

From Darkness Comes Light

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Fandom: Merlin (BBC)

Pairing: Arthur/Merlin

Rating: NC17/18

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Warnings/Spoilers: explicit sex, general spoilers for up to 1.10

Summary: When dark creatures that prey on the living, taking their blood and causing the dead to rise from their graves are reported in Albion it is Arthur who is sent to destroy them. Some things, however, do not fall to the sword and Arthur learns this the hard way. Merlin is faced with giving up more than his secret to save his friend.

Author's Notes: Okay, so those who know me from other fandoms were probably wondering when the vampire fic would happen :). I can never resist it ::g::: Thanks to Soph for the beta.

Word Count: 19,975

Chapter 1 In the Darkness

It was the middle of the day, only just after noon; it should not have been dark, but the forest had a gloom that was like twilight. The magic causing it thrummed through Merlin like thunder before lightning, dark and foreboding, only Merlin was sure it was not a forerunner of light. All he could do was keep his eyes on Arthur and look for any danger; there was no way Arthur would have called off this quest. People were dying from the surrounding villages and what was worse was some of them were coming back. This was a scourge that had to be eradicated and Uther had given the task to Arthur.

There were two guards and one other knight with Arthur, and Merlin had tagged along, almost as an after thought. That this was black magic was no secret, but Merlin was almost sure Arthur believed it could be beaten with the sword. In this case Merlin was not so sure; those that had come back from the dead, seeking the blood of the living, had been easy enough to dispatch, but they had yet to see the creatures which had caused this curse.

When Arthur held up his hand they all froze, even Merlin, who was usually terrible at such things. It was amazing what a little fear could do to help. The feeling of the magic in the air was becoming heavier and he wondered if the others could feel it as well, or if he sensed the situation differently. Sometimes he had no idea what it was like to be normal.

The thing that loomed out of the darkness had Merlin back pedalling before his mind even kicked in; it was horrifying. Luminous, sickly green eyes looked out of a face that was neither man nor beast, but something grotesquely in between. Long, vicious, yellow fangs distorted the creature's mouth, curling its lips like an angry dog's and long claw-tipped hands ended muscled, powerful arms. The creature's skin was almost black, running with red veins that pulsed under the surface like things alive in their own right.

It positively reeked of evil arts and any sane person would have turned and run, but Arthur and his men were soldiers and they did not run. One of the guards was closest and the man attacked with his sword, slicing off one of the creature's twisted limbs. It howled like nothing Merlin had ever heard with a sound that seemed to cut through every nerve in his body, but it did not flee and it did not fall.

To his horror he watched the limb regrow in only a moment and then the creature attacked. It grabbed the guard before the poor man could do anything, wrenched his head to the side and bit the exposed neck. The man screamed and the creature drank, even as the other guard ran to help, and by the time the second guard reached it, the creature was done and threw away its first victim. The second man swiped at it and Sir Tor moved to enter the fray, but more of the creatures appeared.

One grabbed the second guard by one arm and another by the other and as Merlin watched, horrified; the things ripped the helpless man apart. However, that was not what made his blood run cold as Arthur dragged them together, back to back as it became clear the creatures were all around them. What made him lift his hand in desperation and throw the first spell in his head, the consequences be damned, was the first guard. The man was on his feet, eyes a bright luminous green and skin beginning to darken, face morphing into something no longer human. Merlin could feel the power that was doing it; the corruption that the creatures spread around them like seeds into a ploughed field.

The pathetic undead things they had killed in the village the previous night had been pale reflections of those who had created them, but it seemed, here they could create more of themselves.

He cast fire at the nearest creature, but it was as if his magic slid round it, hitting the tree behind rather than the thing of darkness. With his sword in one hand, he continued to cast with the other, trying to buy them some space. He could hear Arthur fighting and Sir Tor, but he did not dare turn to look. The creatures seemed to be playing with them and it took all his wits just to stay alive. When he heard Sir Tor scream he knew that the games were over. Arthur swore and yelled a battle cry, but Merlin did not think it would help.

Magic just seemed to bounce off the creations of darkness just like swords did no permanent damage and Merlin could see things worse than death in their eyes. He was backed up to Arthur and now their comrades were their enemies and there was nothing he could do. It was strange, the only thing he regretted was that he had never told Arthur the truth and he would now never know how his friend would have taken the knowledge outside the heat of battle. As he felt Arthur separate from him, he knew the end was near and he had to turn when he heard Arthur yell. One of those things had Arthur in its grip and had ripped away Arthur's protective armour, leaving Arthur's neck clear and vulnerable.

Everything seemed to slow down as he watched in horror as the creature's long fangs sliced into Arthur's flesh. Almost instantly Arthur's eyes began to turn the sickly green he had seen on the others. Arthur was being taken from him and his whole being rebelled at that. Hands grabbed him from behind, but where they touched him sparks rose and the hand's disappeared with howls of pain.

As he stepped forward, the creature that had Arthur released the prince, clearly afraid and Merlin reached out to Arthur desperately. All that met him was an unearthly growl and Arthur glared at him, eyes glowing now and mouth full of razor sharp fangs, but Merlin didn't stop. Even as he held his hand out to Arthur and Arthur attacked him, biting into the flesh of his arm in a way that should have had him screaming in pain, he lifted his other arm, words that he had never thought before falling from his mouth.

Magic flared through him like fire, bursting from his raised arm with bright, white light and flowing into Arthur in a torrent. Merlin did not know what he was doing or how he knew to do it, but in front of his eyes the creatures howled their pain and fear, bursting into flames as the light touched them. He watched them burn, his words having become a chant that he no longer heard as the magic washed away everything else in his mind. Even Arthur became irrelevant as his thoughts lost track of his friend and all that was left was the power. It was marvellous and terrible and he couldn't have stopped it even if he had known how.

For the first time in his life he truly understood what it was to be himself. This was what he really was; magic in human form and the idea blew his mind.

When it ended it was not slow like the stuttering of an oil lamp as its fuel ran low, it was like a candle being blown out by a breath. One moment it was there and the next it wasn't and Merlin just stood there as his new reality ended. It had been so loud in his mind, so encompassing that it was as if the universe had stopped when it ended, and then, for all he cared, it could have, as his body and mind shut down of one accord. He never even knew where he landed.

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Merlin woke up slowly and the moment he tried to move he realised he was weaker than he ever remembered being even during the whole poison goblet incident. His brain was working slowly, but it did dawn on him that there was bright sunshine coming down through the trees, which kick started his thoughts into remembering the shadowy twilight of before. That in turn led him to remember Arthur and he did his very best to scrabble to his knees.

Arthur was lying on his back only a foot away, covered in blood, but more significantly not dust. There were blackened piles all over the ground, all that was left of the creatures, and the other knight's armour lay on the dirt, empty except for soot. All that remained of the battle was the guard who had been torn apart rather than bitten, the second guard was gone, clothes and all, only his breast plate and helmet remaining.

Moving as fast as he could, Merlin dragged himself to Arthur's side, checking his prince for signs of life. They were there, but he knew the signs of distress when he saw it and his only thought was to get Arthur back to Camelot and Gaius' capable hands. He kept his mind firmly on the now and not on what had been, because every time his thoughts strayed back he wanted to scream and panic. The thought of those things filled him with horror and the memory of his magic was too great for his mind. He was not ready for either and so he refused to think about them.

The horses had run, but Arthur's stallion was well trained and had not gone far. It took Merlin an age to bring him to where Arthur was lying, but he did it because he had to. His limbs shook with exhaustion and at times it was as if he could barely move, but he could do anything for Arthur.

Somehow, he really had no idea how, he dragged Arthur out of his twisted armour and then he climbed onto the horse. The stallion snorted, but seemed to understand this was for Arthur and the beast stood his ground as Merlin called on magic to do what his body was currently incapable of. It hurt more than he cared to admit to use his magic to lift Arthur into the saddle in front of him, but he managed it. It was as if he had strained his magic like he could pull a muscle, used too much too fast and before he was ready, and it complained at being used again so soon.

His arms were shaking so badly that he could barely hold Arthur or the reins, but the horse knew where to go. All he had to do was stay in the saddle and keep Arthur there as well, which was far harder than he had ever expected. Arthur was larger than he was and a dead weight against his chest, but he did his best to keep his back straight and them both upright.

His arm throbbed where the partially transformed Arthur had bitten him and he could feel more to the wound than purely physical damage. His magic was reacting to it as well and was draining his strength even more. When he finally came over the hill, it was coming on for evening and the sight of Camelot almost made him cry.

As soon as he made himself known there were people to help and they carried Arthur to Gaius' chambers, with him, somehow, managing to follow behind. He stood, swaying in the corner as those who had come to assist placed Arthur on Gaius's table and he could do no more than watch as Gaius went to work.

The wound on Arthur's neck was cauterised and half dressed by the time Uther stormed through the door, but by then it all seemed very surreal to Merlin. It was as if he had taken a step back from the world and it was all very distant.

"What happ... my son?"

He could hear bits and pieces, but it was all jumbled.

"Don't kn... brought in ... Merlin."

It took him a moment to realise when Uther came over and started to speak to him and the words just didn't seem to make sense. He had ridden for hours, his only thought to keep Arthur on the horse until they reached Camelot, and he had nothing left. Even as Uther demanded answers, Merlin's tentative grip on reality gave up and the last thing he saw was Uther's surprised expression as he fell in a heap at the king's feet.

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Waking up because someone was trying to pour something down your throat was not a pleasant experience, especially when it went down the wrong way and Merlin came back to consciousness coughing his lungs up.

"Steady, My Boy," Gaius's calm voice brought him out of his dreams and helped him to lie back down as the coughing passed.

He came to rest, looking up at his mentor and slowly pulling his wits back together. What was left of them, anyway.

"How are you feeling?" Gaius asked in his usual fatherly tone.

Merlin tried to speak and give an answer, but somehow, on the way from his mind to his mouth the words became lost in a ridiculous jumble. What he managed to say barely sounded like they had once been words, let alone like they actually were. That scared him somewhat and he tried again.

"Sssh," Gaius said, placing a damp cloth on his forehead, "you have had a high fever, do not try and speak if it pains you."

That did not settle him overly much, but when he tried to move he found that he had all the strength of a new born and it finally dawned on him that his inability to speak had more to do with that than any affliction. Of course that didn't stop his stubborn streak.

"Arthur?" he managed to force that question out.

"Is sleeping just over there," Gaius replied, seeming to understand his need.

Merlin looked where Gaius pointed and immediately relaxed a little. Arthur looked pale and ill, but the daylight was all by haloing his friend and Arthur was very much still alive.

"You were muttering in your delirium about creatures and magic," Gaius told him as he finally let himself sink into the bed, "so I have had the door locked and a guard placed. I have told the king it is to quarantine you both in case you are infected by this curse, but it is also to protect you both. You will both be safe until you are well."

Speaking took far too much effort and since it didn't seem to be very effective at the moment anyway, Merlin just did his best to smile his thanks. His grip on the

world seemed tentative at best at the moment and he felt himself beginning to fade out again. Whatever Gaius had given him felt like it was adding to his need to sleep and he didn't fight it. Now he knew Arthur was safe and did not need him he had no reason or will to fight his own needs and he let his eyes drift close.

"Sleep well, Merlin," Gaius said warmly and he gave the smallest of hums in reply as once again the world slipped from his grasp.

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Merlin came out of his restless sleep to the sound of growling and something inside him clicked into action. He sat up, ignoring the fact that even with Gaius' remedies the ache in his head was not fully gone and swung his legs off the cot, standing up before he even thought about it. He had been awake several times during the day, but never for long and he had so far been unable to move much more than to take a drink or a little food. He definitely hadn't been with it enough to have a sensible conversation, but that didn't seem to be a problem right about then.

The growling was coming from Arthur, who was also standing and seemed to have Gaius backed into a corner.

"Arthur," he said, very firmly, feeling a connection he could not explain and following instincts he did not fully understand.

Arthur turned immediately at the sound of his voice, looking at him with luminous green eyes that rightfully should have scared the wits out of him. This was not the Arthur he knew; there was little understanding in those eyes, but Arthur did seem to recognise him ... sort of.

"It's not Gaius you need," Merlin said, just standing there and waiting.

For a moment Arthur appeared confused and almost seemed properly human. Not knowing and yet somehow feeling what was right, Merlin held out his hand and that was all it took; Arthur came to him. The moment Arthur's hand touched his, the green glow of Arthur's eyes was tinged with gold and Merlin felt his magic moving inside of his body to Arthur through the point of contact.

"Take what you need," he said, absolutely resolute in what he was doing even if his conscious mind did not fully comprehend it.

This time when Arthur stepped towards him, two long, lethal fangs clearly visible, he did not try to get away. In fact he did the opposite; he pulled Arthur towards him, shepherding Arthur to what Arthur needed, what he knew would help.

"Merlin no," Gaius tried to stop him, but he met gazes with the old man over Arthur's shoulder and Gaius froze in his tracks.

There was no magic involved in that, he simply conveyed everything his instincts were telling him with his eyes and hoped Gaius would understand. He had no time for words as Arthur's mouth closed over his neck and fangs sliced into his skin. It hurt and he could not stop the quiet whimper as his eyes closed in pain, but that was gone almost straight away and then all he could do was gasp.

Arthur's arms wound around him, pinning him to Arthur's taught, strong body and he clung to Arthur as such a mixture of feelings ran through him that he could barely remember his name, let alone form a coherent thought. His magic was

reacting, feeding into Arthur through the bite as Arthur took more than blood from him and he could feel it worming into Arthur, finding what was not right and changing what it could. It was flowing out of him and yet it was still part of him and he could feel everything it did.

It was the most intimate feeling Merlin had ever experienced and he could not stop his body from reacting as pleasure danced through his system. There was a primal need in Arthur and Merlin could feel himself reacting to that and the moan that fell past his lips probably conveyed it all to Gaius.

Merlin had fumbled around in the dark with Will before, nothing more than some mutual groping, and he'd almost bedded a girl once as well before her mother had returned and he had found himself climbing out a window without any pants on, but this was in an entirely different league. It filled him with such need that he wanted to rut against Arthur, propriety be damned, and he probably would have if Arthur hadn't suddenly gone heavy against him.

As the bite was suddenly ended, the connection between them snapped shut, leaving Merlin with only the vague feeling of his magic doing things that he had had since he had woken up in the clearing after the attack. He was left reeling and his body seemed to remember then that he was recovering as well and Arthur was too heavy for him to hold. Doing his best not to just drop his friend, he sank onto his cot with Arthur in his arms.

"Merlin?" Arthur's voice was quiet and confused and Merlin looked down to see eyes that were completely golden looking up at him.

"Sleep now," he found himself saying even as he tried to comprehend what had just happened, "talk later."

Arthur looked at him for a moment longer and he could see complete trust in those eyes and then they slipped closed as Arthur became completely relaxed in his arms.

It was then that everything began to seem a little absurd. The certainty he had felt fled like a pheasant fleeing an arrow and he found himself looking to Gaius.

"Help," he said, as Arthur began to slip off the cot and he tried desperately to stop it.

Gaius was on the move immediately and between them they managed to put Arthur back on the other cot, at which point Merlin collapsed onto his own.

"Let me look at that bite," Gaius said in a very businesslike way and Merlin was kind of relieved that he didn't have to talk for a while.

Only as Gaius washed the wound, which, surprisingly, didn't hurt much more than a bruise would have, did the situation hit home completely.

"It is already healing," Gaius said and placed the bloody cloth back in the herb filled water bowl before just looking at him.

He knew he had to explain; he owed Gaius that much, but he really didn't understand it all himself.

"When I saved us," he said, trying to rationalise what was happening, "I pushed all the magic I could through Arthur. I had to, to stop him becoming one of those things. I can still feel it working; he's coming back more."

"He attacked you for your blood," Gaius pointed out in a reasonable and scientific manner.

Merlin nodded; he could not deny that.

"But I could have stopped him," he pointed out, praying that Gaius would understand.

For a moment he held Gaius' gaze until finally Gaius acknowledged that at least.

"How long before your magic can cure him?" Gaius asked and sent Merlin's thoughts spiralling off again.

It was not a question he knew how to answer.

"I don't know," he admitted, feeling his strength beginning to leave him as the excitement passed out of his system, "I don't know if I can cure him; I only know I can get Arthur back. He will be the man he was, but the taint may never be gone."

Nothing he was saying came from knowledge he had found in a book or that someone had told him; he just knew it, but it confused him as much as it answered questions. It was as if part of him was something like the dragon, only at the moment it was bypassing his higher reasoning.

"Gaius," he said, as he felt himself slipping further from the world, "I don't understand, I just know. Please help us."

His eyelids felt so heavy and he could barely keep them open as Gaius reached forward and touched the side of his face gently.

"You are remarkable, Merlin," Gaius said as Merlin slowly slipped back into sleep, "for you I will do this; only for you."

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Staying awake was no longer a problem, as Merlin had found after he had finally woken up again, but moving around took a lot more effort than he wanted to admit. Gaius had given him some water to clean up a bit, some food and a drink he didn't want to investigate too closely, before asking him for everything he knew. It hadn't helped a lot, but at least it had kept him occupied and stopped him worrying for a little while. Then he had tried to help Gaius tend to Arthur, but he wasn't really strong enough for that so Gaius had forced him back to bed. Hence he was lying on his side watching Arthur and waiting for some sign of life from the man who seemed to be at the centre of his universe at the moment.

"You should try and sleep," Gaius said, wandering over from where he had been grinding some herbs; "it is unlikely Arthur will wake anytime soon."

"I can't," Merlin admitted, barely able to take his eyes off Arthur, let alone go to sleep.

"But you need the rest, My Boy," Gaius said, placing a poultice on the wound in Arthur's neck.

The bite that had sent them down this path was beginning to heal and Merlin doubted that Gaius' ministrations were making any difference to it, but he did not voice that out loud. It was not a natural wound and it was not healing to natural laws, but he knew that Gaius needed to be able to do something as much as he wanted to.

"I ..." Merlin tried to put into words the things that were floating around inside his head, "I think he will wake up again soon; I can feel it."

Gaius looked between them then, but did not refute his statement.

"Should I be over there when he does?" Gaius asked in an emotionlessly practical way.

Merlin frowned for a moment since it was quite an important question.

"I don't think so," he said, being as honest as he could; "but caution might serve you well."

Gaius nodded and went back to his work bench.

"Let me know when he wakes," was all the old man said and Merlin went back to watching.

It couldn't have been more than ten minutes later that Merlin felt his magic stir.

"I think now," he said, leaning up on one arm and watching Arthur carefully.

Gaius seemed to have given up asking for rational explanations, which suited Merlin fine since he was very much focused on Arthur. When Arthur's eyes fluttered open and they were their normal blue, Merlin had never been so pleased in all his life. Arthur blinked for a bit and seemed to find the early morning light coming in through the windows a little bright, but that was the extent to which Arthur seemed anything like the creature of the previous night.

"Merlin?" Arthur asked in a weak, but normal voice as those blue eyes sort his out almost instinctively.

"I'm here," Merlin said, doing his best to crawl off his cot and not doing a very good job of it.

"Merlin, stay right where you are; you've used far too much energy for a week, let alone one day," Gaius said, choosing that moment to come over. "Good morning, Your Highness, you are looking much healthier today, how are you feeling?"

"Like I died," Arthur said, glancing up at Gaius and then almost straight back at Merlin.

Gaius nodded.

"That is to be expected, since you almost did," the physician acknowledged and then went about giving Arthur a cursory examination.

All the way through it Merlin found himself the centre of Arthur's attention, almost as if Gaius was irrelevant. Only when Gaius checked Arthur's wound again did anything change as Arthur hissed in discomfort and Merlin saw his friend's eyes flash green. That was the point where Merlin decided he was not interested in Gaius' advice and forced himself off his cot. Luckily for him Arthur was not far away, so the fact that he landed on his knees and had to crawl was not much of an issue. Whatever coordination he had once possessed seemed to have deserted him, but bull headedness had always got him a long way.

"Relax," he said, placing his hand on Arthur's chest, "you're going to be fine."

Arthur's eyes were squeezed shut and Merlin could tell his friend was fighting on the inside and he let his magic flow. It was only a little, but then what was happening was only a reflection of what had happened to Arthur previously and it felt like the right thing to do. The tiniest of growls escaped Arthur and Merlin could see Arthur's hands were tight fists and although Gaius did not move away completely, the older man did step back when Merlin looked at him.

It was over in seconds as Arthur suddenly gasped and relaxed, as if something had shut off inside him, but Merlin left his hand where it was and waited. Eventually Arthur slowly opened his eyes again and looked up at him.

"You're keeping me alive," Arthur said very quietly.

Merlin shook his head, but did not lose eye contact.

"No," he said quietly, "I am only keeping you stable until you are well again."

Arthur seemed to accept that, but did not immediately reply.

"But you did save me," Arthur said eventually; "I remember the light and the power."

"I saved us," Merlin replied, unwilling to let Arthur think it was a self-sacrificing act, "they would have killed us both."

Arthur looked into his eyes then for what seemed like a long time, as if looking for something and Merlin just let it happen. They were connected now, they could not change that and Merlin needed Arthur to understand.

"It's always been you hasn't it?" Arthur spoke again, very softly. "You started saving me the day you arrived, didn't you?"

"I can't help it," Merlin replied with just a touch of a smile, "you're quite compelling."

For a few moments Arthur's eyes closed, but Merlin knew his friend was not going back to sleep.

"Why?" Arthur finally asked, eyes opening again, full of confusion. "Why do you endanger yourself? My father would kill you."

"But you wouldn't," he responded, completely certain of what he was saying. "At first I was told you were my destiny, that you would be a great king and would need my help. I thought you were an ass, but I believed what I was told. Then I learned who you really are and I didn't need the words of prophecy anymore. You do that to people, Arthur; you earn loyalty just by being you."

Arthur gave a rather crooked smile at that.

"So do you," Arthur said and then, as Merlin watched, slowly slipped back into sleep.

It hadn't been a long conversation, nothing like Merlin had ever thought, but it had said all they needed to say. It was strange, but Merlin was sure that even though they would undoubtedly speak of his magic again, the matter was already settled.

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Arthur woke for short periods all through the day, long enough to try and eat a little, to drink some of Gaius' concoctions and to talk a small amount, but not enough to be called real conversations. There were also moments when something would happen to cause the taint inside Arthur to rise and Merlin would help him back to equilibrium. Gaius became so exasperated with Merlin forever all but falling out of his cot that he let Merlin move the cots so they were next to each other. It only took a little magic, which was returning to Merlin far quicker than his strength.

As it drew on to evening it became worryingly clear that the darkness inside Arthur was stronger with the passing of the light. Merlin had been dozing most of the afternoon, but the moment the hour became later he found that his mind would no longer let him rest. He was waiting, that much he knew and he did not fight it.

Arthur's sleep was disturbed the closer it came to full darkness and almost as if the sun going down was a pivot point, Arthur's eyes snapped open as the last of the natural light disappeared. Those eyes were tinged with green, but as Arthur turned and looked at him where he lay, Merlin was relieved to see understanding there.

"I'm hungry," Arthur said, voice resonant and unnatural, but very much still Arthur.

"I know," Merlin replied and reached out to take one of Arthur's hands.

His magic was moving already and once again, the moment his fingers intertwined with Arthur's the green of Arthur's eyes was edged with gold. This time though, the gold was more prominent and Arthur's eyes fluttered shut for a moment as Arthur gasped quietly.

"You need to feed the hunger, Arthur," Merlin spoke quietly, but with the strange surety that he felt inside.

Arthur opened his eyes again then and looked at him with that mesmerising gaze.

"I should fight it," Arthur replied, clearly horrified at the idea of what he wanted to do to Merlin.

Merlin shifted a little closer so they were no more than a few inches apart.

"You can't," he said, positive about what he was saying, "but you can control it."

"I don't want to hurt you," Arthur appeared honestly afraid, but nothing about what was happening frightened Merlin.

"You don't," Merlin promised, never breaking eye contact so that Arthur would understand.

He removed the bandana he had put back on earlier to hide the mark from Arthur's previous feeding and turned his head slightly to one side in offering. He saw Arthur's eyes flick to the old mark and Arthur licked his lips, but did not move.

"I am for you, Arthur," Merlin said in little more than a whisper, "I have always been for you."

For a moment all was stillness as Arthur stared deep into his eyes, but then Arthur moved, rolling up and Merlin rolled onto his back so that they came to rest, Arthur all but on top of him on Merlin's cot. This time Merlin could feel the sexual tension before Arthur had even bitten him and he bared his neck, closing his eyes and waiting for Arthur to feed.

"Forgive me," Arthur whispered and Merlin felt the words as breaths against his neck.

"There is ..." Merlin started to say, but fangs sank into his neck and his voice was lost, [... nothing to forgive,] his mind finished off and somehow he knew Arthur heard him.

His magic flowed, his blood flowed and Arthur pushed against him. This time he could not resist the need to push back against that firm body above him as Arthur ground down, pushing their lower bodies together in a mismatched scissor shape. Merlin groaned as Arthur's hip moved against his rapidly hardening erection and he did not even try and stop the need to respond. He could feel Arthur, rutting against him in an identical state, and the experience was heady and sexual and completely encompassing.

He came first, shuddering against Arthur as with his orgasm his magic spiked, causing Arthur to rip away from the bite, breathing hard and dissolving into his own orgasm with small growls of pleasure. This time though, Arthur did not collapse as soon as he was done and Merlin found himself coming down from his sexual high, looking up into completely gold eyes staring down at him almost in wonder. He let his own power flare, knowing that his eyes would then match Arthur's, allowing the moment to go on for as long as Arthur wanted it to.

They didn't really need words, not that Merlin could think of any that were suitable anyway, but eventually it had to end. He could see Arthur's arms shaking with the strain of staying above him and so he scooted a little to the left.

"Lie down," he said as he made space for Arthur on his cot by turning onto his side.

After a moment Arthur did and they lay, face to face, just watching each other. In the end it was Gaius who interrupted them.

"Merlin, I should look at that bite," Gaius said and Merlin looked over without thinking; "you have blood running down you neck."

He would have said something, but before he or Gaius could do anything Arthur had moved and Merlin felt a tongue on his neck. This time there were no teeth and Merlin just melted as Arthur did things to him that it really shouldn't have been possible to do when all that was involved was a tongue and an injured neck. He felt himself beginning to harden again even after only a few short minutes and his head was spinning by the time Arthur drew back.

All he could do was lay there and look into Arthur's face as the high tingled through him, but what warmed him even more than the wonderful arousal coursing through him was the expression on Arthur's face. The glow was beginning to fade from Arthur's eyes, but it wasn't that which caught Merlin's attention; it was the sense of satisfaction and just a hint of confidence that he could see which had him transfixed. He knew it would take time to find the old Arthur under the trauma of what had happened, but looking into Arthur's face then; he could see him.

"Right, well," Gaius said, interrupting his train of thought, "it seems I am superfluous. Do let me know if you need anything."

Merlin looked up at the rather flustered look on Gaius' face and smiled at his mentor.

"Thank you," he said, but could not keep his attention away from Arthur for very long.

When he looked back, Arthur had gone from satisfied to sleepy and Merlin couldn't say he couldn't do with a nap as well. Turning over without falling out of the small bed was not the easiest thing he had ever done, but when he tried to align himself to Arthur, Arthur seemed to get the idea and they were soon spooned together comfortably. It was almost scary how natural it felt to Merlin, but it didn't stop him relaxing and beginning to doze.

"I am for you too," he heard Arthur whisper just as he slipped into sleep.

End of Part 1

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Chapter 2 Returning to Light

Over the next few days Arthur improved. The incidents during daylight hours stopped completely and when they made it a whole night through without Arthur needing to feed from Merlin, Gaius finally decided it was time to lift the quarantine. The fact that Arthur had taken to ordering Merlin around gave Merlin a clue that Arthur was beginning to feel like himself, but that didn't stop Arthur going white when Gaius brought up the subject of going back to normal life.

"But what if I lose control?" Arthur asked, clearly worried. "You said if I were to bite someone other than Merlin I could pass this on."

There had been many theories bandied about over the last few days, but that was one Merlin wished Gaius has left unsaid.

"That's not certain," he pointer out, glaring at Gaius for good measure, "and anyway, you won't lose control. Every time the hunger comes over you, you are more and more still you."

Arthur didn't look convinced.

"Merlin is right," Gaius said in a very professional tone, "and I believe you may only be focused on him anyway."

Merlin looked at Gaius then, because that was something Gaius had not mentioned before.

"On me?" he asked.

"But I went for you the first night," Arthur pointed out.

Gaius just nodded in his annoyingly patronising way.

"However I believe your needs have changed," Gaius explained. "From what you have told me I believe the creatures you went to destroy survived on human blood and the power gained from corrupting a human soul, trapping it within the corpse. I believe that you, Sire, survive on blood and the magic which Merlin feeds you. Because you are mostly human you do not need to feed often, at the rate I am seeing improvement I believe your need will eventually be approximately one in seven nights, but you do require the sustenance as well as ordinary food."

That rather confirmed Merlin's suspicions.

"You don't think I will ever be cured then?" Arthur asked, no emotion in his voice.

"No," Gaius replied with his usual honesty, "but I do not believe you should look on this as a curse. Because of the horror that came with this condition I believe you fail to see the advantages."

Arthur stood, anger written all over him and Merlin put out a hand, knowing that Arthur's temper was a little more volatile than usual at the moment. Since it had been quite hot enough to begin with that meant he was keeping an eye on Arthur just in case.

"How can needing human blood be an advantage?" Arthur demanded.

"That is a symptom," Gaius said, refusing to be intimidated, "but a treatable one, what you have failed to notice is that you are stronger and faster than you once were and you can also see in the dark. I would humbly suggest these are advantages a Prince would find most useful."

Merlin looked at Arthur then; that was not something he had considered either. He had been so worried about Arthur's mental state and the level of corruption still in Arthur that he had completely failed to consider that there might be another side to the situation. Arthur had been the greatest knight in Camelot before, if he was even stronger and faster he would be truly amazing.

"Stronger and faster?" Arthur asked, clearly not quite sure.

Gaius nodded.

"Last night when Merlin almost fell over the pale," Gaius explained as Merlin felt himself going red at the recollection, he could be so clumsy sometimes, "you moved far more quickly than a normal person could to catch him. You have both told me that the creatures moved with unnatural speed and were demonically strong; I believe those traits have partially been passed to you."

That did not make Arthur look pleased, more worried in fact and Merlin knew what his friend was thinking.

"My father will not suffer a son tainted with magic," Arthur pointed out, "not even if it is benevolent."

"No, Sire," Gaius replied with a nod of his head, "I fear that is true, but I believe you are a man fully capable of moderating your use of these strengths. Merlin had saved Camelot on many occasions, hiding what he can do under the guise of other things. An extra burst of speed at the end of a tourney, or flinging off an attacker will be seen as the excitement of the fight giving you strength. These things can be hidden in plain sight. You have also demonstrated a higher sensitivity to taste and smell; if anyone tries to poison you I am sure you will know before it touches your lips."

Arthur still looked unconvinced and so Merlin stepped up beside him.

"If I can do it, it'll be easy for you," he said with a small grin, trying to lighten the atmosphere. "I am probably the most incompetent idiot you are likely to meet, after all."

Arthur looked at him with a very even stare for a while, but finally smiled.

"That's true," Arthur agreed and made Merlin grin even more.

In that moment, Merlin had a strange sense of forever, as if for an instant he had a glimpse of eternity and somehow he had a feeling they would be trading insults from this world and into the next. It was a good feeling that made his grin become a genuine smile.

"What?" Arthur asked, seemingly having picked up on his change of mood.

"Nothing," he replied with a little bob of his head, "just wool gathering."

He didn't think Arthur was quite ready for the forever speech just yet.

"Yes, well, Sire," Gaius interrupted them again, "I have made arrangements that Merlin will be staying in your rooms until we are sure we can predict your needs. I have told the king that you will sometimes require medicines during the night and Merlin needs to be there to administer them. The arrangements are being made now."

Arthur nodded in a very businesslike fashion.

"It will be good to get back to my own bed at night," Arthur replied, with just the tiniest glance in Merlin's direction.

They had moved back to their own cots after the first night they had shared one, but somehow they always seemed to end up back in one, even the previous night when Arthur hadn't even fed. Merlin had begun to think that's how the universe wanted it and there was nothing they could do about it. From the look Arthur was giving him he doubted he was going to be using the cot that he was sure the servants would be setting up in Arthur's room for him to sleep in.

"But before that, Sire," Gaius said with a small bow, "if I might be so bold as to suggest a bath."

That made Merlin laugh; they were still in the same clothes in which they had ridden back to Camelot, although they had made an effort to clean them, and they had been days in quarantine without large sources of water, so they were getting a little ripe.

"Gaius," Arthur said in an almost dangerous tone, "I think perhaps you ... could be right."

Gaius did not look impressed by the theatrics.

"Thank you for everything you have done, Gaius," Arthur said, now very sincere. "You are a true friend. Come along, Merlin, you're my manservant, you heard the man, bathe me."

Merlin laughed again; if Arthur could joke then things could not be too bad.

"And while we at it, I think I'll bathe you, I can't have a filthy manservant now can I," Arthur added.

Merlin saw Gaius rolling his eyes and muttering something about youth, but he was far too interested in the ideas Arthur's words had sparked in his brain.

"Bye, Gaius," he said with an absent wave, following Arthur out of the room.

He wondered absently if it was possible to fit two grown men into a royal bath tub.

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Once back in Arthur's rooms there had seemed to be people everywhere and Arthur had put up with it for a little while. Everyone had just seemed so pleased to see Arthur well and Arthur had played the good prince for a while as Merlin hovered in the background, but finally had sent everyone scurrying with a demand to be alone. Arthur had then sent a message to Uther saying that he would see him once he was presentable and then, to Merlin's pleasure, they had

put to the test the idea of whether it was possible to get two people into one bath.

It seemed that if they were flexible and you didn't mind water all over the floor, it was indeed possible, but not overly comfortable, which was why as soon as they were clean Merlin had found himself being all but dragged towards Arthur's bed. It seemed that Arthur's bites became bruises within half a day and then faded before the next night, but Merlin had discovered that the spot where Arthur always bit him was more sensitive now. Hence, when Arthur pushed him onto the bed, climbed on top and began sucking and lightly nipping at that spot, Merlin found that all control and any ability to think left him.

The fact that they were naked, on Arthur's bed and that this was probably going to go further than either of them had gone before did try to make itself known in his head, but all he could concentrate on was how good what Arthur was doing felt. He didn't know if Arthur was simply a natural, or if Arthur's new senses made him better at these things now, but Merlin just couldn't keep a thought in his head as Arthur took him apart piece by piece.

Arthur seemed determined to taste him, at least as far as his skin went, moving all over his neck, shoulders and chest, licking, kissing and nipping, which drove him completely insane. He'd never exactly been a good follower, but he had been discovering over the last few months that he was willing to follow Arthur anywhere and this instance was no different. He really didn't care if Arthur was making it up as he went along; if that was the case, Arthur was making it up really well.

When Arthur shimmied down his body a little, brushing lightly over his erection, he didn't even try to stop the moan that sounded so debauched it almost surprised him that he was making it. Then Arthur fixed that clever mouth over one of his nipples and sucked and he decided that he had found Avalon and all its delights. The little tiny amount of sentience he had left was making a mental note of exactly what Arthur was doing for future reference and all of him was melting under the attention.

"There's something," Arthur said between attacking his nipple with tongue and very light teeth, "that I've been wanting to do since I had enough strength, but I didn't think Gaius' heart could have taken the shock."

"What's that?" Merlin asked with breathless anticipation.

Arthur smiled up at him and Merlin felt his whole body throb with arousal in response. If there was one thing he had learned over the past few days it was that look in Arthur's eyes; the look that meant Arthur was hungry. Mostly it had been for blood, but a couple of times, in the dead of night when Gaius was asleep, it had been for hot heavy kisses and desperate touches. Merlin knew which it was for now.

With the grace of the skilled soldier he was, Arthur shimmied further down the bed, watching Merlin the whole time and all Merlin could do was lie there and wait. To a mind that was working it would have been instantly obvious where Arthur was headed; Merlin only caught up when Arthur was nose to tip with his groin and Arthur's tongue darted out from behind those sensuous lips. He had precisely one second to prepare himself before Arthur licked a stripe right up the underside of his cock. He couldn't even manage a moan this time, just some incoherent gasping.

"Do you have any idea how good you taste?" Arthur asked him

Merlin just shook his head and made some sort of unidentifiable noise. He appeared to have been reduced to less than monosyllabic, which, even if he was the subject, left him very impressed. Just for a moment Arthur's eyes glinted with gold and Merlin decided that magic really was the only way to describe his lover. Then Arthur enveloped him in warm wetness and all thinking once again stopped as feeling took over. Merlin lost track of how long the incredibly wonderful sensations went on as he fought with himself to stop his body taking that final step into ecstasy that he had become quite familiar with over the last few days.

Since he had absolutely no control whatsoever when Arthur got his fangs into him, he was making a concerted effort to not completely lose it when there were no fangs involved. It wasn't overly easy, but he was quite proud that he was still teetering on the edge of completion when Arthur finally pulled back. Arthur's eyes weren't quite glowing, but they were definitely brighter than they should have been when his lover looked up at him.

"Come here," he found himself saying, beckoning Arthur with one finger.

Arthur wasn't a follower either and Merlin wasn't sure his request would be obeyed until Arthur began to climb up him again. It was not the fastest climb in the world, since Arthur seemed to become distracted with various parts of his upper body on the way, but eventually Arthur did make it back so they were face to face. That was the point where Merlin decided to take the initiative for a while.

First of all he distracted Arthur with the hungriest kiss he knew how. Then he tensed and flipped them both over so he came to rest on top. He might have used the teeniest bit of magic as well, but then Arthur was bigger and stronger than he was. Of course Arthur was very sensitive to his magic these days and noticed.

"Hey, that's cheating," Arthur protested as Merlin grinned down at the man now pinned beneath him.

"Says the prince who could probably pick up his horse if he wanted to," Merlin pointed out and went back to kissing Arthur so his lover wouldn't object too much.

He took the hum from Arthur as agreement.

There was something he wanted to try, an idea that had lodged in his mind after a particularly vivid wet dream and he couldn't resist it. Magic had always come naturally to him and, since the incident with the creatures, he had felt it even more keenly. Moving things with his mind was as easy as breathing and he seemed to need to use it now.

"Merlin," Arthur's voice was tight with arousal, but also confused as Merlin concentrated on his lover, focusing his magic into an invisible, physical force, "what are you doing?"

He curled his power around Arthur's cock and balls, gentle and yet firm and then he opened his eyes and looked down at his lover. He wasn't trying to push his magic into Arthur this time, but he was not yet skilled at keeping it to himself and some was making it through anyway and Arthur's blue eyes were tinged with gold.

"I want to show you how good magic can be," he whispered, surprised at how deep his own voice sounded in his ears, "I need to."

Arthur had been taught all his life that magic was evil and could do no good. Merlin knew Arthur did not believe this any longer, had known for some time, even before their current predicament, but he still found himself wanting to prove his worth. However, he needed Arthur's approval before he would go any further.

"Then show me," Arthur whispered, leaning up and claiming another kiss.

As the kiss deepened, Merlin used his magic, dancing it over Arthur's skin and making his lover moan into his mouth; he wanted to push Arthur as far as Arthur had pushed him and beyond. He wanted to take both of them as high as they could go.

Aligning himself against Arthur, he slowly began to rub against his lover, cock to cock, using his magic to hold them together and heighten the sensations. Now he was the one moaning as Arthur, never passive, pushed up against him, meeting him move for move. They moved against each other, skin to skin and it was heady and new and wonderful and Merlin knew it could not last long. He was too excited, too eager and he could feel the tremors in Arthur's muscles below him as well.

When Arthur dragged away from his mouth and returned to where they had started, that place on Merlin's neck, sucking hard even though there were no fangs to break the skin, that was it. Merlin came with a shout of ecstasy that he couldn't remotely contain and his magic answered, shuddering as he shuddered, pulsing as his body pulsed, causing Arthur to buck underneath him, spilling his seed as well.

It was not the first time they had come in each other's arms, but it was the first time they had done so naked and it felt that much more because of it. Merlin didn't want to move, he didn't want to lose the moment, but just after his world stopped spinning for one reason it was spinning for another and he once again found himself on his back.

"We're all sticky," Arthur said, but for some reason didn't seem overly bothered by the fact.

"Maybe we need another bath?" Merlin suggested, wondering if he could successfully heat up the water without boiling it with magic.

"Hmm, maybe," Arthur said, leaning above him with his long arms straight so that their legs were still entwined, but their upper bodies were apart.

Arthur was clearly thinking something, but Merlin had no idea what it was. He was pinned to the bed until such time as Arthur came to a decision, so he just lay there and waited.

"I have a better idea," Arthur finally decided and Merlin's question in response turned into an undignified squeak as Arthur attacked him with his tongue.

His skin felt hypersensitive as Arthur licked him, not to mention what the thought of exactly what Arthur was licking off of him did to his nerves as well and he basically writhed as Arthur held him down. Just about his only sensible thought was that Arthur was trying to kill him after all, just not in a conventional manner.

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"Father," Arthur greeted with all the charm and power of the crown prince firmly in place as Merlin and he walked into the King's audience chamber.

The fact that he was wearing some of Arthur's clothes made Merlin feel a little uncomfortable. They hadn't really thought that bit through so all of his clean clothes were still in his room.

"I'm terribly sorry to have kept you waiting, but after five days of illness I felt the need to bathe," Arthur walked up to his father and exchanged a handshake and an almost hug.

Merlin wanted to roll his eyes at the manliness of the whole moment.

"I believe that may have been a good choice," Uther replied, actually smiling for once. "It is good to see you well again."

Arthur inclined his head in acknowledgement of that.

"It is good to be well again," Arthur replied with a smile, "I just hope Gaius will be as fast to declare me completely fit. I feel the need to return to my duties."

Uther seemed to like that.

"Of course," the king said, "but you must obey Gaius in this; your health is important to Camelot."

Merlin wondered why Uther couldn't just admit that Arthur's health was important to him, but gave up when he suddenly found himself being looked at. He was hoping to have not been noticed.

"Arthur," Uther said slowly, "is your manservant wearing your clothes?"

Arthur laughed at that.

"Yes father, old ones," Arthur said in the tone that Merlin remembered from his first meeting with the prince, rather than the one he tended to hear now, "Merlin fell into my bath when trying to empty it. I thought it a waste not to use the opportunity to clean him up and make him presentable rather than sending him back to Gaius' room. We can't have naked servants walking around the place so I put him in some of my clothes for the time being. He looks somewhat ridiculous, but needs must."

If Merlin had not known Arthur didn't mean a word of it, considering the fact that he had had to escape from Arthur's rooms when Arthur decided he looked delectable in his old clothes, he might have been offended, but instead he did his best to look awkward and uneasy. Not overly hard when Uther was involved.

"Yes," Uther said, not sounding convinced in the least, "you may have a point."

Merlin bowed his head and tried to look grateful, something he was not as good at.

"We must record your campaign for the official record," Uther changed the subject and Merlin was very glad to be forgotten again. "The people must understand that we are stronger than magic and this will make a perfect

example. The proclamation about your return to health will be a good time to announce the truth."

Merlin stood very still, this was the part that he was not looking forward to at all.

"I am sorry, Father, it was not the sword which saved us," Arthur said and Merlin could see that Uther turned, very unhappy at that statement. "Our swords had no effect; the creatures regenerated before our eyes. It was magic that saved us."

They had agreed that the creatures were far too dangerous to allow anyone in Albion to believe they had been destroyed by swords alone. If they ever appeared again, the people had to know the truth.

"Magic is forbidden," Uther all but hissed, any good mood instantly gone.

"I do not believe anyone broke the law, Father," Arthur said very firmly; "there was no one there apart from myself and Merlin and neither he nor I have the knowledge or the will to do such a thing. I believe it may have been natural magic. The land herself could not stand such corruption as these things. A bright light appeared above us, burning away the unnatural gloom and destroying the evil as it touched it. I felt it run through me, Father, fighting the taint of the evil that was trying to take me; it did not feel like a human being."

Uther stared at his son then and Merlin held his breath. The story was a gamble, but one they had all felt they had to take.

"Natural magic?" Uther finally asked.

Arthur gave a sharp nod.

"I have felt magic used against me, Father, by the enemies of Camelot," Arthur said in a very resolute tone, "and this felt like no human hand. I would ride back there now if I believed I would find an enemy of our land."

Merlin suddenly found himself with Uther's attention firmly on him for a second time.

"And you, Merlin," Uther said shortly, "did you perceive this in the same way?"

He did his very best not to look quite as nervous as he felt.

"I know little about such things, Sire," he said, happy for once that Uther seemed to be convinced he was an idiot, "but when that power touched me it did not make me think of people."

The second half was no lie either; his magic did not make him feel human at all.

Uther turned away and paced for a moment.

"You are sure, Arthur?" the king said and Merlin was very glad to once again be beneath notice. "Sorcery cannot be allowed; such power is always evil whether it seems benevolent at first or not."

"I am sure, Father," Arthur said, no trace of the lie in his face or his tone.

Something in Merlin hated that Arthur had to lie for him, but most of him knew that Uther would never be rational on this subject. To lie was their only choice.

"Then let this be the end to the matter," Uther said, seeming to relax again. "I am hungry, we should sit and eat."

Arthur smiled at that and nodded while Merlin mentally groaned; no doubt that meant work for him.

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Merlin was exhausted and all he wanted to do was fall into bed and sleep like the dead, which was why he was still moving down the corridor and not asleep against the wall standing up. The idea of curling up next to Arthur was about all that was keeping him going. He needed his own clothes for the next day, since he had had enough quips about wearing Arthur's to last a lifetime, so he had decided to run back to his rooms to get them. Running had been his first mistake.

Arthur had offered to walk with him, but Arthur was even more exhausted than he was. It had been all too obvious that Arthur was even less up to the trip, so he had left Arthur sitting in front of the fire, trying not to fall asleep before he got back. It was still comparatively early for Camelot, but both of them had found out over the day quite how much their ordeal had taken out of them.

"Merlin."

He mentally groaned as he heard Gwen's voice; he was only one corridor away from Arthur's chamber.

"Hi, Gwen," he said, turning to greet his friend, his small bundle of clothes under his arm.

"I haven't seen you all day," Gwen said in her usual cheerful manner, "surely Arthur doesn't have you running everywhere yet?"

That was Gwen; always worrying about him.

"Oh no," he said, trying to sound put upon never the less, "it's just Uther's been monopolising Arthur all day and seemed to want me there to make sure Arthur didn't have to lift a finger."

The truth was he could hardly bear for Arthur to be out of his sight. It was like there was an invisible piece of string between them that could only be pulled so tight before it snapped them back together again. Merlin was sure it would fade soon, but he really wanted to get back to Arthur's side.

"Typical," Gwen said with a conspiratorial smile. "If you're free we could go and talk the kitchen maids out of some ale and you can tell me all about your adventures. You should hear some of the stories that are going around."

If he hadn't been about to drop he would have enjoyed the invitation, but of course he wasn't free.

"Sorry," he said apologetically, "I'm just on my way to Arthur's room. I have to sleep in there until Arthur is properly well; Gaius' orders. Arthur's literally about to fall asleep where he stands so I have to go, but maybe tomorrow?"

Gwen seemed disappointed, but covered it with her usual good humour.

"Tomorrow it is then," she said with a warm smile, "and don't think you can hide from me; I will find you."

Merlin gave her a genuine smile back; he would seek her out if he had to and even if it meant pining for Arthur for a little while. Gwen was a good friend and she deserved his time.

"I won't hide, I swear," he promised, "well unless Arthur lets me sleep the day away, but how likely is that?"

Gwen laughed at that and gave him a quick hug.

"Go on then," she said, blushing as ever when she realised she had been overly friendly, "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Goodnight, Gwen," he said and pecked her on the cheek.

"Goodnight, Merlin," Gwen replied and he turned back the way he had come.

He made it to Arthur's door without falling over his own feet, which he counted as a victory, but he almost fell over just inside the door because of what he saw. It made him smile and he almost missed avoiding the edge of the table as he grinned stupidly. Arthur was sat in the chair by the fire fast asleep and snoring ever so gently because of the odd angle of his head. Merlin found it adorable and just watched for a little while.

It was when he found himself being lulled by the light of the fire that he decided he had to move and he walked over to Arthur and shook his lover's shoulder.

"We need to get you undressed," he said when Arthur grunted quietly and began to wake up.

"You just want me for my body," Arthur replied, but did appear to be trying to move.

"Yeah, like either of us can use theirs at the moment," Merlin responded with a snort of laughter. "Come on, Sire, it's time for bed."

"Promises, promises," was Arthur response; clearly Arthur had a one track mind when he was mostly asleep.

Merlin felt his body trying to respond to Arthur's tone, but he really was far too tired and had to settle for visions of what he wanted to do to Arthur in the morning. He was almost too tired to realise how unusual it was for Arthur to be so sleepy at night; something about the bite had turned Arthur into quite a nocturnal being, but it appeared that even nocturnal beings needed sleep when they had had a very hard day.

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"Merlin."

The voice filtered into his dream full of power and need, but Merlin was just deep enough in the dream to ignore it. The dream was a good one, a warm day, sun and a beautiful meadow in which to relax. It was peaceful and happy and he didn't want to wake up. Arthur and he were lying side by side enjoying the heat.

"You're wearing far too many clothes," dream Arthur told him, rolling onto his side and looming over him.

Suddenly, as was wont to happen in dreams, Merlin found himself naked, next to an equally naked Arthur. When Arthur's fingers trailed down his side he made a small purring noise, closing his eyes and enjoying the sensation. It was only then he realised it felt a bit too real and he sensed the dream dissolving around him. When he re-opened his eyes he opened them on the real world with Arthur looking down at him with a green tinged gaze.

"I'm sorry," Arthur apologised, seeming awkward, "I didn't want to wake you, but I had to."

Merlin just smiled; this was after all the overriding reason he was sleeping in Arthur's room.

"Don't be sorry," he said, coming out of the dream completely, "you can't help being hungry."

The fact that Arthur was leaning over him just like in his dream and appeared to have removed his nightshirt so that all that was between them was the material of Merlin's made him think of his own hunger. Arthur was lying against him and the hardness digging into his thigh was unmistakable, as was the throb from his own groin as the effects of the dream and of Arthur's closeness made themselves known.

Arthur was beautiful. Merlin had known that for a long time, even when he failed to admit it to himself, and in the dim light of the glowing fire, Arthur was like a creature from another world. Merlin was not a poet or overly romantic, but at moments like the current one he could understand why others were. It made him smile; he would probably be a very bad poet.

"You can have all of me," he said, words not eloquent, but saying exactly what he was feeling.

They had shared so much of each other, but not that, not the one thing Merlin could only give once and he had no doubt who he wanted to have it. He was not ignorant; he knew how these things worked, had almost fumbled that far with Will one night only weeks before he had left for Camelot, but for the first time he was sure. There was nothing he would not give Arthur.

"I don't know my own strength," Arthur admitted, sounding just a little afraid in a way Merlin was sure no one else would ever be allowed to hear, "I might hurt you."

"All of me," was all Merlin said, leaning up and kissing Arthur's lips.

He did not want long, meaningful conversations; he wanted hard, passionate kisses and a firm, muscled body pushing against him; into him. As his magic flowed into Arthur, he wanted Arthur to flow into him. In his mind it was like a balance and one that needed bringing into line for everything to be right.

Holding out his hand, he let his magic flow and the little bottle of unscented oil he used to polish some of the more delicate things in the room came to his grasp as the door lock also clicked into place. He knew Arthur could see exactly what he was doing, since Arthur could see when there was virtually no light, and he held out the little container to his lover.

"Are ..." Merlin stopped Arthur's question with another kiss.

Arthur seemed to finally catch on and gently took the bottle from his hand. This time it wasn't him who switched their positions, it was Arthur, rolling onto his back and pulling Merlin with him so that Merlin ended up lying on top, legs either side of Arthur's hips. Through all the movement they never broke the kiss and Merlin pressed himself against Arthur, feeling the passion moving through both of them. It was frustration that eventually pulled them apart as Merlin found the need for skin on skin, which he could not get with his nightshirt still in place. Sitting up, he pulled it over his head and threw it to one side before once again moving so that he was flush with Arthur, kissing and touching.

He didn't think that he would ever get enough, not of the intoxicating man Arthur was. The strength and power he could feel beneath him was all physical and it excited him in ways he had never really considered before. As they kissed, tongues touching and moving against each other just like their bodies, Arthur's hands roamed his skin and it was not long before he felt firm, calloused fingers massaging his arse.

He moaned, moving on from Arthur's lips to Arthur's neck, well aware that if he let Arthur do the same thing this would be over before it was begun. He wanted Arthur inside him before fangs came into the equation. When Arthur seemed a little stuck with the whole fondling bit, he moved encouragingly and made a small noise of encouragement, while focusing his attention on Arthur's ear. The lobe was soft and warm against his lips and Arthur shivered as he nipped gently.

Slick fingers running over his entrance with confidence was the first indication he had that Arthur was moving them on and also the first proper indication that Arthur knew exactly what he was doing. Merlin did not think it was the first time Arthur had been with a man and all the suggestive comments he had heard on hunting trips were beginning to make sense. When Arthur's finger breached him, he had to stop what he was doing because the sensation rather took his breath away.

"Relax," Arthur said and if he had not been so busy exploring the new feeling he would have smiled as the tables were turned and Arthur spoke the word he had used so often recently.

The angle was not the easiest with him sprawled across Arthur and Arthur pulled him up a little, making it less effort to reach and Merlin simply went. Arthur's finger felt strange, but good as his body began to sing to the new tune. He trusted Arthur completely with his body and soul and, as Arthur worked him looser with quiet words and more fingers, he let himself go. Arthur had him and that was all he needed to know. He moaned his need as Arthur slowly prepared him and he began to feel as if he was the one with the hunger, not Arthur.

His magic was moving between them already, using the skin to skin contact to filter into Arthur and back into him, heightening everything they were doing. It made him groan and pant and, when Arthur finally deemed him ready, he was close to begging.

"Sit up," Arthur told him, removing the clever fingers that had been curving inside of him.

Merlin did as he was told as he felt Arthur using the rest of the oil to slick himself. He could not help wondering if the dragon had seen this, if this was what he had

meant with all his words of wisdom, or if this was them taking their own destinies to a level beyond what was written for them. It felt like more to Merlin as Arthur helped him into place and ever so slowly brought their bodies together.

As he began to sink down onto Arthur it hurt and he had to stop, but Arthur's strong hands held him in place as he let his body adjust.

"Just take it slowly," Arthur advised him and Merlin looked down into those green and gold tinged eyes.

"I don't think we have time," he said, smiling through the discomfort as he forced his muscles to relax and carefully pushed himself onto Arthur's needy body.

It was wonderful and terrible at the same time. It made him light up inside at the feeling and the thought, but it did hurt as his untrained muscles refused to give easily. He was panting quietly when he finally sank home and it took long moments for him to concentrate back on the whole.

"Merlin," Arthur's voice called him back from where the sensations took him and when he looked down this time he could see Arthur's sharp, lethal fangs.

All he could do was nod, knowing that any more would have to come another time. Arthur's need was as great as his own and their bodies were joined, but there was not time for that passion now. Arthur sat up slowly, holding him in place, keeping their bodies aligned perfectly and Merlin wound himself around Arthur, leaning his head to one side. He had what he wanted, finesse would have to wait for later, and now it was time to feed Arthur's hunger.

Arthur's fangs slid into his flesh causing pain and then explosive pleasure, mirroring the coming together of their bodies and as Arthur drank, Merlin lost track of anything but themselves. Magic and blood mixed and his muscles gave, allowing Arthur to sink into him even more and all he could do was cling on and whimper as the sensations threatened to take away his mind. He could glimpse the power then, the power he had felt when in desperation he had reached for the raw magic that lived in him. It was woven to Arthur now, woven so tightly that he knew nothing would ever separate them. This was what he was born for, of that he had no doubt and he gave himself to it completely.

"I love you," he whispered as the power and arousal in his body took over.

There was no more thought, no more need for consciousness and as his physical being exploded with sensation he felt his body shutting down. For a moment there was ecstasy and then there was nothing, but Arthur had him and that was all that mattered.

He came back to himself feeling lethargic and content and he was lying down again, cradled in Arthur's arms. Everything seemed rather more real and less mystical as he moved and discovered that certain parts of his anatomy were very aware of what he had been doing. He went to move, but Arthur's arm tightened around him protectively.

"Go to sleep, Merlin," Arthur said in his usual commanding tone, holding him close and refusing to let him move.

It made him smile and he did not fight Arthur on this. Their coupling had been more profound than he had thought it would be and if this was how Arthur needed it to be tonight he could live with that. He had wanted no words and no

talking before and he could respect that in Arthur now. In the morning it would be clearer anyway and so Merlin snuggled a little closer and let his eyes fall closed.

"I meant it," he said quietly as he let himself begin to drift off.

As long as Arthur understood that, that was all he cared about, and when he felt Arthur's embrace tighten just a little, he knew Arthur had heard him.

End of Part 2

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Chapter 3 Allies

Merlin had spent the night with Arthur so he was on light duties for the day, at Arthur's insistence, not his, but at least it meant he'd have some time for reading. Over the past few weeks his light duty days have given him spare time that he wasn't used to having and he had to admit he was enjoying it. He was quite looking forward to getting some more research done, right up until the point where he walked into Gaius' rooms and found Gwen standing there.

"Hello," she greeted and favoured him with a smile.

"Morning," he offered in return, hoping that he didn't look like he had just had sex.

Sometimes when he came back, Gaius commented on how he really should show more decorum, but it wasn't his fault that Arthur feeding left them both begging for all the sex they could get. Light duties wasn't because of blood loss or anything like that; it was because Merlin rarely got any sleep on one night a week. It had been two weeks before he had stopped sleeping in Arthur's room as a matter of course and they were about to enter their third week after that. Gaius was being very cagey about whether he thought Arthur's condition was changing any more, but Merlin couldn't convince his mentor to say any more.

"You were out early," Gwen said in a conversational tone that led him to believe she would not be leaving any time soon.

"Oh, I stayed in Arthur's rooms last night," he said and then mentally kicked himself for his honesty as Gwen looked kind of surprised. "Um ... he occasionally has night terrors from the attack and I have to be there to administer one of Gaius' drafts, but you didn't hear that because Arthur is invincible, okay?"

That made Gwen smile.

"Okay," Gwen promised, seemingly satisfied.

Without thinking about it, Merlin wandered over to the bench and poured some water into the big bowl Gaius always left out. Then he removed his neckerchief and began to wash his face and neck. When he was done he turned back and realised that Gwen was frowning slightly.

"Merlin," Gwen asked and had him worried just by the way she said his name, "what's on your neck?"

His hand flew to where the bite mark had to still be visible and he scrambled for an explanation. It didn't feel raw so he prayed it didn't look too new and he did his best to smile. He wasn't sure it worked.

"Oh that," he said, turning and putting his neckerchief back on casually as if he wasn't trying to hide the injury, "it's nothing. Arthur managed to clock me one with the end of a sword yesterday while trying to teach me how not to be clumsy, and it made a funny mark, but Gaius says it's nothing to worry about."

He wasn't good at lying, but he gave Gwen his best butter-wouldn't-melt expression and prayed it would work better on his friend than it did on his mother. Gwen did not look completely convinced, but she was the type who didn't accuse people of lying.

"Well as long as Gaius is sure," she said and he gave her a big grin and a nod to encourage her way of thinking.

"He's sure," he said and wandered back towards her. "Were you waiting for Gaius, or is there something I can help you with?"

Thankfully that tactic seemed to work and Gwen smiled at him and began to tell him why she was there. She seemed a little worried about something, but he couldn't be sure what since she didn't give him any hints. When Gaius came back, Merlin decided to leave Gwen in his mentor's capable hands and went to his room to read.

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Gaius, after Arthur had threatened to just declare himself completely fit, had finally decided Arthur was as well as he was ever going to be and hence, for the court and Uther, totally healed. This meant a celebration, which in turn meant a feast and the castle had been preparing for it for a day and a half already, which left the whole of the next day for preparations as well. Merlin and Arthur had decided to have their own celebration the night before the official one and hence Arthur's door was locked just as if had been once a week for the last three weeks since Merlin had moved back into his own room.

Merlin didn't always make it back to his room every night and sometimes he only barely made it back before the early hours, but they were trying to be discrete. The night when Arthur fed was the one night he was sure he would not have to find his way back to his own room, so he always looked forward to it.

Standing there in Arthur's powerful embrace, Merlin gave up all pretence of control. In this the strength was in Arthur and he had no choice but to accept that. He felt Arthur's breath on his neck and he moved his head a little to the left, even as his magic stirred under his skin. It knew what was coming as well as he did and his whole being was filled with nervous excitement and anticipation.

They had found through trial and error that sex and Arthur feeding did not always go together well, depending on how hungry Arthur was. Since Arthur was very hungry this evening, they had opted for feeding first, sex later, but that didn't stop the whole thing being incredibly sexual.

As Arthur's lips touched his skin and the pressure on his neck increased, Merlin barely felt Arthur's fangs slide into his flesh. There was a moment of pain, but it was so short as to be irrelevant as Arthur's need and pleasure at the bite flooded into him. He could feel his magic and his blood being drawn out of him and it was intoxicatingly wonderful as Arthur's reactions bled into him without any filter.

At that moment he could not have stopped Arthur even if he had wanted to and his body reacted in the only way it knew how. As pleasure ran round him in

waves, he felt himself hardening, becoming super sensitive to the way Arthur was pushed up against him from behind, totally unable to ignore that Arthur was very much in a similar state. There was no separating this from the sexual edge and Merlin found himself moaning as Arthur continued to drink from him.

So completely overcome was he that the creak of the door barely made it into his consciousness, but the gasp of a woman did. He opened his eyes to see Morgana with a key in her hand and the door half open.

"It's true," Morgana whispered, expression completely terrified.

Merlin just stood there, only just able to comprehend what he was seeing until Arthur broke the connection.

"Morgana," Arthur said, voice tinged with power and Merlin knew that his lover's eyes would be yellow with magic and Arthur's fangs would be clearly visible.

That one word broke the tableau and then Morgana turned and ran. That kick started Merlin's brain as his thoughts finally started moving again and he broke away from Arthur. He had to stop Morgana.

"Stay here," he said, without looking back, well aware that Arthur would be unable to control himself for a while yet.

Then he ran as well.

As he exited the room, all he saw was Morgana's skirts vanishing around a corner and he put on as much speed as he could to catch her. It was late; there were no servants to see them and he prayed that he could reach her before she reached someone else.

"Lady Morgana," he called as he rounded the corner and saw her opening a door further down.

She looked back at him, so obviously afraid, and then ran up the stairs the door revealed. There was nothing else for it and Merlin ran as fast as his legs would carry him, charging up the stairs after her into a long dark corridor.

"Morgana, please," he begged as she ran from him, skirts making her slower than him, but fast enough to keep just ahead, "it's not what you think."

The chase might have continued, but there was another door coming up and with a thought, Merlin turned its lock. When Morgana reached it she screeched in frustration and fear, trying to get it open.

"My Lady," Merlin said, stopping halfway down the corridor so as not to frighten her more, "please."

Morgana stopped then, seemingly recovering her dignity and turned towards him.

"Arthur has you under his power," she said, clearly still afraid, but holding it inside; "you must fight him, Merlin; we must stop him."

At least she was talking to him now.

"No," he replied and put his hand on the wall as the corridor lurched a little, "I swear to you, it is not like that."

"Listen to yourself, Merlin," she responded, sounding sure of herself; "he is one of those things. I saw him drinking your blood."

Merlin might have laughed at how that sounded if he hadn't begun to feel alarmingly sick as the world gave a second lurch. Running had not been a good idea.

"Yes," he said, dropping any formality as he realised he was running out of time, "but he is not one of them. The bite infected him, but the magic that saved us stopped him becoming like them. Arthur occasionally needs blood, but I go to him willingly."

As the corridor gave an alarming spin in his vision he leant against the wall.

"How can you expect me to believe that?" Morgana asked, righteous now rather than afraid.

"The creatures cannot stand light because they are dark magic, light kills them," Merlin tried to convince her; "Arthur walks around in the day. He is not evil."

What he wanted to do was put his head between his knees and stop the world going round, but he didn't dare.

"What he asks of you is beyond something even the most faithful servant or friend would do," Morgana said, but sounded less sure and Merlin looked up at her.

He had to make her see; if anyone else found out, Arthur would be exiled at best and killed at worst and that was unacceptable.

"I am not just his servant or just his friend, Morgana," he said, conveying his honesty in his gaze and using informality to insinuate how this was in the scheme of things.

For a moment she blinked at him, but it was clear she understood. It seemed that maybe he was getting through, but his time was running out. The spinning was more manageable, but his vision was beginning to go dark at the edges. With a sinking feeling he realised he was fainting and there was nothing he could do about it.

"He is still Arthur," he prayed he was getting his point across, because that was the last thing he managed to say and he started falling towards the floor.

"Merlin!" he heard a very familiar voice call his name and strong arms were catching him as the world went away for a while.

When it came back, it came with a stonkingly bad headache.

"Merlin, can you hear me?" Arthur sounded distraught. "I took too much; you should never have trusted me."

That almost made him laugh; the nobility could be so melodramatic.

"No need to be so dramatic, I'm not dying," he said, and winced as he opened his eyes, "and you didn't take too much."

Arthur looked so relieved, even with blood on his chin.

"Note to self, don't run after Arthur's been feeding," Merlin said, and tried to make his eyes focus properly.

Arthur moved to help him sit up and his temples pounded as he did so, but the corridor was very much more stable now and in colour, which seemed to be a good sign.

"I thought I said to stay in your room," he said, looking at Arthur's less than normal state.

The glow was almost gone from Arthur's eyes, but not quite and the fangs had receded, but there was still blood over Arthur's mouth and chin.

"Well I take orders about as well as you do," Arthur replied, looking him over as if he was afraid he would break.

It was then that Merlin remembered Morgana and looked over to see her watching them. The really strange thing was that all the tension seemed to have gone from Morgana's stance and now she was just watching them. He opened his mouth to speak, but Morgana got there first.

"We need to get both of you back to Arthur's chambers," she said and walked towards them, "and then the pair of you are explaining everything."

He actually heard Arthur's sigh of relief and then he was being helped to his feet, Arthur on one side and Morgana on the other. The pounding in his head kept him distracted until he found himself sitting in a chair in Arthur's chamber and being handed the restorative Gaius had made for him.

"Are you okay?" Arthur asked, still obviously concerned. "You don't usually react like this when I just bite you."

"I don't usually chase a very fast young lady down corridors and upstairs afterwards either," he pointed out and downed the herbal mixture in the goblet in one.

It tasted as awful as he knew it always did and he grimaced.

"What was that?" Morgana asked.

"A restorative," Arthur replied as Merlin reached for some water to get rid of the taste.

"From Gaius?" Morgana asked and Merlin realised they had just implicated Gaius as well.

"Of course from Gaius," Arthur said, a little more snappishly than Merlin thought was necessary; "you don't think he'd miss this do you?"

"Well the rest of us did," Morgana pointed out.

"Thank god," Merlin muttered to himself, but realised he had said it too loud when two royal faces looked at him.

Arthur handed him a plate of bread and cheese and then went back to looking at Morgana. Not really feeling up to anything else, Merlin began to eat meekly, but the good thing was that the water and the food almost instantly began to reduce his headache.

"Tell me everything," Morgana said firmly, "now!"

For a moment Merlin thought Arthur might object, but eventually Arthur indicated the other chair for Morgana to sit in and then began to talk. Arthur really did tell Morgana everything, well except the fact that the magic which had saved them was Merlin's. To Merlin's shock, Arthur even explained when and how they had become lovers and from the way Morgana reacted he didn't think it was the first time the pair had discussed Arthur's love life. From the "About time" comment, Merlin didn't think that part really shocked Morgana either and he had to do a whole lot of reassessing of his own as the conversation continued. Suddenly Arthur's seeming infatuation with Morgana in public began to make more sense and the game Arthur and Morgana played for Uther's benefit became clearer and clearer. It was quite a revelation, so for once in his life Merlin just sat there and shut up.

"I'm going to have to tell Gwen," Morgana said, a minute or so after Arthur finally finished the explanation. "She saw the remains of a bite on Merlin which is why I came here tonight."

Merlin remembered the incident with Gwen at the end of the previous week and how she had seemed worried after it and it made complete sense now he knew she hadn't accepted his explanation. At least that was one weight off his mind.

"I knew something was worrying her," he admitted and finally entered the conversation.

"Yes," Morgana said, seemingly unimpressed, "well done for male understatement; she's been frantic. No one in Camelot mentions the word magic without very good cause."

Merlin did his best to look chastised; he was never going to understand women ever, but he knew how to appear apologetic and when to do so. Morgana was looking at him in a worryingly thoughtful way and Arthur seemed to have decided to keep out of it for now.

"You two are going to have to be more obvious about your relationship," Morgana finally decided and caused Merlin to almost choke on his own tongue.

"What?" he asked in a rather strangled tone, but although he looked surprised, Arthur did not seem shocked.

"The locking yourselves away once a week is suspicious, people will talk," Morgana said as if it should have been obvious. "Court intrigue always thinks the worst and after Arthur's encounter they'll need something else to focus on."

"And you think that being open about sleeping together is better?" Merlin was not quite sure how that worked.

He was still confused by politics.

"Of course," Morgana said and Merlin wasn't sure if she was trying to make him feel like an idiot; "Arthur wouldn't be the first prince to have a male lover. Of

course you'll have to keep quiet the fact that you're madly in love with each other," Merlin felt his face heating up, "but other than that, be more overt. As long as Arthur still flirts with visiting ladies to make sure everyone thinks yours is a relationship of convenience, no one will care."

Merlin wasn't so sure he wouldn't end up straight in the dungeon, but when he looked to Arthur, his friend and lover appeared thoughtful about the whole idea.

"Father will probably be relieved that he doesn't have to worry about any bastard children," Arthur mused, "especially if I tell him it's just more convenient when he demands to know what I think I'm doing. He might even approve, especially since he already knows Merlin is loyal."

The whole thing was making Merlin's head spin; he wasn't good at politics at all. The only thing he could imagine was Uther demanding he be hanged, but Arthur and Morgana clearly didn't think anything like that would happen.

"If Merlin virtually moves in here, your nights with locked doors won't seem anything unusual," Morgana said, seemingly having decided this was the only thing to do. "You could let slip to one of your knights that the locked door is because you get up to kinky things and that will just improve your reputation with those louts."

There was only so much redness one face could take and Merlin was pretty sure his was at the limit. Disappearing on the spot seemed like a vaguely good idea if he hadn't thought it might get him killed; although death was looking quite good as the embarrassment level rose. The way Arthur was eyeing him when he dared to look up, he had a feeling that Morgana was giving Arthur ideas.

"How do you feel about being felt up at the feast tomorrow?" Arthur asked with a smile that was a little too wicked for Merlin's liking.

Merlin just groaned; the feast to celebrate Arthur's return to health was going to be torture, he could tell.

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The feast would be that evening and the castle was in full preparation for the celebration, but Arthur and Merlin were in Arthur's rooms waiting for Morgana and Gwen. Morgana had agreed to explain to Gwen, but they had all decided it would be better if Gwen could see for herself as well, so the meeting had been arranged.

"We should tell them about me as well," Merlin said, turning from where he had been staring at a new cobweb in the corner of the room.

It was something he had been thinking about all night; in fact he had only managed about an hour's sleep as his mind had turned everything over and over. No matter how he protested his love for Arthur, he knew Gwen, and he was sure she would think of the relationship as exploiting him. Revealing the whole truth was the only solution he could see to helping Gwen to understand or she would worry about him.

Arthur appeared startled by his outburst.

"If anyone finds out about you, you could be killed," Arthur pointed out, although Merlin noticed his lover did not forbid his idea.

"So could you," Merlin replied, since it was true. "I think if they know it will actually make this easier for them to accept. Neither of them will betray us."

"Not deliberately," Arthur agreed with a nod, "but the more who know, the greater the danger something will be given away accidentally."

That was a possibility he had considered.

"I know," he replied, eyes wandering back to the spider's web with all its complexity, "but I think the risk is worth the gain."

When he looked back at Arthur, his friend appeared thoughtful.

"It is your secret to give, Merlin," Arthur finally said. "If it is what you wish I will not stop you."

Merlin nodded; it was what he wanted.

"You hate lying don't you?" Arthur broke the silence which fell after they had agreed.

The women were due any moment so there was no point in trying to do anything but wait.

"I've had to do it since I was very small," Merlin admitted with a small frown, "but I never get used to it. I always wished for a place I could just be me."

"I think we all wish for that," Arthur replied and Merlin gave his friend a small smile.

They were both trapped by what they were supposed to be. Merlin walked over to where Arthur was sitting and ran his fingers over the base of Arthur's neck, watching the tension fade away as he did. He had been amazed at what a simple touch could do and he had to wonder if it was because no one had ever really touched Arthur like that until him. Outside their safe places, he, a mere servant, would never be allowed to touch the prince with such familiarity even if the prince chose to touch him, but away from prying eyes they were just Arthur and Merlin and he let himself indulge.

Only when there was a knock at the door did he take his hand back.

"Come in," Arthur called and Merlin stepped away just a little, in case it was someone other than Morgana or Gwen.

He relaxed a little when first Morgana entered and then Gwen, looking a little nervous. As Morgana walked over to Arthur, he walked over to Gwen and took her hands.

"Sorry to have worried you so much," he said, and he really meant it.

The last thing in the world he wanted to do was upset Gwen; she was such a sweet person.

"You're really alright?" Gwen asked, searching his face with her eyes.

He nodded and gave her his patented, everything is great with the world, grin.

"Better than alright," he promised faithfully.

Then he led her into the room and offered her a chair, which she took with some reluctance, since they were in Arthur's chambers and servants didn't usually sit down, especially when their masters were still standing up. Morgana soon moved away from where she had been speaking quietly to Arthur and sat down next to her maidservant, so Merlin went back to Arthur's side. Arthur sat down, but Merlin preferred to stay close, rather than take the final chair and placed his hand back where it had been before the women had knocked. He hoped Gwen could see what he was trying to say.

"You must have questions," Arthur began, his princely persona as suppressed as Merlin had ever seen it in company.

Merlin was all too aware that one word from Arthur and Gwen could just quietly disappear, but unlike his father, Merlin also knew that Arthur was not that sort of person. The fact that Arthur was concerned about Gwen's acceptance made him realise just how much Arthur had changed since he first met him.

"We are not masters and servants here, Gwen," Arthur continued when Gwen looked nervously at Morgana; "we are friends. If we were still playing by those rules I would most certainly be dead by now."

That seemed to settle Gwen, at least a little.

"How can this be?" Gwen finally asked. "I don't understand."

"The creatures transferred their corruption with their bite," Arthur was not relaxed, Merlin could tell, but his lover did not object to the question. "One of them bit me and I was becoming one of them. I in turn bit Merlin as I was turning, but then magic came to our rescue. It passed through both of us, but it seems it could not remove the whole taint from me. It has left me with certain needs ..."

"That I am more than willing to fulfil," Merlin finished for Arthur and gave his lover a smile when Arthur looked up at him.

Gwen was watching them both very carefully now and Merlin could feel himself being assessed.

"Why?" Gwen asked, very directly.

Sometimes Gwen could be such a mouse and other times her strength of character shone through like a beacon. Merlin just gave her a beaming smile to begin with as the feeling he was still getting used to welled into his chest.

"Because I love him," he said and for once was not remotely embarrassed about saying something so girly.

Gwen actually smiled at him for that, but then she looked at Arthur and her smile disappeared.

"And?" she asked and Merlin couldn't help grinning as Arthur looked incredibly awkward and blushed a fantastic shade of pink.

There were some things about the upbringing of a prince out of which Arthur still needed to be trained.

"Um," Arthur really seemed incapable of just coming out and saying it, not that Merlin minded; Arthur showed him often enough, "it's mutual."

For a little while Merlin thought Gwen might push for more, which might have been disastrous, but then Gwen smiled and inclined her head.

"Thank you," she said in her usual gentle tone, "now I understand."

Arthur looked so relieved that it made Merlin laugh.

"Men," Morgana said and rolled her eyes, but she seemed more relaxed as well.

All in all things were going remarkably well, but Merlin sobered as he remembered that there was one more thing he needed to do. He used the excuse of walking over to the table and filling a tankard to gather his thoughts about what was to come next.

"There's," Merlin started to say, turning back to the others, but he faltered when all eyes turned to him. "There's something else you should know," he continued after a moment, pulling his courage together.

Magic was such a despised thing in Camelot that it was hard to speak of it, even to those he knew were friends. He found words hard in this case, but he was never one not to act. Holding out his hand, he whispered the words of power that came so naturally to him these days and the small, blue bubble of light appeared and floated up into the room. He watched it for a little while, waiting for his courage to gather again before he dared look at the others.

Arthur smiled at him and stood up as soon as their eyes met and his lover walked over to him as he finally faced Gwen and Morgana. Gwen's eyes were round with shock, but Morgana seemed less surprised.

"You're a sorcerer."

When Morgana spoke it was not a question.

"It was Merlin's magic which killed those creatures," Arthur said, slipping strong arms around his waist and leaning against him from behind, resting a chin on his shoulder, "and Merlin's magic which saved me."

"How did you learn?" Gwen was still shocked and obviously confused.

Merlin leant back into the comfort Arthur was offering in what was an unusual display of affection in front of others. He could not bear it if Gwen hated him for this.

"I didn't," he replied honestly, "I only learned to control it. I was born this way."

Morgana was watching him closely and he could see the wheels turning behind her eyes.

"Good god," she said finally, "the whole place is blind."

That made Merlin smile a little; he did sometimes wonder how the whole of Camelot hadn't noticed what he could do.

"But, Morgana, a sorcerer would be an idiot to work in King Uther's court, let alone for the prince," Arthur said in a way that made Merlin laugh out loud.

"Okay," he said, looking at Arthur out of the corner of his eye and doing his best to appear unimpressed, "I get it, I'm an idiot."

"But an idiot I'm rather fond of," Arthur replied and Merlin found himself blushing.

When he glanced back at Morgana and Gwen, the pair had just finished exchanging glances and he was pretty sure Arthur would not like what the women appeared to be thinking about them. It wouldn't do to call Arthur anything but macho to his face. Then he saw Morgana's expression become serious again and he was almost sure he knew what was coming.

"You have shared things with us," Morgana said, looking into the fireplace as if she was not entirely sure about what she was doing, "and I feel I must share something with you."

Arthur stilled behind him as if he too knew something big was coming.

"I think I have the Seer's gift; I have dreams," she said quietly, "dreams that sometimes come true."

Merlin did his best to appear surprised; he did not want anyone knowing that he already knew this secret.

"Gaius is the only one who knows anything about it and he keeps telling me it is not so, but I have long since come to believe he wishes to protect me from myself," Morgana seemed almost embarrassed by the confession. "I have seen too much to believe in coincidences anymore."

It was almost a relief to hear Morgana say that, because it meant that now Merlin had one less secret to keep. That she recognised what Gaius did for her was a blessing in itself.

"That must be hard," Merlin found himself talking before he thought about it; "knowing things and not being able to do anything about it?"

Morgana smiled at him for that.

"No harder than having to hide what a gift you are to this kingdom, Merlin," she replied and Merlin found himself blushing again when he realised she was not just teasing him.

He really didn't know what to say at all.

"Keep telling him things like that and we'll have to de-swell his head," Arthur saved him by making a joke of it.

"I think, Arthur," Morgana said, giving Arthur a very amused look, "you're confusing Merlin with yourself."

That made Merlin snort with laughter.

"See if I come to your rescue again," Arthur whispered in his ear and made him laugh even harder.

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If Arthur called for wine one more time and felt up his arse, making him spill it, the whole court was going to see one manservant belt the crown prince good and proper. The look in Arthur's eyes alone had had him half hard all night and the inappropriate groping was really not helping him at all. How the hell was he supposed to concentrate on anything when all he wanted was to rip Arthur's clothes off and demand Arthur pay up on what Arthur's gaze had been promising all evening?

Walking over to a quiet corner in the stairwell, far enough from Arthur to be virtually invisible, but close enough in case he was needed, he decided to give himself a chance to calm down before he did something embarrassing. Uther had been shooting glares at him all night from the moment the king had noticed Arthur feeling him up and he just needed a little time away from both Pendragons to gather himself.

It was as he was standing in his quiet spot being ignored by everyone and he heard Arthur laughing (which of course did nothing for the whole calming down bit of the exercise) that an idea popped into his head. The idea made him smile and he got a funny look from one passing servant, so he decided that maybe he looked a bit demonic. Sliding deeper into the alcove he had found, he leant back and closed his eyes; it was time to get his own back.

As long as they were not in skin to skin contact, his magic did not bleed into Arthur, but that didn't mean Arthur was out of reach. Concentrating, he let his magic flow, finding Arthur easily and making it tangible the moment he did. He could see Arthur in his mind with no problem at all, in fact he had a perfect image of Arthur in his head and he sent his magic under the clothes of that image and downwards.

There was a thud of something metal hitting the wooden table and then the sound of someone coughing.

"Arthur, are you alright?" he heard Morgana ask.

"Fine, fine, thank you," Arthur replied, voice just a little tighter than usual. "Clearly I am missing Gaius' care already and am trying to choke myself to make up for it."

Merlin just smiled to himself and focused his attack a little more carefully. Thinking of his magic like a hand, he slipped it down into Arthur's underwear and wrapped it around his target and he heard Arthur cough again. This was fun.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Morgana asked, just loud enough so Merlin could hear.

"Absolutely sure," Arthur replied sounding just slightly off. "Have you seen Merlin?"

Merlin's smile grew; it was nice to know Arthur knew exactly what was going on. Moving his magic very slowly, he began to caress Arthur in just the way he knew drove his lover completely to distraction. For a while there was silence and then he heard a very quiet moan.

"You're looking flushed," Morgana said and Merlin risked opening one eye into a tiny slit so he could see what was going on.

Arthur was kind of slouched in his seat, trying to appear nonchalant and failing and Morgana was looking at him with a very critical eye.

"I'm going to kill him," he heard Arthur say.

Morgana looked very confused by that statement.

"Who?" she asked and Merlin did his very best not to laugh.

"Merlin," Arthur all but hissed as he continued his assault.

It was then that Morgana smiled and relaxed, clearly Morgana did not choose to worry about anything when it came to him and Arthur.

"Oh," Morgana said and went back to speaking to the person on her other side.

Merlin almost did laugh then, but held it in check and closed his eyes again, torturing Arthur for just a little longer. It wouldn't do to have the crown prince make too much of a spectacle of himself, especially when Merlin was pretty sure he'd be blamed for it by Uther even if there was no normal way it could have been his fault, so after another minute or so he finally relented. He opened his eyes just in time to see Arthur looking kind of relieved and kind of disappointed, so he decided it was time to come out of hiding.

"Is everything alright, Sire?" he asked, playing the good servant and Arthur half glared at him and half looked desperate.

He had definitely accomplished his mission; now Arthur knew how he had been feeling all evening.

"No," Arthur said in a tight voice, "I think my incapacitation has left me unused to strong wine. I have a headache; I wish to go back to my room, make sure it is ready."

Merlin gave a small bow and walked towards the corridor while Arthur made whatever excuses were needed. He did not go straight to Arthur's room, since he knew it was quite prepared for habitation, but he did move a little further along and around a corner before he stopped and waited for Arthur.

He began to count in his head and then he heard hurried footsteps and a rather flustered looking Arthur charged around the corner.

"You are going to pay for that," Arthur all but growled at him and then pushed him against the wall.

"I do hope so," Merlin managed to reply before Arthur covered his mouth with a bruising kiss.

He had been dying for that all evening and he might have started ripping Arthur's clothes off there and then if he hadn't had just the faintest memory of where they were. Arthur probably wouldn't get into that much trouble if someone spotted them, but he was pretty sure he'd end up in the stocks, again. However, it was Arthur who pulled away, very reluctantly and looked back down the corridor.

After a moment Merlin heard footsteps that Arthur had to have heard earlier and they turned towards Arthur's room and pretended to be walking.

"Arthur," Uther's voice stopped them in their tracks.

"Yes, Father?" Arthur asked, turning and surreptitiously placing his body between Uther and Merlin.

For his part, Merlin tried to blend into the background.

"Would you like to explain exactly what you think you have been doing this evening?" Uther asked, clearly not overly happy.

"Giving the court something to talk about," Arthur replied without any sign of embarrassment or regret.

"Well that much was obvious," Uther replied and Merlin found himself being glared at.

Arthur placed a hand on his Father's arm and drew him away a little as if in a conspiratorial huddle.

"I have very good reasons, Father," Arthur said quietly, but loud enough so that Merlin could still hear; "I do not make a spectacle of myself lightly."

That appeared to calm Uther a little, a fact that made Merlin very grateful.

"I was attacked by creatures of dark magic, Father," Arthur pointed out, "and I was ill for a long time. It made me reassess how I was living my life and I decided that I needed to relax a little more from time to time. Merlin was willing and we were trying to be discrete, but Morgana brought to my attention that there were rumours about me going around the court, rumours to do with sorcery. You know all too well how rumours can become uncontrollable, so I decided to control them. I think you will agree that rumours of me and my manservant are far preferable to those pertaining to dark sorcery."

"Who would dare suggest ..." Uther began to bluster.

"Father," Arthur placed a soothing hand on the king's shoulder, "people talk, we cannot change that, all we can do is control it. By next week what I choose to do with my manservant will be old news and the rumours of anything darker will have been completely forgotten. I need an outlet, Father, and at the moment, Merlin is it. I know you have dallied in your time, so I am sure you can understand the urges. I would have been discrete, but for a greater need."

Uther still did not look completely happy, but the king did not appear about to explode any more either, which Merlin thought was a very good thing. Finally Uther nodded and Merlin let out the breath he had been holding.

"Just remember where your duty lies," Uther said, seemingly needing to have the last word.

"Of course, Father," Arthur replied in a very serious tone, "that is always my first concern."

That apparently satisfied Uther that his point had been made because the king turned and walked away with one last glare at Merlin. Only when Uther was completely out of sight did Arthur turn around and walk back to Merlin.

"Sometimes," Arthur said with a little shake of his head, "I wonder if my father thinks I am an idiot."

"Well you've always thought I was an idiot," Merlin pointed out with a grin.

Arthur raised an eyebrow at that.

"I still think you're an idiot," Arthur replied in a haughty tone, but then smiled as well. "It's just now you're my idiot."

Merlin accepted the kiss when Arthur leaned in.

"I've always been your idiot," he whispered when Arthur finally pulled back.

The End