

The Long Road to Shambala

<<The story continues the events in Surengiin's Journal #5 – "Throne War">>

"So... Lead on MacDuff," I quote, waving him to lead the way. I'm more than happy to let him go before me.

"And cursed be he that first cries 'Hold, enough!'" Merlin completes without missing a beat. He rises, and I follow behind.

And so we walk out the teahouse door and into Shadow, to begin the long road to our new kingdom.

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"The world is not enough!
But it is such a perfect place to start...
...And if we're strong enough,
Together we can take the world apart...
...People like us
Know how to survive.
There's no point in living
If you can't feel alive."

- *The World is Not Enough*
Garbage

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After having been on the road for over a week, mainly in silence, I am beginning to find myself on edge. Merlin has proceeded to lead the way through Shadow, having first found himself a steed, as I have Kaze. He has said very little this whole time.

You should be more appreciative. He has decided not to push you until now.

"So have you thought about what you'd want to do after?" Merlin's voice interrupts my thoughts.

See, look a gift horse in the mouth!

"After?" After what? "Uh..."

"Hadn't thought that far ahead, hmm?"

"You've apparently spent more time considering this than I have."

"So it seems. Well, we are embarking upon the raising up of a Universal Power. Once that is done, we'll be in the spotlight, what then?"

"Hadn't you thought that far ahead?"

"Maybe, but I'd thought to hear what you had in mind."

"Nothing in particular."

Merlin snorts. "Nothing?"

"Why, what did *you* have in mind?"

"Well, we'll be equal partners in this Power afterwards."

"That was the intention, yes."

"And I believe I have a solution to the situation."

"I hadn't thought of being partners as a *problem*."

Since when do Amberites of any stripe want to share power?

"It isn't, in and of itself. But the political implications of a kingdom with two rulers...there is an obvious solution."

"Who said I wanted to rule?"

Who are you kidding?

Merlin laughs. "It can hardly be avoided. But if we got married..." Merlin stops at my withering glance, but meets it levelly. "What?"

"The last man I married, I killed. And unlike you seem to prefer, I did it personally. I handle matters myself, rather than hiring someone to take care of things." My voice drips venom.

Oh yes, drive away the man you've spent so long trying to get close to. Brilliant.

My comment, although calculated to insult, seems to have missed the mark. Either that, or he is simply too intent to care. "I would hope you would *take care* of your husband yourself. Especially on the wedding night. It would be a shame to *hire* someone. Although I admit we are probably speaking in different contexts." He gives a wicked smile, calculated to get my goat.

I give a snort in response. "Yes, your hires have worked beautifully in the past. Your assassin Tuesday is regent in Chaos now, you know."

What kind of idiot are you? You've been offered the hand of a king! It doesn't get any better.

Merlin shrugs.

"There is no reason for anyone to know that I am a partner in power. I can stand as a bodyguard, or other court figure." It is sound reasoning to me; have a surprise held back. Someone to defend the realm that isn't in the spotlight...

"It would be easier to be my bodyguard from the throne beside me," Merlin taunts.

It's easier to be his bodyguard if you are beside him in bed at night.

"I thought you liked playing the bachelor; courting political alliances in the Courts." I can taunt back!

"Marriage alliances with the other Courts would be for the children."

Children! He presumes quite a lot. And I can tell he recognizes the look of disdain on my face.

"The children of House Hendrake, the core of our new Court," Merlin adds, in a frustrated tone that might almost be considered apologetic, if I didn't know better.

"That's better." I grant him that little bit. "But I still don't know why you insist on this. I offered you a partnership in power. Marriage was *not* part of the deal."

"Reality says otherwise."

"Then what do I get out of it?"

"What?"

"You want marriage. I don't. What do you offer me to change my mind?"

"The good will of Amber, through the personage of my father? Not that you'd care..."

Well he's rather reaching there. "I'm already in his good graces. I saved his behind from the Abyss, remember?"

"If offering myself to you isn't enough, then I guess there isn't anything else." Merlin's tone implies a degree of honest insult.

I've wounded his pride. I should be happy; maybe he'll leave me alone now. But somehow I'm not. There's a pit at the core of my stomach. "Perhaps we should table this discussion." I turn from him. I can't face him right now. In his displeasure, he looks more like his father than ever.

You coward. Self-destructive fool.

After a while I sigh in resignation. Political marriage is a fact of life. If Merlin insists on a marriage to seal this Trump

Throne, so be it. But a political marriage doesn't mean I'll warm his bed. He can find himself a mistress for that.

"I'm surprised you agreed to join me," I begin. "This was just a crazy idea I had, after I was sent out to find you."

"It seemed like a damn good idea."

"It thought so; but I'm certainly not sane anymore."

Once again we lapse into silence.

Finally Merlin speaks, "What happened to you during all this?"

"Not as much as apparently happened to you. After our last meeting in your office,"

Oh yes, remind him of that again. Tease him, you bitch.

"I departed for a couple days to wrap up outstanding business. I went back to Chaos then, to warn you of my concerns about a coup attempt."

It was more like a few months.

"Justified concerns, it seems," Merlin adds blandly.

I nod, and continue, "Only to find that two years had passed in Chaos in the meantime. Brand waylaid me, and tossed me into the Logrus after I arrived. Then Mandor plucked me out again, before I could make much of any headway...Mandor, at the regent's command, set me to find you."

"You succeeded admirably."

"Indeed. But not immediately. I was leashed. I'm sure you remember Mandor's leash. Those little crystal things."

"Yes..."

"I managed to escape the leash."

"Obviously, or I would think they would have yanked it by now."

Why should they bother, you're the loyal cat's-paw. Bounty hunter for Amber & Chaos!

"Hmm. But that was the most difficult part."

"Finding me? I'm flattered." Merlin's comment is flippant.

"No, slipping the leash. Finding you was simple."

"Finding me wasn't meant to be the difficult part. Reaching me was. I took my father up on an offer he made a while back for a bolthole."

"Indeed. Which brings another consideration. How do you *know* I couldn't have walked that Pattern? You don't know which branch of the family I come down from. Aren't you concerned about a marriage that's a bit *too* close?"

You are an idiot. You want to avoid a subject, then bring conversation back to it?

"I know you." Merlin isn't looking at me either, I note, just leading the horses onward through a lightly forested area on the edge of a grassy plain. I can see mountains in the distance.

"Do you indeed? And the forebears from which I spring?"

"Which side?" He taunts me, implying he knows much more than he ever could.

"Either." I make the statement as a challenge. Let him admit what he knows, or doesn't!

"I know what I'm getting into. Do you?" Merlin states his own challenge then. He isn't referring to his parentage, which is, after all, well known.

Spineless wench.

I'm too tired and pained to pursue this any further at the moment. I catch a sideways glimpse of Merlin then, and his

look speaks of concern for me. I straighten in the saddle self-consciously, although it is excruciating to do so.

"Why don't we stop for a while until you feel more up to this," Merlin isn't hiding his concern.

"I'm fine."

"You're practically falling off that monstrous horse of yours. We can head somewhere quiet for a while until you recover."

Well, I can't hide my condition from him. So I may as well acknowledge it. "It would probably take longer than you would care to wait."

"We have all the time required."

"That isn't the point."

"What happened?"

"Mandor's leash. Cutting it wasn't...easy."

"Mandor is quite skilled in that way. What did you do?"

"Enervate myself."

I can see Merlin flinch slightly in my peripheral vision. "Look, you obviously need to recuperate. There's a beach I know."

"Not one with orange sand?"

"No, I was thinking white. And we can get some fizzy drinks with umbrellas in them. And coconut milk..."

"What's a coconut?"

"A big hairy nut..." Merlin pauses, "It's much less disgusting than it sounds."

Wow. Another unintentional innuendo. Aren't you going to be offended?

I shrug stiffly.

And so the grassland fades into dunes, and eventually into white sand, dotted with palm trees. And the water is bluer than any I have ever seen.

And so I resign myself. Resign myself to spending however long here, in this heavenly place. Here in hell with Merlin.

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"But I, I know who you really are
You're the one who cries when you're alone
But where will you go
With no one left to save you from yourself...
...You think that I can't see right through your eyes
Scared to death to face reality
No one seems to hear your hidden cries
You're left to face yourself alone...
...I realize you're afraid
But you can't abandon everyone
You can't escape
You don't want to escape"

- *Where Will You Go*

Evanescence

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Merlin's silence stretches on like the white sands of this beach resort to which he has brought me. The natives call this place Maui. Oh yes, there are natives. And a fancy resort hotel, and everything anyone could wish for, on a remote vacation island. And umbrella-clad drinks with varying alcohol contents, and the freshest seafood.

And Merlin's silent, insistent presence. He brought me here to recover from the enervation I suffered. But he won't leave me to relax.

You've offered him half stakes in a Universal Power. But you're walking wounded. He won't leave you now. There's too much chance of him losing this opportunity if something would happen to you. Until you are recovered, you have a most loyal bodyguard!

I don't want a bodyguard. I want solitude.

What you think you want, and what you'll get are not the same. Besides, could you find any body more appealing to be guarded by?

Oh yes. Once on the beach, Merlin shed the formal attire of the Courts most promptly. He's spent his time here in what I would have thought of as underwear, even as recently as a few decades ago. Shorts, and sometimes t-shirts. I try to ignore that. Sandals and sunglasses.

Come on, he's quite handsome, even if he is more a scholarly type.

What I can't ignore is the fact that he's been staring at me, although he pretends he isn't. Although I've tried to maintain decorum, it quickly became obvious that kimonos are not something I can bear forever, especially in this tropical climate. Practicality forced me to accept the rather more provocative sarong type dress of the locals. That, and the fact that getting much of any garb around my wings is difficult at best, and some mornings downright near impossible.

Whatever Shadow this place is, the wings don't seem to faze the locals, so at least they don't care, or bother me.

For my part, I've taken to basking on an outcrop of boulders, down by the water. The sun is warm, the spray is not unpleasant, and I can lie for hours without getting too cramped. I can spread my wings out, without hitting walls, or trees, or doorframes. Or ceilings, for that matter. And I have at least managed to get used to the muscles and movement of the great things. Merlin had a beach blanket, lounge chair and umbrella brought to the place, where he spends the afternoons reading, mainly. And pretending not to stare at me.

The passing weeks haven't eased the strange mixture of numbness and tingling pain, though. Nor the resultant sleeplessness, and exhaustion, I note as I shift uncomfortably. Not yet. I have the sinking feeling that it may be years before I am back to full form again, if I ever am.

"My father once told me that nerves take the longest to regenerate," Merlin comments, not even looking up from his book.

It bothers me that he so often hits close to the mark of my thoughts.

Oh please, you are as easy to read as an open book.

I just shift my wings to where they fall across my view of him.

"Your feathers are a mess. If you can't keep them properly groomed in your present state, why not dispense with them altogether?"

I know he's right. But I did try, a day or so ago, to do just that. I failed. I just tuck them back again, and see him regarding me over the top of his sunglasses.

"You can't, can you?"

I sigh with resignation. "Not at present."

Merlin shrugs, "The body itself often knows what's best in these situations. If you did manage to revert to human form,

you'd probably be paralyzed. The network of nerves in demon form is somewhat more...robust."

"I'll take your word for that."

"Quite honestly, I'm impressed you're mobile at all. That implies a degree of skill and precision."

I grunt an acknowledgement, but say nothing further.

"How is it you became so suddenly skillful? You never showed any sign of such ability at shifting before."

I make no answer. I honestly don't know myself. I have warped memories of that time in the Logrus, which I don't wish to examine closely.

You know damn well that it was me who gave you the skill. I've always protected you.

"Fine, keep your secrets." Merlin returns to the book he was reading.

After a while I just close my eyes and try to forget he is there. It works for a while, and I manage to drift off into a fitful sleep. Only to find myself awoken some time later by the feeling of fingers digging through the excruciatingly sensitive network of feathers in my wings. The resulting muscle spasm is purely involuntary, and Merlin is sent hurtling off the boulder, where he had settled himself at my side.

"That hurt," he protests feebly, extracting himself from the beach rocks he landed among. By some miracle, he managed to avoid being cut by the razor-sharp edge feathers.

"So did grabbing my wings." I snap. "Don't surprise me like that."

"Fine, no surprises. I'm going to get back up there with you and fix those tattered feathers. So don't pummel me again."

"I'd rather you didn't."

Merlin begins picking his way back up the rocks, despite my protest. "Why not? It needs doing. Come on, I've already seen you naked. Is this somehow worse? You think I'm going to start groping you or something? Unless that's what you want."

I give an exasperated sigh. "You don't know when to give up." I'm tired of arguing with him.

"Neither do you. Sit still."

So now Merlin is my physician as well as bodyguard?

I'm sure Merlin would love to play doctor with you.

The grip of his hands is anything but provocative. I remind myself that it is for the best, when the pain sets in. He methodically goes through, one wing at a time, straightening the crooked feathers, and pulling out the ones that are broken or dead. Combing out the salt that has accumulated from the ocean spray.

"We shouldn't sit so close to the shore, the salt isn't good for your feathers."

I can't really respond for a while. The litany of little pains has grown into a boiling agony. By the time he's finished I can barely keep from shaking, and it is a few moments before I feel in command of myself again. Finally I nod an agreement. The sunny boulder isn't worth this torment.

"We should do this every couple days, until you are well enough to either reach them yourself, or get rid of them."

Oh, by the ancestors, why on earth did I do any of this? The mere thought of submitting to this torture continuously...

"It won't hurt so badly next time, or take so long, it'll just be maintenance." Merlin says this almost as an apology.

I am apparently completely unable to disguise my pain, as I had said nothing... So I just sigh. Again.

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“Under the stars each night,
I wonder do stairs go there?
I'm lonely driving behind the wheel,
Can't get no where.
I can't seem to get it right.
I'm only just a man of steel.
...Is there a place?
And under the stars tonight,
I wonder if someone cares.
I'm lonely, that's the way I feel
Can't feel no stairs....
I'm only just a man of steel.”

- *Man of Steel*
Frank Black

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The seasons here vary little; it seems more a matter of average rainfall than of temperature change. As the weeks turn to months, my basking has been moved to a wide marble banister on the hotel roof, away from the seashore. Merlin continues to lounge nearby, under the shade of potted palms. The resort population has thinned in this off-season, though even in the busier months, Merlin hasn't had trouble arranging for privacy. In the afternoons, when the rain invariably washes the island, we retire to play chess, or read, or take part in some other indoor activity to relieve the utter boredom. He rarely speaks of anything related to the world outside, the world of Amber and Chaos. He seems content to relax as well, to some extent.

The act of fixing my wing feathers has become a sort of ritual for him, though at least he spoke truly; it never hurt again quite so badly as that first time. I can almost relax now.

He's training you to his touch, you realize.

On this day, though, he turns his conversation again to matters of seriousness.

“I've given you time to consider.”

“Consider what?” I mumble.

“What happens afterward. Our marriage.”

I tense involuntarily, and he digs his fingers in, a warning for me to relax. It hurts worse when I'm tense.

“Well?” He demands an answer.

“I can concede the utility of a political marriage,” I admit, intentionally letting go of the tension in my back.

“Good. Was that so terrible?”

“Don't get too full of yourself. I'll marry you, but I still won't warm your bed.”

Merlin gives a sigh that speaks of frustration and disgust.

“Look, keep whatever mistresses you want, just keep them out of the eye of the Court, and don't spawn any bastards for a while, that's all I ask.” I concede that much to him, he's a male; he has his desires.

“Who said I wanted mistresses?”

“You're a man. If you don't now, you will eventually.”

Merlin snorts in derision. “Am I that unattractive to you? Are you a lesbian or something?”

“No, and no. That has nothing to do with it. The matter is not up for discussion.” I can feel myself flushing involuntarily.

“Fine.” He digs his fingers in again, pulling out a damaged feather harder than is necessary, making me flinch. Finished with me, he then stalks away.

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“Time here, all but means nothing,
Just shadows that move across the wall
They keep me company, but they don't ask of me
They don't say nothing at all.
And I need just a little more silence
And I need just a little more time
But you send your thieves to me
Silently stalking me
Dragging me into your war
Would you give me no choice in this?
I know you can't resist,
Trying to reopen a sore
Leave me be, I don't want to argue
I'd just get confused and I'd come all undone
If I agree, well, it's just to appease you
Cause I don't remember what we're fighting for
You see love-- a tight, thorny thread
That you spin in a circle of gold
You have me to hold me
A token for all to see
Captured to be yours alone
And I need just a little more silence,
And I just need a little more time
The courage to pull away
There will be hell to pay
The deeper you cut to the bone
Leave me be, I don't want to argue
I'd just get confused and I'd come all undone
If I agree, well, it's just to appease you
Cause I don't remember what we're fighting for...”

- *Time*

Sarah McLachlan

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After over a year and a half, I finally had to put a stop to that ritual of combing wing feathers. The pain of my enervation had receded nearly to nothing, as had the numbness. I could tell new nerves were beginning to fill the dead areas, for everything was starting to become far too sensitive. I managed to groom myself these days; but Merlin still seemed to want to tend to those feathers, every so often. I don't know why. Or I didn't until today.

It was hard to say exactly when it stopped being a painful process. The recovery had been so gradual, I only realized some time later. It had, somehow, become a relaxing thing, though again, I couldn't acknowledge that to myself until after it had crossed the line into something altogether different.

I stretched out on the rooftop banister, and Merlin had worked his way up from the carpal joint to the roots of my wings, where they met my shoulders. I almost drifted to sleep. At some point, he had ceased to merely comb the feathers, and had begun to massage the muscles beneath. I had some

thought to protest; but I was overcome by a lassitude that rendered the thought impotent.

He's trying to seduce you, you ninny.

And then one hand of his strayed to my back, and traced down Clairvidere. That cold tingle of energy was like an electric shock. I bolted up, in surprise.

He's got you turned on. That's a first.

"Not a word!" The response is to the voice within, as much as to Merlin, who had taken a breath to speak. I had to turn, and leave, as quickly as I could. Even though I was fully clothed, on that bright day, I had never felt more exposed.

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"Had we but world enough, and time,
This coyness, lady, were no crime.
We would sit down, and think which way
To walk, and pass our long love's day.
Thou by the Indian Ganges' side
Shouldst rubies find: I by the tide
Of Humber would complain. I would
Love you ten years before the flood,
And you should, if you please, refuse
Till the conversion of the Jews.
My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires and more slow;
An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast,
But thirty thousand to the rest;
An age at least to every part,
And the last age should show your heart.
For, lady, you deserve this state,
Nor would I love at lower rate.
But at my back I always hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity...
...Now let us sport us while we may,
And now, like amorous birds of prey,
Rather at once our time devour
Than languish in his slow-chapped power...
...And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Thorough the iron gates of life:
Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run."

- "To His Coy Mistress" (1681)
Andrew Marvell

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I managed to avoid Merlin for the next few days. I couldn't deal with him. I was ashamed, I was angry! How could he do that?

How could you run like that? Coward.

The other thing I did was to dispense with my wings. A night spent in intense and exhausting effort left me feeling completely wrung out, but human again.

But the island isn't that large a place. And Merlin was not going to let me alone too long, I knew. And so I found myself in the hotel ballroom, having a very formal, but also quite

public, dinner. At least here I couldn't see him trying anything!

Merlin acts determined to ignore the fact that he's done anything wrong. So I oblige. I really don't want to antagonize him. This kingdom, this throne of ours, isn't something we can accomplish without cooperation.

"Done overreacting?" Merlin jibes, pouring rum.

I frown a bit, but say nothing.

"Apparently not." He shakes his head and downs one drink before he even puts down the bottle.

I just stare down into the glass, swirling the golden liquid around in the dim light.

Do you need more liquid courage?

I take a breath and force myself to raise my eyes to his. "I'm only asking that we keep this on a... how to say this... strictly professional level, for now. Please. I'm tired, and concerned about the progress of this whole endeavor, and not really feeling up to dealing with anything less than immediate."

Merlin's look is one of dissatisfaction, but he relents, "At least you asked nicely. After all, we must at least make the pretense of a unity of intent and purpose."

I nod.

"Then since your condition has improved at least somewhat, perhaps it is time we begin addressing issues of planning."

"Yes."

"I am content to leave the details of our wedding to you, then, so long as you agree it shall take place in conjunction with our joint coronation."

"Details?" This whole idea still makes me uncomfortable.

Merlin sighs heavily, "Am I then to do *all* the work here?"

"No. That isn't what I meant, please. I just honestly wouldn't know where to begin."

You know; fancy dress, reception for all of Amber and Chaos. All the little niceties.

Merlin looks slightly exasperated. "Well, what customs were there among your people?"

"Uhm... Dowry, though that doesn't seem applicable. And... Weddings were performed by priests. But again, I'm not sure about the whole aspect of worship and faith here..."

Oh, and a lovely Serpent priest to marry you. Maybe Brand would agree to preside?

Merlin starts to take a breath, then stops for a moment. "I see your point. To bring in either a priest of the Unicorn or the Serpent to marry us would be rather... politically unwise."

"My people had ancestor worship. But I can't see that as appropriate either. The living ones are bad enough."

"There is a cult of Amberite worship in Chaos. But, I think I'd rather forgo that in this case."

"Agreed. And as far as Unicorn and Serpent go... Ghostwheel would take that place in our lands. I somehow don't think a priesthood of Ghostwheel is going to spring fully formed overnight."

Merlin gets an unreadable look on his face. "I'm a little leery of hailing Ghost as a deity."

"I don't know what to do about this then. Since this is a political marriage, is religious sanction necessary?"

"What we do will set the tradition for all that follows in our Court." Merlin considers, while he finishes another drink.

“On Shadow Earth a wedding can be sanctioned by a legal authority, instead of a religious one.”

“Who would be a considered a legal authority of a newly minted kingdom? You? Me? Do we just declare ourselves married?”

“My father has a friend who’s a lawyer. I’ll send word to him for an opinion. After all, dad knows where this is going.”

He’s already been telling people we’re getting married? “He does? Who have you told about this?”

“My father, Kov, Dalt, Luke... They’ll be readying Hendrake and the other forces to move in once we’re ready.”

“I see.” I try to hide my concern.

“What, more disapproval? Come on, it was obvious from the moment the proposal was broached that the only way it would work was if we married.”

“No. Just distaste at being considered a forgone conclusion. And concern that the more people who know we’re attempting this, the greater the chance someone will interfere.”

“Unlike you, I don’t believe in keeping everyone around me in the dark. I don’t trust them completely, but I never wouldn’t have gotten half as far as I have already if I hadn’t let my friends help me.”

Touché. Mikhail had made a similar entreaty to me once, to know when to ask for help. I shrug. “Very well. You win. Point taken. Once your father’s lawyer gets some word to us, we’ll reconsider the issue then.”

“And the rest?”

I consider, and try to think through the rest of what I recall about marriages. “Is all material things.” I shrug, “Unless there’s something specific you want...”

“Hell no. Hire Flora to cater, for all I care.”

“Urgh. Ancestors forbid. I’d ask Gilva first.”

“Whatever. Now, that’s dealt with...” Merlin rises, and gestures for me to join him on the dance floor.

I hesitate a moment. Dancing has never really been something I’d enjoyed.

“Consider it exercise. You’ve got to start working on those reflexes sometime.” He holds out a hand. “Maybe we should take up fencing in the afternoons?”

Well, at least he’s pretending it isn’t about his wanting to get an arm around me. I don’t want to argue with him again, so I rise to join him. I just hope he doesn’t try to cop a feel.

He continues speaking in a low tone as we weave across the floor. “There, now is that so difficult? As to the actual construction. You still aren’t Logrus attuned, or at least so you say, so if you’re to be of any help at all in the reshaping of the Shadow, you’ll have to at least learn a bit of Sorcery...”

“That I could probably do.”

“You can do anything, with the right teacher.”

“And who would that be?” Who else does he want to bring into this?

“Well in this case, I think I could instruct you. I am a rather accomplished arcanist.”

“I see.”

“We could begin with lessons in the Tantric tradition.”

Ooh. Talk about giving birth to a new kingdom!

“Merlin!” I hiss at him. “How rude, I’ve been nothing but polite to you this evening.”

“You’re cute when you blush like that. It’s so easy to embarrass you.”

I can find no words to respond to him.

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“The ice is thin come on dive in
Underneath my lucid skin
The cold is lost, forgotten
Hours pass, days pass, time stands still
Light gets dark, and darkness fills
My secret heart forbidden...
...I don't like your tragic sighs
As if your god has passed you by
Well hey fool, that's your deception
Your angels speak with jilted tongues
The serpent's tale has come undone
You have no strength to squander
The only comfort is the moving of the river
You enter into me, a lie upon your lips
Offer what you can, I'll take all that I can get
Only a fool's here to stay...”

- Ice

Sarah McLachlan

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I don’t know what to make of this situation as time continues to drag by. It’s been...three years now since we arrived? More or less... Merlin continues to shadow me like a watchdog, but his patience seems to be wearing thin. I told him he wouldn’t want to wait as long as my recuperation would take.

That’s not what’s bothering him.

Is he afraid I’ll leave? I gave my word. I’ll finish this quest of ours, the Trump Throne. It was my idea, after all. And then I’ll marry him. Publicly. And take the throne by his side as his queen.

That’s not what’s bothering him.

And as much as I find his presence to be annoying at times, I suppose I’ve grown accustomed to it. When he’s gone, I have no one to talk to. Even when I don’t want to talk, there is just something oddly... I don’t know. There’s something about having someone nearby. It shouldn’t be relaxing; I tell myself. I can’t trust him. He’s of Amber and Chaos.

He’s been your patron, your friend, your mentor, he’s your betrothed, and he’ll be your king and husband. He wants to be your lover. What more could you ask of a man?

I have no answer for the inner voice. It hounds me more and more as time passes. I’ve found a fondness for rum lately, and taken to trying to drown the voice away, but it doesn’t work.

You realize he hasn’t taken a lover since... before you arrived here. Probably since even before the day in his office when he first saw you naked.

Not my problem.

He’s waiting for you. Proving his respect for you.

He’ll wait for eternity, then.

Coward. Fool. He won’t wait for eternity. Sooner or later, he’ll crack, and you’ll lose him, for good!

Fine. I never wanted him in the first place.

Liar!

I ordered dinner brought up to my rooms tonight. Merlin had ceased our evenings of chess, and dancing, weeks back. He had even given up on trying to teach me sorcery, though I had thought I was making good progress. And so this night I find myself staring out across the sea, from the balcony. I barely notice when the door opens, and I hear the table being laid in the sitting room.

When the music starts, it catches my attention, and I find Merlin has brought dinner himself. He's cleaned up as well. He wears no slouchy beachwear this evening. He seems determined to be genteel. Two places are set at the table, and so I join him without a word.

A romantic dinner. This must be serious.

Dinner begins well enough. He pours drinks, and we eat in relative silence. I have to be suspicious though. He has been relentless in his pursuit of me, for at least the past year.

Longer. Much longer. You just didn't want to see it.

It is when I reach for a dinner roll that everything begins to unravel. He takes my hand, then, and when I pull away he is blatantly peeved.

"You realize that we will have to at least put on the appearance of civility at Court functions."

"We aren't in Court now. This farce isn't required."

"Farce? Have I somehow said something funny?" Merlin has gone from peeved to enraged in record time.

"Not at all." I give an exasperated sigh and try to put on a soothing tone. "Merlin, I'd like to think we've been friends..."

"*Been.*" He slams his glass to the table. "Past tense. The bounds of *friendship* were thrown aside when you offered me a throne and agreed to be my *bride*," he snaps.

Now I'm getting angry. "A *political* alliance, which you were more than happy to engage in, as I recall. If you want to back out..."

"Oh no. You aren't weaseling out of this that easily."

"Me? Weaseling!"

"If we are even going to get as far as *building* this kingdom, you are going to have to face what is between us!"

"Between us? There's nothing but your lust that's standing in the way of this kingdom!"

"Woman, you are infuriating!"

"And you are insufferable."

"You're in denial so deep you can't see daylight." Merlin rises suddenly from his chair, and sends the table flying with a sweep of his arm. Dishes crash everywhere. "Time to settle this, once and for all." He draws the filigreed sword that hangs from his hip. "Get up and draw your blade."

I rise carefully. I'm not sure where this is going anymore. "Merlin." I put a warning tone in my voice.

"Draw your sword." He's past angry, I can tell.

"Do you have a death wish? I bloodied Bleys in single combat. I'm the match, or the better, of anyone in Hendrake."

Merlin grins evilly, "Then why don't we put a wager on this little duel, hmm? If you win, I'll never so much as try to lay a hand on you again. If I win... I claim you now." He has taken a rather formal fencing stance.

"You're crazy. I've trained with the best swordmaster in the known universe. You can't win. You'll be lucky if I don't kill you!" What's he got up his sleeve? He knows I'm better than he is with a blade!

What desire will make a man do...

"Then I take it you accept." Merlin lunges at me before I can speak.

After that, its self defense, for a moment or two. I seize a mundane blade from a nearby rack. Clairvidere, as a magical blade, would cut through his sword like butter, and I won't have him accuse me of cheating in this circumstance. Once I win, I want it clear that I won through skill, not guile. No excuse for him to renege on his wager. And besides, if he does manage to score a hit, I'd rather have Clairvidere's armor. I've had enough pain recently to last me a while.

And besides, you don't really want to win.

Even only half-recovered, with reflexes still dulled, I'm faster than he is. Significantly. He's not unskilled, but my training is far superior. I beat him back, and back again.

But in the instant I would disarm him, and be finished with this, I am undone. His hand brushes my arm, in that split-second when I am off-balanced, and I find myself unable to complete the maneuver. Clairvidere changes from filigree armor to an ephemeral cage. I mentally command it to release me, to come to my hand; but it does not obey. I cannot move, and trip forward under my own momentum, right into his arms.

I struggle against the hold my own Clairvidere has upon me, but it is too late. He forces my arms behind my back as the grip of the armor fades at his touch. Frakir slides off his wrist, and binds both of mine in a grip stronger than iron. A grip I failed to break when I was at my best; and I am far from that.

"It seems you've lost, *my queen*." Merlin hisses into my ear, as he lays his blade at my throat.

"You cheated!"

"I don't remember setting any rules. I *made* that pretty gift of yours. Did you think it wouldn't answer when I call?"

When I try to draw breath for a response, he casts aside his blade and buries my mouth in a brutal kiss. And I am unable to escape him.

Finally. It's about time.

* * * * *

"The night is my companion, and solitude my guide
Would I spend forever here and not be satisfied?
And I would be the one, to hold you down
Kiss you so hard
I'll take your breath away
And after, I'd wipe away the tears
Just close your eyes dear
Through this world I've stumbled
So many times betrayed...
...My body aches to breathe your breath
Your words keep me alive...
...Oh into the sea of waking dreams
I follow without pride
Nothing stands between us here
And I won't be denied!
And I would be the one, to hold you down
Kiss you so hard
I'll take your breath away
And after, I'd wipe away the tears
Just close your eyes..."

- *Possession*

Sarah McLachlan

* * * * *

Why can't anything be simple, just once? Merlin propped himself up on one elbow, and looked to where Surengiin had curled up in a chair across the room. She couldn't leave; he'd made sure to seal the room against it.

He'd always thought it was just some cultural thing with her, some Amazonian need to be conquered before she could give herself to a man. It wasn't his style, but he'd finally accepted it as something to get over with, if he really wanted her. All his attempts to win her through respect and consideration had been rebuffed, often quite rudely.

But that fierceness had always been part of the attraction. Gilva had been fierce too. He had seen that fire in Surengiin's eyes the first time she appeared in his Court, with Frakir around her throat. He'd always thought of the icy demeanor as a cover for some underlying passion. When she had come to him after the coup, with the offer of a new kingdom, well, he'd thought things had changed. What a queen she would make! But nothing had changed. He had nursemaided her through years of a painful recovery, but she'd never opened up to him.

It really chafed him. He'd done everything for her! Given her an artifact of power, as a gift! Repaired it, when she'd nearly destroyed it. Always allowed her a safe haven in his Court, even when she'd made herself *very* dangerous enemies. Gotten her adopted into one of the most powerful Houses in Chaos. Put up with her habitually bad manners. And now, even agreed to marry her. Everything.

And now that he'd taken her, he realized the mistake. It hadn't been passion beneath the ice all this time; it had been terror. The fire vanished the moment she'd lost. She had, at some point past, been so seriously abused that she'd formed a psychotic fear of sexual intimacy. She'd come around, in the end, but it had taken all the joy out of something he had wanted for... years, really. Once he'd realized the true situation, he'd *had* to bring her around, if he ever wanted to have any kind of functional relationship with her, sexual or not, from this day forward.

Merlin sighed. Add 'sex therapist' to his resume'. Because he'd be damned if he'd lose this chance at a new kingdom, much less consign himself to a barren marriage. Maybe once she'd shed her fears, some of that fire he saw once in her eyes might return. He rose to retrieve Frakir from where it rested around her throat again; though crass, it had been necessary insurance against finding a sword in his back during the night...

* * * * *

"Hey your glass is empty
It's a hell of a long way home
Why don't you let me take you
It's no good to go alone
I never would have opened up
But you seemed so real to me
After all the bullshit I've heard
It's refreshing not to see
I don't have to pretend

She doesn't expect it from me
Don't tell me I haven't been good to you
Don't tell me I have never been there for you
Don't tell me why
Nothing is good enough...
...It's not the wind that cracked your shoulder
And threw you to the ground
Who's there that makes you so afraid
You're shaken to the bone
And I don't understand
You deserve so much more than this...
...Oh, So just let me try
And I will be good to you
Just let me try
And I will be there for you
I'll show you why
You're so much more than good enough..."

- *Good Enough*
Sarah McLachlan

* * * * *

Why is it, Merlin thought, that even when things are going my way, they aren't? Surengiin had come around to him quite nicely, but... There was always a 'But', when it came to her.

She'd come around *too much*. She was more agreeable than ever, almost downright pleasant to be around, these days. But whenever the innuendo came out, well, she seemed to lose any will whatsoever of her own. It was most obvious in chess, or fencing. She was so superior to him in these sports, he should never win, but all he had to do was flirt, and she'd elegantly throw the game to him. And she was so much better than he was, that he'd been unable to lose, even when he tried! It was pathetic.

And the lessons he'd been trying to give her in sorcerous arts had ground to a screeching halt. He couldn't get her to accomplish anything on her own. It was intolerable. It had to stop! And the only way he could think of to stop it was to turn the tables on her.

Damn it, he didn't want to have to go through this bullshit again! But if she didn't get back her spine, she was useless to him. He didn't want a compliant, submissive little girl at his side, he wanted a queen that would rule as his equal! Someone capable of holding the reins of Power!

So he had decided on a plan of action. *She* would have to come to *him* from now on. Chase him. And eventually capture him. But not until she really put effort into it. He just hoped it wouldn't take as long for this to play out as it had for him to claim her to begin with. He counted on the idea that having found her libido; she'd be loath to give it up.

And so, he'd been playing hard to get, for months. No, not hard to get, impossible! He'd flirt, taunt, and distract. And then leave her frustrated. She could beat him with a sword, but not with guile. At first she'd been confused, and disappointed. She had tried to inveigle and cajole him. But finally, *finally*, she'd taken up the chase. Her temper had returned. He'd never thought he'd be pleased about fighting with Surengiin, but life takes strange turns...

They'd fought today. He didn't even remember what inconsequential thing it was, that exploded this time. But it had ended with the familiar insults...

"Infuriating woman!"

"Insufferable man!"

But this time, when he'd retreated to his apartments for the evening, he'd found himself ambushed. And this time it was she who wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. He hadn't realized, until tonight, that she was stronger than he was. That he'd been lucky that first night that she had still been in a weakened state.

And he'd never been happier to lose a fight in his life. They had ended in a tangle of claws and black feathers, and he extracted himself carefully.

"Where are you going?" Surrey mumbled.

Oh god, she wasn't going to turn into a jealous lunatic bitch now, was she? How many more hellish incarnations would this relationship take on? "Just to stretch a minute."

"Mm. Well I'll leave if you want, it's your room."

Relief. At least for the moment. "No, stay." He stretched until the kinks were gone from his back, and slid back in beside her. Surrey seemed immune to the angst he felt in that moment. She had closed her eyes and drifted off again, her wings draping the bed like a feathered blanket. And they say men fell asleep after sex! He sighed, and tried to put all that aside.

She yawned, and laid her head on his chest. "What's got you upset, Merle? You going to start dodging me again?"

He had to laugh. "No, Surrey. I think we're done with that."

"What was that all about, anyway?" She regarded him with one sleepy reptilian eye.

"I need you to know I don't want your submission, just acceptance. I need a partner, not a servant."

"Samurai instincts, Merle. You serve a lord. I thought I'd finally found a lord worth serving."

"You're an Amberite, Surrey. You have to serve yourself first." He sighed.

"I have to learn my lessons the *hard* way, it seems. Maybe more than once. Any other lessons you feel you need to dispense tonight, teacher?" She moved then in a way that left no doubt as to her intentions.

Innuendos, from her? Well! "Just maybe there is, you infuriating wench."

"Insufferable tease."

* * * * *

"Wake me up inside
Call my name and save me from the dark
Bid my blood to run
Before I come undone
Save me from the nothing I've become
Now that I know what I'm without
You can't just leave me
Breathe into me and make me real
Bring me to life...
...Frozen inside without your touch...
...I've been sleeping a thousand years it seems
Got to open my eyes to everything"

- *Bring Me to Life*

Evanescence

* * * * *

How long had we been here in Maui? Merlin tried to remember. Four and a half years? Five? Ah well, not that it much mattered. It was an exceptionally fast-time variant. At least matters were finally progressing along a reasonable track.

He and Surengiin had returned to the planning phases of the raising of the Trump Throne. Since she had accepted him as her lover, working together had become much easier, at least for him. He had resumed instructing her in the basics of Sorcery he thought she might need for the endeavor, and sparring once again became something of an entertaining pastime in the evenings.

But not all evenings. Tonight, the resort had sponsored its annual season-opening formal. And for the first time, Surengiin had agreed to join him there. They were considered permanent residents by now, but had never attended before. They had brought the room to a halt with their entrance. She had laughingly called it 'practice for Court'. He admitted she looked stunning.

The hour had grown late. And Merlin found himself lying out on the white sand, staring up into a clear starry sky, far from the lights of the resort. And he couldn't think of a way, in that moment, to be happier. There was no noise here other than the surf, and the sound of Surrey's breathing. She was curled up against him on a blanket in the aftermath of their lovemaking, the moonlight tracing the lines of Clairvidere.

"If the wheels in your mind are still turning Merle," she mumbled, "I've not done something right..."

Merlin chuckled. "I can't help it. We ought to be leaving."

She propped herself on one elbow to regard him. "Mm. Time stands still for no man, not even the King of..." she trailed off.

"What?"

"It occurs to me our kingdom doesn't have a name."

Merlin drew a blank. "It doesn't, does it? I guess I'd just thought of it as the Trump Throne."

"Myself as well, I suppose. But it ought to have a proper name, oughtn't it? It'll be based out of Ghost's Shadow. Doesn't it have a name?"

Merlin thought for a few minutes. "Not really. I created the place, and kept it secret... No one lives there."

Silence fell again, for a while.

"Shambala." Surrey finally said, after a time.

"Hm?"

"Shambala. An old legend of the mountain people of Tybhezt. A place lost high above the cloud-capped mountains, where there was a stark paradise. And there were in that place mahatmas, who lived forever, and the place was shrouded in blue light. And those that dwelled there could see clearly all that transpired in the world around. And the spent their days in meditation and contemplation, in order to find balance and enlightenment. Unless, of course, you'd rather be 'King of Ghost's Shadow'?"

Merlin chuckled, "Well, it is mainly a place with high mountains."

"I know."

"How would you?"

“I’ve seen it.”

Merlin raised an eyebrow. “Have you now?”

“I scryed it out, years ago. Ghost sent me a note, and I was trying to find out who the mysterious missive was from.” Surrey chuckled, “I think I caught him by surprise. He’s not let me glimpse it since.”

Merlin shrugged. “No harm to it, I suppose. If Ghost has blocked it from scrying ever since then, that’s all for the better... But why name it? Why not just ‘King of the Trump Throne’?”

“An accurate title, but it doesn’t do much to encompass a kingdom. You want it called the ‘Court of Trump’? Amber has a name...”

“We are once again hung between different traditions.” Merlin considered for a while, “King of Shambala... Not a bad ring to it.”

“My King,” she mumbled into his neck.

Merlin rubbed her back, until she drifted off beside him. They might leave tomorrow, but it was a long time yet until dawn. And there was one thing left to do. He reached for his slacks nearby, and contemplated the object he fished from the pocket. He’d made it for her, finished just recently. It was a direct link to Ghostwheel. She’d need it, for what was to come. But something about it... The cultural implications from his time on Shadow Earth had inexorably marked the thing in his mind. A ring. A symbol of commitment. They were committed, certainly, to a goal that would bind them most probably for the rest of their lives. One of their lives, at any rate. But still... He hesitated.

It was just a thing, he told himself. And she would doubtless not have the same ideas of symbolism. It probably wouldn’t mean anything to her, beyond its Power. He put the ring on his own finger, and turned back to embrace her. He had what he wanted. A partnership with her, and soon a kingdom. The marriage was just a political thing, but they would take what enjoyment they could from it. It didn’t mean anything, he told himself.

* * * * *

“In more than words I tried to tell you
The more I tried I failed...
...I used to think my life was often empty
A lonely space to fill
You hurt me more than
I ever would have imagined
You made my world stand still
And in that stillness there was a freedom
I never felt before...
And I would stand by you
No matter what they'd say...
...until my dying day”

- *Plenty*

Sarah McLachlan

<<The story continues with the events in *Surengiin’s Journal*
#6 “Trump Ascendant”>>