

## Secrets Revealed

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# Secrets Revealed

by [heartsdessire456](#)

## Summary

After all the years spent together, after all the times Merlin had saved Arthur's life, after so many close calls, he never expected to have his magic revealed in such an obvious and dramatic encounter.

## Notes

Sorry for the crappy title. The canon-au is explained as follows:

- Arthur is King
- Most of the knights are mentioned
- Gwen and Arthur just isn't a thing (not that I don't LOVE them, it just didn't fit this and was too much trouble to explain around)
- The council members are completely made up
- No real setting in the timeline, just somewhere in canon post-crowning as king, no mention of Morgana, and minus Arthur/Gwen being a thing.

After all the years spent together, after all the times Merlin had saved Arthur's life, after so many close calls, he never expected to have his magic revealed in such an obvious and dramatic encounter.

Arthur and only a few of the knights left alive were surrounded, trapped in the courtyard by the advancing army as they fought to protect the citadel. Merlin saw the black, winged beasts that much resembled dragons, but smaller, circling lower as the army advanced. He heard Arthur's cry of 'on me!' to collect his men, but he saw that there was very little hope of a dozen knights to hold off an army of three-hundred strong and beasts attacking from the sky. He took a breath and made his decision.

He ran from his hiding place beside the stairs, charging into the courtyard. He heard someone shout his name- it sounded like Gwaine- and then saw Arthur turn and spot him. "MERLIN! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!" he shouted, waving at him. "What, do you not see the army and winged monsters?!"

Merlin stood still for a moment and looked at Arthur, who was a solid thirty feet away. He looked at his dirty face and hair, his golden locks stained black with soot. His armor was dented, his sword was bloody, and his demeanor screamed 'exhausted'. Merlin thought he looked the same way he did the day Merlin realized that the then-prince was so much more than just another prat royal that his destiny called for him to protect.

Arthur was his friend. Merlin trusted him with his life, with everyone's lives. He had become a great king in their years together and Merlin wished for nothing more than to live to see everything he had worked towards come to pass. He wanted so badly to see magic practiced freely, he wanted to see Arthur unite the lands of Albion, and he wanted to do so while still at his king's side.

He also wanted to remember the long glances, the brief touches, and the gentle smiles he had grown to know and love over the recent months. He had no idea when things changed, but in the recent months, Arthur had looked upon him the same way he had looked upon Arthur for years. He could never act on the feelings he suspected they both shared with a secret so large hanging over his head so the looks, touches, and smiles never went anywhere, but Merlin enjoyed them all the same.

And now, Merlin was about to forfeit it all for his love of Camelot and his king.

"I'm sorry," Merlin called out to Arthur, eyes glancing over the knights- his friends- as he realized they would soon be responsible for his arrest and subsequent execution. As he turned to face the oncoming army, he only hoped Arthur would find the mercy to behead him rather than burn him.

He closed his eyes and then summoned everything he could, raising his hands to either side. He opened his eyes and settled them on the front row of the approaching army and, in fit of rage, didn't even need to mutter an enchantment. He simply cried out, allowing all of his anger at himself, at the attackers, at Arthur, and at everything in general to morph itself into a wave of energy that swept across the approaching army and rocked the beasts from the sky

with one, single long scream from his part. He crumpled to his knees as a white light blast away from him, only avoiding the knights and civilians of Camelot as it swept across the open area and sky. As the beasts fell from the sky, Merlin crumpled to the stone ground, whimpering as he felt his magic still going, targeting the attacking army only.

The last thing he heard or saw before darkness swallowed him was the cries of the knights as they took the chance and defended the castle.

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When Merlin's consciousness began to return, he felt hot all over apart from a cold, wet feeling on his forehead. He couldn't open his eyes yet, he was too weak, but he could hear voices around him.

"I cannot believe it was Merlin all along," Arthur's voice said. "We knew there was a sorcerer in Camelot but... *Merlin*?!"

There was a sigh and Merlin felt something touch his face, a soothing coolness. "I wish so badly it wasn't," Leon's voice spoke. "How will the others react when it comes time to sentence him, Sire? You must remember, most of the knights consider him our brother, even if he is not a knight himself."

"Wait," Gwaine's voice offered, and Merlin felt the coolness leave his face. "*Sentencing*?! He saved our lives!"

"Gwaine, he is a sorcerer- a powerful one by the looks of it- and magic is illegal in Camelot," Leon said simply. "The king cannot be seen allowing a sorcerer to go free simply because he's our friend-"

"Princess, you better speak up, because you don't seem to be jumping in to say Leon is wrong," Gwaine said in a warning tone.

Arthur sighed. "Gwaine, you cannot call me that, I'm your king-"

"Then I liked you better when you were my Princess!" Gwaine snapped and Arthur groaned.

"You idiot, you are a knight of Camelot, you cannot keep speaking to me in such a way- you swore your loyalty to me and you're bordering on treason," Arthur warned and Gwaine chuckled darkly.

"You forget, Arthur, I only swore loyalty to you because of *Merlin*. The only reason I saved your sorry arse when we followed you when you went after the Fisher King is because Merlin asked me to-"

"Gwaine, he is your *king*-"

"Merlin is my friend, Leon. He was my friend long before Arthur was my king," Gwaine argued.

Leon huffed. "The only reason you and many of the others are knights is because Arthur was willing to overlook the first rule of knighthood, you wouldn't be a knight if it wasn't for Arthur-"

"Actually, if both of you have to know, I'm nobility! My father was a knight of Camelot, I *chose* to be a peasant! I liked it. I had a much easier life living by gambling and spending all my time in taverns, not being bossed around by you damn fools," he spat. "Merlin is the reason I gave you the time of day at the beginning, Arthur. You are my king and I am loyal to you for that now, but don't you ever think an oath of loyalty to a kingdom will make me betray the first real friend I ever made from Camelot." Gwaine cursed. "Arthur, think of all the times you went against your father's commands to do the right thing. I'm not your son but I will do the same damn thing if I have to. *Nobody* is burning my friend at the stake for saving our *lives*," he said firmly.

Merlin managed a weak smile, barely opening his eyes into slits. "You always were a stubborn bastard, Gwaine," he croaked and Gwaine gasped, looking down at Merlin's face.

"Merlin! You're awake, thank God," he said, replacing the cold compress on his forehead. "We thought you'd died for a bit there."

Merlin groaned, glancing around at Arthur, who was sitting on his right, across from Gwaine's spot on his left, and over at Leon, who was standing near Arthur. "Did I stop them?" he asked softly and Arthur's lips thinned as he nodded. Merlin nodded. "Good."

"Merlin," Arthur sighed, grinding his palms into his eyes. "Merlin, you are so stupid," he cursed. "Why did you do that?! I can't work out if you were waiting all this time to betray me or not, because if you were meant to kill me, you had ample opportunity and no reason to defeat an approaching army *on your own* with magic. But on the other hand, only an idiot would've stayed in Camelot if he was magical and agreed to be a *servant*."

Merlin chuckled weakly, choking and coughing on the sound. "Well, you've always said I wasn't the brightest candle in Camelot," he said and Arthur just shook his head.

Gwaine looked at him grimly. "They're calling for your execution," he said and Merlin nodded, swallowing hard.

"I understand," he said, blinking as a tear streaked from the corner of his eye to his hairline.

Gwaine just stared. "You *understand*?" he asked skeptically. "Not, 'I'm not evil, you utter bastard' or 'give me a head start at least'?! " he demanded and Merlin smiled weakly, tears filling his eyes.

"It doesn't matter if I'm evil or not. Magic is magic, according to the rules of Camelot. More innocent people have been murdered for their magic than evil ones' ever have or will be," he said and Arthur closed his eyes, looking away. "And what would I do if I ran, Gwaine? I couldn't go home, Arthur knows my mother, he couldn't get away with not searching there for me. I have nowhere else to go. I'm not like you, I can't roam around. I cannot do as my father did and run and hide in a cave when Uther ordered his men to go to Ealdor after him." Merlin shook his head slightly and swallowed hard, fighting a whimper. "I don't regret it. My

purpose in Camelot was to protect Arthur. If I didn't use magic today, you would've all perished and Camelot would've been lost. I did my duty and I'll accept the consequences," he said simply.

Gwaine glared at Arthur, who just stared at Merlin, face pale. "If you plan on executing him, you best go ahead and order a second pyre be built," he threatened and Leon stepped forward, a warning hand on the hilt of his sword.

Arthur put his face in his hands. "All of you just... shut up!" he ordered, glaring at Gwaine and Leon. "Did we all forget that *I* am the king of Camelot? Nobody is going to be executed, damn it," he said, looking at Gwaine then down at Merlin. "Merlin... please," he whispered, reaching out to ruffle his sweaty, dirty black hair gently. "Tell me you have never betrayed me," he said and Merlin shook his head.

"My magic was meant to serve you," Merlin whispered tiredly, eyelids drooping. "My destiny has always been to protect you, my lord. I suspect from the moment Uther brought about the Great Purge, the powers of the heavens set about finding a way to right his wrongs. It was probably something so subtle as a breeze guiding my father down one path towards Cenred's kingdom rather than towards Mercia that was the turning point to make sure that one day, your father's wrongs would be righted."

Arthur frowned. "What does this mean?" he asked, only to stop when Merlin didn't respond. "Merlin?" He reached out and touched his face, sighing when he realized Merlin had dropped out of consciousness again. "Damn it, Merlin," he whispered and Gwaine shot him a look. Arthur rolled his eyes. "Did you really think I'd execute him?" he asked, looking back to Merlin's face where he stroked a finger across his cheekbone. "I am not my father, Gwaine. If he truly did not betray Camelot or me, he will not suffer any punishment. Even if he did, I'm almost certain I could not kill him. I'd probably just banish him," he admitted and Gwaine snickered.

"Ah, the old 'banishment' one. Fun, that," he said and Arthur smiled before looking back to Merlin.

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Arthur had to go oversee some of the work to clean up the damage and make orders for repairs to the lower town after the battle ended, but when he returned to Gaius's chambers to see about Merlin, he saw Gwaine still sitting near Merlin's bed through the open door into his chamber. "Gaius, has there been any change?" he asked, looking into the room before turning back to the physician at his work table.

Gaius sighed. "None at all, sire," he said in a dark tone. "I fear if we cannot control his body fluctuating in temperature, we may lose him," he admitted and Arthur paled.

"I don't understand, he woke shortly before," he said and Gaius nodded.

"Yes, but only for a bit. He does have moments where he comes back to himself, sire, but for the most part he is unconscious as his body temperature goes up and down." He looked into the room himself and shook his head. "At the moment, he is freezing."

Arthur frowned. "Freezing? I thought the body only developed fevers?"

Gaius looked up at Arthur warily. "It is his magic, Arthur, not normal human reaction to his exhaustion. His magic is what exhausted him and it is what is struggling now."

Arthur just looked into the room, noticing Gwaine was looking back. "But how is he doing magic if he is unconscious?" he asked, walking away from Gaius to go to Merlin. He entered the room and Gwaine just shook his head with his mouth set in a grim line.

"There's been no change," he said, then looked back up at Gaius, who had followed Arthur. "He's still as cold as ever," he said and Arthur sat in the empty chair next to Merlin, propping his elbows on his knees to look at the blankets piled on top of Merlin.

Gaius sighed and shook his head. "I'll fetch more warmed blankets, but I fear I'm running out--"

Arthur waved a hand. "Can he be moved?" he asked and Gaius and Gwaine both looked at him. "Gaius, can we move him?"

Gaius looked at him as if he were mad but nodded. "Yes, he has no injuries other than the exhaustion that has taken him--"

"It's drafty here and there aren't adequate supplies to keep him warm," he said decisively. He stood and knelt somewhat, tucking the blankets more firmly around Merlin. "We'll move him to my chambers," he said, sliding his arms under Merlin's shoulders and knees gently, standing up with ease as he shifted Merlin closer, holding him against his chest.

"I'll get him," Gwaine offered but Arthur shook his head.

"I can carry him, you carry whatever Gaius needs you to bring," he said, clutching Merlin close as he turned and carried him through the door feet first, edging down the steps sideways.

Arthur knew he was getting stares but he cared very little as he carried his servant- who most knew now was a sorcerer- through the castle in his arms, ignoring every glance turned his way. He was the king and he did not have to answer to anyone. Arthur ordered the guards to open the door to his room for him and he carried Merlin inside and immediately took him over to his bed. He had just removed the thin, rough blankets Merlin was in and tucked him into his bed, pulling his warmest winter furs from the trunk at the foot to cover Merlin, when Gaius and Gwaine arrived. "Gwaine, stoke the fire," he said without inflection.

Gwaine nodded and went to do as he was told, putting Gaius's supplies on the table. "Sire, you did not have to do this for him--"

"He saved Camelot single-handedly, Gaius, I will do anything to help him," Arthur said firmly, leaving no room for argument. "Now tell me, what is going on? How is he doing magic when he's barely even breathing?" he asked, looking down at his friend as he lay unnaturally still, his lips nearly blue with the cold.

Gaius smiled sadly as he mixed up a concoction at the table. "Merlin is not doing the magic himself," he said and Arthur gave him a perplexed look. "My lord, most sorcerers with any real amount of power utilize tools of the Old Religion. They often come in the form of staffs or rings or stones- something that can harness the power of the Old Religion's magic and be channeled into casting spells, or making into enchantments and mixed into poultices and elixirs." He looked at Merlin. "Merlin, however, was born with magic."

Arthur looked up. "*Born* with it?" he asked and Gaius nodded.

"Most sorcerers come into possession of powerful objects or train to draw the power of the Old Religion into their doing. Very few besides the Druids are born with the ability to do magic." He gestured to Merlin. "Merlin did not learn to harness and control his magic for a long time. In fact, he did not study magic at all until he came to Camelot. What you saw today was no different from the magic Merlin did as a child- instinctive reactions- which is much more dangerous as he cannot control how strong the enchantment is."

Arthur shook his head. "But he came to Camelot years ago. Surely he's trained enough, I mean did you SEE what he did today?!"

Gwaine walked back over. "How could that have been instinct? He leveled an entire army--"

"Exactly my point," Gaius said. "Merlin is foretold to be the most powerful sorcerer of all times. His magic is strong. But unlike sorcerers with magic crystals or objects of power, Merlin's magic draws from his body itself, from his life force. There are no spells that can level an entire army, especially one that did not at all affect the people of Camelot, though they were all mixed together in the path of the spell." Gaius shook his head darkly. "He saw his friends about to die and his magic was instinctive and unchecked. He collapsed and is struggling to survive now because his magic went too far and did too much for his body to handle. While his magic is strong, Merlin's body is not."

Arthur looked over at Merlin with a lump in his throat. "What can we do?" he asked.

Gaius shook his head. "There is nothing we can do but hope he makes it through the resurgence of his magic rebuilding inside him. We need to keep him warm when he is cold, keep him cool when he is feverish, and any times he awakes, we need to try to get him to drink water and a thin broth if possible. His body is very weak, his strength is leaving him. If we can help his body regain some strength to hold out a while longer, his magic should stabilize in less than a week. If he can survive the next few days, he should recover."

Gwaine looked at Merlin then swallowed. "We'll need more wood for the fire- Arthur?" he asked quickly, eyes wide as Arthur began to remove his armor, haphazardly dropping it to the chair near the table.

"We have to get Merlin warm," he said, struggling to haul his chainmail off over his head with how tired his own body was after their fight and the ensuing council meeting. He took off his gambeson and then, without any thought to the others in the room, stripped away his tunic as well. He glanced back as he kicked off his boots and saw Gwaine and Gaius watching him with ill-concealed confusion. "Body heat is better than fire or furs," he snapped, throwing his boot down, only to immediately lose the anger in his movements as he



gently slid into the bed beside Merlin, pulling Merlin up against his chest as he sat back against the pillows, pulling the covers and furs high around Merlin's shoulders. He curled his arms around Merlin and held him to his chest, hissing at how cool Merlin's skin was.

"I'll go get the wood," Gwaine said, clearing his throat before leaving the room to go fetch more wood for the fire.

Gaius came over to him with a vial. "Gently tip his head back. This should help keep him from using as much of the moisture in his body so quickly so that we can at least attempt to prolong his body's strength in case he does not wake to give him water soon."

Arthur allowed Gaius access and then pulled Merlin's face into the crook of his neck, curling his hand around the back of Merlin's head, pressing his lips to Merlin's freezing forehead. "He is so cold," he whispered, closing his eyes. "Merlin," he whispered, voice pained.

Gaius just gave him a knowing look and headed back to the table to work on another concoction.

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Arthur woke from a half-dozing state when he felt Merlin shifting in his arms. He opened his eyes, only to gasp when he saw blue eyes looking up at him. "Merlin?" he breathed, looking up only to see Gaius asleep at the table. Arthur looked back and saw Merlin staring. "Merlin, can you hear me?"

Merlin swallowed. "Are- am I dreaming?" he asked and Arthur shook his head. "Then... am I in the King's bed with him naked in it with me?" he asked and Arthur offered him a weak smile.

"Hey, I'm not naked, just topless," he said, earning a tiny smile. "Here." He leaned out to grasp the cup of water on the table near the bed, sitting up better to gently press it to Merlin's lips. "Drink this," he whispered and Merlin parted his lips, allowing Arthur to slowly give him small sips at a time.

Merlin swallowed with a weak breath and let his head fall to Arthur's arm. "I- I've committed a crime. Why are you caring for me?"

Arthur swallowed and pressed a hand to Merlin's head, feeling how he was now going from cold to warm. "You saved Camelot," he said, then smiled uneasily. "And you are Merlin, what would I be without my most trusted friend?"

Merlin gave him a lazy grin. "Oh, you'd die in a week, I'm sure. You have no idea how many times I save your royal arse," he said and Arthur managed a smile.

"About that," he started and Merlin shivered, hand weakly closing in the covers. "Merlin, why did you do that?" he asked, looking at him. "You nearly killed yourself. You could still die if we can't care for you," he said and Merlin blinked.

"I told you, my magic was always for you," he said and Arthur shook his head.

“But why? I think you should maybe start at the beginning.” He shifted Merlin some and tried to give him more water before he started. Merlin drank a few sips before turning his head.

Merlin sighed and looked up. “There is far too much to try to explain, but I can try.”

Arthur nodded. “Gaius told me that your magic is different from most. You were... born this way?” he asked and Merlin nodded. “You aren’t a Druid, though,” he said and Merlin swallowed, nodding.

“I have a theory,” he admitted and Arthur nodded. Merlin shifted, sitting up a little straighter before falling back against Arthur’s chest, panting.

“Easy,” Arthur whispered. “Don’t wear yourself out,” he said, lifting Merlin with his own strength to help them sit up straighter. “Just talk, I’ll hold you up.”

Merlin nodded, breathing hard as he settled. “Your birth is what started the Great Purge,” he said and Arthur bit his lip and nodded. “You know the story. Your mother could not conceive and your father made a deal with a High Priestess so that they could have a child. He did not know the price was your mother’s life. He loved your mother so much that her death at the hands of magic steeled his heart. After that, he showed no mercy. He had everyone with even a suspicion of magic about them executed. Women, children, old people, everybody. From the smallest Druid babe to the oldest sorcerers in the realm.” Merlin looked up with slightly clearer eyes. “The Old Religion needs balance. All that magic taken from the world at once, it had to go somewhere. The only ones left were whoever escaped, so there were not many people left who had magic. The Druids probably became much more powerful in their exile for it. However, there was a man who escaped to Cenred’s land.”

Arthur gave him an understanding look. “Your father?” he asked and Merlin nodded.

“My father was the last Dragon Lord,” he whispered and Arthur’s eyes widened.

“The man in the cave was-“

“Yes,” Merlin said, smiling sadly. “I did not know until before you and I left to find him- Gaius told me- that he was my father.” He swallowed. “My mother was never married, but I was often told my father died when I was just a small child. The reality is, Uther discovered Balinor had fled to Ealdor, not far across the border into Cenred’s kingdom, and he sent men after him. Balinor never even knew my mother was with child when he was forced to flee into the wild, never to return.” Merlin looked up with clearer eyes. “I suspect that all of the magic went into me. I was born with a destiny and I would need to be the most powerful sorcerer to ever exist in order to fulfill it.”

Arthur swallowed. “I am your destiny,” he realized and Merlin nodded.

“I did not know when I came to Camelot. I was sent here because I could not control my magic and my mother feared that the older I got, the more powerful it got, the more of a chance I would be discovered.” He winced. “Cenred would have heard tales of a sorcerer in a

village in his kingdom, even if Ealdor was outlying and inconsequential, and who knows what would have happened to all of the people there if he came to find me.”

Arthur shook his head. “Why would he do that? Magic is free in Cenred’s kingdom-“

“Free for his using,” Merlin said, looking up. “I would have been forced to do his evils for him. So, my mother sent me to Gaius. She knew him from her time in Camelot as a girl. He also was the one who helped Balinor escape to her care, so she knew she could still trust him.”

Arthur looked over at the sleeping old man and chuckled. “He helped you learn to control your powers,” he realized and Merlin nodded. “So wait, all those times you were accused of sorcery-“

Merlin grinned. “I was never the one who really did whatever was done, but they weren’t *wrong*,” he said and Arthur rolled his eyes.

“Why would you become a servant if you were so powerful? Why would you allow people to put you down, to hurt you, to demean you if you were able to stop them with a blink of an eye?” Arthur asked incredulously.

Merlin frowned. “Because magic is meant for good. Magic is a tool to be wielded, not a force for evil, Arthur. And as I said, I discovered not long after I came here that you are my destiny. I was not yet even your servant when I discovered that I was meant to help you become the greatest king ever- ‘the Once and Future King’ from the stories- and help you bring magic back to Camelot.” Merlin chuckled. “I’ve saved your royal backside more times than you could imagine. I do not even know the count any longer, I stopped after eight,” he admitted and Arthur just raised an eyebrow. “And that was within months of becoming your manservant,” he pointed out.

Arthur shook his head. “All these years... all the things you’ve done with no praise, no recognition. How often have you been punished for things that weren’t your fault? How many times have you saved us all, only to be dismissed as just another boy?”

Merlin smiled up at him. “More than I can count,” he admitted, then giggled softly, leaning his head against Arthur’s arm weakly. “Do you know, I’ve only actually ever been inside the tavern to stop sorcerers, fetch knights, or bring the inn keeper things from Gaius?” he asked and Arthur stared at him in shock. “I’ve never once spent the day there drinking like you always thought I did.”

Arthur chuckled in amusement. “And you let me put you in the stocks all those times to hide what you were really doing?” he asked and Merlin nodded, eyelids fluttering. “Merlin?”

Merlin managed a weak smile. “I’m alright. Just- just tired,” he whispered and Arthur felt of his head, biting his lip at how he felt warm now.

“I’m going to take away the furs and get out of the bed, you’re getting feverish again. Gaius says your magic is trying to rebuild itself after you basically let it all free to stop the army,” he said and Merlin nodded.

“I’ll be alright.” Arthur gave him a bit more water before easing out of the bed, lying Merlin on the pillows. “Arthur?” he called as Arthur tossed away the furs and Arthur came back to his head, looking down. Merlin blinked blearily, barely fighting sleep. “I promise you, only to help you-“ He shivered. “Never- never betray-“

“Shhhh, I know,” Arthur said, catching Merlin’s hand. “I know, Merlin. You are my most trusted friend, you could never hurt me,” he said and Merlin whimpered. “Just sleep, I’ll be here to care for you-“

“You will not, you need to go care for your people,” Merlin argued. “Promise- Promise you- Let Gaius take care of... me...,” Merlin drifted off to sleep and Arthur swallowed hard, clutching at his hand.

“Alright, I’ll be King for a bit, you just rest,” he said, pressing his lips to Merlin’s forehead before standing. “Get better for me, my friend.”

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“The lower town’s fires have all been extinguished and there were many fewer completely destroyed homes than suspected,” Sir Leon finished, and Arthur nodded.

“Thank you, Leon,” he said as Leon took his seat. “We were lucky,” Arthur mentioned and Geoffrey spoke up.

“What of the sorcerer? We have received no order to construct a pyre or gallows, did he die in his own attack?” he asked.

Arthur shook his head. “He is in the care of the court physician, he will hopefully make a full recovery-“

“Why is there hope that the sorcerer will recover?” Lord Edas spoke up. “Forgive me, your majesty, but is it necessary for the sorcerer to be in good health to be executed-“

Arthur lifted his head. “It should be clear by now that there will be no execution.” He lifted his quill. “The sorcerer killed our enemies. He protected the citadel- possibly with his life at this point- and I see absolutely no need for a further trial. He acted to protect Camelot, no differently than my knights and I did-“

Lord Carnathian slammed a hand down. “Sorcery is against the laws of Camelot! There are no exceptions!”

“You saw how powerful this sorcerer is, my lord, even if he is on our side now, that amount of power cannot be allowed to exist in this world-“

Arthur raised his hand. “Shall I remind you who exactly is the king of Camelot?” he asked. “I am going to end the ban on magic within the kingdom so there was no crime committed here.”

“Your father would’ve never made such folly-“

Sir Leon stood. "King Arthur has made his decree and his word is law," he said in a firm voice, silencing the council. He nodded to Arthur and sat again. "Let him speak."

Arthur smiled a small smile. "Thank you, Sir Leon." He shifted in his chair, putting his elbows on the table. "The sorcerer will not be punished, magic shall not be banned any longer, and as long as he recovers, Merlin will be appointed a position among my council as Court Sorcerer."

Lord Edas stared. "You would trust this conjurer to join the council? Is he not a peasant?" he challenged. "My lord, he will use this position to infiltrate, gain your trust, and strike you down."

Arthur narrowed his eyes. "Merlin has been my personal servant since he came to Camelot as a boy, many years ago, when I was little more than a boy myself." He leaned back, clasping his hands on the table. "He has had many years during which he alone had access to my chambers, he served me my food every day without a taster, he poured my bathwater, he mended my armor, he has traveled alone with me many places, he has tended my wounds, he has rescued me, saved my life, and made multiple sacrifices for me so that Camelot would retain its Prince, and eventually, its King." He tilted his head. "Do you not think that if he wanted to supplant me and destroy this kingdom, he has had ample opportunity?" He shook his head. "I suspect now that many times that I have survived seemingly impossible situations, he is to thank. We all owe him our respect and our gratitude for saving this city single-handedly when all else was lost."

He stood and closed his ledger. "Should he recover from saving all our lives, he shall be honored and respected and my word is final," he said simply, adjourning the meeting of the council on those terms.

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When Arthur entered his chambers, he found Gaius gone. In his place, it seemed, Gwen was caring for Merlin while Gwaine and Percival sat at his table, chattering away and eating his fruit. "I could have you in the stocks for putting your muddy boots on my table," he warned Gwaine, who just tossed his hair and winked at Arthur.

"Gotta say, Princess, that's one even I haven't tried before," he said and Arthur rolled his eyes.

"Gwaine, there is a lady present--"

Gwaine chuckled. "C'mon, Percival may be very delicate but I wouldn't call him a *lady*--"

"I'll show you 'delicate'," Percival warned and Arthur gave them both a somewhat disturbed look when Gwaine winked at Percival and Percival blushed.

"Well I'm scarred for life now," Arthur said as he approached Gwen, who was sitting on the edge of the bed. "Sorry about them," he said and she just smiled in amusement. He walked to the foot of the bed and looked on, propping a hand on the post. "How is he?" he asked softly.

Gwen sighed, looking up with a grave expression. "His fever is quite high. Gaius had to go try to find herbs that might help bring it down. He had to put that amulet around his neck because his fever was causing him to lose control of his magic," she said and Arthur saw a disk lying on Merlin's sweaty chest.

"Should've seen it!" Gwaine called over. "A pitcher of water exploded and the water inside was turned to wine! Damnedest thing I've ever seen, and I've seen a LOT in my days," he said. "Elyan ran out screaming like a girl-"

"He did not," Gwen chastised, glaring. She looked up, nodding. "It did happen, though."

Arthur rubbed a hand over his face. "Has he woke to drink more water or have any sort of broth?" he asked and Gwen shook her head.

"I'm afraid not. He has not woken up since I arrived this morning and with this fever, what little water he might've had in the night will have been sweated out." She stood to go grab a cloth and cool water from the table. "Gaius fears if he does not wake, he could die within another day like this, should we fail to lower his fever."

Arthur bit his lip. "Thank you," he said, then nodded at Gwaine and Percival, lowering his voice. "What's the real story as to why my knights have taken to sitting around in my chamber?"

Gwen looked at them then lowered her voice as well. "Gwaine does not trust that Merlin will be safe. He told the others as much and they all care for him, he is their friend. I don't doubt they are staying here should he need defending against someone attempting to kill him while he's ill."

Arthur nodded. "I do have my concerns," he admitted. "Many in the council who were at my father's side in the fight against magic are calling for his execution. They did not take it well when I announced that, should he recover, I am going to appoint Merlin as a member of the council so that when I lift the ban on magic, we will have a sorcerer to consult on matters dealing with magic."

Gwen gasped. "All of that at once?!" she asked and Arthur nodded, looking at Merlin. "Arthur, do you feel that is wise?"

He rubbed his chin. "I was blind. We were all blind, Gwen." He looked to Merlin again. "It took seeing what he did, speaking to him since, and realizing what all he has done in the past to understand that magic is not evil. It cannot be only evil if the most loyal subject of Camelot has been using it for all these years to ensure Camelot was safe." He shook his head. "I only regret it took this long for me to see truth. Magic is just another tool. It is no different to condemn someone for having magic as evil than it would be to condemn every person with a sword as a murderer." He swallowed. "Merlin has suffered all these years hiding this, Gwen, when he has saved my life more times than anyone knows."

Gwen shook her head. "I do not doubt Merlin's loyalty. I simply worry such a large change would be hard to convince the council of," she said and Arthur shook his head.

"I have the loyalty of my knights and of my people. The council has no power if it comes to them trying to overthrow my decisions as long as I have the backing of my people." Arthur walked around and climbed onto the empty side of the bed, kneeling beside Merlin as he took the cold cloth from Gwen. "Let me," he said, wetting it again in the basin near the bed before laying it out over Merlin's fevered brow, wincing when Merlin shivered. "I know," he whispered, soothing the cloth over Merlin's face and down his neck. "We will save you, Merlin." He lowered his lips to Merlin's forehead, ignoring whatever expression Gwen may be giving him. "It's a more accurate way to test how warm his face is," he defended and she gave him an amused look.

"Of course," she said, smiling as Arthur continued to try to cool Merlin. "I hope we can help him."

Arthur shook his head. "We have to," he said simply. "Not many days in the years since I first met Merlin have I not had him by my side," he said softly, looking down at his friend. "Through every terror you can imagine, Gwen, Merlin has been at my side. He has stood by my side when all others fled. He has protected me with his life many times. Merlin has proven to be the most brave and valiant man I have ever met and he has done so in the role of a servant when all this time he has had the power that, should he have wanted, he could've taken the throne from me or my father before me without any chance of being beaten." He cupped Merlin's face, stroking a finger along his cheekbone. "I do not know what I could be without him with me, Gwen. If I lose him, I am not sure how I would go on."

Gwen bit her lip and looked from Arthur's eyes to Merlin's face. "You are a very loyal friend for a king, Arthur. I am sure Merlin knows that."

Arthur sighed. "I hope so."

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Arthur returned from giving orders for patrols only to open his chamber doors to a flurry of motion. He froze in place as he watched Percival helping Gwaine rip off his clothes while Gaius rushed to carry furs towards the hearth where Gwen was stoking the fire furiously. "What is happening--"

"ARTHUR!" Gwaine looked up just as Percival literally *tore* his tunic from him. "Get naked, fast," he said, rushing over to the fireplace, dropping to the floor where Gaius was piling furs. Arthur gasped when he saw Merlin lying there with blue lips and did not pause, allowing Percival to help him tear the laces from his shirt as soon as he had shucked his jacket so that he could strip it off his head, rushing over to kneel beside where Gwaine was trying to arrange Merlin in his arms and pull furs over him as well.

"What's happening?!" Arthur demanded, looking up at Gaius as he worked his way into the furs and sheets and cried out when he felt how cold Merlin's skin was. He moved closer so that his arms and Gwaine's were crossed around Merlin's body, holding him between their bare chests.

Gwen stepped back so that Gaius could wrap furs around the three men. "I fear his body temperature has dropped dramatically very quickly. I was feverish not an hour ago and now he is nearing death with his coldness. Any normal human would have died by now," he said.

Gwen turned and ran for the door. "We need wood!"

Arthur looked up. "Percival! Get wood, Guinevere run and fetch us hot water and more blankets from anywhere you can." He shivered as Merlin cooled him. "Gwaine, I know it's cold but don't let go of him," he said and Gwaine chuckled, trying to hide the panic in his eyes.

"I don't necessarily enjoy ice against my chest, but Merlin's the oldest friend I have," he said, gritting his teeth as a wave of cold rushed over them both. "I won't let him die if I can help it."

Arthur nodded, looking at Merlin's face from where his head tipped back on Gwaine's shoulder. "Merlin?" he whispered when he saw his eyelids fluttering. "Merlin, can you hear me?"

Merlin made a soft sound. "A-Arthur?"

Arthur breathed softly. "Merlin, you're going to be alright," he said giving him a weak smile. "Do you hear me? You will be alright."

Merlin moaned softly. "I- I can't move," he whimpered and Arthur swallowed hard, glancing up at Gwaine fearfully.

"Just hush, save your strength--"

Gaius interrupted. "Give him this," he said, handing Arthur a goblet of warm broth. "He has to drink or he'll die," he said and Arthur nodded.

"Brace him," he said to Gwaine, who nodded, holding him steady. "Merlin, drink this," he said, placing the cup to his mouth. Merlin drank a few swallows before he gasped, eyes fluttering again. "No, no, please, please, Merlin," he pleaded, gritting his teeth. "Merlin?"

"Arthur, I can't," he breathed and Arthur shook his head.

"You have to!" He put the cup to his mouth and made him have a few more mouthfuls. "Please Merlin, for me, do it for me." He leaned closer, pressing his lips to Merlin's ear as he tried to tip a bit more for Merlin to drink. "I cannot lose you," he breathed, eyes clenched shut as he pulled back some to give Merlin just a small bit more before he turned his head. "Merlin--"

"Arthur, I can't," he breathed, panting as he lay back against Gwaine. "I took more than I thought I could but I just cannot. No more."

Arthur let his head fall to Merlin's shoulder. "Please. Merlin, it will warm you. It will preserve your life until you recover--"

Merlin groaned. "Arthur, I am not recovering," he said, giving him a weak smile. "We all know I'm getting worse."



And Arthur did know. It had been four days since Merlin's sacrifice and he barely awoke through his cold and then his feverish days. He was dying and Arthur could not bear it. Arthur shook his head. "Merlin, no," he breathed, pressing their foreheads together. "You do not understand, my friend. I would not be the king I am if it were not for your council all these years." He bit his lip. "What would I be without you to tell me when I'm being a prat?" he asked.

Merlin chuckled weakly. "Gwaine's probably willing to take over, aren't you, Gwaine?" he asked and Gwaine chuckled sadly, biting his lip as he watched the look of pain cross Arthur's face. "You'll be alright," Merlin said softly, looking up at Arthur with tears in his eyes. "Promise me one thing," he said, looking directly into Arthur's eyes. "For me, Arthur, promise--"

Arthur nodded. "Anything."

Merlin smiled weakly. "Don't hire George again, you'll die of boredom."

Arthur burst into weak laughter, confusing everyone with their conversation. "Never, Merlin. Never in a thousand years." He swallowed hard. "But I'd rather you get well for me, please?"

Merlin hummed tiredly. "I have one other request, and Gwaine, pretend you can't hear this?" he asked, ignoring Arthur's words. He looked up and a tear slipped down his cheek. He lowered his voice to a whisper and let their foreheads fall together again. "I've been at your side for many years, Arthur Pendragon. I have been the only person you could trust at times. I have--" He swallowed hard. "I have loved you without hesitation for so many years. I only ask that you never forget that I sacrificed so much so that you could be the greatest King ever and so that you could let magic be free again. I make no dying request to do that now, but just promise me that you will think about all I've done for you and how I did it and then imagine what else could be done if there were more allowed to be like me--"

Arthur smiled weakly. "Magic is free again, Merlin. I signed the decree this morning. I had to, after learning how wrong I was about magic." He swallowed, looking into Merlin's eyes. "Please, I need you at my side still. I've only just begun to realize how much I need you." He whispered softly, voice catching. "I love you, Merlin."

Merlin smiled sadly. "Then stay strong when I go," he whispered, voice slurring as his eyes slid shut again and his head fell to Arthur's chest.

Arthur gasped. "Merlin? Merlin?!" He shook him lightly, then looked up at Gaius. "Gaius, please," he begged and Gaius nodded, going to shuffle through his bottles of remedies. Arthur gasped, tilting his eyes to the ceiling, blinking hard before looking back. He met Gwaine's eyes and swallowed when he saw the pain in them. He looked away. "Don't you dare think me weak," he whispered and Gwaine shook his head ever so slightly.

"I would never, sire," he said seriously, looking down at Merlin, once again unconscious. "No man with any decency and honor would think someone weak in this situation."

Arthur turned to Gaius when he came over and gently tipped something into Merlin's open mouth. "Gaius, you know what I signed this morning. Is there anything to save him?" he

asked seriously.

Gaius hesitated. "There is one way that I know of, sire. Only one for now, but I can look for more--"

"What is this way?" he demanded. "If it can save him, I don't care."

Gaius hesitated, standing back some. "It involves soul-bonding, sire. It would bind two people together in a way that they basically share a life-force. It is a permanent spell that cannot be broken apart from death. However, it is not an option for Merlin--"

"And why not?" Gwaine asked. "Is his magic the problem?"

Gaius sighed. "I fear it is more a lack of someone to bind him to. You must understand, the process is not foolproof. It is possible both could die from Merlin's condition should it succeed but the other life be too weak. There are certain requirements to be met by those bound and even if it does work, they will both be saddled with the misfortune of suffering echoes of any injury or illness the other encounters for the rest of their natural days."

Arthur looked up. "What are the requirements? Surely one of us can do it--"

"The person has to be of the same gender, so Guinevere is not an option, the person has to be of a close age, so I am not an option, and I would suggest Gwaine, but you are a knight of Camelot. Your very life revolves around injuries and brushes with death," he said to Gwaine, who cringed.

"If I were to be killed and we were bound, it wouldn't be good would it?" he asked and Gaius shook his head.

"He would survive, but he would feel an emptiness that would never be filled because you would take a portion of his soul with you when you die, and vice versa," he explained. "Soul-bonding was always very uncommon because of the dangers."

Arthur nodded. "Sounds like I'm a perfect candidate then," he said decisively. "I'm only a few years older, we are side by side in most every battle so our chances of injury are the same, and we are in close quarters so often any illness will be caught either way between us. I plan to have him at my side forever so if he died, I would already suffer an emptiness to never be filled again."

Gaius shook his head. "Sire, you cannot possibly be the candidate. A normal death you would not die with him but as his current illness is his own magic, if he died you could die as well and forgive me, but you are a young king without a queen or heirs. I cannot allow the only person available to rule Camelot to risk their life--"

"Call upon Geoffrey," Arthur interrupted. "Have him draw up a Decree of Succession. I shall name my successor and then we can do the spell," he said firmly. "Do not argue with me on this, Gaius. If you can do this and it is any chance to save him, we must try."

Gwaine watched as Gaius reluctantly nodded and left before turning back while they waited on Percival and Gwen's return. "Arthur, what are you doing?" he asked and Arthur clenched his jaw.

"What I can to save my best friend," he said and Gwaine sighed.

"You have no heir, Arthur. Who would possibly gain council approval should you die and he be named King out of nowhere?" he asked and Arthur smiled gently.

He shook his head with an amused grin. "Actually, he would gain more approval than a true heir would, I suspect," he said, then nodded. "Leon, of course. He has been a faithful knight of Camelot since I was only in training. He is my most seasoned knight, he had my father's trust, he is a member of the council already, and he would do me proud should he have to take my place."

Gwaine shook his head. "Arthur, don't do this--"

Arthur leveled him with a glare. "What should I do? Let him die?" he asked. He closed his eyes and leaned his chin against Merlin's head. "We both know that I'll probably never have a queen or heirs, Gwaine. I don't *want* it. There is a great chance the Pendragon line ends with me and I do not really care," he admitted. He shook his head. "My father would have had my head if he had heard me say that."

Gwaine shook his head. "Arthur, you are the king of Camelot. Even if the line ends with you, even if you will not marry and produce heirs, you cannot risk your life to save a servant," he argued and Arthur gave him a look.

"You were willing to burn with him four days ago," he said and Gwaine shrugged.

"I'm a knight, not the king--"

"I am a man and he is just as much of one," Arthur cut him off. "Most of all he is my friend," he said, closing his eyes. "I would die for any of my friends. He was willing to die for me."

Gwaine hummed. "No you wouldn't, you'd die for him, you'd endure the loss of any friend," he said with a smirk. "Merlin isn't just a friend--"

"Oh shut up," Arthur muttered, looking away.

Gwaine chuckled. "About damn time," he said and Arthur glared. "What?! I thought there was more there way back when I saved your hide in that tavern the first day we met. Besides, why else would he have come after me just to save your sorry arse with the whole incident with the Fisher King?" he asked pointedly. "I couldn't believe he'd worry for his *master* like that. Bloody nobility--"

"Didn't you just admit the other day you were a knight by birth?" Arthur asked and Gwaine scoffed.

"Yeah but I didn't turn to that life until I let Merlin drag me into it," he said, looking at the man between them. "I really couldn't think it was some destiny thing so I thought he was

your lover on the side and he was my friend so I agreed to help him,” he said and Arthur looked away. “For what it’s worth, I grew to respect you more when I finally worked it out he really was just your friend and you still respected him that much.”

Arthur snorted. “When have I ever appreciated him the way I should, Gwaine? I have always respected him but I never believed him when it counted and for that I have paid dearly throughout my years. I only hope I am given the chance to redeem myself in the future.” He pressed his lips to Merlin’s temple. “I’ll never make the same mistakes, Merlin. Just get better for me, please.”

Gwaine looked away, giving Arthur a moment of weakness as he whispered promises into Merlin’s unhearing ear.

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Merlin had only just awoken when Gaius finally entered the chamber with the materials and spell book he would need. “I had him drink some more water,” Arthur said and Gaius gave him a nod.

“It is good you are awake, Merlin, for the spell cannot be done without your consent,” he said, watching them. “Gwaine, Gwen, Percival, I fear I must ask you to leave. I need my full concentration and Merlin will be safe for the moment,” he said and they all reluctantly left as Arthur stood and carried Merlin to the bed.

“Gaius,” Merlin croaked softly. “What- what are you doing?” he asked, panting softly as he lay with his back against Arthur’s chest on top of the bedding, only one fur wrapped around them. “How long has it been, Arthur?”

Arthur shushed him. “You were only asleep for a few hours this time, be still.”

Gaius walked over and sat the book on the bed next to their knees. “Merlin, Arthur has ordered me to perform a soul-bonding spell on you so that we can preserve your life.”

Merlin gasped. “Arthur,” he turned to look at him. “No, you cannot do this-“

“I can and I will,” Arthur argued, stroking his hair gently. “I have had the Decree of Succession signed should this fail and I am ready to proceed.”

Merlin blinked up at him. “Arthur... it’s permanent,” he breathed. “If we do this... it’s more binding than hand fasting because when one of us dies the other will suffer the loss *forever*.”

Arthur smiled weakly. “Then it is a good thing I intend to keep you at my side until the end of my days, isn’t it?” He caught Merlin’s wrist under the covers. “If you do not wish this of me, name the person to use in my place. I do not expect you to ever be more than my friend, I will never ask more from you, I only offer this on my behalf-“

“Don’t be stupid, Arthur, you are everything in my heart,” Merlin said, then groaned. “If we do this and die from my magic I will never forgive you. I’ll kick your royal arse through the gates of hell,” he grumbled and Arthur laughed.

“Then so be it,” he replied softly. “Come on, before you fall asleep again. Gaius?”

Gaius had the book open and he looked at them. “Merlin?”

Merlin nodded, swallowing hard. “Go ahead.”

Gaius nodded. “Give me your right hand, Merlin, and your left, Arthur.” Arthur caught Merlin’s right hand and pulled it from the furs, offering both their hands to Gaius. Gaius picked up a small but sharp blade. “The blood must mingle,” he explained before cutting small slices across both their palms, quickly pressing their hands together. “Hold on,” he said and Arthur laced his fingers into Merlin’s, holding for both of them since Merlin was too weak still. “When I begin the chant, do not stop me for anything. Hold him tightly, Arthur, for you will both begin to convulse but you cannot break the bond of your hands.”

Arthur nodded. “I have you, Merlin.”

Merlin blinked. “I’m so tired, Arthur, don’t let go,” he whispered, fighting to stay awake.

Arthur shook his head. “Never.”

Gaius began to read the enchantment, dipping the blade used to cut them both into a basin full of amber liquid. Arthur watched as the liquid began to glow bright red and bubble before all of a sudden a bright light filled the room and he and Merlin both began to shake violently. He held Merlin tightly, hands never coming apart. He felt a wave of heat flush over them, startling a cry from his lips only to have a frigid blast come over them before it began to fluctuate in waves, much faster than Merlin’s magic had done to him alone.

Arthur’s last thought before all went black was a silent prayer to whomever might hear that they be safely guided through their ritual so he could see Merlin on the other side of it.

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Arthur was not sure if he was waking or dreaming any of the times he was lucid until one morning he awoke the sound of birds outside his window. He groaned as he broke the surface of sleep and woke up, looking around blankly before he remembered what happened. He felt feverish still, if only slightly, so he was slow to notice he was alone in bed. “Merlin?” he breathed, only to gasp as panic set in when he realized Merlin was *gone*. “MERLIN?!” he cried out, voice not as loud as it would have normally been. When the door opened dread filled Arthur’s stomach as he just *knew* Gaius was going to come in and tell him Merlin had not survived after all.

His worry was not needed for the head that popped inside the door was black as soot, not white. “Arthur?” Merlin asked, eyes bright as he walked into the room shutting the door behind him. He put the tray he was bearing on the table and Arthur let his head fall back to the bed.

“Merlin, if you went and got that, I’ll order you be tied to the bed,” he threatened in a weak voice.

“Well now,” Gwaine’s voice said- seemingly out of nowhere- startling Arthur up onto his elbows. Gwaine sat at his desk by the window, eating an apple. “First you wanted to have him in the stocks and now tied to the bed, I knew it, it’s always the ones that seem the most noble,” he said, winking lecherously.

Merlin blushed and rolled his eyes, picking up a roll from the tray to throw at Gwaine. Arthur bit back a grin when it bounced off of Gwaine’s forehead onto the table. Gwaine simply shrugged and picked it up, taking a bite. Arthur’s eyes roamed Merlin, catching the moment he grasped the back of the chair to steady himself. He noticed that Merlin was wearing what appeared to be Arthur’s sleeping breeches and blue shirt, if the way they hung on the taller, thinner man’s body was anything to go by. “Merlin?” Arthur asked softly and Merlin sighed, standing straight so that he could shuffle over to the bed, sitting heavily next to Arthur’s hip.

“I actually just stepped out into the hall to get food from Gwen,” he said, looking tired for his efforts. He reached out and felt of Arthur’s head. “Thank God the fever has broken,” he said, smiling weakly.

Arthur fell back against the pillows. “What happened?” he asked softly.

Merlin raised his hand to show Arthur a healing line along his palm before lifting Arthur’s. “It worked. That was three days ago,” he said and Arthur gasped. “I was able to recover but then yesterday, while I was able to get up and walk and eat some, you were still unchanged. You’re just now to the state I was a day after the ritual.” He shook his head. “You selfish prat,” he said and Arthur glared in offence.

“Hey, I *saved your life* and I’m selfish?!” he demanded and Merlin nodded with a glare, though Arthur could see the mirth in his eyes.

“Yeah, you are!” Merlin scoffed. “Gwaine tell him, he’s selfish!” He smiled down at Arthur, holding his hand. “Arthur, you risked your life to save mine because *you* didn’t want to just let me die. I am one of hundreds of servants in Camelot. You are her *only* king,” he said simply. “You nearly died because you were too selfish and put your wants ahead of the needs of the kingdom.”

Arthur waved his free hand. “Wait, so I’m being lectured for doing something good and saving someone’s *life*? Really?”

Merlin rolled his eyes. “Honestly, sire, the lengths you’ll go to to keep from having to train a new servant...” he trailed off and Arthur smiled to match him.

“Yes, well... good servants are hard to come by,” he said, squeezing Merlin’s hand. “In fact, I’ve yet to have a decent servant at all-“

“Hey!” Merlin cried in offense, laughing when Arthur grinned up at him. “Prat,” he said affectionately.

Arthur’s smile receded and he pulled Merlin’s hand to his lips. “But really,” he started. “I would be no good to my people if I had lost you, Merlin. Surely you can understand that.”

Gwaine snorted. "The state he's been in the last few days says he's no good without you either--"

"Thank you Gwaine, I think you can go now," Merlin said loudly, glowering at the knight when he stood up, made a lewd face at them, then walked out. "That man--"

Merlin was cut off with a loud call from the closing door. "Don't forget to make the ropes loose enough it won't bruise when you tie him up!"

Arthur glowered and Merlin flushed. "I really have no intentions of tying you up and ravishing you. I expect nothing from you except to be my friend. I only need you to be at my side- no matter the manner in which you are there- so that I can always have someone I trust there," Arthur promised. "I do not expect anything but your loyalty, Merlin."

Merlin smiled and rolled his eyes. "You are really stupid, sire," he said and Arthur glared. Merlin stroked Arthur's hair from his face. "You told me you loved me, Arthur. I damn well expect you to keep that promise," he said, leaning down to press his lips to Arthur's forehead.

Arthur shivered, smiling up at him Merlin. "Merlin," he whispered and Merlin hummed.

"You're still pretty warm. I should call Gaius to come bring some herbs- AH!" He yelped as Arthur grabbed his arms and flipped him onto his back, leaning over Merlin while propped on one elbow.

"Maybe Gwaine's right, I should tie you down so you can't run away," he said, earning a playful grin from Merlin.

"And to think you seem so noble most days," he teased, earning a flat look. "I'm not going anywhere," he said and Arthur smirked.

"Good," he said, leaning down to press his lips to Merlin's forehead. "Merlin, I thought I'd lost you," he whispered, pressing a kiss to Merlin's temple. "You cannot imagine how it felt." He kissed a trail across Merlin's cheek, smiling as he pulled back and Merlin opened his eyes to meet him.

"I can," Merlin said softly, lifting a hand to stroke Arthur's hair back. "I have nearly lost you several times."

Arthur stroked his thumb along Merlin's cheekbone and smiled. "Then never leave my side again," he said softly, leaning in to press his lips to Merlin's. Merlin gasped softly, using the hand in Arthur's hair to pull him closer, moaning quietly as Arthur's lips caressed his slowly and gently. Arthur pulled away slightly, smiling down at Merlin. "Your lips should be outlawed," he breathed and Merlin smirked.

"Well, you can join me in breaking the laws of Camelot then," he said, leaning up to kiss Arthur, sliding his arms around the king's shoulders. Arthur moaned as he gently licked at the seam of Merlin's lips, only to falter slightly, breaking the kiss with a gasp as he fell onto his elbow. "Arthur?" Merlin asked and Arthur groaned. "You're still unwell," he said, gently

pushing Arthur over onto his back. He leaned over him and sighed. "I'll send for Gaius," he said, climbing over Arthur to leave the bed.

"Merlin, no," Arthur said, catching his hand. "Don't go--"

"I'm not," Merlin promised, pressing a kiss to his jaw. "I'll be right back, I promise. I couldn't make it all that way on my own anyhow. I'll just go outside and talk to the guards to send for Gaius."

Arthur smiled weakly. "Alright, just hurry."

Merlin scoffed. "Of course, you're demanding even when you're the one that saved my life. Nice, that."

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### *Epilogue*

Arthur had just come out from behind the screen from changing when the door opened and Merlin came in bearing a tray of food. He rolled his eyes. "*Merlin*, do you forget you're not a servant anymore?" he asked and Merlin rolled his eyes at him.

"Arthur, just because I'm an advisor rather than manservant doesn't mean I'm going to stop doing *everything*." He sat down, putting his feet up on the table. "I'm hungry, I know what you like, I know you're hungry, and I'm not going to bother explaining away you needing enough food for two people."

Arthur chuckled and walked over. "Then why did you mend my tunic this morning?" he asked and Merlin shrugged.

"I know how much you like that tunic, I can do it a lot better than somebody without magic can," he said and Arthur grinned.

"Be honest," he asked as he sat across from Merlin and stole a few grapes off the tray. "How many times did you do chores with magic all these years?"

Merlin grinned. "A lot less than you probably expect." He put his feet down and put some food on the empty plate he'd put under Arthur's. "I couldn't risk getting caught. Pretty much the only time I used magic was when I could do whatever it was in my room and had something else I needed to do. I've done a hell of a lot of research on spells to save your arse," he pointed out. "Mostly the only things I could do then was polish your boots and wash your clothes. Then I stopped bothering with that and just snuck your clothes into the laundry--"

"Explains why they started getting actually clean," Arthur teased and Merlin shot him a look.

Merlin poured them both goblets of wine. "Admit it, you miss bossing me around," he said and Arthur made a face. "You do!" he teased. "None of the new servants you replaced me with will snap back at you when you give them over-excessive orders."



Arthur hummed. "And you wonder why I keep you around, still." He looked up from his plate. "It's true, though. It just isn't as fun to tell somebody to go polish my armor and muck out my horses and have them just smile and agree rather than make faces and call me stupid names like 'clotpole' or 'dollop head'--"

"You stole those words as your own, clearly you don't find them that stupid," Merlin interrupted with a small grin. "If you want, I can teach George insults--"

"Oh God no, I'm not hiring George," Arthur whined. "I'll stick with a few of them to do different things, thanks."

Merlin smirked. "Alright, but just remember, you're learning to dress yourself and only some old, fat woman is allowed to attend your baths," he said and Arthur shot him a look. "Don't look like that! I dressed you and attended your baths for years, I know exactly what kind of show they'd be getting," he said, wiggling his eyebrows.

Arthur chuckled into his goblet. "So what, is that reserved for your eyes only?" he asked and Merlin nodded.

"You tried to challenge the new knight that gave me 'looks' to a dual to the death, I think it's less dramatic that I ask you dress yourself and old, fat people attend your baths when I can't," he said and Arthur gave him a heated look.

"I like it when you attend my baths, I think I'll just wait until you're free for those," he said in a low voice that made Merlin blush.

"Arthur!" he chastised and Arthur chuckled.

"What?!" he asked with an innocent smile. "I'm just saying--"

Merlin waved a hand. "I know good and damn well what you're saying." He grinned down at his plate. "Not *arguing* but that's still entirely inappropriate."

Arthur put down his goblet and stood, coming around the table. "And why's that?" he asked as he knelt beside Merlin, tugging his chair around to face him. "I'm alone in my chambers with the most breathtaking man I know," he breathed, sliding between Merlin's knees to lean close to his face, hands on Merlin's hips. "I'd say I can speak with whatever level of propriety I could want while alone with my lover," he whispered, leaning so close to Merlin's lips that Merlin whined when Arthur sat back on his heels. "Actually, you're probably right," he said, patting Merlin's thigh as he stood. "Entirely improper conversation for the dinner table- AH!" He cried out as Merlin leapt from his chair and pulled Arthur back around, claiming his lips.

"You are improper, you clotpole," Merlin groaned against Arthur's lips, tugging at the laces of Arthur's shirt as he backed him into the column nearest him.

Arthur grinned. "Mmmmm, no, no, I do believe we should eat our dinner," he said, turning his head away. "No, no, you are definitely right," he said, sliding from between Merlin and the column, walking back towards the table. "Wouldn't want to be inappropriate--"

“Don’t make me use magic,” Merlin threatened, only to laugh when Arthur gave him a challenging look. “Arthur-“

“You have to catch me first!” Arthur said, running towards the door, ducking when Merlin ran around the table to beat him there. “No magic, that’s cheating!” Arthur called back, rushing towards the antechamber, laughing when Merlin magically moved a stool in front of him and he had to leap over it.

“I’ll show you cheating, you prat!” Merlin called out, laughing himself as he chased Arthur around the room, both of them yelling and crashing into things as they ran. As Arthur rolled across the bed to fall off the other side and run away, he vaguely hoped Merlin had put a silencing enchantment on the room so that the guards outside didn’t hear the king of Camelot laughing and running around with the court sorcerer.

It wasn’t until later, as they fell asleep in a tangled pile of limbs, that Arthur realized laughing and playing was probably the least embarrassing thing the guards outside his door had probably overheard coming from inside his chambers.

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