

Winter's Respite

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Winter's Respite

by [Destina](#)

Summary

It was the coldest winter most in Camelot had ever seen.

Notes

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Merlin's sixth winter in Camelot was the coldest many in the citadel had ever seen. The snow fell day and night for a week, and no matter how many fires were lit in the massive fireplaces, the flickering flames never seemed to touch the chill.

Gaius returned from the lower town on the first day with tales of cattle suffocated where they stood, their breath frozen against their faces. "This will be a difficult winter," he told Merlin, who sat shivering by the fire, a blanket pulled tight around him.

On the evening of the third day, the weight of mud and snow broke the dam above the city, and icy water choked the streets, swirling with sticks and debris. As the bells rang, and Merlin raced to help, citizens of the lower town trudged away from their homes, clutching what few possessions they'd managed to lift above the waters.

No one in the citadel stood above it -- not with Arthur as their king. Instead the knights shed their cloaks and waded into the freezing mire in their mail, hacking people free of tangled branches and evacuating the people as best they could. Percival passed by more than once with children clinging to him like tomatoes on a vine; Gwaine and Elyan carried the old and infirm to safety, murmuring soft words of comfort to them.

"All is not lost -- you are safe now," Merlin heard Gwaine say to a silver-haired woman, whose shaking hand touched his face briefly. Her smile was a brilliant reminder of the kind soul now eclipsed by time.

Day and night merged as Merlin and Gaius treated the injured, so many of them knocked into walls and thrown to the ground by the rising water, their hands and feet made stiff and skin darkened by the unnatural cold. Merlin slept sitting up by the fire, his back against the nearest cot, and rose to wakefulness in an instant when called. It felt good to put his hard-won skills to work, comforting the bereft and tending the wounded.

Once, he looked up to see Arthur watching him, and when he sighed out a tired breath, Arthur smiled, warming Merlin like the absent sun.

When finally the flood was contained, rivulets of water now frozen into crunchy streams in the streets, Merlin returned to his duties. He fetched warm cakes and cider from the kitchens and set them beside the fire in Arthur's chambers, so the king would find them when he returned to his rooms. Then more trips, to retrieve water for Arthur's basins and find freshly laundered clothing. With each journey, Merlin's treacherous body protested more loudly.

The steps of the citadel seemed ever more difficult to climb, and Merlin was so tired. He stopped to rest, back against the wall, which leached all the warmth from him and left him shuddering. Surely Arthur wouldn't mind if he closed his eyes for a time; it had been days since he had had a proper sleep. He slid to the floor in the little alcove, Arthur's dry tunics draped over his arm, and shut his eyes.

It seemed barely a moment later that he woke to Arthur's angry voice. "Merlin. *Merlin*." Arthur was shaking him so violently his teeth rattled, and Merlin struggled to comprehend why Arthur was so furious. He had only meant to take a short rest. "Merlin, get up." Arthur

fisted a hand in his shirt and pulled, yanking Merlin to his feet. The tunics slid from his grasp, and he was not quick enough to catch them; they puddled on the grey floor, pale as snow.

Merlin stared down at them, as his legs suddenly seemed to have turned to water, and they buckled, but Arthur caught him. "Come with me," he said, throwing an arm around Merlin's waist and dragging him down the corridor.

"I'm sorry," Merlin said, though his head was fuzzy with exhaustion, and all he could think of was his bed and a nice warm pile of blankets. "I didn't mean to fall asleep."

"Never mind that, you idiot," Arthur said. He kicked open the door to his chambers and shoved Merlin inside quickly. Merlin stood swaying as Arthur shut the door; the room seemed to be tilting, just as Arthur grabbed hold of his arm again, his grip hard enough to hurt. He steered Merlin toward the fire and leaned him against the mantel. Merlin's whole body seemed to be made of slush and ice; he was having a difficult time thinking, much less moving about.

"Take off your tunic and boots," Arthur said, adding logs to the fire so that it roared up. Merlin reached for the laces and tried, but his fingers were so clumsy, and he faltered. Arthur closed his hands around Merlin's trembling fingers and pushed them away, then made quick work of the laces, pulling Merlin's shirt off over his head. Merlin stared in astonishment as Arthur knelt down and unbuckled his bootstraps, then pulled his boots and socks off and tossed them into a corner. The idea that Arthur would kneel to help Merlin with his boots...well, it was insane, really, and yet here they were.

Arthur pushed Merlin toward the bed and shoved him onto it with an expectant look.

For a moment, the fog lifted, and Merlin began to slide forward again, out and away from the soft warmth of Arthur's amazing bed. He had work to do, and this was no time for sleeping. Arthur was undressing himself, flinging mail and bits of armor everywhere, his clothing fast behind it. That was Merlin's job, and worse yet, he would have to pick it all up later. The armor would rust if it wasn't dried, and then it would be dreadful to clean. Merlin got his feet under him and said, "Arthur, what -- I don't--"

Arthur turned toward him and said, "Oh no you don't," whisking away the towel Merlin had just picked up. "Get in," Arthur commanded with a shove toward his bed, climbing over Merlin to the other side. Merlin sighed and sat down, then swung his legs up just as Arthur touched his shoulder, yanking him closer. Arthur pulled up a heavy covering of blankets and coverlets and pulled Merlin to him, enfolding him in his arms. Merlin made a small noise of protest, but Arthur's chest was bare, and he was so warm and toasty. Merlin was too exhausted to fight any longer. He slipped into sleep, his nose pressed to Arthur's chest, where Arthur's heart was beating as fast as if he'd just stepped out of a battle.

When he woke some hours later, Merlin was warm and comfortable and surrounded by soft blankets and sheets. Arthur was still draped around him, but not asleep - awake and alert. "Merlin?" he asked, the moment Merlin's eyes opened.

"What happened?" Merlin asked softly, brushing his lips over Arthur's tempting collarbone.

"You're a complete fool, that's what happened. You fell asleep in the corridor and were minutes away from never waking up." Arthur curled his fingers around Merlin's, where his fingertips touched Arthur's belly. "You've been working your fingers to the bone."

"So have you," Merlin said, turning his face up and receiving a gentle kiss from Arthur. Bone-deep contentment spread through him like warm water, turning his body liquid and soft.

"Yes, but I didn't decide to nap in the open corridor." Arthur drew Merlin closer and snuggled them down into the nest he'd made.

"I brought cider," Merlin said, thinking of the jug on the hearth. "And sweet cakes, and I can fetch some meat and cheese."

"Later," Arthur murmured sleepily, the words a soft breath ruffling Merlin's hair. "Not just now."

"Later," Merlin agreed, as Arthur's hands stroked long lines down his back. He shivered, but not from the cold.

Outside, the wind and snow continued their siege on the castle. Inside, Merlin drifted off to sleep, safe in the keeping of his king.

End Notes

Happy new year!

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