The View from the Mountain

by Nympha_Alba

Summary

It's 1910 and what is left of the once powerful magical ruling class is a tired, conventional aristocracy who have let their magic slip. Merlin Emrys, pressured by expectations, travels to Italy and Switzerland to find himself. Instead he finds Arthur Pendragon, but in the end that may amount to the same thing.

(Based on E.M. Forster's A Room With a View.)

Notes

Warnings:
Angst, mention of homophobia, mention of minor character death (before the story begins).

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And most of all to the amazing alby_mangroves, who was both my beta and my artist. I can't thank you enough for all your help with my story and for all the gorgeous, gorgeous art that takes my breath away!

The art is embedded in the story but also in a separate post here!
See the end of the work for more notes.
Unexplained Desires

The Piazza Signoria is too stony to be brilliant. It has no grass, no flowers, no frescoes, no glittering walls of marble or comforting patches of ruddy brick. By an odd chance – unless we believe in a presiding genius of place – the statues that relieve its severity suggest, not the innocence of childhood nor the glorious bewilderment of youth, but the conscious achievements of maturity. Perseus and Judith, Hercules and Thusnelda, they have done or suffered something, and, though they are immortal, immortality has come to them after experience, not before. Here, not only in the solitude of Nature, might a hero meet a goddess, or a heroine a god.

E.M. Forster, *A Room With a View*

Or a hero meet another hero.

PART ONE – UNEXPLAINED DESIRES

They arrived by train from Rome.

Florence, they had been told, was a very different kind of city with a different temper – whereas Rome had been hot, dusty and exciting, staggering under the ever-increasing weight of history, Florence would have an artist's soul. But the train was several hours delayed, and when they reached their destination at last, they were thirsty and irritable and in need of a bath. Over dinner at the pension they sniped at each other, quietly at first but more loudly as the wine drained from their glasses. They were too tired to take much notice of the other guests, too tired to see that their rooms did indeed have the promised river view. Gaius made his "good night" sound like a reprimand and shut his door unnecessarily hard; Merlin sighed and fell asleep to the sounds of an unknown city.

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Merlin woke in a room steeped in unaccustomed light that looked edible. That was his first thought; that it looked edible. Honey-coloured, tea-coloured, toffee-coloured. It seeped through the gap between the closed shutters and fell diagonally across his bed, where it curved and bent with the topography of his body: right thigh, left hip, left arm. Mountains and valleys.

Above him the ceiling was painted with clouds and sky, fantastic birds and mythological creatures in blue and emerald, red and gold, and he felt refreshed in a way he never had in Rome. Perhaps Florence would prove to be the right choice.

He threw off the covers and swung his legs over the side of the bed with a great creaking and groaning of springs. The terracotta tiles were cool under his bare feet as he padded over to the window and opened the shutters, blinking and squinting against the light.

The world opened before him with turrets and cupolas, campaniles and tiled roofs, the river and the hot, dazzling sky. When he leaned out of the window he felt like he could fly if he tried. For a moment, the impulse was almost irresistible.

"Good morning."

Merlin jumped at the voice and turned his head to look. *No*, he thought. *It's not real. It's a mirage.* But surely mirages did not speak?
The young man was leaning out of the window next to Merlin's own, all golden skin and fair hair, not honey-coloured like the sun through the shutters but the colour of wheat ripe for harvest. They looked at one another for a long moment, both of them resting their arms on the window ledge. Mirror images; a composition in a piece of art.

Merlin caught himself. If Gaius had been present, he would have given Merlin a stern look and muttered something under his breath about manners, so Merlin returned the "Good morning", a little late. His voice was low and rough with sleep.

"Brilliant day," said Mirage. "Much too good for museums and churches."

He was blinding in the strong light. The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up above his elbows, allowing the sun to play over the blond hairs on his forearms; he had not yet put on his collar and the top button of the shirt was undone. Merlin blinked in confusion and turned his face away, breathless, to fix his eyes on a bell tower in the distance.
A day for wandering around the city," Mirage continued. "I think I'd like to stroll, stop to buy some grapes, or ice cream, that sort of thing. Eat rather than look at paintings or architecture. Nurture the body, not the soul. A hedonist holiday."

Merlin gave a startled laugh and turned to look at Mirage, who was grinning. And Merlin could only agree – it was a day for strolling, not for boredly trying to appreciate old murals or looking at paintings in gloomy halls.

"I'm Arthur Pendragon," Mirage offered.

"Mer-uh." Merlin coughed and cleared his throat. "Merlin Emrys. I saw you at dinner last night."

"I saw you too," said Arthur Pendragon and smirked. "And heard your views on the view, and your travelling companion, and various other things. There wasn't much that passed muster."

Merlin felt himself colour. "Sorry about that," he muttered. "We had just arrived from Rome; we were tired. And frankly a bit fed up with each other's company, as you could probably tell."

Pendragon laughed. "Well, I am travelling with my mother, which can be something of a strain – she is not the most practically-minded person and expects me to sort out the frequent misunderstandings in which she entangles herself."

Merlin smiled at him. "With Gaius and me," he said, "it's generally the other way around."

The sun was hot and more glorious than any sunshine in Britain had ever been. The thought of museums was unbearable, and an idea began to stir in Merlin's mind. It seemed to stir in Pendragon's, too, because they turned to each other at the same time.

"Would you…"

"I was thinking…"

They looked at one another.

"I think," Arthur Pendragon said while the sun in his eyes made him god-like (Apollo, of course; nothing less would do), "it would be very nice to escape those museums and churches. If you had the day to yourself, what would you do?"

Merlin's heart was very loud and he was glad of the carriage that came clattering and squeaking along the cobbled street below. "I would…" He stalled and pondered. What would he do? "The thing is," he said, "I would do nothing. I would walk around. Stop for coffee. See what caught my interest, and then do that."

Pendragon looked pleased. "Excellent," he said. "Care to do nothing together? My mother wouldn't object to my wandering off without her, I think, if I had a… a companion my own age."

He eyed Merlin; Merlin eyed him back and nodded. "Gaius as well."

"It will have to be tomorrow, I'm afraid," Pendragon said, "as I have promised to take Mother to San Miniato today."

Merlin sighed. For his part, he would probably just stroll, exploring the area around the pension to "get acquainted", which was how Gaius referred to it. The day after a journey Gaius was usually tired and preferred to potter about, but the thought of spending tomorrow with Pendragon brightened the prospect for Merlin. "Tomorrow it is."
"That's settled, then," Pendragon said.

The beating of Merlin's heart was deafening. "See you at breakfast."

"Breakfast?" Pendragon's eyebrows lifted. Then he threw his head back and laughed, and Merlin was unable to stop his stare, mesmerised by the strong arc of Pendragon's throat.

Before he could find out what was so amusing, there was a knock on the door and Gaius appeared in the doorway.

"Merlin!" he said reproachfully at the sight of Merlin's nightshirt and bare feet. "Hurry up and get dressed, or the better part of the day will be gone! You have already missed breakfast, and not even narrowly."

Merlin gave Pendragon a look of resignation and shrugged.

Pendragon grinned. "See you at breakfast tomorrow, if not before," he said and shut his window.

Merlin leaned out a little further, looking at the spot where Pendragon had been only half a second ago, unsure whether it had really happened, whether Pendragon perhaps had been a dream. A mirage. He sighed and turned around to meet his travelling companion's disapproving stare.

"Yes, yes, Gaius," he said hastily, "I'll be down in a minute."

"See to it that you are," said Gaius and left.

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As expected, Gaius was tired after the long day on the train yesterday and would prefer not to venture too far away from the pension, only take a leisurely stroll to drink in the atmosphere of this new city.

"Well?" Gaius said as they entered the street, blinking a little at the light and trying to decide where to go first.

"Well what?" Merlin's reply was distracted. There was little room in his mind for anything but the image of Pendragon in white shirtsleeves, leaning out of his window with the sun sending sparks off his hair. Reality was not bright enough to erase the image.

"Florence," Gaius replied patiently. The irritation of yesterday was gone after a good night's sleep and a sound breakfast. "Any misgivings? Any trouble breathing? Did we make the right decision?"

"You ask too many questions, Gaius. No to the first and the second one, and yes to the third."

"Good. I'm relieved. I don't think I could have faced another experience like Naples, even if I was not feeling it as badly as you were."

Merlin closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath, trying to feel this new city. There was magic here, too, but not the same kind as in Naples. This magic was not oppressive but lighter, brighter, more… constructive. Creative, perhaps, was the word. This magic was the artist's soul.

When Merlin opened his eyes again, the light still looked as edible as it had when he had first woken up, but less tea-coloured now and more the colour of sweet wine. He nodded thoughtfully in confirmation: yes, they had made the right decision.

He was pleased, too, that the discord between them was gone. It was unsurprising, unavoidable, that
after travelling together for five weeks they should occasionally get on each other's nerves, but it was better to have accord. Despite the age difference they travelled well together, and Merlin was grateful. If it had not been for Gaius, he would not have come to Italy at all.

They strolled along the river, visited a church, a few shops, a café, and by the time they were done, the shopkeepers had begun to close their establishments for the afternoon, metal shutters rattling down to be locked. Towards evening they would go back up and the city would come to life again, when the cool hours approached and the world heaved a sigh of relief.

Back at the pension, up in his room, Merlin closed the shutters against the heat and threw himself on the bed, pulling out the book he had been reading since Rome. On the train to Florence he had devoured it and only looked up from time to time at Gaius's prompting when there had been some particularly beautiful scenery to be admired, but now the book failed to hold his attention. Instead, his mind wandered once again to Arthur Pendragon, who seemed made to walk under the Italian sun, bathed in light.

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The dining room was nearly deserted that evening. The only other guests were two elderly ladies seated at the only table for two, clearly demonstrating their unwillingness to socialise. When Gaius and Merlin entered the room, the ladies leaned their heads together, both of them fixing their eyes on the new arrivals. Merlin squirmed a little under their stare, bracing himself not to speak in whispers. It felt uncomfortably like stepping out on a stage where every syllable rang out to meet the ears of a disapproving audience.

The dining room itself was a depressing place – the very English signora who ran the pension seemed to have gone to a great deal of trouble creating the ugliest room possible. There were more lamps than guests. The brass chandelier in the centre of the ceiling gave off a dull, tired glow, as if the light itself and not just the brass was unpolished, and the many small lamps with tasselled shades were much too fussy and British for a Florentine room. The wallpaper was dark green with an overly ornamented pattern that had once, perhaps, been printed in gold, and the overall impression was one of gloom.

Merlin and Gaius found themselves hurrying through the meal while trying not to be obvious about it. Merlin in particular seemed to have caught the elderly ladies' interest, and whenever he ventured a glance their way, their gaze was fixed on him. Once, a very long time ago, they must have been great beauties. They were still stately; straight-backed and poised.

As soon as the plates were empty, Gaius got up from the table and gave the ladies a polite nod. Merlin followed him to the drawing-room where they seated themselves in velvet armchairs for coffee and a cigarette, drawing a deep breath as if the gaze of the old ladies had been a weight on their chests. When Merlin looked at Gaius he could see his own relief mirrored in the old man's eyes, and they both grinned.

"Well, that was something of an ordeal," Gaius said, "but we escaped relatively unharmed."

"For now," Merlin agreed and lit both their cigarettes, after which they sat quietly, watching the smoke curl towards the ceiling.

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Merlin opened his shutters the next morning to find the day as sunny and inviting as the one before, but today he did not take the time to lean out of the window. It would not do to miss breakfast again.
Pendragon and his mother were just leaving their table when Merlin entered with Gaius, stopping to exchange polite phrases. Proper introductions had been made in the drawing-room the night before, and they had agreed that Gaius would spend the day in Mrs Pendragon's company while the young men explored on their own.

"Meet you here in an hour?" Pendragon suggested.

As Merlin nodded his agreement, his heart made an anticipatory skip.

"Shall we just stroll?" Pendragon asked an hour later, dazzling in a linen suit and summer hat. "See where our noses point us and our feet take us?"

Merlin found he was genuinely looking forward to his day. It had been a while since that had happened. "That sounds like an excellent plan to me."

"It isn't much of one. In fact, it isn't one at all."

"No," Merlin said, "and that is the best thing about it."

Pendragon seemed pleased. "Shall we, then?"

They stopped in the Piazza della Signoria first, and despite their vows to stay away from art, they found themselves walking around the square slowly, peering up at the towering sculptures. Pendragon ("call me Arthur") squinted up at a rather frightening representation of someone triumphantly holding someone else's severed head by the hair, and said: "Well, it may be art, but at least it's out in the sun. I only mind it when it keeps me indoors on a beautiful day."

Merlin glanced at the lack of fig leaves or strategically draped cloth on another sculpture and hummed in agreement. The corners of Arthur's mouth lifted as he followed the line of Merlin's gaze.

"Italians aren't prudes," he said. "I find it liberating."

To Merlin's dismay he felt himself blush even though he agreed. Then he blushed even more because he had blushed, hoping Arthur would put it down to the sun.

They left the blazing hot piazza to walk along the river, where a breeze cooled their faces. After several weeks with Gaius, spending time with someone Merlin's own age was a welcome change. There was no need to slow down on account of tired old legs and no endless discussions about what thing of educational value to do next.

"What do you think," Arthur said, "should we find a place to have a drink? And then go somewhere else for lunch?"

Merlin was amused. "You are taking the hedonist holiday seriously."

"Always." After a pause, Arthur added with a shrug and half a smile: "It helps to know what you want out of life."

The statement made Merlin blink a little. So Arthur knew what he wanted out of life? Well, that was impressive, but perhaps only by comparison as Merlin himself was distinctly unimpressive in that area. Despite two years at university, he was no closer to knowing what he wanted – on the contrary. Most days he felt he was groping around in a darkened room where he could barely make out the shape of the furniture. To be able to know what you wanted, you had to know who you were, and he had not even come that far. Which was what this Italian journey was ultimately about.
They sat under the brightly striped awning at a café by the river, watching people wander by on one side of them and the river flow lazily on the other. The street was quiet for Florence and the overall atmosphere was calming, but Merlin was still fidgeting. He squirmed in his chair, put a finger between his collar and his neck to relieve the heat, played with his glass of prosecco once it had landed on the table. It was nothing new that he needed time to be comfortable with people; his shyness demanded it. If anything was remarkable about Arthur, it was how smooth the process felt with him. As if there had been an immediate bond between the two of them from the moment they had leaned out of their windows.

Arthur's profile was sharp and tanned in the shade under the awning as he looked out over the river. He seemed to possess the art of simply being, which allowed Merlin in his turn to simply be. There were no expectations, no pressure, nothing to live up to, and Merlin realised he had been breathing very shallowly for god knew how long. Now there was air in his lungs again, all the way down.

The inexplicable fatigue that had plagued him for months back home in England and ultimately brought him to Italy had subsided a little in Rome but still been very much present. It was better now. Merlin still failed to see a clear-cut reason for any of it – not why it had begun, not why it should be relieved now.

All young British men of a certain class and standing ought to travel on the continent, Gaius had said, to broaden their views. Take a grand tour, or at least a petit one, for the sake of learning. It was the cultured thing to do. Merlin's mother had agreed, but the glances exchanged between them had spoken of other concerns besides Merlin's education.

He shrugged to shake off the gloomy thoughts. When he leaned back in his cane chair it made a loud crunching sound, like someone biting into a gigantic rusk, and Arthur smiled at the noise. The red colour of the awning was reflected on his fair hair and Merlin tried not to stare as Arthur lifted the glass of pale gold liquid to his mouth. It did not do to think too much about that mouth.

"What do you make of the other guests at the pension?" Arthur asked.

There was a distracting drop of wine on his bottom lip, and when the tip of his tongue came out to catch it, Merlin turned his eyes to the river.

"I haven't seen very much of them yet," he replied apologetically. "As you noticed yourself that first evening, we were a bit tired and… overly critical." After a pause, he added: "I did notice you and your mother, though."

"It would have been hard not to, seeing as we were seated at the same table."

It would have been hard not to in any case.

"And last night," Merlin continued, "Gaius and I were the only guests at dinner apart from two rather frightening-looking old ladies." He set his glass down on the metal table with a click. "Who are they, and do they ever speak? They kept staring at us all through the meal but never offered a word, barely even a nod. Is our appearance really that offensive?"

"Ah," said Arthur and laughed, "the Gorlois sisters. They are Miss Morgause and Miss Morgana, and I'd say frightening is a good description of them. They give me the shivers, and no, they never speak much to anyone. I don't think I have ever heard Miss Morgause utter a word. Miss Morgana does speak once in a while, mostly to order people around. I suspect they consider themselves a cut above the rest."

Merlin nodded non-committally. He was well acquainted with the name of Gorlois even if this was
the first time he had encountered anyone bearing it, and he was not surprised that they should feel
themselves superior. The Gorlois family was well respected in the magical community, always
spoken of with awe and sometimes even fear, but the bloodline was dying and these old ladies could
well be the last living members of their clan. Even if Merlin did not look directly at Arthur, he could
see him out of the corner of his eye. At a guess, Arthur and his mother did not have magic.

"I must admit I was relieved that you arrived," Arthur was saying, "to divert their attention. I'd much
rather have them stare at you than at me. Have you finished your drink? Let's climb up to the
Piazzale Michelangelo. Then we will have earned a good lunch."

When they came out on the pavement the day had grown even hotter, and Merlin felt pleasantly
dizzy. That single glass of wine was making itself felt. His head was heavy and his feet light, and if
he was not careful, he might say things that would better remain unsaid.

The views from the Piazzale Michelangelo were worth both the sweat of the climb and the slight
headache that followed. Once there, they watched the city spread out at their feet with its sun-baked
buildings along the lungarni and red, tiled roofs glittering with heat. Behind them in the square was a
bronze copy of Michelangelo's David and Merlin allowed his eyes to caress the details of muscle and
sinew, barely resisting the urge to reach out and touch the metal, hot from the sun.

When they had found a restaurant, ordered a drink and sat perusing the menu, Merlin pinched the
bridge of his nose. "Sometimes when I drink I feel like I have no eyes."

Arthur looked up, eyebrows rising. "No eyes? Well, if it makes you feel any better, I can assure you
your eyes are still there, both of them. How do you mean – that you can't feel them or that you can't
see?"

"Neither. It feels more… like they're so small they barely exist."

Though clearly amused, Arthur did not laugh. "Well, they are there," he said, "and they are no
smaller than they were before you had that glass of prosecco. Same size, same colour as before. Trust
me."

"I don't know why I said that," Merlin muttered, slightly embarrassed. "It's such a weird thing."

"I like that." Arthur returned his gaze to the menu. "I like weird things."

Their food arrived, accompanied by carafe of white wine so well chilled it cried tears of
condensation onto the tablecloth.

"Before I came to Italy," Arthur said, "I had no idea how good the food would be. No one had
mentioned that detail, and that has been one of the nicest surprises here."

Merlin loved the food too, how the vegetables tasted of the sun they had absorbed, how most dishes
were very simple because they had no need to be complicated. Just take the best, and it will taste
heavenly even if it only consists of two ingredients with a pinch of salt added.

"Hedonist holiday," he said and nodded.

"Truly."

Alcohol was a treacherous substance. There was a reason Merlin never drank very much, even in the
company of his peers. When Arthur held Merlin's gaze, Merlin was afraid his eyes would show his
thoughts, his dreams, his longing; the image of Arthur's bare skin flashing through his mind.
Arthur returned to his food and ate in silence, with Merlin trying not to watch his mouth as he chewed. Something about his upper lip did things to Merlin, heat curling at the core of his body.

"How long have you been in Italy?" Arthur asked when they had finished their meal and sat back to polish off the wine. "And where are you going after Florence?"

"We've been here five weeks now," Merlin replied, thankful for this comparatively neutral topic. "We're planning to go on from here to Siena, perhaps, and then continue north to Switzerland before we return to England. What about you?"

"Well, we've been in Italy for three weeks – the first two in Rome, and the third here. We intend to stay here another week and then we, too, are going to Switzerland. We want to go on that new railway over the Bernina Pass," Arthur said and played with his napkin, "or rather I want to; I doubt whether Mother cares very much about one railway or the other. It must be a great engineering achievement, which is why I want to go, and the views are supposed to be spectacular, which will please Mother. From St Moritz we are going on to Zürich and possibly to Berne. What are your plans? And where did you go before Florence?"

"It appears we were feeling adventurous," said Merlin dryly, "because we headed to Sicily first."

"Sicily!" Arthur leaned back, twirling what was left of his wine in his long-stemmed glass. "What was that like?"

"Well, first of all, travelling there was hell," Merlin said. "I have no idea what possessed us to go. It was the longest, dustiest, dreariest journey imaginable. It even made me begin to hate travelling by rail, and I've always quite liked it before."


Merlin made a path with his fingertip through the breadcrumbs on the table and thought about Sicily, how overwhelming it had been, in many different ways.

"First of all, Messina," he said in a low voice. "We should have done our research more thoroughly, or used our imagination, I suppose. I'm sure you remember there was a huge earthquake in Messina a couple of years ago." At Arthur's nod, he continued: "It was followed by a tidal wave, and nearly the entire town was destroyed. While we knew that, we had not expected to see so much devastation still. It was… difficult." The suffering, the fear and the grief had still been tangible in the air, in the atmosphere of that ruined city. Gaius had not sensed it as strongly as Merlin had, but Merlin had found it hard to breathe, to sleep, to stay upright in the streets. He had looked around and wished he could have used his magic to rebuild the city, rebuild it with his hands, his eyes, his power. It had frightened him.

He did not tell Arthur any of this, but related instead how they had travelled on along the sea to Catania. Catania had been overwhelming, too, with its blazing sky and heat haze trembling over the paving. Heavily ornamented Baroque style buildings had towered over the small human beings looking up at them, and the entire city had seemed designed to remind its visitors of their proximity to an active volcano. There had been no escaping the blue, imposing mountain with its perpetual plume of smoke. The sea had done its best to lighten the mood of the city but with little success.

"In the evenings, when it got dark, we could sometimes spot lava streams at the very top, like the glow of a cigarette. Only little hiccups, we were assured."

"I'd be rather nervous if I was right next to a volcano with the hiccups," Arthur said.
Merlin grinned. "So were we, but the locals just shrugged."

He was feeling the wine now; a pleasant buzz. Even if drinking was mostly not his thing, it was
different here, more enjoyable – either it was the Italian wines or Arthur's company. Merlin was not
entirely sure he would be able to walk a straight line when they exited the restaurant. Perhaps coffee
would help.

As they ordered it, Merlin recalled one of the distinctly enjoyable things from Sicily.

"Speaking of hedonist holidays," he said, "we tried a truly decadent pastry there, something called
cannoli – have you heard of it?"

Arthur shook his head, and while Merlin explained this sinful combination of crisp pastry and
smooth, sweet ricotta laden with pistachio nuts and candied orange peel, Arthur's gaze landed on his
mouth, more mesmerised than the story warranted. Feeling his lips heat, Merlin struggled to finish his
description.

"The whole thing is dusted with powdered sugar. Have it with a double espresso, and you'll think
you've gone to heaven."

Arthur looked bewitched. "I can only imagine." His gaze moved back up to Merlin's eyes.

"This was in Taormina," Merlin added, "which is quite different from Catania."

That was all he wanted to tell Arthur about Taormina.

"We had intended to go to Syracuse," he finished instead, "but in the end, we didn't. It was all too
overwhelming and too hot, too much of an ordeal for Gaius, so instead we left Sicily and headed to
Naples."

Their coffee arrived in small, thick china cups, fragrant and black with a layer of fine, golden froth
on the surface.

"Was Naples any better?" Arthur asked.

Merlin shook his head. If anything, Naples had been worse.

It had made much the same impression on them as Catania – towering, ornamented buildings; sun-
baked, ominous. The dark, mysterious cave of the Duomo had seemed to swallow them whole. But
whereas Sicily had merely been overwhelming, Naples had been unfriendly, even hostile. It had
reeked of old magic, not evil in concept but dark in nature, without regard for a civilised world.
Merlin had felt it badly and had again had trouble breathing, as if the air itself had been permeated
with ancient darkness. The only respite had been the Chiostri di Santa Clara with its colourful
majolica columns, shaded porticos and heady fragrance of citrus blossom, as if a cool breeze had
swept them clean and left them refreshed. They had intended to stay in Naples a week but in the end
had only endured it three days before heading north to Rome.

Rome had been hot and dusty but altogether more manageable, and they had spent two enjoyable
weeks there, seeing the sights – both the beautiful, awe-inspiring ones like the Forum and the
wonders of Basilica di San Pietro, and the awful ones, like the nearly finished monument to Vittorio
Emmanuele that could be seen from everywhere in the city, its marble shining whitely, reminiscent of
a gigantic set of false teeth.

"And then we came here," Merlin concluded, having talked enough. Time to hand over to Arthur.
"Where did you go first?"
"Well," Arthur said, "we didn't brave Sicily, although I tip my hat to you for doing it. We headed straight for Rome, but oh god, the passage to France across the Channel…!" Arthur's grimace spoke volumes. "I have never been so sick in my life. My mother was sick too, and so was everyone else. Thank goodness the pain was fairly short-lived, at least."

Merlin made a non-committal, sympathetic noise. He did not want to tell Arthur about his own passage across the Channel, how he had quieted the waves to ensure a smooth journey. It did not do to brag, as his mother had instilled in him all his life. *Don't flaunt your magic, Merlin.*

"But Rome itself, once we got there after a train ride that I enjoyed very much and my mother less, was fantastic." Arthur lifted the tiny coffee cup to his mouth, took a sip and made a face before putting it back on its saucer. "Ugh, it's gone cold."

Merlin threw him a glance. He could just let Arthur order another coffee, or he could perhaps… *No bragging*, he heard his mother's voice in his head, but this was not bragging. As well as having a practical purpose it would give Arthur an essential piece of the jigsaw puzzle; it would tell Arthur something important about him. He reached over and placed his fingertip on the rim of Arthur's cup. In another second, steam rose from the golden froth on top of the espresso.

Arthur looked at the coffee, then at Merlin. Nothing registered on his face. "Thank you."

Merlin shrugged, feeling almost a little shy now, and repeated the procedure with his own coffee. It felt good to have let Arthur know, and it was not until they had left the restaurant and were wandering along the river once again that it occurred to Merlin how Arthur could have taken that demonstration — it could have been seen as condescending, a way to let him know his place. Of course, this was what Hunith meant when she told him not to brag. Merlin decided not to take it up to discussion; it would only make matters worse. But Arthur did not look or act as if anything had changed. He was still easy, charming, with his eyes calm under the shade of his hat, his smile blinding. There was no indication of either intimidation or irritation, and Merlin was relieved. He did not want that, from Arthur or anyone.

"Shall we stroll back towards the Piazza Signoria?" Arthur asked. "I never thought I'd say this, but I almost feel ready for some more art. As long as it's outdoors."

Merlin agreed, and they walked back to the Uffizi galleries side by side.

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So Merlin had magic, Arthur thought in his room that night as he hung his jacket over the back of a chair. It was late and he was tired, and he yawned as he removed his cuffs. The world of magic was unknown to him. He had very few acquaintances with magical abilities and no close friends. In any case, people with magic tended to keep to themselves, considering themselves a cut above everyone else. At university, most of them gathered at King's and had as little as possible to do with students from other colleges. They were pleasant enough in any dealings with non-magical students, but distant and somewhat aloof.

Merlin did not come across as aloof. Distant, yes, but the distance seemed mostly dictated by shyness, and Arthur did not want to let that deter him. Something about Merlin made Arthur want to get to know him, something that had been there the moment Arthur had set eyes on the mussed dark hair and dazed eyes. It was not only beauty, either.

Slowly, absent-mindedly, Arthur unbuttoned his waistcoat. Earlier today he had told Merlin that he knew what he wanted, and while this statement was true, Arthur was also aware that some of the things he wanted most, he was not likely to ever have. As of yesterday, aside from the fact that it was
rude to call him a thing, Merlin was one of those things.

Arthur was not sure exactly what it was about Merlin that excited him so – perhaps that they were so different. Merlin: dark, reserved, obviously from a magical family, with that easy grace that comes from good breeding and a long history of importance in society. There was also the sense that Merlin carried a secret, or many, and perhaps this was what really attracted Arthur.

He removed his collar stud, letting the stiff collar spring loose, shuddering a little at the touch of his own cool fingers against the hot skin on his neck. Arthur carried a secret, too; one that should not have to be a secret. Back home in Britain his desires were a crime if he decided to act upon them. Here in Italy they were not, and it filled him with rage that his own country would do this to him.

Merlin was pleasant, polite, cautious, and from the look in his eyes, harbouring a deep unhappiness. It touched something within Arthur, perhaps a corresponding unhappiness.

And there was the undeniable fact of Merlin's beauty. Tall and wiry, with lovely hands, dark hair, fair skin and eyes that seemed to shift from the deepest, dusky, thunder-cloud blue to pure sapphire, crystal clear. Arthur suspected those eyes knew how to sparkle with joy and mischief, but he had yet to see them do so. He knew he could make it a life goal to watch it happen. Merlin's mouth was pretty enough to make Arthur carefully avert his eyes, and the cheekbones were worthy of a Benvenuto Cellini – perhaps in more ways than one.

Arthur undid the top buttons of his white shirt and rolled the sleeves up to his elbows. The room was warm, too warm for comfortable sleep. As he threw the shutters open wide, the night air flowed in cool and smooth as silk, touching his skin, caressing his face. He inhaled deeply, closing his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again he noticed a few, scattered stars in the velvety sky. Below him in the street the gaslights gave off a soft hiss and glow, accompanied by the dark murmur of the river.

There was a click from the window next to his, and Merlin's head emerged. Again, he was in his nightshirt that showed off the graceful lines of his neck, pale in the half-light, the curve of it disappearing in shadow at the neckline of the shirt. When Merlin saw Arthur he started, but his smile was genuine, warm and unreserved, making Arthur's pulse quicken.

"Hello," Merlin said softly and leaned on the sill, looking out over the river. "It's too hot to sleep, but it's a lovely night so it doesn't really matter."

"Yes," Arthur agreed without taking his eyes off Merlin. "It is a lovely night."

"Thanks for your company today," Merlin said. "I enjoyed it."

"So did I."

"Gaius has plans for Torre del Gallo tomorrow. Would you like to come with us? Your mother as well, of course. Or have you visited it already?"

The prospect of spending another day with Merlin filled Arthur with joy. "No, we haven't yet. I'd love to come with you; I'll ask Mother tomorrow morning."

Their smiles met and their gazes held, and for a breathless second Arthur thought he could see his own desire mirrored in Merlin's eyes before Merlin looked away. In the distance, someone shouted something in Italian and a burst of raucous laughter followed. A dog began to bark in an alley, the sound bouncing off the walls.

"I'll see you in the morning, then," Arthur said.
"Good night," came Merlin's soft reply.

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When Arthur's window closed Merlin was alone with the view, the night and his own longing. Arthur was not the first man he had been attracted to, but he was the first to evoke this kind of desire, immediate and disturbingly strong. Merlin had had opportunities before; of course he had. It was not possible to attend boarding school and university without some offers or encounters, but even if Merlin had been tempted at times, he had always declined. Not out of virtue, really, or even out of unwillingness – it was simply that something had been missing, something that, for Merlin, was an absolute requirement. He was not sure exactly what this was, only that with Arthur, the missing piece was there. A thrill ran through him at the thought, equal parts excitement and apprehension.

Not that there was much hope that his desires were reciprocated. In all probability, there was some young woman in England that Arthur would return to after his travels on the continent. Considering Arthur's looks, there could be no lack of female interest.

Merlin stayed by the window a while longer to let the evening breeze cool him, but it had no effect. His body was hot and hard, alive with desire for Arthur – for his hair between Merlin's fingers, for his skin under Merlin's lips.

He gave up and closed the shutters, pulled off his nightshirt and threw himself naked on the bed. Behind his eyelids he called up an image of Arthur in a state of near-undress, slowly removing his clothes for Merlin's pleasure, shrugging off his shirt to reveal an expanse of golden skin… standing naked before Merlin, his erection dark at the juncture of his pale thighs, drawing Merlin's gaze.

As Merlin slid his hand down over his stomach to his cock he imagined a kiss, imagined himself leaning forward to kiss Arthur, their breathing quickening just like he heard his own, the touch of Arthur's hands like he felt his own hand now. He imagined their bodies aligning, pressing together, the hardness and the heat.

Images kept dancing before him, of Arthur kneeling over him in the bed with his cock encircled by both their fists until he screwed his eyes shut with a whimper, painting Merlin's chest with come.

Just at that moment, Merlin heard or imagined he heard a muffled groan on the other side of the wall, and he stuffed his knuckles in his mouth as he came, hard.

For a while he lay panting as the sweat cooled on his skin, staring at the ceiling where tiny flecks of light fluttered and danced, reflections of the river. His thoughts returned to Taormina, to the things he had not told Arthur this afternoon, because Taormina was his own, deep secret.

Too high up on the hillside to have been reached by the tidal wave, it had provided a breathing space. Less affected by old magic, less filled with heavy Baroque and more diversified in style, Taormina had been an elegant, lively little town with a winding Corso, lined with bright shops and cafés. Gaius and Merlin had followed the Corso until a chequered piazza had opened up in front of them, right above the sea, making them gasp. The bright pink of the bougainvilleas in the square had contrasted sharply with the deep blue, turquoise and aquamarine of the sea; the bells of the old Duomo had sent flocks of birds wheeling.

They had stayed there for two nights. Hidden behind white-washed walls and a cast-iron gate, their hotel had a small garden with lemon trees, oleanders and roses. At night, the fragrance had been heady. Merlin had opened the shutters in his room and inhaled the sweet scent, watching the lights of the village cascading down the mountainside below him, down to the sea that he could not see, only hear as it whispered and sighed.
Two things from their visit would forever remain in Merlin's memory.

First of all, the antique theatre up on the hillside on the outskirts of the town. Mount Etna had dominated the view there as it had everywhere else on the island. Even in its ruins, the theatre had still been as dramatic as any play that could ever have been enacted there. The back wall behind the stage was long since gone, opening up a perfect view of the steep hillside beyond. White butterflies had fluttered in the air above the stage, and perfectly centered between the remaining red columns of the theatre, Mount Etna had risen hazy blue.

That had been the daylight side of their visit – sun-drenched olive groves where the breeze combed through silvery leaves, darkly glittering doorways of wine shops, elegant cafés and shop windows piled high with torroncini and colourful marzipan.

Then there had been the night-time side, the one that had been Merlin's own.

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A year ago, he had visited a photographic exhibition in London with Edwin Muirden, a fellow student from his college. While Merlin was not sure whether he liked him or not, Muirden represented something that both attracted and repelled him. Muirden belonged to a group of wealthy students who, while very bright, were casual about their studies, cut lectures and classes and got themselves talked about for their excessive lifestyle and their partying. They often appeared draped around each other's shoulders, and a few of them had even been seen pressing a kiss to another student's mouth. Muirden liked to drop hints about his experiences in London and Berlin and the decadent life that could be had there. You could disappear into a secret night-time world of anonymous debauchery, he said; a world where drugs abounded and no one cared about gender boundaries. You could be anyone you wanted and do anything you liked.

Wandering through the exhibition that had featured several photographers, they had come across a set of semi-nude photographs, homoerotic pictures perfunctorily disguised as artistic portraits – or indeed, as Muirden had pointed out, who said pornography could not be artistic? Merlin suspected it was these pictures that had drawn Muirden to the exhibition in the first place. They had wandered from photograph to photograph, darkish prints of boys with glowing, perfect skin, sometimes wrapped in a toga or a veil of lace, secured with a wreath. Sometimes they possessed a rustic kind of good looks, sometimes a beauty bordering on the feminine.

A staggering majority of the visitors had been young or youngish men, some of them with the same excited glow in their eyes as Muirden had; thrilled by doing this in public, like an open secret, this unveiled stare at half-naked boys. The undercurrent of excitement had electrified the atmosphere and made the hairs on Merlin's forearms stand up.

This exciting photographer, Muirden had said in a low voice across the table as they had gone for a coffee after, was rumoured to have other, more explicit photographs too; sold under the counter, so to speak, distributed to a restricted circle only. The boys featured in his portraits were Sicilian boys, and his studio was located in Taormina.

So when Gaius had retired for the evening Merlin waited, wandered around his room, tried to read and then paced some more, until he slipped out into the Mediterranean night. With a beating heart, surrounded by the fragrant darkness and unused sounds, he found the photographer's studio, where an open doorway revealed a dark hall and dimly lit stairs.

A woman in a thin, floaty dress was coming down the stairs, laughing. On the bottom step she stumbled and Merlin had to catch her to stop her falling. Still holding on to him, she smiled up at him.
"Ah, another pretty boy," she said with soft, American vowels. "Are you here to see The Baron?"

When Merlin replied: "I suppose I am," she laughed again with half a sigh. "He gets all the best ones. Go on up." She pointed up the stairs to an open door from which noise and light came streaming.

Merlin ascended the stairs and entered a vast room filled with people – lightly dressed women, half-dressed boys, drunk men with red, shiny faces, and in the middle of it all the photographer trying to work, a small isle of structured efficiency in a sea of chaos. In a corner near the door, a man was kissing a boy who looked no older than seventeen, with his hand up the boy's shirt. The sight of it made sweat break out at the back of Merlin's neck and set his heart hammering. It was done openly, almost demonstratively, and he could not take his eyes off them, both repelled and excited. A faint moan from the boy made Merlin's face hot and prompted him to tear his gaze away.

His letter of introduction from one of Muirden's friends, someone who knew The Baron, granted him access to the more explicit kind of photographs. With burning ears and his bottom lip caught between his teeth he browsed through them and purchased several to carry home in a brown envelope.

He did not stay long. It was enough for him to see that it was true, that this kind of life did indeed exist. There were obviously more tangible, more physical pleasures than mere photographs to be had if he wanted them, but instead he made his way slowly to the door, thanking everyone, smiling, trying not to shrink away when a hand slid down his back to his arse and squeezed.

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_That is not what I want_, Merlin thought as he lay on his bed in Florence watching the reflections of the river dance on the ceiling. Of course he wanted sex, every young man did, but he did not want it like that. Not in that way. He wanted other things, he wanted something specific that he could not point to; he wanted _more_ than what had been on offer in the studio. A connection. That made him an idealist, he supposed. A hopeless romantic.

Concealed with magic, the photographs were stored in his suitcase from where they had been taken out many nights after Taormina. But not tonight. Tonight, they were all surpassed and dimmed by the images in Merlin's own mind.
Glorious Bewilderment

The village of Fiesole sits on the hillside above Florence, offering a breathtaking view of the city and the surrounding countryside, and it was for this view that an odd company set out from the pension on Thursday morning. Two carriages had been arranged for them by the Signora. Merlin rode in the first with Gaius, Arthur and Mrs Pendragon, while the second was occupied by Miss Morgana and Miss Morgause, who had made it tacitly clear they did not intend to share their space.

"Can you understand why they asked to join us?" Mrs Pendragon said, half laughingly. She was a woman in her forties, still beautiful with clean features, lovely skin and fair, wavy hair on a perpetual mission to escape her hairpins. Despite the humour in her dark blue eyes, Merlin could sense a great sadness in her. "They never talk to us. Why would they want to come with us?"

"They never talk to anyone, Mother," Arthur pointed out dryly. "I'm surprised they managed to ask at all. Must be hard when you never say a word."

"I wouldn't say that Miss Morgana asked me," Merlin said. "Ordered me to let them join us would be a better description. And she ordered me to tell you, probably so she wouldn't have to use up her entire daily allowance of words."

Mrs Pendragon laughed, but a furrow appeared between Arthur's eyebrows as he muttered: "And to make sure she wouldn't have to talk to us lowly creatures."

"Let's forget about their motives and simply enjoy our outing," said Gaius, ever the voice of reason. "What a beautiful day it is, and look at all those poppies on the slope!"

He was right; it was a beautiful day even if the sunshine was not clear. There was a haze in the air that smoothed out edges, left the hills softly blue and turned the landscape into something out of an 18th century painting.

When the company arrived at their destination, Miss Morgana and Miss Morgause promptly walked off into the village arm in arm, leaving the others by the carriages. There was an astonished pause while they all exchanged looks with raised eyebrows.

"Well!" said Gaius at long last. "I suppose that is that, then, and we shall have to entertain ourselves as best we can."

Arthur expressed what they must all be feeling: "And our day will be much better for it. Good riddance!"

Gaius offered the remaining lady his arm. "Would you like to take a walk through the village, Mrs Pendragon, or explore the rather glorious surroundings first?"

"Oh, let us explore," Mrs Pendragon said, "and I will ask the drivers to carry the picnic baskets to a good spot of their choosing. They seem to know their way around here. I'm sure they'll find the best place."

The company parted ways with each of them wandering off on the slope, wading through deep grass looking for the perfect view of Florence where it lay at the foot of the hill, shimmering in the haze.

Soon Merlin had lost everyone, not only Gaius and Mrs Pendragon but Arthur as well. It was of no
consequence. He would find them all eventually. For now, he was content to wander around the hillside on his own.

On a patch of ground covered with violets, he stopped and removed his hat, fanning himself with it slowly. He was surrounded by beauty, by wildflowers and old, gnarled olive trees, fields swaying green, dotted with poppies. To his right, he could glimpse the village through the trees.

He sat down in a sweet cloud of violet scent, thinking what to do. At breakfast that morning, Mrs Pendragon had said it was time for them to move on from Florence. Merlin had gone cold inside and Arthur had said nothing, only poked at the scrambled eggs on his plate as if he was as reluctant to say goodbye as Merlin was. Merlin clung to that hope.

He was not ready to part from Arthur just yet. They could certainly meet again at home, but everything would be different then and he would like to see more of Arthur while they were still travelling, while reality and everyday was pushed aside to make way for dreams. He wanted to see more of Arthur before they returned to Britain and resumed their normal lives, slotting back into the people they were before.

Merlin sat a while until he was dizzy from the perfume of the violets, then wandered back slowly to the carriages. He did not see anyone along the way but thought he could hear Mrs Pendragon laugh further away, beyond the olive grove.

One of the drivers was feeding the horses while the other, a young man with rakish good looks and laughter in his brown eyes, was leaning leisurely against the side of the carriage with a straw in his mouth. Merlin hesitantly walked up to him.

"Excuse me," he said, "but have you seen… er, I'm sorry, what's your name?"

"My name?" the driver asked, surprised, moving the straw from one corner of his mouth to the other with his tongue. "I'm Gwaine."

"Gwaine." Merlin frowned, slightly disconcerted by the amusement in Gwaine's eyes. "Could you tell me where… where the rest of the company is? Have you seen… um, Mr Pendragon…?"

The amused glint grew to a perfectly wicked light as Gwaine leaned his hip against the carriage, slowly pulled the straw from his mouth and looked at Merlin from face to feet and back again. "Ah, Mr Pendragon," he said, his tone insinuating something Merlin did not want to know about. "Yes. He went that way" – Gwaine pointed – "to look at the view. Just follow the path and you will find him. And the view."

As Merlin turned and headed in the direction he was pointed, he felt Gwaine's gaze burning the back of his neck. What had that been about? Was Merlin so obvious in his feelings for Arthur that even a carriage driver noticed it?

Frowning, he followed the path and found that Gwaine was right. The view was there and so was Arthur, standing with his back to Merlin, admiring it. He turned when Merlin cleared his throat and a look of pure joy flitted across his face, making Merlin's heart beat faster. Perhaps he would dare suggest that they meet in Switzerland after all. Perhaps he would not be turned down.

"Oh, there you are," said Arthur easily. "I was wondering where everyone had gone to. The driver delivered a picnic basket a few minutes ago – how he knew where I was I have no idea. Second sight, I presume. Anyway, now that you are here, we can eat."

They sat on the grassy slope unpacking the contents of the picnic basket between them. In a large old
tree nearby a flock of chirping birds had gathered and at Merlin's elbow a poppy bowed its head, nodding under the weight of a bee. As Arthur handed Merlin a glass of wine, Merlin was conscious of an intense happiness, of absolute presence in the moment. This, he thought, was one of those perfect things, a minute of absolute beauty that he would remember, keep hidden like a treasure and revisit when everything felt grey.

The basket contained plenty of everything – a bottle of wine, roast beef sandwiches, tomatoes, cold pie, cheese – but inexplicably, only one apple. It made them laugh.

"We're supposed to be so full when we've eaten everything else that we only have room for half an apple?" Merlin suggested.

"Or so full we don't even want to eat the apple, just look at it," was Arthur's theory. "It is a beautiful specimen."

They ate in companionable silence, then sat with their knees drawn up and forearms resting on them as they looked out over the view. Arthur seemed pensive. There was a slight frown on his face, as if he was trying to solve a problem that was puzzling him. Merlin did not want to disturb him, as that would mean removing a perfect chance to watch him surreptitiously but to his heart's content.

After a while Merlin reached for the single apple and bit into it, then took another bite before handing it over to Arthur, reaching across the blue chequered cloth on the ground between them. Arthur took the apple from his hand without looking, still with his gaze lost far away, and absent-mindedly licked the spot where the sweet, crisp flesh of the fruit was exposed. Merlin's mouth went dry, then watered, and he stared in fascination as Arthur licked the apple again before taking a bite. It did not seem deliberately suggestive at all. On the contrary, he seemed only half aware of what he was doing, and that made it even more alluring. Merlin swallowed. He could not let go of the fact that Arthur's mouth, his tongue, touched the spot Merlin's had only seconds ago. A vicarious kiss.

By the time Arthur had finished the apple Merlin did not dare move, rigidly keeping his position not to reveal his arousal. When a bird flew up from a nearby tree Arthur was recalled to the present with a start.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I was lost in thought there for a while. I must be really brilliant company, staring into space like that!"

But Merlin shook his head. "That's perfectly fine. I've thought of that many times – how it's possible to talk to almost anyone, but there are very few people who will just let you be silent."

Arthur nodded slowly. "Very true. Thanks for letting me be silent."

Small, fluffy clouds were sailing languidly across the sky and both men lay down in the grass, watching them – Merlin with his jacket strategically placed across his body, just to be safe.

"Is there anything you miss from home?" Arthur asked, pulling at the grass fronds above his face. "Is there… do you have a girl waiting for you?"

Merlin wondered if it was only his imagination or if the question really did sound as if Arthur cared about the answer but did not want to let on. He closed his eyes a moment before replying. "Yes, I have."

Arthur's face registered nothing. "Is she pretty?"

"Very." Merlin sat up and thought of Elena on the tennis lawn back home in England, of her laughing eyes and the sun on her fair hair as she returned his serve with ease. "More than pretty. She
is beautiful. Her name is Elena, Elena Godwyn, and we have known each other since we were six years old and her family moved to our village."

Arthur nodded without looking at Merlin. "Is it serious between you?"

Merlin pulled at poppy by his knee, twirling it between his fingers. He was not a good liar and he did not want to deceive Arthur. It was enough that he sometimes almost deceived himself. "When I get back, I'm asking her to marry me."

There was a cold, hollow feeling behind his sternum. This was how his life was going to be. Some of the things he truly wanted, he would always have to deny himself. But he did love Elena, who was not only pretty and from a respectable magical family but also sweet and sensible. His mother regarded her as another daughter, Freya adored her – it was the ideal arrangement.

"What about you?" Merlin countered. It was a question he did not want to hear the answer to, and he did not even make an attempt at breeziness. "Is there a girl waiting for you, too?"

Arthur only shook his head and Merlin fished out a cigarette, offering the packet to Arthur.

"There is something about Italy," Arthur said, turning sideways to exhale the smoke and not have it blown into either his or Merlin's eyes, "that makes me want to be very truthful."

Merlin frowned, glancing at him. Why had Arthur chosen this moment to speak of truth? Had he detected some hint of insincerity in what Merlin had just said? Arthur looked up at the sky, thoughtful, before meeting Merlin's eyes.

"I have a feeling," he said, "that you did not come to Italy only to look at fine art and scenery. That there is another reason for your travels, underneath the official one. Which is true for me as well."

Merlin stubbed out his cigarette and looked at Florence, floating in a pool of gold in the distance. No, he was not here only for the scenic views, and even if his first impulse was to change the subject, perhaps it would be good to talk about this. After all, he needed never meet Arthur again once they had left Florence – unless he arranged to do so. There was a stab in his heart at that thought.

"Is it?" he said in a carefully neutral voice.

Arthur reached out for the neck of the wine bottle sticking up over the edge of the basket. The bottle was still half full and he refilled their glasses before replying. "Just before Christmas my father died. Even if he had been ill for a while it was a terrible shock for my mother, who, I think, had hoped against hope that he would get well. She locked herself in her room for weeks and would not speak to anyone, would hardly eat. I began to worry that she would die, too. At long last she did come out of her room, but only to sit in the drawing-room and stare into space. I thought this – " He made a gesture to comprise the landscape around them. "Sunshine, pretty scenery, art, which she loves – would be the right thing for her. For me, too. Coming here felt like coming out of a long, dark tunnel. It's good to be away from home, where everything reminds us of him. He is with us all the time anyway." Arthur paused to drink from his glass; Merlin looked at his Adam's apple bobbing above the immaculate collar. "There are good days and bad days, I find," Arthur added. "I don't know about Mother, though. Her days are mostly bad still."

So the sadness Merlin had sensed in her was real and raw. No wonder it came across so clearly. "I am so very sorry," he said.

Arthur took his eyes off Florence and nodded in acknowledgement. "Thank you. My father was not an easy man, but he did love us. When I was younger I used to think that I never wanted to be like
him, but now I think I do, in certain ways. I want to be like him but without his coldness. I don't want to keep everything locked up inside."

The silence after that statement was broken by the song of a skylark, like a spiral of silver in the sky.

"My father died when I was eight," Merlin said in a low voice. "I was allowed to go to the funeral and I'm glad of that, because I don't think I would have accepted it otherwise – that he was gone, I mean. My sister was only a few months old at the time. She doesn't remember him at all, of course. I'm glad I was old enough to remember him quite well."

"So you live with your mother and sister?" Arthur asked cautiously, as if he wanted to know but barely dared ask. "I mean, they are still there…?"

"Yes. And Gaius visits us often, so I suppose he has been a father figure for me since." Merlin had not spoken of his father to anyone except his family in a very long time. This was another thing that was taken out into the light, dusted off and aired – it seemed easy to do that with Arthur, somehow, and that was a rare thing for Merlin. Yet another reason he did not want to let Arthur go.

"I write to my sister often," he added with a smile. "She made it very clear before I left that the consequences would be terrible if I didn't."

Arthur laughed. The mood had lightened at the mention of Freya. "I'm quite envious. I have no brothers and sisters. Eight years between you, you said – so she is twelve?"

Merlin nodded. "Twelve, clever and strong-willed."

"Are you alike?"

"In what way?"

"In every way."

Merlin shrugged. "People often tell us that we are, and in looks I suppose they're right." He added self-deprecatingly: "Even if her ears are smaller."

He expected Arthur to laugh but got a smile instead, and a soft look in Arthur's eyes. "But your ears are – " Arthur stopped himself.

"They are what?"

"Oh, nothing," Arthur said. He swallowed a mouthful of wine that had gone lukewarm in the sun and made a face.

Merlin held out his hand. "Here, give me your glass. And the bottle. I'll chill the wine."

Arthur handed him both, watching curiously as glass and bottle were slowly covered with a bloom of frost.

"Do you have to touch them to do that?"

"I could do it from a distance," Merlin replied, "but it would be less precise. I can cool down a room without touching the walls, but if I'm heating or cooling food or drink I need precision."

Arthur nodded, interested. "I don't… I have no idea… how does it feel?"

"The magic?"
"Yes."

"It's like..." Merlin closed his eyes. "It feels like... gold. Like warmth. Like that wine, sparkling. It twines and threads and surges, and I can shape it and mould it and make it do what I want it to do. Sometimes..." He stopped and took a breath. This is yet another thing he had never said to anyone. "Sometimes it's so powerful it scares me. It feels like I could do anything, anything I set my mind to. Even if it's destructive and terrifying." His eyes were still closed. He could not look at Arthur.

There was a rustle in the grass beside him. Arthur was probably turning to take a closer look at the freakish creature next to him.

"Could you..." Arthur's voice made Merlin open his eyes. "Would you be able to move that rock over there, for instance?"

The rock Arthur pointed to was a large boulder, resting perilously near the edge of a natural terrace on the hillside some distance away from them.

"Yes," Merlin replied simply. "But I don't want to cause a landslide. And I don't want to risk anyone getting in the way."

"If you did cause a landslide, could you not stop it?"

Merlin turned and looked at Arthur. Nothing showed in his face, no dislike, no judgement, nothing other than a desire to know.

"I suppose I could," said Merlin slowly. The fact was, he had never really thought of that, only of the devastation he could cause if he let himself. "Yes, I suppose I could stop the landslide once I had started it."

Arthur was looking at him steadily. "I don't think I know anyone who has magic, I don't know the first thing about it, so I'm sorry if I say stupid things. I had no idea magic could be this powerful - I mean, if it is, why doesn't magic take more... space in the world? Why does it not make itself more noticeable? How is it possible that one can go through life, like I have, without knowing anything about it?"

"Because," Merlin said, and despite the sun his lips were cold, "most people's magic is feeble. Most magic users could not do this." Again, there was a silence, and again the skylark filled it with silver-clear song. "This is why it frightens me. It's so strong, and I'm afraid of what I could do. When I leaned out of the window the other day, when you first saw me, I really wanted to see if I could fly. What if I set my magic loose one day? Sometimes it wants to burst out of me. What would happen? What would it do to other people?" He said this very quickly. It was a confession and a painful one; he wanted it out before he could change his mind. If Arthur moved away from him with distaste or even fear, he would have to live with it. "And this," he concluded, "is part of the reason why I'm in Italy. I needed to get away. To get some perspective."

The skylark gave one final sparkle of song and then the sky was quiet, empty. A breeze came whispering through the grass, flattening it in green and silver; the bees droned sleepily in the poppies.

"Well," said Arthur slowly, "I don't think you would do anything to harm other people."

Merlin lay down in the grass, closing his eyes to the sun, to Arthur, to the world. "You don't know me."

"While that may be true, I heard what you said just now. You didn't want to move that boulder because of what it could do if you set it in motion. You worry so much about the devastation you
could cause that you had to go abroad to try to get your head around it. That doesn't sound to me like someone intending harm."

Something was tickling Merlin's face, an insect perhaps, a fly, and he swatted at it. When he opened his eyes a fraction he saw Arthur propped up on an elbow, tickling him with a blade of grass. It seemed such an incongruous, silly thing to do in the face of Merlin's problems that it made him laugh, a small, spluttering laugh but still a laugh. Arthur's eyes were bluer than the sky.

"It seems to me," Arthur said, "that what you need is an outlet for your magic. Not just a vent, but some place to direct it. You need a proper use for it."

He threw the blade of grass over his shoulder, looking thoughtful, and Merlin felt thunderstruck because this was it, this was exactly what he had been thinking without ever putting it as clearly as this to himself. His magic needed a purpose; he needed to do something with it.

He sat up again, taking a sip of his wine. "Yes. You are absolutely right. The question – the enormous, scary question – is what."

"You said you came here for perspective. Has it helped? Did you get your perspective?"

"I'm not sure," said Merlin slowly, "but at least I feel much better now than I did back home."

Arthur drained his glass and lay down in the grass, pushing his folded jacket under his head.

"Feeling better is a good start, isn't it? And you have time to think about what to do. Haven't you?"

Did he? Arthur made it sound easy. Merlin was not so sure.

***

On the drive back to Florence, little was said in the carriage as everyone was tired after a day in the sun. Merlin sat next to Arthur, feeling their legs touch every time the carriage jolted, which was frequently. Sometimes they glanced at each other and smiled. Opposite them Gaius was asleep, rocked by the movement, and Mrs Pendragon seemed to be far away. Her sadness was visible in her face and eyes when she thought no one was looking.

Feeling better is a good start. Merlin bit his lip, vaguely ashamed when he compared his own reasons for being here with those of Arthur and his mother. His own were nowhere near as clear-cut and concrete as theirs and also something of a luxury problem. When he had talked to Arthur before, he had probably only made himself sound like a spoilt child. But when he thought about the past winter, the dreariness and meaninglessness of it all, he shuddered. He had come to Italy to find himself, but he was not sure he was any closer to doing that.

Merlin shut his eyes and remembered how Gaius had knocked on the door to his room that day just before the New Year.

***

When Gaius pushed the door open, Merlin was lying on his bed with his arms under his head, watching shadows dance on the ceiling, the shadows of the bare branches of winter. The sun was low in the sky, hidden at intervals by shifting clouds.

"Hello, Merlin," Gaius said.

He was a distant cousin of Merlin's mother's who came to visit them often at Dragon's Keep – that was the name of their old, rambling house. Gaius was old and wise, soft-spoken and dry, sometimes
sarcastic but always kind. Despite knowing him quite well, Merlin knew very little about his history and sometimes wondered about it. He seemed so alone, apart from Hunith and her family. Why should that be? Had there never been other people in his life, people close to him – girls, women, friends – and if there had, what had happened to them?

"Your mother is worried about you," Gaius said, oblivious of Merlin's musings, "and has suggested that you may need a change of scenery. Something to take your mind off things here."

Merlin sighed inwardly. He did not like to be discussed. "What things? And what did she suggest?"

"That I take you travelling on the continent, and I concur. I consider it a good thing for a young man to see the world a little, get away from his own turf."

Merlin pondered. He knew he should be excited about a suggestion like that, and only six months ago he would have been, but now he was unable to feel it. This was not the only thing that evoked this reaction – or lack of reaction. Other things he used to enjoy had lost their appeal, too, making him wonder if he was slowly going insane. In theory, he would love to travel, but nothing seemed to reach him, touch him, any more. As if there was a wall of glass between him and the world, between him and life.

"Where would we go?" he asked.

"Where would you like to go?" Gaius countered mildly.

Merlin's mind was a blank.

"I have heard you speak of Italy before," Gaius reminded him. "Would that, perhaps, be an option?"

"But what about university?" Merlin tried, casting around for an excuse not to go. "I haven't finished anything yet; I'm only in my second year."

"I have spoken to your Dean," Gaius said, "and you are welcome to take a break and come back when you feel ready. Finish your term and we will go to Italy after that."

Merlin groaned. The thought of his mother discussing him with Gaius was bad enough, but Gaius talking to the Dean... "Gaius, what did you say? I don't want to be...I don't know, pitied. I'm not... fragile. I don't want them to think I'm a delicate little demoiselle."

"Don't be ridiculous." Gaius did not roll his eyes but his tone of voice told Merlin he would dearly like to. "Just take what is offered and don't argue. This is exactly what you need, and you have been granted it. Be grateful and..."

"...and count my blessings, yes, I know," Merlin finished rudely. Then he sighed. "I'm sorry. And thank you," he added, a little belatedly.

"I will tell your mother that we want to go to Italy, then." Gaius waved a hand as he left the room. "He is a good man, your Dean."

"Gaius is taking Merlin to Italy in May," Hunith told Freya in the drawing-room after dinner. "They will be back some time in August."

There was a small glass of port on the table beside her, Gaius was nursing a whisky, and Merlin was on his second cup of coffee. Freya stilled, her eyes darting from Hunith to Merlin and back again as
if she was watching a tennis match.

"To Italy?" she exclaimed indignantly and kicked at the table legs. "Why does he get to go to places when I don't? Italy! And all summer?"

"Don't screech, Freya," Hunith said. "And stop kicking! You are not five years old."

Freya threw Merlin a murderous glance. "You always get to do the fun things just because you're the older brother." She pulled a face at the last two words.

"I'll write to you," Merlin said. He did not want to get into an argument; he lacked the energy to hold his ground. "I'll buy you things, which means I'll be thinking about you. And I'm sure you can go to Italy too, once you're older."

"When I'm older! A hundred years from now!"

"Or eight, perhaps," said Merlin dryly. "When you're my age."

Freya crossed her arms and glowered; the bric-a-brac on the small table next to her rattled ominously.

"Mind your magic, Freya," Hunith said.

Freya did not reply, but the crystal decanters of sherry and whisky began to dance uneasily on their tray.

"Freya!" Hunith warned.

"Yes, I know," Freya said and added with an impertinent imitation of her mother: "Take it to the magic room."

She uncrossed her arms, gave the table leg one last kick and flounced out of the room. The magic room was in the basement, well insulated and devoid of fragile objects, designed by their father when he had come into possession of the house after his own father's death.

Hunith sighed, resigned, but there was laughter there. "This is where the trying age begins. You were never any trouble, Merlin, but perhaps it is different with girls. No, don't go after her. Envy is such an unattractive emotion. Let her work through it on her own."

Just before her bedtime, dressed in nightdress and slippers, Freya peered around the door to Merlin's room. Merlin was stretched out on his bed reading but moved over to make room for her, patting the edge of the bed as an invitation. She came in a little sheepishly and sat down without saying anything, but there was something that wanted out. A question? An apology? Merlin knew his sister well; he knew he only had to wait.

"Sorry I was so obnoxious before," Freya said at long last.

Merlin bit his lip against a smile at the word. She had only learnt it two days ago and it still sat awkwardly with her, clambering to get out, filling her mouth with corners and boulders. Obnoxious. He smiled at her, affectionately and only half teasingly. "It's fine, Freya. You'll always be my favourite little sister."

She gave him a glare. "I'm your only little sister."

"Well, there you are," he said lightly.

She glanced up at him, eyebrows quirkling. Obviously there was more. Merlin waited, and after
another minute it came out, as it was bound to do. "Gaius says you're going to Italy to find yourself." She frowned. "Or was it get to know yourself? In any case, I thought it was strange. I mean," she turned to face him rather than just glancing sideways, "how can you not know yourself? Or not know where you are?" She caught herself as if she had suddenly remembered something. The sidelong look was back. "And Mother says you're not well."

A heartbeat. Then Merlin sat up with a sigh, put an arm around her shoulders and gave her a little shake. "I'm not ill. Not really. But I suppose I've been a bit down in the mouth lately."

Freya thumped his thigh with her fist, not very hard. "Why is it called in the mouth?"

Merlin laughed and pushed her away. "You can't keep asking about everything, Freya. You'll wear people out. They'll get tired of you."

He caught the horrified glint in her eyes, the sudden, pinched look on her face, and hurried to add: "I mean, I won't. But generally. You need to pick your questions. Ask the most important ones, the ones you really want to know about right then." He pulled at a silken curl of her dark hair and watched it spring back, and she leaned away from him, impatient, with a brothers! roll of her eyes. "Anyway, I'm sure Italy will make me feel better. And if it doesn't, then Switzerland will."

"But with Gaius," she said, a small giggle bubbling out. "You'll have to visit so many museums! And there will be lectures all day long."

Merlin could not help laughing, too. "See? There's nothing to be envious of. Just think how many kings and cardinals and painters I'll have to hear about."

There was another giggle, happier-sounding this time.

"Less envious now?"

Freya slid off his bed. "Perhaps. Just a little. But if you don't send me a postcard from every single place you visit, I won't speak to you ever again."

***

It was already getting dark by the time they reached Florence and stepped out of the carriage into the cobbled street. They said their good nights but Merlin was restless, pacing in his room. After writing a letter to his mother and one of the promised postcards to Freya, he braced himself and went to knock on Arthur's door.

Arthur opened in his shirtsleeves, without a waistcoat and with bare feet. Both his hair and the bed were ruffled and next to the pillow a book lay open, spine up.

"Sorry to disturb you," Merlin said. "Have you a minute?"

Arthur stepped aside to let him in. "Yes, of course."

"I see I interrupted you. What are you reading?"

"Oh, just some silly novel I found in the Signora's library downstairs. I'm glad of the interruption."

He closed the door and Merlin was acutely aware of being alone with Arthur in a small space. An intimate space. This was where Arthur was himself and did not pretend; this was where he undressed, slept and dreamed. Merlin's imagination wanted to take that a step further but he stopped himself. His eyes wandered around the room while he gathered up courage for what he was going to
ask; his hands were trembling and he shoved them in his trouser pockets. *Why am I making this so difficult?* he thought. *Why am I making it into such a huge thing? A normal person would just ask.* But a normal person did not have Merlin’s crippling shyness, and moreover, this was important, too important to be flippant about. It was a one-time chance.

"So when are you leaving for Switzerland?" he asked while he looked at a postcard on the writing desk without really seeing it, trying to sound casual.

"The day after tomorrow, leaving early."

"We're going there as well, after Siena," Merlin said with his heart in his throat, deciding to take the last step and jump off the cliff. "I was wondering… I have really enjoyed your company here. It made my stay a hundred times better than it would have been otherwise, and I was wondering if you'd care to meet up again in Switzerland, perhaps to go hiking? Gaius says he is too old for traipsing about in the mountains – his words, not mine."

Arthur's look of surprise changed into one of genuine pleasure. "I'd like that," he said. "I'd enjoy a hike. Any particular place you would like to go?"

Merlin shook his head, smiling. Relief made him warm and feather-light. "I haven't thought that far yet. I hear the mountains around Berne are good for hiking."

Arthur returned the smile. "Let's meet in Berne, then, and decide once we're there. Listen, would you like a whisky? I have a bottle lying around."

When Merlin left an hour later he surprised himself by stopping at the door, turning around and asking: "Why does happiness always feel less real than sadness?"

Arthur blinked in surprise, and Merlin thought he would always remember Arthur as he looked just now, half seated on the window sill in shirt-sleeves, braces and bare feet, the light from the lamp tinting his hair a fuzzy copper. "Does it?"
"To me it does. It always has. Perhaps not when I was a small boy, but definitely later."
Arthur looked at him appraisingly, not unkindly. "Forgive me for saying this, but it seems to me that you are wary of happiness."

It was Merlin's turn to blink. "I believe that is true," he said slowly. "It seems so… fickle. Volatile. Deceptive. When you think you have it, it slips through your fingers."

"No more so than sadness," Arthur said. "It's as if you don't think you deserve it."

"Maybe I don't," Merlin murmured to the floor, his fingers closing on the door handle.

"Of course you do," Arthur stated, sounding so sure Merlin had to look up. "Of course you deserve happiness, if indeed it is about deserving or not, which I don't think it is. It's about what happens and what doesn't, and all you can do is cherish it, enjoy it, when it's there." He lifted his glass, still with a few drops of amber liquor at the bottom. "Until Berne, then," he said, "and when we meet there, I'd like to see you smile."
Descend from Bright Heaven

Despite the crowds, Florence felt empty after the Pendragons had left. Merlin wandered around in a daze, missing Arthur in a way he had never thought possible, thought about Arthur every waking moment until he wondered if he was going insane.

Merlin travelled on with Gaius to Siena, but it might as well have been a ghost town for all the impression it made. He seemed unable to experience anything on his own; everything was viewed through an Arthur filter. Everywhere Merlin went, whatever he did, he imagined what Arthur would have said or the comments Merlin would have made to Arthur, imagining Arthur beside him as he walked, writing long letters to him in his head. Some of them he did put on paper when they returned to the hotel in the evenings but most of it was not fit to be seen by anyone but him.

He re-lived every moment he had spent with Arthur, recalled every smile exchanged and every word said. It could not be healthy, he thought, to have his mind so entirely fixed on one person. To be so obsessed.

It should not have come as a surprise, and yet it did. With everything Merlin had read and heard about love, all the novels and poems and songs, he had never been in love and had not recognised the state he was in until now, as if Arthur's absence had been needed for Merlin to make the connection.

The physical attraction had confused him. It had been unmistakable, readily recognised as something that had happened before with other boys and men, even if it had never been this strong. But Merlin had never before connected that physical desire with love. He had long since accepted that he could be physically attracted to men. Falling in love was a completely different matter.

But now it was obvious even to Merlin that love was exactly what this was about. There was no doubt about it; he was terribly, hopelessly, gloriously, madly in love with Arthur.

When Arthur's first letter reached him at the hotel in Siena, he had to restrain himself not to run with it from the reception desk to his room, and his fingers trembled so much he had trouble opening the envelope. He devoured Arthur's handwriting with his eyes, reading the letter fast, greedily, avidly because he could not wait, and then reading it a second time, and a third. Even the slightest phrase of appreciation or reference to their meeting again was turned over and examined for a deeper meaning, because apparently being in love meant a preposterous attention to detail and a desperate hope against hope.

_We have arrived safely in Zürich and will stay here a few days before travelling on to Berne, where I hope we can meet as planned. The mountains are glorious and I would be very disappointed if we were to miss our hiking adventure!_

'Our adventure'. Merlin closed his eyes. Yes, he would be disappointed too; only that word did not convey the depth of it.

When Gaius asked if he would like to prolong their stay in Siena, Merlin wanted to scream. His heart beat in his throat as he said no and tried to hide how desperately important it was for him that they left. He would have liked to hop on a train tonight, this minute, and travel non-stop until they had reached Berne and he could see Arthur's smiling face again.

He fell asleep with Arthur's letter still in his hand.
The journey to Switzerland was a slow transformation from the hot umbra and ochre of Italy to the cool greys, whites and blues of Switzerland's snow-capped mountains. The bends and climbs of the railway made Merlin think intensely of Arthur and his love for the wonders of engineering. On this magnificent stretch of railway he must have had his fill, and if Mrs Pendragon enjoyed a good view, she would not have been disappointed either.

The scenery was breathtaking. At intervals there were gasps of surprise and wonder from all the passengers, and occasionally a murmur of apprehension.

"Oh, how beautiful!" Gaius exclaimed as they passed a waterfall, cascading from high up on the mountainside. "What an extraordinary journey. When you think you must have reached the most spectacular point, you see something that trumps it. Aren't you glad we decided to go, Merlin?"

"Yes." Merlin leaned forward to see the foot of the waterfall below, but there was foliage in the way. "Yes, I am."

The train dipped into a tunnel, then emerged onto a viaduct, and another gasp moved like a wave through the carriage. Merlin smiled at Gaius, grateful to the old man for giving him this opportunity. If not for Gaius' insistence to come to Italy, Merlin would never have met Arthur.

The second letter from Arthur, which had reached Merlin while still in Siena, had contained the name of the Pendragon's hotel in Berne and suggested a date when they might meet, and Merlin was impatiently counting the days. He leaned back and closed his eyes, shutting out the spectacular views to continue his daydreaming.

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In Merlin's mind, Zürich would forever be connected with anticipation. He enjoyed the change from the heat-hazy streets of Italy to the cooler climate of Switzerland, where the days were sunny and warm but not hot. The air was pure, the blues and greens of the Alpine landscape clear as water, the snows clean and crisp. If it had been the art that had taken their breath away in Italy, here in Switzerland it was the magnificence of nature.

But there was art to be seen here, too. In the recently opened Kunsthau Merlin lingered long in front of some striking portraits by Ernest Biéler before he stopped at Auguste Rodin's Gates of Hell, fascinated. It was an exquisite work, awe-inspiring and even frightening, but it was not only the execution that impressed Merlin. Something about it resonated deep within him, as if a dream had suddenly presented itself to him in his real, daylight life, as if his soul knew it. He could not help himself. Blatantly disregarding the signs telling him not to touch the art, he reached out to follow the bronze outline of the human figures with his fingertip, withdrawing his hand just in time when a uniformed guide approached.

"This is astounding," he told the man, who nodded and smiled his agreement.

When Merlin had found Gaius again and they exited into the sunny street, he stretched and took a deep breath as if just awakened. Arthur, always present in Merlin's mind, was particularly close at this moment.

"Very enjoyable," Gaius said, and Merlin could only agree. "Now let us see if we can find a place that serves a decent cup of tea."

In the end they settled for coffee which was good everywhere, and some decadently wonderful
chocolate creation with truffle cream and hazelnuts.

"This must have been invented for fare in the mountains," Gaius said. "It would give you the stamina for the most taxing climb!"

"Yes," said Merlin absent-mindedly, and dreamed of walking in the mountains.

"Speaking of which – have you and Mr Pendragon decided yet whether to go on a hike?"

Merlin nodded, trying not to smile with pure pleasure at the thought. "Yes. That is, we have decided to go on one, but not precisely where we're going. We'll settle the details when we meet in Berne." The smile could no longer be stopped. "Are you sure you don't mind us going? Will you be all right on your own?"

"If Mrs Pendragon has no objections, I certainly have none," Gaius replied and dabbed a melting crumb of chocolate from the corner of his mouth with his napkin. "I am very pleased for you to have found a friend here, someone your own age. Makes a bit of a change for you. And as Mrs Pendragon is very pleasant company, I have no complaints."

"Arthur says she likes you. She told him she feels safe and relaxed with you."

"I am glad to hear that."

"And I'm glad I can go on a hike without a bad conscience."

"Oh, no need for one in any case, my boy. No need at all. Exercise and clean mountain air is exactly what you need. It will do wonders for you." Gaius put his spectacles on and gave Merlin a searching look. "I must say you look much better. Of course it is possible to be fooled by the tan, but despite the shaky start to our journey, I believe Italy did you good. And Switzerland seems to agree with you."

Merlin smiled. "I do feel better, Gaius, and I'm really very grateful to you for suggesting this trip. And for going with me, of course."

"The pleasure, I assure you, is all mine." Gaius eyed him affectionately. "I do care about you a great deal, Merlin. You have been like a son to me for many years. It is only natural – and sound – for a young man to have his doubts about life and the world, but he should not make himself ill worrying about it. A change of scenery can sometimes prove just the thing, exactly like your wise mother said."

Merlin only nodded and looked down at his empty coffee cup. Perhaps it was Italy, perhaps it was Switzerland, perhaps it was the fact that he had met Arthur and had something to look forward to, but Gaius was right. The idea of the "grand tour", or a petit one, had worked out well so far, whatever the reasons for its success. A shiver of anticipation ran down Merlin's spine. He had had a letter from Arthur that morning, and in only a few days they would meet again.

***

Surrounded by jagged, snow-clad mountains, Berne was solid, impressive and calm with grey medieval buildings, red tiled roofs and a beautiful Gothic Minster. The river that meandered through the city was an astonishing hue of chalky green as it carried the snowmelt of the Alps down to the lakes.

The hotel lobby had deep, soft leather armchairs, and it was from one of these that Arthur rose when Merlin and Gaius returned to the hotel after their first day in Berne.
"Merlin, so good to see you. And you, Mr Greenwood – how are you?"

Seeing Arthur in person again was like a shock, a punch in the stomach. Merlin's dreams and memories had not done Arthur justice. Heart racing, he took Arthur's outstretched hand and met his eyes. With his fingers enclosed in Arthur's, warm and strong, he could easily provide the smile that Arthur had requested to see on their reunion.

"I am very well, thank you, and enjoying Switzerland enormously," Gaius replied to Arthur's question. "Will we see you and Mrs Pendragon down for dinner?"

"You will indeed."

Gaius went to his room to wash, and Merlin and Arthur were alone. The feel of the leather armchairs was like a luxurious embrace and they looked at each other, smiling.

"So," Arthur said. "I'm very glad you're here."

"I'm glad to be here." There was a thrill running through him at that. "You look well."

"I am. Quite ready for that hike, if you're still up for it? Have you done any thinking as to where we could go? I've done some research and there are plenty of good places to go around here. The Berner Oberland is well off for villages to use as a base – and for railways. We can just go to Interlaken and we'll have plenty of choices from there."

"Sounds good. I've been looking forward to that hike ever since Florence."

They ordered coffee and while they were drinking it, Arthur asked, "Have you read the Sherlock Holmes stories?"

Surprised, Merlin blinked and put down his cup. "I have. Every single one, I believe. Why?"

"Well, we could go to Meiringen," Arthur said and grinned. "Walk up to the Reichenbach Falls."

Merlin's spontaneous reaction was a shudder. "Oh, no," he blurted out. "I'd rather not go to a place where someone died."

Amused, Arthur raised his eyebrows. "A fictional character, Merlin, not a real person."

"A fictional character dying is even worse!" A split second too late he remembered the reason why Arthur was travelling and caught himself, horrified at what he had just said. "Oh, god. That was incredibly insensitive."

Arthur shrugged, looking away. "It's all right. I don't need you to tiptoe around me."

"Still," Merlin murmured, ashamed. "I'm so very sorry."

Arthur shook his head. "Anyway," he said, clearly wanting to move on, "if you prefer a place where no one's died, fictional or real, I think we'll be hard pressed to find anywhere in the world."

Not knowing what to say, Merlin gave him a weak smile.

"In any case there are plenty of places other than Meiringen," Arthur said. "Let's discuss it over a whisky after dinner."

***
A week they had, a week with only the two of them and the whole spectacular world of the Bernese Alps. The train took them past blue lakes before it began to climb, taking them over greyish streams rushing along stony beds, through clumps of pines and past bright green Alpine meadows with herds of grazing cows.

"It's like a toy landscape," Arthur said. "It doesn't look real."

"If you saw it in a painting you would think the artist exaggerated," Merlin agreed.

The landscape may have felt unreal, but Merlin was back in the real world. Once Arthur was by his side again, the Arthur filter was gone. Merlin was present in the moment and there was no numbness at his core.

Having decided to go up on the mountain by train and back down on foot, they changed trains at Interlaken. Gradually, the scenery around them changed from lovely, emerald meadows with swaying flowers and copses of trees to a harsher landscape with boulders and rocks, the blue mountains towering over them.

The look on Arthur's face clutched at Merlin's heart – he looked like a small boy, delighted with trains. Merlin was amused and interested, never having thought of railways other than as a means of transport.

"These are rack and pinion railways," Arthur told him as the climb turned steeper. "Such a simple idea, but ingenious – obviously, ordinary rails and wheels won't do for the mountains."

When the train had climbed to the last station, they descended from their carriage and looked around. It was a different world up here, a breathtaking one of ice and snow, blue and white, glaciers and mountain peaks.

"This landscape makes me feel very small," Merlin said. "Humble."

Arthur nodded. "It's a good feeling, really."

The air was chilly but the sun was hot, and they shaded their eyes with their hands as they peered up towards the highest peak.

"In a couple of years you'll be able to travel all the way up, or at least nearly to the top," Arthur said. "The station will be the highest in the world."

The construction of the last part of the railway was well under way; the noise of it reaching their ears.

"The climb to the top is really steep," Arthur said with awe in his voice. "Nothing but a rack railway would work here. I must come back."

"The views from up there must be even more spectacular. You'd be practically on the glacier."

"Apparently you'll be able to see two glaciers, but I'd come for the railway rather than the views," Arthur said and laughed. "I know I sound obsessed, but I would really love to work on a construction project like the Jungfraubahn. To be honest, it's one of my dreams."

Merlin peered up at the sharp point of the mountain, at the glacier like a frozen river down its side. He envied Arthur a little, having a goal as distinct as that to work towards. "It must be dangerous work."

"Yes," Arthur admitted, "but lots of things are dangerous. Where are you ever entirely safe?
Something could have happened to us on the train here. Or the train to Florence."

"If it had, I would have saved us," said Merlin unthinkingly. Then he blushed. *No bragging, Merlin.*

Arthur gave him a searching look, and Merlin pictured cogs and wheels, racks and pinions connecting in his head as he worked out what Merlin had said. In the middle of his embarrassment, Merlin wanted to laugh.

"You mean that if something happened, you could save the entire train?" Arthur asked. "Or just yourself? Or you mean you could sense the accident it before it happened and prevent it?"

"I'm not sure I would sense it before it happened, but once it was happening, I believe I could save the train. Save everyone on it."

Arthur's face against the backdrop of the mountains was spectacular, all that gold and blue, enough to derail Merlin's thoughts. He would have loved to tell Arthur that, and they would have laughed at the metaphor.

"I mean, I've never done anything like it," he added hastily. "Perhaps I'm overestimating my powers."

Arthur was looking thoughtful. The cogs and wheels in his head were still working, still clicking together.

"Would it be possible," he asked as they began to walk to find their hotel, "for magic and engineering to work together?"

"I never thought about that."

"I mean, would it be possible to use magic to create safety systems, for instance? Could 'ordinary' rack and pinion trains like these be provided with magical safety devices, or the railways with a magical alarm system?"

It was an interesting question. "Yes, I suppose it could."

"Has it never been done? I don't mean with trains necessarily, but with other technical innovations. What about motorcars? Construction of skyscrapers?"

Merlin shook his head. "Not that I know. I've certainly never heard of it."

"You know, it's really strange to me," Arthur said, "that magic should be so underused. Do you mean to say there is no collaboration at all between magical and non-magical people? It would be so perfect, don't you think, to combine engineering with magic? Solid mechanical engineering with a layer of magic. Mountain railways with magic to secure them."

The possibilities he was seeing, the new world that opened, made his eyes shine.

"Yes, it is strange," Merlin said just as they reached their hotel. "But then again, perhaps not." Then he laughed. "Be careful what you start, Arthur. This is one of my pet peeves that we're approaching – if you can call it a peeve. That sounds so small, so petty. This is on a wider scale and I could talk about it at some length."

Arthur threw him a glance. "I want to hear all your thoughts," he said.
They continued their discussion across a white-linen table in the hotel restaurant later that evening.

"You said that if something had happened with the train, you could have saved it," Arthur said. "Does that mean you are never afraid?"

"Of course I am." Merlin took a mouthful of his beer. "But not of things like that. Not afraid of... you know, falling." He poked at the food on his plate with his fork. "But there are things my magic can't protect me from."

"What are you referring to in particular?"


The phrase was out before he could stop it and hung in the air between them, making his face heat, but Arthur only said: "Of course. There is no controlling the reactions of others. But I'd like to revisit what we talked about while we walked here, why magic is so underused. What are your thoughts?"

Merlin took a breath. This was important, but it was a challenge to explain it well without sounding pompous about it. "Well, first of all you need to know something about the history. I'm sure you do, but I'll reiterate."

Arthur sat back to listen.

"For centuries," Merlin said, "the world was ruled by magic users. They held all the highest positions and formed an aristocracy of their own. What is left of the magical society today are the remnants of that ruling class. Somewhere along the line, things began to change. Magic users were still highly regarded, still held a lot of power in society, but they were turning complacent. They were taking their place for granted, and gradually down the generations, magic turned into something you had rather than something you used. A dormant asset. It was enough to know it was there."

He poked at a lettuce leaf on his plate, wilted under the vinaigrette. Arthur was listening attentively.

"When the magic was not used it weakened, waned, to the watered-down version we have today. There are still magically gifted people, but their powers are weak. For the past centuries we have only used our magic for our own comfort, for small, domestic things. We have stopped using it for anything on a larger scale or for the common good, for anything that makes a difference."

He paused to get his breath, depressed and enraged by the story he was telling. "The magical society of today has no vision, Arthur, no imaginative thinking. We don't let our magic work for us."

He pushed the plate away and leaned back, tracing the weave of the linen cloth with a fingertip.

"It's depressing, and this is one of the reasons why I came here, an indirect reason that I wasn't fully aware of at the time. Back home I was just depressed without knowing why, but I've done a lot of thinking since. Travelling does that," he said, looking up with a quick smile. "When you sit on a train for hours on end, there is plenty of time for thinking. I didn't understand it back home, but there it is. I was so disappointed in the magical society, disgusted with it, that it made me ill. A tired, complacent aristocracy, that is what we are today. I say we, because I'm no better than anyone else. I never use my magic either."

Arthur had listened to every word without taking his eyes off Merlin.

"Because you are afraid to," he said. "You're afraid of its strength, of what it could do. What you could do."
"Yes, that's part of it, but it's also because I share their lack of energy. Magic is something you are proud of having, but you don't flaunt it, you don't use it, and the sad truth is that many of us don't even know how to use it any more. That is how it is in my world. That is how I have lived, but it's not what I want to do with my life."

A furrow appeared between Arthur's eyebrows. "You say that most people's magic is weak. How can you possibly know? I mean, you say your own magic is powerful, but presumably other people are not aware of that, because it's not something that is demonstrated. Am I right? What if that is true for everyone else as well – that everyone with magic has this tremendous potential that simply isn't used?"

Merlin shook his head. "No. This has been widely researched and tested. There are obligatory tests at school, with charts to measure the strength of one's magic."

"So you've taken them too?"

"Everyone has to. But the only time I used the full strength of my power was at the first test, when I was six."

"Were you off the chart?"

"No, but I nearly hit the top of the scale, which is practically unheard of for a child. After that I learnt to hold back. I never dared use the full strength of my magic again."

"That could be true for everyone else as well," Arthur pointed out.

"Perhaps," Merlin said, but he did not believe it. He had seen his classmates and friends tested, and there was no doubt in his mind that they had used all the force they could muster.

Arthur was silent, frowning as he played with drops of condensation on his empty glass. Merlin looked at his long fingers, the slight arc of his nose, the beautiful mouth, and his heart began to beat faster. Arthur was curious about him and he clung to that fact, because he wanted to know everything about Arthur, too.

No, he corrected himself. Arthur was curious about magic, not about Merlin, and he could not allow himself to get his hopes up. Arthur's interest was not of that kind, not the kind Merlin frantically wished for. Arthur was only intrigued by magic.

"The difference is that you want to make use of your magic," Arthur said at last, looking up. "You want to really use it."

"Yes," said Merlin bleakly. "I do. I'm disgusted with the magical world for ignoring the gift they've been given. We are in possession of something so powerful and with so much potential, something that could be used for the good of everyone. I want to use it. I just haven't found a purpose for it."

"Well," Arthur said and pushed his glass away, "then we'll just have to figure it out."
Call to the Blood

Sleep would not come that night.

Unable to stop thinking about engineering and magic, unable to stop thinking about Arthur, Merlin lay awake in the dark. His magic would not leave him alone. It stirred in his veins, rolling, twirling, making his blood too hot for his body. Restless.

He threw off the covers and padded over to open the window, letting in cool air that carried the faint but distinct tang of snow. Outside, the night washed the majestic mountains with moonlight and crowned the peaks with stars. The magnificence of the landscape created a sense of unlimited possibility: anything could happen here. Anything could take on new shape. No plans were too grand.

Merlin shivered and lit a cigarette, pushing away the thought of Arthur in bed in the next room, pushing away the need to invent an excuse to go and knock on his door. He would only make a fool of himself, and he had six more days to spend with Arthur.

But simply being with Arthur, hiking in the daytime and having dinner in the evening, was no longer enough, for to be in love was to be greedy.

Merlin inhaled the smoke deeply to calm his jittery nerves. Nothing was certain. He could not tell whether what he saw in Arthur's eyes was true desire or a reflection of his own feelings, or simply wishful thinking on Merlin's part.

The desperate desire to touch, to feel bare skin under his hands and lips, was new to him. Any longing on his part had always been vague and general, never directed at any one person. Now, Merlin's entire focus had narrowed down to Arthur. Obsession, he thought. Being in love was to be obsessed. One person meant everything, filled your thoughts relentlessly, incessantly, feverishly, claiming your attention and pounding at the walls of your mind, refusing to let you forget even for a second.

Merlin stubbed out his cigarette, closed the window and thought of the brown envelope from Taormina, left in his locked suitcase in Berne. After meeting Arthur in Florence he had not looked at the photographs even once. Their sepia tint seemed dull and dead when there was Arthur in glorious colour.

Back in bed, Merlin listened to his own breathing as he slipped one hand under the covers and pressed the other hand to the wall, as if he would be able to feel Arthur's heartbeat through it.

***

Morning hailed them with sun and the sky was a blue vault above them as they set out on their hike down the mountainside. Around them the craggy, rock-strewn slopes gradually changed into gentle meadows as they went. The air was crystal clear and Arthur's eyes were laughing, shaded by his hat, leaving Merlin dizzy with the intensity of his own emotions.

The altitude made walking slower than they had expected and it took them a while to find the right pace. They did not talk much and for now, just for a few hours, Merlin was content to walk with Arthur in silence through this spectacular landscape, sharing this experience, creating memories.

Halfway down to the village where they would stay the night, they stepped off the stony path to eat their packed lunch: sandwiches, dried fruit, a flask of coffee.
"You wouldn't think going downhill is such hard work," Arthur said, "but it's murder on the knees."

With his mouth full, Merlin made a small empathic noise. Where they were sitting, the ground had shaped itself into a kind of stone seat with a backrest, perfectly formed for young men with long legs. When they had eaten, they leaned back against the rock and turned their faces to the sun.

"Oh, this is so good," Arthur murmured.

Merlin glanced at his profile and closed eyes, repressing a tremor of longing, imagining Arthur saying those same words in a different situation.

The combination of fresh air, exercise and food made Merlin drowsy. He had almost fallen asleep when he felt Arthur's gaze on him and startled out of his doze. Arthur was leaning forward with his forearms on his thigh, his head turned to look at Merlin. A small, amused smile played around his lips.

"What?" Merlin said. "Did I snore?"

Arthur grinned. "No. I didn't realise you were actually asleep."

"Well, I wasn't. Quite."

"No, I was thinking about you not wanting to go to Meiringen because Professor Moriarty died there." The grin broadened. "Is this better?"

Merlin shrugged, smiling. "Yes. I just wasn't tempted by the Reichenbach Falls."

"This isn't bad either," Arthur said, looking out over the valley before them. "Did you say you've read all of the Sherlock Holmes stories?"

"I think so."

"So have I. Even if the cases are ridiculous, it's impossible to stop reading. Some of them I've read several times."

Merlin nodded, turning his eyes to the view. Far below them he could see the scattered roofs of the village.

He had read some of the Sherlock Holmes stories many times as well; *The Empty House* in particular. The story of Holmes returning from his exile and essentially from the dead never failed to make him breathe faster, and not from the suspense of the case. No, it was Holmes asking Watson to go with him and Watson replying "when you like and where you like". It was the image of Holmes and Watson moving together through the empty house, speaking in nearly inaudible whispers, Holmes with a hand around Watson's wrist. It was the image of them continuously touching. *My companion put his hand upon my shoulder and his lips close to my ear... I threw out my hand to make sure that the man himself was standing beside me... I felt his warning hand upon my lips.*

"Holmes and Watson came to Switzerland on foot, didn't they?" Arthur was asking.

"From France, through the Gemmi Pass."

"I really read the stories just to read about Holmes," Arthur said, "not the cases. It's a brilliant character Conan Doyle created. What Holmes actually does is not all that important – you want to read the stories to be close to him. It's easy to understand Watson's fascination with him."
"Yes," Merlin agreed. "What Watson feels is what the reader feels."

"Don't you think it's strange the way Watson marries and then, later, his wife is just… gone?"

Merlin had his own theories about that. It seemed Arthur had too, because he continued, "I have always thought that Conan Doyle threw in Miss Morstan to stop people thinking there is something odd about Holmes and Watson living together like that. I mean, two bachelors…"

Arthur let the sentence hang, and Merlin's pulse quickened. To hide his face he leaned down and picked up a sharp-edged rock, drawing a haphazard pattern with it on the ground by his feet.

"I have always thought," he said in a low voice, not looking at Arthur, "that Conan Doyle threw in Miss Morstan to divert the readers' attention from the fact that Watson is in love with Holmes."

The silence after that statement was absolute; the only sound breaking it was the distant cry of a bird, high up in the sky above them. Merlin felt Arthur's eyes on him but kept his own trained on the ground, waiting.

After an eternity, Arthur asked: "In love?"

Merlin looked up at last, bracing himself for the disgust in Arthur's eyes but found none. Instead he saw a dark intensity that sent a jitter down the length of his body, of nerves, of hope.

"There are so many signs," he said, dropping the rock. "He describes Holmes in such detail, notices such small things it must mean he watches him very attentively. He watches Holmes' eyes, his hands… his lips." It thrilled him to say these things out loud, knowing he was not talking only about Watson and Holmes. "As you do when you're in love."

As though he was an expert.

Arthur's eyes were fixed on Merlin. "What about Holmes?" he asked softly. "Is he in love?"

Merlin's heart was beating so hard it made his hands tremble. "I think so. For all he claims not to care for the softer emotions, I believe he is every bit as much in love with Watson as Watson is with him."

Arthur nodded slowly. "He can't do without him. He wants his company everywhere. He returns from his exile because he can't bear for them to be parted any longer."

"Yes." They were still holding each other's gaze. It made Merlin's pulse thunder in his ears, because this was not the way you looked at someone who was just an acquaintance, or even a friend. This was the way you looked at someone you loved.

They were sitting so close their shoulders almost touched.


He did not dare ask the question but Merlin knew it already. He knew the answer, too. The sky was blue above them, the sun was hot and there was no one else in the whole wide world. Drunk with light and infatuation, Merlin leaned in slowly until their faces were only an inch apart, tilting his head and closing his eyes to leave no room for misinterpretation. He wanted the kiss and he wanted Arthur to know it, but if Arthur did not want it, he still had room to back out.

He did not back out. Within a fraction of a second there was the slide of his fingertips along Merlin's jaw and the gentle pressure of his mouth on Merlin's.
Merlin heard his own intake of breath in the silence as he parted his lips at the nudge of Arthur's tongue. This was not his first kiss but it was completely new and completely different, because this was Arthur and nothing would ever be the same.

The tentative kiss turned heavy until Arthur's mouth let go of Merlin's and moved to Merlin's ear instead, an edge of teeth at the earlobe, a wet slide down the side of Merlin's neck. Merlin made a sound at the back of his throat, his hands scrabbling for purchase in Arthur's shirt.


They were both trembling with the newness, the daring, the relief of not being pushed away. The exhilaration of being wanted.

"The moment I saw you at the window in Florence," Merlin breathed, "I knew I wanted this."

Arthur's laugh was shaky. "Oh, so did I. This… and more."

Merlin closed his eyes again to let it pass, the shudder of heat and longing. "Yes."

For a while they sat quietly side by side to let their eyes adjust to this new level of brightness, to get used to this new closeness that made every nerve sing.

Arthur leaned over and rested his forehead against Merlin's temple for a moment. "I'd like to kiss you again," he murmured, making Merlin draw a breath. "But we can't risk it. Not here." He got up from the rock seat and looked down at Merlin, his eyes soft as he extended his hand. "Should we get going?"

Merlin let himself be pulled up and felt a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. His eyes were level with Arthur's. "It shouldn't take too long to the village," he said. "And as soon as we have a door to lock, I would very much like to be kissed again."

There was heat in Arthur's eyes. "We should definitely get going," he said.

***

They walked the remaining distance without speaking much, as if there was no room for words between them now that they had found touch. Now and again they caught each other's eyes in a smile, tense with anticipation.

Merlin no longer paid any heed to the magnificence of the mountains or the beauty of the flower-clad meadows. His entire focus was Arthur.

When they had finally checked into their hotel, Arthur held the door to his room and nodded Merlin inside. The lock clicked shut behind them and Arthur turned the key; Merlin swallowed his heartbeat, nervous now. His pulse was ticking in his fingertips as he stopped just inside the door. Arthur was so very close.

"You haven't changed your mind?" Arthur asked in a low voice.

Merlin did not trust himself to speak. He only shook his head, and found his face captured between Arthur's palms and Arthur's mouth hot on his own, his shoulder blades pressed against the door. It was too much and still not enough. They were both breathing fast, and Arthur wedged himself in between Merlin's thighs so that Merlin could feel him hot and hard through their clothes. Which meant Arthur could feel him, too. A small sound caught in his throat.
Arthur took a step back, panting; his eyes were dark and his mouth wet from Merlin's. The sight of him drew a laugh from Merlin, not because he found anything funny but of triumph and joy. This was Arthur Pendragon, and it was Merlin who had put that look on his face.

As Arthur threw his jacket over a bedpost and began to unbutton his waistcoat, still without taking his eyes off Merlin, Merlin was revisited by that night in Florence after his first day with Arthur. He remembered how he had lain naked on his bed in the warm darkness and imagined Arthur undressing, imagined him slowly removing his clothes for Merlin's pleasure. Now it was really happening.

Without thinking, Merlin pulled at his own clothes, letting them fall on the floor. Arthur's skin was pale gold, his muscles clearly defined like a Michelangelo come to life – an indecent version, aroused and very much alive. When Merlin rid himself of the last of his clothes there was a strangled noise from Arthur, who reached out and pulled Merlin to him as if he could not wait another second.

The first touch of skin on skin was a shock of pleasure and they both gasped as Arthur's arm locked around Merlin's waist. They were touching from chest to thigh and Merlin's knees begin to tremble ridiculously.

"Merlin," Arthur murmured with his mouth against Merlin's jaw. "You're shaking."

"Sorry," Merlin whispered. "It's nerves. And you."

Arthur laughed a little, the sound travelling the length of Merlin's spine like a shiver. "No need for nerves. I think we can figure this out."

Merlin closed his eyes, melting into Arthur's kiss, and when Arthur reached down between them and closes his fingers around both of them, stroking slowly, all sense of the world around them turned hazy and floating. The only thing that was real was the pleasure, the movement of Arthur's hand and their quick breathing, until it was all too much. Merlin's thighs were shaking and he clutched at Arthur's shoulders, eyes screwed shut as he stifled a cry and spilled over Arthur's hand. Arthur followed seconds later, and they stood leaning against each other for a moment, panting.

If Merlin had expected awkwardness and embarrassment to follow, he was proved wrong. Instead they lay in bed with their heads close together, cosy and comfortable in crisp, clean linen under a heavy spread of red satin, talking about nothing until they drifted off to sleep.

***

When they woke up, it was to the sound of rain.

"Good morning," Arthur murmured, barely awake.

It was the strangest thing, waking up in someone's arms; more intimate than any of the things they had done yesterday and again in the night. Sleeping, waking, all defences down, no masks, no pretences, all their vulnerability and all their strength.

"Good morning," Merlin replied. "It's coming down in buckets out there."

"Mmm." Arthur pulled Merlin close, leaving no doubt about how hard he was. "Then we can stay in bed all day."

Merlin grinned at the ceiling, his thumb playing with Arthur's earlobe and making him sigh. "Unless you do want to go out, because then I could make it stop?"
"No, no," Arthur said into Merlin's neck, "I'm more than happy to stay where I am." He wriggled his hips until Merlin moaned, then pulled back to see Merlin's face. "What – you mean you can do that? Change the weather?"

"Yes, I can, but I think we've talked enough about the weather."

"We've talked enough, full stop," Arthur agreed, and when he proceeded to suck on Merlin's collarbone and slide his hand down to Merlin's arse, it was impossible to focus on anything but desire.

His stubble scraped down Merlin's chest and stomach and Merlin lost his ability to focus. Gasping in anticipation, he wondered incoherently whether Arthur was really going to –

He was. His thumb stroked Merlin's hipbone like a question, and Merlin closed his eyes and gave the only reply possible: "God, yes."

When Arthur ran his tongue experimentally around the head of Merlin's cock, Merlin was lost in a world that was nothing but intense pleasure, the wet heat of Arthur's mouth. With his fingers in Arthur's hair, struggling not to push his hips up, Merlin had the presence of mind to silence his cry with magic.

***

"Can you really change the weather?" Arthur asked later as they sat in bed with their backs against the headboard, smoking.

It was still raining and the clouds showed no sign of breaking up.

Merlin shrugged and nodded, and Arthur blew out smoke towards the ceiling, watching it thoughtfully as it floated and curled. "It sounds to me like that would take pretty powerful magic."

"Yes, it does. Or so I'm told." Merlin added a little sheepishly: "In fact I'm not entirely sure I didn't make it rain today. Not consciously – I just wanted so badly to stay here with you today that my mood may have gathered the clouds."

Arthur looked at him, then threw his head back and laughed, just like he had done that first day in Florence when Merlin had missed breakfast. "You could have just said. I wouldn't exactly have been opposed to the idea."

Merlin shrugged a second time, but he was smiling.

"If you can change the weather," Arthur said, "what else can you do?"

"I can smooth out the waves of the sea." He could confess to that now. "I did that when we crossed the Channel – I bet you'd have liked to have me with you on the ferry." He laughed when Arthur made a face. "And most likely I can cause an earthquake, but I never tried that."

"For which we are all grateful."

They sat awhile and listened to the whisper of rain outside the half-open window.

"I have a confession to make," Arthur said. "While we were in Florence, I wrote to a friend of mine and asked if he knew anything about you."

"Did you? Why?"
"Well, I was curious about you and didn't feel I could ask you directly." A faint blush was spreading over Arthur's cheekbones and he did not look at Merlin.

"Who is your friend?"

"Lancelot du Lac. It turned out that he does know you a little."

"Yes, I have met him," Merlin said, "a few times." He was not likely to forget anyone with du Lac's good looks. "I liked him. So he is a friend of yours?"

"One of my closest friends," Arthur said, "and the only one I know who is well connected in both the magical and non-magical society."

"And what did he have to say about me?"

Arthur grinned. "Don't worry. Nothing bad."

"I don't think du Lac would say anything bad about anyone even if he loathed them."

"I know him well enough to read between the lines," Arthur said. "If he hadn't liked you, I would have known." He glanced at Merlin. "He did say something interesting, though. He told me that your father was a dragonlord. Is that true?"

Merlin nodded slowly. "Yes."

"I don't know anything about magic," said Arthur helplessly. "I have no idea what that means."

Merlin shrugged. "In practice, not a thing. Not any more. Once upon a time, when there were still dragons in the world, the dragonlords could command them and demand their help. The unusual power of the dragonlords' magic gained them a high position, a position they kept even after the dragons were extinct."

Arthur gave him a searching look. "Lancelot also said this gift often runs in the family." He did not ask the obvious question.

"What if it does? There are no dragons so it's all pointless." Another reason to be depressed.

"So that is why your magic is so powerful? Because you come from a family of dragonlords?"

"Probably." Merlin's voice sounded flat.

There was no point having this conversation, but Arthur persisted. "But since there are no dragons, there is no way for you to know whether you, too, have dragonlord powers?"

Merlin sighed and reached over to stub out his cigarette, then leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes. "I have," he said. "I found that out when I was eight."

***

Balinor was huge and warm, safe and indestructible. When Merlin was with him he was not afraid of anything. Balinor's hands were large, rough and calloused, and Merlin's own hands nearly disappeared in them. He liked that.

One wet spring afternoon they were sitting together in the library, Balinor on the Chesterfield sofa and Merlin on his lap. A fire danced in the fireplace and the rain had just stopped, clouds parting to make the whole world glitter. Even if Merlin had learned to read years ago and was far too old to
have things read aloud, Balinor was reading him a story about dragons. It was a story he had heard many times before, but the suspense and excitement never faded and there were beautiful illustrations to look at.

"That," Balinor said, pointing to a huge, grey, scaly creature, "is Kilgharrah, the last of the Western world dragons. It is an honour to have met him."

On Balinor's left shoulder was a shiny, puckered scar from a wound that could have killed him if Kilgharrah had not intervened to save him. Merlin had heard that story many times, too.

Something was different about the book today. Nothing that showed, only something Merlin felt. He knew all the adventures in it by heart and knew every detail of every picture, but something had changed. When Balinor held up the book the way he always did so they could admire Kilgharrah's claws and impressive wing span, Merlin reached out and touched the picture with a fingertip. Something hot and electric travelled up his arm lightning-fast and strange words spilled from his mouth, rough and harsh on his tongue, burning it.

Tensing under him, Balinor dropped the book to the floor where they watched the oddest thing happen. On the page, Kilgharrah began to move. He stretched as if his joints were stiff from being still for so long, shook out his wings and folded them back neatly, his yellow eyes blinking slowly up at them.

"Merlin," Balinor whispered with a strange light in his eyes. "Merlin, you have the gift."

They looked at many pictures of dragons that afternoon and Merlin made them all move, made them leap and fly from one page to another, coughing sparks, but what Merlin remembered best was the glow of pride and wonder in his father's eyes.

***

When Merlin had finished his story, the only sound was the hiss and whisper of rain.

It had not been until later, when Balinor was gone, that it had occurred to Merlin to wonder what it was all for. What was the use of being a dragonlord when there were no dragons left?

The question still stood all these years later, and now he could see that this had been where it all started. It had been a formative experience and ultimately one of the sources of his depression.
"So you see," he said in a low voice, "just how pointless it all is."

Arthur, who had watched Merlin steadily through the story, still kept his eyes on Merlin's face.

"So you are a dragonlord," he said with a note of incredulity in his voice. "God, Merlin. This is all so new to me, and when I think I'm finally getting to know you, there is a new twist to your story and you feel more like a stranger than ever."

Merlin raised his head sharply. "Why do you say that?"

Arthur shrugged, poking at the blanket with a fingertip. "It's just that… you are this incredibly gifted, this incredibly… and I'm just…" He looked up. "I don't know what I'm talking about. In any case I don't see how possessing extraordinarily powerful magic could ever be pointless. There is really no limit to the things you could use it for. If you wanted to."

Merlin looked at the white rectangle of the window. "If I wanted to," he repeated, his voice as grey as the clouds.

***

When Merlin woke in the small hours, the rain had stopped. He lay looking at the ceiling that shimmered faintly through the first light of dawn, listening to Arthur's even breathing.

This is how life could be, he thought. Waking up with someone you love.

But it was not real. They had taken a step outside of reality and this was only a dream, a dream they could indulge in for now. Perhaps happiness could only fully be happiness when it comprised only here and now and nothing beyond. Soon enough they would have to return to reality, return to who they were before and be who they must be. But for now, they were here.

Merlin kissed Arthur's bare shoulder, lightly, gratefully, and returned to sleep.

***

Their life in the mountains was a mosaic of sharp sun and soft darkness, saturated colours and grey morning mists, stony paths and silken touch; every day dotted with golden moments. They went walking in the daytime but always returned to the hotel in the late afternoon to shut out the world and let their bodies do what they were so good at.

Merlin watched Arthur lie back on the pillows with a fine sheen of sweat on his skin and a smile at the corners of his mouth. A streak of light fell in across his cheek, another down his chest. Edible. Almost reverently, Merlin leaned down and traced the light with his tongue, tasting sunshine.

***

"Are there things like, I don't know, love potions?" Arthur asked in the middle of the night, still wanting to find out about magic. "Is it possible to make someone love you?"

"The operative word is 'make'," Merlin said. "I don't know about potions, but yes, you can use your magic to make someone believe they love you. You can force them to behave as if they love you, but you can't create love in their hearts. In any case, that's not something I'd ever do. I would never want 'love' like that."

"So you haven't bewitched me to love you," Arthur said. There was a certain satisfaction in his voice.

"Did you really think," he asked in a low voice, "did you truly think that I…?"

"Oh, god, Merlin," Arthur said, and his kiss was an apology. "No, I didn't. This… with you. It's the most real thing I have ever felt."

"Me, too," Merlin whispered, pulling Arthur to him and holding him so hard it must hurt. "Me too."

And yet, he thought. And yet…

***

Arthur was standing in front of the mirror with his hair wet and drops of water sparkling on his shoulders, naked apart from a linen towel around his hips. Merlin walked up to him, stopping so close that his erection touched Arthur's arse. Their eyes met in the mirror as Merlin's hands travelled slowly down Arthur's sides to his hips, loosening the towel and letting it fall. He reached around and stroked Arthur to hardness, watching him in the mirror all the while, seeing his eyes turn dark and his lip caught between his teeth. Neither of them said anything.

Still with his hand around Arthur's cock, Merlin licked the drops of water from his shoulder up to the base of his neck, stopping to suck at the point where neck curved into shoulder. When Arthur inhaled, a sharp hissing breath between his teeth, Merlin moved his hand again, stroking Arthur slowly, pressing his own hardness against Arthur's hip. His teeth grazed Arthur's skin as the speed of his hand increased; he watched Arthur's head fall back and his lips part. He loved doing this, loved the warm, heavy, silken slide of Arthur's cock in his hand. That he could do this to Arthur. That he was allowed; that he could make Arthur feel this way.
He kept his eyes steady on the mirror, watching a blush spread over Arthur's chest and neck, his own
arousal feeding on Arthur's pleasure. When he twisted his hand, Arthur's body clenched and he came with a strangled groan, wet warmth spilling over Merlin's fingers.

At long last Arthur opened his eyes, meeting Merlin's gaze in the mirror.

"Mine," Merlin said to their image. "You are mine."

***

"Show me," Arthur said on their last walk in the mountains.

The clouds were hanging low like mist, obscuring the views, and they had not met anyone all day. They had stopped to eat their lunch, sitting in the grass by a copse of trees where the leaves whispered and trembled.

Merlin, who was putting the flask back in his rucksack, looked up in surprise. "Show you what?"

"Your magic."

Merlin frowned. "I've shown you already."

"Only small things," Arthur said. "You've chilled my wine and heated my coffee. I'd like you to show me some of the power you talk about. I want to see what you can do."

He looked so determined that a small shiver of apprehension ran through Merlin head to toe. He had never been asked to prove himself before, but even if he did not like it, his magic seemed to. It woke within him, glowing and strong and ready to be used, making his fingertips tingle.

"What would you like me to do?"

"In Fiesole, you didn't want to move that boulder because you were afraid you'd cause damage. There is a boulder over there, smaller. Could you move that? I trust you, Merlin."

Merlin turned and eyed the boulder, his hearting beat faster. There was warmth in his chest as his magic curled within him, twirled and waited, glowing gold. With a small, tense smile towards Arthur, he got up and held out a hand. He could only see Arthur out of the corner of his eye but felt his rigid attention.

Before their eyes, the boulder escaped the grip of gravity to float in the air five feet above the ground, and it felt so good, so natural, so liberating that Merlin wanted to laugh in triumph. The flow of magic within him was strong and luminous, liquid and hot, eager to obey his command. Effortless. It was empowering, exhilarating, and Merlin decided to give Arthur a show.

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Arthur held his breath as the boulder began to rotate slowly on its axis, as lightly and easily as if it had been a ball of paper, suspended on an invisible piece of string and stirred by the breeze. Some smaller rocks scattered over the ground rose into the air to orbit the boulder, each at a different distance.

Eight rocks… It was the solar system.

As Arthur watched, the boulder began to glow, giving off a light that was bright but not so strong he could not continue looking. The rocks changed colour and turned into perfect spheres: bright Venus, green Earth, red Jupiter, Saturn with its ring, blue Neptune…
Enthralled, Arthur whispered, "Beautiful."

The "sun" went out, the planets stopped spinning. Returning to their old form, they sank gracefully to the ground, reclaimed by gravity. Arthur shook himself out of a dream.

Merlin was smiling, his eyes shining, looking at once proud and slightly embarrassed. A surge of love, hot and strong, rose in Arthur as he pulled Merlin close to kiss him.

"That was… impressive," he murmured against the corner of Merlin's mouth. "So very beautiful."

He was still stunned. Merlin pulled back, his eyes soft.

"Thank you," he said and touched Arthur's face. "I did that for you. Something to remember."

Arthur laughed and kissed him again. "When we get back to the hotel," he said, "I'll give you something to remember."

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That night, Merlin lay awake with Arthur breathing softly, evenly beside him, lost in sleep. The window was open and all he could see was the endless night sky, sprinkled with stars, as if the building had been cut loose and they were afloat in the air high above mountains and valleys.

He thought of Elena, how distant and insubstantial she felt after all this time abroad, as if she had been a character in a book rather than a real, living person waiting for him at home. He looked at Arthur's sleeping face, trying to imagine himself with Elena in an intimate situation like this, with her curled up beside him, sleeping softly. He failed.

Merlin closed his eyes and remembered the first time they had met, when they were six and his mother had taken him to call on their new neighbours. When Merlin had addressed the girl "Elena", she had lifted her chin and said haughtily, "Miss Godwyn to you!" Bewildered, Merlin had glanced up at his mother and seen her struggle to keep a straight face. Strangely enough he had loved Elena anyway, and they had quickly become good friends. She had grown up to be a beautiful girl, with good humour and common sense, and he loved her as much as he had ever loved anyone before he met Arthur.

But Arthur was not comparable to anyone.

Merlin reached for a cigarette, lighting it and blowing smoke towards the ceiling, trying to quell the panic in his chest.

Even if he loved Arthur (and god, how he loved him), this would have to end here. Theirs was a love which would not survive the return home, to reality.

Ultimately, this was an indulgence, and back home in England, Merlin would never have allowed this to happen. A physical connection would have been one thing. Possibly he could have indulged in that at some point, if the urge had been too strong to resist. But love – a love as deep as this? It was disastrous. It would destroy them.

He rubbed a hand over his face. Real emotions in a fantasy world, he thought. They could stay awhile in their bubble, floating above the world with starlight to guide them, but sooner or later they would have to let their feet touch the ground. They would have to go home.

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They had five more days in Berne, five days spent in the sunshine and five long nights that were far too precious to waste on sleep. When they did sleep, it was in each other's arms, waking up to start the day with a kiss.

In the bell tower of the Minster with the city spread out at their feet, they talked once again of magic, of the tired aristocracy, of the lack of innovation and use.

"The victory of science over magic," Merlin said, shading his eyes as he looked out over tiled roofs and green river. "We allowed it to happen; we let it go so far it could no longer be reversed. And now we're not needed any more."

"But you could be," Arthur said. "We could all be needed, whether we have magic or not. I mean, look at this place. Look around – what do you see? Don't be like them, Merlin. Don't give up."

"Are you talking about trains and magical safety systems again?"

"Yes, I am. I can't let it go. I've been thinking about it for days and I truly believe it would work. It could work on the trains, it could work to protect the construction workers while the railways are being built. Think about the Jungfraubahn. Magic could be built into the structures and there could be all sorts of intermingling of technology and magic." He looked at Merlin with a frown on his face. "Why has no one ever done this before? It's incredibly lazy thinking, if you ask me, not to make use of what is there right in front of you, something with so much potential."

As they began to climb down the winding staircase, Arthur painted a vivid picture of the possibilities.

"Any kind of freight or transport – trains, ships, motorcars. Flying machines! Any day now they will really work, and with magic added… Merlin, we could do this. You and I. It would be perfect! I will learn all there is to learn about the engineering and physics involved and consult you about everything concerning magic. It would work, I'm sure of it." He stopped and turned to look up at Merlin who was just behind him. His eyes were laughing, radiant with excitement. "Construction work! Bridges! Mining! There is no limit. Come on, Merlin, let's start a revolution!"

His enthusiasm was contagious and for a moment they were both heady with the dazzling views from the tower and the wild plans in their brains.

"It sounds wonderful," Merlin said, smiling. "Exactly how things should work in the best of worlds."

"Then let us make it the best of worlds!" Arthur turned and continued down the steps, down, down in a spiral. "We can't just sit around and wait for things to happen. We have to make them happen."

"That's exactly what's gone wrong with magic. For generations we've been sitting around, living on past glory. God, Arthur, I hate it."

"Then let's do something about it. We will introduce magic into the working world again. Let's begin with rack and pinion railways and safety systems. We'll move here, to Switzerland, or to the Italian Alps." He turned so abruptly they collided, pulling Merlin's head down and kissing him hard on the mouth until Merlin's eyes closed and he had goosebumps of pleasure all over. Arthur's hands slid down to Merlin's, his thumbs stroking Merlin's palms. "We could live on the mountainside, work together and create something that people need, that they will use. There will be new, real, practical use of magic again. We will bring it back to life."

"Utopia," Merlin murmured as Arthur let go of his hands and started walking again.

"Yes," said Arthur firmly. "Utopia, becoming real."
Sex, Merlin was discovering step by step, could have many moods and configurations.

There were the tender nights filled with wonder, nights when they woke up with slow caresses, working each other gently with their hands, kissing until their mouths went slack with pleasure.

There were the times when pleasure was bright and blinding, so intense it bordered on pain.

There were the silly things, too; like the time when Arthur wanted Merlin to command him with dragonspeak (“I am a Pendragon, after all”). The idea appealed to Merlin more than he would admit, but the words would not burn as they slipped off his tongue, only felt cumbersome and bulky, too large both for his mouth and the small room they were in. It only made him feel ridiculous and a little pompous, and they both collapsed in giggles until Arthur took Merlin’s hand and pulled it down over his stomach, saying that it had at least been a good way to get him hard. Merlin kissed the underside of his jaw and murmured that he did not need magic for that.

There was the time when Arthur asked Merlin to tie him up with magic and suck him off. Black ribbons of magic wound themselves around Arthur’s wrists tying him to the bedposts, but once he was tied up, Merlin did not comply with his wishes. Instead he closed his hand around Arthur’s cock and moved it slowly, alternately watching Arthur’s face and his cock sliding through Merlin’s fist. Whenever Arthur’s breathing quickened he removed his hand, over and over until Arthur was squirming. Then he straddled Arthur, working himself onto his cock and riding him, slowly at first until it was no longer possible to hold back. He silenced them both with magic. There was a darkness in that, a kind of desperation.

They had to do this, had to do it while they could.

Because of course the time came that was the last, the one where they had to say goodbye. Merlin had dreaded it. He knew it was all over, that reality was closing in and they had to leave their beautiful dream. He knew that this was right. But deep inside, there was a dread that Arthur did not see it. That Arthur was hoping.

They did not sleep at all that last night. It was a night that could not be lost. In the morning they were sticky and sore, with swollen lips and bruises sucked to their skin.

When day broke Merlin slid out of Arthur’s bed, searching half-blindly with his hands over the floor to collect his clothes, bracing himself to face the inevitable goodbye. There was pressure behind his eyes, a burning sensation of something hard and bright.

"When will I see you again?" Arthur asked, reclining on the pillow with his arms under his head.

"I don’t know," Merlin murmured with an ache in his throat. "I don’t know. I hate that we have to go back to reality."

He began to get dressed, his fingers stumbling on buttons.

"Reality?" Arthur sat up in bed, having noticed the change in Merlin’s voice. "What are you talking about?"

"It doesn’t work, Arthur," Merlin said to the floor. He could not look at Arthur or he would break; he had to create distance between them. "With us. It won’t work. This has been a dream, a long lovely dream, but this is where we have to wake up. Don’t you see? Once we get home we have to return to normal. I’m getting married. You are… you have other things you must do."
He glanced at Arthur who threw off the covers and swung his legs over the side of the bed, sitting there like the Michelangelo come to life, so devastatingly perfect. "Merlin, I don't understand," he said helplessly. "You can't mean this."

"I mean that this is over," Merlin said. "It's been wonderful, Arthur, and I'm always going to be grateful I met you. But we're going home now, and what we are, what we do is illegal there. It can't go on, however much we wish it could."

He half expected Arthur to lunge at him, flinching a little in advance, but Arthur stayed where he was, looking crestfallen. Stricken. As if Merlin had just hit him in the face.

"Then come away," he said. "We don't have to live in England. Let's go back to Italy. Let's go to France. Anywhere you want, as long as I can be with you. How can you even think of letting go of this? Of us?"

Merlin did not reply. Trousers, shirt, collar and cuffs. The armour of civilisation.

"You can't mean it," Arthur repeated, still sounding more confused than anything. Anger had not caught up yet. "I love you and I thought – do you remember when I said this is the most real thing I have ever felt? Is it not real for you? What happened, Merlin, what did I miss?"

"Nothing," Merlin said, looking at Arthur at last, his armour complete. "You didn't miss anything. We can keep in touch, we can work together if you still want it, but we can't have this." He made a gesture towards the rumpled bed and Arthur's bare, golden skin. "That's how it is."

There was nothing more to say, nothing more he could say or he would break, having found perfection and having to leave it because nothing could ever stay perfect. So he left the room, left Arthur sitting on the bed with his hair ruffled and his eyes wide with hurt, left the most wonderful few weeks of his life and returned to his room that was dark behind closed shutters. It felt symbolic of his whole life.

The dream was over, the light had waned and reality descended like darkness.
Dusk was falling when the motorcar neared the Emrys' house, Dragon's Keep, but gloom had descended on Merlin long before that. It was still summer, there were still flowers and green leaves, but to Merlin there was a grey filter over everything. He did not feel as detached as he had before he went to Italy; the wall of glass between him and the world was gone. He was present and alive but the colours were not clear.

If Gaius noticed Merlin becoming more taciturn, he did not comment on it.

When they stepped out of the motorcar at Dragon's Keep, the door was flung open and Hunith came running out to hug them both – Merlin first, then Gaius, then Merlin again.

"It's lovely to have you home! You're tanned, Merlin, you look so much better! You have been so very good about writing, both of you, but oh, I have missed you. And Freya… oh dear." She lifted her eyes to the heavens and laughed. "Are you hungry?" she asked, slipping an arm around Merlin's waist and guiding him into the hall. "There is a light dinner waiting, baths can be drawn in no time, and your beds are ready."

Merlin was grateful for Gaius, who responded to the chatter and told Hunith about the last legs of their journey home. Home was always home and he would be glad to sleep in his own bed tonight, but this very moment he was unable to feel any joy. Perhaps it would be better once he had slept.

At the back of the darkish hall, Freya hovered like a ghost in a white summer dress with a blue sash. When they entered she stopped moving around, stood stock still and stared at them before running up to Merlin to beat at him with her fists.

"I hate you!"

Hunith whipped around to face her. "Freya, what on earth is the matter with you? Why are you being so rude? You have missed Merlin so much – the least you can do is be nice to him!"

Freya turned on her heel and rushed up the stairs. On the landing she stopped, and there were tears in her voice when she shouted: "I hate you because you've been away so long!" Then she ran down the stairs again and threw herself into Merlin's arms.

He hugged her hard, lifted her up and spun around with her. "I've missed you too, silly."

Her arms were hard around his neck and it was perfectly true, he really had missed her. He put her down and kissed the top of her head. "I'll just go wash off the travel dust, then I'll see if I can find the things I got for you."

She took a step back and wiped at her eyes. "Please don't ever go away for so long again without taking me with you."

"You're used to me being away at university," Merlin pointed out, puzzled as to what had brought this on.

"But when you're not there, you should be here," she muttered. "If you move away, you must let me come and visit you often!"

For a moment Merlin pictured his quiet, settled life with Elena, their well-appointed house and their beautiful children. The image was cold and lifeless. Flat.
"Of course you'll visit me often," he replied softly. He would be glad of visits from Freya.

In the bath, Merlin sank into hot water up to his chin and rested his head against the edge of the tub. When he closed his eyes, images from his travels danced before him, not flat and lifeless at all. They were not primarily of Italy, of Switzerland, of trains, but a backdrop of all those things with the image of Arthur imprinted on them in gold.

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"While you were away, Albion Villa has been let," Hunith said at breakfast. "We have made so much fun of the villas and how no one will ever want to rent them in all their ugliness, but a week ago, Albion was indeed let."

Merlin felt better this morning, resigned rather than despondent. While he was not terribly interested in Albion Villa, he saw there was something his mother was bursting to tell him. Having just refilled his own teacup, Gaius raised both the pot and his eyebrows questioningly to Merlin, who nodded.

"Oh, it's bliss to get proper tea again," Gaius said as he poured. "And congratulations to Lady Alice. She has proved us all wrong."

When Lady Alice had the two villas built on the outskirts of the village, they had quickly become a favourite topic of conversation – whenever they were mentioned, people's eyes shone with a horrified delight. The twin villas, grandly named Albion and Avalon, were small, square, modern and ugly, quite an eyesore in the picturesque little village. The general opinion was that if Lady Alice would ever find tenants for them, they would be the wrong sort. The right sort would never pick a house like that to live in.

"She has indeed, in more than one way!" Hunith handed Merlin the toast rack. "Albion has been taken by two elderly ladies, sisters – and they are Gorloises, would you believe it? Not at all what we thought we would get – neither a muttering, tobacco-spitting old man nor a tired young couple with screaming, ill-mannered children. Could it be the same old ladies you met in Florence, Merlin? What were their names again?"

Merlin, who had just forked in a mouthful of scrambled eggs, choked on them, but Gaius took it all in his stride.

"Miss Morgause and Miss Morgana."

Hunith looked excited. "Oh, it must be, then."

Merlin, who had stopped coughing, groaned instead.

"I don't like them," Freya piped up. "They're scary. They never say anything, only stare at you."

Hunith gave her an affectionate look. "I would reprimand you, because you shouldn't be so disrespectful of old people, but I'm afraid it is quite true. They do stare at one. Or rather," she added to Merlin and Gaius, "they stare at Freya. As far as they are concerned, I might as well be air. They probably know I don't have magic."

"Well, some people are snobs, Hunith," Gaius said. "Surely that comes as no surprise to you, of all people. But taking Albion Villa does not exactly speak of snobbery to me. I would have thought they would turn up their noses at the very sight."

"Yes," said Hunith thoughtfully, "it's all very strange. By the way, Merlin, shouldn't you go over to The Pines and see Elena?"
Merlin put his half-eaten piece of toast back on his plate and murmured something vague about being tired. "Tomorrow," he added, not to raise suspicion. "I will go and see her tomorrow."

"Good," Hunith said. "Then you can ask her over for tea."

***

That afternoon, as Merlin listlessly bounced a ball on his racquet on the tennis lawn at the bottom of their terraced garden, Freya came running, waving a white oblong.

"Letter for you!"

It only took a glance for Merlin to recognise Arthur's handwriting. He dropped the ball and racquet on the ground and took the letter up to the table and chairs on the lawn above, his heart hammering and fingers trembling as he opened the envelope.

***

"I'd like to ask Arthur Pendragon to come and stay for a few days," he told the others at dinner.

_I have to see you_, Arthur's letter had said, and Merlin could not very well refuse him. But it was too soon; he was not ready to see Arthur yet. He had only just got used to not waking up in Arthur's arms, not seeing Arthur's blond head on the pillow next to him, eyes darkening with lust. He shuddered, fighting down a surge of longing. He needed more time, time to build up his defences. But perhaps they did need to meet here, at home, to define what was real and what was not, now that the dreams from the Alps had dispersed.

Arthur had been mentioned enough in Merlin's letters for him not to have to explain who Arthur was, and his mother was delighted.

"Oh, how lovely! It has been far too long since we had house guests. I enjoy having the house full of people."

"You should ask Mrs Pendragon as well," Gaius suggested. "You would like her, Hunith. She is a nice, kind woman who is grieving for her husband. Even if they have only just arrived home, I am sure she would welcome another diversion."

"So you think she would like an invitation?" Hunith asked softly. "Then I will be very glad to send her one. Merlin, you can ask Elena over for tea and tennis, and her friend too. You remember Miss Nemeth, don't you? Mithian Nemeth? She is a lovely girl." An idea lit a mischievous glint in her eyes, and she added: "Perhaps your Mr Pendragon will take a liking to her!"

Merlin winced and tried to hide it.

"Stop matchmaking, Mother," he said, sounding stiff even to his own ears.

Hunith only laughed and Merlin gritted his teeth. This would be even worse than he had thought. He was not prepared to fight a war on two fronts.

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Merlin paced the terrace at the back of the house, chewing the inside of his bottom lip until he tasted iron. In half an hour Arthur and his mother would arrive – Hunith had sent the motorcar to the station to meet them. Tomorrow, Elena and Miss Nemeth would come over for tea and tennis, and while more people meant less risk of Merlin being left alone with Arthur, he did not look forward to the
strain of having Arthur and Elena in the same room.

When the motorcar arrived and they all went out the front door to greet their guests, Merlin's hands were icy and numb. He shoved them in his pockets and smiled through the impact of seeing Arthur again. It was like being punched. Arthur's strong nose and bluer-than-blue eyes, the full lower lip he had kissed and sucked into his own mouth, Arthur's hands that knew every inch of Merlin's body – it made Merlin tremble. It was overwhelming to see Arthur here at Dragon's Keep, as if the familiar surroundings were taking on a new shape and would never be the same again, just as Merlin would never be the same. Arthur had transformed them.

When he held out his hand and Arthur took it, a thrill ran up his arm at the touch. His magic reacted to Arthur, like a small sparkling current through his body, and he remembered another meeting and another handshake, in Berne. Everything had been different then. The anticipation, the longing, the not-yet-knowing.

Merlin took a deep breath and made the introductions, watching Freya's eyes widen as she looked up at Arthur. Apparently his sister was not too young to appreciate male beauty. Merlin fought a smile.

Mrs Pendragon kissed him on the cheek, thanked him for the invitation and said she was glad to find him well; he watched his mother greet Mrs Pendragon warmly, receiving warmth in return.

Arthur was trying to catch his eye but Merlin evaded him. He could not look at Arthur yet. First he had to get used to the idea of him being within touching distance again.

The luncheon was a strain and Merlin was relieved when it was over and they all went out to have their coffee in the garden. There he could at least breathe.

One thing, however, was sure: Arthur had won Freya's heart. Not only did he talk to her like an adult ("like a real person!" she told Merlin later), but when they had their coffee he also produced a present for her – a book about butterflies.

"I bought it in Italy," he said. "I do hope you like butterflies."

"I love them!" Freya's face glowed as she turned the heavy, glossy pages with colourful illustrations of European butterflies and moths. "Oh, it's wonderful! Thank you!" For a moment Merlin thought she was going to hug Arthur, but she restrained herself. "Did Merlin tell you about the butterfly incident?" she asked pointedly, giving Merlin a glare before running over to Hunith. "Oh, Mother, look at this book! Mr Pendragon gave it to me. Isn't it beautiful?"

The look in Arthur's eyes could best be described as amused curiosity. "The butterfly incident?"

When Merlin shook his head and shrugged, Freya came up to them with the book tucked under her arm. "When I turned seven," she told Arthur, "Mother gave me a summer frock for my birthday. It was so pretty I couldn't believe it, white with butterflies embroidered all over it. They had all kinds of colours and they looked so real. But then Merlin – another glare – "Merlin charmed them to come alive so they fluttered around me in a cloud."

"That sounds like a pretty nice thing to do," said Arthur gravely.

"It was a nice thing," Merlin pointed out. "I wanted to make her laugh, and she did. She laughed and hopped around chasing them."

"Yes, but then they all flew away and wouldn't come back, and my dress was just plain white. I cried so much my eyes looked dreadful and I never wanted to wear it again."
Merlin made a face at her. "I didn't know I wouldn't be able to get them back, and I've apologised a thousand times. Let it go!"

Arthur looked from one to the other, obviously trying to think of something to say that would appease them both, but before he had time to come up with anything, Freya asked him for a game of tennis. When he readily accepted, it was sealed. As far as Freya was concerned, Arthur was a roaring success.

Merlin bit his lip as he watched them go inside to change, overwhelmed by his tenderness for them both. The kindness in Arthur always left him defenceless.

When Arthur returned, Merlin gave up all attempts at dignity and rose from his chair. As they walked down the steps to the tennis lawn, Freya came running and joined them with much chatter. Merlin's intention of staying away from Arthur, creating a buffer zone between them, had been shot to hell in less than a couple of hours. Instead here he was, blinded once again by Arthur's radiant presence, watching Arthur laugh in the afternoon sun. A mirage. And Merlin had no defences.

***

Merlin found it impossible to sleep. It was as if Arthur's presence burned right through the walls, and Merlin had to stop his magic reaching out to the room that was Arthur's for the stay.

Arthur was not asleep either; Merlin could feel it. Freya was, though, because her dreams were spilling over into Merlin's awareness, the way they sometimes did. Tonight, she dreamed of butterflies.

Merlin closed his eyes and sensed Arthur moving in his room, pacing, thinking. He wanted to run down the hall and into the room, lock the door behind him and pretend they were back in the mountains, abandon reality and lose himself in Arthur.

With an effort he stayed where he was, in his own room and his own bed, and did not fall asleep until the curtains were touched by the first light of morning.

***

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Merlin! How could you miss that ball?" Half annoyed and half laughing, Elena swatted at him with her racquet. "Where are your thoughts today? What are you daydreaming about?"

Across the net, Merlin saw Arthur still. No doubt Arthur could guess exactly where Merlin's thoughts and dreams were going. He felt Arthur's eyes on him, but just like he had done all day and the day before, he took care not to meet them. Somehow, he had to get through this. It did not do to give in.

"Your serve," he said, pushing his hair out of his eyes.

Elena gave him a searching look but did not comment, only shrugged and took the ball he held out to her. She knew him too well; it was impossible to hide the fact that something was wrong, and Merlin had never been a good actor.

***

Sleep refused to come. With an impatient sigh Arthur sat up in bed, beat the pillow into shape, turned it over cool side up and lay back down. It did not help. Images appeared and reappeared in his mind, over and over until his head spun.
The tea, the tennis, Miss Nemeth and Miss Godwyn, and Merlin, Merlin, Merlin.

_I had to see you_, Arthur had written in his letter, and had been relieved when Merlin's reply had arrived with an invitation. He had not counted on Merlin keeping his distance quite like this, skilfully dodging any possible situation that would leave the two of them alone with each other. It hurt, but not as much as it could have, because at least the careful distance told Arthur one thing: Merlin was not indifferent to him.

Arthur decided not to push. For now, he watched.

Over the past two days he had taken in every detail of his surroundings and Merlin's family, trying to understand Merlin better. He had watched Merlin and his sister in fascination, noticing differences and similarities, identifying a tone of voice that they shared, a gesture, a way of smiling. They were indeed alike with their dark hair, blue eyes, fair skin and full lips, but Freya had an openness that contrasted with Merlin's reticence. Perhaps it was only her age.

Mrs Emrys was warm and welcoming with a no-nonsense air that Arthur liked. _Mr Emrys made an unconventional choice_, Lancelot had written in his reply to Arthur's query about Merlin's background, _in marrying outside his circles altogether. Mrs Emrys has no magic and her family no connections, but the marriage did seem a happy one and as the wife of a dragonlord, she gained respect. I met her once and found her intelligent and pleasant._

Having seen Merlin's tanned face against the dramatic backdrop of Alpine meadows and snow-capped mountains, it was strange to see him in this gentle, well-ordered environment. Arthur could not help thinking that a grander landscape suited Merlin better, that this village and his home were too small to contain him.

It had been with trepidation that Arthur had been introduced to Elena Godwyn. Secretly he had hoped to dislike her or at least despise her a little, but Miss Godwyn was entirely charming, open and unaffected, and he found he could not. Instead, he felt a certain sympathy for her, because he could see that Merlin did not love her. It might not have been noticeable to anyone else, but Arthur knew – because he knew what Merlin looked like in love.

He watched them exchange smiles and share jokes that excluded everyone else, but that only came from them having known each other all their life. There was no electricity between them, no tension, no sizzle and spark, only a gentle affection. Arthur thought of Merlin in Switzerland, the first kiss on the mountainside, the intensity of Merlin's eyes in the hotel room when they had first touched, of the dark head thrown back on the pillow in ecstasy. He thought of the solar system Merlin had created in the swirling mist of a low cloud; _something to remember._

There was no air in the room. Arthur gave up on sleep and went over to the window, pushing it open to breathe in the cool night. As he was about to turn and go back to bed, his eye caught something moving at the far end of the garden. A shirt like a white-ish smudge by the edge of the terrace, the flare of a match illuminating a face that made his heart thump.

_Merlin._

The glow of his cigarette danced like a firefly in the first glimmer of dawn as Arthur watched him wander slowly across the lawn back to the house. Below Arthur's window, outside the French doors, he stopped and began to pace.


As if Merlin had been aware of Arthur's presence all along, he did not even start but deliberately
dropped his half-smoked cigarette to the ground and crushed it under his heel before looking up. "Can't sleep?"

Arthur shrugged. His heart was still racing; he felt his pulse in his fingertips.

"Me neither."

"Come up," Arthur half-whispered.

Merlin stilled, his upturned face a pale oval, and Arthur counted his heartbeats until Merlin said: "Very well."

Arthur opened the door to his room and left it ajar while he waited. There was no sound of a door snicking closed downstairs and no creaking steps on the stairs, but suddenly Merlin was standing in the doorway. He hesitated for a moment before coming in and closing the door behind him, still without a sound. A small, hot triumph blossomed in Arthur's chest: Merlin was here, in his room.

"That's a little scary, you know," he breathed, "you being so completely noiseless."

Half a smile appeared on Merlin's face. "Magic has its advantages."

Arthur took a step towards him and caught both his hands in his own. He would not let Merlin get away with this. "You've been avoiding me."

"I haven't."

"Yes, you have. You've seen to it that we haven't been alone even for a minute, that we've been in the company of other people at all times, and last night when people began to go off to bed, you disappeared."

Even if Merlin was here he was still avoiding Arthur, or at least avoiding meeting his eyes. His hands felt dead in Arthur's and he said nothing in reply. The prolonged silence was agony and Arthur had to challenge him.

"You don't want me anymore."

That made Merlin's head snap up. He still made no reply but his breath quickened, and instead of speaking he took Arthur's face in his hands and kissed him so hard, so urgently, that the breath was knocked out of him. Without breaking the kiss he walked Arthur backwards to the bed until the edge hit the back of Arthur's knees. Together they fell down on the yellow silk spread, tearing at each other's clothes until they were rid of them and all pretence was gone. Now there was only their bare skin and the heat between them, only their desire for one another, only Merlin and Arthur, desperate.

***

In a moment of cowardice, Merlin decided to skip breakfast. With his lips still tingling from Arthur's and a bruise throbbing at the base of his neck, he could not face Arthur over eggs and bacon under the eyes of both their mothers.

When it was no longer avoidable, he dressed and went outside. The door to the garage was half open, and to Merlin's surprise, he glimpsed Arthur in there. Too curious to walk by he went to stand in the doorway, leaning a shoulder against the doorpost.

"Does it meet with your approval?" he asked, indicating the motorcar with a nod.
It was a brand new Ford Model R with shiny red finish, brass details and leather seats, that had made Hunith fall in love with it at first sight.

"Who would not approve?" Arthur said. "It's a beauty."

Like a flash of lightning, brief and blinding, Merlin had a vision of his future, *their* future – Arthur standing by the motorcar called it up before him. This was what it could be like: Arthur and engineering, technology and magic. He stepped inside.

"I want to try something," he said, his voice hoarse with excitement. "Mother would hate me if she knew, but I have to."

He closed the door behind him and went up to Arthur who turned his head sharply, looking from Merlin to the Model R and back again. Then he smiled, a tense little smile.

"I trust you," he said.

Merlin closed his eyes, focusing his magic like he had that day in the mountains, with the boulders and the rocks. This was more complex and needed more precision, but he could feel every part of the motorcar, how they fitted together, how they worked. With his eyes closed like this he saw everything even more clearly, as if his magic sharpened his senses.

He took a deep breath and let the magic work.

When he opened his eyes again he saw Arthur take a step back with wide eyes and parted lips. The motorcar was completely disassembled but still discernible as a motor; each part still more or less in its place relative to the other parts but all of them suspended in air. It looked like the three-dimensional drawing from an instruction manual.

"Holy…" Arthur said, walking around the motorcar to view it from every angle.

"Could we work with this, do you think?" Merlin asked, trembling a little with pride and the effort of holding up all the pieces.

Arthur turned slowly to meet his eyes. "Are you talking of engineering and magic, Merlin?"

"I believe I am," Merlin said, heart speeding up. "We can still work together, if you want to."

There, it was out, he had said it. This was his offer to Arthur.

He closed his eyes again, focusing his magic on the individual parts of the motorcar, joining them back together until everything fit snugly in place and nothing chafed or stuck. If only he could do the same with his own life.

"It would be fantastic, Merlin, and you know it," Arthur said, coming so close that Merlin felt the warmth from him. "You can't turn your back on it. Come work with me, but not here. Not like this, not with all… this." He made a vague gesture towards the house.

"This is what I am," Merlin replied quietly.

It was clear to them both what they were talking about. There was no need to mention Elena's name.

"Break free," said Arthur, his eyes intense as he nodded towards the motorcar. "*This* is what you are, too." His hand touched Merlin's. "Do you still believe that happiness can't be real?" he asked softly. "Do you still think you don't deserve it? That sadness is less volatile? It's not about deserving,
The image of Elena danced in Merlin's mind. "I can do both," he said. "If you'll only let me."

Arthur's finger closed around his own. "But that is not what you want. Think of what we had in Switzerland, what we could have still. Have you forgotten this morning already? It's not just me – you want me too, Merlin; you can't deny it. You're shaking with it."

It was so tempting to give in, to just lean his head against Arthur's and say yes, yes, I'll come with you. But it would never work.

Merlin pulled his hand away. "If I'm shaking," he said, his voice cold, "it's only because I exhausted my magic. I'm sorry I suggested it."

He turned and walked to the door, leaving Arthur in the dim light of the garage with a hand extended and his eyes dark with hurt.

***

Arthur and his mother had returned to London and restlessness made Merlin itch all over. Everything was wrong and he could not make it right; whatever path he chose it would lead him away from something he could not bear to lose.

All his life he had been told to "take it to the magic room" whenever emotions ran high, so that was where he went now. He felt about to burst. His frustration needed somewhere to go.

Inside the door he stopped and looked around. The magic room was a good-sized basement room converted by his father to a kind of bunker, reinforced and padded with magic. His father had been a powerful warlock, this he knew, but he had no idea what that meant in practical terms – what kind of force the room would hold; whether it could contain the full blast of Merlin's magic. Merlin had never tried that.

"You can do anything in here," his father had told him.

"Anything? Can I hurl things as hard as I want?"

"Anything."

But at the time of that exchange Merlin had been six years old, and the room would easily have held the magic of a child. Now it was an entirely different matter.

The floor, Merlin decided. The floor stood the best chance of withstanding a blast of magic, and if it broke it would not cause the whole structure to come tumbling down. At least he hoped not.

For a while he stood in the middle of the floor with his eyes closed, feeling an odd connection with his father. He could sense the magic in the walls, the magical padding, the reinforced structure. Balinor may be dead but some of his creations still lived: his son was standing in the room he had created.

When Merlin's eyes were closed like this he could see it, see the complex pattern of magic like a map. Golden tendrils entwined, twirling, revolving slowly; electric blue whirls, a faintly iridescent white mesh. There was something dark, too, like an ugly black seam running through it all, crossing and re-crossing its own path. It was not dark magic, exactly, but something Merlin did not want to examine too closely. It reminded him of the ancient magic he had felt in Naples and he wondered where his father had learnt it and why he had chosen to use it here, in his own home. He must have
felt that the reinforcement was not strong enough without it.

When Merlin suddenly heard his name spoken, he started and his eyes flew open.

"Merlin?" It was Freya outside the door. "Are you in there?"

He shook himself and opened the door for her. "What is it?"

"What are you doing? Are you practising? Can I stay and watch?"

"I'm in a bad mood," Merlin told her. "You need to leave. I don't want you to get hurt."

She winced as if he had already hurt her, as if his words had. She was so easy to read, always got this pinched, pained look on her face whenever she felt rejected in some way, but he could not let her stay.

"Very well, then," she said in a small voice and backed out.

Merlin closed his eyes, took a deep breath and then another, and summoned his magic. He was not going to use his full power; he would probably cause a landslide if he did. This would be a measured, targeted attack on one spot, and not truly a blast, more of a roar.

He gathered up every thread and shimmer of his magic, focusing, channeling, hurling it. There was a crash like thunder and it felt good, oh, this was exactly what he needed. It felt wonderful to have some of the frustration leave his body along with the bolt of magic, to get rid of the excess energy, get rid of the tension. He did it again, and a third time, breathing hard and reeling a little when he finally opened his eyes.

The floor had cracked in all the spots he had thrown his magic at, as if hit by something tremendously heavy – a battering ram, a steam hammer. All the points of impact looked the same: a crater in the middle, surrounded by a cobweb pattern of cracks.

"That's for Naples," he whispered to the ugly seam, making it writhe in agony.

At least he had learned a couple of things. One: Even when Merlin restrained his magic, Balinor's did not stand a chance against it. Two: There was nowhere he could go to let his magic loose. The consequences would be too great; he would hurt other people. Perhaps somewhere on Earth there was a wide-reaching, empty desert that could work as a magic room for him, but no place within easy reach.

Some questions had arisen, too, although they were not really new. One: There had to be some reason for his magic being this strong – or was he just a freak of nature? Two: There had to be something he could do with it, somewhere he could direct it. But what, and where, and how would he find it?

There was a tiny knock on the door, a mouse-scratch of a knock, before it opened a fraction to show a sliver of Freya's face and one, wide eye.

"It's all right, you can come in now," Merlin said.

She slipped through and stopped dead inside the door, staring at the floor and then at him. "Merlin, what have you done?"

"I don't know," he said helplessly. "I just…"
"You broke daddy's floor!" Freya began to giggle uncontrollably, an unstoppable, snorting giggle that was contagious, and soon Merlin was laughing too. It sounded half hysterical.

When they had stopped laughing and stood there weak and teary-eyed, Merlin took hold of Freya's shoulders and turned her towards him, looking down into her eyes. "We won't tell Mother about this, Freya. She never comes down here so she won't see it anyway, but if she knew, I believe she would be frightened."

Freya nodded. "I think so too. You scared me too, Merlin."

"And myself," he admitted.

Freya gave the cobweb cracks another glance. "Will you mend it?"

"Well," Merlin said, "I'll try." When she looked at him more sternly than Hunith ever could, he added: "I'll do my best."

***

The train windows were streaked diagonally with rain, making it impossible to see anything but fragments of the landscape outside, reality broken up and reflected in the drops. Arthur leaned back on the headrest and closed his eyes, his head rocking with the movement of the train. Unannounced, he was on his way to Dragon's Keep because he simply could not let Merlin go. The past week had been agony. At the back of his mind he kept asking himself at what point he would have to give up, but as long as he thought Merlin still cared for him, he could not.

Mine, Merlin had said in front of the mirror at their hotel in the mountains. The memory made Arthur shudder with longing. Merlin's mouth and tongue had moved so gently over Arthur's shoulders, licking drops of water from his skin. Arthur had been helpless in Merlin's hands, and happy to be.

Yes, he was still Merlin's if Merlin wanted him, even if Merlin had never intended to be Arthur's beyond those intense weeks in the Alps. But that was exactly the problem, exactly what kept Arthur going and not giving up hope: that underneath Merlin's need to adhere to conventions, whatever his excuses were, he was still Arthur's. They belonged together, and that night in the guest room at Dragon's Keep had proved it. Merlin's display of magic in the garage had proved it, the unhappiness in his eyes proved it, too – the unhappiness he could perhaps hide to others but not to Arthur. He knew how Merlin's eyes darkened with desire in the seclusion of their room; he knew the sun-and-sky sparkle in them when Merlin was in a silly mood. There had been nothing of that with Miss Godwyn. Nothing at all.

And as long as Arthur had that to hold on to, he could not give up.

Undoubtedly, Merlin had good reasons to want to marry Miss Godwyn even apart from adhering to conventions and fulfilling their parents' wish. Miss Godwyn had magic, and if that was important to Merlin in a partner, there was no way for Arthur to compete. She came from an old, respected family with a wide social circle overlapping Merlin's, another point where Arthur did not measure up. But none of that had seemed to matter to Merlin in Italy and Switzerland, and Arthur could not see why that would change so completely once they were back in England. Was this perhaps a remnant of the privileged history of the magical ruling class – a sense of their right to use other people for their pleasure and discard them when the novelty wore off?

Arthur shivered, the damp chilling him to the bone. Perhaps he would have to face the truth that for Merlin, the days they had spent together in Switzerland with their window open to the view from the mountain was only a reckless game, some wild oats sown, a youthful misstep that was now to be
forgotten and buried in conventions.

But in the grey dawn in Merlin's home, on the yellow silk of that bed in the guest room, Merlin's mouth and hands and body had not spoken of indifference or rejection. There had been desperation and need, and a connection between them that could not be denied.

One more try, Arthur thought. One more, and if that failed he would step back. He would disappear out of Merlin's life and let darkness descend over his own.

***

The rain never seemed to want to cease.

Merlin stood in front of the library window looking out over the garden watching leaves, twigs and blades of grass pushed down by the drops and springing back, swaying a moment before returning to stillness, only to be hit by another drop of rain. The sky was a uniform grey, the day dark and chilly enough to warrant a fire. It could have been cosy, he supposed, with the rain and the crackling logs in the fireplace, if only he had been in the mood for it. But the sense of hopelessness was eating at him, making his mind dreary and grey. The library always reminded him of his father and the futility of being a dragonlord in a world without dragons. The pointlessness of it all.

At the rustle of fabric he turned, just as his mother entered the room.

"Oh, you are here," she said. "I told Mary to light the fires. It is such a dreary day."

She came up to him and they stood side by side in silence, watching the rain drift like grey veils over the drenched lawn.

"I was thinking about father," said Merlin quietly. "I miss him. I wish I could have known him as an adult, not only as a child."

Hunith sighed. "So do I, Merlin." She gave his waist a one-armed hug and rested her head against his shoulder. "I miss him, too. Every single day."

He put an arm around her shoulders, feeling how small she was. His father must have felt very protective towards her, but she was not a fragile woman. On the contrary, she was one of the toughest people Merlin knew. She would have to be, having the house full of people with magic without having any herself; a magic-less woman marrying into a family of dragonlords.

Now she pulled away a little, reaching up to push Merlin's hair out of his eyes where it had flopped down.

"Did it not help?" she asked gently.

"Didn't what?"

"Your travels in Europe. Did they not do what they were supposed to do?"

When she looked at him like that, it felt as though she could see his soul. He had never been good at lying to his mother.

"Yes and no. They did and they didn't." He sighed. "It was a wonderful journey, Mother, and I'm very grateful to you – and to Gaius, of course, for making it happen."

"I sense a 'but'," said Hunith dryly.
"Not really. The trip was supposed to help me find myself, and I do know myself better now than I did before. But…"

"Ah ha! I was right."

Merlin laughed weakly. "Well, all right then. But. It made me… start dreaming, I suppose, and while the dreams were wonderful, they were impractical and unrealistic."

"That is the nature of dreams, Merlin," his mother said. "They are not realistic – that is why we call them dreams. But that does not necessarily mean they should not be pursued. Where would mankind be if we had not had our dreams?"

"That is true, but some really should not be pursued. Anyway, I know myself better now; I know what I can have and what I can't. I want the wrong things. Stupid things. Castles in the air." He looked at Hunith who had a furrow between her eyebrows, and smiled down at her. "So it's all good."

There was no fooling her and he should have known it.

"You make me want to cry," she said. "Of all the people I know, my son has the saddest smile."

She reached up and gave him a peck on the cheek before leaving the room. Merlin listened as the rustle of her silk dress grew fainter, and then he was alone with the rain – but not for long. A few minutes later, Freya stuck her head around the door.

"Arthur is here," she said.

The name was like jolt and Merlin drew a breath. Freya's face was glowing, lit up by Arthur's presence, and he only wished he could feel the same pure, unmingled joy.

"Is he?" he managed. "Well, show him in here. And ask Mary for tea."

"Ask her yourself," Freya said and disappeared.

Merlin straightened his back and ran a hand across his face, rubbed at his tired eyes. It was unfair of Arthur to catch him unaware like this, unprepared. It put him at a disadvantage.

Moments later, Arthur appeared in the doorway. He looked tired and haggard as if he had not slept for several nights. There was a hardness about him, a darkness in his eyes that Merlin had never seen before. Something cold clutched at Merlin's heart.

"Miserable weather," he said conversationally, stalling to gain time. He had to collect himself.

Arthur must have been carrying an umbrella but his hair was damp and the hems of his trousers were soaked. His eyebrows knitted together. "I'm not here to talk about the weather."

"I thought we could at least say hello, or something of the kind." There was a chill down Merlin's back at the look on Arthur's face.

"May I close the door?"

"There isn't much point yet. I just rang the bell for tea. Mary will be here in a minute."

Arthur's jaw set but he did not comment, only sat on the edge of the old Chesterfield sofa, straight-backed, waiting. Merlin's heart was pounding. Arthur looked ready for battle.
It seemed like an eternity before Mary arrived with a jingling, clinking tray, setting it down on the table by the window and disappearing with a curtsey. The rose-patterned china did not suit the mood but Merlin was glad of the tea that offered him something to do with his hands, somewhere to direct his eyes to avoid meeting Arthur's.

Arthur took the cup and saucer that Merlin handed him without looking at them, holding them like alien objects, something he did not know how to use. Merlin turned his back and poured a cup for himself, intensely aware of Arthur's gaze on him.

"Merlin, please," Arthur said. "We have to talk about this. Or, at least, I need to say what I came to say. If you don't agree with me, this is the last time I will speak of it." He paused, but Merlin's mouth was dry and he found no words. "Please, Merlin, I beg you. Don't go ahead with this. Please, please don't marry Miss Godwyn. I don't understand. Truly I don't. Why are you so determined to go through with it?"

Half bent over the tea tray, Merlin closed his eyes because he could not turn around and look at Arthur, could not stand the pain in his eyes, could not stand the ache in his own throat at the Arthur's words, at the sound of his voice.

"I have an obligation," he said, sounding hoarse.

"An obligation to whom?" Arthur asked from the sofa. There was a click as he put his cup down. "To your mother? Or to Miss Godwyn?"

Merlin took a breath and turned around, holding his cup like an ineffectual shield between himself, his heart, and the raw pain in Arthur's eyes. "To Elena. We have been meant to marry since we were children, Arthur. I can't just abandon her."

"Perhaps you should have thought of that in Switzerland," said Arthur harshly, making Merlin wince. "Is it better to be unhappy for the rest of your life, making her unhappy too?" Arthur stood, agitated. "And me," he added, a flush blooming along his cheekbones as he crossed the carpet and walked up to Merlin. He was too close. Standing this close to him and not touch him was physically painful. Arthur seemed to feel it, too. He took the cup from Merlin's hands and returned it to the table before closing the distance between them, gripping Merlin's upper arms and shaking him, then sliding his hands down Merlin's shirtsleeves to his wrists as he leaned in. "Don't you have an obligation to yourself as well?" he asked with his lips at Merlin's ear. "Life is a gift we are given. Are we not obliged to make the best we can out of it?"

"We are not obliged to seek happiness," Merlin whispered and pulled away. He was shaking. He was so weak, always so weak where Arthur was concerned. It did not help that Arthur was right. He would make them all unhappy.

"I can't bear it," Arthur said, sounding matter-of fact. "I can't bear to have met you and then not be with you. What are the chances that we should have met? It seems so perfect – you and I." His eyes are seeking Merlin's. "Too perfect to be mere coincidence. Call it fate, call it whatever you like, but please, Merlin, let's not throw it away. It's bad enough having to go through life denying who we are to other people. Don't make us try to deny it to ourselves."

Merlin only shook his head, mutely. Of course I want to be with you, he wanted to shout. But how, Arthur? How?

"It's so clear to me," Arthur continued, "that you are not happy with how things are, how they will be. Is it really that important to you to adhere to conventions? More important than people's happiness, including your own?"
"I'm doing it for Elena," Merlin repeated. He was faltering – he could hear how weak it all sounded; his voice, the words, the logic behind them.

"Are you?" said Arthur in a low voice. "Or are you doing it because you're scared?"

Merlin closed his eyes. *Stop it, Arthur. Please don't insist on being right.*

"Let us go away," Arthur urged him. "Let us go to France, to Italy – somewhere we are not considered criminals, loving who we love."

A tremor ran through Merlin and he knew Arthur felt it. His whole being screamed to say *I will come with you, I will go wherever you go.* Dreams, he had said to his mother. Castles in the air. He could not do that to her, to Freya. Perhaps in Arthur's world, an escape like this was something that could be done, something that could be allowed to happen. In Merlin's, it was not.

The silence in the room was absolute. The rain had stopped.

"I can't stand it in here," Merlin said, sounding choked. "Come, let's go for a walk."

Arthur blinked, taken aback, but there was a hint of relief in his eyes. "All right," was all he said.

"Let's go through the woods," Merlin murmured. "Let's go bathing in Freya's Lake."

***

The woods were still and quiet, dripping wet, filled with a fine, transparent mist. Not even a bird was heard and the air felt thick and heavy. Perhaps there would be thunder.

When they reached the lake the surface was still as a mirror, reflecting the grasses at its edge and the shapes of trees, half erased by the mist. The whole scene was permeated by a quiet sadness, or perhaps that was only Merlin's mood.

They had not talked at all along the way but walked side by side in silence, their hands touching from time to time, only their little fingers; each touch sending a jolt through Merlin's body.

At the water's edge they removed their clothes, undressing in tandem; waistcoats, shirts, breeches, shoes left in a pile in the grass. Everything was subdued. There was no jumping into the water shouting and splashing; they merely slipped into the coolness.

After a few strokes in one direction and as many in the other, Arthur stood up, chest-deep in dark water. His hair had fallen into his eyes but he did not bother to push it back. Merlin ran a wet hand across his own face, not sure if he was stroking away tears or lake water. They looked at each other for a moment. Then Arthur reached out and pulled Merlin to him. Merlin let himself be pulled in and waited impassively, his body separated from Arthur's by an inch of air and a film of water. He could feel Arthur's breath on his face.

"Merlin," Arthur whispered, and his lips were so close they had to be kissed.
Merlin's eyes fell shut as he gave in.
Arthur's mouth was hot and his tongue slick, and his arms came around Merlin's waist, holding him hard. They stood in the chest-high water kissing, breathing, holding each other as if nothing could separate them ever again.

"God, Merlin," Arthur murmured in his ear, panting after the kiss, "I can't let you go. I can't."

Merlin's lips, then his teeth, caught Arthur's earlobe. He felt soft inside, weak, resigned to the fact that this could not be changed. "I love you," he breathed. "You know I love you. There is nothing I can do about it. I'm cold, let's get out of the water."

The water sloshed around them, closed and healed where they had disturbed it, rippled and trembled and was still again.

"This is who we are," Arthur said, sounding broken, as they stood in the grass. He leaned forward and kissed Merlin on the mouth, made a gesture to indicate their naked bodies. "This."

There was nothing to say.

They began to dress, pulling on clothes that clung to their wet skin. Still in their underwear, Merlin with his shirt trailing from his hand, they kissed again; slowly and gently at first but gradually deeper, harder, heavier until their bodies had awakened and Merlin's hands were on Arthur's hips, pulling him close, pressing against him; Arthur's fingers combing through Merlin's hair and down the back of his neck until Merlin was shaking again, for a very different reason.

The sound of a broken twig was loud as a gunshot in the still air and they flew apart, confused and hot-faced, looking around wildly. A few yards away, Elena and Miss Nemeth were standing as if they had just grown out of the forest floor. They looked stricken, holding hands like seven-year-olds on a school-trip; there was a grass stain on Elena's white skirt and a leaf had caught in the dark masses of Miss Nemeth's hair.

"Oh, dear God, we're so sorry," Elena said with a hand on her cheek. "We didn't see you! The mist… We were just going to…"

They had seen the kiss; there was no doubt about it, no mistaking the look on their faces. Thoughts collided uselessly in Merlin's head. He had no idea what to do – there was nothing he could do. Any attempts at denying it or explaining it away would only make it worse.

"Elena," he said, imploring, stretching out a hand towards her.

"We're so sorry," she repeated. "I… we… we won't…"

Miss Nemeth, whose eyes had been trained on the ground, looked up straight at Merlin.

"You're safe," she said.

Then she pulled at Elena's hand and they backed away into the mist, disappearing like something in a dream.
"I'm so sorry," Elena repeated as she walked by Merlin's side through the garden at The Pines.

They followed the meandering path until they reached a small, curved stone bench by the brook, surrounded by the green, feathery shapes of ferns. Mist still hung in the air; the brook gurgled and laughed in the stillness.

"Please, if anyone is to apologise, it should be me," Merlin said awkwardly as they took a seat on the bench.

As soon as Arthur had left for the train station, Merlin had gone to The Pines to talk to Elena. What had happened this afternoon could not be left hanging, untouched – it would stay between them; it would fester.

When he had arrived at The Pines, Miss Nemeth had given him a weak smile and a vague excuse about a headache, and Elena had taken him for a walk in the garden.

Now she gave him a searching look. "Like Mithian said, you're safe. You know that, don't you? We are not telling anyone."

A wave of blood shot up in Merlin's face. He could not even bring himself to thank her. When he lifted his eyes to meet hers, he saw no disgust in her face, only a soft kind of worry.

"You are in love with Mr Pendragon, aren't you?" she said quietly.

He could not stop himself wincing. "Elena, please. I –"

But she waved his words aside. "No, Merlin, there is no use denying it. I know you so well. I see it in the way you look at him. I suppose you think I'm shocked, but I'm not. I'm truly not. We were embarrassed to run into you like that this afternoon, but only because we interrupted something we shouldn't have, only because we saw something that was not meant for anybody's eyes but yours. We were not shocked, and I'd like to tell you why."

There was a pause while they listened to the brook. A thousand thoughts whirled in Merlin's head, fragmented excuses and explanations, but he said nothing. While they sat in silence, a tiny breeze touched their faces. The mist was lifting.

"I love you very much, Merlin," Elena said slowly as if she was uncertain how to phrase what she had to say and it was important to find the right words. "You know I do even if I have never said it out loud. But I love you like a brother. My father and your mother would be over the moon if we married and it was always like an unspoken agreement between us – or perhaps between them. But these are our lives, not theirs. We can't enter into something as huge as this only to please our parents."

Merlin's pulse began to hammer, deafening, at the possibility that he had been mistaken, that he had presumed to know Elena's feelings.

"Many people do," he pointed out in a low voice.

But Elena shook her head. "I know that, but you and I are not them. And I have a confession to make." Merlin watched her square her shoulders and take a deep breath. "Something I have never told anyone, just like you haven't told anyone about Mr Pendragon. That the… the other kind of
love, the kind you feel for him… that is how I feel towards Mithian. What Mr Pendragon is to you, Merlin, Mithian is to me."

There was a faint buzz in Merlin's ears, like that strange silence just before you were going to faint. Whatever he had expected to hear, it had not been this. Elena and Miss Nemeth…? Elena's face swam before him, but as he took a breath to reply, she added hastily: "So you needn't worry about breaking my heart."

While Merlin tried to think of something to say, the last of the mists dispersed and the world was clear and sharp once again.

"I would never have guessed," he said, a little dazed. "You and Miss Nemeth."

"That is why your secret is safe with us," said Elena softly. "Your kind of love is against the law; society has chosen to turn a blind eye on my kind. You exist in the dark. We don't exist at all. We are all outcasts, we all have to hide. We should at least be kind to each other."

He squeezed her hand, trying to think what to say to tell her how grateful he was. "Elena, you are the most…the most wonderful…" He could not think of a word to describe her, and absurdly, he wanted to kiss her. He leaned forward until his mouth was an inch from hers and murmured: "May I? Just this once."

Elena laughed as if she understood perfectly and took his face in her hands, kissing him lightly at first and then with more pressure. Her lips were soft, her palms warm on his cheeks. When they pulled back and their eyes met, they both smiled.

As they sat there side by side, a new, sudden thought stumbled into existence in Merlin's head.

"Elena," he said slowly, "there is a solution here, right here in front of us. I'm sure you see it too."

She did not; she looked puzzled as she shook her head.

"Well, now that we know this tremendous thing about each other, this secret, we have an option that would keep us all respectable and still give us something of what we want."

She was still looking at him, tilting her head.

"You say you love me like a brother," he continued. "I love you too, you know that. You are as dear to me as a sister, and if I'm to marry anyone, I would want it to be you." He stopped and took a breath. "We could still go through with it, you know. We could still get married. And if Arthur and Miss Nemeth were to marry, too… It wouldn't be a bad arrangement, Elena. No one would ever know."

Elena turned her gaze from him and out across the brook to the trees on the other side. They were clearly visible now, every trembling leaf. When she nodded thoughtfully, Merlin thought how beautiful she was. It could work. If they all tried very hard, there was a chance it would work.

"Perhaps," said Elena slowly, not looking convinced, "perhaps. But it does seem a little… insincere, don't you think?"

"Does it? Not for the four of us. Not if we all know why. Not if we all know what the premises are."

"Very well," she said, getting up from the bench. "I will talk to Mithian and see what she thinks."

***
Merlin walked home from The Pines with a million thoughts whirling in his head. Darkness was falling and in the houses along the road window after window sprung to life, lit into a softly glowing, yellow rectangle. Inside, people lived their lives in their private circles of light, keeping their secrets and smiling in public. So could not Arthur and he do the same? Marrying would be the perfect solution, the answer to all their problems. They would slot quietly into their corner of society, outwardly law-abiding, impeccable citizens, charming young men with their lovely wives. They could love each other behind drawn curtains and never let on.

There was no reason why the thought should make him feel cold and numb, like something inside of him had died.

***

A few days later, as Merlin walked past Albion Villa on his way to the village shops, he saw Miss Morgana in the garden by the beehives, leaning over to stare at some unfortunate bees. He wondered what she was telling them – perhaps uttering a spell to make them gather all the nectar in the neighbourhood, leaving none for other bees.

Just as he thought he had managed to sneak by unnoticed, she straightened up and called: "Mr Emrys!"

He must have jumped a foot, looking guilty of something he had not done. Miss Morgana so rarely spoke that it was a shock to hear her voice.

"Good morning, Miss Gorlois," he replied across the ridiculous, white-painted fence, only slowing his steps but not quite stopping, hoping he could get away with only a short exchange.

Luck was not on his side.

"Would you come inside for a moment?" Miss Morgana said. As always it was more of an order than a question.

"Of course." Merlin sighed inwardly as he opened the gate and entered the garden, conscious of a sense of stepping into her realm, of being in her hands now. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

There was no immediate reply. Miss Morgana scrutinised him and he shifted his shoulders under her gaze. Her eyes were sea-green in the sun, and once again he thought how very beautiful she must have been as a young woman. There were enough traces of her beauty for his imagination to recreate her young face. She must have been stunning, still beautiful as a middle-aged woman, and even now she was stately. Commanding.

"I have something I'd like to talk to you about," she said. "Please come into the house for a minute. I will not keep you long."

Into the house. Like walking into the witch's lair. Merlin smiled at his own thoughts but his steps were wary as he followed Miss Morgana into the house.

The hall was very small, and so was the sitting-room that opened up to their left. What on earth had possessed them to take this house? They were Gorloises; they had to have at least a London house and a large estate somewhere up north. Anything would have suited them better than this small, poky, modern villa.

Miss Morgause was sitting by the open window, not even greeting Merlin with a nod as they entered, only fixing her dark eyes on him.
"I will go straight to the matter," Miss Morgana said. "I have made some enquiries and I know who your father was. Dragonlords were rare even centuries ago, and today…" She paused, her eyes boring into Merlin. "Am I right, Mr Emrys, in assuming that you have inherited his gift? That it was passed on to you?"

There was no mistaking her meaning. Merlin blinked, taken aback. No one except Arthur and Balinor himself had ever spoken to him about it.

Yes, he meant to say, but no sound crossed his lips until he had cleared his throat. "Yes."

A hint of a smile, a mere shadow, was visible at the corners of Miss Morgana's mouth for a fraction of a second. Miss Morgause's face did not change but there was a flicker at the bottom of her eyes, the tiniest flutter of something like excitement.

"I thought so. My intuition always serves me well. I can sense something else as well – that you are hesitating about what road to take in life. Is this not true?"

"I – it's – yes." It was impossible to try to hide anything from these old ladies.

"I want to warn you against taking the easy route," Miss Morgana continued. "Your head and your heart, Mr Emrys, your head and your heart. You must consider both, for one is nothing without the other, and you must consider other people. You are not a dragonlord for nothing. There may well be things you are meant to do, and it does not do to waste them simply because you are frightened."

She was the second person to tell him he was frightened – Arthur had said the same thing at Dragon's Keep.

Miss Morgause sat straight-backed on her chair by the window, watching Merlin intently, silent as always, but suddenly he did not find the old ladies nearly as intimidating as he usually did. Instead, they rather interested him.

"I'm sorry, Miss Morgana," he said, "but I am not sure to what you are referring."

She looked him straight in the eye for seconds that felt like an eternity. Her gaze was steady, her eyes surprisingly young. "That is because you have not yet heard my proposal. Have you never felt the call?"

Merlin swallowed. "The call…?"

"Of your magic," Miss Morgana said with a hint of impatience. "Do you never feel it calling you to action? Magic, pure and strong, is a rarity in this day and age. It is sad that it should be so; it is sad that people have under-used their magic to the point where the magic of the world has waned. Your father was not among them. Neither are you or I."

One of Miss Morgana's bees had made its way into the small drawing-room and found the flowers in a vase on the table by the window, right next to where Miss Morgause was sitting, but she did not take her eyes off Merlin. He looked from Miss Morgana to Miss Morgause and back again, his magic stirring in his veins, awakened by Miss Morgana's words.

"You said you have a proposal," he said in a near-whisper. "What is it?"

There was a small laugh, a tiny cackle, from Miss Morgana. "Youth! Always so impatient. Sit, Mr Emrys."

Obediently he sat on the edge of a chair, all tension as Miss Morgana sat to face him. Now they were
placed in a triangle, both ladies intent upon him.

"Although I am not of dragonlord lineage," Miss Morgana said, "I have some abilities as regards
dragons. As a child, you were probably told that there are no longer any dragons in the world, that
they are extinct. Your father would have told you this since he believed it to be true. Most people
believed it to be true."

"Believed it to be?"

Miss Morgana's reply was evasive. "Cruel people have hunted them down, and the evolution of the
world has not been in their favour." She paused, giving Merlin an assessing look before she decided
to continue. "Ten years ago, having been subtly pointed in the right direction by an old gentleman
who has since died, I was lucky enough to find a dragon egg." She ignored Merlin's intake of breath.
"I collected the egg and took it to the Alps. Mountains are a good place for dragons – not easily
accessible to people, and there is space to fly. I created the best conditions possible for the egg, and
after six months in my care, it hatched. Since then two more eggs have been found, one of which
will most likely hatch before this year has come to an end." She fixed Merlin with her eyes. "Do you
not find it an extraordinary conflux of events, Mr Emrys? So many dragon eggs found in such a short
time when none had been found for centuries?"

"Are they real?" Merlin managed.

The tiny cackle again. "Oh yes, Mr Emrys, there is no doubt that they are real. This is not
coincidental. It is happening because the dragons sense the imminent arrival of their master."

Merlin's world was tilting on its axis, making the room swim and leaving him dizzy, unsure whether
he had really heard what he had just heard – but underneath his confusion he could feel the
beginnings of excitement. Miss Morgause's face was impassive.

"I have been watching you, Mr Emrys," Miss Morgana said.

Merlin bit his lip to stop an inappropriate laugh. So that was what she called her staring. An
understatement if ever he had heard one.

"I have been watching you," she repeated more sharply, "and now I am asking you to take charge of
my dragon sanctuary. I am an old woman, in need of someone to take over. I have a caretaker at the
sanctuary when I can't be there, but although I trust him he is no dragonlord, only a servant with a
certain amount of magic and a great love for dragons."

A thousand questions were rushing through Merlin's head.

"You will need discretion and patience," Miss Morgana added, "but what you will need to know and
do not already, you will learn."

Merlin struggled to find his voice. "In the Alps?" were the words that leapt from his mouth. Of all the
things he wanted to ask, that was what came out.

"The Italian Alps," Miss Morgana said, emphasising the adjective. When Merlin failed to find words,
she repeated slowly: "Your head… and your heart."

His pulse started thudding. It could not be possible that this old lady meant what he thought she
meant. It could not be possible that she was referring to… that she was suggesting… But if it was,
should he be afraid? He wondered if he had really been so obvious, if she had seen it already in Italy.
If she had, others might have seen it, too.
Merlin took a deep breath. It did not do to get nervous, not here and now. He needed to consider the offer she had made him, seriously consider it. A dragon sanctuary of which he had known nothing only moments ago, a dragon sanctuary which would provide him with the purpose he had been searching for. He had asked himself so many times what use it was being a dragonlord when there were no dragons, and a chance like this might not come again – *would not* come again.

When he was about to open his mouth and begin to ask all the questions that were still crowding in his head, Miss Morgana said: "Consider everyone, Mr Emrys, not only yourself. Do not forget your sister."

Merlin frowned. Whenever he thought he was catching up, Miss Morgana went a step further. "Freya? What – "

Again, Miss Morgana almost smiled, and said dismissively: "Go home now, Mr Emrys, and think things through. Come for tea tomorrow and we will talk more."

Merlin rose from the chair, more confused than he had ever felt in his life, but through the mess of questions and conflicting emotions he could glimpse something quite new: a glimmer of hope.

***

Merlin walked home slowly, taking a long detour through the woods. Even if not yet here, autumn was nearing, and the smells of the woods had subtly changed to herald it. He did not go all the way to the pond but saw the glint of it through the trees like something distant, a memory, something from long ago. It felt like a lifetime since the kisses, the slide of wet bodies, Arthur's darkened eyes… *What am I doing? What will I do?* Fragments of conversations kept running through his mind. *Consider everyone.* He had thought that was exactly what he was trying to do. *I love you like a brother. We should be kind to each other.*

The sky was clouding over, the wind was rising, the trees began to whisper and groan around him. Coming out of the woods, he saw Dragon's Keep like an isle of stillness in a billowing sea of agitated leaves. *This is the past,* he thought. *Dragon's Keep is the past; the sanctuary is the future. I want movement and light. I want something new. I want a life that has meaning.*

In the drawing-room, his mother sat at the desk by the window, writing a letter. When Merlin entered, sauntering slowly with his hands deep in his pockets, she looked up. If he had been twelve, he would have been kicking at the carpet in front of him. The way she looked at him, he was twelve.

"Where have you been?" she asked. "I thought you were only going to be out for a minute."

Merlin shrugged. "Miss Morgana needed help with her flowers."

He was not sure where the lie came from, or why. He could have just said he had talked to Miss Morgana. Everything felt unreal and oddly skewed, as if the room he was in had suddenly grown smaller and dimmer or he larger. He did not recognise it any more. It was becoming strange to him in front of his eyes, as if it already belonged in the past. The opportunities that Miss Morgana had just offered him, the possibilities she had opened up for him, made him feel like a stranger in his own home.

"Mr Pendragon is here," Hunith said.

Merlin started. "Arthur? When did he get here?"

"Half an hour ago, perhaps. I asked him to stay and wait for you."
It was too soon to see Arthur. Merlin's mind was filled with dragons; he still felt stunned. He wanted time alone to make his decision. "Where is he?"

"In the garden with Freya."

Just as Merlin stepped out through the French windows, the clouds broke up once more and the sun dipped the tops of the trees in gold. Merlin walked down through the garden, down the steps to the next terrace, so familiar – familiar and somehow already fading into the realm of memory, as if he had long since moved away.

It was right. This was the right thing to do.

Half-hidden behind the rhododendron, Merlin stopped and listened to the voices from the tennis lawn; listened to the shouts (Freya) and the laughter (Arthur). This, at least, was real. The people he loved were still real.

He stepped out from behind the shrubbery and stood by the white-painted table and chairs, watching the game on the lawn below. While he was in shadow, the tennis lawn was drenched in the late afternoon sun, a sun that made Arthur shade his eyes with his hand to see the feeble ball Freya sent his way. He returned it with ease and not too obviously gently, making Merlin's breath catch. Freya's face was radiant with adoration, and Merlin was stricken by Arthur's unfailing, ever-present kindness as much as by the light playing over his hair and the wind ruffling it. Warmth flooded him and he managed a smile as Arthur lifted his hand in greeting before returning another one of Freya's weak balls.

Merlin sat down on a chair, feeling the wrought-iron cool his skin through his clothes, watching until Freya lost the game despite Arthur's efforts.

"Oh, no!" she wailed in exaggerated despair and threw herself down on the grass.

"Don't be a bad loser," Merlin called to her, amused and a little moved by the fact that she had refrained from cheating. When Merlin and Freya played tennis, they always tried to out-cheat each other with magic. She responded by putting her tongue out, and Merlin added: "Hello, Arthur. Sorry I wasn't in when you arrived." He rose from the chair, shoving his hands in his pockets. "I need to speak to you both – separately."

Arthur stilled and stood there like a god (Apollo, Merlin thought nostalgically, nothing else would do), against the hazy gold and green of the woods and rolling hills behind him. His eyes were wary, his gaze fixed on Merlin. He looked like someone awaiting bad news.

"Can I speak to you first, Freya?"

Frowning, she got up off the grass and walked up to him, batting at the air with her racquet making swishing noises. "What is it?"

"Let's go inside," he said and touched her shoulder. "Come with me to the library."

"What's going on? You look very grave." The racquet hit the shrubbery and a bird flew up, chattering and upset.

"I am, but it's nothing bad. There's no need to frighten the birds. I just want to ask you something."

As they walked back towards the house he felt Arthur's eyes on them. It took an effort not to turn around.
In the library, Merlin pulled out the book his father had read to him, opened it to the illustration of the dragon in the cave and handed it to his sister.

"What…?"

"Can you do anything with this?"

Freya frowned, clearly thinking her brother had gone round the bend. "What do you mean, do?"

"I mean if you can…"

She heaved a sigh and looked at the black and white dragon on the page. At the few words from her mouth it stirred and stretched, shaking itself before leaping out of the book and into her palm, three-dimensional and in colour, a perfect, real, live, miniature dragon whose pin-head tiny, yellow eyes fixed Merlin with a contemptuous look. Speechless, Merlin watched as the dragon distended its nostrils and snorted two diminutive jets of fire, burning a smoking hole in the tablecloth.

"Careful with your fire," Freya told it affectionately. The dragon blinked up at her, making itself comfortable in her hand. She looked at Merlin. "Is that all?"

Merlin could not stop an incredulous laugh. "Yes," he said, eyeing his sister with astonishment. "That is all. For the moment. No, wait. It's not all. How long have you been able to do this?"

Freya shrugged, ordered the dragon back on the page and mended the hole in the tablecloth with a wave of her hand. "Since I was – seven, I think."

"How did you find out?"

"Like that." She pointed to the book. "There was a book that had pictures of dragons in it, and I just… felt something. I spoke to them and they began to move."

There was an uneasiness about her, something in her eyes when she said this, that made Merlin ask gently: "Were you scared?"

When she glanced up at him he could tell she was about to deny it, but changed her mind and nodded. "It was so strange. I could order them to do things. But they didn't actually come off the page until later."

Something clutched at Merlin's heart. It had been easier for him. He had sat on his father's lap when he had found out; Freya had been all alone. "Have you ever talked to anyone about it before? Has anyone seen you do it?"

When Freya just shook her head, he took a breath. "Sit. I'm going to tell you a story."

"But what about Arthur…? It's not very polite to keep your guest waiting, you know."

Merlin walked up to the window and saw his mother seating herself with Arthur at the cast-iron table, with Mary bringing them a tray. "Well, he won't starve, at least. Mother's giving him tea. We have time." When Freya looked up at him questioningly, he added softly: "It's a story about dragonlords."

***

"A dragon sanctuary?" Arthur gaped up at Merlin from where he was seated in the armchair Freya had occupied before. "I... I had no idea there were dragons still. Didn't you say, back in
Switzerland…?

"Yes, I thought they were extinct, too. That's what my father told me and I had no reason to doubt him."

There was an astonished silence, but suddenly Arthur laughed. "Well, at least we know now why those terrifying Gorlois ladies were staring at you all the time."

Merlin shuddered. "Yes. Freya says they stared at her, too."

"And me," Arthur said, a little dazed. "Why would they do that? Whatever I am, I'm definitely not a dragonlord. I don't have a shred of magic in me."

There was another silence while Merlin looked out at the garden, now in shadow; at the treetops where the gold was fading and the sky changing to a cooler blue for the evening. Arthur's eyes wandered around the room with its book-lined walls and heavy furniture, the thick rug that dampened all sounds, everywhere but at Merlin. And that was only fair. It was Merlin who needed to make a decision, Merlin who had to make the suggestions. *Your head and your heart.*

"I have another thing to tell you," he said. "Regarding Elena."

Her name startled Arthur into looking straight at Merlin. "Yes?" He sounded wary.

With a deep breath, Merlin told Arthur about his visit to The Pines after the incident by the lake, what Elena had said about Miss Nemeth and his own suggestion that they all get married. All the while he watched Arthur's face shift from defiance to astonishment to something that was a jumble of so many emotions that Merlin could not parse them.

"But I think I was wrong," Merlin finished slowly, "and that is not what we should do at all. I was wrong about that and so many other things besides, while you have been right from the beginning."

His heart was pounding, thundering in his ears, and he realised that despite everything he was afraid of rejection. Twice Arthur had asked him to move to Italy or France with him, and twice he had said no. There was nothing to guarantee that the offer was still open. There was also nothing for it but to ask, or he would never know.

If Miss Morgana had made him a proposal before, he would make Arthur one now. Perhaps Italy did not exactly welcome people of their kind, but neither would it turn them away or put them in prison for what they were and who they loved.

"So, what do you say?" he asked in a low voice.

Outside, Hunith's bright dahlias were dancing in the wind. Movement and stillness. Merlin was about to leave the past, the stillness of this house, and enter a new and unknown world of air and fire and beating wings, and he wanted Arthur with him when he took the step. He wanted Arthur with him always, whatever the circumstances, wherever they would be. How could he have thought even for a minute that his life would be worth living without Arthur in it?

"About what?" It came almost in a whisper, and it occurred to Merlin that Arthur was afraid of rejection, too – with even more reason, having been rejected so coldly before.

"About going with me to Italy. I realise it might not be your dream, living at a dragon sanctuary, but I believe this is the right choice. This is who I am. And while I raise dragons you will be able to pursue your dream, too. We would be in the Alps. You could immerse yourself in your engineering and I'm sure I would find the time to do some consulting, if you still wanted me to."
The look of confusion was gone from Arthur's face, leaving room for something that was – hope? Hope, yes, and wonder.

"So what you are telling me is…"

"I'm not telling you anything. I'm asking you. Will you come with me? Stay with me, live with me?"

Suddenly Merlin laughed and dropped to one knee. "This feels curiously like I'm proposing, so I might as well do it properly. Well, what do you say, Arthur? Will you accept me?"

Arthur stared at him as if he still did not quite understand. "Merlin…"

"Yes," Merlin said, "yes, I do mean it. At last I've found something that doesn't feel like a compromise or the lesser of two evils – or many evils. I love you. I love you very much and if there is a world without you, then I don't want to live in it. Say yes. Please tell me you'll say yes. We'll work out the details later."

Arthur's eyes were bluer than anything Merlin had ever seen, even the sky above the Alps. He leaned forward and kissed Merlin softly on the mouth, then did it again.

"All right," he said. "I suppose I can put up with you."
Epilogue - Above the Tremulous World

They stayed the night in Dover and boarded the ferry in the morning with the sun in their eyes, standing side by side on the deck. Arthur turned to look back at the white cliffs behind them but Merlin kept his gaze ahead, not wanting the past but the future. So this is happiness, he thought. Perhaps it was not so frightening after all. His magic thrived on it, flowing calm and strong within him, gathering in a glowing coil to be used. The channel was rippled silk and Merlin felt Arthur glance at him, but he stared straight ahead, not letting on. Arthur deserved a smooth passage.

***

The last part of the journey had to be made on foot. The path was stony, sometimes going so steeply uphill that they climbed more than they walked, sometimes flat and level with a wall of rock to one side and a craggy slope falling away on the other.

"Is there another road to the sanctuary?" Arthur asked, out of breath after an hour of difficult walking. "Or I don't understand how anyone could ever have built anything up here. How did they get the stuff up? And the Gorlois ladies, how in the world did they get there? They're there now, aren't they?"

"Magic?" Merlin suggested, wiping sweat from his forehead.

Arthur gave him a look. "Can't you use magic to get us up?"

"I don't know. Possibly. Would you like me to try to fly?" Merlin nodded down, indicating the uninviting rocks and boulders.

Muttering something inaudible, Arthur resumed walking. After another fifteen minutes' silent climb, they stopped and stared at the narrow passage before them.

"Well," said Arthur doubtfully, "I suppose we can squeeze through. Merlin, are you sure this is the right way?"

Merlin closed his eyes for a moment, consulting his inner map, listening to the call of his magic.

"Yes. This is the way."

"Not only a dragonlord," Arthur muttered, "but a human compass as well."

Merlin sighed and laughed, shrugging off his rucksack and digging out half a bar of chocolate, carefully folded in its wrap. Straightening up, he handed it to Arthur. "Perhaps you'd feel more charitable if you had some chocolate?"

With an apologetic grin, Arthur pushed his sweaty hair from his forehead and took the chocolate. "Thanks." He broke off half and handed it back to Merlin. "All right, then. Let's push on."

***

The dragon was smaller than Arthur had expected, even if he had been told it was not an adult creature. Dozing in the sun she sat on a rock, opening her eyes sleepily as they approached. The snout was beak-like and the ridged scales a silvery grey, reminiscent of oyster shells, but the most astonishing thing about her was the eyes. Arthur had imagined a dragon's eyes to be yellow with vertical pupils like those of a reptile, but the eyes of this creature were sapphire-blue and the pupil round, making them look disconcertingly human. The dragon's beauty was as strange, ancient and
awe-inspiring as that of the mountains around them.

Beside Arthur, Merlin had stopped dead in his tracks, staring at the dragon.

"Aithusa," he whispered, and she lifted her head, all traces of sleepiness gone as she fixed Merlin with her unblinking gaze.

For a moment the world slowed to a halt. Then Merlin seemed to shake himself out of a dream, walking up to the rock where the dragon lay and holding out his hand. Aithusa did not flinch, only looked up at Merlin's face as he slowly, gently placed a hand on her nose, cupping it.

Quietly, Miss Morgana came up to stand beside Arthur. Merlin was whispering now and a string of harsh, hissing sounds reached their ears. The whole world held its breath. Then Aithusa closed her eyes and pushed her nose deeper into Merlin's palm, nestling it there, and while they watched she opened her wings. Miss Morgana gasped and Arthur was sure he made some kind of sound, but Merlin was smiling – they could only see him in half-profile, but Arthur knew it from the way his cheek plumped. The dragon’s wings were a wondrous thing to behold – a seemingly fragile structure like the struts and silk of a flying machine, semi-transparent and iridescent in the sun. She held them there as if to let them admire her beauty, and when she slowly folded them again there was a deep, low sound from her, contented, almost a purr.

Merlin turned around to face them, still with his hand on Aithusa's nose, and it was Arthur's turn to
gasp. Instead of the crystal blue that Arthur knew so well, Merlin's eyes were ringed with gold, with fire – liquid, dancing, glowing; the way he had once described the feel of his magic. Now that magic was visible in his eyes for one glorious, triumphant moment.

Miss Morgana had a hand over her mouth, to stop it trembling or to stop herself exclaiming.

"This," she said in a voice not entirely steady, "is more than I had ever hoped for. That I would see the connection made between a dragonlord and his charge."

The fire in Merlin's eyes subsided and he smiled at her, once more the Merlin Arthur knew but still a stranger, a man with powers beyond Arthur's imagination. Human, magic, dragonlord – Arthur would always find him extraordinary.

"I never thought I would, either," Merlin said. "Thank you. Thank you for bringing me here." He bowed to Miss Morgana, turned a fraction and added another bow. "And you, Miss Morgause."

When Arthur turned around to see the ever silent Miss Morgause leaning on her cane behind them, he wondered whether she was going to reply to this, at least. She did not, but she did incline her head, and that was the most he had ever seen her respond to anyone.

"Can you command the dragon?" Miss Morgana asked Merlin.

Merlin looked at Aithusa, gently stroking her nose. "Yes," he replied slowly, "but I have no desire to. No commands, not yet – not unless I have to. I want her to get to know and trust me first. Then she will do whatever I want her to without me giving her commands. We have a strong connection. I know you see it."

Arthur half expected Miss Morgana to protest, but the old lady's face softened into a reluctant smile.

"I trust you, too, Mr Emrys," she said. "I trust you to do what is best for the dragons. And now I think it is time for us to leave."

Arthur turned to look at her, at Miss Morgause. However had these old ladies made their way up here, and how long would it take them to walk back? He asked in dismay: "But surely, if you leave now, you will not reach the village before sundown? Is there anything we can…?"

There was a cackle from Miss Morgana. "You must not underestimate the power of magic, Mr Pendragon. Our combined magic is more than enough to get us safely down to the village, and since we were the ones who placed most of the obstacles on the path in the first place, we will have no trouble removing them."

And with that, the Gorlois sisters took their leave.

***

"So now you are here," Arthur said to Merlin later as they sat side by side on a rock, taking in the view. The valley was in shadow but the tops of the mountains on the other side caught the last rays of the setting sun, the snow tinted a deep rose. In the village far below, lights began to come on one by one like a cluster of tiny stars. Merlin's eyes shone as he looked out over the valley, and Arthur could feel the excitement radiating from him in waves. Seized by a strange melancholy, as if this was the end of something rather than a beginning, Arthur continued in a low voice, "This is what you were meant to do. This is your calling. Now you are where you were meant to be. As for me, I have to say I feel a bit… superfluous. You will have no need for me here."

Merlin blinked, turning his head to meet Arthur's eyes.
"No need?" he said. "Arthur, if there is one thing I am sure of, it is that I need you more than anything." He leaned down and picked up some pebbles, throwing them down the slope one after the other. "I had never thought of a connection between love and magic before. I don't know if that is how it works generally, but it seems to work that way for me. When I'm with you, my magic grows stronger, as if it needs you."

Arthur looked down at his hands. Seeing Merlin with Aithusa this afternoon had been a humbling experience and he knew Merlin had found his place in the world, but Arthur needed to find his own, too. This was not what he wanted; this was not the reason he would wish for Merlin to keep him close.

"So you need me as a… generator?" he asked bleakly.

Merlin sent the last pebble down the slope with a flick of his wrist. "That is not what I meant, Arthur. The love between us does seem to reinforce my magic, but if it ever came to a point where I had to choose between you and magic – then there is no doubt in my mind what my choice would be. I would renounce my magic in an instant."

It took a second for the enormity of that declaration to sink in. "You would… do that?" Arthur said, his voice unsteady. "But magic is such an integral part of who you are. You really would renounce your magic for me?"

Merlin grinned at him. "Not a doubt. I can live without magic. Lots of people do, after all."

Arthur felt curiously light, as if he had just shrugged off a gigantic rucksack, and all of a sudden he was intensely aware of the beauty of the evening around them.

"Lots of people live without me as well," he pointed out.

Merlin laughed and leaned over to kiss him. "I don't know how they do it." Then he turned serious again, reaching down for another fistful of pebbles that he began to throw one after the other, as if it helped him focus his thoughts. "But to be honest, Arthur, I don't think this is what I was meant to do. Don't misunderstand me – this is all wonderfully exciting, and I can never thank Miss Morgana and Miss Morgause enough for bringing me here. It is an honour to be entrusted with this place. And meeting Aithusa this afternoon… Arthur, I'm glad you were here with me, because I don't think I could ever describe it properly to anyone. And the dragon eggs – I can't wait to see them hatch!" He stopped and seemed to search for words. "But in the end," he added quietly, "I am only a custodian."

Arthur frowned, not following. "A custodian? For the dragon sanctuary? You've lost me, Merlin. I don't understand. You are a dragonlord. I saw you back there with Aithusa, the way she took to you. The connection between you. It was wonderful to watch."

"Yes," Merlin agreed, "and of course I was meant for this as well."

"But?"

"But this is not mine." Merlin made a gesture towards the cabin, Aithusa, the cave where the eggs were kept. "I really am a custodian. The real successor, if you can call it that, is Freya."

This was one of the most extraordinary conversations Arthur had ever had. "Freya? Really?"

"Yes. You know that long talk I had with Miss Morgana back home, before they moved out of Albion Villa? That was one of the things we discussed, and I believe she is right. If pictures of dragons on a page are anything to go by, Freya's powers exceed mine by far. Without effort she makes them come off the page, as real as Aithusa. I could never do that. She is one with them,
Arthur, in a way that I don't quite – that I can't – " Merlin stopped, shaking his head slowly. "I wouldn't be surprised if Freya's magic in general turns out to be stronger than mine in the end, not only where dragons are concerned."

"Freya," said Arthur incredulously, looking out over the valley. Then he laughed. "Well, she really is something, your sister."

The smile on Merlin's face was soft and affectionate. "Isn't she?"

They sat in silence for a minute, watching the rose-colour fade from the mountain tops.

"Anyway," Merlin said, "even if part of my life will be dedicated to dragons and I will love every second of it, I think I was ultimately meant for other things." He paused and looked at Arthur as if searching for something in his face. "All the plans we had in Switzerland. Your Utopia, Arthur. Taking the first steps to integrate magic and technology, to make the magic and non-magic communities come together once more. Make magic work again and play a real part in society, make a difference in people's lives. I believe that is my true calling – mine and yours. That is what we are meant to do."

Merlin's eyes were radiant and Arthur looked at him in wonder. This was what Merlin had planned: a future together, where they would both have an important part to play.

"I love you," was all the response Arthur had.

He leaned over and pressed his nose against Merlin's temple, touching the chiseled cheekbone with a kiss, and Merlin turned his head to allow their lips to meet.

From behind them, beyond the cabin, a strange sound emerged – not a mewl and not a growl but something in between, making them both jump.

"Oh," Merlin said and laughed a little, "this is like being handed a baby and asked to take care of it." He put a hand on Arthur's shoulder as he got up from the rock. "I believe our Aithusa is feeling lonely, and we can't have that."

The tenderness swelling in Arthur's chest threatened to choke him. It was obvious he would have to share Merlin's love with a pack of dragons, but strangely enough it did not matter. There was enough to go around.

"You're going to spoil her rotten," he said, grinning, not sure whether it was possible to spoil a dragon. "Aren't you?"

"Of course I am. What did you think?" Halfway to the cabin Merlin added, shouting over his shoulder, "And so are you!"

Arthur sat on, smiling to himself as he watched the last rays of sun disappear and dusk fall over the mountains. With the light gone the evening turned chilly, and he rubbed his hands over his arms as he thought of this new life of theirs that was just beginning, strange and wonderful. Things would work themselves out in time, and as long as he could be with Merlin, he would be happy.

When the stars began to show in the sky above he got up from the rock, brushing dust from his trousers. With one last look over the valley where the village glittered like a diamond on display, he turned and walked back to the cabin where Merlin had already lit the lamps.
End Notes

1) The chapter titles are quotes from E.M. Forster's *A Room With a View*.

2) In Part Three, Merlin looks at Rodin's *Gates of Hell* at the art museum in Zürich. This work would not have been there in 1910 as Rodin worked on it up until his death in 1917, but I wanted Merlin to see it so I put it there ahead of time. :)

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