

House of the Rising Sun

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I.

When Arthur returned victorious from months of troubled fighting kingdoms away, he had hoped to be greeted by his father and receive that mightiest of gestures, the clap of a hand on his shoulder which said, 'I am proud of you' or at the very least, 'I am not disappointed in you, well done'. And then maybe later a feast, some of the best gut rot available in Camelot followed by some uncoordinated, yet most enjoyable rumpy.

And Camelot. Camelot looked beautiful in the distance, snow covered and ethereal. Probably colder than Morgana's teat, but rather pretty all the same. But there in the distance was a lone horseman coming towards Arthur as they neared. A little odd, but this was Camelot after all. Arthur had been greeted by more bizarre things.

"Sire, I bring news," the man had huffed and puffed, his breath misting on the cold air.

"It couldn't have waited?" Arthur asked.

The messenger shook his head. "Sire, it's your father."

Arthur didn't wait to hear more or even think on the messenger's words as he pulled back the reins and had his horse storm towards the castle. He was through the gates and at the steps of the castle in moments, despite it feeling as though everything had slowed down around him.

He cast off his gauntlets and threw aside his helmet as he made his way to his father's chambers, servants scurrying out of his path and picking up the pieces he left behind him. Finally, throwing open the doors of his father's chambers, he saw that for all his hurrying...

Morgana looked up from where she sat at the King's side, her eyes red, but her tears unshed. On the King's other side was Gaius, looking defeated, broken and impossibly old. Gwen hovered near Morgana, her expression unreadable, her discreet eyes on Arthur. And Merlin... Arthur could see a still figure from the corner of his eye, but dared not look to see the expression of sympathy or sorrow awaiting him.

Gaius looked up with glassy eyes, his voice weak as he told Arthur, "Forgive me, Sire. I could not save him."

The room plunged into silence. Arthur found it impossible to look away from the King. No doubt everyone else in the room was now watching Arthur instead.

"Arthur?" he heard Morgana ask quietly after a while.

Arthur found himself frowning at her without reply. It was then Gaius got up from the edge of the bed, coming to Arthur's side, giving his shoulder a gentle squeeze. Arthur nodded mutely, keeping his eyes on the body of his dead father as they all followed Gaius out.

Merlin stopped before leaving, quietly whispering, "I'm sorry."

Arthur looked across at Merlin, unsure of what possible words he had for anyone right now. He absently nodded, letting Merlin leave and hearing the doors close behind him. It felt an eternity before he could move and slowly make his way around the bed, coming to his father's side, seeing

him looking as if he were simply sleeping. Even in death Uther Pendragon appeared troubled.

He sat down on the edge of the bed. "You should have waited," he said flatly. "It's not time yet."

His father said nothing. Arthur remained by his side for a long time before he stepped outside as the King of Camelot.

II.

There was going to be pomp and ceremony and to be honest, Arthur wasn't much in the mood. His immediate plans were out of the window. His father's body would be dealt with before it could be placed in the chapel until the time for burial and already cries of 'long live King Arthur' were beginning to sound outside the castle.

Arthur went back to his own chambers with some relief. At least he could be himself for a little longer here. Merlin was waiting for him by the bed as Arthur closed and locked the door, taking a deep breath before he turned around and gave the room a look, ignoring the way Merlin was staring at him with wide-eyed worry.

"I see you still have no idea what cleaning means," Arthur said, noticing the place far too clean for someone who hadn't lived here in months.

Merlin didn't say anything, coming to Arthur and helping him out of his remaining armour until Arthur stood there feeling too light and too naked despite being dressed. He tiredly went to his bed as Merlin put the armour down for cleaning, making far too much noise as he did so.

"Merlin," Arthur said, when Merlin's pretend busying himself became intolerable.

All went quiet before Merlin answered, "Yes?"

"What happened?"

Merlin slowly turned to look at Arthur. "I don't know. Gaius thinks it might have been poison. We tried our best to find out, Arthur--"

"I believe you," Arthur said. "I know you would do everything in your power."

Merlin slowly came to Arthur's side and sat down. "I'm sorry. It happened so quickly. There wasn't enough time to reach you. I tried, I really tried."

Arthur looked up at Merlin and nodded. "I know."

Merlin was watching him with such wide open affection and worry, Arthur wondered how he wasn't suffocating from being overwhelmed by so much truth in one simple gaze. Merlin couldn't mask his emotions if he had a helmet on. It was... he didn't want to think about this. Not now. Especially not now. He just wanted to... Not. Think. About. This. Thing. With. This. Merlin.

So Arthur reached out and gently fingered the scarf around Merlin's neck, almost as if he was curious before pulling Merlin close and pressing his lips to Merlin's mouth with a long tired sigh, pretending he had returned a prince and not an unprepared king.

III.

Arthur had awful dreams that night. He dreamt of evil creatures, fire and war, swords and magic. He dreamt of his dead father and the mother he'd never seen and things that all added to ill-fated omens. If he believed in any of that manure. Nevertheless, Arthur sat up with a terrified gasp, trying to calm his breathing as he looked around his chambers for evil spirits seeking to cause harm.

It was dark, the fire down to glowing embers and the chill sufficiently creeping across the room. Next to him, Merlin lay under the sheets with his face buried in his pillow as he mumbled nonsensical things in his sleep. Arthur gave him an annoyed look and kicked his leg to quieten him. Merlin frowned in his sleep and proceeded to roll over with his back to Arthur to continue mumbling.

Arthur rolled his eyes and shook his head, falling back against the pillows and staring into the dark of the canopy, sleep having fled completely.

Arthur

Arthur leapt out of bed and went straight for his sword, demanding, "Show yourself!"

Merlin sat up instantly, almost toppling out of bed as he turned to look at Arthur. "What? What's going on?"

"There's someone in here. I need light."

Merlin instantly got up from bed, taking the bed covers with him as he stretched out his hand towards the fire which re-ignited and burned bright and hot with a mere few whispered words. At the same time every candle lit itself and the dark gave way to warm light everywhere. Arthur looked around, sword at the ready even if he looked ridiculous in his long nightshirt. Meanwhile, Merlin was out of bed with the covers wrapped around his shoulders.

"Arthur. I don't think there's anyone here. You must have dreamt it." Arthur made a face at Merlin. "Well, look around you."

Merlin was irritatingly right, so Arthur lowered his sword slowly. Merlin came to him, extracting the sword from his grasp and putting it aside before gently guiding Arthur back to bed.

"I'm not mad. I heard someone," Arthur said. "I'm quite certain I was wide awake too."

"Maybe it was someone outside," Merlin said as he went back to his own side of the bed and started to shuffle into his clothes, still eyeing Arthur for signs of spontaneous insanity.

"Didn't sound like it was outside. Why are you getting dressed?"

"Gaius will wonder where I am."

"I'm quite certain Gaius knows where you are and what you're doing. The old man's not fooling anyone," Arthur snorted.

"Yes, but it's so much less awkward pretending he doesn't know and pretending I don't know that he knows," Merlin said, once again coming into Arthur's line of sight. "Unless you want me to stay."

Stay, Arthur thought, just bloody stay. He really didn't fancy the idea of being alone in this large tomb shaped bed. "No. You best go," Arthur said flatly. The occupants of the castle had a lifetime's worth of gossip fodder. Why give them more. "Wouldn't want Gaius pretending to worry about you debauching yourself."

Merlin nodded, pulling a funny face. "Did a lot of that while you were away." Arthur turned over and groaned into his pillow, though grateful for the smile that spread on his face.

"Be here bright and early," Arthur sighed. "Bring food. Lot's of it."

Merlin muttered something comfortingly rude under his breath, the affectionate tone taking away any real sting the remark might have had. Arthur smiled as the doors closed.

"A sorcerer? Of all the people you could have shared your bed with, you chose a sorcerer?"

Arthur's eyes snapped open to see his father looming by the bed with a look of great disappointment on his face. Arthur might have stared in complete stillness for a slightly ridiculous amount of time before he scrambled away until he fell out of bed, continuing to scramble until his back hit the wall and his father was standing over him looking like every inch of one angry and disappointed King Uther Pendragon.

"This... is obviously not real," Arthur said, looking on in something that probably ranged between horror and plain confusion.

"A servant, fine," Uther said with a still disgusted frown. "But a sorcerer? After *everything* I have taught you? You have seen what magic can do and you have fought to make Camelot safe, and now you do *this*?"

His father didn't stop there, continuing his litany of disgust and disappointment while Arthur stared for a while, mostly in distrust and curiosity, before he reached out to find one of his boots close at hand as left by his tardy love-- *manservant*. His manservant. He picked it up and lobbed it at the man pretending to be his father, watching the boot sail right through him. Arthur stared for a moment before getting up and walking up to his supposed father, waving both his hands through a solid looking body apparently made of thin and rather hot air.

"No doubt he has you under some kind of spell," Uther was saying absently. "An enchantment."

"Oh, it's an enchantment all right," Arthur said flatly, poking his hand into a non-existent chest. "And it appears the rumours of you having no heart are true."

"I'll remind you," Uther snapped. "that dead or alive I am your father."

"Yes. Of course." Arthur nodded. "So... what... brings you here?"

"What are you doing with that boy?" Uther pointed accusingly at the bed.

"I would have thought it was quite obvious."

"He is a sorcerer. Nothing good will come of this. You cannot protect Camelot when you harbour evil inside your own bed."

"He's a lot of things in my bed, but I'd have to say none of them are evil. Or at least not evil in any conventional sense. Depending on your definitions of conventional of course."

Uther glared. Arthur guessed it was because Uther Pendragon could never look disgusted. His face was only made for so many expressions.

"I have to say, this is an odd dream. Even for me," Arthur said. "Usually someone's naked or trying to kill me. Sometimes even both. I really hope no one here is going to be naked soon."

"This is no dream. I am very much your father," Uther said. "I saw you arrive. I thought perhaps those were the last moments afforded a departing soul, but nothing happened. I just continued to linger and wander. I prayed I could say goodbye to you, but I cannot recall when prayers ever worked."

Arthur frowned. "You're... the spirit of my father." Uther nodded. Arthur thought this over and stood there trying to form words for a moment. "You... you weren't here earlier were you? When Merlin and I--"

"Unfortunately," Uther said, aiming a sour look at his son. "It is a side of you I could have done without seeing."

Arthur closed his eyes and made a face. He cleared his throat and said, "Yes, well. Spirit, you say."

"It appears for some reason I have been cursed to not rest in peace."

The whole time, Arthur wondered. His father had been there the whole time he and Merlin had been cavorting? That was some rather stellar cavorting too, he mused.

"Just to be clear. I wasn't celebrating." Uther frowned. So Arthur nodded to the bed. "It's just that... it was either that or, well, being quite unmanly about the whole situation."

Uther's face had a rather bemused look. Arthur wondered if he could have worded his explanation better. Ploughing his... Merlin... into the bed wouldn't have been any kind of manly act in his father's book, no matter how much of his coarse side of the vocabulary he used up in the process.

"So," Arthur said. "You're dead, but not gone. That's rather strange, wouldn't you say?"

"You must go to Gaius," Uther said. "You must go to him and tell him that I have not departed. He must find out what curse this is or I will be forced to wander here for who knows how long."

"Why my chambers specifically?" Arthur asked.

Uther gave his son an impatient look. "I meant Camelot."

"Oh," Arthur said. "Well, it's just good to know where you'll be while you're... passing on."

His father nodded, before taking a long look at Arthur and smiling. "Perhaps in the meantime I will see you crowned king."

"And... perhaps you'll have the chance you wanted to say goodbye," Arthur suggested quietly.

Uther was silent for a long time, just watching Arthur as if he'd never seen his own son before. Arthur considered this a rather odd welcome home, but also oddly welcome nonetheless.

IV.

"And do you see him now, Sire?" Gaius asked, looking at Arthur as if Arthur might explode into ribbons of madness.

"No," Arthur answered slowly. "I told you, I saw him last night. I haven't seen him since then. Either I'm mad or there's something to this, Gaius."

"I do not doubt you for a moment, Sire," Gaius answered. "I will look into it and perhaps we can help your father pass on."

"Fine," Arthur said, accepting Gaius had labelled him as mad.

Gaius ambled off towards Merlin, where he whispered loud enough for the people of Albion to hear, "I think he's mad with grief."

With that brilliant observation out of the way, Gaius offered Arthur a reassuring look and left. Merlin came to Arthur's side where he was sitting on the edge of his bed, pulling on a boot.

"Did... your father see--"

"Everything apparently," Arthur replied. "He's never looked so proud."

Merlin covered his eyes with his hand, because apparently that somehow wiped out things in the past. Arthur just shook his head and stared at him as he bemoaned, "That's not embarrassing at all."

Arthur frowned. "You believe me?"

Merlin's hand dropped as he nodded. "Of course. I mean, if you really think he's a spirit, maybe he is."

"Oh," Arthur said. "Well, good." They sat in companionable silence for a moment before Merlin, of course, just *had* to look at him in a way that suggested he was going to find some variation on the theme of whether Arthur was mad with grief or not. Arthur made a face. "I'm fine. Stop worrying."

"Your father just died. It's all right to be a little upset you know. Even if you are king."

"I know," he said. "I am. But this day was always going to come." Of course that was when he spotted Uther sighing by the open window, like he had never lived. "Besides, it's not like he went very far."

V.

The whole day was spent in a whirlwind of meeting and speaking with the court, signing documents, enduring speeches and glancing at Merlin every few minutes so someone could take note of his boredom and have the decency to look bored on Arthur's behalf. Though, Arthur was sure a lot the boredom was probably Merlin's own.

Looking around the court during the evening feast, one thing was certain. Counting the true friends of the King probably wouldn't have taken very long and possibly only required the use of the fingers of one hand. Arthur saw smiles, some laughter and a strange ease about everyone. If there were any faces that found it hard to offer a true smile, then it was his own, that of Merlin who couldn't stop looking at Arthur in worry and Gaius whose eyes said he had lost a very dear friend. Everyone else carried on, goblet in hand and roving eye.

"They seem remarkably happy."

Arthur turned to his father who stood next to him. He lifted his goblet to his mouth and said, "And apparently no one but me can see you. Which isn't worrying at all, of course."

"Look at them. They have already forgotten Uther Pendragon," Uther said. Then he gave Arthur a rather sad smile. "Or perhaps they are simply happy for their new king."

Arthur felt a small part of him unravelling somewhere deep in his chest. A quick deep breath pulled it back taut. "They should mourn their old one first," he said before reaching for another drink.

VI.

Someone cruelly opened the drapes around the bed and let the harsh sunlight pour into Arthur's head, regardless of the pounding already there. He would have gotten up and throttled Merlin if it wasn't for the fact that any and all movement threatened the contents of his stomach to relocate.

"You're up. Good."

Arthur let his head loll to the side where Gaius stood by his bed looking old and concerned.

"What's happened?" Arthur asked blearily.

"I fear last night's feast could have gone better, Sire," Gaius said, glancing at Merlin.

Arthur let his head loll towards Merlin. "What happened last night?"

"Um. Well, you may have said some things," Merlin answered, looking exceptionally shifty.

Arthur managed to lift his head off the pillows, pushing himself up onto his elbows. "What things?"

"You may have called some people smug and insufferable," Merlin said with a nod. "And odious boot licking mules." Arthur stared. "Before throwing your drink over Sir Baldulf."

"He's seven feet tall and built like a moat, isn't he?" Arthur asked.

"You're lucky most of the court was drunk by that point, Sire," Gaius said. "Sir Baldulf only

managed to land one blow before falling on Lady Helena."

Arthur frowned and felt an ache around his eye. He groaned as the stretch of skin made pain flare up in his face, pinpointing the location of his headache. "He hit me? That lumbering oaf?"

"Yeah. You called him that too," Merlin said, pointing at Arthur. "Before telling him you're the damn King and nobody hits the damn King."

"Well, excellent," Arthur said falling back against the pillows. "I'm sure this turn of events will help my father rest in peace."

A laugh next to Arthur made him frown and look at the source of the sudden mirth. His father was lying on top of the bedsheets, legs crossed at the ankles as he chuckled away rather merrily.

"What's so funny?" Arthur asked.

"Do you have any idea how many times I wanted to tell those insufferable boot licking twerps exactly the things you told them last night? Every day I was king," Uther said with a happy sigh, before he started to laugh again. "And you're quite right. You are the damn King."

"Sire?" Gaius asked, clearly worried.

Arthur pointed to the amused man on his bed. "The King is with us. It appears he is in good spirits."

"No, Sire," Gaius said gravely. "*You* are the King now."

Arthur sighed. "I mean, my father's spirit."

"I see," Gaius said, looking as though he really didn't see at all actually.

"Oh," Merlin said, giving the bed a small customary bow. Oddly, it made Arthur want to jump up and kiss him.

"What are you doing?" Uther said, snapping Arthur out of his daydream and making him look at Gaius instead.

"Gaius, what are you doing to find out how to lay my father's spirit to rest?"

A look passed between Merlin and Gaius. One of those looks where they knew something that would make Arthur want to drink himself into a stupor. Again. "What?"

"Sire, it is the matter of your father's body," Gaius said.

Arthur made a face. "What about it?"

"You'll need to see this for yourself," Merlin said.

Arthur looked at his father who had stopped laughing and appeared worried. "To think I always assumed death would be an end to problems. Not the beginning."

Arthur wondered if it was too late to pretend he was still sleeping.

VII.

"That's hideous," Uther said as they looked at the body in the chapel. "I don't recalling ever owning that cape."

Arthur pinched the bridge of his nose and took a deep breath. "Okay, enough of the guessing games. What is it?"

"Well, look at him," Merlin said. "He looks the same as the day he died."

"I was under the impression most corpses do that," Arthur said.

"And those are certainly not my boots," Uther said, sounding more and more cross.

"Sire, take his hand," Gaius said.

Arthur frowned. "What? Why?"

Merlin took Arthur's hand tentatively, guiding it to the body of the man who lay in all his royal regalia (well, someone's royal regalia), all under Uther's curious and watchful eye. Arthur rested his hand atop his father's, his fingers closing around the still hand. The still, yet oddly pliable hand. Arthur frowned, before he let his hand drift up to his father's cheek.

"He's warm," Arthur said. But when his hand lay on his father's chest, there was nothing, not a single beat. "I don't understand."

"I believe it is the work of powerful magic," Gaius said. "His heart does not beat, but something keeps him as if he were asleep. I have been waiting for his body to cool so we may prepare him for his final rest, but it is as if he sleeps, flesh soft, skin warm. I cannot explain it."

Arthur turned to look at the ghostly man at his side who was silenced by the shock of the revelation. "Someone's done this to keep you here."

Uther nodded slowly. "To keep my spirit tied to this place."

"Why only you can see him is the mystery," Gaius said.

"He's my father," Arthur countered. "Mystery solved. Now find out how to fix this, Gaius. I won't have my father rattling around this castle for the rest of eternity."

Gaius gave a nod. "Sire," he said, instantly turning to leave. Merlin gave Arthur a reassuring nod and followed.

"Gaius and Merlin will find a way," Arthur said, looking at the still body.

"This is the magic you would keep at your side?" Uther asked him quietly. "Something that would do *this*?"

"No." Arthur shook his head. "This is not all magic."

"But what if it is?"

"It can't be. I don't believe it," Arthur said adamantly.

"But what if it *is*?" Uther insisted.

Arthur blinked at the corpse with the flushed face before him. His stomach was sinking like a stone. "Then everything changes," he said flatly. He turned to look at his father. "So it can't be."

Then Arthur turned his back on both corpse, ghost and chapel, walking away from the madness of it all, his father calling out behind him, "I hope for your sake you are right."

VIII.

For the rest of the day, everywhere Arthur went, someone had something to say whether it was condolence or question. Soon correspondence from other kingdoms would be coming in, full of sympathy and renewed distrust no doubt. And everyone was looking to Arthur to just step in, like it was as simple as putting on someone's shoes. Crown. Same thing.

"Did you know there are rumours that the new King has gone mad?" Morgana asked by way of greeting Arthur, just as he was about escape the castle for the evening.

"I don't have time for this, Morgana, what do you want?" Arthur said, pulling on his jacket as Morgana walked in and made herself comfortable at the table.

"Actually, I came to ask you how you are," she said quietly. "We haven't really spoken since..."

"Since my father died?" Arthur asked. "Well, I'm sure we'll make up for it the next time you have a gripe with Pendragon politics."

Morgana didn't seem affected by his brash tone. Ever, to be honest. Though, today she looked at him with something soft in her eyes. Something that occasionally felt familiar. Warmer than her words tended to be.

"Look, whatever it is you're going to say, you really needn't," Arthur said. "I know you and he didn't exactly ever see eye to eye--"

"But for a while he was the only family I had," Morgana said simply. Arthur found himself a little unstuck. He had no retort for this. She seemed tired, more fragile than he would ever have imagined her. She smiled at him and got up. "Maybe you'll be a better king. Doesn't mean I won't mourn him."

"Morgana," Arthur slowly called after her as she opened the door to leave. She stopped. "You still have family here. You have me." She turned back and looked at him. "And if you tell anyone I said that I'll deny it."

Morgana smiled before she seemed to become distracted, looking away from Arthur. He followed her gaze to see her staring somewhere past or through his father, who was rooted to the spot and

staring at Morgana with a soft fond look.

"What is it?" Arthur asked her.

She shook her head, looking confused. "Nothing. I thought I... heard something."

Arthur gave her a nod. "Probably outside."

Morgana nodded slowly, not looking entirely convinced as she left, closing the door behind her. Arthur turned to look at his father. He was gone. The fire had died out too, the sun sinking fast outside. And the night promised to be exceptionally cold.

After some time standing in the middle of his chambers, glaring at thin air, he found himself striding through Gaius's abode, telling the old man and Merlin, "I'll be inside where no one can find me. Let me know if you have something."

He doubted they'd find anything soon, but at some point Merlin would have to sleep and Arthur might be able to feel warm again. What felt like an eternity after Arthur had arrived, Merlin finally did come to bed. Arthur was startled awake, his face squashed into the flattest pillow imaginable, just as Merlin was removing Arthur's boots. Boots done, he then narrowly avoided breaking Arthur's arms while he removed his coat.

Arthur grunted in pain as his shoulder seemed to painfully pop. "If you wanted me to leave, you just had to say."

"Of course not," Merlin said. "It's just... boots in bed."

Arthur snorted, letting himself be pushed to make space in the bed. "I bet your mother made up some rhyme about it when you were a child." Merlin was quiet for a moment, lying still along Arthur's back. "What?"

"People," Merlin whispered. "They don't... they're not glad he's dead. I think they just... really like their new king."

Arthur lay there, rather tired and deflated and possibly glad his ghostly visitor wasn't around. He found also himself wondering if Merlin could read minds as well as whisper air to into fire. "Do you know, when I was a boy, I hardly saw him, he was so busy protecting Camelot."

For a moment Merlin didn't appear to have any comment. What could he possibly say? Uther Pendragon wasn't feared and hated by many? He didn't waste his time cruelly ridding Camelot of magic by any means and forfeiting time he could have spent with his child?

"I watched him fight in your place," Merlin said quietly. "He was so sure he was going to die. I could see it in his face, but he went out there and fought. I don't think he did it to protect Camelot."

The sting in Arthur's chest and eyes was simultaneous and sudden enough that he felt almost too breathless to speak, so he clamped his mouth shut against any sudden stupidity.

"It's just... if you remember him, even if no one else does, isn't that enough?" Merlin asked, taking away any right Arthur had to ever call him an idiot again. Arthur closed his eyes, rather than answer

the question. "Arthur. Arthur?"

A moment later Arthur felt the blankets settle around his shoulders and he thankfully closed his eyes.

IX.

Someone was talking. In soft dulcet tones. Arthur found an odd degree of comfort in it. Then he remembered that in a fit of rather maidenly self-pity he had decided on bedding down with Merlin. The bed was small and the room was perhaps even smaller, but it was filled with gentle and warm light and everything here was just like Merlin. A little unkempt, odd and strange, but inexplicably lova -- likeable. Inexplicably *likeable*.

Arthur smiled regardless of his idiot thoughts and stretched himself awake with a pleasurable sigh. The talking stopped, yet Arthur didn't find himself being manhandled in any kind of inappropriate yet always welcome manner. He reached out for an exploration of the tiny space he wasn't sleeping in. Hmm, nothing.

So of course when he opened his eyes Uther Pendragon was staring at him in a most irritated fashion. "You haven't been listening to a word I've been saying," Uther said, every inch of his dead person judging Arthur (and no doubt the idiotic smile with which he greeted the morning).

"It's an annoying habit I have when I asleep." Arthur sprang up from the bed and reached for his boots which had been placed conveniently close and since this had been done by Merlin, it was unlikely it was done on purpose. "And may I just add, I find the thought of you having spent the night talking to me in my sleep rather disturbing."

"There's little much else to do in the afterlife."

Arthur paused in the middle of pulling on his jacket, looking at the morose visage of his father. "The afterlife. What's it like?"

"Like Camelot," his father replied. "Only, for once I can see everything and no one can see me."

"I can see you," Arthur pointed out.

Uther looked up at Arthur, a small frown creasing his brow. "Yes."

They watched each other quietly for a moment, until Arthur broke the gaze. "I better see if Gaius has anything."

X.

"You've found nothing," Arthur said flatly. "Excellent. We'll just prop my father's body up in the square for the rest of eternity then."

"Sire, this could take some time," Gaius said as Arthur watched the morose figure of his father sitting at the table.

"But we are going to find out how to fix this," Merlin said, his certainty taking the edge off Arthur's

worry.

“Perhaps I am not deserved of eternal rest,” Uther said quietly, regret written across his face.

“I don't believe that,” Arthur told him.

“Arthur, we're trying our best,” Merlin said.

“I don't think he's talking to you,” Gaius quietly told Merlin.

“Oh. Sorry.”

Arthur turned to Merlin. “Just find a way to fix this.”

Merlin nodded. “We will. I promise.”

When Arthur turned back towards his father, the chair was empty.

XI.

If the refusal of his father's body to cool had one advantage, it was the fact that Arthur simply couldn't think of burying him like this, which meant his coronation would have to wait. Which was a bit like not really being king. Perhaps he was ready to be the King, but not with the undead one still looking with a court that was forgetting him too quickly.

The crown was heavy enough without extra burdens added on, Arthur thought as he stood looking high up from the castle. There was something certainly different in the air. The people of Camelot did not appear very devastated. There was an ease in their comings and goings. As the guards passed ordinary men and women, no one seemed to cower from their approach. Much.

Arthur turned around, expecting to find his father hovering with more disappointment written on his face, but here was no one there. Arthur stood quite alone, men standing guard in the distance, like they were carved from the same stone as the castle. Arthur turned and retreated inside, slowly making his way to the main chamber where his father would sit and cast his judgements, take his counsel and more than often argue with Arthur. It seemed a much bigger place without his presence.

He looked around as he walked in, finding himself alone once again. “Father?”

The only reply was the echo of his own voice. Arthur sat down at the table, waiting. For the ghost of Uther Pendragon to haunt him. For news of his father's complete death. For Merlin and Gaius.

For the realisation that he was King Arthur of Camelot.

Arthur left for his chambers when he felt too dwarfed by the emptiness surrounding him, wearily closing the door when he got there. For a while he simply stood staring at the door, like it was going to give up a ghost or an answer or something.

“Sorry... maybe I should come back later.”

Arthur turned around at Gwen's voice, barely restraining himself from instantly reaching for his

sword. He moved away from the door as Gwen gave him an embarrassed look, her mouth opening and closing when she clearly couldn't find what she wanted to say.

Then she sighed and said, "I just wanted to see how you are."

Arthur offered her a nod. He couldn't possibly give any indication of how he was since he hadn't a clue. "I'm fine."

Gwen gave him a nod, her eyes soft with sympathy. "I'm sorry about the King's passing."

Arthur looked at her long and hard, smiling though he felt tinged by a bitter sadness. "Even after what he did to your father?"

Gwen looked at him, the depth of her dark eyes forcing Arthur to not look away. Her stance seemed defiant, yet full of quiet grace. "I know what it is to lose a father. Uther may not have endeared himself to many, but he was your father, the only one you will ever have. And I am saddened by your loss. Sire."

Arthur looked away from her, clenching his jaw, struck by how hard it was to bear this much sympathy. Especially from someone who had been so gravely wronged by his father.

"I best go. Stop babbling," Gwen said with a nervous smile. "I, I just wanted to let you know if, if you need anything--" She smiled and pointed at the door.

Arthur nodded, letting her reach the door so she couldn't see him when he said, "Guinevere. Thank you."

Gwen stopped and he saw the slight nod of her head before she hurried off. Arthur stepped towards the nearest chair, changing his mind at the last moment. He could stand to sit here and talk to more sympathisers. Even worse, people who had decided to seek his favour nice and early.

Arthur changed his jacket and picked up his gloves, heading for the armoury.

XII.

"Arthur. Arthur."

Arthur awoke with a start from where he was splayed across the bed like a dead man to find Merlin leaning over him. "What?" he asked, clearing his throat.

"Everyone was looking for you."

Arthur closed his eyes to block out Merlin's searching look. "Couldn't have been trying very hard."

"Where were you?" Merlin asked.

"I went on a hunt." Arthur sighed, blinking up at Merlin. "Got back late."

"Shouldn't have gone alone."

“I assure you, I can take care of myself, Merlin,” Arthur pointed out.

“I know. But you're the King. You need--”

“My protector,” Arthur said with a grin, his hand reaching out with every intention for a little rough and tumble. Someone cleared their throat behind Merlin. “Gaius.”

Merlin made a face at Arthur and moved out of the way. Arthur sat up and saw Gaius standing there doing the worse impression of someone pretending not to know things they didn't want to know. “Sire.”

“Any news?” Arthur asked, swinging his legs off the bed, Merlin shoving his boots at him.

“Bad news, I'm afraid,” Gaius said.

“Is there any other kind?” Arthur asked, pulling on his boots.

“It's Sir Baldulf and Sir Percy,” Merlin added. “They've gathered the court. They're saying they have some concerns they need to air with you?”

“What concerns?” Arthur asked, getting up as Merlin brought him his jacket and helped him slip it on.

“They won't say, Sire,” Gaius said seriously. “They are awaiting your return.”

“Of course they are,” Arthur said. “Well, let's find out what they want. Merlin, assistance maybe required.”

“Of course, Sire,” Merlin said with a very important serious nod, which Arthur returned.

Gaius sighed and looked as though he would have gladly switched places with the dead King.

XIII.

“So, spit it out,” Arthur said without preamble as he walked in on the waiting court, his sword in hand. The faces around him stared blankly as he went to stand by the throne. “You wished to see me,” Arthur said, watching as Gaius took a spot by the door, Merlin next to him.

Of course, Baldulf stepped forward from the crowd, his nose red and enlarged from a blow. Arthur tried to remember he was the King and didn't allow himself a smile.

“Sir Baldulf. I hope this is not about my heated words during the feast. Surely you'll forgive a man who was grieving for his father.”

This appeared to have upset whatever Baldulf's starting point was going to be. Idiot, thought Arthur. Baldulf looked contrite. “Sire, you wound me.”

“Apparently,” Arthur couldn't help but say, noticing Baldulf flinch.

“That blow is forgotten,” Baldulf said. “I would never come to you with such trivial matters.”

Arthur nodded. "Just as I would not have you thrown into the dungeon for the blow I received." Arthur fancied he saw some people slinking to the back of the crowd where it was darker.

Baldulf cleared his throat. "Sire, we have called upon you here today out of concern for you and for Camelot."

"Why?" Arthur asked, looking at the shine of his sword. "You know of someone who might try and part us?"

Baldulf smiled, clearly amused. "Of course not, Sire. There has been talk. Some of us," he said pointing to a space deserted by 'some of us', "we all feel that in your present state it may be wise for you to look upon the advice of those your father trusted."

"I can recall no such person," Uther said, stepping out from behind Arthur, looking rather dark and ferocious, like he'd just come back from a trip to the underworld.

Arthur smirked and looked at Baldulf. "Sir Baldulf, my father trusted no one."

"Sir Percy?" Baldulf looked to his side and then further back where Percy seemed to be trying to squeeze between two confused looking knights. "You wished to say something?"

Percy was shoved forward, clearing his throat. "Uh... yes. I... yes?"

"You had some concerns?" Baldulf prompted.

"Well? Speak up," Arthur said, employing a tone he'd heard his father use often and noting that Uther looked rather amused.

Percy stepped forward and haughtily told Arthur, "Sire, I fear Sir Baldulf is afraid of saying what he means, fearing that you might have him shackled in the dungeon."

Past his dark luring looks and whorish tendencies Percy was a slimy weasel type. Arthur was inclined to dismiss anything he had to say.

He turned to Baldulf and calmly said, "I am your the King. You must never fear to speak before me." Baldulf looked a little alarmed, and then slightly regretful. "And if you say something that offends the King, well, I'll just have Percy shackled instead." He turned to Percy. "You still into that whole thing?"

There were titters and perhaps a certain manservant employing his voice-throwing skills to announce that Sir Percy was still very much into shackles and chains.

Percy cleared his throat, pretending to enjoy the jest. "Very glib, Sire. However, this still does not resolve the problem that our young king and Camelot is now without an heir. There are rumours that the King is all too happy with bedding servants and has no need for a bride."

There was silence. Many eyes were resting on Arthur's blade as he stood there listening to the sound of a raging ocean in his head. He took a step towards Percy, but Baldulf suddenly stood in his way.

“Sire,” he gently said, “when the King was alive, he had an heir to rule Camelot. If something were to happen to you--”

“Then let the strongest and noblest lead,” Arthur said. “I cannot give you a queen or an heir overnight.”

Baldulf nodded. “Indeed, Sire, but you must now start to think upon it. For Camelot.”

“Think upon it? *King* Arthur hasn't even had the *old* king buried yet,” Percy said.

“Prat,” Arthur heard someone (who sounded suspiciously like Merlin) mutter as Percy turned around in confusion.

“There have been rumours of your state of mind, Sire. Of why you refuse to announce your father's funeral,” Baldulf said calmly.

Arthur stepped back and looked at the court, his father having taken to stand against the wall, watching his son carefully and quietly. “My father's body has been enchanted,” Arthur said. “He lies as if he were sleeping, his flesh warm to the touch, though he is very much dead. Give me the word, that I have done the wrong thing to not entrust him to his tomb, and I will bury him as you wish.”

Baldulf looked back at his supporters. No seemed to want to comment. Baldulf turned back to Arthur, looking regretful as he bowed his head. “We would never have you dishonour him, Sire.”

“That still leaves the matter of you being without queen and heir, Sire,” Percy said, not willing to let it rest, though Baldulf gave him a hard look. “Unless you have no desire for a queen.”

“You will have your queen,” Arthur said flatly. “As soon as I find someone who is worthy of the title. Will there be anything else?”

“No, Sire,” Baldulf quickly said. “We have taken enough of your time.”

“Good. You can all leave. And remember. Next time, I summon you. Not the other way around,” Arthur pointed out, receiving bows all around and catching a glimpse of Merlin who was nodding and smiling at the exiting members of the court. Arthur watched the doors closing, Merlin and Gaius making their way to him.

“What a prat. Bedding servants?” Arthur said, making a face. “He didn't complain when I--”

“Sire,” Gaius cut him off. “May I ask if your father is with us?”

“My father is dead, Gaius,” Arthur pointed out.

“I'm dead, not deaf,” Uther said flatly.

“All the same, Sire,” Gaius said pulling a face like an old prude.

“You have always been a good friend, Gaius,” Uther said, looking at Gaius with admiration.

Arthur rolled his eyes as Merlin muttered. “Really, Percy?”

Arthur sighed, explaining, "I was drunk."

"And blind?" Merlin asked, making a face of pure incomprehension.

"Yes, blind drunk," Arthur said flatly. "Father, good of you to join us. Where have you been?"

Gaius looked at the spot next to him which was being addressed by Arthur as Uther replied, "The son does not ask the father questions, Arthur."

"He does when the father has a penchant for appearing and disappearing at inopportune moments," Arthur replied. "I thought you'd gone for good."

"I was under the impression that was what we wanted," his father said.

"So much for saying goodbye." Gaius and Merlin were quietly watching Arthur, making him realise how mad he must have looked. Arthur looked away from his father's oddly hurt expression and said, "Well, at least the rabble's been dealt with."

"Not quite," Gaius said.

Arthur turned to Gaius. "What do you mean?"

"Sire, you just announced that you are to look for a bride," Gaius explained.

Arthur fancied he must have looked as horrified as he felt. "I did no such thing."

"I fear you did, Sire," Gaius said resolutely. "You told the court it is your intention to find a queen. The news will spread like wildfire by morning and the offers will be coming to Camelot in mere days."

Arthur stared at Gaius. "I've barely got the crown on my head, let alone the time to start producing heirs to the throne."

"Sire, the court will take what you have said as an announcement," Gaius said. "I suggest you start considering the matter of marriage seriously. The issue will not be left forgotten for very long."

Arthur stood rooted to the spot, simmering away silently as he bore holes into the floor from where he refused to look away. He knew Merlin was watching him, just like Gaius. And he knew his father was waiting for Arthur's response. Of course, Uther Pendragon was never much good at waiting. He stepped in front of Arthur, forcing him to look up.

"Marriage is a part of your royal duty to strengthen your hold on your kingdom. You know this," Uther said evenly.

"Yes, I do," Arthur replied.

"Then why do you seem so troubled?" Uther asked, his eyes glancing at Merlin for the briefest moment.

Arthur stiffened at the rather malevolent look. "Perhaps I pity the poor woman who would marry a Pendragon."

Uther stilled, his eyes roaming over Arthur as if he didn't quite know his own son. Arthur watched as he turned and walked away without another look, walking on right through the doors and disappearing.

Arthur watched the doors for a moment before sighing and turning to face Gaius's unimpressed expression. "What?"

"That was a remark unbecoming of a king, Sire," Gaius said quietly.

Arthur glanced at Gaius. "Maybe I'm not a very good king," he said and left.

XIV.

There was a part of the castle that pretended to be forgotten. A whole darkened corner where no one walked the halls, lit torches or candles, opened windows to the rising sun and the blinking moon. A dead limb. Arthur felt the most alone he had ever been as he walked down an empty hall and found the locked chambers. When he turned the key in the lock, the sound was heavy enough that it echoed down the hall, ominous and heavy in this grey afternoon.

The door opened with a loud creak, revealing a room Arthur saw for the first time when he was a child. He had come here during a stolen moment. He had thought his father would never know. And suddenly there he was in the doorway, his face looking as though he would fly into a rage. But his eyes had gone to Arthur's hand as it rested on a long forgotten hand mirror. His face had crumpled into a picture of grief and he had held out a hand and said, "Arthur. Come."

They had walked back into the living castle, Arthur silent by his father's side. He thought his father would say something to ease the strange and sudden loss Arthur felt. Instead, he had turned, sunk to one knee and taken Arthur by his shoulders and made him promise he would never disturb his mother's chambers again.

Arthur had nodded, but promised nothing.

His mother's chambers were dark, as if the colour had leached out of everything over the years and was still fading away. However, there was not a speck of dust, not a single spider web and not even the smell of a long locked up sanctuary. It was clean in here as if someone expected the queen's return. Arthur went to the dresser where the hand mirror lay. He saw himself, one eye blinking back from a corner, before his finger slid across it, catching no dust.

"I said a regrettable thing," Arthur said quietly, turning the mirror over, tracing the curving vines and stems painted on the back. "I did not intend to cause hurt. And I fear I did."

"Perhaps a son who never knew his mother is allowed that much."

Arthur swallowed, nodding. He turned to see his father sitting on the edge of the large bed, everything behind him darkened under the canopy. He looked like an old man. Not a king who had ruled so firmly for so long.

Uther looked up at Arthur, a frown creasing his brow. "On occasion, I have felt her presence here."

Arthur thought about it. Whether it was his mother's presence or just some unidentifiable emotion rising to the surface, he had certainly felt something here. He sat down next to his father, nodding slowly.

"I see you did not keep to your promise," Uther said, a somewhat fond smile on his face.

Arthur smiled slightly. "I made no such promise."

Uther smiled, indulgent and bright, like a father. "No. You had a most rebellious look on your face that day."

Arthur laughed quietly, still able to remember how angry he had felt, how he had run and how he had wanted to rage at someone. And at whom was he to rage? His father for loving the dead queen? Or his mother for dying and never knowing him? Or Camelot who asked so much?

Arthur sat quietly next to his father. As ever his questions hung heavily between them, but remained too hard to ask. How was he to ask his father if it was worth having a son at the expense of a dead wife?

He looked across at Uther and quietly told him, "I will protect and defend Camelot until my dying breath. And one day Camelot will have a worthy queen and heir. One day."

Arthur received a thoughtful nod. "Then let them know, *you* are king."

Arthur tried a smile. "Perhaps when the old one has departed."

Uther smiled and Arthur allowed himself a small laugh. The afternoon sky seemed to clear a little, brightening the dark corners of the dead queen's chambers, illuminating her son and husband for a brief moment.

XV.

Gaius had of course been right. Camelot was rife with rumours of the new King searching for his queen.

"Who's going to marry you?" Morgana had asked with an exceptionally amused look.

"Like you know anything about women," Arthur had retorted irritably. It only seemed to amuse Morgana even more, if her tittering with a thoroughly tickled Gwen was anything to go by.

"You have to do something," Arthur told Merlin the next night, as he flopped back on his bed and received a quizzical look.

"Okay, but you'll have to be less cryptic," Merlin answered, reaching for one of Arthur's boots.

Arthur sat up and grabbed his hand. "Don't."

Merlin looked confused, grinning at Arthur. "What?"

Arthur sat up, swinging his legs off the bed. "I can take my own boots off."

Merlin sat down next to Arthur and stared. "Are you sick?"

"Is it so hard to believe I might want to something for myself?" Arthur said, annoyed as he yanked his boots off.

"Of course not. It's just... well, this is kind of my job," Merlin said, so damned amiable.

Arthur turned to look at Merlin. "Maybe it shouldn't be."

Merlin smiled, too amused and... damn it, why wasn't he being insufferable about the talk of queens and heirs? "Come on, I thought I was improving at this manservant lark." His smile fell when he seemed to sense Arthur was in no jesting mood. "This isn't a magic thing is it?"

Arthur looked him. This was the same Merlin as yesterday and the day before and weeks before and months before. Same old Merlin. And yet every day he... he just looked different sometimes.

Arthur pulled a face at his boots. "Gaius says one day you could be a powerful warlock. Then there's you, talking about destinies and me being a great king one day and I've got you--"

"You've got me," Merlin cut in quietly. "That's all there is to it."

Arthur looked up at Merlin. "Everyone out there is talking about my impending marriage and you're--" He stopped, regretting the words had left him at all.

"Sitting here like it doesn't matter?" Merlin asked quietly.

Arthur sighed and sat back down. "Sitting here like it doesn't matter."

"You're the King," Merlin said. "You won't ever belong to one person."

Arthur snorted, smiling at Merlin. "Seems fair."

"It's not fair. But... but, I'm going to be there every day," Merlin said. "Till the end. And if this destiny thing pans out, we're going to do great things one day. Both of us. Together."

Arthur swallowed, his voice feeling unsteady when he asked, "How do we name this thing we have?"

Merlin smiled, his eyes bright and brilliant. "A king and his loyal servant. Sire."

Arthur shook his head and laughed. He then reached out to cup Merlin's face, pulling him close and muttering, "Idiot."

Merlin's laugh was a huff of air against Arthur's mouth just before they kissed. "And you're still a prat, even if you are king."

Merlin pushed away from the kiss first. "I have to do something," Merlin said, licking his bottom

lip.

“What?” Arthur asked, sitting back.

“No, you said I had to do something. What?” Merlin asked.

“Oh, that,” Arthur said flatly. “About this finding a queen business.”

Merlin made a face. “I was hoping to be as far away as possible from that business actually.”

“What happened to being with me until the end?” Arthur asked.

“I was hoping the other end,” Merlin replied. “Besides. What can I do?”

Arthur shrugged. “I don't know. Conjure me the perfect queen. Or put on a dress,” he said with a smile.

Merlin smiled. “I don't think that's going to fool anyone. Also, I would look hideous as a woman.” Arthur frowned, trying to imagine it. “Okay, stop imagining me in a dress,” Merlin told him.

Arthur nodded. “Would be easier if you had no clothes on.”

Merlin pretended to look confused. He had to be pretending. Arthur smiled and usual pushed him back onto the bed, helping to clear his confusion. Though it appeared that two people trying to undress each other wasn't quite that easy. Arthur stopped and sat back at the ripping sound and Merlin's silly look of shock.

“You tore my shirt,” Merlin said slowly.

Arthur shrugged. “I'm sure you have more.”

“But I like this one,” he said, stern and serious. Arthur liked him just that little bit more. Even more so when Merlin reached for the front of Arthur's shirt and pulled until it also ripped.

Arthur gave him an even look. “That was incredibly childish. Also, I think you're forgetting I'm king.”

Merlin was staring at Arthur in a very strange way, his eyes rather dark. He nodded, “Yes, you are. It's a bit thrilling ripping the King's shirt, you know.”

Arthur blinked. Then he launched himself at Merlin receiving a welcoming laugh and kiss.

XVI.

Merlin.

Merlin.

Arthur awoke with a start to find himself comfortably spooned up behind Merlin. He frowned at no one in particular and rolled onto his back with a sigh, running a hand through his hair, his scalp

aching under it for no discernible reason. Or maybe kingship was a headache. No wonder his father was so irritated all the time.

Just as Arthur debated on getting up for a shirt or leeching off Merlin for more heat, Merlin sat up with a gasp. Arthur watched him quietly from where he lay. Merlin's head turned towards the window, a sudden and sharp movement, as though he was listening to something.

“What?” Arthur asked quietly, sitting up slowly. Merlin appeared startled enough without Arthur's help.

Merlin cleared his throat before he spoke. “It's nothing.”

“By which you mean it's something, Merlin,” Arthur commented. “I know you.”

Merlin's head turned towards Arthur, but he wouldn't look around. He just sat there looking terribly pale under the light of a full moon. “Just a nightmare.”

Arthur thought of stroking a hand down Merlin's back, kissing his bare shoulder perhaps. But Merlin was a liar so Arthur sniffed and fell back against the pillows.

“Hadn't you get back before Gaius starts looking for you? He really is an old woman,” Arthur mumbled quietly.

Merlin gave a small huff of laughter. “He means well.” Merlin pointed to somewhere in the room. “I think I will go though.”

Arthur nodded, glad to be hidden at the dark end of the bed from where he watched Merlin dress in the moonlight, pale skin covered dark, bit by bit. He looked at the open window for a moment before turning to Arthur.

“Cold?”

Arthur nodded, replying quietly, “A bit.”

Merlin absently reached out towards the window, his eyes still on Arthur. In the dark of the room, Merlin's eyes appeared to glow furiously gold and fiery for a moment.

“Sleep well,” Merlin said quietly, walking away under Arthur's hidden gaze.

The door shut and Arthur lay in the quiet and dark for a long time before sighing and closing his eyes. “I know you're here, father.”

When he opened his eyes a dark figure emerged from the shadows, almost a shadow himself. He walked slowly towards Arthur's bed and for a brief moment Arthur felt an odd terror that this wasn't his father at all, but maybe something else. Something evil and made of dark magic.

“Magic. It is not to be laughed at.” Arthur said nothing, pinned to his bed in silence by the leaden misery of his father's voice. “If only you knew what I have lost to it.”

Arthur swallowed. He could guess. He would probably guess right. “I trust Merlin. I trust him with

my life.”

“And, this young man you trust, do you know where he is now? Where he steals off to in the middle of the night?” Uther asked, nearing Arthur's side, his face catching the a sliver of light that made him look cold and... dead.

Arthur looked away. “He can hear the dragon.”

Uther frowned. “You know of the dragon.”

“Despite you neglecting to mention it,” Arthur said flatly.

Uther was quiet, but Arthur sensed his presence closer, as if a cold chill was climbing his fingers and toes. “You must never pay any heed to that monster,” Uther said. “Promise me, Arthur. Promise you will not go to him.”

Arthur turned his face to see a pair of bright blue eyes peering at him from close by, so cold and filled with ice. He sat up feeling shocked cold and startled, as if he had just woken from a nightmare. His breath misted in the cold, catching light from the window. A warm hand touched his back. Arthur twisted around, grabbing the hand.

“That must have been some nightmare,” Merlin said slowly.

Arthur stared at him for a while before looking at the open window. Looking back at Merlin he said, “You're still here.”

Merlin was quiet for a while, making no attempt to free his hand from Arthur's grasp. “Arthur, are you all right?”

Arthur realised he was gripping Merlin's wrist and immediately let go. He uncurled his body from the ridiculously defensive stance he was crouched in. He couldn't have looked particularly threatening crouched naked in the middle of his bed. Feral maybe, dangerous no. Arthur sat back against the pillows, Merlin watching him closely.

“Stupid dream,” he said with a sigh.

“About?” Merlin asked, readjusting the blankets so they weren't freezing to death.

Arthur shook his head. “I don't know. You, me, my father. The dragon.”

Arthur couldn't make out Merlin's expression in the dark, but he knew it was serious and dark from the way Merlin seemed to still. “Why would you dream about the dragon?”

Arthur frowned at Merlin. “I dreamt you went to see him.”

“What else?” Merlin asked quietly.

“You wouldn't tell me where you were going,” Arthur said, wondering if his tone sounded accusing only to himself. “I heard him calling your name, Merlin.”

Merlin was nodding. "I heard it too."

Arthur slid under the blankets. "Well, you'd better go see what dragon breath wants then."

Merlin was shaking his head. "No. I don't need to hear whatever he has to say."

Arthur turned his head to look up at Merlin. He quietly asked him, "And what if it's about my father? I doubt your friend will want to talk to me."

"He's not my friend," Merlin said, something raw and painful in his voice. All the same, he was getting up and dressing. Not as pale as the Merlin of Arthur's dream, not disappearing into darkness as he dressed.

Arthur watched him sleepily, a hazy yearning welling within him to reach out and take Merlin by his wrist, pull him closer and ask him to stay into the morning light, that time when he magically turned back into a manservant and Arthur a king.

Between one heavy blink and the next, Merlin was gone and Arthur was left wondering what was real and what was dreamt. He looked at the window which was still open, the moon bright in the night sky.

"The dragon will never give good counsel," his father said from where he stood by the window. "He will use your friend for his own means."

Arthur looked at his father's spectre who seemed ever fading, but never disappearing. "I don't appreciate you haunting my dreams."

Uther turned to look at Arthur. It made him uneasy. Who knew how far into the dark spirits could see. "Your trust of this boy has blinded you."

"We're all blinded by something," Arthur said as he closed his eyes. "I just want to sleep."

"You're a king, Arthur," his father said. "Sleep is no more than a dream now."

Arthur responded by pulling the blankets over his head. If he couldn't sleep, he'd just have to play dead. It wasn't as if he'd be the only one.

XVII.

Arthur stood behind the parapet, watching his people below. He fancied he'd spotted his father a few times, trailing different people, as if he was listening to their conversations. Then he admitted to himself that he was clearly going mad under the stress of an undead father, an unfound queen... and an all too understanding lov – dammit, Merlin. An understanding *Merlin*. And now, perhaps some unacceptable giddiness.

"You're not going to jump are you?" Morgana asked pleasantly.

Arthur turned to see her smiling at him, her furry white stole wrapped around her shoulders. "No, but I might be in the mood to push someone off."

She rolled her eyes and ignored the comment. “Had any offers of marriage yet?”

“No,” Arthur said. “I’d sooner have the pox to be honest.”

“And what woman would be able to resist such romancing?” Morgana asked, forcing a smile onto Arthur's face. “I’m sure there's someone out there even for you, Arthur. Someone who won't mind you being such a boor.”

Arthur snorted, his eyes catching Merlin. Merlin who was rushing somewhere and running into everyone on his way. Gwen stopped him in his tracks with a laugh, asking him something. Merlin grinned at her, said something and they shared the joke with silly childish smiles.

Arthur turned and smiled at Morgana. “I could always marry you. Not like anyone else will.”

Morgana gave him scrunched up fake smile. “You're very funny. It'll be useful when your bride's crying over her mistake to marry you.”

“Oh come now, Morgana. We both know you're incapable of tears,” Arthur said, holding out his arm. “Let's go inside. I fear that rabbit around your neck isn't going to do much against this weather.”

Morgana grabbed his arm. “I’m walking next to an endless supply of hot air. I'm sure I'll be fine.”

Arthur rolled his eyes. “You do go on, Morgana.”

Morgana smiled. “I think that means I win.”

XVIII.

Arthur looked down the long table, where the most pompous members of the court had gathered. Arthur sat at the head, still feeling very much like he was sitting in his father's place. Everyone had an opinion on something, whether it was neighbouring kingdoms or local issues. Someone complained about current ladies fashions being too excitable. Another was alarmed by a sudden new trend in beards.

There was even a complaint about salacious poetry being purposely left around in public areas by Camelot's very own renegade poet. Arthur had read some of it. It was all a little more stomach-turning than salacious and for that reason alone the culprit had to be stopped.

Matters were discussed from the trivial to the serious. Arthur nodded in the right places and let the complainers and whiners complain and whine amongst themselves, opting to watch his father walking around looking confused and sulky before he came to Arthur, sitting down on the edge of the table.

“They have rhymes about me,” Uther said looking bemused. “My people have rhymes about me.”

Arthur nodded, not telling his father that the rhymes had actually been around for a while and weren't just a celebration of his death.

“I’m called fat King Uther in some of them,” Uther said flatly.

Arthur laughed at that. Everyone seated around the table looked at him. All grave and appalled faces. Apparently the conversation had moved beyond beards and sensational dresses. Arthur gave them a stern look and said, "I laugh only because a king cannot cry."

He received many admiring nods as Uther commented. "Idiots."

"Sire," Gornemant asked in between complaint. "What of the matter of King Uther? He still lies without his last rites."

Arthur nodded. "I am having it looked into."

"Sire, people talk," Gornemant went on. "Neighbouring kingdoms--"

"Let them talk," Arthur said. "I am king. And I have spoken." Gornemant offered an apologetic nod. "If there is nothing else."

There were quiet murmurs of, "No, Sire," before they all began to empty out, leaving Arthur on his own at the table, his ghostly father watching him with something close to admiration.

Arthur made a face. "I heard you say that once."

Uther smiled and nodded. "Yes. I remember it well. You were just a boy at the time."

Arthur got up, avoiding his father's eyes. "I meant what I told Gornemant. I *will* find a way for you to rest."

Uther nodded slowly. His face was hard to read, as if he was holding back on something. He looked across at the window, so the sunlight was shining in his eyes, making them look bright and pale. When he looked back at Arthur he was smiling.

"You will make a fine king, Arthur," he said. Arthur stared at him, nodding mutely. Waiting for whatever awful thing his father wasn't telling him. "Your friend. Merlin. He has found the way to my rest."

Arthur frowned. "What?"

Uther was nodding. "The dragon. He told your friend of a way that will either save me, or damn me forever."

Arthur looked into his father's eyes, the doubt and distrust, solid and dark at the centre of his eyes. "Merlin would never do something to hurt Camelot," he said quietly.

Uther nodded, the corner of his mouth lifting in a small smile. "I am quite sure the choice he makes will not depend on the love of Camelot."

The doors opened before Arthur could say anything and there stood Merlin, out of breath and looking at Arthur with wide eyes. He swallowed before breathlessly telling him, "I know how to lift the enchantment."

Arthur turned back towards his father, but the spectre had vanished. He turned around in a circle, but his father was nowhere to be seen. It was just him and Merlin. He turned to Merlin, searching his face for answers to questions he would never have asked. Questions his father had sown in his head.

“It's in the King's chambers,” Merlin said, his face flushed and his body poised to run straight back out.

Arthur nodded. “What are waiting for then?”

XIX.

When they found the crushed flower under Uther's bed, Arthur could do no more than stare at it. The petals were flat, but oddly still soft when they should have been dry and brittle. The stem of the strange velvety flower was thick, purple veined and dark green, the petals a rich luscious red, crimson and bloody. It fit in the palm of Arthur's hand and seemed so harmless. What harm could a crushed flower do to anyone?

“According to the dragon, someone must have enchanted the flower and then slipped a petal into the King's meal or drink. Destroying it will break the spell.” Arthur's fingers had just flinched to crush it when Merlin put out a hand and yelled, “Not by crushing it!”

Arthur gave him a look. “How about telling me how we destroy it before I put it in my hand?”

“Well, I didn't know you'd try to crush it straight away,” Merlin said. He had the audacity to look annoyed. Arthur might have liked him just that little more.

“We have to break the spell and then burn the flower,” Merlin said.

“By we you mean?”

“Um, yeah, me,” Merlin said with a nod.

Arthur held out the flower to Merlin. “Well, then by all means, please do.”

Merlin took the flower from Arthur, holding it carefully in his cupped hands and went to the fire place. Arthur watched him shift the flower to the palm of one hand and spread the fingers of his other hand over it before he whispered old words in hushed tones. It turned Arthur's stomach inside out.

Arthur:

Arthur turned around to see his father's ghost. He didn't know what to say. All he knew was he didn't feel ready. It didn't seem time yet. And it didn't seem fair. His father nodded at him and opened his mouth to speak. The words didn't reach Arthur's ears and he found himself stepping forward ready to object as the phantom faded away completely.

When he turned around, Merlin stood with the enchanted flower burning in the palm of his outstretched hand, brilliant rings of fire lighting up his eyes. He seemed transfixed by his own magic until the flower burned into nothingness, leaving behind nothing, not even ash.

Merlin slowly turned to face Arthur, his face covered in a sheen of sweat. He was looking at Arthur's eyes and something about his face said that Arthur ought to school his own expression better. But there was a sudden hollowness in his chest and it was unbearable.

“You need to go to the chapel,” Merlin said. “He'll be waking up in a moment.”

Arthur frowned. “What?”

“The King. The enchantment's lifted. He'll be waking up.” Merlin gave an uncertain smile. “We might have been wrong about him being dead.”

“*What?*”

“He had no heartbeat! It fooled you too!” Merlin said. “So, for once we all get to be idiots.”

Arthur stared some more and then he allowed a laugh to splutter out of him before he went to Merlin and grabbed him by his face, kissing him like the wet hero of some bad ballad. And then he turned around and ran.

Gaius was with the King when he ran into the chapel. Arthur could see his slowly father sitting up, looking sore and annoyed and Arthur came to a stop with an incredulous laugh. Merlin stopped behind Arthur by running into his back, which was now customary, expected and somewhat welcome.

Arthur's father was standing now, Gaius looking as though he was ready to catch Uther if he fell. The King waved him aside, refusing help as he regained some balance. He looked at Arthur with a frown.

“Father,” Arthur said, unable to hide his pleased smile.

“What the devil is going on here?” Uther demanded, looking at the faces around, faces that Arthur was sure looked rather idiotic, including his own.

“You... don't remember anything, Sire?” Gaius asked carefully.

Uther seemed annoyed. “I think I wouldn't be asking if I knew, Gaius.”

Gaius seemed to find the response humorous and just smiled.

Arthur looked at Merlin for answers. Merlin shook his head and shrugged. Fair enough, Arthur thought. It didn't matter. The King was alive. Camelot had an heir again and later on there would definitely be celebration rumpy.

XX.

The news of the King rising spread quicker than that of his supposed demise. With it came warnings of the use of magic. Anyone found to have a hand in what had happened to the King would be shown no mercy. His father rode out of the castle to make a brief appearance, so his people would know he was still their king. Arthur wasn't surprised by some of the faces in the crowd, the fear he

saw, the resignation.

“Must be a weight off your shoulders.” Arthur turned from the parapet to see Gwen, her lips curved in a small polite smile. “Not that I mean I think you weren't coping or anything,” she hastily added.

Arthur felt a smile tug at the corner of his mouth. “I can't say I don't welcome things being back to normal.”

Gwen said nothing, looking at the gathered crowd below, the King riding through it, while Arthur watched her. Arthur followed her gaze, watching his father wave at his people.

“You're right,” he said. “It's not fair.” Gwen turned to him. She had a confused frown on her face when he looked at her. “My father coming back from the dead.”

Gwen shook her head. “I didn't say--”

“You didn't have to,” Arthur said. “It *isn't* fair.”

Gwen offered him a tight smile that didn't quite cover the glint of pain in her warm eyes. “Life isn't always fair, Sire.”

Arthur nodded, pondering her comment. “Well, it should be.”

Gwen gave him a long look, as if she was reading every part of him. When she smiled it was real and seemed hopeful. “Maybe, one day it will be.”

Arthur thought it over. There was no harm in a better Camelot, one where there was less fear and more fairness. No harm at all. Arthur nodded, folding his arms and watching the King's parade below, Guinevere watching at his side.

XXI.

His father was standing by the window, looking up at the night sky when Arthur arrived. For a moment Arthur wondered if he was still dreaming, but Uther turned around and walked towards him, his footfalls making a quiet sound on the ground.

“News?” his father asked.

“Gaius thinks it's the son of a man who was executed for practising magic some years ago. Unfortunately he has already fled the city. Still, we've sent word out in case he crosses the paths of any of our allies,” Arthur reported.

Uther shook his head. “I've never heard of such an enchantment.”

“Gaius said it's supposed to cause a death-like appearance, forcing the occupant of the body to wander separated. To hear and see all and be able to do nothing,” Arthur said, wondering how a powerful man endured such punishment. His father's silence said he was still trying to endure. “You're still awake.”

His father scowled at the bed. “Yes. I can't quite bring myself to go to sleep. Especially after Gaius

told me how many days I spent lying in the chapel.”

Arthur nodded. “Understandable. Still don't remember anything?”

Uther sat down at the table, reaching out for a cup of wine. He was frowning, visibly sifting through something that was on his mind. “It's much like waking from a rather long and disjointed dream. I find it hard to remember what is real and what might be dreamt. Gaius says I came to you, though I have no real recollection.”

Arthur nodded. “You told me to go to him.”

Uther had his eyes on Arthur, focused and peering right through him. Arthur wondered exactly what was missing from his memory, if anything at all. “I remember wandering the castle,” he said quietly. “The grounds. In and out of people's homes.”

“Hear anything interesting?” Arthur asked with a small smile.

Uther sat back. “Times have changed. So have the people of Camelot.”

“Everything changes,” Arthur said quietly. He bit back the suggestion that maybe it was time for King Uther to change too.

“Except for the evil inherent in magic,” Uther said. Arthur looked away. Tonight wasn't the night to debate how many sides there were to magic. “All those days wandering between life and death... are you sure I didn't divulge any secrets?”

Arthur looked up to see a curious smile. He laughed. “Actually, no. Well, one.”

Uther stood up. “Oh?”

Arthur nodded. “Yes. You readily admitted that I could best you twice over in a sword fight with even one hand tied behind my back.”

Uther laughed. “I did no such thing.”

Arthur shrugged. “Well, you can't remember.”

Uther shook his head, still smiling. “I hope... I hope I told you something of worth. Sometimes I neglect to remind you that there are things more precious to me than Camelot.” Arthur nodded, not quite able to muster a response. He was saved by a sturdy and manly clap on the shoulder. “Away with you. I'm sure you can do with some rest.”

Arthur nodded slowly. “Yes. Yes, you're right about that.”

Arthur turned to leave when his father said, “That servant of yours.”

Arthur stopped and turned back to see Uther returning to his seat and sitting back down, frowning in confusion at thin air. “Looks after you well?”

Arthur nodded, his heartbeat quickening a little. “He has his moments.”

Uther nodded back. "He takes his post seriously. I recall the sword he had made for you. A fine weapon. The best I've ever used. Keep him close. He will prove useful."

Arthur gave his father a long assessing look before nodding in baffled agreement. "I will."

"And one more thing, Arthur," Uther said, an amused smile playing on his lips. "I hear you have been thinking of marrying."

"Ah. Yes," Arthur said, pulling a face. "About that."

"I think perhaps we'll leave matters of marriage alone for a while. There is time for all that."

Arthur nodded, smiling. "As you wish. Really, I mean that."

"Go. Rest while you still can." Uther said with an amused smile, raising the cup of wine to his mouth. Arthur shifted to leave, but found himself a little unwilling and stuck. His father eyed him with interest. "Was there something else?"

Arthur tried to think of the right words, wondering why it was so hard to find them. Merlin so easily told him once that he would gladly die in Arthur's service. He had no sword or crown and yet he had the fearlessness that kings wore as shield and armour, whether they possessed such fearlessness or not.

"I'm glad the King is well again," Arthur said quietly, saying what he wanted to say the best he could.

His father's face was obscured by the cup of wine from which he drank, but Arthur saw a glimpse of eyes softening and a quirk of mouth. When the cup came down, his father smiled and nodded. There was an unguarded look on his face, one where the lines around his eyes didn't look cruel and the corner of his mouth wasn't pulled up in arrogance. He looked like Arthur's father.

Uther nodded at Arthur and smiled. "I am certain that had I not returned, Camelot would remain in sure hands."

Arthur nodded and smiled back. "Goodnight, Sire."

XXII.

Arthur returned to his chambers a prince, happily so for the time being. Merlin was there waiting, perched on the edge of the table. He slipped off when Arthur walked in, waiting for him to lock the door. Arthur turned around, already half-way through taking his jacket off. He was barely out of one sleeve when Merlin came to his side and dutifully took the jacket off for him, before hanging it up.

It had always been a mundane task, having servants dress and undress him, carrying out their orders with grim resignation. But Merlin. In the beginning there were irritated lines around his eyes and mouth, a flare of nostrils here and there when Arthur was being intolerably prattish. And now... now Merlin took the belt from around Arthur's waist, laying it and Arthur's sword with such care, it seemed these things might have belonged to him.

One day Arthur would have no excuse for Merlin to serve him in these mundane ways. He would be too important, this much Arthur felt in his heart. Arthur wished this moment could be trapped in a small bubble and they could be like this for a very long time, maybe not forever, but something close. Where Merlin would always be this close, to take such care... It was a ridiculous thought.

Merlin turned to Arthur again, eyeing him for any other removable objects no doubt. Arthur took the opportunity to step closer and reach for Merlin's scarf with both hands, gently untying it and dropping it on the table while Merlin looked at it in amusement.

"I have an idea," Arthur said, hooking his finger in Merlin's shirt and wiggling it a little to loosen the opening.

"Just the one?" Merlin asked, peering down at Arthur's manoeuvring.

"Just the one," Arthur said. He looked up at Merlin, playfully bringing his hand up and flicking Merlin under his chin. "I was thinking perhaps you might stay until the morning."

Merlin tilted his head to the side and frowned in supposed confusion. "You were?"

While you still can, Arthur thought, as long as you can. "I was," he said, rather relishing the twitch of amusement that played around Merlin's mouth.

He appeared to think this great matter through before nodding and answering, "Yeah. All right then."

Merlin stepped forward, moving onwards until he bumped into Arthur, chest to chest and Arthur had to start backing away, amusement tugging at his mouth. He let himself be backed up against the door until it shut. Merlin leaned into Arthur, tilting his face up, rising to meet Arthur's expectant mouth, Merlin's hand reaching past Arthur's waist as Arthur let his eyes lazily drift shut. Merlin's mouth slowly covered his, smiling and filled with mischief. When the key in the lock turned and clicked, Arthur smiled back, surrendering without another thought.

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