



"It Begins... Again"

Written by

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Based on his novel

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: Like the book on which it is based (Merlyn's Mistake coming Sept. 2024) Merlyn & Company deals at a meta level with the idea of story-telling itself as a form of magic. Thus, as point of view shifts from character to character, story comes to be told very differently depending on who narrates a given segment. TAROT CARDS flip at the top of each act to reveal which character will serve as narrator. This literary device that carries over from the original I.P. explodes onto the screen in the form of changing shooting styles.

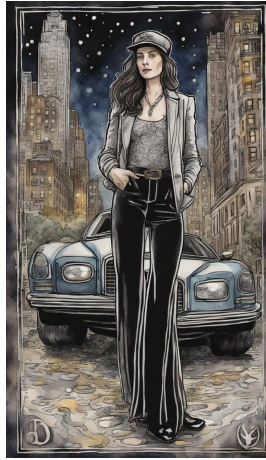
SOPHIA, the Skeptic and Merlyn's lover, the first narrator of the pilot episode, eases us in with fairly standard, television direction: A master shot to set the scene, two shots, simple inserts as needed. Her sequences come across soothingly, reassuringly indistinguishable from any standard hour-long cop or urban fantasy show.

VIVICA, the woman who will be King, studies both law and martial arts. She has begun seeing the chi in those around her, though this talent has not fully manifested at the start of the series. The shooting style, when she narrates, follows the energy of the moment, whether this manifests through physical movement of the characters or through dialogue. Even in these early moments, as physical action occurs the chi appears subtly as a special effect, noticeable but not overly intrusive. Later in the series, as her talent develops, the effect becomes more apparent to match the growth of her sensitivity.

FRANKIE, her adoring Knight, sees deeply into those he observes, reading subtext. His sequences tend to be shot in Martin Schoeller close-up, sometimes flashing in on details of a twitching corner of an eye or the tap of a finger on a tabletop.

MERLYN, the Sorcerer, the Druid, the weaver of spell and story, sees the world in the majesty of the bipolar madman in full mania. The camera sweeps to find the grandeur in a greasy diner. In his memory, old worlds spread out in epic landscapes and cinematic expanse.

AN ODD TAROT-STYLE CARD FLIPS TO REVEAL...



EXT.- MANHATTAN - NIGHT

THE BENTLEY slips along the wet, reflective pavement, unimpeded by traffic. It moves silently, a custom electric job.

SOPHIA (V.O.)
Ever since Covid, the city that
never sleeps can get pretty drowsy.
I'm in my boss's car, the one he
bought for me to drive him around
in. Because he loves me.

STREETLIGHTS cast ghostly reflections over the sleek curves of the Bentley.

BEYOND THE CITY LIMITS

THE BENTLEY rolls on AN ABSOLUTELY EMPTY ROAD out of the City, into the Hudson River Valley.

SOPHIA (V.O.)
I'm headed out to get him out of a
mental institution. Because he
might be crazy but that place isn't
helping. Also, I just met with the
Private Detective I hired and
everything he's dug up points to a
single conclusion.

EXT. THE NY PUBLIC LIBRARY - NIGHT

The great lions stand proud. A few homeless people sit near the base of the stairs, huddled under soggy cardboard.

Sophia stands higher up on the steps, where there's more light. She reads the pages of a bulky folder, shielding them from the rain.

SOPHIA

I'm the worst girlfriend ever.

In high heels and business-sexy bespoke suit, she exudes the kind of comfortable class that makes old money embarrassed. In her forties, she looks as though she's in her forties. Beautiful without girlishness, she has the kind of dense dark curls that make men want to push their fingers through them and women, inexplicably, want to straighten them. Merlyn will say so himself in episode six. Look for it. It's a nice moment.

PERCY

Seriously? That's what you take from this?

PERCY CLOVIS, late thirties, a little bit hard, swarthy, chuckles.

She does not look up at him.

SOPHIA

Also, he's the best boyfriend ever. Tell me what you take from this.

PERCY

You're incredibly rich.

SOPHIA

What? No. *He's* incredibly rich.

PERCY

You're the sole executor of all financial and business--

SOPHIA

Yeah...

She leafs through the pages, scanning.

PERCY

--holdings--

SOPHIA

Until he gets out of the mental institution *I* put him into because--

PERCY

He says, though! He gives that to you!

(MORE)

PERCY (CONT'D)

It's 'until and unless either YOU determine he is free to depart OR you pass--

SOPHIA

--Because he trusts my instincts and impulses completely. If *I* feel this is correct he's willing--

PERCY

And *for so long* as--

SOPHIA

I have to go.

She pulls bills from her pocket and pays him. She turns to go.

PERCY

Thanks but-- this is twice what you owe me.

SOPHIA

Huh. You're a good man, Percy.

She goes back puts her hand out to him. He returns the excess.

PERCY

I keep hoping that's true, Sophia. Thanks for the gig.

She turns to go.

PERCY (CONT'D)

Where are you going?

She turns back in the sparkling night.

SOPHIA

To be a better girlfriend.

As she heads down the steps she SPLITS THE EXTRA MONEY into two smaller piles and splits THE CASH BETWEEN THE HOMELESS GUYS. Her heels clack on the stone step as she distributes the wealth.

She slips into the curb-parked Bentley and glides soundlessly into the night.

EXT. A FANCY, PRIVATE MENTAL INSTITUTION - NIGHT

The Bentley slides past the stone and iron-wrought gate.

SOPHIA (V.O.)

There are moments in your life when you hurt the people you love the most. Usually it's something you can easily fix. Sometimes, it's that you had them institutionalized.

The Bentley stops outside the hotel-elegant façade.

SOPHIA (V.O.)

The place was expensive but I'd begun to suspect that beyond the front-facing offices, it might not be the serene and comfortable facility implied by the visitors' lounges and the brochures. Maybe that's what some people need to keep them safe. Maybe some people need to be here to keep the rest of us safe.

INT. -- MENTAL INSTITUTION - FRONT LOBBY

Sophia stands in the staged spa-center turned hospital waiting area with a blasé young receptionist, KELLY. The most interesting thing about her is that she has glued rhinestones to her nametag.

SOPHIA

But nobody deserves what I have put that man through.

KELLY

Good story. That's my new favorite story.

SOPHIA

So get him.

KELLY

It's three-thirty-five AM in the morning.

SOPHIA

I didn't drive out here to find out what time it is.

KELLY

The Doctors don't like us to call them late at night.

SOPHIA

You keep answering questions nobody asked. I'm going to get him myself.

KELLY

You're not allowed to go back there.

Neither of them moves from where they stand.

SOPHIA

He's here on his own recognizance under my advisement.

From the distance, Merlyn's voice echoes against institutional linoleum.

MERLYN

(off)

She will be here and you will unhand me! Sophia! Sophia! Sophia!

Merlyn bursts through the big double doors that lead to white institutional hallways, linoleum floors, fluorescent light. In his pajamas and slippers under a hanging bathrobe, his long grey hair a bit unkempt, his white beard shaped but not elegantly, he looks every bit the madman.

SOPHIA

I'm so sorry. I love you SO much.

Merlyn beams at her. He embraces her.

MERLYN

Angry orderlies. Fight or flee?

SOPHIA

Flee when possible!

MERLYN

That's my darling!

A loud claxon sounds along with a flashing of lights.

Kelly sighs and goes to a small toggle switch to silence the alarm and turn off the flashing light. She speaks into an airport-style microphone.

KELLY

(tinny through the system)

He's in the front lobby guys. Door's locked. Come and get him.

MERLYN
So much for fleeing.

SOPHIA
How many?

MERLYN
Three or four, probably. Did you
bring my coat?

SOPHIA
In the trunk.

MERLYN
Okay. You feel like helping?

SOPHIA
I'm the body guard. Go sit down.

He wraps her in an adoring arm and kisses her.

MERLYN
I'll talk to Kelly about how the
door unlocks.

SOPHIA
Love that!

Two young men, NORMIE and JORDAN, in matching polo-shirt and
slacks combo uniform burst through the door.

Sophia steps into the space between them and the reception
area, where Merlyn has wandered off to speak with the obtuse
receptionist.

NORMIE
Come on, Merlyn. Just calm down and
call it a night. In the morning
we'll get your doctor on the phone.

SOPHIA
I have his car out front. I'm here
to take him now.

MERLYN
(shouts from the other
side of the room)
I told you she was going to meet me
tonight, Normie.

NORMIE
It's three AM. You're not taking
him anywhere.

SOPHIA

You get points for not saying 'AM in the morning,' Normie. Can this be solved with money?

NORMIE

Seriously?

SOPHIA

Seriously. I'd rather fight you, frankly. I'm pretty deep in the self-loathing tonight and it might make me feel better. But he'd always prefer we do money.

BEYOND THE RECEPTION COUNTER where Merlyn engages in conversation with Kelly, a third thuggish pool boy type shows up through a side door.

NORMIE

Enough for... Like... what do you think, Jordan? Four years college?

SOPHIA

Yes.

JORDAN snorts and chuckles. He shakes his head, softly amused by the whole thing.

MERLYN

You know there's another one, right?

SOPHIA

Clocked him coming in. Thanks for having my back.

Jordan, reminded that his target lies beyond the woman, moves to step past her with a dismissive side push to the shoulder.

She resists for a moment, breaking his rhythm. When he presses further, she melts, confusingly drawing him with her, a hand at his jaw like a lover's touch. Her other arm moves about him, dancing him in a small, sweet little circle, then she controls his wrist with a simple lock and puts him back into position beside Normie.

SOPHIA (CONT'D)

Now here's the dilemma, you face.
You can risk getting your asses
kicked by a woman twice your age
and then find out you were in the
wrong from the start, or you can
take a big pile of money and we all
walk away friendly.

Sneaky... KENT if his nametag is to be trusted, puts a hand on her shoulder from behind. She immediately controls the hand and pushes her hips back, fluid and soft, a willow under a powerful wind. The assailant tumbles ass over shoulder throw. She protects the back of his head and neck as he hits the floor.

She helps him back to his feet and puts him with his friends.

SOPHIA (CONT'D)

Hi, Kent. Thanks for showing up. I was just telling Norm and Jordan here that there's really no need for us to fight. But they seem to feel--

Merlyn shouts from behind her, holding the door.

MERLYN

Got it, Kid!

SOPHIA

Oooh! Sorry, guys. Offer's expired!

She backs away from the young, confused men and then sprints for the door.

Merlyn holds it open for her and she is OUT!

OUTSIDE - CONTINUOUS

Sophia laughs. She and Merlyn wrap one another and spin alone in the outside space between the front door and the Bentley.

SOPHIA (CONT'D)

I'm so sorry.

MERLYN

You need not apologize. Did you realize that I'm not crazy?

SOPHIA

No. No, Merlyn.

MERLYN

You *just* showed up after I told them you were coming.

SOPHIA

Yes. Nonetheless.

They stop turning and just hold one another in the night air.

MERLYN

We have to get going!

SOPHIA

We're fine! They'll call admin, realize you're free to go and--

MERLYN

No! There's urgency! The Questing Field expands about us.

He kisses her with the enthusiasm of an adventurer.

MERLYN (CONT'D)

I heard the whirr and click that comes the night I stalk darkly into the predawn city!

SOPHIA

The poem you heard in the vision.

MERLYN

No! The poem I made up to remember the details of the vision! Tonight's the night!

She sighs tolerantly and presses a button on her key fob to unlock the back door as she circles to the drivers door.

INT. THE BENTLEY - NEARLY CONTINUOUS

She snaps herself into the driver's seat.

SOPHIA

Where're we going?

MERLYN

Central Park.

She glances through the rear view mirror at his back-of-the-car, cramped clothes change.

MERLYN (CONT'D)

Gotta stalk darkly into the pre-dawn city, meet a lady and get this Quest underway. Drive! Drive! Drive, my darling Sofia. Portents and omens abound! It begins!

She steers the impossibly quiet Bentley through the gates and out onto the empty road.

SOPHIA

Begins. . . again.

She tries to adjust her posture inconspicuously as she shifts her mirrored focus between the rear view and the man she seeks to monitor for tics and twitches. He finishes his wardrobe change and settles into the back seat, buckling his seatbelt. He pulls a small electric razor from a dop kit and carves a curve out of each side of his beard and then along his throat.

MERLYN

I'm almost certain I've got it right this time, Sof. It's about starting out with honesty. Right? It's about the intention, yes, but also the commitment to the truth. That's where I got it wrong the last time we tried.

She sighs.

SOPHIA

Merlyn. . . the last *times*.

A set of headlights comes on behind her on the nearly empty nighttime street.

She looks ahead, taking in the couple of vehicles well ahead of her, a dry-cleaning van a block ahead and a sports coup a half a block beyond that.

MERLYN

No. No. Don't start to cry. Listen. Please. Sofia.

He begins climbing over to the front passenger's seat through the console gap, a child frantic to comfort a grieving parent, self-restraint impossible.

SOPHIA

Merlyn. Sit down. I can pull over if you want to -

MERLYN

It's fine. Keep driving.

He folds himself, origami style, through the gap and into the passenger's seat.

SOPHIA

You're a fifty-eight-year-old man for Christ's sake.

MERLYN

I'm eighteen hundred years old. At least.

SOPHIA

Okay.

She focuses on the road.

SOPHIA (CONT'D)

The enthusiastic eyebrows are back.

Settled into the passenger's seat, Merlyn studies her.

MERLYN

You won't send me back to that place.

She grips and releases the steering wheel. She studies the road. She checks the tail.

MERLYN (CONT'D)

Your eyebrows are not at all enthusiastic.

SOPHIA

No. They're not.

MERLYN

It's an adventure! Remember? You said you could spend your life on crazy adventures.

Sofia glances in the rear view.

SOPHIA

I was thirty-two and I hadn't yet parsed the 'adventures' from the 'crazy.'

MERLYN

Indeed. Words matter.

SOPHIA

Yes. The magics linguistic.

Merlyn turns to her, gleeful, then recognizes the tone as dry.

MERLYN

You know you've seen incredible things.

Sophia sighs. She resist the urge to engage and then...

SOPHIA

Merlyn, I have loved every adventure... until they've ended. Then, when it falls apart, I've watched you unravel.

MERLYN

It won't fall apart this time, Sofia. That's what I'm saying! Last time I had lies in operation. I drew people into the Field under false pretenses—

SOPHIA

The professors.

MERLYN

Yes! The professors.

SOPHIA

I'm letting you know that you have always been completely honest with me. I've signed on for everything we've done. I've been in this with you. A hundred percent by choice.

He pauses, taking that in.

MERLYN

Thank you. That's very kind of you to say. Please say it on a day when I am less sure of myself. Or when someone tries to smear me with news of our relationship. Yes. The professors. I lied to them because I didn't trust them to stay on board. Right? This time -it's like the moment in a hot desert just as the lightning cracks before the rain falls. I can feel it. I can smell it.

(MORE)

MERLYN (CONT'D)

The moment I heard the click-whirr-click of new lock on the meds cabinet, I knew it was the night the vision told me of. I came alive again—

SOPHIA

I can see that.

MERLYN

This time things stay together. The center will hold! Nobody has to slouch anywhere to be born! I will weave this Quest with the pure, focused intention of a spell or—or—a fabulous story. I will spin the yarn itself with ever increasing conscientiousness. Beneath the protection of a fabric threaded with truth, the Quest will not fail. The Questing Party will not come apart, and I may remain fully raveled!

She glances toward her side mirror, mostly to mask her amusement.

SOPHIA

Last time it all fell apart *because* the truth came out. Put on your seat belt.

Merlyn claps his belt clasp and folds his legs into a Celtic knot on the passenger's seat.

MERLYN

No! Last time it all fell apart *when* the truth came out. It fell apart *because* I had concealed the truth from the start. I told the wrong story at the beginning. That's the key, Sofia. This is how I screwed up the world to begin with. I told the wrong story.

She speeds up.

The car behind her maintains precise comfortable distance.

MERLYN (CONT'D)

Our mistakes only cause us pain after we realize errors and before we set them right.

She shakes her head, rejecting the notion.

SOPHIA
I can't undo it, though.

MERLYN
You can never undo a thing. You can only set it right. I'm right here.

SOPHIA
But you're doing this again. You went into a spiral, Merlyn. You threw away half a million dollars. Maybe more.

She slows, signals left and changes lanes.

The trailing car stays in its lane but slows to match her pace rather than passing.

MERLYN
Probably way, way more. So, drop me at 112th and Central Park West. Then be ready to pick me up at the Manhattan Diner--

SOPHIA
96th and . . . something?

She signals a left-hand turn and the headlights move over to stay with her. She turns off the signal.

MERLYN
Yeah. I'll have a woman with me. I'll have told her a truthful story, and I'll have built a pretty solid spell into it--

SOPHIA
Merlyn, there's no magic. Please.

MERLYN
No *ambient* magic. But I can generate--It doesn't matter. I will have told her a story and she will be primed to play whatever part she has in all this.

Sofia watches the car behind her and the road ahead.

SOPHIA
You don't know what part she plays.

Merlyn watches her face.

MERLYN

I only know what she smells like.
And what her door looks like.

SOPHIA

I love you so much, Merlyn.

MERLYN

I wish you could love me with less
anguish.

SOPHIA

Me too.

She stares at the road, jaw clenched to hold back lectures.

MERLYN

Do you want to talk about the
Quest, or do you want to discuss my
mental health?

SOPHIA

It's cyclical, Merlyn. You have to
know this. You get excited, you
start talking about magic and how
you're gonna save the world and
when the grandiose fantasies
dissolve, you spiral into
depression.

MERLYN

Do you think the depression was
because the Quest fell apart?

SOPHIA

No! I think the depression was
because you're bipolar!

MERLYN

I may well be, my darling love. But
that doesn't mean I'm delusional! I
didn't spiral because the Quest
fell apart. I spiraled because it
was my fault. It's basic Druidry.
Right?

SOPHIA

I'm not basically a Druid, so...

He chuckles.

MERLYN

The stories I wrote badly wound up
getting told a lot.

(MORE)

MERLYN (CONT'D)

To a lot of people. You can't fix a flawed story by adding lies to it. That's not how it works.

His enthusiasm turns him in his seat, fearless, stupid, unbuckled. With his legs still folded he puts his back to the glove compartment to see her better.

SOPHIA

I worry that I support your absurd delusions because you get so hot when you're passionate about doing something completely insane.

MERLYN

I know. Right? That's part of my Questing Field.

SOPHIA

Pretty sure it's pheromones and testosterone or some shit, baby.

MERLYN

Magic! You can't see it, you can't smell it, but there it is making you think things you shouldn't be thinking while you're driving. About pushing your nose into my neck to take me in.

Inaudible beyond the contained space of the cabin, a tire on the van ahead blows out and the van swerves as the wheel wobbles and the torn tire spins free.

SOPHIA

Not now. Gotta drive.

MERLYN

Having me trace your spine with my fingertips while I whisper in your ear how wonderful it will be to watch your grace and beauty change and grow with age before my eyes.

SOPHIA

Crap! Hang on. Tight.

Merlyn presses his feet to the backrest.

She swerves and then accelerates so that the tire misses her windshield to bounce across the roof.

A glance in the mirror confirms that the car behind her has safely slowed and is able to dodge the stray radial.

The van ahead loses speed fast, crosswise to the road, exposed axle sparking. She lets off the accelerator and cranks the wheel right while she pulls up hard on the old-fashioned emergency break, locking them into a skid to burn off speed.

She manages the slewing Bentley's momentum as the van screams, gouging tarmac.

Sophia steers into the skid to aim for the gap between the van and the curb.

The van slides away toward the center lanes.

The small debris field falls away behind them as they head south at a steady forty-five.

Merlyn turns to face front once more. He fastens his seatbelt.

MERLYN

You are impossibly beautiful.

SOPHIA

Not right now. Right now, I'm driving. Sorry.

MERLYN

It's okay.

SOPHIA

You shouldn't be complimenting my looks. You should be complimenting my reflexes, my eye-hand coordination, my remarkable skills.

MERLYN

You are definitely an excellent driver. And fully focused, taking in the world at full speed, responding by instinct and reflex to utilize your extraordinary skills, you are also impossibly beautiful.

She spreads her fingers and steers for a moment with her palms. She pounds on the steering wheel a few times.

MERLYN (CONT'D)

You okay?

SOPHIA

I thought I was gonna get us both killed.

MERLYN

Not possible right now.

SOPHIA

Merlyn, no. We're not protected by your mystical Questing Field. That was skill, and adrenalin and blind luck.

MERLYN

Okay.

A light turns from red to green as they approach.

She slows to thirty miles an hour. Another light turns from red to green as they approach. She pushes to almost sixty. The next light turns from red to green at their approach.

Merlyn suppresses a smile, observing her experimentation.

SOPHIA

There's been a car following us, I think since right after we hit the Island.

MERLYN

Before that. At least as early as the turn-off for Southbound. I was impressed with their handling of your debris field.

The lights of Manhattan pass over the windshield before her.

SOPHIA (V.O.)

When a fuckton of adrenalin runs through my body and then the crisis ends but there's still adrenalin, I can get angry. Calling that debris field 'mine' seemed insensitive, as if I was to blame for it. Plus, I'd just controlled my temper brilliantly through a conflict with a few deeply testosterony young men. And already my brilliant, sweet, delusional fuckhead had me dropping him at the park in the dark because of omens and portents. I was looking for a fight. I was looking for physical contact. I was looking for a hug.

Her eyes, focused ahead, seem to track a dream as she drives.

MERLYN
Are you alright?

SOPHIA
Why? Sorry. Shit. Was I cursing at
you a lot?

MERLYN
What?

SOPHIA
I might need a minute.

MERLYN
Okay. We've made good time. We have
a minute.

A light turns red. She stops at it.

Two blocks back, the tail slows down, creeping along the side
of Central Park West.

SOPHIA
You have any idea who it is?

Merlyn shakes his head.

SOFIA
So Central Park West at like
4:25am. You don't want me with you?

MERLYN
I can take care of myself. Wallet?

SOPHIA
Glove compartment.

He pops the glove compartment and pulls out a slender wallet.

MERLYN
I know you worry. I love you for
worrying. Do you need my help
losing the tail?

Sophia sighs.

SOPHIA
Point taken.

The light turns green.

MERLYN
Swing around the block so I can get
out on the park side.

SOPHIA

Yep.

She makes a right.

MERLYN

Sophia, this *thing* I keep trying to do, if you read your employee handbook—

SOPHIA

It wasn't an employee handbook. It was a pastiche of complex musings about ethics, leadership principles and vague positive hopes for the future of anyone who has occasion to read it.

MERLYN

You read it!

SOPHIA

Of course, I read it! You hired me.

MERLYN

Did you like it?

SOPHIA

It was seventeen years ago, Merlyn. I'd have to look at it again. It was weird. As an employee handbook.

She makes a left.

SOPHIA (CONT'D)

Now that I know you, it might make more sense. What's in it that you want me to remember?

MERLYN

(reciting)

'If anyone sees a way that he or she might save the world or help to save the world and does not pursue it, he or she is an ass.'

SOPHIA

Yeah. That's not something that goes in an employee handbook.

MERLYN

It might be the most important thing in the employee handbook.

SOPHIA

Then you should update it to 'he,
she or they.'

MERLYN

Good call.

Sophia makes another left to put the park to their right.

SOPHIA

You're very open minded for an old
guy, you know that?

MERLYN

Okay. Up there on the right.

Sofia nods. She tries to make it professional, not worried.

SOPHIA

Nobody's waiting for you.

MERLYN

I told you. I have to stalk darkly
first.

She pulls up so that his door can open freely.

MERLYN (CONT'D)

Pop the trunk. I'm gonna want my
coat.

He gets out and moves to the trunk.

EXT. THE BENTLEY - CONTINUOUS

Sophia and Merlyn meet at the trunk of the Bentley.

He kisses her. She holds him, stalling, smelling his neck.

MERLYN

Give me a three count before you
drive away. I can vanish.

SOPHIA

I love you more than you could
possibly know by my actions.

She runs her fingertips along the clean shave line of his
beard.

They enjoy another moment. He reaches into the trunk and --

END ACT ONE

TAROT CARD FLIP -



EXT. THE LOW WALL ALONG CENTRAL PARK - CONTINUOUS

VIVICA, Black in her mid-twenties, athletic and beautiful and FRANKIE, also Black, also in his mid-twenties, sit on the wall, legs dangling. The BENTLEY pulls up near them at the curb.

VIVICA (V.O.)

The car got Frankie's attention and I knew he was going to want to go look at it. I could practically see his energy pulling toward it. Then the guy got out and it pulled back. He didn't want the conversation.

FRANKIE

Look at that car.

VIVICA

Yeah. Nice.

Vivica looks at him, considers saying something, changes her mind. He watches her face.

FRANKIE

You're thinking a lot of things.

Vivica nods.

In the BG, Merlyn and Sophia stand at the trunk. They kiss.

Vivica and Frankie watch. Their hands almost touch on the stone surface of the wall. Almost.

They watch together as Merlyn pulls a... shadow from the trunk. It seems to flow contrary to normal gravity as he whips it around his shoulders. It moves too fluidly but once he wears it, it hangs normally, an elegant black overcoat, a bit flared, very expensive.

FRANKIE (CONT'D)

(hushed)

Oh, I have to see that coat.

VIVICA

(also hushed)

Let them have their moment.

FRANKIE

(sotto voce)

Did you see the way it moves?

He hops down from the wall, bending his knees so that he makes as little sound as an electric Bentley when he lands.

[A SUBTLE, ALMOST SUBLIMINAL EFFECT: Deep red energy moves through his core as he pushes away from the wall, drops down through his legs as he cushions his landing.]

Vivica drops down beside him, just as silent.

Frankie puts on a Covid mask with a big goofy dog face printed on it.

Vivica puts hers on, a repeating print that alternates between a Martial Arts logo and a cute, kicking manga girl.

VIVICA

(a whisper)

Can we not? You'll scare the crap out of him.

The Bentley rolls away up the Avenue.

FRANKIE

(the barest hiss)

I just want to see the coat.

A blue Honda slows as it passes and then, heads uptown, dopplering off with old-fashioned internal combustion noises.

FRANKIE (CONT'D)

Maybe ask him where I can get one.

They begin to move toward him and...

MERLYN

(Loud, warm, almost
friendly)

Either state your business or
slither back into the shadowed dark
from whence you emerged.

VIVICA

You heard us?

MERLYN

The sound of people sneaking has
long been one to which I am
attuned.

VIVICA

My friend was just admiring that
coat.

Merlyn chuckles.

MERLYN

Thank you. It was custom made by a
brilliant fabricator who took great
pride in his work.

They move toward him.

Without turning to face them, Merlyn reaches into one of his
coat's pockets.

Frankie slips A BUCK KNIFE from the sheath he keeps tucked
into his hip pocket.

Vivica glares at him and shakes her head, disappointed.

MERLYN (CONT'D)

Put the knife away.

FRANKIE

I wasn't sure what you were
reaching for.

MERLYN

It was my mask.

FRANKIE

I see that.

He slips the knife back into its sheath.

They all stand in silence.

MERLYN

(avuncular)

If you're going to try to mug me, you'll want to get started soon. I have to stalk darkly into the predawn city.

VIVICA

Hold on. What?

FRANKIE

We weren't going to mug you.

MERLYN

Okay.

FRANKIE

Screw it. Let's just go.

MERLYN

You and your friend struggle with an ancient dilemma. You are trapped between fear and curiosity.

He gestures, though he has not yet turned to face them. The gesture feels specific, intentional.

VIVICA

How did you know Frankie had a knife?

Merlyn chuckles. He still has not shown them his face.

MERLYN

Listen. I'm going to stalk darkly now. If you want to continue this conversation, you'll have to keep up.

He strides across the empty avenue toward a narrow, numbered street of lamplit, soot-stained brownstones.

FRANKIE

I just wanted to get a better look at your coat!

Vivica shifts into a near-trot, a child keeping pace with a distracted, long-legged parent.

VIVICA (V.O.)

I suddenly had about five thousand questions. I could feel them building in my brain, multiplying.

Frankie catches up to her and then he is keeping pace at her side, making her safe. She veers a bit to bump her shoulder up against him. He responds, bumping her with his hip.

MERLYN

(answering her loudly as
he walks on)

Just before I put on my mask, I
thought I smelled steel. I took a
gamble.

FRANKIE

You can't smell steel.

The man turns now to face them, backing along with the energy of an adolescent, heading home from school with his pals.

MERLYN

You can't smell steel. I have a
history with steel.

He spins away from them then and his stride becomes slightly grander, more performative. He unbuttons his long coat so that it might flare a bit like a cape.

VIVICA

Where are we going?

Merlyn stops walking.

MERLYN

Oh, that is always so much more
complicated a question than anybody
thinks.

He looks up at one of the nearly identical multi-story apartment houses. He puts his hands up for a moment, framing the door between his squared fingers.

He turns abruptly to face them again, properly takes them in for the first time.

MERLYN (CONT'D)

I am going to ring that doorbell,
and convince a woman I've never met
to help me with a project that
means a great deal to me.

His eyes dance between the two of them.

MERLYN (CONT'D)

The fact that you two walked with
me has more significance than you
can possibly realize.

(MORE)

MERLYN (CONT'D)

I tread a righteous path again.
I've seen it before, but that was a
long-ass time ago. I felt it
tonight, but I didn't believe. Not
fully. But the ease with which the
pieces come together nowtastes like
a memory not a dream!

He shifts mercurially between performance, as though his young acquaintances are an adoring audience, and intensity, leaning into their masked faces with his own for emphasis. It is quite possible that this is a man who belongs in a mental institution.

MERLYN (CONT'D)

I'm pretty sure I recognize this moment. You two have a choice. You can go home, one or both of you, and serve only as passing acquaintances who reassure me of the validity of my choices, probably to return briefly near the end of my journey for a reprise, or you may wait here with me and join what will likely be a far more interesting adventure than a series of brief encounters with frightened strangers in the night for meager profits.

FRANKIE

We weren't going to mug you.

VIVICA

Join you?

He steps toward her, eyes smiling above the rim of the mask.

MERLYN

You choose what draws you.

He puts a hand on her shoulder.

Frankie is on him, grabbing Merlyn's shoulder, spinning him away from her.

Merlyn turns with the momentum, ducking as he does so to pass under Frankie's arm.

Merlyn presses a thumb to the back of the offending hand and wraps his middle ring and pinky fingers under to grip its palm.

Vivica watches closely as...

Frankie tilts off balance and **the deep red, almost invisible effect shows as the point of contact gives Merlyn's balanced chi easy control.**

Merlyn's free hand finds the nerve plexus behind Frankie's jaw below his ear.

He does this with calm confidence, not strength. Not Anger.

Using the pull of his left hand and the push from his right, he twists into a left-turned crouch, moving Frankie gently to a new position, lying across four of the cement steps that lead up to the building.

[THE **SUBTLE EFFECT** that comes only with Vivica's POV, the barely visible movement of chi, allows the control points to show clearly, the path of transfer as one center of gravity affects another.]

Finding the young man's sheath, tucked into a back pocket and securely captured in the circle of his belt, Merlyn takes control of the Buck knife.

FRANKIE

What the fuck, dude?

MERLYN

I'm sorry. That was my fault. I forget the power of my desires. I very much wanted to hug you. Either of you. If you'll stop trying to rob me, you can have this back and I won't have to destroy it.

He offers the knife back to Frankie, hilt first.

Frankie eyes the hilt suspiciously, perhaps fearing a trap.

FRANKIE

I wasn't trying to rob you. I was trying to stop you 'cause you looked like you were making a move.

MERLYN

Okay.

FRANKIE

And I'm pretty sure you can't break that knife.

Merlyn's eyes crinkle, suggesting a broad grin under the mask.

MERLYN

Fair enough.

He turns to the stacked-brick newel post at the base of the stairs, finds a crack in the mortar and drives the blade as deep into it as his mortal strength allows. He twists it a bit, grinding away at some of the grouting. He pushes the knife farther in. He closes his eyes.

Vivica glances at Frankie but he is busy rubbing his shoulder dramatically and reassembling his manliness.

Merlyn applies slow, steady, direct pressure to the knife until the hilt comes up hard against the surface of the wall, his effort supported subtly by the deep red energy that only Vivica sees.

He steps up onto the hilt with the agility of a teen. When he hops down, the hilt vibrates a bit against the rock with a *fast-fading spring-steel tone*.

MERLYN (CONT'D)

You might just be right about that.

He tugs a couple of times to be sure it's solid.

MERLYN (CONT'D)

(to Vivica)

You have five questions. I am having too good an evening to play close to the vest. So why don't you go ahead and ask me two of them, and when I come back down those stairs, you'll have to ask me three more.

VIVICA

How did you do that?

MERLYN

I'm not going to count that as one of your questions yet, 'cause it's much, much too vague. I've done more wonderful things in the last eight hours than I have in many years. I am, as it were, on the ascendent.

Frankie snorts.

FRANKIE

'As it were.'

MERLYN

Indeed.

VIVICA

My boy here grabs you. Now, I'm not sayin' he's the best with his hands

—

FRANKIE

Hey! I can hold my own,

VIVICA

Settle down. You're big. You're tough and strong and all that. But it's not like you ever really train with me or anything. Right?—Okay.

(she returns focus to Merlyn)

So, Big dude grabs you from behind and you know he's got a knife. You just — kind of — set him down and take his knife from him and then...

She glances toward the knife stuck into the wall.

Merlyn waits.

VIVICA (CONT'D)

So that's the first question.

MERLYN

I know it seems silly but I need you to make it a question, a specific, clear question.

She studies his face for a moment.

VIVICA

Why?

MERLYN

Language is one of the old magics. I believe that to carry out my current Quest I must be very . . . cognizant of how I do it. A part of me wants to say that you used up a question with 'why?' not to be a dick, just because the words have so much power. The literal lives down deep.

FRANKIE

Dude is crazy, Shorts. We gotta walk away.

He bounces on the balls of his feet, nervous, ready to go.

VIVICA

Hold on. Hold on. He's gotta answer these two questions before he does the thing.

Merlyn beams

FRANKIE

Aw, man. I think we should just walk away.

MERLYN

Up to you, Shorts, but ask me the clear question or don't. I'm supposed to have a predestined encounter on these very steps very soon I think.

VIVICA

Only Frankie calls me 'Shorts.' What is this predestined encounter you're here about?

MERLYN

A long time ago a woman I trusted assured me that when a series of things happened, one right after another, I would remember my purpose and reclaim my power. Part of the whole vision she cast upon me—

Frankie snorts dismissively.

FRANKIE

'Cast upon you.'

VIVICA

Quiet, Frankie.

MERLYN

—was this door. My finger reaching for the doorbell button... the ringing sound... I start to turn, I smell her perfume and then... She remains beside me as the Quest commences. I don't know her face, but these things come next in the vision. I wrote a rhyme to help me remember all the bits of it. Would you like to hear it? One more question and I'm doing this.

VIVICA
I've done a little martial arts—

FRANKIE
A *little*.

VIVICA
Knock it off, Frankie. How did you put him on the ground, and take his knife like that?

MERLYN
Gracefully and with great care.

Merlyn turns to go.

VIVICA
(insistent)
That's not an answer. I'm not—like—a blackbelt or whatever, right? But after you slipped under his arm and got the wrist lock you owned him. I don't know any of those techniques you used afterward.

Merlyn considers this.

He nods. Making the slow gestures to mime the action, Merlyn turns the techniques he applied into a graceful, bending dance, a bit of a kata in an unusually supple style. He drops, turning as when Frankie grabbed him. And performs the full fluid movement in one go, **his chi flowing through him, barely visible as he does so.**

He begins the movement again, much more slowly.

MERLYN
When I felt your friend's hand, I ducked under and came up inside his strike circle, rather than outside. Then I knew which hand was on me and... secured the overhand wristlock. Yeah?

His fingers shape around an imaginary attacker's hand,

VIVICA
Yeah, I got that.

Vivica follows his actions. He throws her an approving nod.

MERLYN

Good! You *do* have some training! As I did this, he tensed his arm and locked his elbow, giving me a structured control point rather than a fluid one, so I found the nerve plexus under his jaw-

Vivica tries to feel about her own jaw line.

VIVICA

Just show me.

Frankie steps forward to object and she steps up to him, a hand to his chest.

VIVICA (CONT'D)

Frankie, knock it off. I want to learn this. I let my master do this all the time to me. I saw how he handled you and why. It was legit, man. I want to learn this. Remember what you said?

FRANKIE

When?

VIVICA

I don't know. Once. You told me a long rambling story about how you tried to get a job and you got your hopes up, but it all fell apart and you were crushed but you'd learned a whole lot about - something - and *no matter how much you risk no matter how much it hurts, if you learn one thing, it's worthwhile?*

Frankie sighs the sigh of a tolerant friend or an indulgent chauffeur.

Vivica grins at him and gives him the finger then bends over, offering Merlyn a locked, extended arm.

Merlyn gently takes the hand and presses his thumb against the back, sending pressure down the shaft of the locked arm.

MERLYN

Here. Yeah?

VIVICA

Yeah. I feel that.

He reaches forward with his free hand to touch two points just below the ear behind the hinge of the jaw. He pushes firmly once just to demonstrate the force of those two techniques combined.

VIVICA (CONT'D)

Nice. Thank you. That's really useful.

MERLYN

So, the answer to that question really is, 'gracefully and with great care.' Now, you'll have to excuse me.

He turns toward the door, pulling his mask down so as to better be understood over the intercom system.

Vivica retrieves Frankie's knife for him, tugging it from the stone wall in a single, smooth pull.

The steel *sings* a clear tone in the night air as it comes free.

Merlyn, hand outstretched, not yet touching the doorbell, turns at the tone. With the mask down, he grins.

MERLYN (CONT'D)

I smell the perfume. You're a girl!

VIVICA

Woman.

MERLYN

Yes.

He sees the blade she has extracted from the stone.

His knees tremble. He staggers down to the bottom step to sit on the second from the bottom, his feet on the sidewalk.

MERLYN (CONT'D)

Oh.

VIVICA

You okay?

MERLYN

That was the sound. Not a doorbell. What's your name?

VIVICA

Is it weird if I feel like I shouldn't tell you?

FRANKIE

This is all fucking weird.

VIVICA

Frankie. Please. We've been friends forever. But none of this would've happened if you hadn't tried to impress me with the whole 'Let's find out where I can get a fine coat like that' thing.

Her eyes never leave the grey-haired man, now.

MERLYN

No. It is not weird. That is intuition. You should trust it. There have been decades that I haven't told anybody my name.

FRANKIE

Can we go, now?

VIVICA

We can't. I have one more question.

THAT gets Merlyn's full attention.

MERLYN

You've been keeping track.

She nods.

VIVICA

I'm in law school. I pay attention to the rules.

MERLYN

Now, I have a great many questions of my own.

VIVICA

Yeah. But I didn't promise to answer yours when you came down those stairs. So please go back to the one you skipped so it isn't wasted.

The man nods but he studies her now.

VIVICA (CONT'D)

Are you okay?

MERLYN

You're using one of your questions
to inquire about my health?

VIVICA

Yes. Yes, I am.

MERLYN

Knowing that you wasted one
question asking if it was weird
that you didn't want to share your
name?

VIVICA

Yeah. Seriously, man. You're
wandering around in Harlem in the
middle of the night, stumbling down
stairs and shit. Are you okay?

MERLYN

I believe I'm fine, my dear young
woman. Not everyone I know agrees
with me. But I have not suffered an
injury, nor fainted. I just needed
to sit for a moment. I am...
pleased and stunned. And I feel
terribly foolish. I believe I am
just fine.

She sits down on the step beside the man. They sit in silence
for a moment, him barefaced, her masked against the plague.

Frankie raises his arms in protest and then, in a
continuation of the same gesture, drops them with a sigh and
performs a full, shrugging spin in place.

MERLYN (CONT'D)

He's your knight.

VIVICA

Friend.

MERLYN

Adoring protector.

VIVICA

So, you're okay, you think. I'm not
weird to want to withhold my name.
I have one left.

MERLYN

Ask.

She thinks for a beat.

VIVICA
What's your name, then?

MERLYN
I am Merlyn Taliesin, last mortal
witness to the War of the Trees.

VIVICA
I don't know what that is.

MERLYN
Almost nobody does. Now, I know you
do not want me calling you Shorts.

They sit in silence.

Frankie shifts his weight from one foot to the other. His
eyes scan the street for threats, occasionally scan Merlyn.

MERLYN (CONT'D)
Frankie! I'm very sorry I mis-
assessed you. I suspect you to be
of great nobility with a capacity
for bravery known to few.

FRANKIE
Fantastic.

He brushes off the comment but he also nods an
acknowledgement, just a New York nod, up a notch and back
down. He relaxes a bit in the night.

VIVICA
Vaccinated?

MERLYN
Yeah.

She strips off her mask. Vivica picks up a small twig from
the step beside her where she sits. She turns it between her
fingertips, absently.

VIVICA
You told me your name.

MERLYN
I have rules I have to follow.

She nods.

VIVICA

Okay,
(She presses the twig hard
between her fingers)
I want to make a bargain with you.

FRANKIE

What the fuck? I don't understand
what's going on.

VIVICA

Neither do I, Frankie. Can you
trust me for a couple more minutes?
I can try to explain later.

He nods.

MERLYN

We have several blocks to walk and
quite a while before my driver
picks us up at the Manhattan Diner.
Before you propose any bargains
with me, might I suggest that you
consult with your oversized friend?
I'm going to start walking, not to
be rude but because I'm hungry. I
hope I will have the opportunity to
buy you two something as well.

Merlyn stands and begins to walk away.

THE COAT flares for a perfect silhouette, seen from behind.

Vivica shouts after him.

VIVICA

I will tell you my name if you will
tell me everything. Whatever your
whole weird deal is with the
stalking and the word games and the
Jedi mind tricks. All of it.

Merlyn spins to walk backward ahead of them again. He grins
broadly.

MERLYN

I will accept your bargain! Also,
you are one of the worst
negotiators I have ever met.

VIVICA

What do you mean?

MERLYN

You were going to get all this information regardless. This is where it starts. Here. On that stoop on this night.

He nearly skips away backward ahead of them on the empty sidewalk, raising his hands to let the coat reveal the wide-flaring joy of the showman.

MERLYN (CONT'D)

A great Quest begins tonight, and I have been waiting a long, long time. You are one of the Great Heroes of the Questing Party. I knew it the moment I heard the ring of steel and smelled your perfume.

VIVICA

Hold on.

She speeds up and jogs to stand before him with Frankie striding along behind her. The man stops backing away so they can approach.

VIVICA (CONT'D)

I'm Vivica DeLongpre.

She drops her hood back so he can see her.

Merlyn repeats her name softly to himself.

MERLYN

Vivica. DeLongpre

He reaches forward with one hand and allows his fingertips to hover just over her heart.

Frankie tenses for a moment but holds his place.

Relaxation spreads through Vivica. She leans forward slowly until his fingertips make contact.

She pulls in air and snaps back into her usual New York street self.

VIVICA

Fuck.

FRANKIE

What the hell just happened?

Vivica notices that the twig she has been twirling has living buds along it, just starting to crack open with green.

MERLYN

You felt it too, huh?

FRANKIE

I felt it. I saw it. I . . . sort
of heard it.

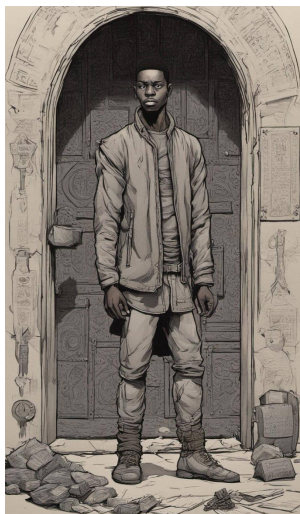
Vivica takes the twig to the little square a few feet away,
where a small tree grows from a dirt patch, and presses one
end of it into the earth.

MERLYN

That, young knight, is the bright
hum of old machinery shifting into
motion.

END ACT TWO

ACT THREE



EXT. THE NEW YORK NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Merlyn walks ahead.

Frankie slows, forcing Vivica to check her pace to stay with him. She looks at her phone as she walks with him.

FRANKIE (V.O.)

I've known Vivica a long time. Long enough to know when I won't be able to talk her out of something. This crazy white guy had his hooks in her and she couldn't see it.

Vivica mutters information, gleaned from her phone.

VIVICA

Philanthropist and longtime social justice activist. Frequent contributor to a long list of charities and NGOs. Runs something called Liberty Is Knowledge Revolutionary Atheist Socialist Society with no apparent headquarters or web presence beyond its listing as a 501-4(c).

FRANKIE

Stop walking. I'm telling you, Shorts. Something's wrong.

He keeps up with her. She does not slow.

VIVICA

I'm well aware.

FRANKIE

I don't get what you're doing here.

VIVICA

He's really good, this guy. He showed me the lock and the pressure points gently, carefully. He's for real. Think about it for a second. You read faces, right? Was he lying? Ever?

FRANKIE

No. No he wasn't. But none of what he's saying makes sense.

VIVICA

Yeah. Something's wrong, Frankie. I knew it from the second he called out to us without looking back. I need to follow this out. You remember a few days ago when I was standing on the roof and I said, 'There's a high-pitched ringing in the back of my head and I don't know what it wants?'

FRANK

I remember being a little worried about you, now that you mention it.

VIVICA

It's been different since just before he heard us behind him. Clearer and softer at the same time. It wants me to listen to him. It . . . that's not right. It doesn't *want*, exactly.

FRANKIE

So, I get no say. I just have to follow along if I'm gonna protect you?

VIVICA

You don't have to do anything, Frankie. I can take care of myself. This guy has no ill intentions.

(MORE)

VIVICA (CONT'D)

I gave him the chance to show me who he is. He's not malicious and he might be in real trouble.

FRANKIE

What?

VIVICA

I'm going to the diner with him. When his driver gets there to pick him up, I'll do a little check-in to make sure someone's got his meds in order or whatever. I'm not going to just let an old crazy white guy wander off into Harlem in the middle of the night on his own.

Frankie chuckles. He lumbers along beside her.

FRANKIE (V.O.)

That made sense, now. Of course, she would have to stay with this guy. Once she refused money to help a classmate cheat; instead she said she'd give him free tutoring. She used a precious question to ask, 'are you okay?' I once had to talk her out of taking in a diseased squirrel.

FRANKIE

You think he made me afraid when he made you curious.

VIVICA

You saying he didn't?

FRANKIE

And you don't think he's just wandered in with your destiny in his hands? You're not going off to be some kind of hero on a quest?

VIVICA

I'm going to make sure a crazy, rich white guy gets a ride home safe.

She picks up the pace so as not to let Merlyn get too far ahead as he makes the left to head down toward 96th street.

Frankie stays with her.

FRANKIE

You know, almost nobody would bother to take care of a guy like this.

VIVICA

That can't be true.

The two make the left in stride.

ON THE AVENUE - CONTINUOUS - NIGHT

Merlyn strides now in the brighter light of the wider sidewalk. As he passes the streetlights, his shadow moves past him like the second hand of a clock turning backward.

FRANKIE

I am hungry.

VIVICA

Right?

FRANKIE

But he's not paying for our dinner.

VIVICA

Agreed. It's like the telling-him-my-name thing. It feels . . .

FRANKIE

Yeah. Exactly.

They walk in silence.

FRANKIE (V.O.)

Vivica is the best person I have ever known. Hands down. I look at her while she talks and I see enthusiasm or sadness or whatever but none of the other shit that goes on. You get what I'm saying? It's not that I can't read her. It's that she's not keeping secrets when I look at her. She listens and she is *listening*. She speaks, and her full mind stays with the thought at hand.

VIVICA

I want to believe him.

FRANKIE

I get that. He took the fear spell off when he apologized and told me he expected bravery from me.

VIVICA

He really is good.

FRANKIE

I felt it. And when he touched you.

VIVICA

Yeah.

FRANKIE

We're just humoring him until one of us can talk to his driver.

VIVICA

Yeah.

They walk in silence for a moment.

FRANKIE (V.O.)

She hears high pitched whines in the back of her head and takes in strays. He's wandering around in Harlem fixing to stalk darkly into the hood or whatever. I follow her around like a ridiculous puppy dog trying to catch a hint I might be able to make a move and not get crushed by a rejection. You tell me who's the crazy one.

FRANKIE

This is more of the great weirdness, isn't it?

VIVICA

I think it is, yeah.

FRANKIE

I'm not sure any of it is connected, Viv.

VIVICA

I know. But right now, it feels like... you know in the movies when a schizophrenic guy is in the basement putting together the strings with the push-pins and the newspaper articles?

FRANKIE

Uh-huh.

VIVICA

It's like I have that going on in my head but it's not about the pushpins and the papers, it's about the strings. You know?

FRANKIE

Not even a little bit.

VIVICA

The whining hum in the back of my head. When I listen to it a whole webwork of strings comes closer and closer toward some kind of alignment or - symmetry and the tone gets clearer sometimes, almost layered harmonics instead of—I don't know all the words for this. The pitch changes to suggest... rightness?

FRANKIE

You're not making me less worried about you.

VIVICA

This old guy might be crazy and he might be in trouble and he might need our help. *He* believes everything he said to us. Plus there's a noise in my head telling me to stick with him. Also a huge part of me wants an adventure while school's on break. So, I'm going to sit with this guy. I'm playing the games and letting him talk until I find out what his deal is because, yes, because of the Great Weirdness. And because I want to make sure he's okay. You in or out?

FRANKIE

I have to be with you.

VIVICA

You get that I can take care of myself, right?

FRANKIE

I don't protect you because you
need me to, I protect you because I
don't know how not to.

He bumps her with his hip. She bumps him with her shoulder.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. THE MANHATTAN DINER -- NIGHT

Frankie sucks chocolate milkshake through a paper straw.

Vivica leans over her plate and takes a grease-dripping bite
of a cheeseburger. Thick braids that start at the front of
her scalp make whole head seem sculpted of dark, knotty wood.

MERLYN

I anticipated a great deal more
resistance.

FRANKIE

You're not arresting us. You're
eating with us,

MERLYN

Still. I consider it a good sign.

VIVICA

And you offered to pay,

FRANKIE

Which will not be happening.

He signals the waitress for another milkshake.

VIVICA

I got a sense about you right away.

MERLYN

Right away before you tried to
sneak up on me or right away when I
busted you?

FRANKIE

I had questions about your coat.

Silence hangs for a moment.

FRANKIE (V.O.)

You see that? How she thinks about
what she's gonna say?

(MORE)

FRANKIE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

She's decided to tell him about the Great Weirdness, right there, but she wants to do it without freaking him out. She's choosing her words. I love watching her choose her words.

VIVICA

Things have been weird. And once, a psychic lady told me that one day, just when I thought things couldn't get any weirder, a man would stalk darkly into the pre-dawn moments of my adventure.

FRANKIE

Shit. I forgot about her. Okay. I missed that entirely.

MERLYN

Things couldn't get any weirder?

FRANKIE

She's been calling it The Great Weirdness.

VIVICA

You have no idea. Did you ever have a couple weeks when suddenly everything is... traction and momentum?

Merlyn nods, but she does not go on.

MERLYN

Can you give me anything more specific?

VIVICA

Okay. So it starts - and I know this sounds like nothing - I'm in a Taekwondo class, right? There's a kick I'm trying to get my body to do. The blackbelts, a lot of them, make this thing look easy, just . . . effortless.

MERLYN

You understand they put in years of work, banked the effort in repetition and improvement to make it look that effortless, each flowing movement the result of -

VIVICA

Okay. You're mansplaining martial arts to me right now and it makes me want to punch you in the throat.

MERLYN

Actually, I was mansplaining magic but there will be other opportunities. Do go on, with my apologies.

Frankie watches Vivica blink.

FRANKIE (V.O.)

See the blink? She's reviewing what he just said to figure what *she* thought was about the martial arts and *he* thought was about magic.

VIVICA

You've studied some martial arts.

MERLYN

A little bit.

VIVICA

Okay. There's a kick called a five-forty. It's a jumping back spin kick —

MERLYN

Flying Dragon Whips Its Tail.

VIVICA

What?

MERLYN

Different style. Same technique. You were trying to learn the kick.

VIVICA

Yeah. And one of the kids—these kids in the class, fifteen, sixteen years old. It's like they can fly, you know? And one of 'em steps up for his kick and I see—sort of see—I can sort of imagine the energy balling at his center and in the muscles of his shoulders and his ass as he starts the step forward. I can follow the lines of energy and I get it.

(MORE)

VIVICA (CONT'D)

When it's my turn again, I'm not straining to figure out how to jump and spin and kick and land. I just let the energy flow, twisting up from floor to the core through the knee, to the turning bull whip of the extended leg and - wow. Yeah. Flying Dragon Whips Its Tail.

FRANKIE

Wait! You said 'Merlin,' right? Are you named after the Wizard guy?

Merlyn chuckles

MERLYN

I am not. And I spell it with a 'Y'

FRANKIE

How d'you know how I was spelling it?

MERLYN

Sounds different.

Vivica eyes him for a long time.

FRANKIE (V.O.)

See that? She's thinking of saying, 'You think you're him, don't you?' He's giving her the opportunity to dig into that or keep telling the story. You can see that, right? Not everyone can, it turns out.

VIVICA

It went on through class. I'm watching the advanced forms, the ones I haven't learned yet I can see this . . . stuff.

MERLYN

Chi.

VIVICA

You can't see, chi.

MERLYN

Or smell steel.

Merlyn grins.

She thinks it through.

FRANKIE (V.O.)

Look at her thinking it through. I could spend hours watching her think things through. She's blazing through law school. Sometimes I watch her do her homework. A lot of times.

VIVICA

Okay. I was suddenly seeing chi. But also, as I saw it, I was— my own chi was learning, or— I don't know. But I was picking up forms really fast. My sparring changed because—

FRANKIE

Nobody can beat her sparring now. None of the black belts. None of the younger guys. Nobody.

MERLYN

Is that right?

She nods.

VIVICA

Yeah. But there's more. More Weirdness. It seemed like I fixed a television by touching it. A bunch of pigeons followed me for two and a half blocks and when I asked them what they wanted they stopped and pretended they hadn't been following me.

FRANKIE

That's true. I saw that. It was fucking weird.

MERLYN

This is very exciting to hear. I expected to have to convince a skeptic of the improbable. Anything else?

VIVICA

There was gum stuck to my shoe and I got most of it off but there was still a little bit of stickiness when I walked and then it suddenly went away—

MERLYN

I don't think that's exactly-

VIVICA

-because a hundred-dollar bill
stuck to it.

MERLYN

That might be something.

FRANKIE

The pizza.

VIVICA

Right! I said I wanted pizza and a
guy shows up at my door. Says he
can't go outside to make the
delivery 'cause there was a spider
or something. He thought it was
after the pie. It was insane. He
wanted to just give me the pizza to
get it off his hands.

MERLYN

You didn't let him?

VIVICA

I gave him the hundred-dollar bill.

FRANKIE

For a pizza!

VIVICA

For a *free* pizza,

Merlyn chuckles.

VIVICA (CONT'D)

Subway shows up as I hit the
platform. Last of the grocery line
finishes up as I reach the counter
to set down my stuff. Money shows
up-

FRANKIE

The ATM!

VIVICA

Right! There was an ATM that threw
money at me.

MERLYN

How much?

VIVICA

I don't know. All of it. Until it was finished. I didn't count it. I was right there at the bank, so I just collected it and took it inside and told them what had happened.

Merlyn nods. He turns to Frankie

MERLYN

You were there.

FRANKIE

Oh, yeah.

MERLYN

And that didn't bother you. Collecting the money and giving it back?

FRANKIE

What else were we gonna do?

MERLYN

Sure. But the hundred dollars for the pizza?

FRANKIE

Oh, that didn't bother me either. I understood it. It just wasn't how I would've done it.

MERLYN

But you understood it.

FRANKIE

Oh, yeah. I understood why she was doing it. I watched her. You know you can do that, right?

MERLYN

What?

FRANKIE

I think most people don't notice it or—they pretend not to notice it 'cause . . .

MERLYN

'cause what, Frankie?

FRANKIE

Say I know Vivica wants me to bring
her peanut butter and chocolate
Haagen Daz -

VIVICA

One time. One time this happened.

FRANKIE

-I have a couple of options. I can
not do a thing knowing that it
would make a person near me happy,
or I can do the thing even though
it means going downstairs and then
coming back upstairs and maybe
having to talk to the guy at the
bodega with the weird twitch that
makes me uncomfortable. But *not*
doing the thing means pretending
not to know that she wanted it.
Right? So, most people start by
pretending not to know. Then, after
a few minutes, when the person asks
for what they want, suddenly there
are reasons not to do it that you
didn't even realize you were making
up in your head to justify not
having gone in the first place.
Then they feel like they were
imposing, and everybody feels
lousy.

VIVICA

Plus, no ice cream,

FRANKIE

Plus, no ice cream. And people do
this all the time. Right? I know I
used to.

MERLYN

You stopped,

FRANKIE

Yeah. A while ago. Once I saw it,
once I realized it, I felt like I
was lying all the time. To
everyone. And like everyone else
was lying all the time, too. But I
couldn't explain it to them.

MERLYN

So, what'd you do?

VIVICA

He stopped going out.

FRANKIE

Except at night.

VIVICA

Except at night. When there are fewer people around to deal with.

MERLYN

You get that this is *part* of your Great Weirdness, yeah? Frankie, you have discovered a powerful talent. When those with great talents recognize them as universally accessible, the talent becomes teachable as craft. When the student is ready, a teacher will appear.

FRANKIE

You think you're my teacher?

MERLYN

I think you are a teacher who has appeared, and you must be ready when a student arrives. Your talent isn't one we have schools for. You figure things out by intuition and instinct. I can't instruct you, but I can offer you reassurance. Many people have the talent to sense the intentions of others, the desires. Some attune only to certain emotional frequencies. Hostility, anger and so on. Others just the connective ones - love, affection. Some can intuit general ideas or detailed thoughts of others and, indeed, of those people some are conscious of their ability and choose to hide it or ignore it. This is a layer of thought that Freud called the sub-conscious, the layer the Druids called - well - it would translate to 'under-thoughts first tier.' Chekhov would think of it as subtext.

(MORE)

MERLYN (CONT'D)

Of the people who have recognized such layers of thought, very few indeed have taken the time to examine them, accepted them as a valid and trustworthy form of communication and -- this is a big thing, Sir Frank -- *none* before has spoken of an ethical obligation to respond to intuited dialogue. This idea you present brings to light an entire realm of ethical consideration and philosophical inquiry previously unobserved: what moral action are we obligated to take based on that which we know to be true despite a complete lack of physical evidence?

VIVICA

Isn't that just faith?

MERLYN

Faith is an insistent belief in the unprovable *despite* all evidence. I'm talking about knowledge intuited. Or instinctively inferred from an eyebrow's lift and the slight movement of an index finger. Or the movement of a person's Chi, invisible to those who have not attuned to it. We know what we know. We know what we see. We sometimes know a truth. Does *knowing* make it imperative that we act? Must a fact become apparent to others to be acted upon?

FRANKIE

I can't be smart enough to light up a new ethical condensation.

VIVICA

Those are just big words for an idea you had that nobody else has had before.

MERLYN

(sharply)

Not 'just big words.' I do not belittle the courage, the kindness, the openness that lie at the heart of your magic, young woman.

(MORE)

MERLYN (CONT'D)

I do not belittle the value or the potential of the magic for which your friend holds a remarkable talent. Please show me the same courtesy. Words live among the most ancient magics and represent one of my most trusted and powerful tools. I choose them carefully most of the time, and when I don't, I've had enough practice to get them right much of the time anyway.

Merlyn turns to the large man, and points a French fry at him, its tip dripping ketchup.

MERLYN (CONT'D)

You just said you see the lies under the surface, the tier one under-thoughts, but sometimes we don't notice them in ourselves. You pretend to be stupid, but you remember exactly what I said. So, let's set aside the 'light up a new ethical condensation,' bullshit. You know what I said and now I must insist that you say it aloud before I explain to you how the three of us are going to save the world.

Frankie stares at Vivica, eyes wide. He looks to Merlyn.

FRANKIE (V.O.)

She doesn't get it. She doesn't see the size of the lie he's caught me in. I didn't know it was a lie until he said it. I don't understand why it's taking me so long to say the words. I notice that I'm gripping the tabletop like its life is at stake.

Merlyn waits, pale hands open, upward on the tabletop.

Tears roll down the young man's dark cheeks. He gasps once. Then again, almost as if he has been weeping, wailing, though he has not.

FRANKIE

The idea I presented brought to light an entire realm of ethical consideration and philosophical inquiry previously unobserved.

MERLYN

There you go. See, the reason I said this was so that you might see the intellectual value of the thoughts you had. They weren't 'just big words.' They were the words that gave you and your idea the proper respect.

FRANKIE

Why was that so hard?

HE wipes his eyes with a sleeve,

MERLYN

It was hard because you had to admit to one of your own lies, so habitual, so reflexive that you were unaware of it until this moment. Soon you'll figure out why you developed the habit and will begin training yourself out of it. It will be good. It will be growth. So, here's the simple rule to follow, 'Never play stupider than you really are. Your own stupidity will always be enough to do the job.'

FRANKIE

Wisdom from some ancient soothsayer?

MERLYN

A San Francisco comic, Will Durst. Hold on. Scrunch down so you're entirely in front of the seat back.

Frankie follows the instructions without comment. He sinks deep into the booth and into thought.

Merlyn pulls out his phone and takes a photo of him against the monochrome background of the booth bench.

MERLYN (CONT'D)

You next.

He checks the photo he's taken as he turns toward the woman.

VIVICA

What's this about now, Wizard?

He grins at her.

MERLYN

I assume you two don't have
passports.

VIVICA

We both have passports, Applied the
day Trump won the primary. Now
what's this about saving the world?

Merlyn's eyebrows twitch.

FRANKIE (V.O.)

You see that? He's been waiting a
long time to tell this story.

TAROT CARD FLIP



INT. THE DINER - CONTINUOUS

The three sit around the table. Merlyn leans in to begin his story. He does not begin.

MERLYN (V.O.)

The moment is here. The hero sits before me. She and her knight are ready to hear the story. Now I do the job I do best, the job I was born for.

He breathes slowly, stirs his tea, lifts out the teabag by its string, captures it in his spoon, uses the string to squeeze liquid into the cup.

MERLYN (V.O.)

Before one becomes Taliesin, before one becomes a Druid, or even an Ovate, one begins as a Bard, working with the earliest magics. Story-telling. Story, rhyme and music. The very first ways we discovered to transmit an idea from one mind to another, the very first skills I learned as a young man. I needed to pace myself, to use my skills. I did not want to fuck this up.

He takes a careful sip and begins.

MERLYN

When I began my second great adventure, I was merely a Bard studying to be a Druid. I was within a moon of testing for the staff when my friend Uther's baby needed tending.

FLASHBACK -EXT. THE PENDRAGON CASTLE - DAY - M.O.S.

The Castle stands, blocky and boring in the BG, banners and pennants blow against a gloomy sky.

A guilty, bearded Uther, father of Arthur, King of a little bit of what is now England, hands a bundled infant to a befuddled Merlyn who looks virtually the same as he does today.

MERLYN (VO - TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)

So, I took the kid to Ector and dropped him off to be raised along with Ector's kid Kay and went off to take the big Druid test.

EXT, A SMALL MEDIEVAL MANOR HOUSE - DAY

Merlyn hands the bundled baby off to a local noble named ECTOR, who hands him off to his young son, KAY.

EXT. DRUID TESTING GROUNDS

In a wide, bright, unkempt clearing, Merlyn and four other Druid candidates stand before a gathering of men and women who sit on rocks, on log-benches. Some sit on the ground, legs folded. Others stand straight, or lean on simple, carved staves.

MERLYN

Dawn of day one, Simon leads a breath anchoring exercise at the start of the day. This is his thing. He's been working at this as an area of expertise on his way to the staff.

FRANKIE (VO)

Breath anchoring?

INT. THE DINER - NIGHT

MERLYN

Very powerful. You want to learn?

FRANKIE

Very yes.

MERLYN

Good! Not now.

FRANKIE

No. Not now.

Merlyn nods and smiles warmly.

MERLYN (V.O.)

I had him. I might not have access to much ambient magic anymore but I could still work the basics. We had a commitment to the future, a plan for a 'not now' during which he might take instruction.

FLASHBACK (SOUNDLESS UNDER V.O.)

EXT. ANCIENT DRUID TESTING GROUND - DAY

Merlyn and two other Ovates sit cross legged, eyes closed. SIMON, of whom he speaks, guides them through a meditation. An audience of Druids, male and female, also close their eyes to participate.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY)

As I attune to the bright emptiness of my own inner landscape, my conscience tells me what I must do.

Merlyn, in the past, sits cross-legged on the ground, eyes closed. His brow furrows. His cheeks twitch. Then... his face goes still.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)

I had to take care of the kid.

INT. THE DINER - NIGHT

Merlyn reaches across the table and Vivica and Frankie reach out to take his hands. They listen, rapt.

MERLYN (V.O.)

I'm getting it right. I have them with me. They're deep in my rhythms and I'm generating enough magic to keep them rapt in the spell. I... indulge.

HIS VOICE DEEPENS, and somehow takes on just a little bit of reverb. His throat relaxes and his chest opens to resonate with his lowest registers.

MERLYN

As soon as I have been raised to the staff, I return to live near to Ector. I spend time with young Arthur, teaching him the old ways of the wood.

FLASHBACK

PRE-ARTHURIAN ENGLAND

Merlyn and YOUNG ARTHUR walk through woods, talking, chatting.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)

I teach him to read the Druid markings...

Merlyn shows Young Arthur a spiral carved into a boulder.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)

To read the leaf strung poems in my own forest library.

In a forest, strands of wool run between trees, each threaded through hundreds of different leaves. YOUNG ARTHUR moves slowly from one leaf to the next, sounding out, checking with Merlyn as he goes. Merlyn moves with him, supportively.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)

This was still Uther's reign. The Romans were around all the time, pressuring him to accept their monotheist militarily expanding governance.

ROMAN SOLDIERS in formation move through A TOWN.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)

Their priests were... problematic.

A ROMAN PRIEST talks to a group of children, stern and scary. YOUNG ARTHUR stands among them, confident even as a child.

Merlyn watches, concerned.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)

I taught him the tools of thought, the use of words to influence, the tenets of the Magics Linguistic.

Merlyn and Arthur sit beneath one of two HUGE SPREADING TREES (GOG and MAGOG) in a GLADE surrounded by THE FOREST ARDEN, a pleasantly spaced, unthreatening wood that goes deep but never seems to become dense.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)
The Laws of Honor as expressed
through the Rhymes, some of the
Histories.

They move through the FOREST ARDEN, the vast wood that surrounds THE GLADE with the two enormous trees.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)
I teach him the secrets of the
Forest Arden, tell him the story of
the great, gardened forest, old
beyond remembering.

ARTHUR, in his teens now, listens to Merlyn with adoration and awe as they move between well-spaced alder. Now between well spaced birch. Now between well spaced oak.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)
Tended by generations of humans and
our allies, the forest had grown
hundreds of ranks deep. And I
taught Arthur how, just by thinking
it, he might see the whole thing
through the eyes of a bird, from
far above...

FROM FAR ABOVE the trees spread out in organized consecutive circles, ranks of related trees, each rank spaced to its species' preference.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)
Each rank raised from saplings in
twelve staggered rows, each row
raised to maturity by a generation
of people, the growing, reaching,
beautiful home of the Greenmen and
the Druids told a generational
story. One might count the rings of
the wood to know the age of our
civilization.

ON THE GROUND - AT THE GLADE

Merlyn and ARTHUR, now a King emerge from the Forest. They walk together as friends, as colleagues. Merlyn still appears almost the precise age he does in our time.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)
 I gave him fruit from the Tree of
 Life...

Merlyn hands Arthur a big fig-looking thing and Arthur scrapes the meat of the fruit from a hard center pit with his teeth. He examines the pit of the fruit, turning it between his fingertips as he chews. His eyes widen as he takes in something profound.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)
 And I gave him fruit from the Tree
 of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

At the other tree, Arthur tastes a big Korean Pear looking fruit and again, it affects him deeply although it might not taste good at first.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)
 I believed that he might serve as
 the bridge between the Romans who
 came with their theocratic
 barbarism and the Civilized World.

Romans sack a village. They slaughter people. One of their priests watches approvingly.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)
 He could introduce these lunatics
 to the truths of the natural
 universe, help them to understand.
 We could welcome them, educate
 them. I had a plan to save the
 world.

Merlyn and Arthur together ride toward CAMELOT (in the distance, a stone and spires castle-city) an array of knights about them, behind.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)
 He put together a brotherhood of
 beloved companions. He built the
 table. That was his.

THE ROUND TABLE. OAK. Smooth sanded, simple. Seats 16 comfortably.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)
 The lasting symbol that was good
 and right? That was his. Mine, the
 one that I thought would solve all
 the problems? That one was so, so
 wrong.

IN THE DINER - CONTINUOUS

FRANKIE
Are you okay, Mr. Taliesin?

MERLYN
What?

Anger flashes in his eyes startling Frankie.

MERLYN (V.O.)
I don't like being interrupted.
More, though, I was so deep in the
spell. I owned them, the listeners,
the audience.

The waitress and the guy at the counter glance at one another, concerned at the outburst, the story broken.

MERLYN (V.O.)
He shouldn't have been *able* to
interrupt me. I was deep in the
weave. It should have been
impossible.

MERLYN
Yeah. I'm fine. Why?

FRANKIE
There was so much sorrow there. So
much regret.

MERLYN
Where?

VIVICA
When?

FRANKIE
Your lasting symbol to solve all
the problems.

VIVICA AND MERLYN
Excalibur.

MERLYN
Yes. Sorrow and regret. Let's get
to this.

FLASHBACK -

AT AN ANVIL Merlyn watches a blacksmith work a glowing shaft into a blade with a heavy hammer.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)
 Now, I know it is very fashionable
 to hold people accountable for past
 mistakes, that 'a product of one's
 time' just doesn't cut it right
 now.

He wraps the heavy blade in a rough-woven blanket

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)
 But I swear to you, I knew no
 better. I saw this boy that I
 loved, in vague visions, becoming a
 powerful force for unification.

WITH THE BLADE wrapped in a blanket, he travels by horseback.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)
 I utilized every skill I had in all
 the Magics. I wrapped it lovingly
 in fire magics and air magics.

AT NIGHT, He mutters over the UNADORNED BLADE and flame from
 his campfire moves through the cup of his hands. He holds it,
 shapes it so that it dances in his palms. Then he pours it,
 still focused and muttering. It spills, down the blade like
 wax or bright ink leaving symbols etched into the metal.

IN A HUT - DAY

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)
 I travelled to have the magics of
 distant lands included in its
 construction.

A SHAMAN in strange headdress ignites a string of beads with
 a twig lit from a candle, sending a bright flame up the
 length of the blade, each bead sparking smoky and bright.

IN A BRIGHT, CANOPIED SPACE, AN OLD, OLD WOMAN uses a tool to
 carve sigils into the flat of the blade, parallel to the dark
 markings, never obscuring them.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)
 I called in experts for the
 elemental infusions, the sigil
 engravings. I traveled to find the
 right techniques and the right
 technicians to build every part
 from pommel to point.

EXT - A MEDIEVAL EUROPEAN WILDERNESS.

Merlyn walks alone, holding the blade before him, exposed but protected from the oils of his hands by the blanket he sometimes wraps it in.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)
 Through all of it, I drew from the world around me, filtering all the power I could channel into this single construct.

As he walks, he mutters. Inner fires dance about the blade. A billion dust motes kissed by sunlight swarm from the wild fields and gather in the sigil-marked, darkly etched blade.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)
 It was forged of iron and carbon from a secret recipe so new it had not yet been named, but also it was built of magics I pulled through my core and pushed through the lens of focused intent.

Beneath an impossibly clear, bright NIGHT sky, the kind not seen since the industrial revolution, Merlyn draws starlight sthrough him into the unguarded blade.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)
 I micromanaged the experts like an arrogant Prince laying down his first album. Coreil, hot-sluiced a golden alloy into the etchings.

IN A BLACKSMITH'S FORGE -

Coreil the forger pours glowing metal to fill the etchings. Merlyn moves along with the alloy, his fingers wagging.

Fire magics from the forge rush to him, engage the weavings of his fingers then pour themselves into the sword's markings.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)
 Garwin stamped the signet seals into the pommel.

AT THE ANVIL

GARWIN drops the hammer on a ball of molten metal thrice, until it is a flat, thick coin. He places a stamp carefully on the metal disk, lifts the hammer and...

Merlyn pulls energy in through the windows, from the fire, so that the flame. He condenses all that magic, balls it into a tight, seething weave and hurls it as...

The HAMMER drops onto the stamp and...

All that magic swirls into the construct, absorbed as the stamp lifts away.

Garwin flips the disk and Merlyn, drenched in sweat, begins again accumulating energy from every source around.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)
 I pleaded with gods and elementals,
 telling them of the dangers of a
 world fragmented by conflicting
 beliefs.

ON A CLIFF, blade and pommel laid on the ground before him, Merlyn shouts into a powerful wind, lashed by rain. He pleads, though he never kneels. LIGHTNING traces the blade and dances about the pommel.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)
 I had a plan to bring Mortal and
 Magic worlds together. They *rushed*
 to join this endeavor, to build a
 unified future under a single
 symbol of humanity's power to
 determine its own destiny.

A HUGE WHITE DRAGON stands on its coiled tail, supported a bit by the beat of its wings and dives into Merlyn'S OPEN HANDS allowing itself to be channeled into...

THE HILT - Eel skin wraps the hidden center of the hilt, held in place with silk thread so strong and so tight that the eel skin takes on a sensual texture, visibly constrained by the strands.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)
 For the boy I loved, the boy I
 swore to protect, I created a
 weapon so powerful it haunts our
 legends to this day.

THE SWORD emerges from THE LAKE **in flashes**. Then NIMUE, up from the water, sword held aloft, majestic and sexy, pommel dripping as the polished blade with the gold-inlay sheds the last of its fluid.

Her nipples hidden only by what appears to be a suede scarf, the supple scabbard, Nimue stands at the shore and speaks to Arthur. He listens carefully.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)

I did this to allow him to better achieve his destiny. I did not realize I had bound leadership to weaponry, unity to war and dominance.

ON A HIGH HILL - ARTHUR on Horseback holds aloft the sword. A shit-ton of knights and serfs stand behind him, at his command.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY) (CONT'D)

I was arrogant and foolish and young and so, so certain. But I contend, by taking on the Quest, by making right this one mistake of mine, we might save the world. And if I do not at least try, then I am an ass.

PRESENT - DINER - NEAR DAWN

Frankie signals for the waiter to bring the check.

Merlyn chuckles.

MERLYN (CONT'D)

I can cover the check.

Frankie shakes his head.

FRANKIE

I don't really care what you can do. Vivica and I cover our own. I'm happy to cover yours as well.

He pulls out an ATM card and puts it on the table.

Merlyn pulls out his wallet, now grinning warmly.

MERLYN

How about this? You pay the tab for all of us on that card, and I'll cover the tip.

Frankie studies his face.

MERLYN (V.O.)

He's looking for the lie, for the ulterior motive. His talent is extraordinary and he's already learned to trust it.

FRANKIE

Fine. Okay.

The waitress passes

MERLYN

Excuse me, Shelley?

SHELLEY

What do you need, hon?

Merlyn pulls a few bills from his wallet and hands them to her with the card.

MERLYN

That's for you, and please put the entire table on this young man's card.

(BEAT)

How much for the guy at the counter and the couple in the back booth?

She starts doing fast math in her head.

MERLYN (CONT'D)

You know what? Here.

He pulls out significantly more cash from the wallet which hadn't seemed particularly bulky to start with. He hands the stack of bills, all hundreds, to the waitress who accepts them, a bit stunned.

MERLYN (CONT'D)

I'm fresh out of the mental institution and I'm feeling good. Cover their tabs and whatever's left is yours. Or - if you split tips with the cooks and busboys or whatever, that too. That's enough. Yeah?

Frankie and Vivica exchange quick looks. Merlyn clocks it.

SHELLEY

Uh. Yeah. Thank you. Way more. Yes. Are you sure about this?

MERLYN

Oh, yeah. But ours? That must go on the kid's card.

SHELLEY

Okay.

She turns for the cash register counting hundred dollar bills.

MERLYN

Don't tell the other customers 'til we're gone, if that's all right?

SHELLEY

Sure. I'll be back in a minute with a slip for you to sign...

(she looks at the card)

Franklin.

FRANKIE

Frankie.

The waitress heads to the cash register.

Frankie watches her go.

FRANKIE (CONT'D)

You think we're going to go on this grand adventure with you.

MERLYN

I think you are, yes.

Frankie watches the waitress as she runs the counterfeit-testing pen over the bills.

FRANKIE

What do we think, Viv?

VIVICA

I think this man believes we're going to find Excalibur.

The waitress folds each tested bill into her apron approvingly, amazed, delighted.

MERLYN

Oh, we are going to find Excalibur. And then we are going to destroy it.

Vivica and Frankie take this information in.

MERLYN (V.O.)

These kids are part of my Questing Party.

Shelley brings Frankie the check to sign. He does so.

MERLYN (V.O.)
Their Great Weirdness is clearly
part of something bigger than my
imagination.

Merlyn holds the door as Vivica moves through it followed by
Frankie and...

OUTSIDE -- CONTINUOUS

The Bentley pulls up and stops.

Sophia comes around quickly to open the door for Vivica who
moves past her into the rear cabin, then Frankie.

MERLYN (V.O.)
I will repair my greatest mistake.
They will be a part of it, this
young hero and her knight.

Sophia and Merlyn wrap in close for a small moment of
intimacy before he slides into the cabin with the younger
folk.

MERLYN (VO-TELLING THE STORY)
Unless, of course the woman I most
love and trust in the world is
right and I am completely
delusional.

She circles the Bentley and it pulls into the soft start of
dawn.

ON THAT THOUGHT...

FADE OUT