deck, and they started out for the Camelot’s infirmary together.
Merlin stood in front of Arthur’s room door fidgeting with his triskelion and worrying his bottom lip with his teeth. Gwaine disappeared around the bend in the corridor with a backward wave, leaving Merlin alone with his nerves jumping. Gwaine had said that Arthur would certainly be there this time. He’d dragged Merlin to all of the man’s other haunts after rotation and he wasn’t at any of them, so if he wasn’t in his room Gwaine was out of ideas.

He knocked, feeling like a supplicant, and waited. He didn’t have to wait long.

The door irised open to show Arthur, naked to the waist and wearing civilian trousers, his hair wet from a recent shower. He expression changed from neutral and a little impatient to a bright grin. “I thought I’d have to come find you.” Merlin swallowed hard and gave him a wan smile that wiped Arthur’s away. “What’s wrong?”

Saying ‘nothing’ would be a lie. Merlin couldn’t even form the word, so he just said, “Everything,” and drooped.

“If this is what’s going to happen when I leave you alone, I think that’s going to have to change,” Arthur said, reaching out for Merlin and curling his hand around the back of his neck to pull him inside. “What happened?”

Merlin found himself drawn into an embrace where Arthur put his chin on Merlin’s shoulder and wrapped damp arms around him. Unwilling to let go of the triskelion, Merlin clutched it harder until it became trapped between them.

He couldn’t bring himself to return the embrace.

Fuck destiny. Merlin hated it more in that moment than he had at any point in the history of ever. And he’d been present for most of the history of ever, memories dim but present as his magic crept back. He hated destiny and prophecy and fucking fate for making him wait, for making promises that it had taken this long to keep, for giving him and Arthur new selves that he had to relearn just to make what he wanted to work work.

Most of all, he hated that he hadn’t gotten a choice in the matter. He had been trapped in the limbo of waiting, hoping, sitting at the window and chasing a dream. The whole thing was a cage, a trap, chains and bindings and an open grave. He had willingly walked into the trap knowing it for what it was, but his gratitude that his time had finally come was a slight, fragile thing next to thousands upon thousands of living days steeped in building resentment.

He melted into the comfort Arthur was offering and cursed himself in the privacy of his own thoughts. This was what he wanted. It wasn’t Arthur’s fault. As Arthur had said, almost the first
thing he’d said, Arthur had been here the whole time. Merlin had just taken the long way ‘round to
get to him. That fact didn’t erase Merlin’s frustrations with the situation, but it was enough to keep
Arthur from being the one Merlin poured all of them onto. He closed his eyes and let the warmth of
Arthur’s body and mods soak through his thin shirt.

Arthur ruffled Merlin’s hair as he pulled away, eyes going to the carving that Merlin was gripping
with both hands and white knuckles. “If not ‘what happened’, then ‘what’s that?’”

“Gaius gave it to me,” Merlin said, easing his hold and lifting it for Arthur’s inspection. “He called it
a triskelion. It’s a focus.”

The shrewd look that Arthur gave him made him wince, but it only resulted in Arthur conducting
him to the bed to settle him on the mattress before seating himself at the desk. Arthur stretched out his
legs and folded his arm across his chest, causing a wave of lights across the metal of his chest
accompanied by the faint whir of servos. His hair was sticking up from his shower. His oculars were
quiescent, not even a hit of artificial blue marred his eyes. “What is a focus?”

“Not entirely sure,” Merlin said. He flashed Arthur a smile. “It’s old. It’s a tool for magic users. It-
my magic finds it comforting, because it’s fully in balance. It’s a focus.”

“What’s it doing here?” Arthur asked. He wasn’t being mocking, at least not that Merlin could tell.
He seemed genuinely curious.

Merlin ducked his head and willed the heat to leave his face. It did not. Some warlock he was. “I
didn’t want to leave it in my room without me for too long. So I- brought it here.”

“Planning on spending a great deal of time here?”

Looking up, Merlin met his eyes and was treated to the humour there. It gave him the courage to
venture, “If you don’t mind terribly?”

“I’d prefer it,” Arthur said simply. “When I left this morning you were in a good mood.”

“Okay,” Merlin said. Relief coloured his tone. “Good.”

Arthur carried right on with, “Does that mean you spoke to Gaius?”

If Merlin hadn’t been blushing before, he was blushing now. He could feel the back of his neck heat
as well as his ears. He almost dropped the triskelion in his lap to cover them. To his credit, Arthur
didn’t laugh, but a quick glance showed that it was a near thing.

“So you spoke to Gaius…?” Arthur prompted.

He was going to die of embarrassment all over again. Bad enough that Gwaine had been waiting out
of earshot, self-admittedly straining to eavesdrop on the conversation. Gaius had taken every
question as if it was perfectly normal, and it had still been horrible.

“I asked him what to do about the whole magic-” he gestured at himself, “- with mods. You. I had to
specify you and he just gave me a look.”

“Ah. A look.”

“Ah, fuck you. You weren’t there, you don’t know.”

“I know. Trust me, I know. He was personal medic to my father my entire life. I stole him for the
Kilgharrah when I was granted command. If you say it was a look, then it was a look. I was just agreeing. Commenting.”

“Interrupting and embarrassing me.”

“There’s only the two of us here, Merlin.” Merlin gave Arthur a flat look worthy of Gaius and Gaius’s eyebrows. Arthur held up his hands in surrender. “By all means, no more interruptions.”

“There’s good news and bad news. Good news is that there’s, um, precedent. Obviously. Obviously there’s precedent.” Merlin was almost thrown off when Arthur remained silent, his expression distressingly polite. “Right. So- that’s good. Usually the magic user of the pair, if there was only one, would simply refrain from magic during and the modded person would turn off what mods they could. And that worked, mostly, unless you were into the whole pain thing, which you could be, and then it didn’t matter. So. There’s that.”

Merlin bit his lip, hesitating, and Arthur took pity on him, “And the bad news?”

“I’m different.”

“I already knew you were special,” Arthur said. “That’s not news.” It was clear to Merlin that Arthur was teasing him, but it made him smile and duck his head again anyway.

“That’s not- I can’t turn my magic off. I can’t not use it.” He peeked at Arthur to judge the effect of his words. If he understood.

Arthur pursed his lips and mulled over his words. “I see.”

“Do you?” Merlin asked a little desperately. He’d had a handful of encounters, sure, but the Ealdor was mod-light and Merlin hadn’t been as strong then as he was now. “I don’t exactly want to break you. I might not have shut you down with a kiss, but-”

“But there’s precedent for that, too. No, I see.”

“And-?”

“And-? And what? It’s foreknowledge that I appreciate, but I don’t think it’ll be a problem.”

Merlin stared. “Really?” His voiced cracked, but he couldn’t bring himself to be embarrassed about that in the face of everything else. “But the kiss-”

“Was not unpleasant,” Arthur finished. “Additionally, you stayed overnight tucked right up next to me and I was perfectly fine.”

He couldn’t be quite as nonchalant about the whole idea as Arthur, but maybe he didn’t have to be. He rubbed the centre of his chest and said, “Thanks for that, by the way.”

“The kiss? You’re welcome.”

“Insufferable-” Merlin let out a short laugh. “I meant the helping me sleep. You woke up a little… bright. It was gone by the time you left, but-”

“Morgana commented that I looked to be in glowing good health today,” Arthur said dryly.

“She didn’t. Oh, fuck.” Merlin grimaced. “I’m sorry. She shouldn’t be able to tell something like that after it’s faded, but- that was stupid. I should have- I’m used to being the only magic user on the ship of any strength at all. I shouldn’t have stayed, or kissed you, or-”
“Hey, hey hey,” Arthur interrupted. He unfolded his arms and sat forward in his chair. “As long as staying helped.”

Merlin nodded, taking a deep breath and holding it for a few moments, his fingers finding the triskelion again, his magic coiling into its safe, comforting spirals and setting it glimmering. “Yes. Yes, it helped. Sigan didn’t catch up with me, and that’s all that matters.”

The silence after Merlin’s words made him look up. Arthur was staring at him. “Sigan? Did you just say Sigan?”

Well, Merlin had wanted Arthur to know. “Yes.”

“As in Cornelius Sigan?”

“One and only.”

Arthur’s eyes narrowed at Merlin’s flippant tone. “Explain.”

Merlin was just going to have to trust that maybe the Kilgharrah was right and that just because Merlin remembered Arthur’s threats from the trip home, that it was possibly that circumstances had changed enough that he was worried for no reason. He hoped he was worried for no reason.

Merlin got as far as ‘Camelot’s ghost’ and Arthur put his face in his hands. When he tacked on ‘magical undead abomination at the bottom of the scar’, he didn’t think Arthur was actually listening anymore. All of Merlin’s fears and worries that he might have gone too far, that ghosts were so wrapped up in the narrative of madness and abuse of power that Uther had instilled within his son that Arthur would decide then and there that Merlin was too dangerous for his own good and-

Merlin’s whole thought process was derailed when Arthur shook himself and said, “I need to stop being surprised when I find out how fucked we are.”

Disoriented by Arthur’s response, Merlin could only manage a wordless, half-surprised noise of query.

“Planetfall is going to break the Camelot completely. No starter for our Kingdom on the colony’s surface. No guarantee that we’ll be able to keep up our end of the terraform so that it will actually finish properly. I am zero percent surprised that we have some sort of malevolent ghost creature thing living in the scar and preventing repairs. You said magic was broken there, didn’t you? You did.” Arthur rubbed his face. “So the Camelot is going to snap open when it hits Albion, destroy itself and the planet for certain, not just in possibility, and did I mention that Agravaine has been recruiting soldiers to support Morgana’s claim to Captain and Queen of Camelot?”

Head-choppy-offy was low on the list of Arthur’s priorities too, apparently. The only good part about Arthur’s news was that it wasn’t death and destruction for everyone, only likely war and higher probability that something would go wrong with the terraform. In the game of bearer-of-worst-news, Merlin thought he was winning. He really didn’t want to be winning.

Merlin grunted.

“That’s what I say,” Arthur agreed. “We have three weeks, maybe four, before planetfall. That’s not much time.”

Shaking his head, Merlin said, “No, but - I have sort of a plan that involves the Kilgharrah. Unfortunately, I’ll need to have most of my magic back and he’ll have to have his repairs finished and time to regain his strength.”
“Kilgharrah.” Arthur bobbed his head at Merlin’s words and said, “My ship has a ghost too, doesn’t it?”

Arthur nodded rapidly to himself, lips squeezed into a line, as his face settled on an excellent rendition of ‘of-fucking-course’. He slumped back in his chair and stared at the ceiling, the muscle in his jaw jumping. “No- of course it does. The comm system glitch should have been the only clue I needed. Next time you chat with him, tell him I’m sorry and that we really need to sort out the hybrid systems to a point we’re both happy with them. Vulgar, she said. Fuck.” Arthur rubbed at the bridge of his nose, stroking his forefinger across the arc of metal above his eyebrows. “Do you think my ship and you will be able to do anything? Are there any more ghosts I need to worry about?”

“I think we’ll be able to do something, at least,” Merlin said, but that’s as far as his confidence in their half-formed plan went. “And just one more ghost that I know about. The Avalon? Down… the ghost of the Avalon is named Freya.”

“And the ghost of my sister’s ship is named Aithusa,” Arthur surprised him by saying. “So there are probably more that you just haven’t met yet.”

“Your sister’s ship has a ghost and you know about it?”

“My sister had a mental breakdown when she was fourteen and a week later she found the destrier she flies now,” Arthur said, mouth quirking into a smile. “She’s always talked about Aithusa as if she were alive, more than destriers are usually alive, and because she was smart enough to hide other traditional signs of being a sorceress it was marked down to idiosyncrasies resulting from her original breakdown. That she was using this ‘Aithusa’ figment as a proxy to express her thoughts in a way that diminished her anxiety. There was always a plausible alternate explanation, she got help, and only her attachment to Aithusa lingered. She’s probably been laughing at me for years.”

“Or she’s unhappy she had to lie to you,” Merlin said quietly.

“I’ve always believed her. Just like I believe her when she says she’s going to be Queen. I can’t bring myself not to believe her. I don’t think that bodes very well for my survival.”

Merlin clambered off the bed. Arthur sat up, eyes tracking Merlin as he came to kneel in front of his chair. He let Merlin capture his hands and hold them.

Hand-clasping accomplished, Merlin gave a slight nod then looked up. Arthur watched him bemusedly. Merlin said, “We’ll sort this, yeah? She’s magic. I’m magic. You’re not going up against any of this without me, and I am very much opposed to anyone getting dead.” His heart started to beat out of his chest, and he felt light-headed. “Especially you.”

He meant his words as sincerely as any oath, but they were half-prompted by ancient loyalty. He clutched at Arthur’s hands and tried to keep himself upright, dragging in a breath only for it to get caught in his throat. The familiar anger made him flush and now that he knew where it came from, the knowledge made him shiver.

Yet for all of that, no matter the past, he couldn’t let someone die. He couldn’t let Arthur die. The current Arthur. The one who hid him and kept his secrets and who was treating Merlin as if he were someone worth holding on to even if Merlin’s doubts gnawed holes in the evidence. It wasn’t giving in to tell Arthur that he’d do anything to keep him from being dead again.

Arthur’s expression transmuted from smiling to concerned as Merlin wobbled in place. He slipped off the chair and to his knees at Merlin’s side, shoring him up before he fell over. “Something is wrong.”
“I have to allow room for you to make it worth it,” Merlin said, unable to stop himself. He wrapped his arms around Arthur and clung for dear life, shifting to bury his face in the crook of Arthur’s neck. “I’m terrified that I’m going to muck up this chance, or that I’ll only be disappointed with finally getting you back. Both at the same time.”

The strange words did not seem to phase Arthur. A warm hand settled between Merlin’s shoulder blades and began to rub in circles. “You shouted at me when I found you. I knew your name before you told me. This weirdness sounds a lot like that weirdness,” Arthur said, and he didn’t even have to ask a question to get Merlin to start recounting everything he could remember.

Everything, it turned out, sounded like complete fantasy with names and places and people matching up like hundreds of waves coming together in one massively constructive peak. The more Merlin spoke, the more dream-like the past became, more as if his subconscious were stealing the familiar and populating his nocturnal hours with the spoils rather than having his current life made up of names and faces that had followed him throughout time and space.

Arthur never paused his comforting circles, letting Merlin talk. When he finished, Arthur was silent. “So that’s why you’re angry with me?” Arthur’s voice sounded odd. Merlin pulled back onto his heels and peered into Arthur’s face. He couldn’t read the expression he found there, with its faint smile and a brightness in his eyes that had nothing to do with his oculars. Arthur’s settled his hands on Merlin’s shoulders at squeezed.

“I’m not angry with you, I’m just… angry,” Merlin said helplessly.

“That’s good then.” Arthur’s tone gave nothing away.

Merlin’s mouth was dry. It wasn’t fair that he’d brought everything to Arthur all at the same time. He couldn’t understand how Arthur was handling it, what he was doing to keep himself so steady while confronted with one thing after another. This was the farthest fetched idea of them all and sounded madder than anything Merlin had yet said.

“I need you to listen to me,” Arthur said, snapping Merlin’s gaze back to his. He looked solemn. “Are you listening?”

Nodding, Merlin tried to swallow.

“Good. Now- whatever happened in the past is gone. It’s so far gone that the planet the Camelot launched from is very likely not the same Earth, nor even in the same galaxy as where we lived our first lives. So it doesn’t matter. It matters that you’re angry, it matters that you’ve been fucked over by this destiny crap, but it doesn’t matter to whatever we’re trying to do together, okay?”

Merlin breathed out. “Okay.”

“However it happened - destiny, coincidence, or sheer stupidity which I’m not going to put past either of us - we’re tied together and I take that responsibility seriously, no matter how it happened.”

“No matter how it happened,” Merlin repeated, not quite sure he understood what was going on.

“So that means you don’t have to do this alone.”

“Just to clarify,” Merlin said, trying to wrap his brain around what Arthur was saying, “When I tell you that I’m having mixed feelings about just climbing into bed with you because I’m traumatised by past lives, your answer is, ‘Tell me, we’ll deal with it?’”

Arthur looked amused. He pulled an exaggerated frown and shrugged one shoulder. “More or less.”
“That doesn’t bother you?” Merlin asked. The exhaustion in his voice overwhelmed his incredulity.

“It bothers the fuck out of me, yes,” Arthur said, making his admission sound perfectly reasonable, “But taking it out on you wouldn’t be fair to either of us. I’m probably going to get drunk and rant to- Gaius maybe. He knows about all this sort of thing. Or Lancelot, though that might be awkward.”

“Could rant to Gwen, which might be equally awkward. Or Gwaine.” Merlin squeezed his eyes shut and waited.

He heard Arthur stand, missed the warmth of their knees side-by-side and of Arthur’s hands on his shoulders as soon as they were gone, but they weren’t gone long. Arthur dragged him to his feet and steered him back toward the bed. Moving the triskelion, he deposited Merlin on the mattress. This time, however, instead of going to sit, Arthur remained at the bedside, hands braced on the bulkhead as he loomed over Merlin’s sprawled form. Exasperated, he asked, “Are you going to just keep risking yourself by telling everyone?”

Merlin’s heart kicked up a dozen or so beats per minute and he gave Arthur an unsure smile. “I didn’t exactly tell Gwaine? He just kind of - overheard me talking to your ship. Same as Lance, actually. I did tell Gwen, though, Gwen sort of needed to know.”

A warm, metal hand clasped the back of Merlin’s neck, and Arthur leaned down further until their foreheads rested against one another. He huffed out a laugh as Merlin swung his legs off the bed to give him a better angle. His toes nudged at Arthur’s insteps and he had to laugh at Arthur’s expression when he looked down to find Merlin shoeless. Arthur raked his gaze back up Merlin’s lanky body and said, “You’re wearing Gwaine’s holster fastener. Is there something I should know?”

“You’re the one who fussed with my trousers for so long putting it on me,” Merlin said, his voice edged rough, challenging.

“Not deliberately,” Arthur breathed.

“Then I guess it’s not much of a memento.”

Arthur put one knee on the edge of the bed and tilted his head, pressing their lips together. The kiss sparked between them.

Merlin reached for Arthur’s shoulders to pull him down before he realised that the sparks weren’t just some sort of poetic nonsense that his brain had supplied to describe the sensation, but actual fucking sparks. Sparks that hurt. Merlin’s magic was trying to pour through Arthur again, but this time it was hitting a sympathetic upwelling of the power that had rushed through Arthur the night before and lingered. With a swallowed yelp, Merlin turned the pull into a push and shoved Arthur up.

Staggering back, Arthur put his fingers to his lips and winced.

“No damage,” Merlin said, panting, struggling back to a sitting position. “Still pretty.”

“What happened to your face, Arthur? Oh, nothing, just kissed my warlock and burnt off my lips, no big deal,” Arthur said rubbing his thumb across his lower lip like he didn’t quite believe Merlin’s reassurances. “The fuck was that?”

“I think I should take my magic back now so we can try again.”

Arthur covered his eyes with his hand, put his other on his hip and just starting laughing.

“To reiterate, you have no idea what you’re doing with your magic,” Arthur said, his laughter quieting. The expression from earlier was back, the slight smile and soft look.

Merlin glowered up at Arthur, folding his arms and trying manfully not to sulk. He felt exposed, even though Arthur was the one wearing trousers and nothing else. He pulled his shoulders up around his ears and shook his head.

“Just making sure,” Arthur said. “Take it back, and we’ll try again.”

“If you’re sure you want to, since I don’t know what I’m doing,” Merlin said. He aimed for snark and ended up with honest, which didn’t do anything to change the odd expression on Arthur’s face.

Arthur repeated, “Take it back, and we’ll try again.”

With a deep breath, Merlin nodded and sat up on the edge of the bed, extending his hands to grab Arthur’s and pull him closer. “Hold still.”

The magic he hadn’t even known he had left within Arthur didn’t want to leave. Merlin yanked it back when it balked, returning it to the growing pool of his returning power beneath his skin. It was a relief to get it back. It was also odd to have even a little of his magic taste so strongly of Arthur.

Merlin’s eyes refocused after the task was complete and he found that Arthur had shaken one of his hands free to rub his chest.

Arthur answered his questioning look with, “Stings.”

“Sorry.” Merlin ducked his head and released him.

Catching his chin with a finger, Arthur leaned forward and kissed him once, briefly, not long enough to call Merlin’s magic forth. It was an echo of the kiss they’d shared that morning. There was too much affection in either for Merlin to be dreaming it up.

It scared him now like it had scared him then, because it was easier to think of Arthur as a distant prince who held Merlin’s life in his hands. Not a man willing to meet him halfway, who held Merlin’s heart in his hands. If he kept kissing him like that - tiny, sweet kisses for no other reason than Merlin ought to be kissed - there was a very real danger that Merlin would lose hold of his anger entirely. He feared that waiting would be worth it almost as much as he feared that it wouldn’t. He’d lived lifetimes with his anger.

Arthur was staring at him, crouched in front of Merlin who still sat on the edge of the bed. “What?” Merlin asked, feeling like he’d been caught out at something.

“I promised I wouldn’t push.”

It took Merlin a moment to parse the comment. “You did, didn’t you?” Merlin grinned. “Figuring out something that works even a little might take a while.”

The solemn nod Arthur gave him almost set him laughing. Arthur squinted at him in mock-reproval and said, “There is a whole sleep shift and then some before I’m due anywhere. We can make plans over breakfast.”

Merlin nodded and reached for Arthur. “This is me pushing. I don’t want to get up.”
“Lazy,” Arthur said, rising from his knees to meet Merlin halfway.
Sitting in the dark suited Arthur’s mood. The equipment in the Camelot’s infirmary hummed loudly enough through the closed door of Gaius’s private office for his auditory enhancements to give him an accurate count of how many of his and Mithian’s wounded still occupied the beds. That five of the seven were still on accelerators, and that the two most badly hurt were still on precious regenerators, added another sour note to the roil in his stomach.

Arthur’s oculars cast a faint blue glow across Gaius’s cluttered desk. He picked up a small chunk of heavy metal, the kind that was hard for the ships to digest, and let it warm in his palm. The room would be more of a mess than it already was if the gravity ever went out. It probably had been a mess the last time the Camelot’s famously stable generators had faltered. The thought of when brought Arthur back around to the Lake woman and the full-system shock her death had caused, which, in turn, left him thinking about Merlin.

He heard the deliberate shuffle of footsteps approaching the portal and looked up just as the door irised open.

Gaius waved his hand to turn on the light, spotted Arthur, and staggered back a step, hand fluttering to rest on his chest as he sucked in his breath. “Arthur. Prince.”

“I tried to modify your auditory pickups for the room so that neither my father nor my uncle would be privy to this conversation, but somehow they were already broken.” Arthur told him.

Crossing the room, Gaius lifted the chunk of metal from Arthur’s hand and replaced it on his desk. “My office is one of the odd places where tech doesn’t seem to last as nearly as long as it should. I suppose I should put in a request to have them fixed, but it does seem to help patient-medic confidentiality, wouldn’t you agree?” Gaius gave Arthur a bland smile and settled into his chair. He folded his arms on the desk in front of him and leaned forward to raise his eyebrows. “Did you ever think that startling an old man might be a poor decision?”

Arthur managed half of an apologetic smile. “Can you help me with Merlin?”

“Help with Merlin?” Gaius repeated. He half-rose from his chair in concern. “Did something happen? Are you alright?”

“Yes,” Arthur said without thinking, waving Gaius back down. He immediately corrected himself. “No. Yes and no to all of those questions. I thought I knew what Merlin being magic meant, but I obviously don’t. When I first saw him, I knew who he was before he said a word, before I could even read his ID chip and according to him, that the odd familiarity is the result of a single life lived with him, you, and everyone I’m close to so long ago that I don’t think it’s part of recorded history. On top of that, he’s angry at me - or perhaps not at me, but just angry - because you have all been
living again and again and I just… haven’t. He didn’t so much imply I was personally shirking my resurrectional duties, but that this so-called ‘destiny’ should have seen to it that I had lived a few of these pasts with the rest of you.”

Arthur pushed out of his chair and began to pace, trying to keep his volume down so he would not disturb the patients in the next room. “So I have questions. Do I need to be worried about this? Is the fact that his fantastic story supposedly affects the rest of you something I need to handle? Is it good? Bad? Neutral? I have no frame of reference. Do the rest of you remember any of this? Or have any knowledge of this? Or is it just Merlin? Does it represent some sort of symptom? Can I help to fix before it becomes worse?”

“Ah.”

Incredulous, Arthur came to a halt and stared at Gaius. “Ah? That’s it?”

“Ah, past lives.” Gaius elaborated. He wore a pensive expression, but he gave no indication that he was surprised by Arthur’s words. “Have you ever given a thought to the concept of reincarnation?”

“No before Merlin mentioned it, no. It’s not something with a great deal of evidence, at least that I am aware of. I’m starting to gather it’s real?”

“There are some that think so, the druids, and I count them the experts on the topic. It’s real enough to affect Merlin.”

“But not affect me. Or at least… not as much as the rest of you.” Arthur tapped the fingers of his metal hand against the arc of his oculars. His current level of frustration would normally be enough to prompt him into starting his diagnostics regardless of the other occupants in the room.

“Does that bother you?”

Arthur shot him a wry glance. “Playing the Counsellor, Gaius?”

“This isn’t something you can see one of the Camelot’s about.”

“No,” Arthur said. He listened to the click and whir of his own breathing for a moment before shaking his head. “I mean, no it doesn’t bother me. Whatever happened back then is irrelevant to me now. I don’t remember, and I don’t need to remember. What bothers me is that it bothers Merlin. What is he talking about? What can I do about it?”

Gaius hummed and hawed. “If you wish more than the simple explanation, I’ll have to check my records.”

Gesturing for him to continue, Arthur shook his head. “Just the simple one will be fine for now.”

“Reincarnation - and this is as unscientific as it’s possible to be, reincarnation being outside of my area of study - is the process of a small dollop of living magic somehow retaining certain essential qualities and attaching itself to flesh similar to that which housed it previously. Before the Purge, when the druids were publishing their findings, it was suggested that reincarnation of a human was a bit like the generation of a ship’s ghost. Just… the magic that drives a human life does not seem to need nudging into human bodies.”

Arthur sat back down across the desk from Gaius and thumped his fist gently against his forehead. It was like speaking with Merlin all over again, having to accept on the fly all of the things that Gaius took for granted. “Except for mine, apparently, and someone forgot to do any nudging at all. Essential qualities?”
“You are aware, are you not, of the conceptualisation of balance the druids hold? Flesh, tech, and magic?”

“I’ve encountered pockets of the belief on the fringe.” Arthur shook his head. “Again, it has never been relevant before.”

Gaius tapped the desk in front of him, drawing Arthur’s gaze up to hold it. When he spoke, his words were direct and serious. “That concept is what they posit drives reincarnation. The mind and it’s fruits. The body and it’s foibles. And, last but not least, the magic that makes you who you are.”

“Ah.”

“Just ‘ah’?” Gaius teased him gently. “But to answer your question. ‘Essential qualities’ means things like broad personality traits, things that cannot be attributed to neither your genes nor your upbringing, but that are unique to the individual. In Merlin’s case, however, he retains the experiences of those prior lives.”

“So he’s unique in remembering.”

“The druids have rituals that will inform them about their prior lives, but they have no memory as such. In my experience, he is unique. That is not to say he will remain so.”

Arthur let out his breath in a noisy sigh and put his head in his hands. On the other side of the portal, he could hear one of the Camelot’s medics tending their patients. A door to one of the other tiny offices irised open and shut before he replied. “This is all so ridiculous.”

“Be that as it may.”

“Say I accept all of this,” Arthur began, lifting a hand to forestall Gaius. “Just for sake of argument, say I accept everything. What happens if, in a prior life, a particular individual made certain choices that - as a hypothetical example - led to their or another’s death. Is that part of the ‘essential qualities’ you speak of? Is a person fated to repeat their mistakes?”

“Are you sure this is a hypothetical example, my prince?”

“Merlin was more than a little distressed about the whole destiny thing,” Arthur admitted. “So, no, not exactly hypothetical.”

Gaius chewed the question over until Arthur began to wonder if he’d started accessing his memory implant and all of its slightly illegal records. Eventually, Gaius said, “No- no, I don’t believe that’s how it works. All of the papers I’ve read make sure to stress that an individual’s life is informed by the reincarnation, but it is not the sole influence. Your current choices will have more to do with situation and conditioning. Though, now we’re getting into a theoretical digression and I’m going to need to access-”

Arthur cut him off with a wave. “That won’t be necessary. A ‘no’ works just fine.”

After a moment, Gaius added, “There are also sometimes repeated patterns.”

“Like Merlin finding me, and I him?”

“I don’t know if twice is a pattern, or simply a coincidence.”

“Merlin seemed pretty convinced that I am somehow a focus, and I can’t help but think… what if I don’t live up to that? What if I get him killed? He’s reckless enough as it is. I’m determined to stick
by him, but- what if that’s a bad thing? Quite outside of all of this talk of lives and nonsense, I don’t want to fail him.” The confession caught Arthur by surprise, and he folded his arms across his chest and slumped back in his chair. “I don’t want to lose him because of something stupid I’ve done. Or not done.”

“A worry not unique to you, I’m afraid, though I will grant that his magic complicates the sentiment,” Gaius said, though not without compassion. “You’re keeping him safe from Uther now.”

“What if that’s not enough?” Gaius was silent. Rolling his shoulders, Arthur loosened some of their tension and unfolded his arms. He breathed a quiet curse and answered his own question. “It’s not going to be enough. I am at risk of losing him.” A thought occurred to him. He shot a sideways glance at Gaius. “Like I’m losing Morgana.”

“Do you want me to get you something to drink?” Gaius asked, shifting in his chair. He popped open one of his desk drawers without waiting for Arthur’s response and began digging through it in a rattle metal and plastic.

Arthur ignored the question in favour of addressing Gaius’s obvious deflection. “You knew.”

Shutting the drawer without retrieving anything, Gaius sat back in his chair and regarded Arthur from across his desk. “I suspected.”

“Why wasn’t she-” Arthur began. He cutting himself off with an inarticulate hiss of frustration. “She had a breakdown living here. It was cruel to keep her.”

“I did everything in my power short of sending her away.” Gaius folded his hands and laid them on the desktop. “Would you like me to give you an accounting up until the point she flew her ship away from the Camelot?”

Metal clicked against metal as Arthur scrubbed at his face. “No. I just-” He ran down a whole list of what he could stay to Gaius, but it all sounded - even to him - a little like whining. “Do you think there’s anything I can do? She wants to be Queen, which means somehow replacing me as heir, and because she’s been associating with Morgause more and more, I fear what she will do.”

“Her intent to become Queen I did not know. Is this confirmed or a simple fear?”

“Confirmed. She told me herself.”

“And Morgause…”

“Merlin heard the pair of them plotting the succession.”

There was a beat of silence between them. Gaius looked stunned, though he recovered enough to give Arthur a sympathetic smile. “I’m sorry about Morgause.”

“She made her choices,” Arthur said, allowing himself a moment of regret. Morgause had hated his father from the first, and Arthur by extension, and they had never been able to come to any sort of understanding. “I made mine. Her actions have destroyed innocent lives and she shows not even the shadow of regret.

“Her influence on Morgana, though… that terrifies me. You saw what Morgana did with Aithusa. That ship should have never been able to fly, let alone become one of the Camelot’s fastest scouts. She modded around her neurological damage, Gaius, and reprogrammed parts of her brain. What do I do in the face of that kind of drive, especially combined with Morgause’s vendetta against my father?”
Gaius shook his head.

“Fuck.” Arthur pushed himself to his feet again and stood in the centre of the room. Once up, however, he found he didn’t have the energy to pace. He felt lost. “I’ve prided myself on being the one who always knows she’s going to get precisely what she wants, even when the odds were impossible. Even when every single other person in the fleet is convinced she is being naively optimistic. How can I just suddenly start hoping she fails?”

“Hope instead that she remains your sister?” Gaius suggested.

Somehow, Arthur found the suggestion funny. He huffed a laugh, and if it was a little bit wry, Gaius did not comment. “Perhaps I will,” Arthur said, amused. “Thank you for everything. On Merlin and the whole thing.”

Gaius’s lips twitched, but he kept an admirably straight face to say, “I think it’s only fair after Merlin came to me for advice already.”

“Ah,” Arthur said. Embarrassment was a somewhat foreign emotion, but he could feel his cheeks heating. His mods creaked as they compensated for the shift in his sympathetic nervous system, a change more than audible in the tiny office. Maybe it hadn’t been very fair of him to send Merlin to ask after their sex life alone.

A smile snuck onto Gaius’s expression. “Ah, indeed.”
Chapter 41

It was testament to Leon’s adept handling that there weren’t more emergencies, even with round-the-clock repair shifts. The third crisis of the morning came about because no one had managed to inform him or Leon that the repairs were out-pacing the space inside of Pellinore’s gravity cage. Four massive loads of supplementary protein for hull regrowth showed up, though not unexpectedly, and wouldn’t fit. Standing in front of the gravity cage and watching the stevedores inside nudging crates around to make room for the new arrivals, Arthur chewed on his interrupted breakfast and surveyed the problem. He was extremely tempted to tell his Quartermaster to just stack them to the side, but it would cost more labour and resources than they could afford to be forced to deal with the loads outside of the cage’s gravity manipulation field.

Arthur was sending pings to the Camelot Quartermaster on duty and receiving nothing in reply when he spotted Morgana out of the corner of his eye. Turning, he watched her head straight for the Kilgharrah and pause at the bottom of the gangplank. She placed her hands on her hips and surveyed the repairs. He could see her mouth moving, though no-one was close. He could attribute that to her subvocal mod, certainly, but Merlin’s revelation about the ship’s ghost made Arthur question.

She disappeared into the Kilgharrah.

Pellinore showed up to demand more space before Arthur could follow. Finishing his seedcake, Arthur dusted his hands together, and set off to find the proper authorisations for the gravity cage’s expansion. A quick note to Leon had Morgana being monitored. Several updates telling him that she wandered through empty corridors that just happened to have malfunctioning auditory pickups left him worried.

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Morgana found him seated in his chair on the otherwise empty bridge as he prepared for the next crisis. His vision was obscured with a partially-composed missive to Annis that he hoped might repair some of the damage that had been done to the position of Pendragon. In the background, he set his algorithms to combing through the Kilgharrah’s repair data. His chair glowed a fain green, the conduits connecting him to the ship rustling when he breathed.

“Busy sitting still?” Morgana asked, seating herself in Griff’s chair at communications.

Arthur jolted, his letter to Annis scattering as he lost concentration. Switching contexts took him a moment. With the letter stored off, he shut off his background processes and freed up a little more of his attention. “Did you need something?”

“Wondering how your pilots are getting on, mostly.”
Sitting back in his chair, Arthur studied her. “Elena and the others are still on their leave off-Camelot. I think they’ve gone from the Gawant to the Caerleon already. Derian sent me a short blurt saying he was showing off his cousin’s cooking in the enclave there.”

“And Mordred?” Morgana crossed her legs at the ankle and leaned forward, her elbows on her thighs. “How is he?”

“Fine? He and Percy have been hitting it off. The Ealdorians barely need them, but I think he’s enjoying having something Knight-like to do. Why are you here?”

Morgana arched an eyebrow. “I can’t ask after my favourites in your crew? You know how I adore your pilots.”

“You number Gwaine among your favourites?”

“You don’t?” Morgana’s smile sharpened with amusement.

“I wouldn’t think Gwaine tractable enough to be one of your pets.”


Pinching the bridge of his nose, Arthur took a deep breath and almost apologised. “Sorry, you interrupted me. Mordred is fine. Really. I can give you his roster schedule if you’d like to find him to say hello.”

“I’ve found him. He’s- I don’t think you quite realise how much of a dream being one of your pilots is for him,” Morgana said. She tilted her head to the side to study him. “He’s… sweet and uncomplicated. I worry about him.”

There was a note in Morgana’s last words that caused Arthur to sit up a little straighter. “I haven’t lost a pilot for ages. We’re not even being deployed back to the fringe until well after planetfall. That’s more than enough time to get him integrated.”

Morgana shrugged one shoulder and changed the subject. “Your repairs are going relatively swiftly. I’m impressed.”

“Lucan’s doing, for the most part,” Arthur said. “He’s pulled in all available hands and has been coordinating extensively with Mithian’s Chief of Engineering as well as the Camelot’s.”

“Is that so?” Morgana asked, pushing herself up from her chair to stalk the bridge. She ran her fingers across the darkened Nav console. “The Glatissant did quite the damage. I was surprised at how much.”

“Three devourers is a lot for one ship, especially one carrying refugees that it needs to protect.”

“Three devourers explains the breaches, I suppose, though I’m a bit confused at some of the… paralysis. At least that seems to be healing as well.”

Her pause before ‘paralysis’ allowed Arthur to catch on. She was talking about the Kilgharrah’s magic damage. “Ah,” Arthur covered his mouth with his hand to hide his smile until he could school his face back into neutrality. He coughed. “You know the Glatissant and their ‘one new trick’ thing. This time it was paralysis. We think it was some sort of poison we’ve never encountered before.”

Morgana threw a look over her shoulder from where she stood at Nav. Kay had left one of his consoles in standby mode so that when Morgana pressed a button the screen lit without need for
authorisation. “Do you have a special team or, perhaps, an individual working on the paralysis?”

“Lucan’s handling the teams. They’re moving across the hull in sections.” Arthur wondered at her question. If she’d been talking with his ship like his surveillance of her implied, the Kilgharrah seemed not to have told her where he was getting his magical repairs. He watched her play with some of the system profiles that Kay had left behind. The familiar shape of the Spelandor system lit beneath her fingers, the description text heavily modified from what Arthur had seen when Kay had recommended it as their new course. “You’d have to ask him about his teams.”

She lingered over the new text in the Spelandor’s profile for a long moment, then flicked the console dark and turned to face him. Leaning against Nav, she tilted her head. “Lucan? Really? He’s fixing the… paralysis?”

“It’s getting fixed. I’ve been dealing with coordination and the occasional panic.”

Morgana’s throat on either side of her trachea mod was turning an interesting shade of speckled rose. “You haven’t found the real cause, though? Just ‘some sort of poison’?” Her voice was rough with frustration.

“I’ve had my hands full. I can pull up the full diagnostics of the… paralysis, if you want me to? We can go over it together and see what my engineers think?”

When he paused as she had, Morgana clenched her teeth and a muscle in her jaw jumped. “I’m sorry, I’m afraid I have a lunch date with Accolon.”


“I happen to like Accolon. Unlike someone, he’s actually a gentleman about my lovers.”

“Someone meaning me?”

“You’re an arse, did you know that?” Morgana told him, pushing away from Nav and striding toward the portal. “I don’t know why I even bother to talk to you.”

“Because you love me?” Arthur called after her.

Morgana thumped the portal activation with more force than necessary and nearly ran over Sefa on the other side. She snarled and strode past, leaving Sefa wide-eyed and baffled in her wake.

“Captain?” Sefa said cautiously. He waved her onto the bridge for her to continue. She came to stand by his chair, shaking her head. “Engineering hit another milestone, and Lucan sent me with another request.”

Arthur sighed as the portal shut behind Morgana. He shifted in his chair to give Sefa his full attention. “Milestone excellent,” he said, smiling to put her at ease. “What’s the request?”

**

Arthur caught up with Merlin as he was striding across the deck toward the Kilgharrah’s engines. The gentle shoulder tap Arthur gave him caused him to jump a foot to the side.

After he recognised Arthur, Merlin beckoned him to follow. They fell into step, and he shot him a handful of curious glances before finally asking, “Is this a social call? I’m on duty.”
“If only. I wanted to warn you that Morgana’s been showing interest in who is doing the-” Arthur dropped his voice so that Merlin had to lean in to hear him, “-magic repairs. I don’t want you getting caught, especially not by her.”

Merlin tripped over nothing and faltered. Arthur grabbed his elbow to steady him.

“Careful,” Arthur said.

Merlin kept his voice low as well. “I’m the only one who can do those kind of repairs. I’m already sneaking extra shifts just to try and keep up.”

“I know. That’s why I’m not asking you to stop. Just- I want you to be careful.”

“Of course I’ll be careful. I’m being careful already.”

Before Arthur could respond, they were hailed by Lucan. Both straightened as he strode over, and - captain or not - Arthur tried to look like he hadn’t been caught out doing something he shouldn’t have been. Merlin fidgeted, shoulder bumping his.

“How’s my good luck charm?” Lucan said loudly enough that a pair of nearby mechanics looked up to see who he was speaking to.

“Good?” Merlin ventured, “You mean me?”

Lucan dipped his chin toward Arthur in salute and turned his grin back on Merlin. “Of course. The first day you started your repairwork, all of my complaints and setbacks started to dry up. We might not blow our repair schedule like I thought we might. You’re some sort of luck, that’s for sure.”

Arthur nearly bit his tongue. He exchanged looks with Merlin.

“I don’t mean to say he’s not a solid worker, though,” Lucan said quickly, misinterpreting Arthur’s expression. “He’s got quite the work ethic.”

“I believe both.” Arthur slapped Merlin on the back, rocking him forward. The sour look Merlin shot him strained his ability to swallow his laughter. “Keep it up.”

Arthur retreated before he broke into chuckles and piqued Lucan’s curiosity enough for him to pry. There was little more he could do when they needed the Kilgharrah up and flying within the fortnight. He only hoped that Merlin would take his warning seriously.

**

Will stood in front of Arthur holding a fluorescent orange protein brick and a thermos. Without preamble, he demanded, “Where is he?”

“Merlin?” Arthur asked, surprised by Will’s presence on the repair bay deck. He was at the gravity cage again, signing transfer slips for Kingdom-level resource allocations. It was lucky he was heir, or his father would have had to be down among his crew to approve the transfers and nobody wanted that. Will’s splayed hand blocked Arthur’s flexiscreen, so Arthur rolled it and tucked it beneath his arm. “Lower decks of the Kilgharrah, working on conduit repair. Why?”

“Just because certain individuals named Arthur have designed themselves for improved stamina, doesn’t mean that certain individuals named Merlin don’t need to eat and rest. It may have escaped your notice, but half of your crew just got back from their mid-shift meal.”
Arthur blinked around him. It had seemed a little empty near the cage in the last hour or so.

“Merlin might have neglected to mention that he’s a little bit prone to pushing himself beyond his limits if he thinks his duties are more important than his health.” Will gave Arthur a flat glower. “He wouldn’t have any reason to think that, would he?”

Arthur barely had to think about the answer. “Fuck.”

“Thought so. Where is he?”

“I’ll take you.”

A quick review of Merlin’s work logs for Lucan while they wended their way through corridors into an out of the way pocket had Arthur swearing to himself. Arthur had been so busy, he hadn’t realised that Merlin was doing his best to keep up with Arthur’s schedule without the benefit of mods. For every hour that Arthur had put in trying to keep personalities from exploding or accounting the decisions of his department chiefs, Merlin seemed determined to put in two on repairs to systems no one else could see.

“This is really down here,” Will said after a good five minutes of shuffling sideways down an access corridor. They both spotted Merlin’s feet dangling through a hatch in the ceiling, his bare toes wiggling. “I thought Merlin was on a team.”

Arthur could hear the sound of a low, tuneless whistle. “Lucan put him on subsystem repair.”

“Well, bully for Lucan.” Will panted to a stop, swearing at the heat of the Kilgharrah’s lower decks.

The feet disappeared from the hatch and after the round of awkward thumps, Merlin peered down at the two of them, a broad smile spreading across his face.

Will shoved Arthur forward and past the hatch. Wiggling the brick, he held it up. “Brought you food.”

Arthur heard Merlin say, “Thanks, Will,” as he turned back. Even though Arthur had things he should be doing, when Merlin invited them both up through the hatch to share, he wriggled his way into the tunnel above without protest.

**

The one night they tried sleeping apart, Arthur should have known that Merlin leaving the triskelion behind was a sign. In the wee hours of Arthur’s sleep shift, Merlin showed up at his door wearing an endearing hangdog expression, his hair sticking up in all directions.

Arthur, not the most tactful after interrupted REM, demanded, “What are you doing here?”

At Arthur’s tone, Merlin straightened deliberately, squaring his shoulders and taking a deep breath until the only sign of how vulnerable he felt standing in the dimly lit hallway was the faint quaver in his voice. “I can’t sleep.” He folded his arms in front of his chest and lifted his chin.

“Oh- for fuck’s sake. Get in here.” Arthur hauled him inside and let the door close behind them. He chafed his hands down Merlin’s arms from shoulder to elbow, trying to see if he couldn’t get some warmth past the chill on Merlin’s skin. “What happened?”

“I tried sleeping alone, and every time I fell asleep it felt like I was choking and like being gutted and I couldn’t shove everything back in in time and my hands were just dripping and dripping and every
time I closed my eyes and I couldn’t close them or it would be back again and I tried sleeping I really
did. So I went to Will and Will tried to help, he did, and it was a little bit better because it helped to
know what was real and what wasn’t, but after the fourth time I kicked him awake and maybe left a
bruise he told me to get over myself and come here.”

Merlin paused to breathe, then started right on up again. Arthur couldn’t get a word in edgewise. “So
I’m here and I’m sorry for waking you up, but I don’t know what else to do. Kilgharrah’s counting
on me and I can’t sleep and I don’t think these are nightmares so much as premonitions and it doesn’t
feel like I’m the one dreaming them but someone I can’t quite see even though she’s right there next
to me and I know I’m far enough away that Sigan can’t hardly get to me except when I’m asleep but
it’s only a matter of time and I thought maybe we could try again because not much sleep was better
than no sleep and I hate to do this to you, I hate it, I hate it so much because you have everything you
have to do and I’m just one more complication and-.”

Arthur was too tired and feeling too increasingly guilty to respond to everything Merlin was saying,
so he just leaned forward and kissed him silent. A brief peck, not enough to spark, but it was enough.
Merlin’s eyes fluttered back open and widened after Arthur pulled away.

Gravelly with sleep, Arthur said, “That’s cheating, I know.” He was drained and while he was
steady on his feet, he felt entirely too wrung out to do more than stand and rub Merlin’s arms until he
stopped shivering.

Merlin’s night terrors were echoes of Morgana’s all over again, every bit as horrifying, and Arthur
wanted a chance to get things right at least once. If he couldn’t help his sister, maybe he could help
Merlin.

He had an idea, and he was going to suggest it regardless, but it wouldn’t hurt to have confirmation
he was on the right track. “If I wasn’t here, where would you go?” Arthur asked, more gruffly than
he had intended, his brows furrowed as he stared through Merlin and into the near distance.

All Merlin got out of the question was a grouchy accusation. Features falling, he withdrew, jerking
out of Arthur’s grip. “Somewhere else. Sorry to disturb you,” he snapped, slapping at the door
activation panel.

Arthur didn’t think. He overrode the door. The Camelot’s systems obeyed with unusual alacrity so
that the irising panels hissed and refused to open, the lights around the frame flickering in distress at
the interrupted protocol. Merlin stiffened and turned, and his careful, wary expression was all the
sign Arthur needed that he had made a mistake. Arthur backed out of Merlin’s space and paced to
the far end of his cabin.

“All the door will open if you want to leave, but I’d very much appreciate it if you’d answer the
question.” Arthur rubbed at the bridge of his nose and activated a system flush. He should have done
so before he’d done something stupid. He needed to be alert. “Where would you go?”

“The Kilgharrah,” Merlin answered quietly. He tracked Arthur’s movements, his fingers once more
curling around his elbows as if he were cold. He didn’t test the door.

That was the answer Arthur had expected. He nodded. “Pack everything, then, and sleep in my
quarters. I’m not going to have you trying to sleep in some access tunnel somewhere because you
can’t get into any of the cabins.”

“I would have asked Gwen for permission to use her and Lance’s berth,” Merlin said, a measure of
his usual spirit returning in the wry twist to his words.
“In the middle of their sleep shift?”

Merlin avoided his eyes. “Might have had Kilgharrah break me into one.”

“Which would put you on Lucan’s shit list faster than getting caught napping in a corridor. No sleeping on the floor,” Arthur pointed at him. “You’ll have access to my cabin until further notice. I can make sure it’s expected.”

They stood on opposite sides of the small cabin in silence after Arthur’s announcement. Merlin was staring at him, processing. Arthur dropped his arm. He couldn’t tell what Merlin was thinking, just that the little metaphorical gears were whirring along inside of his head. It made Arthur want to fidget.

“You were ready for me to say the Kilgharrah. When you asked,” Merlin eventually said. He no longer looked like he wanted to run and some of his usual colour had returned to his cheeks.

“Because it always eased Morgana’s nightmares to sleep inside her ship,” Arthur said, moving to the wall and plucking down Merlin’s triskelion. He turned to find Merlin watching him with a baffled expression. “Get a move on.”

“Morgana’s nightmares?”

“I’m pretty sure she’s sleeping aboard the Aithusa now. I don’t think she’s spent one night on the Camelot once she figured out she didn’t have to.” So much was obvious in retrospect that Arthur wanted to smack his head against the wall a few times just to see if he couldn’t knock loose some sense. He handed the triskelion to Merlin, who accepted it with a small sound of surprise. Arthur said, “You don’t have to either, not when we have other options.”

Merlin relaxed and his customary grin returned. “Okay.”

**

“Just because your mods let you cheat basic biology,” Gwen said, her hand in the centre of Arthur’s chest as she shoved him back onto his chair on the bridge. “Doesn’t mean you can get away with neglecting yourself, too. You will eat and you will sleep.”

“As much as I can,” Arthur promised.

She gave him a suspicious look which he well deserved.

“Are we going to feed Merlin now?”

Gwen’s expression softened at the question and she nodded. “Now that Will warned me about Merlin’s priorities, we’ve got a rotation going.”

“Take me with you when you go?”

“Of course.” She kept her tone light to say, “I just didn’t think you’d want to take the time.”

**

Merlin put his shoulder into shoving an oddly-shaped hunk of metal up and over the rail of one of the scaffolds. There was a confidence in his movements that drew Arthur’s eye. The scaffolding had been extended by ten feet overnight and all of the work teams were scrambling to set up their new zones. Beyond, the White Hart had her own set of scaffolding and teams just as busy as they
streamed from gravity cage to ship with loads of materials.

The muscles in his back flexed beneath his uniform as Arthur watched, pushing the awkward load high enough for the hands above to find purchase on one of the odd angles. He wiped his forehead on his uniform sleeve and said something to the mechanic on the scaffold above.

Pellinore, standing next to Arthur, coughed to get his attention. Arthur sucked in a breath, his spine straightening in reflexive attention. He looked down at his Quartermaster, who was giving him a look of mild amusement.

“Mithian told me her Quartermaster is worried about supply if either of us start hitting our milestones any more swiftly than we are now,” he said, covering his moment of inattention by taking a firm tone.

In turn, Pellinore took the hint and rumbled his response. By the time Arthur snuck another look in attempt to spot Merlin again, he’d already moved inside the ship.

**

Mithian yawned at him, settling into Bedivere’s chair at helm. “He’s customised the shit out of this thing.”

“Who?” Arthur dialled back the brilliance of the text on his oculars and reviewed his buffer to see what Mithian had just said. “Oh, Bedivere?”

“This chair is a thing of beauty. I’m moving in. I’ll just sleep here.”

Arthur flicked off his oculars entirely and leaned on the arm of his own chair. He watched her with suppressed amusement as she sprawled, kicking her feet out in front of her and letting her head rest on the back. She closed her eyes and let a blissful look drift over her face.

Amused, he said, “You won’t have the bridge to yourself, I’m afraid. It’s my new base of operations for the duration of the repairs.”

“You stopped sleeping?” She watched him through slitted eyelids.

“Not entirely.”

At his words, she sat up. “You moved Merlin into your cabin on the Kilgharrah and then you stopped sleeping? Do you see the flaw in your plan?”

Offering her a wry smile, he nodded. “Even I couldn’t miss a flaw that big. Tell me the truth, though, if you were able to forgo sleep these next couple of weeks and ensure everything gets done, would you?”

“Not with the object of my affections sleeping every night in my bed. I maybe be half metal, but I’m still only human.”

“Not even if it would ensure all of the other rulers were in agreement? Just- help me get a grasp on everything I missed on the fringe.” Arthur avoided her eyes, staring instead at the inert forward viewscreen. Ignoring the sympathy on her face was harder than he thought it would be.

“The ruler’s haven’t had a reliable Pendragon in years,” she said. “They won’t know what to do with themselves.”
“I’m still heir Pendragon as yet.”

“We’ll see how long that lasts, shall we?” Mithian grinned.

Arthur chuckled and dipped his chin at her. “You’ll give away my master plan.”

She followed her short bark of laughter with a clap of her hands. Rubbing her palms together, she fixed Arthur with an anticipatory grin. When she spoke, however, she was all business. “I’ve got Enid coming to find me in ten minutes, so that’s all we’ve got. Where do you want to start?”

“Factions. Fleet’s fractures. Who, how, and why-”

“And I only have ten minutes?” Mithian broke in, gesturing him to silence. “You really know how to keep a girl on her toes. Start recording and we’ll see how far we get.”

**

Leon passed over the flexiscreen at the end of Arthur’s rotation and stood there as if he wanted to say something more.

“Yes?” Arthur frowned up at him from his seat on the bridge. The end of secondary shift had brought half a dozen mechanics and the Camelot’s Pre-Colonial Research and Development Enclave head, Lunette, down to the Kilgharrah to check over the ship’s fittings for the new systems Arthur had agreed upon. Lunette was standing on top of Griff’s chair at comms and shouting at someone to boost her up. Arthur was having trouble concentrating on Leon, so he just smiled and hoped he looked like he was paying attention.

“Do you even need me in rotation?” Leon finally said. “If you’re just going to stay awake for every shift and spoil Engineering with your rapid response times, I’m not sure you do.”

Lunette wobbled on the chair she was standing on and Arthur put out a hand as if he could stop her from falling. The cords in his chest connecting him to the ship creaked in their sockets. She recovered and placed one booted foot firmly on the console surface. Arthur winced.

“Sorry, yes, Leon. No, I know. I’m not just deal with repairs, though - I’ve been in discussions with Rodor of the Nemeth and-”

An alert on his oculars flared to life and Arthur cut himself off to read the high-priority message. It was short reading and once he finished he whooped, startling everyone on the bridge and nearly unplugging himself from his chair in his excitement.

Leon, still staring at him worriedly, raised his eyebrows.

“Annis and Rodor are going to send patrols out to the edge of the oort cloud while the recall is in effect,” Arthur crowed. It was a win. It wasn’t a large win, but Caerleon and Nemeth had agreed to work together under the nominal leadership of a Pendragon. When Leon still looked sceptical, Arthur laughed. “This is cause to celebrate! Let’s take what we can get.”

“Congratulations. Still. You’re leaning too hard on your mods. They’re not built for sustained emergency use.”

“We’re making progress,” Arthur said, his pleasure at the news undimmed for all of Leon’s worrying. “At this point, that’s all that matters. Progress.”

**
The Kilgharrah refused to speak with him until Arthur agreed not to rip out and replace the comm system again. The corridor they were in was barely wide enough for Arthur’s shoulders and the cooling system had been damaged, but according to Merlin it was the best place for the system patch. It was hot, muggy with a metallic tang, and the ship was sweating about as much as Arthur was.

The fruits of a dozen hours clandestine work was a formalised magic patch-in for the Kilgharrah so that hijacking the communication system would cause less overall systemic anomalies.

“Not damage,” Merlin was quick to reassure him. “Certainly not damage. It was just that there was no proper way for him to use closed systems without the magical equivalent of an injection attack, which - with how his magic interacts with the base biotech - means that there might just possibly, maybe, be a few itty-bitty anomalies that would occur that might suggest a system failure where there was none.”

Arthur raised his eyebrows and mouthed, ‘Injection attack?’ Merlin only grinned, thumped something with a bare foot, and declared the task done.

At first Arthur didn’t notice anything besides a faint buzz on his comm line as it cycled through several frequencies. Merlin watched him with his arms wrapped around his knees, grinning up from where he was seated among a dozen sliced conduits and unplugged cords that formed a tangle around his feet.

The smile Arthur gave Merlin was a long way from genuine, but Merlin reached forward to pat him reassuringly on the calf. It was enough to make Arthur smile for real.

The Kilgharrah bypassed Arthur’s auditory receiver and went straight to ocular text, the most stripped-down and raw form of communication that Arthur’s mods were capable of. He jumped as the words scrolled across his field of vision.

GREETINGS CAPTAIN ARTHUR PENDRAGON IT IS A PLEASURE TO FINALLY SPEAK WITH YOU

Arthur swallowed and reminded himself to breathe, reminded himself that he’d been captaining the Kilgharrah since he’d finished training. There was nothing to be nervous about except that fact that his ship was sentient. He looked down at Merlin for help. “Do I just talk?”

“Like a madman, yeah.” Merlin’s grin grew brighter, if that were possible. “He can hear you pretty much everywhere there’s a pickup installed, plus his own senses which can be sharper or duller, depending.”

“You’re enjoying this,” Arthur accused. Merlin bobbed his head, not bothering to deny it.

Arthur rolled his eyes at Merlin, cleared his throat, and placed himself at parade rest. He ignored the faint giggle that came from Merlin’s direction. “Kilgharrah!” Arthur began, speaking a bit louder than normal. Talking to the wall was probably the strangest thing he’d done in years. He didn’t think he needed to salute, but then he had no idea what sort of deference was due a ghost from his Captain or visa versa. “I understand that I owe you both a greeting and an apology.”

There was only a slight granularity to the text that crossed his oculars to suggest that the source held more in common with a glitch than a proper connection.

THERE IS NO NEED TO SHOUT I CAN HEAR YOU JUST FINE YOU ARE WELCOME TO ISSUE BOTH GREETING AND APOLOGY AT WILL

“So much for deference,” Arthur said.
I KNOW EACH AND EVERY MOMENT OF EACH AND EVERY MEMBER OF YOUR CREW’S LIVES FROM OUR ENTIRE TOUR OF THE FRINGE INCLUDING YOU

Arthur grimaced as that particularly terrifying thought sank in.

DID YOU EXPECT DEFERENCE

“Not particularly, no.”

THEN WE UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER

“It seems we do.”

Merlin laughed again at something Arthur couldn’t hear - or see. He glowered down at where Merlin had returned to work, re-attaching cables and conduits in a configuration that surpassed Arthur’s knowledge, but were most decidedly not remotely related to standard. The glower lost its effect since nobody was paying enough attention to receive it.

“So-” Arthur tried again. “I apologise for what grief I have put you through in not acknowledging your sentience. I know a simple apology is insufficient and I hope you will allow me to make reparations in whatever fashion suits you. I would like us to come to some sort of understanding and improve our working relationship moving forward.”

VERY ELOQUENT YOU MUST HAVE PRACTISED APOLOGY ACCEPTED I AM GLAD YOU ARE GETTING ALONG SO WELL WITH MY DRAGONLORD

The term ‘dragonlord’ caught Arthur by surprise, especially paired with ‘my’. He glanced at Merlin who had rocked back on his heels to watch Arthur talk. Merlin raised his eyebrows.

“Dragonlord?” Arthur asked.

“Oh.” Merlin tilted his head to the side and scrunched up his face. “Yeah.”

“You weren’t going to mention?” Arthur couldn’t help his incredulity. ‘Dragonlord’ was part of the fleet’s fundamental mythology no matter what the truth behind their existence might be, madness or manipulation, ghosts or no. It was hard to argue with the fact that they had been something when clips of past battles used during training showed spectral suggestions of wings with spans that dwarfed their ships and teeth larger than the destriers flying between them.

Maybe ships so far removed from the established fleet wouldn’t be as steeped in the glories of successful conflicts, but Arthur had grown up on Camelot and had been training to be commander since before he could walk.

Merlin looked confused by Arthur’s reaction. He shrugged. “I didn’t think it was important to anyone but the ghosts?”

“You really don’t know.” Arthur was almost impressed.

Narrowing his eyes, Merlin asked, “Was that a question?”

“We’ve rebuffed entire invasions by beasties far nastier than the Glatissant with the help of a single dragonlord paired with the appropriate ship. It’s one of the resources that even my instructors who were fully in agreement with father still lamented no longer being able to access. Merlin. Merlin. You can call a dragon forth from a ship. That might be a little bit on the important side.”
“I can probably call forth women, bastet, and maybe men, too,” Merlin said thoughtfully. “The Ealdor’s ghost was a human male, I think.”

THE YOUNG WARLOCK IS CORRECT

Arthur absorbed the implication. “You can do the same thing with maiden-rank ships, and you still didn’t think it was important?”

NOW HE KNOWS

Three seconds after the text appeared on Arthur’s oculars, Merlin snorted in amusement. “Sorry,” he said, ducking his head and turning to plunge his hands back into the open panelling near the deck.

The Kilgharrah changed the topic with all the grace of an asteroid barge.

YOU MENTIONED COMING TO AN UNDERSTANDING ABOUT MY HYBRID SYSTEMS CAPTAIN

Arthur sighed, nudged Merlin with his foot, and began the awkward business of negotiating how to jack into the Kilgharrah’s systems and upload himself into the tech without offending the previous resident of the ship. His skin crawled at the thought of someone else jacking into him and taking over his systems. If what Gaius had said about ghosts and reincarnations was anywhere near true, then all of the new tech his father had spearheaded was built upon a similar premise.

Luckily, Kilgharrah was no more than annoyed by the new systems and had little interest in negotiating.

ALL I ASK IS NEXT TIME I WISH INPUT INTO WHICH SYSTEMS NEED TO BE INSTALLED

“That’s something I can very much do,” Arthur said, glancing at Merlin.

UNNECESSARY REDUNDANCY IS A FOUL BEAST TO BE VANQUISHED

Merlin laughed half a beat before Arthur did. Arthur, relieved beyond words that his ship held a more neutral attitude toward the hybrid systems than he did himself, shook his head and asked, “A foul beast? That bad?”

TOO MUCH CHANCE TO INTRODUCE LOOPHOLES AND SECURITY FLAWS

The lights in the corridor dimmed suddenly, shifted red, and the air grew warm enough to make Arthur sweat despite the cooling systems built into his chest mods.

IT IS INEFFICIENT

Ugly block lettering could not convey tone, but the sympathetic response of the ship itself spurred Arthur to move on without comment. He detailed Lucan’s upgrades and the inventions that came out of the enclave via Lunette, from the three-dimensional projection system finally going into the bridge to the more streamlined missile launchers. Then the Kilgharrah surprised him.

AND DO YOU HAVE UPGRADES TO YOUR INTERFACES TO MY HYBRID SYSTEMS PLANNED FOR THIS UPGRADE PERIOD

“Ah, no?” Arthur said, rubbing a hand across the ports in his chest. “None planned? I wouldn’t have time to recover. Why?”
“How soon do you think he will be?” Arthur asked. He caught Merlin grimacing out of the corner of his eye.

“NEITHER OF US KNOW BUT AT LEAST HE IS RECOVERING”

“At least.”

Merlin put his palms out to his sides and wiggled his fingers. “I’m right here. I know you’re talking about me even if I can only hear half the conversation.”

“A pretty ambiguous half, too.” Arthur leaned back against the bulkhead, twitching a little in anticipation of comment when his shoulders met the flesh of his ship, but the Kilgharrah didn’t say anything.

“I get a lot of the Kilgharrah’s low-level emotions, and when he’s talking about me, he gets this weird proprietary undercurrent.” Merlin sounded amused.

Arthur had no single feature of the ship to stare down. “Is that so?”

“HE IS MY DRAGONLORD”

“He’s my-” Arthur began. “He’s just mine.”

There was a long pause, to the point that Arthur thought he’d won their pissing match by default, before the Kilgharrah came back with, I AM A DRAGON

A tiny part of Arthur quailed at the response. The majority, however, was thoroughly amused. Arthur chuckled. “Noted.”

Merlin tapped the side of Arthur’s leg and shrugged when he looked down, but he had a smile on his face that he didn’t bother to hide.

Lingering with Merlin, chatting with him and the Kilgharrah by turns, made it difficult to return to the bridge where the rest of his duties awaited him. Return he did, however, forced out of the narrow, sweltering corridor by the temperature alert on his coolant systems as his mods began to overheat.

**

Arthur approached Lucan, who was surrounded by a dozen of his minions all taking notes while he gestured at a projection on the side of the Kilgharrah’s hull. It looked to be a schematic of part of a hull section that had been giving them fits all week, and each and every one of the engineers and mechanics had out some sort of recording device and were listening with an intensity that Arthur was loathe to interrupt.

He lingered back a few steps, staring up at the hull projection. Lucan swept his arm in an arc toward the schematics and several of the lines rippled into a new configuration. The note-takers murmured among themselves.

“RUN INTO THE MIDDLE OF THE GEESE AND WAVE YOUR ARMS”

“I get colour commentary now?”

“LEAVE ME MY SIMPLE PLEASURES”
“They’re working,” Arthur said, watching the schematic change once more. “They’re fixing you. I would think you’d appreciate it.”

**THEY ARE GOING TO CAUSE A CASCADE FAILURE IF THEY DO NOT SHUT DOWN MY AFT COOLANT SYSTEM BEFORE THE REPAIR HE IS DETAILING PLEASE INFORM**

“You’re sure?”

**THAT IS A STUPID QUESTION**

Arthur snorted and started forward, approaching the gaggle of mechanics. As they parted for him, Lucan looking up in surprise at being interrupted, he resisted the urge to wave his arms just to see what they would do.

**Merlin laughed at Gwaine’s absolutely terrible, terrible joke. Seated between the two of them, his legs stretched out, Merlin had his bright grin turned away. Arthur admired the flex of his throat as he tipped his head back and thunked it lightly against the bulkhead behind them. His laugh turned into a groan. “Bad pun, bad pun! Never again!”**

They passed the thermos between them, sipping some sort of fibrous soup Arthur had never had before straight from the container. Merlin’s shoulder pressed against his and shook when he laughed. Every time he did, some of the panicky, stressed expression that had grown over the course of the week faded. It was the only reason that Arthur hadn’t ordered Gwaine right off the ship the moment he’d shown up.

There was no room for a pilot on leave in the midst of such massive repairs, especially not one dressed in his civilian clothes who made a nuisance of himself by chatting up any mechanic who returned his flirtatious winks. Still, Gwaine was welcome to stay.

Merlin was grinning. Arthur couldn’t help but grin back.

**The bridge had cleared out during an overnight lull. Tired and reeling, only Sefa kept him company, a flexiscreen in her hands as she stood square in front of the captain’s chair and tried to give him a rundown of resource discrepancies and reallocations. She blinked rapidly in the dimmed light of the bridge, squinting at the text on her screen as she held it up closer to her face. “Still blurry,” she muttered to herself.**

**DO YOU THINK SHE WOULD NOTICE IF I BLURRED IT MORE**

Arthur covered his mouth to keep himself from laughing. Though his mods were keeping him running with their boost to his physical stamina, the week’s lack of sleep was starting to affect his sense of humour.

Peering at him suspiciously, Sefa rocked onto her toes and waited for him to say something. She went back to attempting to read a moment later.

The Kilgarrah seemed determined to make Arthur pay for his years of ignorance via petty inconvenience and the joy of seeing Arthur struggle to explain his inappropriate responses to social cues, because he tried again.
Sefa swore a moment later, tossed the flexiscreen to the floor and began to rub her eyes in earnest.

It was too much. Arthur began to laugh, an explosive sound all the worse for having been held in unsuccessfully. Swearing at him instead of her flexiscreen, Sefa flopped into Bedivere’s seat at helm and glowered at him.

“Sleep shift,” he ordered her, gulping air as he tried to conquer his laughter. “Don’t come back until you’ve taken a full one.”

In apology, he didn’t call her back when Sefa muttered, ‘Borgy git,’ on her way out, just loud enough for him to hear.

**

Merlin had his legs crossed in front of him and his back flat against the bulkhead as he sat in the main corridor leading from bridge to forward bay. The panelling in front of him had been set to the side, revealing a tangle of conduits and cords that looked melted together. His deft fingers picked them apart, peeling melted plastic from greasy fat, a peaceful expression on his face.

Lingering just at the curve of the corridor, Arthur leaned one shoulder against the bulkhead. Merlin almost never paused, and when he did, he tilted his head and closed his eyes in such a way that Arthur could almost hear him thinking.

He did not hear Lucan sneaking up on him. The touch between his shoulderblades had him swallowing a yelp as he turned. “Lucan,” he started, only to stop because there was not really much else he could say. Lucan was peering over his shoulder and shaking his head.

“We need you by the gravity cage. Coming?”

Arthur took one last look over his shoulder at Merlin, who had his eyes closed again. Shifting his attention back to Lucan, he said, “Let’s go.”

**

The Camelot’s mess nearest the repair bay was busy enough that both Arthur and Mithian had to squeeze onto the end of a table and defend their plates with their elbows. Today’s meal: crunchy lettuce wrapped around chicken-flavoured protein cubes with a side of purple nutrient goo. Arthur pointed at Mithian with his spoon and nearly spattered the woman sitting next to him with purple. He’d apologised so many times already since he sat down that they mutually ignored one another.

Her eyes glowed amber at him, the document that they were collaborating on obscuring his field of vision so that her oculars were the only facial details he could discern. Wiggling his fingers, he struck a line and rewrote it, tossing it back to her for synchronisation and review.

“So, that means if we can get your father to agree to reintegration after planetfall, we’ll be able to-fuck.”

The document they had been working on had been ripped away to be replaced by fuzzy letters.

THE YOUNG WARLOCK HAS BEEN REASSIGNED TO AN ENGINE ISSUE ON DECK FOUR

He could see Mithian’s face again, her eyebrows raised. “Fuck? Me or my father? That’s going to be
an important clarification here.”

“No, sorry, glitch,” Arthur bit out. While the Kilgharrah was utilising the comm system proper, Arthur had no way to route his responses and be sure the ship would see or hear them. He recalled the document and tried to pick up where he left off.

Before he was able to change even one letter, all of his work was replaced again by the words, QUARTERMASTER STEVEDORES HAVE MISDELIVERED SHIPMENT PLEASE INFORM OR I AM NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR MY ACTIONS OR THE RESULTING SETBACKS

The protocol that Merlin had set the Kilgharrah up to use was too low level for him to block. He thumped himself on the head with his spoon, wiped the purple goo from his forehead, and gave Mithian a wan smile when she started to laugh.

“Fucking neither you, nor your father, all we need after his agreement is a solid plan ready to execute…”

Mithian just shook her head and started making corrections of her own.

**

The full roster of King Uther’s fledgling militia scrolled up his oculars. Arthur had set one of his algorithms to flag interesting person, but most of them were trained soldiers. Half fringe, half Kingdom, there seemed to be no patterns among them beyond all having gone through a basic magic-response course on the Mercia at one time or another. That would be a requirement for his father, surely. Though if it was Agravaine’s plan to use them as foot soldiers in a conflict where magic was on their side, then response training would have gotten them used to at least the flash and bang of magic and make them less likely to panic.

Arthur sat back in his captain’s chair and scratched around the ports in his chest. His fingers came away crusty with half-dried ichor from the conduits. He grunted.

IF YOU TAKE A SLEEP SHIFT I WILL NOT DISTURB YOU

“That’s quite a concession on your part, since I don’t think I’ve found my way to a bed in days.” The bridge was quiet, most of the activity for the space confined to primary shift after everyone was rested. “Is there any other time I might be rid of your interruptions?”

WHEN MY DRAGONLORD IS PRESENT

Arthur made a small ‘huh’ noise. “That’s… almost kind of you.”

I HAVE NO ULTERIOR MOTIVES

“Sure you don’t.” Arthur laughed, throwing the work he had been doing on his oculars to the forward viewscreen. “Shut this off if anyone but Mithian comes through?”

CONDITION REGISTERED AND TIED WITH ID CHIP TRACKING

The system the Kilgharrah accessed registered no anomalies. Arthur sat forward in his chair, feeling a little like he’d been punched in the gut. “How did we go twenty years without being able to even speak with you?”

YOU DEVELOPED HYBRID SYSTEMS
The chair warmed beneath Arthur’s thighs. His fingers itched to unplug the cables and conduits connecting himself to the Kilgharrah.

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO SPEAK OR LISTEN IF YOU SEIZE THE SYSTEMS DIRECTLY

Arthur swore softly to himself. “I’m so sorry.”

APOLOGIES COUNT LESS THAN ACTIONS

“Now you sound like Mithian.”

The door to the bridge irised open and Mithian strode through. “Who sounds like me?”

His conversation with the Kilgharrah effectively over, he pointed Mithian toward the screen. “Can you see any patterns I’m missing? Because right now everything looks very basic. Unless there’s something less straightforward than it seems, I think we’re probably going to find leaving my father his troops.”

Together, they settled in to comb the data. A rogue letter or two sometimes found its way to Arthur’s oculars, a reminder that Kilgharrah was there and listening.

**

Arthur grinned at Lucan, whose expansive gestures took in the entire bridge as he ran the very first initialisation sequence for the three-dimensional projectors. The small audience of mechanics and engineers broke into applause at the first starburst of colour in the centre of the room.

The novelty drew Arthur forward when Lucan indicated he could, and he stood in the midst of small explosions as they shifted into a translucent field of wildflowers around his feet. The wonder of it made him feel buoyant. He turned again to congratulate Lucan and was arrested by the sight of Merlin watching him with a bright smile. He recovered, but the slight laugh Merlin gave when their eyes met made the rest of Arthur’s interminable day feel a lot more manageable.

**

Sitting in his chair on the bridge, letting the aggregate data of a busy day of repairs filter through his algorithms, Arthur thought could pinpoint the moment it had started, this falling in love by degrees. On the bridge of the dying Ealdor, Merlin had turned his back on the Knights to witness Balinor passing, knowing full-well how the Knights could very well respond to the obvious threat of sorcery. That had been courage, and compassion, and all of the things that Arthur believed in with all of his heart but fell short of again and again. Arthur found himself now as unwilling to let go of Merlin as the now-healed scratches on Merlin’s hand proved he was to let go of Arthur.

Repair milestones, flagged by Arthur’s algorithms, clustered at the edge of his vision. They were well on their way. Some systems lagged behind others, but for the most part they were still, amazingly, on schedule.

Yet it wasn’t heroism that drew Arthur. It was Merlin and Will and their teasing camaraderie born of living in one-another’s pockets their entire lives, sweet and loose and full of laughter and inappropriate jokes. It was Merlin and Gwen and how they tucked into each other’s space to share their lunch packets, legs tangled, swapping stories that sounded like the kind of stories that pour forth when you find someone as willing to know all of you as you are all of them. It was Merlin and Gwaine and how easy it was for Merlin to flash Gwaine a smile after a flirtatious remark and not fear the sexual connotations behind the Knight’s words. It was Merlin and the one and only time that Lance became lunch-bearer. How together they had included Arthur in their rambling conversation
that spanned fringe and Kingdom, and how Arthur had learnt more about his former lover in the span of half an hour than he had the entire time they had been sleeping together.

It was Merlin tending his tools with care and something akin to reverence, telling Arthur when he asked that he’d never been able to use tools so well-crafted back on the Ealdor, not when they had been reserved for their own Chief of Engineering. It was how Merlin was guarded and vulnerable by turns, and yet remain willing to show Arthur little bits of who he was. It felt like Arthur was trying to catalogue a lifetime in the span of a week in which he had no time to think. No time to remember Merlin’s newfound love of hybrid muscadines, or his habit of misplacing his boots as soon as he turned the corner out of sight, or even the way he would narrate his current task, speaking encouragements to inert flesh and nonsentient tech as if it would help speed his work along.

In Merlin, Arthur found someone unwilling to take his nonsense. Who pushed himself as hard as Arthur did.

Arthur looked up and around at the sound of the bridge portal irising open. He wasn’t expecting anyone, and it was well past the end of the primary rotation. At the sight of Merlin, he waved away the aggregate he was processing and put it into standby. They had seen each other rarely enough the past week that he didn’t want to split his attention.

Coming around to the front of Arthur’s chair, Merlin dropped a jar of jam, a protein cake, and a small salad liberally sprinkled with nutrient paste down on his lap without so much as a by-your-leave. One look at Merlin’s face convinced Arthur that arguing would be a losing proposition and as effective as Merlin arguing with his own meal breaks.

“You haven’t been off the Kilgharrah since you moved into my cabin,” Arthur said instead.

Merlin curled up on the floor next to Arthur’s chair. “You didn’t come with Will last time he made me eat.” He leaned against Arthur’s legs and let his muscles relax, his weight settling so that Arthur wouldn’t be able to get up even if he wanted to. He slurred something about floors being unusually comfortable and fell asleep before Arthur could thank him or offer the first slice of jam and cake.

Arthur threaded his fingers through Merlin’s hair, stroking his head so that Merlin turned to press his cheek into the side of Arthur’s knee. Neither of them were getting enough rest, but Merlin had no way to compensate, no artificial systems to fall back on. Arthur was content to let him sleep. More truly, Arthur was content, full stop.

Once sure that Merlin was well and truly asleep, he addressed his ship. “I have a question.”

ASK

“You haven’t told Morgana where half your repairs are coming from. Why not?” The Kilgharrah’s response was delayed for just long enough that Arthur wondered if he were going to answer.

I PROMISED

Arthur made a soft ‘huh’ and nodded. “You keep your promises, then?”

WHERE THE YOUNG WARLOCK IS CONCERNED

“Good,” Arthur said, then let out a shaky breath. He didn’t want to plan for these sorts of contingencies, but he couldn’t afford not to. “If something happens to me, he will be assigned to you in perpetuity no matter the new command. I know your influence is limited, but I need to know he has you as an ally.” He lifted his eyes to the ceiling. “Promise me that you will be his ally, no matter
what is between us or how circumstances may change.”

This time there was no hesitation.

I PROMISE

It wasn’t nearly enough to put all of Arthur’s fears to rest, but he had trusted his ship with his life long before he knew it had a life of its own. He had faith in the Kilgharrah. Strange faith, but faith nevertheless. They sat in mutual silence, Arthur playing with the sleeping Merlin’s hair and nibbling on the food Merlin had brought, until Pellinore stamped onto the bridge.

“Captain,” Pellinore said, pulling up short at the tableau that Arthur presented.

Arthur’s lips twitched at the heights to which his Quartermaster’s eyebrows climbed. He preferred this explanation for Merlin’s constant presence on ship, even if it might undermine Arthur’s image as dedicated beyond all reason. Kingdom-bred though Arthur might be, he wasn’t ashamed of his affection.

“It’s a bit late to have an issue, isn’t it? We’re well into primary sleep shift,” Arthur commented.

When Pellinore hesitated to speak, dragging his fingers through his beard in indecision, Arthur said, “He’s asleep. If you keep your voice down, he’ll stay that way. What is it?”

“Nothing official as such.” Pellinore came forward, making an effort to keep his artificial leg from thumping too badly against the deck. They both peered at Merlin when he stopped, but Merlin just snuffled and wrapped one arm loosely around Arthur’s ankle. Pellinore nodded in satisfaction. “The Tyntagel brought your special request. Pirates that those two are, they demanded half again ransom to release their cargo into my care.”

Arthur grinned. “Expected enough, even from old family friends. I hope you paid them.”

“Pains me to say I did.”

“And you have those you can trust to deliver the payload to Lucan to deal with?”

“I do.” Pellinore nodded, folding his hands over his belly. He chewed on his moustache like he only did when he had something he didn’t want to speak on. Arthur waited him out, letting him get to whatever he wanted to say in his own time. “Isolde also brought a rumour that I don’t like at all.” He said eventually. “A shipment of ballistic firearms delivered by a not-so-friendly friend of a friend to someone in the bowels of the Essetir.”

Swearing under his breath, Arthur sat up straighter, careful not to wake Merlin. “Did she say how strong a rumour?”

“Strong enough that she told me without any hint of payment, with nary a peep out of Tristan at her breach of smugglers etiquette.”

“Strong enough that she told me without any hint of payment, with nary a peep out of Tristan at her breach of smugglers etiquette.”

Strong, then. Arthur sat back in his chair and frowned at a point somewhere beyond Pellinore. Sonic pistols didn’t work at all in vacuum, but they were superior in the corridors of ships, not in the least because they didn’t leave poisonous metals embedded in the flesh of biotechnological ships when they were used. There was no reason to use ballistic weaponry when the ships didn’t like them - even nonsentient ones would respond to their threat in alarming ways - and any ricochet was as like to puncture your vacuum armour as your enemy’s. They were dangerous, unreliable, and even if they were to be used in combat, ballistic defence had long been tied into defence against other ancient technologies. Ballistics were next to useless after the first shot.
All that aside, Arthur still didn’t want Lot having his hands on them. Someone could do a lot of damage with a first shot before everyone caught on. “Did they stay on the Essetir?” It would be like Lot to outfit his soldiers with ballistics. The man was the one ruler that Arthur was least certain he could reach with reason.

“She couldn’t say if they were for sale or stockpile.”

“I don’t know which would be worse,” Arthur said, rubbing his eyes with his free hand. “Thank you for letting me know. I’ll start factoring the possibility into our preparations.”

Pellinore nodded once and let his eyes slide to Merlin, but he said nothing more. He dismissed himself, quietly thumping his way off the bridge (for some value of quiet), and left Arthur once more alone with Merlin and the ghost of his ship.

When Merlin woke, he scolded Arthur for letting him sleep when they could have been doing just about anything else. In response, Arthur offered the last piece of jam and cake, saved for the purpose of distraction, and was rewarded a surprised smile that had turned into an ‘I-know-what-you’re-up-to-but-I-accept-this-offering’ grin. Only after Merlin finished off the smudge of jam left on his thumb did he agree to return to Captain’s quarters and take a proper sleep shift.

Arthur watched him go with a sigh and returned to his interrupted work.

DO NOT WASTE WHAT TIME YOU HAVE

Remaining silent, Arthur let the aggregate scroll.

**

Before Arthur knew it, a week had passed and the Kilgharrah’s repairs were half done.
The casualties from both ships had already been recycled, so the ceremony for the fallen crewmembers of the Kilgharrah and the White Hart mostly consisted of speeches and solemnity. Merlin was just grateful that the combined crowd remained well-behaved, and even Mithian’s crew remained respectful when the King said his few words. From how Arthur had been talking of the cracks in the fleet, Merlin almost expected them to throw shoes or something equally as insulting.

After the ceremony, Merlin was torn. To leave time for mourning, all work until primary shift the next day was called off. The Kilgharrah had regained some of his usual verve and Merlin was loathe to halt his repairs for any reason now that he was starting to get results. But it was also very tempting to take his cue from Will and sleep for the next ten years while he had the option. The moment Merlin saw Morgana trapped in conversation with a cluster of Mithian’s crewmembers, however, he revised his plan and slipped away toward the destrier bay several decks up around the curve of Camelot’s hull.

It was odd walking through the Camelot’s corridors again after the keeping exclusively to the Kilgharrah’s decks. He could feel the rasp of Sigan’s presence in the empty Camelot as the ghost reached for him and failed.

The malevolent creature’s inability to snatch Merlin up and chew him down despite how much of his power had returned gave him hope. Exercised, no doubt, by the repair work he was doing on the Kilgharrah’s energies, his magic had recovered enough to leave him feeling almost comfortable again, almost normal. He certainly felt a great deal less hollow. Better still, he hadn’t had any loss of control even with all of the stress.

Yet, he was careful to keep in mind. Yet. This was the swirl of power beneath his skin that he was used to from growing up. Kilgharrah’s previous assessment of his power left him more than a little worried that ‘yet’ was the operative word.

The destrier bay door opened at his touch, the access panel giving a distressed little whine. Merlin grinned. Gwen’s handiwork was still in effect, even if the passcard system and modern access system complained about no longer being quite compatible. He slipped inside, one hand on the wall, and stood for a moment to let his eyes adjust to the gloom. After the stark brilliance of the worklight-flooded repair bay, the green and gray shadows that lay heavy on the clustered ships made it hard for Merlin to pick out individual machines.

His boots shushed over the skin of the deck as he stepped further inside. The nearest destriers had been shoved together, the conduits hooking them to their repair stations stretched across the floor. He stepped over the hazard, placing his hand on a destrier to steady himself. Its living warmth made him smile, as did the kindness of the mechanics who worked on them for pushing them close. Even without ghosts, destriers were herd creatures; they rested easiest when together. The cilia that hung
from each ship rippled gently in a nonexistent breeze and coolant ports wept in the heat of bay. Merlin moved away, avoiding the rivulets that trickled toward the nearest drains.

The Camelot had a full complement of destriers in this bay alone, and the space was large enough that the far wall was lost in darkness. Merlin ambled between the haphazard rows, seeking the fighter without the red underbelly that marked a Knight’s ship. He felt the press of time, didn’t know how long until Morgana would shake free or he would be missed, but he couldn’t bring himself to hurry. There was a hush to the destrier bay while the creatures ‘slept’ around him that he was unwilling to break.

Aithusa found him first and he had no idea which direction she came from. The ghost slipped into his thoughts, into his skin, with the lightest of touches on his mind. The ease with which she formed a deep link startled him, so that when her wordless query lit the space behind his eyes with raw hope and curiosity, he said, “Yes, yes of course,” automatically.

A heartbeat later, when she began to draw from him, he understood what he had just agreed to. He had only a moment to regret his quick response before pain whited out his thoughts. The draw felt like she was searing the flesh from his bones. There was no point of pressure, no easy syphon of power. She simply burnt what she required from him in a single flash.

Merlin decided once he could think again that her method of drawing left a great deal to be desired. “Fuck,” Merlin told the deck, trying to catch his breath from where he rested on hands and knees. He hadn’t even felt himself hit. “Next time maybe warn me.”

Aithusa didn’t reply beyond a faint sense of apology. It took him a bit to focus his eyes. He could feel the sustained connection as hundreds of tiny, prickling threads attached to his arms and torso. Several feet in front of him they tangled together into a cord he could almost see snaking away past the destriers blocking his view. Staggering to his feet, he brushed off his trouser legs and steadied himself with a hand on the nearest machine.

Merlin looked up to find a white dragon peering at him from around the hull. Cautious gratitude flowed through their link as she came around the front of the ship to greet him and he was able to take a look at her in her entirety. She’d done a full draw and, for the first time, he was able to see precisely what that meant. Aithusa was solid, far more solid than Freya had been, and the diffusion of magic from her scales softened her angles, illuminating her surroundings with a faint golden-white glow.

Aithusa was only a little larger than the destrier she lived within, though when she extended her wings to flap them once through the surrounding machines their span was twice again her length. They were massive, glorious things made of skin stretched between bone, batwings drawn large and streamlined so that Merlin could easily imagine her slicing through the sky in pursuit of prey.

The illusion of predatory grace did not last. She tucked her wings awkwardly against her sides and limped forward. Merlin reached out to her. She approached without hesitation, extending her neck to bring her elongated skull close enough for him to touch.

She said nothing when he brushed her scales, only crowded closer to push her head more firmly against his hand. Merlin ran his touch across her brow ridge and down the hollow of her long cheek. The eddies of magic that followed his fingers did not stray far from her conjured hide.

The link hummed with a hunger for affection and she began to coil around him, looping her slender tail around his ankle. Her head was as large as his torso and she nearly knocked him over by pressing
the flat of her broad forehead against his chest. The nearby ships’ bioluminescent stripes washed the iridescent white-gold of her scales with green.

He found himself in the tight circle formed by her body, her good wing half open and crowding against his back to keep him in place.

Her enthusiastic greeting had the secondary effect of cutting him off from the Camelot’s influence. The physical presence of a dragon chased away the spectre of Sigan’s bony, reaching fingers.

“Nice to meet you, Aithusa,” Merlin said. One of her eyes, as large as his balled fist, was level with his face, reflecting the gold of his magic back at him. He felt the wash of her acknowledgement and pleasure at his greeting. A nictitating membrane flicked over the curve of her eye and she let out a noisy sigh that smelled of ozone and brimstone.

He stroked the breadth of her sinuous neck. “You can’t speak, can you?” Her affirmation had him nodding along with her. Patting her side, he crouched down to get a better look at her leg. “You’re hurt.”

She negated his statement with a sharp nudge of her head. This time she did knock him onto his arse, hissing for good measure. He snarled at her in surprise and backed away from her dagger-sized teeth until his shoulders hit her flank.

A link allowed emotion, words, and maybe a bit of sensation. Visions. Colours. Concrete objects and chemical-inspired abstractions. A link didn’t allow for understanding, only interpretation. Aithusa was centuries old and word-mute, and had honed how she communicated until she didn’t need words at all. The explanation for her reaction blossomed, fully formed, into his skull, all emotion and image and sensation within the boundaries of the link’s limitations that formed a more complete picture than if she had spoken at all.

Morgana. Where Freya’s memories had formed around Nimueh, Aithusa’s were filled with a young, painfully skinny Morgana with a feverish light in her eyes. The damage that had caused the injuries was long gone, their only evidence in Aithusa’s imperfect manifestation.

“I didn’t mean to insult either of you,” Merlin said, leaning back against her flank and letting her support his weight.

From the way Aithusa gave him images of Morgana, it was more than clear that while Merlin might be a dragonlord, and Aithusa might revel in the temporary solidity that his power could provide, Morgana was hers. She caught a whiff of his fears and asked after them, wondering that he would be more concerned about one pale human woman when her teeth and talons rested so close to his fragile human skin.

He could not answer her, both because he did not know how to explain Arthur and because of the echo of bootsteps that matched the sudden tempo increase of his heart.

“Aithusa,” he began, hand closing around the ephemeral cord that kept her solid. There was no way to hide this, not unless Aithusa winked out before-

“Aithusa!” The sharp, feminine voice rang in his ears.

Merlin swore beneath his breath. He had come to find the one ghost in the entire fleet who he now understood owed her entire allegiance to the woman who would be ruler in Arthur’s stead. To the ship of a woman who had plotted to kill his father, and him by extension. He should probably have thought of that before his curiosity had brought him to the destrier bay.
The dragon unwrapped herself from Merlin and Camelot’s empty, clawing void returned to banish Merlin’s ability to speak. He pressed his hands to the centre of his chest and wondered if it would help at all to sever the draw. He should. There might be time even now if he wanted to remain undiscovered. Running would be the smart choice.

Instead, the unadulterated joy that flooded through the link made him turn and watch.

Morgana lifted her arms to cradle Aithusa’s massive skull, pressing their foreheads together. She closed her eyes and dragged in an audible breath.

“Aithusa,” she repeated. She sounded close to tears. “My Aithusa.”

The glow of Aithusa’s hide lit Morgana’s sharp features, casting her into relief. Her hair and her ceremonial armour took on a sheen of gold, the black of both fading to living shadow darker than the surrounding gloom. Aithusa seemed to grow graceful beneath Morgana’s hand, curving her body around Morgana’s much as she had done with Merlin.

Beneath Aithusa’s emotions still thrumming through the link was a ghost’s hunger, a wild, unbounded drive for recognition, for possession, for every mote of the choking awe that had caused Morgana to fall silent. It was raw vanity and the desire to be loved to the point of despair. Magic called to magic, like to like, and Merlin felt the echoes of the same hunger within the depths of his returning powers. He thought he felt an identical wild flare of magic from Morgana.

Morgana was torn between not wanting to interrupt and not wanting to be noticed at all.

“How?” Morgana started to ask, opening her eyes and lifting her head from the flat of Aithusa’s. Merlin couldn’t hear what Aithusa ‘said’ to her, but Morgana murmured, “Ah, yes. I do mean who, don’t I?” Her edged question was accompanied by the turn of her head as she sought the answer. Her gaze fell on Merlin.

Merlin stood, gathering every scrap of his power into his hands, ready to mould it to his will if Morgana should prove willing to attack. Through stubborn bravado more than anything, he remained steady on his feet, chin lifted and shoulders squared as he faced her down. “Morgana,” he greeted her, his voice level. Much to his surprise, the longer he faked being unaffected by his fear, the easier it became to fake until he was feeling almost calm.

She kept one hand on the line of her dragon’s jaw as she turned to face him. “Dragonlord,” she greeted him by title, speaking as if she had just found the last and most satisfying piece of a puzzle. Her eyes flicked to Aithusa and then back to him. She widened her stance and turned, narrowing her profile. “I thought all dragonlords dead.”

“Not all of them, despite your best efforts.”

“Since the first question out of you is going to be ‘why’, I might as well skip the posturing,” Morgana said.

Merlin could feel her gathering her potential, but not what her intent might be when she unleashed it. It wasn’t fire. Or, rather, he was pretty sure it wasn’t fire.

She tipped her head back, the long metal lines wrapping her trachea catching in the golden light coming off of Aithusa. “The most effective recruitment method is join or die, but only if you’re willing to follow through.”

“You almost killed my entire ship because he wouldn’t join your little band of- of-” Words failed
him. All he could do was stare and try to keep himself from vibrating apart in anger.

“Interesting that you underestimate the power of a dragonlord,” Morgana said, raking her eyes down his body speculatively. Her look lingered on his twitching fingers, on the jumping muscle in his cheek. Aithusa shoved her head beneath Morgana’s arm. “The magnitude of collateral damage was factored into the task of removing Balinor from our opposition.”

Merlin’s eyes prickled with tears. The tendrils of a spell became visible at the edge of his vision, a subtle spell that she extended in his direction without fanfare. He didn’t know what it would do, but it tasted of decay, of sugar and forged steel. It rolled across his senses like a child’s experience of death in a squashed bug or the found corpse of an unlucky squirrel. The oblivious sweetness of it unnerved him.

He slapped it down on reflex, countering the spell with a surge of raw power enough to burn it away. The contact between his magic and hers caused a burst of pyrotechnics, leaving them both blinking against the afterimages.

Merlin bared his teeth in part grin, part snarl. “You’re going to have to try harder if you’re trying to kill me.”

“Was that not clear? Do I still need to give you the recruitment speech?” Morgana asked, eyes narrowed. She had taken a step back, but otherwise appeared unaffected by the backlash of her shattered spell.

She continued, watching with a sharpness that belied her flippant tone, “I was going to skip it, to be honest. You’re an inept spy and too curious for your own good. You’re also my brother’s newest plaything. It’s a shame, really, to waste you on him, but I can almost smell the loyalty oozing from your ears.” She smiled. “Go ahead, though, tell me your answer isn’t ‘no’ and we can put all this down as a silly misunderstanding.”

He didn’t want to give Morgana a chance to try another spell, not when he didn’t know what any of them did. He might not be as lucky in the raw power vs. trained sorceress department with her next attempt.

Merlin took his eyes from Morgana only briefly. “Aithusa,” he said, pouring every ounce of command into his voice and feeling the shift in his vocal chords. It was instinctive as much as his nonverbal protests to Will had always been, as his moments of anger or fear had brought forth just a hint of the inhuman ghosts whose command was his birthright. When the throat-flaying syllables fell from lips, he was prepared for them.

Like called to like.

He rasped out a string of words that rattled through the deck. Aithusa flared her wings in startled anger. He could feel the betrayal course through her that he would dare order her against her mistress. She hissed and mantled, dipping her head and baring her teeth, but though she had appropriated his magic for her form, the power of command was his.

Rather than obey, she began to fade, her wings leaving motes of magic in the air as she loosed her hold on the draw.

Morgana snapped around, concentration broken. She tried to clutch at Aithusa’s wing and her finger slid through the releasing magic like so much glittering mist. “Stop. Stop this. What did you say to her? What are you doing to her?”
There was nothing he could do to stop her. A ghost was in charge of their own form. Even in a case such as this where keeping her corporeal and yoked to his will would give him a vastly better chance of survival, he wouldn’t want to change that. The moment she disappeared, there would be nothing to stand between Merlin and Morgana’s intent to kill him.

He gave Morgana a weak smile. “She refuses to oppose you.”

Eyes widening, Morgana ordered Aithusa to, “Stop. Immediately.”

The dragon halted her release of power, her body translucent and flickering in and out as waves of magic rippled across her hide. She obeyed Morgana by choice, a fact not lost on Merlin, not when her rage at his order remained undimmed. The gold of her eyes was the only solid part of her as she struggled to retain cohesion without sufficient power. She stared at him, daring him to issue another order like the first.

Merlin’s focus returned to Morgana. She licked her lips, her breathing rapid as she looked from Aithusa to Merlin and back again. He didn’t know why she was hesitating. She had been willing to kill him, after which Aithusa would have winked out regardless. All Morgana had to do was let her go and Merlin would have lost his advantage.

Morgana met his eyes. “Stay,” she told Aithusa. “I will not make another attempt on his life while you are present. Neither will you.”

There was an empty moment of disbelief on Aithusa’s part, mirroring the bafflement on Merlin’s, and then he was slammed once more with Aithusa’s unique style of draw. Merlin doubled over, arms wrapped around his midsection, and keened against the sudden pain. He didn’t white out this time, didn’t lose seconds, but his vision blurred and his lungs burned.

Gulping air, he looked up as soon as he could to make sure that Morgana was keeping her word. She paid him no attention, intent on Aithusa’s reconstruction. He straightened, half-planning to steal away while she watched his magic rebuild her dragon. He had just taken his first step when Morgana whipped a hand out to point at him without looking.

“Arthur trusts you,” she said, giving the now-solid Aithusa a proprietary pat before giving her attention once more to Merlin.

Morgana met his eyes. “Arthur trusts you,” she said, giving the now-solid Aithusa a proprietary pat before giving her attention once more to Merlin.

Merlin tried to reclaim his calm, but he was shaky from Aithusa’s second draw and even if Morgana had elected to keep her dragon at her side, there were a great many other spells she could cast that would not come anywhere near killing him and still be unpleasant. He kept one arm hanging low to protect his belly, balled the other in front of his chest to shield his scars, and gave her a tight smile. “You’re trying to kill him.”

“Does he know?” she asked. She glanced up at Aithusa, patted her shoulder and said, “Forward. This is not a discussion I want to have at a distance.”

It was hard not to back away as she and the dragon approached. Aithusa eyed him balefully. It might not be in her best interest to bite the head off of the one providing her the teeth, but she was thinking very loudly about the prospect to make sure her disapproval was known.
“Does he know that you’re trying to kill him? Yes, yes he does,” Merlin said. Morgana halted several just within arm’s reach. Aithusa loomed above them both. He could smell the brimstone of the dragon’s breath, stronger now with her anger. “I overheard you.”

“What he thinks he knows about me is irrelevant. Does he know about you?”

Morgana reached out to him and he flinched, but her touch was light and entirely mundane. Unwilling to back away as if that would make him lose their confrontation, he let her drag the backs of her nails down the line of his jaw, down his throat over his adam’s apple. She hesitated briefly over his pulse. Aithusa tensed beside them, her muscles bunching as she lowered her head, putting the flat end of her muzzle next to Morgana’s ear. Murmuring something to her dragon, Morgana drew her fingers the rest of the way down to the hollow of Merlin’s throat.

The touch was like enough to their first meeting that Merlin frowned at her. “You threatened me over Arthur. Why would you do that if you want to kill him?”

She pulled away, dropping her hand. “For all you know, appearances. Answer the question. Does he know?”

“He knows,” Merlin said. “You can’t blackmail me with the knowledge, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Letting out her breath, she nodded and turned her face away, the flat of her palm still firmly on Aithusa’s neck. After a moment, she placed her forehead against her dragon’s scales and stood, silent. Aithusa dipped her head to put it between him and Morgana and glowered, thinking pointedly about crunching bone and grinding flesh. He shot the dragon a sour look.

Merlin could probably zap Morgana dead, Aithusa or no Aithusa. He had the raw power, proximity, and the element of surprise. Unfortunately, he was faced with the same dilemma as with Kanen; he only had the one spell that he knew his magic would obey to harm her. He didn’t want to use his one spell. Not on Morgana. She was Arthur’s sister and Aithusa’s pilot, and that counted for something.

There was the possibility he could sucker punch her while she wasn’t prepared, maybe, for all the good it would do. Pilot-specialised Knights were trained in combat even if they rarely used their hand-to-hand skills outside of barfights.

He would not choose her death. Not here, not now.

Morgana appeared to be thoroughly ignoring him, which seemed odd after casting a death spell in his direction. He shuffled his feet, deliberately loud, and the noise recalled Morgana to herself. She glanced back over her shoulder. Whatever she saw in his eyes made her turn back to face him and study him for a long moment. He could see the creases that pain had wrought at the corners of her eyes, across the arc of her brow, and wondered at her decision to mod herself.

When she spoke, she spoke quietly. “This type of convergence is very unlikely to happen again.”

As conversation-starters went, it was a bit opaque. Merlin drew his eyebrows together and tilted his head, squinting. “Come again?”

“All the pieces are in place, arranged just-so. If each individual life, each flame, is instead a mathematically described function, what are the odds that they would all meet at a single point more than once in an infinite plane?”

“Depends on the function, obviously. Linear among linear gives you crap odds, but if they’re all the right sort of cyclical, it’s only a matter of time.” Merlin began, only to stop when Morgana raised her

“As am I. Arthur’s not.”

They stared at each other. Over their heads, Aithusa rustled her wings in agitation.

Merlin shook his head, pressing a hand to his forehead as her words sank in and resonated with his magic. He had memories of people with Morgana’s voice, her face, her temper, and they bubbled to the surface now with his returning magic to give him irrelevant details of lives that no longer applied to either of them. She watched him closely.

He said, “That’s what you meant before. How we both don’t know each other in exactly the same way.”

A calm settled over her and she inclined her head, acknowledging his point.

“Why tell me?” Merlin asked finally. “That Arthur- that this might be it if anything goes wrong?”

Morgana was silent for long enough that Aithusa whuffed a query. She smiled up at the dragon and said, “If I am not going to kill you, then it’s something you need to know.”

Merlin digested her words, lifting his gaze from Morgana to Aithusa. He couldn’t look at her while he asked, “Do you remember me? From before?” He held his breath. There was a lot of ‘before’ to remember, reconciliations and conflict and everything in between. It was too big for Merlin to remember more than bits and pieces, now that he could remember. Sharing it would make him feel a little less crazy.

“No,” she said. “I do not.” She sounded almost sympathetic, and her voice rang a touch of something magic that caused his oath to tingle in sympathy.

He couldn’t decide if he were relieved or disappointed as he let out his breath. Gathering himself, he dropped his gaze to Morgana to find her regarding him with sharp amusement. “What?”

“Just because I don’t remember doesn’t mean I don’t know.”

Merlin’s cheeks warmed. Whatever (quite literal) ancient history she was referring to, he didn’t want to know. Seizing on a change of topic, he said the first thing that came to mind. “Don’t kill Arthur.”

He had intended to make a demand. It came out as a plea. He caught himself before he took a step toward her. He might refuse to back away, but he did not want to be any closer to Morgana than necessary.

“Excellent segue,” Morgana said. She bobbed her head in mock-approval. Aithusa caught her mood and similar amusement bubbled through his connection with the dragon.

Maybe it hadn’t been the best of conversational ploys, but being laughed at for this particular topic caused a slow curl of anger in Merlin’s belly. “You don’t have to kill him.”

“I don’t? Really?” Her sweetly mocking tone never changed. “But I aim to be Queen, Merlin.”

“Without a claim, you can’t,” Merlin said, a little desperate and a lot frustrated. “All the magic or - or troops or allies in high places won’t make the other rulers accept you. You’d be killing Arthur for nothing.”

“Is that all?” Morgana said, folding her arms and leaning back against Aithusa’s broad chest. “If
bloodline is all that legitimises Arthur’s claim, and I daresay that it’s barbaric that there are so few criteria, then I have as much claim as he does.”

Merlin blinked at her.

Her smile never wavered. Almost offhand, she mused, “I suppose it is common knowledge that Arthur is Uther’s only acknowledged offspring. I’m merely glad that my father does not have to witness the genetic proof of my mother’s infidelity in such a… public fashion. It will make me Queen, but dying with his illusions intact was a kindness, don’t you think?” Morgana tapped her lower lip with a finger. “Honestly, the only reason Arthur’s claim is greater is that he’s older. Which doesn’t have to be a problem if one gets creative.”

“Does Arthur know?” Merlin asked. He was surprised and… not surprised at all, really. Morgana had said that they were a vanishingly rare convergence, each of their lives lined up just-so with Albion’s fate between them.

“I don’t think so,” she said, expression evaluating. After a moment, she added, “You’re welcome to tell him.”

Merlin balled his fists. “To taunt him?”

He couldn’t read her expression. The only inkling of what she might be thinking came through Aithusa, who had shifted from her previous amusement to a mixture of impatience and frustration.

Morgana tilted her head and said, “If you like.”

Aithusa’s frustration seemed to be feeding Merlin’s. He ground his teeth at her answer and gritted out, “He calls you sister. Doesn’t that mean something to you?”

The laugh that followed his words was loose and open, like he’d asked a question she hadn’t expected, and Morgana covered her mouth after it escaped her. Her expression could not seem to settle between astonishment and pity as she said, “Yes, he does, and while it may seem to you that I call him brother out of irony, or mockery, or some other insincerity, I still call him brother.”

Merlin flexed his jaw. “It doesn’t seem to mean much to you.”

Morgana’s laughter fled, the hint of a smile that had crept up between them dropping from her face. Aithusa chirred at her, a light sound for such a massive creature, but Morgana did not acknowledge her concern. She simply stared at Merlin until her smile returned, filled with dark amusement. “I did threaten your life if you hurt him.”

“For appearances,” Merlin said, but he narrowed his eyes.

She gave him a one-shouldered shrug, arms still folded, and said nothing.

In the silence that stretched between them, only Aithusa moved. She extended her wings again, sweeping them through the nearby ships, jostling Morgana where she leaned against her. When she resettled herself, curling her tail about her haunches, her tail began to flick to match the impatience that Merlin could feel building through the link.

Merlin didn’t want to stand there until the draw ended and Morgana tried again to magic him dead. “So-” he asked. “What are you going to do about me?”

With a sigh, Morgana straightened, pushing off from Aithusa. “I’m going to have to think about you.”
“Can I at least get a hint?” Merlin asked.

Morgana gave him a flat look. “No.”

“Can’t blame me for trying.”

Her expression softened. “No,” she said, bringing one hand up to rub the bridge of her nose, running a finger across the metal arcs of her oculars. “What I’m going to do now, however, is a little experiment. You are going to leave under terms of whatever our mutual non-aggression pact entails for the moment and we’ll get a good chance to see how long Aithusa remains before whatever it is that you do as a dragonlord fades. After that, you will continue to repair the Kilgharrah and fuck my brother, though good luck peeling him away from the bridge. If I intend to kill you, I will politely inform you and we will deal with it from there.”

Merlin brought up a hand in objection and glared at Aithusa when she bared her teeth to warn him away from doing anything stupid. “Do I get a say in this?”

Morgana looked at him. “Are you going to try and kill me first?”

The question left Merlin cold. He didn’t answer right away, looking instead past Morgana, past Aithusa to the rows upon rows of sleeping destriers. He should, maybe, but if he couldn’t bring himself to try and kill her here with her own attempt fresh in his mind, he wasn’t going to be able to premeditate it. “No,” he admitted quietly.

“Then run along.” She said it with a dismissive wave of her hand, but she accompanied it with a stare so intense that he checked to see if she’d cast another spell while he’d not been paying attention. She hadn’t. He backed away and she never took her eyes off him. Aithusa watched him go with a mixture of regret, satisfaction, and a so-tiny-it-was-barely-there dollop of gratitude.

It was a strategic retreat. Merlin let the cord that connected him to Aithusa spool out as he picked his way back toward the bay entrance. Escalating the confrontation now would damage people, ships, and Merlin didn’t want that. Pausing at the door, hand over the access panel, he frowned back the way he came. He could see the soft glow of Aithusa in the darkness as she lit the bay like false dawn. The dragon had released his thoughts to leave only the draw between them. He hadn’t known that was possible.

By the time the draw on his magic finally faded, he was back on the Kilgharrah and curled up in the corner of Arthur’s bed, knees tucked under his chin. Arthur found him there, shivering as the adrenaline left his system, and wrapped him in a blanket. Merlin couldn’t tell him what happened, only that it had been Morgana.
“Nothing she said will make a difference in planning against her,” Merlin said, clutching the blanket Arthur had given him. His magic was back where it should be, only slightly diminished by Aithusa’s draw, but he still felt odd and hollow. Arthur sat next to him on the end of the bed, his broad hand in the centre of Merlin’s back rubbing circles between his shoulder blades.

He almost expected the oath to flare, but Arthur did not flinch. Merlin relaxed by degrees.

“If you’re certain. She scared you.”

“Morgana is scary,” Merlin said. The shivers, however, were less because of fear that Morgana might decide to kill him and more fear of himself. He had been prepared to bring his power down upon her, whether or not he’d chosen to refrain.

He’d been tempted to say yes when she’d asked if he was capable of the first strike.

“Morgana is scary,” Arthur repeated. He leaned in to give Merlin a kiss on the cheek. “You can tell me when you’re ready?”

Merlin nodded, glad for the blanket and for the warmth of Arthur’s mods through the fabric.

Arthur’s oculars glowed a faint blue. “I hate to do this, but- do you mind if I nap? I feel like I haven’t slept for a week.”

“Sorry. Already initiated the system flush. I don’t think I could move if I wanted to.”

Merlin thumped him on the side and wriggled into a more comfortable position. The blue light gradually faded from Arthur’s eyes and they fluttered closed.

His metal arm rested heavy across Merlin’s belly, his warm torso pressed against his side. It was enough to soothe the shivers, but not enough to let him sleep.

**

Merlin dropped his spanner. The light in the corridor was a pale green just bright enough to see the panels he was releasing, but not bright enough to see where it had fallen. He fished blindly with one
hand, the other trying to keep open the bony curve of an access panel while a web of misplaced ligament tried to snap it shut.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when his fingers met human - rather than ship - flesh and someone cleared their throat.

“Fuck,” Merlin flailed away from the unexpected person. The panel snapped shut with a reverberating clang and he fell hard onto his tail bone. Scrabbling around, ignoring the pain, he peered up into the gloom to find Gaius holding out the spanner.

“You seem jumpy,” Gaius said, releasing the spanner when Merlin reached for it. “You’ve been looking over your shoulder every thirty seconds for as long as I’ve been standing here.”

Dusting himself off, Merlin stood. “How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough that I should have been spotted. It’s too dark down here.”

Gaius’s words caused a ripple of anxiety down Merlin’s spine. He pointed toward the panel with his spanner. “Help me, and then I’ll have a moment to talk. I don’t quite have enough hands and I don’t want to…” He wiggled his fingers. A beat later, he looked over his shoulder at the empty corridor behind him.

“No one anywhere near,” Gaius reassured him.

I am keeping watch, the Kilgharrah added.

Stepping forward to hold the panel open for Merlin, Gaius had to juggle a substantial book from hand to elbow before he could grasp the edge. It took Merlin a moment to snip each of the ligaments. The last one shredded beneath his clippers and the panel slipped from Gaius’s hold. Falling to the deck, it gouged out a substantial chunk of the ship’s flesh and began to well ichor. Both Gaius and Merlin regarded the wound with dismay.

Merlin would deal with it later. “Good enough. What’s that?” He pointed to the book beneath Gaius’s arm as the Kilgharrah laughed at him. The floor rippled beneath them, rapid growth sealing over the gouge and forming a small scar.

“Spellbook,” Gaius said, blinking at the movement, picking up his feet to peer at the deck below. He sounded understandably distracted as he elaborated, “Basic control. Basic spells. Basic theory. It’s for you to keep.” He held it out in front of him, pulling his gaze from the deck, and gave Merlin a slight smile. The book itself was bound much as the history book in Gaius’s collection had been. The cover was wrinkled leather stamped with the image of a tree, overlaid with a triskelion. Merlin could smell the must of ageing paper from where he stood.

Merlin looked from book to Gaius and back. “Can we look at it now?”

Letting his outstretched arm drop several inches, Gaius gave him a puzzled look. “You’re on duty.”

“Teach me one spell, some sort of control, anything. We can try the kinetic one again…”

“And set your ship on fire?” Gaius pulled back completely, his expression growing more worried. “Not that I’m unwilling to teach you, but here and now?”

Merlin resisted the urge to look over his shoulder. “Please?”

They tried again with a thread pulled from the bottom edge of Gaius’s tunic. Crouching in the access
tunnel in the pale green light, Gaius held out the string for Merlin to inspect.

“Remember intent.” Gaius waited until Merlin nodded. “Now, repeat after me.”

“After me,” Merlin echoed, earning him a flat look. “Sorry.”

Gaius shook his head. “Sciftan.”

Fixing his mind on getting the bit of string to move just a tiny bit, Merlin forgot that the last time he’d tried the spell he’d been behind a barrier that blocked his reflexive magic. “Sciftan.” His magic felt his intent and interpreted as it saw fit.

The string moved a tiny bit in the direction of Gaius’s palm. The thread sunk through his skin like dropping a pebble into oil.

With a hiss, Gaius yanked the thread free before Merlin could register what he had done and spat a severing spell that caught Merlin’s attempt at ‘sciftan’ and snapped it in twain.

The unravelling backlash caught Merlin by surprise and knocked him onto his arse. He stared at Gaius in wide-eyed incomprehension. All around them, conduits rattled in behind their panels as the Kilgharrah shuddered from the wild redirection of magic.

Merlin, baffled, tried to make sense of what he had done. “What happened?”

Gaius, seated similarly on the warm deck, rubbed at his hand and gave Merlin a sour look. “Reminded me that I should stand behind ballistic-proof glass while I’m teaching you even the simplest of spells.” He snorted when Merlin sucked in his breath in alarm. “You combined a touch of telekinesis with a hefty dollop of biomodification.”

Swearing, Merlin pulled his knees up beneath his chin. “That takes a lot of power, doesn’t it.”

Gaius nodded wordlessly, his lips a tight line.

“What happened?” Merlin began, watching Gaius’s face for his reaction. When he showed nothing but neutral interest, Merlin continued. “He says I have the potential for even more magic, that I’m still recovering. I don’t know how. I’ve never had this much potential before. Ever. Why now? Why me?”

“Do you want my best guess?” Gaius asked. “I cannot give you more than speculation.”

“Anything.”

Then I would say you’re finding your adult strength. That normally you would have had time to grow into your power, exercise it a little at a time, but that any one of the extraordinary circumstances you’ve found yourself in, for lack of a better word, damaged your natural growth. Or, perhaps not your natural growth, but the natural protections and filters surrounding your power.”

Merlin thunked his head lightly against his knees. “So you’re saying I broke my natural control mechanisms.”

Gaius winced and nodded.
“Fuck.”

“Every student goes through a time when their talent outpaces their control. It’s just a matter of scale.”

“Scale.” Merlin was not particularly reassured. The heat of the under decks felt especially oppressive, the green light wavering and producing shadows that made Merlin wet his dry lips. “Let’s hope I can get a better handle on myself before ‘scale’ becomes even more unmanageable, yeah?”

Looking from his hand to Merlin, Gaius nodded. “Let us hope.”

**

Curling up in Arthur’s cabin, Merlin held the spellbook in his lap and read as if his life depended on it. Sleep dragged at his eyelids, weighed down his limbs, and every page felt as if it took all his strength to turn. The words blurred before his eyes, but he had been reading the same four lines over and over for long enough that he had them memorised.

He let his eyes close as he drifted off to sleep. He moved only when Arthur pulled the book from his hand and nudged him into a more comfortable sleeping position.

**

Gaius stayed on the other side of the room. Arthur’s cabin was just big enough that Merlin could sit on the far side of the bed, Gaius in the standard issue desk chair, and there would be enough physical space between them that Merlin’s attempts to cast were more-or-less safe for his teacher.

“Are you sure you want to try sciftan again?” Gaius asked. He leaned with one elbow on the desk, his cheek on his fist, and watched Merlin over the tops of his glasses. “So far you’ve set a ball of fluff on fire, shoved a thread through human flesh, lit a thread gold - which was very pretty, I might add, made a thread disappear, tied a thread in a knot shaped like a triskelion, created a second identical copy of a thread, and - last but not least - moved a piece of thread precisely two inches to the left.”

“I succeeded once,” Merlin said. “Maybe I need-”

“You need to focus your thoughts, not your magic. Your magic is responding to every errant thought that crosses your mind.”

“It won’t obey me.”

“Give it a reason. Tell it what you want.”

Merlin let his breath out in a long hiss and dug his fingers into his hair.

“Tell you what,” Gaius said before Merlin could vent his frustrations. “Let’s work on control another way. I’ll cast something. You see if you can manipulate it. It’s one of the very first basic exercises in cooperative magic that young druids learn.”

Nodding because any words that came from his mouth at the moment would be foul beyond belief, Merlin dropped his arms and tried to clear his head.

The words Gaius spoke sent a tingle down Merlin’s spine and nudges at the very oldest of the memories swirling in his skull. A small dragon created, seemingly, from embers, flew in a wide circle above the bed. It’s wings extended, it came near Merlin as part of its arc, and without thinking Merlin
put a hand up to feel for it.

“Why this spell?” Merlin asked. He held his hand up, fingers spread, and let the tiny dragon just barely skim the skin of his upturned palm. “This is my spell.”

“It’s an old spell,” Gaius said. “Reach for it when it comes back around.”

Merlin closed his eyes and extended his senses up along his arm and beyond, his magic wrapping around the tiny dragonform as it performed its lazy glide across the room and back.

“It’s a tight spell, no wasted syllables, no wasted intent,” Merlin said. His instinct on how it had originally been constructed resonated with his memories. “It doesn’t do anything, not really.”

Gaius hummed his approval. “A spell can sometimes be meant to entertain.”

“I can-” Merlin began, opening his eyes so he could see the spell. “Here.”

He pulled the spell from Gaius’s control. Some part of him heard the gasp when he did, but for the most part he was oblivious. The dragon coiled into his control, breaking from its simple flight pattern and coming to rest on his outstretched hand. Its tiny eyes, tiny wings, were so much like Aithusa if Aithusa were whole. His memory of her movements gave the small dragon life, and it dipped its head to give him a baleful look.

“Merlin!” Gaius shouted, loud in the small cabin. His call broke Merlin’s focus and the embers of the dragon scattered, burning out before they reached even the blanket on the bed below. He watched them fall. Studying Merlin, he then asked, “Now that I’ve got your attention, what did you do?”

“It’s my spell,” Merlin repeated, feeling somewhat dazed. His sense of confusion only grew when a satisfied smirk spread across Gaius’s face. “What?”

“I think I’ve figured out how to teach your rudimentary control.”

**

“Balance!” Gaius shouted. “Control!”

Merlin winced, hunching in on himself and bringing his hands up to protect the ember dragon that hovered before his chest. Unfortunately, it wasn’t a physical threat he needed to protect the spell from, but his own loss of focus.

The padded stick came down on Merlin’s head with a solid thwump and the ember dragon exploded into spark.

They both watched it fade. Gaius said, “Surprise is still knocking your control loose. You need to be able to hold the spell without faltering.”

“I know, I know.” Merlin scrubbed at his face. This time the embers had scorched his shirt. At least he could blame the damage on his work. Which he needed to get back to. “Can we try again later, Gaius?”

Gaius dusted at the front of his own tunic, surveying the scorch marks. “I think we have to.”

**

For ten minutes, Merlin had been seated in the middle of Arthur’s bed, holding the ember dragon while Gaius puttered off to find them both something to eat. The back of his neck was prickling with
nerves, even though Arthur’s cabin was probably the safest place aboard any ship in the fleet for him to be practising. Footsteps sounded in the corridor at regular intervals. Gaius had been gone a long time.

The door slid open without warning and a helmeted man wielding a short stick leapt through the door to shout, “Now I’ve got you!”

Merlin yelped and scrambled back up the bed, hitting the bulkhead hard with his shoulder. He panted, hand outstretched, trying to come up with some sort of spell that wouldn’t damage the person but still let him escape the ship, until he recognised Will beneath the helmet.

He swore long, loud, and colourfully, leaving Will in stitches.

“You scared me half to death, you wanker,” Merlin dragged himself off the bed one handed. “Did Gaius put you up to this? I’ll poison your tea, I’ll—” he stopped, frowning at Will, whose laughter had quieted to be replaced by a spreading grin.

Will, for his part, just pointed with his stick.

Looking down, Merlin grinned at the ember dragon he was still cradling against his chest.

**

This repair was proving to be particularly nasty. It was an impact bruise combined with a system’s knot with the added bonus of a rip in the magic that made up the ghost of the Kilgharrah. The rip wouldn’t fuse until the system knot came untangled, but the rip was part of the reason the system knot even existed. Merlin would be gratified that his ability to read what magic was trying to do had grown if it hadn’t grown because of ridiculous like this.

The Kilgharrah’s focus lurked, metaphorically, over his shoulder. Both them them were prodding at the system tangle to see if they could find the end of the knot. Merlin was having more success, but only just. He found a loose section that might respond to basic mechanical coercion and reached up to try his hand.

A small sound to the side caused him to glance down the corridor to where Morgana was standing, her arms folder, watching him thoughtfully.

Merlin stumbled away from her, all thought of repair banished by her sudden appearance. His magic, sensing a threat, focused on her in a concentrated maelstrom of power. Golden motes coalesced from thing air to speed toward her. They stopped a hair’s breadth above her skin. She didn’t move, didn’t blink, her oculars inert and her eyes pale green. They reflected the gold light of his magic, but held no inner light of their own.

His magic surrounded her, held her safe from his own reflexive response like he’d defended the ember dragon spell. He let out his breath and the gold disappeared from the air, leaving the corridor dark by comparison.

“That wasn’t a killing spell,” Morgana said conversationally, in motion now that the danger was gone. She leaned against the bulkhead.

Swallowing hard, Merlin nodded.

“You do good work.”

Merlin’s heart rate was slowly returning to normal. “Thank you?”
“I might be able to find you a spell to speed the process, but I cannot promise.”

“Oh,” Merlin said. “That- would be nice of you.”

Her smile was bright in the low green light of the corridor. “Good luck.”

Turning, she stepped away down the corridor only to be swallowed by the gloom before she had gone half a dozen steps. No wonder he hadn’t seen her.

The faint current of Kilgharrah’s laughter rumbled up through the background of the ship’s emotions.

*You jumped a least two feet into the air. That was beautiful.*

“Nobody died. Remind me to thank Gaius.”

*She was just standing there, not even preparing a spell.*

Merlin rolled his eyes and went back to his work, ignoring the Kilgharrah’s amusement. He was too relieved that he’d managed that much control to tell the ship to shut up.

**

Gaius and Merlin stood in front of a jagged rip in the side of one of the gas exchange pumps. The rip, despite the best efforts of three previous repairpersons, refused to close. There were dozens more of these anomalous breakages and only one Merlin. He sagged against the nearest console and debated just sitting down in the middle of the deck. Gaius would understand.

“I think Lucan knows about me,” he said, regarding the rip in the pump. The magic was all tangled up inside of the rip like a neglected ball of electrical cords. It would take ages and ages to untangle.

“Is that so?”

“He’s stopped talking about me to Arthur. And even with how long it takes to fix the magic damage, he has been assigning me every impossible problem that crosses his plate.”

“He’s a smart man,” Gaius commented. He pointed at the edge of the rip. “Maybe try there?”

Merlin squinted. “You sure?”

“I’ll stand back.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” Merlin pushed himself upright and went to prod at the rip. The pulse of tangled magic snapped at his fingers. He sighed and rolled up his sleeves so they wouldn’t catch fire like they had one too many times, and dug his hands through the rip into the empty space behind. Magic skittered up his arms.

With Gaius’s helpful suggestions, it only took them the better part of an hour to repair the damage. Gaius still hadn’t managed to find repair spells, even in his encyclopedic memory mod, but Merlin broke his personal record for the repair anyway. Lucan’s look of surprise when he came back for another assignment was well worth the failed attempt to find a spell to speed their efforts.

**

The frozen flesh affected by Kanen’s lightning spell stymied Merlin. He stared at the patch on the hull, glanced over his shoulder to make sure that no on was watching him, and let his magic flow outward. His connection with the Kilgharrah let him feel the contact as pain on the skin just above
Sometimes it felt like the work he was doing was akin to taking a hammer and just pounding on the delicate magical workings that held the ship together until they gave up and fixed themselves.

Pumping a little more power into the hull and making sure his eyes were hidden, he worried over his lack of finesse. His potential was still growing, and despite his control lessons and his successes with the ember dragon, the more magic he found at his disposal, the more unwieldy his hammer became.

The hull rippled beneath him, grey skin flushing to a healthier red as the paralysis dissolved beneath his artless onslaught of power. He breathed a sigh of relief and released his magic, looking around once more. None of the other working mechanics were paying him any attention at all. Or if they were, none showed it.

So far, the risk had been worth the reward; he was making progress. Little by little, he was making progress.

**

Gwaine showed up dressed in his on-duty uniform with a grin and an invitation to lunch. The invitation was for somewhere on the Camelot, which gave Merlin pause, but with repairs going so well, the Kilgharrah being kind of an arse because Lucan had a team overhauling one of his engines, and Arthur having some sort of official hush-hush thing he couldn’t even tell Merlin about that had kept him off the ship since the ceremony, Merlin was feeling a smidge antsy to get out of the close corridors aboard the galley. He agreed without thinking, so pleased to see Gwaine again after the pilot’s return to duty after his previous week’s leave that he didn’t consider who might also be in attendance.

Gwaine conducted him to the pilot’s private green room on the outer curve of the Camelot’s hull, as far from Sigan and the scar as it was possible to get without going into the underdecks. He talked the whole way, complaining about his destrier’s lack of the newest upgrades, so that when he opened the door and ushered Merlin inside, it took Merlin a handful of seconds to figure out he wasn’t hallucinating Morgana’s presence.

She gave him a little wave and slung her arm across the back of Mordred’s chair. Merlin stared until Gwaine clapped him on the shoulder and steered him in to meet the entire squad. The room was crowded, just a tiny staging area set aside for any and all of the Kilgharrah’s pilot-specialised Knights. Merlin felt more claustrophobic from the way Morgana followed him with her eyes than he did from having ten people in a room with four chairs and barely enough space to move between them.

Gwaine introduced everyone with a flourish and a comment in Merlin’s ear. Elena, squad leader, she of the skullplates and mad skills, with the most unique destrier in the entire fleet. Bertrand, head of the B-quad, with spiked salt and pepper hair and a lined, round face, but still as hale as any of the younger pilots. Derian, a foot and a half taller than Merlin with a squashed nose and sausage-sized fingers, who flew a heavy destrier and formed the squad’s anchor. Ewan and Radnor who were - Merlin was informed - entirely inseparable.

Radnor gave Merlin a shy smile that caused Ewan to tug xir ponytail. Radnor’s corn-silk hair was by far the longest in the room and xe was squeezed in with Ewan in one of the chairs, pale blond arms wrapped around Ewan’s waist. Montague, oldest besides Bertrand, was actually asleep, head tipped back, displaying the cascade of freckles down his neck, red against his dark skin. When Merlin was introduced, his eyes popped open mid-snore so he could see who he was waving at, soldier-alert and assessing Merlin automatically with a thorough once-over.
Memory told Merlin he knew more than half of them from different times and different places, just quick flickers of thought that showed a smile or a word, something to orient him, help him to remember who they were in the here-and-now. His recall had improved to the point of nuisance, part of the new heights of magic he was reaching with every passing day. Most of his memories were junk, garbage data of situations and lives that held no applicable relevance to the present, like how Elena had once delighted in introducing him to her racing stables where every reptiloid had had eight legs and all races took place hundreds of feet up in massive trees.

Useless memories, for the most part, of people whose personalities deviated in tiny, surprising enough ways based on the lives they had lived that it was easier for Merlin to simply forget. It was surprising enough when they acted like themselves.

Last, Gwaine introduced Mordred. Mordred, who Merlin already knew. Mordred, whose hair Morgana ruffled with her eyes locked on Merlin. Mordred, who Morgana’s stare told him was more important than scraps of memory might suggest. He felt the bottom drop out of his stomach when Morgana smiled sweetly and her eyes shimmered gold without the accompanying lights of her oculars.

It was a subtle spell and nothing he was prepared to defend against. It was a mental nudge, a whisper of the name Mordred in his head that unlocked a complicated flood of images.

He thought he’d get used to it eventually, how his magic responded to each new person he met with a who and a why, but this was different. Some of the images were static, the wrong colour, and decidedly not his. He was forced to sort through them all, building a picture of the Mordred who had come before. There was enough to balance the scales between them, terms of truce reached over and over as the progression of actions pushed one in particular further and further into Mordred’s past.

Merlin’s eyes widened as his gaze lifted from Mordred to Morgana and her small, secret smile. In among all the rest was one act of kindness that elevated Mordred beyond the reoccurring faces in Merlin’s dreams. One request granted. One barrier established that had persisted through death and beyond and had chosen only his present life to sunder and release everything back to him. He looked from Morgana to Mordred’s cheerful grin as he waved hello and back to Morgana.

I forgot, he mouthed in her direction. Her lips quirked in a suppressed smile.

Elena was saying, “Mordred here was just telling us about his leave on the Essetir before he was assigned to the Kilgharrah.”

The grin on Mordred’s face was accentuated by his blush. “What she means to say is that I was complaining about the food.”

“You were not.” Elena’s teasing tone had Mordred blushing harder. Derian, sitting on the floor in front of Elena’s chair with his back on her knees, snorted. “He went down into the underdecks to find one of the more interesting places to trade. Anything and everything on the Essetir, yeah? I’m surprised they didn’t just eat him up.”

Gwaine wrapped an arm around Merlin’s shoulders and gave him a squeeze. “Or offer him something delectable.” He indicated Mordred with a completely unsubtle lift of his chin and a waggle of his eyebrows. “The selection down there is, I must say, brilliant. And enthusiastic.”

“I didn’t find anything like that,” Mordred protested. “That’s not what I went for.”

There was no other word for it. Gwaine leered, leaning past Merlin. “That’s because you didn’t go with me.”
The blush put on Mordred’s cheeks by Elena didn’t dim, but he ducked his head at Gwaine’s
innuendo and peered up at him through his lashes. Merlin blinked up at Morgana just in time to see
her roll her eyes ceiling-ward and shake her head.

Elena had covered her mouth to hide her laughter and spoke through her fingers. “He’s just a
sheltered bitty baby, isn’t he?”

Morgana answered, her tone dry, looking right at Merlin as she spoke to the rest of the pilots. “The
Hallowcay is one of the mostly-biosphere bastion-class ships. Lots of trees. Not a lot of anything
that you’d be likely to find in sludge of the Essetir’s underdecks.”

The name of Mordred’s home ship caught Merlin by surprise. His eyes widened. Morgana shrugged
one shoulder and left Merlin to draw his own conclusions.

There was some signal from either Elena or Bertrand and all of the pilots stood to shuffle out toward
the nearest mess. Everyone buckled flaps and rearranged their holsters, setting their uniforms to rights
before they left their informal surroundings. The ones who had done sword training with the ground
Knights adjusted their weapons to keep them out of the way of knees and elbows, and Mordred’s
fingers lingered on the butt of his pistol like it wasn’t quite used to its presence yet as he stood and
squeezed between Derian and Elena toward the door.

Gwaine pulled Merlin around and shoved him toward Morgana as she unfolded herself in one
elegant movement and held out her arm for his. For his part, Gwaine claimed Mordred and
proceeded to flirt so outrageously that Merlin was partially convinced that Gwaine himself
represented some sort of bizarre hazing ritual that the other pilots were content to stand back and
enjoy. Even more hilariously, Mordred seemed to be taking to it, his embarrassment more that his
new squad was there to witness his halting attempts at flirting back than discomfort with Gwaine’s
ostentation.

Merlin linked arms with Morgana with some trepidation, but her eyes remained resolutely not gold
and the very limited range he allowed his senses now that he knew what lurked suggested that her
magic remained quiescent for the moment. She patted his arm.

“Very brave of you to leave the safety of your ship,” she said, letting them drop back from the main
cluster so that no one would be likely to overhear.

Shrugging, Merlin asked, “Decided whether or not you’re going to kill me?” Her hand was warm on
his arm, and he could feel the faint thrum of an arm mod beneath the sleeve of her on-duty uniform.

Morgana laughed under her breath. “If you must know, I still haven’t.”

At the undercurrent of amusement in her voice Merlin made a small rasp of displeasure.

“I know waiting is horrid,” she said. “And I am sympathetic.”

In the grand scheme of things, waiting for Morgana to pass sentence on him was not the most
torturous wait he’d ever experienced. He wrinkled his nose. “If you really were sympathetic, you
wouldn’t be thinking of killing me.”

“That’s a thought.” The smile never left her face, but her tone shut down the conversation more
effectively than an order.

The main group of pilots had outdistanced them while they had been talking. Morgana sped their
steps until they were once more at the rear of the group.
What speculation Merlin had about Mordred’s origin aboard the Hallowcay was dispelled when Mordred’s voice found its way directly into Merlin’s head. *Greetings, Emrys. It is good to finally meet you,* he said with all apparent sincerity.

Merlin frowned and leaned into Morgana’s space to ask, “How do I… telepathy?”

“How do you survive this long on the fringe I shall never know,” she said. Her explanation took all of fifteen seconds and left Merlin feeling incredibly stupid.

He sought the resonance of his magic and, extending his senses in time with the pulse, he ventured a polite, *Hello?* in Mordred’s general direction. *I-* He abandoned whatever else he was going to say and went with a simple, *Thank you. Thank you so much.*

Several people ahead of them, Mordred turned around and beamed back at Merlin. *You’re welcome and I’m sorry.*

Don’t apologise until you’ve done something you haven’t atoned for, Merlin responded, letting out his breath in a faint huff that wasn’t quite laughter and wasn’t quite a sob.

Mordred’s grin brightened and Merlin couldn’t help smiling in response. Gwaine said something into his ear and Mordred faced forward again with a laugh.

Morgana kept hold of Merlin until they reached the mess, her fingers curled lightly around his forearm, and didn’t comment when he ran the back of his thumb across his lower eyelids. Lunch went far better than Merlin had feared. He ended up eating, even with Morgana right there, both studying him and keeping one ear on the conversation so that she might put her sharp tongue to use when opportunities presented themselves.

The meal was an educational experience, the lessons of which lingered with Merlin over the next couple of days. For all that Merlin was their guest and Elena their leader, Morgana was the fulcrum upon which their social dynamics pivoted. It was, for Merlin, like watching a Queen’s court in miniature, or like watching Arthur interact with his Knights. Elena and the rest of the pilots paid her deference in subtle ways. Silence when she spoke. Looking to her for reaction when Gwaine said something particularly egregious. Orienting their bodies and their attention toward her at the table’s far end.

The group laughed as easily with Morgana as they did with Elena, but it slowly become clear to him that all, even the older pilots, regarded Morgana with a faint sense of awe. All except for Mordred, upon whom Morgana turned smiles that had lost all their sharp edges. Merlin thought she had replaced her usual bite with a touch of sadness, but trying to decipher her expression was interrupted time and again by someone elbowing him in the ribs and starting in on a story Merlin was pretty sure was only half true.

Merlin asked after the awe.

Gwaine gave him an amused look and said, “She recovered from the scariest fucking collapse in the black I’ve ever had the displeasure of witnessing, restored a centuries-old destrier by hand while grounded, and then seized a knighthood so she could fly it. She’s an ambassador for Camelot, has her name attached to half a dozen inter-Kingdom trade treaties already, and even Elena will admit
she’s not bad behind a yoke.” Gwaine’s amusement turned suggestive. “Why? Looking to upgrade from Arthur?”

Laughing, Merlin gave his denials and acknowledged the point. After that, however, it was clearer to Merlin why Arthur had faith in her ambition.

By the time Gwaine escorted Merlin back to the Kilgharrah, he had learnt more about the respective sex lives (or deliberate lack thereof) of every single one of the pilots. He was also a little boggled by Morgana’s ability to silence the entire mess table with a well-placed comment that left them all fumbling for their wits.

**

Merlin woke just in time to hear the portal iris shut, and he propped himself up on his elbows to peer into the dark. Slung over the back of the desk chair was one of Arthur’s discarded uniforms. Moisture and the scent of soap hung in the air.

Whatever mysterious business had Arthur absent from the Kilgharrah for most of the last week was causing Merlin’s curiosity, as well as his irrational-and-completely-understandable jealousy, to grow. He stared at the door for a long time after it shut.

It did not reopen.

**

Merlin’s mum, busy as she was, grinned when she saw him, invited him to join her for her evening meal, and brushed his hollow cheeks with her fingers in concern.

“Dearheart,” she said, “The Camelot’s a good deal bigger than the Kilgharrah and I haven’t heard much recently beyond the complaints of the other Ealdorians. Are things well with you?”

The question included so much more than asking after his health that he just smiled and told her he was fine.

She did not ask again. Instead, she caught him up with the refugee integration, and mentioned planetfall preparations with a wry smile. Just as they were settling in, everyone else was uprooting themselves to be ready to evacuate to the cluster of already-waiting daughter vessels that had answered the recall summons. The other Kingdom ships were preparing for emergency evacuation; Camelot prepared for mandatory evacuation.

“Busy times,” she repeated more than once over the course of their dinner, “Busy times. You should look outside at least once, if you can, just to see so much of our fleet standing ready in the sky. Less than three weeks from the beginning of something new.”

**

Merlin figured out how to sweep the Kilgharrah for damage on his own. It caused the pins-and-needles tingling sensation that trying to extend his senses did, but it let him see the remaining rips, tears, and pockets of damage that had hidden from Lucan and his regular repair teams.

*Itches. Badly.*

“I can stop if you’re going to complain,” Merlin said. He was sitting in the middle of the bed in Arthur’s cabin, triskelion in his hands.
The Kilgharrah’s protest was an immediate, No.

Merlin huffed a laugh. The constant connection with Kilgharrah’s thoughts had made sharing sensation second-nature. The march of booted feet across Merlin’s skin reflected the leap in activity after Lucan had shifted the joint Camelot and Kilgharrah crews into polish and gleam mode. The primary crews began detailing the Kilgharrah and the White Hart, getting the ships inspection- and launch-ready down to the last detail. Scars were smoothed. Fittings replaced. Temporary fixes received their permanent hardware. Systems received software updates. Three days (and a handful of hours) did not seem enough time for everything that needed to be done, but Lucan had promised. It was their deadline for the Kilgharrah to be shoved out the airlock regardless if everything was done or not.

_I need to be ready to go after Sigan._

“We’ll get you ready,” Merlin said, preparing to do another sweep to see where he would need to start after he woke up. “Not long now.”

**

Without Arthur’s warmth at his side, Merlin was stuck in the endless race of his own thoughts, staring up at the ceiling and wishing he had better solutions than the ones he was working toward. He whispered the words Gaius used to create the ember dragon into the dark.

Nothing happened. Merlin still couldn’t sleep.

**

By the end of another day with an accelerated schedule, Merlin was exhausted from lack of sleep, craving touch, and not thinking in straight lines anymore. When Arthur stuck his head through into the tiny closet of a machine room Merlin was working in, Merlin dumped the spanner he’d been using on the ground and turned quickly to catch at Arthur’s arm.

“As of right now, I’m done,” Merlin said, tugging on the sleeve of Arthur’s uniform and watching with some satisfaction as Arthur’s eyebrows climbed and his gaze slipped down Merlin’s bare torso. Merlin was stripped to the waist in the heat, the upper half of his uniform hanging loose around his hips. Licking his lips, Merlin asked, “Are you done?”

“Done enough,” Arthur responded, crowding into the tiny closet and pushing Merlin up against the one flat piece of wall amidst a forest of conduits. His hands splayed across Merlin’s ribcage, one knee nudging between Merlin’s legs. “Did you need something?”

“Done enough,” Arthur responded, crowding into the tiny closet and pushing Merlin up against the one flat piece of wall amidst a forest of conduits. His hands splayed across Merlin’s ribcage, one knee nudging between Merlin’s legs. “Did you need something?”

Merlin felt Arthur’s thumb brush the bottom of his ribs, across his Glatissant scars, and his breathing quickened. “I have something we can try.” He brought his face in close, making Arthur tilt his chin up ever so slightly so Merlin could brush their lips together. He was whispering now, though the closet had probably never seen a mechanic since the first time the ship had launched. “But you have to agree.”

“How far do you think my agreement will take us?” Arthur asked, equally as quiet.

By way of reply, Merlin kissed him, letting his lips linger. He regretted not being more present in the kiss, but he applied every scrap of technique from his control lessons, trying to keep his magic from clawing its way through the contact. He closed in tight around his power, holding it with a grip that kept it beneath his skin. It struggled like a living thing, ready to burst forward and outward, to taste, to experience, to fold Arthur in its grip and refuse to let go no matter the consequences.
Arthur smiled against Merlin’s lips and then opened his mouth beneath them, letting their tongues tangle together far too briefly before Merlin had to pull away. Not as much as Merlin wanted, but far more than either of them had managed yet. He panted, watching Arthur watch him - or, more specifically, watch his eyes. From the golden glimmer on the curves of Arthur’s facial mods, Merlin’s eyes were blazing.

The triumph on Arthur’s face dimmed when Merlin shook his head.

Resting their foreheads together, Merlin let out a sigh. Arthur’s hand found the nape of Merlin’s neck. “If my magic wasn’t so eager for an outlet, your agreement would probably take us both to bed. It just- there’s no way I can set it free without it hurting me or the ship, or possibly breaking you, or calling Sigan and having him eat my brains. And I can’t control it. Especially not now.” Too much magic. Too little control. Merlin tightened his fingers on Arthur’s arms, willing him to understand even a little. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Arthur ran his fingers along Merlin’s jaw, a crooked smile on his face, and splayed his hand across Merlin’s scars. “I’m less worried about me and more worried about you.”

Merlin stilled.

“What is it?” Arthur asked, searching Merlin’s face.

“I might be a little worried about me, too,” Merlin admitted.

Arthur did ‘casually concerned’ very poorly. “Any particular reason?”

“Well,” Merlin drew the word out as long as he could. “Morgana and Mordred might know about my magic?”

“Might?” Arthur said, dropping his hands to Merlin’s hips and letting them rest. “How might is might?”

Merlin winced at Arthur’s tone. “Might, in this case, means definitely.”

Arthur took a moment to process that information, then screwed up his face in confusion, “I am not surprised we couldn’t keep it from Morgana, but why tell Mordred?”

“I didn’t tell Mordred,” Merlin said, sliding his hands to Arthur’s elbows. “Morgana probably told Mordred. Why would I tell him? He killed you the last time you were alive. There is not a lot of telling involved in this scenario.”

“He killed me? Nevermind, irrelevant. Why would Morgana tell him?”

“He has magic, too, why wouldn’t she?”

“Your method of telling me news leaves much to be desired,” Arthur said, rubbing at the bridge of his nose before dropping his hand back to Merlin’s waist. “So. My newest pilot has magic. And has killed me before. And Morgana delivered him to me herself. I don’t like how this math is adding up. Do I need to be worried?”

“Yes? No? Maybe? Fuck, Arthur, I have no idea. Everyone’s new and nothing’s the same.” Merlin tipped his head back and knocked it against the bulkhead a few times, just hard enough to make a proper ‘thunk’. “His sweet, stupid face could be hiding the mind of a cold, hard killer and I just wouldn’t know. There’s too much variation in what I know about him to even pretend to make an educated guess.”
“When did this happen?”

“When we were born?”

Arthur pulled out the don’t-fuck-with-me voice. “Merlin.”

“Yesterday for Mordred.”

“And Morgana-?”

“The day of the ceremony.”

“She scared you.” Arthur paused. Merlin could feel him tense, and wasn’t surprised when his words came out angry. “You didn’t think that was something I needed to know? Her knowing about you is kind of a big deal. You’re not a secret weapon if you’re no longer secret.”

“I know, I-”

“Okay, no, I get it. Don’t tell Arthur because telling me might be important, but it doesn’t change much. The plans I am making don’t count on her being surprised anyway. I get it. I know you didn’t want to talk about it, but that’s still cheating the oath.”

“I told you the absolute truth.”

“And I told you. I get it. ‘It’s only Merlin’,” Arthur said, his words dripping sarcasm. Merlin startled, fingers clutching at the fabric of Arthur’s sleeves at the barest echo of memory. Arthur didn’t seem to notice. “I can see how that would be the absolute truth for you, and I don’t like it. Reason enough to be worried, even if you don’t consider it reason enough to tell me.”

Arthur didn’t look happy. Merlin did not want to make it worse, but he couldn’t stop there. “Morgana’s death spell didn’t take, but now I’m wait-” Merlin began, then broke eye contact with Arthur and spoke to his toes, “I’m waiting for her to decide if she wants to kill me or not. Literally waiting. She said she’d tell me when to start watching my back.” Merlin swallowed an unhinged little laugh, bringing his gaze back to Arthur’s. “I don’t understand her.”

Tightening his grip on Merlin’s hips, Arthur stared at him, the muscle in his jaw jumping as he swallowed. His eyes began to glow very faintly blue as his oculars blinked to life. His fingers flexed on Merlin’s hips. “She can’t decide?” he asked. Arthur frowned as his oculars upped their brightness.

“Obviously I’m biased,” Merlin said, frowning at Arthur in return, “but despite the fact I’m on the ‘enemy’ side, she’s still considering.”

“What benefit do you offer her if you live?” Arthur asked.

Merlin shook his head. He neither had an answer, nor all of his wits, not with Arthur stroking his thumbs across the bones in Merlin’s hips. Even though they were discussing a topic rather relevant to Merlin’s interests, he found the movement increasingly distracting. Merlin wrapped his hands around Arthur’s wrists to hold him still.

Arthur was still musing, his hands stilling with Merlin’s grip without conscious thought. “I’m still in her way. Why let me have a warlock?”

“Comic relief?”

“She confronted you,” Arthur said, giving Merlin a flat look. “Cast a death spell. You’re not dead.”
He paused, eyes widening. “She’s not dead, either.”

Merlin let out his breath. “I couldn’t take the opening.” Merlin hesitated, not sure how to explain. “She’s your sister.” Watching Arthur’s face and the complicated flood of emotion that poured across his expression, Merlin did not regret his choice.

Arthur stood for a long time, his hands tight around Merlin’s hips, just staring through him and beyond him and breathing in heavy, calming lungfuls.

Finally, Arthur said, “Thank you.” He lifted his hands, Merlin’s fingers still tangled about his wrists, and scrubbed across his face, smoothing away the relief and the guilt and the sorrow. He gathered himself and slid his hands to cap Merlin’s shoulders.

Merlin loosened his grip on Arthur’s wrists, but did not let go.

Arthur said, “Even so - I don’t like the idea of trading you for her. I love her, but she’s also a traitor sorceress intent on the throne of Camelot.”

“Yes, that, but—” Merlin swore. The unexpectedness of it had Arthur blinking at him in confusion. Merlin tightened his grip on Arthur’s wrists so he wouldn’t pull away. “She’s your sister. Uther Pendragon’s genetic offspring.”

Merlin’s words knocked the air out of Arthur’s lungs.

“Oh,” Arthur breathed. “She has claim.”

Watching him wide-eyed, Merlin waited for Arthur to say something else. When he didn’t, Merlin said, “I should have told you.”

“I should have known.” The tiny self-deprecating note in his voice was swamped immediately by fury directed inward. Low and harsh, Arthur said, “She’s been sequenced, but Lady Vivienne convinced my father to scrub her record. Morgana was livid for weeks.”

Merlin hesitated. “Her claim’s legitimacy changes things.”

It wasn’t quite a question, but it caused Arthur to go silent, his expression turning thoughtful. “Not as much as you would think.” Arthur peeled Merlin’s hands from his wrists and rubbed at his mouth, nodding at Merlin’s quizzical look. “Claim is about providing stability. Establishing succession as early and as broadly as possible. Having an heir staves off opportunists, ensures the next-in-line has access to proper training, gets them involved with the extended rulership of the Kingdom’s daughter ships. Morgana’s claim will grab attention, but the other rulers won’t recognise her as Queen unless there is proof of stability. It’s harder to convince the rulers after a violent coup or an heirless death. Not impossible, obviously, considering my father, but harder. She can spin her claim any way she wants, but in the end it’s just another argument.”

Arthur flashed him a smile, “And if you grew up fringe, probably not a very good argument.”

Merlin shrugged, even though he agreed. “What I think doesn’t matter.”

“What most of the fringe thinks doesn’t matter,” Arthur said. He frowned at Merlin and returned his hands to Merlin’s hips once more, thumbing circles across his lower abdominal muscles. He wasn’t concentrating on what he was doing, even though it sent shivers down Merlin’s spine. His eyes remained on Merlin’s face, his gaze speculative. “I think my father’s stint as Pendragon has managed to split the fleet further than just between Kingdoms.”
Without warning him, Arthur leaned in, using the surprise of his sudden proximity and his solid hold on the sides of Merlin’s stomach to roll Merlin’s spine flat against the bulkhead. Arthur slid his hands up Merlin’s bare torso.

He laid Merlin out for himself one brief kiss at a time, broad hands flat on the sides of Merlin’s ribcage, his lips leaving a trail of sparks that flared behind Merlin’s eyelids as he let his head fall back to close his eyes. Merlin brought his hands up to wrap around Arthur’s wrists again, squeezing his eyes tight shut once before opening to grin at Arthur’s face, inches from his own.

“Are you improving relations?” Merlin asked, lips twitching as he tried to keep from grinning.

In response, Arthur kissed him until the magic gathered and he had to pull away. This time it was Merlin who leaned in to brush his lips across the skin below Arthur’s eye, across the metal embedded in his cheekbone. Merlin wanted to let go, to release every control he had on himself, magic or otherwise. With his grip on Arthur’s wrists, he guided his hands to his lower back, arching himself forward to push their hips and their erections together.

Merlin opened his eyes and grinned. Maybe if they were very careful.

Arthur’s oculars lit briefly and Merlin grunted at the overly-smug voice in his head telling him that the Chief of Engineering was hunting for the two of them.

They looked at each other and said, “Lucan,” in dry unison.

Pulling away, Arthur reached down to readjust himself to be at least a little bit more presentable. Merlin caught his sleeve and said, “Stay tonight. Just once.”

Hissing between his teeth, Arthur said, “I can’t.” He sounded as frustrated as Merlin felt. “I have an appointment with Lot, and Essetir’s primary shift is halfway through our night. Any minor concession I can make to convince him that his petty power plays are working, the better off I will be. I just need him to agree.”

“Can I help?”

Some of the frustration drained from Arthur. He curved his shoulders and let his forehead drop to rest on the hollow of Merlin’s throat. Merlin slid his hands up Arthur’s arms and shoulders to curl both of his hands around the back of his neck. Arthur spoke to Merlin’s collarbone. “Sleep. Rest. This other stuff is… the others are stubborn, Lot most of all, but even he’s coming around.”

Merlin didn’t get a chance to ask ‘coming around to what?’ because Lucan announced his presence with a loud ‘Aha!’ and started laughing at the two of them tangled up together.

The little time they had managed to carve was over. Lucan wasn’t shy about teasing Arthur for getting caught snogging in a closet like a trainee, even if he wasn’t able to quite meet either Arthur or Merlin’s eyes when he gave Merlin his next assignment. Merlin resisted blurring out that Lucan didn’t have to hide anything for Merlin’s sake, but all Lucan was hiding were assumptions, and telling more people about his magic was one risk closer to misstepping and having Uther discover him.

Lucan didn’t apologise for stealing Arthur away. Arthur went without complaint. All three of them knew that moments like this were stolen at best.

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Merlin’s lips were still tingling as Arthur left though the cabin portal. It had been a single kiss,
squeezed in between Arthur’s shower and Merlin’s breakfast, but it had lasted long enough to threaten a rush. Shoving himself to the end of the bed, he contemplated boots.

The door irised open again and Merlin snapped his head up, but it was only Will.

“Don’t look so disappointed,” Will said, flopping down on the bed next to Merlin and pointing at his skull. “I bring new brilliance. Ask me anything.”

Merlin leaned in to see what Will was pointing at. Shiny new scars crisscrossed Will’s scalp, not including the one on his forehead that Merlin already knew about. “What’d you do?”

“Not that sort of question,” Will complained. He thrashed his way into a sitting position. “Like, a fact question. Any fact question at all. Something I wouldn’t know.”


“Better.” Will closed his eyes for a moment and a series of lights that Merlin hadn’t recognised for lights flicked down one of the scars on the side of Will’s head.

“You got a uplink!”

Will grinned, eyes still closed. “Thirty eight feet.” He popped his eyes open. “Yes, yes I did. Ask me another one.”

Glancing at the door one last time, Merlin did. It was the only day that week that the Kilgharrah had to chivvy Merlin into his uniform for the start of his shift.

**

This was the third time that Arthur had showed up during one of Merlin’s repairs to sit with him. He greeted Merlin and settled in to watch him work. Other than that, he didn’t disturb Merlin’s process and for the most part, Merlin just enjoyed his presence while he was trying to get everything functioning.

Merlin kicked the panel closed and dusted his hands together, turning to grin at Arthur. He caught Arthur’s expression in the moment before he smiled. He looked tired, despite not technically requiring sleep, but there was ease in the line of his shoulders, in the tilt of his head as he watched Merlin moving about the business of repairing their ship. He looked regal and exhausted and weighted down with responsibility. An instant later he shed ten years and a Kingdom’s worth of cares to return Merlin’s excitement in his smile.

It was only then that it occurred to Merlin that he might be providing as much stability for Arthur as Arthur was for him.

Whenever Merlin swore at the mess of magical tangles he was trying to undo, he would look behind him for Arthur. For reassurance. To spread a little of the frustration he was feeling. For someone to share with. Sometimes Arthur would talk. Sometimes he wouldn’t. Sometimes Merlin would tell off Kilgharrah for saying something snarky and Arthur would smile or laugh or snark right back.

Arthur stood, brushed a kiss across Merlin’s cheek, and left without fanfare. Merlin stood for a good while after that, staring down the gloomy corridor and listening to the mechanical lub-dub of the Kilgharrah’s great heart.
Arthur found him at shift’s end to escort him to a pre-completion celebration that Lucan was throwing for the combined work crews of the Kilgharrah, the White Hart, and the Camelot. Thanks to some mysterious good fortune - Arthur had looked pointedly somewhere over Merlin’s shoulder when he gave Merlin that particular part of the invitation - the repairs had been sped by six hours, and Lucan was giving them back some of that time to lift their spirits before launch preparations began.

“You’re not the one throwing the party?” Merlin asked. “Isn’t that your job?”

Arthur laughed and steered him off of the ship and toward a cleared area in Pellinore’s bailiwick beyond the gravity cage that had been set up for celebratory shenanigans. They met Morgana heading in the same direction, a cluster of pilots ahead waving in their direction. Arthur’s hand crept up from Merlin’s low back to rest gently at the base of his skull.

Morgana looked both of them up and down.

“Keeping your new pet on a short leash?” she mocked him, the edge in her voice actively nasty.

Ignoring her tone, Arthur asked Merlin simply, “Am I?”

Merlin didn’t answer, just reached out to Morgana as if he could do anything about the hollow look in her eyes as she frowned over him standing next to Arthur. Her hands came up, her magic flared, and his own magic jumped to a reflexive defence in response. He vibrated, ready to cast, to defend, but he was grounded in Arthur’s touch. There was no tension in Arthur’s hold, no fear or worry. Merlin’s own body was taut with stayed action.

After a long moment, Arthur leaned into whisper, “She said she’d warn you.”

It took a handful of deep breaths and a hand over the comfort of his oath, but Merlin dropped his defences. It terrified him that he was ready to take Morgana on in full view of everyone for the simple reason that Arthur was standing behind him.

Merlin was ready to protect him if Arthur even breathed his need.

At Arthur’s words, however, Merlin felt like a weapon safely sheathed. Steadying himself, he re-established control, and let whatever Arthur saw in Morgana reassure him.

Morgana dropped whatever spell she had readied, her composure shot through with bewilderment to the point where she actually stepped back to let them pass, her thumbnail against her lips as she watched them move away.

After the short, raucous party - where all shifts had mingled and Merlin was introduced to more people than he would ever be able to remember, past lives to help or not - Merlin found himself sprawled against Arthur’s side, head on his shoulder, shoeless and wiggling his toes whenever someone stepped over his legs to get to the beverage crate. Arthur’s hand was tangled with his and they were surrounded by those they both knew. Gwen and Lance, Will, Gwaine and several of the other pilots, Leon, Owain and Kay. Even Morgana sat closer than Merlin was entirely comfortable with, a man introduced as Accolon laying against her legs as she traded amused barbs with Owain.

It was Leon who commented, calling attention to how Merlin and Arthur had been trapped in mutual orbit. “Nice to see Arthur a little less Kingdom and a little more fringe.”
Will snorted and pointed at Merlin. “Less fringe, more Kingdom. Practically restrained, he is. I blame the Capt- Arthur. He’s a terrible influence on you, mate.”

Grinning, Arthur shrugged, but Merlin stared at Will long past when he should have laughed. Arthur squeezed his hand to snap him out of it, and the conversation moved on.

Arthur didn’t stay the night after the party either, citing the most delicate of his meetings with Rodor of the Nemeth. Collecting Mithian from among the other partigoers, he left Merlin with Will. Before he went, however, he planted a solid kiss on Merlin’s mouth for a hair too long. When he pulled away a faint sheen of gold drained from his irises as he said farewell for the evening. Merlin’s lips buzzed and he covered his eyes with his hand just in case he’d had the same reaction.

Gwaine wolf-whistled and, because he was an arse, pursed his lips and wiggled his eyebrows at Arthur, loudly wondering where his goodbye kiss was.

As Arthur laughed and headed off to a clandestine meeting, Merlin concluded that even though he already was, he didn’t need to be falling in love to make every moment of waiting worth it. Arthur could have him and his loyalty for the simple fact that Merlin could breathe again when he was standing at his side.

**

The last day of repairs saw Merlin placed on ‘spot duty’, though Lucan never specified what spots or what sort of duty. Merlin took advantage of the relative freedom to perform sweep after sweep, finding few magical tangles to unravel. By the latter half of the day, roundabout when Gwen left after bringing him something spicy for lunch, he smoothed over the last repair and performed a final sweep. Kilgharrah made a satisfied grunt that Merlin could feel in his toes as he sat back and stared at the wall.

“Done,” he said, dazed and a little shocked. “We finished before launch.”

*Good*, Kilgharrah responded, stretching within the ship to make it shudder and groan. *I feel whole.*

“Besides whole, do you think… Sigan? Do you think we’re prepared for Sigan?”

Kilgharrah did not respond. It took Merlin half a minute to figure out that he was running a ghost’s equivalent of a system’s diagnostic, testing out one metaphysical limb after another. Merlin eavesdropped, his senses brushing walls and ceiling as he listened for the ripples of what the Kilgharrah was doing.

Eventually, Kilgharrah came back with, *Yes. With a day or so of rest, I will be capable of whatever combat we mean to attempt.*

There was a lingering suggestion at the end of his words. “But-?” Merlin asked.

*I am only half of what is required. How much power do you hold now?*

Merlin shook his head. “I’m so far beyond what I was on the Ealdor, I don’t know. There’s no way for me to judge.”

*May I, then? I shall not draw.*

“Yes,” Merlin said, and waited until the deep connection of the draw formalised. He reeled when it completed and the sense of Kilgharrah’s hunger pressed against the pads of his feet. He felt the rising thrill of Kilgharrah’s triumph long before the ghost spoke his verdict aloud.
I could do a full draw from you, Kilgharrah said, and there was more of the dragon in him than Merlin had heard before. You have greater power even than that, as well, young warlock. I daresay you might bend the very fabric of space-time if it was your will. The ghost laughed, a roiling, rippling sensation that clogged Merlin’s throat, made him nauseous and giddy all at once. I can draw from you to my full power. You can take me beyond the constraints this tiny vessel puts upon my natural form.

Snorting at the Kilgharrah’s dramatics, Merlin grinned and said, “Draw terminated. Get out.”

The Kilgharrah withdrew, his pleasure at the prospect of a full draw remaining undimmed as he retreated from Merlin’s senses. The hunger for power faded, but the echo in Merlin’s magic remained. It was a solid resonance, a clawing against Merlin’s control and a craving for release, with just a touch of claustrophobia that made Merlin breath harder until he could steady himself.

**

The week over, Merlin was rewarded with a good night’s sleep after seeing to the finishing touches to the Kilgharrah. He dreamt of the ship sitting proudly in his cradle, awaiting the launch ceremony.
Merlin leaned down to murmur into Gwen’s ear. “Bit overkill, don’t you think?” He indicated the platform at the front of the crowd, populated with a more than a dozen people all dressed in their finest for the launch of the repaired White Hart and Kilgharrah.

“Hush.” She elbowed him in the ribs, but her grin belied her. “They all really wanted to wear those fool cloaks. You should have seen Lance his morning.”

“He looks good.”

“They both do.”

All of the Knights - of both Camelot and Nemeth - wore their ceremonial armour, complete with cloaks. Arrayed in rows on either side of the platform, they provided an honour guard for those making speeches. Short speeches. The repair bay’s air was to be pumped out and the ships unlocked from their cradles before too long. Merlin was sure that both he and the hundreds of crew ranged in a sprawling mob in front of the platform would all be grateful to finally see the fruits of their labour released back into the black.

On stage, Arthur stood with Leon and Elena, Lucan and Pellinore, the latter three resplendent in dress uniforms covered with embroidery and leafed with gold. Arthur’s hair shone in the harsh glare of the worklight arrays, his helmet tucked beneath his arm as he bobbed his head and waved his acknowledgements whenever the crews cheered at something he said.

Merlin clapped where appropriate, but he wasn’t really concentrating. Arthur was distracting - handsome, magnetic, charismatic, and Merlin would be the first to admit he was biased - but it wasn’t Arthur that he was watching. Nor Mithian and her people, easily told from Arthur’s by their white armour trimmed in gold. Mithian’s first officer, Enid, had given him an absent smile of recognition when she passed through the crowd to mount the stage.

It was Uther’s entourage who captured Merlin’s attention. The Captain and King of the Camelot presided over the ceremony not in the armour he’d earned in youth as a Knight, but in a vibrant red and gold King’s doublet, slashed with black and picked with strings of tiny lights. It civilian regalia, rather than military, visibly representing the Kingdom ship and the crew that had assisted in accomplishing repairs so quickly. It was easy to see where Arthur had inherited his bearing. Uther had the same breadth of chest and jaw, and the same way of standing just-so with shoulders back and spine straight that spoke of authority. The similarities made Merlin uncomfortable. It didn’t seem right that any of the things Merlin admired in Arthur should be present in a man like Uther.

On Uther’s left was Morgana. On his right, Agravaine. Merlin’s comment to Gwen was mostly for them. Morgana wore her black armour, helmet beneath arm, her hair coiling down her shoulders. She
let her eyes linger on the audience rather than any of the speakers on the stage with her. Agravaine wore a doublet in black trimmed with deliberate silver, de Bois allegiance visible. From the way that Gwen’s lips had thinned when she marked him and the quiet, fond whispers of the name ‘Igraine’ from a couple who stood nearby, the statement did not go unnoticed.

The Camelot’s crew chiefs clustered toward the centre of the stage, shaking hands and putting on a show, but Uther, Morgana, and Agravaine were a lodestone. Except for the Knights and Camelot’s residents, most had never seen the King of Camelot, and attention remained upon him and his attendants no matter what shiny metal plaques and flowery thanks were being exchanged. It was just like a Kingdom, Merlin thought, that they would go to such lengths to deck out a repair bay and set up a stage in Kingdom colours for the relaunch. Merlin was torn between considering it impressive or gratuitous ostentation.

He came down somewhere in between. The Kilgharrah was an heir’s ship, the flagship of the fleet under the Pendragon - even if Pendragon wasn’t a name that Merlin had heard anyone use for Uther the entire time he’d been on board. Then, too, was the White Hart an heir’s ship, and Merlin was pretty sure there was diplomacy happening between the white-and-gold and black-red-and-gold that shared the stage before him. After all the handshakes were done, Lucan and Mithian’s Chief of Engineering were standing shoulder to shoulder and watching the proceedings with identical expressions of worn-out satisfaction.

If Merlin hadn’t been watching Morgana, he would never have noticed that she looked right at him more than once, flicking her gaze across his uniform and insignia before moving on. She seemed restless, her hand going to the butt of her pistol, her fingers flexing like she would have preferred a sword.

Gwen elbowed him again and before he could protest that he hadn’t said anything, she pointed him toward a small cluster of people off the end of the platform. “Godwyn of the Gawant and his,” she explained quietly. “This launch is a triumph for Lucan and the crews, sure, and they deserve every bit of pomp in their honour, but none of that really warrants Gawant’s Captain and King in attendance. What are they doing here?”

“Shouldn’t he be readying for planetfall?” Merlin asked, eyes on the subdued grey and rust red of Godwyn’s entourage.

Gwen nodded, linking arms with Merlin and leaning into his side. “Maybe he’s here for Elena? If he is though, that worries me. Showing up in person to yank your daughter from her command assignment is… bad.”

“Bad’s a good way to put it,” Merlin said. Arthur had mentioned things were delicate, but not that delicate. He sought Arthur where he stood on the stage, grinning and speaking to Elena over his shoulder. He looked like he was enjoying himself. Merlin squeezed Gwen’s arm with his own. “I’m sure it’s nothing like that.”

Up on stage, Arthur turned to face his audience. A thunderous cracking noise reported through the repair bay and Arthur’s head rocked back on his neck, eyes wide. The oath in Merlin’s chest shattered.

Merlin put out a useless hand as Arthur collapsed. His knees folded and hips locked, and he didn’t even try to catch himself. His armour rang against the stage as he hit. Elena had her hands up, fingers on the fabric of her flight suit, and a horrified look on her face. It wasn’t until the flicker of anti-ballistic fields around each and every armoured Knight crackled to life that Merlin understood. Gunshot. A ballistic weapon.
He abandoned Gwen and elbowed his way forward as chaos claimed the ceremony. The Knights on either side of the stage started past him toward something Merlin didn’t care enough about to turn back and see. A handful of individuals wearing medic’s insignia raced toward the stage. Merlin caught their wake through the crowd and was at the edge of the platform in seconds. Arthur hadn’t moved. Everyone else had.

A handful of Knights clustered around his fallen form and a medic - not Gaius, Gaius hadn’t gotten to him yet - blocked Merlin’s view. All mundane crew scattered, leaving the Knights to try and convince Uther off the stage and away from his son. They wouldn’t let Merlin up. He clutched the shoulder of the nearest obstructive Knight and resisted the urge to simply blast everyone out of the way.

“Leon!” Merlin called to the first Knight he recognised. His voice was strangled, but Leon heard him and looked up.

“Get to safety,” Leon snapped. He was kneeling at Arthur’s side and when he lifted an arm to wipe his forehead with his sleeve, his fingers were covering in the brilliant red of fresh blood. “There could be more.”

Merlin closed his eyes and gambled. “Maybe I can do something!”

For a moment, Leon stilled, his breath catching as he instinctively glanced at the King. He did not hesitate long. He dropped his arm and, taking a great breath, gestured to the Knights blocking Merlin.

They moved out of the way and Merlin scrambled onto the low stage, sliding the last foot to Arthur’s side on his knees as he bled away his momentum. “Arthur.”

The ugly, angry entry point for the bullet had burrowed through the metal in Arthur’s forehead, leaving it surrounded by jagged bone and full of confetti shrapnel. Leon had his fingers pressed to the back of Arthur’s head, trying to stem what bleeding his could with the wadded-up corner of his cloak. Merlin could hear the tortured whir of Arthur’s chest mods as they went through their shutdown procedure.

He couldn’t be dead. Merlin placed his hands on the skin of Arthur’s neck, but there was no heartbeat to feel, no rush of blood or electrical signal. The medic kneeling on Arthur’s other side shook her head, the mods in the back of her hands reporting cessation of function in large red letters. She looked up at Merlin, her wrinkled face not without sympathy. “They’ve already registered brain death, his mods are shutting themselves off.”

Merlin’s magic was alive beneath his skin, pushing and pulling at the fading spark of Arthur’s life as it left him. He knew nothing that would heal death. Desperately, he told the medic, “Do something.”

She flexed her hands, setting and resetting her diagnostic mods before running them over Arthur’s face again and down his chest. The same hateful words scrolled across her skin. “There’s nothing we can do. Even brain reconstruction, at this point, would give us a creature who bears little resemblance to the prince. The bullet was… well-placed for a swift death.”

Arthur’s eyes were still wide open, staring into the far distance, sightless and bloodless and empty. Merlin could hardly breathe. Leon’s hands, holding Arthur’s head, trembled, but did not let go.

“Merlin,” Leon said quietly. He said no more than that, but it was question enough.

“I don’t know.” Merlin choked on his own words, “I don’t know what I can do.”
There was nothing for his magic to grab hold of, to drag back, to heal. Arthur was already gone. The broken oath said as much, snapped at the moment of death for both of them, leaving only Merlin to deal with the shards. Fumbling for a spell, hoping for a reflexive response, Merlin squeezed his eyes shut and poured magic through his fingers on the sides of Arthur’s neck, the thumbs on the underside of his chin.

As magic entangled with flesh, however, false memories poured back. Of sitting across from Arthur in a quiet little coffee shop as a young woman who had always been Gwen flashed them shy smiles from behind the cash register. Of turning to his left or his right to find Arthur half a step behind and cocking a rifle, ready as he’ll ever be for the adversary to come. Of a voice over the radio a hundred, a thousand times telling him he’s come for a rescue that Merlin didn’t need, needed desperately, or hadn’t even known was necessary. Of hearing himself tell Arthur that he’d shown up, despite the odds, for a rescue that Arthur refused to want, hated admitting to, or for which Merlin was rewarded thoroughly. Echoes of Merlin’s nightmares rewrote themselves as he scrambled to make his magic do something useful on command.

He could feel the stirring of an idea, more intuition than thought, but it was accompanied by magic tingling beneath his skin and demanding to be freed in full. Fear of what damage that might cause slammed him back to his senses to look up in horror at the medic across Arthur’s body from him. Whatever look he gave her, she misinterpreted. She shook her head and put her finger to her lips.

Metal rang against metal behind him. Snapping his head around he saw only the flash of dagger and chainmail, of Knight’s hands on Agravaine’s shoulders as they dragged him away from Uther. The rent doublet and the sneer on Uther’s face told Merlin how unsuccessful the second assassination had been.

In turning back to Arthur’s cooling body, Merlin’s gaze caught on Morgana’s expression. In the midst of shouting knights and confused crew, of the shocked and angry and already-crying, her face alone was an impassive mask. Chin held high, she had not moved from the spot she had stood the entire ceremony, unwavering and unemotional, observing Arthur’s supine form.

The feedback of Merlin’s magic continued to rewrite his nightmares. Memories - nightmares - of a tug on the end of a rope, of looking back through the snow to see blond hair peeking from beneath a parka.

A shout from beyond the scattering audience caused them to look to the source in unison. Across the flat expanse of the bay stood Mordred - of course Mordred, always Mordred - with one arm extended and shivering violently. His head lolled back, exposing his throat to the Knights approaching with swords drawn. His armour glistened at the joins, dripping fluid onto the deck that only looked the crimson of blood at second or third glance. It leaked from beneath his chestplate and ran in rivulets down his legs to pool at his feet.

His head swung around, eyes wide, sockets burnt and empty as he trembled enough to rattle his armour. The Knights slowed before they reached him, the vulnerable curve of his throat looking more like a trap the closer they came.

Morgana took a deep breath and dropped her helmet to the stage with a disdainful flick of her wrist. Her gauntlets followed. Her jaw flexed. Merlin felt her gather her magic. He couldn’t defend himself, not while he had a grip on Arthur, body and mind and magic wrapped in and through Arthur with just the barest hint of a possibility of a chance at the very edge of his senses and didn’t know if he could grasp hold again if he let go.

“Morgana-” Merlin’s voice broke on her name. “Don’t. Please.”
She stalked toward him, her boots loud on the hollow stage. Behind her, Uther fought with his own Knights as they ushered him away from all apparent danger, tearing him from the corpse of his son before he even had a chance to see for himself. Beyond him, Gowdyn came for Elena, glared retribution at Uther, and called to what crew remained beholden to him. Everything was falling apart.

The potential of the spell Morgana had called to her brushed against his own magic and sent real, physical sparks skittering across the stage. Merlin couldn’t feel what it was, couldn’t taste the shape of it. He closed his eyes and braced himself.

He heard the clank of Morgana’s armour and opened his eyes to find her kneeling across from him, taking the place of the medic. The spell was still held in abeyance, just beyond range of his senses, unreleased and waiting. She placed her hands over Merlin’s, locked her fingers into the grooves between each of his knuckles, and said, “I’ll anchor you. Go.” Merlin didn’t question her or her meaning, not when she sunk sharp daggers of power into his skin and repeated, “I have you. Whatever you do will harm no one.”

Merlin loosed control over his magic, let it billow out and over the assembled with the all-over pain of a waking limb, through human and ship and the slowly-dying flesh of the Camelot itself. Kilgharrah thrashed beneath his touch. Aithusa keened at him when he extended himself through the destrier bay. Freya howled and reached for him. The instant that he touched the dark heart of Sigan’s perverted power, however, it became clear to him that he was releasing his magic in so very much the wrong direction.

Space-time, Kilgharrah had said. It had amused Merlin at the time, but his idea solidified around the tiny kernel of possibility. He was claiming space as his own, but that was only bringing him into contact with Sigan and into a fight he wasn’t prepared for. Arthur would remain just as dead if he kept on his current course.

He halted the spread of his magic through space and instead claimed time.

Morgana magic was a clear, bright warmth at his back as he stepped into the moments surrounding the one where her spell had pierced his skin. He let his magic permeate hours, days, years in all directions. He seized time and rent it, ripping through reality and folding it back on itself. His magic spread further, into the frozen past and the formless future, and the instant before he locked in his choice, before he brought his magic to bear on the moment before Arthur’s death that he might prevent it in its entirety, he saw the past laid out behind him.

He saw the equations and trajectories of each of them. Gwen and Lance and Gwaine, Mithian and Elena, Gaius and Will. Their cyclic rebirths unsynchronised. The only absence: Arthur.

The magic that had stuck with Arthur that first night proved his saviour. Like an enthusiastic puppy, that small part so intimately familiar with the shape and scent of Arthur began the hunt, scouring time with senses far beyond the slender few that Merlin could wield at will. Not long and it bayed its triumph with a squeaky, juvenile sound that was all Merlin’s mind could fathom.

Merlin expected to find Arthur held in reserve for each of his far-between destinies, held aloof in some other realm without bearing on the rest of their many lives.

Except the bright scarlet thread of Arthur’s was tangled up in the mess where it had not been before, twined close with Merlin’s to surface a hundred, hundred times between the point origin in the haze beyond Merlin’s power and now.

False memories strengthened. Solidified. Merlin could almost feel the wax drip down his fingers as he placed his candle upon an altar, shoulder bumping with Arthur’s as he stood once more.
Outside of time, Merlin was nothing and no one. He held the two jagged edges of time he had ripped free of their moorings tight within his power, a moments-width from placing them back together and creating a rift that might save Arthur’s life. The part of Merlin that knew this Arthur best had found him. Known reality could be set back just long enough to make a difference.

The longer he held the edges of time apart, the more real his past lives with Arthur became.

Magic would exact its price. Death for death. Time for time. To seal the rift and thwart fate, the price had been - and perhaps still was - the ribbon of Arthur’s reincarnations.

There was temptation. Let Arthur die and the eternity of loss Merlin had lived would be erased as it had never been.

The roiling chaos of the future held the pulse of menace, of wrongness, and a promised extinguishment of this life and every future reincarnation.

Merlin had lived the broken past already.

He slammed the raw edges of riven time together, held tight, and tried to use his power to fuse them, hoping that maybe he could change how badly he had broken time, Arthur, and their lives together.

It was a hollow hope.

The false (despairingly true) memories burnt from his mind. Magic took what payment it would, and Merlin power was rejected in favour of the power held in the interrupted cycle of Arthur’s lives. Merlin’s hold on himself and his magic loosened, and it was only through Morgana’s anchor that he found himself once more within the restrictive bonds of a new present, his magic settling down within her spell back to something he could control.

Arthur stood on stage, laughing at something Elena had said over his shoulder. Morgana’s eyes blazed gold, her red-soaked fists balled at her side as she stared straight ahead, her helmet and gauntlets lying forgotten at her feet. The assembled crew were calm, murmuring among themselves, the Knight’s alert but unexpectant.

Gwen leaned against Merlin, tucked up against his side with her arm through his and said, “Maybe he’s here for Elena? If he is though, that worries me. Showing up in person to yank your daughter from her command assignment is… bad.”

Arthur turned to face the audience. The gunshot reverberated through the massive space. Merlin’s hand was already raised, his magic a vortex of pure power that netted the bullet mid-air even as it roused Sigan to curiosity. A different sort of chaos than the death of a prince began. Merlin plucked the bullet free and folded it into his palm. He was unashamed to find himself crying in relief.

Half of the Knights activated their anti-ballistics shields and started forward into the milling crowd. The rest tightened ranks around the stage, white-gold mingling with dragon-emblazoned black.

Gwen dug her fingers into Merlin’s arm when he placed the bullet into her hand and said, “Keep that safe for me.” He dropped her arm, kissed the side of her head and started forward, swiping at his tears with the back of his sleeve.

Morgana, Merlin said. The gold in her eyes flicked out.

No one was looking in her direction, too used to the vanity of her golden oculars to comment on them now, but heads swivelled to track her when she strode forward off the stage. She shoved through the protective ring of Knights. The crowd parted. Merlin couldn’t reach her before she
reached Mordred.

Mordred stood with arm extended, pistol still clutched in his hand, a curl of smoke rising from the barrel. The glamour that had hidden its nature hung in tatters. His eyes were intact but rolled back in his head to leave them white and blank. His cheeks were streaked with tears.

Morgana’s fingers sank through the metal of Mordred’s armour and she ripped the chestplate from his body in one violent motion. It hit the deck with a clang that silenced her audience. Blood soaked the front of Mordred’s armour padding and when it joined the still-melting chestplate on the deck in a shower of particulate and plastics, Morgana revealed the sigils carved into the pale skin of Mordred’s chest.

Like the medallion that had hung around Kanen’s neck, Mordred had symbols describing his task and the limits of his will in scars that marched from collarbone to hip. The largest of these rested above his heart, off-centre and weeping blood, and said Serve.

The hush of held breath made the wet sound of tearing skin loud. With her palm in the centre of the symbol Serve, Morgana flayed the skin from Mordred’s chest in a messy burst of magic, a spell so crude as to be a bare step up from clawing him with her nails alone.

The spell faded. Mordred slumped into her arms, squeezing his eyes shut over a choked sob as she claimed the pistol for herself. She whispered something in his ear, smoothed his sweat-slicked hair from his forehead, and propped him back onto his feet. He swayed, the raw muscles in his chest flexing, and remained upright.

Turning, she held the gun out towards Uther. Her eyes never leaving his, she curled her fingers around the body of the pistol. The scent of burning blood grew to overpowering. Her magic fluctuated wildly just beyond Merlin’s senses, but he recognised the fire that Merlin had felt burning at her fingertips before.

Discarding the empty clip with a disdainful flick of her wrist, she squeezed her fist until heat-reddened metal streamed between her fingers.

Uther said nothing. The only one to move, to breathe, was Arthur, who dropped from the stage and strode to confront her. She ignored him, eyes on Uther. Merlin moved to intercept Arthur.

With disgust, Morgana dropped the misshapen lump to the deck and challenged, “Father?”

In one slow, fragile movement, Uther pulled a small sonic pistol from the holster at his belt and pointed it at her. He was too far and there were too many people between them to shoot, but his meaning was clear. He said, “Seize her.”

The Knights closest to her and Mordred moved. Morgana moved more swiftly. She spoke, transporting herself elsewhere with a word. The spell fell from her lips and gathered around her like a mantle, then air rushed to fill the space she had been with a thunderclap as like the original gunshot to make Merlin’s breath catch in his throat.

Even with Morgana no longer present, Arthur was still ignoring everyone and everything, sword drawn and ready, intent on the portal that led out and up. Merlin caught Arthur’s sleeve. When he didn’t stop, Merlin stumbled forward and into his path, blocking his way with hands outstretched. Arthur pulled up short. “What?”

“You died,” Merlin said, putting a hand to Arthur’s chest, feeling the heat and the strength of his furious heartbeat.
“I don’t feel dead,” Arthur snapped. “Perhaps you are mistaken.”

“Listen to-”

“She ripped Mordred’s chest apart using magic. Ballistic pistol or no, the sentence for possession, fuck - even firing, isn’t that.”

“I hate trees,” Merlin said, jamming the words in when Arthur paused to breathe.

Arthur rocked back on his heels, gauntleted hand coming up to rest over Merlin’s on his chest. No oath. No pain. His eyes widened.

Merlin took Arthur’s silence as his opportunity. “Mordred shot you through the skull and you died. Instantly. Before you hit the ground.” He panted, suddenly tired, and his arm grew heavy. The price magic had exacted hadn’t come from his own power, but he’d had Arthur dead at his feet for long enough to hollow him out. “The scars on his chest said ‘serve’.”

“Serve’. As a command,” Arthur said. He looked back over his shoulder toward the now-prone Mordred who was being tended by both Gaius and the elderly woman who had been the first at fallen Arthur’s side. The stage was now empty, each ruler and Captain surrounded by their own. Cloaks, impractical and ceremonial, were being passed to unarmoured crew as the Knights prepared to chase down a sorceress. Arthur refocused on Merlin. “We have to find her first.”

“At least we know where she’s going,” Merlin said. “If we run, we might even get there before she manages to take off.”
Arthur and Merlin shoved their way forward through a small crowd of Knights to find the airlock for the destrier bay standing open. A shimmering barrier lay across the entrance that sparked when any of the Knights stepped too close. Beyond lay only darkness.

From inside the bay, the vacuum warning sounded and the lights above the door began to flash the danger.

Arthur swore. His uplink fed the status of Morgana’s preflight checklist to his oculars. Aithusa was nearly prepared to launch and Morgana was using access permissions she shouldn’t have to start opening the bay’s outer seals.

One of Camelot’s Knights held the door open, her thumb on the access panel. She looked to him for instruction. He shook his head and gestured for her to keep her post. He didn’t trust a shiny film of magic to keep his Knights safe from the vacuum, but they had a minute yet before Morgana’s override spaced the air in the bay and took everything not chained down with it.

As Arthur studied the barrier and how it sank into the walls on either side of the portal, Lance pushed his way forward to Arthur’s side, sword drawn, and leaned in to say, “Burns.” He gestured toward one of Mithian’s knights in his white armour cradling his arm. The air smelled faintly of roasted flesh. “We’re going to need to let the door close.”

“She’s not getting away.” Arthur waved his hand to back the Knights further away from the barrier. Merlin didn’t go with them. He had his arms folded across his chest, a frown on his face as he studied the barrier that blocked their way. Arthur raised his voice to get his attention, “Merlin.”

“What?” Merlin’s head snapped up and he focused on Arthur, taking a step back when he noticed he was standing alone with Arthur inside a loose ring of Knights.

Merlin nodded toward the door.

Merlin’s gaze travelled between barrier and Arthur. His lips parted, his shoulders twitched, and he ducked his head. Their audience quieted to the click of priming weapons and the creak of armour.

Merlin licked his lips and rubbed the centre of his chest.

Arthur knew what he was asking. He wanted to stroke Merlin’s cheek and encourage him with word and touch, but this wasn’t a decision Arthur had say in. He just hoped that Merlin trusted him enough to know he wouldn’t ask if he didn’t think it necessary.

Lance’s drawn sword was no longer pointed toward the door. He watched the rest of the Knights warily. The others’ sword points and pistol barrels drooped floorward, their wielders confused and
uneasy. All eyes rested on Arthur, Lance, and most of all Merlin. “Arthur-” Lance warned.

“I take full responsibility. He is under my protection, is that clear?” He raised his voice for the last question. Speaking over the scattered ‘aye’s, he said, “Merlin?”

Closing his eyes briefly, Merlin nodded. He stepped to the door and squared his shoulders.

Arthur quashed his relief and drew his sword, facing the darkened airlock. He readied himself to dart through, firmly ignoring whispers that sprang up as he turned his back on his Knights.

Merlin put his hands up, palms flat toward the barrier and took a deep breath. A shiver washed over him and in its wake brought stillness, a sort of calm that Arthur recognised from the first lessons he taught his trainees learning to fight with a sword. Rotating his wrists to bring his palms together, Merlin’s eyes lit gold and he plunged his folded hands through the barrier. He lifted his elbows and turned his palms outward to grip the edges of the rip he had just created. He began to strain. A fissure appeared.

The Knights erupted into shouts that made Merlin’s concentration wobble. Arthur growled to himself and turned, cloak swirling, and pointed with his sword to the edge of the ring. At his side, Lance was doing his very best to put himself between the most distressed and Merlin without actively threatening anyone. It surprised Arthur not at all that it was some of his father’s Knights that looked most unhappy.

“Knight Percival,” Arthur barked out. “Knight Elyan.”

The two Knights called came to stand before Arthur. Percival towered over Gwen’s brother, and Elyan planted himself half a step in front of the muscle-bound Knight. They wore identical expressions of concern - but not, Arthur noted, confusion.

“Explain to anyone who needs to hear it that the Pendragon does not discriminate between members of his fleet.”

The sudden, wide-eyed look that Lance gave him and Elyan’s indrawn breath made him review his words and sigh. He’d forgotten to add ‘heir’. The even angrier mutterings from his father’s Knights told him that his slip of the tongue had not gone unnoticed.

No reason to pretend he hadn’t said exactly what he meant, though he would have chosen a more auspicious moment to make his intention public. At least none of Mithian’s knights even twitched at his declaration. He could kiss her for her forethought alone. Or yell at her for telling her crew before-times, even if it had been her idea in the first place.

Percy simply nodded and turned to face the others, rolling his shoulders and planting himself in a wide-legged stance. Elyan took up a post at his side.

It would have to do. “Knight Lancelot,” Arthur said, the full name and formal title making Lance stand a little straighter. “I’m jamming armour and uplink transmissions. Make sure that none that would bear tales leaves this corridor. I wish to maintain the element of surprise when I press my suit with father and the other rulers.” It wouldn’t do to give Agravaine foreknowledge of what Arthur intended.

Lance didn’t bother to hold back his grin. “Yes, sir, Pendragon, sir.”

“Arthur-” Merlin sounded strained, and when Arthur turned back around he found his warlock holding open a gap in Morgana’s barrier just wide enough for both of them to slip through. “It’s designed to backlash if I break it and I don’t think I can protect all of them.”
Arthur wasted no time. He turned his shoulders to slide through the gap in the barrier and, 
swivelling, pulled Merlin through before anyone else could think to follow them. Merlin yelped at 
being manhandled, but Arthur had him safely through and on his feet before the fissure snapped shut. 
The sound from the other side became brassy and muted.

Lance was pointing at his head and then above the portal between them, the sounds of his distress 
similarly dampened. He mouthed the word ‘helmet’.

There was not much for Arthur to do but shrug at him. The timer for the bay’s outer seals was getting 
dangerously close to expiring. He would just have to catch Morgana before a helmet became 
necessary. If worse came to worse, he’d hold his breath and let his scrubbers take over. He shook his 
head at Lance and overrode the door panel, forcing it shut and locking it with every high-level 
permission and access barrier he could think of. The only one who would be able to get in would be 
his father, and even then it would take him several minutes. Hopefully it would be long enough.

“Let’s go,” he told Merlin, giving him a slight shake. The darkness of the bay surrounded them and 
Arthur’s attempt to access the illumination subsystems to turn on the lights were met with a static 
block that felt like a mix between electrical resistance and system corruption. The only light came 
from the green bioluminescence stripes of the destriers clustered beyond them.

Merlin was leaning hard against his side, his wide eyes on the now-closed portal in front of them. He 
huffed, slanted an annoyed look at Arthur, and righted himself. Bringing up his hand to wipe at his 
forehead, he paused when he found it covered with in black. He dusted his hands together and most 
of it flaked to the floor.

Arthur grabbed his wrist before Merlin could drop his arms to his side. Holding up Merlin’s hand, he 
inspected it, cursing internally that he hadn’t had time to patch his scanners to be compatible with 
Merlin’s ID chip and their obsolete biometric format. He had to depend on his eyes alone. “You’re 
burnt.”

“It’s blood,” Merlin said. He smiled, tired, and a small white light began to burn in his palm. It cast 
flickering light over his fingers and captured wrist, shining on his face from below. His hand was 
streaked with the rusty red of dried blood. He rolled his eyes at the look on Arthur’s face and said, 
“Not mine. Yours. You’ve a matching print.” He indicated Arthur with a tilt of his head.

Only then did Arthur look down to see the smeared handprint over the dragon on his chest.

“Head wounds bleed rather a lot,” Merlin said, his eyes on the print, looking through and beyond it.

Arthur dropped Merlin’s hand, startling him out of his reverie, and said, “On your guard.”

There was no time for stealth. Merlin sent the light ahead of them, a bright white point that revealed 
them just as surely as it revealed their path. They ran, leaping conduits and ducking beneath wings. 
Merlin kept up by dint of his long legs, though he started panting about the time he gasped out that 
they were halfway across. Morgana had planned ahead. Aithusa was tethered near the outer bay 
doors. Arthur’s imminent vacuum warning began to scream at him, washing his oculars in angry red 
to the point where he had to mute the alarm.

Morgana had ringed Aithusa in faerie lights of her own, cool white-green orbs that floated in a loose 
circle that encompassed her entire ship and lit her surroundings with a wavering, watery glow. She 
was working on three checklist items at once, using hands and magic to do final vent on Aithusa’s 
ports, to run manual calibration checks on her engines, and to detach the primary nutrient conduit 
from the underbelly of the ship. She was focused, apparently oblivious. Her movements remained 
precise for all that she hurried.
She turned a moment before he called out, not as oblivious as he had marked her. Her hand shot out, her lips moved, but what she said was lost in the roar of the spell as it left her palm.

Behind him, the beat of Merlin’s boot steps faltered and he cried out. A barrier that glowed with the same inner light as the one across the door into the bay flickered to life half a foot in front of Arthur’s chest.

Morgana’s spell hit the barrier in an explosion of light and colour, the shape of both spells manifesting as they contacted one another. The wicked tip of her spell slid through the barrier like a spear through a pillow, barely slowed, shredded the barrier into motes of light that left afterimages when they burnt out. The sharpened end of her spell scored the armour above Arthur’s heart just as the barrier wrenched to the side, dragging her spell off target. Half a heartbeat later, both spells detonated in a mixed conflagration of gold and green.

Arthur brought his arm up to shield his eyes. “Morgana!”

“Come no closer,” Morgana told them, her voice cold. Her hands remained raised. The shadow that crossed her face when she looked past his shoulder had him whirling.

Merlin had fallen to his knees. He clutched his head, eyes squeezed shut, and the low, pained noise that rumbled from his throat in a steady wave was very, very not human.

Taking a step in his direction, Arthur was called up short by Morgana. “Don’t you dare,” she snarled out in warning.

It became clear a moment after she spoke that she wasn’t talking to him. The words that rolled from Merlin’s mouth where in no language Arthur had ever heard. They were harsh-edged and cruel, and the echo that lived within each syllable suggested something ancient, hollow, and vast that lived beyond the vessel that gave them voice. Merlin spoke a single, clipped sentence, dragging his eyes open to stare past Arthur toward Morgana and her ship. He stopped speaking and there was a noticeable change of vibration in the air.

Firming his grip on his sword, he glanced at Morgana, but she was half-turned toward her ship. Her preparations for launch resumed. Arthur caught Merlin as he slumped.

“Aithusa’s very talented at causing pain. She forced a sensation link,” Merlin said by way of explanation, pushing Arthur out of the way so he could regain his feet. “I told her to stay out it.”

“You told her-” Arthur began to ask before his wits caught up with him. “Can you keep her from launching?” He rose with Merlin.

Merlin staggered once, clamping a hand on Arthur’s shoulder to keep himself upright, and shook his head. “She’s still a ship. As like to order someone not to breathe. They might try to obey, but their body would force them to put air in their lungs eventually. I’d rather spare her the distress.”

“Who’s going to spare us the distress?” Arthur quipped, steadying Merlin with a hand on his back. Merlin flashed him a grin that swiftly transmuted into a shout. He shoved Arthur hard - harder than he had the muscles for, especially with Arthur in full armour - and dove in the opposite direction.

Between them, where they had been standing, a ring of bone shards wrapped in steel snapped upward from the floor, piercing the flesh of the deck and spreading outward in concentric circles as the two of them scrambled away. The shards severed conduits and chains as they went, proving that even Arthur’s armour would be hard-pressed to resist them if he let himself be caught. Morgana stood, one hand on the hull of her ship, the other outstretched toward them, her expression blank.
Arthur angled himself towards her, but only managed a couple of steps in her direction before her lips moved and the spell changed. The destruction of the deck ceased and a wave of fire swept before her, blocking his way. The heat of it made him pull up short and cover his face again, bracing himself as it washed over his armour and singed his hair. His armour’s coolant system groaned and threw errors to his oculars. His cloak billowed around him, the heat causing it to flare out, the bottom edge burnt black.

Behind him, Merlin cursed and there was a muted flare of light. Arthur didn’t dare turn around.

“You don’t need to do this,” he shouted as soon as the air cooled enough to breathe. The scent of burnt skin and sizzling fat filled the air as her fire encountered the mangled deck.

“Do I not? You heard the King. I am to be seized.”

“I’m not here to seize you.”

“Then what are you here for, brother?”

“To-” Arthur halted. He felt like he was admitting to something when he said, “I can’t let you leave.”

Morgana laughed. Her hands stayed up, her sharp eyes on him and Merlin behind him, but she did not continue to cast. Instead, she mocked him. “Is that so? I’m afraid I’m needed elsewhere.”

“Stay. I’ll protect you.” He felt more than heard Merlin approaching him from behind and put out a hand when Merlin would have stepped in front of him.

A dozen paces separated them from Morgana. Her green faerie lights flickered fitfully above and behind them. Morgana’s loyalties fell within the same morass of uncertainty, danger, and threat that Merlin’s had. He couldn’t afford to panic this time, not with Merlin to guard. Not with how badly he’d failed Morgana already.

Merlin might allow him his mistakes. Morgana could not afford to do the same.

“Don’t lie to me,” Morgana snarled. Her expression grew venomous. “I’ve broken your precious laws, your binding oaths, and challenged the King with full knowledge of the consequences. I declared my allegiance to those that wish you and father dead. I wish to establish my rule within Camelot and upon Albion in your stead. That’s treason, Arthur, and I have the power to make good on my claim. In magic and allies and soldiers.”

Her eyes looked very green, reflecting her faerie lights. “Do not toy with me.” Her volume dropped and her intensity rose to the point of accusation. “Do not give me false hope of a happy reconciliation. I have been party to the instrumentation of your death twice already, and by luck or Merlin you’ve survived both attempts.” She took a step forward.

Merlin’s fingers curled around the vambrace of Arthur’s off hand where the Glatissant had bitten through. Arthur’s skin prickled, gooseflesh rising. Merlin’s breathing rasped in his chest, harsh, the sound of a man ill-conditioned to fighting openly for his life. Arthur adjusted his grip on his sword, shifted his stance to keep himself between Morgana and Merlin. He could not honestly that the woman who stood before them now was his sister any longer.

“Nothing to say?” Contempt lay thick in her voice. Her eyes went to Arthur’s sword and her lip curled. “You judge me, then? By what right?”

“I will keep Camelot, my people, and the fleet safe,” Arthur said quietly. “The only judgement I pass is whether or not you’re a threat to them.”
All emotion faded from her expression. She clenched her outstretched hands into fists. “You came here to discover if I meant your people harm? Then take your sword in hand and judge me as you would. Even now my allies await my signal across your precious fleet, and you shall never root them all out before I make my summons. Your fleet will turn against you, sweet Arthur, and Camelot shall be mine despite what resistance you might offer.”

Arthur closed his eyes. “Morgana.”

“What choice do I have?” She lifted her hands from attack position and dragged them forcefully through her hair. “I mean to make a place for me and mine. To speak openly and in good faith to the rulers who have long followed father’s lead has been the death of others who have tried the same. The most powerful of us live and train in secret, even now hiding, though the Purge supposedly ended a decade and more ago.

“You live as heir, as embodiment of all father’s triumphs. I am not meant to exist and have been told again and again that my birth is a mistake to be corrected. Did not the hunt of Muriden make that clear? The deaths he wrought are on all of our hands. Yours and mine.” She lifted her hands to inspect them briefly, their cracks and folds edged black with blood. She displayed them, palms out, and gave a watery laugh. “I can be nothing but bloody and still survive to achieve my goals.”

Shaking Merlin free and striding forward, Arthur had his sword at Morgana’s throat before she could bring her magic up to bear. The very point of it rested at the hollow at the base of her neck. She brought her chin high, backed away until she hit the curve of Aithusa’s hull behind her. He followed, elbow up, his sword arm controlled. He watched her hands, her face, her lips for what spells she might destroy him with. Threat though she was, all he saw was Morgana - desperate, resolved, and unafraid.


Her eyes narrowed, flicked to the sword and back to his face. “You ask after Mordred?” She spoke as though she expected a trap. “I saved his life and yours.”

There was a rattle of chain from somewhere on his periphery, a faint rushing noise that he ignored. He could not afford to take his focus from his sister. Again he heard Merlin call his name. Morgana’s lip twitched in something like amusement.

“You ripped his chest open,” Arthur said.

“He was marked. Bound by geas to slay you, his will corrupted.” She spoke calmly, eyes on his. “If he is helped, he will live. If I had not destroyed the mark-” Her gaze tracked something behind him where he felt Merlin’s presence.

Morgana resisted speaking for long enough that he thought she would not speak at all.

Merlin sounded strained and a little pleading, his voice overloud. “She helped me bring you back.”

“Why?” Arthur leaned in, the sword point steady. “If I was dead, why not leave me that way? You have claim, you threaten me with blood and allies and power. Why not leave me dead?”

Morgana resisted speaking for long enough that he thought she would not speak at all.

Every word a confession, she said, “You were not supposed to die like that.”

“Quickly and painlessly? I know what a headshot is like, Morgana. Were you wanting to draw it out
“You’re fucking insufferable, did you know that?” she said, and she sounded so much like the disgruntled little sister he loved that he almost dropped the sword point from her throat. He caught the faint smirk she gave at his reaction and steadied himself. As soon as he had, she told him, “The agreement was that Mordred shoot father.”

Her response threw him off-balance. He frowned at her, eyebrows furrowing as he tried to parse her response into something he could understand. His oculars flickered fitfully, uselessly giving him her heart rate and her pupil dilation when he could read her well enough without. Whatever her intent, her words distracted him. When she lifted her hands and pressed her palms together with the sword between them, his instinct was to thrust.

Morgana wrenched the sword to the side so that it passed her throat harmlessly and deflected off Aithusa’s hull, the metal folding over on itself, coming apart in globules that seared the deck where it fell. He swore and flung his useless sword to the side, snatching his gauntleted hand to his chest and fumbling with the buckles.

The ruined sword never hit the ground. Arthur finally registered his surroundings to find himself in a shimmering golden dome that stretched over the three of them. Merlin was on his hands and knees, cursing at the deck, his eyes lit and brilliant. Beyond the dome, the severed ends of conduits and chains twitching as the air howled out of the destrier bay and into space. A massive crate rolled end over end straight at the dome, shattering to splinters of plastic and scattering bolts that rolled toward the open outer doors.

Turning off the vacuum alert had, perhaps, been a poor choice.

His melting gauntlet followed his sword, swept out into the black by the rush of escaping air. He tried to send a command to cut off the ship’s attempt to refill the bay, or to trigger the manual cutoff where the automatic was failing, but he reached only the same muzzy static he was beginning to associate with magical interference.

Morgana clambered up the ladder to Aithusa’s cockpit and threw herself inside. Arthur attempted to follow.

The first step he took, she threw a spell over the side of the ship and slammed the canopy down. An explosion of sparks seared his armour and stung his cheeks, distracting him long enough for her engines to engage.

Aithusa’s wings rippled and she lifted away from the deck. Swearing, Arthur halted at the edge of Merlin’s spell. The vacuum integrity warning for his armour was a splash of red along his lower periphery.

Merlin stretched a hand as if to hold Aithusa still, to arrest her by force alone, but the moment he did the dome wobbled and wavered and he abandoned the attempt.

The engines still had to cycle up to full power, leaving the ship hovering for long enough for Morgana to fling a message to him via his short-range transmission mods.

“Combining King and Pendragon left so much room for me to undermine our father.” Morgana said, her voice smooth and dark as her subvocal pickups routed her true voice past the signal contamination of speaking aloud. “If Uther does not survive the night, you would be well to mind the gaps between your roles.”
Arthur took her words as a threat. He shouted, hoping she’d hear him, tying the pickups in his suit to his short-range transmitter and lobbing his words at her like he’d given her his diagnostics. “You’re not wrong! Fuck. Morgana! That’s something we can fix. Don’t do this!”

He didn’t know if she heard him until her voice came back over auditory bypass.

“You still have time to kill Agravaine.”

Aithusa’s engines hit peak and she flashed away, out the door and into open space. He caught a glimpse of lasers and the red underbellies of some of the Camelot’s destriers from other bays, but they were slow and clumsy compared to Morgana’s craft.

The moment Morgana was out of range, sensor information flooded through Arthur’s oculars as his uplink to the Camelot came back online. The emergency shutoff finally activated and the Camelot stopped pumping air directly into the void. The outer doors began the long, slow process of re-closing.

Arthur knelt and put his bare hand between Merlin’s shoulder blades. Merlin’s uniform was soaked with sweat and he was panting hard, reeling from side to side even with his head down and arms braced on the floor.

“Are you with me?” Arthur asked, stroking gently down Merlin’s spine. The dome protecting them from vacuum and debris wobbled. Arthur stopped.

Merlin didn’t move from his hands-and-knees, but gave Arthur a look out of the corner of his eye. “You have no idea.”

One glance at the bloody handprint in the centre of the golden dragon on his chestplate left Arthur unwilling to argue. He kept his hand on Merlin’s back, a warm spot of reassurance as they crouched and waited. Merlin eventually sat up and crossed his legs in front of him, resting against Arthur’s support.

Staring at the outer bay door, willing it to close faster, Arthur told him what Morgana had said of Agravaine.

Merlin remained silent for a long moment. “Agravaine failed his assassination attempt because the King was wearing chainmail. In- when you were dead. There’s no reason to assume he won’t try again when a better opportunity presents itself. Or try for the first time.” He scrubbed his hands over his face. He sounded distracted. Granted, that was easy enough to explain by the still-solid dome of magic keeping the two of them breathing. “Even if we can’t stop her, we can stop him?”

“That’s the goal,” Arthur said. He watched worriedly as Merlin rubbed again at the centre of his chest. “You alright?”


“To what?”

Merlin hesitated. “No more oath…” He sounded as if he wanted to continue, ending his sentence without finishing. Arthur waited for several seconds.

When no more words proved forthcoming, Arthur said, “I’m sure you’ll manage.” He kissed the side of Merlin’s head.

Batting him away, Merlin pointed at the dome above their heads. “You’re making me lose my
concentration.”

“Far be it from me.” Arthur sat back on his heels and kept Merlin propped upright as they waited.

It took a small eternity for the bay to seal and fill with air once more. In his impatience, Arthur dragged Merlin to his feet when his spell finally collapsed and carted him bodily to the inner bay door. Removing his own security measures blocking door access to the repair bay took half a minute longer than he would have liked.

Arthur opened the portal with a thought to reveal his worried knights milling just beyond. The relief on Lance’s face made Arthur grin. The shock on some of the other Knights’ faces made him grin wider.

Before any of them could recover, Arthur pointed at Lance and ordered, “Find me King Godwyn and a sword I can borrow. I’m going to have a little chat with my father.”
Arthur swept past the guards at the entrance to the ruler’s council chamber still wearing his brilliant red cloak and ceremonial armour, scarred and singed from his encounter with Morgana. He held a sonic pistol, finger light on the trigger, and approached the small dais where his father and Agravaine stood waiting for the other rulers to connect. In Arthur’s wake trailed King Godwyn of the Gawant, his daughter and heir Elena, Mithian heir Nemeth, and one grubby, out-of-place Merlin.

“Father,” Arthur greeted, getting both the King and Agravaine’s attention. Agravaine swivelled toward the approaching group when Uther did, eyebrows raised and a polite expression of surprise and attention on his face.

The King marked Arthur’s entourage and asked, puzzled, “Arthur?”

Without breaking stride, Arthur brought up the pistol. His aim was true and the sonic blast caught Agravaine square in the chest. His uncle staggered off his feet, his heel slipping from the dais to leave him sprawled across the floor. Uther rose half out of his seat, fingers clutching the arms of his chair as he stared wide-eyed at the pistol in Arthur’s hand.

Holstering his weapon, Arthur halted in front of him. “I will accept your abdication immediately.”

Threatened or no, Uther’s response was swift. “Absolutely not.” He stood. The dais gave him the height he needed to look down on Author, to place his son in the supplicant’s position. “To suggest as much is treason.”

“I’m afraid it wasn’t a suggestion,” Arthur said. The large screens that lined the room began to light. The rulers on the other ends were making their connections. Arthur didn’t have much time.

“You stand accused of working against the best interests of Camelot, and of the fleet. Both now and since your assumption of both title of King and Pendragon.” It hurt to say it out loud. It hurt more to see the colour rise in his father’s face, the anger and betrayal written in the line of his shoulders and the set of his jaw. But it hurt worst of all for Arthur to acknowledge that he valued the spirit of his mother’s memory more than the shadow of his father’s life. “As heir Pendragon and heir Camelot, I exercise my dual right of succession in the wake of your abdication and place myself on the throne of Camelot and at the head of all military forces of the fleet.”

“You can’t do this,” Uther protested, casting a hunted look beyond Arthur to the king and heirs who stood with him. He found no sympathy from that quarter. Pulling himself up, he took a deep breath and when he spoke again, he sounded as reasonable as if he were arguing with a child. “You’ll set a precedent. Destabilise the lines.”

“Then consider this the precedent I set. I was once heir apparent Camelot. As you are Ambrosius
Pendragon’s brother, I thus became heir presumptive Pendragon in your place when you claimed for yourself the throne of Camelot. The other rulers may have accepted you, but you hold no claim to either position by your own actions.” Arthur folded his arms across his chest and watched his father pale. “Your abdication now will be treated as the transfer of power from regent to a ruler only recently come of age.”

Uther licked his lips. The leather of his gloves creaked as he flexed his hands. “When I took power after your birth, we did not know you lived. Regency is for living heirs.”

“Then it is time and beyond to correct the error of your coronation.”

Arthur studied his father. He looked wan, tight-strung, the lines around his eyes pronounced. He stood straight and unbending, but his chest heaved as he dragged in calming breath after calming breath.

When his father said nothing, Arthur continued, “You’ve been compromised, and this has affected your judgement.”

Arthur’s declaration broke Uther from his momentary abstraction. “Compromised,” Uther scoffed, his laugh too loud. “A hypocritical accusation coming from you. A retroactive regency I might accept, but compromised-”

“Morgana.” Arthur silenced him with a word. “Trusted ambassador. Daughter of your Consort. Her revelation as a sorceress of great power and perhaps ill intentions.” He tilted his head back, meeting Uther’s gaze. “I think, perhaps, that you consider mine the lesser betrayal.”

“She knew what she was doing,” Uther spat. “She challenged me upon my own ship, pit law against my fatherly affections.”

Arthur didn’t bother to raise his voice. “A law established because no one thought to question how compromised your judgement was over my mother. Not with the evidence of a sorcerer’s destructive power and cruel willingness for mayhem to lend you righteous motivation and credibility.”

“You question my sanity?” Uther asked, low and dangerous.

“There is no question of your sanity,” Arthur replied, “Only your choices.”

Their silent audience drew Uther’s attention, reminding him that he, too, should have allies to stand with him. He glanced over his shoulder at the fallen Agravaine. “I had advisers.”

“Whoever you had upon your ascension to assist you in decision-making are long gone. You now have one adviser. Singular. And Agravaine too, was compromised. Is compromised,” Arthur corrected himself. “He’s not dead, no matter how tempting.”


He turned back to find his father watching him with an inscrutable expression. “You are also, I have on good authority, wearing your not-so-ceremonial chainmail beneath your doublet as protection against your adviser.”

It was only then that Uther began to sound defensive, “A sensible precaution against a de Bois. It’s not, no matter how many times I’ve been accused, paranoia.”

Arthur had to laugh. He shook his head and broke from his arm-folded stance to rub at the bridge of
his nose. “No, it’s not paranoia. When you question my uncle upon his revival, ask him about the
dagger he carries upon his person. About the plot against your life. About how close you were to
come tonight with your own mortality.”

Uther sat down in his chair. His chainmail rattled. The screens on the walls showed movement, the
pictures beginning to resolve. Arthur froze the screens. He had one last question.

For this, he knelt before his father’s chair, bringing himself down to where Uther held his head in his
hands. Not unkindly, he asked, “Do you abdicate in my favour?”

“Morgana is lost,” Uther said in response, head still down. He spoke quietly enough that Arthur had
to lean in to hear him at all. “What she is… is unforgivable.”

“I would sooner say ‘what she has done’, father.”

There was a long moment of silence between them.

“Lost is not forever. There might yet be hope,” Arthur said, reaching out touch his father gently on
the arm. “Let me help.”

Uther nodded, then straightened in his chair.

“I abdicate in Arthur’s favour. Let the witnesses—” He threw a sour look at Gowdyn and the others,
“—attest that I have seen the logic in abdicating in favour of my son and rightful heir to Camelot, via
Igraine’s line, and Pendragon, via Ambrosius’s line.”

“Thus witnessed,” Godwyn said, a sentiment echoed by Elena, Merlin, and Mithian.

Arthur stood and released the lock on the screens. The other four - Bayard of Mercia, Annis of
Caerleon, Rodor of Nemeth, and Lot of Essetir - resolved on-screen in record time. Annis was first to
react with a startled, “Godwyn, what are you—” before she took in the full tableau with Agravaine just
beginning to stir. “Ah.”

It was Lot who said, “I thought you were going to wait a bit, lad.”


Lot held up his hands and gave Arthur a sardonic grin. “Didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Captain and King as well, Arthur?” Annis asked, her expression solemn, eyes sharp. “We agreed to
Pendragon. I remember nothing in our discussions that said anything about you ruling the Camelot.”

Uther sputtered at Annis’s casual words. “Bayard. Rodor, did you—”

Rodor just tipped his head at the screen. Mithian piped up, “Father might have been included in the
discussions.”

“Now, Uther,” Bayard said, “The boy made a very convincing case that you needed all your wits for
to rule groundside. That I agreed to. This wasn’t part of my agreement, Arthur.”

“There are—” Arthur said, grimacing, “-extenuating circumstances.”

Lot laughed, “Oh, do go on. Like father, like son.”

“Arthur—” Annis sounded concerned.
Arthur interrupted them, “As of this moment, the use of magic is no longer under penalty of death.”

Silence but for Uther’s choked-off cry of indignation filled the audience chamber. Arthur sought Merlin out of the corner of his eye where he was clutching both hands over his chest and looking pale enough to keel right over.

“May I,” Annis began, picking her words delicately, “Ask why?”

“Because as the Camelot’s structure exists at this point in time, it will not survive planetfall intact,” Arthur said. The lack of surprise on the other ruler’s faces told him everything he needed to know. “Magic is required to even attempt repairs within the rapidly closing window we have left. With my father in charge and magic still banned, the Camelot’s destruction is assured.”

He hesitated. “And because the Lady Morgana is willing to go to war with Camelot and the fleet in the name of abolishing the hunting and slaying of magic users. Like herself.”

Lot began to laugh. Behind Arthur, Uther sputtered, his half-vocalised protests sounding increasingly distressed. While the other rulers made startled exclamations and Rodor said something very loud about ‘Morgause’ and ‘obvious’, Lot laughed until tears streamed down his face.

“You find something funny?” Annis finally snapped at him, “Care to share with the rest of us?”

“Oh- only that stopping Morgana will take a bit more than removal of some bitty law,” Lot said, wiping at his eyes. “It has nothing to do with the fact she can wiggle her fingers and call fire. Placing yourself on the throne just makes you the target as opposed to your father. She aims to rule Camelot.”

“So I have been told,” Arthur said, watching Lot cautiously.

Lot leaned forward, sharply amused. “Do you deny that she has claim?”

“Ah-” Arthur let out his breath. He glanced over his shoulder at Merlin, who took the hint and moved up so that he was in Arthur’s line of sight. It was a stalling tactic at best, and a poor one, but watching Merlin step over and around Agravaine’s twitching legs was oddly fortifying.

He waited until Merlin was in place before addressing the screens once more. Each of the other rulers looked various shades of surprised and contemplative. Morgana’s parentage had been a better kept secret than Camelot’s likelihood of surviving planetfall.

Arthur said, “As verifiable genetic offspring of Uther, who upon her birth was acknowledged ruler of Camelot, she thus has a legitimate claim.”

“Tenuous at best,” Annis said after a beat of silence. “Arthur’s claim comes from Igraine, who was Queen upon his birth. With Uther’s abdication-”

Lot broke in, “Abdication doesn’t mean we didn’t consider him legitimate ruler. If we’re not admitting to any mistakes in letting Uther forego regency, because we all know we and our illustrious predecessors are faultless and infallible, then she’s of the bloodline.”

Bayard snorted. “Only you, Lot. How much of your resource allotment have you sunk into her bid for Queen?”

Arthur cut through the budding argument with a sharp, “Do you or do you not acknowledge my status as Pendragon of the fleet and Captain and King of Camelot?”
Annis leaned forward, silencing the others who would speak with a wave of her hand, “I mislike repeating history by allowing you dual roles, Arthur. I say again: we agreed to Pendragon, no more. Leave Uther as Captain and King.”

“I rescind my abdication,” Uther boomed and stood. Arthur whipped around to stare at him, and found his father with hands lifted, hundreds of tiny lights across his extensive mods strobing as he called to the Camelot around him. Uther’s face was the brilliant red of swallowed rage. “I rescind it with respect to both Pendragon and my role aboard the Camelot.”

“Father—” Arthur began.

“No son of mine is going to dishonour his mother’s memory by letting sorcerous filth use their magics upon her ship. I may have lost Morgana, misjudged Agravaine, but you have used their betrayals as vile manipulations. You spew self-righteous drivel of me being compromised by sorcery and you bring him into my presence.” Uther jabbed an accusatory finger at Merlin. What little blood remained in Merlin’s cheeks drained and he wavered on his feet. “You have been bewitched by that boy to use my weaker emotions against me. You are not fit to rule in my stead.”

Arthur drew his sword uncertainly, watching his father gesticulate with increasing force. Around the room, the laser defence systems began descending from the ceilings. Small panels popped open in the walls and guiding beams scattered small multicoloured dots across Arthur and his allies. A heartbeat later, the majority of the dots began to converge on Merlin.

But not all.

“Are you insane?” Annis said from her screen, her expression one of horror as some of the dots remained on Godwyn, Elena, and Mithian.

Mithian broke from Elena and Gowdyn and strode forward, her sword whispering from its sheath. Before she took a handful of steps, a warning shot deflected from her armour with a ping. She swore and clapped hand over the hole, one of the grid’s low-powered lasers more than strong enough to punch through her pauldron. Uther paid her grimace and put the swift-activated components of the grid to use, caging himself off from physical retaliation by layers of crisscrossing beams.

“You abdicated in front of witnesses,” Arthur held out his hand to halt Mithian when she would have started forward again. The Camelot’s internal defences were meant for invading species, two-tiered with light and heavy beams. That the light beams pierced Mithian’s armour meant that Uther had amplified his defences beyond what even Arthur could expect. As evidence of Uther’s paranoia, it was hard for Arthur to argue with modified lasers. He began to work desperately to force himself into Camelot’s systems before his father could activate more the room’s defences and roast them all. “Godwyn. Elena. Mithian. Merlin. The words are irrevocable and irreversible.”

Arthur called up the recording from the Camelot’s databanks, dragging the audio to the council chamber’s speakers and letting it play.

“I abdicate in Arthur’s favour. Let the witnesses attest that I have seen the logic in abdicating in favour of my son and rightful heir to Camelot, via Igraine’s line, and Pendragon, via Ambrosius’s line.”

“You are unfit,” Uther said, speaking over his own prior words. “Your first act as Captain and King has proven that beyond a doubt. Sorcery, sorcerers, must be destroyed if we are to survive.”

“We meaning who?” Arthur demanded. “We who, father? Uncle Ambrosius was a dragonlord, Morgana a sorceress. If magic does not flow within your veins, how do you explain those ties?”
While Arthur stalled, little hoping that his father would see sense, he joined battle with Uther within the systems of the Camelot. Neither of them were jacked in, both depending on uplink, and the Camelot could only feed them data so fast. The Camelot was a vast tangle of interdependent biotechnological operations, accessible through a mixture of commands and abstractions that mapped themselves into Arthur’s brain. It wasn’t as tight a link as jacking in, but it was enough to try and claim control despite his father’s superior access.

Arthur’s desperate attempts to wrest the room’s weaponry away from his father’s control pitted his knowledge of the ship and its intricacies against Uther’s. The abstractions that his brain and mods formulated for him, leaning hard on his aggregation algorithms, left him churning through waist-high mental mud trying to find a single solid path to the firing protocols.

The Camelot refused to respond to him as it should. Uther revoked Arthur’s control over systems as swiftly as Arthur activated them. Arthur started trying more and more obscure systems, looking for anything that might override his father or inject him into the grid. He managed to lock Uther out of the protein paste reconstitution machinery, the sixteenth subsection of underdeck twelve-B where someone had left century-old vibrational recording equipment active, and the uplink system. Arthur made sure that he could not be severed from the Camelot, but the hammer of his method made sure that Uther remained linked as well.

Arthur’s oculars flashed with text he barely had time to read. The lasers hummed as they warmed to fire. His father wasn’t going to use the light, rapid-activation lasers. Those had a chance of survival.

Merlin stood stock still, his eyes wide and decidedly blue. He had his hands up before him, palms out as if that would stop the attack when nothing magic appeared forthcoming.

Uther drew himself to his greatest height, arms raised and poised to signal his attack. “Ambrosius is dead, killed by his own foul magics. Morgana’s traitor sister proves that it is not my line steeped in sorcery. Don’t talk to me of kin, boy. Your mother-”

“My mother would never have condoned genocide,” Arthur cut him off ruthlessly. “Especially not in vengeance.”

At Arthur’s side, Mithian hefted her sword, licking her lips, but otherwise did not move. Godwyn of the Gawant stood back to back with Elena, his sword drawn and her arm raised to hold the flicker of a small, round force shield protecting her father’s flank. The rulers on the screens, safe on their ships, hardly dared to breathe.

“How would you know?” Uther said, quiet and cruel. “Sorcery stole her from you. The Lake woman’s craft killed her as surely as you stand before me.”

Arthur had nearly run out of options to try when he found an ancient permissions system based around inconvenient strips of plastic printed with magnetic information. Somehow, ridiculously, Merlin’s name was included in the otherwise tiny, restricted database hundreds of years out of date, his authorisations propagated across the entire ship to include more systems with greater access than Arthur or his father combined.

Without pausing to question, Arthur hijacked Merlin’s authorisations with an equally-ancient set of heir’s protocols.

There was a loud, audible click as Arthur locked his father out of the defence grid and away from the rest of Camelot’s systems. Mithian and Elena both jumped at the noise, looking everywhere at once as if sword or shield would stave off three hundred and sixty degrees of high-powered laser beams. Only Godwyn remained unmoved, his eyes on Uther.
“Fine,” Arthur told his father. “Then I don’t condone genocide.”

Uther’s lip twisted into a sneer of contempt. The laser’s hum reached their peak and he sliced his arms down to activate the grid.

Even though Arthur knew he had control of the system, that nothing could happen that he did not allow, he still whirled at the gesture. Merlin, breathing hard, watched the little multicolour tracing lights flick out one by one before meeting Arthur’s eyes.

Relieved, Arthur turned back toward his father and extended his sword. “Sit.”

Uther, breathing heavily through his nose, did not. The grid powered down, leaving Uther vulnerable to steel once more.

Arthur echoed his previous words for the silent rulers, his sword point steady. “Do you or do you not acknowledge my status as Pendragon of the fleet and Captain and King of Camelot?”

Again, Annis was first to speak. “I acknowledge,” she said, her tone flat, eyes on Uther, “What I acknowledge, however, is the current necessity. Pendragon, yes, and King, but I wish to register my objection to the breach of our agreement.”

“Duly noted,” Arthur said.

The other rulers were similarly hesitant. Arthur could not tell whether it was because their faith in Arthur had been shaken at his seizure of both his father’s roles or because of Uther’s threats toward one of their own.

Bayard, Uther’s oldest and staunchest ally, shook his head slowly when it came turn for him to speak. His expression unreadable, he said only, “Acknowledged.”

A muscle in Uther’s jaw jumped. He flexed his hands into fists.

Lot was the lone dissenter. He toasted Arthur with an imaginary glass and said, “Here’s to Pendragon. Sorry to say that I’m going to be waiting for a secondary claimant before making my final decision on Camelot.”

“Even after Uther’s display?” Annis asked in disdain.

Lot laughed. “Even after Uther’s display.”

The acknowledgements (even without Lot) were enough to make a ruler of Arthur.

Their combined objections, however, shook Arthur’s confidence. Morgana’s parting warning of how easily he could be destroyed by conflicting role requirements loomed large in his mind as even Rodor - vague, silly Rodor whose power was half due to Mithian’s backing - questioned Arthur’s ability to build Pendragon back into the resource as he’d promised while taking on such a project as the ailing Camelot.

Still, he was now Captain and King of Camelot by acknowledgement of the ruler’s council.

“Thank you,” he managed to say once the formalities were complete.

Uther finally sat. Arthur followed the motion with the point of his sword, stepping up onto the dais, but Uther merely slouched back into his chair, propped an elbow on the arm, and rested his chin on his fist. His face remained florid, his mouth twisted in disgust, but he no longer looked as if he
wished to throw himself forward to attack with his bare hands. Arthur sent out a summons for his Knights.

“Thank you,” Arthur told the rulers again. “If I may have leave to settle affairs here?”

The other rulers signed off with varying hesitance and left Arthur to the task of dealing with his hostile father.

Godwyn himself escorted a dazed and groggy Agravaine from the room, flanked by an unusually-steady Elena and a triumphant Mithian. The latter’s oculars flashed in his direction and the word CONGRATULATIONS scrolled across Arthur’s vision. He gave her a slight smile, not quite as sure he wanted to celebrate as much as she thought he should when his weapon remained drawn and levelled at Uther.

Arthur sealed the door after they left, keeping out Uther’s Knights when they would have entered. Their loyalties had yet to be confirmed.

At last it was just Arthur, his father, and Merlin as they waited for Arthur’s summoned Knights to arrive to escort the deposed King to his new accommodations.

Uther broke the silence, shaking his head and rubbing his fingers across his lips. “I hope you know what you’re doing.” Uther tipped his head toward Merlin, dry disdain in the curl of his lip. “With him as much as with any of this.”

Arthur’s eyebrows rose. “He has done nothing to you.” Merlin came to stand next to him, remaining on the floor next to the dais. Arthur dropped his free hand to Merlin’s back.

“Magic has done everything to me, and he possesses it. If I thought it would make an impact on you I would rail and scream.” Uther chuckled darkly to himself. “I am fully capable of those sorts of theatrics. I would wail ‘sorcery’ and berate you to send my forces to drag your sister back here by her hair. You should. I think you’re wrong to trust creatures with unnatural powers such as his. This course of yours will end in disaster. Magic caused the Camelot’s damage. More magic will merely make it worse.”

Merlin took a breath like he wanted to say something, to protest, but Arthur ran his hand across his shoulders to get him to look up. When he did, Arthur shook his head. Merlin subsided, looking unhappy.

“I take pride in the fact you’re not stupid or you wouldn’t be standing there as my acknowledged successor,” Uther continued when neither of them responded. “But you’re naive. Too young by half, and more stubborn than I gave you credit for. All I have left is an appeal to your sense of duty. You will kill everyone on this ship if you keep your liaison with this… monstrosity. Be well rid of him.”

Arthur’s jaw tightened. He squeezed Merlin’s shoulder in reassurance. “I have no intention to be rid of him.”

“Kill him,” Uther said, his tone mild. “It’s the only way to be sure his magic does not betray you. If I had known about your sister, I would have made sure of her myself long ago. It would have been a kindness.”

At Arthur’s side, Merlin caught his breath.

Arthur stared at his father. “When you said she was lost to you, I thought you meant to reconcile. Killing your daughter won’t bring back your wife.”
Uther huffed, a laugh that was barely a laugh. “It was never about bringing her back.” Rubbing his hand across his mouth again, Uther closed his eyes and ended the conversation.

Waiting for his Knights, Arthur activated succession protocols using Merlin’s impossible authorisations and locked his father out of the Camelot’s systems properly.

Arthur answered for himself the question of how Uther had known of Merlin in the process of revoking his father’s access. The last visual feeds his father had viewed were the ones for the destrier bay. There was no audio and the pickup had been corrupted by magical interference, but it was more than clear how Arthur had survived his confrontation with Morgana.

Percival, Elyan, Lancelot and Leon finally arrived at the council chambers and Arthur gave them orders for Uther’s imprisonment.

Taking Merlin with him, he left Uther still seated with his eyes closed and jaw tight, white lines of anger down each side of his nose. Arthur didn’t look back. His command had just trebled and holding an angry, bitter old man’s hand while he fumed was very low on Arthur’s list of priorities.
“They didn’t even mention it,” Merlin said, his voice rising in volume. “Not one of them. Arthur said, ‘oh, yeah, and magic is legal again, surprise’ and none of them said anything.”

Freya flicked her ear and opened one golden eye to peer up at him. *Loud.*

“Sorry,” Merlin apologised automatically. “Doesn’t it seem odd to you, though? These people supported King Uther for ages and ages, sending soldiers to hunt down magic users, and now that Arthur said it’s all over they don’t even blink?”

He sat on the deck of the Avalon’s bridge with a fully drawn Freya’s head in his lap. She was even more gorgeous than with a partial draw, the glossy black of her fur rich and dark. She wasn’t much bigger when she was solid, but she was pure muscle and he kept prodding her to move so his legs wouldn’t fall asleep. So far, she’d ignored him. The moment the draw had completed and he’d seated himself, she had thrown one massive paw across his knees to keep him still and promptly closed her eyes.

Though it was deep within the Camelot’s primary sleep shift, Freya wasn’t napping so much as enjoying the opportunity to be corporeal while Merlin drowsed. The Kilgharrah had launched alongside the White Hart and with it had gone Merlin’s one protection against Sigan’s nightly terrors. He knew it was horribly counterintuitive to get as close as possible to the source of his distress in order to relieve it, but with his magic still only barely controlled even with all the work he had done, Freya was his best chance for sleep for as long as Arthur remained aboard the Camelot setting his new Kingdom to rights.

Except Merlin hadn’t been able to sleep, even within the shelter of a bastet’s wings.

*Merlin.* Freya’s paws twitched. She flexed her claws, letting the tips of them jab him in the leg. *The only creature more out of touch with events on this ship is the monster that, right this very moment, is trying to eat us. I have no answers for you.* As if to prove her point, the entire ship creaked and groaned. Sigan had redoubled his efforts to drag her in the moment Merlin had taken refuge, but when he offered to leave, she had suggested a trade. If he wanted a chance to sleep, then he could, perhaps, give her a chance to draw.

“Right.” Merlin dragged his fingers through the fur behind Freya’s ear. They had yet to figure out if she was capable of purring. She grunted in approval. “Just, do you think—”

*I really don’t know,* she cut him off. *Maybe they knew he intended to make an announcement as Pendragon and expected it. Maybe they never agreed with the former Pendragon and so their opinions - and perhaps actions - haven’t changed. Maybe they consider themselves sovereigns and beholden to neither Camelot nor Pendragon and will keep magic illegal or not aboard their own
vessels at they see fit. I am pretty sure I have no idea who the current rulers even are.

Letting out a small laugh, Merlin relented. “Fine, it’s just… I expected explosions, or something. Fireworks. Objections.”

*Your memories say that your Arthur did not leave it up for debate. There would be no reason for explosions regarding a courtesy update on a policy change. Diplomacy and negotiations will no doubt come later.*

“Because no longer having to ‘officially’ fear for my life for the heinous crime of breathing is just a policy change.”

*You asked for an opinion. Freya gave him an unimpressed look with her single open eye. I don’t even have databases.*

“Point,” Merlin said. When he started to speak again Freya twitched an ear and slid her eye closed. “It’s just weird that people know, that people can know. I’m still terrified of accidentally doing magic in public. Even if the rulers didn’t object, some of the people living on the Camelot did when Arthur made his announcement.”

*And the fear is too ingrained.*

“On my side and theirs.” Merlin sighed and buried his face in the fur of the broad flat between Freya’s ears. She gave off heat like a true creature created of flesh and blood rather than magic. Her wings still disobeyed the laws of matter, refusing to collide with her surroundings when she wished to extend them, but she otherwise gave the convincing illusion that she could prowl her way right off the ship and down the corridor.

How far she might go and how much of her remained with the Avalon was something Merlin had no one but Freya herself to ask. “How much of you is in this cat-thing?” Perhaps not the most coherent opening question, but it would have to do. She was large enough that even though her skull rested in his lap, he barely had to bend to place his chin on her head.

Freya didn’t bother to stir. *What me* do you refer to? *

“Just… you. The essential ghost bits of you. A ship without a ghost still feels like a ship, just… without a ghost.”

*Unless the ship itself might compress, then this form is only a fraction of me. I permeate the bones and technical systems, from the tips of my grappling keeping us from Sigan, to the raw, stub end of my missing half. I make the ship whole.*

“You make what’s left of it whole,” Merlin said before he thought.

There was a long pause. Freya lifted her head and pulled back, her expression one of pure feline disdain. *Were you going somewhere with that?*

Merlin blinked at her, then grimaced. “Sorry. No.”

*Good. She shifted, shoving him bodily to the side, readjusting herself and her wings to give him more of her shoulder to lean on. But perhaps it is better to say that I bring the ship into balance, instead. It was built in proportion, flesh and machinery, waiting to be filled with a ghost.*

Brushing at her fur lightly to see a swirl of golden motes dust the air, Merlin nodded. “I was just wondering.”
You should sleep, she told him. Eyes closed and wings folded, she provided an example. She didn’t go so far as to snore, but her thoughts quieted in a deliberate attempt to quiet his own.

Sleep eluded him. Every creak of the ship made him freeze in fear that this would be the very second that Sigan overcame Freya, no matter that they’d been locked in struggle for longer than he’d been alive and Freya had grown into the flesh of the Camelot itself. For every creature-induced nightmare that Merlin avoided, his own mind was willing to produce ten more that were worse. He was just thankful that he had had no more past dreams or he might convince himself to never sleep again.

It didn’t help his general sense of paranoia that Morgana’s parting words clung to his thoughts.

She had inserted them into his mind by way of magic as he struggled to hold the vacuum away from her, Arthur, Aithusa, and himself.

She’d said, ‘Wish me luck.’

No explanation. No time to give one. Aithusa flew from the bay before he could ask.

He had lobbed a response into the ether, hoping that she might receive it before she was completely out of range.

‘Luck!’ he’d said. Because she’d asked it of him. Because the determination in her last words made him think she might need it. Because no matter what she aimed to do about her discovery, how little he agreed with her, or how much of who he might have been he saw in her, she had helped him bring Arthur back from the dead.

Freya shook him awake with a gentle bite on his shoulder. Her luminous golden eyes were large enough to startle him, the jolt of adrenaline bringing him fully awake. She sat back on her haunches and folded her wings to her sides, towering over his seated form and looking amused. Her tail twitched in impatience.

He yawned and, once recovered from his moment of surprise, asked, “How long was I out?”

Long enough to satisfy me that you have rested. The draw has almost run its course.

He didn’t want to put any more strain on the Avalon, or on Freya, than he had to. “I should be getting back.”

Before you go- Freya hesitated. Her hesitation captured his attention swifter than anything she might have said. I have a gift for your Arthur. Follow me.

She waited until he stood and put a hand on her shoulder to lead him from the bridge and into the bowels of the Avalon. The light, dim to begin with, faded as they started down a corridor that she had not shown him during the grand tour. His recall of her schematics said that this was an auxiliary route to a compression chamber deep beneath the miniaturised biosphere, part of the gas-capture system that would regulate the pressure should the sphere ever be populated. The corridor became too slender to fit both of them side by side. Freya nudged Merlin out in front, padding after him on silent paws as her wings drew sparks from the equipment they passed through.

At the corridor’s terminus was a small, broken portal. Sections of the iris hung loose and jagged, the metal tarnished and the flesh scraped away. Merlin stopped just before it, glancing back at Freya, but she shoved him through without pausing in her forward progress.

Merlin stumbled and caught himself on the door frame, eyes adjusting to the sudden light. The compression chamber had staved in the ceiling from above, dirt and detritus from the biosphere
collapsing into the cramped space. Roots and overgrowth spiralled down, forming a half-canopy that kept the lower area from filling. Blinking and scrubbing at his eyes, Merlin squinted until his vision adjusted to the brilliance of the white motes that hung in the air.

“Loose magic?” Merlin asked, incredulous. “You- this isn’t possible.”

*Not loose,* Freya corrected, passing through the walls of the chamber rather than attempt to squeeze her bulk through the battered door. *Merely me. Some of my fabric was not lost when I was torn in two. I have stored what I could, though it mislikes not having a host.* The white motes gravitated towards her bastet form, settling in her fur like so much luminous snow. She sneezed.

Resisting the urge to laugh or, perhaps, cry, Merlin tugged a mass of dangling greenery out of the way so he might step further in. Instead of moving onward, he rocked back on his heels, hands still tangled in vegetation, and tried to make sense of what Freya had brought him to see.

A tapered blade speared into the soil, its cruciform hilt wrapped in leaves and coils of vine. It looked partially abandoned and partially grown, flesh creeping up the flat of the blade and across the pommel. There was steel to it, asymmetrical and grooved, and the spider of circuitry across its surfaces. Ports on the grip and set into the crossbar were like none Merlin had ever worked with. They seemed to lead nowhere, though with the amount of magic clinging to the creation itself, he could not say for certain that they did nothing. It was a collection of parts rather than a coherent whole, and yet Merlin couldn’t take his eyes off of it.

*A ship usually creates a whole daughter vessel, spinning off a piece of themselves at the behest of their humans. They do not usually undertake this process alone, nor do they imbue the result with a piece of themselves.* She kept her wings spread and mantled, her eyes on Merlin. *If only a piece of me may leave, let it be Excalibur. A sword for your Arthur.*

Merlin licked his lips, and put out a hand. “That’s… that’s not a sword.”

Her nerves became more pronounced through the link she shared with him, as if she might pace if only she could remain within the chamber. He could feel the idea tickling at his thoughts. Her muscles rippled beneath her pelt as she shifted, her vertical pupils narrowing in the light. She ducked her head.

*I have only memory of swords.*

“Oh, fuck- no, Freya,” Merlin scrambled to take back even the hint of criticism, “It’s gorgeous.”

*Your Arthur will need it,* Freya said, still nervous and fidgety and projecting her uncertainty. *I have seen that he will need the scale of a dragon for vision and the claw of a cat to seek true, as I am both-*

The sudden, overwhelming hunger of a ghost caught Merlin by surprise, dragging through him, sharp-edged and ravenous. The desperate need for novelty and independence, to experience somewhere other than the prison of the half-devoured Avalon. He gasped and flung out a hand to brace himself against her and she subsided.

Panting, he eyed her, and asked, “It’s a way to escape, isn’t it?”

Freya flicked her tail and did not answer.

Merlin placed his hand on the flat of the blade and felt the hum of her permeating the weapon. It wasn’t her, not exactly, but it was a part of her. Non-sentient, but curious all the same.
If Freya said Arthur would need her sword, then, “I’ll take it to him.”

That is all I ask.

Snapping dry vines, Merlin yanked it free. It was light and felt balanced in his hand, but when he probed it with a tendril of his senses, it echoed like a larger vessel only partially filled. “Freya—”

It is not crafted for you, dragonlord.

Merlin grinned at her. She was beginning to fade, the draw ending as his power began to return of its own volition. “If I can come back, I will.”

She blinked slowly at him, then stood to shove her massive head beneath his hand. He laid his palm between her eyes and she sighed.

Do not make promises you cannot keep.
Plugging into the Camelot was far different than plugging into the Kilgharrah. Working around a ghost’s presence felt not unlike trying to get dressed in a cabin built for one during an awkward morning after, but the Kilgharrah had never made him feel unwelcome like the cold emptiness of the Camelot did. The sheer size and potential of the Kingdom ship staggered him. The Camelot’s aggregate data was roughly three orders of magnitude larger than the Kilgharrah’s, and Arthur’s flagging algorithms choked more than once.

Arthur lost hours whenever a new data chunk finished preparation, even though he left as much as possible to automated systems, but the Camelot was still - technically, at least - alive. The most adaptive technology and advanced heuristics could only evolve so fast, and part of algorithmic evolution was his ability to teach his algorithms what he wanted to keep an eye on. The Camelot was massive enough that similar subsystems in different sectors had wildly different behaviour based on their biotechnological underpinnings. Uncertain what would become important when Morgana finally attacked, his instructions contained more guesswork than he was comfortable with.

Sweat streaked his temples as he worked, eyes open and glowing in the empty room. Conduits snaked from the ceiling and up from his father’s former throne. Wires, plugs, and tangles of electrical and ichor-filled lines bound him to the seat. His internal processors stole so many cycles from his new Kingdom that it made him a teeny bit euphoric. The chokepoint of the entire system was his fragile human brain and how fast he could assimilate data; his growing headache kept him firmly grounded or he suspected he’d be flying high.

His sword arm was firmly socketed into the chair, he was using ports on his oculars that he had never found a use for before, and every single one of his chest ports was in use and supporting the maximum throughput, but he still ill-fit the throne. The crown hung mostly unused, some of the wires and conduits mysterious enough to need Gwen’s expertise. He might have been sufficiently modded to jack into the Kilgharrah, but there were aspects of the Camelot’s integrated systems that he had no way to explore.

The portal to the throne room irised open and Elyan poked his head inside. When Arthur didn’t stir, he swatted his flexiscreen against the door frame and ducked back out to the hallway.

Curiosity pulled Arthur from his task and he activated both visual and audio pickups for the corridor outside. Much to his surprise, he found it teeming with Knights and the chiefs of a dozen and more of Camelot’s departments. The unexpected crowd, combined with Elyan telling Lance that Leon and Enid were disembarking now to see him, said that it was time to jack out.

He cleared the scrolling data from his oculars as his physical senses returned. He was sore, his shoulders stiff and his mouth dry, and the ports in his chest and arm buzzed with the overload of unfamiliar cables. The headache that usually only appeared when he seized systems from the inside
was a shadow across his temples and a promise of future pain.

It was too much effort to unplug. Arthur activated the door and startled Elyan a foot to the left by calling his name.

Elyan brought Lance with him when he entered and Arthur raised his eyebrows. Lance wore his full armour, complete with ceremonial cloak. Arthur didn’t get a chance to comment, however, because Elyan strode up to the throne and placed a cupcake in Arthur’s palm.

In the face of Arthur’s bemusement, Elyan explained, “The head of the Pre-Colonial Research and Development Enclave sends you congratulations from the biosphere.”

“She sent me a cupcake?” Arthur asked, holding it up for inspection. It was decorated with his colours, the frosting a brilliant red sprinkled with tiny golden orbs. As he watched, the plastic that wrapped the cake warmed with his body heat and the orbs began to glow with a faint golden light. Faerie lights. Magic. A challenge and a peace offering as much as congratulations. “She wanted me to know.”

Elyan watched the little cake flicker and glow with a distant expression on his face. “She said to bring the decorated one straight to you,” Elyan said, then shook himself and smiled his usual smile at Arthur. Rolling his flexiscreen and tucking it beneath his arm, he thumbed over his shoulder at Lance. “He knows more, seeing as he’s the one who spoke with her.”

Lance said, “She wanted you to know that she has a minor gift only, and that Camelot has always been her home.”

Setting the cupcake carefully on throne’s armrest, Arthur sighed. “Both good things to know.”

The entire Kingdom had been thrown into chaos by Arthur’s announcement of Uther’s abdication and the legalisation of magic, but where those like Enclave Head Lunette – magic user or not – embraced the change and were willing to see what Arthur was going to do with the throne, a good portion of Arthur’s department chiefs had resigned. Most, thankfully, left without fanfare. The only truly memorable leave-taking had been the Chief of Sanitation. He’d all but thrown his resignation in Arthur’s face and parted with an, ‘I hope your precious sorcerers know something about shit, or you’ll be swimming in it before the week is out.’

The backlash hadn’t been as bad as he’d feared, but Uther’s influence ran deep. “You said something about Leon and Enid?”

“You heard that?” Elyan asked, sharing a raised-eyebrow look with Lance. “Between the two of them, they had a request. I’ll bring them in when they get here.”

“Please do. After that, see if you can’t track down whoever the new Chief of Repairs is, if we have one. I need to start reassigning crews to the scar.”

“Is there time?” Elyan asked, “We have a week, maybe two before planetfall.” After a beat, he tacked on, “Sire.”

“Valid question. We’ll have to work quickly.” Gesturing at the door, Arthur said, “Starting with them. You have an accounting of what they’re all there for?”

With the change of topic, Elyan pulled his flexiscreen from beneath his arm and snapped it open with a flourish. His rundown was short and sweet, and when he was done passing Arthur the abbreviated version of the various petitioners and well-wishers and those trying to fill the holes Arthur’d left in his command structure, he dragged Lance back out to the corridor to start ushering them into the
throne room.

First through the iris were Leon and Mithian’s first officer, Enid. The two hesitated as they approached the throne and looked in askance at Arthur’s glowing cupcake.

Leon was carrying a familiar sack.

“Absolutely not,” Arthur said before either of them could say anything. “Kanen wasn’t even a man by the time those things were done with him.”

Leon didn’t bother to deny Arthur’s assumption. “Be reasonable, sire. These rings alone caused at least a weeks worth of repairs to the finest galley in the fleet. We know for a fact they work on anyone, as do the others.”

Gesturing for Leon to open the bag so she could rummage, Enid added, “I have been working with some of my Captain’s contacts and they’ve identified the stud and the rod.”

She dropped the stud into Leon’s outstretched hand. He held it up for Arthur’s inspection.

“Cloaking stud. Variable size. Offers the wearer and whatever the wearer touches the option of limited invisibility and limited invulnerability,” Enid said. She twirled the rod in her mobile fingers for long enough to make the runes carved in the ivory burn red. “Fire wand. Point. Click. Shoot. Simple as a sonic pistol and twenty times more dangerous to the ship you’re on, especially if it’s not in the best of health. Your first officer and I are in agreement, sire. Forgive me the turn of phrase, but we need to fight fire with fire.” She kept the rod displayed until the colour faded from its runes.

“Mithian would have contacts with sorcerers, wouldn’t she,” Arthur said, rubbing at the bridge of his nose and cursing when is fingers fouled in the wires that connected the Camelot’s crown to his oculars. “Obviously. Where else would she find cryptographic cantrips. Ignore me.”

“Not when we need a verdict,” Leon said. “Last standing order was to lock these away for good.”

Arthur rubbed his knuckles over his mouth and studied them both. It bothered him less than it might that Mithian had resources only just now legal, mostly because Enid wouldn’t reveal their existence unless Mithian was offering the knowledge in trade.

“Not the medallion,” Arthur said finally. “Merlin said it was carved with the word ‘Serve.’”

“It likely controlled the Glatissant.” Enid pulled the medallion from the sack. “And it was crude. A rough, nasty sort of control that tapped the wearer for power. Best as our sources can determine, for a non-magic user it just… eats.”

“Eats.” Arthur didn’t like the sound of that.

Enid shrugged and passed the medallion over.

“The medallion remains with me. The rest-” Arthur closed his eyes. “Use them. If your ‘sources’ say they’re safe enough but for being weapons, then I rescind my earlier order to keep them locked somewhere. I would prefer not to use them at all, especially against our own fleet, but I don’t know what sort of fight we’re going to have on our hands.”

Permission granted and medallion tucked safely away in a pocket of Arthur’s uniform, Leon and Enid did not stay long. Almost as soon as they’d left the door irised open again to admit Mithian herself.
Arthur snorted at her when she entered. “There’s nobody on the White Hart right now, is there?”

“Unlike some, I have more than three people capable of piloting my vessel when I’m off doing heir things rather than captain things.”

The Camelot-induced euphoria had not been as offset by his headache as he’d hoped. Arthur pointed at Mithian and crowed, “Captain things!”

“Are you well?” She adopted a look of exaggerated concern. “Has being connected to the Camelot scrambled your wits?”

Swivelling his finger from Mithian to his cupcake, Arthur asked, “Did you miss this? If you can’t see it, then I officially need to disconnect and get some sleep.”

“Perhaps you should get some anyway,” she said, her expression softening as she watched the little thing glow. Its simple magic pulsed in time with the thrum of the ship around them. “Merlin has been at loose ends without you. He seems… worried.”

Arthur leaned forward to put his elbows on his knees only to be jerked back upright by the crown’s conduits that connected him to the ceiling. He popped them all free, and rubbed his hands across his face and through his hair. He ignored the sympathetic look on Mithian’s face. “He has no reason to be worried.” He peered through his fingers at her. “You’ve got sorcerers among your contacts, though? Really?”

“I wondered what Enid traded that got you to agree.” Mithian folded her arms across her chest. “Druids, actually. The Hallowcay is beholden to the Nemeth.”

Quick as thought, Arthur had the full statistics of the bastion-class Hallowcay in front of him, including every one of his crew who listed the ship as their origin. “The Hallowcay. Let’s see… it’s mostly biosphere. Barely even a propulsion system.” His attention lingered on the name ‘Mordred’.

Morgana had visited there often after she’d found Aithusa. He had no right to be surprised.

Mithian tilted her head. “It’s a… school, maybe? A sanctuary? Nemeth has always protected it, even during the Purge, despite our history with Camelot. Apparently magic is best done in and among what little nature we have.”

“Trees.” Arthur shut off his oculars and closed his eyes.

“Trees,” Mithian affirmed. “Among other things…” She paused, and when she spoke again she sounded uncomfortably serious. “Are you alright?”

Arthur didn’t know how to answer. “You’re here for a reason. What is it?”

She pressed her lips into a thin line and studied him for a long moment, but accepted the subject change. “One of my contacts visually confirmed Morgause.”

Arthur sat up. “Where?”

“A contact spotted her, mind, so there was no way for me to place my Knights where she could be captured, but she was seen leaving the Essetir and boarding a caravan-class hauler heading…” Mithian wrinkled her nose. “Their filed flight plan said it was going to resupply one of the galleys that’s in-system because of the recall. Whether or not that’s where she ended up is another matter. They’re both fringe ships and I don’t have anyone on either of them.”
“So we have nothing.”

“I have the purchases she made before she left the underdeck bazaars of Essetir. I have who she visited, for how long, what their affiliations are, and their movements since. I haven’t yet gained access to Lot’s communications systems, but I have several of her off-ship communications if you care to hear them. I know that some manner of signal has already gone out, though what it does and who it’s to, I don’t know.

“So no, we don’t ‘have nothing’. We have a great deal and it all points to impending action on her part. Something I thought the Pendragon should maybe be warned about.” Mithian raised an eyebrow. “Have a little faith.”

Arthur had to laugh. Rubbing his face again, metal clicking against metal, he chuckled through his fingers. “Point taken.” Straightening, he said, “You’re officially an Admiral of my fleet and the Pendragon’s second in command. As of now. Congratulations.”

Mithian stared at him, blinking, for long enough that Arthur thought he might have to repeat himself. Snapping herself out of it with a shake of her head, she snorted and said, “That’s rubbish. I don’t have time to be an Admiral, let alone chase you around getting you out of trouble. It took two weeks of repairs to get my ship back into shape this time. That’s not a precedent I like. That and you’d have me give up my command of the White Hart.”

“Not necessarily. I don’t think there’s been someone of the rank for years. Not with how fractured the fleet’s become. You could rewrite the position.”

Mithian narrowed her eyes. “I’ll think about it.”

“You’re already an asset,” Arthur coaxed. “And you’d get to pull rank on the Captains of other ships.”

“Tempting. I’ll get back to you.”

“The position isn’t going anywhere.” Arthur leaned back onto the arm of his throne, careful of his cupcake. “So Morgause has already sent the signal. Everything’s already in motion.”

“If that’s what the signal was for, then it looks like it. You might not have time to make any progress on the scar if that’s the case. If I were her, I’d want to hit you while you were weakest, and no matter how smoothly this transition has gone - don’t laugh, it has - you’ve still been weakened.”

“You always bear the best news,” Arthur said. He began to unplug himself the rest of the way from the throne, tugging out half of his bundle of chest cords with a single sharp yank. He frowned at the blood on some of the plugs. The throne was going to need to be tuned. His headache started to fade the moment he had severed the majority of his connections with the Camelot. “Think about my offer?”

“Already thinking about what else I can extract from you in exchange for the favour.” Mithian grinned at him, taking his words for the dismissal they were. She spun and headed for the door.

“More mercenary than Isolde,” Arthur muttered.

“I heard that!”

“Here I am, offering you an honour and a privilege—”
“-with a horrible, horrible trap included with the bait. I know what you’re up to.”

Arthur spread his hands and didn’t deny it. They grinned at each other. “Take care, Mith.”

“Stay safe,” she said before disappearing among the small crowd still outside.

He’d need to deal with all of them at some point, but thoughts of trying to accept congratulations or appease the upset disappeared at the sight of Merlin lingering in the doorway clutching a wrapped package to his chest. Merlin peered inside at Arthur and gave him a goofy grin when he saw him up and awake. Arthur beckoned him inside.

Merlin’s expression fell as he got closer, however, and he didn’t stop at the edge of the dais, but climbed right up and put one knee on the edge of Arthur’s seat. Dropping the package he’d brought to the side, Merlin planted a hand in the centre of Arthur’s chest and began to yank the rest of the plugs free with an intensity that bordered on scary.

Closing and locking the door with a silent command, Arthur gently tugged Merlin’s hands away from his chest and peered up at Merlin’s face. In the blue of Merlin’s eyes was a faint ring of gold, and the bruised circles of too little sleep beneath them stood out against his pale skin. “What’s wrong?”

“The Camelot.” Merlin cut himself off, breathing hard. His fingers flexed in Arthur’s grip. His fingers were daubed with Arthur’s blood. “The ship is dying, and the longer you’re linked to the systems, the further it drags you with it. Should you be bleeding?”

Arthur’s throat clogged, but he managed an answer regardless. “It happens, sometimes. Even with a well-calibrated system.”

Earlier, he had scrubbed the blood from his armour, wondering that he’d had no wound that it might have come from even though the most cursory of analysis told him it was his genetic match. A relic of an impossible future, and one he had apparently exited prematurely. Morgana and Merlin hadn’t argued details with each other and they’d had every reason to.

“Father has been linking with the Camelot for years.”


Arthur frowned at Merlin and ran diagnostics. The soothing, familiar greens and blues scrolled past until he got to some of the systems that rarely errored. He didn’t get large red warnings, but the ‘approaching tolerance’ alerts in his circulation and biological temperature systems were new. He didn’t drop his eyes from Merlin’s, only licked his lips and nodded.

Merlin had seen the colour of the results reflected in Arthur’s eyes and, if anything, it made him go paler than before. “You’re cold,” he said, and Arthur could feel the pulse in his wrists speed to almost a flutter. “Fading.” He sounded close to panic. “I fucked up.”

“I’m not fading.” Arthur squeezed Merlin’s hands, then released him to pull the last plugs from his chest and wrap his arms around Merlin. “I’m right here. Whatever you think you fucked up, you didn’t. I’m not going anywhere.”

The throne didn’t quite fit both of them and Merlin was still all bones and angles, but somehow Merlin managed to curl up and press his ear against the skin and metal over Arthur’s heart. Arthur had to rescue his cupcake lest it be squashed and it glowed peacefully in his palm while the steady heartbeat in Arthur’s chest reassured Merlin.
“I’m warming up now that I’m not connected. I won’t plug in again, not until we figure this out.”

It took a good minute before Merlin pushed himself up with a sigh and perched himself on the arm of the throne. He tucked his feet - sans boots, Arthur noted with amusement - beneath Arthur’s thigh. Merlin scrubbed his face hard with his hands and put his elbows on his knees. He peered down and gave Arthur a wan smile. “Don’t plug in, whatever you do.”

Nodding, Arthur’s mind raced. “The Kilgharrah will have to be where we set up our command post.”

“That’d be best. I’d—” Merlin let out his breath again and seemed to steady himself. “I’d want to fight on him anyways. He’s been itching to see what a dragonlord is fully capable of.” Merlin’s only then noticed Arthur’s handful of cupcake. “What’s that?”

“My Enclave Head sent me a ‘surprise I can magic’ pastry.” He wiggled his hand and the little lights bobbed. “Is it safe to eat? For me, I mean. Modded and all.”

Merlin reached out a hand to hover close to the frosting. The light flickered. “You’re too balanced for it to do much to your digestive system. You might shit gold for a few days, though.” Merlin grinned. It was dimmer grin than usual, but a grin nevertheless. Arthur couldn’t help but be relieved.

“Want it?”

“It’s yours.” Merlin put a hand to his chest, mock-scandalised. “I couldn’t.”

The tension remained in Merlin’s shoulders, but Arthur’s offer had loosened his spine and if his grin was a little wobbly still, it was close enough to normal that Arthur didn’t feel too bad indulging in his curiosity. “What did you bring me?” He tilted his head, carefully setting the cupcake on the arm of the chair where Merlin wouldn’t sit on it.

“Oh!” Merlin didn’t bother to descend from the throne, he just put out his hand and the package leapt from the floor. Now that Arthur had a chance to get a good look at it, the package was suspiciously sword-shaped.

Merlin tugged at the strings holding the thermal blanket in place. The plastic crinkled as he carefully undid the knots, stalling for time so he could explain the contents. “So. I slept last night on the Avalon - and before you say anything, it was the only way I was going to get any sleep at all. I knew the risks. But that aside, Freya made this for you.” He shoved the wrapping away and offered it Arthur hilt first. “She called it Excalibur.”

Arthur hesitated, baffled by the construction of what looked like someone’s rendering of a sword who had heard only second-hand descriptions. The sharpened blade was a mixture of bone and steel, inlaid with the repeating patterns of circuitry in copper and gold. He folded his hand around the grip. It felt warm against the metal of his palm and carried the faint tremor of something alive. He ran a thumb over the ports in the crossguard and ran a swift inventory to see if he had cables that would be able to connect his arm to the weapon. “What is it?”

“Freya called it a sword,” Merlin said, leaning over to watch Arthur heft the blade and check its weight. “But it’s really more like, um…”

“More like what?”

“A ship.” Merlin said, shrugging one shoulder. “The Avalon’s - or any galleys’ - one and only daughter ship. Or- not daughter, but clone.”
Arthur looked down at the sword and back up at Merlin. “You’re serious.”

“It’s not sentient, if that’s what you’re worried about, but it is a little piece of her. Sort of immortality, since she will probably never leave the bay she’s trapped in,” he said, over-cheerful enough that Arthur gave him a small smile of sympathy. Merlin wiggled his toes beneath Arthur’s thigh.

“Do you know what it does if I plug in?” Arthur asked, thumping his sword arm to open a small cache full of his own cables and selecting a few that looked to be about the right size.

Merlin shook his head, but said, “She said dragon scale for vision and cat’s claw to strike true.”

“ Appropriately cryptic for gifting me a teeny ship-clone of herself, I suppose.” He flashed Merlin a smile and systematically snapped the ends of his cables into the ports on Excalibur’s hilt. His oculars lit when the last clicked home and unfiltered text injected directly into his system displayed the command TAKE ME UP. Arthur winced.

Merlin nudged him. “What is it?”

“Are you sure it’s not sentient?” Arthur asked. There was a scratchy, rough feeling throughout his system, edged like Merlin’s dragonlord voice.

“There’s nothing in there that I can talk to. Maybe Freya left you a message?”

“‘Take me up’?”

“That… sounds like Freya.” Merlin’s lips twitched. “She’s a little invested in that sword.”

With a snort, Arthur stood and stepped to the centre of the room. Merlin watched him with interest. Arthur dropped into one of his sword forms and began to take it through its paces. He felt systems lock and connect, integrating with his established interfaces. The prickling sensation grew worse, then faded.

He finished his forms, rolling his shoulders to find them looser for the exercise after so long inactive. Excalibur would suit, and the feedback given by the connection gave him almost another awareness, another sense. He turned to tell Merlin to thank Freya for him.

The cupcake on the arm of his chair had taken on a new dimension. The golden orbs that had glowed with a faint light now projected runic patterning in three dimensions. Four, if he counted the pulse of interleaving structures. Whatever spell the Enclave Head had cast was broken down into elementally structured data that his oculars were busy recording and passing back to Excalibur.

“Merlin-”

Merlin’s face was layered with older versions of himself, hundreds upon hundreds of iterations that refined him, polished him, and made Arthur’s Merlin beneath all of them look very young. Every inch of his skin appeared to be written over with tiny golden runes that ran in infinite layers down deep into his flesh.

He looked… himself.

More than that, however, was though Merlin still carried a fragile tension in his shoulders, still looked tired and sunken even when his face was painted with curiosity, the elegance of a feral creature at rest was more apparent than Arthur had ever witnessed, even counting the glimpse of ‘more’ he’d caught in the infirmary before they had kissed.

Rather than perceiving either ‘awkward, human Merlin’ or ‘dangerous, sharp-edged warlock’,
Arthur was seeing both (mostly) in harmony. He squinted at Merlin and shifted his grip on Excalibur. There was a slight dissonance between Merlin’s aspects, flesh-and-blood not quite in tune with the magic beneath.

Seeing everything laid out in Arthur-readable descriptive language made him uneasy.

Merlin raised his eyebrows. “Yes?”

Arthur didn’t get a chance to reply, or indulge in his sudden impulse to kiss Merlin, because someone began pounding on the portal from the other side. A quick peek at the logs for the access panel told him that Elyan had tried to access the door half a dozen times before resorting to just hammering on it with his fist. Arthur threw open the door and Elyan stumbled through. His face, too, was layered with images that summed to ‘Elyan’, and Lance’s beyond him to ‘Lancelot’.

Lifting the blade, Arthur sighted along it and ran the heel of his palm up the flat. Where his skin touched, little blue runes burst from the circuitry, though it felt like smooth, unblemished steel.

Elyan, agitated, snapped his fingers to draw Arthur’s attention back to him. “You back? Check your alerts. It’s happening,” Elyan said. “We’re getting reports of mutiny across the fleet. The fighting has already begun.”
Chapter 49

Merlin kept his hand on Arthur’s elbow or his shoulder the entire shuttle ride to the Kilgharrah, anything to tell him that Arthur was warm and breathing and not being sapped empty by the Camelot’s systems. Arthur did not comment. Merlin suspected he’d scared Arthur. He’d certainly scared himself.

Just because the scales felt balanced didn’t mean there wasn’t some other hidden cost. Merlin didn’t know if the scales felt balanced because he didn’t know any better, or if the magic was truly satisfied with the price it had exacted. He didn’t want to see Arthur cold like that again.

The bridge of the Kilgharrah looked much the same as it had the times when Merlin had visited Arthur during repairs, except now it was populated by the bridge crew. Every one of the many displays was active, every chair occupied but one. Beneath his boots he could feel the thunder of Kilgharrah’s chemically boosted heartbeat, the thrum of his generators and pulse of his engines as he ran hot and fast and ready for combat.

Arthur waved Merlin to the communications console that he’d occupied during the first battle. Peeling himself away from reassurance that Arthur was going to stay put in the present and not just keel over with a delayed bullet wound, Merlin sat down at his console and stared at his screens. He no longer needed skin contact, or even to extend his senses to speak with the ghost. He couldn’t keep his magic enough beneath his skin to cut off any connection a ghost wished to make.

Welcome back.

“You miss me?” Merlin asked, ignoring the startled look that Griff at the primary communications console gave him.

I have pined in your absence, the Kilgharrah drawled, nudging from a simple thought link to a sensation link that had a scaled tail thumping Merlin across the shins. Merlin grinned. He could feel the ghost’s hunger beneath the sarcasm. You are worried for our Pendragon?

“I broke something to fix something else.”

An enigmatic response worthy of a ghost.

Merlin laughed and pulled himself free of the Kilgharrah’s cloying thoughts to regain awareness of his surroundings. “I’m just worried that the fix is temporary.”

A temporary fix that would leave you with two broken things instead of just one. That does sound like a worry. What did you break?

“Time,” Merlin said. He swivelled his chair away from the console to face the rest of the bridge.
Griff was watching him with mild amusement.

Leon stood from the captain’s chair and fired off a salute at Arthur’s approach. He looked pointedly at Arthur’s new sword, which had remained plugged into Arthur’s arm the entire trip over, then at Merlin. “Pendragon?” he asked, tilting his head in Merlin’s direction.

“Our new JCO.” Arthur planted himself in his chair without waiting for responses and began to jack himself in.

Griff broke out in brilliant grin. “Does that mean I get to order him around?”

Not sparing him a glance, Arthur said, “Leave him be. You’ll find out why he’s here soon enough.”

Griff snapped his fingers and gave Merlin an apologetic grin. “Worth a try.”

At helm, Bedivere snorted.

“Weapons systems online,” Leon said, taking a deep breath and helping Arthur arrange his arms so he wouldn’t have to let go of the sword. Merlin hadn’t had a chance to ask him why he was so attached to the thing, but the shuttle ride to the Kilgharrah had been filled with report after report of ships now beneath sorcerous control. A steady stream of issued commands had prevented any less important questions. Leon continued, “Up to and including weapons I really would rather we not use on or near the fleet. Asteroids and aliens are one thing, sir, but—”

“Noted,” Arthur interrupted him. “They’re intended for fringe use, so let us hope nothing so dire as what we find on the fringe finds us here. Kay. Show us what we’re up against.”

Wordlessly, Kay’s fingers danced across his Nav console and he mapped out Albion space for them on the big screen. The battlefield encompassed both immediate space around Albion Four and skirmishes out to the very edge of Albion’s oort cloud. Kay let the screen section into pieces, calling out scenes of ships locked in combat. When he ran out of sections, he activated the bridge’s brand new holographic projectors and began to populate three-dimensional space with the fractured fleet. Numbers at the bottom of every image - coordinates from solar centre - pinpointed the location of each. Arthur’s expression grew grave as he catalogued the extent of the fighting.

The sight made Merlin lightheaded, part in awe and part in horror. With the recall, every ship slated to participate in ground life on Albion was present, hundreds upon hundreds of ships filled with hundreds of thousands of people, more than had ever been present within the system at one time. The system view that Kay left at the very back of the display, showed a secondary starfield of recalled ships in swarms around the Kingdoms, too many to properly display with the resolution he’d chosen. Merlin hadn’t taken his mother’s advice to see the fleet in orbit before this. He almost wished he had.

Arthur waved away the nearest callouts with his free hand, slotting them into layers near the ceiling.

“Colour the map. Factions, Kay. Numbers. Who is fighting who and which ships likely to answer to a Pendragon.”

“Sorry,” was all Kay said before the system display flared into brilliant colour. “We’re red.”

There was distressingly little red on the map. Camelot had a small ring of daughter ships that spread out in a halo from the Kingdom. Beyond that - nothing. Bayard’s Mercian ships were in blue, Godwyn’s Gawant in pale grey. Nemeth in gold, Caerleon in faded black, and Lot’s Essetir in purple. The individual Kingdom fleets were in proportion of Arthur’s red, but threaded through it all was the brilliant green of Morgana’s forces. She had peeled ships from every individual Kingdom’s fleet and incorporated it into her own. With the numbers she was fielding, the only good news was
that her forces were scattered across the entire system.

Then Kay faded out all of the non-combat ships, whether or not they were involved in the fighting. Arthur swore. Green predominated. The other colours were at about the same fighting strength as red - Lot had a bit more purple than any of the rest of them - but with all of them factioned off, Morgana was going to wipe the floor with them if Arthur couldn’t get the rulers to listen to a Pendragon.

“Father’s recruits are all ground-based, which - fuck. Leon,” Arthur said, pointing from Leon to one of the back consoles. “See what kind of offensive capabilities the ‘non-combat’ fringe vessels are hiding and send out a fleetwide against warheads, just in case anyone is as stupid as I am. Griff, start performing mayday triage. Use your best judgement.” He rattled off commands for Kay and Bedivere and then beckoned to Merlin.

Merlin was at Arthur’s side in an instant, leaning down so that Arthur could speak directly into his ear. Arthur whispered, “Do you know what will happen if you call the dragon from the ship or whatever it is that dragonlords do?”

“No?” Merlin blinked. “What will happen?”

“I was asking you,” Arthur said, squeezing his eyes shut for a moment. An alarm sounded and Kay threw a projection of a ship coming their way fast, the image of the hull splashed all-over green in case the lasers aimed directly at the Kilgharrah weren’t clue enough whose side it was on. Arthur’s attention rested on the incoming ship for a moment. The weapon console display behind him began to shift, activating in tiny sunbursts as their own weaponry primed and waited for the target to come within shooting distance.

Merlin dropped into a crouch next to Arthur’s chair, bouncing on the balls of his feet. “I don’t know. Kilgharrah’s much more powerful than either Freya or Aithusa.”

“What should happen?”

The incoming ship was another galley-class warship and it outweighed the Kilgharrah by a quarter. Bigger and meaner-looking, it scored the Kilgharrah’s hull with longer-ranged lasers than those Kay had on file for its type, reminding Merlin in the most unpleasant way possible that the ghost had looped him into a sensory link. Merlin clapped his hand to his head to rub at the lines of fire the other ship had drawn.

The Kilgharrah’s weaponry system had to wait until the other ship was in range, at which point both began their bombardment in earnest. Stinging all over, Merlin said, “A dragon should manifest and then- do what dragons do. Eat things and set things on fire.”

“Do it,” Arthur said, wincing as their ship took a hit from ordnance larger than fleet standard. His attention returned to the fight. “Fucking ship is one of Essetir’s.”

Griff sang out, “Who here is surprised? Bets on whether that one ‘mutinied’ or mutinied?”

“No bet,” Kay grumbled at him, slamming his consoles hard with his fist, trying to keep up with the greater battle as well as pour relevant statistics to each individual’s console. Bedivere rolled the Kilgharrah off the Camelot’s horizontal plane, trying to keep his armoured flank and weapon arrays pointing at the enemy ship as it began to circle, flirting in and out of range.

Grant me a draw, the Kilgharrah demanded.

Merlin shook him off. “Not now. Arthur-”
Arthur’s oculars were a vibrant blue. He wasn’t seeing Merlin anymore. He called out, “Someone try to get Annis or Rodor- fuck, not Rodor, get Mithian. Leon, the preliminary defensive manoeuvres we decided on aren’t going to cut it for this. Whoever is giving the orders for the other team isn’t fucking around. Warn for magic, just in case we’ve got someone not paying attention, and tell the non-combatants ordered to scatter to hurry their arses to the rendezvous points. Tell them I don’t have the firepower to cover them if they dawdle. I want them jumped to Albion’s outer anchors and ready to rabbit if we can’t keep them from being followed. Tell Mith she can have anything she wants if she convinces her father to cooperate. I need his ships. Morgana’s converging on the Camelot and I have nowhere near enough ships to stop her.”

With Arthur knee-deep in trying to keep his divided fleet from falling apart completely, Merlin picked his way back to his console and flopped into the chair. The bridge was filled with light and noise, and Merlin’s muscles twitched whenever the enemy galley landed a hit. “Kilgharrah…” Gooseflesh rose on Merlin’s arms and he rubbed his hands over his uniform sleeves, trying to warm himself. He’d be lying if he said he wasn’t nervous. He could feel the Kilgharrah’s presence pressing hard against his soles through his boots. “A full draw, yeah?”

There was a short pause, then a triumphant, Will you, Dragonlord Emrys, Merlin son of Balinor, last scion of that line, allow me to draw from you?

Mouth dry, Merlin whispered, “Permission granted.”

The force of the draw froze the breath in Merlin’s lungs, like a great band was squeezing him top to bottom to force all of the magic the ghost needed to manifest down and out the bottoms of his feet. He started to see stars, his body panicking to work lungs that didn’t work anymore. The Kilgharrah pulled more and more power, quickly surpassing the power that Aithusa had required. He drew more than Freya had even nibbled at, and still continued to draw with no sign of stopping.

Merlin clung to the arms of his chair as well as the ghost’s previous reassurances that there was more than enough power in Merlin to complete a full draw. He almost expected the draw to kill him. Static-snow crinkled at the edges of his vision.

With one last, fierce squeeze, the pressure released. Merlin wheezed, refusing to black out by sheer force of will and quickly putting his head down between his knees. Out of the three ghosts he had experience with, he vastly preferred Freya’s method of draw.

At Nav, Kay let out a startled, “Fuck,” and all sound cut out. Every screen suddenly showed the exterior of the Kilgharrah from as many angles as Kay had access to visual inputs.

The dragon that clung to the hull was as large as the Kilgharrah itself. In the undiluted rays of Albion, he was a deep, dried-blood red, his scales shadowed with brown and black, claws sunk deep into the hull without scarring the surface. He matched the dragon on the side of the Camelot in form if not in colour: four legs, two wings, and a tail half again as long as his body that whipped and curled in the exhaust ripples from the ship’s engines.

Merlin heard the Kilgharrah yawn inside of his head, felt the stretch of never-before-used muscles up and down the sides of his back as the dragon on the visual feed stretched his wings and opened his eyes. His clawed wings dwarfed his body and his eyes gleamed gold with inner light, fuelled by Merlin’s magic.

“They were spectral dragons,” Bediewere said. He barely needed to raise his voice to be heard on the silent bridge. “In all the old battles. Spectral. Not solid.”

Kay let out a low whistle.
“I always wondered why we call them dragon rank,” Griff said in a conversational tone.

Arthur’s voice cut across the others. “You have him under control?”

Merlin was in no way sure of that. Straightening, he rubbed at the centre of his chest and was glad that Arthur wasn’t looking at him when he said, “Yeah. Totally. I’ve got him.”

All attention snapped to him, and Merlin wanted to laugh. From the looks on their faces, it was as if they’d somehow forgotten that JCO didn’t really mean junior communications officer. Before anyone could say anything else, however, Leon dragged their attention to the fight by reverting all of their screens back to the chaotic, colourful, and increasingly dire view of the battle.

“Do something about that ship,” was all Arthur said. He returned to issuing whipcrack orders to any ship that would listen to him while he set Griff on working out how to access those in the other Kingdom’s forces when they wouldn’t accept a Pendragon communications override.

Merlin did not immediately do something about the attacking ship. For several long seconds, he and the Kilgharrah simply breathed together, taking each other’s measure. The Kilgharrah had been right. Merlin still had power left, power enough that he did not feel appreciably depleted, even with the full draw. His control wobbled and the screens on his console in front of him shivered.

Call your triskelion before you shatter my bones.

The triskelion’s smooth whorls carved into wooden spirals were beneath Merlin’s fingers. Merlin did not remember what he’d done to put them there, but the focus helped more than Merlin thought it would. “Good idea,” he said, drawing one shaky breath, then another, getting himself under control and letting his power coil around and fill the triskelion’s design with shimmering gold.

I have only the best ideas.

“Do these ideas include fire?”

At the next console, Griff started to laugh, only covering his mouth when Arthur barked, “Griff. Any luck?”

Fire I can do.

Merlin closed his eyes. He wasn’t the only one who felt the ship shudder as the dragon launched from the hull. Nor did Kay have to bring up any special view to watch him attack the other combatant. When Merlin opened his eyes again, he could feel the Kilgharrah’s take a deep breath of nothing physical, filling his lungs with magic stolen from Merlin and the enemy ship, and open his throat. Fire rushed out into the vacuum in a torrent, burning power rather than oxygen, and it seared and melted the surface of the other ship’s hull.

Shuddering through the connection was a low wail that originated somewhere between the Kilgharrah’s claws as they sunk into the attacking ship. It reached across the void to where Merlin was sitting. The keen was one he was well familiar with, of the Ealdor in pain. The cries bridged all space between him and the other ship. Merlin sat up straight, “The ship has a ghost?”

The Kilgharrah didn’t stop his attack, his jaws clamping down hard on one of the galley’s several engines, severing it from the main bulk of the ship. It does.

“You’ll kill it.”

I am stopping her attack like you wanted. His wing buffeted a missile launched beneath his flank,
slamming it back against the hull with the deceptive, slow-motion grace of massive bodies moving only in relation to each other.

The missile detonated, causing another ripple of pain to reach Merlin from a ghost he had never met. Merlin watched in horror as the Kilgharrah peeled back a section of her hull and chewed through one of her arterial conduits, leaving each beat of her heart pulsing ichor into the vacuum. Her lasers pierced the dragon, leaving smoking holes that sealed, belying that he was in any way truly corporal. He bathed her exposed interior with fire, cauterising the wound and stopping the flow of ichor with a workmanlike detachment that sent chills down Merlin’s spine.

Behind Kilgharrah’s every action thrummed a heady exultation of now and finally.

“Kilgharrah—”

“Enemy ship requesting communications, Pendragon,” Griff said, waiting only for the flick of Arthur’s eyes towards him before folding all of the multiple displays away and giving the incoming call precedence.

“Pendragon on the Kilgharrah, this is Captain Mandrake of the Ebonrook. Call off your fucking dragon before you destroy my ship.” Mandrake was a short little man with a pasty face and large, ugly hat, the collar of his purple Essetirian uniform soaked through with sweat. The bridge of the Ebonrook was alight with a wash of angry red alarms and emergency lighting.

“Kilgharrah, hold,” Merlin ordered, hoping that he wouldn’t need to use any more encouragement than that, his voice growing rough as he anticipated needing older, stronger language. He could feel the Kilgharrah fighting the instinct to keep going, to sink his teeth into a spine that didn’t exist and snap the life from his prey. On the display, the dragon coiled around the Ebonrook subsided, hunching down against the ship’s hull. His tail lashed and Merlin could feel his discontent at being called away from his attack. Merlin rubbed sweat-sticky palms against his thighs.

Arthur didn’t rise, as much because he was too bound to his captain’s chair as he was too pissed off to accord the other Captain the respect. “You knew you were attacking the Pendragon. What the fuck did you expect?”

Captain Mandrake barked a laugh. “With every intelligence telling me the dragonlords were dead and Uther’s son was at the head of the fleet? Not a fucking dragon. You do know that dragons require magic, don’t you?”

“I’m aware of that fact,” Arthur said dryly. This time even quiet Bedivere snickered. “Is this your surrender?”

Licking his lips, Captain Mandrake nodded and hesitated before admitting, “My JCO’s beside herself and my Chief of Engineering is threatening to space me.”

“Surrender accepted. Call him off, Merlin.”

Calling the dragon back from the Ebonrook was less of a struggle than Merlin had feared and more than he was entirely comfortable with. While the Kilgharrah had full control over Merlin’s magic during the draw and Merlin’s orders could hem him into behaving, both of them knew that if it came down to a struggle of wills that Merlin would simply sever the connection. The dragon settled back onto the Kilgharrah’s hull. The ship shuddered once more as he landed.

Nodding at something only he could see, Arthur addressed Mandrake. “Your surrender places you under my command. Please send a ship’s diag- ah, thank you.” His oculars flared briefly and he
nodded. “I am launching destriers now and dispatching two to escort you to the Camelot. I hope that is satisfactory.”

“S’long as you’re the one answering to Morgause and not me, s’all the better,” Mandrake said, scrubbing at his chin. Without further comment, the connection winked off and the rest of the battle returned to the room.

Griff made an irritated noise and said, “Connection closed.”

“Fuck,” Arthur said. Slumping back in his chair, he scrubbed at his face with his one free hand. “And that, folks, is why Pendragon was traditionally a dragonlord.”

His tone of voice was odd, but Merlin couldn’t catch sight of his face to see what he was thinking. At any rate, Merlin’s attention was captured by the Kilgharrah while Arthur started giving instructions to pass on to Elena and the squad.

Two more come. One is a carrier. The Kilgharrah launched before Merlin could see what he was talking about.

“Incoming, Arthur,” Merlin gasped out, reflexively expanding his senses, his magic, in a growing sphere, eating the sense of pain with only a grimace, knowing the Kilgharrah was too high on being released from the flesh of his ship to feel the prickling static. Merlin couldn’t remain effectively blinded, restricted to the screens and what Kay and Arthur thought was important to focus on. The triskelion gave him something to focus on, to keep him centred, and he chased the dragon across the void to ‘see’ what they were up against himself. “Two galleys, carrier and warship. The dragon’s after the carrier.”

“Kay,” Arthur said. Kay didn’t need the order clarified. The image of the carrier came up onscreen and Arthur swore. “They’re launching destriers.”

The carrier held four times the fighters that the Kilgharrah did. The dragon began to flame as they drew near, washing fire across the tiny ship’s hulls and knocking one after another from their course with a sweep of his tail. Merlin closed his eyes, better able to make sense of what feedback his magic was giving him than decipher what the screens were telling the rest of the bridge. He could feel Elena and Gwaine join the battle, slipping between Kilgharrah’s wing and the bulk of his body, the red underbellies of the fighters flashing and they reoriented away from the dragon’s horizontal.

In the expansion of his magic, Merlin’s senses rolled across the Ebonrook. He could feel the ghost, feminine and furious, and he had to ask, “What is your name?”

She startled and recovered, and the touch of her thoughts was more alien than even Freya’s. Mab. You are Emryss. His name trailed off into a faint hiss, her connection with him filled with sharp teeth and the flutter of delicate wings. Do not let Kilgharrah slip your leassh, dragonlord.

Merlin tried apologise for her injuries, but she merely laughed.

All is fair, she said, and slammed him with her peculiar brand of ghostly hunger. Her desires clawed against his magic, the deep yearning for challenge and wit and rivalry, riddles and awe and the delicacy of lives in her (Physical. Metaphorical.) hands, so she might feel their fluttering heartbeats. It was power over and mesmerisation, and through it all Merlin beheld a sense of gentle, feral sadism.

He cheatss, using brute force - if I were to draw from you, our successesse might be more to your tassste? Her hunger echoed in his veins, desire for the power to take and to push and to find the other yielding, willing and trusting. To guard that fragile spark because it pleased her to see it flicker at her
breath.

“Perhaps later,” Merlin said faintly, pulling his focus from her and back toward where the dragon was bringing his teeth down on the rear of one of the enemy destriers. Its engines flared and died and he worried it like a dog with a bone, letting it go only just before he breached the hull and killed the pilot. He was under no injunction to spare the human inside, though Merlin could feel his tension when he released the tiny ship. It was not so much a desire to please Merlin as a desire not to displease him, not to have loss of life be the contention that dissolved their fragile alliance.

This fight was not won so easily, and Merlin’s breathing grew more sporadic as the Kilgharrah drew power again and again to fuel his breath against the destriers swarming him.

Arthur’s orders took on a frustrated edge as he recalled ships from their dogfights, trying to protect the Camelot best he could with what few he had. On the coloured map, hundreds of little green dots were converging on the Camelot, some - but not all - abandoning the other colours still clinging tight to the space around their respective Kingdoms. If the Camelot was boarded, at least Uther’s gathered army would have something to do.

Arthur swore again and again. When Griff’s team somewhere in Kilgharrah’s underbelly finally cracked the Gawant’s fleet encryptions, Arthur had cheered up - but only until he discovered that Godwyn had ordered his beholden ships to cluster, well-guessing that Morguase and Morgana were heading toward Arthur. His status as Pendragon held no leverage, not against the view that this was a contest over succession, not even when Arthur pointed out that more than one of Godwyn’s ships were being disabled by the arc of visible magic.

Mithian’s face took over the primary screen. She wasted no time with her message. “Arthur. Nemeth’s forces are now under Pendragon control. You - and I quote - ‘owes me very dearly’. But he’s transferring command now.”

“Thank fuck,” Arthur said. His willingness to let Mithian see his relief made Merlin want to kiss him. “Surely he’s not simply chasing tradition at this point.”

“He’s not.” Mithian grimaced. “And you’ll kindly refrain from mentioning any of my more colourful ways of describing that tradition with you anywhere in the same sentence.”

“Gives me the queasies just thinking about it.”

“Good. Keep it that way,” she said, “But Arthur - he agreed because he can read a battlefield as well as you can. This attack is larger than just on you and the Camelot.”

Arthur ground his teeth together. “At least someone noticed. Godwyn’s got his head up his arse and he knows I’m not about to use Elena against him.”

“You should, just to prove a point,” Mithian said, snorting. “I’ll take the White Hart and some of my forces to his front and see what can be seen.” She quieted. “I don’t like this, Arthur. It feels less like succession and more like revenge. Those who followed most happily in the wake of Uther’s Purge are getting hit harder.”

“If the plot was only succession,” Arthur said, equally as somber, “Then a bullet for me and a knife for my father, or whatever got us in the end, would have taken care of succession without requiring coordination and mobilisation on such a scale. Not with Morgana and her legitimate claim. They’re opening a corridor straight to the Gawant, Mith. I think they - whoever ‘they’ are - plan to board while the focus is on the Camelot.”
“I’m on it. You owe me, Pendragon.”

“You’ll have no argument from me.”

She signed off. When the coloured board reappeared with the formerly gold points now gloriously red, Arthur whooped. “Broadcast channel. I want enough forces to cover the Nemeth against anything sneaky, and anyone not heading with Mithian for the Gawant to head straight for us. I’ve already got—"

“Shit- Arthur,” Griff broke in, causing Arthur to swivel in his seat and stare at his communications officer. “Fuck, no, Arthur, it’s Queen Annis. Queen Annis has—"

Kay grunted and started hitting points on the Nav console in rapid order, highlighting the sudden reappearance of dozens upon dozens of multicoloured lights in orbit in and around the Kingdom ships. Not just Arthur’s ships, but Bayard’s and Lot’s and all the rest. They dropped into the middle of firefights, sheering away from lasers and missiles that struck home. They were hit with the arching lightning of the deadening spell and left floating without propulsion. More and more jumped in, obscuring the battlefield for both sides with the huge bulks of bastions and demesnes, of caravan-class haulers of all shapes and sizes. Merlin, watching the back of Arthur’s head, could almost see his plans dissolve into chaos. The only one not to lose his focus was the ghost of the Kilgharrah, still merrily chomping at destriers flitting between his claws, focused on the chase and the ebb and flow of Merlin’s magic rather than the battle at large.

Helpless to explain, Griff made a tossing gesture to the primary screen and it once more cleared, obscuring the sudden appearance of ships that Arthur had thought safely away. Annis’s face resolved into a looping broad-band transmission. “-repeat, all non-combat-capable ships return to Albion Four orbit immediately unless your vessel is capable of a swift jump out of the Albion system. Repeat, all non-combat-capable ships return—"

“Fucking…” Arthur dragged his hand through his hair, sweat leaving it sticking up. “Griff. Raise Annis. Hurry. Try the Pendragon communications overrides again.”

A handful of tense seconds later, Griff said, “Got her.”

Annis connected in real-time, and for this call Arthur left the chaos of his other screens in full view. Her impatient expression cleared when she saw who it was, though the tight way she addressed Arthur told Merlin that Arthur’s call was a dubious pleasure at best. “Pendragon, I daresay you were wise to set patrols. Rodor’s scouts just contacted mine to confirm. I don’t know what nastiness you’re already dealing with, but I would adjust my battleplans to include the Bestes Glatissant.”

Merlin felt his limbs start to tingle and the bottom of his stomach drop out. Arthur said, “You’re not serious.”

“I have confirmation of multiple swarms. I sent everyone fleeing in one direction or the other. Their chances are best with a group or alone.”

“Annis—"

“My forces are yours, Pendragon,” Annis said, her lips twisting into a wry smile. “Time for you to earn your keep.”

Arthur stared at the screen for several silent moments, but Annis was nothing if not sincere. “Thank you,” he said finally.

“Don’t thank me. I’ve watched you grow from boy to recruit to commander. Consider this your
chance to prove to me that my affection for the boy has not addled my perception of the commander.”

“At least I have experience with the Glatissant, which is more than most can say,” Arthur said, his voice echoing the small smile that Merlin saw on Annis’s lips.

“And lived to tell the tale. I’m scrambling my destriers from Caerleon’s upper bays, as many as I have. If the swarms behave anything like the wyverns from a few years ago, you’re going to need all the smaller ships possible. We already know the Kingdom ships’ defence grids aren’t going to be able to keep up. Just…” Annis let her shoulders droop and covered her mouth with her hand. She spoke between her fingers, eyes bright. “If this isn’t the entire Glatissant population in the Meredor sector, then I fear for our continued survival on Albion. If we defeat these.”

“We will. We have to.”

Annis cut the call with a firm nod and Arthur was left once more on the bridge filled with the chaos of combat. The Kilgharrah rocked at a volley from the warship strafing their side, ignored by the dragon to chase the smaller ships. Merlin couldn’t figure out how to call him back since yelling at him didn’t seem to do much. He tried to tell him the Glatissant were coming, that he was needed, but the dragon remained oblivious. The other ships seemed content to harry the Kilgharrah, keep them occupied, and shove them out of Arthur’s defence net protecting the Camelot.

More of the map was red, at least. Merlin was trying to split his attention between the here-and-now on the bridge and the dragon’s antics in vacuum. When the Glatissant devourers began arriving within Albion orbit, using the tether technology so recently developed for their short-ranged jumps, Merlin’s focus went entirely to the Kilgharrah, leaving the bridge behind. Much like the larger ships fleeing the swarms, the Glatissant’s arrival was haphazard and intrusive, devourers dropping onto ships and grasping hold before evasive manoeuvres could be taken.

One devourer appeared between the dragon and his targeted prey, slowing back into realspace with graspers waving in the Kilgharrah’s face.

Glatissant! A backripple of surprise caught Merlin and made him squirm in his chair. The Kilgharrah did not seem to be diminishing as the fight went on, instead growing in strength with each short draw used to feed his flaming breath.

“No, can’t be. Not Glatissant,” Merlin muttered to himself, fingers tight around his triskelion. “It’s like you never listen to me.”

His hold on his magic felt a little loose, drunken and tenuous, and his skin was all-over prickles from holding his magic back and trying to let it chase the Kilgharrah into the black simultaneously. He didn’t think he could use his boiling spell against the Glatissant at this distance, but he really, really wanted to try. He swallowed hard. “Can you flame it?” he asked, both aloud and within his mind.

I can flame anything.

“Bold words,” Merlin said, but another short draw locked his breathing.

The Kilgharrah latched onto a devourer that was nearly as big as he was, jaws coming down hard on the back of its excuse for a head. This creature didn’t have a spine, either, but its shape was close enough. Wrapping his wings around it to hold it close enough for his back legs to rake a hole in the creature’s shell, he bit through where the spinal column would be on a mammal and shook his head to tear off a chunk of the exterior, acid and other vile fluids released to freeze in the vacuum.
Merlin had no compunctions about silently urging him to section the devourer into the tiniest possible pieces. The dragon put his muzzle in the hole he’d ripped, much like he’d done for the Ebonrook, and breathed flames into the interior of the alien beast. For this, however, he wasn’t concerned with the lives of the ship’s occupants, so Merlin was treated to the lick of flames from the rents torn in the creature’s hull as dragonfire burnt through the interior. Clouds of steam escaped as the wet innards cooked and dried. Water vapour froze between Kilgharrah’s claws.

The Kilgharrah launched from the creature, shoving it away from the other ships and sending it tumbling off. It left a trail of briefly flaming Glatissant soldiers as whatever had been inside was pulled out by the creature’s decompression.

Merlin’s magic trembled in his hold, his awareness touching on two more devourers and the squirming forms of dozens of spacefaring soldiers. When they halted their incoming attack, hanging in space as if arrested by an unseen force that wasn’t Merlin, he snapped out of his focus on the dragon outside and back to the bridge inside.

The front screen this time was taken up with Morgause. She was wearing her dress, beskirted and high-waisted, her hair coiled and piled on top of her head, eyes lined with kohl. She held in one slender hand a ribbon from which dangled an ugly, dulled metal medallion with familiar runes stamped on both sides. Her eyes were gold and the runes were filled with the spark of magic. Whatever bridge she stood upon was empty and dark but for her, consoles sparking fitfully.

Arthur and Morgause were arguing.

“—every one of them but King Lot of the Essetir has acknowledged me as Pendragon, giving their ships into my command. Even without him, I outnumber your vessels—”

“By a fraction only. Please don’t give me some sort of ‘superior number’ speech. You might have your little dragonlord, but we have magic and — as you can see - control of the Bestes Glatissant to do with what we will. Surrender to me and I shall spare the lives of your officers.” The medallion onscreen spun as she flicked it with a nail. The runes were carved far more carefully than in the medallion they’d taken from Kanen’s body, and Merlin could almost hear the magic humming from the disk even through the communications feed. Morgause gave Arthur a sweet smile just a little too vulpine to be friendly and said, “You don’t outnumber the swarm.”

Beyond her, Merlin began to make out the details of her bridge. His initial impressions were, to a one, completely inaccurate. Instead of alone, she was accompanied by others who stood, cloaked and robed, in the shadows behind her, their hands up and out, their voices a low drone on the edge of hearing. The ship wasn’t derelict. The bridge was filled with growing things covered in shifting leaves, revealing and concealing the consoles at which dozens of silent crew worked. A symbiote ship, though the bridge was too small for it to be the Hallowcay. Merlin strained to make out the words of the ritual they were chanting, but it was too low and too muddled for him to do more than guess.

“If I choose to surrender, will you send the swarm away?” Arthur asked, drumming the fingers of his free hand on his armrest.

“Don’t you think I should be setting terms?”

“I haven’t heard any.”

“Ah, my mistake. Let’s see- throne of Camelot goes to me,” she said. Whatever she saw on Arthur’s face in response made her raise her eyebrows. “Ah, I see that’s a requirement that sticks in your craw. I would say abolish that silly law that makes magic a dying offence, but you’ve already
managed that on your own. Good job on that. I wish an army, a fleet, a piece of Albion as a haven for my people, and a seat at the ruler’s council.” She rocked her head back and lifted her chin, looking down her nose at the visual input. “And I wish to see Uther’s line destroyed. The man himself. His son. His daughter. You have betrayed me and my people. Whatever sickness courses through Uther’s blood needs to be purged and eradicated, his poison must be lanced from the fleet. From Camelot.”

With audible horror, Arthur asked, “What happened to Morgana?”

Morgause’s eyes narrowed and Merlin thought he saw a flicker of some emotion other than contempt. “Wrong question.” She tilted her head toward the medallion to set it spinning again. At the edges of Merlin’s senses he could feel the Glatissant shudder back to life. They approached, pinpointing the ships on Arthur’s side and resuming their attack while leaving those on Morgause’s untouched.

There were suddenly too many within Merlin and the Kilgarrah’s range to destroy without leaving other ships unprotected. It was the same across the fleet, with devourers wrapping around smaller ships and latching onto larger ones. A demesne similar in size and age to the Ealdor showed up on Arthur’s forward screen with four devourers burrowing into its hull as Kay frantically tried to give them even a fractional view of the battlefield. Merlin’s stomach churned and his hold on his magic quivered.

Several more ships jumped in facing the wrong way and covered in Glatissant, dragged into the melee by the aliens latched to their hulls. The ones that had run during Annis’s original message.

Arthur tried to stand and was yanked back into his seat by the cords and conduits tying him to the captain’s chair, by the clamps holding his arm in its cradle. “Stop! Morgause-” The signal was like a ripple through Merlin’s magic, and the Glatissant halted their attack. Devourers stopped with their graspers buried deep into ships, gas escaping around the spines. Arthur spoke through gritted teeth. “Your power over my fleet is undeniable. Give me- I must speak with my advisers. Five minutes. Give me five minutes.”

Breathing deeply, her breath hitching oddly, Morgause swung her arm down and let the medallion drop from sight. She nodded, eyes bright. “Five minutes. More than that I cannot guarantee my hold against the bloodlust of the Glatissant.”

The screen went dark and nothing replaced it.

Leon was the first to clear his throat, “Arthur-”

“Catch,” Arthur said, lobbing something over his shoulder.

With an ‘oof’, Leon caught what Arthur had thrown and looked down. “Ah.”

Merlin’s senses could feel the tingle of the medallion in Leon’s hands and burst out, “You can’t.”

“It controls Glatissant, Merlin, and even a non-sorcerer can use it. She has the advantage and- as willing as I am to sacrifice myself for the well-being of the fleet, you heard her. She wishes to ‘lance my father’s poison’, and I have few illusions as to how.” Arthur didn’t even turn to speak to him. He sounded empty, bleak, and Merlin tried to push himself out of his chair to go to him only to find his limbs uncooperative. Arthur continued, his words ringing hollow, “If nothing else, Leon can use it to send them away.”

“It’s horrible and crude and she had half a dozen druids to back up the spell she put on her own,”
Merlin struggled to get out of his chair, but the repeated draws had left him enervated, his muscles like putty. He couldn’t even lift his arms. The triskelion stayed in his grasp only because his fingers had seized. “It ate Kanen from the inside out, Arthur, it’s not an option. That rune is meant for ghosts, not people, not aliens, and - fuck - even ghosts hate it. HATE it, Arthur, it’s cruel. The caster’s life is forfeit.”

“Give it back, Leon,” Arthur said, but Merlin’s relief was short-lived. “If that’s the case, I’ll have to be the one to use it. This might be our only chance.” He turned his head so that Merlin could see his profile. “As long as she’s in control of the Glatissant, fighting back is lives lost. Tell me that you don’t think that surrendering will cost even more than that?”

Merlin, a little desperate, wanted Arthur as far from the medallion as he could get. “We don’t know that.”

“She’s angry, and the anger against me is* justified*,” Arthur said, turning back to face the blank screen, “But Mithian’s right. Why would her ships be clearing corridors to other Kingdom ships? Why wouldn’t she just focus on the Camelot so the other rulers would leave me to her mercy? You don’t drop Glatissant on a fleet unless you’re willing to bear the fleet’s destruction. Her swarm is attacking demesnes, not just my fighters. One more display and we could lose hundreds of thousands. I can’t even sound a retreat. The ships will just be brought right back.”

What objections Merlin might have been able to summon were lost in the howl of the dragon as he got too close to a ship armed with magic. Immediately, Merlin’s sensory focus was pulled away from the bridge, dizzying him and leaving him wondering how ghosts could concentrate on anything if their attention was spread as thin as Merlin’s was. The ship had some sort of bursting spell that shot forth from the tiny galley like a missile and lodged in the magic that formed the dragon’s hide. It detonated, sending ribbons of light in all directions including inward, caving in the dragon’s ribcage. The Kilgharrah drew from Merlin then, fast and vicious, and Merlin could neither object to the dragon’s treatment nor to Arthur’s plan without air in his lungs to do either.

Reeling, he felt the Glatissant on the move again, the ripple of magic ordering them stationary became fouled with a counter-pulse that interrupted the harmonics of the holding spell. There was a yell - Arthur? - a snarl - the dragon? - and somewhere in the distance he heard Morgause shouting, “What have you done?! You imbecile!”

Both spells attempting to hold the Glatissant dissolved.

To begin, there was little change but that the Glatissant no longer discriminated between Arthur and Morgasue’s side. Despite the split attention that was starting to give him a headache, Merlin heard a concerned Lot throwing his forces in with Arthur in a retraction of his earlier statements.

Merlin’s primary focus, however, was on trying to keep the Kilgharrah from being overrun. The other side had not received forewarning that the Glatissant now considered them fair game, and when the Glatissant resumed their attack on the Kilgharrah, they attacked Arthur’s forces as well. Merlin wanted to shout at them, but their ships were ghostless and he didn’t know how to infiltrate electronics yet, so they continued to bombard the Kilgharrah’s hull, starting to undo all of Merlin’s hard work from the last two weeks. He called incoming for the dragon as well as the bridge, painting a different picture of the battlefield in magic and dragonfire. The tiny destriers that the dragon found so irresistible were abandoned for the crunch of Glatissant devourer hulls.

More than calling incoming, however, Merlin was starting to fight against the ghost’s insistence on the chase. The connection between the corporeal form of the dragon was growing thready and thin, hardly enough for the ghost to continue to syphon power to fuel his fire and repair what wounds he could not avoid. He resisted Merlin’s increasing demands to come back, come closer, to not range as
far as fast or they might lose the draw and have to start all over. Merlin was losing his grip on his magic, could feel it wanting to push further out, let him see more, touch more, and he didn’t know if it was an echo of the Kilgharrah’s unique hunger or if he was holding fast against a flood of destruction.

He couldn’t warn Arthur because he couldn’t see Arthur, and his physical voice was silenced in increasing, lengthening intervals. He fought the dragon to be able to breathe.

The ships attacking the Kilgharrah were thrown into panic when the Glatissant turned upon them as well. The carrier galley collapsed under the onslaught of one of the devourers that landed a lucky strike and filled it with soldiers.

“-within the Camelot’s defence grid. Immediately,” came Arthur’s voice, “Merlin. Bring back the dragon, we’re moving.”

Groggy, Merlin couldn’t return to the bridge, not quite. The dragon was too far away and the feedback his magic was giving him was too fast, new, and confusing. He could feel spells from at least eight of Morgause’s fleet cross-casting against the Glatissant and Arthur’s forces. Coordination on both sides was breaking down. He could feel the scrape of the spines on the grasper of a devourer as well as the hand on his shoulder. He could see a tiny caravan-class in the wrong place at the wrong time get turned inside out and spill what Merlin hoped were intact pods containing the crew as well as the shadow of a concerned face - Leon’s, because he didn’t smell like Arthur.

‘Bring the dragon back’, as if he’d not been trying. This time, Merlin called and put more power behind it, a whipcrack that set his spread magic to rippling like an agitated pond. He didn’t know what he sounded like, but his throat rasped and the word ‘return’ came out in the language the ghost couldn’t ignore.

The Kilgharrah fought the command with anger and frustration and a jolt of ignored pain streaked behind Merlin’s eyes in lines of excruciating light. The pins-and-needles sensation grew, though Merlin’s senses had not expanded further than before. It felt like he was being shoved into a barrier made of static that filled his lungs and eyeballs and prevented him from acting beyond a flailing retreat. The Kilgharrah was shoving him too close to a snapping point, and he didn’t know what would happen when the tension released.

As the dragon returned, Merlin felt movement among the Glatissant. The swarms had caught sight of the gaping hole in the vulnerable Camelot.

The ship rocked when the dragon landed, and Merlin rocked forward in his chair, his lungs working to suck in air like a drowning man. The bridge resolved around him. Arthur remained in his chair, white-knuckled fingers clutching Excalibur. Leon knelt at Merlin’s side with a worried look on his face.

“You were… gone,” Leon said, his hesitation making the word ‘gone’ as accurate as any other.

“The Glatissant are headed straight for the Camelot,” Merlin said before the thought left his head. “What happened?”

“It broke,” Arthur said. He didn’t sound hurt, but he didn’t turn to face Merlin. The fleet on the primary screen was red blotched with green, and Kay had chosen the acid yellow of the soldiers’ exoskeletons to represent the swarm. “I had hold of every one of them, and it snapped in two.”

The yellow outnumbered Arthur’s red alone.
“It was never meant to hold that many,” Merlin said, one hand curled tight around his triskelion in the hopes he could just hold onto everything a little bit longer, the other pressed to his chest as he wheezed through basic respiration. He wanted to get up and go to Arthur, but just because he could move didn’t mean it would be easy. Or not hurt.

“I had them,” Arthur’s tone held enough frustration that Merlin winced. “I was sending them away. It was working.”

Merlin only repeated, “They’re going for the Camelot,” because telling Arthur ‘I told you so’ was in poor taste and Merlin’s mum was on the Camelot. Leon squeezed his shoulder and backed away.

“I am well aware. The largest daughter ships are going to take advantage of the defence grids as best they can. I’ve- I released the ground troops that my father recruited into his command. If we’re boarded… he’s the best I have.” Arthur’s grip on Excalibur didn’t ease, and metal creaked against bone as he flexed his fist. Merlin didn’t have it in him to protest the order.

“Captain,” Griff sounded perplexed. “We’re being hailed. Morgause’s ship again, but not her codes.”

Arthur squared his shoulders, resettled himself in his chair so that he didn’t look like he was ready to collapse, and took a deep breath. “Put them through.”

The primary screen was taken over by one sharp-featured, green-eyed woman thumbing at a split in her lip. When the open connection pinged, she looked up from inspecting the blood on her thumb and said, “Pendragon. You look like shit.”

Arthur sat forward as far as he was able, relief evident as he said, “Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. I thought your sister killed you.”

“She didn’t try hard enough.” Morgana’s wrists were ringed in bruises, the silver mod that wrapped her trachea scorched by fire and the metal of her oculars etched by acid. The great fall of her hair had been burnt away and what was left stuck out in all directions. She pursed her lips and dusted her hands together with a moue of disdain.

The bridge behind her showed signs of combat, but the consoles were all occupied and none of the operators gave Morgana a second glance. “When I asked her what she thought she was doing with the Glatissant, her answer was unsatisfactory. It was my fault that I lost the first round.” She huffed out a laugh. “I didn’t want to hurt her.”

“You didn’t—”

“Kill her? Don’t be gauche. She’s my sister and I love her. I merely removed her ability to do magic and put my knotwork to good use. I’m not a barbarian.”

Merlin’s attention was pulled away again by the Kilgharrah’s insistent thought.

Sigan, was all he said.

“Sigan,” Merlin echoed aloud, frowning. Sigan?

Morgana was saying, “Thus, I seem to have come into possession of a small fleet. Would you care to bargain?”

“And what do you want?”

“That’s a stupid question, my darling brother. I’ve already told you. I want Camelot.”
Sigan. Merlin frowned. The Kilgharrah was angry with him, but not enough to release the draw. Or, it seemed, keep from imparting important information, even if he was being stubbornly cryptic. Merlin leaned forward and started to hit display buttons on his console, bringing up a view of the Camelot on their approach. His eyes widened. “Oh, fuck.”

Arthur sat back again, leaning on the arm of his chair and kicking his feet out in front of him. “And if I refuse?”

“Don’t,” she said shortly. “But. I will not shirk my duty as Queen when Camelot is in need.”

“Arthur?” Merlin watched, eyes wide, as another Glatissant devourer met a defence grid laser and vapourised in a puff of glittering matter. There were too many, however, and the smaller soldiers wriggled through the grid without triggering retaliation. The grid was keeping the demesnes and bastions tucked up near the hull of the Camelot relatively clear of the beasts, but the majority were heading toward the scar. They were crawling in at volume, and he couldn’t see precisely what was going on inside, but the Kilgharrah had drawn close enough for Merlin’s senses to touch the very edge.

Sigan was growing, devouring the devourers. The creature at the bottom of the scar was sending out a constant violet glow, and instead of giant curling flagella twitching in the bottom, Merlin could see the coil of at least two wrapping the edge of scar, far vaster than Sigan had any right to be. His sucking, hollow hunger rocked Merlin back, had him frantically trying to pull his magic back in before the creature could seize upon it. Sigan shouldn’t be able to move, to leave the scar, but there was a roiling blackness that was beginning to bubble outward from the devastation, fed by the unknowing swarm intent on taking advantage of the Camelot’s apparent vulnerability. Merlin couldn’t be the only one who was seeing this. “Arthur!”

Arthur paused for long enough that Morgana raised her eyebrows in challenge, then said, “Make your claim in front of the rulers.”

“Of which you are two. Of seven.” She snorted indelicately.

“Of which I am one of six, because, traditionally, confirmation of role renders you ineligible for any second no matter how strong your claim. Do you offer command of your fleet to one Arthur Pendragon?”

“Arthur,” Morgana began, then stopped. A slow smile spread across her face. Her lip split again and began to well with blood. “The rulers recognise claims based only on proven competence.” She straightened and looked down her nose at the visual input much as Morgause had. “Use my fleet wisely and well, Pendragon, or I will smother you in your sleep.”

Merlin needed Arthur’s attention now. He boosted his volume reflexively, setting the screens and consoles in the bridge to shuddering. “Arthur. It’s Sigan.”

Both Arthur and Morgana’s heads whipped toward him.

Arthur’s “Sigan?” was followed closely by Morgana’s puzzled echo of the same. “Fuck. Kay, get me a view of the scar, immediately. Centre it so Morgana can see.”

The holoprojectors whined at a higher pitch as Kay built a representation of the Camelot in the centre of the bridge. Morgana’s eyes widened.

“The ink monster,” Morgana said. Arthur winced at the term. She brought her hand to hover before her mouth. “It’s not supposed to be real.”
“Cornelius Sigan eats magic and minds, devourers any future life you might have after this death,” Merlin said, eyes on the larger, sharper rendering of the thing disgorging from the shattered Camelot.

His uncertainty that any of them might have another life after this convergence now had a source, the shadow he’d seen across the future wrapping tendrils around a questing Glatissant devourer and turning it to a husk. Everything he knew was all in half-riddles and prophecy, memories that weren’t memories so much as thought-stuff gathered from his jaunt to bring Arthur back. The flotsam and jetsam of the wreck he’d made of time.

Merlin let the words curl upwards from somewhere deep in his magic. “He snuffs embers in the dark, reaches skeletal fingers into your dreams to scratch away your sanity, and—”

“—and if you light a candle in the vast emptiness inside, he is the first to take notice,” Morgana finished. Her face remained a blank mask, but tears stood unshed in her eyes. “He’s taken all of those too unformed to protect themselves, or magic enough to draw his attention. Believe me, I grew up on the Camelot. I am well aware of the effects, if not the source. The ink monster of my childhood has always overshadowed my abilities as a seer.”

“Merlin,” Arthur said uneasily, “Morgana.”

“I’ll take care of what Glatissant are not heading for the Camelot,” Morgana said, dashing one hand across her eyes and rebuilding her mask of cool detachment. “Keep that thing from reaching Albion or eating any of the living ships or you’ll never be able to stop it. I’ll be commanding from Aithusa.” She lingered, however, not signing off quite yet.

“The Glatissant are no longer something we can worry about, Arthur,” Merlin said. The creature flung one of its great black tentacles from the inside of the ship, narrowly missing one of the smaller bastions trying to keep out of the way of the incoming alien swarm. The defence grid couldn’t seem to see the threat, shooting through the blackness to disintegrate a cluster of Glatissant soldiers aiming for the scar.

“Are you and the Kilgharrah ready?” Arthur asked, turning his head over his shoulder to actually look at Merlin. Arthur’s eyes were sunken beneath the metal arcs of his oculars, his skin paler than usual, and his hair stuck to his forehead with sweat. For all that it hadn’t stayed intact long, the medallion had still taken its toll.

“Not really, but this isn’t something that can wait.” He gave Arthur a pained smile and looked up at the screen and Morgana. “Wish me luck.”

Morgana’s smile grew sharp and genuine amusement sparked in her eyes. “Thank you. It may not have seemed like much to you, but it helped.”

“Return the favour?” Merlin stroked the triskelion with his thumb. His skin felt like it was bubbling from his bones. Sigan’s proximity terrified him that he might not be able to keep hold of his magic in either the destructive sense, or the keeping-it-from-being-dinner sense.

She sobered. “Luck, then, Merlin. You too, Arthur. I will never forgive you if you die now.” Before either of them could reply, the connection cut off.

Merlin reached for the Kilgharrah’s thoughts and said, “We’re not close enough to the Camelot. It’s just at the edge of my range.”

“Too many ships, too many Glatissant. We won’t be able to protect ourselves from all of them if we get in their way,” Arthur said, “Leon?”
“This is the weirdest thing I’ve ever done with my tongue,” Leon said, coming to stand behind Merlin’s chair. Merlin peered up at him curiously. Leon stuck out his tongue, the stud they’d stolen from Kanen piercing the muscle.

Griff snorted. “Can’t be that weird.”

“Different sort of magic for me to be capable of.” Leon looked down at Merlin and gave him a half-grin. “This won’t zap me or kill me or anything, right?”

Merlin shook his head, jaw slightly open. He recovered enough to say, “It’s well-made. Stable.”

“Good.” Leon started loading up his hand with the lighting rings and their disabling spell. “We’ll get you to the creature. Try to kill it before it gets us, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Merlin agreed, looking to Arthur. The weapon’s console lit with new activity and Arthur nodded, the determination on his face growing. Merlin said, “Yeah. Worse if we wait,” and threw his focus from the bridge and up to where the dragon lurked on hull, ready to lend his power and whatever else their fight might require.

The cloaking spell rolled across the ship, hiding them from all but Merlin’s senses and - perhaps - Sigan’s. The Kilgharrah’s huge golden eyes were fixed upon the writhing mass of black, amorphous limbs and tendrils that seemed to multiply when Merlin glanced twice in the same direction.

“Are you ready?”

*My answer is the same as yours.*

The Kilgharrah drew from Merlin again, a steep, deep draw that had him dangerously solid and Merlin seeing stars.

“You won’t be able to let things pass through you.”

*I’d rather he steal only my scales.*

With a sweep of his wings against nothing, mimicking flight in the airless vacuum, the dragon lifted from the ship and made for the Camelot and the ugly, spreading blackness.

Just before they met Sigan in attack, Merlin held them both back for a heartbeat. Sigan’s growing bulk spread out before them, a cancer on the side of the Camelot, already filling the scar on its meal of Glatissant. The waving towers of ink were reaching outward toward where the alien swarm was now fleeing for less deadly prey. The blackness bubbled obscenely, pustules bursting to release pale purple light like afterimage of something brighter.

Kilgharrah steadied himself and Merlin quietly slipped free the leash he’d been trying to keep upon the dragon, the one that had taken his entire concentration to make sure that Kilgharrah didn’t go too far or cause too much destruction. He feared more now what would happen if he did not release him.

Kilgharrah shook his head, rattling the spines along the back of his neck, a clatter felt rather than heard through Merlin’s senses. The dragon grew smug. Merlin’s spread power rippled around them like a spreading cloak, and Merlin readied himself to try and use it.

A flailing limb that made Kilgharrah look tiny swiped at them and the dragon dove. Merlin hung back, his focus on keeping the bulk of his extended magic from touching the creature as it spilled out into space. Without another destructive spell in his repertoire, he tried to boil Sigan, but the moment the spell touched the blackness it was swallowed in a flare of light.
Merlin watched Kilgharrah swoop into the valleys created by writhing tentacles and rake his fire across the surface of the massive creature. Sigan shivered under the onslaught and grasped at the dragon, one tendril scraping down the Kilgharrah’s scales in an explosion of mixed light. The swirl of shed power fell into Sigan’s bulk like metal filings to a magnet, disappearing the moment they touched, but the dragon shot forward and drew from Merlin. Struggling to breathe back in his chair, Merlin was still relieved that Kilgharrah could survive the monster’s touch.

Dragonfire caused Sigan to keen, broadcasting a warped version of a ghost’s pain in every direction. It seared through Merlin’s mind twice, once upon impact with his magical senses, close enough to catch the lingering heat of the fire within the sensation, and once when the delayed shockwave impacted the point of Kilgharrah’s draw, still connected back with Merlin’s physical body. Merlin convulsed against the dual impact with the distant sense of muscles contracting and releasing at random.

They’d hurt Sigan. Damaged him, perhaps, though Kilgharrah’s initial attack did not cause Sigan to shrink back into his hole. The dragon spun about, burning and dragging claws across the pustulent surface, using a combination of wings and momentum and magic and physics to dart through spaces too small and leave destruction in his wake. Still, Sigan grew.

Merlin twitched his magic back and away as Sigan continued to grow and began to throw every scrap of terrified, reflexive power he could at the spreading black. Creativity helped him little, brute power less. Conjured winds and tiny novas and bolts of pure power that skittered across the roiling surface did nothing. Sigan shrieked when each of Merlin’s spells struck home, a noise that dimmed only slightly when the power was absorbed. Merlin had no traction, no ability to make the damage take - only Kilgharrah’s dragonfire seemed to do more than sting.

A coil of frustrated helplessness took root in his gut, and Merlin pulled his magic, his senses, further from Sigan who now blacked half the sky. The warship Kilgharrah hung alone before him as the larger ships fled. Missiles and lasers from a fleet that had turned its interest from the Glatissant to the Camelot struck with as much effect as Merlin’s spells, their destructive power absorbed and regurgitated as circumference and newly-grown limbs that thrashed in retaliation. For all that his magic was spread halfway across the battlefield, Merlin felt caged. The tingling, static feeling grew greater and greater. The closer he came to the breaking point, the harder he had to fight to cast even reflexively.

It was like sleep paralysis, keeping his mind and his magic rigid rather than his body.

He was tired of being afraid of his own magic, of the destructive power contained within - and, perhaps, he needed the flaying, balancing power that uncontrolled magic could bring to bear. For all his fears of going nova, in a choice between his fears and fleet - and Arthur - there was no choice. He needed every scrap of everything he had, and holding himself in rigid control meant they were losing. He didn’t trust himself that his choice was not going to make him a greater monster than that he needed to destroy, but death wouldn’t give any of them another chance to get it right, not if it came at Sigan’s touch.

Merlin let go.

His magic woke up.

Time and space shifted around him.

Like the tumblers of a lock aligning at last, or the crack-pop of a joint returning to place after a stretch, Merlin’s magical reach grew exponentially, washing over and through the Camelot, unable to avoid Sigan any longer. The pain of imbalance, the pins-and-needles of a waking limb faded now
that the limb was fully awake. He could feel Sigan plucking at him as he spread through the creature’s mass, sliding magic into the hollows that Sigan’s ravenous expansion left behind.

He could feel every atom of the ship around him starting to pull from its neighbour, an intensity twelve catastrophe in the making. Distantly, he could feel his own body, bone and blood and sinew, beginning to peel apart, the magic that it housed not spreading fast enough to prevent a singularity. Sigan’s power pulled at his, devouring and sharp and Merlin had relinquished his control.

Merlin sought purchase on Sigan, his magic coiling tight around the creature. He could feel his own power ripping into the monstrosity, but also ripping into every creature and ship within the sphere of his magic, lives like candles guttering as his power washed over and through without restraint. The void beckoned, the offerings of thousands melting beneath his onslaught, so vastly worse than his worst fears. Bone and steel groaned, flexed, shifted and prepared to shatter. There would be nothing left except Sigan, whose darkness existed like a stain on the fabric of reality, warping and consuming as it grew, outside of life and death, magic turned inward upon itself.

There was nothing to grasp, nothing to cleave to, and Sigan resisted all of Merlin’s efforts as his magic thickened and everything began to fall apart.

The focus for Merlin’s inner eye scattered to a dozen, a hundred different points. It was as if, when he’d discarded his control, he had also discarded his ability to see, to hear, to direct his attention anywhere but inward toward the mounting white-hot pain ready to sear outward in a wave that would leave all matter between him and the reach of his power a scattering cloud of elements.

The cataclysm would start with Arthur. Closest to the core of his magic, Merlin could feel the shape of Arthur, the reverberation of his beating heart sending echos and waves through Merlin’s still-spreading magic. Poised on the moment of destruction, Merlin froze.

The warmth of Arthur’s hands on his shoulders broke through Merlin’s cocoon of increasing agony. Arthur’s face was close enough for Merlin to hear the harsh whistle of his breathing like the roar of solar winds. Merlin’s magic inhabited him like the flame in a lantern.

Feeling returned gradually, the edges of the triskelion biting into Merlin’s fingers, the little wooden focus allowing him the fingerhold he needed to bring himself to open his eyes.

His vision was watery with tears he couldn’t blink clear, but Arthur was there.

Arthur was there, standing within the eye of the storm, his hands on Merlin. He looked determined. The lights that ran down the side of his face burned with a steady glow. When Merlin opened his eyes, Arthur tipped forward a bare inch and pressed their foreheads together.

Arthur closed his eyes. A moment later, Merlin closed his once more.

He would never be able to control his magic, not with any strength of grip or power of restraint. Turning inward to the growing ball of pain that was the centre of his magic, Merlin gave it a reason to choose to bend to his will.

The beat of Arthur’s heart remained steady, a metronome to describe the passage of time, and his grip never wavered. He was a stone that Merlin could plant his feet upon as he stretched his hands to the sky.

Trust me, Merlin told his magic, I have you. He matched Arthur confidence for confidence, taking strength from Arthur’s faith.

The pain ebbed along with the fear. His magic began to respond.
His magic sought the balance he had been denying it out of fear and flooded through the Kilgharrah and the Camelot and the fleet, fitting into gaps where it was needed and scattering before it could cause harm. The sense of impending disaster faded, the lives within Merlin’s reach no longer in danger from him. His sense of Arthur, of his own body, drifted to the foggy edges of his awareness as his focus sharpened on the more pressing threat.

Sigan raged within his hold, its grasping limbs frozen in place, and Merlin could feel his own magic picking at Sigan as they locked together.

Still, he could not pull Sigan to pieces, not like he wanted to. His magic was a fractious mount, wildshy, his will its reins. The life in his magic - the hundreds of lives, the years that Sigan couldn’t touch because Merlin had chosen to live them precisely as he had, despite pain and despair and horrible, destructive hope - was balanced by the death in Sigan’s.

The balance kept him intact and apart, but his magic was too human, too built of need and triumph and hundreds of thousands of human choices in boring, mundane human lives. And, in turn, all of those lives had been built upon the choices made - with or without destiny - during one very extraordinary human life right at the beginning of it all.

For Sigan, Merlin needed… something intrinsically inhuman, the Kilgharrah had said.

Power sizzled in Merlin’s veins, and the spread of his magic through the form and fabric of every ship within his reach gave him the idea. It followed that if he could pour magic in without damage, he could draw magic out. Wrapping around the dragon Kilgharrah, Merlin made an offer. Though the odds of success were poor, Kilgharrah did not hesitate to say yes.

Extracting a ghost from his ship proved as difficult as unknotting a snarled chain with no end and infinitely fragile metal. It also proved as easy as dipping hands into a puddle full of water and withdrawing enough to wet his lips. Sigan quivered as Merlin poured the Kilgharrah’s ghost past him and into the Camelot, thrashing against Merlin’s hold. Tentacles twitched and grew while Merlin was distracted in trying not to drop or destroy the living ghost, nor allow him to be damaged by the hungry Sigan.

The Kilgharrah filled the Camelot, using the power of his sustained draw from Merlin to push himself into every nook and cranny, taking the place that Sigan had once occupied.

Merlin’s hold wobbled again at the drain of the draw. The Kilgharrah snarled, tried not to fight. The magic slipped and the backlash hit Merlin with a wash of his own power. The warm wet of blood on his lips was a distant thing.

Despite the near-disaster as Sigan writhed and fought against Merlin’s hold, the Kilgharrah’s ghost displaced Sigan, unfurling power caged by the tiny shell of his previous vessel. When the dragon spread its wings this time, they blocked the sun, his drawn form solid and glorious and as large as the Camelot itself.

The Kilgharrah dug in claws now that his dragon form was large enough to do damage on a scale that made a difference and began to search for the core, the heart of Sigan. When he breathed dragonfire on the frozen tentacles while Merlin held them still, Sigan did more than scream.

This time the shockwave of Sigan’s pain manifested physically, rolling through Merlin’s body and mind and throwing the entire clustered fleet into spins away from the Camelot, the tiny explosions of their missiles and spells bright points of pain and light to Merlin’s senses.

It shook Merlin, threw him off enough that he did not see the tentacle heading for Arthur and the ship
until it had already touched the side. Merlin couldn’t pull back to his body, not while holding Sigan, not while the dragon raked him with his claws. He could not grasp the rogue tendril, could only follow it as it had followed the shining tether that yet connected him with the Kilgharrah’s ghost. He followed it back and down and into the bridge where Arthur stood defending Merlin’s body with sword drawn against the questing tendril seeking to devour the husk that held Merlin’s power if it could not devour the magic itself.

Merlin could hear, but not hear. All of Arthur and Leon and the others’ words sounded like they were filtered through water or time or the blood that Merlin could see trickling from one of his own ears. From outside of himself, Merlin found his eyes wide and unseeing, but his chest still rose and fell. He could not call warnings to Arthur, to not let Sigan touch anyone or anything. Alarms on the bridge whooped to indicate the ship was dying without its ghost.

At helm, Bedivere with, “-unresponsive. Can’t move the ship.”

Leon, striking the blackness with his sword only to have it pulled from his grip and pulled inside the bulk of the tendril. The perverted ghost of Sigan oozed contempt and hunger, left Merlin sticky with it, but Sigan would not pass Arthur and the lifted Excalibur.

“Strike for his head,” shouted Arthur.

There was no head to strike, just a bubbling curve of the darkest ink, held together by surface tension and malign intent. Another sword was lost - this time Griff’s - as he tried to follow instructions that made no sense.

The tendril struck forward, but Arthur met it with a swing already in motion. Excalibur sheered through, parting the stuff of nightmares without resistance, and Merlin would swear later he saw the bounce of an impossible skull on the deck before the blackness collapsed into ooze. The moment it did, Merlin felt Sigan die in his embrace, his keening cut short. The heart of the beast that Sigan had become had gone looking for the heart of Merlin’s own power.

Sigan had found Merlin’s heart protected.

Or, perhaps, standing guard.

Merlin pulled his focus away from a panting, bewildered Arthur already scrambling to plug himself back into his dying warship to give his crew five more minutes before dessication rent holes in the hull. Five minutes would be more than enough time.

The great mass of Sigan’s inky tendrils was slowly collapsing in on itself, shrivelling outward from the one that Arthur had severed, a slow implosion that Kilgharrah followed with fire and jaws. His teeth sunk into the darkness and he ripped a chunk free, lifting his head and shaking his throat to swallow it, absorbing power and death with every bite.

Unhesitating, Merlin released his hold on Sigan, no longer necessary as more and more disappeared into the maw of the new ghost of Camelot. When he did, his senses stuttered, informing him that he’d pushed too far, too fast. Unconsciousness was not far behind.

Before it was too late, he sought the Avalon, sought Freya.

“Freya?” he asked her, his intent at the fore of his thoughts. He didn’t have much time and could make no guarantees.

The warm slide of her magic against his carried her agreement.
Merlin tore Freya free from her broken ship as gently as he knew how, felt her excitement and her hunger as he pulled her across the void to the empty shell of the Kilgharrah. His grip was loose and he could feel her slipping, but she clung to him as much as he clung to her, both unwilling to lose hold of the other when there was hope. Merlin was dizzy, but the sympathetic pulse of the part of her she’d placed within Excalibur was a bright light for both of them to follow. The tiny piece of herself called her home.

The Kilgharrah’s old husk was already greying, the hull thinning and stretching with the magic leeched from its flesh, but Freya took to it, spread to fill it as she had filled her own ship, once more within skin that suited her. It was like and not like, but she quieted alarms and reinsituated systems that had already shut down in the face of imminent ship death. He pulled away from her as she started to change the ship to her own specifications, making it less like the Kilgharrah-that-was and more like the Avalon-to-be.

Sigan was gone, vanished down the gullet of the dragon that now watched with golden eyes rimmed in the palest violet. No longer the Kilgharrah’s ghost, but simply Kilgharrah of the Camelot, it watched Merlin’s focus shift between him and his former shell, and waited.

There were no more Glatissant to fight, the fleet well able to destroy those not drawn to the Camelot and its false promises. There was only Merlin and Kilgharrah, the latter flush with stolen power and the former trembling on the edge of collapse.

Issuing no orders, Merlin, too, waited. He could not fight and doubted his ability to speak, birthright or no.

_You once defended me_, Kilgharrah’s voice came in layers, the raw echo of consumed Sigan lingering in his speech. _By saying that I was the ship, that I and that which I inhabited were one. What do you fear I will do now?_

_“You did not have form,”_ Merlin managed, _“Had not filled that form with the power which I know you crave. Beyond-”_ and his words were merely acknowledgement of what they both knew, _“Far beyond my ability to command you.”_

Kilgharrah blinked once, slowly, his scaled lids closing over glowing eyes. Merlin could feel Kilgharrah savouring the draw, savouring the mass that had been Sigan now pulled from the shell of the Camelot like a snail and eaten with as much relish, and now savouring Merlin’s admittance. _As I once was my namesake, now I am the Camelot. In my own way, I will not let it come to harm._

Merlin felt like he could breathe again when his magic began to report growth within the scar. _More than that, however, I cannot let Albion below be threatened by the failure of something I have the power to control._

A honeycomb of new flesh and cartilage shallowed the scar, filled it with a compact mass of tissue as Kilgharrah fed every scrap of stolen life back into the structure of the ship. _I keep my promises. I am your ally and you were not wrong to defend me_. Kilgharrah’s eyes glittered in the vacuum of space. _Just as you were not wrong to restrain me._

Relief made Merlin dizzier than it should have and unconsciousness dragged at him from below. The spread of his magic collapsed in upon itself. The draw severed. He saw the great dragon lose form and cohesion, melting into the hull of the Camelot as shiny new horn and bone and scavenged steel curved to cover the once-gaping scar.
Merlin was slammed back into his body and his vision - real, physical vision - resolved to Arthur’s worried expression and his hands once more on either of Merlin’s shoulders. Arthur’s uniform was ripped and his chest weeping blood from raw ports too many times plugged and unplugged. He looked haggard, eyes sunken, and when Merlin opened his eyes Arthur’s grip tightened.

A grin wobbled its way onto Merlin’s face and with a shaky hand, he reached for Arthur’s collar, pulling him down and silencing his questions with a kiss that set his lips tingling. He tasted blood. Arthur did not pull away and there was no surge of magic to force them apart.
Chapter 50

“How does it feel to have been King for less than two weeks?” Morgana asked. She stood before Arthur as he bent to adjust the cloak fasteners on her ceremonial armour.

Arthur held her shoulder still and thumped the left fastener with his fist until it popped into place before he answered. “My ruler acknowledgement happened while I was holding father at swordpoint. I’m starting to have doubts I even counted.”

Patting Arthur’s cheek, Morgana said, “You’re recorded as King Arthur Pendragon in the Camelot’s databanks, if it makes you feel better. You’ll be forever remembered as the second and last of the Pendragon Kings.”

“A cautionary tale.”

“Be that as it may.” Morgana grinned up at Arthur. “Do I look the ruler?”

The officer’s green room was as cramped as it had been when she’d threatened that she would become Queen, and Arthur couldn’t step too much further away from her or risk tripping over something or running straight into the wall. The squashy green chairs were strewn with discarded ceremonial robes and capes, crafted for Morgana for the occasion and discarded at the last moment in favour of her pilot’s garb. He shuffled back as far as he was able to look her up and down.

Where her chestplate had before been solid black, she now wore her new personal crest. Two dragons, a smaller white within a larger red, mimicked the seated gold dragon of Camelot that her Knights wore. She had cropped away the singed ends of her hair, and the short spikes stood out from her head of their own accord. The last week had repaired the damage to her mods, and the acid etching had been turned into swirling designs that leapt out into several dimensions beyond the real whenever Arthur was plugged into Excalibur.

She had also edged her cloak in both silver and gold despite the fact that the last de Bois scion was currently rotting in Camelot’s brig. It was a nod to Igraine, to those who still wished her rule had not been cut short or that her line were not being removed from the throne. Arthur swallowed and offered Morgana a small smile.

Arthur tugged the drape of her cloak straight and held out her helmet. “You look ready.”

Morgana brushed her fingers across the arcs of her oculars, her gauntlets clicking against the metal of her brow. “I feel ready,” she said, her eyes finding his. Her teasing good humour dropped away. Solemn, she said, “Arthur.”

Waiting for him to give her his full attention, Morgana toyed absently with her helmet. Her nostrils
flared as she took a deep breath, visibly steeling herself for whatever she wished to say. Arthur raised his eyebrows and nodded.

“‘I need you to know something,’” she began, meeting his gaze steadily. “‘I love Morgause with all my heart and not even me on the throne and her in the brig and all the rest is going to sunder that.’”

Arthur frowned, but when he would have spoken, she waved him silent.

“I want you to know, however, that I have always been on my own side. Morgause never understood that. She assumed that her goals were my goals for all of the same reasons. I take responsibility for my actions while her ally, but you need to know that I have never lied to you. Not once.” Morgana’s only sign of nerves was the of scrape metal on metal as she shifted her helmet from one hand to the other. “Just know that.”

The room was too small for Arthur to give himself some space to think. He rubbed his hand over his mouth and sighed. “I shoved father back in his cabin and locked the door, even after he'd successfully commanded the repelling forces that kept all of the Camelot’s citizens safe from what Glatissant found their way past Sigan. I'm constantly monitoring him because I'm afraid he'll find a way to uplink again and then you'll have the problem of trying to take back the ship from someone more heavily modded and more experienced with the systems. He's threatened both yours and Merlin’s lives without blinking or showing remorse.” Arthur paused, then said, “He looks tired and old and not quite sure what to do with himself.”

Morgana shook her head. “I don’t know what it says that mother doesn’t want to see him, but… you understand.”

“He’s my father,” Arthur said, finding a clear square of floor behind him large enough for his boots. He stepped back to lean against the wall. His chest flexed and creaked. His internal workings chirped and whirred as he breathed, filling the small room with the sounds of life while Morgana waited silently for him to continue. Folding his arms, he nodded at her. “Just - I don’t think he ever saw me as anything but an extension of himself until I contradicted him in front of the rulers’ council.”

“She’s my sister.” Morgana echoed his tone. “Uther gave you a ship full of political prisoners. Morgause gave me a choice of extremes as my only options to further my goals.”

“Your only options?”

Morgana shrugged one shoulder, setting her cloak to rippling. “I preserved what lives I could.”

Closing his eyes, Arthur said, “You convinced the other rulers of that, at least.”

“Including you?”

“Due to the conflict of interest, my vote for ruler of Camelot is void.” Arthur peered at her from beneath lowered lids. “And it’s neither me nor the rulers that you’re going to have to convince. I’m just the Pendragon.”

“The citizens of the fleet mostly see my betrayal of my sister as a redemption for both me as well as my kind, and Kilgharrah has concerns beyond.” Morgana started. Before she got very far, however, stopped, tilted her head to the side, and studied Arthur. “No. You mean Merlin.”

“I mean Merlin.”

“He knows more of the story than is being told.”
Arthur’s managed a slight grin. “Enough to be dangerous.”

“And he’s the last dragonlord.”

“He and his future line until we figure out how the power is passed other than parent to a single child.”

Morgana folded her own arms across her chest, mirroring Arthur’s stance, her helmet dangling from her fingers. “Merlin has the theoretical capability to succeed in whatever revenge he might desire.”

“Then you take my meaning.”

“I do.” Morgana exhaled, letting her shoulder droop. “Have him brought here.”

“The ceremony is about to start. You want to do this now?” Arthur asked, already sending a message off through the Camelot.

Morgana replied, “Better now than after.”

Before she finished speaking, the door to the officer’s green room irised open and Mithian stepped through, Merlin in tow.

“Keep your pants on, I’m already here,” Mithian said. Halting just inside the door, she looked from Arthur to Morgana, eyebrows rising. “Something wrong?”

Merlin peeked past her pauldron and grinned at Arthur. Shooting a wary look at Morgana, he remained where he was, half-hidden from Arthur by the bulk of Mithian’s ceremonial armour and cloak. Arthur resisted the urge to drag him out. He had every right to be wary.

Morgana blinked at Mithian and unfolded her arms. “Why would you ask that?”

Mithian held up several fingers. “You’re standing as far apart as you can get in an itty bitty room like this. Arthur sent for Merlin while we were not ten steps up the corridor, which means neither of you got my ocular message saying I was heading over, which means you were either preoccupied or you’re not uplinked, neither of which bode well. You both look rather more serious than you should considering we’re about to head to a coronation and a party, and you didn’t say ‘no’ when I asked if something was wrong.”

“Admiral Mithian,” Arthur greeted her, hiding his smile with a hand over his lips.

Mithian wrinkled her nose at Arthur. “Don’t ‘Admiral’ me. I don’t have my new insignia yet.”

Arthur dropped his hand and let his amusement show. “You didn’t have to have it custom made. I think you’re stalling.”

“I don’t think the last reason counts,” Morgana told her, stepping forward. “It wasn’t a clue that something might be wrong until after you’d asked, so it couldn’t have been one of the reasons in the first place.”

Mithian dismissed Morgana’s logic with a wave. “Details. I’m right either way. You wanted Merlin?”

Shifting to business and refocusing on Merlin, Morgana held out her hand. “I did.”

Merlin looked to Arthur briefly as Morgana stepped forward, but did not hesitate to take her hand, his slender fingers delicate in comparison to the solid bulk of her gauntlet. Morgana dragged him out
from behind Mithian and Arthur was able to take a good look at him for the first time in over twenty-four hours.

The transfer of dragons and the destruction of Sigan had left their mark. A week after their victory and Merlin still looked worse than he had when Arthur pulled him from the wreck of the Ealdor. The dark bruises around his eyes made his already too-pale face look sallow, and he’d lost what little weight he’d gained in eating fortified meals aboard the Camelot. Merlin moved carefully after Morgana, eyes on her face.

There was blood on the collar of his druidic robe, but it was dried and flaking and there was no sign of where it might have come from. If Arthur never saw Merlin bleeding from ears and nose again, it would be too soon. Sigan had damaged something that was taking longer than Gaius expected to heal and Merlin had refused accelerators. He was no longer wobbling when he walked, though, and Arthur was grateful for the improvement.

Mithian picked her way through the discarded garments to Arthur’s side and leaned against the wall next to him.

“Fleet says, ‘Hello,’” Mithian told him quietly, bumping his arm with her shoulder with a clank. “Did you make your deadline?”

Across the small room, Morgana dropped her helmet into a chair and held out her now free hand for Merlin to take. Merlin looked puzzled, but he did.

“Deadline made.” Arthur could not take his eyes off Merlin, though Mithian began to laugh at him under her breath. “Full transfer of power is complete as of the ceremony. I’m obligation free as soon as Morgana’s fully acknowledged.”

“Not entirely obligation free,” Mithian corrected. “Of course you’re not counting Pendragon duties.”

Arthur slid her a look out of the corner of his eye, tilting his head down. “Why do you think I made you Admiral?”

Mithian sputtered, exaggerating her indignation. “Arse! I knew it was a trap. Fuck you and the ship you flew in on.” At Arthur’s snort of amusement, she dropped her mock ire and threw a significant look at Merlin. “But- you have three days before I resign and shove my insignia in your sexed-up face whether you’re wearing pants or no.”

Morgana squared herself in front of Merlin, dragging Arthur’s attention to her in case he needed to step in, and said, “I accept fault and responsibility for your father’s death and the deaths of your people. If there is anything I can do-”

“Don’t.” Merlin cut her off. “Don’t do that.”

“Why ‘don’t’?”

“Because,” Merlin told her, barely loud enough for Arthur’s enhanced senses to hear, “I’m not really up for forgiving anyone anytime soon. If I accept your gesture, it’s a little like reconciliation and I’m- I’m not ready. Eventually, but- there are more than just you that I’m not going to be able to forgive just yet.”

Morgana’s expression softened. “So I’m not unique in that. Let things be broken between us, then. For now.”

“For now.”
“Promise me, though,” Morgana added, “that you will inform me if you are preparing to seek revenge.”

Touching Arthur’s elbow, Mithian drew his attention down to her. “Be gentle with him?”

“Merlin?” Arthur asked though he did not need to.

Mithian nodded, the bob of her head a flash of light on metal in Arthur’s periphery as he turned back to watch Merlin. She said, “Who else? He’s physically hale according to Gaius, but- you know what I mean. He’s been through a lot.”

Looking at Merlin standing hand-in-hand with Morgana, Arthur nodded. “As gentle as he needs. I promised him I wouldn’t push.”


“It’s only fair,” Merlin said to Morgana, the barest hint of a smile in his voice. “You did promise to let me know before you tried to kill me.”

Morgana shook her head, her eyes bright with the glow of magic or oculars or simply emotion and a trick of the light - Arthur could not say for certain before she turned her face away. She said, “Stay true to whatever ridiculous honour stayed your hand after my attempt on your life. Enjoy my brother and mend. We have time.”

“Time-” Merlin echoed, the bloom of a grin on his face as he turned his head to catch Arthur staring at him. “That we have.”

At Merlin’s words, Arthur strode forward, crunching heedless over spun plastic and piled doublets. He gathered Merlin from Morgana’s hold and leaned in close to whisper, “After.” Arthur brushed his lips across Merlin’s jaw beneath his ear. He heard Merlin catch his breath, a tiny hitch that sounded loud in the sudden quiet that let Arthur know they had an audience.

Arthur pulled himself away from Merlin and Merlin turned to face him, his expression alight with newly-planted anticipation. Instead of leaning in and kissing Merlin properly, Arthur glowered at the combined laughter of Morgana and Mithian.

“And-” Mithian picked up when Arthur caught her with his glare, swinging her attention to Morgana. Mithian continued as if they’d been speaking on the topic the entire time Arthur had been preoccupied. “I thought someone had replaced your heart with a chunk of metal.”

Morgana snorted. “You would be surprised,” she replied, her gaze sliding slowly from Arthur to Mithian at her side. She linked their arms together. “It beats as fast and strong as any artificial one, if given the incentive.”

“And for much the same reasons,” Mithian said. Where Arthur had expected her to leer at him and Merlin and make a joke of it, Mithian squeezed Morgana’s linked arm. He didn’t think he was supposed to hear her when she said, “Thanks for coming back.”

The green room’s speakers chimed, warning its occupants that the ceremony was about to start a moment before the door irised opened and Lance stuck his head through. “Ready?”

From down the corridor, Arthur could hear the swell of voices awaiting their arrival.
The door to Arthur’s cabin on the newly-christened Avalon irised shut behind them. Merlin could not stand still. He remained in Arthur’s orbit as Arthur tried to direct them both to the bed, speaking so swiftly that his words stumbled over themselves.

“Morgana’s face at Kilgharrah’s addition to the coronation ceremony,” Merlin said, letting Arthur catch his hand and spin him back in closer, their lips touching briefly before Merlin’s agitation had him moving once more. Restless, he spoke just to speak, filling the air between them with words so he wouldn’t be tempted to occupy his mouth with other tasks. “I thought she might murder him and take her chances. I don’t think she would have minded as much if he hadn’t surprised her with the whole ‘pledging acknowledgement’ thing.”

“She does like to be prepared.” Arthur watched Merlin stalk back and forth.

Merlin was frustrated with himself. This was the first time in the past week that they’d been alone and together for more than five minutes since the battle and he couldn’t bring himself to take advantage of it. Fire coursed his nerves and his mind felt like it was going in twenty, no- a hundred different directions all at once. There were fleet repairs and trying to sort out rulership and rebuilding the position of Pendragon and a thousand and more things that had left Merlin sleeping alone and Arthur not at all.

Indecision and a tiny bit of fear kept him from Arthur’s side. Breathless and hard, he didn’t know how to start, afraid of mucking things up, of overwhelming Arthur.

As ridiculous as that sounded when Arthur was standing just inside the door, his lips parted and his pupils dilated. Not pushing. Never pushing, never backing Merlin into a corner, never trapping him. It was a promise. Arthur flexed his hands and tilted his head to question Merlin’s stare, wordless.

Standing an arm’s length from Arthur, Merlin wanted all of their firsts to have already happened so he wasn’t so terrified of how he might damage everything. He wanted their triumphant kiss to have never been interrupted, he wanted to have the adrenaline of successfully not dying in his veins to make this easy and unpremeditated and not something he’d had an entire week to fantasise about.

“Merlin,” Arthur said, “I have you.”

It wasn’t a command. It was enough to recall Merlin to himself.

He circled back around, pulled in by Arthur’s faith, and gave Arthur a fierce kiss. Arthur kissed back with enthusiasm and more that banished Merlin’s doubts, soothed his fears.
Merlin made the kiss last. His magic was loosed through the ship and its machinery, no longer trying to escape his control. The rush of too-much-power in too-little-space when pressing their lips together had vanished, and he opened Arthur’s mouth beneath his with a thrust of his tongue. He’d had too few chances, too little time. The door chirruped behind them as it sealed. Merlin didn’t look back, intent on drawing another throaty rumble of pleasure from Arthur.

Arthur’s hands gripped his hips, keeping him in place, though now that Merlin had started he had no intention of stopping unless the ship exploded or Arthur came and overloaded all his mods. Merlin’s fingers sought the releases for Arthur’s ceremonial armour, wanting and no longer willing to give power to his anxieties, not when Arthur was there and meeting him halfway.

The red cloak fell away from Arthur’s shoulders, drifting into a pile at their feet and tangling around Arthur’s boots. Arthur began to help, and the kiss finally broke, the room filled with their panting as they hurried to peel the rest of their respective fancy dress off and get with the naked. Merlin’s honorary druidic robes were easy enough, but Arthur had layers upon layers of metal, circuitry, plastics, and fabrics to shed before Merlin could finally run his hands up Arthur’s damp, bare sides.

Merlin pressed a kiss to Arthur’s collarbone, ducking his head and resting his cheek against the line of Arthur’s jaw. He scratched his nails lightly down Arthur’s ribs, over metal and skin, and smoothed his palms across Arthur’s abdominal muscles. Arthur stroked the line of Merlin’s back, from shoulder blades to hips down either side of his spine, his hands wonderfully, deliriously warm.

Merlin pressed closer and said, “Thinking I’d fucked up saving you was worse than losing you. I don’t think I could go through that again.” It was a quiet admission, made into the join where Arthur’s neck met his shoulder.

“I’ll make you swear to me again if you’re going to lie so poorly,” Arthur said, laughing and pushing on Merlin’s hips to make him take a step back and toward the bed. He wore a smile on his face, but it was the thread of confidence beneath his words that made Merlin close his eyes and sigh. Confidence in Merlin, in what he was capable of, added to just the tiniest of nudges to leave the future in the future.

This time it was Arthur to lean forward and mouth up the underside of Merlin’s jaw and bite down on his earlobe. Arthur nibbled and scraped and the sensation sent a thrill straight down Merlin’s spine to his cock. At the moment when Merlin was thoroughly distracted, Arthur shoved him over backward onto the waiting mattress.

His plan backfired. Merlin snagged a hold of Arthur’s wrist as he tipped and yanked him down. Arthur caught himself before he squashed Merlin into the bed, a grin blossoming on his face that Merlin found irresistible.

With one hand, Merlin pulled Arthur down into a messy, off-centre kiss. He captured Arthur’s lower lip in his teeth and sucked hard. Arthur thrust against Merlin’s thigh at the sensation, his arms giving, the metal of his chest coming down hard and squeezing the air from Merlin’s lungs.

Merlin wheezed, trying to laugh and breathe and swat Arthur off of him at the same time. He had not, perhaps, thought this entirely through. He was lost in the thrill of being able to lick and kiss and bite without worrying about damaging Arthur, knowing that Arthur could meet him touch for touch, bruise for bruise as they marked each other’s bodies with their lips.

Arthur rolled to the side and propped himself up on one elbow, grin returned, and ran the metal of his palm from the hollow of Merlin’s throat, down across the scars on his chest, across the flat of his belly, until he wrapped his fingers around Merlin’s cock. Once there, he didn’t move, letting Merlin’s anticipation drive him fully erect.
“Arthur.” Merlin’s voice was hoarse, not quite pleading, but not quite *not* pleading. Arthur brushed this thumb across the head of Merlin’s cock and Merlin swallowed his response down to a strangled exhale, hips twitching back against the bed. He could feel Arthur’s length heavy against him, warm and hard.

Arthur didn’t seem inclined to do more, content to watch Merlin’s face as Merlin panted at the heat of Arthur’s hand wrapped around him, metal that felt like seamless skin. His hand moved ever so slightly when Arthur breathed to give the barest friction. Merlin rolled his head to maybe do a bit more than not-pleading when he caught sight of Arthur’s expression. It was contemplative, relaxed and fond, and Merlin couldn’t help the demanding, “What?” that fell from his lips.

“You’re not angry anymore,” Arthur said, studying him.

Merlin didn’t know whether to laugh or cry or simply strangle Arthur for stopping when they should be starting. He took a great, gulping breath and said to the ceiling, “Hard to hold onto my anger, once I sorted that I was the one I was angry at. I traded our past for our future, and right about now I’m really okay with that.” He shifted his hips experimentally and Arthur’s hand moved with him. He sighed, letting pleasure war with impatience. “Besides, even if you didn’t have your *hand around my dick why are you stopping*, I had already decided the wait was worth it.” He brushed his fingers down Arthur’s cheek, across his shoulder and down his arm to encircle his wrist. He gave it a slight tug and raised his eyebrows.

Laughing at the unsubtle hint, Arthur flexed his arm, giving Merlin a firm stroke and leaning down to kiss him, open mouthed and sharing breath until Merlin caught Arthur’s tongue gently in his teeth. He held Arthur still for long enough that Arthur huffed in amusement and pulled away, kissing down the side of Merlin’s neck as Merlin arched off the bed.

Arthur pulled his hand away and shifted to nudge Merlin’s legs apart so he could settle between them, his lips following the course that his hand had already taken. He pressed kisses down the line of Merlin’s sternum, traced the scars with his tongue, and sucked a bruise into the curve of Merlin’s ribs.

Arthur took his time, leaving Merlin’s cock untended for as long as it took to work his way down with teeth and tongue, nibbling at the skin of Merlin’s hip and kissing the inner curve of his thigh until anticipation left a low curl of tingling pleasure in Merlin’s groin. Merlin let out his breath in a long sigh that was nearly a groan when Arthur finally took him into his mouth.

Merlin tangled his fingers in Arthur’s hair and held on, letting the heat of Arthur’s mouth and the slide of his tongue reduce him to inarticulate sounds of pleasure that increased in volume the closer Arthur brought him to coming.

“I’m-” Merlin said, warning him because he was *polite* and *fuck*, and Arthur pulled his mouth away and blew on Merlin’s cock head. The unexpected shock of cold had Merlin gasping and cursing as he dropped away from the edge. When he met Arthur’s eyes he was surprised not at all to find him suppressing laughter even as he stroked his hands down either side of Merlin’s ribs.

Unperturbed by Merlin’s curses, Arthur hopped off the bed and returned with a very useful-looking jar of gel from the desk drawer. Merlin propped himself up on his elbows, not entirely mollified by the jar’s appearance, and waited, breathing hard. Arthur placed the jar on Merlin’s belly and knelt back on the mattress. “For me,” he said, looking far too smug. A moment later a shadow crossed his face and he pursed his lips. “Unless you don’t-”

Merlin grabbed Arthur’s hand and pulled him down into a hard kiss, silencing the rest of whatever inanity he was going to spout, and scrambled to his knees. “Over,” he said, pulling Arthur down
again. This time he was clever about it and did not get flattened by the sheer weight of Arthur’s metal body. By the time they sorted themselves out with a minimum of awkward flailing and at least one trip to the floor for the little jar, Arthur had his arse in the air and Merlin was draped half over his back pressing kisses into the base of his spine. When Arthur laughed the sound rumbled up through his ribcage and made the whole bed shake. Merlin smiled into Arthur’s skin.

Resting his forehead on Arthur’s lower back, he breathed in the smell of sweat and metal and the scent that was irrevocably Arthur. Merlin wouldn’t be here but for Arthur, and Arthur wouldn’t be here but for him, and Merlin was starting to think that he would willingly do just about anything for this Arthur, his Arthur.

Not that his current task was a hardship in any way. Merlin’s cock twitched in anticipation all the sweeter for having risen so close to coming against Arthur’s tongue, in Arthur’s mouth. Arthur would be lucky if Merlin managed a handful of thrusts, and it would serve him right.

Merlin’s smile widened to a grin and he worked kisses up along the angle of Arthur’s hip, the tickle of his breath setting Arthur to laughing again, which in turn nearly sent Merlin off into giggles. Merlin had to stop, breathe, and try again, smoothing the cheeks of Arthur’s arse open.

Stroking his hands down the inside of Arthur’s thighs to spread his legs so he could fit his knee comfortably between them, Merlin said, “You are trying to kill me.”

“I might be tempted if you don’t-” Arthur started, stopping suddenly when the press of Merlin’s finger and way too much gel against the pucker of his arse cut him off.

Arthur took hold of his own cock and stroked it leisurely, letting Merlin work him open while he made contented noises into the sheets.

The curve of Arthur’s arse was far too tempting, and Merlin planted a kiss on one cheek followed quickly with a bite, sinking his teeth into skin and muscle. Arthur jumped and cursed, taken by surprise that swiftly transmuted to an arse-wriggle. Arthur peered beneath his shoulder and torso up at Merlin with a ‘really?’ expression on his upside-down face.

“Sorry,” Merlin murmured, mostly-repentant.

Arthur’s hand never left his own length as he laughed. If anything, when he spoke he sounded more aroused, his voice husky as he demanded, “Now that I’m expecting it, for the love of - don’t stop.”

With an amused snort and a small rush of pleasure, Merlin soothed the bite with kisses and licks, nibbling the skin more delicately and taking his time now that he’d made his mark. He bit as a deliberate distraction from - welcome addition to? - the second and third finger he added as Arthur pushed against him. By the time Merlin lined himself up with Arthur’s slicked arse, the cheeks on either side were reddened with tiny indentations of Merlin’s teeth.

He gripped Arthur’s hips and slid inside a tiny hitch at a time. Arthur was noisy. He expressed his pleasure as a series of grunts and stuttering, open-mouthed exhalations somewhere between a moan and sigh. He swore at Merlin and ordered him faster and harder, neither of which were even possible as Merlin fucked into him.

Sweat dripped between Merlin’s shoulder blades. Finally fully seated, he groaned. Leaning half over Arthur, his spine curled and shoulders curved, he dug his fingers into the skin Arthur’s hips to keep himself from coming right then.

Feeling the tingling spread of pleasure radiating from his cock, his sign that he was almost-but-not-
quite going to pass the point of no return, he halted, waiting until he dropped back from the edge again.

Arthur grunted in query. Merlin slid a hand up Arthur’s spine, over the knobby ridges until his fingers met the metal that banded Arthur’s chest. The mods creaked when Arthur breathed. Merlin brushed his fingers over the pinhole lights that ran down either side of Arthur’s upper spine. He wanted to explore everything with his mouth, from the seams that separated skin from mod to how sensitive the warm metal surface could be.

They breathed together for another few seconds, loud and fast and ragged, Merlin’s head bowed and Arthur’s face pressed to the sheets.

Merlin began thrusting, gradually building into a rhythm. Arthur pushed back against him and rocked with the motion. Keeping one hand on Arthur’s lower back, Merlin held tight with the other as his thrusts became harder, his strokes longer. He squeezed his eyes shut and this time he didn’t try to hold back as pleasure spread like a tingle of electricity or magic beneath his skin.

He came, thrusting hard into Arthur, pulling him back so there might be no space between them. He shuddered, barely able to think, his thoughts a white buzz of ‘Arthur’ and a stream of ‘yesyesyes’ that he couldn’t voice.

Merlin pulled free, collapsing backwards onto his heels. Wordless and insistent, he pushed a panting Arthur over. He parted Arthur’s knees, bowed between them as Arthur propped himself up on his elbows and let his cock jut outward and upward for Merlin to claim with his mouth.

Arthur tasted of precome and salt. Merlin had only just fitted his lips around the head, slid Arthur’s length across his tongue as he bobbed down to take in as much as he could and felt him bump the back of his throat when Arthur threw his head back and thrust into Merlin’s mouth. Arthur’s hand found the back of Merlin’s head, held him still as he came down his throat. Merlin breathed heavily through his nose, his mouth wrapped firmly around Arthur’s cock and he could feel the repeated pulse of Arthur’s coming. His throat worked, eyes closed, listening to Arthur’s extended hum of pleasure.

Arthur’s hand dropped away and Merlin let Arthur slide from his mouth, levering himself away only to find Arthur dragging him up, a strong hand on either side of his ribs, to claim his mouth with a kiss.

They finally broke from each other, Merlin panting and dizzy. He clutched Arthur’s shoulders and stared at his face. Arthur put his hand on the back of Merlin’s head and tipped their foreheads together, his chest heaving.

“Mine,” he said, and it was intimate and insistent all at once.

“Yes,” Merlin breathed.

“Consort.” Single words, questions wrapped in demands, questions only by virtue that Arthur waited for Merlin to respond. “Official.”

“Yes,” Merlin repeated for each and Arthur kissed him again, a fierce, affirming kiss that turned languid as their heartbeats slowed.

Their kisses became lazy and Merlin draped himself across Arthur, tangling their legs together and tucking himself up against Arthur’s side. He put his chin on Arthur’s shoulder, nose against his hair, and Arthur relaxed in his embrace, what little tension he’d managed to retain draining as Merlin
curled around him.

“You haven’t slept for a week,” Merlin reminded him, “There’ll be time.”

Arthur huffed in laughter, his eyes closing. “I could go again.”

Not bothering to dignify that with a response, Merlin was also forced to ignore Arthur’s subsequent chuckle.

Merlin listened to Arthur steady his breathing, listened to the clicks and whirs of things happening inside of Arthur’s chest. Arthur’s oculars shone blue through his eyelids for a second before they blinked out again to remain dark.

All signs pointed to Arthur asleep as Merlin did a bit of magic to clean them up, so when Arthur spoke again, Merlin startled.

“I’m here now, you know,” he said, tightening his arm around Merlin to soothe him.

“Er-?”

“You asked me where I had been. I’m just telling you it doesn’t matter, because I’m here now.”

Closing his eyes against an impulse toward tears, Merlin squeezed Arthur, pressing his face into the side of Arthur’s head and nudging his ear with his nose. “Good.”

Arthur laughed and echoed, “Good.”

Sleep found Arthur long before it even flirted with Merlin. Falling asleep proved tougher than Merlin had anticipated, still too keyed up from the ceremony and Arthur. He lay drowsing, his thoughts racing.

Freya’s voice insinuated itself into his mind, her focus somewhere metaphorically over his left shoulder, still giving him his privacy.

*I think he likes you,* she said, her bubble of amusement an itch in his toes.

“I would never have been able to tell,” Merlin said. Arthur shifted in his sleep when Merlin spoke, but didn’t wake.

Merlin brushed a lock of hair from Arthur’s sticky forehead and kissed him on the side of his head. A smile twitched at his lips and he settled back down. He’d need to wait until Arthur was awake to inform him that someone was to blame for him falling in love and it certainly wasn’t Merlin.

Distracting himself, he told Freya, “You’ve gotten stronger.”

*More room to grow.* Her presence was like a cat’s, curled on the floor off the end of the bed. *Preparing for our return to the fringe.*

“Planetfall first.”

*Planetfall first,* Freya agreed, correcting herself, her thrill of excitement infectious. *Then fringe.*

Merlin’s magic vibrated with anticipation beneath his skin and throughout the ship. Arthur shifted in his sleep.

Merlin kissed him again, because he was there.
Chapter End Notes

End of Arc Two

**

Thank you for reading! It was my pleasure to bring this story to you.

Thanks again to my glorious artist for her wonderful art.

This piece is set in the larger Once and Future universe, so if you're intrigued enough to want of this particular AU, please subscribe to the series. I am also planning on writing more Merlin AUs as my next few projects, so feel free to subscribe to me as well.

I'm keeping both an livejournal and a tumblr for my fic and fic-related things, so feel free to follow me at either Desiderii-fic on tumblr or Desiderii on Lj

Go PaperLegends 2013!

Works inspired by this one: Art for "Candle, Cup, and Casket" by Desiderii by AkumuBlack

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