A Bird of Paradise

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A Bird of Paradise

by versaphile
Merlin is Arthur's lover, his manservant, his knight, the grain of sand that will make Camelot into a shining pearl. But the one thing he cannot be is a sorcerer. After Merlin confesses, Arthur is determined to find a way to remove Merlin's magic, to remove the corruption without killing him, and before it can destroy his soul. But magic can only be fought with magic. Without Merlin's powers, Camelot will be defenseless against the next magical attack. And that's not all Arthur has to worry about, because there are visitors to the court, alliances and enemies, and a princess he may have no choice but to marry. To set things right, Arthur will have to confront his father’s lies and embrace the magic he was raised to fear.

Gwen has kept her faith in secret even as she listened to Morgana's muttered nightmares and watched Merlin from afar. But when Morgana sees terrifying visions of Camelot’s destruction, the truth comes out for them both, bringing them together even as it tears them apart.

Through heartache and hard choices, all four of them must join forces to save Albion and its magic from the terrifying Sidhe and an equally terrifying Uther.

Notes

Trigger warning: There are references to past abuse between Uther and Arthur, and Arthur struggles with inherited abusive tendencies. Arthur's anti-magic prejudices initially lead to emotional and physical abuse, though Arthur believes he is helping Merlin and is trying not to hurt him. Unfortunately, until he genuinely accepts Merlin as a sorcerer, his good intentions lead down bad paths.

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Addendum: Many people have contacted me about when in the story Arthur stops being a dick. Keeping spoilers to a minimum, the hard stuff comes to a head in chapter 13, then things start to improve soon after. Merlin and Arthur's reconciliation is in chapters 35-40.
Merlin was a sorcerer. *Merlin was a sorcerer.*

Arthur dropped Merlin's limp body and stumbled back, mind whited out with horror and shock. He stared at the wild mess of his chambers, the papers fluttering to the floor, the wine a dark blotch across the pale stone, like spilled blood.

Merlin was a sorcerer. Merlin lay limp on the floor, unconscious. Arthur wanted to prod Merlin with his boot to make sure he wasn't going to leap up and speak in that guttural language again, with those glowing eyes. He wanted to wail and grab Merlin and hold him close and sob apologies. What had he done? He'd only been trying to stop the magic. To stop it from coming out of him. To stop him from corrupting himself further.

*Merlin was a sorcerer.*

All Arthur had been able to see were those golden eyes, the light in them turning Merlin's open, familiar features into something sinister and threatening. Making them into the face of a stranger, a monster, speaking words that he had only ever heard when his life was in immediate and extreme peril. And all that nonsense before that. Had Merlin... had Merlin been using him? Had it all been a ruse, a seduction to trick Arthur into removing the ban on magic when he became king? Is that what Merlin had wanted, all this time?

He felt sick. His heart felt sick.

He had never understood what Merlin wanted. Merlin had never made any kind of sense. But he was making sense now, and it was a loathsome, dreadful sort of sense. It was every warning his father had ever given him about sorcerers, that they would lie and seduce and entrap. That magic would make any man, however good, rot away from within, so you wouldn't know of their corruption until it was too late. Arthur had not wanted to believe any of that. It had all seemed overdramatic, feverish with paranoia. But here was the proof of it.

All this time, Arthur had held Merlin like a viper to his breast. Merlin had been filled with poison, and tonight he had struck out, trying to infect Arthur in turn. And what a victory it would have been, what a revenge to corrupt the Crown Prince of Camelot, the one kingdom that stood strong against all sorcery.

And it would all make sense, except that it was *Merlin.* Merlin, who at some points seemed to want nothing more than to die for him. Who had cried in his arms like a child. Whose every emotion shone from his eyes, without pretense or deceit. He couldn't even keep a secret, because the moment there was an idea in his head it would be written all over his face.

Except he had kept one secret. One, but even with that, Arthur had known there was something. He couldn't have missed it, when it so obviously made Merlin unhappy not to share it. But magic?

He had not guessed it because Merlin was an innocent. Merlin was all heart and determination and exactly zero sense or forethought. Merlin was nothing like the sorcerers that had threatened his father and then himself, that sought mindless vengeance again and again. Magic was evil, and Merlin was not. Merlin could not have magic. He could not be a sorcerer.

It suddenly came to him that he had said those words before. How blind he had been, for Merlin to actually stand in front of him and his father and the whole council and *announce* himself to be a
sorcerer, and all Arthur had thought at the time was that Merlin was being, as usual, a noble idiot, and that he needed to be saved from himself before something awful happened.

Something awful had happened.

There was a knock on the door, tentative, familiar, startling Arthur so badly that he reached for the sword that wasn't at his hip. "Arthur?" came Guinevere's voice, sounding concerned. "Merlin? Are you all right? I heard shouting. Is something wrong?"

The door was locked, thankfully. Arthur had locked it because he'd intended to have sex with Merlin to celebrate being home, to celebrate all of Merlin's secrets being out in the open. But Merlin wasn't in his bed, smiling and blushing and naked. Because Arthur had been wrong about those secrets.

"Everything's fine," Arthur said, his voice cracking.

There was a pause. "Sorry, I know sometimes you two can be, um. Right. Sorry to, um, interrupt. Um. Goodnight." Her light footsteps faded away down the hall.

Arthur breathed out with a shudder. He had to think. He had to get some kind of control over this situation, before it spun even further into madness.

He had fought sorcerers many times. He knew what magic was capable of, how destructive it could be. The sorcerers that his father arrested barely put up a fight, as their crimes rarely amounted to more than minor enchantments. But all use of magic, even the smallest of spells, was given the same punishment: death by execution, by fire or by beheading. Hanging was not enough. The body had to be violated in order to release the magic. Even a dead sorcerer was a danger until it was beheaded or burned.

Then there were the other sorcerers. The ones who weren't arrested because they were too powerful. The ones that were killed outright, without even the pretense of a trial, because they were so obviously guilty. Because they were an active threat to the kingdom, and threats had to be eliminated. Like Cedric. Like Palaemon.

What Merlin had done was far more than petty enchantments. He had manipulated fire. He had summoned some kind of wind. He had moved things without even speaking. With such crimes, Merlin had earned immediate execution. Arthur should not have strangled him, but snapped his neck and then chopped off his head. But even the thought of doing that to Merlin made him want to retch.

If he called the guards, Merlin would be dead. By morning at the very latest, because to have such sorcery at the heart of Camelot was an atrocity that his father would not tolerate.

No, what he had to do was get control over Merlin. He didn't know how bad the corruption was, how much of Merlin's soul was left to save. But there had to be something. There had to be a chance. Despite the obvious power he had wielded, despite his panicked struggles to free himself, Merlin had never so much as scratched him. That had to be important, a sign that the corruption had not yet consumed him. That enough of Merlin was left that there was a chance that Arthur could still save him. If only he'd acted sooner, instead of blindly trusting that Gaius had been teaching Merlin how to destroy magic safely.

Gaius. Arthur was going to have to deal with him, once he'd dealt with Merlin.

Arthur scooped Merlin up from the floor and carried him into the side room. He blinked as he saw that his sword, his apparently enchanted sword, was sticking out of the far wall, the end of its blade embedded into the stone. He dismissed it for now and lay Merlin down, struggling against an
An upswell of grief that threatened to swamp him.

Merlin looked the same as he always did. There was no malevolence in his soft features, no external sign that he was anything but himself. Arthur pulled back one eyelid and Merlin's unseeing eye was its normal blue, with no trace of gold. But he would wake up soon, and when he did, his eyes might change again.

If Merlin was too far gone, then Arthur would have to kill him. He would rather be the one to do it than let Merlin be arrested and burned. At least that way he could make it clean and quick, and whatever was left of Merlin would not suffer. But if Merlin could hold back the corruption long enough to give Arthur time to find a cure, then there was still hope.

The only way to know would be to let Merlin wake up, and Arthur could not let him wake up without taking precautions. Merlin had to be contained.

Short of time, Arthur would have to use what was at hand. He grabbed one of Merlin's ever-present kerchiefs and gagged him with it, trying not to think of how only a week ago he had performed this same action. He shied away from using his belt again, and instead grabbed the ropes from the curtains. He bound Merlin's wrists, and then his ankles and his knees, and then after further consideration he tied Merlin to the bed. He made the ropes tight, the knots solid. If Merlin could somehow still use his magic to free himself despite the gag, at least this would slow him down.

Finally, Arthur went to get his sword. It took a few hard pulls to yank it free, but then he had it. The blade was not even scratched despite being embedded in the stone. Clearly Merlin had been telling the truth about it being enchanted. But Merlin had also given him the very weapon that he needed most right now: a sword that could kill a powerful sorcerer. He had killed Palaemon with it, and if need be he would use it again. Later, he would have Guinevere fire up her forge and he would burn the magic out of it, as he had the Deorham armor.

Arthur pulled a chair over to the bed and sat down, and lay the blade of his sword across Merlin's neck, and waited.

He had been so pleased when he'd found Palaemon's ring in the pocket of Merlin's trousers, discarded as usual on the floor. It had been the one bit of proof he'd needed to finally coax Merlin into telling him the truth. It had been like pulling teeth to get Merlin to talk about what had upset him in the castle, and Arthur had been certain that the ring would provide just the short, sharp shock that Merlin needed to open up and get it all out of his system.

It was all out, now. But Arthur still had to figure out how much of that crazed mess of words was real and how much was the corruption talking.

It was not long before Merlin stirred. He coughed weakly through the gag, gave a reedy whimper, and then opened his eyes wide with horror. Though he'd barely had time to struggle, he visibly stilled as he felt the press of the blade across his neck. In the candlelight, the polished blade glinted brightly, steel and gold stark against the freshly blossoming bruises. Merlin's fingers twitched, curled into fists. Arthur waited, and when Merlin did nothing, when he did not make himself a threat, Arthur allowed himself some fraction of relief.

"Merlin," Arthur said, looking into Merlin's wide, frightened eyes. "I'm going to remove the gag so we can talk. But if you so much as think about using a spell, I will have to kill you. Do you understand?"

Merlin swallowed, the bob of his throat a slight pressure against the blade. He gave a short, shallow nod.
This was it. If Merlin was corrupted beyond all hope, he would not leave his bed alive. If not... if not, then Arthur would do whatever it took to find a cure. He had never let magic defeat him, and it would not defeat him now. If there was even the slimmest chance of victory, he would fight for it. He had defied his father and braved sorcery for Merlin before. He had no hesitation in doing it again.

Arthur leaned forward and pulled the knot open with one hand, keeping the blade firmly in place. It was the sharpest sword Arthur had ever seen, and one push by either of them would sink the blade into Merlin's throat. Merlin didn't move as the gag was pulled free. He didn't say any spells, but he didn't say anything else, either.

"Can you still speak?" Arthur asked.

"Yes," Merlin said, with barely a whisper. His voice was pained, and injured from the strangling, but there was no way to know if the anguish in his eyes was genuine or if it was a ploy.

And that was the problem. Because Arthur had no way to know what was Merlin and what was the magic. It would be difficult to separate the two without having some way of being certain that Merlin was in there at all. If he had ever been there. But Arthur couldn't believe that the Merlin he knew was just a shell, a false front behind which some monster schemed to manipulate him. Arthur knew when people were lying. He dealt with smooth-tongued liars all the time in court.

Perhaps he could arrange to have Hunith come to Camelot. If anyone would know what Merlin was like before he had been corrupted by Gaius, it was his mother. Or would she? Merlin's friend Will had been a sorcerer. Had Will corrupted Merlin when he was young? Had it started that far back?

"Arthur?" Merlin rasped, warily.

"The things I thought were your secret," Arthur began, thoughtful. "Were they true? Have you been destroying magic to protect Camelot? To save my life?"

Merlin hesitated, then said, "Yes."

"It's been you and Gaius together? He's been teaching you?"

Another hesitation. "Yes," Merlin said, but sounded less certain this time.

"Explain."

"I came to Camelot for help. To control my magic. Gaius was supposed to teach me. But he was... he lied to me. He used me. Him and... the dragon."

Arthur leaned closer, curious. "There's only one dragon left. My father kept him as an example. Are you actually telling me that you've been conspiring against me with the Great Dragon?"

"No!" Merlin said, clearly upset by the suggestion. "He, um, called to me, when I first arrived. He said that it was my destiny to protect you. I didn't believe him, but... then Gaius brought me to the feast, and... I saved your life. And then your father gave me to you, and... I don't know. I think... I think maybe he knew?"

Arthur blinked at him, trying to follow Merlin's leap of logic. "You think my father, Gaius, and a dragon all conspired to set you up as what, my magical bodyguard?"

Merlin looked entirely confused about the matter himself. "Maybe? All I know is that they've been lying to me about the prophecy, and--"
"Prophecy?" Arthur interrupted. He moved the blade away from Merlin's neck, because he didn't need Merlin accidentally slicing himself open. Merlin didn't seem to be trying anything, unless his baffling nonsense was supposed to be some kind of distraction tactic. But Arthur had been watching Merlin's eyes since they had opened, and there was no sign of gold.

"Yes," Merlin said, sounding slightly more certain now. "The dragon told me some of it, but I didn't know if any of what he said was true until we got to Gedref. It was written on the wall in the temple, in that room I slept in."

Arthur frowned. When they'd been hiding in wait for the army to arrive, Merlin had been going on about the cavern being some kind of old temple, about it having magic, but nothing had seemed amiss. It had been a temple, certainly, but it was long abandoned. He'd considered it safe enough when weighed against the risk of trying to find somewhere else to hide from the Deorham's patrols. Apparently he had been wrong, if some lingering magic there had worsened Merlin's condition.

"Tell it to me."

"Well, there's the first part is about fire, which I think is the Great Purge, but then it says, 'The time of magic will return. The Emrys and the once and future king will rise. And all of Albion will bow to them.' And that's us."

"What's us?"

"I'm the Emrys and you're the, um, the once and future king?" Merlin scrunched up his face. "I don't actually know what either of those things mean, so it's not exactly helpful. The dragon said you were the once and future king when I first met him, and then the Druid boy, he's the one who called me Emrys."

"The Druid boy who didn't talk?" Arthur said, skeptically.

"He did talk," Merlin protested, seeming to forget for the moment that he was tied up and at risk of execution. "In my head. That's how I met him. He called to me."

"Like the dragon called to you?"

"Yes," Merlin said, eager now that he thought Arthur understood. Arthur did not. "I haven't learned how to do that on my own yet. I think it might be a Druid thing."

"A Druid thing."

"A dragon and Druid thing?" Merlin shook his head. "Anyway, that's not the point. The point is, we have a destiny together. To bring back magic and unite Albion. To bring about a new golden age."

He looked so painfully hopeful as he said it, as if he was practically begging Arthur to believe him.

"Merlin," Arthur sighed. A picture was starting to form in his head, and as relieved as he was about it, it wasn't pretty. "Here's what I think happened. Whatever magic you already had in you when you came to Camelot, it made you vulnerable. You've admitted that the dragon and Gaius have been lying to you, manipulating you. I don't know what my father has to do with any of this, but he wouldn't harbor a sorcerer, and he certainly wouldn't give you to me to protect me."

"But I have protected you!" Merlin protested. "I've saved your life so many times I've lost count!"

"All right," Arthur said, holding up a hand. "Leaving that aside. Has anyone besides this Druid boy ever said you were the Emrys? Has anyone other than the dragon said I was this once and future king?"
"Well, no, but--"

Arthur silenced him again. "So you have no confirmation about any of this. No evidence."

Merlin stared at him. "But it was on the wall."

"Let's say, for the sake of argument, that there is a prophecy. What proof do you have that the dragon and Gaius haven't simply been using it to manipulate you? What if it was never about us in the first place?"

Merlin stared at him as if he'd never even considered the idea, which wasn't surprising. Merlin was far too trusting. No wonder it had been so easy for the dragon and Gaius to fool him into this subterfuge. To take advantage of him and try to use him to undermine the laws against magic. Obviously his father would never change the law, but they clearly thought change was possible during Arthur's reign. He almost admired their cunning, because he had effectively done the same thing himself in using Merlin to undermine the First Code. But unlike them, he wasn't willing to destroy Merlin for his own ends. Merlin had insisted on being trained, and Arthur had eventually recognized Merlin's determination for the asset that it was. Whatever asset Gaius had made of Merlin's magic, it was not worth the cost of his soul.

"It has to be," Merlin said, with such blind faith. "It's what my magic is for. It's what I'm for."

"That's not what you told me," Arthur reminded him. "Before I knighted you, you said you were nothing. It was the magic that made you feel that way. That's the emptiness you felt. But as my knight, you proved the magic wrong."

Merlin was already shaking his head. "No, I said that because I was denying my magic. I didn't want to have it, because I had to lie to you about it. My magic is all I have."

There was a pitiful look in his eyes as he said it, and Arthur had seen it before. That was the pain that Merlin had been trying in vain to hide from him, over and over. The pain of his magic. He had probably been suffering this way for a long time. It was up to Arthur to show him that he was worth fighting for, no matter what the magic made him believe.

"Merlin, you have so much more than that," Arthur said, earnestly. "Look at everything we accomplished together in Gedref."

"But I did that with my magic," Merlin protested.

Arthur plowed on, sensing that he'd found the crux of it. "You said you were denying your magic. Did you use it when I trained you?"

Merlin shook his head. "I couldn't let you find out. So I stopped."

The news that Merlin had already proved able to resist his magic was a tremendous relief. Arthur knew that Merlin was something special, but this truly was the mark of it, that he could use that determination to fight against his corruption. That combined with his natural innocence had proved a powerful defense. "But you started again?"

"After Geraint died," Merlin said, sadly. "I had to use it. If I was just a knight, I couldn't give you what you needed. I couldn't protect you."

"Tell me everything you used it for in Gedref."

Merlin furrowed his brow in thought. "I tried to open the siege gate, and then when the patrol found
me, I fought them with magic. Then I was captured, but I used magic to knock out the men who brought me inside. After that... I made the chandelier fall so I could earn Idris's trust, so I could get to his papers for you. And then I unlocked a bunch of things and tripped some guards so I could escape with the papers and Palaemon's globe. That was it for a while, until I went in with the knights. I cooled the boiling water so it wouldn't hurt us, and then I unlocked the doors and cells to free the prisoners, and then I opened the gates!" He finished the list with a proud smile. "Arthur, I know all the magic you've ever seen has been used against you, but that's just because of the Purge. But I've been using my magic to protect you from the beginning, not just in Gedref. My magic is meant for you. It's my destiny."

"Meant for me?" Arthur asked, not sure if he was more worried or impressed by Merlin's long list. He had known some of it, of course, because Merlin had told it to him, excluding the magical parts. But he wondered if he would have been able to free Gedref before the harvest if Merlin had not done what he did. He had known that Merlin had practically handed him much of his victory by destroying Palaemon's enchantments, but this put it all into a new and uncomfortable light.

Magic could not be defeated without magic, Merlin had said. Arthur had known for months that Merlin and Gaius had been destroying magic, but he had not known that they had been using Merlin's magic to do it. Could his father truly not know all this? It was hard to believe. Perhaps there was some arrangement after all. One between his father and Gaius, to harness young, powerful sorcerers and use them to defend the kingdom in secret. Arthur had wondered about Lord Wichard's physician when he heard that he had been an apprentice to Gaius, just as Merlin had been.

The physician had seemed fine, but then so had Merlin, until tonight. Perhaps Gaius did know of a way to preserve his apprentices from corruption, and Merlin was being protected by it. It would be easy for the old man to slip it into one of his potions. It might even be in the relaxant, as Merlin had been taking it regularly during training, and then again since he had returned from his adventure in the castle. But then why not use it to help others? Why not give it to people like Linette, who had acted with good intentions? Surely if it could protect someone with as much magic in him as Merlin, a petty sorcerer like Linette could have been helped rather than executed. But his father was rarely rational when it came to magic. At times he would prefer to burn down an entire village if it destroyed even a single enchantment. That was not how Arthur intended to rule, when his time came. Camelot's worth was in its people, and saving them was better done through other methods than punishment.

"Yes," Merlin said, earnestly. "Because you're my King. That means you're meant to have it, so we can unite Albion."

Arthur frowned. They were back to that prophecy again. It was evident that Merlin had based much of his self-worth on the idea that he was this Emrys, despite admitting that he didn't even know what the name signified. But Merlin had been equally dedicated to being his knight. It was clear that what Merlin truly needed was a sense of purpose, of belonging. Merlin needed to serve him, in one way or another, out of love or some deeper urge. Arthur simply had to make him see that there were healthy ways of service, and there were unhealthy ways. It was no wonder that Merlin had been so obsessed with dying when he believed that he needed that corruption inside of him in order to be useful.

"Merlin, as grateful as I am for all that you've done on my behalf, I need you to stop. You have to deny your magic again, as you did for me during your training."

"I can't," Merlin protested. "What if Camelot's in danger? I have to use my magic more, I have to get better, stronger. I have to be as ready to use it as I am a sword."

"Is it?" Arthur asked, concerned. They had only just dealt with one threat. Could there be another
coming so soon?

"I'm not sure," Merlin said, glancing away. He always did that when he knew something he didn't want to tell. Arthur had always considered it to be part of Merlin's odd charm, but some of that charm had worn off now that he knew the kinds of secrets that glance might be hiding.

"Does Gaius know something?" Arthur pressed.

"It's nothing to do with Gaius," Merlin said, and that was the truth at least. "I want to tell you, Arthur, I swear. But I can't until... until I get permission. It's not my secret to tell." He gave Arthur a painfully earnest look.

Arthur gave him a disapproving one back. "How many other secrets are you keeping that aren't yours?"

Merlin glanced away.

"All right," Arthur said, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I won't try to force them out of you, as long as you can honestly tell me that whoever it is means Camelot no harm, and that you will seek permission as soon as possible and then tell them to me immediately."

"I will," Merlin said, and he had that determined look about him that meant that Arthur would likely soon be served a whole feast of secrets. He wasn't sure if he was glad about that.

Merlin shifted against the tight bonds of the ropes. "Will you untie me now?" he asked, hopeful. "I'm sorry I scared you before. I sort of panicked."

"No," Arthur said, stern despite his regret.

Merlin looked puzzled. "What do you mean, no?"

"Merlin, I realize you sometimes have trouble with subtle details, but I have arrested you. Because what you have done is a crime."

Merlin stared, uncomprehending.

"If you refuse to stop using your magic and I let you go, I will be responsible for any further crimes you commit," Arthur explained. "Crimes which are classed as treason. The punishment of which is execution."

"Your father isn't going to execute you for treason," Merlin said, actually amused by this.

"It's not my father that I'm worried about!" Arthur said, growing frustrated. "It's you! And I am the Crown Prince. After everything you've learned, do you still have no idea what that means? What kind of damage it would do if I was seen to be publicly defying my father?"

"But we just did that," Merlin said. "With the First Code. And it was fine."

Arthur rubbed at his temple, feeling a headache coming on. "What we did was a tremendous risk, and it only worked because of my careful planning and your newfound ability to actually follow my orders."

"And my magic," Merlin insisted.

"Yes," Arthur admitted, his teeth gritted. "And I am extremely unhappy about that fact, because the entire point of the exercise was to use a common man, and it turns out that my carefully chosen
common man is a sorcerer."

"Oh."

"Yes, oh," Arthur said, trying his best not to lose his temper. He had done enough damage to Merlin for one night. "If you are caught, not only will you be executed, not only will it cause a massive crisis of leadership, but everything we did in Gedref will be undone. So yes, Merlin, I need you to stop using your magic, right now, and I need you to promise me that you will never use it again."

Merlin was crestfallen. "But I tried that and it didn't work. Arthur, I don't just have magic, I am magic."

"And who told you that, then?"

Merlin bit his lip. "They weren't lying about everything. And if I can't use my magic, I can't protect you. I can't do anything."

"You can be my knight," Arthur insisted. "I know much of what you did in Gedref required magic, but not everything. I saw you fight as a knight, and nothing in that list you rattled off had anything to do with that. There are plenty of ways to open doors that don't require the corruption of your soul. I need you alive so you can be with me, so you can be my advisor, my grain of sand. I need you to stop using your magic so I don't have to watch you die." The last came out with a waver of emotion, despite Arthur's best attempts to stay calm.

But it was the last that finally seemed to get through to Merlin. "You'd let me burn?" he asked, quietly.

"If my father found out, I would have no choice," Arthur admitted, hating the truth of it.

"Is it because I have magic?" Merlin asked, his own voice wavering now. "Because you can't love a sorcerer?"

"I love you, Merlin," Arthur said, though the admission was hard to make, now that he knew. "But you cannot have magic. I need you to accept that. I'm going to do everything I can to find a way to get it out of you, but if you refuse to cooperate, if your loyalty lies with magic and not me, then I'll have no choice."

Arthur returned the sword to rest against Merlin's neck, and watched as Merlin struggled with his ultimatum. After a wait, he seemed no closer to a decision, and Arthur sighed.

"Do I have to decide now?" Merlin asked, looking devastated. "What if it's not possible? What if I really am magic? What if taking it away will kill me? What about Camelot?"

"Camelot will be fine," Arthur assured him. "Perhaps some threats might not be solved as easily as they would be with your help, but they will be solved. As for the rest, that will require investigation. Until I can find something that will remove your magic, you can take the time to make your decision."

"Between my magic and my life," Merlin said, bitterly.

"Between a future at my side and the destruction of Camelot," Arthur corrected. "But as I won't see Camelot destroyed, then yes. You pledged your life to me, Merlin. I promise you that I won't let you burn. But I can only keep that promise if we make the decision together, and soon."

Arthur knew that the choice was a cruel one, far crueler than it had been to ask Merlin to give up his
victories and his armor. But Merlin would understand once he was free of the influence of the corruption. Once he saw that he would still have a place and a purpose without his magic. Arthur hoped he would make the right choice, because the grief inside him still threatened to swallow him up, and if he had to execute Merlin, he wasn't certain he would survive the task himself. Perhaps his father had been right about that, too. To love was to court destruction, and to lose Merlin now, to be responsible for his death, would surely break him, as it nearly had in Gedref.

"Do I have to stay tied up until then?" Merlin asked, and Arthur could see him trying to be brave, pushing back his fear.

"If you swear to me that you will not use any magic, that you'll do as I say and trust me as you have before, I'll untie you. I know that you have the power to free yourself, and I appreciate the fact that you haven't. If you had acted against me at any point tonight, it would have... forced the issue."

Merlin took this knowledge in. "I swear," he said at last, quiet but genuine.

Arthur could not suppress his shudder of relief. There was a chance, a real chance, that Merlin could be saved. It wasn't too late, not yet. There would be no time to waste, because it was clear that the magic had a deep hold on Merlin despite his obedience. It would be a war for Merlin's soul, between Arthur's will and the strength of the corruption. But Arthur had not lost a war yet.

He put his sword aside and untied Merlin slowly, still cautious in case Merlin's cooperation was a ruse after all. But Merlin's eyes remained blue, and he was pliant and subdued. Merlin loved him and would obey his King. In return, Arthur would take care of him, and ensure that if he suffered, it would be for a greater purpose.

Arthur rubbed at the rope marks on Merlin's wrists and ankles as he freed them, and brushed a gentle hand through Merlin's riled hair. He could see that Merlin was trying hard not to cry, and Merlin did not reach out for him as normally would. Arthur regretted that he had hurt Merlin tonight, that he might have to hurt Merlin again, but as with Merlin's suffering as his knight, he would not regret the purpose of that pain.

He saw Merlin looking towards the door, and knew this last thing would be the hardest.

"Merlin, until I know I can stop your magic, I have to keep you here," Arthur told him.

"I'm your prisoner," Merlin said, realization dulling his voice.

"For now," Arthur said, trying to soften the blow. "I'm going to do everything I can to find something we can try, maybe even as soon as tomorrow. My father has vaults full of enchanted objects. I believe there might be something there that can help us. Try and think of it as a day off." He mustered a smile, and Merlin tried to smile back, but his chin was already quivering.

"Do you need anything before you go to bed?" Arthur asked, the need to escape becoming overwhelming. He collected up the ropes and his sword. "I'll bring in breakfast tomorrow."

Merlin shook his head. Arthur could tell that if Merlin spoke, he would fall apart, and felt the same. His heart was tight with pain that the one thing he couldn't bear to do was hold Merlin close. It was what they both needed, but neither of them could stand it. Not tonight.

Tomorrow. Arthur would fix everything tomorrow, and then he would be able to let Merlin out again. Everything could go back to normal. There had to be something in those vaults, even if its contents were largely uncataloged and covered in dust and cobwebs.

Magic could not be defeated without magic. If it was true, then that was what Arthur would do. He
would use the enchantments of the Old Religion against the magic that was within Merlin. He would defeat magic with magic. Whatever it took.

He left Merlin's room and closed the door behind him, retrieved his keys and locked it. He rested his forehead against the wood and listened to Merlin's quiet, tight sobbing, his own grief slicing into his heart like shards of steel.
Prisoner

In the past, when Arthur had come home from war, it always took weeks to stop bolting up at first light, heart pounding in his chest as he scanned his surroundings for whatever slight noise disturbed his shallow rest. But it was not habit that woke him now, not leftover strain from weeks of travel and battle that brought him fully alert in an instant.

In the moment, he couldn't tell what was stronger: his fear for Merlin or his fear of him. Of the sorcerer locked in his side room. Imprisoned, when by rights he should be down in the dungeons, awaiting the judgment of the King. When he should be ashes in the courtyard. When Merlin should be lying here beside him, the corners of his lips tugging into a smile as he burrows against the soft pillows after a week of hard ground, his dark lashes fluttering as his eyes open to a clear and unguarded blue.

Arthur didn't linger. He couldn't. But leaving the bed didn't help, because everything in his room was full of Merlin. Ghosts of him sat at his desk, at his table, in his chairs. There was the hanging on the wall that Merlin always knocked down when he tried to dust it. Arthur was still dressed from last night, because Merlin was the one who undressed him. Merlin was all over his clothes, in the shine of his boots, in the papers that his magic had sent into disarray.

Arthur wanted to be rid of it all, to take his sword and chop everything in the room to bits and leave the mess for someone else to clean up. To walk away from the ruins of his life, from what was left of Merlin. If there was anything at all.

He had not wanted to believe that last night. He had clung hard to denial, to the hope that Merlin could be saved. But now in the stark light of day, with his head clear of shock and panic, he had to face the truth. The Merlin he had known and loved was gone. He might never have been there at all. The thing in the side room was just a sorcerer, not even a person anymore. Just magic in the shape of the man it had consumed. Lying with a stolen tongue, crying tears from stolen eyes. The fact that it had not attacked last night meant nothing. It was more manipulation, more trickery. It was the corruption pleading for survival so that it could cause even more damage.

He picked up his sword, feeling distant from himself. He either ended this now or he called the guards and let his father do the dirty work. But that was exactly what he had done for too long already. Yesterday, after he had told his father about Palaemon, when he had still believed that he would rule as King with Merlin by his side, he had felt that he was ready. If Merlin was not afraid of magic, if Merlin could destroy enchantments and sorcerers without hesitation, then there was no excuse for his own doubts. It was his responsibility to destroy sorcery before Camelot was overtaken by it. It was his duty as Prince and it would be his duty as King, and he would no longer shy away from that knowledge. Not even now.

It would be best to do it quickly, while the thing was still asleep or at least feigning it. Before it opened its eyes and showed gold or false blue, and Arthur wasn't sure which would be worse. He unlocked the door and opened it, braced himself and walked inside. He would make it quick and it would be done.

But the thing, the sorcerer... but Merlin was awake. He was sitting at the window, and when he turned towards Arthur, the bruises under his eyes were almost as bad as the ones across his throat. His sad, weary gaze fixed on the sword, and then up to meet Arthur's.

"You don't need that. I'm not going to run," Merlin said, voice strained from damage and deeper pain. "This is all my fault." He mustered a sad smile which only lasted a moment before it fell. "I
have to be here so I can fix it."

"Fix it?" Arthur asked, warily. He didn't like the sound of that.

Merlin turned away, as if it hurt too much to even look at him. Arthur wanted to reach for him, to make him turn back and make him smile for real. But the Merlin he wanted was dead and gone, corrupted and destroyed as Arthur had stupidly bided his time. This Merlin was an apparition, an illusion. It was a ghost, with no substance that could be gripped.

"I waited too long," Merlin said, in eerie echo of Arthur's own thoughts. "I should have told you before. In Ealdor, maybe."

Ealdor. Arthur recalled the shock he had felt when he had seen the whirlwind, the dread when he had realized that he had walked unprotected into a kingdom where magic was legal, despite his father's best attempts to force Cenred to ban it as part of the peace treaty. Many kingdoms had succumbed to Camelot's terms, their obedience won through threats and bribery as much as through the wars that had been fought after the Purge. Those bans were not enforced with his father's zeal, but the fact of them was sufficient. Before them, many kingdoms had kept court sorcerers, had legitimized the Old Religion. Now sorcery was forced to the margins, lessened even in the kingdoms where it was still legal. Those that clung stubbornly on, like the Druids, would be eliminated in time.

Arthur had often objected to such actions in private, disturbed that once again his father had gone to extremes in his campaign against sorcery. He had told that to Merlin. He had told a lot of things to Merlin. His grip tightened on his sword as he realized what power Merlin held over him now, the strength of whispered secrets even greater than magic. Was it his own loneliness that had blinded him to the truth?

"So you could escape?" Arthur asked, unable to keep the betrayal from his voice. "Or because I was vulnerable?" A paranoid thought flashed through him, that the whole matter of the bandits had been a sham to lure him out, so Merlin and Will could-- but no, that was too much to believe. He could not believe that the whole village would have conspired, would have faked their suffering, killed their own. Even if his father would believe it. His father would believe anything if he liked the sound of it.

Merlin turned back to him, and he had no right to look as upset as he did. "How can you still think I would hurt you?"

"Then why Ealdor?" Arthur said, unable to hold himself back. Unable to resist the urge to engage with Merlin the way he always had.

"Will wanted me to tell you," Merlin said, with the sadness that he always had when he spoke of Will. "If I hadn't been such a coward, I could have stopped the bandits myself. Everyone would have been safe."

"Because you're more powerful than Will? He couldn't do it on his own?"

"Will isn't a sorcerer," Merlin said, shaking his head with something like amusement. "He took the blame to protect me."

"Then the whirlwind?"

Merlin raised his hand and wiggled his fingers, and Arthur tensed, ready to defend himself. But Merlin's eyes remained blue.

It was still hard to believe, despite everything he had seen, despite spending the night reconsidering the past year and a half of his life. All this time, Merlin had been using magic right under his nose.
When he had believed that Merlin was using some secret but mundane methods to destroy magic, he had been proud of Merlin's courage, had seen it as just as much a sign of his determination as his insistence on protecting Arthur with his life. But now it was all tainted, all suspect. At best, Merlin was a puppet, manipulated by some combination of malign forces. At best, the magic could be taken out, and there would still be something of him left. At worst...

Wait a moment. "If Will doesn't have magic, then how do you have it?" Arthur asked, confused.

Merlin blinked at him, equally confused. "I told you. I've always been magic. I was born with it."

"From your mother?" Arthur asked, thinking of Linette and her unborn child.

"Mum doesn't have anything either," Merlin said. "And I don't know anything about my father. My magic might have come from him, but if he was so powerful, why did he have to leave? Why didn't he bring us with him?"

Arthur began to feel as he had last night, that this had to be Merlin speaking and not the magic. That for whatever reason, the use of sorcery had not destroyed him. Was it because he had been born with magic? Had that made him immune to the madness it caused in others? Arthur felt his previous conviction slip away from him again, and in its place was the return of his revulsion and horror at himself, at his intention to kill the man he loved. Was Merlin having some kind of effect on him? Influencing him without actively enchanting him?

It was worse than he'd thought. He already struggled to differentiate Merlin from his magic. But now he realized that he couldn't even tell if his own thoughts were being influenced. Until he could get rid of Merlin's magic, there would be no way to be certain of anything.

"I have to get ready for court. Will I be able to trust you to stay here and not to unlock the door?"

Merlin rolled his eyes. "Why even bother to lock it, if you know I can open it whenever I want?"

It was an annoyingly good question. "You swore to me that you wouldn't use it," Arthur reminded him.

"If you trust me that far, then let me come with you," Merlin said, brightening up for the first time since his confession. "Please? I was looking forward to the ceremony."

"I'm not bringing a prisoner to court," Arthur said, sternly enough to make Merlin look disappointed again.

"People will wonder where I am," Merlin said, stubbornly. "The knights and the servants. Gwen and Morgana. Even your father. They'll be expecting me to be by your side."

There was one person that Merlin had obviously left off that list. "I take it that Gaius will not be surprised by your absence?"

Merlin's mouth twisted up. "He'll just take it as confirmation that he was right. He wasn't. Nothing changes the fact that he's been lying to me, just like the dragon. If I hadn't lied to you, you'd know that you can trust me. That you don't have to be afraid, no matter what your father told you."


Merlin got up from his chair, but before Arthur could brace himself to defend, Merlin had dropped to his knees before him, as he had more than once before.
"My fealty is yours," Merlin said, that determination back in his eyes, unbowed despite everything. "It can't be un-sworn. That's what you said. I don't care if everything they told me was lies, I don't care if they used me or if the prophecy is real or not. I'm your servant and your knight, and I'm your sorcerer. I was that before I was anything else, before I even knew you could be more than a bullying prat. None of that has changed and it never will."

And there it was. That was Merlin summed up: boundless faithfulness and determination wrapped up in a stubborn innocence, with just enough insolence to keep things interesting. And if Merlin made no sense before, he made even less now. It was odd enough for a servant to show such traits, but they were unheard of in a sorcerer.

"Magic is evil," Arthur reminded him. "It corrupts the soul and it threatens the kingdom, and you're telling me that you want to serve me as a sorcerer?"

"Yes," Merlin said, bravely. "That's what I did wrong. I thought it would be safe to tell you if you weren't afraid of magic. But you weren't afraid because you knew I was protecting you. I did too good a job. The only way you'll ever trust magic is if you can get close enough to understand it. I want you to use me so you can learn."

Arthur took a moment to consider this, to consider the sorcerer kneeling in fealty before him. If Merlin had truly been born with magic, it was unlikely that letting him use that magic in a limited fashion could make his condition any worse. Merlin wanted to be used and he wanted to teach Arthur everything about magic. Very well then, Arthur would allow that. But not for the reason Merlin expected. In order to remove magic, Arthur needed to better understand its nature, and right now he knew practically nothing.

Learning about magic from a sorcerer. It was madness to even consider the idea. No matter how curious he might have been before, no matter what doubts niggled at him, the fact remained that magic was an insidious threat and it was his duty to stop it. But despite being unaware of it until recently, he had been relying on Merlin to stop magical threats even before they'd disenchanted Terit. There were no books to teach him. There was no one else he could ask for help. His father would overreact and Gaius was plainly untrustworthy. Every other sorcerer he had ever met was dead or mad. Even the thought of asking the dragon was absurd. And he could hardly go to the Druids for help, when he'd led raid after raid against them. They probably feared him even more than they feared his father.

If Arthur could find a way to be certain that Merlin was not affecting his thoughts, that Merlin was genuinely as loyal and honest as he seemed to be, then this arrangement could work. And even if Merlin might balk at teaching Arthur how to destroy magic, Merlin had already presented a way around that. All Arthur had to do was play along and let Merlin think that he only wanted to understand. Merlin's magic might provide the key to its own undoing. If magic was needed to defeat magic, it would be valuable indeed to have a powerful sorcerer in hand. But first that power had to be controlled, for Merlin's own sake as well as his own.

A new plan was laying itself out before him, one more beneficial than simply trying to destroy Merlin's magic outright. First, he would find something in the vaults that could control Merlin's magic, restrain it. It would be more likely that such a thing would exist than anything that destroyed magic, for why would the Old Religion want to destroy magic? Once Merlin was secured, Arthur would allow him to resume his duties, and in their spare time, Merlin would teach him how magic worked. Once Arthur knew enough, once he'd mastered magic as he had so many other things, Merlin would be his test case again, even more valuable in this than he had been in undermining the First Code.
Merlin was right, in his naive way, that some kinds of treason were acceptable. If they were done with forethought, if there was a worthy goal, if everything that could be managed was managed correctly. If Merlin remained obedient despite his magic, then Arthur could take care of the rest. If he could get the magic out of Merlin without killing him, then others could also be saved. Camelot could finally be made free of magic without the suffering that resulted from his father's methods. He was not blind to the fact that the executions did much to aggravate the situation. That if his father did not kill so eagerly, they would have fewer enemies, and fewer citizens would feel the need to turn to magic out of a misguided attempt to protect themselves. When Arthur was King, he would put an end to this vicious cycle, but until then, he needed to learn as much as he could about magic and how to defeat it. For Merlin's sake, and with his help, they would defeat magic as surely as they had the Deorham and the First Code, quickly and efficiently. They would make their Camelot safe and fair and just. Together, they could do anything.

Perhaps all of Albion would one day bow to them, for once their success was seen, other rulers would want magic purged from their lands as well. It amused him that they might fulfil some part of Merlin's ridiculous prophecy after all.

"All right," he agreed.

"Really?" Merlin said, his surprise betraying the doubt that must have been hiding beneath his determination.

"Really," Arthur said, more at ease now that he had a plan. He always felt better with a plan, sometimes several per problem. There were enough redundancies that he could manage almost anything that might occur. He was even looking forward to the fresh challenge of it, since things would be quieter now that Gedref was safe and harvest season had come. And best of all, he would be able to keep Merlin where he belonged, by his side.

"I don't have to choose?" Merlin asked, cautiously hopeful. "Between my magic and my life?"

"Not if they're both mine," Arthur said, and that made Merlin give a shaky grin. Arthur was pleased to note that he was still on his knees, just as he had been when he'd formally sworn his fealty as a knight. The more confident he was in Merlin's obedience, the more confident he was that this could all be worked out. He rested a hand on Merlin's shoulder, and that was all it took to make Merlin almost painfully relieved.

"Then I can come with you?"

"No," Arthur said, and as expected, Merlin's smile wilted. "From the look of you, you've been up all night. You didn't sleep at all, did you?"

"No," Merlin admitted, his unhappiness creeping back.

Arthur weighed his options, the risks and the benefits. The preservation of Merlin's loyalty was paramount, even more now than it had been during their foray into Gedref. Ropes or locks or even the threat of death would not keep Merlin put if he was motivated to move. But Gedref had proved that magic or no magic, Merlin could be managed, and that he responded far better to rewards than to any sort of punishment.

"Come on," Arthur said, urging Merlin to stand. Merlin did so warily, uncertain as to what Arthur intended. But he followed Arthur out of the side room despite his uncertainty, and he was again visibly relieved as he did so.

"Obviously I've spoiled you so badly that you can't even manage to sleep one night in your own
bed," Arthur said, keeping his voice light. He patted his bed in invitation for Merlin to climb in.

"Really?" Merlin said, even more surprised by this than he had been by Arthur's agreement.

"I have a busy day ahead of me, and I can't have you nodding off all over the castle, and certainly not in the middle of the ceremony. And don't tell me that you won't when I've seen you nearly fall off your horse after a night without sleep."

"I suppose," Merlin admitted, and the reminder of the morning after Geraint's death seemed to both reassure and quiet him.

"I'll check in on you at noon, but I want to find you sleeping," Arthur told him. "I'm expected for dinner with my father, but I'll bring you something from the kitchen when I come back. All I need you to do is stay here."

He could see how tempted Merlin was by it all. By the familiarity and comfort of being cared for, and the obedience it made him want to give in return.

"I won't even lock the door," Arthur said, giving him one last, gentle push. "You can go out if you want, but I'd be happier if you wouldn't." It wasn't much of a sacrifice, since obviously there wasn't a lock in the castle that could stop Merlin if he truly wanted to leave. But it was the meaning of the gesture that mattered. Merlin would not trust him, especially not with his magic, if Arthur didn't trust him first.

"All right," Merlin agreed, and in his relief he made an aborted move to reach for Arthur, to hold him and be held. But he pulled it back before it could be completed. Arthur didn't show his relief, keeping it hidden with the practice of a lifetime of being constantly observed.

Merlin sat down on the edge of the bed and touched the soft sheets as if he had not expected to ever feel them again. Arthur wondered what Merlin would have chosen, if he had been forced to choose between his life and his magic. Merlin had been unable to decide even with a sword at his throat. When the time came, Arthur might have to make the decision for him, and hope that Merlin would be both willing and able to forgive him.

There was a short rap on the door as a servant delivered their breakfast from the kitchens. Arthur had placed the order last night, expecting that Merlin would not be in any condition to be running about the castle. He wished now that he had been wrong.

He brought the tray inside and took a small amount for himself, then placed the still-laden tray on the table by the bed. Merlin gave a teary blink, and rubbed his eyes dry with the back of his hand. For someone so slim, Merlin loved food nearly as much as he loved a soft bed. But when he reached for a grape, he hesitated and then pulled his hand away. Despite his brave exterior, his obvious desire to believe that things had not changed, Merlin was not unscathed. Arthur would have to manage him carefully, even after his magic was under control.

Arthur went to change into the appropriate finery for the day ahead. Even with Merlin in his bed, Merlin's ghost was still all over his clothes and in the crown that he placed on his own head. In the absence of his hands, which dressed Arthur with such attentiveness and care when they weren't eager and exploring. But Arthur could not bear to let his thoughts go as far as that.

It was only now that he realized why Merlin was wearing the outfit from the banquet, only now that he realized that the fire he had summoned had been in the shape of the Pendragon crest. It had not been an attack, or at least not a conscious one. Merlin had wanted to show him that he still belonged to him, even with his magic. And the damage that Merlin's wild magic had wreaked, which had
frightened Arthur out of his wits, hadn't even been that bad. Just a bit of wind and some tall candle flames. The curtains were slightly singed, and that was the worst of it. It hardly seemed like anything, now. Could Merlin's fealty extend even into his magic? It seemed unlikely, but that did not mean it was impossible.

Soon, Arthur would divide Merlin from his magic, and he would know the truth of both their natures. When Merlin was his and his alone, it would be safe to love him again. But until then, Arthur had to be strong enough for the both of them.

"I'm sorry about Geraint," Merlin said, when Arthur returned to the bed. "I should have used my magic to protect him, or tried to heal him. I should have done a lot of things. But that's why you need to understand. Even if you can find a way to remove my magic, you can't. You need it."

"We'll talk about it later," Arthur said, guiding Merlin to lie down. Merlin resisted and reached for him. Arthur stilled, breath half-caught in his throat, but all Merlin did was straighten the clasp of his cloak.

"You always buckle it crooked," Merlin said, and then lowered his hands, shy and uncertain.

Arthur's fear receded again, and he rewarded Merlin with a mustered smile in appreciation of the gesture. Merlin and his ridiculous, bottomless loyalty. He was a sorcerer and he knew enough to blackmail the entire council several times over, yet he still wanted to be his manservant. He wanted to be whatever Arthur wanted him to be. If that willingness held... Once Merlin was under the blankets, he pulled them close against himself with an air of desperation. But even as he did, the pleasant associations of the bed lulled him, and he went from anxious and tense to sleepy in no time at all.

"If you need me..." Merlin began, not quite ready to let go yet.

"I'll know where you are," Arthur finished for him. He forced himself to reach out and brush Merlin's hair back behind his ear, just once before he pulled his hand away.

But that was all it took. He stood and watched as Merlin dropped to sleep, and felt, as he had so many times before, that Merlin was a perplexing creature, contradictory and impossible to oust. A sorcerer should not rest so naturally in the Crown Prince's bed, and the Crown Prince should not have invited him into it. But there were already so many things that Merlin should not be. What was one more, when at least this was a problem that had a chance of being solved?

Arthur left his chambers and closed the door quietly behind him, resisting the urge to lock it, to bar the way with heavy planks, to nail his whole chambers shut as he once had the side room. At the end of the hall, a pair of guards stood vigilant, oblivious to the danger so close at hand. Arthur merely nodded to them as he passed.

§

The castle was only just starting to hum to life as Arthur walked through the halls. He seized on the normality of it all, of bustling servants and the fresh smell of bread drifting up from the kitchens. This was home. This was where everything made sense, where everything and everyone had a place and a purpose and was bent to it. From the dungeons to the towers, from the curtained nooks where he had hidden as a small boy to the throne that would one day be his.

If that no longer felt true, it was battle that was to blame. It had changed him as others had before, and it was only natural that things would feel wrong for a time. That he would not fit neatly into the
space he had left behind. He would make himself fit, as he had before, and he would make Merlin fit, and the fractures that threatened his foundations would heal.

It wasn't until he was already halfway across the courtyard that he realized that when he'd dressed in full ceremonial wear, the sword he'd automatically sheathed in his belt had been the enchanted one. His steps faltered as he thought of turning away from his current path and to the armory, so he could exchange it for another. But even the hilt of the sword Merlin had given him was unique, with finely worked gold engravings. This was the sword that had defeated Palaemon, that had won the battle against the Deorham. To discard it now, to hide it away when it was expected to be seen, when his father had already seen him wearing it, would only raise questions. And he would have enough of those to deal with already.

He discarded his plan to have Guinevere fire up her forge after the ceremony so he could burn the magic out of it. He could not afford to destroy whatever enchantments lay within the blade until he was certain that Merlin was safe. Until every last bit of magic was out of him once and for all. Until then, he would have to keep the sword close at hand, in case the worst happened. At least Merlin had shown some fraction of sense in this, as his father had indeed already used it without any apparent concern.

Or had he? Arthur had been just as guilty as everyone else in dealing with the Black Knight. He had thought that steel and sinew would prove sufficient against any enemy, even if that enemy had already taken deadly blows and not been felled. When his father had triumphed against the knight, he had taken it as simply another example of his father succeeding where others had failed.

But his father had held him back with the paltry excuse that the knights had needed a chance to prove themselves now that they were at peace with Mercia. And then when he had challenged the Black Knight himself, sick of standing aside as others fought and died in his place, his father had been furious, had forbid him to fight. Had been so absolutely certain that for Arthur to face the knight would mean his death. Arthur had taken it as yet another example of his father's lack of faith in him. He had believed that even more when he had woken late, muzzy from the strong sleeping draught that Gaius had tricked him into taking, and found himself locked into his own chambers.

And when it was over, like everyone else, Arthur had simply been relieved that yet another threat had been vanquished. He had not raised questions because the threat was passed, and it was better to put his energies into preparing for the next threat, into fulfilling his new role as Crown Prince and all the responsibilities that came with it, than to worry over a foe that had been utterly destroyed.

And yet. And yet now, looking back, the entire matter felt only half-known. It had been another instance of Gaius and his father whispering together behind closed doors. He still did not know the origin of the crest that the knight bore on his shield or the purpose of his challenge, and he had been taught all the crests of Albion during his time spent in Geoffrey's tutelage. If Merlin's sword was responsible for destroying the knight, then it did explain why his father had survived, but it did not reveal what his father knew. Merlin had taken the sword and hidden it, and his father had been surprised by its absence, desired that it be found. Yet he had not been urgent about it.

As Arthur entered the tower, he found himself returned yet again to the questions that had been raised in his discussion with Merlin. Had his father known about the sword's properties and gone to face the knight with it because only magic could defeat magic? Did his father know about Gaius and Merlin and their use of magic to defend the kingdom? He must know, and yet it seemed impossible that he did. His father had always stood so absolute against all sorcery, no matter how useful or how minor the enchantment. Because it corrupted the user and eventually consumed them with madness and rage. The only way the situation could even begin to make sense was if his father and Gaius had some way to control it, to bind the magic as to make it as safe to use as any other tool.
Or there was another, less pleasant possibility, which was that Merlin was not the first young sorcerer they had used. And when the corruption began to progress too far, the sorcerer was executed and a replacement was found, so the defense of the kingdom could be maintained. As for the physician in Gedref, surely most of Gaius' apprentices had actually learned the healing arts from him rather than sorcery. It would make far more sense to have a sorcerer placed as a knight, but that would require a sorcerer born of a noble house. Yet a secret sorcerer would have to have a plausible reason for his presence, and therefore Merlin's position as his manservant seemed far too canny to be a coincidence.

Which brought him back to Gaius.

Arthur opened the door slowly, cautiously scanning the room. Gaius' cot was empty, but one step into the room revealed that he had fallen asleep in his chair by the hearth. If a fire had burned there last night, it had long since gone out, and Gaius had a blanket across his lap. There was a deep frown on his face, even in sleep.

Gaius knew the answers for all his questions. Arthur was certain of that, just as he was certain that actually achieving those answers would not be a simple matter. Even in minor matters, Gaius only ever said as much as he wanted to say. His father did not trust Gaius with his secrets without knowing they would be safe with him. It had always stung Arthur that his father trusted Gaius more than him, even now that he was Crown Prince, and ostensibly should be involved in all matters of importance. He could not grow into his kingship if he was kept in ignorance. Yet for all that his father now offered approval and smiled proudly upon him, nothing had changed.

It was going to change now. He would not be kept in ignorance anymore.

Arthur pushed a chair over to the hearth, placing it so that he could sit facing Gaius directly. He sat down and crossed his arms and waited for Gaius to wake up. It didn't take long, for even the scrape of the chair across the floor was enough to rouse him. Gaius opened his eyes slowly, and he betrayed no great surprise at finding Arthur in his chambers at such an early hour.

"Sire?" Gaius asked, slow from sleep as he straightened his posture.

"Gaius," Arthur replied, keeping his expression as stony as he would in any delicate negotiation.

"Merlin is not with you," Gaius said. It was impressive how he could say so little, when asking so much.

"He's sleeping."

Gaius' relief was obvious and palpable. "Then he's still alive."

"I'd like to keep it that way," Arthur said. "That depends on you."

"Sire?" Gaius asked, caution dominating his expression again.

"I'm going to ask you questions," Arthur said, watching Gaius carefully. "If the answers you give me are lies, if you attempt to manipulate me for any reason, this conversation is over and I can make no guarantees for Merlin's life or your own."

Gaius nodded once. "I understand. As you must understand that there are certain questions which I am sworn not to answer."

"Even to me?" Arthur challenged.

"As I said."
It took gall to defy the Crown Prince on a matter of such blatant treason. But it was already clear that Gaius had an overabundance of gall. Very well, then. Arthur would establish the facts and proceed from there.

"Merlin is a sorcerer," Arthur said, barely managing not to trip over the word as he struggled against the emotions it provoked. "And you have been using him and his magic to fight sorcery in defense of the kingdom. Is all of this true?"

"It is," Gaius said, and for what it was worth he did not seem to be lying. "Is that what Merlin told you?"

"I've known since Terit." When Gaius raised his eyebrow at this, Arthur continued. "I knew that you were teaching him, that you were destroying magic together. I didn't know how."

"Ah," Gaius said, in a tone that Arthur was familiar with from his childhood. It was the 'I said it was a bad idea and you went ahead and did it anyway' tone. If Merlin had been present, it would surely have been directed at him.

"Merlin said that magic cannot be defeated without magic," Arthur continued. "Is this true?"

"Largely," Gaius admitted. "The more powerful the magical attack, the more necessary it is to have a magical defense. I assume you are aware that the Griffin and the Questing Beast were not defeated without help."

Arthur nodded. "And Cedric?"

"Cornelius Sigan possessed him," Gaius said, with such utter certainty that Arthur was finally starting to believe that he was right. "Merlin used a powerful spell to stop Sigan, but the possession itself killed Cedric."

"How much does my father know?"

"Nothing."

Arthur scoffed. "Do you seriously expect me to believe that?"

"Believe what you will," Gaius said, evenly. "But if you tell the King any of this, both Merlin and I will be arrested and executed. And I do not believe that is something you wish to happen."

"You just told me that magic can only be fought with magic, and yet my father has no idea of the magic being used to defend his kingdom?"

Gaius pressed his lips together. "Sorcery is a delicate matter. And the laws against magic are absolute."

Arthur stared at Gaius, trying to translate his diplomatic phrasing into something solid. "You mean he can't afford to know," he realized.

Gaius said nothing, which was an answer in itself. It was a question he couldn't answer, but perhaps Arthur wouldn't need him to. He just had to keep talking.

"My father trusts you with a great many things," Arthur said, leaning forward with interest. "Things he doesn't even trust me with. Every time we face a magical threat, you and Merlin whisper to each other. But you also whisper with my father. You advise him when a threat is too dangerous to be defeated by normal means. And he ignores you. But then you turn around and take care of the
situation yourself. And when it's all over, he raises no concerns."

Gaius' frown deepened, and it was obvious that Arthur had hit the target. But the victory he felt was a sour one. It was one thing to suspect that his father was using magic, and it was another to have it confirmed, even if it was all tacit. It was rank hypocrisy, no matter how noble the intent.

Except he was guilty of that as well, if only in hindsight. He had approved of Merlin's actions, had encouraged them in Gedref, had been ready to celebrate them now that they were home, even make them public. And now he was forced to disavow them, lest his knowledge result in Merlin's execution.

It appeared that Merlin was indeed serving under his father's command, however indirectly. But his father would provide no acknowledgement of this, and no protection in return. Merlin was expected to forfeit his life, just as the knights were, just as all the people of Camelot were. Because they were all disposable in his father's eyes. Arthur refused to accept that.

"Have there been others, before Merlin?" Arthur pressed, sobering. "Sorcerers who gave protection to the kingdom? What happened to them?"

Gaius visibly struggled before he spoke. "None like Merlin. He is... unique."

"Because he was born with magic?"

"That is part of it, yes," Gaius admitted. "He is more powerful than he realizes, and this has enabled him to succeed despite his inexperience. Others with far more training were not so fortunate."

Arthur had heard enough. "I want the magic out of him. Now."

"Impossible."

"With all that you have lied to me and to my father, I have no reason to trust a single word you say," Arthur said, tersely.

"Then believe me when I tell you that there is no way to remove Merlin's magic. It cannot be done, not even with the darkest magics."

"If magic can be put into a thing, it can be taken out again," Arthur insisted. "The same must go for sorcerers."

"Even if it were possible, which it is not, it is because of Merlin's magic that the kingdom still stands. Without it, you will not live to become King."

"Is that a threat?" Arthur asked, disbelieving.

"It is a fact," Gaius said, sternly. "If you are aware of what he has done, then you know that he has already saved your life many times over."

"Because you and my father are determined to keep me ignorant of the true nature of the threats I face, and refuse to tell me how to defeat them," Arthur shot back. "I am Crown Prince and you treat me as if I am still a child. When my father can no longer rule, this will be my kingdom, and I cannot rule as I must when I am lied to at every turn." It was humiliating to realize that they had set Merlin to watch over him like some sort of magical nanny because they did not believe him capable of making his own decisions. "If the magic cannot be removed, then it must be contained," he continued, brooking no argument. "Is there a way?"
"It may be possible," Gaius said, though he didn't look happy about it.

"Is there a potion we can give him? Or something in the vaults?" Arthur pressed. "Something we can find and use today?" When Gaius hesitated, Arthur gave him a less than gentle push. "Merlin is alive, but he is my prisoner, and he will remain as my prisoner until we find a way to control his magic. Otherwise, I will have no choice but to proceed with the punishment for his treason according to the law."

"Foolish boy," muttered Gaius, as defeat washed across his face. "You have no comprehension of the forces at work."

"Then explain them to me," Arthur said, anger leaking into his voice despite his best attempts to restrain it. "Tell me everything that my father will not. Unless your promises to him mean more to you than Merlin."

Gaius' unhappy silence was answer enough.

"I will not see Merlin's life thrown away on my father's orders," Arthur said, making himself absolutely clear. "We find something that will enable me to suppress Merlin's magic, and we will make use of it tonight. Does this contradict what my father has bound you with?"

"No."

Arthur stood. "Then I will see you at the ceremony. Merlin will not be there as he is under orders to remain in my chambers until I allow otherwise. Do not attempt to see or communicate with him without my approval. If you conspire, I will have no choice but to tell all of this to my father. Is that clear?"

"As a crystal, sire," Gaius said, coldly. "And understand that if Merlin is in danger, I will do everything in my power to protect him, no matter what the cost to myself."

They stared at each other, sizing each other up, and Arthur sensed that despite all their differences, they were well-matched. As they both shared the same goal, that of protecting Merlin, Arthur was content with this, even if their definitions of protection were not the same. Gaius would help him gain control over Merlin's magic, and then Merlin himself would help Arthur destroy it. That was the only way that Merlin would truly be safe. And like Gaius, Arthur would do whatever it took to protect Merlin, no matter what the cost.
Ceremony

Magic. His father used magic.

Arthur crossed back through the courtyard, the knowledge a heavy weight on top of the burdens he already carried. In his father's zealous quest to destroy magic, he had come to rely on the very use of it. With all that he was learning, Arthur had little argument with his father's overall goal. He had no doubt that the removal of magic was necessary for the good of the kingdom, for the health of his future reign. But if he had questioned his father's methods before, argued against the extremities of them, this new discovery was the most extreme of them all.

It did not matter whether or not his father had any direct hand in the finding and use of sorcerers. Command at a distance was still command, and a king was responsible for the actions of those below him. If a knight was rash and heedless in his actions, it was his commander who was held to task. The orders his father had given Gaius regarding sorcery were no different than the orders his father gave him when he assigned the task of freeing Gedref from the Deorham. His father trusted them both to carry out their orders, and to do so as representatives of both the King and the kingdom.

But while Arthur reported back to his father, Gaius did not. His father had been eager to hear about his victory in Gedref, but it seemed that he wanted no knowledge of Gaius' victories, because those victories were won with the breaking of his father's own laws. The laws that said that any use of sorcery, however small, was treason, and therefore punishable only by death. A law that was absolute, with no exceptions ever made, no consideration for circumstances ever given. It was one thing to kill a dangerous sorcerer like Palaemon, who had already forfeited his life by participating in an invasion. But Linette had died merely because she sought to protect her husband and the future of her unborn child. Guinevere's father had died because he had allowed a sorcerer to use his forge, and then tried to escape in fear of his life.

He had always felt that such minor crimes did not deserve the punishment attached to them. And now knowing that his father tacitly encouraged sorcery on a large scale, the hypocrisy of it all made him almost physically ill. It strengthened his resolve to extract Merlin from this untenable situation before it spiralled entirely out of control. Despite what Merlin and Gaius both believed, there had to be a better way. And even if they were right, if magic was necessary to fight magic, this was not the way to do it. It was dishonorable. It was ignoble and it was against everything that Camelot stood for.

When Arthur had been crowned, he had taken an oath. He had sworn to exercise mercy and justice in his deeds and judgments, and to govern in accordance with the law. His father had taken that same oath when he had been crowned, and yet he had broken it, continued to break it. Where was the justice and mercy in his deeds and judgments? How could he govern according to the law when he broke it daily? When he broke even the Knights' Code, the very foundation of Camelot, created by Bruta, its first king? It was a pledge that had held strong for centuries: to conduct oneself with nobility, honour, and respect. A knight's word was a sacred bond. A knight fought for justice, freedom, and all that was good. His father had been a knight, was still a knight, because such an oath could not be unsworn.

A kingdom lived or died by the strength of its laws. And making exceptions to any law, no matter how well-intentioned, only caused problems as those exceptions piled up. It had always frustrated Arthur that his father was only too eager to make exceptions in areas other than magic, applying one set of laws to the noble and another to the common. The First Code was emblematic of this, providing the sons of the nobility with opportunities, training, and support that were denied to
everyone else, no matter how deserving or needed they were.

When he was King, he intended to throw out the old laws, the ones riddled with exceptions, and write new ones. Ones that were fair and just and merciful. It was not enough to respect the statutes, customs, and laws of his forbearers, not when conditions changed, when people changed. Laws and kings must change and adapt to suit the needs of the people, not the other way around. The alternative only led to tyranny and suffering. That Camelot thrived despite his father's failures was a testament to the strength of its foundations, to the justice and mercy of Bruta's laws, laid down centuries ago.

But now. Now he saw that even his father's own laws had been riddled with those same exceptions. One set of laws for his father and those he favored, and another for everyone else. Once the situation with Merlin was resolved, once Merlin himself was no longer a part of his father's machinations, Arthur would set himself to the deconstruction of them. If magic was to be fought, it would be fought openly, and those who risked their souls and lives for the good of the kingdom would be rewarded for their sacrifice, just as any knight would be. His original plan to have a court-appointed defender against sorcery was still as valid as before. It was simply not acceptable that Merlin be the one that he appoint.

His father was always trying to convince him that the sacrifices of others were necessary. That their lives were not worth his tears or the endangerment of his own life. And perhaps there was some truth to that. But such sacrifices would not be obtained through deceit and trickery, and hidden away in the shadows. If the situation with Merlin had taught him anything, it was of the poisonous nature of secrets long-kept.

"Ah, Arthur, excellent."

"Father," Arthur greeted, slipping on the familiar mask. He had become quite expert at it in recent months, and achieved the fine balance of dutiful, obedient, and rebellious that made his father most amenable to him. After all, it would not do for a Crown Prince to be too agreeable, but neither could he be as plainly defiant as he had been when he'd spent weeks in the woods training Merlin. The lessons he had learned from that experience, and from Linette's execution, had guided him in his careful planning when he decided to use Merlin against the First Code.

"I was hoping we'd have a moment to talk this morning, before the ceremony," his father continued, and he waved a hand to Sir Leon, who had been standing at attention, watching as their audience trickled in to the great hall. "I'm appointing Sir Leon as your new second-in-command."

"Sir Leon," Arthur greeted, not letting his annoyance show. He had nothing against Leon, who was a good man and one of the better candidates on his own personal list of knights to promote. But it grated on him that yet again his father had decided what was best without even bothering to ask if he had an opinion on the matter.

"It will be an honor to serve as your second, sire," Leon said, eagerly.

"It will be an honor to have you," Arthur replied. In truth, there were others he would have chosen, largely because they had been to war and Leon had not. When he had been taken on as a knight, Leon's father had pressed upon Uther that he would not see his only son sent off to war, and to preserve his fealty, Uther had obliged. And so Leon had never been tested as the others had been tested, as Geraint had been tested.

Arthur remembered quite clearly when he had returned that autumn, sobered and weary from war with Cenred, and found that Leon had been installed as one of the castle knights. After the strains and losses that even a victorious season provided, Leon had seemed impossibly fresh-faced, despite
being several years older than Arthur himself. A part of Arthur had hated him for that, for being unscathed, and that winter Arthur and the other seasoned knights had not been kind to him. Even at the time, Arthur had regretted his actions. Yet he had not been able to quash the urge to push Leon until he broke, so he would know some semblance of the pain that they had suffered. Leon did not break; he he taken it all and kept smiling, his good nature allowing him to persist until at last he was accepted.

If his father had chosen someone entirely unfit, Arthur would have argued the matter. But since that time they had all done a great deal of growing up, and Leon had bravely defended the castle against many threats, both magical and mundane. Leon was loyal to the crown, and performed his duties with both sobriety and enthusiasm. He would do.

Besides, Arthur had much larger issues to deal with.

"Father, if you have a moment, I'd like to speak with you in private. Perhaps this afternoon?" That should give him enough time to take care of all the things that he needed to.

"Of course," his father said, smiling. "We'll talk over dinner." He patted Arthur on the arm, but when he looked past him, his smile shifted into shallow annoyance. "Where is that boy of yours?"

"Resting," Arthur said, calmly. "He was exhausted."

"I know you've developed a fondness for the boy, but you indulge him too much. It sets a poor example."

"Merlin was of great help to me in Gedref," Arthur said, unable to stop himself from pointedly using Merlin's name. His father never used it, only referring to him as 'that boy' when he wasn't outright insulting him. But Arthur couldn't tell if it was because Merlin was a servant, and therefore beneath notice, or a sorcerer, and therefore beneath contempt. "He was worn out from both battle and journey, and I would rather give him a day to recover than have him be unable to perform his duties due to exhaustion. It would hardly set a good example if he yawned his way through the ceremony."

"I suppose the boy was busy helping the wounded," his father said, and despite its reluctance it was probably the most praise he had ever directed towards Merlin. "From your description, it was quite a battle. I wish I'd seen it. It's been too long." The last he said with an air of longing. He missed the battlefield. He'd missed it ever since he'd ceded it to Arthur halfway through the war against Cenred. His father had not fought at all against Bayard, and at least part of his eagerness to crush Bayard diplomatically had been an attempt to make up for his absence in the war itself.

His father shook the longing away. "You should consider a replacement."

"Replacement?" Arthur asked, confused by the sudden change of topic.

"For the boy. First he broke his arm, and now this. I know he's loyal to you, but if he's unable to perform his duties..."

Arthur paused before he spoke. "You think he's unfit."

His father softened again. "I think that my son is growing into a fine man. And when the time comes, you'll need servants you can rely on. Who have the bearing and experience suitable for their position."

It was an innocent statement, but nothing was innocent anymore. If his father knew about Merlin's magic, if he was expecting Merlin's corruption to have advanced far enough that he would have to be quietly destroyed, that would be reason enough to discourage Arthur from having any attachment
towards him. Perhaps that was why his father had gone to such an extreme in preventing him from saving Merlin's life after the incident with the poisoned wine. But his statement could just as easily be taken at face value. The uncertainty was making Arthur feel uncomfortably paranoid. He needed to resolve it, and now was as good a time as any.

"If he was never suitable for the job, then why did you assign him as my manservant?"

"Gaius recommended him for the position before he arrived," his father said, without any hint of discomfort or guilt. "And you had run through just about everyone else." He smiled, amused. "It was something of a desperate effort. I'm as surprised as anyone that he's lasted this long."

Arthur allowed himself a moment of relief. Gaius had been telling the truth, then, and his father didn't know that Merlin was a sorcerer. It didn't make the situation any better, but it did mean it wasn't likely to become dramatically worse. As long as his father didn't know, the situation could be contained and managed. If his father didn't want to know about the magic being done right under his nose, then Arthur would oblige him.

"If you have some suitable candidates, I'm willing to review them," he said, generously but with a hint of reluctance. It wouldn't do to be eager. And the truth was, if he couldn't save Merlin, he might indeed need a new manservant, assuming he was still in any condition to make use of one.

"I'll draw up a list," his father said, pleased. "Take your time with the decision. Find the right man and you'll have a servant for life."

Arthur thought bitterly that he had already found the right man. The problem lay in keeping him.

§

There were two worlds that Arthur had been born to, that were in his bones and in his blood: the worlds of Court and of War. Both had their own kinds of battle, and in each there were rules, allies and enemies, risks and rewards. Despite their similarities, in truth they rarely overlapped. When they did, it was almost always in the aftermath, when all the blood that was required had been spilled, when king and king would at last face each other across a table, rather than a field full of injured and dead. Arthur had often felt that quite a lot of trouble would be saved for everyone if they simply skipped to the end and locked the kings in a room together until it was all settled.

Gedref had been different. Yes, there had been losses, and the scars of battle would not fade quickly for most. But as they had ridden home, Arthur had felt proud of what they had accomplished, in a way that he never had when he'd returned from battles in the past. He had headed out to Gedref expecting the worst: a weeks or months-long siege followed by a hungry winter as the battle diverted resources from an already slim harvest. Instead, he had found fertile fields and a battle that was won in the course of a morning. He did not know why his father and Lord Wichard continued to have such a strained relationship when his innovative techniques meant a healthy harvest and full bellies until the spring, but it was obvious that Gedref was even more valuable than its harbor and its swordsmiths had already made it. He would have to encourage a wider use of Wichard's seaweed compost at the next meeting of the Lords.

If only the victory they had won could still feel as honorable as a good harvest. The fact that it had been partly won through the use of magic, and worse, hidden magic, had hollowed their triumph. It had hollowed most of what Arthur had thought were the other successes of the past year and a half, whether his own or Merlin's. In every case, what he had thought was a defeat of sorcery had in fact been achieved through sorcery itself. He did not see how he could be glad of that, or of the cost Merlin was paying as a result. And what victories had been won before that, before Merlin's arrival, only Gaius knew.
But at least in Gedref, Merlin's magic had largely only been used against Palaemon's, or to open the way for the rest of the army to succeed. This ceremony was to be a celebration of the achievements of steel and sinew, and those achievements held true. He could still feel proud as he stood tall before his people and his men, as his father gave his speech congratulating them on all that they had done for the kingdom.

Arthur barely listened to the speech itself. It was only the latest variation of one he'd heard many times before, and if he paid attention to the praising of honor and nobility it would only make him angrier at his father's hypocrisy. Now was not the time for him to drive himself into a temper. Instead he focused on the audience before him, filling the great hall to capacity. It had been some time since such an unalloyed good had been celebrated. The wars against Bayard and Cenred had been long and bloody, and the peaces won still felt tenuous. At the ceremonies that followed each war, the overwhelming atmosphere had been one of relief. But looking out upon the people now, what Arthur saw most of all was pride. Pride that the kingdom had held strong, that an unjust attack had been so utterly defeated, and that almost all that had left had come home again, or would soon. And there was pride in him, that the Crown Prince had grown into as mighty a warrior as his father had been, that he had left behind his childhood and accepted his role as a leader of men. And more, that men sought to follow him. The victory at Gedref would only strengthen their willingness. The successes of his army all combined to shine upon him. Even Merlin's.

Arthur could not avoid the fact that Merlin's absence was both of note and a disappointment. All through the start of the ceremony, people would look at him, smiling, and then look to his side and frown. Just as his father had, in fact. Arthur often felt that Merlin had become as naturally a part of him as his shadow, or as the sword at his side, and now he could see that everyone else had come to feel the same. Even before Gedref, Arthur had made it clear that Merlin was his. Not merely as a servant, or as his knight, or even as his lover, but in a more fundamental way. Merlin was his because that was the way Merlin wanted to be, and because Arthur liked him that way, and because it felt natural, as right as the joining of two broken pieces into a whole. Without him now, even knowing about the corruption that lurked inside him, Merlin's absence was an ache he could not ignore.

He had to save Merlin from his magic. The grief he had felt in Gedref, which had nearly driven him to madness, would be nothing in comparison to what would attack if he could not save him now. Arthur could feel it waiting like some monstrous beast inside him, claws and fangs as full of poison as the Questing Beast's. It was hope that kept the beast caged, but that hope was as tenuous as the treaty with Cenred.

Merlin was essential. Not only to himself, to his heart, but to the kingdom's future. Arthur had seen the fact of it with the knights and in Gedref, seen that Merlin's inherent goodness and determination inspired those around him, united them in purpose. It had even managed the impossible and brought him closer to Morgana, the two of them sparring companionably as they had not since before Arthur had first gone off to war. Those first battles had changed him, and when he had returned, Morgana had treated him as she always had. She had treated their sparring like a game, when he had learned the hard way that it was not. When Arthur had refused to fight her with swords, Morgana chose words as her weapon, and her cuts had been deep and unkind. Their relationship had never recovered from the blazing rows of that autumn.

He was glad to see her now, but he was shocked at how much she had changed in the weeks they had been gone. Their regular sparring had brought a flush to her cheeks and a sparkle to her eyes that had been missing for years, and now both were gone again, drained away by her nightmares and the powerful sleeping draughts she took to overcome them. Morgana's nightmares came and went, but they always seemed to bother her worst in times of stress. Her worry over the battle must have set off this latest round, and now she stood unsteadily, leaning against Guinevere despite her proud efforts
to stand tall and on her own. For her part, Guinevere's brow was deeply furrowed with concern, and she looked exhausted herself, no doubt from having sat up all night with Morgana yet again.

Gaius stood a short distance from Morgana, and if Arthur did not know better, he would think that nothing was amiss with him at all. But then, Gaius' outward appearance had always been a disguise, in one way or another. Merlin's magic and Arthur's knowledge of it were only two secrets added to the countless already within him. It took a great deal of deceit and courage to be simultaneously treasonous and obedient.

Arthur did not know much of Gaius' involvement with sorcery from before the Purge. He knew that Gaius had used magic, but whenever he advised his father on the matter, it was more about what was in this book or that book, rather than any personal experience. Of course, part of that was probably a matter of appearances, but it was distinctly different from Arthur's conversations with Merlin so far, fraught as they had been. He suspected that Gaius had been more like Linette: he had dabbled in sorcery, used spells perhaps as part of his work as a healer, but seemed unlikely that he had had been anything like Merlin. But then Gaius had said that Merlin was different than other sorcerers, whatever that meant.

Arthur felt his lack of knowledge keenly. When he was faced with a problem, the first step was always to understand it. It was only then that he could break it down to its essentials and the connections between them, and then rebuild them into solution after solution until he found the right one. But his father had always been unwilling to discuss magic beyond its destruction, and his own discomfort with his father's irrationality and rage had led him to focus his efforts elsewhere. He had always had the unsettling feeling that if he pushed too hard on the matter, he would not like what he found, like overturning a long-settled rock to find the insects that crawled beneath. And now that he had had a peek beneath the rock, he knew that he had been right to be wary. His first discoveries had been so monstrous that, if exposed to the light, they could bring the kingdom to its knees. But his dread at what else he might uncover was no longer a sufficient excuse for his ignorance. He was sworn to defend the kingdom, and if magic was a tool that was required for such defense, he would have to master it as he had many before it. It was his duty as Crown Prince and as King. Even if he was only yet King in Merlin's eyes.

His father was unwilling to say more, and it was evident that he had sworn Gaius to that same silence. But Merlin was not sworn to anyone but Arthur himself. It did not matter that Merlin had been kept in ignorance by Gaius, that he had been fed lies. Together, they would be able to find the truth, the essentials and the connections that would lead them to the solution to removing magic completely from Merlin and from Camelot.

Arthur joined in the applause as his father finished his speech and stepped aside so that Geoffrey could intone the details of their victory. Again, Arthur did not care to listen, as he himself had written the list for Geoffrey during his long report the day before. But the frequent mentions of Geraint caught at him, reminding him of the knight and friend that he had not yet had time to truly grieve for. And he saw how the mentions caught at those attending. For those who had not been there, it sorrowed them to be reminded of Geraint's death, for as Arthur's second he had been prominent and well-considered. In them, he saw a mixture of pride and melancholy. In those who had been in Gedref, he saw pride and melancholy as well, but it was of a different nature. The sadness they felt for Geraint was overcome by a greater sorrow for Merlin, as they glanced towards the space of his absence at each mention. The pride that they felt was for Merlin, for how he had proved himself, for all that he had done for them, for his humility in surrendering so much bravely and without complaint. And in a few, those who had been closest to him, there was a mutinous gleam. They did not think it was fair for Merlin to have to surrender his victories to Geraint. They did not think it was fair that Merlin was not even at the ceremony to hear his victories lauded, even if they could not be attributed to him.
Arthur was certain that they would not say anything, because despite the unfairness of the situation, they knew that to praise Merlin publicly would only hurt him, at least until the First Code was removed. But it was a powerful thing to see the loyalty that Merlin had earned in so short a time, and from those that had every reason not to have loyalty to a servant. That was what Merlin did, the true magic of him, and Arthur had sought to take full advantage of that. He had been eager to make Merlin into his grain of sand, and he had done so before he had understood the full nature of him. He had used a tool without comprehension of it, without true mastery, and now he was paying the price. He would not make that mistake a second time.

He had not understood Merlin when they had left for Gedref, and he still did not understand him. But he would. He would learn Merlin as he learned his magic, know the essentials and connections within him. And then once the magic was gone, he would rebuild Merlin and keep him.

It was a good plan, and he wasn't only telling himself that because it was the only plan he had. It was a good plan because it benefitted everyone. Yes, there were risks. And it seemed that Merlin had been right to raise the danger that the loss of his magic would leave Camelot vulnerable to magical attacks. But that was only because Arthur did not know enough about what he was fighting in the first place. Once he understood sorcery, he was certain he would find ways to overcome any magical threat, no matter how powerful. It would be the same as it had been with the enchanted armor, which had shielded the Deorham from piercing weapons but not blunt force. Just because an enchantment protected against one kind of attack, that did not mean it was invulnerable to others. There were always weaknesses that could be exploited. Once he had his own resources and knowledge to draw upon, rather than depending upon the vague warnings that his father and Gaius reluctantly doled out, the risks would be minimized if not eliminated.

Geoffrey finished and stepped aside, and once again his father spoke, commanding all the knights to step forward from their positions at the front of the audience and to kneel. Arthur knelt as well, turning to his father and lowering himself onto one knee, his head bowed in submission. He could not help but think of Merlin's own display of fealty, and how the depth of it made of mockery of the fealty he showed to his father now, when Arthur neither desired to submit nor thought his father worthy of his submission. But the oath that Arthur had sworn, that his father and the knights had sworn, was not to any one king but to Camelot itself. It did not matter that when Arthur had sworn it, he had still been unable to imagine that his father and the kingdom could ever be divided from each other.

"You have all shown great courage and defended our kingdom and its people with honor and nobility," his father said, glowing with unfettered pride. Pride that mere months ago, Arthur would have given anything to see. But now it was a sour thing, bitter on his tongue, and he ached to spit it out. To turn to all watching and shout his discoveries to them, to share his pain so he could be unburdened from it. But he was not a child anymore, and it was his duty to protect and sustain the kingdom, not to tear it apart. If there was a burden to be carried, he would carry it.

"In two days, we shall have a feast to celebrate your victories. You shall be the guests of honor. Know that your names will be carried down through the ages, written in the pages of our histories. Rise now, and stand proud as knights of Camelot."

Arthur stood as the others did, all of them standing straight and tall.

His father had once been the model of what any great king should be. Whatever his flaws, whatever the weaknesses of age, in his prime his father had been everything that Arthur wanted to be: a powerful warrior, a strong leader who ruled with wisdom and justice. A king who was greater than the flesh and bone that made a man, who was unbowed and unbeaten even in the face of impossible odds. A man who inspired others to follow him, and deserved the loyalty given to him. His father
had been great, and as Arthur had grown from a child to a man, he had watched that greatness fade. It had made him angry that his father could be weak, and it had made him afraid. And now to see how far he had fallen, that he was resorting to magic itself... Despite his outward strength, it was clear that his father was indeed no longer the man he had once been.

There was a time that Arthur had thought that his father would be King forever. But that time was passed. His father was as mortal as any man, with all the failings of a man. Soon, perhaps sooner than Arthur truly felt prepared for, the crown would be too heavy for his head, and it would be Arthur's duty to carry it until it was too heavy for his own head. For the first time, he truly began to feel a part of the line of kings that stretched back through the past, all the way to Bruta and the native and Roman lines that bore him. Camelot itself was only centuries old, but the Pendragon line was far older, and had centuries, perhaps millennia of leaders, of kings and warlords and commanders and sovereigns. His own life was a single point on a line that stretched into a forgotten past, and hopefully would stretch equally forward. His time, like his father's time, would only be a short one when compared to such a history, but that made them no less vital.

Other kings rose and fell, but the Pendragon line held true. That was what his father had told him, when Arthur was still small enough to sit on his knee. Not even the Romans and their long conquest had cowed them. There had been Pendragons before the Romans, and with Bruta's birth the Romans who ruled Albion had been subsumed into the Pendragon line, strengthening it with fresh blood but never overpowering it. And now he was the endpoint of that line, and all of history weighed upon him with expectation. If he failed to protect the kingdom, if he could not sire children to succeed him, that line would break, when time itself had left it unbroken.

As a young child, Arthur had often wondered if the dragon on their crest was related to the dragon imprisoned below the castle. But Geoffrey had informed him that the Pendragon crest was older than the oldest records, so much so that the dragon it bore had lost whatever meaning it once had. Therefore it could have nothing to do with the imprisoned dragon, or any dragon for that matter. Childhood curiosity had compelled Arthur to sneak down to see the dragon for himself, but even after he had snuck past the guards and made his way down, he had found the way blocked, sealed up with rubble far too heavy to shift on his own.

Now that both Merlin and Gaius were at least somewhat under control, Arthur at last turned his thoughts to what Merlin had said about the dragon. Obviously Gaius had not been the one to fill Merlin's head with talk of the unbanning of sorcery. The dragon had been the one to tell Merlin of the prophecy, who had convinced him that it was their destiny to fulfil it. As much as Arthur longed to seal the lying creature back up again, he knew that he would have to confront it in order to truly settle things with Merlin. But despite his own curiosity, it was obvious that even imprisoned, the monster was dangerous, and he was in no hurry to face it. Not until he was ready.

His father had bound the dragon well. Despite whatever hold it had on Merlin, it had not escaped in twenty years, and it would wait a while longer. Merlin was certainly not going to go anywhere near the dragon again without Arthur there to protect him.

"Sir Leon," his father called.

Leon stepped out of the audience. He went down on one knee as the others had before him, and bowed his head. "Your majesty."

"With Sir Geraint's passing, a knight must step forward to accept the duties and responsibilities that he has left behind. Such a knight must be fully devoted to the defense and care of both the kingdom and the knights under his command. Are you willing and able to accept this burden?"

"I am, your majesty," Leon said, somberly.
Then rise and stand with them.

Leon obeyed, and though he was facing the audience, Arthur could see the determination in the straightness of Leon's spine, in the jut of his jaw. Arthur relaxed another notch, knowing that Leon was taking his position seriously, and not looking upon the promotion as some kind of reward. He was not Geraint, would never be Geraint, who Arthur had bled with, had lain with, had been through hell and back with. But he was a good knight, and perhaps with time and pressure he would become a great one.

The room filled with applause as the ceremony ended, and then the formal atmosphere was broken as the knights broke their stances. His father stepped out to speak with some of the nobility directly.

Arthur tucked away his ruminations and stepped out into the crowd himself, intending to speak with some of the knights about their next postings. He also needed to speak with them about Leon, because he saw the doubt in their eyes when they looked to their new second. They might not have the difficult history that Arthur had with Leon, but they all knew that Leon had not gone to battle, had never gone to war, and so it was only natural that they would doubt him. Arthur owed it to Leon to back him up, to give him the chance to prove himself to them. But Guinevere and Morgana caught him first.

"Arthur," Morgana greeted. "Did you pay attention to any of that, or was it as boring for you as it was for us?" Despite the glaze in her eyes, her tongue was as sharp as ever. And for all that she yearned to fight, Morgana had never thought much of knights or the glories of battle. The contradiction of it had always baffled him, especially in his younger years.

"I wrote most of it, Morgana," Arthur said, tartly. "Geoffrey wasn't likely to change it just to surprise me."

Morgana quirked a smile at that, and then to his surprise she pulled him into a hug. But this was the first time he had spoken with her since his return, and so he softened and hugged her back.

"I'm glad you're home," she whispered. When she pulled back, she was shy from the vulnerability of the gesture, and quickly reverted to her usual stubborn posture. But Arthur wondered just what had compelled her, and guessed it was her nightmares. They must be worse than usual to have upset her to the point of needing comfort from him, something she usually treated as beneath her.

He didn't press her about the nightmares. Morgana hated weakness, especially her own, and wouldn't like them being discussed on anything but her own terms, and certainly not in such a public place. It was something else that he would have to talk to Gaius about, once the situation with Merlin was sorted out. He hated to see her in such a bad way. She was so proud, and had such a fire to her, and to see it slowly doused was a sorrowful thing.

"I barely recognized you at first," Morgana continued, voice sharp again. "I'd forgotten what you looked like without Merlin trailing after you."

"Is he all right?" Guinevere asked, her concern directed away from Morgana and towards Merlin. "He said that he was really looking forward to ceremony."

They both looked to him expectantly, and Arthur mentally sighed. It was bad enough when the knights or his father asked where Merlin was. But Morgana and Guinevere had been privy to their relationship before it had even started. They had been there through it all, good times and bad, and they would not simply accept the idea that Merlin had been too tired to attend.

"We had a talk last night," Arthur said, coming up with a plausible lie, one that was grounded in
truth. The best lies alway were. "He was more upset about what happened than he wanted to let on."

"What did happen?" Morgana pressed. "Gwen said that he promised to come by and tell us all the juicy details."

Arthur glanced around them and then leaned in, lowering his voice. "He fought as a knight. Impressed everyone, in fact. But he's upset about having to give it all up again and go back to being just a servant. Attending the ceremony would only have upset him more."

He saw them accept the lie, saw the empathy in Morgana and the sympathy in Guinevere.

"Perhaps we should go visit him now, cheer him up?" Guinevere suggested, brightening.

"No," Arthur said, a little too quickly. "I mean, not yet. He needs some time to get used to being home. Before he's ready to talk about what happened."

"Of course," Morgana said, understandingly. One of the surprises of their group training sessions had been how close Morgana and Merlin had grown. Arthur would not have expected that they would have enough in common, and yet they had connected in some significant way. They had been quite a sight, sparring together, the both of them quick and dark and lithe. Even Guinevere had been transfixed as they sat together and watched.

Despite all their differences, they had seemed almost two of a kind, and Arthur had felt a surge of genuine jealousy at their sudden closeness. He had held Merlin's attention and devotion so entirely in the woods, it had been a shock to see it turned elsewhere, and to Morgana of all people. It was the same way he had felt when he had watched Merlin with the knights in those early days of their training, when Merlin's arm had still been healing. He had felt it again in Gedref, and it had, along with other factors, driven him to mark Merlin even more blatantly as his own. His heart clenched to think about that now, and he pushed the memories aside.

"But don't think that litany that you had Geoffrey read out is any substitute for what you have to tell us," Morgana continued, smirking knowingly. "We want the unpolished version. The one that's actually true, not the one that's been all neatly arranged so it's easily swallowed."

"When Merlin is up to it, you can interrogate us together," Arthur promised. Even as he said it, as he thought about all the things that hadn't been spoken of, an idea came to him.

"Was that what you two were arguing about last night?" Guinevere asked, evidently still concerned.

"Arguing?" Morgana asked, brow furrowing.

Arthur clenched his jaw. "This really isn't the best place to discuss it," he said, putting weight behind the words.

Morgana understood before Guinevere did, but when she did she let out a little gasp. "Oh, of course. Sorry, sire."

"Don't be sorry, Gwen," Morgana soothed. "That just means that Arthur has even more to tell us than we already thought."

Arthur glared at her, but he could not deny that he was privately relieved to see that she had not lost all her spark to nightmares and sleeping draughts. It would take more than that to crush a spirit like Morgana's, and he was proud of her for that.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I have a full schedule ahead of me," Arthur said.
"Will Merlin be with you later?" Guinevere asked, clearly eager to see him. "Even if he's not ready to talk, I'm sure he'd appreciate it if we said hello." She really was amazingly persistent.

"He was up all night so he's sleeping now," Arthur said, hoping that would finally be enough to ward her off. "I gave him the day off to rest. I'm certain he'll be back to normal tomorrow."

"Poor Merlin," Guinevere said, as if Merlin was an undernourished kitten with a sore paw. Arthur could actually imagine Guinevere picking up Merlin-kitten and wrapping him in a warm blanket. It was disturbingly adorable. He blinked to clear away the vision.

"Tomorrow, then," Morgana said, reigning Guinevere back but also making it clear that she would not tolerate Arthur's delaying tactics for very long. Morgana might have accepted what she had been told, but she was far too experienced with court and all that came with it. If Merlin was still unreachable to her tomorrow, she would barge her way in to see him. Like Merlin, she did not let anything as simple as a locked door stand in her way.

When Arthur at last pried himself away, he found that the time their conversation had taken meant that most of the knights had already left. No matter; it would be better to talk to them in private as well, so he would track them down later. In the meantime, it was his turn to ask the questions again, and he knew just the person to ask them to. After all, there was more than one prisoner beneath the castle. He did not want to risk the dragon, but he realized now that there was in fact someone else to talk to about Merlin and about magic. Someone who had far more motivation to be truthful to him.

It was time he paid a visit to Lord Idriys.
One of the pieces of information that Arthur had declined to pass on to his father was that Idriys had intended to betray Alined and keep Gedref for himself. As a noble, and as Alined's trusted cousin, Lord Idriys was a valuable asset. If Alined knew of that intended betrayal, it would lessen his worth and perhaps even eliminate it. And if that happened, not only would Camelot lose a significant source of leverage against Alined, but Idriys himself would likely lose his life. He had, after all, attacked Camelot with sorcery. And even if he had not used it himself, he had commanded the use of it, and under the law was as guilty as Palaemon himself. That he had not already been executed was a testament to the fact that his nobility and his worth as a hostage outweighed his guilt.

But Arthur had also spared Idriys for other reasons. He had grown familiar with the man through his papers, reading them over and over in the days in the cavern until he knew the most important passages by heart. And Idriys intrigued him. He appeared to be a good man who had as much concern for his captives as he did towards his own people. He had forethought and skill in planning and in military action, and if not for Merlin, he might have even succeeded in becoming the new Lord of Gedref. And yet he openly used magic, and seemed unafraid of it, if respectful of its power.

In a way, Idriys had inspired him to be fearless himself. Idriys and Merlin both. In Gedref, Arthur had held them up as examples, that here were two men in opposition, with drastically different personalities and backgrounds, and yet both were unafraid of the magic that stood between them. Their calm had made his father's rage and paranoia about sorcery seem absurd and childish. And as Arthur had never felt comfortable in accepting that rage and paranoia as his own, he had at last discarded it so that like them, he could see clearly.

He no longer knew if that decision had been the right one. He knew now why Merlin had been unafraid of magic, and he wondered if perhaps Idriys had been affected as well. If he had been enchanted by Palaemon. If he had been enchanted by Merlin. Because despite all the revelations of the past day, he still did not know how Merlin had swayed Idriys into taking him on as his manservant, much less trusting him within the privacy of his chambers, after mere hours. Merlin's ramblings had included something about a chandelier, but that hardly explained anything. And if Idriys had been enchanted, could Merlin have used that same magic against Arthur himself? It was not a pleasant thought, but it was one he had to consider.

Merlin had not included the enchanting of Idriys in his long list of crimes. But if he had such a skill, he would have reason to hide it.

Perhaps the reason that Merlin felt so essential was because he had used his magic to force that feeling into Arthur's heart. Perhaps what Arthur thought was loyalty and love was merely an illusion, all a part of Merlin's desire to have Arthur remove the laws against magic when he became King. Because even if it had been the dragon who manipulated Merlin into believing the prophecy, Merlin held and acted under that belief, even now that the prophecy itself had been cast into doubt.

But now Palaemon was dead, and any enchantments he had placed upon Idriys should have died with him. And from the way Idriys had glared in mention of Merlin's name upon his capture, it was clear that he had no false affection towards him now. Yet Merlin had gone to Idriys on the journey home, spoken with him in private and intently. The guards had reported of the meeting in detail, concerned by its unusual nature and because Merlin had been agitated by it. Arthur had intended to ask Merlin about it once everything else was out in the open, but as he could no longer trust anything Merlin said, he had to turn to Idriys instead.

Despite his status and his value, Idriys had not been allowed any comforts since his surrender and
capture. Rather than speak with him right away, Arthur ordered that Idriys be allowed to bathe and shave, and that he be given fresh clothing to wear.

Once he was clean, Idriys was shackled and brought out of the dungeons and up to a private room. Platters of food were carried in and left upon the table. Arthur waited until the servants left, and then waved away the guards as well. Idriys was not fool enough to try anything, and even if he was Arthur could take care of himself.

Despite having only been fed porridge and bread for weeks, Idriys did not so much as glance at the meats and fruits and cheeses. Instead he kept his focus solely on Arthur as he locked the doors and sat down across from him. Arthur let him stew and took some food for himself. After all, it was lunch time.

"It's not poisoned," Arthur said, sliding one of the platters towards Idriys.

"I didn't think it was," Idriys replied. The man could keep his cool, that was certain. But he did betray himself in one way, when he glanced around and gave a small frown.

"Expecting someone?" Arthur asked, internally sighing. Even Idriys assumed that Merlin would be by his side. He gave up waiting and bit into a piece of cheese.

"Do you normally bring your manservant along for your interrogations?"

"With Merlin, I don't usually have a choice," Arthur replied.

Idriys couldn't entirely suppress his own amusement at that. It gave Arthur an odd feeling of camaraderie. After all, they had both had Merlin as their manservant, even if for Idriys it had been only briefly. He was probably the only other person in the castle who knew what that entailed, in both suffering and delight.

The thought that Merlin had seduced Idriys into trusting him only then occurred to Arthur. It entirely soured his appetite, and he pushed his own plate aside.

"Where is he now?" Idriys asked. If Arthur had not known better, he would have accepted Idriys' amiable tone, that he was merely asking out of some distant curiosity. But Arthur did know better, and he saw the interest and concern in Idriys' eyes.

"Tell me how you met him," Arthur replied, with the same amiable tone.

Idriys finally reached out and took a piece of fruit, chewed it slowly and swallowed. "I assumed he already told you."

"I'd like to hear your version."

Idriys took a sip of wine and settled back in his chair, making himself comfortable. "He appeared to be just another servant. And then he did something quite extraordinary. He risked his life to save my nephew from a falling chandelier."

So that was what the chandelier comment had been about. Merlin had made it fall, and then saved Aeddan's life in order to gain Idriys' trust, or at least his attention. Arthur could not help but be reminded of the first time Merlin had saved his life, when the chandelier had fallen on the disguised Mary Collins and broken her enchantment. Arthur had of course known that Merlin had pulled him out of the way of the knife, but he had not realized that the chandelier had been his doing as well. Had both been false rescues, or only the one?
"And that was enough to make you trust him?"

"Hardly," Idriys scoffed. "It was obviously a ploy. But I was curious. The people of Gedref would have been happy to see me dead, and this was far from their first attempt. I suspected that he had learned of the plan and decided to thwart it. I wanted to know why he went against the others." He took another bite of food, another sip of wine. "I pressed him for the truth, and he told a story about wanting a better life. It was believable enough, so I allowed him to clean my chambers, under supervision of course."

Arthur nodded. "And then?"

"He gave himself away," Idriys said, fondly. "I already suspected he was lying, but no stable boy knows how to polish boots as if they were a prince's. I was prepared to send him down to the cells, but he begged me to let him stay. He claimed his life was in danger, and told me a very sad story about losing his only friend, and being hated and alone. And the odd thing was, I actually believed him." Idriys looked directly into his eyes, as if looking for something. "Perhaps it was true in spirit."

Arthur took a sip of his own wine. "Or he's that good a liar." At least seduction had not been at all involved. He could take some solace in that.

"Perhaps. He swore his loyalty to me, and I believed that as well. But now I know that it was truly sworn, just not to me. Such complete loyalty is a rare thing. I hope you understand its worth."

"Why wouldn't I?" Arthur asked, with a growing suspicion.

Idriys shrugged and ate a few more bites of food.

Arthur considered his opponent. "Why did Merlin go to you on the journey from Gedref? What did you talk about?"

"He apologized for lying to me and abusing my hospitality," Idriys said. He chuckled. "You can imagine my astonishment. But he was genuine, once he no longer needed to lie for his King."

Arthur bit his tongue. It was clear that by King, Idriys meant Arthur and not Uther, and he could only have picked up on that from Merlin. It eased Arthur's fears somewhat that Merlin had held that foolish loyalty even when apologizing to an enemy.

"And that was all you talked about?" Arthur pressed. "He apologized, you accepted, and he left?"

Idriys glanced away, clearly reluctant to say what else had passed between them. "I made him an offer," he said, and met Arthur's eyes again. "One that still stands."

"Which is?"

"To make the lies true and swear himself to me," Idriys said, boldly.

It was Arthur's turn to scoff. "You actually want Merlin as your manservant?"

"If he is willing. If he is genuine. Any master would be fortunate to have such a servant, no matter what his talents."

The last word hung in the air between them. It was subtle, but it confirmed what Arthur already suspected. Idriys knew that Merlin was a sorcerer. Somehow he had found out, and now that he had lost Palaemon, he wanted Merlin to take his place. That must have been what their argument had been about, what had upset Merlin so. It certainly made more sense than the idea that Idriys simply
couldn't get enough of Merlin's talents at lying and boot polishing. Obviously Merlin had declined, but Idriys wanted him anyway.

"Tell me about Palaemon."

Idriys' private smirk revealed that not only did Arthur know that Idriys knew about Merlin, but Idriys knew that Arthur knew about Merlin. But neither of them wanted to be the first to admit it plainly, even alone together in a locked room.

"What would the Crown Prince of Camelot care to know about a sorcerer?" Idriys challenged. "Especially one he has already killed."

"I prefer to understand my opponents. It makes them easier to defeat."

"Then I see no reason why I should help you, if it means assisting you in defeating me a second time."

Arthur raised his eyebrows. "Are you actually planning another attack? After being so soundly defeated?"

"I admit I'm considering the possibilities," Idriys said, thoughtful. "It rather depends on you, and what forms of loyalty you find acceptable."

In other words, if Arthur rejected Merlin, Idriys would lay claim to him and make use of him. And as Merlin had been pivotal in Palaemon's defeat, Idriys believed that with his assistance, victory would be possible. Camelot would have no sorcerer to defend it, and Idriys would have one more powerful than he had in his first attempt.

Arthur had considered letting Merlin go. He had considered exile, even though it would be at cost to himself in many ways. But he saw now that if he broke Merlin from himself, he rejected the fealty that had been sworn and let him leave, there was a chance, however slim, that one day he would find himself meeting Merlin on the battlefield. And either outcome of that, his own defeat or Merlin's death, was unacceptable.

He reconsidered telling his father about Idriys' planned betrayal. Idriys' death would at least remove that option from Merlin's path. But there were many lords and kings in Albion who were willing to take advantage of a powerful sorcerer, if one could be found. His father had solved that problem by having most of them killed during the purge or shortly after. Palaemon himself had been found outside of Albion because there were so few truly battle-worthy sorcerers left within it. Certainly the powerful sorcerers Arthur had fought would have been useless, having been driven to wild violence by their corruption.

"What experience do you have of sorcerers?" Arthur asked, genuinely curious. "From what you wrote in your papers, Palaemon seemed quite sane, if poorly-natured."

"Why would he be anything but sane?"

"With so much power, I would expect his corruption to be far more advanced."

Idriys tutted. "Don't tell me you believe that ridiculous propaganda."

Arthur blinked at him. "Propaganda?"

"Alined is no great king, hardly even a good one. But he has always had enough spine to him to reject Uther's lies."
"Are you calling my father a liar?" Arthur asked, astonished at his gall.

"You do not strike me as a man who blindly accepts what he is told. And yet you have never questioned this notion of corruption?"

"I have seen it with my own eyes," Arthur said, firmly. "Time and time again, this kingdom has been attacked by maddened sorcerers. Once the corruption has hold of them, they care nothing for the damage they do to others. They attack indiscriminately, and the only thing that stops them is their own deaths."

"And how many sorcerers have you met outside of Camelot?" Idriys challenged. "Or has your father succeeded in his lies to you only because he has kept you isolated?"

"You should guard your tongue, lest you lose it along with the rest of your head," Arthur warned, angrily. He was not some sheltered child who knew nothing of the world. He had been to many kingdoms, both in war and in diplomatic visits, and never once seen a powerful sorcerer that was free of corruption. But beneath his anger lay his own frustrations, his own doubts. Merlin's presence in his chambers defied everything he had been taught about sorcery, everything he had learned from hard experience. And now this man, this enemy, who had openly stated his desire to attack a second time, was trying to divide him from his father on the matter most vital to Camelot's defense.

"My apologies," Idriys said. "I had hoped, for Merlin's sake, that he was right about you. Should I expect his company in the cells tonight, or is he already dead?"

And there it was. "He is no concern of yours," Arthur said, tersely. "Do not think you can use him as you did Palaemon."

"It is not likely that I could, at least not as long as you live. In his own words, his place is by your side, and no threat or bribery or danger will take him away from you. My concern is that you will take him away from this world, perhaps with your sword."

Arthur breathed in sharply, the weight of the enchanted sword heavy against his hip. He had come so close to doing just that, and had no choice but to keep the blade intact until it was no longer a necessary option. "I will do what I must to keep my kingdom safe," he said, tightly. "Perhaps you do not understand that, as you were willing to abandon your own lands for a claim on Gedref."

"Arrangements had been made," Idriys replied. "You forget that Alined is my cousin. Had I claimed Gedref, I would have given him my old lands as a succor. That is hardly abandonment."

"Yet minutes ago you called him hardly even a good king."

"Hardly a good king is still better than a bad one."

"And now you call my father a bad king?" Arthur asked, outraged.

"What else do you call a tyrant who slaughters his own people?"

Arthur gaped at him, then narrowed his eyes. "I have treated you with hospitality, and you have insulted me and insulted my father. Magic is a blight and it will be purged from this land. When I am King, I will finish what my father began. Do not doubt that I can."

"I do not doubt it," Idriys said, quietly. "That is what worries me. And it is why I worry for Merlin."

"As I told you before, he is no concern of yours," Arthur said, anger cooling but no less potent within him. "He has placed his life in my hands, and I will decide what his fate will be. I assure you
that it will never lead him to you."

"As you say."

Arthur stood, ending the conversation. "I will instruct the guards to allow you to finish your meal. After that, you will be taken back to your cell, and you will remain there until Alined has paid the price for your release. Tell anyone what we spoke of today, and I will inform my father and Alined of your intention to keep Gedref for yourself, and you will find yourself dying a traitor's death. Is that clear?"

"Entirely," Idriys said, evenly. He held Arthur's gaze without fear or flinch, until Arthur was forced to break it.

Arthur unlocked the door and gave the guards their instructions, and then marched away. Only once he was alone did he allow himself to feel the depths of his anger and frustration.

The conversation had not gone as he had wanted it to go. It was clear that Idriys would not listen to warnings of corruption or enchantment as he believed both to be false, based on lies instead of hard-earned truth. And because of that, his words could not be trusted. They would either be founded on lies or on the illusions that the magic fed him. More and more he understood his father's attitude towards magic. The slipperiness of it all, the way it made him doubt and gave him no way to confirm or refute those doubts. Perhaps the only way to deal with magic was simply to destroy it, all the way down to the smallest enchantment. Perhaps no sorcerer could be saved, even after the performance of a single spell.

Yet every time he tried to accept that, his thoughts were carried right back to Merlin. Merlin, whose existence and nature defied everything Arthur knew about sorcery. Merlin, who had accepted the sacrifice of his own life if Arthur chose to take it, even when he had more than enough power in him to escape at any moment. Merlin, who knelt in unconditional fealty over and over, who wanted nothing more than to serve and to help Arthur become not only King, but High King of all Albion. How could such power exist in combination with such innocence? How could someone born with magic live so long without corruption consuming his soul with blackness and rage? And why would any sorcerer of such power submit himself?

The only thing that even began to explain it was that Merlin was unlike any other sorcerer. As much as Arthur could trust anything anymore, he believed that Gaius was telling the truth when he said that Merlin was different, special in some remarkable fashion. He found himself trying to recall the exact wording of the prophecy Merlin had rattled off to him. How had it gone? 'The time of magic will return. The Emrys and the once and future king will rise. And all of Albion will bow to them.' Arthur did not have much experience with prophecies, but upon reflection he realized that this one was actually quite vague. It didn't say that they would bring back magic, it said that magic would already have returned. That must have been the dragon's interpretation. No, it made far more sense -- assuming the prophecy meant anything at all -- if their rise was to defeat magic rather than to aid it. Merlin had often insisted that he had been in some way born for Arthur, to protect him and be used by him. Perhaps that instinct was correct. Perhaps Merlin had been destined for him, and that was why he was so different from all other sorcerers.

Arthur shook his head. It made as much sense as anything did, which wasn't much. It was a slender thread on which to hang his hopes. But it was better than grabbing for empty air. He had never realized how exhausting uncertainty was, how perilous it made everything feel. He was used to making decisions based on experience and knowledge, on numbers and facts. A kingdom could not be ruled by guesswork, not when every cup of grain meant the difference between life and death for someone. It was not that he did not know how to adapt to change, but how could he even begin to
know the right course to take when he had no idea of where he was even standing?

It was no wonder that Merlin clung so desperately to the prophecy. It was all he had to explain himself and give him purpose. It was no wonder he had never been happy until those brief days in Gedref, when he had finally felt like he belonged, when the doubt and fear had fallen away from his eyes. The shock of empathy Arthur felt was like a key to finally solving the puzzle that Merlin was. To live his whole life in such confusion, to have no true understanding of himself, to have no set purpose, no guidance... it was so entirely alien to Arthur's own life, which was filled with guidance and purpose and clarity from the very moment of his birth.

Despite what he had said to Idriys, and before him to Gaius and to Merlin, Arthur felt less and less certain that he could go through with Merlin's execution. Perhaps it was an enchantment swaying him, or perhaps he had simply waited too long and his courage was failing. But as his panic ebbed away, the absurdity of such an act became more and more obvious. They had lived together for over a year, and been lovers for months. If Merlin was a danger to him, if he had ever been a threat, Arthur would have been dead a hundred times over by now. In fact, Merlin would not have had to do anything at all, but merely step aside and let some other sorcerer or magical beast succeed. But time and again, Merlin had put his own life at risk for the sake of others. Perhaps the reason Arthur could not reconcile the Merlin he loved with the corrupted sorcerer was that Merlin had never been corrupted at all.

But still. He could not let Merlin walk freely, not when he could use his magic and be discovered using it. Even if Merlin's soul was not at risk, his life certainly was. Merlin's innocence might have disguised him thus far, but it also meant he was a danger to himself. Arthur only had to look at the conversation with Idriys to see that. Or Merlin's many moments of noble idiocy. The consequences of his father finding out were far too terrible to ignore.

Even if he could not face the prospect of executing Merlin, nothing else had changed. If it could not be removed, then Merlin's magic had to be contained. Once it had been stopped, Arthur could finally begin to eliminate his doubts. He would know for certain what was Merlin and what was his magic, and if either of them could be trusted.

When Arthur looked up at last, he realized that his wandering footsteps had carried him back to his chambers. He had promised to check on Merlin around this time, and now here he was. He stared at the door and uncertainty grew in him again. When he opened it, what would he find on the other side?

He braced himself and opened the door. It swung away with a slight creak, revealing the dimly lit chambers within. The curtains were still drawn against the daylight, but enough light filtered through to show that Merlin was in the bed, just as Arthur had left him. He closed the door quietly behind him and walked silently towards the bed. Merlin was indeed asleep, deeply so from the slackness of his features and the even rise and fall of his chest.

Arthur had often found himself watching Merlin sleep. In the mornings, when Merlin would turn away from any disturbance and refuse to rouse. At night, when Merlin would collapse from exhaustion from a hard day's training or a particularly energetic bout of sex, or both. Arthur could not deny that there was a part of him that loved to push Merlin as hard as he could, because it was fascinating to watch as Merlin struggled and strained and then ultimately overcame each challenge. There was almost a rhythm to it, especially when they had been alone together in the woods. A strange, clumsy sort of grace, fuelled by a seemingly endless well of determination. And then at the end of each day, when Merlin would be too tired for his usual insistent push and pull, and he would be easy and pliant and intoxicatingly trusting. Arthur had been afraid of becoming drunk on Merlin's trust, and he had succumbed despite himself. Even when he was asleep, Merlin effortlessly battered
at every one of Arthur's walls and rules and certainties about what should and should not be.

He had watched Merlin sleep in Gedref. That first night, when Merlin had returned from what had seemed to be his certain death, bundles in his arms and a weary smile on his face. That smile had been struck away when Arthur hit him, an action that Arthur regretted with the same immediacy as every other time he had hurt Merlin. Even now, with all the complications and perils, Arthur felt a heavy regret at all he had done, at the threats he had made. Every time he hurt Merlin, it felt like a piece of his own soul was being ripped away, no matter which of them was the sorcerer.

That night, he and the knights had gone through Idris's papers, and Arthur had felt awed and ashamed. Merlin had done so much for them, at such risk, and they had repaid him with mistrust and anger. And as the sun rose, he had sat outside the small, dark room that Merlin was huddled within, and wanted more than anything to see Merlin's weary, hopeful smile. He knew that he would do whatever it took to repair the damage he had done, and swore to himself yet again that that had been the last time.

But as before, he had broken that promise again.

He had watched Merlin sleep after the battle and been absolutely terrified that he would not wake again. Guilt had wracked him then, too. Guilt that he had brought Merlin to this place, that he had put him at risk in so many ways, that he had allowed lies to sit silently between them out of some misguided anger that Merlin did not trust him enough to tell him that he was secretly fighting magic with Gaius. Arthur was the Crown Prince, the one with experience, the one with all the power. That's what he had told Merlin, when Merlin had fretted on Arthur's behalf. If something needed to be aired, he should have taken responsibility and aired it, and not waited for Merlin to gather up whatever mountain of courage he required. If Arthur had said something after Terit, would things have played out differently? At the very least, he would not have wagered his entire reign on Merlin's worth. But perhaps then things would have gone worse for them both, because he had not yet trusted Merlin enough to risk keeping him despite his magic.

Arthur looked away from the dark smudges of Merlin's lashes, the lax pout of his lips. Merlin's hands were still stained from the herbs and poultices he had used when he'd helped Gaius with the wounded. He'd spent hours on end patiently changing bandages and cleaning wounds, all with a friendly, caring smile. How could Arthur doubt Merlin's soul? How could it all be false? If Merlin was false, how could anyone be judged real? How could Arthur live with himself, knowing that he had come so close to killing the man he loved, and more than once?

If Merlin had been asleep that morning, if Merlin had not been awake to persuade him otherwise, Arthur would have gone through with it. Would have cleaved Merlin's head from his shoulders just as he had Palaemon's. As he had other sorcerers before him. That was all Arthur knew to do with sorcerers. Arrest them or execute them. That was all his father had taught him.

How could he accept a sorcerer into his heart? How could a sorcerer love him back?

Idris could not be right. Sorcery was dangerous and corrupting. Magic had to be defeated and purged from the people and the land. If Merlin contradicted everything he understood about magic and sorcery, then it was because Merlin was an exception. A single exception was not enough to break a law. It did not change anything, certainly not when Merlin himself had fought against and destroyed sorcerers and magical creatures. Merlin's own actions made a lie of any claim that magic was neutral or even good. If magic was good, Merlin would not have spent the past year and a half destroying it in defense of the kingdom.

Arthur silently promised Merlin that he would not fail him again. That he would take full responsibility for him as he should have from the start. He would take care of Merlin and keep him
safe, even from himself. Once Merlin was released from the burden of his magic, he would understand and accept that he was better off without it. He would help Arthur in its destruction and then he would be free of it, and with his help the kingdom would be free of it. And then perhaps even all of Albion would be, too, and united in its freedom. He could still give Merlin the future that he longed for, that he believed in so fervently, where he did not have to suffer in fear and silence. He could still give him that.

He removed his crown and stepped away from the bed, to change from his formal clothes to something more suitable for the rest of the day and for dinner with his father. Unlike Merlin, he could not afford to rest.

§

The magical vaults were rarely accessed. The first time Arthur was inside them, it had been a part of his lessons, as his father and Geoffrey had shown him the most dangerous objects. The second time was when he was old enough to be given responsibility for the castle keys, which was a great honor that he still took extremely seriously. He had keys for all the important vaults and rooms, and would be held accountable for any breaches of security. In all the years that he had held those keys, security had not been breached.

Until now.

There was nothing illegal in what he and Gaius were doing. Arthur had every right to enter the vault and access its contents. He had informed the guards that they would be making an inventory and that they were not to be disturbed, and of course the guards had no reason not to believe him. The Crown Prince and the Royal Physician and Councilor could not be targets of suspicion. And there was nothing wrong with doing an inventory, especially as one was currently lacking. But to remove any item from the vault required permission from the King, and Arthur had no intention of asking for such permission.

The vault was covered in dust and cobwebs, a testament to the years that the objects within had lain untouched. Arthur knew that most of the items had been confiscated by his father during the Great Purge. All the items in the vault had been used for sorcery in some manner, even the innocuous goblets and vases, which had probably held some kind of magical potions or enchanted oils. He used to wonder what the point was in keeping it all, if magic was so evil. Having seen the result of the destruction of Palaemon's ring, he understood now why his father had left the items intact. The more powerful the enchantment, the more dangerous it would be to destroy it.

But most of the objects were a mystery to him. He knew the most dangerous, the ones that would be the most tempting targets, such as the Crystal of Neahtid. And then there were the ones that he himself had added recently, such as the Mage Stone that had been taken from the body of the sorcerer Tauren, who had brutally attacked his father and Morgana at her father's grave, and the amber necklace found upon the neck of Mary Collins. He pulled Palaemon's ring from his pocket and examined it against the light of his torch. It was set with a blue gemstone. It seemed that crystals and magic went hand-in-hand.

He saw that Gaius was watching him with curiosity, peering to get a better look at the ring, and Arthur handed it over.

"What do you make of it?"

Gaius frowned thoughtfully. "This was used by Palaemon?"

"It strengthened his magic," Arthur explained. "Is it dangerous?"
Gaius handed it back. "Not anymore. It could be repaired, but only if it was returned to Rome."

"Why?"

"All magic is tied to the land of its origin," Gaius said, with obvious reluctance. "With Palaemon
dead, it has no connection to its source."

This was the first time Arthur had ever heard of such a relationship. "Is that why some enchantments
are released when the sorcerer dies, and some persist?"

"There are many kinds of spells, and some are lightly bound. Others can persist for hundreds,
thousands of years."

"But they can be broken with fire." Arthur knew that much.

"Only as long as it was not created using fire magic." Gaius gave him back the ring.

Arthur blinked. "Fire magic?"

Gaius sighed. "I suggest that this is not the time for an extensive education on magic."

"Then when would be the time?" Arthur asked, annoyed.

Gaius gave him a pitying look. "You wished to find something that will contain Merlin's magic?"  

"Yes," Arthur said, deciding to take it as a reminder to stay focused, rather than as a veiled insult. 
Merlin was the first priority for all of this. His own understanding about magic would follow after.

"Then let us see what might be of use in all of this."

"I don't want anything that requires a spell," Arthur said, after a few minutes of poking around the 
shelves and feeling utterly lost.

Gaius looked up from the gold cuffs he had been peering at. "You wish to restrain Merlin's magic 
without the use of any enchantments?"

"Is that a problem?"

"It is an impossibility," Gaius said, eyebrow raised.

"I do not intend to break the law when the entire purpose of this is to prevent it from being broken," 
Arthur said, testily. "You can't tell me that with all the items here, none of them can be used without 
a spell."

"Some can," Gaius admitted. "But the majority of these objects were taken from the temples of the 
High Priestesses themselves. They were used for the focus and amplification of the magic of the user. 
For those that directly hold an enchantment, only the simplest can be used without being activated in 
some fashion."

Arthur drew his sword and held it up. "This sword holds an enchantment, and I can use it without a 
spell. The Deorham armor was enchanted, and it protected those without any magic."

"What you wish to do is far beyond anything as simple as enchanted armor. And as for that sword, 
the magic that created it is more powerful than any spell. It is not a toy to be waved about."

Arthur sheathed his sword again, feeling his temper rise. "If you already know so much about
everything here, then stop wasting my time and give me what I need."

"You would do well to clear your ears and listen for once," Gaius said, unrepentant.

"Listen to what?" Arthur asked, angrily. "To evasions and half-truths? I am lied to from all directions, the same as Merlin. It's listening to you that got us into this mess in the first place."

"If Merlin had listened to me, he would not have been so foolish as to tell you of his magic."

They glared at each other, but neither was willing to back down. Finally, Gaius turned away with a huff and went directly to a dust-covered chest at the far end of the vault. He pulled out two torcs and handed a silver one to Arthur. Arthur took it warily.

"What is this?"

"The only thing that will even come close to what you are looking for, without resorting to dark magic. And before you ask, such dark magic would absolutely require sorcery, and would likely damage Merlin in terrible ways. I hope you are not so determined in this that you would consider that acceptable."

"No," Arthur said, chastened. "I don't want to hurt him."

"There is no way to avoid hurting him as long as you continue to reject his magic," Gaius said, sternly. "The torc can be used to restrain him. It was used by the Blood Guard, the warrior priests who guarded the Old Religion. Silver torcs were worn by their apprentices, and because of the dangers of their inexperience, each torc is able to act as a restraint." He held up the gold torc. "This is the torc of a full Blood Guard. The wearer can activate the restraint of an apprentice, which prevents the apprentice from accessing their magic."

Arthur took the gold torc. "Do I have to wear this all the time?"

"No. You must wear it in order to give a command, but the command itself will persist until it is stopped."

"But it still requires a spell?"

Gaius nodded. "Because you have no magic, it will be necessary for Merlin to activate both torcs. This means that they cannot be used without his consent. If Merlin refuses, that is the end of the matter."

"But once they're activated, I can give the command and he'll have no way to stop it?"

"The command will persist."

"What if he just takes it off?"

Gaius took back the silver torc. The ends of it were flattened, and with a slight push they pressed together. "These torcs were worn as a symbol of great honor and power. They were meant to be worn constantly. The ends will fuse together as part of the restraint."

"Permanently?"

"Until you release the restraint. Keep in mind that it was never meant to be used as anything but a temporary measure. It will not damage him, but neither is it entirely pleasant."

Arthur started to feel another niggle of suspicion. "How exactly do you know all of this?"
Gaius declined to reply.

"Very well," Arthur sighed. "I'm expected for dinner with my father, and after that Merlin and I will use the torcs. I will allow you be there to assist. Until then, you may go."

"Sire," Gaius nodded, and with one last warning look, he took his leave.

Arthur watched him shuffle out of the vault, absolutely certain that Gaius knew far, far more than he was saying, and equally certain that he was using that knowledge to manipulate Arthur and Merlin both, for reasons he still refused to give. Gaius might be old and frail, but he was not the keeper of his father's secrets without reason. Gaius had already been past his prime when Arthur was a child, but he had a determination not dissimilar to Merlin's, which gave him a strength that sustained him even as great men faded and fell around him. Gaius would outlive his father, might outlive all of them, from the comfort of his chair by the fire, surrounded by his herbs and potions.

Arthur held the torcs up in the torchlight. It seemed that to save Merlin, he would have to use magic, however indirectly, and the prospect was entirely unsettling. And if Gaius did not trust him, Arthur did not trust him back. Merlin would likely accept the torcs with only token resistance, but Arthur needed to know more before he would even consider using them.

He hooked the torcs over the waistband of his trousers and then covered them with his shirt. Burdened now with four objects of magic, none of which he could hide in his chambers because it was occupied by a sorcerer, he locked the vault door and walked calmly past the guards, and headed for the library.
Dinner With Uther

As usual, Arthur arrived first to the dining room. Second, if he counted Louvel, his father's manservant, but Louvel hardly counted. The man was so utterly committed to his role that he rarely made eye contact, and rarely spoke unless directly questioned. Arthur had never understood how his father could actually enjoy having someone so stoic and impersonal as his constant company. In those first weeks after his father had given him Merlin, who proved to be entirely useless at every single one of his duties, his irrepressible insolence had been his one saving grace. But then his father didn't seem to want companionship, especially not from the lower classes.

Louvel had just finished lighting the candles when Arthur entered, and one by one he brought out the platters of food. As usual, the long table was filled with enough to feed twenty men: a whole ham, a large braided loaf of soft bread, several bowls of apples and pears, assortments of cheeses and grapes, and a variety of baked dishes. The center was set with two huge candlesticks, each with a fat candle that had a braided wick thick enough to make a flame that would brighten half the table. Arthur did not sit, but waited by his chair until his father arrived. His father sat first, and then Arthur, and Louvel bowed and filled his father's goblet.

Having been away for weeks, Arthur found himself considering their dinner with fresh eyes. They had had a feast in Gedref, of course, and there would soon be another as Camelot held its own celebration of the victory. But having spoken at such length about food concerns to Lord Wichard, the bounty set before them was almost comically overdone. Arthur himself rarely took more than a plateful, and his father drank more than he ate these days. But the food would not go to waste. Morgana had long ago instructed the kitchen staff to send what was left to the widows and orphans of the lower town, perhaps out of a sense of solidarity. And before that, the servants would have divided it amongst themselves.

And yet it bothered him now. He put the blame on the strain that soured his mood. It would be a vast understatement to say that the day had been trying, and it was far from over.

"Arthur," his father said, greeting him with a raise of his cup. Arthur returned the gesture as Louvel finished filling his own. He took a sip, and reminded himself to wave off Louvel's inevitable attempts to top him off. His father did not like his wine to be watered down. More than once, Arthur had bit back the urge to chide his father for overindulging, because if he did not drink so much, his health would not be so poor. But Arthur knew better than to say such a thing aloud.

Beyond the drink and the food, there was the table itself. To accommodate his father's preference for sumptuous displays, a long, narrow table had to be used. And of course as King, his father had to sit at the head, and as Prince, Arthur had to sit opposite. The result was a great distance between them, one that Arthur had alternately loathed and embraced, depending on if he and his father had been arguing that day. Morgana, when she joined them, would always be stuck in the middle, trapped with the monstrous candlesticks. It was no wonder that the two of them went out of their way to avoid such dinners now that they were old enough to do so. An intimate dinner with Merlin around the small table in his chambers was far more pleasant on a multitude of levels.

He missed Merlin now. Usually when they were instructed to attend, they would end up in a competition: Merlin doing whatever he could to make Arthur smile, and Arthur doing whatever he could to keep a straight face, lest his father realize that Merlin was goofing about just out of his line of sight.

Merlin was probably awake by now. Even at his laziest, he would not sleep for this long. All Arthur could do was hope that Merlin would obey and stay where he had been put. He felt the weight of his
enchanted sword, of the sorcerer's ring in his pocket, of the two torcs hanging from his waist along with his keys. Though the solution Gaius had given him was clearly not sufficient for what Arthur truly wanted to achieve, it was better than nothing. The situation otherwise would be untenable.

"It's unfortunate that Morgana is still too ill to join us," his father said, at last initiating the conversation. "Gaius has been keeping me apprised of her condition. These latest nightmares..." He shook his head.

"She looked better at the ceremony this morning," Arthur said. He had hoped that her appearance meant that she was on the mend, but perhaps not. Unless she was simply using it as an excuse to avoid another uncomfortable dinner.

"She's a brave girl," his father said, with a morose affection. "I only hope that he can find a cure for her soon. Perhaps once he has an assistant again, he will have enough time to dedicate to her treatment."


"When you're finished with him, of course," his father said, and took a gulp of wine. "I've prepared the list you asked for." He pulled a folded parchment from his jacket and handed it to Louvel, who carried it solemnly to Arthur and handed it over.

Arthur did not want to look at the list. He left it on the table, still folded. "Gaius says he'll be fit to work tomorrow. Is there any particular reason that I should hurry my decision?"

"No," his father said, dragging out the word in such a way that it meant 'yes, but not so much that I'm going to make it an order. Yet." "But it's as I said this morning. Your victory in Gedref, the way you've handled yourself since you came home. It's time you began preparing to step into a larger role."

Arthur stared in surprise. "You want to prepare me for a regency."

"I have a few good years left in me," his father said, with a smirk. "But the best thing for the kingdom is a smooth transition. The kingdom is at peace and the situation with Alined will be resolved shortly. Things will be quiet once the harvest is over. It will be the perfect opportunity."

Arthur could hardly believe it. All that he had strained and raged at how his father constantly held him back and kept things from him, all that his father clung to the isolation of his rule. Arthur had only been Crown Prince for a year, and now he was to be groomed into his role as Prince Regent? "Why now?"

"While you were gone, an assassin was caught leaving your chambers."

Arthur straightened, shocked. "What!"

"He arrived shortly after you left," his father continued, his casual tone belied by the anger in his eyes. "He was captured and interrogated. He confessed that he had been sent by Odin, in revenge for the death of his son. I sent my reply to Odin in the form of the assassin's corpse."

Arthur leaned back in his chair. "Prince Aegir." He remembered his meeting with King Odin's son very clearly. It had only been a few years prior, at a spring tournament. Aegir had challenged him outside of the tournament and refused to back down, out of some need to prove himself. Arthur had not meant to kill him, but he had had no choice but to defend himself, and Aegir refused to withdraw until he had already sustained mortal injuries. Gaius had been unable to save him, and his body had been sent back to Magonset, Odin's kingdom. It seemed Odin had not taken the loss kindly.
"If our army had not already been occupied with Alined's incursion, I would have sent them to Odin. He must be made to pay for his actions."

"No," Arthur said, unwilling to become the cause of more war, more bloodshed. "We should send an envoy. We must try and make peace with him."

"He tried to kill you!" his father said, pounding his fist on the table, his anger flaring now. "We must strike back!"

"And if we do so, how many other sons will be killed?" Arthur argued. "How many other fathers will be consumed with pointless revenge? Surely you understand the grief he feels for the loss of his son. It helps no one to compound his loss with the losses of others."

His father stared at him, and at first it seemed that his words had had no effect. But then he sat back, oddly chastened. "Perhaps you are right," he admitted. "And we can afford to be generous, as you were unharmed." He took a deep drink from his cup, and Louvel obediently refilled it.

Arthur breathed out in relief. An assassin. He would never have thought that he would have his life saved by being sent off to an unexpected battle. "How did he get in?"

"Bribery," his father said, with distaste. "The guard responsible has been executed. If we had not already been on high alert, the assassin might have escaped and headed down to Gedref after you. It was Sir Leon who cornered him, after several others had already been killed."

"Ah," Arthur said, allowing himself a sip from his own cup. That explained Leon's sudden promotion. A reward for saving the Prince's life. His father did have a tendency towards that sort of thing. No doubt the matter had been hushed up, which was why it had not been mentioned during Leon's promotion.

They ate in silence for a while, both caught up in their thoughts.

"I've been considering your request."

"My request?" Arthur asked, confused.

"Regarding your knights." His father took another drink. "There may be some merit to the idea of keeping them together. From your report, they were remarkably effective, considering their inexperience."

His father had surprised him again, but this time Arthur had an idea of what was behind the change. "To accompany me on any future excursions?"

"Exactly," his father said, pleased that Arthur understood.

"As my bodyguards," Arthur guessed, unenthused. "I can take care of myself," he said, already bristling from the extent to which Merlin had been set to the same task. How could he prove himself as a worthy leader if he was not allowed to fight his own battles?

"Of course you can," his father soothed. "It is not a matter of your ability."

"Then what is it a matter of?" Arthur asked, annoyed. "How can I expect men to follow me if I cower behind the lives of others?"

"We have been over this before," his father said, his patience wearing thin. "You are my only son and heir. I cannot risk losing you."
"I do not intend to fall," Arthur replied, evenly. "You have always told me that strength must be tested, tempered as any steel. I will accept both your offers but only on my own terms. The knights will be kept as a unit, but they will go where I send them, and will accompany me only when I chose it. And I will prepare to become Regent, because that is what is best for the kingdom."

His father stared at him for a long moment, almost shocked. And then his mouth crooked into a smile. "There are times when I look at you and still expect you to be the boy who sat upon my knee. But you truly have become a man."

Arthur had the feeling that he had passed some unspoken test. "Thank you, Father," he said, stiffly.

His father's smile widened, and he took an enthusiastic bite of his meat. As he gazed upon Arthur, his smile softened into something fonder. "Your mother would have been so proud to see you now."

Surprise after surprise. His father rarely mentioned his mother, much less so openly. "Do you think so?" he asked, sounding small and uncertain to his own ears. He knew so little about her, except that she had died giving him life.

"I do." His father quieted, and the sadness came over him as it always did when his mother was discussed. The one thing that Arthur was certain about was that the pain of her loss had been enormous, and that it had not faded in over twenty years.

But before Arthur could muster the courage to ask even one of the questions that had always plagued him, his father rallied. "But enough of the past. Let us discuss the future. Deorham's future."

Arthur took another sip. "What are you considering?"

"To put an end to our particular gnat," his father said, eyes narrowing with intent. "Alined has overreached himself with this latest maneuver. His messenger arrived this morning, saying that he is already on his way here. We must use this opportunity to stop him for good."

"And how do we do that?" Arthur asked, taking a bite of his food. Strategizing did tend to work up his appetite. "Once he pays the ransom, assuming he can afford it, he'll be back to his old tricks next year. He'll just bide his time until the treaty summit." War was a game for men like Alined, a way to jockey for position and move the border a few feet one way or the other. Men like Alined did not deserve to call themselves kings.

"What do you think of this Idriys fellow? You spoke with him today. Could he be... directed?"

Arthur frowned. He was not surprised that his father knew of the visit. The castle guards were fully employed as his father's spies as well as his protectors. That was why he had spoken to Idriys alone. "You wish to use him against Alined?"

His father leaned back in his chair and finished off another cup of wine. "Tell me my options."

It was a game from his childhood lessons, one they had not played in many years. His father would present a problem and Arthur would have to lay out all the possible solutions, and the benefits and costs and consequences of each. They began with old battles and various examples from the histories, and eventually analyzed the problems that his father himself faced. It was how Arthur learned the strategies and tactics he employed regularly. But the consequences of this discussion would not be confined to the abstract.

"All right," Arthur said, applying himself to the problem of Alined. "Reason, manipulation, intimidation, subterfuge, and war. We can exclude reason and war. Alined is not interested in peace for its own sake, and to invade Deorham now would carry a great cost with no certain benefit."
"And the three options that remain?"

Manipulation, intimidation, subterfuge. They were not the noblest of choices, but being a king was largely a matter of constant compromise. They were certainly better than war, which was a form of honorable combat largely composed of needless death and atrocities.

"Manipulation with bribery," Arthur began. "Bloodless but expensive, and Alined has too much pride to accept. He would rather risk open warfare than hold a position of weakness. And he would see such an offer as a sign of weakness in Camelot, which would only encourage him to strike again, likely using our own gold against us."

"Well-considered." His father was genuinely interested in his opinion. It was quite a novel experience. "Continue."

"As you suggested, use Idriys against Alined, either as a spy or as a saboteur. But I do not think that Idriys is the sort of man who is willing to be directed." That Idriys had shown disloyalty might make him appear to be a good candidate for such a scheme, but he had betrayed Alined in an attempt to escape the rule of others. And Arthur could not see him swearing loyalty to Camelot when he had already shown such disregard.

"Then you do not think he would be amenable to a coup? He might be willing if it elevates him to the crown."

"Even if he was, Deorham is already in a fragile condition. The cost to us would be minimal, but without the support of the people it could result in civil war. Especially if our part in it was made known. The south would be in chaos."

"That is unfortunate," his father said, with some disappointment. "But again, I cannot fault your reasoning. We are left with only one choice."

"Intimidation," Arthur considered. "A show of force. Are you considering something more than a treaty?"

His father smiled, pleased. "He cannot afford to pay the full ransom. He no doubt intends to try and negotiate us to a lower amount. I propose a counteroffer: that we allow him the return of all his men, for a token cost. In exchange, he and his court will swear fealty to the crown of Camelot."

Arthur blew out a breath. It was a bold move. "And Deorham becomes a vassal state." Alined would keep his crown, his gold, and his lands. But the loyalty of the Deorham would be subsumed into a greater loyalty to Camelot. That would make it politically impossible for Alined to act against them.

"His nobles and his army would become ours," his father continued, eagerly. "It will push our border south, and we will collect a portion of the taxes."

"It means that we will have territory vulnerable to the Saxons," Arthur cautioned.

"Then we fortify their southern border. Our men are better trained, better armed. Their people will be better defended, as will ours."

Between the rout at Gedref and Alined's low treasury, there was every chance that they could actually pull it off. It would be bloodless, Alined would be neutered as a threat, and it would be entirely above board. Best of all, it would benefit both Camelot and Deorham.

"Then you agree that this is our course?"
"I agree," Arthur decided. "But Alined will not submit without a significant show of force."

"I made arrangements with Lord Godwyn in case the situation in Gedref deteriorated. Our combined armies should be more than enough to sway Alined into seeing sense."

Lord Godwyn was his father's closest ally. He had a small kingdom to the southeast, but it was well-protected with natural borders, and he had a standing army of high repute. It had been brought to their aid before, when Cenred had laid siege to their castle.

"Most importantly," his father continued, "once we have control of Deorham, it can be cleansed of sorcery. It's been used as a refuge for magic for too long. This latest attack shows how important it is that it be taken under our control."

Magic. Of course. They had come to the true reason behind his father's scheming. This was not the first time that his father had sought to stamp out magic from within a neighboring kingdom. It was one such effort that had sparked the war with Cenred in the first place, though his father had later declared Cenred's attack on Camelot to be an act of unprovoked aggression. His father's purge raids had extended into Cenred's kingdom, but that fact had not been included in the official histories. That had been a time when his father had still led such raids himself, and they had been brutal and unforgiving. Arthur had not been told much directly, and he had been too young to attend council. But rumors and whispers had reached him anyway.

Before Merlin's confession, even before Gedref, Arthur would have balked at his father's vehemence. He would have questioned the necessity of such extreme actions against a foe that was already on the retreat. But now he had a sorcerer in his chambers, full of magic that he was desperate to remove. Now he knew how powerful and dangerous magic could be, how insidious a threat it was.

"Then let us bend ourselves to it," Arthur said, firmly. "Once Alined submits, we will give them until the spring. Let the Lords of Deorham make a pilgrimage to us to swear their fealty and surrender their sons. I will train them into Knights of Camelot." A fresh source of noble sons. It was not the long-term solution that the elimination of the First Code would provide, but in the short-term, it would at last replenish their ranks to something close to full strength.

"Then we are in full agreement?" his father pressed. "You have no further concerns?"

"None." It had been a long time since they had been in complete agreement about anything. But there had been a time when his father had been strong and vital, and Arthur had been his most devoted servant. When Arthur had knelt in faithful submission to his King and been content. He saw that same emotion in Merlin and in his knights, and at times he envied them for it. To have a taste of such contentment now, when he was in the first steps of his elevation to ruling by his father's side, was entirely unexpected.

"I will need someone to lead the raids," his father continued, watching him intently. "I was thinking summer would be a good time. Once the fealty of the Lords is secured and the knights have been trained."

"Then I will lead them," Arthur said. "I will not allow sorcery to flourish in the south. But I will see to its removal in my own way." He would not rid Deorham of its magic with his father's bloody raids.

"The last time we spoke of raids, you were not in favor of them. May I ask what changed your mind?"
"That was against the Druids. They harbor magic, yes, but they are largely peaceful. There is no benefit to mindless slaughter against them, and I will not see such actions taken against the Deorham either."

"Sorcerers cannot be reasoned with," his father cautioned.

"That may be true," Arthur allowed. "But that is why I must increase my understanding of them and of the workings of magic."

His father took another drink. "And that is why you were in the vaults with Gaius today?"

Arthur had expected his father to bring that up. But he was ready for it. "And in the library with Geoffrey. It is also what I spoke with Idriys about. Based on my experiences with Palaemon, I wanted to understand the use of sorcery in battle."

"So that it could be used?" his father asked, clearly thinking of Arthur's interest in the enchanted mail of Uwen and Linette.

"So that it can be fought and destroyed," Arthur said, firmly. "As all magic must be destroyed."

His father blinked rapidly, suddenly quite affected. "My son," he said, proudly. "You have no idea how glad I am to hear you say this. I had feared for the future of our kingdom, but now I see that it will be secure."

Arthur felt rather affected himself. "I am glad that I could make you proud," he said, and meant it. For once he did not have to pretend to engage with his father, and it betrayed how alone their division had made him feel. Yes, he had Merlin, but until Gedref, he had not allowed himself to trust Merlin with such matters of importance, which was just as well. For all that he and his father disagreed, it wasn't until Merlin that Arthur truly began to pull away from him. Even if Merlin had not intended to manipulate, the result had been the same, confirming what his father had always told him: even a single word from a sorcerer could not be trusted. But in a way, he was equally indebted to Merlin for finally ridding him of the confusion that had plagued him for so long. It was clear to him that magic was evil and dangerous, and had to be dealt with accordingly.

Arthur took out the sheaf of folded papers from his jacket, and handed them to Louvel to pass on to his father.

"What are these?" his father asked, unfolding them.

"I mentioned yesterday that the effects of Palaemon were melted in Gedref's forge. It was only after the fact that I realized that it would be useful to know what their purpose had been, in case I ran across other sorcerers using the same types of items. I checked to see if there was anything like them in the vaults, and when that failed, I tried Geoffrey. I made drawings of the items as I remembered them so I could run them by you, as you have the most experience with sorcery."

In truth, Arthur had used the books Geoffrey had provided to make sketches of an assortment of magical items, of varying uses. Among them, he had included a drawing of Palaemon's ring and of a torc, with its details modified from the ones he carried with him. He had also made a guess at what Palaemon's globe had looked like, based on what Merlin had told him in the caverns.

"But the items have already been destroyed?"

"Completely."

His father nodded, and flipped through the papers with a thoughtful air. "You showed these to
"Gaius?"

"Not yet. I wanted to bring them to you first. I described some of them to Gaius, but without an inventory, it was difficult to determine if the vaults hold anything similar."

His father quirked a smile. "I'm certain that with these, he will be able to provide more information than I can."

"But you must have run across some of these yourself," Arthur pressed.

His father went through them again, and this time identified several of the objects that Arthur had copied from Geoffrey's books. He did not recognize the ring or the globe, but as they were from Rome, that was not surprising. And then they came to the torc.

"I haven't seen one of these in many years. And you say Palaemon had one?"

Arthur nodded. "He did not use it in battle, as far as I can tell. It was among his belongings. He seemed to be something of a collector."

"An eclectic one," his father said, with some amusement. "It's the torc of a Blood Guard. I expect he picked it up somewhere in his travels."

"You're not concerned by it?"

"They're useless on their own, and the Blood Guard were eliminated many years ago. We confiscated many of these torcs from them. Have Gaius check the vaults again, I'm certain he can find you some examples."

It was not as much as he had hoped, but the information was sufficient to confirm what Gaius had told him. At least with his father he finally had someone who had maintained enough distance from magic to be trustworthy.

He did not believe that Gaius was telling him the truth. Yes, Merlin might be different, and that did have to be taken into account. But for all that his father trusted Gaius, Arthur was beginning to truly question his loyalties. That he knew so much of the Old Religion, that he insisted so readily that magic could not be removed from sorcerers, it was possible that he was playing his father for a fool in some way. That was the folly of giving so much power to someone without any oversight. Gaius may have been lying to his father for years. Aiding magic. Perhaps that physician in Gedref was of concern after all. He already knew there was magic in Gedref because of what Merlin had said about the abandoned temple. And it was not far from where Anhora had taken them, for the tests after he had killed the unicorn. So close to the south, to Deorham.

Perhaps he had judged his father too harshly. With all that was against him, with so few to trust, it was no wonder that his father had ended up using sorcerers to destroy magic. Was it any different than allowing Merlin to wear the enchanted Deorham armor? Was he any different from Linette in her attempts to protect Uwen? It was not easy to be responsible for a kingdom's well being, and his father had boxed himself in with his own laws. Faced with his own impending use of a sorcerer against magic, he felt a sympathy that he had not that morning. But he could not tell his father that he knew about Gaius without endangering Merlin. Until Merlin's magic was completely removed, he would have to play along with the subterfuge.

His father handed the papers back to Louvel, who returned them to Arthur. Arthur folded them up, and added his father's list of potential manservants before tucking them back into his jacket.

They finished their meal with companionable silence and idle discussions of the more mundane
events that had occurred during Arthur's time away. When they bid each other goodnight, Arthur felt better than he had in a long time. His father was finally giving him the control he needed and the respect he craved, and together they had found the common ground to solve the problems that plagued them. Next spring, he would have a whole host of new knights to train. And in the summer, he and Merlin would travel south with their knights again, this time to rescue the south from its magic, just as they had saved Gedref from Palaemon's sorcery. There was only one obstacle to his goals, and that was the magic that Merlin harbored within himself.
For the second time that day, Arthur braced himself before opening the door to his own chambers. This time when he walked inside, he found that it was lit by candles and by the evening light, coming in through the uncovered windows. Arthur closed and locked the door behind him.

Merlin was awake and sitting at his desk, and when he heard Arthur come in, he looked up and gave a hopeful smile. As Arthur came closer, he realized that Merlin had been writing something, and that the result of his labors was an array of sealed letters.

"What's all this?" Arthur asked, keeping his tone casual. He set the plate of leftovers on the table for Merlin to eat later.

Merlin looked down at the letters. He scraped his teeth along his bottom lip as he gathered them into a stack. Arthur craned his neck and saw that the top letter had his own name written on the front.

"Something I had to do," Merlin said, quietly. "In case you couldn't find anything to 'help' me." The last was said with distaste, but it was quickly swallowed down beneath an acceptance born of desperation.

"Is that one for me?" Arthur asked, reaching for it.

"Not yet," Merlin said, covering it with his hand. "Hopefully not ever, but..." He met Arthur's eyes again, looking uncertain, hopeful, afraid, resigned. His eyes were blue and wide, his lashes clumped as if he had been crying not long before.

"Then tie them up with one of those ribbons," Arthur said, pointing to the roll of them that he kept for securing official documents together.

"Does that mean you found something?" Merlin asked, with equal parts hope and trepidation. He took a ribbon and tied the letters into a bundle, and knotted it so tightly it nearly bowed the paper.

"It does," Arthur said. He held out his hand. "If you want, I can put those somewhere safe. I promise I won't open them."

Merlin was gripping the bundle tightly, but after a moment of hesitation he handed it over. "I suppose I should make my last request now," he said, with a tremor to his voice. "I ask that you only read the letter that's for you. Give the others to who they're meant for."

"Merlin..."

"There's nothing in them that will harm you. Nothing about you. I just want to be able to say goodbye." Merlin wiped quickly at his eyes. "Please? Promise me that?"

"I promise," Arthur agreed. Given how much Merlin had cooperated thus far, and how much he was willing to sacrifice, it was the least Arthur could do for him. "But I will do everything I can do ensure that they are not needed."

Merlin nodded and swallowed, the bob of his throat rising and falling. "So what is it? What did you find?"

Arthur took the bundle over to the chest where he kept his tournament winnings and important papers and items, and opened it with a key from his belt. He put the bundle inside, and tossed
Palaemon's ring in as well before locking it again.

"These," Arthur said, pulling the torcs from his waistband as he stood. He handed them both to Merlin, who took them cautiously and then peered intently at them. "Have you ever seen anything like them before?"

Merlin shook his head. "What are they?"

"Torcs. They're a sort of necklace, but sturdy. Before the Romans, they were worn by chieftains and their warriors. These were worn by the Blood Guard, the warrior priests who guarded the Old Religion," Arthur said, repeating what Gaius had told him, the little he had found in the library, and what his father had confirmed.

Merlin looked intrigued, which was much better than looking resigned to his own execution. "The Old Religion? Like the High Priestesses?"

Arthur nodded. "They were worn as a symbol of great honor and power. The gold one is the torc of a full Blood Guard, and the silver is the torc an apprentice would wear."

Merlin traced the triskelion symbols that were engraved into both torcs. "Do we both wear one? Is that why there's two of them? How do they work?"

"One question at a time," Arthur said smiling despite himself. "Do you feel any spells in them?"

Merlin frowned at the torcs, and ran his fingers along the braided metal. The gold torc was heavier, and the ends terminated in loops, with the triskelion engravings just before each loop. The silver ended with the same engravings, and then flat ends that slightly flared. "Nothing," he said, puzzled. "Should there be something?"

"Gaius said we'd need a spell to use them. I was hoping that wasn't the case."

"A spell?"

"I think perhaps Gaius should explain. He's the one that found them for me. He's waiting in the hall, but I wanted to talk to you alone first."

From the way Merlin's mouth twisted into a frown, it was clear that Merlin was still angry with Gaius for lying to him and manipulating him. Arthur felt a moment of chagrin that what he was about to do was more of the same. He knew that it was wrong, that any lies between them were different from the lies of court. But if he told Merlin the truth, it was unlikely he would cooperate, and then Arthur truly would have no choice but to go through with the execution. And Merlin had been lying to him about so much more, and for so much longer. Arthur could not help but feel that he was justified. This was for Merlin's own good. Wasn't that what Merlin had always said to him? That he defied Arthur and lied to him for his own good, to protect him by destroying magic in secret, and with Gaius' help? There was a bitter satisfaction in returning the favor.

"All right," Merlin said, handing back the torcs and standing up from the desk. He took a deep breath, gathering his courage, and came around to join Arthur, to stand with him in what they were about to do. The determination on his face was a pale shadow of what it had been in Gedref, but it would suffice for now.

They went to the door and let Gaius in.

"Sire," Gaius greeted, as Arthur closed and locked the door again. Gaius softened as he turned to Merlin, and his brow drew with concern when he saw the florid bruises at his throat, more vivid now
than they had been that morning. "Let me see," Gaius fretted, peeling back the high collar and gently prodding. "Are you all right?"

Merlin nodded bravely, but it was clear that even if he was mad at Gaius, he was still glad to see him, and relieved by the comfort he offered, however small. "I've had worse."

"That is not reassuring," Gaius said, sternly. "Were you hurt anywhere else?"

"Just that," Merlin said. "The rest is left over from the battle."

Some kind of silent conversation passed between the two, resulting in Gaius' frown growing progressively deeper, and Merlin's relief at seeing Gaius shifting into stubborn defiance.

"I'm doing this," Merlin said, in a tone that brooked no argument. "Don't try and talk me out of it."

"If you must," Gaius said, lowering his hand.

"How can Arthur accept magic if all he ever sees is people being hurt by it?" Merlin said, tensing up. "I have to do this. I have to show him that magic can be good. That people with magic can be trusted. I'm not lying to him anymore. I'm done doing things your way."

Gaius nodded and took a step back to give Merlin some space.

"What do we have to do?" Merlin asked, looking at them both, determination coming to the fore.

"Let's take this one step at a time," Arthur said, shaking his head. Magic or no magic, some things about Merlin never changed. "Gaius, tell him about the restraint. I already explained the rest."

Gaius gave him a warning glance. "Once the torcs are magically active, you will each need to wear one. Arthur will then be able to make your torc go into a special state that will restrain you from using your magic."

Merlin flinched, but shoved away his fear. "And they used to endure it? The Blood Guard apprentices?"

Gaius nodded. "It was an emergency measure, used temporarily, for those who had difficulty controlling their magic."

"I suppose this qualifies as an emergency," Merlin said, with gallows humor. "What's the spell I have to use?"

Arthur had expected to have to convince Merlin to accept the torcs, but with the way Merlin was barrelling ahead, it was Arthur who had to work to keep up.

"Here," Gaius said, and pulled the book from under his arm.

"It's in my book?"

Gaius opened the cover and took out a sheaf of paper, which contained a string of unintelligible words. "No, I've written it down here. But I thought you would find the book useful, since you intend to teach Arthur about magic."

That made Merlin soften towards Gaius again. "Thank you, Gaius. I know this isn't..."

"It's all right, my boy," Gaius said, gently. "You must do what you feel is right. I only hope that this works out for the best."
Merlin hesitated, then opened his arms and stepped towards Gaius. They hugged each other tightly. Arthur wondered at the sight before him, that they could forgive and accept each other so easily. It made him feel ashamed of his own sense of betrayal, at the anger and horror he had struggled with all day. If Merlin could forgive Gaius for using him, surely Arthur could forgive Merlin for protecting him? He believed that he could, if not for the magic, which complicated everything.

"I'll leave you to it," Gaius said, as he pulled away. "I think this is something you need to do yourselves."

Merlin nodded, seemingly fine with being left with only a scrap of a paper and a hug, when his entire life hung in the balance.

"Wait," Arthur said, catching Gaius by the sleeve. "How do I activate the restraint? How do I turn it off again?"

"All you have to do is think it," Gaius said, as if it was blatantly obvious. "If you run into any trouble, you know where to find me." And with that, he turned the key in the lock and left.

Arthur felt somehow confounded, and yet nothing had happened that he had not wanted to happen. Merlin had agreed to the restraint, and Gaius had given them the information they needed. They had the torcs, they had the spell, and Merlin was looking at him expectantly.

"What's this book?" Arthur asked, suspicious that they had somehow conspired against him despite not having spoken to each other all day. Hadn't Merlin said something about people being able to talk without speaking? Had they just done that right in front of him?

"It's my grimoire," Merlin said, with quiet pride. "Gaius gave it to me when I first came to Camelot."

He held it out and Arthur took it. He opened it at random. He couldn't translate the writing, but there were enough drawings to glean some understanding of the text. "You can read this?"

"It's the language of the Old Religion. Mum taught me."

"I thought you said she didn't know magic."

"She doesn't have any herself, but she used to live in Camelot, before the Purge. She doesn't like to talk about the past, but she must have known a lot of sorcerers."

Arthur had always wondered why Merlin was so literate, given how poor he was. No one in Ealdor likely ever had need of quill and ink, and yet Merlin had shown skill in both letters and numbers. "What else did she teach you?" Arthur asked, flipping through the pages. The book was old but well cared for, and had blank pages in the back so that additions could be made. It was clear that the previous owners had taken advantage of this, and Merlin himself had even made some additions, his neat writing in the margins the one thing that Arthur could make full sense of. As he reached the front of the book, the language was no longer the familiar Albion script, but written in runes.

"I've seen these before," Arthur realized. He put the book on the table and pulled out his sword. "You said it was decorative."

"I told you what it said," Merlin said, amused. "That side says 'cast me away,' and the other side says 'take me up.'"

"What does it mean?" Arthur frowned.

Merlin shrugged. "It was like that after the dragon forged it. I didn't have time to ask him to explain"
because I had to hurry to get the sword to you. And then I had to hide it after your father used it, and by the time I got it back again, I'd stopped talking to the dragon."

"Because you realized he'd been lying to you?" Arthur sheathed the sword and pulled out a chair for Merlin, then sat down himself. This was clearly going to take a while.

Merlin sat down, and finally noticed the plate of leftovers. He stared at it as if suddenly realizing how hungry he actually was, and stuffed a huge piece of chicken into his mouth all at once. He really did have atrocious table manners.

"Sort of," Merlin said, through his mouthful of food. "You wanted to know how me and Gaius saved you from the Questing Beast?"

Arthur nodded. He had figured out that Merlin must have used his magic to slay the beast, but he didn't know what measures were taken to cure him of its poison. He had been lost in fever and delirium for days, with only brief moments of lucidity, and in those moments he had not seen Merlin by his bedside. Merlin's absence had gnawed at him, the way Merlin's absences always gnawed at him. But it had been worse when Merlin later vanished for nearly a week, after coming by and giving him a very odd lecture about not being a prat.

When Merlin finally returned from wherever he had gone to, Arthur had yelled at him for disappearing, thrown several objects at his head, and then worked out his frustration on Merlin on the training fields. It had all been to the benefit of teaching Merlin a lesson, and as a bonus it had been tremendously satisfying. Merlin had given his usual long-suffering sighs and grumbles and eye-rolls, but he had taken everything that Arthur had dished out with unusual acceptance. Thinking back, that had been when Merlin had at last started to make a genuine effort to improve himself as a manservant. Before that, Arthur had always had the sense that Merlin was merely putting up with a load of inconsequential nonsense in serving him, rather than appreciating the importance of his duties as the manservant to the Prince.

"It's a bit complicated," Merlin said, not even bothering to swallow all of what he was chewing before he stuffed more food into his mouth. "It goes back to when Bayard visited. I met one of his handmaidens, Cara. Right after the treaty was signed, she told me that she saw Bayard poison your goblet."

"She was the one who poisoned it?" A mysterious handmaiden had vanished after Merlin's collapse, and later had been blamed for the poisoning. His father had given no explanation why the woman had tried to sabotage the treaty, and Bayard had insisted that she had not been with them when they had left Mercia, and that she was not a member of his household. Arthur had been let out of the dungeons early to see Bayard off, and he had seemed genuinely baffled by the whole affair.

"That's what Gaius told me when I woke up again," Merlin said, with a little frown. "And that was the last I saw of her until you were dying and I went to the Isle of the Blessed. She was there, and she was definitely not a handmaiden anymore."

"The place is a complete ruin. Why did you go there?"

"The dragon told me to," Merlin said, his frown deepening. "He said that the only way to save you was to find someone who still followed the ways of the Old Religion and held the power of life and death. That you had to live, no matter what the cost. So I rode there as fast as I could, and Cara was there. Except her name wasn't Cara, it was Nimueh, and she was a High Priestess."

"She tried to kill me, and you trusted her?"
"What choice did I have? She said that she could save your life, but that there would be a price. A life for a life, to preserve the balance. So I offered her mine."

Arthur leaned back in his chair, stunned. He didn't know why Merlin's sacrifice affected him so much. Merlin had done his best to die for him many times already. But there was something far weightier to the offering of a life with forethought and intention, rather than in the heat of the moment. "But you didn't die," he said, stating the obvious.

No," Merlin said, bitterly. "When I got back, I discovered that it was not my life that was to be taken. It was my mother's. And the dragon knew it. That was why he told me that your life was worth any cost. It was all a trick to take her away from me. That was when I stopped going to the dragon for help. The only reason he'd ever helped me was so he could convince me to free him."

"Hunith is dead?!" Arthur said, aghast. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"No, no! Mum is fine now," Merlin said, mustering a reassuring smile. "I was headed back to the Isle of the Blessed to force Nimueh to take my life instead of hers, but Gaius got there before me. He traded his life to save her. So I tried to make Nimueh take my life to save Gaius. She wanted me to join her, for the both of us to work together to make you King. I refused. She tried to kill me but I stopped her. I killed her and restored Gaius. I mastered the power of life and death."

When Merlin began his story, he had been his usual self, his emotions shifting and open as he wound through the tale. But as he finished, as he described his victory, he changed. His eyes remained blue, but something came into them and into his voice, his expression. Something ancient and alien and powerful.

It was the magic.

And then as quickly as it had come, it was gone, and Merlin was himself again, giving a bashful smile. He picked up a pear and bit into it. The juices dripped down his chin, and he wiped at them with his sleeve. "Oh, sorry," he said, realizing that he was wearing the fine clothes that Arthur had given him in Gedref, and blotted clumsily at the stain with a napkin.

What was Merlin, that he could be this? That he could genuinely be the foolish, awkward, good-hearted man that Arthur knew him to be, and at the same time contain such unbelievable power? How could he destroy a High Priestess, restore life to the dead, and then come back to toil and kneel and allow himself to be pushed around and abused and insulted and take it all with a sigh and a tolerant smile? Because he believed in a prophecy that he didn't even understand?

"You won't be able to get it out that way," Arthur chided, and went to get the wash basin. He set it on the table with a thump and took Merlin's arm and cleaned his sleeve for him, because the idiot could apparently give life to the dead but he couldn't clean a stain.

Merlin gave a soft laugh as Arthur dabbed away the pear juice, and Arthur looked up to see his answer. Merlin tried to die for Arthur because he loved him. He served and suffered for him because he loved him. Arthur had known that Merlin loved him, had known it even before Merlin had himself. He had seen it in the devotion Merlin had shown him even as far back as the tournament with Valiant. But he did not know why Merlin had so chosen him, especially when he had done little to deserve it.

But the love he saw in Merlin now, that he saw clearly because he was at last seeing Merlin clearly, was deeper and greater than he had realized. It was that enormous love that fuelled Merlin's determination, that carried him through all his suffering. Perhaps it was even that love that helped protect him from the corruption, though it could not have done so before Merlin came to Camelot.
But then that must be why the dragon and Nimueh had conspired to kill Hunith. Merlin was as devoted to her as he was to Arthur himself. Merlin loved, and that love was what drew others to him, Arthur included. It was so strong that it had conquered even the huge amount of magic that he had been burdened with since his birth.

"I think it's clean now," Merlin said, softly.

Arthur broke their shared gaze with a start. "Yes," he said, and went to put the basin back on its stand. That gave him a moment to collect himself.

He wished that Merlin's love could be enough. He wished that he could trust that it would hold against the magic, that Merlin would obey him as unquestioningly as he had in Gedref. But it was not enough, not against dangers from both within and without. Whatever his intentions now, Merlin had disobeyed him too many times before. The possibility of his magic being discovered was of great concern, greater than it had been before Gedref. Merlin mattered to others now in a way he had not before. People would be watching him even though he had returned to being only a manservant. They would be seeking him out and would not allow him to remain hidden in the shadows. From his father to Morgana to the knights and servants from the army, they would all be watching Merlin to see what he would do next. And it terrified Arthur that the next thing they would see would be his eyes glowing with golden light.

"Thank you," Merlin said, as Arthur sat down again. "For listening. There's so much I've wanted to tell you for so long. You don't know how much this means to me. To share my magic with you."

"I want to know everything," Arthur said, genuinely. "I need to understand."

"We can start now." Merlin pulled over the grimoire. "I can teach you about the four elements. About how spells work. I can teach you to read the old tongue, and we can practice magic together." He glanced at the torcs, lying quiescent on the table, and his smile faded again. "Maybe not the last part. But we can still do the rest?"

"We can," Arthur assured him. "But you're right. We need to give these a try." He picked up the torcs and placed them on the table between them. "Let me see the spell."

Merlin handed it over. It wasn't written in those runes, but the best he could do was sound it out. Arthur was fluent in several languages, including Latin and Greek, and had been taught enough of the Frank, Danish and Germanic tongues to get by for diplomatic meetings. But he had not learned the old tongue, the language of Albion from before Roman rule. Arthur had asked Geoffrey if he would teach it to him, but he had been firmly refused. It was too closely associated with the Old Religion, with sorcery. Any books that contained the old tongue had been removed from the library after that, and locked away somewhere that even Arthur didn't have keys to. It was no wonder that he hadn't recognized the runes on his sword for what they were.

"Can you tell me what it means without using your magic?" Arthur asked.

"Of course. It's an invocation to the Triple Goddess, to bless the wearer with protection and strength so that they may serve her and Albion."

"Hold on. The Triple Goddess?"

Merlin gave an exasperated look. "I guess your father didn't teach you about the gods of the Old Religion?"

"He refused to let me near anything remotely to do with magic." Arthur's education, for all its
breadth and depth, had at times been an exercise in frustration. Any time his curiosity about magic had compelled him to seek out information, it would be taken out of his reach because his father feared that any proximity to magic would lead to his corruption. Arthur had hated being so coddled, as if a Prince had anything to fear from a book. And yet now he found himself eying Merlin's grimoire warily.

"Right," Merlin said. "Well, the Triple Goddess is Modron, the mother goddess of birth, life, and death. She's the highest of all the gods."

"And sorcerers are what, her slaves?"

"No!" Merlin said, managing to sound both amused and indignant. "Well, probably not. I don't feel like a slave."

Arthur moved from eyeing the grimoire warily to eyeing the torcs warily. It was bad enough that they had to use a spell to make them work, but he would have to then wear one of them himself. It was one thing to use a sword that had been enchanted. It was quite another to use a magical object that might somehow enslave him to an evil god. Confirmation aside, using the torcs meant trusting Gaius, and even though both his father and Merlin trusted Gaius, Arthur did not. A servant could not have two opposing masters and be loyal to them both.

But his options were few. If he refused to use the torcs, he had no other way of controlling Merlin's magic. But he could not keep Merlin imprisoned without raising suspicion. And the longer he waited to decide, the less he felt able to carry out the remaining options, exile or execution. If he was going to keep Merlin alive and by his side, he was going to have to do the one thing he had been taught never to do. He was going to have to trust magic. It would be temporary, only until he could find a way to destroy Merlin's magic for good, but that made it no less dangerous, no less a risk to his own soul as well as Merlin's. And without any real guidance or information, he was going to have to do what Merlin did, put his head down and barrel through until he achieved his goal.

"All right," he said, handing back the spell. "Do we need to do anything to prepare? Do you need any herbs or potions?"

Merlin looked at him curiously. "Are you really all right with this?"

"Are you?"

Merlin picked up the silver torc and turned it in his hands. "I know you believe that magic is evil. I don't know what this will do to me, but if I refuse to wear it, I know that you would have no other choice but to execute me."

"Yes," Arthur admitted, though he had lost the certainty that he had felt when he had given Merlin the ultimatum. No matter what he felt, it came down to two choices: either Merlin's magic was stopped, or Merlin himself was stopped. If Arthur failed in either task, it would only be a matter of time before his father succeeded in both. And Arthur would not see Merlin burn.

"I have to prove to you that your father is wrong," Merlin said, stubbornly. "I can't do that if I'm dead. So I will do whatever you need me to do so that you can feel safe with me, so that you can trust me. Everything that I am is for you. My magic is yours, and nothing will ever change that."

"Even if I tell you right now that I will never repeal the ban on magic?" Arthur pressed.

Merlin swallowed, breathed in deeply. "I believe that you will make the right decision once you aren't blinded by your father's lies. You are my King."
Few men had ever shown the depth of faith and devotion that Merlin had to Arthur. Fewer still would hold on to that faith when imprisoned and at risk of death. It had always been more than Arthur deserved, but he had never been more grateful to have it.

"Thank you," Arthur said, reaching out to rest his hand over Merlin's. "I only want to keep you safe."

Merlin nodded, accepting. Arthur picked up the gold torc with his free hand and gave it to Merlin, then let him go and leaned back. They were going to do this. Merlin was going to do magic at his command. Arthur had gone against his father many times before, in ways small and large. But never had he done something so utterly treasonous. Never had he defied his father to engage in sorcery.

Merlin placed the spell on the table and moved his lips as he read the spell over and over to himself in his head. When he was ready, he gripped the torcs in both hands and braced himself with long, even breaths. And then he spoke, shifting into the strange, guttural tongue of the Old Religion.

"O Modron, ábiddee þú blétsest dryhtenweardas þætte ámundodedon ond áfæstnedon ond cwémedon hwít æga!"

With the last word, Merlin's eyes swirled with golden light. His eyes flashed bright and then faded back to blue, and the torcs glimmered with a strange brightness which also faded away. When it was done, both Merlin and the torcs looked the same as they had been before the spell. And yet magic had passed between them. Merlin's magic had entered the torcs.

"We can use them now," Merlin said, staring at the torcs with fascination, as if seeing something in them that Arthur could not. Arthur wondered if he could see the magic, or feel it somehow. For all that Merlin had apparently been using magic around him all the time, for all the sorcery that Arthur had fought, he had never been able to tell when it was present but for the results of the spells that were cast with it.

The spell Merlin cast had been nothing like the frightening magic that Arthur had witnessed the night before, or in the vicious attacks that Camelot had suffered in the past, but that did not mean it was harmless. He could not let his guard down until Merlin's magic was restrained.

"Should I put mine on first?" Merlin offered.

Arthur took the gold torc from him. "No, let me." If the torcs did give the wearer some kind of boost in magical strength, it was better if Arthur was ready to activate the restraint before Merlin put his on. Gaius had said that all he would have to do was think the command.

The torc was too stiff to bend, so he pressed the looped end against the soft flesh of his throat and rolled the torc around his neck. It was a tight squeeze to get through the narrow opening, but the band settled loosely around the base of his neck, and he found that it fit comfortably as it warmed against his skin.

Once Merlin had done the same with the silver torc, Arthur felt something come to life within his own. He quashed down the panic that tried to rise up. This was no time for cowardice. He would not be frightened by a piece of jewelry and some sparkling light. A Pendragon did not run from a challenge, but stood and faced it.

"How does it feel?"

Merlin seemed more affected by it than he had been, but in a very different way. "It's like the temple," he said, distant and soft. "Full of old magic, layers of it. It won't hurt us."
It seemed that the magic was speaking in Merlin again. But it was less alien this time, and gentler, as if it was being soothed by the presence of the torcs. Arthur decided to take that as a good sign. The torcs must have been used to tame sorcerers so they could be controlled and directed without their corruption driving them mad.

Merlin's eyes half-closed, and he slipped into a kind of stupor, presumably as the torc tamed his magic. Arthur hoped that the apprentice torc would be strong enough to contain a sorcerer as powerful as Merlin. He took away the paper with the spell and placed it back into the grimoire, and waited for Merlin to rouse. Aside from the initial sensation of connection, Arthur felt nothing at all within his own. He realized that it must mean that no magic had entered him in all of this, which was a great relief indeed.

Minutes passed, and Arthur was starting to grow concerned. But at last Merlin's eyes cleared and he straightened from his slump.

"Are you all right?" Arthur asked.

"Mm." Merlin still seemed somewhat affected, docile in a way he had only ever been after a strenuous bout of training or sex. As useful as that would be in the short term, Arthur hoped that it would wear off. As much as he enjoyed indulging in Merlin's submission, he loved Merlin for his passion and courage. Merlin would not be himself if he lost either.

"I'm going to activate the restraint now," Arthur warned him. "Tell me if you feel any differently."

"All right."

Arthur reached up to grip the looped ends of his torc, and focused all his thoughts into the metal. Gaius had said that the silver torc would close when the restraint became active, so Arthur stared at the flared ends of Merlin's torc and tried to force them to close.

The ends snapped together, and Merlin immediately broke from his docile state. His eyes widened and then rolled back as he slumped bonelessly to the floor.

"Merlin!" Arthur cried, alarmed, and hurried to Merlin's side. He patted Merlin's face to rouse him, and when that didn't work he hauled him up and quickly carried him to the bed, where he tried to wake him again. "Merlin? Can you hear me? Merlin?"

Arthur nearly commanded the ends of the torc to separate again, for the restraint to stop. But he stopped himself before his panic got the best of him again. Gaius had said that it would be unpleasant but that it wouldn't damage Merlin. And Merlin himself had said that the torcs did not feel like a threat. If Arthur gave up on them at the first sign of trouble, he had nothing else to fall back on.

Just as before, Merlin roused on his own. This time he was disoriented rather than docile, and it took Arthur a few tries before he could get Merlin to stop his clumsy flailing and focus on him. As Merlin's eyes cleared, he looked down at himself, at Arthur's bodily restraint of his arms and legs. Arthur released him and sat beside him on the edge of the bed.

"You passed out," Arthur told him, resting one hand lightly against Merlin's chest, both to soothe him and to keep him still. "Can you still feel your magic?"

"My magic," Merlin echoed, and he raised his hand towards the bedside table, to the unlit candle there. "Forbærne," he said, quietly, and then louder when the wick failed to light. He let his arm fall and closed his eyes. "It's there, but I can't reach it. Something's in the way."

"That's the restraint," Arthur said, wanting to smile, to laugh with relief, but holding it all back.
Merlin reached up and touched the torc, felt that the gap of it had sealed shut. There was no break in the metal now, as the two flared ends had joined into a seamless whole. Merlin tugged weakly at it to pull it off, but it was too solid to break and too small to be pulled over his head, though it was still wide enough not to be uncomfortable in itself.

The torc would stay on now, and the magic would be held in check.

"Can you sit up?" Arthur asked, and when Merlin nodded, Arthur helped him upright. With every passing minute, Merlin was more himself, without even the docility that he had displayed before the restraint. Arthur held back his excitement, not wanting to risk upsetting Merlin at such a delicate moment. "How do you feel without it?"

"Tired," Merlin said, with a weak smile.

"No pain? No discomfort?"

Merlin's smile faded as his eyes cleared further. "I don't like it. It feels like I'm... empty." He wrapped his arms around himself, pulled at the torc again. He was starting to panic. "Stop the restraint. Please, Arthur. Just for a minute. I can't..."

"You can," Arthur assured him, taking his wrists and pulling his hands away from the torc. "You can do this, Merlin. I know you can. My brave knight."

Merlin bit back a whimper, but rallied against his fear. After living with magic for so long, it was not surprising that it would be a shock to lose it, even only in part. It was good that they had figured that out now, before Arthur found a way to remove the magic entirely. Now he would be better prepared.

"That's it," Arthur soothed, as Merlin calmed.

"Gaius said it was temporary," Merlin said, hopefully.

"I want you to keep it on for as long as you can, so you can get used to it," Arthur explained. "If it's really too much for you, I'll stop the restraint. But whenever it's off, you have to stay here. I can't let you leave my chambers if you can use your magic."

"Then I'm still your prisoner," Merlin said, sadly.

"Not as long as you wear the torc. With it on, you're my knight again," Arthur told him. "These were worn by chieftains and warriors, remember? That's just like kings and knights. You keep yours on, and I'll wear mine whenever I can."

Merlin mustered a smile at that. "I'd like that."

Arthur would wear his torc as much as he could if it helped Merlin feel better about his own. He could not wear it in public, as it could not be hidden beneath his clothes, and he did not wear scarves as Merlin did. But he could keep it on in his chambers, especially if it encouraged Merlin to remain restrained even here. Perhaps once he adjusted to the change, he would allow the restraint to be made permanent, at least until a better solution could be found.

"We'll see how long you can go before you need a break," Arthur said, rewarding Merlin with a warm smile. "Everything can go back to normal now. You'll be by my side again, like you always are. Did I tell you that everyone was asking after you at the ceremony today?"

"They were?" Merlin asked, perking up.
"Morgana and Gwen were especially persistent," Arthur admitted. "They said you promised to visit them and tell them all about your adventures as a knight. I thought we could go see them together."

This cheered Merlin further, perhaps helping to make up for his missing out on the ceremony in the first place. "Can we tell them everything?"

"More than we could tell the knights," Arthur said, and Merlin nodded, understanding that if he could not use his magic, he could not speak of it either. "Morgana will be pleased to know that you put her lessons to good use."

"She will," Merlin said, smiling at the thought. "And Gwen. You should have heard her yesterday. If Gaius hadn't been there, we would have spent the whole afternoon gossiping."

A great weight lifted from Arthur's shoulders as he saw that Merlin was still himself. The magic was stopped and Merlin was still himself. He pulled Merlin close and held him tightly, eyes suddenly damp with gratitude. He had been so afraid that the worst would happen, that Merlin would refuse the torcs and turn on him, or that he would accept them only to become a stranger once the restraint was on. But there was hope now. The magic was stopped and Merlin was all right. Arthur had not lost him.

"Arthur," Merlin sighed. He held Arthur back, equal with relief if not strength, and this bolstered Arthur further. Merlin still loved him, even after Arthur had demanded that he surrender the thing that he saw as most essential to himself. Merlin had been truthful: Arthur was his King, and Merlin would give him absolutely anything, even his magic. Merlin was his obedient knight, his loyal and faithful servant. His fealty was true and unbroken.

Arthur kissed his cheek once, brushed his fingers through Merlin's riled hair. All his fear began to fall away as he gentled Merlin, and Merlin grew soft and docile again as he surrendered himself. Perhaps with time, Arthur would not have to lie to Merlin with half-truths and omissions, but would be able to share his plans with him again, as he had in the caverns. He would be able to tell Merlin how he planned to remove the magic fully from Camelot, and Merlin would accept it and agree to help him achieve all of his goals.

But for now, it was not Camelot that Arthur was concerned with, but Merlin. It was Merlin that mattered more than anything else. Merlin had surrendered so much to him, and it was Arthur's responsibility to take care of him and protect him. Not merely out of duty or obligation, but because it was necessary for his own heart. Merlin was precious to him, and nearly losing him again had only driven that fact home.

He wanted to reward Merlin for his obedience, for his strength in Arthur's service, as he had many times before. He had rewarded Merlin after they had destroyed the enchanted mail together, and he had rewarded Merlin in a long, glorious night after the feast in Gedref. That Arthur himself took no small pleasure in Merlin's rewards did not make them any less for Merlin's sake. After all, Arthur had asked him so many times if there was anything at all that would please him, and all that Merlin ever wanted was Arthur himself.

But where Merlin's boundless need usually drove Arthur to extremes, tonight Merlin required a gentler hand. He needed to feel safe and secure, to know that without his magic, he still mattered, he still belonged, and most of all that he was still loved and worthy of that love. Arthur would not let Merlin believe that without his magic, he was nothing.

"Everything will be all right," Arthur murmured, pulling back enough to see Merlin's face. "You'll teach me about magic, and we'll protect Camelot together. As we were meant to."
The look that that earned him was so painfully hopeful that it broke Arthur's heart. "That's all I want," Merlin said, fervent despite his subdued state. "I would never do anything to harm you or Camelot." He rested his hand over Arthur's upper arm, where Merlin had cut him during their training in the woods. Arthur would never forget how upset Merlin had been about that cut, how frantic and distraught he had become. "I only want to keep you safe."

"And I want us both to be safe," Arthur said, gently.

He knew that Merlin would destroy himself if it meant Arthur and Camelot would be protected as a result, but Arthur had been trying in various ways to curtail that tendency ever since Merlin had drunk poison for him. He had initially hoped that training Merlin to fight would both teach him to defend himself and knock some sense into him, but that was before Merlin had admitted that he felt that he was nothing. They had made some headway with that in Gedref, as Merlin had finally learned to take orders and accept help, but now Arthur knew how deep it all ran. Arthur understood now just how central it was to Merlin's identity that he be of use to Arthur, that he be able to protect him. He hoped that once the magic was fully out of Merlin, once he was free of it, he truly would want to live for their future. He had trained Merlin into a knight, against all the odds. He could train him out of being a sorcerer.

"I know," Merlin said. "And I know you think my magic is bad for me. But it isn't. What would it take to prove that to you?"

"I don't know," Arthur admitted. "But I do know that we wouldn't be here now if you'd used your magic against me. And you didn't because you're a good man, and because you love me."

"How can you trust me but not trust my magic?"

"How can I trust your magic when I don't understand it?" Arthur countered, using Merlin's argument against him. "When all I have ever known is the threat that magic has posed to myself and to the kingdom? When you yourself have been defending me from that magic?"

"But if I use my magic to help people, isn't that proof enough?"

"According to Gaius, you're not like other sorcerers. You yourself admitted that. Your uniqueness somehow enables you to resist the corruption that affects all other sorcerers."

Merlin opened his mouth to rebut the argument, but shut his mouth with a groan of frustration. "What about Gaius?"

"What about him?" Arthur asked. "Did he use magic when he was teaching you?"

"No, actually," Merlin frowned.

"Have you ever seen him use magic?"

Merlin's frown deepened. "But he used to. He was a sorcerer when he was younger. And there are other sorcerers who help people..." He trailed off and looked away.

"You know other sorcerers?" Arthur asked, wondering about what other magic could be rooted out of Camelot. "Is that who the letters are to?"

"No!" Merlin protested. "And I can't tell you who they are. Not if you're going to do to them what you're doing to me."

"What, helping you?" Arthur challenged.
Merlin got a mulish look about him, but it faded into sadness. "I just want you to understand."

"I want that too," Arthur said. "But I don't, not yet. And I can't rely on hearsay, not for such an important decision. I need you to be patient with me, to give me time and help me learn. Will you do that for me?"

Merlin sighed and rallied. "You know I will. I'll tell you everything I know, show you everything I can about magic and how it works. And I'll try to be patient. But if Camelot is in danger--"

"Merlin, Camelot is always in danger. Camelot is under constant threat from one thing or another. I know that better than anyone, and I also know that you can't let that knowledge consume you. At some point, you have to trust that other people will do their best to keep you safe, and let them do it. That's why we have knights and an army, why we have castles and fortresses. Why we have treaties with other kingdoms. You are not solely responsible for the good of the entire kingdom. You are not even solely responsible for me. I am the Crown Prince and the best fighter in Albion, and I am actually capable of taking care of myself. Even against magic, once I understand it, and that's what I need you for most of all right now. I need you to be my advisor on magic and teach me. But I do not need you to put your life at risk."

Arthur could not deny the irony in his words. His father had said much the same to him many times, when he had been young and impulsive. He had received a similar lecture as recently as his journey to the Forests of Balor. But he had not intended to ride alone that day. His father had forced him into that by denying him his knights. Merlin's situation was different. He had been encouraged to fight alone no matter what the danger. Arthur could tell that he was going to have to work harder to sway Merlin's thinking in that than he was in stopping Merlin from using magic.

Merlin was looking mulish again, so Arthur did the one thing that he knew rarely failed to improve Merlin's mood: he leaned in and gave him a kiss.

It worked. When he pulled back again, Merlin was fighting a smile. Arthur kissed him again, and the smile broke free. The third time, Merlin kissed back, and that kiss went on for a while.

When they stopped, Merlin's eyes were closed, and he looked overcome by the emotions that had welled up within him. It was a familiar sight despite its new context, and Arthur knew what to do to remedy it. He gentled Merlin as he had before, brushing his cheek and arm and kissing him softly along his jaw. He watched as Merlin half-opened his eyes, and how each time the emotions in them were both clearer and easier.

Merlin did not resist as Arthur untied the lace of his shirt and opened his collar, and bared his neck so Arthur could kiss it. He stiffened as Arthur touched the torc, then eased again, more pliant than before. He allowed Arthur to strip off his shirt and push him to lie back against the pillows.

Arthur looked at the shirt before he put it aside. Merlin had put on these clothes to show his loyalty and his love, and there was no reason to discard that gesture now.

"Merlin," Arthur began, then paused to find the right words. He wanted to be honest in this. Merlin looked at him curiously, but waited for him to continue.

"I want to thank you for last night," he said at last. "For giving me the rest of you, as you promised. I know how hard it was, and I'm sorry that I... that I got scared and hurt you again."

"Arthur," Merlin said, and there was such forgiveness in his eyes, in his soft smile. Forgiveness that Arthur didn't deserve, that he had never deserved, for all the times that he had hurt Merlin and somehow still kept him.
Arthur touched lightly at the bruises beneath the torc. "I'm not as good a man as you think I am," he admitted, was forced to admit by the knot of guilt in his chest. "But I want to be. I want to be the King you see."

"You will be," Merlin said, with such belief. "I'll help you, for as long as you'll let me."

"I told you before, you are to remain at my side until you are released from my service," Arthur said, the ache in his heart finally easing. "And I will not let you go."

Merlin swallowed hard, and blinked at the wetness in his eyes. Arthur leaned down and kissed him again, covering him and keeping him safe in the most essential way he knew. Part of him wanted to never let Merlin leave his bed ever again. It was only when he let Merlin go that things went wrong. And then Merlin was the one holding him, arms wrapped around him as Arthur was swamped by the emotions he had struggled against all day, that had finally caught him in a moment of weakness. Arthur buried his face against Merlin's shoulder, breathing in tight gasps, his eyes shut tight against the tears.

He had almost lost Merlin. He had almost lost him to magic and to his father's laws and to his own fear. And now he needed nothing less than to feel how alive Merlin was, to feel the heat and pulse of him, the stubborn life of him that persisted against all sense.

Arthur pulled off his own shirt, catching briefly against the torc before he tugged the fabric free and tossed it aside. He kissed Merlin deeply and pressed against him, chest to chest, running his hands over every inch of skin within reach. In his desperate state, he worked the both of them free of their trousers, and then it was just the two of them with nothing in between, bare but for the torcs.

As Arthur's frenzy subsided, he realized that Merlin had not responded with his usual fervor. He had not lain limp, but neither had he pushed back or tried to turn the tables as he usually did. Yet Merlin had shown interest.

"Merlin?" Arthur asked, concerned.

"It's all right," Merlin said, and Arthur could see that he wanted this, but also that he had yet to recover from losing his magic. Of course it would take time for him to adjust, and Arthur was not exactly helping by pushing him so quickly.

"Maybe we shouldn't," Arthur began. If Merlin was weakened from his service, then that was not in itself a barrier, as long as Merlin was willing. But if he was not...

"No," Merlin said, pulling him back when he tried to move away. "It's fine."

They stared at each other, silently negotiating as they sometimes did. Arthur stared deeply into Merlin's eyes, seeking every last scrap of truth, because he knew the power he held over Merlin, power that didn't require torcs or threats of death to enforce.

For all that Merlin was his own man, he had given Arthur his heart and his life willingly and unconditionally. More than once Arthur had failed in some way to care for both, or taken advantage of Merlin's unjustified belief in him. But every failure spurred him on, because he truly did want to live up to that belief, and to the oaths of honor and nobility he had sworn. His failure to properly care for Merlin had brought them to this point, and he swore that he would not make that mistake again. When Merlin was weak, it was up to Arthur to be strong for him.

And yet Arthur realized that he was also weak, worn out from fear and desperation. Such emotions did not sit well with him, and now that things were at least temporarily settled, now that he could at
last stop and catch his breath, the only thing he wanted was Merlin. Merlin was the only thing that he had ever wanted, as a man. Not as a Prince or a knight, not because of what was expected of him or out of his own sense of duty and position. Wanting Merlin went against all of those. It was selfish and foolish and potentially disastrous even from the start. It was taking advantage of someone with no ability to refuse him, no matter how stubborn Merlin had proved himself capable of being, because Merlin did not want to refuse him. Merlin wanted to give him everything, and had proven many times that he would do so eagerly and without constraint, no matter what the cost. And Arthur had never been more grateful for that, because while it had been the cause of so much worry, at this most vital hour, it had saved them.

It had saved them.

Again Arthur found himself caught up in a wave of emotion, this time driving him to pull Merlin back into his arms and hold him. Just to hold him, at first too tightly and then easing back to something comfortable and solid. Merlin tensed and then relaxed, tensed and relaxed, caught up in an internal struggle that Arthur could only guess at. He simply waited it out, wanted until Merlin finally calmed and stayed calm.

"My sweet bird," Arthur whispered, voice catching as his throat tightened. He soothed Merlin to soothe himself, easing his grip further so that he could caress and pet Merlin's neck and back, and kiss him softly here and there.

Merlin raised his eyes to him, and Arthur saw his own need reflected back at him, and more.

"Shall I take care of you?" Arthur asked.

"Yes," Merlin breathed, barely a whisper. He swallowed, and his eyes were wet again.

Arthur wiped them dry. "Tell me what you want. What would make you feel good."

Merlin hesitated before replying, and visibly struggled with his answer. Arthur knew that what would truly make Merlin feel better was the removal of the restraint, but he had challenged Merlin to accept it, and Merlin would not back down from that challenge. To compromise now would only make things harder in the long run. He had to build up his endurance to a life without magic as he had for wearing armor and using a sword, and for such things there was no shortcut.

But getting Merlin to admit his needs was as difficult as getting him to talk about anything else personal. Clearly what he required was some assistance. It was fortunate, then, that Arthur knew his needs so well.

"Would you like this?" Arthur asked, reaching down to grasp Merlin's soft cock. He didn't stroke it, but simply held it and rubbed his thumb just under the head, a spot that never failed to make Merlin squirm. Merlin took a sharp breath in and a long one out, but still said nothing.

"Maybe this?" Arthur asked, tilting his head so that he could gently nip and suck at the soft skin of Merlin's throat, and this earned him a swallowed whimper and the shifting of Merlin's hips, both good signs. And he thought about the reward he had given Merlin in Gedref, the way Merlin had surrendered so deeply. How it was only when Arthur mastered Merlin completely that he could begin to sate that bottomless need. He reached out with his free hand and drew Merlin's arms up, then pinned his wrists against the pillows, holding him with his weight. "Or this?"

Merlin's reply was a breathy moan and a flush of heat against the palm of Arthur's right hand, and that was answer enough. For all that Merlin had given, what he needed was to give more. For Arthur to take all of him and make him feel safe and right in his arms. That was something Arthur was
certain he could do.

Arthur kissed him, and Merlin parted his lips so that Arthur could press his tongue inside. He used force, even though Merlin did not want to resist and was hardly even capable of it. But he knew that Merlin needed to be pressed and pushed, needed to feel himself being held down and kept. If he was denied, he would only struggle and fight until he provoked Arthur into giving what he wanted anyway.

"Should I get my belt again?" Arthur asked, nipping at Merlin's lip. "Or the curtain ropes? Should I bind you up like a wild beast?"

"Just your hands," Merlin said, the spark returning to his eyes as his cock heated in Arthur's grip. "Your body. Just you."

"I'll hold you down," Arthur promised, rubbing his thumb against the slit of Merlin's cock, watching the way it made Merlin shift restlessly. "Keep you right where I want you. Where you belong. I'll never let you go."

Merlin cried out, and strained against Arthur's hold just to make him strengthen his grip. Arthur let go of Merlin's cock and rose up over him, sat on his wriggling hips and let Merlin feel his weight. Merlin curled up his legs and kicked at the bed, and Arthur moved again, this time bringing Merlin with him. The result was Merlin completely trapped, arms and legs pinned as Arthur wrapped bodily around him. Merlin tensed and strained against him, forcing Arthur to pull himself tighter and tighter around him.

"I have you," Arthur said, low into Merlin's ear. "I've caught you. Tell me what you are."

"Yours," Merlin gasped, and Arthur could feel the race of his pulse, could see Merlin's cock arching out full from his body. "Your knight."

"My knight," Arthur said, approvingly. He lay a kiss where the torc lay against Merlin's neck, feeling skin and body-warm metal against his lips, and Merlin breathed in sharply. "Wearing my armor," Arthur continued. "Serving me as you were meant to serve me."

"Yes," Merlin moaned, and Arthur could see him falling now, sliding into that state where he no longer struggled, where he did not have to strain towards submission but could let it swallow him. It was those moments when Arthur felt able to see Merlin most clearly, when the essence of him shone out past his peasant manners and stubborn foolishness. When the fears and tensions fell away, and what was left was something beautiful and rare and unguarded. Arthur had seen flashes of that essence here and there, but never as strongly as he had in Gedref, and he found himself chasing it now.

"Tell me what is mine," he prompted.

"All of me. Everything."

"Tell me."


The last word hung in the air, and if ignored it had the potential to destroy what they had worked so hard to regain. But Arthur saw the significance and seized it. "Yes," he said, shifting to strengthen his grip on Merlin even further. "All of you. Mine to use, and mine to care for. Mine to command, and mine to refuse. I have all of you now. There is nothing in you that is not mine. Is that understood?"
"Sire," Merlin cried, half pain and half joy.

Arthur released him, then, and lay Merlin on his back and covered him. There were fresh tears on Merlin's cheeks, and Arthur kissed them away, tasting the salt of them. He stroked Merlin's hair, his forehead. Merlin's eyes were glassy, yet beneath the fading tears there was a kind of peace.

"Do you want me inside you?" Arthur asked. "Tell me what you want."

"Fill me," Merlin breathed. "Open me up and fill me."

It was an order that Arthur was only too happy to obey. He kissed Merlin deeply and rutted his aching cock against him, letting Merlin feel how much he was wanted. "Don't move," Arthur told him, and pulled away. Thankfully there was still plenty of oil in the bedside chest.

Arthur took the opportunity to clear his head, even as he slicked his cock with oil. He let his gaze fall across the length of Merlin's body, taking in the full expanse of him. The fading bruises of battle, the gleaming silver torc, the florid marks that he had left across Merlin's throat. As much as he regretted the last, it was good that he looked at them. They reminded him that for all the parts of Merlin that were his, for all that Merlin surrendered to him, he had an equal obligation to protect and care for him. For the sorcerer as well as the knight, the servant, the man. Even if that protection meant standing between Merlin and the magic inside him. Merlin would give everything for Arthur. Arthur could not accept such fealty without returning it in kind.

It would be easier for Merlin, given his weakened condition, to lie on his front as Arthur fucked him, but Arthur needed to see his face through all of this. He needed to see his eyes and all the unspoken things within them. He knew better than to trust that Merlin would defend himself, especially when he was in a state of surrender.

He crawled back into the middle of the bed and coaxed Merlin to spread and bend his legs, baring himself. Arthur caressed Merlin's inner thighs, the join of his leg, avoiding Merlin's reddened cock and swollen balls. He was so beautiful like this, aroused and open and waiting to be taken. It had only been a week since Arthur last fucked him, but the journey back home had been a long one, and full of sacrifice. In a way, they were still on that journey, but at least they were nearing its end, and the last of Merlin's sacrifices. When it was done, Arthur would at last be able to build Merlin up into the man he truly was meant to be.

Arthur grabbed one of the sturdier pillows and tucked it under Merlin's hips, raising him up. He bent and took Merlin's cock into his mouth, sucking gently on the head, laving at the now-wet slit of it, drawing out the taste of him, bitter and good. Merlin thrust up against him until Arthur pinned him down again, and then all Merlin could do was writhe and moan as Arthur pressed slick fingers inside of him, rubbing to give him wave after wave of pleasure.

He didn't think Merlin would have enough stamina to come more than once tonight, so he stopped when Merlin was getting too close. He went back to stroking Merlin's thighs as he waited for him to ease back from the edge of his arousal.

Despite his need, Merlin was relaxed enough that when Arthur covered him again and pressed inside, Merlin's body parted easily for him. Yet he was still tight enough that Arthur had to take his time, fucking shallowly and working his way deep little by little. His patience made it all the better once he was fully sheathed in the slick heat of Merlin's body, which clenched and clung at him with a strength that Merlin's limbs lacked. Arthur thrust a few times to make himself comfortable, and then held himself deep for a time, letting Merlin savor the fullness he'd asked for. Arthur passed the time on Merlin's belly and chest, then took each nipple into his mouth in turn, and not leaving them until they were tight and swollen and wet with spit. Merlin clung weakly to him, reduced to a wordless
string of soft gasps and moans and whines as Arthur had his way with him.

"So sweet for me," Arthur purred, pleased as ever by Merlin's descent into incoherence. He finally began to fuck Merlin, then, short strokes that only brought him halfway out and then fully in again, so deep that his balls were pressed taut between their bodies. And Merlin's cock was caught between them, too, and dripping more wetness against their bellies.

"Do you feel open now, Merlin?" Arthur teased. "Do you feel full?"

"Not full enough," Merlin slurred, unable to resist a challenge even now. He mustered some reserve of strength and his grip on Arthur increased, both within him and without, the tight squeeze of him making Arthur groan and fuck him harder, longer.

"I'll give you full," Arthur promised, and strengthened his thrusts until they were enough to drive Merlin into the pillows and off the one that had been under him. But now Merlin was with him, and his thighs clutched hard as Merlin rode his hips. When Merlin was recovered, Arthur was definitely going to have to give him his hand again.

But for now, Arthur knew that they were almost done. His own arousal was climbing high, and Merlin had been near the edge for a good while now. Arthur stopped holding back, stopped delaying the inevitable, and surrendered himself to the moment, to the feel of Merlin's body against him and around him, full of heat and life and devotion, and all of it was his. Merlin was his, all of him his, and Arthur allowed himself a glorious celebration of his victory as he came and came, pouring himself into the core of Merlin, taking base pleasure in marking him anew, in claiming him whole. No part of Merlin would be denied him ever again, and in that he took the deepest satisfaction.

They came down together, Arthur holding himself deep as he slowly softened. But Merlin's strength gave out, and he slumped down onto the bed, separating them. Arthur fell onto him and rested as he caught his breath, before dragging himself from the bed to grab a washcloth.

In the aftermath, Merlin was boneless and pliant, unresisting as Arthur wiped him clean and maneuvered him under the blankets. He was defenseless in a way he never truly had been before, now that he was weak and without his magic. Arthur could do anything to him and Merlin would be unable to stop him, unable to open locks or untie ropes or even fight as he had as a knight. But where such knowledge might have once intoxicated him, now it cautioned him. Arthur would not harm him again. As long as Merlin was his, he would be safe.

"My Merlin," Arthur murmured, resting his hand over Merlin's throat, over the bruises and the torc. He gave Merlin a doting smile, and Merlin smiled drowsily back. Arthur kissed him, still holding his neck, a claim without any force because it needed none. Merlin had wanted to give him his magic, and the transfer had been achieved. It was not for Merlin to decide what happened to it next, and that was something he would come to accept with time.

Merlin's mouth stilled below his own, and Arthur pulled back to see that exhaustion had claimed him despite his recent sleep. Arthur watched for a while as Merlin's sleep deepened, as his breathing slowed and evened and his features smoothed, and then went to clean himself up.

Arthur felt the gold torc around his own neck, and considered the strange turn that his life had taken over the past day. He was too worn out to analyze any of it further. He hoped that tomorrow Merlin would feel better, that he would begin to regain his strength and spark. He hoped that with time they would find a way to rid Merlin of his magic entirely and not have to depend upon the torcs. As effective as they had turned out to be, he looked forward to the day when Merlin was entirely free of sorcery of all kinds.
He closed the curtains and made his way back to bed by the light of the last candle. He slid in alongside Merlin and touched where the ends of his torc had sealed whole. It was as if they had never been separated at all, as if the torc had been forged by the magic into one solid piece, never to be broken. He tested the metal and found that it was strong, and satisfied, let it rest against Merlin's neck. Despite the magic, it was a beautiful piece of smithing, probably only rivalled in modern times by royal crowns. It was a shame that such skill had been bent to evil, but at least it had found a good purpose in the end. When Merlin's magic was gone, he would melt the torcs down along with his sword, and that would be the end of it all.

Everything was going according to plan. He blew out the last candle, pulled Merlin against him and into his arms, his certainty of their future easing the way to sleep.
Gwen

Gwen was not raised to be a worrier.

For her mother, it had been a practical matter. Her mother was a mender: of things, of problems, of people. It had always been that way, from Gwen when she was small and wide-eyed at the world from behind her mother's skirts, all the way to the very end, when her mother was too weak from her illness to stand. Better to work than to worry, to fix than to fret, no matter how dark the day.

Her father also mended, re-forging broken tools and weapons until they were strong and whole. But he was a dreamer at heart, not a mender. Whenever there was spare time and spare steel, he would spend both in the forge, creating beautiful objects, shields and swords, weapons and tools of the highest art. Her father did not believe in worrying, because there was no room for worry between his anvil and his hammer, or in his dreams.

So Gwen did her best to do as she was taught. To mend and to dream, and not to fret about tomorrow or the day after. But it was hard not to worry. It was hard not to be afraid of what was to come, when she knew that her world might well be about to end.

"Pass the butter, please?" Gwen asked, and smiled politely as Ciara passed it to her.

"I'm so glad you were able to join us tonight, Gwen," Ciara said, smiling back. "It seems like we never see you anymore."

"She was starting to worry they'd locked you up again," joked Peithan.

"Peth!" Ciara chided, giving her husband a glare.

"It's all right," Gwen assured them. "Things have just been so busy lately. The Lady Morgana insisted I take the evening off, now that I'm not doing the work of three servants anymore."

"How is she doing these days?" Ciara asked.

"Not well, I'm afraid," Gwen sighed, looking down at the bread in her hand, preferring to look at the butter rather than the knowledge in Ciara's eyes. It was kind of her to ask, even though she certainly already knew the answer, as Morgana's health had long been the topic of town gossip. But Gwen had accepted her friend's offer of dinner in order to have a distraction, not a reminder. "It's good to have everyone home again," she said, changing the topic.

"I was so worried," Ciara said, looking to her husband. "I kept telling you, you didn't have to go. There are plenty of carpenters about."

"The Prince asked for me by name!" Peithan protested, his pride evident. "My name! I could hardly refuse."

"At least you're back now," Ciara said, clearly torn between relief and the lingering effects of weeks of anxiety. "But I don't care if the King himself asks for you. Lynwen is not growing up without a father."

Peithan rolled his eyes. "My own wife has no confidence in me," he said to Gwen, with exaggerated disappointment.

"I married a carpenter, not a soldier," Ciara said, loudly, and cursed under her breath as Lynwen
woke and began to cry.

"I'll get her," Peithan said, glad for the excuse. He left the table and went to the other side of the house, where the baby had been sleeping.

Gwen reached over and rested her hand on Ciara's arm. "He's home now. He's fine. Everything's fine." She hoped that it wasn't a lie.

"I know," Ciara said. She mustered a smile and placed her other hand over Gwen's. "While he was gone, I was too worried about him to be angry. Now that he's home..."

"Just be glad that he is," Gwen said, because it was the sort of thing her mother would have said.

"I think she wants you," Peithan said, returning with an unhappy Lynwen. When she saw her mother, she reached for her and her cries tapered off. Ciara took her into her arms.

"She's growing so fast," Gwen marvelled. The last time she had seen Lynwen was almost two months ago, and in that time she had begun transforming from a baby into a little person. Lynwen peered shyly at Gwen and then ducked her head, giggled, and grabbed at Ciara's breast through her shirt.

"Hungry thing," Ciara tutted, and opened her shirt enough for Lynwen to nurse. She took to it eagerly, and settled against her mother, calmed. Peithan had sat down again, and was looking at his wife and daughter with a soft expression, full of fondness and love. Ciara met his gaze, and her own expression softened.

"I'll tell you a secret, Gwen," Ciara said, though she held Peithan's gaze. "We've been trying for our second. A son this time."

That explained why Ciara had given her food an extra dash of salt. "That's wonderful," she congratulated. It seemed that all of Gwen's friends in town were pairing off and having children. Gwen was starting to feel like the lone holdout.

"It is," Ciara said, but sobered again. "And with another mouth to feed, there'll be no running off to war."

"All right, all right," Peithan surrendered, holding up his hands. He looked to Gwen for support. "She hasn't even let me tell her a word since I got home, if you can believe it."

Gwen had known both Peithan and Ciara since they were all young enough to be running around town scraping up their knees and causing mischief. Peithan had always liked Ciara, but had tended to show his affection by pulling her hair and scaring her with bugs and toads. Gwen had never been scared of such things, but Ciara would scream and cry. It had taken years for Peithan to realize that what his attempts to woo Ciara were counterproductive, and years more before Ciara forgave him and accepted his posys of wildflowers. For all that they had grown and fallen deeply in love, some things about them had never truly changed.

"I don't want to hear about people dying," Ciara said, lowering her voice and placing a hand over Lynwen ear.

"You know we didn't close enough to the fighting for that," Peithan protested. "And anyway, barely anyone died at all, once they stopped going up the wall."

"Oh?" Gwen asked, curious. With Merlin unable to tell her what had really happened, all she knew was the list of deeds that Geoffrey had rattled off, and that had mostly been an account of how many
of the enemy had been killed or driven off by each knight. It was the typical sort of thing that was celebrated at the end of a victory, and as usual it said very little about the actual battle itself. But as most battles were actually quite unpleasant, Gwen had never minded not knowing the details. This time was different.

"Yes," Peithan said, eager to tell Gwen even if Ciara still didn't want to hear any of it. "We all thought it was going to go badly at first. Poor fellows were barely making it up to the top of the ladder. And then, well..." He trailed off, as if uncertain he should continue, then rallied again. "I hardly believed it myself. But the knights actually volunteered to go on the wall themselves."

Ciara was shocked. "They never!"

"I know!" Peithan said, sharing her amazement. "They took the men right off the ladders and went up themselves. Nearly ended up boiled alive for it, too, but the fool Deorham hadn't made the water hot enough." He chuckled. "You should have seen them, shouting at each other and running around in a panic. And they toppled right over when the knights got at them. It was spectacular."

"It must have been amazing," Gwen said, with some envy. Even though she had no love for war, there was always a part of her that longed to go with the carpenters and smithies when they marched away. The same part of her that couldn't let go of her father's dreams, of her own dreams, even as she strove to follow her mother's practicality.

"Did they fight their way down?" Ciara asked, curious now despite her reluctance.

"They didn't leave the wall, and we thought they were stuck," Peithan explained. "But the Prince took everyone over to the gate anyway. And then not half an hour had passed before they opened right up, just like that."

"That was Sir Geraint, wasn't it?" Gwen asked, remembering that he had been singled out during the ceremony. It was one of the few things mentioned that hadn't been about killing. Geraint had died fighting the Deorham's sorcerer.

Peithan hesitated again, and some of the joy went out of him. "Yes. Sir Geraint. And Sir Merek."

"Such a shame," Ciara said. Lynwen had finished nursing, and Ciara closed her shirt back up, placed a napkin over her shoulder, and patted Lynwen to burp her.

"Sir Leon's to be Arthur's new second," Gwen said, changing the topic to something cheerier. Leon was a few years older than her, and of course they had never been close. But she had spent a great deal of time around him and his family when she had been younger, helping her mother and learning her duties. At one point, Gwen had been expected to become a servant in Leon's household, and nearly had. Over the years, Leon had grown into a fine man, a good knight, and though they had always been separated by class and formality, she was proud of him.

"He could end up as the Prince's first one day, when he's King himself," Ciara said. "That would put you in fine favor with the royal household."

"Oh, I couldn't impose," Gwen protested. She didn't even like to take advantage of her position as Morgana's maidservant. It didn't feel right, putting herself above other people. She didn't want to be like the servants who pretended they were just as important as their masters, lording over everyone else when they were in the market.

"You've always been far too sweet for your own good, Gwen," Ciara said. Lynwen, fed and happy, was now much more interested in their guest than her parents. She tried to climb across the table to
get to Gwen, and struggled when she was held back.

"Give her here. I'm done eating anyway." Gwen took Lynwen and smiled dotingly at her, teasing her and making faces at her.

"That's just what I mean," Ciara said, fondly. "You're always too busy looking out for everyone else to take care of yourself. You should find a good man and let him take care of you for a change. Start a family and fill up that house of yours again."

"I know," Gwen sighed. "I want to, I do. It's just..."

"Your father's been gone for a year now," Ciara said, with sympathetic concern. "You have to move on."

"I'm not alone out of mourning," Gwen said, prickled by the assumption.

"Isell was asking after you the other day," Peithan said. "He's been keen on you for a while."

Isell was a baker's son. He'd had an unfortunate adolescence, but was maturing into a fine man, attractive if not quite handsome. He would inherit his father's business and was, on the face of him, a fine prospect. But he was so ordinary, and had no ambition beyond what had already been laid out for him. There was nothing in him that drew her.

Gwen wanted someone who wasn't ordinary. Who had dreams of their own, who didn't simply accept the life they were given. She had been drawn to Merlin for his bravery, and she had been drawn to Lancelot for his courage. But Merlin's heart was plainly taken, and Lancelot had only been a flirtation, a spark that never had the chance to catch into flame. And... well. Some dreams were not meant to be attained.

"Isell will find someone else to be keen on," Gwen said. "How about Sanan? She's had a crush on him ever since his skin cleared up."

That set Ciara and Peithan off on a round of matchmaking, and Gwen left them to it, focusing her attention on Lynwen instead. So many babies being born, or planned, and none of them might live to see the next season. Gwen ached to warn them all, to go to each house and insist they pack their belongings and run away from Camelot as fast as they could. But she could not. She knew from bitter experience that she could not. Either they would not believe her, or they would, and either way it would only lead to disaster.

Best to keep busy. To keep focused on what was in front of her, and not to worry about a tomorrow that might never come.

There was always a curfew in times of war, and the current curfew would not end until Alined formally surrendered. So as soon as dinner was finished, Gwen bid them goodnight. Ciara gave her a bag of herbs that the town healer swore up and down would help guard against bad dreams, and Gwen took it gratefully, even though she knew it was unlikely to help. Gwen had already tried all the little bags of herbs that there were to try, and none of them had ever stopped Morgana's dreams.

On her way back to the castle, Gwen stopped by her house. It needed airing and dusting after standing empty for weeks. Morgana had tried to persuade her to sleep at home for a change, but Gwen still couldn't bear being alone all night in an empty house. Better to stay with Morgana and watch over her, and be there for her to settle her from her nightmares. Better to be there to hear what was coming, than to wonder and be caught unawares with everyone else.

Gwen opened up the windows and wiped down the tables, changed the straw and freshened her
bedding. Most of her clothes and personal belongings were in Morgana's chambers, but she checked everything over to make sure there were no moths and that nothing was missing. She did not leave anything valuable in the house now that it stood empty much of the time, but neither could she stand to see it bare, as if it was no longer her house at all.

In the end, her mother could not mend herself. Her father’s dreams and artful weapons could not shield him. In the end, she had lost her mother to illness, lost her brother to his grief, and lost her father to harsh reality. The house was all she had left of them, the house and the cold forge beside it, and she could not let go of either.

At least now she could afford to pay the rent on both. She had sold all but the most prized of her father's creations, and then had sold the spare furniture and possessions, in order to make ends meet, since her mother's illness and her father's grief had drained away the family savings and her salary was not enough on its own. She was down to the one bed, the simple table settings, and had been near the end of her resources when Arthur and Merlin had suddenly given her a ridiculous amount of gold in payment for her father's sword. She could buy it all back now if she wanted, but there was hardly any point when she was never home anyway. She had saved what was important.

There were some things that Gwen had left in the house, things that she could not safely bring to the castle. Things that had been her parents’, from the old days, and had been carefully hidden and handed down. Gwen went to the back of the house and pulled away the sacks that she kept stored there. She rolled away the mat and exposed the hidden compartment beneath. Her father had built it during the Purge, and made it of iron so heavy that it would take a dozen men to lift it, and a giant to break it. Yet she had been taught the way to make it open, with the right pressure to the right spot.

She took out the few, precious items it contained. The small statues of Modron, the triple goddess, and Gofannon, god of smithing. The gold cup with its fine engraving, the small ceramic crucible, and the ritual knife.

This was the other reason she could not lose the house. She could not let anyone discover the hidden compartment, and without it, she could not keep these relics of the Old Religion. She had come too close to execution herself, and she would not suffer the same fate as her father, as Linette and Uwen, as so many others. It did not matter that she had no magic herself, that none of her family ever had. Worship of the Old Gods was treason enough, but like the house and the forge, it was all Gwen had left of her family, and she would not give it up.

She set the items up away from any possibility of prying eyes. First the two statues, and then the gold cup with a little ale poured into it. She carved her name into the wax of a small candle and placed it in the crucible, and lit it. She prayed for Elyan to be safe and to come home. She prayed for Morgana to be well, for Camelot and all her children to be protected. She prayed until the candle burned down, then cleaned out the crucible and the cup and put everything safely away.

§

It was dusk when she left the house, and the pale light was fading fast. Thankfully the guards knew her and always let her pass when she came home late during curfew. She cut across the courtyard, having one more errand to run before she could settle down for the night.

She found that the door to Gaius' chambers was closed and locked, and was about to give up on knocking when Gaius arrived from up the stairs behind her.

"Oh, Gaius, there you are," Gwen greeted. It was odd for Gaius to be out so late. Usually he did all his deliveries and errands at midday, so that he had time for council duties in the morning and everything else in the afternoon. But Gaius was kept on his feet for far longer these days, ever since
Merlin moved into Arthur's chambers. He really ought to take on a new apprentice, or at least a page.

Gaius had looked distracted and serious when he was climbing the stairs, but he shook off whatever was bothering him and greeted her back with a warm smile. "Gwen, my dear. I believe I owe you a draught."

"Afraid so," Gwen said. She waited as he slowly unlocked the door and then followed him inside. Even though Merlin had only lived with Gaius for a year, she felt his absence from the room. She saw him more often now that he was living with Arthur, of course, and she with Morgana, all four of them so close together. But when he had lived with Gaius, in a way Merlin had been hers as much as he had been Arthur's. Merlin had always turned to her for help, and while he still did on occasion, it was far less often now that he could more freely impose on Arthur. After all, it was one thing for Arthur to turn down a request from his manservant, and another entirely to turn down a request from his lover.

She expected that once things settled down again, they would all resume their regular sword practice. She had not yet worked up the courage to ask to join them, though she wanted to. She knew how to use a sword, of course, and had sparred freely in her youth with her father and brother, and even with Morgana, in their early days together. But when Morgana had stopped sparring, Gwen had stopped too. And now that Morgana was sparing again, Gwen was tempted to ask, and knew that if she did, Morgana would agree. But it was one thing for the King's ward to have such an indulgence now that she was grown. It was one thing for her to drag the Prince's manservant into her games with the Prince. But for her own maidservant to spar on the training fields was a step too far, no matter that she was the blacksmith's daughter. Especially as the blacksmith had been executed for consorting with sorcerers. Morgana had already done so much for her after her father's death, protecting her against accusation of complicity in her father's treason, against revived suspicions about her father's recovery during the plague. Gwen could not impose upon her further.

"How was her sleep last night?" Gaius asked, as he gathered the ingredients he needed for the draught. With the new formula he was using, he needed to make each dose fresh every night, or it would quickly lose its potency.

"The usual disturbances, but she hasn't woken up screaming." Those nights were the worst, but thankfully the new draughts seemed to be putting an end to them. Morgana still tossed and turned in her sleep, still spoke of things she should not know, but she did not wake in terror, and she did not remember the things that she dreamed. It was a small mercy, but Gwen was grateful for it. Too many times Morgana had run from her chambers upon waking, too wild with fear to be aware of the danger she was putting herself in when she screamed out her nightmares to all and sundry. If Morgana was not the King's ward, she would surely have been executed years ago. Instead, she was dismissed as a madwoman, which was hardly better. No one would want to marry a madwoman, even if she was a King's ward.

Morgana was not mad, but her nightmares seemed bent on driving her into madness. Gaius' potions were the only thing that stood in their way, and for that reason Gwen always made sure that Morgana took her medicine. If only the medicine itself was not becoming a problem.

"It's how she is in the daytime that worries me," Gwen continued. With each strengthening of her draughts, Morgana herself was fading further away.

"Perhaps we can hold the same dose, as she slept through the night," Gaius said, with kind reassurance.

"Yes," Gwen agreed, relieved. Hopefully this round of awful nightmares would end soon, as the others had before them, and they could go back to the old draughts. Perhaps they had not been
enough to stop Morgana from waking in terror, but at least they had not taken her days along with her nights.

Gwen did not know if Gaius was aware of the truth about Morgana's nightmares. It was not something that could be spoken of in the castle, even behind locked doors. But he had surely heard enough of her desperate cries, and observed the timing of her nightmares, to at least suspect the obvious. That Morgana's dreams were the dreams of a seer, and therefore granted to her through some magical means. That did not necessarily mean it was her own magic, as there were stories of people being cursed with foresight rather than born with it. But in Camelot, such a distinction would not matter.

Gwen had never asked Gaius, just as she had never raised the question to Morgana herself, for Morgana could hardly ignore the obvious any more than she or Gaius could. And yet it was better for them all to pretend that her nightmares were only nightmares. It was better to play the game of denial than to confront the truth, when the truth brought with it such dire consequences. Gwen had lost so many people already, she would not lose Morgana as well.

She waited patiently as Gaius prepared the draught, then took it from him. But before she left, she remembered something that Merlin had said to her yesterday.

"Gaius," she began, "Merlin said that there's a physician in Gedref who might be able to help Morgana. Do you think perhaps we could arrange a visit, once the treaty is signed?"

"Perhaps," Gaius said, though he did not seem eager for the idea. "But it's a long way to travel, and I would not recommend such a journey as long as Morgana is so unwell."

"Then maybe we could have the physician come to us?" Gwen suggested. "I'm sure the King would be happy to cover his expenses." The King did dote on Morgana, at least when he wasn't threatening her for defying him. Thankfully none of Morgana's outbursts of prophecy had reached the King's ears. Even denial had its limits.

"His skill is dearly needed in Gedref, especially after a siege and a battle," Gaius said. "But I will write him a letter, if it will ease your mind. He may have some recommendations for her treatment."

"That would be wonderful, thank you," Gwen said, grateful. "I'd better get this up to Morgana. Good night, Gaius."

"Good night, my dear. I'll see you tomorrow evening."

Gwen hoped that she would not, but knew that she would. Because the one person she knew who could help, the one person she needed to pass Morgana's warnings to, was the one person she couldn't reach. It was Merlin.

§

Just as the timing and outbursts of Morgana's nightmares made it obvious that her dreams were more than dreams, Merlin's oddities and warnings had given away his own nature. If anything, he had been quite plain about it, as he had confessed to curing her father right in front of the King himself. As with Morgana, Merlin's life had been saved by the dismissing of his words as the result of a temporary madness, in his case caused by love. Even Morgana believed Arthur's claim. But Gwen knew all too well that Merlin did not love her, not as anything more than a good friend. He had never once looked at her the way he looked at Arthur, even then.

If his confession had not been borne of the madness of love, then like Morgana he must have spoken
the truth, even if it was a truth that no one wanted to hear. And it explained so much. It explained her father's sudden and unique recovery, it explained Merlin's guilt at seeing her imprisoned and condemned. And it explained why Merlin had asked Morgana to persuade Arthur to help them hunt down the creature that had caused the plague in the first place, ultimately saving her life as well as the lives of everyone in Camelot.

Even though Merlin had not returned her affections, she had fallen quite in love with him for all of that. For saving her father, and then saving her, with such foolhardy bravery. When he had nearly died from drinking poison to protect Arthur, and he had survived against the odds, she had not been able to stop herself from kissing him. But it was a stolen kiss, and one she never should have taken.

Knowing the truth, that Merlin not only had magic but was using it to protect others, was a tremendous relief, even if she could no more speak of it than she could speak of Morgana's prophecies. Every time Morgana's nightmares riled up and an attack came, Merlin would somehow be at the center of it. Usually it was because he had tried to stop it, even going so far as to warn Arthur, but Arthur generally dismissed Merlin's warnings just as he had Merlin's confession. Gwen sometimes hid in the shadows and followed him, keeping at a safe distance, and watched as he did what she could not, despite the fact that he rarely received the warnings that seemed somehow meant for him.

She did not like being a coward. She had tried to take advantage of Morgana's warnings herself, tried to alert those in danger, to prevent whatever crisis was foreseen. But when she had intervened, it had raised too many questions. She then tried entrusting her knowledge to those who would keep it safe, but as a result they themselves were suspected of sorcery. It only took the execution of one of her friends for Gwen to silence herself completely, to accept that she could only wait and let the inevitable happen. The alternative was even worse than Morgana's dreams.

But Merlin could act, and was somehow able to do so without being accused of sorcery, even when he confessed to it or was blatantly implicated. She could only assume it was because of Arthur. No one could even imagine that the Prince would keep a sorcerer for a manservant, or that the King would condone and even endorse such treason. And Arthur was always protecting Merlin from one thing or another, shielding him from the reality of castle politics, from situations that might imperil him, from the ambitions of others. Merlin seemed as unaware of those protections as Arthur was unaware of all that Merlin was doing to keep Camelot safe. And that was before they had become lovers. That this state of mutual ignorance had persisted since then was a mystery to Gwen, but perhaps it was because they were men, as men could be rather oblivious about things.

As she reached the hallway to both Arthur and Morgana's chambers, Gwen hesitated. She wanted to knock on the door and check to see that Merlin was all right. She wanted to pass on Morgana's muttered warnings. But she was afraid. She was afraid that what she had heard last night was not the throes of passion. Merlin never left Arthur's side, and even after his tumble down the steps, when he had barely been able to hobble about, with his ankle and head bandaged and his arm in a sling, he had been desperate to follow after Arthur to Mercia. When Merlin had been ill and feverish after being poisoned, he had still managed to mumble spells of protection for Arthur, obvious to Gwen even though Gaius did his best to blame his words on the fever. Gwen knew enough prayers in the old tongue to recognize a spell when she heard it.

If injury and illness could not keep Merlin from Arthur's side, if even Arthur's various moments of rejection had not been enough to dissuade him, how could anything make Merlin hide away all day, unwilling to see even his closest friends?

And that was not all. For all the intensity of their passion, which Gwen had blushed to overhear many times, she knew that Merlin was putting himself in great danger by falling in love with Arthur.
As soon as he had been old enough to fight, Arthur had become the King's hand in the enforcement of his laws, especially when it came to magic. Arthur had led many attacks on the Druids, who had never harmed anyone. He led the searches that were regularly done through every room in the castle and every building in the lower town. Over the last two years, Arthur had arrested every single one of his friends: Morgana for helping the Druid boy, Gwen for her father's recovery, and Merlin for his attempts to stop Cedric. He had arrested her father for allowing a sorcerer to use his forge, even though he had not known the man was a sorcerer until it was too late. Gwen had hope that Arthur had learned something from her father's undeserved execution, his outright murder, but when she had brought Linette to him, all that had happened was the death of three instead of one. He had failed her, failed Camelot, and now... now she was afraid that he had failed Merlin. Not just because Merlin was so unlikely to hide away, not just because she had heard raised voices and loud noises, but because she had seen something cold in Arthur's eyes that morning, and it reminded her of of the coldness in Uther's when he had condemned her to death.

She was afraid. She could admit that to herself, at least. She was afraid for Merlin and afraid for all of them. She was afraid that she should have warned Merlin yesterday, before it was too late, because among Morgana's fragmented words was Merlin's name, and that meant he was in danger himself.

But hard experience paralyzed her, muted her. She could do nothing and hated herself for it. Hated that she was boxed in from all sides, unable to warn or to act without causing further harm. So she tried not to worry. She tried with all that she had.

She took a deep breath and let it out, and walked towards Morgana's door.

She was surprised to find Morgana out of bed, standing with her face towards the moonlight as it streamed in through the open window. Even though it was a full day since her last dose of the new draught, she was still under its influence. Her brief rally that morning had cost her dearly, and now she was glassy-eyed and unnaturally quiet, and every trace of pink was drained from her cheeks. It broke Gwen's heart to see her this way, and made her want to take the draught in her hands and cast it out the window. But if she did that, nothing would stop the dreams. And she had to stop the dreams, or she would lose Morgana.

"My lady," Gwen said, leaving the draught on the bedside table and hurrying over to Morgana. The night was chilly, and when she touched Morgana, her skin felt even colder than the air. "Come, you need to warm yourself." She guided Morgana back to her bed, disturbed by her pliancy. Morgana was never meant to be pliant. If only her nightmares would ease their grip, and things could go back to the way they had been.

"The cold... I was trying to clear my head," Morgana said, her speech slurred at the edges.

"Rest will help with that. The last thing you need now is to catch a chill." Gwen helped Morgana into the center of her bed and pulled the blankets up around her.

"You always take such good care of me," Morgana said, mustering a tired smile.

"I just want you to be well," Gwen said, gently. She rested her hand against Morgana's cheek, wishing that she could somehow will Morgana better. She wished that she did have magic, that there was a bag of herbs she could place under Morgana's pillow that would make her wake up fully recovered. She remembered the herbs that Ciara had given her, then, and pulled them out of her pocket. "I had dinner with Ciara today. She and Peithan asked after you. They wanted me to give you this." She pressed the small bag into Morgana's hand, and Morgana gripped it loosely before bringing it up to her nose and breathing in.

"Rosemary," she breathed, and sniffed again. "Thyme and... is that anise? Anise and chervil."
They were all good herbs, healing herbs. They would do absolutely nothing to help, but sometimes it was the thought that counted more than anything else. And right now Gwen was in no position to be choosy. "Shall I put it under your pillow?"

"Mmm. Then tell me about your day. I want to know everything."

"I will, as soon as you take your sleeping draught," Gwen insisted, picking up the bottle and opening it.

Morgana gave an unhappy look at the innocuous little bottle, but sighed and took it despite her unhappiness. Gwen sometimes wished that Morgana would resist the draughts, because at least then it would give Gwen an excuse not to give them to her. But Morgana didn't want her dreams, and deep down was probably even more frightened by them than Gwen was. Gwen could not imagine how she must feel, as the King's ward, to be burdened with magic that could cost her her life. Or perhaps she did know, having faced execution herself. Perhaps she knew exactly why Morgana would choose drugged oblivion over the truth.

Gwen wanted to laugh at all of them. They were all so trapped in this place, divided by their fears, by the fears of everyone around them. They had not started out in such a desperate state. There had been a time before the nightmares, before Merlin, when she and Morgana had been innocent and unaware of the trials that lay before them. When Morgana had been a newly orphaned girl, using her bold confidence to hide her grief and loneliness, and Gwen had still had a family. She could still see that girl in Morgana now, despite all the dreams and draughts had done to obscure her.

Gwen took the empty bottle and closed it, and put it back into her pocket. She sat with Morgana and talked to her until the draught pulled her down into a deep, unnatural sleep. She did not leave for her own bed in the side room, but stayed with her, smoothing her hair and stroking her forehead.

It was not until the night of Morgana's 18th birthday that the nightmares began. At first they were small and seemed little more than bad dreams brought on by too much indulgence at her birthday feast. But no matter what she ate, the nightmares kept coming back, a little stronger each time. It was Gaius' draught that made Morgana begin to talk in her sleep, and with her unconscious mutterings came Gwen's realization that the dreams were more than just dreams.

And as if Morgana's suffering was not enough, soon after those first nightmares, Gwen's mother fell ill. Gaius took it upon himself to care for her, even refusing payment for his treatments, but in the end there was nothing to be done. Grief crushed her father's spirit for a long time, and it drove Elyan away. And just when her father seemed to be rallying at last, regaining his strength and passion for the forge, perhaps inspired by the sight of the King himself victorious in combat bearing his finest sword, he was gone.

Five years of suffering, of pain and grief and loss, and Gwen wondered when it would be enough. When the gods would finally answer her desperate prayers and have some kind of mercy on them all. If they would all be orphans before their trials were ended. Of the four of them, they only had two parents left, and even though she knew how much it would hurt Arthur, Gwen would not be sorry to see Uther die. But then, if Morgana's latest nightmare came true, and Merlin could not stop it, there would be no more orphans in Camelot because there would be no more Camelot at all.

Gwen picked up Morgana's lax hand and held it between her own. She kissed it and pressed it against her cheek. And though she had already prayed that night, though she had no statue, no cup, no crucible at hand, she prayed again, and did not stop until she slumped asleep.
The Knights

Arthur woke slowly and without alarm, calm in a way that he had not been in weeks. Merlin was warm against his back, limbs wrapped around him, holding him yet lax from sleep. Merlin's breath fell against his neck, soft puffs of air that tickled the hair on his nape. When they had gone to sleep, Arthur had been holding Merlin. At some point, they both must have turned in their sleep. Arthur turned again, careful not to disturb Merlin or lose his embrace.

Merlin did stir then, but only until he had resettled comfortably against Arthur. His limbs tightened their grip as he reassured himself that Arthur was still there, and then he was out again. Arthur smiled indulgently and lightly stroked Merlin's hair, smoothing out the disarray that sleep had left behind. The fear and panic of the day before seemed distant and irrelevant.

His Merlin. His brave, foolish Merlin. Relief flooded anew through Arthur's chest, knowing that Merlin was safe now, that he had not been lost. His own grip on Merlin tightened and held, and he pressed soft kisses to the bridge of Merlin's nose, to his forehead. But his grip eased again as the remnants of his fear fell away again, unable to regain the hold they had claimed on him.

As if in response to Arthur's thoughts, Merlin stirred again. Arthur watched fondly as he went through the slow stages of his awakening: the restless shifting, the way he clung harder and then eased, the twist of his mouth and the furrow of his brow, and then finally the way his eyes scrunched up and then relaxed and opened, lashes fluttering as he blinked in confusion. His eyes slowly focused on Arthur, and then he smiled.

"Arthur," Merlin sighed, and closed his eyes again.

"Morning," Arthur murmured, and kissed him on the nose again. It made Merlin's scrunch up his face, which was always adorable.

"How do you feel?" Arthur asked, keeping his voice gentle and quiet. "The same as yesterday?"


Arthur kissed him again, rested a hand on the back of his neck, the base of his palm against the silver torc. "Good," he said, not hiding his relief. He had meant it when he told Gaius that he did not want Merlin to suffer. He knew that Merlin could brave through a great deal of pain if he had to, but he was glad that they had found a way to stop the magic without needing to resort to such measures. And really, it should not have been a surprise that Merlin would defy the odds yet again. If anyone could recover from having magic, it was Merlin.

"I love you," Arthur murmured.

The novelty of the words had yet to wear off, and it eased something in his heart to say them aloud. Each time, it sewed another stitch in his wound, the one he had thought could never close, never heal. It eased the loneliness and guilt that he had felt his entire life, because his birth had meant his mother's death, his father's grief. And if his father was weak because of that grief, if the kingdom was weak because of his father, it followed that the kingdom was weak because his birth had weakened it.

When he was younger, Arthur had believed that he could prove worthy of his mother's sacrifice, that he could undo the damage his birth had caused. That he could earn forgiveness. And so he pushed himself even harder than his father pushed him. He fulfilled every expectation, shouldered every
burden. It did not matter if the task was unpleasant or perilous or one he personally agreed with. He had been born to this life and all its duties, and his life was pledged to the kingdom and to his king. The cost of his birth had been high, but Arthur was determined to repay it.

As Arthur matured, he realized that he had been wrong. How could he ever earn forgiveness for killing his mother, for destroying his father's heart? Such damage could not be undone, and so he could never be forgiven, and the realization had embittered him. Certainly he had found joy in victory, pride in his father's approval, satisfaction in knowing that he could not be beaten in tourney or in battle. But that was not love. That was not happiness. Those were things he could never have, things he did not deserve. And so he took what he could from those who would give it, but never let them close. If they tried, he would push them away, for their own good as well as his own.

Until Merlin. If Arthur pushed Merlin away, Merlin pushed himself right back in. If Arthur was cold to freeze him out, Merlin was hot, melting away his defenses. If Arthur was sensible, logical in his arguments, Merlin defied both sense and logic. His battles against Merlin were the only ones he had ever truly lost, and they were over and done before Arthur could even raise his sword.

Merlin's answering smile sewed another stitch inside him. "I love you," Merlin said, and snuggled closer, pressed their foreheads together and closed his eyes.

"Not afraid of jinxing us?" Arthur asked, remembering Merlin's outburst in the cavern.

Merlin gave a soft laugh, took a deep breath in and out. "I think we're past the worst now."

Arthur's father, Morgana, the council, the knights, all the way down to the lowest servant, they all knew what Arthur was, what he had been, what he could never make up for. But Merlin looked at him and saw what he could be, saw an Arthur that didn't even exist, and yet gave his love freely to the Arthur that was. And instead of chasing the ghosts of the past, Arthur found himself eager for their future.

Arthur brought a hand up to rest it against Merlin's cheek, and Merlin turned against it, kissed his palm before turning back again.

"Thank you," Merlin said, opening his eyes again. They were so close together that it made Merlin's eyes cross a little, which was so adorable that Arthur had to kiss him again or he'd end up laughing. This time it was a proper kiss, and Merlin kissed back, all soft from sleep.

"For?" Arthur prompted, finally, when they stopped.

"Mm?" Merlin blinked at him.

"You were thanking me," Arthur reminded him, a doting smile tugging at his lips.

"Right," Merlin said. "I was thanking you."

"For anything in particular?"

"Yes," Merlin said, visibly gathering his wits, after Arthur's kisses had so thoroughly driven them away. "For giving me a chance. For being willing to listen. I realize... I know how hard it was for you. How afraid you were. You don't have to be afraid, Arthur. Not of me. I never want you to be afraid of me."

"I'm not," Arthur said. He had never been afraid of Merlin, only of the magic inside him. Now that the magic was stopped, tamed by the torcs, there was nothing in Merlin that he could ever fear. He could not fear what was his, what loved him. "Not anymore."
"Whatever it takes to prove myself to you. Whatever you need. It's already yours."

"I know," Arthur said. He petted Merlin, and Merlin melted against him, content. He was reminded of how Merlin had been in Gedref, both before the battle, when he had been so eager to be of use, and after, when he had been so calm and trusting. Merlin had only wanted to prove himself then, as a knight. Arthur let his hand rest on the torc again, feeling the warm metal against his palm. "You're already proving yourself to me."

"I'll keep it on," Merlin promised. "As long as you need me to wear it. It's not so bad, now."

Arthur kissed him for that. Even though he felt better knowing that the torcs meant Merlin's magic was completely under his control, he was glad to not have to force the matter. He did not want Merlin to be unhappy, or to have to restrain him against his will. "My brave knight."

Merlin gave a happy squirm at that, and a restless twitch of his hip. Arthur reached down between them and felt Merlin's morning arousal. It seemed Merlin truly was feeling better. He gripped it loosely and gave it a few testing strokes.

"Mm, sire," Merlin murmured, heat sparking in his eyes, rousing him in more ways than one. "My King."

"Shall your King reward his brave knight?" Arthur teased.

"If my King wishes," Merlin said, mouth curved in a knowing smirk. Arthur couldn't resist smothering it with kisses as he pushed Merlin onto his back and covered him, as their bodies rubbed languidly and lazily together.

Unlike the night before, Merlin had the strength to hold him back, to caress and grip at his back and arse as Arthur settled between his thighs. The blankets were pushed down and kicked away as they both grew heated, as their kisses became more eager and passionate. Merlin began to grasp at him with urgency, scratching at him with blunted nails, nipping at his lips, and then at last pushing his shoulders down to urge him on to the promised reward.

Arthur wasted no time in gripping Merlin's erection, giving his first teasing licks to the already-swollen flesh. On another day, he might have drawn out Merlin's pleasure with a long tease, but right now he wanted to feel how alive Merlin was, wanted to feel the pulse of him against his tongue. Merlin spread his thighs wide and spread his arms out across the bed as Arthur slipped a finger into Merlin's still-slick arse and took his cock deeper into his mouth, sucking and laving at it as if it was some long-denied treat.

He kept up his assault as Merlin groaned and writhed beneath him, flushing prettily as he tossed his head back and forth against the pillows. He knew Merlin's body so well that it was easy to play him to a perfect tune, giving Merlin spike after spike of pleasure without letting it rise too far. Merlin eventually stopped grabbing at the bed and grabbed at Arthur's hair instead, guiding Arthur to take him deeper. Arthur released his grip on Merlin's cock and took it all into his mouth, his throat, and used both hands to drive Merlin wild, two fingers crooked inside him while his thumbs pressed behind his balls. Merlin's groans grew louder and more desperate until his whole body went taut, and he keened as his cock pulsed against Arthur's tongue and into his throat.

Arthur swallowed neatly and then drew himself from Merlin's cock with a slurp. Merlin was laid out and panting, cheeks and mouth and body flushed and eyes sparkling beneath lowered lashes. He looked beautiful and alive and Arthur climbed over him and kissed him again, grateful beyond words. He couldn't break the kiss, couldn't let go, but when Merlin's hand wrapped around his aching cock, he covered it with his own and used Merlin's hand to bring himself off. He came
quickly and in long stripes over Merlin's front, and sighed in contentment.

"You've made a mess of me," Merlin murmured, smiling against his mouth.

"Leave it," Arthur said, pinning Merlin's wrists above his head. He dragged in a chestful of air and finally broke away, soaking in the sight of Merlin and the torc and his come. Merlin was his, all of him his, and nothing would ever change that now. Nothing would ever take Merlin away from him, not magic and not his father's laws.

When the possessive urge calmed in him, sated for the moment, he released Merlin's wrists and sat up beside him. He couldn't resist trailing his fingers through the drying come, marking Merlin that much further before feeding him his finger to suck clean. Merlin gave a soft hum as Arthur dragged his spit-clean finger against his swollen lips, and then stilled as Arthur's hand covered the torc. There was a brief flare of discomfort in Merlin's face, but it quickly eased.

Even though his larger plans had not changed overnight, Arthur felt a greater affinity towards the torcs now. It was obvious that Gaius' worries had been exaggerated, and Merlin would be able to wear the restraint for as long as was necessary. And it was a beautiful piece, and suited Merlin in a strange way. The gold torc he wore himself was surprisingly comfortable, barely noticeable despite its solid weight. It was certainly something he could have worn proudly if it did not have such negative associations with sorcery. He had always had some interest in Albion culture from before the Romans because of his ancestry, because of the Pendragon line that went back more than a thousand years. Few records survived, mainly due to the Roman purges, but there was evidence that the old chieftains would indeed have worn such torcs as a symbol of their status.

The morning light was growing too bright and high to ignore. Arthur reluctantly slid out of bed and stretched, working out the last of the sleep from his bones. Merlin sat up in the bed but was slower to get going, and Arthur had already finished his morning ablutions by the time Merlin dragged himself to his feet.

Arthur couldn't help himself, and grabbed the washcloth again before Merlin could take it. He wiped Merlin's front down, cleaning away his marks before rinsing off the cloth and allowing Merlin to finish on his own.

"With all the knights staying in Camelot, it will be a full morning of training," Arthur said, as he pulled out some suitable clothes from his wardrobe. "I want you to stay by my side today. Will you be up for the usual fetch and carry?"

"I think so," Merlin said, as he dried himself off. "But I'm probably not up to running around the field in full armor."

Arthur turned to see Merlin's self-effacing smile, and saw the longing there. Merlin wanted to be out there with the knights, training with them, not stuck on the sidelines. Arthur wanted Merlin out there, too, but they could not afford to indulge that way. They needed to remind the knights that Merlin was now only a servant again, that his secrets had to be kept. It would simply be too dangerous to muddy the waters by allowing Merlin to join in, even if he was feeling up to it.

"Let's take things easy today," Arthur said, keeping his tone free of any hint of pity. Merlin did have pride even if he wasn't one to show it off, and it had already been dented enough in the past week. "Broken arm rules."

Merlin laughed at that. "Maybe not that bad. But yes, you're probably right. I'm surprised at how much better I feel, actually."
"That's because you're stronger than you think you are," Arthur said, confidently. "You've just been relying on magic for so long, you don't know your own strength."

"Maybe," Merlin said, not entirely convinced.

As Merlin went into the side room for something to wear, Arthur picked up the clothes he had discarded the night before. He took the papers out of his jacket pocket and flipped through the drawings of the torcs and other magical objects. He found the list of servants his father had given him and shook his head. He put the drawings into his desk drawer, then lit a candle and burned the list up.

Merlin came back out again as the last of the small paper curled into ashes. "Is something burning?" he asked, frowning and sniffing the air.

"Just getting rid of something I didn't need," Arthur said. He blew out the candle and dumped the ash into the fireplace. Arthur often disposed of unneeded paper scrap that way, since there was plenty of sensitive information that he could not afford to leave lying around, even in his chambers.

Merlin merely nodded and knotted the lacing of his shirt. He had a fresh kerchief draped over his arm, but left it on the table and went over to help Arthur dress. Their shared relief at the familiar routine was palpable, and once Arthur was dressed he pulled Merlin into his arms and simply held him.

"Should I go get breakfast for us?" Merlin asked, half-muffled by Arthur's shoulder.

Arthur was reluctant to let Merlin leave his sight, even just for a trip down to the kitchens, but he nodded. They needed to find their old routine again, after all that they had been through.

"Wait," Arthur said, before Merlin could turn to go. He grabbed the kerchief from the table and wrapped it around Merlin's neck, bringing the ends around to knot them before hiding the knot and the torc beneath the bulk of the cloth. Merlin's hair was still a mess, so Arthur brushed it down until he was presentable. "There," he said, satisfied. "Now you can go."

Merlin gave a half-jestful bow and went out, looking remarkably cheered. Once he was gone, Arthur leaned back against a bedpost, an intense wave of relief rushing through him, making his knees weak. Everything was going to be all right. It really was. Merlin was going to be all right. He could hardly believe it, and he had never been more grateful.

When his knees were working again, Arthur put on his belt and sword and sat down at his desk to quickly review a few documents. Even a short battle was expensive, and payments would have to be made to those who had been badly injured, and to the families of those who had died. Arthur had long taken charge of such payments himself, as his father did not consider them a priority and would delay them if he felt the money was better spent elsewhere. But it was a relatively small amount of gold, and many times Arthur had been deeply thanked for the payments and told how important they were to those who received them. He had sometimes resorted to paying with his own gold, if his father was being particularly stubborn. Fortunately, his father had given him full responsibility for the battle of Gedref, including matters of the treasury, so he could ensure that all the payments were made quickly.

He had just finished the list of payments due when Merlin returned with breakfast. Arthur dusted the ink dry and folded the paper, putting it into his pocket so he could hand it off to the royal treasurer at the first opportunity. Merlin brought the tray over to the desk and pulled a chair up so they could eat together. Arthur was glad to see that Merlin's appetite was also restored, as he had clearly been nibbling at the grapes and cheese on his way back.
"Gwen says hello," Merlin said, as he grabbed a handful of grapes and went at them. "She was getting breakfast for Morgana. We'll have time to go see them today, right?"

Arthur hadn't had a chance to catch Merlin up on his conversation with Guinevere and Morgana, but clearly nothing Guinevere had said had raised questions or bothered Merlin.

"I told them you weren't feeling well yesterday, when they asked after you," Arthur said, figuring it best to prevent any possible misunderstandings. "That you needed time to adjust to being a servant again."

"Ah," Merlin said, as if that explained something. "Well, it's true enough. It's going to be difficult when we're with the knights, isn't it?"

It wasn't really a question, but Merlin seemed to need an answer anyway. "It will be hard for them to treat you as a servant again, after treating you as a knight. But they'll follow our lead," he assured Merlin. "And if they are more accommodating to you than they ought to be, then that only suits our needs, since my father believes that you were driven to exhaustion."

Merlin gave an outraged noise. "I was not!"

Arthur chuckled. "I know that, you know that, the knights know that. But it's better that my father thinks you useless than that he discovers the truth. Either truth."

Merlin gave him a sideways look. "Then he doesn't know about my magic?"

"No," Arthur said, confidently. "My father seems to have handed off responsibility for the kingdom's defenses to Gaius, of all people, and Gaius is the one who arranged for you to become my manservant so you could protect me."

Merlin blinked at him. "Gaius arranged it?"

Arthur nodded. "He recommended you for the position even before you arrived."

Merlin looked stunned. He sat back, breakfast forgotten. "Then the dragon was right. Gaius really was using me."

As loathe as Arthur was to defend Gaius, he felt the need to do so now. "He got you to where you needed to be," Arthur said. "He's in a difficult position, forced to betray my father in order to serve him. My father should not have put him in that position in the first place, but he has made the best of it. Without Gaius, we would never have met. And he's helped us with your magic. That counts for a lot, to me."

"I suppose," Merlin said, looking plainly conflicted.

"You don't have to talk to him again if you don't want to," Arthur said, reassuring him. "I won't let him hurt you."

Merlin mustered a smile at that. "I'm not going to hide," he said, visibly bracing himself. "He'll be at council and we'll need his help for all sorts of things when we're facing whatever comes next."

Arthur rewarded him for his courage by feeding him a piece of chicken. "Good," he said, and was glad to see Merlin's mood improve again. "Now, I don't want you to push yourself too hard today. You're still getting used to being without your magic. If you need to rest, just tell me, and don't brave your way through. I mean it."
Merlin rolled his eyes, but agreed, and let Arthur feed him another piece of food. He returned the favor by holding out a cube of cheese, and Arthur took it from his fingertips and kissed them before leaning back to chew.

Finally they could delay no longer. Merlin added the plate of leftovers from last night to the breakfast tray and handed the tray off to a passing servant, and then returned to Arthur for the last, necessary step before Arthur himself could safely leave the room. Arthur found himself to be quite reluctant to remove the gold torc, but it had to be done. He gripped the band and slowly eased it from his neck, and the moment it was fully off, he felt a sense of loss that he could not explain. Merlin also seemed affected, gripping the silver torc and losing some of the flush from his cheeks.

"Are you all right?" Arthur asked, concerned.

Merlin nodded. "Just felt... something. I don't know."

"Like you've lost something?" Arthur dared.

Merlin's answer was clear in his eyes. "Exactly like that," he said, quietly.

Arthur considered the gold torc. He should be afraid of it. It held an enchantment that he did not understand. It was clearly affecting them both in some way. But it did not feel wrong or evil or corrupting. His father always said that that was what magic did, it made you think it was safe until it was too late. But even if he doubted Gaius, he could not believe that Gaius would deliberately try to corrupt him, not when Gaius himself was serving in defense of the kingdom against magic and at his father's command. And it made no sense if Merlin felt the same loss. If magic was trying to infect them through the torcs, it should make Merlin feel better, not worse.

He shook his head. Now was not the time to lose himself to questions he could not answer. He wanted to bring the gold torc with him so it would be close at hand, but with Merlin bearing the restraint so well, there was no need to risk its discovery, especially as it would have to be set aside during training. He put the torc into the heavy chest where he had put Palaemon's ring, and then, realizing it had been lying open on the table all night, grabbed Merlin's grimoire and added it to the chest as well. Then he locked them all safely away.

By the time they arrived at the armory, delayed further by a quick detour to the royal treasurer, most of the knights had already armored up and taken their training swords and shields out to the adjacent field. But among those still lingering was Leon, who seemed to be at a loss.

"Sir Leon," Arthur greeted. "Is there a problem?"

"Oh, sire," Leon said. He gave a startled bow. "I'm afraid I'm unable to find my armor and sword."

Arthur frowned, annoyed. "Leon, if you're going to be my second, you'll be responsible for a great deal more than a set of armor. If you can't even keep track of that..."

"I swear, sire, it was right here last night," Leon said, adamant. "I was up late making sure all the equipment was in order. But now it's just... it's gone, sire, I can't explain it."

Arthur had a sinking suspicion. "Very well," he said. "You can use one of the spare sets. Merlin, if you would?"

Merlin retrieved a set of spare mail, of the type Arthur had made him wear during his own training. It had some broken links and was a bit shabby, but it would still do the job. Yet for a knight to wear it,
for Arthur's second to wear it, was somewhat shameful. And it was exactly the sort of thing Arthur would have wanted to see if he was a knight that didn't care for his new commander and wanted to show his disdain.

Merlin helped Leon into his mail and armor, and then retrieved Arthur's mail, which was perfect and gleaming. Again, Merlin assisted, and took Arthur's enchanted sword and gave him his favorite blunted sword in its place. Merlin seemed a little breathless after all the exertion, but otherwise he was holding up fine.

They made their way out to the training field, the last to arrive. The knights were in rough formation, each warming up in their own way, and when they saw Leon they smirked and snickered under their breath, only barely hiding their satisfaction and contempt.

When his father had told him that he was assigning Leon as his second, Arthur had been afraid of just this sort of reaction. The knights were fresh from the glory of battle, and Leon had yet again remained at home. It did not matter that it was not Leon's choice to do so. The men were in high spirits, and they saw Leon as a coward who hid behind his father's shield. They were extremely displeased by the idea of having to take orders from him.

Arthur could simply bawl his knights out for their poor behavior, but that would not solve the problem. He needed the knights to respect Leon and want to obey him. If he did not allow Leon the chance to prove himself at the start, a proper bond would never be formed. And a strong bond was vital, especially now that Leon would be going to battle, should the opportunity arise again. A second could not be hidden away behind the castle walls like a castle guard. Lord Heward would have to accept that his son could only rise in the ranks if he risked his life with all the other knights.

But Merlin had been in a similar situation just weeks ago, and he had risen to the challenge. It was a shame that Leon could not be told the truth about Merlin, because if he knew, Arthur was certain that it would inspire Leon to rise as well. And perhaps Leon could be brought fully into the fold with time. But Leon had not yet proved himself to Arthur either, certainly not enough for the sharing of secrets. They had all been forced into this arrangement by the King, and they would have to make the best of it.

"Sir Leon," Arthur said, turning to Leon but making his voice loud and clear enough for everyone else to hear. "As my second, you will lead the men through the standard exercises."

"Yes, sire," Leon said, clearly intimidated by having to face all the knights at once. But he rallied and took the battered spare training sword with him to begin shouting out the familiar orders.

Arthur turned his back and left him to it, showing the knights that at least in this, Arthur was not going to coddle Leon, that he had confidence in him. He walked through the ranks, correcting any sloppy or incorrect behavior as he went, with Merlin tagging along at his heels. And just as the routine of their morning had been a balm, so was the sight of so many knights all together, hale and hearty and focused at their task. Their insubordination towards Leon was not so great that they would shirk in their duties.

When the exercises were over, Arthur had Leon lead the men in a run around the field with shields and swords, and Arthur himself took up the rear, so he could motivate the slowest of the group to quicken their pace. He left Merlin to rest on the grass with the water skins, since he seemed to be wearing out rather more quickly than expected.

While the knights had been cooperative during the exercises, they were in a bolder mood during the run. They ran harder than they should in order to outpace Leon, forcing him to go faster and faster to stay ahead. Finally Arthur took pity on him, and ran up to the front of the line himself to force
everyone back to a normal pace. Leon gave him a grateful but embarrassed look, and if he had not yet figured out what was going on in the armory, he clearly realized it now.

When they were all sufficiently worn out from running, Arthur sent the men back to Merlin for a drink and a rest, and took Leon aside.

"You don't need to say anything, sire," Leon said, humiliated.

"It seems I do," Arthur said, keeping his voice quiet but firm. "I know the conditions of your promotion were not ideal, but you cannot let that hold you back. If the men feel you are weak, they will never respect you."

"I want nothing more than to prove myself to them and to you," Leon replied, fervently. "But I fear they have already judged me."

"Then it is up to you to change that judgement," Arthur said. "You must set the terms. That is what makes a leader. If you allow them to override you, they will not follow you in a crisis, much less on a run."

Arthur had restrained from intervening because he needed to see how bad the situation was. It was not awful, but it was not good, either. Leon was a solid fighter, and had proven his worth in defense of the castle. He was not so low in their esteem that they would refuse to follow him at all. But Arthur was almost certain that the knights had been discussing who would make a better second should Leon fail to prove himself able. If they were able to cow him sufficiently, Leon might surrender his promotion and return to his old position, where he had already proven himself and could retain some status. And then the knights could offer up their own candidates, and the King would be likely to accept whichever one Arthur chose.

It was tempting to go along with the knights' plan and be able to choose his second himself. It was tempting in spite of the shameful behavior it would require. But Arthur had to give Leon the opportunity to succeed. Arthur had always had an eye for potential, and there was potential in Leon. In the right conditions, he could become a great knight and not merely a good one. And Arthur needed great knights.

"You must call out their doubts and defeat them," Arthur said. "If they think you are weak, you must prove you are strong. If they think you a coward, you must prove your courage. If they think you a fool, you must prove your wisdom."

"Then I must prove my courage," Leon said, gathering himself despite the bitterness in his voice. "But how?"

It was a difficult question to answer. Leon had been a knight for years, and in that time no enemy kingdom had breached their borders and reached the castle keep. The last time that had happened had been when Cenred lay siege to Camelot. The siege ended in Cenred's retreat, when allying kingdoms had sent troops to aid Camelot, and had led to the long war with Escetir. But Leon had only become a knight after that siege, as the deaths of so many had opened a surfeit of positions. But of the domestic threats he had faced, there had been creatures like the Griffin, various sorcerers, and the occasional mundane threat like assassins...

The assassin.

"The assassin you captured. The one that Odin sent to kill me. Tell me about him."

"The King commanded me never to speak of that," Leon protested.
"If you are to be my second, you will follow my command, not my father's," Arthur said, sternly. "Tell me about that night."

"I was taking extra patrols at night," Leon began. "The King ordered me to make an additional pass by the Lady Morgana's chambers due to her importance and the vulnerability of her ill health. If I saw light from under the door, I would knock and check that everything was all right. There was a light that night, and I believe the Lady Morgana was having one of her nightmares. But Guinevere sent me away. That was when I saw that the door to your room was ajar."

"And the assassin was inside?"

Leon nodded. "I drew my sword and he attacked. He went for my neck with his knife, but I was able to block him. We fought and he proved himself to be no simple intruder. I shouted for assistance, and by the time it arrived, I had disarmed the assassin and knocked him unconscious. We later discovered that he had killed two guards and hidden their bodies so that they would not immediately be discovered."

"And the assassin's identity?"

"His name was Myror, my lord."

Arthur stilled. Myror was a skilled assassin feared throughout Albion. Leon had described their meeting as if it was a mere scrap, and yet it must have been a fierce fight, and one where the odds were not in Leon's favor. That he had won handily against such an opponent, and done so on his own, was a great testament to his courage and his strength. But because his father had kept the matter quiet, Leon was not recognized for his deeds. It explained why the King had thought him worthy of such a promotion.

But then, his father had always had a keen eye for potential himself. Perhaps Arthur had also allowed the past to cloud his judgement of Leon.

"Is there a man among the knights you trust? One who holds you in esteem?"

Leon looked past Arthur to the resting knights. They were all nobles, of course, and as a result had largely been acquainted with each other before they were knighted. Service changed men, changed their relationships, but some bonds persisted.

"Sir Alynor," Leon said. "We've jousted against each other since we were old enough to ride. We had both intended to enter the tournament before it was cancelled."

"Does he know of Myror's capture?"

Leon shook his head. "Only myself, your father, and a few of the castle guards. Oh, and Gaius."

Arthur restrained himself from rolling his eyes. Of course Gaius was to be found in the middle of this as well. But Alynor would be useful, since he had fought with them in Gedref. "Tonight, take the men out for drinks, and once you are both in your cups, tell Alynor privately of your defeat of Myror. By the end of the week, every single knight will know what you have accomplished. They will hold you in a new light, and give you the chance to prove yourself."

Leon looked rather bewildered by the idea, but he nodded in acceptance. "I will do as you say."

"Excellent," Arthur said, confident that the situation was on its way to resolving itself. "And in the meantime, you should show off your impressive skills against the men. If you were able to defeat Myror on your own in a darkened room, you should be able to hold your own against any knight..."
who steps forward."

Leon looked less certain about that, but Arthur merely punched him on the arm before heading back to the others. It would do the men good to work out their frustrations in a formal setting, and once Leon had both proved his general mettle and been knocked on his arse a few times, it would make them more amenable. The best of them would have a change of heart once they had been pried with free ale and heard about Myror's defeat through whispers and rumors, and the rest would follow suit.

"Right," Arthur said clapping his hands together and rubbing them with anticipation. "Time to see if the lot of you have gone soft."

"I'll show you soft, my lord!" someone shouted, and laughter rippled through the group.

"You're not going to show me, you're going to show Sir Leon. I can't expect him to defend the kingdom with a bunch of layabouts. So one at a time, let's see some volunteers."

As expected, there were many who were eager to test themselves against Leon, or rather to test Leon. Some of them were probably the ones who were most keen to take his position for themselves. If Leon could at least prove to be their equal, it would make their acceptance of him easier still.

Arthur left Leon to face his opposition and sat down beside Merlin. The color was gone from his cheeks despite his rest, and Arthur frowned with concern.

"How are you feeling?" Arthur asked.

"Worse," Merlin admitted. "I don't understand it. I felt so much better this morning. And now... I'm starting to feel empty again, like I did last night."

"Do you think you're going to pass out?"

Merlin shrugged. "I don't feel faint, just... exhausted. Run down."

"Maybe you need another rest," Arthur suggested. "Go over there and take a nap, and I'll wake you when we're done." He pointed to the spot where Merlin usually ended up napping when he was bored during training, out of the way of any activity and half-shaded by a tree.

Merlin didn't even protest, simply dragged himself to his feet and obeyed. He laid himself down and was out in moments.

It was worrisome, Arthur had to admit it. He may have been too optimistic about Merlin's recovery, and Gaius correct in his cautions. But Merlin had seemed so much better that morning, and he was so much worse now. They would see how Merlin was feeling after his nap. Perhaps he would bounce back again as he usually did.

"Is Merlin all right, sire?" asked Sir Ronald. He and the other, newest knights did not have anything against Leon as the older knights did, and so were less interested in the drama playing itself out on the field. "We were concerned when he wasn't at the ceremony yesterday, and he seems to be unwell."

"He picked up a cold on the journey back," Arthur lied. "I gave him the day off to rest and recover, but it seems he needs more time." He gave Ronald a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, Gaius has already treated him."

Ronald nodded in understanding. "The battle and the long journey must have taken a great deal from his reserves. He pushed himself very hard in Gedref. We must watch over him." He mustered a
smile, but it was aimed at Merlin and not Arthur.

"We will," Arthur assured him. "The best thing for now is to let him rest when he needs to. We'll ease him back into his normal routine."

"Of course," Ronald said, and went back to the other knights to tell them about Merlin's health. Borin, Althalos, and Jarin each turned to look at Merlin with fondness and gentle concern. It was obvious how much they had come to care for Merlin, that they still considered him to be one of their own.

Arthur took one last look at Merlin himself, and then turned his attention to the knights who weren't eager to duel with Leon. "All right, the rest of you pair up," he called, and put an end to their idleness.

§

By the time the sun was high, Leon was not the only knight who had a sore arm and a bruised arse. Arthur had driven them all hard, himself included, because it was too easy for them to let their guards down after a victory. Even if the battle had been won, the war would not be over until Alined formally surrendered. And as Merlin had himself pointed out, there would always be another threat on the horizon. They had to keep sharp and at the top of their game if Camelot was to be well-defended.

Arthur ended practice but did not rouse Merlin, wanting to let him sleep as much as possible. He removed his own armor and put it away himself, and if any of the knights thought it odd they said nothing. Only Leon and the others who had stayed in Camelot betrayed any surprise, and they only gave sideways glances.

Before they all left, Leon invited the men out to The Rising Sun, and even the most set against him could not resist unlimited ale at Leon's expense. They would have a rousing night at the tavern tonight, and Arthur regretted that he wouldn't be able to join them. But he had other matters to attend to, and Leon needed to do this on his own, without Arthur's presence muddying the waters.

Once there were no more excuses to delay, Arthur went back to the tree that Merlin was sleeping under. He sat down beside him and stroked his fingers through his hair, which was growing long and curling up at the ends as a result. He was reminded that neither of them had had a proper bath since leaving Gedref, and made a mental note to arrange for hot water to be brought to his chambers tonight. It would do them both good to have a soak.

He gave Merlin a light shake on the arm, and then another. Merlin stirred and lifted his head, blinking in confusion before he focused on Arthur and remembered where he was. He sat up and rubbed blearily at his face, stretched and yawned.

"Feeling better?" Arthur asked.

"Think so," Merlin said, as he straightened his clothes. Arthur saw a gleam of silver before the kerchief was pulled back into position.

Despite his grogginess, Merlin did look better for having slept. Arthur was reminded about what Ronald had said about reserves. If Merlin had been reliant on magic, then it would make sense if he did not have his own reserves of energy. But as sleep went some way towards restoring him, then the solution was equally apparent. When Merlin tired, Arthur would send him off for a nap. With time, Merlin's reserves would increase, and he would need less and less sleep to make it through the day, until only the normal nighttime amount was necessary. It was somewhat inconvenient, but it was
"Are you up for visiting Gwen and Morgana now?" Arthur asked. "We can have lunch with them."

Merlin brightened at the suggestion. "I'd like that," he said. He rested his hand over Arthur's and gave it a squeeze, and if they had been truly alone they would have kissed. But now that they were home, such things were only for behind locked doors.

"Good," Arthur said, warmly. "After that, I have some paperwork to do in my chambers, and you can take another nap if you need it. And then you can give me my first lesson."

Merlin brightened even further, and broke into a wide grin. "Have I ever told you that you're very good at planning?"

"Yes, I am," Arthur said, smugly, and Merlin batted him playfully on the arm.
It was still dark when Gwen woke, chilled and with a crick in her neck. She chided herself for falling asleep in her chair again, and saw that the candle she had left lit had burned itself down. But it was not discomfort that had roused her. Morgana was in distress, tossing and mumbling incoherently as her visions overwhelmed her. The new draught would keep her from waking up and remembering what she had dreamed, but it did not prevent the dreams from happening in the first place. If Gwen woke Morgana now, it would interrupt the vision, but to wake her would undermine the effects of the draught. The last thing Morgana needed was to remember the awful things she was dreaming of, and to run out of her chambers shouting prophecies.

As her visions intensified, Morgana's words grew clearer, though under the effects of the draughts they never became more than a confused jumble. But a confused jumble was more than enough. Whatever was coming, it was bad. Very, very bad.

There was a part of Gwen that wanted to run out into the courtyard and shout the warnings herself. A part that didn't care about the consequences. That didn't care if the morning she acted would be the last morning she would ever see. At least then she would know that she had done what she could. But she did not want to die, to burn as so many others had burned. Perhaps that was selfish and cowardly. But she was not Merlin. She did not have the protections he had, the powers he had. All she would be able to do was warn, and in Camelot such a warning would be no guarantee of anything but her own death.

Morgana began to settle, her muttering trailing into soft whimpers. Merlin's name again, the same as before. Whatever his fate was, it had not yet befallen him, and for that she was grateful. If she could just get him alone, away from Morgana and Arthur, she could tell him about the fate that was upon them, and he could find a way to change that fate, as he had changed so many fates before.

When Morgana was sleeping calmly again, her visions finished for another night, Gwen smoothed the blankets around her and brushed her hair back from where it had fallen across her face. There were so many things that Gwen wanted and could not have. There were so many things that she had no choice but to live without. She sometimes thought about following in Elyan's footsteps, leaving Camelot behind and making a new life for herself in another land, one where she would not have to live in fear. But she could not leave Morgana. She could not let her go and leave her alone with her suffering.

Gwen stood and went to her room, lit a single candle and changed her clothes. She sighed as she lay flat and settled beneath the warm blankets. As the chill seeped from her bones, her thoughts drifted drowsily, and wandered into dreams. Not of the future, but of the past, to Morgana as they had all been.

In those first days, Gwen had only really seen Morgana from afar. Sometimes her mother accompanied Lady Asceline, Sir Leon's mother, to the castle, and as Gwen was officially her apprentice, she was allowed to come along. The castle had seemed impossibly large to her back then, and despite her familiarity with the ways of nobles from Lady Asceline and Lord Heward, she was dazzled by the luxuries and fineries of court. All the colors were brighter there, the candles more numerous, the displays of food and wealth more extravagant. Morgana, dressed in mourning black with a sword on her hip, had stood out starkly among the knights with their vivid red cloaks and gleaming mail, the men in their silk and velvet suits, and the women with their grand dresses. Brash and outspoken and precocious, she had immediately made herself the star of the court, and the King had doted on her as if she was his own.
But Morgana had to share the stage with Arthur, who had quickly and fervently resented her presence. Everything Morgana did, he saw as intentionally against him. At eleven, she was a year older than him and an inch taller. She was a full orphan while he was only half of one. She was poised and confident and he was serious and subdued. The King doted on her, indulging her every whim, while Arthur was expected to work and study and practice from sunup to sundown, and barely earned a smile from the King for all that he labored. She insulted him, called him a bore, acted like she was a Princess even though her father had only been a Lord and she would not even inherit his lands, and Arthur was the Prince and would one day be King of all of Camelot.

Everyone could see the changes she wrought in Arthur. He began to seethe with jealousy, and her provocations drove him to public outbursts and private revenges, revealing that he had in fact inherited his father's temper after all. These set Morgana off in turn, and when the two of them actually came to blows one day in the town market, the King had no choice but to intervene. He punished both of them with equal harshness, forcing them to spend their days together in study and labor, and to share everything but their chambers, so that they would learn to work together and respect each other.

It worked. By the time their punishment ended, the two of them were better behaved and genuinely endeared to each other. Morgana drew Arthur from the somberness of his childhood, and they regularly rode and sparred together, which gave Morgana focus and settled her from her wilder tendencies. By spring, there was talk that the two were courting, and that the King would marry them together when they were older. The town was full of excitement at the prospect of a happy match for the Prince, after so much loss and such dark times.

But it was not to be. The King had already began to look for a husband for Morgana among the noble houses of the kingdom. But each suitor that the King found for her, Morgana rejected. No one knew if the rejections were because of her affections for Arthur, or if Morgana truly disliked all the noble sons of Camelot, or if she was simply too proud to accept an arranged marriage.

All of this Gwen had heard through gossip. Her mother was an absolute font of knowledge about the goings-on of the court, because she was Lady Asceline's trusted maidservant, and Lady Asceline was the biggest gossip in all of Camelot, or so it seemed to Gwen. She and Lord Heward had extensive lands to the east, but preferred to live in the upper town, within the defensive walls. Both of them spent much of their time in court, as they were very important people, almost as important as the royal family itself, or so Lady Asceline said. Gwen thought that Lady Asceline was an awful snob and a show-off, but had the sense not to say so. Especially as at the time, it seemed that her life was destined to be spent in the service of her and her house.

But her destiny changed the day Morgana was brought to Lord Heward for the possible match of his son, Leon. After hearing so much about her, after catching glimpses of her in the town market, Gwen could not help but neglect all her chores so she could spy on the two of them together. Unsurprisingly, Morgana had been utterly uninterested in poor Leon, to the point where the boy was quite upset by her scathing dismissals.

And then, even though Gwen had been careful to be absolutely quiet, Morgana had turned directly to the cracked-open door that Gwen was peering out from, and winked at her. At her! Gwen had blushed and squeaked and run to the kitchen to hide; it was generally off-limits to the nobles as they did not want to dirty their fine clothes with flour and grease.

But Morgana had not cared about dirtying her mourning black. She had marched right into the kitchen and ordered Gwen to come out from where she was hiding.

"I'm the Lady Morgana, and if you come out right now, I might not tell anyone you're a spy."
"I am not a spy!" Gwen had said, alarmed at the accusation. Everyone knew that the King would have you executed if you were a spy. A month before, a mapmaker's apprentice had been arrested for making copies of the royal maps and and selling them to Cenred. The King had left the head on a spike for a week as a warning, right where everyone could see it, and ravens had eaten out its eyes. Gwen still got the chills when she thought about it. "You'd better not tell anyone such lies," she said, sternly, standing up from where she had been crouching.

"It's not a lie," Morgana defended, undeterred. "You were absolutely spying on me. You have been since I arrived."

Gwen felt her cheeks flush. "I'm a servant. I'm supposed to watch so I know if someone needs me."

"You're very young for a servant," Morgana said, stepping closer. "What's your name?"

"Guinevere," Gwen said, using her full name because it sounded grander. "And I know all about being a servant. My mother has served Lady Asceline for years, and I've been helping her since I was eight. And I'll be eleven in a month."

"This summer, I'll be twelve," Morgana replied, proudly. "You must be an expert at being a servant if you've been doing it for so long. I'm an expert at swords. My father started teaching me to fight when I was five."

"My father's a blacksmith," Gwen retorted, unwilling to be cowed by Morgana's boasting. "He makes swords, and I know how to make swords, too! And I can fight!"

"Prove it," Morgana said, drawing the sword from her hip.

Gwen gaped at her. It wasn't a proper longsword, like her father usually made; it was smaller and lighter. But it was still a real sword, and it was extremely rude to draw swords in the house.

"But I don't--" Gwen began, but before she could protest that she hadn't brought a sword of her own, the door to the hallway opened, and in came Morgana's maidservant. She was an older woman with a stern air, and when she saw Morgana, she went all aghast.

"Lady Morgana! Put that sword down at once!"

Morgana glowered but quickly sheathed her sword, and kept a protective hand over the hilt, as if worried it would be taken from her.

"Drawing a sword on a servant," huffed the maidservant. "Wait until the King hears about this."

Morgana looked truly alarmed, and she stepped backwards, away from the maidservant, and nearly backed right into Gwen. Morgana gave Gwen a quick but obviously pleading look, and for some reason, Gwen felt obligated to rescue her. Even if she was rather rude.

"She wasn't threatening me," Gwen said. "My father's a blacksmith. I asked if I could see her sword."

The maidservant now gave the both of them the same dubious look. But she seemed to accept the explanation. "You should not be in here in the first place," she told Morgana, and took hold of her arm. "You are not here to talk to servants. You're here to meet young Leon."

"I don't want to marry him," Morgana said, stubbornly. "I don't want to marry any of them. You can tell the King that, I don't care."
The maidservant began to drag Morgana towards the door. "You will have to marry someone, young lady, and you're lucky that the King has allowed you to have a say in the matter thus far. Now come, you must apologize to Leon for your rude behavior."

That was the last Gwen saw of Morgana that day. She did not dare go back to her spying ways. Later, she found out that Morgana and Leon had been taken to sit with Lord Heward to discuss their shared future, and that Lord Heward was very keen indeed on the match. Lady Asceline was even more excited by the prospect of marriage bringing them closer to the royal family, even if not by blood, and Gwen's mother told her that the two were pressing the King to accept the match despite Morgana's refusal.

Gwen was dusting one day when she found Leon sitting in his father's study and staring disconsolately at the book in front of him, quite obviously not reading it. He had been in a quiet mood since Morgana's visit. Despite the excitement of his parents, Leon did not seem happy about the idea of being married to Morgana.

Gwen was not supposed to speak to Leon, or to any of the nobles, not without being spoken to first. It was the first lesson her mother had taught her about being a servant, before she had learned how to properly fold a sheet or pour a jug. A servant was meant to be unheard and unseen unless she was called upon. But Leon's elder brother Lewin was away in their lands to the east, and it seemed that without him, Leon had no one he could turn to.

Before she could stop herself, she stepped towards him and said, bravely, "Maybe it won't be so bad. To marry the Lady Morgana, I mean."

Leon looked towards her, startled by her sudden outburst, then looked down again. "She hates me."

"I'm sure she doesn't, really," Gwen soothed. "She doesn't want to get married to anyone."

"Father is set on the match," Leon said, with a sigh. "If the King allows it..."

"I'm sure she'll stop being mad about it, once it's done," Gwen offered, though she wasn't sure if she believed it herself. Even though their meeting had been brief, it was clear to Gwen that Morgana was extremely certain about not marrying anyone. "And she is... she is quite lovely." The thought made her blush, though she wasn't sure why. Everyone said that Morgana was a beautiful young lady, that she would be stunning when she was grown.

Gwen had thought about Morgana a great deal since that day. She had been quite unable to stop thinking about her. She had never met anyone like Morgana before, any girl so proud and beautiful and bold and extraordinarily rude. Somehow even her rudeness was appealing.

"Everyone will be jealous of you, if you have her as your wife."

"Do you think so?" Leon said, perking up.

"Oh yes," Gwen said, nodding. "You'll be the most envied man in all of Camelot, to have the Lady Morgana's favor. Well, after Prince Arthur, of course."

Leon rallied further. He had always lived in Lewin's shadow, and the idea of such success, even through an arranged marriage, was clearly appealing to him. "Once the King agrees, we'll probably be married right away. Maybe even before I leave to squire for Sir Kay."

Sir Kay was one of Camelot's bravest knights, and the son of Sir Ector, who trained all the knights and who even trained Prince Arthur. Leon was meant to squire for Sir Kay until he was old enough to be trained by Sir Ector and join all the knights. There was a lot of talk around the town that there
might be a war between Camelot and Escetir, and the sabotage by the mapmaker's apprentice made such a war almost certain. It was both exciting and terrifying to Gwen, and her father and Elyan had been busier than ever making swords and shields and armor in preparation for the inevitable.

Lewin would inherit Lord Heward's lands and title, Leon was destined to gain glory for the family through acts of valor and bravery in defense of the kingdom. Lord Heward had always been supportive in that, and had arranged for the squiring with Sir Kay in order to position Leon so that he might one day lead the knights himself, perhaps even becoming King Arthur's first knight. Gwen knew that Leon was eager to join the knights and fight against Cenred when the time came. He was ready to march into battle as a squire and prove himself, even at his young age.

"I must go speak to my father at once," Leon said, closing the book he had not been reading and marching out of the room.

Gwen had intended to cheer Leon from his sadness, and she was glad to see him restored. But she felt oddly sad herself now. Even if their marriage would be good for Leon, it was not what Lady Morgana herself wanted. Gwen did not want to see her sad. But then she realized: if they married, there was a chance that she could become Lady Morgana's maidservant. And even if Morgana was very rude, Gwen already liked her much better than she liked Lady Asceline, or even Blitha, Lewin's wife. Blitha was nice enough, but for all her sweetness she was rather dull.

Gwen tried to put the matter out of her thoughts. A few days later, she was helping her brother in their stall on market day, while their father worked back at the forge. Gwen had a talent for talking to people, one she had inherited from her mother, and was often able to persuade passers-by into considering a fine new knife or an overdue sharpening of one they already owned. Elyan took care of those who were interested in having custom or larger items made, and they took turns with the sharpening.

Elyan was busy talking to a man about mending an old shield, and Gwen was giving the knives a quick polish to clean off the settled dust, when someone suddenly held a sword out over the table. She recognized the sword before she recognized the girl holding it. It was the Lady Morgana!

"It needs to be sharpened," Lady Morgana told her. "Can you do it properly? This sword is very important."

"I won't help you at all if you're going to be so rude," Gwen huffed, not caring to be treated that in such a brusque manner, even if Lady Morgana was a noble. Maybe she had to be quiet and good when she was helping her mother, but her father always wanted her to stand up for herself and not let anyone treat her like she didn't matter.

"You have to help me, you're a servant," Lady Morgana said, as if this was all quite obvious.

"I'm not a servant when I'm here," Gwen said, proudly. "I'm a blacksmith. That means I don't have to help you unless I want to."

"Is that so?" Morgana said, narrowing her eyes.

"It is," Gwen said, firmly.

They stared at each other for a long moment, Gwen resolute and Morgana considering. To Gwen's surprise, Morgana was the one to back down.

"Very well, blacksmith," Morgana said, eyes sparkling with interest and amusement. "I would like my sword sharpened, if you please." She held the sword out again.
Gwen took it and carried it over to the wheel to be sharpened. Morgana stood where she was and watched closely, and Gwen made sure to do an excellent job. Everyone knew that the sword Morgana carried had been given to her by her father, Lord Gorlois, and that Morgana rarely took it off and never let it out of her sight.

Once it was properly sharp, Gwen gave it a thorough polishing. She handed it back to Morgana and gave the price, and Morgana reached into the money bag at her waist and pulled out a whole gold coin.

"This is too much, my lady," Gwen protested, and reached into her own money bag to find enough coins to give back the difference.

"Keep it," Morgana insisted. "Consider it a retainer for the next time I need you to sharpen my sword."

The pleased smile that Morgana gave her made Gwen blush, but she fought the urge to duck away. "I told you I was a proper blacksmith."

"I've never met anyone who was a servant and a smithy," Morgana said, as she sheathed her sword. "Much less someone who was good at both."

"Well, I am," Gwen said proudly. She'd worked hard to be good at both, to help her mother and her father. It felt good to be useful, to prove herself skilled enough to have such important responsibilities.

"I'm sorry I said you were a spy," Morgana said, and she did seem genuinely apologetic. "But you have been watching me, haven't you? I've seen you before, here in the market and in court."

"Everyone stares at you," Gwen defended. "You're the King's ward. And you're, well..." She trailed off, too embarrassed to admit everything that she thought Morgana was.

"I'm what?" Morgana asked, leaning forward over the table.

Gwen was certain her whole face was going to turn red, even though her skin was dark enough to hide most of her blushes. "Are you going to marry Leon?" she blurted out, desperate to change the subject.

Morgana leaned back again, frowning. "Not if I have anything to say about it," she said, crossing her arms defiantly. "I don't want to marry any of those stuffy boys."

"Even though they're going to be lords and knights?"

Morgana huffed. "That just means they're either too dull or too boorish," she declared. "All they care about is having the King's favor or dying in glorious battle. It's so tedious, you can't imagine."

"But you want to fight, too," Gwen said, pointing at Morgana's precious sword.

"That's different," Morgana defended. "I want to be like my father. He was a proper Lord. He always did what was right. He even argued with the King all the time, and everyone respected him. He didn't bow his nose just to get something he wanted."

Lord Gorlois had died an untimely death on the Northern Plains, fighting in battle against King Caerleon's men. Gwen did not know about the death of Morgana's mother, except that it happened when Morgana was still very young. People didn't like to gossip about things that happened during the Purge.
"He was a good man," Gwen said, softening.

"He was," Morgana said, softening as well. For a moment she seemed as if she might cry, but it was only a moment, and then her grief was hidden again.

"I might be your servant, someday," Gwen said, suddenly.

"Will you?" Morgana asked, her curiosity rallying her.

Gwen nodded. "If you marry Leon, I could be your maidservant."

"Would you like that?"

Gwen shrugged. "If you were nice to me, I would. I wouldn't like it if you were rude all the time."

She bit her lip. "Would you like me to be your maidservant?"

"I thought you were a blacksmith," Morgana said, evading the question.

"I won't be when I'm older," Gwen said, regretful of that fact as ever. That was what she really wanted to be. She wanted to make beautiful things, strong things that would protect people and save lives. She wanted to do things that really mattered, and not just spend her life cleaning up after others. But a woman could not be a blacksmith, and so that honor fell to Elyan, even though Elyan and their father sometimes fought because Elyan wasn't sure that he wanted to be a blacksmith. Elyan was more interested in joining up to fight.

"Then yes," Morgana said, smiling again. "I would rather like having you as my maidservant. But only if you really can do more with a sword than sharpen it."

"I can fight," Gwen said, her pulse quickening with excitement.

"Name the place and time," Morgana dared.

Gwen bit her lip again. She couldn't do it now, because she had to stay and help Elyan. And she couldn't do it when she was busy helping her mother. But Lord Heward and Lady Asceline were going to visit their lands in a week, and Gwen would not be going with them. "Next Tuesday at first light, by the edge of the woods," she said, pointing to a spot that would be away from any morning activities.

Morgana held out her arm, as the men did, and after a moment's hesitation, Gwen took it and they shook. It gave her a thrill to do something so forbidden, so dangerous. She was already thinking about which sword she would take with her to the duel.

On Monday night, after a sweaty day helping her father and Elyan in the forge, Gwen took her favorite sword and a set of mail and hid them in a piece of burlap. She could barely sleep in her excitement, and as soon as it was close enough to dawn, she snuck out of the house with the burlap under her arm. She made it to the woods as the sky was lightening, and shivered in the cool air as she pulled on the mail over her clothes. She warmed up with some practice swings and lunges and parries, and it wasn't long before she saw Morgana striding towards her.

"You don't have any mail," Gwen said, when she saw that Morgana had only brought her sword, fixed to her hip as usual.

Morgana turned up her nose. "I hardly think I'll need any."

"My father says you should always fight with mail, even when you're using blunted swords. And I
know yours is sharp."

"Let me see yours, then," Morgana said, holding out her hand. Gwen reluctantly handed hers over, and Morgana frowned as she examined it. It wasn't a fancy sword like Morgana's, just one of the smaller ones they kept around the forge so their customers could try different sizes and weights to see what fit their arms. Gwen had at least given it the same sharpening and polishing that she had given Morgana's sword, so they were equal in that. And besides, a sword didn't need to look pretty, it just needed to be well-made, and her father's swords were the best in the land.

"I suppose it will do," Morgana said, handing it back. "I'll make a deal with you. If you can get one hit, then next time I'll wear mail."

Gwen hadn't expected there to be a next time, but now she wanted one very badly. "Deal," she said, and held out her arm to seal it. Morgana shook, and as they stepped close, she could see the flush in her cheeks, the sparkle in her eyes. Gwen swallowed hard.

They separated and moved into starting positions. Morgana circled around her, sizing her up, but Gwen was ready. Her father had taught her and Elyan to fight because he said that it wasn't possible to make a tool properly unless you knew how to use it yourself. The only way to know the strengths and weaknesses of the metal, of the design, was to push until you found them.

Gwen wanted to know Morgana. And so she didn't wait for Morgana to make the first blow, but dealt it herself. Morgana blocked it deftly, and at once they were at it, swords clashing loudly against each other in the still dawn.

"Ow!" Gwen cried, as Morgana slipped past her defenses and caught her on the arm. They lowered swords and Gwen rubbed at the sore spot, which would certainly bruise. She didn't practice as often now that she was spending so much time helping her mother, and it frustrated her that she wasn't as good as she used to be.

"Not bad," Morgana said, impressed even though Gwen had lost. "Not bad at all, blacksmith."

"My name is Guinevere," Gwen reminded her. "But everyone calls me Gwen."

"Gwen's a pretty name," Morgana said, shy beneath her brash exterior. "We can try again, if you want."

Gwen's answer was to raise her sword again and move into a fighting stance. Morgana did the same, and this time she struck first. Their second fight went on for longer that their first, as Gwen was determined not to lose, and didn't care how much her arm ached. She blinked against the sweat that stung her eyes, and then she saw it: an opening in Morgana's defenses. She struck out and grazed her blade along Morgana's shoulder, cutting through her sleeve and drawing blood. Morgana hissed and lowered her sword, and pawed at the tear to see how bad it was.

"I'm sorry," Gwen said, feeling bad for hurting her. "But I told you you should have worn mail." She put down her sword and went over to Morgana. In the dim light, the blood looked black, but Gwen simply tore a piece from her linen underskirt and pressed it to the wound as a makeshift bandage.

"It's just a scratch," Morgana said, reaching over to hold the bandage herself. "But I suppose you were right. I'll bring my mail next time. I have my own, you know. My father had it made for me."

"I'm sorry he died," Gwen said. "It sounds like he was nice."

"He was wonderful," Morgana said, and again Gwen saw a glimpse of the grief and longing that Morgana hid so well.
"You used to spar a lot together?" Gwen guessed.

Morgana nodded. "He never had any sons, and my mother died a long time ago, so it was just the two of us. We did everything together. But he wouldn't let me come with him to battle. If I'd been there, I would have saved him." The last she said with certainty.

"I believe you would have," Gwen said, and rather believed it herself. Morgana smiled at her, then, a warm and proper smile, and Gwen smiled back.

"I have to get back home," Gwen said, reluctantly. It was getting lighter, and if they stayed much longer they might be found out.

"And I must return to my chambers, before my awful maidservant comes in with my breakfast," Morgana said, and sighed. "I don't want to marry Leon, but I suppose if I have to, at least I'll have you there to keep things interesting."

"We could spar all the time," Gwen said, imagining how it would be, the two of them together all the time. Leon would probably be away fighting as a knight, and there wouldn't be anyone around to tell them what to do.

Morgana smiled even wider at that. "And you can sew up my clothes after you slice holes in them."

"If you wear mail, I won't have to," Gwen replied, reluctant to leave.

"Then I shall wear mail, starting tomorrow. Meet me here at dawn," Morgana said, and suddenly turned and ran away. Gwen blinked in surprise, but hurried away herself, grabbing her sword and the burlap as she went, not wanting her father or brother to wake up to find her gone.

They met the next morning, and the next after that. All through the spring they met in secret, duelling in borrowed mail until their arms ached and the sun was above the trees. Leon's parents continued to petition the King for marriage, and when Morgana continued to reject all other potential suitors, he finally gave his blessing, even though Morgana still refused the match. Their futures seemed set.

And then summer came and everything changed. But before Gwen could recall all that happened, she slipped into a sleep too deep for dreams to follow.

§

Gwen always liked the morning. It was a fresh start to a new day, after all the past day's worries had been carried away by the night. She drew back the curtains and let in the light, smiling at the bright, cheery dawn. Morgana groaned against the light and turned away, pulling the blankets up over her head.

Gwen took pity on her and drew the curtains against the rays of light pouring in through one window and directly onto the bed. Morgana gave a limp wave of gratitude.

"How are you feeling?" Gwen asked, going over to Morgana to take care of her, now that she was awake.

"Awful, as usual," Morgana complained. She allowed Gwen to help her sit up against the pillows. She rubbed at her temples. She might not be able to remember her nightmares thanks to the draught, but they still resulted in pounding headaches that could barely be alleviated with another of Gaius' potions. Fortunately, Morgana's bedside table drawer was kept stocked with a supply, since it did not lose efficacy the way the new draught did. Gwen quickly took out a phial and help Morgana drink it, and then gave her water to help wash it down.
"Thank you, Gwen," Morgana said, as she settled back against the pillows.

"Do you feel up for some breakfast?" Gwen asked.

"I probably should be, by the time you get back with it. Maybe some fruit and a little bread?"

"Of course," Gwen said, giving her a warm smile. "You just rest. I'll take care of everything."

"You're so good to me, Gwen," Morgana said, returning her smile with a weak one of her own. "Did you spend the night again? You know you can go home if you want to."

"As you well know, I'd rather stay here," Gwen said, firmly enough to put an end to the matter, at least for now. Morgana felt guilty about how her bouts of poor health imposed so much on Gwen, and tried to make up for it in various ways. It was all quite unnecessary. She patted Morgana's hand where it rested over the blanket and headed briskly out to and down to the kitchens.

She gave the cook her requests for both her own and Morgana's breakfasts, and settled in to wait. A few more servants trickled in, and she nodded good mornings to them as they passed.

"Good mo-- Merlin!" To Gwen's surprise, there he was. He waved to her while he gave his order, then came over to wait with her as he usually did. He wasn't as bouncy as he usually was, but he seemed otherwise fine, and in remarkably good cheer. Perhaps all her fears had been unfounded after all.

"Sorry about yesterday," Merlin said.

"Oh, it's all right," Gwen assured him. "I'm just glad you're feeling better."

Merlin reached up to tug at his kerchief, but quickly pulled his hand away. "So am I," he said, quieting. "Yesterday was, um, a bit difficult."

Gwen lowered her voice. "I know it must be hard for you to give all that up for Arthur."

Merlin blinked in surprise, then shook himself as if remembering that of course Gwen knew that he had fought as a knight. "Yes," he said. "But it's important. It's what I have to do for everyone to be safe."

"Of course it is," Gwen said, understandingly. She didn't know what Merlin had done in Gedref, but it was clear he had proved himself somehow. She wondered if he had used his magic to help Camelot to victory, or if he had done it all just as a knight. Either way, it wasn't fair that it all had to be hushed up so Uther wouldn't find out. "Will you have time to see us today? We'd love to hear all about it."

"I think so," Merlin said. "I just have to check with Arthur. He's dealing with a lot right now and I think he'll want me to stay close, but if he's not too busy we can stop by. Maybe during lunch?"

"That would be perfect," Gwen said. She couldn't help but to give him a hug, and didn't care what anyone thought about it. Merlin was surprised, but quickly returned the hug with surprising force.

"I'm glad you're all right," she whispered.

Merlin just gave a soft assent, and breathed against her hair. When she drew back, she saw that he was visibly gathering himself back together. She felt so bad for all that he had to go through, but at the same time, she knew that it was his choice. He was the one who wanted to learn to be a knight, who convinced Arthur to teach him. And he had always been quick to put himself in danger if it
meant he could help others. She was deeply grateful to him for that, for all that he had done for her personally and for Camelot in general. She hoped that one day she could tell him that.

Her tray of food was ready too soon. She reluctantly fetched it, but stopped by Merlin before leaving the kitchen.

"Tell Arthur I said hello," she told him. "And don't forget about lunch."

"I won't forget," Merlin promised, and smiled in a way that he only did when everything really was all right. "Go on," he said, waving her away.

Gwen left feeling greatly cheered. She decided to tuck away her worries, founded or otherwise. Merlin was all right, Morgana had made it through another night, and it looked like a beautiful day was ahead of them. It was better to welcome the sun than to make her own rainclouds.

By the time she returned to Morgana's chambers, the draught was starting to take away the worst of Morgana's headache, and Morgana nibbled at her breakfast while Gwen ate hers. They had always taken meals together when they could, preferring a more companionable relationship in private than the one they maintained in public. But they had never had a typical mistress-servant relationship. Morgana had not wanted a proper servant, and Gwen had not wanted a proper mistress, and so they had made their own way between them.

"I'll pick up some fresh flowers in the market today," Gwen said, seeing that the bouquet in the vase by Morgana's bedside was looking a little wilted. "Do you feel well enough to join me?"

"Perhaps," Morgana said, putting on a brave face as usual. But as usual, Gwen doubted her bravery would be enough. These days, Morgana became exhausted just walking around the room.

After breakfast, as expected, Morgana was not up for a visit to the market. But she pressed a bag of coins into Gwen's hand and told her to do the rounds without her.

Usually when Morgana was feeling better, they would go out to the market together. Along with flowers and fabric for new dresses, they would buy basketfuls of food and bring them to the lower town. When Morgana married she would gain access to the money her father had left for her. But Morgana did not want to marry, and so the King gave her a generous stipend to make up for the lack. Morgana had always taken it as something of an insult, since if she were a man she would have simply inherited the money directly and she would not have to depend on anyone's generosity. But as the King insisted on giving her so much, she spent it freely on those that the King most neglected. It was Gwen who had introduced Morgana to the lower town and the widows and orphans of Camelot's wars, but it was Morgana who had taken them on as a personal passion.

Gwen went on her own to the stalls, and collected the usual baskets from the baker, butcher, and greengrocers, and carried her heavy load down to the lower town. Everyone asked after Morgana and gave good wishes for her health, and some even whispered that they had prayed for her recovery. Gwen knew many people who still worshipped the Old Religion just as she did, though most only had their own memories and thoughts to draw upon, as any relics would have been discovered and destroyed in one raid or another. And most of those who admitted their worship were older, and had been adults before the Purge. There were fewer her own age who would admit to worshipping, and she suspected that there were fewer who worshipped at all. Many believed that the gods had abandoned them, or been driven away by the Purge never to return. Gwen hoped that they were wrong.

On her way back, Gwen bought a huge, bright bouquet of flowers that was certain to bring a smile to Morgana's face. She picked up meat and fruit pies from the baker for the four of them to share at
lunch. It was nearly noon, so she swung past the training fields before heading up to the castle keep, just to see if Arthur and Merlin had finished. She saw the two of them sitting together beneath a tree, and remarked to herself how obvious it was that they were in love, even seeing them from a distance, with the two of them barely touching. She felt a pang of jealousy, of regret and longing, and sighed to herself. She could not have what she could not have, and there was nothing to be done about any of it.

She returned to Morgana's chambers and found that Morgana was feeling well enough to read. Gwen left her to her book and changed the flowers, tidied up the room so it would be fit for company, set up chairs at the table, and put out plates and forks along with the pies. It was not long before there was a knock on the door.

Morgana put aside her book and eased herself out of bed, pulling on her day robe. She nodded that she was ready, and Gwen went to the door to let Merlin and Arthur inside.

The first thing that Gwen noticed was that Merlin no longer looked as well as he had that morning. He looked tired, strangely washed out, as if he was not entirely there at all. But he was still smiling and clearly making an effort to be alert and engaged, and Gwen knew from experience with Morgana how important it was to be supportive of such efforts. Arthur was still wearing his training clothes, and it was obvious that they had come directly from the field.

"Ugh, couldn't you have had a bath before you came?" Morgana said, holding her nose with theatrical distaste.

"Merlin likes how I smell," Arthur returned, and gently elbowed Merlin. "Don't you, Merlin?"

"Oh yes," Merlin said, rolling his eyes. But he gave Arthur a fond smile anyway.

"Adorable," Morgana drolled, unimpressed. "You can sit together on the far side of the table."

"We were going to do that anyway," Arthur replied, equally unimpressed. The two of them tended to engage in volleys of unimpressed statements if no one interrupted them.

"Then let's sit down and eat, and we can catch each other up," Gwen said, ushering them towards the table. She was both surprised and unsurprised when Arthur actually pulled out a chair for Merlin, waited for him to sit down, and then pushed it back in for him. Morgana merely arched an eyebrow and sat down across from Arthur, despite his smelliness, and Gwen sat opposite Merlin.

When they were together like this, all four of them in private, the usual rules tended to break down. Gwen herself still felt unable to relax around Arthur -- he was the Prince, after all -- but Merlin cheerfully disregarded convention most of the time anyway, and Morgana enjoyed keeping things casual between them. It was a refreshing change from their shared dinners with the King, which were painfully formal and convention-bound. Here and now, they felt almost like four equals, and not two masters and two servants, two men and two women, two nobles and two commoners.

Gwen cut slices for herself and Morgana, but Arthur insisted on doing the same for himself and Merlin. But Morgana poured the wine, and Merlin proposed a toast.

"To the future," he said, looking at each of them in turn.

"Here, here," said Gwen, and she clinked their goblets.

"To the future," Arthur echoed, and so did Morgana, and they brought all four goblets together as one, then broke apart and drank.
"So come now, Gwen and I have been dying of curiosity," Morgana said, as she broke her slice with her fork. "We want to hear all about Merlin's great adventure. How was his swordwork?"

"He was in fine form," Arthur said, looking towards Merlin with obvious pride. "How many Deorham did you kill?"

"Um, a few," Merlin said, modestly, but it was obvious that he was proud of his accomplishments himself. He gave Arthur a meaningful look, and Arthur returned it with a short nod. "You know how Sir Geraint did all those great deeds?"

"Scaling the wall to open the gates?" Gwen said, remembering what Peithan had said.

"Single-handedly killing an entire patrol?" Morgana recalled, suspicion narrowing her eyes. "Sneaking into the castle to steal the enemy's papers and destroy their magical barrier?"

"Not to mention helping defeat the Deorham's sorcerer," Arthur added, smiling at Merlin as he did. "Sir Geraint was awfully busy. Especially as he never made it to Gedref."

Gwen and Morgana looked at each other, then at Merlin, who was ducking his head and grinning adorably.

"Sir Geraint died in an ambush just past the Mountains of Isgard," Merlin admitted. "Everything they said he did, that was me. But I had to give up the credit, because, well..."

Morgana cried out in delight and clapped her hands. "I should have known! Stuffy Sir Geraint would never have done even half of all that."

Gwen was extremely impressed, even knowing of what Merlin had accomplished with his magic in Camelot. "That's absolutely fantastic! Merlin, you were amazing!"

Merlin was blushing, but he was also looking quite restored, puffed up by finally being able to tell someone. Arthur clapped him heartily on the back, and then patted him more softly, apparently trying to be gentle with him.

"Were you badly hurt?" Gwen asked, concerned.

"Just a bit banged up," Merlin said. "Arthur and the knights made sure I was all right." He had a distant, fond look as he relived his memories. "It was all rather mad and terrifying, but it was wonderful, too."

Gwen reached across the table and took Merlin's hand, squeezing it to show her gratitude. Morgana did the same, and Merlin squeezed them back, looking quite touched. When he leaned back, he wiped at his eyes, and took a gulp from his goblet.

"It's not fair," Morgana said, quietly. "Uther and his precious First Code. Merlin earned the right to be up there with the knights yesterday."

"He will be, one day," Arthur said, confidently. "When I'm regent, I'm going to revoke the First Code. The knights have already pledged the support of their houses."

"When you're regent?" Morgana asked, furrowing her brow.

"My father wants to start preparing me for a regency," Arthur said, and took in a sharp breath, as if he scarcely believed it himself. "I won't be able to change any laws right away, obviously, but once things are far enough along..." He shrugged.
Morgana leaned forward, and it was obvious how keen she was. "I want a seat at your council."


"Uther might treat me like a prized nightingale, but I've stood by and watched the injustices of his reign for long enough. I have no intention of being hidden away for the rest of my life."

"You don't have any land," Arthur began, but Morgana didn't let him finish.

"I should have inherited my father's wealth and my father's lands when I came of age. But because I am a woman, both are withheld from me. Is that right? Is that fair? I refuse to marry simply to be given what is already mine."

"It's not fair," Merlin said, quiet but certain. "Arthur wants to put me on his council, and I don't have land or money or anything."

Gwen was astonished. Did Arthur intend to somehow give Merlin the status necessary for a royal councilor, or was he actually going to put a commoner, a servant in such an important position? She knew that Arthur wanted to open up the knights, but it was another matter entirely to open up the council as well. If he wasn't careful, such actions might cause the lords to withdraw their support.

Morgana stared at Merlin in surprise, and then narrowed her eyes at Arthur. "Is this true? You want to put your manservant on the royal council, but you won't even consider letting me have a seat?"

Arthur gave Merlin an annoyed look, but Merlin jutted his chin stubbornly. Arthur glared at the both of them and then held up his hands in surrender. "All right. I can't imagine what a nightmare it will be with the two of you going at me all day, but fine. You can have a seat."

"Good," Morgana said, satisfied. "Then I'll only have to blackmail you into giving me my father's lands."

"Lord Gylis does a fine job running things in Powys on your behalf--"

"I don't want things run on my behalf," Morgana spat.


"Not now, Merlin," Arthur said, locked in a staring match with Morgana. "You're not in any condition to be running a large property with your health the way it is."

"My health is absolutely fine," Morgana said, though it was obvious how much the argument was taking out of her meager reserves.

"Arthur," Merlin said again, more urgently this time.

"Merlin, not now," Arthur said, and everyone turned to Merlin just in time to see him pass out completely. Arthur's eyes widened in alarm and he caught Merlin before he hit the floor.

"Merlin!" Gwen cried, hurrying over to help. Between the two of them they eased Merlin back up into his chair, but he wouldn't rouse, and his head lolled unless Arthur held it up. She looked to Arthur and saw that despite his obvious concern, he wasn't surprised. "What's wrong with him?" she asked.

"Nothing," Arthur said, and Gwen knew he was lying.

"He needs some air," Gwen said, and lifted the front of his kerchief to untie the knot. And stopped.
"What is this?" she breathed, shocked.

Arthur pulled the kerchief back down, tearing it from her grip. "Nothing," he lied, looking even more evasive.

"What's going on? Merlin?" Morgana said. She had gone pale, and her eyes were glazed from exhaustion. Whatever fire had kept her going had banked itself again, and Gwen was worried that she might pass out as well.

Unable to rouse Merlin, Arthur settled for hauling him up into his arms. "Guinevere, open the door," he ordered.

"We need to take him to Gaius," Gwen said, deeply worried now. What she had seen around his neck... it didn't make any sense.

"Open the door," Arthur ordered, and from the stern tone of his voice, it was clear that if she didn't open it, he would force it open, key or no key.

Gwen hurried to obey, torn between staying to help Morgana and following after Arthur to help Merlin, assuming Arthur would let her help at all. She didn't think he would. She didn't think he was going to take Merlin to Gaius, either. She opened the door and Arthur strode out, and she watched as he carried Merlin into his chambers. The door stood open for a long moment, and then shut, and she heard the turn of a key in the lock.

Gwen shut the door behind her and locked it, and hurried back to Morgana, who was barely sitting up now. "Let's get you back to bed," Gwen said, and pulled Morgana's arm over her shoulders to take her weight. It was even more worrying when Morgana didn't argue, when she simply let herself be guided to bed and laid down.

"I'll get you some water," Gwen said, and stood to get the pitcher to fill Morgana's goblet.

She had been right to worry about Merlin and Arthur. She had been right. Something was very wrong, and she didn't understand what she had seen beneath the kerchief. The necklace Merlin was wearing was just like the ones on her statues of Modron and Gofannon. The symbol on them, the triskelion, was the symbol of the Old Religion. And Arthur knew about it, was hiding it.

"Gwen?" Morgana called, weakly.

"I'm here," Gwen said, hurrying back to her with the jug. She filled the goblet, brought it to Morgana's lips, and tilted it so she could sip.

Arthur knew about Merlin's magic. He had to know. He had done something to Merlin, something that was hurting him, that had made him as weak as the draughts made Morgana. If he was that weak, he wouldn't be able to save them from what was coming. No one would be able to save them. And all Gwen could do was tuck Morgana into her bed and clear the table of their abandoned meal. She felt sick herself, sick with grief at everything she had never been able to change.

And now Camelot was doomed. And there was nothing she could do to save it.

She set aside the goblet and soothed Morgana's brow. Gwen had thought that draughts, old and new, were a good thing. That they would save Morgana from a worse fate by holding back the nightmares. But seeing her now, exhausted to the point of sleep by a simple argument, her condition mirrored in Merlin's sudden illness, Gwen realized that she had been wrong. That Morgana's visions were being sent to them for a purpose greater than torment. That the gods had been helping them all along, but they had been deafening themselves out of fear.
Gwen's whole life had been shaped by what others thought was best, by the limitations of her gender, her class, her position, her faith. As a woman, she had few choices of her own. As a commoner, she had no say in the laws of the land. As a servant, she had to obey. Under the King's laws, she could not speak of prophecies and magic, of gods and prayers. Gwen had always tried her best to work within those limits while still keeping true to her own heart.

But Merlin was a commoner, a servant, a sorcerer, and yet he did not let himself be ruled. He loved the Prince even though he should not, and so the Prince loved him back. He wanted to be more than a servant, and so became a knight. He was a sorcerer, yet while he hid his magic, he was not afraid to use it. He was not afraid to act, to demand, to force the world to bend under his will. He kept true to his heart and defied all limitations.

She couldn't stop what was coming, but Merlin could. And if Merlin needed help, she would help him, just as he had helped her father, just as he had helped her. She would save Merlin from whatever Arthur had done to him, she would pass on Morgana's warnings, and together they would defy their fate. Whatever the consequences, whatever the costs, she could no longer be a coward. She could not stand by and let Camelot fall.
As soon as he had locked the door, Arthur hurried back to the bed and tried to rouse Merlin again, but he did not respond with so much as a twitch. Arthur tried not to panic. Merlin had fainted after the restraint had first been triggered, and he had woken up after a few minutes. Surely this sudden faint would be the same.

Guinevere had seen the torc. She couldn't know what it was, and he didn't think she would tell anyone. What would she say? That she saw the Prince's manservant wearing an unusual necklace? A servant's word had no standing without evidence, and even if she told Morgana and Morgana made it an issue, it would be simple enough to temporarily remove the torc and hide it.

But Arthur did not want to remove the torc or even release the restraint. He did not want to give an inch in his battle against the magic inside of Merlin. He wanted to break whatever hold the magic had on Merlin and keep it fully at bay, so Merlin's natural strength could be restored, so he would not be so dependent on the corrupting, deceitful power. Merlin had been better that morning, Arthur was certain that he had been better. He had been certain that with enough care, enough rest, enough patience, Merlin would be able to bear the restraint indefinitely.

Yet whatever strength had been restored to him, it was gone again. It had faded with frightening speed despite the long nap on the field. The nap had not even bought them a full hour. Arthur cursed Gaius for giving him a solution that came with such a cost.

Minutes passed and Merlin did not wake up; he looked as pale as the bedsheets. Arthur knew that he was going to have to release the restraint, if only for a while. Sometimes a tactical retreat was necessary in order to win the greater war. But for the greater war to be won, he would have to accept that they could not simply pretend that everything could be the way it had been. He was going to have to keep Merlin somewhere safe, somewhere he could rest and recuperate without the exertions of his position. Arthur regretted burning the list of servants now, for he would need to pick one of them to take Merlin's place until he was recovered. And he would need a good excuse for Merlin's absence.

Hunith. Surely after his first experience in battle, it would make sense that Merlin would want to go home to see his mother. Could Arthur rely on Gaius to help him? Or would it be better to keep Merlin in the side room? But that meant the risk that the replacement manservant would discover him. Yet to keep Merlin anywhere else would bring its own problems, and just the thought of leaving Merlin alone and helpless was upsetting enough. Perhaps he could bring Merlin to Ealdor and leave him there with Hunith, with the restraint active. But that did not sit well with him either. He would have to sleep on the problem, see if he could find a clear path through the maze.

Arthur pulled out his keys and unlocked the chest, drew out the gold torc. He returned to the bed and sat beside Merlin and waited for a few minutes longer, just in case Merlin would wake on his own after all. But Merlin did not wake, and so Arthur took up the gold torc and slipped it back around his own neck.

He felt... something. He didn't know what. But the feeling of loss that had accompanied the gold torc's removal was matched by a feeling of restoration now. He stared at the silver torc and thought about the restraint lifting, the metal un-fusing, and the torc obeyed. It was strange, surreal, for his thoughts to be transformed into action, for his will to shape even this small part of the world. Was this what it felt like to perform a spell? Was he becoming contaminated after all? Had the seed of corruption already taken root in his soul?
He had no time to begin to answer any of his questions, because mere moments after the restraint released, life surged back into Merlin's body. His cheeks flushed and his eyes opened, and he gasped for air as he twisted on the bed, disoriented.

Arthur held him down to stop him from hurting himself, and hushed him to calm him. "It's all right. Everything's all right. I'm here. Look at me, Merlin, I'm right here."


It broke Arthur's heart to see it. The magic had such a hold on Merlin, and Arthur was afraid he might never be able to break it. What then? What if Merlin could be saved from his magic only to be trapped in some kind of half-life? What if his father was right, and in trying to save Merlin he had only doomed them both? Doomed Camelot to a future without a rightful king, where it would be torn apart from all sides as stronger kingdoms invaded?

"Don't cry," Merlin said, his words soft as he reached up to wipe the tears from Arthur's cheeks, the tears he had not even been aware of shedding.

Arthur swallowed against the painful clench of his throat, squeezed tight with emotion. "I can't lose you," he choked. "But I..." He shook his head, unable to say more. Unable to dare say more.

"You'll never lose me," Merlin said, and he pushed himself up and pulled Arthur into his arms, the evidence of his restored strength in the firmness of his grip. Arthur let himself be held, let himself be weak, if only for a moment. He buried his face against Merlin's shoulder and waited for his eyes to stop insistently leaking.

"You are a bit smelly," Merlin admitted.

Arthur laughed despite himself. "So I am," he said, rubbing his eyes dry on Merlin's shirt. "How do you feel?"

"Like myself again," Merlin sighed, happily. "What happened?"

Arthur's eyes had dried, so it was safe to ease himself from Merlin's arms. "You passed out in Morgana's chambers, and I couldn't wake you."

"The last thing I remember is the two of you arguing. Everything started to go all fuzzy and then I just... couldn't keep going." He sobered, blue eyes looking soulfully into Arthur's. "I'm sorry I couldn't be stronger for you."

Of course. Of course Merlin would be the one to endure, even in this. Even if he was physically weakened, Merlin was the one who would have faith, who would never give up. "We can stay here for the rest of the day," Arthur said, as all his external obligations had been fulfilled that morning. He still had paperwork to do, but he'd planned on doing that at his desk anyway. "So I don't have to put the restraint back on for a while."

"Thank you," Merlin said, smiling warmly. "We'll try again tomorrow. Maybe I'll be able to go longer once I've had some practice."

Arthur mustered a smile back. "I hope so. But let's just take this one day at a time." Seeing Merlin exhausted and suffering, seeing him pass out like that, had scared him. He could admit that now. He couldn't lose Merlin, couldn't let him go, couldn't hide him away, not without great cost to himself. Not without breaking his own heart. But Merlin was right. He could not give up at the first setback. He could not let the magic win. They would survive this as they had survived everything else, as
long as they had each other.

Merlin kissed him, sweet and solid and traced with salt from Arthur's tears. Arthur surrender to him, let himself be held, let Merlin be the one in control and himself be comforted, even though by all rights it should be the other way around. Merlin had been the one to suffer all morning, to faint and fall like a stone. But Merlin was fine, and Arthur was the one who was all in pieces.

He was in love with a sorcerer. Merlin was a sorcerer, and Arthur should be afraid of him, should see him as the enemy, should be set on his destruction. But he wasn't. He couldn't. Because Merlin was Merlin, and it still make no sense in Arthur's heart that Merlin could be someone to fear, someone to hate, even now that his magic was free again. Merlin was unrestrained and Arthur still could not find it in himself to be afraid.

Perhaps it was because the corruption was inside him, too, and taking him over piece by piece. Perhaps he was not afraid because sorcerers were not afraid of other sorcerers. Perhaps he would soon be able to cast spells, and his own eyes would glow golden. Would he go mad all at once, or would it be slow? Would it take weeks, months, years? Would his father live to see his only son consumed by the very magic he had tried so hard to extinguish?

There was no way to know. There was no test to give that would detect if someone held magic within them. There was no way to measure corruption. Magic could not be known in itself, only through the consequences of its use. One day he would wake up and he would no longer be himself, because whatever had saved Merlin's soul from corruption, Arthur could not imagine having anything so pure within himself, not when his very birth had been tainted, destructive, murderous.

"Arthur?" Merlin said, concerned.

Arthur swallowed back his fear, forcibly pulled himself together. There was still every chance that he had not been infected. There was still every chance that Merlin could be saved. He could not falter. And more importantly, he could not continue to live in ignorance of the world around him. The only way he would be able to truly resist and destroy magic was if he understood it.

"Change of plans," he said, drawing reluctantly from Merlin's embrace. "Everything else can wait. This afternoon, I want you to teach me everything you know about magic."

Merlin's answer was a brilliant smile. "Ready when you are. We just need my book."

Arthur slipped from the bed and went back to the chest. It was the safest place to keep something as incredibly illegal as a grimoire. Knowing Merlin's habit of leaving his belongings strewn all over the place, he could only imagine that it was sheer luck that he had not been caught with it when he'd been living in Gaius' back room. Especially as Arthur had conducted searches of that room himself more than once.

"We'll do it at the table," Merlin said, standing and walking over to it. But when he got there, he stopped and frowned.

"What's wrong?" Arthur asked, concerned that Merlin wasn't fully recovered after all.

"When I fainted, I must have given Gwen and Morgana a scare," Merlin said, looking at the door. "Maybe I should go pop my head in, show them I'm all right?"

"No," Arthur blurted out. "I mean, I can't let you leave my chambers without the restraint. And you'll probably pass out again, like the first time."

"True," Merlin admitted. "But you can go. Just so they don't worry?" He gave Arthur a hopeful
Arthur knew that if he resisted, it would only make Merlin fret. "All right. Just for a moment. I'll be right back. Don't do anything..." He waved his hand to represent magic.

Merlin sat down and tucked his hands under his thighs. "I won't budge an inch," he promised.

Ridiculous man, Arthur thought, and unlocked the door and went out into the hall. Only then did he remember that he was wearing his own torc, and he quickly pulled it off and tucked it into his waistband, hiding it under his shirt as he had before. He chided himself for his carelessness and shook off the odd sense of disconnection that it seemed would always accompany the torc's removal. He approached Morgana's door with trepidation, but braced himself and knocked. After a long pause, Guinevere opened the door.

"Shh," she said, pressing her finger to her lips. "Morgana's resting." She slipped out into the hall and closed the door behind her. "Where's Merlin?"

"In my chambers," Arthur said. "He wanted me to come over and tell you and Morgana that he's feeling better."

"I'll believe that when I see it," she muttered, and stalked right past Arthur and headed for his chambers.

"Guinevere!" Arthur hissed, but for some reason she completely ignored him. He hurried after her, and reached the door just as she walked in and saw Merlin. Merlin looked up and smiled, and Guinevere hurried over to him.

"You're all right?" she said, as if barely believing her eyes. Arthur had to admit that the transformation in Merlin was dramatic. When he'd fainted he'd looked almost ghostly, and now he was flush with life. The magic inside him must be powerful indeed.

"Sorry I scared you," Merlin said, lowering his head in apology.

"Don't be sorry," Guinevere said, and stepped forward to hug him tightly against herself. Arthur couldn't quite tell, but it looked like she was feeling beneath Merlin's kerchief. When he stepped around to get a better look, she had moved her hand away from his neck. She looked up at Arthur, and Arthur stared back, startled by what he saw.

He had never paid Guinevere much mind. She was Morgana's, not his, and she was just another servant in a castle full of servants. The first time that he had ever really talked to her had been during his recovery from the Questing Beast's poison. He knew that she had used some kind of healing charm to save her father's life, and by all rights she should still have burned even after the creature in the water supply had been vanquished. But his father had waved off the matter and Arthur had not wanted to see her executed for such a minor crime.

But she knew something of magic. He could no longer ignore that inconvenient fact. Her father had been arrested and executed for consorting with a sorcerer. Morgana had been adamant that Guinevere and Tom were both innocent, and Arthur had not felt it worth the battle to contradict her, especially as he had held no great fondness for his father's methods at the time. But things were different now. Guinevere was no longer a misguided girl who had been led astray by her father's dabblings. She had seen the torc and was brazenly trying to find out more about it. And she did not keep her gaze downcast, but stared back at him with accusation in her eyes.

"Gwen?" Merlin said, drawing back in confusion. He looked back and forth at the two of them.
"Um, is something wrong?"

"Nothing," Guinevere insisted, plastering on a smile. "I just wanted to make sure you were all right. You looked awful before, but you're so much better now!"

Merlin looked to her with evident longing. Arthur was certain that Merlin wanted to tell her about his magic, and gave Merlin a warning glance. Merlin gave a slight nod in understanding. "Yeah, I just... haven't been feeling quite myself. Maybe my head isn't as healed as I thought it was." He rubbed at the back of his head as if to demonstrate. "I've been having these bad turns, and they come and go." It was a decent lie, as Merlin's lies went, but anyone who knew him well would see that he wasn't being truthful.

"You should go see Gaius," Guinevere insisted.

"Gaius already knows," Arthur said, stepping closer. "You don't have to worry about Merlin. I'm taking care of him. You should go look after Morgana."

"How is she?" Merlin asked Guinevere.

Guinevere saddened. "She's resting now." She glanced at Arthur and stepped back. "You're right. I hate to leave her alone for long. I'll let her know how you're doing."

Merlin gave her a little wave as she hurried out, and Arthur closed the door firmly and locked it again. When he turned back to Merlin, it was clear that Merlin had no idea that Guinevere was something of a sorcerer herself, if only the very minor sort, like Linette. The kind that Arthur used to believe were essentially harmless, that did not deserve his father's paranoia-fuelled judgements. Now he was not so certain. But if Guinevere was guilty, Arthur was even more so. It would do neither of them good to pursue the matter right now. He would deal with her as he would deal with all the sorcerers in Camelot, once he and Merlin learned how to safely destroy their magic.

And speaking of learning... "Feeling better now?" Arthur asked, as he sat down next to Merlin at the table.

"Much, thank you," Merlin said, and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek as a reward. "Right. Magic!" He pulled the grimoire closer and opened the cover, and began flipping through pages at random. "Um, not really sure where to start, to be honest."

"Start with the basics," Arthur said. "Both you and Gaius mentioned the elements. And I don't know anything about the Old Religion, or how to read that writing."

"We'll start with the elements and the gods, then, and how spells work," Merlin said, gnawing at his lower lip in thought. "It'd be easier if I could show you some of it rather than tell you, but if you don't want me to do any spells..."

Arthur pulled the gold torc from his waistband and eased it back on, and braced himself for the good feeling that shimmered through him. "I want you to show me. If you lose control, I can always trigger the restraint."

Merlin gave him a patient look. "You don't have to worry about that. But if it makes you feel better, you can use it."

Arthur had the distinct impression he was being humored. Usually such insolence merited a good headscruffing, or at the very least a tart insult. But Arthur wasn't in the mood for roughhousing or teasing words. "Let me get something to write with," he said, and moved to stand. But Merlin stopped him with one hand to his shoulder, and then stretched his other hand towards the desk. He
turned his face towards the desk and Arthur could just see the flare of gold in his eyes, and then the quill, inkwell, and several sheets of paper floated towards them, following Merlin's guiding hand. They settled neatly on the table before Arthur, and the quill dipped itself into the inkwell.

Arthur forced himself to breathe again. He warily reached for the quill and gripped it, and it felt perfectly normal. He wrote 'Spells made without speaking - floating' and set the quill back into the well.

"All right," he said, his calm tone more for himself than for Merlin, who was watching him with barely hidden amusement. "How on earth did you do that?"

"Magic," Merlin said cheekily, and grinned, showing his dimples. Arthur was not amused, and gave him a pointed glare. "Sorry, couldn't resist," Merlin admitted. "It's something I've always been able to do. According to my mum, I could make things float before I could speak or even crawl. If I saw something I wanted, I would just--" He waved his hand. "--float it over. And it doesn't need a spell. Well, I could use a spell if I wanted to, but I don't have to."

"Right," Arthur said, though as explanations went it was clear as mud. He crossed out the word 'Spells' and wrote 'Magic' above it. "What other magic can you do without spells?"

"Well, I can do loads of things, but the problem is that it's a lot harder to do it on purpose that way. A lot of the magic I used to do was by accident. Like a reflex or a sneeze. When I first came to Camelot, Gaius tested me by knocking over a bucket of water, and my magic accidentally stopped it before it fell. That's why I had to leave Ealdor. Mum was terrified I would be found out, and it really was a close thing."

"So you can do any kind of magic without spells, but spells make them easier to control?"

"Spells are... structured," Merlin said, chewing over the words as if he wasn't quite sure of them himself. "When I brought over the quill, I sort of... reached into it? And then I could make it do what I wanted. But apparently that's not how it is for other sorcerers. They don't have the strength, so they have to use spells. And a spell is more like... asking, rather than telling. And they're better for complicated things. Sorry, I've never explained this to anyone before, and Gaius isn't really generous with details."

Arthur raised his eyebrows in agreement. He scratched out his first line and wrote down 'Silent magic - rare ability, forcing action through will and brute strength' and then 'Spoken magic - spells are structured magic, advanced magic, asking rather than telling'.

Merlin peered at the paper and said, "Oh, that's not quite right. You can use a spell without saying it aloud. It takes a lot of practice to get it right, though. You have to say it in your head. But that's still not the same as doing magic without any words at all."

Arthur adjusted his notes accordingly. "What about the elements?"

"Ah," Merlin said, more confidently. "That's easy. Fire, air, earth, and water. Watch this." He held out his hand towards the fireplace, moved a fresh log onto the hearth, and said "Forbærne!" The log burst into flame. "Færbled wawe!" he said, and a gust of wind made the fire roar high. He directed his hand at the water basin and said, "Wæter, acwence þa bælblyse!" and the water lifted from the bowl and floated over the fire and doused it in a hiss of steam.

Arthur forcibly unclenched his hand from the hilt of his sword. It wasn't easy to fight every deeply ingrained instinct he had and sit calmly as Merlin performed spell after spell, but he had to make the effort. He had always performed his duty to Camelot, always defended it with everything he had.
But he had been acting in ignorance and fear. He needed to understand, and he couldn't do that if his only reaction to magic was to immediately destroy it.

"Fire, air, and water," Arthur said, with deliberate slowness. "You didn't do earth."

"I don't want to shake the castle down," Merlin said, with an easy shrug. "Fire's the most dangerous, but earth is always big. Like, rockfalls and earthquakes big."

Merlin didn't want to shake the castle down. Arthur's gut twisted as he began to understand just how powerful Merlin truly was. It was no wonder that it was proving difficult to extricate Merlin from the magic, if it was that strong. He had his work cut out for him.

Arthur settled his nerves by making more notes, and then switched to a clean sheet of paper. "Let's take a break from magic. Tell me about the Old Religion."

"Well, first there's the gods. The most important god is Modron. She's the triple goddess of birth, life, and death. She's basically the high queen of all the gods, so when you pray, you always have to pray to her as well as whatever specific god you want the favor from."

Arthur dipped his quill and noted everything down. "Specific god?"

"Everything has a god. Or rather, every god is like a king with their own territory, but it's not about land like it is for us. Like, there's Cernunnos, and he's the god of nature and fertility. So if you're trying to have children, you'd want to make an offering to Cernunnos as well as Modron. But praying isn't like magic. It's like... if my instinctive magic makes things obey, and spells ask things to obey, then prayer is a way of showing the gods that you are open to them and their will. And if your will and their will align, then the gods might help you. But if you aren't open to them, or they don't want to do what you're asking, then they won't."

"Strange system," Arthur said, hurrying to keep up. But it did make a sort of sense. And it was not dissimilar to the way things worked when commoners petitioned the King. His father would consider their requests, and if he agreed with them and it was beneficial for the kingdom, he would give them some or all of what they wanted, depending on his judgement. It was an important part of Arthur's own education in learning when a request ought to be fulfilled or denied. "What are the other gods?"

"After Modron, there are a bunch of king-level gods, the really important ones that have a lot of territory. There's Silus, goddess of the waters. Brighid, goddess of healing and wisdom. Lleu, god of the sun and the sky. And Rhiannon, goddess of beasts and the hunt. After that there's loads of smaller gods -- they're like lords, I guess -- but mum and I never bothered much with them."

"Is there a god of war?"

"War would be Modron's, because that's death," Merlin answered. "But you'd also want to pray to Rhiannon if you're fighting with horses. Or to Silus if you're fighting at sea. If you make an offering with your prayer, it increases the chances that the gods will show their favor. Like bringing a gift when you petition a lord or a king for help."

Arthur was halfway through his last sheet of paper when Merlin waved over some fresh pages for him. Arthur accepted them with a nod. So far it was all surprisingly sensible for a system based on evil and madness. Perhaps magic hadn't always been evil, and had itself become corrupted at some point.

"What about dark magic?" Arthur asked. "Gaius mentioned it."

"I'm not exactly sure," Merlin admitted. "Sigan and Nimueh used dark magic. Gaius said it's often
used for selfish ends. All I really know is that it feels... off, somehow. But not the way Palaemon's magic did."

"Maybe Palaemon's magic felt the way it did because it wasn't from the Old Religion?" Arthur guessed. "The Romans have their own gods."

"That makes sense," Merlin said, and then grinned. "See, I knew we'd make a great team."

Arthur smiled back, but couldn't help but puzzle over something. For all that his father had raged against the Old Religion, he'd never said anything about the Roman gods, even though the Romans had magic, too. And he knew from his diplomatic meetings that the peoples of other, distant lands all had different gods of their own, and presumably their own sorts of magic. It lent credence to the idea that the Old Religion used to be good, but somewhere along the line it had become corrupted, and that was why his father had to purge it out.

Did that mean that Merlin's magic was somehow itself uncorrupted? It was a stretch, but he could not dissuade himself of the possibility.

"What do you know about magic from before the Great Purge?" Arthur asked.

Merlin bit at his lip, thinking. "Gaius said that before the Purge, people used magic for the wrong ends. He said it was causing chaos. Oh, I forgot about Edwin Muirden. Gaius said that his parents used dark magic, and that his beetles were made from it."

"Beetles?"

"Edwin had these magical beetles, Elanthia beetles, and they would crawl into your brain through your ear and eat your soul." Merlin grimaced. "That's what caused Morgana and your father to become ill. I might not know exactly what dark magic is, but I know it's bad."

"But if regular magic is used to hurt people, isn't that dark magic?"

"Of course not," Merlin said. "A knife doesn't change what it is if you use it to stab someone instead of cutting bread. It's just a knife. Magic can be misused, but that doesn't make it evil. Regular magic wouldn't eat your soul."

"How do you know that?" Arthur challenged. "I don't even know what the equivalent of a 'dark knife' would be."

"Yeah, but a knife isn't magic."

Arthur gave him a skeptical look. "That's not much of an explanation."

"I can't help it if everyone's been lying to me or refusing to tell me anything," Merlin said, exasperated. "My mum never wanted to talk about her old life, or even who my father was, and all she and Gaius ever did was tell me to stop using my magic all the time so I wouldn't get caught. I don't even know if anyone's been telling me the truth about anything anymore. All I really have is my book."

"What's in the book, then?"

Merlin slid the open book between them. "It's not a history book or anything, but there's all sorts of spells."

Arthur turned to the early pages, the ones written in runes. "These are the oldest?"
"Yeah, I think so. They're different than the later ones, too. I think they were written by a High Priestess or a Druid, because the spells are more like prayers, and it's all really formal and you need special cups and blessed wine and a ritual knife. I can't use any of them because of that. And see, these pages are made from a different parchment, like they were from another book and they were rebound into this one."

Arthur examined the pages closely and saw that Merlin was right. "Makes sense. And the rest?"

"They're more useful, and they're grouped by type. I think what happened was, someone saved what they could from a really old spell book, and then they compiled a catalog of all the spells they could find. It's like a collection of recipes, but instead of breakfast and dinner and dessert, it's healing spells, or manipulating the elements, or ways to defeat magical creatures. And whoever did it must have wanted to keep adding things, because they left a lot of blank pages at the back, and someone else used those to add the last group of spells." Merlin flipped to the last filled pages. "See, the handwriting changes."

According to Merlin's marginalia, on that particular page was the spell he'd used to defeat the griffin, and in the writing he'd sounded out the pronunciation very specifically. Breg-dan ann-we-eld ga-fel-uec. Arthur marvelled. It was only three words, and somehow that was enough to enable Lancelot to do what Arthur and a dozen knights could not. "What exactly does this spell do?"

Merlin smiled when he recognized the page. "This was one of the first powerful spells I ever cast. Took me ages to figure out what I was doing. It strengthens mortal weapons so they can be used against magical creatures. It's also how I killed the Questing Beast and the giant boar that turned out to be King Terit."

Three words. Merlin had uttered three words, and that was all it took to stop monstrous creatures that had destroyed whole villages, killed dozens of people, and defeated the strongest knights. Arthur had always thought of magic as a kind of trickery, a way to cheat the hard rules of the world. But if Merlin was right... Arthur felt like a child who had been taught only the simplest things, and had suddenly been handed a lengthy treatise. Perhaps that was what he was. The idea did not sit well with him, and he wondered if perhaps he should not have written off Idriys' words so quickly.

"Have you read this entire book?" Arthur asked.

"Pretty much," Merlin said. "But I haven't used it in months, and even before that Gaius was always yelling at me if I was using my magic when it wasn't some life-threatening emergency. And I was always chasing after you to keep you safe, or doing ridiculous amounts of chores. So I never had time to practice properly." He gave Arthur a hopeful look. "I want us to work together so you can teach me to wield my magic like a knight. And I want to learn how to heal. There's so much I want to do. All my life people have been holding me back, telling me to hide what I am, and I'm... I don't want to be that way anymore." He reached up to touch his silver torc, and looked away, clearly realizing that now Arthur was one of the people holding him back.

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"Look," Arthur said, struggling with what to say. "This is all... it's a lot to take in. And we don't know everything we need to. I'd be more comfortable if I could read this book myself."

"I can teach you," Merlin said, brightening again. "Now, if you want."

"Now is perfect," Arthur said, smiling. "I'm good with languages. And once I know how to read the old tongues, maybe I can find some books in the library that can fill in the gaps for us."
"Whenever I'm in there, Geoffrey watches me like a hawk," Merlin said. "He acts like I'm going to ruin his dusty books just by standing near them. But if you're there, he might actually let us poke around the stacks."

"Better than that," Arthur said. "I have the keys. We can go into the library when Geoffrey isn't around." He felt a bit like he had when he was younger, when the stacks had towered with knowledge and he'd wanted it all. Even if Geoffrey had squirrelled away all the books that were written in the old tongue, he was far too protective of his collection to destroy any of it. They still had to be somewhere. The prospect of finally getting his hands on all of that forbidden knowledge was temptation enough to overcome any qualms he might have. If there was any dangerous magic to be found, he would have Merlin to protect him.

He had Merlin.

Arthur had to remind himself that even if Merlin was the exception of all exceptions, magic itself was still a dangerous thing, still corrupting, and he couldn't afford to let down his guard. He was doing all of this so he could learn to destroy the threat, not be seduced into accepting it, no matter how innocuous or tempting it seemed. He could not forget that this was all utter treason, that there was no other interpretation. That he was risking his soul and Merlin's soul and the safety of the kingdom. That Merlin might believe that magic and dark magic were distinct in nature, but Merlin had been lied to about many things. He had to proceed with caution, with great care. Assumptions could be deadly for them all.

§

Arthur had a lot to learn. They worked together all through the rest of the afternoon and well into the evening. Merlin showed him the basics of the two writing systems and how to read and pronounce them, along with a beginner's set of vocabulary. Arthur worried that to speak anything of the old tongue would mean speaking a spell, but Merlin assured him that even if Arthur had magic, which he didn't, he wouldn't be able to read just anything aloud and have it be a spell, because spells didn't work that way.

Not that Arthur understood how spells actually worked. Merlin's descriptions of "reaching into things" and "asking" were vague and frankly incomprehensible. Reached into what, and how? Did that mean everything had magic, even things that weren't alive? And how did magic relate to the gods? But Merlin was unable to answer any of those questions to Arthur's satisfaction.

Still, by the end of it, Arthur had some solid ground under his feet, even if it was only a small patch overlooking a steep chasm. And after hours of instruction, they had both had enough.

"No more questions. My head hurts." Merlin lay sideways on the bed, his arm over his eyes.

Arthur snorted. "This is nothing compared to my old lessons with Geoffrey." But he had to admit that he was worn out himself. His head felt utterly stuffed to the point where everything he had put into it was jumbling into nonsense. He hadn't pushed himself this hard with anything but fighting in years.

"I need some ice," Merlin said.

"Ice? Where are you going to get..." Arthur trailed off as he saw a clean washcloth float across the room, dip into the water jug, and then float over to Merlin. It folded itself, the dripping water solidifying into ice, and then lay itself gently across Merlin's eyes and forehead. Merlin sighed in relief.
Arthur was starting to see why Gaius and Hunith had spent so much time yelling at Merlin not to use his magic. "Did you at any point do your chores yourself, or was it all done with magic?"

"Only if someone was looking," Merlin admitted.

Arthur rested his forehead against his palm. "That explains so much."

"You always gave me too many chores anyway. How could anyone get them all done without magic?"

"My other manservants managed it."

"You worked your other manservants into the ground. That's why they hated you."

"They didn't hate me," Arthur protested.

"Arthur, I love you, but you can be a tremendous clotpole."

Arthur turned to Merlin and glared at him, but Merlin didn't tremble in fear because his eyes were covered. That was absolutely the reason.

Arthur stood with a groan and stretched himself loose. He plucked at his sweat-stiff clothes and realized that he well and truly did need a bath. But it was late, and it was one thing to request a bath for the morning, or sufficiently ahead of time. At this hour, the servants would have to start boiling now, and it would take ages until it was all ready.

"That thing you did with the water, to make ice. Can you do the opposite? Make the water hot?"

Merlin lifted a corner of the frozen washcloth. "Oh yes," he said, breaking into a grin. "I can make a fantastic bath."

"But you still need someone to bring up the tub and the water? You can't just make it all appear?"

Merlin let the washcloth back down over his eyes. "There's a huge difference between manipulating something that's already there and making something out of thin air. I'm too tired for all that. But I can make a bath the perfect temperature and keep it there. You have no idea how long I've wanted to tell you that."

"A bath that never gets cold," Arthur murmured. No wonder his father was always warning people about the seductive nature of magic. There were few things as seductive as a properly hot bath that never got cold.

Merlin didn't look likely to budge, so Arthur gathered the remains of their dinner from the table onto the tray and remarked that somehow he had ended up servant to a sorcerer. His life had taken very strange turns indeed. Rather than remove his torc, he did his best to tuck it under his shirt. He couldn't totally cover it, thanks to his preference for open collars, but he managed to mostly hide it. It wouldn't pass muster for a substantial length of time, but it would do for now.

He took the tray to the door and called for a servant. One arrived shortly and took the tray and the order for a cold bath. Arthur closed the door and went over to the bed.

"Two choices. Either you go into the side room and I leave the restraint off, or it goes back on."

Merlin gave a long-suffering sigh, but dragged himself to his feet and over to the side room. He went inside and collapsed onto the bed there, and Arthur shook his head in amusement and closed the
door. There was a knock, and he went to let in the servants with the tub.

Cold water could be brought up without delay, so it didn't take long for the tub to be filled. Arthur locked the outer door and opened up the side room to let Merlin out. Merlin peeked his head out, and Arthur saw that he was already naked but for the silver torc and the red favor around his upper arm.

"In a hurry, are we?"

"You're not the only one who stinks," Merlin said. He hurried over to the tub and splayed his hand over it. "Onhâête þá wæter," he said, hurriedly, his eyes flashing gold. Arthur was almost getting used to the sight by now.

The water roiled with bubbles and then settled, and even at a distance Arthur could feel the steam. Merlin dipped a finger in, and his eyes glowed again as he silently tweaked the water until it was just right. Then he climbed right in, not waiting for Arthur at all.

"Ohh, that's so good." Merlin moaned as if he was experiencing some kind of sexual bliss.

"There's no way it's that good," Arthur chided, but he quickly stripped down himself. When he stepped in and sat down, he had to admit that Merlin had a point.

"See?" Merlin said, smugly.

Arthur gave an incoherent groan and slumped deeper into the tub. He felt like his bones were being gently melted. It was glorious. They silently soaked for a while, utterly content, and every time the water cooled even a little, Merlin's eyes glowed and there was a rush of delicious heat.

"You've spoiled me," Arthur groaned. "I'm ruined for life." Every hot bath he'd ever had now seemed little more than lukewarm.

"I should have done this first," Merlin said, as the soap and washcloth floated into his hand. "Seduced you with hot water and then told you I had magic."

"It would have a more relaxing approach," Arthur admitted, and then sighed as Merlin began to wash his hair. Merlin's fingers kneaded at his scalp, but Arthur had to open one eye to make sure it was actually Merlin doing it and not more of his magic. Merlin smiled fondly down at him, flushed nearly red from the heat.

Arthur closed his eye again, and rested contentedly as Merlin finished with his hair and began to wash the rest of him, slow and thorough with a hint of teasing. Arthur wondered when he had stopped pretending not to be afraid of Merlin's magic and actually stopped being afraid. He knew he was being foolish, he knew he was indulging in something incredibly dangerous. But it made Merlin happy to do this for him, it made Merlin happy to show that magic was about more than killing and destruction. And Arthur had to admit that there was some truth to his arguments. It was clear that magic could be used to protect, and on some level he had accepted that ever since the discovery of Uwen's enchanted mail. And magic could also be used for simple things, for pleasant things that made life better.

But his father had never said that magic couldn't be used for all of that. The problem with magic was not what it could do. It was what it was. It was its inherent nature, the contamination it brought. Putting together what he knew with what Merlin had told him, it seemed that magic used to be separated into two types: regular magic, which might actually be safe, and dark magic, which destroyed the souls of those who used it. But at some point, the dark magic had taken over the Old Religion, and that was why it had to be destroyed. He couldn't be certain, of course, not without
some kind of evidence to confirm it. But it was the only way he could make sense out of the contradictions.

He thought about the magic he had experienced, the sorcerers he had met who had not been attacking out of madness and vengeance. There was the blue light that had helped him in the Forest of Balor, of course, and there was the unicorn. He was not sure about Anhora, as the man had been quite suspicious despite his claims that he had not caused the crop failures and the drought. But if Arthur had ever felt magic, he had felt it when the unicorn had returned. And it had felt... good. It had felt pure.

Did Merlin feel pure? Could he rely on such a judgement if he could make it? He didn't know what dark magic felt like, so it would be difficult to even make a comparison. Merlin thought dark magic felt different, but Arthur could not feel magic at all, had never felt magic except for the unicorn. He had only ever felt its effects.

But perhaps he was wrong again. What about the way the torcs made him feel? They were still wearing them. Perhaps now was a good time to experiment. Merlin was cleaning his feet, and Arthur was loathe to interrupt him, but his curiosity was too strong to deny. He sat up in the tub and guided Merlin to face him.

"I want to ask you something," he said. "About the torcs."

"I only know what you've told me. You're the one who found them."

"Yes, but the first time you put yours on, it affected you somehow. Before the restraint."

A guilty look flashed across Merlin's face. "I'll tell you, but I don't want to you to get upset."

"Is there a reason I should be?" Arthur asked, giving him a look. And this time, Merlin could definitely see it.

"I know I promised to be completely honest, but everything happened so fast, and afterwards I wasn't sure if I should say anything. And the torcs were your idea."

Arthur sighed. "Spit it out."

"It felt really good. Like... it's hard to explain--"

"I'm getting used to that," Arthur drawled.

Merlin gave him a look for that. "You try explaining sight to someone who's blind. Or what sounds are to a deaf person. It's not easy."

"All right," Arthur said, showing his hands in surrender. "Do your best."

Merlin huffed and shifted in the water. "I've never had anyone I could do magic with. Not really. But when I put on the torc for the first time, it felt like... connecting. Like I finally wasn't alone." He bit his lip. "You're not going to make us take them off, are you?"

"You actually want to wear the torc?" Arthur asked, surprised.

"Well, the restraint is awful," Merlin admitted. "But when the restraint is gone, it's... comforting. It's nice." He ducked his head, then looked up at Arthur, regretful yet pleading.

Arthur wasn't sure what to say. He needed the torcs to keep Merlin safe, to keep them both safe.
He'd been wary enough about them at the start. He could not question the effectiveness of the restraint — in that, Gaius had been truthful — but Gaius had conveniently neglected to mention anything else about how the torcs work, and now he was finding out the hard way, as usual.

"I want to try something," Arthur said, keeping his voice level so as not to upset Merlin. "I'm going to take my torc off, and I want you to tell me what you feel."

Merlin nodded. "Go ahead."

Arthur gripped his torc and eased it from his neck. The moment he did so, he felt the same sense of loss that he had in the morning, and again in the hall. Merlin did not go pale as he had before, but he visibly flinched.

"It's like... going from a hot bath right into a cold one," Merlin said. "This morning, I thought it was because of the restraint, but it happened again when you went to talk to Gwen."

"You said it felt like losing something," Arthur recalled.

Merlin nodded. "The connection. The feeling of being part of something greater. Something wonderful. It's sort of like... when I do really huge magic, it comes from somewhere deep inside me, like a well that reaches down into an ocean. I felt it when I opened the gates in Gedref, and when I called down lightning and killed Nimueh. But afterwards, it always goes away again, and I can't reach it. When we're both wearing the torcs, it's not as strong as that, but it feels the same."

Arthur considered this. "Does it feel like the unicorn?"

Merlin blinked at him, surprised. "Maybe. It was sort of similar, I guess. I didn't feel connected to the unicorn, but its magic was really strong." He tilted his head. "Did you feel it? The unicorn's magic?"

"I think I might have," Arthur admitted. "It felt good."

Merlin smiled. "Then you're not afraid? You're not afraid of magic?"

Arthur made a face. "I wouldn't quite go that far. But... I'm working on it."

Merlin sloshed across the tub and hugged Arthur tightly. "I knew it. I knew you'd understand if you just had the chance." When he pulled back again, he was blinking away tears of joy. "Arthur," he said, deeply affected, his chin trembling. Arthur pulled him close again, and held Merlin as he cried and laughed and squeezed him tightly.

"Will you put it back on?" Merlin sniffed, easing back again. His eyes were red, but he was smiling tremulously. "Please?"

Arthur handed him the gold torc, and held himself still as Merlin eased it around his neck. Arthur breathed in sharply as he felt the connection return; the rush of restoration seemed stronger now that he wasn't fighting it as much. The effect on Merlin was obvious as he sighed in contentment.

"I wish you could wear yours all the time, too," Merlin said. "I think that's why I felt better in the morning. It was so much worse after you took yours off."

"Do you think you could bear the restraint all day if I kept it on?" Arthur asked. Perhaps this was the solution to his earlier dilemma. He would have to change his wardrobe to high, closed collars, but then the weather was getting cooler, and it was about time to have his warmer clothes brought out. There should be a few shirts and jackets he could wear that would hide the torc effectively, despite its bulk.
Merlin nodded. "It's like... it gives me just enough so that I don't feel exhausted. Not right away, because everything's gone when you trigger the restraint. But after we've had them on for a while, it gets better. We'll have to test it."

Arthur made a thoughtful noise. That could either be a problem or a solution, depending on his goal. If Merlin's magic was somehow free of the contamination that was in dark magic, then perhaps there was no urgent need to break him of it. It would be sufficient for now to simply keep Merlin's magic controlled, and if he always wore his own torc, Merlin would not suffer the way he had today. And Arthur would not have to hide him away as he had feared.

Yet if there was still danger, then the torcs were more than an imperfect tool. They would restrain Merlin's magic but not cut it off completely, and thus leave an open path for the corruption. And now he realized that it would affect both of them, not just Merlin, as the magic was clearly not confined within the torcs. His own soul was more at risk than he had feared. Wearing the gold torc constantly might be the worst possible thing to do. He would have to accelerate his search for a permanent cure for Merlin's magic, especially if he could not find a way to confirm whether or not Merlin's magic was contaminated. Every day, every hour he was gambling his soul, his life, his future and the future of the entire kingdom. He could not justify such a massive risk with so little chance of success, and yet neither could he give Merlin up. It was incredibly selfish, but his heart would not let him make any other choice.

"We'll see how tomorrow goes," Arthur said. "You might be able to go longer without depending on your magic or whatever boost you get when I'm wearing my torc."

Merlin twisted his mouth in annoyance. "I shouldn't have said anything," he sulked.

"No, I'm glad you did," Arthur said. "I can't make the right decision if I don't know all the facts. I'm trying to do what's best for us, for both of us. I don't want to hurt you, but I need to know you're safe."

Merlin's eyes flashed gold, and there was a rush of heat. "But you don't mind me making the water hot."

"Locked door," Arthur reminded him. "Do you need me to remind you what will happen if someone sees you doing magic? You're a knight now, not just a servant. You can't get away with ducking behind a tree or some drapery, assuming you even bothered to do that much to hide yourself."

Merlin pouted at him. "I was doing just fine on my own," he insisted.

"You were lucky," Arthur said. "More lucky than I realized. But no one's luck lasts forever. The torcs are a temporary measure. I need you to be patient with me until we can find a better solution. Please?"

Merlin made a reluctant sound, but nodded. "Only because you asked nicely. I like it when you ask nicely. It's much better than when you're all bossy and supercilious."

"That's a big word," Arthur teased, grabbing the soap and washcloth from where they were floating.

"I have all sorts of big words to describe you."

"Do tell," Arthur said, and gave him a gentle push backwards. He began to wash Merlin, starting with the sensitive nape of his neck.

"Maybe later," Merlin muttered, and began to relax again. "Keep doing that."
"Now who's being bossy?" Arthur said, without heat. But he obeyed.
"Gwen, my dear," Gaius said, giving her his usual welcoming smile. "I didn't expect you so early. Is everything all right?"

"As well as could be expected," Gwen replied, regret in her voice. "It seems last night's draught wasn't quite strong enough after all. Morgana's quite worn out and wants to make an early night of it."

"Of course," Gaius said, understandingly. "I'll get her draught ready. A bit stronger this time, and I'm certain she'll have a good night's rest."

Gwen gave a grateful nod. She watched as Gaius gathered up the herbs and bottles necessary for his task, then said, casually, "Arthur and Merlin visited for lunch today, but they had to leave early because Merlin wasn't feeling well."

Gaius stilled, then picked up a sprig of an herb and began plucking its leaves and placing them into a mortar. "He's still recovering from his injuries, I'm afraid."

"Really?" Gwen pressed. "But he seemed fine when we were treating everyone together. And it's been over a week since the battle. Perhaps it's something else? Something new?"

Gaius picked up a pestle and began to slowly grind the dried leaves into powder. "I don't believe so, no. Head injuries can be tricky. Symptoms can take time to appear."

"Then you saw Merlin after he fainted today?"

Gaius stilled again, but Gwen couldn't see his face, as he was turned away from her. "Yes, I examined him myself. I understand how alarming it must have been, but there's really no reason to worry."

Arthur and Merlin had not left their chambers after lunch, and while Gwen had eventually gone out herself, they were still there when she returned. She was almost certain that Gaius was lying, because she was equally certain that he had not known about Merlin's faint until now. And that could only mean that he was covering for Arthur.

"I've been thinking about what Merlin said," Gwen began. "About finding some other way to treat Morgana's nightmares. She's suffering so badly. What if the draughts are doing more harm than good?"

Gaius took two pinches of the ground herb and sprinkled them into his mixture. "You've never had a problem with them before. Is there a reason for your change of heart?"

"That was with the old draught," Gwen said, unwilling to give ground. "At least we could go back to it..."

"The old draught no longer worked," Gaius said, as he stirred in the last ingredient. "After so many years, her body had become quite resistant to its effects. It took me more than a year to find this new formula. She is sleeping through the night now, is she not? Like she used to?"

"Yes," Gwen admitted.

Gaius handed her the bottle and put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I only want what's best for
her, just as you do. My hope is that with time that she will adapt to the new treatment. In the meantime, we must be patient."

"Of course."

"I know it's hard," Gaius said, sympathetically. "It's not easy to stand by and watch those close to us... to watch them suffer. But sometimes that is all we can do."

Gwen met Gaius' eyes, and saw the pain in them, the regret. She looked away. "I have to go. I'll bring this to Morgana."

"Good girl," Gaius said, and patted her shoulder before he let her go. "I'll come by tomorrow and see how she's doing. Perhaps some adjustments can be made."

"Thank you," Gwen said, with a sad smile.

She slipped the little bottle into the pocket of her dress and went down the steps to the courtyard. But instead of heading towards Morgana's chambers, instead of bringing her the draught right away as she was meant to, she walked across the courtyard and out of the castle, and headed down to the lower town.

She had lied to Gaius. She had never lied to Gaius before, to the man she had known and trusted like a grandfather all her life. The man who had done so much for her family, for her mother, for Morgana. She had not wanted to lie. Part of her had hoped that Gaius would be an ally in rescuing Merlin from Arthur, because Gaius and Merlin had always been so close, because Gaius was once a sorcerer and of the faith himself.

And yet she knew where Gaius' allegiances lay, where he stood now when it came to magic. She had always known, but she had not wanted to believe it, just as everyone else did not want to believe that Morgana's nightmares were prophetic. For all that Gaius helped Merlin, for all that the two of them had shared conspiring glances and whispers, Gaius was first and foremost the King's man. The Royal Physician and Advisor, more faithful and trusted and true than any of the noble lords and knights.

Had Gaius now brought that loyalty to Arthur? Had he had helped the Prince do whatever he had done to Merlin, the way that he had used his draughts to suppress Morgana's magic and her dreams? The answer seemed terribly clear. Gaius might be a friend, might even be a help, with his long memory, his knowledge, his books. But he had not defied the crown in decades and was unlikely to do so now. What Gwen was about to do, she would have to do without help. This was a task that was meant for her alone, to make up for all the times when she had done nothing at all. It was better for everyone that way, in case she was caught. When she was caught.

She had seen the look in the Prince's eyes when she had barged into his chambers and hugged Merlin. When Arthur returned to his chambers and found Merlin gone, his suspicion would immediately fall upon her. But she had to free him, just as she had had to lie to Gaius.

Morgana had not said anything at all about going to bed early. By the time she drank the draught -- if she drank it at all -- its potency would be greatly reduced. Whatever was left would not be enough to stop the dreams, to stop Morgana from waking. And once Gwen knew the full extent of the prophecy, she could bring it to Merlin, and together they would find a way to stop it.

But to do that, to free Merlin from whatever had been done to him, she was going to need some tools.
She unlocked the door to the forge and walked inside. The low evening light spilled into the room, and she went directly to the storage closet. Several times a year she gave all the tools a polishing to keep the rust away, and so she knew exactly where to find what she needed: a small but strong hacksaw and an iron rod cutter. She didn't know what the torc around Merlin's neck was made of, but metal was metal, and she knew how to break gold or iron or even steel. She'd judged the thickness when she felt under Merlin's kerchief, so she was able to pick out the right strength of tool for even the strongest alloy. She put them into a basket and covered them with a cloth, then covered that with the bundle of flowers she'd picked up on the way down. Satisfied that nothing would appear suspicious, she locked the forge again and headed back to the castle.

Morgana was reading by the window when Gwen returned, and looked better for having slept most of the afternoon away. Gwen left her be and brought the basket into the side room. She quickly hid the tools in her dresser and then brought the flowers out to freshen the vase by Morgana's bed.

"New flowers already?" Morgana asked, setting aside her book. "You just bought some this morning."

"I wanted to buy some more," Gwen said, as she slipped in the humbler wildflowers in among the showy flowers from the morning market.

Morgana stood and walked over, then leant down to take a deep sniff of the flowers. "Mmm, lovely, as always." She looked at Gwen as she straightened, and gave her a smile that put a knot into Gwen's belly.

"You're in a good mood."

"I am," Morgana said. She took one of the loose wildflowers from the table and carried it with her back to her chair. "For the first time in years, I really am."

For a moment Gwen was confused, and then she realized. In the stress of Merlin's faint and everything that had followed, she had quite forgotten. She broke into a grin. "You're going to be on Arthur's council."

"Do you have any idea what this means?" Morgana asked. She looked excited, joyful in a way Gwen had truly not seen in years. Not since the nightmares started. "I'll finally inherit my father's property. The money he put in trust for me. I'll be free." She looked out the window, at the horizon, pinning at the corners as the sun set behind them. "Free, Gwen. The both of us."

"Then you'll still want me with you, when you're the lady of your own lands?" Gwen said it in jest, but could not help the real worry that leaked into her words.

Morgana turned back to look at her. "Even if I became Queen of all of Camelot, I would want you with me. You know I would never leave you behind." She held out her hand. "It's the two of us against the world, isn't it? Still?"

Gwen stepped forward and took her hand, squeezed it. "It is, my lady."

"Then it's settled," Morgana said, squeezing back. "Once I have my lands, we will never be at a man's mercy ever again."

"Except Arthur's," Gwen said. "I mean, he will still be the King."

Morgana let go and waved at the air. "Pfah. Perhaps I shall become Queen. Then Arthur will have to be satisfied with having a seat on my council."
"Somehow I don't think he'd go along with that," Gwen said, amused.

"Powys would make a rather good name for a kingdom," Morgana said, with a too-sweet smile.

Gwen just laughed and shook her head. It was not that she doubted Morgana's ability or her willingness to fight. But the idea of her starting a civil war was rather much. "But truly, my lady, this is wonderful."

"It's one of the few things I've ever truly wanted," Morgana said, looking out at the window again. "That and to be rid of these blasted nightmares. I am owed a good night's sleep and my inheritance. Perhaps both will come once I am free of this gilded prison."

"I hope so," Gwen said. She worked to hold her smile, but inside her heart sank. She had hoped that Morgana might be willing to give up her denial for Merlin's sake, but it seemed Merlin himself had hardened her against such a path. Morgana would not want to face the truth of her nightmares when she finally had a real future before her, one where she had all the power and control over her own life that she could desire, without dependence on the whims of others. To have magic would mean the death of that dream. A woman might struggle for power and achieve it, but a seer, a sorcerer...

Letting the draught wear itself out had been her backup plan, but it was the only plan she could rely on now. Morgana could not know the truth.

When it was finally time for bed, and Morgana had quite worn herself out talking about all the things she would do once Arthur was regent and fulfilled all his promises to her, Gwen left under the pretense of fetching the draught. She waited at the bottom of the steps until enough time had passed, then went back up, stale draught in hand. Morgana took it with unusual gratitude and eagerly swallowed it all, and when she lay down to sleep, she looked more peaceful than she had in years. Gwen gave her a soft smile as she tucked her in, then blew out the candles and bid her goodnight.

Gwen did not sit at Morgana's bedside, but went to the side room to lie in her bed there. She left the separating door open. When Morgana woke screaming from her nightmare, Gwen knew that she would hear it, no matter how deep her own dreams carried her. When the time came, she would wake, and she would learn what terrifying force could be strong enough to bring down the walls of Camelot. Walls that had held for centuries against every foe, against the months-long siege that had begun the war with Escetir, all those years ago. The siege that had brought her to the life she lived now, to this very room, this bed. To Morgana.

§

It was a week after the Beltane festival, and a week since Gwen had last seen Morgana. They had continued their woodland duels all through the spring, but after the festival, Gwen had snuck out as usual, only to wait alone at their secret spot until she trudged home again. It was not the first time that had happened, since it was harder for Morgana to sneak away than it was for Gwen, most of the time, and they could not exchange letters. They had to be careful; if they were discovered they would both be in trouble.

As Gwen approached the woods, she was relieved to see that Morgana had at last arrived. But as she drew closer, she saw that not all was well. Morgana's sword was stuck in the trunk of a tree, and the girl herself was sitting on an old log. Gwen sat down beside her and saw that despite the angry flush of her cheeks and her furrowed brow, Morgana had been crying.

"Morgana?" Gwen asked, gently. "Are you hurt?"

Morgana shook her head once, but Gwen saw that Morgana's knuckles were scraped raw, as if she
had been punching something. Perhaps the tree. Gwen ripped off a piece of her underskirt and damped it with her waterskin, then took Morgana’s hand and wiped away the drying blood. Morgana let out a soft hiss, but didn't pull her hand away.

Despite the relative shortness of their meetings, Gwen had learned something of Morgana's temperament. She knew that it was generally better to let Morgana speak in her own time, rather than try and drag answers out of her. Morgana did not like to be dragged.

Soon enough, Morgana broke her silence. "It seems you're to be my maid after all," she said, with a brittle smile. "The King and Lord Heward have decided my fate."

"Then you're to marry Leon? But I thought the King said--" Gwen began.

"He lied," Morgana spat, fury flaring in her. She pulled her hand away and curled it into a fist. "He promised that I would marry no man against my will. But because I chose none of them, he has broken that promise. I hate him! I hate him!"

Morgana sprung to her feet and grabbed the hilt of her sword, but it was stuck fast. The side of the blade had embedded deeply into the tree, no doubt propelled there by a furious swing before Gwen's arrival. Morgana pulled and pulled, tears in her eyes, until there was a sudden snap.

"No," Morgana gasped, horrified, fresh tears instantly welling in her eyes. "No, no!" She fell to her knees, sobbing, clutching the broken sword to her breast.

Gwen knelt before her, helpless to comfort her. "Let me see," she said, reaching out. "My father can fix it. He can fix anything."

Morgana sniffed and allowed Gwen to take the hilt. It was a clean break, right across the blade's fuller; no doubt some weakness had been put into the metal as it struck the tree, and Morgana's rough pulls had forced the split. The blade would need to be reforged, but the hilt and crossguard were undamaged. They just needed to get the other half of the blade free.

"It's not bad at all," Gwen assured her. "My father fixes this sort of thing all the time. He'll make it good as new again."

That coaxed a smile out of Morgana, even it was tearful and small. "Promise?"

"I promise," Gwen said, confidently. "And if he's busy, I'll fix it myself. I can do that, you know."

Morgana suddenly hugged Gwen tightly, so tight she could barely breathe. "You're the only good thing about any of this, Gwen. I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have you. I'd go completely mad."

Gwen was glad that Morgana couldn't see her face, because her cheeks flushed quite hot. "I suppose as the lady of the house, you're my mistress now."

Morgana gave a soggy laugh. "I haven't married Leon yet. But... I don't want us to stop being friends. I don't care what anything thinks. You're the only one who's made my life here at all bearable."

"What about the Prince?" Gwen asked, unable to suppress her curiosity about the rumors.

"Arthur's nearly as much of a bore as the rest of them," Morgana sniffed, but Gwen suspected it wasn't the whole truth. When Morgana finally pulled away, eyes averted, that was confirmation enough.
"Is it..." Gwen began, and bit her lip. "I mean... Do you not want to marry Leon because of the Prince?"

Morgana's cheeks reddened again. "I'm hardly going to marry Arthur. Besides, he has to marry a princess, and I'm not a princess."

"You're almost a princess," Gwen countered.

"Almost isn't good enough," Morgana said, with a hint of anger. "I'm not good enough for Arthur so the King wants to marry me off. To get rid of me."

There was a part of Gwen that felt disappointed, that selfishly wanted Morgana all to herself, instead of only these snatches of stolen time together. But of course Morgana would have to marry one day, as would Gwen herself. And then their private meetings would have to stop, because there would be husbands and then babies and no time for secret games.

"I wouldn't want to marry Arthur anyway, even if I was a princess," Morgana insisted. "He's not as awful I thought he was at first, but all he cares about is pleasing the King. He barely has a mind of his own."

From what Gwen's mother had told her, Arthur had not been quite so amenable to the King of late. Morgana was, according to her, a strong influence on the Prince, and had sowed a good deal of discord into a previously harmonious relationship. Perhaps that was the real reason the King wanted Morgana and Arthur to be apart.

They were both startled by the sudden ringing of the castle's warning bell. They looked to each other, wide-eyed.

"What do you think it is?" Gwen asked. "Another spy?"

"Or another sorcerer," Morgana suggested. "I'd better get back. Help me get the blade free?"

Gwen and Morgana each took an end, wrapped the sharp edges with whatever cloth or leather they had at hand, and with a few mighty heaves yanked the blade from the trunk.

"Here," Morgana said, handing Gwen the broken halves.

Gwen knew how important the sword was to Morgana, and how much it meant that she was entrusting it to Gwen. "I'll bring it back to you, good as new."

Morgana gave a crooked smile. "I know you will." She looked like she wanted to say more, but she turned towards the castle, and the bell was still ringing. "I'll see you tomorrow? I suppose I can borrow a sword from the armory."

"Tomorrow," Gwen said. And then she had to hurry away herself.

By the time Gwen reached her house, she was surprised to find that not only was everyone awake, but they were packing.

"Gwen! There you are," said her mother. She looked worried, and her mother never looked worried. "I don't know where you've been sneaking off to every morning, but we'll talk about that later. Go and pack all your things."

"All my things?" Gwen asked, confused.
"As much as you can carry," her mother said, pushing her along. "We have to go live in the castle for a while."

"Live in the castle?" Gwen echoed. "Is this something for Lady Asceline?"

"It's Cenred, Gwen," Elyan said, as he hurried past. "His army's been spotted crossing the border. They're headed right for us."

Gwen's jaw dropped. "They're going to attack us?"

"Don't frighten your sister," her father said to Elyan. He came over and crouched down in front of Gwen. "Everything will be all right. Camelot has the strongest walls in all of Albion. You and your mother will be safe."

"What about you and Elyan?" Gwen asked.

"We'll be helping to protect the castle," her father said, and pulled her into a tight hug. He pulled her back again and stood. "Now go on. I've put some bags on your bed."

Gwen went over to her bed and began to pack. An army invading Camelot! She had known that war was possible. Everyone knew that. But to have it actually happening, right now... It was hard to believe it was real.

She filled her bags to bursting, fitting in everything she might need. Apparently they didn't know how long the attack would go on, or when they would be able to go home again. There was a chance, however slim, that they would never be able to go home again, that Cenred's army would win. But Gwen did not like to consider such things. She did, however, make sure to pack two sets of mail and two swords, along with Morgana's broken one. If the worst happened, she and Morgana would not go down without a fight.

Her parents locked the house and forge, and the four of them joined the streams of people already heading to the gate to the upper town. The warning bell had stopped ringing, but town criers were running through the streets and banging on doors and windows as they shouted the alarm. The streets of the upper town were already packed with people. Gwen had never seen so many gathered in one place, not even at executions, where attendance was unofficially mandatory.

As they made their way up to the drawbridge, Gwen craned her neck to see ahead. There was a kind of sorting process going on, with some people directed to wait and others allowed inside. Gwen's mother saw her anxiety and gave her a reassuring pat on the head.

When they reached the drawbridge, her mother spoke to the guards and they were waved on through. They were to be guests of Lord Heward's family. That meant Gwen and her mother would be living right there with them in the servant's quarters of their suite. Elyan and her father would also be able to stay with them as well, but most of the time they would be busy helping with the castle defenses. Elyan was too young to fight, and anyway their blacksmith skills made them too valuable to put in danger.

"I want to help with the smithing, too," Gwen insisted.

"And I want to fight," Elyan said.

"You're not even fourteen yet," her father countered. "You're staying with me and that's final."

Elyan gave a mulish glare, but held his tongue. No doubt he would return to the argument again later, but for now he simply tugged at the straps of his bags and stomped ahead a few paces.
"I want to help," Gwen repeated, preferring to press her case. "Lady Asceline doesn't need two servants when all she's going to do all day is sit around. I can do more if I help with the forge."

"No," her mother said, with stern finality.

"But I can--"

"Do as your mother says, Gwen," her father said, tersely.

Gwen gave a mulish glare of her own, and copied her brother in tugging at her bags and stomping ahead. They glanced at each other with an unusual sense of camaraderie and continued on together, united against the common foe of parental denial.

The first few days in the castle were tense, as everyone settled in knowing that soon Cenred's army would be cresting over the hills. Both Gwen and Elyan were stuck in their assigned roles, no matter how much they pleaded and argued and complained to their parents. Gwen saw little of her father and brother as they were both kept busy assisting the royal blacksmiths and arming and armorning the men. Sometimes they were pulled away to help shore up one defense or other, or to assist the carpenters with their work. By the time they returned to Lord Heward's suite at night, they were too tired to do anything but sleep. Meanwhile, Gwen and her mother were lent to Gaius to help prepare for the inevitable wounded. They readied bandages, dried and mashed herbs, and did whatever else Gaius instructed. Soon the royal physician's chambers were stuffed full, so much that there was barely room to work.

"Will we really need all of this?" Gwen asked, on the afternoon of the third day.

"And more," Gaius said, gravely. Gaius was friends with her mother, and that was how they had ended up where they were. He had visited her mother, and often made rounds of the lower town, treating anyone who had been injured or taken ill. It was odd that the royal physician should do his work in the lower town, but there weren't many healers left in Camelot after the Purge. Gaius was one of the few left who knew the healing arts, even if he healed using his "science" instead of the old ways.

"I've lived through many a war, Gwen, and I fear I'll live through many more. We must be prepared, otherwise..." He pressed his lips together. "But such things are not meant for young ears."

"I'm not young, I'm eleven," Gwen said, drawing herself up. "I'm not a child anymore."

Gaius gave her a doting smile. "You're growing too fast for this old man," he said. "I still remember when you were in swaddling clothes. You were a terribly fussy baby."

"And very little has changed," her mother said, from across the room.

"Mum!" Gwen whined, embarrassed. Her mother was always embarrassing her lately. It was utterly intolerable.

There was a knock on the door, and to Gwen's delight and surprise, there was Morgana. "I was wondering if you needed another pair of hands," she said.

"Of course, my dear," said Gaius. "Why don't you and Gwen start taking all of this down to the main hall? I'm afraid of poking out my elbows in case I send everything toppling to the floor."

Morgana laughed, and Gwen giggled. They smiled at each other, and wasted no time in loading up their arms and heading down the steps.
"I've been looking all over for you," Morgana said. "Well, as much as I was allowed, anyway. I thought you would be in the upper town or maybe in the servants quarters. Getting to stay in the keep was a stroke of luck."

"My mother arranged it with Lady Asceline," Gwen explained. Apparently her mother had been concerned about a possible invasion for quite some time, since the spy was found at the start of the spring.

"Do you know what that means?" Morgana said, an eager look in her eyes. "It means we'll get to spend the whole summer together."

"The whole summer?" Gwen asked, surprised. "I thought if Cenred's army couldn't get in, they'd just leave."

Morgana shook her head. "My father led sieges, and sometimes he would be gone for months. He'd try to starve them out, or burn them."

Gwen's eyes widened. "They're going to burn Camelot?"

Morgana shrugged, surprisingly relaxed about the whole affair. "You can't burn stone, so they wouldn't be able to do that even if they wanted to."

They reached the main hall and put down their burdens. The castle was full of busy people, hurrying to and fro, carrying things from one place to another.

"You know," Gwen said, as they headed back. "They say Camelot was built by magic. By a powerful sorcerer. They say nothing could make the walls of Camelot fall."

"Do they?" Morgana asked, intrigued. "But magic is banned. Why would the King be living in a magic castle?"

Gwen shrugged. "Maybe it's just a story after all." She looked away, wondering if she should have risked saying anything. Her parents had always made it very clear how important it was not to mention the Old Religion. She wondered if Morgana hated magic the way the other nobles did.

"What wars did your father fight in?" Gwen asked. Before Morgana's arrival, she had been vaguely aware of Lord Gorlois. She knew that he was an important lord and knight, but that was all, really.

"He was the King's best friend and his most important ally," Morgana said, proudly. "He fought in all the wars Uther did, until this one. He was at Uther's side all through the Purge."

Gwen tried not to flinch. "Oh?"

"Oh yes," Morgana nodded, eagerly. "He took on the Blood Guard and won!" She made a gesture as if slicing into an enemy with a sword. "He was a hero. No sorcerer could stand against him and survive."

"You must be proud of him," Gwen said, swallowing down her disappointment. She hadn't realized it until now, but part of her had hoped that because Morgana was from outside the city, maybe she wouldn't be against magic and the Old Religion the way so many here were. Maybe she even worshipped in secret, the way Gwen and her family did. But it was clear that Morgana was the same as the other nobles.

"He was everything to me," Morgana said, softer now. "My mother, she... I don't really remember her, but she died during the Purge. I think she was killed by a sorcerer, but nobody ever wanted to
talk about it, not even my father. At least I have a painting of her. She was a beautiful woman. And sometimes my father would talk about her, would say how much he missed her." She swallowed. "I hope they're together now. Before he went off to his last battle, he talked about her more often. I think maybe he knew that he would be with her again soon." She wiped at her eyes. "Sorry, I don't... I've never really told anyone all of that."

They had stopped in a hallway when the conversation had turned serious. Gwen pulled Morgana into a hug and squeezed. "Thank you for telling me," she said. Even if she was disappointed that Morgana hated magic, that didn't change the fact that Morgana was her friend. That she was Morgana's friend. It didn't stop everything else from mattering.

On the fourth day, a patrol came back to Camelot bloodied and wide-eyed. They reported that the lands to the east, between the castle and the border, had been overrun by Cendred's army. They said it was over 10,000 men strong, mighty and terrifying. They said that they had almost been killed when they had been caught spying, and that the enemy would arrive in a day.

If Gwen thought things had been tense and frantic before, the first few days seemed languid in comparison to what followed. Every bit of food and firewood, every piece of clothing and livestock, every tool and weapon was brought into the keep from the upper and lower town and even the outer farms, leaving the majority of Camelot utterly empty. Every spare bucket and tub was filled with water. Fire breaks were set up in the upper town because most of the buildings there were wood and thatch. At the end of the day, the gate into the lower town was walled up with heavy stone, sealing them in. A family arrived belatedly from the outer villages and a rope ladder was sent over the wall for them. But that was the last time anyone would enter or leave the fortifications until the siege was over.

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That night, after finishing up with Gaius, Gwen went directly to Morgana's chambers. She was too wound-up to sleep and didn't want to deal with Elyan's moodiness. She knocked cautiously on the door, and a forbidding maidservant answered the door. It was the same woman who had pulled Morgana from the kitchen on their first meeting.

The woman blinked at her. "May I help you?" she asked, in a tone that said she was very much not interested in helping.

"Um. I'm here to see the Lady Morgana," Gwen said, keeping her chin high.

"The Lady Morgana is not seeing anyone tonight, much less a serving girl," the woman said, sternly. "She has had some most distressing news and wishes to be left alone."

Distressing? "Morgana?" Gwen called, worried. "It's Gwen. Are you all right?"

"Gwen?" Morgana called back. "Gwen, my dear, you must come in."

Gwen looked expectantly to the maidservant, who frowned at her but stepped aside. Morgana was sitting by the window, dabbing her eyes. Her eyes were red, as if she had been crying.

"Please leave us. I wish to be alone with my future maidservant," Morgana said.

The woman raised an eyebrow at that, but obeyed, closing the door behind her as she left. There was the sound of her footsteps going down the hall, and the moment they faded, Morgana suddenly broke into a joyous smile.

"Gwen, I've had the most wonderful news!"

Gwen was baffled by the sudden transformation. She pulled over a chair and sat down across from
Morgana. "Well?" she prompted.

"The wedding's been called off," Morgana said, almost bouncing with delight. "Wait, wait. Let me tell you the whole thing from the start. You know that Lord Heward's lands are to the east, between here and Escetir."

Gwen nodded. "Lady Asceline has been worried about Lewin." Apparently he had insisted on staying to defend their property, though according to the last messenger, he had sent his wife Blitha away to safety. "Is there news?"

Morgana nodded. "A scout arrived just before they sealed the doors. They were overrun and Lewin has been taken as a hostage."

"Oh no!" Gwen gasped. She didn't know Lewin very well, but this was awful. "That's your good news?"

"Of course not, let me finish," Morgana said. "When Lord Heward found out, he went right to the King, but the King said there was nothing he could do until the siege was over. So Lord Heward demanded that Leon be released from his obligation as a future knight, so he could inherit in case Lewin doesn't survive."

That wasn't good. Gwen knew how much Leon wanted to be a knight, how important that was to him. "And?"

"And he agreed, but only if Leon agreed. And Lord Heward went to Leon and told him to agree, but he wouldn't! He stood up to his father and insisted on staying a knight. And do you know what happened next?"

Gwen shook her head.

"Lord Heward told Leon that if he insisted on being a knight, then he would never marry the King's ward. And Leon still refused. And now the marriage is off!" She clapped her hands together and gave a great sigh of relief. "Can you believe it? I've been pretending to be upset because there's no way I'm going to let the King marry me off a second time, and I know how much he hates it when I cry. But I'm so glad you're here."

Gwen struggled to take it all in. She felt bad for Lewin, who was now stuck as a hostage for who knew how many months, and she felt bad for his parents, who were no doubt already worried sick for him. She felt bad for Leon, because he had been so happy about the idea of marrying Morgana. Yet Leon had made the choice for himself, had sacrificed the arranged marriage in pursuit of a greater goal, of something he truly wanted, rather than something that would simply gain him status. She was impressed by anyone who did that, who went for what they wanted and didn't let anything or anyone stand in their way. And she was glad for Morgana, who was freed from a marriage she'd wanted no part of.

"But that means... I won't be your future maidservant after all," Gwen said, realizing the effect this would have on her directly.

"That's the best part," Morgana said, in a conspiratorial tone. "Just before this all happened, Arthur stood up to the King and said he didn't like his manservant and wanted to be rid of him. It was all quite shocking. I think it was the first time Arthur's ever really stood up to him. And that gave me the idea. I'm going to tell the King that after everything that's happened, I want to choose my own maidservant. I'm tired of that awful woman he's assigned to me. I'm going to tell him I want you."
"Me? Really?" Gwen said, astonished at the idea. Maidservant to the King's ward! And she was only eleven.

"You're a bit young, but you already know everything about being a maidservant," Morgana reasoned. "And you were already going to be the maidservant to a noblewoman. He'll have no reason to reject my request, I'm certain of it." She gave Gwen an expectant, hopeful look. "Tell me you'll say yes? Please, Gwen? Please?"

Gwen held her breath, dizzied by the suddenness of it all. "Yes," she blurted out, all in a rush. She grinned, laughed. "Yes, I'll be your maidservant."

"Oh, Gwen!" Morgana said, and slipped from her chair to pull her into a tight hug. "This is going to be absolutely wonderful." She pulled back again, still holding onto Gwen's arms. "We'll get to spend all our time together, and we can sneak around and do whatever we want, with no one to stop us."

Gwen had the feeling she was going to be doing a lot more swordfighting from now on, and didn't mind at all. The thought of spending every day with Morgana made her feel warm and excited all at once. She was going to be Morgana's maidservant, and it was going to be wonderful.

They had a bright future together. But to reach it, they had to survive the war. And the next morning, war was upon them.

§

Gwen woke to darkness and plaintive whimpering. The threads of her dream dissipated as she hurried out of bed and rushed to Morgana's side. Morgana was in the grip of her nightmare, and without the draught to protect her, she was in great distress. Gwen felt another pang of guilt for causing Morgana such suffering, but she knew it had to be done. She needed to know as much as she could about what was coming. Just as Merlin was their only real defense, Morgana was their only advance warning. Morgana would suffer far worse later if she slept peacefully now.

Morgana began to writhe and shudder, to grasp and tear at the bedclothes, to keen and moan in her sleep. It had been five years since Morgana had dreamt unprotected. Even when a spell of nightmares passed, she took a lighter draught before bed to help her sleep undisturbed, and in case a new round of nightmares came upon her. But Gwen's sabotage had ruined the night's draught and left her exposed and vulnerable.

Gwen wanted to shake Morgana awake, to rouse her and soothe her, but she forced herself to wait. To let the visions run their full course. It seemed to take forever, but at last the moment came: Morgana's eyes shot open, wide and terrified, and she gave a mournful scream and began to cry.

"It's all right," Gwen said, finally able to take Morgana into her arms. "I'm here. I'm here."

"Gwen," Morgana cried, sobbing. "Gwen, it was awful. It hurt so much. Why did it hurt so much?"

Gwen hushed her and stroked her hair. "It's over now. Tell me what you saw. Let it out. You'll feel better once it's out."

"Camelot was burning," Morgana moaned. She was trembling in Gwen's arms. "The stones were burning. Everyone was dead. You were dead, I saw... There were these monstrous creatures, winged monsters ridden by people, strange people with glowing red eyes, murderous... And Merlin!" She pulled back and grabbed at Gwen. "Merlin was screaming! He was calling out for help, for Arthur, over and over again, but it was too late. They dragged him away into the darkness. We have to warn Arthur, we have to!"
"It was only a dream, Morgana. Merlin's fine, I'm fine. It was just a nightmare, nothing more."
Gwen's throat was tight as she lied, over and over again.

"A dream?" Morgana echoed, looking to Gwen with wide, tearful eyes. "Only a dream?"

"Only a dream," Gwen said, trying her best to smile. She dabbed at Morgana's tears with the corner of the bedsheets.

"It felt so real," Morgana said, calming now. "More real than any of them. Like I was there. Like I could touch them. Feel the fire, the heat..." She shivered. "I have to tell Arthur, I have to warn him, before it's too late. I have to..."

"You have to rest," Gwen insisted, gently pressing Morgana back against the pillows. Quite often after one of the nightmares broke through the draught, Morgana would go running to Arthur, shouting out her warnings. Gwen didn't know why the compulsion came along with the visions, but those times were more terrifying to her than any nightmare. No matter how mad people thought Morgana was, one day someone would realize the truth and drag Morgana away in chains, even as she continued to shout and plead for Arthur to listen. Such thoughts chilled Gwen to her very marrow.

"Rest," Morgana echoed, exhausted as the shock of the nightmare faded, leaving her drained. "Not strong enough. Tell Gaius it wasn't strong enough. He has to make it stronger."

"I'll tell him in the morning," Gwen said, stroking Morgana's brow. She wiped away the fresh tears with her thumb. "Everything's all right. It was just a dream."

Morgana began to settle, and to Gwen's alarm, she saw a trace of gold flash in Morgana's eyes. It wouldn't have been visible in the daylight, but it was unmistakable.

Morgana was not only a seer. She had magic.

It should not have been such a shock to Gwen. But it was. All this time, she had held on to the hope that the dreams were something imposed upon Morgana, something external, because that meant they could be stopped. But if Morgana had magic, that meant the dreams were her own. They came from within her. The draughts had been doing more than deepening Morgana's sleep. They had been suppressing her natural magic. Without them, Morgana would begin to use that magic, and without anyone to help her, she would not be able to control it.

Perhaps Merlin could help Morgana once this magical invasion was stopped. But until then, there was only one thing to do, and that was to make sure Morgana took her draught as she should. If her magic broke free, it would only be a matter of time before she was put onto the pyre. Gwen would not save Camelot from burning only to watch Morgana burn in its stead.

"It felt so real," Morgana said, softly. "I don't want it to be real."

"Shh, just rest," Gwen hushed, and soothed Morgana until she fell asleep again.

Gwen left the bed and walked over to the window. She looked out over the courtyard. So many had burned there. So many innocent people had died for no good reason. On the worst days, she wanted every injustice visited upon Uther tenfold. She wanted him to know what it was to be afraid and to burn. But she did not want Camelot to burn. She did not want thousands of people to suffer and die. There had to be a way to stop what was coming. Merlin would know what to do. She only had to get him away from Arthur and cut him free. Then the nightmares would leave Morgana alone again.

She only had to get Merlin away from Arthur. Perhaps at the banquet tonight. Arthur would have to
let Merlin serve him, and that meant she and Merlin would have the opportunity to slip away together.

She went back to bed, and fell asleep thinking of the cutting tools waiting in her basket.
For the second day in a row, Arthur woke from a calm, restful sleep and found himself trapped in Merlin's bodily embrace. While Arthur was usually the more tactile of the two of them, after all that they'd been through, it wasn't a surprise that Merlin was clingier than ever. Merlin had always dogged his footsteps and nosed into his business, no matter how inappropriate it was for him to do so. But like so many things about Merlin, such behavior had grown on him like a particularly insistent mold. And he could not deny that he needed this closeness as much as Merlin did. Perhaps even more.

Despite how restful his sleep had been, he was still waking at the first sign of light and probably would for weeks. Once triggered, the habit was too ingrained in him to fade easily. But there were benefits to having an extra hour or so before the day's schedule took him over. It allowed him indulgences he could not always afford. He took one now, allowing himself to feel safe, even if it was the safety of a sorcerer's arms. Merlin's magic was restrained, and Merlin had allowed it to be restrained, calmly and willingly. The trust he showed eased Arthur's heart, and made him all the more determined to keep Merlin safe, whatever it took.

Last night, Merlin had kept the water hot for so long that the both of them had ended up water-pruned and boneless. But before they finally left the tub, Merlin reheated the water one last time and then trapped him with kisses. Too lazy for anything more, they had simply rutted together and stroked each other until they spilled into the water's heat. After, they barely managed to dry off as they stumbled to bed, utterly relaxed. Merlin had nearly fallen asleep the moment he rested his damp head on a pillow, but he forced his eyes open and gave Arthur permission to activate the restraint. As before, Merlin passed out the moment the ends of his torc snapped together. Arthur stroked the damp curls of his hair and waited for him to rouse again, and when he did, Arthur simply hushed him until he closed his eyes again and rested naturally. They had decided that it would be best that way, so that Merlin would have sufficient time to restore himself before the morning.

For the same reason, Arthur let Merlin sleep once he'd finally extricated himself from Merlin's grip and the warm bed. There was a nip in the air, and the stone floor was cool under his bare feet. He dressed quickly into something comfortable and warm, completed his morning ablutions, and went over to his desk to work.

While Merlin’s lessons yesterday had been important, they had caused Arthur to neglect his other duties, and those still needed to be done. Without distractions, he estimated that he would have enough time to finish them before he woke Merlin so they could head out to the training field for the morning. Hopefully Leon’s night out would prove to be a success.

He checked and found that he had plenty of ink but barely enough paper left for the morning’s tasks. With Merlin otherwise occupied, even his lighter duties were being completely neglected. In truth, Merlin was only a manservant in name at this point, and when it was necessary for appearances. If it wouldn't result in Merlin passing out on halfway down the stairs, Arthur would leave him with a list of chores to complete rather than take him out to the field. But instead he would have to pull aside one of the general servants again and give them the tasks. That was how he had always done things before he had a regular manservant, so it wasn't unmanageable, but it was inconvenient. And it meant letting random servants into his chambers to clean and restock and manage his wardrobe and laundry. A regular servant in addition to Merlin might not be a terrible idea, assuming Arthur could find one that was trustworthy enough, but to have two manservants would require some kind of explanation to his father.
It would be a challenge to find anyone as unwaveringly loyal as Merlin. At least he wasn't likely to end up with another sorcerer for a manservant. It was mystifying enough that Merlin had managed to live in the heart of Camelot for so long without discovery, though that was at least partly his own fault. He remembered Merlin's confession back during the plague and shook his head at himself. The truth had been right in front of him all along, and he simply hadn't wanted to see it. And of course once the Prince says something is so, everyone else does their best to believe it as well. It would not do to contradict, after all. Merlin had implied that there were other secret sorcerers in Camelot, but Arthur could not imagine who they were, especially as it didn't seem that Merlin knew about Gwen. Perhaps they lived in the lower town rather than the castle, or he had some contact with the Druids.

Arthur sighed and set aside the mystery for now. He rubbed his ring against his chin and thought about the letter he had to write, the formal death notice that would be sent to Geraint's father. Arthur had written too many such letters already in his life, but they never got any easier. It never got easier to have to watch good men die, to know he had sent them to their deaths. He had written the other letters for the dead in Gedref, to keep busy while Merlin healed, but he had not been able to face Geraint's letter, not then. Not when he had feared he would lose Merlin as well.

He braced himself now and wrote in careful hand. He commended Geraint for his bravery, his sacrifice, his devotion to Camelot and its people, to his King and his Prince. He did not write about how Geraint had loved him more than he should, how it had felt to hold him in the darkness, the way his lips had tasted, or the salt of his skin after a day's sweat. Arthur was not sure if he had loved Geraint. He had not believed himself able to love, until Merlin. But Geraint had loved him, and Arthur had returned that affection as much as he was able.

When it was done, he leaned back in his chair and stared at Merlin's sleeping form, curled under the blankets. Merlin made everything both impossibly simple and impossibly difficult. It was simple how Arthur loved him, how Merlin loved him back. It was simple when they were naked against each other, trying to fit together so wholly that they could never separate again. It was simple when all he had to do was look into Merlin's eyes to see his soul, as bright and clear as sunlight. But everything else was a challenge. Every expectation, every contradiction, every treason. Everything that didn't fit into the world the way everything was supposed to. He had been raised to understand his kingdom in all its complexity, to know each piece and how it fit. There should not be pieces left over, pieces that didn't fit anywhere, that made lie of his knowledge of the whole.

It had only been two days since Merlin confessed of his magic, and while those two days felt like a lifetime, they were not. For all that Merlin had told him so far, for all that he had discovered for himself, he still barely knew anything about magic. He needed to break through the wall of silence that had always blocked his way. He wanted his father to help him, to treat him as the grown man he was and teach him the full truth about magic. About how it had become corrupted and what the nature of that corruption was. But he knew with a deep certainty that he could not ask that of his father. He knew what reaction it would bring, the same it had always brought. It would fill his father with a rage that blinded him to reason. After the disaster with Uwen and Linette, he knew it would do no good to even try. Far better to find those hidden books and master the old tongue enough to read them himself.

One task done, he turned to the next: more accounting and records for the battle. Some of this he would have done before they left, if they had not been in such a hurry. It was not the most engaging work, and so his mind was only half-occupied, allowing the other half to drift in thought. He had rarely been so glad to have a war season end for another year. Not that he had ever sought war -- he had not needed to, when so much war came of its own accord -- but he had spent half his life in combat in some form or another, and he was tired of it, of the deaths, the costs, the petty reasonings of kings. If he and his father could indeed force Alined to swear fealty, then that at least would mean one less enemy battering at their borders. They would have the Saxons to deal with, true, but
together Deorham and Camelot would be stronger than they were on their own.

Sometimes Arthur wished that his father had not been quite so zealous in his desire to rebuild Camelot to the fullness of her past glory. When his father had become King, Camelot had been a shadow of its former self, as much of its territory had been stolen over the centuries by its neighbors. His father had been determined to take back what was rightfully his, and had won a series of short, intense wars that swelled Camelot all the way to her current borders.

But the cost of such ambition was dear: every territory won back became territory that was contested. Cenred wanted to reclaim the eastern lands and the Forest of Ascetir. Mercia wanted the northeast corner all the way through the Vale of Denaria. Even though Deorham had made a grab for Gedref, it was Nemeth that had a claim. King Caerleon of Gwynned had promised to retake Powys, and Dyfed was testing the border near Daobeth, even though the land there had been scarred by dragonflame. Aside from the one shared with Gawant, the only border that wasn't threatened was shared with the Perilous Lands to the north, and that was hardly a comfort.

Yet for all the trouble at their borders, it was a distant neighbor that troubled Arthur most. Odin's land was to the southwest, and so should not be any immediate threat. But the fact that he had gone so far as to send an assassin -- an expensive assassin -- was not a good sign. The man was driven mad by his grief, that was obvious, and mad men could be reckless and desperate in their actions.

Arthur suspected that once Alined was subdued, Odin would be the next to challenge them, as he would be able to attack Camelot more easily once their kingdoms shared a border. If not, it was likely he would attempt assassination again. Either way, his desire for revenge made him a dangerous enemy. Camelot would have great need of its allies, and because of that Arthur was glad his father had called upon Lord Godwin. Gawant was a faithful ally and had come to their aid before, during the Purge and again when Cenred brought a siege against Camelot. While these times were not as
desperate, it seemed they were ever-balanced on a knifepoint, ready to tip over into disaster should the wind be against them.

That was why the Five Kingdoms treaty was so important. Even though Camelot was the strongest and largest kingdom in Albion, they needed more allies if they were to survive their enemies and the Saxon raiders. His father meant it to be an alliance with the most powerful rulers in the region: with Olaf, King of Norway; with Brian Bóruma, High King of Éire; and with Alan the Second, King of Breton. The treaty had first begun as a peace treaty between Breton and Norway, after Alan successfully expelled Olaf's occupation. Uther had agreed to manage the negotiations as an impartial party, but soon talk had turned to uniting their kingdoms as allies against the greater threat of the Saxon tribes. They had invited King Brian to join Éire, Norway, Camelot, and Breton together.

The inclusion of Deorham had been odd, but his father had been motivated by another past glory: the Union of the Five Kingdoms by Bruta. That was the peace treaty that had finally stopped the widespread warring that followed the end of Roman rule, and a Four Kingdoms treaty did not have the same ring to it. If it meant peace with Deorham, then all the better. Of course, there had been more than five kingdoms in Bruta's treaty, because there were dozens of kings at the time, but it was named after the five most powerful, Camelot included. If Deorham was successfully subsumed, then his father would need to find another kingdom to make up the fifth spot.

Perhaps it would be Gawant, even though Lord Godwyn was already a strong ally. It was unlikely to be any of their other neighbors, with tension as they were. Or it could be one of the northern kingdoms. They were isolated from the south by the Perilous Lands, a cursed kingdom that was extremely dangerous and difficult to cross, so as a result his father had not managed to impose himself upon them. It was madness enough to walk into the Perilous Lands, much less to try and move an army through it.

At least this was one problem that Arthur didn't have to worry about himself. The Five Kingdoms treaty was his father's personal passion, and while Arthur was glad to help him with it, he was equally glad not to have one more set of duties on top of everything else. Especially with all he had yet to learn about magic.

He finished his work just as he filled the last sheet of paper, then bundled it all up and set it aside. He leaned back and stretched; he was looking forward to another morning of exercise with the knights, to the simplicity of muscle and steel and a good spar. His head was full of too many things, too many complicated and troubling problems, and he needed the break.

When he handed one of the servants his list of tasks, he went ahead and placed the order for their breakfast as well. He was beginning to realize that trying to re-establish their old routine was a fool's errand. If Merlin was only a manservant in name, if he had become too valuable and too dangerous to be what he had been, then they would have to start over and figure out the best way to proceed. As usual, the difficulty was not in Merlin so much as in everyone else, in the expectations of position and court, and in the fact that Merlin's current status was what enabled them to be together as they were. If Merlin was no longer his manservant, it would be very difficult to find a believable excuse for them to share their chambers. And yet change felt inevitable.

Arthur gathered up Merlin's grimoire and the notes from last night, and glanced at them briefly before opening up his heavy wooden chest and placing them inside. He added in the drawings of magical objects he had made for his father. His collection of contraband was mounting quickly. He left the chest open and his gold torc on for the moment, wanting to give Merlin as long as possible to gather his energy. But the day was upon them, and he could dally no longer. As soon as breakfast arrived, he left the tray on the table and went over to the bed. As always, Merlin never quite seemed to settle after waking until he had focused on Arthur's face.
"Morning," Arthur smiled. He rested his hand on Merlin's shoulder. "How are you feeling?

"Not too bad," Merlin said, rubbing at his eyes. "Like yesterday morning. Maybe a little better."

"Good," Arthur said, warmly. "I had breakfast brought up for us, so you could save your strength for the training field."

That earned him a proper Merlin look, one that made Arthur want to curl his toes in contentment. Merlin took his hand and gave a sleep-soft kiss to his palm, and then rested his cheek against it. Such simple gestures, and that was all it took to make everything feel easy again. To make it feel that all the complexities, all the complications and perils ahead could simply be brushed aside. That if he trusted Merlin the way Merlin trusted him, every barrier would fall from their path.

It was nonsense, like so much of Merlin was nonsense. But there it was.

When Arthur had finally drawn Merlin out from under the covers, Merlin almost ran into the side room to dress, shivering in the early chill. Arthur chuckled and sat down at the table to eat, and after a few minutes Merlin joined him. His hair was all in disarray but he had a good appetite, which was generally a reliable measure of his health and mood. After the scare Merlin gave him yesterday, Arthur was very glad to see such improvement.

"You know, I was thinking," Merlin said, cheeks full of food. "If you can keep your torc on all day, hide it under your clothes, I should be well enough to work again. I could help more on the field and I could clean up the chambers, take care of the horses. And your armor needs work after the way you banged it up yesterday."

"You're actually volunteering to do your job?" Arthur asked, raising his eyebrows.

"I don't enjoy lying around all day," Merlin said, dryly, before he stuffed his mouth again. "I like being useful. And someone has to take care of you."

It was tempting. It had been tempting last night. But he was still reluctant to wear the gold torc constantly, even if he could hide it. "Let's see how you do this morning," Arthur said. "If you end up exhausted again before lunchtime, I'll consider it."

"But then I'll need time to recover again," Merlin countered. "If you just kept it on, I probably wouldn't get exhausted in the first place."

"If you need to recover, then you'll take the time," Arthur said, unwilling to budge on the matter. "I'd rather not jump to that option until we're sure that it's absolutely necessary."

Merlin gave an annoyed frown, but shrugged in acceptance. "I just hate being so weak," he said, with less cheer than before. "It's bad enough not having my magic, it's so much worse without you."

"You still have me," Arthur said, tilting his head to meet Merlin's gaze.

Merlin's frown slipped into a crooked smile. "Right," he said, and shook his head. "You know what I meant."

"We'll discuss it later," Arthur said, putting an end to it for now. "Finish your breakfast."

"Yes, sire," Merlin said, tolerantly, and obeyed.

Just as the morning before, when they were ready to leave, Arthur removed his gold torc and locked it in the chest. Merlin flinched when the connection broke and wobbled before steadying himself. He
Arthur was not surprised to find that the men were not as sprightly this morning as they had been yesterday. He supposed he could take pity on them and have Gaius prepare a batch of his hangover cure, but some suffering would humble them, which was necessary after their poor behavior towards Leon. Leon himself was looking rough, but his mood was vastly improved despite whatever headache he was nursing. And it was obvious why, as his armor had mysteriously turned up again.

"It was just where I'd left it," Leon said, still somewhat awed by its sudden return. "Thank you, sire, for your help with the men."

Arthur was impressed himself, as he had expected it to take at least a few days for the story of Leon's capture of the assassin to properly circulate. But it seemed that Sir Alynor was a true friend indeed, and had realized the impact such a story would have on the other knights. Arthur would have to keep an eye on Alynor and confirm that he had such insight and loyalty in more than just his friendship with Leon. Just as Camelot always needed new knights, it also needed experienced knights to lead them. Alynor might be a good candidate for such a position.

"They'll give you a chance now," Arthur assured him. "In fact, I want you to take the lead today. Take the men through all the usual exercises, and write me a report on everyone's strengths and weaknesses." The exercise would be good for Leon, so he could better know all the men under his command, and it would give Arthur a fresh perspective. It was hard to keep up with each of the knights when he had so many other things on his plate. "If you need help, have Alynor assist you. He seems to be a good man."

"He is, sire," Leon said, proud on his friend's behalf. "He will be honored to hear that you think so highly of him."

"Excellent," Arthur said, clapping Leon on the arm. "Go ahead and get the men warmed up. I think they'll be slow to start this morning." He grinned and winked, and Leon smiled back, then winced and rubbed at his head.

Leon headed out of the armory, and through the doorway Arthur saw him head over to Alynor to tell him the good news. That was one problem solved, and in the process another problem was headed off before it could begin. Alynor would keep Leon from becoming isolated by his position above the others, as it seemed he had a better relationship with the other knights. Perhaps as the planned tourney had been cancelled, after the treaty was signed, a smaller jousting tournament could be arranged, and Leon and Alynor could display their skills. Arthur could use a good joust himself. There was nothing like bashing an opponent with a giant lance to work out his stress.

The only disappointment to the morning was that Merlin once again wilted quickly. He lasted slightly longer this time, but not by much, and soon enough Arthur had to send him off to nap in his usual spot. This time the knights that were close to Merlin went to him directly, asked him how he was and expressed their concern. Merlin gave them the same story he had given Gwen and Morgana, that he was not entirely recovered from his injuries after all and that Gaius had told him to rest whenever he started having a bad turn. Arthur could see that it did cheer Merlin to finally speak to the knights himself, to see their friendly smiles and receive their back-pats and hair-ruffles. But his good mood was not enough to overcome the tax that the torc restraint put on his body.

Even after his rest, Merlin was dragging as they made their way back to his chambers for lunch. Merlin barely ate a few mouthfuls before he had to lie down again, and that was even after Arthur had put back on his torc, though without releasing the restraint. If Arthur was going to be stuck
wearing a magical object, he needed to test its capabilities. And he had plenty to do while Merlin slept. After he'd cleaned himself up, he examined the warm clothes that had been brought out in their absence. He found enough high-collared shirts that could hide the bulky ends of the torc, and also found that his long brown coat was a perfect addition, as its high collar helped disguise the bulk as well. The feast was this evening, and he needed Merlin to be there to serve him, to ease his father's concerns and lessen his attention on Merlin. If that meant wearing the torc, then so be it.

Arthur took out his notes and the grimoire and sat down at his desk with the rest of his lunch, and picked his way through it as he practiced with the old tongue. He was starting to grasp it, and he could pick out words that matched the ones on the vocabulary list Merlin had given him. It would take time to become fluent, of course, and there were many words he did not recognize and could not yet parse without help. But it was a good start.

The comfort of his warmer clothes made Arthur think about Merlin's wardrobe. The first winter Merlin had been in Camelot, he had shivered through the cold months yet resisted any pointed remarks Arthur had made about getting a warmer coat. He suspected that Merlin simply wasn't used to thinking that way. In Ealdor, he had no doubt been barely able to afford the clothes he already had. The extravagance of buying a heavy, fur-lined cloak and thick mittens was probably beyond him, in conception if not in gold -- though as he sent most of his money to his mother, he might not have been able to afford them, and probably still couldn't.

If Arthur didn't intervene, Merlin would wear the exact same outfits over and over until they became so threadbare that they could not even be mended, and they simply dropped from his body as rags. Even for a manservant, such a slovenly appearance was quite inappropriate, and it would be even less appropriate when Merlin became... whatever he was going to become. Better clothes would make a better impression, and it would make his gradual elevation in status more palatable for those who objected on principle to a servant being made into, say, a royal advisor. Appearance wasn't everything, but it mattered a tremendous amount.

It was long past time that Arthur took matters into his own hands. He would have Merlin's measurements sent to the royal tailor and a new wardrobe commissioned, for both warm and cold weather. Not anything as fancy as what he had given Merlin to wear in Gedref. He would allow Merlin to keep the style his clothes had now, if he so chose. But the quality of the cloth would be finer, and he would have properly warm shirts and jackets, a good travelling cloak, and whatever else was needed. Which was basically everything, as Merlin's entire wardrobe could be easily fit into his bag with room left over, as half of it was nothing but kerchiefs.

Merlin woke on his own after an hour or so, and despite the relative shortness of the nap, it was already obvious that the torcs were having a beneficial effect on him. Arthur was going to have to give Gaius a piece of his mind for putting him into this position. He had slyly forced Arthur to accept the torcs' magic in order to control Merlin's. Even if Merlin's magic was somehow not harmful, or was simply unable to harm Arthur through the torcs alone, it was all playing with fire as far as Arthur was concerned. Gaius of all people should know better than that. Gaius might be deeply loyal to his father, but it was clear that the King was not the only target of his loyalty. The question was if Gaius was loyal to the Old Religion in an abstract way, or if he was actually reporting to other sorcerers. If he was shielding Camelot with one hand and endangering it with the other.

"Feeling better?" Arthur asked, setting aside the grimoire.

Merlin nodded. "Does that mean you'll keep wearing your torc from now on? Until we can find a better solution, I mean, like you said."

Arthur pulled back his collar so Merlin could see the gold beneath. "For now, yes."
Merlin fell back against the bed, his arms spread, and sighed in relief. "Thank the gods," he said. "I could hardly stand feeling so awful."

Arthur decided that it was best not to comment. "Then you'll be up for serving me at the feast tonight?"

Merlin brought his head up, surprised. "I completely forgot! Yeah, I don't want to miss it. When do we go?"

Arthur couldn't help but smile. "It's early yet. We should have the rest of the afternoon to ourselves--"

But of course, no sooner had he said that, then there was a knock on the door. Arthur tilted his head, and Merlin picked himself up and went to answer it. It was a page, sent from his father, passing on the message that Arthur's presence was required in the throne room.

"Do you think it's about the feast?" Merlin asked, once the page had gone.

"Unlikely," Arthur said. He checked to make sure that the gold torc was entirely hidden under his clothes, and then straightened Merlin's scarf to hide the silver one. "Seems we'll find out together. Ready?"

"Ready," Merlin said, and they left the chambers together, walking in step.

§

Arthur braced himself as they approached the throne room. The fact that the message the page had relayed had been so sparse meant that his father was trying to surprise him about something, and he hated his father's surprises. There was always some kind of pointed lesson behind them. He had hoped that his father's newfound appreciation for his maturity meant the end of such lessons, but it seemed not.

He squeezed the handle of his sword, took a deep breath, and strode through the doors, back straight and head high. His father was on his throne, and among the various attendees scattered before him were three visitors to the court. As he approached, he noted their luxurious red and blue robes and delicate gold jewelry -- whoever they were, they were clearly nobility -- and their wooden walking staffs. Recognition tickled at the back of his mind.

He heard Merlin's strangled gasp of surprise just as he turned and saw their faces.

It was Sophia of Tír-Mòr. Sophia and her father, Aulfric. Sophia, who he'd nearly eloped with in some fit of passion before Merlin knocked the sense back into his head with a lump of wood. And they were accompanied by a third man, one Arthur didn't recognize.

"Ah, and here he is now," said Uther, turning to Arthur with a smile that always meant trouble. "Arthur, you remember Prince Aulfric and Lady Sophia of Tír-Mòr. They were just telling me of their stay with King Caerleon."

"He was a most generous host to us in our time of need," Aulfric said. "But it is time we reclaimed our former home. We are travelling east back to Tír-Mòr, where we will battle to force the Saxon raiders from our land and our shores."

Arthur tore his eyes away from Sophia, who was watching him intently and smiling demurely, and looked to Aulfric. "A noble goal. But the Saxons are a dangerous enemy. They encroach deeper into Albion by the day."
"That is why we have returned to your court," Aulfric said, turning back to Uther with a respectful nod. "We wish first to thank you for your generosity and patience towards us during our last visit. We must apologize for taking such a hasty leave of you, but we were met by an urgent messenger and had no time to delay. A family matter, you understand."

"Of course," Uther said. "And second?"

"That we wish to discuss in private, your Highness," said Aulfric. "But we believe it will be of benefit to yourself and Camelot as well as to us."

"Then you must stay as our guests," Uther declared. "Arthur will arrange for your rooms, and you must join us at the feast this evening." He turned to Arthur. "I suggest a set of rooms in the north wing. Let us keep temptation at more than arm's length this time."

Uther and Aulfric chuckled, which was an odd enough sight on its own, but Sophia simply continued to stare at Arthur. Her intense gaze had drawn him in from their first meeting, and he struggled not to betray his reaction as he recalled the passion she had drawn from him. He had been so captivated by her, so certain that she was the one, that nothing short of death could ever part them. And yet when he had woken up with a sore head and Gaius and Merlin by his bedside, his ardor had been completely cooled. His father had eventually dismissed the matter as a bout of foolish young passion, and Arthur had done the same. But now that she was back, he only had to look at Sophia to feel the same stirrings as before. There was just something about her that made it hard to look away.

Arthur lifted his foot to step towards Sophia, but before he could put it down again, Merlin had shoved himself into his way.

"Merlin!" Arthur hissed, annoyed.

"Is there a problem?" said the unnamed man that stood with Sophia and Aulfric.

Arthur shoved Merlin aside and stepped in front of him. "Not at all. You must excuse my manservant. He was recently hit on the head."

"Let me introduce myself," said the man, as he bowed his head. "I am Sir Drudwas, champion of Tír-Mòr, Knight of the Sparrowhawk."

"An unusual title," Arthur observed.

Drudwas gave a knowing smile. "It is a great honor to meet the famed Prince Arthur, champion of Camelot. I will share the chambers of my Prince and Lady, as they are in my care throughout this dangerous journey. I hope that does not offend?"

"Not at all," Arthur said, grabbing Merlin's arm as he started forward again. What was wrong with him? Was he having a fit of jealousy over Sophia?

Drudwas smirked. "You seem to have your hands full. If you will show us to our chambers, we will take a respite before the feast."

"Of course," Arthur said, giving Merlin's arm a very pointed squeeze. What was he doing, drawing attention to himself like that, acting up in front of noble guests? Did he want to be executed?

Uther gestured Arthur over, and Aulfric, Sophia, and Drudwas left to rejoin their personal servants, who were waiting for them in the hall with their belongings. It seemed that this time, Aulfric and Sophia had brought a retinue.
"Is there a problem?" Uther asked, glancing towards Merlin, who was glaring after Sophia as if to kill her with his thoughts alone. "I will not have you or your affliction of a manservant embarrassing this kingdom, is that understood?"

"Of course, sire," Arthur said, humiliation washing away any revived feelings towards Sophia. He had made a fool of himself once already with her, he would not do so a second time.

His father stared at him, then eased. "I expect to see you at your best behavior at the feast tonight. We want to make a good impression."

"We do?" Arthur asked. As far as he knew, Sophia and Aulfric were little more than refugees, and it was unusual for his father to have such a strong desire to impress a noble without any land, even one of high rank. Rank meant nothing if there was no land to base it on.

"We'll discuss it later," Uther said. "Ensure that our guests are made comfortable and that all their needs are attended to."

"Sire," Arthur said, with a short bow. He turned on his heel and strode out, grabbing Merlin by the arm as he went. "Shut up, Merlin," he hissed, before Merlin could get a word out. "Whatever it is, it will wait."

Merlin glared at him. "Yes, sire," he hissed back, the honorific once again an insult.

"Let me show you to your chambers," Arthur said, warmly, as they reached the group. "It's just this way."

Arthur ushered the whole lot of them to the north tower. He remembered when Sophia had last visited, how he had intended to put her and her father there, but that Merlin had talked him into installing her right next door. Merlin had been ridiculously eager for he and Sophia to spend time together, ending up in the stocks three times so Arthur wouldn't get in trouble for his dalliances. And yet now he was fumingly furious and looked ready to attack her should she make any sudden movements. It was baffling, even for Merlin.

They reached their chambers, which was a suite large enough for all of them, servants included. They filed wordlessly inside, and before Arthur could ask them if they needed anything, or dare to strike up a conversation with the woman he had nearly eloped with, Drudwas closed the door in his face.

Arthur blinked at the door, feeling quite thoroughly dismissed. "Rude," he muttered. Before he could turn to Merlin and ask him what he was so upset about, Merlin grabbed him by the arm and hauled him away. "Merlin!" Arthur protested, surprised by the strength of Merlin's grip and the insistence of his pull. He yanked himself free and dragged Merlin into a private nook. "What is going on?"

"That's not Sophia," Merlin said, in a hurried whisper. "It can't be her, or Aulfric. I know it's not them."

"What are you blathering about? Of course it's them," Arthur chided.

"It can't be," Merlin insisted. "You don't remember what happened last time, but she nearly killed you."

"Killed me?" Arthur echoed, baffled. He certainly didn't remember his life being at risk. Perhaps his sanity, but arguably that was at greater peril now. "Merlin, what on earth are you talking about?"

"You were never in love with her," Merlin insisted, eyes wide. "She enchanted you and you nearly
died! I had to do it!"

"Do what?" Arthur said, slowly.

Merlin swallowed. "I killed Sophia and Aulfric. They're dead, I swear it. That's why it can't be them."

Arthur took a step back, away from Merlin. Merlin stared at him, pleading and demanding and afraid and angry all at once.

"All right," Arthur said, with a calmness he didn't feel. "You killed them to save me. I understand. But why did they want to kill me in the first place?"

"To get back to Avalon," Merlin said. "They look human but they're not. They're magic. They're Sidhe."

"Sidhe?"

"We need to talk to Gaius," Merlin said, all insistence again. He grabbed Arthur by the arms. "He can show you. Please, Arthur, I need you to believe me. I swear, I'm telling you the absolute truth."

Arthur looked into Merlin's eyes and saw no trace of deception, no hint of deceit. Merlin was genuinely afraid of Sophia and Aulfric, and genuinely meant what he was saying, no matter that it sounded like the ravings of a madman. Merlin could not have murdered Sophia and Aulfric because they were hale and hearty mere feet away from them. And yet Arthur knew better than to simply disregard Merlin's word at this point, even though none of what he said made sense or matched what Arthur knew, and as usual lacked even the slightest scrap of supporting evidence.

If he had indeed been enchanted, that would explain his inexplicably sudden and brief passion for Sophia. It would explain why he felt drawn to her even now, when he knew full well that he did not love her, when he had not thought of her even once since her disappearance a year ago. The threat of elopement might be the least of their worries.

"We'll talk to Gaius," Arthur agreed.

Merlin gave him the look that said that Arthur had hung the moon and the stars. "Thank you," he said, and kissed Arthur quickly but firmly on the lips. And then he was gone, hurrying down the hall, and Arthur was hurrying after him.
The Sidhe

For someone who had spent most of the past few days either unconscious or exhausted, Merlin could really move when he wanted to. Arthur waved aside the concerned looks of passers-by and castle guards as they ran to Gaius' chambers.

"Gaius!" Merlin called, as he shoved through the door, a few long strides ahead of Arthur. Arthur followed and closed the door behind them, glancing around to make sure they hadn't been followed, after making such a show of themselves.

"Merlin, my boy," Gaius said, looking up from his reading. "Whatever's the matter?"

"Gaius, they're back," Merlin blurted out. "Sophia and Aulfric. I don't know how, but they're alive, they're right here in the castle. We have to stop them."

If Arthur had held some small hope that Gaius would prove to be the voice of reason, that he would explain to Merlin that he was talking nonsense, that hope was quickly snuffed.

"What?" Gaius gasped, visibly alarmed. He set aside his book and pushed himself to his feet. "If they somehow survived--"


They stared at each other for a long moment, some silent conversation passing between them, and then they turned as one to look at Arthur.

"What?" Arthur asked, unnerved.

"Sire, you may want to sit down," Gaius said, gentling his tone as he would for a patient.

"And why exactly would I want to do that?" Arthur asked, crossing his arms. When the two of them shared an identically guilty look, he glared at them sternly.

"Arthur," Merlin began, cautiously. "Do you remember anything unusual about the last time Sophia was here? Anything at all?"

"You mean besides the fact that you somehow managed to hit me on the head with a lump of wood?" Arthur asked, raising his eyebrows.

"You don't remember the lake?" Merlin pressed. "Or Aulfric attacking me?"

"I think perhaps we should start from the beginning," Gaius intervened. "When Sophia and Aulfric first arrived in Camelot, I grew suspicious about your sudden attraction to the girl. Upon investigation, I discovered that Aulfric's staff bore unusual markings. The writing was in Ogham, the ancient script of the Sidhe. When confronted, Aulfric's eyes literally flashed with anger."

Arthur couldn't help but look at Merlin. "They flashed gold? Like you?"

Merlin shook his head. "Red."

"The Sidhe have magic, but they are not sorcerers," Gaius explained. "Not as we know them. They're creatures of magic. They live in Avalon, a land of eternal youth."

"Then why come here?" Arthur asked.
"To get back home," Merlin said. "I followed Aulfric to the lake and saw him open the gates to Avalon. He asked the other Sidhe for passage back to Avalon. The other Sidhe said that Aulfric had killed another Sidhe and his punishment was to live a mortal life. But if he offered up the soul of a mortal prince, Sophia would be allowed in. When you announced your engagement to Sophia, I tried to warn you, but it was too late. She'd already enchanted you. Then Aulfric blasted me with his staff, and the next thing I knew, Gaius was there and you were gone."

Merlin was growing visibly upset, so Gaius rested a hand on his shoulder before taking over the tale. "Sophia and Aulfric took you out to the lake, intending to sacrifice you to the Sidhe. Merlin pursued them and killed them using Sophia's staff. The gates to Avalon closed and Merlin was able to save you from drowning. Unfortunately, your near death left you in a weakened state. I followed after Merlin on horseback and we used the horse to carry you home. When you woke the next morning, it was clear that you remembered nothing of the previous night, and that the enchantment upon you had broken. The story of the lump of wood was a necessary explanation."

Arthur sat down on the nearest bench. "I see," he said. Not for the first time, he felt that his life had been lived in parallel to reality. At least with this he could lay the blame on the enchantment, rather than self-imposed denial. "Then how do you explain the fact that the two of them are quite clearly alive?"

"I'm afraid I can't, sire," Gaius said. "But we do have evidence to support what we've told you."

"We do?" Merlin asked, turning to Gaius in surprise.

"The staff, Merlin," Gaius prodded, with mild exasperation.

"Oh! Right!" Merlin said, and hurried off to his old room. He returned a moment later with a familiar staff in hand. He held it out to Arthur, who took it.

It was definitely the same as he remembered, and even the same as the staves that he had just seen in the hands of Sophia, Aulfric, and Drudwas. Arthur turned it in his hands and peered at odd symbols engraved into the wood. "This is the writing you mentioned?"

"Ogham, sire," Gaius said. "The writing means 'To hold life and death in your hands.'"

"And this is a weapon?" Arthur asked. He touched the large blue crystal at the head of the staff. Crystals and magic yet again.

"A deadly one," Gaius said, soberly. "Merlin was lucky to survive."

"What did you do with their bodies?" Arthur asked. "Did you bury them somewhere?"

"There was nothing to bury," Merlin said, giving him a soulful look again. "When I blasted them, they just exploded."

Arthur handed the staff back to Gaius. "If Merlin survived, there's every chance that they did as well. But if that's the case..."

"Indeed," Gaius said, with a deepening frown. "It's possible they've returned for another try. If so, then it's vital that we keep you safe."

Merlin took the staff and gripped it in both hands. "I know what to do." He clenched his jaw and started towards the door. Arthur jumped up and hauled him back.

"Let me go!" Merlin tried to wriggle free, but Arthur kept a hold of him. "I have to stop them!"
"No, you don't," Arthur said, firmly. "Will that staff even work without your magic?"

Merlin stilled, as if he hadn't thought of that. The idiot probably would have marched all the way to the enemy before he realized that he had no way to stop them. "I don't know. Maybe. If you remove the restraint, then I know it'll work."

"No," Arthur repeated.

"You have to let me do this!"

"I have to what? Let you go alone to face an enemy we barely understand with a weapon that we can't trust? Absolutely not. In case you forgot, they have the same weapon and they actually know how to use it, and there are three of them."

Merlin made an annoyed face. "Fine," he grumbled. "You might, might have a point. But we still have to stop them. And can you please let go?"

Arthur let go, and Merlin stumbled a few steps away before tugging his clothes from their disarray. He had the air of a cat that had misjudged its leap. He gave a protesting squeak when Arthur grabbed the staff and pulled it away. Merlin pouted at him, so Arthur replied with a stern look, and then Merlin replied back with an incredibly long-suffering sigh.

Gaius cleared his throat. "If I might, sire, Merlin and I have been quite successful in defending Camelot in the past. Unless you have a better plan..."

Arthur wondered how Merlin and Gaius had managed to survive this long without him. "Of course I have a better plan. It's what you should have done back then. Human or not, they're guilty of using magic. I'm going to take this evidence to my father and have them all arrested as traitors."

Merlin gaped at him, and Gaius gave a deep frown, his eyebrows furrowing to match. "That may not be wise, sire. The Sidhe are an old and powerful enemy. We underestimate them at our peril."

"Just a moment ago, you were fine with letting Merlin run off to stop them single-handed," Arthur replied, holding back his frustration. "I have a whole army at my disposal. Are you seriously telling me that Camelot is defenseless against three people with walking sticks?"

"No, sire," Gaius said, with tart deference. "I believe any direct action would be rash. We must first discover the reason for their presence here." The last he said towards Merlin, and pointedly.

"That reason is clear enough," Arthur replied. "Merlin, come with me."

"But--"

"Now," Arthur ordered, and strode out of the room, staff in hand. After a moment, he heard Merlin scurrying to catch up.

"We can't tell the King," Merlin said, in a rushed whisper. "It's too dangerous!"

"The fact that it's dangerous is exactly why he must be told," Arthur replied, under his breath. "You know how he is about magical threats. As long as he has one solid piece of evidence of magic, that's all it takes. The Sidhe will be dead by sundown, and we won't have to worry about them coming back a third time."

"But what if fire isn't enough?"
"Fire is always enough. And if it isn't, I have my enchanted sword."

Merlin finally cracked a smile. "Yeah, you do." Then he tilted his head. "Then why don't we just go up and kill them with the sword? We know that works."

"Because I'm the Crown Prince of Camelot, and that's not how we deal with our enemies," Arthur said. He still regretted his panicked attack on Merlin, and he wasn't about to make the same mistake twice. He would deal with magic the right way, through the right channels, and with a clear head. "They must be openly accused and then arrested for trial. If they resist arrest and show their guilt, then that is evidence enough for their execution."

"And then we can kill them?"

"Yes, and then we can kill them."

Merlin narrowed his eyes. "Good. Right. Let's do this."

Arthur couldn't help but smile. Merlin was oddly adorable when he was bloodthirsty.

When they reached the throne room, the doors were closed, and the guards indicated that the King was in conference. Arthur took advantage of the moment and pulled Merlin aside.

"I want you to wait here," he said, keeping his voice low so the guards wouldn't overhear.


Arthur raised his hand, holding off Merlin's inevitable argument. "It's best if I speak to my father alone."

"But you don't know the Sidhe like I do."

"And that's exactly why I need you and my father to be as far away from each other as possible," Arthur explained. "You incriminated yourself already this morning. The last thing we need is for him to make the connection between you and them." Not to mention that his father was probably looking for any excuse to dislike Merlin further. If he knew that Merlin had brought this to him, they might end up snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

The doors opened and Leon walked out. Arthur waved for him to wait, and Leon saw and nodded a bow. Arthur turned back to Merlin. "Wait here," he said, pointing his finger in Merlin's face to make his point perfectly clear. Then he walked over to Leon to greet him.

"Sir Leon. You were reporting to my father?"

"Yes, sire," Leon said, with a hesitant expression. "He asked me to provide him with an accounting of our current assets, in case of further trouble from Alined. I didn't want to bother you with it as you've been busy since your return. I hope my actions were not an imposition."

"No, perfectly all right," Arthur lied. It wasn't so much a sign of his father's lack of faith in him as it was his general paranoia. This business with Alined had stirred up his blood. "I need to speak with my father, but after that I may need your assistance. If you could remain here until I return?"

"Of course, sire," Leon said.

Arthur glance at Merlin, who was already looking restless and slightly mutinous, then stepped closer to lean to speak privately to Leon. "And in the meantime, keep an eye on Merlin for me. He's been
Leon looked to Merlin, who stared back at him. Leon stiffened. Arthur rested a hand on the hilt of Leon's sword. "Restrain him if you must, but do not harm him. Not so much as a bruise, is that understood?"

"Yes, sire," Leon said. Curiosity was evident in his eyes, but he held it back like a good soldier.

Arthur left the two of them in a low-level standoff and went to speak to his father. He closed the doors behind him as he entered. His father was reading over some documents, presumably those given to him by Leon, and when he looked up and saw Arthur he smiled.

"Ah, Arthur, good. I wanted to speak with you in private."

"As do I, Father. About an urgent matter."

His father set aside the documents and stood. "Certainly. But first we must discuss something of the utmost importance. The Five Kingdoms treaty."

Arthur internally sighed. Not this again. "What about it?" he asked, politely.

"Once Alined has been subdued, there will only be four kingdoms left in the treaty. We are in need of a fifth. And I believe we now have it."

Arthur blinked at him, confused. "We do?"

"We will, if we play this right," his father said, looking pleased. "After all, our common enemy is the Saxons. Who better to be the fifth kingdom in our alliance than the Tír-Mòr? Aulfric has already expressed interest in a relationship with Camelot."

It was such an absurd idea that it took Arthur a moment to make sense of it. "You can't be serious. Tír-Mòr isn't even a kingdom anymore. The Saxons burned them to the ground."

"Tír-Mòr was once one of the richest kingdoms in Albion," his father said. "Before you arrived, Aulfric informed me that the noble houses and their assets were all safely assembled in Gwynedd. Caerleon is hosting them, but he's unwilling to lend them the men to help them reclaim their lands."

"Because if he did, Gwynedd would be defenseless. Do you have any idea how big an army they'd need to fight off the Saxons?"

"I do," his father said, and held out the documents.

Arthur refused to take them. "Absolutely not. There is no way I'm leading our army to fight another kingdom's battle. Camelot barely has enough defenses as it is."

His father's smile flattened into a thin line. "We would not be fighting alone. We would have the support of the other kingdoms in the treaty."

"And how many men will they lend to the fight?" Arthur asked, angrily. "The treaty is not even signed yet, and you want to commit them to saving a kingdom that is already lost. If they discover what you intend, they might refuse to sign at all."

"Their kingdoms are equally under threat from the Saxons," his father replied. "As is Camelot, in case you've forgotten. They will help because they must, just as we must, for the sake of all Albion."

It was a laudable goal, and Arthur might have welcomed it. But he knew the real reason for all of
"And I expect you would arrange with Aulfric for a share of Tír-Mòr's riches."

"A large payment would be appropriate," his father replied, unmoved.

"And what if that gold is an illusion?" Arthur challenged. "What if Aulfric is not who he says he is?"

"Of course he is," his father scoffed. "The last time they were here, I had Geoffrey check the records. Aulfric is the rightful heir to Tír-Mòr and Sophia is his daughter."

Arthur was surprised by that, but continued on. "Were there portraits of them in the records? Had anyone here ever met them before their sudden appearance last year?"

His father frowned at him, annoyed. "I take it you have a purpose behind these ramblings?"

"I have reason to believe that Aulfric and Sophia are imposters," Arthur declared, holding his back as straight as his sword.

His father sighed and reached for his wine. "Arthur," he began.

"Not only are they imposters, but they have broken the law by using magic."

His father stared, his cup halfway to his lips. "What?"

Arthur braced himself and held out the staff. "This is one of their staves. The crystal it bears is a magical weapon, and there is magical writing there on the staff."

His father put down the cup and took the staff, and peered at it closely. Arthur nearly held his breath, waiting for his father to angrily throw down the staff and shout for the guards to arrest Aulfric and Sophia and the lot of them. But to his shock, his father simply handed it back.

"I see what this is," his father said. "I suggest you return this to Sophia. I assume she gave it to you, though I doubt the poor girl knew what you intended. I'm going to assume that this absurd display is the result of your heightened state from the battle, rather than a transparent attempt to frame an innocent man and his daughter."

"What?" Arthur said, baffled. "I'm not making this up! They have magic, I swear it."

"Do you have any idea what would happen if the rightful King and Princess of Tír-Mòr were killed while under my protection? It would be just the excuse Caerleon needs to attack us. And all because of a broken heart."

"A broken heart?" Arthur echoed, dumbfounded.

"As if I'd believe that ridiculous excuse about being called away. Aulfric was obviously trying to be diplomatic. Last year, you tried to run away with her and she refused you. Don't bother lying to me, you were seen leaving the castle together. When she was gone the next day, I decided it was best to leave things alone. But I saw the way you looked at her today. You still have feelings for her." His father stepped forward and took him by the arms. "Son, I understand the pain of a broken heart. There's nothing I wouldn't do to spare you that suffering. But what's done is done, and I cannot let you destroy this kingdom's future for the sake of some petty revenge."

Arthur had not been slapped in a very long time, but it felt as if he was a child again and his father had just sent his ears ringing. How could his father not believe him? How could he ignore the evidence right under his nose? Usually all it took was the slightest whiff of magic and his father would rush to condemn the accused. And now when presented with a blatantly magical object and
the word of his own son, his father came up with this absurd story about Arthur seeking revenge for his wounded heart. Was his father truly that blind? Or did he care more about the wealth of the Tír-Mòr than he did their magic?

"I swear to you, I'm telling you the truth," Arthur said, willing his father to open his ears and listen to him.

But his father shook his head. "Return the staff to the girl and we will pretend this never happened. But if you ever make such a false accusation again, you will be sent to the dungeons until you come to your senses. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sire," Arthur said, forcing the words out through clenched teeth.

"You're dismissed. I expect you to be on your best behavior at the feast tonight. Especially towards Sophia and Aulfric. If you upset them in any way..."

"I understand." Arthur didn't dare try to say anything more for fear of what might slip out.

His father picked up his wine and drank, and that was generally the signal for Arthur to go away. Arthur went, stunned and silently furious.

Out in the hall, Leon and Merlin were still giving each other the gimlet eye. They broke their standoff and turned to Arthur expectantly.

"Sire?"

"Arthur?"

Arthur held up a hand. He needed to collect himself, to revise his plan of attack. If his father would not help, he would have to deal with the Sidhe himself, with the resources at hand. Fortunately, he was not entirely out of options.

"Sir Leon," he said, taking Leon aside. "I have a task for you. One of the utmost importance. Can I trust you with it?"

"Of course, sire," Leon said, earnestly.

"This is a delicate matter," Arthur continued. "I need you to only report directly to me. Not to the King. If that is a problem for you..."

"Not at all, sire," Leon said, looking to him with a loyal expression. "I shall report to you and you alone."

"Good man," Arthur said, slapping him on the arm. "I need you to make a discreet watch on our new guests. Take no action. Simply observe and make note of anything suspicious."

"Of course, sire. Shall I watch the guests or the suite?"

"Both. Can your friend Sir Alynor be equally circumspect?"

"Absolutely, sire," Leon said, confidently.

"Then split the task between you. Report back to me tonight after the feast. I may have new orders for the two of you then."

"As you command, sire," Leon nodded, and marched off to carry out his orders.
Arthur went over to Merlin, who was nearly bouncing with unasked questions. "Well? What did he say? Did you send Leon to arrest them?"

"Not exactly," Arthur grimaced. "He didn't believe me."

"What? Leon?"

"No, my father," Arthur said, irritated. "My father didn't believe me. He thought I'd made the whole thing up to get back at Sophia for breaking up with me."

Merlin gaped at him -- which wasn't a very good look for him, frankly -- and then started laughing. He tried to stop, but only ended up laughing even harder, until he had to lean against the wall to keep himself from falling down. The guards by the door looked on with mild astonishment.

"He--" Merlin gasped, between cackles. He pointed wobbly in Arthur's general direction. "You--"

Arthur's face burned with humiliation. "Yes, it's all extremely funny."

Merlin's laughter finally tapered off. "Sorry," he mumbled, wiping his eyes. "You have no idea how much I needed that."

"So glad I could help," Arthur muttered. He grabbed Merlin's arm and hauled him away from the snickering guards.

"Shouldn't we be going back to Gaius?" Merlin asked, when he realized which way they were going.

"I think Gaius has done enough damage for one day."

"Hey," Merlin said, tugging his arm free. "Gaius told you not to tell your father. It's not his fault if you didn't listen."

Arthur huffed out a breath. "I know. I just... I need some time to think. Figure out what to do."

That earned him a rather more sympathetic look from Merlin. "Arthur, you don't have to solve everything by yourself."

Arthur raised his eyebrows at him. "Pot, kettle."

Merlin shrugged. "Yeah, but you were right. I was being stupid. I don't want to do this on my own. I'm just... used to it, you know? A few days of teamwork with the other knights wasn't enough to break all my old habits."

"That's... surprisingly mature of you."

Merlin gave an easy smile. "I'm full of hidden depths."

"Speaking of depths," Arthur said, suddenly reminded. "That lake you mentioned. That wouldn't happen to be our lake, would it?"

"Ah," Merlin said, pink coloring his cheeks. "Um, it might be."

"So if you're right about all this, we've been swimming in bits of dead Sidhe this whole time?"

"Oh, that's disgusting," Merlin said, scrunching up his nose. He shuddered and wiped at himself, as if to brush away the invisible remnants. His eyes opened wide in horror. "We had sex in that water!"
he hissed.

Merlin was so aghast that Arthur couldn't help but laugh. At first that only made Merlin turn affronted, but then he relaxed and laughed with him.

"There wasn't much left after they blew up," Merlin shrugged. "And then the fish probably ate what was left."

Arthur imagined Sophia trapped inside the belly of a fish, and it made him feel oddly better. "That's all right, then."

"We are still never having sex in that lake ever again," Merlin quietly declared.

They agreed to take a break from the problem at hand. They would have the opportunity to observe the Sidhe up close during the feast, and in the meantime they needed to regain their bearings and consider ways to stop the Sidhe without one or both of them ending up in the dungeons. Arthur had a good long stare at the courtyard through his favorite window, and Merlin pondered which of Arthur's clothes would be best suited for the feast and any food fights that might ensue.

When Arthur finally tore himself away from his thoughts, Merlin was lying on his bed and staring at the staff, peering into the crystal and tracing the strange writing with his fingernail.

"Can you read it?" Arthur asked, curious.

"No," Merlin said, still staring into the crystal. "I'd never even heard of the Sidhe before Sophia. Gaius made the translation and told me about them. He said they were a vicious people and masters of enchantment. I did see their true form, though."

"True form?"

Merlin looked up. "When Aulfric went to the lake to petition the other Sidhe. At first they were just blurs of light. But when I really looked, I saw these tiny blue people, only inches tall. They had these beautiful, shimmery wings, like dragonflies."

The fact that Arthur had nearly eloped with some kind of magical human dragonfly was somehow not the weirdest part of his day so far. "Then how do they manage to look like us?"

"Enchantments." He looked down at the staff, then back up. "Arthur, I know you don't want to break the law, but the only way to stop them is with magic. My magic."

"My father will listen to reason once we have enough evidence. With luck, Leon and Alynor will catch them in the act of some kind of sorcery."

"Or they'll end up enchanted themselves," Merlin said, unimpressed with his plan. "And then what? Even if you arrest them, they could just enchant your father, or anyone else for that matter. They might kill whoever tries to stop them."

Arthur picked up the staff and hefted it. "What if they can't do magic without these? All we'd need to do is take their staves and they'd be defenseless."

Merlin gave him a dubious look. "Maybe, but that's a big if. And without my magic, the only weapon we have is your sword."
"Need I remind you that I'm the best swordsman in Albion?"

"And if they fly out of reach?" Merlin challenged. "Then what? Throw your sword at them?"

"If I have to," Arthur replied. "I have a very good arm."

Merlin gave an exasperated huff. "Look, I'm not asking you to let me run off and face them alone. We can do it together. Your sword and my magic."

"No."

Merlin pushed himself up to sit. "What do you mean, no? I can stop them. I have the power to stop them. Let me help." When Arthur didn't reply, Merlin got to his feet and continued. "If you're afraid I'm going to lose control of my magic again, I won't. But you're wearing your torc. You know that means you can stop my magic whenever you want."

"It's too dangerous."

"Too dangerous?" Merlin said, disbelieving. "I infiltrated the Deorham twice in Gedref and both times I came back to you. I defended you and this castle for over a year before you trained me to be a knight, and I'm good at it. I know what I'm doing, Arthur."

"I will not allow you to break the law," Arthur said, and knew he was running out of excuses.

"We broke the law a hundred times yesterday," Merlin argued, growing louder and more agitated. "We broke the law for weeks before that. It's probably against one of Uther's laws for a servant to fuck a Prince, and we did that!"

"Merlin!" Arthur said, sternly. "That's enough."

"No, it's not," Merlin said, and Arthur could see him making up his mind, the determination in him becoming focused and sharp. "The only purpose I have for my magic is protecting you and Camelot. I was born for this, Arthur. Let me do this. Otherwise what's the point?"

"The point?"

"Yes, the bloody point!" Merlin said, spreading his arms in frustration. He reached up and tugged at his torc. "Do you have any idea how much I hate this restraint? What it feels like? Imagine having both your arms cut off so you can't fight, and your tongue so you can't speak."

Arthur hesitated. "You said it was better when I wore mine."

Merlin quieted. "It is better. It is. But it still hurts. I'm still being cut off from everything I am, and I hate it. I'm doing it for you. For us. For everyone I need to protect, because I can't protect them if I'm dead. And if you don't let me kill the Sidhe, none of it's going to matter because nothing you or the knights or your father could ever do will be enough to stop them."

Arthur couldn't help the burn of humiliation he felt, that he still felt about having been secretly guarded by Merlin for so long. "I am a Prince and a knight and it is my sacred duty to defend this kingdom. I do not need you to do it for me as if I'm some sort of helpless child."

"I don't want to do it for you," Merlin spat back. "I want us to face the Sidhe together. I want us to be a team, the way it was before. Why is that so hard to understand?"

"Because you're a sorcerer!"
Merlin shut his jaw with a click. He stared at Arthur, looking deeply disappointed. "How can you say that? I thought--"

"What? You thought what, Merlin? That I would change my mind if I saw all the tricks you can do?"

Merlin's expression shifted from disappointment to anger. "I thought you would change your mind if you saw that you could trust me."

"I do trust you," Arthur said, quieting again. "But I will never trust the magic that is inside you. I can't trust it."

"I am my magic! It's not some separate thing that's infected me. Why do you think it hurts so much to have this restraint?"

"Gaius said it wouldn't hurt you," Arthur defended.

"Gaius was wrong," Merlin said, his voice wavering with pain. "Or he lied. He does that, you know. Lies to people. Was it a lie when you told me you understood? That you'd stopped being afraid?"

Arthur didn't know what to say. "I'm... It's not that simple."

"It is," Merlin insisted. "It's exactly that simple. I am my magic, Arthur. You either trust me or you don't. You can't break me into pieces and decide which parts of me you can love. You can't pick and choose."

"No," Arthur said, shaking his head in denial. "I can't accept that. Magic is evil, it destroys people's lives, it's a danger to the kingdom."

"Magic is good," Merlin said, stepping forward so that they were almost nose-to-nose. "It saves people. It's saved this kingdom more times than I can count. Your father is wrong. No, he's more than that."


"Your father is a liar. He's a monster. A murdering tyrant! And he wants to make you just like him!"

"Shut up," Arthur said, clenching his fists tightly in order to hold himself back from doing something he knew he'd regret.

"You're so happy to throw out the rules you think are wrong. You're already planning to change your father's laws. Why is magic different? Why is that the one thing that he has to be right about?"

"Because I've seen it with my own eyes and so have you. You're so proud about all you've done to defend Camelot. What do you think you were defending it from? Magic, Merlin. You were destroying magic because that's what it means to protect this kingdom."

Merlin took a step back. "I thought I was doing the right thing. But it doesn't have to be this way. And just because some people abuse magic, that doesn't make it evil. That doesn't mean that hundreds of innocent people deserve to die."

Arthur faltered. "My father has never executed anyone without proof," he said, defensively.

"Proof?" Merlin laughed, bitterly. "He arrests people for just thinking about magic. Do you know how many executions I've seen since I came here? The moment I set foot in your castle, a man had
his head chopped off. Gwen's father was murdered for letting a man use his forge. Everyone here is terrified, but they've lived with it for so long that no one sees it anymore. Do you see it? Do you even want to see?"

"That's enough," Arthur said, pained by Merlin's accusations. By the position Merlin was putting him in, in having to choose between his father and Merlin. "My father brought this kingdom up from its knees. He cares about it more than anything else. He would die for it, as would I."

"As I would die for it," Merlin challenged. "Does that make all of us right?"

"I don't want you to die for it," Arthur said, on firmer footing there. "I'm trying to save your life!"

"What kind of life would I have with this?" Merlin asked, grabbing at the torc again.

"That's only temporary. Until..."

"Until what?"

Arthur took a sharp breath. "Until I can find a way to remove your magic for good."

That was finally enough to silence Merlin, but it was a sour victory. Merlin stepped back from him again, looking utterly betrayed. "No."

Arthur took a step forward. "I have to do it. You'll understand once it's done. Once it's out of you."

"Arthur, listen to what you're saying. You can't... I won't understand once it's out of me because I'll be dead. There won't be anything left. I am magic. Will you get that through your unbelievably thick skull?"

"You're only saying that because that's what the magic wants you to believe! That's what it does. It gets into you and it takes you over."

Merlin's betrayed expression was rapidly giving way to despair. "The dragon was right. I should never have trusted you. You're just like Uther. The two of you would rather let Camelot be destroyed than admit you might actually be wrong."

"Merlin, listen to me," Arthur said, trying to salvage this. "All my life I have been threatened by sorcery. I know magic is evil because I have faced that evil time and time again."

"What about the unicorn?" Merlin challenged. "You said you felt its magic, that it felt good."

"And look what happened! The kingdom nearly starved to death."

"Because you killed it! Because you ignored me like you always ignore me. I have warned you over and over, and all you ever do is tell me to shut up because I'm an idiot. And every single time, I've had come in and save you at the last minute." Merlin gave a bitter laugh. "I thought things had changed. I thought you trusted me. Respected me. I thought I meant something to you. I thought you loved me."

"I do," Arthur said, emotion tightening his throat. "I do love you, Merlin. I love you so much it hurts. That's why I have to do this." And before Merlin could even open his mouth to reply, Arthur pulled off his gold torc.

Merlin flinched, physically pained by the broken connection. "No. Put it back on, Arthur. Right now."
Arthur ignored him and walked over to his chest. He unlocked it, put the torc inside, and then locked it again. When he turned back to Merlin, Merlin looked absolutely furious.

"Magic is poison, Merlin. It doesn't matter what you can do with it if using it destroys you. I can't stand by and let that happen. Not to you and not to Camelot."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm going to find a way to remove your magic," Arthur told him, glad to finally have the whole truth out now. "There has to be a way to do it without killing you. And then I'm going to use that method to remove all the magic from Camelot. There will be no more executions because there will be no more sorcerers. Ever."

Merlin's eyes went wide. It was obvious that he was about to bolt, but when he did, Arthur easily caught him. Merlin struggled fiercely, but without the sustaining connection to counteract the restraint, it only served to exhaust him.

But when Merlin realized he couldn't get away on his own, he changed tactics. "Gwen! Morgana! Help! Help!" he shouted, as loudly as he could.

Arthur covered Merlin's mouth with his hand, but Merlin was done playing nice. He bit Arthur hard on the hand, hard enough to draw blood. Arthur clenched his jaw against the pain and held on. He knew from the past two days how small of a reserve Merlin had without his magic. He just had to wait him out.

As soon as Merlin's struggles tapered off, Arthur dragged Merlin into the side room. He released Merlin's mouth long enough to grab one of the kerchiefs from the dresser and shoved it into Merlin's mouth just as he opened it to shout again. Merlin tried to spit out the kerchief, but Arthur pushed it back in and held it there. He could end this quickly by strangling Merlin unconscious, but he didn't want to do that again. He was trying to save Merlin, not hurt him, even though it was proving impossible to do one without the other.

He loosened his grip enough so that Merlin could struggle again, and waited for Merlin to wear himself out. Soon enough, Merlin didn't even have the strength to stand, and he was having trouble keeping his eyes open.

"I'm sorry," Arthur said, genuinely. "This is for your own good."

Merlin gave one last, muffled denial, and then he went limp. He'd passed out at last. Arthur lay him gently down on the bed and took a step back, and cursed under his breath at his bloodied hand. He grabbed another kerchief and quickly wrapped it, then went out to grab the curtain ties again.

Without his magic, Merlin wouldn't have much strength, but that didn't mean he was completely helpless. Arthur tied him to the bed, though not as thoroughly as he had before, and gagged him properly.

Thankfully, it seemed that Merlin's shouts were in vain. Neither Gwen nor Morgana came and knocked on the door; they had probably already gone downstairs. And ever since Morgana told him that she'd been keeping the guards from overhearing, Arthur had put a standing order for their hallway to be undisturbed except in emergencies.

Arthur sat down on the chair and watched Merlin sleep. He didn't know how long it would take for Merlin to wake up again, or if he even would until Arthur put back on the gold torc. This whole situation was completely out of hand. This was not remotely how he wanted it to go. But he had no other choice. He couldn't give in, couldn't let the magic win. He had to hope that when it was all
over, Merlin would understand.

Arthur left the side room and used the assortment of bandages and salves to wrap his hand properly. He checked on Merlin and saw that he was still unconscious, and so he went over to the clothes that Merlin had laid out for him and changed into them. After one last look, he closed up the side room and locked it. It was time to attend the feast.

But before he could do that, he had something else to take care of. He took the staff and wrapped it in a spare sheet. He would take it down to the vaults and put it with the other magical objects, as he should have done from the moment he’d seen it. In fact, all the magical objects needed to be down there. He opened his chest again and pulled out Palaemon's ring, Merlin's grimoire, the drawings and notes, and the gold torc.

Merlin was wrong. Gaius was wrong. Magic was not needed to fight magic. If anything, that only perpetuated the corruption. Arthur could never win if he fought on magic's terms. He needed to trust his own instincts, to trust steel and sinew as he always had. Otherwise he would end up just as dependent on magic as Merlin was.

He locked his chamber door and went down to the vaults. He found an empty spot and put everything there: the grimoire, the papers, the ring, and his gold torc. He drew the enchanted sword from his belt and put it and the staff into a tall vase.

A clean break. That was the best way, for himself and for Merlin.

He walked out of the vault and locked the gate behind him, and went up to attend the feast.
The Banquet

It was nearly time for the feast when Gwen returned to Morgana's chambers. She'd helped out in the kitchens to keep busy while Morgana rested, and was pleasantly surprised to see that she was already up and dressed.

"Feeling better?" Gwen asked.

"Almost like myself again," Morgana said, smiling. "Gaius said I'd get used to the new draught eventually. And not a moment too soon. I was starting to forget what it was like to not walk around in an utter fog."

Gwen didn't let her smile slip. "That's wonderful news. Is this what you're going to wear tonight? Let me see."

Morgana stood and slowly turned, showing off her outfit. It was a beautiful purple dress, the silk shimmering and delicate, with a sheer shawl to cut the chill. "I'm still deciding what to wear with it. Help me choose?"

Morgana's one vice was for fashion. It was partly from necessity, as the King's ward could hardly go around in rags, and partly for the power her beauty gave her. But mostly it was because she loved beautiful things, loved expensive fabrics and dyes and ornate jewelry. She had enough precious metal and gems in her jewelry boxes to buy a whole castle, though in fairness most of it had been gifted to her from the King or from courting noblemen. It would be an insult not to wear them, and worse to sell them.

"I've narrowed it down to these four," Morgana said, and held up each necklace in turn. There was gold with emeralds, silver with sapphires, a favored string of pearls, and a slim gold choker with a drop of amethyst.

"The last one," Gwen decided. It was understated yet striking, and it went well with the clean lines of the dress.

"Help me put it on?"

Gwen took the choker and carefully fastened the small clasp at the nape of Morgana's neck. Morgana considered her reflection from various angles, and then smiled. "It's perfect."

Gwen brushed and styled Morgana's hair and applied her makeup, then went to change into a nicer dress herself. Knowing what was to come, she found herself drawn to the last gift her father ever gave her: the dress with its starfish buttons. She had never worn it, partly out of grief and partly because she could not bear to risk staining it. But it felt right to wear it today, and it might well be the last chance she would ever have. If she failed, Camelot was doomed, and if she succeeded, she would likely share her father's fate. As she put on the dress, she felt that her father was still with her. It gave her strength.

They left for the feast. As they walked towards the stairs, Gwen spared a glance at Arthur's chambers. She could not bring her cutting tools with her, so she had to trust that they would have enough time to reach Morgana's chambers before Arthur became suspicious about Merlin's absence. It was risky, but it a risk they would have to take.

It was Morgana that Gwen felt bad about. She had promised never to leave her, but now she was about to break that promise in the worst way. Morgana had done so much for her, had gone to such
lengths to protect her and clear her name, and it would all be for nothing. Gwen could only hope that her execution would not harm Morgana's reputation. Her worst fear was that if she was not there to protect her, Morgana would end up facing the pyre herself. She would have to trust in Gaius to be there for Morgana, and that the King's denial and love were stronger than his rage.

They reached the grand hall. Gwen had helped with the preparations, but it was still a sight: bright red hangings on the walls, long tables laden with sumptuous foods, all the lords and ladies of the court in their finery. They had brought in extra tables for the knights, who wore armor that had been polished until it gleamed, reflecting the light of dozens of candles. As they walked in, heads turned. The men stared at Morgana with open lust, the women stared in envy, and Morgana welcomed it all with a satisfied smile. She was in her element.

The crowd parted and the King arrived. "Morgana, you look absolutely stunning," he said, looking at her with affection and pride.

"Thank you, my lord," Morgana said, with a short curtsey.

"I'm so glad to see you're feeling better. I was quite concerned you wouldn't be able to attend. Gaius has been taking good care of you?"

"As always."

"He tells me you've been sleeping through the night. No more of those awful nightmares."

Gwen stilled, immediately worried, but Morgana obviously had no desire to share the truth with the King. "Like a baby," she lied, smoothly. "Gaius is a wonder with his potions."

The King surveyed the room, then looked towards the open doors. "Arthur should be here by now. If that boy of his is causing trouble again..."

"Who, Merlin?" Morgana asked. "You know, I'm quite worried about him. He actually passed out earlier today."

"Did he now?" The King turned thoughtful at this news. "Excuse me for a moment." He waded back through the crowd and Gwen saw him speaking to his manservant. Louvel nodded and left. Perhaps the King was sending him to check on Arthur.

"Perhaps I should talk to Gaius about Merlin," Morgana said. "What do you think, Gwen?"

"Arthur said he'd already taken Merlin to Gaius himself," Gwen said, which was true enough.

"Hmm. Still. Arthur isn't exactly known for being gentle with his toys."

"Merlin's not a toy," Gwen said, defensively.

"You know what I mean," Morgana said. "Arthur's always been hard on his servants and his knights. And on everyone else for that matter. He expects everyone to live up to the same ridiculous standards that Uther holds him to."

"True," Gwen admitted. It was part of the reason she found the Prince so intimidating. Sometimes he could be quite sweet and gentle, especially with Merlin. But other times, she was as afraid of him as she was the King. And she never knew quite which version of him to expect: the man who doted on his lover, who was bound by honor and chivalry, or the man who did not hesitate to arrest even those closest to him.
Morgana passed the time chatting with various members of the nobility, and then it was time for the feast to begin. Gwen had just finished helping Morgana into her seat when Arthur arrived. His fine clothes were noticeably crooked, something Merlin always complained about when Arthur insisted on dressing himself, there was a bandage on his hand, and he looked to be in a foul mood.

There was no sign of Merlin.

"You're late," the King said, when Arthur sat down.

"I was detained," Arthur said, tersely.

"And your boy? I've been informed that he's ill again."

Arthur looked surprised, then looked at Morgana and made the connection. "Yes. I left him to rest."

"Have you considered my list?"

Arthur hesitated. "I may need a new copy. I'm afraid I misplaced it."

The King sighed. "Arthur, this is absurd. You cannot fulfill your duties if you don't have an able manservant."

"I know, Father, but if you'll just--"

"No," the King said, firmly. "You show up late and unpresentable and without a manservant. This cannot go on any longer." He nodded to Louvel, who signalled towards the servant's entrance. A young man walked over, and Gwen recognized him as Louvel's son, George.

"I'm assigning George as your temporary manservant," the King said. "No, don't argue with me. You had the opportunity to resolve this yourself, and you didn't. Until you choose a permanent replacement, George will attend you."

Arthur looked extremely tempted to argue, but instead he gave a muttered 'fine' and resigned himself to glowering in George's general direction.

Arthur and Morgana were in their usual positions on either side of the King. But there was an empty seat to Morgana's left and one to Arthur's right. Gwen had been told they would be filled by the guests of honor, but they had not yet arrived themselves. As if in answer to her thoughts, she saw three figures approaching the servants entrance, which Uther sometimes used for dramatic effect when presenting guests. The entrance was cast in shadows by the bright light of the hall, so Gwen could only make out that it was a woman and two men. The applause of the hall tapered off as the King lifted his goblet.

"Tonight we celebrate Camelot's proud victory. We honor the proud men who risked their lives in defense of the kingdom and saved the city of Gedref. We commend them for their bravery and their service. But as we celebrate our past success, we must also turn our thoughts to the future. Please welcome our guests, King Aulfric and Princess Sophia of Tír-Mòr."

Gwen and Morgana both gasped in surprise as Aulfric and Sophia entered, dressed in lush fabrics and delicate gold. They bowed to the King and were directed to their seats: Aulfric next to Arthur, and Sophia next to Morgana. The applause of the hall tapered off as the King lifted his goblet.

"To Camelot, to Tír-Mòr, and to the strength of both our kingdoms," he said, and drank.

Everyone sat down, and the feast began.
"Well. I never expected to see you here again," Morgana said, dripping with disdain.

"And here I am," Sophia said, sweetly. "I do hope we can be friends."

"I think you'd have more luck persuading Arthur to try to marry you again," Morgana sneered.

"Morgana," the King warned.

Morgana turned to him, eyes blazing. "How can you welcome this woman back, after what she did?"

"It's my understanding that Arthur is the guilty party in that particular debacle," Uther replied, quietly. "Usually you're the first to defend a woman's honor."

Morgana turned back to Sophia. "I wasn't aware you had any honor to defend."

"Morgana," the King warned again, this time with more force. "I expect you to behave respectfully towards our guests." He took a gulp of wine and muttered, "I thought I was done raising teenagers."

Arthur and Morgana both glared at the King, then made annoyed faces at each other before plastering on matching, grudging smiles. It really was like they were teenagers again. Gwen was only too glad to abandon the both of them to retrieve a platter of food. To her surprise, the other man was gone from the doorway, and instead two unfamiliar servants came out and took their places behind Aulfric and Sophia. It seemed they'd brought their own this time.

Gwen listened to the terse conversations between the five of them with one ear and waited for the right opportunity to slip away. There would be a lull between the main course and dessert, and that would be the best chance she had.

Finally the time came. Gwen excused herself from Morgana and went to the kitchen, then slipped out into the hall. She hurried as fast as she could, and reached Arthur's chambers in record time. She pressed her ear to the door, but didn't hear anything inside.

"Merlin?" she called, as loudly as she dared. "Merlin, are you in there? Can you hear me? Merlin?"

Gwen strained to listen. She thought perhaps she heard something, but it was too faint to make out. She hurried to Morgana's chambers and retrieved the basket of cutting tools. Before she left, she rummaged through Morgana's drawers, looking for what she knew had to still be there. "Yes!" she breathed, and hurried back to Arthur's door. It was a skeleton key, and it would open all the doors in the keep. Morgana had stolen it years ago during one of her rebellious phases, determined never to be locked out of anything. The locks had not been changed since, so Gwen was certain it would still work.

The lock turned and clicked open. Gwen removed the key and closed the door behind her, not wanting any passing guards to have their suspicions aroused. There was still no sign of Merlin, but the side door was locked. She called again, and heard a muffled response from behind the door.

"Merlin? It's Gwen. I'm opening the door." She held her breath as she put the skeleton key into the side door lock, and let it out when the lock opened. She removed the key and tucked it into her basket.

"Merlin!" Gwen cried in alarm, when she stepped inside. Merlin had been gagged and bound, and there was dried blood on his chin. She quickly began to free him, opening the knots in the curtain ties that Arthur had used to secure him to the bed.
"What are you doing here?" Merlin asked, once she removed the gag.

"Saving you," Gwen said, unable to stop her smile. She was really doing it. After all this time, she was helping Merlin, and they would save Camelot together. She felt giddy with daring.

"I don't understand," Merlin said, as she helped him sit up and brushed the dried blood from his chin.

"I brought these," Gwen said, showing him the basket of tools. "I know, Merlin. I know you have magic. I know you've been using it to save us."

Merlin had already looked pale, but at her words he went terribly white. For a moment she thought he might pass out again, as he had at lunch, but he rallied. "How?" he asked, shocked.

"You confessed to save my life," Gwen said, meeting his eyes. "I've wanted to thank you for that for a long time."

Merlin was overwhelmed. "It was my fault you were arrested. The poultice under your father's pillow, I put it there."

"You saved his life," Gwen said, gratefully. "You gave us time together that I cherish more than anything." She hugged him tightly, and when she pulled back, there were tears in Merlin's eyes.

"Sorry," he said, wiping at them with his sleeve.

"It's all right. But we don't have much time." Gwen pulled out the strongest tool, a heavy pair of cutters that her father used on thick rods of iron. She didn't have his strength, but she removed Merlin's kerchief and found that the torc was somewhat delicate looking. Her own strength ought to be enough.

"Lie down and hold the torc out as far as you can," Gwen said, readying the cutters. Merlin obeyed, and she positioned the cutters on the weakest part of the torc, the join between the end of the braiding and the fused buffer. She wondered how on earth Arthur got it onto Merlin in the first place, because it was far too small to pull over his head and a glance confirmed that there was indeed no natural break in the metal.

But there was no time to waste on such questions. Gwen pulled the cutters closed with all her might. She was not weak of arms. She had been a hard worker ever since she was old enough to help her parents, and even though she no longer worked at the forge, she had the callouses and muscles of a servant's life. And yet when she stopped and inspected the narrow band of metal, she found that the cutters had not made so much as a dent.

"I don't understand, it should have cut right through."

"Magic," Merlin said, regretfully. He sat up. "I told Arthur the truth about my magic, and he didn't... it went badly. I let him restrain my magic because I thought if I trusted him, if I showed him that magic isn't evil..." He shook his head. "I was wrong. But it doesn't matter now."

"But we need your magic," Gwen said. "Camelot is in danger."

Merlin's eyes widened. He opened his mouth to say something, then hesitated.

"Merlin, do you... do you know about Morgana?" Gwen dared.

"About her nightmares?" Merlin asked, cautiously.
"They're not just nightmares," Gwen said, braver now. "You know they're real."

Merlin looked disbelieving and relieved all at once. "I can't believe you know everything. Then Morgana knows?"

"Morgana doesn't want to know," Gwen said, realizing now how much she regretted that fact. "But she tells me about her nightmares, when she remembers them. She told me about the one she had last night."

"Is it about Sophia?"

"I don't think so," Gwen said. She knew that Morgana had had awful nightmares about Sophia before, about Arthur drowning. But she hadn't mentioned Sophia last night. "She said that Camelot was burning, even the stones. That everyone was dead. She saw some kind of winged monster, ridden by people with glowing red eyes--"

"That's them! The Sidhe!" Merlin exclaimed. "Sophia and Aulfric, they're not human. They're Sidhe. They're going to destroy Camelot, we have to stop them!"

"But we can't do that without your magic."

"I know, but... oh! The chest! Can you open Arthur's chest?"

"I don't have the key to it," Gwen said, biting her lip. "But maybe I can do something with these."

"If he left his torc inside, you can use it to open mine."

They hurried out to the main room and over to Arthur's chest. They worked together and managed to break the lock on the chest, but when they opened it, Merlin gave a cry of dismay.

"It's gone," he groaned, grasping at the rim of the trunk. "Everything's gone. He must have moved it somewhere."

"We don't have time to search the castle," Gwen said, knowing that she didn't have long before her absence would be noticed.

"There's still a way to stop them," Merlin said, rallying. "Even without my magic. All we need is proof, and I know just where to get it. But I'll need your help."

"You have it."

"Wait a moment. Let me just..." Merlin grabbed a small knife from his pack and tucked it into his boot.

They hurried from Arthur's chambers, and Merlin led them to the other side of the castle.

"This is their suite," Merlin whispered, as they crept closer. "You're certain the key will work?"

Gwen nodded. "Well, mostly sure. Unless the lock's been changed. But I don't think it has."

Merlin gave her a look, and Gwen shrugged. "Right," he said, gripping the key in his hand.


"Sir Leon?"
"No, he was at the feast. It's Sir Alynor."

Merlin cursed under his breath. "Arthur must have them watching the Sidhe and the suite."

"I'll take care of Sir Alynor. Will you be all right to go into the suite on your own?"

Merlin wasn't looking entirely healthy, and Gwen was worried that he might be ill the way he had been earlier. But Merlin was resolute, and they really only had this one chance.

"I'll be fine. I'm good at being sneaky." Merlin gave her a cheeky smile, one that made his dimples show. Gwen suddenly remembered why she'd fallen in love with him.

She straightened her dress and walked casually out into the hall. When Sir Alynor saw her, she smiled warmly at him. She knew him well from their childhood, when he was Leon's closest and sometimes only friend.

"Gwen," Alynor said, happy to see her. "I thought you'd be down at the feast."

"Oh, I just needed to slip away for a moment, take a break from all the noise. Morgana insisted I get some fresh air."

She kept Alynor busy with small talk, drawing his attention away from the door. She glanced over his shoulder and saw Merlin creep silently to the suite and disappear inside. She didn't know how long Merlin would need to find his evidence, so she dragged out the conversation by flirting with Alynor. As a knight, he was too far above her for marriage, but many knights enjoyed dalliances with the servants, and Alynor appeared to be no exception. Not that Gwen was that sort of girl.

But before she found herself in a compromising position, something worse happened. A man walked down the hall and pulled out a key as he approached the suite, and to Gwen's horror he walked inside. She realized that he must be the man she saw in the shadows with Sophia and Aulfric. He was definitely not a servant.

"Gwen?" Alynor asked, when she didn't respond to whatever he'd said.

Gwen looked to him, speechless, then back to the door. There was nothing she could do. If she told Alynor that Merlin was inside the suite, they would both end up arrested. Merlin was trapped in the suite, and she was already late in returning to Morgana.

"I'm sorry, I have to get back," Gwen said, excusing herself. She could only hope that Merlin was as good at hiding as he was at sneaking about. She would come back after the feast and try to find some excuse to get inside the suite. If she could make enough of a distraction, Merlin should be able to sneak out again. She hoped.

§

Gwen returned to the kitchens just as dessert was being brought out. She hurried back to Morgana.

"Where have you been?" Morgana whispered.

"Sorry, so sorry," Gwen said, as the King glared at her. After her arrest and her father's execution, she did her best to stay on his good side. So much for that.

George sniffed at her, unimpressed. He was as big a snob as his father, possibly even bigger. She knew that he had been eager to fill his father's shoes, and hoped one day to become Arthur's manservant. She also knew that he had an extremely low opinion of Merlin, who had taken what he
considered to be his rightful position. Though she doubted that George would be keen to take up all of Merlin's responsibilities, as he was not the type to resort to bedwarming.

"Is it difficult to find good servants in Camelot?" Sophia asked.

"Easier than finding them in Tír-Mòr," Morgana replied, with the same acid sweetness. In Gwen's absence, it seemed she had been rather liberal with the wine.

The King merely sighed and raised his goblet, and Louvel filled it again. At the other side of the table, Arthur and Aulfric had little to say to each other. Aulfric did try to strike up conversation, but Arthur mostly responded with suspicious glares and one-word replies. He had been glaring at Sophia for much of the feast as well, though whenever their eyes met, his eyes glazed over and he softened into longing. Then he would look away from her and shake himself, as if trying to rid himself of whatever feelings remained from their brief passion.

Gwen's impatience to rescue Merlin made the minutes drag past. Finally it was late enough for Morgana to excuse herself for the night. Arthur watched them with envy, but he was trapped there for a while longer, as it was less acceptable for him to leave at an early hour.

"Well, that was awful," Morgana said, once they were safely back in her chambers. "I can't believe Uther actually let that vile woman come back here. She's nothing but trouble."

"Yes, my lady," Gwen said, as she fiddled with the clasp of Morgana's necklace. It opened and she set the necklace aside, then started on the buttons of Morgana's dress.

"Where did you wander off to, by the way? I didn't mind, but it would have been nice to have some warning. Uther was on a rampage about bad servants tonight. Poor Merlin, he's not going to be happy about George."

"I don't think Arthur's happy about George, either," Gwen said. "I needed to help a friend. Another servant. I didn't realize it would take so long."

"You're always looking out for everyone," Morgana said, giving her a warm smile. "Help me with my dress?"

Gwen helped Morgana out of her dress and into her night clothes. "I should get your draught from Gaius."

Morgana picked up her book, and Gwen lit the candle by her bed for her. "He left just after dessert, so he should be in his chambers by now."

"I'll be back soon," Gwen said. She slipped one of Morgana's least favorite perfumes into her pocket on the way out.

As soon as she was far enough down the hall, she broke into a run. She needed to make it back to the suite before Sophia and Aulfric returned. If she was really lucky, the man would have left by now, but she thought that was probably hoping for too much.

Sir Alynor was still lurking in the hall, but she only nodded to him before going directly to the suite and knocking on the door. It opened, and there was the man.

"May I help you?" he asked.

"Are you a servant of King Aulfric and Princess Sophia?" Gwen asked. "My name is Gwen. I'm Lady Morgana's maidservant."
"I am no servant," the man said, sounding somewhat insulted. "My name is Sir Drudwas."

"My apologies, Sir Drudwas. I meant no offense, not at all. I merely seek to carry out my lady's orders."

"And those orders are?"

"She asked me to present a gift to Princess Sophia. An apology for her rude behavior at the feast tonight."

"I'll take it," Drudwas said, holding out his hand.

Gwen bit her lip, looking as conflicted as she could. "I'm afraid that my lady's orders were quite specific. She wanted there to be no possibility of her gift being misplaced or misconstrued. She asked me to give it to Princess Sophia herself. And if she was still down at the feast, and her maidservant was not available, I was ordered to place the gift directly in her chambers. I apologize for my insistence, but I must obey my lady's commands, or she will be quite upset with me." Gwen mustered her best, most pitiful look.

Drudwas looked annoyed, but to her relief he was like most men, and unable to bear the sight of a woman's tears. "Make it quick," he said. "And touch nothing."

"Of course," Gwen said, and stepped inside. She walked as slowly as she could, glancing around for any sign of where Merlin might be hiding. There were several rooms and the doors to all of them were open. Merlin could be hiding in a corner of one of them, or in a wardrobe. All she could do was make enough of a distraction of herself so he could slip away. Gwen began to talk loudly about Morgana, about how sorry she was, and how beautiful Sophia was, and how Morgana hoped that her gift would go some way in improving relations between their two kingdoms. It was all a lot of nonsense, but if Merlin was in any condition to listen, he would hear her.

Finally she could delay no longer. She placed the bottle of perfume on Sophia's table and thanked Sir Drudwas for his patience and understanding. He ushered her out and closed the door quite firmly behind her. Gwen nodded to Alynor again and headed back the way she'd come.

"Merlin?" she whispered, hoping he'd got away. But there was no answer.

§

"Are you all right, my dear?" Gaius asked, as he crushed the herbs for Morgana's draught. "You seem rather preoccupied."

"Just worried about someone," Gwen said, mustering as much of a smile as she could.

"Oh? Is it anyone I know?"

Could she tell Gaius the truth? She knew how much he cared about Merlin. And yet he was helping Arthur stop Merlin's magic, just as he made his draughts to stop Morgana's. She wanted to trust him, but she couldn't risk it. Not yet. Surely Merlin had got away before she arrived. He must be hiding somewhere, or even left the castle entirely. They hadn't planned for such a result, but if he had got away, he couldn't return to Arthur or Gaius. He would need somewhere to go. She couldn't leave the castle herself tonight, not with the curfew, but tomorrow she would look for him. Perhaps Merlin was taking refuge in her house in the lower town.

"No. Just a friend," she said.
Gaius finished the potion and Gwen thanked him for it, and she headed back to Morgana. As she climbed the steps, she heard voices above her. She slowed her pace and listened.

"Go away." It was Arthur, and he sounded extremely annoyed.

"I'm afraid I can't, sire," replied George. "I'm under explicit orders from the King. There are duties I must perform--"

"If you are to be my manservant, you will answer to me, not to my father," Arthur said, testily. "And I'm telling you that there is nothing you need to do in my chambers tonight."

"I must obey the King's command," George insisted, stiffly. "You are only the Prince, sire. We are both bound to obey. If it's a matter of my ability, I assure you that I was trained to the strictest standards."

"I don't need another manservant. I already have one. Now go away."

There was the sound of a key turning, a brief altercation, presumably as George tried to force his way into the room, and then the slamming of a door. Gwen heard footsteps heading her way, and she quickly composed herself and continued her climb. She passed an extremely disgruntled George, who went down the stairs without even acknowledging her.

Gwen had greater concerns, and she hurried to Morgana's room. She knew what Arthur was about to find. She and Merlin had closed the chest and locked the doors, removed any incriminating evidence, but Merlin's absence would be enough to--

"Merlin!"

Gwen heard Arthur's furious shout just as she closed the door behind her. She leaned against it as if to keep him out, then scrambled for her key to lock the door, which would do a far better job of it.

"Gwen?" Morgana called. "Was that Arthur?"

"I think so," Gwen said, pressing her hand to her chest to calm her frantic heart. "I have your draught. Just... I need a moment." She hurried to the side room where she'd left her basket. She hadn't had time to hide it properly, so she did it now. She didn't know if he would give the room more than a cursory search, but Arthur had his own skeleton key. He had whole rings full of keys. That was why nowhere in the castle was truly safe.

She hoped that wherever he was, Merlin was safe. She prayed for that.

There was a hard knock on the door. "Morgana!" Arthur called, angrily.

"What on earth?" Morgana said, and slipped out of bed. "Arthur, go away. You're drunk."

"I know he's in there," Arthur shouted back. There was the tinkling sound of keys, and then a crash and a curse as they dropped onto the stone floor. That was not a good sign. Arthur never got drunk. Gwen backed away from the door and stood behind Morgana.

The lock turned and the door swung open. Arthur stomped inside, barging his way past the both of them. "Merlin! I know you're in here!" he called, as he checked behind the curtains and the changing screen.

"How dare you force your way into my private chambers!" Morgana said, outraged.
"I know you're hiding him," Arthur replied. "Don't think I'll fall for the same trick a second time."

"Why would I be hiding Merlin?" Morgana asked. "You said he was resting in your chambers."

"He's gone," Arthur said, as he walked into the side room. To Gwen's relief, he quickly walked out again.

"The poor boy's unwell. Maybe he went to see Gaius. Gwen was just down there. Was Merlin there, Gwen?"

"No, my lady," Gwen said, and swallowed nervously. "I didn't see him."

Morgana turned back to Arthur. "What is all this about? What's wrong with Merlin? I'm quite worried about him, you know. What if he's come down with a fever and is wandering about the castle in a daze? You really ought to take better care of him." She gave a short laugh, the kind she made when she was anxious about something. "I swear, the poor boy's giving me nightmares. Last night, I dreamed that something awful had happened to him. He was screaming your name. Obviously that was because you've been so terribly neglectful of his health of late--"

"I don't have time to hear about your bad dreams, Morgana," Arthur interrupted. He checked under her bed, then gave a resigned huff. "I'm going to check with Gaius. But if I find out that either one of you had anything to do with this..." He glared at Gwen and Morgana in turn, and left his warning unfinished. Somehow that was worse than if he'd actually threatened to arrest them.

Once Arthur was gone, Gwen quickly locked the door again. Even if Arthur could barge in anytime he wanted, it made her feel a little better.

"What was all that about?" Morgana asked, baffled. "Gwen, was it Merlin you went to help? Is that why you were gone so long?"

Gwen looked at Morgana, and couldn't bring herself to lie, to pretend that everything was all right. She nodded. "I'd heard them fighting earlier and I was worried when he wasn't there. Arthur, he... he'd locked Merlin in the side room. It was awful. I had to help him."

"Arthur can be such a beast," Morgana said, angrily. "Where is he now? Is he with Gaius?"

"I don't know," Gwen said, covering her mouth to keep her chin from trembling. "I didn't want to leave him, but I had to get back."

Morgana saw her distress and softened, and drew her into a hug. "Poor Merlin. I would have helped, you know."

"I didn't want you to get in trouble," Gwen whispered. She drew back. "But Merlin's ill. And now he could be anywhere."

"We'll look for him together," Morgana said, resolute. "If he's ill, he can't have gone far. We just have to find him before Arthur does." She grabbed a robe and pulled it on over her nightclothes.

Before they left, Gwen put a hand on Morgana's arm. "Morgana. Thank you. I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I just..."

Morgana put her hand over Gwen's. "It's all right. Now come on, Arthur has a head start on us. But there's two of us and one of him, so we can cover twice the ground. He won't stand a chance."

Gwen couldn't help but smile, and Morgana smiled back. They could do this. They could find Merlin
and rescue him. Together, they might even find a way to break the torc and free Merlin's magic. There was still hope. Camelot hadn't fallen yet.
Arthur was beginning to deeply regret having drunk so much wine. It had seemed a good idea at the time. There was no reason to restrain himself. His life was a shambles. Merlin hated him and would probably never forgive him. It didn't matter that Arthur was trying to save him, to save his life and his very soul. Arthur knew that it was his own fault, that he had made the mistake of believing that any sorcerer could be reasoned with, could be made to realize that they were enchanted themselves by the very power they thought they wielded, that it was the magic that wielded them. It fooled them into believing that they needed it, that without it they were incomplete and weak. That was what magic did. That was why it was so insidious.

His mistake had been in allowing the battle to be fought on the enemy's terms. Such an approach always meant certain failure. His love for Merlin had clouded his thoughts, made him vulnerable. That was what love did. His father had been right about that, too. Not for Sophia, never for Sophia, no matter how his heart strangely ached every time their eyes locked. The ache always dissipated when he forced himself to break away, when his true and painful heartbeat flared hot, burning away the enchantment like it was a paltry mist. No enchantment, no deep draught of wine could soothe him, not for more than a brief moment before it all came crashing back again.

He didn't know what to do. He had absolutely no idea what to do. He had nothing: no plans, no options, nothing to fall back on. No one to turn to, no one who would accept what he was trying to achieve. Those who feared magic would follow his father's laws to destroy it, and in doing so, destroy Merlin. Those who welcomed it would resist any attempt to destroy his magic. In trying to save a sorcerer, Arthur had made himself the enemy of both sides.

And Merlin himself was only the start of his troubles. Arthur's political victory, the undermining of the First Code, was undermined itself. Without Merlin by his side, Arthur knew that the knights that had pledged their support would find themselves wavering, doubting the wisdom of that pledge. Worse, they would begin to doubt Arthur himself, his abilities as a leader of men, as a judge of character. If they found out the truth, that Merlin was a sorcerer, they would all turn against him. They would have no loyalty to a King who might himself be enchanted and corrupted, who had fallen in love with a sorcerer. His reign would be over before it had even begun.

And so he drank, each cup a toast to the wreckage of his future. Not that his present was anything to be sober for, either. His father had saddled him with Louvel's son, who was even stuffier than Louvel himself. Arthur hadn't even known that the man had a son. It was hard to believe that Louvel had ever lowered himself to something as base and messy as sex. Perhaps George had been born like one of the Roman gods, asexually and out of Louvel's bathwater.

Drunken, he had returned to his chambers, with George yipping at his heels like a small and uptight dog. He could not let George in, not with Merlin imprisoned in the side room. He'd had to physically force the man out and slam the door in his face. But he hadn't had time to celebrate that small victory, because as soon as he opened the door to check on Merlin, he discovered that the worst had happened: Merlin had escaped.

How was it even possible? True, Arthur had not been as thorough about the ropes as before. But with the restraint on, Merlin should have been too weak to break free of them. And even if he'd managed that much, he would not have his magic to unlock the door. No, someone must have helped him, and the list of possible suspects was very short indeed. Fortunately, two of the three were just down the hall.

His first instinct was that Guinevere had freed Merlin and brought him to Morgana's chambers. No
wonder she had been gone for so long during the feast. Morgana had harbored the Druid boy, she
would certainly harbor Merlin. Arthur had wasted no time in barging into her chambers and checking
every nook and cranny. But if she was harboring Merlin, he was not hidden in her chambers. He had
left them with a warning and went to confront the last of the three: Gaius.

And that was where Arthur was now, making his way through the castle and up the stairs to Gaius's
chambers, and regretting the way the wine made it hard to focus, hard to think about what to do next.
He hated the way it sapped away his self-control, made everything feel dull and sharp all at once.
He'd kept drinking anyway, because he didn't want to think, didn't want to focus. He'd wanted to be
numb. He'd wanted to forget, to make it all go away, just for a while. He suspected that that was why
his father drank. To forget the mistakes he'd made, the people he'd lost. To let the stain of wine
obscure the stain of blood.

That was the other reason he hated being drunk. It made him maudlin.

Maybe it wasn't Guinevere. Gaius had left the feast early. He would have had the opportunity to free
Merlin as well. When Arthur reached Gaius' door, he didn't knock, but instead fumbled with his
keys. He dropped them again, the heavy ring slipping through his fumbling fingers. But when he
straightened up, the door was open.

"Sire? Is something wrong?" Gaius asked.

Arthur barged in, and Gaius stepped back just in time to avoid being shoved out of the way. "Is he in
here? Are you hiding him? Merlin!"

"I haven't seen Merlin since your visit," Gaius said, as he closed the chamber door. "He wasn't at the
feast. Sire, may I ask if something is wrong?"

"Don't you 'sire' me," Arthur grumbled, as he found that the back room lacked Merlin as well. "You
know exactly what's wrong."

"I'm afraid I don't," Gaius said, evenly. "From your argument earlier, it appeared that the torcs were
working exactly as you specified. Merlin's magic was restrained without any harm to Merlin
himself."

"Without any harm?" Arthur said, too astonished to hold his tongue -- though perhaps he could lay
most of the blame on the wine. "What do you call him passing out all over the castle?"

Gaius' brow furrowed. "It's happened repeatedly? How long does he remain unconscious?"

Arthur opened his mouth to reply, then shut it. "You're the one who gave me the torcs. Are you
telling me you don't know how they work?"

Gaius stiffened. "I am quite aware of how they work. However, Merlin tends to make himself an
exception to a great many rules."

Arthur narrowed his eyes. "How are they meant to work, then?"

Gaius stepped closer and lowered his voice, cautious as ever. "As I told you, they prevent a sorcerer
from using his magic. For those with a great deal of magic, such a block is quite unpleasant, and for
that reason the restraint was only ever meant for temporary use, measured in minutes or hours."

"When you say unpleasant..."

Gaius raised his eyebrow. "It should not cause him to fall unconscious. But as I said, Merlin is an
exception."

"What about exhaustion? He barely has any energy with the restraint on. He can only manage an hour, two at most before he's out again. Unless I'm wearing mine..."

"And I see you are not."

Arthur ran his hand back through his hair. "Things escalated. I had to stop him. For his own good, before he did something stupid."

Gaius' expression was shifting from wary to alarmed. "And that something would be more foolish than leaving Merlin on his own in such a condition?"

"Don't blame me. This is all your fault," Arthur accused. "And now he's gone!"

"Gone?"

"Wandering about the castle, for all I know," Arthur said, waving his hands in frustration. "There's no way he escaped on his own. Someone helped him, you or Guinevere or, or--"

"Escaped?" Gaius asked, his eyebrow raising even higher.

"Don't look at me that way," Arthur glared. "He was about to break the law. I had to do something."

"You should have have brought him here," Gaius said, sternly. "Gwen told me last night that Merlin had been ill, but I had no idea of the extent of it. You say he's better when you wear your torc?"

Arthur nodded.

"Then quickly, put it back on," Gaius urged.

"I can't," Arthur said, feeling mildly ashamed. "After I took it off, I... I brought it down to the vaults."?

"Foolish boy," Gaius said, and somehow it was enough to make Arthur feel like a small child, caught with broken glass all around him on the floor because he'd been playing with Gaius' colorful bottles again. "If you weren't so drunk you'd know exactly where he's gone."

It only took a moment. "The Sidhe," Arthur sighed. Of course Merlin would have gone there, no matter who had broken him out. Merlin was too single-minded to do anything as sensible as running away.

"There's no time to waste. Give me the key to the vault and I'll retrieve your torc. If we're lucky, you'll be able to extract him from whatever trouble he's got himself into. At least you still have your sword..." Gaius trailed off as he looked down at Arthur's side, and when he looked up again, he looked genuinely angry. Arthur couldn't remember Gaius ever looking truly angry before. "I expect that is also down in the vaults."

"I don't need an enchanted sword to protect this kingdom," Arthur hissed. His normal sword was quite sufficient. Simple, reliable steel. Arthur didn't need to be able to cut through stone, just flesh and bone.

"At this rate, soon you will no longer have a kingdom to protect," Gaius said, sharply. "Go. And hope it's not too late for all of us."

Arthur reluctantly handed over the key to the vaults, then stomped out of the room. Gaius was on his
heels for only a few moments before their paths diverged in opposite directions. Arthur quickened his pace and then broke into a run.

When he reached the hallway to the Sidhe's guest chambers, he was relieved to find Leon and Alynor.

"Sire," Leon said, alarmed by Arthur's near-frantic state. "Is something wrong?"

"Yes," Arthur began, then faltered. Leon could not know the truth about Merlin, or all of this would be for naught. "No. That is, possibly. I need your report, immediately."

"Of course, sire," Leon said, glanced at Alynor in confusion. "Sir Alynor just finished giving me his. As you saw, neither Aulfric nor Sophia acted suspiciously during the feast."

"What about Sir Drudwas?" Arthur asked, turning to Alynor. "He wasn't at the feast. Did he remain here?"

"No, sire," Alynor said. "Sir Drudwas left with the others. I assumed he'd be at the feast all evening as well, but he returned early. Just after Gwen stopped by."

Arthur stilled. "Guinevere was here?"

"Twice, sire," Alynor explained. "Once towards the end of the feast, and then again quite recently."

"Was she alone?" Arthur pressed. "Was anyone with her? Was Merlin with her?"

"No, sire."

Arthur was certain now. Guinevere had freed Merlin, and she had likely helped him distract Alynor so Merlin could gain access to the Sidhe's chambers. "The first time she was here. You say Sir Drudwas arrived soon after?"

"Gwen was actually still here when he arrived," Alynor said, remembering. "But she left almost immediately after. She seemed in quite a hurry."

Arthur wanted to hit his forehead against the wall. "Come with me," he said instead, and took on the most officious posture and expression as he could. He knocked loudly on the door to the Sidhe's suite.

There was a long pause, and Arthur knocked a second time before the door opened, revealing Sophia. Arthur steeled himself, but when he met her eyes, the strange heartache mysteriously failed to grip him.

"Arthur," Sophia said, her voice as soft and sweet as ever. "What a pleasant surprise."

Even though he knew she was a Sidhe, and therefore some sort of inhuman, magical being, Arthur couldn't help but see her as the noble lady that she appeared to be. "You must excuse my manners," he said, softening. "But I must insist that you allow us in to search your chambers. An intruder was seen entering it earlier tonight, and it's likely that he's hiding inside."

"An intruder?" Sophia said, breathily alarmed. "How awful! Of course, please enter."

"Search everywhere," Arthur ordered, as he and the knights walked in. Arthur searched along with them. The two servants from the feast were there, but Aulfric and Sir Drudwas were not. Which was odd, since Leon and Alynor surely would have mentioned their leaving.
"Nothing, sire," Leon reported, and Alynor said the same.

"Go wait in the hall," Arthur told them. He wanted to speak to Sophia privately.

"It seems you will have to search for your intruder elsewhere," Sophia said.

"Sophia, where are your father and Sir Drudwas?" Arthur was certain they must have caught Merlin and taken him somewhere.

"They had to go home," Sophia said, still smiling. Her grip was firm on her staff. Arthur eyed it warily, suddenly feeling extremely unprotected despite his trusted, un-magical sword.

"Home? You mean they're headed back to Caerleon?"

Sophia gave a tinkling laugh. "I believe we're past the need for such pretense. Though I have enjoyed it. I see why she chose you, Arthur Pendragon. Your soul would buy many things."

There was a quiet menace in her tone, one that Arthur had never heard in Sophia before. The fog of alcohol was at last clearing from his head, and he suddenly knew that Merlin was right. That Sophia and Aulfric were dead, and whoever these people were, their appearance was a lie, an enchantment.

"Where is he?" Arthur said, matching her menace with his own. "Where's Merlin?"

"Such a sweet name, Merlin," Sophia said. "We were rather curious, you know, when someone used magic to save your life. It takes a great deal of magic to kill a Sidhe. Why should Camelot suddenly hold such strength, when it had made itself so conveniently weak?" She shifted her grip on her staff, a subtle warning to match the grip that Arthur held on his sword hilt. "Some of us wondered if Uther had at last come to his senses, but of course it was you. You and your pet sorcerer. It was so kind of you to geld him for us. It made things so much easier."

The knot of dread that had formed in Arthur's gut swelled into a monstrous tangle. "Where. Is. Merlin?" he demanded, low and quiet and deadly.

Sophia -- or whoever she was -- turned and walked to a table, and opened a small, ornamental box. She took something from it and brought it to him. "As a warrior, his soul belongs to Avalon. But I'm certain he would have wanted you to have this. He called so desperately for you, before the end."

It took Arthur a moment to understand what he was looking at, and when he did, he staggered back in horror. It was Merlin's favor, the red cloth torn and bloodied.

"No," he gasped, suddenly numb with shock. The cloth seemed so small and fragile in his hand. He gripped it tightly. "No!"

She smiled sweetly at him.

The blood was freshly dry, still slightly tacky to the touch. Merlin was gone, was dead, and Arthur had only missed him by a matter of minutes. "His body. Where...?"

"It's quite gone," she said. "Now if you please, it's improper for you to intrude upon a lady's chambers." She tilted her staff ever so slightly towards him, and her eyes flashed red.

The next thing Arthur knew, he was standing out in the hall, and the door to the suite was shut. He could not remember leaving it, and the thought of returning made something in him rebel.

"Sire?" Leon said. He and Alynor were standing in front of Arthur and looking at him with concern.
"Sire, are you all right?"

"I'm..." Arthur began, and stopped. He couldn't... He couldn't. "You're dismissed," he said, his voice suddenly tight, so tight he could barely speak.

Merlin was...

Merlin...

Arthur walked away in a daze, gripping the scrap of cloth in his fist. His heart, his very being rebelled against its meaning. It should be whole and knotted around Merlin's arm, where it belonged. Where it meant that Merlin was his, his knight, and sworn to return to his King whole and hale. Once Arthur had tied it around his arm, Merlin never took it off, not for anything.

Somehow Arthur ended up back at Gaius' door. He stood in front of it, staring blankly at the wood, but didn't open it. If he didn't open it, Merlin might still be inside. He would be pouting and angry and shout at Arthur for being a clotpole, or some other absurd word he'd made up for the express purpose of insulting Arthur with it. He would still have his magic. But he would be alive.

Voices startled him. Instinctively, he stepped away and into the shadows. The voices grew louder and clearer as they floated up the stairs. It was Morgana and Guinevere.

"...that if he was here, I would have seen him," Guinevere was saying. She sounded reluctant, wary.

"Gaius knows Merlin better than anyone," Morgana said, with her usual certainty. "I don't know why you didn't ask him for help in the first place."

Guinevere had no answer to that. The part of Arthur's mind that was still functioning, that was always working over problems and alert for danger, supplied it for her: she didn't turn to Gaius because she'd somehow discovered that he was helping to stop Merlin's magic. That part of Arthur's mind also realized that Morgana didn't know the truth. She couldn't know. She mustn't.

"Arthur!" Morgana said, startled by Arthur's sudden presence as he stepped out of the shadows. She pressed her hand to her chest. "You shouldn't lurk in the shadows like that. You'll frighten some poor chambermaid to death."

"You shouldn't be here," Arthur said, his voice a rasp of grief.

"I have every right to be wherever I want to be," Morgana insisted. "Besides, I need to talk to Gaius about my sleeping draughts."

"Gaius isn't here."

"Gwen and I can wait until he returns. Isn't that right, Gwen?"

Guinevere kept her distance from Arthur, standing so that Morgana was just barely between the two of them. "Yes, my lady," she said, looking nervously at the door and the stairs.

Morgana gave a toss of her hair and opened the door. She strode inside, and Guinevere was fast at her heels. Arthur followed them, his motions automatic.

Morgana continued her nattering. "I felt so much better today, I can't begin to tell you. I must finally be adjusting to the new draughts. But I woke up with such an awful dream last night, so obviously there's a problem with the new draught like there was with the old one. That's the one you were so rude about, by the way. Poor Merlin. It was so awful. I don't think I'll ever be able to forget the way
he screamed your name. The last thing I want to is to have to go through-- Arthur! You're hurting me!"

Arthur looked down and saw that he had grabbed Morgana's wrist, and that he was holding it with bruising force. She tried to pull away but his hand wouldn't let go.

"What's got into you tonight?" Morgana scowled. "You've gone completely mad. I'll have to tell George to keep you away from the wine."

"Your nightmare," Arthur's mouth said, as the rest of him watched on with dawning horror. "Tell me."

"What, now?" Morgana gave a nervous laugh. "You've never wanted to hear them before. All you ever do is mock me and tell me to go back to bed."

"Sophia. You knew about Sophia." She'd warned him, hadn't she? She'd had a dream, a nightmare that Sophia wasn't what she seemed. All the things he had done his best to ignore were now making themselves painfully evident. "And the Questing Beast. You knew what it would do to me." Another nightmare screamed to him in a blind panic. And she had dreamed about Merlin.

"Arthur, let go," Morgana said, and he could see the sudden fear in her eyes.

"Tell me," Arthur ordered.

"I... It was nothing," Morgana said, her cockiness gone. "Just a bad dream. That's what Gwen said it was, didn't you, Gwen?"

"A bad dream, yes," Guinevere said. But Arthur could see the fear in her, could see her tensing like a cornered beast.

With his free hand, Arthur drew out his sword. Guinevere and Morgana stiffened, with identical gasps of shock.

"You have magic," Arthur said, the words coming involuntarily to his tongue. He spat them out, rejecting them, even as he knew they could not be denied.

Morgana paled. She squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them painfully wide. "No, Arthur, no--!"

"Sire!" Guinevere cried, reaching out.

"No!" A sudden yell shocked them, and they turned to see Gaius rushing towards them. Despite the weakness of his age and the bundle in his arms, he managed to fling himself between Arthur and Morgana and break Arthur's hold. "That is enough! That is quite enough! Gwen, close the door. Now."

Guinevere gaped at him, then hurried to obey.

"Was he there?" Gaius asked, staring Arthur directly in the eye. "Merlin. Was he there?"

Arthur shook his head. "Sophia... Sophia said he was..." He looked at his empty hand, and then down at the floor, to where the red cloth had fallen. Where he'd dropped it when he grabbed Morgana.

Gaius picked it up and held it out. "What is this?"

"Merlin's," Arthur said, emotion surging up, breaking through the numbness that protected him.
"He's..." He couldn't finish the sentence, couldn't say it aloud. His eyes stung, and when he blinked, tears weighed on his lashes.

"No," Guinevere gasped, covering her hands with her mouth. "It's too late."

"Gwen?" Morgana said, confused. "It was just a dream. You said it was just a dream."

"You knew," Arthur accused, turning on Guinevere, on Morgana. "You both knew. You knew he was going to die!"

Guinevere sobbed and stepped backwards until she was pressed against a worktable.

"It was just a dream," Morgana whispered. "Gaius, tell them it was just a dream."

Gaius turned to her, his face lined with sorrow. "Morgana, my child..."

He reached for her, but she flinched away, stepped back from all of them. She stared at Gaius and Guinevere, eyes filled with betrayal and denial and panic. "You told me they were just dreams!"

To Arthur's horror, her eyes flashed with golden light, and the candles suddenly flared high. It was just like Sophia, just like Merlin all over again.

Guinevere acted first. She grabbed the nearest bucket and wrenched the candles from their holders, plunging them into the water, where they extinguished with a hiss. Arthur stared at her, and then flinched as Gaius took hold of the sword, grabbing it by the cross-guard. They stared at each other until Arthur's hand opened, allowing Gaius to take the sword. What little was left of Arthur beneath the shock and horror was relieved to let it go.

"Morgana," Gaius said, turning to her with a gentle tone. "It's all right. I won't let him hurt you."

"You lied to me," Morgana said, her voice small and hurt, like a child.

"I'm sorry," Gaius said. "But it was to protect you."

The room went dim, and then dark as Guinevere dropped the last flaring candle into the bucket. There was silence, broken only by Guinevere's rushed breathing and the thump and slosh of the bucket as it hit the ground.

"That's enough," Guinevere said, her voice ragged and pained. "All of you. It doesn't matter anymore. If Merlin's gone, nothing matters." She stood in profile against the moonlight, her eyes closed, her cheeks wet with tears.

"Merlin?" Morgana asked, her voice trembling. "Why...?"

"Because he had magic," Guinevere said. "He used it to save us. To save all of us, over and over again." She opened her eyes, and when they turned to Arthur, even in the dark they blazed with accusation. "You can arrest me now. Arrest all of us. Burn us. It won't matter. You'll burn too, when they come. Everyone will. Even the stones." Her voice broke, and she turned away, sat on a bench and began to softly cry.

There was the quiet strike of a flint, and then a small light flared. Gaius had lit a candle, but its flame remained calm.

"Merlin has magic?" Morgana said, and to everyone's surprise she began to smile, and then laughed. "Merlin?" She laughed again, a bark tapering into giggles, and then she sat down heavily on a
bench, her back to Guinevere. But her giggles quickly faded, as did her smile. "He's dead? He's really... he's really dead?"

"You should know," Arthur said, bitterly. "You saw it in your dreams. You knew what would happen. You should have told me!"

"I did tell you," Morgana snarled. "And you did what you always do. You ignore whatever you don't want to hear."

"It was too late!" Arthur growled back. "He would be safe in my chambers right now if Guinevere hadn't broken him out!"

"Safe? From what Gwen said, you were treating him like a prisoner!"

"That's what he was!"

There was a long silence.

"And now what?" Morgana asked. "Are you going to arrest us? Will you light the pyres yourself?"

An awful realization came over her, and she turned to Gaius. "The monsters. Does this mean the monsters I saw are real?"

"I'm afraid so," Gaius said, solemnly. He walked slowly over to a cupboard and pulled out fresh candles. "Without Merlin, it may indeed be too late for all of us."

"There has to be something we can do!"

"I'll stop them," Arthur said, forcing resolve into his voice. "Camelot's army will stop them."

"Then you will make widows of their wives," Morgana said, with an eerie tone, as if something else was speaking with her, through her. Her magic, sharing her voice as Merlin's magic had shared his. "Orphans of their children. Until they burn as well. I saw it, Arthur. I saw them die. I saw you die."

She shuddered and looked as if she might be sick. "What chance will they stand against an army of flying monsters? Against magic?"

Arthur saw the enchanted sword, resting on the table with Merlin's grimoire, the Sidhe staff, the gold torc. Gaius had brought it all back from the vaults. He stood and took the sword. "I can stop them with this," he said, holding it up in defiance.

"One man against an army?" Morgana replied, dubious. "One sword won't be enough."

"You have magic," Arthur said, and knew that he was far gone if he was actually asking Morgana to use her magic to save them.

"I have nightmares. What good can they do us now?"

"You lit the candles!"

"I don't know how!" Morgana said, a quiver of fear in her voice. "I don't. It just happened."

Arthur couldn't help but think of Merlin, of him saying that he'd been born with his magic. "How long?"

"I don't know," Morgana said, looking away. "Maybe... five years. I don't..."
Arthur sat down. Morgana had had magic for five years. Was it too late for her as well? Merlin, Morgana, Guinevere, Gaius. Magic ran through the kingdom like a plague, and it seemed no one was safe from it. Would he wake one day and be able to light candles with his thoughts?

"Guinevere? Gaius? What about you?"

"I no longer practice magic, sire," Gaius said. "And when I did, I had very little. As for Gwen, she has none at all. Why would you think otherwise?"

"Her father," Arthur protested. "She saved his life."

"Merlin saved him," Guinevere said, quietly. "I was innocent, just as my father was."

"You don't have magic?" Arthur said, surprised. "But... then how did you recognize Merlin's torc?"

Guinevere drew herself up. "Because I worship the Old Religion," she said, boldly but with a tremble she could not suppress. "I know that will earn me the same punishment as any sorcerer. If you are determined to arrest us, then I will not let Morgana die alone." She walked around the table and stood between Morgana and Arthur, her hands clenched into fists.

"Gwen," Morgana said, softly.

"I'm sorry, my lady," Guinevere said. "I'm sorry I lied to you."

"The King cannot find out," Gaius insisted.

"Arthur won't say anything," Morgana said, her strength coming back to her. "Will you, Arthur? You're as guilty as the rest of us. And even if you're fool enough to try, who do you think Uther will believe? It will be your word against mine."

"Fine," Arthur said, and sheathed the enchanted sword back into his belt. He knew he should be afraid, he knew he should treat Morgana the same way he had treated Merlin. He should arrest her and force her to give up her magic, for her own sake. But his attempts to save Merlin had been worse than a failure. And if Morgana's nightmares were truly prophetic, Camelot would be cleansed of all its magic soon enough.

Guinevere was right. Without Merlin, they were helpless. Without Merlin, nothing mattered. All his plans, all his hopes, everything he wanted their future to become. Whether or not the monsters came, none of it mattered now.

"Gwen, do you have the draught that Gaius made for me?" Morgana asked.

Guinevere took it from her pocket and handed it to her. Morgana held up the little bottle and stared at the liquid within.

"Five years," she said. "For five years, I've taken your draughts. What happens if I stop?"

"You'll remember your nightmares," Gaius said, with quiet reluctance. "There may be other manifestations of your powers. The candles, for example. Waking visions. Without the draughts, your magic will begin to manifest itself fully."

Morgana held out the draught, offering it to him. "Then I no longer have need of them."

"Morgana," Gaius said, worriedly, "I must caution you. You have no training, no ability to control your magic--"
"And whose fault is that?" Morgana said, her anger returning. "You lied to me. All of you. Gwen, even Merlin. I thought I was alone. I thought I was going mad." When Gaius still refused to take the draught, she threw it into the cold hearth, the glass smashing against the stone. "If we die tomorrow, at least I will die a free woman."

With that as her final flourish, Morgana turned on her heels and left. Gwen started to go after her, but faltered, stopped. She turned to Gaius with tearful eyes.

"Go," Gaius said.

It was enough. Gwen ran from the room, her calls for Morgana echoing as she hurried down the stairs.

"Now what?" Arthur asked, turning to Gaius because he had no other options.

"Do you have any evidence of the Sidhe's true nature?" Gaius asked. There was little sympathy in him, but little was better than none at all.

Arthur shook his head. He'd tried to show his father the truth and failed. If he tried again without anything new to support his claim, it would only make his father dig his heels in deeper.

"Then there's nothing we can do," Gaius said.

"I can't accept that. There has to be a way. There has to be something..."

"Anything?"

Arthur nodded. He could not let Camelot fall. Such a thing was beyond his comprehension. He would give his life for Camelot gladly, if the sacrifice was necessary. He had done so before, to end the famine of the unicorn.

"Anything?" Gaius prompted again. "Even magic?"

"I..." Arthur trailed off. He had admitted as much, when he'd asked Morgana to help them. "If it would save the kingdom. Yes, even magic."

"You stupid boy," Gaius said, turning his back on him. "You stupid, foolish boy."

The insult rankled. "This is not my fault," Arthur protested.

"It is very much your fault, sire," Gaius spat. "I warned Merlin not to tell you of his magic because I feared you would be the very spit of your father. You have proven my worst fears correct, and now this kingdom is doomed."

"Everything I have ever done has been to protect Camelot!" Arthur said, angrily. "The only exception to that has been Merlin. I was trying to save him!"

"He did not need to be saved," Gaius said. "As I am certain he told you repeatedly. You chose not to listen."

"You gave me the torcs!"

"What was the alternative? I knew I could not reach you. My hope was that Merlin could, as you claimed to love him. But love without understanding is no love at all."

Arthur stepped forward, towering over Gaius in his fury. "Don't you dare tell me what I feel."
Gaius glared right back at him, without even a flinch. "I would have given my life for that boy. I loved him like a son. I have done everything I could to protect him, and especially to protect him from you."

Arthur hissed in frustration and turned away. But Gaius went after him, and picked up the sheaf of notes from the table.

"He told you all of this, and you wrote it down as if you believed it. Did you even try to understand it?"

"Of course I did."

"And?"

"And what?" Arthur asked, rounding on Gaius with a bitter laugh. "He's a sorcerer. Was. A sorcerer. How could I know what was him and what was the magic? How could I be certain that any of it was true?"

"Because Merlin was magic," Gaius said, with utter belief. "That was what he was. I regret that he was kept in ignorance, but we believed that it was necessary. Everything here, everything he knew by instinct, that is the truth." Grief gripped him, and he sat down, his anger damped. "There are things that I am sworn never to speak of. I cannot break those oaths, not even now."

"We might all die tomorrow."

"And we may not," Gaius said. "But as Merlin has already broached one particular topic, I will answer your question."

"My question?"

"If magic was always evil. It was not. You were correct in your assumption. However, there came a time when there were too many who used magic for selfish purposes and dark ends. Such actions threatened all of Albion. There were those who believed that a purge was necessary. That it would cleanse the Old Religion. I was one of them."

"Then my father was right?" Somehow it was a shock to hear it confirmed, after Merlin's fervent protests.

"In a way," Gaius said. "But once kindled, Uther's rage burned too bright. The deaths of those who abused magic were not enough to quench it."

Arthur stared at him. "Are you telling me... Are you saying..." He could not bring himself to say the words, could barely even stand to think them. "If that's true, then why? Why would you stay here? Why help him?"

"I made a promise to your mother," Gaius said. "That is all I can say."

"I need more than that," Arthur demanded.

"It is enough for one night. If we survive another day, you may learn more. Now if you'll excuse me, I prefer to mourn alone."

Gaius gathered up the magical objects from the table and handed them to Arthur. Arthur took them, and saw that Gaius was trembling. With anger, yes, but also with grief that was barely contained. It was the mirror of the grief in Arthur's own heart, that burned and blackened it from within, like the
Arthur didn't want to be alone with his grief, because he knew it would destroy him. Perhaps not all at once, but with enough time. With enough time -- if he had any time at all -- he truly would become the very spit and image of his father.

But alone was what he was, now. And perhaps that was what he deserved to be. It Camelot was destroyed tonight, for himself it would be a mercy. But the innocents that would die...

The innocents. The blood on his hands. It was too much to accept. Too much for one night.

He took what he was given, and he left.
Gone

Arthur was accustomed to death. As much as he hated it and fought against it with all his will, he had learned to inure himself to it, to use his grief to drive him on. Geraint had died on the way to Gedref, and Arthur had not let his death be in vain. Owain and Pellinore had been killed by the Black Knight, and their sacrifices had driven Arthur to lay down his own challenge. His mother had died to give him life, and Arthur had devoted his life to Camelot to repay that debt.

Yet he could not accept that Merlin was gone. How could he accept it when he been denied the chance to see the truth with his own eyes, to touch Merlin's still chest, to kiss his cold lips goodbye? And yet the bloodied favor in his hand, the false Sophia's cruel smile: alone either would not have been enough to convince him, but together they were cruelly definitive.

Terrible grief swelled in him again, and his shame at his own tears finally forced him to stop, lest he stumble on the stairs. He leaned against the wall, his throat strangled tight as he struggled not to sob. He remembered crying in Merlin's arms, salved by Merlin's love and his forgiveness, and knew that nothing could salve this grief. A blade of sorrow had struck deep into his chest, like his sword into solid stone, and it would drag its way through his heart unimpeded.

He dragged in a painful breath and it caught into a sob. He pressed his hand over his mouth to silence himself and squeezed his eyes tight against his tears. He couldn't lose control like this. He'd been taught his whole life to not let his emotions rule him, to be strong against the weaknesses of his heart. A prince, a knight, a king: none of these could afford to be weak. None of them could afford to love, because this was the cost of love. Merlin had been wrong. Love did not save; it destroyed. It had destroyed him, just as it had destroyed his father. That he was still breathing, that his blood still moved in his veins: these were inconsequential.

But destroyed or not, he could not afford to give up. His father had lost his mother, and he had not given up. Pendragons did not give up. Pendragons did what was necessary to survive, and to ensure that those under their protection survived. They stopped their tears and put one foot in front of the other until they were walking again.

When he reached the top of the stairs, he stopped, listened. Someone was crying. He stepped into the hall and saw that it was Guinevere. She was sitting on the floor, her back against Morgana's door, and when she saw him she turned away.

It would be less trouble for Arthur if he turned away as well, locked himself in his chambers and wallowed in his grief. He doubted Guinevere wanted anything to do with him, and he wanted little to do with her right now. Merlin's death was her fault as much as it was Arthur's. If she had not freed him, Merlin would be safe in Arthur's chambers. He would be furious and maybe he would hate Arthur too much to ever forgive him, but he would be alive.

But the revelations of the evening plagued him. He had misjudged Guinevere, accusing her of sorcery when she was innocent of it. If Arthur had voiced that accusation to anyone else, Guinevere's death would have been on his hands. And if she was innocent, if her father was innocent... If Gaius had been truthful about his father and magic...

He walked towards Guinevere, and she quickly stood, wiping the tears from her face with her sleeve. Her back was stiff with defiance, and in her eyes were wariness and anger. She stepped away as he approached, but when he reached where she had been, instead of pursuing, he knocked on the door.

"Morgana?" he called. When there was no answer, he tried the door. It was locked, of course, and on
instinct, he reached for his keys.

"Don't," Guinevere said.

Arthur turned to her, ready to argue that Morgana shouldn't be alone, that with her magic so wild, she was a danger to herself and to everyone else in the castle. But in Guinevere's eyes, he saw the same defiance that he had seen in Merlin, when they had argued about how to deal with the Sidhe.

"She doesn't need us," Guinevere said, sad but certain. "Not now. It has to be her decision, and we've decided too much for her already."

Arthur could not argue against the wisdom of that. He nodded, and she relaxed slightly, seeing that he was not an immediate threat. She looked at the magical contraband that he was holding under his arm, then up and down the hall.

"If the guards see all of that, they may not arrest you, but it will still be reported to the King."

Arthur nodded again, but all he could think of was how he should be the one warning Merlin about being careful, about the dangers of being seen. When he continued to stand there, frozen by grief and guilt, Guinevere took action instead, giving him a respectful but firm push towards his chambers. When they reached his door, she looked at him expectantly until he opened the door and walked inside.

His chambers were just as he had left them. His previous outfit was still draped over the back of a chair, because Merlin was not there to throw them into the pile in the corner. The curtains were already closed because the ties were still abandoned on the floor of the side room, next to Merlin's empty bed.

Guinevere closed the door while he lay the magical objects on the table. "We need somewhere to hide it."

"Use the chest," Arthur said, waving his hand in its direction.

Guinevere gave an apologetic look. "Somewhere besides that. Merlin, um, he insisted we open it, and we didn't have a key."

Arthur looked at the chest and realized that it had been forced, the wood by the lock cracked and splintered. Merlin must have been looking for the gold torc, or even his grimoire. Arthur almost regretted that he had taken them down to the vaults. If he had left them there, Merlin and Guinevere might have been able to release the restraint, and Merlin might have been able to fight back against the Sidhe.

"You knew," Arthur said, staring at the broken lock. "What you said before. Did he tell you?"

"No," Guinevere said. "He confessed to saving my father from the plague. I had no reason to believe your excuse."

Of course. It had been a desperate lie, weaved in the face of Merlin's arrest and execution. He had not had time to consider consequences beyond the saving of Merlin's life. But it meant that she had known the truth for over a year. She had known and said nothing, even after Merlin had become Arthur's lover. Even when she had brought Linette to him, desperate to save her husband from the pyre.

"Are there many like you?" Arthur asked, turning to her at last. "Worshippers of the Old Religion?" How many times had he led raids against the Old Religion, at his father's command? How many
books and scrolls and wooden carvings had he burned? How many had been arrested and executed for their beliefs? "Why do you worship?"

Guinevere paused before she spoke. "When my mother was dying, I was so angry. I cursed the gods for making her ill. But she said that to turn my back on the gods was the same as refusing to eat or sleep. That they are part of us, and we of them."

"But you have no magic."

"I don't pray for magic," Guinevere said, seemingly offended by the idea. "I pray for my friends and for what is left of my family. I pray for Camelot. I pray that the gods will be merciful to us even though so many have turned away." The last was obviously aimed at Arthur, though she had the tact not to say it directly.

"What happens if they aren't merciful?" Arthur asked. He wasn't even certain he accepted that the gods of the Old Religion were real, but their favor certainly seemed important to both Merlin and Guinevere. Were they a dangerous force to be appeased, like Kanen's raiders? And if they were so powerful, why had they done nothing to protect their followers from persecution?

"I don't know," Guinevere admitted. "But I fear we are about to find out. Without Merlin..." She turned away, leaving the rest unsaid.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Arthur felt keenly the distances between them, even greater than those between himself and Merlin. How could he begin to close them? She had noticeably avoided answering his question about others in Camelot who shared her faith. But just as Merlin knew of other sorcerers, surely Guinevere knew of other worshippers. Those who had avoided Arthur's own grasp, when he had been put on the hunt. He riled at the thought. Was he no better than a dog, seeking blindly after a scent because his master commanded it?

"My father says the Old Religion is corrupted beyond hope," Arthur began, keeping any hint of accusation from his voice. "That all who even dare to pray are in danger of losing their souls and becoming evil. Merlin gave up his magic in order to convince me that my father is wrong."

"And if he is?" Guinevere asked, turning back to him. "If the King is wrong?"

It was Idris all over again. If his father was wrong, then either he had been deceived himself, or he was lying intentionally. Neither option sat well with Arthur, but he could no longer deny them. Was the entire idea of corruption mere propaganda? No, Gaius had contradicted that himself. He claimed that the Purge had been necessary to cleanse some kind of corruption from the Old Religion, but that it had all gone too far. That his father had gone too far.

Arthur tried one last time to deny it all, to dismiss Gaius as corrupted himself, or lying to protect Merlin. But the thread was too fragile and it broke the moment it was touched. Gaius' grief was too genuine for lies. And while one might be an exception, four was not. He was surrounded by sorcerers and believers, had unknowingly lived with them all his life, and they were not evil.

They were not evil. It was a relief and a heartbreak all at once.

"What do I do?" he asked.

Guinevere did not jump in delight, or even smile at his conversion. "I don't know, my lord. If we live to see the morning, ask me again."

Guinevere looked as weary as he felt, and they were both grieving. It was too late to send her out of the castle, and he could not send her back to Morgana. "Stay with me tonight," he said, and held up a
hand when her eyes widened. "I mean nothing improper, I swear. But it's late, and... that is..."

Thankfully, Guinevere understood. "Thank you, sire. Arthur. I don't want to leave her alone."

Arthur nodded. It was the least he could do, so she would not have to sit on the cold stone floor all night.

At last he turned to the magical objects on the table. Lacking the chest, he would have to resort to carrying what he could. His sword was easy enough, and he slipped the ring back into his pocket. He picked up the gold torc and stared at it. It had been bane and boon to him over the past few days, but now it was useless again. Without Merlin, it was nothing but a decoration. And yet now it might be all of Merlin that he had left. That and a lifetime's worth of kerchiefs.

The thought made him crack the smallest of smiles, but that only brought him close to tears again. What would he do without Merlin to make him smile? To tease him out of his moods? What would he do with a cold bed and an empty chair beside him? He turned away, discreetly wiping at his eyes. He covered the motion by tucking the torc into his waistband.

When he turned back again, Guinevere was stealing a glance at the grimoire and Arthur's notes on magic. She quickly looked away again, fixing her eyes on far wall.

Arthur considered the book and papers between them. He wanted to believe that, had Merlin not been lost, he still would have been merciful to Guinevere and Morgana. He had not wanted to arrest Guinevere for using magic to save her father's life, or Morgana for helping the Druid boy, but each time it was all too public to do otherwise. Instead, he had tried to talk sense into his father and failed, just as he had with Linette. How many of those that he had arrested over the years had been contaminated by dark magic? Any of them? What about those he had fought and killed? Palaemon and the Sidhe were magical and a clear threat, and yet neither Gaius nor Merlin had accused them of using dark magic.

A picture was forming for Arthur, and it was resolving into something unspeakable. If Gaius was right and dark magic was all but gone from the land, Arthur had questions that needed answers. Why had his father turned against the Old Religion? Why had he begun the Great Purge? Why did he refuse to end it? But just as Gaius had said, such questions would have to wait until morning to be asked, and they might not be answered easily. But there were other questions, too.

"Guinevere," Arthur began, carefully. "Would you be willing... I know it's a lot to ask, but... would you consider teaching me about the Old Religion? Merlin tried, before, but I wasn't... I wasn't ready, then."

Guinevere looked at him, really looked at him. She was understandably wary. But he asked in genuine supplication, and she saw that truth in his eyes. "I'd like that," she said with a small smile.

Arthur gave a small smile back, but he sobered again. "I'm sorry. For your father. For what you've suffered. I know that I can't..."

Guinevere stepped forward and rested a hand on his arm; it was a daring action for a servant to take, but right now he could only be grateful for the small comfort. "It's what Merlin would have wanted. And if we survive, you'll still have the chance to be the king Camelot needs. You can make this a fair and just kingdom. For Merlin."

Arthur swallowed, his throat suddenly tight. "For Merlin."
Guinevere retired to the side room to sleep, but Arthur could not rest. He ended up at his window, staring down the courtyard while he tried to make sense of his life. It had begun to rain and the weather suited his mood. When that failed, he wandered around his chambers, and ended up kneeling on the floor in front of his broken chest, a bundle of letters in his hands.

The letters had been Merlin's last request, written while he waited for Arthur to return and execute him for the crime of sorcery. Merlin had wanted only to say goodbye, and had begged Arthur to promise not to open them. To only read the letter intended for him, and only if the worst happened.

The worst had happened.

Arthur swallowed as he carefully pulled apart the tight knot in the ribbon. He lay out the sealed letters on the floor and read the names on them: Arthur, Gaius, Gwen, Hunith, Merek, and Morgana.

Six letters. Six people that Merlin needed to say goodbye to. Who knew what secrets were held within these letters? What could Merlin have to say to Merek? The temptation to open them all himself was great. No one else knew the letters even existed. But he had made a promise to Merlin, and he would not break it. Even though he had already broken the most important promise: to keep Merlin safe, to protect him, no matter what.

He picked up the letter with his name on it and turned it over. He traced along the wax seal, remembering the curl of Merlin's slim fingers around the wooden stamp. As long as he didn’t break that seal, he could pretend that Merlin was alive. That he had just stepped out on some chore or errand, and that at any moment he would blithely walk in and roll his eyes at Arthur for worrying himself into a state.

But Arthur had never been very good at pretending.

He broke the seal.

It was too dim to read by the chest, so he brought all the letters to his desk, where he'd left a few candles burning. He sat down, put the other letters aside, and opened his.

'Arthur,' the letter began. Merlin's handwriting was neat and careful, as if each letter was written individually and with great care. Arthur had always imagined that paper and ink were rare resources in Ealdor, and that Hunith had taught Merlin not to be wasteful with it. Arthur was going to have to deliver Hunith's letter himself, and he dreaded seeing her kind face crumple with grief. But he could not be a coward and have it brought to her by some anonymous messenger. He owed Merlin more than that. Far more.

'If you are reading this, then I have failed you and failed our destiny. You must not blame yourself. Whatever my fate, I believe that you did what you thought was right.

One day you will be a great king. Be kind to your people. All of them. Please don't grieve for me.

It was an honor to be your servant.

I love you. I'm sorry.

Merlin'

Tears dropped onto the paper, and Arthur quickly moved it away before any could fall upon the ink. He tried to wipe away his tears with his sleeve, but he couldn't keep his eyes dry, and soon both his sleeves were damp.
He didn't deserve forgiveness. He hadn't deserved it when Merlin wrote the letter, and he didn't deserve it now. He hadn't deserved it since he drew his first breath and his mother drew her last. But Merlin had given it anyway. Of course he had.

Selfless magical bastard.

Arthur covered his mouth and swallowed back his sobs. He didn't want Guinevere to hear him, didn't want her pity. How could he do as Merlin asked and not grieve for him? It was an impossible request. His chest felt full of knives, cutting him apart from the inside.

Merlin was gone. Merlin was... he was really gone. His blue and golden eyes and his foolishness and the soft nape of his neck, and the way his hair curled after he'd been caught in the rain. Merlin would never kiss him again, never be kissed, never blush or laugh or smile knowingly at him. He would never trip clumsily or swing a sword with strange grace, would never have fingers stained green from grinding herbs, or come back from the stables with hay in his hair and up his sleeves.

In the forests of Gedref, when he had found Merlin's sword, Arthur had gone mad with grief. But this was worse, far worse. He was sober with grief. He could see all his mistakes with painful clarity and knew that they could not be undone. That what was lost was lost forever, and all his plans, all the futures he'd imagined and dreamed for them, they were all dust, like ashes swept into the courtyard gutters.

He wanted Merlin to blame him. He wanted Merlin to be furious, to yell at him to not be such a prat and a clotpole and a cabbagehead. But Merlin had forgiven him, and he could not bear it.

A blood-curdling scream rang out, followed by the crash of breaking glass. Arthur had never been so glad for an emergency. He hurried across the room, wiping away his tears as he went, and ran to Morgana's chambers. Guinevere had woken immediately and was already at his heels.

"Morgana?" he called, pounding on her door. When there was no answer, he fumbled for his keys, but Guinevere was quicker with hers. They rushed inside and found Morgana sitting up in bed, looking panicked and terrified, her own cheeks streaked with tears.

"Morgana!" Guinevere immediately went to her side and stroked her arm to soothe her. "Was it another nightmare? What did you see?"

"Never mind that, she blew out the windows!" Arthur hissed. Broken glass littered the floor, and rain was blowing in with the wind. He heard the sound of running footsteps, and cursed under his breath. This was just what they needed.

"Sire!" said the first of the two guards. "We heard a scream."

"Everything's all right," Arthur said, scrambling to come up with a believable explanation that didn't involve Morgana's magic bursting out of her after she'd had a prophetic vision. "Lightning struck the tower and shattered the windows. The Lady Morgana is unharmed. Get someone to clean up the glass and cover the open windows."

"Yes, sire," said the second guard, and they left.

Arthur breathed out in relief. If it wasn't for the storm, he would have been hard pressed to find a reason for why the glass would have broken. But that was the smallest of their problems. He had thought Morgana's tendency to light candles was dangerous, but that was nothing compared to this. He understood now why Gaius had suppressed her magic all these years. The peril wasn't so much her nightmares as the fact that she might be capable of destroying half the castle in a panic.
He tried to find a flint and candle to give the room some light, and realized that there were none. All the candles had been removed from the room. He looked out the broken windows and just made out a half-dozen candles scattered among the broken glass. Morgana must have thrown them from the room before she went to sleep.

"I saw everything again," Morgana said, her voice wavering with fear. "Everything but Merlin. It was so real, Gwen. And it hurt..." She clutched at Guinevere's arm. "I'm so cold. Why..." Only then did she finally look around and realize what had happened around her. She stared in horror at the broken windows, then at Guinevere, and then at Arthur.

She heard the sound of the guards returning, and she shot Arthur a venomous glare. "How dare you-..."

Arthur gestured frantically for her to be quiet, and then resumed his normal poise as the guards returned with oilcloth and servants. Guinevere gave Morgana a reassuring squeeze and Morgana frowned in confusion as the broken glass was removed and the windows were covered.

"What on earth is going on?"

Everyone turned, and there was the King, a lit candle in hand. He'd pulled on a robe over his nightclothes and was frowning at the damage.

"Lightning, Father," Arthur said, hurrying to explain before his father's paranoia gave him any ideas. "It struck the tower and blew out the glass. Morgana's fine."

Guinevere nearly jumped from the bed, taking the candle and stepping aside as Uther moved in to sit. He took Morgana's hands in his. "Are you all right, my dear?" he asked, gently.

Morgana nodded, giving him a fragile smile. "It nearly frightened me to death. But the glass didn't reach me."

"Thank goodness for that," Uther said, visibly relieved. He reached up and stroked her hair. "My poor child. I'll have Gaius prepare you a fresh sleeping draught."

Morgana seemed ready to protest, then gave him a grateful smile. "Thank you. You're so good to me."

Uther gave her a doting smile and kissed her forehead. Then he stood and gave the cleanup a critical eye. "There must not be a single shard of glass left on the floor. And seal the windows tightly. If the Lady Morgana takes ill, I will be extremely unhappy, is that understood?"

There was a murmur of obedient 'yes, sire's, and everyone picked up the pace. Uther gave an approving nod and turned back to Morgana.

"Let me move you to another room," Uther said. "At least until the windows are repaired. That must have given you a terrible shock."

"That's very kind of you, my lord, but I'm certain I'll sleep better in my own bed." She gave him another sweet, reassuring smile, and Arthur was impressed. He knew Morgana could be as false and manipulative as any in court, but it was something else entirely to see her flatter his father mere hours after admitting to herself that she had magic. Perhaps she would make a powerful ally on his council after all, if they managed to survive long enough for him to become regent.

Except she couldn't be on the council, because she was a sorcerer. Even if he waited until his father died, the Lords would never go along with it. Yet he'd made that promise to Merlin as much as to
Morgana, and he couldn't go back on it now.

Morgana finally convinced Uther that he could leave once she'd sent Guinevere off to get a sleeping draught from Gaius. It took a while longer for the glass and the windows to be sorted out, but then the two of them were alone.

With the oilcloths and the lone candle, the room was dark. They stared at each other in silence. If Morgana needed proof that Arthur wasn't going to arrest Morgana for having magic, she had it now. But Morgana's inability to control her magic had also been proved. It was obvious they were going to have to do something to repair the situation, but neither of them had anything to offer.

They were both relieved when Guinevere returned, draught in hand. "Gaius says this one's just a plain sleeping draught," she said, when Morgana glared at the bottle. "Nothing else."

"I don't want anything from him," Morgana said, angrily.

Guinevere put the bottle on her bedside table, then stepped back to stand next to Arthur.

Morgana narrowed her eyes at them. "Since when did you two get along?"

"Since you threw her out," Arthur said, unable to miss the opportunity to get a barb in. "And... since I apologized. I was wrong. What I did to Merlin, what I said to you... I'm sorry."

Morgana treated his apology with the expected skepticism. She crossed her arms. "Don't think this makes up for anything," she said, stiffly.

"I know it doesn't," Arthur said. "But I have to try. For Merlin." He had to steady himself with a deep breath. "I have something to give you both."

It took some effort on both Arthur and Guinevere's parts to persuade Morgana to come with them, but eventually they were all together in Arthur's chambers. He picked up two of the letters and handed one to each of them.

Guinevere looked at her letter and gave Arthur a quizzical look. "This is Merlin's handwriting."

"He wrote them to you," Arthur explained, and felt fresh shame at what he was about to tell them. "The night we returned, Merlin told me he had magic. It was my duty to arrest him."

Morgana stared at him, her eyes sharp even in the candlelight. As he so often did, he felt as if she was judging him and finding him wanting.

"I'm not proud of it, all right? I told Merlin he had to choose between his life and his magic. He thought that I was going to..." He trailed off, turning away. "So he wrote these, in case he couldn't say goodbye."

He couldn't bear the condemnation that was certain to be in their eyes, so Arthur listened as they broke the wax seals and unfolded their letters. Guinevere gave a soft sob, but Morgana was silent as she read hers. When Arthur finally turned back, they had both folded their letters again. Guinevere was wiping her eyes and Morgana... She had pulled herself straight, and held an air of renewed purpose.

"Things are going to change," she told him.

"I know."
"They have to change. And not just so we can survive what's coming." Morgana lifted her chin, as she always did right before she made a demand. "Merlin has a book. He wrote that he wanted me to have it. Where is it?"

"It's--" Guinever began, turning towards the table where Arthur had left it. She looked to Arthur, uncertain and half-apologetic. Arthur gave her a short nod, and she continued. "It's right here." She picked up the book and handed it to Morgana.

"What are you going to do with it?" Arthur asked.

"What do you think?" Morgana said. "I'm going to find a way to save our lives. Gwen, bring some candles. We have reading to do."

Guinevere gave Arthur another apologetic look, but did as Morgana commanded.

"Wait," Arthur said, as they headed for the door.

"Don't even think about talking me out of this," Morgana warned.

"I'm not," Arthur said, holding up his hands. "It's just... you won't be able to read most of it. Unless either of you can read the old tongue?"

"Not really," Guinevere admitted. "It wasn't safe to write anything down. I only know how to speak it, for prayers."

Morgana shook her head.

"Then you'll need these," Arthur said. He handed them the notes he'd written when Merlin was teaching him how to read the grimoire. It was hard to give away another piece of Merlin, with so little of him left, but he knew it was what Merlin would have wanted. And hopefully Morgana would forgive him, and agree to help him understand, just as Guinevere had.

Morgana took the papers, and when she glanced them over, she softened, if only a fraction. She gave him a short nod, and then Arthur was alone again.

Arthur gave a tired sigh and lay down on his bed. With all his distractions gone, his throat tightened again, and his eyes wet with fresh tears. Merlin's absence gaped inside him, impossibly large. His bed and his chambers felt too big, too empty. And in Merlin's wake, his whole world was transformed.

He had always known that his father's treatment of sorcerers was too extreme. He had always feared that such extremities would result in innocent people being arrested and possibly even executed. But he had always done his best to ensure that the letter of the law was followed. That only those who were genuinely guilty of using magic were punished. He had not always succeeded. Out of dozens, hundreds of executions every year, a few innocents were bound to be unfairly accused. But for each failure, he had sworn that he would not make such mistakes when he ruled. That he would not continue his father's overzealous ways.

He had not considered that the law itself could be wrong.

Merlin had challenged him on it in their last conversation, their last argument. Why was he willing to reconsider every other rule but this? Why was magic the one thing his father had to be right about? Arthur had no easy answer. He thought back to before he'd discovered Merlin's secrets, before Uwen and his enchanted armor, before the unicorn and poisoned wine. And back again, past bloody battles and Druid raids and bodies burning in the courtyard day after day, to the half-remembered flashes of
his father's fury, and slaps that made him taste blood.

He had questioned it. A long time ago, he had questioned it, because he had hated the executions, hated the searches and the raids, hated how afraid it made everyone feel. But he had been taught to stop. To accept without argument, without discussion. For every other law, his father would encourage him to understand the purpose of it, the reasoning behind the words. How the law fit into the kingdom and helped it thrive. But the laws against magic were sacrosanct, absolute. Arthur had not wanted to question them because the desire to question them had been beaten out of him, long before he was old enough for true defiance.

Merlin was right. Everyone was afraid, and Arthur had been too blind, too stubborn to allow himself to see it. Because if he did, if he faced the truth, it meant facing his own fear, his own weakness and cowardice. Because deep down in his heart, he was terrified of defying his father about magic, and he always had been.

There must have been a purpose to it, at the beginning. When dark magic abounded, as Gaius said. His father had seen the corruption and understood it to be poison in Camelot's blood. He had purged it out. But if Merlin had been born with magic, if Morgana had been born with it... Merlin's magic had not seemed to be corrupted, and Merlin had recoiled against the dark magic he had confronted. Morgana's must be the same. There was nothing evil in her warnings, which seemed meant to help, not hinder. Her magic was uncontrolled, but Merlin had been insistent that misuse of magic was not the same as dark magic. And Gaius had said that Merlin's instincts were correct.

If Merlin had been born with pure magic, magic without corruption. If Morgana had been born the same. Then how many other sorcerers had been pure? How many had Arthur judged guilty of corruption when they were innocent? What monstrous acts had he helped his father achieve? And what about the Old Religion itself? The worshippers like Guinevere, who did not even have magic, who had not been corrupted by a lifetime of prayers?

He knew nothing. He had been so certain, his father's absolutism a bedrock for him despite his own, private doubts. And now that bedrock was gone, and he did not know where to stand or where to go. He cursed his own stubbornness, and Merlin's stubbornness. If they'd had more time, Arthur would have understood. Merlin did not have to die for Arthur to understand. It was just too much, too soon, too fast. He'd needed more time, more evidence, more than what Merlin alone had been able to give him. And now... now he had nothing. Just an enchanted sword, a burnt-out magical ring, and a gold torc that would bind him to no one.

He sat up and pulled the torc from his waistband, turned it in his hands. He traced the fine filigree with his thumb. Part of him wanted to throw it out the window, as Morgana had done with her candles. The torc was a symbol of his failures, of his ignorance and his fear, of the loss of Merlin's love and then his life. But he couldn't. Through the torcs, he and Merlin had shared something, even if Arthur had not understood it and and still could not.

Merlin had understood. Merlin had held him, smiling and grateful. Despite all that the restraint had made him suffer, the good had outweighed the bad.

That was what Merlin did, after all. He'd accepted Arthur the same way, seeing the good in him and prizing it. Merlin had believed in him even when Arthur had been executing sorcerers left and right. Merlin had seen the King within him, a King that would love his people and be kind to them. To all of them, even those with magic, even those who worshipped the Old Religion.

Arthur had failed Merlin. He had failed to be the King that Merlin believed him to be. And perhaps that was inevitable, because Arthur was not King yet, only Prince. But even his father knew that the time had come for that to change. He would be Regent soon, and one day he would wear his father's
crown. But he did not have to wait for his father, and he should not.

He had failed Merlin in life, but he would not fail him in death. He would be Merlin's King, and he needed no crown to do that. He needed only his heart, and Merlin had given him that. No matter how much it hurt, no matter how deeply grief sliced, he would not give up that most precious gift.

The ancient chieftains had worn torcs like these. That's what he'd told Merlin, what he'd read in the history books in Geoffrey's library. And even though Merlin was no longer alive to be his warrior and his knight and his sorcerer, Arthur had promised to wear it for him. It would be a symbol of everything he had promised Merlin, of his failures and of the faith that Merlin had held for him. He would feel the metal, heavy at the base of his neck, bereft of magic, and he would never forget.

He closed his eyes. With great care, he eased the gold torc around his neck. He let it settle into place, and he breathed out.

He opened his eyes wide.

He grabbed at the torc in shock. He pulled it off, then slid it back on again. Off, then on.

The connection was still there. The connection to Merlin's torc was still there. How could it be? Could someone else be wearing it? One of the Sidhe?

No. The connection felt exactly the same. He wasn't imagining it. It felt like Merlin.

"Please," Arthur whispered, hope a fresh ache in his chest, pushing back the sharper pains of grief. "Please, please."

He grabbed the Sidhe staff and ran from his chambers, down the stairs and through the halls. He needed answers, and Gaius was the only one who could give them. And this time he would listen, even to the things his father had taught him not to hear. Whatever he uncovered, whatever crawled out from the rocks he overturned, he would not turn away.
"Gaius!" Arthur called, in a loud whisper. Even the thump of his fist on the door resounded in the quiet halls. Morgana's disturbance aside, at this hour only a handful of guards and servants were awake, and he wanted to keep it that way. He suspected that very soon he was going to have to break a few laws, and he didn't want any witnesses.

Arthur gave up on propriety and opened the door himself, and found that Gaius had fallen asleep over a pile of books. As Arthur approached, he stirred and rubbed at his eyes.

"Arthur?"

"I can feel him," Arthur blurted out, unable to contain himself. He sat down across from Gaius and grabbed at his torc. "Merlin. I can... I think I can feel him. Through this. I think he's alive."

Gaius was fully awake in an instant. He sat up straight, his eyes wide. "You're certain?"

"As certain as I can be about any of this," Arthur said, allowing some of his bewilderment to show. "It feels like him, but... could it be someone else? One of the Sidhe?"

"The torcs wouldn't work for the Sidhe," Gaius said. "And it's my understanding that it's impossible to remove the torc while the restraint is active. Not without... well."

"As certain as I can be about any of this," Arthur said, allowing some of his bewilderment to show. "It feels like him, but... could it be someone else? One of the Sidhe?"

"The torcs wouldn't work for the Sidhe," Gaius said. "And it's my understanding that it's impossible to remove the torc while the restraint is active. Not without... well."

Not without separating Merlin's head from his neck, Arthur guessed. "Could it just be some remnant of his magic?" He pressed. He needed to be certain. If Merlin was really alive...

"As I explained before, the restraint is merely a safeguard for apprentices. For the Blood Guard, the torcs were a communal tool. Their primary purpose was the focus and sharing of magic, particularly for large spells. For a lone wearer, they would be of little use."


Gaius blinked at him. "As I said, sire."

Arthur stared back at him. It was obvious that he'd stumbled over another of Gaius' secrets, but he would have to deal with it later. Merlin was the first priority.

"When you spoke to Sophia," Gaius said, dropping his eyes to his books. "What exactly did she say?"

Arthur thought back. "That his body was gone. That as a warrior, his soul belongs to Avalon."

"Could she have been lying?"

"I don't think so. I had knights watching the Sidhe and their chambers. Merlin went in, but they didn't see him leave." If there was a chance that Merlin might have been able to sneak out without being seen, the bloodied favor eliminated it. But now that Arthur had a clear head, he remembered that Merlin was not the only one who had mysteriously disappeared. "Drudwas and Aulfric," he said. "They were seen going into their chambers, but when I searched it, they weren't there. And there was no other way out, unless they left out of the windows..." Even as he said it, he remembered, and smacked himself on the forehead. "Merlin said they could fly." Merlin was right, he was a terrible listener.
"His soul belongs to Avalon," Gaius said, mulling over the words.

"You think they took him there?"

"It seems the most likely option," Gaius said, but he wasn't very happy about it. "Which means the situation is even worse than I feared."

"Worse? Merlin's alive. How is that worse? All I have to do is go to Avalon and get him back."

"Avalon is not merely a place," Gaius said, his deliberate speech betraying his frustration. "It is the land of eternal youth. The Otherworld. Mortals are only supposed to glimpse it the moment before death."

Arthur huffed in confusion. "But Merlin saw it."

"And he would not have survived had his magic not protected him."

Arthur stared at him. "What are you saying? That there's nothing we can do? That Merlin is trapped there, forever?"

Gaius doleful expression was answer enough.

"No," Arthur said, standing up again. He paced away and then back. "I refuse to accept that. If they brought Merlin there, then they can bring him back."

"They may not be able to. Sophia said his body was gone. Merlin may no longer be as we knew him."

Arthur had no idea what to do with that. "I don't care what they've done to him. Once we get him back, they can undo it."

"Then what do you suggest? I take it your plan is to force Sophia into cooperating?"

Arthur handed Gaius the staff. "Can you use this?"

Gaius hesitated before he took it. "It would require a spell. You understand that you are asking me to use magic."

"As you and Merlin did countless times right under my nose," Arthur replied. "I'll make it an order if that makes you feel better. Can you use it?"

"I'm not certain," Gaius admitted. "But the appearance of it may be enough, as you have the sword."

The sword. At this rate, it was going to need a name, at the very least to prevent confusion. The history books and bards' songs were full of swords with names. Even in the recent past, there was a king of the Franks who called his sword 'joyful', of all things. Maybe Merlin could come up with something, once they got him back. Merlin liked making up words for things. Though knowing Merlin, Arthur would end up with a sword named cabbagepole.

The thought was almost enough to make him smile.

"I've been researching the Sidhe," Gaius said, gesturing to the pile of books he'd fallen asleep on. "Trying to find any possible weaknesses we can use. According to legend, the Sidhe are masters of enchantment. Even their appearance is an illusion. In their native land, they have extraordinary powers, and some can even bend nature to their will. However--"
"I like a good 'however'," Arthur said, as he strained to stay positive.

"However," Gaius continued, "in our world, they are much more limited. They can enchant, but only if they make eye contact with their victim. And their staves appear to be necessary for their defense."

"So if we can disarm her, blindfold her..."

Gaius nodded. "But we must be careful. Their enchantments are extremely powerful. As we saw the last time Sophia was here."

Arthur considered this. "Do you think they've enchanted my father?" Perhaps that was why he had refused to listen to Arthur's warnings. Arthur preferred that his father be enchanted against him, because then it might actually be possible to change his mind.

"Perhaps," Gaius said. "But we cannot rely on that assumption. We must not let the King discover any of what is happening. If we do, there will be no chance of rescuing Merlin. And if Aulfric and Drudwas should return..."

Arthur flexed his sword hand. He was more than ready for a fight. "Then we can't waste any more time. What else do I need to know?"

§

Arthur was not unaware of the irony of what he was doing. Working with Gaius in secret to defend the kingdom against magic by using magic. Sneaking around the castle in the dead of night, hiding around corners to avoid the guards on patrol, because they couldn't risk their movements being reported. Arthur knew all of those men, knew their patrols because he'd had a hand in scheduling them. He felt as if he was invading his own castle, and he didn't much like it.

If Arthur had his way, he would call the patrols to him and they would help him capture and arrest the false Sophia. But it seemed that when it came to magic, Arthur was never going to get his way. Instead, he was having to bend and contort himself so that magic could get its way. No doubt if Merlin was here, he would complain that magic had been bent and contorted enough already, and a turnabout was only fair.

But Merlin was not here, and that was the crux of it. Merlin had to be saved, and Arthur would do anything to save him. That had been true for a long time. But even if he accepted that magic was not necessarily corrupted, that sorcerers were not necessarily evil, that did not mean he trusted magic. Even if magic had to be fought with magic, even if it was the only way to save Merlin and protect Camelot, even if it seemed that everyone in the castle was secretly involved with magic in some form, Arthur didn't have to like any of it.

But he was used to doing things he didn't personally like. Most of his life had been spent doing things that were necessary but not pleasant, and it would be the same when he was King. As these acts of subterfuge and treason were necessary, he would do them. Finer considerations would have to wait.

Right now, he needed to concentrate on not falling off the wall.

Arthur glanced down at the ground, which was very far beneath his feet. He'd never really appreciated how tall the castle was until he was hanging off it. If his father had given the Sidhe a suite on the ground floor, this would all be a lot easier. But faint heart never rescued fair manservant. Or something like that.

Arthur paused just beneath the windowsill. The window to Sophia's chambers was still open, just as
he'd remembered. Presumably she was leaving it that way so Drudwas and Aulfric could return the same way they'd left. From inside the room, he heard an insistent knocking on the door, and then Gaius' voice.

"At this hour?" Sophia complained, her muttering drifting out above Arthur's head. The door opened. "Yes?"

"My lady," Gaius said, with politeness borne of decades of court life. "I must speak with you on an urgent matter."

"Urgent?"

"Yes, it concerns my apprentice. I believe you met him earlier tonight. His name is Merlin."

Arthur was halfway through the window when Sophia went still and silent. She brought her staff to bear on Gaius, but Gaius had already brought his staff to bear on her.

"I know exactly what you are, and I have no intention of letting you leave this room," Gaius warned.

Arthur silently lowered himself to the floor. Another half-minute was all he needed. He carefully shut the window, took the piece of wire from between his teeth, and secured the glass so it wouldn't easily open. Sophia might be able to cast illusions, but whatever she was underneath, she was solid as any human.

"You don't have the power to use that, old man," she sneered.

"Perhaps not, but what if I do? Are you willing to take that chance? Return Merlin to me, unharmed, and I'll decline to tell the King about you until you've already left. That is my only offer."

Sophia laughed, and it was an ugly laugh. "You won't be able to tell anyone anything. Dioddef--!"

She stopped abruptly as Arthur pressed the edge of his sword along the front of her neck. "Not another word," he warned. "Gaius."

Gaius quickly yanked the staff from her hands, then turned and shut the door.

"You will pay for this, Arthur Pendragon," Sophia snarled, and Arthur pressed the sword a fraction closer. Any more pressure and the sword would slice into her neck, and they needed her alive.

"Gaius!" Arthur warned, sensing Sophia was about to act.

Gaius quickly began to close all the open doors to the other chambers. He was halfway around the room when Sophia made her move.

"Tynnwch y guddio gas!" she cried, and there was a dazzling burst of light. She vanished from Arthur's grip, and suddenly there was a glowing light darting around the room like a demented firefly. Arthur could just hear Merlin saying 'I told you so' as he swung his sword frantically in an attempt to swat her down.

"Arthur!" Gaius called, as Sophia flew into the last open door. Arthur ran in after her and Gaius shut the door and guarded it, staff at the ready. Fortunately, the windows in this room were all closed against the night's chill. But Sophia's light suddenly blinked out.

"Where?" Gaius whispered.

Arthur held up his hand to silence him. He retraced the crazed path he had seen her follow and knew
where she had gone. He sheathed his sword, crept towards the bed, and in a single action, grabbed
the brocaded blanket and dragged it under the bed, capturing Sophia within the thick, heavy fabric.

She fought like the monster she was, writhing and flailing wildly in his grip. Arthur had barely
managed to maneuver her out into the open when he heard a ripping sound. His eyes widened in
alarm as he saw a blue, clawed hand rip its way through the blanket, and then there she was.
Sophia's true face was blue and ugly, a fierce mask with protrusion, vicious little teeth, and glowing
red eyes. A sudden heaviness came over him, and he couldn't look away.

"Barus, yr wyf yn poe--"

"Oferswing!"

The next thing Arthur knew, Sophia was flying across the room, but not under her own power. She
slammed into the stone wall with an audible thump, which was impressive given how small she was.
Arthur looked up just in time to see the last of the golden glow fade from Gaius' eyes.

"Sire! Are you all right?"

"I think so," Arthur said, shaking his head to clear it. Gaius offered a hand, but Arthur waved it away
and pushed himself to his feet. Gaius looked rather stunned himself. A silent understanding passed
between them that whatever happened next, they would never speak of this again.

They looked down at the unconscious Sophia, then looked at each other.

"Right," Arthur said. He went back to the window, unwound the wire and brought it back to the
bedchamber. He picked Sophia up and between the two of them they were able to bind her tiny arms
and legs. Gaius tore a narrow piece of cloth and was able to fashion a blindfold, to keep her from
trying to enchant them again.

It was possibly the strangest moment of Arthur's life. It was certainly the strangest arrest he'd ever
made.

"Now what?" Arthur asked.

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"That is surprisingly sturdy for a candle holder," Arthur said.

They'd found a prison for Sophia hanging in Gaius' chambers. It was a candle cage in the shape of a
globe. The little candle seat was the perfect size for Sophia to sit on, but the gaps between the bars
were too narrow for her to squeeze between, even if she was able to get free of the wire bindings.
Just to be sure, Gaius looped another bit of wire to tie her to the candle seat.

It was hard to believe that this was really Sophia. With her glamour gone, she was utterly
unrecognizable, with blue skin, antennae, elongated hands and feet, pointed ears, and glittering insect
wings. Her fine clothing was gone as well, replaced by a green, shimmering shift that looked like it
was made from an enchanted leaf.

They put the cage on the table between them and waited for her to wake up. It didn't take long.

"Where's Merlin?" Arthur asked.

Sophia bared her teeth at him. "As I told you before, Arthur Pendragon. His soul belongs to
Avalon."
"Bring him back. Now."

Sophia laughed. "Or what? No mortal blade can kill me."

Arthur slipped the end of his sword between the bars, and when she bumped against the sharp point, she immediately stilled. "This blade is dragon-forged. It's my understanding that it can kill anything, even a little bug like you."

That finally shut her up.

"You know what I want," Arthur prompted.

"Very well," she said. "Let me free, and I will get him for you."

Arthur gave her a look, and it was a shame she couldn't see it through the blindfold. "I don't want you to get him. The moment they let her go, they would be back where they'd started. "I want you to open the Gates of Avalon for me."

Sophia laughed. "Well, of course I can do that. You only had to ask."

"Let me free, and I will open them for you now," Sophia said, sweetly.

"Sire," Gaius said, concerned. He gestured for Arthur to follow him, and they walked to the other side of the room to speak privately.

"You're certain she won't be able to break free?" Arthur asked.

"Not without her staff," Gaius said. "Though I would not risk leaving her unguarded. My greater concern is for you. Sire, you cannot go to Avalon. You cannot pass through the Gates alive."

"And I need her to think that so she'll open the Gates," Arthur explained, keeping his voice quiet. "Let her believe she's sending me to my death. I know there has to be a way. If Merlin's magic could protect him, there must be a spell that can do the same for me."

"It would have to be extremely powerful. And I do not have the strength to perform such a spell, if one could even be found."

"You stopped Sophia."

"That small spell was as much as I could manage."


"She's far too untrained," Gaius countered. "It will take time for her to learn how to perform even basic spells. If she's unable to successfully complete the protection spell, we may not know until it's too late."

"There has to be someone else," Arthur said, frustrated. "Merlin can't be the only powerful sorcerer in the whole kingdom."

Gaius gave him the eyebrow for that.

"Right," Arthur sighed. There weren't any others, because Arthur had helped arrest or kill them all. And those who were left would hardly be eager to expose themselves to aid the Crown Prince who had hunted them for so long. They would fear it was a trap, and if Arthur was in their place, he would think the same.
Gaius was giving one of those thoughtful frowns that meant he had an idea.

"Gaius?"

"There is someone," Gaius said, slowly. "With both the power and experience necessary."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"I doubt he would be willing to help," Gaius said. "Especially after recent events."

"We have to try. Who is it? One of the Druids?"

"Not a Druid, sire."

Arthur didn't like any of this. It was bad enough that he had to leave Gaius guarding Sophia with a magical staff he wasn't actually able to wield. It was bad enough that Arthur once again had to sneak past his own guards, and was beginning to seriously doubt the overall competence of the castle's security. But that their last resort had turned out to be the Great Dragon...

The half-collapsed hallway was ominous in the torchlight. Over his many visits, Merlin had cleared a comfortable path through the rubble. The path wound down until he was deep beneath the dungeons, and finally led to a ledge that had been carved out of a rocky wall. Arthur stood at the edge and held out his torch, but it was the moonlight that showed him the scale of the place.

It was an enormous cavern, so huge it was amazing that the distant walls could hold up the massive weight of the castle above. He heard the rush of flowing water; looking down, he could just make out a wide, smooth river, running for miles into the distance. Squeaking startled him, and he turned and saw a flock of bats flying down through a column of moonlight and vanishing into some dark crevice to nest.

The dragon's prison was nothing like he'd expected. What was this place? Why was it connected to the castle? And where was the dragon?

A low growl made the hairs on Arthur's neck stand on end. It was an inhuman sound, and it seemed to come from all directions at once. He drew his sword and held it ready as he stared into the gloom.

"Show yourself!"

The growl strengthened, and then grew into a mighty roar. Arthur skittered back as a monstrous shape flew at him from the darkness. There was the clank of heavy chain pulled taut, and the creature pulled back with an angry snarl as its claws dug into its rocky perch.

It was the dragon. The creature breathed in, and Arthur barely managed to leap to safety before the ledge was consumed with fire.

"Murderer!" growled the dragon, voice thick with fury and pain. There was another gust of fire, and flames licked up the passageway.

"Wait!" Arthur called, as the dragon drew its next breath. "Please, I need your help!"

The dragon gave a bitter laugh. "Help? The only help I would give you, *Pendragon*, is the help your father gave to my kind."

The third gust of fire was even stronger, and Arthur had to retreat again. "Not for me," he shouted.
"For Merlin!"

"Merlin is dead," growled the dragon.

"He's alive!"

"Do not lie to me! He is my kin. If he was alive, I would know."

"Not if he was in Avalon!" Arthur braced himself, but the passageway remained blessedly free of fire. He decided to take that as permission to continue. "He was taken by the Sidhe." He inched his way back down to the ledge. "I need your help to save him. Please."

Arthur peered out, and saw that the dragon had settled back on his haunches. He was staring at Arthur with narrowed eyes. "I'm listening," he said, and gave a smoky snort.

"I have a way to open the Gates of Avalon, but I cannot pass through alive. I need a spell to protect me. Gaius said--" He was interrupted by another angry snarl.

"Do not speak to me of that traitor," the dragon sneered.

Traitor. It was another piece of information to tuck into the back of his mind. Arthur stepped fully out onto the ledge. "He said you could help me."

The dragon gave him a considering look, then turned his head away dismissively. "Why should I help you? I felt what you did to Merlin. I felt his suffering. I warned him that this would be his fate, and now Camelot is doomed. I will take great satisfaction in seeing it burn." He finished the last with a wide, malicious smile that showed far too many teeth.

Arthur had already gained enough experience with Morgana -- though most of it was in hindsight -- to know a seer when he met one. "You can see the future?"

"The future takes many paths. Some destinies cannot be escaped. But not all."

Was the dragon always this maddeningly vague? "What's that supposed to mean?"

The dragon gave an annoyed flap of his wings. "Without Merlin, you will never succeed. Without Merlin, Albion cannot be united. You have failed in your destiny, as your kind have failed before."

"No. It's not too late," Arthur said, forcibly sheathing his sword. "And this isn't about my father, or me, or Gaius. It's about Merlin."

"Only the Sidhe can open the Gates, and they have no love for humans."

"I've taken a Sidhe prisoner. She will open the Gates to lead me to my death, but Merlin saw Avalon and survived. I need you to help me do the same."

The dragon finally seemed to waver. "How can you be certain that he is alive?"

"Because of this," Arthur said, and pulled away his high collar to reveal the torc.

The dragon's eyes widened, then narrowed. "I have not seen one of those in many years. Their power died with the Blood Guard."

"Merlin put his magic into two of them. He wears the other. I can feel him through mine. I know he's alive."
"Free you?" Arthur asked, warily.

"Use the sword. If you wield it, its power will be great enough to cut these chains." The dragon rattled them for illustration.

"Why? So you can help the Sidhe destroy Camelot? What assurance would I have that you would leave Camelot unharmed?"

"None," the dragon said, and at least it was being honest. "But the Sidhe have done great wrongs to my people. I am willing to delay one revenge for another."

Arthur felt his resolve waver. Could he trust the dragon to rescue Merlin? Could he trust the dragon not to destroy Camelot after he saved it?

No. Common enemies or not, the dragon had made his intentions far too clear. Arthur could not trade one doom for another. Merlin would not want Camelot to be the cost of his rescue, not when he had all but given his life to prevent such an outcome. Especially after he had turned against the dragon himself. But it was clear that whatever had happened between them, some bond persisted.

"The prophecy you told Merlin. Is it true?"

"It was, once. Perhaps it may be again."

"Then my destiny is to unite Albion? To restore magic?"

"Your destiny cannot be fulfilled alone. You are but one side of a coin. Merlin is the other."

Arthur didn't understand destiny, didn't know why he had been chosen for such a path. There was still so much he needed to learn. But it seemed that whatever lay before him, he would only reach it if he had Merlin beside him.

"Can you give me the protection I need to enter Avalon? Yes or no?"

"Yes," the dragon said, with obvious reluctance.

"Then do it," Arthur said, with all the certainty he could muster.

"And my freedom?" the dragon asked, pressing forward as far as his chains would allow. "I will not spend the rest of my life a prisoner."

"And I cannot risk Camelot's destruction. When Merlin is safe, if Camelot's protection can be guaranteed, I will give you your freedom. But only then."

The dragon gave a threatening rumble, but saw that Arthur was resolute. "Very well."

"The spell. What do I have to do?"

The dragon pushed itself up, flexing its wings as it stood. "Close your eyes, and open your mind."

The dragon looked at him expectantly. Arthur took a deep breath in and out, and braced himself. It might all be a trick, and the dragon might be about to fry him to a cinder. But he had to do this. He had to trust the dragon, to trust his magic, for Merlin's sake.
The dragon exhaled, and Arthur found himself suffused with heat. But it was nothing like fire. It rushed through his veins and into his lungs, filling him to the brim, making every inch of his skin prickle and flush.

Magic. He recognized it now. It was not quite the same as the unicorn, not quite the same as what he felt through the torc. But they were all of a kind. Even from a creature as fierce and dangerous as the dragon, a creature bent on revenge against Camelot and the Pendragon line, even to Arthur's untrained senses, this was pure, uncorrupted magic.

The dragon stopped, and the spell settled under Arthur's skin, sinking into his muscles, his bones, into the very core of him. He could feel how powerful the spell was, the way it filled him as a few drops of dye could fill a basin of water.

As he opened his eyes, he felt them tingle, and he wondered if they had flared golden.

"Few men have ever been gifted such power," the dragon declared. "Use it wisely."

"I will," Arthur breathed. He wobbled, unsteady, but already his body was adjusting to the change it had undergone. He did not have any way to describe what was different. There was no test he could perform to be certain that he could cross into Avalon alive. He was making a tremendous act of faith. But no matter what the danger, he had to. He had to.

§

It was fortunate that the Lady Sophia was small enough to fit inside a candle cage, because otherwise it would have been rather difficult to smuggle her past the castle guards. Arthur had dressed himself for battle, in mail and armor, and disguised himself under a large blue cloak. He hid the cage beneath the fabric, confident that he could quickly have his sword at hand should Sophia try anything. Gaius was similarly disguised, and carried one staff while he used the other as a walking stick.

It was not a short walk to the lake, but it was a familiar one. Arthur could not help but reflect on the many times he and Merlin had been this way. He remembered Merlin's strange hesitation on their first visit, how he had seemed oddly wary about entering the water. How even after Arthur had teased away that hesitance, Merlin would sometimes go still and look worried or sad.

Merlin often had such moments. No matter where they were, no matter what they were doing, there were always times when Arthur would call for Merlin and turn to find his manservant lost to some memory or daydream that was quite irrelevant to what was happening around him. After Arthur had realized that Merlin was working with Gaius on more than bandages and draughts, some of that absent-mindedness had made sense. But not all of it. That had not explained all of Merlin's inexplicable moods, his sadnesses, his silences. Why he withdrew into himself, and would not open up no matter how Arthur teased or pushed or pleaded.

The more Arthur learned, the more he realized that he himself had been the one who was trapped in his own little world. His own bubble of normality in a sea of strangeness and danger. Idriys had been right about him, that he was sheltered and ignorant. Arthur had known so little, and had been so very certain. No matter what his doubts, he had been certain enough to stake lives on what he thought he knew. And not just Merlin's life. What would he have done a week ago if he'd discovered Morgana's magic? Would she have shared the same fate as Linette, as Palaemon, as so many before them? He wanted to believe he would have tried to save her, as he had helped save the Druid boy. He wanted to believe that.

He had so many questions, but there was no time to ask them.
They walked in silence until they reached the lake, not wanting to risk drawing attention to themselves. Arthur shed his cloak and folded it, and gave it to Gaius.

He held up Sophia's cage and slipped the point of sword between the bars. "Open them. Now."

"I shall need my staff," Sophia said, bold despite the indignities of her situation.

"It's a bit big for you," Arthur pointed out.

"Bring it to the cage. It will fit."

Arthur nodded, and Gaius held out the staff. Sophia reached out for it, and the moment her hand touched it, it instantly shrunk to fit her size. Or perhaps it had always been her size, and it was an illusion that it had been human-sized. Trying to make sense of it made Arthur's eyes start to cross.

Arthur suddenly wondered if he was making a mistake. If letting Merlin stay in Avalon would be the kindest thing. Maybe he would be better off in a land made entirely of magic, populated with his own kind, safe from whatever disaster was about to befall the city. The moment he finished the thought, he discarded it. Merlin did not belong there, any more than Arthur did. Merlin's home was in Camelot, and by his side. If Arthur was certain of anything anymore, it was that.

"Careful," he warned, giving Sophia a nudge with the sword tip.

"Fear not, Prince Arthur. I would not keep you. Your delivery is long overdue." Sophia laughed, clearly amused, then bared her teeth at him. "Shall I open the Gates for you now?"

Arthur waited while Gaius blindfolded himself. "Do it."

"Gatiau," Sophia began chanting, "eich hunain agored."

A wind began to rise from the water, rustling the trees and sending red and golden leaves to swirl and fall around them. The blue crystal on Sophia's staff lit with power.

"Gatiau, eich hunain agored. Agorwch llydan i'r tir tragwyddoldeb!"

A glow began at the center of the water and swelled until the whole lake was alight. As he watched, the murky water became clear as glass, revealing an upside-down world of huge, gnarled trees and floating lanterns.

"Is that it?" Arthur breathed. "Avalon?" It was beautiful.

Sophia had stopped smiling. "How can you look upon my home and live?" she said, furious. "How have you done this?"

"Shut up," Arthur said, glad to no longer have to play along. He'd already had enough of subterfuge, but he had a feeling that there was more waiting in his future. "Drop the staff. Now."

He had to nudge her with the sword to get her to let it go. Even with the blindfold obscuring most of her face, he could tell that she was absolutely livid. He handed her cage to Gaius, who took it blindly. Only the thick blindfold protected him from instant death.

"When the Gates close, take her back to the castle and wait for me. I'll be back as soon as I can." It was too risky to bring Sophia with him to Avalon, where she would have access to the full strength of her powers. Better to keep her as a hostage in case they had further need of her. Gaius should be able to keep her in line with the staff, as long as she didn't realize he couldn't wield it. Arthur had
bluffed his way to victory with less.

"And your father?" Gaius asked.

"Tell him I've gone hunting." It was as good an excuse as any. And most importantly, it was believable.

"Be safe, Arthur. Bring him back."

"I will," Arthur promised. He waded out into the water, and looked up at the forest around them. At Camelot, at Albion. He swore to himself that he would see it all again, and that Merlin would be beside him.

He took a deep breath, and he dove.
The Unseelie Court

Arthur swam towards Avalon, the weight of his armor carrying him down into the water's depths. His lungs already ached in his chest, but he kept going. Merlin was somewhere on the other side, and Arthur had never let himself be stopped by the weaknesses of the flesh.

Suddenly a golden haze began to pervade the crystal-clear water. Were the Gates of Avalon closing? Arthur kicked faster, pushing into the golden water. As he passed through it, something strange happened. Some force began to push at him, slowing his progress even as the water cleared again. He realized that he had stopped swimming down and started swimming up, and pushed himself harder, muscles burning. He could feel that he was running out of time. Shapes appeared before him in the water, long lines running like ropes up to dark shapes, and he grabbed at them to haul himself forward. He reached the shapes, but had to push away from them when he nearly impaled himself on the large, menacing spikes along their underside.

He breached the surface and gasped in air. As the ache faded from his lungs, he realized that he had made it through. He pushed back his wet hair and blinked the water from his eyes.

The ropes he had dragged himself up with were not ropes at all but stems, each as thick as his arm. The dark shapes with their dangerous spikes were not some kind of fortification, but were gigantic lilypads, each at least thirty feet across, interspersed with huge white and pink flowers that were just starting to open for the day. The pads' upturned rims were a foot high, and covered with the same deadly thorns that were on the underside. But there was a v-shaped notch that nearly came down to the water, and Arthur was able to reach through it to haul himself up onto the dry surface. The leaf sagged but held his weight, and it gave him a chance to catch his breath and orient himself.

Avalon. The Otherworld. He had not known what to expect, exactly, but this was a surprise nevertheless. He found himself at the center of an endless lake that stretched on past every horizon. In a loose circle around him, there were islands of varying sizes, all of them covered with thick forests. There were no buildings, no signs of habitation, but he could hear the buzz of insects and the chatter of wildlife echoing across the calm waters.

The sun was about to rise, and in the lightening sky Arthur could still see the moon; at least that was the same as always. And then he realized that it wasn't. It was backwards, the gibbous moon lit on the wrong side. Arthur had a strong sense of direction, and could find his reckoning even if he was blindfolded. Once he saw the moon, he realized that the sun was rising not in the east, as it had always risen, but in the west.

Strange indeed.

Arthur did not have much to go on from this point. He knew that Drudwas and Aulfric had taken Merlin here, so they must be on one of the islands, but which? There were dozens of them, and the larger islands went on for miles. If he could find their king or queen -- assuming they had such a thing, for Gaius' books had said little -- there was a slim chance he could petition them for Merlin's release. Yet he knew that diplomacy was not likely to be the solution here. Merlin had been taken by force, and if Morgana's visions were as true as they had always been, then some kind of attack or invasion was already being planned. He was in enemy territory, and Merlin would be rescued best by stealth. But first he had to be found, and if Sir Drudwas was the Sidhe equivalent of a knight, he would have taken his captive home.

What Arthur needed right now was some local assistance. Someone to point him in the right direction and give him the lay of the land. In the world he had left behind, Arthur had maps to rely
on, scouts with advance information, or even local farmers and townspeople who were willing to trade for information. There were no maps here, and he was alone, but there had to be the equivalent of peasantry.

He decided to start with the closest island. He could leap from lilypad to lilypad to get close and swim the last part of the way, but he would have to jump over the gaps between each leaf. He gave himself a running start, and leapt from his leaf to the next. As he landed, his feet tore through and he nearly ended up plunging down into the water again. He managed to drag himself back up onto the leaf, and gave the pad a testing push. It was strong enough to hold him, but clearly still somewhat delicate. He tried again, leaping onto the third pad with a rolling land to soften his fall, and this time the material held.

He was making good progress when he heard the distant sound of a woman's voice. Whoever it was, she was humming and half-singing. Arthur paused and scanned the water, but saw nothing. He heard a splash from behind him, and turned to see the source of the noise, almost a dozen leaves away. A woman had been swimming nearby, and she had pulled herself out of the water to sit in the notch of one of the lilypads. He saw her from the back, and as she hummed she began to comb her long, draping hair. Could she be a Sidhe? Would she help him or alert the others? He had to take a chance.

"Hello?" Arthur called, but there was no response. Perhaps she was too far away to hear him, or too preoccupied. He had to get closer. But as he readied to leap to the next pad, he saw something in the water. At first he thought it was only a ripple from a fish, but with alarm he realized that it was some kind of monstrous creature, sneaking up on the oblivious woman. He called to her again, and this time she turned to him, but instead of responding to his alarm, she smiled demurely and continued to comb her hair.

He saw the yellow-furred back of the creature surface again, then slip deeper into the water. It was headed right for the woman. He had to reach her before it was too late. Arthur quickened his pace, leaping and rolling from pad to pad almost as quickly as the lurking creature swam. But he wasn't fast enough. With a burst of speed, the creature leapt from the water and tackled the woman. She shrieked in alarm as she was grabbed from her perch and dragged into the water.

Arthur pulled out his sword and dove after them. He saw them easily in the clear water, and as he sank towards them, he realized with shock that the woman was not a woman, but another monster herself. She and the yellow creature were wound together in a pitched battle; her sweet smile had filled itself with vicious teeth, and her hands were clawed and finned. He had thought her legs were simply dangling in the water, but now he saw that they were scaled and finned like that of a fish.

He began to swim away in alarm, but the monstrous woman had seen him, and she lashed out at the yellow monster hard enough to tear herself from its grip. She swam right for Arthur, her teeth bared and claws reaching out to grab him. Arthur couldn't swim very fast with his armor weighing him down, so he kicked to keep himself from falling deeper and raised his sword.

She was fast, faster than him, and when she reached him, she knocked the air from his lungs. Arthur struck her on one scaled thigh, and she tore at his armor. Angry at his survival, she opened her jaws wide to rip open his throat, but she was yanked back. To Arthur's further surprise, it was the yellow monster again. It was restraining the woman with some effort, and Arthur realized that it was helping him, saving him. Though his vision was fading from lack of air, he used the last of his strength to swim forward and thrust his sword into her chest. She went wild, kicking out with her legs, and caught Arthur a second blow.

He pulled his sword free, ready to stab her again, but it was a mistake; without the support, without air, under the weight of his heavy armor, he began to sink, and he didn't have the strength to swim
upwards. Numbly, he fumbled for the buckles of his plating, but it was too late. His chest felt like it was about to burst, and he couldn't stop himself from breathing in.

There was something familiar about drowning.

*Merlin,* he thought, as the darkness swallowed him.

§

Arthur could breathe again, but there was something wrong with the air. It felt heavy and slow, and his lungs rebelled against it, sending him into a coughing fit. His lungs ached, and his mouth tasted of lake silt. Someone was holding him down, but even that felt strange, like if they let go he would float away. And their hands were...

He opened his eyes, and the shock temporarily silenced him. There was another creature on top of him: a woman on top, like the monster woman, but her lower half was like that of an octopus. The tentacles were what was holding him down, rubbery suckered and gripping him with surprising strength. The tentacles were an orange-red with brightly colored rings that seemed to flash in warning. She was lean and severe, and her upper half was naked but for a heavy draping of silver and pearls.

He was lying on the bottom of the lake. He was on the bottom of the lake, and he'd just escaped two magical creatures only to be captured by another. No, not just one. To either side, he saw more of the tentacle creatures, some smaller creatures that were best described as human-like seals, and yellow monsters like the one that had fought against the woman.

"You are awake?" asked a voice, but no one seemed to be speaking with their mouths. Instead, the sound somehow happened inside his head. Speaking without talking; it was what Merlin had described.

"The Mari-Morgen was an undying spirit. How did you kill her? How?" asked the voice, and Arthur realized it was coming from the octopus woman who was restraining him. She was staring down at him, and her eyes were red. "Speak, human, or I will crack your shell."

Arthur tried to speak, but with the water it just came out as a muffled gurgle. The tentacles tightenedpainfully around his ribs, and in desperation, Arthur silently shouted 'Wait!' in his head.

The tentacles eased their grip. Arthur was fairly certain he could wrench himself free of them, but he was on the bottom of the lake and somehow not dead, and he had a feeling that to stay that way, he had to cooperate. At least these monsters weren't actively trying to eat him.

Yet.

'My sword,' Arthur thought aloud. His hand flexed to reach for it, but he remembered that he'd dropped it when he drowned.

"Where is it?" she demanded, turning away from him.

"We had to leave it behind, Kyria Cirrina," said one of the seal creatures. The creatures were androgynous, and wore diaphanous white shirts and red hats with feathers sticking out. It was an odd touch for an undersea creature. "It was stuck, and there was no time to take it if we were to save both Vough and the human."

"Then send someone to get it. We are already delayed. We will deal with the human once we are at the palace."
The seal creature gave an obedient flick of its tail and sent another of its kind swimming away.

'Vough?' Arthur thought, and then, 'Stuck?'

"Vough is my Fuath," explained the seal creature, evidently also able to hear Arthur's thoughts. "The Mari-Morgen hurt him, but she might have killed him if it wasn't for you. Please do not fight, I do not wish to hurt you."

Arthur was gradually released from the grip of Kyría Cirrina, only to be trussed up in ropes made of extraordinarily tough kelp. They were probably magic, like everything else around here seemed to be. As the rope was brought around him, the seal creature pressed down on Arthur's head, and he realized that he was wearing one of the red hats himself. Somewhere, Merlin was laughing at him.

"Do not take it off," said the seal creature. "Without it, you will drown again."

When they finished with him, he could barely so much as wriggle. Though he might be able to get out of them if he had some time and privacy, he was given neither. Instead, he was grabbed by one of the Fuaths and hauled onto its back as the group resumed their journey.

The seal creature swam alongside him and gave him a friendly smile. "My name is Síofra. What's yours?"

Arthur had been trained on how to respond in the unlikely event that he was captured in battle. Normally his status was the one thing that it was valuable to share, because knowledge of it made him valuable to others. But right now Arthur was reluctant to share any information at all. 'Arthur,' he thought in response, leaving out any matters of title.

"Ar-thur," said Síofra, mulling it over. "That is a kind name. It was a kind thing you did, risking your life for my Fuath."

Síofra was looking at him with such gratitude that it made Arthur want to squirm. It was pure chance that he'd ended up killing the Mari-Morgen, which had initially looked human, rather than the monstrous Fuath. If he been had faced any of these creatures in Camelot, it was likely that he would have killed them without hesitation.

'I have to get back to the surface,' Arthur thought. 'Will you let me go?'

Síofra's black eyes went wide; the creature was strangely innocent, though it was clearly acting as some kind of guard or servant. "Oh, no. You are the property of Kyría Cirrina now. I could not steal from her."

'Property?' Arthur thought, raising his eyebrows in astonishment. He was not property.

"When we reach the Finfolkaheem, you will be presented before the Court. You will make a valuable trade. That is why Kyría Cirrina saved your life."

Arthur didn't like the sound of that. It was one thing to be captured as a hostage, and quite another to be scavenged and sold.

"You are unhappy," Síofra observed. "You would rather be dead? Was that why you came here?"

'Of course not,' Arthur thought. But he was here on a mission to rescue Merlin, and he hadn't put up with Sidhe and dragons and spells just to end up captured himself by some other magical creatures. 'What's the Finfolkaheem? Is it far?"
"It is the palace of the Finfolk. Unseelie travel from distant waters for its market. But we are near at last."

'Unseelie? Is that what you are?' It seemed that Arthur had found a helpful local after all.

"I am a Merrow," explained Síofra. "Kyría Cirrina is of the Finfolk. You will meet many races in the Court, and all are Unseelie."

'I'm looking for the Sidhe,' Arthur thought, deciding that it was worth the risk to ask. 'Will they be there?'

Síofra gave a thoughtful hum. "Sidhe are Seelie, not Unseelie. They pretend they are like you. Like humans. They are not welcome here."

Síofra flicked its tail, and moved ahead to keep pace with the Fuath. Arthur wondered if he'd managed to insult the only friendly face he'd yet met. His rescue plan was not going very well. Perhaps once they reached this Finfolkheem, he would have a chance to get away. At least he had a destination now: the Court of the Seelie. It was a start.

As Arthur was carried along, he observed his surroundings. He was near the head of the procession, which meant that most of it was before him. The other Finfolk were similarly decorated in lavish silver and pearls, and did not carry any of the kelp-woven nets that most of the Merrow did. The nets were filled with glowing orbs, each gently swirling with light. They were neutrally buoyant, so they did not seem to be much of a burden for the Merrow. Something about them looked familiar, but they were too obscured by the nets for Arthur to be certain. He guessed that whatever the orbs were, that was what the Finfolk had brought to trade.

Other Merrow were clearly acting as guards, in conjunction with the Fuath. Without the obscuring chaos of the fight, Arthur could study the monsters in full. The Fuath were huge beasts, each bigger than a horse and covered with shaggy yellow fur. They had massive, spiked tails, and limbs that ended with clawed fins. One of the Fuath was injured, and Arthur realized that that must be Vough.

He looked out past the procession. Here was the forest of old, gnarled trees and floating lanterns that he had seen from Camelot. At some time, maybe a very long time ago, Avalon was not a vast lake with a series of islands. It was a forested valley within a circle of mountains. It was impossible to guess what had caused its transformation, and Arthur did not try. But he saw the way these water creatures had taken advantage of what that old world had left behind. Even the path they took now, one swum above the sand, traced along what was clearly the remains of a gallery. Huge stone blocks stuck out of the sand at odd angles, and broken columns had overgrown with algae. Where once there had been a forest of trees, or perhaps even gardens, now there was a forest of tall, colorful kelp that swayed in the gentle current. Morning light rippled far above, casting down streaks of light as if through clouds.

As they passed the lanterns, Arthur saw that they did not hold anything as mundane as candles. Instead they seemed to be full of tiny creatures that themselves glowed, the largest no bigger than a pea. Each lantern contained hundreds of the little creatures, and together they cast a strange, diffuse light, brightening the depths that the sunlight could not reach.

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It was over an hour before they reached the Finfolkheem. At the rate the procession had swum, it was impossible that they had remained within the water between the islands, and yet distance, like everything else in Avalon, proved to be a deceptive thing. They had not left the lake, and yet it seemed that they had travelled beyond it. Arthur only hoped that he would be able to get back to
But what concerned him now was not what lay behind him, but before and above him. The Finfolkaheem was a palace beyond any he had ever seen. Camelot's glory lay in the height of her towers, the thickness of her walls, the brilliance of her white stone, but Finfolkaheem was its opposite and its better. Instead of heavy stone, she was made of clear crystal, delicate and shimmering. She had not towers but spires that reached almost to the water's surface. Instead of fierce gargoyles, living creatures rested and played at those heights, rippling shoals of fish and smaller things too distant to name. As they drew closer, he saw that there were decorations in the crystal, impossibly fine patterns that seemed not to have been carved but grown.

They entered through a high arch. There were many other creatures here, and Arthur caught glimpses of them as he was carried along. Though many had human attributes, like faces and hands, they were obviously all creatures, though not only of fresh water. Some had fins, some wings; some scales and some fur. Some had the horns of great stags, and some floated in bubbles of air. Many carried similar nets of glowing orbs, but others held chests of unknown treasure, or mysterious sacks. But as Arthur was carried past, all eyes were upon him, curious, vengeful, hungry. His hand itched for his sword.

They arrived at a room. Some privacy was lent by the kelp that had been woven into living, multi-colored curtains. Despite the height of the palace, there were no floors above them, only crystal and water, and below was only soft, pale sand. Rocks were arranged like furniture.

Just as Síofra left on some errand, a male Finfolk swum into the room, looking slightly harried. "You're late. The market's about to open. What took you so long?" He saw Arthur and frowned. "A human? A living human? How is this possible?"

"Oh, Keuppedros, he is more than that," Kyría Cirrina said, swimming over to Arthur and resting a webbed hand over his chest. "I found him near the moment of death. Come, feel him."

Keuppedros joined her, and rested his hand next to hers. His harried expression transformed into one of delight. "We should crack his shell. There is a worthy pearl within."

"We have enough pearls," said Kyría Cirrina. "He will fetch a far higher price intact. That he is still alive adds an air of mystery which will make him worth even more."

Crack his shell? Pearl? 'I am not yours to sell,' Arthur thought at them, disturbed and angry. 'I demand you release me.'

They ignored him. "He seems to be damaged," said Keuppedros. He moved his hand over the damage that the Mari-Morgen had done to Arthur's armor. "Époulothoún," he said, and his red eyes flared with magic. When he dropped his hand, the metal was pristine, as if Merlin had just spent the afternoon mending and polishing it.

"He shines like silver now," said Kyría Cirrina, as she stared in desire. "Perhaps we should keep him."

"He will buy us all the silver the Merrows can carry," promised Keuppedros. "If we enter him at the start of the Council, we will have our pick of treasure, before it can be spent at the market."

While the Merrows and Finfolk busied themselves unpacking the glowing orbs -- and perhaps those were the pearls? How could he have one of those inside him? -- Arthur finished working himself free of the kelp that bound his wrists. He had been slowly making progress all through the journey here, and it was long past time that he escaped this nightmare. All he needed was the right moment, and he
could swim into the busy halls. He could use the tall spires of the castle to quickly reach the surface, and then figure where to go from there. He'd been waiting for the Merrow to return with his sword, because once he had it again, he would make quick work of any Unseelie that tried to stop him. But the Merrow had yet to return. It seemed the sword would just have to wait.

One of the floating nets slipped from a Merrow's grasp, and the orbs spilled out and up. It was just the distraction Arthur needed. As soon as everyone turned away, he pulled his wrists from behind his back and freed himself from the rest of the rope. He half-ran, half-swam for the door, and heard the cry of alarm just as he turned into the hall. It was just as crowded as before, perhaps even more, and he used that to his advantage, ducking behind flowing robes and blending in next to creatures whose skin gleamed like armor.

He didn't head back the way they'd come in, because that was where they would be expecting him to go. Instead he travelled with the crowd towards the center of the palace. The crowd slowed almost to a stop before suddenly releasing into a huge chamber, and Arthur realized that this must be the market. Despite the alienness of these creatures, he recognized that they were setting up just as a human market, with laying out their wares for display. A quick glance around revealed a dizzying assortment of wares, foods, bottled potions, plants, even other creatures. There were also more of the glowing orbs, as well as items that seemed to have been taken from the human world.

But he had no time for sightseeing. There was no ceiling to the chamber, just as with the rooms, and he swam upwards as fast as he could. He considered discarding his armor, but if he met up with another creature like the Mari-Morgen, it could be the difference between life and death. He suddenly remembered that the red Merrow hat was also the only thing keeping him from drowning, and he gave it a firm tug to secure it.

The chamber's walls did not lead to a spire, but a wide opening only a few stories up. He pushed himself over the lip, slid along the smooth crystal walls and then pushed off, propelling himself away from the palace. He was free!

"Arthur!" called a voice, faint in his head, and he glanced over his shoulder to see Síofra swimming after him. Arthur was a strong swimmer, but he was tiring, and Síofra was faster. Arthur pushed himself harder, kept his eyes locked on the surface. If he could only get to solid ground, he would have the advantage over these water creatures, sword or no sword.

Síofra called again, louder as it drew closer. When its voice suddenly became alarmed, and Arthur glanced back to see Síofra waving its furry arms, as if to warn him. A movement caught the corner of Arthur's eye, and he turned to see what Síofra was warning him about.

It was a huge creature, over a hundred feet long, with two massive bull-like horns and a mane that ran down the length of its back, and it was headed right for Arthur, its huge mouth opening in anticipation. Arthur briefly froze in shock, then swam for the surface with everything he had.

He could hear the deep rumble of the creature as it closed in on him. He wasn't going to make it in time. He turned to face the monster as it barrelled towards him, rows of sharp teeth encircling its maw. He braced himself, ready to go down fighting, but just as he was about to be swallowed, Síofra crashed into him and sent them both tumbling away.

The monster bit down on nothing, and gave a bellow of anger that shook Arthur's bones. Síofra recovered first, dragging Arthur along by the arm back towards the castle. Arthur tried to pull free, but the small creature was surprisingly strong. And then there were other Merrows with them, and their Fuaths, and the next thing Arthur knew he was trapped in one of the nets that had been used to hold the glowing orbs. He struggled against it, but a Fuath grabbed him and held him tight.
Through the netting, Arthur saw that the huge creature was finally completing its turn, and coming back for a second try. He was hustled back into the market chamber, where Síofra rounded on him.

"That was very foolish, Arthur," it chided.

'Let me go! I am Prince Arthur of Camelot, and you have no right to hold me!' Arthur kicked at the Fuath, but the monster just grunted at him.

"You are the property of Kyría Cirrina, by right of salvage," said Síofra. "Your life was forfeit, and it has been claimed. Do not try to escape again. Not every being is as easy to deter as a Water Bull."

Arthur was not taken back to the chamber he had escaped from, but to a new room just off the market chamber. Kyría Cirrina and Keuppedros were waiting there, and they looked angry and relieved to see Arthur returned to them.

"The sooner we are rid of him the better," muttered Keuppedros. "A living human is far more trouble than a pearl."

"It is a shame," sighed Kyría Cirrina. She stroked Arthur's armor through the netting. "He is so wonderfully shiny."

It was a shame it was impossible to spit on someone underwater. Arthur would have taken some satisfaction in seeing her indignation.

Besides Arthur's group, there were dozens of different creatures gathered in a circle around a wide, shallow depression. Another Finman swam into the center of it. He was decorated with even more silver than Kyría Cirrina. "I welcome you all to Finfolkheem, and to this season's meeting of the Unseelie Court. I must remind everyone that for the duration of the market, Finfolkheem is neutral territory. All wars, fights, feuds, and blood battles are suspended until all parties return to their own lands. There will be no stealing, no killing, and no eating of other participants."

There was a murmur of assent from around the circle.

The Finman curled his tentacles in satisfaction. "Excellent. To begin our festivities, a special treat will be presented for auction. A unique piece, never before seen in Avalon." He gestured towards Arthur, and the Fuath carried Arthur into the center, flanked by two Merrows. The net was cut and pulled away.

"A living human!" declared the Finman, with evident pride. "The real thing. No glamour, no illusion. Remove the cohuleen druith, and he will drown." The Finman removed the red hat from Arthur's head just long enough for Arthur to start to struggle in alarm. It was replaced, and the water that had been drowning him suddenly became breathable again.

Several creatures swam over to inspect Arthur. They poked and prodded him, tugged at his clothes and his armor and his hair, pinched his skin and licked it. There was a palpable excitement in the room as everyone realized that Arthur really was an actual, living human.

"What about his soul?" asked something that looked like a giant, painted slug. "How do we know he has one?"

"Because I have seen it," said Kyría Cirrina, stepping forward and shooing away the last of the creatures that lingered around Arthur. "I found him at the moment of death, and restored him before the pearl could fully leave its shell. His soul is one of the most beautiful I have ever seen. I promise you, you will not be disappointed."
"Bidding begins at a hundred silvers," said the Finman. Immediately fins, tentacles, and paws were raised, and the price was quickly driven up. Though it was a strange sort of compliment, Arthur could only fume and hope that whatever bought him, it would be easier to escape from than the Finfolk and their servants.

Bidding slowed as the price grew too high for all but a few. Arthur hardly cared which of them won him, but in the end it was, of all things, a horse. Not a normal horse, obviously, but a magical aquatic horse, white and sky-blue in color, with a mane that seemed to be made of sea foam. The horse was also accompanied by servants, who carried over a huge chest full of silver. When Arthur was delivered to them, they bound him in silver chain and lay him over the back of the horse. The skin of the creature was smooth and cold and oddly sticky. The horse and its servants excused themselves to take away their prize, and the last sight he had of Kyría Cirrina was of her slathering her body and tentacles with silver in utter ecstasy.

To his surprise, Síofra accompanied them out.

Arthur immediately began to work on freeing his hands, but the more he strained, the tighter the chains became.

"Do not struggle, Arthur," warned Síofra. "You must not injure yourself."

'Why?' Arthur thought back, with surly anger. 'Because you don't want me to damage my new owner's property? What does it matter if you're just going to kill me and take my soul?'

Síofra said nothing. They left the market and made their way to a garden outside the palace. It was an underwater garden, with strange, bony plants and shoals of small, glimmering fish.

"I also saw your soul," Síofra said, at last. "The pearls we bring to market are the souls of humans who lost their way before they died. Their souls belong to no one. If we did not take them, they would go to waste. But your soul does have a claim upon it. Not the claim of a god, or Kyría Cirrina would not have taken you. But it is a claim."

'Then why go through all this?' Arthur asked. He had not been bought cheaply. 'Why not just let me go?'

Síofra and the others brought Arthur down from the horse and put him on a flat rock that served as garden seating.

"I could not let you go when you belonged to Kyría Cirrina," said Síofra. "If she believed you could not be sold, she would have taken your pearl for herself. Your soul would have been consumed. But I knew there was another who would be willing to help."

Arthur turned to the horse.

"Not all Unseelie are as mindlessly greedy as the Finfolk," said the horse. "And we are not all hostile to humans. I myself once lived among your kind. There, my name was Morvarc'h."

'In Albion?' Arthur thought, surprised.

"If you are from Camelot, then you must know of the kingdom of Cornwall," said Morvarc'h. "I rescued Gradlon, King of Cornwall, and Malgven, the Queen of the North, from drowning at sea. I became quite fond of them, and remained in their land with their daughter, Dahut, until her passing. I have not returned to the human world since."

'Cornwall?' The names were familiar, but it took Arthur a moment to recall from where. His mother's
line, the DuBois, were from Cornwall, and he remembered the names of Gradlon, Malgven, and Dahut from distant lessons on genealogy. 'Those are my mother's ancestors. To have lived with them, you would have to be centuries old.'

"I am a kelpie," said Morvarc'h. "Unlike the Finfolk, we live long lives. That affords us a perspective that they cannot achieve, and the wisdom not to lose ourselves to greed." He turned to Síofra. "You may remove his chains. He will not endanger himself now."

Síofra removed them. Arthur was tempted to take advantage of his sudden freedom, but he recognized that Morvarc'h was right. Having found an actual ally, the best thing to do now was cooperate with him.

'If I want to leave, you will let me?' Arthur asked.

"I will return you to the gates of Avalon, if that is your wish."

'It is,' Arthur replied. 'But not alone. I came to Avalon because the Sidhe took someone from me. Someone very important. I have to get him back. Will you help me?"

"The Sidhe," said Morvarc'h, thoughtfully. "They are not like us. For all their long lives, they are trapped by their envy of the human world. If they have taken your friend, they will not be willing to part with him. Not for any price."

'They have no claim to him,' Arthur insisted. 'He was stolen from me. I will not leave Avalon without him."

Morvarc'h seemed amused by this. "You have the spirit of your ancestors. And if I am not mistaken, you bear their aspect."

'Then you will help me?"

"I can take you to the island of the Sidhe. There they hold their own court, the Seelie Court, where their kind congregate before Titania and Oberon. All Sidhe are as greedy and vain as the Finfolk. The ones who took your friend will not be able to resist displaying their treasures to her. Sit upon my back and I will carry you."

'Thank you,' Arthur thought, grateful. It was more than he'd hoped for. He pushed himself up off the silt and swum into position on Morvarc'h's back. When he tried to grab at his mane, his hands went right through it; it really was sea froth, or the magical equivalent. The sticky fur would have to suffice to help Arthur keep his grip.

Síofra swam up to him. "The Mari-Morgen has long preyed on my kind. Even the Finfolk did not have the power to destroy her, but you did. For that, all Merrows owe you a debt. If it is within my power to assist you, I will."

'There is something. My sword."

"Ah. When it fell from your hand, it plunged into the bottom of the lake. We tried to pull it free, but it was fixed solidly within the rock. I will try to free it, but it may take time."

Time Arthur didn't have. He couldn't wait for the sword and then go to Merlin. He had to save Merlin first, and then deal with the sword. 'Keep trying."

"I wish you blessings, Arthur of Camelot. And blessings to your friend." Síofra gave him a sympathetic look, and it was clear that Síofra believed that Merlin's shell had already been cracked,
and his pearl, his soul removed. That Merlin was dead. Arthur couldn't let himself consider that as an option. Whatever had happened to Merlin, Arthur was going to get him back.

"Hold on," said Morvarc'h, and then they were flying, away from the garden and the palace. Morvarc'h galloped through the water as if upon an invisible road, and water rushed past them like wind. Arthur gripped the horse's neck with one hand and his hat with the other; the last thing he needed was another round of drowning. The rush of water threatened to dismount him, and he curled himself against Morvarc'h's neck, burying his head beneath the foamy mane.

His mother's ancestors had been friends with an enchanted horse. It was hard to grasp, even though he had heard legends of such creatures. He had thought of them only like the unicorn, prey to make made into trophies, or as threats to be destroyed. And yet here he was, being rescued by one that had lived with his own ancestors. From the sound of it, he would not even exist if not for Morvarc'h.

The last thing he expected to find in this strange, surreal place was a link to his family's past. It made him wonder about the DuBois. The only one of his mother's relatives still alive was his Uncle Agravaine, and Arthur had not seen him in a very long time. His mother's death had devastated the family, and driven a wedge between his father's side and his mother's side, one that had not healed after more than twenty years. The current feud with King Odin only exacerbated the situation. Perhaps when he returned to Camelot, he would reach out to Agravaine and arrange a visit. Even if Arthur could not safely travel to Cornwall, Agravaine could come to Camelot. He tucked the thought away to deal with once this crisis was over.

They broke the surface, and suddenly they were galloping on the water instead of under it. Arthur straightened up and saw that they were headed directly for a large island. As they approached the beach, Morvarc'h slowed, and he stopped at the edge of the water. Arthur hopped off, his boots splashing in the water as he struggled to regain his land legs.

"Be careful when you remove--" Morvarc'h began, but Arthur had already pull off the red hat. He had expected to simply resume breathing air, but the water still in his lungs had other ideas. He ended up on all fours on the muddy beach, vomiting up water and coughing violently.

It probably shouldn't be possible for a water horse to look dryly amused, but Morvarc'h achieved it. Arthur straightened and looked at the island. Just as he had seen on his arrival in Avalon, there was no sign of habitation, no markings or structures. "Where do we go next?" he asked, his voice roughened from the water. Arthur took off the hat and wrung it out. He shook it out, folded it, and tucked it into his shirt for safekeeping. If the sun could be trusted, it was already noon.

"I can go no further," said Morvarc'h. "I cannot trespass upon Sidhe soil. But I will advise you if I can. What do you know of the Sidhe who took your friend?"

"The only name I am certain of is Sir Drudwas."

"Ah, Drudwas ap Tryffin," said Morvarc'h, knowingly. "He is a knight of the Tylwyth Teg and the brother of Erdudwyl. She is the wife of Edern ap Nudd, who is brother to Gwynn, the king of the Tylwyth Teg. You have made powerful enemies."

"Whoever they are, they have trespassed upon my kingdom. They have threatened me and my people. I will stop them, however powerful they may be."

Morvarc'h nickered. "Then you walk in the footsteps of Beli the Great. When you are ready to return, call my name into the water, and I will hear you." Morvarc'h turned and leapt into the water. As he did, he dissolved completely into mist, so that the surface did not even ripple.
Arthur could not even begin to process everything that had just happened. Now was not the time. But he needed to rest for a moment, for the sake of his sanity. There was a log on the narrow beach, so he sat on it and sunned himself to chase the chill from his bones. The hat may have allowed him to survive underwater, but the bottom of a lake was still an inhospitable place for a human.

Síofra and Morvarc'h, for all their inhumanity, reminded Arthur very much of Merlin. Of the faith that Merlin put in him, despite the fact that Merlin was a sorcerer and Arthur's duty was to kill sorcerers. They had saved his life, just as Merlin had, time and again. Arthur had to get Merlin back, had to make things right between them.

With Morvarc'h gone, the island looked perfectly normal. Insects buzzed at the water's edge here, just as they did in Camelot. There were even dragonflies, and they looked like perfectly normal dragonflies. Arthur had always liked them. They were strange and curious, but still comfortably within the bounds of normality.

Perhaps things would be less baffling from here on. Perhaps the oddest parts of Avalon were behind him, left behind in Finfolkaheem. Perhaps he would stride into the woods, find Sir Drudwas and Aulfric with a captive Merlin, and all it would take to rescue him would be one good sneak attack and they would be on their way home.

A giant frog with bat wings instead of limbs suddenly flew down from an overhanging tree and leapt into the shallows, lunging at the dragonflies. The dragonflies breathed fire, singeing the bat-frog before they scattered to escape it. The bat-frog gave a massive croak and lashed its long, lizard-tail at the water in frustration, and then jumped back into the tree.

So much for normality.

He had rested for long enough. He pushed himself to his feet and saw that there was a narrow path that led into the deep forest. A path that might very well lead him to the Seelie Court. He had no weapons, no allies, no idea of what he was about to face.

He stepped onto the path, and he walked.
Morgana's chambers were quiet and dark when they returned, with only a few slivers of moonlight slipping in through the unbroken windows now that the storm had passed. Gwen carefully made her way to the table, her one lit candle casting a small but warm circle of light around her. She set it down and used it to light the rest, then stood at the end of the table in wait, uncertain if she was truly welcome or if she had merely been taken back by Morgana to spite Arthur.

Morgana wrapped herself in a blanket and sat down. She placed the grimoire and the notes on the table, put on a resolute expression and opened the book. "There has to be something in this we can use," she said, flipping through the pages. "I refuse to sit around, waiting to be slaughtered."

Gwen peered over the candles at the grimoire and the stack of notes. She had been eager to get a look at them herself since she'd spotted them in Arthur's chambers, but Merlin had gifted them to Morgana in his letter to her. It made sense, since Morgana was the one who needed it most, and at the time he'd written the letters, Merlin had not known of Gwen's faith. To be so close to a book of the Old Religion, to the very words of the gods... She had not felt such awe since she was little, and worshipped in unquestioning devotion with her family.

At first the pages were filled with the writing of the Old Religion, which Gwen could recognize but not read with any fluency. Then the writing changed; Gwen sounded out some words in her head, and recognized the words, understood at least some of them. There was a pause and she realized that Morgana had stopped flipping the pages and was staring at her.

"You can read this?" Morgana asked. "You understand it?"

"The old tongue," Gwen said, and took a cautious step closer. "Yes, my lady. My parents taught me."

Morgana stiffened and looked down at the open pages. She traced a finger lightly against the ornate painting on the page. "You never told me," she said, the hurt and betrayal clear in her voice. She looked up, and Gwen nearly flinched at the anger directed at her. "I wonder if I ever knew you at all."

Gwen forced herself not to step back. Despite Merlin's death, despite all the revelations, their fate had not changed. This could still be their last night alive, and she wanted no more regrets. "You know why I couldn't."

Morgana gave her an incredulous look. "Did you really think I would have told Uther?"

"Not now," Gwen said. "But when we met. When I came to the castle. You were the King's Ward."

"I thought I was more than that to you. I thought we were friends."

"We were," Gwen insisted.

"The two of us against the world. Or was that a lie as well?"

"I couldn't put my family at risk. And you said..."

"What?" Morgana prompted, angrily. "What could I have possibly said that would make it impossible for you to trust me? That made it right for you to lie to me for years?"
"Nothing, my lady," Gwen said, biting back the truth, because it would do little good to remind Morgana that there was a time when she was as prejudiced against sorcerers and worshippers as any in Camelot. That it was not only Uther that taught her that magic was evil and corrupting, but also her beloved father Gorlois. "But I lied only to protect you, just as I lied to protect my family. As you lied to the King tonight."

That seemed to soften Morgana. "Yes," she said. "And I know that after the loss of your father... you had reason to be afraid. But you shouldn't have lied about my dreams. You should have told me the truth."

There was an awkward silence, and they both looked away. What more was there to say? What was done was done, and there was nothing either of them could do to change the past. The future looked little better. Yet Morgana's bleak prophecies had compelled Gwen to action thus far, and even with Merlin's death, she could not accept their fate, could not surrender to it. She straightened her back, sat down beside Morgana despite the lack of invitation, and started pointedly reading Arthur's notes.

Morgana stared at her, perhaps stunned by her defiance. But instead of throwing Gwen out as she had before, she turned back to the grimoire and resumed her attempts to make sense of it. Then with a huff she slid the grimoire over to Gwen and took the notes for herself. "Here. It's all nonsense to me," she said, with feigned indifference.

Gwen bit back a smile. Morgana had always been proud, and no matter how difficult her pride could be, Gwen was glad that it had not changed. She bent over the grimoire and got to work.

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By the time the sun rose, they had made it through the grimoire, but they had little to show for it. They could not translate the first section of the book but for a few words that Gwen had learned from her mother. The rest of it was somewhat understandable, but there were so many gaps in Gwen's vocabulary -- which consisted only of the words needed for prayers -- that it was difficult to discern the purpose of any given spell. Guessing seemed like a particularly dangerous thing to do, even as a last resort.

The other problem was that while Gwen knew about prayers and spells, and had known sorcerers and seen their magic, she had no magic of her own. It was difficult if not impossible for her to teach Morgana how a spell worked as she had never performed any herself. Even where she could translate a spell clearly, Morgana could say the words all morning and nothing would happen. As a result, they had both grown weary and frustrated.

As the world had not yet ended, they agreed that the best thing to do was to take a break.

Gwen went down to the kitchens to get their breakfast, but doing so was a sharp reminder of Merlin's absence. There was so much going on that it wasn't easy to take the time to grieve, but she couldn't ignore the pain of his absence. Gwen had mourned too many already in her life, and the sudden, cruel death of her father was still fresh even after a year. Sometimes she woke up and forgot, only to be reminded all over again. And so she did not break down in tears and was not overcome by the loss. She maintained the same polite, calm facade that had always protected her, while in her heart she mourned.

She should have told Merlin the truth a year ago, when she had first found out about his magic. She should have told Morgana the truth when her nightmares started. Gwen had been so afraid that she had stopped trusting even her closest friends. But that was life in Camelot. Uther's long campaign against magic turned neighbor against neighbor. Even the mildest accusation of sorcery would earn the King's favor and even his gold.
Before her mother died, there were days when people would just disappear from Gwen's life, and only later would she find out that they had been executed. Some of them had been secretly of the faith, and a few had even been sorcerers, but many were neither. As Gwen grew older, she learned how easy it was for a landlord to be rid of a difficult tenant, or for jealousy and rejection to result in accusations of love spells and witchcraft. To survive as a citizen of Camelot meant keeping your mouth shut and your head down. It meant being as careful of your friends as you were of your enemies. Gwen had always tried to fight against that fear, to remain open to the world, yet now she saw that she had succumbed.

She returned to Morgana's chambers feeling angry at herself, angry at the injustice that was so commonplace and mundane. She was angry at her own powerlessness, and at her acceptance of it. She put down the tray with a thump and set out the food with equal violence.

Morgana peeked out from behind the screen where she was changing. "Gwen? What's happened?"

"Nothing, my lady," Gwen said, and sat down. She stared at her plate and felt entirely absent of hunger. Her stomach was already full of anger and had no room for food.

There was a pause as Morgana finished changing and stepped out. She was wearing a simple black gown, loose and flowing. "I thought we were done with little white lies," she said, and there was heat in her voice despite her calm expression.

"I was thinking about Merlin," Gwen admitted, her chest knotting up again. "I miss him."

Morgana didn't reply. She turned and frowned at the oilcloth-covered windows.

"Morgana?"

"I miss him too," Morgana said, "but he lied to me. He knew about my magic and he said nothing. I thought we were friends."

Gwen couldn't help but feel that it was as directed at her as much as Merlin. "He gave you his book."

"And what use is it to me when I can't even read it?" Morgana said, her temper flaring. "I needed help, not kindling paper. I needed to know I wasn't alone. And instead he and you and Gaius lied to my face and drugged me!"

As her anger reached its peak, her eyes went wide and golden light flared in them. Gwen shrieked as the vase of flowers on the table suddenly exploded, sending water and ceramic shards flying. Morgana stumbled back, horrified, and shut her eyes tightly.

Gwen uncurled from her protective hunch and was relieved to find that they were both unharmed. She looked at the mess on the table and the floor, and at Morgana, who was frozen stiff and squeezing her eyes tightly shut. Gwen stood up from the table and small fragments from the vase fell from her hair and clothes. Their breakfast was ruined, the whole table soaked and covered in bits of vase and flowers.

"Gwen?" called Morgana, trembling and frightened.

"I'm all right," Gwen said, though she felt quite shaken herself. It was one thing to come in after the fact and see the blown-out windows, but Morgana had just looked at the vase and it had exploded. For all the years Gwen had known Morgana, she had only ever been afraid for her, never of her. Yet here they were. The only solace was that Morgana seemed even more scared of herself than Gwen was.
"Morgana," Gwen said, keeping her voice calm and even. "I know you're angry, and you have every right to be. None of us wanted to accept the truth. But you have to let us help you now."

Morgana slowly opened her eyes, as if ready to close them again if her magic flared. But her eyes remained their natural pale green. She breathed in sharply. "You're bleeding," she said, and reached out to touch Gwen's forehead. When she drew her hand back, there was blood on her fingers.

Gwen reached up to feel the wound, and hissed when she found it: a grazing cut near her hairline. One of the pieces of the vase must have sliced her as it shot past. A few inches down and it could have blinded her, and the thought was sobering.

Morgana had already sprung into action, grabbing the nearest clean cloth and wetting a corner of it in the washbasin. She returned and gently dabbed away the blood, then bundled the cloth and pressed it against the shallow wound.

"There," Morgana said, and Gwen took hold of the cloth and stepped back.

They looked at each other. Regret and anxiety warred on Morgana's face.

"In the letter," Gwen said. "What did he write to you?"

Morgana hesitated, as if reluctant to share whatever small piece of Merlin she had been gifted. "And yours?"

With her free hand, Gwen drew her letter from her pocket and held it out, a sort of challenge. Morgana hesitated again, then offered hers in exchange. They each turned away to read.

Gwen had already memorized what was in her letter. In it, Merlin had thanked her for being so kind to him when he first arrived in Camelot, for being his first and closest friend in a strange new place. He'd remorsefully confessed to being the source of the poultice that both saved her father's life and nearly doomed her, just as he had when Gwen had freed him. It was a solace to her that she had been able to thank Merlin for that poultice, and to grant him forgiveness for it. He did not deserve to carry that burden, either in life or in death.

He had ended his letter with pleading not on his own behalf, but for Arthur and Morgana and Gaius. He asked Gwen to look after them as best she could, to help Gaius and Morgana, though of course he made no mention of their magic. His last request to her, the most important, was that she watch over Arthur and keep him from being alone, because he would be a great king one day, but he couldn't do it if he was alone. And he knew that Gwen would be kind, and love him.

Morgana's letter was not dissimilar, but it was far more direct.

'My Lady,

If you are reading this, then I am dead. I am sorry for this, not for myself, but because it means I cannot give you the help you deserve. You are a brave and wonderful friend. You risked your life for me and my mother, and your teachings kept me safe in Gedref.

Yet in return I was a coward. I was afraid to tell you the truth about myself and about your dreams. I am a sorcerer, a warlock, as I have been since birth. If I was executed, you already know this. No matter what was said about me, know that I sought only to protect Camelot. Know that magic is not evil, that it does not corrupt, and that there are others like us who need help.

Your dreams are prophetic. You are a seer. I bequeath to you my book of spells and hope that it will aid you. Gaius may be able to help you control your magic, if he is still alive. If he is dead, journey
to the woods and seek the Druids, or south to Gedref.

Be well. Be safe.

Merlin'

Gwen had just finished reading when she was startled by Morgana thrusting Gwen's letter back into her hands.

"Unbelievable," Morgana muttered, eyes narrowed.

"Sorry?"

"As if he had any right to assign you to Arthur," Morgana seethed. "Arthur deserves to be alone for what he did. I can't believe Merlin was just going to let Arthur kill him."

"But he didn't."

"And how close was it, do you think?" Morgana challenged. "How bad did things have to be for Merlin to write these? And what he did do wasn't much better. He turned Merlin into his own personal prisoner, all so he wouldn't be alone." She said the last with a sneer. "He's no better than Uther."

"That's not fair," Gwen protested. Morgana's temper often made her take things too far, made her quick to judge. "Arthur's trying to understand. He's trying to be better."

"Now that it's too late."

"It's not too late for everyone else," Gwen said, Merlin's words giving her strength. He had been brave in the face of death, and she could be, too.

"Arthur plays the hero when it suits him," Morgana said, unmoved. "But he goes to his knees the moment Uther crooks his finger."

"You know that's not true," Gwen said. Arthur might not go against Uther the way Morgana did, in blatant defiance, but that didn't mean he never stood up to him when it mattered. Morgana didn't have the weight of expectation on her shoulders. Gwen knew all too well that it was easier to be openly defiant when you had nothing to lose.

"Arthur does as he's told. Or have you forgotten what happened to Linette?"

Gwen stepped back, the words like a blow. "How could you ask me that?" As if Gwen had not taken the full weight of guilt for bringing Linette to Arthur in the first place. As if she had not had nightmares of her own about the execution, as if those images had not merged in her mind with her father's death. She would never forget Linette.

Morgana finally seemed to realize that she'd gone too far, but the words could not be taken back. "Gwen," she said, softly, regretful.

"No," Gwen said, turning away. She gathered up the notes and the grimoire and took them. "If you have no use for this kindling, I'm bringing it down to Gaius. Merlin said he could help and I believe him. I'm not going to let people die just for some... some petty revenge!"

"Gwen, wait," Morgana said, as Gwen reached the door.

But Gwen ignored her. She opened the door and marched out and hurried down the steps, blinking
back her tears. She stopped at the bottom of the stairs, but Morgana hadn't run after her. She dried her eyes on a clean corner of the bloodied cloth, then gently prodded the cut. It seemed to have stopped bleeding, but she would have Gaius take a look at it anyway. And then he would teach her how to read the grimoire, and they would work together to find a spell to save Camelot, whether he liked it or not.

Gwen spared a thought for Morgana and the wreckage of the broken vase and their breakfast, but she refused to turn back. Let Morgana clean up her own mess for a change. Gwen had a kingdom to save.

§

"Gaius? You're out early." Gwen had not expected to find Gaius at the foot of the stairs to his tower. Had he been out on his rounds?

"Gwen, my dear," Gaius said, but as Gwen approached him on the stairs, she realized that he had not woken early but been out all night. And out of the castle, from the look of him. He was wearing his travelling cloak and was leaning tiredly on a Sidhe's staff. He had something hidden under his cloak.

Before she could ask what he had been up to, he fumbled under his cloak and handed her his key ring. "Open my door? I've grown far too old for midnight jaunts."

Gwen gave him a curious look, but accepted his keys. Once they were inside his chambers, she told her to lock the door. Her curiosity was growing by the second. She noted the dirt on his shoes, and the fragments of dried leaves clinging to the hem of his long cloak. She had expected Gaius to be secluding himself in mourning, not traipsing around the forest.

"Gaius? Has something happened?"

"A great deal."

He handed her the staff, and at last revealed what he had been hiding. Gwen gaped in astonishment: it was a tiny blue woman, with gossamer wings, bound up with wire and fixed to the center of a candle cage! The woman had been gagged and blindfolded with scraps of cloth, and despite the coverings her seething fury was evident. She struggled, testing her bonds, but they held firm.

"The Lady Sophia," Gaius explained, setting the cage down on the table. "In her true form." He held up a hand. "I'll explain everything, but first..." He sat down with a groan, and rubbed his lower back. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Oh," Gwen said, suddenly remembering the grimoire. She put it down onto the table, a safe distance from Sophia. "I need... that is, Morgana and I need your help with this. To translate it."

"Of course," Gwen said. "But nothing this, well, advanced, I suppose. And I can't read the first part at all. I'm trying to teach Morgana, but..."

Gaius frowned, then sighed. "Another generation and it will all be forgotten, I expect." But he patted
her hand and mustered a smile. "Let's see if we can keep it alive a while longer."

The door rattled as someone tried to open it, and Gwen and Gaius turned to each other in alarm. The possession of either the grimoire or Sophia would be enough for a death sentence. Gwen's blood ran cold, and she frantically scanned the room for hiding places.

Gaius reached for the cage. "Quickly, we must--"

There was a knock. "Gwen? Are you in there?"

"It's Morgana," Gwen said, relief overwhelming her. She pressed a hand to her chest, to calm her beating heart.

Gaius leaned back, as affected by the close call as she was. Gwen went to the door and let Morgana in, then locked it behind her.

"Gwen, I--" Morgana glanced towards Gaius, then looked again and stared at Sophia. She tilted her head, quite taken aback. "What on earth is that?"

"It's Sophia."

"What do you mean it's Sophia?"

Gaius cleared his throat. "I suggest that I explain everything over breakfast. Unless you've already eaten?"

§

Gaius was in no condition to be crouched over a fire, so Gwen took over the cooking duties. Fortunately Gaius' chambers were well-stocked with water and firewood, so it was short work to heat up a porridge for them. Morgana grated in some cinnamon, and Gwen added a dollop of honey, as they all needed something to calm their nerves.

After their scare with Morgana, they decided that while they could keep the grimoire at hand, for it was easy enough to hide amongst Gaius' library, Sophia needed to be secured from prying eyes. They considered a few hiding places, including a loose floorboard under Merlin's old bed, but eventually settled on the grain barrel Gaius kept along the wall. They wrapped Sophia's cage in burlap, then worked the bundle down into the center of the grain. As a magical creature, she would not suffocate, and the grain would prevent her from raising an alarm -- and from overhearing their conversation.

They were settled around a table, halfway through their bowls, when Morgana could bear to wait no more. "All right," she said, turning to Gaius. "Start explaining."

Gaius finished his mouthful, set down his spoon, and looked at them each in turn. "There is a chance -- a very slim chance -- that Merlin might be alive. Arthur has gone to Avalon to find him."

"What do you mean, he's gone?" Morgana said, taken aback. "How could he leave without us? Did he think we wouldn't have helped?"

"Time was of the essence," Gaius said, with a placating hand.

"How could he have gone to Avalon?" Gwen asked, confused. Avalon wasn't somewhere you could just visit, like a village down the road. "He's not... Gaius, tell me he hasn't..."
Gaius’ eyes widened. "Oh! No, absolutely not. He's alive. Or at least he was, the last time I saw him."

Morgana looked between them, clearly at a loss. Gwen realized that of course Morgana didn't know about Avalon, having been raised without the Old Religion. When they had been trying to read the grimoire, Gwen had been solely focused on the practicalities of spells and magic, but without knowing the old ways, it was like... like trying to make a fine sword by sticking a lump of iron ore into a campfire.

"Avalon is the Otherworld," she explained. "The land of eternal youth. It's where your soul goes when you die. It's where the gods live."

But that just made Morgana more confused. "What does any of this have to do with Merlin still being alive?"

"The last time the Sidhe were here, Merlin saw them open the Gates of Avalon," Gaius said, stepping in. "He should not have survived, and yet he did. We surmised that rather than killing Merlin, the other Sidhe, Aulfric and Drudwas, took Merlin with them and returned to Avalon, perhaps in revenge."

Realization dawned on Morgana's face, followed swiftly by a fresh wave of anger. "When Sophia was here. I came to you about my dreams. I warned you about her. And you drugged me and sent me off to bed!" She stabbed the remains of her porridge with her spoon to punctuate her words. "I can't believe I ever trusted you."

But Gaius refused to turn repentant. "The fact that you did meant that Merlin was able to save Arthur's life."

"And that would have been impossible if you'd admitted the truth?"

"I have taken care of you since you were a child. It was for your own protection. If Uther found out--"

"This has nothing to do with Uther."

"You are the King's Ward," Gaius said, sharply. "While I regret that you have suffered, my first priority has been to keep you alive. The draughts were the only thing that protected you."

Morgana didn't reply, and the two of them were caught in a stare-down. Gwen decided to get back to the business at hand. "So Merlin's in Avalon?"

Gaius dropped his gaze. "It appears so. We were able to locate a spell that allowed Arthur to enter Avalon unharmed. Sophia opened the Gates. Arthur will return when he has found Merlin."

Morgana held out her hand, palm up. "Give me the spell."

"I'm afraid that's not possible."

Morgana snorted and crossed her arms. "If this is about protecting me, I'm not going to be very protected when Camelot is a pile of smoldering ash. Arthur's not the only one around here who can fight, and I know what's coming better than anyone. We have to stop them before it's too late."

"I cannot give you what I do not have," Gaius said. "The spell was given to Arthur by the dragon."

"The Great Dragon?" Gwen said, surprised. She and Morgana had once snuck down into the
dungeons to look for it, but the way had been blocked. "Then it's still alive?"

"Yes, but--"

Morgana pushed away her bowl. "If it gave Arthur the spell, it can give it to me."

Gaius gave her the eyebrow for that. "Even if he was willing, which I very much doubt, you would still have no way to enter Avalon. Only the Sidhe have the power to open the Gates."

Morgana looked towards the grain barrel, then back to Gaius. "If she doesn't want to do it, we'll just have to convince her." There was a substantial threat implicit in her words, but then Morgana had been experiencing the Sidhe's invasion of Camelot over and over again every night in her dreams. Her anger and her urgency were understandable.

But Gaius wasn't ready to give in. "The Sidhe are magical beings, and must be fought with magic in return. Mortal weapons are of little use against them. If and when Arthur returns from Avalon, we will have his sword."

"And what's so special about that?" Morgana said, then gave Gwen an apologetic glance. "Not that it isn't a fine sword."

Gwen couldn't help but think of the strange engravings she had seen on the sword -- the ones that had definitely not been put there by her father. "Did Merlin do something to it?"

"Yes," Gaius said, though he didn't sound very happy about it. "The sword was forged in dragonfire. It was imbued with great power. Even the Sidhe cannot defend against it."

A speculative light came into Morgana's eyes. "Could he do it again?"

Gaius finally seemed to relent, after seeing that Morgana wasn't going to back down. "You'll have to ask him that yourself. But we cannot risk going down to the dungeons until tonight."

"Very well," Morgana said. "But I'm not going to sit idle until then. Tell me what else we have."

When Gaius didn't immediately reply, she stared him down, undaunted. "Merlin told me you would help me. Unless there's a reason why you can't?"

Gaius pushed aside his own bowl and looked down at his clasped hands. He seemed to be gathering his strength, or perhaps his thoughts. "Your magic is a rare gift. There are few who can see what is to come. But no prophecy is absolute, no matter how clear the vision. We cannot rush to action, or we risk becoming the very cause of its fulfillment."

"But the Sidhe are already here," Gwen said. "We know they're here for revenge."

"Yes," Gaius said. "Revenge against Merlin for killing Aulfric and Sophia. But it seems in that they have already succeeded."

"But Aulfric and Sophia are alive," Gwen said, confused.

"And that mystery is exactly why we must proceed with great care," said Gaius. "Arthur has taken a tremendous risk in going to Avalon. Even if he is able to locate Merlin, he may no longer be as we knew him. If they cannot find a way to open the Gates from the other side, they may be unable to return at all."

"Then why let him go?" Gwen asked. "How did he even know that Merlin is still alive?"
"The torcs," Gaius explained. "Arthur was able to feel Merlin through the connection they share. Once he believed that Merlin could be saved, he could not be dissuaded, despite the dangers. We must wait and pray that he succeeds. Yet it may be that in saving Merlin, we are bringing upon ourselves a worse fate."

"My vision," Morgana said, realizing. "You think Arthur is going to start a war with the Sidhe."

"It's possible. But he may not, and it may be our actions here that cause our doom. Prophecies are never as simple as they first seem. We must consider the consequences of our actions."

"Then you have experience with them?" Gwen asked. "You've worked with seers before?"

Gaius hesitated. "Only a few are gifted with such power. Great Dragons are able to sense the threads of fate, but such threads can be pulled in many directions."

"What about the Druids?" Morgana asked. "Merlin said they could help."

Gaius frowned. "And when, exactly, did Merlin tell you all of this?"

Morgana didn't miss a beat. "He wrote me a letter while he was waiting for Arthur to execute him for being a sorcerer. He said that if you couldn't help me, I should go to the Druids or to Gedref."

Gwen was startled by the anger that flashed across Gaius' face. Gaius rarely got angry, and he almost never got angry at Merlin. Yet his reaction was unmistakable.

"Gaius?" Gwen asked, worried.

"I cannot stop you from going. But know that the consequences would be dire," Gaius said, with absolute certainty. "Either would cause the deaths of dozens, perhaps hundreds. If you go to Gedref, you risk sparking a civil war."

"You're making this up," Morgana said, taken aback. "Trying to scare me off. It won't work."

"I promise you that I am not."

Gwen looked at Morgana and then at Gaius, and decided to intervene before things escalated further. "But we won't have to leave, because you're going to help us. You're going to teach us how to read the grimoire, and you're going to teach Morgana to control her magic. And when Arthur and Merlin get back, we're all going to work together to stop the Sidhe. Is that clear?"

Gaius and Morgana both stared at her in surprise, but Gwen held firm. It was not her father that she felt was with her now, but her mother, who handled squabbling siblings and fighting noblemen with the same aplomb. The situation might be dire, but arguing with each other wasn't going to help.

Gaius backed down first. "Very well. But I must take care of my patients first, so we aren't interrupted." He stood and walked over to his medicine basket, and began selecting bottles from the cabinet to fill it. His back was stiff, and it was obvious that he wasn't happy about any of this. But as much as Gwen cared about Gaius, as much as she understood the dangers of what they were doing, she was certain that he was wrong. Morgana didn't deserve to be treated so poorly, to have no support from Gaius when he was so clearly willing to help Merlin. Gwen was also certain that Gaius knew more than he was saying, but they would have to try to pry those secrets from him at another time.

Gaius tucked the medicine basket under his arm, but stopped and walked back to them. He grabbed the Sidhe staff from where it was leaning and handed it to Morgana. "You may need this."
Morgana took the staff and turned it, inspecting it. "What do I do with it?"

"It's a weapon," Gaius explained. "If Sophia tries to escape, threaten her with it."

"But how do I use it?"

"You don't," Gaius said. "Not until you can control your magic. When the firing spell is cast, it causes a bolt of deadly energy to shoot forth, rather like a crossbow bolt."

"You're expecting me to bluff," Morgana realized.

Gaius' eyebrow arched. "Will that be a problem?"

Morgana jutted out her chin. "Not after what she did to Merlin. If she doesn't believe me, I'll use it as a magical flyswatter."

Gwen smiled at that, and Morgana quirked a smile back.

"I do believe you could," Gaius said, as a conciliatory gesture, and left for his rounds.

Gaius left the key with them, and Gwen got up to lock the door behind him. Nowhere was truly safe when it came to practicing magic in Camelot, but at least the lock would give them time to hide anything incriminating. She had new respect for how long Merlin had managed to survive as a sorcerer, living so intimately with the Prince. It had been hard enough for her to keep Morgana's secret, and it must have been many times harder for Merlin, especially once he and Arthur became lovers. It was no wonder he had finally given in and confessed, despite the danger.

"If he's not back by lunch, I'll drag him back here myself," Morgana declared.

"I'm sure he'll return soon." Gwen felt awkward defending Gaius, after everything, but he deserved the chance to make up for his mistakes. They all did.

She turned to Morgana and their eyes met. She could see that Morgana wasn't sure what to say to her, and Gwen felt the same. They had known each other for so long, and yet now there was such a distance between them. Just like Gaius, Gwen had thought that she was doing the right thing in protecting Morgana from herself, and maybe it had been right -- but it had also been wrong. If they had made a better choice, if they had helped Morgana accept and control her magic from the start, they would not be in this position now. Morgana would not have suffered in fear of herself, and none of them would have felt so alone. Gwen hoped that it was not too late to set them all on a brighter path, that the threads of fate could still be woven into something strong and good.

Morgana stepped forward, and stopped at arm's length. She reached up and gently touched the dried cut on Gwen's forehead. "It needs to be cleaned," she said, and turned to the cabinets. "Sit down."

Gwen sat. She kept silent as Morgana found bandages and cleansing ointment. Morgana cleaned the cut with a practiced hand; they had both spent so much time helping Gaius in one emergency or another that they were probably more skilled than Merlin in the role of physician's assistant.

When Morgana finished, she looked down at the stained cloth in her hand. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have lost my temper at you."


Morgana looked up, and their eyes met, held. For a moment, a sharp, brief moment, something
passed between them, and then they both looked away. Gwen rubbed her palms on her dress, and Morgana busied herself in putting back the supplies.

"It's good news about Merlin," Gwen said, moving on to a safer topic. "At least he's still alive."

Morgana made an unimpressed sound. "We'll see how long that lasts. Arthur might be bringing him back just so he can have him properly executed."

Gwen didn't reply; she didn't want to argue about it again.

But Morgana continued on. "Once they're back, we'll make sure Merlin is safe. I think we should go to the Druids first. They're closer."

"You still want to go? To leave Camelot?"

"I have magic," Morgana said, and there was a waver in her voice as she said it, aloud and definitive. "If Uther finds out, he'll have me killed. He'll have us all killed."

"But what about the Sidhe? What about what Gaius said?"

Morgana gave a pace away and then back. "All right. We save Camelot, then we leave. You, me, and Merlin. As for Gaius, it's obvious that he can't be trusted. He's just lying to keep us in line, like he's lied to me over and over again."

"What about Arthur?"

"What about him? He's not going to leave. He has everything he wants. In a few years, this whole kingdom will be his. I'm sure Uther will have found him a princess by then."

Gwen wondered if Merlin would be willing to leave Arthur behind. A few days ago, such a thought would have been absurd, but she could not deny Merlin's quiet bitterness and disappointment when she had rescued him from his imprisonment. Whatever had happened between them, Arthur may have pushed Merlin too far. Whatever sacrifices Arthur was making to get him back, it may be too little, too late.

And yet despite everything, despite her own fears, despite the appeal of living where they could be accepted, Gwen hated the idea of running away. Camelot was her home and she didn't want to leave it. It would be like abandoning a part of herself. And yet could she let Morgana leave on her own, or with Merlin? If she had to make the choice between Camelot and Morgana, either would break her heart. But it seemed she would have to make it, and soon.

"Gwen?" Morgana said, stepping closer in concern. "You said you wouldn't leave me." For all her strength and determination, there was a fragility to her, one that softened Gwen's resistance.

"Of course," Gwen said, reaching out to take her hand. She held it between her own and met Morgana's eyes. "I swear, wherever you go, I will be with you."

Morgana smiled and hugged her, and Gwen held her back. Morgana was warm and soft in her arms, and Gwen was loathe to release her. She could not recall the last time they had held each other so closely, and for so long. Perhaps Morgana needed the comfort as much as Gwen did herself.

But comfort did not explain why, when they broke apart, Gwen felt at once awkward and bereft. And it did not explain why Morgana blushed and looked away.
The forest path initially kept to the island's edge, where sunlight reflected off the water and played on
the trees as if it was alive -- and for all Arthur knew, it was. But then the path turned, and he found
himself missing the cheerful light. The Sidhe's forest was old and dense, with only a dappling of
sunlight breaking through the thick canopy overhead. There was an atmosphere of overall gloom, not
dissimilar to the depths of the lake, but here there were no floating lanterns to brighten the way. The
only sign that anyone or anything had ever lived here was the path, and it was narrow and
overgrown.

He felt unwelcome in a way he could not describe. The only comparison he could make was to the
way he felt when he rode through the Valley of the Fallen Kings. Growing up, Arthur had heard
many stories about the evils that had happened there, the dark magics that had brought down the
great kings of Albion and left behind only overgrown ruins and mute statues. Soldiers and knights
had gossiped around campfires, spreading rumors and myths that Arthur had soaked up with wide
eyes. Looking back, he wondered about those stories. How much of them was true, and how much
was the result of his father's lies? What had really happened all those centuries ago, after the Romans
left Albion? The more he thought about magic, the more answers he sought, the more questions he
found.

He wasn't alone in this place. He kept catching glimpses of movement in the corners of his eyes, but
every time he turned, whatever it was would vanish from sight. He kept on high alert, ready for
whatever weirdness Avalon threw at him next. But whatever creatures were out there, they were
playing with him. If he looked away from the path he was on, even for a moment, there would
suddenly be a fallen branch across it in the perfect position to trip on, or a foot-sized hole presumably
made by a half-rabbit, half-gopher or whatever strange hybrids lived in this forest. Unseen hands
threw acorns at him from above, and Arthur feverishly imagined an army of squirrels, each with little
outfits of mail and a shield.

"I'm ignoring you," Arthur muttered under his breath. His patience was wearing thin, but he had
already learned the hard way that any assumptions on his part could get him killed extremely quickly.
In the world of the Unseelie, the appearance of humanity held no meaning, and his instincts were all
but useless. It was likely to be the same here. Any rash action might be his last. No matter how
annoying these creatures were, no matter how insistently they taunted him, he was not going to lose
his temper. He was not going to lose his temper. He was not--

An acorn smacked him right between the eyes, and he almost screamed in frustration. A flash of red
cought his eye, and he rounded on it. "That's it! I've had enough of your immature, idiotic--"

He stepped forward, and a length of ivy pulled taut across his ankle, sending him sprawling into a
puddle that had definitely not been there a second ago. Arthur sputtered furiously and wiped the mud
from his eyes. "Right," he seethed.

He heard more giggling, and a rustling in the undergrowth just feet from the path. He had it this time,
he was certain of it. He saw a glimpse of red and he lunged for it. The creature, whatever it was, was
quick. Arthur lunged again, and nearly had it, but then its friends joined in, throwing nuts and twigs
at him from the high branches. Arthur took refuge beneath a half-fallen tree, and in that moment,
wished more for a crossbow than for his sword.

The barrage finally ceased. Arthur cautiously looked out, and when no attack came, he decided the
wisest thing would be to return to the path. He didn't have time for distractions, not when he was on
a rescue mission. He turned back the way he'd come, looking around warily for his attackers, and
then stopped short.

The path was gone.

At first he thought that he was looking in the wrong direction, confused by Avalon's topsy-turvy nature. Then he thought that he wasn't seeing it because it was so narrow and overgrown. But no, there were the trees he had passed, the rotted stump, the copse of hazels. Everything was exactly the same, except that the path was no longer there, as if it had never existed at all.

There was more giggling, and Arthur knew at once that he had been tricked. The creature had lured him from the path, and now he was even more lost than before.

"You got me into this," Arthur muttered at the creature. "You're going to get me out of it." He stood perfectly still, listening for the sound of his tormentor, for the tell-tale rustle of old leaves. He saw another glimpse of red, but this time he didn't move towards it. He let the creature sneak up on him, no doubt intending another round of mischief. As soon as it was upon him, Arthur snatched it up, his reflexes at least one thing he could still rely on.

At first glance the creature looked like a small, squat man, only inches high, with a white beard, a red jacket, and a wrinkled face. But on closer inspection, the tiny man was not a man at all: its white hair was a ruff of downy feathers, its feet were those of a squirrel; it had pointed ears and all-black eyes.

"I've got you now," Arthur said, holding it tight as it squirmed. "Tell me what happened to the path. How do I get it back?"

The creature squinted at him, as if it was sizing him up. Arthur squinted back at it. The creature turned up its nose at him, somehow finding him wanting.

"I know you can speak," Arthur told it. "I've talked with stranger things than you. Now tell me how to find the path again, or you're going to regret it." He didn't have his sword, but that didn't mean he was defenseless. There were countless ways to kill a creature this small, and he could do it with his bare hands alone. He didn't want to kill it, nuisance though it was, but threats were the only weapon he had left.

"Why should I waste my voice on one so rude?" said the creature. Its voice was high and reedy, with an undertone like that of a cooing pigeon.

"You're calling me rude?" Arthur said, astonished. "You tormented me!"

"That was a test," said the creature, offended. "How do I know you're worth helping if I don't test you?"

Arthur tilted his head. "You want to help me?"

"I already did," insisted the creature, puffing its feathered ruff. "I did you a favor, getting you off that path."

"What do you mean?"

"No one enters the Seelie Court uninvited, especially not some wandering mortal. If not for me, you would have ended up walking that path for all eternity."

"Oh." Arthur looked around. "Which way should I go, then?"

"I'm not going to tell you that," smirked the creature. "If you wanted my help, you shouldn't have
been so rude."

Arthur had no idea what to make of this creature. But it was the only source of information he had found on this island, and he wasn't going to give it up just because it was mildly insane. Sometimes Merlin made less sense than this creature did, and Arthur wasn't letting him go even if it meant being stuffed with magic and crossing into the Otherworld.

If this creature wanted him to be polite, then fine. He could be polite with the best of them. He could out-polite any preening courtier.

"I'm terribly sorry," he said, with all the earnestness he could muster. He put the creature down on a branch of a small tree. "I didn't mean to be so rude. I apologize."

The creature didn't run off or start pelting him with acorns, so that was a good sign. It didn't look at him with sudden trust, either, but at least it had moved from sneering to skeptical.

"I'm a stranger to this place," Arthur continued, laying it on thick. "Someone very dear to me was taken by the Sidhe, and my fear for him has made my temper short. That is no excuse for my rough treatment of you."

"No, it is not," said the creature, but the flattery appeared to be working.

"Thank you for what you have already done," Arthur continued, stepping back. "For saving me from the Sidhe's trap. I will make my own way from here, and not impose upon you any further." He turned and walked away, but he only made it a few steps before the creature called for him.

"Wait," it said, reaching out a hand. "You will never find it."

"I have no choice," Arthur said. "I have to save him. It's my fault that... that he was taken." His pretense of humility had become real, and the sudden swell of emotion made his chest tight.

The creature hopped down from the branch, and looked up at him. "Pick me up, mortal," it instructed, and Arthur bent down to let it sit on his hand. "You are far too rude to be worth my time, despite your posturing. But this friend of yours, he is kind? Patient? Generous in nature?"

"He is," Arthur said, honestly.

"Then I will help you for his sake, and his alone. Put me on your shoulder, and I will guide you."

§

Arthur felt somewhat absurd, traipsing through the woods with a tiny man sitting on his pauldron. He wasn't entirely certain that the creature wasn't simply playing him for a fool again, using him as its own personal horse on an aimless wander. He had been walking for miles and there was still no sign of the Sidhe. But he bit his tongue and followed the creature's occasional, brusque directions. At least the squirrels had stopped throwing acorns at him.

They seemed to be headed in the general direction of the center of the island, though Arthur was certain they were taking the long way around. It was also the way that forced Arthur to slog through patches of forest so muddy they were nearly swamps, and up and down hills that brought him no higher or lower than the rest of the island, a fact which hurt his head if he tried to make sense of it. Every time he asked if the creature was absolutely certain this was the right way, it would give him a baleful eye and threaten to leave him on his own if he continued to ask such rude questions.

After he'd stepped in a puddle and ended up waist-deep in a sinkhole, Arthur had had enough. It was
obvious that this creature was only pretending to help him while it continued its campaign of torment.

"That's it," he grumbled, as he hauled himself out. He'd just finished drying off from the lake, and now he was soaked again. He plucked the creature off his shoulder and snarled at it. "I've had enough."

"You'll never find the Sidhe without me," sniffed the creature.

"I'll never find it with you!" Arthur said. He was sorely tempted to pull back his arm and fling the creature as far as humanly possible, but it would probably only be counterproductive. He clenched his jaw tightly and deposited the creature on the ground with only a modicum of force. "I'm fine on my own. Now go away."

"You are refusing my help?" asked the creature. It really shouldn't have sounded so surprised.

"Help?" Arthur gave a bitter laugh. "I'd hardly call it 'help.'"

The creature glared at him. "Rude as ever. I should have known better than to assist such an ungrateful mortal. You will not last long without my protection."

"Your protection?" Arthur sputtered. The gall of the creature!

The creature hopped up onto a log. "If you are eaten, it is no less than you deserve," it declared, and then with a hop it vanished from sight.

Arthur waited for a few minutes, just to be certain that the creature was really gone. The forest was blissfully peaceful, with only the wind in the canopy and the regular chittering of wildlife. He sighed in relief and started directly for the center of the island.

Protection. Ha! He had been tromping around these woods for miles now, and the only nuisance had been that creature. He didn't have his sword, but what of it? He'd been trained to kill since birth. He could take care of himself in any situation, weapon or no weapon. He didn't need some absurd, obnoxious magical creature mocking him and insulting him while it dragged him through every mud patch in the whole forest. If he just kept heading for the center, he was bound to find this Seelie Court eventually.

As if to prove his point, it was not long before he found his first sign of civilization. Faint music lilted through the air, and Arthur stilled, listening to determine the direction of its source. Some kind of flute or pipe was being played. As he drew closer to the music, he heard the sound of children laughing. He slowed his pace, not wanting to startle whoever he was about to meet. In his filthy state, he did not look very civilized himself right now. There was a mound of earth, and he hid behind it so he could safely spy ahead.

The first thing he noticed was that the dancing, laughing children were naked. The second thing he noticed was that their bottom halves were those of goats, with brown and white fur, short fluffy tails, and hooves for feet. There were little goat horns peeking out from their hair, and they were moving in a circle around an adult of their kind who was playing on a flute.

Arthur's attention was so focused on the strange scene before him that he was caught entirely by surprise as he was attacked from behind. A dozen creatures descended upon him; they were larger than the red-jacketed creature, but more inhuman. They had twig-like limbs and hands and puffy, striped tails. They were also incredibly ugly, and they clambered all over Arthur, tugging at his armor and trying to pin him to the ground.
"Get off!" Arthur hissed, flailing at them. A few of them teamed up to grab him by the hair, and Arthur's eyes watered as they pulled. He tried to smack them away, only to yelp as one of them suddenly swelled to several times its size. He tried to push himself up to escape them, but the other creatures copied the first, and collectively they pinned Arthur flat with their suddenly-impressive weight. To his alarm, they began to drag him towards a large hole in the mound, which he was now realizing was their burrow.

"Oh no you don't!" Arthur exclaimed, but in the battle of inches, he was slowly losing. Just before he found himself going head-first into a hole, someone cleared their throat very loudly, and the ugly creatures instantly shrank back down and fled into their burrow. Arthur looked up to see that the adult goat-man was standing over him, holding out his hand.

"Spriggans believe any shine to be wise," the goat-man said. "To trespass their barrow only fools would advise."

Arthur took his hand and the goat-man pulled him back to his feet. Arthur wasn't feeling very shiny anymore; he was even more of a mess thanks to the Spriggans, though he did his best to dust himself off and straighten his clothes. "I'll remember that next time." He didn't appreciate the implication that he was a fool, but he wasn't in any position to be picky about his rescuer. The red-jacketed creature's warning echoed in his ears, and the accompanying humiliation burned.

"But here are my manners lost. We'll share names, as our paths crossed. Those who fear will call me Hob, those who seek my favor Rob. But to merry wanderers, the name of Puck will do the job."

"Uh. Puck it is, then," Arthur said, bewildered.

"And thy name, good mortal?"

"Arthur," Arthur said, keeping the rest of his identity a secret. After the experiences he'd had in Avalon so far, he was wary about trusting this Puck, who seemed even less sane than the other creatures he'd met. This one couldn't even decide what his name was. But if this had been a tournament, he would have been at the bottom of the rankings. The red-jacketed creature had been right; he needed help, and he couldn't afford to be particular. "I seek the Seelie Court."

"The Seelie Court?" Puck said. "Why good mortal, I know it well. It lies here within this forest wild, a grave and grove where I have passed many happy hours."

"Then you can take me there?" Arthur asked, cautiously hopeful.

"Over hill, over dale, thorough bush, thorough brier. Over park, over pale, thorough flood, thorough fire. No mortal hale can there retire. And yet..." Puck paused in his rhyming and studied Arthur intently. "Thy heart doth beat, and breath expire."

Arthur opened his mouth to speak, then closed it. "Is that a yes?" he asked, confused.

"I jest to Oberon and make him smile when I a fat and bean-fed horse beguile, neighing in likeness of a filly foal," answered Puck, and he gave a trill on his flute. "But fairy favor requires fair favor. What have thee?"

Had Puck just called him a fat horse? Arthur had been humiliated at every turn in Avalon, and it was probably for the best, otherwise he would have been more insulted. As it was, his bruised pride was the least of his worries. "You seek... a trade?" he guessed.

Perhaps Puck was like the Unseelie creatures in the marketplace. But what did Arthur have to offer? Only his armor, which he could not afford to part with in this dangerous place. His sword was
beyond his reach even he was willing to part with it, and he certainly wasn't going to offer his 'pearl'... A sudden thought struck him, and he reached into his pocket. Yes! Palaemon's ring was still there. It was broken, but maybe it would be just enough to get Puck to take him to the Sidhe. He gave it a rub on his leg to give it a bit of shine, then held it out.

Puck's eyes lit up. "A fair favor indeed," he said, with open admiration. "From Portunes to his priest, king of doors, north-west, south-east."

Portunes. The name was familiar, and Arthur's thoughts were drawn to Gedref. What was it that Idriys had written in his papers? Palemon's globe had been from the temple of Portunes, the Roman's two-faced god of doors and gates. It made sense that the ring would be as well.

Puck reached for the ring, then stopped. "Ah, but I am servant to my lord. To what dark deed might I be lured? To risk the making of such treason, from thou I require a reason."

Apparently this Puck wasn't as blindly greedy as the Finfolk. But Arthur had right on his side, if nothing else. And Oberon... that was one of the names that Morvarc'h had rattled off. Oberon and Titania. "My servant was stolen from me by the Tylwyth Teg. I seek his rightful return."

Puck was amused by this. "He must be a fine servant, for his master to pursue him to such a distance."

"He's a terrible servant," Arthur admitted, unable to keep the fondness from his voice. "His clothes are shabby, he has appalling manners, and he never does as he's told. But he's mine."

"Then good mortal, good Arthur, take my coin." Puck extended his empty hand, and with a flick of his fingers, a gold coin appeared upon his palm. "But spend it not til thee and thine stand to this isle's shore."

"What will it do?" Arthur asked, warily.

"While thou holds my gold, thou shalt seem a Pixie bold. As my servant play a role, lest Titania claim thy soul." Puck took a step forward, urging Arthur to take the coin. "No mortal leaves the fairy court. Let this disguise thy dark fate thwart."

More magic. It was hardly a surprise, as this was a world entirely made of magic, but he couldn't help but feel compromised. He didn't trust magic, but neither could he refuse its help. He could not refuse the dragon's spell that brought him here, and he could not refuse Puck's coin. Just as he should not have refused Merlin.

He took the coin and put it into his pocket, in place of Palaemon's ring. At first nothing happened, but then Puck bowed and played upon his flute, and a sudden flash of magic sizzled through Arthur like fire. He bent double and clutched at himself as the coin's spell took effect. His skin began to itch and pulse, and his very bones began to ache. The weight of his armor lifted as his clothing transformed. Everything around him suddenly grew taller, and he realized with a jolt that he was shrinking.

When the spell finished its work, he staggered back with a gasp and stared at his hands. He recoiled at his transformed flesh. His hands were not his hands, calloused yet finely-formed. These were ugly, club-fingered things, with red veins and black warts worsening the sickly pink skin. His nails were black and pointed. He reached up to touch his face, and felt a huge nose, giant, pointed ears, and bumps all over, some so large they actually wiggled of their own accord. His soft hair had turned black and become as heavy and coarse as wire.
"What have you done to me?" His tongue felt clumsy and oversized, but at least his voice was still the same. Arthur was repulsed, recoiling from himself. Had he accepted one spell too many? Had his flesh been twisted by magic as corruption twisted the soul?

"Fear not, mortal," Puck said, smirking. "Thy true nature is unchanged. Only thy appearance has exchanged. My masters of humanity are enamoured, but for thee, as Pixie thou hast been glamoured."

A glamour. Just as Sophia's glamour had made her seem a beautiful young woman, this glamour disguised him as an ugly creature. A Pixie, and not a Sidhe or a half-goat like Puck. It seemed that to be Puck's servant, he had to be of some other race, just as the Merrows were the servants of the Finfolk.

He forced himself to inspect the rest of his changed appearance. His armor, gloves, and boots were gone. He still wore a shirt and trousers, but they were made of a strange, leaf-like material which seemed to have been grown instead of woven. His bare feet were as ugly as the rest of him, with three splayed, clawed, hairy toes. He clung to the knowledge that all of this was merely an illusion, that underneath he was still himself. He was not a monster, no more than Sophia had ever been human.

"Now what?" he asked. He wanted to get this over quickly, so he could throw away Puck's coin and return to himself. "How do we get to the Court?" He suddenly realized that the dancing children had vanished. Where had they gone?

"We'll follow my Fenodyree-- but ah, of course, thou cannot see." Puck stepped back, spreading his arms dramatically. "Into the Court I doth invite, and free the shackles from thy sight!"

As the words left Puck's tongue, a change came upon the forest around them. The trees grew lusher, their trunks wider. Bright flowers blossomed on winding vines, and the tips of their anthers were as bright as candles. Dew formed upon the leaves and glistened like diamonds, and giant mushrooms bloomed from the soil, their stems glowing like lanterns and their caps iridescent. The undergrowth retreated, revealing a winding path that led down to a gentle stream, where fountains arched from silver bowls. And beyond the stream was a broad clearing like Arthur had never seen. Giant trees, so tall they seemed to scrape the clouds, encircled a huge dome of crystal and wood, formed in branches and swirls.

And where Arthur had thought the forest empty, now he saw that it was full. There were the goat children, the Fenodyree, gathered round a giant cricket as it played its legs like a fiddler. Blue Sidhe flitted through the air, dancing with butterflies as large as eagles, while others with their human glamours walked below, or sat upon the mushrooms as they brushed their hair. A ladybird the size of a hog carried a teacup on its shell, and delivered it to a seated Sidhe, who took it and gracefully sipped. In the distance, he saw a trio of Sidhe riding what appeared to be harvest mice the size of horses.

All this time he had thought himself wandering alone, and in truth he had been blind to the bustling life around him. This island was mad and absurd. It was beautiful and fantastic.

It was magic.

He stepped towards the path, but Puck stopped him.

"Before thou steps into the Court, to thee these things I must exhort. First, of nothing thou must eat, not richest meat nor sweetest treat. Only water, pure and clear, can thee partake without a fear; all else will serve to bind thee here. Second, likewise, any favor, turn from it without a waver. Else thou
wilt be made to pay, and upon thy soul they'll prey."

"And you?" Arthur asked, though it was too late for such questions. "How do I know you won't prey upon my soul?"

"I am an honest Puck," said Puck, pressing a hand to his chest. "A shrewd and knavish sprite, a merry wanderer of the night. While in misfortune I delight, for thy trade I'll do thee right. And to that end we must deceive, if thy passage be achieved. As thy name doth mean a bear, Ursa shall thy name be there. Lose thy pride upon this day, for to survive, thou must obey. No longer knight, nor human kind, yet what is lost, thou here shall find."

"Right," Arthur said, readying himself. "Will I have to speak in rhyme?" He hoped not. He had never been very good at poetry.

Puck gave a hearty laugh. "A Pixie speaks only when told. 'My Lord,' 'My Lady' -- else withhold. Work, and for thy friend do spy. I'll too, but say what he goes by."

"Merlin. His name is Merlin." Arthur didn't know what condition Merlin would be in when he found him. The only solace he had was the fact that he could still feel Merlin through the gold torc, even now that the torc itself was hidden by the glamour.

Puck stepped towards the path and gestured for Arthur to follow him. "Then come, my servant, well-comport, abide and enter the Seelie Court."

§

A crystal bridge, sparkling with sapphires and silver etchings, carried them over the placid stream. As they crossed, Arthur looked down at his reflection, and it took everything he had not to cry out in horror. It was even worse than he'd imagined. What looked back at him was utterly unrecognizable, and while that was the point, it made Arthur want to tear at his skin to rid himself of it, to cut away the foreign flesh and escape it. While he had always taken care with his appearance, taken pride in his fitness and strength, he did not consider himself to be a vain man. But to be reduced to this, to be so inverted from everything he was... it was all his worst fears about magic made real, that it transformed and corrupted until all humanity was lost. He gripped the coin in his pocket and it took all his will not to cast it into the stream. He felt physically ill.

Yet he could not deny that the Pixie disguise was perfect. As they continued into the clearing, though Puck's arrival generated some attention, neither Sidhe nor any other creature gave Arthur more than a passing glance.

He would not let himself be overcome by an illusion, no matter how convincing and complete, no matter how real it was to himself as well as to others. He knew what he was, what he had always been, what he always would be: a man, a knight, a ruler, a warrior. Just because he played a thing, that did not mean he became it. His essence was inviolate.

He instinctively straightened his spine, lengthened his stride, only to be given a warning look by Puck. A Pixie did not stand or march like a knight or a prince, of course. This body he wore wanted to slouch and waddle, and reluctantly he let it, despite how it grated, how it went against a lifetime of training.

When they reached the dome, Arthur saw that beneath it was some kind of underground room, which appeared to grow larger with each step they took down. The wood that made up the structure of the dome was not lumber but living roots from the towering trees, and around the perimeter of the dome they formed a downward-spiralling staircase, which was braced by silver columns shaped like
trees. Even the metals here seemed not to have been made but grown into their shapes. He followed Puck down and down, passing balconies that led away to unknown rooms, until they reached the bottom.

It was a palace. Though it was underground and shaded by the forest above, the great hall was airy and full of light, gleaming with gold and silver, pearls and gems. A harpist played, and her music delicately filled the hall. Three fruit trees lined each side, each bearing a different, ripe fruit. There were long tables bearing an abundance of food and drink, pitchers of wine, of milk, and entire bowls of honey. Arthur had not eaten since last night’s feast, and even there he’d had more wine than food, but Puck’s warning braced him against temptation. He did not want to end up trapped in this place, no matter how splendid it appeared to be.

There were dozens of Sidhe scattered through the hall, in various states of repose, and every single one of them was breathtakingly beautiful. All the women were gorgeous and all the men were handsome. Their clothes were fine and rich, layers of gauzy material that seemed almost to be made from spider silk, and their hair was long and woven with gold thread. It was strange to know that beneath such refined beauty they were all small, ugly, and blue.

At the head of the hall was a raised dais with a great stone throne, and upon it lounged a frowning man with red hair and a golden circlet upon his head; he was somehow even more beautiful and radiant than all the other beautiful and radiant Sidhe. Even if Arthur had been fully himself, in all his finest robes and jewels, he would have felt a muddy pauper in such company.

Puck took a roaming path through the hall, pausing here and there to sour a cup of milk as it met the lips of a Sidhe, or to make a roast pig on the table spring to life as another Sidhe reached to slice it. Arthur was astonished that no one sought revenge for Puck’s mischief, but they all seemed enured to it, even bored. Puck rolled his eyes at their passivity and skipped up to the throne. Arthur stood back, assuming that being a servant here was much like being a servant in Camelot, and the most important thing was to be out of the way, unobtrusive yet still close enough so that nobody had to shout to get your attention. Arthur had long despaired of Merlin ever learning that particular skill.

"Lord Oberon," Puck greeted as he bowed his head.

"Good Robin, attend," Oberon said, straightening up. "For hours I have waited, yet my queen doth not appear. For thine own sake, thy jests forbear, find and guide her swiftly here."

Puck put a hand to his chest, offended. "My lord, doth thou say my hand is cause of her delay? I must protest and say thee nay. Crook thy finger, Titania will move, not to thy side but some far remove."

"No idle habit this, but spite," Oberon insisted, leaning forward. "Mark, I'll have thee put her right. Gleaming dew-drops, silver gossamer, these delights bring them unto her. Plied with sweetness she'll be swayed, from her wanderings be bade."

Puck glanced briefly towards Arthur, then back to Oberon. "Whate'er the reason she is late, I'll ease thy mind from painful wait. A flute's sweet song or gentle jest will draw the anger from thy breast."

He brought his pipe to his lips and played a lilting trill.

Oberon was not amused. "Gentle Puck," he began, tersely, "fetch me her. And be thou here again ere the leviathan can swim a league."

Puck replied with a wide-eyed bow and turned on his hoof. He motioned and Arthur followed him back to the foot of the stairs. There was an archway there, half-concealed by a heavily laden fruit tree. The air was sweet with fragrance, and Arthur realized that the tree was simultaneously in fruit
and in bloom.

"Though promise made to help and stay, his order I'll at once obey," Puck said, reluctantly.

"You can't just leave me here!" Arthur whispered, urgently. Without Puck's help, he didn't know how long his disguise would hold. And he hadn't even begun to search this underground palace for Merlin.

Puck gave a thoughtful hum, and rubbed at the tuft of hair on his chin. "Ah! But here thy fine disguise will ward off thy early demise. With the Pixies serve as planned, and while thou cleans, seek, find thy man. Hold thy tongue, downcast thy vision, endure each and all derision. Be a fool and safety earn; patience, wait, and I'll return." He gripped Arthur by the arms and pushed him through the archway. "Quick I'll girdle 'round this earth. Til my return, go prove thy worth."

"You-- But--" Arthur sputtered, but as soon as he spoke, Puck was gone. Vanished, leaving only the slightest huff of wind in his wake.

Now what? Arthur looked one way and then the other. If he went back to the main hall, his presence would be questioned. No, he would have to do as Puck said and find the other Pixies. If he blended in with them, he would be safe enough until Puck could return with Titania. But to play a fool? An idiot? Perhaps Puck was right and such a feint would protect him, but it chafed against his honor and against his pride. Despite Merlin's insults to the contrary, he did not consider himself to be haughty or conceited. If he was proud or imposing, it was because he knew his worth and knew that he had earned it, and saw no reason why that worth should not be recognized. He was a natural leader, but he had always believed in earning the respect of those he led. He could hardly achieve that by debasing himself.

And yet no one would look upon him and see a leader now, and certainly not a prince. They would see nothing but a servant, ugly and misshapen. Puck had chosen this shape for him, and if Arthur tried to fight against its expectations, he knew he would only lose. The goat-man was clearly fond of mischief, and in helping Arthur he'd managed to play a great prank on him as well as on the Sidhe.

At least if he was with the Pixies, he wouldn't have to deal with anyone rhyming at him for a while. He chose the lesser of two evils and stepped into the passage away from the hall, wary of where it would taking him. Did this lead to the servants' quarters? The kitchens? Or was this the way to the Sidhe's chambers? He tried each door, but none would open for him. Was this more of Puck's mischief, pointing him in the wrong direction?

"Ow!" Something thumped against the back of his head, and he whirled around, ready to defend himself. An empty ewer was floating in mid-air. Arthur stared at it, and it gave an impatient bob. He stepped aside, and the ewer continued down the hall.

Arthur rubbed the back of his head and stared, mystified. Then he did the only thing that seemed logical in this place, which was to follow after the ewer. It turned a corner, and as he turned after it, he smacked face-first into a second ewer -- one that wasn't empty.

"Who's mucking about out there?" called an irritated, gruff voice. Another Pixie, slightly larger than Arthur was in this form, stomped out and glared at him. It appeared to be a woman, if such a thing had any meaning to these creatures.

Arthur held out the now-empty ewer apologetically, feeling rather like a child caught trying to nick a tart from the cooling tray in the kitchens. Except that instead of getting a warm treat, he was soaked in some kind of honeyed ale. "Sorry?" he offered.
The Pixie took the ewer, saw that it was empty, and whacked him on the head with it. "Idiot!"

Arthur was outraged, and opened his mouth to give the creature a tongue-lashing she wouldn't soon forget. But before he could start, he realized that talking back was not a good idea. "Puck sent me," he said, doing his best not to grind out the words.

"Oh he did, did he?" The Pixie gave him a scornful look. "Since when has that ass had a servant?

Arthur thought of the Unseelie marketplace, of the exchange he had made for Puck's aid, of the sort of mischief Puck probably got himself into. "I was... won. In a bet." Be a fool, Puck had said. "A fool for a fool."

The Pixie gave a loud laugh. "Someone beat him at his own game. So you're a fool, are you? What's wrong with you?"

Arthur looked at the floor and tried to make himself as small as he could, which wasn't easy given his monstrous body. He couldn't claim he was mute or blind or deaf, for obvious reasons. She'd already accused him of being an idiot, and he seized on that. "My master said that I was simple."

She gave him an inspecting look, and her antennae bent towards him. "How simple?"

Arthur kept his mouth shut. He tried to look lost and confused, which wasn't that difficult when it came down to it.

She straightened up and harumphed. "Can't be that simple if you can work. Start by cleaning yourself up, and the floor."

Arthur looked around for a cloth or clean water to clean himself with. He tried to waddle past her, but she stopped him.

"Where do you think you're going? I said clean yourself up."

Arthur was at a loss. What was he supposed to use? He looked at her and shrugged.

She narrowed her eyes at him, then seemed to realize something. "Oh, Puck's really won himself a treasure with you. You can't do magic, can you, fool?"

Arthur shook his head.

She thumped him with the ewer again. "That's for your master. What am I supposed to with such a useless little worm?" She huffed. "No wonder you were given to that ass."

She grabbed him by one of his huge ears and dragged him along. Arthur winced and restrained the rising urge to just kill this monster and be done with her. Things were so much easier in Camelot.

The room they entered was clearly a kitchen, but it was like no kitchen Arthur had ever seen. Instead of a bustle of servants each performing a single task, there was only a handful of Pixies, and each orchestrated a variety of tasks by magic. The spits turned on their own, the soup stirred itself, knives chopped vegetables and meats without the guidance of hands. Serving platters floated patiently in the air, waiting for the food to finish itself.

"Oi! Gunnulf!" she called.

There was a clattering sound, and another Pixie appeared from around a corner. "What is it, Grimhild? I'm busy."
"Do you think I'm lazing around?" Grimhild huffed. She released Arthur's ear, and he stumbled to a halt between the Pixies. "Take this one to Gydur. See if he can find some use for him."

Gunnulf waddled over to Arthur and gave him a critical eye. "You're new. What's your name, then? Who do you belong to?"

"My name is Ursa," Arthur said, keeping his posture submissive. "I'm Puck's."


"What good is he, then?" Gunnulf asked. "Waste of time bringing him anywhere. Should just feed him to the Spriggans."

To Arthur's alarm, the Pixies seemed to genuinely consider that as an option. It seemed that the Pixies held no love for Puck, and so his 'ownership' of Arthur lent no protection. Once again, Arthur was on his own. But he had no leverage to use against the Pixies, and he could not manipulate them or they would realize he was not simple after all. The situation was desperate.

He bent his ungainly body to its knees and looked up at them pleadingly. "Please," he begged, shoving down his battered pride. "I have no magic, but I will work hard. Very hard. I will prove myself. Please, take me to Gydur."

The Pixies looked at him skeptically, but Gunnulf relented with a sigh. He grabbed Arthur by the ear and hauled him up. Arthur winced but let himself be pulled. He was dragged by his ear through a maze of hallways. He did his best to memorize their route, but this was a palace of illusions. They walked through walls that weren't there, and sometimes the floor led in one direction while they walked in another. He glanced through every open door and archway for Merlin, but saw no sign of him.

When he was finally released -- with a very sore ear -- it seemed that he had been taken out of the palace proper. But as he looked around, he realized that what seemed to be a grove was instead some kind of grand hall. Silver trees with gold and copper leaves branched and curved into a half-open bower, and the perimeter was ringed with mushroom seating. There were more Pixies here, using their magic to prepare the room for some kind of event. There were even some Sidhe, flitting high above in their natural forms as they placed dewdrops on the leaves.

Gunnulf took Arthur to the Pixie who was overseeing the preparations. Presumably this was Gydur. Gydur gave a nasty laugh when he was told that Puck had won a useless servant in a bet, but was less amused when Gunnulf foisted Arthur off to him.

"Useless idiot," Gydur sneered, and smacked Arthur with the back of his warty hand. "Until Puck returns, I have been tasked to be thy master. But first thou must thank me for my generosity."

Arthur inwardly seethed, but had no choice but to endure. "Thank you, master," he ground out. Gydur gave an unimpressed harumph. "And what use is this magicless fool to me? Art thou as lazy as thou art stupid? As incompetent as thou art ugly?"

Arthur could not stand to be so insulted, so demeaned. Every fiber of his being screamed for justice, for recompense. He barely restrained himself from pulling off a glove and throwing it down between them, and might have done so if his gloves were not blocked from him by Puck's enchantment.

Gydur took his lack of response as an answer. "Then there's just one use for thee," he said, taking Arthur by the ear again. "I'll give thee work," he smirked. "Most odious and foul work."
Arthur gritted his teeth and let himself be dragged along, silently cursing Puck all the way. He had no choice but to play along until Puck returned. If this was another test, like the red-jacketed creature had put him through, then he would do whatever it took to pass it. He might be at the bottom of the rankings, he might be a toy for every creature in Avalon to kick around. But this tournament of a day wasn't over, and he had never lost a tourney yet.
"Gwen, my dear," Gaius said, as he eased himself down into his seat at the table. "Now that my obligations for the day have been fulfilled, I believe you were commanding me to help you."

Despite the urge to blush and duck her head, Gwen kept her shoulder squared and her chin up. "Yes," she said, and she tightened her grip on the heavy grimoire before holding it out for Gaius to take. "And Morgana. Please."

Morgana stiffened beside her, straightening her back in defiance, ready to argue if Gaius refused to fulfill his promise.

But Gaius did not argue; he accepted the grimoire and opened it, and reverently turned the pages. "This book was given to me when I was about your age. It had been preserved by my family for generations, passed down from father to son for centuries. I never had any children of my own, and thought I would be unable to continue the tradition... until the day Merlin walked into my chambers. I hope you will allow me to return it to him should Arthur be successful."

"He gave it to me," Morgana said, firmly. "It's not yours to give to anyone anymore." But then she softened, perhaps at the hope of Merlin's survival. "But if he returns to us, I will share it with him."

"Thank you," Gaius said, with a small, grateful smile. He looked down at the pages and flipped through them consideringly. "Ah, I think this will be a good place for you to start."

He turned the book around so that they could look at the pages. There was an illustration of a lit candle, and the words 'Leohtbora oandelweoce' and 'Acwence oandelweoce' written in ornate letters around it.

"A candle lighting spell?" Gwen said.

"I can already do that," Morgana said, anger creeping into her voice. "And I don't see what use it is anyway. I need a spell that I can use to protect Camelot."

"You need to learn control," Gaius corrected. "If you cannot control your magic, defending this kingdom will be the least of our worries. It's only through sheer luck that no one has been hurt. The next time we may not be so lucky. Not to mention the danger if the King should learn of any of this."

Morgana glanced at the cut on Gwen's forehead, and her anger faded, chastened by her guilt over the exploding vase. But she wasn't going to be humbled by Gaius' lecture, no matter how correct he was. "Then teach me a spell that's useful. What good is a candle going to do against the Sidhe?"

Gaius gave a patient sigh. "This pair of spells was among the first magic my father taught me. While they are small, any spell using fire is by nature dangerous and powerful. Once it is mastered."

Morgana gave him her best 'unconvinced' expression, but relented. "Very well," she said, leaning forward. "Teach me, and I'll master it."

Gaius raised an eyebrow, but turned to Gwen and asked her to bring over an unlit candle. Gwen obliged, and brought over a candlestick with a half-used candle in it.

"Right," Morgana said, staring at the candlestick. "Now what?"

Gaius took a flint from his pocket and with a few practiced strikes lit the wick. The flame grew and
then steadied. "As you said yourself, you have already proved able to light a flame. Now try and use your magic to extinguish one. Focus your thoughts, concentrate, and say 'Acwence oandelweoce.'"

"Acwence oandelweoce." Morgana repeated, staring at the flame. It continued to burn. She spoke the words again and again, then leaned back with a groan of frustration. "Nothing's happening," she complained. "I can't even feel my magic. Is this how you taught Merlin?"

"When Merlin came to me, he had been using his magic instinctively all his life, yet like you he could not always stop his magic from lashing out. While his situation was not as dire as yours, it is quite similar. And I will tell you the same thing I told him: the most important skill you must learn is patience. If you act before you think, with or without magic, you will put yourself and those around you in danger."

"I know how to control myself," Morgana said. "And no matter what Arthur says, I have more skill with my sword in one little finger than he does in both hands."

"Then use that skill here," Gaius said. "Reach for your magic and unsheath it as your would your sword. Strike at the flame."

They went silent, and Gwen watched as Morgana closed her eyes and concentrated. After a few long minutes, she began to move her lips, speaking the spell without sound. At last she opened her eyes, breathed in and out, making the flame waver, and then, as quick as her sword, she spoke aloud. Her eyes glowed, and the flame snuffed out, leaving only a wisp of smoke trailing up from the wick.

Gwen clapped her hands together, delighted. "You did it!"

Morgana breathed out and smiled; the spell, small as it was, had been a visible effort. "I did," she said, proudly.

"A fine start," Gaius said, approvingly. "Now use your magic to restore the flame -- without burning down the castle -- and extinguish it again. The more you practice, the stronger your control will become."

Morgana gave him a grateful look, but then remembered herself. "That wasn't so hard, now was it?" she said, and gave the both of them a pointed look. Then with equal pointedness, she turned her attention back to the candle, ignoring them as she focused on her lesson.

Gwen and Gaius turned at each other in shared sympathy. Morgana was not one to let go of a grudge, and it might be a long time before either of them was completely forgiven, no matter their reasons for letting Morgana suffer in ignorance. In truth, Gwen was no longer certain that it had ever been the right decision to lie to Morgana about her magic, despite how she had felt before. But what was done was done. Morgana might not forget or forgive, but whatever the consequences, they would bear them after Camelot was safe from the Sidhe. For now, they had to work together.

Gwen brought over parchment and ink, then sat next to Gaius so they could work on her vocabulary. They skipped the first section of the book, with its runic letters, and started with the spells that were at least in a familiar alphabet. As Gaius guided her through page after page, Gwen became acutely aware of how little of the old tongue she knew, and how much she had forgotten through disuse. She wished that she could have spoken the old tongue more often, become natural and flué, but of course it hadn't been safe. Perhaps her parents had thought it a fair trade to preserve their lives at the cost of their history. Gwen could not argue with that, and yet she felt a profound sense of loss -- greater than just the loss of so many lives. The Great Purge had been more than executions, more than burned books and wrecked temples. It had been the death of a whole culture, one that had survived and thrived since time immemorial -- until the King had turned against it. Even if they
survived all of this, even if Arthur and Merlin came back home safe and sound, what could the five of them do in the face of so much loss? Perhaps Gaius was right, and in a generation the Old Religion would be forgotten completely -- whether Camelot stood or fell.

"Gwen?"

Gwen was startled by Morgana's voice, and realized that she had stopped paying attention to Gaius' lesson, and that she was on the verge of tears. She wiped her eyes dry. Morgana was looking at her with gentle concern, and Gwen did her best to smile for her. To her relief, Morgana didn't press her to explain her tears, no doubt because there were so many obvious reasons for them. It would be hard to explain to Morgana just what she was grieving for, when Morgana, for all her magic, hadn't even the smallest tie to the Old Religion.

Gaius slipped a blank sheet of paper into the grimoire before closing it, marking their place. He looked up at the window and judged the light. "It's nearly noon. Let's stop for lunch."

Morgana didn't argue, and as Gwen shook free of her own melancholy, she saw that Morgana looked tired, drained from performing the simple spells over and over. And of course none of them had slept well or long last night. Perhaps a nap after lunch would restore them.

Gwen went down to the kitchens, and when she returned, tray laden with food, the tension in the room had noticeably increased. Morgana and Gaius caught in a standoff, with Morgana attempting to stare a hole through the back of Gaius' head.

"Did I miss anything?" Gwen asked lightly, as she set down the tray.

"Nothing much," Morgana said, still staring at Gaius. "I asked Gaius how he managed to keep his head all these years. After all, if it's too dangerous for the King's ward to have magic, how did the King's physician avoid being burned alive?"

Gwen exchanged a glance with Gaius, then started laying out their meal. "By being very careful," she said, choosing diplomacy over confrontation.

Morgana didn't look convinced, but she relented from her interrogation. They sat down together and ate in silence, if only because their mouths were too full for arguing. Gaius gave Gwen a brief but thankful nod.

Though the peace was not destined to last, when it broke, at least the mood was more amicable. It was harder to be in a bad mood with a full belly.

"It seems you're quite the expert on all things magic," Morgana said, turning to Gaius again -- this time keeping her poise. "Have you taught many others?"

"A few," Gaius said.

"You taught Merlin," Morgana said, pressing on despite his obvious reluctance. "You gave him the grimoire. Who did you take it from?"

"It was given to me by my father," Gaius reminded her, obviously resenting the implication. "As it was given to him by his father before him."

"Then you're from a magical family?"

"I am. But I regret to say that I do not have the talents of my forefathers."
"Is that why you turned your back on them?" Morgana asked, her voice even despite the sharpness of her words. "Because you were a disappointment?"

Gaius gave her a warning look. "Some are born with the potential for more magic than others. Just as the son of a blacksmith might not become one in turn. We all must find our own paths with the gifts we are given. I chose the arts of healing and science."

"What about those without magic?" Morgana asked, turning curious. "They can have children born with magic?"

"No. One or both of the parents must have magic themselves, even if only weakly."

"Then it's inherited?"

"Those born without magic can make use of magical objects. They can perform simple spells to control magic that has already been created. But magical power cannot be taught. It comes from within."

"And my magic?" Morgana asked, leaning forward. "Where did it come from?"

"You were born with it," Gaius said, with obvious reluctance.

"My father had magic?" Morgana asked, disbelieving.

Gaius leaned back. "Not your father."

Morgana was struck speechless. She looked to Gwen, who shrugged; both of Morgana's parents had been dead by the time Morgana came to Camelot, and Gwen knew little about them that she had not learned from Morgana herself. Just like Arthur, Morgana had lost her mother at too young an age for memory. That shared loss was one of the things that had brought them together -- and perhaps helped to drive them apart as they grew up.

Despite Gwen's mother's love of gossip, she had never said much at all about Lord Gorlois and Lady Vivienne. Gorlois had always been close to Uther, and during the Great Purge had become one of his closest allies -- especially after Vivienne's death, which happened mere months after Ygraine's passing. There was much about that time that was a mystery, forever unspoken of out of guilt and grief. Gwen had long ago learned not to ask about the Great Purge, because she didn't want to make her parents cry for the past; there were already tears enough for the present.

Morgana turned back to Gaius. "If my mother had magic, why on earth would my father have taken Uther's side? Why would he teach me that magic was something to be afraid of? He had to know that I would inherit."

"Some lines remain strong, or strengthen through the generations. But in others, the magic dies out. Most children do not manifest their magic until they come of age, and the earliest is puberty. Your father could not have been certain about your powers until that time."

But Morgana was not assuaged. "He asked Uther to take me in as his ward in the event of his death. He had to know that could mean sending me to mine."

"Perhaps he would have decided differently, had he lived long enough. But at the time, he felt that this was the best place for you."

Of course Gaius must have known Gorlois well. They would have sat together on Uther's council. Gaius likely patched Gorlois' wounds after their battles against the Old Religion. Gwen saw that
Morgana had made the same realization: that Gaius had stood at the center of history. Who knew how many secrets he kept?

"If you know so much," Morgana said, "then where does all this magic come from in the first place? If it's inherited, it had to start somewhere."

"That's a question Gwen can answer," Gaius said, turning to her. "Gwen?"

"Oh! Well, um." Gwen scrambled to remember her childhood lessons. "All magic comes from the gods. A long time ago, there was a tribe in Albion that made a pact with the Triple Goddess. They pledged their souls and the souls of their descendents, and in return she shared with them her power. When Albion was first united, members of the tribe were sent to live with all the other tribes of Albion, and that was how magic spread throughout the land."

"But your family doesn't have magic," Morgana said, and it was half a question.

"No, none of us do," Gwen admitted. "My family came over with the Romans, and we converted to the Old Religion after they left. None of my ancestors married anyone of magical descent. But there's more to the Old Religion than magic." Her mother had told her stories about how things used to be before the Great Purge, about how the Old Religion and the gods were a part of every aspect of life: the seasons, the harvest, birth and death, family and community. Though she had grown numb to its absence in recent years, Gwen had always yearned for that sense of wholeness, of belonging. To worship in secret as she did, with only her lone voice and candle, was hardly worship at all.

But Morgana did not seem enthused by the Old Religion. "I don't see the point of worshipping some dead gods."

"They're not dead," Gwen said, prickling at the thought. Uther claimed, in his propaganda, that the gods had become corrupted and evil, and that was why the Great Purge was necessary. After the Purge, he claimed that the gods had been defeated, and would wither away into death. It had been twenty-one years since that proclamation, and there were many who said that that time had at last come. That Uther had starved the Triple Goddess and the other deities of Albion into oblivion, through the annihilation of the faithful. Gwen refused to believe it. As long as there was even one believer left sending their prayers to the gods, the gods would still be there to hear them.

Morgana was startled by Gwen's insistence. "Maybe not," she hedged. "But I don't see why I should worship the gods who gave me my nightmares. I certainly never asked for them."

Though Morgana's anger was not directed at her, Gwen couldn't help but take it personally. After all these years, she was finally able to share this part of her life with Morgana. Gwen had always been afraid that if Morgana found out about her faith, she would reject her. Morgana having magic herself changed that, stirred up memories and feelings that Gwen had kept long-buried -- because now she could share all of herself with Morgana, not just the parts that were safe and acceptable. She could be open with Morgana the way Morgana always had been with her.

Perhaps Morgana just needed time. It must be difficult for her to accept something that she had denied about herself for so long. Though Morgana was proud to stand against Uther when it came to defending the magical people of Camelot, the ones who were rounded up and executed, it was something else entirely to accept that she was one of those people herself, that she could end up sharing their fate. Gwen had been born into the Old Religion just as Morgana had been born into magic, but Morgana had been taught to hate the very thing she was to become. Even though she had rejected those lessons, Gwen knew that such hate could be insidious and hard to shake. There had been times when she railed against the gods herself: when her mother died, when her brother left, when her father's body was carted out of the dungeons. She could not deny Morgana her feelings.
"We are given much in life that we do not ask for," Gaius said, with a weariness that betrayed how much he had struggled himself. "It is up to us to decide what to do with our gifts, good and bad."

"What I need is a way to save my life now that it's been endangered by your precious gods," Morgana said, angrily. "Camelot's guards are hardly going to be scared off by candle flame. What I need is power, real power. Otherwise we're going to end up saving Camelot from fire only to burn ourselves."

"That situation is exactly what I'm trying to avoid," Gaius said. "For a long time, the best way to keep you safe was to stop your magic from manifesting at all. That is no longer an option."

"Then teach me," Morgana pressed.

"You must be patient," Gaius said, firmly. "You must build up your strength or any large spells will quickly run out of control. Your attempts at protection may well have the opposite effect. That is not a burden you wish to carry."

"Is this how you taught Merlin? Give him an inch of rope and then yank him back?" Morgana tutted in disgust. "No wonder he was afraid to tell me the truth. All you did was scare the poor boy into paralysis."

"I kept him alive," Gaius said, his own anger riled. "A condition he would still be in if he had not been so foolish."

"You said he's alive," Gwen interrupted. "You said Arthur went to get him."

Gaius sighed. "The best we can hope for is that the Sidhe merely captured Merlin and left him otherwise untouched. But they are cruel creatures, vicious and unforgiving, and he killed two of their kind. We have no guarantees."

"All the more reason to give me a weapon," Morgana said. "What about the staff? Will it work against humans as well as Sidhe?"

"With deadly effect," Gaius warned.

"Perfect," Morgana said, and stood up to get it. She hefted the staff in her hands and seemed as pleased with it as she was with a sword.

"If you must do that, point it into the fireplace, please," Gaius said, looking rather alarmed.

Morgana raised her eyebrows at him, but obliged. "You mentioned something about a firing spell?"

Gaius looked to Gwen, and then visibly relented. "Think of the staff as a vastly powerful candle flame. Just as you were able to command the wick to light, you must command the staff to fire. It will draw from your own reserves of magic, which can have a tiring effect. The candle spells did as well, but it was too small an effect to be noticeable. The same principle applies to all spells: the more energy it takes to perform the spell, the more it will drain you. There are ways to manage this, such as sharing magic with other sorcerers, but that we must leave for later lessons."

"Right," Morgana said. "What are the words?"

Gaius pressed his lips together, disapproving of her apparent disregard for the mechanics. "As you saw with the candle spells, the performance of a spell is the combination of words and will. There is a formality to the more advanced spells, with specific phrasing that must be followed. But while the Sidhe staff itself is advanced, it is simple in use. You must speak in the old tongue to command, and
use the force of your will to push your power into it. The crystal will focus and transform your magic, and send a deadly blast into your opponent."

Morgana nodded, taking this in, and then said, "And the words?"

"'Acwele' is the simplest. It means 'destroy.' And while I'm certain that you'll ignore it, I must warn you again that this is not the same as lighting a candle flame. If you lose control of your magic when using the staff, it will have dangerous consequences."

"More dangerous than being run through with a sword?" Morgana asked. "Than being executed? I'll take my chances."

"Very well," Gaius said.

Gwen watched as Morgana began to practice with the staff. Just as with the candle, she said the simple spell over and over again, but despite being only one word long, it proved to be more of a challenge. Gwen knew that Gaius was right, that Morgana needed to hone her basic skills before using such a powerful weapon -- just as how Arthur had built Merlin up before he began to teach him any real fighting skills. But Morgana had too many reasons to skip ahead. They were in danger from both sides: from the Sidhe and from Camelot, from magic and from steel. It was not a pleasant position to be in, and for Morgana it was new and raw. But Gwen had lived with it all her life, just as Gaius had.

Gwen knew the answer to Morgana's earlier question: how Gaius had survived this long. All the survivors of the Purge knew. He had turned his back on the Old Religion and swore himself to the King. When Gwen was young, she would overhear arguments between her parents and others of the faith. Many saw Gaius as a traitor, but her mother knew that Gaius had chosen to stay by the King's side not simply to survive himself, but so that he could help others where he could. Her mother told stories about how Gaius helped smuggle out people and books during the worst of the Purge, saving irreplaceable lives and knowledge. And yet to achieve those heroics, he had helped commit atrocities in the King's name. The Great Dragons might never have been slaughtered if Gaius had not been at Uther's side. How different might Camelot be if even one magical assassin had succeeded? Gwen did not want the anarchy that would follow, the wars of territory as every neighboring kingdom fought for their own scrap of Camelot. And yet it was vile that innocent people continued to pay the price for Camelot's stability.

All of this she had always known. She had grown up knowing it, and she had hoped and prayed that something would stop Uther without throwing the kingdom into chaos: an early, natural death, or a sudden change of heart. But still Uther held the throne, and still he hated. She had come to accept it as simply the way things were, and the way they would be until Arthur took the throne -- and always there was the blind hope that Arthur would be a better, kinder king. That things would change under his reign. And perhaps they might, but there were no certainties, and she had to acknowledge that Arthur had always been his father's right hand. His recent change of heart could prove to be temporary.

Perhaps Morgana was right. After the Sidhe had been stopped, they should leave Camelot behind, make a new life somewhere safe, somewhere they could be accepted. While the Great Purge had never been restricted to Camelot's borders, and many of the surrounding kingdoms had turned away from the Old Religion, there were still places they could go. Gwen had often wondered why her parents had chosen to remain in Camelot, to live in such constant peril, when they could have left. Even burdened with a toddler and an infant, even leaving everything they owned behind, they could have walked north to a better life. But like so many others, they had stayed, and paid a steep price. Now that all of her family was gone, what did she truly have to keep her here? An empty house and
a cold forge were not enough. Perhaps it was time to do what her parents would not.
Bargains

Gwen eventually convinced Morgana that they needed a rest from their lessons -- though Morgana only agreed out of frustration. After she was unable to get the Sidhe staff to fire, Gaius switched her back to beginner spells, and it was obvious that Morgana was unhappy with the setback. There was no shame in being new at something, in learning one step at a time instead of leaps and bounds, but Morgana's pride did not take well to dents.

Still, as far as Gwen was concerned, they had both learned a great deal. Gwen's head was so full of words that she feared it might burst, her eyes were sore from reading, and her hand was cramped from writing. When they returned to Morgana's chambers, Gwen barely fumbled through the familiar tasks for Morgana before slipping between the cool sheets of her own bed and closing her eyes.

They were roused at sunset by the knock at the door. Gwen shook off the wisps of sleep and answered; it was a page telling them that Morgana had been invited to dinner with the King. As usual, Gwen was expected to be there to serve and attend to Morgana's needs. She passed the news to Morgana, then went to change and clean herself up.

After she pulled off her dress, she stopped to look at it. She had expected to die in this dress, and yet it seemed that life went on after all. Tomorrow held no less danger than today or yesterday, and she was still afraid. But the fear was not as sharp and suffocating as it had been. Whatever happened next, for the first time since her father's death, she would not have to face it alone. And there was a kind of peace in that.

She emerged from her room, skin and clothes clean, and feeling worlds better for it. Morgana had already washed herself and selected a dress for the evening, one she had not worn since last spring. It was velvet, a flowing, luxuriant purple with silver and pearl vines along the neckline. It was one of Uther's favorites, and for that reason she rarely wore it. But just as Gwen had worn her own father's gift as a shield, now Morgana used the king's gift as a small but vital protection. Uther had always been the sort of man who appreciated symbolism and marks of allegiance. Without saying a word, Morgana could give the impression of loyalty and love, and use that to keep Uther blind to the truth.

By the time they left, Morgana looked stunning: her makeup perfect, her hair falling in waves around her face, pearl earrings and an amber necklace sparkling bright against her hair and dress. She walked through the halls with utter poise, as confident as the King himself. No one could guess that she was a sorceress and a seer, or that she had anything in common with the poor souls that were regularly arrested and executed. There was no trace of the hazy, drugged state she had been in for weeks, or her frustration and temper. She was in absolute control and wanted everyone to know it. And yet as they entered the King's dining hall, she shifted in her expression and her stance, revealing a softness, a gentle humility that was meant for the King alone. Uther had been wearing a tense frown, but when he saw her, his shoulders eased and he smiled.

"My Lady," he said, as he stood. He gestured for her to sit at the opposite end of the table, as was customary when it was just the two of them.

"My King," Morgana said, with a short curtsy. She smiled back as she took her seat.

"It's wonderful to see you so restored," Uther said. He gave her a long, fond look, then shook his head. "After that lightning strike, I was afraid your nightmares might start up all over again. But I see I was entirely mistaken."
"Gaius' treatments have worked wonders," Morgana lied, her voice warm and content. "I feel better than I have in years."

"And no more nightmares?"

"I also slept better than I have in years," Morgana said, with a gentle laugh. She raised her cup, which Gwen had only just filled. "To Gaius."

Uther raised his own goblet. "To Gaius."

They drank, and both settled back into their chairs. Uther let out a long sigh and let his shoulder slump, letting out whatever tensions he had been holding onto all day.

"Is something troubling you, my lord?"

"What else?" Uther said, then took another sip from his cup before setting it down.

"Arthur?" Morgana asked, innocently. "I haven't seen him all day. I thought you'd sent him out."

"He hasn't been seen since the feast. I should have had George lock him into his chambers," Uther grumbled.

Morgana gave a small laugh. "He'd only climb out of the window."

"The dungeons, then," Uther said, but beneath his annoyance there was a glimmer of amusement.

"No one's seen him at all?"

"Under normal circumstances I wouldn't worry. But these are not normal circumstances. Our visitors from Tír-Mór have also disappeared."

Despite knowing that Sophia was currently small, blue, and trapped in a candle cage in Gaius' chambers, Morgana reacted with completely believable surprise. "All three of them? Not just Sophia?"

"Then you understand my concern." Uther frowned. "I had hoped his infatuation had passed. But now I fear that it has."

"My lord, you know Arthur would never... He's far too honorable for revenge."

Uther raised his cup again and drank. "He loved her enough to abandon his duty. The loss of such a love could be equally motivating."

"The pain of a broken heart," Morgana said, sympathetically, then shook her head. "No, I don't believe it. Arthur could never love anymore more than he loves his duty. He's always been more prince than man."

"Which is exactly what he should be," Uther insisted. "But I can see no other reason for this... shared disappearance. If there is still no sign of them by morning, the four of them will be hunted down and brought back in chains. Assuming they're all still alive."

As Uther stared into his cup, Gwen and Morgana shared a glance of concern. There was no telling how long it would take for Arthur to rescue Merlin from the Sidhe and return from Avalon -- assuming he was able to return at all. Uther was already assuming the worst. If Arthur was lost, the consequences for Camelot would be dire, even if they were saved from the horrors of Morgana's visions.
"Children can be so troublesome," Morgana said, with soothing sympathy. "Arthur's probably just off on one of his snits, stomping through the forest. Give him a few days to calm down. You did just fire Merlin, and you know how fond he is of the boy. I haven't seen Merlin either today. Perhaps Arthur's taking him back to Ealdor."

The wrinkles eased from Uther's brow. "It wouldn't be the first time he's snuck off for that boy. I've never understood what Arthur sees in him."

"Adoration," Morgana said, leaning back as she gained control over the conversation. "Merlin worships the ground Arthur walks on. He'll do anything for him. Who wouldn't enjoy having such a servant?"

Uther leaned back, mirroring Morgana's posture. "I've never questioned the boy's devotion."

"Then why get rid of him?"

Uther stared at a candle flame and twisted his mouth in thought. "It's natural for a servant to worship his master. But such devotion shouldn't be returned. Arthur has always cared too much for the boy. If he's going to be King, he has to learn."

Morgana frowned. "A king must care for his people."

"A king must care for his kingdom," Uther corrected. "After the Five Kingdoms are united, Arthur will become regent. He needs to be ready."

Morgana feigned surprise. "So soon?" The Five Kingdoms treaty was to be signed next spring.

"It's time," Uther said, simply. He gestured to Louvel to bring their dinner.

Gwen followed Louvel out of the room and down to the kitchens. She was loathe to miss any of the conversation, and so hurried for her waiting tray. By the time she came back, the topic had moved away from Arthur and onto Morgana.

"...the glaziers should have the new windows ready tomorrow," Uther said, sounding pleased by the fact. No doubt he had gone to the glaziers himself and commanded them to stop all work until Morgana's new windows were fritted, worked, and installed.

"That's wonderful," Morgana said, smiling. "I've missed the moonlight."

Gwen and Louvel served dinner, topped off their masters' cups, and stood back to wait for further command. There was an amicable silence as Morgana and Uther ate.

"My lord," Morgana began, as she finished eating and set aside her fork. "As my health has improved, and as Arthur is coming into his inheritance, I have been thinking of my own."

Uther frowned. "Morgana, we have been over this many times."

"And there is still no man in all of Camelot that I would deign to take as a husband," Morgana said, with fire behind her words. She quickly composed herself again. "Lord Gylis may continue to manage my father's lands. But that does not mean I cannot live upon them. I wish to move to Powys next summer."

Uther set aside his own fork. "You are my ward. Your place is here."

"I am of age, my lord," Morgana said, politely insistent. "I have lived more than half my life in your
castle. But for ten years I lived in my father's. I wish to do so again, now that I am able."

Uther did not disguise his hurt, nor the anger that came with it. But he quickly composed himself, just as Morgana had. "I will allow a visit, but no more than a month."

Anger flashed in Morgana's eyes, and for a moment Gwen feared the candles might flare high, or a vase explode. But with a blink the anger was gone. "A month," Morgana agreed.

"And no more."

"A month, and then we will discuss it further," Morgana replied. "Unless you have a better reason why I must remain here?"

"You are under Gaius' care, and I cannot spare him."

"Gaius can teach another physician how to make my medicine. Surely there are skilled physicians in Powys."

"Gaius is the best in the kingdom, and I would trust your care to no other," Uther insisted. "I will not see you leave his care until you have been fully cured."

"Even if I marry?" Morgana challenged. "Even if my new husband commanded me to travel far away with him?"

"In which case, I would have words with your 'new husband', and unless he was a king, he would do well to listen."

They stared at each other in mutual defiance, and then both broke into resigned smiles. This was an old argument, one Gwen had seen many times in many variations. Morgana tested the bounds of her cage, and Uther fortified them. And yet it was clear that the King kept Morgana close out of a true and deep affection, and that losing her for any reason, even a husband, would be a great and painful loss to him. It did not matter that she was only his Ward; to him, she was the daughter he had never had. And as much as that fact restrained Morgana, it also gave her power she would never have merely as the daughter of Lord Gorlois.

"Besides," Uther said, in a conciliatory tone, "I'll need you here to keep an eye on Arthur. You're the only one I can trust to be as fearless with him as you are with me."

This gave Morgana pause. "You wish me to counsel him?"

Uther nodded. "As you already do for me."

Morgana smiled. "I would be honored, my lord." Gwen knew that at least some of that smile was for the fact that Morgana had already secured herself an official seat on Arthur's council -- and not merely as a captive conscience. With or without Uther's permission, she would one day claim her full inheritance -- assuming they weren't forced to flee Camelot entirely in order to stay alive.

"If I am to follow in my father's footsteps, you must tell me how he challenged you," Morgana continued. "About his courage and honor, and the friendship you share. I was too young when he was taken from me."

"He was the greatest man I've ever known," Uther said, fondly.

"Tell me a story," Morgana said, with a warm smile. "Anything. Tell me... tell me how he met my mother."
Uther's smile froze and faded. "Your mother," he said, and took up his wine again.

"He always said the two of you had been friends since you were boys," Morgana said, continuing on in the same warm tone, as if oblivious to Uther's darkening mood. "Surely he told you how they met. I know so little about her. How she lived. How she died."

Uther drained his cup and Louvel quickly refilled it. "Surely your father told you."

"Only that she took ill."

"There is little more to say," Uther said, tersely. "The disease took her quickly. I sent Gaius to Powys, but it was too late."

"Perhaps I'll speak to Gaius, then," Morgana said.

Uther gave an assenting grunt and drank again. Gwen and Morgana exchanged another glance; Morgana would pry no more from him tonight, but his reaction was revealing in itself. Once again it was clear that Gaius was the vault of the secrets of their past. The trick lay in learning how to unlock him.

§

Dinner finished soon after, and Morgana and Uther parted for the night. Instead of returning to her chambers for the night, Gwen and Morgana headed back to Gaius. Morgana's long strides and clenched jaw meant that Gaius would have questions to answer before they could resume their lessons.

When they arrived, they found the door was locked, but on their previous visit Gaius had given Gwen one of his spare keys. Gwen opened the door, and found that Gaius was asleep in his cot.

"Should we wake him up?" Gwen whispered.

"Oh, I'll wake him up," Morgana said, with promise, but as she walked towards him, she stopped and cocked her head. "Do you hear something?"

Gwen listened. It sounded like something was scratching against wood. She looked to Morgana, and realization came over both of them just in time. They turned towards the barrel just as it burst apart in a shower of grain and wood. Everything happened at once: Sophia flew out from the ruined barrel, Gaius startled awake with a yelp, Gwen slammed the door shut, and Morgana leapt for the Sidhe staff.

"Stop her!" Gaius cried, as he struggled to his feet. "Don't let her get away!"

Gwen turned the key in the lock and grabbed the nearest blanket. Gaius had told them how he and Arthur had captured Sophia before. If they could just pin her down and threaten her with the staff...

"I'll stop her," Morgana said. She whirled around with the staff and pointed it at the crazed ball of blue light that was streaking around the room. "Acwele!" she cried. "Acwele! Acwele! Acwele!"

There was a crackle of energy in the air, and Gwen's eyes widened as she remembered it from the explosion of the vase that morning. She yanked Gaius down to the floor and pulled the blanket over their heads just as an explosion rocked the room. There was a cacophony of shattering glass, and then a sudden silence. Gwen lifted the corner of the blanket and peeked out.

"Morgana?" Gwen called, alarmed.
"I'm all right," Morgana said. She stood up with a groan and brushed herself off. She looked around and gave a triumphant cry. "Got her!"

Gwen helped Gaius up, and they surveyed the scene. Morgana was all right, but her dress had been ruined, sliced up by shattered glass. The Sidhe staff was also destroyed, as the crystal that powered it had exploded, overloaded by Morgana's magic -- as had nearly all of Gaius' glass vials and bottles.

In the middle of the room, lying among the glittering shards, was Sophia.

"Is she dead?" Gwen asked, walking carefully over.

Morgana picked up Sophia with some distaste and handed her to Gaius. Gaius peered and prodded at her, and concluded that she was still alive, but had been knocked unconscious by the blast of magic that Morgana had channelled -- or rather, forced -- through the staff's crystal.

"The larger problem," Gaius continued, "is what do with her now. She must be imprisoned somewhere more secure before she awakes."

"Steel isn't enough," Gwen said, looking at the wreckage of the barrel. Sophia had managed to free herself from the wire, and then bent apart the candle cage before breaking out of the barrel itself. "We need something stronger."

"I know where we can get something stronger than steel," Morgana said, with a knowing smirk.

Gaius sighed. "It would probably be best if the two of you went alone. Take her with you, and go before the guards get here. I'll tell them an experiment went wrong. It wouldn't be the first time." He shook his head at the broken glass and spilled potions. "They might even help me clean up this mess."

"Thanks, Gaius," Gwen said, giving him an apologetic look. She wrapped the unconscious Sophia up in a cloth, and she and Morgana hurried out the door. They heard the guards coming up the stairs and ducked into a shadowed corridor until they had passed, then quickly went down the steps themselves.

§

Gwen's stomach knotted as they crept to the top of the dungeon stairs, barely disguised by their heavy cloaks. But the sensation was not solely from fear of being caught. Down below, where the guards passed the time with dice, was where her father died.

But this was not the night for distractions. She and Morgana peered down and found that the dungeons were well-lit with torches tonight. Gwen looked to Morgana, who appeared both intimidated and determined in what she was about to do. There was only one way they would get past the guards, and that was under cover of darkness.

Gwen reached out and held Morgana's hand with her own. Morgana squeezed back, grateful, and took a shaky breath, then another.

"Close your eyes," Morgana whispered, and Gwen obeyed. She held them tightly closed as Morgana gathered her strength. Though it was not as strong as during Morgana's explosions of power, Gwen recognized the tickle of magic against her palm. Despite the danger, despite the dire consequences if they were discovered, she could not deny the thrill that ran through her. She was feeling Morgana's magic. The intimacy of it almost made her blush, but she sternly told herself to stay focused.

"Acwence oandelweoce," Morgana whispered under her breath, and despite their near-silence, there
was strength in her words. There was a disturbance below as the torches were quenched, one by one, until the dungeons were plunged into darkness.

"Now!" Morgana whispered, and Gwen opened her eyes. They would have a good minute before everyone else's eyes adjusted to what little moonlight there was, and that was all the advantage they needed. Gwen pulled Morgana along as they slipped down the stairs and past the guards, Morgana trusting her to lead them safely to their destination.

They reached the gate, which was at the end of a corridor of cells. But when Gwen tried to open it, she found to her horror that it was locked. Morgana looked at her, and they realized at the same time that when they had last done this, they had used Morgana's skeleton key. The same key that had vanished along with Merlin in the chambers of the Tír-Mòr.

At the other end of the corridor, the orange glow of the torches flared up again as they were re-lit by the guards. At any moment, a guard would come down this way to re-light the rest. They had to get past the gate.

"The unlocking spell," Gwen whispered urgently. "Can you use it to open the gate?"

Morgana was wide-eyed in the darkness. "I don't remember the words."

Gwen frantically thought through everything she had read and learned over the past two days, and almost gasped in relief as she recalled the spell. "'Tospringe'. It's 'tospringe.'"

Morgana glanced back over her shoulder at the flickering light, and then rounded on the gate lock as she would any opponent. She stared at the lock, gathering her strength and will anew, and with one word the lock clicked open.

"You did it!" Gwen whispered, proud and amazed.

Morgana grinned back at her, and pushed open the door. They hurried through and closed the door behind them, letting the lock click shut again. They didn't need skeleton keys anymore.

There was no light at all once they reached the bottom of the first flight of steps. Gwen had grabbed one of the torches from the wall, but they didn't dare use it until there was no chance that the light would be seen.

"Leohtbora oandelweoce," Morgana cast, and the torch flared to life.

Gwen blinked as her eyes adjusted, but it was not the light that startled her. Morgana stared at the torch with delight and joy, her face flushed with excitement and life as it had not been for years. This was her Morgana, not the pale, suffering girl that Gwen had watched over in sorrow. This was the Morgana that she...

"Come on," Morgana said, grabbing Gwen's hand and pulling her along, breaking her from her thoughts.

When they had been this way before, years ago, they had been stopped by a blockade of rubble; now, they found a cleared path had been made through it. Merlin's work, no doubt. The path led at last to a broad ledge, and beyond it they found a vast, dark cavern, lit only by shafts of moonlight. The cavern was enormous, and big enough hide a whole army of dragons. But there was only one dragon left.

Gwen hesitated, but Morgana was emboldened by her successes. She called out into the darkness. "Great Dragon! Show yourself!"
The dragon did not reply, but the clink of chains and a low rumble betrayed his presence.

"Please," Gwen added; this was, after all, one of the holiest creatures of the Old Religion. A little politeness couldn't hurt. "Please, we need your help."

From the shadows came a low, menacing laugh. "The witch asks me for help."

Morgana stiffened at this -- if not because of his words, than because of his sneering tone. It was clear that the dragon held her in disdain, and yet they had never met. "Show yourself. Or are you such a coward that you can only shout insults from the shadows?"

The dragon growled, and then abruptly lunged forward into the light. He was a monstrous beast, with huge wings and sharp teeth and claws. Both women jumped back, and were relieved when the dragon's chains kept it from reaching the ledge. The dragon settled back on a large outcropping and glared at them. It snorted smoke.

"I will never help you, Morgana Pendragon," snarled the dragon.

"Why?" Morgana challenged, stepping forward to show that she was not afraid, even though anyone with sense would be terrified. "What right do you have to cast such judgement?"

The dragon said nothing.

"Then will you help me?" Gwen dared. "You forged my father's sword. Can you forge a prison that will hold a Sidhe?"

The dragon turned and looked directly at her, and Gwen had to force herself not to flinch. His yellow eyes seemed to stare into her soul. He flicked his tail against the rock, sending stone clattering down. It was clear that he was judging her, and all she could do was hope not to be found wanting. It was a mystery to her why the dragon would hold any animus towards Morgana. As they were all parts of the Old Religion, they should have every reason to work together.

"Your father's sword," the dragon rumbled. "Then you are the blacksmith's daughter. Serving girl to the witch."

"I'm right here," Morgana said, offended.

"It is not your destiny to be here," continued the dragon, ignoring the interruption.

"Yet here I am." Gwen dropped to one knee and bowed her head. "Please, in the name of Modron, for the sake of all who hold her in our hearts--"

"Silence," the dragon growled.

Gwen stood up, confused. The words of the Old Religion should be a consolation to such a creature of magic. But then she heard the rattle of his chain, and saw the bitterness in his ancient eyes. There was, after all, only one dragon left, and he had spent the last twenty years imprisoned. It did not surprise her that he should turn against the Old Religion in his anger and grief, but it saddened her.

"So you hate magic?" Morgana braved, undaunted. "You hate me because I'm a witch, you hate Gwen because she worships the gods you've turned from."

"I hate those who have imprisoned me," the dragon said, turning on her with fresh enmity.

"You helped Merlin," Morgana replied. "He has magic. He worships the Old Gods. Why help him
"Merlin is no longer of interest to me."

"You're lying," Gwen realized. "If you didn't care about Merlin anymore, you wouldn't have helped Arthur get to Avalon."

The dragon gave an irritated rumble. "The only thing Arthur Pendragon will find in Avalon is his own death. I merely helped him to it."

"You're like me. You know what's coming," Morgana said. "You know we'll all be dead soon if we don't stop the Sidhe. Thousands of innocent people will die. Is that what you want?"

"I am the last of my kind," the dragon growled. "By Uther Pendragon's hand. I will see his line end before mine."

"This isn't about Uther or Camelot," Gwen said, her own anger growing. "The Sidhe are our common enemy. For thousands of years, dragons were sworn to protect Albion against them. Will you turn your back on that legacy and let the Sidhe win all for the sake of revenge?"

Morgana's hand came to rest on Gwen's shoulder, and only then did she realize that she was shaking with anger and fear, and that she had stepped to the very brink of the ledge in her passion. She let Morgana guide her back to safety.

There was a tense silence as the dragon considered their words. "It is true that the Sidhe deserve my fire," he said, slowly. "But the Triskelion broke when my kind were slaughtered. Uther destroyed that legacy. I owe Albion nothing."

Gwen's heart sank. For all Morgana's newfound strength, she could not stop what was coming, not without help. If the dragon refused them, then their only hope was that Arthur and Merlin would return alive and whole. If not, they would have to run, to warn those who would listen and to abandon Camelot to its fate.

"Coward," Morgana called, defiant as ever. "Liar!"

The dragon gave a warning snort.

"You heard me," Morgana continued, taking a step forward. "Gwen seems to think you're someone important. But all I see is a selfish, lying coward who'd rather wallow in his own bitterness than see the truth. And that makes you just the same as Uther."

The dragon reared up, furious. "How dare you?"

"It's the truth," Morgana said, undaunted. "If you ever cared about anyone but yourself, you'll help us stop the Sidhe."

"And how, exactly, do you expect me to do anything?" He rattled his chains noisily. Then his eyes narrowed. "If you want my help, first you must free me."

Morgana hesitated and glanced at Gwen, who shared her concern. The dragon seemed just as likely to burn down Camelot himself if he had the chance. If they let him go, even if he did help them against the Sidhe, they would have no way to stop him if and when he turned on them. But it might just be a risk they would have to take.

Morgana turned back to the dragon. "How?"
At last the dragon seemed genuinely interested in them. "My chains must be broken. It will require powerful magic and a sword blessed by the Old Religion."

"And in return, you'll help us against the Sidhe?" Morgana pressed. "You'll help save Camelot?"

"That is the bargain," the dragon agreed.

"Prove it," Morgana said. She turned to Gwen. "Show him."

Gwen reached into her pocket and pulled out the still-unconscious Sophia. She held her out for the dragon to see, and was relieved to see the hatred that flared in his eyes.

"Shall I kill her for you?" the dragon asked, eagerness dripping from his voice.

"We need a prison she can't escape," Morgana said. Gwen gave her the fresh candle cage that she'd had tucked under her cloak. "Can you forge this as you forged the sword?"

"I can," said the dragon. His eyes glowed, and the cage lifted from Morgana's hand to float in the air above them. "But what assurance do I have that you will keep your side of the bargain? I have been betrayed before."

"You're not the only one for whom Camelot is a prison," Morgana said, honestly. "When all this is over and Camelot is safe, I will free you, as I free myself. Is that enough, or do you not trust the word of a 'witch'?"

Morgana and the dragon stared at each other, and it was the dragon that broke first. He nodded his head and flapped his wings once. "Very well. Step back, and I will give you what you have asked for."

Morgana and Gwen quickly moved back to the entrance, where they could shield themselves from the dragonflame. With a mighty heave, the dragon breathed out a gust of intense, white-hot flame that seared the air around them. When the flame stopped and the air cooled, they stepped out from their safety and looked up. There, gleaming in the dim light with the same extraordinary sheen as Arthur's sword, was the candle cage, transformed. The dragon's eyes glowed again as the cage sank down into Morgana's open hands. But she did not flinch from the forge's heat.

"It's cool," Morgana said, amazed. "Quickly, put her inside."

Gwen placed the bound Sidhe into the candle cage and quickly closed it, securing the door with the burnished latch.

"You're certain this will hold?" Morgana asked the dragon.

"It would hold against a hundred Sidhe."

"Thank you," Gwen said, genuinely grateful. She tucked the cage back under her cloak.

"Let's go," Morgana whispered, and Gwen gave a quick nod of agreement. They had what they had come for, and the promise of additional help should they need it. It was more than Gwen could have hoped for, yet the cost might prove high.

Morgana turned back to the dragon. "Thank you," she said, with all the formality of the court.

"Remember your promise," warned Kilgharrah. "Or I will keep you to it."
At the halfway point between the dragon and the dungeons, Gwen and Morgana stopped and hugged each other tightly. They were both shaking, exhilarated, overwhelmed by what they had faced, what they had done.

"You were amazing," Morgana said, grinning.

"I was so afraid," Gwen admitted. "The way you stood up to him, it was the bravest thing I've ever seen."

"You were more than brave," Morgana said, pulling back enough to meet her eyes, but not letting her go. "I thought you were going to march right off the cliff!"

"I couldn't believe it," Gwen said, gripping Morgana's arms. "That a Great Dragon would turn his back on us. I knew we had to reach him, to make him listen, to--" Her words and thoughts were stopped abruptly as Morgana closed the narrow space between them and kissed her.

Gwen gave a soft gasp as Morgana suddenly broke the kiss, obviously as surprised by the action as Gwen had been. But when Morgana tried to pull away, Gwen held her. They stood embraced, breathing raggedly in the quiet of the tunnel, cast in half-light by the abandoned torch.

Slowly, Gwen leaned forward and pressed her lips to Morgana's. For an infinite second, Morgana didn't respond, and Gwen's mind raced with fearful, dizzying possibilities. And then she kissed back, and the world righted itself.

This time when the kiss broke, they moved closer, resting their foreheads together as their hearts raced, beating faster now than they had when facing against a monstrous, angry dragon. And surely this was more terrifying, more wonderful than any magical creature.

This was the Morgana that she... that she loved. That she had loved since they were too young to understand it, too young to know what love meant. Gwen had loved Morgana for more than half her life, but until now she had only ever been able to give Morgana half of herself. It was only now that the truth was out, now that they had both broken free from the fears that imprisoned them...

Morgana drew back again, but this time it was to look at Gwen and to touch her cheek, wiping away the tears that Gwen had not known she was shedding. "All this time?" Morgana asked, her voice trembling as it never had against kings and dragons.

Gwen took Morgana's hand and kissed her palm, tasting the salt of her own tears. "I'm sorry."

"Don't," Morgana said, and hugged her again. "Don't ever be sorry. Gwen..."

They held each other for a while, Gwen burying her face against Morgana's cloak and the crook of her neck. And then: "What are we going to do?"

"Exactly what we were going to do before," Morgana said, resolute. "We're going to save Camelot, and then we're going to leave this awful place behind and make a new life for ourselves. And if anyone tries to stop us, I'll cut them down where they stand."

She smiled at the end to soften her words, but Gwen saw how much she meant them. And Gwen saw, even in the dim light, the fear in Morgana's eyes. Not of Gwen, but for her, for the both of them: that they might lose what they had only just found, what they had wasted years in denying. Love, magic, hope... only now had they grasped it, just when everything was against them, ready to rip it all away.

With a burst of nervous courage, Gwen kissed Morgana again -- and dwelled upon the softness of
her lips, the warmth of her in her arms. They might die tomorrow, or they might live. They might save Camelot only to leave it behind. But whatever fate awaited them, they would face it together.

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As they reached the last flight of steps, Gwen extinguished their torch against the stone ground. Though Morgana was bearing it well, Gwen could see that the use of so much magic had once again taken its toll on her. With time and practice she would build up her endurance for spellcasting, but for now they would have to depend on her sheer stubborn determination to get them to safety.

They crept up to the gate and peered out. All the torches had been re-lit, and from the lack of idle chatter and rolling dice, it seemed the guards were still on alert. The one thing Gwen and Morgana had on their side was the general paranoia that Camelot's guards had about magic. It was said that in the early years after the Purge, there were so many false alarms that even Uther grew weary of them. He wanted to hear no more about the supposed ghosts and spirits that haunted the dungeons, especially as the ghosts were of the hundreds of executed sorcerers and conspirators that the King was eager to forget. Even though the guards continued to whisper of strange noises in the night, of objects moving on their own and wine souring in the cup, few of those whispers ever reached the King's ear, for fear of his wrath.

Morgana quietly unlocked the gate, and pushed it open just far enough so that they could peer down the hall. There were only a few torches down this way, but one of them was right next to the gate. If a guard came down this way, they would have to duck back down the steps and wait. But thankfully they were too busy guarding the dungeon's entrance to worry about the securely locked cells behind them.

"Same as before," Morgana whispered, and Gwen nodded. But as Morgana gathered her strength to quench the torches again, Gwen gave one last look up and down the hall -- and then something caught her eye, and she looked straight ahead at the dark, empty cell across from them.

It wasn't empty.

A man was there, sitting on the straw-covered floor. He was staring at them, and when their eyes met, he gave a wry, knowing smile. Gwen's heart squeezed in her chest, and she swallowed a whimper as she grabbed tightly to Morgana's arm.

"Ow! Gwen, what?" Morgana whispered, turning back to her, annoyed. And then she followed Gwen's eyes, and froze.

The man, the prisoner -- he had seen them. He had seen Morgana doing magic, and it only took one witness for a trial and execution. It would be his word against theirs, and he was just a prisoner, but that might not be enough to save them. Gwen's mind raced, frantic -- yet even through the haze of panic, she saw the moment that Morgana made her decision.

"No, don't!" Gwen whispered, grabbing Morgana to stop her.

"I have to," Morgana hissed, trembling with desperation. Gold flared in her eyes, more from emotion than magic, and she tried to pull free even as Gwen tried to cover her mouth.

"Ladies," whispered the man, raising his palms in surrender. "Please. Your secrets are safe."

Gwen and Morgana froze, and both turned to the man.

"And why should we believe you?" Morgana hissed urgently.
The man opened his mouth to reply, but then came the sound of boots against stone as a guard approached. Gwen and Morgana both held their breath; they were far enough back not to be in sight unless the guard came all the way down the hall, and the guard seemed to be lazy enough not to bother with the walk. But the gate was open a few inches, and if the guard noticed...

Long seconds passed. The guard moved on.

Gwen released Morgana, slumping against the opposite wall. Morgana turned to her, both relieved and angry. Morgana never took kindly to anyone trying to control her, and it was clear that friends or lovers, the resulting argument would be the same.

"As I was saying," said the man, quite unruffled by the close call. He was an older man, and unlike the other prisoners, it was clear that someone had allowed him to clean up recently, as he was wearing clean clothes and had only a couple of days' worth of stubble. "You have my word that I will tell no one."

"What good is your word?" asked Morgana, unimpressed.

"Better than most," he replied, and gave a courtly bow -- or a passable one, for someone chained to the floor. "I am Lord Idris of Deorham. I apologize for the mess. I wasn't expecting visitors."

Gwen stared in surprise. At least that explained why he was here on his own, away from the other prisoners. And it gave some credence to his promise, as he had no need of bargaining chips to regain his freedom -- or save his neck.

Gwen looked to Morgana, and saw that her anger had faded, replaced by curiosity. Yet she was never one to make things easy. She lifted her chin at him. "You're the fool who tried to invade Camelot. I see you got what you deserved."

Though Gwen and Morgana had never had a chance to get the full story from Merlin himself, they had been able to piece together most of his adventures in Gedref. It had been said that Sir Geraint had infiltrated the Deorham and breached the very chambers of Lord Idris himself in order to steal the enemy's plans and defeat their sorcerer. In truth, that meant that Merlin must have met Lord Idris, and somehow gained his confidence enough to access his chambers.

"That I did," Idris agreed. "But I am not so much a fool that I would seek the death of a lady of such potential."

It was such an unexpected thing for him to say that it stopped Morgana cold. Gwen could hardly believe it herself. Of course, magic was not banned in Deorham, and Lord Idris had taken a sorcerer into battle.

Gwen looked to Morgana again, and that they were thinking the same thing. When they left Camelot, they would need somewhere to go, and they had no illusions about Uther's reaction to Morgana's departure. King Alined might be disreputable, but if they had an ally in Lord Idris, perhaps Deorham would be willing to harbor them against Camelot.

Morgana composed herself as she would against any courtly enemy, no matter that the longer they stayed here, the greater the chance they would be discovered by the guards. "Tell me, my lord. What intentions would you have towards such a lady?"

Idris did not bother to disguise his interest. "If I were to meet one, I would have much to offer her. Lands, money... safety."

"Tempting," Morgana said, and then faded her sly smile to a frown. "And yet I would not think it
wise for a lady to ally with a defeated man."

"The mark of a man is not whether he is defeated. It is if he remains defeated."

If their conversation had been a test, it was clear from Morgana's pleased expression that he had just passed it. "Then perhaps we will meet again," she said, with a demure smile.

"Soon, I hope," said Idriys, with another formal bow. "Before you go, may I have your name?"

Morgana opened her mouth, paused, then said: "Vivienne. Lady Vivienne."

"A pleasure and an honor, my lady."

Morgana bowed in return, then peered out into the hall to see if the way was clear. She nodded to Gwen to shut her eyes, and then torch by torch, she whispered the dungeons into darkness.
Arthur was not afraid of work, whether physical or mental. While he was most proud of his abilities as a warrior, he had been taught a wide range of skills. He could not judge the skill of a smithy without understanding forge and ore, nor the farmer without understanding crops and soil. Arthur had been taught everything from animal husbandry to land management to the movements of the stars -- not enough to be an expert, but equal to that of any apprentice. With that knowledge and his physical and mental strength, there was little in Camelot that he would not be able to achieve if he set himself to it.

But he wasn't in Camelot. Here in Avalon, a land where everything was made of magic, where everything was achieved by magic, all his strength and knowledge and abilities were worthless. As a human, he was less than a person here: food to most, or an object to trade like a handful of coins. And while his disguise as a Pixie restored that basic personhood to him, nothing could hide his lack of magic.

In Camelot, there were tasks that could be delegated to a servant who had no particular skills. They could be put to work carrying firewood or scrubbing floors. Repetitive, mindless work, often backbreaking, but it kept them busy and out of trouble. But in the Seelie Court, mindless tasks were done by magic, with one Pixie casting multiple spells at a time. So what tasks were left for the lowly, useless servant?

It seemed that there was one task that even the Pixies didn't care to lower themselves to. Most odious and foul work indeed.

The Sidhe did not ride on horses as humans did, but on all manner of beasts: birds and small mammals magnified to great size so that they could be ridden; wild beasts tamed without whip or tack, including enormous deer-like creatures with huge, heavy antlers; and some creatures that he could not recognize at all, and did not know what size they ought to be. All through the afternoon the Sidhe arrived, streaming in from the woods and beyond, and when they dismounted, their beasts were left in the care of the Pixies. Each would be magically groomed and fed, and then the natural result of that feeding would... result.

Gydur had made it clear that if 'Ursa' shirked his duties, if he was too lazy to do one task where every other Pixie could do a dozen, then Puck would return and find himself short one servant. Gydur had handed Arthur a shovel and a bucket and left him under the watchful eyes of the Pixies who cared for the beasts.

The filth and stink was beyond description. But Arthur took his tools and got to work. He wasn't going to give Gydur any excuse to be rid of him, no matter how many disgusting piles he had to shovel and haul away. He found himself thinking longingly of the relatively sweet smell of the Camelot stables. At least there weren't any carnivores there.

The one benefit of being in the stables was that Arthur could see everyone who arrived, and keep his own watchful eyes out for Merlin, Aulfric, and Drudwas. He could also look over to the grove of the grand hall, where the Sidhe were gathering. Oberon and the other Sidhe from the palace were already there, but along with those he had come to Avalon to find, there was no sign of Titania or Puck.

It was the last that had him concerned. Several hours had passed since Puck's departure, and Arthur was starting to worry that he had been abandoned. It did not seem farfetched that the mischievous creature had set him up, that he was hiding behind a tree and snickering to himself at how far the
Crown Prince of Camelot had been reduced. But Arthur had little choice but to wait and endure, and he doubted that Puck would push things so far with his own master. Even from a distance, Oberon looked as impatient as Arthur felt.

By the time Gydur returned, the stream of arrivals had trickled off. Arthur's arms and back ached and he was filthy, but he couldn't help the spark of pride he felt at having met Gydur's challenge. He considered it a mark in his tourney column at last.

"Passable," Gydur grunted, unimpressed. He turned to Arthur and wrinkled his huge, pink, warty nose. "Hmph. Thou canst carry a bucket. Thou art not so simple after all, I think," he said, narrowing his eyes.

Arthur froze. He had been at least partially found-out. What would happen next? Could he still fight in this Pixie body? Was there anything he could use as a weapon? If he had to fight his way out, how would he save Merlin?

Gydur laughed and slapped him on the arm -- and the Pixie must not know his own strength, because the force of the blow nearly knocked Arthur over. "If thou plays a jest on Puck, it's just revenge for that knave's tricks."

"A jest, yes," Arthur said, hiding his relief.

"I blame thee not," Gydur said, with some sympathy. "Even for a weakling, it is a pity to serve anything other than a Sidhe." He gave an adoring sigh. "We are blessed to stand in their exquisite presence, to kneel and serve their sublime resplendence."

Arthur saw the glassy reverence in Gydur's eyes, and realized that the Pixie was enchanted, just as he himself had been enchanted by Sophia. That all the Pixies must have been enchanted to love and serve their masters. It explained their fierce devotion, their protective jealousy. He felt a pang of sympathy towards the creatures and was surprised by it. The Finfolk might have been greedy and vicious, but at least the Merrows had served them of their own volition. Gydur would never turn from his masters the way Síofra had, because he had no true will of his own. Arthur had chafed at the physical qualities of his Pixie glamour, at the ugliness and the deformities; he had strained against his human frailty in this magical place. But the weakness of the Pixies was not in their form.

And with that understanding came a bitter revelation about his own treatment of Merlin. Arthur had so feared that Merlin had enchanted him, that a servant would control his master, and here the reverse was true. He had be willing to use the torcs to dominate Merlin and control him, all in the name of saving him from his magic. At the time, he had clung desperately to that control because he was afraid of Merlin, of what he was capable of, of the damage his magic might do, but did that fear justify his actions? Was he any better than the Sidhe? Than Sophia? He saw himself reflected, and as when he had looked into the stream and seen a Pixie's face, he recoiled to see himself with a Sidhe's mind.

Arthur knelt in the grassy hay and gave a mournful sigh. "If only I could serve a Sidhe, just for an hour. Truly, I would be blessed."

Sympathy poured from Gydur's eyes. "Then be still." He waved his hand, and it was the work of a moment of magic for all the filth to vanish from Arthur's clothes and body. "Now thou art fit to serve in the presence of the beauteous Sidhe. If thou canst pour wine without spilling, then go to the feast and serve. Thy master Puck will return anon. He would not miss this evening's festive delights. Until then, be the Sidhe's slave, and know their love."

Arthur was given a hefty slap towards the palace, and he wasted no time in waddling there. Once he
was inside, he decided to skip the party for now and take the opportunity to search for Merlin. Now that he had been accepted into the Pixie's ranks, if he was caught he could simply give the excuse of being lost. He began poking through any room with a door he could open. If Merlin truly was a prisoner here, they could be holding him anywhere.

If only the layout of this mad palace made the slightest bit of sense! It didn't take long before Arthur actually was lost, and his attempts to retrace his steps only led him further astray. He felt as he had when he'd followed the path from the shore and been led in circles by it. He was becoming quite tired of the Sidhe's illusions, of constantly being wrong-footed the moment he tried to act on his own. He missed being in a world where things actually made sense.

He came to the end of a hallway and opened a door, and it turned out to be a linen closet. He closed it again, but as he turned to go, he heard a knocking sound. It was coming from inside the linen closet. Puzzled and wary, he carefully opened the door.

"Ursa!" Puck called, leaping out from the linen closet. He bounded into the hall and bounced in delight.

"Puck?" Arthur gaped. "But how...?" He looked into the closet again, but the only thing inside it was shelves and linens. There was no hidden entrance, not even room to stand with the door closed. Was even the closet an illusion?

"My shining bear," Puck said, grabbing Arthur in a hug and swinging him around before setting him down with a jolt.

As relieved as Arthur was to see Puck, he remembered how angry he was at being abandoned for hours, and all his suppressed frustration burst out of him. "Where the hell have you been? Do you have any idea what I've had to put up with? How dare you--"

Puck silenced him with a finger pressed to Arthur's lips. "Cease thy temper, cruel words forbear, for I've a tale that I must share. To every holy place I flew to bring Titania to her due, and found her quick, and did exhort to leave her rest and fly to fairy court. Upon her Oberon's gifts I plied but my petition was denied. Imprisoned I could only wait until her votaries abate their jingling prayer and jangling knell; I watched them from within my cell. But mark!" He jumped back and held up his hand, which bore Palaemon's ring. The blue gemstone was no longer dull, but shimmered with potent magic.

"You fixed it?"

"With a prayer to Portunalis. Then I fled fair acropolis and to thee, obedient, swift, came to thank thee for thy gift. Thy servant I'll be longer yet and one more favor will be met."

One more favor. Arthur already knew what he wanted. "Then fetch me Mer--" But he was stopped by Puck's finger once again.

Puck cocked his head, as if listening to something. "Patience, wait, for I am bade, from my master I have strayed. To his side I must return, lest his umbrage I do earn. Yet mark the hour, the sun's retire saves us from a fate most dire. Swift we'll fly to Oberon's side and welcome home his fickle bride."

Puck grabbed Arthur's hand and pulled, and the world blurred around them. Arthur's oversized feet barely touched the floor as they sped impossibly fast through the winding hallway, and then just as suddenly they stopped. Arthur gripped his dizzied head until he could see straight again, and realized that they were just outside the dome where all the Sidhe had gathered.
"Attend and mark," Puck whispered, then stood straight, checked the air, and waited for a beat before striding confidently into the hall. Arthur started after him, then hesitated. As soon as Puck was seen, all revelries halted and the pipers lowered their instruments. All eyes turned to Puck and then to Oberon, who looked up with a thunderous glare. That thunder was matched by a sudden swift, chill wind and a rumbling from above the forest canopy. The attending Sidhe, in their gossamer silks, retreated and huddled behind the mushrooms, and some even abandoned their glamours to retreat into the silver branches above.

"Long hours hath made my patience slim," Oberon warned.

But Puck stood firm, his only deference a slight bow. "Let my words be thy sweetest hymn. For I have found thy fairy queen, gave thy gifts and bade her glean thy love, thy patience and thy will. Swift I bring her to thy feet; she comes, as sun and earth do meet."

Puck spread his arms to the sky, and as the sun set, the moon appeared through a gap in the canopy above. The half-moon grew and swayed and sank down through the trees, and Arthur realized that it was but a fairy throne in the likeness of a moon. The stars that shimmered around it were Titania's fairies, and the queen herself reclined upon her throne in breathless splendor. She wore a sheer gown that sparkled with what must be diamonds. But as the throne carried her down into the hall, Arthur saw that the diamonds were dew-drops, and the sheer fabric was silver gossamer. She had fashioned her dress from Oberon's gifts.

And then Arthur had to avert his eyes, for he saw how little of her womanly figure was obscured. His face flushed with sudden heat. He had never seen such stunning beauty, not even among the dazzling Sidhe, who were themselves emerging from their retreat with applause and murmurs of awed delight. Oberon's stormy mood eased, and with it went the wind and thunderous clouds.

"My lady," Oberon said, with a reluctant nod. Instead of celebrating Titania's arrival, he put on a contrary air, as if he did not care if she stayed or left.

"My lord," Titania said, with a knowing smile. She gestured and her throne was set beside Oberon's; her luminous, smooth moonstone was a contrast and a pair to his rough-hewn obsidian. "I shall not be fetched like a dog's bone." She said it sweetly, but there was menace in it.

Oberon leaned forward, matching her menace with his own. "Thou wast brought to kneel before my throne."

"Hence I came when ready, not when bade," Titania replied, then looked to Puck, who was putting on a disaffected air of his own. "Tell, Puck, how from prison have you strayed?"

Oberon turned his gaze to Puck, who smiled. "A mere delay, a brief suspension, while she finished her convention. Nothing even worth a mention."

"With Rome, a delegation?" Oberon asked, turning back to Titania.

"My Lord, a convocation," Titania corrected, resting her hand on Oberon's arm in gentle appeasement. "Rome's feast was for Consus and Ops, their gods of harvest, grain, and crops. My votaresses to me yearned, and to my order I returned to join with them and to kneel down. We lay green cloth upon earth brown, made offerings and then did dine on garden fruits and blessed wine. From their sweet lips they sent up prayer, and with their souls did soak the air. Then from those lips of love I drank. Down to the cloth our bodies sank."

Oberon riled with jealousy, but Titania continued on, smiling as she relived the delights of Rome.
"In breaths of faith my body soaked as to their goddess they evoked prosperity: the full storehouse, grain free from mold or trace of mouse; the fattened herd; the hearty child; the autumn harvest's weather mild; let their households each survive; let their health and wealth all thrive. To Ops Consiva, hopes expressed, each swore the soul within their breast. In return they will be blessed, and share with me their god's bequest."

Titania leaned in and kissed Oberon. As she did, Arthur felt a stirring of magic in the hall. Oberon stiffened, and Titania gripped him as power shimmered in the air around them. When she pulled away, Oberon was flushed, and his eyes had grown bright with life and spirit. In contrast, his previous state now seemed faded. Oberon had been in some way ailing, and Titania had restored him.

"Salve Ops Consivia," Oberon murmured.

Titania smiled back. "A gift for thee, my husband-lord. And now that thou hast been restored, let us celebrate this night, as is custom and our rite." She stood and raised her arms to the sky. "Let wine flow free and honey drip, praise stars and moon, let's dance and skip and dawn the revels of the night! For flesh and spirit: sweet delight!"

A rousing cheer came from the Sidhe; they were all quite recovered from their fright. The musicians resumed their play with a new, jaunting tune, and everyone joined in to dance and drink, often both at once. The Pixie servants stayed to the shadows, using their magic to attend to their masters and keep their cups full.

Puck was initially drawn into the celebrations, but after a few rounds of dancing managed to make his way over to Arthur. He held out his empty cup and Arthur grabbed a nearby pitcher to refill it.

"What's wrong with Oberon?" Arthur asked. Not that he cared if the Sidhe lived or died, but he couldn't help his curiosity.

"Tis Albion that ails my lord," Puck explained. "Its magic fails, its gods ignored. We spirits live twixt god and land, where animal and man doth stand. Cut one end, the end's at hand."

Despite Puck's perpetually jovial air, there was a sobriety in his eyes, and Arthur found himself reconsidering Titania's story. The way her magic had restored Oberon, so alike to how Merlin could be restored by his own magic. Human souls, gods, magic, even the land itself -- it all seemed to be connected in some essential way. Was Oberon's illness the direct result of the Great Purge? Did it have anything to do with Camelot's ailing crops? Was their failure the gods' revenge against his father, or was there something greater at work?

Before Arthur could ask any of them, Puck had rejoined the revelers and was very welcome among them. It seemed that even if the Sidhe found Puck to be a nuisance at times, they bore no true ill will towards him. He was not of their kind, but he was one of them. Arthur was glad now that he had kept his full identity from Puck; if he knew that Arthur was the son of the man who had cut the connection between the gods and men of Albion, it was possible he might not have given such aide. As it was, Arthur wasn't sure what would happen once he had used up the last of Puck's favors. But once that favor was fulfilled, Arthur had no intention of sticking around to find out.

The festivities grew rowdier as the Sidhe drank greedily from their cups, which were kept perpetually full by the attentive, adoring Pixies. Despite the cooler evening air, the hall grew warmer from the heat of so many dancing bodies, and more and more skin was on display. The Sidhe seemed to have no personal boundaries, and touched each other freely as they danced, sometime with a single Sidhe at the center of attention. Arthur tried to avert his eyes but he couldn't help but look, and he was certain that he had turned red beneath the glamour of his pink Pixie skin. It was not
entire dissimilar to a fire festival, which always had an atmosphere of fertility about them, but this was wilder -- both more animalistic and more refined, which was true to the nature of the Sidhe themselves.

The arrival of some latecomers was announced, interrupted the merry-making. Titania and Oberon returned to their thrones, restoring their condition and attire with a gesture of magic. The crowd parted to let them through, and Arthur looked up in shock as he recognized one of the two Sidhe: it was Drudwas!

Arthur stepped in for a closer look, only to be forced back against the wall by a glaring Sidhe. Arthur moved around until he was behind Puck, who was standing next to Oberon's throne. It gave him a clear view, but he was disappointed to find that he didn't recognize the other Sidhe, and that there was no sign of Merlin. The other Sidhe carried some large, covered object, but it was far too small to contain a person.

While Drudwas had cut a striking figure in Camelot, here in the Seelie Court he was twice as handsome. His clothes were different, both more formal and more militaristic, with the same sword at his hip. The other man was definitely a regal sort, perhaps a lord or a king, though he was about the same age as Drudwas -- assuming age meant anything to the Sidhe, when their human appearance was false to begin with.

Puck cleared his throat and gave their introduction. "Prince Edern ap Nudd of the Tylwyth Teg, and Drudwas ap Tryffin, Knight of the Sparrowhawk."

"Most gracious and highest Queen Titania," replied Edern, as they bowed to her. "Most noble and generous King Oberon," he continued, and they bowed to him.

"You are late," said Oberon, annoyed at the interruption.

"We beg forgiveness; stay our fate and let us join your glorious fete. We greetings bring from our high blood: thanks and praise from Gwynn ap Nudd."

"Accepted from thy noble king," Titania said, warmly. "Did he command a gift to bring?" She gestured to the covered object.

"A treasure of great value, yea, and tis the cause of our delay," said Edern. He handed the object to Drudwas and stepped towards Titania, then knelt on one knee. "With this gift your blessing's sought. We seek the fate of Camelot."

Arthur stiffened. Perhaps at last he would find out why Drudwas and his other Sidhe were in Camelot, and what foul purpose they intended.

"Arise, fair Prince, this comes to naught. For as you know, that fate is bought. The Aos Sí have claim yet spent. Until they're done, I'll not relent."

Edern didn't seem happy with her answer. "Their claim is weak and poorly bought. For one Sidhe's death, revenge is sought. King Gwynn doth fight for all the Sidhe, o'er Queen Mab give him priority."

Titania gave him a warning look, a hint of storm in her eyes. "Here my judgement thou affronts. Pray thy gift my anger blunts."

Edern backed down, bowing deeply and then returning to his feet. "As thy judgment's fair yet stern, let this gift thy favor earn. Gwynn's orders did we three fulfill, with wife and sister Erdudwyl, and into Camelot did brave to find Sophia's murderous knave. Their sorcerous defense we quell and
bring to you as tiercel."

Drudwas pulled the covering away, and revealed a large birdcage. Within it was a falcon, small and hooded. Arthur was confused. If they'd "quelled" the "sorcerous defense," and Merlin was that sorcerer, then where...

Titania reached out her hands. "Give to me my falcon tame. Does my new pet have a name?"

"His kind and human name are kin. Thy pet was once the mage Merlin."

Merlin. Arthur's eyes widened in horror and disbelief. The falcon was Merlin! he lunged forward, unthinking, and found himself immobilized by Puck's magic. Puck gave him a warning glance before releasing him, and Arthur took the hint and stayed back.

"Merlin, that's a name most sweet," cooed Titania, as she reached into the cage. "I'll hold the jesses of thy feet..."

But Merlin wasn't having any of it. When he felt Titania grab at the leather straps on his legs, he screeched in anger and attacked her hand. It was bleeding when she pulled it from the cage and closed the door. The sky thundered ominously as Titania hissed in pain; Merlin's sharp claws had left vicious gouges. But Oberon took her hand in his and healed it, stroking the now-whole skin to soothe his queen.

"There, my love, now all is mended," Oberon said, then turned to Edern. "But thy gift has most offended. This pet has not at all been tamed!"

"For that, my king, I must be blamed," said Drudwas, stepping forward. "This sorcerer's magic -- though withheld -- my enchantments has expelled. When bound his nature should be meek, yet proves itself to be unique."

"And that, my queen, doth prove his worth," added Edern, following Drudwas' lead. "For there are few like him on earth who can resist a fairy's might. Thy potent strength will set him right."

Titania held up the cage and looked at Merlin consideringly. "Tell me, shall I make thee grand? Shall I train thee to my hand? From a fledgeling, weak of flight, brought to pitch, to stoop then smite? Will to me thy prey divest, then rest gentle at my breast? Be warned, Merlin, answer well: I'll make thy heaven or thy hell."

Merlin fluffed his feathers in anger and let out a furious squawk, defiant against Titania. But even as he did so, he seemed to lose his spirit as the reality of his situation sank in. As far as Merlin knew, he had been captured and changed and imprisoned, and now he was to live forever as a pet of the Sidhe in the land of eternal youth. Arthur's heart broke for him, seeing him in such a dejected huddle.

Yet he knew that Puck was right to stop him before. He would rescue Merlin, but he had to be careful or they would end up in a cage together. And Arthur was not going to spend eternity as a bird.

"Though he is a raw submission," Titania said to Edern, "I accept. And thy ambition is considered. Yet tradition holds. If the Aos Sí fail their mission, I will give to thee permission. Return to Albion and wait. Do not try to conquer fate. For the evening, as my guest, drink and dance and join our jest."

Titania held out Merlin's cage, and one of her maidens took it. Another brought over a small table, and the caged was placed upon it. The Sidhe gathered around it, blocking Arthur's view, but when he heard Merlin's agitated squawking, he couldn't help but head over to put a stop to whatever
torment the Sidhe were putting Merlin through. But once again, Puck's magic pulled him back.

"They're hurting him!" Arthur hissed.

"Hush, sweet Ursa, halt thy cries. They'll not harm Titania's prize. Taunts and teases provoke rage, but he'll stay safe within his cage. A little torment, that is all, so he'll take Titania's thrall."

"They've already turned him into a bird," Arthur grumbled, not liking any of this one bit. "I'm supposed to stand here and let them torture him?"

"Hold thy temper for his sake or else be found out as a fake," Puck warned. "Merlin's found, and he'll be freed, if thy favor to this cede."

"Yes," Arthur said, without hesitation. "Help me save him from Titania and get him out of here."

"That Puck will do. But first we wait until fate's crooked path runs straight. Hold thy tongue and brace thy heart, for first with Merlin she must part. Then once he's off the common floor, go steal him back, then 'scape to shore."

Arthur had no other option but to accept, and trust that Puck would keep his word. For now, he would wait, and suffer every plaintive cry as a punishment of his own.

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It was fortunate that the Sidhe were so easily bored. Once Merlin stopped responding to their torments, the crowd lost interest in him and returned to their regular merriments. Yet Titania did not order him taken away, but rather kept him near and seemed to be considering how best to train him into the perfect, obedient pet. Arthur shuddered at the thought, at how wrong it was, even as his conscience jabbed at him. He could not help but see the human Merlin of the past few days, weak from his restraint, as Arthur himself had looked at Merlin and planned how best to train him out of being a sorcerer.

Arthur had truly held only the best of intentions. He had been afraid for Merlin, and wanted to save him so that they could spend the rest of their lives together. So Merlin could stay by his side, just as he was meant to. He had trained Merlin into a knight and Merlin had thrived, and it had seemed at the time that training him out of his magic was just another step on the same path. And yet had Merlin truly thrived as a knight? Even in Gedref, Merlin had been suffering in silence as he held back the pressure of his secrets. He had used his magic to save Camelot even as every man and knight spoke of destroying all magic, killing all sorcerers. And Arthur had never truly treated Merlin as just another knight. Merlin was unique, in Camelot as in Avalon, and that had always been plain to see. If Merlin had thrived, it had been for reasons other than conformity.

That Merlin had fought for so long for Camelot and in such danger, with so little chance for reward or recognition. That Merlin had loved Arthur so deeply even knowing that Arthur fought against magic every day. It all said far more about Merlin's strength and heart than it did the worth of the kingdom he protected or the man he loved. It was past time that Merlin had some repayment for all that he had given. And if Camelot did not deserve him, if Arthur did not deserve him, then the plain fact was that both Arthur and Camelot needed to change.

Arthur could change himself, yes. He could become a better man, and wanted to. In private, there was much that he was prepared to do. Yet he knew that any public steps would be fraught with peril. When the next sorcerer was arrested, how could he stand by and allow an innocent to be executed? Yet how could he defy his father? Not because he was afraid to defy him, but because such an action, especially over magic, would have damning consequences for the entire kingdom. He could
not step into such a situation without great care. And then there was Camelot itself. Twenty years of his father's rage had sunk into the bones of the kingdom. It would be no easy task to purge that hatred out, and perhaps even as impossible as his father's quest to purge all magic from the land.

Arthur had been wrong about magic. He had been lied to his entire life. That was the plain fact of it, and he had seen too much over the past four days to pretend otherwise. He still didn't understand why his father had lied or why he had begun the Great Purge in the first place, but that was secondary to his other concerns. He had tried to force Merlin to choose between his magic and his life, and Arthur now saw that truly was an impossible choice. They were one and the same, just as Merlin had insisted. Given the choice between Camelot and magic, Arthur suspected that the situation was similar. He had so much yet to understand, but at least now he was no longer shutting his eyes to the truths before him.

He wished he felt better about any of it, but along with some small relief he gained only a host of troubles.

The one thing his whirling thoughts did provide was a distraction to keep him busy while he waited for Titania to have Merlin sent from the party. Poor Merlin certainly wasn't enjoying any of it. Arthur's heart had nearly seized when a Sidhe tried to coax Merlin into taking some food, but thankfully Merlin was far too miserable to want their succulent berries. To eat even a single berry would have trapped him in Avalon forever, even after Arthur was able to free him from the Seelie Court. Puck played his part in protecting Merlin, at least, using his wits and games to distract any Sidhe who took a renewed interest in Merlin now that the crowd had moved on. So even though Merlin was miserable, he was at least largely left alone.

Arthur had no interest in the magic of the Sidhe, or in their beauty, or their world. He had eyes only for Merlin. His heart ached as he watched Merlin from the shadows, the short distance between them seeming greater than all the miles he had already crossed. The worst of it was that he could do nothing to tell Merlin that he was there. He couldn't comfort him or reassure him. He could only stand and wait and watch as Merlin suffered. Even the feathered hood, which reminded him so much of Merlin's official servant's hat, could not lift a fraction of his spirits. Nothing would be right until Merlin was safe again.

The Sidhe's carousing carried on well into the night, and it seemed an eternity until Titania had finally had enough.

"Come, my husband, let's retire, and thy replenished health admire," she said, coaxing Oberon towards the exit. Was she just going to leave Merlin there in the middle of the party? If so, Arthur was going to have to revise Puck's plan. But she hadn't forgotten. She drew the attention of one of her maidens and gestured for her to bring the cage. "To my chambers have him brought, tend to him but give him nought." She looked at Merlin through the bars. "From thirst and hunger you'll be pliant, and in training less defiant. Forget thy past and human shape. Abandon hope of some escape. Thy life is mine and here shall stay, to soften it thou must obey."

When Merlin didn't respond, she waved her maiden on ahead, and as a group they left. As soon as they had gone, Arthur and Puck looked to each other and followed after them. They waited around a corner until the maiden left Titania's chambers, leaving Titania, Oberon, and Merlin inside.

"Now what?" Arthur whispered. If the plan was to wait until Merlin was unguarded, they were going to have a long wait. It seemed that Titania had taken quite a liking to Merlin despite his defiance, or perhaps even because of it.

Puck cupped a hand to his pointed ear and smiled. "Their time apart has made them amorous and with excitement are most clamorous." He reached out and snapped his fingers, and suddenly there
was a feather in his hand. "A cruel hand breached his cage and plucked; now rescued, with this I instruct. With this feather creep inside, silent, lest thy shape be spied. Pluck thy Merlin from his cage and rest his feather on his stage. With magic shall his form appear, and they'll be fooled by that veneer."

Arthur took the feather. It was one of Merlin's tailfeathers, brown and striped. "How much time will this buy us?"

"At least until the morning's break. When Titania doth awake, she'll try to coax him from his pique. Be gone or else thy future's bleak."

Arthur nodded. The message was clear. If they were caught, Puck couldn't help them, not when it meant publicly siding against his master. Arthur understood all too well. They had to be out of Avalon before dawn. It was a good thing that Arthur had always found deadlines to be very motivating.

He crept up to the door, feather in hand. Puck's ring glowed as the door silently opened, breaking any wards or locks present. Arthur had no doubt that by giving Puck Palaemon's ring, he had unleashed mischief on the world, but what was done was done. Puck had lived up to his side of the bargain, and for that Arthur was grateful. He might never have been able to save Merlin without him.

Titania's chambers were a grand affair, and as impossible as everything else in Avalon. Instead of the expected bedroom and outer chamber, she lived in a forest garden, lit by stars and moonlight. Flowering vines twined up the trees and shrubs, and their white blooms gave off a rich, almost intoxicating perfume. Intimate sounds drifted down from above, where a huge nest rested improbably on the low branches. Oberon and Titania's clothes lay abandoned, waywardly draped or fallen to the forest floor, which was carpeted with soft, dense grass.

The King and Queen of the Sidhe did indeed seem fully occupied with each other, and Arthur took advantage of their distraction to find Merlin. Thankfully he didn't have to climb any trees to get him, as his cage had been left on a wide stump. The cage was covered with a dark cloth, and Arthur carefully lifted it up.

Despite the hood over his eyes and the dimness of the night, Merlin sensed that someone was near, and he shifted restlessly on his perch. He moved one way and then the other, then huddled himself as tightly as he could, presumably to put as much distance as possible between himself and any reaching fingers. He already looked bedraggled from his earlier abuse, his feathers askew and unpreened.

"Merlin," Arthur whispered, incredibly glad that Puck's glamour had not altered his voice. "It's me. It's Arthur."

Merlin turned towards him, as shocked as it was possible for a small, hooded falcon to look. He let out a soft, sad, wary squeak.

"Shh, it's all right. I'm here to rescue you." Despite the danger of their situation, Arthur couldn't help but smile. With great care, he coaxed open the cage and reached inside. Merlin skittered back, then held still as Arthur's hand wrapped around him. Merlin was little more than a handful, his body slim even as a falcon. Arthur placed the feather onto the perch and closed the door, and as soon as the latch shut, a false Merlin appeared, identical to the one in his hand and seemingly alive. Arthur pulled the cloth down over the cage and crept out the door.

Puck smiled at Merlin and gave a little wave, though with the hood Merlin couldn't see him. He handed Arthur a canvas bag, similar to the sort Arthur himself used to bring back small game from a
"Put him in and keep him covered; he'll be calm and not discovered."

They eased Merlin into the bag and then wrapped the loose end around to swaddle him. Arthur had some experience with hunting birds in the royal falconry, and knew that this was probably the safest way to transport Merlin, given his poor condition and the danger of recapture if he was seen. So covered, Arthur was able to tuck him under his shirt without fear of Merlin's sharp beak and claws.

The rest of their escape was almost anticlimactic. Arthur merely followed Puck out of the palace and over the crystal bridge. On the other side, Puck stopped and turned to him.

"Thank you," Arthur said, more grateful than he could express. But there was still one very large problem. "How do we change him back? Is it a glamour?"

"No, a transformation has been made. And now thy trade to me is played and I shall cease to give thee aide. Unless you'll swear thy soul as trade?"

Arthur definitely wasn't going to give Puck his soul, not even to turn Merlin back into a human. There would be other solutions. "Thank you, but no."

"Then thou must leave and not return. Make haste to go and do not turn. When morning breaks my mask's unmade, and no one here will give thee aid against Titania. I implore, get thee hence and out to the shore."

"But which way--" Arthur began, and Puck pointed. Arthur turned to look, and there, not a half-mile away, was the very shore he'd arrived at. He blinked in surprise, then shook his head. Of course it was so close, now that the Sidhe's magic wasn't leading him in circles. At last things finally seemed to be going his way.

Arthur ran to the shore, knowing that every step he took carried him away from the Seelie Court and towards Camelot. When he stopped at the water's edge, he looked back, and the palace and all its splendor were gone, once again hidden from his sight. He didn't miss any of it.

What was it Morvarc'h had said? Call his name into the water and he'd come? Arthur was game for anything at this point, and knelt down at the edge of the water, disturbing a few resting dragonflies. He took a breath, plunged his head down, and yelled Morvarc'h's name. He knelt, water dripping down into his clothes, but nothing happened. Perhaps Morvarc'h was not in the immediate vicinity and needed time to reach the island.

Arthur sat down on the log on which he'd rested on his arrival, and pulled Merlin out of his shirt. He unwrapped the bag and carefully eased Merlin out, leaving only his sharp claws covered by the canvas. The leather jesses were still attached to Merlin's legs, and by habit of Arthur's falconry training, he took hold of them.

"Merlin?" Arthur said, worried because Merlin was so unmoving. "I'm going to take off your hood," he warned, then gripped the leather cap by the tuft of feathers at its top and gently lifted it.

Merlin flicked his head back and forth, blinking as his eyes adjusted. He went suddenly still, and then just as suddenly bolted, flapping frantically to get away. Arthur just managed to grab Merlin by his feet with the canvas, then took hold of the leather jesses. Looking down at his pink, warty hands, Arthur realized his mistake. He cursed under his breath, grabbed Puck's coin from his pocket and threw it away.

Arthur cried out as the pain of the transformation hit him. This time, he burned as the magic was ripped out of him. He clenched his teeth and held his grip on Merlin as his bones ached and his skin
itched, and the world grew suddenly shorter. The weight of his armor returned, but it felt light after hours of waddling around in a squat, heavy body. He gave a cry of relief as he was restored. He stepped towards the water and saw his reflection, and knew that he truly was himself again.

"Sorry," he said, feeling rather giddy. "Merlin, it's me. I swear, it's me. That was just a glamour, a disguise so I could rescue you. I'm bringing you back to Camelot and everything's going to be all right."

Merlin stared at him. He gave a cautious squeak, then another, puffed his feathers and then settled again. Arthur untangled his claws from the canvas and let Merlin grip his gloved hand. There was a moment of calm, but then Merlin bolted again, flapping wildly to get away. Arthur just managed to hold on to the jesses, and when Merlin failed to achieve flight, he fell, his wings outstretched, and dangled from his ankle straps in a splay.

"Merlin, it's me," Arthur said, and only belatedly remembered that he wasn't at the top of Merlin's list of favorite people right now. The last time they'd seen each other, they'd had a screaming argument that ended with Arthur strangling Merlin unconscious and imprisoning him. That wasn't the sort of thing that was easily forgotten or forgiven, no matter what else had happened since.

Merlin's tail lifted, and a stream of white birdshit sprayed onto Arthur's front. Arthur recoiled in disgust, letting go of the jesses, and Merlin dropped awkwardly to the ground. He squawked angrily and beat his wings, but he couldn't seem to actually achieve flight. Arthur realized, as he wiped white spatter from his face, that Merlin had never flown, and hadn't magically attained the required skill when his body had been transformed.

Confident that Merlin couldn't go far, Arthur let Merlin be and knelt down to clean himself off. "I can't believe you did that," he muttered at Merlin, who was running in circles around the small clearing with his wings stretched wide, flapping hard but not making any real progress. It only took a few minutes before he gave up, beak open as he panted in exhaustion.

"Finished?" Arthur asked, and Merlin gave a tired squeak. It was hard to read emotion in a bird's face, but in Merlin's he saw anger, fear, and resignation. He had thought that Merlin would be glad to see him and happy to have been saved. But Arthur hadn't finished saving him yet. Not by a long shot.

Merlin walked over to Arthur and waded into the shallow water. He stared at his wavering reflection for a long time, then gave a very un-birdlike sigh. He looked to Arthur and stared at him, but whatever he was trying to express, Arthur couldn't understand it.

"I'm sorry," Arthur said, knowing the apology was long overdue and of little worth given how disastrously everything had turned out. "I should have listened to you. I was wrong."

Merlin gave a few squawks, clearly trying to reply, then flapped his wings in frustration. The dragonflies were back, swarming at the shore, and Merlin had the misfortune to end up in a cloud of them. He flapped his wings to shoo them away and snapped at them, and Arthur first worried that Merlin was going to eat one and wasn't sure if it would be sufficiently food-like to trap Merlin in Avalon. Then he worried because he remembered that these were fire-breathing dragonflies, and reached for Merlin just in time as several of the more annoyed insects flamed at where he had been standing.

"Bad idea," Arthur told him, and Merlin squawked chattily. Fortunately, before the dragonflies could continue their revenge, the surface of the water shimmered and Morvarc'h emerged with a splash, scattering the insects away.
Morvarc'h whinnied and shook his sea-foam mane. "I heard your call. Have you found your friend?"

"Er, yes," Arthur said, glad to have someone to talk to who neither rhymed nor squawked. "This is Merlin. He's not normally a bird. Merlin, this is Morvarc'h. He's a kelpie."

Merlin, to his credit, was largely unfazed by Morvarc'h. He gave what was presumably a greeting squawk, and wriggled in Arthur's grip.

"I believe he wants you to let him down," Morvarc'h said.

"You can understand what he says?" Arthur asked, hoping he'd stumbled upon a translator as well as a rescuer. "Can he speak to you like you do to me?"

"My kind are not as dependent on words as yours," Morvarc'h said. "There are many creatures in Avalon that cannot speak at all, but we must still understand each other."

"Of course," Arthur said, trying not to feel insulted on behalf of parochial humanity. He set Merlin down. Merlin paced around the shore, then shook out his feathers, which had been quite disturbed by now. He tried to preen them. He wasn't very good at it. He wasn't very good at being a bird, period, but hopefully that wouldn't be an issue much longer.

Arthur turned back to Morvarc'h. "We need your help. We have to get back to Camelot before dawn."

"I can carry you to the Gates of Avalon, but you will have to open them yourself. I do not have that power."

"I didn't open them the first time," Arthur admitted, running a hand down his face in frustration. "In Camelot, we took one of the Sidhe captive. She opened them for me." The false Sophia. Her true name must be Lady Erdudwyl. And that meant Aulfric must be Edern. Arthur thought with dry amusement that his father was right after all. Their visitors truly were royalty.

"Did you not make an arrangement for your return?"

Arthur shook his head. "She wouldn't open them a second time. The first time she only did it because she thought it would kill me."

"Then you will have to wait for another Sidhe to open them."

Arthur relaxed again. "The two who brought Merlin here. Drudwas and Edern. Titania told them to return to Camelot. When they open the Gates, we can follow them through."

"Before dawn?"

Drudwas and Edern had been gone for a day, just as Arthur had -- and from what they'd said in the Seelie Court, none of them had intended to be gone from Camelot for so long. To be away for a day could be excused as an overlong hunting trip or some other day visit, but more than that would raise suspicion. Arthur was fairly certain that the two Sidhe would want to sneak back before dawn as well. "I believe so."

"Then I will take you to the Gates to wait. And while we are there, you can try to retrieve your sword, though it has proven itself quite stubborn."

"Then I'll have something to do to pass the time." Arthur looked over at Merlin, who had managed, through sheer persistence, to sort his feathers out. "Merlin can't breathe underwater. Will the Merrow
hat protect both of us if I carry him?"

"Síofra provided a second cohuleen druith in case you succeeded." Morvarc'h lifted his leg and there, tied to his foreleg, was a red, feathered hat.

Arthur took it gladly. He looked at the hat, then at Merlin, then at Morvarc'h. "I don't suppose there's any chance you can turn him back into a human?"

"I do not have the power of bodily transformation. It will take powerful magic to restore your friend to his natural form. But no Sidhe magic binds him."

"And that means?"

"Most Sidhe magic is based on illusions. If the spell is broken or removed, the truth will be bared."

"Like a glamour?"

Morvarc'h knickered. "But the more powerful are also capable of true transformation. In such cases, there is no spell to release. Instead, a new spell must be cast, one of equal strength. He was turned into a bird. Now he must be turned into a human."

Arthur looked to Merlin, and found that Merlin was staring at him again. But as before, he couldn't understand what Merlin wanted. He sighed and pulled out his own cohuleen druith and put it on. "Come on, you need to wear one, too," he said, stepping towards Merlin to put it on him.

Merlin took one look at the red, feathered hat and went off on a long, loud rant of squawks. Arthur was almost certain that Merlin was making some angry comparisons to his official servant's hat, and throwing in a few creative insults as well. Arthur gave him a patient look and waited for him to get it out of his system.

Once Merlin settled into a general sulk, Arthur picked him up and put the hat on him -- or rather, put him in the hat, because the hat was bigger than Merlin. "This will let you breathe underwater," Arthur told him, ignoring Merlin's indignant glare. "When we go down, just breathe normally and you'll be fine. All right?"

Merlin gave an assenting bob and pulled his claws in, letting Arthur bundle him up. Arthur used the canvas sack to swaddle Merlin up again, so he wouldn't accidentally slip out of the hat and drown. It left only Merlin's face exposed, and Arthur once again tucked him into his shirt; the water was cool enough that he didn't want Merlin losing all the heat from his small body.

With Merlin secured, Arthur mounted Morvarc'h and got a grip on the kelpie's sticky fur. Morvarc'h turned, and Arthur braced himself, and with a leap they plunged down into the lake.

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In the moonlight, the underwater world of Avalon looked even more magical and mysterious. The sunken forests teemed with creatures that pulsed like fireflies, and those that perched on the tall kelp lit up the green with strings of light. More of the floating lamps were visible now, forming a map of the Unseelie's paths and guiding their way. Arthur held tight to Morvarc'h as the water horse carried them swiftly along the ruined gallery. He felt Merlin squirm with discomfort and then settle as he adjusted to breathing underwater, and Arthur looked down to see Merlin's face just peeking out from his surcoat and mail. Arthur smiled at him, but Merlin had eyes only for their surroundings. It seemed he had not experienced anything like this when he had been brought here by the Sidhe. Arthur was glad that he could give him this. That for all that Merlin had suffered, there was some reward in Avalon's ethereal beauty.
Even at speed, it took time for them to reach the Gates. From this side, they were a wide circle of standing stones embedded in the silt and sand. Arthur wondered if similar rocks were on the other side, and if they could be removed to stop the Sidhe from their invasion. He had not noticed anything, but he had not been able to see beyond the golden light of the open Gates.

Morvarc'h trotted along the lakebed to a rocky outcrop. Arthur looked up, and high above were the giant lilypads from his arrival. And down below, embedded solidly into the rock, was his sword. Arthur dismounted and swam up to it. Despite being immersed in water for a full day, it was as gleaming and perfect as ever.

Merlin moved restlessly again, and gave a muffled yet audibly insistent squawk.

'Yes, yes,' Arthur thought at him, rolling his eyes, though he wasn't certain if Merlin could hear him. Merlin was so finicky about that sword. 'I'm getting it back, don't worry.'

"The Merrows were unable to dislodge it," said Morvarc'h.

Arthur gripped the hilt with both hands, braced himself firmly against the rock, and heaved with all his might. The sword popped free from the rock immediately, and Arthur fell back and landed on his arse. 'Ow,' he thought, annoyed.

Morvarc'h gave a thoughtful knicker. "Interesting."

Arthur opened his mouth to say that he must be that much stronger than a Merrow, but then he remembered how strong Siôfra had been when he rescued Arthur from the Water Bull. Arthur stood and dusted himself off, then sheathed the sword. It felt good to have it back at his side, and with Merlin also largely restored, he felt oddly complete.

Merlin gave another muffled squeak, then wiggled until his head was tucked back down under Arthur's surcoat. Arthur tucked him in with the end of his cohuleen druith; he was probably already taking on a chill.

They found a decent hiding spot behind the cover of some kelp-ridden ruins. Morvarc'h stayed with them, acting as guard and lookout while they waited for the Sidhe to arrive. Merlin dozed, huddled against the warmth of Arthur's chest, and Arthur felt his own tiredness pulling at him. But he couldn't rest until they were safe in Camelot again. Once they were home, Arthur was going to eat a small feast and then collapse into his bed. He only hoped that he would be holding a human Merlin as he fell asleep.

It was Morvarc'h who raised the alarm, his sudden movement rousing Arthur from a half-doze. Edern and Drudwas had arrived, staves in hand. They had abandoned their glamours and reverted to their small, flying forms, and they came to a stop just outside the stone circle. Arthur silently roused Merlin and they readied themselves to follow. Arthur looped his arms around Morvarc'h's neck, as the kelpie could carry them faster than Arthur could swim.

Drudwas chanted, and there was a burst of golden light. Edern and Drudwas spoke briefly and then dove through, and as soon as they were gone, Morvarc'h sprang out like an arrow.

"Good luck, Prince of Camelot."

Arthur thought a quick 'thanks,' and as soon as they were over the Gates, he pushed himself off of Morvarc'h and swam down as fast as he could. The weight of his armor was at last a help and not a hindrance, and in moments he was through to the other side and swimming upwards again. This time, Arthur didn't have to hurry to the surface thanks to the cohuleen druith, and as soon as he was
into the lake proper, he hung back beneath the water. Once the Gates closed, he looked down, and
could just make out a mirror image of the same circle of standings stones. They must be the same
stones, one half in Avalon and the other in Camelot.

As soon as the Sidhe had vanished, flying up over the trees, Arthur swam up to the edge of the lake,
waiting until the last moment to bring his head above the surface. He had learned his lesson on the
beach of the Seelie Court, and bent over in the sand and coughed the water from his lungs before
removing his hat. He pulled the sopping bundle from beneath his shirt and coaxed Merlin to cough
his lungs clear, and then unwrapped him.

Merlin was a sorry sight, utterly bedraggled and soaked to the skin. He spread his wings and flapped
furiously, trying to shake the water from his feathers. Arthur took the moment to wring out his
surcoat and trousers as well, but there was little he could do for his mail; he could almost hear it
rusting. He checked the sky and judged that he would have enough time to reach the castle by dawn.
Yet he had wanted to get back to the castle before Drudwas and Edern, and that was no longer an
option. He had left Gaius alone and unarmed against a dangerous hostage, and Arthur's sword was
still their best and only defense against the Sidhe.

Merlin had made some progress in drying himself off, but Arthur couldn't wait any longer. Their
only hope was that it would take time for the Sidhe to realize what had happened to Erdudwyl. He
apologized as he plucked a protesting Merlin up and wrapped him in the canvas again, then tucked
him back into his surcoat. A flash of blue caught his eye, and he saw that Gaius had left his blue
travelling cloak tucked in the fork of two low branches. He grabbed the rolled-up bundle and tucked
it under his arm.

He ran into the forest, heading straight for Camelot.
They reached the castle at dawn. Arthur stopped at the edge of the woods, taking a moment to rest from the long run, and looked up. Camelot was a welcome sight, cast in pale grey against a yellow dawn, her flags flying high. At her feet, the lower town was waking, with the first puffs of smoke floating up from the morning woodfires.

Home. They had made it home.

Merlin stirred beneath his surcoat, disturbed by the sudden absence of movement. He wriggled and peeked his head up, and gave an impatient squawk.

"We're almost there," Arthur told him. "I'll take you right to Gaius. He'll know how to fix this."

Merlin ignored him and began trying to work himself free, but Arthur easy pushed him back down. This, of course, earned him more complaining.

Arthur shushed him. "Do you want to stay a bird for the rest of your life? The Sidhe who did this to you are in there. The last thing we need is for them to see you."

His answer was a disgruntled silence. It was remarkable that as a bird, Merlin could be just as stubborn and sullen as he was as a human.

Arthur didn't want to be seen either, as it would only result in delays in bringing Merlin safely to Gaius. He shook out his cloak and drew it around himself, pulling up the hood to hide his face. He took a slower pace as he made his way through the lower town, so as not to draw attention to himself. It soothed something in him to see his people going about their completely mundane, normal day. There were no magical creatures, no illusions here. Just solid wood and stone, thatched roofs and packed earth. Here, everything made sense, everything was in its proper place. This was where he belonged.

Yet having been away from Camelot, it did feel strange to be back. Despite the fact that it had not even been a week since their return from Gedref, and despite the fact that he had only been in Avalon for a day, something was different to him. There was both a presence and an absence that he had never felt before, and with a start he realized that it was magic. The constant thrum that had pervaded Avalon was not present here, leaving the world oddly lessened; and yet in its place there was a different kind of magic. It grew stronger as he reached the outer gate, and on instinct he veered away from the entrance and toward the high walls. He pulled off his glove and touched the stone, and his breath caught.

Magic. The castle was magic.

How had he never felt this before? It was like birdsong from a high window, gentle and muted, yet undeniably present. Did his father know of this? Had he tried and failed to purge the magic from the stones? A memory tickled at him, and he recalled stories he had heard as a young boy: that a powerful sorcerer had built Camelot with magic. Only now did he connect those stories with the incident with Cedric last spring, and the unearthing of Cornelius Sigan's tomb. It seemed that the stories were true after all.

Arthur stepped back from the wall and shook his head. He pulled back on his glove and tugged at his hood, bringing it as low as he could. He headed back towards the gate, trying to look as unassuming as possible, and held his breath as he walked past the two guards that flanked the gate. The guards
didn't so much as blink at him.

Once all this was over, he was going to have to do something about the lax security around here.

But he wasn't safe yet. He made his way through the upper town, past the familiar stables, and slowed as he approached the guarded drawbridge that led into the central courtyard.

"Halt!" said a guard, and Arthur stilled. "Show yourself!"

Perhaps castle security wasn't a total loss. Arthur reluctantly drew back his hook, and both guards' eyes widened.

"Sire!" said the first guard, with a bow of respect. And then he looked to his fellow with chagrin.

Arthur decided to put them out of their misery. "I expect my father has orders to have me brought to him."

"Yes, sire," admitted the guard.

From the look on their faces, Uther must have been in a particularly bad mood when he gave the order. Arthur made things easy for them. "Shall we?" he said, gesturing towards the courtyard. He walked calmly forward, and the guards fell into place behind him. It was oddly appropriate, when facing his father felt so much like heading into battle.

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Despite the early hour, it was not a surprise to find that his father was already at work in the council room. He sat in his usual place at the head of the long table, an array of papers and maps spread before him. Louvel stood by the wall, waiting for his next command. Arthur stopped and stood at the other end of the table, and waited for his father's reprimand.

At first, Uther said nothing. He barely glanced at Arthur before turning his attention back to whatever document he was pretending to read. They had played this game before, and Arthur knew that his only choice was to wait. If he broke the silence first, by his father's rules, he would lose before the conversation even began.

He only hoped that Merlin would have the sense to do the same.

After several long minutes, his father set aside his work and leaned back in his chair. He knitted his fingers together and pressed his forefingers against his lips, as if in contemplation. He stared down the long table at Arthur and radiated disappointment.

Arthur did not so much as twitch. He could do this all day if necessary.

"I will ask you one time," Uther began, reluctantly breaking the silence, "and I expect an answer. Where is the girl?"

Arthur frowned, surprised by the line of questioning. "Girl?"

Uther slammed his hand down on the table, making his goblet wobble. "Lady Sophia. Or must I now refer to her as your *wife*." He spat the word.

Arthur had to stop himself from laughing. All at once he realized what his father was actually fuming about. It wasn't just that Arthur had vanished for a day, it was that Sophia had vanished with him. And the last time that had happened, it was after Arthur had threatened to elope.
Arthur had intended on excusing his absence as a day off hunting, perhaps as part of his adjustment in returning from Gedref. But with Sophia -- or rather Lady Erdudwyl -- hopefully still a prisoner under Gaius' care, Arthur could not simply have her called down to corroborate their lack of marital bliss. And with her as a hostage, he had to find a way to deal with the other Sidhe without rousing his father's paranoia even further. It was a delicate situation. He needed a reason for her absence, something that would play into his father's expectations. Something that the Sidhe could not deny under the guise of the Tír-Mòr...

Aha! That was the answer.

Arthur relaxed his posture and adopted a conciliatory pose. "Father, I must apologize. I take it that you did not receive our message."

Uther lifted his chin. "Your message?"

"Yes, father," Arthur said. "After the feast, I took a walk to clear my head, and I happened upon Prince Aulfric. He had taken your advice to heart, and asked for my assistance."

Uther leaned back in his chair. It was a good sign. "Go on."

"He was concerned about the Lady Sophia's safety, given the dangers of their quest. It was decided that she should be sent back to stay with her family in Gwynned until the retaking of the kingdom of Tír-Mòr is complete and the Saxons have been purged from the land. As an apology for my poor behavior, I volunteered to escort them and the Lady Sophia to the northern border. Due to the distance, we left without delay."

Uther pondered this. "I see. And the message?"

Arthur's first thought was to lay the blame with George, in the hope that it would get him fired so that Merlin could be restored to his position once he had been... de-birded. But George was too scrupulous, and might say something that contradicted Arthur's story. He didn't want to get some innocent servant fired, and so there was really only one choice for his scapegoat. Or rather, scapefalcon. At least he wasn't going to end up in the stocks for it this time.

"Ah, I gave it to Merlin, father. As one last task. I'm certain he--"

Merlin squawked in surprised protest. Arthur coughed loudly to cover it, then patted his chestplate with a firm thump. Merlin went silent, though if he hadn't been bundled up in thick burlap, Arthur would probably have earned a painful scratch to the chest for that.

His father gave him a curious look, then shook his head. "I will remind you again that you're to have nothing to do with that boy."

"Of course, father."

"George is your servant now, and the appointment is final. If that boy is seen in the castle, he will pay the price, not you."

"Yes, father."

His father gave a curt nod, then settled back in his chair, calmer now. "You have a responsibility to this kingdom not to vanish without a word. You cannot be a suitable Regent if you persist in such childish behavior."

"Yes, father," Arthur said. He gave an expectant look, hoping to be excused now that he had
received the necessary tongue-lashing.

But his father wasn't done yet. He turned to Louvel and beckoned him over with a twitch of his finger. "Have Prince Aulfric and Sir Drudwas brought to me at once." As Louvel left the room, Uther turned back to Arthur. "I assume that their story will agree with yours?"

Arthur gave him an innocent look. "Of course, father."

It took a while for Aulfric and Drudwas to arrive. As the minutes passed, Arthur patiently held his bluff, while internally he was scrambling for a backup plan. He had hoped to speak with the Sidhe before they had a chance to speak with his father, but that option was gone. He would have to take charge of the situation without being too obvious about it. He also had to hope that the Sidhe had already realized that Sophia was missing. Fear was one of the strongest motivators, and that applied to Sidhe as well as men.


Neither of the two Sidhe looked pleased at being summoned. It was still hard to believe that their true form was just a few inches tall. If Arthur hadn't seen it with his own eyes, he might not believe it. It was little wonder that his father was so dismissive of his earlier claims.

"Prince Aulfric," Uther greeted, with sudden warmth. "I was hoping you could explain your absence yesterday. My son has told me that you asked him to escort Lady Sophia back to Gwynedd. Is this true?"

As if as one, Aulfric and Drudwas turned to Arthur, and Arthur saw the moment when they realized that he was somehow the one responsible for Sophia's disappearance. Arthur responded with a small bow, and a subtle adjustment of the sword at his hip. Both Sidhe replied with a subtle fury, but when they turned back to Uther, they were smiling to match his warmth.

"Of course, Your Majesty," said Aulfric. "He was most... helpful."

"As I told my father," Arthur explained, "I agreed with your concerns about Lady Sophia's safety. Far better that she wait safely in Gwynedd until Tír-Mòr has been secured from the Saxon invaders."

"Yes. Far better," agreed Aulfric. "I must extend my great thanks to you, King Uther, for your generosity and understanding. We will remember your kindness."

There was a long pause while Uther processed this. He had a strange expression on his face, a mixture of relief and disbelief. It was clear that he had not expected the Sidhe to agree with Arthur's story, but now that they had, he had no choice but to accept it as true.

"Is there anything else, father?" Arthur prompted.

Uther shook his head. "You may go."

Arthur and the Sidhe all turned to leave, with Drudwas casting Arthur a particularly meaningful look. One that promised bloodshed, if he had his way. But before Arthur could follow them out into the hall, he was called back again.

"Yes, father?" Arthur asked, trying not to sound impatient.

"Lord Godwyn is due to arrive soon. I need you present and alert. No distractions."

"Yes, father."
Uther lapsed into silence, and Arthur waited to be dismissed. But it seemed that there was one last
concern on his father's mind.

"As to your activities prior to your sudden disappearance," he began, and then met Arthur's eyes
with unusual focus. "Is there a reason why you and Gaius have been accessing the vaults with such
frequency?"

It was not a surprise that his father should be aware of their repeated visits to the magical vaults, and
yet Arthur was startled by the question all the same. "Research, father. Regarding the sorcerer
Palaemon's magical weapons."

"No other reason?"

Arthur shook his head. "I merely sought a better understanding of the enemy."

Uther frowned at this. "There is nothing to understand. I will not have you risking yourself for the
sake of an enemy that has already been defeated. You said that nothing of the sorcerer's magic has
survived? It was all destroyed in Gedref?"

"I burned it myself," Arthur said, honestly.

"Then let that be an end to it," Uther said, and this time there was no mistaking the dismissal in his
voice.

There were many things that Arthur wanted to say to his father on the matter of magic, and most of
them were likely to result in him being hauled down to the dungeons for a week for his own good.
But now was not the time; he could not confront his father until the time was right, and until he had
undeniable proof to back up his claims. Instead, he bowed and left the room, and walked straight into
the Sidhe waiting out in the hall.

"Gentlemen," Arthur said, cordially, and gestured down the hall. This was not a conversation they
wanted to have in hearing range of his father. Arthur led them to the end of the hall, and into a room
away from prying eyes.

As he turned to face them, Drudwas' eyes glowed red, and the doors slammed shut.

"Where is she?" snarled Aulfric, and he rounded on Arthur, the gem in his staff glowing blue.

But Arthur had already drawn his sword -- the dragon-forged sword that Sophia had feared, that had
killed the unkillable in Avalon. One look at it and Aulfric stopped in his tracks, his mouth open in
shock.

"Kill me, and you'll never see her again," Arthur promised, putting every ounce of certainty into his
words.

The red glow left Drudwas' eyes as he stared at the sword. He and Aulfric looked to each other, then
back to Arthur. They stepped back, signalling their withdrawal.

"That's better," Arthur said, but he didn't lower his sword.

"What do you want?" Aulfric ground out, his temper barely contained.


"Impossible," Aulfric scoffed.
"Why should we?" said Drudwas. "Without your pet sorcerer, Camelot is helpless."

"I killed Sophia once before," Arthur told them. "I can kill her again."

There was a long silence as the three men stared each other down.

"He's bluffing," declared Drudwas. "We should kill him and find her ourselves."

"Do I look like I'm bluffing?" Arthur asked, his expression fixed for battle. "Return Merlin to me," he continued, making every word clear. "Return him safe and whole and Sophia will be returned to you in kind. But if you act against Camelot, if you dare threaten my kingdom or my people in any way, her life is forfeit." He turned his sword so they could get a good, long look at it.

He knew that his demand was impossible for them to fulfill. Not just because their supposed hostage was currently right under their noses, but because they knew Queen Titania would never let them take back their gift to her. They would not dare such an insult. But that suited Arthur just fine. He had no intention of releasing Sophia until the Sidhe threat had been completely neutralized. He was forcing them into a stalemate, and that was enough for now.

But it was evident that the Sidhe needed one more push. In the blink of an eye, Arthur brought the tip of his sword to Aulfric's throat, then as the Sidhe froze in shock, Arthur finished the move, so that he was behind Aulfric and facing a stunned and furious Drudwas. But it was not Drudwas that Arthur wanted to make an impression on.

"Dragon-forged," Arthur said, quietly into Aulfric's ear. "There's more where this came from. Threaten me again, and you will find yourself facing an army of these swords."

He felt Aulfric tense in fear, and Arthur realized something about the Sidhe. These were creatures who were effectively immortal. It was likely that they had not faced true peril in centuries. Mortal men had a healthy respect for death, and as a knight and soldier Arthur even accepted it. But such creatures as the Sidhe would be paralyzed by such a threat, just as Sophia was. Because they never thought to lose their lives, life was all the more precious to them.

Arthur released Aulfric and stepped away, keeping his sword raised and ready. Aulfric grasped at his neck, rubbing at the shallow cut the sword had left behind. He looked at the traces of blood on his palm and was ill with horror. Drudwas was even more furious than before, but he did not attack. 'Sophia' was their wife and sister. They would not risk her loss.

Arthur stared at them, playing the same game with them that he had played with his father. And again it was not Arthur who broke first. Aulfric nodded once in acceptance of Arthur's terms, and then the two turned and hurried from the room, their long robes wafting out behind them as they strode out into the hall.

Arthur waited for their footsteps to fade away, then slumped in relief. He sheathed his sword and leaned back against the nearby pillar, waiting for his heart to stop racing.

Hearing that they were finally alone, Merlin squirmed until he was able to peek out from under Arthur's surcoat, and he gave a cautious chirp.

Arthur looked down at Merlin, and sighed. "Let's get you to Gaius."

Merlin squawked in agreement.
Arthur made his way carefully to Gaius' chambers. He had to double back and take a wandering path in order to make sure he wasn't being followed -- either by the castle guards, at his father's orders, or by the Sidhe, who were no doubt scouring the castle in search of Sophia. Once he was certain it was safe, he made his way to Gaius' door and found it locked.

"Gaius," he whispered into the door, knocking quietly. "Gaius!"

To his relief, he soon heard noises on the other side of the door, and then it cracked open. To his surprise, it was not Gaius who was on the other side, but Guinevere.

"Arthur!" she said, visibly surprised. She let him in, then closed and locked the door again.

Inside, Arthur found not only Gaius, but also Morgana. The three of them had been having breakfast, based on the three half-eaten bowls of porridge, but their half-guilty, half-defiant expressions betrayed them. They had been up to something, and likely it was something magical.

As the three of them overcame their surprise at seeing Arthur alive and whole, he saw their expressions fall at Merlin's apparent absence. Guinevere turned away and wiped at her eyes, and Morgana took on a sober expression, as if bracing herself for something. Gaius walked sadly over to Arthur and hugged him.

"Welcome back, my boy," he said, holding back his sorrow. "I thought we'd lost both of you."

"Gaius," Arthur began.

"I'm sure you did everything you could," Gaius continued, releasing him and turning away. He was too caught up in his disappointment and grief to listen.


Everyone rounded on him, stunned. "You got him back?" Morgana asked. "He's all right?"

Merlin began trying to wriggle free again, squawking noisily, and this caused further consternation.

"Arthur," Guinevere began, warily. "Why do you have a bird in your shirt?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," Arthur said, exasperated, as he struggled to get hold of Merlin and pull him out. Merlin's struggles were making it difficult. "Will you hold still?"

Merlin gave an extremely angry squawk, but complied. Arthur huffed and extracted Merlin, and gently unwrapped him from the sackcloth, which took some doing as Merlin had managed to get his claws all tangled up in the fabric. As soon as Merlin was free, he leapt from Arthur's grasp, flapping his wings frantically, and crashed to the floor. He lay there for a moment, stunned, and then started running in circles around the floor, flapping his wings in a desperate effort to get airborne. He was acting just as madly as he had on the Sidhe beach.

"Merlin, will you stop that!" Arthur chided him.

"That's Merlin?!" Guinevere gasped, and she looked like she was about to break out laughing and crying at the same time. Morgana had her hand over her mouth because she was already laughing and trying to hide it, and Gaius looked like he was about to pass out from the shock.

Morgana recovered first. She intercepted Merlin, picking him up and stroking his ruffled feathers. "You poor thing," she cooed, trying to soothe him. Merlin was quite bedraggled, his feathers all in disarray from being soaked and squished. He squawked in distress, giving Arthur a furious glare
before turning his head away and settling into a huddle in Morgana's arms. Guinevere helped Gaius over and the three of them huddled around Merlin so that Arthur couldn't even see him.

"How did this happen?" Gaius asked, nearly as distressed as Merlin.

"The Sidhe transformed him," Arthur explained, passing on the little he knew. "It's not a glamour. I was told that he can be turned back into a human, if we can manage a powerful enough spell. Can you do it?"

"Not on my own," Gaius admitted. He gently extracted Merlin from Morgana's care, and Merlin remained pliant as Gaius checked him over. When he reached Merlin's neck, he felt under his feathers and then turned to Arthur, as angry as Arthur had ever seen him. "Arthur! The restraint is still active!"

Guinevere and Morgana looked to Arthur with equal anger. "You left it on all this time?" Morgana asked. "Take it off at once!"

"You know how much it hurts him," Guinevere added.

Arthur opened his mouth to reply, and was forced to confront the fact that he hadn't removed the torc restraint at the first opportunity. He knew how much it hurt Merlin to be cut off from his magic. He knew how weak and miserable it made him even when he wasn't trapped in the body of a bird. And yet Arthur had not once allowed himself to consider it. His first priority had been to get Merlin back to Camelot and to Gaius, and to keep him safe along the way. And it was true that keeping Merlin safe was much easier when he was small and could not fight back.

But he knew that was no excuse, and it was not even the true reason. It was not why he hesitated even now to release Merlin from the torc that bound him. The moment Merlin had his magic back, the moment he was fully restored, Arthur knew he would lose him. That he had already lost him, and the only thing delaying that loss was the restraint. And Merlin would surely only hate him all the more for the fact that Arthur preferred to let him suffer if it meant holding on to him for one more minute.

Merlin had loved and trusted him, and Arthur had betrayed that trust. Every second that passed was another betrayal. If Merlin was already lost to him, the only thing he could do was let him go.

He gripped the gold torc at his neck and sent the command, and in the next moment the magic rushed back into Merlin. His small body stiffened, and he gave a long, weak cry, and he seemed to fall unconscious. Gaius eased the silver torc out from under his feathers and off his neck and set it on the table. Arthur felt the connection between them break, and flinched.

"Merlin?" Gaius asked, gently. "Can you hear me?"

Merlin roused, blinking slowly, and gave a grateful chirp.

"My poor boy," Gaius said, petting him. "Do you want to rest?"

Merlin shook his head and turned towards one of the abandoned porridge bowls. He squawked meaningfully.

"Food? Water?" Gaius asked, and Merlin nodded. "Has he had anything to eat?" Gaius asked, turning to Arthur.

"If he had, he would have been trapped in Avalon," Arthur said, and realized that he had also had nothing for a full day, not counting whatever lake water he managed to swallow. Everything caught
up with him at once, and he sat down heavily on an empty bench.

"We need something suitable to his form," Gaius said, looking to Guinevere. "Can you get some meat from the kitchen? Small pieces. Raw."

"Of course," Guinevere said, already hurrying for the door.

Morgana was up as well, pouring water into a small bowl. "Here," she said, bringing it to Merlin's beak. It took him a few tries, but he managed to drink his fill before turning away, his face dripping wet. Gaius used the corner of his sleeve to wipe him dry.

Arthur was unlikely to get such attentive service, and forced himself back to his feet. Fortunately there was some porridge left in the cooking pot, and he was too hungry to care that it had congealed. From the first sticky spoonful, he had never tasted any porridge as delicious, and he finished the bowl in under a minute before drinking half a pitcher of water in one go. He wiped his face with the back of his hand, then collapsed back on the bench again. Morgana and Gaius stared at him, but he was too exhausted to care about their disapproval. He suddenly ached for his bed, and wanted to sleep until dinner and then stuff himself with a whole platter of food, then sleep some more.

He wondered if the magic that had sustained Merlin had also sustained himself. Its absence already gnawed at him, and he pulled off the gold torc in frustration. It was useless to him now. Merlin would never consent to wearing the silver torc again, would never consent to sharing that connection. It hardly mattered now, as his father had banned Merlin from even setting foot in the castle, much less being Arthur's servant. Arthur would fight that ban, would fight to get Merlin restored to his job, but it was too late for that. Things had gone too far, and he had hurt Merlin too badly and too deeply. He knew that, and he knew he could do nothing but bear the blame.

Arthur remained in a disheartened, exhausted stupor until Guinevere returned with a bowl of chopped meat. She joined Gaius and Morgana in fussing over Merlin. Arthur watched them, then forced himself to his feet again, even more tired now than he had been before.

"I'll just..." he said, and gestured to the door. But Guinevere saw and stopped him.

"Wait," she said, taking him by the arm. "I don't think you'll even make it down the stairs."

Arthur had to admit she was right. He let her lead him into the back room, Merlin's old room. To Merlin's old bed, which was little better than a plank of wood and few handfuls of straw. Yet as she helped him onto it, it might as well have been the softest down.

"Thank you, Guinevere," he said, grateful for the small kindness.

"Gwen," she said. "Please, call me Gwen."

"Gwen."

As his head hit the pillow, his eyes closed, and the world went blissfully away.

§

Muffled voices woke Arthur, and he immediately regretted it. He groaned as he sat up, feeling sore, stiff, and filthy. Something appeared to have crawled into his mouth and died, and his eyes were all glued up from sleep. He rubbed the sand away and scraped his tongue against his teeth.

He squinted up at the high window; judging by the light, he'd been out for a few hours. He felt sluggish and dulled, and his head ached. He needed a bath, clean clothes, water, and food, not
necessarily in that order. As the cobwebs of sleep fell away, he realized that someone had anticipated at least some of those needs. There was a wash basin and a clean cloth, and a fresh set of clothes folded and stacked next to it.

Arthur moved slowly, dragging off his armor and filthy clothes, then scrubbing himself clean as best as he could -- though not as well as a long, hot bath would do. But as he finished dressing himself, he felt at least somewhat human again. He stretched his aching muscles with a short warmup, then went out to face what was left of the day.

It was evident that much had happened during his nap. The tables were now covered in opened books, and Gaius, Morgana, and Guinevere -- no, Gwen -- were sitting in various states of repose as they flipped through even more heavy books. Merlin looked much restored himself, and was half-hopping, half-flying from table to table so that he could look at any page that was open, with Gwen, Morgana, and Gaius flipping pages for him.

"Ah, good," Gaius said, peering up at him. "Another pair of eyes."

"And hands," Gwen said, flipping another set of pages for Merlin.

Arthur nodded, but continued past them and headed directly for Gaius' array of pre-prepared draughts. He found one for headaches and one for body aches and downed them both, followed by two cups of water. He leaned back against the cabinet and waited for the draughts to kick in. He felt like he'd been kicked by an ornery mule.

"Feeling better?" Gwen asked, which earned her a glare from Morgana. Gwen looked abashed, but still waited politely for Arthur's reply.

Arthur nodded, then realized that Gwen was likely the source of his bath and fresh clothes. "Thank you," he said, genuinely.

Gwen gave a half-smile in response, then an apologetic one to Morgana, who replied with resigned annoyance. There was something going on there, but Arthur didn't have the capacity to deal with it yet. He stared at the opposite wall as something niggled at him. There was something important he needed to tell them. What was it?

"Sophia!" Arthur said, suddenly, as he remembered his confrontation with the Sidhe. He rounded on Gaius. "Where is she?"

"Quite secure," Gaius assured him. "Gwen?"

Gwen went over to the grain barrel -- was that a new barrel? -- and reached down into the grain. She pulled out a bundle of cloth, then pulled away the cloth to reveal a candle cage. But it wasn't the same candle cage that Sophia had been trapped in when he left. It gleamed and glittered like... like his sword.

"Dragon-forged," Morgana said, proudly. "There's no way she's getting out of that." She gave Sophia a smug smile, and Sophia replied with muffled cursing. Gwen wrapped the cage up again and returned it to the grain barrel.

Arthur turned to Morgana, not sure if he was more impressed or horrified. "You went to the dragon."

"I did," Morgana said, smiling.

"The dragon under the castle. Thirty feet high, breathes fire."
"I do believe there's just the one," Morgana said, tolerantly.

Arthur considered this. "He didn't say anything about destiny, by any chance?"

"Not especially. He was too busy insulting everyone." Morgana set aside her book, which earned her an annoyed flap from Merlin, who clearly did not care for all this time-wasting when they could be finding the spell to change him back. "What did he say to you?"

Arthur looked to Merlin, and Merlin glared at him before quite pointedly turning away. "Nothing helpful," Arthur said, not wanting to dredge up talk of destiny and prophecy now, when it was clear that both had been foiled by his own hand. Yet if the dragon cooperated with Morgana, she must have made the same promise that Arthur had. "Did he make you promise to free him, too?"

Morgana and Gwen both started at this, and clearly had not intended to share that particular information.

Gaius frowned at all of them. "I hope that none of you are so foolish that you actually intend to hold your end of the bargain."


"If he helps save Camelot, surely he deserves freedom," argued Morgana.

"The moment that dragon is free of his chains, Camelot will be reduced to a smoking ruin," Gaius said, with utter certainty. "There is little point in saving the kingdom if your own actions bring its doom."

"That's a bit dramatic," Morgana said, rolling her eyes.

Gaius gave them all his sternest eyebrow. "Three hundred years ago, the kingdom of Daobeth was the most powerful of the Five Kingdoms, greater than Camelot at its peak. Dragonfire left the land barren to this very day."

There was a pointed silence. Gaius settled back in his chair, having made his point.

"That doesn't change the fact that we made a promise," Gwen said, quietly. "We all did."

Arthur had to admit that she was right. And yet they could not doom Camelot foolheartedly. "Then we'll have to find a way. Gaius, the Old Religion must have had ways of controlling dragons."

Gaius pressed his lips together. "They did," he admitted, slowly. "But such resources were destroyed during the Great Purge."

"What did they use?" Morgana asked. "Spells?"

"What about swords like mine?" Arthur offered. Surely a dragon-forged blade was powerful enough to kill a dragon.

"Unless your intent is to kill him, that sword will be of little use to you," Gaius said, tersely. He looked to Merlin, and Arthur saw that Merlin had stopped his frantic hopping and reading and gone quite still. Gaius seemed to regret his words, and reached out to Merlin to comfort him. But Merlin hop-flapped to the next table and pointedly resumed reading. It seemed that Arthur was not the only one that Merlin was still angry with.

"Magic such as your own would be useless against the dragon," Gaius told Morgana. "I suggest we
focus on finding solutions to the problems at hand, rather than on how to make new ones."
"Perhaps you could tell us what happened in Avalon," Gwen prompted, obviously hoping for a less controversial topic.
"There's a lot to tell," Arthur said, sitting down. "Before I start, did I miss anything else while I was away?"

Gwen and Morgana immediately looked to each other, then looked away.

Arthur decided to take that as a 'yes, but nothing we're going to admit', and pressed on. He gave them a compressed recounting of his adventures, from the portal in the lake to the underwater world to the Sidhe palace. As he recounted, even Merlin softened long enough to take an interest, as his experience in Avalon had been far more constrained. He finished up with his confrontation with Aulfric and Drudwas, and their true identities.

"So Merlin really did kill Sophia and Aulfric?" Morgana asked. "And the Sidhe want to destroy Camelot in revenge?"

Arthur nodded. "King Gwynn's tribe does. But Queen Titania denied them. She said Queen Mab's tribe already has a claim on Camelot."

"I don't like the sound of that," Gaius said. "But it may be to our benefit if we can play one side against the other."

"We have to find them first," Arthur said. At this point they had no idea where Queen Mab was, or what she was planning. "If they're already in Camelot, they've been keeping a very low profile." Which reminded him... "And speaking of low profile, we need to talk about Merlin. If Edern or Drudwas see him, they'll stop at nothing to capture him again. And on top of that they're searching the castle for Erdudwyl. It's only a matter of time before they find one or the other, and we lose our only protection."

"Surely we can keep them both hidden," Morgana said.

"It will be rather more difficult once Merlin is himself again," Gaius said. "I agree, it will be too dangerous for him to remain here. Even if we can keep him hidden from the Sidhe, if the guards catch sight of him he'll be dragged before Uther. We need a safe house."

"He can use mine," Gwen offered. She turned to Merlin. "If that's all right."

Merlin clearly appreciated her consideration, especially when everyone else was busy making decisions on his behalf. He hopped up onto her shoulder, making his opinion clear.

"There's a place I can hide, um, Erdudwyl as well," Gwen offered.

"Perfect," Arthur said, relieved to have at least those worries off his shoulders.

"If I'm using the house again regularly, it'll be less suspicious. And Merlin shouldn't have to stay there all alone."

Morgana was not pleased at this development. "We can use my chambers. There's no way they'd dare invade a lady's chambers."

"The glaziers are due to be in soon to install the windows," Gwen said, apologetically. "It won't be safe."
"Your chambers aren't safe from the guards, Morgana," Arthur said, remembering the many times that he had personally brought guards in to search her quarters -- including the time she bluffed him out of finding the Druid boy.

"By that measure, the lower town isn't safe either," Morgana said, not giving up.

Merlin gave an angry squawk and puffed his feathers. He hopped back onto the table, flapped his wings pointedly and squawked again.

"I believe Merlin is pointing out that we have a more pressing issue at hand," Gaius interpreted. "If we are to have any chance of survival against the Sidhe, it is vital that Merlin be restored. Everything else can wait."

Morgana and Gwen relented and returned to their books, each turning the pages of the open books on the table so Merlin could read them. Gaius followed suit, and Arthur sat down with him to do the same. But when he reached out to turn to a fresh page, Merlin hopped over and nipped him sharply on the hand.

Arthur hissed, pulled his hand away and pressed against the small wound to stop the bleeding. It wasn't a bad cut, but it was enough to get the message across, along with Merlin's angry glare.

"Fine," Arthur said, standing up, and feeling rather put out. Yes, he had made mistakes. He accepted that, and he accepted the consequences of them. But he had gone a long way to get Merlin back and start making up for them, and apparently that counted for nothing. "If you don't want my help, fine. This is me going."


"I'm sorry, all right?" Arthur said, angrily. "I'm sorry I'm not magic like the rest of you. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a kingdom to take care of." He strode out of the room in a suitably dramatic fashion, closing the door behind him with more force than was necessary.

It wasn't until he was halfway up the stairs to his chambers that he remembered that he'd left his armor behind in Merlin's old room. It would wait. He had his sword, and apparently that was the only thing that mattered anymore. He had been reduced to being nothing more than the wielder of a magic sword that could kill magical creatures. If that was all he was to them, fine. He was used to being disrespected by his father, it was hardly worse to be disrespected by his friends. But then, a Prince wasn't supposed to have friends. Or sorcerer lovers.

He slammed open the door to his chambers, and badly startled George, who had been polishing his dress boots.

"Sire!" George said, almost stammering. He shot to his feet, only to bow deeply. "If I had known of your return, I would have prepared the room. I most humbly apologize for the mess."

Arthur looked around the room. He'd never seen it so clean. Even the stone floor looked like it had been polished within an inch of its life. He hoped he wouldn't wake up in the middle of the night, slip on it, and break something.

"Please, sire, if there's anything I can do for you, anything at all..."

"Lunch," Arthur said, all-too-aware of the empty pit in his stomach. It was no wonder he was in a bad mood. "Lots of it. And a hot bath. And some wine."

"At once, sire." And with that, George was out of the room like a sprung arrow.
Arthur went over to the window and looked out at the courtyard. Things would look better once he had a full belly and a good night's sleep. The last thing he needed to deal with now was more magic anyway. He'd had his fill in Avalon. His father was right about one thing: he needed to focus on what was important. No more distractions.

And yet as he turned and looked at his room, all that mattered was that Merlin wasn't there. No matter how deeply George scrubbed and polished, nothing could change the fact that this was where Arthur had failed Merlin most. This was where destiny had failed, broken on the rocks of Arthur's faith in his father's lies.

His father wanted him to be Regent. He wanted Arthur to rule as an extension of himself. Arthur no longer knew what to make of magic and dragons and the Old Religion. For everything that had happened, all he had truly learned was that he knew nothing. But knowing nothing was a far better than knowing the wrong things, when the wrong things meant he had the blood of hundreds of innocent people on his hands.

It was no wonder that Merlin no longer loved him. It was only strange that he ever had.
"Don't worry, Merlin," Gwen said, trying to sound as reassuring as she could. "I'm sure we'll find something soon."

"We've been through every book three times," Morgana said. She pushed aside a heavy tome and sighed. "There's spells to cast illusions. There's spells to transform objects. There are even spells on how to change yourself into a bird. But there's nothing that will tell us how to change someone else who has been turned into a bird by the Sidhe back into being a human." She folded her arms and rested her head on them.

Both Gaius and Morgana had tried to perform any spell that seemed like it could restore Merlin to his natural form. But even the ones that either of them had both the strength and ability to perform would fizzle out on impact. Merlin himself even tried to perform the more powerful spells, including one from his grimoire that seemed perfect. But though his magic was restored, his voice was not, and he could only chirp and squawk in frustration.

"Maybe we should go to the Druids," Gwen offered. Surely they would have both the power and knowledge to help them. And unlike the dragon, they were unlikely to demand the destruction of Camelot as a payment. "Gaius? Do you know how to find them?"

Gaius blinked, startled from his thoughts, and twisted his mouth into a frown. "Until the treaty with the Deorham has been signed, Camelot is on full guard. The army is patrolling the forests. To approach them now would put both the Druids and us at great risk."

Merlin flap-hopped over to Gaius and spread his wings wide. He hopped in place and flapped his wings, then gestured towards the high window with his head.

"Absolutely not," Gaius said, sternly. "It's even more dangerous for you to go alone."

Merlin gave a frustrated cry and hopped to the end of the table. He spread his wings to their fullest, then started running to the other end of the table, flapping his wings hard. When he reached the end, he leapt into the air and coasted... right into the opposite wall, before crashing to the ground.

"Merlin!" Gwen gasped, and hurried over to him This was not the first time that Merlin had tried to fly, but so far the results had been mixed, as he hadn't yet worked out how to turn. She picked Merlin up from the floor and gently checked him over. He was dazed and his right wing was tender from the impact. She gave him to Gaius, who was quite resigned to Merlin's antics by now.

"Do you want to end up with your arm in a sling again?" Gaius tutted.

Merlin glared defiantly. It seemed he would gladly risk injury or worse rather than remain stuck as a falcon for a minute longer. He and Gaius stared at each other, each silently making their respective points, and it was Gaius who gave in first.

"Very well," Gaius said. "I was hoping to avoid this, but it seems we have no other choice." He stood and handed Merlin back to Gwen, and Merlin climbed up onto her shoulder -- a spot that was quickly becoming his favorite perch.

"Where are you going?" Morgana asked.

"We are going to pay a visit to the library," Gaius said, as he opened the grain barrel and pulled out Sophia's cage. "All of us."
There were times when being a servant could be both a blessing and a curse. Gwen hitched the heavy laundry basket against her hip and followed Gaius and Morgana up the stairs to the library. Beneath the spare -- and clean -- shirts and blankets was Merlin, who kept trying to surreptitiously peek his head out, and the well-wrapped cage that held their hostage. The basket was, of course, the perfect way to transport them through the castle. No guard would bother to stop and search through a basket of laundry carried by a trusted servant. At least, as long as neither Merlin nor Sophia gave them a reason to. Gwen gave Merlin a gentle but pointed tap on the beak, and he retreated.

When they had nearly reached the library, Gaius told them to wait as he went on ahead. Gwen and Morgana peered around the corner and watched as Gaius entered the library. A few minutes passed, and then Gaius and Geoffrey entered the hall. Geoffrey stopped and locked the door behind them before they left. As soon as they were out of sight, Morgana and Gwen hurried to the door. Gaius had given them his key to the library, and Morgana quickly opened it so they could slip inside. Gaius had bought them time by distracting Geoffrey with the excuse of an overdue medical checkup, but they could not afford to dawdle. He had also given them instructions on how to find the secret room in the east wing, and even before Gwen could put down the laundry basket, Morgana was running her hands along the shelves, trying to find the trigger.

"Was it the third bookcase from the left or from the right?" Morgana muttered, as she thumped at the shelving. "It has to be around here somewhere." She yelped in surprise as a section of the shelf, books and all, tilted under her hand. She leapt back as the whole bookcase pivoted in place. There was the sound of stone scraping against stone, and for a few seconds the secret room was revealed. But the wall didn't stop turning, and before it shut completely, Morgana hopped through the gap to the other side.

The door stopped, and where had been a tall, dusty bookcase, there was now only a stone wall. Gwen stared at it, then at Merlin, who looked just as stunned as she felt. Gwen grabbed the basket as Merlin hopped onto her shoulder, and she went over to the wall, searching it for another trigger. But there was nothing. It was as if the bookcase had never been there.

"Morgana?" Gwen whispered into the wall. "Morgana, can you hear me? Morgana!"

There was a soft thump, and then the wall began to turn again. This time Gwen was ready for it, and she jumped through to the other side, where Morgana was waiting -- only for Morgana to jump back out again as the door swung shut. Thankfully, before Gwen could ask what on earth Morgana was doing, there was another thump and the door swung around again.

"There," Morgana said, satisfied. "That should do it. Now we'll be able to get out again."

"Quick thinking," Gwen said, smiling, and Morgana smiled back. Gwen couldn't help but remember their kiss under the dungeons, and wanted to kiss Morgana again. But they weren't alone, and Merlin reminded her of that by jumping off her shoulder and hop-flapping around the room in amazement.

Gwen turned, and finally took in their surroundings. Gaius had told them that there was a secret room where many books of the Old Religion had been hidden, to save them from the fires of the Great Purge. But this was was so much more than she could have hoped for, or even imagined. This was a whole library of books and scrolls, statues of the gods and goddesses, objects of ritual and magic. It didn't matter that they were covered in cobwebs and dust. This room held irreplaceable treasures. That it had survived this long without discovery and destruction, at the very heart of Camelot...
"Gwen," Morgana said, softly. "You're crying."

Gwen quickly wiped at her eyes. "We have to start looking," she said, and walked away from Morgana and over to the shelves. She picked a book at random and opened it, and spared a glance back. Morgana looked confused and hurt by the dismissal, and Gwen felt badly about that. But Morgana wouldn't understand how she felt, and Gwen didn't want to hear Morgana dismiss the Old Religion again. She was glad that Merlin was too busy clinging to the shelves and reading the book spines to notice anything else.

They fell into a similar pattern to their previous research. Gwen would look for anything that could be relevant and give it to Morgana, who would show it to Merlin to verify if it was. Gwen wanted to take the whole library, but knew from hard experience that such precious books would be in great danger anywhere outside these walls. She could not be responsible for their destruction. They would have to narrow down their selection to only one or two, which was as much as they could safely hide.

Merlin gave an excited squawk.

"I think we've found it," Morgana said, hopeful. She brought the book back to Gwen, who inspected it more carefully this time. It was a book of advanced transformation spells, and specifically a page that showed a human being turned into an animal and then back again. It was accompanied by a lengthy description about the dangers of such spells, stories of those who had used it, and various recipes for potions that were required. There was also discussion of involuntary transformation and how to counteract it.

"Thank the gods," Gwen breathed, closing the book and hugging it to her chest. "We'll get this to Gaius right away," she told Merlin, and she tucked it into the laundry basket. "Let's go."

"Wait," Morgana said, and pressed a finger to her lips. "I hear someone."

Gwen and Merlin stilled and listened. Had Gaius and Geoffrey already returned? There was a faint voice, but it wasn't coming from the other side of the wall. It was in the room with them. A chill ran down Gwen's spine, from both excitement and fear.

They soon found the source of the noise. It was a box that had been abandoned on the floor, not large but heavily and firmly secured. Merlin considered it warily from higher ground.

"Should we open it?" Morgana asked, wide-eyed.

"I don't know." Gwen knocked on the box, and started when whatever was inside the box knocked back and growled.

"I don't like the sound of that," Morgana said, equally alarmed.

"What if it's a magical creature?" Gwen asked, thinking of the dragon's imprisonment. Of Sophia locked up in the dragon-forged cage. Of Arthur's description of Merlin, held captive by the Sidhe.

"Obviously it's magic," Morgana said. "Anything normal wouldn't survive locked up in a box for twenty years."

Gwen bristled at the implication that anything magic wasn't 'normal'. "Maybe it's innocent."

More muffled sounds came from the box. It did sound almost like a person was trapped inside. She wrapped her arms around the box and dragged it upright. The iron band that secured the top had been riveted in place, and there was a keyhole at the center. Gwen knew a prison when she saw one,
and whatever was inside it, it had to be powerful.

"I could try to open it?" Morgana offered, despite her reluctance.

"No," Gwen said, reacting instinctively. Whoever had brought the box here was someone who had respect for the Old Ways. They would not lock up a creature of magic without good cause.

"We could take it with us," Morgana offered.

"It's safer here," Gwen said, standing up. "We'll come back for it later. Maybe Gaius knows what it is."

Morgana nodded in agreement, but Merlin wasn't convinced. He landed on the box and bit at the metal band, as if to pull it open.

"You'll hurt yourself if you do that," Morgana chided, and picked him up. Merlin didn't care for that and wriggled from her grip, landing awkwardly on the floor. He picked himself up and stared at the box, and his eyes glowed as he cast a silent spell. To Gwen's alarm, there was a click as the lock popped open.

"Loc faest!" Morgana spelled, and the lock clicked shut again.

Merlin rounded on Morgana, furious. He began to squawk and chatter and hop, and while none of it was translatable, Gwen understood the general meaning. Merlin related to the creature's plight and didn't want it to suffer as he had suffered. And yet that didn't make his actions right.

"Merlin, stop it," Gwen said, in a firm enough tone to stop Merlin's ranting. "Whatever is in there, it could be dangerous. We're in enough trouble already."

Merlin turned away, dismissive, but Morgana moved to face him. "Going off half-cocked against magical creatures is what got you into trouble in the first place," she reminded him. Merlin visibly bristled, his feathers puffing up.

"Once you're human again, we'll come back," Gwen said, trying to calm him down. "When you can use your magic fully, and when Gaius can tell us what it might be. All right?"

Merlin gave grudging nod, but his feathers remained ruffled.

§

Part of Gwen wanted to stay in the library and continue researching. Maybe they could find some information about the Sidhe and Avalon. But they couldn't risk it when Gaius and Geoffrey would be back at any minute. They would have to return to the secret room later, for both the books and the mysterious box.

With the laundry basket now loaded down with the heavy book, Sophia, and Merlin, Gwen and Morgana snuck back into the hall and locked the library behind them. They headed back to Morgana's chambers, where they could safely read. But as they approached, they found the door to Morgana's chambers open. They cautiously stepped inside, and found that the glaziers were at work replacing the broken windows.

"Ah, you're just in time," said the King, as he stepped towards them.

Gwen nearly jumped out of her skin. She tightened her grip on the basket and gave a short bow, and tried to be as inconspicuous as possible.
"My Lord," Morgana greeted, smoothly. She gazed up at the first of the new windows. "It's beautiful."

"As promised," Uther said, proudly. "They'll be done by sundown."

"I'm certain it will be," Morgana said, knowingly. "Then I shall leave you to it. Unless you need help cracking your whip?"

Uther smiled, amused. "I do believe I can manage a few unruly glaziers." Then he sobered, and spoke quietly. "I know you said you were all right, but you've barely been in your chambers since the lightning strike."

Morgana ducked her head, then looked up, showing a hint of vulnerability. "Perhaps it shook me more than I cared to admit."

Uther touched a gloved hand to her cheek in fatherly affection. "If there's anything else I can do..."

Morgana touched his hand, then smiled. She turned to the new window and the bright sky visible on the other side. "You already have."

Uther smiled back, his worry eased.

"Shall we be dining together tonight?" Morgana asked.

"I'm afraid not," Uther said, regretful. "Our guests are due to arrive any day now. I'm far too busy with preparations." He hesitated. "But perhaps you could do something for me."

"Of course, my Lord."

"Arthur returned this morning. I want you to keep an eye him."

"Of course, my Lord," Morgana said. "Is this about Sophia?"

"Perhaps. Apparently they disappeared because Arthur was escorting her back to Gwynedd." He didn't look like he entirely believed that to be the truth. "Regardless, the girl is gone."

"I'm sure that's for the best," Morgana said.

"That it is," Uther agreed.

"Then I shall go and do as my Lord commands," Morgana said, with a smile. Without looking at Gwen, she turned and walked calmly from the room. As soon as Uther had turned away, Gwen hurried after her. There were few places they could go with a laundry basket full of magic, and as neither of them wanted to deal with Arthur's bad mood, the only other immediate option was to return to Gaius' chambers. By now he was likely back in the library with Geoffrey.

Yet when they reached his chambers, the door was ajar. After the close call with Uther, they were inclined to be cautious. They peered inside, and nearly gasped in shock as they saw Drudwas and Aulfric searching the room.

"I know she was here," grumbled Drudwas. "I can taste our magic."

"Old and faded. She's not here now," said Aulfric, grumpily. "How are these humans hiding her? Is Camelot harboring an army of sorcerers?"

"One or a hundred, they'll die all the same," Drudwas said, with dark promise. "Come on. We have
to keep looking."

Morgana and Gwen slipped back from the door, ducking into the shadows. They held their breath as the Sidhe walked out. As he closed the door behind him, Drudwas paused and sniffed the air, and for a long moment Gwen feared that he could smell the magic in her basket, dragon or Sidhe or Old Religion. But he shook his head and walked on.

Once their footsteps had faded, Gwen and Morgana hurried inside. Morgana locked the door -- for all the good it would do in a castle full of sorcerers and magical creatures -- while Gwen set down the basket. Poor Merlin was probably stiff with fear after all the close calls. She pulled back the blanket and found that his feathers were so fluffed up he looked twice his size.

"It's all right. We're safe now," she soothed, stroked his head and back with a finger.

"We won't be safe until we leave Camelot for good," Morgana muttered.

"And I'm not leaving until Camelot is safe," Gwen said, unable to stop herself.

Morgana looked ready to argue, but then she changed her mind. "One crisis at a time," she said, digging out the transformations book. She flipped it open and began scanning the pages, then sighed in frustration.

"Let me help," Gwen said, and sat down beside her. The language in the book was challengingly advanced, and of an older form than she was used to. Morgana was making great strides for someone who had never read the Old Tongue until a few days ago, but she had a long way to go before it came naturally to her. They read in silence for a few minutes before Morgana spoke.

"You're right," Morgana said, quietly. "We have to save Camelot first. I know how important it is to you."

"It's your home, too," Gwen said, feeling prickly. "It should be important to you."

"It's not the same for me," Morgana admitted. "When I was first brought here, I didn't think I could ever be happy again. But then I was. Because of you."

Gwen looked up, surprised. Morgana had spent months in Camelot before they'd even met. Even then, Morgana had seemed preternaturally confident, at ease no matter where she was. If there had been any unhappiness, Gwen had taken it to be caused by her grief over her father's death, or by Uther's insistent matchmaking. Camelot had loved Morgana from the start. Gwen had not imagined that that love was not returned. Not in those early days, before the nightmares began.

"My home was in Powys, with my father," Morgana continued. "When he died, I lost everything. Camelot was just a place that I was forced to live, where everyone was a stranger."

"You were friends with Arthur."

"Misery loved company," Morgana said, with a crooked smile. "But then I found you. And I wasn't alone anymore."

"Morgana," Gwen said, affected, and reached out to take her hand.

"You were my friend," Morgana continued, with tears in her eyes. "But you were more than that. You loved Camelot, and I couldn't help but fall in love with it through you. With you. But I never thought... Until last night, I never imagined..."
"Morgana," Gwen whispered, seeing the fear in Morgana's eyes. The fear that whatever was developing between them, it could ruin everything. It could take the one thing that Morgana relied on, their friendship, and dash it on the rocks. "I promised I wouldn't leave you. I won't ever leave you."

"You can't promise that," Morgana said, the tears streaking down her cheeks. "My father promised that, and he..." She stopped, her breathing short, her throat tight.

Gwen wrapped her arms around Morgana and held her. She said nothing, knowing no words could ever be enough. She felt the dampness of Morgana's tears against her neck.

When Morgana finally drew back, her eyes were red, but when she wiped her cheeks, they stayed dry. "I'm sorry," she said, embarrassed.

"Don't be," Gwen said. She took a deep breath to brace herself, and kissed Morgana the way she had wanted to in the secret library. Morgana's lips trembled under hers, and taste of salt. But when she drew back, the light was back in Morgana's eyes. But so was the fear.

Magic aside, there were few secrets they had not shared with each other. Morgana knew the power and constraints of her sex, and had never given any man more than she had given Gwen. And Gwen had never found anyone who could tempt her from Morgana's side. There was much that was new about this for both of them. But Gwen was no longer living a life girdled by fear. They would face this together, as they would face everything together. Even if that meant leaving Camelot behind.

There was a scratch of claw against wood, and both women immediately blushed as they remembered that they were not alone in the room. Merlin had been looking pointedly in the other direction, and he glanced at them as if to check that it was safe.

"Merlin," Gwen began, but she wasn't sure what to say. Morgana was no help, as she was even more embarrassed than Gwen. She could face down kings and dragons, but genuine love, and the love of women, was harder to accept, much less embrace.

But Merlin didn't need an explanation. He hopped over to them and rested his head against each of their arms in turn, giving them his birdy blessing. Gwen couldn't help but pick him up and hug him.

"Thank you," she whispered, and Merlin chirped.

§

"I do believe you've found it," Gaius said, looking up from the open book.

"Will you be able to make the potion?" Gwen asked. There was rather a long list of ingredients, many she was unfamiliar with.

"It may exhaust my supply of the rarer herbs and elements, but I daresay it will be worth the cost." He looked to Merlin, who was restless with expectation. "We'll have you back to your old self in no time."

Merlin gave an eager hop and a chirp.

Gaius considered Merlin's chirp, then gave a thoughtful hum. "The potion should not be a problem. There may, however, be a difficulty in the execution of the spell itself. With Merlin unable to speak, none of us have both the power and ability to cast something this powerful."

"Could we somehow give Merlin back his voice?"
"I wouldn't dare risk complicating an already complex spell," Gaius said. "If the two should interact, the consequences could be dire."

"Then teach me how to do it," Morgana said, rising to the challenge.

"Such a spell would require months or years of practice for a novice, no matter how powerful. The use of magic is about more than mere spells. Like any skill, it requires thorough training."

"Then what do we do?" Gwen asked.

"There is a way," Gaius said, and looked to Merlin with some regret. "If you are willing to use it."

Merlin flapped his wings impatiently.

Gaius reached into his pocket and pulled out the small silver torc. Merlin saw it and stepped backwards, shaking his head.

"I wouldn't ask you to wear it again if there were any other options," Gaius said, and placed it between them on the table. "Gwen, please fetch my medicine bag." Gwen retrieved it and handed it to Gaius. He reached inside and pulled out two gold torcs. "One of these was Arthur's. The other is inert." He placed them both on the table with the silver torc.

"How are these supposed to help?" Morgana asked, with disdain.

"Arthur abused the power of the torcs out of his misguided desire to stop Merlin's magic. However, the restraint is only a small part of what the torcs are capable of, and they were never intended to be used for control. They were a symbol of great honor, worn only by the most powerful sorcerers, and they were used by them to augment and share their magical abilities." He picked up the silver torc and held it out to Merlin. "I swear to you, your magic will not be restrained again."

Merlin was still not convinced, but he seemed to acquiesce.

Morgana picked up one of the torcs and inspected it warily. "You want each of us to wear one?"

"You, Merlin, and myself," Gaius said. "If we are connected through the torcs, we can perform the spell together so that I may guide its execution, and Merlin's magic will support us both. The torcs will also help to ensure that the spell remains focused and controlled between us. No exploding glass or accidental fires." The last he said gently to soften his words.

Morgana gave the torc a skeptical look. "You did say that only the silver torcs have the restraint?"

"That's correct."

"All right, I'm in," Morgana agreed. "What do I do?"

"First I have to prepare the potion for Merlin to drink," Gaius explained. "In the meantime, you're holding the torc that has yet to be activated. Gwen and Merlin can help you with that." He stood up and headed for his cabinets.

"Activated?" Morgana asked.

Merlin squawked at them and then hopped-flew to where they had hidden Arthur's notes on magic. Gwen took them out and flipped through them until Merlin found the page he wanted and nipped at it.

"Here it is," Gwen said, and brought it and Merlin back to Morgana. "It's a long one."
Morgana took the paper and read it intensely, then looked up. "What does it mean?"

"It's a sort of prayer," Gwen explained. "It reads, 'O Modron, we pray that you will bless your guardians so that we may protect and strengthen and please the white island.'"

"I assume that the 'white island' is Albion," Morgana said, considering it.

"And Modron is the mother goddess," Gwen reminded her.

Morgana made a face. "This isn't going to enslave me to your gods, is it?"

Gwen bit back her annoyance. "The Old Gods are the gods of all Albion. They are bound to the land, just as we are. You can no more be a slave to them than you could be a slave to the earth or the air."

Merlin gave a squawk of agreement. He nipped at the paper, urging Morgana to continue.

"All right," Morgana sighed. "But you'll have to guide me through the pronunciation."

With some practice, Morgana was ready. She gripped the torc in her hands and braced herself for the spell. "O Modron," she began, "ábiddee þú blétsest dryhtenweardas þætte ámundodedon ond áfæstedon ond cwémedon hwít æga!"

As she finished, her eyes flared with golden light, and the torc glimmered in response. When the light faded from them both, Morgana stared at the torc in fascination.

"Morgana?" Gwen asked, concerned.

Morgana shook her head, as if to clear it. "I'm all right. I just... thought I felt something."

"I suggest you and Merlin wear the torcs now, to give you time to get used to them," Gaius said, briefly looking up from his work. "I assure you, they're quite safe."

"Merlin?" Gwen asked, picking up the silver torc. Merlin eyed it warily, and she couldn't blame him for it. But what had happened before was Arthur's fault, and Arthur wasn't here.

"I'll go first, just to show you it's safe," Morgana said. She was always on firmer ground when she could be the strong one. She eased the gold torc around her throat and let it settle. She blinked, disappointed. "See?" she said. "Now do yours."

Merlin was unimpressed, but in the face of Morgana's bravery, he had no choice but to do the same. He allowed Gwen to slip the silver torc back around his neck, and only flinched a little. But the moment Merlin's torc was fully on, it was Morgana who reacted.

"Oh!" Morgana breathed, touching the torc but making no attempt to remove it. She looked to Merlin, who looked back at her with a sort of relief. "Oh, Merlin," Morgana sighed, and reached out to him. Merlin hopped over to her and allowed her to embrace him. They both seemed to settle into a sort of daze.

Gwen looked on with a mixture of alarm and envy. She had never seen Morgana so relaxed, so content. "Gaius?" she called, worried at the sudden change.

"It's all right," Gaius assured her. "Just give them time. The first connection with another's magic can be quite powerful. Especially with two sorcerers of such natural strength."

For all Gwen's knowledge of the Old Religion, this was far outside of her own experiences. Her
family had no magic, and such things were never safe to talk about with others. And so she knew little of what it meant to be a sorcerer, to have magic and to share it with another. An awful, jealous thought came to her, that Morgana would suddenly love Merlin more than her because of his magic. That Gwen would find herself cast aside as suddenly as she had been embraced. She tried to brush it away, to stop the thought because it was unfounded. And yet seeing them share something so intimate, she could not deny that she was shaken.


Gwen obeyed, and numbly began to grind some dried herbs into powder.

"I know how it looks," Gaius said, as he mixed two brightly-colored liquids together. "But don't worry. They'll come out of it soon."

"Do the torcs always do this?" Gwen asked.

"The torcs merely open a connection between them," Gaius explained, in his tutorly tone. "It's the magic itself that affects them. We all have a little magic inside us, even when it's not apparent. We would not be alive without it. But for sorcerers like Merlin and Morgana, the sharing of magic can be healing. Especially for those who have been hurt."

"Then it's helping them?" Gwen asked, feeling a little better about it.

Gaius nodded. "They have both been alone, and suffered. And I'm afraid that we've both been a part of their pain, despite our intentions."

Gwen could not deny the truth of that. There were many things she would have done differently, if she had the chance. If she could go back. She could have told the truth, and none of them would have had to feel so alone. They could have helped each other before so many disasters befell them. But they could only go forward.

"Thank you, by the way," Gwen said, thinking of the library. "For saving all of those books. I thought all of that was lost forever."

"It's Geoffrey you should thank."

Gwen was surprised by that, as no one had ever so much as whispered about Geoffrey having been involved with magic before the Purge. "Really?"

"Mm. He was quite the passionate collector when he was young. He actually had the library relocated around the secret room, in order to safeguard it. Though he said that most of the collection was already there when he became an apprentice to the previous librarian."

It was no wonder that some of the books were so old. The secret room was not there as a desperate attempt to save what was left. It was the product of decades, centuries of preservation. "Does he know that you know about it?"

"Yes, but it's not something we speak of."

"Why hadn't you told Merlin about it?"

"The preservation of that knowledge is of the utmost importance," Gaius said. "Don't tell him I told you this, but Merlin tends to be something of an overeager puppy when it comes to magic. I try to keep the more breakable things at a safe distance."
Gwen covered her mouth to stifle her laugh. She could easily picture it. "Morgana, too." Merlin and Morgana both tended to be accidentally destructive when they were trying to help.

"Experience will mature them," Gaius said, sagely. "And the torcs will help, if they let them. It was before your time, of course, but it used to be that the first wearing was the most important moment of a young sorcerer's life." His eyes became distant with memory. "A coming-of-age, meant to guide them to their full power and their path." He looked down, sobering. "But such things are long gone."

Gwen paused before she spoke, knowing the question was a sensitive one. "Did you...?"

But Gaius took even longer to respond. "Yes," he said, with a terseness that warned her away from further questions.
By the time the potion was ready, Morgana and Merlin had come back to themselves from their torc-induced state; despite Gwen's fears, she saw that they were better for it, their eyes clear and bright as they had not been for some time. Merlin kept close to Morgana, as if their physical proximity was a part of their magical connection. He was more settled, and not hopping about with impatience as he was before. But perhaps that was due to the nearness of his restoration.

"Drink as much of this as you can," Gaius told Merlin. He gave Morgana the potion and a narrow spoon to feed it to him with, so as to avoid Merlin making a mess trying to manage it on his own.

While they were busy, Gaius and Gwen set up the rest of the spell components. They cleared a spot on the floor and wrapped two bundles of dry herbs to burn, each with one of Merlin's recently-shed feathers inside. Gwen also placed a warm blanket in easy reach, as Merlin was going to be without his clothes when he was restored to human form. Finally, once Morgana and Gaius had taken their positions on the floor, face-to-face with Merlin between them, Gaius traced a circle of reddish powder around them, a safety measure to help contain their magic should anything go wrong. All that was left was for Gaius to put on the remaining gold torc, and for them both to perform the spell.

But just as Gaius raised the gold torc to his throat, there was a knock on the door. Everyone froze. It could be anyone, including the castle guards, and there was magic all over the room.

The knock came again, and then Arthur's voice. "Gaius? Are you in there? Gaius?"

Gwen looked to Gaius, who nodded. She went to the door and opened it a crack.

"Arthur," she greeted.

"Guinevere," Arthur said, then caught himself. "Gwen. Is Gaius there?"

"He's a bit busy," Gwen said. "Perhaps you could come back later?"

Arthur gave her a look that said 'I know the lot of you are up to no-good magic, and I'm not impressed, and I'm going to barge in whether you like it or not' and then he proceeded to barge in. He stopped short, surprised by what he found, and Gwen closed and locked the door behind him.

"What on earth are you doing?" Arthur asked, baffled.

"What you couldn't," Morgana said, tersely.

Gaius cleared his throat. "We are attempting to restore Merlin to his natural form. An act which will require great concentration. If you wish to remain, kindly take a seat and stay quiet."

Arthur raised his eyebrows at Gaius' stern tone, and looked around for an ally. When he failed to find one, he relented. "Fine," he said, walked around them, and sat down on the nearest bench, crossing his arms to make sure everyone knew he wasn't happy about any of this.

Gwen rolled her eyes. Arthur could be such a child.

And of course, Arthur couldn't follow even those simple directions. "You're using the torcs," he blurted out.

"Thank you for stating the obvious," Morgana said, tersely.
But Arthur seemed to be quite hurt by this revelation. "But I thought..."

"Arthur," chided Gaius. "If you are unable to restrain yourself, you may leave."

Arthur wisely kept his mouth shut.

Gaius gave a long-suffering sigh. "Now where was I? Oh yes." Once he had regained his composure, he eased the gold torc around his neck. The effect it had upon him was not as powerful as it had been with Merlin and Morgana, perhaps because Gaius had far less magic of his own, and perhaps because he had previous experience wearing one. Now was hardly the time to inquire.

As Gaius' eyes cleared, he breathed in deeply, and somehow seemed to have shed years of his age in a moment. He and Morgana joined hands, and Merlin stood in the circle of their arms -- facing pointedly away from Arthur, if only to preserve his own concentration.

"Repeat after me," he began, his voice steady and strong. "Thurh minum gewealde ond thinum maegen."

"Thurh minum gewealde ond thinum maegen," Morgana echoed.

'Through my power and your strength,' Gwen silently translated.

"Geclippaþ we gyden Modron, héahgod. Ontíest we áttor fram we sáwol þín ár."

'We call upon the goddess Modron, highest of the gods. Draw the poison from the soul of your servant.' Except Gwen knew that unlike the common 'ambiht' that she would have expected him to use, 'ár' meant more than just a simple servant. It was the word used when referring to a servant of the gods themselves, a herald and messenger of their word. It was a strange choice, as Gaius would have considered every word with great care when he assembled the final spell.

"Ácenest we ealdorgeard!"

'Birth and renew the living house of his soul!'

Gaius and Morgana repeated the last line three times, and with that the spoken spell was complete. The magic swelled in all three sorcerers, their torcs glowing with power along with their eyes. Arthur stiffened in alarm, but Gwen had never seen anything so beautiful. She basked in the magic shining out from the circle, basking in it as she would a warm fire on a cold night.

As the transformation began, Merlin cried out, writhing as the change took hold. Morgana flinched, but Gaius held her hands tightly. With so much power flowing between them, it was essential that the circle hold. The gold light that shimmered on Merlin's silver torc expanded until he was covered in it, so much that it was hard to look at him. As the spell crescendoed, Merlin gave a cry of pain as the light became nearly blinding, but Gwen would not let herself turn away. As her eyes watered, she saw Merlin's bird form fill with a pure golden light. And then the shape of him dissolved, leaving only the light -- and at the center of the pulsing light was a swirling blue orb that floated in the circle of Gaius and Morgana's arms. But it was only there for a moment before the light began to shape itself again, growing and solidifying into the shape of a man. The light became a head and body and limbs, fingers and skin and hair and eyes and then there was Merlin, and he cried out in pain to be born.

The light faded, shimmering on his skin, and then it was gone. The spell was over, and a stunned, gasping Merlin lay naked in the cradle of their arms.

Gwen waited until Gaius released Morgana and wiped a gap into the circle of red powder. As soon
as she could, she picked up the blanket and wrapped it around Merlin, who was shaking like a leaf in a storm. He moved clumsily as Gaius and Morgana helped him sit up.

Merlin fumbled to speak, but couldn't seem to manage it. Gaius hushed him and rubbed a warming circle on his back. Merlin looked around at them, dazed by his transformation. Finally Gwen could wait no longer. She pulled Merlin into a great hug, squeezing him tightly, relieved by the solid, human feel of him. The silver torc pressed against her cheek; it had been restored to its proper size, just as it had shrunk to match Merlin's bird form.

"You're back," she whispered, her chest tight with relief. She glanced over Merlin's shoulder at Morgana, and saw her hesitate before moving in to join them. When they released Merlin, Gaius quickly took their place, his eyes glistening with unshed tears.

"This should help restore you," Gaius said, as he handed Merlin a cup of herbal tea. "Drink it slowly."

Merlin sniffed the steaming tea, scrunching his nose at its astringency, then took a careful sip. He seemed pleasantly surprised. "Thanks, Gaius," he said, and took another. He glanced over the cup at everyone sitting around him at the table, then looked down again with a jerk. He shut his eyes tightly, fighting a wave of dizziness.

Gaius finished his inspection of Merlin's condition. "The spell appears to be a complete success," he said, with evident relief.

"Doesn't feel complete," Merlin muttered, the words still an effort.

"It will take time for your reflexes and senses to adjust. But they're already improving. A good night's sleep and you'll be back to your old self."

Merlin gave a short nod and sipped his tea. Despite her own concern, Gwen had to agree with Gaius. When the spell had finished, Merlin had been terribly disoriented, barely able to stand or speak. His body was human, but his mind was still used to being in the shape of a falcon -- so much so that he opened his mouth to speak and instead gave out a startled squawk. Arthur made the mistake of laughing in surprise, and Morgana had elbowed him so hard that he would be feeling the bruise for days.

Arthur had not said anything since the spell. He had neither protested the use of magic nor welcomed it, and instead seemed caught between contemplation of what he had witnessed and relief at Merlin's recovery. He had used magic himself in his quest to rescue Merlin from the Sidhe, and so could hardly protest its use again for the same purpose, but he gave no hint that he had felt the joy that Gwen had. It was the same as when he had reluctantly described the wonders of Avalon, as if allowing himself to praise them would betray his principles. Nor had he embraced Merlin as everyone else had. He had stood apart, and they had let him.

The four of them sat together now, united in a rare moment of peace. Merlin plucked at his shirt, unused to the sensation of coarse fabric against human skin, and tugged at the blanket draped around his shoulders. He was restless under the weight of so many eyes, and yet Gwen, sitting right across from him, couldn't bring herself to look away. None of them could stop staring at Merlin, as if the moment they turned away he would vanish again, or sprout feathers and fly head-first into a wall. It seemed they would all need time to adjust to Merlin's restoration.

Morgana sat close beside Merlin, propriety the only thing that stopped her from simply pulling him in
for a cuddle. It was one thing to do that when Merlin was a bird, quite another now that he was himself again. Merlin was not pulling away either, despite his usual wariness, and Gwen wondered if they still felt drawn together by the connection they shared through the torcs. None of the three had removed theirs after the spell was finished, because that connection was helping Merlin recover.

Arthur finally broke the silence, clearing his throat. He glanced around the table before settling on Merlin again. "Merlin, I... I'm glad that..." He swallowed, struggling for words. "It's good to see you home."

Merlin gave a short nod and continued staring into his teacup.

Arthur took this as a signal to continue. "I know that things haven't been... that things between us can't go back to what they were. But I want you to know that I will do everything in my power to have your position rightfully restored. It's the least I can do, and my father had no right to--"

Merlin finally looked up, with a confused frown. "Restored?"

Gwen bit her lip as she realized. Merlin couldn't have known about George, because Uther hadn't formally appointed him as Arthur's manservant until the evening of the feast. And when that was happening, Merlin was tied up and unconscious in his bed.

Arthur was obviously realizing the same thing. "Yes. Because you weren't able to fulfill your duties after... we returned from Gedref. My father decided that I needed a servant more... suitable and... reliable." He winced as he finished, trying to awkwardly smile to soften the blow.

Merlin stared at him.

"But now that you're back, and without..." Arthur gestured to the torc on Merlin's neck, indicating the magical restraint. "You'll be fit to resume your duties."

"Have you lost your mind?" Morgana said, eyebrows raised in astonishment. She closed the last space between herself and Merlin, turning as if to shield him from Arthur. But Merlin rested a hand on her arm, gently pushing her back.

He reached up and took hold of the silver torc, easing it off his neck as he held Arthur's gaze. Morgana and Gaius both flinched from the loss, but Merlin didn't so much as twitch. He slapped the torc down onto the center of the table. "You mean without this?" He shoved it towards Arthur, who caught it before it fell over the edge.


"I wasn't finished." Merlin gathered his strength before continuing. "If you think for one moment that I'm going back to running around after you, cleaning up your messes--"

"I didn't--"

"Shut up. Not just as your servant. The next sorcerer who comes marching in for revenge is going to have an easy time of it. I should never have saved you in the first place."

Arthur leaned back, his eyes narrowed. "If that's the way you feel."

But that only enraged Merlin further. "If you had actually listened for once instead of being an ignorant, stubborn ass, none of this would have happened!"

"I had to stop you," Arthur said, leaning forward again, his cheeks flushing with emotion. "You
were going to get yourself killed. I risked my life to save you!"

"I wouldn't have needed saving if you'd trusted me. But you didn't and you won't, because all I am to you is a sorcerer."

Arthur's silence spoke for itself.

"Get out," Merlin said, his anger turning cold. "If you can't accept magic, then you have no right to be here."

Gwen was certain that Arthur was going to keep arguing. His clenched jaw jumped with the strain of holding back his tongue. But he spat out "Fine" and pushed himself to his feet. He started for the door, then turned back, a retort poised on his tongue. But he swallowed it back, giving a grunt of frustration, and yanked at the door. Unfortunately for his dramatic exit, it was locked.

"Gwen," Arthur ground out, not looking back.

"Oh, sorry," Gwen said, and hurried over with the key. Arthur stared at the door while she opened the lock, then stomped out, his footsteps echoing as he thudded down the stairs.

As soon as the door was closed again, Merlin slumped with exhaustion. Gaius went over to the table and picked up the silver torc, but Merlin shook his head.

"I'd rather die than wear that again," Merlin said. He looked more miserable by the second, and tugged his blanket closer around himself.

Gaius looked away to hide his exasperation, disguising the motion by removing his own torc. "I don't think that will be necessary," he said, taking them both in hand and gesturing for Morgana to remove hers as well. She handed it over with reluctance.

"It's getting late," Gaius said. "We need to get you out of the castle before curfew. Gwen, my dear, would you get a basket ready to take with you? Food, a change of clothes..."

Gwen nodded. "I'll get some things together." She would properly restock the larder tomorrow, but with the house so empty there were quite a few things they needed to bring back with them. The rest of Merlin's things would have to wait, as now was not the time to barge into Arthur's chambers to get them.

As Gwen opened the door, she looked back, and saw that Merlin was huddled in Morgana's arms, struggling not to cry. Morgana held him, resting her head against his.

§

The journey out of the castle was tense, and Gwen and Merlin struggled to keep a natural pace as they hurried through the guard-filled halls. Merlin wore Gaius' spare travelling cloak, but it was a slim protection. Yet it held, and soon they were across the courtyard and over the bridge into the upper town. Only then did Gwen breathe out a sigh of relief.

As they walked through the town, Gwen smiled and nodded to her friends and neighbors. There would inevitably be some gossip about her mysterious companion, his face hidden by the cloak, but Merlin would be safer with a bit of gossip than if everyone in town knew where he was. The Sidhe might not look beyond the castle themselves, but if they heard a servant mention Merlin's name, it would lead them right to Gwen's door.

But while Merlin was her main concern, Gwen also worried about Arthur. Not because he
particularly deserved it right now, but because it had become clear that despite everything he had learned, despite the risks he had taken and the revelation that both Morgana and Merlin were sorcerers, Arthur's opinion of magic had changed very little. Once the Sidhe were taken care of, Arthur was going to be on his own, and then what would become of Camelot's magic? Of her people?

More than ever, Gwen felt that it was wrong for them to turn their backs on Camelot, to abandon it and Arthur to Uther's control. Before he went to Avalon, Arthur had asked Gwen to teach him about the Old Religion, and she had agreed. If she went to him now, would he still be willing to listen? Or would losing Merlin only harden his heart, as loss had hardened Uther's? Camelot might not survive two cruel kings in a row.

Merlin was hardly in any condition to consider Arthur's heart, not when his own had been broken and smashed so utterly. Once his anger faded, all that was left in him was pain and sadness, and Gwen ached to see him in such a state.

When they reached her house, she sat Merlin down at the table and left him to unpack his things. She opened up the house and lit some candles, while making sure that there was no direct line-of-sight from outside to where Merlin was sitting. She laid out the ingredients for a simple stew and then went to fetch some water from the well. When she got back, she was surprised to find that Merlin had already lit the fire and chopped the vegetables.

"I hope you don't mind," Merlin said. He moved restlessly, and obviously needed something to keep him occupied.

"Of course not," Gwen said, giving him a warm smile. She poured the water into the pot and they added in the vegetables. Merlin volunteered to stand and stir while Gwen prepared the table. She checked on him a few times, and found him lost in thought, staring into the fire and the simmering stew.

She and Merlin shared their simple dinner of bread and stew, with apples for dessert. Merlin didn’t seem inclined to talk, and Gwen chose not to push him. She knew what it was to grieve for something lost.

Merlin insisted that he clean the dishes, as a small repayment for her generosity in sharing her home, so Gwen went about preparing the house for the night. She found Merlin's basket in the corner, still packed, and looked inside. Gaius had given Merlin a few things, including more of his restorative tea and some sleeping draughts in case he needed them. There was also the book on transformations that they had found in the secret library, and the grimoire that Merlin had gifted to Morgana. Before they left, she had given it back.

"It's safer with you," she had said, with courtly grace, but Gwen knew how much it cost her to let it go. "But you have to promise that you'll use it to teach me."

"I will," Merlin had promised, his eyes somber. "I'm sorry. I should have told you. It was wrong to let you suffer."

Morgana had nodded. "You should have. But... I understand. I couldn't even admit the truth to myself." She had given a crooked smile. "From now on, no more secrets. Agreed?"

Merlin had given an emphatic nod, and Morgana had pulled him into a hug. He had hugged her back tightly.

It was then that Gaius had brought over the last item in Merlin's basket: Sophia. Or rather, Erdudwyl,
as that was her true identity. Gwen took out the cage and pulled away the surrounding cloth. The little Sidhe glared up at her, furious at her imprisonment, and bared her tiny, sharp teeth. The Sidhe gave her the chills, and brought back faded memories of her mother's warnings and stories. There was another name they must be called, the 'fair folk', because it was bad luck to anger them. The fair folk might steal your gold, or dry your cow of milk, or shoot you with a fairy dart to make your hands and feet swell with pain. They might take the breath from babes at birth, or steal them from their cribs. But the fair folk had not been seen in Camelot since the Great Purge, and even Gwen had wondered if there was much truth to the stories. She didn't wonder anymore.

"You said you had somewhere to hide her?" Merlin said, startling her.

"Yes," Gwen said, glancing over to the hidden safe. A lifetime of habit made her hesitate, and then she felt foolish for doing so. Of all the people in Camelot, Merlin was the one she knew she could share it with. Morgana would not understand and Gaius no longer practiced the old ways. But Merlin did. Though they had been raised in different kingdoms, in different ways, the Old Religion connected them just as the torcs had connected Merlin and Morgana.

Gwen set Erdudwyl aside and went to the back of the house. She pulled aside the heavy sacks and knelt down on the floor to reveal the safe. Merlin peered over her shoulder, curious.

"My father made it," Gwen explained, as she felt for the release. She pulled open the heavy iron door, revealing the items within.

"What are these?" Merlin asked, as he knelt beside her. He picked up the gold cup and squinted at the engraving in the low light, and his eyes widened in realization.

"You never had anything to pray with?" Gwen asked.

Merlin shook his head. "It was just me and my mum. It wasn't safe to keep magic in the house. Not that we could afford something like this."

Gwen recalled the bare huts in Ealdor, the dirt floors and threadbare clothes. Her father's forge and her mother's position with Lady Asceline meant that even when times were tight, their family was always one of the better-off in the lower town. It was one of the reasons why her mother made such a point of helping others.

"Then how did you learn to read?" Gwen asked. There had certainly not been any books in Hunith's hut.

"Mum taught me," Merlin said. "We used whatever was at hand. She wrote in the dirt, or with chalk on stone. When we had a good harvest, she would buy paper and ink, but whatever we used had to be burned or wiped away." He smiled in remembrance. "Once I was old enough, she would tell me things and I would write them down, over and over." He raised his hand and waggled it. "Excellent penmanship."

"So what did she teach you?"

"Whatever she could," Merlin said. "History, prayers, grammar, herbs, numbers. No actual spells, because she never wanted me to use my magic. I spoke two languages growing up, but only one of them was safe to use with anyone but her. She once told me that the old tongue was the one part of my heritage that she could give me." He frowned, then shook his head. "What is it?" Gwen asked.

"Nothing," Merlin said, and picked up the statue of Gofannon. "It's just... she told me that after I
asked her about my father. Who he was, what happened to him. It was the one thing I really wanted to know. She wouldn't tell me."

Gwen knew that Hunith had raised Merlin alone. All four of them had lost at least one parent, but there was a special pain in knowing that his father might be alive somewhere, but had chosen to turn his back. Gwen felt the same about her brother.

"Do you know who that is?" she asked, pointing to the statue.

Merlin considered it, then smiled. "Gofannon?"

"The forge hammer is a bit of a giveaway," Gwen admitted. She handed him the other statue. "And this one?"

"Too easy," Merlin said, touching the engraved triskelion. "Modron."

"I don't suppose you prayed to Gofannon, growing up," Gwen said. It was usual for a household to pray to whatever lesser god was most likely to be sympathetic to them, as well as to Modron. "Amaethon?" she guessed. He was the god of the fields.

"During planting and harvest," Merlin agreed. "Mum didn't have a favorite, though. We usually prayed to Modron and the Five. Lleu, Cernunnos, Brighid, Silus, and Rhiannon."

Gwen was taken aback. "What, all the time?"

Merlin shrugged. "Yeah. What's wrong?"

Gwen wasn't sure what to say. "It's not wrong to pray like that. It's just... well, it's the sort of thing only Druids do. Because they're so much closer to the gods. Did Hunith know any Druids?"

Merlin frowned. "No. She always told me to stay away from them."

Gwen looked over to Erdudwyl, and saw that she was watching them with interest. Gwen removed the rest of the items from the safe, then grabbed the cage and put it inside. She closed the heavy lid with satisfaction, cutting off Erdudwyl's protest. She would have to hide the statues and the rest at the bottom of one of the sacks and hope that the King didn't order a search of the lower town until this was over.

"Merlin," Gwen said, turning back to him. "Are you familiar with the word 'ár'?"

"Sure," Merlin said. "It means servant. Ár Modron, servant of Modron. That's what mum would say when she prayed for the gods to protect me." He snorted. "Which usually meant 'please keep Merlin from making trouble.' Not that it did any good."

"Gaius used 'ár' in the spell today."

"What else would he use?"

"'Ambiht.' He should have used 'ambiht.'"

Merlin looked confused. "Don't they mean the same thing? Maybe it's different in Camelot than it was in Ealdor. I had an awful time learning Gaius' spells at first because I couldn't get the accent right. I stayed up all night with this statue, trying to turn it into a dog, and..." He trailed off as he realized that Gwen wasn't listening. "What does it matter which word he used?"

"I don't know," Gwen said. "Maybe it's nothing. It's not like I know anything about magic. But I
know about prayers and I know what 'ár' means. It's not just a servant. It means a servant of the gods. A holy messenger."

"Right," Merlin said, obviously uncertain about what any of this meant, if it meant anything at all. But then some realization shocked him, and he leaned back, slipping off his heels with a thump. Realization then quickly turned to anger. "They knew," he said, his face drawn with sudden pain. "All this time, they knew, and they didn't tell me."

"Merlin?"

Merlin pulled in on himself, struggling to breathe. He looked away and rubbed at his face, trying to calm himself.

"Merlin, you're worrying me," Gwen said, reaching for him in concern. She took his hands and held them. "Tell me what's wrong. Whatever it is, you can tell me."

At first, Merlin said nothing, but he was visibly struggling to find the right words. His eyes were red and he swallowed against the tightness in his throat. "I didn't want to believe him. It had to be more lies, manipulation. But what if he was telling the truth?"

"Who?"

"The dragon," Merlin said, looking at her with suddenly-wide eyes. "When I first came here, he called to me. He told me that I was part of a prophecy, that I was born to protect Arthur. That he would bring magic back to Camelot. And when we were in Gedref, there was this old temple, and the prophecy was there. It was written on the wall, but there was more to it than the dragon said. It wasn't just about Arthur. It was about someone called the Emrys."

Merlin looked to her as if the word should mean something, but she had never heard it before. "Who's the Emrys?"

"Me," Merlin said, a tremor in his voice. "At least, I think it's me. You remember the Druid boy we saved? He never spoke, but I could hear him in my head. He called me that. Emrys. Like it was something important. Like it mattered. But Gaius, my mum... they never said anything." He pulled one hand away and wiped his eyes on his sleeve, but then brought it back to hold Gwen's again. "When we got back, I confronted the dragon. I told him that I knew he'd been lying to me. And he said... he said that they knew. That they had known all along what I am. That they were using me."

"Ár Modron," Gwen said. "That's what the Emrys is?"

"I think so," Merlin said. He looked stunned and relieved and horrified all at once. She had never seen him in such a state. "Why wouldn't they tell me?" he asked, his voice small and hurt.

"I don't know," Gwen said, and her heart hurt for him. She pulled him into her arms and held him. "But it's like Morgana said. No more lies. Whatever the truth is, we'll find it together." She drew back, and saw silent tears running down his cheeks. She pulled out her kerchief and wiped them dry. He caught her hand and pressed against her palm, drawing comfort from her touch.

"I'm sorry," he sniffed, and let her go.

"Shh, it's all right," Gwen said. She gave him a gentle smile. "Come on, let's get to bed. We both need to rest."
Gwen's house only had the one bed left, so she had placed a bedroll beside it. She offered the bed to Merlin, but he wouldn't have it.

"I'm not kicking you out of your own bed," he said, and stubbornly sat down on the bedroll.

Gwen tutted at him, and secretly gave him the better of her two pillows. Soon they were both tucked in for the night, with one lone candle burning on the bedside table.

"Merlin?" Gwen began, and looked down at him. "Whatever happens, whatever it means that you're this Emrys... Morgana wants to leave Camelot after this is over, and she asked me to come with her."

The candlelight glimmered in Merlin's eyes. "Where will you go?"

"South, probably," Gwen said. "Deorham. Magic is still legal there."

"Deorham," Merlin echoed, and turned thoughtful. "I was thinking about going there myself."

"Then we can go together," Gwen said. "Yeah?"

"Maybe," Merlin said, and gave her a crooked smile. "I'm happy for you two, you know. I never would have guessed."

Gwen blushed, glad for the dim light. "Just because we're not as obvious as you and Arthur were..."

"Oi!" Merlin protested. Gwen wasn't certain, but she thought he might be blushing himself.

"It's all so new, though," Gwen said, letting her uncertainty show in her voice. "We haven't really talked about it. So much has been going on. She bit her lip. "I'm not even sure I want to leave."

"I don't think I should be giving relationship advice," Merlin said, the sadness creeping back into his voice. "But if I did, then I think you should do what's right for you. Not just what she wants."

It was sensible advice, but Gwen wasn't sure she could follow it, if it meant letting Morgana leave without her. "Maybe."

Merlin shifted below her, trying to get comfortable on the thin bedroll.

"Do you think you'll ever forgive him?" Gwen asked. She couldn't blame Merlin for being angry. Merlin had suffered greatly since telling Arthur the truth about his magic, and had lost his position, his home, and his humanity. He had every right to be furious with Arthur, no matter how much Arthur had done to rescue him from Avalon. And yet Arthur was hardly the only one of them to make mistakes, to hurt people he cared about.

Merlin stilled. "You think I should?"

"I don't know," Gwen said, quietly. "I helped Gaius lie to Morgana and suppress her magic for years. But she forgave me. And when you were gone, when we thought you were dead... Arthur really did risk everything to save you."

There was a long silence, so long that Gwen thought she'd gone too far. But then Merlin sat up and looked her in the eye.

"It's not enough," he said, soberly. "I wish it could be. That it could be enough for him to love me. But he doesn't. He loves this... lie that I constructed so I could be with him. Loyal, magicless Merlin. That's who he loves. But that's not what I am." He gave a bitter laugh. "Even I'm not sure what I am. I spent so long wanting to believe in Arthur that I would have forgiven him anything. And when I
told him the truth..." He swallowed, the bob of his throat casting a shadow. "When I was trapped in Avalon, all I could think was that it was my fault. That if I hadn't trusted Arthur again and again, even after he kept hurting me, after he kept destroying magic and killing sorcerers and unicorns and everything that Uther told him to kill..." He looked down, ashamed. "All that blood is on my hands. For every time I saved Uther's life, everyone he hurt and killed, that's on my hands."

"Merlin," Gwen said, her heart breaking for him.

"If I am the Emrys, whatever that means, then I have a responsibility to magic. I have to protect it. It doesn't matter what I want. Arthur doesn't trust magic, and I don't think he ever will." He looked up and gave Gwen the saddest smile she'd ever seen. "That's just how it is."

He blew out the candle and lay back down.

"I'm sorry," Gwen said.

"Yeah," Merlin said, and turned away.
The morning bell rang, calling out to rouse the day. In the distance, a rooster crowed.

Arthur cracked opened his eyes, still more than half-asleep, and saw a blurry figure in brown and blue. For a brief moment, an absurd hope sprang in him that Merlin had come back to him after all, that he had changed his mind and accepted Arthur's offer. But as his vision snapped into focus, his heart sank. It was only George.

"Oh. It's you," Arthur grumbled, and thumped back against the pillows.

"Good morning, sire," George declared, his head high with pride. "I have polished your armour, sharpened your sword, selected your clothes. There is a slight chill in the air today, sire. And now, if you would allow me, I would like to serve you breakfast."

Arthur looked to the side, where Merlin usually dumped a single plate with a hunk of bread, a lump of cheese, and fruit that Merlin had surreptitiously nibbled on the trip between the kitchen and Arthur's chambers, and found that George had nearly brought him an entire banquet. There were whole platters loaded with ripe, gleaming fruit, fresh bread still steaming from the ovens, nuts and cheeses and a full pitcher of wine.

George went over to the banquet and selected a perfectly-rolled napkin. With a flick of his wrist, it fell open, and George laid it gracefully upon Arthur's bare chest before giving it a single, satisfied pat.

"Listen, George," Arthur began, as George proceeded to prop him up with pillows. "This is all very impressive. Very impressive indeed."

"Thank you, sire," George said, and handed him his goblet and an empty plate, both of which he clearly intended to fill.

Arthur didn't want a banquet, and he didn't want perfect, solicitous George. He wanted Merlin, with his shabby clothes and his appalling manners. He wanted to wake up with Merlin sprawled around him, so lazy and grumpy in the morning that Arthur had to get someone else to bring them their breakfast. He wanted to complain that half his grapes had gone missing, and then taste them on Merlin's sticky lips.

But he'd lost all of those things, and he wasn't likely to get them back. He stared glumly as George filled his goblet and began piling his plate with food, and decided that he didn't have much of an appetite. He pushed the plate and goblet back into George's hands, tossed the napkin away, and hauled himself out of bed. What he needed now was to find something he could beat senseless. Fortunately, there was a whole army camped outside the castle.

"If anyone needs me, I'll be training with the knights."

"Sire, you must have your breakfast," George insisted.

"I don't like to fight on a full stomach," Arthur said, and found himself racing George to the wash basin. Arthur won, and wiped himself down while George tried and failed to intervene. George finally relented, huffed in frustration, and began to lay out Arthur's surcoat and armor.

Armor that Arthur had left behind in Gaius' back room.
"Wait a minute. Where did you get that?"

"I retrieved it, sire," George said, innocently. "And I must say that it challenged even my skills to remove the rust."

Arthur narrowed his eyes at George, trying to figure him out. He certainly hadn't told George where the armor was, nor ordered him to retrieve it. Taking the initiative was all well and good, but the only way he could have known where to look was if he had been shadowing Arthur yesterday. A day when Arthur had been up to his neck in treasonous magic.

It could be that George had merely retraced Arthur's movements after the fact in order to locate his armor, and had not actually witnessed anything suspicious. It could also be that George was yet another of his father's spies in servant's clothing. The third and most remote possibility was that George was actually that rare breed: a completely loyal and trustworthy manservant. Arthur doubted he could be so lucky twice in a row.

Or it could be that George was secretly magic himself. That possibility did not bear thinking about. Whatever George was, for the time being, Arthur was stuck with him. And George was far sharper than Arthur had first given him credit for. George could be dangerously useful, or he could simply be dangerous. Either way, Arthur would have to keep a close eye.

"Will you be wanting me to move into the servant's quarters, sire?" George asked, as he tightened the straps on Arthur's right pauldron.

"No," Arthur said, before he could think better of it. The thought of George taking over that last piece of Merlin, the last piece that Arthur had of him, made his stomach rebel against the lump of bread and cheese that George had absolutely insisted he eat. "No one is to enter that room without my explicit permission."

"Very well, sire."

Arthur knew that Merlin was going to need his things. He expected someone to show up at his door soon and pack everything away into Merlin's bag, leaving behind a bare room that might never have been occupied at all. Even though Merlin had made his feelings clear, even though Merlin was beyond his reach, Arthur wasn't ready to let him go.

If only Merlin had accepted his offer. At the time, it had seemed the right thing to do. A way to give Merlin back at least some sense of normality, a small piece of his old life back. But the idea had gone over with all the grace of a rockfall. It seemed there was no normal for Merlin to return to. At least, none that involved Arthur.

He thought back to those first days with Merlin, before the two of them had truly gotten to know one another. Merlin truly had been useless then, with a complete absence of knowledge of any task a servant might possibly be expected to perform. He was completely incompetent, constantly dropped things, and was as absent-minded as a hollow gourd. And yet despite all of that, and despite his own intentions, Arthur had liked him. It had taken months for Arthur to admit it even to himself, but Merlin was insistently, stubbornly likeable. He got under Arthur's skin and stuck there like a tick. A mouthy, impertinent, likeable tick.

Arthur had liked Merlin because he was honest and open. Because there were no illusions between them. Merlin made no bones about his opinion of Arthur, good or bad. Even when he tried to hold his tongue, his feelings would write themselves plainly on his face. Arthur looked back now, and all the things that had puzzled him about Merlin, all the contradictions and mysteries that had frustrated
him had been unlocked by the one truth that Merlin had hidden right under his nose.

Merlin had accused Arthur of only seeing him as a sorcerer and nothing more. But that wasn't true. Perhaps for that one dark moment, when he had nearly... perhaps then, but only then. If Merlin was only a sorcerer, Arthur's life would not have been turned upside-down. Merlin was so many things to him. He was his lover, flushed and gasping against him. His friend, looking to him with understanding eyes. He was the useless fool who saved his life, then grinned and stole his heart. The servant and the knight; the commoner and the sorcerer. For one man, Arthur had broken all the rules, because with Merlin, the rules didn't matter. Anything was possible, any victory could be won. But without him?

Without him.

"Your sword, sire."

Just as when he had first awoken, for a moment Arthur saw Merlin in George's place, holding out his sword for him to take. Merlin, standing before him, flushed with nervous pride at having finally put Arthur's armor on correctly for the first time. Merlin, kneeling before him, offering up the dragon-forged sword with strange solemnity.

George stood in silent expectation, patiently waiting, undemanding. The perfect servant. He might as well be a post.

Arthur sighed and took the sword. He pulled it from its sheath to inspect it, and thought about the fact that it had been at the bottom of a lake more than once. The fact that not even stone could dull its edge.

"Did you sharpen my sword?"

George hesitated, clearly caught between appearing to be the perfect servant and being truthful. "I... made certain it was perfectly sharp, sire."

Arthur nodded. "No problems with rust, then? Because between you and me, it did get a little damp."

George bit back a whimper, as if it physically pained him to lie. "It is a fine sword, sire. Truly fine."

Arthur barely managed not to smirk. "Good man," he said, and slapped George heartily on the arm. Perhaps there was hope for him after all.

§

Out on the training field, Arthur's mood quickly soured.

Usually, if he was plagued by dark thoughts or a foul mood, fighting was the one thing that would give him relief. He could lose himself in the burn of his muscles, the heavy swing and impact of his steel. There was no room for doubt or hesitation or fear in battle, and so he had long learned to leave such things behind. For all the pain and bloodiness of war, there was something in Arthur that thrived on the purity of it, the simplicity of survival and victory. In the chaos and rage of battle, there were times when he felt most at peace with himself.

Simplicity and peace were in short supply at the moment. He almost missed the distraction of needling George. But George was at the sidelines, studiously polishing like the proper servant he was. There was a time when Arthur would have ordered him onto the field and made him cower behind a practice shield. But in the mood Arthur was in, George would have stood a real chance of
losing a limb, even from the blunted training sword. Even Sir Ronald was barely holding his own, and his retreat only made Arthur hit harder.

"I yield, sire!" gasped Ronald. "I yield!"

Arthur ignored him, finishing his swing with a spin that brought him back around, knocking the sword from Ronald's hand. Ronald yelped and brought up his shield just in time, and the blade embedded itself into the wood.

"I yield!" Ronald shouted.

The sword was jammed deep into the wood. Arthur let go, breathing hard, and accepted the surrender. His awareness of himself crept back. He was soaked in sweat, his heart pounding in his ears. He nodded once to Ronald and walked over to the water bucket. He splashed his face and wet his neck, glimpsing his reflection in the rippling water. He broke the surface again and drank from his palm as he worked to catch his breath.

Ronald retreated to nurse his bruises, as had the dozen other knights that Arthur had fought and struck down. But a dozen wasn't enough. The harder Arthur fought, the harder he needed to fight.

"Right," he said, standing up and taking another training sword from the rack. "Who's next?" He looked around the field, but no one stepped forward, and their cowardice enraged him. They were all that stood between Camelot and her enemies, and yet they were too afraid to stand against one man with a blunted sword?

"You," Arthur said, pointing to Sir Grimond. The man had taken years to finally pass Arthur's one-minute test, and even then it had only been by the skin of his teeth. If he hadn't been of noble blood, he would never have been worthy of his knighthood. He had strength and ambition but less skill than he would admit, even to himself. It would give Arthur some satisfaction to beat the stuffing out of him.

"And you," Arthur continued, pointing to Sir Erec. He was a younger man and a better fighter, but he was vain and hotheaded, always getting himself into duels when he felt his honor had been slighted. Let him prove himself. Let them all prove themselves.

Both men approached, visibly bracing themselves after seeing so many better men fall before them. But they were proud, too, and eager for victory. No doubt each felt bolstered by the other's presence, fooled into thinking that numbers would be their advantage.

In less than a minute, Arthur had them both on their backs, a sword at each of their throats. He gave a snarl of disgust and turned away, dropping both swords to the ground. It was no wonder that Morgana's vision had shown Camelot's fall. "Useless," he muttered.

He still couldn't believe that Morgana had magic. He could barely believe that Merlin had magic, and he had had a few more days to get used to the idea. And Gaius. The golden light in their eyes, the magic so powerful that it had made his hair stand on end. He had felt it during the spell, recognized it, even without the torc's aid -- and without the torc, he could no longer feel the gentle magic in Camelot's stones.

He knew the power of the Sidhe. Against such magic, what chance did they have? What good were these knights, these noble sons, when even the best of them, even a man like Geraint, could fall from a single blow? How had his father purged the land of so much magic and so many sorcerers, when in Gedref it had taken an army to overcome even one? Had Gaius and his apprentices been enough?
Even Gedref would have been lost to them without Merlin. Arthur harbored no illusions about that. Hundreds of lives would have been lost on the walls, lives they could ill-afford to lose, and Gedref would have been lost until they could try again the next summer.

He tensed at the sound of approaching footsteps, but did not turn.

A cautious "Sire?" followed by a softer "Arthur?" It was Sir Kay. Arthur gave a short nod of acknowledgement.

Sir Kay was not just any knight. His father was Sir Ector, who had acted as Uther’s loyal first knight in the years after the Purge. Arthur himself had been one of Ector’s last students before his death. Kay had succeeded him until an injury had forced him to step down, by which time Arthur had been old enough to take on the role himself, and Geraint had been made his second.

Despite his injury, or perhaps because of it, Kay was a survivor. He was one of the oldest knights, and had slowed down in his later years, but Arthur would trust him with his life. There had even been a time when he had trusted Kay with his heart, or at least as much of it as he had dared to give. But that had been a long time ago, when Arthur had still been a boy, frightened and in need of comfort in the face of battle.

When Arthur had returned from Escetir, after their victory over Cenred, Kay had chosen to stay at the border. He had told Arthur that that was where he belonged, where he could best keep Camelot safe from her enemies. But to Arthur it had been a rejection, and a pointed one. Arthur was more than just another knight and he had a great destiny ahead of him -- one where a man like Kay had no place. By the time their friendship recovered, Arthur had learned to keep his heart closed, and to push away his lovers before they could pry it open. He had learned to be his father’s man, and had stayed that way until Merlin.

But the past was past. Kay had proudly fought beside him in Gedref, and when Merlin had proved himself in battle, Kay had been the first to pledge his support for the breaking of the First Code. And Kay was standing beside him now, patient but expectant, waiting for Arthur to say whatever it was that he needed to say.

If only Arthur could figure out what that was.

"That was sloppy form, you know," Kay said, when the silence ran on too long. "Anyone halfway competent would have gone for your right flank."

"Then find me a knight that's halfway competent," Arthur grumbled.

"Last I saw, you were working on that yourself," Kay replied. "I take it that's what's bothering you."

Arthur clenched his fists, longing for a weapon to hold, for something to hit. "Merlin quit."

"That's not what I heard. Was it about Gedref? If the King found out the truth, Merlin wouldn't have just been fired."

Arthur shook his head. "There was a misunderstanding," he said, tersely.

"Misunderstandings can be fixed."

"Not this one."

"Then I'm sorry," Kay said, genuinely. "I liked him, and I know he was important to you." He paused, letting all the meanings of 'important' hang in the air. "Don't worry about the First Code.
Arthur gave a bitter laugh. "That's not what I'm worried about."

"Then what is it? Deorham? Alined will sign his surrender, he has little choice."

Arthur wanted to tell him about the Sidhe. He wanted to tell him about all of it, because if anyone would listen and understand and even keep his secrets, Kay would. But they were not solely his secrets to tell, and like all knights of Camelot, Kay had no love for magic. He had just as much sorcerer blood on his hands as Arthur did. And until a week ago, Arthur would have been proud of both of them for that.

The knights had accepted Merlin as one of their own. If they knew the truth, Merlin would become a traitor to them, his magic alone negating everything he had done even though he had only ever used that magic for good. Some might be moved to reconsider their stance against magic, but that in itself would be traitorous by the laws of Camelot. The ban on magic was absolute, and no knight could risk divided loyalties on the matter. It would be tantamount to volunteering for execution, for the shame and disgrace of their households.

And yet Arthur would give each and every last man a dragon-forged sword and shield if he could. Even if it meant that they would all die as traitors after the battle was won. Because that was what it meant to be a knight. Once fealty was sworn, it could not be un-sworn. They had pledged their lives and to a man they were willing to give them. The acknowledgment finally softened Arthur's anger and frustration.

"I wish I could say," Arthur admitted.

Kay nodded in understanding. "Is it bad?"

Arthur swallowed. "It will be. If I can't stop it."

"Then you'll stop it," Kay said, plainly. He put a hand on Arthur's shoulder. "If you have to, you will."

There was such certainty in Kay's voice. It reminded Arthur so much of Merlin, of Merlin's belief in him. The belief that Arthur had shattered, that he had betrayed, that he had never felt he deserved because he had never truly earned it. Had he truly earned Kay's faith? The knights' faith? The kingdom's? They had all believed in him from the moment of his birth, and he had done his best to live up to that faith. But he had failed Merlin, and by failing Merlin, it seemed that he had failed them all.

But Camelot had not fallen yet. Kay was right about one thing: Arthur would find a way to stop the Sidhe because he had to stop them. There was only one path, and Arthur would walk it until he reached its end, no matter what the cost to himself. If he had to fight a whole army single-handed, he would take them down with him. And once he fell, he would need his knights to be ready to stand in his place.

"I hope so," he answered, turning to Kay at last. "But if I fail, the men have to be ready. I need you to make them ready."

Kay glanced past Arthur's shoulder, across the field to where Leon was training the newest knights, two fresh-faced young noblemen who barely looked old enough to be squires. "I'm not your second."

"No," Arthur admitted. "Leon's a good man, but he doesn't have the experience. Help him. Train
"Arthur," Kay began, more concerned now than he had been at the start of all this.

"Please."

Kay stilled, taken aback. He took in a shaky breath, then nodded. "Sire."

The alarm bells suddenly rang, echoing out over the hills. Arthur looked to the castle and saw a messenger approaching the field. She stopped and spoke hurriedly to George before rushing off again, and then George rushed towards Arthur and Kay. Arthur had never been so grateful for an interruption.

"Sire," George said, his breath short with urgency. "An army has been spotted approaching Camelot. Gawant crest. Sir Godwyn is arriving and your presence is requested--"

But before George could finish, Arthur started to run back to the castle. If Godwyn was here, Alined would arrive soon after. At least there was a problem he knew how to solve.

As he reached the armory, he glanced back to see George running to catch up. But when he looked past him to the training field, all he could see were dead men. He felt a surge of pity for Morgana that she suffered to see their future every night.

§

By the time Arthur reached the courtyard steps, he was the last to arrive. This fact earned him an impatient glare from his father, but Arthur brushed it off. No one else had been in the middle of training on the fields, nor had they been involuntarily scrubbed within an inch of their life by George. By the end, Arthur was starting to wonder if George was trying to make him gleam like one of his polished spoons.

Morgana and Gwen were there, of course, as was Gaius. It was suddenly strange to have the four of them all together outside of Gaius' chambers. He felt Merlin's absence more keenly than ever, and had to hold himself back from asking Morgana and Gwen how he was doing. Then he noticed Drudwas and 'Aulfric' were there, and it was a lot easier to keep his mouth shut. Their presence could only mean that his father was serious about his planned alliance with Tír-Mòr.

Except that Tír-Mòr didn't exist anymore, not since the Saxons invaded it. And 'Aulfric' was a Sidhe prince of Avalon, not a landless nobleman with chests full of gold. Arthur didn't know how he was going to break the news to his father, especially since his first attempt had been an utter failure.

"Morgana," Arthur greeted, taking his place between her and his father. "Father."

"Arthur," Morgana returned, giving his name only a glazing of disdain.

"Arthur," Uther greeted. He kept his eyes on the entrance to the courtyard, waiting as Godwyn's entourage wound its way up through the town, leaving his army to camp at the outskirts. "This is an exciting day."

No doubt his father was keen to set the stage for Alined. "The arrival of Lord Godwyn is always a cause for celebration."

"And Princess Elena."

"Yes," Arthur said, with less enthusiasm. The last time he had met Elena, she had been loud, rude,
annoying, and gross. She had also been five years old, and seven-year-old Arthur had not had any patience for her. The last he remembered, she had been carried off squalling by her nursemaid, a portly woman who had loomed over Arthur rather aggressively. He hadn't cared much for her either, but of course that had been years ago. He doubted that Elena still had a nursemaid now that she was nearly of age.

"I hear she's grown into something of a beauty," Uther continued, sounding strangely eager about it.

"Really?" Arthur didn't see how that was likely.

"Oh, yes. Beautiful, charming, witty. Strategic."

Arthur finally turned to his father, sensing trouble. "Strategic?"

"I've always thought so. We have always thought so. That is, Lord Godwyn and myself. That is, he finds you strategic, not Princess Elena."

Arthur stared. He had rarely ever seen his father so flustered. "He finds me strategic?"

"Oh, yes," Uther said, confidently.

"And beautiful?"

Uther was saved from having to muster a response by the sound of trumpets and marching boots upon stone. Everyone straightened in expectation as Lord Godwyn's entourage poured into the courtyard.

"Father, what are you trying to say?" Arthur muttered through clenched teeth. The bad feeling in his gut already knew the answer, but some small hope fought against it. He knew this day would come, but he wasn't ready for it. Not now. Not Elena.

"Godwyn!" his father said, conveniently ignoring the question. He walked down the steps and greeted Godwyn with open arms, and Godwyn returned the gesture. They hugged and slapped each other's backs.

"It's been too long," declared Godwyn.

Uther and Godwyn finally stopped hugging, and Uther turned to greet the others. "Princess Elena, you are most welcome."

Princess Elena stepped forward to return the greeting and immediately tripped and fell flat on her face, making the whole crowd gasp. A short, stout woman hurried to her side to help her up, and it was with some horror that Arthur recognized her as Elena's nursemaid. She was older and greyer and much shorter now that his perspective had changed, but it was indeed the same woman.

"I'm all right," insisted Elena. She stepped out of her shoes and gave a great sigh of relief. "I told you I couldn't wear them." She slapped her bare feet against the stones and seemed inordinately pleased by the act, and then stopped, eyes wide, as she remembered where she was. "Oh, sorry," she said, and attempted a ladylike bow. "King Uther. Prince Arthur."

Arthur bowed in greeting, but his heart was sinking. "Princess Elena. It is my honor to welcome you to Camelot."

"You must be tired from your long journey," Uther said, putting a hand on Godwyn's back and walking him up the steps into the castle. "Arthur, please see to our guests."
"Yes, father," Arthur said, and turned to George. "George," he began, but the man was already
gone. Arthur looked for him, and found him loading himself down with luggage.

"Already arranged, sire," George said, as if this was one of the proudest moments of his life. "They
will not fail to be impressed."

"Good," Arthur said, feeling rather at a loss. He had to talk to his father before this whole business
got out of hand. He hurried up the steps and found Uther and Godwyn in the throne room, smiling
and chatting happily to each other. The bad feeling in Arthur's gut turned to outright dread.

"Ah, Arthur," greeted Godwyn, who waved him over. "I do believe that every time I see you, you've
grown taller."

"The last time you saw me, I was sixteen," Arthur reminded him. The last time Godwyn visited
Camelot was six years ago, when Arthur had just returned from Escetir. Godwyn had been an
important ally in the war with Cenred, and had assisted Uther in brokering that peace as well. But
Godwyn wouldn't have brought Elena into Camelot just for the company. "My father informed me
that you think me 'strategic'."

Godwyn laughed. "He's always had a way with words. But yes. Uther, you have rather let the cat
out of the bag."

"You have always been our strongest ally, our closest friend," Uther said, pouring on the flattery.
"To join our two kingdoms together at last is a fulfillment of our greatest hopes."

"They do make a lovely couple," Godwyn said, smiling warmly.

"And a strong match," Uther agreed.

"Please tell me you mean a jousting match," Arthur said, frowning at them.


"I'm sorry," Arthur said to Godwyn. "Your daughter is a lovely woman, but I hardly know her."

"I realize that this is a delicate situation," Uther admitted. "But the matter has already been decided.
This marriage will secure the future for both our kingdoms."

"I have no feelings for her," Arthur insisted.

Uther's smile vanished. "When we talk about your future, Arthur, we're not just talking about your
happiness, but the safety and security of the whole of Camelot. You may one day be a husband, but
more importantly, you will one day be King."

"Now, now, Uther," Godwyn said. "There's no need for force when a gentler hand will do. Of
course Arthur has reservations. Let them get to know each other, spend some time together. They're
two lovely young people. The rest will come naturally."

Arthur very much doubted that anything would come naturally between himself and Elena, much
less love. "Very well," he said, knowing his agreement mattered little, if at all. He might as well
preserve whatever illusion of control he could.

"I knew you would understand," said Godwyn.

Uther brought his arm around Arthur's back and guided him firmly towards the door. "Lord Godwyn
and I have much to discuss. I expect you to be on your best behavior at tonight's dinner."

"Father--"

"This is for the good of Camelot," Uther said, with hushed insistence. "The matter has been decided."

"And when, exactly, did you decide it?" Arthur challenged.

"Twenty years ago."

Arthur stared at him, stunned.

"Accommodations were made," Uther said, as if realizing how awful the whole thing was. "If you or Elena had found a match before your coming of age, obviously things would be different."

"Are you telling me this my fault?" Arthur asked, astonished.

"You must have a queen if this kingdom is to have any future."

"One I will choose myself!"

Uther gave him a look. "You've already shown that you have much to learn about choosing the right people."

Arthur gaped. "Is this about Merlin?"

"That boy was my mistake," Uther said. "But the matter is closed, as is this one. You will marry. And as for your feelings towards Elena, I would encourage you find some."

The doors to the throne room thudded shut. Arthur stared at them, speechless. If the Old Gods did indeed still exist, he was certain they were laughing at him.

§

Though Arthur had privately cultivated a plan to avoid having to attend his father's dinner, George foiled him every step of the way. And so when the appointed hour came, they walked to the private dining hall, and to Arthur's personal doom. Arthur doubted he would be able to muster much of an appetite with his stomach in knots of anger, frustration, and dread. Then he saw that the rest of the dinner party was already seated at the long table, and he was torn between running away in horror and laughing until he cried.

His father sat at the head as usual, but the long body of the table was packed full. To his father's right sat Godwyn, the nursemaid Grunhilda, then Elena; to his father's left sat 'Aulfric' and Drudwas, and then Morgana, who was understandably displeased with her seating. Arthur wondered if he would have to stop her from stabbing Drudwas with her cutlery. He wouldn't put it past her.

As Arthur sat down, the various servants hovered round, filling wine goblets and opening napkins. Uther was attended by Louvel, Morgana by Gwen, Arthur by George, and their guests by their own servants. Arthur wondered if the Sidhe's attendants were real at all. They were certainly not pink and warty like the Pixies in Avalon. Of course, that could be hidden with a glamour...

Arthur understood now why his father had been so angry about his possible elopement with Sophia. Such a marriage would have ruined his father's carefully-laid plans for uniting Gawant and Camelot. And now here they all were, one big happy family.
Uther raised his goblet and looked around the table. "A toast to our honored guests, and to the friendships between our kingdoms."

"Here here," agreed Godwyn.

Everyone raised their goblets and then drank. Morgana side-eyed the Sidhe, then smiled over the table at Elena, who blinked in blank confusion.

"You must give my regards to Princess Sophia," Godwyn said to 'Aulfric'. "I was quite disappointed to hear that I missed her. She sounds like a lovely girl, just the age to be friends with my Elena."

"Father!" Elena protested, embarrassed.

"It is most unfortunate," Aulfric rumbled. He looked sideways at Arthur. "Once things are settled in Tír-Mòr, we will have to pay a visit to your fine kingdom."

Arthur suspected that he and Morgana were the only ones to understand the dark promise in those words. Uther took them at face value, and was expectedly delighted.

"A wonderful idea," Uther declared.

"I understand that you have a great challenge ahead of you," Godwyn said. "It must have been a great loss when the Saxons invaded. I have heard reports that they are all along the southeast."

"We will take what is rightfully ours," declared Drudwas. "No enemy will stand against us."

Arthur and Morgana looked to each other, and Arthur saw Morgana had a white-knuckle grip around the hilt of her knife. He reached over, keeping his hand just below the table, and rested his hand on her arm to caution her. She reluctantly eased her grip.

"Very dramatic," said Grunhilda, eyes bright with laughter. "Very menacing."

Both Drudwas and 'Aulfric' bridled in response. Drudwas turned to Godwyn with disdain. "How dare you allow your servant to speak to her betters?"

Grunhilda squawked at the insult, but it was Elena who came to her aid. "You will not treat Grunhilda with such rudeness."

"Elena," childed Godwyn. "I must apologize for both of them. It has been a long journey, and tempers are shorter than courtesy requires."

"Of course," said Uther, eager to smooth things over. "We understand completely." He turned to 'Aulfric' with an expectant look.

"Yes," 'Aulfric' said, drawing out the word. "Of course. And we must apologize as well. Princess Sophia's absence has been... difficult. She is greatly missed."

"A full goblet and a full stomach will ease a great deal of ills," said Uther, and he gestured for the food to be brought out.

Due to the fullness of the table, an extra table had been set up for the bounty of serving platters that were carried in from the kitchens. Uther had outdone himself this time, ordering nearly enough food for a full banquet. Arthur was pleasantly surprised when George filled his plate only with the foods he liked best, and to the right amount. Clearly he had been asking questions to the kitchen staff.

There was one mishap, however. As one of the Gawant servants leaned over to refill Grunhilda's
goblet, she suddenly fell as if her legs had been knocked out from under her, and the full jug of wine spilled right down Grunhilda's front. Grunhilda yelped and grabbed her napkin, but no amount of dabbing was going to salvage her clothing.

"Oh dear, oh dear!" she exclaimed, distressed.

Arthur saw Drudwas' barely hidden smile, and was certain that the Sidhe had used his magic to get his revenge. Elena grabbed all the napkins she could reach and clumsily dabbed at the wine stain, but Grunhilda looked near tears.

"Oh, my poor clothes!" she wailed. "And this was my nicest dress!"

Arthur didn't think that the pile of rags she called a dress was the nicest anything, but he did feel bad for the woman. "George," he called. "Could you?"

"At once, sire," George said, and rushed to her aide. "Come with me, my lady. We'll have this cleaned up in no time."

Grunhilda looked longingly at the food, and at her wine-soaked plate. "But my dinner..."

"A fresh plate will be brought to you," promised George, and he guided her out the door.

Morgana looked to Gwen, who immediately understood. She quickly stepped in and refilled Arthur's goblet, taking over George's duties.

"Well," 'Aulfric' said. He took a bite of his food and leaned back, smiling. "Most delicious, my lord."

"Poor Grunhilda," mourned Elena.

"I'm sure she'll be fine," soothed Morgana. "George will take good care of her."

Elena wiped at her eyes, and then wiped at her nose, and then wiped her snotty hands on the skirt of her dress. Morgana's smile wilted at the edges, but she was too polite to let it fall.

"And what brings you to Camelot?" Morgana asked, looking to Elena and Godwyn.

"I'm sure Lord Godwyn would prefer not to discuss matters of state--" Uther began.

"Father's helping with the treaty," Elena said, ignoring him. "And, well, um..." She blushed and looked at Arthur, then looked down at her plate.

Morgana stared at her, then stared at Arthur, and Arthur saw the realization dawn on her face. "I'm sure you'll make a lovely couple," she said, smirking gleefully.

Arthur glared at Morgana, but Elena was oblivious. "Do you really think so?" she asked, biting her lip.

Morgana raised her goblet. "To Arthur and Elena." She drank before anyone else could respond.

"Nothing's happened yet," Arthur ground out, feeling his father's eyes boring into him. He turned to Elena. "But perhaps we could spend some time together. Just the two of us."

"Oh!" cried Elena, perking up immediately. "Like a picnic?"

"Um, yes. A picnic," Arthur agreed.
"I love picnics," said Elena, dreamily. "And horses. And jam!" She looked around the table, then saw a pot of jam on the cheese platter. "Can I have that?"

A servant handed her the jam pot. She stuck her fingers into it and then stuck her fingers into her mouth and noisily sucked them clean. Then she stuck her fingers back into the jam pot to scoop out some more.

Arthur stared at her and wondered if she was entirely simple. Did his father actually expect him to spend the rest of his life with this girl? To let her rule Camelot by his side? It was madness. She had even more appalling table manners than Merlin.

Morgana was wide-eyed with amazement and doing everything in her power not to laugh. She looked to Arthur and he could have sworn that there was actually some pity in her eyes on his behalf. Uther, on the other hand, looked as if he had swallowed a particularly sour cherry and was trying not to let it show.

"A picnic is a fine idea," said Godwyn, with strained cheer. "Fresh air, sunshine. Especially in this lovely weather."

Elena finally seemed to realize that she was doing something inappropriate, and she threw the jam pot over her shoulder. The glass skittered across the stone floor and one of the servants chased after it.

"Sorry," she said, her lips stained and sticky. She wiped them furiously with her napkin, which was still damp from Grunhilda's wine. Her hair, which had been somewhat tamed, was now in utter disarray, as if it had been yanked about by some invisible hand. And then, worst of all, she made a strange, strained face, then let out a stunningly loud fart. "Ohh, that's better," she sighed. Then she straightened up and began voraciously eating her food, barely chewing it before taking another mouthful.

Godwyn seemed inured to this sort of behavior. "Elena, dear," he said, and she looked up, cheeks bulging from her mouthful of food. He sighed and settled for smoothing down her hair.

Elena's eyes seemed to clear, then, as if until then she had been in a daze. She looked down at herself and her face flushed with embarrassment. "I'm so sorry," she said, and tried to neaten herself again. There wasn't much she could accomplish, but the effort was appreciated. Godwyn gave her an approving smile.

'Aulfric' frowned, and leaned close to Drudwas and whispered something in his ear.

Drudwas stood. "If you'll excuse me, I'm afraid I must take my leave. An urgent matter must be attended to."

"Of course," Uther said, with only a hint of annoyance. Their dinner was not going as he had planned, not in the least.

Elena, meanwhile, was so ashamed by her behavior that she was nearly in tears. "I... I should go check on Grunhilda," she said, standing up so quickly she nearly pushed her chair over. "Arthur, Morgana. It was lovely to..." But her chin began to tremble before she could finish, and she ran out of the room.

"Oh dear," said Godwyn, and stood up to go after her. He looked to Uther apologetically, and Uther just waved his permission. The evening was a loss by this point anyway.

Arthur cleared his throat and surveyed the wreckage. He noticed Gwen was hiding behind one of the
pillars, her hand over her mouth from some combination of astonishment and laughter.

"Tell me, Aulfric," Morgana said, turning to the man. "What are your thoughts on arranged marriages? I consider them to be backwards and barbaric, but they say that kings are more enlightened in the east."

'Aulfric' stared at her, clearly at a loss. Uther picked up his goblet and drank until it was empty. Louvel immediately refilled it.

"Morgana," Arthur warned, sensing that she was building up to something.

But that only made Arthur the target of her anger instead of Uther. "Are you seriously going to go along with this?" she challenged. "You're going to let yourself be sold off to the highest bidder?"

Arthur looked down, not knowing what to say.

Morgana turned back to Uther. "Treating your own son like... like a herd of cattle! And that poor girl! You disgust me." She stood, threw down her napkin, and strode out, her head held high. Gwen gave an apologetic shrug and hurried after her.

Uther scowled.

"Well," Arthur said, leaning back in his chair. "What's for dessert?"
Elena

Arthur looked up at the clear blue sky and sighed. What he wouldn't give for a downpour right now.

George was checking the tack, putting his personal finishing touches on the horses before Elena arrived for the appointed ride and picnic. Arthur had chosen Hengroen for himself, of course, but had not been able to bear the thought of someone else riding Llamrei, especially when that someone else was Elena. Of the remaining two, he did not dare lend her Passelande, Morgana's favorite, and so that left Llwyrddydwug. It would be good to give the mare some use after a few weeks with just the stable hands.

Arthur sighed again. Elena could barely walk without tripping herself; he dreaded what she would do to the poor mare. Probably run her off the path and right into a bramble bush. Perhaps it would be safer for everyone involved if he had her ride double with him on Hengroen. They could take an easy amble around the palace grounds, safely away from any streams or brambles or other things Elena was likely to run herself into.

He shifted impatiently and glanced up at the stairs, uncertain if he wanted Elena to appear immediately or not at all. He knew that he had to at least try to make this work for the sake of the kingdom's future and to avoid his father's wrath. Surely Elena must have some worthy qualities, even if they were buried deeply underneath a host of unappealing ones. Godwin was a good man and a fair king, and with her as his only heir, he must have passed down at least some of his wisdom. And surely Uther was not so blinded by his plans for Camelot's future that he would undermine it by putting an incompetent on the throne, even if only as queen.

Surely. He hoped.

"Sorry I'm late!"

Arthur turned again and saw that Elena had appeared at the top of the stairs. She was wearing the same yellow dress that she had worn on her arrival and at dinner. Arthur could imagine Morgana's disdainful comments. That she had not changed from her travelling dress for dinner had been one thing, but to wear the same dress for two days in a row was beneath a lady, much less a princess. Even her hair was in the same state of disarray, as if she had not even bothered to brush it after rolling out of bed. The only concession she had made was a pair of surprisingly sensible riding boots.

"Princess Elena," Arthur greeted, with as much of a smile as he could fake. "How lovely to--"

"You have such beautiful horses," Elena said, completely ignoring him. She walked right past him and over to the horses. "What are their names?"

"Hengroen and Llwyrddydwug," Arthur said, restraining the urge to pull her away before she poked one of the horses in the eye or ended up getting kicked. But rather than making the usual mistake of touching Llwyrddydwug's nose, which would have upset the horse, Elena went to Llwyrddydwug's side and stroked her neck. Then she stuck her face at the end of Llwyrddydwug's nose and huffed out. Llwyrddydwug huffed back and turned her ears forward, making Elena smile, and suddenly the two were best of friends.

"Here, let me assist you," Arthur began, stepping forward to help her up onto the saddle.

Elena waved him away. "Oh, please, this is something I can actually do." With sudden grace, she grabbed the base of Llwyrddydwug's mane in one hand and the cantle in the other and easily slipped
up onto the saddle. And then, before Arthur could even finish being surprised, she had taken the reins and gone off at a trot.

Arthur turned to George, who met him with equal astonishment. Arthur quickly mounted Hengroen, realizing she was expecting him to follow her. So much for the easy ambling he had planned for them. It seemed that Elena wasn't entirely a loss after all.

He was going to have to step up his game. He wanted to make a good impression with her -- though gods knew that she had already made a hell of an impression on him.

"Follow her," he told George, who was mounting one of the household horses reserved for the servants. It was already loaded up with everything they would need for the picnic. "I'll catch up."

Arthur urged Hengroen on, and they bolted out of the castle. There was little time to spare, but little was just enough for what he had planned. He saw which way Elena was riding and knew what paths she could take. Instead of following her directly, he swung towards the upper town market. As he approached one particular stall, he pulled a coin from his purse, tossed it to the flowerwoman, and plucked a perfect pink rose from her display.

"Sire," she said, startled but grateful. Arthur had just enough time to give her a short nod of acknowledgement before he sped off after Elena, tucking the rose into his vest as they galloped. Though she had a few minutes' lead, he quickly found her trail. As fast as Llwyrdyddwg was, Hengroen was faster, and soon enough he saw her yellow dress in the dappled light of the forest.

"Slow down!" he called.

"No chance!" she called back, grinning, and urged Llwyrdyddwg into an eager leap.

As Hengroen closed the gap between them, Arthur couldn't help but smile. He eased back, letting her maintain enough of a distance to keep things interesting without taxing the horses. She led him on a merry chase through the forest, taking a winding, narrow path that finally ended at a wide streambed. They dismounted and let the horses drink.

"That was very impressive," Arthur said, pulling off his riding gloves as he approached her. "I'm not easily impressed."

"Oh," Elena said, stepping forward almost demurely. "Well, neither am I. And I wasn't!" The last she said with a great snorting laugh and a punch to Arthur's arm. So much for demure. She seemed to realize as much, and her smile vanished from self-consciousness.

There was an awkward silence.

"I've been riding since I was a child," Elena continued, trying to salvage the conversation. "I don't get to do it as much as I'd like." She rolled her eyes. "Princesses don't." But apparently my mother was an excellent horsewoman. Apparently."

Elena's mother had died in childbirth, just as Arthur's had, and that was the one thing they definitely had in common. Perhaps that was why Elena was such a mess, growing up without her mother.

"I often wonder if I'm like my mother," Arthur admitted. It was a small relief to be able to talk to someone who would understand. Someone who would commiserate rather than pity him. Morgana had lost her mother and then her father as a child, and Merlin had never known his father at all, but that was not the same as being the cause of his mother's death. Not that he needed to talk about his mother when he barely knew anything about her. He wondered if Godwyn was as reluctant to speak of Lady Aelfleda as Uther was to speak of Ygraine. "I hope I don't take after my father entirely."
Elena had slipped into a sympathetic smile, but then burst out, "Ugh! You don't!" Then she grimaced. "I don't mean that in a bad way."

Arthur couldn't help but laugh. Perhaps it was time to make his romantic move, before things became irrevocably awkward. "So," he began, reaching surreptitiously into his vest, "the real reason you beat me here is because I stopped to smell the roses." With a subtle flourish, he presented her with the rose, still unbruised despite the energetic ride.

"Oh!" Elena seemed truly touched. She grabbed the rose -- admittedly rather roughly -- and looked between it and him, almost flabbergasted. "It-- it-- it's beautiful!"

Arthur gave her an encouraging smile. Elena took a deep sniff of the rose, and everything seemed perfect. Then she grimaced, rolled up her eyes, and gave a huge sneeze all over the rose and Arthur's shirt.

Elena gaped at him, stunned by her own sneeze, and Arthur wondered if it would be too impolite to pull off his shirt and set it on fire during their first date.

"Shall I set up here?" George asked, having surreptitiously arrived. He approached them carrying a fur blanket and a basket.

"George! What kept you!" Arthur called, incredibly relieved. As they met, he lowered his voice and muttered, "Do not leave me again."

"My deepest apologies, my lord," George said. He looked at Elena, then back to Arthur, then down at the spatters of snot on Arthur's shirt. He became visibly pained. "Sire, if I may," he began, putting down his burdens and reaching for a kerchief.

Arthur stopped him with a finger to his face. George stared at his finger, his eyes nearly crossing.

"Just... do your job," Arthur muttered, then turned back to Elena with a forced smile. "George will take care of everything."

They tethered the horses to an overhanging tree, where they proceeded to chomp on the low, thin branches. Arthur and Elena then sat down on the fur blanket while George set out their food and drink. When George handed him his napkin -- and Elena was momentarily distracted by the cheese platter -- Arthur was finally able to wipe his shirt clean. Clean-ish, at least.

"For the cheese, my lady," George said, and presented Elena with a small jar of jam.

"My favorite!" Elena cried, delighted, and immediately scooped some with her fingers and stuck them in her mouth to suck them clean. When she set down the jam, she wiped her fingers on her dress, adding to the jam stains from last night's dinner.

George watched in dismay and reluctantly set aside the spreading knife. Arthur gave a short shake of his head, signalling to him to ignore Elena's rude behavior. It seemed that food brought out her worst habits. Arthur imagined the two of them sitting at the head of a banquet. He imagined straining not to react as she ripped into a pie with her bare hands and stuffed the handfuls into her mouth. His stomach turned as his appetite ran as far away as it could.

"I brought your favorite, my lord," George said, seeing that Arthur had not touched any of the food, even the food that Elena hadn't put her sticky fingers on yet. George unwrapped a small veal tart, miraculously still steaming from the kitchen ovens. Arthur's appetite instantly returned, and he bit into it, barely holding back a moan. Elena saw his delight and smiled, clearly seeing their shared enjoyment as common ground. Arthur decided that George looked suspiciously smug about the
whole matter.

So what if Elena enjoyed her food? Better that than she have no appetite at all. She reminded him a little of Merlin at the feast in Gedref, so eager to try all the strange and spice-laden dishes. Merlin had certainly never been polished in his manners, but polish could always be added. It was the quality of the metal itself that mattered.

As they finished eating, Elena let out a tremendous belch. "Pardon me," she said, at least attempting manners, and then farted just as loudly. Arthur decided it was better not to comment on either.

"Perhaps we could go for a stroll," Arthur suggested.

"Oh, yes," Elena said, and sprung to her feet, nearly knocking over George. She patted her stomach like a drunkard in a tavern and started walking. Arthur rolled his eyes and started after her, leaving George to deal with the cleanup.

"So. Elena," Arthur began, once he had caught up to her and matched her stride. "Tell me about yourself. How are things in Gawant?"

"All right, I suppose," Elena shrugged.

"Is there some kind of trouble?" Arthur asked, suddenly concerned. Perhaps Godwyn was so eager for the marriage not for Camelot's sake but because his own kingdom was weakened.

"Oh no!" Elena assured him. "My father does a wonderful job as king." She sighed. "I'm afraid I'm the problem."

Arthur bit back the urge to say how little of a surprise that was. "How so?" he asked.

Elena bit at her lip, obviously uncertain if she should be so truthful about her own shortcomings. But the need to share her troubles overcame whatever paltry sense of etiquette she had. "I fear that... that I'm a disappointment to my father," she admitted. "That I'll never be the princess he wants me to be."

"Some expectations can never be lived up to," Arthur said, having only come to grips with that idea quite recently himself. "All you can hope to do is your best."

"I'm afraid my best isn't good enough," Elena said, sadly. "Grunhilda says I shouldn't worry about it. That things will work themselves out on their own."

"Sometimes the wisest thing to do is nothing," Arthur said, thinking of his own lessons in leadership. Too much meddling could result in as weak a kingdom as too little.

"Maybe," Elena said, though she didn't seem to believe it. She thought for a while, then turned to him again. "Is it hard for you? Being the Crown Prince?"

It was a difficult question to answer, mainly because 'hard' didn't really enter into it. All the choices of his life had been made for him before he had learned to speak, even who he was destined to marry. He sometimes wondered if he would ever truly feel like his own man or if his father's ghost would haunt him to the very end of his life. Was it 'hard' to have his life laid out before him, fixed and certain? To have no choice but to live up to every expectation? If anything, that was the easy part. Going against his father on the First Code, discovering the truth about magic, loving Merlin and losing him: those things had been hard. They were still hard, and harder with every step.

"Sometimes being Princess feels impossible," Elena confided, with a crooked, relieved smile.

"Do you love your kingdom? Your people?" Arthur asked, seriously.

Elena thought about this. "I think so, yes."

"Then you may not be a good princess, but you'll be a good Queen."

Elena absolutely beamed at that. "That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me. Thank you, Arthur. Truly."

Arthur smiled back, feeling a faint blush heat his cheeks. He had not expected to like Elena, not truly expected to find anything of substance beneath her uncouth demeanor. It seemed that she was a diamond after all, if a diamond in the very, very, very rough. And again he was reminded of Merlin. Who would have thought that the clumsy fool he had fought in the market would prove himself as a knight, as man, as a... as a sorcerer.

Arthur's smile dropped.

"Perhaps it's for the best that our fathers decided to bring us together," Elena continued, much brighter now, and not noticing Arthur's sudden change in mood. "None of the other princes I've met have ever been as nice as you. Usually they're very rude, in fact. But that's all right because I don't want to marry someone rude." She kicked a rock from their path and it startled a chipmunk out of the leaf litter. "When we're married, we can go riding all the time and no one will be able to tell us that we can't. That's when I feel like I'm me. Like I fit. Sometimes I feel like I don't belong. But when I'm riding, it's different. I'm different. Does that make sense?"

Arthur hummed an assent. "You feel free."

"Yes! Exactly," Elena said, even happier now that someone understood. "You feel the same way?"

Arthur considered his answer. He interpreted her babble to mean that when she was riding, she felt free of the burdens of her position. She felt like Elena, not Princess Elena. "It's hunting for me," he said. "I can let everything else go. Focus on the hunt. Forget about..."

"About everything," Elena finished for him. She sobered, thinking about all the things that they rode and hunted to forget. "But we're not, really. Free, I mean. It's nice to pretend, but..."

They both sighed.

"We don't have a choice about this, do we?" Elena asked.

"I don't think so," Arthur said. There wasn't much point in avoiding the truth, not when it was just the two of them. "But we have to do what's best for our kingdoms. For our people."

"They'll be both our peoples, once we marry. Both our kingdoms." Elena considered this. "Camelot seems very nice."

"Gawant is a fine kingdom," Arthur offered, mustering a weak smile.

Elena's shoulder slumped. She kicked a branch, but it turned out to be a root. "Ow," she said, pouting. She hopped on her good foot, shaking her injured foot back and forth. Arthur couldn't help but laugh at her antics, and Elena smiled back.

It was usually Merlin who played the fool to make Arthur laugh.
Arthur had only ever truly loved one person. Until a few weeks ago, he had not even been able to say the words 'I love you' aloud. But Merlin's love was lost to him now, and he didn't know if he had it in him to fall in love with anyone else. Over the past week, his heart had been broken over and over again, and despite the numbness that had come over him since Merlin walked away, he could feel the shards of it cutting him up inside with every breath. He didn't know if he could piece those shards back together. He didn't know if he could let himself be vulnerable again, knowing the pain that would result.

For most of his life, he had done everything he could not to care, not to feel. He didn't want to go back to being that way, but he didn't know how else to be, if he couldn't be with Merlin. He didn't know how to get him back, and he didn't know how to let him go.

Perhaps Elena was right. Perhaps it was for the best that this decision was made for them just as every other decision had been made for them. Following his heart had only led to disaster. Perhaps it was time to go back to following his head, to making decisions based on cold logic instead of hope and emotion.

Marrying Elena was the logical choice. It was the best thing for Camelot. He just wished it could also feel like the right thing.

§

The ride back to the castle was subdued, and Arthur knew it was his fault. Elena could not fail to notice his sober mood, and the connection they had formed meant she had great sympathy for him. They reached the courtyard and dismounted.

"Thank you," Elena said, with rather less enthusiasm than she had expressed in the woods. "I had a lovely time."

"Me too," Arthur said, and even meant it a little.

Elena gave him a long look, then leaned down and hugged him -- though leaning down meant that she ended up with her head pressed awkwardly to his chest. Still, he respected her intentions, however embarrassing the result might be.

"See you soon, I expect," she said to his chest.

"I hope so," Arthur said, his voice strained. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw two guards snickering at him.

Elena let him go and walked back up the steps, only to trip on them and nearly fall flat on her face. Arthur moved to help her, but she waved him off. "I'm all right," she said, hiked up her dress, and lumbered up the steps.

Arthur thought that right now he wanted nothing more than to take his crossbow, hop back on Hengroen, and go hunting for a week, but he knew that was not an option. Especially once he saw his father coming down the steps to meet him.

His father was smiling. That was never good.

"Arthur," Uther greeted him warmly. He hooked an arm around Arthur's shoulders and guided him away from the horses and the servants. "I trust the proposal was a success? I hope you made a fuss. Women like that sort of thing. I couldn't be more thrilled. Elena will make a wonderful wife."

"No, she won't," Arthur said, rankled by his father's eager assumptions.
The arm around Arthur's shoulder tightened to become more of a vise. "Arthur, you will marry the
girl."

Arthur pulled himself free of his father's grip. Despite all that he had worked to convince himself that
he had no choice, now he clung to his choices. "That is my decision to make, if and when I am ready
to make it."

Uther glowered, clearly frustrated by their public location, which prevented him from launching into
whatever rant he had planned for this situation. Arthur decided to take advantage of this and try and
make his father see sense.

"Elena is a lovely girl, and I have tried to get to know her. But the truth is that I have no feelings for
her. I'm sure she's a wonderful person, but I cannot marry someone I don't love."

Arthur might as well have been speaking to the castle stones, for all the good it did. Uther narrowed
his eyes at him, and when he spoke, it was absolute.

"You can, and you will. You will do your duty. Alined is due to arrive tomorrow. This business with
Elena will be decided before then. I will not let you embarrass this kingdom and make us weak. Is
that clear?"

Uther glared as if glaring could burn his command into Arthur's very soul. It was the sort of glare that
his father only reserved for when he was well and truly furious. Whole armies had battered
themselves against that glare and fallen, defeated.

"Perfectly," Arthur said, through gritted teeth. To say anything else would likely result in a week's
imprisonment and a marriage so forced that the groom would be in chains.

Arthur knew he should be angry himself. He should burn with righteousness the way his father did.
But as Uther turned and walked away, taking the heat of his glare with him, Arthur only felt cold,
and heavy with dread.

There was only one person that Arthur could turn to when he needed to talk, when there seemed to
be no way out, when his father was intractable.

He didn't care if Merlin hated him. He didn't care if there was nothing he could do to make things
right between them. He needed Merlin, and he needed him now.

§

Arthur made it all the way to the lower town before his temper cooled enough for common sense to
intrude. With everything they were doing to keep Merlin safe from the Sidhe, it would be rather a
dead giveaway if Arthur just strode in there on his own and started loudly arguing with Merlin.
Fortunately, Arthur was dressed in his riding clothes, which were rather less obvious than, say, armor
and a huge red cape, but it was still easy enough for people to recognize him.

He first checked to see if he had been followed. When he failed to find a tail -- even a small,
glowing, flying tail -- he covered his tracks by doubling back and taking a more circuitous route.
When he had arrested Tom, he had used a back way into the forge, which was connected to a
narrow alley; he did the same now, moving carefully to make sure no one saw him go in.

The forge was closed up now, but the lock on the back door was easy enough to force. He made a
mental note to leave Gwen some gold for the repairs. He slipped inside and closed the door again.

The forge was dimly lit and smelled of disuse. It was a shame to let Tom's forge stay cold, but he
could hardly demand that Gwen open it again. Tom's execution had not been at his hand, and Arthur had tried to save him, but he felt guilt over his death despite it all. Camelot had lost a good man that day. An innocent man, as Arthur now knew for certain.

Innocent of treason, but not of magic. For even though he had not known that Tauren was a sorcerer until it was too late, Tom had worshipped the Old Religion just as Gwen did. As Merlin did.

Arthur felt, quite suddenly, that he was walking into hostile territory. It was a ridiculous thought, because it was only Merlin, for pity's sake. And yet they had not parted well. Merlin had made his feelings towards Arthur abundantly clear, having drawn his blood more than once since their huge argument before Merlin's abduction. Had they gone from lovers to enemies in the space of a few days? Perhaps from a sorcerer's perspective, Arthur had been the enemy all along.

Arthur's hand twitched at the handle of his sword, and he vividly recalled the press of his sword to Merlin's throat. Regret made him drop his hand.

"Merlin?" he whispered, and slowly opened the connecting door into the house. Light streamed in through the window shutters, illuminating motes of dust in the air. He shifted his weight to step forward, then froze, seeing the movement of air in the dust. Arthur eased his posture and calmly turned to his left.


Merlin relaxed from his attack position and lowered his knife. "Arthur," he said, sounding simultaneously relieved and annoyed. "You scared the life out of me," he frowned, shifting more towards annoyed. "Can't you knock like a normal person? What are you doing here anyway?" His frown became a scowl.

Arthur raised his eyebrows at him. "Nice to see you, too." It was interesting that Merlin had chosen a mundane knife as his defense, but then he supposed it was safer for Merlin to defend himself poorly without magic than to defend himself well with it. Arthur wasn't sure if that was reassuringly sensible or exactly the kind of stupidity that was likely to get Merlin killed one of these days. Probably both.

At least Merlin was back to his normal self. He hadn't begun growing feathers or claws, so Arthur assumed that the restoration spell truly had worked as intended, without side effects. He was clean and shaven, and wore unfamiliar clothes; no one had come to Arthur's chambers to retrieve his belongings. Arthur grasped onto that fact as a slender thread of hope.

But while he might be physically fine -- no doubt because of Gwen's insistent care -- Merlin looked tired and sad and, yes, angry. There were shadows under his eyes that betrayed how poorly he must have slept the past two nights -- not that the previous nights had been ideally restful either. Most of all, Merlin was unhappy, and for that Arthur knew he only had himself to blame. He wanted to fix this. He wanted Merlin to be with him again, to be happy again. He wanted to wipe away the distance and pain that stood between them.

Arthur looked around, taking in his surroundings. He didn't remember Gwen's house looking quite so austere the last time he was there. But then she did spend most of her time with Morgana these days. Besides the usual trappings, Arthur noted Merlin's sleeping roll spread out on the floor next to Gwen's bed, as well as a large basket which appeared to have been hurriedly covered.

"What do you want, Arthur?" Merlin pressed, apparently impatient to never see Arthur again.

"To see you," Arthur said, honestly. "I... wanted to see how you were doing."
"Now you've seen me. Are we done?"

Arthur pressed his lips together, restraining the urge to meet Merlin's anger with his own. It hurt to have Merlin so turned against him, and Arthur knew that his own instinct when hurt was to lash out, to fight back. But following his instincts was what had got them into this mess in the first place, and he knew from experience that shouting at Merlin rarely made things better between them. He couldn't yet bring himself broach the topic of Elena, so he cast about for something else to discuss. His eyes caught on the basket again.

"Been keeping yourself busy?" Arthur asked, turning back to Merlin. "I know how you hate having nothing to do."

The familiar teasing had some effect, as amusement and annoyance warred on Merlin's face. Annoyance won, but Merlin betrayed himself by glancing at the basket. "Not that it's any of your business, but yes." He stared directly into Arthur's eyes with the sort of defiance that only ever happened when Merlin had something to hide. Which, in hindsight, was only when he was awake and breathing.

Arthur called his bluff, turning towards the basket and taking a step. Merlin's eyes widened and he moved to block him, taking three steps before he realized what Arthur had done. His scowl deepened and he squinted furiously. It was terribly adorable.

Arthur gave a long-suffering sigh and relaxed his posture. He casually walked past Merlin and pulled off the the covering cloth. Inside was Merlin's grimoire, a few other books of magic, some potions from Gaius, and a very angry, caged Erdudwyl. Somehow she had freed herself from the gag and wire bonds, and when she saw him she pressed herself up against the dragon-forged bars and smiled menacingly. She hissed at him and her eyes glowed red, and Arthur quickly covered her again, alarmed.

"Merlin, she-- We have to--!

"It's all right," Merlin said. He stepped forward and removed the cloth again, then held up the cage. "She can't do anything to us. Not so long as she's in here."

Merlin stared at Erdudwyl, and she glared back at him. She hissed something in a language Arthur couldn't understand, but if it was a spell it had no effect. It seemed that dragon-forged steel could do more than just kill the unkillable. Arthur decided that it would be incredibly useful to have a cooperative dragon of his own right now. Camelot would actually be able to defend itself instead of standing around waiting to be slaughtered by a Sidhe invasion.

"Mortal fools," Erdudwyl hissed, turning to Arthur. "Set me free at once, and your pathetic kingdom will pay dearly."

Arthur's stomach clenched. His worst fear was that Gaius was right, and all their actions now were only leading them directly into the path of Morgana's prophetic nightmares. But in any battle, the worst mistake was to become frozen in indecision. Whatever the result, they had to do everything they could to stop the Sidhe.

"Shouldn't that be 'or'?' Arthur asked. "Set you free 'or' my pathetic kingdom will pay dearly?"

Erdudwyl's glare slid back into a toothy smirk. "I meant my words, mortal prince. Your death will be saved for last, only once you have suffered to see all you know and hold dear crushed beneath--"

Her threats were cut off as Merlin wrapped her cage in a heavy blanket, muffling her. "She's been
going on like this for the past two days," Merlin said, exasperated. He held up the bundle and gave it a stern glare. "Time for you to go back again."

There was a muffled, tiny shout of outrage, but Merlin ignored it as he carried the cage to the back of Gwen's house. He ducked behind a screen and there was the sound of a heavy lid being closed. When Merlin returned, there was a moment of regret that broke his satisfaction at locking Erdudwyl away, and Arthur realized that Gwen's family had a secret safe, no doubt used to hide whatever Old Religion contraband they had held on to since the Purge. They had kept it hidden for over twenty years, and Merlin had just betrayed its presence to the Crown Prince.

It hardly mattered when Gwen had confessed her beliefs to Arthur directly. But there was a difference between hearsay and evidence, even for the Crown Prince. It stung that after everything, Merlin was afraid that Arthur would endanger Gwen's life and perhaps even arrest her.

"You've been interrogating her?" Arthur asked.

"You could call it that," Merlin said. "Mostly I ask her questions about the Sidhe and Avalon, and she insults and threatens me."

Arthur couldn't help but chuckle at the image. "Not the best conversational partner."

"Yes. Well, I don't have many to choose from," Merlin said, gesturing at the empty house. "But I've been keeping myself busy."

Arthur reached down into the basket and pulled out one of the books. "Gewrixlunge," he read aloud, trying his best to wrap his tongue around the strange word. "What does that mean?"

Merlin crossed his arms defensively, obviously ready for Arthur to lecture him about the dangers of practicing magic in Camelot. "It means 'to change one thing into another'. Transformation."

"Like a falcon into a man?"

Merlin gave a curt nod.

Arthur opened the book and flipped to a random page. He could just about recognize some of the simple vocabulary that Merlin had taught him, but most of it was a mystery. He skimmed through the book, paying more attention to the ornate illustrations. It seemed there were endless combinations of ways to transform one thing into another thing. It was strange to think that the world could be so malleable when it had always been to him so solid and constant. It made him wonder if anything was real at all.

"You should hide this," he said, placing the book back into the basket. "All of it. Back there with Erdudwyl."

"I can't. There's not enough room."

Arthur stared in astonishment at Merlin's carelessness. "You can't leave these books just lying around," he chided. "What if someone comes in? What if my father orders a search of the lower town?"

"Then you'll have to lie," Merlin said, unmoved. "Or you could save us both a lot of time and arrest me now."

"Merlin," Arthur scowled. Of course Merlin was only saying that to provoke him, but all the same he had a point. If Arthur led the search, yes, he could make sure that the books weren't discovered. But
his father could easily order someone else to lead it, like Sir Leon, and as with the idea of giving his
knights dragon-forged swords, such an action would only lead to terrible consequences. "If you can't
hide them, then let me take them back to the castle. Gaius and I can keep them safe." He reached for
the handle of the basket, but Merlin snatched it first.

"Don't you dare," Merlin said, holding the basket protectively. "You have no right to tell me what to
do, not anymore. And neither does Gaius."

Arthur took in Merlin's mix of defiance and guilt and made the logical conclusion. "You've been
using magic. Practicing."

"I have," Merlin said, defiantly. "If that bothers you, then leave."


"Afraid I'll be arrested? Don't worry, I won't tell anyone that you've used magic. Not that they'd
believe me anyway. The King would never take the word of a sorcerer--"

"I'm worried about you, you idiot!"

But Merlin met his concern with a stony expression. "If you're so worried, then you should change
the law."

Arthur closed his mouth, silenced. But his silence only made things worse. Merlin grew more than
angry; he pulled in on himself in a way he only did when he was deeply hurt. It made Arthur's chest
ache with sympathy and guilt.

"I can't," he said, pleading for Merlin to understand.

"Why?" Merlin demanded. "The law is wrong. You know it is. Your father lied to you, to
everyone."

"It's not that simple," Arthur said, the excuse sounding weak even to his own ears. But it truly wasn't
that simple. "I'm not the King. I'm not even Regent yet."

The look Merlin gave him was made of pure disappointment. "Then you're just going to wait until
your father gets tired of being in charge. And you don't care that dozens, hundreds of innocent
people are going to die."

"Merlin, I can't change the law when I have no authority," Arthur said, trying to get that fact through
Merlin's thick skull. "And you know how my father reacts to even the slightest suggestion of magic.
There's no reasoning with him. Do you seriously expect me to convince him to invite in every
sorcerer in Albion?"

"How about just one? Morgana is his ward. If he knew the truth, do you really think he would have
her executed?"

Arthur remembered all too well how things went when Morgana defied Uther about the Druid boy
Mordred. Arthur wasn't willing to risk Morgana's life just for the chance that Uther might spare her,
and he doubted that Merlin was either. "I don't think we want to find out."

Merlin's mouth twisted as he tried to find another solution. "What if you told everyone the truth about
your father? That he lied to them about magic being evil. That he uses magic himself when it suits
him. He's a hypocrite."
"Either they'll believe me or they won't," Arthur said. "Either way it would be a disaster. If they don't then they'll say I've been enchanted and I'll lose all authority with them even assuming I live to become King. If they do and they side with me against my father, thousands will die, and thousands more will suffer as the kingdom falls into civil war."

That finally was enough to quiet Merlin, who had clearly not considered that possibility. But neither of them were happy about it.

"I'm sorry, Merlin. I truly am."

They stood in silence, regret hanging in the air between them.

"When you trained me to be a knight," Merlin said, at last. "You said it was about more than just fighting. That it was about protecting people. Doing the right thing. That all knights swore to exercise mercy and justice. You saw the injustice in the First Code and you found a way to start changing it. But for magic... Do you know what I think? I think even if you could change the law, you wouldn't, because you're afraid. You still see magic as the enemy."

Arthur struggled to respond. Merlin was right, he was afraid. But if he was wary of magic, of sorcerers, it was not simply out of habit. Even if magic wasn't the corrupting contagion that his father had always claimed, even if sorcerers were not driven to madness by their magic, the fact was that Camelot had been attacked by sorcerers for over twenty years. Arthur couldn't see himself embracing and encouraging the very thing he had spent his life fighting. "Whatever his reasons, my father has made magic a mortal enemy of Camelot."

Merlin stepped forward, seeing an opening. "Then make peace."

"It's not that simple," Arthur said, and saw Merlin's disapproval. "It isn't. Look, Camelot has been at war with Escetir on and off for decades. But you were able to cross the border and come and live here without any trouble. That's because for the past few years, we've had a treaty with Cenred that ensures peace and free travel. And because Cenred is the King of Escetir, when he signs a treaty, everyone in his kingdom must respect it. They have to follow the rule of law. If they don't, then Cenred's knights will capture them and punish them. The same knights that the year before were giving their lives to attack Camelot. Even if I was able to abolish the laws against magic, there's no King of the sorcerers. There's no rule of law, no one to sign a treaty or enforce it. I can't broker a peace if the other side can't agree to it."

Merlin struggled to understand Arthur's argument, but it was clear that he wasn't entirely convinced. "You could make peace with the Druids. They could help us convince the other sorcerers not to attack Camelot. If magic isn't illegal, then people won't have as much of a reason to fight you."

"But some will," Arthur insisted. "And when they do? The Druids are pacifists."

"Then the sorcerers who aren't pacifists, who are willing to forgive Camelot, they'll defend the kingdom. Like I do," Merlin frowned. "Did."

Arthur ran his hand down his face. There were too many unknowns, and too much of it was founded on Merlin's hopeless optimism. Arthur couldn't see himself trusting some random sorcerer to defend Camelot. He wasn't even sure what to make of Morgana anymore. The only sorcerer he trusted was Merlin, and he didn't have Merlin anymore.

Arthur shook his head.

The hope in Merlin's eyes soured into frustration. "When you wanted to use me to change the First
Code, you didn't ask for permission. You didn't even ask me! You went and you did it because that was what you wanted to do, and I ended up paying the price. Make all the excuses you want. For all your talk about self-sacrifice and doing the right thing, all you are is a coward."

"Merlin--"

"Get out."

"No," Arthur said, too sharply. "No," he said, softer. "Look, I didn't come here to argue with you."

"Then why did you come here, Arthur?" Merlin asked. His lips were pressed thin; his posture was tense and almost readying for a fight, as if he fully intended to make Arthur leave by force if necessary. Though the shutters on the windows cast the house in murky light, Arthur was almost certain that he saw a gleam of gold in Merlin's eyes.

"I..." Arthur faltered, at a loss. He had been with Elena, with his father, and in a panic he had run here, desperate for Merlin to somehow say the right thing, to show him a way out. For Merlin to save him from himself. What did that say about him, that he couldn't sort out even his own problems, much less those of the whole kingdom?

Merlin was right; he was a coward. It was not a pleasant realization.

"I need your help," Arthur admitted, and he was not surprised when Merlin gave a bitter laugh and turned away. "Merlin, wait. Please. I just need you to-- to listen. There's no one else I... Please."

Long seconds stretched out, until finally Merlin turned back to him.

Arthur swallowed, struggling for the right words, if they existed at all. "Lord Godwin arrived yesterday, and my father... my father told me that he and Lord Godwin had arranged for me to marry Princess Elena, Lord Godwin's daughter. That they'd planned this since our births. And now my father has ordered me to propose and Elena is..." He shook his head, unable to explain just how odd Elena was. And her oddness was really the least of it, because even if she was the most beautiful, intelligent, elegant princess in all of Albion, Arthur still wouldn't want to be forced into marriage with her.

"I don't know what to do," Arthur finished, lamely. He looked to Merlin with desperate hope, still clinging to the memory of all the times that he had poured his troubles into Merlin's ear, and Merlin had said the right thing, the thing that made it all better. Only slowly did he realize that Merlin was suspiciously unsurprised.

"Gwen already told you," Arthur realized, feeling like an idiot. Of course she would have told him everything, especially about the horrendous dinner the night before. All this time, Merlin had already known.

"Yes," Merlin said, and there was no sympathy in him. "It took you longer than I expected to spit it out."

"Merlin, I--"

"Shut up."

Arthur almost flinched back at the anger and coldness in Merlin's voice, in his eyes. Arthur had looked to him for gentleness and understanding, and what he got felt like a slap in the face.

"That's what you came here for?" Merlin asked, though it wasn't really a question. "To ask me for
permission to marry her? Or are you looking for another excuse to run away?" He laughed bitterly. "It doesn't matter what I say, does it? When it comes down to it, you'll do whatever your father tells you."


But that was the wrong thing to do. Merlin stepped towards him and stared him in the eyes. "You're right about one thing. I am an idiot. I was an idiot for ever believing in you. For thinking you actually--" He turned away, blinking back tears, but then turned to face Arthur again, eyes shining. "You told me right to my face but I didn't listen. Even if we'd still been together, you'd still marry her, and all I'd be to you was a consort. Just another knight to keep your bed warm. How many of them did you make that promise to?"

"No," Arthur insisted. "Merlin, you're the only one I've ever--"

"Shut up," Merlin said, eyes red with tears and fury. "Do you have any idea what you did to me? I gave up everything for you, everything, and you lied to my face. You stole my magic. You stole what I am. If it had been up to you, you would have never given it back. Never."

"Merlin--"

"Don't you dare. Go on, tell me to my face that you would have given me my magic back. That if Gaius and Morgana and Gwen hadn't forced you, you would have taken off the restraint. Go on."

Arthur said nothing; there was nothing he could say. The truth was that he had been willing to let Merlin suffer, to let him be weak and in pain and cut off from his magic. No matter how much he regretted it now, no matter how much he wanted to take it all back, the damage was done. Because he had had been afraid of losing Merlin. Because he had been a coward.

"I thought so," Merlin said, his voice growing hoarse with emotion. "And now you think you have the right to come to me and ask me for help? For advice? Well, guess what? That's not my job anymore because I was sacked. And since I'm a sorcerer, I can't see why the Crown Prince of Camelot would be asking me for advice anyway, since obviously sorcerers can't be trusted without a King to order them around and magic is too dangerous to ever be allowed. But if you really want to know what I think, I think you should leave me alone!"

Merlin's eyes flared with golden light, and a sudden force shoved Arthur back towards the door. Arthur caught himself, stunned, and stared at Merlin, whose eyes had faded back to reddened blue.

"Go marry your princess," Merlin said, and turned away.

Arthur nodded. He stepped forward and dropped some coins onto the table. "For the door," he said, and walked out the way he'd come in.
The warnings bells sent a chill through Gwen's heart whenever she heard them ring. She could not help but fear the worst, whatever form the worst might take. But when she looked out of the castle windows, her attention was drawn not to a sky full of attacking Sidhe, or to smoke pouring from the inner courtyard, but to the watchtowers beyond the town.

A castle guard hurried down the hall, and Gwen caught him. "What's going on?" she asked.

The guard shook his head and ran off. Gwen put down the basket of fresh linens and looked out the window again, peering as hard as she could to see what was beyond the trees that had caused so much alarm. And then her eyes widened as she saw.

Another army. Not Camelot's or Gawant's, which were, by the sounds of shouting men, already massing in response. It could only be Alined, but he was not expected until at least tomorrow. It seemed that he had hastened his approach to make a show of his arrival. And not only that, but instead of bringing only his retinue and however many men needed to protect them, leaving the rest of his army for the harvest, it seemed that he had brought with him every of-age male in all of Deorham. It was a show of force. From what little she knew of Alined, it seemed he was living up his reputation.

Gwen gathered up her basket and hurried to Morgana's chambers. As she reached the door, she was met simultaneously by Morgana, who had flung open the door to leave, and a page who had arrived with a message.

"My lady," said the page, out of breath from running. "Your presence is requested in the grand hall at once, by order of the King."

Before the page even finished her message, Morgana had pulled the basket from Gwen's hands, tossed it into the room, and locked the door behind her. "At once it is," Morgana said, and strode out, her legs stretching to their fullest stride. Gwen thanked the page and hurried after Morgana.

When they reached the hall, they found they were not the only ones who had been summoned. Alined might have hurried his pace to make his arrival a surprise, but Uther had made plans of his own, and they involved half the nobles in Camelot. Lord Godwyn's retinue was gathering as well. Gwen and Morgana waded through the crowd to find their familiar spot at the front next to Gaius -- the space where Merlin would be, if he was here.

Gwen could not help but worry for Merlin, even more now that there was a hostile army at Camelot's edge. Of course the bulk of it would be stopped before it could enter the lower town. Between Camelot and Gawant, the city was extremely well-protected. But Alined and his retinue and personal guard must already be snaking their way up the road, slithering like a snake to Camelot's heart. Despite their tenuous pact with the imprisoned Lord Idriys, and the plan to flee to Deorham where Morgana would not have to fear persecution for her magic, Gwen had no love for Deorham's king. She would have scorned him only for his repeated invasions of Camelot, but Alined also had a reputation as a scoundrel, a greedy and ruthless king who loved war for war's sake. And while she had even less love for Uther, who was no less greedy and ruthless in his own way, and hated for hatred's sake, for all that she might soon leave behind, she hoped he would be the victor between them.

Despite the commotion around them, Gwen became aware that Gaius was looking at her, and she could guess what he wanted to know. She looked to him and smiled, then nodded, wordlessly saying
that Merlin was safe and well. He gave a small but grateful nod back.

The truth was, while Merlin was physically safe and well, she worried for his heart and his head. At first Merlin had been subdued and sad, nursing his broken heart. But last night, after Gwen had told him about Elena and her arranged marriage to Arthur, his sorrow had soured to anger. He had waved off her concern, saying that he was fine with Arthur marrying, but it was obvious that he was anything but fine. Gwen was only glad that Merlin had control over his magic so that he wouldn't end up breaking all the windows in her house in a burst of anger. Especially as he was spending his days quietly practicing spells while she was out. If he was discovered, she knew she would blame herself, even though she could hardly stop him. She knotted her fingers together, worrying them as she thought of her father.

The crowd finally began to settle into orderly rows, and Gwen glanced back at the rows of nobles and knights that Uther had summoned. It did not surprise her that he had declined to greet Alined on the steps as he had with Godwyn, for such measures of respect were generally reserved for allies, and Alined was anything but an ally these days. Yet such large and important gatherings were generally reserved for the end of negotiations, not the beginning.

Such gatherings had become something of a regular occurrence over the years, as Uther excelled both in starting wars and winning them. And though most of them had been before her time, the treaties with Mercia and Escetir were strong in her memory. Yet while their kingdoms had warred on and off since before the Purge, today was the first time that Alined had ever come to Camelot in surrender. Even in retreat, he had always stood unbowed, the narrow border between their kingdoms proving a strong defense. But Arthur's victory in Gedref had finally brought Alined here.

Whatever was going to happen, they would not have to wait long. Uther emerged from the back entrance and took his place at the throne, and Godwyn and Elena joined him, standing beside the throne. Only Arthur was missing, but his absence was quickly explained. The heavy sounds of boots and armor echoed from the outer hall, and then there they were: Alined at the front, escorted by Arthur; Alined's retinue in the middle, and his personal guard surrounding them.

The retinue and guard stopped to wait in the aisle, and Alined and Arthur walked forward. Arthur left him then and joined Uther, standing at the other side of his throne. The hilt of his sword glinted in the afternoon sun, the light colored by the stained glass windows.

The two kings stared at each other in a silent battle of wills. Gwen could actually see the muscles in Alined's jaw jump as he gritted his teeth. But Uther was as still and unforgiving as stone.

Alined raised his hand, and one of his retinue came forward. From his garish dress, Gwen guessed that he was Alined's court jester. It was an odd choice for such a serious occasion, but perhaps Alined needed something to keep his spirits up -- or the jester was meant as an insult to Uther. The jester carried a large and heavy chest, and when he reached Alined's side, Alined opened it, revealing a literal king's ransom's worth of gold coins.

Alined grabbed a handful of coins and held it up, showing it off to the crowd. He took another step closer to Uther and spoke. "Payment for every single one of my men, dead and alive," he declared, and then slowly opened his fist, letting the coins drop in a shower to the floor. "I expect their release within the hour."

"No," Uther said.

Alined stilled, visibly surprised by the sudden rejection, but forged on. "Those are my terms. They are more than generous." He gestured for the chest to be placed at Uther's feet. But when the jester stepped forward, Uther stood, imposing. The jester looked back, caught between the two kings,
obviously uncertain.

Uther stepped forward and closed the lid, then walked past the jester, his eyes locked on Alined. The whole room seemed to hold its breath.

Alined didn't so much as flinch. "Surely you would not want to risk battle at the heart of Camelot."

Uther's eyes narrowed. "Is that a threat?"

"Only a fool would meet his enemy without the strength to defeat him."

Uther looked disdainfully out of the hall, as if he could see Alined's army from where he stood. Then the corner of his mouth quirked in satisfaction. "That is true. And I expect you scrounged every last man and boy to build an army capable of standing against mine. But there is something you overlooked."

"And what, pray tell, is that?"

"I am no fool," Uther said, with a rumble. He turned and walked back towards his throne, then turned again to face his audience. "I believe you have met Lord Godwyn. He's visiting with his daughter, Elena."

Godwyn and Elena stepped forward. Godwyn gave a small but gracious bow towards Uther, and Elena gave a bewildered smile, as if she wasn't entirely certain what was going on.

"Would but that we met in happier circumstances." Alined said to Elena, with a leer.

Elena wrinkled her nose at him.

"But these are happy circumstances," Uther said. "It's fortunate that you rushed to be here today." He looked out at the audience again. "Next year, it will be exactly four hundred and fifty years since the founding of Camelot. Since King Bruta made a lasting peace between the Five Kingdoms. In his honor, Camelot will welcome four kings, and together we shall forge a lasting peace of equal greatness."

Alined did not look impressed. "And if I decline? I don't think 'Four Kingdoms' has the same ring to it." He laughed, but only his jester laughed with him.

"Deorham will be represented at the treaty," Uther said. "But you will not. Before I release the hundreds of men I have in my dungeons, you will sign a treaty making Deorham a vassal to Camelot. You will swear fealty to me or you will surrender Deorham entirely."

Alined laughed again, this time in disbelief. "You don't have the strength."

"Perhaps not yet," Uther admitted, and stepped back. "But that is about to change." He turned to Arthur and gave him a meaningful look.

Gwen and Morgana looked to each other in horror as they realized what was about to happen. Gwen looked to Gaius, who didn't look any happier about it than they were.

It was hard to say what Arthur was feeling. He had the same locked-down expression he always wore when he was being forced to obey his father. He might as well be stepping into battle. But instead he stood in front of the rapt crowd and cleared his throat.

"I am honoured to be standing before you today in the presence of our dear friend, Lord Godwyn,
and his wonderful daughter, Elena.” He turned to Elena and nodded, and she warily approached
him. Arthur turned back to the hall. "From the moment of my birth, my life has been set upon a
single path, dedicated solely to the care and protection of the people of Camelot. In this, I walk in the
footsteps of my father, and hope one day to carry on his good work, to continue the fight to make
Camelot a place of peace and happiness."

He turned to Elena who stood frozen, with wild hair and wide eyes. "It is my sincerest hope that you,
Princess Elena, share these dreams. With this in mind..." He sank to one knee. "I would like to ask
you to do me the honour of being my wife."

Gwen looked to Alined, and saw an unpleasant realization dawning on his face. Shock quickly
turned to bitter anger. She looked to Morgana and saw her disappointment. Morgana was always
pushing Arthur to stand up to his father, and now this. His proposal was the ultimate act of
capitulation to Uther. For herself, Gwen could only think of Merlin. She was glad now that he was
forbidden from entering the castle, for because of that he did not have to see the proposal with his
own eyes.

"Yes," Elena said, smiling awkwardly. "Yes, of course."

The hall exploded with applause and cheers, and Arthur and Elena held hands as they smiled to the
crowd.

"The perfect couple," Morgana sneered under her breath, even as she faked a smile for appearance's
sake. "Merlin’s better of without him."

"But what about Deorham?" Gwen whispered back. If Uther succeeded in taking over the
kingdom...

Before Morgana could reply, Uther raised his hand to silence the hall. "Today, Camelot gains
something worth far more than gold. With the marriage of Prince Arthur and Princess Elena, an
unbreakable bond shall be forged between Camelot and Gawant. Two shall become one, and our
united kingdom shall be the strongest and most powerful in all Albion."

There was more applause, countered only by Alined’s furious expression. He dismissed his jester
with a sharp look, and the man hunched and scurried back into the protection of the retinue. Alined’s
hand went to the hilt of his sword, but before he could draw it fully, Uther stepped forward and drew
his own, bringing the blade to Alined’s throat. The crowd gasped and guards from both sides rushed
belatedly forward, but Uther held up his free hand, stopping them. The two kings stared at each other
in a silent battle of wills... and Alined lost, releasing his sword and raising his empty hands in
surrender.

"You bastard," Alined growled.

Uther smirked and stepped back, sheathing his own sword with obvious satisfaction. A memory
suddenly flashed before Gwen’s eyes from when she was a child: Uther returning from battle,
glowing with triumph at his enemy’s defeat. He wore the same expression now. Alined had gambled
on gaining Gedref, and instead he had lost everything.

"The wedding shall be held tomorrow," Uther announced. "The treaty will be signed, and then we
shall feast to celebrate the permanent union of our three kingdoms."

"My people will fight you to the end," Alined swore. "They know you for the tyrant you are. They
will never kneel for a monster like you!"
Uther's triumphant smile suddenly turned, and he dealt Alined a backhanded blow across the face. Gwen covered her mouth in shock.

"They will kneel," Uther said, voice low with warning. "As will you."

Alined wiped the blood from his split lip and looked around the room. Gwen could only wonder what he was thinking. If he was desperately searching for a way out of Uther's trap. But his leg had been caught firm, and he could either cut himself to escape it, or let the hunter claim his meal.

Alined reached for his sword again, and everyone tensed. But he did not raise it. Instead, in what seemed almost a parody of Arthur's proposal, he sank to one knee and held out his sword with both hands, surrendering it.

"My lord," Alined said, the words tight and forced.

Uther took the sword and held it up, displaying his victory for all to see. And then in one quick movement, he broke the sword over his knee, snapping it in two, and then dropped the pieces to the ground.

"Take him away," Uther commanded, and Camelot's guards moved in to escort Alined to his guest chambers. As Alined walked away, Uther made one last announcement to the hall.

"Deorham has yielded. But our victory is not yet complete. This spring a new era shall begin as magic is purged from our new lands, ensuring the peace and security of our united kingdom." He turned to Arthur and held out his hand, gesturing for him to step forward. Arthur obeyed, but looked stonier than ever. "I have dedicated my reign to the destruction of the evils of sorcery. And as Prince Regent--" He paused as the crowd murmured in surprise. "Arthur has pledged to follow in my footsteps. And this spring, in his first act as Prince Regent, he will ride south to cleanse Deorham of the magic that has corrupted the land for so long."

Gwen covered her mouth again, this time because she feared she might be sick. How could Arthur stand there and accept this? With everything that had happened, how could he go along with his father's insanity? She looked to Morgana and saw that she had gone pale with shock and anger, and was glaring at Arthur as if to strike him dead with thoughts alone. Worryingly, she might even be able to do it. Gwen turned to Gaius, and found him looking more somber than she had ever seen. He shook his head.

This was bad. This was very, very bad.

His victory complete, Uther dismissed the hall. Everyone began to talk at once, stunned by what they had seen, by the boldness of Uther's plans and actions. When he was a young king, Uther had retaken Camelot's lost territory by force, and some thought he would go beyond that border. But then the Great Purge began and the battlefront turned inward. After the Purge there were excursions beyond Camelot's borders as Uther chased after the sorcerers and druids who fled the kingdom, but those raids were halted when they led to war with Escetir and Mercia. It seemed that now, at the end of his reign, Uther was eager to pick up from where he had left off all those years ago, and had found new ways to victory.

Camelot was already the largest kingdom in Albion. Absorbing Gawant and Deorham, as well as their armies and resources, would make them dwarf even their largest neighbors. Perhaps Uther, for all his talk of peace, was preparing to use that strength to expand even further, to rid himself of his enemies once and for all, just as he had with Alined. Cenred, Odin, Caerleon, Rodor, even the Saxons in the east... how far did his ambition go? Would anywhere be safe for magic?
Gwen turned to Morgana again, only to find her gone. Gwen was not surprised to see that she was stalking her way over to Arthur, and she hurried to meet them. This was too public a setting for Morgana to tell Arthur exactly what she thought he deserved, but it was obvious that she was going to give him whatever piece of her mind she could squeeze into polite conversation.

Arthur's expression had not grown any less stony with the end of Uther's display. "Morgana," he greeted in monotone.

"Uther was full of surprises today," Morgana said, with icy politeness. "And you're right at the center of all of it. It must be wonderful to have your whole life decided for you. Though I'm confused. Are you marrying Elena or your father?"

Arthur gave her a warning glare. "Now is not the time."

"Now is exactly the time," Morgana replied. "You won't be a free man for much longer. But then you never were. How long have you known about this? I didn't see you gasping in surprise."

"You know when I found out about Elena--"

"I don't mean her," Morgana snapped. "You knew about Deorham. How long?"

Arthur sighed. "The day after we returned from Gedref. But I didn't know everything."

Morgana gave him a scrutinizing look, likely trying to decide the answer for herself. But a sinking feeling had already come over Gwen. It didn't surprise her that Arthur was willing to let Uther marry him off for the sake of a land grab. Given how badly Merlin was doing after their breakup, Gwen expected that Arthur was too heartbroken to put up a fight. But after everything Arthur had learned about magic, now knowing how many of his closest friends had magic and that it was not the corrupting evil his father had always claimed...

"How many innocent people will you kill for him?" Gwen asked, quiet but trembling with old, old anger. At the injustice and cruelty and fear she and so many others had suffered for so long, and at Arthur for perpetuating it. Morgana and Arthur looked to her in surprise, the same surprise that Gwen felt at herself. But she could not stop herself from speaking. "You talk of peace and happiness and then..." Her throat tightened as she teared up, and she had to force her sorrow back down. She tasted oily smoke at the back of her throat and swallowed hard.

But her reaction had finally shocked Arthur from his defensive posture. "Gwen, I..." he began, his private grief and sadness and regret revealed in a moment, and then hidden again. "I must do what's best for Camelot."

"You mean what's best for yourself," Morgana said, with all the sweetness of a dagger.

"I have responsibilities--" Arthur began, but it was an old refrain and Morgana was tired of hearing it.

"You've nobly pledged to protect your people. And now you've made it clear exactly who your people are. Fine. But if we don't belong in your Camelot, then we're leaving."

Arthur stared. "You can't--" He dropped to a whisper. "Morgana, you can't leave. You're my father's ward."

"But I am not his prisoner," Morgana replied, with impressive calmness. "I'm leaving, and I'm taking Gwen and Merlin with me."
Arthur's expression darkened. "You can't take Merlin."

"He can go where he pleases. You certainly have no need of him." She gave a lilting laugh. "In fact, I would say that you just made your feelings for him perfectly clear."

Arthur pressed his lips together, obviously angry, but he had no ground to argue from.

"Fine," he said, grinding out the word. "Things will certainly be easier without the three of you causing trouble. Maybe you should take Gaius with you."

Morgana's false sweetness turned sharp again. "You won't last a day without us. Come on, Gwen. I need some fresh air."

Morgana put a hand on Gwen's back and urged her away. They walked out of the hall, leaving Arthur to stew.

"But Arthur," Gwen began. While she hated the idea of leaving Camelot behind, she felt absolutely sick at the thought of all the innocent people that they would be abandoning.

"Once we're gone, Arthur won't be our problem anymore."

"We can't go south. Not now."

Morgana's anger had focused into calculation. "Yes we can," she said. She stopped and turned to Gwen. "Alined might have surrendered, but the war's not over yet. There's one thing that can stop all of this." And she turned and looked at Elena, who was standing by her father. Despite being the blushing bride, she didn't look very happy about it. One might think she didn't want to marry Arthur at all.

They could stop Uther. They could save Deorham and even save Arthur from himself. Without Gawant's army, Deorham would have the strength to resist Camelot's invasion. All they had to do was convince Elena to refuse the marriage.

"Come on," Morgana said. "I have a plan."

§

Gwen sat down, twisted in her seat, then stood up again. She went over to the table and checked to see that everything had been perfectly placed, that the jug of wine was still full, that the food beneath the cloches was still hot. It was all exactly the same as it had been a minute ago when she last checked it, and the same as the minute before.

"Gwen." Morgana turned from her dressing mirror. "If you keep doing that, you're going to make me nervous."

Gwen stepped back and clutched at the skirt of her dress to stop her hands. "I can't seem to help it."

"There's nothing to worry about," Morgana insisted. She stood with an elegant slide, the purple silk of her dress shimmering in the evening light. In contrast to the recent exile of candles from her chambers, on her orders Gwen had filled the room with warm light, giving it a calm and welcoming air. Morgana's dress had also been chosen wisely, conservative in cut but of a sumptuous material. Through inquiry with Lord Godwyn's servants, Elena's favorite foods had been identified, then procured through favors and flattering of the kitchen staff. The goal was to make Elena as comfortable and unthreatened as possible, so that she would let down her guard and thus be more easily swayed. "Everything is going as planned."
Their plan wouldn't do them any good if Elena didn't come. "She's late."

"She's not the type to arrive fashionably early," Morgana said, unconcerned. But she went to Gwen and stepped close, touched her cheek to make her raise her eyes.

"If this doesn't work..." Gwen began, letting all her worries show. They had to persuade Elena to refuse the marriage. If they didn't, if she couldn't be convinced...

Morgana kissed her, gentle and comforting, and Gwen relaxed into her embrace. She sighed and rested her head on Morgana's shoulder, letting herself be held. She was glad that she could let Morgana be the strong one in this, that she didn't have to face it alone. She felt Morgana against her, warm and soft, and became suddenly aware that they were much more than friends now. Their kiss tingled on her lips, and she wished they had time to talk about what they had become to each other. To do more than kiss and comfort each other in brief, stolen moments. But the knock on the door made them part. They shared a look of frustration, but both knew to set it aside.

Gwen opened the door to reveal Elena, who was expected, and Grunhilda, who was not.

"Elena," Morgana greeted, her welcoming smile not faltering for a second. "I'm so glad you came. And I see you brought your maid."

It was hardly unusual for a lady to have a maid, or for that maid to accompany her. But Grunhilda was a nursemaid, and it was strange that she still looked after Elena as if she was a small child, rather than a princess nearly of age.

"I couldn't leave my Elena alone," Grunhilda said, cheerily, and stepped past her charge to precede her into the room. But Morgana didn't budge, politely blocking her way.

"Of course, I completely understand," Morgana soothed. "Travelling in a foreign land, I'm sure you want nothing more than to keep her safe."

Grunhilda stopped, startled by Morgana's sympathy. "Of course! And my Elena's such a sensitive girl. She has very special needs." She stepped forward again, but Morgana held firm.

"And you've taken such good care of her. You deserve a reward. An evening off. Don't you agree?" Morgana turned to Elena and smiled at her expectantly.

Elena stared back, baffled. "Um. I suppose." She looked to Grunhilda for guidance.

Morgana obviously saw who was the decision maker between the two of them and switched back to Grunhilda. "Fortunately, Elena is perfectly safe here, so there's no need to worry. And we are about to become family." She reached out and gently herded Elena inside, while still blocking Grunhilda. "So we really should take some time to get to know each other. Privately."

"I suppose," Grunhilda began, uncertain.

"Wonderful," Morgana said, smiling broadly. "Enjoy your evening off." She pulled back and nodded for Gwen to close the door.

As it shut, Grunhilda leaned forward and called out to Elena. "Elena, my sweet. If you need me, I'll be--" The rest was lost on the other side of the door.

"Please, have a seat," Morgana said, as she guided Elena towards the table. Gwen helped the both into their chairs and opened their napkins. "I'm so glad you came. I feel as though I've barely gotten to know you at all. And here you are, about to marry Arthur."
"There's not much to tell," Elena said. She pulled nervously at her hair, which was frizzing seemingly before their very eyes. It was no wonder that Elena could never keep it tamed.

"Oh, but how rude of me," Morgana declared. "You must be hungry, and here I am chatting away."

Gwen finished pouring the wine, then removed the first cloche. A waft of steam rose out, revealing a small collection of roasted snails. They had been prepared and then returned to their shells.

When Elena saw them, she broke out into a smile. "I love those! How did you know?"

"We have our ways," Morgana said, smiling back. "Please, enjoy."

Elena looked to Morgana and then to Gwen, almost as if asking for permission. Then, without waiting for them to be served to her plate, she grabbed almost all of the snails at once and with her bare hands, then popped one whole into her mouth, shell and all. It crunched loudly as she chewed. "Mmm, delicious."

Morgana glanced to Gwen, even as she hid her surprise. There was no point in correcting Elena and telling her that the shells weren't normally eaten, not when she was obviously enjoying them. Gwen served Morgana the remaining two snails, and Morgana delicately extracted the meat with a slim fork, smiling warmly as Elena finished off her handful.

"Good?"

"Mmm," Elena answered, crunching merrily away. "What's under here?" She lifted the other cloche before Gwen could reach it, then stuck her face close to the revealed pie and breathed in deeply. She moaned in delight. "Lamprey pie! I haven't had this in ages."

Gwen liked snails all right -- without their shells -- but she had never acquired a taste for lamprey. It was considered a delicacy for the nobility, but the smell turned Gwen's stomach. She was glad she only had to serve it, not eat it.

Before Elena could grab a scoop of the pie with her bare hands, Gwen stopped her. "Let me," she insisted. She reached in with a serving fork and carefully pulled out the lamprey, which had been baked whole according to their given instructions. Apparently Elena had unusual tastes, preferring whole animals to pieces of them, and creatures of the river and sea to those of land. Gwen supposed that there was no accounting for taste; when times were thin, she had learned to eat whatever was on hand. She placed the syrupy lamprey on Elena's plate, much to Elena's delight.

Elena bit off the head first, and Gwen had to turn away as her bile rose in rebellion.

"Well," Morgana said, doing an amazing job of not reacting to the spectacle before her. She served herself a small portion of the pie, mostly crust. "You must have excellent chefs back in Gawant, if you're used to such delicacies."

"Oh yes," Elena agreed, her mouth full of half-chewed lamprey. "But it's really Grunhilda who does it. She takes care of everything for me."

"She's taken care for you for a long time."

"Since I was born," Elena said, and swallowed. "After my mother... you know. Grunhilda looked after me. She's done so much for me." She looked towards the door, as if longing for her nursemaid to return.

"It must have been difficult for you, growing up without your mother," Morgana continued, drawing
her attention back.

Elena shrugged and put down the remains of the lamprey. "Sometimes. I do wonder what it would've been like if she hadn't died."

Morgana gave her a sympathetic look. "I lost my mother when I was young. Not at birth, like you and Arthur. But young enough that I have little memory of her. It can be difficult for us to grow up without our mothers, as women. We have to learn be strong without them to guide us."

Elena looked at Morgana, really looked at her, probably for the first time. "You must have had someone like Grunhilda. You're... you're sort of... perfect." Elena smiled awkwardly and looked down, embarrassed.

Morgana laughed gently. "That's very sweet of you to say. But I'm afraid I didn't. When I lost my mother, I was too old for a nursemaid. I was raised by my father and that made me something of a tomboy. I've always been more partial to the sword than the court."

Elena perked up again. "Do you like riding?"

"I love it," Morgana said, with a conspiratorial gleam. "We should go riding together."

"Yes!" Elena exclaimed, and nearly jumped from her seat in delight. Then she settled down again, self-conscious of her outburst. "Sorry."

"You should never apologize for doing what you love," Morgana said. "I must admit, I envy your position. As heir to Gawant, you're free to do as you please."

"I wish," Elena said, rolling her eyes. "I can never do what I want."

Morgana frowned with concern. "But surely as a future Queen, you've been raised to lead. To make your own choices."

"My choices are never the right ones," Elena sighed.

The conversation paused as Gwen refilled their cups.

"I always took Lord Godwyn to be a gentle man," Morgana said.

"He is," Elena said. "My father's very kind. It's not his fault that I'm so..." She gestured at herself as if that summed up the problem.

But Morgana feigned confusion. "So...?"

Elena frowned, her brow furrowed with frustration, and then she huffed. "I don't know. My father's tried to teach me. How to be a good ruler, a good queen. But when I try to understand it, it's just... confusing."

"Confusing how?"

Elena huffed again. "All that writing and reading and numbers. They make my head hurt and I break the quills when I write them. When I try to concentrate, it all ends up jumbled in my head. None of my tutors has ever been able to help. And then..." She bowed her head, ashamed. "And then in court, I'm such an embarrassment to him. I never know the right thing to say, and I never dress the way I'm meant to, or walk right or say the right thing..." She trailed off, on the verge of tears.

Morgana glanced to Gwen in alarm, and Gwen moved to comfort Elena. "It's all right," she said,
rubbing her back as she would a crying child. "You're safe here. You can tell us." She handed Elena a kerchief, and Elena blew into it noisily.

"You're very kind," Elena sniffled. "I'm sorry for ruining dinner."

"You haven't ruined anything," Morgana insisted. She reached across the table and took Elena's free hand into her own. "If something's upsetting you, the best thing to do is talk it out with a friend."

Elena gave a wobbly smile. "I've never had any friends. Not real ones. Just Grunhilda." She put down the kerchief and took a gulp of wine.

"It can be difficult for us, as noblewomen," Morgana said. "And doubly so for women who rule. Someday I hope to take charge of my father's lands, and I know the challenges before me. But I also know that they are worth meeting. To be my own woman, to make my own choices. That is worth any burden."

Elena looked wide-eyed at Morgana. "I wish I could be like you. I bet you'd make a wonderful queen. Not like me." She sighed. "I'm no good at anything."

"You love riding," Morgana said. "You must be good at that."

"Riding won't help me rule," Elena said, with a sad smile. "Princesses aren't even supposed to ride."

"And who told you that?" Morgana asked, tutting. "Nobody ever says princes aren't meant to ride. Of course you should ride."

Elena bit her lip. "But it's not ladylike."

Morgana was not impressed. "Is that what your father told your mother?"

"Oh no. She rode all the time! That's where I get it from, I think."

"Then how can he say that it's wrong for you?"

Elena looked down at their clasped hands, then drew her hand back. "I don't know. But he's right about everything else. That's why I have to marry Arthur. It's... it's the only thing I can do to repay him."

Morgana could not hide her displeasure. "Your life is not a thing to be bought and sold, or traded for the sake of politics. If your father truly loves you, he wouldn't put you in this position."

"He does love me," Elena insisted. "But he also loves our people, and what future could they have with me? If I cannot be their princess I cannot be their queen, not as I should. Not as they deserve." She rubbed at her head, as if it had begun to ache. "Arthur is the only prince I have ever met who has been kind to me. Who has not been cruel and sneering. For the good of my people, for their future, I must... I must..."

Morgana's anger faded as she realized something was wrong. "Elena?"

"I don't feel well," Elena whimpered, and clutched at her stomach.

'The food?' Morgana mouthed, and Gwen shrugged. While the snails and lampreys were not the usual fare, she had never known the cooks to prepare them badly, or to use spoiled ingredients. Morgana had eaten the same food, if in lesser quantities, and was so far unaffected.

"Grunhilda," Elena whined. "I need Grunhilda."
Morgana sighed, frustrated, but it was obvious that the plan was on hold for now. They could hardly convince Elena to refuse the marriage when she was doubled over with some sort of illness. "Then let's get you to her."

Morgana and Gwen each took an arm and helped Elena to her feet. Fortunately it was not a long way to the guest chambers. They hurried as quickly as they could, for Elena's condition only worsened, and she refused any suggestion of assistance from Gaius, insisting that only Grunhilda could help her.

The old nursemaid had sharp hearing, for even before they reached her door, she flung it open and rushed out to meet them.

"Oh, my poor sweet girl," Grunhilda cried. She took Elena from them, her surprising strength nearly knocking them from their feet. "I'll take care of you." She helped Elena inside, then slammed the door pointedly shut.

Morgana and Gwen stared at the door, then each other.

"That poor girl," Morgana said. "I had no idea."

"Now what do we do?" Gwen whispered. "The wedding's tomorrow."

Before Morgana could answer, they heard an alarming cry from Elena's chambers. There was a vent set high in the wall that led directly into Elena's bedchamber, and when the cries grew louder and more desperate, Morgana grabbed a small but sturdy table and quietly placed it beneath the vent.

"What are you doing?" Gwen whispered.

"We need to find out what's wrong with her," Morgana whispered back. "Steady the table for me."

Gwen held the table firm as Morgana climbed up onto it and peered through the vent. Her eyes suddenly widened and she covered her mouth to hide her gasp.

"What's happening?" Gwen whispered, desperately curious at what could have surprised Morgana so much.

Morgana climbed down and urged Gwen to quickly step up in her place. Gwen clambered up and looked through the vent, and it took her a moment to understand what she was seeing. And then she nearly gasped aloud herself.

Elena wasn't just ill. Whatever was afflicting her it wasn't food poisoning, because food poisoning didn't make your skin turn blue and fleshy horns grow from your face. It didn't make your human cries harsh into something vicious and animal.

Grunhilda reached into a small pouch and sprinkled a sparkling powder over Elena, and just like that she was human again. Or rather, she looked human again.

In Avalon, Arthur had found out that there were two group of Sidhe in Camelot: the Tylwyth Teg, who sought revenge for the deaths of Sophia and Aulfric, and the Aos Sí, whose motives and actions were still a question. Gwen looked to Morgana and knew that they had just found the answer: sweet, strange, clumsy Elena was a Sidhe, and if they couldn't stop her, in less than a day she would become the Queen of all Camelot.
The Changeling

Despite the obvious risks of living alongside Uther Pendragon, Gwen had always felt that the castle was a safe place, a refuge against the greater dangers that lay beyond. But tonight, as she and Morgana walked through its halls, it seemed as though there was no refuge left. None but one.

They made it to Gaius' chambers as quickly as they could without drawing attention to themselves, without a Sidhe of the Tylwyth Teg or Aos Sí following them, without drawing the curiosity of the guards at their activities so close to curfew. The door was unlocked, and when they hurried inside, they found Gaius cleaning up from his dinner. When he saw their urgency he immediately put down his bowl.

"What's happened?" he asked.

"Elena's a Sidhe," Morgana said. "She's one of them."

Gaius blinked at them. "Are you certain?"

"We both saw it," Gwen said. Though they had not dared travel at much faster than a walk, she felt out of breath and her heart was beating painfully fast. "Arthur's going to marry a Sidhe." She felt faint.

"Oh dear," Gaius tutted. He guided her to sit and lower her head until the shock wore off, then he turned to Morgana. "Tell me exactly what you saw. Every detail."

"We were having dinner with Elena," Morgana began, as she sat down next to Gwen and rubbed her back. "Everything was fine, and then all of a sudden she took ill."

"Symptoms?"

"Headache, weakness. Some kind of stomach pain. She wouldn't explain and she refused any help."

"And then?"

"She begged us to bring her to her nursemaid so we carried her there. Grunhilda took Elena and shut the door in our faces, but we could still hear that Elena was in pain. We had to know what was wrong with her, so we looked through the vent into the bedroom. Elena was on the bed, writhing in pain, and then... And then she turned blue. She looked just like Erdudwyl, exactly like her, except she didn't shrink. Grunhilda took out a pouch and there was some kind of powder inside it. She sprinkled it on Elena and it turned her back to herself."

Gaius frowned in thought as he considered their story.

"Gaius, we have to stop her," Gwen said, her heart finally calming. She straightened up. "We can't let Arthur marry her."

"Something must be done," Gaius agreed. "But we must tread carefully. Did you notice anything else unusual about Grunhilda? Anything out of the ordinary?"

"She's incredibly strong for a woman her size," Morgana offered. "She nearly knocked us both flat."

"Do you think she's also a Sidhe?" Gwen asked.

"It's more likely that Grunhilda is a Pixie, a servant of the Sidhe. The same creature that Arthur was
forced to disguise himself as to rescue Merlin in Avalon."

"They must be Aos Sí," Gwen said.

Gaius frowned with thought. "According to Arthur, Titania warned the Tylwyth Teg not to interfere with the Aos Sí's 'mission.' To put a Sidhe Queen on the throne of Camelot... it certainly fits. And it explains the conflict. One group seeks to rule Camelot, the other to destroy it."

"And Lord Godwyn?" Gwen asked. "Do you think he knows? Could he be one of them?"

"How could he not know his own daughter is a Sidhe?" Morgana asked. "He must know. He's probably the one behind the whole thing."

"I have known Lord Godwyn for a very long time," Gaius said. "I cannot believe he has any part in this."

"But how would you even know?" Morgana challenged. "All he would have to do is throw some of that powder on himself and he could be anyone."

"A glamour alone is little more than a costume. I believe the powder you saw is actually Pixie dust." He sat down across from them and took on an instructional air. "And that Elena is in fact a changeling."

The word was familiar to Gwen, but she couldn't remember exactly what it meant. "Isn't that... something to do with the fair folk stealing babies?"

"Not exactly," Gaius said. "I've been reading a great deal about the Sidhe, and while not every source is in agreement, I have pieced together some information. Like all fairy folk, they are extremely long-lived. While not strictly immortal, by feeding off the magic of the land they can survive for hundreds, even thousands of years. However, it appears that at some point they became dependent on humanity for reproduction."

"How could it help them to steal human babies?" Morgana asked, repulsed.

"The babies are not stolen," Gaius continued. "When a Sidhe desires a child, it will find a newborn human and magically seed the child with its offspring. If the child is weak, the growing Sidhe will overwhelm it too soon and the baby will disappear, hence the belief that the child has been abducted. In such cases the Sidhe also dies. If the infected child is stronger, it may fight off the invader and destroy it. But if they are matched, then the child will survive, but they will be burdened as the Sidhe inside them also grows. Grunhilda must use the Pixie dust to feed the Sidhe and keep it from waking too soon."

That certainly explained almost everything strange about Elena. "Then Elena has no idea that she has a Sidhe inside her?" Gwen asked.

Gaius shook his head. "The Sidhe are a very patient people. It may be that they created this changeling knowing that Lord Godwyn and the House of Pendragon would one day seek unity through marriage. That would give the Sidhe -- the Aos Sí in particular -- a foothold in Albion. The first in a very long time."

"And what happens to Elena?" Morgana asked. "After she and Arthur marry, what happens then?"

"The details are unclear," Gaius admitted. "Changelings are rare, and rarer still are those that come of age. But there are stories of those with 'addled minds' who simply vanish. I suspect that once the Sidhe within Elena has matured, it will wake and possess her entirely."
The thought alone gave Gwen the chills. To have some creature invade your body, your very soul, and feed off you until you were nothing more than a husk... She understood now why her mother had always held such fear of the Sidhe despite their absence. The Sidhe had not been seen in Camelot since the Great Purge, but not because they were no longer a threat. All this time, they had been patiently waiting for their plan to play itself out. For Uther and Godwyn to finally go through with the marriage they had planned for their children all those years ago.

"How do we stop them?" Gwen asked, praying that Gaius had found a solution somewhere in all those books. "Can we still save Elena?"

"I believe we can," Gaius said. "There is a spell that can force the fairy out of her. But we don't have much time and I lack certain ingredients. Recent events have rather depleted my stocks. We can give her the potion and remove the Sidhe, but I suspect we must do so before the wedding. If we wait until after, it may be too late."

"No," Morgana said.

Gaius and Gwen both looked at her. "No?" Gwen asked.

Morgana stood, walked away and then back to them. "This is exactly what we need to save Deorham. There's no way Uther would agree to let Arthur marry a Sidhe!"

"We cannot tell Uther," Gaius warned, sternly. "Lord Godwyn is one Uther's dearest friends. Accusing him of having a Sidhe for a daughter and a Pixie for a nurse is not something that can be undertaken lightly. Not to mention the cost to Elena herself. Even if she somehow survives the Sidhe inside her, it's likely that Uther will have her beheaded, noble or not. Lord Godwyn would never recover."

"Then we tell Arthur," Morgana offered. "He'll have no choice but to back out of the marriage."

"And he may feel equally obliged to tell Uther the truth," Gaius countered, with palpable regret. "Without Merlin, Arthur's allegiances towards magic are uncertain."

"Wait," Morgana said, realizing something. "Maybe that's it. What if we do nothing? What if we let the Aos Sí win?" She held up her hands. "Hear me out. This could solve all our problems. If the Aos Sí succeed, if we ally with them, the Tylwyth Teg will lose their claim on Camelot. We'll be safe from invasion and magic will be on the throne. Uther's purge will finally end, and Camelot and Deorham will be saved! Gwen, we won't have to leave. We could stay. Isn't that what you want?"

"No," Gwen said, shocked. "Not like this. Morgana, as bad as Uther is, the Sidhe are worse. They've been the enemy of magic for thousands of years. And poor Elena..." She wrapped her arms around herself and turned away. She couldn't believe that Morgana could be so cold.

Gaius got up and walked over to one of the piles of books. He took a sheaf of clean paper and copied out a list from one of the books, then handed the list to Gwen. "Merlin will know where to find these. Bring them to me as soon as you can." He turned to Morgana, holding up a hand to stop her from arguing. "We'll decide what to do when the time comes. We are facing dangerous and powerful enemies. We must be prepared for every outcome."

§

Gwen was quiet as she followed Morgana back to her chambers. So much had happened today that she was no longer certain what she thought about any of it. She scraped her nail along the edge of the paper in her pocket, too many thoughts spinning in her head. Elena and Grunhilda, Arthur and...
Morgana. The Tylwyth Teg, seeking the deaths of thousands in revenge for two; the Aos Sí planning for decades to take Camelot by stealth. Uther and Alined's struggle for power and the innocents caught between them. It was all too much. How could they solve any of it? How could they save others if they couldn't even save themselves?

She had never felt so small, so helpless against the massive forces around them.

The remains of dinner were cold on the table when they returned. Gwen was suddenly reminded of their lunch with Arthur and Merlin, which had been similarly interrupted. It was only five days ago, but it felt like a lifetime had passed. Morgana had still suffered under Gaius' potions, her visions and magic suppressed, and Merlin had been weak from the restraint imposed by Arthur. He had borne the restraint because he had loved Arthur too much to refuse him, and Arthur had hurt him because he loved Merlin too much to let him go. To let him be who and what he truly was. And Elena, who suffered out of love for her father and her kingdom? Did they have the right to decide her fate for her?

She placed the trays of cold food and dirty dishes out in the hall for a passing servant to take, then went back inside to help Morgana to bed. Morgana sat at her dressing table and Gwen stood behind her to release the long line of buttons that secured her dress.

"You're very quiet," Morgana said.

Gwen glanced at the soft, pale skin of Morgana's back, at once familiar and achingly unknown. She continued to open the buttons until the back of the dress fell open, baring Morgana's shoulders, gaping out to reveal a glimpse of her breast before it was pulled close again. Gwen glanced up at the mirror and saw Morgana watching her, knew that she had been caught staring.

"Gwen," Morgana said, soft and hopeful, and Gwen knew that she was not the only one of them who felt as though time had been against them. In the warm candlelight, alone at last, she found that she could no longer look away.

Without turning from the mirror, Morgana reached back and took Gwen's hand, brought it to rest over her heart. Gwen could feel it against her palm, thrumming like a hummingbird's wings, and felt her own rise to echo it. And then Morgana brought her hand down, so slowly down, pushing away the silk of her dress to bare the silk of her skin, the swell of her breast, until the firm nub of her nipple pressed into Gwen's palm.

"You can look," Morgana murmured, only a tremble betraying her nervousness. "I want you to look."

For the second time that night, Gwen's chest felt too tight, the air too thin. She felt dizzy as she rubbed her hand against Morgana's breast, smelled the sweat and perfume in her hair. In the mirror nothing was exposed, with Morgana's bare breast covered by their hands, and her other breast by her dress. But it was only an illusion, a parody of modesty.

Gwen knew what was beneath that dress. She had washed almost every inch of it, sometimes shyly and sometimes practically, and even sometimes in anger -- at herself, at Morgana, at the world. But now that it was covered, now that she saw only glimpses in the flickering light, everything seemed new and unknown. She knew Morgana as her friend, but as her lover she was almost a stranger, seductive and terrifying and everything that Gwen wanted.

"Morgana," Gwen sighed, hearing the tremble in her own voice. She closed her eyes, overcome, and before she could open them again, she felt Morgana move and then... and then they were standing, kissing, and the dress was on the floor.
"Stay with me tonight," Morgana murmured, guiding Gwen back towards the bed. "Please."

Gwen could barely think, much less refuse. But as Morgana pressed full against her, the crinkle of paper was as shocking as a bucket of cold water.

"No," she began, and stumbled away.

"Gwen?"

"Don't you 'Gwen' me," Gwen said, her outrage growing. She pulled out the list and held it up. "You seduced me just to sabotage the potion."

Guilt flash across Morgana's face before it was quickly replaced by defiance. "I seduced you because I want you. The potion was... incidental."

Gwen hardly knew what to say. She shook her head and grabbed a blanket from the bed and handed it to Morgana.

"Gwen--"

"No," Gwen said, unwilling to give her the chance to try and talk this out. "Right now I don't want to look at anything. I'm going home and I'm giving this to Merlin."

"Wait," Morgana pleaded. "Just listen."

"I have been listening," Gwen replied. "You're the one who needs to listen. The Sidhe are dangerous. They're the enemy. We can't trust them."

"Magic is magic," Morgana said, wrapping the blanket around herself. "And before you go on about your precious gods, what's the difference between what they did to me and what the Sidhe did to Elena? Neither of us chose to have magic forced into us. You and Gaius were so certain that you had to suppress my magic. Arthur was certain he had to suppress Merlin's. All of you were wrong. Gaius doesn't know what will happen to Elena, he's just afraid of her, just like he was afraid of me." She took a sharp breath, then quieted. "All I want to do is give her the same chance I had. The chance to be herself without being drugged into submission."

Gwen barely knew where to start. "The Old Religion is part of Albion, part of its people. It's part of us. The Sidhe--"

"You'd rather let everyone suffer under Uther than let magic rule Camelot," Morgana countered. "You, Gaius, Arthur. It's always the same story. 'For your own good.' Elena could be the ally we need if we give her the chance."

"Then let's tell her the truth," Gwen challenged. "We'll go to her chambers right now and tell her what happening to her."

Morgana faltered. "No, not now. Grunhilda's there. And if we tell Elena before the wedding, we don't know how she'll react. It could ruin everything."

"By then it might be too late to save her at all. And what about Arthur? Doesn't he have the right to know he's marrying a Sidhe?"

"Arthur made his choice. He doesn't care who he's marrying as long as Uther tells him to do it."

Gwen shook her head. "It's wrong, Morgana. It's wrong to lie to her."
"And you know all about lying to people," Morgana said, coldly. "You had so much practice, lying to me for years. Please, tell me how important it is to tell people the truth."

The words struck like a blow to Gwen's heart. "If that's the way you feel," she said, her throat tight. She shoved the paper back into her pocket and turned to go, then turned back again. "You know, you hate Uther so much, but sometimes you're just like him. And I can't bear it."

Morgana pulled the blanket closer around herself. "You're not the one who's been living the same horrors night after night. You don't know what I've seen. I have been helpless against my nightmares for years, no thanks to you. If I can do something to stop this one, if I can do anything, I have to. No matter what the cost."

Before her father died, Gwen loved to watch him work a piece of metal for hours, hammering and bending to turn lump metal into a sword or a scythe or some other tool. But sometimes his hammer would come down and crack the metal apart, shattering it. She felt as though her heart was that metal, shattered in the forge from one wrong blow.

She turned and walked away, but not to the door. She went to her room instead and packed up everything she could fit into her bags. By the time she was done, Morgana had dressed herself for the night and was sitting on her bed, silent with determination. Gwen said nothing to her and walked out into the hall.

She headed for the stairs, then walked past them and knocked on Arthur's door. After a pause Arthur opened it.

"Gwen?" he asked, uncertain.

"I'm here for Merlin's things."

"Oh." He paused, then stepped aside to let her in. "Of course." He looked guilty, and it took her a moment to realize it was because of the wedding. He must have thought that was why she was there. And in a way it was. Morgana was right about one thing: Arthur had made his choice. There was no need to drag out the inevitable. Merlin deserved to have what was left of his life back, no matter how brief their future might be.

"Do you need help with all that?" Arthur asked. "I can get George."

"No, thank you," Gwen said, with terse politeness. She finished quickly and headed for the door.

"Gwen," Arthur began, but he visibly struggled with whatever he needed to say. "Tell Merlin... Tell him I'm sorry."

Gwen nodded and left, tugging at the straps of the heavy bags.

§

Gwen made it home by keeping one foot in front of the other. By focusing on the bite of the straps as they dug into her shoulders and hands. Past the gate and the drawbridge, through the upper town and into the lower, past her neighbors' houses, each closing up for the night, wary from the armies surrounding them.

But three steps past her door, she fell apart. The bags dropped to the floor and the first sob broke from her chest, and then she was leaning against the wall, curled in on herself and crying.

Merlin hurried over, eyes wide with alarm and concern. He saw the bags on the floor, and surely
recognized his own things among hers. Then he stepped over them, reached for her and hugged her.
He didn't ask anything, didn't press or chide. He simply held her as she cried herself out.

As her tears trickled off, he gave her his kerchief and she took it gratefully, wiping her face dry and
blowing her nose. Despite Merlin's kindness, she looked away, feeling raw and exposed by her grief
in a way she had not since she had seen her father's body brought from the dungeons.

"Gwen, what happened?" Merlin asked, unable to hold back any longer. "Is everyone all right? Did
the Sidhe...?"

"Yes," Gwen began, then shook her head. "No. I mean, that's not why... it's not the Sidhe we've
been worrying about."

"It's not?" Merlin asked, confused.

She shook her head again. "So much has happened. I don't know where to start."

"From the beginning," Merlin said, urging her to sit down at the table. "That's what Gaius always
says." A flash of emotion crossed his face, then was quickly gone. "Wait here."

He left and went over to the hearth, and only then did Gwen become aware of the smell of
simmering stew. Yesterday morning, once he had settled in, he had insisted on cooking for her as he
said it was the only way he had of repaying her. Gwen had demurred, insisting that of course Merlin
didn't owe her anything. If anything, his presence brought life and warmth back to a house that had
been cold and empty for too long. In truth, she suspected that more than anything else, he simply
needed an excuse to keep himself busy.

"My mum always made me eat when I was upset about something," Merlin said, as he brought back
two steaming bowls. "It's a lot harder to panic on a full stomach."

Gwen closed her eyes and breathed in, taking in the warm and rich, herbal scent. Merlin was quite
the cook, and she wondered if that was more due to Hunith or Gaius. She knew herself that
sometimes medicine and nourishment were one and the same. She stirred the stew, then took a sip,
and then another. It chased away the chill she had barely been aware of feeling, and loosened the
knot of grief and fear in her belly.

"Morgana and I had a fight," she began, in what felt like an impossible understatement. "About
Elena."

Merlin stared down at his bowl, obviously unhappy to hear her name. Gwen couldn't blame him,
though it was hardly Elena's fault that she had been forced into marriage with Arthur. "I heard about
the proposal. Everyone in town was talking about it."

"You didn't go out?" Gwen asked. She knew Merlin was restless, but she had hoped he had more
sense than to let himself be seen.

"Of course not," he insisted. "But your neighbors love to gossip right outside your window for some
reason."

Gwen couldn't help but give a small smile. "Old habits. My mother was the one everyone used to
gossip to, so they got used to coming here to talk. Now they tell each other instead of her."

"Ah," Merlin stirred his stew, pushing around the chunks of vegetables. "Gwen, you don't have to...
It's not as if I have any honor to defend. The Crown Prince was never going to marry a servant." He
mustered a sad smile, but that only showed just how much losing Arthur was hurting him.
Arthur marrying Merlin felt as impossible as the survival of Gwen and Morgana's friendship. But that
didn't mean Merlin was right. "Your honor doesn't need defending. You have more honor in your
little finger than Arthur does right now."

Merlin gave a shy smile, then looked up. "So what was it about?"

"The other Sidhe. The Sidhe that already have a claim on Camelot."

"The ones ruled by Queen Mab? Then they're here, in Camelot?"

"Not exactly, but we know what they're after. And they're using Elena to get it."

Merlin straightened, taken aback. "Elena's enchanted? Did you see her eyes glow red?"

"I saw her turn blue."

Merlin frowned, confused.

"Gaius says she's a changeling," Gwen explained. "It means that soon after she was born, a Sidhe
was placed inside her. All this time it's been growing with her, hurting her, and she doesn't know
anything about it. Once she marries Arthur, the Sidhe will wake, and then..."

"And then a Sidhe will be the future Queen of Camelot," Merlin finished. "We have to stop the
wedding. Arthur can't marry her." Unlike Morgana, he immediately saw this for the threat that it was.
He knew from personal experience that a Sidhe queen would be no ally.

"That's what Morgana and I were trying to do. Even before we found out the truth. Merlin, Uther is
forcing Arthur and Elena to marry so he can use the peace treaty to take over Deorham. He's going
to send Arthur there as Regent to lead another Great Purge. And Arthur's going to do it."

Merlin went pale. They had all lived with the fact that Arthur had destroyed magic at Uther's
command, but it had never been at such a scale. And that had all been before Arthur knew the truth,
before he knew that so many of those that he had persecuted and killed had been innocents and not
the corrupted monsters that Uther had claimed them to be.

"Maybe dinner was a bad idea," he said, pushing away his bowl. He looked like he might be sick.

"The wedding is tomorrow," Gwen said, unsure if the gossips had passed that detail along. "Uther
isn't wasting any time. But it's not too late." She reached into her pocket and pulled out the list of
herbs. "Gaius said to give you this. It's all the ingredients he needs to make a potion that will force
the Sidhe out of Elena."

Merlin took it, but only stared at it mournfully.

"Morgana tried to talk Elena out of marrying Arthur," Gwen continued. "She doesn't want to marry
him but we know she's going along with it because of the Sidhe. It's affected her so much that she
can't rule on her own. But if we can get it out of her, she might change her mind. Deorham would be
saved."

Merlin considered this. "But if the wedding is called off, there would be nothing to stop the other
Sidhe from attacking. Elena is the only reason that Titania didn't give them permission to attack. If
we save Deorham by stopping the wedding, then Camelot is doomed."

"And if we don't, then Arthur marries a Sidhe."
"Is that what you and Morgana were arguing about?"

"Mostly," Gwen sighed. "Morgana tried to use me to stop Gaius. If he can't get the ingredients in time, there'll be no way to stop the wedding." Not without revealing to Uther that Elena was a Changeling, and given the consequences, that could only be a last resort.

"What do you think we should do?" Merlin asked, and seemed to genuinely need to know.

If she hadn't been so angry about the whole situation, she would be flattered by Merlin's respect. For nearly two years she had watched him defend Camelot from afar, and at last she was fighting beside him. But all she could think of now was Morgana. Just like Merlin with Arthur, Gwen had been willing to give up her own path to walk beside Morgana, and she had also been driven by guilt as much as love. But it seemed that Morgana had no more forgiven Gwen for her crimes than Arthur had forgiven Merlin for his. Without forgiveness and understanding, love could never be enough.

All four of them had made mistakes, often with the best intentions. But right now, Arthur and Morgana were making the wrong choices for everyone. They were both being selfish and shortsighted, refusing to listen and taking refuge in their ignorance. If Camelot and Deorham were going to be saved, they weren't going to be the ones to do it. Not alone.

"We have to do what's right," Gwen decided. "And if Morgana and Arthur won't see sense, then we'll have to do it ourselves."

The despair faded from Merlin's eyes, and resolve hardened in its place. He reached across the table and took her hand. "Then we will. Whatever it takes."

Gwen squeezed his hand, hope suddenly fluttering to life in her chest. They had an impossible challenge before them, but none of them had to face it alone, not anymore. They had each other, and together they would find a way.

Merlin gave her hand one last squeeze and let it go. "Finish up," he said, picking up his bowl. "It's going to take hours to find all those herbs."

Gwen glanced out the window. It was after curfew, and besides the darkness, if they went out now they would have to contend with a town full of guards and fields and forests full of soldiers. "Maybe we should wait until dawn?"

"Can't," Merlin said, with a mouthful of stew. He shoveled what seemed like every solid piece of the stew into his mouth, then drank the rest. "Gaius won't have enough time to make the potion."

"Right," Gwen said, and began working up her courage. She quickly finished her own dinner while Merlin got up and began rummaging through the bags Gwen had brought home.

"First we cure Elena, then we stop the wedding," Merlin said, as he pulled out some clothes. "All we need to do then is find a way to stop the Sidhe from invading."

"Just like that?" Gwen asked, amazed at Merlin's determined optimism.

"We'll think of something," Merlin said, with a shy shrug. He ducked behind the folding screen to change. "Thanks for bringing everything back." He emerged dressed in familiar clothes, knotting a red kerchief around his neck to go with his blue shirt.

For the first time in days he looked like his old self again, and when he smiled, she somehow knew that everything would be all right.
"No time to waste," she said, picking up the list. She scanned it again, thinking of where each herb could be found at this time of year. A few of them she didn't even know, but she trusted that Merlin would be able to find them.

Merlin put on Gaius' travelling cloak and pulled up the hood. Somehow it made him seem taller, mysterious. The scent of herbs and forest clung to the fabric, and in the low light, he could almost be mistaken for a Druid. The thought sent a strange shiver up Gwen's spine.

They blew out the candles, then slipped out the door and into the night.
Spying

Arthur stood in his alcove and stared out of the window. The morning was bright and beautiful, the crispness of autumn just a hint on the air. Down below, people milled through the courtyard, their steps eager with excitement at the grand day ahead. He envied and resented their happiness in equal measure, as he had envied and resented their freedom all of his life. The common people, unburdened by destiny, free to live their simple lives as they chose. Free to love as they chose.

He was not such a fool as to think their lives were perfect. He knew that they envied and resented him for his position, his privilege, his own freedom from want and hunger. That they both welcomed and feared his power over them. But he doubted they understood that the crown was a hungry thing, that it would take and take until it devoured everything that he was, everything that made him a man and not a Prince and a King, bound by birthright and sworn oaths.

Sometimes he wished he had been born a girl so that he could fight against his father's matches as Morgana had. All through their youth together she had defied him, refusing every noble son in Camelot and beyond. Yet instead of punishing her as he had Arthur, Uther had merely sighed in resignation and doted on her all the more. Arthur had envied her that unconditional love, given so freely to her when it was denied to him. He was his father's only child, his son and heir, and yet his father showed more love to an adopted ward. Though they had been close friends for a time, in the end Morgana had only made him feel more alone.

He was alone now. And the girl he was meant to marry, the girl he was hours away from spending the rest of his life with, was someone he had no feelings for. Before Merlin, Arthur would not have let that fact matter because he had not believed in love, had not believe it possible for him or that he could truly deserve it anyway. And then Merlin had wormed his way under his skin, into some crack in the walls around his heart, and made those walls crumble.

Loving Merlin had been like a war, and like war it had changed him. And now that he was returned to his old life, the fit chafed and strangled him. For days he had struggled to regain his old numbness, his ignorance of what he couldn't have, but every time his defenses fell apart like rusted armor. His heart was raw and wounded and felt as if it would never heal. And yet in a matter of hours, he was expected to walk down the aisle, to stand and smile and kiss his bride.

There was no one he could turn to for comfort or help. All of those he was close to now stood against him. Merlin, Morgana, Gwen, even Gaius. He could not be what they wanted him to be, and the consequences of that were the same as they had always been. He could not blame them for their anger because he knew that he had failed them. He had seen the fury in Morgana, the horror in Gwen, the disappointment in Merlin. In a twisted way it was almost comforting, because it was little different from the judgement he saw in his father every time he could not be what his father wanted him to be.

Perhaps this was all for the best. As a man, he had failed time and again, but as a Prince he still had worth, still had purpose. After the wedding, after that last private piece of himself had been taken away, there would be nothing left to distract him. At last he would truly become the King his father had always wanted him to be. His father had raised Camelot from its knees, built it into the greatest kingdom in Albion, and it would take a great King to preserve and defend it. He would fulfill his oaths and give his life for his people. Sacrifice was an easy choice when it was the only choice left.

And as for Deorham...

It did not trouble him that his father sought to conquer Deorham. Alined had been a thorn in
Camelot's side for too long, and if anything, his father's use of the pen rather than the sword was modern and admirable. His father was certainly a better king than Alined, and the union of their kingdoms would strengthen both. And a week ago, he would have barely questioned the need to purge Deorham of magic. Corruption had to be driven out for the people to be safe, for the land to thrive.

But now he knew that there was no corruption, except in his father's heart. Corruption was a lie told by his father for reasons Arthur could not yet fathom. Deorham's sorcerers and Druids and worshippers of the Old Religion no more deserved death than Camelot's had, yet their blood stained Arthur's hands as much as it did Uther's. And in that aching wound in his heart, pain and defiance flared together, because whatever was left of Arthur the man would not survive the purge of Deorham. And he knew that even as he obeyed his father today and took the wife that his father had chosen for him more than twenty years ago, his sacrifice would only bear poisoned fruit. For if he stood against his father to save the magic of Deorham, Camelot would fall, one way or another. And if he did not, and he obeyed his father's command, it would make him a greater monster than his father had ever been.

He hoped, when the time came, that he would have the strength to make the right choice. But then, if he was anything other than a coward, he would not have proposed to Elena, would not have stolen Merlin's magic, would not have destroyed the only love he had ever truly known.

He was almost grateful for the sudden knock on his chamber door. He had chided George repeatedly for walking in on him unannounced, and perhaps the man had finally come to grips with the fact that Arthur treasured what little privacy he had. It was more likely that George was being on his best behavior; earlier he had asked Arthur if the removal of Merlin's belongings meant that he could at last move in to the manservant's chamber himself. Arthur barely remembered what he had said in response, but it had made George pale and excuse himself from the room.

The knock came again, more urgent this time. Arthur sighed and left the comfort of his alcove, readying himself to tell George once again to leave him alone until it was time to prepare for the wedding. But when he opened the door, there was not one servant on the other side but two, and unless George had taken to cross-dressing, neither of them was him.

"Gwen," Arthur greeted, warily. After her sudden appearance last night and the angry way she had stormed in and taken Merlin's things, it was a surprise to see her now. And he didn't know the maidservant she had brought with her. The other girl was unusually tall, and she wore a hooded cloak that hid her face.

Gwen looked nervously behind them, as if she was making sure no one was watching. Then she barged right past Arthur without a word, the other girl following silently after her. As they passed, the familiar scent of herbs and forest wafted by, and Arthur saw that the girl was wearing Gaius' cloak. Realization narrowed his eyes.

"Arthur," Gwen began, turning to him with anxious urgency. "There's something--"

Before she could finish, Arthur grabbed the cloak and yanked it from the mysterious girl, who gave a distinctly un-girlish, indignant yelp. Merlin sputtered, exposed. He grabbed the cloak back and held it against himself, apparently trying to hide the fact that he was wearing a dress. He looked ridiculous.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Arthur said, angry mostly on Merlin's behalf. He was putting himself in mortal danger coming back to the castle. "If anyone saw you--"

"Why do you think I'm wearing this, you complete prat," Merlin seethed. He shook out the cloak and tugged it back over his shoulders, pulling it around himself to hide the ill-fitting dress. Merlin might
sometimes act like a girl, in Arthur's opinion, but he certainly didn't have the right shape to pull off looking like one. Certainly not with those shoulders.

"Arthur," Gwen said, stepping forward and putting a calming hand on Merlin's shoulder. "We have something important to tell you. It's about Elena."

Arthur braced himself. After Morgana and Gwen's reaction to Uther's announcements, Arthur had expected them to try one more time to talk him out of the wedding, as if the whole thing was remotely his decision in the first place. He hadn't expected them to drag Merlin into it. He crossed his arms. "What about her?"

Gwen and Merlin looked to each other, then back to Arthur, the both of them full of apprehension and concern. "Arthur," Gwen began, clearly trying to soften whatever blow she was about to deliver. "Last night, Morgana and I had dinner with Elena, and something happened. She took ill and demanded we take her to her chambers, but when we did..." She glanced at Merlin again, and he gave her an encouraging look. "She turned blue."

Arthur stared at them. Both of them were looking expectantly back, as if Gwen's words actually meant something that wasn't gibberish. "Are you..." He moved his hands to his hips and furrowed his brow. Was this a confession? "Are you saying that Elena's been poisoned?"

Gwen's eyes widened. "No!" she said. "Absolutely not. That's not--"

"She's one of them," Merlin said, impatiently. "Elena's a Sidhe."

"Well, not exactly," Gwen said. "She's a changeling. She has a Sidhe inside her. But it's not her fault and Gaius is working on a cure. He's sure it will be ready before the wedding..." She trailed off, giving him that hopeful look again.

Arthur sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling a headache coming on. "You're telling me that if I go to Elena's chambers now, she'll be blue. Because she's a Sidhe."

"She won't be blue now," Gwen admitted. "Grunhilda used, um, Pixie dust on her."

"Grunhilda's a Pixie," Merlin added.

"I think I would have noticed if Grunhilda was bright pink with giant black warts," Arthur said, dryly. The woman was odd, certainly, but harmlessly so. And Elena a Sidhe? He'd never heard anything so ridiculous. Elena was as far from a Sidhe as it was possible to get without being turned into a giant boar. "Look, I know what this is about."

"You do?" Merlin asked, warily.

"Of course I do!" Arthur said, exasperated by the obviousness of it all. "I'll give you credit for originality. But you can't seriously think this story of yours is going to change anything."

Merlin merely thinned his lips, as if Arthur had behaved exactly as expected. But Gwen was outraged, and not only stood her ground but stepped forward into Arthur's personal space.

"I saw it with my own eyes," she told him, defiant. "She looked just like Erdudwyl. If you don't believe us, fine. We'll deal with this ourselves." She turned to Merlin and softened. "I'm sorry. You were right. But I had to try." She started for the door, but Merlin put a hand on her arm to stop her. Then he turned to Arthur and visibly prepared to give him a piece of his mind.

"We're not trying to stop the wedding," Merlin said, tersely. "Marry her. I don't care. But Elena
doesn't deserve to suffer just because you can't wrap your thick head around the truth."

Arthur gave a disbelieving laugh. "The truth?"

"I told Gwen you wouldn't listen," Merlin said, coldly furious. "You never listen. You didn't believe me last time, either."

Arthur's stomach gave an uneasy turn. "Merlin--"

"Shut up," Merlin said. Just as Gwen had, he moved right into Arthur's personal space, then closer, until they were almost touching. Arthur was suddenly struck by the clear, unclouded blue of Merlin's eyes.

"We don't have any proof," Merlin continued, the word 'proof' said with contempt. "After everything we've been through, we shouldn't need any. But you don't want to know, so go ahead and forget it. We'll deal with this ourselves. We'll stop Mab and Gwynn, and you can keep on doing whatever Uther tells you."

Guilt and shame made Arthur's face flush, but also hardened him against Merlin's accusations. "I am doing what's best for Camelot," he ground out.

Merlin gave a bitter laugh. "You know what, Arthur? I don't care what you think, because you are just as big an arrogant, short-sighted, stubborn ass as your father. And if you march on Deorham, I will do everything in my power to stop you."

Arthur took a sharp breath in. Looking straight into Merlin's eyes, he could see that Merlin was absolutely not bluffing. Though for years Arthur had seen Merlin as weak, as someone who needed protection, he had also glimpsed the power that Merlin held. And he knew in his gut that if Merlin stood against him, it would be Gedref all over again. The battle would be over before it could even begin, no matter how big an army he raised. It was quite possibly the most terrifying and arousing moment of his life.

Arthur swallowed, and Merlin faltered. The air was thick between them, and at once it seemed that one of them might grab the other and kiss him with passionate fury. But then Merlin turned away, his whole being taut with anger.

"Let's go," Merlin said, and headed for the door, pulling his hood down over his face. Gwen hurried after him, and barely had time to glance back at Arthur before they were gone, the door slammed shut behind them.

Arthur breathed out and wondered what the hell had just happened.

It was obvious that whatever Gwen saw last night, she truly believed what she had said. Merlin was certainly convinced. But could it really be true? Could Elena be some sort of Sidhe? It seemed like madness, but if Arthur had learned anything over the past week, it was that madness was everywhere.

Mab and Gwynn. Erdudwyl was their hostage against Gwynn, and so far the stalemate was holding. But the true deterrent to invasion was the claim that Queen Mab had on Camelot. If Gwen and Merlin had discovered that claim, found out what the Aos Sí were up to...

He had to find out for himself. If Elena had been enchanted somehow, if Grunhilda was -- against all odds -- actually a Pixie, if there was some greater scheme in play... Whatever the truth was, Arthur had to see it with his own eyes. After that... After that, he didn't know. But he had spent too much of his life hiding from the truth. He just hoped that whatever consequences he faced, he would not take
the kingdom down with him.

§

As Arthur reached the door to Elena's chambers, he looked down at the white roses he had brought as an excuse. He had taken the bouquet from a vase in the hall, no doubt placed there only minutes earlier by some industrious servant as part of the wedding decorations. His father had never been one for flowers and was more usually inclined to swath the castle with vivid red. But for a wedding more delicate decor was expected, particularly by the nobility, and his father could never resist a noble tradition.

Arthur braced himself and knocked, then knocked again. He called through the door, but there was no answer. Mixed relief loosened the knot in his gut; he had not been ready to face Elena, and it would be easier to search her chambers rather than face her directly. After a quick look around to make sure he would not be seen, he pulled out his master key and unlocked the door. He slipped inside.

At first glance, the chambers looked absolutely normal. As with the other guest chambers, it was furnished with the standard necessities, as well as a few expensive decorations to impress the nobility. Its layout was similar to his own chambers, if less grand: a sitting area for receiving visitors; the servant's chamber for Grunhilda; and the bedchamber, with a fireplace and large windows overlooking the courtyard.

The sitting area lacked any personal touch; no doubt the ladies were keeping all their personal effects in their private chambers. It felt less invasive to start with Grunhilda's, and so Arthur rifled through the small room, searching her travel bags, the dresser, and the bed. He found nothing remarkable apart from a wardrobe full of unfashionable dresses and underthings he had no desire to touch. There were certainly no magic staffs or mysterious crystals. His thoughts towards Gwen and Merlin soured, and he wondered if they really had gone so far just to trick him out of the marriage.

He sighed and moved on to Elena's bedchamber. It was hardly the first time he had searched a lady's chamber for evidence of magic, but the act had never felt as improper as it did now. It was hardly an auspicious start to their marriage. But for every instinct telling him that this was a wild goose chase, that the right thing to do was to leave now before his transgression was discovered, there was an equal instinct telling him that he could not stop until he was absolutely certain that he had either proved or disproved Gwen and Merlin's claims.

He opened Elena's wardrobe. Inside hung an array of dresses, including the yellow one -- which she had finally been pried out of -- and her wedding gown. It struck him as both elegant and unfitting. He could not imagine Elena in it, draped in layers of soft, shimmering peach. It did not match the girl in vivid yellow who slouched and stumbled except when she was on a horse. Yet while it did not suit her, there was nothing magical about it, and so he moved on.

The dressing table had more potential, covered in jewelry and small boxes. He inspected every gem, holding it up to the window to see if they held anything beyond their natural gleam, but sensed nothing. Perhaps if he still had his gold torc he would be able to sense any magic in them, as he had been able to sense the magic in the castle stones. But without it he was a tongueless man at a feast.

He opened each box, and found mostly the sort of creams and powders that he was familiar with from Morgana. Again he inspected them, and again he found nothing. And then his eye caught on an ornate box that was placed aside from the rest. He picked it up and lifted the lid. A small green toad stared back at him. It blinked, croaked, and then hopped out onto the floor.

Arthur cursed under his breath and immediately started chasing after the toad. The little bastard was
fast, and the next thing Arthur knew it was under the bed. It almost didn't surprise him that Elena would have a pet toad. It certainly fit her personality better than that wedding dress. But it was no wonder the creature was eager to escape when it had been locked up in a small dark box. Perhaps he should have a special glass container made for it as his wedding gift to her. Assuming he could actually catch it.

Just as he almost had it, reaching out to catch the toad under his hands, it leapt out from under the bed, forcing Arthur to wiggle out after it. As he did, he felt something soft land on his back, but he dismissed it rather than lose track of his prey. Once he was on his feet again, he was able to corner the toad and snatch it up, and with great relief he trapped it back inside its velvet-lined home.

"Stay," he told the toad, and put the box back where he'd found it.

Inauspicious indeed. He brushed himself off and made a mental note to chastise someone about the uncleanliness of the guest room floors. The chase had been more toad than goose, but so far there was absolutely no evidence of magic to be found. Elena and Grunhilda might return at any time, and so he had to finish up this ridiculous folly and leave before he was caught.

He went back over the places he had searched, making sure that everything was as he had found it, and then remembered that he had dislodged something from the bed during the chase. He thought it might be a pillow, but when he knelt down, the only thing he found was a small pouch, tied with pink ribbon. Curious, he pulled it open and peered inside, then poured out some of the contents into his hand. It was a sort of sand, so fine it was nearly a powder, and it sparkled like gold. It felt warm as a sunbeam against his palm, and when he traced his thumb through it, it shimmered like rippling water.

The old fear clenched in him. *Magic.*

He had to stay calm, keep his head. What had Gwen called it? Pixie dust? He poured the dust pack into the pouch and brushed his hand clean. He closed the pouch and tied the ribbon tight. Merlin might not feel the need for proof, but here it was, undeniable. And it made the rest of their story, as unwelcome as it was, all too possible.

Arthur had what he needed. He reached for the door, then froze in alarm as he heard voices on the other side. Elena and Grunhilda's voices. He'd taken too long and now he was trapped. He had to stand firm, confront them about what he had found. He had to be strong and make them confess their plans.

He couldn't.

His courage failed him, and yet there was no escape. He quickly opened the tall wardrobe and ducked inside, pulling the doors closed after him so that there was just enough of a gap to spy out from.

"I could have sworn I left this locked," Grunhilda said, as they entered. "Oh, but look at this!"

"They're lovely," Elena said, and then sneezed. They must have found the white roses.

"Oh Petal," Grunhilda said. "Here, let me." There was a rustling sound. "There, that's better. Much prettier than those old flowers. Arthur must have sent them."

"Maybe," Elena said, and then sighed. He heard them enter the bedchambers and shifted to watch them through the gap.

"That Arthur's a fine man," Grunhilda continued, eagerly. "In fact, given half a chance, I'd marry
him myself!"

"Maybe that's not such a bad idea." Unlike Grunhilda, Elena showed little enthusiasm for the wedding.

"Now, now," Grunhilda chided. "Don't be a silly girl. Arthur wants to marry you. He stood up right in front of everyone and said so, and you accepted. The wedding's in a few hours. It'd be a bit late to change your mind now."

Elena sat at her dresser and slumped. "I know. I want to make this work for Father's sake. I know how important it is to him."

"And to you," Grunhilda said. She picked up a hairbrush and began brushing out Elena's wild, knotted hair. "You had a lovely time with him on that picnic."

"I suppose. It's just... It's all happened so fast. We barely know each other. I certainly don't love him, and he doesn't love me. Maybe if we had more time..."

Even though Arthur felt the same way, her words still stung. For all that he had resisted and railed against being forced into marriage, he had never truly considered that a princess might not want to marry him.

"He respects you," Grunhilda soothed. "That's more than many can say. I mean, what is love anyway? Here today and gone tomorrow. Respect, that's what lasts." She kissed Elena's hair with a motherly peck. "That's just the nerves talking."

In the mirror, Elena mustered a weak smile. "Maybe you're right." She gave a sad chuckle. "I still can't believe he proposed. No one else ever has."

Grunhilda clucked her tongue. "Now don't you pay those silly boys any mind. If they couldn't appreciate you, that was their loss."

Elena's reflection turned mournful. "But look at me. Arthur's the perfect prince, and I'm not exactly the perfect princess."

"Poppycock," Grunhilda declared. "What does that mean, anyway, 'perfect princess'? Sounds perfectly boring. You've got spirit, child. If Arthur's got half a brain, he'll recognise that. And if he doesn't have a brain, well, you can always marry him for his brawn." She laughed and moved her hips in bawdy suggestion. But when she saw Elena's unhappy expression, she sobered. "Oh, you'll be just fine, Petal. Marrying a Pendragon will secure your future."

"And if it's not the future I want?"

"It's the one you need. And you'd best keep your doubts to yourself. These are dangerous times."

"You're right," Elena said, but she sounded more defeated than anything else.

"There, there," Grunhilda soothed. "I have just the thing to cheer you up." She moved over to the dressing table, and at first Arthur couldn't see what she was up to. And then she turned, and he saw that she was holding the ornate box. The one with the pet toad inside. But when she opened the lid, Elena gave a surprised gasp.

"Our little secret!" Elena said, delighted, as she scooped out the toad. She held it up, dangling it by its leg. And then, to Arthur's horror, she opened her mouth wide and ate the toad whole, slurping down its wiggling legs with a happy moan.
It appeared that the toad was not a pet.

"You're very special," Grunhilda said, fondly. "And if Arthur can't see that now, he will soon enough."

It wasn't said as a threat, but her words sent chills down Arthur's spine. He reeled at the realization that Gwen and Merlin had been right, that Lord Godwyn had brought a Sidhe and a Pixie into the very heart of Camelot. That a Sidhe was hours away from taking the throne. He had to get out of here, but there was no way to leave now without exposing himself to the enemy. Perhaps if he had believed Gwen and Merlin when they had come to him, perhaps if they had searched for proof together, he would not be trapped and alone. Arthur had no choice but to grip the hilt of his sword and brace himself. As soon as Grunhilda opened the wardrobe to take out the wedding dress...

But before Arthur could finish working out his battle plan, there was a knock on the door. Through the gap, Arthur watched Grunhilda go to answer it, leaving Elena to pick the last bits of toad from her teeth. He heard the door open.

"Yes?" Grunhilda greeted. Obviously whoever had knocked, it was not a noble.

"The Princess Elena's presence is requested downstairs." It was George! What on earth was he doing here?

"We just came back," Grunhilda protested, not sounding pleased. "It'll be hours before we're ready. What do they want now?"

By this point, Elena had become curious and had left the bedchamber to investigate. "Grunhilda? What's going on?"

"My lady," George said. "I apologize for the interruption. But a selection of cakes has been prepared by the kitchen, and we would be greatly honored if you were to sample them and select your favorite."

"Ohh!" Elena sounded as delighted by the cakes as she had been by the toad. "Grunhilda, please? Surely we'll still have enough time?"

"Very well," Grunhilda relented. "But we must come back as soon as it's done, and no more interruptions. It's going to take hours to sort out your hair..."

And then they were gone. Arthur slumped in relief, but was equally baffled by George's appearance. There was no reason for him to have anything to do with the kitchen or the wedding preparations. But if his appearance was mere luck, it was the first Arthur had had all day.

He was halfway out of the wardrobe when he heard the door open again. Thinking that Grunhilda had returned, Arthur ducked back inside. He held his breath and kept absolutely still, hoping that she would quickly leave again. To his alarm, the wardrobe doors opened wide. But it wasn't Grunhilda who had opened them. It was George.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Arthur asked, astonished.

"I believed you to be in need of assistance," said George, unruffled. He held out his hand to help Arthur out of the cupboard. Arthur frowned at it, but took it anyway. He had been a bit cramped in there.

"And how exactly did you know that?" Arthur asked. He stared at George, trying to fathom him out. The only way George would have known where Arthur was was if he had followed him here. If he
had spied on him the same way that Gwen had spied on Elena.

George said nothing, and perhaps that was its own answer. Arthur gave him a short nod.

"If I might suggest, sire," George said, gesturing towards the door.

"Right." Arthur strode out, pausing only to ensure that no one would see them exiting Elena's chambers. Once they were safely away, he breathed a sigh of relief.

Toads aside, the morning's revelations had given him a lot to digest. But perhaps the biggest surprise had been George himself. Just as with Arthur's armor, George had gone above and beyond what any normal servant might do, and in the process stuck his nose quite deeply into Arthur's private affairs. George could have gone to the King about Arthur's meetings in Gaius' chambers, about his odd behavior, and now about his apparent invasion of Elena's chambers. And yet not only had George kept Arthur's secrets, but he had helped to perpetuate them.

Arthur rubbed his thumb against the pouch full of Pixie dust and thought very hard about what to do next.

"George," he said, stopping them as they reached the stairs.

"Yes, my lord?" George asked, his back straight as a board, his chin high with dignity. And yet there was no sense that he was trying to place himself above his position. It was merely that he took great pride in his service. Perhaps he really was that rarest of birds: a servant loyal and true to his master, even above the King himself.

He wondered if such servants were not so rare at all, as he had been gifted with two of them in a row. Or if perhaps George was a second chance for him now that he had ruined his first one. He thought of all the things that Merlin had done for him, spoken and unspoken, obvious and hidden, and the anger that Merlin had shown when Arthur returned his loyalty with neither respect nor gratitude.

The past was the past. There was no way to take back the mistakes he had made. But he didn't have to keep making them.

He clapped George on the shoulder and looked into his eyes. "Thank you," he said, forcing himself to be honest and unguarded in that moment. To show George that his loyalty was valued.

George pressed his lips together and his chin wobbled dangerously. "My lord," he said, almost reverently, and bowed his head. When he raised it again, his eyes were suspiciously shiny.

Arthur had the distinct feeling that he had just cemented George's loyalty for life. It felt good to be believed in, to be looked up to rather than scorned, even from the most unexpected of places. It didn't fix anything, didn't solve the mess his life had become. But somehow it was enough to ease the loneliness that had been squeezing his heart so painfully tight.

He wasn't alone. Maybe he never had been. He just hoped it wasn't too late: for Camelot's future, and for his own.
Negotiations were not to be interrupted. That was what his father had told him yesterday evening, as he, Godwyn, Alined, and Geoffrey had convened in private to formalize Deorham's surrender and transformation from independent kingdom to vassal state, as well as the preliminary integration of Gawant and Camelot. Even at this early stage, there was much to work out regarding defense, harvest, land and water rights, taxes, and the countless other aspects of life that kept a kingdom functioning.

Normally, his father would have insisted that Arthur actively participate in the creation of such an important document. It would have been considered an essential part of Arthur's education and experience for the day when he would head such negotiations himself. But Uther was still angry at Arthur's failure to propose to Elena of his own accord. Arthur had been given a command by his King, and he had failed to carry it out without being publicly forced into obeying. Exclusion from deciding yet another important part of his own future was the resulting punishment. Privately, Arthur believed that his father preferred it this way so that he could more fully glory in his conquest.

Arthur approached the guarded doors to the negotiation chamber with a confident stride. The guards hesitated, then stepped aside to let him in. No matter what else happened, Arthur was still the Crown Prince, and no one wanted to stand in his way. He pushed open the doors and stepped inside. All four men were there, surrounded by scrolls, books, and documents, while their servants blended silently into the walls, waiting to be needed. Arthur wondered again at Alined's choice of manservant. A jester was well and good for entertainment, but as a manservant this Trickler made Merlin look like George. The man was simply odd, and smirked at Arthur in a way that was simultaneously simpering and menacing.

As expected, Uther was not pleased by the interruption. Arthur forestalled the inevitable argument by only briefly acknowledging the group before heading directly to Godwyn.

"I apologize for the interruption," Arthur said, smoothly drawing Godwyn's attention. "But I was hoping for a private word with my future father-in-law before the wedding. If you don't mind?"

Arthur's framing was enough to mollify Uther. Obedience always pleased him. "Make it quick." He waved his hand dismissively and turned back to the document before him.

Arthur led Godwyn down the hall and to the same room where he had confronted Drudwas and Edern after returning from Avalon. He closed the doors and turned to Godwyn, whose brow was furrowed with wary concern.

"Arthur?" Godwyn asked. "Is something wrong? I had hoped that when you proposed, you had resolved your doubts about the marriage."

Arthur paused before he spoke. It was an understatement to say that this was a delicate situation. Confiding in Godwyn was a gamble in itself; Godwyn had never displayed the same rabidity towards magic as Uther, but he had long adopted Uther's ban as his own. But while Uther kept the fires of the Great Purge burning, Godwyn preferred warning and exile as punishments. There had been times when Uther had privately grumbled that such exiles would merely settle in another kingdom where magic was legal -- Deorham in particular -- and might end up as one of the many sorcerers who sought vengeance upon Camelot in their 'madness.' But Gawant was too valuable an ally to lose, especially in times of war. As long as the ban on magic remained, Uther did not have sufficient grounds to press the matter.
Yet no matter how deep Godwyn's friendship with Uther ran, no matter how far he was willing to adopt Uther's practices as his own, Arthur knew that what passed between them now would not make its way to Uther's ear. Godwyn loved Elena too much to risk losing her on one of Uther's pyres.

Arthur understood that feeling all too well.

"Do you know what this is?" He held out the pouch of pixie dust that he had found in Elena's bed. Godwyn took it and inspected it curiously. Arthur saw the moment when Godwyn recognized its nature, and the fear that the revelation sparked.

"Magic," Godwyn whispered. "Why have you brought this to me?"

"Because I found it in Elena's bedchamber," Arthur said. "It's been identified as Pixie dust, a kind of fairy magic."

Godwyn blanched, then hardened. He tightened his fist around the pouch. "I have always believed that you had your mother's heart. Perhaps I was wrong. If you had no desire to marry my daughter, there was no need to descend to this."

Arthur held up his hand. "Lord Godwyn, you misunderstand. I have every desire to marry Elena." A necessary lie. "I brought this to you on her behalf. The pouch belongs to Grunhilda. I believe that she has placed Elena under some form of enchantment. That there is a magical plan to destroy Gawant and Camelot from within, using Elena as their weapon." It was a vast simplification of the situation, but they did not have time to delve into the politics of Avalon. And while Arthur trusted Godwyn to protect Elena, that did not mean he was willing to openly incriminate himself and others by revealing how they had obtained this information.

"Grunhilda?" Godwyn said, baffled. "She has been loyal to us for over twenty years. She's been like a mother to Elena. I hardly believe that she would betray us."

"I saw the truth with my own eyes," Arthur said, gentler now with sympathy. He recalled what Gwen and Merlin had told him. "A cure is being prepared that will free Elena from the spell. If she can be treated quickly, I see no reason why the wedding cannot go on as planned."

Godwyn visibly struggled to accept Arthur's story. "What is the nature of this enchantment? What has been done to my daughter?"

"The less you know, the better," Arthur said, because he knew how difficult it was to face his father when carrying such a secret. "But I swear that I would do nothing to risk Elena's life. That is why I came to you directly. My father knows nothing of this, and it is my intent that he never will. I only ask that you trust me now, as you have before to safekeep your daughter and your kingdom."

Arthur waited as Godwyn made his decision. Like any good king, at heart he was a pragmatist. If Elena had been enchanted, the marriage was untenable. Either the magical plan would succeed and Camelot and Gawant would pay the price, or Elena's magic would be discovered and Uther would see her burn. Arthur could all-too-easily imagine his father's humiliation and horror at having married his only son and heir to a Sidhe. The only solution was to remove the enchantment in the few hours they had left. Godwyn could not excuse himself from the negotiations without explaining why. But Arthur had been excluded from them and so was free to act. And more importantly, he already had a solution at hand, albeit one that almost certainly required magic to succeed. As Arthur had learned the hard way, like it or not, magic could not be fought without magic.

"You can save her?" Godwyn asked, almost pleaded. "You're certain?"
"I can," Arthur said, with more confidence than he truly had. He could only trust in Gwen and Merlin -- as he should have trusted them from the beginning.

Godwyn handed back the pouch. "I admit that this is all rather beyond my experience. Magic is..." He shook his head. "I can only pray that Grunhilda was enchanted into this herself. After Aelfleda died, I depended upon her greatly. If what you say is true, then it is my own actions that have endangered my daughter's life."

"You couldn't have known," Arthur assured him, thinking not only of Merlin's lies, but of the Sidhe's glamours.

"A king must know who to trust. He must know the hearts of those he relies on. By coming to me, you betray your father."

"You would rather see her burn?" Arthur asked, pained by the insult.

"I would give my life to protect my daughter," Godwyn said, with utter certainty. Then he sighed. "Arthur, when you become king, you will find that there are few easy choices. Every action has consequences that must be weighed. The choices we make..." He looked down with unspoken regret. "We do what we must, and then pray for forgiveness."

Arthur wondered if Godwyn meant that figuratively or literally. A week ago, the idea of Godwyn praying would have been easily dismissed; how could a close ally of Uther Pendragon worship the Old Gods? But each day, Arthur learned that more of what he thought he knew was wrong. He itched to press Godwyn about exactly what choices he had made. About why his father had turned against magic all those years ago, and why Godwyn had followed suit. Did the Great Purge have anything to do with the Sidhe? Was Elena's possession more than just a means to an end, but a revenge in itself? Yet again Arthur found himself with too many questions and no time to ask them.

"Such choices are already before me," Arthur admitted. In his youth, despite Gawant's strength, Arthur had seen Godwyn as something of a pushover. He had always seemed too gentle, too soft-spoken to be as great a king as Uther. But perhaps he had been wrong. Perhaps there was a strength in kindness, in listening and trusting, instead of the demands and dismissals that Uther ruled with.

His mother's heart. Godwyn had said that before, that he saw Ygraine in Arthur. It was meant as a compliment, and yet so often it had felt like an accusation. Knowing so little about her, not even what she looked like, he saw in the comparison only flaws. His mother had been weak, unable to bear the physical demands of childbirth, and if she was gentle and kind, such traits could only be part of that weakness. How could he believe otherwise, when his father's strength was so bound up with cruelty and coldness, with dominance and the will to fight? Sometimes he had felt that every part of him that was a disappointment was inherited from his mother, and he wanted nothing more than to destroy that inheritance. Other times, he abhorred that there was so much of his father in him, and he yearned mournfully for the mother he never had. If she had lived, she would have been kind to him, protected him, loved him as he had never been loved by his father. But she had died, and while Arthur sometimes blamed himself for her death, on some level he hated her for dying, hated her for abandoning him.

But he was not a child anymore. Such blame and regret were pointless now. As a man, as a king-to-be, it was his choices and actions that mattered, not his past. He would do what he must, do what was right. If that meant lying to his father, going behind his back in order to save Camelot and Gawant from disaster, then that was what he would do.

"We do what we must," Arthur said, resolving himself. "And we accept the consequences. Not just for Elena, but for our kingdoms and our peoples."
"And that is why I believe you are the right man to trust," Godwyn said, and clapped Arthur on the shoulder. "And I will be honored to call you my son."

Arthur mustered a small smile. He still dreaded the wedding, but perhaps in Godwyn he would gain not only a father-in-law, but a friend and ally. He had nothing against the union of their two kingdoms. He only wished there could be a better way, and one that would not doom him to a loveless marriage.

Yet perhaps this was for the best after all. Once Elena was cured, she might still prove herself a kind and capable ruler like her father. Someone he could rely on as a friend. And if anything should happen to one of them, the other would be able to rule on without the anguish and suffering his father experienced after his mother's death. If he lost Elena, it would not rend his heart as Merlin's death had twice already. He might never love Elena, and she might never love him. But neither would they know grief. And their children would never know what it was to be looked at by their father as if he wished their mother had lived instead of them.

§

They returned to the negotiation chamber, but Arthur did not go inside. He nodded in acknowledgement to his father in silent thanks for allowing the interruption to his important work, and then turned to head for Gaius' tower. As he did, he noticed that Trickler was no longer waiting at Alined's side. He must have been sent on an errand for his master, perhaps to his chamber for papers or down to the kitchens for sustenance. Alined looked to be in a foul mood, which was to be expected as he was surrendering his kingdom. And yet Alined ought to be grateful that he was not losing everything. Instead of losing his life in battle, once this was all over Alined would return to Deorham to rule as Uther's vassal. Arthur would be glad to see the back of him and his jester -- at least until the spring, and he was not yet prepared to think about the spring.

He reached Gaius' chamber door and knocked, then waited for the sound of the key in the lock. Gwen opened the door, and she looked at him with wary hope. Inside, Gaius was squinting at an open book and an assortment of glass jars. Merlin worked beside him, grinding herbs with the same stubborn determination that he usually had when polishing Arthur's armor. Merlin barely glanced at Arthur, then continued with his work, pointedly ignoring him.

"Arthur," Gaius greeted, his own feelings neatly hidden behind bland attentiveness. It was the same way he looked at Uther, especially when they were talking about magic. "To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"Is it ready yet?" Arthur asked, skipping to the point. "Elena's cure. How long will you need?"

Gaius let down his defenses, revealing his frustration. "The witches of Meredor are the worst recipe writers I've ever known. But thanks to Merlin and Gwen, I believe I have all the necessary ingredients. With a bit of luck, it will be ready before the ceremony."

"One hour?" Arthur pressed, tired of Gaius' cautious hedging. "Two?"

Gaius looked down his nose at him. "However long it will take, it will not be done sooner if I am distracted." He harumphed and went back to squinting at the open book.

Seeing that Gaius was in no mood for conversation, he moved on to Merlin. "You're still dressed like a girl," he pointed out.

Merlin picked up his head and glared at him. "How else am I supposed to disguise myself? Put on a false beard?"
Arthur looked at the expanse of Merlin's bare neck and clavicles. Merlin could hardly wear one of his scarves when he was pretending to be someone else, and so he had been forced to leave himself exposed. Arthur remembered the taste of his skin, hot and tender against his mouth; remembered marking it again and again in some vain quest to claim Merlin as his forever. "A false beard would have more dignity."

"I'd rather wear a dress than hobble around the castle like an old man."

"Any excuse you need," Arthur said, welcoming this sudden return to their old banter, even if the circumstances were still strained. "What was it you said the last time I caught you sneaking a dress around the castle?"

Merlin flushed. "I was helping Gwen with Morgana's laundry."

"And the time before that?"

"Lady Rosalind had a tear that needed mending."

"I don't recall her wearing that particular shade of purple. That dress suited you better than this one. And what about the time I found you with one of Morgana's dresses over your head?"

"That wasn't my fault!" Merlin was fuming now, but totally focused on him. Just the way Arthur liked it.

"What a man does in his spare time is completely up to him," Arthur teased, just to make Merlin pout with embarrassment.

"Is there an actual reason you're here, or did you just stop by to practice being an ass?"

Arthur pulled out Grunhilda's pouch and dangled it by the ribbon strap. "I thought you might want to see this."

Merlin eyed it suspiciously, then snatched it away. He jammed his fingers into the pouch -- the careless idiot -- and then pulled them out. They were covered in Pixie dust.

"Pixie dust," Gaius said. He took hold of Merlin's hand and peered at his fingers through his glasses.

"That's what Grunhilda used on Elena," Gwen said, moving to Merlin's side. "How did you get it?"

"I found it in Elena's bed," Arthur said, declining to include the fact that he had ended up trapped in a wardrobe until George came to his rescue. He still had some pride. "I wanted to believe you, but I needed proof. Now I have it." He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry I didn't listen. You were right."

"Better late than never, I suppose," Gaius said. He plucked the pouch from Merlin's hand and moved away to inspect it. Then he turned back. "Merlin, clean your hands before you touch anything. The last thing we need is you tracking Sidhe magic all over my workshop. Lord knows what it would do to my potions."

Merlin rolled his eyes, but had the sense to comply. Arthur would have thought that after being on the wrong end of powerful Sidhe magic, Merlin might be more careful. More fool he.

"What does this stuff do, anyway?" Arthur asked, looking at the wash basin Merlin had dirtied. The Pixie dust had dissolved into it, and the water shimmered with a faint but unearthly light. It reminded him strongly of the waters of Avalon. "What's it made of?"
"Pixies," Gaius said, rather archly. "As the name implies."

Arthur recoiled. "You mean this is made of Grunhilda?" He grimaced. "What is it, magical dandruff?"

Merlin snorted and stifled a laugh, but Gaius actually chuckled. "I suppose you could call it that. As we are made of flesh and blood, Pixies are made of magic. And such magic is far too valuable to waste. Any, ah, leavings or debris are saved and ground into a fine powder."

"Oh, that is disgusting," Merlin said, staring in horror at his hand. He shuddered and shook it away from himself, even though he had already cleaned it.

"And sprinkling... that... on Elena," Gwen said. "That feeds the Sidhe inside her?"

"Rather like mother's milk, or a bird feeding its young from its gullet," Gaius explained. "If not for such regular feedings, the growing Sidhe would overtax its host."

"Then she isn't just enchanted?" Arthur asked. "There really is a Sidhe inside her?"

"One that is nearly mature, if it was implanted inside of Elena soon after her birth. According to the witches of Meredor, if the potion is taken when the host is still young, the Sidhe inside will be too weak to survive. Once it has detached from the human's soul, it simply disintegrates. But if the potion is given to a host with a mature Sidhe inside, the detachment will force the Sidhe whole from the host's body. The recommended course of actions after that is to destroy the Sidhe before it can reach Avalon."

Arthur didn't need to be told what would happen if the newborn Sidhe found its way home. "And the host?"

"If the natural process is interrupted in time, the host is not only preserved, but they no longer suffer from the heavy burden imposed upon them. They are described not merely as restored, but 'newly blessed.' Elena will feel like a new person."

Arthur let out a breath he had barely been aware of holding. "Lord Godwyn will be pleased to hear that."

Gaius' eyes widened in alarm. "You told Lord Godwyn about Elena?"

"Of course I told him, he's her father," Arthur said. "If this goes wrong, or we can't cure Elena before the wedding, we'll need his help. The last thing we need is my father finding out any of this." He saw Gaius' disapproval and it irritated him. "I suppose you think it would be best to do all of this in complete secrecy, and damn the consequences."

Gaius gave him a stony look. "I have not survived to this day by incriminating myself to anxious fathers, no matter how much they love their children. Once the potion is prepared, all we have to do is convince Elena to drink it. She won't be aware of what's happened to her, only that she feels better."

"You want to keep lying to her, just like we lied to Morgana?" Gwen said, unhappily. "It isn't right. Elena deserves to know the truth."

Gaius softened, but didn't relent. "The situation with Morgana was different."

"No," Gwen insisted, more certain now. "It's exactly the same. It was wrong then, and it's wrong now. We're going to tell her the truth. We're going to give her the potion and let her decide."
"Now hold on," Arthur said, alarmed that there might even be a chance of Elena not taking the potion. If she refused...

"No," Merlin said, joining Gwen in defiance. "It's decided. And neither of you has any right to say otherwise." Arthur expected to be glared at, but it was Gaius that Merlin reserved his venom for. "No more lies. Is that understood?"

Gaius didn't so much as twitch. He was used to being stared down by Uther on a regular basis. But perhaps he sensed that this was about more than Elena, and that this particular battle wasn't worth winning. "Very well," he said, and turned back to his work. "If you'll excuse me."

Merlin almost flinched from the dismissal, but he held firm. Arthur wasn't sure what was going on between them, but it had to be bad. He doubted Merlin would be willing to talk about it to him, however. Perhaps later, if there was a later...

There was a soft knock on the door. Arthur recognized it as Morgana's knock, the kind she would make on his door after they had both cooled down from an argument. Now that he thought about it, he was surprised that she hadn't already been here when he arrived. But Gaius had said that only Merlin and Gwen had been helping him. Based on Gwen's guilty look, he guessed that they had had an argument themselves. He sympathized, knowing all too well how sharp Morgana's temper could be.

Gwen let her in. As soon as Morgana entered, Arthur knew that she had been listening at the door. Morgana had always been nosy, and more than once he had caught her spying. Whenever she was discovered she had the same look on her face, a mixture of knowledge, shame, and defiance. Not that shame ever stopped her from spying the next time, or the next. Arthur sometimes wondered if perhaps Morgana would not be quite so hungry for power if she had not been so thoroughly excluded from it by Uther. Certainly he had lost the taste for it after being force-fed like a fattened goose.

"It's very cozy in here," Morgana said, though it was obvious to anyone with eyes that the atmosphere was anything but relaxed. "Were you going to invite me to the party?"

"Yes, actually" Merlin said, drawing himself up. "We'll need your help. Everyone's help."

Morgana started to reply, then saw what Merlin was wearing. She raised her eyebrows speculatively. "It's a disguise," Arthur said, before she could start poking fun at Merlin. Certainly he couldn't resist the temptation.

"Ah," said Morgana. She turned back to Merlin. "You were saying?"

Merlin cleared his throat, trying to regain his momentum, and perhaps some tatter of dignity. "Gaius is working on the potion to save Elena. We're going to bring it to her and tell her the truth. We won't lie to her, not for anyone's convenience. If you can accept that, then we'd greatly appreciate your help."

Morgana was pleased by Merlin's formality and by his regard. "No more lies," she agreed, deliberately echoing Merlin's words. "And I accept. That is," she turned to Gwen. "If you're willing to have me."

Morgana gave her a look of surprising humility, a wordless apology that was startlingly intimate, even for such close friends. But as Merlin had before, Gwen stood her ground. Arthur wondered at their transformation.

"Did you mean what you said?" Gwen asked, pain tightening her voice.
Morgana looked down, ashamed. "I was angry," she said, softly.

"That makes it all right, then?" Gwen asked. "I never wanted to lie to you, Morgana. But I did it because I love you. I couldn't bear to watch you die. I've watched so many people die..." She squeezed her eyes tight, and tears streaked down her cheeks. Arthur felt as though he was invading their privacy, and yet he couldn't look away.

"You said you forgave me," Gwen continued, her voice trembling. "But you didn't. Maybe you never will."

"No," Morgana insisted, stepping closer to Gwen, reaching for her. "I should never have said that. Done that to you. I'm sorry. I..." She bit her lip, uncharacteristically hesitant. "You were right. There's so much I don't understand about magic, the Old Religion. About myself. But..." She took Gwen's hands into her own. "I know that I'm a better person when I'm with you. And I don't want to lose you."

Gwen and Morgana looked deeply into each other's eyes. Gwen sighed, and they moved together, and then--

Arthur gawped. They were kissing. He turned to see if anyone else was seeing this or if he was just hallucinating it. Gaius was politely looking down at his herbs, and Merlin was quietly beaming with happiness. Of course they already knew. Of course.

"Excuse me," Arthur said, loudly. "But was anyone going to tell me about that?"

Gwen and Morgana almost jumped apart, both of them blushing at their public display. Everyone stared at him, even Gaius. He was suddenly reminded of a saying about glass houses and stones.

"I mean, um, congratulations?" Arthur tried, awkwardly. Gwen hid her face behind her hands, mortified.

"Tactful as ever," Morgana sighed. Sarcasm had always been their refuge against emotion and embarrassment. "Shall we focus on the business at hand?"

"An excellent idea," Gaius seconded, without looking up.

The four of them looked to each other for a long, somewhat awkward moment. So much had happened to all of them in such a short time, they were still each trying to sort themselves out on top of all the changes in their relationships. As shocked as Arthur was by Gwen and Morgana's romance, and despite its apparently difficulties, he was glad that they had found each other. He wondered how long they had felt this way. It certainly explained why Morgana had never wanted to marry any of her suitors, and why Gwen was so devoted to her mistress. He felt a pang of envy that they still had what he had lost.

He looked to Merlin, but Merlin only looked away. Arthur knew that what was broken between them could not be fixed with a simple apology. He knew that marrying Elena would only make things worse. But his heart stubbornly refused to accept that Merlin was lost to him for good. There had to be a chance of salvaging something of what they once had. When he imagined his life without Merlin, it felt startlingly bleak, as if all the color would simply drain away without Merlin to keep it there. He was aware that only minutes ago, he had stood in front of Lord Godwyn and tried to convince himself that loving Merlin would only cause him pain. And yet the loss of him was hardly a salve. It seemed that it would be his lot to suffer either way.

"Gaius will have the potion ready soon," Merlin said, taking the lead with an easy confidence that
Arthur had rarely seen in him. But then, Merlin and Gaius had been solving Camelot's magical problems for nearly two years. This was familiar territory for him. "Once Elena knows the truth about her condition, I believe she'll want to be cured. The problem is Grunhilda. We have to lure her away from Elena, but if she gets suspicious, we'll have a fight on our hands. Pixies are incredibly powerful. It's going to take everything we have to stop her."

"What do you propose?" Morgana asked.

"Divide and conquer," Merlin said. He handed Morgana something small. It was Erdudwyl's tiny Sidhe staff. "Arthur and I will lure Grunhilda down to the crypts. I'll try to restrain her with magic, but if that fails, Arthur can stop her with his sword. While we're busy, you and Gwen tell Elena the truth about what's been done to her. Gaius will bring you the potion as soon as it's ready. Once the Sidhe leaves Elena's body, you have to use the staff to destroy it."

"Gladly," Morgana said, hefting the little staff in her hand. It was only a few inches long, and at that size it looked almost demure. But it would pack just as powerful a punch as it did when full-sized.

Gwen nodded. "Let's do it."

Arthur raised a finger. "Ah, if I may," he began, aware that his contribution would not be entirely welcome. "That is a terrible plan."

Merlin blinked at him. "Excuse me?"

"Killing Sophia and Aulfric is what led to this mess in the first place," Arthur reminded them. "The last thing we need is to anger the Aos Sí."

"What difference does it make if Elena's Sidhe dies or not?" Gwen asked. "Either way, as soon as the other Sidhe realize you aren't marrying a changeling, the Tylwyth Teg will have permission to invade."

"I've seen what happens, over and over," Morgana added, emphatically. "One group of Sidhe or two, it all ends the same way."

Arthur mentally counted to five, then reminded himself that he was the only one of them who had been properly trained in the tactics of both diplomacy and war. "If you were a Sidhe queen and you wanted to gain a foothold in a valuable but hostile territory, who would you put inside the future queen of Camelot?" When all three of them stared blankly at him, he rolled his eyes. "You put a royal inside her. Whoever is growing inside of Elena, they're not disposable. If the Sidhe are this furious about Sophia, who was an exile, how do you think they'll react if we kill their prince?"

"Or princess," Morgana countered. "But I see your point."

"Then we capture it," Merlin said, adapting. "Put it into the cage with Erdudwyl. Then we have two hostages."

"Better," Arthur agreed. "But Grunhilda's the one we need alive most."

"You said the Sidhe don't care about the Pixies," Gwen said. "That they treat them like dirt. What good would Grunhilda be as a hostage?"

"Not as a hostage," Arthur said. "Once the Sidhe is out of Elena, there's nothing anyone can do to put it back. Right, Gaius?"

"Correct," Gaius replied.
"So once Elena is cured, Grunhilda is no longer a threat. But she failed her masters, and we already know how the Sidhe are about forgiveness. We need someone like Grunhilda if we're to stand any chance against the invasion."

"You think she'll help us?" Merlin asked, doubtful.

"Do you have a better idea?" Arthur replied. "We know almost nothing about the Tylwyth Teg's invasion plans. Their strengths, their capabilities. We need information."

Realization dawned in Merlin's eyes. "Like when we were ambushed on the way to Gedref. The last man. You wanted to question him, but Merek killed him."

"Exactly," Arthur said, pleased that at least some of his training had stuck. "So we go up there and distract Grunhilda long enough to get Elena to take the cure. Then we capture our second hostage. By the time Grunhilda realizes what's happened, it's too late, and we offer her the chance to redeem herself by aiding us against the invasion."

"That's... actually sort of brilliant," Merlin said, and smiled. For the first time in what seemed like an eternity, Merlin looked to him with warmth and pride and devotion. Merlin looked at him and saw his King. To Arthur, it felt as though he had been trapped in a freezing cave and then suddenly freed to bask in the bright summer sun. It was blinding and beautiful and the only thing he ever wanted for the rest of his life.

And then just as quickly it was gone, the walls of the cave rising around him as Merlin's smile faded. The sadness crept back into Merlin's eyes, followed by regret and resolve and a grief that took Arthur's breath away. And in that moment he knew.

Merlin still loved him.

On its own it meant nothing. Love wouldn't solve any of their problems, wouldn't fix the truths that threatened to tear Camelot apart and destroy her very foundations. Love was a complication, a weakness, a vulnerability that no king could afford. But when Merlin looked at him that way, he felt his heart unfreeze from the cold prison of his chest and beat again, strong and true, however briefly, and he no longer cared what his father thought.

Even when the sunlight was gone, its warmth lingered.

They had to help Elena first, capture their hostage and stop Grunhilda. He could only deal with one huge crisis at a time. But some small flame of hope had been kindled in him, and he could not bring himself to blow it out.

"Where's Erudwyl?" Morgana asked.

"Right there," Gwen said, pointing at a familiar basket. It was the same one that Merlin had brought with him to Gwen's house.

"How did you catch her in the first place?" Morgana asked.

"We used a blanket," Arthur said, forcing himself not to smile. "No, get two. The heavier the better."

"All we need now is the potion," Merlin said. "And a good excuse to lure out Grunhilda."

"I'm sure we'll think of something," Arthur said, with confidence that surprised him, and yet didn't surprise him at all. It felt good to be working with his friends at last instead of against them. As a group they were far from the trained, organized knights he normally fought with, and yet he felt the
same spark between them as he had with the knights in Gedref. And now as then, as long as Merlin
was by his side, he believed that they could win against any foe, no matter how stark the odds.

It was absurd, laughably so, that Merlin could make him feel this way with just a glance. Arthur had
felt helpless and lost for days, overwhelmed by shock after shock that sapped his strength. But
perhaps this was love, as Merlin had once told him: not to be weakened by another, but raised up. It
made him almost giddy.

He took a deep breath to clear his head. Now was not the time for such ridiculous fancies, not right
before a battle. Not right before he was meant to marry someone that wasn’t remotely Merlin. The
reminder sobered him like a bucket of cold water. But he watched Morgana and Merlin and Gwen
together, coming up with excuses for Grunhilda, with ideas for how to fight with their magic, and the
flame in his heart flickered stubbornly brighter.
Arthur and Morgana walked side-by-side through the castle, their pace steady and purposeful as they passed servants and guards and wandering nobles. The halls bustled with preparations for the sudden wedding. Arthur's wedding. As inevitable as the idea had always been to him, the reality of it was like a rockslide: one could stare at a mountainside for years, even decades, noting its precarious cliffs and boulders, worrying only in abstract. But then in an instant it was begun, and in an instant it was over. Already he could feel the rumble of rock and soil shifting high above.

As they turned a corner, he spared a glance behind them. Gwen and Merlin were keeping pace, carrying baskets that helped them blend in all the more while they smuggled magic past the guards. Arthur still thought that Merlin's disguise was ridiculous, but the dress and cloak were working well enough. Apparently everyone else thought he made a passable girl as well. But then, even from the start, Merlin had always been different, even if the depths of that difference had been obscured.

Or even when they had been shouted aloud. Arthur was reminded again of Merlin's confession during the magical plague, of his willingness to sacrifice himself to save Gwen from execution. In hindsight, it was obvious that Merlin was the one who cured Tom, and that he was also somehow responsible for the massive flame that had sprung from Arthur's torch and incinerated the Afanc.

At the time, Arthur had been reluctant to aid Morgana and Merlin with their ridiculous plan, but he had gone along with them anyway, if only because his pride had been pricked. He wondered now at his resistance, and at his continued unwillingness to believe each time Merlin warned him about a magical threat. It was not that he denied that magic existed or that it was a powerful threat. He had fought against sorcerers and creatures of magic his entire life. It was simply a matter of proof, of evidence, because judgement could not be passed without evidence, because the King would not accept the word of a servant without proof.

And yet such excuses felt hollow. Even if his father would disregard Merlin's word, Arthur knew that it was worth a great deal, that as a servant his devotion and loyalty were unquestionable. So what was it in him that resisted, that rebelled against Merlin's words, that made him want to close his ears and eyes to the truths that Merlin so insistently pointed out? Was it that Merlin was only a servant? That he was a sorcerer? That for all his loyalty and devotion, he'd kept secret after secret from Arthur, hidden vital knowledge from him for years, evaded the truth when confronted, and lied to his face?

Guilt and resentment mingled together. Perhaps, like Morgana with Gwen, he had not truly forgiven Merlin for lying to him. Almost from the start of their time together, Arthur had known that Merlin was keeping secrets. Merlin was a terrible liar, full of obvious tells, but he was good at keeping his mouth shut when it suited him. It had long vexed Arthur that Merlin could be at once so open and honest and so inscrutable. That frustration had made him lash out at Merlin at times, punishing him with chores or scorn, but perhaps it was also why when Merlin most needed Arthur to believe him, when he pleaded with wide eyes and empty hands, Arthur found himself looking for any excuse to turn away.

He had accepted that Merlin was a sorcerer, that there was no way to separate Merlin from his magic. That was simply the truth and fighting against it had only caused them both pain. He couldn't blame Merlin for hiding what he was, nor for his confession, no matter how overdue. Merlin wouldn't have had to hide his magic if it hadn't been outlawed in the first place. But he couldn't help but wonder how different things might have been if Merlin had told him the truth from the start. Isolation had caused them to work against each other even when they had the same goal of protecting Camelot.
That moment they shared in the water tunnels could have been more than a false start, belied by secrets and half-truths. But instead of working as a team, Merlin had used Arthur as a weapon against the Afanc, just as Arthur had used Merlin to defeat the First Code.

Now there were no more secrets, no more half-truths used to manipulate. All of them knew what they were facing and what resources they could rely on. But as long-awaited as this moment might have been, it might also be the last they shared. Morgana had declared her intent to take Gwen and Merlin away with her, presumably to a kingdom that would welcome the presence of two powerful sorcerers. Arthur needed more time: to win Merlin back, to find a solution to their problems, to even begin to deal with the consequences of his father's actions. But it was time he might not have.

As they neared Elena's chambers, Arthur slowed his steps and motioned for the others to do the same. They needed to proceed carefully; for all that they had learned about Pixies, Grunhilda was still an unknown. They didn't know the extent of her powers or how she might react. If this devolved into a full-on magical battle in the middle of the castle, their attempt to save Elena would only doom them all.

They had taken the servant's hallway so they could approach from behind instead of the front. Just before the turn that would lead them to Elena's door, there was a vent in the wall with a small table beneath it. Gwen nodded to indicate that this was what she and Morgana had used to spy on Elena the night before. Arthur gestured, and Merlin and Gwen each moved to hold the table steady so that he could climb up.

The plan was to lure Grunhilda away so that they could speak to Elena alone, then capture the Sidhe inside her without the Pixie's interference. Arthur saw Elena at her dresser, but he neither saw nor heard any sign of Grunhilda. If Grunhilda was already busy elsewhere, that meant they could skip the first part of the plan. Perhaps luck was finally on their side.

Arthur climbed down. "Elena's alone," he whispered. "Grunhilda must have gone out."

"Let's go," Morgana said, and turned to leave. But she was stopped by Merlin's hand.

"She might already be on her way back," Merlin whispered. "Someone has to wait out here so they can stall her."

"I'll do it," Gwen offered.

"No," Morgana began, concerned. "If she attacks you, you're the only one of us who can't fight back."

"And that's why it has to be me," Gwen said. "I'm just a servant. She'll have no reason to see me as a threat. Arthur and Merlin have to be there to deal with the Sidhe." She looked down, then met Morgana's eyes directly. "And I trust you to help Elena. To do the right thing."


Merlin stiffened, interrupting their moment. "Someone's coming."

Once Merlin had pointed it out, Arthur heard the distant but approaching footsteps. Obviously those giant ears were good for something. They pressed against the wall, with Morgana nearest to the corner.

"Grunhilda?" Arthur whispered.

Morgana peered around the corner, then pulled back, confused. "It's Alined's jester. What's he doing
"Trickler?" Arthur moved to see for himself. Was this the errand that Alined had sent him away for? Arthur doubted anything good could come of it, but if Alined was up to something, this was their chance to find out what it was.

It was Trickler. Arthur and Morgana watched as he rapped on Elena's door. When she opened it, he gave a broad smile and bowed.

"Princess Elena," he greeted.

"Um, yes?" Elena asked, uncertain. She did not step out, so they could not see her, but they could hear her voice. "Have we met?"

"Only in the briefest of fashions," Trickler said, smoothly. "But even that small glimpse was enough to show me your great beauty... and your great sadness."

There was a pause, and then: "I remember you now. You were with King Alined! Oh, where is Grunhilda... Leave now or I shall call the guards!"

Trickler hushed her. "Please, please, my lady! If my master finds out where I've been..." He cringed in apparent terror. "He will be unkind. Again."

Whether it was true or not, Trickler's fear was convincing. "You poor thing. But then why...?"

Trickler stepped closer to Elena and lowered his voice. "Please, my lady. If we could speak in private..." He looked back over his shoulders, then back to her, beseeching. "I believe I could be of great aid to you in your time of need."

And just like that, he was in. Elena closed the door, and Arthur hurried back to up to spy through the vent again. As they passed through the anteroom, he could only hear their voices.

"As you know, my lady, soon my master will no longer be king of Deorham. When that time comes, I hope to serve my new master instead."

"You mean me?" Elena said, surprised. "Why not go to Arthur? Or King Uther?"

"Because it is you who are Camelot's future," Trickler said, as they entered the bedchamber. "You who will bear her heirs, who will suffer the thankless burdens of womanhood."

Elena pressed a hand to her stomach, then dropped it. "I suppose I must," she said, as if only realizing it now herself. She bit her lip and looked away.

"Such sadness in such a beautiful lady," Trickler said, with too much sympathy. "The same sadness I saw when you accepted Prince Arthur's proposal. You are unhappy." Elena shook her head, but he persisted. "There is no need to hide the truth when it is so plain to those with eyes to see."

"What good would it do to talk about it?" Elena said, and Arthur's heart panged with sympathy.

"That depends on who is spoken to." Trickler guided her to sit, then knelt before her. "I am a jester, my lady. My sole purpose is the happiness of others. Of those I serve. But Alined is a cruel man who delights only in the suffering of others, and so I beg you for relief. Let me serve you and we may both be happy. Let me bring smiles to the lovely face of my Queen, so that she may laugh with her children."
Was it true, any of it? Did Trickler truly seek escape, or was it all just part of a larger ploy by Alined? Arthur could not deny that Trickler was persuasive. Elena's uncertainty melted away and she reached out to take his hand.

"You show great kindness," Elena said, touched by his words. "Perhaps we can help each other."

"That is all I want in the world," Trickler said, looking into her eyes. His grip shifted so that he was now holding her hand, and he bowed to kiss it. Elena blushed.

"Now that I am yours, my lady, let me serve you with a gift for your wedding day," Trickler released Elena and held out his hands, displaying their emptiness. Then with a flick of his wrist, he presented to her a posy of myrtle leaves and flowers. "Take their sweet essence into your heart, and your marriage shall be blessed with love and fertility. Or so they say." He gave a crooked smile.

Elena gathered the posy in her hands, then brought it to her nose and breathed in fully, then again. But as she breathed a third time, her eyes clouded and the posy fell from her hands. Trickler caught it and smiled, and this time there was no sweetness to him, only dark delight. He pressed the myrtle back into her hands and placed them together on her lap.

Trickler began to enchant. "Lufaþ sícest, forþæm lufaþ þu cunnan, éadlufan eallwundor ond écelic."

Arthur forced himself not to intervene. If Elena was already under Trickler's spell -- and it was evident now why Alined tolerated the man, for he was a sorcerer -- then they needed to find out what the spell was in order to defeat it. Who knew how another spell might complicate Elena's condition or its cure?

"What's happening?" Merlin whispered, but Arthur held out a hand to silence him.

"You wish to love Arthur, and so you shall," Trickler smirked. "But then..." His demeanor darkened as he continued the spell. "Onuppan þín lufiend coss, lufaþ sceal aheardunge be billhete."

Elena gave a small whimper, as if she was somehow aware of what was being done to her. Arthur's grip on the stone ledge whitened his knuckles.

"Then with love's kiss, that love will turn to hate," Trickler continued, proudly. With his free hand, he drew out a dagger, slim and deadly, and slipped the hilt between her hands, alongside the myrtle. Elena whimpered again; perhaps the Sidhe magic in her resisting Trickler's spell. But Trickler was determined. He pressed her hands together with crushing force. "Ofstingest hine fullhálne, mid his blódsihte sceal lufaþ eftcyme. Strike hard, for only his blood will--"

The bedchamber door suddenly flung open, and Grunhilda barrelled in, eyes blazing red with fury and magic. "Get your filthy hands off her!" she cried. With startling speed, she grabbed Trickler by his jacket and swung him away to fall onto the floor.

"Oh petal, what's he done to you," she soothed, but Elena was still locked into a trance. Grunhilda rounded on Trickler, who had just pushed himself to his feet. "Release her now! Remove your foul spell, or I swear--!"

"Swefe nu!" Trickler said, his eyes flaring gold as he flung out his spell. Grunhilda cried out as it hit her, then sagged, and for a moment it seemed that Trickler had stopped her. But to Trickler's surprise, she quickly recovered, then struck out with her own magic, wordlessly flinging him off his feet.

There was a tug on Arthur's leg, and he looked down to see Merlin urging him down. "We have to stop them," Merlin whispered, urgently, and Arthur couldn't agree more. The last thing they needed was for these two to bring down Camelot's guards on all their heads. The four of them hurried in,
Arthur explaining what he had seen as he drew his sword. Gwen stayed to watch for guards at the door while the rest of them headed for the bedchamber.

They looked at the chaotic scene before them, Trickler and Grunhilda magically swatted at each other as Elena sat in a daze with the dagger in her hands. Arthur felt distinctly out of his element, and found himself looking to Merlin for guidance.

"Elena first," Merlin said, without hesitation. "We have to get her out of here. Then we can deal with these two."

"Try the posy," Arthur offered. "It was part of the spell."

The three of them hurried to Elena, and Merlin looked her over.

"Can you snap her out of it?" Morgana asked. She had the Sidhe staff out in defense, but was wide-eyed with uncertainty. This was no mere swordfight. And aside from that, Trickler and Grunhilda were both enemies. To attack one was to defend the other.

"If Trickler anchored the spell on the posy, maybe..." Merlin carefully plucked the posy from Elena's hands and peered at it. "Ah! He used one of her hairs." Merlin unwound the blonde strand from around the myrtle stems, and the posy fell apart.

Elena's eyes cleared as the trance broke. "What..." she began, confused. She pressed her hand to her head, dropping the knife to the floor.

"You're all right," Arthur said, intensely relieved. It was clear that Trickler and Alined had intended to use Elena as an assassin. If they had succeeded and she had stabbed him right at the moment of their marriage, even if he had lived it would have been a disaster for Camelot and Gawant. If the enchantment had not been discovered, the two kingdoms would have been instantly at war, and Alined would have secured both his freedom and his revenge. If Arthur had died from his wounds, then Camelot would have been permanently weakened, and ultimately she would have fallen to her enemies. Some small part of Arthur had to admire Alined's cunning, even as the rest of him wanted to storm into the treaty negotiation and personally haul Alined down to the dungeons.

Elena turned her eyes to Arthur, and then a change suddenly came over her. She began to smile, huge and happy, and she flung herself into his arms. "Oh, my Arthur," she sighed.

Merlin looked down at the scattered myrtle. "Wonderful," he muttered, through gritted teeth.

"I thought you said it would break the spell," Arthur hissed, as he tried unsuccessfully to untangle himself from Elena.

"Well obviously it didn't," Merlin hissed back.

"I can't wait til we're married," Elena sighed, contented. She ran her fingers through his hair. "We'll have such lovely babies."

"Perhaps we should have Trickler enchant Arthur as well," Morgana said, sarcastically. "They'll make such a happy couple."

"Ha ha," Merlin replied, dryly. He stood up, walked a few away, then raised his hand at Grunhilda and Trickler, who had stopped flinging spells at each other and were now grappling directly. "Ic þe wipdrife!" he cried, and flung them both viciously hard against the wall; both fell to the floor in stunned heaps. "That's enough!"
Trickler didn't move, the breath surely knocked out of him. But Grunhilda's Pixie constitution allowed her to recover quickly. She saw Elena in Arthur's arms, Morgana standing in defense, and Merlin with his hand still raised. "Get away from my Elena," Grunhilda warned, breathing hard.

"She isn't yours," Merlin replied. "And you're lucky we're here, because we need Trickler alive. We need him to break the spell he put on her."

The red faded from Grunhilda's eyes, and she seemed to come back to herself. "What did he do to her?" she cried, alarmed, and hurried to Elena's side.

"A love spell," Arthur said, as Elena somehow managed to snuggle closer to him.

"We thought it was in the myrtle, but that was only a catalyst," Merlin said. "Can you break it?"

Grunhilda took hold of Elena's face and turned it to her, then stared into her eyes. Grunhilda gave a cry of alarm, then stepped back, covering her mouth with her hand. "Oh no. That wretched man!"

"What do you care?" Morgana said, unimpressed. "You want them to marry so the Sidhe inside her can take over Camelot."

Grunhilda rounded on her, alarmed, then faked a laugh. "What nonsense is that?" she said, in a poor attempt at innocence.

"You were probably going to have Arthur killed anyway so your Sidhe Queen could rule alone," Morgana continued. "You don't care about Arthur, and you certainly don't care about Elena."

"How dare you!" Grunhilda cried. "That girl is like a daughter to me."

"A daughter you lied to for her entire life," Morgana said, stepping closer, the staff tight in her hand. "Who you used and manipulated. All so you could throw her away when you were done. You disgust me."

They were almost toe-to-toe now, staring each other down. Arthur looked to Merlin for help, because he couldn't exactly fight with Elena clinging to him like a limpet.

"We have to break the spell," Merlin reminded them, stepping forward to intervene before another magical fight broke out. Behind them, Trickler groaned and struggled to stand up.

"And what do you know about spells?" Grunhilda challenged, but to Morgana directly. "Don't you dare talk down to me, human. I'll deal with this." In the blink of an eye, she wrenched the staff from Morgana's hand and turned it on Trickler. "Na þing biþ!" Energy blasted out of the staff and into Trickler, and he fell to the floor, dead.

As the last breath left Trickler's body, Elena stiffened. The false love faded from her eyes, replaced by outright bewilderment. As she looked around the room, her eyes only grew wider, so much that it seemed they might pop out of her head.

"Kill the sorcerer, kill the spell," Arthur murmured, realizing. It seemed his father had been truthful about that, at least.

Merlin knelt down beside Trickler and checked him over. "Dead," he confirmed, though the Sidhe staff had not left so much as a mark on him.

"Dead?" Elena stumbled over to Merlin's side, but when she saw Trickler, she nearly burst into tears. "He was kind to me. He gave me flowers."
"It was a trick, Petal," Grunhilda soothed, taking her arm. "But everything's all right now. All better." Grunhilda glared briefly at the three of them, then smiled warmly at Elena. "Now if you'll excuse us, we have a lot of work to get Elena ready for the wedding."

"We're not going anywhere," Morgana said, standing in their way. "You're the one Elena needs to be saved from."

Grunhilda scowled and pulled Elena closer, but that only made Elena grow more confused and pull away. "Could someone please explain what's going on?"

Grunhilda raised the staff and pointed it at Morgana, then at Arthur. "If you know what's good for you..."

"Haven't you ever wondered why you're so different?" Merlin said, and everyone turned to him. But Merlin only had eyes for Elena. "It doesn't matter what anyone says. You know you're different. There's something wrong with you. You're a freak, maybe even a monster."

Elena stared at him, and it was obvious that his words had struck home. She gave a slow nod.

"I know because it's how I felt," Merlin said, with a crooked smile. "Until someone told me why. Explained what I am. You have a choice, Elena. You can trust Grunhilda and never learn the truth, or you can let us help you."

"Now hold on a minute," Grunhilda said, not liking this one bit. But she wasn't going to interfere, not anymore. Arthur drew his sword.

"Dragon-forged," he told her. "Now sit down."

Grunhilda sat, but she didn't look happy about it. Arthur kept his sword at the ready in case she tried anything. Morgana took the opportunity to snatch back the Sidhe staff, and Grunhilda scowled at her.

"Morgana, could you?" Merlin said, and Morgana went to get the potion from Gwen. Merlin guided Elena to sit with him on the bed. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the bag of pixie dust.

"Have you ever seen this before?"

Elena looked at the sparkling dust. "Sometimes I find it in my bed in the morning. What is it?"

"It's Pixie dust," Merlin explained. "Grunhilda has been treating you with it when you sleep. When you were born, something was planted inside you, and it grew with you. Grunhilda was assigned to take care of both of you. This is its food."

It was a far kinder explanation than Arthur would have given. But for all her strangeness, Elena was a gentle soul, and Grunhilda was almost a mother to her. It would be harder for her to believe that Grunhilda had ever only cared for the life inside her.

"There's something inside me?" Elena asked, shaken. She looked to Grunhilda beseechingly, but Grunhilda looked away, guilty. Perhaps the Pixie had some conscience after all.

"Have you ever heard of the Sidhe?" Merlin continued, as gently as he could. Elena shook her head. "They're a race of magical beings, and in order to have a child, they need to put it inside a human. That's what they did to you."

"You were too strong for it to hurt you," Morgana said, as she approached with the potion in hand. "But all this time, it's been draining you. Making it hard for you to be who you truly are. It stole your
life. But it's not too late. We can get it out of you. All you have to do is drink this." She handed Elena the potion.

Elena stared at the small bottle, then shook her head. "This is all happening so fast. How do I know any of this is true?"

Merlin considered this, then looked past Elena. "Ask Grunhilda. I think she's ready to tell you."

Elena stood up, the potion grasped tightly in her hand, and walked over to her nursemaid, the woman she had trusted unquestioningly for her entire life. She didn't ask anything, perhaps not even knowing where to start. But that was enough.

"It's true," Grunhilda admitted, with a mixture of regret and relief. "A Sidhe was placed inside you and I was sent here to protect it. But that doesn't make anything else a lie! I've loved you like you were my very own."

"Then tell me why," Elena said, the tremble in her voice revealing her. "Tell me what will happen to me if I don't take this." She held up the potion.

Grunhilda scoffed. "Don't you dare take that poison. That life inside you is your future." She moved to stand, but Arthur's sword held her back. She huffed in annoyance. "They don't understand how special you are. Both of you. You share a soul. And yes, it's set you back, but when the time comes that won't matter at all. It's not your marriage to Arthur that will make you Queen. He's a means to an end. Your true power will come from the union inside you. When she awakes..."

"She?" Elena asked, seizing on the detail.

Grunhilda nodded. "She's a princess, just like you. She has a great destiny before her, one you'll share. What's inside you is no monster. Together you'll live for thousands of years, with the power to bend reality itself. Why deny that for life as a mere human?"

"If human life matters so little, then why does she need mine?"

Grunhilda hesitated. "It's complicated, my sweet. But--"

"Don't treat me like a child," Elena said, angrily. "Why me? Because I was pledged to marry Arthur?"

Grunhilda huffed, but hesitated to answer.

"It's because they need us," Merlin said. "If a Sidhe is born without consuming the soul of its human host, it can't live outside of Avalon. It can't feed from the magic of our land. The only way the Sidhe can conquer Albion is if they can live here, and that's why they need you. You're their foothold."

"Who are you?" Elena asked. "How do you know all this?"

"My name is Merlin. And I know because I've faced them, talked to them, read about them. And if there's one thing I've learned, it's that no matter how beautiful their glamours, the truth is that they're the enemy of all of us, every human in Albion."

"If you join with her, you'll be better than human," Grunhilda said, making a last attempt at persuasion. "You will be more than a Queen."

Arthur watched as Elena made her decision, as she chose who to believe. Tears welled in her eyes, but she stubbornly wiped them away on her sleeve. "I trusted you," she began, her voice trembling
with emotion.

"Petal--" Grunhilda began, pleading.

"No," Elena said, sharply. "Morgana's right. You lied to me. Everything was a lie. If you had ever cared..." She sniffed and wiped her eyes again. "You always told me that I was special. That I was perfect just as I am. But you want to change me more than anyone!" She looked down at the bottle and thumbed at the cork, visibly bracing herself.

Grunhilda hung her head. "Please don't. If I fail..."

"Your masters won't forgive you," Merlin said, without pity. "I'm sorry, but you chose to help them do this to Elena. Every time you fed the Sidhe inside her, you made that choice."

"This creature inside me," Elena said, looking to Merlin. "I don't want to become her. Some cold, conquering queen. I've never wanted that."

"Then don't be," Merlin said. "It's not too late. You have a choice. Take it now, while you still can."

Elena removed the cork from the bottle, but hesitated. "Will it change me?"

"It will free you."

Elena mustered a smile beneath her tears. She closed her eyes, holding them tight as if making a wish, then raised the potion to her lips--

"No!" cried Grunhilda, and she lunged from her seat. Arthur blocked her with his sword, forcing her back as Elena drank down every last drop.

At first nothing happened. Then she burped, loudly. Then her eyes rolled back and she fainted. Merlin caught her before she hit the floor, then let her down gently. He cradled her head in his hands as she started to shake and spasm.


"Right." Morgana hurried out, then hurried back with Gwen and the baskets. They each took out a blanket and held it up -- and just in time. Elena's stomach grumbled noisily, and she dry-heaved as if her body was trying to force something out. Her skin pulsed a patchy blue, and her teeth sharpened, and for a moment Arthur feared that the potion had gone wrong, or that they were too late and the transformation was happening. But then Elena's whole body went taut and a small blue light flew from her open mouth.

"Now!" Merlin shouted, and Gwen and Morgana lunged.

"I've got her!" Gwen cried, as the tiny light tried desperately to escape the blanket. But Gwen held firm as Merlin pulled Erdudwyl's cage out of the basket.

"Let her go, you filthy beasts!" snarled Erdudwyl. "You disgusting, wretched mortals! How dare you touch her!"

"Ignore her," Merlin muttered. "All right. Cover me."

Morgana spread her blanket over Merlin and Gwen, and Arthur held his breath as Merlin and Gwen eased the newborn Sidhe into the cage without losing either her or the still-shouting Erdudwyl. There was a great deal of tussling, and then they went still.
"Got it!" Merlin and Gwen shoved aside the blankets and emerged victorious, with the dragon-forged cage now housing two furious Sidhe.

"The mighty Sidhe, beaten by blankets," Morgana smirked.

Grunhilda gave a mournful wail, and all the fight went out of her at once. She slumped in her chair as tears welled in her eyes. Arthur couldn't help but feel some pity for her, despite all that she had done.

"Elena?" Gwen called, as Elena's eyes fluttered open. "How do you feel?"

"I'm not sure," Elena said, as Gwen helped her up. But instead of her usual slouch, she stood straight and tall, like a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. "I feel.. amazing! I haven't felt this good in years." She moved more easily, sudden grace replacing her clumsiness. Even her voice sounded stronger, clearer. It seemed that the Sidhe had been taxing her tremendously.

She peered down at the cage. "Why are there two of them?"

"We caught that one earlier," Merlin explained. "It's a long story."

Arthur lowered his sword. Grunhilda sat in a stunned slump, reeling from her defeat. She was no longer much of a threat, though she would need to be dealt with one way or another. Arthur longed for some dragon-forged chains to bind her up with, since anything human-made would hardly hold a creature so powerful.

"Keep an eye on her?" he asked Morgana, and she was only too happy to oblige. He joined Merlin and Elena to inspect their newest hostage. He took the cage from Merlin and held it up, bringing the Sidhe to eye-level. The new Sidhe was quite similar to Erdudwyl, blue-skinned and gossamer-winged, clothed in a magical dress of shimmering green. But she was much younger; if she was a human, she would be no more than ten. Erdudwyl held the girl in her arms and coddled her as she glared at the humans around them. Then she seemed to realize something, and gave a mocking laugh.

"You will pay dearly for this," Erdudwyl smirked. "Your submission to Princess Maeve was your only hope of survival. This victory has only sealed your fate."

"Maeve?" Elena asked. "Is that her name?" She touched a finger to the cage as she stared at the young Sidhe. "I can hardly believe you've been inside me all this time."

"You should have been grateful to be hers," sneered Erdudwyl. "Together you would have ruled this land for a thousand years, restored the Sidhe to the throne that is rightfully ours."

"Then the Sidhe ruled before?" Arthur asked. If Erdudwyl was finally in the mood to talk, he was eager to take advantage.

"For a hundred thousand years, Albion was ours," Erdudwyl proudly declared. "The first humans who came to our land bowed in submission. That is how it will be again. For what you have done, Queen Mab will not rest until every corner of this land is ours."

"But you follow King Gwynn," Merlin said. "Why change sides now?"

Erdudwyl laughed. "King Gwynn only sought revenge for the death of an exile. For the death of Queen Mab's daughter, all of Albion will pay. Queen Titania will see to that."

"Maeve is dying?" Arthur asked.
"Unjoined to a human soul, she cannot survive for long beyond Avalon," Erdudwyl said, as she stroked a soothing hand through Maeve's hair.

"How long?" Arthur pressed. "A week? A day?"

"Hours, newborn and alone," Erdudwyl said, her anger evident. "But I will sustain her with my magic as long as I can."

"Would Pixie dust help?" Merlin asked.

Erdudwyl spat. "I would not take the magic of that traitor if it was the last in all of Albion."

Grunhilda gave a pathetic wail and turned away.

Arthur had no intention of letting either of the two Sidhe die. He felt mildly ashamed that he had not given thought to Erdudwyl's survival in the days since her capture. Partly it had been out of anger for her part in Merlin's capture and transformation, and partly it had been his assumption that she was like the Great Dragon, able to survive on magic alone. But the Great Dragon was, as far as he understood, a part of the Old Religion. He could survive for years on whatever magic lingered in the land itself. It seemed that the Sidhe's survival was equally tied to Avalon, and while Erdudwyl had obviously joined with a human soul in her birth, even that was not enough to sustain her indefinitely in isolation. Maeve's vulnerability only made the situation more urgent.

"Then sustain her," Arthur said. He lowered the cage and handed it to Gwen. "Wrap them up and keep them safe."


Arthur hesitated. Before, he would have lied to Elena, but the cats were well and truly out of the bag. And now that she was restored, she no longer seemed an absent-minded girl, but a thoughtful, intelligent woman, one quite capable of understanding their perilous situation. It was a remarkable transformation.

"Yes," he admitted. "The Sidhe are poised to attack. The only thing that's been holding them back was the plan to join you and Maeve to me."

Elena immediately understood. "In saving me, you've invited invasion. When?"

"Soon," Arthur said. "Very soon. But we have a plan. Tonight, after the feast, Merlin and I will go to Avalon and stop them." Somehow. That they had two hostages was a start, but it was by no means a solution.

But instead of flinching in fear, Elena only stood taller. "How can I help? Can I come with you?"

Arthur shook his head. "I need you here. Even if we succeed..." He trailed off, swallowing hard. He could hardly believe he was asking this of her, but now that she was free of Maeve's influence, Elena might be their only hope for Camelot's future; it seemed that Elena might make a fine queen after all. "Camelot will need an heir."

"I see," Elena said.

"But there is something else," Arthur continued. He glanced at Grunhilda, who was a mess from crying. He lowered his voice. "Grunhilda has information we need. If you can persuade her to talk..."
Elena looked just as displeased as Erdudwyl at the idea of relying on Grunhilda for a moment longer. Grunhilda had violated and betrayed her, lied to her and manipulated her. Arthur understood why she would want nothing to do with her former nursemaid, why she might even want her executed for her crimes. But whatever punishment she was due, it would have to be delayed.

"Please, Elena," Arthur said, trying to convey how much they needed Grunhilda's cooperation.

"What good would it do?" Elena asked, with understandable bitterness. "The Sidhe are all she cares for."

"It's not entirely her fault," Merlin said, intervening. "Pixies have been enslaved by the Sidhe for thousands of years. Their whole race is permanently enchanted. She loves them because she has to."

"All the more reason not to trust anything she says," Elena said.

"True," Arthur agreed. "But I think... despite everything, she loves you, too."

Elena looked to Grunhilda, who was dabbing her eyes with a kerchief. Grunhilda was mournful and miserable, and looked to the door that Gwen had taken the Sidhe through with pitiful longing. But when she looked to Elena, it was with the same sadness, the same longing. It was obvious that for all her faults, Grunhilda loved both her charges.

Elena huffed, relenting. "Very well." She pushed her hair back behind her ear and walked over to Grunhilda. Arthur had to admire her courage.

When Grunhilda saw Elena approaching, she attempted to gather herself and stand. Morgana gave her a warning glare and prodded the Sidhe staff in her direction. Grunhilda recognized the threat and stayed put.

"Grunhilda," Elena said. She was doing her best to hide her own hurt, to protect herself when her wounds were so raw. It was not entirely the same, but Arthur knew how hard it was to discover that he had been lied to for his entire life by his father and Gaius. He knew how Morgana struggled with Gwen's lies, and how lies had torn his relationship with Merlin apart. Some things could be forgiven, but some could not. The question of where to draw the line came to each of them individually.

Grunhilda nodded and hung her head again, waiting for Elena to pass judgement. Her remorse now somehow only made her betrayals worse. She must have had some awareness of how much she had made Elena suffer through the years, how much being a changeling had stolen from her, how much more could have been taken. And yet she had decided that such suffering was a fair price to pay for what was, in her eyes, a glorious reward. It mattered little to her that there would not be much of Elena left after her soul had joined with Maeve's. Arthur also knew such cold calculation, how necessary it could feel and how cruel it could be. He had used it and had it used against him. The ends justifying the means. It was how his father ruled as King, how he had taught Arthur to rule when his time came. But what if the ends were just as wrong? And how could they not be if it took so many wrongs to reach them?

"For what you did to me," Elena began, emotion trembling her voice, "perhaps no punishment would be enough. I loved you, and you..." She blinked, swallowed hard. "Tell me this. Was it all lies? Was any of it real?"

"Not at first," Grunhilda admitted, with a sad smile. "The first time I held you, you were a red-faced, squirming thing, and all I could see was the life inside you. The glorious Queen she would become. But you were such a sweet child. My darling Petal, lovely as a flower." She chuckled, reliving some fond memory.
"But you kept hurting me."

Grunhilda sighed. "It was for the best. I couldn't hurt Maeve. I love her, too! I did the best I could for both of you."

"She doesn't love you anymore," Elena said, coldly. "She wants absolutely nothing to do with you. And I don't think the Sidhe will be eager to spare you when they attack."

Grunhilda shook her head mournfully. "They'll never forgive me," she said, nearly breaking into tears again. "I can never go home!"

"You can't," Elena agreed. "Not to Avalon." She took a deep breath, bracing herself. "But help us now, protect Camelot, and Albion will owe you a debt of mercy."

Grunhilda looked up, lit with sudden hope. "Does this mean...? Oh, Elena..."

But her presumption was too much for Elena. "No," she said, stepping back, overcome. Tears welled in her eyes. "After today, I never want to see you again. But... if you help us, I will show the mercy my father has towards all magic. You may live in exile, never to step foot in Gawant or Camelot for the rest of your life." Then she turned and walked to the other side of the room, keeping her back to Grunhilda. Arthur decided that she had given them more than enough.

"Well?" Arthur asked, taking Elena's place.

"For Elena," Grunhilda agreed.

"Good," Arthur said, breathing out in relief. "Merlin, Morgana, if you would?"

"We'll take it from here," Morgana agreed. She urged Grunhilda to her feet and towards the sitting room and the outer door. Arthur trusted them to deal with Grunhilda, to find out what they could from her.

He trusted them.

Merlin went to follow Morgana out of the room, but in the doorway he paused and looked back. His eyes flicked between Arthur and Elena, and whatever he saw, it kept him silent. He turned away, blinking too quickly, and stepped out of the room without saying a word. He took the basket from Gwen and headed out into the hall with Morgana and Grunhilda.

He knew that Merlin was only going to back to Gaius. He wasn't leaving Camelot, not yet. But it felt as though he had just begun to say goodbye.

Once they were gone, Elena went to Arthur and hugged him tightly. "Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you so much."

Arthur awkwardly hugged her back. "It was Merlin, mostly."

Elena released him, then hugged herself, somewhat self-conscious. "He's your friend? And he's magic?"

"A sorcerer, yes." It was still hard to say it out loud for fear that the admission would somehow reach his father's ears. "Is that going to be a problem?"

"He saved my life," Elena said. "I know the law is against it, but... my father has never truly believed that magic is evil. He only exiles those who use magic as part of greater crimes. Those that bless the
crops, those that heal... he's always done what he could to turn a blind eye."

That matched what little Arthur knew of Godwyn's attitude towards magic, though obviously it was far more liberal than Uther could have imagined. Godwyn had obviously been caught between his loyalty to Uther and the truth, and like Gaius, done what he could to be a friend to both. It was not an enviable position, but Arthur had joined them there nevertheless.

"I do have one question about Merlin," Elena said. "Why is he wearing a dress?"

A laugh burst out of Arthur's chest.

There was a knock on the door, and they all froze. There was still the matter of Trickler's body to deal with, and that would be hard to explain away.

"Quick, hide Trickler," hissed Elena, and Arthur and Gwen hurried to comply. They hauled Trickler up by the shoulders and feet and took him to Grunhilda's room. They could leave him there until they could figure out a more permanent solution. Surely Alined would be wondering where his jester was by now.

"Who is it?" asked Elena, calling through the closed door.

"George, my lady. Prince Arthur's manservant."

Arthur sighed in relief as he closed the door to Grunhilda's room. He waved to Elena. "It's all right. Let him in."

Elena was visibly surprised, but she opened the door and stepped aside.

"Tell me, George," Arthur began, tolerantly. "Do you spend all your time following me around?"

George ignored the jibe. He cleared his throat. "Your wedding is in an hour, my lord. Your wardrobe has been prepared. If you will accompany me to your chambers?"

Elena covered her mouth as she gave a squeak of alarm. Arthur was actually glad to see that there was still some of that silly girl left in the woman Elena had become. "What am I going to do?" Elena cried, looking down at herself and touching her wild hair.

"Um," Arthur floundered. "Gwen can help you?"

"I have to dress myself and Morgana," Gwen reminded him. "But I'm sure one of Lord Godwyn's maidservants will be happy to help. I'll go get one, if that's all right?" The last she asked Elena.

"Yes," Elena said, relieved. "Thank you, Gwen."

Gwen smiled and bowed. But she hesitated to go, and looked to Arthur expectantly. Arthur walked over to her to hear whatever it was she had to say.

"Arthur," Gwen began, her voice low but urgent. "You know what this marriage will do to Deorham. What Uther will make you do. Please, stop this. It's not too late."

The reminder was a cold splash of water, stealing away the warmth of their victory. "I'm sorry, Gwen. I am. The marriage is too important. But I promise you, I will find another way to protect Deorham."

That wasn't what Gwen wanted to hear. "You're letting Uther decide the rest of your life. Yet you ask us to trust that you'll stand between him and magic?" She shook her head, disappointed. "Maybe
Morgana was right. Maybe we should leave Camelot."

"Gwen!" Arthur protested, but it was a weak protest. The truth was that he had no idea how he was going to stop Uther from purging Deorham, just as he had no idea how he was going to stop the Sidhe from invading Camelot and fulfilling every one of Morgana's nightmares. Marrying Elena might provide Camelot with stability and a better future, but it would doom Deorham and drive Merlin even further away from any chance of reconciliation. And yet Arthur felt powerless to stop it.

"I hope you'll be very happy together," Gwen said, every word dripping with disapproval, and she marched out the door.

Arthur looked to Elena, but she just shrugged. George cleared his throat and stepped forward to usher Arthur along. Arthur let himself be led, and with every step the reality of his fate weighed him further down.

§

Arthur paused outside the wedding hall. Within, their audience was already starting to gather, knights and nobles and commoners of importance. There was no sign of Alined yet, or Uther, but Lord Idriys and his nephew Sir Aeddan had been brought up from the dungeons, cleaned and dressed but in chains. No doubt Uther thought it important that they witness the passing of Deorham's crown from Alined to Uther.

Arthur still had a few minutes left of unmarried life, and despite how he had grown to like Elena, he felt in no hurry to rush the matter. He closed the door to the hall; he was expected to stand in the hall's waiting room until fanfare of trumpets signalled his entrance. But when he turned, he saw Elena approaching.

She looked beautiful: her hair finally tamed and silky, her face composed and subtly painted. She wore the shimmering, layered dress he had seen when he had hidden in her wardrobe, and somehow made it look even lovelier. But most of all she looked as if she was finally comfortable in her own skin. He was happy for her.

"They say it's bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the wedding," Arthur said.

"Come," Elena said, holding out her hand. "I want us to see my father together, before the wedding. He's waiting for us."

They walked down the hall together, Elena leading the way. She seemed to be preoccupied, saying little, and Arthur wondered what she was thinking about. Perhaps she was considering their life together as husband and wife, as future king and queen, and all that she was about to gain. All Arthur could think about was what he was giving up.

The rockslide had been let loose, and now it was barrelling down the mountainside, readying to crush what lay below. And what was it that he was sacrificing? What chance had he ever had of love, of choice? Morgana's accusations had always stung him because they were true: so often he put up only a token resistance, assuming he resisted at all. His father had beaten that out of him, if only with his words.

Arthur could acknowledge that, could see the painful story of his past laid out before him now, at this moment of truth. If he was a coward, it was because his father had made him a coward. But knowing that wasn't enough. He still felt as trapped as he ever had, fearful of his father's coldness, terrified of his rage. Arthur had never been good enough, never fast enough, never strong enough. He had to be better than any other man in Albion just to survive, long before any battle. Uther would accept
nothing less. It was not that success meant he was worth his father's love. It was that every defeat was a sign that he was not, that he never could be. It was a sign of his imperfection, and Uther had made it painfully clear that he could not have an imperfect son. To be his father's perfect son, his only choice was to obey, to keep his questions to himself. To resist only when resistance was expected, approved of. True rebellion meant a week in the dungeons, or the taking away of whatever small joys he had scrounged for himself.

Arthur had believed that his father was right. Only someone who was perfect could know perfection, could hold up others to that standard. Uther had raised Camelot from its knees, vanquished his enemies, defeated and humiliated his opponents. Arthur had always had his doubts, his criticisms, but despite all of that he had seen his father as a towering figure, stone or iron standing high on a stone pedestal. Yet at some point over the past week, that pedestal had finally cracked. There was no question that his father had lied about magic, and worse, had destroyed countless innocents, countless lives, for no apparent reason at all. He had stood and spoken again and again of Camelot as a paragon of goodness and truth and righteousness, all the while sowing seeds of poison into her soil. It was, at last, too much for Arthur to reconcile.

In the caves of Gedref, he had told Merlin that he had been taught never to believe in love. But the truth was more complicated. Uther's love for Ygraine had been real, and that the loss of it had destroyed Uther's heart, hardened him into the man he was today. If his father was perfect, if perfection was cold and loveless, then how could Arthur ever open his own heart? A prince could not have friends, a prince could not love, and neither could a king, if he hoped to rule with wisdom and clear eyes. Marriage was as joyless a duty as everything else.

That was what Arthur had believed. But as the crack widened, as the pedestal crumbled before his eyes, he knew that it was all lies. He wondered now if anything he knew of his father was true. He felt on the verge of an outright crisis, the brink of madness, and forced himself back from the edge. If he gave in now, let the weight of it crush him, Camelot would fall under the wrath of the Sidhe. All those people gathering in the hall, everyone in the town and far beyond, to the borders of Camelot and Gawant and Deorham, they were all depending on him to save them. If his life had any true purpose, it was their protection.

None of them deserved to die in flames, screaming as they burned. None of them.

Elena opened the door to the waiting room, and there was Lord Godwyn. As soon as he saw Elena, he rushed to embrace her. Father and daughter held each other tightly, their eyes wet with tears of joy. Arthur could not remember ever being held that way, could not even imagine it. Did his father love him at all, or only however much of Arthur had been molded in his image?

"Look at you," Godwyn said, gazing upon Elena. "I can hardly believe my eyes. The enchantment...?"

"I'll explain everything later," Elena said, glancing at Arthur. "But it's gone. Arthur... he saved me, father. For the first time, I feel like... like I can do anything. My mind is clear."

"I can see it in your eyes," Godwyn said, and cupped her cheek with his hand. But then he dropped it, anger clouding him. "Grunhilda. For what she's done to you, to all of us..."

"She will be punished," Elena said, with remarkable calm. "I'll see to that. But I promised to show her mercy. She has information..." She hesitated, looking to Arthur again.

"Grunhilda's cooperation is needed, my lord," Arthur said, apologetically. "If there were any other way..."
"I see," Godwyn said, though it was obvious he was full of questions. Questions he knew not to ask. 
"Then the situation is the same?"

"I'm afraid so," Arthur said. The less Godwyn knew, the better. At least until he was safely back in 
Gawant and away from Uther's observant gaze.

"My daughter has been restored," Godwyn said, squeezing Elena's hand. "That's enough for me." 
He held out his other hand for Arthur to take. "Then the wedding can go on as planned."

Arthur reached out to accept Godwyn's offer, but before he could, Elena let go. "Father," she began, 
hesitant. "I know how important this day is," Elena began, cautiously. "I know how long you've 
waited, what it means to you, to our kingdom, but...

Arthur suddenly knew what she was about to say. And he knew that if he said anything like it to his 
own father, the response would be as swift and painful as it ever was: lectures, threats, emotional 
blackmail, even physical violence if it came to it. But Godwyn showed nothing but concern. "What 
is it, my dear? Whatever it is, you can tell me."

"I know I've never been the princess you wanted me to be," Elena began, then held up her hand 
when Godwyn began to interrupt. "Just let me finish, please."

"Go on," Godwyn said, gently.

"It wasn't that I didn't want that. To make you proud of me, to walk in your footsteps. But I couldn't, 
no matter how hard I tried. I couldn't think properly about things or concentrate long enough to learn 
or remember. Until today. When the enchantment lifted... I could see the world, see myself for the 
first time. All the things that had seemed impossible, they're finally within reach." Elena paused, 
working up her courage. "And that's why I don't want to marry Arthur." She looked over to Arthur, 
eyes suddenly wide. "Not because of you! You would be a wonderful husband, a great king, but..."

She turned back to her father, quietly pleading. "I'm only just finding out who I truly am. What I'm 
capable of now that my mind is finally my own. It's not that I don't want to be Camelot's queen one 
day, but that I want to be Gawant's queen. I want to make you proud."

"Elena," Godwyn began, obviously affected by her words. "I have always been proud of you. 
Always. The only thing I've ever wanted was for you to be happy. And if this is truly what you 
want..."

"It is," Elena said, with a tearful smile. She hugged her father again, squeezing him for all she was 
worth. Godwyn chuckled fondly and held her back.

"Then we'll find a way," Godwyn said. "Uther will understand."

"He won't," Arthur said, regretting that it was the truth. As remarkable as Godwyn's love for Elena 
was, that was nothing against the strength of Uther's determination to defeat Alined. Arthur realized 
now that his own feelings mattered so little to Uther because he was just another pawn in his father's 
political games. The marriage was nothing more than a means to an end. All this time, he had been 
begging his father for respect, for kindness, for the smallest scrap of love, but they would never be 
granted. The plain fact of it had been in front of him all along, but it had been too terrible to accept. 
But just like Elena, he saw clearly now. And it changed everything.

"Arthur, you must understand, this is not a rejection of you," Godwyn began, concerned.

"I know," Arthur said, holding up a hand to stop him. "And Elena's right. We both deserve to make 
our own choices. But the marriage was never about us."
Realization immediately sobered Godwyn. "I'm afraid he's right," he told Elena. But before she could protest, he continued. "Let me speak to Uther. If I can convince him to change his mind..."

"You won't," Arthur said, as a plan began to come together in his mind. "But you won't have to. He-"

He was interrupted by the sound of trumpets, and realized with horror that the wedding had begun. They were out of time. The trumpets sounded again, and the three of them looked to each other in alarm.

"If you stand against my father, it will only put Gawant in danger," Arthur said, hurriedly. "The only way we can call off the wedding is if we can still give him what he wants."

"Deorham," Godwyn said. "But how?"

The trumpets sounded again, rather more impatiently this time. Arthur half expected his father to send in the guards to haul them out by force. There was a general murmur of discontent on the other side of the door, and then a familiar heavy stride.

"Let me do the talking," Arthur said, then turned to face the door. Moments later, Uther burst in, face flushed with humiliation.

"What is the meaning of this?" Uther demanded, then his eyes set on Godwyn. His eyebrows raised in irritated surprise. "Lord Godwyn?"

"Father," Arthur said, and thought that facing down the Great Dragon was nothing compared to this. "I apologize for the short notice, but we've come to a new arrangement."

Uther blinked at him, as if Arthur had just spoken complete gibberish. "Excuse me?"

"Elena and I do not wish to marry," Arthur said, putting every ounce of courage into his voice. "We discussed it with Lord Godwyn and the decision is made."

Uther stared at Godwyn and Elena, then dragged Arthur over by the arm and lowered his voice. "What exactly do you think you're doing?"

For once in his life, Arthur refused to let his father bully him. "The right thing, father."

"For who? For Camelot, or for yourself?"

"The two things aren't entirely separate."

"Clearly I was wrong. If you're incapable of putting your duty before your feelings, you're not ready to be Regent, much less King."

Arthur bristled. He longed to tell his father that he would make a better King than Uther ever had, because he actually cared about people other than himself. But now was not the time to be dragged down to the dungeons until he'd learned his lesson.

"The decision is made," he said, with finality. "But Lord Godwyn has generously agreed to pledge his full support of your campaign against Deorham. His army is yours to command, for whatever it takes to secure Alined's complete surrender."

That stopped Uther in his tracks. He rounded on Godwyn. "Is this true?"

"It is," Godwyn said, quickly adjusting to the new plan. "I know that this is a delicate situation for all..."
of us. The last thing I wish is to cause Camelot any difficulty. But I must put the needs of my
daughter first. She is, after all, my only heir. You understand how precious she is to me." He gave a
warm smile, as if of course Uther would understand why a father would be willing to sacrifice
anything for the happiness of his child.

"I must apologize, my lord," Elena said, with a graceful bow. "Please forgive me. But I must follow
my own path. I hope that this will not risk the close relationship of our kingdoms."

Uther looked at the three of them with thinly veiled disgust. Arthur saw him calculating his odds,
looking for a way to squeeze every drop of victory out of a bad situation. Then on came the mask,
and he smiled generously at Godwyn and Elena. "Of course. I understand. But as you say, such a
delicate situation must be handled appropriately. I will have the treaty amended."

As Uther turned, he shot Arthur a venomous glare, just for him alone. He opened the door and
waved, beckoning for Geoffrey to join them. The old man walked as quickly as he could while still
maintaining his dignity.

"The situation has changed," Uther told Geoffrey. "Arthur and Elena will not be marrying."

"What!" Geoffrey exclaimed, taken aback. "But sire--"

"Lord Godwyn has generously pledged the full support of his army," Uther continued.

"It shall be Uther's to command," Godwyn agreed. "Until we have secured Alined's complete
surrender."

"Yes," Uther said, obviously not pleased by the qualifier. "Change the documents immediately."

"Yes, sire. Let me just..." Geoffrey sat down at the small table in the corner and unrolled the treaty
and the marriage contract. "This is quite irregular," he muttered, shaking his head. He uncorked his
small bottle of ink and dipped his quill, then began striking out lines from both documents and
writing new ones. It was obvious that he did not appreciate being so rushed, but he worked as
quickly as he could, what with Uther hovering over him like a thundercloud.

In a matter of minutes, it was done. The marriage contract was now reduced to a pledge of military
support by Godwyn and Gawant, and the treaty had been amended to remove all mention of the
marriage. Uther instructed them all to enter the hall, not even waiting for the ink to dry.

When the trumpeters saw Arthur and Elena proceeding down the aisle, they raised their instruments
to herald their arrival. Uther ignored them, his eyes locked on Alined, who was waiting at the end of
the aisle with undisguised curiosity. No doubt Alined was wondering if this was an opportunity to
snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. Given what he had sent Trickler to do, Arthur had no
sympathy for the man. It would be satisfying indeed to see him taken down.

Godwyn and Uther took Geoffrey's place before the thrones, and Arthur and Elena stood before
them, facing the hall side by side. In the front row, he saw Morgana, Gwen, and Gaius, each
watching him with curiosity and varying levels of hope. He wished that what he was about to say
would not be a disappointment to them. He wished that Merlin was here beside him. But those were
battles he had yet to win.

"People of Camelot," Arthur began. "There is something I must tell you. Something I should have
said a long time ago." He turned to Elena and took her hands. "Elena, you are a wonderful woman,
and a beautiful bride. But you do not love me, and if I'm honest, I do not love you, either."

"No," Elena agreed, softening her rejection with a gentle smile.
"Then we are both here out of duty. Can you forgive me?" He was the one, after all, who had proposed. If he had stood up to Uther sooner, done the right thing then, they would not have to make such a public display.

"I forgive you," Elena said. "And I agree with all you have said."

"Then let us part as friends, and let the close relationship of our kingdoms be preserved."

They released each other and took a symbolic step apart, then turned to face the hall together. The hall rumbled with shock and surprise. But the biggest reaction of all came from Alined. He began to laugh and slowly clap his hands.

"Perfect," Alined declared. "Absolutely perfect. Why Uther, it seems you've been outflanked by your own."

"Alined," Uther warned. "You would be wise to hold your tongue. Geoffrey!"

Geoffrey cleared his throat and presented the amended treaty to Alined. Arthur watched as Alined's smile wilted into a sour frown.

"My daughter has made her choice, as have I," Godwyn declared. "Gawant has pledged complete military support of Camelot against Deorham. Surrender, or your kingdom will suffer the consequences."

Geoffrey dipped his quill and offered it to Alined.

Alined glared at Uther. "You bastard. I'll see you pay for this, mark my words."

Uther gave him a cold smile in return, and patiently waited.

Alined grabbed the quill with a snarl. All pretense fell away as he sneered at everyone around him like the vicious brute he was. But flail all he might, he was trapped and he knew it. Even his gambit with Trickler had failed, with his magical jester nowhere to be found. He had nothing. He had lost.

He signed with such force that it snapped the quill. He tossed the broken feather aside with a furious cry and stormed out. The guards moved to stop him, but Uther waved them back.

"Let him go," Uther said. "Geoffrey?"

Geoffrey produced a fresh quill, dipped and presented it for Uther and Godwyn to sign. The signed treaty was presented, and the hall broke into applause. Uther savored his victory, then raised his hand for silence.

"The feast will go on as planned. But it shall be a celebration of two kingdoms: the union of Camelot and Deorham, and our close and continuing friendship with Gawant."

There was more applause, and then the trumpeters sounded, signalling the end of the ceremony.

"We will speak of this later," Uther muttered as he walked past Arthur.

"Yes, father," Arthur said. But his father's threats were the last thing he was worried about. For there among the nobles of Camelot stood Prince Aulfric and Sir Drudwas of Tír-Mòr. They smiled to each other, then stared at Arthur with a dark satisfaction that sent a chill down his spine.

They had saved Elena, stopped the marriage, defeated Alined and saved Gawant from Uther's wrath. But all their victories had only brought them another day closer to Camelot's doom.
The Feast

The ceremony was over, and Arthur wanted nothing more than to escape from the crowded hall. Because everyone else was expected to attend the wedding, Merlin had been left alone with Grunhilda and Maeve and Eruduwyl, and while Arthur did trust that Merlin could defend himself, that didn't stop him from worrying. But more than that, he wanted to be the one to tell Merlin that the marriage was off, that he wasn't marrying Elena, that the worst had not happened.

Worst, of course, being a relative concept. These days, Arthur had a new understanding of how bad things could truly get. But for the time being, they were all alive and well and Camelot was still standing. The trick would be to keep it that way, and that was why he couldn't leave. They had a plan to stop the Sidhe invasion, or at least the beginnings of a plan. But for it to have any chance of succeeding, it was up to Arthur to keep Edern and Drudwas from leaving Camelot until Merlin and Gaius could take care of things on their end. Right now, the two Sidhe were maintaining their guise as Tír-Mòr royalty, but it was only a matter of time before they bored of smugly plotting the deaths of everyone in the castle and actually left to rally their army.

The abrupt cancellation of the wedding had resulted in no small amount of political confusion among the noble guests, and Uther and Godwyn were speaking to the noble families in turn to assure them that Camelot and Gawant's special relationship was secure, and that the plan to absorb Deorham was intact. Arthur had no doubt that many of the noble lords were already planning to stake their claims on Deorham lands, regardless of the current residents. Especially once Uther's Purge was underway. Arthur wondered, with a sick feeling, just how many of Camelot's lords had gained their power through Uther's first campaign of terror, plundering lands and wealth from those condemned to the pyre for their affiliation with the Old Religion.

Arthur knew that he couldn't let another Purge happen, but the prevention of it daunted him. Even if he stood his ground, refused to the point of being thrown into the dungeons or worse, that would do nothing to stop his father from sending others in his place. The Purge would be supported by the knights and nobles whose families had profited greatly from the Great Purge, who had no allegiance to the Old Religion, who would see in Uther's fury only opportunity for themselves.

Even now, with the ink barely dry on Alined's surrender, Uther was laying the groundwork for his next victory. It was no coincidence that he was speaking to Leon's parents, Lord Heward and Lady Asceline, with such particular enthusiasm, or that his attention was avidly returned. Lord Heward had long been one of Uther's staunchest allies in the court, and was nearly as anti-magic as Uther himself -- though Arthur had always felt that for Heward it was more a political stance than a personal one.

But if there was anything Uther cared about more than maintaining a powerful ally, it was wooing in another.

"Father," Arthur greeted, as he approached the group. "Lord Heward, Lady Asceline. I believe I owe you an apology."

"Nonsense," insisted Heward, with a paternal pat to Arthur's arm. "Best entertainment I've had in years. I was just telling your father how much I enjoyed watching the smoke pour out of Alined's ears."

Arthur couldn't help but laugh at the image. "Yes, that was rather... satisfying." For all his concerns for Deorham's future, he had no regrets about Alined's defeat. The man's only good quality as a king was benign neglect.
"It is a shame about the wedding," Asceline added. "You and Elena made such a lovely couple." She smiled at Godwyn. "My Leon has been just as stubborn about marrying. All he cares about is fighting." She pressed a hand to her chest. "One of these days I fear he'll break my heart."

"War is a dangerous business," Godwyn said. "But for all the heartache, I'm sure he makes you proud."

Asceline softened. "That he does." Then she brightened, as if an idea had just occurred to her. "I know it's soon, after all the trouble, but perhaps Princess Elena would like to meet him. He's not a prince, of course, but as second knight of Camelot..."

"Er, perhaps," Godwyn said. "I think for now Elena would like to concentrate on matters of state. But I'm certain she'd appreciate Sir Leon's friendship, and yours."

Arthur glanced back to Edern and Drudwas, and to his alarm he saw that they were heading out of the hall. He had to act fast.

He cleared his throat, drawing his father attention. "If you'll excuse us," he said, drawing Uther away from the group. "I think your friends from Tír-Mòr are leaving."

Uther quickly switched from irritated to alarmed. "What did you say to them?" he asked, accusingly.

"Nothing," Arthur said, honestly. "But I heard them muttering something about needing an ally who wasn't afraid to fight his way to victory."

That struck Uther right where it mattered: his pride. While Arthur might admire the bloodless victory over Alined, he knew that Uther would have much preferred to win Deorham the old-fashioned way. But his father was too old for the battlefield, and Arthur knew how much that fact galled him. The implication that he was seen as weak by the Tír-Mòr was too much for him to bear unchallenged.

Arthur followed his father as Uther marched straight for the Sidhe, catching up with them just before they reached the doors.

"Prince Aulfric," Uther said, putting a companionable arm around the man to guide him back into the room. "There's some people I'd like you to meet. Allies of mine that may be of great assistance to you and your people."

"King Uther," Edern replied, obviously annoyed. "I'm afraid we must be going."

"Yes," added Drudwas, with even greater impatience. "We've seen enough. It's time we were going."

"Absolutely not," Uther said, with a friendly tone that softened the steel beneath.

"You have been more than generous," Edern said, with more diplomacy than Drudwas had mustered. "And gracious in your offers of assistance. But at the present time..."

"You no longer seek to reclaim Tír-Mòr?" Uther pressed. "To retake your rightful throne and join the Five Kingdoms?"

Edern faltered, perhaps realizing that he had committed too well to their subterfuge, and backing out now might cause more trouble than anticipated. Arthur knew that his father could be like a dog with a bone when he set his sights on something he wanted. And he wanted Tír-Mòr, wanted the glory and power that would come with rescuing the kingdom from the Saxons and uniting it with the rest of Albion under the Five Kingdoms treaty. Especially after losing Gawant. Even if Uther was willing
to listen, Arthur didn't have the heart to tell him that Edern's plans and promises were as solid as smoke.

"I must apologize for the neglect of the past few days." Uther said, guiding the Sidhe firmly on. "The situation required my attention. But rest assured, Camelot shares your goals."

"Be that as it may," Drudwas said, though he glared at Edern as it said it. "Time is of the essence."

But the resistance only strengthened Uther's resolve. "To travel, you will need supplies, preparation. It will take hours before you can leave, and by then it will be far too close to nightfall. Leave tomorrow if you wish, but I insist you stay for the feast." Then he smiled again. "One last good meal before the road."

Edern actually appeared to be considering it. Arthur knew how much the Sidhe loved a good feast. Drudwas was less enthused, but it was clear that the decision wasn't his to make. "Very well," Edern said.

"Wonderful!" Uther said, and slapped Edern heartily on the back. "Now let me tell you about the time I defeated King Caerleon on the Northern Plains..."

Arthur struggled not to smirk as he watched Edern resign himself to his captivity. The two Sidhe were in for a long evening of Uther's company, complete with increasingly drunk regaling of Uther's many victorious battles as the feast wore on. Arthur couldn't think of anyone who deserved it more. And it would keep both his father and the Sidhe out of trouble for the rest of the day.

Arthur looked across the hall to where the knights were still gathered, and saw Leon chatting with Kay and Alynor. His last orders to them had not changed: protect Camelot at all costs. Now as then, he could not explain the nature of the danger, or that two of the enemy stood mere feet away. But if Arthur was going to stand against his father for Deorham, he could not do it alone. Whether Merlin, Gwen, and Morgana remained in Camelot or not, Arthur was going to need allies of his own: to protect both Deorham and Camelot.

Arthur began to see now how expertly his father had worked to secure his legacy, and why the First Code was so important. Only noble sons of Camelot could become knights, and those noble sons had all been raised by lords and ladies loyal to the crown and to Uther specifically. Some hated and feared magic as Uther did, and others opposed magic for their own benefit like Heward and Asceline. Either way, the nobility had been purged of those willing to restore magic should the winds change -- or when Arthur took the throne. Even once Arthur wore the crown, he would find himself faced with a council that would resist any change in the laws, and with an army of knights who were inculcated against magic just as he had been. Uther could not stamp out the Old Religion from the hearts of the common people, but by politically purging the nobility and dividing the classes, he had ensured that no believers would ever threaten his rule.

Arthur had thought that the First Code was a matter of snobbery and naked politics, but it was so much more than that. Before the Great Purge, there must have been nobles who worshipped, even nobles with magic. Knights who were also sorcerers. Such a thing was unthinkable now, and yet the reality of the First Code made it almost certain. If he went to Geoffrey's secret library now, what lost history would he find there? And how could it have been lost at all when it was in living memory of everyone older than him? Was it guilt that kept them silent? Greed?

No. It was fear. He suddenly realized why his father continued to persecute the peaceful Druids, why he regularly commanded searches for contraband, why even the smallest infractions was punishable by public execution. It was not that Uther considered people like Linette and Tom to be any kind of real threat to the kingdom. They were merely the examples that had to be made to keep everyone else
The realization gave Arthur a strange sort of hope. He remembered something his father has said when the kingdom had been suffering from the water plague: that if the disease could not be controlled, then the people would turn to magic for a cure. At the time, Arthur had seen it as his father's desire to protect the kingdom from magical corruption, but now he saw the truth: that Uther's oppression kept only a tenuous hold over the people, and should that hold slip, those who once worshipped the Old Religion would turn to it again. The strength of his father's iron grip was equalled by the force that pushed against it, even after twenty years of destruction and suffering.

It was in the common people that Arthur would find his allies, those he sought to elevate to knighthood. The men like Lancelot who, once trained, would make better fighters than all the noble sons combined. And perhaps even there, too, for surely amongst the nobility there were those who kept silent only out of fear. Even in this very room there must be some who held ties to the Old Religion, like Gaius and Gwen, or who had been born with magic like Merlin and Morgana. It was with bitter irony that he recognized that a week ago, he would have hunted such people down at his father's command. Those that remained hidden would have little reason to trust him now. But it was a comfort to know that he was not alone, that despite his father's best efforts, there were still allies to be found. People like Godwyn and Elena, who might one day stand with him against Uther because it was the right thing to do.

And there was another. There, flanked by guards and in chains but allowed to attend the ceremony and the feast, were Idriys and Aeddan. Arthur knew little of Aeddan beyond his prowess in battle, but with Idriys for an uncle it was likely that he had little fear of magic. Idriys not only accepted magic but welcomed it enough to employ Palaemon in his bid to capture Gedref, and also to try and tempt Merlin into his service. Idriys had laughed off Arthur's belief in corruption, had seen Uther's propaganda for what it was and was bold enough to say it. If any noble would be willing to stand against Uther to save the magic of Deorham, it was Idriys. True, he was still a prisoner until Deorham was conquered in more than name, but Arthur couldn't afford to be picky.

After glancing back to make sure that his father and the Sidhe were still occupied with each other, Arthur headed over to Idriys. Circumstances had changed drastically since their last conversation, when Arthur had still been reeling from Merlin's confession. Arthur felt ashamed of how he had been that day, almost out of his mind with shock and suspicious of everyone around him. It had not been his finest hour. But he was getting used to having to prove himself to people that he had disappointed. At least, unlike Uther, there was a chance that Idriys would understand and forgive him.

"Lord Idriys, Sir Aeddan," Arthur greeted, with a nod to each man.

"Prince Arthur," Idriys replied, wary but respectful. He was hardly in a position to do otherwise, but Arthur appreciated it anyway. Aeddan was less polite, giving only a tight nod and looking as though he would gladly strangle Arthur where he stood. He had not taken his defeat well, and was clearly even less pleased by Alined's submission.

There was little that Arthur could say directly, especially because of the guards. He knew all too well that anything unusual about the conversation would reach his father's ears. Yet this was the best opportunity he would have to speak to Idriys at all, so they would have to make do.

"I must congratulate you," Idriys said. "Uther has waited for this day for a long time. Deorham would not be his without your victory at Gedref."

If Arthur didn't know what Idriys really thought of Uther, he might have actually taken it as a compliment. "Alined has only himself to blame. Gedref was his gamble."
"And now he pays his due," Idriys said, with a philosophical sigh. He held up his chained wrists. "And what shall the payment be for our freedom? Surely Uther has use for us now that we are his loyal subjects, and yours."

"Your freedom has already been paid for," Arthur said, thinking of the chest of gold that Alined presented upon his arrival. Despite Uther's grandstanding, the gold had been included in Alined's surrender and was already secured in Camelot's vaults. "A delegation will be prepared to bring you and Alined back to Deorham so that you may formally announce your surrender."

"And my men?"

"Also paid for," Arthur said. "They will be allowed to write messages to their families, dictated if necessary, and the letters will be brought down with the delegation. But their release will have to wait until Deorham's lords have pledged their fealty to my father." Arthur regretted the delay, but they could hardly release Deorham's army before then. If the lords still believed they could resist, there was a chance they might revolt.

"Not all the lords will be willing," Idriys warned, and Arthur had no doubt that he was one of them.

"Then their lands and possessions will be confiscated by the crown," Arthur replied, bluntly. If another, more cooperative noble could not be found to manage of the land, then one from Camelot would volunteer. No doubt after the long history of attacks by Deorham on Gedref, Lord Wichard would be eager to help. Sir Merek might find himself in charge of his own lands soon enough.

"I see. I expect you are eager for the spring, when you arrive as Regent."

Arthur hesitated to reply. Despite Uther's anger over the marriage, Arthur doubted the rest of his plans had changed. For years Arthur had anxiously awaited the day that he would be named Regent, when he would finally have some real power of his own. But now that power would come at the cost of innocent lives. "I will do what I must," he said, which was as truthful as he could afford to be. "Deorham must be protected."

Idriys frowned, disappointed. "Then you still accept what you are told?"

"My eyes are open," Arthur said. "And it is my intention that Deorham's people be treated well. You have my word."

Idriys stared at him, at first uncertain, then pleasantly surprised. "And Merlin?"

"Released from my service, and free to do as he wishes," Arthur admitted. "But it is my hope that he will chose to stay."

"Then perhaps we will dine together in the spring," Idriys said, with a genuine smile.

"I would like that," Arthur said, and held out his arm as a gesture of respect. Idriys hesitated, then took it, the manacles jangling as they shook arms.

Arthur glance to Aeddan, who was staring at them in astonishment. Idriys gave him a look, and Aeddan nodded and turned away; obviously they would talk about this later, once they had some privacy. At least, as much as the dungeons would allow.

"By the way, I never had a chance to thank you," Arthur said. "For what you did for Merlin in Gedref." If Idriys had not taken Merlin under his wing, Merlin might not have made it out of the castle alive.
Idriys gave a wry chuckle. "Perhaps if I had been less generous, our positions today would be reversed." Then, more soberly: "It can be difficult to know the right choice, and even harder to make it. I hope, Prince Arthur, that you will rule with an open mind and an open heart."

Arthur nodded, feeling humbled by Idriys' words. His eyes had been opened to the truth about magic, but more importantly, to the truth about himself. So many times he had rebelled against his father's ways, only to find himself perpetuating them. He didn't want to do that anymore. He didn't want to be cold and angry and controlling of others, didn't want to push them away and hurt them. Not only as a man, but as a king. He didn't want to rule by fear and domination. There were better ways to be.

The life that had been laid out for him by his father, the path that he had been forced to walk, was gone, blown away by the storms of the past week. There were challenges and choices ahead that he never dreamed he would have to face. But despite his fear and uncertainty, he welcomed them because they would be his choices to make. And he would not have to make them alone, because princes and kings and men didn't have to be alone. From now on, Arthur knew his life would never be the same, because he would decide for himself what he wanted it to be.

§

While Arthur was watching over the Sidhe, Gaius, Gwen, and Morgana snuck away from the hall, and they did not return until it was almost time for the feast to begin. Arthur barely managed to keep from running to meet them at the door.

"Everything is prepared," Gaius said, keeping his voice low. "Merlin will be waiting for you at the lake."

"And Grunhilda?" Arthur asked.

"Moderately helpful," Gaius said. "But she refused to accompany you to the lake or into Avalon. She fears for her life, as well she should."

"Then she won't open the portal for us?"

Gaius shook his head. "We must rely on our previous plan. I trust you've been able to keep our friends from leaving?"

Arthur looked over at the Tír-Mòr. Uther had kept them on a tight leash all afternoon, trying to impress upon them just how valuable an ally Camelot would be. Edern seemed to be enjoying himself at last, having matched Uther's pace at drinking wine, while Drudwas had remained sober and sour. "They're not going anywhere. At least not until my father is too drunk to notice."

Morgana snorted. "From the look of him, that won't be long. He's had an early start today."

"And that will be to our advantage," Gaius said. "As is the treaty. There are celebrations being held all over the town and in the camps outside the walls. You should not have any difficulty in reaching the lake."

"I doubt the Deorham are celebrating," Morgana muttered. She raised up her chin. "But I suppose you're happy about that."

Arthur gritted his teeth, then forced himself to relax. Now wasn't the time to be affected by Morgana's needling. "I swear to you, Morgana. I will not let anything happen to Deorham."

"And how do you intend to do that?"
"I don't know," Arthur admitted, then held up a hand to stop her retort. "Not yet. Even I can only save one kingdom at a time."

Gwen laughed, then cleared her throat, embarrassed. "Sorry."

"I'm coming with you," Morgana said. "I'm the one who's been forced to see it every night. I'm not going to just sit around waiting to live my nightmares for real."

"You want to come, you go convince our friend beneath the castle to protect you," Arthur said, trying not to blatantly speak of magic in the middle of a crowded room. "Right now, Merlin and I are the only ones who can safely pass through the Gates. And... if we fail, you'll be Camelot's only real defense. I need you here. Please."

Clearly flattery worked as well on Morgana as it did when she was trying to sway Arthur into doing what she wanted. "Very well," she said, as if she was the one to make the decision. "Go save Camelot. But if you come back, don't think one victory changes anything. You need to choose whose side you're on."

On that dramatic note, Morgana shoved past him and glided into the room, making her typically grand entrance that drew the eyes of any man with a pulse. Arthur shook his head in bemusement, then noticed that Gwen was staring at Morgana with the same interest as the men. When she realized that she was gawping, she blushed and hurried after her mistress.

"Well," Gaius said. "She's not wrong, you know."

"I know," Arthur agreed, then sighed. It had already been a long day, and it was going to be longer yet. "One crisis at a time, Gaius."

Gaius chuckled. "The gods are rarely so merciful," he said, then went to take his seat.

The horns sounded the beginning of the feast, and Arthur made his way to the high table. His seat was between Morgana and Elena; beside Elena was her father, then Uther, and then Edern and Drudwas. At the far end sat Alined, who had been retrieved from wherever he had gone off to sulk after the ceremony. Arthur would have expected Alined to be at his father's left, so the distance between them was as much an insult to Alined as it was an attempt to woo the Tír-Mór. But of course Uther had no intention of letting Alined remain in charge of Deorham even as a proxy. Once Arthur was declared Regent, Alined would be retired to some lonely patch of land and never seen again. Arthur almost felt sorry for him.

Arthur barely listened as his father made his usual short speech; it was nothing he hadn't heard countless times before. But as Uther spoke of Gawant, he faltered and glanced in Arthur's direction. As brief as it was, the look carried a palpable anger. Arthur may have escaped marriage, but in doing so he had humiliated his father in public. There were few more terrible sins.

As the feast began, Elena gave Arthur a supportive smile. "He'll come around. He can't stay mad at you forever."

"You don't know my father very well," Arthur said, as lightly as he could. Despite his newfound resolve, he still quailed under his father's anger. He was a grown man, the best swordsman in Albion, and yet part of him was still a frightened boy, blood racing and face hot with shame and fear, flinching away from his father's words or his hand. He forced himself to breathe until the feeling passed.

"He did the right thing, you know." Godwyn was speaking to Uther, and Arthur glanced past Elena
to see that his father was glowering at his wine. "You mustn't punish him. They were neither of them
in love."

"That's not the point," rumbled Uther, just audible over the low din of the hall. "It's not the way
things are done."

"Maybe it's time things changed," Godwyn said, kindly. "I think he has the makings of a great king.
You should be proud of him."

Uther's reply was to drink deeply from his cup. He gazed across the room, looking for an excuse to
change the conversation. "What happened to that nursemaid of yours?"

To his credit, Godwyn didn't bat an eyelash. "Grunhilda? I'm afraid she was too distraught over the
wedding to attend. Poor woman had her heart set on the match."

Uther gave a dismissive hum. "That fool of Alined's is missing as well."

"Good help is so hard to find," Godwyn said.

"I don't trust him," Uther continued, and took another sip. "If he isn't found by the morning, I'll have
him hunted down." The last he said as he glared down the table at Alined. Arthur remarked to
himself that no victory was complete to Uther until his enemy had been reduced to ashes. Alined
should consider himself lucky.

"You know," Godwyn began, "I do believe that the real reason Grunhilda is so upset is that she sees
how much my Elena has grown up, these past days. She no longer needs a nursemaid. Such a
parting can be quite difficult. After Aelfleda's passing, Grunhilda was like a mother to Elena." He
sighed. "We raise our children wanting nothing more than for them to grow up strong and proud. But
when they do, we don't want to let go. We don't want to lose them. But if we hold on too tight, that
only pushes them away."

Uther's expression softened, but as his anger faded his grief rose to the fore. He drained his cup and
set it down hard. "Perhaps you're right," Uther said, but there was little conviction behind his words.

Arthur looked away, Uther's grief was almost more terrible than his anger. Intentional or not,
Godwyn's mention of his own dead wife was certain to bring up memories of Ygraine, and his
father's grief for her had yet to lessen after all these years. It only made Arthur feel lonelier, because
he couldn't share in whatever memories his father held so dear. Twenty-two years dead, and she was
still the only one that Uther had room for in his heart.

Arthur didn't have much of an appetite, but he forced himself to eat. He needed his strength for
Avalon. For that reason, he had George water his wine down until it only hinted at its former life as
grapes. Morgana and Elena ended up chatting past him as he found he wasn't up for much
conversation. Instead, he focused on the Sidhe, about what he had seen in Avalon when he rescued
Merlin, about what knowledge they had gleaned from Geoffrey's books. He did what he could to
arm himself against so much yet unknown.

He also watched the Sidhe. As Uther sank deeper into his cups, even Edern grew impatient. It was
only a matter of time before they excused themselves for the night, with the intent to head directly for
the lake. Arthur couldn't leave until they did, but he also needed to make sure he reached the lake
first. And as they could fly, he needed to give them a reason to leave the feast but not Camelot.

He waited for Edern and Drudwas to say their goodnights to Uther, then stood to follow them out
into the hall. As he did, Morgana placed a hand on his arm.
"I won't wish you good luck," she said, wryly. "But... good luck, Arthur." She gave him a crooked smile, and Arthur realized that she didn't want them to part on bad terms. Not if this might be the last time they saw each other.

"Thank you," he said, genuinely, and mustered a smile back. Then he headed after the Sidhe, and took a deep breath. He caught up with them in the hall.

"Prince Arthur," greeted Drudwas. There was a malicious eagerness to his smile that didn't look right on a human face. "Have you come to say goodbye?"

"Before you hurry off, there's something you should know," Arthur said. "That is, if you're still interested in finding Erdudwyl."

Drudwas' smile instantly snapped into a snarl, matched only by the fury in Edern's eyes. They shifted as if to lunge at him, but Arthur drew his sword, warning them back.

"Where is she?" growled Drudwas. "Tell me, human, or I will personally see to it that you die last."

Arthur didn't let himself be intimidated. He'd faced down his father today; compared to that, a couple of pissed-off fairies were child's play. "You've searched the castle from top to bottom, but you couldn't find her anywhere. That's because you've been looking in the wrong place."

"Where?" demanded Edern.

Arthur took a step closer, taunting them to really get their ire up. "Do you really think I'd be so stupid as to keep her here? Or maybe you're the stupid ones. You didn't have the sense to look past your own noses." He chuckled at them, then gestured towards the window. "Before you burn down my city, you might want to look around. See the sights. All the little cottages. There are so many of them. You know, I just don't remember which one I put her in..."

Drudwas gave a snarl of frustration, and then in a blink he was gone, and a small blue light went flying out the open window. Edern stared at Arthur, then just as quickly he shed his glamour and flew after Drudwas.

Arthur had no time to waste. He had set them on a wild goose chase, one that should keep them occupied for long enough for him to reach the lake. But every minute counted. He took off on a run, heading out of the castle and town and into the forest beyond.

Once Arthur started running, he didn't stop. He ran straight on, not caring that his fine clothes became soaked with sweat and streaked with dirt and tree sap. He didn't slow or stop for an instant until he skidded to a halt at the edge of the lake, then looked wildly around. Had he come too late? There was always a chance that the Sidhe would beat him here no matter how much they delayed or how fast he ran. If worst came to worst, the plan was for Merlin to leave without him, so at least one of them would make it through to Avalon.

"Arthur." A hushed whisper made Arthur turn, and there, hiding behind some scrubby bushes was Merlin. Arthur hurried over to meet him, and let out a breath of relief. He hadn't come too late.

"You're a sight for sore eyes," Arthur whispered, as he knelt next to Merlin. Merlin was finally out of that ridiculous dress, and was wearing the knight's armor that Arthur had made for him to wear in Gedref. It suited him, though now was not the time to say so.

"Here," Merlin said, holding out Arthur's armor. "And hurry, they'll be here any minute."
Arthur didn't argue; he quickly stripped down and changed. He didn't protest when Merlin reached out and tightened his buckles for him. The familiar action made Arthur's heart twang. Whether they lived or died, this might be the last time Merlin would ever adjust his armor for him. This might be the last time for a lot of things.

"You have our hostages?" Arthur asked, focusing on the matter at hand.

Merlin nodded and gestured to his pack. "And supplies. Food, water."

"I thought we couldn't eat in Avalon."

"Grunhilda said we can eat what we bring with us," Merlin explained. "We just can't eat food grown from Avalon soil."

"Huh. Makes sense, I suppose." As much as anything magic made sense. Arthur was all-too-aware of how little he knew, how much he had to learn. Even though he'd navigated Avalon himself and Merlin had merely been a captive bird the whole time, he knew he would be relying on Merlin to get them through this. Merlin was magic. Even if Sidhe magic was different from the Old Religion, this was the sort of thing that Merlin lived and breathed, just as Arthur lived and breathed the court and the battlefield.

"You know," Arthur said, grasping for something to say, "last time I wasn't hungry at all. Not until we got back."

"That was because of the torcs," Merlin said. "My magic sustained and protected both of us. Don't expect things to feel the same."

"Oh."

Arthur lapsed into silence as Merlin finished tightening his armor. When he finished, Merlin reached down and picked up the sword and held it out for Arthur to take. A wave of memory came over Arthur as he recalled their first days together. How proud Merlin had been to fit his armor properly and hand him his sword so he could fight in the tournament. At the time, Arthur had shown little patience or regard for Merlin, who he had seen as a burden and a nuisance imposed upon him by his father, even as Uther pressured him to win. So often Uther's anger and expectations had covered Arthur's heart like a shroud, but time after time Merlin had torn it away to let the light in.

Arthur took the sword and sheathed it in his belt. He looked Merlin over, noting that his armor was clean and well-fitted, that the sword Arthur had given him was ready at his side. The troubles of the past week had not diminished the muscle he had built up over his training. He looked every inch the knight, and Arthur felt painfully proud of him for that.

"Merlin," Arthur began. "In case things go wrong..."

"Don't," Merlin said, sharply. Then he softened, but only some. "We'll get through this. We'll save Camelot. And then..." He looked away, unwilling or unable to finish. He reached into his pack and pulled out two red hats: the cohuleen druiths that Síofra had given them, that would enable them to breathe underwater. Merlin put his own on, then handed the other to Arthur without a word.

Arthur hated this. He hated the distance between them, hated that he had put it there, hated that Merlin was suffering and there was nothing he could do to make things better. Not right now, with so much depending on them. Of all of the people Arthur had harmed in his ignorance and fear, Merlin was the one he had hurt the most. The one he had lied to and abused. And even before Merlin's confession, there were so many ways that Arthur had failed him, it was nothing short of a
miracle that Merlin had forgiven him and trusted him for so long. But that trust had been broken, shattered and crushed under his boot, and he didn't know how it could be rebuilt. If Merlin would even want to rebuild it.

In Elena and Godwyn, Arthur had seen kindness and mercy. Despite all that Maeve had cost Elena growing up, she had still learned the lessons that mattered from her father. Now that she was freed from her burden, she was certain to become a wise leader and a good queen. Godwyn loved Elena, and love did not destroy them. They had lost Elena's mother, and grief had not destroyed them. All the absolutes of Arthur's childhood were proved false by their mere existence. But knowing he had been wrong didn't tell him how to be right.

Every moment that Merlin couldn't look at him, it was because he was saying goodbye. Arthur didn't want to make the same mistakes again, didn't want to force Merlin to stay, if he even could. He wanted Merlin to stay because it was what Merlin wanted, because staying would make him happy. But Arthur didn't know what would make Merlin happy. He didn't know what would make Merlin love him again. There were no books with answers to such questions, not in any library. There were no tactics to follow, no battles to win. Love was a matter of the heart, and Arthur was only just beginning to understand his own.

There was only one small flicker of hope, and he clung to it with all his might. It was the glimpse he had seen that morning, the brief flash of sunlight that had been Merlin's love for him, or at least some lingering ghost of it. It wasn't much, but it was all he had, and so it would have to be enough. They just had to get through this, and then maybe they could try again, start fresh, whatever it took. If Arthur had learned anything today, it was that he had to fight for what he believed in. And the one thing he believed in more than anything else was Merlin.

"Get down," Merlin whispered, urgently.

They crouched low and peered through the leaves as two bright balls of light floated down from over the treetops and circled over the lake like agitated gnats. Arthur could barely follow them, but Merlin was focused, tensed and ready. He reached out and grabbed Arthur's arm, holding it in preparation for when the moment came.

And then it began. A wind rose from the water, rustling the trees and carrying the leaf litter up from the ground to swirl in the air. The center of the lake began to glow, and then the glow swelled until the whole lake was alight. The murky water turned clear as glass, and through it lay Avalon, rising down.

Merlin hitched his pack and braced himself to lunge, but didn't let go of Arthur's arm. The blue lights circled again, and then plunged down into the water.

"Now!" Merlin hissed, nearly dragging Arthur along as they leapt out and sped for the water's edge. They didn't have long before the Gates closed again, and every second counted.

They breathed Camelot air one last time, then dove into golden light.
The world turned around them as they swam down through the golden haze of the Gates of Avalon. Up became down, left became right, and as the light faded, they found themselves swimming upwards into crystal-clear water. Seconds after they emerged, the golden light blinked out, and Arthur blinked against the sudden darkness as his eyes strained to adjust. At first all he saw was the blue light of the two Sidhe racing up to the surface ahead of them, too fast to follow. They broke the surface and were gone.

Let them go. They would meet up again soon enough.

The darkness eased, and in the dusk Arthur saw Merlin treading water a few feet away from him. Around them lay the now-familiar standing stones that circled the Gates on both sides, and silhouetted above were the giant lilypads that Arthur had rested on when he first arrived in Avalon.

There was a tug at his arm, and Arthur turned to see that Merlin was pointing upwards. With a few kicks, Merlin started swimming upwards, but Arthur hesitated. Thanks to the cohuleen druith, he did not have to scramble for air as he did before, and he found himself considering an idea that he had been forced to set aside before.

He had a sword that could cut stone. A sword that could destroy powerful magic. Maybe they couldn't stop the Sidhe directly, but maybe they didn't have to. It would have been better to destroy the Gates from the other side, but Arthur knew better than anyone about the sacrifices of war. If he could trap the Sidhe here, Camelot and Albion would be saved.

He drew his sword, and even in the low light it shone with startling brilliance. Would the stones of the Gates part as easily as the castle stones or the lake bed? There was only one way to find out. He swam over to one of the large stones and raised his sword to strike a cutting blow--

He cried out in shock as the hilt of his sword suddenly became hot as a brand. He let go, and the sword floated slowly down, the steel handle glowing orange before it sizzled grey, cooled fast by the waters. Arthur looked up and saw Merlin above him, hand still outstretched from casting a spell. But there was no gold in his eyes, only anger. Merlin pointed upwards urgently, then kicked away, rising up to the surface with pointed dismissal. Arthur retrieved his sword, holding it carefully by the unheated blade, and followed.

At the surface, they clambered up onto the nearest of the giant lilypads. They coughed their lungs clear of water before removing their cohuleen druiths, then sat to catch their breaths and adjust to the air again. The last traces of sunset lit the horizon in the east, and in the west the moon and stars brightened. The islands were dark mountains around them, scattered with glimmers of light in echo of the stars above. Fireflies sparked across the surface of the lake, and an evening chorus of frogs chirped noisily.

"Why did you stop me?" Arthur asked, when it became apparent that Merlin wasn't going to voluntarily explain himself. "You know what we're up against. Destroying the Gates could be our only chance to stop the Sidhe."

"No," Merlin said. "Not like this."

"Then how?" Arthur asked, genuinely wanting to know. If Merlin had any plans up his sleeve, now was the time to share them.
"I don't know," Merlin admitted. "But you have no right to destroy the Gates."

Arthur sputtered. "You're the one who keeps saying that the Old Religion and the Sidhe are enemies. Why do you suddenly want to protect them?"

"Because this is about more than the Sidhe," Merlin said, and gestured to the islands around them. "Arthur, this is the Otherworld. The Afterlife. If you're lucky, this is where your soul goes when you die. It's where the gods live. But you don't care about any of that, or how ancient and powerful the Gates are, or what the consequences might be. To you they're just another magical threat to Camelot, and that means they deserve to be destroyed."

"It's not..." Arthur began, protesting, but he knew that Merlin was right. It was still his first instinct to treat magic as if its only importance was how dangerous it was to Camelot. Despite the hints he had seen of how vital magic might be to Camelot and Albion, it was hard to break that lifelong habit. He sighed. "Maybe you're right. But we have no other way to stop the Sidhe. I know you care about Camelot. Thousands of innocent people don't deserve to die."

"Don't you think I know that?" Merlin asked, exasperated. "I've spent the last two years of my life giving everything I have to protect them. And in case you forgot, this whole mess is our fault. Sophia and Aulfric tried to kill you to get back here, and I killed them to save you. You might not remember any of it, but I do, and so do the Sidhe. They want to destroy Camelot because I killed Sophia and Aulfric. How do you think they'd react if you destroyed the Gates?"

"It wouldn't matter, because they'd be trapped here with us," Arthur said. If the invasion was their fault, then they'd pay the price.

Merlin gave a long-suffering look. "Arthur, this isn't the only passage between our world and Avalon. Gaius said that there are five Gateways in Albion alone. Destroying this one would only delay the invasion and make it worse. It wouldn't just be the Tylwyth Teg coming after us. It would be all the Sidhe plus everyone else who was affected because you thought you had a bright idea to stop them."

"Fine," Arthur said, and thought to himself that they could have skipped a lot of the argument if Merlin had only told him the last part first. But he had the sense not to say that aloud. He wanted Merlin to be less mad at him, not more. Attempting to destroy the Gates had been a mistake. Arthur knew that if he ever wanted Merlin to trust him again, he had to stop putting him in the position of fighting against magic on Camelot's behalf. That would be easier to achieve if magic would stop putting Camelot in danger in the first place.

Merlin turned away, quite clearly fed up, and opened his pack. He pulled out a cloth bundle, which was surprisingly dry, and opened it to reveal the Sidhe cage. Arthur slid closer to look inside.

"Is Maeve feeling better yet?" Merlin asked.

"She will not thrive until we are released from this prison," Erdydwyl scowled. "Your dragon magic is foul and cold."

Arthur wondered if perhaps Maeve was too young to speak, or if she had been harmed by her separation from Elena. He doubted that the witches of Meredor had cared about the damage their potion might do to a Sidhe born too soon from its changeling host.

"But she won't die now that we're in Avalon," Merlin pressed. "Don't think you can lie to me. Grunhilda told me she would be better even in the cage."
Erdudwyl gave an angry snarl. "Once I am free, I will see that traitor flayed alive."

"The potion wasn't her fault," Merlin said. "And she helped us because of Maeve. She still loves her. She wants to keep her safe."

"A loyal Pixie would die before allowing harm to come to any Sidhe," Erdudwyl said, unmoved. "She should have killed you all or died trying."

"She loves Elena just as she loves Maeve," Merlin countered. "She couldn't choose between them."

"Then why is it only Maeve who suffers now?" Erdudwyl said.

Merlin had nothing to say to that. He wrapped the cage back up and put it deep into his pack again. Arthur noted that the rest of the pack's contents were also dry, unlike their sopping clothes.

"Grunhilda put a protection spell on your pack?" Arthur asked.

Merlin nodded. "Go call Morvarc'h. Let's get this over with."

Arthur bit back a comment about a servant not ordering around the Crown Prince. But Merlin wasn't a servant anymore, and Arthur was tired of holding his crown and position between them like a shield. If there was any hope of fixing things between them, he had to start treating Merlin with respect, like an equal. He went to the edge of the lilypad and dunked his head to call for the kelpie.

They sat in silence as they waited for Morvarc'h to arrive. The water horse was a fast traveller, but there was no way of knowing how far away he was starting from. Hopefully he wouldn't be long. Arthur looked at the islands again and wondered who and what might live on them, which were the homes of the Tylwyth Teg and the Aos Sí. He thought of his journey through the Unseelie court in the waters below, and the island of Oberon and Titania, full of strange creatures and magical illusions.

"I never had a chance to ask," Arthur said, his own voice sudden in the twilight. "During the feast, when you and Gwen... When you were captured. What happened?" Arthur had left Merlin tied up in his chambers, and the next thing he knew, Erdudwyl was giving him the blood-stained favor. That was what had convinced him that Merlin was dead. The next time he had seen Merlin again, he had already been turned into a bird.

Arthur had hoped the question might make Merlin open up, but if anything it only made him more tense and silent.

"I mean, obviously I know what happened," Arthur said, trying to recover. "I should have asked sooner. But you were a bird, and then... well..."

"It doesn't matter," Merlin said, tersely.

"Maybe it does," Arthur said. It might be easier for Merlin to talk about if they focused on the tactics of the situation. He knew how Merlin needed to feel useful. "Something you saw, something you heard. Anything could be the key--"

"I don't want to talk about it," Merlin said, brooking no argument. Then, softer: "I just want to get this over with."

Arthur wanted nothing more than to pull Merlin into a tight hug and never let him go. He wanted to clear the pain from Merlin's eyes and his voice. He wanted Merlin to be happy the way he had been in Gedref, before they had returned to Camelot and everything had gone wrong. Maybe it would be
better for Merlin to leave Camelot for good, but Arthur couldn't accept that.

And yet Merlin had already done it once: travelled to another kingdom and left behind everything he knew, his family and his friends and home. He had left Ealdor behind, left Hunith and Will with barely a look back and thrived in Camelot even as a secret sorcerer. If anyone could find happiness in a new life, it was Merlin. Merlin was a survivor, an adapter, while everything that had happened over the past week had taught Arthur how awful he was at real change. He daydreamed of leaving everything behind, living a simple life without duty and expectations, but even as a dream such thoughts had only been half-hearted. He recognized now that it was not that he had ever truly wanted to go, but that he yearned to leave behind his unhappiness. As if his sorrows could be abdicated like a crown, or shed like a blood-stained shirt after a battle.

Arthur couldn't let Merlin leave Camelot in grief and sadness. If he had chained Merlin's heart with pain, it was his responsibility to free it. It was the least he owed after everything Merlin had done for him.

The surface of the water shimmered and Morvarc'h emerged with a splash, trotting across the surface of the water before stopping at the edge of the lilypad. The kelpie whinnied and shook his sea-foam mane.

"Merlin," Morvarc'h greeted, with a strangely formal bow of his head. "It's an honor to meet you properly at last."

"Um, likewise," Merlin said. He was surprised, but covered by returning the bow. "Thank you for helping us."

"Morvarc'h knew my mother's ancestors," Arthur explained. In his previous recountings, he'd skipped that detail, perhaps because it raised so many questions he couldn't answer. "He saved them from drowning."

"Then you used to live in Albion?" Merlin asked.

"Centuries ago," Morvarc'h said. "It was a time of great change, as it must be now."

Merlin gave the water horse a curious look. "What makes you say that?"

Morvarc'h blew a puff of air from his nostrils, and he seemed almost amused. "Perhaps I speak hastily. If the legends are true, even the great power you bear now is nothing compared to what you will become. You are the Emrys, are you not?"

Merlin gaped at him, nearly losing his footing on the unsteady lilypad. "How?"

"There were signs, to those who know to look," Morvarc'h said. "But with your magic restrained, I could not be certain."

"But the last time you were in Albion, it was still ruled by the Romans." Arthur turned to Merlin. "How old is that prophecy?"

"I don't know," Merlin said, astonished. "It was on the temple wall, but... If that was right before the Purge, it doesn't explain..." He turned to Morvarc'h. "The time of fire is upon us. The time of retribution, brought about by our own pride. But when we are humble, the time of magic will return. The Emrys and the once and future king will rise, and all of Albion will bow to them."

After Merlin had confessed his magic, Arthur had been in a state of shock. At the time, the prophecy had seemed a minor detail, perhaps even a lie used by the Great Dragon to manipulate Merlin. But he
didn't recall Merlin telling him this full version before. Suddenly that minor detail was much more important, and every word might matter.

"The details have changed, but the essence is the same," Morvarc'h said. "The Emrys and the Once and Future King have always returned to Albion in its time of need. King Gradlon believed that his own father was one such incarnation. But without the Emrys, he could not fulfill his destiny. Now that you are together--"

"Hold on," Arthur said, straining to take that in. "Are you telling me that I'm the reincarnation of one of my mother's ancestors?"

"You bear the stone-cutter," Morvarc'h explained. "And the Emrys has found you." He gave a pleased knicker. "It has been more than a thousand years since your destiny was fulfilled. If it is fulfilled again, Albion may be a home to my kind once more."

Merlin walked away, his body taut with frustration. Then he walked back. "I can't deal with this right now." He rubbed at his ear. "Do you hear that? That buzzing sound?"

Arthur looked around, but he didn't hear any buzzing. He wondered if Merlin was trying to change the subject. To be fair, they had more pressing matters at hand than destiny and prophecies. Such vagaries could wait until Camelot wasn't in danger. "We need to reach the island of the Tylwyth Teg. Can you take us there?"

"Of course," Morvarc'h said, and sidled up to the lilypad so they could climb onto his back. "It will be my honor."

"Of course it will," Merlin muttered, and Arthur forced back a smile. Merlin was always adorable when he pouted.

§

They rode fast across the surface of the water, Morvarc'h's hooves kicking up a spray in their wake. Even though they could have travelled underwater as they had before, Morvarc'h wanted to spare them the arduous process of clearing their lungs of water again. Perhaps it was Arthur's imagination, but the kelpie seemed to be treating them with greater respect now that he'd decided they were these figures of prophecy. None of it made much sense to Arthur, but destiny or otherwise, he couldn't deny how right it felt to hold Merlin in his arms again.

Merlin had protested, and a small part of Arthur had been reluctant to impose physical closeness on him. But they needed to get to the island, and Arthur had insisted Merlin take the safer position of holding directly onto Morvarc'h's mane. Even through their layers of mail and armor, with his arms around Merlin and their bodies nestled tightly together, he could feel how Merlin alternately tensed and eased, torn between taking comfort in Arthur's touch and rejecting it.

All too soon they reached their destination. Morvarc'h stopped at the water's edge, and Arthur forced himself to release Merlin and hop down onto the rocky shore. He offered his hand, but Merlin ignored him, dismounting on the other side and nearly falling backwards into the water for the sake of his pride. He quickly recovered his balance and trudged up onto dry land, where he sat to shake the water from his boots.

"Follow the path until you come to a lake. There you will find King Gwynn's palace. But take care," warned Morvarc'h. "The Tylwyth Teg, like all Sidhe, do not care for uninvited guests. You will not find the way easy."
"We'll be careful," Arthur said. He'd learned his lessons from travelling to the Seelie Court. "Thank you again for your help."

Morvarc'h gave him a respectful bow, then another to Merlin. He flicked his tail, then leapt into the water, leaving barely a ripple in his wake.

On the journey over, the last of the twilight had faded. Even the fireflies had ended their courting, leaving them with only the moon and stars for light. Arthur surveyed the area and quickly found a single path leading into the island, just as he had in the island of the Seelie Court. That path had been both a guide and a trap, and he expected the same from this one. Yet he also knew that leaving the path meant walking directly into danger. It was unlikely that they would stumble onto someone as helpful as Puck again, so they would have to figure this out on their own.

Despite the similarity, the islands were otherwise very different. Where the Seelie Court had been surrounded by an ancient forest, rich with strange creatures, this island bore a remarkable resemblance to the Eryri mountains between Camelot and Gwynedd. There were patches of forest, but the land was mainly grass and rock and shrubs, and rose up sharply from the shore. Arthur took a few steps up the path to get a better view, but when he turned, his heart caught his throat. The shoreline was gone, and in its place stretched a few hundred feet of steep and ragged mountainside. Stretching far into the horizon were only mountains and forests in a misty, undulating landscape that dizzied the eye.

"Merlin!" Arthur shouted, trying not to sound as panicked as he felt. He'd only gone a few feet away. If this was an illusion, surely Merlin would be able to hear him. "Merlin!"

"I'm coming, I'm coming," Merlin grumbled, suddenly appearing just a few feet down the path. He stopped, frowned, then turned around. "Oh!"

"It's an illusion," Arthur explained. "I think."

Merlin tilted his head and squinted, as if trying to figure out what had happened. Then he carefully took a step back down the path, and then another. As his foot came down, he vanished.

"Merlin!" Arthur called, even more alarmed. He walked down after him, but when he reached the spot where Merlin disappeared, nothing happened. He walked past it, then back up again. He was not going to panic. He was absolutely not going to panic.

"Interesting," Merlin said, suddenly reappearing directly behind him.

Arthur yelped and rounded on him. "How did you do that?"

"It's not an illusion," Merlin said, brow furrowed in such a way that Arthur knew he was thinking hard. "It's a sort of door. But you have to walk through it just the right way or you'll miss it. Can't you feel it?"

Arthur waved his hand in the space Merlin had been. He shook his head. Merlin huffed, then guided Arthur a few inches to the right. Arthur took one cautious step forward, and there in front of him was the shoreline. When he stepped back again, it was gone. He looked to Merlin and felt utterly lost.

"Ah," Merlin said.

"Ah what?"

"Remember when I said that things would be different without the torcs? Without the connection to my magic, you can't feel what I can."
"Oh." It was more disappointing than Arthur had expected. He remembered the ache he felt when he realized he could no longer sense the warm magic humming through the castle. It was like losing something vital, even though he had only just discovered it. "Will you be able to find it again? The door?"

"I think so," Merlin said, with less certainty than Arthur would have liked. Then he reached down and ripped a strip of cloth from the bottom of his shirt, and he tied it to the scrubby tree beside the path. "That should do it."

Arthur reached over and knotted the cloth again, just to be sure it wouldn't fall off and leave them stranded. "Right. From now on we stay together." Holding hands if necessary, he was tempted to add.

Merlin gave him a look that said 'I'm not the one who wandered off in the first place.' "Fine," he said, and gestured for Arthur to come with him.

Arthur gave the strip of cloth one last look, then braced himself and turned away. He had expected to rely on Merlin to get them through this, but the reality of it was harder to take. He hated feeling helpless, and right now that was exactly what he was. At least it put Merlin in a better mood. Arthur would have to take his victories where he found them.

They walked up the path in silence. Arthur was intent on memorizing the details of their route, and Merlin seemed content to focus on the way ahead. The path was not well-kept, intentionally or otherwise; after all, the Sidhe had little need of paths when they could fly. It was slow going in the moonlight, but they helped each other climb over large rocks and boulders and across a precarious patch of loose gravel. As they finished crossing a ridge and headed down into one of the patches of gnarled forest, the silence between them became something companionable. Which is why it was a shame that Arthur had to break it.

"Do you think it's true? The prophecy?" he asked, genuinely curious. He had chewed over Morvarc'h's words, and while it was no less plausible than any of the mad things Arthur had encountered with magic, he had trouble believing that his own life could be tied to magic in such a way. If anything, the past week had taught him how utterly unmagical he was, despite being up to his neck in the stuff.

"I find it hard to believe I've put up with you in more than one life," Merlin said, dryly. Arthur gave him a light smack on the arm for that. Merlin made a show of rubbing the spot, but even in the moonlight he couldn't hide the smile that tugged at his lips.

"Look," Arthur began, turning serious again. "If even half of what he said is true -- assuming we can trust the word of a manipulative dragon or a magical water horse that claims to be over five hundred years old --"

"It doesn't matter," Merlin interrupted. Then he sighed. "I'm tired of having this destiny I can't escape. It's like my whole life has been planned out for me and I've got no control over anything, and sometimes I don't even know if what destiny decided is really the best thing at all. So what's the point? We should just... live our lives. Forget about the whole thing."

"Is that what you want to do?" Arthur asked, unaccountably betrayed by the suggestion. "Leave Camelot and forget the last two years ever happened?"

"Maybe. I don't know."
Arthur forced himself to stay calm. He had to focus on what Merlin needed, not his own fears. "Then what do you want?" He waited, even as they clambered over a large tree that had fallen across the path. The mist was growing heavier again, and they needed to walk carefully. But when Merlin didn't answer, he decided that some prompting might be in order. He needed to help Merlin open up the way Merlin had always helped him. "I'd imagine you don't want to feel trapped anymore."

"No," Merlin agreed. "You know, when I first came to Camelot, it felt like anything was possible. And then the dragon told me that I had a great destiny, and for the first time in my life I had a purpose. A reason for what I am." He gave a wry snort. "You."

"I'm flattered."

"Well, don't be. You were an ass. If I'd had any sense I would have turned around and marched back to Ealdor."

"Why didn't you?"

"I didn't have any sense," Merlin said, with an arch of his eyebrow that was terrifyingly Gaius-like. Then he shrugged. "It was exciting, fighting monsters, saving lives. Living in a castle, meeting more new people in a week than I had in my whole life. And then..." He trailed off, lapsing into silence, but Arthur knew what he couldn't say.

And then he fell in love. Destiny and love joined together, two powerful forces that bound Merlin to Arthur with a strength that was overwhelming even from the outside. They had filled Merlin's eyes with devotion that both baffled Arthur and drove him to become the King that Merlin thought he could be. There were times that Arthur had resented such expectations, but having lost that belief, he realized now how much he needed it. How much he wished he could have it back. He had failed Merlin and failed himself, and perhaps that meant he didn't deserve it, no matter what some prophecy might say.

Would Merlin have loved him if the dragon had never spoken to him? Would they have found each other without the guiding hand of destiny? Maybe not, but Arthur didn't want to force Merlin to stay out of duty. Arthur knew all about how miserable that choice could be, and he was grateful to Elena for saving him from it. He was reminded of how Morgana strained to escape, to be more than Uther's ward, a beautiful bird in a gilded cage. His father claimed to want to protect her, but all he did was make her feel like a prisoner.

"You should go."

Merlin stopped walking and stared at him in surprise. "What?"

"If that's what you want," Arthur continued, stopping but not quite able to face him. "When we get back to Camelot. Whatever you need, food, clothing, horses... it's yours."

"I couldn't possibly--"

"Yes, you can," Arthur said, feeling more certain by the moment. He forced himself to meet Merlin's eyes. "You and Gwen and Morgana. You're right. It's all just... words. Stories. None of it matters. You deserve the freedom to make your own choices."

Merlin kept staring, and seemed unable to believe his own ears. "You really mean it?"

There was another fallen tree lying across the path, and Arthur sat down on it. "I know what it's like," he began, staring down at his boots, dirtied by soil from two worlds. "To be told what your life is supposed to be. For everything to be out of your control." He swallowed. "I should have learned
from my father's mistakes. Instead, all I've done is repeat them with you." He looked up, feeling bared by his shame, but he needed Merlin to see it was the truth. "I'm sorry."

Merlin gaped at him, absolutely floored. Arthur tried not to feel insulted. It wasn't as if he had never been generous before, never done nice things for others because it was the right thing to do. It wasn't as though he'd never apologized and meant it. He'd spent his whole life being selfless, sacrificing everything for the greater good.

He wondered if maybe the Prince inside him was like Maeve, draining him away to feed itself. If his eventual coronation would mean the final consumption of his soul, and out of him would be born a King, a stranger that only looked like him, that was as cold and unforgiving as his father had bred him to be. He wished there was a potion he could drink to free himself. Maybe then he could be like Elena and have the chance to find out who he really was when he was just himself. Just Arthur.

Merlin sat down beside him, landing on the tree with a heavy thump. "Wow."

A painful laugh forced its way out of Arthur's chest. "That's all you have to say?"

"Give me a little time," Merlin said, wryly. "It wasn't what I was expecting." Then he turned, and his voice softened. "You're crying."

Arthur quickly wiped the hot streaks from his face with the back of his glove. It had only just dried, and now he was getting it all wet again. "Sorry," he said, and sniffed.

"You don't have to apologize for that," Merlin said, gently. "It's kind of nice, actually."

"Nice?!"

"Well, yeah," Merlin shrugged. "It's just that sometimes you can seem so... indomitable. No matter what happens, you just take it and keep going. It took me so long to realize that was a lie."

"You're one to talk," Arthur said, feeling prickled. "I'm not the one who kept massive secrets for two years."

"Because I was trying to stay alive so I could protect you," Merlin said, eyes narrowing with annoyance.

Arthur scoffed. "I didn't need protection."

"As a matter of fact, I've never met anyone who needed saving more than you," Merlin declared. "You would actually be dead right now if it wasn't for me."

"Did you also keep track of how many times I saved you? Usually from tripping over your own feet and breaking your neck."

Merlin scowled. "Maybe if I didn't have to hide my magic, maybe if I didn't have one arm tied behind my back all the time, maybe then I could hope to be as graceful as you, your highness."

Arthur scowled back. "You're the only one person I've ever met who makes every honorific into an insult."

"It wouldn't be an insult if you weren't such an ass. Do you have any idea how hard it was to be with you? How much crap I had to put up with? And I'm not talking about your horses and your chamberpot."
Arthur stood up. "If it was so awful, I don't know why you bothered being with me in the first place!"

Merlin stood and faced him. "Because I had to. Because your father and the Druids and Gaius and a bloody great dragon told me you were my destiny. Even Morvarc'h said it, and he only just met us!"

"My father did not say I was your destiny," Arthur said, certain about that.

"He's the one who made me your servant. And that's not the point. The point is... The point..."

"Yes?"

Merlin crossed his arms protectively and looked away. "I don't know. What if... Maybe I fell in love with you because... because I had to. Just to survive. Maybe..."

A cold knot formed in the pit of Arthur's stomach. "You don't mean that."

"I don't know what I mean," Merlin said, voice tight with upset. "Everything happened so fast and then it was one thing after another, and most of the time we were lying to each other and I trusted you and you hurt me. You hurt me, and I never..." His voice dropped, ragged. "You don't hurt people you love. You don't treat them like they don't matter. Like they're just tools for you to use. You don't try to destroy what they are because you're afraid."

Arthur wanted to protest, but it was all true. He had done all of that to Merlin and more. Dismissed his feelings and concerns. Insulted him to his face and to others. Instead of loving Merlin for who and what he was, he tried to change him, mold him in his own image, just as his father did to him. And when he found out the truth about Merlin's magic, all he could think to do was destroy it. He made Merlin a prisoner, threatened and hurt him, all in the name of love. What kind of love was that?

It wasn't love at all.

"You're right," he said, quietly. "And that's why you should go."

"Arthur--"

"No," Arthur said, needing to say it. Needing to lay the full truth of it out in all its awful glory. "We have to stop lying to each other. To ourselves. We both know the truth. Of course you loved me. You have more love in you than anyone I've ever met. Do you have any idea how powerful that is? Forget magic. Merlin, you... You." He swallowed against the lump in his throat. "The only mistake you ever made was me."

"Patrick--"

"And that's my fault. I thought if I pretended, if I faked it long enough, that would make it real. But I don't know how to be that... that man you saw in me. I just don't. And that's why you should go as far away from me as you can. You should find someone who can make you happy. Someone who isn't--"

"Arthur!"

Arthur groaned in frustration. He was baring his soul, maybe Merlin could just let him finish? He looked up, and his eyes widened.

They were surrounded. Not by creatures like the ones he had encountered on the way to the Seelie Court, but by the forest itself. While they had been talking, the trees had silently closed in around
them, and now their roots and branches were reaching out through the mist. He drew his sword.

"Merlin?" Arthur asked, as they moved to stand back-to-back at the center of the ring, swords drawn. "What do we do?"

"Normally I'd say run, but that's no longer an option." He cursed as a root grabbed for his ankle. "Berbay odothay firgenholt áblinnan!"

The root snapped back as if struck, but that didn't stop the others from coming.

"Can't you stop them all?" Arthur asked, and swiped at the nearest branch. The blade cut clean through, dropping the branch to the earth. But that seemed to anger the tree it had been attached to, and it shook its remaining branches furiously.

"I'm trying," Merlin said through gritted teeth. "Berbay odothay firgenholt áblinnan! Berbay odothay firgenholt áblinnan! Berbay-- shit!"

"Merlin!" Arthur turned to find Merlin had been caught by the roots, and they were winding their way up his body, immobilizing him. Merlin lost his balance and fell, but Arthur caught him.

"Use your sword," Merlin hissed, straining against the painful compression of the roots. "Cut your way out of here."

"I'm not leaving you," Arthur hissed back, and started hacking at the roots around Merlin's feet. But as fast as he cut, it wasn't fast enough. One of his own feet was gripped and he turned to hack himself free, but before he could do it the angry tree lashed out and clubbed him hard across the back of his head. He fell hard, and the roots were on him in an instant.


Arthur fumbled for his fallen sword, but his vision was blurred from the strike. When he grabbed for the hilt it slid out of reach, then he realized that he was the one being dragged, away from the sword and from Merlin. "No!" he cried, and clawed at the earth, but the roots were strong. He strained against their pull and reached for Merlin, but then he was being pulled away too. The roots had covered Merlin to the shoulders and were growing up to cover his mouth. Terror flooded Arthur with a surge of strength, and with all his might he wrenched himself free. He grabbed his sword and lunged at base of the thick roots that had captured Merlin and cut them through with one mighty blow.

And then a huge branch swung down and knocked him off his feet. He crashed into two tree trunks, the breath punched out of him, and was instantly caught as more branches closed around him like prison bars. He kicked and shoved to free himself as the branches grew together into a wall of thickening wood. The last thing he heard before he was enclosed completely was Merlin's frantic cry as he cast his magic wildly against the forest.

The trees pressed tight around him, stealing his breath. Solid wood trapped his legs, then his arms, then his chest and his head. This wasn't how he thought his life would end. Death by magic tree. He couldn't breathe. Sparks of light danced before his eyes, and he squeezed them shut as the rough wood pressed against his face.

_Camelot_, he thought, and then _Merlin_, because if he died in this place he failed them both. And then he thought of nothing at all.
The first thing Arthur knew was pain. It was focused in his head and in his chest: a burning, throbbing hurt that sharpened as his awareness grew, with the squeeze of pressure all around him. He heard voices in the distance, loud but muffled, but couldn't open his eyes, couldn't move to look for their source. And then from all directions came the cracking of wood, and the pressure eased. Arms grabbed him and dragged him, and as he strained to open his eyes he saw light. And then he was released, and fell against a hard stone floor.

"And now the other," said a voice.

"Doléci coimét brága." The incantation was followed by more cracking sounds, and then a familiar groan of pain. Merlin?

"The restraint is gone," warned the first voice, alarmed. "He has his magic."

"Let me kill him," said a third voice, male and familiar. "We're owed vengeance for what he did to you."

"No," said a woman. "We need him alive." A rustling of cloth, and then: "Fear not, my brother. Tomorrow, all our injuries shall be avenged."

Arthur finally pried one eye open and looked up towards the voices. A heavy dread came over him as he saw his captors: it was Drudwas, and the woman beside him must be Erdudwyl, though her glamour no longer looked like Sophia. Beyond them he saw two unfamiliar Sidhe who seemed to be some sort of palace guard, and hanging limp between them was Merlin, barely conscious and bloodied. Splinters of wood clung to his mail and hair. He was dumped onto the floor next to Arthur, who winced in sympathy as Merlin's head smacked painfully against the floor.

"Seal them in," commanded Drudwas.

The cell door was closed, then one of the guards raised his hand. "Cenglaid airecal brága." His eyes flared red as he cast the spell, and the walls and ceiling and floor briefly shimmered.

Erdudwyl approached, then looked directly at Arthur. "Are you awake?"

Arthur glared up at her with all the effort he could muster, which wasn't much. Something in him felt broken and wrong, and he could barely move a muscle. Merlin groaned again, then dragged himself to his feet. He was trembling with some combination of fear and pain and determination. As soon as he had his feet, he marched towards Erdudwyl, only to smack into an invisible barrier. He pounded on it with his fists, but all that did was make the air shimmer from the impact. There were no iron bars to hold them, but they were trapped all the same.

"It's over, Emrys" Erdudwyl gloated, her joy barely contained. "We know everything. All your whispered plans, all your secrets. Did you think I wasn't listening?" She held up Merlin's pack, then reached in and pulled out two gold torcs. Merlin clenched his fists at the sight of them, but Arthur was stunned that they were there at all. A perverse spark of hope lit in his chest that Merlin had even considered sharing his magic with him again.

"You have no right to touch those," Merlin warned, voice low and rasping.

"You won't be needing them again," Erdudwyl said. "I've heard stories about them. About you. The Emrys and the Once and Future King, the great champions of the Old Religion, defenders of
Albion. It was thought that your souls had been destroyed."

Drudwas approached. Arthur's heart sank even further when he saw that Drudwas was holding both his and Merlin's swords. "I don't care who you are. You deserve a painful death for what you did to my sister."

Erdudwyl lay her hand on his arm. "No. Satisfying though it would be. Their punishment must be to live for eternity at the end of a leash. Queen Titania will have her falcon returned to her, along with a gift as payment for the trouble he caused. What shall we make of him? A robin?"

"Perhaps a raven," smirked Drudwas. "All black to mourn the passing of his kingdom."

"You don't have to do this," Merlin said, with quiet fury. "I'm the one who killed Sophia. If you want to punish me, then do it. But you have no right to hurt thousands of innocent people."

"We have every right," declared Erdudwyl.

Merlin sputtered, outraged. "The only reason I killed her was because she was trying to kill Arthur! And why do you care so much about her now? You didn't care when she and her father were exiled."

There was the sound of approaching footsteps, and both Sidhe turned and bowed their respects. The newcomer was a man, dressed in rich finery and a crown of antlers.

"Emrys," said the man, with a respectful nod. "We meet again."

"We've never met," Merlin said, tersely. He wasn't intimidated for a moment, but then he was used to living as a secret sorcerer right under Uther Pendragon's nose.

"Of course," the man said, gently amused. "It is the nature of men to forget. And it was a very long time ago. Let me introduce myself to you again. I am King Gwynn ap Nudd, and this is my kingdom. I apologize for our cruelty to you on your previous visit. If we had known who you truly are, we would have treated you with the respect you deserve."

Merlin stared at him, visibly taken aback. But he quickly recovered. "If you respect us so much, then let us go."

"If you remembered yourself, you would know why that is the one thing I cannot do," said Gwynn. "Your fate is sealed. However, I will answer your question. And I will forgive your ignorance. Sophia pledged herself to me. That is why she matters."

"And her life is worth the thousands of people you're going to kill?"

"The killing of a Sidhe is the highest crime," Gwynn replied. "Her father was guilty of that, and his punishment was exile to the mortal world. Sophia chose to stay with him, but because she was innocent I was able to accept her pledge."

"She tried to kill Arthur," Merlin replied, holding his ground. "What's the punishment for attempted murder?"

"Of a human?" Gwynn chuckled. "What is the human punishment for the killing of a wolf, or a wasp? The life of a human is worth nothing compared to the life of a Sidhe. If an animal kills a human, the punishment is borne by all of its kind."

"Fine," Merlin said, obviously unhappy but unable to argue against such thinking. "But Arthur isn't
"And that is why you both shall live." Gwynn turned away, signalling an end to the conversation. He turned to Drudwas and Erdudwyl. "Come. We have much to do."

The three Sidhe left, presumably to ready their army for the invasion and destruction of Camelot. As soon as they were out of sight, Merlin slammed his fists against the barrier again, perhaps more to vent his frustration than out of any serious attempt to break it. The serious attempt came next; he stepped back and raised his hand, then snarled out a series of spells, his eyes flaring gold with each attempt. "Tőspringe. Tőspringe! Ic ia tőspringe. Min strenge miht hate þe tospringan! Ic ðiðetee ðæt clúshol! Break, you bastard!"

Each spell failed, its energy dissipating in shimmers against the barrier. Fury spent, Merlin slammed his fists against the shield one last fruitless time, then turned away, his arms wrapped around his stomach as if he might be ill. He moved out of Arthur's line of sight, but Arthur could hear his ragged breathing, the tight sounds as he fought against the emotions that threatened to overwhelm him. Arthur wanted nothing more in that moment than to go to Merlin and hold him, to give and gain some small comfort, but he couldn't move. His head was clearing, but his arms and legs still wouldn't listen to him.

"Merlin," Arthur said, as calmly as he could. "Merlin, something's wrong."

"Of course something's wrong," Merlin said, voice thick with tears. "Everything's wrong. We failed."

"Maybe," Arthur said, not certain why he was even trying to be optimistic when their situation was so absurdly bleak. Maybe it was because Merlin was always the one who buoyed him when he despaired, who stubbornly hoped for the best even when there was no hope at all. If Merlin couldn't do that anymore, then Arthur had to try and hope for the both of them. "But we're still alive and so is everyone in Camelot. At least for a few hours. So if you could stop sulking and help me get my limbs working again, I'd really appreciate it."

Even though he couldn't see it, he could easily imagine the expression that came with Merlin's sudden, shocked silence. Wide eyes and mouth hanging open, skin gone pale even though his cheeks and nose and the tips of his ears would still be flushed pink from upset. In the quiet of their cell, he could hear Merlin's audible swallow, and pictured the long bob of his throat as he struggled to speak.

"What?" Merlin breathed, gormlessly.

Arthur tried for the hundredth time to sit up, and for the hundredth time absolutely nothing happened. "Ever since I woke up. I can't... I can't move. At all." The curl of panic in his gut twisted for attention, but he ignored it.

Merlin approached, first quickly and then warily, as if Arthur was a trapped animal that might bite if Merlin tried to free him. Then the moment came where Merlin stopped being a worried once-lover and once-manservant and started being a once-physician's assistant. He clenched his jaw and touched Arthur with gentle, professional hands.

"Tell me if you feel any pain," Merlin said, as he probed for injuries. "Any numbness?"

Arthur hissed as Merin pressed against a bruise on his leg. He must have earned that in the fight against the trees. "Apparently not."

Merlin gave a slow breath out, his eyes focused on his hands. "That's something, at least. If you can just any human any more than I am."
still feel, then the damage might only be temporary." He resumed feeling his way along, and along the way managed to prod every sore spot on Arthur's body. Well, except the places where it might actually be enjoyable, if he wasn't paralyzed and trapped and facing down certain doom. Though he had a right to, Merlin didn't seem to be taking any pleasure from Arthur's suffering; if anything, he flinched apologetically whenever the pain was bad enough to make Arthur cry out.

"Sorry," Merlin said, as he reached Arthur's neck and head. "I don't want to make it worse, but..."

"It's fine," Arthur said through gritted teeth. "I've seen Gaius..." He trailed off as he remembered watching Gaius treat men with similar injuries. Most never recovered, and those lucky enough to live were never the same again. "Do what you have to."

Despite Merlin's apology, he touched Arthur with the gentlest of care. His fingers brushed lightly against the back of his neck and through his hair, and Arthur's heart ached at the tenderness, and at how much he missed it. He thought of all the times he had pushed Merlin away, afraid of being weak, because love was weakness and Merlin was love. He felt a thousand times a fool.

When Merlin sat back on his heels, he wore a sober frown. "Arthur," he began, in that careful way both he and Gaius used to break bad news.

"Just tell me."

Merlin took a shaky breath and wiped his sleeve across his eyes. "When you were trying to cut me free... Do you remember?"

Arthur could hardly forget. "A branch hit me. Hard. Couldn't see straight after that."

"A concussion. If it's just that, you might get better on your own. But it could be hours or days or..."

"And if it's not?"

Merlin swallowed. "I don't even have anything to treat you with." He looked away and sniffed wetly. "So it doesn't matter, does it? If it's a concussion or-- or worse. If you'll never... if you're..." He turned away and pressed his sleeve against his eyes, holding his breath to stop from crying.

Arthur knew what Merlin couldn't say. If the damage was great enough, if the branch had scrambled his brains. If whatever was broken inside him was only going to get worse. He felt some dark satisfaction at spoiling whatever plans the Sidhe had for him, but it was small in comparison to his horror at the thought of leaving Merlin to face his fate alone.

"Merlin," Arthur said, trying to put as much comfort into his voice as he wanted to with his useless arms. "It does matter, because we don't need potions or herbs or... or anything else to fix this. All we need is you." He took a deep breath, bracing himself. "Your magic."

Merlin turned, eyes wet but wide with surprise. Then they narrowed. "You want me to use magic. On you. To heal you."

"Are you saying you won't?" Arthur asked. He'd never considered that Merlin might refuse him.

"No, of course, I..." Merlin shook his head. "I just can't believe you actually asked me." He looked around the otherwise empty cell. "But then it's not like you have any other choice."


Merlin gave him a look of pure disbelief.
"Look," Arthur continued, forging on. "You've patched me up hundreds of times. This isn't any different. Just... hold up your hand and, you know..."

Merlin's eyebrows raised even higher.

Arthur huffed. "Merlin, please. This isn't exactly the best of circumstances but I'm trying, all right? I am actually trying."

Merlin continued to look skeptical, but he relented. "I'll try. It's just... healing's tricky. And Gaius never let me practice. I don't want to make it worse."

"Merlin, I can't move. How much worse could it get?"

Merlin gave him a look that said 'Do you really want me to answer that?' Which left Arthur in the position of actually arguing with Merlin on behalf of magic. He wondered if his life could possibly get any stranger. "Help me sit up."

"I can't move you, not until I know what's wrong. Gaius says that if it's an injury to the spine--"

"Never mind Gaius," Arthur huffed. "He's not here. You are." When Merlin still hesitated, Arthur continued. "All this time you've been using magic left and right. Why are you so afraid to try?"

"I have tried," Merlin said, suddenly exasperated. "Do you know how many times..." He hung his head. "Every time you were hurt. Every time, all I wanted to do was help you. Heal you, your knights, everyone. But I couldn't. First because it was too dangerous, too obviously magic. And then when I finally tried... I failed."

Arthur thought back to the times over the past two years when he had been badly hurt, and his thoughts went immediately to the Questing Beast. He vaguely remembered Merlin telling him how he had to turn to a High Priestess to save him, and that he had offered up his own life in exchange. Merlin had certainly displayed an array of magical skills in his recounting of the past. But Arthur couldn't recall any discussion of Merlin's healing abilities, and perhaps this was why. "You've never healed at all?"

"I can do little things. Cuts, bruises. Broken bones, if the break is clean," Merlin mustered a sad, wry smile. "If no one had been around when I broke my arm, I probably could have healed it in a day or two."

That finally made sense of the many contradictions in Merlin's behavior, and why he would take such dangerous risks by going off on his own like he did in Gedref. Why he would alternately act as if he was invulnerable and as if he was afraid of any injury at all. It wasn't just that he needed privacy to use his magic unseen. If he was hurt and his injuries were noticed before he could erase them, then he would have to suffer them for weeks or months until they healed on their own, or at least within an acceptably non-magical amount of time. As reckless as Merlin could be, in some ways it was more dangerous for him to ask for help. If Merlin had ever been mortally injured himself, and in view of others...

And it wasn't just Merlin. Arthur had seen so many good men injured or killed, and there was a chance that Merlin could have healed them, even saved them if it wouldn't have cost him his life to do so.

"Geraint," he said, before he could stop himself.

"I wanted to," Merlin said, regretful. "I almost tried, but... it was too quick. I'm sorry."
"Don't," Arthur said. "It wasn't your fault." There must be other sorcerers strong enough to heal, but most would have died at his father's command. How many did his father kill in the Great Purge? Was that why his mother died in childbirth, because his father refused to allow her a healer? Could Elena's mother also have been saved? How many died because of his father's anger, his pride? And all for what? What could possibly justify so much destruction? Only Uther could answer those questions, and Arthur wasn't ready to ask them.

But he would be. One day, soon, he would be ready to hear the answers, no matter how terrible.

"Forget about what happened before," Arthur said. "The only thing that matters is what you do now. And I know you can do this."

"Why?" Merlin asked, genuinely confused. "Yesterday you told me that you could never accept magic. You were practically ready to arrest me yourself just because I was practicing--"

"That's not--"

"You said that magic could never be legal in Camelot. Because you couldn't trust it. Ever."

"Do we have to talk about this now?" Arthur asked, impatient. They could debate the politics of magic once he could scratch his own nose again. It was starting to itch.

"Why not?" Merlin asked, a manic edge to his voice. "Just because Camelot's about to be destroyed? Because we're going to be turned into pets and tortured for the rest of our lives? Maybe you're just lying to me again to get what you want. That's what you do, you and your father. Manipulate people and lie to them, execute people for using magic when you're happy to use it if it suits you."

Arthur knew when Merlin was talking around a problem, and he was doing it now. "Is this about Elena? You came to me first. You wanted to work together to help her."

"I didn't come to you because I trusted you. I did it because of Gwen and because Elena didn't deserve to suffer. She certainly didn't deserve to suffer you for the rest of her life."

"Oh, here we go," Arthur said, realizing. "Go on, spit it out. We're obviously not going anywhere, so tell me what's really bothering you."

Merlin glared at him, but at least he didn't try and argue his way out of being honest. Arthur supposed they really ought to be past pretence, after everything. Honesty was the only thing they could afford. "Gaius told me what happened." He looked away, as if afraid to see Arthur's reaction, then gave a bitter laugh. "He thought I would be happy."

Arthur swallowed. "You weren't?"

Merlin's unhappy smile faded into simple misery. "Why should I be? You've made it abundantly clear that you want nothing to do with me."

Despite everything else that was going on, somehow the most awful was the realization that Merlin genuinely believed what he was saying. But then, he had enough evidence on his side. Despite the lengths that Arthur had gone through to rescue Merlin from the Sidhe, Arthur had all but turned his back on Merlin in the hours before his capture. He had sworn to destroy Merlin's magic. And then there was the stupid fight they had after Merlin was restored to his human self again, and when they fought again at Gwen's, and...

Two weeks ago in Gedref, Merlin had been his knight, his lover, and his secret sorcerer. Ever since then, all Arthur had done was take things away from him: his title, his position, his freedom, his
magic, his home, and nearly his life; with all that, how many times had he broken Merlin's heart? He'd stripped Merlin to the bone, and maybe there was no coming back from that. But if he didn't try, he knew that he'd regret it for the rest of his life, however long that might be.

Yet he also knew that just apologizing wouldn't be enough. He'd lied to Merlin and manipulated him, told him what he wanted to hear while planning to use him to destroy not only his own magic, but all the magic in Albion. Arthur was ashamed at how much like his father he'd become. Panic and shock were no excuse. He'd done those things because he'd believed that that was the way things were done, because he'd believed his father was the way kings were meant to be.

"I was wrong," Arthur said, feeling the weight of the entire week in those words. Maybe the weight of his whole life. "I believed my father's lies, and because of that I hurt you. I'm sorry."

Merlin turned back to face him, brow crinkled with disbelief. Then he shook his head. "You don't have to lie to me to get me to heal you."

"I'm not lying," Arthur said, with every ounce of sincerity he had. "And I know that. You saved my father's life, even if you hate me I know you'll try--"

"I don't--" Merlin cut himself off, but it seemed somehow that he relaxed a fraction. "I don't hate you."

It was the smallest of victories, but it was still enough to grow that spark of hope into a flame. "I don't hate you, either," Arthur said, and he would have given Merlin a playful punch on the arm if he could have lifted his hand. Then, more seriously: "I never did. I was afraid and I lashed out, but I won't use that as an excuse." A memory from Gedref returned to him, sharp with painful clarity. "What I did to you, to your magic... it was no better than when I hit you in the caves."

"It was worse," Merlin said, but his eyes were suddenly and suspiciously damp.

Arthur knew that it was half-meant as a joke, a deflection, but that didn't make it any less true. "It was," he admitted. "And I would give everything I have to take it back. All of it." He remembered the night of Merlin's confession. Being terrified of Merlin and for him. For that night alone, he would understand if Merlin never forgave him. He blinked against his own tears, but he had no way to hide them or wipe them away. He felt them trickle across the bridge of his nose and down his cheek.

Merlin saw the tears and his own chin wobbled dangerously. He wiped his sleeve across his eyes and sniffed. "Bit late for that. 's already lost."

"Not yet," Arthur said. As long as they were alive, as long as they were together... "Did Gaius tell you why I didn't marry Elena?"

Merlin shook his head. "I don't think he understood it either. Once Maeve was out..."

"I could have married her. I know." Arthur gathered up his courage. "I believed it was my duty to marry Elena. It never mattered what I wanted, who I loved." He saw Merlin's flinch, but soldiered on. "Elena felt the same. But after you saved her... it changed everything. We realized that we didn't have to choose between duty and happiness. You gave us that."

Merlin fought not to show it, but Arthur could see that he was affected. "Yeah," he said, looking out of the cell. "For all the good it did you."

"I would rather die here with you than live a thousand years with anyone else," The words rushed out of him to be said, but Arthur didn't regret them.
Merlin was still for a long moment, then he wiped his eyes dry and turned. "Guess I should make sure you don't die here."

Arthur smiled, and then broadened into a grin. "Guess you should."

Merlin fought not to smile back, then quickly sobered as he remembered what he was about to do. "Arthur..."

"It's all right," Arthur said, gently, sobering as well. "Whatever happens, if it works, if it doesn't..."

"But what if--"

"It won't," Arthur said, with optimistic certainty. "I know it won't, because I trust you. I trust your magic. I know that... that you and it would never hurt me."

Merlin's chin wobbled again, and he had to struggle to keep his composure. He gripped the mail over Arthur's front and kneaded at it, like a kitten seeking comfort. "If you don't mean that..."

"I swear to you," Arthur said, meeting Merlin's eyes. If anything did go wrong, the last thing he wanted was for Merlin to blame himself. He probably would anyway because that was the way he was, but at least if the worst happened he would have some kind of absolution. Arthur did trust him to do his best, but some things couldn't be fixed, not even with magic.

"Right," Merlin said, straightening up. He nervously ran his hand back through his hair, knocking loose a small rain of wood splinters. "Sorry," he muttered, brushing the splinters away.

"You can do this," Arthur assured him. He needed Merlin to focus on the task, not the danger of it. "You've healed before. It's just like that."

"Like you know anything about magic."

"Then tell me."

Merlin gave him another skeptical look, perhaps recalling the last time Arthur asked for a magic lesson. "You're distracting me."

"Is it working?"

Merlin gave a short huff, almost amused. "You're such a prat." He leaned down and cupped his hands against the back of Arthur's head and neck, bracketing the wound. It was an intimate embrace, and brought them so close that it would only take a few inches more for their lips to touch. The feel of Merlin's breath against his mouth sent a shiver through him. Their eyes met, and for a long moment they stared. Then Merlin closed his eyes.

At first nothing happened. Arthur had expected Merlin to launch into a spell the way he had when he attacked the magical shield that imprisoned them. But he was still and silent, the only hint of action in the furrow of his brow and shortened breathing as he concentrated. Gradually, Arthur became aware of a tickling sensation in his skin around where Merlin's hands were pressing. It was very strange, and different from how Merlin's magic felt through the torcs.

"Merlin--"

Merlin hushed him, then pressed his lips together in a thin line as the sensation grew stronger, until it was just shy of painful. Then it converged somewhere inside of Arthur's head, and flashes of light danced across his vision.

"It's fine," Arthur said, forcing his jaw to relax.

"I'm hurting you."

"It hurt when I helped Gaius set your broken arm," Arthur said. "I did it anyway because that was what you needed. I need you to do this, Merlin."

Merlin gave a shaky nod. "I found what's wrong. Inside your head, it's swollen. I think there's blood."

It wasn't just a concussion, then. "Can you fix it?"

"I don't know." Merlin's wide eyes betrayed his fear. "It's bad."

"If it doesn't work, if you can't heal me--"

"Arthur, no--"

"Listen. If it doesn't work, you have to find a way out of here. You have to go on without me. Camelot needs you."

"This is all my fault," Merlin said, stricken.

"No," Arthur insisted. "You killed Sophia to save me. If it's anyone's fault, it's hers. It's mine, for not listening to you."

"You never listen," Merlin said, with a teary smile.

Arthur knew that to survive this, to save Camelot, Merlin would need something to hold on to, something to hold himself together with. Arthur may have lost everything, but there was still one thing he could give. One thing that Merlin had given him. "You swore that you would fight for me. Against any foe, with all your strength. When we left Gedref, I told you that you would always be my knight. I meant it."

"But--"

"Everything you are is mine," Arthur continued, staring into Merlin's eyes, willing him to believe. To renew that wellspring of faith that had driven Merlin to victory after victory. "I can't make up for how I hurt you. You don't have to forgive me. But know that I never stopped believing in you."

"I'm not going to let you die. Camelot needs you, I n--" Merlin cut himself off, pained by the admission.

Merlin's words made him feel as though he could take on the whole Sidhe army himself, if only he had his sword. If only he could raise it. "Then stop holding back. I'm not afraid of your magic. It's mine because every part of you is mine. What's sworn can't be un-sworn. You are my knight and my sorcerer and nothing will ever change that."

Merlin made a pained sound. "Please don't lie to me," he said, but looked to Arthur pleading for it to be true.

"It's the truth," Arthur said, honestly.
Merlin leaned forward until their foreheads pressed together. He squeezed his eyes shut, and when he opened them again, they were lit -- not with magic, but with love and faith and determination. The sight of it made Arthur's heart ache, because it was the most beautiful and precious thing in the world, and he had nearly destroyed it out of fear and selfishness.

Merlin pulled his hands free and straightened up, taking a moment to collect himself. He wiped his face dry and took steadying breaths. "Right," he said, and leaned back down again, taking careful but strong hold of Arthur's head. Instead of closing his eyes, this time he kept them open, and stared at the center of Arthur's forehead. Golden light shimmered and swirled in his eyes, and Arthur gasped as Merlin's magic moved into him, faster and stronger than before. It filled his head until it felt as though it would burst.

It hurt. Arthur swallowed the pain.

"Gestepe hole," Merlin began to chant, casting the spell to give shape and purpose to the raw magic he had poured into Arthur's head. "Gestepe hole. Gestepe hole. Þurhæle dolgbenn. Þurhæle bred."

Merlin kept chanting, and gradually Arthur felt something changing inside him. The fullness eased, and the presence inside him focused on the same place inside him that made lights dance across his eyes. The lights came back, flashing in strange and random patterns, but the sense of wrongness in his head began to lessen.

"I think," Merlin began, his voice tight with effort. "I think it's working. Tell me what you feel."

"I don't..." Arthur struggled, his tongue suddenly thick and clumsy. "Better?"

"I've stopped the bleeding. I'm trying to stop the swelling, bring it down..."

Arthur's left hand suddenly twitched, and he gasped. "My hand."

"My hand." His hand twitched again, and he tried to control the motion, squeeze his hand into a fist. But it wouldn't respond, and then his arm started twitching.

"Arthur?" Merlin said, suddenly worried.

Arthur tried to respond, but before he could force his mouth to work, he smelled something sharp and strange, and tingling waves washed through his head. His whole body suddenly jerked, convulsed, and then--

"Arthur. Arthur!"

Arthur tried to call back, fought against the darkness pulling him down. He didn't want to leave Merlin alone, not here, not now, not ever. But the darkness rose up to meet him.
When she had arrived for the feast, Gwen had been more than a little relieved to find Morgana seated at the far end of the table next to Arthur. It was an understatement to say that Uther was in a foul mood, and his constant glowering did nothing for her nerves. She did not envy Lord Godwyn for his seat beside the King, though his cheerful demeanor betrayed no fear of retribution -- or of discovery of their involvement with magic. But to spend so long in Uther's company and survive, one had to learn to smile.

It was Edern and Drudwas who had borne the brunt of Uther's attention, however, as Uther boasted of Camelot's strength and tried to convince the two Sidhe that the alliance between their kingdoms was not only beneficial but essential. But the subterfuge of Tír-Mòr was of little use to the Sidhe now, and their lack of interest only drove Uther deeper into his cups. Once they and Arthur both left the feast, the King was left to drink himself into a stupor, glowering all the while.

Gwen was certain that the world would be a better place if only he would remain in a drunken stupor for the rest of his natural life. Assuming they lived to see the morning, she looked with dread to his mood while he nursed his inevitable hangover. People died because of Uther's foul moods. Some small part of her thought that the Sidhe invasion would be a relief, if only for the change of pace.

She hated waiting, hated the paralysis of it, the frustration in knowing the problem but being unable to speak of it to anyone. All her life she had swallowed down warnings and fears, terrified of what would happen if anyone knew the truth about her beliefs, about Morgana's visions, about Merlin's magic. The past few days had been both a nightmare and dream, as for all the direness of their situation, at last she had found her voice and her feet and her strength to fight.

But she could do nothing to stop the Sidhe now. They were in Avalon along with Merlin and Arthur, and there was nothing she could do to help them. She didn't have Merlin's powerful magic or Arthur's dragon-gifted protection to enable her to look upon the Otherworld and survive, much less cross into it. She didn't even have Morgana's forewarning nightmares, for all the good those did her. All she could do was wait and hope, but having finally acted, waiting and hoping were so much harder than they'd ever been.

She was startled from her gloom by the sound of a door closing. She turned to see Gaius leave Merlin's old chambers and walk over to the hearth. Grunhilda was 'resting' in Merlin's old room, half-prisoner and half-refugee. The Pixie couldn't return to Avalon or Gawant, and Camelot was hardly hospitable to such a creature of magic. She was free of her masters but had nowhere to go.

Gwen couldn't help but empathize with her situation, with not knowing where to turn. She and Morgana had patched things up for long enough to save Elena and stop the wedding, but now the rush of victory had faded. At the time, Morgana's apology had seemed heartfelt, but the plain fact was that Morgana had manipulated her. Gwen had trusted Morgana with her heart, and Morgana had not hesitated to use it against her to sabotage Elena's cure. Gwen had always known about Morgana's coldness, her need for control, but she had never had it turned against her like that. It had shaken her, made her question whether leaving Camelot with Morgana was the right thing to do.

Morgana was sitting by the fire in Gaius' chair, trying to get as much light as possible as she re-read Merlin's grimoire and Gaius' books on the Sidhe, looking again for anything that might help them should Merlin and Arthur fail to stop the invasion. Now and then she stopped and stared at the tiny Sidhe staff, perhaps trying to feel the magic inside it and how to interact with it. Right now it was their only reliable defense, and the last time Morgana had tried to use a Sidhe staff she had blown it up in the process. Gwen couldn't blame her for her concentration, but the necessity of it only made it
harder to begin a conversation. To talk about what their future should be, assuming they had a future at all.

"What did she say?" Gwen asked, looking to Gaius.

Gaius had filled a small cauldron with water and placed it over the fire to boil. He ladled out the steaming water into a jug and infused it with dried herbs. "Grunhilda is reluctant to help us further," he said. "She wishes to protect Elena, but fears the Sidhe's punishment."

Fragrant steam rose as the herbs steeped, and the scent of it drew forth memories of other evenings spent in the refuge of Gaius' chambers: sitting around the table with Merlin and Gaius, she and Merlin both nursing their grief over their brief exiles, all mourning the deaths of Uwen and Linette. She could not say that those were simpler or easier days, but at that time she did not have such difficult choices before her.

Once the tea was ready, Gaius poured out three cups. He left one on a bare spot by Morgana's pile of books, and brought the other two over to Gwen. He sat down with her and slid one cup to her. Gwen thanked him with a small smile and wrapped her hands around the warm ceramic.

"She should leave now, before it's too late," Gwen said, quietly.

Gaius rested a comforting hand on her arm, and she turned to look at it. His hands were gnarled and calloused from age and work, and no matter how he scrubbed they were always faintly stained from some herb or colorful powder. They reminded her of her father's hands, equally worn and marked by his trade. Her father's hands had been thick, sandpaper-rough with callouses and burn scars and stained with soot, yet when she was young she would rest her cheek against his palm and feel nothing but safe. Fresh grief welled in her at the memory.

"They'll be all right," Gaius soothed, giving her a gentle squeeze. "Merlin and Arthur have faced grave dangers before."

"Yes, of course," Gwen said, mustering another small smile. She could see how hard he was working against his own fears. Merlin was like a son to him, and Arthur too. If they never returned, the loss would devastate him.

Gaius let her go and took a careful sip from his cup. "Despite her actions, Grunhilda cares a great deal for Elena. She knows that to remain near Elena will endanger her life, yet she cannot see a future without her."

"Then why not help us? She must know that the Sidhe won't spare either of them."

"Grunhilda devoted twenty years of her life to Elena, but it's likely that she's served the Sidhe for centuries. To make a new life alone... Such a change may be too much for her."

Gwen nodded and stared into her cup. Was that was she was doing? Choosing not to change, to stay in Camelot where one day she could end up arrested and executed just as her father was? She could have left after he died, as her brother left after their mother's death, and no one would have blamed her. Yet every day she walked through the courtyard where she had seen his body, blood staining the rough brown cloth that had been draped over him as they wheeled him away like so much refuse. He should be resting with her mother, but for the crime of his 'treason' Uther had not allowed him the dignity of a proper burial. She had been powerless, only able to pray to the gods to guard and shepherd his soul.

"Then she'd rather stay here and die?" Morgana said, her sudden contribution making Gwen look up
in surprise. "I don't know who's the bigger fool, her or us."

"We're not going to die," Gwen insisted, more to herself than out of any attempt to convince Morgana. "Merlin and Arthur--"

Morgana set aside her book with a thump, and only then did Gwen see just how frustrated and angry she was, how hard the wait was for her to bear. "We should have allied with the Sidhe when we had the chance. The two of them don't stand a chance against what's coming."

"You don't know that," Gwen began, but Morgana just raised her eyebrows. Gwen stopped and bit her lip. Of course Morgana knew. She knew better than anyone.

"The Sidhe are a grave threat," Gaius agreed. "But they are not unstoppable."

"And we couldn't let them take Elena," Gwen added, still feeling prickly after their argument over the Sidhe and the Old Religion. She wished Morgana would understand that they were not one and the same.

"if we want to save Elena, we should have told her to leave. We should have told all of them."

"You know why that is not possible," Gaius said, a hint of warning in his voice.

Morgana gave a groan of frustration. "Tell me, Gwen. Why do your gods make me see the future if I can't do anything to stop it?"

"We are," Gwen insisted. "Merlin has stopped the threats in your visions before. And that was before Arthur knew to help."

Gwen had expected her words to be comforting, but they had the opposite effect. "You told Merlin about my nightmares? Is that how it was, the two of you sneaking around while I lay in a drugged stupor?"

"I didn't tell him," Gwen defended. "I wanted to, but I couldn't put you in danger. I would never betray you like that."

"You betrayed me every day," Morgana said, coldly. "Both of you."

Gwen went silent with guilt, but Gaius riled. "What was done was necessary to protect you."

Morgana glared at him. "No wonder you always take Uther's side. You're just as bad as he is."

Gaius continued, undeterred. "You cannot warn anyone about the Sidhe, just as you could not have warned anyone about your past visions. To do so would put your own life in grave danger."

"And what sort of life did I have before? What you did to me is as bad as what Grunhilda did to Elena. Drugged into submission, deprived of our will, all for our own good. It was monstrous."

"If we had not protected you, Uther would have had you executed for treason."

"I would rather have died free," Morgana spat.

"Please stop," Gwen said, as she struggled not to cry. Her heart was breaking all over again. Of course Morgana could never forgive her. Such crimes could never be forgiven, no matter how good their intentions. She pulled out her kerchief and dabbed at her eyes, taking some small refuge behind the cloth. She didn't want to see how much Morgana hated her.
But when she lowered the kerchief and dared to look up, Morgana had softened. "Gwen," she began, apology in her voice. "I didn't mean..."

"You did," Gwen said, ready to face the truth. "How could you ever..." She swallowed against the lump in her throat. "You should go before it's too late. You don't owe Camelot anything."

"Will you come with me?" Morgana asked, and for the first time she truly seemed uncertain.

"Do you want me to?" Gwen asked, not expecting a positive answer. "You're right. I betrayed you. I only wanted to keep you safe, but all I did was hurt you. I'm so sorry, Morgana. I truly am."

Morgana nodded, accepting, and didn't argue. "I can't go to Deorham," she said, turning away. "We stopped the wedding, but Arthur did nothing to stop Alined from surrendering. Even if he comes back, he'll do nothing to stop the Purge."

"Arthur swore that he would not allow his father to harm the people of Deorham," Gaius reminded her.

"And what good is that?" Morgana replied. "He barely managed to stand up to Uther about his own marriage. He's always been a coward when it comes to his father."

"Maybe that's because he was always alone," Gwen said, quietly. "No one could stand up to Uther alone."

"Very few have defied him and lived," Gaius admitted, resting his hand on Gwen's arm again to comfort her. He looked to Morgana. "But the people of Deorham do not deserve to suffer."

"There has to be something we can do," Gwen said, looking to them searchingly. But she was answered with silence.

"We can't save Alined," Morgana began, slowly. "But what if we don't have to? What if we can save Deorham without him?"

Gaius frowned in thought, then a spark of hope lit in his eyes. "Uther was so determined to force Alined's surrender that he built the entire treaty around him. But if Alined were to relinquish his crown--"

"Or have it taken from him," Morgana said, excited now. "If Lord Idriys is willing..."

"A coup," Gaius said, straightening as he considered it. "It's possible. If he could be smuggled out..."

"Not just him," Morgana continued. "We have to free all of them, the whole Deorham army. Once they're over the border, Uther won't be able to launch an attack."

"One man can be disguised, but we can hardly smuggle out hundreds of soldiers at once."

"We can with magic."

Gaius gave her a forbidding look, but wavered in the wake of Morgana's earlier accusations. "And just what do you suggest?" he asked, with an air of resignation.

Morgana's eyes narrowed as she planned. "First we knock out the guards. We can put a sleeping draught in their wine. Then we get everyone out through the siege tunnels."

"Camelot is surrounded by three armies," Gaius countered. "Their escape will be noticed."
Morgana opened Merlin's grimoire again. "Not if I make a mist to hide them. They can head for the forest and make their way south from there." She found the spell to create mist and held it up for them to see.

"There is a great deal of risk," Gaius said, still unconvinced. "The mist will dissipate unless the spell is sustained. And when the guards awake, whoever brought them the wine will be in immediate danger. Even if you wear a disguise, you will still be in danger. Uther will stop at nothing to find the culprit."

"I'll bring them the wine. And I'll leave with Idrys," Morgana said, seeming to make the decision in that moment. "If we succeed, Deorham will be safe from Uther." She looked to Gwen, hesitated and then turned back to Gaius. "Do you have a better plan?"

Gaius stood. "I may have something that can help us with the guards. But my greater concern is for the consequences of your departure. Uther is likely to assume that you were taken by the Deorham as a hostage."

Morgana shrugged dismissively. "I've been no end of trouble to him. I'm certain he'll be glad to finally be rid of me."

"He will pursue your 'captors' to the ends of the earth," Gaius warned, gravely. "And should he discover the truth, the consequences--"

"I don't care. I want him to know," Morgana said, with cold anger. "He's taken everything from me: my home, my freedom. He even forced me to take his name. But I am not his daughter and I never will be. I'm just as much a prisoner as the Deorham and I have the scars to show it." She held up her wrists, and while the scars from the shackles had faded to thin white lines, Gaius would know they were there. He was the one who had treated her wounds after her brief imprisonment. "In case you've forgotten."

"I have not," Gaius said. "If you wish to leave, then you shall. But let me give you one last piece of advice."

"If you must."

Gaius gave the sigh of an old man who had seen too much in his time. "The seeds of our greatest desires often bear the fruit of our own destruction. Once they are sowed, all we can do is live with the consequences."

"I'm not afraid of him."

"I am," Gaius said, plainly. "And I fear for those who will stand in the way of his fury, as countless have before." He looked to Gwen, and his silent sorrow said that she would soon find herself to be one of those countless, if she stayed.

Gwen wondered if perhaps that was what she deserved.

§

This was it, then. Their last night together. Gwen could hardly believe it, and yet there was no time for denial. Morgana had decided to leave, and betrayal had destroyed any hope of a future together. The guilt of it weighed heavily, but Gwen shouldered it. What mattered now was freeing the people of Deorham from Uther's grip, even if that meant she might never know that freedom for herself.

Morgana deserved a better life, just as Elena did. Even if that meant a life without her. Perhaps the
only way to make up for her betrayal was to let her go.

At least they'd found a better way to knock out the guards. In protest of the risks of using drugged wine -- not all the guards might drink it, or drink enough to pass out -- Gaius had produced a set of brownish balls wrapped in rags. Once lit, the balls would produce a sleeping fog that would knock out everyone in the dungeon at once.

Gaius stood lookout while Gwen and Morgana lit the balls and set them rolling down the dungeon staircase. The smoke was potent, and though one guard rose to investigate the balls, he crumpled to the floor before he could reach them. Gwen kept a cloth over her mouth as she watched guards and prisoners alike all succumb to the smoke. Once the air had cleared, they would have to work quickly, as it was uncertain just how long their sleep would hold.

As soon as it was safe, the three of them hurried down into the dungeon. They dragged the guards up against the cells and tied them to the bars, then bound their arms and legs, blindfolded and gagged them, just in case they woke during the breakout. Uther would still be furious once the escape was discovered, but at least he would have no easy way to identify the culprit.

Not that he would be pleased by Morgana's disappearance. It was hard to know which would make him more furious: if he believed her to be abducted, or if he knew she had left of her own accord. Uther had always had a blind spot towards her anger. Morgana often accused him of refusing to respect her, of treating her like the child she was when she first came to Camelot. Certainly last year the two of them had nearly come to blows and Morgana had ended up spending a night in this very dungeon. But once they had reconciled, all had been forgiven. At least on Uther's part.

As Morgana unlocked Idriys' cell, Gwen wondered if she was making a mistake. If the smart thing to do would be to leave for Deorham after all, not to be with Morgana but for her own survival. What if Morgana's disappearance was what finally brought her all the way to Uther's pyre? One close call had been enough, and yet she couldn't ask Morgana to stay on her behalf. And if they pulled this off, if Idriys took and held the throne, Deorham could become a true sanctuary for magic and the Old Religion.

But if she left now, it would mean turning her back on Camelot. It would mean leaving Merlin and Arthur behind. Morgana might not have faith in them, but Gwen did. She had faith in the gods and in the people, and she would not abandon them out of fear of what might happen. This was her home and she needed to stay and fight for it, just as they needed Lord Idriys to leave and fight for his.

Idriys was still dressed the borrowed finery he had worn in attendance of the wedding; he had been treated as a guest there, but he had been chained for his attendance and returned here before the feast. Like the rest of the Deorham prisoners, he had not yet pledged his fealty to Uther, and so was still treated as an enemy. If they remained in Camelot, that fealty would be all but forced upon them, granting them their freedom at a greater price than any ransom.

Morgana knelt beside Idriys and waved a vial of smelling salts under his nose. He woke with a start, but before he could say anything, she pressed a finger to his lips to hush him.

"Your king has been defeated," she said, with quiet urgency. "But your kingdom may yet be saved, if you have the strength to fight for it."

His eyes widened as he realized what she was saying. What it would mean. If he had any personal loyalty to Alined, the offer might well be rejected with anger, but all he did was move Morgana's hand away with a gentle grip. He sat up, only a little unsteady from the smoke's effects, and peered out the cell. "You did this?" he asked, looking to Morgana with interest.
"I can do more," Morgana said, boldly. "Much more."

Idriys looked amused by this. "You are a lady of great ambition."

Even in the darkness, Morgana's eyes glinted with excitement. "And you?"

"I offered you a fiefdom, and in turn you present me with an entire kingdom." He rubbed his chin. "The decision to invade Gedref was unpopular with the other lords. If it had been a success, their displeasure would have been of no consequence. My association with it may cause some difficulty. But that is manageable, should I return with all my men. Can you get us out of the city?"

Morgana had only successfully executed a mere handful of spells, but she had always been willing to bluff when necessary. "I can," she said, with only a faint tremor betraying her confidence.

Idriys gave a nod of respect. "Then I would be honored to have you by my side, Lady Morgana."

Morgana stilled, then relaxed again. It was hardly a surprise that he had seen through her earlier ruse, and of course such misdirection would no longer be necessary if they were leaving together.

"We need to hurry," Gwen reminded them. She was eager to have all this over and done with. She hated this place. Besides, if they lingered too long, there was a greater chance that they could be discovered by the night patrols. One shout of alarm was all it would take to bring the guards crashing down on them, just as it had her father. She suppressed a shudder as she walked towards the very spot where he had died.

Just as she thought it, she heard distant voices coming from the top of the stairwell, muffled through the dungeon door. Her blood went cold, but she forced herself not to panic. She heard Gaius talking, but couldn't make out the other voice. Was it a guard? A servant? If he could persuade whoever it was to leave, perhaps draw them away on the pretext of a medical emergency...

And then the door opened, and Gwen skittered back into the shadows. She held her breath as she saw light from the door above and two figures silhouetted, and then it was dark again as the door was shut. The figures walked down the steps, both male, one treading lightly and one heavily. Had Gaius brought the other man down here so Morgana could knock him out with magic? As they reached the light of the torches, Gwen saw the glint of guard's mail and a large bag slung over his shoulder.

"Stay right there," Morgana warned, stepping out from the shadows.

"Or you'll do what, little girl?" challenged the guard, but his demeanor quickly relaxed. He chuckled and dropped the heavy bag to the floor. "Oh, I shouldn't tease. I don't know how those men get around with all this weight." And then with a shimmer of gold, the guard was gone and Grunhilda stood in his place, grinning in amusement at her own antics.

"What are you doing here?" Gwen asked, baffled.

"Grunhilda has offered her assistance," Gaius said, and clearly he wasn't best pleased about it.

"Camelot seems to be full of sorcerers," Idriys marvelled, coming out from behind Morgana.

"I'm so sorry, my dears, but I couldn't help but overhear. I told myself what I always told my Elena: it's no use moping about, feeling miserable for yourself. You've got to take action. So I went and fetched him." She gave the sack a kick. It didn't budge.

"Him?" Gwen asked, approaching the bag warily. She knelt down and opened the drawstrings, and
jumped back in alarm when a pair of feet fell out. She covered her mouth and swallowed her scream. Grunhilda grabbed the other end of the sack, and with a grunt she yanked it free. Trickler's body sprawled out on the floor, and Idriys' eyebrows shot up even further. "I couldn't leave him in Elena's chambers. By the time I got to him, he was already starting to smell a bit funny. And I thought, here, if that nasty Uther needs someone to blame, why not him?"

"An idea with some merit," Gaius said, apparently surprising himself with the admission. "And as Grunhilda has offered her services, I thought perhaps she could assist in the escape. You have only had your magic for a few days. As a Pixie, Grunhilda has a great deal of power and even more experience."

Morgana glared at him.

"A Pixie?" Idriys said, approaching Grunhilda with interest. "I was under the impression that all Pixies were loyal to their Sidhe masters."

"Grunhilda was of assistance to us against the Sidhe, at great cost to herself," Gaius explained. "She is in need of a new home. If you would be willing..."

"We don't need her help," Morgana sneered.

"A delicate little mist might be all right at first," Grunhilda said, addressing Idriys. "But you'll need more than that if you want to take all your men back with you. You don't want to leave behind all of them outside? Divide your army up like that?"

Gwen realized that Grunhilda was -- glamours aside -- much more than she'd appeared to be. But then she had only been pretending to be a foolish old nursemaid. In truth she was a magical creature of great power who had lived under everyone's noses for decades, all while protecting two charges and working to effect her masters' plans. Those plans had been foiled at the last moment, but that did not make her any less formidable an asset.

"What would you suggest?" Idriys asked.

"A glamour," Grunhilda said. "Just like the one I did to carry him through the castle without any bother. Once the mist lifts, it'll be like they never left. No one will suspect a thing, at least until morning."

Idriys was impressed. "And you can sustain such a glamour until then?"

"Yes, but I'll have to stay for that," Grunhilda, admitting some weakness at last. "Once it's done, I'll just pop into the woods. No one will notice little old me."

"No, they won't," Idriys said, considering. "Would you be willing to pledge yourself to my service? Accept me as your king and master?"

"A handsome gentleman such as yourself?", Grunhilda said, flirting. "In a heartbeat."

Morgana rolled her eyes. "She's a Pixie. You can't trust her."

"Perhaps," Idriys said, turning to her. "But I have known her for as little time as I've known you, and as Uther's ward your loyalty is equally questionable. But please, my lady. My offer to you has not been withdrawn. Let Uther rage at his losses. His anger will bring him no further into Deorham than it has before. And without Alined and his greed, Deorham will become a true stronghold."
"For all magic, or just that which benefits you?" Gwen wasn't sure what compelled her to ask. Perhaps it was simply out of concern for Morgana.

But Idriys did not take it as a slight. "I do not deny the benefit. In fact, there is another that I offered shelter to. But I didn't see him at the wedding."

"Merlin is indisposed," Gaius said, annoyance seeping out from behind his cordial tone. "I'm afraid you must return to Deorham without him."

"Then with your permission," Idriys said, nodding to Grunhilda, "I will remain in Camelot with you until he returns."

"You can't," Morgana insisted. "You have to leave now."

"Why?"

But before she could answer, one of the guards stirred, groaning in confusion. Everyone froze except for Grunhilda, who hissed "Súan!" as her eyes glowed red. The guard instantly slumped back to sleep, and Grunhilda cast the same spell upon the other guards. "That's better," she said, clapping her hands together in satisfaction.

Gwen gaped. "Um, thank you," said said.

But the gratitude only served to annoy Morgana further. "I've seen what's coming. None of this is going to matter if we're all dead."

"Merlin and Arthur will stop them," Gwen said, tired of Morgana's cynicism.

Morgana rounded on her, but before she could reply, Gaius interrupted. "Ladies, if I may. The priority is to escort out friends safely out of the castle. Further discussion can wait."

"You're right," Gwen said, and went to open the other cells. Any excuse not to stay under Morgana's withering glare.

Like the guards, the Deorham had begun to wake on their own, but Gwen assisted them with smelling salts where necessary. In a matter of minutes, the dungeon was packed full of dazed men, shocked by the sudden chance at freedom but eager to attain it. They took the weapons from the unconscious guards and silently distributed them, and looked to Idriys for further orders.

Eager to prove herself, Morgana led them to the siege tunnels and opened the door with her magic. Idriys sent Grunhilda in first to assist his nephew Aeddan at the other end, where another locked gate awaited. Idriys and Morgana would be the last to leave.

As the prisoners made their escape, Gaius and Gwen dragged Trickler's body over to the tunnel entrance, where Gaius stabbed Trickler in the back with one of the guard's knives.

"It will appear as though Trickler was sent by Alined to free Idriys," Gaius explained. "But instead he was double-crossed."

"Are you sure that Uther will believe it?" Gwen asked.

Gaius gave a thin smile. "When his body is found, I will be summoned to provide an explanation for the escape. Uther will easily believe Alined bold enough to smuggle a sorcerer into the heart of Camelot. As indeed he was."
"Without his crown, Alined will pay dearly for that," Idriys said. "He was a poor king, but even he doesn't deserve Uther's rage."

"There are worse things than Uther," Morgana said, quietly. As the last of the Deorham climbed into the tunnel, she turned to Gwen. "Come with us."

"I can't," Gwen said, and wished it wasn't true. It would be a relief to simply up and go, to leave behind all the grief and suffering. But she couldn't.

"You know what will happen."

"Perhaps. But this is my home. I won't turn my back on it."

Morgana shrank back, as if Gwen's loyalty had physically pained her. But she held her ground. "I won't stay here to burn. Not by anyone's hand."

Gwen stepped forward and clasped Morgana's hand in her own. "Then go," she said, gently. "Be safe."

Tears welled in Morgana's eyes. "Gwen..." she began, but couldn't finish.

Gwen reached up and brushed her fingers through Morgana's silken hair, touching it for one last time. "We'll be all right. And you'll be happy there. Safe. That's all I've ever wanted for you. I never meant..." She shook her head. It didn't matter what she had wanted, what her intentions were. The fact was that she had hurt Morgana in so many ways, and that was a guilt she would have to bear. "I'm sorry."

Morgana stared at her for a long moment, and Gwen began to wonder if perhaps Morgana had changed her mind about leaving after all. But then Morgana pulled her into a tight hug, and Gwen knew it was goodbye. She held Morgana back and tried not to cry.

"I'm sorry, too," Morgana said, her chin trembling and her eyes wet. "I hope..."

"Go," Gwen said, unable to bear it any longer. "Please. Just..." She pulled away, turned away, barely holding herself together.

She didn't look back. She kept her eyes fixed on the opposite wall. She heard the soft click of the siege tunnel door as it shut tight. And when Gaius returned alone, she silently followed him back up the stairs.
There was blood in his mouth. He had been nowhere, nowhen, floating weightless on water until the familiar taste had drawn him to shore. Something had happened, something bad, but he couldn't remember. Was there an attack? A battle? His whole body felt weighed down, heavy and useless as a sack of stones. His head hurt all over, like it had been battered from the inside.

He flexed his tongue, trying to summon enough saliva to spit his mouth clear. He was lying on his back, the hard ground beneath him too flat and smooth to be anything but castle floor, but his head was resting on something soft, and there was some sort of blanket draped over his chest.

His eyes felt glued shut, but when he tried to reach up to wipe them, he couldn't move his arm. And then he remembered, and heavy dread wrapped like a band across his chest and throat. He forced his eyes open and saw the ceiling of the Sidhe prison and the faint shimmer of the spell that fortified it. They had come to Avalon to stop the Sidhe, and they had failed. Merlin's healing magic had failed.

He wet his mouth again and tried to speak. "Merlin?" The word came out as a faint croak, but it was enough. Motion caught the corner of his eye, and Merlin moved into view, kneeling beside him and leaning over him. He was pale, his eyes swollen and red from crying, and his chest was bare. Arthur quickly realized that Merlin had taken off his mail and surcoat and shirt and used them as a makeshift pillow and blanket. He wondered if Merlin had begged the guards for those small mercies, and if they had refused.

"Arthur?" Merlin began, hoarse and hopeful and scared. He reached down and touched Arthur's brow, his cheek, then rested his hand on his chest, over his heart, as if to feel its beat and the steady rise and fall of each breath. Merlin tried to say more, to ask, but the words caught in his throat. He looked into Arthur's eyes, and as he saw the despair in them, horror filled his own.

"No," Merlin whispered, even as he bowed his head. His face crumpled and he gave a cry of frustration and pain and grief. He drew his hands back, then reached for Arthur again, hands moving over him as if he was afraid to touch, afraid of doing any more damage.

"I'm sorry," Merlin sobbed, tears streaming down his cheeks. "Arthur. Please, I'm so sorry."

"It's not your fault."

"How can you say that? My magic--"

"You did the best you could."

"I stopped the bleeding," Merlin sniffed. "But when I tried to stop the swelling, you had a fit. I didn't know what to do."

Arthur knew that if Merlin couldn't heal him, then he didn't have much time left. Beneath the new pain that the fit had left him with, he could still feel the wrongness in his head that came from the brain injury. But his own life had never mattered, not in the grand scheme of things. He had been born for one purpose alone: to protect and defend Camelot. To die for it if necessary. He did not want to outlive his kingdom, and if he couldn't save it, he didn't deserve to. "You have to try again."

"No," Merlin said, visibly horrified at the idea.

"I need you to try."
"No. I nearly killed you--"

"I'm dying."

Merlin went absolutely still, not even breathing. Then his chest hitched with a swallowed sob. "No," he whimpered.

Arthur wished there was anything he could do to comfort Merlin, but right now he needed to push. Merlin was the only one who could save Camelot, and all Arthur was doing was weighing him down. "It's not your fault. But if you can't heal me, then you need to go. You have to save Camelot."

"I can't leave you."

"You'll come back for me. When it's done, you'll save me, just like I saved you."

"I can't."

"Merlin--"

"Arthur, I can't. I tried. When you were unconscious..." Merlin swallowed. "I tried everything. The Sidhe's magic is too strong." He sat back, frustrated, then rubbed his face. He sighed heavily, then pulled up his knees and wrapped his arms around them, folding himself into a tight huddle of misery. His knuckles were bloody, as if he had tried to punch his way through the barrier in desperation. He probably had. "I have all this magic, and it's useless. Some Emrys I turned out to be."

"If it didn't work, then you have to keep trying," Arthur said, suddenly irritated by Merlin's self-pity. They didn't have time for self-pity. "We have to save Camelot. Thousands of people are depending on us. And I can't--" He grunted as he tried to lift his arm, to clench his fist, to even twitch a finger. Nothing. "I can't. So you have to."

Merlin gave a groan of frustration. "How? Even if I could get out of here, how? We lost our hostages, we lost the torcs, your sword--"

"You'll figure something out. A new plan. It's not like the old one was any good."

Merlin stared at him, his eyebrows slowly rising with astonishment.

"I assumed something would come up," Arthur said, forcing himself not to be embarrassed. "Something always comes up."

"Yeah, it did," Merlin said, with a slightly manic air.

Arthur could see that they were at an impasse. No doubt Merlin's failure to heal had only worsened his confidence with his magic. A pep talk wasn't going to be enough. Arthur had dealt with knights who had lost their confidence, shaken after battle or some personal failure. He needed to guide Merlin away from his losses and towards victory.

"Why did you bring the torcs?"

The unexpected question startled Merlin out of his panic. "What? Oh. Yeah. Um, I didn't want to, but Gaius... he said we might need them. Maybe to keep you safe, I don't know."

It gave Arthur a small and strange sense of satisfaction to know that Gaius gave Merlin the runaround just as much as he did everyone else. "No other reason?"

Merlin huffed. "What does it matter? They're gone."
"True."

"And even if we had them, it's not like they'd do us any good. Maybe if Morgana was here..."

"Because you could share your magics?"

"I guess." Merlin's expression softened, just a bit. "It was nice, feeling so..."

"Connected?"

Merlin shrugged shyly.

"Gaius must have thought they were important. He went through a lot of trouble getting us to wear them."

Merlin gave him an odd look. "What do you mean?"

"When I came to him, demanding a way to suppress your magic..." Arthur winced internally. "He did what he always does. Made the best out of a bad situation."

"He never wanted me to tell you the truth. Maybe I should have listened to him. If I hadn't told you--"

"I'm glad you did," Arthur said, honestly. "No matter what happens."

There was a long pause before Merlin replied. "I think... maybe if we had the torcs, I could try again. They helped with the spell that restored me."

"Because you shared your magic?"

"It was more than that. Even though Gaius led the spell, it was like..." Merlin scruffed at his hair. "I came to Camelot because I needed help controlling my magic. There's so much of it, it kept on spilling out of me. Gaius helped me to control it, to stop it. To use it when I had to to save you. But when I do use it, sometimes there's just so much."

"Brute force," Arthur said, understanding. Merlin was so strong that he had never learned to be truly skillful with his magic. Until the Sidhe, he'd never come up against an enemy capable of overpowering him. It reminded Arthur of his youthful duels with Morgana, and how as his strength increased, she depended more on cleverness and agility to match him. "Is that how you defeated Palaemon? Broke his defenses?"

Merlin nodded. "If I couldn't figure out his spell, I'd throw everything at it until it broke." He cracked the faintest of smiles. "Worked pretty well."

"And that's what you've been doing to escape?"

"Yeah. But when they hit, my spells just fizzle out. It's like... the shield is too slippery, there's nothing for them to get a hold of."

"There has to be a weakness," Arthur insisted. He'd spent too many years fighting, seen too many 'perfect defenses' broken to believe otherwise. "Even if it's a small one. You just have to focus, feel it out." He'd seen what Merlin was capable of in Gedref, even if he hadn't been fully aware of it at the time. He had been holding Merlin back from the Sidhe threat for too long, driven by doubt and fear more than any real foresight. It was time he changed that.

"I told you, I tried."
"You were angry, upset. You need to try again with a clear head."

"I need the torcs," Merlin insisted, frustrated.

"Maybe. If you were any other sorcerer. But you're the Emrys, and I'm..." Arthur wanted to laugh at the absurdity of it, but right now he was willing to believe anything if it helped. "I suppose I'm the once and future king. That means we can do anything, as long as we do it together."

Merlin looked at him askance. "There's no way you believe that."

"Everyone else does. Maybe we should start listening to them."

Merlin squinted at him, almost angrily, as if annoyed that Arthur was being so optimistic. "Fine," he huffed. "But on one condition: if you help me break out, then I'm going to get the torcs and come back and heal you."

"There's no time--"

"You're the one who said we have to work together."

"Merlin, how can I fight the Sidhe when I can't even scratch my nose?"

Merlin reached down and scratched the tip of Arthur's nose. "There. Better?"

Arthur glared at him, then relented. "Yes. Now take my hand."

"Why? So I can help you can scratch your own nose?"

"No," Arthur said, patiently. "Before, your magic connected us through the torcs. But you don't need the torcs for that. So take my hand."

Merlin obeyed, if warily. It was obvious that he was afraid of hurting Arthur further, which was understandable, but now was not the time for caution. Besides, Arthur might be dying, but he wasn't fragile.

"Now what?" Merlin asked.

"Share your magic, just like before, but don't push. Let it flow the way you did through the torcs."

"Right," Merlin said, doubtful. But he closed his eyes and concentrated, and Arthur felt the now-familiar tickling sensation against his palm.

"Good," Arthur encouraged. "Just like that."

Merlin was more cautious with his magic this time, either holding it back or letting it passively flow as Arthur instructed. It spread, slow as honey, up the length of his arm, and then widened to pool in his chest. The sensation was gentler and less overwhelming than when Merlin had tried to heal him, though not as rich as it had been through the torcs. Arthur guessed that through them, Merlin's magic had been mediated and perhaps even mingled with other magic; this was pure and raw.

The steady flow soon filled him, but not to bursting. It seemed to reach some natural equilibrium, warming Arthur from head to toe like a hot bath. The magic was a living thing, with currents and eddies like a river, and a heartbeat--

No. That was Merlin's heartbeat. Strong, steady, but quick with excitement and fear.
"I can feel you," Arthur murmured. "Your heart."

Merlin opened his eyes, then ducked his head. "I can feel yours. I've never..." He bit his lip, and there was a surge in the magic as Merlin's heart sped up. "I should try again. Maybe this time--"

"No," Arthur said, firmly. There wasn't time for Merlin to risk a second healing attempt. "Close your eyes," he continued, needing to steady him. "Focus on your breathing."

Merlin shifted restlessly, but obeyed. The magic calmed again. "Now what?"

"Reach out. Together. Find the shield."

Merlin led, pulling Arthur's awareness beyond his body, the both of them stretching wider and wider until they filled the small room. Arthur had never felt anything so strange, but he wasn't afraid. It was like sword practice, wrapping his body around Merlin so that they could move together in perfect form. He suddenly realized that their heartbeats had synchronized.

Arthur opened his eyes and saw that the room was glowing. Merlin's magic was pressed up against it, making the perfect globe visible around them. Except it wasn't perfect, because it cut down through the floor. Arthur guided their awareness down, closing his eyes again, and together they brushed along the bottom of the globe. It felt like there was something different there.

"Do you feel that?" Arthur asked.

"Mm. I think it's an anchor."

During his magic lesson -- those few, long days ago -- Merlin had taught Arthur that all spells were anchored in some way. Anchors were a source of power that sustained a spell. Any spell was initially anchored by the caster, and that was why some spells could be stopped by killing the sorcerer, such as when Elena's love spell had been broken by Trickler's death. But spells could also be anchored in an object so that they could be sustained separately from the original caster.

"It's a crystal," Merlin realized.

Arthur could feel it now, almost see it. It was embedded beneath the floor of the cell, and it pulsed with power. The spell within it must be a permanent fixture, activated by the guards when needed. It seemed that even the Sidhe had to deal with practicalities. "Can you break it?"

"Yes," Merlin said, and Arthur could feel his smile. Then a wave of concern. "They'll come. The guards. They'll know when the spell breaks."

"You'll be ready for them."

The concern only increased. "I can't just leave you."

"Yes, you can."

"They'll be angry. They'll hurt you."

Arthur could feel the fear in Merlin, and still-fresh pain. "What did they do to you?" he asked, realizing that Merlin had never told him the full story of his capture, and what the Sidhe had done to him before Arthur rescued him. Whatever it was, it was bad.

"Not now," Merlin said, the agitation in his voice mirrored in his magic. And then suddenly he and it withdrew, the shock of absence like being dunked in icy water.

Merlin let go of Arthur's hand and stood. "You're right. I need to be ready."

Merlin was finally doing as he was told, but that only made Arthur worry more. Yet Camelot had to come first. "Do it," Arthur said.

Merlin stood very still, his brow furrowed with concentration. He held both hands out, palms to the floor, and the shield shimmered in random patches as his magic jostled against it. Then the shimmering stopped as Merlin began to focus his magic. Even without their connection, Arthur could feel the power of it, sharp and building.

And then the moment came. Merlin shouted "Abricab cristalla!" and thrust his palms down, sending the powerful spell down to its target. There was a faint crack, and then the whole shield wavered and vanished. Alarmed voices echoed down the hall from where the guards were stationed.

"They're coming," Merlin whispered, then lay down on the ground, feigning unconsciousness.

Arthur closed his own eyes, and listened as the guards approached with heavy footfall. Their steps slowed with confusion and caution as they neared the cell. Arthur cracked open an eye just in time to see Merlin grab the blunt end of one of their staffs and cry "Acwele!", blasting the guard in the face with his own weapon. The guard exploded in a shower of gold and blue. The other guard brought his own weapon up to bear, but before he could use it, Merlin had felled him, too.

At least they weren't nobles. Arthur supposed that the situation couldn't really get any worse. And if Merlin was going to stop the Sidhe, it was likely that he was going to have to kill a lot more than two guards. The plain fact was that this was war, and war meant casualties. "Take the staffs. Go."

Merlin turned to go, then stopped. He looked towards the door, then back at Arthur, visibly torn.

"For goodness sake, go!" Arthur shouted.

Merlin started to say something, then turned. "Did you hear that?"

"Merlin, there's no time--"

Merlin hushed him, then rubbed at his ear with his free hand. "I heard it before. At the shore. You don't hear it? It's getting louder."

Arthur groaned in frustration, but Merlin ignored him, intent on figuring out the mysterious sound. And then motion caught the corner of Arthur's eye. "Behind you!"

Merlin turned and fired, but their attackers were small and swift. At first Arthur thought it was more Sidhe in their true forms, but then he realized it was the dragonflies from the lake, the ones that breathed fire. There were three of them, and they swarmed around Merlin with agitation.

"Oh," Merlin said, surprised, and lowered his staff. He turned to Arthur and broke into a sudden, astonished smile. "Arthur, it's them. They're talking to me."

"What are they saying?"

"That we have been waiting for you," said a voice that echoed in Arthur's head. It was surprisingly deep for a creature so small. One of the dragonflies landed on his nose, making Arthur look at it almost cross-eyed. "Does Albion still stand?"
Arthur glanced at Merlin, who looked just as bewildered as he felt. "Yes. For the next few hours."

"Then we are not too late, little King. Come, we have much to do." The dragonflies flew back out of the cell.

"Wait," Merlin said. "He can't walk, he's paralyzed."

"Why have you not healed him, Emrys?" asked one of the dragonflies.

"Where are your torcs?" asked another. "Where is your sword?"

"Um, the Sidhe took them," Merlin explained, as baffled as Arthur was about how they knew about them. "And I can't. I tried. It only made him worse."

The dragonflies swarmed around Merlin again, inspecting him. Then they did the same to Arthur.

"How do you know who we are?" Arthur asked, though so far it seemed that half of Avalon had them figured out. "And who are you?"

"Long have we slept here," said one, her body a shimmering green. "We roused when the Emrys appeared in Avalon, but at first his magic was faint. Then it returned again, strong and bright, and woke us from our slumber."

"We came to greet you," said another; his shell was golden. "We roused when the Emrys appeared in Avalon, but at first his magic was faint. Then it returned again, strong and bright, and woke us from our slumber."

"We are three of many," said the third, in shining red. "It is our sorrow that we could not help you against the Romans. They allied with the Sidhe and tricked us."

"Trapped us," said the green one, angrily.

"We must retrieve your weapons," said the red. "The Sidhe and the Romans must pay for what they did to us, to Albion."

"The Romans?" Merlin looked to Arthur, baffled. "What do the Romans have to do with any of this?"

"Rome left Albion centuries ago," Arthur added. "How long have you been here?" Whatever these creatures were, they were far behind the times. He doubted Palaemon had anything to do with this; it was five hundred years since Albion freed itself from Roman rule, and five hundred more of Roman rule before that. Could they really have been trapped in Albion all that time?

All three insects went silent, clearly disturbed by the news. They seemed to talk silently amongst each other. Merlin looked to Arthur, shrugged, then stepped out to see if any other Sidhe were coming.

Their conversation finished, the dragonflies flew back to Arthur. "We will heal you, Once and Future King. And then you will come with us."

"I mean you no offence," Arthur said, his annoyance growing. "But how much magic can three dragonflies have?"

"We are not insects," sneered the red one, as if the word was an insult. "These are not our forms. The Sidhe did this to us, and we will make them pay dearly for it."

"We are the third leg of the Triskelion," said the golden one, proudly. "We are the defence of
Merlin whirled about, eyes wide. "Dragons!" Then he turned back again, and Arthur heard footsteps approaching. "We have to get out of here. Can you help us?"

"Defend us, Emrys, and we shall heal him."

Caution and relief warred on Merlin's face, then both were obscured by determination. "Right," he said, hefting the staff. He left the cell, and mere moments later Arthur heard sounds of fighting.

"Be still," said the green one.

"That's what I've been doing," Arthur muttered, but the dragons weren't listening. They lined up above him, and for a moment he wondered if it was a good idea to trust three dragons, no matter what they had been turned into. And then it was too late to wonder. Just as Camelot's dragon had breathed his protection spell into Arthur, so too these dragonflies breathed out not flame, but magic. Once again he found himself suffused with heat, rushing through his veins and into his lungs, filling him to the brim, making every inch of his skin prickle and flush. Like Merlin's without the torcs, their magic was raw and pure, and it burned the pain from him in a cleansing fire.

He gasped as it faded, the ends of his fingers and toes still tingling. His head felt clear, the wrongness gone. He held his breath, then tried to lift his hand, half-afraid that it wouldn't budge.

His hand rose.

He could move.

He sat up, then stopped, dizzy from the sudden motion. But there was no time to wait for his body to adjust. He struggled to his feet, clumsy, and grabbed the other staff to use as a crutch. He rolled up Merlin's shirts and mail and hobbled out of the cell, only to meet Merlin returning.

"Arthur," Merlin breathed, stunned. Then he leapt forward and pulled him into a crushing hug. When he pulled back, he was grinning, and his eyes were wet. Arthur wanted to kiss him dearly.

"Hurry," said the green one, as the dragonflies flew past. More Sidhe guards approached, but this time they were met with dragonfire. Though together their flame was a candle compared to one breath from Camelot's dragon, it was enough to make the Sidhe flee. They were vulnerable to dragon magic, and Arthur was more than happy to take advantage of that fact.

"I can lead us to our weapons," Merlin said. "Can you get us through?"

"They could be anywhere in the castle," Arthur pointed out.

"I can find them," Merlin said, confident. "We have to go up."

"Then we shall," said the green one.

"Try not to kill everyone," Arthur said, but he doubted they were listening. Escape was all well and good, but their only allies were three fire-breathing insects. That wasn't going to get them very far when Titania declared all-out war for their slaughter of an exit. He hoped the Sidhe had enough sense to let them go.

In the cell, Arthur hadn't paid much mind to his surroundings. His range of vision hadn't given him much to work with anyway. But as they stepped up out of the dungeons, it was difficult not to become distracted. It was built of marble so pure it seemed to glow, shining white and picked out
with the rarest of gems, glittering with gold and with silver. Everywhere he turned, there were vines, trees, flowers growing from the stone itself, brilliant emerald growing into living green. Ivy garlands wound their way up the banisters, leaves glossy and thick. Fruit trees grew in espaliers along the walls, laden with perfectly ripe cherries and apples and fruits he didn't even recognize. His mouth watered from temptation and hunger, but it was easy to leave them behind when one bite would trap him in Avalon for eternity.

"How do you know where they are?" Arthur asked, as Merlin led them. It wasn't as though they'd had a chance to look around. Had Merlin overheard something while he was unconscious?

"I can hear them. Well, I can hear your sword."

"What?"

"It's, um. It's sort of calling for you." Merlin gave an embarrassed shrug. "I don't know. The dragon--my dragon. He said it was made for you and you alone. When I didn't give it to you, it, um, missed you."

Arthur had thought that he'd reached his limit of strangeness for one day, but clearly he was wrong. He decided not to press for details. "How much further?"

"We must be close. It's getting louder."

Arthur had the sudden image of Merlin tracking after him like a dog with a scent should he ever wander off without him. Perhaps that was why he had been born with such enormous ears. Arthur filed the thought away for future Merlin-teasing, should they get out of this alive.

Arthur heard a commotion ahead. "Wait," he hissed, calling the dragons back. To his relief they actually obeyed.

"What is it?" Merlin asked, suddenly concerned.

"If the Sidhe are anything like us, they've taken our things to a vault or armory, or as prize for the nobility. Either way, we can't just charge straight in." He turned to the dragonflies. "You three make a distraction. Merlin and I will go in quietly."

The dragonflies looked to Merlin for approval, which was a bit odd, but hardly odd enough to mention. Merlin nodded in agreement. "We'll call for you once we're out."

The dragonflies flew off, and Merlin and Arthur waited, hidden, as a dozen armed Sidhe ran past in pursuit. They crept up the stairs, and peeked inside the room. It was an armory after all, and three guards had remained behind. They were on alert, and Arthur didn't like the odds.

Neither did Merlin, apparently. "I have an idea," he whispered. "But I need you to distract them."

Arthur nodded. He left his staff with Merlin, and walked slowly into the room, his empty hands raised in surrender. The guards instantly surrounded him, shoved their staffs at him and pushed him up against a wall. He said nothing as they began to aggressively question him; magic or no magic, he'd faced worse before. And then there was a clatter behind them, and they turned to see Merlin's pack and the two swords suspended in the air, and a spare helmet rolling on the floor.

"Oops," said Merlin, and the pack flew out of the room and into his hands. The guards rounded on him, but as they raised their staffs, Merlin sent the swords flying at them. One knocked Merlin's sword aside, but Arthur's sword plunged through the second, shocking all three guards long enough that Merlin was able to take out the other two with his staff. Arthur walked over to the body of the
remaining guard and pulled his sword free, wiping it on the Sidhe's clothes before she too died and turned to dust.

Merlin picked up his own sword and sheathed it in his belt. Arthur allowed himself a moment to take in the sight of him: shirtless, sweaty, flushed, and victorious. He'd never looked so beautiful. When Merlin realized he was being stared at, he ducked his head and fought not to smile.

The dragonflies, for their part, were making an excellent distraction. They'd managed to draw the Sidhe's full attention, and had led the guards out of the castle. Merlin and Arthur had to duck out of sight several times to avoid being seen as they followed after the hurrying guards. Arthur began to worry that the dragons might actually be doing too good a job. How were they going to get past so many Sidhe?

Out in the courtyard, the dragonflies were flying in wild patterns, dodging fire from the Sidhe guards and then diving down and driving them back with their flame. It was almost comical to see the mighty Sidhe cowed by three little insects. Arthur began looking for an escape route, expecting to see a horizon of mountainous terrain. And his jaw dropped.

Beyond the courtyard, the white marble castle was surrounded by a garden of astounding beauty. All the flowers he knew, and countless that he didn't, were blooming together. It was spring, summer, and autumn, all at the same time, and every leaf was lush and perfect; every flower open and inviting, petals brilliant with color even in the moonlight. But that wasn't what made him gape. It was when he looked up at what should be the night sky, and saw instead hundreds of feet of crystal-clear water. The Sidhe's castle was at the bottom of a lake.

There was no time to wonder how, except that it must take powerful magic to make such a thing possible, even in Avalon. If they were going to get out of here, they were going to have to swim for it. Arthur turned to Merlin, who was still gawping up at the water, and elbowed him to get his attention.

"Do we still have the hats?" Arthur whispered.

Merlin burrowed into his pack and pulled out the two red cohuleen druiths. He and Arthur tugged them on tightly.

"How are we going to get up there?" whispered Merlin.

It was a good question. The castle was several stories high, and the water began at the tip of the tallest tower. "We'll have to climb."

Merlin stared at him as if he was mad. "We'll break our necks."

"Do you want to go back in there?" Arthur pointed to the crowds of Sidhe gathering at the windows. Merlin had no way of leading them safely through the castle now that Arthur had his sword again. He couldn't hear any singing, but now that he knew, he recognized that the feeling of rightness the sword gave him was more than just his own satisfaction.

"Ten minutes ago, you were paralyzed."

"And now I'm not."

But Merlin wasn't convinced. "You can barely stand on your own. There has to be another way to get up there."

"Can you..." Arthur hesitated to ask, almost afraid of the answer. "That trick you did in the armory."
Can you do it again? Make things fly?"

"Yeah," Merlin asked, with equal wariness. "But I've never... I can't fly, Arthur!"

"No," Arthur agreed; that would be too dangerous. "But you can make things float. Can they take our weight?"

Merlin pressed his lips together and thought. "I think so," he said, slowly, even as his eyes widened with equal parts apprehension and hope. "Maybe... if we walked up them like steps..."

"What do you need?"

"Um. Something light and flat..."

Arthur unsheathed his sword. "Like this?"

Merlin let out a breath, then pulled out his own. "Right."

They moved to a quiet spot at the side of the castle and placed both swords on the ground, then stepped back so Merlin could cast. He held out his hand towards them and whispered, "Gúðsweord forguy bimwēbo. Áflute!"

The swords lifted into the air, both coming to rest about a foot above the ground. Merlin nodded, and Arthur stepped carefully onto the flat blade; It bobbed slightly but held his weight. He held out his hand to Merlin, who took it and stepped up beside him. Merlin's eyes glowed again, and the other sword lifted higher. They stepped together, using the staffs and each other for balance, and rose one careful step at a time into the air.

Halfway up, Arthur made the mistake of glancing down past the swords and his stomach rolled. If they fell now, they would break their necks -- if they were lucky. "Keep going," he murmured, glad that Merlin was too focused on the task at hand to let his attention wander. Merlin's eyes glowed an almost constant gold, and he was sweating from the effort of floating the swords higher and higher while taking their weight. They were far past the dragonflies now, who were still drawing the attention and ire of the Sidhe in the courtyard below. Arthur was grateful that it was night, for if it had been broad daylight they surely would have been seen.

A stray blast from one of the Sidhe staffs flew past them, and Merlin started, nearly losing his balance. Arthur tightened his grip on Merlin's waist and pulled him steady.

"Careful," Arthur hissed.

Merlin nodded, pale. His eyes flared again as the other sword slid into place, and they continued up again.

The higher they went, the harder it was for Merlin to carry them, but Arthur didn't doubt that his sheer determination would bring them to the lake. The question was, what would happen when they reached the water? There must be some force keeping those millions of gallons of water from pouring down; surely it could hold the weight of two mere humans.

Five steps left, then three, and then they were there, hanging high in the sky with a wall of water mere inches from their heads. Merlin was barely holding on, putting everything he had into keeping them afloat. Arthur reached up into the water; it was just as if he had dipped his hand into a lake from above. There was no resistance except what was normal for the water itself. He reached up again, this time holding the Sidhe staff. Once it was fully immersed, he let it go, and it began to slowly float upwards.
"Almost there," Arthur soothed. "Just a few steps more."

Merlin gave a tight grunt, unable to spare the effort to talk. With the next step, their heads pushed into the water, then their shoulders, then their waists. They let the air from their lungs and breathed in water, and then with two more steps they were buoyant, held by the water instead of the swords. Arthur grabbed their hilts as Merlin released his spell and slumped with exhaustion.

Arthur sheathed his own sword, then swam up and grabbed the staff before it floated too far away. He swam back down to Merlin and touched his cheek to rouse him. Merlin rallied, heartened by their escape, and together they rose, sharing the push upwards. They weren't as buoyant as the staffs, but the water seemed to be carrying them more than it should. Arthur wondered if it was intended keep out intruders. It was an effective defense, though like so many it was better at keeping people out than in.

As they neared the surface, something small and fast flew past them, speeding upwards. There was another streak of bubbles, then another, and Arthur realized it was the dragonflies finally following after them. But he didn't have time to be relieved, because hot on their trail were the Sidhe guards, glamours abandoned as they flew up through the water in pursuit as small blue streaks of light.

Now would have been a great time to use that 'speaking without words' trick, if they had only known how to do it; lacking that, Arthur nudged Merlin urgently and used hand signals to order him to fire his staff. Arthur kept swimming and pulled Merlin along as he brought the staff to bear and began picking off the Sidhe one by one. That had the unfortunate result of drawing their attention and fire away from the dragons and towards themselves. Arthur kicked harder, dragging them to the surface through sheer force of will, every muscle in his body burning from the effort.

They broke the surface, and Arthur immediately began dragging Merlin towards the moonlit shore. Around them was the mountainous terrain they had walked through before their altercation with the trees. The lake itself was nestled within a wide crater, girdled by its gently sloping walls.

Arthur coughed to clear his lungs, breathed in a chestful of air, then shouted up at the dragonflies. "Dragons! We could use some help here! Hey!" The dragonflies seemed to ignore him, flying higher up into the sky until they were too small to follow.


Arthur looked down, then started swimming as fast as he possibly could. There was a small army's worth of small blue lights streaking up through the water towards them. Merlin was a good shot with the staff, but that wasn't going to be enough, not against that angry hornet's nest. They had to get to shore and find somewhere safe to hide. But even if they could reach land in time, the crater was flat and open, the only cover in the form of some scraggly shrubs that dotted the grass. Spots of light shimmered like stars, and as they drew closer he realized that the grass was thick with pearlescent wildflowers. Arthur absently thought that at least this was a beautiful place to die.

And then just as the blue lights rose to meet them, just as the Sidhe swarmed to attack, the dragonflies returned, the sky streaked with the orange light of their flames. And then the three streaks were joined by more, by dozens, hundreds. Hundreds of dragonflies dove into the water, meeting orange with blue and driving the Sidhe back down.

"Follow me," said a familiar voice in Arthur's head, and there was the green dragonfly. Arthur and Merlin followed her to shore, mindful of the battle raging under their feet. They crawled onto solid ground and collapsed, exhausted and panting.

"I'm never moving again," Merlin groaned.
"You must," urged the green dragonfly. "In this form, we cannot hold the Sidhe for long."

Arthur hauled himself to his feet, ignoring the way his muscles trembled. He grabbed Merlin's arm and pulled to coax him up. "Come on. This is no time for a nap."

"Where are we going?" Merlin asked, with an exhausted whine.

"I have no idea," Arthur admitted. They started up the slope, wading through the long grass.

"Emrys, you must ask the mountain for sanctuary," said the dragonfly.

"What?"

The green dragonfly rested on Merlin's shoulder. "The Tylwyth Teg are bound to Albion and so is their land. You are the Emrys, child of Albion, kin to its earth and sea and sky. Ask, and her spirits will hear you."

Merlin looked to Arthur, clearly at a loss. "Worth a try," Arthur shrugged. It wasn't as if they had any other options.

"What do I have to do?" Merlin asked.

The dragonfly flew up into the air, then returned. "You must kneel on bare rock. Follow me."

They climbed higher, and the grass thinned out along with the soil. Finally they reached the bare stone of the mountainside. Merlin knelt, then looked to Arthur, weary and overwhelmed.

Arthur knelt with him. "You can do this," he said, taking his hand. He glanced past Merlin, down at the lake. It was lit with a chaos of orange and blue, and he realized with alarm that the fighting had broken the surface. They were running out of time. He turned to the dragonfly. "What next?"

"Emrys, you must ask the mountain spirits to shelter us. Pray for them to open the way."

"I'm praying," Merlin said, tersely.

"You must speak with your soul," urged the dragonfly. "Reach out with your magic."


Merlin took the gold torc without hesitation and eased it around his neck. In the darkness, Arthur saw the dim glow that sparked and shimmered as Merlin's magic connected with the torc. The exhaustion eased from his eyes and he straightened from his slump. Then he reached down and pressed his hands against the rock, and bowed his head in prayer.

There was a tremor from the ground beneath them.

"The spirits answer," said the dragonfly, gratified.

There was a bigger tremor, and then a groan, and the bare stone cracked. Arthur pulled Merlin away from the danger, but Merlin shook him off. "It's all right," he said, suddenly calm.

As they watched, the earth opened for them. What had been solid rock and earth was now the entrance to a tunnel that looked for all the world as if it had always been there. Pale blue light glowed from within.

"Go," said the dragonfly. "We will follow." She flew off, presumably to gather her brethren.
Arthur looked to Merlin, and Merlin smiled. "It's all right," he said, and held out his hand.

Arthur took it, and followed Merlin down, down into the heart of the mountain.
The Last Dragonlord

Arthur followed Merlin down, hands held tight as they walked into the darkness. There was a sudden rush of air and the sound of thousands of tiny wings as the dragonflies flew past them, and then a rumble from above as the mouth of the tunnel sealed shut, cutting them off from the starlight. Arthur and Merlin stopped, their own breaths loud in the narrow space. Arthur strained to see in the pitch black; without light he couldn't go forward, too wary of a wrong step on the downward slope. The last thing he needed now was another injury.

At first he thought it was an illusion, his mind playing tricks on his eyes. But slowly the eerie blue-green glow strengthened, the rocks themselves glowing in distinct veins and patches. They brightened more and more until he could see Merlin, his features silhouetted and then softly lit.

Merlin was wide-eyed, looking around them in wonder. He reached out and touched the glow, and it rubbed off on his fingertips. He turned to Arthur and smiled, holding out his glowing fingers. "Arthur, look..."

Arthur touched Merlin's fingers with his own, and the glow brightened from the contact. Their eyes met, then held for a long moment -- until Merlin looked away, his smile fading, letting go as he turned. Arthur wanted to pull him back, but he let Merlin walk on and silently followed.

The passageway continue down, down. There was no sign that the Sidhe were able to follow. Presumably they were not on good terms with the mountain spirits. Arthur quietly wondered at how his life had reached a point where all of that actually made sense. Despite his exhaustion, he had never been so glad to be upright. He was never going to take walking for granted again.

Eventually the slope evened out, and they walked a way further before they saw a brighter light ahead. At the end of the tunnel they found a natural cavern, its ceilings high and dripping with stalactites; a shallow lake sat at its center, bright with phosphorescence. The dragonflies had scattered around the space, but some of them had clustered together. They seemed to be talking silently amongst each other, but when Merlin approached, they turned to face him.

"Um, thank you," Merlin began, awkwardly. "For saving us. But we can't hide down here for long. We have to stop the Sidhe from invading Albion. Can you help us?"

"Why does he ask?" asked a dragonfly. "Does he not know his nature?"

"The Dragonlord is young," said the green dragonfly from the cell.

Several dragonflies flew around Merlin, inspecting him. "He is old enough. He has his torc. Why has he not come into his power?"

"I've had magic since I was born," Merlin said, confused. "Why do you keep calling me that? Is it another word for Emrys? Some sort of title?"

"The Emrys is what you are," said the golden dragonfly. "What you have always been. But in this life, you are also our kin. Do you not feel the bond we share? Even in these wretched forms..."

"Blood calls to blood," said the red dragonfly. "For thousands of years, the gift has been passed from father to son."

Merlin went very still. "My father was a Dragonlord?"
"As his father before him, and his father before him," said the red dragonfly. "Since the dawn of the Triskelion."

Merlin said nothing, pale and shocky even in the strange light of the cavern. Arthur cleared his throat. "What's the Triskelion?" He had heard it mentioned several times now, but all he could gather was that it was something important to the Old Religion.

But the question only served to disturb the dragonflies. They turned silent, flitting with agitation as they talked privately amongst themselves. Then the three returned, the green dragonfly speaking first. "You said that the Romans had been gone from Albion for centuries."

Arthur nodded. "For five hundred years."

"Then their invasion was successful?"

"They ruled Albion for five hundred more," Arthur said. "I'm sorry."

"A thousand years," whispered the red dragonfly, stunned and sorrowful. "We have slept here for a thousand years."

"The Sidhe did not take all of us," insisted the golden dragonfly. "They did not take the Aerie."

"The Triskelion is forgotten," said the red dragonfly, distraught. "The Emrys did not come to rescue us. The Dragonlords are forgotten. We have been forgotten. There can be no dragons left in Albion."

Arthur looked to Merlin, expecting him to react, but he seemed to be barely taking the conversation in. "No," Arthur said, speaking up on his behalf. "There is one. A Great Dragon."

"Only one?" The golden dragonfly sagged with grief.

"There were once dozens," Arthur admitted, regretting the truth but knowing he had to face it. "But at the time of my birth, there was a war. They were all killed. Slaughtered. As were the Dragonlords." He forced himself to look at Merlin again. Slow realization, slow horror spread across Merlin's face, and he stepped back, shaking his head in denial.

"My father," Merlin breathed, betrayed.

"Merlin," Arthur began, but what was there to say? If Merlin's father was a Dragonlord, that could only mean one thing: that he had died at Uther's command at the start of the Great Purge, when all the Dragonlords were rounded up and executed.

"How could you allow this to happen?" demanded the red dragonfly, addressing Arthur directly.

"I was just a baby," Arthur protested; he didn't know why they were blaming him. He felt plenty of guilt at his own complicity after the fact, but the blood was on his father's hands, not his own. Not that the dragonflies knew that, and he thought it wise not to say it; whatever he was to them in another life, he doubted they would be so eager to help if they knew he was now the son of the man responsible for executing their children and last of their kin.

But Merlin knew, and he looked at Arthur with such pain. Arthur felt all the mending they had achieved coming undone, the bonds between them unravelling. "Merlin," he said again, reaching for him, but Merlin flinched back.

Great King Uther had brought down the monstrous dragons with the very Dragonlords charged to protect them. As a child that had made him proud, but now all that Arthur felt was sick with shame.
After the revelations, Merlin retreated to a quiet corner of the cavern. Arthur let him go, knowing that Merlin needed to be alone. He tried to speak with the dragonflies further and asked them about the Triskelion again, but found that they were just as wounded as Merlin, grieving for family that they had found and lost in the same breath.

His presence unwelcome, he took the time to reacquaint himself with his body with some training exercises. He was tired, exhausted by the effort of their escape, but he had no desire to sleep. Some part of him feared that if he closed his eyes, when he opened them again he would find himself paralyzed once more. The mere thought made him work harder, to feel every flex of muscle, every pull of tendon, to let no part of himself remain still.

But when he stopped, panting and sweating, his mouth was dry and his stomach grumbled noisily, reminding him that in this magical paradise he was only a mortal human. He remembered the food and water in Merlin's pack and hoped that that the Sidhe had left it intact. He was loathe to disturb Merlin's grieving, but if they didn't act soon, how much worse would that grief be? He had lost the father he'd never known, but he could still save his friends, still save thousands more.

Arthur sat down a few feet from Merlin and opened the pack. There was enough food and water for two, of course, and from the neatly folded cloth, it was obvious that Gaius had done the packing. Arthur drank half of his water in one go, then practically inhaled his entire portion of bread, cheese, and dry sausage. As the food hit his stomach, he felt infinitely better. Nearly dying had taken rather a lot out of him.

Arthur slumped against the cool cavern wall and rested. He gazed about the cavern and watched the dragonflies flutter about, perching on the stalactites and at the edge of the water. He wondered again if the two of them and a swarm of magical insects would be enough to stop the Sidhe, but he didn't feel confident. Despite the impressive show of their escape, so far they had only faced a fraction of what the Sidhe's army must be. And even against that, the best they could manage was to run away and hide.

He realized then that he had been avoiding looking at Merlin, out of guilt as much as respect. He turned and looked at him now, and saw that Merlin had put back on his now-dry shirt and surcoat against the coolness of the cavern. His mail and plating were in a pile a few feet away, no doubt collecting rust after their swim. He was pulled into himself as he had been in the Sidhe cell, his arms wrapped around his knees and his head down.

What could Arthur say? That he was sorry that his father had killed Merlin's father? Killed the dragons, killed countless sorcerers, druids, believers? Nothing could bring them back, nothing could wash the blood from his father's hands or his own.

Arthur had always thought of their deaths as executions. It was a clean word, a righteous word. An execution could only happen after a judgement, and it was the right of a king to judge. If magic was a crime -- a great and terrible crime -- then execution was the natural consequence. It was no more murder than the death of a soldier in battle. Arthur regretted the deaths of his enemies, but he also accepted them as necessary. He had to defend his kingdom, just as his enemies defended theirs. It was a matter of survival.

He had been brought up to believe that magic was an enemy. That they were in a long, slow war that his father had begun with the Great Purge. But if there was no war and magic was no crime, then what his father had done, what he himself had done, was murder, and there was no honor in that. Merlin's father had been murdered. The dragons and Dragonlords of Albion had been murdered. It was no wonder that the Great Dragon sought revenge, or that so many sorcerers had attacked
Camelot over the years. And all this time, his father had talked endlessly of honor and justice... Perhaps Camelot was no longer worth saving at all. Maybe the best thing to do would be to let it burn, and take Uther's poison with it.

He thought of Hunith, all alone in her dirt-floor hut in the mountains.

No. No matter how complicit Camelot as a whole had been in Uther's massacres, the blame was his, not theirs. They didn't deserve to die, and Arthur would not deny his own responsibility for their safety. He had sworn an oath to protect Camelot, and even if his father had broken it, even if he himself had been lied into breaking it in the past, he would not break it again.

He took Merlin's portion of food and water out of the pack, then shifted closer and held them out. This close, Arthur could see that he had been crying. "Here. You need to eat, keep your strength up."

Merlin lifted his head, then shook it. "I'm not hungry."

"Your magic is masking it," Arthur reminded him. "If you don't eat now, you'll feel worse later."

Merlin twisted his mouth in annoyance but took the food and water. He drank a few sips, then as his thirst awoke he drained the whole skin. Arthur reflexively thought to chide him, but thought better of it; now of all times, he needed to chose his battles wisely. He took back the empty waterskin as Merlin opened his bundle of food, but all he managed to do was nibble at the bread. It was better than nothing.

"I'm sorry about your father," Arthur said, because even if it changed nothing, Merlin deserved the apology. He deserved a lot more than that. "You were right. My father was wrong. He's a liar, a monster, and a tyrant, and he's murdered a lot of innocent people. I'm sorry your father was one of them."

Merlin glanced at him, then went back to staring at his bread. "He's your father," he said, as if offering an excuse. The easy forgiveness Merlin had always granted him, even when he shouldn't have.

"The way I feel right now, I would rather that your father had killed mine," Arthur admitted, letting some of his bitterness show. "I suspect it would have been better for everyone."

Merlin had the honesty not to argue otherwise. He took another bite of the bread, this time more than a nibble.

"I have to save Camelot," Arthur continued. "Not just from the Sidhe. What my father has done..." He shook his head. "I don't know how to fix it. I don't know if it can be fixed. But I know I have to try."

Merlin swallowed. "That's... good." he said, hesitant.

It wasn't the ringing endorsement that Arthur had hoped for, but then it wasn't as if Arthur had given him much to be confident in. If he was honest with himself, the entire matter seemed insurmountable. And yet no matter how much Uther had made it seem otherwise, he was not some unstoppable force. Even as a king, he was just a man, and he was no longer the terrifying figure he was in his prime. The problem was as much in the kingdom itself as in its king. Uther had spent more than twenty years sowing hatred. It would be a bitter harvest to reap, and poor soil to grow a healthy kingdom from.

Assuming, of course, that they survived the dawn.
"So you're a Dragonlord as well as a sorcerer," Arthur said, with as light a tone as he could. "Any other secrets up your sleeves?"

"Ask them," Merlin said, nodding towards the dragonflies. "Or when we get back, you can ask the Great Dragon." He said the last unhappily.

"He didn't tell you?"

Merlin shrugged. "He talks in riddles and half-truths. He said we were kin. He wanted us to restore the Old Religion together." He picked at the bread, letting the crumbs fall to the floor.

"You thought he was lying?"

"I know he was lying," Merlin said, with weary frustration. "He was using me. All he cares about is revenge."

"He has a right to," Arthur admitted. "As do you."

"And what good would that do?" Merlin asked. "The Great Dragon wants to kill Uther, the Sidhe want to kill me, if this keeps up there won't be anyone left."

"Then what do you want?"

Merlin let his head fall back against the wall, the breathed out. "When I was little, all I wanted was my father. I thought if he was with us, we would be happy. Safe. He could tell me what I was, why I have magic." He pressed his sleeve against his eyes, then continued. "Do you know why I saved your father's life? Why I stopped Edwin and Tauren and the Black Knight? I could have let him die so you would be King."

"Why?" Arthur asked, genuinely curious.

"Gaius said that if I let magic kill your father, then you would become just like him. You would never accept magic. But that's not why I did it. I believed in you, in your honor, your heart. That once you were King you would do what was right. You'd see the truth. Your father didn't matter, except... I knew that if he died, it would hurt you. And it would be my fault. I never wanted you to feel alone."


"But when it mattered, when I needed you--" Merlin's voice wavered with emotion. "I was alone. You took my magic, my magic, and then the Sidhe took everything else." He grabbed at the gold torc around his neck and tugged at it, then let go. "I trusted you, and you--" He cut himself off and turned away. "Do you have any idea what they did to me?"

"Tell me," Arthur said, softly.

"Drudwas tried to get me to talk. Give up Camelot's magical defenses. I wouldn't. Not that there was anything to tell. It hurt so much and then... I woke up in Avalon. I suppose it was somewhere in this castle. I was in a room with no windows. I couldn't move. They were angry. And then they cast the spell... They wanted to kill me but they couldn't. So they did the next best thing. Ripped me apart. Made me their pet. I kept fighting. They tortured me, tried to break me--"

The recounting was finally too much, and Merlin stopped, body tight and trembling. Arthur hesitated, then threw caution to the wind and pulled Merlin into his arms and held him. Merlin barely made a sound, letting out the smallest whimper into Arthur's shoulder before holding on to him with
"I couldn't stop them," Merlin said, voice muffled against Arthur's mail. "I couldn't do anything. I hated you for that."

"It was my fault," Arthur said, wishing more than anything that he could go back and stop himself from making such terrible mistakes. Merlin had made himself vulnerable, trusting that Arthur would protect him, and Arthur had failed him in the worst way. "You were right to be angry. You should hate me."

"I should," Merlin agreed, but he seemed to be calming.

"You should," Arthur echoed, and rubbed his cheek against Merlin's hair. It felt like years since he'd done that, since he lay with Merlin in their bed and held him. Arthur had forgotten how soft his hair was. Merlin could be so stubborn and strong, even without magic, that it was easy to forget that he had such a tender heart. That he hadn't been born into battle and cruelty. He'd never had a father, yes, but he'd also never had a father who made him feel worthless, who treated him as a thing to be used and not a son to love. Arthur's heart had been calloused over by the time Merlin came along, but Merlin's heart bore only recent bruises. And most of them had been made by Arthur himself in his thoughtlessness and fear.

"Do you?" Arthur asked, his voice small. He was afraid of the answer. That it would be what he deserved.

There was a long pause that made Arthur's chest squeeze too tight for air, and then Merlin pulled back to face him. Their eyes met, and Arthur forced himself to not look away in shame. To let Merlin see him and judge him.

"No," Merlin said, almost sadly. He seemed to want to say more, but instead withdrew, leaving Arthur with empty arms. "But it doesn't matter."

"You're still leaving," Arthur realized.

"If we get back. I have to."

"You don't," Arthur insisted, though he knew how childish it sounded. He had told Merlin to go before the Sidhe captured them, but in truth that was the last thing he wanted.

"I have a duty to magic. How can I live in Camelot and be the Emrys? I can't even practice without worrying I'll end up on the pyre."

"We can make it work. Go out into the woods, like when I trained you."

"That's just it," Merlin said, latching on. "Arthur, all my life I've lived a lie. I'm tired of pretending. Always watching over my shoulder. When we left Gedref, I thought I could go back to the way things were, but I can't. Morgana's right. We need to go somewhere that magic is legal. Make a new life for ourselves."

"But I can't be part of it?"

"I wish you could," Merlin said, wistfully. "But Camelot is where you belong. You said it yourself. If you tried to run off and become a farmer, you wouldn't even last a week."

"Maybe," Arthur admitted, knowing there was a lot of truth to that. "But you're not the only one who's changed. Camelot can change too, if we make it change."
"It won't. Not as long as your father is King."

"He won't be King forever," Arthur said, barely believing the words coming out of his own mouth. "Do you think he wants to make me Regent? He has to. And the more power he gives up, the more I can do. The more we can do, if you help me. Please, Merlin."

Merlin was swayed, Arthur could see it. But he was stubborn to the last. "Your father fired me and banned me from the castle. And you let him."

"I was an absolute idiot," Arthur said, and meant it. "The moment we get back, I'm going to march up to my father and tell him you're my manservant again."

"I don't want to wash your filthy socks anymore," Merlin said, but he was only half-teasing, and he quickly sobered. "I don't want to go back to the way things were."

"I'll find you a better position. No laundry duty, no stable mucking---"

"No target practice, no scrubbing the floors---"

"You were a terrible servant anyway," Arthur teased. Merlin was trying not to smile, but all that did was make Arthur break into a grin. For a moment, everything was all right again. And then Merlin stopped trying not to smile and began trying not to frown.

"What?" Arthur prompted, anxious not to lose that small happiness. "Tell me."

"Deorham," Merlin said, voice quiet but heavy. "Your father wants you to Purge it."

"I won't," Arthur promised.

"What if he makes you?"

"He can't."

Merlin looked disappointed. "You know that's not true."

"Spring is a long way away. We'll have all winter to plan. We can find a way."

"Even if it means defying him? Standing up to him, right to his face?"

"It won't be easy," Arthur admitted. "But that's no excuse not to try. It never was."

If it wasn't a full answer, it did at least seem to be in the right direction. Merlin softened, and his shoulders slumped as if letting go of some heavy burden. But he didn't look any happier. "I want to believe you," he said, in almost a whisper. Then he looked up and met Arthur's eyes. "I believed you before."

Arthur didn't know what to say. He had lied to Merlin, told him what he wanted to hear in order to manipulate him. It didn't matter that he had done it with good intentions -- especially when those intentions had been wrongheaded. Merlin had told him the truth, and in the face of it Arthur had only believed his father's lies, repeated his father's mistakes. Was there any way to regain Merlin's trust after such a failure?

"Just... give me a chance," Arthur pleaded, for once in his life trying not to hide his emotions. "Please, Merlin. I love you. I didn't... I was wrong. I hurt you and... even if you forgive me, I will never forgive myself for that." He took a breath to steady himself. "You're right. Things can't be the way they were. They shouldn't be." He gave a short, bitter laugh. "All you ever did was try to
protect me. I couldn't even protect you from myself."

"Arthur," Merlin began, but Arthur held up his hand.

"Before you say anything, let me finish. Please." Merlin nodded once. Arthur took another steadying breath. "I want things to be the way they were in Gedref. I want you to be happy. Wherever you have to go, whoever you want to be with... it should be what makes you happy. I know Camelot doesn't, and I don't. Not the way things are."

Merlin reluctantly gave another short nod.

"You came to Camelot because you needed help, but you stayed because of me. Because of the prophecy. It's a lot to live up to." Arthur swallowed. "Especially alone. I don't want you to be alone."

"Or you," Merlin said, quietly.

Arthur wanted to say that it didn't matter if he was alone, if he was happy. It didn't matter what he wanted. But it felt too much like what his father would say. That he was born only to sacrifice himself for the good of the kingdom, that he had no choice but to harden his heart, to cut himself off from any happiness of his own. What good had any of that done him? In Gedref, he had realized that Merlin had always been unhappy, trapped in his fear; now, Arthur realized that he himself was the same. He had been trapped in his own fears: of never being good enough, of failing his father and his kingdom. Merlin had broken free, shed his chains, and now Arthur needed to do the same.

"I want you to stay with me," Arthur said. "If we can't find a way to save Deorham by the spring, to save Camelot..." This was it. "Then I will renounce the crown."

Merlin stared. "Arthur, you can't."

"I can," Arthur said, more certain with every breath. "Maybe I can't be a farmer, but I refuse to be my father's son. Wherever you want to go, that's where we'll go. If you'll have me."

Merlin shook his head in disbelief, but he couldn't stop the smile that was tugging at his lips. "You're mad. One too many blows to the head..."

"The last one finally knocked some sense into me," Arthur said. He was starting to feel almost giddy, suddenly light where he had only ever borne the weight of heavy chains. To make his own life, chose his own path... he had never dared to truly consider such things. But now he saw that they were what he had always wanted. He loved Camelot, her lands and her people, her joys and her pains. He wanted to be her King. But he would never be a King until he stopped being a Prince, stopped being Uther's son and starting being his own man. If he didn't, he would live forever in his father's shadow, in his father's hatred and pain. It would poison everything before it could even begin.

Merlin shook his head again. "Camelot is your whole life."

"I won't let my father use me against magic. I won't be part of his madness anymore. If we can't make him stop, then perhaps my leaving will be enough to change his mind."

It was something of a long shot. Arthur knew that there was another, unspoken option. A drastic one. But he recoiled from it. It was one thing to defy his father, but to kill him... He couldn't. Perhaps that made him weak. Yet while abdicating would cause a succession crisis, it would not bring civil war. He already had to live with the blood of innocents on his hands. He didn't think he could bear the stain of his father's blood, or of the thousands who would die as Camelot tore itself apart. There had to be another way. If anyone could help him find it, it was Merlin.
"I know I'm asking a great deal," Arthur continued. "You don't have to answer now. If we can't stop the Sidhe none of this will matter. Just... think about it. Please."

"I will."

Arthur breathed out. "Thank you. You don't even have to decide when we get back. You can leave with Gwen and Morgana if you want. I don't want you to feel any pressure--"

Merlin took Arthur's hand in his own. "Arthur. If you really mean it, all of it... I'll stay."

Arthur's eyes prickled, and when he blinked tears welled up and blurred his vision. It didn't matter, because even blurry Merlin was beautiful. Merlin was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, outshining all the glories of Avalon. His heart and his throat squeezed tight, but he was afraid to reach out. Then he told his fear to shove it and pulled Merlin close, and Merlin hugged him back just as strong.

"Arthur," Merlin sighed. He sounded... glad. Relieved. But then he started to pull away.


"Merlin," he sighed, ragged as he gasped for breath.

Merlin kissed him again, then let him go. "Come on," he said, holding out his hand. "We have a kingdom to save."

And Arthur took his hand.
"We need your help," Merlin said, stepping towards the dragonflies with open hands. "Please."

Arthur had hoped that Merlin's pleading would be enough. If he was truly their kin, the last living dragonlord, then his word alone should command them. But the dragonflies remained huddled together, silent with shared grief. Arthur wanted to respect that, to give them time to bear the terrible weight of their losses. But he couldn't. Every minute they wasted in this cavern, the Sidhe spent it massing their forces for invasion.

"Albion is your home," Merlin continued, frustration edging into his voice. "Once the Sidhe take over Camelot, they're not going to stop. They'll destroy everything. Don't you care?"

"Albion is already destroyed," said the red dragonfly, her voice low with pain and bitterness. "It was destroyed when the Triskelion broke. When you let our children die."

Merlin looked to Arthur in helpless frustration. Arthur stepped up beside him. "Tell us what the Triskelion is, since it's all that matters to you." If pleading couldn't do the job, maybe prodding would.

The red dragonfly let out a gout of angry flame and flew up to face them. "Your ignorance is an insult."

"Then teach us," Arthur said, on the verge of spitting flame himself. "I don't know why there's this whole secret history that no one told us about. I don't know why there's ancient prophecies that we're somehow meant to fulfil. But maybe if someone gave us a straight answer for once, we could actually do something about it!"

The red dragonfly huffed another flame and flew back to her brethren, but the green and gold dragonflies flew out in her place.

"You must forgive Macha," said the green dragonfly. "She left behind a hatchling when we were taken."

"Macha?" Merlin asked. "That's her name?"

"I am Kaloka," continued the green dragonfly. "And he is Synkomida. I apologize for our rudeness."

"You are our kin and our Emrys," said Synkomida, and bobbed in the air as if bowing. "And you are our King. The fact that you are here means there is hope. That is what you are for."

"I don't understand," Merlin said.

"Then listen," said Kaloka. "It is the nature of men to forget, but dragonkind remembers. We were there at the start when the Triskelion formed, the great alliance forged against the cruel domination of the Sidhe."

"We were refugees, driven from our home by a great war," said Synkomida. "As we flew north in search of a new home, we found allies in a tribe of human sorcerers and their goddess Modron. Together we flew west until we reached the sea."

"When we crossed it, we found Albion's peoples and gods suffering under the yoke of oppression," continued Kaloka. "The Sidhe are parasites and vicious conquerors. The tribes and gods of Albion
were fragmented, each unable to defeat the Sidhe on their own."

Synkomida continued. "The tribe of Modron summoned their leaders and a pact was formed. In exchange for welcome into their land, dragon and sorcerer alike would join the fight against the Sidhe."

"But the pact was no mere alliance. It was a union of our peoples, of three into one, and a union of our gods and their power. And from that union was born the Great Dragons, as we were strengthened by the power of the Triskelion."

"And so were you born, Once and Future King. You, Beli, first son of Manogan the mighty king, were offered as a sacrifice to our united gods, but you were not killed. Instead your soul was taken and bound with the land, with its destiny, so that you would forever be reborn to serve it."

"And so were you born, Emrys. You, Mabon, child of the union of the Triple Goddess and the Old Gods of Albion, a god borne into human form by Danu the Prophetess, Queen of the Tuatha Dé Modron. Your soul was bound to Beli's, for you were born to be his eternal aide and companion. Together you would live, tasked to mend and heal whenever Albion was torn asunder. And while peace reigned, together you would rest."

"Do you understand now?" finished Kaloka. "That is how it was for thousands of years. That is what the Romans and the Sidhe destroyed."

Arthur barely knew where to start, and from Merlin's expression he was equally shaken. It was one thing to have a vague prophecy about their future, but this was so much more. If it was all true, then he and Merlin had lived and died together for countless lives, and they were no more human than a dragon. They were creatures of magic, their fates set for them from the moments of their first births, thousands of years ago. Could his father have known about this? How could he have not, if it was so essential to the entire history of Albion?

Or had it all been forgotten, erased by the Romans during their rule? The Romans would have brought their own gods with them to Albion, and if the gods of Albion would not submit, then the Romans would destroy them by any means necessary. It appeared that they failed, unable to complete the job before they were driven out. But the damage had been done.

"The Dragonlords," Merlin asked, wide-eyed. "Who were they, at the start?"

"When the Triple Goddess took her place atop Albion's pantheon, she imbued her priests and priestesses with great power, but it was not theirs to wield for selfish ends. Her priestesses became the High Priestesses, born to care for both the magic of the land and her peoples, to be the nexus between the gods and the people."

"Her priests were given to us. Their souls were joined with ours. By making us kin, we were blessed as Dragonlord and Great Dragon, born to defend our land."

"The High Priestesses and Dragonlords and sorcerers were sent to the other tribes of Albion to dwell with them and become one with them. It was through this that the tribes of Albion ceased their warring and became one tribe, ruled in time of need by its Once and Future King. And so the Triskelion was complete, through its strength the Sidhe were driven out. It is only because the Triskelion failed that the Sidhe threaten you now."

"They threaten you, too," Merlin said, clearly having caught the exclusion. "Albion is your home as much as ours."
"No longer," said Kaloka, sadly. "The Sidhe were clever. None can return after tasting the fruit of Avalon."

"There has to be a way," Merlin insisted.

"The only way left to us is revenge," said Macha, returning from her huddle. "The Sidhe destroyed our home, murdered our children, reduced us and stole away our lives. It is long past time that we returned our suffering upon them."

Arthur didn't like the sound of that. "We want to stop the Sidhe, not destroy them."

"How dare you defend them?" Macha hissed, outraged. "They are our most ancient enemy. You were born for us, not them!" She flew over to Merlin, rushing at him so forcefully that he stepped back in alarm. "Restore us to our true forms! I demand it!

"I don't know how!" Merlin protested.

"You are the Emrys! You are a Dragonlord!"

"Yes but... I don't know how to be a Dragonlord. I never knew my father, I never knew any of this!"

Kaloka intervened. "We will help you. Once your power is awoken, we will work our magic through you to restore ourselves."

"And then the Sidhe will burn," promised Macha.

"No," Arthur said, firmly.

"Their destruction is all that will save Albion," she said, pointedly. "You have no choice. The gods themselves brought you here. It is your destiny." She circled around him, then hissed out more flame. "Or has Roman blood polluted your soul?"

"How dare you," Arthur said, outraged. He was proud of his ancestors, Roman and native alike. "My family has been loyal to Albion for centuries." It was true that not everyone on his father's side had been a shining example, but Bruta had united Albion, and his father Constantine had chosen Albion's side against his Roman brethren. It was believed that his mother's line stretched even further back, with no less a pedigree, but few records had survived the long occupation.

"Macha," chided Synkomida. "A thousand years have passed without us. It is not our place to question the gods. The Once and Future King would not have been born with Roman blood if it was not in their design. The Emrys would not be by his side if he was not the rightful King. We must keep faith."

"We are owed in kind for the Sidhe's offenses," Macha insisted. "If the gods do not respect that, then what good is our faith? What good has it served for the last thousand years? Perhaps it is time that we made a new path, as we did once long ago."

This set up a stir among the other dragonflies. It seemed that they had never considered such a drastic course before, but now that it was spoken... Arthur exchanged a worried look with Merlin. If the dragons decided to go to war for all-out revenge, there was no telling how much damage would be done. Not just to those fighting, but to Albion and Avalon and everyone caught in-between. There was a kingdom near Camelot called Daobeth, and centuries ago it was destroyed by dragons, stone melted to slag and the earth so burned that nothing grew -- and that was the damage a mere few dragons could do. They had to put a stop to this rebellion before it got completely out of hand.
"You said that the Triskelion drove the Sidhe out of Albion," Arthur began. "Why didn't they-- why
didn't we simply kill them then? Why let them live?"

This caused another stir.

"The Once and Future King speaks wisely," said Kaloka. "We drove the Sidhe from our land as an
act of defense, but we did not pursue them. If we had, they would have had no choice but to fight
back with all their strength. Force is always met with force. By allowing for the possibility of peace,
peace was won."

"If we had killed them then, they would not have returned to destroy us," Macha retorted. "Mercy
was our first mistake. We must not make it a second time."

"I could stop you," Merlin said, quietly. "That's how it works, isn't it? If I give you an order, you
have to obey it."

Macha hissed in anger. "You would make a slave of me?"

"The bond between dragon and dragonlord is a sacred trust," said Synkomida, intervening. "It must
never be abused."

"You're right," Merlin said, backing down. "It shouldn't be. But I trusted the Great Dragon of
Camelot and he used me, lied to me, all for revenge. I hoped you would be better than him." He
looked to Arthur meaningfully, then back to the dragonflies. "I know what it's like to be trapped. To
lose everything, even your own will. If the Triskelion means anything to you, if you care anything
about our bond, you won't abuse it either."

"You said it yourself," Arthur said, adding his own voice to Merlin's. "We were created to defend
Albion. To rule it and care for it wisely. We're here to fix things, not make them worse. There's been
enough suffering already."

There was a heavy silence, and then Macha flew past them, towards the still lake at the center of the
cavern. "I will show you what suffering the Sidhe will bring," she said. She flew down to skim along
the water, and as she did she breathed out a spell upon it, making the surface sparkle and shimmer.
Arthur and Merlin walked over and looked into the water, and saw that she had turned it into a
scrying pool. But that was not all they saw.

The wavering surface of the water was like a window onto another place. The scrubby and
mountainous terrain meant that what they were seeing was somewhere on the island with them.
Torches and magical lights brightened the dark landscape, revealing an army -- not just of Sidhe and
Pixies, but of huge monsters dressed for battle. Huge, familiar monsters, with bodies like lions and
the heads and wings of eagles.

"Griffins!" Merlin exclaimed, turning to Arthur in alarm. "Hundreds of them!"

Arthur felt chills just looking at them. He vividly remembered the damage just one wild griffin was
able to do. And that monster hadn't been stopped by Lancelot and a bit of wood. Merlin had stopped
it with his magic, with a spell to enchant the weapon against magical creatures. But one wild griffin
was nothing compared to these well-trained beasts, with their Sidhe and Pixie mounts armed with
staves and magic.

"Their kind are Roman-bred. No doubt they were gifted to the Sidhe for their 'assistance',' Macha
sneered.

"Can you stop them?" he asked her.
"Once we have our true forms, yes," Macha said, certain.

Arthur considered the odds. It was obvious that they all needed each other, and that there was no way to save Albion without the dragons' help. But together they just might be able to pull this off, assuming the situation didn't devolve into all-out war. It was up to him and Merlin to make sure that didn't happen. There had to be a way to give the dragons some kind of justice that didn't involve genocide.

Arthur thought about all the things the dragons had told them, and about Camelot and the grief and anger that came with loss. About his own mistakes and the injustices of his father, and the destiny he and Merlin were meant to fulfil.

"We will help you," he said, slowly. Merlin started to speak, but Arthur gave him a look that said 'I know. I'm going somewhere with this. Let me try.' Merlin closed his mouth and nodded.

"We'll restore you to your true forms and we won't force you to stop if you truly want revenge," Arthur continued. "But I ask you, as your King, to help me protect Albion by making peace with the Sidhe." Macha made a sound of disbelief, but Arthur continued. "If you help us, if we can stop the Sidhe together, then I swear to you that we will pledge ourselves to the rebirth of the Triskelion."

"And to the restoration of the dragons of Albion," Merlin added, moving to stand tall by his side.

"That is not a promise you can make," said Kaloka, sadly. "Once one has eaten of the fruit of Albion, it is impossible—"

"I don't care about impossible," Merlin said, firmly. "I'm the Emrys and Arthur's the Once and Future King, and it's our job to do the impossible. To restore Albion to a golden age. I don't think Albion can have a golden age or a Triskelion if it doesn't have any dragons."

"There must be a way, or we wouldn't have been reborn," Arthur pointed out.

"There is no hope for us, but there may yet be hope for Albion," said Synkomida, thoughtfully. "You claim there is only one Great Dragon left in Albion, but are you certain?"

"He says he's the last of his kind," Merlin said. "If there was another dragon, wouldn't he know?"

"Not if the dragon is still unhatched," Synkomida explained. "A dragon can remain dormant in its egg for more than a thousand years, but at the word of a Dragonlord it will wake and hatch. It must only be summoned with its name."

"Then that's what we'll do," Merlin said, certain. "We'll find all the dragon eggs left in Albion and we'll hatch them."

"I know the odds are against us," Arthur admitted, balancing out Merlin's optimism. "But if we start a war with the Sidhe, those eggs might be destroyed before we can reach them. Are you willing to risk the lives of your children? The last of your kind?"

That was finally enough to give Macha pause. If her grief was driven by the loss of her own children, then the prospect of dragon eggs was likely the only salve they could offer her.

"What the Sidhe did to us..." she began, quieted. "To you. You do not remember, but Great Dragons live for more than a thousand years. I have known you through other lives. I grieve not only for myself and my kin, but for you as you were. Brave Boudiga and wild, gentle Lailoken." She moved to Arthur. "I see her in you, in your spirit and your heart. I see all that you have been. And I know that if you pledge yourself truly to this task, if you swear upon all that you were and all that might yet
be, then I may put my faith in you as I have so many times."

"We pledge," Arthur said, and looked to Merlin.

"We pledge," Merlin agreed.

"Then kneel," Kaloka told Arthur, "And let the Emrys crown you, as he has in every life."

"But there's no crown," Merlin began.

"You brought two golden torcs, did you not?" Kaloka said.

"Oh," Merlin said. "Oh! Right." He hurried over to his pack and pulled out the other torc, then made an attempt at solemnity for his return approach. He cleared his throat. "Um, what do I do?"

"You must kneel before him, and recognize him. The King is always born first, but it is the Emrys who finds him. Who sees his soul and knows it, and is known in return. Do that, and the rest will come."

Merlin knelt and held the torc ready, but self-consciousness made him stop and blush. "Er. This is all a bit..."

"Yeah," Arthur agreed, feeling his own cheeks warm. Just a day ago he thought he'd lost Merlin forever, a few hours ago he'd stared his own death in the face, and now they were... well. Whatever this was, it was hasty and huge and terrifying, but it didn't feel wrong. Beneath the sudden butterflies in his stomach, what was terrifying was how right it felt. He thought of the cavern temple in Gedref, and of the great hall where he was meant to marry Elena. Was that was this was? A marriage of sorts? Or perhaps a renewal, if they had shared their lives together over and over for millennia, if their souls had been bonded from birth.

He wished he could remember any of it, if only to convince himself that it was all absolutely real. Right now it was just words, implications, fragments pieced together. The whole tangled mess was dizzying, like staring down a steep precipice, the edges of the rock crumbling from beneath his toes because none of it was solid. Yet somehow he knew he wouldn't fall. Not as long as Merlin was with him.

"Are you certain?" Arthur asked, because if either of them had a right to refuse this, it was Merlin. "You don't have to do this. Not for me."

"I'm not," Merlin said, and finally raised his eyes. "I think it's what I've always wanted. For you to see me. For most of my life, I barely even saw myself."

"I always knew there was something about you," Arthur said, crooking a smile to acknowledge their circumstances. "Something more than special. But I was a fool." He swallowed. "I'm sorry."

Merlin blinked, his eyes bright and shining, and not from his magic. "Yeah."

"Forgive me?"

"Maybe," Merlin said, but he was fighting not to smile. Arthur couldn't resist his own, and then Merlin's smile broke free, and it was wide and beautiful.


Merlin sobered, but the smile in his eyes only brightened. "I see you, Arthur Pendragon. My King. I
Arthur bowed his head, and Merlin slipped the golden torc around his neck.

The first time Arthur had worn the torc, he had felt little more than a tickle from Merlin's magic. Each time the sensation had been a little clearer, and little stronger, and when he removed his torc he had felt a greater sense of loss. But none of that compared to what he felt as Merlin's hands tugged the torc into place.

This time, instead of feeling magic going into him, he felt his own awareness spreading out, something in him unfurling to reach down into the earth and up into the sky. And then an answering touch that made his breathing tight, made his heart skip a beat. The magic of Albion, of the Old Religion, of the Great Dragons, of Merlin and Emrys, of their own ancient souls welcoming them back. Albion's most beloved children returned to her at long, long last.

He opened his eyes, and saw gold shining from Merlin's eyes. He saw himself through Merlin's eyes, all in a flash, and saw his own eyes shining gold. And then another flash, and another, another, of faces he didn't recognize but knew to be their own. He gasped, reeling. It was true. It was all true.

Something compelled Arthur to reach up and hold Merlin's torc, and it felt as though they had done this many times before. As soon as he did, Merlin gasped. Arthur knew he was feeling the same things he had felt.

"I know you," Merlin breathed, and this time he meant it.

"I know you," Arthur echoed, and his heart ached with how much it was true. With how much he had always known Merlin, how he had always loved him and yet how new and sharp their love was now, in this life.

"Hold your power. Do not let go," said Macha, her voice now warm and kind. "Emrys, face me. Feel the blood we share racing in your veins. Know me as Dragon and yourself as Dragonlord, and restore me!

Merlin shuddered, and through the torcs Arthur felt it: the dragon in Merlin's soul and the human in Macha's, two sides of the same coin. "O drakon!" Merlin roared, his voice suddenly guttural and inhuman as he stared up at the dragonfly. "E male so ftengometta tes'hup'anankes! Mésa apó tí dynámí mou kai tí dynámí sas, kaloíme tí théa Modron, ypsiótera tôn theón. Schediáste to díljúrio apó tín psychí tou douíou sou. Génniši kai ananeónei to zóntanó spíti tí psychí tísi!"

The words sounded like some form of Greek, which Arthur didn't know beyond a few words, but the rhythm of the spell was familiar and it didn't take long for him to recognize it. It was the same spell that Gaius had used to restore Merlin's form. And just as with that spell, the torcs began to glow with golden light. Powerful magic skittered along his nerves and his skin. Macha gave a cry of pain as the spell ripped her insect body away and laid her soul bare. And here, too, was the same: a floating, glowing globe of swirling light, visible only for a moment before her true form took shape... and grew, and grew, and grew.

There, shaken and gasping, was a dragon as great as the Great Dragon beneath the castle. But Macha was not chained or suffering from twenty years of imprisonment. She was strong and bright and gleaming, and she reached her long neck high and howled with victory, making the very earth tremble. For a moment, Arthur wondered if they had made a terrible mistake. And then Macha looked down upon them and smiled with toothy benevolence.

"Thank you," she said, and stepped back, flexing her wings. "Help him, my King. We have much to
do, and it must be done before the dawn if we are to save our home."

"Thank you," Arthur said, and turned to face Merlin again. "Go on. Do it again."

"I am ready, Emrys," said Kaloka, as she hovered close.

Merlin threw his head back and laughed with the same deep, guttural tone he had used for the spell. It made the hair on the back of Arthur's neck stand on end. He could feel Merlin's power and the deeper, endless power of Albion flowing through them, waiting to be used. He welcomed it and felt it welcome him in return.

"O drakon!" Merlin roared, and Arthur held on tight.
The Gates of Avalon

They left the cavern, then, their way lit by the dim, eerie glow of the rocks as they were guided from the earth. It was barely an effort for Merlin to ask the mountain to open for them again, and Arthur could feel the joy of the mountain spirits as they bent to Merlin's will. As they welcomed the return of the Emrys and their King, finally awake from their long, long rest.

He could feel everything, now. The thrum and pulse of Albion's beating heart, its sap and blood and water rushing with life, the magic that was its very fabric, ancient and worn yet new as the dawning day. He felt the pull of it, the push and yearning of the land for them. He was beyond himself, his senses unchained from the narrow confines of his body, made one with the sea and the sky and the earth and most of all with Merlin.

They walked into the brightening dawn, hand in hand as they climbed out onto rocky, grassy soil. Arthur wanted to strip bare and roll in it, to feel the long grass and the gritty earth and the rough-smooth rocks with every inch of himself, to know its touch upon his skin as it embraced him. He wanted to throw himself into the sky and fall into the wind and the clouds and bake in the sun. He wanted to dive into deep water and let its currents move him. And he wanted Merlin beside him, against him, their hearts beating fast in time, their bodies hot and wild in ecstasy.

"Arthur," Merlin breathed, eyes and skin glowing with power, matching Arthur's own, and Arthur knew he felt the same. Dragon after dragon had poured their magic through them, reached in and opened them wide to draw upon the magic of Albion. By the end of it they were drunk, so drenched in magic that it was all they knew. They had barely been able to stand, forced to lean against each other just to keep from toppling over. The only thing that sobered them at all was the knowledge that they had run out of time.

But that time had not been wasted. As they stepped back from the entrance, they heard the loud crunch of claws on stone, the sound growing in strength and size and urgency. Synkomida was the first to emerge, his golden scales shimmering in the pale light, catching the very first rays as the sun broke over the mountains around them. He shook himself and flexed his wings wide, threw his head back and roared, trembling the earth. And then with a great rush of wind he launched himself into the sky, wings beating hard. Merlin and Arthur were both pushed off their feet, and they fell back laughing.

Kaloka emerged second, and she gave a keening howl as she broke the earth. Macha was fast behind her, and they flew up together, twining past each other as they shot straight up, gleaming red and green. And then the rest came, jostling impatiently, joyous and bold as they flew in their true forms for the first time in a thousand years, and they filled the air like thunderclouds.

"We did it," Merlin said, eyes wet with happiness. He clambered onto Arthur and kissed him, and Arthur could taste the magic in him, sharp and rich. Merlin broke the kiss and rose up, head back to stare at the whirling mass above them. Arthur could feel Merlin reaching for them with his magic, for his kin, and felt them reach back. A thousand dragons and one dragonlord, and they filled Merlin to overflowing so that Arthur was filled up, too.

Merlin sank back down and settled around him, cuddling and snuggling him, euphoric from magic, from love and belonging. Arthur held him and planted soft kisses on his hair, tender and besotted, and watched the dragons sweep and hurl and glide.

It was a perfect moment, and it felt as though it could go on forever. But the sun crept higher until at last it caught them in its beam, warming them and burning away their languid haze. The dragons
began to settle, landing around them on the wide vale to greet and groom each other, restoring bonds that had been forgotten for too long.

Merlin reluctantly pulled away, and they both felt the loss. The overload of magic was dissipating now, carried away through the torcs, and while the world was less intense without it, Arthur knew he needed the clear head. They stood and held hands again as they took in the sights around them. In the dim cavern, their heads full of magic, they had not had a clear view. But now they saw. There were Great Dragons, yes, but that was far from all. There were a great variety of sizes and colors, some with horns and some with feathers. Out of the jumble they identified several breeds, and asked their names.

There were Knuckers, as large as the Great Dragons but more suited to water than air. They were shades of blue and green, bodies serpentine and claws webbed, and they breathed out not fire but scalding water, hot enough to burn. Small but vibrant were the Penllyn, lush with richly-colored feathers, which crested their heads and lengthened their long tails. Their dark counterparts were the Bod, sleek-bodied with feathers as iridescent as the Penllyn's but raven-black. Both types were the size of a griffin; the Bod boasted proudly of their speed in flight, while the Penllyn preened and spoke longingly of the High Priestesses.

The Peluda were not so proud. They could hardly be called pretty, with horns and quills instead of feathers, and larger, stout, dull-green bodies. They were the fewest in number, but showed a pleasant nature and an eagerness to defend. And last there were the Bheithir, quick and playful as pups, covered with downy feathers that hinted at life in colder climes. They romped around Merlin and brushed him with their thick tails, knocking him off his feet more than once.

The six breeds, including the Great Dragons, made up roughly equal parts of two-thirds of the population. The rest were mongrels, but Arthur guessed that they were the originals that the others were bred from. They ranged from small to medium-sized and some, like the Peluda, spit acid instead of fire. All in all, they made a mighty army. But they weren't going to do Camelot much good if they stayed here.

"We have to stop the Sidhe from breaching the Gates," Arthur told the Great Dragons, who had revealed themselves to be the natural leaders of all their kind.

"Then we will stop them," said Macha, confidently. "We will defend our home as we should have done a thousand years ago."

If they only faced the griffins, there would be no question of their success. But it was their mounts that gave Arthur concern. "The Sidhe and Pixies will have their staffs and spells. Can they harm you?"

"They can try," growled Macha. She snorted smoke from her nostrils. "The Sidhe are creatures of pure magic. For all their power, they are brittle, without substance. Even trapped here, we are flesh and bone."

"Is that why they turn to dust?" Merlin asked, hefting up the staffs that Macha had carried for them. Macha nodded. "The Pixies are a greater threat. Though their nature has been changed by their long enslavement by the Sidhe, they were once living creatures, natives of the frozen lands north of Albion. They will not be so easy to kill."

"Can Pixies fly?" Arthur asked.

"No," said Macha. "They are kin of the trolls, earth-bound."
Arthur considered this. "Then the griffins are their biggest weakness. If we dismount them, the Pixies will fall into the water. The Sidhe will have to revert to their true forms to fly."

"Do not be deceived by their small size," Macha warned. "The lack of glamour does not diminish their power."

"No, but these will," Merlin said, gesturing with the staffs. "I've killed Sidhe before. It only takes one direct hit."

"Then we have a plan," Arthur said, feeling cautiously optimistic. "But remember, we're trying to avoid a massacre."

"Yes, we are," Merlin said, pointedly. But he relented. "If I graze them, they'll probably just be knocked out."

Arthur recalled Morgana's attack on Erdudwyl. The indirect hit had left the Sidhe unconscious for a good while, certainly long enough to keep an enemy out of the battle. He put his hand on Merlin's shoulder. "Good man," he said, feeling the pre-battle mood come upon him. The dragons might not be his knights, but they were his army nevertheless, and had waited a long time for him to command them again. He felt suddenly eager to try them out.

"I will carry you," Macha said, rising up as if to dare any of the other Great Dragons to challenge her claim. "I will see our enemy fall before us."

Arthur looked up at Macha, looming above them as high as the towers of Camelot. Over ground or water, that would be a nasty fall. He turned to Merlin. "Did I see some rope in that pack of yours?"
It didn't take them long, but by the time they had worked out a way to secure themselves to Macha, the rest of the dragons were airborne and ready. Time was of the essence, but Arthur wasn't going to let them go up until he was sure that Merlin was secure. He remembered all too well how quickly Merlin had been dismounted in the battle at Gedref. It had taken everything he had not to turn back.
to protect him then. They couldn't afford that sort of distraction now, especially when Merlin was so vital to their success.

And, Arthur admitted to himself, because Merlin was vital, period. He had only just got him back, he wasn't about to lose him again. Not for want of a strong hold.

"Any tighter and I'm going to lose feeling in my legs," Merlin complained, fidgeting.

Arthur secured himself behind Merlin at the nape of Macha's neck. He pushed himself flat up against Merlin's back, then tied them together with the last bit of rope. He hooked his legs to Merlin's and wrapped his arms around him. Merlin couldn't hold on to anything with a staff in each hand, but fortunately they didn't need to steer. If they needed to direct Macha's attention, all they had to do was tap her on one side or the other.

Merlin swallowed nervously. "You know, I never did get the hang of flying when I was a bird."

"You flew all right," Arthur said, feeling just as nervous but trying not to show it. "It was the landing you had trouble with."

"Don't remind me," Merlin groaned.

Arthur suspected that there were a few solid bruises left over from those landings. He decided that, should they survive this, he would reward himself by checking over every inch of Merlin's body to find them. His cock, nestled against Merlin's arse, stirred at the thought, and Arthur hushed it. It did tend to get excited before a battle.

"I won't let you fall," Arthur promised, soft in Merlin's ear, as Macha crouched low and raised her wings high.

They rose into the air with a sudden jerk, then nearly hovered in place as Macha's wings beat hard, long strokes, forcing down the air and stirring up dust. It was a strange thing to watch the ground fall away from them, and quite different from climbing up Merlin's sword-steps. They rose higher, higher, until they caught the wind and Macha's wing-strokes evened out.

They travelled, the wind hard against their faces as they flew faster than even the fastest horse. Arthur was certain that if he had been at all lax with the ropes, they would have been forced off. All he could hear was the rush of air past his ears. He sheltered his face behind Merlin and turned to see that they were now leading the army along with the other Great Dragons. A part of him thrilled to the sight of all the dragons flying in formations, their grouping the undeniable mark of experienced fighters. It was no wonder that the Sidhe and the Romans had taken them out before they began their invasion all those centuries ago. Even the Romans had balked at facing such mighty foe in open battle.

He hoped that Merlin was right and that there would be a way to bring them home. A week ago the thought of trusting a dragon would have been absurd, never mind a whole army of them. But no matter what happened today, they had already earned his loyalty and respect. He would find a way to fulfill his promise to them somehow.

The dragons flew higher until they were barely skimming the clouds. The wind and the cooler air brought a chill that even the sun couldn't keep away, and Arthur held Merlin tighter to share their warmth. Avalon was spread out beneath them like a map, drawn with every detail tiny and perfect. At last he could see the full extent of it: the cluster of islands with the Gates at their center, and then countless more islands that dotted the waters far into the horizon. The other Gates must lie in those distances, each leading to other lands. It was almost a shame that they wouldn't have the chance to
explore them.

But it was their own Gates that mattered now, and they were rushing towards them with all speed. As they approached the central ring of islands, Arthur saw their enemy, though from this high up they were merely hundreds of tiny dots. He pointed them out to Merlin, relieved that they had reached the Gates in time to defend them, but even as he did he felt the change in Macha's flight. He glanced back to see the others splitting off: some to fly ahead and defend the Gates, others to come in from behind to surprise. The Great Dragons, the largest and most powerful, were going to attack head-on.

The Sidhe thought that Camelot was defenseless, an easy victory that was theirs for the taking. They were very, very wrong.

In the space of a breath, the Great Dragons dropped as one, hurtling head-down towards the Sidhe with their wings folded back. Arthur's stomach twisted, his thighs burned as they held their grip, and he felt Merlin's cry of alarm through his chest, the wind drowning out its sound. He curled over Merlin trying to protect them both as the air hit like a battering ram, making their ropes strain taut and cut painfully into their flesh. For a moment, he knew how mad this was, the two of them small and vulnerable, strapped to the back of a monster in a war of monsters.

And then, through his watering eyes, he saw Macha's great wings flex and spread, and the brutal wind eased enough for him to look ahead. He saw the astonished faces of the Sidhe as the first wave of dragons crashed through their army and scattered it. The first hit stunned dozens of griffins, but the dragons did not wait to see the results. Their flight arched out and up, swooping from under the army's edge and rising. As Macha climbed, Arthur used their closer position to survey the enemy's forces. Over half the griffins held a Sidhe and a Pixie each, and the rest bore two Pixies. At the front of the line were flagbearers, just as in a human army, and with them were griffins that bore only a single Sidhe each. Arthur squinted as they rose higher, and was certain that he recognized Drudwas and Edern in the lead. No doubt they were eager for their much-delayed revenge.

Before the army could recover, the dragons dove again, leading with fire and finishing with cruel claws. And then the third hit, the fourth. Even from their privileged position, it happened almost too fast to follow, and Arthur and Merlin both looked down in amazement to see griffins and Pixies alike falling into the lake while their Sidhe masters shed their glamours for the sake of flight.

"Can you hit them?" Arthur shouted, straining to be heard even though Merlin was so close. The wind was much reduced now, but the roars and shrieks of the battle made up for it. He looked for Drudwas and Edern, but couldn't find them in the chaos. If they had shed their glamours, he wouldn't be able to recognize them at any distance. Which might pose a problem. If they wanted this war to end, they needed to force a surrender. Capturing the head of the army might put an end to things before they got out of hand.

Arthur gripped one staff while Merlin brought the other to bear. But Macha's furious attack made it impossible to keep aim as they were jerked this way and that, as the world turned and spun and made their stomachs roil in protest. Their distance from the tiny Sidhe didn't help.

"We need to get closer," Merlin shouted back.

Arthur and Merlin both slapped at Macha's neck to get her attention, but she was in a frenzy of bloodlust, tearing through enemy after enemy without mercy -- though even in her wild state, she followed Arthur's orders and did not kill the Sidhe. Arthur winced as she set one griffin's wing aflame while she clawed at the stomach of another, slicing away its harness and sending spatters of blood into the air. The Sidhe had been flying in close formation, and that had set them out like a banquet for the dragons to tear through. But the feast was nearly over: as the Sidhe recovered from
the shock of the attack, they were falling back, regrouping.

As the griffins gained distance, the dragons switched to individual pursuit. The griffins were fast and powerful, but the Great Dragons were more than their match and all but Macha were unburdened. But now the Pixies and Sidhe were joining in the fight, driving back the dragons with staff blasts and flinging spells, and their fellows were coming to their aid. The staff blasts had little effect on the Great Dragons, glancing off their thick scales with little more than scorchmarks, but their vulnerable human riders weren't so well-defended.

A close call left Arthur's heart in his throat. And then to his greater alarm, Merlin pushed him away and straightened, seeming to make himself a perfect target. As Merlin raised his arm, Arthur saw a light rushing directly towards them, but there was no time to throw himself in the way of the Sidhe's bolt. He braced himself for the worst.

"Scildan!" At Merlin's shout, the air shimmered around them. The bolt hit, but it was stopped a few feet away, crashing into an invisible wall and dissipating into it.

Arthur wasn't sure if he wanted to kiss Merlin or strangle him. Instead he boggled. "Why didn't you tell me you could do that?!"

Merlin gave a self-effacing shrug. "Didn't come up?"

The Sidhe flew closer and continued to shoot at them, but the shield held strong. It was close enough now that Merlin could hit it easily, but he didn't raise his staff.

"What are you waiting for?" Arthur asked. The Sidhe seemed determined to test the limits of Merlin's shield.

"I can't shoot it unless I drop the shield," Merlin admitted.

It was a problem that Arthur was intimately familiar with, even if the elements involved were usually metal and wood. The solution, as with so many things in battle, was timing and teamwork. "Let me help. Do you need to keep your hand up to hold the shield?"

"Yes."

"Right." Arthur tucked the second staff under his leg and took hold of Merlin's. "I'll aim. When I say, drop the shield and make the staff shoot."

Merlin gave a sharp nod. He kept his grip on the staff but allowed Arthur to control it. It wasn't easy to keep a steady aim with a mount that flew dizzyingly fast and in all directions, but Arthur had been trained for mounted battle. Besides, the Sidhe simplified things by matching their pace to make its own aim easier.

Macha turned, and there was a pause as the Sidhe adjusted its flight. They had to catch it now, before it started shooting again. "Go," Arthur said, short and sharp. He felt the pulse of energy in the staff, the wood warm against his palms, and in the split-second of the shield's fall, it fired. It had a kick that Arthur hadn't expected and the shot barely grazed the Sidhe's wing, but before it could recover they aimed and fired again, and this time the shot was true. Its limp body dropped out of sight.

"Nice," Merlin said, grin spreading wide. Then another Sidhe blast winged past them, and he quickly raised his shield again.

They ran through the same routine again, Merlin shielding and Arthur aiming until the right moment came. Their success drew the attention of other Sidhe, which worked perfectly until they were
surrounded by several of them at once. Merlin held the shield, but when the Sidhe realized the futility of a direct attack, they started going after Macha, firing at the soft parts of her wings. She roared in fury and lashed out at them, whirling in the air as she snapped her jaws at the tiny fairies. But they were small and fast, almost too fast for Arthur to follow, and even with the Sidhe's attention focused away from them, Arthur was afraid of missing and hitting Macha instead.

"I've got this," Merlin said, taking control of the staff. There was a seriousness to him, an anger that Arthur had rarely seen him display. When things were dire, Merlin was more likely to crack a joke than anything else, which Arthur found to be alternately irritating and one of Merlin's most charming qualities as a servant. But as he took aim at one of the Sidhe, he moved with the control and intent of a knight, his hands steady even as Macha twisted and turned.

It all seemed to happen at once: the glint of gold in Merlin's eyes as the shield dropped, and then almost as one the Sidhe were struck down, each bolt fired impossibly fast. And then the shield was back up again and Merlin breathed out, sweat beading on his brow despite the wind.

"How did you do that?" Arthur asked, astonished.

Before Merlin could reply, there was a terrifying roar from one of the other Great Dragons. Another group of Sidhe had surrounded it, but they were using their magic instead of their staffs. Whatever spell they were using, it was making the dragon writhe in agony.

Macha roared, spitting smoke and flame, and she rushed towards the Sidhe. She scattered them with her fire and chased after them with snapping jaws. Arthur and Merlin picked off the few that pursued them. But the other dragons weren't so lucky. Their mercies towards the Sidhe had not inspired similar mercies in return, and all across the sky they were grouping together and casting spells that made their victims writhe in agony. Some were falling down to the water, weakened or worse. Arthur wasn't sure if it was that the Sidhe didn't have the strength for a spell that would kill a Great Dragon outright, or if they were eager for the dragons to suffer. He thought of Merlin's tearful confession in the caves, and suddenly mercy was a much less appealing choice.

"It's time," Arthur said. "We have to call them down."

"Yeah," Merlin said. "We have to call them down."

"Yeah," Merlin said. He lowered his shield and his arms, closing his eyes in concentration. Just as in the caves, Arthur could feel Merlin's magic surge through the torcs as he drew on his dragonlord power. The ancient magic stirred Arthur's blood, resonated in his bones, as Merlin threw his head back and roared. "O drakon, erkheo! Anale tendai gard amasen fulakson!"

There was an answering cry from high above, and then in streaks of black and brilliant rainbows came the second wave as the Penllyn and Bod drove into the battle like a rain of hailstones. Their speed was amazing, and the Bod in particular were a match for even the Sidhe's flight. The smaller dragons drove the fairies from the Great Dragons and chased them away, singeing them with their flame as they pursued.

But the victory was short lived. While they had been busy fighting half the Sidhe army, the other half had recovered from the initial attack and resumed their trek towards the Gates. Merlin called the remaining Great Dragons to attack. The fight had taken some toll on them already, but it had taken none of their determination. They flew after the griffins and Pixies, wings beating hard.

"We're going to need the rest," Arthur shouted above the wind. The other dragons had gone on ahead -- common, Peluda, and Bheithir -- and were waiting in reserve should the first waves fail. They did not have the might of the Great Dragons or the speed of the Bod and Penllyn, but they had sheer numbers. With the Sidhe's army reduced, they could be enough to bring them to victory.
"Look!" Merlin pointed ahead, and saw that the third wave had already begun. They met the army head-on, attacking the griffins and Pixies without mercy, tearing into them with tooth and claw, acid and fire. The griffins fought back hard, claws and beaks tearing away scales and feathers, slashing at wings. The Pixies were just as vicious, jumping onto the dragons' backs and attacking them with fists and spells.

Arthur knew this sort of battle. It was the worst kind, the bitter, heartless slog that came when tactics failed and chaos bloomed. He had been in the thick of them and somehow survived, but always came out of them bruised and bloodied, the thrill of the fight curdled sour by so much death.

They couldn't let the army breach the Gates. If it reached Camelot, it would rip through the town as if it were made of vellum.

As the melee thickened, the Great Dragons flew around it, picking off the griffins that were trying to fly out towards the Gates again. While the Pixies couldn't fly, they were more troublesome than their masters. Where the Sidhe shied away from physical conflict due to their fragility, the Pixies fought tooth and nail, their hardy natures enduring of attacks by staff and fire. This forced the dragons to fight them in close quarters, which was itself an advantage for the Pixies -- they might not be able to fly, but they could certainly jump.

In such conditions, it wasn't long before Macha herself was boarded. A Pixie had leaped onto her tail and was inching its way up her body, intent on reaching Merlin and Arthur. She tried to shake it off, but the Pixie held on tight. Merlin tried to twist around to shoot at it, but Arthur had a better idea. He pulled out his sword and cut the rope that bound him to Merlin.

"Arthur, don't!"

"Keep firing. The others need your help," Arthur told him. "And tell Macha to keep steady." On impulse, he gave Merlin a firm kiss, then turned and crawled towards the Pixie. It was a male, and as ugly as the others he had met during his time at Oberon's palace. He smirked at Arthur, his sharp teeth as menacing as the long nails on his warty hands. As their paths neared, Arthur rose up onto his knees and raised his sword. The Pixie sneered arrogantly, obviously thinking little of the human and his bit of shiny metal. He opened his black lips to cast a spell of attack, but before he could finish it, Arthur lunged forward -- and with one strong stroke, he cut clear through the Pixie's neck. There was a look of comical shock on his face as his head fell away from his body, and then both halves of him fell down towards the lake below, before dissolving into dust that shimmered in the air.

"Ha!" Arthur cried. It was his first proper victory of the whole battle, all his own, and he relished it. He turned to check on Merlin -- and perhaps gloat a bit -- when a heavy weight knocked him off his feet and into the air -- but before he could fall he was captured, seized by huge, vicious talons whose sword-sharp tips bit into his flesh, piercing through the mail like arrows. He heard the distant shout of his name as he was carried away, but he could only focus on two facts: that he was still alive, and that he still had his sword in his hand. Twice in Avalon he had lost it, but he wasn't going to let it go now.

They were flying up and away from the fighting, and with some irony he realized that the Sidhe had taken him hostage, perhaps expecting to use him to force the dragons to surrender. If they refused, the griffin would only have to squeeze its feet and its talons would pierce him through, slice him open so that he would die before Merlin or the Great Dragons could save him. The Sidhe didn't know him very well if they expected him to let that happen.

A Sidhe bolt flew past them, and Arthur looked back to see Macha hot on their tail, with Merlin crouched on her back, his furious intent clear even from afar. The Sidhe rider fired back, forcing Merlin to switch to his shield. Arthur took advantage of the distraction and reached back with one
arm to grab the griffin's ankle. With the other he reached down and sliced into the thick scales of its
toes. The griffin screeched and opened its hold to drop him, but Arthur swung his weight up and
hooked his arms around the ankle, then hauled himself up so he could cling bodily to its leg, just
under its beating wings. The rider looked down to see what the trouble was, and to Arthur's delight
he saw that the Sidhe was Drudwas, glamour intact.

The griffin clawed at Arthur with its free foot, but Arthur chastened it with a few strikes of his
sword. He didn't want to hurt the creature so badly it would fall, which from this dizzying height
would kill them both. Drudwas commanded the griffin to shake him off, but Arthur clung on tightly.
He took a breath of relief when the shaking stopped, but his reprieve was brief as he saw the tip of
the Sidhe staff pointing down at him. It seemed that if the griffin couldn't manage Arthur, then
Drudwas would do it himself.

The first shot nearly hit him, and it grazed the griffin's foot so that it screeched in alarm and flew
wildly. Even Drudwas had to abandon their fight to keep his hold as the world spun sickeningly
around them. Despite enduring so much already, Arthur's stomach finally rebelled and he spat out
what little remained of his meal in the caves. He watched the bile fall away as the griffin began to
calm again, and wished for a swig of ale.

When Drudwas calmed his mount, Arthur looked down and saw that Macha was being attacked by
two Pixie-mounted Sidhe, and that they were driving her down as Merlin alternately fired and
shielded. They fell away as Arthur was carried into the clouds where they could not be easily found.

The air was thin and cold, numbing Arthur's fingers, but he forged on, inching his way higher.
Rather than try to attack Drudwas directly, he leapt onto the griffin's back leg and climbed up it,
muscles straining as the creature tried to shake him off. But he held on, and then he was atop it. As
Drudwas turned, Arthur lunged at him, sword arm driving hard. He knocked away the staff and
brought his sword to the Sidhe's throat. Drudwas snarled and tried to shove him off, and Arthur had
to use one hand to hold on to the griffin's harness. Then the griffin turned sharply and they both
nearly fell off. They clung on to the harness as their legs hung in the air, then grunted from the
impact as the griffin steadied.

Before Arthur could recover, Drudwas was upon him, eyes glowing as he thrust his hand against
Arthur's chest. Arthur found himself paralyzed, muscles frozen in place. His grip was tight on his
sword but he couldn't bring it up to bear.

"My King ordered me to bring you back alive," growled Drudwas, eyes lit with a dark satisfaction.
"But he didn't say you had to be in one piece. You will be king of nothing once I make a trophy of
your hands. And perhaps your tongue."

He reached for the hilt of the sword and tried to wrench it free, but Arthur's paralyzed fist held it fast.
He pried at Arthur's fingers but even his pinky held firm as stone, and they both realized that the
paralysis spell had done too good a job. If Drudwas wanted the sword, he was going to have to
release the spell. From the lust in his eyes as he stared at the gleaming steel, he thought it worth the
risk.

"Dragon-forged," Drudwas smirked, throwing Arthur's words from their days-old confrontation back
at him. "With this, I will kill your dragons once and for all. I will cut out the heart of your precious
Emrys. Gwynn wants you both, but we only need one of you alive."

Drudwas braced Arthur's body with his own, holding him down to stop him from escaping when the
spell was released. Arthur knew that he would only have once chance at this. If he was paralyzed
again, he would be helpless to stop the Sidhe from fulfilling his promise. He would have to do
whatever it took to stop that from happening.
When Drudwas was ready, confident of his hold on Arthur's limbs, he released the spell. Strength rushed back to Arthur's body, and he gathered all his might and slammed his head into Drudwas'. The force of it stunned them both. But in order to secure his hold on Arthur, Drudwas had let go of the harness. Dizzied, he fell back, toppling off the griffin and taking Arthur down with him.

One second, two seconds. They plunged through the clouds and out into the bright sunlight. Three seconds, four seconds. He twisted in the Sidhe's grip, jabbing him with the hilt of his sword to knock the air out of him. Five seconds, six. Arthur sheathed his sword and grabbed Drudwas bodily, covering his mouth with his hand so he couldn't use the paralysis spell again. The Sidhe struggled, but it was clear that he wasn't used to such close combat. Nine seconds. Arthur tried to maneuver so that he could get behind Drudwas and put him in a choke hold, but the Sidhe abandoned his glamour with a puff of light. He nearly flew away, but Arthur caught him in one hand and squeezed him tight. Eleven seconds. The Sidhe cried out in pain and restored his glamour, lunging furiously for Arthur's neck. Arthur punched him hard across the jaw and Drudwas went limp, the powerful Sidhe reduced by sheer muscle and bone.

Fourteen seconds, and the lake rushed up to greet them, its placid waters deceptively gentle. He braced himself for impact, worried what would happen to Merlin if he didn't survive this. Fifteen seconds, and a dark shape rushed towards him, wide wings blocking out the sun. Sixteen seconds, and massive claws stretched wide, snapped around him and Drudwas like a vise. His outstretched hand skimmed the water as they swooped in a low arc down, and then Macha was flying up again, wings beating gently as she loosened her grip, allowing Arthur to find a more comfortable position. His heart stopped trying to burst out of his chest.

"Arthur!!" Merlin's frantic yell made him look up. Merlin was inching along Macha's back, trying to get to him. He had cut the ropes.

"Stay there!" Arthur shouted. The last thing they needed was for Merlin to take a tumble as well. At least from this height, he would only get a soaking and not break his neck.

Merlin stayed put, perhaps realizing that sliding down a dragon's scaly side mid-air was not a smart move. "Is that Drudwas? Is he dead?"

"I knocked him out."

"Good," Merlin said, cheeks dimpling with anger. "Get out of the way so I can kill him."

"Merlin," Arthur chided. But he could see how thin Merlin's anger was, and how much fear and pain was hiding behind it.

"Are you well, my King?" asked Macha, glancing down at him.

"Yes. Thank you. Can you help me up?"

Macha reached out with her other front foot and Arthur climbed into it, leaving Drudwas in her grip. Merlin hurried to meet him as Arthur made the leap from her raised leg to her back. She kept her flight steady, knowing that any further acrobatics were not ideal without the ropes. As was typical, Merlin had simply cut them and let them fall, rather than save them for rebinding. Someday Merlin might actually think about the consequences of his actions, but Arthur wasn't going to hold his breath. He crawled back to Merlin, who pulled him into a desperate hug.

"I couldn't reach you. I thought--" Merlin choked.

Arthur stroked Merlin's hair, kissed his jaw. "I'm all right."
"Should've tied you down," Merlin muttered, and gave him a token slap on the chest to show how terrified he had been. Then a look of horror spread across his face. "You're bleeding."

"It's just a few scratches," Arthur protested, as Merlin checked his wounds with an air of panic. "Drudwas was trying to take me alive." Arthur decided not to mention the bit about threatening to cut out his tongue. He didn't think it would go well for Drudwas if Merlin found that out.

Arthur waited tolerantly as Merlin confirmed that he wasn't at risk of bleeding to death. Only a few hours ago, Merlin had been in pieces at the thought of losing him forever. There was, perhaps, a small part of Arthur that felt a grim satisfaction at the tables being turned, after Merlin gave him such a terrible scare in Gedref. But it was very small indeed. When one of them hurt, so did the other. And despite knowing his duty, Arthur no longer saw the honor in throwing his life away. With Merlin, he had something worth living for.

Yet the fact was that they had both worked up a solid record of nearly getting killed at this point, and in his gut Arthur knew that things weren't likely to get any easier. He looked up at the battle raging above them, still making its way inexorably towards the center of the lake, and knew they had to find a way to turn the tide. But without the ropes they couldn't continue their previous maneuvering. Staying with Macha now would only hold her back.

After his altercation with Drudwas, Arthur was eager to take the fight to the enemy, rather than staying at the edge of it waiting for another attack. They needed to go on the offensive, get up close and do some damage. They had two swords and two staffs, and if they stuck close, they could use all four to their advantage. Not to mention Merlin's ability to shield. A plan began to form in his head, much to Merlin's alarm.

"You've got that look," Merlin said, warily. "That 'I've come up with a stupid, suicidal plan' look."

"You're not going to like it," Arthur conceded. "But it's not actually suicidal."

Merlin took a few breaths, visibly working to steady himself from the shock of Arthur's capture and rescue. His worried eyes stared into Arthur's, searching for any hint of the absolute self-sacrifice that Arthur had so often displayed. When he couldn't find it, he softened and nodded once.

"Just tell me."

"We have to go into the battle," Arthur restrained the urge to go in alone. That only ever resulted in Merlin doing something utterly reckless like trying to protect him without his knowledge. If he had learned anything in Avalon, it was that they were both better off if they stuck together, no matter how dire the situation. He pointed at the heaving battle, dragons and griffins and Pixies making a living mass as they fought in close quarters. "See how the Pixies are jumping between the griffins and dragons? We need to go in there and stop them."

When Merlin didn't immediately respond, Arthur continued. "You gave me this sword to keep us safe. That means the safest place we can be is in there."

"That's the most idiotic thing you've ever said, and that's saying something. Did Drudwas knock you on the head?"

"Actually, it was the other way around," Arthur replied. "Do you have a better idea?"

Merlin stared up at the battle, but it was with worry, not fear. "They're hurting the dragons. I can feel it. We have to protect them."

"We do," Arthur acknowledged, feeling a swell of pride for Merlin. Few would ever face such a
battle willingly. Even the bravest knights would turn and run. But Merlin was ready for it.

Perhaps it was their newfound knowledge about themselves, or perhaps it was simply the accumulation of everything they had been through. But in that moment, Arthur saw just how much Merlin had changed. The mask of pretense and fear that had once so defined him was gone, revealing the truth of the man. And a man he was, the callow youth of him burned away.

But then, even before Merlin had trained as a knight, even when he was pretending to be useless to hide his magic, he had never been a coward. It was only that Arthur could now see the whole of him, the depths of his courage. He saw that Merlin fought not from anger or fear or glory, but out of love for those he sought to protect. Love for Arthur, for his dragon kin, for Camelot and Albion.

Arthur kissed him, then, his own love for Merlin overflowing in his chest. Merlin gave a soft, hurt sound and held Arthur tight, his fingers curling into Arthur's hair. Arthur gentled him, stroking his cheek and his chest, letting Merlin take what he needed.

"I won't leave you again," Arthur promised.

"Don't," Merlin whispered, barely audible, but Arthur heard him loud and clear.

They sheltered against each other, holding on tight as Macha carried them up, up, to the very top of the throng. Arthur was used to battles that were flat, or sieges that had one or two levels of action. This battle was an entirely different beast, with action happening in all directions, up and down, side to side, diagonals and circles. They started with a straggling pair: a Pixie clung to the back of a common dragon, battered as the dragon tried to force it off with its spikey tail. Macha roared to the dragon and it ceased its struggles. The Pixie took this as a victory and raised her hand to strike with her magic, but as she opened her mouth to speak, Arthur and Merlin jumped down, knocking her of her feet. Together they cut the Pixie down, and she dissolved into dust, showering the battle below. The common dragon roared in their shared victory and returned to the battle with renewed effort, and Arthur and Merlin moved on to their next target.

Together they made quick work of Pixie and griffin alike, cutting a swath and rescuing dragon after dragon. In close quarters they would both use their swords, Merlin using the spell he had cast on Lancelot's lance for his own sword. When they attacked from a distance, they would each aim a staff and Merlin would send his magic through them again and again, shooting out a barrage of bolts to cut down their foes. Fighting with Merlin this way was a revelation, exhilarating and deadly effective, and Arthur knew that this was how it was always meant to be for them. It was how it would have been from the start, if only fear and ignorant hate hadn't stood in the way.

Gradually the mass of the battle began to move backwards, safely away from the center of the lake. Even when the Pixies realized what a threat they were and went on the offensive, the dragons were able to take advantage of their distraction to stop them. The waters below began to shimmer with Pixie dust, but its beauty was sullied by dead and injured griffins and dragons. Both sides were taking losses, but the tallies would have to wait.

Near the bottom of the fight, on the back of a black Bod, Arthur and Merlin paused, panting, and spat dust from their mouths. They brushed it from their hair and faces and tried not to think about what it was they had swallowed. And then Arthur noticed something else gleaming in the water. His eyes widened in alarm as he recognized the blue lights streaking past them and towards the Gates. Fortunately, the Gates were defended by the Knuckers, but the sea dragons would need help, and they needed it now. He grabbed Merlin and pointed at the water.

“The Sidhe are headed for the Gates. Call the Knuckers and warn them. We'll meet them there.”

Merlin roared in dragnetongue, and the Bod flew at all speed for the center of the lake. Some dragons followed after them and skimmed the water, trying to fish out the Sidhe, but that only made the Sidhe dive deeper. Some dragons dove after them, sending up huge splashes of water, but despite their strength, the water slowed their pursuit. Better to fly ahead and meet them coming, as there was no doubt as to the Sidhe's destination.

When they reached the center, the Bod hovered over the lilypads and gently dropped them off. Free of her fragile human burden, she flew up high, then dove into the water with bone-shaking force. Merlin and Arthur were knocked off their feet as the waves rocked the lilypad.

Merlin opened the pack on Arthur's back and pulled out the Merrow hats. He gave one to Arthur and they both pulled them on tight. They took a moment to ready themselves, checking their weapons and taking their last breaths of air.

"We can't hold back anymore," Arthur said. Sparing the Sidhe's lives was what had allowed them to get this far. He didn't regret their mercy, at least not yet. He hoped he wouldn't. "If even one Sidhe gets through and opens the Gates..."

"I know," Merlin said, his posture reluctant but accepting.

Their eyes met. A smile quirked at Merlin's lips, but he said nothing. They didn't need words.

They stepped to the edge, and together they jumped. The weight of their armor was finally an asset, hurrying their journey down to the Gates. As they sank, they saw how the clear water of the lake had been churned up by the fighting, the silt moved in like a fog. But despite that, they could make out the shapes of the Knuckers in the distance, roiling the water as they chased the tiny Sidhe and spat boiling steam at them.

They reached the Gates, and to their relief they were the first. The plan was simple: stop any Sidhe that came close, by any means necessary. With Camelot's magical defenses trapped on the wrong side of the Gates, even one vengeful Sidhe could wreak havoc -- and any Sidhe that made it that far would be very vengeful indeed.

They waited, alert for any hint of blue light in the murky water. They didn't have to wait long. A Sidhe flew towards them, frantically pursued by a Knucker. Arthur and Merlin braced to defend. As the Sidhe reached the Gates, it slowed its approach, no doubt readying to call the Gates open. But the Knucker didn't slow down. It rammed through, its jaws open wide, and when it reached the other side, the massive jaws snapped shut. It chewed once, twice, then swallowed.

Well. That's one down, Arthur thought, feeling vaguely ill.

The Knucker acknowledged them with a nod and then turned tail, heading back into the fight. Arthur wondered if perhaps the dragons would be able to stop the advance entirely, but even as he thought it, he saw another blue light headed towards them, this time without pursuit. Arthur signalled to Merlin, who braced himself against a standing stone and fired. Two shots, three, and then a direct hit, and the Sidhe exploded in a shimmer of blue light.

The next to make it through was a Pixie. He swam down from above, but Merlin's shots did little to dissuade it. Arthur met it with his sword, and quickly dispatched it into a drifting cloud of gold. As the fight dragged on, the water grew murkier until they could barely see each other. After a Sidhe nearly got by them, Merlin used his magic to clear the water around the Gates. They still couldn't see if anyone was coming from a distance, but at least they wouldn't end up running into each other or
A pair of Sidhe, then three more, and a half-dozen Pixies descended on them, and so did the Knuckers pursuing them. The dragons ate several Pixies and a Sidhe, but sheer bulk of displaced water shoved everyone about, making it impossible to fight properly. Merlin finally told the Knuckers to keep a safe distance back and concentrate on not letting anyone through. Once the enemy was dispatched, they moved out to the edge of the clear water and swam guard in a slow circle. Whatever they couldn't stop was swiftly dispatched by Merlin and Arthur.

The knot of fear in Arthur's chest began to loosen. They were winning. The Sidhe army had taken heavy losses, and no doubt the dragons above were busy finishing them off. But they couldn't let down their guard yet. Not until the Sidhe surrendered, and there was no way to tell which of the tiny blue lights was Prince Edern. Assuming of course that he hadn't already been eaten by a dragon, which might make things tricky.

Something drew the attention of the Knuckers, and Merlin and Arthur looked up to see what it was. There seemed to be a disturbance in the water. Was it a new attack by the Sidhe, some sort of spell? Arthur looked to Merlin, who shrugged his shoulders in confusion. The knot began to tighten again, and Arthur swam over to Merlin's side. Whatever it was, they would face it together.

At first, Arthur didn't think much of the circling water, accustomed to the gentle whirl caused by the Knuckers. But as the current strengthened, he realized that the dragons had all gone still and were crouching against the lake bed in alarm. Soon the water was strong enough to carry them away, so Merlin and Arthur braced themselves against the stones and Merlin protected them with his shield. They watched in alarm as they found themselves trapped at the center of a whirlpool, one so strong that it was actually pushing the water out from its center. Sunlight poured down as the top of the lake opened up, and they saw a figure silhouetted in the sky.

It wasn't a dragon or a griffin. The water drained away and revealed none other than Titania, hanging in the sky in full glamour, her gauzy dress billowing in the wind. As she drew closer, they realized that she had grown outsized, nearly as tall as a Great Dragon. When the dragons attacked her, she swatted them away like they were troublesome flies.

"Who?!!" she boomed, pointing down at Merlin and Arthur. The last of the water drained from around them, leaving the Gates fully exposed. The rocks glimmered in the sunlight -- light they hadn't seen for who knew how many thousands of years. "Who has Sidhe blood shed so bold, scoured griffin flesh and rendered Pixies gold?"

Arthur and Merlin coughed the water from their lungs, but left their merrow hats on in case Titania let the water fall down upon them. They breathed in air, and Arthur spoke first. "The Emrys," he shouted back. "And the Once and Future King!"

Titania sneered down at them and laughed. "The King reborn mayhap I could believe. That single half a thousand years has grieved for what I took. The Emrys' soul I cleaved, oh foolish King. Again you are deceived."

Arthur looked to Merlin, but he was equally confused. The brief flashes of their past lives did little to made sense of her words. Had the Tylwyth Teg kept their discovery secret? And why?

"I don't care who you think we are!" Merlin shouted up at her. "You've seen what we can do. Call off the invasion now!"

She reached down towards them, as if to grab them. Merlin dropped the shield long enough to fire his staff at her, but the bolts bent around her, as if refusing to harm their Queen. With a single wave
she brought them flying back to their source, and Merlin brought up the shield in defense.

Their survival only angered Titania further. "Your sulph'rous, foul wyrms doth blight my land, my sacred waters based at your command. O'er Albion you mortals have no claim. You starved your holy spirits with your shame, you poisoned earth and sea and sky and flame so I shall purify it and reclaim. Your realm was ours and now shall be again!"

With that, she spread her arms and chanted, and to Arthur's alarm a golden light shimmered in the stones. "She's opening the Gates! Merlin, we have to stop her."

"How?" Merlin asked, just as frantic. "Look at the size of her! Even the dragons can't scratch her."

Almost as one, they came to the same realization. "No," Merlin breathed, heartbroken.

"We don't have a choice," Arthur said, taking no pleasure in it. "I'm sorry." He looked up and saw the remaining Sidhe massing around Titania, readying to cross over at last. "You heard what she said." This was about more than just Camelot. If the Sidhe made it across, all of Albion would be in grave peril. And they were the only ones who could stop it.

Arthur raised his sword, but Merlin stopped him. "There are other Gates. This won't stop them."

"Maybe not," Arthur conceded. "But we have to try. Unless you have a better idea?"

Merlin tugged at his hair, thinking so hard Arthur could almost see the smoke coming out of his ears. But they were out of time. The sand beneath their feet glowed as the Gates began to open. Arthur pulled back his arm and swung hard, slicing into the stone. Halfway through it stopped, stuck, and Arthur had to yank it out again. He swung again, cutting into the rock from the other side. Maybe he didn't need to destroy them all. Maybe he could just take out enough to stop the Gates from working.


Arthur rounded on him, furious. "Merlin!"

But Merlin wasn't trying to talk him out of destroying the Gates. Instead he was walking into the center of the circle, a staff in each hand. "I have to do this," he said, a sad acceptance in his eyes. "I'm the only one who can."

"Don't you dare," Arthur said, rushing to meet him. If he dragged Merlin out of here, they could escape with the dragons, try to find another way to stop the Sidhe. But even as he clung to the thought, he knew it wasn't an option. Any delay would be at the cost of Camelot and everyone who lived there. This was their last stand against the Sidhe, and they had to take it.

"You have to leave now," Merlin said, an eerie calm coming over him. As if he had made peace with this moment, with the likelihood of his own death. Arthur had seen it in him before, when he drank the poison meant for Arthur's lips. When he said goodbye and rode off to the Isle of the Blessed to bargain away his life. It seemed as though Merlin had always been ready to die for him, for Camelot, for Albion. But Arthur couldn't let him die alone.

If they had been born to defend Albion together, then that was what they would do.

Arthur took hold of each of the staffs. "I left you before," he said, knowing somehow that he had failed Merlin in more than this life. That he had left Merlin to suffer and die alone. "I won't leave you again. I made a promise."

Merlin blinked, and tears fell from his eyes. "So you did," he said, voice tight with grief. Arthur let
go of the staffs and wrapped his arms around Merlin, holding tight.

The Sidhe streamed down towards them, ready to fly through the moment the Gates opened wide. Golden light streamed up through the sand, and then the two of them were falling into golden light. It was different without the water, some greater force pulling them through the void. He felt the change as the world began to turn, as they reached the center between the Gates. He saw the gold in Merlin's eyes, nearly drowned in the blinding light around them as Merlin poured his magic into the staffs, their torcs hot with the force of so much magic. At the very last moment he let the staffs go, but Arthur didn't look at anything but Merlin. He wanted him to be the last thing he saw in this life, and the first thing he saw in the next, if they had a next life at all. The force of the explosion hit them like a boulder, slamming the air from their chests, and then there was nothing but light, pure light as the Gates collapsed around them.
Titania and Creiddylad

Chapter Notes

At long last! Apologies for the long delay, this one took a while to get right. This is a heavy chapter with intense amounts of poetry (not THAT kind of poetry). It's recommend that you take your time when you read it to achieve the full effect.

There was pain. He knew it, whole-body and complete, and a deep hurt with every struggling breath. He wasn't awake -- and he was glad for that, for how much worse would it have been if he was? -- but some part of him remained aware, conscious as if in a waking dream. He strained through the fog of it, the world shapeless and indistinct around his bodiless self, reaching for something with a long-forgotten name.

The nothing seemed to go on forever. He began to wonder if this wasn't a dream at all. Perhaps he been trapped in the space between the worlds, the absence of existence. Despair weighed on him, making the nothing seem heavier, darker, making it harder to breathe. How could he hurt so much when he had nothing to hurt with, no bones to break or blood to bleed? He knew what dying felt like. He had to be dying, and some part of him welcomed its relief.

But not all of him. No, not that stubborn core that railed against surrender, that fought on even when all hope was lost. That part of him would never give up. He focused his awareness inward, feeding it with what little strength he had, nurturing that small, mulish ember into a flame to burn away the darkness. And as he did, he felt an echoing fire, a warmth that matched his own and yearned to join it: a sunbeam cutting through midnight-black, racing towards him as a golden thread.

The thread found him, anchored him. And Arthur knew that long-forgotten name.

_Merlin._

Dragon magic flooded him, lightening the darkness, coaxing away the pain so he could breathe again. He knew the familiar itch of healing and welcomed it with relief. His body returned to him, or perhaps it was the other way around, and he thought briefly of the lost souls of Avalon, each swirling light adrift and lost. But he was not adrift, couldn't ever be, not with that solid cord tugging from deep in his chest, pulling him in like a fish on a line.

He opened his eyes and Merlin filled his vision. His blue eyes were red from crying, but he was grinning so wide it must hurt.

Arthur gasped as full sensation rushed back to him. He could still feel the dragon magic healing him, which meant he could also feel what needed to be healed. Whatever had happened when the Gates collapsed, it had been bad.

Merlin broke with something between a sob and a laugh. "I thought..." he began, then swallowed hard. He stroked Arthur's face, seeming to need the reassurance for himself. Arthur mustered the strength to raise his own hand and touched him back, resting his hand against Merlin's tear-streaked cheek. Their foreheads pressed together and Arthur closed his eyes, drawing on the contact to help him gather and orient himself.
They were lying on soft grass, the morning sun shining down on them through the dappled shade of enormous trees. They were still in Avalon, no doubt on one of the islands. Somehow they had made it out of the Gates before they completely collapsed, but Arthur couldn't recall anything after the explosion.

"You saved us," he said, opening his eyes again.

Merlin shook his head. "I woke up here. The dragons healed me, but you were so hurt... They didn't think they could save you."

Arthur could see the fear that lingered in him, no doubt compounded after nearly losing him so many times already. "I made a promise," he said, knowing now that that was why he had fought. Even if he had forgotten everything, even in the black nothing. He remembered the pull of the golden cord and lowered his hand to Merlin's chest. Had it all just been his imagination? It had felt more real than anything else in that place. Merlin's hand rested over his own, holding it against his racing heart.

Some motion dragged Arthur's attention away from Merlin, and when he finally looked around, he discovered that they had an audience. A discreet audience, but still. He gently detached himself from Merlin and pushed himself up, ignoring the way it made his head spin.

"My King." Macha bowed her long neck in respect, and the other dragons did the same.

"Welcome back," said a familiar voice, and Arthur turned to see none other than Morvarc'h. The water horse flicked his mane, sending out flecks of sea-foam. "It is good to see you well again. I feared my rescue came too late."

"You saved us?" Merlin asked, sitting up as well. "How?"

"Your battle could hardly be missed," Morvarc'h said, with a wry tone. "Though I was not invited, I thought you might need my assistance. The Sidhe took no notice of me in their haste, and as the Gates collapsed I carried you out, as I once carried Gradlon and Malgven."


"It has been a long time since I've witnessed such a fight," Morvarc'h continued, sobering. "I regret that your victory came at such a cost, yet this hard-won peace is only temporary. We must find a way to make it last."

Now that he was sitting up, Arthur saw that more than a few dragons had accompanied them here. Spreading out into the forest were both armies, each keeping to their own side. Dragons and Pixies, griffins and Sidhe, each using healing magic to restore their wounded.

Macha followed Arthur's gaze. "You seem surprised, my King. Do you not have sorcerers to heal your human army?"

"Not anymore," Arthur admitted, fighting a wave of terrible guilt for that fact. This went beyond what even Merlin could do. His father's hatred towards magic was always especially acute when it came to all who claimed to heal, whether that be Druid priests or merely some fool boasting about his herbs. He had heard stories of royal healers, and there were places even today where the desperately ill took pilgrimage. Dragon magic was clearly meant for so much more than just some fancy tempered steel.

Macha shook her head. "Even with the Triskelion broken, I never imagined that our Albion would fall into such a state. As long as there is life and will, by the blessing of the Triple Goddess all wounds can be healed."
"Arthur frowned, remembering Merlin's words to him when he awoke. "Then why did you think you couldn't save me?"

"Without your soul, your body would have been but a hollow shell, no matter how healed," Morvarc'h said, when the others hesitated to answer.

"I couldn't let you go," Merlin said, his voice quiet.

Arthur understood him all too well.

Macha looked around, then bowed her head in grief. "Even here in this land of eternal youth, with all our strength restored to us, there were those we could not save. We can only pray that their souls will reach the gods and enter the great cycle once again." She gave a wistful smile. "Perhaps that is how we all shall one day return to Albion."

"When the Gates opened, couldn't you just have passed back through?" Merlin asked.

"I told you before that we are trapped," Macha said, with mild impatience. "If we had tried to pass, we would have met the fate our King escaped: our souls lost, forever trapped between the worlds, beyond the reach of even the gods."

Arthur could not suppress his shudder. Merlin's grip on his arm tightened.

Macha turned her long neck towards the Sidhe palace. "Just before the Gates collapsed, when Titania still thought her victory at hand, she tried to herd us towards the Gates, intending to force us through and be rid of us once and for all. When you treat with her, take care. No matter how gentle she appears, you will find no mercy in her heart."

§

Arthur and Merlin made their way towards Oberon's palace, walking slowly as neither of them was entirely steady on his feet. Arthur kept his attention focused on the task ahead rather than dwelling on how bad off they must have been. Dragon magic could heal miraculously, but as Arthur had already experienced once before, it took some time for the body to recover from the trauma. When was all over and they were home again, he was ready to sleep for a week, in his own bed with Merlin beside him. Just the thought was motivation enough to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

Not that they needed motivation. Winning the battle was all well and good, but if they couldn't reach a peaceful resolution with the Sidhe, it would be all for naught. The Sidhe would recover and resume their invasion through one of the other Gates, and with the dragons trapped in Avalon, Albion would be all but defenseless. No doubt the Sidhe knew that as well as they did, which meant they must give their enemy enough reason to give up their ambitions.

Merlin was silent beside him, growing increasingly tense as they approached the crystal bridge.

"It's going to be all right," Arthur told him, hoping it wasn't a lie.

"I don't trust them," Merlin said, frowning deeply.

"It's not about trust," Arthur said. He wished that Merlin had been awake in the days after the battle of Gedref, because the experience would have helped him here. Not that there had been much negotiating after such a thorough victory, but with so many hostages involved, he and Idryis had still had plenty to sort out. Arthur idly wished for a dragon to heal Merlin every time he got himself hurt - - but then, if Merlin had never broken his arm, Arthur might never have trained him to be a knight.
They stopped at the foot of the bridge, Arthur's hand on Merlin's arm.

"Do you think my father ever trusted Cenred or Bayard or any of the kings he treated with?" Arthur continued. "There are only two things that matter to any negotiation: greed and fear."

"That sounds like something Uther would say," Merlin said, dismissive.

"I saw it myself. From the moment I was old enough, he had me by his side for every treaty. Though perhaps it could be phrased more kindly, sometimes there is value to my father's bluntness."

"Does this have a point?" Merlin asked, crossing his arms to show his displeasure.

"Yes," Arthur said, dragging out the word to show just how patient he was being with Merlin's cheek. "The point is that you don't have to trust them. In fact, you shouldn't. We just showed them how powerful you are. A thousand dragons wasn't enough to stop this fight, but you were."

Merlin cracked a smile, unable to resist the flattery. "Yeah. So?"

"So we need to use that. Be intimidating, and if anyone tries anything--"

"Which they will."

"Very likely," Arthur admitted. "When then do, I'm trusting you to put a stop to it. Keep us safe, but do the best you can to calm things down. Defend, don't escalate."

Merlin looked both uncertain of himself and quite determined to succeed -- which was entirely typical of him. He took a breath, let it out, nodded as if making a resolution. "And you?"

"Oh, I have the easy part. I'll be the one making them angry."

Merlin stared at him, silently conveying his belief that Arthur was some kind of prodigy idiot, and marched over the bridge without waiting for him. Arthur chuckled to himself and hurried to catch up.

Arthur had only ever seen the Sidhe palace by moonlight, but it was just as beautiful in the sun. Light glittered on its crystal dome, casting scattered light in all directions to dazzle the eye and cast rainbows into the dewdrops. Where at night the flowers and plants had glowed with some internal light, now they shone with colors of such vividness that they were greater than all the colors of the human world: more red than the strongest Pendragon dye, more green than the forest in deep summer, more white than the deepest snow. If he were to bring home such a blue, the Mercians would pay a lord's ransom for it.

His eyes ached to behold it, yet he couldn't look away. There was only one other place that he had ever seen such color, and it was in the cavern temple in Gedref. He had been blind to not recognize it for the powerful magic it was, and a fool not to treasure it.

As they entered the palace, they were watched intensely by many Sidhe -- many of them still in their battle armor -- but none tried to stop them. As they entered the underground palace, Arthur could not help but recall the last time they were there, when he was disguised as a Pixie under Puck's guidance and Merlin was a trapped falcon in a cage. The two of them had been powerless then, desperate only to survive and escape. Now they entered without disguise, heads held high, and faced their enemy as equals. At least, as equal as any human could be in the eyes of the Sidhe.

Despite the crowds outside, the great hall itself was all but empty. As they walked down the spiralling staircase, past the silver tree columns, they found Titania and Oberon on their thrones, flanked only by their closest attendants, including the mischievous Puck. Titania lay back in her
throned as if too weak to sit upright, and Oberon was leant towards her with concern. Though the two were dressed in their typical finery, no glamour could hide the pain and anger in their eyes.

A sob called attention to another pair of Sidhe huddled close together by the wall. It was Erdudwyl and Gwynn, and they stared at Arthur and Merlin with a terrible grief.

"You!" Erdudwyl cried, rushing to her feet and striding towards them. Gwynn half-heartedly tried to stop her, but it was clear that he would welcome any vengeance she could deliver.

When her eyes glowed red, Merlin quickly brought up his shield, then raised his eyebrows at Arthur pointedly. Arthur raised his eyebrows back at him. When her spells bounced off with no effect, Erdudwyll flung herself at them bodily and pressed against the shield, eyes blazing with anger and magic. Merlin flinched but the shield held firm.

"Vicious beasts!" She snarled, all noble dignity abandoned. "Foul murderers! Thy shield I'll break, thy flesh I'll rend. Once revealed, your wretched souls shall suffer torment, thy pain eternal, deep and fervent."

"I don't think they need any help getting angry," Merlin muttered.

Gwynn came up beside her and raised his hand to the shield. "I'll lend my strength. They shall repay for each Sidhe death they took this day." He gave them a dark smile, showing his teeth. "Thy mortal kin will share thy fate. When Albion falls and we create its land anew from sea to sky, and all your gods do glorify Titania. They'll bow and pray to be the drudging slaves of Fae."

Their double assault was taking its toll on Merlin. Though of course he would hold it as long as he could, he was still weak from the destruction of the Gates. It made sense that in this land of eternal youth, death would be so rare that its impact was even more terrible than it was elsewhere -- and the Sidhe hadn't suffered losses like this in a very, very long time.

Arthur knew he had to manage the situation quickly. He drew his sword.

"Stop or else this peace will end," he warned, keeping his tone even but forceful. He stared at Gwynn and took a half step closer to him, his sword raised between them.

"Our revenge has too-long been denied," Gwynn warned back. "For any peace, we must be satisfied."

Arthur was not impressed. "It is our command that holds the dragons back from slaughtering you all. End this now or Avalon will burn with dragonfire."

Though Gwynn did not cease his attack, Arthur was satisfied to see him flinch.

A soft splat made him turn. Erdudwyl's spit dripped down the shield as she glared. "Cowards! I will break thy feeble shield and slay thy kin. Thy fate was sealed with my husband and brother's demise. For that deed, thy souls shall be my prize."

"My highest queen, do not be deceived!"

Arthur turned to see another Sidhe approaching, an unfamiliar but regal woman dressed in mourning black. He glanced to Merlin to see if he knew her, but he shook his head once. She strode past them and knelt before Titania, bowing deeply.

"From treachery and lies that they conceived, my only daughter from my breast was cleaved. Envy drove those fair to treason vile. My queen, I beg thee: grant to them exile."
"You're Queen Mab," Arthur realized. The mother of Princess Maeve, the Sidhe that had grown inside of Elena. Did she think her daughter dead?

"Vip'rous slander!" cried Gwynn, rounding on her in an instant. With a promising glare, Erdudwyl followed suit, and Merlin slumped in relief as their assaults on his shield ceased. "Cease thy poison lies," Gwynn continued, no less angry at her than he was at Merlin and Arthur. "Thy own lack was cause of her demise."

The slap that Mab dealt him echoed round the hall. Gwynn's eyes glowed bright as he readied his response, but he never had the chance to strike.

"Enough!" boomed Oberon, stopping them both. "Now I end this tedious game. For thy queen's wounds thou must feel shame for both thine petty houses share the blame."

"My king," plead Mab, "with great pain in my heart I mourn for treach'ry took my first and only born. I swear that I did naught to earn thy scorn."

"Thy failure was an insult to our queen," said Erdudwyl. "And thy false accusation's clearly seen."

"What greater insult is there than defeat?" Mab retorted. "Thy arrogance imperiled all our fleet and too much of it paid for thy deceit. For their blood and my kin's I'll see thee pay. Fair Albion shall now at last be mine and too thy kingdom. A mortal's fate is thine." She turned to stare at Merlin and Arthur.

All fell silent as Titania finally roused from her recline and faced them. They fell back, bowing their heads while glancing up at her with a mixture of arrogant certainty and mortal terror. But she ignored them all in favor of Merlin. Her eyes were locked upon him, fixated as her fingers curled against the arms of her throne. Arthur readied his grip on his sword; he wasn't about to let her harm a hair on Merlin's head, or even a feather if it came to that.

"O troublesome pet," Titania said, the fondness in her voice surely but a surface calm over the roiling anger beneath. "The fault was mine. O'er centuries I did forget the signs of thy true nature. Firm in my grip I held thee briefly, but let thee slip. I saw the beauty of thy soul untame, yet turned my back and let thy king reclaim."

Merlin tensed, more wary of Titania than of the Tylwyth Teg's revenge. Yet to Arthur's alarm he dropped his shield. For a moment he worried that the Sidhe Queen was attempting to glamour Merlin, but no, his eyes were clear and alert. He stood defiant, chin high, and Arthur realized that he was showing her that he was not afraid, that she had no power over him, no matter what their circumstances had once been.

"I'm not your pet," Merlin declared, his jaw tight. "I never was."

Titania laughed, but the sound of it sent chills up Arthur's spine. "Thou art still wild, thy song and nature crude, a fresh-caught fledgling not yet intermewed." She opened her palm in offering. "Come back, restore thyself to my good care. I'll train thee sweet and always treat thee fair."

"You tortured him," Arthur said, flatly. She couldn't actually expect Merlin to willingly give himself over. What was she up to?

"And for that error dearly have we paid," Titania replied, spreading her arms and then folding her hands together in her lap. "Forgive me and forgiveness shall be made, full pardons given, all invasions stayed. Give thyself freely to me whole and true. Eat sweetest fruits and here be born anew. By my hand train to swoop and glide and shine. Albion shall be safe while thou art mine."
"You're mad," Merlin said, shaking his head and taking a step back -- not out of fear, but to place himself close to Arthur's side. Arthur touched his side to Merlin's, supporting him without words. He didn't care what Titania wanted or what she offered. Merlin was no one's pet and never would be.

Gwynn stepped forward, finally breaking from his fear of Titania's wrath. "O Queen, there is no need to offer trade for that already given. This charade of freedom he'll discard and sweet song sing. Upon thy word to highest heights he'll wing. Let me restore thy pet and make redress; I'll make amends for all I did transgress. Both Emrys and his King I shall provide; twas error then to make one whole divide." Then he turned and stared Merlin and Arthur, eager to fulfill his promises. "I'll tame thee true, I'll fast and certain bind thy souls to hers, then through you all mankind to her shall bend and bow. They shall revere and worship their true Queen with love and fear, their prayers and souls shall her power nourish -- for eternity the Sidhe shall flourish!"

"Never," Merlin spat, showing his teeth and raising his hand in warning. Arthur had never seen him look so deadly, not even in battle. Arthur matched him, glaring at the Sidhe and raising his sword to swing. So much for calming things down.

Gwynn chuckled arrogantly. "My queen, see how they rush towards their fate. With thy permission I shall captivate and cage thy foes as I did twice before. A third time they'll fall quickly to the floor, their necks arched in welcome to thy tether. Quick they'll take thy bridle and thy leather."

Titania's eyes shone with greed, their fire fed by Gwynn's eager promises. "Humanity will welcome my return. With my majestic power, kind but stern, my rightful rule shall stretch from sea to sea; from king to pauper, all shall bow to me. Where magic once was quenched or took abuse, it first shall overflow and then suffuse; all barren rock and sterile earth revived where one by human hand was life deprived." She looked up at the sky through the crystal dome, alight with joy -- and then frowned as she saw a dragon flying overhead, above the canopy of the trees. She turned to Oberon and took his hand. "I swore to free thee from thy deprivation, yet still behold one cause for our frustration. From mortal life the dragons did we wrest, but brought our enemy right to our breast."

But Gwynn was not deterred by her concern. "My queen, through me thy reign shall e'er endure, for tis thy pet that shall this threat secure. From this day forth, all dragons shall concord with thee, the master of their only lord."

Titania's eyes widened and she sat up straight. "A Dragonlord! My falcon, is this true?"

Merlin said nothing, but Arthur saw his jaw twitch with tension.

"The truth before mine eyes this day revealed," Gwynn answered. "His word alone the dragons did subdue. Once he is thine, thou shalt his power wield."

"The dragons are my kin," Merlin warned, his voice reverberating with Dragontongue. "I will not allow you to harm them."

Oberon sneered. "Thy coarse, insulting tongue thou will retract, or else that loathsome organ I'll extract."

Arthur didn't like how this was going. He had hoped to find some common ground or shared regard with Titania and Oberon as a foundation for peace, but it was clear that there was no getting through to either of them. But the Sidhe were not a united front. He turned his attention to Mab and Gwynn, recalling their earlier quarrel. Perhaps his earlier plan to use Maeve and Erdudwyl as hostages had failed, but he had other resources to draw on now. It was time he used them.

It was a shame that he had never warmed to Geoffrey's poetry classes. At the time he wanted nothing
more than to slice up those dusty old books with his sword and run outside to train with the knights. But as powerful as it was, his sword wasn't going to convince the Sidhe to listen. Perhaps a bit of rhyming could.

"King Gwynn of the Tylwyth Teg, with respect," Arthur began, speaking slowly as he frantically worked out the rhyme in his head. "These cruel ambitions thou must reject. If peace between us you'll protect, then Sir Drudwas we shall resurrect."

Merlin glanced at him, eyebrow raised. He gave a considering tilt of his head as if to give his mild approval to Arthur's doggerel. The Sidhe were even more mildly impressed, yet clearly the gambit worked as they were finally paying attention to him like he was at least worth listening to and not a bug to be scraped off their shoes.

He silently congratulated himself on the unintentional rhyme.

"Not even the Emrys could resurrect my husband," Erdudwyl said, though she was clearly shaken by the mere suggestion. "You treat us with disrespect."

Arthur gave a bow of deference. "I swear that I speak to thee true. Swear peace and he'll be returned to thee anew. If for the life of one Sidhe all mankind is the purse, then you must accept it is fair to pay the reverse."

Gwynn and Erdudwyl both gave him skeptical looks, but they leant together to quietly confer. He couldn't make out their whispered words, and found himself holding his breath as he waited for their decision. Finally they straightened and turned to give their answer.

Gwynn cleared his throat and stood with his hands behind his back, a smug expression on his face. "Win or lose, we shall benefit the same, thus we accept the bargain of thy game. Our peace with Albion we shall proclaim when Drudwas, whole and hale, we have reclaimed." Then he sobered. "But if thou fails then still our bargain's made: for his life, full surrender shall be paid."

Arthur's stomach turned queasily as he staked the future of all Albion on a trade. But he didn't dare let his discomfort show. "Thy terms accepted. Drudwas shall be bade."

"No!" Mab interrupted, confronting Gwynn. "Thou stole my claim and now thou steals my child." She turned to Arthur. "Restore my daughter. We'll be reconciled."

Neither Gwynn nor Erdudwyl did much to hide their amusement at her desperate plea. But they also did not admit the source of that amusement. It was with satisfaction that Arthur did it for them.

"I cannot accept the peace thou hast sworn," Arthur began. "For it is the Tylwyth Teg who have thy firstborn."

Gwynn and Erdudwyl's smirks instantly dropped. Mab turned back to them, utterly livid.

"Her swift return we truly intended," Gwynn plead, his hands open. "Once, of course, our invasion had ended."

"And her poor health was properly mended," added Erdudwyl.

Mab stepped forward, forcing Erdudwyl and Gwynn to step back. "Again we see this foul pattern's repeat. You take what is rightfully mine by deceit," she growled. "Return her safely to me or I swear: on the Tylwyth Teg, full war I'll declare."

It was an opportunity that Arthur had to seize. "Queen Mab of the Aos Sí, I lend my support." He
turned to Gwynn. "If she's not restored, then my offer's cut short. A swift reunion the Teg must endeavour, lest Sir Drudwas be lost to them forever."

It had the intended effort: the Teg gaped in shock, and Mab preened smugly.

Arthur continued, sensing the ripeness of the moment. "Your royal highness," he said, addressing Mab. "I beg for thy relief. Tis my deepest sorrow that I ever caused thee grief."

Mab pressed a hand over her heart. "The repentance and respect that you grant to me doth warm my heart and soul enchant, whilst my own kin against me planned. Let peace between our kingdoms stand."

One down, Arthur thought. Two to go.

The Teg were whispering to each other again, in rushed and urgent tones. Whatever their argument, Erdudwyl appeared to win it, stepping forward and speaking first. "To thee my brother will at once attend," she said, with as much contrition as any Sidhe was capable of. When Gwynn didn't budge, she glared at him until he rolled his eyes and sighed. He marched over to Oberon and bowed deeply. "King Oberon, I beg of thee to lend thy servant Puck for this urgent mission."

Oberon looked even less pleased about all of this than Gwynn was, but nevertheless he obliged. He crooked his finger and Puck rushed to attention, his perpetual air of deviance intact despite his obedience.


As soon as Puck was gone, Erdudwyl turned to them again, making no attempt to hide her desperation. Arthur felt a pang of commiseration. All she wanted was her husband back. He looked to Merlin and nodded for him to go ahead.

Merlin gave him a look that said 'I hope you know what you're doing, because this is entirely mad'. But like a good knight, he followed Arthur's command. He threw back his head and thundered in Dragontongue: "O drákon, férei ton kratoúmeno gia ména!"

There was a long pause as the echo of it faded, and the Sidhe looked around as if expecting Drudwas to appear from thin air. At last a shadow fell upon them from above, and they looked up to see a growing silhouette diving towards the crystal dome. Just before the shape hit the dome, the crystal shimmered and divided itself in two, opening wide to let the brightly-feathered dragon through. It was a Penllyn -- one of the smaller dragons, though at fifteen feet in height and thrice the length and she still did much to fill the great hall. Her deep coat of feathers, though brightly colored, added much to the effect as she raised them in defiance of her enemy.

Held against those feathers, tight in her front claws, was an angry and humiliated Drudwas. He was bound and gagged, but as she released him, the Penllyn neatly cut him free of his bonds. He staggered forward and into Erdudwyl's open arms.

"O my husband," she said, voice wavering with grief and relief. "I truly thought thee dead."

Drudwas was stiff in her arms at first, embarrassed by his capture and still trying to make sense of what was happening. But as he saw his wife's tears, he softened and held her close. "I'm with thee now. Let no more tears be shed."

"Thy trade was fair," said Gwynn, grudgingly. "Our bargain now is sealed. All claim to Albion the Teg do yield."
Two down, one to go. But Titania was not pleased to see her subjects' joy. Her anger simmered and seethed, quieter and far more deadly than her earlier bluster. Arthur sobered, fearing that all he had done was drag Albion to a crueler fate. No matter what happened next, he would fight to the very end to save it. But just as when they faced Titania at the Gates, he took strength from the fact that Merlin would stand with him to the end and beyond it.

Titania leaned back, her eyes narrowed and focused on Arthur alone. When she spoke, he felt the pull of her glamour, forcing all to fix on her alone:

"The King returned at last, there's no mistake. With thy true crown and sword thou stands awake. Five thousand years ago I claimed thy land. A thousand years I ruled with steady hand til thy rebellion stole away my crown and forced us through the water's Gates to drown in exile. Long we suffered, magic frail; grew strong, then built our new home in this jail. Three thousand years I had to plot and plan, And then one day he called: Rome's great madman. Not satisfied with fate the gods had wrought, Caligula my Fae assistance sought. He begged for me to ally his assault: in Triskelion's defenses find a fault. When he took his share of Albion's wealth Rome would grant me freedom, power, health. Though he gave me much, I cared for naught except the cold revenge I with him wrought: the Emrys poisoned, suffering in my grip while from thy hands all Albion did slip. Thy dragons vanished and army soon felled, A wealth of slaves and grain unparalleled their army looted, and then burned the rest. I save for last a memory most blessed: the moment when your fate did truly fail, thy vaunted destiny became a tale believed by children, fools, and cretins. Whilst thou lay dying, wretched and beaten, I told thee of his pain and promised death. I kissed thy brow and took thy final breath, Then with thy sword, quick to the Emrys flew I shared thy fate, then cleaved his heart in two. Quite sated, left the Romans to their mirth. I watched and waited for thy next rebirth yet when thou came, no Emrys did appear and so it went for near a thousand years. I've watched thee born and reborn from afar. In every life thy soul did bear my scar as thou suffered, thy whole e'er incomplete, forgetting by my hand his end was mete. And through the years the Old Religion fell. Rome and civil wars made a hollow shell. Then thy father's purge, oh how I smiled
as he destroyed the future of his child.
Thy land was ripe, its poor defenses slight,
one left who could defend against my might --
yet here he stands, returned at last to thee:
brave Emrys, child of earth and sky and sea.
The past repeats, the gods restored his soul.
Thy two halves once again I see made whole."

Arthur quietly reeled at the scope of her story. It was one thing to be told that he had lived countless
lives over thousands of years, or even to have flashes of those past selves in his mind. It was quite
another to actually meet someone who had known all of those lives, who had watched and plotted
against him for centuries, millennia. He could not begin to comprehend it and so he forced it all
aside, intolerant of the distraction. He only hoped that Merlin could do the same.

At last Titania turned her gaze away, releasing Arthur and focusing it on Gwynn. When she spoke
the thrall was gone, but her tone was just as hard, all pretense stripped away. "Of their true nature
thou for too long knew. The blame is thine for every Sidhe they slew. Had thy knowledge before the
battle shared then I would not have faced them unprepared. Because this secret thou did closely
guard, once-perfect Avalon is badly marred."

Gwynn looked terrified and Arthur couldn't blame him for it. As Titania's anger flared, the sky above
them darkened with thunderous clouds. Bad things happened when Titania was angry, and right
now she was working up a full-on fury.

"That's enough," Arthur said, hoping his interruption would stop her temper from getting any worse.
It worked exactly as well as interrupting Morgana ever did, which was not at all. Titania turned her
wroth back to him again, and Arthur tried not to regret it.

"Fair Albion shall once again be mine!" she warned. "I care not that thy rebirth is divine or that today
this once my hand was stayed. Through other Gates thy kingdom I'll invade. Surrender now, forever
wear my yoke and mercy to thy kin I shall invoke. If not, I'll make thy torment eternal and o'er
Albion my reign infernal!"

Before Arthur could muster a response, the Penllyn roared in fury. She reared up and crashed down,
making the whole palace tremble. "Foul Queen, thy silence now is my demand! Thy own kin were
spared by my King's command, yet thou canst find no mercy in thy soul. A thousand years of our
destiny thou stole, most vicious foe; for this thy fate is doom: with dragon's flame thy soul I shall
consume!"

True to her word, the Penllyn attacked, impossibly-hot dragonfire coursing from her maw. Everyone
scattered except Titania, who stood unscathed as as her and Oberon's thrones reduced to slag and the
palace floor melted around her. The Penllyn roared and breathed again, hot and close, but Titania's
shield defied the dragonfire. The Penllyn tried to swallow her whole, shield and all, but at last Titania
struck back. The dragon was flung back, carried above their heads to crash into the far wall. She
 landed with a painful moan, one wing askew, and Merlin rushed to her side.

Arthur hurried after him, ready to defend him if Titania continued her attack. But she only stared at
Merlin with regret. To his surprise, it wasn't just a ruse or a way to trap her enemy; she truly wanted
to keep Merlin as her beloved pet for all eternity. Somehow that only made the whole thing worse.

But there wasn't time to contemplate. Once she had dismissed all hope of keeping her pet, there was
nothing left in her but fury. The gathering storm above became a hurricane as rain poured down and
wild winds scoured, stripping the leaves from the trees and spraying dirt and debris in all directions.
Thunder and lightning struck in concert, making the palace quake and earth tremble.
"We have to get out of here!" he shouted to Merlin, but Merlin shook his head. He was still trying to help the Penllyn and wouldn't abandon the dragon to Titania's wrath. The three of them were protected behind Merlin's shield, but Arthur feared the entire palace would soon crash down around them. The other Sidhe tried to flee, but Titania trapped them, filling the exits with stone. The only way out was up through the open dome, but the winds made it impossible to reach.

It was then that a strange scent caught Arthur through the wall of wind: spring flowers: apple blossoms, sweet violets, bright wallflowers standing tall in new-green grass. He shook his head, bewildered, and saw Merlin do the same. The delicate scent grew stronger, and as it did the winds changed, calming at the edges and turning back upon Titania. She fought them, wild with confusion, the pressure tight around her until at last it burst, the shockwave knocking everyone off their feet.

"Enough!"

The voice was female, but it wasn't Titania's. When his vision cleared, Arthur looked up to see a woman standing over Titania. Another Sidhe? Whatever she was, she wasn't human, not when she was lit with impossible spring sunlight, when her skin and dress glimmered with powerful magic. When he looked at her, Arthur felt as though he was lying in the grass on a warm spring day, kissed by the sun as life buzzed and bloomed around him. Merlin was equally transfixed.

Titania pushed herself up, glaring daggers as she staggered to her feet "Traitorous sister," she snarled. "How dare you interfere!"

Gwynn emerged from the rubble, both pleased and wary of her appearance. "Creiddylad, my love, thy sweet sight doth cheer. But how in this dark time doth thou appear? It is not yet the turning of the year."

"Thy grief and strife has spread beyond the veil," Creiddylad replied, addressing Titania. "Thy cruel ambition thou must now curtail."

"Again thou take the side of humans frail," Titania sneered, "and turn thy back on thy true kin in need."

"I share my love with all of fair earth's seed," Creiddylad said, undeterred. "Human, god, and Sidhe are forever tied; in harmony we once all did abide as countless flowers in a field reside. Twas thy ambition caused this harsh divide."

"I strike because humanity hath failed: under their reign destruction's long prevailed. The faith thou placed on humankind's mistaken: the land they've spoiled and the gods forsaken." Titania raised her arms to the sky. "Tell thy Queen to grace Sidhe with her favor, not these fools whose faith doth ever waver."

"Tis but a passing flicker in their flame. The Triple Goddess knows of thy true aim," Creiddylad said. Arthur sensed that they had made these arguments with each other many times before. "My sister, one day yet you may return, when thy long-taught lesson has been truly learned. But now, whose eyes are clear enough to see welcome blessings from our goddess three and joyfully accept her fair decree. With anger blinding, thou struck bold but lost; for great damage done, great shall be thy cost. Yet in her mercy's one last proposition: renounce thy greed and bow in full submission."

Titania needed no time to consider her sister's offer. "Never," she spat.

Creiddylad did not appear surprised by this. As she looked upon her sister with regret, the halo of sunlight around her began to grow brighter. "The poison in thy heart is fixed too deep. The harvest of thy greed thou now shalt reap."
Her voice began to resonate, as if it was not one but many, and though she remained the same, her aspect changed and grew. Reality itself seemed to slide away from around her. Arthur's heart beat painfully in his chest, his muscles trembling and bones aching as if his body was rebelling from exposure to what was beyond its ability to comprehend. It was Merlin who saved him, forcing him to turn away and cover his ears. They huddled together as the fabric of the world was torn asunder by something of incalculable power. Through muffling fingers he heard Titania's scream as it faded into some unknown distance.

And then as quickly as it began, it was over. Arthur sat up, breathing hard, and turned to see Creiddylad standing alone, wiping a tear from her cheek. Titania was gone.

"Was that...?" Arthur whispered, unable to finish.

Merlin nodded, face pale with awe. If Arthur had doubted the Old Religion's gods before, that doubt was burned away.

The scattered Sidhe arose from their hiding places. Creiddylad rushed to meet her husband, her blazing halo now a gentle glow, as it had been before -- yet now Arthur felt a touch of winter frost in the warmth of her spring. When she reached out for Gwynn, he hesitated to be in her arms. His fear of Creiddylad visibly stung her.

"My husband dearest, let go of thy fear," she plead. "Despite the pain she caused, Titania is dear to us. This deepest wish she had expressed: a home among the gods to take her rest. When to the Triple Goddess she repents, her soul reborn will back to us be sent."

Gwynn relented and held her. "That she is gone I must admit relief, for she has been the cause of so much grief. From her rage was Edern lost forever. For brother, sister, let us grieve together."

Now it was Creiddylad's turn to stiffen and pull away. "Dear husband, for thy brother I do grieve, but I have seen the truth. Do not deceive thyself as she did. For this disaster thou bears guilt: thy greed was made thy master."

"No!" Gwynn denied, reaching after her. "Twas not for me but thee my dearest love. Half the year below and half alone above! Through every spring and summer we have lost, I wait for thy return with autumn's frost. If our two locations I could tether, then every season we shall be together. Twas meant but as a gift to heal our rift."

But that only made things worse. "Such foul destruction could not be a gift! Perhaps our time apart has been too long as thy presumptions now are deeply wrong." But unlike her sister, Creiddylad refused to hold on to her anger. "The damage done, we must here make accord. Be now the man that I have long adored."

Gwynn nodded, taking strength from his wife's support, and together they found Oberon. The Sidhe King was bent with grief, reeling from the loss of his Titania. Again Arthur felt a pang of sympathy, but it was eased by the brush of Merlin's arm against his own.

Gwynn held out his hand to Oberon. "At last let's put an end to all this strife. When she finds peace, again you'll see thy wife. The gods have shown great mercy to her life. Now let us show that we here too have grace: arise, end this war. At last peace embrace."

Oberon took his hand and stood, though his loss carved deep lines in his face. He saw the ruins of his and Titania's thrones and looked away, unable to bear the sight. He saw Merlin and Arthur and approached them, humbled.
"Before me is the truth my wife ignored: with thy return there is no need for war. The Emrys and his
King make magic strong, and for that strength indeed I've waited long. While the gods Albion's
magic provide, in my home Avalon I shall abide."

Arthur and Merlin bowed in acceptance. "We thank you for thy mercy and thy grace," Arthur said.
Before he could finish his rhyme, Merlin did it for him. "In Albion again may our harmony one day
find a place."

Arthur was impressed. Of all of them, Merlin had been the most against the Sidhe. Yet now he put
aside his animosity for the hope of a better future for all. Arthur was more certain than ever that once
Merlin became his advisor, the lords of the court wouldn't know what hit them. And he wouldn't
need a speck of magic to lay them low.

There was a thump against one of the stone-blocked doors, so unexpected that it startled everyone.
Another thump, and then a gentler, cautious knock. Creiddylad waved her hand and her magic
brushed the stones aside. The door creaked open, and out peeked Puck. He took in the destruction of
the hall with alarm.

"With swiftest feet to Tylwyth Teg did go and found there a girl beneath a willow. We tarried not,
but brief I was away. How in those moments was this awful fray?"

Oberon met him first, glad to see his faithful servant. "I shall tell thee of my Titania's woe." He
looked past Puck into the doorway. "Come forth now Maeve, and to thy mother go."

When the young Sidhe stepped out of the shadows, both Arthur and Merlin breathed in sharply.
There, in fairy finery, stood the spitting image of Princess Elena.

"Of course," Arthur realized. Maeve had patterned her glamour on what felt most natural: the face
that she had seen looking back at her in the mirror all her life. He wondered what other impressions
had been made upon the fairy as she grew.

Despite their deception, the Teg had indeed cared for her as their own. While not quite strong, her
cheeks were pink with health and her eyes searched the room unclouded. Despite trying to follow
Oberon's command, she had never seen her mother and therefore did not know what she looked like.
But that didn't matter once Mab approached, anxious for her long-awaited daughter.

"Mother?" Maeve asked, in Elena's voice, with Elena's gentleness.

"Here, my dearest child," Mab cried, and embraced her.

§

They left the ruined palace behind. Of course it would have been a simple matter for the Sidhe to
rebuild it, but Oberon refused, unable to bear the memories it summoned, both good and bad. Arthur
himself was glad to walk out into the sunshine. Above them, where Titania's rage had stripped the
trees bare, Creiddylad's magic brought forth fresh buds that swelled and burst to new-green leaves.
The Pennlyn, healed, flew out before them, and her news of peace quickly spread.

"Is there any way..." Merlin began, looking out at the celebrating dragons. He paused as he tried to
fashion his request into a rhyme.

Creiddylad chuckled. "Speak freely, Emrys. The customs of the Seelie Court do not bind us now."

Merlin was visibly relieved by this. "Great! So, um. I know it's a lot to ask, but is there any way you
could allow the dragons to return to Albion?" When she didn't immediately reply, he continued on, rambling as he did when he was nervous. "I know it's a lot to ask. It's just that... if Arthur and I are meant to rebuild the Triskelion, it would be a lot easier if we actually had more than one dragon. I don't even think he'd want to help us anyway. We probably don't even need them all. I mean, a thousand dragons, that's a lot of dragons--"

He finally stopped when Creiddylad held up a silencing hand. "I'm sorry. It's simply not possible."

"But you're a goddess," Arthur said, frankly baffled by what rules could possibly constrain someone who had done... whatever it was she did to Titania. "Besides, it's not like I'm supposed to survive here. If dragon magic can let me enter Avalon, why can't we do the reverse? Shield the dragons somehow?"

"When the dragons ate of Avalon's fruit, their flesh was bound to this place," Creiddylad explained. "They cannot leave this world or be reborn. There are boundaries greater than even the power of the gods." She softened her tone. "The Triskelion shall be rebuilt. I have faith in thee as I always have, since the gods joined together for thy creation. Ye shall make Albion whole and keep her safe."

"It'd be a lot easier to do that with a thousand dragons," Merlin said, muttering half to himself. "Just saying."

Creiddylad seemed amused by his cheek. "Fear not. With the help of the dragons, all the Gates of Avalon shall be safely guarded. The Sidhe will trouble you no more."

§

They said their goodbyes to the dragons. Merlin seemed to want to speak to each individual dragon personally, but they really had to be getting home. His father's no-doubt extensive hangover would probably buy them just enough time to get back to the castle before he noticed that Arthur was gone. But enough dawdling and Arthur would get an earful at the very least.

It would be good to just be themselves again and not the five-thousand-year-old reborn souls that everyone here saw them as. He and Merlin needed time to sort their own lives out before they could begin to deal with their destiny. At least he knew the first order of business, which was to get Merlin officially back by his side where he belonged.

"Thank you again," Merlin said to Macha, Synkomida, and Kaloka, who he had saved for last. "For everything, not just the battle."

"Thank you, young Dragonlord, for restoring our faith," said Kaloka, her green scales shimmering in the sun.

"Dragonlord," Merlin said, shaking his head as though he still didn't quite believe his inheritance. But he stood up straight and bowed to them. "It's my honor to be your Dragonlord."

"The honor is ours," Macha said, as they bowed back.

"I meant what I promised," Merlin continued. "I swear I'll find a way to bring you home. Somehow."

"Do not worry for us," urged Synkomida. "After a thousand years as insects, we are our true selves again. We have a purpose again. We will protect the Gates and guard the Sidhe. That is more than enough for us."

Arthur had only just pried Merlin away from the dragons when Puck pulled him aside. His cheerful
disposition now had a rather strained quality. "More than most all I enjoy a good jest, but our bargain's made a terrible mess. No dark deeds or treason you surely assured, yet Ursa, by thy hand to these I was lured! How can I brighten my master with sport when he grieves for Titania, lost to his court?"

"I'm sorry for your Master's loss," Arthur offered. "As for your treason, I won't tell Oberon if you won't." He patted Puck's shoulder and turned to leave. But Puck took his wrist, holding him there.

"O King," Puck said, the sharpness of his tone commanding Arthur's attention. "Pray my master's spirit I restore. If not..." He held up his other hand, which still bore Palaemon's ring. "They say that every prison has a door."

Arthur pulled his wrist free and stared Puck down. "Be careful you don't end up in the belly of a dragon," he warned. Hopefully the gods would keep Titania safely contained. If not, then even with the dragons' help they might end up with their hands full.

At last they returned to Creiddylad. The dragons had offered to carry them to one of the other Gates, but there was no need for that when the Goddess of Spring herself could send them to Camelot with a flick of her hand.

"Bow thy heads," she told them, and they complied. "It is time for thee to return home. Albion has waited long enough already for thy return. I trust ye will not fail her."

Then she chanted:

As dark winter's grip at last recedes,
as soil warms and days grow long,
I bless the eggs, the buds, the seeds:
Renew the earth and make her strong.

They closed their eyes as Creiddylad touched her hands upon their heads in blessing. When they opened their eyes again, they were home.
In the blink of an eye, they moved from Avalon's eternal summer to Camelot's bright autumn, from deep, endless green to brown-tipped gold. Arthur breathed out warm, humid air and breathed in cool, tasting at once the natural decay of the leaf litter that crunched under his boots, and the faint scent of apples grown overripe in some nearby orchard. Birds and other creatures called noisily through the forest, restless in their preparations for the coming winter. They paid no mind to Merlin and Arthur's sudden appearance.

Instinctively, Arthur searched the trees for anyone who might have seen their unmistakably magical return, but Creiddylad had been careful in her delivery. They were in a quiet spot of the forest, close to the town but away from the main roads. They were safe. They were home.

Merlin turned to him, looking rather overwhelmed. "We did it," he said, in disbelief and amazement. He broke into a wide smile, the kind that lit up Arthur's heart like a sunbeam.

"We did," Arthur agreed, unable to keep from smiling back. The odds had been so against them, the situation so impossible.

"We met the goddess of spring," Merlin continued, flailing about with excitement. "We rode dragons. We nearly died!"

Arthur chuckled. "But we didn't."

"Wait til we tell everyone. They're not going to believe it. I hardly believe it and I was there!"

It warmed Arthur's heart to see Merlin so happy and spirited. He had gone through fire and come out forged all the stronger. Arthur wanted to celebrate their victories with him, to stay in the moment, but already his head was filling up with the challenges ahead and everything he had put aside in order to survive. Sometimes he hated that: his inability to simply be the way Merlin could. To remain content in the moment. But whatever yearning he had once held for the simple life, he knew now how deeply his nature ran the other way.

He wasn't certain if that knowledge was a good thing or not.

Arthur clapped his hand to Merlin's shoulder. "I'm sure we'll be able to convince them." He started to guide Merlin in the general direction of the castle.

But Merlin resisted. "Arthur..."

Arthur knew that whining tone well. "Merlin?" he prompted, patiently.

"Can't we just..." Merlin turned to him, eyes pleading, "stay here a while longer? Camelot's safe, there's no reason to hurry back. We could make camp, spend the night. You could go hunting, it's been ages since you went on a hunt. I'll get some wood for a fire--" He started to pull away, but Arthur pulled him back. Whatever the problem was, it had to be bad if Merlin was actually encouraging Arthur to go hunting.

"What's this about?"

Merlin shrugged loosely and dropped his eyes. He always did that when there was something he
wanted to say but he was certain that Arthur wouldn't like it. Arthur used to attribute it to Merlin being a bit simple, but really it was Merlin's preferred method of lying. As if it wasn't a lie because it was only not telling the truth.

"I promised you that things wouldn't go back to the way they were," Arthur assured him, wondering if that was the problem. Merlin would certainly be reluctant to admit it if he didn't trust Arthur to make things right. But Merlin still kept his eyes down, so that couldn't be it. Perhaps some prodding would open him up. "Besides, even if you did want to be my manservant again, the position has been filled."

Merlin's head shot up and he stared at Arthur in vague horror. "What do you mean, it's filled? How can it be filled?"

"I couldn't very well serve myself breakfast in the mornings," Arthur said, with intentional arrogance. "His name is George. Good man, very competent."

Merlin narrowed his eyes, instantly jealous. "You don't need someone competent."

"You should see the job he did polishing my mail. Not a speck of rust."

Merlin flushed, outraged. "No one could get all the rust out of your mail! Not without magic! Maybe he's a sorcerer, too. Maybe all the servants are secretly sorcerers."

Arthur gave Merlin a tolerant look. "Then we should hurry back so we can enlist them into our service. We need all the sorcerers we can get."

Merlin gave him a suspicious look for that, as if certain that Arthur was pulling his leg. Then he realized that Arthur actually meant it and had to fight back a smile.

"That's better," Arthur said.

"You're really going to do it?" Merlin prompted, apparently needing to hear Arthur say it all again.

"We're going to do it, yes," Arthur agreed. "And we're not just going to make magic legal. We promised the dragons we'd rebuild the Triskelion. That starts with Camelot." It was a bold plan to say the least, and more than a little impossible. But the impossible felt rather more manageable to him now.

As pleased as Merlin was by this, the last of it made him pause. "Maybe we should start somewhere else. Like Gawant or... or Mercia! King Terit wasn't afraid of magic and he had a Seer for an advisor. I'm sure he'll want to help us."

"No doubt he will," Arthur said. "But we agreed to start here. What's changed?"

"What hasn't?" Merlin muttered. He shifted with discomfort, walked a few paces away and then back again. He wrapped his arms around himself. Whatever was upsetting him, it was clearly difficult for him to admit.

"You don't really want to go back to being my manservant, do you?" Arthur asked.

"No," Merlin said, certain, but then softened. "Maybe a little. I don't know."

Arthur tried to think of what else this could be about. It wasn't about magic being legal, it wasn't about George. "We'll find a way to stop my father from harming Deorham's magic," he promised again, in case Merlin had any doubts. And perhaps that was close to the mark, because Merlin's
expression darkened. "Is that it? You're worried about Deorham?"

Merlin paused, his mouth press together in a thin line. Then he looked out in the direction of the castle as if preparing for battle. "I'm worried about your father."

A laugh burst out of Arthur's chest at the unexpectedness of it.

But Merlin wasn't amused. He clenched his hands into fists and faced Arthur, eyes sharp with anger. "You know what I'm capable of."

"I know," Arthur soothed, apologetic. "But Merlin--"

"He killed my father. Murdered him. It's his fault my mum's alone, that I grew up thinking I was a monster. If my father had lived..." He stepped away from Arthur, tense with grief. "You know, sometimes... my magic does things. Slips out of my control. If we go back there, I can't promise..."

"No," Arthur said, firmly. "I don't believe that and neither do you. You're not a killer."

"I am," Merlin insisted. "How many people have I killed to protect you? How many did I kill in Gedref? In Avalon?"

"You fought to survive and defend the people you care about," Arthur said, keeping his voice calm. "Like I do. Like any knight."

"I'm not a knight anymore," Merlin said, petulance mixing with his anger.

"It was wrong of me to take that away from you," Arthur said. It was one of his many regrets, but at least this was one he saw a way to fix. "I want to put that right, too."

"And give your father even more of a reason to behead me?"

"I'm not going to let him hurt you."

"And how exactly will you do that?"

The question hung in the air.

"We'll figure it out together," Arthur said at last. "That's what we're meant to do."

It clearly wasn't the right thing to say. Merlin reached up and tugged at his torc, which made Arthur more aware of his own. It was a comforting weight around his neck, but returning to Camelot meant they would have to take them off. Suddenly Arthur understood.

"Come here," Arthur said, and when Merlin didn't comply, he marched over himself. He pulled Merlin into his arms and held him as Merlin tensed up and then relaxed against him; he tucked his face against Arthur's neck, against the skin-warm metal of his torc.

It was all of the things that Merlin had said, and it was none of them. They had both been through so much and there had been no time to deal with any of it properly. Avalon had been a constant state of life-or-death peril, of revelations and horrors, and before that had been the Sidhe, the arranged marriage, Merlin's capture and transformation, and above all the breakdown of their relationship after Merlin's confession. Arthur had handled much of it badly, but Merlin had done his best to hold everything together, to protect everyone as he always had -- and the cost of that had been to lose everything that mattered to him. When they had returned from Gedref, Merlin had been forced to give up his knighthood and his victories, and now he was afraid that going home would mean once
again being stripped to the bone. Even taking off their torcs would be a loss.

Merlin must feel that he had so little to be certain of, it was no wonder he was tempted by the familiarity of his old job. But he deserved so much more.

"It won't be like before," Arthur promised softly. "I swear to you. Whatever it takes. Even if it means we have to leave Camelot. But please, Merlin. Give me a chance to fix things."

Merlin sighed against him. "Why can't we just stay here?"

As if on cue, Merlin's stomach growled. They hadn't eaten anything since their respite in the glowing caves, and even that had hardly been a feast. "Everything feels impossible on an empty stomach," Arthur reminded him -- not mentioning that Merlin was especially cranky and intractable when he was hungry. "I don't suppose there's any food left in that pack of yours?"

Merlin grunted against Arthur's neck and it sounded like 'no'. Then he lifted his head. "You sure you don't want to stay and hunt?"

"I want to get home so George can serve us a private feast and then we can sleep for a week," Arthur said, letting his own exhaustion show.

"That does sound tempting," Merlin admitted. "Oh, all right. Let's go home."

Arthur kissed him for that, and then Merlin wouldn't let him stop. Arthur felt a low spark of heat in his belly and wondered if maybe they should camp in this private, secluded glade for the night after all. But just when he was about to give in to his baser urges, Merlin decided to be the sensible one. He broke their kiss and extracted himself from Arthur's eager grip. But before he could say anything, his stomach rumbled again, and then Arthur's echoed it.

"Right," Merlin said, resolute. "Private feast first. Then sleep. Then... well." He gave Arthur a suggestive look.

"George is very discreet," Arthur assured him.

§

They put it off for as long as they could, but when they reached the edge of the forest it was time. They both changed out of their armor, stuffing the mail and plating into Merlin's pack. Arthur changed back into his clothes from the feast -- and it was startling to him that for all they had been through, they had only been gone less than a day -- and Merlin put on Gaius' borrowed cloak.

They faced each other with shared regret. Neither of them wanted to lose the connection the torcs gave them, the feeling of deep connection with each other and with Albion itself. But there was no way they could safely wear such items of obvious magic in Uther's Camelot, not where they could be seen. In the privacy of their chambers, however, or in the forest... Just as they would find a way for Merlin to practice his magic safely, they would wear the torcs when they could.

But not now. Not yet. They each grasped the end of their torcs, but when Merlin delayed, Arthur was the one to act first. He braced himself and eased the metal from around his neck, ready for the moment when he went numb, when his senses could no longer perceive the magic around him or in Merlin. Each time the loss had been stronger, and this was no exception. He swallowed a whine as the world seemed to dim around him, the forest silenced and the sun eclipsed. But as the shock of it quickly faded, he stared at Merlin with wonder.

"What is it?" Merlin asked, concerned. "Arthur, what's wrong?"
"I can still feel it," Arthur said, slowly. "It's weak, but..." He touched his bare neck. After wearing the torcs through so much magic, was this a lingering effect? Or something more?

Merlin looked at him curiously, then grew emboldened. He pulled off his own torc with a shudder, then breathed out slowly. He opened his eyes with a flash of gold, and as he did, Arthur felt it, the surge of his magic, muted but undeniable. They both grinned with relief.

"Thank the gods," Merlin breathed, eyes suddenly wet.

"Yes," Arthur agreed, and found that he meant it. It seemed the Old Religion had a new convert. He supposed it was pointless to deny them now. He tried to reach out with his magical senses as he had in Avalon, and while it was not even as strong as what he had felt from Merlin, the connection could still be perceived. He thought of the first time he had returned from Avalon and sensed the magic in the stones of the castle and felt like a newborn opening its eyes.

Your soul was taken and bound with the land, with its destiny, so that you would forever be reborn to serve it. Synkomida's words echoed in Arthur's head, feeling more true now than than they had in Avalon. His father had so starved him of any magical contact that he had been denied his true birthright. But perhaps on some level he had always sensed it, the absence, the loss of something he had never known. He had always assumed that it was his mother, but now...

He understood Merlin's anger. Uther had taken so much from both of them, from everyone. They would not let his tyranny stand.

§

They decided it was wisest not to take the main road in, and so snuck into the lower town from the side, where it met the forest. They left Merlin's pack and the torcs at Gwen's house, not wanting to risk bringing magic into the castle proper -- especially when Uther was likely to be in a foul mood from the aborted wedding and his resulting hangover. As many risks as they had taken before -- and were likely to take again -- right now they needed to be cautious.

As they walked through the back streets, they noticed that the town seemed to be in a strange mood. An uneasy feeling came over Arthur, though he couldn't pin down the reason for it.

"Perhaps it would be better for you to stay at Gwen's," Arthur suggested, as they approached the guarded gate to the upper town. "Just until I get things sorted out." The last thing they needed was for Merlin to end up in the stocks for trespassing.

Merlin followed his gaze and saw the guards, and his steps slowed. He tugged his hood lower. He started to speak, but as he breathed in he froze, his eyes widening. He stared up at the castle's towering height and turned to Arthur in alarm. "Do you smell that?"

Arthur breathed deep, smelling the usual odors of the lower town -- the nose-bending mélange of leather, hay, animals, human waste, baking bread and bubbling stews over the smoke of cooking fires -- and caught the tang of something dark and oily. He stiffened, immediately recognizing it, and matched Merlin's gaze. There, just appearing over the walls of the inner courtyard, was the black smoke of an execution.

Only sorcerers were burned at the stake.

"Morgana," Arthur breathed, horrified that it must be her. That Uther had found her out while Arthur was away and now...

"We have to save her," Merlin said, resolute, and pulled his cloak close.
If the black smoke was anything to go by, it was already too late. But still they ran, rushing past the guards even as they recognized Arthur and reached for him. They ran up the road through the upper town and crossed the drawbridge, again evading the guards, and rushed into the courtyard.

Though he could not say that he'd ever enjoyed his father's executions, Arthur had never been afraid of them. Despite their unpleasantness, they had been a symbol of order, of the power of the king asserted over the enemies of the land. But as he forced himself to look upon the body burning in the flames, Arthur shuddered in horror. No one deserved to die in fire, but not Morgana, please not Morgana.

"No," Merlin gasped.

The flames burned high and hot, obscuring the charring corpse within. Arthur scanned the crowd, hoping against hope that he would find Morgana among it. He saw his father's stern, closed expression, its subtleties unreadable from such a distance; he saw Alined beside him, chained and flanked by guards. Morgana's chamber window was empty. But there by the corner of the courtyard was Gaius, with Gwen beside him.

"It's not her," Arthur realized, relief rushing through him.

"What?" Merlin turned, still pale with shock. "Where is she?"

"I don't know. But it's not her." Arthur pointed to Gaius and Gwen. Morgana must be all right, or else Gwen would be in tears as she had been when her father died. Even Gaius, stoic though he could be, bore merely his usual frown with no grief or deep alarm.

Behind them was the sound of running feet as the guards caught up with them. Arthur held up his hands to calm them. The crowd stirred, staring.

"What's the meaning of this?" boomed out Uther's voice, irritated by the disturbance of the execution. Then, with relief and astonishment: "Arthur? Guards, stand down at once."

The guards complied, rather embarrassed that they had threatened their Crown Prince in the first place.

"You escaped from the Deorham," Uther proudly declared. "I knew they couldn't hold you."

"No, I-- Father, what is going on?" Arthur asked.

Uther ignored his question. "Who is that beside you? Is that Morgana? Show yourself!"

Arthur shook his head for Merlin to stay covered, but of course Merlin ignored him. He pulled back his hood and revealed himself, staring up at the King with open defiance. "Sire," he said, bowing his head with the pretense of obeisance.

Uther's relief immediately soured. He glowered at Merlin, then at Arthur. Across the courtyard, Gwen and Gaius now looked extremely concerned.

"Arrest them both," Uther commanded, and the guards closed in.

Arthur was at once astonished and entirely unsurprised. His father had been itching to arrest them ever since Arthur first refused to marry Elena. Whatever situation they had just stumbled into, it gave Uther the perfect excuse to finally get what he wanted. But Arthur wasn't eager to let him have his way. He drew his sword and warned the guards back.

"I won't let them hurt you."

They locked eyes and Arthur saw that Merlin wasn't afraid. Wary, yes, and angry, but not afraid. And it made sense: after facing down Sidhe and dragons and griffins, what could mere humans do to him? Merlin knew his power and had shed his fear of using it to defend himself.

It was Arthur who was afraid. If Merlin defended himself as he should, as he had every right to, then that was it. There would be no turning back and any hope for their life in Camelot would be reduced to ashes.

Arthur could feel Merlin's magic as it rose to the ready. "Please, Merlin," he whispered, begging him not to fight. "Give me time to fix this. Please."

Merlin's lips pressed to a thin line of frustration. He took one last glance at the pyre, the charred remains now visible as the flames began to lower. To Arthur's relief Merlin's magic retreated. Merlin stared at him as he raised his hands in surrender, silently holding Arthur to his promise. If Arthur couldn't make Uther see sense, then Merlin would do it for him. He would not again suffer as a bird in a cage.

As soon as Arthur sheathed his sword, the guards closed in. They were pulled apart and hauled away in opposite directions, Merlin towards the dungeons and Arthur up the courtyard steps.

The guards escorted Arthur into the council room, handing him with some care despite Uther's anger. It wouldn't do to be rough with a prisoner that might one day be your King. The same, unfortunately, could not be said for Merlin. But then, the two of them had been arrested so often that he doubted the guards would be cruel. After all, it wasn't as though Merlin had been accused of sorcery.

Yet.

Apart from the guards who remained to keep an eye on him, the room was empty. But it had clearly been in use already today, for the large table was covered with maps and documents. The guards did nothing to interfere as he inspected them, and Arthur immediately recognized his father's long-held plans for war against Deorham. Several questions added themselves to the ones already swirling in his head: What had happened in the hours they had been in Avalon? Why had his father thought he had been taken hostage? Where was Morgana? Who had burned on the pyre? And why would his father be planning to invade a kingdom that was already his by right of treaty?

At least he wouldn't have to wait long to ask them. Uther stormed in just a few minutes later with Louvel at his heels. He sat down heavily at the head of the table and stared at the map before him. Almost immediately, Louvel plucked up Uther's goblet and refilled it, then presented it to him without a word. Uther drank. When the goblet was empty, Louvel refilled it again and smoothly melted into the background until he was needed again. With Louvel as a father, it was no wonder that George was such a paragon. How many secrets had Louvel learned and kept over the decades? As many as Gaius, surely, if not more.

Arthur stood beside the table, expectant with his hands neat behind his back, but still he was ignored. Uther rubbed at his forehead, no doubt sore from his hangover and the stress of whatever had led up to the day's execution. Arthur held his tongue, knowing that the best tactic in such situations was to let his father speak in his own time. Again he did not have to wait long.

"Some time last night," Uther began, tersely and without looking up, "your prisoners from Gedref escaped from the dungeons. All of them. This morning, you and Morgana were missing from the
castle." Finally he turned to face Arthur, his eyes burning cold. "It was assumed that you were both taken as hostages."

"How?" Arthur asked, trying to sound baffled despite having a fair suspicion of what had happened.

"Magic." Uther hissed out the word. "Alined brought a sorcerer into the heart of Camelot. That snivelling creature destroyed everything."

"He what?" Arthur asked, with false shock. "Who?" That was another question answered: it was Trickler's body on the pyre. But the last time Arthur had seen him, he was dead and stuffed out of sight in Elena's chambers. He had definitely been dead -- unless the sorcerer had more power than they realized.

"The jester," Uther sneered, refusing the man the dignity of his name. "He's paid for his crimes. Soon all of Deorham will pay for theirs."

Arthur silently cursed. To his father, magic was the worst treason, but there was no greater crime upon the King than his public humiliation. In his mind, Camelot and its King would be a laughingstock for losing a whole army overnight from its locked, guarded dungeons. But as for who was truly responsible... "Father, where is Morgana?"

"As I said," said Uther, forcefully. "She is a hostage of the Deorham. They took her in undeniable act of provocation."

Arthur looked down at the table again, seeing the loss of lives and resources that each documents represented, then back to his father, and faced him with his back straight. "Father, now is not the time for war."

"War is what the Deorham clearly want," Uther said. "It is our duty to give it to them. You do remember your duty to this kingdom?"

Arthur ignored the slight. If Morgana was with the Deorham, it was likely of her own free will. Trickler had been long dead when the Deorham were magically freed. There were only two other active sorcerers he knew of in Camelot, and it was highly unlikely that Gaius was behind the jailbreak.

"What about Alined?" Arthur asked. "If Trickler broke out his army, why is he still here?"

Uther allowed himself a grim smile. "He was betrayed by his own men. The man who led the invasion -- Lord Idryis. It seems he saw an opportunity."

Lord Idryis had not struck Arthur as a man happy to serve his King. But when that King was Alined, Arthur could hardly blame him. "He'll meet resistance when he tries to claim the throne. Why not just let Deorham devolve into civil war? We need do nothing but let it collapse." It was exactly the sort of thing that Uther liked to encourage in his enemies.

Uther briefly considered the idea, but then dismissed it. "They took Morgana knowing full well that I would stop at nothing to bring her home." Finally he met Arthur's eyes, showing him the full force of his disappointment. "If you had been here and not cavorting through the woods with that boy, you might have been able to protect her."

"Father--"

Uther slammed his fist down on the table, making the wine slop over the side of his goblet. Louvel slipped from the shadows just long enough to wipe the small puddle away with a cloth before it
stained the important documents of war. "This is exactly the kind of irresponsible, foolish behavior that must stop. If you cannot control yourself, as your father it is my duty to do it for you."

Arthur had had his fill of such talk with his 'engagement' to Elena. "I am quite capable of making my own decisions--" he began, but he wasn't given the chance to launch a defense.

"This situation with Deorham is your responsibility. You failed to control your prisoners. You refused to marry Princess Elena. You failed to protect Morgana and you turned your back on this kingdom for your own selfish lusts."

Through his father's litany Arthur grit his teeth, unable to throw back that his father had endangered the kingdom by nearly marrying him off to a Sidhe, or that he and Merlin had done the impossible in Avalon and prevented utter disaster. But it was the last insult that finally reached Arthur's limit.

"That's enough," he barked, furious at his father's constant disregard for both Merlin and Camelot's well-being. He had outgrown any tolerance for it and refused to cower for a moment longer.

"Wherever Morgana is, I refuse to believe the Deorham are responsible. Lord Idryis was not such a fool that he would instigate a war in the middle of the harvest. He won't last very long as King of Deorham if he lets his people starve to death, and that's exactly what will happen to Camelot if we go after them now." He took a breath, relishing his father's shocked expression. "And as for Merlin, you will release him at once. He has committed no crime and you have no claim for his arrest. Sire."

Uther stared at him as if Arthur had struck him with a physical blow. Then he rose, his chair scraping against the stone as he shoved it away. "I see," he said, with an unsettling calmness. "If that's how it is."

As satisfying as it had been to defy his father, Arthur was quickly remembering why he had always been so afraid to do it. He could feel his father's rage -- once diffuse and spread among many enemies -- focusing upon him and everything he held dear. But it was too late for apologies that he no longer had the stomach to make. He had laid down a gauntlet and his father had picked it up, and now it was war. His only choice was to stand and fight.

"That boy," Uther began, staring him down, "has committed a grave treason. I didn't care when he was merely a distraction, an outlet. But his influence on you has been worse than I could possibly have imagined. He has poisoned you against me and against this kingdom, and I will see that poison rooted out."

"Merlin has nothing to do with this," Arthur said, holding his ground. "All he did was believe in me. He gave me the strength to speak my own mind. Something you never did."

"He is a weakness. One of many that I have tolerated in you for far too long. I will purge it from you as I have purged the weaknesses from all my kingdom."

Madness, Arthur thought. Pure madness. He had seen it in Titania and he saw it clearly now in his father. It would almost be comical if not for the fact that his father commanded an army. If not for the fact that his words became law at the moment of their exhalation. He did not have the power to shape reality with magic, but his tongue could suffice.

Arthur realized too late that he had made a tactical error. In the face of mutiny, Uther saw no room for retreat. The consequences were bleakly predictable.

"I had intended for the boy's punishment to be exile," Uther said, looking away as if Arthur no longer interested him. He picked up his goblet but did not drink. "But now I see that a more permanent solution must be found."
"No," Arthur breathed, ice chilling his heart even as he flushed with anger. "No."

Uther took a single swallow, then sighed with dark satisfaction. "Alined dies tomorrow at dawn. Then the boy. The decision is final. Now get out of my sight."
Arthur marched through the castle halls with only one thought, one goal. When it had first germinated in his mind, he had instantly dismissed it as impossible. But over the past day he found it would not leave him, that it grew stronger with each new discovery. In Avalon, he had begun to consider and cultivate it, to follow the paths that led to its achievement and its consequences. It would be the greatest challenge of his life, and he had thought to have months, even years to carry it to completion.

He opened the door to Gaius' chambers and closed it behind him. Gwen and Gaius turned to him, faces lined with concern even as they looked to him with hope. When they saw his somber expression, Gwen's eyes fell and Gaius' hardened.

"My father must be stopped," Arthur told them.

Gaius stepped forward. "Let me speak with him. I'm certain I can convince him--"

"You don't understand," Arthur said, cutting him off. "There's nothing you can say to change his mind. I tried and it only made things worse." He glanced at Gwen and swallowed back a wave of guilt. "He intends to have Merlin executed tomorrow at dawn."

Gwen gasped and covered her mouth, her eyes wide with horror. "No," she whispered. "Please no, not again." Tears welled in her eyes.

Gaius went pale. He sat down, hand clutched at his heart, grief aging him a decade in seconds.

"We have to save him," Gwen said, resolution strengthening even though her voice trembled. She blinked back her tears and straightened her spine. "We'll go down tonight."

"Wait," Arthur said, holding up a hand.

Gwen riled. "I am not letting what happened to my father happen to Merlin. You can help or you can step aside."

It seemed that as much had changed here while he was away as he had changed in Avalon. "Gwen, I promise you--"

His interruption only spurred Gwen on. "Do you want him to die? Do you still hate magic that much?"

"No," Arthur insisted, trying to show her how much he meant it. When they left for Avalon yesterday, his relationships with magic and Merlin had been tentative at best. He could hardly begin to explain everything they had been through and how much it had changed them. There was just so much and he'd barely had time to process it himself. But he needed them to work with him, not against him. "Gwen, I swear, what Merlin and I went through, what we experienced... I see now that my father is wrong, that he has been for a very long time." He glanced at Gaius, but like Gwen he was largely unmoved by such declarations. Arthur supposed that he had earned their skepticism.

He thought about all the things the dragons and the Sidhe had told him. About how it felt when his soul joined with the magic of Albion for the first time -- in this life, at least. About the promises he made to the dragons, to Merlin, to himself. "Has either of you heard of the Triskelion?"

That got their attention. Gwen and Gaius looked to each other, then back to Arthur, but both held
their tongues.

Arthur continued. "Good. Then you'll understand what it means when I tell you that Merlin and I intend to rebuild it."

Gwen's eyes widened in astonishment, and Gaius' eyebrows threatened to float right off his face. "Forgive me, sire," Gaius said, with regret, "but however admirable, such a feat would be impossible."

Arthur wanted to laugh at that, but the situation was too dire. He thought of Merlin in the caves, glowing with power as they restored the dragons; Merlin in the midst of the battle, bloodied and unbowed. Merlin grieving over the death of the father he had never known. "Merlin and I did the impossible in Avalon and I swear to you that we will do the impossible here. And that is why you must believe me when I tell you that I will not let Merlin come to harm. Whatever the cost."

He saw that Gwen was coming around, but still she resisted. He stepped forward to meet her and she held her ground, clearly ready to fight for Merlin's life.

"I know I've hurt him," Arthur said, softer, not hiding his guilt and regret. "I've hurt all of you. I'm not asking for your forgiveness because I haven't earned it yet. But I do need your help." He looked to Gaius. "Both of you. Please."

Gaius, ever the pragmatist, nodded his agreement. Arthur turned back to Gwen and saw that she was nearly there, but something still held her back. Grief over her father, perhaps, or sympathy for what Merlin had suffered. The two of them were good friends and Gwen had been Merlin's refuge for the worst of it. Her loyalty to him was admirable.

"I love him," Arthur said, and the words came easier than he expected. There had been a time when he had to wrench the words out and still they felt false. Now they were simply the truth and he felt no shame, no embarrassment at their admission, because his love for Merlin made him strong, not weak. The thought of him in the dungeons now, alone and angry and afraid and hurting, made Arthur furious. It made him want to march up to his father and punch him in the face. It made him want to cut down the guards and open the cell door and take Merlin into his arms and hold him forever.

However much of that Arthur silently conveyed, it was finally enough for Gwen. She softened with sympathy and then quite unexpectedly hugged him. Arthur stiffened, then held her back, grateful for the comfort he hadn't acknowledged needing. When he let her go, she blushed, flustered at having been so bold.

"All right," she said, recovering her composure. "How can we help?"

"I need to know what happened while we were away. What happened to the Deorham prisoners? How on earth did Trickler's corpse end up on the pyre? And where is Morgana?"

Gwen and Gaius looked to each other again, silently conferring. Gwen took the lead. "Last night, after you left... You have to understand, there was no certainty that you would succeed or even survive. And Morgana knew what was coming. She had seen it, night after night." Her hands kneaded at the skirt of her dress, then smoothed it flat. "She didn't want to stay here and die. Not if there was another way."

"Then it was her idea to free the Deorham?" Arthur asked.

Gwen nodded. "She made a deal with Lord Idryis. Their freedom in exchange for a new life in
Deorham where she wouldn't have to live in fear. She asked me to come with her."

"But you didn't."

Gwen met his eyes. "Camelot is my home. And Morgana..." She looked again to Gaius, but this time it was not to confer. "We betrayed her. Night after night we lied to her and poisoned her."

"Gwen," Gaius began, trying to calm her.

"No," Gwen said, denying him. "What we did to her is as bad as what Arthur did to Merlin. It's worse because we did it for years. She was afraid and suffering and--" She choked and wiped at her eyes. "I'm sorry."

Arthur wanted to comfort her the way she had him, but she stepped away, pulling in on herself as she struggled with her guilt.

"Though rash, Morgana's actions were correct," Gaius said, picking up where Gwen had left off. "They protected the lives of hundreds of prisoners in the event that you and Merlin failed to prevent the invasion. Idryis' coup also had the benefit of removing Deorham from Uther's control. Once Idriys reaches Deorham and formally takes the crown, Alined's signature will be worthless. The treaty will be nullified."

"No wonder my father is in such a foul mood," Arthur realized. If he had known all of this, he would have handled their return differently. But it might not have made much difference, not when his father was already so set against Merlin. The fact was that their confrontation had been inevitable for many reasons.

"We had hoped to give Uther a safe target by leaving Trickler's corpse to be discovered. While we were successful in diverting blame, Uther's reaction has been far worse than was anticipated. Largely, I'm afraid, because of Morgana's disappearance."

"Then we must bring her back," Arthur said, as he tried to figure out if they even had enough time to reach the Deorham and return back before dawn. "They can't have gone as far as the mountains, not with that many men. They need to stay out of sight so they might only be travelling at night."

"Arthur, wait," Gwen began, finally breaking from her guilt.

"As far as I'm concerned, she has every right to live where she pleases," Arthur said, anticipating Gwen's argument. "But if she doesn't return of her own free will, my father intends to invade Deorham to bring her back. Without delay."

The news was a surprise to Gwen, but not, predictably, to Gaius. "He's going to invade now?" she asked, turning to Gaius in alarm. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I have told you," Gaius said, pointedly. "All four of you have repeatedly ignored my warnings and now we must face the consequences. I have spent my life taking great care to avoid just this sort of situation." The last he said to Arthur directly. "Uther is not a man to be rashly crossed. With the state he's in now, if you attempt to leave the castle he will have you thrown in the dungeons as well."

Arthur didn't back down. "Bringing Morgana back here is the only way to save Merlin. It's the only thing that will calm my father down enough for him to see sense."

"I fear even that will not be enough," said Gaius, gravely. "He blames your affections for Merlin for your refusal to marry Princess Elena and the subsequent loss of Deorham."
"Then you expect me to stand by and let Merlin be executed?" Arthur asked, frustrated. "We wouldn't be in this situation if you hadn't forced Merlin to lie to me."

"If he had told the truth from the start, he would have been put in exactly the same situation he is in now." Gaius turned to Gwen. "As would Morgana. Blame me if you must, but know that everything I have done was to protect them." He turned back to Arthur, weary but unbowed.

As much sympathy as Arthur felt for Gaius, he knew too much to simply accept this. "No. Lie to yourself all you want, but not to me. Not to any of us. We deserve the truth and all you've done is hide it from us."

"You were not ready to hear it, as you proved with your behavior towards Merlin," Gaius replied. "The truth can be a weapon more deadly than any sword. If not wielded carefully, it can destroy entire kingdoms."

And there was Gaius in a nutshell. There was no point in arguing with him about it, just as there was no point in arguing with Uther about magic. They were both fixed in their ways and only the grave would free them. If he and Merlin were going to succeed in their goals, they would have to make their own path.

Arthur turned to Gwen. "Go visit Merlin and tell him I'll be back before dawn." He started for the door, but Gwen ran up to him.

"Arthur, wait. I know where she is. She's waiting with Idryis in the woods, close to the town. Gaius is right, you have to stay here. I'll find her and convince her to come back."

"Are you sure?" Arthur asked. If Gwen had chosen to stay when Morgana left, it must have been very difficult for them both. It must have put an end to whatever relationship had been budding between them.

"She and Idriys refused to leave without Merlin," Gwen explained, missing -- perhaps intentionally -- the point of Arthur's concern. "Idryis made him an offer, and before you left he was so unhappy..."

Arthur never wanted to throttle Idryis so much as he did now. "It's an offer he won't be taking," he insisted. "I promised Merlin I would fix this and I will."

Gwen mustered a supportive smile, but it was clear that she didn't really believe him. Arthur understood why; she had already gone through this nightmare before and was not eager to relive it in full. "Of course," she lied, politely. She bit at her lip and then took a bracing breath. "Perhaps it would be for the best if we all left with Idryis."

"You said Camelot is your home," Arthur reminded her.

"It is," Gwen agreed, but without the conviction she had previously displayed. "But I can't go through this again." Grief crossed her face, deep and raw.

Arthur thought of when she brought Linette to him, trusting that he would find a way to save Uwen, and how badly he had failed her. He remembered the fear and horror he felt when he saw black smoke rising over the courtyard, believing it to be Morgana on the pyre. He thought of all the families of the dead, the wailing, endless grief that he had forced himself to dismiss over and over. The weight of guilt would suffocate him if he let it, and he wouldn't be of any use if that happened. He had to focus on what he could do to fix things now.

"Before we came back, I made a promise to Merlin," Arthur told her. "If he was unhappy, if I couldn't give him the life he deserved here in Camelot, then we would leave together."

"It's done," Arthur said, dismissing him. "Merlin is quite capable of defending himself. It's up to us to make sure he doesn't have to. If we can't change my father's mind before dawn, Merlin will leave the dungeons of his own accord. When that happens, I will leave with him."

But that only hardened Gaius further. "Uther is willing to declare war to bring back Morgana. If you abandon this kingdom in the company of a known sorcerer, the consequences will be grave."

"Then I suggest you stop berating me and start working on a solution," Arthur shot back. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to pay a visit to the dungeons."

"I'm coming with you," Gwen insisted. "Morgana will want to know how Merlin is. She won't just take your word for it. And neither will I."

Arthur had to admire her courage. She'd come a long way from the meek servant who only managed to talk to him when she thought he was asleep. "Good. While you're at it you can bring him something to eat."

Gaius picked up his medicine bag and stepped forward. "I would also like to speak with Merlin myself."

"Of course," Arthur said, feeling rather exasperated by this point. Gods forbid that any of them would trust his word. "By the way, since you didn't ask, everything went very well in Avalon. In case you were still worried about any of that. 'Oh Arthur, thank you for risking life and limb to save Camelot from the Sidhe,' he said, in an imitation of Gwen's voice. Then, as Gaius: "Yes, your brave actions will be remembered."

Gwen and Gaius both rolled their eyes, and then Gwen shouldered past him. Gaius merely shrugged and followed her.

"It was my honor," Arthur said to the empty room. Then he shook his head and strode after them.

§

As they walked down the hall towards the dungeons, Arthur eyed the tray that Gwen was carrying for Merlin. It was loaded with simple, warming food: a bowl of hot stew with plenty of meat, a crusty roll fresh from the kitchen oven with a generous slab of butter, and a slice of apple tart. Between the leftovers from last night's feast and the current preparations for dinner, Arthur was able to have his pick -- but he had declined anything for himself. He couldn't stomach eating until he knew Merlin would be safe.

Predictably, the guards stopped them when they tried to enter. "My apologies, sire, but the King gave orders that no one was to be allowed to see the prisoners."

Arthur stared them down, in no mood for his father's games. "And I am ordering you to stand aside," he commanded, his left hand resting on the pommel of his sword. The guards wilted under his glare and meekly let them pass. It would do them no good to cross swords with the Crown Prince, even on the King's order. "And give me the keys," Arthur finished, holding out his hand. One guard reluctantly handed his over.

Merlin must have heard him, because he was already at the bars of his cage when they reached him. "Arthur, what--" He stepped back as Arthur unlocked the cell, but when he tried to come out to join them, Arthur gently pushed him back inside.
"No good news yet, I'm afraid," Arthur admitted.

"Oh," Merlin said, trying not to be too disappointed. "Gwen, Gaius!" he greeted, then fixed on the tray. "Is that for me?"

"Of course," Gwen said, smiling.

"Gods that smells good," Merlin said. He grabbed the bread and the bowl and dipped one into the other, immediately stuffing his mouth. He moaned with delight. "Thanks," he mumbled through the bread. Some things never changed and Arthur was glad of it.

"It's good to see you home," Gaius said, warmly. They had to be careful with their words. "I trust everything went as planned?"

"I wouldn't exactly say that," Merlin said, slightly out of breath from eating so fast. The bread nearly gone, he switched to his spoon. "But yeah. Didn't Arthur...?"

Gwen and Gaius finally had the grace to look ashamed as they realized that Merlin wasn't angry with Arthur anymore, and so they no longer needed to be angry with Arthur on his behalf. "We didn't have time to ask," Gwen covered, and gave Arthur an apologetic look.

Arthur silently forgave her. Gaius, frankly, was another matter, but they would deal with him later. "Our first priority is getting you out of here," he added.

"Did you talk to Uther?" Merlin asked.

"Yes," Arthur said, grimacing.

"Went that well, did it?"

"Even better. Now instead of exiling you, he intends to have you executed tomorrow at dawn."

Merlin stopped eating. "What?"

"I'm so sorry, Merlin," Gwen said, stepping in and giving Arthur a quick glare for his lack of tact. "We're going to find a way to fix this. Just like you did for me." She stepped forward and hugged him tightly. "I promise."

Arthur took the bowl so Merlin could hug her back properly. Not that there was much left; he'd seen dogs that ate more slowly and with better manners. He put the bowl down on the tray so Merlin could polish it off later.

"Thanks, Gwen," Merlin said, touched by her determination. "Just don't do anything I would do."

Gwen gave a small laugh at that, no doubt remembering how reckless Merlin had been in his attempts to free her. None of them were about to go and confess to using magic in front of Uther, that was certain.

She held on to him and lowered her voice to a whisper that even Arthur could barely hear. "I'm sorry. If we hadn't helped the Deorham escape, Uther wouldn't have arrested you."

"Nah," Merlin whispered back. "He would have done it anyway. So that was you?"

Gwen nodded. "And Morgana. She's with Idryis now. I'm going to bring her back."

Merlin broke their hug and raised his voice back to normal. "I'm proud of you, Gwen. Both of you.
You did the right thing."

Gwen lit up and hugged him again, just briefly, then backed towards the door. "I'll be back as soon as I can." On her way out, she mouthed 'thank you' to Arthur, and then she was up the stairs and gone.

"Executed?" Merlin asked, instantly sobered.

"It doesn't change anything," Arthur insisted. "When dawn comes you'll be back by my side where you belong. Whatever it takes." Even if it meant leaving Camelot behind.

Merlin accepted this, but he didn't look particularly pleased about it. But that was nothing compared to his expression when he turned to Gaius. His mouth pursed like the back end of a cat.

"Merlin," Gaius began.

"Did you tell him yet?" Merlin asked Arthur, without breaking his stare.

"There wasn't really a good time," Arthur said, glancing out at the guards. "Now isn't either."

Merlin clenched his fists, clearly frustrated that he couldn't shout at Gaius the way he wanted to. But when he did speak, he had the sense to lower his voice. "I know everything now," he hissed. "About my destiny. About my father."

Gaius stilled. "How?"

Merlin wasn't in the mood to explain, and the implied confirmation only made things worse. "Did you ever tell me the truth about anything?"

Gaius gave a tired sigh. "My boy, I promise you that I will explain everything. As soon as this is resolved. We have a great deal to talk about."

"Yes, we do."

Gaius shifted his grip on his medicine bag. "Are you well? Do you need anything? A potion to help you rest?"

"I don't need anything from you," Merlin said, and turned away, dismissing him.

"Very well," Gaius said. "I'll be in my chambers," he told Arthur, and then left, trying not to show how much Merlin's rejection had hurt him. Whatever his faults, Gaius did love Merlin dearly. But Arthur had learned the hard way that love was not enough. Not when it was so easy to hurt the ones you loved with the best of intentions.

But even if it wasn't enough, it still mattered. It mattered more than Arthur could say as he met Merlin's eyes and silently told him: 'I love you. I'll save you. I love you.'

And it meant more than Arthur could say when Merlin silently loved him back and trusted him to fix this, please fix this, because Merlin wanted to stay by his side and make Camelot into the kingdom its people deserved. That as flawed and frightening as it could be, Camelot was their home and Merlin didn't want to leave it. They held whole books full of conversations in that moment, without a single word or touch, without the torcs or silent speech.

"You should rest," Arthur said, finally speaking. They had both had a very, very long day. They had been up for nearly two days straight if he didn't count their brief respites in the Sidhe's cells or in the
glowing caves. Which he didn't, as they had been anything but restful.

"So should you."

"I can't. Not until you're out of here."

Merlin gave a small smile. "Then go. I'll wait for you."

Arthur glanced towards the guards, and then threw caution to the wind and held Merlin close, just as Gwen had. They deserved that much. Merlin's chest hitched against him as he held him back, squeezing so tightly. When Arthur reluctantly withdrew, Merlin wiped at his eyes. He put up a brave front, as usual, but this was hard for him. Arthur couldn't imagine how hard.

"I won't be long," Arthur promised.

Merlin nodded, but he was already drawing in on himself again, surviving the only way he knew how. Arthur's heart broke as he stepped out of the cell without him, and it broke again as he forced himself to slot the key into the lock and turn it. The clank of metal was impossibly loud, but Arthur refused to accept it as final. No jail or lock could hold Merlin, not in Gedref, not in Avalon, and not in Camelot.

On the way out, a thought occurred to him, and he turned down the next row of cells to find Alined. The king was sat on the floor at the back of the cell looking even more miserable than usual.

"Well, well," Alined said, giving him a baleful glare. "Come to rub it in my face?"

"If you insist," Arthur replied.

"Little brat," Alined sneered. "I should have put you over my knee the first time we met. Taught you some manners."

"I've learned all I need from you," Arthur said, coldly. "You were never worthy of your people. It's time they had the king they deserve."

"They'll be back," Alined said, baring his teeth. "By dawn my men will ride over your hills and stomp all over your pathetic little army. You and Uther will beg to lick my boots before I shove you into a hole so deep you'll never see daylight again."


Alined spat at him, but the distance between them was too great. His spittle landed uselessly on the ground. Arthur stared down at it with a snort and then walked away, leaving Alined to stew. Perhaps it was wrong to enjoy the man's suffering, but Alined had long been a thorn in his and Camelot's side, and frankly he was an outright terrible human being. Arthur would take his small pleasures where he found them.

§

What Arthur needed to do now was think, and the best place do that was in the peace and quiet of his chambers. He sighed as he opened his door, relieved to finally have the privacy to let down his guard and admit his exhaustion. But as he turned the key, the door pulled itself open, revealing none other than George.

"Sire," George said, with a prim bow.
"George, I really don't--"

"I have already taken the liberty of preparing a warm washbasin and a clean set of clothes," George continued, ushering him inside and closing the door behind them. "I have also procured a selection of food from the kitchens." Before Arthur could protest, George began to tug off his clothes.

Arthur decided it would be quicker and easier if he just let George have his way, and in a matter of minutes he had been washed and dried and clothed again. He had to admit that he felt the better for it, but he also felt worse because he realized that Merlin needed it even more than he did. He pushed away the plate of food that George had piled up for him.

"George, go take a set of my clothes down to the cells. Merlin needs them." All of Merlin's things were still at Gwen's, so Arthur had to lend him some of his own. Not that dressing Merlin in his clothes was much of a sacrifice. Merlin wearing Arthur's shirt was exactly what had got them into this mess in the first place and it was still one of his favorite things in the entire world.

"Very good, sire," George said. "And a washbasin?"

"Good man," Arthur agreed. "If the guards give you any trouble, just tell them I sent you."

"Yes, sire. But sire, before I go, you must eat something." He pushed the plate at Arthur.

"I'm not hungry," Arthur lied. How could he stomach anything while Merlin was in danger?

George considered him, his eyes narrowed with thought. "Merlin would want you to eat," he declared, and pushed the plate at him again. "Sire."

Arthur glared at him, realizing too late that George's sneaky cunning could be used against him as well as for him. "Fine," Arthur said, and took a bite out of a chicken leg.

George smiled, satisfied, and went to Arthur's wardrobe to fetch some clothes. Arthur glared at his back and then finished devouring the chicken leg, then the rest of the food on his plate. He found himself doing a passable imitation of a hungry Merlin. He barely noticed the outer door shutting as George left to make his delivery.

As soon as he was alone, he slumped, absolutely bone-tired. He dearly wished for the boost that the torcs gave him. At first he felt weighed down by the food and was angry with himself for being weak, but soon he felt better for it, his head clearer. He needed a clear head if he was going to out-think his father.

He went to the window and stared down at the courtyard. Though the hour felt late to him, it was not yet evening, and he watched as the servants scurried back and forth on their errands, as the last deliveries and messengers arrived for the day, as the people went about their work.

Despite his promises, he had no idea how he was going to fix this. When his father made up his mind, he could be as immovable as a mountain. Time after time he had tried to scale that mountain and failed; time after time he had watched Morgana try to shatter it. His father would listen to neither reason nor threat. Mercy was a weakness that disgusted him. Arthur would challenge him to a duel if he didn't know that winning it would only make his father lash out harder.

He prayed to the gods, knowing now that they were listening. But he received no answer, saw no sign of their blessing. Maybe they couldn't hear him without the torcs, without magic to reach them. Sending Merlin food and clothes was one thing, but a magical torc was quite another. The last thing they needed was for Merlin to be freed for one crime only to be arrested for another.
The irony was, of course, that he wasn't trying to find a solution to save Merlin's life. Merlin could knock down the walls of the cells without even lifting a finger. He could walk out of Camelot with his shield up and no sword or arrow could touch him. Arthur was trying to find a solution to save himself. To save the only life he'd ever known, the position he had been born to fill. He was trying to save his future as Camelot's rightful heir. It was utterly selfish that he had asked Merlin to stay in Camelot in the first place. Merlin deserved to live in a kingdom where he didn't have to live in fear of being discovered as a sorcerer, where he could practice his magic freely and use it with pride.

Merlin hadn't wanted to come back here, to face his father's murderer, to risk arrest and worse. But Arthur had insisted, had begged him, and now Merlin was paying the price.

Damn his father. Damn Uther Pendragon and his blasted laws and his rank hypocrisy.

Yet as selfish as it was, Arthur only had to look out at the courtyard to know it was the right decision. If he had done as Merlin wanted, if they had not returned but left directly for Deorham or Gawant or Mercia, they would have been turning their backs on the only thing that made this kingdom worth saving: its people. Morgana had walked away from it because she could, but Arthur was his people's future. He couldn't abandon them or leave them to his father's madness. None of them deserved that.

But how? How?

The knock on the door was a relief, giving him an excuse to stop turning the same thoughts over and over in his head. He expected it to be George returning, but to his surprise it was Elena.

"Arthur," she greeted.

"Elena. Come in, please." He still couldn't get over how much she had changed. She was a new woman without the burden of Maeve growing inside her, with a calm poise and eyes that shone bright with perception and intelligence.

And yet still she was the same silly girl. She made a delighted coo over the rest of the food that George had spread out for him and took a fingerful of cream, sucking it clean with a savoring moan. "Oh, sorry," she said, cheeks pinking. "Old habits."

"It's all right," Arthur said. "Have all you like. To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?"

Elena tore herself away from the food and sobered. "My father and I heard the news about Merlin. We wish to offer our assistance."

"That's very generous," Arthur began, "but--"

"Merlin saved my life," Elena said, insistent. "At the very least, he deserves a safe refuge. And at the most..." She visibly braced herself. "As Alined has lost the throne of Deorham, the contract binding our kingdoms together is null and void."

"Yes, but--"

"Gawant's army is no longer bound to Camelot," she continued, ignoring the interruption. "We are free to use it as we wish. And we -- my father and I -- we both wish for the same thing." She stepped forward, a determined gleam in her eyes. "Tell your father that if Merlin is not freed at once, then we will have no choice but to free him by force."

Arthur knew a bad idea when he heard one, and this one was for the history books on terrible ideas. "Absolutely not."
Elena gaped at him, clearly not having expected an outright denial. "Why not?"

"Because the last thing either of our kingdoms needs is another war. Merlin does not want anyone to die for him."

"No one has to die," Elena said, cuffing him on the arm for being silly. "It's a threat. There's no way Uther won't back down."

"If you think that, all it proves is that you do not know my father."

"You think he'd go to war. Over a servant." Then her eyes widened. "He doesn't know that Merlin's... you know." She waved her hands in an apparent representation of sorcery.

"If he did, he wouldn't be waiting until dawn to have Merlin executed," Arthur said, though even saying the words made him queasy. "No, this is about teaching me a lesson."

Elena frowned, understandably confused. Frankly Uther barely made sense to Arthur at the best of times.

"My father is already on the brink of war with Deorham. He blames Lord Idryis for Morgana's disappearance. That alone is enough for him to risk the strength of the entire kingdom by starting a war when our soldiers should be in the fields for the harvest. As should yours, and Deorham's, and everyone else's." He spread his arms in exasperation, then let them fall. He walked back to his spot by the window and stared out through it. "My father spreads his madness like a contagion. It has to stop."

No, it was not his madness that must be stopped. It was the man himself.

*I've learned all I need from you. You were never worthy of your people. It's time they had the king they deserve.*

Arthur imagined himself saying those words again -- not to Alined, but to Uther. To his father, furious and humiliated, stripped of his crown and sitting on the hay-strewn floor of his cell. The vicious satisfaction it gave actually shocked him. Did he hate his father that much?

Yes, he did. Not just for threatening Merlin, for imprisoning him. Not just for the countless humiliations Uther had dealt him over his entire life. Not just for his hypocrisy and his lies and the countless lives he had taken without cause, but for all of it and more. His father had never been worthy of the people of Camelot, and it was past time they had the king they deserved.

He turned to face Elena, a cold resolution setting over his heart. "Maybe you're right. Maybe it's time my father was taught a lesson in return."

Elena's eyes widened as she realized what Arthur was saying. "Then you'll accept our support?"

Was he ready for this? He had faced down a mad, all-powerful High Queen. He had fought sorcerers and monsters. He had ridden on the backs of dragons. If not now, when would he ever be ready?

"I accept," Arthur said, the moment surreal. "Tell him to prepare. But he must do nothing until I give the word. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Elena said, and it was clear that she did. She extended her arm and Arthur shook it. The deal was made. Arthur prayed that he would not have to call upon it.
That night, Gwen watched from the top of a tower as the fog rolled in, silent and swift. From its germination at the exit to the siege tunnel, it had spread and thickened until the castle seemed to be floating in the clouds, the pale stone glowing in the moonlight. Down below, the town and fields and forests were blanketeted in darkness, all torches and fires banked to mere embers. An unnatural hush fell, the thick air muffling every sound. She felt as though she and all the people of the town were holding their breath, caught in some suspended moment and waiting for it to pass.

Unable to look down, she looked up, watching the sky all through the night, unable to sleep when every moment could be her last. Her eyes strained for any sign of the Sidhe and their invasion as Morgana had described. For fires that could burn through even this magical mist. But the dark sky was lit only with the moon and the stars, and then at long last came the first light of dawn. The fog thinned and burned away as a new day began.

She breathed out.

She prayed again, but this time it was to thank the gods for their gracious mercy. She prayed for Merlin and Arthur's safe passage and return. And then she was torn from her prayers as the alarm bells rang, their loud, harsh peals jolting the castle awake.

Not wanting to be found out of place, she quickly hurried to Morgana's chambers, slipping inside just before the guards marched by and checked that the door was locked. On the other side of the door, key still in hand, Gwen stared at Morgana's empty bed and hoped that the alarm had not been raised for her.

If the world wasn't going to end after all, then there were always chores that needed doing. Gwen moved around the chambers, straightening and tidying for what must be the last time. When she had chosen to stay, she had not thought of what she would do if the invasion never came. She had been Morgana's maidservant for more than half her life. No doubt she could get a similar position for one of the noble houses, but did she want to? Suddenly her future was wide open in a way it had never been before.

She opened the heavy chest and took out the smaller one within. She sat down and opened it, marvelling again at the sheer wealth within. A royal payment for a royal sword, and in a way her father's final gift to her. In truth, she didn't have to work another day for the rest of her life if she didn't want to. She didn't have to scrub or wash or serve for anyone. She didn't have to be the responsible one, the one taking care of a sick mother or a grieving father or a beloved mistress plagued by nightmares. She was alive and free and alone and she had no idea what to do next.

She closed the chest and put it away, a hundred different possibilities swirling through her thoughts. When the lock clicked shut, she forced herself to put it all aside. Whatever her choices were, they would be constrained by the events of the next few days. By Merlin and Arthur's fate and The King's reaction to his losses. As glad for Morgana as Gwen had been for her freedom -- and as sorrowful -- even as Morgana entered the siege tunnel, the potential consequences of her departure had caused a knot to form in Gwen's stomach. It hardly mattered when the Sidhe were about to invade, but now...

The alarm bells rang for a second time, long and loud. Gwen closed her eyes and prayed.

§

As she had feared, by the afternoon Gwen had more than enough to worry about. She was worried
about Merlin, waiting in the dungeons for his execution. She worried about Arthur, playing a
dangerous game in outwardly defying his father. She worried for Camelot now that Uther was intent
on a wholesale invasion of Deorham. But right now, what she most worried about was that she
would not be able to find Morgana in time.

The days were getting shorter, and though she was used to evading the curfew, it would be best if
she could get Morgana back before dark. Though they had not agreed upon a specific meeting place,
Gwen knew where Morgana and Idryis were likely to be if they intended to stay close to the town.
Even with Grunhilda's considerable magic, they would not want to risk discovery. But there was a
place that she and Morgana had escaped to when they were young and Morgana chafed at her gilded
cage, a hidden spot in the woods away from the main roads and paths. They had to be there.

The forest rose into rocky hills, signaling that she was close. Ahead there was an outcropping that
contained a shallow cave not deep enough for any dangerous animals to take residence, but sufficient
for shelter if it rained. It was strange to be back here after so long. With each step, she was flooded
with memories: playing together, crossing swords, caught between the formality of their positions
and their budding friendship. Looking back, Gwen can see now how she had fallen hard for
Morgana. She had been willing to put up with all her games and challenges, eager to go anywhere
she wanted. Morgana was a force of nature, as beautiful and sharp as her sword, and she took what
she wanted -- even when what she wanted was Gwen. Morgana had merely crooked her finger and
Gwen followed.

But nothing had ever come of it, because nothing could. She had buried her longing because
Morgana was a noble and she was a servant, and even friendship was a daring thing between them.
How could she ever hope for more? It was an infatuation of girlhood and would be left behind when
she married.

For a brief moment, she had thought perhaps Lancelot... or even Merlin. But no. And then Morgana
had kissed her in the darkness.

Gwen was done with lies and that included the lies she told herself. She did love Morgana. She
wanted a life with her, a real one and not just the one imposed on them by circumstance. There was a
heat, a passion in her for Morgana that was so much more than she had ever felt for anyone. Part of
the appeal of Lancelot and Merlin, for all their difficulties, was that they fit into the life that Gwen
was taught to expect for herself. Morgana didn't fit that in any way, not as a woman and certainly not
as a noble.

Yet none of that mattered now. Years ago, Gwen had made the choice to lie to Morgana instead of
confide in her or help her with her magic. Merlin had suffered the consequences of his lies to Arthur,
and whatever had happened in Avalon to patch things up between them, she doubted if she and
Morgana would have the same opportunity. If Morgana would even be willing to forgive her.

It was for the best that it was over. She couldn't imagine Uther ever accepting a relationship between
them. Most likely, she would have ended up like Merlin, exiled or worse. She didn't have the ability
to simply walk out of a dungeon if she wanted to. It was hard enough to be down there as a visitor,
the memories of her near-execution and her father's death like a vise around her heart. She wanted
Merlin to be safe, wanted all of them to be safe and away from that awful place.

From all of it.

For the first time, she truly considered leaving Camelot. Not because she wanted to stay with
Morgana or to escape some terrible fate. There was no certainty that Merlin and Arthur would be
able to stay. She had no family left, no job, no real ties to hold her. If she couldn't go to Deorham,
she could find a home elsewhere. With Grunhilda gone, Princess Elena needed a new maidservant.
Or with her gold she could buy a forge in Gawant and follow her childhood dream. At the thought of it, a fresh start in a friendlier place, she felt a flutter of something like happiness.

She shook away her woolgathering as she drew up to the outcropping. She looked around to make sure that there were no passersby, patrolmen, or wandering hunters, then crept quietly over to the cave opening. She called Morgana's name, but there was no response. There were signs of recent disturbance on the ground, so she wasn't wrong that they had been here. But it seemed that they had already left. They might already be halfway to the mountains for all she knew.

She was too late. Uther would order the invasion of Deorham and everyone would suffer for it. With the King in such a state, there would be no way for Arthur to convince him to let Merlin go. Merlin would have no choice but to break out, and then -- if Arthur's promise held true -- they would leave Camelot behind. And then things would really start to fall apart. As horrible as it was, she only felt numb. It was too huge to take in, the consequences of it all, when things could have been so different if only she had told Morgana the truth from the start.

All she could do now was go back and prepare for the worst. But first she wanted to take a moment to say goodbye to this place and whatever might have been. She rested a hand on the cool stone and a well of emotion tightened her throat.

"Goodbye," she whispered, and quickly wiped her eyes before turning and walking away.

"Wait!"

Gwen whirled at the sound of Morgana's voice. There, standing in the entrance of what had been a completely empty cave, was Morgana. Relief and anger hit Gwen at the same time. Had she been there the whole time, hidden by magic? She had been. In the shadows behind her were Grunhilda and Idriys, both looking vaguely apologetic. If Gwen needed confirmation that Morgana would never forgive her, she had it now.

"Gwen," Morgana began, her voice uncertain and soft.

"You have to come back," Gwen said, refusing to meet Morgana's eyes. Unwilling to waste any more time on the ruins of their relationship. "Merlin's been arrested. Uther is going to have him executed."

"What?" Morgana asked, alarmed.

Idriys cursed and shook his head. "I was afraid this would happen. That boy put too much trust in Prince Arthur."

"No, no," corrected Gwen. "It's not like that. Uther doesn't know he has magic." Yet.

"Then why?" Idriys asked.

"There's no time to explain," Gwen said, and there really wasn't. She barely knew herself, except that the King -- who had once chosen Merlin to serve his son -- had decided that Merlin was now unsuited to the role. And Arthur's refusal to abandon Merlin had only made things worse. Besides, Uther had never needed a reason to be a vicious tyrant before. Why start now? "Uther's angry about losing Deorham so he's taking it out on Arthur."

Morgana smirked. "Good. Serves them both right."

If Gwen hadn't seen the change in Arthur with her own eyes, she might be inclined to agree with Morgana, at least a little bit. But this wasn't about Arthur. She rounded on Morgana, finally facing
her. "Even if you don't care about Arthur, I know you care about Merlin."

Morgana faltered, but she wasn't going to give in that easily. "If you're making this up just to get me to go back there..."

"It's not just Merlin." Gwen took a deep breath. "Uther thinks the Deorham kidnapped you. And if you don't come back right now, he's going to declare war."

"Oh no!" Grunhilda put her hands over her mouth, her eyes comically wide.

"He won't," Morgana denied, though she was clearly shaken. "Half the time he wants to lock me in my chambers to protect me and the other half he wants to throw me in the dungeons. He'll be glad to be rid of me. The only reason he's declaring war is because of his ridiculous obsession with Alined."

"No. Alined's going to be executed tomorrow at dawn," Gwen said, exasperated. "Along with Merlin. And if you don't come back, hundreds or even thousands of people are going to die because of you."

Morgana stepped back, staring at Gwen as if she had physically struck her. "This isn't my fault!"

"You might hate him, but Uther can't let go of you," Gwen said, sharply correcting her. "You shouldn't have gone. It wouldn't have mattered if the Sidhe came, but it matters now."

"I'm not his property," Morgana shot back. "I have every right to leave if I want to."

"You do," Idryis said, intervening with a calming tone. "Of course you do."

"Don't take his side," Morgana said, rounding on him.

"King Uther is a tyrant and a fool," Idryis said sharply, not backing down so much as a fraction. "But I would be a greater fool if I brought full-scale war upon my kingdom for the sake of my own ambition. I'm sorry, my lady, but you must go back."

"No!" Morgana said, and now Gwen could see the fear behind her defiance. "He's bluffing, he has to be. He'd have to be mad--" But even as she said it, terrible understanding came over her, because of course Uther was mad. That was why she wanted to get as far away from him as she could. And now to stop him, she had to go back to him. She turned away from them, face drawn and arm across her stomach.

Gwen and Idryis shared a concerned look, but Idryis was the one to act on it. "Lady Morgana," he said, gentler now. "If I wish to be King, I must take care of my people. But I have great sympathy for your position. If you can find a way to excuse yourself from Uther directly, I would not hesitate to welcome you back."

"Because you want your own pet sorcerer?" Morgana said, sneering even as her voice trembled.

"In case you've forgotten, I already have one," Idryis said, gesturing to Grunhilda, then giving her a silent apology for the implication. Grunhilda beamed back at him, quite happy to be needed.

"I believe you to be a woman of great intelligence and power," he continued, addressing Morgana again. "Not because of your magic, though that is formidable. I would be honored to count you among my allies."

His words had some effect, calming Morgana enough that she could face them again. "Thank you," she said, grateful. "If I go back... will you wait for me?"
"I will."

"Very well." She visibly braced herself, straightened her back and held her head high. "I'm certain I can talk Uther out of this ridiculous invasion. And as for Merlin, the only way he'll face the pyre is over my dead body. If Uther won't see sense, then Merlin will come to Deorham with us." She turned to Idriys with a respectful nod. "If, of course, that is acceptable to you, my lord."

Idryis chuckled. "It is indeed. Grunhilda and I shall await your return."

They bowed to each other respectfully, then Morgana turned to Gwen. When their eyes met, Gwen saw a flicker of uncertainty. But it was quickly buried as Morgana started her resolute march towards the castle. Gwen quickly caught up and walked beside her.

Away from the others, Morgana dropped her facade. "I'm sorry. I didn't think--"

"No. You did."

"Uther deserves to suffer," Morgana said, defending herself even as she accepted responsibility.

"And so does Camelot? And Deorham?"

"Of course not." Morgana clucked her tongue, clearly not appreciating Gwen's newfound willingness to speak her mind. It was remarkable how freeing it could be to lose everything that mattered to you. "He won't let me leave, you know that."

There was no point in talking this in circles. "Merlin and Arthur returned from Avalon, obviously. They were able to stop the Sidhe."

"I know," Morgana said, then explained. "After dawn came, I finally let myself rest. There wasn't a single nightmare. Not even a dream. I slept like a baby." She breathed out. "And without any potions. I feel like myself again." She chuckled dryly. "If it hasn't been so long that I've forgotten what that is."

Gwen refused to feel guilty anymore. "I'm glad," she said, voice tight.

"I shouldn't have hidden from you. I'm sorry. I thought you'd come to... well..."

"Beg?" Gwen said, in no mood for tact.

"I wouldn't put it that way."

"No matter how you put it, you have nothing to worry about. After this is over you can do whatever you want. Go anywhere. Uther might try to stop you, but I won't."

Though Gwen expected otherwise, Morgana didn't seem terribly happy to hear it. "Of course."

And that was that. But then what was there left to say?

§

As they approached the edge of the forest, Morgana's steps slowed. Gwen assumed that she was reluctant to face Uther, and she could hardly blame her for that. But her assumption was wrong.

"You should stay here," Morgana told her. It was getting dark, and she squinted as she scanned the way ahead. "I don't want Uther to blame you for not telling him where I was."
"I can take care of myself," Gwen said, unwilling to hide even if it meant facing Uther's wrath. What was the worst he could do? Kill her family? Arrest her and sentence her to execution? He was a monster, but she wasn't afraid to face him anymore. She refused to be afraid.

"And if you're arrested?" When Gwen didn't answer, Morgana pressed on. "You're the one who wants to stay."

Gwen was reluctant to admit that she had changed her mind. It wouldn't make any difference anyway, because it was quite clear that Morgana wouldn't appreciate her company in Deorham. Merlin's, perhaps, and for that Gwen felt a pang of jealousy. Of course, Morgana wouldn't be pleased to learn that where Merlin went, so did Arthur.

"As long as you're in Camelot, as your maidservant I have a duty to protect you," Gwen said, which was true enough. Even if she was angry and heartbroken, even if Morgana was willing to abandon her, Gwen had been raised better than to abandon anyone she cared about. Even if that person didn't care back.

Morgana gave her a skeptical eyebrow for that, but she also didn't question it. "Very well. Let's get this over with."

They had hoped to get back before curfew, but even if they had it wouldn't have made much difference. As soon as the first guards saw them, they had a personal escort directly to the castle. There was none of the rough handling that Merlin and Arthur had been greeted with, but there was an air of annoyance for all the trouble that both Arthur and Morgana's disappearances had caused everyone.

They were brought to the council chambers, where even at this late hour the whole council was hard at work, toiling over papers and maps as they schemed for war. Morgana's eyes went wide as she saw the reality of what she had caused with her sudden departure. At least she understood now how serious the situation was.

Uther looked up and saw them, and a multitude of emotions crossed his face: relief, joy, suspicion, disappointment. Then he closed off, showing nothing as he stood. Everyone else turned and stared at Morgana, realization settling swiftly over the room. They put down their quills.

"My Lord," Morgana said, with a short bow.

"Leave us," Uther said. Councilors, lords, and servants all practically scurried out of the room in their haste to obey.

Uther leaned back in his chair and steepled his hands together, tapping them against his chin. "Do you have any idea how worried I was?" he asked, anger simmering just below his words.

Morgana looked contrite, and it might even have been true. "Gwen told me. All I can do is beg for your forgiveness."

Uther spared Gwen a brief stare, looking down at her as if glancing at an ant that had wandered near his dinner plate. She was used to it and didn't flinch from her composure, holding her servant's neutrality and submission like the shield it was, hiding the roiling emotions she truly felt. He saw what he expected to see and looked away, returning to the source of his current ire.

"I expect this sort of behavior from Arthur but not you," Uther said, tersely. "If you were not taken hostage by the Deorham, you will explain yourself at once."

There was a flash of anger in Morgana's eyes, but she quickly hid it. She kept her tone polite, though
through slightly gritted teeth. "No one took me, my Lord. I simply needed some fresh air after watching you glower your way through the feast. Once I left, I was in no hurry to return."

Uther was not impressed. "You left the castle alone, unguarded, without your servant and without a word. That was completely irresponsible!" He slammed down his fist, making the cups clatter against the table. "We are in the middle of a war. Anything could have happened to you."

"We weren't in the middle of a war when I left!" Morgana defended. "We'd just had a feast to celebrate not being in a war. I did nothing wrong. With the foul mood you were in, it was safer to be out there than to stay here."

"Yet you refused to return when the alarm was raised. Twice."

Morgana shrugged dismissively. "I must have dozed through it. I sleep so deeply these days."

Uther pinched the bridge of his nose, as if his headache from the hangover was surging back. But his anger was fading into exasperation. "If you left the castle of your own accord, then why didn't your servant tell me where you were?"

"She didn't know. I told you, I wanted to be completely alone."

Uther's frown twitched. "Then how did she know where to find you?"

Gwen tensed, worrying that the small inconsistency was all it would take to unravel the lies. But Morgana was undeterred.

"She didn't. Gwen was worried and went looking for me. I was already on my way home when we happened to find each other. Then we came straight back to the castle, where your guards rudely escorted us here."

"Morgana!" Arthur appeared in the doorway and strode in. "You're all right?"

"Perfectly," Morgana smiled. "I can't believe you all thought I'd been kidnapped!"

"He thought the same of me," Arthur said, with resigned amusement. He turned to Uther. "My Lord, you must call off the invasion at once. The loss of Deorham is unfortunate, but they have done us no harm. We need our men to be out in the fields, harvesting so our people do not starve. Surely in your wisdom you see this."

Uther stared at his cup, his brow furrowed with consternation. It was clear to Gwen that he doubted both their stories, yet with both of them home and safe (and as irritating as ever), what other explanation did he have? Regardless, it was clear that the Deorham could not have been involved in either disappearance, and so his entire rationale for invasion could not be sustained. If he kept pushing, the Lords would revolt, for they no more wished to starve than the lowest peasant. Just as Idrys had said, if a King did not care for his kingdom, he would soon find himself without it. It was a lesson that Alined had learned too late.

But Uther, for all his faults, did care about his kingdom. With a deep sigh, he surrendered. "Very well. "He picked up his cup and took a long sip of his wine.

Morgana gave Arthur a smug look, quite pleased with her handling of the delicate situation. But instead of excusing herself, she stepped closer to Uther. "While we're sorting things out, what's this about Merlin being arrested?"

"Morgana," Arthur warned. "Don't."
Morgana ignored him. "My Lord, what crime has he committed? The boy is harmless. Locking him away, threatening to execute him -- it's nothing but needless cruelty. I demand that he be released at once."

Whatever progress Morgana had made in defusing Uther's anger, in a moment it was all undone. He scowled deeply, his knuckles white as he gripped the stem of his goblet. "Offenses have been made upon this kingdom. Tomorrow morning, Alined and the boy will each pay for theirs. As for Deorham, let it make war upon itself. When it is ripe this summer, the entire kingdom shall be taken with ease. As for tonight, I expect you both to return to your chambers and remain there. Is that clear?"

§

Out in the hall, Gwen felt able to breathe again. Uther's anger could be a physically oppressive thing, heavy and poisonous. She often found herself breathing shallowly or even holding her breath, as if her body refused to take in the tainted air, unwilling to be contaminated by it. Away from it, she filled her lungs freely, fresh air washing them clean.

Morgana was less sanguine, though it was hard to tell if she was more angry about Merlin or Deorham. But before Gwen could muster up an argument as to why Morgana shouldn't antagonize Uther further, Arthur pulled them both out of the hall and into an empty room. Morgana gaped at him, outraged, but he cut her off before she could start.

"Don't," Arthur said, sharply. "Whatever it is you're thinking, don't. It's only going to make things worse."

"As if anything you've done has made things better," Morgana shot back. "At least I tried to stop him."

"Of course I've tried!"

Morgana scoffed. "I think you wanted this to happen. It makes things so much easier to just let him decide for you. Now you can blame him instead of yourself."

Arthur glared at her with a fury that matched Uther's, but Morgana didn't back down, meeting him with her own righteous anger. For a moment it seemed as if he might strike her for her insult, but in the end he clenched his fists and turned away, every line in his body tensed. As harsh as Morgana's words were, there was enough truth to them that Gwen suspected it was guilt that stayed Arthur's hand.

But Morgana did not seem pleased with her victory. She sneered at Arthur in disgust and took a few steps away from them. "I'm leaving for Deorham again tonight, and this time I'm taking Merlin with me."

"No, you're not," Arthur said, turning to face her again. This time he was resolute.

"Try and stop me," Morgana said, equally determined. She turned to leave.

"Morgana, wait," Gwen said, reaching for her. Morgana faltered long enough that Arthur was able to get to the door first, blocking her.

Morgana glared at Gwen in accusation. "You're taking his side?"

Gwen felt at the end of her rope. "If I'm taking anyone's side, it's Merlin's. You know how powerful he is. Do you really think he would be down there if it wasn't his choice?"
"What are you saying?" Morgana asked. "Merlin wants to be executed?"

"Of course not," Arthur said. Then he took a deep breath. "He's there because I asked him to stay. If he breaks out now--" He held up his hand to forestall her argument. "--or if anyone else does, it's over. He has to leave Camelot. And so do I."

Morgana stared at him, then at Gwen. Gwen understood her confusion. The last time they had all been together, Merlin had wanted nothing to do with Arthur. It had been hard for her to accept the change and she had seen it with her own eyes.

"It's true," Gwen said. "I spoke to him myself. He and Arthur... I don't know what happened in Avalon. But it changed them both."

"I swear to you that I won't let anyone harm him, especially not my father," Arthur said, and there could be no question of his sincerity. "Either we find a way to stop the execution or Merlin and I both leave Camelot tonight."

Morgana took this in. "You want to come to Deorham?" she asked, barely believing the words even as she spoke them.

"If we must," Arthur said. "If Merlin wants to go there. Deorham won't be safe, but then I doubt my father will hesitate to declare war on any kingdom that agrees to take us in. And he'll do the same for you."

Morgana struggled against his words, but she couldn't deny them. Not when she had seen the council planning an all-out war just to get her back. Uther was a possessive man at the best of times and never took well to being denied what he thought was his. Gwen doubted he would have taken it any better if he knew that Morgana had left willingly. And for Arthur to leave, to renounce the throne... Uther would never accept that. Never.

"I refuse to be his prisoner," Morgana said, quiet but absolute.

"Then help me," Arthur said, softening. "Help us. Please. Morgana, you have always tried to make me stand up for what's right. You were the conscience I didn't want to hear. But I'm listening now."

Morgan scoffed, but it was half-hearted. "How do I know you won't go right back to licking his boots?"

"I've lost the taste for them," Arthur said, dryly, then he sobered. "I've come to realize... The fact is that things need to change. And they're not going to unless someone stands up and makes it happen."

For the first time, Gwen understood Merlin's devotion to Arthur. She understood what Merlin had seen in him from the start. She believed that Arthur could be a great king one day, and not just out of a desperate hope that someone, anyone would be better than Uther. This was the Arthur that could make Camelot fair and just. He truly could become a king that the people would love and be proud to call their sovereign.

Though she doubted Morgana would ever admit it, Gwen saw that she was also affected by Arthur's words, by the evident change in him. Almost overnight he had matured, sobered and seasoned by his experiences. He was willing to admit that he was wrong and to ask for help. A year ago he would have done neither in all but the most dire of circumstances, and even then with great reluctance.

But as she thought back, she knew that it had not been overnight; that the changes had come slowly, over months, years, and then all at once. That Merlin had changed him, but that so had Morgana, and even Gwen herself had played a part. And she saw that they had all changed each other.
Could she really let them go, or leave them behind?

"You really are a lovesick fool," Morgana said, hiding behind her wit as she so often did. "Merlin must be just as bad if he's mad enough to want to stay here with you. Someone has to help if only to save the both of you from yourselves."

"Thank you," Arthur said, genuinely grateful. He gave Gwen a relieved glance.

"I take it you have some semblance of a plan?" Morgana asked.

"A semblance," Arthur admitted, clearly not happy about it. "It's a last resort."

Morgana had no patience for equivocation. "Come on, spit it out."

Arthur took a deep breath. "Elena and her father have pledged Gawant's support on Merlin's behalf."

Morgana boggled. "You want to call Uther's bluff with an army?" She smiled as she shook her head in amazement. "I am impressed. That's absolutely mad."

"Yes, and that's why I don't want to have to do it," Arthur ground out. "We just talked my father out of one war, I don't want to be the cause of another."

"Can you imagine his face?" Morgana asked, delighted by the whole idea. "It would be absolutely worth it."

"It really wouldn't," Arthur said. "As my future advisor on my council, do you have any other suggestions?"

"Flattery will get you everywhere," Morgana preened. Then she thought. "I do have one idea. But I don't think you'll like it."

"Yes?" Arthur prompted, visibly dreading whatever she was about to say.

"As much as I loathe the Sidhe, why not try things their way? Do you have any idea how many enchantments are in Merlin's grimoire? There must be one that we can try. Or we could use Grunhilda."

"You're right, I don't like it," Arthur said, flatly. But he was considering it. He sighed in frustration.

Would it be better to risk using magic on Uther -- an act of outright treason on multiple levels -- or to make an honest if risky attempt to call his bluff? Gwen had to admit that neither option was terribly appealing. Others had tried to enchant Uther before and they had always failed. Uther wasn't the only one paranoid about magic, and a sudden change of heart would raise suspicion among the court. If it was discovered that Arthur was behind the enchantment, the consequences would be terrible indeed. But if Arthur confronted Uther with the assistance of a foreign army -- even one as friendly as Gawant -- the results would hardly be any better. Even if they succeeded, Arthur's actions were likely to be seen as treasonous, and then what?

They needed a way to defy Uther without defying Camelot. But Camelot and its King were one and the same.

"Perhaps Gaius can help with the enchantment," Arthur said, relenting. "I doubt he'll be any happier about it than I am."

Morgana gave a victorious smirk. "He didn't seem to mind conspiring against me for the last five
years. I'm certain I can convince him to help."

"I don't doubt it," Arthur grumbled. "But let me be very clear. I don't want to use it unless we absolutely have to."

"Of course," Morgana said, but it was clear how eager she was. "Gwen, is the grimoire still at your house?"

Gwen nodded. "I can go get it."

"While you're there, Merlin and I left our armor and torcs at your house," Arthur said. "It looks like we might need them if we're going to pull any of this off."

"Of course," Gwen agreed.

"But be careful," Arthur added. "With the mood my father is in, any hint of magic will probably result in an immediate execution."

"I'll come with you," Morgana insisted.

"No, you stay here," Gwen said. "I can take care of myself. Besides, I doubt the guards will let either of you go very far."

"After we talk to Gaius, we'll wait for you in our chambers," Arthur said. "That's where my father expects us to be. The last thing we need to do is to raise any more suspicion." He gestured towards the door.

"Be safe," Morgana said, eyes lingering on Gwen as she followed Arthur out into the hall.

§

Though it was after dark, the guards didn't trouble Gwen as she made her way home. Even in the most dire of circumstances, there were always workers and servants who needed to be able to move freely in order to keep things in order. While Gwen wasn't strictly one of them, her position meant it was rare that anyone would trouble her. And more than that, she knew the guards and they knew her. Her parents had known their parents. She had broken bread with them and their families. Year upon year they had come to her father for surreptitious repairs to their armor and weapons when they didn't want to get in trouble with the royal armorer.

Word had already spread that the invasion had been called off. A whisper at one end of town could blaze its way to the other end faster than the most fleet-footed messenger. The result was a sense of relief and quiet celebration even at this late hour. Despite the curfew the pubs were open, full of revelers toasting to a peaceful harvest.

As she reached an intersection, she saw a couple heading her way and Gwen smiled as she recognized them: her friends Ciara and Peithan. Ciara was carrying her baby daughter Lynwen, all swaddled up in a bundle.

"Gwen!" Ciara greeted, happy to see her. "You're out late."

"So are you," Gwen said, joining them.

"We just heard the good news," Peithan said, throwing his arms up in celebration. "Who can sleep at a time like this?"
"Lynwen, thankfully," Ciara said, hefting the sleeping baby.

"Here, let me," Gwen offered, reaching for her. Ciara handed her off gratefully. Lynwen gave a sleepy burble and smacked her lips, but didn't rouse. She was heavy and warm against Gwen's breast. What kind of life would Lynwen have? What would happen to her if Arthur left? If he failed?

She deserved a better life. A happier one, without the fear that Gwen had known growing up. One where she didn't lose her parents at a young age to disease or famine or war. Gwen's heart ached for her friends and their young family, knowing how much of their fate hung in the balance of the next few hours.

"Is something wrong?" Ciara asked.

Gwen hesitated, not wanting to burden them with her troubles when they were so happy. But it seemed they shared her burden.

"It's about Merlin, isn't it?" Peithan said, sobering. "Is there no chance the King will change his mind?"

"I don't know," Gwen admitted. It wasn't a surprise that they had heard the news about Merlin as well. The Prince's former manservant arrested and sentenced to execution? It must be the talk of the town.

"I don't understand what that boy could have done to deserve this," Ciara said.

Peithan gave Gwen a shifty look, and Gwen remembered that Peithan was in Gedref. That he knew the truth about what Merlin had done there, and that Sir Geraint had never made it to Gedref to achieve the victories claimed for him. But he had sworn to Arthur to keep it secret, and it seems that he had. At least, until now.

"You know, don't you?" Peithan blurted out.

Gwen hesitated to answer, which of course was its own admission.

Ciara frowned at the two of them. "What are you not telling me? Come on, out with it."

Peithan looked guilty. "We're not supposed to say." Then he crossed his arms, angry. "But it hardly matters now. The poor lad."

"What, Merlin?" Ciara asked. "What did he do?"

"He saved Gedref," Gwen explained. At Ciara's confusion, she continued. "Arthur trained Merlin and knighted him. But Uther doesn't know. Merlin was the one who opened the Gates and stopped the sorcerer, not Sir Geraint."

"Poor Geraint never even made it to Gedref," Peithan said, clearly relieved to be able to tell his wife the truth at last. "He was killed in an ambush."

Ciara was astonished. "And Uther knows this?"

"We all swore to keep it secret to avoid exactly this sort of trouble," Peithan explained. "Gwen?"

Gwen shook her head. "He doesn't know. It's complicated, but..." She didn't want to gossip about Merlin and Arthur's relationship, but they needed some kind of answer. "The King thinks Merlin is a bad influence."
"A bad influence!" Peithan exclaimed, outraged. "I'll show him a bad influence! That boy saved our lives. He probably saved this whole kingdom. What absolute nonsense."

"Peithan!" Ciara cautioned. "Don't talk like that about the King." She glanced around to see if they had been overheard.

"Merlin will be all right," she assured them, not wanting them to get into trouble. Not when they had their whole lives ahead of them and a baby to raise. "I'm certain that Prince Arthur will convince the King to change his mind." By force or magic, if necessary, though she hoped it wouldn't be.

"He'd better," Peithan grumbled.

Perhaps disturbed by the tension, Lynwen stirred and shifted restlessly. Gwen handed her back to Ciara. "You should go and celebrate."

"Not in much of a mood for it anymore," Peithan grumbled.

But Ciara nudged him on. "We've done enough standing around in the chill. Besides, I know a few people who'll be very interested to hear your little secret." She gave him a poke in the ribs for lying to her.

"It wasn't my secret to tell," Peithan defended.

"Good night, Gwen!" Ciara called back, and they headed into the warm light of the pub.

Gwen waved them goodnight, and continued home, pondering their conversation all the way there.

Once she was inside and the door was closed, she lit a candle and carried it to the back of the house. She opened the safe and took out Merlin's grimoire, then carried it over to the table where Arthur and Merlin had left their things. There were two bundles of armor and Merlin's bag, which among other things held the two gold torcs. Gwen opened the bundles and inspected the armor, half out of habit and half to delay going back. With so much going on, there hadn't been any time to find out what had happened to them in Avalon, but there were clues in the damage done. Rips and scratches from huge claws. The first hints of rust from submersion in water and the ripe smell of pond silt and sweat. Arthur's surcoat and trousers had been shoved into Merlin's bag, and their story was much the same, along with a lingering smoke.

There had been a battle. A terrible one from the look of it. But they had survived and stopped the Sidhe and come home. Would all of that be for nothing? She refused to accept it, but the solution eluded her.

She packed everything up into a laundry basket and covered it, then piled clean laundry over the top and covered that with a dust cloth. The basket was heavy but she hefted it against her hip and carried it. As a blacksmith's daughter, as a servant, she was used to the weight.

On the way back, there seemed to be even more people out than before, which was quite unusual at such a late hour. Perhaps they were all eager to celebrate the peace, but they were leaving the pubs, not entering them. As she passed through the upper town, she realized that some of them were taking the same route she was. She hefted the basket and continued on.

When she crossed the bridge and entered the courtyard, she stopped, stunned by what she saw. There were people gathering by the entrance to the dungeons, each of them holding a single candle. They stood together in silent vigil, and even as she watched more came to join them. She moved closer until she could see their faces in the darkness, and she recognized them: soldiers, servants, and tradespeople who had been in Gedref. Their wives and husbands. Their friends. And she knew at
once why they were here.

"Gwen," greeted a quiet voice. "Have you come to join us?"

Gwen followed it and found its speaker: Eduard. He was a few years older than her, and he had gone down to Gedref to fight. His mother Ethelia was beside him, and she waved Gwen over. Ethelia, a fellow servant and one of Arthur's many nursemaids, had been friends with her parents.

"Would you like a candle, dear?" Ethelia asked, offering a spare.

"What's happening?" Gwen asked them.

"It was one thing when Merlin was arrested," Eduard explained. "That boy's been thrown in the stocks or the dungeons more times than I can count. But once we found out about the execution, we knew we had to do something."

"The Prince asked us not to say anything," Ethelia added. "But we have to show the King how important Merlin is to us."

"That's very kind of you," Gwen said, concerned that they were putting themselves in danger. "But is it wise--"

"He saved our lives. He saved mine," Eduard said, and it was clear how much that meant to him. "If I didn't at least try to save him, I would carry that shame for the rest of my life."

"As would I," Ethelia said, with equal determination. "As would all of us. Perhaps the King will listen to us, perhaps not. But we won't let him go without a fight."

The others around them quietly agreed. Gwen was deeply touched and quite taken aback by it all. She had never seen such an outpouring of support, not in Camelot, not for a prisoner marked for execution. It was unthinkable to stand against the King, even with a peaceful protest. Everyone was too afraid.

And yet here they were, and more were coming to join them. What had been unthinkable was now very thinkable indeed. All because of Merlin, because of what he had done for them.

Did he know what was happening? His cell didn't have a view of the courtyard, but surely the guards were talking about it. Even though she had stood in his place not long ago, she could barely imagine what this would mean to him. She wanted to run down to the dungeons and tell him, show him how much they all cared for him. The people of Camelot.

The people.

It was true that a kingdom and its King were one. But so were a kingdom and its people. That was a lesson that Alined had learned too late. But it wasn't too late for Uther, and that meant it wasn't too late for Merlin. For all of them.

"Thank you," Gwen said, blinking the tears from her eyes. She hefted the basket against her hip and carried it as she rushed towards Arthur's chambers.
When Gwen bolted into his chambers, flushed and in a state, Arthur's first, fearful thought was that something terrible had happened. That she had been caught with magical items and had rushed to him for help, or that Merlin had run out of patience and broken out early. But even as he rose from his desk to meet her, she turned away from him and stashed the basket in Merlin's chambers.

"Gwen, what--"

"Arthur, you have to see this," Gwen said, grabbing him by the hand as she rushed towards the courtyard window. "Look!"

Arthur looked. It took him a moment to realize what she was so excited about. "A vigil?"

"It's for Merlin," Gwen said, still trying to impress its importance on him. "They're protesting his execution."

Arthur groaned. This was the last thing they needed with the situation already so delicate. "We have to tell them to leave. They're going to end up down in the dungeons with him."

"No, we don't," Gwen said. "Arthur, don't you remember? They did this for you when you were dying from the Questing Beast. They thought they were going to lose you, and now they think they're going to lose Merlin."

That gave Arthur pause. "You spoke with them?"

Gwen nodded. "It's because of what Merlin did for them in Gedref. They've kept his secret but they haven't forgotten. They feel they owe him their lives."

"What are you saying?" Arthur asked, though he was starting to understand her urgency.

"I'm saying..." Gwen took a deep breath. "They want to help. I think we should let them."

Arthur looked at the cluster of candlelight down below, then at Gwen. She was afraid but so hopeful, so determined to find a way to save Merlin. If the others were anything like her, if they were willing to risk their very lives on Merlin's behalf... "It would be treason," he warned.

"It's the opposite," Gwen insisted. "This kingdom is theirs as much as it's yours and Uther's. If they want to have a say in its future, we should let them speak."

It was a preposterous idea. How would that even work? Would the King have to constantly go knocking on every door, asking everyone's opinion, begging for the people to support him? What if they disagreed? How could any kingdom function without a single, strong voice to lead it?

And yet. And yet.

"Arthur," Gwen continued, full of barely-contained passion. "The people of this town are willing to fight. Let us help."

Before Arthur could answer, the door swung open again and Morgana burst in. "What on earth is going on out there?"
The three of them went down to the courtyard. Even in the short time it had taken them to reach it, several more people had arrived to join the vigil. Arthur recognized that everyone holding a candle had been in Gedref or was close to someone who had. Between the army and its support, that had been a thousand-strong. Surely not all of them were going to come.

"Prince Arthur," greeted the vigilers, bowing in welcome.

"I understand that you're here because of Merlin," Arthur said, curious to hear their intent from them directly. Was it really as Gwen had said?

"We are, my Lord," said a voice, an older woman. She stepped forward to meet them and Arthur recognized her.

"Ethelia," Arthur greeted, surprised. She had tended to him when he was young and she had always been quite maternal towards even as he grew. She was a gentle soul and not the sort to stand up to a royal decree. But here she was, and beside her was her son. "Eduard," he greeted.

"Sire," Eduard said, visibly pleased that Arthur remembered his name. "Gwen, thank you for bringing him."

Gwen gave a gracious nod. She looked to Arthur expectantly.

"The King has made his decision," Arthur said, wanting to make the situation perfectly clear to them. "What do you hope to achieve by this defiance?"

Both Eduard and Ethelia were taken aback, but they quickly recovered, showing that their determination in this was strong. "My Lord, when we heard about Merlin, we knew we had to do something," Ethelia explained.

"He saved us in Gedref," Eduard added, heatedly. "If we didn't at least try to save him, we would carry that shame for the rest of our lives. And you should feel the same."

Ethelia put a hand on his back to gentle Eduard, but when she spoke it was with no less passion. "My Lord, of course we respect your request for our silence," she said. "But we agreed to it for Merlin's sake as well as yours. It will do either of you little good if he's executed."

"I see," Arthur said.

"My Lord," said Eduard, managing deference even as he was clearly ready for a fight. "When I was a boy, when you gave me your sword, it meant the world to me. Ever since I've dreamed of serving you as a knight of Camelot. I know I'm only a commoner, but so was Lancelot. So is Merlin. They risked their lives for you and proved themselves worthy. You may have turned your back on Lancelot but we won't turn our backs on Merlin."

"He doesn't deserve this fate, my Lord," Ethelia added. "Merlin is loyal to you and has risked his life for yours many times. If there's no justice for him, what is there for any of us?"

Arthur was astonished. He had expected fondness, even gratitude, but this was so much more. Even though all eyes were on his every move, he hadn't realized the impact that Lancelot's knighting and departure had made beyond the castle keep. Merlin's knighting had built on that, but his importance to them was far greater than Arthur had anticipated. Merlin had become a symbol of hope, of a brighter future. The people stood vigil now for the same reason that they had stood vigil before.

Except now their bane was not a magical venom but the King's fury. And still they came, undaunted. Their faith meant more than Arthur could say. He might not deserve it himself, but Merlin did.
Merlin was the grain of sand that would make Camelot into a gleaming pearl. That was what Arthur had hoped, and here it was becoming a reality. The pearl was forming before his eyes. Now it was up to him to protect it.

"Thank you," Arthur said, grateful. "Your words have touched me deeply, and I have no doubt that they will bring great comfort to Merlin once he hears them. I have no intention of allowing any harm to come to him, and your actions tonight may have given me what I need to secure his freedom."

He didn't need Gawant's army, not when he had his own. But if this was going to work, he was going to need a lot more than just this small group, even though more continued to trickle in to join them.

"The King is making a mistake," Arthur admitted, which was nearly treason itself. "It's not too late to change his mind, but to do that I need your help. I know it's asking a great deal--"

Eduard dropped to one knee and bowed his head. "I am ready, my Lord."

"As am I," agreed Ethelia. The others around them all voiced their agreement, and looked to Arthur expectantly. Waiting for his command as they had in Gedref.

Arthur reached down and held out his arm to Eduard. Eduard visibly puffed with pride as he took it and rose to stand tall. They shook arms as equals, and the crowd stirred with emotion.

Arthur pointed towards the drawbridge. "Go. To your friends, to your family, to anyone who will stand with us. If they wish to save an innocent life, they should come here to where so many have died. Bring them all and I shall stand with you tonight."

The vigilers looked to him with eyes full of hope and pride, and with a quick assent they strode out of the courtyard to complete their mission.

Only Ethelia remained behind. "He shouldn't be left alone," she said, quietly.

Arthur bowed to her, and she bowed back.

Gwen was staring at him with the same hope and pride he had seen in the vigilers. "Arthur, that was..." She turned and looked towards the drawbridge.

"Go, help them," Arthur said, giving her permission -- though in truth she didn't need it.

Gwen looked to Morgana, to Arthur, and then overcame whatever resistance had held her back. She hurried after the others to join them.

Morgana was simply astonished. It was clear that she could hardly believe her own senses. For years she had pushed and lectured and berated Arthur to stand against Uther's cruelties, and now at last it was happening. As the fact of it sank in, he saw her distrust and cynicism begin to melt away, and she looked at him as if seeing him for the first time.

"You're really doing this?"

"I am."

He was going to stand up to his father for the sake of a servant and a sorcerer. For the man he loved. Despite everything Morgana had been through, despite her own fear, she too rose to join him. "You're going to need all the help you can get," she declared, taking her place by Ethelia's side, with
her back straight and her head held high. "Uther wants me where he can see me? Now he'll see me."

"Go," Ethelia said. "Do what you have to. We'll be waiting for you."

"Let's show the King what we're made of," Morgana said, and for the first time in a long time, she looked at Arthur with approval.

In Gedref, Arthur had told Merlin that one day, before he became King, he would have to start taking power for himself. That it was expected of him, that it would prove he was fit to take the throne. He hadn't expected that time to come so soon and in such a drastic manner. But there was no denying that it had come.

§

If he and Merlin were destined to bring a golden age to Camelot, to Albion, that destiny would not simply happen on its own. If they wanted that future, they would have to work for it, fight for it, live for it. If they wanted a better world, it was up to them to make it better. And they were going to need everyone's help to do that.

Arthur found the knights gathered in the dining hall. From the state of the room, with its mugs and kegs of ale, they had been celebrating the peaceful end to the Deorham crisis. But the mood of the room was sober.

"Prince Arthur," greeted a relieved Sir Leon. "We just received word that you've convinced the people to disperse."

"Thank you, Sire. We are much relieved," added Sir Alynor. "If it went on much longer, we were certain that the King would command us to clear the courtyard."

"Such an action would risk a riot," Leon continued. "My Lord, we have no desire to harm our own kin. But thanks to your wise leadership, the people are returned safely to their homes."

"They aren't," Arthur said, with some regret. They weren't going to like what he was about to say, but if Arthur ever hoped to lead them as their King, he had to lead them as their Prince, whether the going was easy or hard. They had followed him to victory in Gedref; now he had to persuade them to follow him in the heart of Camelot. "They're coming back and in greater numbers."

"Then we must stop them," Leon said, alarmed. "Send order to pull up the drawbridge at once."

"No," Arthur said, countermanding him. "Let them come."

"Sire?" Leon asked, confused. "I don't understand."

"The people are gathering for a peaceful vigil in order to pay their respects to Merlin. They're unhappy that the King has ordered his execution."

"We're not happy about it either," said Sir Kay.

"Why is Merlin to be executed at all?" asked Sir Ronald. "For trespassing? It makes no sense. Why was he even banned from the castle in the first place?" Sir Jarin, Sir Borin and Sir Althalos all voiced their agreement.

"If the King wants to punish him, why not the stocks or a few lashings?" asked Kay. "The punishment far outweighs the crime. It's no wonder that it's compelled a vigil."
"If only it was that simple," Arthur said. "I have tried to reason with my father but he refuses to listen."

Kay scoffed. "The King selected Merlin to be your servant in the first place, over your loud protestations as I recall. Though he was hardly ideal, his loyalty to you was undeniable from the start. He drank from a poisoned cup to save your life! I know of few who would perform such an act, much less a country boy who had only been in your service for a matter of weeks." He frowned. "But we must respect the wisdom of our King."

The others gave regretful agreement.

It was no surprise that Ronald, Jarin, Borin, and Althalos were all loyal to Merlin, having been closest to him among the knights. And Kay's fondness for Merlin was evident. He had been the first to accept Merlin as a knight and the first to swear to keep that knighthood secret. But they had sworn an oath to serve the King and to protect Camelot. Such oaths were not a thing taken lightly, as Arthur knew well. To take it, a man must accept the order of things, for it was he who ultimately maintained and protected it. To stand against their King would be an act of treason, and he couldn't force them to it. Like the vigilers, they must do it of their own free will.

"I don't see why you're all so concerned about him," said Sir Melias. He was a younger knight with an arrogant air, and had not been among the many who went to Gedref. "He's not even your servant anymore, my Lord. Surely his fate is no longer your concern."

"The boy's loyalty should count for something," argued Sir Driant. He had also stayed behind, though he was among the oldest of the knights. "But the King's word is law. We must respect his decision."

Leon and Alynor regretfully agreed. They too had remained behind when the army had marched to Gedref.

Arthur realized then that they would never be willing to fight for Merlin until they knew the truth. As Ethelia had said, keeping Merlin's knighthood and victories a secret had made sense at first, back when Arthur had planned for the truth to be revealed at a much later date. But the situation had changed.

"There's something I need to tell you," Arthur began, addressing the room. "Something many of you already know and kept secret on my behalf. Merlin is more than just a servant."

"Sire?" Leon asked, brow furrowing.

"I personally trained him and swore him to my service as a knight," Arthur said, clear and loud so everyone could hear, so there would be no mistaking it. "And as a knight, he fought by my side in Gedref."

The minority in the room who did not already know all reacted with shock. Leon in particular. As Arthur's second, he was expected to have Arthur's trust. But Arthur had not trusted him with this.

"I'm sorry," Arthur said, regretting that the situation had played out this way. "I had intended to tell you. All of you. But I didn't wish to risk Merlin's life -- for all the good that did him. I made a mistake, just as my father is making one now."

"You all knew?" Leon asked, turning to the knights who had been in Gedref. "You didn't say anything?"

"The Prince asked us not to," said Kay, gently.
"You lied to the King!" exclaimed Melias, outraged, then rounded on Arthur. "You broke the First Code for your own servant!"

"Yes, I did," Arthur said, staring Melias down. "I chose Merlin because I saw his loyalty and his potential. But he has more than proved himself to be worthy as a knight of Camelot."

Many of the other knights voiced their agreement, though quietly.

Melia sneered. "What, did he suck all of your cocks? This is treason, and I for one--"

"Silence!" barked Kay. Some of the old fire was still in him from his days as Uther's first knight.

Melia stopped, the command giving him pause. But he glared mutinously at Kay and Arthur.

"I will tell you what treason is," Arthur said, his voice low with anger. "It is treason to intentionally leave our kingdom's defenses weak to attack. It is treason to let good men die out of simple pride. The First Code is nothing but a yoke and it has held us back for long enough. If anything is proof of that, it is Merlin." He took a breath. "It was Merlin, not Geraint, that broke into Gedref's occupied castle and infiltrated the enemy. It was Merlin who broke the sorcerer's magic. He rode into battle by my side and fought with great bravery, risking his own life to help me kill Palaemon and defeat the Deorham invasion. And when it was done, he was humble enough to return to life as my servant until the day came when he could once again be my knight. My father's actions mean that that time must be now."

He paused and took in their reactions. Some were proud, some uncertain, and a few scornful of Arthur's subterfuge. But most were on his side. He only had to call upon them to act.

"I would see that loyalty returned," he continued. "For Merlin's sake, I intent to stand vigil tonight. I ask you to join me."

"Sire," Leon said. He was one of the most visibly torn. "I respect you greatly and would follow you anywhere in defense of Camelot. But you are asking us to stand against the King."

"No," Arthur said, softer now. "I am asking you to stand with me, as your Prince and your fellow knight, for the sake of another knight. We will stand out of respect for what Merlin did for us in Gedref and for the good that he may yet do."

But Leon wasn't convinced. "You realize what you are asking of us? We may end up in defiance of our own houses."

"I do not seek to challenge my father, but neither will I allow an innocent man to die," said Arthur. "A man who has risked life and limb to protect our kingdom and its people. The King is making a mistake. I seek only to change his mind. To show him the evidence he needs to make his judgement just, as a King's judgement should be." He addressed the room again. "As Knights of Camelot, we swore an oath to exercise mercy and judgement. To the protection of our kingdom and its people. There is no justice in the deaths of innocents. There is no mercy in an execution where there is no crime. The people of Camelot stand in that courtyard and risk their lives because Merlin risked his for them. I will not force you to join me. But if I stand by and let injustice happen, if I do not fight for mercy, then I am nothing but a coward."

"We will stand for justice," said Ronald, and he, Jarin, Borin, and Althalos stepped forward. So did Kay, and Driant, and even Leon sighed and came over. In the end, Arthur had the support of all the knights who had been in Gedref and most of those who had not. Only a few remained, Melias unsurprisingly among them.
"My father will never accept this nonsense," warned Melias, "and neither will the other lords. If you do this now, don't expect their support if you ever take the throne."

"So be it," Arthur said. He made careful note of each holdout, for they and their houses would one day need to be dealt with. And then he turned and headed out of the hall, his loyal knights in tow.

When they reached the courtyard, they found it was quickly filling up as more and more people poured in across the drawbridge. Gwen and Morgana were handing out candles that they had likely taken from the castle storeroom, sharing them with anyone who needed them. When Morgana saw the knights' arrival, she gave each of them in turn a candle and a warm smile, giving their morale a much-needed boost. As they settled into the crowd, Arthur took his position at the front of it, candle in hand.

To his surprise, Elena walked over to join him. "Took you long enough," she said, giving him a prod with her elbow. "it's a good thing I wasn't waiting around for an invitation."

Arthur cracked a smile, glad of her support. "You don't have to be here, you know."

"I rather think I do," Elena insisted. "My father is staying inside to see if he can talk some sense into your father."

"I hope he can," Arthur said, but doubted even Godwyn could reach Uther at this point. He looked out at the courtyard and all the people in it. His people. Merlin's people. They were too many, too strong for Uther to ignore. The plan would work because they were going to make it work. There was no backing out now.

When Arthur turned to face the courtyard steps again, he saw a figure in the doorway. It was Gaius. He stood there for a long time, but Arthur didn't call to him. It had to be his own decision just as it had been for everyone else. Gaius had to weigh the decision in his own heart, the consequences of action and inaction, the burden of fear and the strength required to carry it. Was his love for Merlin stronger than his duty to Uther?

The answer came in his action. Gaius shuffled forward, his expression grave. Arthur braced himself for a lecture, but Gaius said nothing. Instead he silently accepted one of Morgana's candles and allowed it to be lit. Then he took his place beside them.

"Thank you," Arthur said, quietly.

"I just hope you know what you're doing," Gaius muttered.

Arthur looked up at the windows overlooking the courtyard. Another figure caught his eye, and he recognized his father's silhouette, his broad chest and the angles of his crown. Uther was watching them, as silent and unmoving as a statue.

"So do I," Arthur said, and stared back.

§

All through the night, Uther watched them. From his window, he had a perfect view of the crowd that filled the courtyard to the brim and overflowed beyond it. It seemed that almost the whole town was there: the people who had served and fought in Gedref, the knights, everyone that Merlin had helped as a servant or a physician's assistant or simply out of his own kindness. Perhaps there were even a few, like Gwen, who knew of his magic and kept it secret. If that was not enough, all had brought their friends and families, old and young. And in every hand was a candle, flickering bravely in the darkness, so that from above they were a constellation that outshone the bright stars above.
As Uther watched them, Arthur watched Uther. It was a battle of wills, a test of strength, and Arthur would not fail it. Not with his army, his people by his side and at his back. Everyone had wanted him to show that he could lead, and now he led. If they had any doubts, this night would put them to rest -- as long as Arthur could claim victory here as he had so many times in war.

The trick, of course, lay in walking the fine line between protest and rebellion. There were countless ways that this could end badly, but Arthur kept his mind fixed on the one way it would end well. He had commanded that no weapons be brought in to avoid escalation. To dissuade the palace guards from pushing them out, Arthur had placed the guards' families before them. Arthur stood, silent and determined, and from child to servant to knight, everyone followed his example. And what was a King for if not to be an example to his people? Like his father, he had sworn an oath to fight for all that was good. To exercise mercy and justice in his deeds and judgments, and to govern in accordance with the law. If his father had forgotten those values, if any of them had, it was Arthur's duty to remind them.

As the hours passed, everyone stayed put. Some sat down to rest, then stood again. Water and food were passed around, as were fresh candles to those who needed them. And then at last the sky began to lighten, and Uther's silhouette vanished from the window above.

Arthur braced himself.

The doors to the keep opened and Uther stepped out, flanked by palace guards and the knights who had stayed behind. With him came Lord Godwyn as well as Geoffrey and the rest of the Council. They were old men, and they had had a long day and a long night, and their exhaustion was clear. Arthur felt exhausted himself, but he would not give in to it. He would rest again only when Merlin was safe in his arms.

Uther raised one hand, signalling for his retinue to stop, then came forward without them. He walked directly to Arthur and stopped.

"I have waited for you to stop this madness on your own," Uther growled. "I will wait no longer. Guards!"

The guards started forward, then faltered again. Their wives and children and parents stood before them like a wall, and they were torn between the orders of their King and the reality that they couldn't attack their own kin. It didn't help that they were severely outnumbered. Even if they each stopped a few, there would be many more who could overpower them. They had the sense to recognize that an attack would only end badly.


Uther sputtered with outrage. "This irresponsible behavior is exactly why his influence must be removed. You are putting the entire kingdom at risk for one stupid boy!"

Again Arthur recognized that it was time for the truth to be spoken. Gaius was wrong about a great many things, but he was right about one: that the truth was a weapon. It was the most powerful weapon he had.

"Merlin is a loyal servant and a good man," Arthur began, readying himself for Uther's reaction. "And he is a knight of Camelot."

Uther stared. "What?"

"You claim that Merlin is worthless and foolish. But the victory in Gedref that you prize so highly
could not have been won without him."

"What absolute nonsense--"

"I trained him myself," Arthur said, firmly. "I taught him how to fight and then I knighted him. And when Camelot was in danger, he fought by my side and did what no one else could. He was the true hero of Gedref."

It was clear that Uther did not want to believe this. He shook his head. "Sir Geraint--"

"--died before we could reach Gedref. He was killed in an ambush and fought bravely to the end. But he did not kill the Deorham's patrol. He did not breach the castle and rally the servants against the enemy. He did not steal Lord Idryis' plans or break sorcerer's protection." Arthur stepped forward, closing the distance between himself and his father. "He did not ride by my side into the heat of battle and risk his life to help me kill the sorcerer and defeat Lord Idryis. All of that, all of it, was Merlin. Sir Merlin." He took a breath. "You keep telling me to put my trust in the right people. Merlin is one of those people. He has proved himself to me a thousand times over."

By the end of it, Uther's fury was white-hot. "This insolence is at an end. You've betrayed the First Code of Camelot, our founding principle--"

"The First Code means nothing if we cannot defend our kingdom," Arthur said, interrupting sharply. "Lancelot proved himself worthy against the griffin, and if he had not left of his own accord I would have fought for him. In Gedref, Merlin proved himself as a knight. That our people stand here now is proof of that. We would be wise to listen to them."

Arthur said the last quietly, but it was like an arrow, silent and swift and striking true. For all that Uther ignored the common people and disregarded their importance, after Alined he could not help but be aware of how dangerous it was when a people rose against their king. Arthur had led an army down to Gedref at Uther's command, but when it returned, it was Arthur's command they followed.

Arthur did not want to have to follow fully in Idryis' footsteps, and neither did Uther wish to share Alined's fate. The result was that Uther was trapped and they both knew it. The balance of power had shifted irrevocably. More than that, Arthur had made his case before everyone and proved its strength, and he could see that his father had no argument against it. In this moment, Arthur had won... yet if he didn't give his father the graceful exit he needed, a way to save face and avoid humiliation, Uther would only dig his heels in deeper and push a peaceful situation into violence.

If he wanted to walk that fine line to victory, there was only one thing Arthur could do. He lowered himself down to one knee and bowed his head. With a glance from him, the knights copied him, and then the whole vigil followed suit. Yet they kept their candles in hand.

"My Lord," Arthur began, his voice ringing out clear for everyone to hear. "I know that you are a good and just king. I know that you care deeply for your kingdom and your subjects. We ask you now to be merciful in your strength. We ask you to spare the life of this man who has saved the lives of so many. And as your heir and Crown Prince of Camelot, I petition that you may to allow me to restore Merlin's knighthood under your authority and grace."

He looked up to meet his father's eyes. Despite his submissive posture, he knew that Uther could not ignore the steel in his eyes. Arthur had offered a way out of what was for him an impossible situation. If Uther refused to take it, then it would mean war, a civil war that would tear Camelot to pieces. Even in his deepest madness, Uther must see the folly of such a path. He would not risk everything, not over one man, even one that had broken the First Code.
Guards," Uther called, holding Arthur's gaze. "Bring out the prisoner."

There was a clatter of metal chains, and then Merlin emerged from the doorway, braced by the guards. His legs and wrists were bound, but he was wearing the clothes that George had brought down to him. He must have been held just inside the keep and would have heard everything. His eyes glistened in the pre-dawn light.

And then just as Arthur had hoped, had prayed, had imagined for all the long hours of the night's vigil, Uther backed down. They had won.

"Perhaps I was wrong," Uther admitted, turning away and looking out at the people. "I am touched by the depths of your concern for this b-- for Merlin. If he was indeed responsible for our victory in Gedref, then he is of course a hero." Only Arthur was close enough to see the disgust that flickered across his father's face as he spoke that last word. But it was quickly hidden. "Had I known the truth, this situation might never have occurred." He waved to the guards. "Let him go."

Arthur stood and watched as Merlin was uncuffed. Merlin was frozen with shock as the guards took away the heavy chains and gave him a respectful bow. He managed a halting nod back to them, then stared out at the crowd of people before him. Though Arthur would not deny that his actions had been instrumental, the truth was that Merlin had been saved by the people of Camelot and by their love for him. When he had needed it most, they had risen to his defense and risked their own lives as he had risked his life for them. And now, because of them, he was free.

Merlin walked straight to Arthur's side. Then he took a long, deep breath and turned to face the King. He bowed deeply. "Thank you for your mercy, my Lord. I live only to protect your son and your kingdom."

Uther stared at Merlin's bowed head, and Arthur half-feared that he would take out his sword and swing for Merlin's neck. But Uther's hands remained at his sides, and his sword remained in its sheath. "See that you do," he said, at once an acceptance, a dismissal, and a warning.

Uther looked to Arthur and stared intently at him, but said nothing aloud. He conveyed that they would speak of this in private and that their conversation would be one that Arthur would not soon forget. Then he turned away and waved at the guards to stand down.

It was over.

As realization moved in waves through the crowd, the vigilers began to celebrate. They grinned and cheered and raised their candles high as the morning sun broke into the sky, its golden light warming the castle stones from the long, cool night. Their victory won, the people broke formation, and many came forward to congratulate Merlin and thank him for all he had done for them. Knights slapped him on the back and shook his arm, and several women and children hugged him, as did Ethelia and Gwen, Morgana and Elena.

Uther retreated and the council followed him inside. Geoffrey and Godwyn remained behind and came down the steps to join the celebration: Geoffrey to Gaius, and Godwyn to Elena.

"Wonderful work, Arthur, simply wonderful," Godwyn declared. He clapped an arm to Arthur's shoulder. "Gawant would have been proud to have you as her king."

"Thank you, my Lord," Arthur said, sharing a regretful look with Elena. "Your daughter would have made a fine Queen of Camelot."

"Perhaps one day," Godwyn said, wistfully. Then he took his daughter's arm. "Come, my dear. It's
been a long night."

"At least you got to spend it sitting down," Elena said, as they walked up the steps.

As Arthur turned around, Gwen and Morgana approached him.

"Arthur, I'm so proud!" Gwen said, beaming at him. She bowed deeply to him. "Thank you, my Lord."

Arthur accepted her fealty and returned it. "I only wish I could have done the same for Tom."

Grief dampened Gwen's joy, but at the same time he could see how much his words meant to her. "As do I, my Lord. He would have been so proud of you."

"Of you as well," Arthur insisted. "None of this would have been possible without you and you have my gratitude."

Gwen beamed again, and bowed to Arthur once more before slipping back into the crowd to celebrate with her friends, leaving Morgana behind. Morgana watched her go with evident longing, but then sharply turned away, as if dismissing whatever action she had been considering. She raised her head and faced Arthur directly.

"I must say I'm impressed," Morgana said, giving him an approving smile.

"Didn't think I had it in me?" Arthur teased. It felt good that they could tease each other again.

"Oh, I know you didn't," Morgana jested. Then she looked to Merlin and sobered. "But he did." She turned back to Arthur. "You'd better hang on to him. You'd be lost without him."

Arthur nodded in agreement. It was all true. And yet if he'd learned anything about his relationship with Merlin, it was that it wasn't about holding on to him. Despite his father's intervention at the start, the truth was that Merlin had come to him, found him and chosen him of his own free will. And that was the way it was meant to be. All Arthur had to do to keep him was to be worthy of him.

As the crowd dispersed, Arthur went to Merlin's side. Merlin was dazed, grinning, his eyes wet with emotion. As Arthur drew close, he saw that Merlin was trembling all over.

"Arthur, I..."

Arthur hushed him and moved closer. Merlin closed his eyes tight and tears streaked silently down his cheeks. Arthur gently wiped them away. Merlin opened his eyes again, cheek pressed against his hand, and he was full of love and need. Arthur ached to hold him close and kiss him. But they couldn't do that here.

Arthur placed a hand on Merlin's back and guided him towards the steps. "Let's go home," he said, thinking of his bed -- their bed. Of Merlin laying beside him, soft and warm with sleep. They would close the curtains against the sun and make their own private world together once more, and for the first time.

"Home," Merlin echoed, and walked in step with him into the keep.
When they entered their chambers, they found that it had been prepared for their return. George had been busy, and along with the presentation of a small feast's worth of food, the rooms had been prepared as though it was evening instead of dawn, with curtains drawn and candles lit. The man himself was nowhere to be seen.

Arthur locked the door behind them and proceeded inside, not certain if sleep or hunger would win out first. He turned to ask Merlin what he wanted, and saw that he had stopped. "Merlin?"

Merlin was still raw from his captivity and rescue, so it was difficult to tell what he was feeling just by looking at him. But there was a new hesitance to him. He seemed caught, unwilling or unable to enter any further. When he didn't reply, Arthur returned to him, concerned. But that was enough to break him free.

"This looks good," Merlin said, with false lightness. He picked up a plate and began piling food on it, seemingly at random.

Arthur wanted Merlin to eat, but he wasn't going to let Merlin bottle up whatever was bothering him. Not anymore. He picked up a plate of his own and chose some food. "While we eat, you can tell me what's bothering you."

Merlin froze with a spoon full of mash halfway to his plate, then gave the spoon a loud rap to empty it. "Can we talk about it tomorrow?"

"No. If it's bothering you now, we'll talk about it now."

Merlin glared down at his plate, then picked up a chicken leg and bit into it angrily. He chewed like the chicken had done some grave insult to his mother. Arthur let him have his huff; Merlin usually burned himself out fairly quickly.

Perhaps it was the food's calming effects or his lack of reserves for anything like a proper snit, but Merlin gave up quicker than usual.

"I can't help remembering." Merlin glanced at where they had fought that awful night, at the doorway to what had been Merlin's chamber before everything went so disastrously wrong. The last thing it had been was a prison cell. It was no wonder that Merlin was uncomfortable.

"Do you want to leave?" Arthur asked. They didn't have to sleep here, not tonight. Maybe not ever again. "I could persuade Morgana to swap chambers with us, if that would help."

"She'd love that," Merlin said, mildly amused by the idea. Then he sobered. "No. There's good memories too. A lot more of those, really." He mustered a smile. "I'm just tired."

It wasn't just that Merlin was tired, but at the same time he was right. Things would look better once they'd rested, and the good memories they'd made here together far outweighed the bad. If they were willing to fight for Camelot, they should start with their own private piece of it.

They finished eating and prepared for bed. Merlin's belongings were still back at Gwen's house, so he had to borrow from Arthur again. Arthur didn't mind; in truth, there were few things he loved more than when Merlin was all wrapped up in him. But he made a note to have everything brought back as soon as possible. He wanted Merlin to feel at home here again. He wanted Merlin's clothes draped over the furniture or piled on the floor. He wanted this space to be theirs.
He blew out all but the last candle and they climbed into bed. Their bare skin brushed, but only briefly. There was an awkwardness between them here that was new, and Arthur hated it. Too much morning light escaped the curtains, so he drew down the bedcurtains. He blew out the last candle and they lay down in the darkness.

He couldn't sleep. He could barely even close his eyes. He could feel the tension in Merlin's body even without touching him. Had bad memories ruined this as well? Would they ever get back what they'd had? Their breathing seemed loud in the quiet of the curtained bed, as did every shift of their bodies as they tried in vain to find respite.

They needed to do something or they were never going to be able to relax enough to sleep. They'd already eaten, sex wasn't an option, they were too tired for exercise, and Merlin was too stubborn to agree to sleep elsewhere. That just left talking. But what about?

Maybe... Maybe what they needed was to do was focus on those good memories. To remember why they had fallen in love with each other in the first place. Arthur stared at the black velvet cloth that hung over the bedposts and thought back to the early days. Before Gedref, before the training. Before Merlin had turned up in his bed, naked except for one of Arthur's shirts, and Arthur had decided to accept what he was offering so blatantly. Even before they had truly gotten to know each other and become friends.

"The first time I nearly lost you," he began, quietly, "I did something very stupid. My father ordered me not to, but I didn't care. I only knew that I had to save you. So I rode out into a dangerous, magical forest, fought a monster, then nearly died falling off the wall of some dank cave trying to pluck a flower off it."

Merlin gave a soft, fond huff. "You were very brave."

"I nearly died," Arthur said, without heat. "But I didn't. Because you saved me."

"Me? What did I do?"

Arthur thought he was joking at first, but then he realized that Merlin was serious. "You don't remember?"

There was the sound of Merlin's head shifting against the pillow. "I was out cold for days. Between drinking from that goblet and waking up from the antidote? Nothing." He paused. "Except..."

"Yes?"

"Gaius said I did something strange while I was fighting the fever. That I was talking in something like the Old Tongue, but he couldn't understand it. And there was this light..."


Merlin turned and stared at him. "There's no way Gaius told you that."

"He didn't have to. I saw it myself. You were dying and you sent your soul out of your body to protect me."

"What?"

"I know it sounds crazy," Arthur said, because it truly did. At the time it had been a mystery, but he had learned so much since then. He knew now what he had seen. "But when you did the transformation spell to change back from a bird, I saw it, the same blue light. Just like the lost souls in
Avalon. Even the dragons', and I know you saw theirs."

Merlin was speechless. Then Arthur saw the flare of his eyes in the darkness, and it appeared: a small globe cupped in Merlin's palm, swirling with blue-white light. "Like this?"

Arthur stared in awe. "Is that?"

"It's not real," Merlin said, as if it was no matter at all to be able to summon the image of his immortal soul into his hand. "Is it the same?"

"Yes." Arthur reached out and tried to touch it, but it was only light, nothing solid. Yet he felt the power of Merlin's magic giving it life.

Merlin's eyes glowed again, and the globe floated up and bobbed in the air above them, casting gentle swirls of light and shadow against the curtains. It was beautiful.

"That's how I knew," Arthur said, softly. "I didn't know what it was or who had sent it. But I couldn't deny that magic had saved both our lives. My father was wrong. Magic could be used for good." He turned to face Merlin. "You showed me that. Right from the start."

At last Merlin reached for him, and they held each other in the light of Merlin's soul. Merlin gripped him tightly, and Arthur gentled him, soothing him with soft caresses and sweet kisses. Slowly Merlin's breathing began to even and his hold on Arthur eased. They lay down again, this time together, and Arthur continued to gentle Merlin until his eyes drifted shut and the lines of strain smoothed from his face.

Sometimes Arthur forgot how young Merlin was. How young they both were. They had to take care of each other because the world wouldn't wait for them. It couldn't, not when it had already waited for such a very, very long time.

The small orb was still glowing, so Arthur reached up towards it and cupped his hand around it. Though it had no weight, it obeyed the guide of his hand as he brought it down between them. Again he felt Merlin's magic in the globe, thrumming gently, and he stared in tired wonder at the soul of the man he loved with all his heart.

Then, on some mad impulse, he brought it to his chest. As the light quenched inside him, the magic released, and for a moment he felt as he had in Avalon: the rush of awareness, the answering touch of magic. He knew and was known. The silver cord between their souls plucked like a lyre, and Arthur closed his eyes, following its resonance into sleep.

§

Sunlight woke Arthur, which confused him until he saw that the curtains had been drawn back, both the ones around the bed and the ones at the windows. It was dawn, which confused him again, his mind sluggish from the long, restful sleep, until he realized that they had slept an entire day away. He rubbed his eyes and stretched, and found that his left arm was trapped under Merlin. Merlin had never been an elegant sleeper, and the morning found him in an undignified sprawl, his hair adorably askew from being mashed up against the pillows. He showed no sign of stirring.

Arthur eased his arm free and sat up. He watched Merlin fondly, then stood, his body eager to move again. He looked out at the bright morning, opened a window and found the temperature pleasant. Down below, people were passing through the courtyard on their chores and routines. It was all gratifyingly normal.

Arthur returned to the bed and sat down, then touched his chest where he had pressed Merlin's light
He felt his own heartbeat against his fingers, strong and steady. He reached down and pressed his hand over Merlin's heart and felt the beat there just as true. He leaned down and kissed Merlin's forehead, smoothed down his hair.

At last Merlin stirred, brow furrowing as his eyes cracked open. When he saw Arthur, he smiled blearily, and the sight of it filled Arthur's chest to bursting.

"Morning," Arthur said, softly.

Merlin yawned and stretched, full-bodied like a cat. Then he slumped flat. He rubbed his face and blinked to wakefulness. "I had a very strange dream last night," he said, looking at Arthur with mischief in his eyes. "Half the town marched into the courtyard and talked Uther out of executing me. No way that could have happened."

"Absolutely absurd," Arthur agreed, and cupped his hand to Merlin's cheek. "There's no way all of them could love you as much as I do."

Though it was said lightly, Arthur saw the impact of his words. For a moment, he was afraid that Merlin would break into tears, but instead he rested his hand over Arthur's and held it. The morning light from the windows glittered in his eyes.

"I know it's strange, but you're just going to have to get use to it," Arthur teased, lightening the mood. "You're officially my knight again. Or you will be once we have the ceremony. I want everyone to see just how important you are."

Merlin groaned and covered his face. "Do we have to?"

"Too late to go all shy now," Arthur said, amused.

There was a discreet knock on the bedroom door, and then George's voice came through the door. "My Lords? I have breakfast."

"Just a moment," Arthur said, and pulled on the nearest pair of trousers. Merlin tugged the blanket up higher, then braced himself. "Enter," Arthur called.

George entered with a tray laden with food. He bowed to them and placed the tray on Arthur's desk. "My Lords. How can I be of service today? Sir Merlin, I am at your service, unless you wish to procure your own manservant?"

Merlin stared, uncomprehending, and then the light slowly dawned. "I don't-- Um, I mean, um." He looked to Arthur for help.

"You'll be serving both of us, George, if that's all right."

"Perfectly, sire," George said, and began filling their plates with selections from the platter. He promptly served them both breakfast in bed. Merlin gaped at him like a landed fish.

"Yesterday was quiet after your vigil completed," George said, reporting to them as he placed a fork into Merlin's hand. "The only event of note was Alined's execution."

"It's done?" Arthur asked, surprised. He had thought his father would delay it.

"It was not well attended," George said, handing Arthur his goblet. "Most of the town required rest after the long night."
"A private execution," Arthur said. He wondered if that was better or worse than one with a crowd. In the end it didn't make much difference, but to Alined it could have been either a relief or an insult. He had plagued Camelot for decades, yet when his ignominious end had come, no one had cared enough to come and watch. And what had Uther thought of it all? "I suppose my father didn't want to delay his one source of satisfaction."

Merlin snorted, then quickly hid his face in his cup. He glanced at George warily, apparently expecting him to defend the King like a loyal servant should. But George wasn't Uther's manservant, and his loyalties were not as might be expected.

"George, I need you to get Merlin ready for his ceremony. His armor and boots need to be cleaned, he needs clothes chosen and fitted, and his sword must be polished. Have the tailor come to take measurements for his new wardrobe and inform the King that we're awake so that the knighting ceremony can be scheduled."

"Of course, my Lords," George said. He looked to Merlin. "Is there anything else? Anything at all? I am at your disposal, my Lord."

Merlin was clearly at a loss. He shook his head and his cheeks flushed pink.

"Oh, there is one more thing," Arthur added. "Merlin's things are currently at Guinevere's house in the lower town. When the other tasks are done, go and bring them back here."

"No!" Merlin said, almost dropping his plate in his urgency. "I'll do it. It's fine."

George tilted his head, then looked to Arthur to confirm. Arthur nodded and waved for him to go. "Very well, my Lords." He turned on his heel and marched off to obey.

Merlin watched until George had left the chambers entirely, then rounded on Arthur. "What was all that?"

"You might want to narrow that down."

Merlin glared at him for being cheeky. "I don't need him to do anything for me. I can take care of it myself."

"It's his job," Arthur reminded him, tolerantly.

"It's my job," Merlin began, then stopped as he realized that it wasn't his job anymore. He scowled and pushed away his plate, as if it was the food's fault he'd been displaced. "I don't trust him."

"He's a good man," Arthur said, knowing it would take time for Merlin to see that. He'd always been prone to jealousy; Arthur only had to think of the debacle with Cedric to see that. Even before it had been revealed that Cedric was a thief who had been possessed by Sigan, Merlin had been riled by the competition. But George wasn't Cedric. "He was raised to serve as my manservant for life. He'd already have been if you hadn't taken his job."

"Maybe I should take it back," Merlin muttered.

Arthur picked up the plate and put it back in Merlin's hands. "I know it's all happening fast. But the sooner we accept the change, the easier it will be for everyone else. It's an adjustment for them too, to have a servant become a knight."

It would be a bigger adjustment for some than others. George's natural obsequience reminded Arthur that even something as minor as an honorific was going to be an issue. Because all knights were
noble, all knights were addressed nobly. The natural instinct would be to address Merlin as noble, and that would have the effect of reminding everyone that he wasn't noble every time they saw him. It was the kind of small detail that would ultimately cause a great deal of friction, especially in the Court. Arthur could already see Sir Melias and his family making a mockery of Merlin with it, and even the thought of it rankled him.

If Arthur truly wanted to build on their victory, he was going to have to resolve the problem before anyone could take advantage of it. Fortunately, he'd already considered many options for this back when he'd first started planning to make Merlin his knight. And given the situation as it was now, the ideal solution immediately presented itself.

"It will be less of an adjustment if the servant becomes a noble first."

"What?"

"Before the ceremony today, I'm going to have a talk with Geoffrey. I don't want there to be any reason for my father to change his mind at the last minute." It was just the sort of thing his father would do if he thought he could get away with it. Arthur fully expected his father to be desperate for any excuse, and if he could find one that was 'for the good of Camelot' that would be all he needed. With the execution order revoked, the people would be unlikely to rise up a second time. The whole gambit would collapse.

Merlin stared at him. "You're serious."

"Think of it as part of the promotion. Technically I don't own any land until my father dies. But as Crown Prince, I have provisional claim. And if I chose, I can divide that claim."

Merlin's eyes widened with alarm. "You're going to give me your land?"

Arthur set aside his goblet to explain. "Some of it. I'm not King yet, and until then I have to meet my father halfway. He doesn't want to knight a commoner, but he'll accept it if you're at least a noble on paper."

"I thought yesterday, didn't he agree..."

"He did. But that was yesterday. It's the same as the negotiation after a battle. Just because we won, it doesn't mean we get everything we want. Not without one hell of a rout. There has to be compromise."

"I don't know what to do with land!"

"You don't have to. It won't even be mine until I take the crown. When that day comes, we'll deal with it. Until then it's just something for Geoffrey to write into his ledger." At Merlin's continued skepticism, Arthur pressed on. "George called you Sir because all knights are called Sir. Sir is a noble title. If you're a knight but not noble, it will encourage some of the court against us. A few lines on a page and the problem is resolved."

"Then why not just do that in the first place?" Merlin asked, bewildered.

"Because I didn't have the standing. We can only do this much because of what happened last night. My original plan was to open up the knights to any man who could prove his worth. But that would have been years from now and after I took the throne. We're doing this early so we have to do it differently."

Merlin was clearly at his wit's end with the whole business. He had reacted much the same when
Arthur had explained his plans to him in Gedref. Merlin had a lot to learn about court politics and he was going to have to learn fast. Perhaps they could enlist Morgana's help, assuming she wasn't going to hare off again.

"I'm sorry," Arthur said, not wanting Merlin to be upset. "I know it's a lot. But this is what we wanted. We just have to get through today and things will settle down."

"It's what you wanted," Merlin said, grumpily. "All I wanted was to keep you safe. You're the one who turned it into all this!" He spread his arms to indicate all the 'this' it was. "Maybe next time you should ask me before you put me in the middle of one of your bright ideas."

Arthur mentally counted to ten. He had to be patient. Besides, the fact was that he hadn't considered Merlin's feelings when he'd dreamed all this up, and that hadn't been at all kind. Not when Merlin had borne the brunt of the consequences. Even if it had turned out all right in the end, he'd put Merlin through hell.

"It's not too late to back out," Arthur offered.

Merlin looked at him as if he'd just grown a second head. "You're giving up?"

"Of course not! But I'd understand if you want to." Merlin started to speak, but Arthur stopped him. "I know you're not a coward. You're the bravest man I've ever known, and maybe you'd do anything if I asked it of you. But you're right. This was what I wanted and by forcing you into it, deceiving you..." He shook his head. "I don't want that to be our foundation. Not just for the kingdom, but for us. If it's going to make you unhappy..."

"Arthur," Merlin began, meeting his eyes. Merlin's eyes were somehow always so clear, so full of emotion, that it could hurt to look into them. But he wouldn't turn away. "I'm not unhappy." A half-truth. "Can you give me some time?"

"My father will expect the ceremony to be today," Arthur reminded him. Besides, delaying it would only make it more likely that it would never happen. They had to strike while the vigil was still fresh in everyone's mind.

Merlin leaned back against the headboard, baring his neck. His throat bobbed as he swallowed. He closed his eyes and breathed in, breathed out. Arthur waited.

"When I asked you to teach me," Merlin said, his eyes still closed, "it wasn't just to keep you safe. I was being selfish." He opened his eyes. "I wanted you to see all of me, not just your servant. I wanted your respect. You were always in the sun and I wanted to stand there beside you. But I didn't know what that would mean." He straightened up, facing Arthur directly. "We were both using each other because we were afraid to say what we really wanted."

Arthur nodded in agreement. "So what do you want now?"

Merlin thought about this. "I don't know. Everything's changed. The things we've learned... I don't even know who I am anymore."

There was fear in Merlin's eyes and Arthur's heart broke for him. "Our past lives?" he asked. He himself had adjusted to the idea surprisingly easy, but that was mostly because it felt so right. There had been an emptiness inside him for so long and now it was filled. Some grave wound had healed when they put on their torcs and woke that sleeping part of themselves. But it seemed that it was different for Merlin.

"I always thought that if I could find my father, or at least learn what he was, that would fix things.
That I wouldn't feel like a monster anymore. But now..." Merlin shook his head, distraught. "I'm not human, I was never human."

Arthur realized that this was about so much more than Merlin's status in the Court. This was about his very identity. He hadn't only become a knight, but also a Dragonlord and the Emrys and thousands of years of lives. Where was Hunith's son in all of that?

"When I told you about my magic," Merlin continued, his eyes welling up. "You said I'd ruined everything. I couldn't be your knight if I had magic. If anyone found out, you'd lose everything and would be my fault." He wiped roughly at his eyes. "They'll hate me. Just like you did."

"Oh, Merlin," Arthur said, reaching for him. "I never hated you. I was just afraid and stupid and--"

"They'll be afraid, too," Merlin whispered. He looked absolutely haunted, and the sight of it hurt Arthur's heart.

It was a hard truth and Arthur couldn't deny it. It was even more true now than it had been when he first said it. If it all went wrong it would go spectacularly wrong, because it was bad enough if the prince was somehow enthralled by a sorcerer. It was another thing entirely when the people had taken that sorcerer into their hearts and risked their lives for him. They would feel used, betrayed.

"You're right," Arthur admitted. "If they find out the way I did, they'll react just as badly. But that's why we're going to do it differently." He took Merlin's hands into his own. "You still want to make magic legal, yes?"

"Of course, but--"

"Changing hearts takes time," Arthur said, plowing on. "It takes leverage. My father's lies have to be carefully undone. But that's why I need you beside me. I want us to learn from our mistakes, use them to make Camelot better."

He could see that Merlin was coming round to the idea, if slowly. At least the bleak terror in his eyes had faded. And there just might be a spark of that familiar hope.

"I want us to go into this with our eyes open," Arthur continued. "It can't be like before. I refuse to do things my father's way. I won't pretend it's going to be easy, but I believe in you. In us."

"It's just so much."

"We'll take it one step at a time," Arthur promised. "And we won't be doing it alone." They had both been taught to fight alone and had paid the cost of it. It was time they un-learned those lessons. They had friends and allies ready and willing to help them -- and in truth, they always had. They had just been too stubborn and afraid to let them.

"I wish we could have brought the dragons with us," Merlin said, touching his bare neck. And then his eyes widened. "The torcs! Oh no!" He lunged from the bed and rushed into the side room.

"Oh, for--" Arthur hurried after him, taking a brief moment to enjoy the sight of Merlin's naked rear. And the rest of him.

"Oh no, oh no." Merlin was panicking as he dug into Gwen's laundry basket. He pulled out the torcs and the grimoire and whimpered. "Arthur, it's too late. We have to leave."

Merlin looked like he was about to either pass out or blow up. Arthur took hold of his shoulders and forced him to sit down. "Breathe," Arthur told him. "Tell me what's wrong."
Merlin leant forward and breathed deeply. "George. He must have seen these when he took our armor. How could you just let him in here? He's going to tell your father. The guards must already be on their way. We have to--"

"Merlin," Arthur said, trying to get through to him. "George already knows."

That did the trick all right. Merlin gawped. "What?"

"I didn't tell him. He figured it out on his own, mostly by being incredibly nosy. But he's absolutely loyal to me. He won't tell anyone. Certainly not my father."

"You barely know him!" Merlin said, disbelieving. "He's only been your servant for a week."

"You'd only been my servant for a week when I trusted you about Valiant," Arthur reminded him. "I know when a man is loyal and when he's not." When that failed to convince, he continued. "Remember what I said before? George was raised to be my manservant. The manservant to the Crown Prince and then the King. You may not have thought so, but the position is a great honor and an even greater responsibility. A proper servant knows everything about his master, which in my case includes any number of secrets and vital information about the kingdom and its defenses. My manservant has access to keys that open every lock in the castle, including the vaults, the map room, the library, everything. You might not have thought of that, but our enemies have. That's why Cedric wormed his way in here, remember?"

At the mention of Cedric, Merlin sobered. "All the more reason not to trust George."

"I have to trust him. I have to trust all the servants in the castle. I have to trust the cooks not to poison me. I have to trust Gaius not to put poison into his medicine. Loyalty is incredibly important for all of them, but most of all for my manservant."

"Oh." Merlin considered this. "It's amazing your father ever gave me the job."

"Throwing yourself in front of a knife for his only son and heir went a long way. And Gaius vouched for you."

At the mention of Gaius, Merlin frowned. But then he looked down at the torcs and grimoire still gripped in his hands. "For most of my life, only two people knew about my magic. And Will only found out by accident. Mum said it had to be that way. The more people know a secret, the more likely it is that everyone will know it. And now... You. Gaius, Gwen, Morgana. George and Elena and Lord Godwyn and Grunhilda and Lord Idryis and--" He cut himself off.

"And?" Arthur prompted, curious. Sitting in this room, seeing the flash of fear on Merlin's face, it reminded him of some other things that were said that night. "There's someone else? Is that one of the secrets you couldn't share with me?"

Merlin kept silent, but Arthur didn't push. He could see that Merlin was struggling with the decision. And then he wasn't anymore. "It was. But you need to know now." He turned to Arthur. "I trust you."

Arthur gave him a grateful smile. "I'm listening."

"Right." Merlin took a deep breath. "So Gedref. You already know about the temple. But there's so much more than that. It's full of magic."

Arthur leaned forward. "How so?"
"When we were in the temple and I saw the prophecy on the wall, I thought..." Merlin shook his head, amused at himself. "I thought I was somehow going to wake up everyone's magic. But I was wrong. The magic never left. Even with the Purge."

"In the temple?" Arthur asked, knowing it had to be more than that.

"In the people," Merlin said, and he was warming up again. "In the land. In everything. And Uther knows. He's known the whole time."

"Who told you this?"

"Gaius and Merek. Lord Wichard, Lady Helewisa, Merek and Milesent and Mahenyld. They all have magic. They were born with it just like I was. They use it to keep the southern lands fertile. That's why Uther has to put up with them. If he got rid of them, Camelot would starve."

It was a shock, but at the same time it made an awful lot of sense. "I had wondered why Merek was denied his inheritance."

"Lord Wichard agreed to give up his son as a sign of his loyalty. That's how they survived the Great Purge. But because the crops give them so much power, things are changing."

Arthur was impressed. Lord Wichard had always been one of the better Lords, but his odd submission had been a mark against him. Now Arthur saw that it had only been part of a greater plan. There had been quite a religious tone to Wichard's speeches. If he was quietly increasing his strength, bringing back the Old Religion, taking power from the less magic-friendly Lords in the process... "Then my father's grip on Camelot is already slipping. Lord Wichard and his family may be the allies we need to pry it from his hands. Do they all know about your magic?"

"Merek found out during the battle, but he swore to keep it secret."

"Good. That's good. We'll have to arrange a visit to them over the winter. If my father knows about them, we have to be careful not to arouse his suspicions. Perhaps an inspection of their fleet..." All sorts of possibilities were sprouting, and Arthur began the careful work of tending them. After a while, he realized that Merlin was watching him, and that he was happy again. Proud. Arthur smiled back. "Feeling better?"

"Yeah," Merlin said, as if the fact of it surprised him. "You're right. We don't have to do this alone."

"We have friends in Camelot. And in Gedref and Gawant. And in Deorham, if all goes well."

"How about Mercia?" Merlin offered.

"Now you're getting it," Arthur grinned, thinking of Terit and Bayard's gratitude. Uther had expected him to take power, to prove himself worthy, but with the vigil and Merlin's knighthood they had started something much bigger than that. It would only end when Arthur took the throne, whether that was through Uther's willing submission or by force. If his father still intended to attack Deorham and purge its magic, they had until after the spring sowing to strengthen and grow their alliances, to bolster the foundations of Camelot's future and magic's restoration. After all that they had done in a matter of days, all those months would surely be enough.

"We should visit the Druids, too," Merlin decided. "They can help us restore the Triskelion. And they can help Morgana. And there's another promise I have to fulfil. The Great Dragon, our dragon. I promised him I'd free him."

"Then we will," Arthur agreed. He had to stop and marvel at the scope of it. "That should keep us
busy for a while. If you still want it."

"Of course I want it," Merlin said, and he was back to his old self again, bright-eyed with determination. Then he pouted. "But can we take a few days off first?"

Arthur laughed. "I think we can manage that."

Merlin gave him an affectionate bump and Arthur bumped him back. They had their work cut out for them and it was going to take everything they had and more. But all the terrible mistakes he had made, all the bad memories, in a way he needed to hold on to them. They were the spear at his back, forcing him to march forward to that brighter future. To the Golden Age they had been born to create.

Their eyes met and then the kiss was inevitable. They were starved for each other and the first touch released them to their banquet. Arthur couldn't get enough, delving into Merlin's mouth, tasting his lips, touching him all over, and Merlin was just as insatiable, wrapping around him as they fell back onto the bed.

"Arthur," Merlin moaned, breathy in his ear, and it was the most beautiful sound in all of Albion. Arthur groaned deeply and shoved at his trousers, desperate to get them off so that every part of him could be touching every part of Merlin.

They were both achingly hard in no time at all, and Arthur knew they wouldn't last long. They both needed it too badly. He forced himself to slow down and then forced Merlin to slow down, too, by pinning him to the bed with his body. They rutted shallowly against each other as they kissed and touched, stroking each other's backs and chests, feeling the tense of muscle under soft skin. Merlin was still pleasantly fit, and his slim form showed off every line. Arthur tasted and kissed his way along the dusting of hair on his chest, to each sharp nipple, and then down, down that lovely belly to his glorious cock, arching dark and proud.

He took the head into his mouth and savored it, sucking and licking without mercy. Merlin groaned and writhed beneath him, grabbing at his hair and urging him on. Arthur moved down the shaft and felt the pulse beating there, the rush of life and blood, and sucked at it until Merlin nearly rose off the bed. He cradled Merlin's balls, squeezed them in his hand and sweetly tormented them. And then he did it all again.

"Arthur, Arthur, oh gods," Merlin warned, and in response Arthur took him deep, spearing Merlin's cock into his throat and then out again, in and out until he felt Merlin's balls pull tight in his hand, and then he took it to the root. Merlin's cock pulsed against his tongue and clotted his throat. Arthur savored the bitter salt of it, swallowing as he drew back, then rose to savor the sight below him.

It had been too long since he had seen Merlin this way, panting and flushed and sweetly ruined. He would do anything to keep seeing it for the rest of his life. "I love you," he said, lowering himself over Merlin again, caging and kissing him. Merlin was lazy with afterglow, soft and calmed in Arthur's embrace.

"I love you," Merlin said, a blush of happiness pinking him even further. He looked down and then smirked, then somehow managed to turn them over in the narrow bed. "My turn, I think."

"Please," Arthur begged, more than eager for Merlin's mouth. But now that he'd found his own satisfaction, Merlin was able to take his time, taunting Arthur as he slowly worked his way down his front, then skipped down to feast on his inner thighs. When his fingers tangled in Merlin's hair, insistent, Arthur suddenly found his hands pinned above his head, held there by magic. He cursed as
he nearly came from that alone. It was unspeakably hot.

Merlin chuckled and brushed his chin just barely against Arthur's straining cock. "You didn't think you were going to get off that easy?"

Arthur groaned at the pun. "Merlin."

Merlin giggled, because despite everything he was still a bit of an idiot. But he was a happy one and that was what counted. But to Arthur's relief, Merlin could no more resist a treat than Arthur could, and his hot, wet mouth wrapped gloriously around Arthur's cock.

"Yes," Arthur hissed, bucking his hips up, only to have Merlin push them down again, this time pinning him with his weight. Arthur tensed all over and cursed as Merlin took his time. Some small part of his brain was still working enough for him to realize that Merlin was doing to him what he had done so many times, denying satisfaction while taking his own at his leisure. And now he was trapped, overpowered, and it was hard to decide if he wanted it to keep going or if it was driving him mad.

It was definitely driving him mad.

"Please, please," he begged, his back teeth aching with need. "Merlin, please."

"Since you asked so nicely," Merlin said, entirely too pleased with himself, and he leaned down to finish Arthur off. And then to Arthur's horror, there was a knock on the door.

"Don't," Arthur whined, but it was too late. Merlin was getting up from the bed, and Arthur was still magically stuck to it. "Merlin!"

Merlin laughed. "I'll be right back. Won't be a minute."

Arthur growled at him, but Merlin was delighted with himself and practically skipped out of the room. Arthur heard him rustling through the wardrobe and pulling on some clothes, then walking over to the door.

"Morgana!" Merlin greeted, and Arthur froze. How far was Merlin going to take this? To his intense relief he was suddenly released. Arthur lunged for his trousers and yanked them on, cursing his erection as he tucked it in. He thought desperately of unpleasant things to make it go down. Wounds, rotting corpses, that one time he'd caught his father coming out of the bath. He shuddered.

"Oh, thank the gods," he muttered as it subsided.

"Arthur and I were just, uh," came Merlin's voice as it approached the open door.

Morgana chuckled. "Yes, so I see. You two didn't waste any time. Arthur, I do hope you're decent."

She entered the room and looked rather disappointed to find that Arthur was in fact decent. "Morgana," he greeted, his teeth clenched.

Behind Morgana, Merlin entered, looking rather embarrassed and apologetic. He mouthed 'Sorry' but there was no way that was going to cut it. Merlin was going to pay dearly for this.

"I hope this wasn't a bad time," Morgana said, not meaning it one bit.

"Not at all," Arthur lied.

She considered the bed, then pulled over a chair and sat on that instead. She gestured for them to sit.
"Now that you're done with your beauty sleep, I thought I would see what you two had planned. Unless you're going to rest on Merlin's laurels."

Arthur didn't take the bait. "Funny you should ask. Merlin and I were just talking about that."

"Merlin's laurels? Yes, I could see that."

Merlin pined up again. It was adorable, but Arthur rolled his eyes. "Do you actually have something of substance to talk about?"

A flash of discomfort crossed Morgana's face, and Arthur realized that whatever the substance was, she was as desperate to avoid it as she was to talk about it. Having been through more than a few difficult conversations of late, he understood her plight.

"Have you decided what you're going to do?" Merlin asked, surprising the both of them. But then Merlin did always have a tendency to cut to the heart of things.

Morgana's mood soured. "After what happened, I think it's clear that I don't have a choice. I'm as much a prisoner as I ever was." She looked intently at Merlin. "How can you even stand to look at him?"

It was Merlin's turn to be startled. "You mean Uther?"

"Of course I mean Uther," Morgana said, impatient. "He's determined to keep me pinned to my chambers like a dead butterfly, but he was more than happy to be rid of you. You didn't have to come back at all." She looked at Arthur. "Was it just for him?"

"Well, I--" Arthur began, but was cut off.

"I'm talking to Merlin," Morgana said sharply. When she turned to Merlin she was all sweetness. "You were saying?"

"I was going to leave," Merlin said, with quiet honesty. "I thought that once the Sidhe were dealt with, I wouldn't have any reason to stay. But I was wrong." He looked to Arthur, then back to Morgana. "Not just because of Arthur. Not even because I thought I was supposed to stay. But because..." He paused, thinking deeply. "All I've ever wanted was somewhere to belong. To be accepted as I am."

"Camelot is the last place we'll be accepted," Morgana said, and she wasn't happy about it. "If they knew you had magic, those people would have volunteered the kindling themselves."

"I know," Merlin said, visibly pained, and Arthur took his hand to comfort him. "But we're going to change that. We're going to restore magic to Camelot."

"And we want you to be a part of it," Arthur added. At her resistance, he continued. "Didn't it feel good to be out there together, standing up to him?"

"It would feel even better to stand over him," Morgana said, darkly. She looked to Merlin again. "If you could stop the Sidhe, why can't you stop Uther? He deserves to be flung against a wall and squashed like a bug." She looked at her hand and flexed it. "All that power. It would be so easy."

Arthur was curious to hear the answer himself. What would Merlin have done if Arthur had never asked him to hold back? If Gaius hadn't convinced him that protecting Uther was the right thing to do?
"If we kill him, that makes us conquerors," Merlin said. "I don't want to conquer anyone. I want..." He raised his chin. "I want the people to turn their backs on him and reject him. I want magic to be legal again because everyone knows how good and important it is. I don't want to defeat Uther. I want to make Arthur King."

Arthur was impressed, and he could see that Morgana was as well. But she wasn't giving up that easily. "You know he's going to fight you to the bitter end. Perhaps even past it."

"Uther is the past," Merlin said, calm and certain. "We're the future. It doesn't have to be easy. It just has to be worth doing."

"I know you feel like you're trapped," Arthur said, as he quietly marvelled at Merlin's poise. "But I think if you had the choice, you would stay anyway."

"Why on earth would I do that?"

"Because you've been fighting for justice longer than any of us. You're the one whose stood up to Uther again and again, even when he threatened and imprisoned you. If you failed it was only because no one else was brave enough to stand with you. That included me." It wasn't pleasant but it was the truth, and the truth was what Morgana needed to hear. She had never been much for lies, pretty or otherwise.

"And I suppose you're sorry now," Morgana said, still defensive.

"More than I can say," Arthur admitted. "But I know you don't think much of words."

Morgana stared at him, her eyes as challenging as Merlin's. "Anyone can say them. Uther talks all day about justice and then slaughters the innocent. You've stood up for one man. What about the rest? The ones you don't take with you to bed. What will you do when the next sorcerer is arrested for using magic?"

"Free them, as long as they are innocent of any other crime," Arthur said, because that was the only answer worth giving. "I think we've proven that the dungeons can do little to hold anyone with real magic. I won't let what happened to Uwen and Linette happen to anyone else."

It was clearly the right thing to say, judging by the pride in Merlin's eyes and Morgana's grudging respect.

"And as for sorcerers who actually are strong enough to pose a threat, I'm hoping we can redirect them to something more constructive than revenge. Merlin suggested that we contact the Druids. I want them to put out the word to whatever remains of the Old Religion that I intend to revoke the laws against magic."

That got Morgana's attention. "If Uther finds out, he'll have your head himself."

"He can try," Arthur said, confident. "But if we do this right, by the time he finds out what we're up to, it'll be too late to stop us."

Morgana leaned forward, intrigued. "And what, pray tell, is that? Arthur, are you fomenting rebellion?"

"Uther has far more enemies than friends," Arthur said. "Even some of his friends have made it plain that they'll be happy to switch sides when the time comes. My father wants the Five Kingdoms treaty to be the crowning glory of his reign. I propose we make it the beginning of mine." He felt dizzy even saying it, yet with every word he grew more resolved.
"Oh, you have grown bold!" Morgana clapped her hands together, delighted. "Perhaps it won't be so bad to be stuck here after all. If nothing else I'll be entertained."

"We want you to join us," Arthur said, eager now. "Help us, Morgana. It's your fight as much as ours."

"If it was mine first, shouldn't I be asking you to join me?"

"It'll be the four of us," Merlin said, cheerily. "You, me, Arthur, and Gwen."

At the mention of Gwen, Morgana's mood suddenly sank. "Three will do just as well," she said, looking away.

Merlin frowned. "Is something wrong?"

"She's gone," Morgana said, quietly.

"What?"

It was clear that Morgana didn't want to talk about it, but she had to tell them something. "While you two were off dreaming, Gwen took the last of her things and quit. She's no longer my maidservant."

"I don't understand," Merlin said, quite shocked.

Morgana was trying not to show how hurt she was, but she couldn't hide the tremor in her voice. "There's nothing to understand. It simply is."

Merlin stood up. "Did she say where she was going?"

"Home. After that, it's no longer my business."

"I'll go talk to her," Merlin said, already headed for the door. "I need to get my things from her anyway." He paused in the doorway and looked back at Arthur. "I'll be back as soon as I can." They heard his footsteps rush to the outer door and into the hall.

When Arthur turned back to Morgana, he was alarmed to find that she was on the verge of tears. "I'm such a fool," she said, mournful.

"Go with Merlin," Arthur urged. "Talk to her."

"It's too late for that."

"I thought it was too late for me and Merlin. I was wrong. He forgave me."

"I don't need her forgiveness," Morgana said, sharply. "I need... I don't know. I need a new maidservant. I don't suppose George has a sister?"

Arthur saw that whatever the matter was, Morgana wasn't ready to discuss it much less resolve it. But he had to say one last thing before he let it rest. "Morgana, for the first time, I'm happy. I want you to be happy, too." She was the closest thing he would ever have to a sister. Even if they'd spent their formative years endlessly needling each other -- which really only made them more like real siblings -- he cared about her and hated to see her this way.

"I'll be happy if you never mention any of this again," Morgana said, and that was that. "Tell me more about your grand scheme. That will cheer me up."
"All right," Arthur agreed. I want to reach out to the Druids next. I have a lot of questions for them, as does Merlin. We think they can help you with your dreams."

"My nightmares," Morgana corrected, not caring for the euphemism. "It's worth a try. As long as I don't have to drink anything."

"I also want you and Merlin to work together again. You're good for each other. You can train each other and learn to fight with magic as well as swords."

"I thought you didn't want a war."

"If you want peace, prepare for war," Arthur said, echoing some passage Geoffrey had taught him. "And it's not as if Camelot will suddenly be without threats after I become King. Everyone will want to test my strength as a ruler. When that time comes, I'll need my sorcerers more than ever."

"That's the most sensible thing you've said all day," Morgana said, pleased.

"I want Camelot to be a place where magic belongs," Arthur continued. "I can't do that without you."

"No, you can't," Morgana said. She stood and smoothed the skirt of her dress, then held out her arm. "Don't think I won't keep you on your toes."

Arthur stood and took her arm. "I'm counting on it." They shook as equals, and Morgana left the room with her head held high. When he heard the outer door close again, he sat down and breathed out, feeling as though he'd just run five laps around the training grounds.

When he recovered, he picked up the grimoire and torcs. George might be safe, but that didn't mean they could leave magical objects lying around for anyone to trip over. He carried them out of the side room, then over to the heavy chest where he had kept the torcs and grimoire before. They would be safe there.

When he opened the chest, something stopped him cold: a scrap of red cloth. It was the bloodied favor he'd given Merlin to wear in Gedref, then had handed back to him as proof of Merlin's death. Such a small, inconsequential thing, and yet it meant so much, good and bad.

He took it out and shoved it into his pocket, then put away the grimoire and torcs and locked the chest shut.
Proposals

A loud knock drew Gwen from her thoughts. She hesitated to answer it, but when the next knock was followed by Merlin's voice calling her name, she hurried to the door. When she opened it, she stepped back in astonishment.

"Merlin, what on earth?"

Merlin's arms were overflowing with all manner of items, from loaves of bread to swatches of cloth. Sacks of fruit and vegetables hung from each arm and a pair of boots had been draped around his neck. Gwen wasn't sure how he had managed to knock.

"Help," Merlin squeaked, as the whole stack threatened to topple. Gwen took the most precarious items and guided him over to a table, where they barely managed not to send everything crashing to the floor.

"What are you doing with all of this?" she asked. Surely he hadn't bought it all for her.

"Everyone keeps giving me things," Merlin said, rubbing his hair. "I didn't want to insult them. What should I do? I mean, I already have boots, but..."

She shook her head; it was adorable how oblivious Merlin could be at times. "They're showing their appreciation."

"They already did that," Merlin said, self-conscious. "I can't ask anything more from them."

"You don't have to. Besides, this isn't just about being generous. Some of these are, well. They're samples. They're hoping you like them."

Merlin picked up a swatch of cloth and gave it a dubious look. "It's not really my color."

"But it might be Arthur's," Gwen pointed out, as Merlin wasn't seeing the bigger picture yet. "He's made it very clear to everyone that you're his favorite. What's important to you will be important to him."

"I don't know about that," Merlin said, but he wore a shy, sweet smile.

She had never been able to resist that smile; it didn't surprise her that no one else could. He was going to have Arthur wrapped around his little finger from now on. She was glad that they would be all right together. It would be even harder to leave if they weren't.


"Nothing," Gwen said, then looked to the window, seeing the castle even though it wasn't visible. "Everything." A part of her had hoped that no one would come after her, that she could pack her things and slip away without any fuss. But of course Merlin had come. He cared about everyone.

"And why is it so dark in here?" Merlin asked, finally noticing his surroundings. He went over to the windows and opened the shutters, letting in air and sunlight. The bright beams cast starkly on the half-finished packing. Realization dawned on Merlin's face, and he turned to her in shock. "You're leaving? You can't leave!"
"I can, actually," Gwen said, with a lightness she didn't feel. "It's for the best."

"That's absurd!" Merlin chewed the air in frustration as he worked up his argument. "You can't leave now. We need you!"

"You really don't," Gwen insisted. What was she in the grand scheme of things? She wasn't a Prince or a noble. She didn't have magic. She didn't even have a job anymore. Merlin and Arthur had each other, and Morgana had made her feelings clear.

She loved Camelot. But there was nothing left for her here.

"You're my friend," Merlin said, plaintively, as he sat down beside her. "Of course I need you."

"Maybe you did. But now you have the whole city looking after you. You have Arthur. You're happy."

"And if you leave, I'll be sad!"

Gwen crooked a smile. "Maybe a little."

Merlin sputtered. "No. This is ridiculous. Gwen, what happened while we were in Avalon?" Then he grew concerned. "Morgana didn't try to, um, you know... again?"

It took Gwen a moment to realize that Merlin was referring to Morgana's attempt at manipulating her with sex. "Oh! No, no, it's nothing like that, it really isn't."

"Then what?"

He gave her such a sad, confused look that Gwen had to try and explain. She knotted her fingers together and gathered her thoughts.

"When I was a child, I often wondered why my parents stayed here. The searches, the executions... Camelot hasn't been an easy place to live, not for people like us." She was sure that Merlin understood that better than anyone else. He would understand the rest. "There were always reasons to stay despite all of that. But when I lost my father, all I had left was Morgana."

"And now you've lost her," Merlin said, and she could see that he did understand. No matter how much better things were now, he and Arthur would never forget the pain they had caused each other. And yet she could also see the optimism their reunion had granted him. "It's not too late. You just need to talk--."

"No, Merlin," Gwen said, with a harshness she immediately regretted. But she wouldn't back down. "What I need now is to move on. Make a fresh start somewhere. Elyan is out there somewhere and perhaps it's time I found him."

"Do you know where he is?"

"Not in the slightest," Gwen said, wryly. "But I have to try." He was all the family she had left. If she couldn't find him, she would be alone in the world. That was a terrible thing to be.

"No," Merlin said, shaking his head in refusal. "You can't just go wandering around Albion on the chance you'll bump into him. This is your home and it's his too. It's the one place that Elyan knows to come back to."

"He could be in trouble," Gwen said, though it was hardly a defense. "What if he needs me?"
Merlin softened. "That's what I said when I wanted to chase after my father. Sometimes I would actually yell at my mum because she wouldn't let me go after him." Grief creased his features. "Oh Gwen, I haven't told you."

"Told me what?"

"My father," Merlin said, and looked at with a mixture of grief and excitement. "Arthur and I... when we were in Avalon, we found Dragons. Hundreds of them."

"That's impossible," Gwen said, stunned. The dragons were gone, all but one.

"They helped us against the Sidhe," Merlin said, with a shaky grin that quickly failed. "They couldn't come back with us. But they told me what I am. Who my father was." He took a deep breath. "He was a Dragonlord. And Uther killed him."

It was a double shock, and Gwen covered her mouth. She had heard the stories: of the might of the Dragons and their Dragonlords, of their brutal downfall at Uther's command. She felt joy to know that one Dragonlord yet survived, and bitter grief that Merlin's father had not. Uther had taken the lives of too many fathers. "Oh, Merlin."

"It wasn't easy facing Uther again," Merlin said, anger lacing his voice. "Bowing to him when what I really wanted--" He swallowed. "But I did it for Arthur. For the future we're going to build together. Gwen, we need you to be a part of that future. I need you. You're my friend."

Gwen's heart ached for him, and yet... "Thank you. But it's not enough," she said, regretful. "I won't be in the castle to help you. And even if I was, Morgana wouldn't want me there. It would only make things difficult."

"This isn't about Morgana," Merlin said, stubbornly.

Gwen huffed. "Merlin, I don't have a place here anymore."

"Then we'll make one. I didn't spend my childhood dreaming of being a servant and I don't think you did either."

"There's nothing wrong with being a servant," Gwen defended. Her mother had been proud to be a maidservant, and so had she.

"That's not what I mean and you know it," Merlin said. "Gwen, you are such an amazing person. You deserve to be happy. There must be something."

Gwen hesitated, because there was something. Something she had considered for herself and then pushed aside as she had countless times before, because there had always been an excuse, a reason not to try.

"I wanted to be a blacksmith," she admitted.

Merlin broke into a grin. "That's perfect!"

"I don't know if I can," Gwen hedged. "It's been years since I worked the forge, and even then it was only to help my father. I'd have to find someone willing to take me on as an apprentice." And who would do that? At her age she was too old to be an apprentice, and worse than that she was a woman. Smithing was not a profession that welcomed women.

Merlin waved off her concerns. "You were already an apprentice for your father, and don't tell me..."
that doesn't count. After we met, the first things you did was teach me about armor. You knew everything about it. I bet you've made armor and all sorts of things."

"I helped my father," Gwen said, because she couldn't deny that it was true. Until it had been decided that Gwen was old enough to become a maidservant full time, she had spent every hour she could in the forge, helping her father and Elyan night and day. She had loved it: the heat, the effort, the bellows breathing like lungs, the hissing steam of quenched steel. Most of all she had loved making things: useful, beautiful things that would help grow and harvest the crops, that would protect and defend in battle, that would help people with their everyday lives. She looked at the chest full of gold that sat unassumingly on the floor.

"Stay here with us and open up the forge," Merlin urged. "If you need help, get your own apprentice. Or hire someone to help. Gwen, you don't have to be anyone's apprentice or servant ever again."

A dozen arguments were on Gwen's tongue: about being sensible, practical, realistic. About keeping her place. But she didn't want to keep her place and she didn't want to be practical. She had spent her whole life taking care of other people; maybe it was time she took care of herself for once. "You really think I can?"

Merlin took her hands. "I know you can."

The way he looked at her, she couldn't help but believe him, in herself. She realized that this must be how Arthur felt all the time. It was no wonder that he was on his way to taking the throne. If she had someone like Merlin who looked at her that way, she would end up a Queen herself.

"Come on," Merlin said, standing up. "Let's do it now."

"Merlin," Gwen protested, but she let him pull her to her feet and towards the connecting door. The forge was in good shape. It hadn't been a year since her father's death, and since that time she had kept it tidy and free of rust. She had even opened it for others to use during the urgent preparations for battle in Gedref. But she hadn't used it herself, and now she hesitated again. All she could think of was the dark day of her father's arrest, when he had been taken from this room and never returned.

"Merlin, I don't know," she began.

Merlin cheerfully ignored her. He opened up the windows and shook off the dust cloths. "Look, it's all ready to go." He began taking wood and charcoal from the bins and loading them into the hearth. When he was satisfied, he looked around to make sure no one was peeking inside, then put his hand up to the opening. "Forbærne," he whispered, and just like that the hearth was ablaze with heat.

"Merlin!" Gwen chided, but she was fighting not to smile. "I can't believe you did that."

Merlin gave her a cheeky grin and went to poke around in the scrap heap. He pulled out a rod of raw iron. "I bet you could make a sword out of this. Want to give it a go?"

"Do you have any idea how long that would take?" Gwen asked, as she took it from him. She hefted the rod in her hand and found her old instincts creaking back to life. She could look at this raw metal and see the shape of the sword inside it, feel it, just as her father had. She wondered if the pain of her grief for him would ever go away.

Something caught her eye and she forced herself not to turn away from it. It was nothing much to look at, just a humble tool left half-finished. But it was the last thing her father's hammer had
touched. His final work, stopped as abruptly as his life.

She put down the rod and picked up the iron. As it had never been finished, it had never been given a protective wax, and over time it had begun to rust. She brought it over to the forge.

Merlin gave it a skeptical look. "You sure you don't want to make something else? A sword or a shield or something?"

"You work the bellows," Gwen told him. She used the heavy tongs to pick up the long blade and placed it into the heart of the fire. The heat would make the iron live again, burning away the rust that had been eating it. She could give it the new beginning it deserved.

Merlin worked the bellows and the coals glowed hot. As she waited, she ran a cloth across the top of her father's anvil. It had been passed down through generations of her family and borne the blows of countless hammers, yet its strength had endured.

She checked the forge again, then took up the tongs and drew out the glowing metal, bringing it carefully down onto the anvil. She adjusted the tongs for a firm grip. She had outgrown her old hammers, so she took up her father's and struck. The metal and anvil rang high and true.

Though she was strong, her father had taught her that smithing wasn't about strength. It was about control. A good blacksmith aimed for the anvil -- the same spot every time -- and moved the metal where it should be struck. As she pounded, she felt the strain of unused muscles in her arms and back. She hadn't used those parts of herself when she was helping Morgana dress or carrying laundry or serving food. When she had served, she hadn't created, hadn't guided her own hands.

Righteous anger flared in her, and she struck too hard, too wild. She cursed under her breath as she saw how she had marred the blade. But as she chided herself, she remembered something else her father had always said: there were no mistakes in metal. If something went wrong, it could be undone just as easily. Breaks could be healed, scars beaten clean. Nothing was ever beyond repair, not as long as Gofannon still blessed the forge.

She put the blade back into the forge and waited as Merlin drove the bellows. When she took out the glowing blade again, she was in control once more. She beat the blade, heated and beat it. She stared at the metal and saw herself: how she had put herself away, let herself rust with grief and fear. Life had marred her but she hadn't tried to heal, to thrive. She had only survived.

Even for something as mundane as a sickle, forge work was hard and hot. Merlin fetched clean water and they used ladle after ladle, quenching their thirst and washing away soot and sweat. Merlin was the perfect assistant, uncomplaining and ready to lend a hand. And then at last the work was done, the metal worked thin but with a strong spine. She quenched the blade one last time and took it over to the grinding wheel to sharpen it. Sparks flew as she honed the blade against the fine stone, then polished it against a leather strap.

No longer fed, the fire quickly banked itself to embers and a breeze swept fresh air in to cool them. Gwen attached the blade to the wooden handle, then inspected the finished scythe. It was good. Her father's last work was done.

She would miss him forever, just as she missed her mother. But she had to live her life.

"It's nice," Merlin said, and while it was obvious that he didn't understand why this particular piece was important, she appreciated that he was trying. "Are you going to sell it?"

"Not this one," she said. She found an empty nail on the wall and hung the sickle from it. Sickles
were important things. Without them, without the hard, mundane toil they represented, there would
be no harvest, and without the harvest there would be no people. And without the people, there
would be no kingdom and no king to rule it. She had seen the truth of that with her own eyes when
the people had stood vigil for Merlin. She would no sooner forget that than she would forget her
father's love.

"Thank you," she said, and hugged Merlin tightly.

"Ugh, we're both filthy," Merlin lamented, even as he left more smudges all over his shirt.

Gwen grabbed the last bucket of clean water. "Let's wash up. And then you'd better get back.
You've been gone so long that Arthur must be worried!"

A guilty look flashed across Merlin's face. "Yeah, he must be." Gwen gave him a curious look, and
that was all it took to break Merlin's resistance. "Arthur's knighting me again today. In front of
everyone."

"That's wonderful!" She gave him a playful swat on the arm. "Why have you been wasting time
here? You should've been getting ready."

Merlin shrugged. "I'd rather help you with your troubles than deal with mine?"

"Oh, Merlin," Gwen said, fondly. But she could see that he was upset. She looked at him
expectantly, knowing he wanted to open up to her.

And he did. "Everything's changing so fast. Arthur loves it, but..."

"It's not easy," Gwen finished for him, wryly noting that he had just pushed her into change himself.
But she didn't want to point that out to him. It was too much like something Morgana would say and
it wouldn't help. Merlin had become the center of everyone's attention, for good and ill, and that
could be frightening.

"It was like this in Gedref, sort of." He ducked his head shyly. "Arthur wanted to show everyone I
was his brave knight. It was wonderful. But it was different there. Like a dream I knew I'd have to
wake up from."

"And now you're awake?"

"Yeah," Merlin said, eyes wide. "Is it terrible that I just want everyone to stop looking at me?"

"It's perfectly normal," Gwen assured him. "You have to give yourself time to adjust. I'm sure Arthur
will understand."

"Maybe you had the right idea after all, running away," Merlin muttered.

"I know you don't mean that."

Merlin looked to her plaintively. "Will you come back with me? For the ceremony? I know you don't
want to see Morgana but it'd really help."

"Of course I will," Gwen said. After what Merlin had done for her today, of course she would be
there for him in return. He was her friend and she was his. Perhaps she wasn't as alone as she had
thought.

She left Merlin to scrub and went into her house to change clothes. And while she was there, she had
to do a quick bit of unpacking.

§

Though she and Merlin shared the burden of his gifts -- as well as the few belongings he had initially brought to her house -- they were each given so many more on the way up through the town that they had to get assistance from one of the guards. He was only too happy to help Merlin; Gwen recognized him as one of the guards who had failed to carry out Uther's command to clear the vigilers because his family stood against him. No doubt he would be glad to be able to tell them that he had helped Sir Merlin after all, even in this small way.

She also saw for herself why Merlin felt so overwhelmed. So many people stopped to greet them, to thank Merlin and offer him tokens of their appreciation. She suspected that many of them felt guilty for Merlin's arrest and for giving his victories to Sir Geraint. They were making up for it now.

When they finally reached the top of the courtyard steps, they were intercepted by George.

"There you are, my Lord!" George exclaimed, his veneer of politeness barely containing his impatience. He looked Merlin up and down and tutted in disapproval. "The Prince has been expecting you. We've barely any time to get you ready for the ceremony."

Gwen started to follow them, but George stopped her. He seemed about to say something to her, then thought better of it and simply lifted the burden from her arms.

"I'll be right back," Merlin called back as he was hustled up the steps.

Gwen made her way to the Great Hall. It was already starting to fill up, with commoners as well as the knights and nobility. She found Gaius and joined him.

"Gwen, how good to see you," Gaius greeted, smiling warmly. "I hope you've been keeping yourself busy."

"Yes. Merlin was just helping me reopen the forge." She picked her head up higher. "I'm going to make a go of it."

Gaius' eyebrows raised with surprise. "Really? Well now. Tom would have been very proud of you."

Gwen gave a hum of assent. Gaius' eyes drifted to the raised platform and the empty thrones, and concern bent the corners of his mouth.

"Is something wrong?" Gwen asked.

"No, no, not at all," Gaius insisted. Then he sighed, and when he spoke again it was with a lowered voice. "I am happy for Merlin and Arthur. But I cannot help but worry at the attention this will put on them, and on Merlin in particular."

"They'll be all right," Gwen said, though having seen Merlin's anxiety, she found herself somewhat in agreement.

"Perhaps," Gaius said. "However, such attention can be... restrictive."

Now Gwen saw what his concern was. If everyone was watching them, it would be quite a lot harder for Merlin to use his magic, either for practice or in defense of Camelot. But it wasn't as though that was a new concern. Merlin was used to doing magic right under everyone's nose. And
Arthur had been the center of attention for his whole life, yet found ways to carve out privacy for himself. Surely he was already planning to do the same for Merlin.

A few minutes later, Morgana joined them. She was dressed in her usual elegance, beautiful and poised in a dress of deep forest green, her neck and ears dripping with emeralds, and Gwen wondered if she had already been replaced. When Morgana saw her, both of them averted their eyes.

"Gwen," Morgana said, the coldness in her voice only revealing how much she was hurting.

Gwen politely returned the greeting, but that was all. She didn't want to argue or go over old wounds, which left them little to discuss. A clean break had seemed ideal when she intended to leave Camelot behind. Now it seemed the break was going to be messy after all.

She repressed the urge to mend, to sacrifice her own needs for Morgana's happiness. In the end it would do neither of them any good. Now that her head was clear, she saw that she had been trying to run away in some vain attempt at sparing Morgana the pain of her presence. But Camelot was her home. She had every right to stay and fight for it. She would nurse her broken heart and no doubt Morgana would do the same.

"Lady Morgana," greeted a voice, and Gwen turned to see Lord Godwyn, with Princess Elena on his arm.

Morgana bowed and gave Godwyn her hand. "I understand you'll be leaving tomorrow."

"Alas, yes," Godwyn said. "But now that things are resolved here, we must return to Gawant. It's time we brought our army home." He looked to the empty thrones. "I am glad that some good has come of all this trouble."

"I'd say there's been quite a lot of good," Elena said.

Godwyn chuckled. "There certainly has."

"We'll be sorry to see you go," Gwen said.

"You're welcome to come visit us anytime," Elena told them. "And we'll be back next year for the Five Kingdoms treaty."

"Hopefully peace will provide us with better circumstances than war," Godwyn added. They took their places, Elena standing beside Morgana.

"Now tell me, Elena. Will you be carried back to Gawant, or will you ride there?"

Gwen stiffened at the prickliness of Morgana's question, but Elena simply laughed. "Oh, I'll be riding. Isn't that right, father?"

Godwyn gave a long suffering look to the ceiling, then nodded. "I am sorry, my dear. It was just that you reminded me so much of your mother."

"Riding wasn't what took her from us," Elena said, with impressive maturity. "It wasn't anyone's fault."

"Perhaps not," Godwyn allowed. "Will you forgive me?"

"I already have," Elena said, and kissed him on the cheek. They smiled warmly at each other.

The room continued to fill, first to capacity and then beyond. Despite being the largest room in the
castle, there wasn't room to hold everyone who wanted to see Merlin be knighted. It was so crowded that there was barely room to move. She bumped into one woman, then into the man standing behind her.

"Oh, sorry," she apologized.

"Perfectly all right, my dear," said the man, with a courteous nod. He was surprisingly polite for a noble. She didn't recognize him and wondered if he had come from out of town. There had certainly been enough excitement in the past week to draw the whole kingdom's attention.

The hall buzzed with anticipation. It was taking so long for the ceremony to start that Gwen had to fight the urge to go check on Merlin herself. But then at last the trumpets sounded, and everyone turned to see the King striding down the aisle, followed by his retinue, which included Arthur. When they reached the dais, Arthur and Uther each stood before their thrones, their formal crowns gleaming, and Geoffrey stood beside them. Leon and his group of knights took their place to either side.

Arthur stepped forward. "Before we begin, I must make an apology to the family of Sir Geraint. Sir Geraint defended Camelot with his life and faced his death with bravery. Had he not he died before his time, he would have fought bravely to free Gedref. Though he did not perform the great deeds last accorded to him, that does nothing to lessen the honor of his name. Let his deeds be honored."

The crowd bowed their heads in respect, then raised them in anticipation. Arthur stepped back and allowed Geoffrey to take his place.

"My lords, ladies, and gentlemen of Camelot," Geoffrey began. "The Knights of Camelot have long been honored for their great nobility and strength. They stand here now as the finest army the world has ever known. Today we welcome one more to their ranks. Step forth, Merlin of Ealdor."

The trumpets sounded again, and there was Merlin. George had done his job well. Merlin wore a fine, deep blue shirt and dark trousers, and a brown jacket with a high collar, similar to Arthur's favorite red one. He had changed into the boots that he had been gifted earlier that day. And at his waist, he carried the sword he had taken with him to Gedref. He kept his eyes fixed straight ahead as he walked slowly up the aisle, though as he passed Gwen he glanced to her, and in that brief moment she could see how nervous he was. When he reached the dais, he dropped to one knee and bowed his head.

Geoffrey stepped aside, revealing a stone-faced Uther. Beside him, Arthur was just as composed, but he couldn't hide the pride beaming from him as he looked down at Merlin.

The room held its breath.

Arthur held out his hand and Geoffrey placed a scroll into it. Arthur opened it and presented it to the room. "I, Prince Arthur Pendragon of Camelot, do hereby bestow upon you, Merlin of Ealdor, claim and title to the Forest of Ascetir and the royal lands surrounding it."

The reaction was immediate. A wave of shock crashed through the crowd. Uther's eyes bulged with outrage and his face flushed. Gwen heard leather of his gloves creak from the strain as he clenched his fists. When Arthur presented the scroll to him, he glared at it as though he would sooner throw it into a fire than read it. But Arthur matched his stare and continued to hold out the scroll, and at last Uther accepted it. He skimmed it briefly and then rolled it shut. He breathed in through his nose, and when he breathed out, he was once again stone-faced. He nodded his approval and handed back the scroll.
"Thank you, Sire," Arthur said, and displayed the scroll to the crowd again. "This transfer of property is given in reward for your brave service in defense of the Kingdom of Camelot. Your selfless and bold actions saved countless lives and restored the freedom of the people of Gedref. I can think of no greater honor than to welcome Lord Merlin of Ascetir, a full and free citizen and a noble Lord of Camelot, as a knight supplicant." He rolled up the scroll and offered it to Merlin, who accepted it.

"Thank you, my Lord," Merlin said, his voice quiet but clear as the room hushed again. "I am deeply honored by your generosity." He swallowed, glancing from side to side, then bowed his head again. He held the scroll tightly in his hand.

After that, if Uther had hoped to find some excuse to not go through with the knighting, that hope was dashed. With one bold stroke, Arthur had forced his hand. Before him was no longer Merlin of Ealdor, the foreign commoner who had defied the First Code. Now it was Lord Merlin of Ascetir, Lord of Camelot, the savior of Gedref. Gwen couldn't have been more proud.

Arthur stepped back with a bow to the King, making way for him to perform his part in the ceremony. After a beat, Uther drew his sword. For a moment, Gwen feared he might well swing it down and lop Merlin's head off after all, but instead he spoke.

"Lord Merlin of Ascetir," Uther began, visibly forcing himself to say the words. "Do you swear allegiance to Camelot, now and for as long as you shall live?"

"I do, Sire."

"Do you pledge to conduct yourselves with nobility, honour, and respect?"

"I do, Sire."

Uther lowered his sword over Merlin's head. He rested the tip of his sword on one shoulder, and then the other, then raised it again. "Arise, Sir Merlin, Knight of Camelot."

Merlin rose and faced the King, his back straight and his head held high.

"You have been accorded a great honour," Uther told him. "But with that honour comes great responsibility. From this day forth, you are sworn to live by the knights' code. Your word is your sacred bond. I expect you to prove yourself worthy of your title."

"I will, Sire," Merlin said.

Gwen had seen many men become knights, but none had accepted the honor with such devotion and pride. Even Uther saw it, and though he remained stern, there was a sense that he had at last accepted what had been forced upon him. Perhaps Arthur's gambit had played some part in that by removing the issue of nobility and the violation of the First Code, or perhaps Uther had finally realized how valuable Merlin was. Whatever the reason, she was relieved.

Now that Merlin was knighted, she expected the ceremony to end. But Arthur stepped forward again. After such a victory, what else did he have planned?

"Sir Merlin," Arthur began. "In Gedref, with Sir Geraint's death, I lost my second. But I did not feel that loss when we went into battle against Deorham."

Out of the corner of her eye, Gwen saw Sir Leon tense. Was Arthur about to replace him with Merlin?
But once again, Arthur was ahead of everyone else. "Since then, the position of my second has been
filled. Sir Leon has proven himself more than worthy of his position and my respect. Sir Leon, I
thank you for your duty and your valuable leadership."

Leon was quite unprepared for the recognition, but he managed to bow in response. "It is my honor
and privilege, my Lord." When he straightened up, he was fighting a smile, and the knights beside
him quietly congratulated him.

"Therefore," Arthur continued, turning back to Merlin. "In recognition of your loyalty and your great
achievements, I hereby revive one of our kingdom's traditions. In centuries past, each King or Prince
kept beside him one man he trusted above all others: his Knight Equerry. This knight was a lifelong
companion who remained ever by his side: in battle as a fellow knight, and as a confidant and friend,
only to be parted by death. I offer that to you now."

As he paused to let this new information sink in, the room was once again alight with surprise and
anticipation. What Arthur was offering, to make Merlin his 'lifelong companion'... if Merlin had been
a woman, it would have practically been a proposal of marriage. That similarity was not lost on
anyone, much less Uther or Merlin.

"Sir Merlin of Ascetir, will you accept the position as my Knight Equerry?"

Their eyes met, and Gwen could see that this wasn't a formality. Merlin hadn't been expecting this
and Arthur was genuinely waiting for an answer. She couldn't help but compare this moment to
Arthur's proposal to Elena, given under duress and without feeling. Here there was more feeling than
could be expressed. As the seconds passed, the tension between them was so thick it could be cut
with a knife.

And then at last Merlin made his move. He dropped to his knee once more, but instead of bowing his
head he continue to hold Arthur's gaze. "I will, my Lord. I will fight for you against any foe and with
all my strength. I will serve you as your knight and nothing will keep me from your side. Everything
I am is yours."

Arthur drew his sword and raised it, and the gold and steel reflected the light that streamed in through
the stained glass. He rested the tip of his sword on Merlin's shoulder, and then the other, then raised it
again. "Arise, Sir Merlin, Knight Equerry."

Merlin stood, then at Arthur's nod he turned to face the crowd. Arthur stepped back, signalling the
end of the ceremony. The room broke into applause, roused by the headiness of the moment. Perhaps
they didn't understand just what Arthur had done today, but they were happy that Merlin had been
properly knighted and rewarded for his victories. They were happy that Arthur was proving his
power and his generosity. And everyone loved tradition, the older the better.

Uther wasn't happy. He bore a sour look, like he had reached for his wine and ended up with a
mouthful of vinegar. But he mustered a thin smile for the crowd to keep up appearances. It was a
striking reversal of the past two weeks, which so often had Uther revelling in power while Arthur
gritted his teeth.

Things really were changing. Arthur had not simply elevated a servant. Even if the title of Prince
Regent hadn't yet been formally conferred, Arthur was now more than a Crown Prince. Instead of
waiting for Uther to bestow power upon him, he had taken it for himself. But then that was the
greatest Pendragon tradition of all. The delight of the people -- even the nobles -- only confirmed
that.

The trumpets blared again, and at their signal the room began to empty even as it immediately grew
loud with conversation. People would be talking about this for days, perhaps even years. The knights came over to Merlin to congratulate and welcome him into their ranks, and the nobility were inching forward, eager to do the same. It was just as she had seen in the town. Merlin was something new and everyone wanted a piece of him. But as much as she ached to rescue him, it was clear that this was a gauntlet he needed to run in order to be fully accepted into his new status. If it wasn't, Arthur would have intervened instead of hanging back and watching with pride.

And then Uther brushed past Arthur with a glare, and the two of them retreated, exiting through the back of the hall.

"Excuse me," Gwen said, leaving the others and weaving her way through the crowd. She headed for the exit that Arthur and Uther had left through and saw it was flanked by guards. She told herself that she had an urgent message to bring the Prince, and walked with purpose and calm intent, and by some small miracle no one stopped her.

As she walked through the passage, she heard Uther's voice and followed it. There was an open door and she stopped beside it and peered inside.

"--went too far," Uther finished, riled. "Knight Equerry? Do you have any idea what you've done?"

"I know exactly what I've done," replied Arthur. He faced his father confidently. "You don't have to like him, but I expect you to give him the respect he deserves." Uther scoffed, but Arthur continued. "We reward those who are loyal to us. You taught me that."

"You are making yourself reliant on that fool of a boy!"

"You will call him by his name," Arthur said, sharply. "When I am King, I will need to be able to trust the people around me. Merlin has more than proven his loyalty to me. He's saved my life and risked his own for the sake of this kingdom. Everyone else can see that, why can't you?"

Uther didn't have a response to that, which was amazing in itself. But he wasn't going to give up that easily. "I know what this is really about," he declared, eyes narrowing. "Perhaps the boy is what you say, but you've put him where he doesn't belong." He stepped towards Arthur, trying to stare him down. "You think that if you do this, the people will love you for it. If that is how you intend to rule, then I have failed to teach you anything and Camelot will suffer."

"You're wrong," Arthur said, defiant.

"Love is useless," Uther declared. "Fickle. Fear is what makes lasting power. Ingratiate yourself to the people and you will quickly find them ruling you."

"If love is useless, then why did you love my mother?"

Uther reeled, pain sapping his strength. "I've told you never to mention her."

"She is my mother and I will speak of her," Arthur said, pressing forward. "I love Merlin and I intend to share my life with him."

That riled Uther again. "You will leave this kingdom without an heir! You will destroy everything our forefathers built!"

"If I must marry to make an heir, I will marry," Arthur said. "But that will be my choice and I will share that choice with Merlin. Whatever happens, I will give him no reason to leave my side, nor will I allow any harm to come to him." The last was clearly a warning.
"You've made that quite clear," Uther said, flatly. "Do not forget that I am still your King."

"You're the one who told me it was time," Arthur reminded him. "You said to prepare to be Regent and guide this kingdom into a smooth transition. That's exactly what I've done. Since Gedref's invasion my strength and leadership have been tested and I have kept our kingdom safe. The people see that and that is why they love me. I will continue to fulfil my duties as Regent and I will do what I know is best for Camelot."

Uther stared. "You seek to challenge me?"

"I seek to follow you," Arthur said, quieter but no less certain. "To ensure that Camelot remains strong and prosperous. I am your son and heir, not your conqueror. You raised me to be a great King. Or will you keep your grip on this kingdom and drag it with you to your grave?"

Uther clenched his fists tightly. He turned away from Arthur, took a few steps and then turned back again. He opened his fists. "You are my heir." He closed his eyes tight, then opened them again. "You still have much to learn. But you are a Pendragon. You are my son." He raised his head. "I will inform the council that you are ready."

"Thank you, my Lord," Arthur said, with a nod of respect.

Uther headed for the far door, but before he left he paused and turned back. "You have proved yourself to be a true Pendragon. But take care that you do not go too far. And as for Sir Merlin--" He bared his teeth. "If you intend to keep him, see to it that he's made presentable." And with that he made his exit.

Arthur slumped, breathing out in relief. Gwen gave him a moment to recover before lightly knocking on the door, then stepping inside.

"Spying, Gwen?" Arthur said, accepting her presence with only mild surprise. "You're as bad as George."

"Servants must be closeby to hear their master's call," Gwen replied, feeling brazen.

"Morgana tells me you're not her servant anymore. Is that why you're here? I can find you a new position."

"Oh, no, that's not necessary," Gwen said, though it was kind of him to offer. "That was a brave thing you did. Standing up to Uther like that."

"It's what I should have done a long time ago. But thank you." Arthur gave her a small, grateful smile.

"Yes, it was most impressive."

It was Morgana's voice, but where was Morgana? Gwen and Arthur both started in surprise as Morgana suddenly appeared in the room with them.

"How on earth did you do that?" Arthur exclaimed.

"Grunhilda," Gwen realized, and suddenly there were two more people in the room with them: Grunhilda and the man she had bumped into before the ceremony. She quickly realized who he really was. "Lord Idryis?"

"I apologize for the deception," Idryis said. "When you didn't return, we thought it best to come and
find you. But I saw for myself why was I the last thing on your minds."

Arthur gave the three of them a sour look. "Did you hear everything you needed?" He clearly didn't appreciate having such a private conversation overheard by a veritable crowd.

"We did," Morgana said, unapologetic as ever. But she looked proud of Arthur.

"I just wanted to see my Elena one last time," Grunhilda said, a tear in her eye. "She looked so lovely."

"Perhaps you should marry her after all," teased Morgana. "Pop out a few heirs. That would make Uther happy."

Arthur visibly prayed for patience. "I'm not marrying anyone."

"That's not what it looked like to me," Morgana said. "Have you set a date for the wedding?"

Arthur blushed. "Morgana!"

"It was quite romantic," Gwen said, unable to resist.

"'Everything I am is yours!'" Morgana mimicked. "You two are just too adorable."

Arthur had turned beet red. Gwen couldn't recall him ever being so embarrassed. He must truly love Merlin to have become so vulnerable.

"Arthur?" Merlin's voice came from down the hall. "Arthur?" When he found the open door he started in surprise. "Oh! Um, is everything all right?"

"Grunhilda, if you could?" The glamour dropped, and Lord Idryis appeared them as he truly was. He bowed to Merlin. "Sir Merlin. Or do you prefer Lord Merlin?"

"Just Merlin, please," Merlin said, and closed the doors behind him. "What are you two doing here?"

"We're here to see you," Idryis said. "But I have a feeling that my offer is going to go untaken."

Merlin made his way to Arthur's side. "Camelot is my home and Arthur is my King. But thank you."

"He's not King yet," Morgana reminded them.

"Neither am I," Idryis said. "But I will be, and I believe so will Arthur, soon enough." He went to Arthur and offered his arm. "I look forward to the day when we can forge a new friendship between our kingdoms."

Arthur took his arm and shook it. "As do I, King Idryis."

Idryis chuckled. "That's going to take some getting used to." He turned to Morgana. "And you, my lady?"

"I wish I could," Morgana said, bitterly, then strengthened her resolve. "I'm afraid these two would be lost without me."

"One day, Camelot will know your worth, my lady," Idryis said, bowing to her. "Whatever path you take, you are all welcome in my court." He straightened. "And now we must be going. Deorham has waited long enough."
"Before you go," Arthur said. "I must apologize for my earlier behavior. I acquitted myself poorly."

"We all make mistakes," Idryis said. "Not everyone is capable of learning from them. I am glad to see that I leave both Merlin and Morgana in safe hands. These two are more valuable than you can imagine. Take care of them."

"I will," Arthur promised.

Idryis turned to Grunhilda. "Grunhilda, if you could?"

"Oh, this is all so exciting!" With a wave of her hand, both their glamours were restored.

"May we meet again soon and under better circumstances," Idryis said. "When the time comes, Deorham will hear your call."

"As Camelot will hear yours," Merlin said, warmly.

They said their goodbyes and left to start their journey home.
Kilgharrah

That evening, Arthur had expected to be the one to help Merlin unpack his belongings and help him settle back into their chambers. But instead Merlin asked Gwen to stay and help, and after dinner the two of them bent their heads together, thick as thieves, leaving Arthur feeling quite surprisingly like a third wheel. Still, it warmed him to see the two of them in good spirits, so he left them to it and went across the hall.

The mood was rather less cheerful in Morgana's chambers. Morgana was standing with her arms crossed, watching her new maidservant with a critical eye. The maidservant seemed able enough, but he knew it wasn't her skill at cleaning and serving that were the matter.

"Arthur," Morgana said, her relief evident. She used his presence as an excuse and interrupted the maidservant. "That's all for tonight. I'll expect my breakfast promptly tomorrow morning."

"Yes, my lady," bowed the maidservant, then she grabbed her basket and scurried out of the room.

"You do realize that none of them will be able to replace Gwen," Arthur said, once they were alone.

"I don't recall asking for your opinion," Morgana replied. "What do you want?"

That was Morgana, direct and to the point. He went for honesty in return. "Gwen and Merlin have taken over my chambers."

Arthur's suffering had always brightened Morgana's day and this was no exception. "That is a shame," she said, as she barely suppressed a smirk. "I hope you're not expecting me to do something about it."

"No. But I'm hoping you'll come with us tonight when we go down to free the Great Dragon."

Morgana's eyes widened. "You're serious."

"I am. I think the four of us should do it together. Five, if Gaius will come." Morgana was less enthused than Arthur had expected her to be. "You don't think it's a good idea?"

"I don't trust him."

"Neither do I," Arthur agreed.

"He made it clear how much he loathes us. I think he hates the Old Religion as much as he hates Uther."

"He still helped us. And we made our promises in exchange for that help. Do you really want to keep him imprisoned?"

"No," Morgana admitted. "What Uther did to him is terrible. But what's to stop him from turning around and frying us all to a crisp?"

"I am," Merlin said, as he and Gwen walked in. It seemed Arthur's absence had been noted and they had followed after him. "I'm a Dragonlord."

"A Dragonlord?" Morgana asked.

"It's something I inherited from my father. It means I can stop him from hurting anyone."
"Your father?" Morgana asked, even more curious now. "And when did you find all this out?"

Before Merlin could explain, Arthur stopped him. "I think it's best if we discuss this with everyone together. That's why I want to bring Gaius with us."

Merlin was visibly displeased at the suggestion. "It's none of his business."

Arthur closed the distance between them and lowered his voice. "Gaius knew about your father. I know you're angry with him for that, but we need to know what he knows."

"Fine," Merlin said. "But I don't want to talk to him."

"You don't have to," Arthur assured him, though privately he hoped that bringing everything out into the open would go some way toward healing their rift. For all his flaws, Gaius was still their best asset when it came to the Old Religion and it would be far more difficult to achieve their goals without him. And more than that, it hurt Merlin to be angry with Gaius. Maybe their relationship would never be what it was, but some peace needed to be reached.

"It's late enough," Arthur decided. "I'll go get him. We'll meet you by the dungeon steps." He gave Merlin a kiss and walked out into the hall, ignoring Morgana and Gwen's delight at their casual affection. He further ignored the way his own cheeks heated at the memory of Merlin's lips. He was a Prince, he couldn't go about blushing all the time.

Fortunately, by the time he reached Gaius' chambers, he had contained himself. He knocked and waited. After a minute, the door opened. When Gaius saw him, he straightened and gestured for him to enter.

"I'd like you to come with me," Arthur said once he was inside. He kept his tone light. "It's time we spoke about what happened in Avalon. And Merlin's father."

"I don't believe that's necessary," Gaius said, stiffly.

"The four of us are going down to the Great Dragon. I want you to come with us. Please."

Gaius' reluctance was plain, if not entirely explicable. But he relented. "Very well. Give me a moment."

Arthur waited as Gaius finished whatever potion he had been concocting, then sealed the bottle with a cork and put it into his physician's bag. He pulled on his cloak and tucked the bag under his arm.

"What are you bringing that for?" Arthur asked.

"An excuse," Gaius said. "Something the four of you would do well to cultivate for yourselves should you insist on roaming the halls at night."

§

The dungeon was as devoid of guards as it was of prisoners; as the latter had all been either freed or executed, there was no need to waste men protecting empty cells. Arthur was relieved to not have to use magic or trickery against the guards as they had already suffered enough for their failure with the Deorham. With any luck, this would be the last time any of them would have cause to be down here.

They made their way down the long, dark stairway by torchlight. Arthur thought about his previous encounter with the Great Dragon and about those the others had made. They had each petitioned the dragon at one point or another. Arthur himself had been granted the protection that allowed him to
enter Avalon. The dragon had aided Merlin many times before giving him the spell to stop Cornelius Sigan. Gwen and Morgana had bargained for aid against the Sidhe. Each time, the dragon had asked for only one thing in return: his freedom. Tonight, their debts would be repaid.

Arthur wondered if Gaius had ever asked for anything, and if so, what the dragon had said to him in response. From his wary, pinched expression, the two of them were not on the best of terms. Arthur understood his concern, but after Avalon, he was more than confident in his and Merlin's ability to handle a single Great Dragon, no matter how ill-tempered.

The moon was clouded tonight, so when they reached the cavern, they found it nearly pitch black. There was no sign of the dragon, but with the chain around his leg he couldn't have gone far.

"Hello?" Arthur called out. "I know you're here." There was a distant rattle of heavy chain, but nothing else. "Show yourself!"

Their only warning was the scrape of claws against stone, and then a plume of fire came blazing at them from the darkness. The direction and intensity of the attack made it impossible to flee back to the stairs, but even as Arthur braced himself for the worst, the fire curved around them, enveloping them but leaving them unharmed. Arthur squinted against the blinding light to see Merlin standing in front of them, his hands raised in protection. Of course, his shield. Behind him, Gwen, Morgana, and Gaius were all realizing the same thing as they came out of their huddles. But having never seen it before, they stared at Merlin in awe. Even Gaius.

"Stop!" Merlin shouted, straining to be heard over the roar of the flame.

The dragon stopped, but it was only to breathe in and then the flame returned anew. It seemed he was determined to fry them to a crisp. Merlin's shield was strong against the flame, but Arthur didn't want to discover which one of them would give out first.

And neither did Merlin. He shouted again for the dragon to stop, then bent his head, concentrating deeply. When he spoke again, his voice resonated with the deep thrum of Dragontongue. "O drakon, e male so fiengometta tes'd'up'anankes! Katostar abore ceriss. Me ta sentende divoless."

The flame abruptly choked out, and the dragon stared at Merlin in astonishment.

Merlin let the shield drop and marched up to the edge of the platform. "I know the truth," he declared. "I know what I am. A Dragonlord, like my father before me!"

"You have already come into your power," the dragon realized. "How? It should not be possible. I am the last of my kind."

"No, you're not," Arthur said, stepped up to stand beside Merlin. He wasn't afraid. The dragons of Avalon were brilliant and beautiful in their power, and having met them he could see now how much this dragon had been reduced. Captivity and age had leached his scales of their beauty, leaving their once-bright colors dulled and faded. He wore his grief like a mourning shroud, and his eyes were cold with bitter anger.

The dragon snarled. "If any of my kin lived, I would know."

"You didn't know that Merlin was still alive when he was taken to Avalon," Arthur replied. "That's where we found them. They've been trapped there since the Roman invasion."

"Do not lie to me! The Romans slaughtered my kind."

"It's the truth!" Merlin said. "They weren't killed, they were tricked. Hundreds of them, Great
Dragons and Bod and Penllyn. Knuckers and Peluda and Bheithir. My kin. My sisters and brothers. Like you were supposed to be. They taught me all the things you didn't want me to know. Kaloka and Synkomida and Macha, they told me what my magic is for. They--"

"That name," the dragon interrupted, something about it jolting him from his anger. "Macha. It cannot be her." He seemed... was he actually distraught?

"She was taken a thousand years ago," Arthur pointed out. If the dragon was up to something, he wasn't going to play along.

The dragon bowed his head. "I was but a hatchling when the Romans came. My memories of those days have long since faded. But I remember her. My mother."

Arthur looked to Merlin and saw that he was thinking the same thing. Macha had mentioned that she had left behind a child. There was no way for the Great Dragon to know that. He had to be telling the truth.

"I'm sorry," Arthur said, sympathizing with his loss. "If we could have brought them back with us, we would have. But before we left we made them a promise: to return magic to its rightful place and restore the Triskelion. Will you help us?"

The dragon laughed, then sneered. "Never. I owe the Old Religion nothing."

Merlin was pained by his dismissal. "How can you say that? Macha--"

"Do not say her name!" The dragon flapped his wings and snorted out smoke, visibly frustrated that he couldn't use his flame against them. "Release me from this prison! I have waited twenty years for my freedom and I will have it!"

"So you can have your revenge?" Merlin asked. "That's all you ever wanted. You never cared about me or Arthur or any of it. You used me."

"I am the last of my kind. There is but one road I can take."

"I was right," Morgana said, stepping up to stand beside Merlin. "You are as bad as Uther. You're a self-pitying, selfish monster!"

The dragon roared in fury, and Morgana took a step back in alarm. Then she stepped forward again, standing close to Merlin in solidarity and perhaps in protection in case the dragon figured out a way to attack them again. "Pathetic," she sneered.

"Do not speak to me, witch," growled the dragon.

"You keep calling me that. Is it supposed to be an insult? Do you hate everyone with magic?"

"The High Priestesses betrayed my kind. I took my revenge upon Nimueh. With time I would have destroyed you and put an end to all of your kind."

Arthur didn't know what all of that meant, but everyone else was shocked by it -- everyone but Gaius. Gwen was looking at wide-eyed Morgana with newfound awe, while Merlin was visibly horrified.

"You're not going to hurt her or anyone else," Merlin said, his fists curled tight. "Not ever again. Is that clear?"
The dragon's claws scraped against the rock. "I have sworn to destroy everything Uther Pendragon holds dear. It matters not that some of my kind still survive in Avalon. Their fate is worse than death. I am still the last of my kind."

"You are not the last." Gaius came to Arthur's side. "There is at least one dragon still alive in Albion. It is unhatched, kept safe in its egg."

The dragon was less than pleased. "For twenty years I have been trapped here, old man, and only now do you tell me this? Where is it? Tell me!"

Gaius gave them a regretful look, then faced the dragon. "You're not the only one who thought it best to let the old ways die."

Beside him, Merlin let out a wounded sound. Arthur's heart hurt for him. It was one thing to know he had been lied to. It was quite another to hear from those he had trusted that he'd been used to destroy the very things he had been born to protect. He took Merlin's hand and held it tightly, sending all his love into him, hoping he could feel it without the connection of their torcs.

He had never been more glad that Merlin had found the courage to tell him about his magic. In that moment, he saw so clearly how badly things could have gone. Without the truth, Arthur might have always lived in his father's shadow. Innocent people would have continued to die because of his father's laws. And Merlin would have been alone, slowly drowning in guilt and fear, his burdens weighing him down until they crushed him. The grand destiny they had been born for would never have arrived. The Great Dragon would have had his revenge.

"I will not be denied what is mine," the dragon warned.

"You'll stay away from that egg," Merlin warned back, his voice echoing with Dragontongue even without the strange language. "It doesn't belong to you."

For the first time, Arthur saw regret on the old dragon's face. "Merlin," the dragon began, suddenly contrite. "Only a Dragonlord has the power to summon a dragon from its egg. Please, I beg you--"

"No," Merlin said, cutting him off. "You wanted your freedom. That's what you're going to get. But after that, we're done."

It wasn't like Merlin to be so harsh, but Arthur understood his anger. His words were much the same as the ones Arthur longed to say to his father. Uther, Gaius, the dragon... all of them had done such harm to the future they claimed they valued. They had each produced their own particular poison and neither he nor Merlin would suffer it any longer.

"I know that the both of you have lost a great deal," Arthur said, looking at both Gaius and the dragon. "But the old ways will be restored. You don't have to like it, but don't stand in our way."

"Arthur," Gaius began, but Arthur didn't want to hear his excuses.

"I want to tell you what happened in Avalon. All of you." At his gesture, Gwen finally joined them. He kept holding Merlin's hand, knowing how hard it would be for him to relive some of the things that happened there. "Merlin and I were captured soon after we arrived. I was badly injured. We were able to escape, and when we did we met what appeared to be dragonflies. They revealed themselves to be the lost dragons of Albion, trapped there and transformed by the Sidhe. When we entered Avalon, Merlin's magic woke them."

"They helped us," Merlin said, joining in. "They healed Arthur and they brought us somewhere safe. That's when they told us everything." He stopped and looked at Arthur, silently asking him to
continue. Arthur nodded.

"Thousands of years ago," Arthur explained, "the Sidhe ruled over Albion. To defeat them, a pact was made between men, magic, and dragons. And from that day forth, the Once and Future King and the Emrys were destined to be reborn in Albion's time of need, to unite and heal the land and its people." He paused as Gwen gasped, covering her mouth. "A thousand years ago everything went wrong. The Romans came, and with the Sidhe's help they trapped the dragons in Avalon. They captured the Emrys, and then with Albion all but defenseless they invaded." What had once been merely distant history was now so much more. It was personal. It was his life, or at least one of his lives. He didn't remember it but now he couldn't help but see himself and Merlin there.

"A Sidhe then killed the King and the Emrys," he continued. "That Sidhe was Queen Titania. After we restored the dragons to their true form, we fought with them to stop the Sidhe army from invading. And then she came. The only way we could stop her was to destroy the Gates of Avalon."

It was Gaius' turn to gasp in shock. "The Gates are sacred."

"We didn't have a choice," Arthur said, and now he truly regretted what they had done. "Perhaps someday it can be rebuilt. But if we let the Sidhe through they would have conquered Camelot, then all of Albion. We couldn't let that happen." He looked to Merlin, worried he would be guilt-ridden from destroying the Gates, but instead Merlin seemed restored by the recollection. Arthur paused, tilting his head in question, and Merlin expressed that he was ready to speak again.

"The battle was over, but with time the Sidhe would strike again," Merlin said, voice steady. "We met with Titania to find a peaceful resolution. But all she cared about was revenge. We couldn't stop her. And then..." His voice softened. "She came. Queen Creiddylad. The May Queen."

Gwen was even more astonished. "The goddess of spring?!" she squeaked.

"Yeah," Merlin said, his dimples showing as he smiled. "She was amazing. She blessed us."

"I can't believe you met a goddess," Gwen said, envious.

"And she stopped Titania?" Morgana asked.

"She took her away," Arthur answered. "We're not sure where. But I don't think she'll be giving us any trouble for a long time." He looked at them all. "The Old Gods are alive and strong again. That Merlin and I are here at all is evidence of that." He looked at Gaius and the dragon again. "The time of magic will return. The Emrys and the Once and Future King will rise, and all of Albion will bow to them.' That was the prophecy you didn't want us to hear. Well, now we've heard it." He paused. "It won't be easy. My father's crimes are many and their wounds may never fully heal, but that is no excuse not to try. What's important now is that we move forward and start rebuilding. So I will tell you again: you can help us or you can get out of our way. If there's anything else you want to say, anything else you lied about or hid from us, now is the time to tell us."

The message was meant more for Gaius than the dragon, as Arthur didn't expect him to help at all. But to his surprise, it was the dragon who spoke.

"The Druid boy."

The words instantly made Merlin freeze. His hand went slack in Arthur's grip, but Arthur didn't let him go.

"The one we saved? What about him?" asked Morgana.
"Though I do not have the power of a seer, the threads of fate are visible to my kind," said the dragon. "His path and yours are fated to entwine."

"You told me he would kill Arthur," Merlin said, voice small and hurt.

"Mordred?" Arthur asked. He could hardly believe that the small, slight boy would ever be a threat to him. "You're serious?"

The dragon gave a rumbling hum. "It is your shared fate to die in battle. Before, I saw him standing against you. Now it is far more likely that he will die by your side."

Arthur wasn't terribly enthused with either option, but he had always expected to die in battle one day. It was hardly a surprise to have it confirmed. Still, he preferred an ally to an enemy. He was far more relieved that the news brought some of the color back to Merlin's cheeks.

"I will not stand in your way," the dragon said. "But my path can no longer lie with yours. Perhaps that is for the best." He looked to Merlin, but Merlin was wary. "For twenty years I waited, chained here in the dark. When I first felt your presence, I knew that you were my best and only hope for revenge. I thought of nothing else. Yet still I grew fond of you. It was a cruel trick of fate that my only weapon was my only kin." He closed his eyes and bowed his head. "Please, Merlin. Do what I could not and find forgiveness in your heart."

The dragon waited and so did Arthur. They watched as Merlin struggled, full of anger and pain. But in the end he gave a great sigh and his eyes cleared.

Arthur gave him his sword. Merlin stared at it, touching the golden letters, then looked to the dragon before him.

"You're the last dragon and I'm the last Dragonlord," Merlin said, softly. "I forgive you."

Not waiting for a reply, he went to the edge of the platform and started down the rugged steps that led down to the anchor of the dragon's heavy chain, his torchlight flickering in the low breeze. When he reached the anchor he stepped over the heavy chain, so huge and thick that it could only have been wrought by magic. He rested his torch on the stone and readied to strike. The dragon bent his long neck, watching intently, yellow eyes narrowed with anticipation.

From far down below, Merlin looked up to Arthur. Arthur nodded once. Merlin raised the sword high. "Ic bebeode þisne sweord þæt hé forcierfe þá bende þæra dracan. Un clýse!"

With the last word, he struck, sending out a shower of sparks as the sword sliced clean through the chain. The loose end fell with a clatter as the dragon rose up and gave a terrible roar of victory. For a moment, Arthur was gripped with a wave of mortal terror at having loosened such a beast upon the world. Had they made a mistake? Would Merlin's magic be enough to stop him?

The dragon stretched his wings wide and rose onto his hind legs. But instead of flying directly away, he lowered himself back down again.

"Young warlock, what you have shown is what you will be. For your clemency, I have a gift for you. As I may no longer be the last dragon, know that you are not the last Dragonlord." Gaius glared at the dragon in warning but that only egged him on. "Your father is alive, and unlike my kind he is within reach. When you see him, tell him that Kilgharrah sends his regards. Our paths may yet cross again." With that, he rose into the air and flew away, his massive wings beating hard for freedom, their gust nearly blowing out the torches.

"Kilgharrah," Arthur echoed. So that was his name.
"Wow," Gwen said, staring up at where Kilgharrah had gone. "That was... Wow." She looked at Arthur. "I don't know what to say!"

Morgana ignored her, leaning over the edge and looking down. "Merlin, are you all right?"

"Yeah." Merlin picked up the torch and headed back up the steps. "I'm coming."

Arthur was certain that 'yeah' didn't even begin to cover what Merlin was feeling right now. But now wasn't the time to press. They both needed time to digest everything that had happened. He expected that once Merlin was back with them, he would want to go back to their chambers right away. But when Merlin reached the top of the steps, he headed directly for Gaius, a mutinous look in his eyes.

"You knew," Merlin said, confronting him. "You knew who my father was and you knew he was alive."

"Yes," Gaius said, reluctantly. "His name is Balinor. But the last time he was seen was many years ago."

Merlin had more than enough color back in his cheeks now. Any more and his head might well pop from the pressure. "And my mother? How much did she know?" When Gaius didn't answer, Merlin inched forward, as aggressive as Arthur had ever seen him. But his voice only lowered. "Tell me why you lied to me."

Gaius didn't flinch. "It was necessary to protect you. The truth was dangerous."

"I had a right to know!" Merlin seethed. Whatever forgiveness he had mustered for Kilgharrah, he had none left for Gaius. Certainly not as long as Gaius continued to lie, or at least hide the truth. "Get out."

"Merlin--"

"Leave before I do something I regret."

"Very well," Gaius said. He gave Arthur a look, then left to shuffle back up the stairs to the dungeons. In retreat he was a sad figure, but Arthur knew better than to pity him. For whatever reason, Gaius was still playing games with them. They would find a way to get the full story out of him eventually.

Before Arthur could fully turn his attention, Morgana breezed past him and took Merlin into her arms. She had never been very demonstrative, so the gesture was all the more surprising. Yet it was exactly what Merlin needed. He held her back, his face pressed against her hair, his whole body sharp with tension. She whispered something and Merlin gave a bark of a laugh. Then he eased, his eyes tearing as his anger faded.

She let him go. He wiped his eyes. "Thanks," he muttered.

"Anytime." Morgana turned to Arthur. "Well. Let's not do this again."

"Fine by me," Arthur agreed. He remembered that once he had been eager to learn Merlin's secrets. Since then he'd had his fill and then some. "We've all had enough excitement."

They went back up to the dungeons, then stopped in the hall. Gwen gave Merlin a hug.

"He's alive," she said, still in awe. "I'm so happy for you."
Merlin mustered a smile. "Now we just have to find him."

"We will," she said, confident. "Oh, Merlin. Will you be all right?"

"Yeah," Merlin said. "You should go home. It's late. You'll be busy tomorrow with the forge."


Arthur gave her a short bow, then watched her go. Morgana was silent, turned away. For all the good that had come out of the past two weeks, there was a great deal of damage as well. But things would get better. It was his job to make it better, even if he didn't yet know how. It was a challenge and a purpose, and those two things were all he truly needed.

Well, almost all.

Morgana parted from them when they reached their chambers, and then at last it was just him and Merlin again.

He needed a moment to catch his own breath, so at first he gave Merlin some space. Merlin was restless, rearranging his few possessions yet again, looking out the window, walking in and out of the now-empty servant's chamber. Eventually Arthur knew he had to put a stop to it or Merlin would work himself into a state and stay there all night.

"Hey," he said, stopping Merlin and touching him. Even as a small gesture it helped, his touch seeming to ground Merlin as it so often had. Even when they didn't know how to talk to each other, they could always rely on that. "Come on. Bed."

They undressed and climbed into bed. Arthur left the last candle lit as they lay down together. They were both wide awake and he had left the curtains open; pale moonlight filtered through the thinning clouds and cast the room in shades of gray, the candlelight a sole, small halo of warmth around them.

"We don't have to talk about it," Arthur said, softly. "Not until you're ready."

"What if I'm never ready?" Merlin asked. His voice was rough with contained emotion. But even if he needed to let it out, it would be cruel to force him.

"I'm very patient," Arthur reminded him. "You're the one who can never stay still when we're hunting."

Merlin gave a small laugh. "It's not my fault that hunting is so dull."

"It would be a lot more interesting if you weren't always scaring off our prey."

"I thought you liked the chase."

"I like a challenge," Arthur corrected. "What I don't like is having every deer, bird, and rabbit bolting off because you somehow manage to step on every twig in the forest."

"You always catch something eventually," Merlin said.

Arthur was pleased to see the twinkle back in his eyes. He propped his head up on his arm. "I suppose you think you're done beating the bushes for me. Think again."

"You're not going to get George to do it?"

"Nah. He'd be too good. Takes all the fun out of it."
Merlin gave a soft, private smile. "I knew it."

Arthur smiled back. He reached up and stroked Merlin's arm, then shifted closer so that they were almost pressed together. He slipped his hand against Merlin's back and pressed him closer, kissed him. Merlin sighed against his lips and kissed back, soft and tentative.

They didn't rush this time. They needed it to be slow and tender, comforting after yet more heartache. Their bodies pressed together as they held each other, vacillating between comfort and arousal. Arthur wanted to kiss Merlin until his full lips were swollen, until it looked as though they had been painted like Morgana's. Eventually Arthur had to see them, and he forced himself to break away. It was worth it; Merlin's cheeks were flushed and his lips reddened. The flush ran down his chest, where his nipples had pulled themselves to sharp points. Arthur pushed down the blanket, exposing Merlin down to his knees.

"You're so lovely," Arthur murmured, taking in the length of him. His skin, pale and pink, contrasting his dark hair. Wisps of it decorated his chest and belly, leading down to a neat thatch at his groin where his cock curved up, beckoning to be touched. There was such strength in him, in his wiry muscles and the magic held inside them. Arthur stroked along his stomach and side, caressing over smooth skin and rough hair, feeling muscle tense and flex against his touch. When he looked up again, he saw that Merlin's blush had deepened and his eyes were lowered with shyness.

"Do you mind the way I look at you?" Arthur asked.

Merlin's plump lower lip caught between his teeth, then dragged free. "Only if I get to look at you," he said, then kicked the blankets away, baring them both entirely. Merlin raked him with his eyes and Arthur let him, lying back to better bare himself to Merlin's gaze. Merlin pushed himself up, touched him, and then lowered himself down and clung bodily to him. He was suddenly trembling, and Arthur held him, soothing his back.

"I can't let you die," Merlin whispered, the words barely audible as Merlin spoke them against Arthur's chest, over his heart. And oh, oh. Of course. Arthur felt a fool not to have realized.

"I can't promise I won't," Arthur said, gently. "But I'll always come back to you. You'll always come back to me."

"It's not enough," Merlin whined, tightening his grip.

"Shh. I know." Arthur felt the same. They had nearly lost each other so many times and each time hurt just as much, maybe even more. Both their hearts had been deeply bruised. But they had found each other, saved each other. They were here now, together, and that was what mattered.

Arthur turned them over so that his body covered Merlin's. Merlin relaxed his grip and Arthur bent down and kissed him again. Their tongues slid against each other as their kisses deepened, lips pressed together as their hunger rose.

There was a soft flash of golden light between them; Arthur felt the tingle of Merlin's magic, then heard the click of a latch. The lid of his heavy chest raised and Merlin raised his hand just in time to catch something in them. Arthur looked up to see their golden torcs in Merlin's hand.

"That's going to be useful on cold mornings," Arthur remarked.

Merlin snorted. Then he took one of the torcs and eased it around Arthur's neck. He settled it into place, stroking it and the skin beneath it. Then he handed the other torc to Arthur. They sat up and Arthur eased the other torc around Merlin's neck. They both gasped as their connection returned.
"I missed this," Arthur groaned. "I missed you."

Merlin smiled, then broke into a grin. "So you only love me for my magic?"


"My King," Merlin whispered. "You are my King, Arthur." He had that Merlin look again, full of love and devotion and pride, but now it was so much more. To Arthur, it was the light of Merlin's soul shining in his eyes, reaching out to his other half. Arthur felt himself looking at Merlin with the same love, the same devotion and pride; he felt his soul reaching out to make them whole again. His gold torc was warm with the magic that flowed between them, strong and pure.

"However long we have," Arthur said, because it needed to be said. "It's what we have. I don't want to waste it by worrying when it will end."

He felt Merlin's sorrow through the torcs, so terrible with fear. "I feel like I only just found you."

"I feel it too," Arthur said. "I think I've waited a very long time."

"I'm sorry."

"It wasn't your fault." Arthur was sure of that.

They kissed and Arthur once again pressed Merlin beneath him. He began to work his way down, tasting and touching Merlin's body as he had that afternoon, but taking his time. He pressed kisses to Merlin's belly, feeling it rise and fall against his mouth with each breath. He kissed each scar knowing that Merlin had earned them for him. Protecting him as he always had and always would.

Then he reached Merlin's parted thighs. He nipped their soft skin and Merlin squirmed away, but Arthur wouldn't let him escape. He crawled after Merlin and tackled him again, which had the benefit of presenting him with Merlin's delightful little bottom. Arthur nipped it, making Merlin yelp and whine.

Merlin thrust against the bed, aroused by the rough play, and Arthur pushed his thighs wide, baring him. Merlin stilled, submitting, and Arthur felt a thrill of power and knowledge. It was one thing to use his strength to overpower Merlin physically. It was quite another to know that Merlin was a Dragonlord, a powerful sorcerer, a demigod born to human form -- yet Merlin submitted to him because he wanted to. For all his raw power, Merlin had given himself to Arthur, sworn his love and fealty forever, and in doing so had bound Arthur completely in his thrall.

Merlin was his and he was Merlin's. His King, his love. His master, when he wanted it, and it seemed Merlin wanted it now. Arthur could only obey.

He spread Merlin's cheeks and found the tight furl of his hole. He pried it open with his thumbs and then his tongue, making Merlin writhe and moan and softly beg. Merlin's body clasped at him hungrily.

Arthur rose up and knelt over Merlin, pinning his spread thighs and pushing down against his back. Merlin was gaping, dazed and eager with need, but Arthur could see that he needed more. Merlin always needed more.

Arthur's own cock was achingly full. He rubbed the tip of it against the crack of Merlin's arse, promising.
"There's oil in that drawer. Give it to me." It was a command. A command for Merlin to serve his King with his magic. Merlin whimpered and tensed, nearly coming from that alone, but Arthur was pleased to see him hold himself back. His eyes flashed gold and then a phial of oil flung itself into Arthur's palm.

"Very good," Arthur approved, and Merlin shivered. Such a needy boy. It was good that he had Arthur to take care of him.

Arthur thumbed open the cork and slicked his cock, then worked his oiled fingers into Merlin. They hadn't done this in a while and he didn't want Merlin to hurt -- well, except the places where the hurt would feel good. But he didn't spend too long. He wanted them both to feel this.

He lined himself up and pressed in. The head of his cock met the tightness of Merlin's arse, and he pushed until Merlin gasped and opened for him. "So good for me," he soothed again, his voice tight against his own arousal. He usually liked to exhaust Merlin and open him up so that he would be loose and unresisting. But now he wanted to feel Merlin's strength: the tension in his muscles, the tight clench of his arse as it alternately gripped his cock and welcomed it deeper. He wanted to feel Merlin resist him and submit to him, over and over, all while knowing that Merlin wouldn't have to lift a finger to stop him if he truly wanted to.

Before he could bottom out completely, he kissed Merlin's back and then pulled almost all the way out, just to hear Merlin whimper, to feel Merlin fighting to keep him. Merlin groaned with pleasure as Arthur thrust back in, forcing him open before drawing back again. He fucked Merlin slow and long, denying them both the depth they craved. When Merlin began to rut himself against the bed in frustration, Arthur stopped midway and spanked him, once and then again, the slap of skin sharp and sweet. Then he touched where he had struck and felt the skin heat in the shape of his hand.

"Patience," Arthur chided, quite pleased with himself.

Merlin whined. "Prat." He clenched tightly around Arthur's cock, which was both exquisite and very naughty. Arthur spanked him again for that, then kept going until both of Merlin's cheeks were glowing hot and Merlin was clawing and biting at the sheets.

"That's better," Arthur declared. He rubbed the heated skin to soothe it, then lined himself up again. This time he sank down all the way, not stopping until Merlin was filled to the very brim. They both groaned in satisfaction.

"Finally," Merlin sighed, and gave him a pleasant squeeze.

Arthur gave a hum of agreement. He lay down on Merlin, trapping him with his full weight, and screwed his hips to grind himself just a fraction deeper. He reaching underneath to pinch and tug at Merlin's sensitive nipples, all while planting kisses and nips along his shoulders. Merlin writhed beautifully in his embrace, struggling just enough to prove that he wanted this: to have Arthur squeeze out everything but their shared pleasure. Arthur stayed deep inside him, sweetening him with tender words as Merlin whimpered and strained.

But even Arthur's patience had its limits. He pulled out completely, rising up on his knees, and considered how best to take his satisfaction. The answer came to him quickly.

"I think it's time you served your King," Arthur said, lying back against the pillows. He tucked one hand behind his head and slowly stroked his cock with the other.

Merlin's eyes narrowed as he sat up. "Is that so?"
"It's an order," Arthur said, knowing that his gleeful arrogance would only rile Merlin further.

Merlin stared at him with that perfect mixture of defiance and submission. "Very well, my Lord." He clambered over Arthur and then, never breaking eye contact, he sank down on Arthur's cock, all the way down. He settled, as satisfied as a cat with cream, and pressed his hands against his abdomen. Arthur shivered, remembering the last time Merlin had made that gesture, when Arthur had reached so deep inside him. He would never forget the way Merlin had treasured him, as if he had captured a piece of Arthur and would never let it go.


"Is my King not satisfied?" Merlin asked, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

"Your King knows his sorcerer is capable of more than sitting on his bottom."

Merlin laughed and wriggled his arse. "That's not what I'm sitting on."

"Go on, impress me," Arthur challenged.

With a flash of golden eyes, Arthur found his wrists and ankles spread and pinned to the bed, just as Merlin had done to him that morning. "That's more like it," he said, pleased and perhaps a tiny bit nervous.

Merlin gave a wriggle of anticipation, then closed his eyes and worked himself slowly, rising up and down on Arthur's cock. Arthur enjoyed the view, then gave an impatient thrust just as Merlin was sinking down. When Merlin's eyes opened, they were full of challenge.

"You want me to impress you, my Lord?"

"I'm waiting."

A smile tugged at Merlin's lips, and then the phial of oil flew into his hand. His eyes glowed as he slicked his hand, and then his smile widened. Merlin slicked his fingers, then pressed one of them into the air in front of him.

Arthur yelped as he felt something pushing at his arse. Merlin drew back his hand and it stopped. He pushed forward and Arthur felt his finger.

"How?" Arthur gasped, amazed.

Merlin grinned and answered him by thrusting into him with two fingers. He spread them, crooked them, and Arthur felt every move. He felt the oil they left behind as they spread him. And then Merlin wiped the oil onto his cock. He curled his hand into a fist and thrust into it, and Arthur cried out as he felt Merlin's cock fucking him.

Arthur cursed and groaned as he let his head fall back, overcome by the dual sensation of being inside Merlin as Merin was inside him. He looked down his lashes at the sight of Merlin's darkened cock, the head glistening with oil as it peeked in and out of Merlin's fist. Arthur felt every stroke as a thrust inside himself, stretching him wide and pushing deep. And then Merlin began to ride him, rising up and falling down, clenching exquisitely as he tormented Arthur with pleasure.

"How is that, my Lord?" Merlin gasped, breathless.

"Don't stop," Arthur ordered. He had never felt anything like this: Merlin holding him down, riding
him and fucking him and gasping above him. It was perfect and it was too much and neither of them could make it last.

Arthur had given the command, but it was Merlin who was in control now -- all the better to serve his King. Arthur surrendered to him, held fast and fucked open as Merlin's hips and hand quickened their pace. He could feel himself being taken, dragged along in thrall to Merlin's magic and arousal, his own hips moving in perfect time with Merlin's thrusts and his strokes as he filled and was filled, fucked and was fucked. He strained for Merlin and was held firm by him and he had no choice but to let it all happen.

They came together, Arthur's cock pulsing deep as Merlin ground down against him and clenched with his climax. Merlin's fist pulled back and his cock thrust deep into Arthur's arse, and Arthur felt the wet heat of Merlin's come inside him even as it striped across his front, the end of one line catching in his mouth. Merlin wrung them both dry, squeezing his cock hard before releasing it with one last stroke that left Arthur empty, his body clenching the air with aftershocks. With a flick of Merlin's wrist the invisible bonds released, and Arthur immediately pulled Merlin down and kissed him senseless.

"That was absolutely mad," Arthur declared, between kisses. "Let's do it again."

Merlin laughed. "Maybe later." He broke away and gave a languid stretch; he lay himself down over Arthur, then turned so they were both on their sides, still embraced. "Mmm, this is nice, too."

Arthur had to agree that it was. There were few things as lovely as when Merlin was soft and tender in his arms. He wiped the lines of come from his front and fed them to Merlin, who sucked at his finger with sleepy promise.

"I still owe you for letting Morgana interrupt us," Merlin reminded him.

"You do," Arthur said, fondly. He fed Merlin his finger again and let him suck it clean. "I would love to wake up to your mouth tomorrow morning."

Merlin hollowed his cheeks, laving Arthur's finger before drawing free. "As long as George isn't watching. I was never that nosy."

Arthur barked a laugh. "You were even worse!"

"Maybe," Merlin said, narrow eyed. "You know, you taste a bit like the dragon. Kilgharrah, I mean."

"I hope you're referring to the spell he gave me," Arthur said, eyebrows raised.

Merlin gave him a look, then turned alarmed as he realized how he had sounded, then scowled. "Yes, I mean the spell. But I think it's fading."

"Good. The only magic I want all over me is yours."

Merlin was pleased by that. "You're mine. Nobody else gets to put spells all over you."

"Of course," Arthur agreed. Though he suspected he was going to have to stop Merlin from wrapping him in protective spells for the rest of his life.

Merlin sighed with contentment, and Arthur thought perhaps he was ready to drift off to sleep. But then he opened his eyes again. "I'm going to find my father," he said, amazed.
"We are." Arthur was intensely relieved that Merlin's father hadn't been killed with the other Dragonlords. He knew Merlin would never hold Uther's crimes against him, but nevertheless, Arthur felt a personal responsibility for all of them. A King should take responsibility for what happened to his people, good and bad, but his father was clearly incapable of that. That Balinor was alive somewhere was one less burden on his conscience.

"Where do you think he is?" Merlin asked. "I wonder what he's been doing all this time."

"I guess we'll find out. Perhaps we can bring him to Ealdor to see your mother."

"Maybe," Merlin said, reluctant. But even as he spoke, he grew resolved to the idea. "Yeah."

"We'll find him," Arthur said again, assuring him. If he could reunite Merlin's family, give him the love of both his parents together... He would do whatever it took to make that happen. He might never meet own his mother, but Merlin deserved to know his father. Gaius would help them find him whether he liked it or not.

"And we'll find the egg," Merlin said, excited even as he fought to keep his eyes open. "There must be others somewhere out there. I don't think Creiddylad would have blessed us if there weren't any dragons left. We need them. Everyone does." He yawned. "Morgana said we should put leeches in Gaius' stew. And his socks."

Arthur smiled. "Is that what she told you?"

"Mmm." Merlin mustered the effort to magic the blankets over them, then snuggled closer. "Give him a taste of his own medicine."

"She does have the occasional good idea," Arthur admitted. The last candle was still lit, but he didn't think he could reach it, not with the way Merlin was wrapped around him. "My sweet bird," he murmured. "Put out the candle?"

Merlin gave a sleepy grumble and the flame snuffed out. Arthur kissed him as he fell asleep. He closed his eyes knowing that at last they were back where they belonged, home safe in each other's arms.

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"The bird of paradise alights only upon the hand that does not grasp." - John Berry

(Epilogue to follow.)

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A High Priestess. Morgana was a High Priestess.

Gwen had walked home in a daze, her heart full and her head bursting from all the things she had learned. As tumultuous as things had been of late, the past few days alone had changed everything.

The Old Religion was returning. She wished her parents had lived to see this day. They had never mentioned the Emrys or the Once and Future King to her, perhaps for the same reason that Gaius had kept it secret. The truth was dangerous. But the truth was also necessary, and so her parents had found a way to share it with her. When things had been at their darkest, oily smoke still lingering over the town and their home a mess after being trampled through by guards on yet another search, her mother had held her and promised her that the Old Gods had not forgotten them. That one day they would return and through their blessings the Triskelion would be reborn. When she'd asked her mother how it would happen, how the gods would help them, her mother had said only that it would happen as it had happened before. And when that day came, all of Albion would be blessed and they would no longer live in fear.

Gwen had never dreamed it could be real. She had certainly never imagined that their saviors would be Arthur, the bratty son of the King that tormented them, and Merlin, a kind but foolish peasant boy. But they had grown up a great deal since Merlin had first walked into town and told Arthur off for being a bully. She was so proud of them. She could truly believe that they were destined to bring about a golden age. She was humbled to have a place beside them.

And they were not the only ones with a great destiny. Morgana's nightmares, her powerful magic. Gwen felt a fool to not have realized what it all meant. But she had never known any High Priestesses herself. They were all thought to have died in the Great Purge and her parents hadn't liked to speak of them. They said only that bad things had happened in the past and the High Priestesses were not innocent. When the Purge began, Uther had proclaimed that the Old Religion had been entirely corrupted by dark magic and that was why the Priestesses and the dragons and Dragonlords and everything to do with magic had to be cleansed.

But whatever bad things had happened, they were in the past. Just like Arthur said. As difficult as Morgana could be, she had a good heart. Whatever bad things the High Priestesses had done before the Purge, that had nothing to do with Morgana.

Perhaps knowing why she had magic would help Morgana accept it and the Old Religion. Gwen wanted to help her. Morgana was touched by the gods themselves yet she knew nothing about them. How could she fulfil her duties if she didn't know what they were? Even having been raised in the faith, Gwen knew there were many gaps in her own knowledge. But they had found that secret library full of books of magic and history. There was so much they could learn from that. She wanted nothing more than to help Morgana with them, to support her and love her and help her understand.

But she couldn't. Even their friendship had been destroyed and now Morgana could barely stand to look at her. It made her heart hurt.

But she wouldn't let it drag her down. Tomorrow she was making a fresh start of her own. And Merlin was right: even if Morgana didn't like it, Gwen had every right to spend time with them. She didn't need Morgana's permission.

From now on, the only chores she had to do were her own. She was no one's servant. She was a blacksmith, just as she had always dreamed. And when she wasn't working, she was going to help
Merlin and Arthur and learn all the old ways and magic and knowledge that she had thought lost forever.

She gave a happy sigh and picked up the candle and knife from the small shrine before her. She carved her name into its side and placed it in the crucible. She lit it, then poured ale into the gold cup beside the statues of Modron and Gofannon.

She prayed, thanking Gofannon for the forge's heat and for iron's strength. She thanked Modron for protecting Merlin's father and the dragon egg, and prayed that both would stay safe until they could be found. She prayed for Morgana's heart and Elyan's return, for Arthur and Merlin to succeed, for Camelot and all her children to be protected. And she thanked all the Old Gods for blessing Albion once again.

As the candle burned down, a resolution came over her. A purpose of her own. She had no noble blood, no magic, but she had faith. She had kept that faith even when things were darkest and now it had been more than rewarded. There was only one thing she could do. She summoned all her resolve, all her faith, and let it burn bright like a candle flame, feeding like a wick from her soul.


I pledge my soul to you. I give to you my every breath and every step. Guide my hand and heart that I may serve you for all the days of my life.

Gwen had prayed to the gods almost every single night. She had gone through the simple ritual again and again, thanking the gods and asking for small boons, for the protection of those she loved. But she made this prayer selflessly, for the sake of Modron and Gofannon, for Lleu and Silus and Brighid, for Rhiannon and Cernunnos and Amaethon and all the Old Gods of the land. She swore everything she was to them, to Albion, to the future that the Emrys and the Once and Future King had been born to create.

And for the first time, the gods answered back.

The small candle flared like dragon flame and the ale boiled in its cup. Her vision filled with golden light and something reached into her chest and it hurt, the force of it driving the breath from her lungs. A deep vibration ran through her from head to toe, like distant thunder so loud it made the ground tremble from miles away. But it wasn't thunder, it was a voice -- no, three voices in one. The Triple Goddess.

She said only one word. "Cíesaþ." We accept.

The candle melted and extinguished itself. The last of the ale boiled away, leaving the cup empty. And then she was gone. Gwen gasped as her lungs filled again and her vision cleared. She found herself lying flat on the floor, and stared up at the ceiling, stunned silent. Her heart was beating impossibly fast and she pressed a trembling hand against it.

Wordless, she struggled to her feet. She cleaned the cup and put everything back in the hiding place with her gold. She washed her face and changed and lay down in her bed.

As she returned to herself, a sense of peace came over her. She pressed her hand against her chest again, feeling in some way transformed, transmuted. Not as metal through a forge, but like alchemy. Modron had reached into her soul and changed it with her blessing. In return for Gwen's oath, the goddess had granted her a destiny of her own, one she felt filling her up with every breath: to serve the gods for all the days of her life.
Perhaps she was meant to be a servant after all. But this time she had made the choice for herself. She didn't regret it.

Tomorrow, she would start her forge and practice her trade. She would go to the secret library. She would take her first steps on the path of her destiny.

She fell asleep and dreamed not of her past, but of the future that awaited her.

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Epilogue (Prologue)

Gwen hated the siege. She hated being stuck in the castle, the whole town crammed in together for weeks on end, trapped and terrified, their supplies dwindling as their losses mounted. But most of all, she hated the way the walls shook every time Cenred's army flung rocks at them. She had nightmares about the walls finally giving way, crashing down around them and entombing them alive.

"It'll end soon," her mother insisted, her quiet voice strong despite its weariness. Another rock made the room tremble and Gwen pressed deeper into the shelter of her arms.

Gwen tried to be brave. She truly did. Elyan and their father were out there, supporting the men who defended them from the Escetir, and she felt that she ought to be out there with them. But the attacks were relentless, wearing her down even though the walls of Camelot stood firm.

The noise of the battle intensified, cries coming from above as the men fought back those who tried to breach the top of the walls. The first of the wounded arrived, the trickle before the inevitable flood. Her mother kissed the top of her head and then gently pushed her aside.

"It's time we do our part," her mother told her, then headed over to help Gaius. Gwen dragged herself to her feet and followed after her. Maybe she couldn't join in with the fighting or the forge, but when it came to healing, Gaius needed all the help he could get.

Maybe, she thought sourly, if the King hadn't had all the proper healers executed, things wouldn't be so desperate. Just a few months before the battle, yet another sorcerer had been executed for using magic to heal. Sometimes Gwen wondered if the King simply wanted his people to suffer and that was why he did it. The war was his fault anyway, even if no one wanted to admit it. It had been ten years since the end of the Great Purge, but that didn't stop him from sending knights into every bordering kingdom to chase after any hint of sorcery.

Not that Gwen could talk about that to anyone. With everyone pressed in together, it wasn't safe to talk about the Old Religion at all. They couldn't even pray properly and they needed the favor of the gods now more than ever.

Someone was carried into the room on a stretcher and the mood of the room grew even more somber. The first casualty of the day. The man had several arrows sticking out of his chest and he was still alive, but only barely. He was wheezing badly, the sound of it pained and wet, and as Gaius bent over him she already knew that the arrows had pierced his lungs. There was nothing they could do for him now.

Gaius shook his head once and the men who had brought him in bent their heads in sorrow. The man wheezed out his last words, or at least tried to, but he began to choke on his own blood. With a flail and a spasm he died, his body releasing itself as his breathing shuddered to a halt. Gwen turned away from the sight, the smell.

He was the first today but he wouldn't be the last. Every day there had been casualties: gaping sword
wounds, crushed bones from heavy rocks or falling masonry, arrows and crossbolts piercing deep. The injured were many more. The relentlessness of it made Gwen both numb and heartsick and she wasn't sure which was worse.

She tried to smile for them, to stay in good cheer to bolster their spirits. She and her mother and other women and girls cleaned and stitched and bandaged wounds, made poultices and draughts, pulled hard to set broken bones. They helped feed and wash those who couldn't help themselves. And those that could stand and raise a sword would pull back on their mail and march back out again, putting their lives on the line to keep them all safe.

But the ones who couldn't, those were the ones Gwen hurt for most of all because she knew they didn't have to suffer. If only Camelot had a King that was just and kind. Sometimes she wondered if it would be better if they lost. Magic was still legal in Escetir. Surely that meant Cenred was a better King than Uther. But all she really knew about him was that he was young and looking to make his mark, and that it was terrible to be on the receiving end of his ambition.

Her mother gave a cry of alarm, and Gwen looked up from her bandaging to see that her father and Elyan had returned. Both were bloodied but Elyan had a crossbow bolt sticking out of his arm. Her heart leapt to her throat and she hurried over to them.

"What happened?" her mother asked, distraught.

"Elyan was carrying fresh bolts to the ramparts," her father explained. As he sat Elyan down on a bench, he glared at him. "And then our fool of a son decided to stay and fight. He's lucky he wasn't killed!"

Elyan winced and then stuck out his jaw, stubborn as ever. "I wanted to help."

"Waving a sword around is not helping," her father said, his usually gentle nature overcome with emotion. "And now look! You might lose your arm!"

"I'm sure it won't come to that," Gaius said, intervening. He inspected the wound and then prodded carefully around it. Then he took hold of the end and turned the shaft in place. Elyan hissed in air and wobbled as though he might faint.

"Let's lie you down," Gaius soothed, guiding Elyan to lie flat on the bench. He turned to Tom and Anne. "The bolt appears to have missed the bone but it's best if we get it out quickly. I'll need you to hold him still. Can you do that?"

Her parents both nodded, though they looked positively ill. Gwen felt the same but she wasn't going to let her brother down. Even if he was rude about everything these days. Her father kept saying that Elyan just needed to finish growing up, and Gwen was going to make sure he was alive to do it.

At Gaius' instruction, they put a leather strap between Elyan's teeth and kept him still. Gwen held a candle close as Gaius carefully widened the hole around the bolt. They couldn't simply pull it out without risking terrible damage. At least it wasn't an arrow; arrows were more dangerous than bolts, as the wood could splinter or the head become stuck inside the wound, almost guaranteeing infection.

Mercifully, Elyan passed out. Gaius eased the bolt out of his arm and then straightened up. As soon as the wound was clear, Gwen flushed it with clean water. She sewed the wound shut with a few stitches, then Gaius and her father turned Elyan over so she could do the same to the exit wound. Small hands make small stitches, Gaius had told her when he taught her.
She treated and bandaged the wound, and as she secured it Elyan stirred awake. Her mother sagged in relief, but her father tensed again.

"Lie still," Gaius told Elyan. "You're going to need to rest your arm for at least a week to let the muscle heal."

Elyan ignored him, sitting up even though he was stiff and wincing from the pain. "A whole week!"

"You were very lucky," Gaius warned, gravely. "If that bolt had shattered the bone, you would have lost your arm."

Elyan wasn't dissuaded. "I can't sit around for a week!"

"A week at least. If you injure the muscle further, you may weaken it permanently."

"You'll do as he says," commanded her mother.

"It's not fair," Elyan protested.

"Elyan," her father began, his anger finally fading with exhaustion. "I saw you fall. I thought--" He cut himself off before he could finish. Then he riled again. "You'll do as your mother says. And if you heal before this is over, you'll return to the forge and you'll stay there."

"It's not fair!" Elyan fumed, then stumbled to his feet and cried out in pain. Gwen tried to help him but he pulled away and staggered off to the other end of the room. He slumped down on the floor and curled against the wall to stew in his misery.

Even though he was older than her, he could be such a child. She turned back to her parents and saw that they were hurting nearly as much as Elyan was. Then she realized that her father was actually hurt.

"It's just a few bruises," her father insisted. "When I saw him fall I ran out to get him."

"You didn't take a shield?" her mother asked.

"I wasn't thinking straight," he admitted. He gave her a silent apology; she sighed, then kissed his cheek.

"You're both safe," she said, softly. "That's all that matters."

Her father let Gaius check him over and after some prodding he was pronounced free of any major injury. Gwen retrieved some doses of the proper draught and a poultice for the worst of the swelling.

"You're such a good girl, Gwen," her father said and hugged her. Her mother gave her a warm, approving look and Gwen basked in it.

Gaius also gave his approval. "Your daughter has made herself a fine apprentice these past weeks," he told her parents. "Perhaps the position could be made permanent. Gwen, would you like to become a healer one day?"

Gwen thought about it. She liked helping people and she liked working with her hands. But being a healer meant having to face terrible things every day, blood and death and so much pain. She didn't think she could bear to spend her whole life that way. "Thank you, but..." She looked down, feeling awkward about the refusal.

But Gaius wasn't offended. "It's all right, my dear. Ah, but you already have a new position. It's quite
an honor to be a servant in the royal household."

"It is," her mother said, warmly. "A tremendous honor. We're so proud of her."

When Morgana had offered Gwen the position -- chosen her for it, really -- Gwen had accepted it immediately. It was only later that she realized that she probably should have asked her parents before making such an important decision about her whole life. But to her relief, they were more than happy for her. To be a maidservant in the royal household was a rare honor, and though Gwen was quite young for the position, she already knew how to clean and launder and care for noble women from apprenticing to her mother.

As far as everyone was concerned, Morgana had chosen Gwen and that was the end of the matter. But once her initial enthusiasm had worn off, Gwen had realized that perhaps she had made a mistake. Morgana was her friend and she wanted to be close to her, but it was her dream to be a blacksmith. In the excitement of the moment she had made a choice, but perhaps it had been the wrong one.

The older she got, the more everyone told her what her life was supposed to be. That smithing wasn't suitable work for a girl, that she wasn't strong enough for such hard work, never mind that she'd been helping her father since she was old enough to carry a water bucket. It wasn't as though being a maidservant was easy. She didn't understand why she had to give up the one thing she had always wanted.

In that regard, she did empathize with her brother. If only she and Elyan could change places. But then she doubted he would want to be a servant either. He wanted adventure. She wanted to make things, build things. She worried that her father would end up selling the forge once he was too old to work it.

"And how is Lady Morgana?" Gaius asked. "I'm afraid I've been so busy that I haven't had time to visit her."

A few days into the siege -- just after Gwen had been officially instated to her position -- the King and Morgana had had a terrible fight right in front of everyone. In those first days, the Escetir army had pushed hard and everyone was feeling the strain. Morgana had suited up with her mail and boldly run out into the battle to fight. Though she wore a helmet to disguise herself, it wasn't long before she was discovered. Uther was absolutely livid, and even though Morgana hadn't been hurt, he ordered that she be confined to her chambers until the siege ended. Morgana replied, just as furious, that she hated Uther and Camelot and that he wasn't her father and that her father was a better man than Uther would ever be. And then she had spat at him.

Two weeks later, Morgana was still stuck in her chambers and there was no sign that Uther might change his mind.

"As well as can be expected," Gwen admitted, feeling that she could tell Gaius the truth. "It's been quite hard for her."

Gaius sighed. "Yes, I expect it has been. I'll speak to the King, but I'm afraid he's unlikely to change his mind." He rested a hand on her shoulder. "It's quite fortunate that she has you now. I want you to look after her for me."

Gwen straightened up. "I will," she promised, buoyed by his trust in her. Even if she wasn't certain about her future, she cared about Morgana and wanted to help her. She was glad that Gaius cared about Morgana, too.
"Good girl," Gaius said, patting her shoulder and giving her a warm smile. But his smile faded as another wounded man staggered in. Gwen followed him over to the injured man, ready to do her part.

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The fighting couldn't go on forever. After several fruitless weeks, the Escetir were as weary as everyone inside the walls. They were too stubborn to just go home, but at least they gave up while it was still daylight.

With the bombardment over, the fighters relaxed and everyone came out of their huddle. There was plenty of patching up to do, both for the people and the castle, and soon the air was full of hammers ringing against wood and metal and stone. As the last of the wounded were tended to, Gaius finally shooed Gwen off for dinner. She ate with her family and they all tried to ignore Elyan's sullen silence. She felt for her brother as she felt for Morgana: both of them had been punished for trying to help. But she wished that they would try to be a bit more sensible. Even Elyan was barely old enough to be a squire. If they weren't so proud, maybe they would see that there were many other ways they could help that were just as important as fighting.

With that on her mind, Gwen excused herself to go bring Morgana her dinner. Though they were all on rations, extra food was set aside for the royals and the highest nobles and that included Morgana. Gwen got her tray from the kitchens and carried it upstairs.

Though Morgana was confined to her chambers, Uther hadn't bothered to post a guard. It would have been a waste of resources -- though arguably it was a waste to imprison Morgana in the first place. Instead he had made it clear that if anyone saw her step foot outside her door, they were to take her to him immediately and he would deal with the matter. It was implied that Morgana would face a far worse punishment if she disobeyed the King a second time. Gwen got the shivers just thinking about it.

So though Morgana stewed with frustration, she stayed where she was put. Gwen tried to spend as much time as she could with her because she was practically Morgana's only visitor and it was terrible to be all alone. But usually she was needed to help Gaius with the wounded. It left them too much apart and Gwen felt frustrated about it as well.

But that made what time they did have all the more precious. She put aside her worries as she knocked on the door, and when it opened, Morgana was as happy to see her as always.

"Gwen, thank goodness." Morgana pulled her inside and shut the door. "I've been going absolutely out of my mind. Tell me what's happened."

While Morgana ate, Gwen caught her up on the news of the day. Though each day was far too much like the last, Morgana was always eager to listen and her attention made Gwen eager to talk. Even without saying anything, Morgana could be a powerful presence, her eyes sharp and intent, betraying the quickness of her mind. She was like no one Gwen had ever known.

Gwen's enthusiasm faded as she recalled what happened to her brother and her father. When she spoke of Elyan's desire to fight, she saw the sympathy in Morgana's eyes.

"They're fools for holding us back," Morgana declared. "If they let us help, we wouldn't still be trapped. If my father were here, he would have kicked Cenred back to Escetir right away instead of hiding like a coward."

Morgana spoke with such conviction that Gwen almost believed her. But Elyan's misadventure
belied such grand claims. "But what could we do that everyone else can't?" she asked, hating to speak against Morgana but yearning for an answer. For all that she was able to contribute herself, she still felt helpless and as trapped within the castle as Morgana was in her chambers.

But Morgana didn't have an answer. "I don't know," she said, frowning. "I just know that this would never have happened if my father was still alive. Uther's going about this all wrong. He's not protecting us, he's turned us all into prisoners. It's no different than if Cenred had already won."

Gwen wasn't quite sure about that, yet the spirit of it rang true. Not for the first time, Gwen wished that she could tell Morgan how much Uther frightened her, how she wished he would go away and never come back. How his mistakes and his cruelty were hurting everyone so badly. But as always, she held her tongue. Even if Morgana kept her secrets -- and there was no guarantee she would -- there was always a chance she might let something slip or be overheard when she thought she was alone. Someone might even be listening now. Gwen didn't want to burn.

"It's terrible," Gwen agreed, trying not to show how she felt. But some of it must have come through. At least she had an excuse to be upset.

"Oh, Gwen," Morgana said. She stood up from her chair, came around the table and hugged her. Gwen let out a little gasp at the contact and then relaxed into her arms, and they held each other as if they never wanted to let go.

Morgana, she thought, wishing now that they could stay together forever.

Morgana let Gwen have half of her dried fruit, a precious treat when her daily ration was mostly bread and gruel. The sweetness lingered on her tongue as she set about her duties, tidying up the chambers and preparing the bed for the night. They couldn't spare the fuel for a bath, so Gwen washed her mistress with a bowl and a cloth. Morgana was lovely and though Gwen was used to washing others, she felt oddly as though she were the one exposed and had to avert her eyes. It was easier as she washed Morgana's hair and then dried it, and then they sat together on her bed so Gwen could brush out the long, silky strands.

"You're so good to me," Morgana sighed, taking Gwen's hand and resting her cheek against it. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

Gwen felt a flush of warmth and smiled shyly. She liked taking care of Morgana. Being with her, being close this way, it made her stomach flutter strangely.

After she tucked Morgana into bed for the night, she didn't leave right away. She stayed by her side, holding her hand until she was fast asleep, her breathing slow and even, her dark hair spread across the white pillows. Morgana was so strong, so brave, and yet Gwen sensed something fragile in her. It compelled Gwen to stay, to protect her mistress against their harsh and unforgiving world. In that moment, she understood Elyan and Morgana and why they'd tried to fight despite the terrible danger of it. She knew then that if danger came, she would fight for Morgana. She wouldn't let anyone hurt her.

Her own exhaustion finally forced Gwen to let go of Morgana's hand. Though she was so tired that she was sorely tempted to simply lay down beside her, she knew it wouldn't be proper for her to fall asleep on Morgana's bed. Instead she forced herself to her feet and left, taking the tray and the day's laundry with her.

When she reached Lord Heward's chambers, she quietly let herself in. Lord Heward, Lady Asceline, and Leon were all asleep in one room and her family was asleep in the other. She moved by moonlight, stepping silently as she prepared to sleep. But as she dug through her things, a flash of
steel caught her eye. She pushed aside her clothes and saw the two pieces of Morgana's sword.

After Morgana had broken it, Gwen had promised to fix it for her. How could she have forgotten about it? It was no wonder that Morgana was missing her father so dearly -- the sword was all she had of him.

Gwen couldn't bring it back to her still broken. She had to fix it. But she could hardly use her father's forge in the middle of a siege. She would have to use the royal forge, but they were even snootier about a girl using the forge than the other blacksmiths in the lower town.

But she knew for a fact that sometimes the forge was empty. Not during the day or even late into the evening. But in the middle of the night, for a few hours, when everyone was asleep. If she wasn't so tired now she would go down right away. But she could barely keep her eyes open.

Tomorrow night. She would take the sword to the forge tomorrow night and fix it. She would give it back and Morgana would be so happy, she just knew it. And then everything would be all right.

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Despite her intent, it was another night until Gwen could make it down to the forge, and even then she was stymied by some teenaged couple who had chosen the forge as a private spot to kiss. Gwen rolled her eyes and waited for them to go, but it took them so long that she didn't have time to do more than grind the broken ends and make the initial weld. It was a fine sword and she didn't want to disrespect it by doing a poor repair, so she went back again the following night.

This time the teenagers were gone. She worked hard, using all her strength to get the forge glowing hot, then pounding the blade with all her might until she felt as though her arm was going to give out. The work was even harder than usual without anyone to help her, but she was determined. She was so focused on her work that she didn't notice she wasn't alone until it was too late. Someone grabbed her arm and she yelped, raising her hammer in defense. She turned and her stomach dropped.

It was Prince Arthur.

"What are you doing?" he asked, sternly. He the same age as her but he was the Prince and carried himself with all his royal authority.

Gwen was frozen. What could she say? She was going to be punished. Her parents were going to be so upset. And the sword wasn't done yet, what if the King took it and never gave it back? It would be all her fault.

"Are you stupid?" the Prince asked, scowling. "Say something. What's your name?"

"Guinevere," Gwen stammered out, and gave a deep bow. "I'm sorry, my Lord, so sorry. Please forgive me. I meant no harm or disrespect, please, you must believe me."

The Prince stared at her for what felt like ages, then he picked up the sword. "Whose sword is this?"

"Lady Morgana's, my Lord. I promised to fix it for her. I meant no harm, I swear." After a pause, she dared to look up at him again. She was relieved to see that he wasn't angry anymore. He was looking at the sword with consideration. "My Lord?"

"You're Tom and Anne's daughter," the Prince said, and now he was looking at her with the same consideration. "You're the one helping Gaius."

"Yes, my Lord."
"If Gaius trusts you, you can't be all bad." He paused. "You can stop bowing now."

Gwen bolted upright. "Yes, my Lord. Sorry, my Lord."

The Prince groaned. "And stop saying that. I'm not going to have your head chopped off."

Gwen opened her mouth to apologize again, realized that was not going to help, and closed it.

"Now I remember," the Prince said, as he inspected the sword. "You're Morgana's new maidservant. Did she tell you to do this?"

Gwen didn't want to get Morgana in trouble as well. Besides, it had been her own decision to take the risk. "No, my Lord." She squared her shoulders. "I wanted to fix it for her. If you're going to arrest me, please give it back to her. Don't let the King take it."

"My father has no use for a broken sword," the Prince said, stiffly. Then he softened. "And I'm not going to arrest you." He handed her the sword. "It's good work. Morgana will be pleased."

"Thank you for your kindness, my Lord." Gwen looked down at the sword with regret. She was going to have to wait until the siege was over to finish fixing it now. She turned to leave.

"You can come back tomorrow," the Prince said, suddenly. When she turned back to him, she saw that he was looking away, as if a bit shy. "If you still want to finish it. No one will stop you if I'm here."

"You want to help me?" Gwen asked, amazed.

The Prince shrugged. "I've been having trouble sleeping. Father won't... I need something to do." He finally met her eyes, and she saw at once that he was as lonely as Morgana, as frustrated as Elyan. That despite his position, he felt just as trapped as the rest of them. Her heart went out to him.

"I would be honored, my Lord," she said, and smiled for him. He seemed to like it. "I'll see you tomorrow." Then she ran off, heart racing. She couldn't believe that she had talked to the Prince himself and he was going to help her! She held the sword tightly all the way back.

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The next night, the Prince was waiting for her at the forge. They set to work at once and the Prince kept the forge blazing hot for her. The harder they worked, the more at ease they became with each other.

"So what are you?" the Prince asked. "A servant or a blacksmith?"

"Both, sort of," Gwen said, breathing hard as she rests her arm.

"You can't be two things," the Prince chided.

"Why not?" she challenged. "You're going to be the King and a knight."

"That's not the same. Being a knight is part of being a King. Besides, girls can't be blacksmiths."

Gwen fought the urge to hit him with her hammer. "Obviously girls can. Unless you just imagined that I fixed this sword."

The Prince scowled, not appreciating being proven wrong. "You're a blacksmith's daughter. That doesn't count."
"You're the King's son," Gwen shot back. "That means you don't count."

The Prince gaped in outrage, then laughed. "I see why Morgana likes you so much."

Gwen felt her stomach flutter again. "Oh?"

"Morgana barely likes anyone," the Prince said, with an air of pride. "She's nice to me because we're stuck with each other, but she doesn't have to be nice to you. You're nobody."

Gwen ignored the insult as she didn't think the Prince quite intended it. "Morgana's special. It's not fair that the King won't let her leave her chambers."

"It's her own fault," the Prince said, mood souring. "She was extremely disrespectful. It wasn't proper behavior for a lady." He said the words as though imitating someone else and she had a fair idea who. It made her sad. The Prince was actually quite nice but he was being taught to be mean. That wasn't right.

Gwen held the sword up to the light, considering. It had lost about an inch in length from the repair but it was well-balanced in her hand. "Looks like it's ready," she decided, changing the topic. "It just needs to be polished." She found the grinding wheel and started it going. When the stone struck the steel it threw off sparks. She ignored the ones that hit her skin as she was used to the tiny burns, but to her amusement they made the Prince yelp and jump away. It served him right for being so rude.

"You did that on purpose," the Prince accused.

Gwen laughed. "Don't be silly. Here, you try. You'll see."

He accepted the sword with a dubious air. She showed him how to get the stone rolling and how to angle the blade. The first time he brought the blade down too hard and the force of the spin nearly wrenched it out of his hand.

"Careful!" she chided. She took the sword and frowned over the scrape. It was shallow enough that it could be fixed but it was still a nuisance.

The Prince hunched in on himself but also looked at her defiantly. It was like he was expecting her to yell at him. In that moment, she pitied him too much to be angry with him.

"It's all right," she said, gently. "A bit of polish and you'll never know it was there."

The Prince cautiously relaxed. He stepped aside so she could take the wheel again, then watched silently as she expertly ground away the scratches as well as the ugly scar from the join. By the time she finished sanding and polishing, there was no sign that the blade had ever been broken.

"A fine sword," the Prince declared. "Almost as good as mine." He gave a small smile to show that he was joking, then sobered. "Morgana is lucky to have you."

Gwen ducked her head shyly. She wrapped the sword back in its cloth. "I'll bring it to her in the morning. I'll tell her you helped."

"Don't," the Prince said. "You're the one who did all the work. Blacksmith."

Gwen quietly thrilled at that: to be recognized for her skills by the Prince himself. No one would ever believe it even if she dared to tell them. But she knew the importance of keeping secrets.

"Thank you, my Lord."
"Arthur," the Prince said, even as he looked away from her. "Morgana calls me Arthur."


§

She slept well that night, at least for the few hours she could snatch between finishing the sword and being woken the next morning. She was tired from having so little sleep the past few nights, but it would all be worth it when she saw the smile on Morgana's face. Before she left the room she took one last peek at the sword, then wrapped it tightly and tucked it under her arm.

As she had every morning these past few weeks, she retrieved Morgana's breakfast tray and carried it upstairs. As usual Morgana was still asleep, as it was only just past dawn and she didn't have to wake up early for the day's fighting. Gwen set down the tray and unwrapped the sword, then carried it to Morgana's bedside.

The noise of her arrival stirred Morgana. Her eyes fluttered open and she smiled when she saw Gwen, just as she always did, and Gwen smiled back. Morgana rubbed her eyes and sat up.

"I have something for you," Gwen said, barely containing her excitement. She held out the sword.

Morgana's eyes widened with amazement. "Is that?" She reached for the sword, hesitant, and Gwen handed it to her. Morgana carefully touched the blade, searching for any hint of where the break had been. But it was fully whole again. Morgana broke into a grin, then dropped the sword and pulled Gwen into a hug. "Gwen, you're amazing."

Gwen's stomach fluttered again and she buried her nose in Morgana's silky hair. She always smelled so good, her neck dabbed with expensive perfumes that Uther gifted her in tiny bottles. The scent of it lingered as Morgana pulled away.

"I can't believe you fixed it," Morgana marvelled, inspecting the sword again. Then her brow furrowed. "Is it shorter?"

"A little," Gwen admitted. "But the join is strong and it's all the original steel."

Morgana shoved aside the blankets and leapt out of bed, parrying at the air. "Good balance," she declared, then stabbed at some invisible foe. "Now we can practice again. Did you bring your sword?"

"Of course," Gwen said, standing up. "I'll bring it tonight, and our mail." She couldn't wait to spar again. Still, she couldn't help but be sensible. "But we'll have to be careful. If anyone finds out..."

She stepped closer. "I don't want you to lose your sword. You just got it back."

Morgana lowered her sword and closed the distance between them. "Thanks to you," she said, her eyes sharp and intent again. She reached up to touch Gwen's cheek, the air charged between them, and then--

The room trembled as the first rock hit the outer wall.

They stepped apart, the moment lost. Morgana turned and glared at the wall. "I've had quite enough of this."

"Me too," Gwen sighed. But what could they do? Morgana was right: they were trapped. And until the Escetir gave up, they would stay trapped.
"It's time someone ended it," Morgana said, her eyes narrowed in thought.

Gwen wanted to stay and ask her what she meant by that, but her other duties called. "I have to go," she said, regretting that she had to leave Morgana alone yet again. "I'll be back as soon as I finish helping Gaius. We'll spar then, I promise."

"We will," Morgana said, certain. As Gwen left she looked back over her shoulder and saw that Morgana wore a strange smile.

§

Another day of fighting over, another day of patching up the wounded and mourning the dead. But as hard as the day had been, she had something to look forward to at the end of it. After eating with her family she grabbed the bundle of her mail and sword, then went to get Morgana's dinner.

When Morgana opened the door for her, she was already dressed for practice.

Gwen could tell how eager she was to get started. "Just let me put down the tray first," she said, feeling eager herself. But when she went to pull on her mail, Morgana stopped her.

"Not yet," Morgana said, and lowered her voice as she stepped close. "We're going out. Tonight."

"Out?"

Morgana smirked, a dangerous glint in her eyes. "We're going to kill Cenred."

Gwen wondered if she should be more exasperated or concerned. "You're not allowed out of your chambers."

"And here I thought you liked a challenge," Morgana said, obviously trying to egg her on. "Don't you want Camelot to win?"

"Of course! But whole idea's completely mad!"

"So mad it just might work," Morgana returned. Then she shifted into a pout. "Please, Gwen? I can't do it without you."

Gwen didn't see how any of it was possible even with her help. But she knew that if she didn't, Morgana would try to do it all on her own, and then she would end up like Elyan if she was lucky. And if she wasn't lucky, well. That didn't bear thinking about.

"All right," she relented.

Morgana jumped with delight, then sobered with intent. "I need you to get some clothes for the both of us, something commoner boys would wear. And then I need you to distract Arthur so I can steal his keys."

"What?!" Gwen gaped. The Prince had been nice to her, he had helped her. She couldn't do that!

"He won't bite," Morgana assured her, misunderstanding her reaction. "You just need to get his attention. Flirt with him. Just for a few minutes."

"You flirt with him!" Gwen said, outraged.

"If I do it, he'll know I'm up to something. And he knows I'm not supposed to leave my chambers. Please, Gwen? For me?"
Gwen narrowed her eyes, but once again she found herself giving in to Morgana's pleading. "All right. Tell me what to do."

Morgana hugged her and planted a quick kiss to her cheek. Then she jumped back and drew her sword, stabbing into the air. "Cenred will never know what hit him."

Gwen hoped they both lived to regret this.

§

The laundry was mostly quiet at this time of the evening, and those who had to wake early had already bedded down on the floor for the night. But Gwen hardly needed subterfuge to pick up laundry. Morgana's clean things were dry on their line and she took them down and folded them, filling her basket. As she did, she spotted some trousers and shirts that would fit herself and Morgana, and took them as well. No one even looked at her twice.

She brought the basket back to Morgana and they took out the clothes. Morgana changed into hers, then pulled on her mail and sword belt over top. Gwen helped her tuck her hair up in a tight bun, and when she pulled up the hood of her cloak she almost looked like a boy. A bit of dirt and the dark of night would complete the disguise.

Morgana picked up the basket and gave it back to Gwen. "Take this and dump it down the stairs. Pretend you hurt your ankle then cry out for help."

"What if he doesn't come?" Gwen asked. "What if someone else comes?"

"Arthur can't resist a chance to play hero," Morgana said. "And remember, keep him focused on you. If he catches me we'll both be in trouble."

Gwen walked out towards the stairs, her stomach in knots. She couldn't believe she was going to do this. There was no way Morgana's plan could work. And yet she was following it anyway. She dumped the clean clothes and sheets out and kicked them down the steps so that Arthur would have to walk down to get them. Then she lay down awkwardly at the top of the steps and whimpered.

"Help! Please, someone help!" She whimpered again and clutched at her ankle. She glanced down the steps but thankfully she didn't see any guards. "Help!" she called again, a little louder.

Just as Morgana planned, Arthur's door opened. He rushed out, sword drawn, looked left and right and then saw her. He sheathed his sword and hurried to her side.

"Guinevere! What happened? Are you all right?"

He was so genuinely concerned that she felt terrible lying to him. But she had to. "I twisted my ankle. I dropped all of Morgana's laundry. She's going to be so upset." She pretended to be near tears.

Arthur froze, then puffed up his chest. "I'll take care of that." He took her basket and went down the steps to retrieve her laundry. As he turned his back, Gwen looked towards Morgana's chamber and gave the signal.

Morgana hurried across the hall. In his haste, Arthur had left the door to his chambers open, and Morgana ducked inside. Now all she had to do was find the keys and sneak back to her chambers again.

"There, no harm done," Arthur said, carrying the full basket back up to her. "Let me see your ankle."
If it's swollen I'll take you to Gaius."

"That's very kind of you, my Lord," Gwen said, realizing quickly that he would find no injury. She rubbed her ankle as if trying to ease it. "I think it's all right now. It wasn't a bad twist after all."

"Oh." Arthur was suddenly at a loss. Then he reached for the basket. "Let me at least carry this for you."

"No, wait," Gwen said, holding it down. She couldn't believe she really had to do this. "My Lord. Arthur. Wait."

Arthur stilled, his hand still on the basket. He looked at her questioningly.

"Sit with me," Gwen said, pulling aside the basket to make room for him on the top step. "Just for a minute? Please?"

Arthur stared at her for another long moment, then he sat down. He seemed to be quite unaccustomed to a servant being so forward. But he wasn't running away in disgust either.

"I want to thank you again for helping me with the forge," she said, and smiled for him. "It was very kind and you didn't have to."

Arthur relaxed and gave a half-smile back. "You were pretty good for a girl."

Gwen forced herself not to roll her eyes. "That's so nice of you to say. You know, my father is the best blacksmith in all of Camelot."

Arthur seemed vaguely insulted by that. "If he's that good, then why is he working in the lower town?"

Gwen was definitely insulted by that. This flirting business was a lot harder than she thought it would be. "I do hope this war will end soon," she said, her smile feeling rather more forced. "Is there any hope?"

"My father sent word to Gawant," Arthur said, thankfully oblivious to her feelings. "But if Lord Godwyn was going to come, he should have been here by now. The messenger may have been intercepted. We'll have to send another."

"But how will the messenger get past the Escetir?"

"Oh, that's easy," Arthur said, confident again. He patted his side and there was the metal clatter of keys. "That's what the siege tunnels are for. We'll just let him out in the middle of the night. It's not that hard to sneak out one or two men-- Guinevere?"

Gwen had slapped her hand to her face in frustration. Morgana had snuck into Arthur's chambers to get his keys so they could open the siege tunnel. The same keys that hung from Arthur's belt. Now what would they do?

A clattering sound came from Arthur's chambers, and Arthur turned towards it. His eyes narrowed with suspicion. Without a word, he stood and marched into his chambers. Gwen ran after him.

"Morgana!" Arthur called, looking around and then heading into the bedroom. "I know you're in here."

After a pause, Morgana stepped out from behind a curtain. There was a wooden chest lying on the
floor next to Arthur's bed; presumably it had caused the noise when it fell.

Arthur looked at it, then tugged at the key ring on his belt. "Looking for these?" he asked, disapproving.

Morgana pressed her lips together in frustration. "Arthur," she began, but it was clear that she didn't have a plan for this.

"What on earth are you wearing?" Arthur asked, then his eyes widened. "You were going to sneak out."

Morgana raised her head high. "I was going out to do what no one else could. Stop Cenred."

Arthur laughed, but that only drove Morgana on. She marched forward and started yanking at Arthur's belt. Arthur yelped and tried to slap her away, but he was afraid to hurt her. Morgana gave a cry of victory as she yanked off the belt and held his keys high.

"Give those back," cried Arthur, reaching for them. But Morgana was older and taller than him, at least by enough to keep the keys out of reach. Arthur's cheeks reddened with humiliation and anger.

"Gwen and I are going out there and you can't stop us," Morgana taunted.

"Give them back now or I'll call the guards," Arthur threatened.

That made Morgana pause. But it didn't make her give up. "You could call the guards," she admitted. "Or you could come with us." When Arthur didn't say anything, she continued. "Uther's kept you locked up too. He thinks you're a weak little baby. Come with us and you can prove him wrong."

Arthur narrowed his eyes at her. "And what's your grand plan?"

A smirk tugged at Morgana's lips as she sensed victory. "We dress up like dirty serving boys and sneak into the camp. Then we find Cenred, wait until he's asleep, and kill him."

Arthur thought some more, presumably deciding if it was a suicide mission and if they had any chance of actually succeeding. "Fine," he said. "But I'm in charge."

"Of course you are," Morgana assured him, blatantly lying through her teeth. She handed him back his keys and he took them with a warning glare. "Better get ready," she said, and walked away with a swing of her hips. She took Gwen's hand and pulled her along. "I'll take care of Gwen."

'Sorry!' Gwen mouthed as Morgana dragged her out into the hall.

§

As Arthur was at least the nominal leader of their small party, it was his decision to wait a while longer before heading out. He didn't want to risk them being caught by either their side or Cenred's. By the time they crawled out of the siege tunnel, it was pitch black out, the moon a sliver peeking out from behind a haze of clouds. Arthur locked the tunnel gate behind them and they scurried into the nearest patch of woods so they could plan their next step. They smeared themselves with soil, dirtying their clothes and skin and hair so it would look like they had been stuck sleeping outside for the past three weeks.

The Escetir had camped all around the perimeter of the town. They'd actually breached the outer walls several times over the past few weeks, but each time they had been driven back and the
fortifications had been built higher and stronger. Gwen was grateful for that; she didn't like to imagine the Escetir stomping all over the lower town, living in their homes and making a mess of everything. But they weren't going to be able to kill Cenred if they couldn't find him.

When they reached the first group of tents, Gwen gestured for the others to stop. Several slop buckets had been left at the edge of the camp to keep the stench away. She took one for herself and gave one each to Arthur and Morgana.

"Ugh, disgusting." Arthur wrinkled his nose, holding the bucket as far away as he could.

"These will give us a reason to be walking around," Gwen whispered. "You have to hold it like you're used to the smell."

Morgana was also less than pleased, but she managed to overcome her revulsion. "Let's get this over with."

They wove their way along. Many of the soldiers slept with only their bedroll, and the tents they saw were unlikely to contain any royals. Along the way, they kept their cover by picking up and dropping off slop buckets, occasionally pouring one into the other and trying not to look at the resulting mixture. As Gwen predicted, no one bothered them, and if anything they were given a wide berth. When this was all over, they were going to have to wash for hours to get the smell out.

It was Arthur who saw it first: a tent much larger and finer than any of the others. Royal flags planted to either side of it hung limp in the still air. But just as they started towards it, a loud male voice called out. "Hoy! You there! Stop!"

They froze, suppressing the instinct to bolt. A soldier was hurrying towards them, but if they ran now it would bring down the whole army on their heads.

"I was about to burst," the soldier said, opening his belt as he approached them. "Hold it out quick boy, or I'll piss all over you." He belched and a cloud of alcohol wafted over them. Morgana was the closest, so she held out her bucket. The man took out his cock and pissed into it, giving a loud groan of relief as he did. Morgana looked positively green, but she held her composure.

The man shook off the last few drops and tucked himself back in. He belched again, then made a face. "Better empty that out. What a stench!" He laughed and staggered off.

Morgana looked as though she wanted nothing more than to cut the hand that held the bucket and burn it. "I'll take it," Arthur said, exchanging buckets with her. Then he gave a soft chuckle. "It could have been worse."

Morgana recoiled. "I'd rather die."

"You really wouldn't," Gwen whispered.

Arthur snorted and headed for the fancy tent. He put down his bucket as they approached, no doubt because anything that smelled that terrible would actually draw attention instead of turning it away. Gwen and Morgana put down theirs as well. The tent was at the heart of the camp, far away from the patrols -- and those patrols were too focused on the perimeter of the camp and the castle itself to pay attention to a few dirty serving boys doing their rounds. Just where Cenred thought he was safest, he was most vulnerable.

For the first time, Gwen believed their plan might actually work.

They peeked in through a gap in the tent. The inside was dim, but the night was warm and the front
flaps had been left open. Gwen had never seen Cenred herself, but Arthur had. He nodded in confirmation.

"I'm going in," Morgana whispered, gripping the handle of her sword.

"No. I'm the Prince, it's my duty--"

"It was my idea in the first place!

"We'll all go in," Gwen whispered. Now was hardly the time for squabbling!

"No, someone has to keep watch." Arthur looked to Gwen.

"It's all right," Gwen said. She's never killed anyone before and wasn't even sure if she could. But both Arthur and Morgana had. It made more sense for them to do it together. "I'll watch."

Arthur and Morgana took out their swords and crept around to the open flaps. Gwen looked around, but there was no sign that anyone had seen them or that anyone would. She looked in through the gap again, peeking over her shoulder every so often just to be safe.

Cenred's bed was huge, far bigger than he could possibly need, especially in the middle of a war. But then they had been here for weeks already. No doubt it was important for a king to sleep comfortably. He was sprawled in the middle of it, and Arthur and Morgana crept cautiously around the edge. Cenred stirred and Arthur dove down, yanking Morgana down with him. Gwen held her breath, then let it out again when Cenred settled down again without waking.

Morgana pulled away from Arthur and glared at him, then climbed right up onto the bed. Arthur waved at her to come back down, but she smirked at him and stood over the sleeping king. She raised her sword and thrust it down--

But before the blow could land, both Arthur and Morgana were knocked off their feet by some invisible force. Morgana's sword landed on the bed but the two of them were blown to the ground. Gwen covered her mouth in horror as she realized that she had been so caught up in watching them that she hadn't done her job as lookout.

A woman was standing at the entrance to the tent, her hand raised.

A sorcerer! Cenred had a sorcerer!

She was young and her blonde hair fell around her shoulders.

Arthur stood up, his sword drawn, only to be knocked off his feet again. This time he didn't get up. Morgana wasn't getting up either, and now the woman was headed right for her. Gwen's heart was in her throat as she rushed around to the entrance to the tent, pulling out her sword as she ran in.

Then she stopped. The woman wasn't hurting Morgana. She was holding her -- no, cradling her, as if she was distraught at having hurt her. It didn't make any sense. But Gwen was going to stop her if it was the last thing she did.

"Get away from her," she commanded, her voice shaking too much. But she somehow managed to hold her sword steady.

The woman turned and stared at her, her brown eyes sharp and intense. She let go of Morgana and rose, bringing up her hand. Gwen froze, thinking of Elyan, her parents, oh gods she didn't want to die.

And then the woman grunted and collapsed, falling over Morgana and revealing Arthur. He was standing with his sword raised, the end of it bloodied. Despite his experience, he seemed shocked at
what he'd done.

And then Cenred stirred again.

"We have to go, now," Arthur hissed. He grabbed the woman's arm and started dragging her off of Morgana. Gwen took the other arm and helped.

Morgana was still unconscious. Gwen was near tears with worry but now wasn't the time to cry. The important thing was getting Morgana back to the castle. They each took an arm -- Gwen grabbing Morgana's sword as they lifted her and shoving it back into its sheath -- and half carried, half dragged her out of the tent.

They went back the way they'd came. They didn't run -- no matter how much they wanted to -- because that would get them caught. They walked quietly and steadily and kept their eyes fixed ahead of them, relying on their disguises for safe passage. By some stroke of luck, they made it all the way back to the edge of the camp before the alarm was raised.

"Run," Arthur ordered, and they ran to the woods as fast as they could, lugging Morgana along.

"Please wake up," Gwen whispered. But Morgana's eyes stayed shut.

They made it back to the siege tunnel and locked the gate behind them. They were safe again but that didn't make her feel any better. Gwen started to shake.

"We'll bring her to Gaius," Arthur told her. Gwen nodded. He was shaking himself. "I've never killed a sorcerer before."

His confession didn't make her feel any better.

They were just climbing up the steps out of the dungeons when they heard the bells tolling. The alarm raised in the camp had caused the alarm to be raised here as well. They had to hurry again or they would be discovered. Arthur hauled Morgana over his back and they sprinted across the courtyard.

Gwen reached Gaius' door first and knocked frantically.

"My keys, take the keys," Arthur hissed, glancing back to see if anyone was coming.

Gwen fumbled for the keys. Why did he need so many keys? She was still trying to find the right one when the door opened.

"What on earth?" Gaius said, clearly having been disturbed from his sleep.


Gaius ushered them in and instructed Arthur to lay Morgana down on the table. "Tell me what happened," he told them, making it clear that he wanted the full truth.

"It's my fault," Arthur said.

"No, it's not," Gwen insisted. "It was Morgana's idea. She thought if we could kill Cenred, we could end the siege."

Gaius' eyebrows nearly rose off his head. "You're lucky to be alive. That was an extremely foolish thing to do. How was she injured?"
"Magic," Gwen said. It was strange to talk of magic with Gaius. She knew he was of the faith, that he had been a sorcerer, but they never spoke of such things, much less in front of others. "A woman caught us. A sorcerer. She used a spell to fling Arthur and Morgana across the room."

Gaius continued his inspection. "A concussion," he judged. "Hopefully nothing too dire. Let's see if we can wake her up." He used his smelling salts.


Gaius had little sympathy. "That will teach you to put yourself in danger," he chided. "Let this be a lesson for all of you."

Arthur and Gwen both looked down, guilty.

"Will you tell my father?" Arthur asked, eyes pleading.

Gaius pressed his lips together in consideration. Morgana was sitting up and rubbing her head.

"No. As long as you promise never to do anything that foolish again," Gaius chided. "Gwen, I expected better of you. I'll speak to your parents and let them know you'll be staying with Morgana for the next few days. You are to tend to her and let me know immediately if you notice anything out of the ordinary."

"I will," Gwen promised, bowing her head with contrition.

"If there is any sign that Morgana is badly hurt, Uther will have to be informed. But as long as she takes her medicine and rests and her injury heals..." He gave them another stern look, then eased. "Then I see no reason to speak of this again."

"Thank you," Arthur said, grateful.

"Arthur, you're excused. With the alarm raised your father will be expecting you. And clean yourself up, quickly boy!"

Arthur gave Morgana and Gwen one last look, then ran off.

Gwen stayed with Morgana and helped Gaius tend to her. She cleaned off the dirt and watched as Gaius finished his examinations. When he was finished, he gave Morgana a healing tincture.

Morgana made a face as she drank it. "It tastes awful."

"Medicine is not meant to taste good," Gaius told her. "Perhaps next time you'll think twice before putting yourself in harm's way."

§

When they returned to Morgana's chambers, Morgana tossed aside the filthy clothes in frustration. "We were so close," she groaned.

Gwen silently gathered up the clothes and folded them. She'd have to bring them back them to the laundry to be cleaned and returned to their owners. She ducked into the servant's room to change back into her dress.

When she came out, Morgana had already changed into her nightshirt and was sitting by the windows, sulking.
"We could try again?" Gwen offered, even though that was the last thing she wanted to do.

"They'll be on guard now," Morgana said. "And we can't get out without those keys. Arthur will never go along with it a second time."

Gwen couldn't deny her relief. "Perhaps it's for the best."

Morgana turned to her, angry, but when she met Gwen's eyes she softened. "I scared you."

Gwen nodded. "You wouldn't wake up. I thought..."

"Oh Gwen," Morgana said. She shifted and gestured for Gwen to sit with her. "I'll be all right. It'll take more than some awful sorcerer to stop me."

"I just want you to be safe," Gwen said, feeling that it was terribly important. If Morgana died she didn't know what she'd do. The tears she had been holding back finally burst out, and the next thing she knew she was in Morgana's arms, bawling. When the flood of emotion receded, she pulled back, embarrassed.

But Morgana looked at her tenderly. "You were so brave for me."

It was all too much for Gwen to deal with. She took refuge in the safe, the familiar. "I'm your maidservant. That means it's my job to look after you. You're going to take your medicine and you're going to get better."

Morgana laughed. "You sound just like Gaius."

"Maybe he's right," Gwen said. "We have to be careful. You're important."

"To Uther?" Morgana said, annoyed.

Gwen bit her lip and bent her head, feeling her cheeks heat again. She looked up at Morgana but couldn't say the words.

But she didn't need to. Morgana knew.

"You're important to me, too," Morgana said, softly. She ducked her head, then straightened up. "All right. I'm going to take all of Gaius' awful medicine if it means keeping you out of trouble."

Gwen's blush deepened. "Thank you," she said, her fingers curled against the loose fabric of her dress. "My Lady."

"My Gwen," Morgana said, warmly. Then she winced and rubbed her head. "Perhaps I should lie down for a bit."

Gwen tucked Morgana into bed, the ritual comfortably familiar after only a few weeks. Then she sat on the edge of the bed.

"I'll stay with you," Gwen promised. She had nearly lost Morgana tonight. She never wanted to lose her again.

From now on, she was going to take her duty seriously. She had never wanted to be a maidservant, but if it was for Morgana, if it meant they would be able to spend their lives together... Perhaps it was worth it to give up one thing she wanted if it meant she could have something else. Something she wanted even more.
When Morgana was finally asleep, Gwen leaned over and pressed a kiss to her cheek. Then she lay down beside her and slept.

§

Coming Soon: Falconry Book 5: Bird In Fine Feathers

§
Extra bonus chapter! I commissioned the amazing artist Maryluis [Tumblr](https://www.tumblr.com) [Deviantart](https://www.deviantart.com) to make an illustration of the Dragons of Avalon. The result was the beautiful four-part piece below.

Synkomida was the first of the Great Dragons to emerge, his golden scales shimmering in the pale light, catching the very first rays as the sun broke over the mountains around them. Kaloka emerged second, and she gave a keening howl as she broke the earth. Macha was fast behind her, and they flew up together, twining past each other as they shot straight up, gleaming red and green. And then the rest came, jostling impatiently, joyous and bold as they flew in their true forms for the first time in a thousand years, and they filled the air like thunderclouds.

Small but vibrant were the Penllyn, lush with richly-colored feathers, which crested their heads and lengthened their long tails. Their dark counterparts were the Bod, sleek-bodied with feathers as iridescent as the Penllyn’s but raven-black.

There were Knuckers, as large as the Great Dragons but more suited to water than air. They were shades of blue and green, bodies serpentine and claws webbed, and they breathed out not fire but scalding water, hot enough to burn.

The Peluda could hardly be called pretty, with horns and quills instead of feathers, and larger, stout, dull-green bodies. And last there were the Bheithir, quick and playful as pups, covered with downy feathers that hinted at life in colder climes. They romped around Merlin and brushed him with their thick tails, knocking him off his feet more than once.
Author's Epilogue

And with that, I'm afraid, Falconry has come to an end.

I had plans to continue the series to show all the things that the TV canon promised but never delivered on. I wanted to do right by Morgana and Gwen and Merlin and Arthur. But when I came to the end of A Bird of Paradise, I found that I had already said the most important things I needed to say for the heart of the series: about Arthur and Merlin's relationship and their inability to see the truth in each other despite their closeness. Their fears and confusion and the hard process of growing up, truly opening up to another person. Of being human when the world tells you you're not; of realizing your world is a lie and finding a new one.

In the way of grand plans (as I often bite off more than I can chew), in the rest of the series Morgana was meant to begin her training as High Priestess and then to go through her own arcs to move beyond her fear and anger. To channel it into real action for the good of the community she was meant to lead and care for. Gwen's path was less defined for me, but I wanted her to stop living for other people and start living for herself, to gain the power she needed to make the world a better place. And I wanted to bring the two of them back together on equal footing.

I wanted the truth to come out, all of it. For Uther to show just how monstrous he was and for Arthur to defy him openly, and as a result lose everything he thought he held dear. The four of them were going to have to flee Camelot and take refuge in Mercia, only to find themselves caught between Uther's fire and Morgause's ice.

And then the OT4 would travel north, break the curse on the Perilous Lands and find the remnants of Old Religion, to gather those fragments to make a new, whole cloth. To gain knights and allies as they travelled south again, only to run right into trouble with the Saxons. That Merlin would have to find a way, with Balinor's help, to bring the Dragons back to Albion to drive the Saxons back. And with that, Arthur would become High King of Albion while still having no lands of his own.

The final book would have been their return to Camelot to find it a land broken by civil war. All of Arthur's worst fears would have come to pass as Uther lashed out in grief and fury. There would have been different factions, Morgause and Gedref, the heart of magic in Albion dying and the OT4 restoring it. Flashbacks to Merlin and Arthur's past lives. The rebirth of the Old Religion. Uther's death. And then finally peace and the Golden Age beginning.

I apologize to my readers that I can't write all of that, but I hope you can be satisfied with the first four books and this brief glimpse. It was a pleasure having all of you along for the ride, as far as we could go.

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