

To You I Pledge

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Warnings/Spoilers: general for season 1

Summary: Merlin lays his life on the line to save Arthur yet again, only this time there are witnesses, lots of them. Only Arthur prevents him going to the headman's axe straight away, but Arthur alone cannot save him. That is up to both of them.

Author's Notes: This one was a long time in emerging from my brain and it's a lot longer than I expected when I first started it. Thanks to Soph for the beta. It was written for the Merlin Big Bang 2009 LJ comm. boxofmagic.

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Chapter 1 Exposure

Merlin felt Arthur's body pressed against his, with the cold wall at his back, and the sensation of Arthur's lips covering his own was more than wonderful, but even as most of him surrendered, the voice at the back of his mind would not let him give in. He wanted this; he wanted this with all his heart, but one thing was very clear to him and it would not let him do it. As gently as he could he pushed Arthur away.

"I can't ..." he began to explain and watched hurt and disappointment flair in Arthur's features.

Defensive as ever, Arthur went to move away, harsh words on his lips, but Merlin caught him.

"Arthur," Merlin said, needing Arthur to really be listening to him, "I can't yet. There's something you need to know; something I have to tell you. Then ... if ..."

For once in his life he ran out of words. This was so important to him that it robbed him of the one weapon he rarely had any trouble with. Arthur's features softened again, seeming to understand, but Merlin knew that his prince could never really understand, not until he told the truth. Telling the truth scared him, and not because he thought Arthur would have him killed or tell his father, but because he thought Arthur might look at him differently. The fear of magic was so ingrained in Camelot and Arthur had grown up knowing nothing else and if Arthur hated him for this Merlin knew it would be the end of him.

"Then tell me," Arthur said simply and that was it.

The invitation was there and Merlin opened his mouth, but he just didn't know how to say it. He opened his mouth and shut it again, pausing to think of the right words. Seconds passed and he opened his mouth again, still unsure of what he was about to say, but knowing Arthur would press him for it in a moment. As he finally drew in a breath to speak, there was a banging on the door and Arthur looked away with an irritated frown.

"Sire," a voice came through the door, "your father, the King, requests your presence before the feast."

Merlin wasn't sure if he was relieved or as irritated as Arthur by the interruption; he was such a mess of emotions.

"We will continue this after we have paid host to these ignoble Barons," Arthur said, looking him in the eye once more. "I do not intend to let you go, Merlin, that is a promise."

All Merlin could do was nod.

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The feast was, quite frankly, boring as the two Barons in court tried to out do each other with more and more outrageous stories of their gallant exploits. They had of course brought their daughters, who were being paraded in front of Arthur like prime beef, and Arthur was playing the dutiful Prince and taking notice of both sides. No doubt that was what Uther had wanted to talk to Arthur about, but it annoyed Merlin. It was Arthur's duty, but Merlin didn't have to like it.

Uther had changed a little since the whole questing beast fiasco. It had clearly driven home that Arthur was mortal, something Merlin would have expected a father to realise, but something, it seemed, about which Uther had needed reminding. Uther had been involving Arthur in many things far more lately, treating Arthur more as an equal than a son, but some things definitely hadn't changed. When it came to duty, Uther and Arthur were as bad as each other. Merlin was very much of the opinion that banging their heads together would not only be fun, but it might knock some sense into them as well.

The gathering was to do with trading routes and taxes and other boring things like that, at least that is what Merlin had gathered from Arthur's moans about how tedious it all was. Watching him from across the room, however, Merlin would never had known that Arthur was bored, well except for the fact that Arthur's eyes weren't sparkling in the slightest. Arthur wasn't even drinking that much, a sure sign this was all work and no play.

At least there was going to be some interesting entertainment at the feast. One of the Barons had brought along a troop of players and acrobats as a sort of gift to Uther and they were going to be performing. Merlin was looking forward to it and he hoped it would improve Arthur's mood; he wanted to have that conversation with Arthur as soon as possible and having Arthur in a bad mood to begin with would not be a good thing. In fact, Arthur in a bad mood might result with him in the dungeon for the night. The players would also, hopefully, take his mind off of that conversation for a while as well; thinking about it was making him nervous.

He knew well enough that Arthur would not betray him, but he had no way to know how Arthur would react beyond that. Arthur could be volatile and he didn't know if Arthur would understand his reasoning for remaining silent. They had been friends for quite a long time now and Merlin did not want that to change. He didn't think it would, but that was why they had to have this conversation first; just in case.

He loved Arthur, he was sure of that, but he could not let that kind of relationship be built on a lie.

Considering the thoughts that were running around his head, he was very glad when the players finally arrived. It started with one acrobat bouncing down between the tables and striking a pose. The tumbling was spectacular and gained everyone's attention and some heart felt oohs and ahs from the ladies present. Merlin found himself smiling despite where his thoughts had been.

"Our bold hero," a voice boomed from the hallway, "a brave and noble prince."

It was obvious where this was going right from the start, but Merlin was determined to enjoy it, even if it was all about sucking up to Uther. Arthur appeared amused if nothing else; the acrobat had a very bad blond wig.

As it turned out, the plot wasn't overly original, but the players were good. There was an evil dragon and an evil sorcerer and the handsome prince was tasked with rescuing the beautiful maiden from their clutches. There were streamers and smoke as the prince fought bravely to save the damsel and it was all quite exciting really, for a play that was. Having seen a real dragon, the fake one was a bit of a let down, but Merlin wasn't about to let anyone know about that.

Of course the prince slew the dragon and killed the evil sorcerer and rescued the girl to much cheering from everyone watching. Merlin would have clapped as well, except he was holding a jug of wine and remembered at the last second before he managed to throw it over anyone.

It was clear that the court was pleased, so as the players held their final positions, Uther stood. Then and only then did Merlin feel something strange.

"Well done, brave prince," Uther said, playing along with the actors, much to the courts delight, "you have defeated the evil and won your good lady."

The actor playing the prince smiled and bowed deeply, but Merlin found himself watching the fallen evil sorcerer. The man looked like an actor, was made up like an actor, but something was wrong and Merlin did not think the way the man looked at the king was acting. The damsel, who was actually a woman rather than a boy dressed up as a woman, moved from her prince's side and went to stand next to the downed sorcerer and then Merlin felt it; real power.

"The lady is mine," the supposedly fake sorcerer said and came to his feet in one smooth, unnatural move.

Uther clearly did not know how to take that, but Merlin realised he was the only one who knew that it was not some trick.

"Magic," he hissed at the person next to him, unwilling to shout it out himself, but knowing that, in Camelot, the whisper would pass quickly.

"I believe, Evil Sorcerer," Uther said, clearly still believing this to be part of the game, "that you are dead."

The man at the other end of the room just smiled.

"You will wish it were so," were the rather ominous words as the man brought up his hands to be matched by the woman and spoke words of power.

Merlin went completely cold as the guards and knights who came to attention at the threat were thrown backwards by a powerful wind conjured by the woman.

"Now your line ends, Pendragon," the male of the pair declared in a tone that would have made Merlin laugh if the man hadn't obviously had the power to back up the statement.

As the man called out a spell, one of the high windows burst inwards, glass shattering into lethal shards, and rather than falling, all of them flew directly at Arthur. Merlin didn't even think; he just reacted.

"No," he yelled at the top of his lungs and threw out his hand.

The shards came to a shuddering halt only inches from where Arthur was now on his feet, twitching in the air like small glass ornaments as two lots of magic tried to contain them. Merlin felt like he was prickling all over, as if the shards were touching his skin rather than his magic, but he refused to let them go. This was not the controlled magic he had been trying to perfect with the aid of the book, this was the raw power inside of him; the power that burned in his eyes. The whole court could see him, they all knew what he had to be, but he could not let Arthur die.

There was a stunned silence across the whole room as if the shock of what was happening held everyone as still as the magic holding the shards of glass. With bloody death so close to Arthur it was as if no one dared move.

"I will see them dead," the sorcerer all but growled, shattering the stillness with another whispered spell, and another window exploded.

This time shards flew at Uther, Morgana and Arthur and Merlin thrust out his other hand as well, throwing his magic in the way. This was the kind of magic that came most naturally to him, the instinctive use of the power within his veins, but it was not easy. He could feel the pressure of alien power against his own and it was hard to resist it. It felt like a hundred hands pressing against him as he held the glass in place.

"I won't let you hurt them," he said through gritted teeth, taking his eyes off the shards just long enough to send a glare at Camelot's enemies.

He knew his eyes had to be glowing bright gold with all the magic flowing through him and he wondered if he even looked human anymore. His mother had always told him that the change in him gave him an air of someone not quite mortal and that she found it beautiful, but others might find it frightening. He hoped the other sorcerers found it less than settling at least.

"Foolish child," the other man snarled; "you are no match for our power and these cattle would kill you for what you are."

Merlin felt the pressure build and he forced his magic to face it. They were both working against him now; he could feel it, but he dug into the same depths that had helped him defeat Nimueh and found that he was not yet lacking.

"I stand for Camelot," he ground out his reply, pushing a small burst of magic at the foreign sorcerers, knowing they would feel it.

He did not have much to spare as he used everything he had to keep Uther and his family safe and there was no chance of using another spell. When he allowed himself one glance at Arthur, his friend was looking at him, shock having morphed into something else and he wished he had time to explain, but it was too late for that now.

"Then you will die with them," was the ultimatum delivered by the woman.

A third window shattered to yet another spell and this time, not only did the shards fly towards the nobles, but at Merlin as well. It was hard to stop them with both the other sorcerers working against him, but he felt his magic flare to protect him as well as the others and he held. The sorcerer snarled as the pair was thwarted again and Merlin felt the magic being used against him swell in intensity. He had to put everything he had into fighting the death that hovered only inches away from himself and those also under attack.

Flicking his eyes over to Arthur he sent a silent plea; he needed help.

"Attack, you fools," Arthur all but bellowed, even as the deadly glass moved a fraction closer.

It was a diversionary move, Merlin knew that the pair of sorcerers had enough power to divert the guards and knights, but it was what he needed.

It was only a fleeting second, but as his enemy threw off the opposition once more, Merlin felt the force directed against him stutter and he threw everything he had at the crack in the magical armaments. He screamed a battle cry and pushed every last ounce of strength he had into repelling the deadly weapons. Some shards flared and melted, some shattered into elemental parts and some flew right back at the pair who had created them. Merlin did not have enough time to see what happened as all the energy in his body was channelled into the one need and he passed out before he could see the benefits of his handiwork.

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For a moment Arthur just stood there dumbfounded and watched the two sorcerers fall to their own implements of death. Both were riddled with glass shards as they had intended him to be and neither moved when they fell. It had been quite amazing to watch and incredible to feel. The touch of magic had been unmistakable and he had no doubt he had just experienced the clash of some incredibly powerful magical energy. That was when his eyes turned back to Merlin and all he saw was an empty spot where Merlin had been standing. It took him a moment to realise that Merlin, beautiful, stupid, brave Merlin had not run, but was in fact lying in a heap on the ground.

Arthur did not hesitate then; disregarding what he might have been supposed to do, he went straight to Merlin's side.

"Get them out of here," he heard his father rage, and he heard the guards doing as they were told, but no one came near him and Merlin.

Merlin was sprawled where he had fallen and Arthur knelt down next to his friend. Unlike himself and the rest of his family, Merlin had not escaped unscathed. There was a long cut along one of Merlin's cheeks and a huge shard of glass was protruding from the flesh just below Merlin's right shoulder. It was just like Merlin to sacrifice himself to make sure others came out better than he and Arthur reached out gingerly to touch Merlin.

There were no signs of life in the body sprawled on the floor, no discernable movement, nothing to indicate that Merlin was not as dead as his foes. Only as Arthur's fingers touched the cold skin of Merlin's face did he feel the slightest

breath on his hand and it was as if some of his own heat leeches into Merlin from the point of contact.

"Gaius," he said loudly, ignoring everything else and looking to the court physician for his help.

The way Gaius met his eyes told him all he needed to know as to whether Gaius had known of Merlin's abilities or not. There was fear in Gaius' expression, but it was not of Merlin, it was for Merlin. Arthur stood out of the way as Gaius sunk to his knees beside Merlin's still form and he waited until Gaius gave him one look. Only then did he turn to his father, knowing that he had to forestall the headsman's axe, no matter what else he did.

His thoughts were still spinning and part of him did not completely believe what he had seen, but things were beginning to slot into place in his mind. He knew one thing only for sure as his mind tried to contain the new reality and that was that he had to save Merlin.

"Arthur, you know what must be done," Uther said firmly as their gazes met; "you saw what he is capable of."

"What I saw was Merlin saving our lives, Father," Arthur replied, keeping the anger he was feeling just below the surface. "You would condemn him without a fair hearing?"

"The law is plain," Uther said, clearly unwilling to even remotely back down.

Then again, Arthur was not willing to give in either.

"The law is made by you," he pointed out, hoping that his father would see reason.

"He is far too dangerous," Uther snapped back, "he must be executed immediately."

That was it, Arthur had had enough, as the guards came forward he stood tall and looked his father straight in the eye.

"If you execute Merlin," he said very slowly and very clearly, "I will never speak to you again."

There was total silence through the whole court as Arthur and Uther stared at each other. For a moment he wasn't sure that his father believed him, but he meant every word and he let it show. It took long seconds, but Uther finally seemed to realise he was deadly serious and then his father looked at Gaius.

"He must be confined," Uther said and Arthur had the feeling he was missing something; "use the west tower and every means necessary."

"Yes, Sire," was all Gaius said.

Under Arthur's watchful eye and Gaius's guidance, two servants disappeared while Gaius did his best to stop the bleeding from Merlin's shoulder wound. When the two men returned they were carrying a large piece of wood that looked like a loose table top or something. Only once he had packed Merlin's wound did Gaius allow Merlin to be lifted and placed on the hastily made stretcher. No one did anything to interfere, but Arthur could feel the tension as everyone watched. All

he was worried about was Merlin and he was not about to let Merlin out of his sight. He was all too aware that he was the only reason Merlin was still alive and he was not about to let some knight believe that in the best interests of Camelot Merlin should quietly die. Without even a glance at his father, he followed the makeshift litter out of the room to whatever was in the west tower.

The west tower was not part of the castle that was used very often. There were guest quarters at the bottom of it, but the top was shut off, supposedly storage rooms. Arthur had been told that some of his mother's things were stored up there and that his father had forbade anyone to go up there. It was the one boundary Arthur had never tried to push as a child, simply because it had always been clear to him how much pain remembering his mother caused his father. It was beginning to appear as if his father had used that knowledge to hide something else in the west tower as well.

He followed the men carrying Merlin up the stairs and towards a room he had never been into before. The room had ornate designs on the door and he watched as Gaius pulled a key from beneath his robes and put it in the sturdy lock. By the way the key turned easily in the lock, however, Arthur realised the door had not been left closed for long and, when the party walked in, it was clear the room was clean.

"What is this place, Gaius?" Arthur asked as the physician oversaw Merlin being carefully placed on the bed.

"A room created to shut out magic," Gaius replied, moving to Merlin's side as soon as Merlin had been laid out properly on the bed. "It is both a place of refuge for those under attack and a place where a sorcerer may be imprisoned."

There were strange designs over all the walls and Arthur could only assume they were the barriers that Gaius was suggesting were in place.

"And why do I not know about this place?" he asked, feeling once again that his father was keeping him in the dark about things he should not be.

"Because your father believes that such times where it is needed are past," Gaius replied, carefully peeling the blood-soaked clothing from around the wound in Merlin's shoulder, "and it reminds him too much of your mother, Sire."

That was a bit of a shock.

"My mother?" Arthur asked.

Usually his mother was only ever mentioned in hushed tones, but Gaius seemed distracted enough to actually talk to him; not that he didn't wish the distraction was something other than Merlin.

"He had this room created for her as a place of safety while she was with child," Gaius said, examining the damage done to Merlin. "There are only two keys and I oversee the room's cleaning once a month. Just be glad this room exists or your father would likely have sent Merlin to the headsman's block by now."

Gaius sounded agitated and Arthur decided that it would be best if he stopped asking questions for now.

"May I be of assistance?" he asked instead.

It was then that Gaius seemed to remember exactly who he was talking to.

"Thank you, Sire," Gaius said, recovering himself, "if you would send someone for my things, I must attend to Merlin's wound, and in that cabinet you will find a satchel, if you would be so kind as to bring it over here."

Firstly, Arthur sent one of the hovering servants to fetch the things Gaius needed and then he went to the indicated piece of furniture. When he picked up that satchel it was relatively heavy and he brought it to where Gaius was waiting. The ties on the bag were waxed and sealed shut and it was clear it was not new wax; whatever was inside had not seen the light of day for years.

"If you would be so kind as to break the seal, Sire," Gaius said, still carefully dealing with Merlin, "and place what is inside on the table; we will need them later."

Without asking stupid questions, even though he had a thousand of them, Arthur did as he was asked and what was inside the bag was not what he expected at all. He pulled out the first of three wrapped packages, all in soft red cloth and he opened it to find an arm brace, only it was like none he had ever seen. Where most were plain or lightly decorated, this one was covered in carvings and edged with gold. It did not appear remotely practical and the designs did not seem to be picturing anything specific. Some of the engraving looked almost like writing, but it was no script he recognised.

Knowing that Gaius was busy, he waited to ask what he was looking at and instead, opened the other two packages as well. There was a second brace and a collar, almost as delicate as jewellery, but not quite. All three had similar designs on them, but even the braces were not quite the same and Arthur had the distinct impression that the items had a purpose that he could not divine. He had no idea why Gaius needed them, but he suspected it had something to do with magic.

Gaius' supplies soon arrived and then Arthur made himself busy helping the physician remove the glass from Merlin's wound and to bind it, as well as cleaning all the small cuts and scrapes that also seemed to be on Merlin's person. Where no injury had come to him or Morgana or his father, it was clear Merlin had not been so careful with himself.

"He is as comfortable as I can make him," Gaius finally announced and looked over to where Arthur had laid out the braces and the collar, "now we must use the bindings."

The expression on Gaius' face and the tone of the old man's voice did not fill Arthur with any liking for the strange ornaments.

"What are they for?" he asked, walking over and picking them up, returning to Gaius' side.

"They are a way to shut a sorcerer off from magic completely," Gaius said, taking the first brace from him. "They were designed to make safe an enemy so they could be brought to trial. No man or woman wearing them can perform magic of any sort."

It sounded like something a kingdom overrun with magic would need, but Arthur had trouble imagining it. He had only ever seen sorcery dealt with one way and most of those wretches would never have needed such binding anyway. Of course it did explain why the bag had been sealed for so long.

"They were created by Nimueh at the behest of your father," Gaius said even though Arthur had not asked; "when sorcery was prevalent. I assisted in their creation and saw them used only once. No sorcerer of power has lived long enough to need them since."

Arthur liked the things even less the more he heard about them, and he could see the reluctance in Gaius as the man lifted one of Merlin's wrists and placed it in the first brace. So far Merlin had made little movement, only reacting slightly to Gaius' ministrations, but Arthur heard Merlin whimper quietly when the brace was snapped closed.

"I am sorry, My Boy," Gaius said gently, smoothing the hair from Merlin's forehead, "but it must be done."

Almost the moment the brace was closed, Arthur saw a change in Merlin. He had seen many men wounded and drifting just under consciousness as Merlin had been, but when the first brace was put in place it was almost as if life flowed out of Merlin completely. Merlin's features relaxed totally and any tension just flowed out of him and Arthur didn't like it at all.

The second brace went on and this time there was no sign Merlin knew anything was being done at all.

"Gaius, what is happening to him?" Arthur asked, afraid that they were doing something terrible.

"Merlin is not just a sorcerer, Sire," Gaius said, picking up the third and final binding; "he is magic. I have met no other man or woman like him. These are the ultimate imprisonment for one such as he; I cannot begin to guess what they are doing to him."

"Then we must take them off," Arthur said, ready to remove them himself.

Gaius looked at him then, full of sorrow and worry.

"And your father will have Merlin executed," Gaius pointed out simply. "We must do as the king wishes for any chance to save him."

It felt so wrong and Arthur couldn't even explain to himself why. He knew so little about magic, other than that he was supposed to wipe it out at every opportunity, but he was beginning to think that was wrong.

"If you would be so good, Sire," Gaius said and Arthur moved, albeit reluctantly, to help the physician place the collar around Merlin's neck.

Merlin had to be bound or he would be killed, it was that simple, but Arthur wished it was not so.

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Arthur walked into his father's presence and knew it was not going to be a pleasant meeting, which was why he stood in front of Gaius.

"Well, is the sorcerer awake yet?" Uther snapped almost immediately. "What does he have to say for himself?"

"Merlin is deeply unconscious, Sire," Gaius said before Arthur could stop the man speaking; "I do not believe he will wake for some time."

That didn't please Uther any more than everything else seemed to have.

"Arthur," his father rounded on him, "did you know about this?"

"Of course not," Arthur replied, affronted by the suggestion; if he had known he was completely sure he would not have let Merlin stay in such danger, but he was not about to tell his father that.

"And you, Gaius?" Uther snapped.

Arthur prayed for the physician to lie, but he should have known that was not what Gaius would do and when Gaius looked at the floor he knew what was coming.

"I did, Sire," was the short reply.

"Treachery," Uther hissed and Arthur knew he had to do something before Gaius ended up in as much trouble as Merlin.

"Father," he said, stepping into Uther's line of sight, "Merlin saved our lives today at almost the cost of his own; that is not treachery. Never once has he failed to come to my aid; that must count for something."

His father's gaze was full of fury and he knew that there was little rationality in the king when it came to magic, but Arthur was not going to let Uther win this one.

"I ask only two things," he said, knowing that he had to head this off before he found himself in the dungeon listening to Gaius and Merlin being executed outside, "that Merlin be given a fair hearing. He revealed himself to save us and he deserves the chance to defend himself. And secondly that you do not condemn Gaius for keeping safe the only family he has here. Think for a moment what you would do for me. There is no one you have trusted more and Gaius has only ever made this one mistake."

He held himself tall and looked his father directly in the eyes as he asked, son to father and prince to king. Given how his father usually reacted to magic he was doubtful he would be successful, but he had to try.

"Merlin is contained, Sire," Gaius said, voice low and eyes still cast to the floor; "he is in the tower room and wears the bindings even now."

Uther looked at them both then and turned away, making a low growling noise.

"Be gone from here," Uther said without looking back at them; "I will discuss it no more."

And that was it; they were dismissed. Arthur was not sure what that meant, but it was better than hearing his father order the execution of two people he now considered friends.

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Arthur wanted to go back to Merlin, but he knew eyes would be watching him to see what was going on, so he let Gaius go back and he walked towards his room. He wasn't overly surprised to find Morgana sitting there waiting for him with Gwen by her side.

"Well?" Morgana asked, standing up as soon as he entered the room.

"He's alive," Arthur said, feeling exhausted by the whole thing and going to sit on the bed.

"And?" Morgana pushed, because that was what Morgana always did and Arthur found the annoyance he felt rather refreshing.

As least he could still manage that.

"And I don't know," Arthur replied and let a bit of his exasperation show; a bit of normality through the strain. "There is a room in the west tower, a room that shuts out magic; that's where Merlin is. He had been bound further with what Gaius called bindings; I have never seen them before, but they shut out magic completely. That is all I know."

"And his wound?" Gwen asked in a hesitant tone.

With everything else going on, Arthur had almost forgotten about that.

"Deep, but not dangerous, I believe," Arthur replied in a much less terse tone; it was impossible to be nasty to Gwen; "Gaius did not seem worried about that."

Gwen at least looked comforted by that.

Morgana walked over to him and sat down.

"What about your father?" she asked, clearly treading very lightly for a change.

"He is allowing Merlin's confinement for now," Arthur said, trying to sound sure of himself, "and I do not see why that should change."

He did not want to upset either of the women, but it was clear Morgana saw straight through him.

"But this is Uther we're talking about," she said blackly, "and Merlin is a sorcerer."

No one said anything for some time.

"I never suspected," Gwen finally broke the silence, "well not really. There was that time in Ealdor. It does rather explain some odd things though."

"Like friendly, hovering balls of light," Arthur commented and then realised both women were looking at him rather oddly.

"Are you going to explain that?" Morgana asked him, crossing her arms and giving him a look.

It would have been fun to refuse and frustrate her, but Arthur didn't really think that any of them were in the mood for childish games.

"When I went for the flower," he said with a shrug; "I didn't find my way out myself, a ball of blue light led the way. It felt familiar at the time and I think it must have been Merlin."

"But he was unconscious the entire time," Gwen pointed out.

"When has something like that ever stopped him getting his own way?" Arthur replied and for the first time since the feast managed to raise a smile.

He shook his head; it was still hard to believe the power he had felt coming from his manservant; his inept and slightly idiotic manservant at that. Of course, given what he knew now he was beginning to think maybe all of Camelot was soft in the head, not Merlin.

"He was magnificent today, wasn't he?" he heard Morgana say and it surprised him; Morgana was not usually taken with such fancy.

"I've never seen anything like it," Gwen admitted with a small nod; "or felt it; all the hairs on my arms stood up."

"I had no idea such things were possible," Morgana added and Arthur suspected she and Gwen gossiped like this quite a lot of the time since it felt like a habit, "I mean I've heard the stories, but to actually see it. There had to have been thousands of glass shards just hanging in the air."

"Pretty if they hadn't been for such a dark purpose," Gwen agreed and Arthur was not sure if they remembered he was there.

"Will we be allowed to visit him?" Morgana asked, suddenly snapping back to him so fast that Arthur had to let his thoughts catch up.

Uther had not forbidden it, but Arthur did not think it was likely to be a wise move.

"Better that you didn't try," he said, thinking it through; "we do not want to anger the king. The less he has to rage about the better."

Morgana looked as if she wanted to argue, but couldn't fault his logic.

"You're not going to let that stop you though, are you?" she pushed just a little.

"Of course not," was his vehement reply.

Until his father stood there and ordered him not to see Merlin nothing was going to prevent him.

"Good," Morgana decided with a firm nod, "then we will just have to give you things for him. We can't have him believing those of us out here have forgotten him."

When Morgana said things in such a tone it was pointless to argue, and in this case Arthur actually agreed.

"If you insist," he replied, since it was also not a good idea to give in too easily.

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Chapter 2 Caged and Bound

Arthur made it his business to visit Merlin every morning and every evening, very careful to make sure that these visits did not interfere with his duties. Gaius was usually there when he arrived, but would leave to allow him to sit with Merlin alone. Not once in the three days since the feast had Merlin so much as twitched while he sat in the chair beside the bed and talked.

"I have resisted my father's attempts to give me a new manservant," Arthur said, staring past Merlin's passive features at the far wall. "I think it would be too much of a shock to my system to have an orderly room again."

Why he was talking to Merlin when it was obvious Merlin was so unconscious that he was barely breathing, let alone able to hear anything, Arthur had no idea, but sitting there in silence seemed so wrong. He really wanted to hear Merlin's inane chatter coming back at him, but so far there were no signs of consciousness at all.

"And my horse doesn't know how to react to being so beautifully brushed every day," he continued to talk. "I am sure he almost died of shock this morning. Of course I know you've been slipping him treats because he refused to let me mount until I produced three carrots today. You really are such a pushover."

It was strange what he was learning about Merlin just because Merlin wasn't there. How much Merlin was a part of his life was becoming more and more obvious; even when Merlin was away from him doing something else there had always been the knowledge that Merlin would be back shortly or in an hour or so. He kept finding himself making mental notes to ask Merlin to do something or to tell Merlin something and then remembering that Merlin was not going to be in his room, tidying it badly, when he finished training with his knights.

"And let me tell you I do not appreciate having to wait for the servants to fill my bath," Arthur prattled on with the first thing that came into his head. "How long have you been keeping the water hot with magic? I have discovered I do not like tepid bath water in the slightest. The sooner we get you out of here and back on the job the better, because I am very displeased."

He knew Merlin would have had a comeback about him being a royal prat or some such thing for that, and his chest tightened when all there was, was silence. It hurt to see Merlin imprisoned and cowed; his heart ached with it, but he could not let himself dwell on it too deeply. That his father had not yet changed his mind and ordered Merlin's death was one thing that made the wait bearable. The longer it went on, the less likely the king was to demand that Merlin pay the price of being a sorcerer the moment he woke up. Arthur still had no idea what he was going to do when Merlin did wake up, but he knew he could not let this end with an execution.

"All this loafing around had better be about getting better," Arthur continued to talk to fill the silence, "because if you're just wallowing I might have to teach you a lesson myself. We can't all lay around forever and a little wound like the one in your shoulder is no excuse for laziness. I was up and around far quicker than you and according to everyone, I was dying."

He felt so empty inside and he didn't like it. Finally he turned and looked at Merlin's relaxed, slightly flushed features and he sat forward in the chair. Gaius would return soon and they would talk and pretend that everything was going better than they expected. It would be as hollow a gesture as he felt in his chest,

but it was all they had. It was like Merlin was shut away from them behind glass and Arthur hated it.

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Arthur looked down as the pale, thin figure in the bed and knew without a doubt that he was losing Merlin. It had been a week and Merlin had not so much as stirred.

"How is he, Gaius?" Arthur asked as the physician tended Merlin.

"Slipping further away from this life with every breath," Gaius replied with a sigh and turned to look at him.

It was not what Arthur wanted to hear, but he nodded, knowing it was the truth. If he had not been looking hard and been able to see the virtually unnoticeable movement of Merlin's chest he would have believed Merlin to already be dead. Ever since the braces had been placed on Merlin's wrists and he had seen Merlin go completely still he had known it could not end well.

"His wounds are barely healed at all," Gaius told him, even though Arthur could see as much, "and they refuse to even seal properly. I believe Merlin requires magic the way we require food and the bindings shut it off from him completely. He exhausted himself utterly in the confrontation and I do not believe that if the bindings remain in place any longer he will live through the night."

Arthur looked at the ornate artefacts around Merlin's arms and neck and it was as if he could almost see them killing his friend, inch by inch. He knew Merlin was unique; had known it from the moment he had laid eyes on the troublesome young man who had become his friend, and he also knew he could not let this end. Merlin had done more than crawl into his heart, Merlin had crawled under his skin like no other person ever had, and no matter what his father tried to tell him, Arthur knew it was nothing to do with magic. Seeing everything that was bright in Merlin fade was unacceptable.

"Take them off," he said, just as Gaius was turning back to Merlin.

Gaius looked shocked.

"But your father..." Gaius began to say.

"My father promised me that Merlin will have a fair hearing," Arthur snapped back, "and Merlin cannot have that if he is dead before it happens. Take them off. The room will still contain him."

Gaius did not move,

"That is an order, Gaius," Arthur added, taking the full responsibility onto his own shoulders.

His father would not like it, in fact his father would rage and shout about sorcerers and their evil ways, but Arthur was not letting Merlin die.

Gaius bowed his head in acknowledgement of the order and as Arthur stood there, reached for the clasp of the first brace. Arthur watched every movement and he fancied he could see a little colour returning to Merlin's cheeks even as the first ornate binding was removed. Once the second was gone he moved forward

to help, pulling Merlin's limp form into a slightly raised position so that Gaius could reach the clasp in the collar.

He felt the change the moment the bindings were removed as something tugged at part of him that he was not usually aware existed. He gave it willingly and just as he had felt that first time he had touched Merlin after the confrontation, it was as if heat seeped out of him and into Merlin. Only, this time, he knew it was not just heat.

Once the collar was removed, he helped Gaius lie Merlin back down on the pillows and then stepped back. The last thing he wanted was to be in the way. His father let him remain at Merlin's side under sufferance and he would not give anyone else a reason not to want him there. As Gaius went to place a compress on Merlin's forehead, Merlin moved and Arthur did not think he had ever been so glad to see something in his entire life. It was only the tiniest movement, little more than a twitch of neck muscles which shifted Merlin's head the smallest amount, but it was voluntary and it was real and for the first time Arthur began to hope.

Letting Gaius get on with his work, he stepped backwards and sat down in the chair by the wall. There would be fallout from this, but he could not regret it as he watched Gaius fuss over Merlin and could feel the life very slowly seeping back into his friend.

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If there was one thing Arthur knew it was that if his father found out about the bindings being removed from someone other than him there would be hell to pay. There would probably be hell to pay anyway, but it would be worse if it did not come from him, which was why he placed the braces and the collar back in the leather bag from which he had first seen them produced and, leaving Gaius with Merlin, walked directly to his father's chambers.

"I had them removed," he said, placing the vile things on the table next to his father's chair and firmly taking responsibility for everything.

They were alone, but he knew that would not temper his father's reaction.

"Are you a complete imbecile?" his father asked, rising to his feet. "Those are the only things that protect us against that boy's power."

Arthur actually laughed at that; not a nice sound even in to his own ears.

"That boy was dying," he said, not willing to back down on this. "He is no more capable of harming anyone than a new born, not that he would even if he could. That room will be more than enough protection, not that I understand how. Ask Gaius if you think me soft in the head; he has whole theories about Merlin and his need for magic."

"Gaius has already proved himself a traitor," Uther started to tell him, but he was not having that.

"Gaius is your most loyal subject," Arthur decided he was not about to mince his words. "That old man would give his life for you in a second and his only fault is that he loves Merlin like the son he never had. If Gaius had ever thought Merlin was a danger to Camelot he would have, at the least, sent him away, and you know that as well as I do."

He was not used to speaking quite so harshly to his father, but he knew that Uther needed to hear it. No one else would dare tell the king what was right and true, which left only him.

"If you order those back on Merlin he will die," he was not going to give his father a chance to start ranting at him. "Go and see for yourself if you must. He was not healing, he was just lying there and that was a death sentence. You gave me your word he would have a fair hearing and that would be impossible if he dies."

Merlin brought out the best and worst in him and he could not let Merlin down.

"Merlin has never done anything except save my life and yours," he said with all the vehemence he was feeling. "The least you can do is know the man you intend to condemn. Take off your blindfold, father, and be the king I know you are."

Then, without giving his father time to reply, he turned and marched out the way he had come. Everyday he had Merlin was precious and he did not know how much longer he would be allowed that, but his father was watching too carefully; there was no way that Merlin could vanish like the druid boy had. He was as stuck as Merlin in that room all that way at the top of the west tower and he felt completely trapped.

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Waking up was more of a gradual thing than what he was used to and Merlin was sure he heard people talking at times, but that had stopped when he finally opened his eyes. He had enough time to think about how lovely and soft wherever he was, was and quite how terrible he felt, before it dawned on him that he was surprised to be alive. That opened the flood gates to his memory and he recalled what had happened, at which point he did his very best to force his eyes to focus and find out what was going on.

Something wasn't right, that much he knew. He might have been lying on a comfortable bed, but the world felt wrong, muted somehow, as if it wasn't quite real. What he really did not expect to see when his eyes finally decided to obey him was the King, standing next to what seemed to be a four poster bed, glaring at him. The King was alive and whole, but there was no sign of Arthur and Merlin felt an edge of panic.

"Arthur?" he asked, needing to know that he had succeeded, that his sacrifice as least had been worth it.

At that moment he didn't care why he was still alive; all that mattered was Arthur. For a moment he saw a softer expression behind the King's eyes, but it lasted for only a tiny fraction of time and was gone, replaced by an even harder glare.

"My son is outside this room," Uther said in a very cold, hard tone and Merlin felt himself relaxing instantly; he had not failed, "and out of your influence."

Merlin didn't really care what Uther was saying after that; there were more words, but he now knew what he needed to know. His mind was free to move again, free to wander in a very dazed fashion and it wasn't interested in Uther's speech.

"Why am I still alive?"

The question popped out before he had any choice in the matter, interrupting whatever the King was saying, and he realised that his mouth was working without the willing cooperation of most of his brain even more so than usual. Uther raised an eyebrow at him, but it wasn't as if he could take the question back, and his throat really hurt after just those five words.

"You at least acknowledge that I should have had you executed," Uther said, still glaring at him.

"That's what I thought would happen," Merlin admitted, trying to bring his mouth a little more under the control of rational thought, "Sire," he added as he remembered whom he was talking to.

He felt like he might actually have died and he was too tired to try and lie or be clever. Given his display in the hall he was surprised he hadn't been executed while he was unconscious and unable to defend himself. Not that he really felt up to doing much more than breathing as it was.

Uther stood there in silence for a little while in a way he assumed was supposed to make him uncomfortable, but he really didn't have the strength to worry too much. Now that he knew Arthur was safe, he was still coming to terms with being alive. It wasn't as if the King could be much more threatening than the death sentence hanging over him anyway.

"Why did you come to Camelot?" was the very direct question Uther chose to ask.

"For help," Merlin admitted, since it was the truth and it popped into his head before he thought about it.

"From whom?" Uther asked and at that Merlin made himself shut his mouth.

They looked at each other for a little while.

"Gaius has already confessed," Uther finally said, "you cannot betray him by speaking."

That made him wonder if Gaius was still alive as well and he glanced at the table beside the bed. It definitely looked like Gaius' handiwork and he had a nagging feeling that Gaius had been close recently.

"I needed help to control what I am," he said after considering his options, "my mother sent me to Gaius because he was the only one who could tell me anything."

That was met with stony silence; if anything he said now caused Gaius to be executed as well he would regret it for eternity.

"He didn't really have much choice," he tried to put Gaius into a better light; "I saved his life the moment I met him and then I played on his sympathies."

Being well known as a kind old man might work in Gaius' favour at least, only Uther did not look impressed. The problem was, Merlin couldn't think of anything else to say and his thoughts were moving too slowly to come up with something remotely believable.

"Why did you become a sorcerer?" Uther broke the silence with another question. "It is against the law of the land."

Merlin found himself laughing at that and he realised he might be a little bit delirious. He was light headed and woozy and he wasn't thinking very clearly. Even talking seemed to be taking a lot out of him and there wasn't a great deal to start with.

"I was born this way," he said, blinking and wondering if the little flashes at the edge of his vision should be worrying him. "I didn't choose anything. My mother once told me I would move things I wanted before I could talk to ask for them. I only learned spells because otherwise things just happen, like I'm a big water skin with a leak. There was this one time when almost everyone in Ealdor found out ..."

He realised he was rambling and shut his mouth so fast his teeth clacked together. The fact that his mouth felt like old parchment and his throat was raw and dry didn't seem to have changed his need to talk. He really needed to control himself better, but, this time at least, when he managed to make his eyes focus on Uther, he thought that the King's glare was slightly less intense. Of course that might just have been his imagination.

The fact that Uther wasn't ranting at him was a good sign, at least he hoped it was.

"Have you ensorcelled my son?" Uther asked and for the first time Merlin remembered that Uther was Arthur's father.

It made his frown because he couldn't imagine ever hurting Arthur like that, but he did understand it.

"No," he said, a little too vehemently as he discovered the need to cough, which really hurt. "I would never do that," he managed to wheeze out as his whole body decided to ache.

He felt like he had been trampled by a horse or something, but he knew that couldn't be right and he wondered if it had anything to do with how dead the world around him felt. It was as if he was a bellows with all the air squeezed out and no way of filling up again and he really didn't understand what was going on. His head was all woozy again and he was finding it hard to concentrate.

"Lots of people keep trying though," he said, as the thought occurred to him, "like that cow Sophia. She tried to drown him to get back to Avalon. The Sidhe should bugger off back to where they belong and not try and steal other people's Princes."

With a supreme effort Merlin shut himself up again and tried to make his thoughts work properly. What his body wanted him to do was close his eyes and go right back to sleep, but the King was standing next to him and he wasn't so sure he'd ever wake up again if he gave in to his instinct.

"Sophia?" Uther's voice was sharp.

He knew it was his own fault and he really didn't want to explain, but he knew that he had no choice. At least if Uther was angry after he'd explained the King would have all the facts to be angry about, so he told Uther all about Sophia and the lake and Arthur nearly drowning. He really wasn't sure how Uther was taking

the news, since the King had stoic and cold completely down as facial expressions went, but he told the man everything anyway. It wasn't as if he could be condemned anymore than he was likely to be already.

"Why did you not alert the guard as soon as you realised what was happening?" Uther all but demanded once he was done.

Merlin found himself laughing again, which was a bad idea because it hurt and it was bound to annoy the King, but he couldn't help it. Far too many things were beginning to appear amusing and he had a feeling that was a bad sign.

"You don't usually believe me," he pointed out when he pulled himself back under control, "and anyone going after them would have just been killed. Sophia and her father were powerful even in human form, otherwise they'd never have been able to enchant Arthur. He has a really strong will, you know, stubborn as a mule most of the time, just like you in that regard."

He'd said too much again, he just knew it, but things just kept slipping out of his mouth. When he forced himself to look at Uther again he found that he was the focus of a very intent stare. He could honestly say he had no idea what was going on behind the King's eyes.

"How many times have you saved Arthur's life?" Uther asked him and it was possible the tone was not quite so cold.

Whether that was from anger or another emotion, Merlin couldn't tell.

"Um," he replied and tried to sort the wool out in his head to answer the question.

He began counting on his fingers, but kept getting confused, especially when he tried to decide what counted and what didn't. It was simply a matter of fact that he was in no shape to think that hard.

"Can't remember," he eventually admitted and then he was sure he saw a momentary glimpse of surprise on Uther's face.

"And yet you do not seem to understand why magic is outlawed," Uther said, back to the cold tone again.

Merlin knew the King had a blind spot about magic, but that irritated him and he wasn't thinking very clearly and even when he was he always said things that got him into trouble anyway.

"Magic is not evil," he said, and regretted instantly how forcefully he said it as his head pounded like Arthur was drilling his knights inside it.

"Magic corrupts," Uther spat back.

"No it doesn't," Merlin replied, even though his better judgement was screaming at him to shut the hell up, because even if he wasn't going to be dead very soon anyway, he sure as hell would be if he kept talking. "The ability to do what you want when you want with no one able to stop you corrupts, but that isn't just magic. Most people couldn't do enough magic for it to corrupt their little finger and most of those who could do enough don't want power anyway. I don't want power, I just have it and mostly I use it to make sure Arthur stays alive long enough to be the great king I know he's going to be. Well except when he's being

a royal prat and I have to use it to clean his armour because he's given me too much to do, but that's not the point."

It was the last bit that finally made him sensor himself. Uther was staring at him again, but did not look as angry as he had expected. Not that that meant that the King didn't look angry, because Uther did, just not as insanely furious as Merlin had expected. Under that glare he had the urge to fidget, unfortunately he wasn't really strong enough to do so and he moved a little in the wrong way and agony ran through his shoulder, even more so than when he had coughed. He couldn't stop the little cry that escaped his lips and he screwed up his eyes in pain.

That was why he only heard the door open rather than saw it, but he definitely felt it as well. It was like being struck by a wall of heat when an oven door was opened and realising you were freezing. He knew what it was the moment it hit him and he gasped, arching off the bed slightly and clutching the bed clothes as magic tried to enter his every pore. It was so sudden and overwhelming that it hurt, but when it was cut off again it was worse and he felt like crying. Now he understood why the world felt almost dead and he would have railed against it if he had been able.

"Arthur," Uther sounded angry, "I told you to stay outside."

"I thought there was something wrong," Arthur said and Merlin wondered what Arthur had been listening for, but he couldn't even open his eyes to see Arthur's face.

"With your leave, Your Majesty," Gaius' voice this time.

There was some sort of reply, but Merlin didn't follow it and he only realised it must have been an affirmative when he felt a cool hand against his forehead. He just about managed to force his eyes open and saw a glimpse of Gaius' tired face, but that was all he could manage. The conversation with Uther and the feeling of magic trying to reach him had taken what little strength he had and he sank back to the dark depths of unconsciousness.

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His father had placed himself between him and the bed and Arthur tried to look round Uther to see where Gaius was tending Merlin.

"I will have the truth, Arthur," his father told him, clearly angry, but somehow, not as angry as Arthur had been expecting when he had opened the door, "and I will not allow you to interfere."

Opening his mouth would only put him in worse trouble, Arthur knew, but he almost did it anyway. That his father had actually listened to him and come to see Merlin was a miracle in itself, but he was not sure how much good it had done.

"You were not alive when this kingdom was overrun by magic," his father continued to talk at him, "you do not know how dangerous sorcerers in our midst can be."

"I have seen enough, Father," Arthur replied, still trying to see Merlin, "and I know the dangers. Merlin is not one of them."

He believed with all his heart that Merlin was his friend and a loyal subject of Camelot and he did not know why his father could not see that. At his centre

Merlin was a gentle soul; Merlin didn't even like hunting for sport for heaven's sake. He knew, from the depths of his being that Merlin was good, but all his father seemed to see was the magic. It was more complicated than that, he recognised the issues, but he would not allow Merlin to be sacrificed to them.

"Merlin is a sorcerer," his father said, not an overly unexpected response.

"And he had been in Camelot for nearly a year," Arthur pointed out, "and done nothing except help."

He saw his mistake as soon as he made it; at the mention of how long Merlin had been with them his father's face hardened.

"Clearly your judgement in this matter cannot be trusted," his father said with a finality that he did not like at all.

"Father, you will not..." he started to say, terrified that as king, his father would decide Merlin had lived long enough.

They both knew what Arthur was worried about.

"I do not renege on my word," his father said coldly and Arthur lowered his eyes, abashed.

That was one thing he did know; his father was swift to anger and often a hard man, but his word was his bond.

"As I was saying, this sorcerer has had his claws into you for far too long for you to be trusted in this," his father told him.

"Merlin has no more influence on me than any other," Arthur tried to protest, but his father silenced him with a look.

"You need distance, Arthur," his father said in a very no nonsense tone; "you are forbidden to enter this room again. Leave now and return to your room. If you enter here again I will have the sorcerer summarily executed; am I understood?"

There were some arguments Arthur knew he had a chance of winning with his father, but it was all too clear this was not one of them. He could see that his father truly believed there was a danger Merlin was influencing him and nothing would change Uther's mind then. His only hope was that his father's attitude might mellow over time and so he bit back what he really wanted to say and bowed his head.

"As you wish, My Lord," he said and gave one last glance to Gaius who was now looking at him.

He could not fight this battle, so he retreated, turning and leaving, so he could fight another day.

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Chapter 3 Absence makes the Heart Grow Fonder

Merlin swam back to consciousness to the feeling of being moved and he felt a pillow being put behind him. He opened his eyes slowly and came face to face with one of the other servants that he didn't really know very well. They had

passed in the corridors often enough, but they weren't on chatting terms. The man took one look at him, realised he was awake and very rapidly moved away, fear in his expression. It cut Merlin right to his heart and he had to look away.

Gaius was on his other side and he looked up at his mentor, unable to hide his grief at the other man's reaction.

"Don't fret," Gaius said, placing a gentle hand on his forehead and giving him a gentle smile. "I have a tonic you need to drink and then there is some food. Thomas was just helping me sit you up. Thank you, Thomas, you may go."

Merlin did his very best to ignore the fact that the man all but fled the room. The hatred and fear of magic was too ingrained in the inhabitants of Camelot and Merlin could almost feel it where he lay. It at least gave him something to think about when he felt the magic outside the room trying to reach him as the door opened and closed. It took more effort than he cared to admit to keep from reaching out, but he knew if he did he would not be able to stop.

"He was terrified of me," he said in little more than a whisper as Gaius picked up the small beaker from the table.

"Thomas is not known around the castle for his brains," Gaius said, as if it was nothing. "I am sure he was specifically chosen for his task to prevent there being any chance of him helping you. Those who know you, Merlin, are not afraid."

Looking into Gaius' eyes, he tried to believe that, but it was very hard. Magic corrupts the soul; that was what Uther taught his subjects and he wondered how many in Camelot believed that he was corrupted.

As Gaius helped him lean up a bit and put the beaker to his mouth he drank down what was inside and it showed how in need he was, since the relief of the liquid made it to his brain before the horrible taste. He felt a little more with it on this awakening, but the way Gaius had to help him lie back again showed him how weak he was.

"Are you in danger because of me?" he asked as he watched Gaius pick up the bowl of broth next.

Gaius gave him a look that told him he should be worrying about himself for that question.

"Uther has not acted against me," Gaius replied gravely, "but I do not know what he is thinking. He allows me to see to my patients and to speak with Arthur about you, so I do not believe he will punish me, at least, not until he has chosen a course of action."

"You should leave while you have the chance," he said, all sorts of horrible ideas running through his head. "Go away from here, Gaius, be safe."

For that suggestion Gaius gave him a very hard stare with a particularly pronounced eyebrow lift.

"Stop talking nonsense, Merlin," was the short response before Gaius picked up another vial of something and offered it to him. "Let us concentrate on making you well and then we will worry about Uther."

Merlin thought it wise not to argue.

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Someone opening the door woke Merlin as his body sang with the momentary flare of magic. It was just the same every time someone went in and out of the room, but he was managing to curb his reactions the more it happened. Even so he almost bit through his lip as his hands clenched in the blankets and he tried to stifle the moan that wanted to leave his throat. He longed to drag the magic to himself to will the door to stay open, but he held himself in check. As the door closed, the sensation was almost completely cut off with only the slightest hint that there was magic at all being left and he had to bring his breathing back under control as his mind screamed how wrong this was.

"You sense magic in Camelot," Uther's voice made him open his eyes and look at the King; "where is it?"

"Everywhere," was all he replied, because it was the truth.

"Magic is banned," Uther said with the usual hostility.

Merlin wanted to laugh, but he did not have the excuse of being as out of it as before, so he did not react as he wanted to. Instead he chose to be completely honest; if he was going to die for what he was then he was going to be true to himself.

"You can ban its use, but you cannot banish magic itself," he said, letting any anger he had for the King's attitude flow away so that his voice was just tired and quiet. "Magic is in everything, even you, Sire. That is what I feel. I never realised it, not until I woke up here."

He looked into Uther's eyes, almost daring the King to deny what he said was true, but all Uther did was sit down in the seat that Gaius had used before him.

"You play the fool," Uther said eventually, watching him closely, "you are not."

Merlin smiled to himself a little; sometimes he wasn't so sure.

"I am me," he replied, "sometimes that is a fool, just like any other man."

There was silence again and Merlin did not even try to figure out what Uther was thinking. He was alive for now and that was as far as his thinking went. Gaius had given him something to ease the pain of his shoulder earlier, which was why he had fallen asleep in the first place, and, even though his head felt a little woolly, the tonic was beginning to wear off and his shoulder was starting to hurt again and it was distracting. He really could have done without another visit from the king.

"You have deceived a great number of people," Uther said and Merlin knew he was being scrutinised, "yet you seem to expect us to believe you now."

Merlin grimaced at that; it did not help that he felt guilty about that.

"I know," he said, trying to divert himself from the dark thoughts that threatened, "but it's not like I had much choice. I didn't come here and plan to be anything but Gaius' assistant, but fate has a funny way of playing with my life. You made me Arthur's manservant and I've never met anyone who can attract trouble in so many diverse forms on a daily basis."

"He's the prince," Uther said tersely.

"He's honey to every wasp lurking in this kingdom," Merlin replied and then suddenly remembered who he was talking to, "Sire."

About all he could do in his current situation was think and it wasn't really helping his peace of mind. He had never been good at lying around to begin with and he was finding that his thoughts could become very dark when he had nothing to be doing.

"Why do you hate magic?" he knew he shouldn't have asked it, after all the king was there to question him, not the other way around, but, as Arthur was very fond of pointing out, he never did have the sense he was born with.

Uther's expression was thundery.

"Impertinent wretch," was the king's response.

"I meant no offense, Sire," Merlin apologised quickly, letting his eyes fall to the floor, "I have nothing to do but think and I cannot help but wish to know why I must die for something that is not my fault."

He knew that Uther hated magic, that the king believed it was evil, but did not know exactly why and that bothered him. The fact that all Uther had to do was say the word and he would be without a head was not settling, but it also made him brave in a reckless way.

"Magic is evil," Uther said, clearly falling back on rhetoric, "I have seen it do terrible things."

"So have I," Merlin put in before the king wound into a great speech, "but I have also seen it do wonderful things."

"You cannot understand the evil that nearly destroyed this kingdom," Uther responded, eyes ablaze with righteousness; "Nimueh and..."

"Oh," Merlin said as one of the pieces he was trying to puzzle together in his head dropped into place.

"You know her," Uther accused and Merlin assumed the king had seen recognition on his face.

Merlin looked up then.

"About her we agree," he said in as flat a tone as he could manage; "she's dead."

Uther appeared honestly shocked by that statement.

"Explain," was the royal demand.

"When Arthur was dying I made a deal with her," he said, his voice clipped as the hatred he had felt tried to rise up again, "my life for his, only she tried to take another instead of me. She paid for her mistake."

The time on the Isle of the Blessed was etched in his memory and it still brought up strong emotions within him. He had never realised what he was capable of

until that day, what his magic could do when he really needed it and he did not let himself forget.

"You killed Nimueh?" Uther looked completely astounded and maybe momentarily sad, but it was wiped away and the coldness was back in only moments.

"Yes," Merlin said flatly and suddenly found the thread he was picking at on the blanket incredibly interesting.

Uther sat forward in the chair and for the first time Merlin saw a flash of the man under the king. There was more history there than Merlin knew about, he was sure, but he knew well enough that he would also probably never know it.

"You admit how dangerous you are and expect me to ignore it?" Uther seemed genuinely confused about that part.

"I don't like lying," he replied, since it was his underlying reasoning, "and you saw what I can do. There is no point in pretending anymore; if I am to die I want to be seen for who and what I really am."

That, at least, Uther seemed to understand.

"I do not understand you," Uther finally said and Merlin thought that, for the first time, they were really talking rather than throwing words at each other.

It was actually an unsettling experience.

"There is not much to understand," he replied, and he didn't think there was; he was not an overly complicated person.

It was funny how magic got in the way of things like that. His life and motivations were really quite straightforward, but no one was going to be willing to believe that anymore.

"Tell me about Nimueh's death," Uther decided as they looked at each other; "tell me everything."

Merlin was not in the least bit tempted to lie or tell half truths and so he gathered his thoughts and began to talk. His greatest secret was already known and everything else seemed small in comparison. It actually made his heart a little lighter to tell someone else the truth.

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It had been days since he had been allowed to see Merlin and Arthur had thrown himself into his duties, but it could not stop the ache in his chest. He checked with Gaius at least three times a day about how Merlin was and he knew that Merlin was slowly becoming stronger. That was not enough, though, he needed to see with his own eyes and he knew there was only one way that was ever going to happen. His father was the only one who could give permission.

"Father," he greeted, walking into his father's private chambers, away from the prying eyes of the court, "may we speak?"

Arthur knew he was proud; it was how he had been brought up, but he was ready to put that pride aside and as his father looked at him he knew Uther saw it as

well. Over the past few days most of their meetings had been cold and formal, but Arthur had decided that he had to put that away now.

"Come and sit down," his father said and the tone was not warm, but neither was it scathing.

It was more than he had been expecting; his father could be more stubborn than himself, and that was saying something.

"What is it you wish to speak to me about?" his father asked, even though Arthur was almost positive they both knew why he had come.

"Merlin," he said simply, since there was no hiding it.

He saw his father's expression close some as he spoke the name. Arthur knew Uther had visited Merlin at least twice, but he had no idea what his father had gained from those meetings.

"You show too much care for a servant," his father said, trying to sound dismissive, but not quite managing it.

"He is now just a servant, Father," Arthur had decided that plain speaking was all he had left; "he is my friend."

That made Uther frown.

"You are the crown prince," his father said firmly, "you cannot be friends with a commoner."

"Father, I have spoken to the older knights, I know that you were friends with a commoner," Arthur played the card he had kept hidden for a long time, one he had found when he had finally realised that Merlin was not really his manservant at all. "I have heard stories of the time before ..." he paused, knowing that he could be stepping over a line, "before the purge, when you were happier. Gaius was your friend then and I am sure he still considers himself your friend now, even though you do not allow it."

Surprisingly his speech did not throw his father into a temper, in fact his father just leant back in his chair and sighed.

"It can bring only pain," Uther said in a tired voice; "they are not the same as we. They live their lives by different rules."

For once he knew he was speaking to his father, not the king and Arthur's began to hope, just a little.

"I do not believe Merlin is like anyone I have ever met," he admitted honestly. "I can only guess, Father, but I believe you may think the same."

Uther gave him a warning look then and he knew he was close to the line.

"He is a sorcerer," Uther said, but there was no fire behind the words.

"I know, Father," Arthur replied with a nod, "I witnessed as well as anyone else, but I have seen sorcery before and I have been afraid, but when I saw this, I was not. I felt power in that room so powerful it should have scared me witless, but it did not, and I do not think it frightened you either, Father, or you would have had

Merlin executed to safeguard Camelot no matter what I had said. I am not under a spell and Merlin could not possibly influence me from within that room and I still know that he is my friend."

Uther just looked at him for a few moments.

"What do you ask of me?" was the eventual question.

There was no condemnation in his father's voice or face, but neither was their acceptance.

"Please allow me to see him, Father," Arthur said, with as much feeling as he knew how to put into words. "Allow me to visit Merlin as you do."

The only sound in the room was the crackling of the fire as he awaited his father's reply, but he was sure his heartbeat had to be audible to Uther as well. Arthur honestly did not know what he would do if his father forbade him to see Merlin again.

"You have duties, Arthur," Uther said eventually.

"And I will not neglect them, Father, I swear," Arthur answered quickly.

More silence.

"Remember that Merlin is still a prisoner, Arthur," Uther finally spoke again. "His life is forfeit under the law."

Arthur held his breath; he knew there was more coming.

"You may see him."

It was close, Arthur almost lost his composure at that, but he held it together, just.

"Thank you, Father," he said, standing up; "you will not regret this decision."

"I had better not," was Uther's reply, but it was nothing Arthur had not been expecting.

It was just after lunch and Arthur had knights to put through their paces and papers to read, but he went to work with a much lighter heart, knowing that he would be able to visit Merlin once he was finished.

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There was just no getting away from it, Merlin was in a peevish mood. He was bored and totally unable to do anything about it; even sleep eluded him. He wasn't allowed anything like books and he didn't have the strength for even gentle exercise; most of the time he could doze when Gaius wasn't there to talk to, but not right then. When the door lock clicked, he was all ready to take his ire out on the poor servant sent to check on him, since he knew it couldn't be Gaius coming back yet. The fact people were afraid of him mostly bothered him, but in his current mood he felt like making them even more nervous. However, it was not a servant who opened the door and Merlin's mouth dropped open in surprise.

"Arthur," he said, both shocked and incredibly happy at the same time.

He knew Arthur had been by his side when he was unconscious, but had been forbidden to see him now he was awake, and just seeing Arthur's face brought him more joy than he had thought possible.

"Well you're looking more alert than when I last saw you," Arthur said, smiling back, "still stating the obvious though."

In his excitement Merlin tried to sit up a bit more, which was an incredibly bad idea as he found out very quickly as just about his whole body rebelled.

"Still an idiot as well," Arthur said and Merlin found his friend helping him to relax back against the pillows. "Is this something you do for everyone that comes in, or am I special?"

"You're special," Merlin managed to gasp out as he did his best to reassert his equilibrium; "it's the only way to get your attention."

He was struggling to ignore the fact that he still felt like he'd been mown down by a whole cavalry unit simply because he was so happy to see Arthur. It was difficult, but seeing Arthur again was something he hadn't even dared to wish for. His talks with Uther had given him a little hope that he wasn't going to be dragged down to the square without any warning to lose his head, but being allowed to see Arthur had been something he had refused to think about.

"Okay, so I may have missed a few things, but so did everyone else," Arthur said, making sure he was comfortable and then sitting down in the chair beside the bed.

It was Arthur's usual sprawl, casual but commanding and Merlin was overcome with the desire to reach out and touch. This time at least he managed to control himself, but it made him realise quite where his thoughts were going and, considering his circumstances, that rather surprised him.

"Yes, but I wasn't living in their pocket," Merlin replied, trying to keep the tone light, but it rather brought home one fact: he hadn't told Arthur the truth. "I wanted to tell you," he said quietly, "so many times, but I never figured out how."

He was surprised when he felt a hand covering his own.

"That's the past, Merlin," Arthur told him when he looked over, "you were going to tell me, just forget about the rest. I've spoken to Gaius at some length and I realise how much you have done for me. All we need to worry about is the future now."

It was a relief for him to hear that, but he couldn't help wondering if Arthur would have reacted quite so well if he had just told him. Arthur was a good man, but he had a hot temper. Even so he wished he had had a chance to tell Arthur before Arthur had found out.

"That might be very short," he said, unable to stop the black thought before it came out of his mouth.

"You're still alive, Merlin," Arthur said, sounding gruff and sure, "that in itself is a miracle, and I know father has been here to talk to you."

Merlin gave a little nod.

"He's a strange man," he said, still unable to decipher Uther like he thought he should be able to; "different to how I expected."

"What most people see is not all there is," Arthur said, sitting back in the chair again, "but enough about my father. How are you feeling? You're looking more alive."

Merlin smiled at that; he really didn't want to look in a mirror at the moment, he suspected it would not be pretty.

"I feel terrible," he admitted, but did turn his head so Arthur could see that he was smiling, "and I hate this room, but Gaius assures me I'm getting better."

"And we all know Gaius is never wrong," Arthur said and they both grinned.

His heart felt lighter just because Arthur was there and Merlin hoped his friend could stay a while. He didn't want to talk about anything important, in fact he just wanted to swap insults and make jokes and be like they normally were. Arthur was probably the only person who could make him forget what was really going on.

"I thought that was just what we all let him believe," he replied, simply because he knew it would make Arthur keep smiling.

It did too, Arthur even laughed. For a moment he couldn't help thinking how different it might have been now if Uther's war on magic had not brought new combatants to the court. Would he and Arthur have ended the night the way they had almost begun it, or would his confession have changed everything? It was irrelevant now, but it still bothered him and he ran the idea over in his mind as he looked at his golden prince. They were so close and yet separated by so much now and Merlin contented himself with just watching as Arthur began to talk to him. He didn't care what Arthur was talking about, just that Arthur's was the voice doing the speaking.

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The shards of glass hung in the air, twisting like tiny knives and glinting in the light and they moved closer and closer to Arthur. Merlin tried to stop them; he threw all his strength at them, but they just kept moving, agonisingly slowly, but moving nonetheless. Arthur seemed to be oblivious to the danger, just standing there smiling benevolently and ignoring all Merlin's shouts about the danger. He had to save Arthur, it was what he was born to do, but he couldn't. It was as if there was something missing, something he didn't have and he wasn't strong enough.

The shards of glass touched Arthur's skin, slowly digging in. Deep red blood began to run down Arthur's perfect skin and it was too much for Merlin.

"Arthur!" he yelled and woke up with a jolt, the name still on his lips.

His shoulder had been giving him some severe pain after a particularly stupid move on his part and Gaius had given him something to make him sleep. It had clearly been a bad idea, because unlike the pain medication that had just made him sleepy, this had put him right out and given him nightmares. He really didn't want to see Arthur being torn apart when he closed his eyes.

What shocked him more, however, as he began to recover was the fact that the person sitting in the chair was not who he thought it should have been. He had to have been well and truly out of it not to notice the door opening and he remembered Gaius being there and now a woman was sitting there just watching him; a woman he had never seen before. She was dressed like a lady and had long golden hair and blue eyes that he was sure he should have recognised.

"Bad dream?" she asked in a quiet, gentle tone.

"Yes, My Lady," he said, knowing that there was something that he should be realising, but unable to track it down in his still sleepy mind. "My apologies, but who are you?"

He could not understand why anyone else would have been allowed into the room, not unless Uther had decided something that he didn't have a hope of understanding. The woman smiled at his question, but it had an air of sadness.

"I am a friend," she said and there was something about her that made Merlin believe that she really was.

She just looked at him for a few moments, her open gaze taking him all in and he did not have the heart to interrupt her.

"You love him a great deal, do you not?" she finally said and for a moment Merlin did not completely understand her.

Then he remembered whose name had been on his lips when he woke.

"If you are speaking of Arthur, My Lady," Merlin replied, feeling awkward, but somehow needing to speak, "then yes, I love him. He is a great man."

When she smiled this time, his visitor's face held no sadness, only amusement.

"You need not try to hide the truth from me, Merlin," she said, eyes glittering with humour in a very familiar way that Merlin still couldn't figure out, "we are not speaking of the love of a man for his prince."

If he'd been a little more awake he might have panicked, as it was he was only rather shocked.

"You are good for him," the woman told him in a very motherly tone; "I approve. I was beginning to despair he would never see what was in front of him; he is very much like his father in that way. It took Uther over a year to propose, a year! Can you imagine?"

Merlin shook his head, trying desperately to figure out who this mysterious woman was. He had never seen her before and yet she spoke as if she knew him and Arthur as well as Uther. She appeared too young to be an Aunt or that generation of Arthur's family and Arthur had never spoken about cousins. It was very confusing.

"I do not believe Arthur is likely to propose to me," he said, unwilling to ask her who she was again when she had declined to tell him the first time.

"No, Dear," she replied, smiling fondly at him, "but then I do not think you would make a good wife."

Merlin actually laughed at that; it was true.

"I would make a terrible wife," he admitted even as he tried to relax again after his shoulder twinged and objected to the laughing.

"But he needs you, Merlin," the strange woman told him, tone very sincere now, "and he always will. Married you may never be, but your connection will run far deeper than that."

The woman was beginning to remind him of the dragon.

"You will have to find him a very understanding woman when the time comes for him to father an heir," the woman was almost talking to herself now and Merlin thought she was getting rather ahead of current events. "Possibly one who's heart belongs to another, just as his does. After all only the first boy child, as heir, has to be truly his, and Pendragons always father boys."

Merlin began to wonder if the woman was a bundle short of a haystack.

"But that is the future," she suddenly decided and looked back at him, smiling again, "and there is plenty of time for such things. I should not disturb you any longer; you need to sleep to regain your strength."

Standing up, she stepped towards the bed and Merlin felt the most delightful cool breeze as she did so. For some reason, looking at her he felt peaceful and he didn't understand why.

"Sleep now, Merlin," she said, leaning over him and gently brushing the hair off his forehead as his mother had often done when he was a child; "I will guard your dreams for you."

It was as if her words and her eyes were hypnotic and he found his eyelids so heavy he could not keep them open and he blinked once, then twice, trying to stay awake, but it was no use.

"Who are you?" he whispered as he slipped into dreamland once again.

As she had promised, this time his dreams were not bad, in fact they were bright and sunny and the woman was in them. He walked with her in summer woods and through summer fields and they talked and talked. She told him who she was and all about herself and he realised he should have known all the time, but when he woke the memories faded and he could not recall what she had told him.

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"Gaius," Merlin said as his friend and mentor mixed something in a beaker beside his bed, "who was the woman sitting with me yesterday?"

Since then Uther and Arthur had visited and Merlin had been so tired that he hadn't had a chance to speak to Gaius. Her memory seemed to be lurking at the back of his mind, but it was very elusive and it took quite a lot of effort to make the mental image stay clear to talk about her.

"Woman?" Gaius asked, looking at him in a confused manner.

"After you gave me the sleeping draught," he explained, since he was well used to Gaius' occasional, confused old man act. "I woke up because I had a nightmare and she was sitting where you are now."

What he hadn't really expected was Gaius to look so dubious.

"There was no woman, Merlin," Gaius said in a gentle, almost patronising tone and Merlin had the distinct impression his friend thought he had been hallucinating. "While you were asleep I took the opportunity to visit some of my other patients and you were left completely alone."

"She wasn't a dream, Gaius," he replied, very sure of himself; "I spoke to her before I fell asleep again. She was tall and beautiful with long blonde hair and blue eyes. She reminded me of someone, but I couldn't figure out who, and she spoke about Arthur and Uther like she knew them very well. I'd never seen her before, but she seemed to know me."

Gaius was giving him one of those very hard, penetrating stares.

"I do not recall anyone of that description being in court at the moment," Gaius told him after a moment. "Think hard, Merlin, who did this lady remind you of?"

It was clear that something about the situation did not sit well with Gaius, so Merlin did his best to do as he was told. He tried to picture her clearly in his mind and then put the scattered hints together.

"I'm not sure," he said, frowning as he thought; "she seemed to find many things amusing, but at first she had such a hint of sadness about her. Her eyes said so much more than her face just like ..."

He trailed off as he realised he had just tracked down the elusive connection his thoughts had refused to give him.

"Arthur," he said, feeling a little sheepish, but realising why he had assumed the mysterious lady was a relative of the royal family.

"All of Uther's family are dark haired," Gaius said and slowly stood up, "and I know of only one person who matches your description."

Merlin was a little confused when Gaius walked over to a small cupboard, opened a small drawer and pulled something out. Only when Gaius returned to his side and handed him a hand sized portrait did he understand.

"Is this her?" Gaius asked and Merlin could tell that something was going on behind his mentor's eyes, but not what exactly it was.

The portrait was quite a good likeness and Merlin nodded.

"Yes," he said, smiling at the memory; "who is she?"

Gaius sat down, rather pale and for a moment Merlin was worried.

"That, Merlin," Gaius told him, "is Arthur's mother, Igraine."

For a moment Merlin decided he had heard wrong.

"But she's dead," he said when he realised he hadn't.

"Yes," Gaius replied as if that much was obvious, "that is apparent."

"Gaius," Merlin said, not really believing what he was hearing, "I'm a sorcerer, but I don't usually go around talking to dead people. I felt her touch me, she was as real as you or I."

When Gaius did not immediately agree with him he began to worry. Looking at the portrait again he tried to think of a rational explanation.

"I have sometimes felt her presence," Gaius finally said after a long few moments of silence, "but I thought it my own fancy. Now I believe it may not have been."

Merlin had seen shades before; echoes of what had been, but the woman he had spoken to had been real and vital and seemingly alive. It seemed impossible it really had been Igraine.

"How could that be?" he asked, not understanding at all.

"Igraine's death was not a natural one," Gaius said and Merlin did not think his mentor really understood either, "and it would not surprise me if she remained to watch over Arthur. That she appeared to you and in here as well must mean something important. What did she say to you?"

That caused Merlin to look at his hands for a while; he was not ready to share the depth of his feelings for Arthur, not yet and not when he did not know if Arthur still felt the same way.

"She told me I was good for Arthur," he said, editing himself as he spoke, "and that she approved. That was all. Aren't the spirits of the dead supposed to bring deep and important messages to the living?"

Gaius smiled at that, strange given what they were talking about.

"To a mother such things are very important," Gaius told him and placed a gentle hand on his arm. "Igraine was never a woman to mince her words, Merlin, I believe you should be pleased by her visit. All I beg of you is that you do not mention her to Uther or Arthur; there is too much pain there for both of them."

Merlin nodded and tried to remember Igraine more clearly. He had so much to think about, as if he needed anymore.

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Chapter 4 Bonds and Trials

Lying in a bed waiting to get better when it seemed to be taking so long was very frustrating, but Merlin could at least sit up on his own now, just. He still had little strength, but enough magic did get into the room to keep him going and help him heal, so he wasn't about to complain too loudly. The fact he wasn't dead yet was more than enough of a miracle for him not to push it and he did have Arthur to talk to when Arthur could be spared from his duties.

"I brought you some food," Arthur said, kicking the door shut behind him as he walked in with a tray.

The servants that were allowed anywhere near him were very nervous and so Merlin really appreciated the fact that Arthur seemed to have interceded on his behalf. Dealing with one more serving maid who almost dropped things because she was scared he was going to curse her, might have driven him mad.

"Thank you," he said and gave Arthur his best smile.

The stronger he became the less the door opening overwhelmed him, so he pushed his reactions aside easily.

"And Morgana asked me to give you this," Arthur balanced the tray on one hand and produced a small, embroidered handkerchief, "and Gwen gave me these for you," Arthur finished and pointed to the flowers on the tray.

That brightened Merlin's mood almost as much as seeing Arthur had. The handkerchief had a Merlin on it in Morgana's skilful handiwork.

"Will you tell them thank you from me please?" he said, feeling quite choked up at the little gifts.

That people cared about him kept him going more than anything else. What would happen the next day or the next hour even, was so unsure that he could not let himself dwell on it. To know that he had friends waiting for him gave him something to hope for.

"You're not going to cry are you?" Arthur said in such a normal manner that it made Merlin laugh.

"I'm not you," he replied, swallowing any reaction he might have been having to the gifts and entering into the spirit of the jibe.

"For that," Arthur said, "I'm stealing some of your dinner."

Even as he said it, though, Arthur was putting the tray down for him over his knees. It had little legs that sat on the mattress and made sure he didn't throw the contents across the room when moving, for which he was very glad. He could be clumsy at the best of times since he always seemed to be thinking about more than one thing, and being so weak he had even less control of his limbs. The fact that he only had one working arm unless he wanted to be in pain didn't help either.

"Well if you think I can eat all of this on my own you're dreaming," he said, looking at the overflowing plates of food.

It had become clear very quickly that someone in the kitchen still liked him, because the food that showed up was always very good and in ample portion. Since Arthur swore he had had nothing to do with it and neither had Gaius or Morgana or Gwen for that matter, that led him to believe at least one other person didn't think he was an evil sorcerer.

"I think," Arthur said, stealing a piece of fruit off the tray, "you may be eating better than me at the moment. I may have to have the cook put in the stocks."

"Makes a change from me," Merlin replied and reached for the mug of ale on the tray.

Given the concoctions Gaius kept forcing down his throat along with funny tasting boiled water, he was glad of something normal to drink. It wasn't strong, but in his current condition it also made him feel warm and fuzzy, which was a bit of a blessing.

As he ate, making appropriate noises of agreement or derision, Arthur chatted away about what was going on outside the room. Merlin enjoyed hearing Arthur grouching about the hopelessness of his knights or the idiocy of some of Uther's councillors. He did not know how Arthur had persuaded Uther to let him start coming to see Merlin again, but he relished every moment they spent together. No doubt Uther would be back for one of their evening chats, which still bemused Merlin since they seemed to debate the same things over and over again and never see it the same way, but it was Arthur he could really talk to.

He was beginning to feel sleepy with his belly full and the deep tones of Arthur's voice were very soothing.

"Oh no you don't," Arthur said and woke him up by taking the tray away, "I have strict instructions. Gaius wants to see if we can get you out of bed this evening."

That rather shocked Merlin, since he could barely sit up, let alone stand.

"Don't look so afraid," Arthur reassured him with a smile, "I'm not going to leave you to fall on your face. Gaius might poison me or something."

Merlin would have joked back, but the idea of getting out of bed had him quite spooked. He'd tried once before, when he was being pig headed, and it had taken so much effort just to get his legs off the bed that Gaius had had to help him back in when he'd found him an hour later, cold and shivering and totally unable to help himself.

Without asking him if he was ready or anything, Arthur swept back the covers and began helping him to turn to the side. It was ridiculously hard and Merlin knew it was because he didn't have enough magic at the moment, but it still frightened him. He really was little more than helpless and he hated it.

"Just lean on me," Arthur said, seeming to sense his nervousness and leaning in close.

Merlin let his good arm be pulled around Arthur's neck, where he just about managed to grip onto Arthur's far shoulder and then Arthur's arm went round his waist and they were set.

"Ready?" Arthur asked, at least giving him time to prepare for the big move.

"As I'll ever be," Merlin said, trying to sound nonchalant and not managing it.

He then found himself hauled to his feet, which was a lot easier than expected because Arthur did most of the work. Merlin felt his shoulder twinge at the movement, but it was as if his feet were barely on the ground, which was a good thing, because his legs were shaking even with the effort of just standing. Beside him, Arthur was all strength and muscle, virtually holding him up and he felt suddenly very small and protected.

"Gaius said just a few steps, to start to get you moving again," Arthur said, holding him tightly.

Merlin made a sound of acknowledgement, but his mind was spiralling away as he looked at Arthur's chiselled profile. He could feel the physical power in Arthur so clearly and he could see the king that would be. For a moment he thought he saw an older face overlaid on Arthur's, a face full of wisdom and kindness, tempered with the same mischievous wit he saw in Arthur now, and then his knees buckled.

"Oops," Arthur said, catching him before he even began to fall, "maybe too soon."

He blinked as Arthur helped him to sit down again on the bed and the vision was gone, but it left a feeling in his heart of something he couldn't quite grasp. It had been a glimpse of what should be and it was fleeting, but he knew that he had to make sure it came to pass. This was important, more important than anything else he had ever known and for the first time he knew that the Dragon, amongst its self interest, had spoken the truth. Suddenly he knew that there was something he had to do, something the universe needed of him.

"Arthur," he said, looking deep into Arthur's eyes, "you will be a great king."

Arthur just grinned at him as if he was a bit soft in the head.

"Of course I will," Arthur replied; "I'm bred to it."

"No, Arthur," he said, needing his friend, his Prince, his future King to understand he was serious, "I have seen it. You will be the greatest king this land has ever seen and you will be remembered forever."

He could feel what little magic he had at the moment moving inside of him. The core that sustained him with the trickle of power that came from Arthur, from any who visited him even though they didn't know they had it, shifted within him as he finally, truly recognised his destiny. Whatever force chose to interfere in his life; he could feel it then, feel it pushing him onward.

"I pledge myself to you, Arthur Pendragon," he said formally and it was almost as if someone else was saying the words as they came from deep inside of him.

He placed his hand on Arthur's chest, feeling the life there under his palm.

"My magic and my life are for you and your kingdom that will be," the words just flowed out of him; "this I swear, so shall it be."

His magic flared, causing pain in his chest and he stiffened, feeling weakness wash through him as an ache settled over his heart. The world seemed to become remote in his consciousness as his magic moved through him and he knew he had just done something that bound him. There was no going back, for better or worse his course in life was now set. Wondering how long he would have on this path, he slumped against Arthur and let the world float away.

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"Merlin," Arthur said, shaking the motionless man in his arms.

When Merlin had spoken those words, Arthur had felt it in his soul; he knew Merlin had just done something with magic, but he was more worried that Merlin wasn't moving.

"You idiot," he said even though he was pretty sure Merlin couldn't hear him.

He hurriedly stood up, lying Merlin back onto the bed. Merlin was barely breathing, sounding as if he was almost struggling to do that and Arthur knew he had to act fast. Not caring what the guards outside might see he ran to the door and wrenched it open.

"Fetch Gaius," he all but roared at one of the two men on duty.

The two guards looked at each other as if unsure.

"Fetch Gaius now," this time he did roar with the full fury of which a Pendragon was capable, "unless you want to be flogged within an inch of your life and put in the stocks from here to eternity."

That got the man moving.

He went back to Merlin, leaving the door open and it seemed as if Merlin was breathing a little easier just from that. Yet Merlin was still so still, not moving in any way to give signs of life and it reminded Arthur too much of when they had first brought Merlin to the west tower.

"Merlin," he said, hoping for some reaction, smoothing the hair off Merlin's face and praying for any sign that Merlin was still with him.

He was so busy trying to get a reaction out of his manservant that at first he did not notice the gold glow, but then his eyes travelled down Merlin's chest. Under the thin nightshirt he could see something and it made him stop. He knew well enough that the light was coming from just over Merlin's heart and he dreaded what he might see. It occurred to him that this might be the end of his sorcerer, that, that glow might be the last magical moment of Merlin and the idea froze him. However, he was not a prince for nothing and if there was anything he lacked least it was courage, so he shook himself and carefully moved the material away from Merlin's skin. What he found made him pause even more.

There, over Merlin's heart, about the size of a man's palm was a dragon, the Pendragon dragon in an outline of gold and even as he watched it was changing. Under his gaze it slowly filled in, forming the full crest, only overlaid on it was a red and gold A. It was the Pendragon mark, the mark of kings, but it was his alone as well and looking at it, he knew that Merlin's oath was sacred. Merlin had meant every word of his strange little speech and Arthur could feel the tie that bound them together. Without a doubt he knew that Merlin was his and the protective feeling he had been nurturing for some time grew even more.

"Sire, what happened?" Gaius' voice brought him out of the daze he seemed to have fallen into.

"I had him out of bed like you asked," Arthur said, stepping away so Gaius could move in, "and I think he saw something. He swore an oath and then he collapsed."

He indicated the sign on Merlin's chest.

"It was magic," he said, and then wished he hadn't as he saw his father appear in the doorway.

It appeared Gaius had been with his father when he was summoned. Not that that was surprising, since Uther had taken to talking to Gaius about Merlin quite a lot.

"Magic?" his father jumped on the word.

Uther stepped into the room and slammed the door, making a dramatic entrance, but Arthur's eyes went straight to Merlin. As soon as the door closed Merlin's breathing became laboured again.

"I believe he has over taxed himself severely," Gaius said almost immediately.

"Father please, open the door," Arthur all but begged; he could see Merlin slipping away before his eyes.

"He dared do magic," Uther said in a completely cold tone; "he brought this on himself."

All the times his father had spoken to Merlin, everything people said about Merlin, Arthur had hoped it had begun to sway his father's opinion, but it sounded like they were back to square one.

"He bound himself to me," Arthur threw the truth at his father in a desperate attempt to make his parent see reason. "He pledged his magic and his life to me; that is the magic he did. See for yourself. He is not our enemy."

The crest was more than obvious on Merlin's chest now, swirling with what little magic Merlin had left.

"Gaius?" Uther asked and Arthur prayed his father would relent.

"It is something Merlin would do, Sire," Gaius said in his usual calm tones. "If he felt that proof was needed of him, he would not hesitate to give it. I doubt he thought of the consequences."

That was Merlin through and through; jump first, ask questions later.

"Father, please, the door; he is slipping away," he did not bother to hide how much he cared. "There is not enough magic in here to sustain him."

There was a moment when he thought his father would refuse, but to his shock, after a few moments his father turned and opened the door. Immediately Merlin's breathing eased, but it was still weaker than before and Arthur did not know what he could do. He waited, hoping that Gaius could tell them what was happening. It seemed like an age as the old physician went about his task.

"I believe, Your majesties," Gaius said, eventually standing back and turning to look at them, "he may be unconscious some time. I think the oath has drained what little reserves he had managed to recoup and we are back where we were when we first removed the bindings."

Arthur looked at his father and the king did not look happy about that. There was only so long this could go on and he knew, the longer it took the more face saving his father would have to do. He knew this was a political mine field that he was helping cause, but he could not regret it.

"Let me take him out of here, Father," he said, pulling the mantel of Prince around him, as well as appealing as a child to his parent; "Merlin will heal far faster without these enchanted walls."

He looked to Gaius.

"I have seen Merlin recover from illness and injury far faster than a normal person," Gaius back him up. "I believe his magic helps him."

"He is a prisoner," Uther pointed out, but to Arthur's surprise his father did not sound angry, more resigned than anything else.

"And I give you my word he will remain under my watch at all times," Arthur replied, looking his father full in the face. "I will keep him at close quarters at all times as if he were a hostage."

It pained Arthur to see Merlin so weak and helpless. He knew that for Merlin to regain strength he had to be outside the warded room and he prayed his father would see reason. He was almost holding his breath.

"On your head be it, Arthur," Uther finally said and he could barely believe his father was relenting. "If he escapes you will be punished and you will hunt him down."

"Of course, Father," he said, princely mantel fully in place.

He knew what was at stake, but all he could think about was Merlin. Before his father could change his mind he turned and picked up Merlin, his manservant's frame feeling like almost nothing in his arms and then he walked out. Merlin was his now, his beyond a shadow of a doubt and he walked straight to his rooms, ignoring every one along the way. Only when he placed Merlin on one side of his bed did he even realise that Gaius had followed him. His father, however, was conspicuously absent.

"Make him comfortable, Gaius," he said and let the man do his work.

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Something was different; that was the first thing that went through Merlin's head and the second was that someone was humming to themselves, a female someone. Opening his eyes he tried to puzzle out what was going on. The first thing he realised was that he was no longer in the west tower and it didn't take him very long to recognise Arthur's room. That was one thing that was different and as his eyes sought out the source of the humming he saw Gwen tidying up.

"Gwen?" he said, a little confused.

"Merlin," she said, turning to him and giving him the biggest smile, "you're awake ... but of course you knew that since you're talking to me and ..."

"I'm awake," he agreed, smiling back even in his confusion since he was so happy to see her. "What am I doing here? What's going on?"

Gwen immediately put down what she was doing and walked over. Looking at the light from the windows it appeared to be mid morning and he realised he had to have been sleeping for quite a while again.

"Arthur brought you here," she told him, patting his hand kindly. "After you swore your oath to him you were so weak you would not wake up and Arthur persuaded his father to allow him to bring you here to recover. He took responsibility for you like he would do a royal hostage. He's been so worried about you."

With the word 'oath' Merlin remembered what had happened before he passed out, and not sure why he was doing it, but knowing he needed to he looked down at himself. Barely hearing the rest of what Gwen was saying he pulled down his night shirt and saw the shimmering mark. It was Gwen's little gasp that made him look up again and he could see her eyes were fixed on his chest.

"I heard Arthur tell Morgana about it," Gwen said in little more than a hushed whisper, "but I never imagined."

Neither had Merlin as he looked back down at it; that, at least, explained the ache he remembered before passing out. Feeling more than a little self-conscious he covered it up again and tried to work out what he had been thinking.

"I don't think I did either," he admitted, turning the whole idea around in his mind.

He had effectively branded himself without even knowing what he was doing and at a logical level he thought he should resent that, but he simply didn't. He had meant every word when he pledged himself to Arthur and the mark was simply a visible representation of that. For now until he died he was tied to Arthur, that much he knew, and he realised that was what else was different. He could feel the change and it felt right.

"And why are you here?" he decided to change the subject since he didn't want to think that deeply just at that moment. "Not that it isn't a pleasure to see you, but I thought anyone who knew me except Gaius and Arthur were being kept away."

Gwen smiled again at that and began to fluff his pillow beside his head, as if she felt it needed it.

"Well with you being laid up, someone has to clean," Gwen said, fussing over him like a mother hen, "and my lady was perfectly willing to lend me to Arthur for a little while, so here I am. Arthur was called away to his duties, but one of his knights is on guard outside and Arthur wanted you to wake up to a friendly face."

Merlin smiled again at that, feeling more settled than he had since his status had been revealed. It was clear his fate was still up in the air, but he refused to dwell on that. What would come would come; he had chosen his path now and he could not change it.

"Do I smell food?" he asked as his nose informed his stomach that it was time to be hungry.

That earned him a knowing smile from Gwen.

"Yes you do," Gwen replied and began to start to help him to sit up; "Arthur left strict instructions for there to be something for you to eat as soon as you decided to wake up."

To his pleasure, Merlin found that he felt so much stronger that Gwen barely had to help him into a sitting position at all. He was off balance thanks to his shoulder, but he felt fifty times stronger than he had before. The magic flowing freely through his body was something he would never take for granted again and it felt wonderful.

When Gwen presented him with a large platter of bread and cheese and soft fruit he dived in like a starving man. It seemed that with his magic his appetite had also returned with a vengeance.

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"As I thought," Arthur said as he closed the door behind him; "Guinevere has been spoiling you."

Gwen had jumped to her feet the moment Arthur had entered and now appeared adorably embarrassed.

"I'm injured," Merlin replied in kind hamming it up and sinking back into the pillows with a dramatic sigh, "someone had to look after me."

The way Arthur's eyes lit up at the way he spoke said everything Merlin needed to know. Gwen had been splitting her time between tidying the already tidy room and sitting and talking to him and he had been able to feel himself becoming stronger with every minute. He could actually sense the magic around him and he knew Arthur could see the change in him.

"You always need looking after, Merlin," Arthur said and walked further into the room, throwing himself into the chair next to the table and picking up an apple, "that's why the rest of us are always so busy."

"Yes, because you look so busy at the moment, Sire," he replied and pushed himself into a better sitting position.

He wasn't about to try and get up by himself just yet, but he was definitely enjoying the fact he wasn't dependent on everyone else to make sure he wasn't flat on his back. His shoulder made itself known as he moved, but it felt so much better than it had done.

"Well," Gwen interrupted carefully, clearly still embarrassed, "if you do not need me any more, Sire, I should return to my lady."

"Please don't feel that I'm chasing you out, Guinevere," Arthur said, becoming polite and princely again when speaking to Gwen.

"Thank you, Sire," Gwen said, falling back on formality, which Merlin always found endearing, "but I really should be getting back."

Arthur stood up again.

"Then thank you, Guinevere," Arthur said, taking her hand and kissing it, "you have done a superb job with my wayward manservant. Please pass my thanks to Morgana for allowing me to borrow your services."

Gwen clearly didn't know where to put herself and Merlin grinned at Arthur's antics until she turned back to him, where he tried to make the grin into a smile.

"Thanks, Gwen," he said and meant it completely, "you've kept me sane."

"I will see you again soon," she told him and then bent down and gave him a quick peck on the forehead.

Then Gwen scurried to leave the room.

"No kiss for me?" Arthur said just as Gwen was about to escape and the poor girl all but fled.

"That was mean," Merlin said, but couldn't help laughing, just a little.

"Gwen knows I don't mean it," Arthur replied and returned to his chair; "very sensible girl is Gwen."

That much was true; Gwen was the sweetest, most sensible woman Merlin knew and since living in Camelot he knew quite a few.

"Thank you for arranging for her to be here," he said, letting the amusement fade; "it was good to talk to someone else again."

"So I'm not good enough anymore?" Arthur said in a very superior tone.

"There's only so much anyone can talk about swords and fighting, sorry, Arthur," he responded and Arthur threw a grape at him from the fruit bowl, which he caught and popped into his mouth.

"I think maybe I should have left you where you were," was Arthur's off hand comeback.

That made Merlin's mind focus back on what was really going on and the last trace of humour trickled away.

"I didn't exactly expect to end up here," he said honestly; "actually I didn't expect anything."

"Leaping without looking can get a man killed, Merlin," Arthur said, but it was only half a rebuke. "Why did you do it?"

It was only fair that he think about the answer to that question, because, when it came down to it, it was rather important.

"Because it needed to be done," he replied eventually, after realising he didn't have a rational explanation. "I've been having bad dreams," he admitted as the pattern fell into place in his head, "mostly not too bad, more unsettled and I knew something was missing. This is what was missing."

He looked down at his chest, even though the mark was covered. Igraine's words came back to him and he knew this is what she had meant, but he also remembered Gaius' request not to mention her to Arthur, so he put her to the back of his mind for a conversation at a later date.

"I was told my destiny by one who knows such things," he said, thinking about it some more, "but yesterday I felt it like I have never felt it before. That's why I did it."

Arthur was looking at him almost as if he did not believe what he was saying, but slowly Arthur's expression softened and Arthur nodded.

"You really believe I will be a great king one day, don't you?" Arthur said, looking at the apple in his hands as if it was incredibly interesting.

"Yes," Merlin replied simply.

They fell into silence and Merlin found himself staring at his hands and just waiting; it was not the most comfortable of moments.

"Then I suppose I must do my very best to live up to your expectations," Arthur finally said and when Merlin looked up he could tell Arthur was trying to lighten the mood again.

"I can help you work on that," he replied, going along with the attempt.

"Yes, Merlin," Arthur said, standing and walking to the other side of the bed, "because you are the epitome of all that is good and right."

Merlin laughed as Arthur threw himself onto the other half of the bed and then bit into the apple.

"Glad you noticed," he said and began to relax again.

That gained him a noise of derision from Arthur as his prince chewed on his apple.

"I thought about having a cot brought up here for you to sleep on," Arthur said after they lay side by side for a while in companionable silence, "but I didn't want to clutter the room, but just so you know, if you steal the covers you're sleeping on the floor."

Merlin just smiled to himself at that; Arthur really was a terrible liar and it made him feel warm inside that Arthur was willing to share his bed. It wasn't as if they hadn't shared sleeping space before, but this was different; this was in Arthur's room in the castle and it made Merlin very happy.

"I could just float if it's easier," he said in a mischievous mood.

Arthur actually looked startled for a second, but soon realised he was joking.

"Yes, Merlin," Arthur said in a very derogatory tone, "because you're clearly suicidal now."

Merlin just laughed; he'd have Arthur acclimatised to the whole magic thing in no time.

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"There is still time to leave," Arthur said, looking at the braces and collar on the table.

"I can't," Merlin replied, eyeing the objects with just as much trepidation, "and even if I could I wouldn't. I could never dishonour you like that."

The time had come; his fate could no longer be put off and he didn't know what was going to happen. Uther had not visited him since he had been moved to Arthur's rooms and he could not guess what the king was planning. At times when they had spoken he had thought maybe he had seen reason in Uther, but when it came to magic, Uther was not known as a reasonable man. There was too much history, too much pain there and Merlin did not know if he would survive the day.

"Your father has gone to great lengths if he is just going to chop off my head anyway," he pointed out, trying to look on the bright side.

Arthur's eyes did not waver from where they were staring at the bindings. Arthur had fetched them himself only a little while before and they had been sitting on Arthur's table every since.

"He promised me you would have a fair hearing," Arthur replied, not sounding all that hopeful; "he would not go back on that, but I would rather you were away from here, safe. My father has funny ideas of what is fair when it comes to sorcery."

That much was true; Merlin had seen the results, but he could not run. They had avoided the subject of Uther and what Uther intended for Merlin while Merlin recovered, all but pretending they were just friends, but now Merlin had his strength back and the reprieve was over.

"Let's get on with it," he decided, since the conversation was getting them nowhere, "it would not do to be late today."

Arthur looked at him then, clearly not wanting this to go on, but they both knew there was no other way.

When it came down to it there were very few things Merlin feared. His magic had always protected him and it had never let him down, but the bindings were something that took that away. They left him defenceless and virtually helpless and even though he had been unconscious when they were last used, his body remembered them and his magic remembered them. He could not help the tremble that ran through him as Arthur picked up the collar.

Merlin had shown himself to be such a powerful sorcerer that there could be no hearing with him unfettered. The court would not believe it any other way and so the bindings were necessary. Gaius had offered to help him with this, but he had known that there was only one person he could bear to allow to bind him in such a way and that was Arthur.

The bindings were so beautifully made; they looked like fine jewellery rather than the bonds they were and Merlin tried to focus on that as Arthur brought the collar towards him. Every instinct in his body bade him to shy away, to run, but he did not.

As Arthur fastened the collar around his neck he couldn't help the small groan that escaped his mouth as he felt himself cut off from, what was to him, life. He tried to stand tall, but his body felt suddenly heavy and his shoulder, that Gaius had told him was healing remarkably quickly, stabbed with pain, and he grabbed at it instinctively.

"I can't do this," Arthur said, reaching out to steady him.

"You must," he replied, looking into his friend's eyes and not trying to hide his fear, but showing his resolution as well; "you are the only one who can."

It was awful, the worst moment of his life that he could remember as first one brace and then the second was slipped into place. It was like the world around him died in his senses and it was the most terrible thing. Nothing could have prepared him for it and the wave of weakness that ran through him caused him to

sway in place. Only Arthur held him and stopped him falling as he tried to adjust to the worst feeling he had ever known.

"Sling," he said as his shoulder screamed in pain, but it was nothing compared to how his instincts were screaming.

He felt so completely wrong and only Arthur being there stopped him panicking. For Arthur he could bear this, but only for Arthur.

There was a knocking on the door and Merlin knew it was time. In minutes his life could be forfeit or he could be free, but all he could bring himself to wish for was the bindings to be gone.

"I will not let him hurt you," Arthur whispered in his ear and then Arthur was gone from his side to open the door.

He did not want Arthur to endanger his own life or to do anything ridiculously heroic to save him, but he could not deny that those words gave him strength.

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It felt like the life was being dragged out of Merlin with every step and given Gaius' theories about him and magic and the fact that he was currently cut off from it completely, he supposed it was. His shoulder ached and he wasn't sure he would have been able to lift the arm without the sling looped around his neck anymore. He felt about ninety.

Putting one foot in front of the other was so hard that he didn't even notice how many people were in the room until he came to a halt in the centre and looked up. Uther was sat on his throne directly in front of him with Arthur stood by his side, but there was barely any space around the rest of the room. It seemed every noble in Camelot wanted to see the sorcerer for whom the crown prince would challenge his father. Merlin had to fight the urge to laugh like a mad thing and he wondered if his execution would gain an even bigger crowd as his thoughts turned maudlin.

"Merlin Emrys," Uther said almost as soon as he lifted his head, "you stand accused of being a sorcerer, what say you?"

For a moment he stood there and then he dragged in a breath.

"It's true," he said and a murmur went round the whole room.

It seemed that even though half the people there had seen the truth at the feast, they hadn't expected him to just come out and admit it.

"When did you first perform magic?" was Uther's next question; quite an odd one as far as Merlin was concerned, since he knew that Uther already knew the answer.

He wasn't quite sure where this was going, but that wasn't exactly a new feeling these days.

"I don't remember," he said honestly and another murmur followed his answer.

"Have you broken the law of the land so many times that you cannot remember when you first did it?" Uther asked, almost sounding angry, but not quite to Merlin, since he was very well versed with seeing the king angry.

Merlin frowned; he was confused. Clearly Uther was up to something, but Merlin wasn't sure what.

"No, Sire," he said, playing along for now, "I do not remember because I was too young. My mother told me I could not yet talk the first time I did something unnatural."

That caused more of a murmuring and Uther hushed it with a look. When he glanced away from the king, Merlin saw that Arthur's face was cold and shuttered, but there was something in Arthur's eyes, something that had not been there before. Merlin couldn't quite decide what it was.

"You claim to have been able to perform magic since you were born?" Uther sounded incredulous, but he knew for a fact that Uther knew all this and had come to believe it, or at least come to believe that Merlin himself believed it.

"Yes, Sire," Merlin said and decided that trying to work things out might be a bad idea and that just answering the questions would be better.

Uther sat back on his throne, looking at him as if considering something. Merlin stood there under the scrutiny and tried not to sway as the bindings weighed heavily on his arms and neck.

"You have committed the crime of sorcery," Uther said eventually, "and do not try to deny it, yet it cannot be avoided that you have only been witnessed to use magic in defence of your Prince and your King. If I were to pardon you for your crimes, would you swear never to use magic again?"

That confused Merlin even more; Uther knew that was impossible.

"No, Sire," he said, since he could not lie about this, "I would not."

Much more noise greeted this statement. Never had a sorcerer been offered clemency in Camelot's court and yet Merlin was refusing it.

"I cannot swear that oath, Your Majesty," he added since Uther did not jump straight in, "if I do not use magic it uses me."

Uther did a very good impression of suspicious.

"You claim you have to use magic?" Uther asked him.

"Yes, Sire," he replied, since Uther seemed to want him to speak the truth, "when I try not to use it strange things happen around me; unpredictable things."

This time Uther's silence did not go on as long.

"Then the bindings?" Uther said and Merlin shivered, looking down at the ornate braces on his wrists.

He did not want to die, but some things were worse.

"Begging your pardon, Your Majesty," he said, looking the King directly in the eye, "but I would rather die quickly than slowly and these, without a doubt, will kill me as surely as the headman's axe."

Almost as if talking about them increased their potency he swayed in place as standing became more difficult. Uther stood up at that and walked towards him, then round him and then sat down again. It felt like a mummings play or something equally as ridiculous, but there was no way out, so all Merlin could do was stand there.

"Tell me," Uther said shortly, "how many ways have you used your magic in defence of Camelot?"

That definitely wasn't a question he had been expecting in front of the whole court.

"I'm not sure," he said honestly since he didn't keep count.

"Then recount them all," Uther said, as kingly as ever.

That just about astounded Merlin and he thought he probably looked vaguely fishlike for a little while until he gathered his scattered wits back into his head.

"Yes, Sire," he said, since it was about all he could manage for a moment or two as he tried to think.

In the end he decided to start at the beginning, so he began with the debacle that had caused him to become Arthur's manservant in the first place. He spoke slowly and as clearly as he could, revealing everything that did not endanger another person and he was glad that only Gaius had known about his sorcery, because he didn't have to lie much. He only had to omit Gaius and he knew that the King was already aware of his mentor's involvement. He went through every time he had used his magic, from bringing the snakes out of Valiant's shield through his defeat of Nimueh with everything in between and beyond. Uther already knew it all, but for some reason the king wanted the court to know as well and so he told them all.

"The last time was when everyone saw it," he finally came to the end of his tale, his voice rough with use, but feeling strangely light now that it was all in the open, "Sire," he remembered to tag on at the last moment.

His head was beginning to spin as the bindings took their toll on his system and he really wished he could sit down.

"You seem to be a formidable sorcerer," Uther said, the last word filled with derision that didn't quite seem to be in the king's eyes, "why do you meddle in the affairs of Camelot."

"For Arthur," Merlin said simply, because that was his whole reasoning.

He had been doing so before, but he had never truly admitted it to himself until he took the oath; he lived for Arthur and Arthur alone.

"And what do you seek from my son in return?" Uther really did sound like a protective father then.

"Only that he live," was his next reply. "One day he will be the greatest king this land has ever seen and someone has to make sure he gets there."

Now Uther laughed as if he did not believe a word of it.

"And are we supposed to just take your word?" Uther asked in a harsh tone. "You stand before me, a self confessed sorcerer who has been hiding in our midst for months, and you expect me to believe you?"

"Arthur has my oath," Merlin replied, finally beginning to see where this was leading, but still unsure how it would end.

"An oath can be broken," Uther pointed out.

"Not this one," Merlin said, momentarily sure of himself.

"And why is that?" Uther gave him his cue.

Lifting his hand he pulled down the collar of his shirt so that the magical brand over his heart was visible. His magic might have been low, but the golden Pendragon crest with its ornate 'A' still glittered under his skin.

"I sealed it with magic," he told an enrapt court.

It was almost over, Merlin could feel it and he was quite surprised how long it had gone on. He really didn't know what game Uther was playing. The truth was now out, almost the whole truth, but he didn't know why. He was pretty sure that having everyone know how many times he had saved Arthur or Camelot was not going to make everyone a whole lot happier when he was put to death, and the knowledge of the oath made it even more complicated.

No one spoke and everyone present was virtually still as Uther sat there and just looked at him. He could almost see the weight of rule on the king's shoulders and he could see quite how difficult this whole situation was for a man walking a fine line.

"Merlin Emrys," Uther spoke grandly, just as he had done at the beginning and Merlin knew this was it, "it is my judgement that you are guilty of the crime of sorcery..."

The murmuring rose and so did the pace of Merlin's heart.

"...however," Uther added in a tone that demanded silence from the whole of the court, "I have studied you and I find that you are unique."

Not quite how Merlin had expected the King to start his sentence.

"A man such as you has never been seen in these lands before," Uther continued and Merlin felt as if this speech had been rehearsed a great deal. "When invited into a human soul, magic corrupts it," Merlin didn't believe that, and he wasn't really sure Uther believed it as totally as the king once had, but he was not about to argue the point right then, "and you were born with it, yet I can see no corruption."

That was even more of a surprise than Uther's opening gambit. The whole thing was not what Merlin had thought would happen at all.

"You did not seek magic," Uther was clearly choosing his words carefully, "it sought you, and you have used it to protect Camelot and her people even though you knew, should others find out, you would be put to death. You have pledged yourself to the crown prince rather than trying to run and hide and you stand here now, bound and helpless when you could have long since escaped."

As Uther looked him in the eye he had the first inkling that the king might actually understand him. It was strange to think that he, never overly good with words that didn't get him into trouble, might actually have reached a man who had never been swayed by anything else. It was almost too much to ask for.

"Because of all of these things I now make a judgement as unique as I find you," Uther continued, words spoken with complete confidence.

Merlin realised he was holding his breath. Would he be banished rather than put to death? It was an option, but one Uther had never before taken with any other sorcerer.

"Merlin Emrys," Uther said, looking him straight in the eye, "I pardon you for all past acts of magic and for all future acts of magic which you may do in the service of your Prince and this kingdom. Further more you will no longer be Arthur's manservant; you will be his bodyguard from all things magical that may try to harm him. You and you alone may study the arts which are forbidden to all others, but only under the watchful eye of my trusted physician, Gaius. Should you ever work magic against Camelot your life will be instantly forfeit. This is my judgement."

To say that he couldn't have been more shocked would have been putting it mildly and Merlin couldn't begin to hide it. He might actually have said something, but at that moment his legs decided that enough was enough and buckled underneath him. He went slamming to his knees and barely managed to stop himself going face first into the floor.

"Remove the bindings," Uther's voice was as commanding as Merlin had ever heard it.

People moved and low talking began and Merlin was not overly shocked when Arthur made it to his side first. He found himself pulled against a very strong muscled chest, Arthur's warm embrace holding him up. When he managed to lift his head and look into Arthur's face, he could tell that Arthur was as amazed as he was.

"Hold still while we get these off," Arthur told him, seeming to need something to say even though Merlin had no intention of moving.

He nodded anyway, not trusting himself to say anything sensible. His thoughts were spinning, as was the room and he really couldn't care less if he was making a spectacle out of himself. The first brace came off easily and he felt the hairs all over his skin stand up as the barrier to magic was partially removed. It was like feeling the energy in the air before a storm came and Merlin suspected this might be just as violent. It made him very glad he had been unconscious and inside the room in the west tower the last time the bindings had been removed.

The second brace came off with a click and he drew in a sharp breath as his skin prickled all over. It felt like the first tingling when a dead limb began to come back to life and he curled his fingers into Arthur's shirt, preparing himself for what was coming next. The moment the clasp on the collar was undone he knew

about it as the ambient magic in the room crashed into him, filling the hole in his reserves that he had used while being cut off from it.

He buried his face in Arthur's shoulder with a small cry, clinging on tightly as pain flared through every part of his body. He felt his flesh coming back to life and it hurt. The only comfort he had was Arthur holding him close, supporting him as he shook, readjusting to the power flowing through him. Having been deprived of what it needed it now felt as if his body was ready to explode as magic leapt at him from all directions, and it seemed to go on for ever.

It energised him in a way nothing else could, but he was physically and mentally exhausted and when it finally ebbed away all he could do was slump in Arthur's arms. He could quite honestly say that it was an experience he never, ever wanted to repeat, well if he'd had the strength to put two words together that was. He felt like a wine jug that had been emptied out, broken, put back together again badly, overfilled and then had started leaking all over the table. His head was swirling with so many things that he wasn't even sure he could have said something remotely comprehensible if his life had depended on it.

"With your leave, Father," Arthur said as Merlin tried to bring himself under control, "I will take Merlin to his new rooms."

Merlin didn't hear a reply, but there must have been some sort of affirmation from the King, because the next thing he knew he was being lifted. He wanted to protest that he didn't need to be carried like a girl, but since he couldn't even manage that it was rather a moot point. He was still so dazed that it didn't occur to him what Arthur had said until they were out of court and in a corridor somewhere.

"New rooms?" he managed to put the words together and was quite proud of himself for the achievement.

"You wouldn't be much of a bodyguard if you were over the other side of the castle would you," Arthur pointed out and sounded like he was talking to an idiot which made Merlin feel incredibly warm inside. "The Prince's bodyguard always has the rooms next to his. I haven't needed one in a very long time, but it seems my father believes that I do now."

"You'd get yourself killed in five minutes without me," Merlin was amazed as he managed to make a joke.

Arthur gave a derisive snort at that.

"Go to sleep, Merlin," Arthur told him and he could just see the smile curling at the sides of Arthur's mouth as he looked up at his friend through his fringe, "you're clearly delusional."

There was a reply on the tip of his tongue, but it just seemed like far too much effort to actually say it, so for once in his life he closed his eyes and tried to do as he was told. The gentle lope of Arthur's walk and Arthur's strong arms holding him made him feel safe and warm and he found himself drifting off. So much had changed in so little time that he could not bring himself to think about it and he escaped into the quiet of sleep.

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Chapter 5 Archways and Other Consequences

Arthur knew that his father had been planning everything for some time when he walked into the rooms that should have been shut up for nearly a decade and discovered they had been aired out. He also realised how focused he had been on nothing but Merlin recently, since he had failed to notice servants preparing the room right next to his for habitation. Placing Merlin on the freshly made bed, he was not surprised to find Gaius at his elbow.

"If I might, Sire," Gaius said and urged him gently out of the way.

With a nod he stepped back and let Gaius check Merlin over, just in case it was more serious than the exhaustion it seemed to be.

He had known from the very first moment he had challenged his father about Merlin that he had put Uther into a very difficult position. The laws were there for a reason, he was well aware of that, and even if he didn't agree with the letter of them he could see how they helped keep order. Merlin was a political disaster waiting to happen and he had to give his father his due; Uther had found a solution that neither involved killing Merlin nor changing the law. One day he would have to ask Merlin what Merlin and his father had talked about when they were sequestered in that room together alone. No other sorcerer had ever found anything but the sharp edge of an axe in Camelot.

The court was still surreal in his head. He couldn't really believe that it was done, settled and he would not lose Merlin to it. The best he had allowed himself to hope for was banishment, but it seemed his father knew him better than he knew himself, as he realised he would have found that unbearable.

"He is just sleeping, Sire," Gaius said, stepping back from the bed. "For once I believe he may have followed an order to the letter."

Arthur found himself half smiling at that and Gaius returned the gesture. He was not the only one who was feeling amazed and overjoyed at the verdict, he could tell.

"I find that highly unlikely," he replied in a similar tone.

"If it is alright with you, Sire, I will return to my quarters now," Gaius said, glancing back at Merlin. "I fear all this excitement is a bit much for me at my age. I will send someone along with Merlin's things and if you would be so good as to make sure he eats something when he wakes up, I would be most grateful."

"Of course," Arthur replied, smiling properly, "I can't have him wasting away on the first day he is my bodyguard. What kind of reputation would that give me?"

Gaius actually grinned at that.

"I can't think, Sire," the physician replied and headed towards the door.

When it closed and Arthur found himself alone with Merlin, he let himself just look for a while. Merlin was still paler even than usual, not yet fully recovered from his injury or the ordeal which had followed it, but there was pink life in Merlin's cheeks and hidden strength building under the surface. Now that he knew, now that he knew what he was looking for, he found it incredible to believe he had not seen the power in Merlin from the beginning. It was written all over Merlin as

plain as day and seeing Merlin devoid of it in those bindings had made his heart break.

Happy that Merlin was not about to expire at any moment, Arthur began to look around the room. It had been a long time since he had had a bodyguard and the room was devoid of anything resembling personality. It had a bed and a table and chair and was similar in layout to his own, just a little smaller, but it was missing any life. Merlin would undoubtedly make a mess of it; Arthur had seen enough of Merlin's current room to know that, but he began to make a mental list of things to acquire for it anyway. It would not do for the prince's bodyguard to not have things in his room.

There was a nice spot above the fireplace that would look good with some swords, or maybe a pike. Bodyguards were supposed to have weapons and even if Merlin's weapon was magic, making sure the room looked the part would be a good idea. He was pretty sure he'd seen a tapestry in one of the far corners of the castle with a sorcerer on it as well. It had been very fine and looked very expensive, which was probably the only reason it hadn't been burnt, but Arthur thought the wall on the other side would put it to good use.

Not that he really expected Merlin to entertain much, apart from him that was, but it always did to be prepared.

"Don't sleep too long," he told the slumbering form in the bed and then headed out of the door to see what he could find.

Merlin's room might have something useful in it, although not much, so he walked in that direction first.

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Merlin felt like he could have slept all day and he did vaguely remember someone trying to wake him with talk of food at some point, but he had just rolled over and gone back to sleep. Hence, when he did finally decide to rejoin the land of the living he wasn't sure what time of the day it was, but his stomach was one hundred percent sure it was time to eat. He was very comfortable lying down, but the growling coming from his torso refused to let him stay there.

"I'd obey that monster in your stomach if I were you," said a somewhat amused voice and Merlin rolled over onto his back and looked over at Arthur.

On the table next to which Arthur was sitting there was a stunning array of fruit and cheese and cold meat and Arthur was looking far too pleased with himself. If he hadn't been quite so hungry, Merlin might have resisted for a bit, just to lessen the smug grin on Arthur's face.

"For once, I think you may be right," he said, sitting up carefully.

He was amazingly pleased to find that he felt infinitely better. His shoulder was still aching, but other than that he felt rested. He was a little lightheaded, but he put that down to hunger and pushed himself off the bed with a little more abandon. It was then that he realised that, although the room he was in looked very much like Arthur's, that wasn't in fact where they were. For a moment he just stood there and stared.

"My room?" he asked, not really sure he believed it.

The room was decked out almost as grandly as Arthur's and he couldn't help but notice the staff that was mounted over the fireplace. He was very sure that had been under his bed.

"Your room," Arthur said and kicked the chair next to the table, which Merlin took as a rather coarse invitation to sit down; "get used to it, you've gone up in the world."

Merlin gave a small laugh at that; he couldn't really imagine that.

"I see you ransacked my old room," he said, seeing other things of his around the room. "You do realise that's a magical staff?"

Arthur just smiled.

"I deduced as much," Arthur replied, in a very cheerful mood it seemed. "Great hiding place, by the way, under your bed where anyone could have found it."

"No one did," Merlin pointed out and grinned back.

At least Arthur had to acknowledge that.

"Did you have someone bring my clothes?" he asked, looking around on his way to the table.

Arthur motioned to the cupboard over to one side, but there was something in Arthur's expression that worried Merlin a little.

"Which reminds me," Arthur said as Merlin took the offered seat and reached for some of the food, "we need to make you an appointment with the tailor as soon as possible. You're going to need a whole new wardrobe."

Merlin stopped chewing the bread he had just bitten into and looked down at himself.

"What's wrong with these?" he asked after swallowing the bite.

He had worn his best set to the hearing and he didn't think there was anything wrong with them. When he looked up at Arthur, his friend was giving him a look of resigned acceptance.

"What?" he asked.

"They're servant's clothes, Merlin," Arthur said in a put upon, patient tone. "You are the only legal sorcerer in the entire kingdom and you are my magical bodyguard. You need to look more imposing. From now on people are going to want to talk to you rather than ignore you."

"I can't just stand there and, well, guard?" he asked hopefully.

If there was one thing he was really not very good at, it was playing politics. From the look on his face, Arthur was enjoying his discomfort far too much.

"Nope," Arthur said, "sorry," Merlin didn't think Arthur was sorry at all, "you just became important. If you were just a guard you might be able to get away with it, but you're a sorcerer and people are going to expect you to do more than stand there like an idiot. Something in black and red I think."

There was a sinking feeling in the pit of Merlin's stomach that had nothing to do with the heavy bread that had just hit it.

"You've been thinking about this all the time I was asleep, haven't you," he said, realising that Arthur had had time to start planning his life for him.

Arthur gave him a very unrepentant grin.

"Eat up," Arthur said, "you're going to need the energy."

Merlin wasn't quite sure a death sentence wouldn't have been better.

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Merlin woke up three times in the night. He and Arthur had talked all evening about what would be expected of him now and such things before moving on to more trivial chatter and it had been late when Arthur finally took his leave, but Merlin still couldn't sleep properly. It was simple really; the bed was too big. Somehow he had become accustomed to Arthur filling the space on the other side and now that he had his own bed there was far too much room in it. He wasn't fully recovered yet and he needed to sleep, but that didn't seem to stop his subconscious prodding him into wakefulness every hour or so.

"Merlin, what did you do?"

He started awake to find that after the third time he had turned over, thumped the pillow and demanded his body sleep he had managed it until at least light, but he had the feeling all was not well. Arthur sounded not annoyed exactly, but more shocked.

He opened his eyes to find Arthur standing in his nightclothes in an archway next to the fire place. The major problem being that there hadn't been an archway there the previous evening.

"Oh," he said as what he might have done began to dawn on him.

"Oh," Arthur repeated back at him, "is that all you have to say, or would you care to explain why you thought the castle needed some remodelling?"

Merlin sat up, at least it was a nice archway; it wasn't as if he'd just made a huge hole in the wall.

"I didn't think," he tried to explain, "at least, that is, I kept waking up because I'm kind of used to you being there and, well, I haven't been doing magic lately and I did explain that weird things sometimes happen if I don't and, it must have, that is ..."

Arthur was looking at him a little incredulously.

"Are you trying to say your magic missed me and so it made a new doorway?" Arthur asked, sounding a little exasperated, but also kind of fond as well.

Merlin nodded; that was the only explanation he could think of.

"If I wake up one day and there is no wall at all I will be most displeased," Arthur said with a shake of his head and then turned and walked back into his own room.

What Merlin wanted to say was something along the lines of 'if you let me sleep with you we could be sure it didn't happen', but he wasn't that brave and instead, hurried out of bed. He ran his fingers over the stone of the arch; faced stone as if a master craftsman had done the job and he couldn't help feeling a little pleased with himself, even if he hadn't done it deliberately. His magic at least knew good workmanship it seemed.

"Um, I could try and fill it in again if you like," he offered, wandering into Arthur's room.

He quite liked the arch, but was well aware that Arthur might not.

"And have the wall fall in?" Arthur said in an offhand tone, "I think not."

Merlin was pretty sure that was Arthur's way of saying he'd rather keep it.

"We can put up a curtain or something to stop a draft blowing through," Arthur decided and that seemed to be an end to the matter.

The other thing that caught Merlin's eye was the fact that Arthur's breakfast had already been set out on Arthur's table. What whoever had done it would have thought about the arch he had no idea, but he was trying to decide if he could acquire a little of the food; he was starving. He had always had a good appetite and now that he was doing magic again, all be it unconsciously, it was back with a vengeance.

"Sit down then," Arthur said, moving to the table himself; "we need to get an early start. There is so much to do today."

Then and only then did Merlin notice there was a second plate sitting under the first and he hurried over and did as he was told as Arthur put it in place next to the second chair. He had become used to eating with Arthur, having been confined in Arthur's rooms and, much to his pleasure, it seemed as if Arthur was happy to continue the tradition.

"Don't bother getting dressed," Arthur said as they ate, "I'm going to have to find you some decent clothes before you can be revealed to the gawping hordes."

It was a tribute to the strength of Merlin's appetite that it did not vanish at those words.

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Merlin was mortified; Arthur had ordered him to pack away all his old clothes and had then proceeded to look through his own wardrobe for things that Merlin could wear. As far as he could tell Arthur was treating him like a doll that a girl might have had and enjoying having him try things on far too much. By the time Arthur was done, Merlin felt utterly ridiculous and wasn't sure that the awful livery and hat might not have been better than what he was wearing. Arthur's clothes were much finer than anything he had ever worn and he felt more than a little ridiculous.

"Much better," Arthur declared, looking him up and down, "come on, I feel like I can be seen with you outside these chambers now."

"But what about the mess?" Merlin asked, surveying the devastation around the room.

Arthur hadn't improved on the tidiness front.

"My new manservant will deal with that," Arthur said with a grin, "unless you're feeling nostalgic."

Merlin looked at the chaos and decided he wasn't that much of a masochist.

"Lead on, oh fearless Prince," he said and rolled his eyes.

If truth be told he was a little nervous about leaving the apartments. He didn't know how everyone was going to react and it made him a little afraid.

"I can still put you in the stocks for sarcasm," Arthur pointed out even as he headed to the door.

"And what good would I be as a bodyguard there?" Merlin asked and followed.

"You're the sorcerer," Arthur replied with a grin, "you figure it out."

That did make Merlin smile, even with his nerves. Even if things were different now, it felt good to have Arthur teasing him as usual. It was comforting.

"Where are we going?" he asked as he hurried to follow Arthur striding down the corridor.

"My knights are on the practice field," Arthur replied as they walked, "and I want to make sure they are doing as they should be."

Merlin almost fell over his own feet; so much for easing into things gently. The knights had become used to him over his time as Arthur's manservant, but he had no idea how they were going to react to him now. He was lowly born so he was not their equal, but he was powerful and that put him in a very awkward position. He didn't even know how anyone was supposed to react around him, so they probably had no chance.

"So what do I do," he asked, trying to think the best of the situation, "stand around looking overdressed?"

"More or less," Arthur said with a grin; "it's not as if you can do anything useful with your shoulder still healing."

It was beginning to feel as if Arthur just wanted to show him off. He thought he was starting to know what being a prize stallion felt like. As they walked through the castle they came across some people and Merlin smiled and waved at those he knew. Some smiled and waved back, other dipped their heads and hurried away and he did his very best to ignore them. Clearly some of the castle staff were still afraid of him. Fear of magic was part and parcel of living in Camelot so he really didn't blame them, but he wished they could see beyond it. He was still the same person he had always been and he squared his shoulders as well as he could and decided to prove that to everyone.

As if fate was making a point, as they headed down towards the courtyard one of the castle cats raced out of a side corridor with a bird in its mouth, straight into his path. With his usual lack of grace he managed to fall over it and ended up in a heap of cat, bird and man, which the cat left with a screech, leaving him with the bird. Arthur just laughed at him and he had the childish notion of sticking out his tongue, but he didn't. The bird drew his attention by giving a half-hearted flap and then sitting there looking at him. It was a tiny song bird and one of its wings was hanging down, bloody, where the cat had been at it.

The bird didn't seem overly afraid of him and he reached out without thinking, picking it up and holding it gently as he climbed to his own feet.

"Poor thing has a broken wing," he said, handling it carefully and showing it to Arthur who didn't appear particularly interested.

Truth be told, Arthur was better at killing things than seeing their softer side; it was just the way he was.

"Then put it out of its misery," was Arthur's solution to the matter and Merlin glared at Arthur for that.

He could feel the little life in his hands, so much more aware of everything after having been cut off from it for so long. There was natural magic in the bird, just as there was in everything and Merlin could feel it and it felt so very wrong to let it be ended. He needed to do magic, that much the incident with the archway had shown him and so he just went with his instincts. Closing his eyes he felt for the little life in his hands and felt the hurt to it. Then he pushed his own power at it, mending the hurt. For a moment the little bird went still in his grasp and then he opened his eyes and his fingers at the same time. With a burst of song the little creature took off and he smiled, watching it fly into the courtyard and up into the sky.

When he looked back at Arthur there was an inscrutable expression on his friend's face.

"How did you do that?" Arthur asked, sounding a little awed.

"I don't know," Merlin replied honestly, since he wasn't really sure, then he grinned, happy for no other reason than he had helped a tiny bird. "Don't you have some knights to see?"

Arthur looked at him a little more, but he was feeling too pleased with himself to worry and finally Arthur smiled.

"You are a sentimental fool, you realise that I suppose?" Arthur said and turned back the way they had been walking.

"One of us has to have a heart," Merlin quipped back and followed his prince towards the practice grounds.

As soon as they made it to their destination Arthur began ordering people around as usual and so Merlin decided to take up a position by the fence and just watch. He saw some of the knights glancing in his direction, but not paying attention to Arthur was likely to earn bruises, so there wasn't any staring going on. He liked to watch Arthur and even though Arthur wasn't in his armour and doing battle, he was still correcting technique and showing his knights how it should be done in slow motion, which Merlin found he appreciated even more. Without mail and

armour he could see the muscles moving under Arthur's clothes and he was rather enrapt.

He let his mind wander for a while and couldn't help wondering what it would feel like to have those muscles moving against him. Arthur had not tried to reinitiate what had been happening between them before the feast that began the whole adventure, but there had been touches and looks that made him think it was only a matter of time. He did not want to push Arthur on this; he was glad of anything he could have of Arthur, but he did not deny the want inside. It seemed even stronger now, as if pledging his magic to Arthur meant that all of him was now on the same page, wanting the same thing.

"He is an amazing fighter is he not?"

Merlin almost jumped out of his skin and he turned to find that Sir Percival was standing next to him. He'd been so busy ogling that he hadn't noticed he was no longer alone.

"Yes," he replied, hoping that his voice was not full of the desire he was feeling, "the best I have ever seen."

"Our Prince could stand against any in battle," Percival continued and Merlin was not quite sure if the knight was just labouring the point or trying to say something.

He nodded, agreeing, not sure what he was supposed to say to that. Arthur was an incredible warrior, everyone knew that. Percival was looking at him intently and he wasn't sure why.

"Are you trying to tell me something?" he finally asked, almost sure there was a point to the conversation.

Sir Percival had always treated him well, not like some of the nobles did with servants, but he really didn't know why the man was talking to him now.

"Be careful you don't unman him," Percival finally said and rather shocked Merlin with his words.

For a moment he was afraid that Percival had known what he was thinking and was trying to warn him off, but that really didn't seem like a Sir Percival way of doing things.

"What?" he asked, not at all sure what they were talking about.

"We have seen what you can do, Merlin," the knight told him, speaking to him as anything but a servant; "you could protect him from anything, even things that he does not need protecting from."

The light dawned in his head and he looked back across the field to where Arthur was showing one of the younger knights a particular attack. His protective instincts were strong, but he knew what Percival was saying.

"I would never do that," he said, turning back to the other man and looking him straight in the eye. "I'm here for the things that cannot be stopped by flesh or the sword, that is why I have always been here. My magic is his, Sir Percival, if Arthur commands me I will do it, but we both know he will never ask me to fight his battles for him."

Merlin had seen into the dark, he knew the dangers that lurked there and he would preserve Arthur's light for all to see, but he had no intention of becoming a one man army. Percival studied him for a while longer and then smile.

"I like you, Merlin," the knight finally said and patted him on the shoulder.

Unfortunately it was his bad shoulder, but he managed not to wince too much.

"Thank you, Sir Percival," he said with a small bow of his head and then the knight was off across the training field to where the other men were gathered.

It was good to know that at least one of the knights was not watching him with fear. He couldn't help smiling as he watched Arthur do what Arthur did best and he didn't even care that it looked like it was coming on to rain.

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Merlin was really beginning to wonder if Arthur had been a woman in another life, because Arthur seemed to have a definite propensity for dressing him up. Arthur spent three hours with the tailor discussing colours and matching Merlin's eyes and things that Merlin had never, ever associated with clothing before. To him clothes were simply things to keep you warm. The fact that at one point they had made him do magic so they could see what colour gold his eyes went had almost made him walk out.

At first he had thought that Arthur might be taking the piss out of him, but as the whole debacle went on and on, Merlin was finally convinced that, no, Arthur was actually serious. The whole making him into more than a servant was real and almost a mission for Arthur, so Merlin just went with it. He even let Arthur have someone cut his hair; it was getting to the point where it was a little bit on the wild side.

Arthur also seemed to be trying to educate him as fast as humanly possible and for once Merlin was listening, but he really didn't think he was going to get it all, all at once. There were things that as a manservant he had not had to take any notice of, not that he was much for protocol anyway, but it seemed that now he did. He was in the unique position of being noticeable even though he was still a servant and Arthur was pumping him full of things he needed to know.

By the second day his head was starting to spin and by the end of the week he knew more about the internal workings of Camelot than he had ever thought possible. He had always known that things were more complicated than he bothered to realise, especially the politics, but he had new respect for Arthur after having to learn so much in so little time. Of course Arthur had been brought up with all the information he was trying to pass on to Merlin so Arthur was better equipped to deal with it, but Merlin couldn't help finding most of it bizarre.

Over his time in Camelot he had thought he had picked up a lot of information, but it was nowhere near what Arthur seemed to carry around in his head. Being a bodyguard seemed to mostly consist of following Arthur around and pretending to know what he was doing when in fact he had no clue. As Arthur told him, most things were about looking like you knew what was going on rather than actually knowing all the time, so he stuck close to Arthur and did his best to absorb everything he was being taught.

When the clothes arrived he felt ridiculous, but he put them on anyway and he did his best to be what Arthur wanted him to be. He wasn't sure he really fitted the mould, but he did as well as he knew how. He had come to Camelot to be Gaius' assistant and to learn about his gifts and now he was a bodyguard and he was a bit out of his depth. He was used to saving Arthur's life, but mostly from behind things when no one was looking; it was all a bit different now that people were noticing him.

The entire time Arthur did not try to reinitiate what had almost started between them, but the curtain that was put up over the archway remained swept back the entire time and Arthur had taken to wandering into his room mostly naked in the mornings. It was a little bit confusing, but then Arthur seemed to specialise in that, so Merlin had decided to just go with things and see what happened. After all he was the one who had rather upset the whole apple cart.

His life was so different and yet so much the same in that it involved running around after Arthur that he still felt at home. However, he had not had much time to spend with Gaius given his new duties, but when he found Gwen one morning, worried about Morgana, he decided he had to go and see his mentor. He was supposedly allowed to study magic under Gaius' watchful eye, but so far he'd had no time to even try.

"Gaius," he said as he walked into his mentor's work room.

"Merlin," Gaius greeted with a bright smile, "how pleasant to see you."

He gave Gaius a smile, but he wasn't really in a cheerful mood.

"Do you have time to talk?" he asked, carefully closing the door.

"Of course," Gaius replied, seeming to realise he had come with a purpose, "what is it you need to talk about?"

Merlin wandered into the room, thinking about what had been weighing on his mind.

"Morgana," he said simply and Gaius' face took on a knowing look.

"Ah, I see," Gaius told him and Merlin had the distinct impression that his mentor was not surprised by it.

Since he had followed his instincts and pledged himself to Arthur, Merlin had begun to realise that his instincts tended to serve him well. At least instincts driven by certain things and his were telling him things now.

"I think she needs my help," he revealed, picking up a bottle from the bench and reading the label absently.

"Two magical people in his court will be more than Uther can stand," Gaius told him in a very sagely manner and he turned to look at his mentor.

He nodded; he realised that.

"I know," he acknowledged, "at least for now, but I think I have to help her anyway, in secret. I'm not a seer, Gaius, not like Morgana is, but I feel things sometimes and I feel this. I feel as if we are running out of time."

Gaius was looking at him very seriously now, but he couldn't explain it any more. It was the invisible hand moving the pieces on the game board of his life and he only glimpsed it in the periphery of his mind.

"Then I would suggest you do as you feel you must," Gaius finally told him, "but that is not all, is it? I know you, Merlin and you would have already gone to Morgana if that was all it was."

Merlin smiled a little at that; Gaius did know him very well. The smile didn't last long, though, as his reasons for being there filled his head again.

"I cannot keep it from Arthur," he said, since that was his quandary. "If I help Morgana, I must tell him. I promised him no more secrets about magic and I believe he needs to know."

"It is not your secret, Merlin," Gaius told him in his usual calm tones.

"But it is," he replied, going over his reasoning in his head, "if I help it is my secret. I know I have no right to tell anyone, but if I help I have to. Gaius, I don't know what to do."

He had been thinking about it all day and still had no solution. There was a need, he could feel it, but he also knew how precious a secret could be. Gaius gave him a fond smile and he had a sudden notion he was being an idiot.

"Talk to her," Gaius said simply. "Merlin, not everything is for us to decide; this must be Morgana's choice. Let her know that you understand and are willing to help, but that your help is offered with one condition. Let Morgana decide."

Merlin decided that he had definitely been an idiot as he took in Gaius' words. He had been so worried about the feeling tickling the back of his mind that he had forgotten the obvious. Suddenly it didn't seem so impossible, actually it didn't seem impossible at all and he smiled.

"Thank you, Gaius," he said and gave his mentor a quick hug, "you're a genius."

That made Gaius laugh.

"Just older and a bit wiser, My Boy, that's all," he heard Gaius say as he dashed out the door.

He needed to find Gwen; Gwen could help him see Morgana.

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It was another day before he had time to see Morgana and she had time to see him without Arthur asking awkward questions. In the end Merlin told a small white lie that Gaius needed his help while Arthur was off with his knights, but in reality he found himself at Morgana's door. There he knocked and waited.

"Come in," Morgana's voice called out, so he entered.

The bright smile Morgana gave him did not help settle the nerves he was feeling, but he did smile back.

"Merlin," she greeted, putting down what she was doing, "how nice to see you. You've managed to get away from your slave driver then?"

"I hid," Merlin replied in kind and went over to sit down when Morgana patted the seat next to her.

Normally Gwen would be there as well, but Merlin had asked to speak to Morgana alone, so Gwen had simply nodded, patted him on the arm and gone to find something to do. Gwen was probably the most wonderful human being he knew; she had not even tried to ask. He thought she probably knew that Morgana was as talented magically in her own way as he was, but he couldn't be sure, so he needed to speak to Morgana first.

"What brings you to see me, Sir Sorcerer?" Morgana asked, with mock grandness.

Merlin considered beating around the bush a little, maybe making small talk, but then discarded it in favour of just speaking plainly from the start.

"Your dreams, My Lady," he said in the most gentle tone he could manage.

"Why would you worry about my dreams?" Morgana asked, suddenly nervous and looking away from him.

"Because we both know they are not just dreams," he replied and she finally looked back at him.

Morgana had warned him about the questing beast and denial just didn't work anymore, but Merlin knew how hard it was to admit something like this in Camelot.

"I think I can help," he said when Morgana did not speak, "but I cannot unless you give me permission to tell Arthur what I am doing."

There was pale and then there was the colour Morgana's face went at that idea.

"How can you help?" she asked, voice tight and a little defensive.

"I believe there are ways to control them," he said, speaking honestly since he was not completely sure, "and I am allowed to study magic; I could find out more. I could help you in secret so that no one else would have to know. I am not a seer, but I feel you need help and, as far as the court is concerned, I could be one. If you had a path to use these visions they might not hurt you so much."

Morgana sat quietly for a little while, looking at him and then glancing out the window and then looking back and he could see that she was distressed, but he did not interrupt her thoughts. This had to be her decision and even though he knew which way he wanted her to choose, he could not force her.

"But you cannot do this for me without telling Arthur?" she finally said.

Merlin nodded.

"I have sworn to him no more secrets about magical things," he explained, just as he had done to Gaius, "and I cannot break that oath. I know you do not always see eye to eye, Morgana, but you must know that he will not abandon you in this."

He was a little surprised when she reached out and took his hand.

"I know, Merlin," she said earnestly, "but I have spent so much of my life pretending that all they were was dreams. I feel that they are not, but admitting this, even to myself, is so difficult."

That was not difficult to believe, but Merlin was determined.

"I fear for you, Morgana," he said, speaking plainly and to her, not to her title or her position, just to Morgana as his friend. "I do not have your gift; I cannot see the future, but sometimes I have a sense of what is to come. I caught a fleeting glimpse of Arthur as he must be, which was why I pledged myself to him, and now I fear for you. I fear this great burden will take you from us unless you share it."

He had not intended to frighten Morgana, but he could see she feared the same herself and her fingers squeezed his hand in an unconscious gesture.

"But you can help me?" Morgana asked in a small voice, very un-Morgana like.

This was a woman who wore trousers and fought with a sword better than he did when she felt like it and to see her so afraid of what was in her own head was awful. There was no choice about this.

"I can," he said, because he felt that he had to and that his instincts would not be urging him into this unless there was something he could do.

They sat for a few more moments, just looking at each other and Merlin felt almost kindred to Morgana in those moments.

"Then I give my permission," Morgana finally said. "I do not know how to tell him myself, but you may share this secret with Arthur."

It felt like a weight was being lifted, or the sun was coming out from behind a cloud and Merlin was completely certain he had done the right thing.

"Thank you," he said and squeezed her hand back.

"It is I who should be thanking you," Morgana replied and finally smiled again. "You are a ray of light in this kingdom, Merlin," she told him; "a ray of hope that shines for all of us. I do not know where we would be without you."

Merlin felt himself blushing; he wasn't used to compliments.

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"You weren't helping Gaius," was the first thing Arthur said to Merlin when they met again and Arthur did not sound happy; "I met him while returning here."

They were in Arthur's room.

"No," Merlin replied in a open a voice as he knew how, "I was doing something else that I couldn't tell you about then, not until I had spoken to the person I needed to see. I was with Morgana."

That headed off whatever Arthur had been planning to say; clearly Arthur hadn't been thinking that at all.

"Morgana," Arthur asked, clearly confused, "why Morgana?"

"Her dreams are not just bad dreams," he replied simply and poured Arthur a class of ale simply because he needed to do something as well as talk.

That earned him a very appraising look.

"And you have known this how long?" Arthur asked.

"A while," Merlin explained, being true to his word; no more lies about magic, "since before all this, but it was not my secret to give or I would have told you as soon as I was able. That is why I went to see her, to ask permission to tell you. Morgana's dreams are slowly driving her mad, but I know I can help her, only I could not help her without telling you, so I had to speak with her privately. I am sorry I deceived you."

It took Arthur a while to digest all of that information, so Merlin passed him the beaker of ale and waited. It was a tense moment.

"I understand," Arthur finally told him and he let out the breath he had been holding.

Tension between him and Arthur was something he just couldn't deal with at the moment.

"So how do we help her?" Arthur asked and Merlin found himself smiling at the 'we' part of that.

"Well I'll need to do some digging to find out things," he said, going through the plans he had started making in his head, "and I'm going to suddenly have a new sideline in prophetic dreams which it would be most useful if you could mention to your father in a way that won't make him decide to cut off my head."

Arthur rolled his eyes at that.

"Nothing difficult then," was the resigned response.

Merlin had known he could count on Arthur, but that didn't stop him being pleased when it was proved true.

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"Just so we're clear," Arthur said as Merlin felt himself being pushed firmly against the wall, "there's nothing else you need to tell me is there?"

"Um, no," he replied with a little shake of his head.

After he had gone to Arthur about Morgana something had changed almost instantly, but Merlin hadn't realised quite what it was until he had followed Arthur back into Arthur's room that evening. That had been about five minutes ago. Whatever Arthur had been waiting for, the situation with Morgana had provided it and now Merlin found himself in almost exactly the same position he had been in before the whole adventure began.

Arthur's stare was very intense and it was making it hard to think as all the blood seemed to be rushing from Merlin's head to other places.

"Good," Arthur decided and then kissed him with the force of a small storm.

Last time Arthur had been forceful and Merlin was pretty sure Arthur didn't know how to be anything else, but this time the passion in the kiss was breathtaking and it began to dawn on Merlin that Arthur had been thinking about and wanting this as much as he had. He did not have the muscle mass Arthur did and he was completely outmatched in strength, but then the last thing he wanted to do was resist. When he had pledged himself to Arthur it hadn't just been about his magic and his power hummed through his veins, very happy that he and Arthur were finally getting to such things.

When the little thought popped up that he technically had Arthur's mother's blessing for this he banished it ruthlessly because, really, the last thing he wanted to be thinking about was Arthur's mother.

He moaned into the kiss as Arthur plundered his mouth with a seeking tongue one moment and nipped at his lips another. This was new to him, new and exciting. He had kissed girls before, but, other than the last time, he had never been kissed by a man and it was a very different experience, especially given Arthur's apparent determination. There was an element of surrender in it that he had never felt before and it made his blood sing. Merlin's was not a submissive personality, but for Arthur he would do anything, even stupid things and this was very far from stupid. When Arthur was a prat he told him so, because Arthur needed someone to ground him and when Arthur was being magnificent, like just about then, he was happy to let Arthur do anything Arthur damn well liked.

Arthur's mouth was one thing, but Arthur's hands were also on the move over his clothes and Merlin's only thought was that he wanted them under them. He wanted skin on skin; craved it like a drowning man craved air, but when he tried to slide his own hands under Arthur's shirt he found them being foiled. In a swift move Merlin had not been expecting, Arthur pushed his arms above his head, crossed his wrists and then held them in place with one hand. His shoulder might have ached a little at the treatment, but he really didn't care.

"Not yet," was all Arthur said and then went back to kissing him.

Merlin hoped he didn't whimper like a girl as the excitement that caused ran through him like a flame through straw. He knew Arthur was experienced since Arthur had told him enough tales, mostly when drunk, but Arthur had never spread around the royal favour as much as castle gossip liked to make out. Arthur also never took advantage of the servants and Merlin was basically an exception to another of Arthur's rules; Merlin knew that for a fact and he liked being an exception a great deal. He was very sure he would like Arthur to take advantage of him a lot and maybe let him take advantage of Arthur when he knew what he was doing.

Even though most of the stories weren't true, Merlin realised that one part was: Arthur had a reputation as a great lover and if the kissing was an indication it was well deserved. Merlin had had no idea kissing could be so good. He did his best to kiss back, but Arthur kept doing things that made him forget what he was trying to do; things with lips and teeth and tongue and seemingly every available area of skin above the edge of his shirt. A little corner of his mind kept pointing out that they weren't even naked yet, but Merlin was ignoring it in favour of not pondering that for fear of losing what little mind he had left.

"By Avalon, Merlin," Arthur said, finally pulling back and letting him pull in a deep shuddering breath, "I want to pleasure you until you can't even remember who you are. You moan so prettily."

That bothersome little corner of his mind tried to be offended by that, but most of his thoughts were far too busy chanting 'yes' to worry. He would worry about who was the girl in this relationship later and just about all he wanted then was to find out exactly what Arthur meant by that.

"Okay," he said, feeling his arousal and magic surging around his body in equal measure.

Arthur looked into his eyes very seriously then and he found himself being appraised. This was why he knew that Arthur would be a great king, why he had no doubt that his destiny was not only for their good, but for the whole kingdom's. In Arthur's eyes there was pride and knowledge of power, but it was tempered with caring and love and, although he did not see the future again, he felt it.

"Have you been with a man before?" Arthur asked simply.

It was not a conversation they had had, but Merlin shook his head, answering truthfully. At one point he had thought that he and Will might have ended up exploring such things, but then his mother had sent him to Camelot and everything else was history.

"With a woman?" Arthur asked and if anyone else had been asking Merlin probably would have been embarrassed, but he didn't seem to feel that at all with Arthur.

He nodded at that since he had been, what he didn't mention was that they had both been drunk on honey wine and he wasn't one hundred percent sure they had managed anything beyond some serious touching and getting naked. It was all very hazy and he liked to think he had actually got his end away, because he was of an age where he really should have, but he couldn't have sworn to it if pressed.

"With a man a little more preparation is required," Arthur told him, eye flashing with heat, "but that can be fun as well."

Merlin seemed to have been struck dumb as the thoughts that that conjured ran through his head.

"If I had known how easy it was to shut you up I'd have tried this ages ago," Arthur said, clearly noticing his struggles and then the bastard kissed him again before he could even attempt a witty comeback.

Given that his brain was almost as non-verbal as he was, it might not have been such a bad thing; 'ugh' and 'ngh' were probably not great for conversation.

"Please," was about the most he could manage when it looked as if Arthur was going back to what he had been doing before.

Merlin was all but positive that he would go insane if that was all Arthur did. He even felt Arthur smiling against his neck and it just made him want Arthur more, even if he did go mad in the process.

"I think I like you like this," Arthur said, seeming to be very much enjoying the moment.

"Arthur," Merlin said even as Arthur's words caused wild eddies in his body, "please ... I need ... my magic needs. I can't think."

He really was rather more desperate than he had expected and he was beginning to think it wasn't just a physical thing, after all he had been resisting Arthur for some time. At his plea Arthur stopped and looked him in the eye again and his let his power flow to the surface knowing it would show in his eyes.

"Blue and gold," Arthur said, smiling just slightly; "that's new."

Arthur just loved to court trouble and Merlin bit his lip, trying to hold on to himself. He could easily have taken over with the will of his mind and he didn't want that, but it was incredibly difficult to hold on.

"Take off our clothes, Merlin," Arthur ordered, releasing his wrists, but not breaking their eye contact for a moment; "take them all off, now."

He never even thought about it, didn't consider how or what he was doing for a solitary moment, he just obeyed. In less than two heart beats he felt stone against his back, his bare back and where Arthur was pressed against him there was skin on skin. It felt like his muscles were turning to water as Arthur held him there, seemingly effortlessly and he really couldn't help but notice the hardness pressing against his hip.

"Well that was a bit faster than I expected," Arthur said, seemingly unfazed and kissing along his jawline slowly and carefully. "Yes, I definitely like you like this. Now I am going to explore; let me know if your legs are going to give out."

All Merlin could do was hum in acknowledgement and then flatten himself against the wall when Arthur let up on the pressure holding him in place. He really didn't count himself as that inexperienced; he'd been after girls just like any other hot blooded male and he'd caught a few and had his hand up their skirts, but this was a million miles away from that. Arthur seemed to be dismantling him, touch by touch and when Arthur began to kiss over the mark on his chest he whined in what he would have once considered a very pathetic way. Giving up clutching at the wall he grabbed at Arthur's shoulder with one hand and laced the other into Arthur's hair, trying not to hang on as if he wanted to pull it out at the roots.

He didn't dare look down, not yet, or he was sure he would have lost all control, since Arthur was as naked as he was.

Every time Arthur touched the mark, Merlin felt his magic flare and it was too much.

"Arthur," he eventually panted quite desperately, since Arthur really seemed to be enjoying himself, "not there, please, not yet."

He did glance down then and clear blue eyes looked back up at him. Surprisingly there was not even a track of mocking humour in those eyes, just lust and arousal and something deeper that Merlin didn't want to name in case it wasn't true.

"Later then," Arthur said and continued his journey over Merlin's chest and beyond.

Arthur was being very thorough and Merlin was losing more and more touch with reality as his prince continued. By the time Arthur reached his navel he knew he

wasn't going to be able to stand much longer. Arthur's tongue dipped into the shallow dent in his stomach and he half moaned, half squeaked in response.

"Legs," he just about managed to force out of his mouth, since they were shaking and he didn't think he could remain standing for more than a few moments.

Arthur continued to torture him for a little while, making his stomach muscles twitch and tremble as strong hands held his waist in a firm grip, but just before he thought his knees would buckle, Arthur stopped and slowly stood up again.

"Maybe we should take this to the bed," Arthur said, smiling just slightly, pupils completely blown with desire. "I have so much more exploring to do and I can't have you hurting yourself."

Usually there was always something about a situation between them that let Merlin stamp his own brand of rebellion on it, but not in this and he found that it was because he didn't want to. He wanted Arthur to explore, to find out everything; anything less was unacceptable.

"I want to touch you," was all he could come up with to say, because he did; he wanted to do his own investigation.

At that Arthur's smile increased, but it was interested, not amused.

"Later," Arthur told him and dragged him away from the wall into a close embrace; "I claim privilege of rank. You can do your own exploration later, Merlin, that I promise."

That was good enough for Merlin and he made no resistance as Arthur took him to the bed. Arthur threw aside the top covers and then lowered him down onto the sheets before climbing on between his legs, urging them apart and half lying down. Then Arthur went back to what he had been doing before and Merlin just put his head back, grabbed at the pillows and tried to stop himself overloading before Arthur was ready for him.

With his magic and his arousal fighting around his body it was a close thing and, even though Arthur seemed to be deliberately leaving his cock alone, he had trouble holding on.

"Merlin," Arthur said, looking up from where he had been nibbling along the inside of his thigh, having already thoroughly investigated the other one as well, "bring me the oil from the mantel."

Merlin was having trouble remembering what day it was and simple things like that, but without questioning it, he held out his hand and the small bottle of oil he hadn't even noticed until then, flew to his hand. It seemed that Arthur understood him almost better than he understood himself, because that was just what he needed to take the edge off. Using his magic stopped it raging quite so loudly through his veins and he handed the bottle to Arthur feeling just a little more in control.

Arthur took the bottle and placed it on the bed before going back to what he had been doing and Merlin had no choice but to go back to enjoying it. It didn't take long for him to stop paying attention to the oil altogether, which was why when he felt oiled fingers playing with the soft skin behind his balls he was quite surprised.

"This will feel strange," Arthur told him, still completely in control, "just relax."

When those fingers moved slowly backwards and one began to play gently back there, it did feel strange, but also incredibly good. Arthur was watching him, which made his feel hot and almost feverish as Arthur touched him in such an intimate place. When Arthur pushed his finger against his entrance a little more firmly he found out why he needed to relax and he gasped as the oil allowed it to slip inside of him.

"Spread your legs more," Arthur said, moving that finger ever so slowly in and out of him, "lift them a little."

Merlin did as he was told, changing the angle of his hips to give Arthur better access and it felt amazing. He was beginning to get used to the intrusion and the more he became used to it, the better it felt, adding to the little shocks of excitement going off in his belly.

"Now, Merlin," Arthur said, voice low and full of desire, "I'm going to show you something Sir Bedevire showed me at the tender age of sixteen."

Clearly noble educations were very broad and covered many things.

As Merlin felt Arthur's finger moving deeper into him, he just concentrated on staying relaxed and when Arthur crooked his finger and brushed over a place inside him, the sparks in his belly turned into a white hot sheet of flame and he bucked and mewled at the amazing sensation.

"Very sensitive then," Arthur said and did it again, "I like that; so am I."

It was reassuring to know he wasn't reacting out of turn, but it didn't really help Merlin regain any control of himself. He didn't even bother trying to speak; it was pointless, since the words were all muddled in his head so trying to make them come out of his mouth in any sensible fashion would have been a wasted effort. When Arthur's tongue began to trace torturous trails over his balls and the sensitive skin behind as Arthur's finger slowly worked him looser, he gave up all pretence of being able to do anything but lie there.

He cock felt ready to burst and his balls felt tight and heavy, but Arthur seemed to know just how to play him to stop him exploding. One finger became two, making him burn, but also hum with pleasure and soon after Arthur sat up and urged him to lift his legs further. He felt exposed but safe in Arthur's presence and he surrendered to his prince, his lover, in a way he never had before.

How long Arthur played he had no idea, but Arthur was up to three fingers before he seemed satisfied that Merlin was ready for more. Merlin had long since closed his eyes, being able to see himself in such a position with Arthur touching him so intimately had almost been too much for his control, but when Arthur finally withdrew his probing fingers and leant over him, Merlin blinked back the self induced darkness.

Arthur was all but looking in his eyes.

"This will be uncomfortable to begin with," Arthur told him, "but I promise it will begin to feel good."

Merlin nodded; he trusted Arthur implicitly.

Now he watched as Arthur sat back, taking the oil and slicking the long, hard cock that Merlin had so far not allowed himself to think about. Arthur was a magnificent man in all ways and Merlin finally allowed himself to admire all of Arthur. As he kept his gaze in place, Arthur took himself in hand and moved forward and Merlin could see and feel Arthur lining himself up before slowly pushing forward.

At first there was just pressure; Arthur's cock felt big, but there was little resistance, but then Merlin's muscles decided they didn't like it and rebelled and then there was pain. Arthur stopped moving as soon as he tensed, pulling back just a fraction.

"Relax," Arthur told him in a tight, controlled voice, "it will fit."

When Arthur moved forward again there was more pain and Arthur pulled back a little, but the third time it was less and then the fourth and on the fifth Merlin felt his body give in a way it never had before. He gasped as Arthur slowly slid into him and he felt stretched and full and just about perfect.

It was difficult to explain, even in his own mind; he had always thought of sex as physical no matter what romantic notions women spouted about it. Love happened and sex was a part of that, but he had always thought of it as a happy consequence, a physical pleasure that would be fun, but at that moment he realised how wrong he had been. He felt the physical pleasure alright, but there was something else about the act, something that made his blood burn and his magic sing and it was more spiritual than physical. That it was Arthur above him and in him, touching him so intimately affected him far more than the mere physicality of it all. It was the ultimate surrender and he began to tremble at the enormity of it all.

"Are you alright?" Arthur asked, clearly having trouble maintaining his own control.

Merlin nodded.

"I love you," his mind said, but he could not speak, all he could do was gaze up in wonder.

Arthur began to move then, slowly at first, but gradually building in speed and force and Merlin began to get lost in the physical pleasure of it all. It wasn't comfortable, in other circumstance he thought he might not have found such a sensation pleasant, but something about the whole situation was amazing, mind blowing, and he gave himself to it completely. Physical pleasure combined with the magic in his body, taking him higher and higher and he really felt like he would explode. He didn't know how long this was supposed to take, how long Arthur could keep thrusting into him before they both came apart, but when Arthur bent down and placed a kiss on the mark over his heart it was irrelevant.

It was as if Arthur had completed a circle of power and Merlin arched up, crying out loudly as his magic exploded through him. His body reacted by reaching for the completion it had been chasing and he felt hot liquid hit his stomach and chest as his seed issued forth from his body and waves of pleasure broke over him. Arthur must have felt something as well, because he heard Arthur give a strangled cry before burying himself deep in him, shuddering and letting go as well.

Reality undid in that moment for Merlin, undid and then reconfigured around him and Arthur, as if, for that instant, they were the centre of everything. The focus of time and existence was on them and nothing else as if the eye of the universe was looking at only their union. It made the physical irrelevant and the forces moving through Merlin seem like power beyond imagining, but it could not last. When Arthur finally moved, carefully pulling out of him and collapsing to the side, the moment ended and what was real reasserted itself.

Merlin found himself sprawled on the bed, panting quietly at the exertion with Arthur by his side. He ached in places he had never thought to ache and the odd random muscle in his body was jumping from time to time as if just to make him notice it. He felt spent and sated and lethargic and he wasn't sure he ever wanted to move again.

"What did you do?" Arthur sounded as dazed as Merlin felt.

"No idea," Merlin replied after a few moments of deciding which order to put the words in.

"That was ... umm," Arthur seemed to be having a little trouble with words as well, which was a blessing at least.

"M'know," Merlin agreed and made a clumsy grab for the covers that had been thrown out of the way.

Before they'd started he'd had a vague plan of reciprocating at some point, but the idea of any time soon had fled him and given how still Arthur was lying beside him, he thought Arthur was probably on the same page. Pulling at the covers he did his best to cover them both.

"Sleep now," he said as the lethargy began to creep into his brain as well, "talk later."

Arthur didn't usually agree to anything without saying at least something, but it seemed Arthur was in total agreement because all Arthur did was help pull the covers the final distance and then move closer to Merlin. They would have things to talk about, but words didn't really matter, not with what Merlin knew in his heart and he was pretty sure he fell asleep with a dopey smile on his face.

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Chapter 6 Balance of Power

It was Merlin's first feast where he was not serving Arthur as his manservant and to his shock he found he had been given somewhere to sit. He was on the end of one of the lower tables, about as close as he could be to Arthur without actually sitting on the same table. According to Arthur, having him lurking about like a normal guard would make people nervous, so Uther had made arrangements to allow him to take part in the feast and talk to people.

One of the barons, the one who had brought the players with him, had already returned to his home with his retinue and whatever agreement had been made with Uther, but the other Baron, Cedric of somewhere or other that Merlin had missed, was still in residence and was leaving the next day. According to Arthur, Cedric drove a hard bargain and had also been very interested to see the outcome of Merlin's trial. With that all done that just left the feast and then Baron Cedric and his party up and leaving.

Merlin was up for a feast, especially since, firstly, he was actually a guest rather than serving at it for once and, secondly, he was beginning to feel completely well again. His shoulder made itself known every now and then, and his arm was not quite as strong as it should have been, but it was nothing he couldn't ignore. He was sat next to Gaius and opposite a woman called Eve who was someone's Aunt visiting from some town Merlin couldn't pronounce. She seemed to find him fascinating and kept asking him about love spells while he kept claiming ignorance even as she pointed out how useful they would be in finding Prince Arthur a wife. Merlin didn't actually follow her logic, but then he rarely did with the womenfolk.

The two tables down the other side of the hall were where Baron Cedric's people were, along with some of the knights. They seemed to be enjoying the feast as well. Merlin had the feeling Cedric, on the top table next to Uther, was not enjoying the feast as much and found him fascinating as well, but for very different reasons to Eve. There was definitely tension in the air every time the man looked in his direction, and there seemed to be a few others who agreed with him.

Uther was a strong king, of that there was no doubt, but Merlin couldn't help feeling that not everyone liked this decision. There were only a few, but he could still sense it. It was just something he was going to have to live with, after all Camelot was not used to dealing with such things as he when they did not involve the chopping block or a pyre.

As Merlin did his best to not look as if he was uncomfortable he saw Morgana suddenly stop talking to Cedric's lady wife and place her hand to her throat. He turned to look properly and realised that Morgana seemed to be in some pain.

"Gaius," he said, trying to be discrete about it; "there's something wrong with Morgana."

Gaius looked up as soon as he spoke and from the frown that immediately appeared on Gaius' face, Merlin did not think this was just nothing. He hurriedly moved off the bench to let Gaius out as it became clear Morgana was not recovering quickly. Unable to stop himself needing to find out what was going on, he followed Gaius towards Morgana as others began to notice that something was going on.

"What ails you, My Lady?" Gaius asked as Morgana began to breathe in small gasps.

"No air," was Morgana's breathless response.

"Are you choking?" Gaius asked, but Morgana immediately shook her head and pointed to her goblet.

Merlin waved his hand over it before Gaius could pick it up, but he felt nothing from it and just gave Gaius a little shake of his head. This was not magical and all he could do was leave Gaius to figure it out and the physician picked up the goblet and sniffed it.

"The wine does not smell right," Gaius said, lifting Morgana's chin and carefully looking her over.

"Poison?" Arthur asked and it was clear that Morgana's lips were beginning to turn blue.

Gaius simply nodded.

"I need to analyse this," Gaius said as Merlin just hovered, waiting to see if he could help.

"You have no time," the voice that joined the conversation was unexpected and caused the whole hall to fall silent.

Baron Cedric was on his feet and he was glaring at them all with righteous anger in his face.

"What is this?" Uther demanded, standing and looking at the guards who went to move.

"If one of your lackies touches me, the Lady Morgana will die," Cedric said firmly and Uther held up his hand. "The poison is very rare and very precise; she has mere minutes left and only the antidote will save her."

"Why have you done this?" Uther demanded, clearly at a loss.

Merlin knew from Arthur that the trade discussion had gone well, so he could understand the king's confusion.

"Because of him," Cedric replied and Merlin once again found himself the centre of attention. "He is the greatest threat to peace seen since the purge. I will see that threat removed."

"Merlin is my bodyguard," Arthur spoke up now, "nothing more. Camelot wishes nothing but peace."

"We have seen his power," Cedric responded and Merlin could see the conviction in the man, "I will not allow that risk. He must be bound and disposed of."

It was funny, Merlin did not feel fear for himself, only Morgana, that was until the baron threw a familiar leather bag onto the table.

"I had these borrowed for the purpose," Cedric said and Merlin went cold all over.

He had survived Uther's wrath and Uther's law, but it seemed the universe believed that was not enough.

"Either he allows those to be placed on his person, or we watch the Lady Morgana die," Cedric made his pronouncement loudly and giving no room for denial.

Merlin looked at Arthur and then Morgana; he could not just let Morgana die. There really was no question. He stepped forward and held out his arms.

"Then bind me," he said, knowing that he was likely sentencing himself to death; "before it is too late."

"Merlin no," Arthur said and Merlin felt his magic stir at Arthur's words, but he could not turn back from this.

"Would you rather she dies?" Merlin asked and Arthur could not answer that.

One of Cedric's men stepped forward and pulled the braces out of their case, opening the first and approaching Merlin. He had hoped never to see the cursed things again, but he held himself still as the man placed the first one on his arm. As soon as the man went to close it, Merlin felt his magic surge and he gasped as his power flared. The edge of the brace glowed where the man tried to push it closed.

"Surrender, Sorcerer," Cedric ordered him as the resistance became obvious.

"I'm trying," Merlin said, doing his best to make his magic obey him, but he couldn't stop it.

The brace snapped open again and fell to the floor as the man holding it dropped it as if it might bite him. It then glowed all over and began to lose form; it was basically melting and from the glow that came from the bag, Merlin was pretty sure it wasn't just the one on the floor. He hated to admit it, but his magic had just decided and there was nothing he could do about it. As the only offered solution turned into a pile of metal Arthur went into action. There was the sound of swords being drawn and Arthur went straight for Cedric. Arthur was all prince and all warrior and if Merlin hadn't been so very worried about Morgana he would have been very impressed indeed. He could see Arthur's sword at Cedric's throat and the man looked afraid.

"You will give me the antidote and you will give it to me now," Arthur's voice was icy cold.

"Never," the man replied, at least having enough conviction to stand up to Arthur.

Morgana was dying in Gwen's arms and Merlin knew he had caused this, but the braces were gone; he could not do what the man wanted. His magic was bound to Arthur and he knew for a fact that no other man could bind him, his magic would not allow it. In that moment he realised that he could no longer just be Merlin, he had to be Prince Arthur's bodyguard and he finally glimpsed how it must be for Arthur all the time.

"Sire," he said, taking on the same mantle as Arthur, voice just above freezing as he found part of himself he hadn't really been aware of, "let me."

Arthur turned to look at him then and, as their eyes met, Merlin tried to convey what he finally understood. His back was straight, his face was set and he knew exactly what he had to do.

"He wanted me, Sire," he said, letting his magic flow to the surface and knowing that his eyes would change to deep gold, "let him have me."

He saw the moment Arthur understood.

"Very well," Arthur said and took a step back.

In as casual a gesture as he could, Merlin held out his hand and with a word and a flick of his wrist he lifted Cedric into the air, letting the man just hang there.

"The antidote," he said simply and walked so that he was standing at Arthur's shoulder.

"I will die first," Cedric replied, still brave even as Merlin's magic held him in place, but Merlin could see the cracks.

He kept his face completely impassive, hiding anything he was feeling, but he let his eyes harden.

"How would you like to die?" Merlin asked and moved his fingers subtly, making Cedric sway in place. "The Lady Morgana is a light in this dark world, Baron, I will do anything to see her well."

He stressed the anything.

"I can peel the skin from your body inch by inch," he said, making an invisible wind glide down the side of Cedric's face, "and keep you alive, unable to scream through every moment. Or I can break each bone in your body one at a time, crushing them to dust as you hang there unable to move. If the Lady Morgana dies, so will you, but not for a very long time."

Merlin was not a vicious person at heart; he preferred life to death and joy to sorrow, but he could play a part when he needed to. This man, all of Camelot in fact, needed to know that he was no longer the same, no longer just the manservant of the prince. He had power and he was Arthur's man; now the enemies of Camelot would know that he was willing to use it. Looking Cedric directly in the eye he let his power squeeze just a little bit and he saw realisation dawn in the baron's face.

"My wife's hat," Cedric said, suddenly very willing to cooperate, "I secreted it there without her knowledge.

Arthur and two guards descended on the poor woman, who passed over her headgear as quickly as she could manage, while Merlin held Cedric exactly where he was.

"We have it," Arthur said, producing a small bottle. "Gaius, quickly!"

As Gaius took the vial and went to Morgana's side, Merlin finally began to release his hold on the now terrified baron. He knew Cedric wouldn't be the only one looking at him differently either, but he turned and gave Uther a deferential little bow before moving to Arthur's side as two guards took Cedric off his hands. Gaius, with Gwen's help, was carefully tipping the contents of the small bottle down Morgana's throat and he could feel the tension in Arthur as they waited.

Even as he watched he could see it beginning to work as the blue colour began to leave Morgana's lips and he saw her beginning to relax. As the pain lines began to vanish from Morgana's face he still felt the desire for revenge curling around inside him, but he quashed it easily; Morgana would be alright, that was all that mattered.

"The Lady Morgana needs rest," Gaius said after a few moments of checking and looked to Uther, who simply nodded.

Merlin could have used the same magic he had with Cedric to lift Morgana and move her, but he held back as Arthur went to help instead. He could only imagine he had looked something similar after the trial as Arthur lifted Morgana into his arms and went to follow Gaius to Morgana's rooms. It was all very human and just what the court needed and Merlin followed at a short distance.

There was nothing he could do now, well nothing Gaius could not do just as well and as Gaius and Gwen made Morgana comfortable in her rooms, he and Arthur hovered.

"Merlin," Arthur said in a low whisper when it finally looked as if Gaius was just fussing and Morgana was going to be fine, "do you really know how to strip a man's flesh bit by bit?"

Not quite how he had expected conversation to return.

"No," he replied honestly, "but I'm a quick learner when I need to be."

Arthur gave him a long appraising look then and finally nodded.

"I noticed that," was the short response and that was where the conversation ended because Morgana chose to wake up.

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Merlin spent that evening helping Gaius while Arthur sat with Morgana as she recovered and they did not return to what was now, basically, their rooms until late. It had been a day full of revelations as far as Merlin was concerned, but Arthur seemed to have just taken everything in his stride. Apart from the one tiny exchange, it was too short to be called a conversation, Arthur had spoken to him very little about the incident.

Arthur did have a new manservant, but Arthur has shooed the young man off to bed hours before, so Merlin started to help Arthur undress without even thinking about it. It wasn't that Arthur couldn't dress and undress himself when he needed to, it was just comfortable for Merlin to do it and it felt far more normal than thinking about what had happened during the day.

He had removed Arthur's outer tunic and was about to kneel down and help Arthur remove his boots when Arthur's hand came up and cupped the side of his face. When he looked up, Arthur was regarding him with a very serious expression.

"Cedric tried to take you away from me today," Arthur said in a voice so low that Merlin could barely hear it.

"Morgana was the only one ever in danger," he replied, a little unsettled by the intensity in Arthur's eyes.

"That doesn't matter," Arthur told him, stroking the side of his face slowly with his thumb; "his aim was you and you would have let him have you if it would have saved Morgana."

It was almost an accusation, but not quite; they both knew they would sacrifice themselves for others, it was part of who they were and why they matched each other so well.

"I can never let that happen, Merlin," Arthur told him, voice suddenly intense, "I cannot lose you."

Arthur's other hand came up then and rested over his heart.

"I feel this too," were the words that made Merlin's breath catch in his throat.

He had seen Arthur looking at the dragon on his chest, but until now Arthur had never really spoken to him about it. It had been a silent reminder of what Merlin had done in pledging himself to Arthur, but to know it affected Arthur as well changed everything.

"I can never leave you," he said, knowing it in the depth of his being; "no matter what my head tells me, I can't do it, my magic won't let me. I didn't melt the braces deliberately my magic just did it; the only human being who can ever bind me is you."

"And I never will," Arthur said, bringing their heads together so their foreheads touched, "I am glad those wretched things are gone; no one will ever bind you again, Merlin, on that you have my pledge."

That meant more to Merlin than he could express, because he knew that Arthur would never break his word. Only Arthur could ever have asked that of him again and now he knew that moment would never come. It lightened the air between them and Merlin realised that he had been carrying a weight he hadn't even been aware of. He looked into Arthur's eyes seeing only sincerity there and he wanted to open his mouth and say "I love you", but he knew he didn't need to. Then the moment broke as Arthur smiled.

"I never knew you were such a good actor," Arthur told him, but did not increase the distance between them; "I almost believed you would do those things to Cedric."

A small voice at the back of Merlin's mind said: "I would have for you," but he just smiled back.

"I'm a bit slow," he said, turning it into a joke, "but I finally realised that I have to pretend to be less of an idiot."

That made Arthur's smile morph into a grin, but a fond one.

"Well pretended," Arthur said and then leant forward to kiss him lightly on the lips.

Merlin was pretty sure it was supposed to just be a quick peck before they finished getting ready for bed, but, almost without their conscious consent, it deepened and Merlin found himself winding his arms around Arthur. This was still so new, but it felt so right and right about then Merlin needed to know that his actions that day had not changed this. However, Merlin was unwilling to let Arthur lead everything this time.

Pulling back slightly he broke the kiss and looked into Arthur's eyes and then slowly lowered himself to his knees. They had touched each other in different ways since that first time, explored each other's bodies and each other's reactions, but there was something Merlin had been thinking about that he wanted to try. He had heard other men talk about how a mouth could be even more incredible than another body when applied to cock, although he had no first hand experience, and he wanted to be the one giving Arthur pleasure this time.

He was all too familiar with Arthur's clothes and it did not take him long to unfasten Arthur's tunic and move it out of the way before unlacing Arthur's breeches and carefully lowering them slightly. Arthur did not try to stop him or to

help, but, where Arthur's hand was resting on his shoulder, he felt Arthur's fingers tighten a little as he pulled out Arthur's cock.

Arthur was already half hard given their kissing and as Arthur's cock twitched in his hand, becoming fuller as he watched, he felt himself smiling. That Arthur trusted him this much despite what he was and what Arthur had been taught all his life filled him with a joy he could not explain and desire caused his own body to throb as he licked his lips. Leaning forward, he darted out his tongue, tasting the very tip of Arthur's cock and recording the memory in his mind. It was not a taste that was quite like anything else and it occurred to him that he could become addicted to it very easily.

"Merlin," Arthur whispered his name with a reverence he didn't think he deserved, but it did encourage him and he opened his mouth, sliding his lips slowly over the head of Arthur's cock. "Oh god," was Arthur's moaned response.

Merlin sucked experimentally, after all he didn't really know what he was doing, and he took Arthur's low gasp as a positive response and tried again, running his tongue along the underside of the head as well. That time he actually saw Arthur's thighs tremble and he smiled around his prize. He was in control now and he liked that he could give Arthur as much pleasure as Arthur gave him.

His performance was not perfect, after all he was learning, but he used Arthur's reactions to tune himself to what Arthur liked and it took a while, but Arthur was grabbing onto his shoulders and barely standing on his own sooner than Merlin would have expected. He did not really want this to end, but he also wanted to see Arthur come undone, so he pushed Arthur on as well as he could. He sucked and hummed, a combination he had discovered made Arthur tremble from head to foot and unlike the first time when he had pulled back a little, this time he drove on.

"Merlin," Arthur spoke in a hoarse broken but urgent tone, "I'm ..."

Merlin didn't need telling, he knew what Arthur was about to do and he did not try and stop. He took as much of Arthur into his mouth as he could and employed his tongue firmly to the slit of Arthur's cock and then Arthur was shuddering and groaning and spilling his seed down Merlin's throat. Far from being repelled, Merlin was entranced and he suckled on Arthur's cock until there was nothing left and Arthur was begging wordlessly for him to stop. The connection between them was warm and happy and Merlin only pulled away reluctantly, coming to his feet as Arthur urged him to.

He did not kneel unless he had to, but he would kneel for Arthur any time Arthur wanted him to. Eye to eye he could see the emotion in Arthur's soul and it made him so happy.

"I love you," he said, forgetting himself in the moment and letting the words that always hid behind his smile escape.

What surprised him was that Arthur did not pull away as he had expected, shrugging off the womanly sentiment. Instead Arthur pulled him close and cupped the side of his face with one hand.

"You own the heart of a prince, Merlin," Arthur said in little more than a whisper, "keep it safe for me."

And Merlin smiled.

"Always, Sire," he said and accepted the gentle kiss Arthur placed on his lips.

Things had changed so much in scant weeks and Merlin was sure fate was playing with his life, but for the first time he didn't mind at all.

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It wasn't until the next day that Merlin really came into contact with anyone else and then it became clear things had changed. He finally understood and he knew that this had to be, but he didn't really like the way people looked at him now. The servants who had shown fear before no longer seemed to feel that, but they showed him deference, almost as if he was noble born. With one act he had changed his own status in a way Uther had been unable to do.

He was no longer Merlin, Arthur's manservant and a bit of a fool, he wasn't even Merlin, the slightly inept sorcerer whom Uther had made Arthur's bodyguard, he was Merlin, Arthur's right hand and defender of Camelot.

Even the nobles appeared to look on him differently as he found out distinctly when he slipped into the council chamber to be with Arthur after having delivered a note from Arthur to Morgana. All eyes turned to look at him as he took up his usual position and he inclined his head as he was acknowledged. People had looked on him as a curiosity before, but now he knew they were looking at him as something far more useful. He was lowly born so they looked down on him, but he was no longer something to entertain them, he was a person.

"The trade routes through Cedric's lands are very important," one of the council members returned to the point he had clearly been making, "this could put those in jeopardy."

"And anything short of execution will put this kingdom in jeopardy," Uther responded shortly and Merlin thought they might have been talking about this for a while. "Cedric tried to kill one of my family and retribution must be seen to be taken."

"Morgana almost died," Arthur agreed with his father. "It would be seen as a great weakness if Camelot did not demand justice. Someone else would try again."

For once Uther and Arthur seemed to be on the same page and Merlin couldn't help but see their point.

"Could the debt not be repaid in tribute?" someone else suggested.

It was interesting how justice for powerful men was not meted out so quickly and finally, but Merlin could also appreciate the delicate nature of the situation.

"I will not have my family nor my rulings challenged," Uther said very firmly.

Merlin was pretty sure that if Uther had had his way, Cedric would be dead already, but that the king was controlling his wrath for the good of the kingdom. It could not be easy, Merlin was sure.

Another of the councillors jumped in with another idea, pretty much the same as the previous, just worded differently and Merlin settled in for the long haul. This was obviously going to go round and round for a while until Uther ran out of

patience. He let his mind wander while watching the way both Uther and Arthur were reacting and he had no doubt one of them would put their foot down sooner or later. Arthur was very protective of Merlin and Morgana so he wouldn't have been shocked if Arthur was the first to decide that enough was enough.

Arthur could be all avenging warrior when he wanted to be and an execution was not a battle, but it was part of a political war. If this could have been settled with swords rather than an axe it would have been far easier, and then it hit him.

"Trial by combat," Merlin heard the words pop out of his mouth before he managed to stop them.

He was not here to speak, he was here to stand there and be a bodyguard, but, as ever, his mouth was ahead of him. Everyone in the room was suddenly looking at him. Uther did not look pleased.

"This crime..." Uther began to say.

"No, Father," Arthur stepped in quickly, "Merlin may be right. The punishment for what Cedric did should be the headsman's axe, we all know that, but this way gives us a far better outcome. It would allow Cedric to die with honour and for peace to remain between our people and his. We are not ready for war. This is a solution fitting to the very delicate situation in which we find ourselves, and Camelot will neither be seen as weak nor tyrannical."

Uther was looking at his son very carefully.

"And who would face Cedric on the tournament field?" Uther asked simply.

"I would," Arthur replied and Merlin didn't really like that part of the idea, but it made sense; Arthur was Camelot's champion. "I will be your champion and Morgana's."

The fact that he didn't count and the whole situation was really about him actually amused Merlin, but he had the sense to keep his mouth shut this time. He was well aware Arthur was his champion as well.

"Sirs," Uther said, looking at the rest of his council, "what say you about my son's chosen course?"

That was another thing that Merlin found amusing; the way a noble could take a servant's idea and decide it was their own.

"It is a very persuasive argument," was the first reply and there was a rumble of agreement from the rest.

No one was going to say outright that this was the only way to go about things, but it was clear where favour lay.

"Very well," Uther said after a few moment's thought, "for Camelot I will offer this traitor an honourable death. Have him brought here; if he accepts we will set the combat for tomorrow morning."

With Uther's command everyone leapt to do the king's bidding, but Merlin found himself the centre of the king's attention. Arthur may have successfully taken the trial by combat as his task, but it was clear to Merlin that Uther, at least, was very aware who had suggested it. Uther's gaze was very speculative, very unlike

Uther in fact and Merlin hoped that he wasn't going to find himself in trouble again.

"Come, Merlin," Arthur said, walking past him, "I need to practice."

Merlin paused for just a moment under Uther's stare and then followed Arthur out of the room. One day he was going to learn to keep his mouth shut.

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Given how Arthur looked in his armour, Merlin wasn't sure he would have had enough concentration to do any magic even if he had needed to, so it was a good thing he didn't need to. He was decked out in the plainest tunic he now owned, since Arthur had had the gall to have someone go through his wardrobe and steal all his old clothes. Arthur promised that they were still safe, for nostalgic purposes, but that he wasn't having them back until he could be trusted not to try and wear them every day. The plain tunic was not a protest to this treatment, even though Merlin had protested loudly, it was actually Arthur's idea.

Everyone was going to notice him, that much was for sure, but Merlin had agreed that it would be better if he was as unnoticeable as possible. He was in brown and blue and he still felt over dressed, but Arthur assured him his clothes looked functional. The bond mark was covered up mostly, but it could just be seen through the laced neck of his shirt, just in case people needed reminding.

A man was going to die today and, given the very delicate political situation, Merlin was happy to go along with anything Arthur asked of him, which was why he was standing by and watching Arthur's new manservant make sure Arthur's armour was in place, rather than doing it himself. He had an irrational need to check that everything was being done correctly himself, but, as Arthur had pointed out, it was no longer his place and it looked better if he just played bodyguard. No one could then claim Merlin had tampered with the armour in any way.

Arthur gave him a smile, but he found it difficult to smile back. He knew Arthur would be victorious, but he was still worried because this was all because of him. It was fear that had stared this and he only hoped that with the solution being implemented the whole situation would end.

"Go and help Gwen look after Morgana, Merlin," Arthur told him with a nod towards the stands, "I doubt very much there will be a magical attack between now and the start of the battle."

Even though Morgana was still weak, she had insisted on being at the combat and Merlin wanted to object, but he knew Arthur was trying to distract him.

"Given your history, Sire," he said, while bowing his head to acknowledge the command, "I would not be so sure."

Arthur gave him a very good raised eyebrow for that and he turned to go. He did not want to leave Arthur's side, but he made himself do it anyway. Arthur was fully capable of taking care of himself. In fact, Arthur was probably the person most capable of dealing with any physical threat that Merlin knew, but he was still allowed to worry.

Since Morgana was not well, she was already seated, where as Uther would make a grand entrance a little later, so Merlin went to stand with Gwen, where his friend was hovering behind her lady.

"Smile, Merlin," Morgana said, looking at him and smiling as if it was just any other day, "we must be seen to be confident in Arthur's abilities or the people will be nervous."

Something else that Merlin was coming to understand was that where servants could be invisible, nobles and those the population found interesting could not. Most people found him very interesting at the moment so people were always looking. Doing as he was told he smiled as if Morgana had just said something delightful.

"I have new respect for you, My Lady," he said, still smiling, "I do not know how you keep this up."

"Practice," Morgana replied and looked back out to where Arthur was making final checks on his armour.

Baron Cedric was on the other side of the field of battle, decked out in armour just as fine, but where Arthur's stance was strong and proud, Cedric did not look so confident. It was clear everyone knew what the outcome was supposed to be. Merlin glanced over at the second stand where Cedric's family were sitting and he could see the resignation in the man's wife. Only one person seemed to be clinging to hope and that was Cedric's twelve year old son. The boy would soon be a baron, and Merlin could wish it no other way, but Merlin also wished that the boy could have been spared seeing what had to happen.

There was a fanfare, everyone rose to their feet and Uther walked grandly to his throne. When the king sat so did every one else, except Merlin since he was standing behind Morgana and Gwen, and Arthur and Cedric came forward. Given quite how nervous he was feeling, Merlin tuned out the speech Uther gave about what was going on and just did his best to look calm and confident like Morgana had told him to.

"The sorcerer's power over human movement has been proven," were the words that made Merlin tune back in, "I demand he be removed."

"Baron," Uther said in a very cool, patronising tone, "you are in no position to demand anything."

"Would you deny me a fair trial?" Cedric returned and lifted his head in defiance.

Merlin realised that he was once again the centre of attention and wished that he could just disappear.

"If I may, Your Majesty," Arthur said, stepping in before things could escalate.

Uther was clearly annoyed, but nodded anyway.

"Merlin," Arthur spoke to him directly.

"Sire," Merlin replied and bowed slightly, playing his new role as well as he could.

"You are forbidden to interfere in anyway," Arthur told him even though they both knew he never would in the first place. "Unless a dragon or other mythical beast

flies over that hill to endanger Camelot you are forbidden to act or speak. Do you understand?"

"Completely, Sire," Merlin replied and bowed again.

Then he looked at Cedric. To challenge him now would be to question Arthur's honour and it seemed Cedric was not that stupid.

"Prepare yourselves," Uther commanded and both Arthur and Cedric put on their helmets and hefted their shields.

It was time for the fighting to start.

"Begin," was the only word Uther spoke and then both men moved into action.

Merlin had lost count how many times he had seen Arthur fight, well actually he hadn't, he had every single time committed to memory, but he wasn't admitting that to anyone. Arthur was all power and grace and Merlin let his eyes follow every move. It was clear from the beginning that Arthur was the stronger fighter, but Cedric was on trial for his life and the man fought well. So well in fact that it was hard for Merlin to remain silent as he watched the fight to the death.

It was exciting and more than a little arousing to see Arthur in all his battle-trained glory and Merlin had no outlet for it. All he could do was grip the back of Morgana's seat and watch, silent and still as Arthur fought for the honour of Camelot. His thoughts ran more along the line of dragging Arthur off the field and into a quiet spot to get him out of his armour more than doing anything to help the battle along, however, and he was more than a little glad that his tunic covered the front of his trousers. The longer the battle went on the harder it was to keep still.

Arthur was a flurry of movement and where Cedric was clearly tiring, Arthur looked as if he could keep fighting all day. Merlin wanted to shout and to cheer along with the rest of the spectators, but he knew that at the first word out of his mouth someone would accuse him of helping Arthur. He could do nothing except stand there and watch the magnificent display of skill. How anyone could ever think Arthur needed help, let alone wanted it, was beyond him.

Having seen enough tournaments to know what to look for, he knew the moment Arthur saw an opening. Arthur whirled, a blur of silver and red, bringing his sword down and around and slicing into the back of Cedric's leg, right where there was no protection at all and the Baron went down. However, the man was not completely beaten and as Arthur's sword returned for the killing blow, Cedric's own came up and blocked it before the man fell over sideways onto the ground.

It had not been the one sided battle everyone had been expecting, but the hush that came over the crowd showed that they all knew it was over. Arthur had his sword raised, waiting, and Cedric tried to stand, to meet his death like a man, but it became all too clear, all too quickly that Cedric was unable to regain his feet. Merlin held his breath as he watched Arthur slowly lower his sword, look to the stands and then back at Cedric. The man was done, that much was clear and all it would take was one blow.

"You are defeated, Baron," Arthur said in a firm and loud voice that carried all across the field of combat to those watching.

"End it," was all Cedric said, holding his head up bravely.

Merlin had thought the man a coward with the way he had used Morgana to cover his own plans, but his opinion was changing, as it seemed was Arthur's. It dawned on Merlin then, just how afraid of him Cedric had to have been to use such tactics.

Arthur raised his sword and pointed it at Cedric's neck and then Arthur did something that renewed every hope and dream Merlin had for his prince. Rather than draw back for the killing blow, Arthur simply nicked Cedric's neck and stood back.

"Remember, Baron," Arthur said in the same proud, sure tone, "today you died for your crime against my family. Build yourself another life carefully."

Out of the corner of his eye Merlin saw Cedric's wife collapse in tears, clutching her son to her, but he never took his gaze off of Arthur. The crowd cheered as Arthur turned his back on his defeated opponent and walked to stand in front of his father.

"I request permission to leave the field, Your Majesty," Arthur said formally, bowing to his father as King rather than parent.

Uther's face was as cold and impassive as ever, but Merlin could tell that the king was pleased. Camelot was victorious and he had no doubt that Uther realised the kingdom now had a real hold over Cedric.

"Honour is satisfied," Uther replied, equally as formally; "you have made proud the name of Camelot. Permission is given."

Then and only then did Arthur spare him a glance and as Arthur bowed and went to walk away, Merlin hurried to follow his master. He had every intention of shooing away Arthur's new manservant and giving Arthur a rub down himself. There was no way he was letting someone else touch Arthur, not after such an arousing battle.

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Chapter 7 Epilogue

"You need to learn to defend yourself properly."

Merlin looked up from the book on court etiquette that he was reading, quite surprised by that statement.

"I can defend myself," he replied, looking at Arthur who was standing in their archway with a pensive expression on his face.

"Not with magic," Arthur clarified, which made more sense. "You need to be able to defend yourself if your magic is cut off again. I know you say your magic won't let it happen, but I want you to be prepared, just in case."

It was a chilling thought, but one Merlin had considered nonetheless. He was sure his magic would not consciously allow itself to be caged in such a way again unless by Arthur's hand, but if he, for example, was hit on the head, he wasn't sure what the outcome might be.

"I would not be strong enough to lift a sword if it was," he pointed out the obvious flaw in what he thought Arthur was thinking.

"I know," Arthur replied, striding towards him, "that is why you are going to learn to use knives, throwing knives to begin with."

Merlin found the book taken out of his hands and closed.

"Um, are you sure that's a good idea?" he said dubiously, "I'm not really very good with sharp objects."

"Oh that I know only too well," Arthur replied, but smiled. "Never fear, we will improve your sword work as well, but knives now. I have had a target set up in the practice field."

And that was it, the decision was made and Merlin didn't even bother arguing, he just followed Arthur when his prince led the way towards the practice field. As promised there was a straw target set up ten feet or so from a small table, which appeared very out of place in the middle of the open space. On the table there was a box, a quite ornate box and Arthur immediately opened it. Merlin wasn't sure he had ever seen so many perfect blades next to each other, or any such finely crafted handles. He knew for a fact he had never been asked to clean them.

"My father gave me this set for my thirteenth birthday," Arthur said, pulling one of the knives from its velvet bed, "they are well weighted and will be good for a beginner. I am having a set made for you, but these will do until they are ready."

Merlin looked at the set of knives, the one in Arthur's hand and then at Arthur; he was a little overwhelmed.

"A set made?" he asked, very surprised by that.

"Of course," Arthur said and handed him the knife; "under my tutelage you will become an expert and you will need your own blades."

Merlin felt very much out of his depth, but he was nothing if not resilient. He changed his grip on the knife in his hand and felt its weight as well as he could and then squared his shoulders.

"Okay," he said, deciding that he might as well put his mind to learning, because Arthur was determined and there was no point in resisting the irresistible, "what do I do?"

Arthur smiled at him for that response and took one of the other knives and moved them so they were facing the target.

"Hold it quite loosely like this," Arthur instructed him, showing him the proper grip, "then just aim and throw. Look at the target, not what you are throwing and centre yourself on it."

Moving with his usual grace Arthur then demonstrated and hit the target just off centre. It was annoying how easy Arthur made it seem, but Merlin soon found out how difficult it actually was when he threw his knife and missed the target completely. The way Arthur looked at him was not impressed.

"Guess we have a lot of work to do," Arthur finally said and handed him another knife from the box.

When his third knife went to sail past the target as well, admittedly closer, but still not good, Merlin had had enough and flicked it back towards the target with a little bit of magic.

"That's cheating," Arthur said, standing there with his hands on his hips.

"It worked didn't it?" Merlin protested and went to pick up the six knives they had used, just so he didn't have to miss spectacularly again quite so soon.

"Yes, but the idea is to make sure you can do this if you have no magic," Arthur told him and just waited for him to bring the blades back. "Once you can do it without the magic, then you can practice tricks with it. Now let's try again; I think you're holding the knife too tightly."

After three hours of continuous tutelage, Merlin thought his arm might be about to fall off, but he could at least now hit the target, most of the time.

"Good," Arthur actually praised for a change as Merlin buried a knife in the outer part of the target, "there may actually be hope for you yet."

Merlin grinned at that and wondered if Gaius would have any of the salve that he usually used on Arthur. It would be nice to be able to move his arm come the evening.

"Now collect up the knives and put them back in the box," Arthur told him, "we'll move on to light sword work now."

Light sword work was done with straw body protection and lighter than normal blades, but that didn't stop Merlin's mouth from dropping open. His arm felt like it was going to cease at any moment.

"Your father changed his mind didn't he," he said, just standing there rather helplessly, "and you're trying to kill me, right? That has to be it."

Arthur seemed to find that response amusing.

"Stop complaining, Merlin," Arthur told him and began to walk off to the other side of the field, "this is light compared to what I usually put my knights through. I won't ask that of you, just yet."

Sometimes Merlin wondered if destiny hated him, but he eventually shrugged and then went to retrieve the knives. If Arthur knew what was good for him there was going to be a good hot bath in their future once this ridiculous play fighting was done.

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Uther stood on the battlements and looked down over the training ground where he could see the two small figures of his son and Merlin. Had one of his councillors suggested, a few weeks ago, that he would suffer a sorcerer in his court he would have had them flogged, but reality was far stranger than imagination it seemed.

The man, little more than a boy really, practising beside Arthur was the most powerful being he had ever met. He had seen Nimueh's power up close and been awed by it, but he had always known that it was magic sought by a human will

and likewise it could be overcome by human will, with Merlin he was not so sure. If Merlin had not allowed himself to be bound, Uther was not sure any could have forced it. He was all too aware that he had been allowed to stand in judgement by the will of a boy, not by his will alone.

It was love that had created his hatred of all things magical, love that had revealed the corruption to him, but it had also been love that had shown him there were exceptions to every rule. It was not words that had made him come to his final decision; it was what he had seen in the eyes of those he had spoken to about Merlin and it was what he had seen in Merlin's eyes.

What he had seen was simplicity itself: nearly every person who knew Merlin well loved him, whether they admitted it aloud or not. He had seen it in them and he was not blind, most of all he had seen it in Arthur. He had no doubt that his son would do his duty for Camelot, but it was obvious to all with eyes who held Arthur's heart. Uther remembered a love like that and he could no more bring himself to take it away from his son than he had wanted it taken away from him.

But that was not all. If it had been necessary he would have taken the hard choice, but Merlin seemed to exist outside all rules, natural and unnatural. He had long seen the devotion in Merlin for Arthur, but now he saw it for what it truly was, a love as deep as that which Arthur held for Merlin, a love as deep as his own had been for his beautiful Igraine.

Uther worried for his kingdom, for his people and for his son. It was the burden of the king to do so, but although he would admit it to no man, Merlin's presence lightened that burden a little. Merlin gave him hope that his son would be all that his promise showed, that Arthur would become the great king Merlin proclaimed he would be. So much faith and so much love made his heart a little lighter and he silently wished them well before turning and walking back into the castle.

On the outside he would play the king who tolerated a sorcerer to save his son so that he could keep his kingdom in order, but on the inside he wished them joy and far longer together than he had been permitted with Igraine. His wonderful, beautiful Igraine who had been the victim of his need for a son and the dangerous will of a sorceress. Some things he could never have back, but there were others he was willing to safeguard for the future.

The End