

The Hunt

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The Hunt

by [novemberlite](#)

Summary

“Those Pendragons, they’re a different sort. Beastly, but clever. It’s said they’re drawn to magic--to power--and that’s how they find their... mate.”

Notes

ty to boo and marguerite_26 for their help and enthusiasm.

They arrived two days before Beltane, and turned everything on its head.

The forest shook under their assault and began to bleed the colours of Camelot: red and gold everywhere Merlin went, laughter and the beat of weary hooves ringing in his ears. There were dozens of them, and they came armed and armored, setting up their tents and rousing their fires; fighting among themselves with swords and sticks and being so bloody *loud*, Merlin thought he'd go mad with it.

He said as much to his mother, curled up on his pallet and face buried in the pillow, trying to drown out the noise. "If they're here to make peace, why'd they bring an army?"

Hunith didn't look up from her work, grinding herbs with a steady hand. "You expected the Crown Prince to come alone?"

Merlin hadn't expected them to come at all. He'd been hearing whispers for months--what little snippets of conversation the druids didn't bother to censor in the presence of a servant and the juicier bits he picked up from eavesdropping--and they'd all carried an undercurrent of uncertainty. Uther Pendragon was a volatile man and couldn't be trusted, but what this treaty would mean for the People was too great to ignore.

There hadn't been blood shed in years but the threat of it hovered, and the People were tired of living like fugitives on their own land. Binding one of their own to the Crown meant more than freedom; it meant protection, and if for that they had to suffer Uther's demands--if they had to suffer the *Hunt*--they would with a smile.

"They look like they're going to war," Merlin said, remembering glinting metal and the unsettled shuffle of horses. "Do you suppose they're afraid of us?"

"No," Hunith said, working the pestle in tense circles. "They're not afraid. And there is no 'us'. This is between Camelot and the People. We're neither here nor there. It's none of our concern, and you'd do well to keep away from all this." She wiped her brow with the back of a hand and fixed Merlin with a knowing stare.

Merlin pulled a blanket over his head. "I haven't done anything."

"Yet," Hunith said, and Merlin didn't have to see the stern, disapproving set of her mouth to know it was there. "Keep busy, Merlin, and not with gossip. This is only a matter of days. Beltane will pass, these men will leave, and everything will go back to how it used to be."

The sullen ache in his stomach disagreed. Merlin ignored it, rolled over, and tried to sleep.

"They're animals," someone was saying, voice thick with disgust, "and they stink like it, too."

Laughter, high and feminine. "A bath would take care of that. Some of them are quite comely, you know. The Prince--"

“Oh, yes, tell us about the Prince. Nimueh’s *dying* to know--”

“Be quiet.”

“The Prince? He’s tall and strong and has a dog’s--” A muffled shriek, and then peals of laughter, interspersed with “don’t say it, don’t say it!” and “oh, Goddess, I can’t imagine--”

“You’re disgusting, the lot of you.”

“You’d best start getting used to it,” someone taunted. “You’ll have to do more than hear about it soon enough.”

“You’ll have to touch it, Ni-mu-eh,” came another voice, delighted. “You’ll have to put it in your--”

“Merlin?”

Merlin jumped a clear foot into the air, hand clutching his chest and heart leaping into his throat. He nearly tripped over his own feet and into the tent, but caught himself in time and turned to see Freya watching him, eyebrows raised.

“Freya,” he sputtered. “I didn’t, um, I didn’t see you. I was just,” he waved a hand around and hoped she took it to mean anything other than, *listening in because I was bored and curious*.

“Eavesdropping,” Freya concluded, and Merlin slumped. She smiled and pulled him away from the tent. “Come on, they’ll have your head if they catch you. What was so interesting that you’d risk Nimueh’s wrath? You know she doesn’t like you.”

“She doesn’t like anyone,” Merlin said, glancing back at the tent. Nimueh was on her way to becoming a High Priestess, and easily the most proficient from her group. Merlin supposed she wasn’t arrogant so much as she was well-aware of her place in her world: head and shoulders above the rest of them.

“I won’t argue that,” Freya said, “but stay out of her way, just the same. She’s in a mood.”

“Because of the--ah, the Prince?”

Freya looked at him and Merlin looked back, the picture of nonchalance. “In part,” she said slowly. “What do you know about that, Merlin?”

“Beyond what I heard just now? Nothing.” He grinned sheepishly. “Won’t you tell me? That way I don’t have to go back and hover outside their tent, pretending to look busy.”

“You didn’t look busy,” Freya pointed out, “just very suspicious.”

Merlin threw his hands in the air. “Well, there you go. Help me, Freya. Save me from myself.”

“Your inability to mind your own business is going to get you into a lot of trouble one day,” she warned, but grasped his hand anyway, and led him away from the camp and deeper into the woods, where the trees grew touching each other, roots broad and tangled beneath their feet. It was the birth of summer, but the air was cool and damp under the cover of leaves. A stream gurgled nearby, one that would soon run dry, and they headed toward it instinctively, tripping each other through brush and thorn.

Freya didn’t speak until she’d found a dry place to perch, her small feet dangling in the stream and toes curling from the cold.

“I don’t know much,” she said, resting her chin in her hands, “only what Sophia’s told me, and you know how reliable she is. It’s just talk, but everyone’s talking. They say he’s going to choose her. Nimueh. For his bride.”

“But,” Merlin said, startled. “How do they know? The Hunt--”

“They’re saying it’s all been set up--that she’s told him what mask she’ll wear. That they’ll hold the Hunt for the sake of tradition, but he’s already decided who to wed.” Freya pulled her knees up to her chest. “I don’t believe it. She wasn’t at the procession--she doesn’t even know what he looks like. When would they have met? It doesn’t make sense.

“It’s more likely that he’ll just--know. Those Pendragons, they’re a different sort. Beastly,” Freya shuddered, “but clever. It’s said they’re drawn to magic--to power--and that’s how they find their... mate.” She looked over to him and wrinkled her nose. “*Mate*. Like animals.”

Freya flushed, and then laughed. “That’s how they do it, too. They tie, like dogs.” Merlin blanched and she laughed harder. “Merlin, the look on your face.”

“You’re making that up,” Merlin said sternly, but what he’d overheard was starting to make sense. He tried to picture it, and couldn’t; the tips of his ears were burning up and Freya was shaking her head, breathless from amusement.

“I swear,” she said, “he--the Prince--he’ll do it right then. Once he catches her.” She wiped at her eyes and gave him a wry look. “Now you know why Nimueh isn’t the happiest she’s ever been.”

Merlin felt a little queasy. “Does she have to? Doesn’t she get to choose?”

“Of course she does,” Freya said, surprised. “But there’s no question, really. Who wouldn’t want to be Queen?”

“Princess,” Merlin corrected, but Freya shook her head.

“Queen. Uther’s declining health must be the worst kept secret in the realm. That’s why they’ve come now--Uther is a bloody tyrant, but he wants his son to keep the higher ground.”

“They’re using us,” Merlin murmured. “They want to hold us over Cenred.”

“It was either be used by Camelot or be used by Escetia. The Elders--well, Aglain. He Saw something that helped him make a decision.”

Merlin leaned forward, eyes bright. He could loiter around the priestesses' tents and warlocks' quarters as much as he wanted, but there wasn't any need for a serving boy to be present when the elders gathered. When it came to them, whatever he heard was hearsay's hearsay, and the thought of this new, otherwise inaccessible insight made his stomach flip. "What?"

Freya shrugged. "No one knows. Not even Nimueh."

He couldn't keep the disappointment from showing on his face, and Freya shook her head at him fondly when he asked, "Nothing? Not even a rumour?"

"That *is* the rumour," Freya said, wry. She got up and stretched before stepping off her rock. "Satisfy your blasted curiosity with that, because it's all I know."

Satisfaction, Merlin thought as he followed her back into the forest, was a ways off. Questions swirled in his mind like a storm: he'd seen the men from afar when they'd arrived, red capes and tired horses and all, but missed the Prince's welcome. Merlin hadn't cared--didn't think there would be anything beyond his title to set him apart from the rest of Camelot's men--but now, he wondered.

Freya had called him *beastly*, and the image Merlin's mind conjured up was of a hulking, bearded man, with wild hair and large, coarse hands, more warlord than prince. Picturing him against Nimueh's slight frame made Merlin shudder, his gut twisting in sympathy.

"Merlin!"

Freya's call rang in the dense space between trees and jostled Merlin from his thoughts. He couldn't see her; she'd kept moving while he loitered, and the edge of impatience in her voice told him she wasn't about to slow down. The air was colder now, and the day was beginning to die. Merlin had kept her longer than he'd thought, and he was opening his mouth to reply when something--shifted.

He didn't know how he knew to stop, and go still. It wasn't something seen or heard, no shadow in the corner of his eye or the rustle of leaves, but a pull in the middle of his chest, a compulsion, a command that seemed to rise from the earth and dig into his bones. It wasn't the first time it had happened, not by far, and he'd never been able to explain it--didn't even know what to *call* it--but he knew better than to think he could ignore it. He halted with his foot braced against a fallen log and held his breath, waiting for whatever it was that wanted him here.

It took him a moment to realize he was staring right at it.

The stag was massive, even half hidden in the brush, and the antlers crowning his head were thick and long. He breathed easy, unimpressed by Merlin's presence; blinked once slowly in his direction before bending to graze, nosing through the mulch on the forest floor. A ray of sunlight cut through the trees and fell like a target on his flank, and--target, Merlin thought, *target*, and he looked beyond the stag and had his heart rise up in his throat, eyes fixed for a horrified second on the glint of a crossbow.

“Don’t!”

His shout had everything lurching violently into motion. The stag reared, hooves kicking a spray of leaves and dirt into the air, and the crossbow fired with a sudden *twang*, burying an arrow inches away from Merlin’s foot. Man and beast clamoured, filling the copse with noise, and by the time Merlin could bring himself to move, the stag had vanished and in front of him stood a gaggle of men, looking as startled as he felt.

“What the fuck,” one snarled, “do you think you’re doing?”

All right, Merlin thought, perhaps less startled and more *angry*. He backed away on instinct and caught his foot against the log, flailed ineffectually and toppled. The earth was damp beneath his palms and the man looked even angrier from the ground, all broad, tense shoulders and scowling mouth.

“I should be asking you that,” Merlin managed, because even dressed as they were, in dark, dirty clothes, these were Camelot’s men, and they didn’t belong in the forest. “You can’t be here.” And then, because he couldn’t stop himself: “The Hunt isn’t until tomorrow.”

The man’s eyes narrowed. “Oh, I’m sorry,” he said, raking his eyes over Merlin and sounding anything but, “I didn’t realize this was your land. It’s just, you look so much like a serving boy, I became confused.”

Merlin flushed and pushed himself to his feet, wobbling only a little before he regained his balance. “It might not be my land, but it isn’t yours, either.”

“It will be soon enough,” someone said from the back, and the men snickered, their faces relaxing into sneers. Only the man in front seemed unamused, face dark and eyes boring right into Merlin’s. He shouldn’t have looked imposing now that Merlin wasn’t lying on the ground, but something about him had Merlin’s palms clammy and insides tied into knots. He had the look of a noble and the air of a fighter--a knight, then, but that didn’t mean he had any sort of hold over *Merlin*.

So he raised his chin and said: “That’s for tomorrow to decide. Today you’re guests of the People, and you’d best behave that way.”

“Boy--” came a snarl from the cluster of men, but the one who held Merlin’s gaze raised a hand and they fell silent, faces twisted with anger. Merlin didn’t care, barely noticed, attention fixed on the man--the knight--as he stepped forward, walked right up to Merlin until they were only inches apart. This close, Merlin could smell him, cloves and leather and sweat, the faint edge of metal and horse; could make out the furrow between his brows, the startling blue of his eyes. The knight’s nostrils flared as he took in a quick, sharp breath, and then he looked--speculative. Calculating.

“Who are you?” he asked, voice low, and it wasn’t a challenge, too curious to be a taunt. Merlin’s mouth went dry, the click of his throat audible when he swallowed.

“A servant,” Merlin said, because he was, and because the man couldn’t be asking him for his name. “You--you weren’t mistaken.”

The man frowned. “No,” he said, “you’re--*what* are you?” and Merlin reeled, because what did that mean? What did--

“Merlin! *Merlin!*”

Freya’s voice cut through the copse, loud and flustered. The man jerked back like he’d been burned, and Merlin took his chance and ran, leaving them to shout among themselves. He tripped through the forest, face burning and heart pounding, and found Freya not so far from where he’d stopped, hands on her hips and looking impatient.

“There you are,” she said as Merlin came up to her, and he nodded in breathless agreement. “Stop dawdling, would you, we still have work to--are you all right?” She frowned in concern. “You look flushed.”

“No,” Merlin said, and then, “yes, yes, I met--I saw a stag.”

Freya rolled her eyes, but her smile was pleased. “You’re already the luckiest person I know, getting into and out of trouble like you do. You don’t need any more.” She looked up at the darkening sky and sighed. “But if we tarry too long we’ll both be out of luck.”

The dying light of the sun made everything bright and hazy and too much; Merlin felt eager and weak and thrilled and frightened and all sorts of contradictory things. He shook his head free of stray thoughts and forced himself to look at Freya and see *her* instead of curious blue eyes.

“Sorry,” he said. “Sorry. Let’s go.”

They went.

He dreamt that night, in weak, disorienting pulses. He was in the forest, in the stream, underwater. Leaves crackled under his feet and smoke stung his eyes; there was water in his nose and mouth and it tasted deceptively sweet, like the skin of a berry before he crushed it with his teeth. Juice streaked down his chin, sour and sticky and red, and someone was licking him clean, tongue catching at the corner of his mouth. There were hands tangled in his hair and a body pressed against his own, tree at his back and palms scraping on bark, or teeth, someone’s mouth on his wrist, sucking bruises. Flushed red and purple and blue, blue eyes, the water still and quiet and deep, deeper, he sank.

Merlin woke up breathless and hard and trying to forget the man’s face.

He didn’t manage it, no matter how busy he got: running from one tent to the next, fetching this and delivering that, that curious look still caught in his mind. He was clumsier than usual, preoccupied and prone to drifting away, and he got cursed at by nearly everyone he ran into, even his mother.

“Merlin, please,” she said, more tired than angry, now. She’d yelled herself hoarse in the morning and seemed to lose more of her ire as the day wore on. “If you can’t be of use, *stay out of the way.*”

There was a streak of oil on her cheek and she smelled like almonds and exasperation. Merlin clasped his hands and rocked back on his heels, thrumming with nervous energy.

“I can help,” he insisted, because the last thing he wanted to do was sit around and think. It was madness outside: people bustling from one end of the encampment to the other, laden with food and drinks and wood for the bonfires they’d light at dusk. Everyone was anxious for the Hunt, waiting impatiently for the sun’s descent; even the ones who weren’t going to have any part in it couldn’t stop *talking* about it, all coarse, vulgar speculation and taunts that Merlin knew half sprang from a place of envy.

There wouldn’t be more than two dozen taking part, though coupled with Camelot’s men, that meant they’d run the forest down. The knights had little reason *not* to join in, and Merlin twitched at the thought, wondered if that man--if the knight from the forest--

“Merlin. You aren’t even listening.” Hunith’s mouth was pursed tight, and went tighter when Merlin blinked at her owlishly.

“No--what? I am. You want me to take that--” he gestured at the vial she gripped in her hand, “to--someone.”

She sighed and rubbed at her temples, looking harried. “Never mind. I’ll take it myself.”

“No, mum--” Merlin grabbed the vial and managed not to slosh anything out. “I can do it, I swear.”

He widened his eyes, earnest, until Hunith sighed again and said, “It’s for Nimueh. Go quickly--she needs to drink it now. And be *careful*, Merlin, you can’t imagine how important that is--”

“I will be,” Merlin said, when she started to look unsure about having him handle it. The vial was warm in his hand, and filled with a rich red liquid, thick and potent from the smell of it: almonds, again. “What is it?”

“None of your concern,” Hunith said sternly, snapping the sheets on his cot. “You’re to leave it in her tent and that’s all. Don’t poke around and for heaven’s sake, Merlin, *don’t* ask any questions.”

Merlin rolled his eyes and ducked outside. It wasn’t as if Nimueh would even notice his presence, much less answer any of his questions, but Hunith had been nurturing a wealth of paranoia for long enough that it was second nature. She wanted him safe, and that meant making him invisible--no matter how badly Merlin wanted to be seen. He weaved through the thinning crowd, fingers tight around the vial’s neck and trying not to remember how it’d felt in the forest, to have those eyes on him.

The powerful smell of incense coming from Nimueh’s tent made that easy enough. He coughed, then sneezed, eyes watering, as he pulled aside the flap and stepped inside, straight into thick clouds of smoke.

“Who is it?”

Merlin blinked his eyes clear at Nimueh's sharp voice, and tried to hold his breath. "Me," he choked out, and then realized that meant nothing to her. "Merlin, it's Merlin."

Nimueh hissed a spell and the smoke cleared, condensing into a tiny whirlwind and hovering over the palm of her hand. She closed her fist and it vanished. Merlin was left staring at her dark eyes and scowling, unpainted mouth. "What do you want?"

He fumbled with the vial, trying not to be obvious about looking around. He didn't often get a chance to run errands for Nimueh--she had a maidservant who took care of that--and he didn't know if he'd ever get another one. At first glance it didn't look very different from the tents of the other druids; less parchment and more charms, perhaps, but sparser than he'd expected. There were jars lining the shelves and scattered about were the sort of artifacts Merlin would kill to get a proper look at: worn engravings and old staffs, rings and things that spit magic into the air. He could feel it collecting on his skin and shivered.

Nimueh made an impatient noise and he jerked, coming back to himself. "I'm, uh. I'm to give you this."

She took the vial he handed her with barely concealed distaste, and put it on the desk behind her. It was already cluttered with things--herbs and powders and a chalice that was still blurting wisps of smoke, and something behind it that he couldn't quite make out. He moved closer and Nimueh stepped to the side, blocking him with her body.

"Is that all?"

"Um," Merlin stalled. "You're supposed to drink that right away." He stepped around her and closer to the desk, grabbing the vial and holding it up with what was hopefully an unassuming grin. "While it's still warm," he said, like he knew what he was talking about, and cut his eyes to the side. What he saw made him gape, and say, despite himself and all common sense: "That--is that the mask?"

He looked up, expecting to see Nimueh's scowl, but her face was wiped clean of expression. "Yes," she said. "Ugly, isn't it?"

It was an old, blotchy red swatch of fabric with two crude, eye-shaped holes and a dirty string that tied one end to the other. Merlin didn't know what he'd been expecting, but it wasn't this; Camelot was known for its opulence and craft, and this looked like it'd been made by an unskilled toddler. It looked like something *Merlin* would make.

"It's..." he started, and struggled to find the right word. 'Ugly' wasn't doing it enough justice.

The sound of Nimueh's laugh startled him into looking up. She was smiling, and the hair on the back of Merlin's neck prickled.

"Don't be fooled," she said, reaching around him to take it. "It changes once it's worn."

"Into what?"

“Whatever suits you best.” She shrugged, long fingers running along the frayed cloth. There was something speculative in the way she eyed him. “Yours would be a mouse. Perhaps a hare,” she said. “Always underfoot, but--harmless.”

Merlin flushed, but didn’t look away. “And yours?”

“A bird of prey.” Her smile didn’t falter as she held out the mask. “Let’s see it, then.”

It felt coarse against his skin, and covered his face from forehead to nose--left his mouth bare and smelled like something old and violent. Primal. The string cinched behind the back of his head and Nimueh began to speak, slick sounding words in a language Merlin ached to learn, voice edged with excitement. Her breath hitched partway through and something like shock lined her face, but Merlin was too busy *feeling* to care--there were tendrils of magic digging their way under his skin, into his bones, and a queer pressure behind his eyes that made them clench shut. He didn’t realize he was panting until Nimueh fell silent and his laboured breathing was all he could hear.

When he opened his eyes, he found her looking like she’d never seen him before.

“Well,” she said softly, “aren’t you full of surprises,” and turned him to face his reflection.

The first thing he saw was gold instead of blue. Panic clawed at his throat; his eyes only changed when he messed up and did magic, and he hadn’t--had he?--but he couldn’t force them back no matter how hard he tried. The markings on the rest of his face didn’t make any sense, these thick, bold lines that made him look alien and new. He blinked once, frantic, and it was as if the mirror cleared to let him see, and he saw--he saw--

“Dragon,” he said, hushed, “it’s a--” *dragon*, bright and fiercely scaled, and Merlin’s eyes didn’t look out of place at all. The mask was warm when he reached up to touch, buzzing like his skin was, and Merlin was riding out a shiver when the signal sounded, a horn blown loud and long.

He whirled to find Nimueh watching him.

“It’s time,” she said, and Merlin nodded, heart still beating too fast in his chest. They were beyond dusk now, and well into the night; he could hear the horn blow again, more urgent this time, and reached up to tug on the mask.

It didn’t budge.

“What--” he managed, and pulled at the edges, at the string, clawed at it, but it was like trying to peel off his skin, like it was *in* him. “It’s not coming off--Nimueh, it’s not--”

“Well, why would it? The Hunt’s only just begun.” She slipped into a robe, and pursed her lips at Merlin’s stricken face. “Did I forget to mention that? How careless of me. You wear the mask and you’re a part of it, Merlin. You’re in for a wild night.”

“This doesn’t make sense,” Merlin said, heart lurching into his throat. “It’s yours, you’re meant to wear it--you’re going to be Queen!”

Nimueh hissed and pulled the hood over her head so Merlin could see nothing more than the bitter curve of her mouth. "I don't need any man to rule," she said, "much less a Pendragon."

Merlin shook his head, fingers going still against the mask as he struggled to understand. *You had a choice*, he wanted to accuse, but the mutinous set of Nimueh's jaw made him wonder if that was true. So he said, instead,

"Why me?"

"Because I like you, Merlin," she said, dry. "And this way, we both win. I get out, and you--well, you get tupp'd by a knight." Her mouth quirked. "Don't worry, I hear they're quite good at this kind of thing."

"The Elders will be furious," Merlin tried, panic squeezing his throat and cutting off his air. "This isn't a game, it's a--it's a *treaty*. If you leave, you'll never get to come back."

Nimueh tilted her head back so he could see the glint of her eyes. "You have bigger things to worry about. Don't think you can hole up in here; they'll find you wherever you are." She stepped close and gripped his arm with one hand, touched the mask with the other. "This is a little bit magic, you know."

"Take it off," Merlin whispered, and she shook her head.

"I can't do that," she said. "But I can give you some advice."

Her eyes flashed gold and he felt the force of her magic hit him right in the chest, sending him flying through the air and landing outside, cold earth under his palms and all the breath knocked out of him. Nimueh stepped out and over him, heading for the fields beyond their camp, and when she looked back at him once, it was only to say,

"Run."

He ran.

His first thought had been his mother: she'd be furious, but more than that, she'd be *worried*. He'd cut halfway through the camp and to her when someone caught him--a man in red, with the face of a grinning bear, who had grabbed Merlin's arm for a split second before getting kicked between the legs. It was more panic and instinct than anything else, but the man's mouth had twisted into a painful, betrayed *o* as he sank to the ground, and as Merlin had turned to run, he'd shouted, "If you don't want to play, then bloody well get out of our way!"

Merlin winced and headed for the forest. If the mask was magic, then it would take magic to destroy it; what few spells Merlin had picked up from the druids would probably be useless, but he had to try. The dense cover of the forest would provide more protection than the campground, and if he could just get the bloody thing *off*, no one would have to know what mess he'd gotten himself into this time.

The forest should have been pitch black this time of night, but he found it lit up instead, with bonfires at a distance and little sparks circling the trees; enough to see, if not very well. There was a cacophony of noise: the squalling of angry birds and skittering of creatures across the forest floor, the heavy footfalls of men and rustling of robes.

A sudden, high-pitched scream.

He startled, and turned towards it, taking off on instinct and the irrepressible urge to help, but then there was *laughter*, and a woman's voice, excited, between short grunts. As he neared he could make out words among the moans, though they weren't ones he particularly wanted to hear: *yes*, and *Gods*, *more--* and--

There was someone moving beyond the trees. No, more than one--two, three--too many to count, and they were coming closer, long-legged gait eating up the distance in a matter of seconds. They were all dressed in red, Camelot's men, and tall of build; Merlin stayed long enough to see a serpent, a boar, a crow, their mouths twisted in identical sneers, before turning tail and running in the opposite direction.

They gave chase, but not for very long, falling back just as Merlin was starting to become short of breath. He supposed they were more interested in the ones for which this really *was* a game--the ones who'd make a show of slowing down and scream in delight when they were caught--instead of Merlin, who was running like his life depended on it. His feet were aching by the time he found a place to rest, and even then it wasn't ideal: a clearing with a bonfire glowing hot in the center, sending plumes of smoke up into the sky. Merlin could make out the moon from here, full and heavy, and felt far too exposed--but there weren't any couples rutting nearby, no figures in the shadows Merlin could see, so he crept closer to the fire, and knelt.

Heat lashed against his face and sweat began to bead on his upper lip, at the corners of his eyes. The mask felt cool against his flushed skin, and he traced it with nervous fingers, the dips and ridges and curves, and wondered--fire. Would fire be enough?

He knew only the one spell and it was a weak one, meant to strike against wood and dry, dead foliage to set it ablaze. But if he could direct it somehow, turn it on the mask and give it a purpose, it might--it might--

"*Forbearnan*," he whispered, but the word was clumsy on his tongue, stuttered and uneasy. He wiped at his eyes and swallowed down his nerves; opened his mouth to try again and got as far as, "*forbear--*" before a twig snapped, sudden and loud, and he was scrambling back, dirt caught under his nails and heart pounding.

Beyond the fire stood a man, broad-shouldered and golden-haired, but all Merlin could see was the dragon that looked back at him. It was different from his, wider and thicker and more unrestrained--its scales a terrible, violent red, same as the colour of the man's mouth. The fire made his eyes flicker, made sweat gleam in the hollow of his throat, and Merlin didn't know how long they stared at each other, still and silent and barely breathing.

It could have been seconds or hours, the space between one blink and the next or the passage of the night, but when the man moved it was like he'd never been still at all. One moment

Merlin was cataloguing the shallow rise and fall of the man's chest and the next he was a blur, faster than Merlin could have ever expected, and a hand glanced Merlin's shoulder even as he got his feet under him and started to sprint.

He ran without thought, with the single-minded urgency of someone who knew they were only one step ahead and one slip, one stumble, would get them caught. His shoulders knocked into trees and arms were clawed at by the shrubbery and he didn't care, because the man was right *there*, so close Merlin thought he could feel hot breath at the back of his neck and fingers grasping for the edge of his robe. He ran until his lungs burned and eyes began to water, pushing himself despite the vicious cramp in his side and his throbbing feet, but the man didn't slow, didn't even seem to *tire*, and the steady thumpthumpthump of his feet hitting the ground made Merlin look back over his shoulder and shout, frantic,

"Would you stop--stop chasing me!"

He didn't expect a response, didn't even think on it beyond an instant of frustration, so the snarled,

"Then stop *running*,"

had him tripping over himself, foot slipping against mulch and root, hands scrabbling at whatever he could reach for purchase. He found nothing and began to fall, would've hit the ground hard if a hand hadn't caught him by the arm and yanked him up and forward and right against the man's chest. Merlin could feel his heart beating, wild and erratic, and he couldn't say what it did to him--didn't even know--but his mind wiped clear of all thoughts but *no*, and *not that easily*.

Magic rose up in him like a wave, the way he'd always tried to prevent, *careful, careful, can't let anyone know*, but he couldn't stop it now, or didn't want to--and it tore its way out, made the ground go shaky beneath his feet and the wind shriek through the trees and lash against them, leaves and dirt caught in a whirlwind and rising--rising--rising--

--but the man only tightened his grip, nothing frightened about him; growled "*settle*," and kissed Merlin, hard.

His mouth was a wet, forceful slant against Merlin's, breath searing the sensitive skin of his upper lip; Merlin opened at the slick prod of a tongue, let it tangle with his own, and gasped at the feel. The kiss was clumsy and fierce and felt better than it had any right to, sank straight into Merlin and lit him up from the inside. The man curled a hand in his hair and smiled against Merlin's mouth.

Merlin bit him and set fire to the dry leaves beneath their feet.

"Fuck!" He jumped back, but took Merlin with him, arm like a steel band around his waist. The fire leapt and Merlin kicked at him, connected with what felt like a shin, and the man cursed again.

"Enough," he snarled in Merlin's face, teeth gleaming, "stop fighting me, it's done. You have nothing to prove. I've already chosen you."

“What--” Merlin started, fire and wind dying down as confusion eclipsed panic. “What does that mean, I don’t--I don’t *want* to be chosen! Let go of me!” He squirmed out of his grip when it loosened, stepped away and put some distance between them, breath still coming in thin, ragged gasps. His entire body was buzzing with adrenaline and he was--he was *hard*, damn it, and all he’d wanted was-- “I just want to get this bloody mask off!”

The dragon’s face was set in a permanent snarl, but the man’s mouth was parted and he carried an air of bewilderment about him, watching as Merlin struggled with his mask, frustrated and ineffectual, slumping with defeat. “It won’t come off.”

“It’s spelled,” the man said, slowly, as if Merlin might not understand him otherwise, “to be removed at the hands of your hunter.”

“That’s--absolutely daft,” Merlin said, disbelieving, and the man bristled. He was close enough to smell now, something spicy that had Merlin’s gut clenching in reaction. It was almost familiar, tangled with sweat and smoke. Merlin held his breath.

“It’s tradition,” the man said stiffly. “Yours is bound to me, and mine to you.”

Merlin lifted his chin. “Do it, then. Take it off.”

He didn’t move, mouth twisting into an irritated moue. “They’re meant to stay on until after we’ve sated ourselves,” he began, but Merlin had heard enough and didn’t bother letting him finish--just lunged forward and grasped his mask, the edge smooth and warm against his skin, giving easily at the slightest pressure. He pulled it off and promptly choked at who it revealed.

“You,” he managed, and his knight’s face went tight around the mouth and eyes.

“Me,” he said, lips curling into an angry little smile. “Changed your mind about being chosen now, have you?”

“What,” Merlin said weakly, but all he could think about was the smell of cloves and his eyes, that blue turned gold from the flickering lights from the trees. His insides were tying themselves into knots and he felt over-heated, flushed from head to toe, and something in him curled up shy and frightened, because he *wanted*, but he was just a bloody servant, and the knight knew it. “I--I have to go.”

He was caught as soon as he turned, and spun around. The look on his knight’s face was indecipherable; he reached up to touch the edge of Merlin’s mask and Merlin flinched. “What about this?”

“I--changed my mind.”

“Like hell,” he said, and Merlin squeezed his eyes shut as he tugged it off, biting at the inside of his mouth when he heard a sharp inhale.

“You’re--” he said, an odd echo of Merlin, “--the mouthy one from the forest.” Merlin opened his eyes to glare and found his knight’s mouth hooked in a smile. He lifted a hand and

dragged his thumb against Merlin's bottom lip, callused skin catching against the soft inside. "I knew," he said, low, "I knew there was something about you--"

This time, Merlin kissed him back.

Their masks were on the ground, back to the same crumpled, dirty fabric they'd been before, and Merlin's hand landed on one as he was eased down. The smell of smoke and wood was heavier here, but pressed close as they were, Merlin was breathing in leather and sweat; tasting spit and--berries, like some odd, unsettling fragment of his dream. There was a hand cradling his head, fingers dragging through his hair and against his scalp, and it made Merlin shiver and arch up, urgent. His heart was beating quick and hard in his chest, but in more anticipation than fear--he'd explain away what he had to in the morning, but right now, he wanted *this*, this man's mouth and hands and eyes on him, and he'd take it, anything, everything he could get.

"What are you going to do," he whispered into the hungry, wet space between their mouths, because he wanted to hear him say it, because saying it always made it more real.

"Fuck you," his knight said, hoarse and tight like a promise, like something inevitable. Large hands slid under Merlin's tunic and found skin; Merlin wanted to jerk away and press closer, squirmed with indecision while his clothes were pushed and pulled at, until he was laid bare on the cold earth--trousers caught on his ankles and shirt bunched up high on his chest. His knight placed a hand right in the centre, rough palm just above the sensitive span of his navel, where nerves fluttered like wild things, and said, "will you let me?" all taunt, like he couldn't *see* how hard Merlin was, cock jutting up shameless and demanding.

"Does it matter?" Merlin asked, and his knight's grin was all teeth.

"No," he said, and ducked down to press a hot, open-mouthed kiss on Merlin's chest, before biting hard enough to hurt. Merlin cried out and bit down on his tongue because he wouldn't be like those others, he wouldn't--but then his nipple was caught in a sharp, sweet suck and he couldn't hold it back, bucking up hard and shouting his pleasure, hands curled tight in golden hair and tugging, yanking, keeping him in place.

He didn't let up until Merlin felt ravaged, nipples too sensitive and throbbing, gone an obvious, angry red even in what dim light they had. Merlin could feel the hard, thick length of his cock against his leg and wanted to see it, touch it, put it in his mouth, but his knight seemed content to rut against him with slow rolls of his hips while he sucked bruises on whatever patch of skin he could find. Merlin threw his head back and let him, fixed his hazy vision on the merry, blinking lights in the trees until he couldn't take it anymore and whined, "Would you just--touch me--"

What he got was a sharp bite on the jut of his collarbone, and a nose nudging his shoulder, his arm. "Don't tell me what to do."

"I wouldn't if you didn't seem in need of instruction," Merlin said, if only as a means to distract himself from the way his knight was snuffling against him, taking quick, hungry breaths right under his arm, where sweat and musk had collected the most. Merlin didn't say anything until he yanked the shirt off and pressed his face there, against damp skin and fine

hairs, and then he couldn't *not*, burning up with embarrassment and cock blurting precome. The words seemed to stick in his throat but he got them out, said, "You're--what are you doing?"

He raised his head and looked at Merlin with dark eyes. "You smell good," he slurred, and bared his teeth when Merlin took in a sudden, hitching breath; kissed him like that, salty and bittersweet, fucking his tongue into his mouth until Merlin broke away to gasp. Then he dragged his face behind Merlin's ear and sniffed hard, said, "here, too," and trailed a hand down Merlin's body to grip his cock, firm and sudden, "and here, I'll bet," rolling his aching balls in his palm and then moving lower, digging three fingers into the tight, hot space he found there, rubbing insistently against Merlin's hole and nearly groaning out, "*here, fuck--*"

Merlin covered his flushed face with his hands and said, "o-oh," and again, louder, when those fingers pressed against his mouth and he was told to, "taste," and, "get them wet," and Merlin squeezed shut his burning eyes and did it, sucked hard and got them sloppy with his spit. His knight hissed, and Merlin followed his fingers with his mouth when he pulled them away, plaintive, eager little noise easing its way out of his throat.

It turned into a moan when he was breached, two thick fingers pressing inside him without any kind of warning, giving him no chance to tense up. He opened for them easy, took to being fucked like he was made for it, like this wasn't the first--the only time. It hurt and Merlin pushed up into it, the burn giving way to sharp, stabbing pleasure and the ache settling somewhere deep inside, winding him tighter. His knight was panting, all laboured breaths and short, hungry snarls, and Merlin could barely hear him over the rush of blood in his ears, nearly didn't hear him say,

"This enough?" as he twisted his fingers and nudged a third inside, making everything go white-hot and too-much.

"I don't know," Merlin gasped, because he didn't, and couldn't imagine, but he didn't want it to stop. He whined when the fingers pulled out, said, "wait, I--yes, it's enough, it's--" and his knight half laughed and half groaned and lifted Merlin's hips up, easy; spread him open and *spit*, thick and wet right where he was empty and sore and there wasn't anything for Merlin to do but shout his surprise, clawing at the dirt when all three fingers slotted back in.

"Fuck," his knight groaned, knuckles deep in Merlin and sounding more animal than man. "Fuck, fu--ck--" and eased them back out, playing against the rim, teasing with his thumb. Merlin made a short, desperate sound when he pulled away completely, but then his legs were being lifted and hooked over his knight's head, feet still trapped in boots and trousers. It hurt to be spread this wide, thighs burning with the strain, but Merlin forgot all about that when he buried his face there, right *there*, nose to his balls and mouth on the sensitive, throbbing clench of Merlin's hole.

Merlin couldn't breathe. What air he managed to draw into his burning lungs was punched out by the wet stab of his knight's tongue, the feel of hands holding him open and the sounds he was making--like he was starved and Merlin was a feast. He ate at him until Merlin's cock was a dribbling, sticky mess against his stomach and his balls taut; hole flinching and so sensitive Merlin thought he was going to die from it, and then--then--he began to bite, sucking bruises and worrying thin, delicate skin between his teeth.

“Please,” Merlin said, voice hoarse, worn, “please, please--” and the knight lifted his head, mouth sloppy and gleaming with spit, and looked at him; then up at the tiny, wildly flickering lights, and Merlin tried to make them stop, rein in the threads of magic that were escaping him, but he was hard and aching and so, so wet, and he couldn’t--*fucking--think--*

The lights didn’t make any noise when they went out, but Merlin could see them dying far off into the distance, the forest going wild and dark within the span of seconds. His knight laughed and pressed his mouth to the soft skin of Merlin’s inner thigh--bit there, gently, and said, “show-off,” equal parts admonishing and amused.

Merlin turned his face against the dry, cold ground and trembled, whined, “it wasn’t--I didn’t mean to,” and, “stop--*teasing*,” because his feet ached from curling his toes so hard, and he was dry-mouthed and dizzy and couldn’t take it anymore. There wasn’t any response beyond another bite, less gentle this time, and just when Merlin thought he’d have to start begging again, his knight’s hands gripped his legs and eased them off his shoulders. For a beat he was folded near into two, thighs pressed against his chest and spread wide, and he thought he’d get fucked like that, tightened up at the thought of how the breath would squeeze out of him when he got split open.

But his knight just held him, thumbs pressing into the tender backs of Merlin’s knees, still and focused like he was committing Merlin to memory. It was an impossible feat in the pitch black of night, but Merlin could feel eyes on him just the same, tracking from face to chest to groin, and it made him shiver, fine hairs prickling all over his body.

He swallowed noisily and felt nails dig into his skin when he said, “I thought you were going to fuck m-me?” voice as steady as he could make it, which wasn’t very at all, and--“have you forgotten how?” just to entice a sound from his knight, a hungry, animal sound. He was manhandled onto his front before he could take another breath, hands and knees and face in the dirt with his legs kicked apart as far as the trousers would allow. There were thumbs spreading his arse open, kneading a little at his hole, and then a blunt, unfamiliar pressure, slick and slippery, held against him like a threat.

“Oh,” Merlin said into his arms, “oh, fu-uh--” as he was fucked into, a steady, relentless thrust that had him whining and clenching up and trying to squirm away. Every wheezing breath he took tasted like the earth and sex, hard and bitter and sharp enough to make his eyes water, tears prickling at the corners and gathering somewhere in the back of his throat. His knight was making noises and running his hands down Merlin’s sides, gentle the way his cock wasn’t, still, *still* shoving into him.

“Shh,” his knight said, hushed and strained, fingers laid over Merlin’s ribs and mouth on his shoulder, “almost--just a little more,” but it didn’t feel like a little, it felt like a whole fucking *lot*, like too much too quickly, and Merlin couldn’t do anything but whine, hurt and muffled against the ground, and try to let him in.

The feel of his balls against Merlin’s arse was sudden and startled him into going tight and tense all over; his knight groaned at the clench around his cock and Merlin hissed, wounded and smarting from it. The spark of pleasure that came from being fingered was absent here and Merlin couldn’t stop himself from squeezing around the invasive width of his knight’s

cock, trying to ease the ache that got worse as he began to move, pulling out a little and slotting right back in.

“Don’t,” Merlin choked out, “don’t, just--just stay still--”

“I can’t,” his knight said, gritted out against the back of Merlin’s neck. “I have to--” and started fucking him in earnest, short, powerful snaps of his hips that had Merlin rocking and clawing at the ground. Each thrust punched a gasp from his throat, and Merlin went dizzy from the lack of air, body one big pulse, burning up from the inside. “I’m sorry,” his knight was saying, “sorry, fuck,” but he didn’t stop; if anything, *sped up*, the slapslapslap of his balls against Merlin’s arse filthy loud in his ears.

“It hurts,” Merlin managed, voice wet and clogged up, and his knight cursed viciously, bit hard at his shoulder before going still.

“Easy,” he murmured, for all that he was vibrating with tension against Merlin’s back, “s’ all right, I’ve got you.” He carded one hand through Merlin’s hair and dragged the other down his side, across his stomach and to where his cock had gone near soft from the hurt. Merlin shivered when he took it in hand, calloused thumb on the head, digging into his slit and the prominent nerve below. His knight’s breath came fast in Merlin’s ear, strained and desperate, but he pulled Merlin off like he had nothing better to do, with slow, twisting tugs that had him hard in minutes, and leaking plaintively against his thigh.

“Good?” he asked, almost unsure, and Merlin reached back and pulled him forward for a clumsy kiss, the taste of dirt and musk and salt thick and perfect between them. His cock shifted inside Merlin at the move, but it didn’t hurt nearly as badly now, so Merlin pushed back, tentative; once, and again, and again, fucking himself with little rolls of his hips, widening his stance and pushing himself up onto his hands for better leverage and--

“Fuck,” Merlin gasped, and, “oh, *fuck*,” because that was the same overwhelming stab of pleasure he thought he’d lost--returned tenfold, making his mouth water and cock pulse precome, balls drawn up against his body. “There,” he babbled, “there, that--” and keened when his knight fucked right into it, slow careful drags and then, as Merlin grew louder, near-violent thrusts that made him drop his head and try to remember how to breathe, trembling all over.

“Tell me,” his knight was saying, mouth hot on the back of Merlin’s neck, “say--” but Merlin couldn’t find the words or the air, and came, instead, with a cry like it was torn from his throat, cock spurting thick ropes of come on the ground, arse clenching up tight. His knight inhaled, quick and sharp, and bit down on the knob of Merlin’s spine, fucking into him furiously as Merlin went all loose and pliant, still jabbing into that tender spot inside.

Merlin rode it out, head hanging between his shoulders, sweat dripping down his face. His arms were shaking from the strain but it didn’t matter and he didn’t care, focused instead on the way his knight was panting, letting out a short little *unh* every time he fucked in. The forest was dark and silent and still, but there was a full moon beyond the canopy and Merlin could feel the start of a breeze stirring against his skin and he reveled in it, mouth and open and taking in deep, hungry breaths.

He almost didn't notice when the fuck slowed, turned into an unhurried grind instead of in-and-out, distracted as he was by the way his skin was buzzing, the pleasant ache settling in every inch of his body--but the broad, sudden pressure against his hole couldn't be ignored, and he started, head jerking up, as that--that something forced its way inside.

"What," he said, rocking forward slow and sluggish, too sated to really be alarmed, "what--what is that," because it felt too wide to be his knight's cock but couldn't be anything else, and something twinged in the back of his mind, something remembered and discarded as--as ridiculous, because it couldn't be--"What are you doing?"

His knight lowered himself until his chest pressed up against Merlin's back and his mouth landed hot on the side of his neck. "Breathe," he said, hands bracketing Merlin's waist, "keep still," and then, soft in Merlin's ear, hips still circling tight and slow, "ask me my name."

Merlin's heart began to pound again, skin prickling and going flushed, hot. "Who are you," he managed to whisper, even though he knew, he *knew*, the shock of it lighting up his nerves.

"Arthur," said the Prince, and huffed a laugh at Merlin's panicked, "fuck, oh--fuck, *fuck*," and said, "don't get too excited, darling," mocking even as he fucked his--his knot in, and Merlin clamped down on instinct, heart somewhere in his throat and beating like it wanted out. His knight--*Prince Arthur*--grunted in disapproval and spread a palm low on Merlin's stomach, easing him up as he said, "take it for me, won't you?" all low and soft, and hissed when his knot finally, finally popped inside.

Merlin bit at his arm and moaned weakly when he didn't wake up; he could feel the knot growing, stretching him still, and the Prince was pressing wet, open-mouthed kisses against his neck, sucking Merlin's earlobe into his mouth and making pleased little noises as he came, rolling his hips languidly and shooting thick, hot pulses of come right up into him.

Merlin understood well enough how dogs mated to know what this was, and felt something inside go liquid at the thought of being tied. Moving meant a sharp, stinging pain where they were joined, so Merlin went still and kept the panic at bay while he was lifted, careful hands turning him on his side, back pressed against the Prince's chest. He was still breathing harshly--still *coming*--his hands wandering restlessly over Merlin's body, plucking at his nipples and curling around his spent, too-sensitive cock, and Merlin was caught between arousal and the terrifying thought of facing his mother in the morning.

The Prince read the sudden tension of his body and huffed. "You truly had no idea," he said, sounding amazed, like he thought no one could be that daft. Merlin bristled and squirmed as far away from his mouth as the knot would allow.

"You were masked," he reminded pointedly. "How was I supposed to know who was behind it?"

"Of course," the Prince said, petting Merlin's cock with languid strokes of his hand, "because the *dragon* made it terribly difficult to guess."

"I was a dragon too!" It was too dark to make out anything more than the blurry outlines of the Prince's face, but Merlin already knew the smug little twist of his mouth. He ignored the

way it made his face flush and said, "The mask's rubbish, it doesn't mean anything."

A hand squeezed his balls, rough enough to make him twitch. "It means we're well matched." The Prince shifted his hips just enough to have the knot catch at Merlin's rim and make him shove back, shivering. His chin was caught in a firm grip and he was kissed, hard. "Right about that, wasn't it?"

"I'm a servant," Merlin said against his mouth, "and you're a--prat."

"Insolent," the Prince observed.

"Unimpressed," Merlin corrected, and turned away to hide a smile when the Prince--Arthur--made a disbelieving noise.

He had no idea how long it had been since the Hunt began, but the forest was quiet now, the rustling of leaves the only thing Merlin could hear. Dread wavered at the back of his mind but his eyes were heavy and his body lax; he was warm, and comfortable, even aching and stuffed full as he was, and all his worries could wait for morning light.

"Merlin," he said, right before he closed his eyes. "My name is Merlin."

Arthur hummed softly and nosed at his hair.

"Sleep, Merlin," he said, and Merlin did.

He woke to the filtered, grey light of dawn and the voices of men.

Merlin's eyes were dry and burning, vision blurry from sleep, but he could make out four--no, five--gathered in a loose circle around them, jeering amongst themselves. They were armed, swords at their belts, and draped in Camelot's colours, these unsettling splotches of red against the backdrop of the forest. They were saying something, and Merlin's sluggish, sleepy mind strained to catch up; didn't manage until one turned, cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, "Wake up, Princess!" and had Merlin jolting in surprise.

An arm wrapped around him and he was crushed back against a hard chest before he could think to move, flipped so he was lying under Arthur's broad form. Their eyes caught for a second, and Merlin felt, all of a sudden, every bruise that littered his body, the unrelenting throb inside; the tips of his ears burned and Arthur's lip curled up into a snarl.

"Cape!" he barked, and Merlin jumped a little, hands coming up to brace against his chest. "Now, Gwaine."

"Aw, come on," said a man, and Merlin looked over Arthur's shoulder to confirm it was the one that had yelled before.

"Now." Arthur's eyes were narrowed, and still locked on his. Merlin swallowed and tried to remember that anger wasn't directed at him; glanced back at the knights and found the loud one pouting, unhooking the cape from his armor. It took Merlin a moment to realize what it

was for, and by then he'd already been wrapped in it, covered from shoulder to knee and lifted to his feet.

Arthur's hands on his waist were the only thing that kept him from wobbling back down. His thighs were sticky and skin stiff with dried spit and come and it hurt even to tremble, the ache in his arse sharp and persistent and twisting all the way up his spine. But there were eyes on him, and not just Arthur's, so he squirmed out of his grip and bit his lip against the pain.

"All right?" Arthur said, but he sounded like he wished he hadn't, face stiff and uncomfortable. He was entirely bare and not at all conscious of it, but Merlin couldn't even appreciate the fact because of the way he was acting, like they were just strangers, instead of strangers who'd fucked all night.

"M'fine," he mumbled. He got a curt nod in response and Merlin stared intently at the ground, ignoring the curious gazes of the knights, the badly muffled conversation. Arthur began to gather their clothes, and Merlin took a peek from the corner of his eye, caught sight of his soft, tender looking cock before he pulled on his trousers. It wasn't so different from his--smaller, Merlin thought, when it wasn't hard--beyond the fleshy swell of his knot at the base. Merlin's arse twinged at the reminder and he looked hurriedly away, worrying the inside of his mouth and ignoring the tentative swell of arousal.

"Did you bring the horses?" Arthur asked, bending to pick up Merlin's clothes, and their masks. At a chorus of *yes, Sire*, he turned to Merlin and said, "let's go, then."

"Wait," Merlin called, when he began stalking towards his men, "my clothes."

"Later," he dismissed, not even bothering to glance back, and Merlin gaped for a second before the meaning registered and his face went hot. Surely he couldn't think to have Merlin ride back like this--wrapped in Camelot's colours and looking like he'd been mauled--but clearly, he did, and Merlin's hands twitched into fists at the thought.

"No," he said, loud, "*now*."

His tone wasn't lost on Arthur, and neither was the obvious mimicry; he stopped and glared, and Merlin glared right back, held out a hand when he didn't move. A vein ticked in Arthur's jaw, and he handed Merlin his clothes with a little push, halfway to petulant. Then he looked to his knights and scowled, and they--they began to turn their backs, heads down.

"I'm not a blushing maiden," Merlin said hotly, and let the cape drop. "Look, if you want."

"They don't want," Arthur snapped, and the one who'd been glancing back--the loud one--quickly turned away, coughing. When Arthur came to stand in front of him, a large, unhappy shield, Merlin made an agitated noise.

"What is wrong with you," he hissed, squirming into his trousers, face red from embarrassment and anger and potent confusion. Silence stretched long and thin and Merlin jerked his tunic over his head, the smell of sex and sweat strong and sudden in his nose.

“I don’t want anyone looking at you,” Arthur said, so quietly Merlin almost didn’t hear him. His face was sullen and serious, belying the absurdity of his words, and Merlin couldn’t help but laugh a little, weak.

“That’s--” he started, and didn’t know how to finish. Arthur had a little furrow between his brow and his mouth was pursed and very red; he looked as unsettled as Merlin felt. He didn’t know how long they stood there staring at each other, wondering, but it was long enough to make the knights restless, muttering and shuffling their feet.

“We haven’t got too long, Sire,” one of them called, sounding apologetic. “We’re to ride at noon. King’s orders.”

“Noon?” Merlin echoed as Arthur grimaced. “Noon--today?”

It made sense, of course; there wasn’t any reason for him to stay after the Hunt was over, and unsuccessful to boot, but something still clenched up in Merlin’s chest. He looked at Arthur and couldn’t manage to keep the unhappy edge from his voice when he said,

“You’re leaving?”

“No,” Arthur said, slowly, almost quizzical, “*we* are.”

Merlin blinked.

“What?”

Merlin didn’t think he’d ever seen so many people gathered in so small a space before. The air inside the Elder’s tent was thin and stale, smelled like age and thick, powerful herbs. It burned to breathe it in, and out of the corner of his eye Merlin could see Arthur’s nose twitch, the only thing to mar his stony expression. Behind him, his knights wore identical faces, eyes narrowed and mouths set into firm lines.

Sweat gathered at the back of Merlin’s neck. The Elders didn’t look pleased, and his mother’s face had gone ashen the moment she’d seen him, and stayed that way; she was gripping his arm now, nails digging into skin, and Merlin could hear her swallow, the shallow breaths she took.

The silence that had descended was tense, stifling, but when it broke Merlin was sorry to see it go.

“If what you say is true,” Elder Helewys spoke, the curl of her mouth making it clear how little she thought of his word, “then Nimueh decided to leave us. And you--what? Thought you would simply take her place?”

“I didn’t--” Merlin winced as Hunith’s grip tightened, panic rolling off of her in waves. “I didn’t know what would happen.”

Elder Helewys raised her brows. “You didn’t know of the Hunt?”

“No, I knew--”

“So you knew what the mask was for--*who* it was for.”

“Yes, but--”

“And you wore it willingly, isn’t that right? Or did she hold you down and force it on you?”

“Peace, Helewys,” Elder Aglain said, before Merlin could stutter out a reply that would only feed her anger. His eyes, when they fell on Merlin, were kind. “What use is bickering now? He is chosen.”

“But he shouldn’t have been.”

“Then I suggest you question *me*,” Arthur said, voice flat, “since I am the one who chose him.”

Helewys pursed her mouth. “It is not you I find at fault, Prince.”

“But the fault is mine.” Arthur shrugged, loose and dangerous. “Perhaps you aren’t aware of what the Hunt entails. *I* was the one to pursue *him*.”

“I am aware,” Helewys said, stiff. “But he wasn’t meant to be a part of it. it was conducted under false pretense--”

“Are you saying I’ve been tricked? Has Camelot been made a fool by the People?”

“No!” Colour rose in Helewys’ thin face. “I am saying that this boy does not--cannot--represent us. A union with Camelot means haven for we magical few, Prince. We would have you bound with a person of magic.”

Arthur’s mouth curled up and Merlin felt his insides turn to lead. “You don’t believe Merlin possesses magic?”

Hunith made a small, horrified noise that was drowned out by the Elders’ murmuring. Helewys frowned and said, slowly, “Not beyond what he has been taught.”

“That’s odd,” Arthur said, pursing his mouth in a mocking imitation, “because I was under another impression entirely.”

Merlin closed his eyes and didn’t flinch when Hunith’s nails dug sharply into his arm. *Sorry*, he thought at her, *sorry*, *sorry*, but couldn’t quiet the little throb of pleasure in his gut at the sight of the Elders’ startled faces. Helewys looked at him and he held her gaze until she turned away, looking perturbed.

“Well,” she said, taking a breath and folded her hands slowly. “Then we would request more time from you. We need to--deliberate.”

“Take all the time you need.” Arthur smiled. “But we ride at noon, and we take *him*,” a jerk of his chin in Merlin’s direction, “with us.”

He ignored Helewys' protesting noise and stalked outside, his knights falling into place behind him, filing out of the tent in a neat line. He hadn't looked Merlin's way once since they came in here, and Merlin tried not to wonder what that meant, forced himself to focus on the matter at hand. Helewys had gone a blotchy red, Aglain pensive, and the other Elders wore identical troubled expressions. Hunith released Merlin's arm to wipe her damp palms on her robes, and it began to sting in the absence of pressure.

"Well," Aglain said. "That seemed rather final. I'm not sure what there is left to deliberate, Helewys."

Helewys' lip curled, but before she could speak Hunith stepped forward, hands wrung together.

"Elder," she said, voice wavering, and Merlin itched to call her back, "surely you won't allow him to do this."

"No," Aglain said gently. "I cannot *allow* Camelot's Prince to do anything."

"But this is a mistake! Merlin's not meant for this, he's not a part of it. He's--he's just a boy."

"Hunith." Aglain clasped his hands together. "We both know Merlin is far more than just a boy."

Hunith lost what little colour there had been left in her face and Helewys' eyes widened at the confirmation. Merlin's stomach began to cramp with unease; it was one thing for Arthur to say what he had, and another entirely for the *Elder*. He didn't want to hear any more, didn't want to know what he knew, and by the look on his mother's face, neither did she.

But they couldn't turn away, and had to listen as he said, soft, "Balinor was both friend and mentor. He spoke highly of you. Both of you."

Hunith took in a wet, ragged breath, and the Elders frowned and turned surprised, speculative eyes in Merlin's direction. *Balinor*, someone echoed.

"You knew of this," Helewys said, suspicion twisting her mouth. "You knew this would happen."

Elder Ulric spoke, voice rusty from age and disuse. "He Saw it. Didn't you, Aglain?"

"I See many things," Aglain said easily, "and most never come to pass."

Helewys snorted, a startling sound to come from a woman so tiny and frail. She looked at Merlin again, this time with the stirrings of interest in the lines of her face, and he bit the inside of his mouth as he stepped forward and curled a hand around Hunith's wrist. His mother fit her palm to his and Merlin directed his attention to Aglain.

"It's decided, then?" he asked, ironing the trepidation from his voice, and hiding the excitement. He squeezed Hunith's hand, a silent reassurance. "I must go?"

“You always have a choice, Merlin,” Aglain said, looking fond. “But some things are destined, and will be no matter what you choose.”

Merlin ducked his head when Hunith squeezed back. “I don’t suppose you’ve Seen that, too?”

Aglain laughed.

He found Arthur near the edge of the campground, hidden in the shade. There weren’t any of his knights around, and Merlin supposed they’d gone to fetch their things, or ready the horses, or whatever they did to prepare for days long journey. Merlin would find out soon enough, and that thought made him bite back a smile.

Arthur’s eyes were closed, and he didn’t open them as Merlin approached. “Well?”

“Well what,” Merlin said, stepping close enough to touch the toes of their boots together.

“Well, have you come willingly, or will I have to tie you to the horse?”

“Would you really do that?” Merlin asked, curious. “I don’t think the horse would find it very comfortable. The rope would chafe.”

Arthur’s mouth twitched, and his eyes opened to slits, still that shocking blue. “You’re nervous.”

“I’m worried about the horse.” Merlin swallowed, and reached out a hand to pluck at the hem of Arthur’s tunic. “They’re right, you know. I’m not meant for you.”

“Who gets to decide?” Arthur sneered. “Your Elders?”

“How about life?” Merlin suggested. “You know who I am. A servant.”

“I know *what* you are.”

“It’s one and the same.”

Arthur reached out and grabbed his arms, spun him so he was pressed back against rough bark. “You really are an idiot,” he said, nostrils flared, and Merlin’s mouth went soft, wanting a kiss, but Arthur held that aching inch of space between them. “You won’t be a servant in Camelot. Just someone who could set the forest on fire with a thought, and douse it with less.”

Merlin swallowed, and turned away. “You don’t know--”

Arthur gripped his chin and forced him to meet his eyes. “I’m a Pendragon,” he said, on a short laugh, “*I know, ” and then, softer, like it meant something more than Merlin could understand: “I chose you.”*

Merlin's throat clicked, dry, and he dropped his gaze to the collar of Arthur's shirt, the hollow of his throat. What he thought he knew wasn't even half of what Merlin had been hiding his entire life but, Merlin thought, eyes on the strong beat of his pulse, maybe it was a start. So he lifted a hand and placed it on Arthur's chest, tilted his head back and said, like he was entirely unaffected,

"What if I don't choose you?"

He didn't know what he expected, but it wasn't for Arthur to grin and lean in and kiss him, hard, like he'd been wanting to ever since they stopped, and say:

"You already have."

There wasn't really any way to argue that. Good thing, too, because Merlin was too busy kissing him back.

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