“Oi!” Merlin shouts. “People are trying to study in here. Piss off somewhere else!”

“What did you say, spellbegger?” he calls back, tone arrogant and haughty like just about every other Knight on Campus. “Come down here and say that to my face.”

Or the Sky High AU where Knights and Magic Users attend University to learn how to fight evil magic and Merlin and Arthur do not get along. Until they do.

Notes

Chapter title is from the song **Evil Twin** by Krrum it's great give it a listen!

I have no idea how this happened. I was rewatching Sky High months ago and I thought wow, what if this was a merthur fic but instead it was Knights and Magic Users rather than Heroes and Sidekicks? And then this kind of fusion fic was born. Might have a few blink-
and-you-miss-them similarities to the movie but I basically just took this concept and ran with it.

Here's the result! Also, I'm not British so if there are any glaringly obvious mistakes in the language don't be afraid to point them out. This is my first ever merthur fic (finally) so let me know what you think!
Merlin’s first day at University goes about as well as expected.

Besides the fact that he’s attending Camelot University to practice magic and further hone his skills in a place that values physical strength over mental or magical ability.

He hugs his mother goodbye, takes one last look at their little B&B, the farm and the town of Ealdor before he walks down to the station. Merlin catches the tube into Kensington with only a rucksack full of clothes in hand and the prospect of a new adventure.

Gaius, the Magic Professor he’ll be living with can’t meet him at the station because he’s busy preparing for the new term. He’s been a lifelong friend of Hunith’s, and a close personal friend of Merlin’s late father before he died.

His mother had been so proud when Merlin earned a scholarship but they’d worried about the expenses of living on Campus for some time afterward. Camelot University doesn’t come cheap. And Merlin can’t travel four hours from Ealdor every day just to attend his classes.

They’d been at a loss at what to do before Gaius heard of Merlin’s enrolment and contacted Hunith to offer up his spare room.

His flat is only a ten-minute walk away from the University and Merlin couldn’t have found a better place to live whilst he’s studying magic if he’d tried. Everything just seemed to fall into place after that. Instead of paying board, Gaius only asked that he clean up around the flat and pull his own weight with chores. Merlin doesn’t even have to buy food.

But he’s happy to help out in any way he can, though he’s a pretty messy flatmate on his own, as his mother always likes to remind him. He’ll need to make more of an effort to clean in Gaius’ flat.

He follows the address Gaius wrote to his mother and ends up at a nice-looking set of flats just beyond the main road. He needs to be buzzed in to get into the complex and since Gaius isn’t home he uses magic to convince the gate that he has a key so it unlocks to let him slip inside.

Gaius lives on the ground floor, unit C and he’s left the key under the mat for Merlin to let himself through the door.

The flat is small but cosy and he sets his rucksack down on the kitchen table and has a good look around the place. Gaius has changed the sheets in the second bedroom for his arrival and Merlin stares about the empty room for a few minutes before fetching his rucksack and unpacking all of his clothes.

Once he’s finished, he sets out to the kitchen and makes himself a cup of tea. Will, Merlin’s best friend, was sorry to see him leave Ealdor but he’s never had any interest in University, nor the types of skills that would get him accepted to Camelot.

Still, even now Merlin misses him. Will insisted he’ll visit though, and they’ve agreed to ring each other whenever they can. Merlin knows that Will’s got his hands full with his job at the steel factory so he’s not expecting much.

He’s also expecting that there will be a bit of culture shock at first, moving from such a small urban
area and into town but Merlin’s more or less prepared for it. At least, he’s determined to be.

He’s grown up on a small little farm that doubles as a bed and breakfast and Merlin’s only been to the city a couple of times with Will to get completely arseholed. So he doesn’t really remember much of it.

Once he’s drank his tea and set it down in the sink, he locks up Gaius’ flat behind him and heads on down to Camelot to familiarise himself with the Campus. Merlin still needs to get his student ID all sorted out. He’s already ordered most of his textbooks online, but there’s a book that he can only buy at Camelot’s Campus bookstore, so he needs to visit there as well.

It’s windy today but not raining yet so Merlin hunches over against the chill and walks quickly, hoping for the best. Knowing his luck, it’ll be pissing down soon enough. He finds a map once he’s on Campus and looks up the best way to get toward the student centre. He gets lost about halfway there.

The Campus is huge. But thankfully not empty. He spots a woman carrying a handful of books with a sword strapped at her waist and decides it’s safe to approach her with questions.

“Er, hello,” he says, sticking out his hand to shake. “I’m Merlin Emrys. I was wondering if you knew where the student centre is?”

The girl smiles, bright and sweet.

“Oh that’s just down there, right next to that red building you see? You’d be blind to miss it.” Her expression twists a little. “Not that I mean that you’re blind or that I’m insulting people who have that disability, I mean. Er- hello, I’m Gwen Smith.”

Merlin smiles at her. “Thanks, thanks so much. That’s really kind of you. That’s a nice sword- uh, very swordy.”

Gwen glances at the weapon at her hip. “Oh, thank you. My dad’s a blacksmith. He likes to forge swords that are impervious to magic.”

Impervious to magic? Merlin tries not to frown. He didn’t actually think that was possible. Isn’t that why graduates have such problems stopping evil Magic Users? Because their weapons aren’t impervious?

“You’re a fresher too aren’t you?” she guesses. “So am I, but I’ve arrived a few weeks earlier to get to know the Campus a little. I’m excited for Character Placement too.”

Merlin really has no idea what she’s talking about. “Character Placement?”

“You know when they place you into your department,” Gwen explains. “A Knight or a Magic User.”

He should have read the Camelot handbook more closely.

“Oh, what is it? Some kind of test?”

“Yes I should think so,” she says. “I’ll be a Knight, I haven’t got a drop of magic in me but I’m not too excited about joining their department either.”

Merlin’s openly frowning now. “Why’s that?”
Gwen glances around them but there’s nobody else around to listen in. The Campus is all but empty at the moment. “Well I’ve heard that they’re horrible bullies and that they don’t treat Magic Users very well. They’re quite sexist too.”

“I guess I have that to look forward to then,” Merlin supposes gloomily. “I’m a Magic User. I’m here on scholarship.”

Gwen’s smile widens at that. “Oh well good then. My brother, Elyan, is a second year Magic User. You’ll have to promise that we stick together, us ordinary folk. I mean, not to say that you’re ordinary, just that you seem very nice and I’m quite worried there’s a shortage of us on Campus.”

“Maybe it’s rumour though,” Merlin suggests hopefully. “Maybe it’s not as awful as they say.” He’d rather think that then assuming they're doomed to have a horrible year. Gwen doesn’t seem so convinced and it’s hard not to agree with her. “I’ve just finished up collecting my books, did you want to head down to Camelot pub and grab a pint?”

Merlin shrugs. “I’ve got to get my ID sorted and buy a book from Camelot’s bookstore but it shouldn’t take too long, if you don’t mind waiting. You can make sure I don’t get lost on the way.”

She nods and stows the pile of books into the bag slung across her waist, adjusting her sword. “Sounds like a plan to me.”

And that’s how Merlin makes a new friend on his first day visiting Camelot while he sits in for his photo. The young man at the student centre prints out his University ID next but he's much less enthusiastic than Merlin feels.

Gwen waits in the corner and holds her hand out for it once he’s finished.

“Oh you look very handsome,” she says kindly before handing his ID back.

He grins. “What’s yours look like?”

Gwen rummages through her bag as she leads them towards the bookstore, searching for her wallet. She hands over her ID a moment later.

Merlin peers at it with interest. Her curls are neat and pulled back and she looks very pretty. “You look wonderful.”

She places it back into her wallet with a pleased smile. The bookstore is fairly busy but Merlin manages to locate the textbook that he needs. It’s worth seventy pounds and Merlin winces when he hands over the right amount for it. The plastic bag feels heavy when they head on over to the pub, even if Merlin’s wallet is much lighter.

Gwen’s sympathetically explaining how much money her text books cost as they walk and Merlin feels a little better. When they reach Camelot pub and try to pass through the front door the bouncer waves a hand out to stop them.

“No swords in the pub or other weapons of any kind.”

“Oh,” Gwen says, flushing. “Right, sorry. I’ll just er-“

The man gestures at what looks like an armoury shed right outside the pub. “You can leave your weapons here.”
Gwen places her sword inside and after showing their licences they head on in and find a booth together.

“What do you drink?” she wonders. “My shout.”

Merlin tries to think of something but comes up empty. “Er- I don’t? Not usually. Alcohol affects my magic.”

“How bout a mocktail?”

“Great, thanks.”

Gwen returns a few minutes later with two bright pink drinks, raising an eyebrow in challenge as if she’s anticipating that Merlin will refuse. He grins instead and raises his glass, clinking it with hers.

“Cheers,” he says. “To a great first term.”

“Hear, hear,” she agrees, gulping down the drink.

Merlin is a lot more hesitant but it’s surprisingly sweet flavoured and he finds he really likes it.

“You know I hear that a Pendragon is starting this term,” she offers conspiratorially after a minute of calm silence.

That doesn’t sound good at all. “Guess we’re well and truly fucked if that’s not just a rumour,” he mutters, expression dimming at the prospect.

Uther Pendragon has been on Camelot University’s radar for some time now. He was the biggest known Knight to ever graduate and his partnership with his Magic User partner Ygraine, and later wife, is a story told with passion and awe.

Their success against evil Magic Users is what really encouraged universities to place more value on partnership programs from the separate departments that would nurture both magical and combative skills. Whilst also ensuring the public is still protected. But there was some kind of accident and Ygraine died. And then Uther took his children out of the spotlight and became a recluse.

That’s all changed now. Uther Pendragon, a powerful man with an entire wing named after him at Camelot, is vehemently trying to remove the magical program altogether. He’s been condemning it for years whenever he’s been in the public spotlight but it’s only recently that his disapproval has become more proactive.

Merlin has a feeling it has to do with the fact that his children are old enough now to attend the University themselves. And to learn to start fighting evil Magic Users. He knows that Uther’s prejudice stems from the manner in which Ygraine died, but that itself is as much of a mystery since her body was never discovered. No one has quite been able to move past her death. Or the circumstances in which it happened. Especially Uther.

It’s a rough time to be a Magic User on Campus.

As it has been ever since she died twenty years ago, shortly after giving birth to a son. Uther never married again, but he did have another child to a different woman. A daughter.

Merlin really hopes Gwen’s not right. Uther’s children have a tendency to make trouble, but his
heir is the worst of the two. The last thing anybody needs right now is Uther’s troublemaker of a son stirring up the place. Half the time he makes the Camelot headlines since Uther Pendragon didn’t stray too far from his alma mater once he’d graduated.

They live in the fancier part of town but their father has gone to extreme measures to protect their identities. No doubt to shield them from the many enemies Uther Pendragon has made over the years. So if they make the papers they’re mentioned in name only, pictures of Uther’s children haven’t been seen since they were very young.

There aren’t very many people who know what they actually look like. And Merlin would really rather not meet them at all if he can manage it.

They sit there for an hour, chatting about what they’re looking forward to learning until Merlin has to leave and meet Gaius. They exchange numbers and plan to find each other before Character Placement takes place for the new students at the start of next week during orientation.

He’s nervous about it. From what Gwen has told him, the test takes place in front of the entire new student body. He hopes he doesn’t make a right arse of himself.

But he’s glad that at least he’ll know one friendly face when the time comes.

Merlin gets back to the flat before Gaius does so he rummages through the cupboards and starts cooking dinner with whatever ingredients are available. He’s only just put the vegetable shepherd’s pie in the oven and started cleaning up the mess that he made preparing it when he hears the front door opening.

“Ah, Merlin is it?” the man says, setting his down his bag. “Hunith’s son.”

“Er, yeah, hello,” he says, sticking his hand out which Gaius shakes. “It’s nice to meet you.”

He's got a kind look about his eyes, with white hair that makes his age a little harder to guess. Gaius smiles at him and sniffs deeply. “Is that supper I smell?”

“Oh yeah,” Merlin says, remembering, as he hurries back to the oven to check its progress.

It’s looking good. His mother taught him how to make it after Merlin kept having magical accidents in the kitchen. Probably only needs five more minutes which is great because Merlin's bloody starving.

“It smells delicious.”

“Thanks,” Merlin says and starts setting out plates to serve it on.

Gaius takes a seat at the table and Merlin joins him a moment later. “You are prepared for your first term of Camelot University?”

“I suppose so.”

“I should warn you Merlin, that it will not be easy,” he says. “Magic Users have long since been treated with suspicion and hatred here since the passing of Ygraine Pendragon.”

He knows that already but Merlin desperately wants to learn magic and Camelot is still the best
institution to do that. Even if Magic Users here have an unearned bad reputation.

Maybe he can start to change that.

The oven timer goes off, signalling it’s ready and he stands up to fetch their dinner. The food is a success, and Gaius insists on washing the dishes afterwards since Merlin did all the cooking.

He calls his mother to let her know he arrived safely and also to describe the Campus to her, along with the new friend he already made. She’s ecstatic at the news but Merlin can tell she’s trying to hide her sadness that her only son is now living four hours away from home. It's certainly going to be an adjustment for both of them. Merlin vows to go back and visit her once he’s settled into the routine of things and isn’t too busy with uni work.

They talk for a long time before Merlin finally goes to bed, ready to start his first week at Camelot.

He’s nervous when Monday comes around. Since Placement will mean he has to show his magical aptitude. The problem with that is that he’s yet to have learnt any spells.

So far all of his magical ability is instinctual but Merlin is concerned that during the test he won’t be able to use it at all. He can already imagine how humiliating it would be to fail entirely, lose his scholarship and be sent back to Ealdor.

Merlin meets Gwen outside the amphitheatre as planned. It’s large enough to house the entire student faculty because it’s also where the tournaments for the Knights take place. Gwen mentioned that it’s a tradition for all of the University to sit in and watch. Merlin can't say it sounds all that appealing.

Once the time reaches nine o’clock precisely a wizened old man opens the doors with magic.

“I am Kilgharrah,” he booms. “I am Dean of Camelot University but I also instruct those willing to learn about Elemental Magic.”

“He’s a powerful warlock,” Merlin whispers, pleased to know something about Camelot that Gwen doesn’t. “He can shapeshift too. They call him The Great Dragon.”

Gwen’s eyes widen. “Is that what he transforms into? Bloody hell.”

“You may now enter the theatre to begin Character Placement,” Kilgharrah continues, disappearing back into the theatre with a swish of his robes.

Gwen squeezes Merlin’s hand so tightly he’s afraid she might crush it. Those are definitely the fingers of a daughter blacksmith. Merlin manages to squeeze back, in spite of nearly losing his fingers but before they can step through the door someone crashes into him.

It’s a strapping blonde bloke and he knocked his shoulder without even bothering to glance at him or apologise as he strides past. There’s a swagger to his walk and his head is held high with an irritating sort of arrogance that makes Merlin want to throw something at the back of his thick head.

Gwen manages to catch his arm before he goes completely arse over tit.
“What a prick,” she declares and Merlin would agree with her but he’s too nervous about the upcoming test to speak.

They enter the theatre together a moment later. Then Kilgarrah summons a roll of parchment and opens it without preamble. “Freya Allen,” he calls and Merlin quickly realises he’s listing them in alphabetical order.

“Oh I wish I was an Emrys,” Gwen whispers at him when a pretty girl with brown hair nervously joins Kilgarrah on the platform. “Then I could get this over with already.”

Merlin raises an eyebrow at her, grinning and Gwen seems to realise what she’s said. “I mean not that I want to marry you. Or I mean that there’s anything wrong with marrying you- I just mean-“

“I know what you meant,” he promises, still smiling.

They fall silent to watch Freya perform the test to figure out which department she should be in. Kilgarrah summons what looks like a mannequin holding a sword and Merlin frowns at the sight of it, until Kilgharrah waves his hand and it comes to life.

“Begin,” he declares and in the next moment the mannequin is rolling forward and advancing on the small wisp of a girl.

Merlin wants to protest that it’s not right and certainly not a fair test but then the girl is shifting into some manner of creature, fur black and sleek like a panther with heavy strong wings and she is swatting away the dummy’s sword as if it were nothing more than a toothpick. His mouth falls open and Gwen’s eyes are impossibly wide.

Somebody whistles, impressed. Merlin would have to agree with them.

“Magic User,” Kilgarrah declares and Freya is shifting back, looking quietly pleased with herself before the Dean directs her to the opposite room where she’ll wait until the test is over.

Magic Users and Knights take separate classes. The only moments they spend together are in Camelot’s corridors, the food hall or in the Amphitheatre for tournaments or school announcements. If the Knights are as big pillocks as Gwen says they are, then it’s probably for the best.

Kilgharrah calls the next name and a muscular looking man steps up to take Freya’s place. A second later when he melts the steel with a sharp incantation, Kilgharrah declares him a Magic User as well.

The next girl becomes a Knight. Kilgharrah directs her to a separate room than the one the Magic Users have been disappearing into. The one after that is a Knight as well and so it goes until Kilgarrah is calling on Merlin.

“Merlin Emrys,” he says, though Merlin hears it faintly like it’s coming from far away.


He comes awake at once and rushes towards the podium so fast that he trips on the stairs leading up to it. A few people laugh but there’s one voice who rises above the rest, loud and amused. And definitely male.

Merlin is on the stage by then and forgets the mannequin beside Kilgarrah in favour of searching out the face of the bloke who laughed at him. There’s something about the way he sounds-
He’s so distracted he doesn’t see the mannequin come to life or begin its approach.

“Merlin!” Gwen shouts.

Abruptly Merlin remembers where he is, and what he’s supposed to be doing, whirling back to face the dummy just as it swings the sword towards his neck. Merlin doesn’t think, he flinches back as magic flares inside chest, burning through his eyes as the sword stops.

Except it’s not just the sword that stops. The whole room is frozen when Merlin steps under the weapon and out of the way before time restarts and the mannequin completes its attack, swinging the blade out against no one.

Silence settles amongst the group and Merlin can’t help but notice that nobody is laughing now. Kilgharrah doesn’t declare his placement yet, though Merlin knows it could only ever be Magic User. He has hardly a scrap of muscle on him to even begin fantasising about being a Knight.

“What spell was that, boy?” Kilgharrah wonders, eyes narrowed with curiosity.

Merlin shuffles his feet. “Er, it wasn’t one?”

The Great Dragon narrows his eyes. “Did you whisper it? Or say the incantation in your mind? Don’t be shy, tell me.”

Merlin glances at the rest of the students and flushes at the way they are all watching him keenly. He’s not used to being the centre of attention. “There wasn’t one,” he admits, quietly, eyeing his shoes. “I don’t know any spells.”

Kilgharrah stares at him long enough for Merlin to feel like he’s being looked through rather than at. He seems to remember the rest of the students a second later.

“Well, yes. Magic User,” he says and gestures at the doorway the other Magic Users have since disappeared into.

Merlin heads on down and thankfully doesn’t trip this time. He manages an encouraging smile at Gwen who looks a little surprised before disappearing behind the door. There are already seven Magic Users standing about the room and Merlin takes a seat in an available chair, shaky and relieved that the test is over.

The girl, Freya, is sitting nearby and he can’t resist saying something. “Hello, I’m Merlin. You’re a powerful shapeshifter.”

She smiles. “My mother doesn’t like it so much. I leave fur all over the couch.”

Merlin laughs before he can feel too nervous not to. They sit there for at least twenty more minutes with more Magic Users entering the room every now and again. Kilgharrah soon returns after every magical student has finished their placement.

“If you’ll follow me we can begin the induction Ceremony. Magic Users and Knights are introduced separately.”

Merlin can hear the disapproving edge to his voice but everyone in the room follows him obediently onto the stage without questioning it.

There’s a small crowd now gathered to receive them and Merlin recognises the rest of the faculty standing to the side, Gaius among them. The Knights are standing off on the left of the podium and
Merlin can't help but notice nearly all of them look as haughty and high-handed as their reputations suggest.

Except for Gwen of course who’s beaming with pride.

There’s a photographer to document the moment and Merlin’s barely focusing on the camera before there’s a loud clanging sound and he’s struck on the head by something wet and dripping. He sputters in shock, hearing other exclamations of surprise from his fellow Magic Users as the same substance douses all of them.

The camera clicks off and Merlin’s rubbing the muck away from his eyes as the shouts of laughter start coming directly from the Knights. He opens them to see what it is and his hands come away green and wet and stinking of paint.

He looks up to where a can of it sits upside down amongst the beams. Somebody rigged it to tip over so the contents will land on all of them. Merlin has no doubt who, a second later.

“Oooh look the witches are melting,” somebody declares above the laughter and then the rest of the Knights are guffawing loudly.

Merlin flushes, feeling ridiculous as he tries to wipe more paint off his forehead so it stops dripping down his face. There's so much of it. He's going to be smelling like paint fumes for the rest of the day.

“Oh no,” Freya whimpers beside him, sounding a lot more short of breath than she was before. “I’m allergic to paint.”

Panic erupts in his chest but before he can think to call for help, Kilgharrah is appearing at her side, vanishing the paint from every inch of her, even as her skin turns raw and red like a rash.


The call brings him forward and Merlin is able to drown out the cruel taunts and laughter through sheer worry for Freya’s well being. Gaius seems to recognise her symptoms because he leads her from the stage immediately to treat her.

Merlin’s rage shows itself next. He vanishes the rest of the paint from every Magic User without thinking. He doesn’t even have to raise his hands he’s so furious. Kilgharrah turns to him with a raised eyebrow, seemingly knowing it was his doing but he’s too mad to feel pride at impressing The Great Dragon more than once today.

He stomps off of the stage and strides out of the theatre without looking back.

He first day at Camelot is going swimmingly.

He might have forgiven the Knights if what happened at the Induction Ceremony had been a one off. If they were just trying to get some attention, make a bit of a splash as the new freshers, Merlin might have been able to forget about it.

Freya hadn’t ended up seriously hurt, though the threat of it still makes his blood boil with righteous anger.
Except it’s not a one off.

Gwen and Gaius were right after all. The Knights are complete and utter arseholes.

In his first week, they strut around Campus like they own the place, clogging up the walkways, great red capes emblazoned with Camelot’s logo billowing obnoxiously behind them. They push Magic Users out of their way constantly and aren’t shy with their insults, catcalls or whistles. They’re loud, proud and obnoxious, and trip Magic Users whenever they can manage to stick a foot out.

Merlin makes more friends in the first week merely by helping other Magic Users to their feet and gathering whatever books, pens and bags go scattering during their fall. He perfects a chilling scowl that he’s never had much use for before and unleashes it upon as many Knights as he can.

They act like they’re the only students who matter on Campus.

There’s a gigantic round table in the quad and a bunch of Knights swarm around it persistently like they’ve conquered it for themselves. If any Magic Users make the mistake of ever sitting there a group of rowdy Knights are always happy to remind them that they don’t belong. Before they unceremoniously remove them.

They really are a bunch of bullies.

At first he thinks it’s just the freshers, that only the first years have a true grudge against Magic Users because they’re being rowdy and trying to find their place in the new environment. But the older students, though less unruly and disruptive, mostly treat Magic Users with a disinterest that borders on pretending they don’t exist at all. Some of them are just as vile but in subtler ways, ways that might be even worse than the first years.

He’s certain Gwen is the only kind Knight among them. At least from what he’s seen so far. But even if the Knights are a right awful bunch, the magic lessons themselves more than make up for the lot of them.

In fact, Merlin’s never learnt so much. For his first lesson of Elemental101, Kilgharrah leads them to Camelot’s forge where the Knight’s swords are made.

“Camelot’s best blacksmith has allowed us the privilege of witnessing him work today,” Kilgharrah announces to the class before leading them inside.

Merlin can already feel the heat from where he’s standing, but it’s nothing compared to the furnace like temperatures inside the forge. A muscular man is bent over the countertop weaving powerful magic to heat the metal as he works when Kilgharrah leads them inside and gestures for the group to stand at a safe distance behind him. Merlin is amazed at the ability and dexterity of the muscular man’s fingers.

“Elyan is a skilful elemental magic user,” Kilgharrah continues as Elyan turns to smile warmly at them in greeting. “His control of fire and air allows for the construction of the best weapons in Camelot.”

The compliment seems to embarrass him because Elyan quickly turns back to resume his work. “You are too kind, Kilgharrah.”

“It is not kindness but fact,” he booms. “A Magic User's ability to balance both elemental magic and the elusive forces of nature is a fundamental part for defeating evil magic.”
Kilgharrah has the students take note as Elyan demonstrates his work.

The forge becomes so hot that Merlin is sweating and has to remove his jumper by the time Elyan has turned the metal a yellow orange as it reaches forging heat. Then he removes it from the furnace and pours the metal into the mould of a sword. They watch as he hammers it into the correct shape, twisting his magic through it when it does not suit him and fleshing it out to match his needs.

It is incredible work. Merlin has never been more amazed by the power of magic in creating new things. He doesn’t understand how people like Uther can only believe that it was meant for destruction.

“While you attend this University, I’m afraid you will face ignorance about the forces of magic and its usefulness,” Kilgharrah says. “Do not be deterred by this. Camelot does not merely exist for Knights to protect the innocent from evil magic. This is a University that respects the dual importance of the skills required to be a Knight and those abilities it takes to practice good magic.”

Elyan takes a break from his work to watch them as Kilgharrah continues.

“It is not common knowledge that magic is used in the construction of weapons for Knights on Campus. Magic is no longer the respected and coveted craft it used to be. It is now greeted with mistrust, fear and outright hostility. That is a burden we face for our desire to learn.”

So Gwen was right after all. They do use magic to make their swords. What kind of state is this University in if the magical abilities that help Knights construct their weapons to fight are met with distrust?

“That behaviour is not tolerated on Campus,” Kilgharrah says. “But still, despite my best efforts it runs rampant in Camelot. The arrogance of Knights and belief in their superiority has fractured the school. Until we are united on equal terms, Camelot will remain so.”

Fractured isn’t exactly the word Merlin would use. Broken more like.

“I have shown you this forge to help you understand what you will face. Outside, there lies great forces of evil, misusing magic for their own greed and personal gain, with a driving need to create harm and spread cruelty through the world. It is up to both Knights and Magic Users to face them. For without elemental fire guiding it the metal cannot reach forging heat and without the metal to focus its power, the fire is wild and uncontrolled. Two forces working together. Elemental fire and metal. Magic Users and Knights. Two sides of one coin.”

Kilgharrah pauses when Elyan moves back in to hammer out the final shape, gripping it with heavy metal pliers and dropping it into a barrel of water to cool. When he removes it the sword is glistening, shining with both metal and magic. Complete.

Merlin’s never seen a more breathtaking sight.

“When you graduate from this University you will be assigned your Knight and it will fall to the both of you to protect the innocent from evil magic. I ask that you never forget this lesson for no matter how imperious a Knight may appear, they will be needed to defeat the evils of this world. This sacred partnership has existed since Camelot’s creation and will continue long into the future. Knights and Magic Users, facing threats. Together.”

When the lesson finally finishes, the class is left in an awed hush. Merlin knew that Kilgharrah was an impressive and renowned sorcerer in the magical community, but he had no idea that he had
Kilgharrah dismisses them until their next lesson and leaves the forge without looking back. Some of the students stay to watch Elyan work for a while but most of them leave for their next classes or to sit in the sun for a few stolen minutes.

Merlin waits to approach Elyan, not wanting to accidentally get hit by the powerful elemental fire he's wielding.

“Hi, I’m Merlin,” he says. “I know your sister Gwen.”

Elyan only smiles not offput by him in the slightest. “Yes, she told me about you. I’m Elyan. I’d shake your hand but I don’t want to melt the flesh from your bones.”

That would be preferable. “Thanks. You’re a talented Magic User.”

Apparently he’s terrible at accepting compliments even when they don’t come from the Dean, because Elyan only shrugs, as modest as his sister. “Blacksmithing I learnt from my father. But magic came from me.”

There’s something quietly remarkable about him, and Merlin enjoys the feel of his magic. It’s very steady and sure, even as it flows within him and there’s a pleasant kind of liveliness to the unobtrusive power. It's nice to be around. Merlin likes it very much.

He was the only Magic User back in Ealdor. It’s incredible to be exposed to so many talented people that possess magic in Camelot. “Well I hope I’ll see you around Campus,” he says eventually. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Elyan’s teeth flash bright amongst the flames and magic in the air. “Any friend of Gwen’s is a friend of mine.”

Merlin smiles back before he heads for the door, still mulling over Kilgharrah’s inspiring words. The idea seems a little far fetched though, now that an entire tin of green paint has been dumped on him and the rest of the first years. Merlin doubts the others feel very forgiving either.

Uniting Magic Users and the Knights seems like an impossible task.

It’s no wonder the University is fractured.

Besides all the unpleasant encounters with Knights during his first week, Merlin is enjoying himself immensely.

He’s taking four classes this term: Elemental Magic with Kilgharrah, Healing and Restorative Magic with Gaius, Incantation with a druid named Aglain and Alchemy with a sidhe called Ostane.

There’s a lot of work, but so far Merlin is picking up so many new skills. He’s already begun performing incantations rather than simply relying on instinctive magic. So far with mixed results. He set fire to the curtains in Gaius’ living room the other day, but thankfully managed to put them out just as quickly. Though Gaius kept asking if he’d burnt dinner for the rest of the evening.

Living with Gaius is exactly what he needed. They’ve got similar kind of energies, so they don’t
clash and Merlin thinks they’ll get along really well while he’s living there. As long as he doesn’t get too messy.

He almost reminds Merlin of his father, if he had any lasting memories of him. He died when Merlin was very young. But Gaius has a certain fatherly presence about him, even if he’s never actually fathered any children. He’s even lent Merlin some tomes from his personal collection to help with his incantations and reading up about magic.

Knowing even just a few incantations has helped direct his magic in a much more constructive way. Merlin’s amazed by how helpful the classes are as well. And for now, the workload isn’t too overwhelming.

Gwen messaged him her term timetable, and they’ve managed to coordinate meet ups between their classes every day this week. Merlin’s so glad to have met her. She’s got an unexpected sense of humour that never ceases to make him laugh, even on the bad days. And it helps to know she’s struggling as well. Unfortunately, some of the Knights are as sexist as she’d worried they would be.

Their situations aren’t precisely the same, but it’s comforting to know that they’re in this together. Merlin looks forward to seeing her whenever they can, and he might even joke about her becoming his replacement best mate if Will wouldn’t get so offended by it.

He’s met a fair amount of friendly Magic Users too, though some of the less friendly students are about as arrogant as the Knights about their magical prowess. The good mostly outweighs the bad though, Merlin’s confident that he’ll make plenty of friends here.

And the work will hopefully allow him to have a bit of a social life.

He’s already planned his schedule for completing assignments so that he can be organised and finish them early rather than falling into a panic around the due date. At least that’s what Merlin hopes to do. He has a habit of being unorganised. Luckily there isn’t much work to do on the weekend, because it leaves him with enough time to roam the Campus and to attend the tournament.

The tournament is usually scheduled for the first Saturday once term resumes, though Merlin had no idea about any of it until Gwen explained things.

Since Knights are only allowed to participate, it’s structured entirely around physical tasks like the melee on horseback, jousting and sword fighting. If they could participate a Magic User would have no chance of winning. Especially without magic.

First years don’t normally sign up for the first few tournaments of the term. Mostly because they haven’t done enough training yet to teach them how to last more than one round against the second, third and fourth year students. But Gwen hasn’t let that deter her, she signed up for it anyway. First years are allowed to participate but it’s been a couple hundred years since any of them have ever been able to win a tournament.

There are far too many experienced Knights on the field. Fourth year Knights, who will be allocated their Magic User before they graduate, are usually the most formidable opponents participating.

But Gwen is determined.

So Merlin takes to the stands on the Saturday following his first week, prepared to watch a bunch
of Knights wail on each other for the rest of the afternoon. He’s not expecting much, but it’s a small measure of delight that he ends up accidentally sitting next to a friendly face.

“Elyan,” he says, surprised to see him out of the forge, without being covered in dirt and sweat.

He certainly cleans up well. The jumper he’s wearing gives him an edge of softness that the arm muscles Merlin’s seen working the forge don’t.

“Oh,” he exclaims, as if surprised that somebody would think to talk to him. Merlin didn’t realise he was such a loner. Though for someone who spends all his time in a forge nearly every day it makes sense. “Merlin right?”

“That’s me,” he says, scanning the crowd for any sign of Gwen’s thick curls.

“They’re inside the training room getting ready,” Elyan explains, seemingly figuring out what he’s doing. “They don’t come out until before the tournament starts. That’s when they introduce themselves.”

Merlin stares at the sharp protruding points of the lances resting against the walls opposite and tries not to feel nervous. “It’s all safe right? Nobody dies in these, do they?”

Elyan shrugs. “Not since the 1600s. Witchburning was still popular then.”

Merlin nearly falls out of the seat, banging his shin against the head of the Magic User sitting in front of him. They hiss out a breath and whisper a sharp curse before Merlin feels foreign magic smack the back of his head in retaliation.

“Sorry,” he mutters, rubbing at his skull. “It was an accident.”

The Magic User grumbles something but doesn’t even bother to turn around and look at him. He’s much too interested in the empty theatre below though Merlin doesn’t understand why his attention is so fixed. These kind of tournaments really can’t be that exciting for Magic Users, can they? Not when they’re barred from participating, a fact that certainly sours the experience. He’s only here to support Gwen really.

“They burnt Magic Users here?” Merlin demands, lowering his voice as he leans in closer.

Elyan laughs. “No, I was only joking. Campus at least kept Magic Users from the pyre until witchunts died out around the 18th century. Everywhere else was well into the witchcooking business.”

Merlin slumps into the chair, wincing in sympathy. Most Magic Users were skilled enough back then to prevent being burnt to death but a life on the run, starting all over again mustn’t have been much of a laugh.

“So this is dangerous then.”

“Just a few broken bones here and there. Nobody has actually died in a tournament in centuries. Gwen is perfectly safe and Gaius is on call to patch anybody up who needs it.”

Merlin has absolute faith in Gaius’ abilities, but the idea of him needing to patch people up sends a little shiver down his spine. “Oh wonderful.”

The chatter around them is interrupted by the blaring of trumpets as the first set of Knights come riding out on horses, concealed by their armour and helmets. “I’ve heard that Arthur Pendragon
will be in this tournament,” Elyan admits, watching the Knights keenly, though Merlin thinks his attention is more focused on their actual swords than the people carrying them.

He does spend a lot of time around them after all. The inquisitiveness makes sense. Merlin’s lost on the possibility of seeing a Pendragon at the tournament to think more on that.

“Arthur Pendragon is here?” he demands, astonished and horrified to have Gwen’s suspicions confirmed. “He enrolled this year?”

Elyan only nods, expression forbidding at the mention of Pendragon. “Yeah, him and his sister Morgana. Not sure if she’s in this tournament though.”

Several heads turn to stare at them grimly, clearly overhearing the conversation. Magic Users at least know what the name Pendragon means. Merlin had hoped to have graduated well before ever encountering any of Uther Pendragon’s offspring. He should’ve known he’d never be that lucky. From what he’s heard in the papers, Arthur Pendragon is around his age and Morgana Pendragon isn’t too many months apart from him.

There’s a rumour that Uther hired a powerful Magic User to make his children’s faces impervious to being photographed, but Merlin doubts that’s true. The fact that they’re attending this University now is unfortunately something he can’t so easily dismiss as wild rumour.

Of course Merlin gets lumped with both of them. Fantastic.

The Knights individually lift their helmets to reveal their faces when Kilgharrah introduces them by name. He recognises Valiant Thomson as the arse constantly tripping as many Magic Users he encounters in the hallways as possible, Merlin included.

He’s gotten bruises on his knees from that cockhead from this week alone, and not in the good way. Gwen seems to have spotted them in the crowd because when Kilgharrah finally announces her name she smiles and waves in their direction.

She’s not the only female Knight in the tournament either. Merlin recognises three more and when the last girl removes her helmet, a sheen of beautiful dark hair cascades down her back, contrasting starkly with her pale skin. She’s a vision, so much that he almost doesn’t hear Kilgharrah address her as Morgana Pendragon.

The whispers erupt after that but Morgana stares the crowd down with an uncanny sharpness that forces them into silence quicker than Kilgharrah might have succeeded. The audiences interest slowly dies down until they reach the last Knight ready to be introduced. He’s waiting quietly at the furthest end of the arena from where they’re sitting and the rigidity of his posture speaks of somebody high born. Or at least expertly trained.

“Arthur Pendragon,” Kilgharrah announces, though his voice has gone softer than before, considering.

There’s no need to strain to hear him, the entire arena is hushed as the Knight removes his helmet. He’s blonde but that’s about all Merlin can tell from where he’s sitting, though he can see people standing on their seats in order to get a better look at him.

Honestly, have they abandoned all sense of dignity?

Uther Pendragon isn’t a total recluse anymore, but the insistence in protecting his children’s identities has certainly awarded them with an unwelcome level of mystery. Arthur Pendragon raises a gloved hand in greeting like he’s playing to the crowd and Merlin hates how much louder
the applause gets from that simple gesture.

His father is an arsehole, ruled by his own heartache and grief and that’s what has brought about his intense vendetta against magic. All magic. Not just the forces of evil they’re being trained to destroy once they graduate. Uther is a threat to all of magickind.

And so is his son.

Merlin turns away as the screams get louder and focuses on Gwen instead, in the steady way she handles her horse. Out of everyone’s hers is probably the calmest of the lot, though maybe not compared to Arthur Pendragon. His horse is a statue. Merlin realises that he’s looking at him again and turns his eyes away with a grimace.

“He’s pretty fit, isn’t he?” Elyan comments, realising where he’s staring.

Merlin carefully refuses to blush. “His father is Uther Pendragon. It doesn’t matter what he looks like.”

“Probably a right twat, I suppose,” Elyan agrees, still eyeing him. “Shame.”

From the way it looks like he’s filling out that armour, Merlin would have to agree. The jousting goes first and after the first few rounds, Merlin starts shutting his eyes each time the Knights get close enough for their lances to connect.

“I can’t watch,” he says, after the last Knight is taken out on a stretcher. “This is barbaric.”

“I’m only here for Gwen and the swords,” Elyan admits but even he is still grimacing from the last violent lancing that knocked a Knight free of his horse and had him dragged along for several metres, foot caught in the stirrups.

Merlin manages to open his eyes when Morgana’s match comes up and he can’t help but sympathise with her when she’s paired up against Valiant. Her mount seems ruffled by something but she soothes it with a steady hand and Merlin is somehow surprised by her gentleness.

Pendragons are not known for being tender. And there’s nothing gentle about the way she knocks Valiant flat on his arse first try. Merlin has to admit he enjoys watching that part immensely.

Gwen is up next and Kilgharrah announces she’s to face Leon Williams.

“Who’s that?” Merlin whispers. “Is he good?”

Elyan is clapping along with everyone else but he’s frowning. “How should I know?”

Leon comes out astride his mare a moment later and Merlin can’t help but notice he looks confident on his horse. When they hand him his lance, his grip is sure but it’s not like Merlin has any real idea how it should be held anyway.

“Somehow I don’t think he’s entirely incompetent.”

Elyan sits up straighter when Gwen enters the arena again, her horse trotting calmly towards one of the officials fetching her a lance. “Yeah Gwen,” he shouts, cupping his hands around his mouth. “You can do it!”

Leon is good, Merlin can see it in the way he lines himself up at the starting position and adjusts his seat. The bell announces the beginning of the joust and Merlin immediately shuts his eyes.
He waits and waits until the distinct sound of wood splintering interrupts the pounding of hooves and the crowd is roaring its delight. Elyan is smacking him on the shoulder excitedly. “She did it!” he shouts in his ears. “She won the round!”

Merlin wrenches his eyes open to see that Elyan is right. Leon is sitting in the dirt, pulling off his helmet and looking mightily surprised by the situation. But he still accepts Gwen’s hand when she gets off her horse to help him to his feet.

The crowd likes that just as much.

The rest of the joust goes much quicker now that Gwen is out of danger. Things get mildly interesting when it comes to Arthur Pendragon’s match, especially when he’s facing off against some kind of mountain troll. Merlin’s not sure how the horse is even supporting all of his bulk.

“Oh,” Elyan exclaims faintly. “That’s Odin. He’s a fourth year Knight graduating this year. Runs with Sarrum Amata and all his lot. A nasty bunch, the lot of them.”

Merlin can’t argue with him, not at the sight Odin makes.

“Well that’s Pendragon out of the running then,” Elyan says sitting back in his seat. “Freshers never beat fourth years.”

Merlin’s eyes slide toward Arthur Pendragon, completely concealed now beneath his armour and has the strangest feeling Elyan’s about to be proven wrong. When the bell announces the start of the joust, Merlin doesn’t close his eyes this time.

And what he sees should have been impossible.

Arthur Pendragon unseats Odin on the first try. It happens so fast he’s not sure what he saw, but knocking such a huge figure like Odin off his horse shouldn’t be such an easy task. He’s a human bolder.

The way the arena erupts around them after clearly means they hadn’t expected this outcome either. But they’re just as delighted about it. Merlin doesn’t know what to feel. But he certainly didn’t want to be impressed by Arthur Pendragon. Not if he can help it.

“Huh,” Elyan says, surprised. “Let’s see how he fairs against Sarrum though. He’s never lost a tournament. Not since he enrolled at Camelot.”

Lancelot d’Angelo is next and Elyan shifts his hands to his knees, leaning in closer with a significant amount of interest. Merlin doesn’t ask but from the dark curls and the strong build of the Knight there’s no doubt he’s well fit.

Handsome too probably. Is that why Elyan is so interested?

Lancelot faces off against a second year Knight called Eira and during his approach, the sunlight seems to hit her helmet just right, effectively blinding her. Pressing the advantage wouldn’t surprise Merlin in the slightest, but instead Lancelot lifts his lance upward and allows them both to retry their chances.

“Pretty noble for a Knight,” Merlin is willing to admit, glancing at the way Elyan is still watching him with a frown.

“I suppose,” he agrees, distracted.
Lancelot unseats Eira fairly during the next approach and he gets more cheers because of it. Merlin honestly thought Gwen was an anomaly among the Knights, the only decent one of them. It’s nice to think maybe he might have been wrong about that.

The jousting round soon finishes, to be followed by the melee on horseback.

It’s bedlam from the beginning the bells sound and Gwen is soon lost in the rush of bodies and horses, though she manages to scrape through that round by the skin of her teeth.

She, Lancelot, Arthur and Morgana Pendragon are the only freshers still in the tournament by the time the five minutes are up. From the mutterings in the crowd it’s clear that such a large amount of first years have never lasted in the tournament this long before.

Merlin wonders how different it might have been if Magic Users were allowed to join.

The sword fighting is the final round. Each match is between two Knights and once one is eliminated they’re paired up with the next opponent. Arthur Pendragon’s matches are the quickest by far but also the most skilled. He woos the crowd like a fine tuned instrument and Merlin is scowling at the cheers coming from the seats in front filled with Magic Users. Even they find something to be captivated with.

It’s not that great. It’s just clear that Arthur Pendragon’s training far outweighs any of the Knights there. He has the advantage of being born Uther Pendragon’s son. He was probably training with wooden swords before he could walk.

Lancelot wins his first match but loses the next one to Sarrum. Gwen manages to outlast three of her opponents before she loses out to Sarrum as well. Morgana lasts two rounds before she’s paired up against Arthur. The interest in the arena increases tenfold seeing the siblings face each other off. Morgana’s sword fighting style is much more vicious than Arthur’s but he’s sure footed and unbelievably patient.

They may have trained together since birth but Arthur seems to know the attacks she favours because he counters them without issue. Merlin wishes all of the hype about him was only that, but he’s a skilled fighter, eventually he wears Morgana down.

He puts her in the dirt to the cheers of Magic Users and Knights alike, but helps her to her feet after the bells signal the end of the match.

Morgana furiously sticks her sword in the sand and stalks off afterward but Arthur is grinning when he removes his helmet. Merlin can see the flash of his white teeth even from so far away as he smirks at her retreating back.

What a tosser.

But Arthur Pendragon makes it to the final deciding match of the whole tournament. His opponent is Sarrum, who hasn’t lost a battle today. He’s pretty talented as well, though Merlin has no doubt that he’s a brute who likes to fight dirty.

“He can’t win,” Elyan says, assuredly. “First years never win tournaments.”

Merlin watches Arthur rotate his sword in a quick arch with a flick of his wrist. “He’s going to win,” he says, firmly, eyes following the path of the metal as it slices through the air cleanly but with an elegance that he's never seen before.

Elyan turns to look at him, eyebrow raised but he doesn’t take back what he said under the
Merlin knows things on occasion with a stubborn kind of certainty that somebody shouldn’t posses. The bell announces the start of the match and it’s pretty easy to see that Sarrum wasn’t expecting this challenge. He’s vicious in every strike, clinging desperately to his title as reigning champion.

He’s going to lose it though. To a Pendragon.

Arthur doesn’t waver, he holds his ground, defends and attacks in equal measure, constantly knocking Sarrum off balance with his fancy footwork. Merlin has never seen a Knight look so wobbly, or furious. The helmet might be protecting his head and concealing his expression but if he didn’t know better Merlin he could almost see the steam of Sarrum’s anger coming off his armour.

His temper is hanging on by a thread. He’s not going to take the loss well, that’s for sure. Merlin stands up abruptly when it looks like Arthur is gaining ground on Sarrum, realising he has no reason to be here anymore. He could care less which Knight wins this fight. He should go check on Gwen. She looked pretty disappointed when she walked out of the arena.

“I’m going to find Gwen,” he tells Elyan, who’s riveted by the sharp clash of steel, and waves him away distractedly.

Merlin glances back at the match when he manages to squeeze past the row of legs to reach the centre aisle.

And then Arthur Pendragon’s helmet seems to tilt in his direction. He fumbles for the first time throughout all of his previous matches, like he’s been distracted and Merlin pauses to watch the clumsy movement, reluctantly fascinated. But Arthur Pendragon recovers a second later, disarming Sarrum so quickly it’s as if he was never carrying a weapon in the first place.

The arena erupts around him and Merlin realises that he’s just standing in the middle of a seated crowd like an idiot and turns to head for the exit. He doesn’t glance back as the audience stomp their feet in the stands, cheering and shouting at the major upset of first year, Pendragon’s victory.

Merlin hurries on to find Gwen and wonders about Arthur’s unexpected stumble. What one earth had he been looking at? He can’t have been staring at Merlin. Of course not, he thinks, snorting at the idea. That would be ridiculous.

He drowns out the sounds of triumph and excitement and heads down to the contestants waiting area where Gwen will be. Hopefully she doesn’t take the loss too hard. She was utterly brilliant in the tournament. Maybe next time she’ll win.

Merlin wouldn’t put it past her.

His first major essay for Alchemy107 is due at midnight and Merlin is squared away in the Albion Library trying to finish off some last-minute editing.

He’s not the only Magic User frantically attempting to finish the assignment either. There are a lot of familiar faces from the Alchemy107 lectures congregating in there too, inhaling coffee and looking particularly bug-eyed from lack of sleep. He can even see Mordred hidden between one of the booths, though he doesn’t look up from feverishly typing words onto his laptop.

Merlin would be doing the same, except for the continuous shouts of laughter and carrying on
coming from outside, raucous and impossible to ignore. He’d chosen the second level specifically to avoid any distractions, since not many other students use it but now he’s read the exact same sentence for the fifth time in a row and his patience is thinning.

Merlin leans back, rubbing at his temples with aggravation. At the corner of his eye, he keeps seeing other Magic Users stand up and angrily stride towards the windows to peer down onto the grass lawns. He hopes they’re planning to yell at whoever it is but each time a new person approaches, their expressions darken and they stalk back to their seats, muttering disgruntled curses.

It must be a group of Knights then.

Merlin drags his eyes away from the screen and considers heading downstairs to fetch a coffee. It’s barely half four, there’s still about seven hours left before the deadline. Caffeine would probably help things move along a lot quicker.

There’s another shout and suddenly somebody is whistling, long and piercing amidst the wild laughter and Merlin’s finally had enough. He stands up so quickly he knocks his knee into the wooden table, cursing quietly as he snaps his laptop shut, sealing it with an anti-theft spell as he stomps on over to the window.

The ancient looking window panes spring open before he even reaches them, and he sticks his head out without hesitation. Looking down he can see the cause of all the disturbance, the group of Knights running about and kicking around a football. They’re too far away for him to see faces clearly but it’s not hard to notice that the blonde in possession of the ball currently running toward the opposite goal has a great arse. He’s too mad about all the noise to let that unsettle him.

“Oi!” he shouts, satisfied that the blonde currently aiming a kick at one of the makeshift goals, flinches at the sound, foot slipping so the ball goes wide. He misses by such a huge margin that even his own teammates stop to laugh at him even as they look around in search for the source of the voice. “People are trying to study in here. Piss off somewhere else!”

Merlin glances back at the other students but nobody looks like they’re about to tell him off for shouting in the Library. Though he can see some of them staring open mouthed after the outburst.

He turns back, preparing to shout some more if they’re planning on being total pillocks about it. The blonde curses loudly and snaps his head around to stare up at Merlin, locating the voice that threw off his game. Even from far up Merlin can see his expression is not grateful at the interruption.

Yeah, well bloody get in line then.

“What did you say, spellbegger?” he calls back, tone arrogant and haughty like just about every other Knight on Campus. “Come down here and say that to my face.”

Magic Users aren’t supposed to practice magic on Campus unless it’s supervised by a tutor but then again Knights walk around armed to the teeth and aren’t afraid to use their weapons whenever they feel like it so it’s hardly fair. And Merlin’s furious enough not to care about rules right now.

Magic flares in his gut and then Merlin is reappearing on the grass right in front of the blonde prat who called him a spellbegger, no thought that it might be a terribly stupid idea. Or that he’s now surrounded and outnumbered by a group of sweaty Knights.

The blonde is unfairly handsome too, along with his great arse but the look on his face means he
“I know you,” the Knight declares at the sight of him, smile widening dangerously. “You’re that wand lover who stopped time in Character Placement.”

Merlin tries not to lose his temper. “We don’t have wands, you prat. Have you even spoken to a Magic User before?”

The blonde only smirks. “I’m talking to one right now, aren’t I?”

Merlin swallows his anger and tries to be civil. If they’re not going to be decent about this then it’s up to him to try for a different arrangement. “You’re messing about right in front of the Library,” he tells them. “There are people in there trying to study.”

The blonde only raises a self-important eyebrow. “So?” he says and the rest of his mates snigger at the grin on his face.

Merlin’s had enough. He tried to do things the nice way. But these wankers clearly don’t give a toss about being nice. “Look, arsehole, you’ve had your fun now go and bloody well kick your football around somewhere else. There’s plenty of other places on Campus.”

The blonde’s eyes widen a little at the ‘arsehole’ comment and a strange glint settles in his eyes when the rest of the group, abruptly falls silent. “You’ve got a right stick up your arse don’t you, spellbagger?”

Of all the rude names Knight’s call them, Merlin probably hates spellbagger the most.

“I wouldn’t call me that if I were you,” he says, fists clenching.

But the blonde isn’t remotely intimidated. If anything, Merlin’s threats seem to amuse him. “Why? What are you going to do to me?”

He’s got a few ideas. Though some of them probably might get him kicked out of Camelot. Or lose his scholarship. Better not risk it.

“You have no idea.”

The blonde steps closer, brave for a Knight when it’s clear that Merlin’s angry enough to use his magic. “Be my guest,” he says, smile widening. “Come on. Come on then.”

Merlin’s eyes him heatedly. He knows he can’t outright attack one of the Knights, but he can ruin their game for them. He turns and glances at the bulky Knight now holding the football behind him, one he thinks might be named Percival because the other Knight’s were shouting it often enough and vanishes the ball from his hands without a word.

“Hey,” Percival says, surprised at his sudden empty handedness.

Before Merlin can even think about escaping, somebody seizes the scruff of his jumper and tugs him towards one of the nearby study classrooms that sit just inside the main doors of the Library.

“Oi,” he protests, struggling, but their grip is strong and firm when they locate the first empty available room and drag him into it.

Merlin can’t help but notice there aren’t any windows so it’s the perfect place if they’re planning on killing him. Not that he won’t go down without a fight. But they’re releasing him instead so that
Merlin stumbles into the nearby desk before whirling about to face them. It’s the blonde and his eyes are dark and heady.

“Alright,” he says. “What do you want for it?”

“What?” Merlin sputters, shocked.

“For the ball,” he repeats, rudely. “What do you want for it then?”

That’s unexpected.

“Er-“

He hadn’t really intended to keep the football. He’d planned to toss it into the bubbling fountain across from the Quad. But only after submitting his essay.

“Come on then, or are you too stupid to negotiate?”

Maybe he should just burn the ball and be done with it.

“Suck me off,” he demands, knowing there’s no way in hell that a Knight like him will get down on his knees, and is hoping to frighten him away.

No doubt he’s some kind of hyper masculine homophobe. And yet somehow he’s the one playing with his sword all day. What kind of irony is that? Except the blonde doesn’t react how Merlin predicted. He only raises that ridiculous eyebrow again at the suggestion, a slow grin forming on his face.

“Hmm, you’re not as uptight as I thought,” he says, impressed. “Alright.”

And then he’s getting on his knees without any protest.

“What? What?” Merlin splutters, jerking into the table to back away from him. “I was joking.”

“Really?” he wonders, tilting his head up to stare at him through his eyelashes, lips falling open temptingly even when his own interest is unmistakeable. “You sounded serious.”

This is a terrible idea. But Merlin has to admit that he’s a fair sight kneeling like this. Much less prattish at any rate. He doesn’t realise how turned on he is until the blonde reaches for his belt.

“What? No kiss first?”

“Sod off,” he mutters but by then he’s already gotten Merlin’s belt undone and is worming his hands into his pants to grasp at his cock.

“Bloody hell,” he gasps when the Knight pulls him free and quickly swallows him down.

He’d be planning a break to get out of his head for a bit before coming back to edit his essay but this was nowhere near what he had in mind. “Gods,-“ he moans, and abruptly realises that he doesn’t even know this bloke’s name.

But then he’s opening his throat and taking Merlin deeper and he no longer cares. The muscles in his stomach twitch as he resists the urge to thrust into the Knight's pink mouth, seizing onto the threads of his blonde hair instead and clutching at the table to keep still.

Gods, he had no idea that a Knight could have a talent with his mouth for something other than
talking. But then again, he could never have predicted one would ever willingly suck him off and
look like he was enjoying it.

The Knight hums around his prick, reaching down to grind the heel of his palm against his own
bulge, groan muffled around his full lips. Merlin gasps and tilts his head back, blood buzzing as his
orgasm draws nearer. The Knight strokes along the base of Merlin’s cock before his fingers drift
beneath to gently cup his balls.

The pleasure keeps building heatedly beneath his skin and Merlin needs to draw in his magic or
else he’s going to accidentally set something on fire. The Knight keeps reaching past his balls and
presses a dry finger to his hole and then Merlin is coming with a sharp cry, thrusting into his mouth
even as he swallows everything down.

He shudders through the aftershocks and sinks to his knees, slipping out of the Knight’s mouth,
cock wet with saliva as he half collapses on top of him.

“Bloody hell,” he repeats, seizing the back of the Knight’s neck and dragging him into a filthy kiss.

Merlin fumbles to cover the Knight’s hand working furiously over his cock now and slips his own
fingers into the Knight’s running shorts to wank him off. He’s definitely a handful. The Knight
kisses almost as well as he sucks cock and he’s panting into his mouth when he finally comes with
a long drawn out groan.

Merlin pulls away to let the Knight breathe and then uses his magic to clean them both up.

“Not so cheeky now are you, spellbegger?”

The consequences of what he’s just done and who with, hits him like a battering ram. Merlin
pushes the Knight back, rocking to his feet and tucking himself away furiously.

“You are such a clotpole,” he snaps, kicking at his shoulder so that the Knight tips over onto his
back.

“Now, hold on,” he laughs and Merlin really wishes he could teach him a proper lesson.

Merlin steps over him instead, dodging his hands when he tries to grasp at his ankle.

“Come on now, love, give us the ball,” he says. “Deal’s a deal after all.”

He stops at the door, concentrating hard for a moment. “There you go.”

The Knight only frowns. “Where is it?”

“I think you’ll find it on one of the dorm rooftops,” he replies, with the same type of airiness. “If
you’re lucky.”

The Knight laughs again as if he couldn’t be more pleased by the fact and Merlin clenches his fists
together. “Huh, you’re a funny little warlock, aren’t you?”

Merlin can’t believe somebody could be such a fantastic shag and still be an utter prat about it.

“Get stuffed.”

“You don’t know who I am, do you?” he guesses, amazed.

Merlin spins about to face him. “I know you’re an arsehole Knight that just got me off and if we’re
both fortunate, we’ll never see each other again.”
“So you don’t fancy another round then?” the Knight wonders twisting elegantly onto his side in some ridiculous pose as he stares up at him.

Merlin really wishes he wasn’t so bloody fit.

“Nah,” he lies, twisting open the door. “You weren’t that good. Not worth getting a leg over at all.” And he’s slamming the door shut in the Knight’s shocked face.

Merlin stumps on up to the second level again but pauses on the staircase to stare out the window and watch the Knight return to his friends. He swaggers out all casual and visibly sated and Merlin has no doubt he’s already telling them about the Magic User he just shagged in the Library.

He’s just about ready to summon a rain cloud over them before the blonde is throwing his arm around the curly haired Knight and leading the rest of his mates away without further protest. Merlin allows himself to feel only a little bit triumphant at that. He hurries up to second level and reclains his seat.

He barely gets his laptop open and starts proof reading his essay all over again before he can feel the eyes of the other students. He glances up and nearly every single person is gawking at him. Even Mordred is watching him curiously.

Merlin should hardly be the first Magic User to ever stand up to a bunch of thick-headed Knights but something tells him that in this instance, what he just did was unheard of. If they really knew what actually happened- he doubts they would be looking at him so admiringly. Merlin manages to proof read about five hundred of his fifteen-hundred-word essay before the attention becomes too distracting and he gives up on the Library altogether.

He walks back to Gaius’ flat and thankfully, for once, doesn’t encounter any Knights on the way there.

He submits his essay with an hour to spare and doesn’t think on how that orgasm, courtesy of the blonde haired Knight, cleared his head enough to make it happen.

Amazingly, rumours about what they did in the study room doesn’t spread around Campus, at least not to Merlin’s ears.

The blonde and his Knights retrieved the football from the dorm rooftop in the West Wing that Merlin left it on and thankfully he hasn’t run afoul of any of them since. Until he’s on the way to his Tuesday lecture for Healing and Restorative Magic and catches sight of that blonde head again.

Merlin considers turning right around and going the long way to his lecture, Gaius’ disapproving scowl when he inevitably walks into the lecture hall late, be damned. That is before he realises that he and his little gang of Knights are carrying crossbows and preventing Magic Users from getting through the corridor.

“You’re blocking the hallway,” Merlin announces once he reaches them. “Go mess about with your weapons somewhere else.”

The blonde Knight turns to face him with a delighted smile. “Oh it’s you again. Here to banish us, are we?”
Merlin gestures at the rest of the students still attempting to squeeze through. “You’re choking up the corridor. The least you could do is take your blood initiation rituals elsewhere.”

The pretty looking Knight with perfect hair snorts in amusement as the blonde Knight stares him down. He waves the rest of the Knights on a moment later. “Well you heard him, men. We’re blocking the corridor.”

Merlin catches their unmistakeable surprise at the response before they obediently file out of the hallway.

“And for your information,” the Knight continues. “Our blood initiation takes place on Friday.”

Merlin only rolls his eyes. “Right of course.”

He stalks off before the Knight can speak, disappearing as fast as he can. But the Knight is quicker on his feet than he anticipated, catching his wrist and dragging him into an empty corridor that Merlin’s never even seen before.

“Hey, what are you-?”

“Fancy a go then?” the Knight whispers urgently in his ear. “I’ve got time.”

Merlin certainly does not have time but his hands are already in the Knight’s pants fumbling to grip his cock hard. “So you do want to then?” he mutters, annoyingly stating the obvious and sounding unfairly breathless about it. “Even if I’m not worth getting a leg-“

Merlin shuts him up with his mouth just because he can. And the Knight responds in kind, enthusiastically pinning him to wall, warm hands holding tight to his waist. But they shouldn’t be doing this again. And not in some empty hallway where anybody could spot them.

Somehow Merlin can’t find it in himself to care. Not when the Knight is yanking at his scarf, pulling it down in order to get his mouth on his throat.

“Why do you even wear this hideous neckerchief thing,” the Knight mutters and Merlin’s heated answer is lost in response to the Knight’s mouth on his exposed throat as he sucks bruising kisses into the skin there.

“It’s a scarf,” Merlin remembers to argue eventually. “It’s bloody cold here in-”

His words become airless flakes in his mouth as he gasps, harsh and bewildered by the sensation of the Knight pressing against him, one hand on his hip, the other still holding the scarf out of the path of his burning lips.

Merlin clutches at him, shuddering and flushed and wishing they weren’t standing there in the hallway so he could climb atop the Knight and shut him up once and for all. But the Knight pulls back instead, to catch his breath, watching closely as Merlin swallows air and tries not to sound breathless.

“God, you’re a pretty thing, aren’t you?”

“And you’re pompous and arrogant,” Merlin retorts, reddening at the compliment in spite of himself.

He’s already got in his pants, the Knight hardly needs to butter him up. He’s not expecting anything beyond another random shag. Merlin doesn’t want anything else. “Hey what’s your name
anyway?” the Knight wonders once he’s gotten their cocks out of their pants and pressed them together in his palm.

Merlin summons lube into his hand to slick them up and the Knight groans in surprise and longing.

“Like you need to know,” he gasps when the Knight starts to stroke.

This is really starting to become a bad habit. “C’mon,” the Knight presses, wanking them off together. “Stop pretending that you’re interesting, spellbegger.”

Merlin shoves him backwards, forcing him to let go of their pricks. “Stop calling me that.”

The Knight doesn’t move closer. “Tell us your name then and maybe you’ll have me moaning it.”

He wishes he didn't make that sound so suggestive. “It’s Merlin.”

“Mer-lin?” the Knight repeats with disbelief. “Well no wonder you’re so hot and bothered all the time.”

Wow. Merlin didn’t think he could dislike this bloke more but apparently he’s ambitious. “Piss off.”

“Oh is that how it is Merlin,” the Knight teases. “You sure you don’t want me to help you relax a little?”

Merlin steps forward and pulls him in, pushing their bodies close and wrapping his hand around the both of them again. “Just shut up already,” he mutters, biting at the Knight’s throat. “I like it better when you don’t talk.”

But the Knight laughs, long and loud at the words. “I could have you kicked out of Camelot for that.”

Merlin scoffs and rolls his eyes, jerking his hand faster as his orgasm starts rushing forward. He comes with a cry, spurting across his own fingers and the Knight’s prick, slicking up both of their cocks with the mess.

He shivers through the aftermath, sensitive and overwrought but grips them both harder, tugging the Knight off until he’s coming as well. Merlin collapses against the wall and tries to get his breath back. “Who do you think you are? The Dean?”

The Knight grins and tucks himself away, Merlin cleaning them up with a sharp look and a bit of focus. “Ask me my name then.”

Merlin pulls his pants back up, buzzing from the thrill of an amazing orgasm and raises an eyebrow, trying to mock the Knight’s expression. “And why would I want to know that?”

He ends up ten minutes late to Gaius’ lecture. The entire class of Magic Users turns to stare at him when Merlin walks in. He skulks to the back of the room, trying to seem as unobtrusive as possible, flushing from the unwanted attention.

Gaius frowns at him and now Merlin has a different kind of lecture to look forward to when he heads back to the flat tonight.

He’s not willing to admit that it was worth it.
Gwen invites Merlin to a Knight party on Campus that weekend but he turns her down on principle.

“Oh don’t be like that Merlin,” she says, smiling fondly. “It’s fancy dress. Nobody will be able to tell who you are, Knight or Magic User. It should be fun.”

Merlin highly doubts that but Gwen can be plenty convincing when she wants to be. And it would be good to have some fun for once. He hasn’t taken a break from study since term first started.

Gwen dresses up like a pirate and looks positively swashbuckling so much that Merlin spells the fake parrot stuck to her shoulder to caw every twenty minutes. He goes dressed as the trickster Loki, but conceals himself with an emerald cloak, hood pulled low to cover his face.

The party is full of Knights and Merlin hates that most of them have taken to dressing up like different kinds of wizards and witches. There are more than enough Harry Potters running around and Merlin knows their intentions for dressing like that are offensive rather than fun. Merlin does his best to ‘accidentally’ tread on as many toes as possible, spilling drinks over people when their feet are otherwise out of reach. He ends up having a much better time than expected.

And Gwen seems to be enjoying herself as well.

There’s a pretty woman dressed as Ariel from the little Mermaid wearing a red wig and tight scaly looking green pants standing beside her, holding a drink. The bright smile on Gwen’s face tells him the pale beauty has her complete attention.

At least she’s got a chance of getting laid tonight. Merlin sees another Knight, Cenred, who’s a particularly unbearable prat on Campus, and a violent one too, and makes sure that his elbow hits his cup hard enough to spill the entire drink all over his wizard robes. He disappears into the crowd before Cenred can find someone to blame.

“I saw that, you know.”

Merlin snaps his head up at the person gripping his arm and sees that bloody blonde Knight again. “You,” he accuses, sounding exactly like he’s reproaching him for simply existing.

At least he’s not dressed up as a Magic User. But the fact that he’s carrying a hammer and looking every bit the Norse God Thor with tight trousers that hug his arse, probably makes it worse. Their costumes are bloody matching. Merlin could think of nothing more horrifying than that.

The Knight seems to like it though because he laughs once he realises who he’s dressed as. “Very nice, Merlin,” he admits admiringly. “Gonna give me a look at what’s underneath that cloak then?”

Merlin’s not relieved to see him. He’s not. He’s not out of his element here and feeling like a bit of an idiot roaming from room to room without drinking. But he can’t deny it doesn’t feel good to reel the Knight in close and kiss his mouth. Or the way it parts under his tongue, hot and pliant and softer than it has any right to be.

He forgets about stomping feet and spilling drinks, twisting his fingers in the strands of the Knight’s hair and keeping him close. The Knight fumbles at his tunic before he manages to get his fingers under Merlin’s shirt, to press at the heated skin there.

“Come on,” the Knight says, drawing back, pupils wide and his lips swollen from snogging. Merlin
wants to mark him all over. “Upstairs.”

Merlin hesitates. This is a Knight’s place and it’s known as their unofficial party house on Campus. The Knight who owns it must be flush with coin and Merlin doesn’t like the idea of being in enemy territory longer than he has to.

But then again he’s already getting off with the enemy so what’s one more line to cross? Merlin lets the Knight lead him upstairs, prick swelling with interest as he watches his arse move in those tight trousers of his. He might be a total prat, but he’s a fit one at that. He finds an empty room and then he’s dragging Merlin inside it, tugging on the material of his cloak.

“Come on then. Want to shag a God?”

Merlin rolls his eyes and pushes the Knight down onto the bed. “You already think you’re a God without the costume. Can’t go giving you an even bigger head.”

The Knight laughs and then he’s rolling onto his stomach. “Now don’t be jealous Merlin. It’s a combination of raw talent and hard training.”

Yeah right. What a load of bollocks.

Merlin hunches over the Knight’s body, kicking his legs apart so he can better situate himself. The Knight groans and eagerly cants his hips back, pushing his arse up into Merlin’s groin. “Well come on and a bugger me then. We haven’t got all day.”

He hesitates, loathe to admit that he hasn’t in fact actually buggered anyone before. Merlin’s never gotten that far. But there’s no way he’s going to confess that to a Knight. He knows the procedure of it, thanks to having a mother that didn’t assume heterosexuality as the default in sex education, but there’s a difference between knowing and putting it into action.

But then the Knight huffs into the pillows with an irritating level of impatience. “Bloody well get on with it then.”

And Merlin forgets about being nervous.

He gets a hold of the Knight’s tight leather pants and tugs them down, hissing in shock when he uncovers his bare arse. Who goes to a party without any pants on? Before he can ask the Knight is fumbling with Thor’s plastic armour and miraculously procuring some lube and condoms.

He doesn’t bother to question him about it, it’s highly unlikely the Knight brought them along anticipating Merlin, a Magic User would turn up at a Knight party. Besides, the Knight is a fit bloke, totally lush and Merlin hardly doubts he’s the only one shagging him.

He gets the lube first and smears a large amount onto his fingers before slipping them between the Knight’s arse cheeks. The soft noise that falls from the Knight’s mouth as he traces the rim of his hole, makes his throat dry. Merlin cups himself just to find some relief while he slides a finger into the Knight’s body.

The Knight is soft and hot inside and Merlin presses his finger deep and savours the noises he offers at the first touch. He’s careful, probing, as he slides in another, using his fingers to open him up and wishing the Knight was out of that stupid costume altogether. Just so he can put his mouth against his spine and see it arch beneath his hands.

“Go on, get your kit off.”
The Knight snorts with muffled laughter. “Do you know how long it took me to get into those blasted trousers, Merlin?”

He sighs because of course he’s going to be difficult. Merlin removes the Knight’s costume with a whisper of a spell, glad to finally see all of that bare skin. He leans down to kiss at the Knight’s spine, curious at all of the fresh bruises and left over battle scars.

He sucks a mark onto the ridges of his spine, tasting his flesh there and crooking his fingers inside him.

“Bloody hell,” the Knight pants. “I knew those long fingers of yours were good for something.”

He can’t help but snort into the Knight’s skin, biting deeply at the flesh and twisting his fingers just so.

“Merlin,” the Knight cries out and truly, he likes the sounds of him begging.

Merlin pulls his fingers out, too quickly from the sound of the Knight’s hiss of surprise but he’s already too busy fumbling to withdraw his prick from his trousers.

He gets the condom open and manages somehow to roll it onto his cock along with more lube, all with the helpless shuddering of his hips, sliding his prick against the Knight’s arse. He nestles his cock between the Knight’s hips next, breathes deep and starts to press up against his entrance.

There’s resistance at first before the Knight relaxes and his body opens up like a flower, pulling Merlin’s prick in deeper, welcoming him in. The burning heat of him is unbearable. Merlin’s arms buckle and he collapses on top of his back, forehead pushed up between the Knight’s shoulder blades, struggling not to finish already.

“Yes, yes, God, yes,” the knight groans, catching at his hipbone and urging him on.

Merlin feels the floor start to rattle beneath them with unrestrained magic and has to pause and focus on reining it in. But the Knight only rocks forward, oblivious, and drags him into a thrust that he’s not ready for.

“Oh- O,” he gasps, gripping onto his ribs to settle him. “Hold on. Let me just-“

“Hurry the fuck up,” he snaps. “Come on, Merlin. Shag me already.”

He breathes deep for a full minute, trying to ignore the incredible heat wrapped around his prick or the way the Knight keeps tightening around him. Once he’s sure he’s not about blow up the entire house, Merlin lifts his head up, gathering himself up onto his elbows to watch his prick slide out of the Knights arse before he’s ramming back in.

“Oh, that’s right,” the Knight says encouragingly and if Merlin knew he’d get so much sweeter with a cock up his arse, he’d have buggered him the very first time they did this.

Though to be fair, Merlin would probably do anything right now to keep his prick where it is so he understands. Not that he fancies the Knight or anything. But Merlin didn’t know a roll around could feel so fantastic. He pulls out and shoves his prick back into the warm clutch of the Knight’s body, stretching out to reach his throat. Merlin cards his fingers into the blonde’s hair, gripping tight and tilting him around to get at the bare expanse of his neck.

Merlin grinds deep, pushing the Knight further into the mattress as he sucks marks onto his throat. The Knight’s hand reaches out to cup the back of Merlin’s skull, goading him on. The next shudder
of his hips, pushes him deep enough that his balls press up against the Knight’s arse. The heat of it is too much, the slick making the slide between them faster as Merlin curls over him.

The Knight curses and shakes through his orgasm, tightening viciously around Merlin and clutching him close through the aftereffects.

After that there’s not much holding out. Merlin follows, coming with a weak sigh, moaning into the Knight’s skin and resting against his back as their bodies cool. He settles against the Knight more firmly, the strength to move sapped out of him for the moment. He’s going to need a few minutes. Or maybe he’ll just lie here content and sated forever.

Until of course the sound of somebody else banging on the door interrupts the bliss of his afterglow. “Oi! Pendragon! Get your arse and whichever slag you’re buggering in there outside to share a pint!”

Merlin curses fiercely, and goes to pull out, rolling over onto the mattress even as the Knight makes a protesting noise and tries to grab at him. As if to keep him inside a little longer. “Ignore them-“

“Stop that,” Merlin hisses, swatting at his hands. “Didn’t you hear him? This is Arthur Pendragon’s bedroom! We’ve got to get the hell out of here.”

The Knight turns over with a bemused grin. “I can assure you that Arthur Pendragon doesn’t live on Campus.”

Merlin resists the urge to roll his eyes. “Oh yeah? And what makes you so sure?”

But the Knight only grins wider, calmly folding his arms underneath his head and looking mightily pleased with himself. “Because I’m Arthur Pendragon.”

Merlin laughs, because he knew the Knight was a dollophead, but he didn’t know he was reckless enough to impersonate a Pendragon. “Alright,” he says, tucking himself away and reaching down to fetch the emerald cloak that he tossed onto the ground earlier.

The Knight is truly amused now. “You don’t believe me, do you? No wonder you’ve given me such cheek, you’re too much of an idiot to realise who you were talking to.”

This isn’t seeming so funny now. “If you’re Arthur Pendragon, prove it then.”

That doesn’t daunt him in the slightest. The Knight finds his costume that Merlin pitched into the corner of the room with his magic and rifles through it, coming away with his wallet. Then he saunters over and hands Merlin his driver’s licence. Merlin stares in horror at the picture of the blonde Knight smirking up at him with the name Arthur Pendragon branded underneath.

“Oh,” he says, faintly.

How could this have happened? Arthur Pendragon.

“Well this is a right cock up.”

The Knight, no, Arthur bloody Pendragon, laughs. “Not what you were expecting, I gather?”

There’s a whole entire universe Merlin could probably fill with what he wasn’t expecting. “I thought you were a tosser. I just didn’t know you were bloody king tosser!”
Arthur is still smiling. “You know, I think I like you all riled up like this.”

He reaches out like he’s going to drag him back into bed again and the most horrifying thing about that is how Merlin is completely up for it. And that’s about all of the alarming realisations he’s willing to take in one evening.

“Right, I’m off then,” he says, starting for the door.

“Now wait a moment,” Arthur says, trying to hurry after him but Merlin’s quicker and manages to slip out the door before he can catch him.

Merlin seals the door shut with magic and Arthur curses and bangs his fist against it but the spell will hold for at least ten minutes. He ignores the sounds of him cursing, remembering the charming noises he made earlier and fumbles to cover his flushed face, drawing the hood back up over his head.

Merlin has plans to say goodbye to Gwen first but when he makes it downstairs she’s a little busy snogging the hell out of mermaid Ariel so he figures it’s better to leave her alone. He’ll text her later to say he got home safe.

He heads on outside, making sure to hit as many unprotected feet as possible of any warlock costumers and pauses to look out at the Campus, reconsidering most, if not all of his life choices. When a couple more Knights in offensive warlock kits come drunkenly lurching toward him, he decides that he’s had enough.

Merlin walks back to Gaius’ flat alone, still feeling the pull of Arthur’s skin between his teeth and the tight, phantom heat of his body.

Gwen visits him at his flat on Sunday covered in a few hickeys herself.

“At least you had fun,” he grumbles and sets about making her a cup of tea.

He’s not entirely sure that he wants to admit the colossal betrayal he’s committed by sleeping with a Knight. “You looked like you were enjoying yourself,” she protests. “And don’t pretend I didn’t see you snogging Thor.”

Bollocks.

“Yeah, but he’s the enemy, I’m sure Ariel is a Knight just as you.”

Gwen’s frowning now as he pours the boiled water into two separate mugs. “Well there weren’t many Magic Users there, you see, but I wouldn’t have been bothered if she was-“

“If you say so, but I saw plenty of Magic Users last night and none of them were friendly.”

She accepts the tea with a sigh. “Well, yes that was incredibly rude and pig-headed of them, but you mustn’t have been that bothered by it since you went off with that Knight nearly half the night.”

“Yeah, until I found out he was bloody Arthur Pendragon!”

She gasps and nearly drops the mug. “The bloke in the tight pants was Arthur? And you shagged
Merlin puts his fingertips to his forehead, pushing his hair back with a pained sound. “Before I knew who he was. He’d been trying to tell me every time we-“

Gwen has to set her tea down because she looks like she’s about to drop it. “Every time? You’ve done this with Arthur before?”

“I didn’t know he was Arthur!”

Thank the gods, Gaius is out replenishing his herb stocks today, so he can shout and make a fuss as much as he wants too. Though Merlin should probably refrain from disturbing the neighbours.

“It was Morgana,” Gwen declares suddenly, flushing a deep red. “The little mermaid? That’s who I was snogging last night.”

“Morgana Pendragon?”

“Yes well, unlike you I did bother to ask her name first,” Gwen mutters before realising what she said. “Er, not that there’s anything wrong with not knowing a person’s name before you bugger them but—“

Merlin has to sit down. “What a pair, we make,” he says, rubbing at his face. “Snogging Pendragons.”

Gwen sits next to him, avoiding his eyes. “Well maybe a bit more than snogging,” she admits. “I er- gave her my number.”

Right. Naturally. Merlin gulps down some of his hot tea just for something to do. Gwen still seems to be processing all of this new information. “So even though you despise Knights more than anything you been letting Arthur, what? Bugger you all over Campus?”

Merlin’s willing to admit it’s a little nonsensical to be sure. But he’s oddly defensive about it. “And if I have? And who says I’m the one being buggered?”

Gwen lets out a little incredulous laugh and manages to cover her mouth. “Are you telling me Arthur Pendragon has been taking it up the arse from you?”

Merlin’s not so sure that he wants to discuss this anymore. What happened at the party had been—something. It shouldn’t matter who got buggered by who but the prevailing focus of horror should be that Arthur Pendragon was involved. But Gwen only stares him down, impatiently waiting for the truth.

“Last night he did, yeah.”

She laughs again. “But Merlin don’t you see? Arthur’s a complete and utter prat and now you’ve got him right where you want him.”

The picture of Arthur beneath him, swims into his mind again just like earlier this morning when he had an energetic wank to the memory of it, and he swallows hard, reddening at the image. “I do think that was rather the point, Gwen,” he suggests trying not to sound too strangled. “Besides, what kind of arsehole would make fun on somebody for that?”

Gwen seems to deflate a little then. “Goodness you’re absolutely right. I can’t believe I even suggested it.”
Merlin sips his tea and pats her shoulder comfortingly. “It’s not your fault,” he teases. “The Knights are rubbing off on you.”

“Oi,” she protests, shoving him with an easy laugh. “I wouldn’t be surprised. They’re a right bunch of pricks. Well, most of them are. And I still can’t believe you’re shagging one.”

He sets his mug down with a loud bang. “Obviously I no longer have any plans to shag him now that I know he came from the loins of Uther Pendragon.”

“Ugh,” she cries, face screwing up. “That’s disgusting.”

“Exactly.” Merlin nods and goes back to drinking his tea. “So I’ve committed the highest of treasons ploughing his son, since I loathe Uther Pendragon and all that he stands for.”

Gwen stirs her pinky through the surface of her tea. “Morgana’s not so bad. She seems to think Uther’s a right prat too.”

Merlin grins at the innocent disinterest in her voice. “Does she now?”

Her answering blush says a lot about the situation. Merlin can’t help but feel happy for her even with the Pendragon name involved. “Oh shut up you. Drink you tea.”

Merlin drinks his tea. It’s a better alternative to thinking of what happened.

Arthur bloody Pendragon.

What on earth has Merlin *done*?
I've done everything I know I can do, I'm still hung up you

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is from the song Hung Up by Tritonal & SJ feat Emma Gatsby

Merlin sticks to his word. Throughout the weekend. Then on Monday and Tuesday.

Wednesday gets complicated. Because he’s finally catching sight of Arthur again at the opposite end of the hallway. He has plans this time though. Tactics of avoidance.

Ignoring the flare of heat in his gut, the sharpness of his breath and the urgency in his blood at the sight of Arthur isn’t easy but Merlin tries his best.

He doesn’t want Arthur Pendragon. He *doesn’t*.

He can’t. He won’t. But then Arthur seems to feel the eyes on him because his head turns, catching Merlin in the act of staring and that’s all it takes.

Merlin steps forward and grabs at Arthur, or Arthur grabs at him because when reality comes crashing down on him again in the back of an empty classroom, Merlin’s trousers are pooled around his ankles and he’s pushing his cock, slippery with lube and come feebly into Arthur’s fist, snogging the hell out of him.

Arthur grins when they draw back to take a breath, fingers locked in the material of Merlin’s scarf. “So the horrid neckerchief thing is back, I see.”

Merlin recoils in horror.

“This didn’t happen,” he insists, though the mixture of Arthur's and his own come splashed against his jumper might say otherwise. “You’re a Pendragon.”

Arthur only smiles. “Yes, funnily enough I did know that. What with you repeating it just now before you came all over me.”

How- how dare he look like he’s enjoying himself! This is a mistake of monumental proportions. A Knight and a Magic User should never-

Merlin cleans up the mess by sliding the palm of his hand over the air above them, spluttering in protest. “Obviously, this is just some bizarre kind of accident. And won’t ever happen again. I’m in control of myself.”

Arthur doesn’t seem so convinced. But that might have more to do with the fact that Merlin is already stroking Arthur’s prick until he starts to get hard again.

For Kilgharrah’s next lesson, the entire class is instructed to wear swimmers, as it will take place in
Avalon. They’re learning about the properties of elemental water magic this week and they need the extra space in order to conduct the lesson.

The swimming pool inside the Avalon building is colossal but it’s closer to a lake than an actual pool. Merlin can feel the magic in the air and knows it’s been enchanted to make it larger and deeper than any pool could possibly be.

The magic gives the place a strange and eerie energy, and the rest of the Magic Users are silent once they’ve gotten undressed in the locker rooms and entered the lake. He can see that Freya looks nervous, and so does Gilli, the boy who sits next to him in his Healing and Restoration class.

Kilgharrah waits for them by the lake’s edge, hands clasped behind his back and instructs them all to float on the surface of the water.

The place feels sacred, innocent, and Merlin is soon swept up in the tranquillity of it. No one talks. The other Magic Users clearly sense the same thing Merlin does as they get comfortable on their backs.

Kilgharrah speaks only after a few minutes of the students floating in the lake and Merlin struggles to concentrate, swept away by the peace and quietude. The water is cool and soothing against his skin and it’s very easy to slip into a meditative state.

“As we have discussed the significant uses of elemental water magic in our previous lesson, this week you shall put it into practice. Spread yourself out in the water, not within touching distance of your fellow Magic Users.”

There’s a fair amount of splashing as they move to comply. Merlin is already by far the one at the furthest distance from Kilgharrah, nearly floating in the centre of the lake and doesn’t need to move. Kilgharrah waits until the rest of them are in the right position.

“What I wish for you to do, is to attempt to influence the water around you. Start small, feel the pull of the lake, feel the presence of old magic that has been here since Camelot was founded and allow it to embrace you.”

Merlin can feel it.

“Bend it to your will. Let your thoughts flow like water and they will strengthen your connection to it. You should be able to create ripples in the lake around you. You may begin.”

Merlin closes his eyes and focuses on his breathing, the push and pull of air and how it swirls like the ocean. He lets his consciousness roll and surge as it sinks rapidly to the bottom of the lake.

His mind drifts beneath the muddy soil until he is no longer in the lake at all. He is standing at the centre of the Quad and he is not alone.

Arthur is running towards him at full pelt, grin wild and joyful, covered in chain mail and armour, sword drawn as he gives chase. Merlin turns and there are more Knights running, dressed the same as he is, hooting and laughing.

This is some kind of training exercise and Merlin does not need to move before he is at Arthur’s side again, tugged along by an invisible chain. Arthur’s eyes are alight and determined as he closes in, completely unaware of Merlin’s presence. His hair is matted at his forehead, eyes blue and bright and Merlin has never seen him look so alive.

He runs and even though Merlin doesn’t move he keeps pace, pulled along as if he were physically
tethered. Arthur laughs again, eager and so free that Merlin wants to kiss him badly enough that he aches with it.

“Merlin!”

He flinches and comes back to himself, opening his mouth and swallowing what feels like the entire lake before sinking under. When he chokes and resurfaces Kilgharrah is somehow above him, floating on the air.

“Breathe Merlin,” he commands. “Slowly.”

Merlin does, feeling the shifting of the lake beneath him, the way it moves like the ocean does, rolling back and forth with every breath. Half of the Magic Users have swum to the water’s edge and clambered out, some of them, Morgause in particular, are shooting him dirty looks.

Once he realises that it’s his breathing which is influencing the flow of the lake, the magic leaves him in a rush. Kilgharrah returns to land once he’s certain that Merlin is not going to drown and waits patiently for him to swim back.

He feels a little shaky and off centre, but mostly embarrassed. Nobody else seemed to slip into the trance that he did. Merlin climbs out of the lake and fetches a towel to cover himself. Before he can consider the pros and cons of fleeing half-naked, Kilgharrah has already reached his side.

“What visions did you see?” he wonders, fascinated.

Merlin flushes and looks at his bare toes. There’s no way he’s planning on admitting it was some strange kind of daydream about Arthur Pendragon to a room full of Magic Users.

“Nothing.”

Kilgharrah does not believe him, and his heavy orange eyes peer into him unsettlingly before he blinks and steps to face the other students.

“You experienced first hand what elemental water magic can do for a Magic User,” he says. “Merlin here was able to transform the calm stillness of the lake into a motion of the ocean’s waves, pushing and pulling as it flows and retreats from the shore. All of this, he connected to the push and pull of his own breaths.”

Merlin wipes the water dripping from his face, feeling a rush of pride as well as discomfiture from all the quizzical stares being directed his way. “He was able to tap into this instinctive connection between the body and magic, and it was this which allowed his mind to experience a significant vision.”

“Of the future?” Mordred asks, suspicious.

“Water is the surface in which we may see a mirror reflection of other worlds,” Kilgharrah explains. “This is why scrying is intrinsically linked with elemental water magic. A mind without direction is a curious thing. When it flows like water, there are many visions it may seek, the past, the present, the future, things of significant weight or meaning within our lives.”

Merlin highly doubts that it’s the latter. The only significant weight Arthur Pendragon has is the significant prattishness that he unleashes upon everyone else. That hardly makes him special or unique.

“This is a powerful element of magical learning but foretelling the future is explored more
substantially within our Seers and Soothsayer courses.”

Merlin has plans to enrol into the Soothsayer course but they don’t offer it in the first term. He’ll have to wait until after the break.

“I think we will leave it there for now. For your homework I want you to attempt to recreate what Merlin has shown us today, though individual Magic Users might not have such an affinity for elemental water magic. Since Avalon is closed after five pm and I doubt magical lakes are freely available elsewhere, for your attempts to create ripples in the water, a bathtub will suffice. Your ability to influence every element will be tested in the exam at the end of term so I suggest you practice. You may now shower and get redressed. Thus concludes the lesson.”

When the Magic Users start shuffling towards the locker rooms, Merlin starts to head on after them. “Merlin?” Kilgharrah calls, expression calm like the surface of the lake beside them. “A word, please.”

Merlin shuffles towards him, aware of the eyes on his back and the fact that he’s still in his swimming trunks and dripping all over the tiles.

“I do not think I need to tell you of the extent of your powers,” he says. “Particularly as you have yet to learn many spells.”

He shifts his feet, watching the last of the Magic Users disappear into the locker rooms to shower and get dressed. “Er-

“Camelot has not seen your like before,” Kilgharrah continues. “I think it is clear that you have a great destiny awaiting you.”

Merlin stares up into his orange eyes with interest. “So you know of my destiny?”

Kilgharrah only smiles. “I think you will find, Merlin. That your destiny, in particular, holds great power over the future of Camelot.”

That seems like a lot of pressure for only one student. Especially a Magic User who’s barely learnt any spells. Merlin doesn't want to be responsible for the future of Camelot if he can help it. “What exactly does that mean, sir?”

“It means, Merlin, that your gifts have the potential to heal the fracture within this University, caused by ignorance, fear and hatred.”

Merlin frowns. “My gifts?”

“I have seen many things,” Kilgharrah explains. “And in each future, it is you Merlin, who serves the best chance for affecting great change in the way Knights perceive Magic Users.”

The faraway look in his eyes makes Merlin think he's peering into the future right now. Has Merlin been prophesied to unite the departments of Camelot? How could anyone complete a task so hopeless as that? It doesn't seem possible.

“But it cannot be done alone,” Kilgharrah continues, as if answering the questions in Merlin’s head. “A Knight circles you and it is only together that you might succeed.”

He’s definitely lost Merlin now. “A Knight?” he wonders distrustfully.

“Yes. Without him you will surely fail. As he would fail without you. Together your power only
grows to defeat the evil magic throughout this land.”

“So he must be the one I’ll get assigned to before I graduate then,” Merlin guesses. “Who is he?”

Kilgharrah’s large glowing eyes, blink at him. “That, young warlock, is what you are destined to discover alone.”

Right. Of course. He should not have expected clarity from The Great Dragon. From what Gaius has told him, it is not one of his strong points. “Er- alright then. Thanks.”

Merlin heads off to the locker rooms alone but by then most of the Magic Users are dressed and already leaving. Morgause stops him before he can enter the men’s room.

“That was impressive, Merlin,” she says. “I think perhaps you are not at all what you may seem.”

Merlin only offers a weak smile and it’s after she’s walked away that he realises maybe that was more of an insult than a compliment. He collect his things from the locker, pleased at least that he has the whole place to himself when he sets his clothes and fresh towel down by the clothes rack and steps into a shower stall.

His trunks are tricky to pull off since the water makes them cling to his skin and by the time he’s finally naked, he lets them drop to the tiles with a wet slap of relief. Merlin picks them up afterward and shakes most of the water off before hanging them over the door. He can always dry it with magic later. The hot water is a nice change from the calming chill of the lake and Merlin is quietly humming to himself under the spray when a heavy door slams shut outside.

He jumps at the noise and pauses, turning around to listening carefully. He thinks he might be able to hear footsteps.

“Hello?” he calls. “Who’s there?”

There’s no answer but Merlin can sense people moving about, drawn to the sound of his voice and he suddenly regrets announcing that he’s all alone in here. There are heavy footsteps in the locker room now. Merlin thinks he might hear a whisper of a voice and he reaches out to turn off the taps to better hear them when the trunks hanging over the door suddenly disappear, yanked off from the other side.

“Oi!” he protests and there’s an explosion of laughter and running feet.

Followed by the clinking of chain mail. Merlin bursts angrily out of the shower, forgetting his nakedness as he looks over and sees they’ve nicked the rest of his clothes and towel as well. Merlin runs out through the changing rooms and back into the main part of the building where the lake is housed and sees the backs of two Knights, dressed in full armour like Arthur had been, taking off through the doors at the opposite end of the building.

There are two entrances to Avalon but Merlin’s too busy clenching his fists and angrily staring at the doors the Knights just disappeared through to worry about anybody else coming in and seeing him from the opposite side. Of course until those doors are slamming open and the sound of approaching footsteps pound across the tiles. Merlin snaps his head towards the noise, shocked to see Arthur running towards him, fully dressed in armour and looking exactly like he had in his daydream. As if it hadn’t really been a daydream after all.

“Arthur,” he says, startled, when Arthur pulls up short and grins before sheathing the sword held in his grip.
“You’re not wearing any clothes, Merlin,” he points out, delighted.

Merlin looks down and flushes, remembering he's completely naked and not in possession of any clothing. He barely succeeds in covering himself, though he doesn't make much of an effort. “How is it that I always end up naked around you?”

Arthur doesn’t even try to pretend that he’s not looking. “I personally think it’s one of your best qualities,” he replies, stepping closer with evident interest.

Merlin sighs and figures he’ll just have to summon some clothes to wear in order to replace the ones that were stolen. “Not that I’m complaining,” Arthur continues, ogling him all over. “But why exactly are you naked, Merlin?”

Yes well. That.

“Some of your arsehole mates nicked all my clothes,” he mutters. “I don’t think they thought it through very much. I mean, they do realise I have magic right? And can summon anything I want?”

Arthur looks less amused now, folding his arms impressively. “Oh? Who were they?”

Merlin only shrugs. “Only saw the back of their heads. Bit more embarrassing for them than for me, really.”

He still looks a little peeved which Merlin can’t quite seem to understand, since he was perfectly cheerful a moment ago. “Pity,” he says, and Merlin has the distinct feeling that he means it.

What was he going to do? Knock a couple heads together?

“Well since you’re here,” Arthur adds, sliding a gloved finger down Merlin’s chest and watching him shiver with hooded eyes. “And you’re already naked—”

Merlin starts to get hard when Arthur touches him, gloved hand trailing down his sternum and increasing the sensitivity of his skin. He feels very naked all of a sudden since Arthur is all but covered in armour and he has no idea how he’s supposed to get at his body underneath all those layers.

Arthur smiles when he cups one of Merlin’s arse cheeks and hauls him closer, pulling him into a kiss that makes the rest of the world fall away. But the chain mail is coarse and hard against his skin and Merlin reluctantly pulls back, resisting the urge to rut into Arthur’s hip.

“Why are you in armour anyway?” he wonders, defying Arthur’s attempts to draw him back again.

“We’re doing a drill,” he explains. “Hunting Gwaine.”

Merlin’s not sure that he heard that right. “You’re hunting Gwaine? Who is a person? And not some manner of wild beast?”

Arthur’s gloved fingers are roaming across Merlin’s body again. “Yeah. We do them every week. Whoever takes the longest to be caught automatically earns a spot in the final stage of the tournament at the end of this month.”

“Have they er- hunted you yet?”

Arthur smiles, sly and eager. “Not yet. But of course I plan to win.”
Right. Naturally he’d be cocky about that. “Then you better be off then.”

“Nah,” Arthur says, stepping close again signalling his intent. “They’ll have caught him now anyway. I’d rather stay here and get my fingers in your arse.”

The image makes him shudder. He should have realised he’d caught Arthur’s interest in a different sort of hunt. Merlin hasn’t really fingered himself very much, let alone had anybody else do it but with Arthur’s enrapt expression and the heat coming off his body, he’s certainly interested in giving it a go.

“Alright,” he says, taking Arthur’s arm and leading him back towards the locker rooms and out of sight. “But you better get out of all of that armour first.”

Arthur follows, especially pleased with the situation as he eyes Merlin’s naked body. Merlin’s still hard but he can’t see for sure if Arthur is in the same state underneath all of those bloody layers. But he sits down on one of the long benches anyway, facing Arthur and letting his legs fall open before wrapping a hand around himself and stroking.

He hisses out a moan at the dryness and Arthur steps forward, the fingers of his right glove between his teeth as he pulls his hand free. He tosses them next to Merlin when his hands are bare and kneels before him, getting comfortable between his splayed legs.

Arthur starts to unlock the breastplate slung across his collarbones from where it covers his right shoulder and protects the rest of his sword fighting arm. The interlinking plates look complicated but Arthur removes it quickly, tossing the armour onto the floor without pause.

He tugs off his chainmail next, leaving it in a pile beside him so that he’s left standing in a lightweight shirt and pants. Merlin swallows as he summons the lube next to him and sighs when Arthur runs his hand down his thigh, spreading heat across his skin before leaning down to kiss his stomach.

His prick twitches heavily at having Arthur’s mouth so close and he struggles to hold still when his hands continue towards his arse.

“I haven’t-” he starts, grimacing at Arthur’s shifting expression. “Much.”

Somehow he expected more teasing at the admission. But none are forthcoming. Arthur only traces his rim softly with his fingers and doesn’t press any inside. “Do you want to?”

He likes the feeling, and from the little he’s done alone in the shower, he’s liked it then too. “Yeah,” he pants. “Just- er- go easy.”

Arthur’s grin curls around his mouth, frisky and thrilled as he reaches for the lube and starts to slick his fingers up. “I’ll make it good,” he says, wrapping his left hand around Merlin’s cock and pulling him off in slippery strokes. “I promise.”

Merlin groans and tilts his neck back, focusing on trying not to lose his head already at the sturdy grip. There are callouses on Arthur’s hands, no doubt from all his sword work and Merlin can’t deny it increases the pleasure of the sensation tenfold.

He really wishes Arthur wasn’t as talented at all this. Then maybe he could stop dropping his trousers whenever he catches sight of him. Merlin has no interest in doing that right at this moment though. Not when Arthur starts stroking his rim again, adding pressure as if trying to slowly ease him into the experience before pushing a finger inside.
Arthur’s fingers aren’t as long as Merlin’s but they’re thicker, the skin around his knuckles rougher even slicked with lube. It feels like it’s too much already. There’s so much intimacy to it, feeling that first index finger and Merlin has no idea how Arthur let him shag him that first time without blinking. Especially if it feels this good.

“Arthur,” he groans, clutching desperately at him, gripping his hair at the base of his neck, and at the wrist moving slowly between his legs.

Anywhere his fingers can reach.

Arthur stops moving instantly at the strain in his voice. “Too much?”

Merlin tips his head back again, squeezing his eyes shut. “No, no. It’s good. Keep- keep going.”

Arthur moves the finger deeper, kissing at the inside of Merlin’s thigh before he carefully presses another past his rim. He sighs at the feeling, legs widening for Arthur as he slowly pushes into him.

Merlin expects him to start stretching him out immediately but Arthur doesn’t, content to get him used to the sensation. He does, a lot quicker than expected, especially when Arthur finds his prostate and keeps up a steady pressure.

“F-fuck,” he gasps, body arching into his fingers as he jolts up off the bench.

Arthur splays a hand across his sternum and easily coaxes him back down again. “That’s right,” he says. “Feels good, doesn’t it?”

Merlin groans incoherently when Arthur withdraws his fingers and pushes them back in deeper, in a slick slide that glances over that spot inside him again. Once he’s figured it out, Arthur zeros in on it like a target, seeking that spot every time and moving with a surety that shouldn’t be possible. Merlin’s cock is leaking profusely when Arthur’s third finger slides in to join the others but he stops to watch Merlin’s reaction, easing in gradually.

It’s fuller than Merlin’s been before when Arthur stretches his fingers apart and his body revolts at the strain until he finds his prostate again and rubs. Merlin groans so loudly that it echoes around the locker room.

He clutches Arthur’s forearm braced beside his hip, fingernails digging in tightly as the need rolls across his skin. Merlin’s prick twitches when Arthur’s eyelashes lower and his attention shifts towards the flush of his cock, swollen with an eagerness to come.

Arthur licks his lips and Merlin barely opens his mouth to ask before he’s leaning in to swallow Merlin’s cock. The burning heat of him nearly draws out his orgasm but he manages to hold out, even with Arthur tonguing the sensitive slit, tasting his precome. But he doesn’t last much longer after that. Arthur takes him deeper, separates his fingers to stretch out his arse before pressing up against his prostate again.

Merlin comes on a cry, body locking down around Arthur’s fingers, pushing his prick further into his mouth as he spills. He collapses back onto the bench with a sigh even as Arthur makes no move to pull away, swallowing his come and gentling him through the aftershocks.

When Arthur finally pulls off his sensitive prick it’s with a satisfied expression on his face. “Told you,” he says, none too modestly.

If he hadn’t just sucked him off, Merlin might have been able to come up with a better response.
Instead, his thigh spasms as he tries to knee Arthur in the chest and misses. Arthur shuffles back a little, allowing Merlin room when he slides off the bench and down into his lap.

He kisses the taste of his own come from Arthur’s mouth, fumbling with his trousers and grinning when Arthur hisses at the hand skimming across the ridge of his cock. Merlin’s too lazy with his orgasm to be graceful about it as he gets his fingers past his waistband. Languidly, he starts to wank Arthur off, kissing his neck, his jaw, his cheek.

“If I’d known you’d be so grateful about it, I’d have gotten my fingers in your arse ages ago-“

“Shut up,” Merlin mutters breathlessly. “Shut up.”

He captures Arthur’s mouth next, just as he goes to say something else equally pigheaded. Arthur goes along with it at least, moaning when he finally comes all over Merlin’s fingers.

Afterward, Merlin pulls back to breathe and Arthur struggles to get his own gasps under control while they wait for their bodies cool off. Arthur tears off his shirt with his clean hand and Merlin helps unbutton his trousers once he realises what he’s doing.

He edges Merlin towards the showers a second later and they’re cleaning themselves up under the hot water. Merlin thinks he should feel uncomfortable being naked like this with Arthur but he’s not. He wipes away the leftover come and lube, admiring the ridges of muscle on Arthur’s back as he turns into the spray.

Merlin steps out once he’s done and summons two towels and a set of clothes from Gaius’ flat to wear. He rubs himself down and is only just buttoning his jeans when Arthur strides back into the locker room, completely naked.

“Here,” Merlin says, passing the spare towel and hating how scratchy his voice sounds at the sight of him.

He averts his eyes even as Arthur accepts the towel, drying off his body without shyness. He steps into his underwear and tugs up his trousers, ruffling his wet hair against the fabric of the towel at the same time. It makes his hair stand up all over the place and Merlin manages to smother his snort of laughter at how amusing it is.

“Wanna get a bite to eat?” Arthur wonders, tossing the used towel into the basket that sits in the corner of the locker room.

“I have a class in an hour. I can’t leave Campus.”

Arthur’s in the middle of tugging his shirt back on. “Who said anything about leaving Campus?”

Once he’s dressed, Merlin lets himself be dragged on over to the chippie that sits behind one of the main study halls which the Knights haven’t completely overrun yet. Merlin is surprised that Arthur even knows about it. Even more surprised when Arthur pays for their food without asking.

“I could’ve paid myself,” he grumbles as the man behind the counter sets about getting their chips ready.

“Interesting that I didn’t ask that,” Arthur says, self-importantly, pocketing his change.

“Well it’s rude,” Merlin pushes, getting his own money out. “Here’s my share.”

“I don’t want it,” Arthur says, shoving his hand back. “I wanted to pay.”
“And I don’t want to owe you anything,” Merlin continues, forcing Arthur’s hand open and tipping his share into it.

He accepts it with bemusement before meeting Merlin's gaze again with a raised eyebrow. “You know anybody else would jump at the chance for Arthur Pendragon to shout them lunch.”

Merlin receives the chips from the guy at the counter once he’s wrapped it up for them and doesn’t wait for Arthur. “I seriously doubt anybody would jump at the chance to spend time with someone who talks about themselves in third person. And you can’t honestly expect to connect with real people if you’re throwing your name around like it should mean something every time something doesn’t go your way.”

Arthur’s mouth has fallen open. “The house of Pendragon has a noble lineage spanning centuries of…”

“And here I thought it was the deeds you do, not the name you carry which determines a person’s substance.”

Merlin takes the chips and stalks over to a nearby bench to sit down. What is he doing, planning on sitting around and sharing food with Arthur Pendragon, the bloke he more or less shags every time they come into contact? This is a terrible idea. They don’t spend time together outside of getting naked and getting off. And Merlin likes that arrangement just the way it is.

“You wouldn’t have owed me anything,” Arthur mutters when he sits down next to him a second later. “It’s just chips.”

Merlin opens the paper at one end, making a wide hole and resting it on his knee as he pulls out a chip. It’s so hot it burns the tip of his tongue but the taste makes it worth it. “To you maybe,” he says, after he’s finished chewing. “But what about someone who isn’t rolling in quid like you are?”

Arthur snags a few chips and practically inhales them into his mouth. Merlin can almost believe that his father hasn’t brought him up with all that high end, dining with nobility, table etiquette. But he knows better.

“It’s not my fault other people are poor, Merlin,” he says afterwards, completely missing the point.

“But it is your fault if you throw your money around like it means nothing. Do you expect that would make people who struggle to get by every day on what meagre money they have, feel very good?”

Arthur is watching him closely now as he takes another chip. “Are you struggling to get by every day, Merlin?” he wonders evenly.

Merlin flushes a little. “This is a hypothetical. I wasn’t talking about me.”

“We were a second ago.”

“And now we’re not. What I’m saying is, how can you expect to know anything about the world if you’re not willing to really look at it? You know there are Knights and Magic Users here who can’t buy all of their equipment for training, who take multiple jobs to afford their education. Not everyone has the same privileges as you.”

Merlin chews on a chip as he watches Arthur think about what he’s said.

“I didn’t mean to offend you,” he says, surprising him. “Truly. It wasn’t my intention and I
apologise.”

“Er—” Merlin flounders, pleased but surprised by the sudden formality in Arthur's tone, completely at a loss of what to say back. “Thank you.”

Arthur takes a handful of chips and eats them one by one. They sit there in silence for a few minutes, but it’s not uncomfortable. Even if Merlin is thinking maybe it should be. “You know I’m not actually the massive prat you think I am,” Arthur says eventually, wiping the salt off his fingers.

Merlin tries not to snort because he’ll end up choking on the chip in his mouth. “Oh really?” he manages, once he’s swallowed it. “Tell me where I went wrong.”

Arthur rolls his eyes, but scratches at the back of his neck like he’s embarrassed. “I didn’t say you were wrong,” he says. “Just that I’m not as bad as you think I am. I’m not trying to hurt anyone.”

Merlin feels a slice of white-hot anger pierce through him. “I guess that’s where you and your father differ,” he says coldly.

Arthur’s jaw clenches. “And what exactly have you got against my father?”

He’s got to be kidding. Merlin stares at Arthur long and hard before figuring out he’s actually serious. The thought makes him laugh, loudly and forcefully. “No, Arthur,” he says, shoving the bag of hot chips into his chest and standing up. “The question is, what has he got against me?”

Merlin storms off before Arthur can think of an answer.

He doubts he’d have anything to say anyway.

“Is it possible to be cursed into shagging someone every time you see them?” Merlin asks Gaius one evening. “Do sex curses exist?”

Gaius raises a thick eyebrow but actually ponders the question. “There are powerful love and lust potions which have been used throughout time but they aren’t long lasting and eventually wear off if not constantly administered. I’ve never heard of what you’re describing. In what manner do you believe you have been cursed?”

Merlin scratches at the back of his head. “Er, there’s this bloke and he’s an utter git, couldn’t possibly be friends with such an arse and yet every time that we see each other we just—er—”

“Have sexual intercourse,” Gaius finishes. “Really Merlin, if you can’t even say the words—“

“So how do I stop shagging him every time we run into each other?” Merlin demands.

Gaius frowns. “Have you perhaps considered that you might have feelings this young man after all?”

Merlin scoffs. The thought is more than ludicrous. He can’t have bloody feelings for someone like Pendragon, who carries around lube and condoms in the hopes that he can have a quick anonymous shag with anyone who’s up for it. Even if Merlin is the one constantly taking him up on that offer.

“He’s a Knight, and a total pillock and I don’t fancy anything about him,” Merlin mutters, before
thinking about it a little more. “Well, I suppose he could be worse, and he is bloody fit- but he’s still a Knight. And his father is about a hundred times worse.”

Gaius seems surprised. “You’ve met his father? Merlin, this sounds more serious than you say.”

“I haven’t met him,” he says hotly. “I just know of him. And he’s terrible.”

It’s not a lot of information to go on but Gaius pauses to think about it. “This is highly unusual, Merlin. But I don’t have the answers that you seek. Let me consult some texts first.”

“Okay,” he agrees, disappointment and unease settling in his stomach.

So this is something that he should be concerned about. There are other forces at work here. “Thanks, Gaius.”

Morgause practically corners Merlin at the end of his Incantations lecture on Wednesday.

"I'm having a party this Friday night on the rooftop of the dorms," she says with a kind of intensity that Merlin finds a bit intimidating. "Bring your friends. It's the east building."

"Er- alright. I'll be there."

Morgause nods, satisfied with the answer and takes off with a swish of her long, flowing hair. He doesn't quite understand why she makes him so nervous. Maybe it's the fact that he's seen her training with a sword on more than one occasion. Or that she's created a spell that lights that sword on fire. Morgause is as good with a weapon as any Knight. Better even.

Merlin doesn't quite know what to make of that.

But a party is a party. And Merlin's never been to one with such a large group of Magic Users in attendance so he tells Freya, Gwen and Gilli and they make plans to go together. Except when they finally arrive at the dorms at around ten, Merlin's suddenly a little less enthusiastic.

"Are we sure about this?" he wonders. "Morgause is a little- intense."

Gilli glances nervously at Gwen before responding. He's not used to being in the company of a Knight. He hasn't actually spoken at all since they met Gwen in front of the library. "I heard that she only associates with powerful Magic Users," Gilli tells them quietly.

Freyas shares an uncomfortable look with him. Merlin can see the night might be coming to an end already in their eyes and tries to salvage the situation. "She invited us, didn't she?"

"She invited you, Merlin," Freya says quietly. "I don't know if."

"Why don't we go inside for a little bit," Gwen suggests pragmatically. "If it's really awful we can go out to the pub instead."

The rest of the group seems to agree. Merlin is happy to get this over with and find out exactly what kind of welcome they'll receive. When he crosses the steps towards the building however, he feels something prickle at the back of his neck.

"What was-?" he starts to ask, already turning towards the others before Gwen lets out a squeak of
surprise and runs directly into an invisible barrier.

"Oh," she says, stepping back before reaching out to feel the unexpected wall that's preventing her from going inside.

"They must have warded against those without magic," Gilli realises, eyes wide.

Gwen looks embarrassed and then uncomfortable. "Oh, well- I guess I'll just- I mean, I'll go home."

"Wait," Merlin mutters, upset that she's been forcibly kept out. "Let me."

He puts both palms flat against the area in front of Gwen and passes them over her body like a security guard would at the airport. "Try it now."

Hesitantly, Gwen moves forward again, but this time there's nothing there to stop her. "Oh," she says, visibly relieved. "How did you do that?"

"He covered you with his own magic," Freya explains. "So it would fool the magical barrier into thinking you were a Magic User."

Gwen looks a little wistful. "Oh wow. I'd always wished I could use magic."

Gilli and Freya seem unsettled by the idea that a Knight could ever want to be a Magic User but Merlin only smiles at her encouragingly. "C'mon then," he tells them. "Let's head up there and try to have some fun before Morgause terrifies us."

Freya laughs and they walk toward the elevator together.

They barely make it onto the dorm roof, which has been magically lit up to accommodate the Magic Users and what looks to be a fun gathering of people in full swing. Gilli disappears over towards the table full of colourful alcoholic drinks and Freya catches sight of the boy she fancies from Elemental101 and quickly disappears to talk to him.

Merlin and Gwen are barely left alone for a moment before Morgause and several other Magic Users are crowding around them. Merlin recognises Mordred and Nimueh and can't help but notice that most of them are glaring at Gwen. "What's she doing here?" Nimueh demands angrily.

Merlin has to admit he's a little surprised. Stubbornly, he reaches out to take Gwen's hand when she shrinks away and tries to take a step back from the force of their glares.

"Knights weren't invited," Morgause says coldly. "Why would you help her past the barrier?"

Merlin feels a rush of anger when Gwen's face falls. "You said to invite my friends and Gwen is my friend."

That explanation doesn't appease them at all. If anything, they seem angrier. "She shouldn't be here, Merlin," Mordred says firmly. "We don't trust her kind."

They're being completely unfair. Gwen's never done anything to deserve this kind of treatment. "I'd never do anything to hurt anyone," she says, defending herself. "I'm not that kind of person."

But none of them budge. It doesn't look like they're going to let Gwen stay. Merlin can't believe it. "I didn't realise this was a Knight's party," he says harshly. "Will you be dressing up as them next and push Gwen down the stairs yourselves?"

They don't bother to reply, but Morgause folds her arms and that seems to be the end of it. Merlin
can see Gilli watching the commotion from the other end of the roof, drink in hand and Freya has already abandoned the bloke she was chatting up, struggling to get back through the crowd to reach them.

"Fine," Merlin says, not letting go of Gwen's hand. "I hope you realise the hypocrisy right now. You're acting just as horrible and exclusive as the Knight's you claim to be above."

"Oh, Merlin it's fine," Gwen protests with a brittle laugh as she tries to get her hand free. "You stay. I'll-"

"No," he says glancing disapprovingly at Morgause and her gang. "I want to spend time with my friends. Not the people who insist on treating you badly when they've never even spoken to you before. Let's go."

None of the Magic Users try to stop them and Merlin's so infuriated that they could even act the same as the Knight's that he can't speak until they've reached the elevator. Freya catches up with them before it arrives and Gilli is conspicuously absent. Merlin's probably the most disappointed about that even if he understands why Gwen makes him nervous.

"That was awful," Freya says, reaching out to awkwardly pat Gwen's shoulder. She doesn't quite know what to make of her yet either, but Merlin can see them becoming friends. And Gwen even manages a small smile. "Let's go to the pub then. I could use a drink."

Luckily the main pub on Campus is only a five minute walk away. And Gwen's actually cheered up some by the time they reach the doors. Thankfully she's not carrying a sword this time so they get past the intimidating bloke at the front door without any issues.

The pub is packed with patrons and Merlin might think that was a good thing if they weren't all bloody Knights. Freya steps closer to him almost instinctively, sensing safety in numbers even if the Knight's barely pay them any attention. Merlin's eyes seem to find the blonde head amongst them first, laughing uproariously at something the curly haired Knight said. Of course those tossers would be here getting wankered on how much ale they can chug down in one sitting.

Gwen seems to realise what kind of company they have because she turns towards them, trying to be heard over the shouts, conversation and general carrying on. "We can go somewhere else?" she tries to yell, and Merlin only just manages to catch what she's said.

When he looks up again, Arthur is staring at him, having clearly caught Merlin's eye. He remembers abruptly that he'd stormed off the last time they were together, infuriated by Arthur's ignorance about his own father. Merlin's also quickly reminded that that's the last time he got off recently.

So he shrugs at her and leads them over to the bar to get some drinks. Alcohol doesn't seem to mess with Freya's magic as much as it does Merlin so she and Gwen end up getting matching colourful cocktails which are more vodka than cocktail and Merlin settles for a soda water with a very fancy lime wedge.

He pays the barman and they wander through the crowd of bodies to find an empty table. They don't get very far before an arm slides around his waist. At first, Merlin thinks it's Arthur. That is until his magic twitches at the unfamiliar energy. He tries to skirt away but the bloke laughs in his ear, curls touching Merlin's forehead he's so close.

"Won't you come sit with us?" the curly haired Knight wonders with a cheeky grin. "We're all friends, aren't we?"
Merlin stares at him, then at Arthur who's hunched over at their table with the rest of his gang of Knights and not looking very pleased with the situation. The curly haired Knight is confident, Merlin will give him that. "I don't even know your name," he points out.

But the curly haired Knight is already looking past him, now that Merlin has been successfully snagged. "Hullo Gwen," he says brightly before sliding over to Freya. "And her beautiful companion."

Freya looks surprised at being addressed and complimented in one sentence and her cheeks flush red. Gwen throws a protective arm around her. "You leave her alone, Gwaine. She's already got a bloke she fancies."

So this is the one the Knights were hunting during training the other day. The curly haired Knight, Gwaine, shrugs in a good-natured way before he starts tugging Merlin over to their table. Merlin recognises most of the Knights there already, even if he might not know them all by name. He glances back at Gwen and Freya to see if they might have a problem with the situation but both of Gwaine's hands abruptly come around his waist and he's been lifted, and deposited on the stool besides Arthur with some surprise.

"Bloody hell," Gwaine says with a laugh after he's let go. "How are you supposed to fight off evil magic when you're only skin and bone?"

Merlin's just glad he didn't spill his drink all over himself like a total plonker, and glares at him instead. Freya and Gwen don't seem to mind so much because they take the last two available stools while the rest of the Knights budge up to help them fit around the table. The result being Merlin is firmly pressed along Arthur's side.

He hasn't said anything since Gwaine all but dragged Merlin over here and he wonders if Arthur's planning to ignore him the entire night. That is, until Arthur's hand comes down onto his thigh and he's whispering, low and hungry in his ear, "Hello Merlin. Got yourself in some trouble lately?"

He might resent that assumption if Arthur's intentions weren't already plain. "What are you all doing here?"

Arthur raises his glass. "I would've thought that was fairly obvious. What are you doing here?"

"I heard there was a spellbegger party on Campus," Gwaine interrupts, giving them all a considering look.

"Magic User," he amends at their less than favourable reactions. "That leggy bird. The blonde one."

"Morgause," Freya says helpfully before glancing at Gwen and Merlin. "We were there but-"

She trails off and doesn't finish. Arthur leans into Merlin as if he's trying to catch the rest of her sentence but Merlin thinks it's so he can move his palm against Merlin's crotch. He swallows half of his drink in one go in order to hide the reaction. Gwen doesn't seem to notice but Merlin can feel Gwaine's knowing gaze. At least the rest of Arthur's Knights aren't as observant.

"We left," Gwen admits. "Turns out they did want us around."

Arthur seems to pick up on the strange tension between the three of them. "Didn't want them around or didn't want you around?" he wonders, staring pointedly at Gwen.
Freya frowns a little but doesn't confirm the truth. Merlin squirms with a mix of arousal at Arthur's steady hand, and anger at the situation. They shouldn't have treated Gwen like they did.

"Like we'd want to go to their wand lover parties anyway," Cenred sneers and Merlin finally realises he's sitting at the opposite end of the table.

He didn't see Cenred when Gwaine pulled him over to sit with them. He's probably more of a prat than Arthur is. At least Merlin's never had or seen outright problems with the Knights Arthur spends his time with. They're not usually the ones bullying Magic Users on Campus even if they don't do much in the way of stopping it.

But Cenred is a whole other story. Merlin has a particularly strong dislike for that Knight. It's almost disappointing to know that Cenred and Arthur might run in the same circles.

"We don't use wands," Merlin explains, trying to keep his temper under wraps. "And they obviously set up the magical barrier against non-Magic Users as a form of protection against you lot."

The Knights exchange considering looks and Merlin realises that he's said too much about the subject. He shouldn't have mentioned the barrier at all. Now the Knights seem overly interested in the party they weren't invited to. Gwen comes quickly to his rescue though.

"So who's started training for the next tournament?" she asks the group at large, tactfully changing the subject and then the discussion about Magic Users is lost to their bragging about the best training regimens for the upcoming battle.

Arthur doesn't say much, but that's mostly because he's quietly trying to rub Merlin off underneath the table. He's half hard already and the last thing he wants is to have a hard cock around a room full of Knights. Merlin pushes Arthur's hand away and he withdraws without even looking in Merlin's direction, calmly sipping his beer as he watches the conversation unfolding around them.

The Knights are remarkably welcoming considering the two Magic Users in their midst, bar Cenred of course who is openly hostile the entire time, but Merlin appreciates that Percival tries to include Freya into the conversation from his seat beside Gwaine, gently ribbing his mate when Gwaine tries to hit on her and Freya turns him down.

But Freya is still smiling like she's having a good time anyway, and one of the more serious looking Knights who was in the first tournament, Leon, Merlin thinks he's called, has already gone to the bar to fetch her and Gwen another drink. Merlin turned down his offer when he asked, since he's still working through his soda, and he doesn't feel comfortable admitting that alcohol affects his magic to the table full of Knights.

Merlin's sort of following the conversation at the table now but he keeps glancing at the shape of Arthur's jaw out of the corner of his eye, getting distracted by the heat of his body pressed up against him. He drains the rest of his lime and soda drink, sets the empty glass onto the table and then moves his hand carefully onto Arthur's lap.

Arthur's legs shift, startled by the touch before he relaxes at once, his face betraying nothing as Merlin starts to rub him through his jeans. He's careful about it, keeping his hands hidden and the movements small and innocuous but he feels like Gwaine knows exactly what he's doing anyway.

He seems to have an eye for these type of things.

Merlin stops, feeling his cheeks heat up, even as Arthur takes his hand and squeezes it, to show
he's more than approving of the situation. And Merlin's certain his hard-on is visible in his own trousers now. He's embarrassed by the need coursing through him, and maybe a little irritated that Arthur caused such a reaction without really even trying.

"I need some air," he announces suddenly, voice shaky. "I'll be right back."

"Spellbegger can't even hold his brew," Cenred scoffs meanly.

Freya locks eyes with him after that and tosses her entire drink back in one go, to the delighted whistles and cheers of the rest of the table. Merlin manages a thankful smile in her direction as he stands up while Gwen dissolves into laughter at her side, undoubtedly impressed.

Merlin needs to breathe for a bit. It's a little stifling in the pub with so many people. He's starting to sweat even and he barely heads out past the burly bloke at the main doors, turning left towards the open grass when someone catches at his elbow.

"Finally," Arthur says, crowding into him and nudging Merlin towards the wooden shed where the pub stores Knight's weapons. "I was thinking I'd have to beg for you to wank me off under that table."

Merlin shudders a little at the image, Arthur begging, but his answer is lost when he's pushed into the armoury and Arthur snaps the door shut behind them. There's no lock but that doesn't seem to bother Arthur in the least. Though he seems to take Merlin's shudder for something else. "This is what you wanted right?" he wonders dubiously. "When you said you wanted fresh-"

Merlin throws his arms around his neck and kisses him, nearly throwing Arthur up against one of the wooden shelves with his enthusiasm. Arthur doesn't taste that much like beer as Merlin expected, and he didn't even seem as tipsy as the rest of the Knights when they first sat down with them.

But it's enough to give him pause.

"You're not legless are you?" he asks. "How much have you had?"

Arthur snorts at the question. "I'm perfectly sober, Merlin. Want me to pick up a sword and prove it?"

Merlin hardly believes that's necessary. He doesn't want to watch Arthur dancing about with some other Knight's sword and making a general nuisance of himself. But Arthur seems to take the matter to heart because he draws away and selects a sword from the nearby shelf, removing it from its scabbard as he turns to face him.

Merlin rolls his eyes when Arthur does a few impressive tricks with it including his signature move where he rotates the sword in a fast arch with a mere flick of his wrist. "If you're planning on playing with that sword the entire time I'm leaving."

Arthur laughs then, loudly and with ease before he matches the sword back with its scabbard and puts it away. "Well I suppose now that I've properly seduced you with that display-"

Merlin's about to launch into a tirade about how that would never work but Arthur's already caught the front of his shirt and reeled him in for another kiss.

It's a mad kind of scramble after that. Struggling to get their cocks free and find purchase on a reasonably steady surface whilst avoiding the deadly sharp objects in the room. Arthur finds a low bench behind the main shelf and practically throws Merlin on top of it, half climbing aboard
himself so they can keep snogging while Merlin summons lube and gets his hands wrapped around them.

"Yes," Arthur groans into his mouth, already jerking his hips forward. "That's it. Bloody hell."

"You can't just-" Merlin gasps. "Get me, oh gods- off- in a- crowded- pub."

Arthur chuckles a little into the shell of Merlin's ear, putting his hand between Merlin's and tugging them in a tight, slow slide. "But I can get you off here?" he wonders at a whisper, kissing heat along Merlin's throat. "You've got some backwards logic there, Merlin."


Arthur obliges, but he's smiling now when he leans in to snog Merlin breathless again. When Merlin eventually comes, gasping into the underside of Arthur's chin, struggling to draw air into his lungs as he shoots across their fingers, it's arguably the best thing that happened all evening. Arthur follows him a little while later, working to get himself off now that Merlin is a pile of useless limbs, using the hand Merlin's still got gripped around them to help him along.

They stay there for a while longer, snogging without much intent until Merlin cleans them both up with magic and Arthur's prick starts to stir again.

Merlin's not even sure he's ever had so much sex before in his life. He's certainly never wanked as much as he does now. Nor dragged prattish Knights into random public places so they can get their kits off and shag as much as possible.

Merlin's not even that surprised when he starts to harden again as well. It has to be some kind of sex curse.

"Want my fingers in your arse again?" Arthur wonders. "Or do you want to shag me?"

Merlin swallows heavily, already summoning lube onto his fingers. "Turn around."

Arthur smirks, eyes gleaming with desire and does as he's told. Merlin tries not to focus on how much he likes that and gets busy working his fingers into the heat of Arthur's body. They rush through it a bit. Merlin's always a bit more desperate to come the second time around and it's an unspeakable relief when he finally slots his cock inside.

Arthur groans, long and thready and clutches wildly at the bench to steady himself when Merlin pumps his hips and falls straight into a rhythm they know so well. There's hands and lips, biting and stroking and Merlin wants this to last longer, wants to do this forever but Arthur's tightening around him constantly enough that Merlin thinks he's actually trying to kill him.

"I'm close," Arthur mumbles after they've been going at it for a while and he's dissolved into a much more agreeable mess of limbs and pleasure. Gods, when he's like this Merlin can hardly think beyond the need to make him come.

He reaches around to get a hand on him just as Arthur spends, shooting his come across some of the weapons stored a short distance away. Merlin laughs at the sight, even as he locks up and pushes as deep into Arthur as he can coming straight afterward, just so he's completely enveloped in every inch of him. Arthur makes a breathy sound at the sensation of it and Melin is content to lie there until dawn breaks but he turns instead towards the door as if he's heard something.

"Gwaine," he realises, and Arthur tenses up all over, suddenly trying to shove Merlin off him. "He's outside."
Arthur frowns, but relaxes again, tilting his head to listen just as there's a sudden knock at the door. "You'd best come out here," Merlin hears Gwaine say. "Cenred's convinced the others to crash that bird's party. They've taken off to the dorms. Perc and Leon couldn't stop them."

"Those knob heads," Merlin mutters irritatedly as he pulls out, ignoring Arthur's hiss of displeasure.

A bunch of trolleyed Knights is a piss poor opponent against a entire group of angry, possibly tipsy Magic Users. This won't end well. And where are Freya and Gwen?

Merlin cleans up the mess Arthur made of the shelves, but when he moves a hand towards Arthur to clean him up too, he reaches out to catch his wrist. "Leave it," Arthur says gruffly, avoiding his eyes. "I- like it."

Merlin licks his lips and tries to remember that he's already come twice in the past hour. And that there are bigger problems at hand. He steps back to fix himself up, stuffing his prick back into his trousers while Arthur yanks on his jeans and buttons them up again. Merlin heads out first once they're presentable, ignoring Gwaine's leery expression when Arthur comes out carrying the sword he showed off a little while ago.

Of course it belongs to him.

Gwen and Freya come out of the pub a few minutes later. "There you are," Gwen says, looking between Arthur and Merlin like she knows exactly what they've been up to. "We were looking for you. Cenred's gone after-"

"We know," Merlin says.

Gwen deflates a little but Freya looks increasingly nervous. She's had run-ins with Cenred before. Merlin knows he can't be up to anything good. "Let's go stop them," Arthur adds, sheathing the sword at his waist. "Those blithering idiots might hurt someone."

Merlin thinks that's their intention entirely.

When they get to the dorms it's just as bad as he imagined. There's about six Knights including Percival and Leon who are still trying to convince the others to turn around, with Cenred standing at the forefront of the group, pressing up right against the barrier that blocks them off from the Magic Users' dorm. Morgause, Nimueh and Mordred are standing on the other side of it, fury contorting their faces.

"Oi!" Merlin shouts at the sight of them. "Go back to the pub you pissheads."

Percival and Leon look relieved at the reinforcements but the rest of the Knights are less enthused by their arrival. Most of them can't even stand upright without swaying. Why on earth did Cenred convince them going after Magic Users right now was a brilliant idea?

"Thanks for that, Merlin," Arthur mutters patiently, stepping closer with his hands out in placating manner. "Alright, let's not get into snit here. You go back to your party and we'll-"

Morgause summons a ball of fire to her hands, illuminating her face in eerie shadows. Most of the Knights let out exclamations of surprise and stumble back. Merlin darts in front of Arthur without thinking. "Stop it," he says urgently. "They're completely rat arsed can't you see?"

Morgause turns a cold eye on him. "I don't care if they're drunk, Merlin," she says. "They came here with the intention of hurting us. It's within my rights to defend myself."
Merlin snorts and glances over at the Knights, two of which have fallen over since her display and another who is currently vomiting in nearby bushes. Cenred doesn't look like much standing among them now. "Yes, I can see they're such a threat."

Mordred takes a step forward but Nimueh snatches at his wrist to draw him back before he can step over the boundary. Merlin stares them down, gathering magic in his body in case he needs to use it but Morgause eventually backs off, extinguishing the ball of fire and shaking her hands out. "Remove them," is all she says, before turning back and storming into the building without another word.

Mordred takes a step forward again but Merlin hears an animal snarl in warning behind him and Mordred finally seems to think better of it. He and Nimueh turn around and disappear into the building as well.

"Thanks," Merlin tells Freya, whose fangs are already receding.

She shrugs and goes over to help Percival, Leon and Gwaine get the Knights to their feet. "Do they live on Campus?" Gwen wonders anxiously. "They barely look like they can walk."

"Leon has a flat nearby they can crash in," Arthur says, stepping up beside Merlin with an odd expression on his face. "They'll sort them out."

He moves in closer to Merlin. "Do you want to come-?"

"I'd better get Gwen and Freya home," he mutters, jerking away from him, unsure of his own feelings at the moment.

Merlin knows he helped his fellow Magic Users, attacking the Knights would have gotten them expelled from Camelot, but it still feels like a betrayal anyway. He's also embarrassed with himself. Why was it his first instinct to step in front of Arthur when Morgause summoned those flames? Why didn't he even think about protecting Gwen? Or Freya?

He takes Gwen's arm, linking his through her own as they hurry over to join Freya.

They wait around until the others manage to start moving the drunk Knights away from the dorms and out of danger before they head off towards the flat Gwen is currently sharing with her brother, and where Freya intends to crash tonight on their couch. They don't talk about what happened when they split up with the rest of the Knights, though Merlin can still sense Cenred's seething rage lingering in the air around them.

What a night.

Merlin feels it when he’s walking towards his Healing and Restorative Magic lesson. The presence of strange magic.

Ancient. Powerful.

He breathes deeply and turns, forgetting the text books in his arms, stowing them into his backpack and abandoning it in the Quad. He moves towards it like he’s been called, inhaling the goodness in the air, absorbing it into his heart as he travels forward in a strange trance.
He passes two Knights carrying javelins and howling with delight and the softness swirling inside him churns into fear. Merlin starts to run, shouldering between them as his footsteps pound furiously across the pavement.

No, no, no. This can’t be happening. The Knights aren't doing what he thinks they're about to do.

Merlin can taste the steel of their blades, the arrows, the pointed sharpness of spears heavy in his mouth. Anger comes as quickly as his flying feet and Merlin’s tearing into the trees of the Darkling Woods that surround Camelot, protecting it from outside forces.

The magic directs him, ducking underneath branches, tripping over roots until Merlin can see the bright glow of the creature’s flank. The flash of red, the University colours, tells him the Knights aren’t in fully body armour only their training gear.

And that they’re closing in around it.

Merlin sees the protruding horn and nearly loses his balance for the tenth time since it called him into the woods. The unicorn snorts and tosses its mane before turning to regard him with intelligent eyes. Merlin stands there open mouthed and sees a Knight charge toward the defenceless creature of pure energy and moves with a cry of horror, throwing himself between them.

“No!” he shouts, staggering forward.

“Stop!” a familiar voice roars but the Knight, Leon's, momentum has already thrown his arm forward.

He won’t be able to in time.

Merlin freezes and prepares himself to be skewered by a javelin before Arthur is appearing beside Leon, catching his upper arm with one hand to change the direction of the throw, striking the wood of the weapon with his own, knocking it violently off course.

It buries itself in the dirt only two steps from where Merlin is currently standing. He releases the magic that built up inside him and feels it retreat with a sharp twang.

“If you were aiming for the weak, pathetic Magic User, Leon, then you're worse at this than I thought.”

“Sod off,” Merlin snaps, shaky as he turns away from them to stare at the unicorn.

It hasn’t looked away since he entered the clearing and the sight of it burrows past the boundary of his physical body, straight down to the core of his magic. Watching the unicorn makes Merlin feel inhuman.

But the raised voices draw him back.

Leon, is sweaty but flushed with anger as he glares at Merlin. “-fool came out of nowhere. There was no way I could stop in time.”

“And somehow I managed it.”

Merlin ignores their argument, sensing more Knights are closing in around them. He cautiously approaches the unicorn, letting it see him move so as not to startle it.

The unicorn’s tail swishes back and forth, inclining its head and Merlin raises an eyebrow to see
what it’s pointing at. The unicorn is gesturing at Arthur. Merlin snorts and turns back towards it again, quietly raising his hands to encourage escape while they’re distracted.

“Go on,” he whispers, egging it on. “Get out of here. Shoo!”

“Oi,” Leon shouts, rushing forward to yank his javelin out of the dirt. “What are you doing? The kill is ours.”

Merlin steps between him and the unicorn again before he can get closer. “You’re not killing it. I won’t let you.”

“Oh come on, Merlin. There’s no need to cry about it,” Arthur replies, spinning the javelin in his hands as he steps closer. Why won’t the unicorn leave already? “We’re hunters this is what we’re trained for.”

Merlin spreads his arms wide. “What threat does it pose? Has it harmed you or anyone else? It’s innocent.”

“It’s sport,” Leon insists, trying to step closer but Merlin shoves at his chest.

“It’s murder,” he snaps and the rest of the Knights are entering the clearing now.

He catches sight of Percival and the curly haired, charmer Merlin now knows is called Gwaine. His stomach twists at their equally delighted grins, after the unicorn is finally cornered.

Arthur pushes Leon back and steps between them. “I’ll handle this,” he tells him. “Merlin’s just getting emotional.”

By then Arthur is already catching at his arm. “Merlin, you idiot,” he whispers furiously. “What the hell are you doing out here?”

“You can’t kill it,” he shouts, aware that his eyes are wet and he must look hysterical covered in scratches and sweating from the run here even as he pulls his arm free. “I won’t let you.”

Then Arthur reaches out again like he’s going to try and touch him, pull him away from the unicorn. As if he’s some strange creature that’s been set off by an unusual custom, and needs to be settled down.

Merlin swats at his hands and steps back. “I don’t care what you say, you’re not killing it. And the only way you’re going to get at it is through me.”

Arthur only rolls his eyes, not taking him seriously. How does he forget that Merlin is a powerful sorcerer?

“Honestly, Merlin. It’s just a bloody horse.”

He shoves Arthur as hard as he can and that’s when he finally seems to pay attention. Only after the force of it makes him stumble a step. Then he seems to understand that Merlin isn’t backing down.

“No, it’s not,” he cries hotly. “Gods, Arthur, look at it.”

Arthur’s still grinning like the whole situation is amusing but he listens. Thank all the powers that be, he listens. The condescending smile freezes and an odd, beguiling expression steals over his face instead when he stares at the unicorn.
“Hold on, is that-?”

“It’s a unicorn,” Merlin snaps, loud enough that his voice carries to all of the other Knights who are still armed and shifting restlessly around them. “It’s a creature of magic. Sacred. Killing it would bring about terrible misfortune. Not to mention it’s wrong.”

Gwaine smirks. “Wrong, is it? I like the sound of that.”

Merlin scowls. “Wrong as in cruel. It’s defenceless.”

Gwaine’s expression shifts, amusement disappearing as he glances at his companion. Percival’s enthusiasm has lessened some as well. The only Knight who has lowered his weapon stands at the back of the group and Merlin can see the troubled emotions in his brown eyes. It’s Lancelot D’Angelo. The same Knight who lowered his lance during the last tournament when his opponent had the sun obscuring her vision.

He wasn’t with them at the pub the other night when Cenred convinced those idiot Knights to go after Morgause. Merlin thinks if he was though, that he would have been more successful than Leon and Percival in stopping them.

At least some Knights have a bit of decency.

“That horn doesn’t make it defenceless,” another Knight behind Merlin declares, just to prove him wrong. “Arthur you’re really going to listen to this Magic User? He’s just trying to spoil the hunt.”

Merlin recognises the Knight's voice. It's bloody Cenred again, and Merlin knows this time he'll have the blood he desires no matter what the cost. Arthur’s body tightens up with tension. “Merlin has a point-“

“Bollocks,” Cenred snaps and Merlin hears the twang of an arrow as it’s released from his crossbow.

“No,” Merlin cries and the arrow freezes mid-air before he vanishes it with magic.

“Cenred,” Arthur is shouting, already stomping over towards the Knight. “Are you mad-?”

Merlin reaches him first. The force he unleashes throws Cenred directly to the ground, crossbow flying with a flash of his eyes. It hits the branches of a nearby tree and snaps in half. Cenred’s curses are lost when he hits the dirt, the power of Merlin’s anger putting him deep enough into the earth that his body forms a crater. His groans are easy enough to ignore as Merlin spins back to face the others.

The rest of the Knights have advanced but only one has his back to Merlin, hands raised. There’s a lot of trust in that, he realises, a Knight showing his vulnerable back to a Magic User. Merlin would be shocked by the sudden change of events if it weren’t for what comes out of Arthur’s mouth next.

“Merlin’s right,” he says, and he’s so surprised he doesn’t even notice the unicorn approaching until it’s nudging at his elbow.

“He’s just saying that cause the unicorn fancies him,” Leon insists, but even his weapon hangs loosely at his side now, his expression softer.

The unicorn is silently chewing on the fabric of Merlin’s jumper at this point and he gently tries to push it off his arm. It’s not really helping the situation and Merlin has no idea why his tatty old
jumper is remotely appealing to a creature composed of pure magic.

“My father says the worst kind of curses originate from the killing of innocent magical creatures,” Arthur says.

The mention of Uther puts an end to the argument.

Gwaine lowers his javelin and Percival does the same. Even Leon takes a step back. Lancelot, who’d already lowered his sword first, makes no movement but his eyes are focused on the unicorn, sweetly mesmerised by it.

"Unicorns are pure of heart," Arthur continues. "They only appear to those who have those same qualities. Take it as a compliment, men."

There’s a lot of unnecessary cheering and amusement for Merlin’s liking but he’s just glad he doesn’t need to take on a group of Knights anymore. He didn’t really want to hurt them. He keeps his eyes on Cenred though, because he doesn’t trust him and when Cenred finally tries to climb out of the crater his body created, Arthur is there, resting his boot on top of his chest and pushing him back down.

“Not you,” Arthur says less friendly now. “What you did was cowardly, attacking without honour. You face your enemy head on, not by striking when their back is turned. You could have hit Merlin-"

“Not much of a loss,” Cenred snarls, shooting daggers at him. “We’ve got enough Magic User filth on this Campus as it is.”

Arthur applies more pressure and Cenred falls backwards into the hole with a grunt of pain. “Don’t ever talk about him like that again. You do something like this in the future or ever try to hurt another Magic User I’ll kill you myself. Is that clear?”

“I don’t need your protection,” Merlin protests, stroking the unicorn now as it chews a hole through his jumper.

The unicorn’s body is humming, a faint sheen above its coat that heats Merlin’s skin when he touches it. The air seems to shimmer around it with magic but the creature is kind and inquisitive. Merlin can’t believe they could ever look at such a thing and desire to harm it. Arthur doesn’t look away from Cenred. “Shut up, Merlin. Now tell me you understand.”

Cenred’s eyes are narrowed with promised violence. “This is-"

“Do I look like a man to be trifled with?” Arthur says and the hard expression on his face is a much greater threat than anything Cenred could fabricate.

He must see it too, because the fight seems to go out of him and he relents. “I understand.”

Arthur’s clever enough not to take him at his word. Even as he lifts his boot and heads back toward his men. “Lovely,” he says. “But that’s the last time you’ll ever hunt with me. I want men around me that I can trust.”

Cenred climbs out of the crater Merlin’s magic created and storms off, kicking the wreckage of his crossbow with a mighty curse so that the wood goes skittering off in different directions. He shoulders past Leon, hard enough to make him stumble as he leaves the hunting party. Merlin doubts that’s the last time he’ll cause problems. From the look he shoots him behind Arthur’s back, Merlin's definitely made an enemy today.
Brilliant.

The unicorn releases the shreds of Merlin’s jumper and rears back, whinnying and pawing at the ground. He realises that it wants him to kneel only a moment later.

“Don’t,” Arthur insists as he starts to take a knee, grabbing at his arm to prevent him. “It could hurt you.”

Merlin shakes him off and kneels on the forest floor. “If it wanted that it would have done so already.”

Arthur doesn’t try to drag him up, nor does he move away when the unicorn considers Merlin. He waits quietly and trusts the intentions of the magical being, the way it called him here. He ignores the other Knights, unable to look away from the ancient knowledge hidden in its eyes.

A hush falls over the clearing and all Merlin can see and feel is the light shining between the trees and the heat and purity radiating from the creature before him. It slowly lowers its head again and Merlin stays very still when the tip of its horn touches the centre of his forehead. Magic rushes into him and he gasps at the sensation, even as Arthur reaches out as if to steady him.

Inner warmth spreads through his body as if he’s been completely immersed in the strange magic of the old religion. He feels it when the unicorn pulls away. The gift that it has bestowed upon him.

“Thank you,” he says softly, and the creature tosses its mane again before regarding Arthur with a penetrating eye.

He stiffens when the unicorn moves within touching distance and after a second of hesitation, Arthur lifts his hand to touch its muzzle. The unicorn snorts and butts its head into Arthur’s chest instead, nickering as if in amusement when he lets out a soft sound and staggers back in surprise.

He recovers quickly and runs his hand down its crest to shoulder with an enthralling amount of gentleness considering a sword is still sheathed at his waist. The unicorn snorts softly again and tosses its head in Merlin’s direction. He has the very distinct feeling that he’s being singled out.

“What’s it trying to say?” Arthur wonders quietly, swept up in the reverence of the interaction.

The unicorn eyes Merlin keenly and he suddenly recalls the Great Dragon’s prophecy several days ago. Surely it’s not trying to say what he thinks it’s saying? But the unicorn pushes its muzzle into Arthur’s back this time, edging him forward, toward Merlin.

Oh, bollocks it is, isn’t it?

Arthur is not the Knight Merlin needs to help unite Camelot. It’s not possible. The only thing he wants from Arthur is a quick, desperate shag that has none of the emotional problems and all of the physical chemistry to get off as many times as he can. And it seems to be working so far. No point complicating things.

“Nothing,” he mutters, looking away.

The unicorn dips its head to point at Merlin again as if to contradict the words. Arthur is frowning now, trying to puzzle out what’s happening. ‘There’s something about you, Merlin,” he says. “Something that this unicorn here seems to be trying to tell me.”

“It’s nothing,” he hurries, getting to his feet. “It just likes me, remember?”

Gwaine frowns. “And what do you know about it?”

He shrugs, even as the unicorn turns to watch him. “Enough.”

The unicorn’s ears twitch and it snorts again, pawing the ground between Merlin and Arthur before it takes off into the woods, the magic that transformed the copse of trees into something ethereal vanishing with it. The Darkling Woods settle around them almost menacingly now without the unicorn to hold it back.

“Gaius’ lesson,” Merlin remembers, smacking at his forehead, which is still warm from the touch of the unicorn’s horn.

Arthur snaps his arm again. “There’s no point. It’s across Campus. We’re too deep in the Darkling Woods for you to make it back in time.”

“I’m starving,” Gwaine declares, smacking at Percival’s bicep. “Let’s head over to the chippie.”

Percival only grins. “You just want to an excuse to get rat-arsed before noon.”

“Well I wouldn’t say no to a bevvy as well.”

“Off you go then,” Arthur says, not looking away from Merlin. “I’ve got a few things to discuss with Merlin here-”

Gwaine snickers a little and Merlin might resent him for it if he wasn’t so charming. But the Knights listen to Arthur, and take off into the woods together, following some invisible path that Merlin doesn’t see.

He knew Arthur had power among the Knights as Uther’s son and because of his military prowess, but it’s a different thing seeing it in action. Merlin doesn’t even wait until he can no longer hear their footsteps. Instead, he pushes Arthur up against the nearest tree and somehow manages to climb him like one, snogging the air out of his lungs.

“That’s what you wanted to discuss, right?” he checks once his mouth is swollen and he’s grinding against Arthur’s stomach.

Arthur holds the back of his thighs with ease, gasping into Merlin’s throat and pushing the bulge in his trousers up against his arse. “Yes, Merlin,” he pants, in the snottish tone he uses to tell somebody they’re being obtuse.

Naturally.

Merlin helps Freya on his way to his next class after some bull-headed Knight knocks her over hard enough that she twists her ankle.

He shouts angrily at his retreating back, getting Freya onto her feet again but she only thanks him quickly before hobbling away with her head down. Infuriated, Merlin’s in a right mood as he heads off to class and barely passes the Albion library before another Knight is bearing down on him.

Magic steals into his palms in preparation of an attack but the man has a kind, open face. With a
jolt he realises it’s the Knight from the Darkling Woods, the one who lowered his weapon first at the sight of the unicorn. The one in the tournament who could’ve pressed an unfair advantage but didn’t.

Lancelot.

“I was hoping I might find you,” he says and that only makes him seem more suspicious. “Merlin, is it? My name is Lancelot D’Angelo, I’ve seen you talking with Gwen.”

Oh. So *that’s* what he’s after. “Look, er, Lancelot. Gwen sort of fancies someone else—“

Lancelot only seems more embarrassed. “No. It is not for Gwen’s sake that I come to you for advice. But for her brother.”

“Elyan?” Merlin says, astonished. “But he’s a second year Magic User. We don’t even share any lessons together.”

“But you’ve spoken to him and I know you to be a kind person, willing to help others. Could you perhaps spare some time to give your advice? There’s a Costa Coffee on Campus.”

Merlin hesitates. “I don’t know if I can give you the advice you need. I’m hopeless at relationships.”

Lancelot isn’t worried though. “I only wish for the perspective of a Magic User. I know you do not trust Knights and the fault of that lies with us, but I want to be able to approach Elyan without being greeted with the suspicion you feel right now.”

Merlin realises that he’s frowning, putting careful distance between them and that Lancelot is absolutely right about that. “Alright. Not today though. How’s tomorrow?”

“Half nine?” Lancelot says.

“Works for me.”

Merlin retrieves his phone and unlocks it so Lancelot can add his number. He seems nice enough and sincere about his feelings. But Merlin knows better than to trust a Knight outright without being certain of their intentions first. And he’s well aware of what kinds of barriers lie between Knights and Magic Users. Pursuing a relationship with one will surely not be easy.

“Thank you, Merlin,” Lancelot says, grateful and flushed. “I will not forget this.”

He nods and hurries away before another Knight can approach him. Merlin has no idea how so many of them suddenly know his name. Or seem to want to speak to him. And actually be fairly polite about it. Merlin didn’t think that was possible for a Knight that hangs around with Arthur on a regular basis.

He worries about Elyan and Lancelot for rest of the day, so much that he’s distracted in Incantation101 and messes up the spell for a simple heating charm with a freezing one. Once Professor Aglain has removed the snow covering every inch of the desks and vanished the snowflakes from the air, he politely lectures Merlin on the importance of memorising the correct incantations while the other students shiver away in their seats.

The spell for a heating charm and a freezing one, unfortunately sounds very similar. Merlin can only manage an apologetic smile afterward when Professor Aglain reheats the room to a survivable temperature.
Once class is over, he meets Gwen in the Quad and they sit down for a moment to bask in the sunshine. It’s been raining for the past two days. The weather has been utterly miserable. This is a small blessing.

“Is your brother single?” Merlin asks, head tipped up towards the sun and eyes closed.

Gwen sputters out a laugh. “Why? Do you fancy him?”

“No,” he protests quickly, flushing at the suggestion. But it’s not like Elyan isn’t unbelievably handsome, sweetly interesting and a talented Magic User. Merlin just happens to have another focus right now. “I- er, spoke to an admirer of his today.”

Merlin glances over at Gwen to view her reaction, but she’s already beginning to smirk at the prospect. “Oh really? Well do tell.”

“He’s a Knight,” Merlin says firstly, because that seems to be the biggest attribute against him.

Gwen’s face falls.

“Would Elyan ever go for it?” Merlin wonders. “If his experiences with Knights have been like mine then-?”

“Elyan’s wary of Knights, yes,” Gwen finishes for him. “I don’t know. What if it’s some kind of horrible trick? Elyan is very guarded with his feelings, he’s got an emotional nature and is hurt easily. I don’t want that to happen. Who is it that-?”

“Lancelot,” Merlin admits, having his own similar worries about it. “He came to chat when I was heading over to Incantations.”

“d’Angelo?” she finishes, surprised. “Oh, but I’ve met him. I thought he was rather nice, a little too nice if I’m being honest.”

“I thought the same,” Merlin assures her. “But I don’t think it’s an act. Lancelot is just kind.”

He’d had misgivings about him at first, but Merlin’s magic is particularly sensitive to picking up deception. Lancelot is absolutely genuine in his unfailing desire to be respectful and thoughtful towards others.

“Oh he’s fit too, isn’t he?” Gwen says, remembering.

Merlin nods. “Elyan certainly didn’t take his eyes off him at the tournament.”

Gwen still seems torn. “Should I warn Elyan about him?”

“Your choice, but he’s asked me to meet him at the Costa tomorrow.”

“Should I come too?” she wonders. “No that’s silly, of course not. I wasn’t even invited. Oh, I know, I’ll ask Morgana about him. I think she shares more classes with Lancelot than I do.”

Merlin almost forgot that they exchanged numbers after that Knight’s costume party.

“And how is the Lady Morgana?” he asks her, with only a small amount of mischief.

Gwen flushes, but her grin is self-satisfied and maybe a little lewd. “She’s coming over to our flat later. Elyan will be at the forge working until midnight at least.”
Merlin thinks he has some idea of what their plans might be. It's probably a good thing that Elyan is so busy on Campus, Gwen most likely has the flat to herself most nights.

Since she only has twenty minutes until her next class, Gwen drags out her textbook to finish off the weekly reading, a little smile resting on her face.

“I’m sure you’ll have a lovely evening.”

Gwen smacks lightly at his arm in a bashful way. “I bought some scented candles,” she admits shyly, but pleased.

“Very romantic,” he agrees, with an encouraging nod.

Gwen goes back to the textbook, pink cheecked and smiling. Merlin is finished for the day, but he likes to spend time in the sun with her until she has to head off to class. He usually stops by the café for a quick cup of tea or a snack before returning to the flat.

After she heads off, Merlin manages to make it home without any further magical incidents.

But word of the freezing spell in Incantation101 must have spread about the staffroom because when Merlin finally gets back to the flat, Gaius has left a book about rudimentary incantations on his bed.

As if it wasn’t embarrassing enough.

Matchmaking, it turns out, is a very distracting endeavour.

Costa Coffee is nearly overran with Camelot students the next morning.

“So why exactly do you like Elyan?” Merlin wonders after they manage to snag a table squeezed up in the corner of the room. “I’m not trying to be an arse but I don’t think I’ve ever seen you together?”

Lancelot avoids his gaze, face going softer than Merlin expected. “When I arrived at Camelot I found it difficult to afford the required items for a Knight, the armour, the textbooks, the tuition. I am not from one of the wealthy, noble Knight families.”

That’s something that Merlin can relate to. His magical scholarship is really the only reason he’s attending this University. Otherwise he and his mother would never have afforded it.

“I’m on a scholarship to even be here,” Merlin admits. “I know how expensive it is.”

“Elyan works in the forges on Campus,” Lancelot explains though he doesn’t need to tell Merlin that. “He helps forge the swords for every Knight in Camelot.”

Ah, Merlin is starting to see it now. “And that’s how you met?”

Lancelot smiles wryly. “We barely exchanged more than two sentences with one another but when I could not pay for my sword he gave it freely. I should like to get to know him better.”

“You are right about the suspicion,” Merlin admits. “Magic Users have been treated too badly by Knights to look at them with anything but distrust.”
Lancelot's crushed disappointment hurts Merlin as much as any physical blow. “So there is no hope, then?”

“I didn’t say that. I think perhaps you should find a common interest. A way to get to know one another. To be able to look past those instincts.”

Merlin doesn’t think of Arthur in that moment. Or of the consistent energetic shagging that allows them to tolerate one another for short periods of time until they fall into heated arguments.

“Can’t you volunteer your hands at the forge?” he wonders. “If you work together then-“

Lancelot’s expression brightens. “Of course. I can’t believe I never thought of it.”

Merlin takes a sip of his coffee. “You just need to be yourself. That will prove to Elyan exactly what kind of Knight you are.”

“I suppose I’m just hoping he won’t flee at the sight of me.”

There’s no denying that he’s fit. And sweet. And Elyan watched him intently during the first Tournament of term so perhaps they’ve got a good chance of hitting it off together. Merlin doesn’t think he should mention that though. “Somehow I don’t think you’ll have that problem.”

Lancelot only smiles and lifts his own mug to his mouth. Merlin wishes him well. He knows that relationships are not always easy. Well, of what little he’s been exposed to. They finish their drinks and leave just as the student rush is coming through the door. Lancelot says he has a training session at ten so he disappears with a wave, thanking Merlin profusely for his help.

Merlin has a lesson in two hours and has plans to sit in the sun to do his readings beforehand. But he runs smack bang into somebody’s chest first.

“Do watch where you’re going, Merlin.”

“Arthur,” he says, surprised. “What are you doing here?”

“What were you doing with Lance?”

Merlin glances around but Lancelot has long since gone. “How long were you watching us?”

“Long enough. Do you like him?” he demands, mulishly.

He’s not grinning like he usually does and Merlin cannot fathom why. “Yeah, he’s a good bloke. And here I thought Knights were all as prattish as you.”

Arthur looks gutted. Merlin’s never seen that expression on his face before. He doesn’t like it. In fact, the sight of it seizes him with a sense of urgency. “What crawled up your arse?”

He grips Arthur’s forearm in concern, wondering why he can’t sense what the problem is.

“Nothing,” he says, voice no longer playful. “I should go.”

Merlin catches at his shirt to stop him. “Sure you don’t have time to, er-“

They’re blocking the door, he realises.

Merlin drags him by his shirt around the corner, not stopping until he’s leaning against the stonewall in the gardens. Arthur is strangely silent and watching him closely and Merlin has no
idea what the problem is when Arthur doesn’t immediately snog the breath out of him.

“So you don’t fancy it, then?”

It was bound to happen eventually. The thrill of this would sputter out soon enough. Maybe there’s no curse after all.

At least that’s what Merlin is starting to think before Arthur mutters, “Oh, sod it,” and leans forward to kiss him.

Merlin responds eagerly, twining his hands around Arthur’s neck and pulling him in closer. It’s only been two days since he last saw him but gods, Merlin already wants another go. He digs his hands into Arthur’s hair, sighing into his mouth at the feel of him. It really shouldn’t be this good.

When he pulls away to breathe, Merlin’s leg is tucked around Arthur’s hip and he’s been thoroughly pressed up against the stone, hard enough he’ll bruise from it. His cock feels heavy in his trousers, the pressure of Arthur’s own arousal snug against him.

“You know I would rather a bed, Merlin,” Arthur murmurs. “But if stone walls really do it for you-”

“Shut up,” Merlin says, pulling him in for another kiss.

There’s nobody in this small alcove but there’s every chance someone could see them. Merlin’s not sure if he can last the walk back to his flat. Plus he’s never taken Arthur there before. Merlin doesn’t waste any time. He’s got Arthur’s cock out before he can say anything else and he slicks him up with magic, fumbling with his own pants at the same time. Arthur bats his hand away distractedly and gets his hands in Merlin’s jeans, unzipping him quickly.

“Gods,” Merlin groans when Arthur gets his hand around his prick.

He leans in, pressing Merlin up against the stone more firmly as he sinks his teeth into his neck. Merlin groans again when Arthur presses their cocks together and wraps them up in his fist, jerking them smoothly.

“Arthur,” he hums, tilting his neck so Arthur’s mouth has better access.

He flushes a little when he bites at the lobe of his ear, because they’re sensitive and people like to make fun of them for their size but Arthur doesn’t have any comments or move his hand any faster. Merlin realises he’s stirring the air around them with his magic, leaves spinning frantically across the grass and tries to focus enough to draw it back.

Arthur is muttering all kinds of things in his ear, but no matter how much Merlin tugs at his arms, grips his biceps to suggest he go faster, he doesn’t change his rhythm.

“God- Merlin…. Perfect,” Arthur mutters distractedly and Merlin clutches Arthur’s face, gets his fingers in his hair and tugs his mouth closer.

He loses himself in the kiss for a while, trying not to get impatient, but Arthur’s moving like they’ve got all the time in the world for this and Merlin just wants to come already. He works his hand into the back of Arthur’s trousers to cup his arse when he can’t take it anymore.

“Can I?” he wonders, waiting for Arthur’s heated agreement before he summons lube to coat his fingers and slides them between Arthur’s arse cheeks.
Arthur curses and his grip around their cocks tightens enough to derail Merlin’s fingers for a second before he’s cupping Merlin’s arse and lifting his thigh up to curl around his hip and slot them closer together.

Merlin’s finger slips inside of Arthur just as Arthur shifts his hand to spread the pre-come between them. “Shit,” Arthur curses. “Yeah, that’s it. Fuck, Merlin.”

He leans in to press his face into Arthur’s neck and puts his mouth to any available skin that he can. Arthur’s hand starts moving faster as Merlin works him up to two fingers, pressing deeper to find his prostate. He knows as soon as he’s got it, because Arthur’s grips them so tightly Merlin nearly comes in his fist, groaning as he speeds up his movements, the friction almost unbearable.

Arthur’s cursing again when he captures Merlin’s mouth and shifts his fingertips around their pricks, thumb sliding against Merlin’s slit.

He shudders in his hand and works harder to make Arthur come first, wanting him to forget whatever it was that got him all wound up earlier. His cheeks are all flushed with heat and Merlin wishes they weren’t half-hidden behind a stone wall so that he could open Arthur up and shag him properly.

He settles for the next best thing when he crooks his fingers just so and Arthur comes all over them both with a shocked, strangled sound that Merlin won’t easily forget.

Merlin’s so close that he doesn’t pull his fingers free as carefully as he should. But the way Arthur shivers and moans against him tells him that he likes it. Arthur’s out of it, too, pliant with his orgasm but he recovers quick, lifting Merlin up against his hips, propping him against the wall as he braces himself on the stone and holds Merlin’s thigh encouragingly.

Merlin locks his ankles behind Arthur’s hips and rolls into the mess of Arthur’s cock, spreading his come. Once Arthur realises he doesn’t need to hold Merlin up, he gets his hand around his cock again, smoothly stroking upward with just the right amount of pressure. He’s startled for a second when Arthur pushes him closer to orgasm, realising that he knows exactly what Merlin likes, what it takes to get him to come.

He twists his wrist on the next stroke, tightening on the sensitive head and Merlin pumps his hips a few more times before he comes, splattering himself and Arthur with his release.

Arthur laughs and kisses the gasp from Merlin’s mouth, holding him close as they get their breathing under control again. Merlin’s skin is flushed and he’s weak with satisfaction, slumping into Arthur who catches and supports his weight when his feet slide down to the ground again.

He vanishes the mess they’ve made with a glance and Arthur kisses him into the wall before he can tuck himself away again. He’s still breathless when Arthur pulls away but he’s nowhere near finished when Arthur starts hiking up his underwear and trousers.

Merlin reluctantly pulls his jeans back up, zipping himself up despite feeling like he could go again. When he reaches out to cradle Arthur’s face and snog him stupid, Arthur catches his hands to stop him.

“What?” he wonders, still leaning in closer.

Arthur steps back abruptly. “I’ve got to go.”

Merlin tries not to show any disappointment. “Right.”
He drops Merlin’s hands and drags him in by the front of his jumper a second later, kissing him hungrily. He stops before Merlin gets the chance to properly get into it and walks off with a parting smirk.

It leaves Merlin feeling more randy than he was beforehand.

Arthur really is a prat.

Merlin’s on his way home from class Tuesday afternoon when he catches sight of Arthur messing about on the field two streets away from Gaius’ flat.

Normally, Merlin might give a shot at ignoring him but Arthur is alone and he’s wearing footy shorts that show off the muscles in his thighs and Merlin’s making the detour before he can think better of it.

Arthur’s actually pretty good with the ball. Merlin didn’t really notice it the last time he and the rest of the Knights were kicking it about. He’s pushing the ball up into the air with the top of his foot and using his thighs and feet to keep the rhythm going. If Merlin played sports he might know what that was called.

“Er- hello,” he says, after he’s close enough that he can see the flush of exertion on Arthur’s skin.

The flash of heat flaring in his cock at the sight of him isn’t exactly shocking anymore. Arthur turns, flicking his wet hair off of his forehead before planting the ball onto the grass with his foot.

“Merlin,” he says, stretching the name out like it’s something he wants to play with.

Merlin feels like he’s swallowing a stone. “Yeah.”

Arthur stares at him for the barest of moments before he seems to decide something, scooping down to pick up his duffel sports bag and the ball. “Alright,” he says evenly and starts forward.

“Er, yeah I’m-“ he starts, but Arthur is already throwing an arm around his shoulder and steering him off the field.

Away from Gaius’ flat.

“Hey,” Merlin protests. “What are you-?”

“Want to come home with me?” Arthur wonders. “I could just suck you off in the middle of the park here but I doubt you’d go for it.”

“Are you out of your mind?” Merlin demands, flushing hotly at the thought as he looks around for witnesses.

The field is empty but there’s an old woman pushing a trolley across the road and there’s no way that’s happening.

“So is that a yes?” Arthur guesses, arm falling off his shoulder so that his hand can slide down the side of his ribs to cup the bone of his hip and curl inward.

Merlin’s breath leaves him in a whoosh. Especially when Arthur’s fingers tighten. He’s not
actually pulling away though, not when he’s already hard and Arthur is sweaty and wearing those shorts. He hesitates but only at the thought of the other unsavoury individuals that live with Arthur Pendragon.

They’ve learnt to steer clear of talking about him now. Much easier to shag that way. But there’s no way Merlin’s going anywhere near him.

“Your father—“

“In Madrid,” Arthur answers quickly, leaning in to press his nose underneath Merlin’s jaw like he’s breathing him in. “Business conference. Won’t be back until Sunday.”

“Fuck,” Merlin agrees eloquently when Arthur throws caution to the winds and reaches down to cup his crotch.

“Yeah,” he breathes. “Come on, Merlin. Come home with me.”

Merlin seizes Arthur’s hair and tugs his head back, just so that he can kiss him. Arthur’s mouth is hot and opens so easily that it makes Merlin groan before he’s deepening the kiss, tasting the slick pressure of Arthur’s tongue.

Arthur drops the football altogether and Merlin grips the back of his neck and aligns their hips, feeling the outline of Arthur’s prick through the flimsy fabric. Merlin doesn’t know how it happens but one second he’s snogging the hell out of Arthur and in the next he’s got a leg curled around his hip and Arthur’s hauling him up off the ground.

Merlin might complain about the nuisance they’re making of themselves, that old lady is still about, but in this position he’s much more equipped to grind down against Arthur’s cock and grip his hair like he likes. Arthur curses and pulls away to get air into his lungs but Merlin just ruts harder, kissing along his neck, biting at the sensitive flesh behind his ear.

“Fuck, Merlin,” he gaps, staggering as he works his hips just as furiously. “Fuck.”

A car honks nearby and Merlin comes back to his senses. “Shit. Put me down.”

Arthur does but he’s snickering and even manages to wave at the car when it passes by.

Merlin flushes and straightens up his clothes, flattening the mess Arthur made of his hair. His mouth is probably all swollen too, but there’s nothing much he can do about that. Arthur scoops up the football again and takes Merlin’s hand, leading him down the street. He should be saying no, but Arthur’s hand is steady and Merlin’s cock is pressing up painfully against the confines of his jeans and Arthur’s father isn’t home.

Merlin follows.

Arthur lives in a bloody mansion. The place is the largest house Merlin has even been inside and he stares about in astonishment for a few minutes before Arthur loses patience and drags him up into his bedroom without a word.

His bedroom is also just as ridiculous.
It’s bigger than Merlin and Gaius’ rooms put together and every inch of it is covered with trophies, weapons and sports equipment. There’s also a fair amount of books scattered about the place as well and not all of them are textbooks. Merlin’s somehow the most surprised about that.

What he’s not surprised about is the mess. Arthur’s kind of a slob, nearly matching Merlin’s own bedroom back in Ealdor but something tells him that Arthur has someone hired to clean up his messes. Not a mother who will nag him about it for at least twenty minutes until Merlin finally caves under the pressure.

The memory of her twinges a little and Merlin’s abruptly reminded that they haven’t spoken for a while. And that he misses her. He’ll call her when he’s back at Gaius’ flat later. But for now, Arthur’s back is to him as he sets down his duffel and football in the corner of the room. Merlin drops his own backpack in Arthur’s computer chair before moving in behind him.

“You’re going to lecture me on the mess, aren’t you?” Arthur guesses but Merlin’s already caught the edge of his shorts, palming at his arse.

“No,” he says and yanks them down, along with his underwear, exposing Arthur’s body.

Arthur hums softly before Merlin pushes him face first onto the bed, summoning lube. He works him open quickly, carving a place just for him before the noises Arthur’s making become too much and he can’t wait a second longer. Merlin struggles out of his clothes as quickly as he’s able, tossing items across the room in his haste until he’s finally naked.

It’s a good thing too because Arthur raises himself up on his arms, turning around to see what’s taking him so long when Merlin climbs onto the mattress behind him. He pushes inside with a groan, forehead collapsing onto Arthur’s arched spine as they clutch madly at one another.

Merlin can’t settle, can’t breathe past the heat coiled in his groin, the spark of pleasure fizzing in his brain until Arthur’s scrambling back to grasp at his hips, rolling his body with a choked off sound. He’s perfect, so perfect when Merlin rolls him onto his side, catching his thigh and bringing it closer to Arthur’s chest so that he can watch his cock disappear into the clutch of his body.

Arthur pants unevenly and presses his face hard enough into the pillow that he might disappear in it, but he still reaches out for any part of Merlin he can hold onto as he rocks in deeper. Merlin can’t take it anymore, descending onto Arthur’s face, turning his cheek so that he can kiss his mouth properly. He’s good like this, Merlin thinks, sweet with his pleasure and it thrills him to no end that Arthur isn’t afraid of what he wants. That he doesn’t try to hide it.

Merlin’s balls feel heavy as they slap against Arthur’s arse but he can’t concentrate past the burning heat of him, gripping his cock tight. How easily their bodies fit together. He’s not much experienced with all of this, but Merlin knows that he comes much too soon before either of them have worked up a good rhythm. He might be embarrassed about it, if not for the way Arthur clenches down on him, pulling him in deeper when he comes a second later.

Merlin doesn’t even bother to get free, just collapses atop of Arthur’s body, trying to kiss every inch of him until Arthur obliges and offers his mouth. They kiss and kiss and kiss until Arthur seems to get his second wind back and rolls them over to press Merlin into the mattress.

He asks if Merlin still wants to and he swallows and nods and manages to say yes before Arthur’s willing to proceed. This part is definitely new to Merlin. Arthur's fingers are just as gentle and sure as they were before and he takes his time opening Merlin’s body to accommodate him.
He doesn't feel the need to mention that it's his first time doing this, Arthur seems to know without him using any word. Merlin's orgasm is rapidly approaching again when Arthur finally slots a pillow underneath his hips and splays his legs wide, sliding between them. He looks down into his face carefully, waiting for some kind of response before Merlin is groaning and getting his fingers around Arthur’s prick and trying to get it inside.

Arthur grunts like he’s been hit and resists just to slather his cock with more lube, waiting for Merlin to whisper a breathless protection spell before he lines them up and starts to push in.

It’s more than Merlin was expecting. But Arthur made sure that he was ready for it, and any mild discomfort washes away to make room for desire. Arthur starts out slow, biting his lip to hold back and Merlin presses his thumb to the pucker of his mouth, opening his legs wider.

Arthur’s watching him intently, so much that Merlin feels like he’s become something he might hunt, the way his eyes alertly follow every shift of his hips, twitching muscle and sharp breath. He adapts so well to each reaction that Merlin frantically wonders if Arthur is somehow in his head right now. But he can’t think on that for long when Arthur’s hands are trailing softly along his thighs, lifting them around his hips and sinking in deeper.

“Oh fffuck,” Merlin gasps, scrabbling to get a hold of Arthur again but he’s moving so fluidly it’s like he’s water.

He tips his head back into the pillows, squeezing his eyes shut against the onslaught of sensation, recognising the building pressure in his cock, the rush of heat in his balls for what it is. Arthur leans down to kiss him again and Merlin tangles his fingers through his hair. When he opens his eyes again there are floating balls of light illuminating Arthur’s bedroom.

“You like it, huh?” Arthur wonders, glancing around at his uncontrolled magic smugly before rolling his hips in a smooth arc.

Merlin flushes but can’t reel it in right now. Arthur’s making that impossible.

“What do you need?” he gasps and there’s sweat sliding down his chest and Merlin wants to put his mouth to it. “C’mon, tell me. Fuck- what do you-?”

“Touch me,” he demands, feeling brittle like his lungs might collapse without it. “Gods, Arthur.”

Arthur smooths his palms along Merlin’s hips, sliding upwards against his sides towards his ribcage. He leans in to rest his forehead against Merlin’s and a shudder crawls through him at the shock of eyes staring into his. It makes him feel more naked than the absence of clothing ever could. He wasn’t expecting this kind of intimacy, Merlin hadn’t prepared against it.

Arthur kisses his cheek, his eyelids, his ears and Merlin sighs, shallow and shaky with how it makes him feel. The steady roll of his hips is spreading fire throughout his body and Merlin doesn’t think he can keep up.

“What do you need, love?” Arthur murmurs, leaning down to bite teasingly at Merlin’s nipple. He curves into his mouth, knows his prick is all but dribbling pre-come right now as he pushes back onto Arthur’s cock. “You,” he gasps, rocking his hips faster. “You, fuck, fuck,”

A sharp hiss of breath escapes Arthur’s mouth before his hand is skating between them to grasp Merlin’s cock. His fingertips barely slide between the slick mess before the added sensation becomes too much and Merlin’s body locks up tight and comes.
Arthur pants heavily and fucks into him with abandon, thrusting with all the strength and power that Merlin knew he possessed. He cries out, anchoring himself to Arthur whilst his body twitches sensitively through the aftershocks.

They both need a break. Arthur rests against Merlin’s forehead again, kissing him briefly before his eyes fall shut and he moans like he’s been slain. Merlin feels the rush of his come a second later as he fills him up with it.

Arthur doesn’t pull out straight away, the muscles in his arms wavering with the struggle of not dropping directly on top of him. Merlin wishes he would. Just so he could feel him a little longer. The magic lights floating throughout the air start to fizzle out, now that his body is back under control and Merlin makes a tired sound when Arthur finally withdraws.

He doesn’t go anywhere, cupping the back of Merlin’s neck and inspecting him closely.

“Alright?” he wonders, eyes burning with some unnamed emotion that Merlin can’t read.

He’s flustered all of a sudden by the things he said whilst Arthur was fucking him. Much too intimate. All of it felt too familiar for a random shag. “Yeah,” he manages, cheeks colouring when he sees the mess he’s made of himself.

He feels Arthur’s come slipping between his arse cheeks a second later and groans when his cock twitches. Arthur hums a little and rolls off Merlin entirely, laying on his back on the empty space of the mattress. He throws a heavy arm across Merlin’s chest a second later before sliding his fingers through Merlin’s come.

When he brings it to his mouth, Merlin can’t help the whimper it brings out of him. Arthur licks it up with relish before leaning in for a bruising kiss. Merlin’s so overwhelmed that he can’t speak after but Arthur just hauls him closer and lets his eyes fall shut.

Merlin doesn’t mean to go along with it but he does.

When he wakes up it’s dark, there’s come between his legs and Arthur is snoring softly against his chest. Merlin manages to extract himself without much difficulty but when he catches sight of the time on Arthur’s beside clock, he curses softly and gets up. Before he can make his escape he trips over his own boots, banging loudly into Arthur’s desk.

So much for sneaking out without notice.

Arthur’s up like a shot, reaching underneath his pillow and drawing out a knife before Merlin can even start to apologise. His eyes widen at the weapon until Arthur finally sees it’s him standing half naked in the corner and frowns.

“Bloody hell,” Merlin says. “You sleep with *that* under your pillow?”

“Can’t ever be too careful, Merlin,” Arthur replies easily, fully alert now. He realises that Merlin is stepping back into his underwear and his frown deepens. “Where are you going?”

“It’s late,” he says, using a spell to clean himself of all the shared come. “Gaius will worry if I’m not home before six.”

He locates his jeans and stick his legs into them, quickly jerking them up until they’re at his hips before buttoning up.

“Then tell him where you are,” Arthur suggests easily, like it’s no problem for Merlin to stick
around longer so they can shag each other senseless.

It’s tempting but Merlin’s body already feels like it’s had a good workout and he’s not sure he could go again so quickly. He shrugs and wrangles the t-shirt he tossed atop Arthur’s laptop back over his head. “No. I just- er- I’ve gotta go.”

Arthur drags himself out of bed then, throwing on his dirty shorts and stepping towards him. Merlin can see the love bites he left all over his chest and his neck and stumbles into his socks, jerking his boots onto his feet.

“What’s got you all shy?” Arthur wonders, grinning charmingly as he gets a hold of Merlin’s hips. “When you’ve still got my come in your arse.”

“So off,” Merlin mutters, flushing deeply and using magic to tie his shoelaces.

He moves out of Arthur’s grip and bends down to scoop up his backpack. When he glances back, Arthur’s expression has shifted. There’s something unpretentious and soft about it that leaves Merlin with the strangest urge to kiss him again. But that’s not what this is.

“See you later,” he manages, grabbing his jumper off the floor.

He staggers out of the room quick enough that Arthur won’t be able to follow. But he barely makes it down the hall, heading for the front door before knocking into someone.

“What the-?”

“Er- sorry,” Merlin says automatically before recognising her. “Oh you’re Morgana. I’m Merlin, nice to meet you.”

Morgana raises an eyebrow at him and stares at his neck long enough for Merlin to realise he isn’t the only one who got carried away with lovebites. He flushes and hastily uses his magic to conceal them. Morgana’s expression changes and she glances at the bedroom where Merlin clearly just came out of, putting two and two together.

“Arthur’s shagging a Magic User?” she crows, absolutely delighted. “What a bloody hypocrite.”

Merlin feels a spike of shame curl in him. “Look it’s not serious,” he admits. “It was an accident really. It’s not like I don’t know what a tosser his father is.”

That seems to make Morgana smile. “Er- I mean, your father too, I suppose.”

“Oh don’t worry. I’m quite aware of what a cock he is.”

Merlin nearly drops his jumper in surprise. “Oh, well- er, good for you?”

“Merlin was it?” she says. “I like you. You’re a good sort.”

He snorts. “What compared to the others Arthur brings home? Thanks.”

Morgana’s smile shifts, becomes sharper than it was a second ago as if she’s suddenly come across a new weapon to use. “Yes. Yes, exactly.”

She holds her hand out to shake and Merlin accepts it, feeling a lot less embarrassed than he did a second ago. That is before the welcoming hum of power flows from her fingertips and into his own.
“You have magic!” he gasps, shocked.

Morgana flinches, and pales, violently tearing her hand free and that’s when Arthur comes stomping down the hall.

“Merlin, c’mon don’t be such a-“

He stops short at the sight of Morgana and the softness of his expression turns harsh as stone. Merlin’s so surprised by the realisation that Morgana is a Magic User and the stark change in Arthur’s demeanour that he doesn’t run for the front door like he should. He just stands there frozen to the spot.

“What did you say to him?” Arthur demands, misreading Merlin’s shock and angrily stepping forward as if he’s going to intervene.

Merlin puts a hand to his chest to stop him. “Don’t talk to her like that,” he says. “Morgana is lovely and you’re still a prat.”

Morgana looks stunned for a second before some of the stone on Arthur’s face cracks. “Don’t try to be cute Merlin, you’re no good at it.”

This Merlin understands at least. “Wow, you’re a git.”

Morgana’s smile is steadily reappearing. “Oh, I get it now.”

“Shut up, Morgana.”

But she ignores Arthur completely. “Where are you going then? Fancy a drink, Merlin?”

Arthur is already reaching out and steering Merlin toward the door. “He’s not available to you.”

“He can speak for himself,” Merlin mutters, annoyed. “I’ve got to head home, but I’ll look for you on Campus. We can grab coffee.”

Arthur’s grip on him tightens. “Oh so you grab coffee with anybody now.”

“What?” Merlin splutters, surprised at the irritation in Arthur’s voice. “What are you on about?”

Morgana only laughs. “My, my, brother. I didn’t think you could get jealous.”

Arthur’s skin has an unexpected pinkish tinge to it and Merlin realises that there’s some other argument going on that he probably shouldn’t be getting involved in. Private family matters and the like.

“Morgana,” he warns and she seems to decide that now is the time to back off.

Merlin turns abruptly and opens the front door before Arthur can. “Nice to meet you, Morgana. I meant it about that coffee.”

Arthur makes an aggravated sound and pushes Merlin out the front door, shutting it behind the both of them.

“I didn’t realise you two don’t get along,” he says, staring at the closed door with interest now that they’re alone. “What’s that about?”

Arthur’s lips are pursed like he’s trying to hold something back. “Nothing. We get along fine.
Morgana just likes to meddle.”

Merlin doubts that’s the whole story but it’s probably none of his business. “Alright.”

“You are you know,” Arthur says abruptly.

“Are what?”

“Cute,” he admits.

Merlin has no idea what to say to that. “Er-“

“C’mon,” Arthur says, acting like he never said anything and moving in to throw an arm around him. “I’ll walk you home.”

Merlin has a horrifying image of Gaius meeting him at the door and having to explain who Arthur is and what they’re doing together. Or that he’s the one Merlin thinks he’s been sex cursed with. “No,” he protests quickly. “I can walk myself.”

Arthur hesitates like he wants to protest but then he leans in and kisses Merlin instead. He’s surprised but recovers, gripping Arthur’s jaw to hold him there longer before he pulls away.

“Er-“

“See you later, Merlin.”

Somehow Merlin doesn’t doubt that he will.
Morgana tracks him down on Campus the next day. She does it so efficiently that Merlin has the distinct feeling that he’s been stalked.

“Er- hello,” he says once she’s caught a hold of his elbow, preventing him from walking to his next lesson. “I have a class-“

“I don’t care,” she says and drags him off behind a statue of Uther Pendragon. At least Professor Ostane is understanding about tardiness. He shouldn’t get into too much trouble for being unceremoniously kidnapped by Morgana Pendragon.

Merlin has to wonder if she’s realised the irony of whose statue they’re hiding behind to talk about her apparently secret magic.

“What’s happened?” Merlin asks, worried that Uther somehow found out. “Are you alright?”

Being a Magic User when people like Uther Pendragon exist to spew constant hate and terrible lies about them is hard enough. Merlin couldn't possibly imagine what it would be like to be a secret Magic User living under Uther's roof. How could he not know that his daughter has magic?

“Did you tell anyone?” Morgana demands, getting right to the point. “Because if you did-“

“About the magic, you mean?” he says. “Of course I wouldn’t. I know who your father is. Does Arthur know?”

Morgana glances around them but nobody seems to have caught sight of them behind the statue. It's a really bloody big statue. Some of the Magic Users charmed birds to fly over and shit on Uther Pendragon's likeness during lunchtime every day last week until Kilgharrah found out and put a stop to it.

“Nobody knows. I’ve never told anyone.”

That doesn't sound good at all. “Then who’s teaching you how to control it?”

Morgana doesn’t answer and Merlin realises it’s worse than he thought. “I can, you know,” he says. “I can teach you control.”

She makes a derisive sound, tossing her long hair back.

“I can,” he insists. “I’ve had control since I was six years old. I can help you.”

Morgana stares at him carefully for a moment, undecided. “Arthur said you’re powerful.”

That’s surprising. Merlin was under the impression that Arthur believes he doesn’t possess any magic from the way he acts sometimes. Or at the very least he was constantly underestimating
Merlin's abilities. “Really? He said that?”

Morgana smirks a little. “I don’t think he’s ever been so smitten.”

Yeah right. Merlin rolls his eyes. “Trust me, it’s not like that. We’re just fooling around.”

She raises an eyebrow, much in the way he’s seen Arthur do it but she doesn’t seem to believe him. “So you’ll teach me then?”

“Yeah,” he promises. “What days are you free?”

“Thursday would be best.”

“We can practice at Gaius’ flat. He goes out with his healing group that night and won’t be home until later.”

Morgana considers it. “What about Arthur?”

He shrugs. “What about him?”

Morgana seems to like the answer to that because she gives him her mobile number and promises to meet at Gaius’ flat this Thursday. "Arthur never brings anyone over to the house, you know," Morgana tells him once they've exchanged numbers.

Merlin has not idea what that means. Is she trying to tell him that having strangers in the house sets off her magic? Merlin could probably help her with that.

"Reclusiveness runs in the family I suppose," he responds, not entirely understanding what she's getting at.

Morgana sighs, like he's wilfully making this harder for her and Merlin has the strangest urge to apologise for it. But when she reaches out and pats him supportively on the shoulder a second later before finally walking away Merlin has the strangest feeling that he’s just made a friend.

Another Pendragon.

Merlin really hasn’t learnt his lesson.

"Hello Mum," Merlin says, on his walk into Camelot the next morning when she finally picks up her mobile. "How are things?"

"Merlin," she gasps, utterly delighted. "Oh how are you? Are you eating alright? Learning a lot? I hope you've been careful-

"Everything’s great," he promises cutting off her rant before she can really work herself up into full blown worry. "I'm sorry it's been so long since we last spoke. I've just been so busy here but I've missed you."

Merlin can hear the sound of conversation in the background. She must be sitting in her favourite armchair in the dining room. It's right by the fire and Merlin usually keeps the embers warm with his magic during the winter months.
"I've missed you too," she sighs. "Hasn't quite been the same without you here. Will keeps coming over, forgetting you're not staying here anymore."

Merlin laughs, even as he feels a twinge of regret. He's been missing Will a lot too. Even if he's made some great friends at Camelot. "How's the B&B?" he asks. "You been getting a lot of customers?"

"Yes," she says with a kind laugh. "You wouldn't believe how many people turned up for the potato festival last weekend. Though I really couldn't say for the appeal."

Merlin snorts too. He'd have to agree with her. There are much more interesting things in Ealdor than potato festivals. "I might visit in a few months. We've got a short two week break for the easter holidays," he explains. "So I might come back home and spend the time with you before term resumes. If you have the room of course."

"Of course I have the room, Merlin," she replies as if anything else would be short of ludicrous. "I carried you in my womb for goodness sake. But, oh it would be lovely to see you."

Merlin coughs, but manages not to die with embarrassment at her words, especially when he can hear other women laughing in the background. His mother happens to have a very loud voice too. It carries. No good for keeping secrets.

But gods, he loves her dearly.

"Okay, brilliant," he says, once he's reached the University's gates. "I'll see you then. Take care of yourself, Mum. I love you."

"And I love you."

Merlin hangs up his mobile and walks around with an easy smile for the rest of the morning.

Uther Pendragon’s return to Camelot is highly televised to the point that Merlin wishes he’d turned right around on his private jet and decided to stay in Madrid forever.

Unsurprisingly, Arthur doesn’t try and lure him over to his flat again now that Uther is back and Merlin still refuses to let Arthur into Gaius’ place. Not that Arthur has actually asked about it. That doesn’t mean they aren’t creative whenever they meet on Campus.

Merlin is feeling particularly clever hunched over Arthur’s back while he drives his cock up into him in the reserve section of the library. He’s put a spell on the door so nobody will come in and interrupt them but they’re probably about to be caught anyway with the amount of noise Arthur is making.

“Come on, come on,” he urges, like Merlin isn’t giving it to him hard enough.

Which he’s not, he’ll admit, he’s teasing Arthur a little right now. But Arthur feels so good that Merlin knows if he moves any faster he’s going to come almost immediately. So he reaches around and gets a hold of Arthur’s prick instead, leisurely pushing into him, one arm wrapped around Arthur’s chest tight because it’s the only thing holding him up right now.

He grunts into Arthur’s shirt and jerks him off furiously, spelling lube into his palm to make it
slick and struggles not to fall over when Arthur’s body tightens viciously around him.

“Fuck, Merlin,” he groans, panting and moving without direction as if he doesn’t know whether to push into Merlin’s hand or move back for his cock.

Gods, Merlin didn’t think he needed to shag someone this much. But he does. So much that it’s driving him out of his mind. He gasps harshly before biting at Arthur’s neck, tasting his skin as he jerks him faster, listening to Arthur fall apart under him.

“Arthur,” he moans, amazed and astonished when Arthur comes hard a second later, spilling onto the carpet with a sweet, plaintive sound that pushes Merlin straight over the edge.

He comes inside him with a cry, holding Arthur tighter since he’s going to collapse otherwise and Arthur’s ribs start to shake with laughter. Merlin grins into his neck but when he tries to pull out, Arthur catches hold of his thigh to stop him.

“Just,” he sighs, sounding raw and tired and Merlin shivers at the strain in his voice. “Just a little longer.”

Merlin lets go of Arthur’s cock and strokes any available skin that he can, smoothing his hands across Arthur’s stomach, his chest, his back, kissing his neck and moulding to his spine. It’s not uncomfortable, Merlin’s still hard after his orgasm and there’s something unsettling about how wonderful it feels to stay inside Arthur for a lengthier time.

He figures out pretty quickly that he can’t stay still for long though. Merlin starts pushing in again, pressing deeper, forcing his cock in and groaning at the way his come makes the slide so much easier.

“What-“ Arthur pants. “What are you-?”

“Can I?” Merlin begs, frantic need overwhelming him all over again. “Please, fuck, I need to-“

“Yeah,” he says, trying to adjust the angle so Merlin’s right against his prostate. “Please, yeah-“

Merlin steps back, letting his prick slip out only about half way, watching Arthur’s body struggling to keep him inside before pushing in again. He goes slow just to feel it better, knowing they’re too sensitive for anything more than that and pants into Arthur’s shoulder with how fantastic it feels.

He rocks his hips slowly, doesn’t fully withdraw like that again, just nudges in a little deeper every time so that his balls are pressed right up tight against Arthur’s arse.

“Gods,” Arthur gasps and he sounds wrecked. “I’m gonna-“

“Me too,” Merlin promises, and heat licks up his thighs, pulsing at the base of his cock before he’s coming again.

Arthur curses, flushed all over and shaking when he comes onto the carpet a second after. Merlin pulls out this time, cleaning the floor and Arthur with his magic as he staggers backwards.


Merlin groans and collapses onto his back, cock still out and somehow still hard. “No shit.”

Arthur clutches at the shelf and manages to get upright before he’s turning to stare at Merlin all
laid out on the floor, looking at his flushed cock while his pupils widen. A sort of determined air seems to possess him before he lurches over, straddling Merlin’s stomach as he sinks down. Merlin’s breath disappears in a rush at the weight but then vanishes entirely when Arthur catches hold of his prick and tries to align their bodies again.

“What-?” he pants, bewildered and unbelievably aroused. "Again?"

“Just one more,” Arthur promises. “One more-“

Merlin’s already pushing his cock back inside Arthur’s arse. “Yes, yes yes,” he groans, feeling like he’s going to die.

But he doesn’t care. He doesn’t care, because Arthur is biting his lip and rocking his hips already as his cock shoves into him and Merlin might already be dead.

The thought doesn’t bother him that much.

Gilli comes running over just as Merlin is biting into his sandwich and finishing off his Alchemy notes. The Quad is full of Knights and Magic Users, most of which perk their heads up in interest to see what’s going on.

The expression of horror on Gilli’s face probably doesn’t bode well. “Merlin,” he pants, “I need your help.”

That’s been happening a lot lately too. Merlin doesn’t know if it’s because they’ve seen him stand up to the Knights before, or because word spread around about him stopping them killing that unicorn but Magic Users keep coming to him with their problems lately. And nearly all of their problems in some way or other involve the Knights.

“What’s happened?” he demands, setting down the sandwich reluctantly.

“Cenred,” he gasps, trying to get his breathing under control. “He tried to take this-“ he lifts his hand up to show an intricate looking ring. “It belonged to my father.”

Merlin has a feeling this isn’t going to end well. “He attacked you?”

“He tried before I- defended myself.”

What is so wrong with Knights that simply working peaceably besides Magic Users without hurting, demeaning or trying to take things from them is somehow unthinkable? The Knight mentality at Camelot makes Merlin hot with rage more times than he cares to admit.

“Cenred won’t dare come after you in a Quad full of witnesses. You’re safe for now.”

“I’m not,” Gilli insists miserably. “He went to get Sarrum.”

“Bollocks,” Merlin says, but his eyes are already focused on the crowd of Knights stomping toward them. “Get behind me.”

Gilli obeys without question. Merlin doesn’t stand up when they arrive, forming a semi circle around him and looming impressively. He notes that Arthur isn’t among them. Not that he’s looking for him or anything.
“What do you want?” he says, expression hard as he stares up at the leader.

“Give us the spellbeggar and we’ll be on our way,” the one standing next to Cenred says.

Merlin frowns at him. “That’s not his name.”

One of them tries to reach out for Gilli’s hand, the one that he wears the ring on but Merlin raises his own in warning. “And that doesn’t belong to you.”

“It does now,” Sarrum says, eyes cold and full of hate.

There’s no way that's happening. Merlin's not going to stand aside for these plonkers even if they look just about ready to tear his head off. The situation is only going to escalate from here. Merlin doesn’t recognise any level-headed Knights among them. Cenred really went out of his way to find the worst of the bunch.

Sarrum is still glaring at them both but Merlin only stares him down. “No, I don’t think so.”

Cenred is standing at the back of the crowd of Knights with a sneer that's as hateful as it is ugly. “It’s none of your concern, wand licker,” he taunts, looking as if he’d like nothing better than to rough him up.

“It is actually,” Merlin continues, unperturbed. “Anybody who wants to harm Magic Users has to go through me.”

He knows he doesn't make much of an impressive image given how Sarrum's legs have more muscle than Merlin's entire body mass, but he's not going to back down. And he has more than enough strength to take them all on, even if they might not be able to see it.

Sarrum actually snorts and Merlin isn't surprised enough to be offended. “And who the bloody hell are you?”

“I’m Merlin,” he says.

Sarrum takes a step closer. “Look you little queer muppet. You probably couldn’t win a fight against my grandmother.”

Merlin stands up, so that Sarrum can see his face more clearly. He’s tall enough that he can actually look down at him which startles Sarrum before his expression contorts into a scowl.

“You go through me,” Merlin repeats firmly.

The Knights titter with amusement and Sarrum turns back to laugh with them before he throws a punch without warning. Merlin’s eyes flash gold and Sarrum’s shirt tugs up over his head so that his arms are caught and he can’t see where he’s going. He curses and trips into the table, fists going wide with a loud crash and suddenly all of the Knights are rushing forward.

He barely lifts a hand and every single one of them goes flying across the Quad. Two land on top of other Knight’s tables, one directly atop of someone’s pizza and that gives Merlin an idea. He focuses his magic and in the next second there is pizza, hot chips, shepherds pie, potato mash and every other kind of hot meal flying out of the Food Hall, pelting all of the Knight’s who tried to attack them.

It’s utterly shambolic after that. There’s shouting and stumbling and some of them are trying to draw their weapons but they’re tripping over spaghetti and potato mash and falling all over the
place. Some of them are rubbing at their eyes where they’ve been hit with curry.

Gilli lets out a shocked sound of amusement before Cenred is launching himself at Merlin. He only just gets his hands around Merlin’s throat before he’s tossed into the fountain by magic. When he emerges, spluttering and mad with rage a nearby garbage can upends on his head.

Merlin glances back at Gilli, who’s smiling to himself at the small victory. He rubs his neck a little and focuses on the other Knights. Surprisingly, Merlin and Gilli aren’t the only Magic Users helping things along. Mordred throws two angry Knights up against the brickwork, hard enough to knock them unconscious and Morgause creates a whirlwind to help spread the food missiles quicker.

Sarrum gets to his feet with a roar of fury, shirt half torn in his efforts to free himself before he dives at Merlin.

He steps back, but not quick enough to avoid Sarrum’s fist as it collides with his stomach. Merlin hunches over with a gasp of pain, wheezing uncontrollably, but before he can respond in kind, Kilgharrah is appearing in the centre of the Quad with an ear-splitting explosion of sound.

“Enough!” he roars and Merlin withdraws his magic, miscellaneous food objects clattering harmlessly to the ground as the Knights stop fighting.

Sarrum isn’t deterred, he goes for Merlin again, ignoring Kilgharrah, bloodlust in his eyes with the intention to do more than just hurt him. Merlin’s ready but he doesn’t get the chance to defend himself before Sarrum is tipping over in front of him, Arthur suddenly there, gripping the back of his neck as he pushes Sarrum face first into the concrete, pinning him to the ground.


Arthur shoots him a sceptical look but Merlin’s having none of it. “Do I look like I need your help?”

Arthur glances around the Quad, eyes falling on Kilgharrah as he magically removes the mess Merlin and the other Magic Users made. He stops to revive the two Knights who are still unconscious.

There are a few bloody noses and broken bones but Kilgharrah passes through the crowd quickly, dispelling panic and anger and healing anyone he touches. Arthur lets go of Sarrum and steps back before Kilgharrah even reaches them. Suddenly free, Sarrum turns over with a groan of pain and his nose is clearly broken from the fall. But his eyes are wide with rage when Kilgharrah crouches down to heal him.

Once everyone is unharmed, the Dean of Camelot whirls around to face the rest of the students.

“This will not stand,” he booms and Merlin notices that nobody can quite meet his eyes. “There will be grave consequences for this, of that I can assure you. This animosity between Knights and Magic Users cannot continue. The next person to engage in any acts unfitting of inter-University cooperation will be expelled.”

Kilgharrah pauses to let that sink in and disappears with a billow of his cloak.

Merlin returns to his table to pack up his things, watching Sarrum carefully as he gets to his feet, glaring at Arthur and then Merlin before he stalks away. Arthur’s staring like he wants to say something but Merlin slings his backpack over his shoulder by then and grabs at Gilli’s elbow to drag him away before another fight can get started.
He knows Kilgharrah’s words are not an empty threat. There will be consequences, on that he can count on.

Merlin grits his teeth and doesn’t glance back. To where he knows Arthur is still standing, watching him.

Merlin is supposed to be attending his Elemental lecture but he catches a flash of blonde hair and that infuriating smirking grin in the corridor and the next thing he knows, he’s getting buggered on a desk in an abandoned classroom.

There wasn’t even a chance to lock the door in between Arthur kissing feverishly along his skin and yanking off all of their clothes. If he’s truly been hit with a sex curse then Merlin definitely isn’t complaining. Not when Arthur doesn’t wait for further instruction, nudging Merlin up against the desk and situating himself against his arse.

A quick lubrication spell and some prep and then Arthur is sliding his thick cock inside him with a choked off groan, anchoring the palm of his hand against the base of Merlin’s spine and gripping the edge of the desk. They shudder together for a moment before Arthur starts to move, pounding roughly into him.

“Oh, gods,” he moans, needing to press his cheek against the wood of the desk to cool the heat of his skin.

Each thrust pushes his prick against the rigid wood of the desk, feeling the press of Arthur’s cock deep and perfect.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Arthur pants into his ear like an utter prat but he gives a particularly satisfying jerk of his hips, hitting Merlin’s prostate dead on before he can offer a scornful retort.

The thing is, since Arthur’s such a great shag, most of the time when he’s bent over Arthur, or getting Arthur to kneel for him, he can almost forget he’s a total turnip head. That is, until he opens his arrogant mouth. Then Merlin just wants to conk him on the skull all over again.

“You know- Sarrum- he’s after your neck,” Arthur pants with every thrust.

Merlin lets out a strangled laugh. “This is… what you want- to talk about? Right- now?”

“No,” he groans, low and pained, as he spreads Merlin’s arse cheeks, cock ploughing him roughly. “God, you’re such- an idiot, Merlin.”

The feeling of Arthur filling him up is so spectacular that Merlin needs to squeeze his eyes shut in order to concentrate. “I can- take care of myself.”

Arthur snorts out a laugh and it rumbles through Merlin deliciously. “Right. Course you can.”

But he’s not taking him seriously. Merlin would take the time to be annoyed with that if he could focus on anything else but Arthur’s prick. And how close is he is to coming all over the desk.

“Come on,” Arthur groans, pushing his cock deep. “Come on, come on.”

Merlin senses her before she opens the door. "Wait," he tries to warn Arthur. "There's someone-"
The handle turns and a small wisp of a girl walks into the room, distracted before the sounds alert her to the fact that Arthur Pendragon has him bent over a desk and is shagging the living daylights out of him.

She lets out a small gasp of shock, flushing a deep red at the sight and Merlin scrambles to get out from under him, to duck behind the desk, to cover himself, do something, but Arthur just catches at his hips and pushes closer with a particularly unsteadying thrust.

“Sod off,” he snarls, and the girl backs out of the room with a squeak, slamming the door shut behind her.

Merlin’s complaints at his rudeness get lost in the sounds of pleasure, arcing back to keep Arthur’s cock in that perfect slide which is going to make him come sooner than later. He manages a breathless spell to lock the classroom door this time. The last thing they need are more students walking in. Or a professor.

“Look at you,” Arthur murmurs and Merlin moves his hips harder in the hopes of shutting him up before he can say something prattish. “Merlin.”

“Don’t be a prat,” he groans. “Just- don’t stop.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Arthur groans into his ear before kissing along his throat. “You’re so good, so good for me.”

“Bugger off,” he mutters just as Arthur starts to come, collapsing briefly on top of him before staggering into the professor’s chair and hauling Merlin into his lap. He doesn’t pull out, still hard as he drags his thumb over the tip of Merlin’s prick, spreading his pre-come around.

“Come on then, Merlin,” he breathes, holding him tight. “Come for me.”

Merlin spurts onto his jumper, come splashing against the blue fabric as he shivers through his orgasm, clenching Arthur tight and riding him through it. He pants heavily, startled when Arthur’s arms wrap around his stomach and holds him close, savouring the endorphin rush.

“I gotta go,” Merlin says once he has his breath back and Arthur still seems interested in having another go at him. “I’m late for my lecture.”

Arthur keeps one arm around his waist and starts rummaging through the pockets of Merlin’s jeans still pooled around his ankles. “What the bloody hell are you doing?”

“Looking for your phone,” Arthur explains, in a patronising way. “So I can give you my number.”

Merlin wriggles a little and they both get a bit lost in the sensations that brings about. Arthur is definitely raring to go again and Merlin’s starting to stiff up himself. But he can’t miss this lecture or he’s going to fall behind.

“Why would I want that?”

Arthur does not take offence though it’s a wonder he doesn’t. Merlin’s starting to think he likes being insulted by the people who shag him. Though to be fair, Merlin is only one of those people, he can’t speak for the rest.

“To contact me Merlin,” he announces. “So we can schedule these little tête-à-têtes of ours.”

“That’s not as good an innuendo as you think it is.”
But Arthur goes on like he hasn’t heard him, idly stroking the bare skin beneath Merlin’s jumper so that he shivers. “You don’t live on Campus, right? Leon said Gwen told him you live nearby.”

Merlin finally manages to drag himself off of Arthur’s cock with all of the dignity he can muster, reciting the cleaning spell and dragging his pants and underwear back up to cover his bare arse.

“Heaven been stalking me through your Knight friends?” he demands. “What kind of perv are you?”

“The kind you let bend you over this table two minutes ago,” Arthur declares. “And who made you come all over yourself. Still think I’m not worth getting a leg over?”

Merlin straightens his jumper, clean now of any indecent activities just undergone. He’s not going to be able to look at it now without remembering Arthur though. That’s unfortunate. “I should have realised Knights have insecurities about their sexual prowess almost as big as their egos.”

Arthur’s frowning now. “What have you got against Knights exactly?”

Merlin picks up his backpack. “What they’ve got against me. The pranks that go too far, the derogatory name calling, the bullying, the way they see themselves as above Magic Users or more valuable and important. The fact that they tried to steal Gilli’s ring the other day, his last memory of his dead father because it was amusing to make him suffer. And that they attacked me when I wouldn’t let them. The way your father sees us-“

“Hey, hold on a minute.”

“You don’t think we don’t know he’s trying to have the magical department removed entirely? What happens to Magic User then? We’ll just lose control because nobody is teaching us and get killed for it? And Knights in turn, will be killed by evil magic since there won’t be good Magic Users around to protect them. And all over these stupid prejudices that view us as worthless before we’ve walked in the damn University door.”

Arthur’s watching him closely, speechless.

“And don’t pretend you’re above all that. You’re just as bad as the lot of them, calling me names, thinking of me as lesser than you, I wouldn’t be surprised if it was you who covered us in green paint at the Character Placement ceremony-“

Arthur appears extremely offended by that. “It was a harmless prank, Merlin. And it wasn’t me-“ he starts to protest.

“But you know who did it, don’t you?” Merlin snaps, openly shouting now. “Did you also know that my friend Freya is allergic to paint? She could’ve died Arthur from your friend’s ‘harmless prank’ and none of you arsehole Knights would’ve given a damn.”

He’s breathing heavily once he’s finished and Arthur is staring at him in shock, visibly cowed and unable to say anything to defend himself.

Merlin stares at his phone in Arthur’s hand and snatches it back. “I don’t want your number,” he says. “We shouldn’t do this anymore. You don’t understand and you never will. This is a mistake.”

Arthur pales, but there’s anger in the set of his shoulders too, a protest of everything Merlin’s just accused him of. “You say Magic Users have it bad but when you look at Knights all you see is one thing. You’re just as prejudiced.”
“Leave me alone,” Merlin mutters, scooping up his backpack, the rush of a good roll around fading fast.

This whole thing is utter bollocks. He should never have done this for so long. He must have been barmy to think any of this was a good idea.

Merlin runs to his lecture and manages to make it just in time. He sits down and prepares to learn more about earth magic as Kilgharrah paces the front of the theatre, setting up for his lecture while other Magic Users keep filing into the room. It’s interesting content, Merlin particularly enjoys everything he’s learning from his Elemental course.

But by the time the lecture is finally over Merlin barely feels like he absorbed a single word.

“How are things?” Gwen asks during their free period on Wednesday.

They’re sitting out in the Quad so that they can study and talk without being glared at. But the fact that they’re a Knight and Magic User, Gwen still in her training gear from her last class, is drawing the most attention since the departments have a fierce aversion to spending any time together.

Merlin’s had about a dozen Magic Users looking over at him with concern ever since he and Gwen sat down. The food fight incident in the Quad a few days ago has everybody on edge. And not to mention word spread among the Knights of Morgause’s fire magic attack as well. Magic Users have taken to travelling around in groups as if they expect the Knights to slice them through with their swords the first chance they get.

He understands their wariness. There’s been a notable shift in the Knights’ reaction to Magic Users since they used magic against them, and Merlin didn’t actually think things could have gotten worse. It turns out the Knights didn’t have much of an opinion on Magic Users besides constantly taking the piss and otherwise ignoring them.

But now they’re paying attention.

Merlin didn’t realise what a blessing the absence of outright hatred was until he’s seeing it every day. The Knights are furious, even if they can’t retaliate without expulsion and that leftover tension simmers throughout the school like a sickness. Merlin feels like he’s about to be attacked any second. It’s no wonder the Magic Users are worried to see him with a Knight.

It probably doesn’t help that he’s avoiding Arthur as well, the one who probably has the best chance of keeping the first year Knights in line. Maybe not the fourth years though. But Merlin’s trying not to think about him at all. He hasn’t forgotten about Sarrum.

“We’re done,” Merlin mutters. “Me and Arthur, I mean.”

“Oh, so that’s what’s got you so upset,” Gwen notes. “I’m really sorry Merlin.”

He flushes at what she’s implying. But he’s not upset about Arthur. There are so many things bigger than whether or not they’re shagging each other. “I ended things. It was my choice.”

“Oh,” Gwen says, a little surprised. “I thought you were quite happy with how things were—er going.”
Merlin clears his throat and tries very hard not to think about Arthur naked and tangled in bed sheets. “It was a bad idea from the start. He’s a Knight.”

Gwen frowns but decides not to comment. And that only gives Merlin the distinct and horrifying impression that he’s the one being unreasonable in this situation. But he’s not. They’re much too different. Crossing that divide just isn't possible.

“So how’re things with Morgana?” he wonders, just to change the subject.

They haven’t had their first magic lesson yet with all the drama that's been going on but Merlin is curious to know what she’s like.

Gwen sighs, and her eyes go a little distant. “At first it was going really well. We went on a date last weekend. She took me dancing. I’ve never had so much fun but lately I don’t know.”

“What don’t you know?”

Gwen shrugs and goes back to writing her notes to hide her feelings on the matter. “She’s just distracted, I suppose? I think there’s something- that she’s not telling me.”

Merlin winces. But he’s not going to betray Morgana’s confidence even if it will make Gwen feel better.

“I’m sure she’ll tell you once the time comes,” he says gently. “Maybe it’s personal.”

Gwen eyes Merlin shrewdly for a moment and he worries that he’s said too much.

“You’re probably right.”

Merlin returns to his Alchemy107 readings and tries to keep his mouth shut.

Teaching Morgana how to control her magic for the first time doesn’t go as horribly as he’d predicted.

She’s right on time arriving at Gaius’ flat and Merlin has set up the living room to accommodate them while they work. He has to actively resist the urge to ask her questions about Arthur too which is a lot harder than he'd imagined. Merlin still hasn't seen him since he said it was over.

Morgana peers around the small living space with interest but thankfully doesn’t make any comments. She might be a snob but she’s nowhere near as bad as Arthur. Or at the very least she appears to have some tact.

Her magic came during puberty like all Magic Users (Merlin’s early development had been a special case) and it’s repressing any evidence of magic that’s creating the biggest problem for her. By trying to subdue a significant part of herself, the magic has revealed itself in strange ways.

Like in her dreams. She tells Merlin that they’re nightmares but he knows there’s more to it than that, especially when he feels the pulse of magic around her. It’s most likely prophetic. She’s accidentally started a few fires as well. But her magic is tied in closely with her emotions and it only really emerges when she’s panicked.

So far she’s managed to conceal it from Arthur and Uther pretty well. Merlin doesn’t want to think
what will happen to her if Uther Pendragon finds out.

They start with breathing exercises first, just so Merlin can get a feel of the state of her magic. There’s six candles surrounding them and Merlin explains her magic to her and how it can be an extension of herself. He must do it well enough because she’s able to light all of the wicks without difficulty.

Merlin has a feeling she’s a powerful Magic User. It’s a shame that she can’t benefit from the courses available at Camelot. But he can show her everything he knows and more from the classes he attends.

They end up working for more than two hours before Merlin realises how late it is and signals the end of the lesson, getting up to fetch them some tea when it looks like Morgana wants to stay. He understands. For a while it felt like he couldn’t talk about it to anybody besides his mum. Until Will came along.

So Merlin brews the tea and hands Morgana a chipped mug, trying not to feel self-conscious about it.

“Thank you for this, Merlin,” she says. “I never thought that I’d find someone to talk to about any of this.”

“I’m happy to listen and help in any way I can.”

Morgana smiles a little, less guarded and more genuine than he’s seen her before. “I know.”

Merlin sips his tea and feels oddly content all of a sudden. "I just thought you should know, Gwen's worried about you."

Morgana stills. "What?"

"She can sense that you're distracted by your magic, and that you aren't being completely honest with her about what's going on. If you feel comfortable, you should tell her. I know Gwen will understand."

She frowns but there's a sudden softness about her at the mention of Gwen. "I'll think about it," she says. "I don't want to lie to her, but I've hidden this for a long time it's not so easy to tell people about it."

"I understand," Merlin says, because he does. "I just thought that you should know. She cares about you a lot."

Morgana nods, but there's a pleased little edge to her smile while sips her tea. They sit in comfortable silence for a while and Merlin feels hopeful that he might have made their burdens a little easier.

“So if you're asking about Gwen does that mean we're going to talk about why Arthur’s all mopey lately?”

He flinches so hard some of the tea spills onto the couch. He removes it by glaring at the stain until it dries itself. “I’m just not-“ Merlin struggles to think of the best way to phrase it. “Doing that anymore.”

Morgana raises an eyebrow but she’s smiling. “I was under the impression that the both of you really enjoyed doing that.”
Merlin’s skin feels hot and he has to set the mug down before he does something worse with it. “Maybe, but he’s still a Knight.”

“I’m a Knight,” Morgana points out. “Does that mean you’ll stop talking to me too?”

“You’re a Magic User,” Merlin corrects. “It’s not the same. I know that not every Knight is an utter prat but most of them are and I’m sick of how they get away with treating Magic Users the way they do.”

She doesn’t answer right away and Merlin thinks that she either doesn’t believe him or thinks that he’s being overly opinionated. Neither options make him feel better.

“What have they done exactly?” she asks.

“That paint prank for one,” he mutters, angry now. “They push Magic Users out of the halls, trip them over, kick them out of their seats like we don’t belong there. They try and take the things that matter most just to torment us. They call us spellbeggars, make magic out to be some kind of dirty, dishonourable trick when it’s not. They’re bullies. They dismiss us. They think we’re worthless.”

He’s ranting now, he’s knows but he can’t stop. “They dress up as us at costume parties because they think we’re a joke. They exclude us from every single thing possible on this Campus just to show us we’re not welcome but if we try to make something for ourselves, they show up and try to ruin it because how dare we try and protect ourselves from them with magic? They won’t let us participate in tournaments but they expect us to be able to defend ourselves, just like they expect they’ll be able to defeat evil Magic Users without magic. The whole of Camelot is a sham.”

Morgana’s eyes are narrowed. “I’ve never done any of those things.”

“Oh, but have you stopped it?” he counters. “Have you ever intervened when you’ve seen it happen?”

Morgana’s mouth purses and that’s her answer. Standing by and doing nothing, remaining neutral is just as bad as being one of those Knights.

“Has Arthur ever done any of this?” she wonders and she’s angry now, enough that she’ll go after Arthur if he says so, he’s sure.

The question stumps him for a second. “Well, no actually,” he admits. “But he’s still benefitting off a system that doesn’t value Magic Users.”

“Look I’m not denying that he can be an arrogant fool sometimes but he’s good,” she says. “To his very core. Annoyingly so. He might stumble a few times but he always tries to do right by everyone around him.”

Merlin’s a little surprised by her words. Her eyes are determined and earnest, she’s not lying about this. But the last thing he would have expected of Morgana was to come to Arthur’s defence so quickly. So why were they fighting then when he last saw them together?

“If you tell him I said any of that I will kill you,” she adds cheerfully and Merlin saves himself from reply by swallowing nearly half of his tea at once.

The thing is, Morgana might believe that to be true, but the reality of it could be entirely different. Merlin’s real problem is that there’s a part of him that wants to believe Morgana is right.
He tries to forget about Arthur. Move on with his life. There’s still studying to be done, lectures and classes to attend and Knights to avoid between them.

There are other things going on on Campus to distract him anyway. The Knight who pulled the paint prank at their Induction Ceremony turned himself in two days ago. It’s Valiant Mellor, who’s knocked shoulders with Merlin hard enough to bruise more than once and never resists an opportunity to trip him in the hallways between lessons.

Kilgharrah, puts him on academic suspension and he has to formally apologise to all of the first year Magic Users in an assembly. Merlin even sees him talking to Freya of all people afterward, looking contrite as he wrings his hands.

Freya sees him looking and joins Merlin after Valiant finally walks away. “Can you believe it?” she mutters. “He apologised. Said he only did it because he was trying to impress Morgana Pendragon.”

Merlin can’t believe anything so ridiculous. Who would try humiliating a group of people to impress a woman? And why did Valiant even think that would work?

“As if that would impress Morgana,” Freya snorts. “You know, I’ve actually heard that she’s very nice to Magic Users.”

Merlin raises an eyebrow. “I’ve heard that she’s terrifying.”

Freya only smiles. “Yes, well that too.”

Somehow Merlin doesn’t think the Dean instructed Valiant to bring his apology to her. Freya’s allergy isn’t common knowledge to the Knights.

Merlin might have suspicions about that but he’d rather not think on it. The Magic Users seemed pleased by the gesture though many of them, Morgause especially, doubt Valiant is being genuine. Merlin understands their scepticism. A mere apology really isn't going to fix the problems at Camelot. They need a fundamental reshaping of the entire institution.

Break it down and start again from the ground up.

For now, he’s just glad that he’s managed to avoid Arthur. Merlin's a little worried that he'll have no control over himself as soon as he sees him again. Better not to have the temptation. It’s a small favour he doesn’t have to suffer through any classes with Knights.

At least that’s what Merlin thinks before attending his Elemental101 lecture in the next week.

He drops his books at the sight of Arthur perched at the back of the lecture hall, boots resting on the head of seat in the row in front of him. The Magic Users in the room are whispering, turning back to look at the Knight in their midst and Merlin wonders how he ever mistook him as anything but a Pendragon.

Merlin glances at the front of the room where Kilgharrah is setting up for the new lecture, realises he’s holding up the crowd and bends to scoop up his books. Arthur is watching him keenly from the back of the room and Merlin hurries toward him, glancing angrily at the eyes that watch him go.
“What are you doing here?” he hisses, once he’s reached his row and met Arthur at his seat in the middle of it.

Arthur puts on an expression of one severely troubled. “Why Merlin I’m here to learn, like you. You said I don’t understand Magic Users so I’m discovering what all the fuss is about.”

Merlin takes the seat beside him, glaring at the Magic Users who look their way until they turn around again. This will be all over Campus by lunch time.

Bloody fantastic.

“Very funny, now get out before Kilgharrah kicks you out,” he says, grabbing at Arthur’s jumper.

But Arthur only grins at him and takes a hold of Merlin’s fingers instead. He wishes the touch didn’t start a slow heat in his belly. It feels like forever since Merlin got off with Arthur. Even if he’s been wanking off like crazy in his absence.

“Afraid not, Merlin. I’m enrolled in this course.”

What a load of tosh.

“This is a magic course,” he insists, ripping his hand free and poking Arthur hard in the chest. “You’re a Knight.”

Arthur only shrugs. “There’s no rules against it. Magic ability isn’t a requirement. I checked with Kilgharrah before I enrolled. My exam at the end of term will just be a written test rather than magically demonstrated.”

“We’re in third week,” Merlin mutters. “You can’t just—”

“Cut off is next week,” he points out. “So yes I can.”

Arthur catches his fingers again and tries to draw them to his mouth. He manages to wriggle free but not before they brush against his lips. Merlin shudders and crosses his legs to hide the growing hardness of his prick. Apparently Arthur can't fail but get a reaction out of him, even if Merlin is trying his best to fight it.

He tries to be subtle, but Merlin has the feeling he's out of luck.

And Arthur’s sharp eyes miss nothing. “Is that for me?”

“No,” he says stubbornly. “You’re a git. We’re not doing this again.”

“Certainly, Merlin,” he says, turning away with a small smile. “Happy to oblige.”

And then Arthur’s pulling books and a bloody pen out of his bag and getting himself set up.

“No,” Merlin says, horrified at the sight. “This can’t be happening.”

“By all means, Merlin, if it’s upsetting you so much go sit somewhere else then.”

Arthur’s serious, he realises. He’s in this class because he actually intends to learn something. This can’t be real, but before Merlin can demand more answers, Kilgharrah is finally speaking.

“Today I will be discussing the uses of the elemental fire in that of healing and defensive magic.”
The chatter falls away in favour of the scratching of pens across paper and the clacking of laptop keys. Arthur is old school, no laptop, only pen and paper and he’s handwriting is impossibly neat.

Merlin opens his own notebook and scrambles to write what Kilgharrah has on the slides. He draws the book closer and on an angle so that Arthur can’t see his chicken scratch and make fun of him for it. Turning puts more pressure onto his crotch and Merlin subtly tugs his jumper down, glad it’s long enough to cover his erection.

“I did offer,” Arthur whispers gallingly, not looking away from his work.

What a turnip head. He can’t really mean-

“Here?” Merlin demands on a whisper. “Anybody could see-“

Arthur’s leaned in to nuzzle at his throat. “No one’s looking Merlin. Besides they can’t see anything over the chairs in front.”

He worries his lip between his teeth but Arthur is right, no one can see his crotch because the chairs are high enough to cover it. This is terrible. Merlin would be an idiot to let Arthur get him off right here. In a lecture hall full of students. And yet, this has probably been the longest time they’ve spent together without shagging.

And Merlin’s self-control could use some work.

“Go on then,” he whispers, swallowing hard now that his throat is completely dry.

Arthur still doesn’t look up, taking notes faster than Merlin would have expected of him. “Go on what?” he wonders innocently.


He goes to stand up, maybe find a seat next to Freya if he can spot her but Arthur’s hand shoots out and grips him hard through his trousers. Merlin barely manages to swallow his gasp in time, falling back into the seat.

“Now come on, Merlin I was only teasing,” Arthur says and starts to rub.

Merlin hisses and ducks his head to hide the redness in his cheeks, pretending he’s taking notes when all he’s really doing is gripping the pen tight enough that it might snap in half.

“You know,” Arthur continues conversationally as he starts to unbutton him. “I think I’m starting to learn a lot about Magic Users already. For instance I know if I do this-“

Arthur pushes into Merlin’s trousers, finally getting a bare hand around him and Merlin jolts hard at the sensation, kneading the seat in front of them roughly by accident. A few Magic Users turn to stare and Merlin is sure he’s transformed into a tomato by now, furiously avoiding their eyes as he elbows Arthur in the chest.

“Careful.”

Surprisingly, Arthur listens. Maybe he’s not as much of a filthy perv as he likes to think.

But that’s before he leans forward to whisper, “reckon they’d notice if I got on my knees?”

“Yes, they would. Don’t be an idiot,” he pants, breathless when Arthur curls his thumb over the slit of his cock just so.
There’s no lube but Arthur smears pre-come along his shaft to make it slick enough to wank him properly. Merlin bites his lip to keep quiet but he’s struggling and the soft smile on Arthur’s face is making it worse.

“Stop that,” he mutters.

Arthur stops moving his wrist instantly. “Too rough?”

He wriggles his hands free and licks the palm of his own hand, faking a yawn as he does it. Merlin cants his hips, missing the sensation but then Arthur’s putting his hand right back where it was and gripping him tight again.

He noses at Merlin’s jaw and pretends that he’s leaning over him to read his notes, grasping him firmly and shifting his hand along his prick. “Better?”

“I meant stop grinning at me like that.”

But Arthur only smiles wider.

“Don’t be a pillock.”

Arthur holds him roughly and tugs, reaching down to fondle his balls as he tries to get him off. The friction against his prick is too much and Merlin finally gives up on clutching the pen, dropping it in order to grip the arms of the seat. It’s the only thing holding him back from climbing onto Arthur’s lap right now.

“You know Merlin, I’m starting to think you’re running out of ways to insult me.”

“Are you sure, bone idled- oh- toad?”

Arthur snorts so loudly that two rows of Magic Users spin about to stare at them. Merlin grips at his forearm when he caresses his prick smoothly, trying to stop him or stop himself from coming.

Kilgharrah clears his throat pointedly before continuing and Merlin ducks his head, flushing with heat and trying to control his reaction. His magic squirms beneath the attention, coiling and rising even as he fights to draw it back, to push it down. Has the wind always been howling like that outside the lecture theatre? Merlin can’t remember.

“Careful now,” Arthur admonishes. “Don’t want them to know you’re enjoying yourself too much.”

“Shut up,” he snaps, swallowing and licking his lips. “Oh- oh, I’m about to-“

“Are you going to come, Merlin?” he whispers. “Right in front of all these nice people? Going make yourself all filthy for me?”

Merlin would protest that he sounds ridiculous but he’s too focused on not shooting in his trousers.

But then Arthur is whispering in his ear, “come on then, love.”

And then Merlin is coming into Arthur’s fist as if his body commanded it, trying not to make a sound.

The window’s of the lecture theatre rattle hard enough like they might break but that’s it. Nothing else gives them away. Merlin pants quietly into the crook of his shoulder, forcing his body to calm. Arthur carefully withdraws his hand after that and licks up Merlin’s come with a smug grin.
Merlin can’t look at him because if he does he’s not going to go soft at all and he needs to concentrate on Kilgharrah’s lecture, what little of it is left. Subtly, he whispers a cleaning spell before tucking himself away and picking up his pen again. He’s at least six slides behind.

But then Arthur is pushing his notebook toward him and he can see he’s got at least two pages on Merlin’s three pitiful lines.

“Were you taking bloody notes that whole time?” he hisses, flushed and embarrassed that Arthur was able to make him feel so good without much of an effort.

“I’m a multi-tasker, Merlin,” he says, still edging the book towards him.

Merlin’s eyes flash as he slides his hand across the paper before doing the same to his own. Arthur’s notes soon appear beneath his chicken scratch and he passes the notebook back once he’s finished.

“Well that’s a handy trick,” Arthur says.

“I’m not doing your study for you,” Merlin retorts before he can ask.

Arthur dips his fingers beneath the sleeve of Merlin’s jumper to stroke his wrist. “You dare suggest a Pendragon would cheat?”

Because Pendragon’s are so honest and noble. And not currently attempting to remove half of Camelot’s students from Campus merely for possessing magic.

“Right what was I thinking?” he says, more to himself than anything.

Merlin really didn’t stick to his plan not to get involved with Arthur again. He wonders if he should be disappointed in himself, but the buzz of his orgasm leaves little room for him to care.

“Now hush up Merlin, I’m trying to learn,” he whispers, still caressing his damn wrist even as he turns to concentrate on Kilgharrah.

And then to Merlin’s immense surprise, Arthur doesn’t speak again for the rest of the lecture even though he can see the bulge in his trousers that shows just how much he’s gagging for it. He doesn’t ask for Merlin to return the favour either. Doesn’t even whine about the double standard. Not that he ever has.

When Kilgharrah’s lecture is finally over Merlin is about to jump out of his skin. Arthur moves to stand up like he intends to leave but Merlin catches at his arm and pretends to start packing away his books. Arthur raises an eyebrow but stays where he is even as the rest of the Magic Users pack up around them.

Merlin waits until the last of them have left the hall before sealing the doors shut with his magic.

“That’s very cheeky of you,” Arthur says. “What are you up to Mer-?”

He surges forward and kisses him, hands scrabbling for purchase in his hair as he clambers into Arthur’s lap. It's been too long, Merlin can't cope with waiting another minute. Arthur cups the back of his head and pulls him down, dragging him in further. His skin burns at the contact and Merlin slides onto Arthur’s cock, still hard in his trousers and presses into it, rolling his hips.

“God, Merlin.”
Merlin ignores him, biting at Arthur’s neck before climbing off his lap, pushing Arthur’s thighs wide and situating himself between them.

“Oh hell,” Arthur says recognising what he's up to. “Yes, please.”

Somehow he would never have guessed he’d feel powerful like this, kneeling at Arthur’s feet but he does. And more than ever he wants to have Arthur in his mouth.

Arthur’s thighs are trembling when Merlin rocks forward to open up his trousers, dragging his cock free. He inhales with a sharp hiss at the exposure to the air but Merlin whispers a quick protection spell against diseases before he slips down to take him in, mouth open wide as he wraps his lips around his cock.

Excitement shivers across his stomach, but Merlin is too eager, rushing forward too fast and he chokes, pulling back to splutter and cough.

“It’s okay,” Arthur says, voice gentle like he’s soothing a spooked horse. “Don’t push it.”

Merlin hasn’t done this very often. Besides a few awkward fumbles in the bathrooms of house parties in grade 12, and a bloke he picked up from a nearby pub in Ealdor, he hasn’t actually got that much experience of sucking people off under his belt. Until anger and arousal in the form of Arthur Pendragon came along and took away all of the nervousness and the overthinking about it.

Even now he can’t believe how brave he’s been.

The Merlin before Camelot could never have allowed anyone to get him off in a lecture hall full of people. Arthur’s a terrible influence. Merlin always knew he was dodgy. But he still shivers at the softness to Arthur’s words when his large hands card through his hair, comforting and distracting all at once.

Merlin hums and moves towards Arthur’s cock again once he’s sorted himself out, letting the tip nudge against his lips so that he can taste him.

Arthur doesn’t push like the others, doesn’t try and shove his cock into Merlin’s mouth before he’s ready. He’s patient, flushed and gritting his teeth when Merlin slides his mouth along his prick, familiarising himself with the taste of it, the smell.

The feel of Arthur, straining not to buck beneath him. Merlin reaches the head again and opens his mouth, taking it slow this time, judging his own limits. It’s better this way, Arthur’s cock is thick and long, and it takes time to open his throat around it, breathing through his nose. Arthur sighs at the sensation and rests his hands atop of Merlin’s head, stroking his hair but not holding him down in any way.

Relaxing steadily, Merlin feels the saliva pooling in his mouth, making Arthur’s cock sloppy with it and he pulls back, seeing the glistening skin before opening his mouth again. He starts to bob his head, fucking his mouth on Arthur’s cock and clutches at the top of Arthur’s thighs for purchase when it’s clear he’s going to let Merlin do all the work.

He might complain, only he can see the wisdom in being able to control this pace himself, less likely to choke that way. The sounds coming out of Arthur’s mouth as he figures out his own technique, lavishing his cock with attention, only ensures that his own trousers are uncomfortably tight.

The generous, encouraging words falling from Arthur’s lips make him want to snog him but the heat of Arthur on his tongue is just as sweet. Merlin can see when it starts to be too much. The
flush on his cock darkens, his chest heaving with laboured breaths and Arthur's hands start to flex spasmodically in his hair. His groans turn to curses and Arthur twitches like he’s trying to win out a battle against his own body, eyes squeezed shut.

Merlin pinches the exposed skin of his stomach just to get him paying attention and Arthur hisses and looks down at him, with his mouth stuffed full and his pupils dilate.

“I’m about to-“ he tries to warn before he’s spurting in Merlin’s mouth, come sliding down his throat as he convulses in pleasure.

His mouth fills with him and Merlin tries his best not let it spill over his lips as he keeps swallowing, humming at the unusual sensation. Arthur cups his cheek, head bowed toward him but doesn’t move. He's frozen like unable to, panting as his body catches up with him. Merlin pulls back eventually, letting his prick fall from his mouth and wiping away any of the come he might have missed.

Arthur must find his strength then because he hauls Merlin back up into his lap, spent cock forgotten as he slides his hands beneath Merlin’s jumper and shirt, thumbs sliding across his nipples before a hand trails warmly down his spine to cup his backside. Merlin arches his body into Arthur’s, feeling the pleasure build in his groin. He’s close already, still strung out and sensitive from his earlier orgasm and he tips his head back to give access to Arthur’s mouth, panting and moving with him.

Arthur barely gets his hand down the back of Merlin’s trousers before he’s seizing up and coming in pulses, messing up his pants again.

He feels too fantastic to care, burying his face in Arthur’s neck and riding out the overwhelming feelings as his body settles. His mouth feels swollen from snogging and other things and Merlin can’t believe this could feel so good with a Knight of all people.

Arthur must be thinking the same.

“There’s just something about you Merlin-,” he says like he can’t quite believe it himself. “Fancy joining me at the pub for a few pints?”

Merlin huffs into his throat, trying to pretend he’s not flattered. “I don’t drink. It upsets my magic.”

He’s exhausted and wrung out, his head so fuzzy with contentment that he’s even starting to think of Arthur with a strange degree of fondness. Until he opens his fat mouth. “Don’t be such a girl, Merlin,” he argues and any soft feelings for the gigantic arsehole vanish.

Merlin pulls back abruptly, magically cleaning himself up again before climbing off of Arthur’s lap. “Don’t be sexist,” he snaps. “Female isn’t an insult.”

The look on Arthur’s face is endearingly confused. “That’s not sexist,” he starts, frowning. “-Is it?”

Merlin slaps his cheek firmly but lightly, leaning close to stare into his eyes. “It's sexist and you’re still a prat.”

“I completely respect women,” Arthur starts even as Merlin is collecting his things and stuffing them into his bag.

“Sure you do,” he snorts, swinging his bag across his shoulder and heading towards the end of the row for the exit.
He can hear the sounds of Arthur scrambling to collect his stuff in order to chase after him. Merlin just rolls his eyes and walks faster. “It was just a joke,” Arthur insists, suddenly at his side, wrapping his arm around Merlin’s stomach and pulling him in close.

“It’s never a joke when it’s at the expense of someone who doesn’t have the same gender privileges or culture as you.”

Merlin unlocks the doors without a word and doesn’t force Arthur to let go, like he probably should.


Arthur lets go, surprised. “You’re right,” he admits and Merlin would think he’s lying just to get into his pants again but he can tell he’s not. “I never say the right thing around you.”

The door opens under his hand and Merlin leads them out into the hallway. “Or maybe I’m the only one willing to tell you off for the prattish things you say. I suppose it’s a good thing I’m not so interested in your talking either.”

Arthur laughs but it sounds strained since they’re standing in a hallway where any Knights could see them together. “Of course.”

Because a Knight wouldn’t be caught dead screwing around with a Magic User. Merlin keeps forgetting all of these unpleasant things about Knights because getting lost in their little odd arrangement is much more enjoyable. And apparently, he can’t stay away from Arthur even if he wanted to. Neither of them have mentioned the fact that Merlin ended things between them a few days ago.

The separation didn’t last long.

“I’ve got to go,” he mutters, straightening his clothes as if that will somehow hide the flush to his cheeks or the way his hair is sticking up in all directions from Arthur’s fingers.

“Don’t you want to come to the pub with me?” Arthur asks, a lot less abrasive now. “You don’t have to drink, I promise.”

Merlin’s torn all of one moment. They haven’t actually spent some time together outside of hurried snogs and frenzied shagging but he has to admit that the last hour wasn’t so bad. And if they do go to the pub there’s a higher chance Merlin might get off again.

“I- your mates are coming,” he realises, trailing off and turning towards the corridor.

Percival comes jogging around the corner a second later. “Oi! Arthur!” he shouts, hurrying towards him. “There you are.”

He stops and Arthur tenses up considerably at the sight of him. But Percival is smiling. Merlin doesn’t quite understand the reaction. Surely Gwaine has told the rest of his Knight friends already that Arthur is shagging a Magic User.

“Hullo Merlin.”

Merlin startles, surprised that Percival actually took the time to learn his name. Nobody really
bothered with introductions when they were at the pub last time.

“Er, hello. Sorry about your football.”

Arthur grins but Percival doesn’t seem too upset about it. “Oh that’s alright. We had a blast climbing the dorm building to fetch it back. Gwaine fell off twice.”

“But he didn’t hurt himself, did he?” Merlin demands, anxiously.

He’d meant to make their lives harder, not seriously injure them.

“Broke two bones in his leg,” Percival says, still smiling. “But Gaius healed him right up. He’ll be in the next tournament, no problem.”

Merlin can’t believe that he’s grinning about it. What is bloody wrong with Knights? Gwaine catches up with them a second later and has to stand on the tips of his toes in order to throw an arm around Percival’s shoulders. But he succeeds anyway.

“Hello little man,” Percival greets, smiling down at him.

“I can assure you Perc, I’m not little in any way,” Gwaine insists, waggling his eyebrows suggestively. “But if you fancy checking to make sure-“

Percival shakes his head, still smiling. “Very funny.”

Gwaine’s charming grin shifts minutely and Merlin has the strangest feeling that he wasn’t joking at all. He turns his attention to Merlin instead and raises an eyebrow at Arthur expectantly.

“Gwaine you know Merlin,” Arthur says, making the proper introductions.

It’s not like they haven’t met before. Gwaine eyes Merlin speculatively as if he’s trying to see what makes him so interesting.

“Ah yes, protector of woodland creatures and the one with abnormally large ears. Not so bad on the eyes either. Reckon you’d fancy-?”

“Gwaine,” Arthur and Percival warn in unison.

Gwaine turns at the tone of Percival’s voice with some degree of surprise. He mustn’t tell Gwaine off very often. Percival seems equally shocked by his rebuke and flushes a little, scratching at the back of his head and avoiding his eyes.

“Er, so are you coming to the pub then?” Percival wonders, quickly changing the subject before Gwaine can open his mouth.

Merlin suspects there’s something else going on here besides a few pints at the pub. Arthur tries to reach for him but Merlin is already stepping away. “Can’t sorry. I have to help Gaius with, er collecting herbs.”

“Wait-“ Arthur says trying to grab him but Merlin’s is already a couple metres away by then.

He waves his hand in farewell, thinking Arthur’s probably relieved he’s not joining them.

Less need for explanations that way.
Kilgharrah’s big consequence makes itself known at the mandatory University assembly the following week.

Merlin has a bad feeling before he’s even started talking.

“Due to the recent escalation of bullying and violence between Knights and Magic Users on Campus, I have decided to escalate the program that assigns Knights to Magic Users to before graduation. Any first year or second year students who typically would not have been assigned their partner until their final year will now undergo probationary partnerships.”

The hall erupts into noise to discuss the sudden changes. Merlin glances at Freya in surprise but all she has to offer is a grim smile. What Kilgharrah has done is unprecedented. First and second year students never find out their partner until final year.

“You will be required to spend a minimum of six hours a week together and this will be achieved through a mandatory cooperation class. If you do not attend this class, both you and your partner will fail the term. You cannot pass without mutual participation.”

Merlin groans at the sound of that. He doesn’t want to be near a Knight. It would be a small miracle if he was paired with Gwen or Lancelot. Hell, Merlin wouldn’t even mind Morgana.

“Your assigned partners have been announced on the bulletin boards outside. Partners cannot be changed unless under extreme circumstances. It is time that students stopped seeing enemies where there could be friends. That is all.”

“Bollocks,” Freya mutters as the hall explodes with protest and incredulity. “I really hope I’m not assigned a total arsehole.”

Merlin sighs and gets to his feet. This is not good news. “Too right. But they’re Knights Freya, you’d be lucky if they weren’t an arse.”

Freya curses and they hurry out of the amphitheatre quickly. If for the chance to find out who they’re stuck with for the rest of the year. He loses Freya in the crowd since the lists have been allocated alphabetically. His name is listed at the front of an already gathering crowd.

There are a lot of bulky Knights around and Merlin gets more than one elbow to the gut and his feet continually stomped on. So he uses his magic instead to magnify the lists and scan them without having to get any closer.

He finds his name fairly quickly. The Knight they’ve assigned him couldn’t have been a bigger mistake. The words, Arthur Pendragon, loom in his vision, despite how many times he tries to blink them away.

Fantastic.
Merlin catches sight of Gaius standing with the other Professors and hurries over to them.

“Arthur Pendragon. Seriously?”

Gaius looks over to observe the amused glances of the other Professors and leads Merlin away so that they can talk privately. “Partners were selected on compatibility and evidence of cooperation.”

Merlin’s mouth opens incredulously. “What evidence of cooperation?”

“There have been multiple situations where Arthur has publicly attended and heeded your advice. Arthur listens to you. A partnership between you both seemed wise.”

Merlin can’t help that being one of the blokes that Arthur is shagging makes him more agreeable. But clearly they intend to punish him for it. Merlin can't think of a worse Knight to be partnered with.

“You have to change this,” he insists. “Arthur listens to anyone.”

Gaius actually smiles then. “I’m afraid you’re mistaken Merlin. I speak with his Professors on a daily basis. Arthur Pendragon listens to no one. And that is why Kilgharrah felt it to be a good omen that you were the exception in this.”

“You need to change who I’ve been assigned,” he repeats. “Please Gaius.”

“The rules are absolute. I can only intervene if there are extreme circumstances. Has he threatened you?”

“No,” Merlin admits.

“Physically harmed you in any way?”

Merlin wonders if shagging him senseless counts. “No,” he sighs.

“Forced you into committing a criminal act?”

“No.”

“Bullied or tormented you?”

Once again Merlin’s head falls straight into the gutter. He remembers Arthur tormenting him in Kilgharrah’s lecture the other day, teasing him into a mind-blowing orgasm. But that's not the kind of question that Gaius is asking.

“No.”

“Then I’m afraid I can do nothing.”

Gaius reaches out to pat his shoulder. “Just think of it as this Merlin. By being partnered with Arthur, there’s less time to be concerned with your- er gentleman caller.”

Merlin flushes at the reminder. Gaius still hasn’t found anything to explain why Merlin can’t stop shagging Arthur whenever he sees him. Though Merlin still can't be certain that it is a curse of some manner or just a really active libido. “Arthur will most certainly keep your hands full. Perhaps this is the distraction you need to avoid- entanglements.”

“Right,” Merlin agrees, faintly, realising how terrible this will be. “Of course.”
Gaius grips his shoulder firmly before returning to the crowd. Merlin stands there for a few minutes to get his head straight.

“Hello partner,” a voice whispers unexpectedly at his ear.

He flinches away, but Arthur reaches out to catch his wrist.

“Shut up,” he insists. “This is a horrible mistake.”

“Sure Merlin,” he agrees, showing a full-teethed smile before Merlin is dragging him further away from the crowd, out of sight, already looking for a place they can get off in private.

Arthur seems wholly on board with this plan, scanning the area for somewhere they can go before Merlin has the sudden urge to do this in a bed. Then they won't have to worry about being interrupted.

"Do you have class now?" Merlin asks suddenly. "Or are you done for the day?"

Arthur understands what he's getting at. "I'm finished but my father is at home."

Well there goes that option. But Gaius should be busy for the rest of the day and if Arthur knows where the flat is then maybe he can start coming over more often. That is definitely appealing.

"Let's go to Gaius' flat then," he suggest, tugging Arthur toward other end of Campus.

He goes along quite willingly, looking well pleased with the situation. "Want to take your time do we, Merlin?"

He refuses to flush. "And if I do?"

Arthur suddenly stands a little straighter. "How far away is your flat?"

Merlin's having some difficulty swallowing. "Five minutes. But Gaius won't be home for hours."

And just like that he's walking along with Merlin, maybe walking even faster than he is. "By all means, Merlin lead the way."

It doesn't take them very long to get there. But with Arthur explaining how much easier it will be to shag now that they share another class together Merlin feels like it takes forever. From the way Arthur's hand lingers on his shoulder, Merlin thinks he might be struggling a little as well.

“Is this you?” Arthur wonders, tilting his chin at Merlin’s building.

He seems to understand the urgency for both of them because he drags Merlin towards it when he’s made an affirmative noise. Merlin doesn’t bother with the code, the gate springs open when they reach it. Arthur hums out a pleased sound, hands sliding all over him.

It’s a bloody good thing that Gaius’ flat is on the ground floor. Merlin isn't sure he could make it up a flight of stairs right now.

“Where-?” Arthur starts dazedly, leaning in to trail his mouth across Merlin’s neck in heated kisses.

He pulls Merlin in by the hips, pressing his prick up against his arse as if he has to prove his intentions. Like Merlin doesn’t even know what they’re about to do here. He’s about to be shagged within an inch of his life if he’s lucky. Something tells Merlin he’s about to be.
His fingers skitter through his sling bag, ruffling around for his keys while Arthur tilts his neck further, encouraging Merlin to give his mouth more room to work. He’s shaking by the time he locates his keys and manages to unlock the door.

Merlin tugs Arthur down the hallway, managing to squeeze the door shut behind them as he does. They head past the living room and Arthur’s already pulling at the hem of Merlin’s jumper, lifting it up like he’s about to yank it off him.

He loses it soon enough, followed by his shirt and Arthur’s working on Merlin’s tight pants when they finally make it to his bedroom. It’s not very big. Not compared to Arthur’s room. Or his house for that matter, but Arthur wisely doesn’t comment on the size, too focused on attempting to free Merlin of his pants.

Merlin’s bed isn’t gigantic like Arthur’s either but he’s just happy he’s got a double bed here where he can spread his long legs out. Back in Ealdor he sleeps on a single. Even on the floor sometimes when they fully book up the bed and breakfast. He makes sure his mother takes his bed whenever that happens, because she always gives up her own room to the guests.

It’s not as uncomfortable as people might think.

Though Arthur would probably complain about those conditions until he was red in the face. His room is a little messy, but it’s nothing compared to what he’s seen at Arthur’s place. Merlin’s been putting in the effort to keep it reasonably clean, for Gaius’ sake. And possibly for the way Gaius raises his eyebrows pointedly when it gets too shambolic.

They don’t waste anytime getting ready. Merlin grabs lube from out under the bed and Arthur gets to work opening him up with his fingers. He's just as gentle and teasing as the first time and Merlin's panting by the time Arthur slides his cock inside.

Everything's simple after that.

Nearly an hour later when they're on their third round and Arthur is riding Merlin's cock into the mattress, he comes across his chest with an exhausted laugh.

"Now that's teamwork," Arthur jokes, half collapsing on Merlin's chest while they get their breathing under control.

Merlin's reminded that they're partners until he graduates. There's no escaping Arthur Pendragon now. Merlin can't even manage a weak smile at the thought.

This is definitely a problem.

Merlin nearly runs directly into Lancelot the next morning just as he's emerging from the forge.

"Er- hello," Merlin says a little surprised to see him. He wasn't entirely sure that Lancelot would take his advice. "Have you been volunteering here then?"

Lancelot smiles at him. "Yes, I have. But I have much to learn."

"About forging swords or Elyan?" Merlin wonders, teasing him a little as he checks him over. "You look uncommonly clean. When I left the forge the first time I thought I'd need ten showers at
Lancelot glances back at the forge and flushes. "Elyan- helped clean me up."

That's unexpected. "You let him use his magic on you?" Merlin asks, astonished.

It's unheard of. Knights certainly wouldn't trust a Magic User to perform magic on them, even if it could save their life. Especially not lately. Merlin didn't realise how quickly their friendship had progressed.

Arthur's certainly never let Merlin use his magic on him, beside those quick clean ups after they've shagged and made a mess of each other. Though to be fair, Merlin's never really wanted to use magic on Arthur anyway, and Arthur's never asked.

Lancelot seems confused by the question which just goes to show that prejudice doesn't always run as deep as Merlin thinks. "Why not? He is a sorcerer skilled beyond even my imaginings."

Merlin decides it's best not to point out the reasons why the second and first year Magic Users have been assigned their Knights years in advance. If Lancelot is happy with his situation then Merlin has no reason to ruin that for him.

"Do you have class now?" Lancelot asks.

"I have Alchemy107 in an hour," Merlin tells him. "Why?"

"Would you like to get coffee together? Or perhaps some tea?"

Merlin has to admit that it's nice to spend time with a Knight as noble and kind as Lancelot. He might even call them friends. "Alright," he agrees, turning to walk with him. "I could do with a warm drink. My fingers feel like they're about to fall off."

It's bloody cold this morning. Merlin would use a warming charm to heat himself up but ever since the incident in Incantations, he's been less than willing to attempt the spell in the event that he mix it up again. He should have worn gloves today.

Costa Coffee is packed full of students but before they can search for seats, Gwen spots them from her own empty table and waves them over. He hasn't seen her since yesterday. Merlin doesn't know which Magic User she was assigned yet. Lancelot gets up to order them coffee while Gwen scoops up the marshmallow from her hot chocolate and pops it into her mouth.

"So who were you assigned then?" Merlin asks, getting right to it. "I'm sure you've already heard about mine."

Gwen nods sympathetically. "I got a Magic User named Sefa Wood. Oh and I heard about Arthur alright. It's all over Campus."

Merlin sighs and stares forlornly at his fingers spread out on the table. Sefa isn't too bad. Merlin's spoken to her a few times and she's about one of the only Magic Users who doesn't seem to outright despise the Knights. She's still hopeful that what's happening on Campus can be changed.

Merlin likes Sefa's optimism even if he feels a little more realistic about it.

"If you can't work with him any longer, then you should tell the professors that you were in a relationship," Gwen suggests in a low voice. "I'm sure they wouldn't allow that conflict of interest between assigned partners. I mean, of course they'd give you a different Knight."
Merlin appreciates her advice, but he's not entirely sure that he wants another Knight. He and Arthur's interactions, though maybe a little complicated, are a whole lot better than what Merlin might actually suffer with a different Knight. At least in this case, he'll be getting shagged.

Arthur's tolerable at least.

"It's alright," Merlin admits, realising that he hasn't informed Gwen as yet of the fact that he and Arthur are shagging again. "We're er, I mean, Arthur and I- you know-"

"Again?" Gwen says, surprised. "I thought you were determined not to-?"

Merlin flushes. "Yes, well it turns out I wasn't determined enough."

Gwen's eyes widen at his words, reaching out to take his hand. "Merlin," she says, carefully as her face scrunches with worry. "Did he force-?"

"Oh no," Merlin says, embarrassed, and realising what she's trying to get at. "Nothing like that. I- er, he's enrolled in my Elemental magic course and I just couldn't- er... resist apparently."

She snorts then, withdrawing her hand. "He can't possibly be that good."

Merlin's body floods with heat. "Trust me, Gwen," he mutters, savouring the rush of memory. "He is."

Gwen laughs uncertainly, but she's blushing almost as hotly as Merlin is. Lancelot finally returns with his coffee and a spot of green tea for Merlin. "What did I miss?" he wonders, glancing between them.

Merlin's face is on fire.

"Nothing," they both say quickly.

Lancelot smiles, unconcerned and takes the empty seat between them, pushing the take away cup full of hot tea towards Merlin.

"Thanks," he says, trying to stop himself from flushing. "So who did you get assigned to?"

"Gilli Owen," Lancelot says, with a sense of unfamiliarity. "I admit we've never spoken before."

Merlin brightens a little and Gwen smiles at the name. She's met Gilli a few times, but he's still a little wary of her. Gwen understands and hasn't tried to push him even if they both know he abandoned them at Morgause's party. Merlin appreciates that. His friendship will Gilli feels a little complicated as well.

"Oh Gilli's a good bloke. You'll get along well. I suppose you don't need to ask me who I've been assigned to."

Lancelot's smile is wry as he looks over at Gwen. "Word spread as soon as the lists were posted."

Merlin doesn't exactly fancy being the main topic of conversation even if it doesn't surprise him in the least. Arthur's celebrity status brings him an uncommon amount of attention.

"It's too bad you didn't get assigned to Elyan though," Merlin says. "Second years have been sorted into partnerships too, haven't they?"

Gwen nods in confirmation of his question, but she's clearly more interested in watching Lancelot's
"The University decided not to increase his workload anymore than they have to," Lancelot explains, shyly. "Elyan is all but running the forge on his own. He's got his hands full making swords for the Knights on Campus. So they've classified his work now as independent research and made him exempt from the mandatory cooperation lessons."

Gwen looks a little envious. "I wish I was exempt from the mandatory cooperation lessons."

"Sefa is alright," Merlin promises her. "You'll get along, I'm sure of it."

Sefa has seen Merlin spending time with Gwen before and he hopes that might make her more open to trusting her. Gwen is a good sort. It's impossible to meet her and not to become friends. Lancelot nods as if he agrees that things will work out for them.

"So," Gwen wonders innocently after a beat. "How are things with my brother?"

Lancelot's cheeks turn pink.

Kilgharrah’s decision doesn’t go down so well.

In the next few days since he made the announcement, protests and criticism is rife among the Magic Users, and Merlin knows the Knights echo the same sentiment. But Uther Pendragon is probably the biggest opposition to the Dean's decision.

He arrives in Camelot during the afternoon on the day following their assembly where Merlin discovered Arthur is his partner, and word spreads about his presence on Campus. Merlin doesn’t catch sight of him until he’s storming out of Kilgharrah’s office, re-buttoning his expensive suit jacket and looking practically livid with rage.

This isn’t the last they’ve seen of Uther Pendragon that’s for sure.

The incidents on Campus make it into the paper the next day, and Merlin doesn’t need to guess that Uther used his sway and influence to ensure he’s aired out all of Camelot’s apparent shortcomings.

The author is rather scathing about the situation, citing Kilgharrah’s lack of control of the students as the main cause of the problem, instead of the pervasive institutionalised bias that exists at the University. Kilgharrah’s decision to assign partners before graduation is painted as a feeble attempt to regain control of Camelot and the students who attend it.

The author even makes a point to suggest that Kilgharrah’s frequent transformations into The Great Dragon have somehow weakened his mind. It’s obviously a smear piece, designed to call fault on Kilgharrah and his reputation rather than the real problems in Camleot, but Merlin’s hands are shaking by the time he reaches the end of the article.

Uther Pendragon is trying to get rid of their Dean. That much is clear.

Merlin doesn’t even want to think what might happen if he was sent away. Perhaps Knights will actually get away with killing Magic Users once and for all. Whatever the outcome, it won’t be good. Especially if Uther Pendragon becomes the new Dean, as it seems like he's attempting.
Merlin can’t think of a worse consequence. Uther will rule Camelot like a tyrant king, they’ll have no hope of keeping the magic department if that ever happens.

When Merlin tosses the paper in the garbage and glances around the grassy knoll he’s sitting on with a fair few Magic Users, he can see they’re all reading the same paper he was, and that their expressions are grim.

They know exactly what kind of threat Uther poses.

Merlin hopes things will die down eventually, but if anything Uther seems to have a renewed sense of purpose in the destruction of the magic department. He’s turning up on Campus to have meetings with Kilgharrah almost every day following his first visit, and Merlin’s taken to avoiding the walkways he uses, just to reduce the chance of ever running into him.

Arthur’s on edge because of it. He hasn’t said anything, but Merlin knows the situation at home is very unpleasant right now. But luckily for Arthur he's found a definitive way to channel his frustration.

“Oh gods,” Merlin whimpers, trying to arch his back and get Arthur’s cock deeper.

Heat licks up his spine as Arthur hits his prostate dead on and Merlin fumbles to brace himself against his shoulders while he’s being wonderfully impaled, Arthur working him over furiously and fucking him into the ground. Merlin hadn’t expected a shag in Darkling Woods but it had been the closest, most private area available and Arthur had that look in his eyes that guaranteed it would be worth it.

And he wasn’t wrong.

Merlin pants against the perfect onslaught, thigh muscles shuddering as Arthur grips underneath his knees and practically pummels his prick into him. His energy is incensed and riled up, no doubt because Uther is still on Campus today and Merlin can’t find any words to ask him what happened. Not since he’s shagging the air right out of him.

All he can manage is to get a shaky hand around his own cock with a wounded groan, pressing his thumb roughly along the vein and gripping tight until he can start a proper wank. His pre-come is already slicking up his hand and Arthur’s face, gleaming with the sweat of their efforts, leans in to watch him closely.

“That’s it,” he says roughly. “Get yourself off.”

Merlin comes at the coarse edge to his voice, just as he feels Arthur spend inside him. But Arthur keeps moving though, pushing his pick through the lube and come in Merlin’s arse like he’s determined to carve him open with his cock. Merlin groans a little, but drags him in again, encouraging the movement. They’ve certainly made a mess of each other this time around.

“Arthur,” he tries when he finally withdraws and Merlin’s cleaned them both up with magic. “Are you alright?”

Arthur leans in to kiss him again whilst they’re dragging their clothes back on and it’s less bruising now, a little more tender. Merlin enjoys both sides of it, Arthur furiously shagging him is a new experience that he’s begun to crave. Especially when it seems like Arthur’s fighting with his cock instead of his sword.

Merlin has a feeling he’s going to be limping slightly for the rest of the day.
“Much as I’d love to talk about my feelings,” Arthur says in the most sarcastic way possible. “But I have a class to get to. Your place tonight?”

Gods. Merlin swallows heavily at the thought, but nods his agreement. “Yeah, Gaius should be out. I’ll- I’ll return the favour.”

Arthur’s eyes darken and seem to glaze over at the come on, and Merlin’s prick stirs again in his trousers. “I bloody hope so,” he eventually manages to reply. “I’m going to be thinking about it all day.”

Merlin smirks and pats him on the shoulder. “Patience is one of the Knights virtues isn’t it?” he teases.

Arthur gives him an unimpressed look. “Do shut up Merlin,” he says, but he drags him back in for another kiss anyway.

They part ways soon after they've gotten dressed and Merlin heads off to his Healing and Restorative Magic lecture. They’re learning about aura healing today, which involves using the power of the Magic Users’ aura to restore a person’s physical health. He doesn't even know what type of aura he possesses. Merlin’s curious to learn more on the subject.

Even if he does end up limping his way to the lecture hall.

Merlin's first mandatory partner cooperation class starts on Tuesday at three pm.

Their professor is a druid called Talesin and he makes Magic Users and Knights sit with their assigned partners once they enter his classroom. Merlin recognises a few familiar faces: Gilli, Mordred, Morgause and Gwydion, and the rest of the Magic Users he's seen around Campus or helped collect their scattered belongings after a Knight tripped them over.

Arthur is conspicuously absent and Merlin barely has a chance to savour his relief that he won't have to suffer through this lesson with him as well when he comes flying through the door, interrupting Talesin's introduction to the class five minutes later.

Talesin makes a pointed comment about arriving to the lesson on time and Arthur makes a formal apology along with an overly exaggerated gesture to proceed before taking his seat beside Merlin. Half of the first row turn around to watch him sit down as Talesin asks the students to go along and introduce themselves to the class by row.

Arthur apparently has a talent for entrances. Merlin is about to tell him off for letting him hope he'd be doing this alone but when Arthur finishes putting his satchel under the table, he finishes the action by resting a hand atop Merlin's thigh.

Merlin's chin slips off the palm of his hand where he'd been resting it previously and he barely has the chance to glare at Arthur before he grins cheekily back and slides his palm further across his thigh towards his inseam, painfully close to his crotch.

He barely manages to shove the hand away before he's been called on to introduce himself.

"Merlin Emrys," he squeaks, red faced and flustered by Arthur's directness.

"As Kilgharrah has explained," Talesin starts once the rest of the class has finished introducing themselves. "The point of this mandatory class is to encourage cooperation between Magic Users and Knights in a safe and respectful setting."

Merlin would hardly classify Arthur trying to grope him in class as respectful.

"This will be achieved by various trust exercises which will challenge the way you perceive each other and engage your critical thinking. The team which succeeds the most in these challenges will be permitted to attend the Feast of Beltane at the end of term."

Whispers erupt among the class at this news.

Merlin's heard of the feast. Active Magic Users and Knights attend the party from all corners of the globe to celebrate the destruction of evil magic and to network with other noteworthy partnerships. The areas where a Magic User and a Knight are assigned after they graduate greatly depends on their skills in magic and sword fighting, but also on their ability to talk to the right people.

And Merlin wants to be assigned somewhere where he can make a real difference.

"The Feast of Beltane?" Mordred repeats, surprised. "But I thought only graduates of Camelot are allowed to attend."

Talesin nods. "This is correct, but Kilgharrah is willing to make allowances for those who best personify the cooperation and unity between Knights and Magic Users, that is the teams that score the best overall in the challenges I will be setting. Only one team from each class will be selected to attend the Feast of Beltane, and I assure you it is an experience worthy of your attention."

It's impossible not to be aware of how the rest of the students perk up at the news.

Kilgharrah has certainly set an irresistible incentive for the students cooperate. Merlin's heard that all sorts of wild things happen at the feast. Drunken benders that last several days until Magic Users are waking up in random sacred fields after hours of may pole dancing, or the extensive lovemaking that usually follows the rituals of fertility significant to the tradition.

Merlin can't deny that he'd be interested in attending the celebrations himself. The hungry look Arthur directs at him tells Merlin he's amenable to the idea. Talesin starts to explain the different tasks they will be competing in to develop their cooperation skills with one another and Merlin can barely concentrate with how excited he is.

An hour later when the class is finished and Arthur has Merlin in his lap in the now empty classroom, desperately riding his cock, does he bring up the topic again.

"We're going to win, Merlin," Arthur pants into his ear, helplessly clutching Merlin's body to him as he presses in hard. "Think of the fertility ritual I can perform with you."

Merlin must think about it too much, because he comes a second later, Arthur's warm hands supporting his back, keeping him upright in the seat when he collapses against his chest, sated.

"I have to ask you something," Gwen says, catching up with him the next day while Merlin's on his
way to his Healing and Restorative magic class.

Gaius seems to have heard enough of Merlin's excuses for lateness that he's running out of patience. And Merlin can't exactly cite Arthur as the main cause of the problem, not when he's in constant need of recovery from a bout of incredible orgasms.

"Walk with me?" Merlin suggests. "I can't be late to another one of Gaius' classes, he'll kill me."

Gwen raises an eyebrow but manages to keep up. "Arthur keeping you busy, is he?"

Merlin doesn't think he wants to answer that question. Even if Gwen knows she's right. "You don't understand," he says, sighing ruefully. "He does something to my magic. It's much easier to channel when I feel so spectacular all the time-"

"Yes, I get it," Gwen coughs. "That's not what I wanted to ask you."

Right. Maybe it was a bit rude to go into detail there.

"Arthur joined your Elemental magic course right?" she wonders. "I just wanted to know if you'd be alright with it if I enrolled as well."

Oh. Merlin certainly hadn't expected that.

"Did Morgana talk to you?"

Gwen looks confused and Merlin's stomach sinks once he realises it has nothing to do with her semi-girlfriend. Bugger. He shouldn't have said anything.

"No," she says, frowning. "Did she tell Arthur to join?"

"No," he says quickly, trying to think of a reasonable explanation. "I thought she might be encouraging the idea."

"Well I mean, I doubt she'd be against it. But I've just been thinking lately. All we do is learn how to fight. They don't teach us about magic or how it works. I mean that's a fairly fundamental part of being able to defeat evil magic isn't it? Understanding it first? And since the Dean let Arthur into the class I thought-"

What a wonderful idea.

"You should do it," he encourages. "Elemental magic is probably one of the most important aspects of defensive magic, since it means you can use nature as your weapon. It would be a good idea to understand it. Maybe- maybe if you asked Morgana she'd want to join you?"

He knows he's pushing it. Maybe Morgana will react badly if Gwen asks her, but it couldn't hurt to try. And it would be a good cover for her to get some more practical information about magic.

Gwen thinks about it. "Yes, I'm sure she'll like the idea. I'll ask her."

They've reached Gaius' classroom by then and Merlin catches sight of Arthur at the end of the corridor just as he's started to approach.

"Oh bollocks, there he is," he mutters, already moving toward him.

Gwen puts a reminding hand on his chest. "Gaius?"
Merlin turns back towards the classroom where he's on time for once. She's right. He's got to get control of this, whatever it might be, cursed or not. Arthur's quick though, he reaches the both of them before Merlin can hurry inside, pushing Merlin up against the wall and kissing him on the mouth.

"Yes, hello Arthur, how are you?" Gwen wonders sarcastically at the lack of manners.

Merlin barely manages to get his mouth free. "You're being- rude to- Gwen," he manages between kisses.

Arthur stops and turns back to face her, not taking his hands off Merlin's neck and waist. "Yes, hello Gwen how are you?" he says parroting her words back at her. "Can I shag Merlin now?"

Merlin can see other students gawping at them behind their backs and finally wriggles free while Gwen blushes hotly at the question. "You don't need my permission."

"I have class," Merlin groans, finding it much harder to draw away. "I'll find you- after."

Arthur lets out a desperately frustrated sound and pushes Merlin up against the wall again, snogging him hard and fast and making Merlin very aware of the cock suddenly pressed against him. Uther must be on Campus again today. And they must have had another run in with each other. That's usually what happens when Arthur gets all aggressive and aching for it like this.

"After," he says heavily once he's pulled back and left Merlin in a heap of confusion and desire.

Gwen helpfully pulls him away and nudges him into the classroom when it looks like he's not going to do it on his own. Merlin sends her a grateful smile and trips over one of the desks but thankfully manages to sit down without further disaster. Even if Gaius is staring at him with a raised eyebrow.

At least he's not late.

"Finally," Arthur mutters when Merlin is free an hour later, grabbing his hand and yanking him into the computer lab already fumbling with his pants.

Merlin glances frantically around to see if anyone's in there first before locking the door behind them and hurrying to get free of his own clothes.

"Hurry up," Arthur insists, arse bare as he leans his body up against one of the desks.

Merlin was already hard before class finished, knowing Arthur would be out here somewhere ready to chase him down for a quick, thorough shag. But when he crowds closer and Arthur tries to get his cock inside straight away, Merlin holds him off.

"Don't you need to-?" he starts, but Arthur is still trying to get Merlin's prick where he wants it.

"What do you think I was doing while I waited?"

Merlin covers himself with a protective spell and doesn't even bother to lube himself up a little. He just braces his hand on Arthur's shoulder, gets a firm grip on his cock and pushes it straight into Arthur's perfect arse.

"Move," Arthur begs. "Oh yes, that's it."

Merlin slots his cock in deep and goes to town, pounding into Arthur's arse like he's trying to brand him with it, lost in how Arthur's heat clings to him like a second skin welcoming him in desperately. He'll never stop doing this, not if Arthur will let him.

"I need you," Merlin babbles almost incoherently, heat pooling in his lower back, his balls. "Give- give me-"

"Yes," Arthur sighs. 'I'll give you anything. Anything you want- take it."

Merlin comes on a shout, hands in Arthur's hair and turning his head for a kiss. Arthur's still hard but Merlin's got other plans for him first. When he goes to pull out, Arthur tries to stop him.

"There's something I wanted to try," Merlin admits, summoning the object he bought online last week from the box hidden under his bed. He reaches around Arthur's body so it's in his line of sight and feels Arthur clench on his cock, as a quiet noise falls from his lips.

"You said you liked it," Merlin says, heart pounding faster. "Keeping my come in. So I-"

Arthur groans, long and aroused and half collapses on the table on his forearms. "Put it in me."

Merlin doesn't insert the plug just yet. "I can spell it," he admits quietly. "So it won't come out until I'm the one to remove it."

Arthur gasps at the words, tightening around his cock again. Merlin thinks he likes the idea but he's not going to do it until he has verbal consent. "You can come to the flat later tonight once Gaius is asleep and I'll take it out and shag you again. But only if you want."

He makes a sharp sound, clenching Merlin's cock tight before Merlin realises that he's just come. Untouched. Gods, he must really like Merlin's suggestion.

"Do it," he says, trying to sound demanding but coming off much more affected than he realises.

Merlin smiles.

He withdraws, prick softening now, and lubes up the plug with magic before slowly working it inside. Arthur's thighs are shaking with the strain, even if Merlin's cock is bigger than the plug. He knows it's because Arthur is just unbelievably turned on.

Merlin wonders if he's done this with someone else before. He certainly hadn't thought much about sex toys until Arthur.

"The spell-" Arthur tries, before moaning again. "It won't let anyone but you take it out? Not even me?"

Merlin doesn't know if he's hesitating or getting turned on by the idea. "It was just a thought. You don't have to-"

"Do it," Arthur says abruptly, pushing his hips back. "Oh gods, do it Merlin."

Merlin slides his fingers across Arthur's sweaty back and starts whispering the spell. He found it online, and he knows it will work because he tested it out on himself first. He didn't want to accidentally hurt Arthur.
But he makes a sound like he's hurt anyway once Merlin is finished.

"It feels so-" Arthur sighs, unable to articulate himself.

Merlin watches when he reaches around and tests the magic, trying to see if he can draw the plug out himself. All he manages to do is move it around more, pressing it more firmly against his prostate and Merlin struggles to swallow at the sight, even as he cleans up their come from everywhere but where Arthur's body is keeping it inside.

"Do you have any classes?" Merlin asks, realising that he probably should have suggested this earlier and given Arthur more time to think about it.

This might have been a bit impulsive on Arthur's side, even if Merlin's been thinking about it ever since that night in the armoury shed.

"Swordfighting lecture," he answers, slurring a little. "But this will make it so much better."

Merlin's a little nervous now. "Are you sure-?"

"Fuck," Arthur sighs as he pulls his pants back up with shaking fingers. "I'm sure. It's bloody perfect. Thanks."

He's surprised by the words but he manages to make light of the intensity of what he's feeling right now. "Well if I'd known you'd be so grateful," he starts, repeating the words back to Arthur that he's said before.

Arthur turns back with a laugh, deeply amused as he drags Merlin in for a kiss. "See you tonight, Merlin."

Merlin shivers at the promise of heat in his voice. Yes, he's definitely got that to look forward to. He wonders what Arthur would do if Merlin spelled the plug to vibrate at odd pulses during his lecture. But that's something they'll have to discuss for another time. He has no intention of doing something Arthur never agreed upon.

But when they're both completely dressed and Arthur's moved to the doorway to unlock it, walking only a little unevenly as he adjusts to the plug in his arse, Merlin is confident that this evening is certainly going to be memorable.

Merlin's on edge for the rest of the night.

He can't stop thinking about the plug in Arthur's arse so much that he's continually checking to make sure the magic still works. The spell wasn't exactly difficult but because it's connected to his own magic Merlin doesn't have to try very hard to get a sense of it no matter what distance might exist between them.

He's so distracted that he nearly burns dinner and only avoids it because Gaius walks two steps past where Merlin is stationed by the oven and checks the roasted vegetables himself.

"Are you alright Merlin?" Gaius wonders, looking at him strangely. "You appear as if you're somewhere else."
Merlin draws his magic back in from where he's focused on the plug and tries to shake himself into the present. "Yes, I-" he starts, then doesn't have anything else to say. "Things on Campus, you know."

He gestures vaguely but Gaius seems to understand.

"I know Uther's presence in Camelot is disheartening, but he doesn't have the power to unseat Kilgharrah like he believes he does. He has tried several times previously and failed. I know you are concerned about the fate of the magical department, Merlin, but I assure you it will work out for the better."

Merlin feels a rush of guilt at Gaius' sincerity because he hadn't really been worrying about the fate of the University like he should have. Arthur's got him twisted up in all sorts of ways. Merlin bought a bloody sex toy just so he could put it in Arthur's arse and magically seal it there. How did he become like this?

Gaius seems to deem Merlin unworthy of serving dinner once it's cooled down because he spoons the vegetables onto a plate for the both of them, including some roasted pears and Merlin fetches the goat's cheese and hummus to add onto their plates. He's wearing his biggest jumper because he's been in a constant state of arousal ever since he and Arthur separated and Merlin would rather Gaius not know about his erection.

Merlin manages to eat, but he's not really focused on the food and he can barely manage one word responses before Gaius gives up on conversation altogether. They clean up after, Gaius washing up and Merlin drying on autopilot and he's jumping at every strange thump, somehow imagining it's Arthur sneaking into his bedroom.

"I think I'll go to bed," he decides once the kitchen is clean again. "I'm- er really tired."

Gaius doesn't look like he buys it but he waves Merlin away without further questions. Merlin hurries into the bedroom to check Arthur's not there, and when he's not, decides that he'll have a quick shower and clean himself up a little. It's been a long day.

He lies on his bed after, shirtless and in sleep pants, wired and hard even if he decides not to touch himself for the time being. Merlin's too alert to sleep right now, but it happens anyway.

He dreams of Arthur, and they're naked and rutting against each other so perfectly until there's a soft bang interrupting them. Merlin wakes up with a jolt to Arthur half perched on his windowsill.

"Oh fuck," Arthur groans, letting out a throaty whimper from the position of the plug in his arse. "Fuck me already."

Merlin's room is dark and thankfully he shut the door before he fell asleep so he gets to his feet and quickly hauls Arthur into the room. He's all shaky and loose-limbed with pleasure and Merlin wonders just how many times he's come already when Arthur basically drops onto the bed.

"You wouldn't believe the orgasm I had during that lecture," Arthur croons, still sounding dazed and satisfied. "Thought about you the entire time."

Merlin groans and uses magic to strip Arthur's clothes off before wriggling out of his own pyjamas. "I nearly burned dinner," he admits. "Couldn't focus on anything else."

"Yeah?" Arthur asks, interested. "What were you thinking about?"

Merlin covers his cock in protection spells and works the plug out of Arthur's arse, listening to him
whimper at the loss of it. "This," he says heavily, pushing between Arthur's spread legs and easing inside him.

Arthur grips Merlin's sheets and presses his face into the pillows, panting harshly as Merlin slides through the wetness of his come. It hasn't dried yet and it leaves them with the perfect amount of friction when he starts to grind into him, working his cock in with steady thrusts that Arthur arches back to receive more of.

He's burning hot, flushed and filled with longing as Arthur restricts his prick, working him so tightly that Merlin doesn't think he has a hope of lasting. He bites into the meat of Arthur's shoulder, overwhelmed by the pleasure running through his veins and physically feels the way his magic reacts.

He loses control of it and the energy inside him pulses into Arthur like an electric shock, filling him up with the intensity of his magic. Merlin's afraid for a flash of a moment before Arthur makes the sweetest sound and comes, gripping Merlin's cock tight and shudders through the aftershocks, gasping out his satisfaction.

"What," he pants. "Was that?"

Merlin can't answer for a second, hips rabbiting hard against Arthur's arse before he comes as well, moaning in relief as he collapses against his back.

"My magic," he explains once he can breathe again. "I lost control of it for a moment there. Are you alright?"

Arthur stretches a little, nearly moving Merlin along the bed with him from where they're still connected. "I'm bloody fantastic. That felt brilliant."

Merlin's surprised he's reacting so easily to this. He lost control of his magic. For a Knight, Merlin isn't so sure Arthur understands what kind of danger he was in for a moment. He might have been seriously hurt.

"But."

"Stop worrying," Arthur says, when Merlin slips out, cleaning them up with a slight jerk of his hand. "It didn't hurt. It felt good. I'm alright. Your magic seems to like me anyway."

Merlin snorts at the accusation but Arthur merely rolls over on his side to deliver an unimpressed look.

"I don't think you realise just how often you lose control of it when we're shagging," Arthur says, shocking him into silence. "If your magic wanted to blow me up, it would have already."

Merlin doesn't have an answer for that but he leans over and cleans the plug magically before stowing it back under his bed. When he looks over at Arthur, he's curled up on the mattress with a pleased but exhausted sigh, pressing his cheek into the pillow. Merlin wants to tell him he should head home now, but he hesitates.

Things aren't great with Arthur's father at the moment, he's been upset lately and returning home to his father's house probably isn't of much interest to him. Not to mention that Arthur looks softer like this, hair messily spread out as his chest rises and falls with ease.

It's late. Gaius won't come in and check on them and Merlin can always sneak him out the next morning. So he gets comfortable, curling up on his side and allowing it when Arthur snuggles
closer and nearly plasters himself against Merlin’s back.

It’s just a one off. There’s no chance they’ll do this again. They shag. They don’t cuddle or sleep after. That’s just the way things work.

But Merlin lets his eyes fall shut and drifts off just the same.

Only this once.


Merlin flushes and tries to drown out the rest of the shouts before him right now.

It’s their first cooperation task together and Talesin has set up a magical mine field of sorts in the middle of the area the Knight's use to train their horses.

The point of the task is to have one partner stand at the opposite end of the field whilst the other navigates the 'mines', various knee-deep bogs magically transformed with obnoxious colours and situated across the entire field, blindfolded, whilst listening to their partner's directions.

Talesin's blindfolds have been imbued with magical dampeners so Merlin wouldn't be able to use magic to cheat even if he wanted to. At the very least if he falls into one of the bogs he'll be walking around with hot pink stained legs for the rest of the day. Or the hideous mustard yellow or popsicle orange. That's enough of a reason to hope Arthur won't lead him astray.

But it doesn't help things that Arthur sounds like he's about to burst into laughter at any second.

Merlin's hoping that's because other students have fallen into the bogs and not because Arthur is purposely leading him into danger. He doesn't think so, not after Arthur showed his enthusiasm following the announcement of the invitation to the Feast of Beltane as the main prize for cooperation.

"Alright perfect," Arthur calls. "Now take three small steps forward. Yes, and about five steps to the right."

"About five?" Merlin yells back after he's stepped forward without falling into a magical bog. "That's not bloody accurate, Arthur."

"Five steps," he repeats calmly. "There you go. Now walk towards my voice."

That doesn't sound right. Talesin said they had to travel fifteen metres, it doesn't feel like Merlin has walked that far at all.

"What? Just walk forward? For how many steps?"

"The way is clear," Arthur says, sounding impatient now. "Come on Merlin, we're about to lose."

Is he sure he's not missing a hidden bog somewhere? This seems like it's been much too easy. "Are you sure-?"

"I'm sure," he insists. "Come on Merlin. Trust me."

Oddly bright coloured legs isn't exactly the worst thing that could happen to him today. Merlin
walks forward, heart beating faster out of nerves anyway even if he doesn't unceremoniously fall into an unexpected bog. He doesn't stop until he's walked straight into someone's chest.

Merlin doesn't need his eyes to know that it's Arthur. He can tell by the familiar smell of him, the weight of his hands on Merlin's shoulders.

"Well done," Talesin says quietly, and Merlin's blindfold suddenly disappears.

He blinks a few times to adjust to the light before turning back to stare at the bog field.

It might only be fifteen metres but Merlin can see straight away just how much further ahead of the rest of class they are. The rest of them haven't even passed halfway yet even if they're all shouting at each other. Merlin's surprised for a second before he realises exactly what the problem is.

The Magic Users who are blindfolded and unable to access their magic, don't trust their Knight counterparts, and are equally reluctant to listen to or obey any of their directions being shouted out to them.

Gilli, who's fallen into at least four differently coloured bogs already looks furious, and Merlin feels a swell of pity for him. Especially since Lancelot appears so distressed by the situation, even when Gilli doesn't seem to be following his advice.

Morgause actually fell face first into a yellow bog, but from the random snickers of laughter every few seconds, Merlin has the suspicion that her Knight did that intentionally. It's no wonder none of the other teams have passed the halfway mark.

Merlin glances back at Arthur who seemingly navigated him through the coloured bogs with ease, and notices that he's smirking at the others, proud of their success. Merlin's not entirely sure why their results surprise him. Maybe it turns out he trusts Arthur a lot more then he was ever letting on.

They did get through that mine field very quickly. But that could be because their familiarity with each other has advantages.

The advantage of being more willing to trust each other for one.

Arthur still looks impossibly pleased with their efforts though. And Merlin knows that heat in his eyes. A celebratory shag is in order after this. Merlin's just glad that he didn't fall into a magically created bog.

Those colours Talesin created really are horrid to look at.

Merlin is having a strange day.

The Knights on Campus are abuzz with more energy than usual. Though it's not the kind of tense, aggravated energy that's been directed toward Magic Users ever since they were assigned their partners. There's something focused about it, almost excited.

They've probably got another hunt going on. As long as they keep well out of any Magic Users way and only hunt other Knights, then he's got no problem with it.
The only issue with that, however, is that it feels like everybody is hunting Merlin instead. The horn blows at midday, signalling some kind of message to Knights only and Merlin’s in the middle of a lesson with Gaius when the door bangs open and there are a bunch of Knights filling up the doorway.

“Where is he then?”

The Magic Users in the room tense up at the sight of them and Gaius frowns. “What is the meaning of this?”

“There he is,” one of the Knights declares, pointing at him and Merlin thinks her name might be Mithian. “That’s the one he fought Cenred over.”

Merlin flushes all the way up to his ears. “Wha- wha-?” he splutters as the rest of the Magic Users turn to stare at him.

There was no fighting! If anything, Merlin is the one who tossed Cenred on his arse. Arthur barely did anything. And it’s not like Merlin needs him to defend his honour anyway.

“Well where is he then?” the Knight beside her demands. “You said he’d be here.”

“I said he might-“

Gaius has clearly had enough. “Kindly leave my classroom.”

The Knight beside Mithian curses and they take off without even looking at the rest of them, though Mithian manages an apologetic shrug, sheathing her sword before chasing after the rest.

“What was that about, Merlin?” Gaius wonders once they’ve disappeared.

Merlin just stares at the empty doorway in confusion. “I have no idea.”

Freya nudges his shoulder. “They’re not- planning on hunting you are they?” she whispers, concerned.

Merlin tries not to think about it.

If they did, then he’d surely defend himself. There’s no way in hell he’s letting a bunch of Knights hunt him around Campus.

He’s worried after class ends, but it turns out they don’t have much interest in Merlin at all. Except they do appear to be particularly fascinated with the space around him. For the rest of the day, groups of Knights keep showing up to find him and once they do, spend an unusual amount of time observing the people in his general vicinity.

Merlin loses his patience by the third group.

“Had a good look then?” he demands when they get so close that Freya actually cowers away from them. “What is the matter with all of you?”

“He’s not here,” the one closest to him announces mysteriously. “Let’s keep looking.”

“Looking for what?” Merlin shouts after them but they’re already hurrying away.

He finally catches on when the sixth group of Knights come across him in the hallway on the way to his next class. They’re armed to the teeth and Merlin nearly walks straight into a loaded
crossbow. Only Leon, who's standing beside the Knight, pulls him back a step just in time.


“Wait—what did he say?” Merlin demands, scowl deepening when the Knight with the crossbow looks nervous and suddenly retreats.

He has a very bad feeling that Arthur has done something worthy of being a prat again. “Leon,” he starts. “If you don’t tell me, I’m going to cover each and every one of you with painful boils. **All over** your body.”

The alarm on his face is gratifying to say the least. The Knights shift uneasily behind him.

“We’re to leave the Magic Users alone,” the Knight with the crossbow admits, despite Leon nudging him to keep quiet. Loyal to the end. “Anybody giving them a hard time will have Arthur to deal with.”

“We can take care of ourselves,” Gilli insists darkly. “We don’t need his help.”

Merlin has to agree but before he can, he notices the other Knights searching keenly around them. It clicks so suddenly that Merlin can’t believe it took him so long to get there. “Arthur? You’re hunting Arthur? Is that why you’ve been coming after me?” he demands. “What on earth makes you think he’ll be here?”

The Knight behind Leon flips her hair mulishly. “Don’t play innocent. Everyone knows you’ve had Pendragon trailing after you ever since term started.”

Merlin blushes furiously at what they’re insinuating. Especially since they’re partially right. The fooling around part, not the other suggestion.

“He’s all moony about it,” one insists.

“Like he’s been enchanted,” another Knight rudely calls out from the back of the group.

Merlin laughs so loudly his voice carries through the hallway. He can’t stop not even at the sight of their startled expressions. “You’re joking,” he gasps, half doubled over, eyes watering as his stomach aches from laughing so hard. “You think I enchanted Arthur? I want nothing to do with him. We practically hate each other.”

“That’s not what I heard,” crossbow Knight declares and Merlin can’t help but notice Leon has suddenly gone very quiet, lips pursed with disapproval.

Merlin’s cheeks feel hot but he refuses to be embarrassed.

“For your information, you can still shag someone and dislike them.”

Leon clears his throat pointedly as if he can’t listen to this anymore.

“In any case, he’s clearly not here and it’s unlikely I’m stowing him in my backpack so you can all head on out before you accidentally kill someone.”

“But—” one of them tries to protest, immensely unsettled by the interaction.

“There’s no way he’s coming to me for help,” Merlin says patiently. “That would be cheating wouldn’t it? Are you calling Arthur Pendragon a cheater?”
That seems to be all the convincing they need. The group of Knights take their crossbows and spears and march past them. Leon is the only one who lingers.

“He doesn’t, you know,” he says. “Hate you.”

Merlin’s taken aback by his seriousness. “Well, yes I know that. Hate is a strong word I suppose. He a giant clotpole, that’s all.”

Gilli snorts loudly and unexpectedly and then tries to pretend he wasn’t laughing. Leon is not at all convinced but shakes his head at Merlin bemusedly anyway. “So I’ve heard. Don’t mind the Knights. Arthur’s been gone since this morning and nobody’s managed to catch him yet. They’re getting a bit antsy.”

Somehow, Merlin isn’t surprised. For a bloke who came into the first tournament of the term and singlehandedly won it as a first year, hiding out from the rest of the Knights probably wouldn’t be much of a challenge.

“He did say he was going to win,” Merlin points out.

Leon sighs and checks his watch. “I don’t doubt it. Sorry they got in your face Merlin.”

“And Gilli.”

Leon shuffles a little, awkward. “Er- yes and Gilli. Sorry there, mate.”

“You know we have magic right?” Merlin checks. “We don’t need Arthur to protect us.”

Leon scratches at his chin, suddenly interested in the nearby walls. “Yes, of course. Well I’d best be off. See you around, Merlin. Gilli.”

Merlin sees him go with a raised eyebrow, turning to Gilli who’s watching with wide eyes.

“Was that some kind of trick?” Gilli wonders mistrustfully, when they realise they’re running late to Ostane’s lecture and start jogging over to the theatre.

“I don’t think so,” Merlin mutters, scowling when the Knights nearby perk up as if he’s going to lead him straight to Arthur Pendragon himself.

As if he even knows where he is.

Merlin’s day goes steadily downhill from there.

Gwydion somehow manages to tip the entire contents of his scrying bowl into Merlin’s lap during Incantations101. This week they’re learning the rudimentary spells for scrying, though this type of magic is taught further in the Soothsaying course which Merlin has enrolled in for second term.

The downside is that he’s drenched in the strange murky liquid and Aglain dismisses him from the class so that he can go get a spare pair of trousers from the Knight’s training room. Unfortunately they only have hunting gear, which means tight, form fitting clothing that clings to every inch of his body.

Merlin wants to walk around for the rest of the day with his hands covering the bulge of his crotch
but it’s a lucky thing that he’s wearing a loose jumper and that it escaped most of the scrying liquid. He could just summon a pair of trousers from home, but it took him over ten minutes to squeeze into the pants and Merlin doesn’t have the energy to attempt taking them off again.

At least his jumper covers most of it. But it still doesn’t mean he can’t feel eyes staring at his arse on the way back to Aglain’s class. When he re-enters, he raises at eyebrow at what Merlin is wearing but doesn’t comment.

Thankfully.

Gwydion is grinning at him from across the room and Merlin has the sudden sharp sensation that what happened might not have been an accident. He’s a bit of a prankster. But only when people put him up to it. Gilli mentioned once that students even pay for his services. Especially if they need an excuse to get out of an exam or an assignment.

Merlin frowns and retakes his seat.

They’ve been working on their bowls for twenty minutes now and Merlin’s managed to see a lot in that time. He’s probably the most consistent at scrying so far but that might be because he finds it so easy to empty his mind. It starts to wander again when he should be concentrating on the area Aglain has set them to observe, the round table in the Quad.

The water ripples and Merlin’s accidentally ends up looking at Arthur instead.

He’s sitting somewhere, looking quite pleased with himself, eyes shut as he leans against a wall, headphones in and listening to music. Merlin glances around himself but Aglain is across the room helping Holda focus her inner eye.

Merlin’s head drops down to the bowl again and there’s Arthur still looking fit as always and Merlin wishes he could chew him out for making him the target of every Knight today. He didn’t mean to think about him. Thoughts about Arthur are just like that sometimes, sudden and unwelcome as they slip into the forefront of his mind.

Arthur’s lips are dry and his tongue darts out to lick them absently as he resettles against the brick wall he’s leaning against. Merlin can’t actually locate him from the images alone, not that he actually has any intention to. But a jolt of heat stirs through him all the same, without permission, instinctive and unconscious.

He wishes that Arthur wasn’t still hiding from a bunch of Knights trying to hunt him down right now. He wishes there was a spare classroom where he could push Arthur up against a wall and work off some of today’s frustration.

He wishes his pants weren’t so tight.
Merlin doesn’t mean to find out where Arthur Pendragon is hiding. It’s not like he’s actively looking for him or anything. He’s finished classes for the day and is finally on his way back to Gaius’ flat when he senses that someone is following him.

He knows that it’s a Knight and that the energy they give off is familiar. Merlin abruptly changes direction and heads towards the library. In the next second he ducks quickly behind one of the alcoves on the outside of the building to hide. Next thing he sees is a shaggy headed Knight passing by, eyes scanning the area for him alertly.

“What the hell, Gwaine?” he demands, jumping out after him.

Gwaine flinches a little and spins in surprise. His eyes zero in on Merlin’s crotch straight away and then his smirk widens considerably. Merlin jerks his jumper down a little lower, flushing. He’s in a right state at the moment. This is why he wanted to hurry home as soon as possible.

“Looks like Gwydion made good on that money I paid him.”

Hold on a moment. Merlin doesn’t even begin to bother hiding his astonishment. “You paid him to spill his scrying potion all over me?”

Gwaine doesn’t seem to find that an odd thing to do because he only manages to look mightily proud of himself. “Why yes, Merlin. How else was I going to get you into those pants?”

The sentence is certainly confusing, because if anything, it seems that Gwaine’s primary goal in life generally revolves around getting people out of their pants. Merlin’s a little behind here.

“You know what,” he mutters. “I don’t care. I don’t want to know. I’m going home before this day has the chance to get any worse.”

At least that’s what he plans to do until somebody is landing out of the bloody sky onto the grass beside them. Merlin stumbles away in shock, magic surging in his ribs just in case before he recognises the blonde head as Arthur’s when he straightens out with a disarming grin.

Then Merlin glances up and recognises the brickwork from the scrying bowl earlier. This whole time Arthur’s been hiding up on the library’s roof. Merlin has no idea how he even got up there in the first place.

“Alright Gwaine,” he says but his eyes haven’t left Merlin’s body since he landed. “You win.”

Merlin glances between them and starts to cotton on. “Hold on,” he starts. “Did you ruin my favourite pair of trousers just so you could put me in tight pants and lure Arthur out?”

Arthur, who is currently admiring said pants with a great degree of approval. Gwaine appears infinitely satisfied with himself as if a clever plot of his own making has unfolded to perfection.
Merlin has a few things to say about that.

“Well it worked, didn’t it?”

“That it did,” Arthur agrees wholeheartedly, taking a step towards Merlin as if any minute he’s going to start helping him out of his clothes. There’s a red scrap of fabric pinned to his chest but Arthur is already removing it.

“Pretty clever there actually. Here you go,” he admits, still not even glancing at Gwaine as he goes to toss the fabric at him.

Merlin has a feeling that once they’ve caught who they’re hunting that they’re usually supposed to fight them for that token. Not just hand it over.

“Wait,” he protests. “Don’t do that. Then you’re just letting everyone think that if they want to get to you then they should go after me!”

“Ah, don’t be a killjoy Merlin,” Gwaine says. “Just because you don’t approve of my methods-“

“Oh I approve alright,” Arthur agrees, still advancing. “Merlin, your arse in those pants.”

He flushes at the heat in Arthur's voice.

“Every single Knight on Campus has come and harassed me today because of your damn hunting drill. If you hand over that token you’re giving them permission to do it again.”

“Come on Merlin,” he says, smiling at him as his fingers grip the material of Merlin’s jumper, finding purchase on his hips and keeping him there. “You’ve got to admit it was pretty smart of him.”

“Fine,” Merlin mutters, and snags the fabric out of Arthur’s hand before he can think to stop him. “Then I caught you first instead.”

Gwaine’s frowning now. “Can he do that?”

Arthur’s attention is still focused on the pants. “Magic Users can’t participate. But he did get the badge first.”

“Are you serious?” Gwaine grumbles, not so amused by the situation anymore. “I paid that Gwyn fella thirty quid. Helios won’t allow it anyway. C’mon Merlin, be a love and hand us the badge.”

Merlin pulls himself free of Arthur and his hands which are steadily progressing towards his backside and steps back. He rolls his eyes at Gwaine's pleading expression before tossing the badge. Gwaine catches it with minimal effort.

“You pull something like this off again and I won’t be so nice,” Merlin promises, spinning and stalking off before either of the Knights can reply.

Arthur catches up a second later, wrapping his arms around Merlin from behind and reeling him in. “Come home with me,” he says, mouth on Merlin’s neck and he can feel Arthur’s cock pressing up against his arse. “God, you’re fucking gorgeous.”

Merlin’s own body is responding just as rapidly but his brain isn’t so easily convinced. “I have a lot of study to do-“

“Do it after. Come on Merlin, I can make it so good.”
He doesn’t doubt that for a minute. But Merlin hesitates anyway, torn. “I’m not going anywhere near Uther Pendragon,” he mutters, trying to pull free.

Arthur releases him but he’s all stroppy all of a sudden and Merlin just wants to shag already.

“C’mon then,” he says, grabbing at Arthur’s arm and tugging him forward.

“Where to?” he asks, frowning.

“My flat,” Merlin explains, feeling the newfound heat in his body. “You’re gonna fuck me.”

Arthur grins, chuffed and wraps an arm around Merlin’s waist to tug him in closer. “I’ll do my best.”

Merlin leads them through the main courtyard of the University, heading out onto the main road and Arthur is quite happy to wander with him. He’s pretty handsy actually.

“Arthur,” he mutters, when Arthur’s hand skates over the curve of his arse for the third time since they’ve started walking.

“Come on,” he murmurs, eyes hot. “Not sure I can wait.”

Merlin pushes his hand back and tries not to shudder. “You’ll wait,” he mutters. “It’s not like you weren’t hanging around all day hiding out from the Knights anyway.”

Arthur lets out a disgruntled noise. “Knights don’t hide, Merlin. We’re not cowards. We conceal ourselves from our enemies and wait for the perfect moment to strike.”

Merlin snorts and patiently swats Arthur’s warm hand away again when he tries to cup his arse.

“What’s the difference?”

“What’s the difference?” Arthur repeats, outraged. “Where’s the honour in hiding?”

“Where’s the honour in Knights hurting people for their own sick entertainment?”

“There is none,” Arthur says sharply, not holding back any condemnation. “Pride isn’t always a virtue. Men have done foolish things for less.”

Merlin doesn’t exactly disagree but he knows if they go down this road he’ll be too furious to get shagged. There are a few other things he’d like to do as well. Like ask Arthur what the bloody hell he’s been telling the Knights. Whether he thinks giving them commands to lay off the Magic Users is actually going to work. Or more importantly, why he’s even bothering with such a thing in the first place.

Arthur’s hand curls bracingly around his hip like it’s taking all of his energy not to drag Merlin up against the nearest surface and snog the hell out of him. And then Merlin stops thinking with anything other than his prick and the need to have Arthur shagging him into his mattress already.

They hurry back to Merlin’s flat. Though he seriously considers attempting teleportation for the first time when it takes too long. Thankfully, they reach his building in next to no time, fumbling to unlock the door before Arthur drags Merlin straight to his bedroom, goals set.

They encounter a few problems when he tries to get Merlin out of his pants though.

“What kind of shite trousers are these?” Arthur complains, irritated by the delay when he can’t manage to remove them and Merlin laughs at the put upon expression on his face.
Until he tries to wiggle out of them himself.

“Bollocks,” he mutters, when it’s not as easy as he thought.

Are these made of bloody leather or something? Arthur’s already busy yanking off his shirt and kicking off his boots and doesn’t offer any further assistance. The prat. Merlin sighs when he only manages to get the material past his hips and to the beginning of his thighs.

Arthur snorts at him, watching him struggle.

“Where the bloody hell did Gwaine even find these trousers?” Merlin mutters, wondering if it’d just be better to rip them.

Maybe he needs to cut himself free.

“Let’s not talk about him right now,” Arthur suggest, pushing up against his back again, shirtless and only in his pants now.

“I’m trapped, Arthur,” he snaps. “Get these bloody things off me.”

Arthur laughs, loud and amused at his current predicament. “You’re the one with the magic aren’t you, Merlin,” he says. “Just think, I can’t shag you if you’re stuck in those.”

Merlin’s eyes flare with heat and the pants vanish altogether.

“You know,” Arthur says conversationally as he drags Merlin onto his bed. “I think I’m starting to see the uses of magic after all.”

Merlin rolls over until he’s perched on Arthur’s hips. “You mean besides saving your lousy Knights from certain death when facing evil magic? Besides the healing properties, the undoing of curses, purification of areas sorrowed by deaths of—”

“Yes, love,” Arthur cuts him off. “Magic Users are very important, of course.”

Merlin glares at him and crawls off Arthur’s hips, anger clouding his need. Arthur just groans out a disappointed sound and drops back into the pillows.

“You know if you want to shag someone, insulting them isn’t actually the best idea.”

“Alright,” Arthur says, unzipping his pants and pushing them off his hips, kicking them past his shins and onto Merlin’s floor until he’s only in his underwear. “Sorry, Merlin. While you sit there and fume I’m gonna have a wank in this lovely bed of yours.”

And then Arthur frees his prick from his underwear and starts doing just that, ignoring Merlin’s irritated sigh.

“You are such a clotpole,” he mutters, focusing his magic to prepare his body for Arthur’s prick.

He waits until he feels ready before lining himself up over Arthur. Except Arthur drops the hand on his cock, in favour of sliding it between Merlin’s arse cheeks to feel the slickness there first in order to check. Then he slips a finger inside.

Merlin keens, arching his body when Arthur adds another and starts stretching him open.

“Fuck,” he groans. “You’re such a- bloody hell that feels fantastic.”
“That’s right,” Arthur croons encouragingly. “You ready for me, Merlin?”

Arthur’s fingers skate tenaciously across his prostate and lights burst beneath Merlin’s eyelids. He can’t see it, but he can taste his own magic in the air. Shagging always seems to leaves him unable to concentrate on reeling it back. Or maybe it’s just Arthur.

“Yeah,” he pants. “Come on.”

Arthur gets a hold of his prick again, pressing it up against Merlin’s entrance without going further. He wants Merlin to sink down on it himself, he realises, so he does just that, groaning at the different angle. It’s like he’s being supported by Arthur’s cock alone. The feeling is overwhelming.

“C’mon, you prat,” he moans. “Bloody well move already.”

Arthur obeys the order with a smirk and a particularly strong thrust of his hips and Merlin loses the ability to speak.

Campus is full of gossip today but Merlin hasn’t managed to overhear what’s going on.

He’s on the way to his Incantations lecture when he spots an older man in a suit walking down the hall towards him. It’s later in the day so there’s not many other students around but Merlin sees how the man’s expression wrinkles distastefully when he recognises that Merlin is a Magic User.

It’s not hard to figure out. Merlin doesn’t walk around in chain mail, sword at his waist and brandishing a mace for the hell of it. He’s carrying books when he gets close enough to see the man’s face properly.

It’s Uther Pendragon.

Merlin’s stomach swoops uncomfortably as they lock eyes, nearly losing the hold on his textbook but he manages not to drop it. Only one thought blares through his mind. I’ve had my cock in your son’s arse, and it’s more than likely I’ll do it again.

Uther’s expression becomes more unfriendly and Merlin wonders in horror if he can see the truth written there on his face before he sees Uther is directly in his path despite there being plenty of room to walk around each other. Naturally, he’s expecting Merlin to move.

What a bloody ponce.

Merlin doesn’t shift one bit, just stomps forward more determinedly. Uther Pendragon’s expression worsens once he realises Merlin isn’t backing down, and he keeps walking until there’s barely a breath between them.

“You’re in my way, sorcerer,” he says, and his voice is exactly the same as it sounds on the news, commanding, and innately arrogant.

“Right,” Merlin says, without stepping out of the way. “Because there’s nothing more pathetic than an old man who thinks he owns the bloody ground you’re standing on.”

Uther Pendragon’s eyes flash with affront.

“How dare you! I own-“
“You donated money to this institution,” Merlin snaps. “If you truly believe that gives you the right to walk about like there’s a crown on your head, you’re dafter than I thought.”

Merlin knows that he’s putting his foot in it, but there are so many things he’s wanted to say to Uther Pendragon’s face that it just comes spilling out.

“You’re a scourge to this University,” he hisses. “You’re the reason that prejudice and animosity is rife in the halls and Magic Users can’t be properly educated without fearing for their safety. Grief has turned your heart hard with hatred and ignorance. You’ve transformed loss into a weapon.”

Uther Pendragon rolls back at his words, mouth quirking with rage and shock so that he can't even speak.

Merlin gestures around. “So you want me to treat you with respect? Bow down when you walk past? When you’ve no respect for magic or what endless good can be done by those who have it?”

Uther is recovering himself now, staring at Merlin with a considering sort of attention. “Who are you to speak like this?”

“Arthur Pendragon,” Merlin says sarcastically, watching Uther’s face turn purple with rage.

“You dare compare yourself to my son?”

Merlin’s got a whole bloody list of things he could tell Uther about his son, but he doesn’t hate Arthur that much. Not really. “Because I’m so much less than he is?” he spits furiously. “What crime is it to be born with magic?”

Uther straightens up abruptly, jutting his chin out. “Brave words for a man who won’t even admit to his own name. Where’s your honour-?”

“Where’s yours?” Merlin retorts. “Who are you to decide how Magic Users ought to be treated?”

“I-“

“My name’s Merlin Emrys,” he interrupts. “And I’m not afraid of protecting those you’ve seen fit to condemn for crimes they never committed. Welcome to Camelot, prick.”

Merlin’s so angry that he turns about and goes back the way he’s come instead of stepping aside for Uther Pendragon. He’s late to class, but he moves to the back of the lecture hall and decides to sit alone until he cools off.

His magic feels agitated and very present in the room and Merlin knows if doesn’t get a handle on it there’s a high chance he’ll accidentally set something ablaze. He needs to blow off steam. But nothing seems to settle him for the rest of the hour. Merlin can't let go of the anger, even after the lecture is finished and other Magic Users start spilling out of the theatre.

He hasn’t calmed down at all and barely took any notes the entire time. Merlin's just thinking maybe it would be better to head back to the flat and get changed to go for a jog or something when he catches sight of Arthur and gets a better idea.

Arthur seems to feel the weight of his gaze because he drags his attention from the conversation with Percival and Gwaine to look up and around the Quad before his eyes meet Merlin’s.

Five minutes later, Merlin’s got him alone in an empty classroom, trousers around their ankles while Merlin drives his cock furiously into Arthur’s arse, listening to him moan as he fucks him up
against the wall.

“What-?” Arthur tries to ask, not for the first time since Merlin pulled him in here about the unexpected and vigorous anger making him rougher and less talkative.

Merlin doesn’t respond, overwhelmed by the constricting heat as he rolls into Arthur steadily, feeling him writhe and jerk back eagerly to meet his thrusts. He’s got a firm hold on Arthur’s hips, arching his back to take Merlin’s cock better, easing the slide and the angle so Arthur’s pretty much incoherent with desire.

Almost immediately Merlin’s magic reacts, energy licking around his cock and balls as he plunges in deeper, the magic stirring up a rush of heat in his blood. Arthur gasps brokenly as he scrabbles backwards to reach for Merlin, catching onto the skin of his hip and encouraging his rhythm.

The tingle starts underneath his skin, the build and release of magic and Merlin reaches around to squeeze Arthur’s cock, to help him along as well. Soon enough Arthur is tightening all over as he comes, whimpering into the woodwork as he spills copiously against the wall.

Merlin yanks at Arthur’s shirt in order to bite into the base of his throat when his orgasm strikes, filling up Arthur’s arse with come.

Arthur half collapses against the wall once they’re finished and Merlin’s pulled out of him entirely. He can see how the muscles in Arthur’s thighs are trembling as he gets his breath back but there’s a dazed, sort of contentment to his expression.

“What’s-“ Arthur pants. “What’s gotten into you?”

Merlin cleans the mess with a wave of his hand, already bending down to pull up his pants and jeans. “Had a run in with a cockhead,” he mutters, buttoning his jeans to make himself presentable. Arthur keeps trying to meet his eyes but Merlin fiddles about with his jeans until he’s done and refuses to look at him.

“Who-?” he starts to ask, but Merlin is already making a break for the door.

“I’ve got to go,” he says shortly. “I’ll see you later.”

He leaves before Arthur can get a word in edgewise.

Arthur crawls in through Merlin’s window that night.

Merlin didn’t even know that it was unlocked, but he’s startled by the unexpected bitter air and the massive figure stepping into his room. He barely opens his mouth to scream before a cold hand is covering it.

“It’s me,” Arthur whispers in the dark. “Budge over.”

Merlin pushes his hand away. “Budge over?” he hisses. “What the hell are you doing here? Gaius is in the other room.”

Arthur closes the window and slips out of his shoes, undoing his trousers until he’s only in his briefs before squeezing into Merlin’s bed which was the perfect temperature a second ago before
he carried the cold in with him.

“Bollocks,” Merlin hisses as he turns on his side and struggles to move away from him but Arthur just wraps his arms around his stomach and snuggles in.

Did he walk through a bloody ice freezer to get here? Merlin’s eyes flash and the bed warms itself again. Arthur lets out a small sigh of relief.

“I had a row with my father,” he admits a second later into Merlin’s neck.

Merlin stiffens at the mention of Uther and waits for Arthur to say he knows about what happened earlier today but he doesn't mention it. Arthur must have fought with Uther on some other unrelated thing. It doesn't make Merlin any less nervous.

“And you came here?” he wonders. “Isn't that just going to make him madder?”

“I snuck out,” Arthur says, pushing his hands beneath Merlin’s shirt and stoking his fingers along Merlin’s stomach.

His prick is already starting to rouse from the attention.

Merlin lets out a small groan and a moment later he can feel the press of Arthur’s growing erection against his arse. “You reckon we could-?”

“Fuck me,” Merlin demands, already trying to push off his sleep pants, where he’s naked underneath.

Arthur makes an affirmative sound and suddenly he’s palming at Merlin’s arse with one hand already cupping his cock. Merlin rocks between his hands, getting lost easily in the sensation, even if he already wants more.

He’s too impatient for lube, so Merlin slicks himself up with magic, reaching back and getting a hold of Arthur’s cock before he’s even fully naked and leading him towards where he wants it most.

Arthur curses when he slots his cock up against Merlin’s hole, but once he realises it’s been stretched with magic he rocks straight in, pushing in deep and fast until his balls are nestled underneath Merlin’s arse.

Merlin bites his cheek to stop from keening, scrabbling to get a hold of something, the sheets, Arthur’s arms now wrapping around his midsection. His heart is pounding and it’s beyond warm under the blankets now, enough that Merlin’s started to sweat when Arthur slowly drags his cock out and nudges it back inside.

He’s taking it slow, easy and unhurried and Merlin notices that he’s whispering into his ear on the second thrust.

“He told me what you said to him,” Arthur says, licking along the shell of Merlin’s ear as he rocks his hips into the next thrust, thoroughly impaling Merlin with his prick. So he does know about what happened after all. “And how you refused to apologise for it. Fuck, you’re brilliant, Merlin. Never heard of anyone standing their ground against him like that.”

Merlin groans out a curse, caught up in the sweet fullness of Arthur’s cock, rocking slowly into him, not withdrawing far enough to stop the slow grind of his hips. Why Arthur’s talking about his bloody father right now, is a mystery, but Merlin doesn’t even care.
“You could,” he gasps, gripping Arthur’s forearms hard enough that his nails leave imprints. “Oh, Arthur.”

“That’s right, love,” he says sounding strangely earnest. “Do you like that?”

Merlin tries to snort at the question, but Arthur changes the angle of his steady onslaught and starts hitting his prostate when he moves. “Oh-I- yes- fuck- you prat. Don’t stop.”

“I won’t,” he promises, holding him close, intimately. “I’ve got you.”

He keeps the same pace, no matter how much Merlin begs for it faster, harder, rougher. Arthur works his body up slowly to the edge, and then tosses Merlin over it, without even needing to touch his cock at all.

He kisses along Merlin’s throat the entire time, gentles him through it, until Merlin’s just shuddering and trembling from the pleasure. Arthur comes a little while after and Merlin holds tighter when he tries to pull out, still hasn’t quite softened.

“Stay,” Merlin mutters, flushing with some unnamed emotion.

But Arthur obeys, holding him close, keeping him warm and content until they’re both asleep, wrapped around one another.

The situation on Campus hasn’t improved that much in spite of the mandatory cooperation classes between Knights and Magic Users but Merlin has a distinctly uneasy feeling Thursday morning as soon as he’s entered Camelot.

Merlin can't figure out why it dogs him all morning but everything is reasonably normal.

He stops for his regular cup of tea on the way to his first lecture of the day. He attends his Elemental101 lesson with Arthur, Gwen and Freya like always. And he and and Arthur sneak off afterwards to snog and give each other sloppy handjobs behind the Nemeth building afterward.

Nothing unusual happens all day.

But that doesn't mean something isn't wrong.

When Lancelot finds them both once they've reemerged from their hiding place and done up their trousers, Merlin's automatically on guard. Arthur is also less than welcoming which Merlin can't quite figure out since he and Lancelot are supposed to be mates. Well they seem like they are.

They're close enough that Arthur calls him Lance anyway.

"What is it?" he asks, certain he's about to be proved right about the feeling he's been carrying around all day. "What's wrong?"

Lancelot glances between them both and hesitates. "I'm not sure entirely," he admits. "Have you seen Gilli at all today, Merlin?"

It's a sad state of affairs that Merlin takes so long to think about it. Why hasn't he seen Gilli this morning? They share nearly all of their classes together.
"No," he says slowly. "Not since Tuesday."

"This is that real weedy looking bloke you hang around with right?" Arthur wonders out of nowhere. "I saw him yesterday afternoon. He was talking with Cenred. Arguing more like."

Merlin gaps at him. "And you did nothing?"

Arthur looks affronted. "He stormed off by the time I got there. And Cenred wouldn't tell me what they were going on about."

Merlin wishes he'd listened to himself sooner. "Something's wrong," he says. "I've been feeling like something's off all morning and this must be what it is."

Lancelot is instantly worried. "I'm only asking because Gilli didn't attend our mandatory cooperation class today. But perhaps he's not on Campus at all."

"Or maybe he is," Merlin says sharply. "And something's very wrong."

Lancelot looks like he's about to question this further but Arthur cuts him off with a wave of his hand. "Trust him," he says to Merlin's complete and utter astonishment. "Merlin has a sense for these things. We'd best start looking."

Merlin already has a few ideas. "I think, we need to find Cenred."

"He'll be at the training grounds now," Lancelot explains. "The Knights usually have sword practice in between classes to pass the time. Cenred likes to train there, that's where he'll be."

"Come on," Arthur says, taking Merlin's arm and dragging them towards a part of Campus that Merlin's never been to before.

He wouldn't know how to get to those training grounds without a map that's for sure. Merlin knows they're going the right way though because the tension he's been carrying all day loosens a little.

But Merlin knows they're really in trouble when his ears start ringing. "We're running out of time," he says urgently. "How far are we?"

"Two minutes walk," Lancelot answers.

It's not going to be enough.

"Run," Arthur says, having read Merlin's expression.

They run.

When they reach the training area Merlin has no idea where to go but Arthur does. He drags him right over to where Cenred is training with a small group of Knights, Lancelot keeping pace at their backs. Sarrum is among them.

Merlin can't see Gilli anywhere but the tightness in his chest is escalating.

"Where is he?" Arthur asks him. "Can you sense his magic?"

He can, but Merlin doesn't know the exact location. What have they done with Gilli? Have they stashed him somewhere? If they've hurt him Merlin doesn't know what he'll do. But they should probably get the Dean.
Sarrum finally realises that there's a Magic User in their midst. "What are you doing here?" he demands, eyeing Merlin with distaste.

But Merlin's not watching him anymore. He's looking at the shelf full of swords, maces and metal spears at his back which have begun to levitate menacingly behind him and Cenred.

Gods, Gilli wasn't the one in danger after all. What is he doing?

Merlin catches sight of him standing at a safe distance, controlling the weapons with his ring and knows that he has to prevent this from going any further. He might be the only one who can.

"Gilli," he shouts, over the ringing in his ears. "You can stop this. Nobody needs to get hurt."

Cenred and Sarrum seem to realise the danger they're in, turning back at the wall of weapons at their backs. Cenred tries to shrink away but that only makes the weapons inch closer. They freeze to the spot.

"I'm not afraid of magic," Gilli says, and there's hatred in his eyes as he looks at the Knights. "But they should be."

Merlin steps forward, ignoring Arthur's attempt to grab at his wrist and pull him back. He faces Gilli and tries to keep eye contact, hoping to disrupt his connection. If Merlin could just get him to look away from the Knights for a second-

"Don't do it," he says. "You're better than this. You're a good person."

Gilli laughs, but it's a hollow, hopeless sound. "You know, I'm not so sure that I am."

Merlin lashes out with his magic, throwing up a barrier between the Knights and the weapons, feeling the pressure of Gilli's own power pushing against him. Gilli smiles grimly and only presses harder, searching Merlin's magic for weaknesses.

They strain against each other, the weapons rattling in the air with the force of the struggle, but Merlin doesn't relent.

"Magic isn't about hurting people who deserve it," he says, voice shaking with effort. "There's enough evil in the world already."

Gilli starts to sink to his knees, buckling under the exhaustive weight of using so much magic at once. He can't hold out for long. Merlin is praying for that. He can't defend any other magical attacks while he's manifested the barrier between the weapons and the Knights. Merlin isn't able to split his focus right now even if he wanted to.

But he doubts Gilli can either.

He's crying, Merlin realises and he has no idea how it got so far. How the Knights could push a sweet boy who only wanted to learn magic into a violent horror such as this? Gilli's face is still wet with tears when he unleashes every single weapon at once at Cenred and Sarrum.

Merlin shouts out in horror, feeling each and every weapon hit the barrier, repelled by the power of his magic before clattering harmlessly to the ground. But Sarrum doesn't stay behind it.

He tries to run and he gets outside the wall of Merlin's protection as the last of the weapons are hitting the dirt. And that's when the metal spear goes straight through his chest, impaling him.
Merlin cries out, experiencing Sarrum's pain at that moment while the toll of Gilli's spellwork knocks Gilli unconscious, the horror frozen on his face as he tips into the grass.

Merlin races forward as Sarrum keels over, eyes wide with pain and confusion and Merlin doesn't bother with the spear, just puts his hand above where the spear sticks out of his chest and tries to sense the damage.

It's extensive. Even as Merlin feels the blood pulsing under his fingertips, the frantic beat of his heart, he knows that Sarrum's life is already slipping away. He clutches at Merlin's arm like a lifeline and the genuine fear on his face adds to the painting of horror it makes.

Lancelot and Arthur are shouting from somewhere far away and Merlin knows this man is going to die beside him because a scared Magic User lashed out and made a mistake. And that's not good enough.

Magic burns into his palms like hot irons and Merlin cauterizes the wound in his chest, directing Sarrum's blood flow to ease up as he takes the spear in hand. Merlin simply wills the weapon not to exist and it vanishes in the next second as if it never did, the place where it pierced Sarrum a wide, gaping hole.

He keeps Sarrum's heart pumping at a slower rate to reduce his blood loss, and lets his magic feel for the areas that need the most attention. His ribs are broken. His sternum cracked and shards of bone have disappeared into his lungs, puncturing one of them.

Merlin coaxes the bone back to itself, healing the holes in his lung until Sarrum can breathe again, mending the fractured and splintered bones slowly together until they reform. The pierced arteries close, those torn veins dangerously close to his heart heal and reform and darkness starts to form in the corner of Merlin's eyes.

Kilgharrah's shouts can be heard in the distance, but they slip past Merlin like a vague sensation.

He's used too much magic, bringing Sarrum back from the brink of death but Merlin gives what's left of it to close the hole in Sarrum's chest, muscle knitting back together as the layers of skin slowly reform, pink and raw and new.

Arthur's hand is at Merlin's back when the magic finally leaves him in a rush, and he crumples against him.

Unconscious.

Merlin wakes up in the dirt of the training arena, Gaius and Kilgharrah and two unfamiliar women surrounding Sarrum who's conscious.

And alive.

Merlin lets out a small sigh of relief and feels the arms around him tighten. Before he figures out that he's lying in someone's arms.

"He's awake," Arthur says urgently. "Gaius-!"

Gaius hurries over and immediately shoves some kind of weed into Merlin's mouth. "Chew on
"This," he instructs. "It will give you your strength back. You're going to be very weak over the next few days."

Merlin chews it until he can swallow the whole thing and it's not entirely terrible. "Sarrum, is he-?"

"He's alright," Gaius says grimly. "But what you did was beyond foolish, Merlin."

Kilgharrah joins them. "He's right. The use of such taxing magic could have very well killed you. You took a terrible risk, Merlin."

He's not sorry that he did it. Sarrum should never have been hurt, no matter what type of horrible Knight he is. He certainly didn't deserve to die for it.

"I didn't want him to die," Merlin says, stubbornly.

Kilgharrah glances back at the two women who are currently tending to Sarrum. Professor Aglain is standing by Gilli's unconscious form, waiting for him to awaken. "Do you understand how you did it?"

Merlin tries to sit up but fails to do so until Arthur actually assists him. "I found the worst of his injuries and I repaired them."

"You used extremely complicated magic," Kilgharrah says. "Magic that a graduate would not be capable of, let alone a first year."

He doesn't try to explain how he knew what to do. Merlin has a much higher affinity for magic than most Magic Users which would explain why Gilli is still unconscious and Merlin is already awake.

"Gilli didn't really intend to hurt anyone," he says, quick to defend his friend. "He was upset and he lashed out. I don't think that he meant for it to happen like this."

Merlin remembers the expression on his face before he fainted. No, Gilli didn't mean this. He only wanted to stand up for himself.

"Nevertheless," Kilgharrah says. "This incident means instant expulsion. His partner will have to be reassigned."

Merlin glances over at Lancelot who isn't sitting too far from them, red faced and sweating. He must have run to get help while Merlin stopped Sarrum from dying. He has a sudden, amazingly brilliant idea.

"Sir, Lancelot was Gilli's partner," he says. "But he's been in the forge lately to assist Elyan with his workload. Wouldn't it make more sense to increase his time there as the mandatory weekly six hours of cooperation? Everyone else has already been assigned a partner."

Lancelot's eyes widen at Merlin's suggestion and his expression is hopeful when he turns towards the Dean of Camelot. Kilgharrah thinks it over. "We do need more help in the forge," he admits. "Elyan has been working many diligent hours of late. I will consider it for now, but I make no guarantees."

Lancelot's mouth falls open in shock and Merlin rests his weight back against Arthur again. "I think I'd like to go home now," he says tiredly.

Kilgharrah glances at Gaius. "We need you here to monitor Sarrum and be certain Merlin's healing
magic was successful."

"I'll take him," Arthur offers unexpectedly. "I know the way."

Gaisu seems a little surprised by that but he doesn't ask questions, returning to the two women who have begun to levitate Sarrum out of the training area and into the Healer's Office. They should probably take him to hospital, Merlin's no expert.

Arthur lifts him to his feet but Merlin's too exhausted to walk on his own. That's not an issue because Arthur helps him, reaching out and carrying most of his weight like it's nothing.

Merlin slumps against him fully, barely capable of putting one foot in front of the other and lets his mind drift. They walk for hours it feels like but Arthur shakes him awake once they're outside his flat. Merlin has no idea how he got through the locked gate but he manages to produce his key from his bag and hand it over.

Arthur helps him inside and shuts the door behind them, quickly leading Merlin to his bedroom. He lays Merlin down on the bed, propping him up so he's in a seated position and Merlin feels hot pinpricks behind his eyes once he starts thinking about what happened.

"Merlin-" he tries.

"I didn't even know things had gotten so bad for him," he mutters, feeling pathetic. "I was supposed to be his mate. How did I not see this?"

Arthur sits down on the edge of his mattress.

"I don't think even Gilli knew what he was going to do. You can't blame yourself for his actions."

Merlin's not so sure that he believes that. There was something that he could have done. If he'd only noticed. If he'd paid attention to something other than Arthur Pendragon for a few minutes. "But I could have helped him."

"You did help him," Arthur insists. "You saved him from murder today, Merlin. You protected men who didn't even deserve your help. You brought a man back from death when he had no chance of survival. You were bloody amazing."

He flushes at the praise, struggling to understand the intensity in Arthur's eyes. "I'm too tired for a shag if that's what you're after," he mutters, annoyed that his heart is suddenly beating so quickly.

Arthur turns his face away so Merlin can't see his reaction, but he knows that he said the wrong thing. "Okay," he says, unsure of what else Arthur would be here for.

He doesn't mean to take care of Merlin now while he's like this does he?

"Do you want something to eat? A drink of water?"

Merlin realises he's parched and he could probably stand to eat. "Yes. Both I think."

Arthur reaches out and pats Merlin's shin like he's trying to comfort him and Merlin can't speak. He's still in shock, he thinks. Merlin can't believe that Gilli did any of this. That he's expelled now and Merlin might very well never see him again. What will his mum say about his expulsion? Merlin knows it wasn't easy for them to get Gilli into Camelot.
He doesn't have a scholarship like Merlin does.

Arthur comes back a little while later with a glass of water and a sandwich. Merlin barely has the strength to lift the drink to his mouth but he manages.

"Are you alright?" Arthur wonders a little anxiously. "You look-"

"I'm just thinking of Gilli and his family," he says after he's set the glass on his bedside table. "His mum worked so hard to get him into this school, to be able to afford it. And now-"

"There are other magic Universities, Merlin," Arthur says rather gently.

"But not in London," he protests. "Gilli will have to go elsewhere. How will they manage to pay-?"

"Gilli's lucky not to be in prison actually. You know what my father would have done if he were the Dean."

Merlin shudders.

"And Sarrum might press charges," he continues. "Gilli could very well get done with attempted murder."

Merlin tries to sit up and nearly falls face first into his sandwich. Arthur pushes his shoulder back into the pillows at the last second. "What are you doing?"

"I have to help him," Merlin says urgently.

Arthur pushes him down more forcefully. "You have already," he promises. "But he has to deal with the consequences of his own actions, Merlin. You can't do that for him."

Merlin hates to admit it, but Arthur is right.

He's done all he can. He's not a lawyer and he doesn't have the money to hire one. There's not much else he can do to help Gilli's situation except maybe appealing to Kilgharrah for help. He seemed fairly decided on the matter though when Merlin last saw him and there's no doubt Sarrum will want punishment for Gilli's attempt on his life.

The situation is grim. Merlin doesn't know what he can do to fix it.

"You're still thinking how you can help, aren't you?" Arthur says with an incredulous laugh. "I don't believe you. You save Gilli from murder, rescue a Knight from certain death and do Lancelot a great service sorting out his partner and it's still not enough."

Merlin feels like he should be offended that Arthur is laughing at him, but he can't work up the energy. Arthur becomes a little more serious. "Why did you help Lance?" he wonders. "Are you two-?"

He doesn't elaborate and Merlin's face scrunches up in bewilderment. "We're friends?" he says, not understanding. "He's been asking for my help with winning Elyan over."

Arthur looks startled. "Elyan? That magic bloke who runs the forge?"


Arthur actually collapses onto Merlin's bed with a snort, as if his response is unbelievable.
"Of course," he mutters with an odd lilt in his voice. "Lance fancies Gwen's brother."

"It's not that strange you know," Merlin insists. "The situation with Knights and Magic Users isn't great right now, but that doesn't mean they can't date."

Arthur rolls over and gives Merlin a significant look. "Trust me, I'm well aware."

What is he getting at? Is Arthur trying to date a Magic User? If he's getting serious with someone then he can't keep shagging Merlin at odd intervals, it wouldn't be right. Merlin is immediately pained by the thought. He's gotten used to whatever it is they're doing with each other. He's not quite ready to be finished with it just yet.

"So do you-?"

"Go on, eat up Merlin," Arthur says abruptly, turning his face away again. "You need your strength back though I doubt you'll make it to Campus tomorrow."

When Merlin feels like he's attempting to lift up a car rather than the carefully sliced sandwich half Arthur made, he has to admit that Arthur has a point. "I guess I'm stuck here all weekend then," he says with a sigh.

"I can keep you company," Arthur offers.

Merlin's too distracted by the rush of pleasure he feels at the words to answer. He doesn't mind spending time alone, but he's blind sighted by the fact that Arthur's willing to stick around. They don't usually do this.

"Won't you have classes tomorrow?"

Arthur folds his arms behind his head. "So I'll skip them. It's not a big deal, Merlin."

He doesn't bother arguing, but Merlin can't help but feel that it is.

Merlin gets tired after finishing off his sandwich and Arthur helps him change out of his clothes which Merlin didn't even notice were still covered in Sarrum's blood. He pulls the blankets back once Merlin is in sleep pants and kicks off his shoes before climbing in after him.

Merlin doesn't say anything when Arthur pushes up against his back, holding him in his arms and spooning him.

He's afraid if he does that Arthur might stop. They talk for a little while, but Merlin loses out to sleep eventually.

When he wakes up again the room is darker than it was before and someone is banging on the front door. It's colder too. Merlin shivers when Arthur drags himself out of the bed, taking his body heat with him and leaving Merlin with a frustrated groan.

He can hear the exchange of words when Arthur opens the door and recognises Gwen's worried tone.

"Gwen?" he says, struggling to sit up as she barges her way into his room.

"Oh thank the gods," she says at the sight of him, rushing forward and wrapping him up in a hug. "It's all over Campus what happened. They said you were injured in the fight and Gilli's expelled."

Arthur folds his arms behind her back. "More like he exhausted his magic trying to stop Sarrum"
from dying."

Gwen's eyes are wide when she pulls back to give Merlin some room. He's shivering a little now, and clears his throat, giving Arthur an expectant look and patting the bed again. Gwen glances between them in surprise but Arthur steps closer, climbing under the blankets again with a little smile on his face that Merlin might even call sweet.

He helps Merlin sit up a little straighter. Even if it means he's mostly leaning against Arthur's chest.

"What happened?" Gwen asks, seeing how weak Merlin is, face twisting up with concern.

Merlin doesn't think he can say it. But Arthur launches into the story without pause.

"Lancelot came to find us, said that Gilli missed their cooperation class with Talesin. Merlin had a bad feeling and said we had to find Cenred at once, so we ran over to the training grounds those Knights usually haunt in between classes just as Gilli used his magic to lift every weapon into the air in order to use them against Cenred, Sarrum and the rest of their gang."

Gwen lets out a little gasp of dread.

"Merlin used his magic to create a protective shield between the enchanted weapons and the men and tried to talk Gilli down. The magic proved to be too much for him and he launched the weapons in a last ditch effort before he collapsed. Merlin managed to protect the Knights from harm but Sarrum ran from the shield and was impaled by a metal spear."

Merlin flinches almost at the same time Gwen does.

"Merlin ran over to Sarrum and I sent Lancelot for help. When I finally reached him he'd removed the spear with magic and was trying to heal Sarrum's fatal injuries."

Gwen stares at him in amazement and Merlin can't help but notice the awe in Arthur's voice.

"He was in a trance I think, wouldn't respond to me or Kilgharrah when he finally arrived with Gaius. Merlin didn't stop until Sarrum was whole again. He re-knitted bone it was the most incredible display of magic I'd ever seen. And Merlin used up all his strength to do it. He passed out straight after."

It sounds more heroic the way Arthur is telling it, but Merlin knows that's not the case.

At first he'd assumed Gilli had been the one attacked. He cost precious time worrying about what the Knights had done to his friend when the Knights were the real ones in danger. His prejudice against the Knights almost cost them their lives. That doesn't sit well with him.

"I can't believe it," she says. "To think that Gilli-"

Merlin can't meet her eyes.

"I couldn't believe it either."

"He didn't want that," Arthur says confidently. "You should have seen his face after it happened. He was repulsed by the savagery of his own magic. I don't believe Gilli truly intended to kill anyone. He was just desperate."

There's an unexpected kindness in Arthur's voice, an understanding that Merlin might have
assumed was beyond him. Merlin's eyes burn with unshed tears for Gilli, for the other Magic Users who will be punished for this, for Sarrum. The violence of the day still sits in his stomach like a terrible ache.

"This is awful," Gwen says quietly.

"Yeah," Merlin has to agree.

"You're father was at Camelot," Gwen tells Arthur. "I think he was trying to find out exactly what happened so he could use it against Kilgharrah."

Arthur lets out an infuriated noise and tenses against Merlin. "I'd better go then," he admits. "Before he finds some way to put this all on Magic Users."

Merlin doesn't have the words to respond to that, he's so surprised. Since when is Arthur sticking up for Magic Users? As far as Merlin knows he hasn't really gone against his father before this. Why start now?

He leans in after he's put his shoes back on, and kisses Merlin on the mouth before he can figure out what's just happened. Merlin's flushing when he pulls away, feeling Gwen's eyes on them, and wonders why the thought of a brief peck can make him uncomfortable when they've shagged on pretty much every available surface on Campus and elsewhere, in every possible position.

Perhaps it's because this time they haven't shagged for once. Snogging without it leading anywhere is something Merlin isn't used to. He's surprised Arthur thought to do it as well. For a moment it felt awfully affectionate like they were a couple.

He manages a wave even as Arthur scoops up his bag and nods at Gwen before heading out and leaving through the front door.

"Well," Gwen says after he's left. "You two seem awfully comfortable."

Merlin's cheeks are still pink when he tries to burrow further into the blankets. "That's because we shag all the time."

She shakes her head almost disbelievingly. "That's not what I meant."

Merlin doesn't have any answers for her.

Before Gaius heads into Camelot on Friday, he warns Merlin that Kilgharrah has requested to speak to him. And he should be coming over to the flat around lunchtime.

Merlin doesn't know what to think about the Dean of the University showing up to his flat but it's not like he can turn him away. Thankfully Arthur hasn't arrived yet. Merlin doesn't know how he's supposed to have a serious conversation with Kilgharrah if Arthur is in his bed. Or even in his flat.

He's not at all prepared.

Merlin can hardly move around much even after he had a good night's rest. And from the headache he'd almost believe he was seriously hung over if he wasn't also as weak as a feather. It takes him almost twenty minutes to make it into the kitchen just to boil some tea.
When Kilgharrah finally arrives, Merlin is curled up in the living room but he doesn't have the strength or the speed to reach the front door.

"Come in," he calls. "It's unlocked."

Kilgharrah walks inside, his large orange eyes peering alertly about the place. He doesn't pause before he finds Merlin in the living room and sits down so surely that it's obvious he's been to Gaius' flat before.

"Merlin," he greets. "And how are you feeling today?"

Merlin struggles to shrug his shoulders. "Weak."

Kilgharrah passes a hand over him, and he feels the warmth of the Dean's magic. "Hmm well you haven't completely depleted yourself. You should be strong enough to return to Camelot on Monday."

Merlin doesn't smile. The thought doesn't exactly fill him with joy. Merlin doesn't even know what kind of Camelot he'll be returning to. "Gaius said you wanted to talk?"

"Ah yes," he says and Kilgharrah takes a seat opposite him and gets comfortable. "Sarrum has decided not to press any charges against Gilli Owen and has requested that the incident be kept private."

Merlin can't believe what he's hearing. "Hold on," he says. "Sarrum wants to keep it quiet? He doesn't want to tell anybody? What about Uther?"

Kilgharrah's eyes are sharp. "Oh so you've heard of his interest I suppose. No, Sarrum has requested the incident report be sealed and there be no additional backlash against Magic Users."

This has to be some strange kind of dream. Sarrum actually wanting to help Magic Users? Merlin is sure he's hallucinating. It doesn't make any sense at all. Merlin doesn't understand his change of heart.

"Why?" he asks, astonished.

Kilgharrah's mouth curves as if he's smiling. "I suspect it's entirely because of you, Merlin."

That doesn't sound right at all.

"What?"

"I believe that Sarrum considers himself to owe you a life debt for healing him so extensively. His perception of Magic Users has undergone a rapid change since yesterday."

And that's all it takes? Suddenly Sarrum is interested in the greater good of the University? Merlin really can't believe it.

"So that's it?" he wonders, doubtfully.

"No, I'm afraid not. The situation between Magic Users and Knights on Campus doesn't seem to be improving even with mandatory classes."

Fury curls up inside him.

"Then fix the institutional biases set in the foundations of how Camelot is run," Merlin snaps,
losing his temper. "Why are there only tournaments for Knights? If we're destined to work together after we graduate then why don't Magic Users and Knights share any classes? Why aren't Knights being taught to understand magic? Why aren't Magic Users being taught to fight with weapons? Why are Knights allowed to carry weapons on Campus but we need permission to use magic?"

Kilgharrah blinks, shocked by the vehemence in Merlin's voice.

"If you want us to work together then stop treating us differently. Stop allowing Knights to act like we're worse or less. The way you run the institution isn't working, so change it."

Merlin's breathing heavily by the time he's finished. Shouting takes up a lot of his energy apparently. Kilgharrah looks at him in bemusement.

"I see you've already given this some thought," he says. "Uther was quite forthcoming about how you voice your opinions so readily."

Suddenly Merlin realises that Uther must have made an attempt to have him expelled for what he said the other day. Kilgharrah seems to sense his unease. "I assure you, contributors to this University have no real say on the students who attend it. Nor do they have the power to remove students should they call important men like Uther Pendragon a prick."

Merlin colours and sinks down lower into the cushions at the way Kilgharrah raises a candid eyebrow. "But yes, Merlin I do believe I will consider what you've said today. In the meantime, I wish you well in your recovery."

He gets to his feet and Merlin can't even find it in himself to regret it. Even if Kilgharrah is the Dean of Camelot. And he knows that Merlin shouted at Uther Pendragon and called him a prick. But it doesn't seem that Kilgharrah is asking him to. He nods once, spinning smartly on his heel and lets himself out of the flat without another word.

Merlin finishes off his tea and waits around for Arthur to show up.

He doesn't come to the flat until at least four hours later, but Merlin's been keeping himself busy in the meantime. He catches up on his weekly readings, and even gets started on those for next week just to be organised. It's much easier to do when he physically can't move very far and he has Gaius' laptop to access the internet with.

He feels very productive when he finished. Then he falls asleep again. This time on the couch.

When he wakes up Arthur is in his living room and cupping the side of his face tenderly. "The door was unlocked," he explains before pulling away. "Sorry I didn't get here sooner. My father was at Camelot again today, trying to find out what happened with Sarrum and Gilli, I wasn't able to sneak away."

Merlin isn't complaining. Especially not when Arthur's brought over some DVDs and popcorn. While Arthur puts the film into Gaius' DVD player, Merlin shuffles into the kitchen to use the microwave.

Arthur arrives before the popcorn has finished popping, wrapping his arms around Merlin's waist and nuzzling his neck. "How are you feeling?"

Merlin groans sadly when his cock twitches a little but doesn't stir. He doesn't even have the energy for a shag. That's depressing.

"Like utter shite."
"Charming," Arthur snorts, amused as the microwave times out and Merlin opens it to drag out the bag full of popcorn.

Arthur lets him go while Merlin pulls out a bowl from the cupboard. He practically lifts Merlin into the air and takes him back to the couch and Merlin huffs out a laugh at least because he doesn't have to try and walk. He opens the packet once they've sat down, tipping the popcorn straight into the bowl as Arthur grabs the remote off the coffee table.

Pacific Rim starts playing a second later and Merlin settles in against Arthur's chest, bringing a handful of popcorn to his mouth.

Merlin can't begin to explain how nice it is just to sit there in each other's company.

And actually keep their clothes on for once.

The rest of the weekend goes by fairly slowly.

Arthur leaves when Gaius gets home and sneaks through Merlin's window afterward to spend the night. He goes home to get a change of clothes on Saturday but then he comes back so they end up spending the whole day together again.

It's strange to be around Arthur without having sex. But what's even stranger is how easy it is.

Arthur is surprisingly good company it seems. By Saturday afternoon, Merlin can feel his strength is gradually returning and he's finally decided it makes more sense to have Arthur's number if he's going to keep on sneaking into Merlin's room at odd hours.

When Merlin puts his mobile number into Arthur's phone though, Arthur's smirking nearly the entire time as if it's some kind of accomplishment. As if it's some great victory them being able to message one another now. Arthur's competitive edge is utterly bizarre sometimes but Merlin hands over his phone so Arthur can put his number down anyway.

Gaius returns from the market eventually, and Arthur takes that as his cue to go because he politely lets himself out after exchanging a few words with Gaius in the hall.

Merlin strains his ears to listen to their conversation but Arthur doesn't say anything incriminating. And Gaius doesn't ask him any questions about his presence in the flat after he leaves.

He's probably just assuming that Merlin is trying to cooperate with his assigned partner like he's meant to. Merlin doesn't bother to correct him. Not when Arthur is climbing into his bedroom window ten minutes later.

He leaves on Sunday, mentioning an assignment that he has to finish and Merlin receives a text from Morgana inquiring when their next magic lesson can be. He's not up to full strength yet, he can't even manage simple spells but Gaius bought more of those peculiar herbs and he can still teach her without a practical demonstration.

He invites her over to the flat tomorrow afternoon an hour after his last classes are finished, giving him enough time to shower and relax for a while. Because there's a very high chance he might be in trouble with her. Gwen hasn't mentioned talking to Morgana about enrolling in a magic course but he's certain that Morgana will let him know her feelings on the matter.
She is terrifying after all.

Merlin's actually worried about going back to Campus on Monday considering the recent events. But when the day finally comes around Camelot couldn't seem less affected. He knows that the students aren't exactly aware of the details of what happened, but Merlin expects to see the changes somehow.

Like a stain on the walls.

But Campus moves along like usual. The Knights are rude and obnoxious and the Magic Users simmer away at the regular injustice but put up with it because there's no better option. Merlin might curse the power of predictability if Kilgharrah didn't call an emergency University assembly during the morning for one o'clock that afternoon.

Gwen insists that they were already warned in an email on Sunday, but Merlin, who has a terrible habit of leaving his University emails unread, will just have to take her word for it.

It turns out Kilgharrah doesn't plan on keeping what happened with Sarrum and Gilli a secret for long. As soon as all the students have sat down in the amphitheatre, he gets straight into it.

"As I'm certain you are well aware a student was nearly killed on Campus last week," Kilgharrah says, voice echoing through the hushed silence. "The perpetrator has since been expelled but it is time that we address the real issues underlying this incident and previous incidents that have taken place before this at Camelot. As of today there will be significant changes in the coursework, student activities and general behaviour whilst on Campus."

Merlin exchanges looks with Gwen and Freya sitting on either side of him, but neither of them seem to have any guess of what Kilgharrah is about to reveal.

"The Knight's tournament at the end of the month has been cancelled."

The Magic Users erupt into whispers as the Knights protest loudly, some shouting, others booing the unexpected decision. Most of them have been in training for the next tournament since the first one ended. That's months of training wasted. Merlin knows that Arthur was excited for it.

"Silence," Kilgharrah booms over the noise. "The professors at Camelot have joined together to devise a new and inclusive activity which any student can participate in. The tournament will be postponed for an additional two months while these changes are implemented."

"What changes?" a Knight demands loudly.

"Knights cannot participate in tournaments now without a Magic User," Kilgharrah announces, and the silence is deafening. "And vice versa. The new challenges will include a magical component and triumph is only possible through teamwork."

The shock in the amphitheatre is palpable.

"Knights are no longer permitted to carry weapons outside of the designated training areas and any who do so will face immediate academic penalty. Fundamental magic courses are now required of every Knight and Magic Users must enrol in rudimentary Knight courses to fulfil their core requirements."

They have to do what? Merlin stares at Kilgharrah, mouth open.

"Students now cannot graduate without completing a minimum of two classes from their neighbour
departments. Certain allowances will be made for fourth years graduating this year. Your mandatory cooperation course is not included in this. Due to these changes the course fees for these units will be offered at a reduced rate until the end of this year."

Nobody says a word. Merlin wonders if he should have said something to Kilgharrah after all. These changes will be monumental. Merlin has to take two Knight courses now. How the bloody hell is he meant to pass Swordfighting101 without magic?

"Further details of these new requirements for graduation will be listed on the Universities website and we will be holding two information sessions further on in the week. Please direct any of your questions to the officials at these events. We will no longer increase the divide between Knights and Magic Users in Camelot. One day you will fight together to rid the world of evil magic. It's high time you started to learn how."

Kilgharrah strides out of the amphitheatre without another word, and then the students erupt around them. Merlin's in a state of shock. Whether the changes Kilgharrah has implemented will work however, only time will tell.

"We have to take Knight's classes," Freya says with horror.

Gwen winces a little. "They're not so bad," she promises. "Swordfighting101 is alright or I suppose you could take Hunting104, they teach you how to track prey in that class. It's a very helpful skill and it couldn't hurt to know how to fight with your fists."

Freya's expression seems to say it would hurt a lot. Merlin isn't too worried about it. He's confident in his abilities. And maybe learning how to physically fight isn't such a bad thing. It would be good to know how to defend himself in the event that he can't use magic. Plus Arthur can always show him a few moves.

Merlin's attention dissolves into imagining them wrestle, then picturing them naked while they wrestle and then he's all but useless for the next few minutes.

But what an idea.

He finds Arthur afterward. Or, more accurately Arthur finds him.

"Can you believe it?" he wonders, taking Merlin's arm and dragging him away from Freya and Gwen so that they can talk in private. "Guess we'll be spending even more time together."

Merlin finds it difficult to swallow for a second, but the thought doesn't bother him nearly enough as it should. "Yes, I reckon so."

Arthur leans in, hand propped up against the stone wall behind Merlin's head as he moves in close. "So what do you think? Reckon you'd enter the tournament with me?"

Of all the things Merlin could have expected him to say, that was not at all top of the list. "Oh," he says, startled. "I'm not sure."

"You should think about it," Arthur says keenly. "We'd be good together."

Merlin can't deny that when Arthur leans in to snog him, worming his hand into Merlin's trousers at the same time. It's barely been three days since they last fooled around but Merlin could swear it's been a century. And that he's probably not going to last long.

Arthur isn't bothered by it.
At the end of the day he finds Morgana outside Costa Coffee and they walk back to his flat together.

Merlin's nervous about what she's going to ask him, but it turns out Morgana has other things on her mind. "Arthur told me you were there the other day," she says. "He told me you saved a Knight, half killed yourself doing it."

That is not at all how it happened.

"Arthur's exaggerating," he says, cheeks heating.

"But still, I feel like what's happening at Camelot, the recent changes are somehow your influence," she continues. "Am I wrong about that?"

Morgana is getting very good at relying on her magic to sense things now. "I've always been-outspoken on what needs changing in Camelot. But I think I definitely gave Kilgharrah some things to think about."

"I told Gwen about my magic," Morgana blurts out, then flushes at the secret she's revealed.

"Oh." Gwen never said anything about it today. Which only goes to show how determined she must be to protect Morgana's secret. "She never mentioned it."

Morgana goes quiet for a little while, and Merlin can tell she's processing how that makes her feel. To know that Gwen can actually be trusted. "I was so scared," she admits. "I've never felt like this about anyone and I don't share these parts about myself. I don't know how I did it."

"Because you trust her," Merlin points out. "And you know what kind of person she is."

Morgana doesn't argue with him, but he suspects there's more to it than that. Some secrets, Morgana should be allowed to keep to herself. He won't push when it's clear she has no interest in talking about it.

"How do you feel about the new changes to your coursework?" he wonders. "You have to enrol in at least two Magic User courses now."

"I enrolled in Elemental101 last week," Morgana says. "With Gwen. But I suppose I'm just worried the professors might figure out I have magic."

"They can't force you to transfer if they do," Merlin says. "You can hide it from Uther."

Morgana doesn't seem so confident in that idea anymore. "I don't even know if it's worth it," she tells him. "Uther couldn't be a worse parent than what he is already."

Merlin doesn't want to frighten her, but that's not at all true. "He could. He could kick you out of home, cut you off, disown you entirely. Uther could definitely get worse."

That might have been a little too negative. Morgana shoots him an impatient look. "Are you always this cheerful, Merlin?" she wonders, scowling.

He shrugs. "When the situation depends on it."
They reach Gaius' flat and Merlin buzzes them in through the gate and they walk in together. He
riffles through his bag before procuring his keys and unlocking the door. Morgana strides in first,
already familiar with the place and Merlin follows her in.

She moves towards the living room to get set up and Merlin dumps his bag on the floor and heads
into the kitchen. "Tea?" he calls out as he checks the kettle is full of water and flicks it on to boil.

"Green please," she answers and Merlin sets about grabbing two mugs for the both of them and
fetching the tea bags out of the cupboard.

Once he's finished, he carries the hot mugs out and joins her. She's sitting cross legged on the floor
and has the incantation book he lent her open and spread out in front of her. Merlin sets her mug
right by her knee and sits opposite.

"I'm not up to scratch just yet so we'll have to take it easy today," he says. "If something goes
wrong I won't have the power to right it again."

"Want to try levitating things today then?" Morgana asks. "The worst I could do is drop a chair on
our heads."

Merlin grins. "Or put a hole through the wall."

Morgana isn't daunted by the thought and waves him away.

Levitating objects it is. If they mess up the living room too much Gaius can always put it to rights.
He's a Magic User too after all.

Merlin returns to the kitchen to fetch more mugs and lets Morgana start out trying to lift those first.
The spell isn't particularly hard, but it saps power to keep the object floating and Morgana can only
increase her endurance through practice.

On the third try she manages to levitate the empty mug though she can only hold it for about thirty
seconds. They keep going until Merlin has drained his tea completely and by then Morgana can
hold the mug aloft for ten minutes before she starts to flag.

She insists that she wants to try with the chair next and although Merlin knows it might be a bit
beyond her as yet, he can't say no in the face of her determination. He's in the middle of offering
advice on how to make the spell last longer just as she gets the slightly heavier object airborne
when there's somebody knocking at the front door.

He leaves Morgana with the chair she's currently lifting with her magic and goes to answer it. The
last person he's expecting to see is Arthur, who doesn't wait once he's seen him, grabbing the
material of Merlin's jumper and tugging him into his arms.

"Arthur!" he cries, loud enough that there's an enormous clatter as Morgana loses her concentration
and drops the chair with a loud clunk.

Arthur's expression is a little desperate when he tries to lean in and kiss him, but Merlin moves to
avoid it. "What are you doing here?" he demands. "You could have called first. I've got
company."

Arthur drops his hold of Merlin and steps back so quickly that Merlin stumbles against the
doorframe. "Of course. You've got company. What was I thinking?"

His voice sounds weird, strained and uncomfortable in a way that Merlin hasn't heard before. He
takes an automatic step forward in concern but that leaves Arthur’s line of sight open to the flat behind him.

And of Morgana who is sweating with exertion from the strain of magic, straightening her clothes and trying to appear unruffled. Arthur’s expression pales, hands curling into fists and if Merlin didn’t know better he might think he looks hurt.

“So you and Morgana,” he says. “You got coffee with her too, then?”

Merlin glances between them, seeing Morgana rolling her eyes as she stalks closer and then back at Arthur who looks kind of betrayed now actually.

“Coffee?” he repeats. “What on earth are you talking about?”

Arthur’s stepping back now and that’s the last thing Merlin wants him to do. “You never said… so I thought… should have known… right of course.”

Merlin’s totally unsettled by his behaviour but it’s not like he could have told Arthur about it anyway. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I wasn’t trying to keep it from you but it wasn’t any of my business.”

Arthur lets out an incredulous laugh. “None of your business?”

Morgana’s standing behind Merlin now, hands on her hips and already fed up with the conversation. “Oh, calm down, Arthur it’s nothing like that. Merlin’s been helping me with something.”

Arthur does not seem to like that answer. “Helping with what?”

“Er-“

“With getting control of my magic,” Morgana declares, unrepentantly.

Arthur scoffs disbelievingly before she loses her patience and sets the bushes in the flowerbed by the front door alight with a wave of her hand. “Fuck,” he cries, tripping over his feet to back away as his eyes widen in shock.

Merlin puts out the fire with a hard look that takes a lot out of him and catches Arthur’s arm before he stalks off. He and Morgana obviously need to talk. Arthur hesitates but doesn’t pull himself free, which Merlin takes as a good sign.

“Why don’t you come inside?”

Arthur allows Merlin to take his hand and lead him back into Gaius’ flat. Morgana heads back into the living room and makes herself comfortable in the meantime, looking surprisingly unconcerned for someone who's hidden her magic for so long.

Merlin goes to sit next to her but Arthur holds him back and drags him into the comfy armchair instead so that he’s practically in his lap. He flushes at the display, Morgana might have seen him coming out of Arthur’s bedroom weeks ago but that doesn’t mean he’s used to this kind of open parade.

Morgana scowls at Arthur. “Honestly, Merlin’s not a toy.”

“I know that,” Arthur splutters, but he snakes an arm around Merlin’s stomach all the same.
Morgana only raises an eyebrow. “Then why are you acting like you own him?”

Merlin can feel Arthur shifting uncomfortably at the accusation and this is not at all what they’re here to talk about.

“We’re getting off topic,” he mutters. “We’re here to talk about Morgana’s magic.”

“Right,” Arthur agrees, decisively. “How long have you-?”

“Since I was ten,” Morgana admits.

“The nightmares,” Arthur realises and Morgana seems just as surprised as Merlin is at how quickly Arthur puts it together.

“Yes,” she agrees, frowning. “That was my magic. Merlin thinks I have the qualities of a powerful seer.”

Arthur is idly stroking Merlin’s exposed hipbone with his thumb. “Then why haven’t you told father?”

Morgana actually cackles at that and Merlin tries not to look at him like he’s deranged. Is he actually serious right now?

“Tell Uther Pendragon that his daughter has magic? Are you mad?”

“He loves you,” Arthur insists, stubbornly. “He would understand.”

“Oh Arthur,” she says, sadly. “No, he wouldn’t. You know what he’s like. It’s why you haven’t told him about Merlin.”

“Whoa,” he protests. “We do not need to bring Merlin into this. Me and Arthur aren’t even dating.”

Morgana watches Merlin closely for a moment before her eyes slide over to Arthur deliberately. When he grimaces, Merlin thinks it’s because Arthur doesn’t want the reminder of any kind of serious commitment. Merlin ignores the twinge of irritation that brings out.

“Right. But you still see my point.”

“How are you meant to understand it if you aren’t even being taught by the right teachers? You’re not even a designated Magic User!”

Luckily for Morgana it's not likely that that might be a problem for very long. Especially if she's required to enrol in two Magic User classes now in order to graduate. She can learn without it being suspicious or raising any red flags.

“Merlin’s teaching me what he can,” Morgana says, untroubled. “And the rest I can figure out on my own. Not to mention those mandatory Magic User classes now.”

“But if you just told-“

“It’s not happening Arthur. Same as you’re never going to tell Uther you’re shagging a Magic User.”

Merlin tries to stand up but Arthur isn’t letting go. “Stop bringing me into this!” he mutters, swatting at Arthur’s hands to gain his freedom.
“What if I did?” Arthur wonders once Merlin has wriggled free and gathered the rest of the mugs before stepping into the kitchen to brew a fresh pot of tea for them all.

Maybe that will calm down some of the tension overflowing in the adjoining room.

“What?”

“I’ll tell Uther about Merlin if you tell him about your magic.”

Merlin almost breaks the mug he’s carrying. “Whoa, whoa-“

“Deal,” he hears Morgana say, ignoring him completely.

Merlin abandons the tea altogether and storms back into the living room. “I thought I said to leave me out of this!”

Arthur’s eyes travel up his body appreciatively and Merlin’s abruptly reminded of the reason Arthur came over unannounced. “It’s too late, Merlin, we shook on it.”

He scowls at them both but Morgana seems overly pleased by the outcome. Arthur is still watching him closely. “I’ll make it up to you,” he mutters, lowly, meaning unmistakable.

Morgana snorts and Merlin disappears back into the kitchen again to avoid the both of them with a sound of disgust. But it’s not like that’s going to help him in the long run. They’re in his flat after all.

Pendragons.

Arthur stays late when Morgana finally leaves and Merlin doesn’t even wait for the front door to snap shut behind her before he’s climbing back on top of Arthur’s lap.

His hair is soft between Merlin’s fingers when he cups the back of Arthur’s head and dips down to kiss him. Arthur’s hands slide up across his waist, drifting under his shirt to stroke the skin there and Merlin grips him tighter getting lost in the touch. His hands drop to Merlin’s thighs next and abruptly he’s hauling Merlin into the air, moving with the intent to carry him into the bedroom.

“Hurry up,” Merlin gasps, titling his chin.

Arthur kicks the door open with his boot and moves towards the bed before depositing Merlin on top of it. Merlin’s already fumbling with his zipper when Arthur’s finished toeing out of his shoes and clambers onto the edge of the mattress.

He catches Merlin’s ankles and drags him bodily down the bed towards him, so Arthur can crowd between his legs and start unbuttoning his shirt. Merlin lets him work, gazing up into his face.

“What?” Arthur says, getting his shirt open so Merlin can wriggle out of it.

“Er-“

“You’re staring, Merlin.”

Arthur yanks his shirt off next, twisting out of his pants until he’s left in underwear and socks.
Merlin snorts and draws his eyes away, tugs his jeans past his thighs instead, struggling until Arthur re...
Merlin rushes it a bit, but Arthur’s running out of patience as well and only rolls into the sensation when Merlin finally pushes his prick inside.

And it’s just like the world stops. The pleasure consumes everything so that the rest falls away, until Merlin’s suspended only in the moment. He might have never shagged someone else before but somehow he thinks if he ever did it would never quite be like this. There’s just something about Arthur. Merlin loses himself in it so easily, forgets his indignation at all the injustices surrounding his name, his title as a Knight, and as a Pendragon.

When it’s like this all of that suddenly doesn’t matter. Merlin couldn’t stop himself even if he tried. He grabs hold of Arthur’s hips and lets his body move instinctively, chasing the compulsion to fill Arthur up to the brim, to ram his prick deep and swim in the bliss of it.

Arthur clenches around him deliciously, encouraging each thrust with his body until Merlin is panting into the back of his neck, sweaty and flushed and on the precipice.

Merlin comes feverishly inside him, weak and coltish as he collapses on Arthur’s back, feeling him shudder through his own orgasm as he frantically pulls himself off. He’s disappointed only briefly, thinking of Arthur finishing in his mouth or across his fingers, but this was just as satisfying.

“It’s a bad idea to tell Uther about me,” he says suddenly. “Not after I already had that run in with him. Don’t- don’t tell him.”

Merlin pulls out and manages to roll to his side so Arthur can turn over and look at him. “I’m sorry, Merlin. I know you’re nervous, but I made a promise to Morgana and I have to fulfil that promise.”

Of all the times to be noble. Merlin gaps at him.

“It will be alright,” Arthur assures him. “Father will- adjust, I’m certain.”

The buzz of overflowing magic is gone now, and Merlin can suddenly see with clarity just how much of a terrible idea this is.

Afterwards, once Merlin has cleaned them both up, Arthur falls asleep. He’s tucked himself under the covers and nodded off straight into the pillow. They haven’t done this outside of that time when Merlin was weak from using too much magic. That had only been a special circumstance. Merlin doesn’t want to encourage Arthur into thinking they’re too comfortable just like Gwen said.

Merlin’s about to wake him up to boot him out before Gaius catches them but there’s something about the soft, unguarded expression on Arthur’s face that makes him pause.

He was upset about something before he showed up here tonight. Before he even knew about Morgana. Or her magic. Merlin never bothered to ask him what it was. Arthur’s eyelashes are longer than he remembers and his lips are still red from biting them so many times while Merlin shagged him.

There’s no point really, waking him now.

Merlin lets his eyes close.

It’s Friday night and Merlin’s finished his weekly readings and the first draft for his Incantation
essay due next month. He’s ahead of schedule so far so Merlin decides to take a break.

He’s barely brewed himself a cup of tea before there’s a knock at the door. Gaius is out tonight for a professor in his department’s birthday, and Gwen is out on a date with Morgana so it can’t be either of them.

Merlin feels a thrill of heat in his gut, thinking it’s Arthur. He sets his mug down and hurries forward, smiling already at the prospect of sex when he opens the door.

Except it’s not Arthur.

“Will,” Merlin says, shocked.

“Hey mate,” Will says, stepping forward to pull him into a tight hug, slapping him happily on the back. “Thought I’d surprise you. Your mum gave me the address.”

Merlin gets over his shock, laughing at his own surprise and hugging Will back just as enthusiastically. “Yeah, you definitely succeeded,” he agrees. “I had no idea! How long are you staying?”

Will lets him go and pushes past to inspect the rest of the flat. “Just for the rest of the weekend. I’ve got work Monday.”

“I can’t believe you’re here,” he says amazed. “How’ve you been?”

“Yeah, alright. Bored. It’s no fun not having my best mate around it turns out.”

Merlin grins at him.

“You got some space for me to crash?”

Oh. That could be a problem. Possibly. They only have the two bedrooms which already have occupants and a couch in the living room. “The couch is a bit lumpy and uncomfortable,” he admits. “But you can share my bed?”

Will only laughs. “No way I’m sleeping on the floor. We can budge up, share like we used to.”

“We were twelve then,” Merlin points out.

But Will shrugs, a teasing smile emerging on his face. “Yeah, and it’s not like you’ve grown much since that time anyway.”

“I’m bloody taller than you!” Merlin protests with a laugh.

“Yeah but it’s not like you’ve bulked up since.”

Fine. Merlin might concede that point. He’s still pretty lean. His mother always insists he’s skin and bones, but it’s hard to argue that when she feeds him so much and Merlin hasn't gained any weight. Muscle or otherwise. The result of a fast metabolism.

“Want some tea?” Merlin offers. “I’ve just boiled the kettle.”

“Having a slow night, are we?” Will teases, but follows Merlin into the kitchen anyway, setting his bag down by the fridge.

“I was studying,” he points out, as he fills another mug with hot water.
“You look good for someone who’s doing nothing but study magic,” Will observes. “I expected you to be paler. Well paler than usual.”

“Oh har har,” he mutters, pushing the mug towards Will.

“Actually you look really good,” Will continues suspiciously. “Just like you did after you first figured out wanking calms your magic down when it's getting outta hand.”

Merlin nearly spills tea all over himself. “What?” he sputters. “No-“

“Are you shagging someone?” Will declares delightedly. “That’s it innit? You’re getting off with some magic bloke.”

Merlin winces.

“No,” Will gaps, half laughing himself at the thought. “A knight. You’re shagging a Knight? After all those things you told me about them?”

That’s the problem with having a best friend he’s known since he was a kid, he can easily read everything on Merlin’s face. Might as well be a picture book.

“Maybe a little,” he admits, avoiding Will’s gaze.

“Good for you mate,” he says. “I know it was slim pickings in Ealdor. Matter fact it still is.”

“What happened to Hannah?”

Will gives that smile he always does when he’s pretending he’s not upset about something. “Oh, you know. She ran off with a mate from the factory. Good riddance I say.”

Oh, bloody hell. Merlin hadn’t liked her much, but he hadn’t thought she would do something like that. Will really liked her too. “Let’s go to the pub then,” he suggests. “Er- drown some sorrows.”

Will waves off the suggestion. “It’s fine. These sorrows have been well and truly drowned already. Plus it’s not that fun getting pissed if your mate is afraid he’ll set a barn on fire with his mind.”

“I put out the fire straight away,” Merlin hisses as if Mrs O’Flattery, the owner of said barn, is within earshot. “You know drinking messes with my-“

“Yeah, yeah,” Will says, grin spreading wider. “Let’s just grab dinner eh? I’m bloody starving.”

It’s not a bad idea. Merlin hasn’t eaten since lunchtime. He’d planned to stop for a bite after classes finished in the afternoon, but he’d come across Arthur first and gotten- distracted.

“You’re thinking about that bloke right now, aren’t you?” Will demands. “I can see it on your face, going all starry eyed. Does he have a monster cock or what?”

“Piss off,” Merlin mutters, embarrassed. “We’re just shagging. It’s nothing serious.”

Will snorts with laughter but doesn’t say more which is probably the most annoying thing he could possibly do. Merlin drinks his tea and tries not to think about singeing Will’s eyebrows off.

He’s done it before.

They head out to a nearby pub. One that isn't on Campus because Merlin thinks it would somehow be a terrible idea to introduce Will and Arthur to each other. Not when Will knows him so well and
Arthur knows him so \textit{intimately}.

That's a disaster in the making.

Will orders an ale while Merlin sticks with ginger beer. Will gets a steak with mashed potato and Merlin, who doesn't eat meat, asks for a vegetable pasty. The pub isn't very full with other patrons, so they're able to speak over the music and actually hear each other while they catch up on what the other has been doing in their time apart.

Will flirts openly with the waitress when she brings over their drinks and when she carries over their food. She smiles a little but as far as Merlin's concerned she's not interested. Will doesn't push any further either. Mostly because he's too busy eating.

Merlin regrets not checking in on him sooner. He's sure that things haven't been great for him. Losing Hannah to one of his work mates and his mum being sick again. Ever since his dad died, Will's been taking care of her, and Merlin knows it's hard to cover her medications with his paycheck.

Will might not admit it. But things have been hard. Merlin's happy to spend an evening getting reacquainted again.

He's Merlin's best mate after all.

They head back to his flat at around eleven. It's bloody cold outside and they move quickly since Will didn't think to bring a coat with him before they left.

Merlin lets him use the shower first because he's complaining about freezing his balls off, and once he's out, towel wrapped around his waist, Merlin grabs a fresh set of clothes and moves into the bathroom himself.

They chat a little bit about how things have been at Camelot once Merlin has climbed into bed, and he can tell that Will thinks the Knights are a bunch of arseholes once he's done ranting about them. But Will's solution to the Knight problem is typically more violent than Merlin would have suggested. But that's not especially surprising.

They handle things much differently that's all.

The conversation trails off naturally, since they're both warm and comfortable under the blankets and Merlin’s just starting to nod off to sleep when Will lets out a shout.

“Aaargh,” he yells, flailing in the bed so hard that he nearly punches Merlin in the gut. “What the-?”

“Who the hell are you?” demands a familiar voice.

Merlin summons an orb of light automatically, blinking away his confusion as he spots Arthur looming over the both of them in bed. He came through the bloody window again. They should probably start coordinating this better. Merlin’s got his mobile number now after all.

Arthur’s eyes trail over Merlin’s shirtlessness before resting on Will who’s also bare chested and seems to reach his own conclusions. “Right,” he says in a hard voice. “I’ll let myself out.”
But Merlin’s already scrambling over Will’s form, kneeling his thigh as he gets to his feet and stumbles into Arthur’s chest.

“Merlin,” Will says loudly. “Is this-?”

“Shut up,” Merlin hisses, glancing over at the wall he shares with Gaius. “The walls are thin, you’ll wake him up. Just give us a minute.”

Then he catches Arthur’s wrist and drags him out of the bedroom and straight into the bathroom, locking the door behind them. Arthur jerks his hand free and folds his arms rather intimidatingly.

Merlin has no idea what his expression means.

“Why didn’t you call first?” he demands, trying to keep his voice low.

“Because you never needed me to before,” Arthur says waspishly. “I didn’t realise there was a chance I’d be interrupting anything.”

“Well you did,” Merlin snaps back, unsure of why he’s so angry.

He’s the one who came over unannounced. It’s his own fault for assuming that Merlin wouldn’t be busy. Arthur’s face falls.

“I was just about to fall asleep,” Merlin continues, covering a yawn. “You nearly gave us a heart attack.”

“And who’s us?” Arthur wonders, strangely subdued all of a sudden.

“Will Davies,” he says. “And he came all the way from Ealdor to see me so you’re gonna have to leave. Best mate before the bloke I’m shagging and all that.”

Arthur raises an eyebrow at him. “Will is your mate?”

“My best mate,” Merlin corrects. “And his girlfriend just dumped him, so I’ve been trying to cheer him up. And a random bloke feeling him up in the middle of the night isn’t quite how you do it.”

“I thought it was you,” Arthur protests. “How was I to know you’d have your friend over?”

“If you’d texted me-“

“Oh bloody alright then, Merlin,” Arthur mutters, and crowds him up against the wall, kissing him full on the mouth.

The conversation is forgotten for a little while until Arthur’s kneeling down on the tiles and dragging off Merlin’s pyjamas.

“What?” he hisses, embarrassed. “You want to- here?”

But Arthur merely smirks at him whilst getting a hand around his prick. “Well I came all this way, didn’t I?”

Merlin’s already thickening up in his palm. He’s not really going to let Arthur suck him off behind the closed door of the bathroom while Will is barely two doors down, is he? But Merlin is already bracing his hands onto the sink to keep himself upright so he won’t lose balance and apparently he is.

“Bloody get on with it then,” he mutters, red faced.
Arthur grins, still on his knees and looking every bit like all Merlin wants in life before he draws Merlin's cock into his mouth. He's so good at this. Merlin's speechless as he reaches out to steady himself on the towel rack as well as the sink, gripping the edges of both tight like he's worried he's about to fall over.

When Arthur opens his throat and swallows Merlin down entirely, he's absolutely certain that he will.

"Oh gods Arthur," he whispers, trying to bite his lip.

Merlin's not used to having to be quiet and Arthur seems to be doing his best to make him fail at it. The towel rack rattles a little under his hands and Merlin has to squeeze his eyes shut because the sight of Arthur's lips wrapped around his cock does his head in.

"I reckon you're doing that- on purpose," he pants, when Arthur hums around him, sending sweet little vibrations along his prick.

Merlin has no chance of lasting. "Arthur-Arthur, I'm-"

He comes before Arthur pulls away, but it's clear he never intended to when he swallows and swallows, taking all of Merlin's come at once. He slumps against the wall afterwards, fingers gripping the sink edge and the towel rack so tightly they've cramped up. Arthur gets to his feet with a snicker and has to help Merlin unlock his fingers.

Once he's free, he pulls his pyjama pants back up, flushed and overheated. But when he reaches out to return the favour, grazing the material of Arthur's jeans, he pulls away from the touch.

"Arthur-" he starts, confused why he's suddenly not interested in an orgasm.

"Seems only fair," Arthur shrugs. "Since I felt up your best mate."

Merlin snorts at that but doesn't press the matter. When it looks like Arthur's going toward the door and heading out of the flat Merlin takes a step to catch him. "Don't go," he protests, dragging Arthur back in when he pulls away.

Arthur grins a little smugly and kisses him again, fast and hot. "We can't all three fit in your little bed, Merlin."

And alright maybe he has a point.

"See you round," he says, kissing his mouth. "I'll text next time."

Merlin laughs but he highly doubts it. They head out of the bathroom together, checking Gaius hasn't wandered out of his bedroom before Merlin leads Arthur towards the front door.

He unlocks it as quietly as he can and Arthur slips nimbly through the crack in the door and out into the night. Merlin catches at his jumper and drags him back in for another kiss. Arthur looks immensely pleased when he pulls away.

"Goodnight, Merlin," he says.

"Night."

Merlin watches until Arthur's disappeared out of the security gate before he shuts the door and locks it again. Smiling to himself, he sneaks back towards his bedroom thinking of everything else
they could have gotten up to if Will wasn't here.

But he doesn't regret having his best mate around. Even if he might have unintentionally cockblocked him.

Merlin returns back to his bed soon enough, still flushed and relaxed from the rush of a good orgasm. Will is sitting up when he enters the room and Merlin’s orb of light is still hovering above the bed, illuminating his face oddly.

“That was him, right?” he demands, quietly. “The Knight?”

Merlin only manages a peaceful nod.

Will’s eyebrows climb a little higher. “He sucked you off just now, didn’t he?” he realises. “You cheeky bastard.”

Merlin climbs into bed again and turns to face the wall with a tired and contented sigh. It’s really a pity that Arthur couldn’t stay. Merlin wasn’t quite finished with him yet.


“Yeah,” Merlin admits quietly after a beat. “Yeah, that’s the one.”

“Bollocks. You sure know how to pick them, mate.”

Merlin frowns, but doesn't argue.

They've barely finished their mandatory cooperation class with Talesin before Arthur's dragged him off so they can fool around in private.

“The things I’m going to do to you,” Arthur pants, gripping the back of Merlin’s neck as he nudges him up against the stone wall.

Merlin doesn’t get the chance to ask Arthur for more details because he’s slanting his mouth down onto Merlin’s, tongue hot and insistently pushing into his mouth.

Arthur’s snogging the hell out of him before long, sliding a thigh between Merlin’s legs as his hands disappear into Arthur’s golden strands of hair, gripping him tight and hearing him groan. Gods, he's never going to let go.

Merlin sighs into the pressure of Arthur’s muscled leg pressing up against his prick as it hardens and he really wishes they’d skipped out on class earlier in order to head back to Merlin’s flat and take this further. Will stayed over and kept him busy all weekend. Merlin wasn't able to organise any time with Arthur.

Short stints like this without sex tend to make them more desperate for each other.

“Arthur?” a man’s voice demands, shocked and appalled and Arthur goes rigid under Merlin’s hands.

Merlin’s been knocked over the head by his own arousal, so when Arthur wrenches away to answer the man who called out to him, it takes Merlin a little longer to recognise why Arthur's so stiff.
It’s Uther Pendragon.

Oh buggering fuck. Merlin’s lips are swollen, achy and hot as he gasps, and when Uther’s eyes roll over onto him, and then widen with recognition, he realises that things are about to get much worse.

“Father,” Arthur says quickly, sensing the danger. “I can explain–”

“You!” Uther splutters, pointing at Merlin’s chest. “You- and my son-”

“We’re not getting married if that’s what you’re asking,” Merlin mutters dryly, trying to appear nonchalant while ignoring the flush on his skin.


“Yeah, you’re right,” he agrees. “I get to walk away, but you’re the one stuck with that tosser.”

Uther takes a step forward, violence in his eyes but a group of students happen to pass by where they're standing, pausing to watch the exchange curiously. They seem to sense there's some kind of commotion, but Uther spots them and straightens his spine, adjusting his appearance to look unruffled.

"We will discuss this at home,” Uther warns, words layered with danger and Merlin can almost see the exact moment Arthur's shoulders tense.

This is not good at all. And Uther Pendragon strides away without another word.

"It's alright," Merlin says quickly. "Just tell him all we're doing is shagging. That I mean next to nothing to you. It'll be fine."

Arthur can't even look at him. "I can't," he says miserably.

Merlin's gut twists anxiously. "Yes, you can," he insists. "It's simple."

Arthur laughs then, long and hard as if he can't even begin to understand the irony of the situation. Merlin thinks he's lost his mind.

“You know,” he says. "For someone so bloody clever it’s sure escaped your notice that I’m in love with you.”

Merlin's heart stops beating entirely. Then he laughs. When Arthur's expression doesn't lose any of its intensity though the laughter dries up. Oh gods, Arthur is serious.

"What?" he demands, shocked.

But then Arthur doesn't speak again. Doesn't even try to take the words back. He can't love Merlin. All they do is have sex. They don't do anything else- well perhaps that's not entirely true.

How did Merlin not notice that that had changed?

“Yeah, that’s right," Arthur agrees wryly. "Here I am losing my mind over you and you have no bloody idea."

Merlin can’t speak. What is he supposed to say to that? He's never been bloody in love before! How would Merlin even know the difference? What does Arthur want him to say? Merlin doesn't think he could speak even if he tried.
When he doesn't say anything, Arthur finally meets his eyes. Whatever he sees there mustn't be enough because he says, “I think we should end it.”

Merlin flinches. It feels like the world just tilted sideways.

"Why?"

Arthur gives him an incredulous look. "I’m not going to keep shagging someone who doesn’t see me as anything but a great lay.”

That's-that's- Merlin's angry all of a sudden. And he reckons he's angry enough to say something stupid. “And the people before me, who you shagged and moved on from? What? This is just you getting a taste of your own medicine?”

Arthur takes a step back from him as if Merlin lashed out with his magic. “Well I certainly know what it feels like now.”

No, no, no, no. This can't be happening. Merlin never wanted this. “I didn't even know you,” he hisses. “I never promised you anything. But what, you've just decided I owe you my feelings now?”

“No,” Arthur protests, voice rising. “But I’m done pretending I don’t have them. For you. I want something more than what we've been doing. I want you to think on that and figure out whether you want the same.”

“I know what I want,” Merlin snaps, hurt and hurtful and striking out in any way he can. “A shag that doesn’t mean anything.”

Arthur’s face hardens as he closes himself off from the conversation. “Then I guess that’s it, isn’t it? We want different things. I won’t come round anymore.”

That's it? Months of shagging and that's all Arthur can say? Merlin's never punched anyone before but he thinks that he's about to. But then Arthur swallows heavily like he's fighting off his own emotions and Merlin can't do it. He can't hurt him, no matter how badly this is already tearing him apart.

"Goodbye Merlin.”

And then Arthur's stepping away, hiding the emotion in his eyes and that’s not what Merlin wanted at all.

He knew this couldn't last, he's always been aware of that fact. Arthur's too fit, too charming, too brave and competent to be satisfied with this forever.

But Merlin never thought it would end like this.
And my aim is steady and true as it's been right from the start

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Little Hell by City and Colour

also me @ past me for saying I could wrap this all up in 6 chapters: why you always lyyying?

Merlin’s not bothered by it. He’s not bothered at all. Of course it would come to this eventually.

You can’t keep shagging people casually forever. Something was bound to change. Someone always loses interest or meets someone else. Merlin doesn’t even know really why he’s surprised at all.

Why should he be surprised? Besides the fact that Arthur declared passionate love for him. Merlin hadn’t anticipated that.

How did he not know that Arthur’s feelings had changed? Was it when Merlin let him spend the night? Or after they’d gotten each other off for the millionth time? When did Arthur start to think it was love?

It’s a sad state of affairs that Merlin can’t relate to the words at all. He’s never even had a serious relationship. And he’s certainly never been in love. Merlin wouldn’t know what that even felt like. He wouldn’t even be able to put it into words.

So why lie and say he felt the same as Arthur just so they can keep shagging? Merlin knows he’s probably unintentionally caused Arthur pain with his unrequited feelings, but he doesn’t want to make things worse. The situation has changed between them now, and Merlin can't be selfish about this.

Of course he doesn’t want to make things worse for Arthur. He may put his foot in his mouth on occasion, but Arthur’s not a bad person. He’s certainly a better Knight than the rest. He doesn’t deserve to be treated like this.

So of course Merlin will back off and leave him alone as requested. Sex with Arthur isn’t everything. Merlin can live without it. Certainly he’ll be sexually frustrated for a while through the adjustment period but that’s survivable.

He skips the rest of his classes for the day, walking back to the flat in a daze and wishing there was more he’d said during their last conversation. Why didn’t he ask Arthur when exactly he’d figured out that he was in love? Or what it felt like? Or how it even happened?

Merlin had been taken by surprise so much that he hardly said a thing. There’s so much more that they should have spoken about. But it’s done now.

He runs into Freya on the path and he’s so distracted that he looks straight through her.

“Merlin,” she says, smiling at him before figuring out that something is wrong. “What is it?”
“Arthur,” he says almost immediately. “He and I- er split up.”

Freya blinks at him before her face swells with pity. “Oh.”

“But we weren’t together,” Merlin says quickly. “We’re just- finished. I don’t-“

“It will be okay,” she insists, reaching out to touch his arm, eyes wide and sincere but Merlin can’t handle any comfort right now. “You’ll be okay-“

“I’m not upset,” he says sharply, voice breaking. “It was just sex.”

Freya looks at him carefully but doesn’t contradict him. “Alright.”

Merlin feels smothered all of a sudden even as they’re standing outside in the open air. “I’m- I think I’ll go home,” he says. “Bye Freya.”

She says something else but Merlin’s already hurrying off. He’s in a daze for the rest of it, only realises how far he’s come when he stops at the locked gate in front of the flat.

He’s so distracted that the spell he usually uses to open it doesn’t work. Merlin puts the code in manually with a sigh and starts fumbling for his keys. Once he’s home, he goes straight for the bedroom, doesn’t stop in the kitchen to make tea like he always does.

Merlin doesn’t feel like tea right now.

He’s not exactly cold but he dumps his bag in the corner, slips his shoes off and crawls straight into bed. The book he was in the middle of reading sits at the foot of his mattress, on the side Arthur usually sleeps on but he doesn’t feel like reading. Bloody hell, Merlin thinks Arthur has a side of his bed now.

This is a disaster. He doesn’t know what to do with himself.

Merlin has a lot of friends. Many of which would want to help him feel better about the situation. But right now Merlin can’t seem to find it in himself to give any of them a call. He has a Healing and Restorative Magic essay due on Sunday, which is already half finished and Merlin should probably be spending the time now completing it, but he doesn’t.

What is he supposed to do now that he an Arthur aren’t shagging? They share two classes. Merlin is his assigned partner. Things are bound to be uncomfortable. Merlin doesn’t know how to be around Arthur without having sex. How are they meant to act now? And when Arthur finds someone else?

Merlin knows that he can’t handle it. Not right now at least.

Suddenly it’s a good thing the Easter holidays start next week and he’ll be returning to Ealdor for two weeks during the time off. Beforehand, he’d worried how he’d survive so long without regularly shagging Arthur. Merlin had even been considering inviting him home to visit.

He’d been willing to endure the embarrassment that his mother would have unleashed upon them if it meant they could keep shagging. Maybe even do it in Merlin’s bed. But now. Now going back to Ealdor will be just what he needs. Some time to get away from it all.

To get away from Arthur.

Merlin sighs and reaches out for his headphones. He puts on one of the slower, more acoustic, and
mournful sounding playlists and tries to shut his eyes for a while, ignoring the inexplicable feeling of being trapped inside his own skull.

Gwen knocks on his door once it gets dark. Merlin lets her in and automatically goes about making tea while she gets comfortable in the living room.

“Are you okay?” she asks almost immediately. “Freya told me what happened.”

“He said he’s in love with me,” Merlin blurts out, flushing heavily as he sets the two mugs down on the coffee table. “That he wants more.”

Gwen accepts her mug. “And you don’t?”

Merlin’s cheeks feel hot. “He’s a Knight,” he says almost instinctively. “And- I don’t even know how to be in love. I’ve never even been in a relationship.”

“Well love doesn’t look or feel the same for everyone,” Gwen points out. “And Arthur can’t be upset if you don’t feel the same.”

Merlin feels like he’s swallowed something unpleasant. Maybe it’s still too soon to be talking about this. Merlin's still kind of raw.

“Right. Yes, of course. Because I don’t. Obviously.”

Gwen narrows her eyes at him. “Are you sure that you don’t?”

Merlin groans and collapses on the couch next to her. “It’s just sex, Gwen. Really brilliant sex, but that’s it.”

They're quiet for a while. Merlin drinks his tea in silence and tries not to feel too sorry for himself but it's a hard task. He's upset that this didn't work out how he'd planned. Not that he'd really planned anything in the beginning. Things had just sort of happened.

But of all the people to start shagging, Merlin would hardly have predicted that Arthur Pendragon would be the one to develop feelings for him. Merlin had been counting on the fact that things would never be serious between them.

“Morgana is throwing a party this Saturday at her house. She invited you.”


Gwen isn't as disturbed by the idea as he is. “Arthur has plans with Gwaine and Uther is out of the country then. Morgana checked. Come on Merlin, she wouldn’t set you up.”

He doesn’t exactly believe that. Morgana might have a complicated relationship with her brother, but he doesn’t doubt that she has his best interests at heart. Morgana loves Arthur. Merlin’s merely useful to her right now, they’re not exactly best mates. And considering the new changes in Camelot, he won't be useful to her for much longer.

Even if he is friends with her girlfriend.

“I don’t know,” he says. “Being back there. After- I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Morgana’s inviting lots of fit blokes,” Gwen adds, and she's clearly trying to tempt him into turning up at the party now. As if random fit blokes will just do it for him. “You can find someone
else to shag.”

Merlin opens his mouth to protest angrily at the words before he catches himself. “Oh,” he says uncomfortably. “Yes, someone else.”

What a horrible idea.

“I’ll think about it.”

Gwen nods, as if that’s all she could have hoped for and finally drops it. Thankfully, she stays around for the rest of the night. Gwen even joins Merlin and Gaius for dinner. They end up in front of the TV watching Pride & Prejudice with Keira Knightley afterwards. Gaius falls asleep on the couch opposite them almost as soon as Lizzie has met Mr Darcy. He's had a very busy week.

Merlin doesn’t even realise that he’s tearing up at the scene after the church in the rain until Gwen points it out. It's not even a sad moment really more sexually charged with Darcy and Elizabeth's frustration and attraction, but somehow he loses it.

“Oh goodness, Merlin,” Gwen says, aghast. “You’re crying!”

Surprised, he reaches up and touches his cheek. And his fingers come away wet. “Oh, you know,” he says, floundering and embarrassed by his reaction. “I just really love this part.”

Gwen raises an eyebrow and doesn’t challenge him on it. But she does throw an arm around him and pull him into her side so that she can rub his shoulder comfortingly for the rest of the film. Merlin’s grateful for that at least.

When she finally goes home, he showers and goes off to bed. And Merlin tries his best not to think about Arthur.

He sleeps badly.

Gilli shows up at the flat the next afternoon just as Merlin is about to buzz himself in through the main gate.

Merlin's surprised to see him even if he looks much better. He'd been so pale after all the power he'd used against those Knights. The magical strain definitely took its toll on him even if it wasn't to the same degree as Merlin's did.

"Gilli," he breathes, pulling him into a hug, shocked and relieved to see him. "How are you?"

Gilli is a little stiff in his arms but Merlin chalks that down to the last time they interacted with each other. Merlin didn't enjoy using his magic against a fellow friend, but it had to be done. And Sarrum would be dead now if he hadn't.

“I want to thank you for everything you did for me,” Gilli says and Merlin unlocks the front door and leads them into the living room, leaving Gilli to get comfortable on the couch while he goes into the kitchen to make tea.

It takes a little longer since he doesn't use magic and Gilli doesn't make any comments on that when Merlin finally returns and passes the mug of tea towards him.
“I didn’t do anything,” Merlin says, uncomfortably. “Not nearly enough.”

Gilli can only manage a small, hesitant smile. “I know you might not think so well of me anymore but I swear Merlin, I never wanted to kill anyone. I just wanted them to take magic seriously. To see what I could do. To stop laughing at me.”

Merlin completely understands that. How many times has he wished that Knights would take him seriously? But Gilli let that frustration get out of control, to an extreme where it consumed him completely.

"I know where you're coming from, mate," he says. "But you used magic against me. Not them."

Gilli looks miserable and Merlin doesn't want to make him feel worse for what happened. It's done. It's in the past now and they have to move forward whichever way that they can.

“I’m so sorry. I could’ve killed you.”

“I’m still your friend,” Merlin promises, nudging at his shoulder gently. “I know you didn’t mean-things just got out of hand. How are you though? What are you going to do now that-?”

“I got a scholarship,” Gilli says quietly. "To a school down in Salisbury. Near Stonehenge. I want to do better, be more like you, actually. I really hope we’re still friends.”

“We are,” Merlin assures him. “We’re still friends.”

Gilli sips from his cup absently and Merlin thinks that's not the only reason that he came to visit him today. "I guess," he tries. "I guess I just wanted to know if you think of me like those blokes at the pub did."

Merlin frowns. "What blokes?"

He doesn't answer straight away and Merlin waits while Gilli sets the mug of tea down on the coffee table. "A few nights ago, barely a day or so after it happened and I'd been expelled and had no idea what I was going to do, I was working the bar when these two blokes came up to me." That seems a little strange.

"Who were they?" he asks. "Did you know them?"

"No," Gilli says, with an odd expression on his face. "I'd never seen them before. But they knew me. I think- well it felt like they'd tracked me down actually."

Merlin raises an eyebrow.

"And they knew about what happened, with the Knights."

Alright that's certainly not on. "How?" Merlin demands. "Kilgharrah kept it quiet on Campus. They shouldn't have known unless they were there."

Gilli shifts uncomfortably.

"They knew," he says. "And they wanted me to come and join them. They offered me a place in their group, said I could get anything I ever wanted."

Merlin's liking the sound of this less and less.
"But I don't think their magic was good, Merlin," he admits after a bit. "I think there was something- something wrong with it."

"Gilli," he says slowly. "Do you think they could have been evil magic users?"

The thought doesn't shock him and Merlin thinks that Gilli reached his own conclusions about this strange encounter a while ago. "Yeah," he says. "I think they were."

"Bloody hell," Merlin mutters, anxious at the thought of evil magic just roaming around London. The news always makes it seem so far away. So removed from everyday life. But that's not entirely true is it?

"They assumed that I'd meant to do what I did," Gilli continues. "To those other Knights I mean. They talked to me like I enjoyed it."

Merlin reaches out and takes Gilli's hand. "They were wrong, okay?" he says. "They were wrong about you, Gilli, and you know it."

He nods, but Merlin has the feeling that Gilli just wanted to hear it from someone else. "Yeah," he agrees. "I told them no. I said that's not the kind of magic I'm interested in. They left after that."

"That was really brave," Merlin tells him. "I'm proud of you."

Gilli ducks his head a little like he always does when someone else praises him. "Thanks, Merlin," he says. "I visited Sarrum too. He let me see him at the hospital. We talked for a bit."

Merlin's surprised at Sarrum. He wouldn't have expected that. Especially after what Gilli almost did.

"Really?"

"He doesn't hate me or anything," Gilli says. "In fact, he said what happened has made him reassess a few things."

Yes, Merlin heard the same. What Sarrum is reassessing though is really anyone's guess.

"That was good of you," he says. "I know how hard it is to accept the consequences of your actions sometimes."

Gilli nods and they fall into companionable silence for a little while. "I'm really going to miss you, you know," he says abruptly.

Merlin's sad to lose another friend in so many days. First Will again. Then Arthur and now Gilli. "I'll miss you too. But I’m sure our paths will cross again."

Gilli seems to like the sound of that.

"Yes," he agrees. "I suppose they will."

Merlin manages to avoid Arthur for the rest of the week, though it’s impossible during his Elemental magic and mandatory cooperation classes.
He doesn’t know what he should say to Arthur anyway, and he’s saved the chance when Arthur immediately sits at the back with Morgana during their Elemental lecture and doesn’t look over at him once.

Merlin finds Freya in the middle rows and Gwen joins them a little later and he has to keep reminding himself that turning around to look at Arthur in the theatre will be too obvious. It’s a miracle he manages to resist at all, though his insides are churning uncomfortably the whole time. He’s not looking forward to their mandatory cooperation class where he and Arthur will actually be forced to interact with each other.

He’s thought about telling Gaius that they were together before it all fell apart, but he can’t bear to admit that Arthur Pendragon was the bloke he was shagging all over Campus. Even if practically all of Camelot seems to know already.

He could probably get the professors to switch who he’s assigned to if he wanted. But that would mean admitting there was actually something between them to classify as a break up besides just sex and Merlin doesn’t think he’s ready to address that. Even if he knows he’s unhappy without Arthur.

Merlin’s fairly confident that he’s been a bit of a fool over this whole thing. He doesn’t think he can fix it though. Some things magic can’t help with. And that’s how Merlin solves nearly all of his problems. He doesn’t know how to without magic. It’s everything to him. Just like being a warrior is everything to Arthur.

If he and Arthur sat down and talked about their feelings- but the issue there is that Merlin doesn’t even know what he feels. And he doesn’t want to waste Arthur’s time with false promises. It doesn’t help much either that Arthur’s walking around Campus without a care in the world, laughing and carrying on like nothing happened.

How is Merlin supposed to think approaching Arthur about his feelings is worth it after seeing him like that?

Arthur doesn’t even look upset. Perhaps he wasn’t as invested as he said. Maybe he doesn’t love Merlin after all. Maybe he lied just to end things between them. He must have known that was how Merlin was going to react to the prospect of a deeper emotional connection. Why else would he admit to loving Merlin in the first place?

He can’t say that anything makes sense right now. Because it doesn’t. And what's worse is that he can't even rely on magic to address his problems anymore since it seems like something is wrong.

Suddenly he’s mixing up simple spells, making obvious mistakes, and even if he gets the formula right, his magic doesn’t seem interested in following through. He knows that his Professors have noticed the change in his spellwork, but only Gaius has managed to bring it up so far.

Merlin was so flustered about it that he lied and said he hasn’t been sleeping well. Which might be partially true. Ever since their last conversation, Merlin can’t seem to stop thinking about it. What they said. What he should have said instead of what spilled out of his mouth.

He can’t stop picturing where everything went wrong, where he went wrong. His brain really is working too much for him to fall asleep at night.

Merlin honestly can’t stop thinking about it. And he's aware that he's obsessing over the situation, but he can't seem to stop. He wishes he could just switch it off, but it’s not that simple. And with his magic on the fritz, the rest of the week is especially terrible anyway. Even with Gwen, Freya,
Morgana and surprisingly some of the Knights trying to cheer him up.

Lancelot is disarmingly funny it turns out. He makes Merlin laugh a few times now whenever their paths cross at Camelot. And they usually cross when he's with Elyan, who seems more taken with his new partner than Merlin is.

He knows he mustn’t be much fun to be around right now but Merlin can’t stop worrying about being stuck in a classroom with Arthur again. When the day finally comes for their mandatory cooperation class, Merlin’s nearly wildly alert when he walks into the room and Arthur is sitting in his usual seat.

“Er- hello,” Merlin tries once he’s sat down next to him and put his bag on the floor.

Arthur doesn’t even turn to look at him, and Merlin feels like a fool for trying.

“Merlin,” he says politely and then doesn’t say anything else.

He’s fuming before he really understands why. It’s not like he can be angry that Arthur wanted a relationship and Merlin couldn’t handle it. Rationally he knows that, but Merlin’s furious at how Arthur's behaving anyway. Why did he even bother trying to talk to him? He’s just making it worse for himself.

Arthur doesn’t really want him.

“Today we will be using both magic and physical hunting and tracking abilities,” Talesin declares once the rest of the class has arrived. “The task in question will be for Magic Users to use their senses to locate an object that has been spelled to call out only to them.”

Merlin feels his stomach drop. Right now he doesn’t trust that his magic might be capable of such a thing. Not when it’s been so weak ever since their fight. Nervously, he glances over at Arthur, but he’s not remotely worried by the idea of having to work together.

“One the object has been located on Campus it cannot be retrieved with magic, only with physical aptitude and strength, which is where a Knight’s talents are necessary for success. Without both partners working together you will be unable to find the object or retrieve it.”

This does not sound like it will go well at all.

“You will be given an hour, the duration of this lesson, to search across Campus to find your allocated object. You may leave your things in this room until you return. Start as you wish.”

Arthur stands up so quickly that his chair scrapes on the floor. The rest of the classroom is already hurrying out the door.

Merlin can feel a hum in the air but he’s not sure if that is the object that his magic is being drawn to. He doesn’t feel very confident in his abilities right now, but he stands up when it looks like Arthur is going to run off without him.

“Alright. Where are we going?”

Merlin doesn’t answer immediately. Mostly because he doesn't have the answer. Arthur raises his hands expectantly. "Well?"

He flushes at the demanding tone in Arthur's voice. He must think that Merlin's wilfully trying to ruin this for them on purpose. He can't honestly believe that Merlin is that petty. What a horrible
thing to think about someone.

Merlin flushes and ducks his head to hide his embarrassment. "Er- this way."

He can feel something but Merlin can't seem to pin the magic down. Each time he tries to lock onto it, it slips out of his mind as if he's been distracted. Or that the connection is broken. It's also much harder to do with Arthur waiting impatiently at his side for new directions. Even if he knows to be silent and not to interrupt Merlin while he works.

"Should it be taking this long?" Arthur wonders when they've been standing in one place for ten minutes.

They've barely walked more than twenty metres from the classroom. Merlin's really struggling to keep his emotions out of it, but having Arthur at his shoulder with a significant no-touching distance between them is only a reminder of everything that's wrong with them. Merlin can't stop picturing the expression on Arthur's face when he said that he was in love with him.

Or Uther's infuriated distaste when he realised that it was Merlin with his hands all over his son. Merlin can't keep himself from imagining all of it. And it's only making things worse.

"Er- this way," he says, thinking there's a vague buzz coming from the direction of the library.

Arthur follows his lead and they walk in silence until they're nearly at the opposite side of Campus. Merlin doesn't recognise where he's led them until it's too late. Arthur stares at the little alcove behind the building where their mandatory cooperation class is and one of the previous areas they utilised to get off whenever the situation called for it.

Because of its reasonable privacy. But it wasn't secluded enough when Uther found them out a couple days ago. Merlin realises that he's just led them around in a giant circle.

Arthur folds his arms and steps back, with a look on his face that's oddly vulnerable.

"Is- is this some kind of joke?"

It's never happened before. Merlin's never been betrayed by his own magic like this. "No," he says hurriedly. "I just need to concentrate. Give me a moment."

When Arthur seems like he's going to protest, Merlin turns his back so he won't have to look at him. Pretending he's not here is the best bet. It's the only way that Merlin is going to be able to focus on anything else.

He tries to find a quiet place in his mind not overrun with worries and hurt feelings and insecurity. It's harder to find than he realised. Merlin has to dig deep. The spot above his forehead starts to feel warm and abruptly he remembers the unicorn and the blessing it gifted him with.

The unicorn. The Darkling Woods. That was a quiet place.

Merlin lets himself picture it, allows the image of the place to fill him inside and out. It comes to the forefront of his mind almost immediately like it's been waiting for him all along. Peace. Sanctuary. Ancient Magic. He can feel the flow of his own magic in this place, where it's unencumbered by daily troubles and unfolding drama.

He finds the tether next. The object calling to his magic specifically. It's at the bottom of Avalon Lake. Merlin can't see the item entirely but it shimmers under the water.
"The object is in the Avalon Building," he says, opening his eyes and facing Arthur. "You'll have to swim to the bottom to fetch it."

Arthur shrugs and starts marching over towards their destination without waiting for him.

"It's not that deep anyway."

Suddenly Merlin's uneasy. "It's magic Arthur. Don't underestimate it. This is supposed to be a challenging task."

But he clearly doesn't share Merlin's concerns. *He doesn't trust me* Merlin thinks and his chest aches. Maybe he really can't handle being partnered with Arthur at all. Maybe he should go to Talesin to get them separated.

Merlin doesn't speak until they've reached Avalon building where the lake is housed. It's empty inside, but the lake is a different colour to what it was last time Merlin had a lesson here. The surface seems murkier, less inviting.

"Where is everyone?" Merlin wonders, glancing around suspiciously. "Don't they usually have a lot of classes in this building?"

Arthur isn't bothered.

"Not today they don't," he replies, already unbuckling his weapons belt from around his waist and setting his belt and sheathed sword in a pile by the wall of the lake. He starts on the armour covering his sword arm next and Merlin doesn't offer to help nor does he watch the process.

If Arthur takes his shirt or pants off, Merlin's not going to punish himself by looking.

He moves to the edge and trails his fingers into the water instead. When Merlin lifts them out they feel slimy and cold. He can hear Arthur's chain mail tinkling as the links connect with each other but he doesn't turn at the sound. Merlin's inspecting the water for their object. They've got less than half an hour left. Merlin wasted a lot of their time trying to find it in the first place.

It's very likely that they've already lost this challenge to another pair, but Arthur doesn't feel the need to mention that when he comes to stand by Merlin's side. He's shirtless, unfortunately, and he's got his underwear on but that's it. Merlin is doing his best not to be aware of how fit he is.

"It's there," he says, pointing at the shine in the water. "Can you see it? I think it's a chalice."

"Right," Arthur says, nodding his head as if a decision has been made. Merlin puts a hand out before he can dive straight in.

"Wait," he says a little too urgently. "I just have this feeling--"

Arthur gives him a look and purses his lips. That expression enough tells him he's not impressed by Merlin's feeling at all. But he can't shake the thought that there's something a little bit off with the lake.

"Why do you keep sabotaging this?" Arthur demands. "Do you really not want us to succeed?"

Indignation pushes his hesitance away. "I'm not *sabotaging* anything," he snaps. "But fine, don't trust me or my magic and see where that gets you."

Arthur glares at him. "You mean after it wasted half of our time and led us around in a godforsaken
Merlin's scathing response gets lost in the splash of water when Arthur dives straight in without another word. He watches his body ripple under the surface, powerful arms striking out with his legs as Arthur swims towards the shimmering item. His hands have just begun to stretch out for it when the water changes.

Merlin feels it first before he sees it. The appearance of other magic. Angry magic. Then the surface of the lake shifts as if an unexpected wall has been erected between them. Arthur vanishes beneath it.

And Merlin can't see him anymore.

He rushes to the edge, putting his palm against the lake before he strikes a solid barrier. It's like the lake has been frozen over. Except the colour of the lake isn't the powdered blue of solid ice. It's bright red. And Merlin has no idea how long Arthur can hold his breath for.

So he panics.

"Arthur!" Merlin shouts, scanning the red ice frantically for some kind of imperfection that could allow him to see through it. "Arthur!"

He hears it in the next second. A dull thud. Arthur's banging against the barrier from the other side.

Oh gods. He's running out of air. Magic pours out of Merlin in waves. Suddenly it doesn't matter that he's been having trouble performing incantations this week, or focusing his magic effectively. Or that he can now feel the two Magic Users on the opposite end of the spell, keeping it in force long enough to have the desired effect.

Drowning Arthur Pendragon.

Terror swells in his throat, and unexpectedly it feels like he's the one drowning when he puts his hands to the lake's surface.

All of this means nothing to Merlin when he slams his fists down onto the red ice with hands that feel impossibly warm. The barrier shudders like it's experiencing a shock wave and an impossibly long crack appears in the ice, emanating from where Merlin's hands connected and travelling across the entire length of the lake from the force of his magic.

The two Magic Users are struggling with the barrier now, Merlin can feel their strength in the spell shaking when he brings his hands down again. The barrier quakes for longer this time, bigger splits in the ice appearing as water begins to spurt out from the pressure of being forced down by magic. The Magic Users are strong, he knows this is a complicated spell for anyone to pull off even together.

But Merlin is stronger.

He gathers all the magic that he can, channeling it into his hands as he pushes against the ice with everything that he's got. Merlin hears one of the Magic Users groan at the strain when he brings his hands down for the final time.

The wall erupts, red ice exploding everywhere and Merlin is thrown off his feet when the spell falls apart. He lands on the tiles on his back and a huge chunk of ice lands on his chest, knocking the breath out of him. But he shoves it off and manages to scramble upward just as Arthur breaks the surface of the water.
He's still got the bloody chalice in his hand and when he makes a grab for the lake's edge, Arthur's too weak and disoriented from the lack of oxygen that he misses and goes right back under.

Merlin jumps in without a thought. He catches Arthur about the waist, shoes hitting the bottom of the lake before he pushes off and manages to get them both back to the surface. Arthur catches the edge this time and struggles to get up one handed.

"Drop the bloody cup, you idiot," Merlin snaps incredulously, still shaking with fear and adrenaline.

Arthur gives him a touchy look and ignores him, reaching up and tossing the chalice towards his pile of clothes and armour. While they're still in the water, Merlin manages to send red warning sparks above the building to signal for help before focusing on getting Arthur out of the lake. When he doesn't have the strength to lift himself up, Merlin ends up getting much too close and personal to boost him out of the water.

He's red faced and shivering when Merlin finally climbs out himself.

“What the hell was that?” Arthur demands from his position on his back, spread eagled across the tiles.

He's still breathing heavily, trying to make up for lost air and Merlin can't believe that he held his breath that long.

"Magic Users," he says grimly.

Arthur manages to turn his head. "Funny that you're so adamant that us Knights are bad news but Magic Users are leading the charge with two attempted murders this year so far to our zero."

Merlin shoots him an unimpressed look before collapsing on the tiles next to him. "That you know of," he mutters darkly.

Kilgharrah comes slamming through the doors five minutes later with Uther Pendragon of all people behind him. Merlin practically launches to his feet at the sight of them both. Arthur, who's sitting up now and resting his arms on his knees barely turns his head. They're both still wet as Merlin wasn't sure if he could magically dry them since the adrenaline and instinctive magic has worn off.

He didn't want to attempt a spell and fail in front of Arthur either.

"Hello Father," Arthur says rather gloomily. "Lovely to see you."

"What's the User doing here?" Uther demands, glaring directly at Merlin as if his very presence is an affront.

Arthur's eyes flash with anger before he turns around to face them. He doesn't seem too bothered by the fact that he's half naked.

"Well Merlin saved me from drowning for one."

Uther's expression hardens when he exchanges a quick glance with Kilgharrah. "You're not surprised by that," Merlin realises before staring at Arthur again. "How many times have people tried to kill you?"

Arthur waves the question away with an airy kind of deliberation and Merlin abruptly remembers
the knife he sleeps with under his pillow. The lack of response doesn't seem very comforting.

"Magic Users?" Kilgharrah wonders, bending to inspect a large shard of red ice by his foot.

Uther looks around the lake area, observing the remaining ice debris and Arthur and Merlin's obvious lack of dryness and seems to reach his own conclusions about what happened here.

"Two," he admits without looking at Uther. Merlin doesn't want to see the triumph on his face. "I think I knew them. Their magic was familiar. They- they go to Camelot."

Uther's facial expression is getting nastier by the minute. "Gilli Owens-"

"Was expelled and hasn't set foot on Campus since then," Merlin snaps, furious at the suggestion. "And if it was him, I would have recognised his magic."

Arthur sighs and flicks his wet hair out with a frown. "Why are you here, Father?"

Uther's eyes fall on Kilgharrah before he looks quickly away again. He doesn't answer the question. So Kilgharrah steps in. "Mr Pendragon received death threats against his children this morning and came to be certain of their safety."

Arthur's on his feet like a shot. "Both your children?" he demands, snatching at the material of his pants like he means to put them on wet. "Where's Morgana?"

Kilgharrah magically dries him and when he looks over at Merlin and realises that he's standing around in drenched clothes, he dries him also. Though not without a raised eyebrow. Merlin doesn't comment on the fact that he might potentially be having trouble with his magic. Especially not with Uther present.

Arthur gets his pants and undershirt on and doesn't bother with anything else. He just picks up his sword and leaves the rest in the pile by the wall, ignoring Uther's disapproval. "Where is she?"

It takes Merlin a second to realise that Arthur is asking him. "Oh, she and Gwen were finished with their classes and studying in the library for the rest of the day."

Arthur doesn't wait for anything else. He sprints out of the building, even with Uther shouting after him to slow down.

"You're not going to stop him," Merlin feels the need to say. "You can't stop Arthur from doing anything."

Uther very pointedly gives Merlin a once over. "I'm very aware of that, Mr Emrys."

The fact that he remembered Merlin's name probably isn't a good sign. Or that he's implying something about his and Arthur's previous sex life. So he decides running after Arthur is probably the better option than sticking around for the awkward conversation between Kilgharrah and Uther Pendragon on their way to find Morgana.

He's out of breath when he makes it to the lawns where Arthur and his Knights were kicking a ball around so very long ago and the first sound he's welcomed by are the screams. Morgana and Gwen are standing out on the grass just outside the Library as if they were caught once they'd stepped outside and Gwen's got her sword out and a hand wrapped around Morgana who's half collapsed on her.

Merlin figures out why a second later.
It's because she's lit the whole lawn on fire. He can see a small crowd is fleeing, as well as the rest of the students from the Library and Gaius and Talesin are arriving just in time to start putting the fire out before it becomes a blaze. Or reaches the Library or any of the other buildings.

When Kilgharrah and Uther finally turn up, the grass is still smoking and Gaius has managed to revive Morgana and has begun treating Gwen's knuckles after she punched one of their attackers.

Morgana isn't quite coherent yet but Arthur took her off Gwen's hands once Gaius offered to see to her wounds and she's been resting her head on his shoulder ever since. Merlin doesn't know where he's supposed to stand but he ends up near Gwen anyway while she tearfully accounts what happened.

"There were two of them," she explains while Gaius dabs some strange smelling balm onto her hands. "They had magic but they weren't students here. I'd never seen them before this. But their magic was evil."

Merlin can already feel it in the air without Gwen's words. The kind of magic that wants to tear things apart and relishes the chance to destroy. "One attacked me, the other one. They were-" she glances over at Morgana who touches her throat gingerly.

Suddenly Merlin can see the bruises there. "Strangling Morgana with magic," he finishes when it seems Gwen can't say it.

She nods, tears still flowing down her face and Morgana tries to take a step towards her before Arthur prevents it in order to better inspect her neck. She scowls but tips her head back so he can get a good look.

Kilgharrah is frowning at the scorched grass. "And the other stranger lit the fire?"

Gwen glances quickly at Morgana and Arthur and then at Merlin. Nobody says anything. Until Arthur accidentally brushes up against the tender area of Morgana's throat. She gasps in pain, eyes flashing and suddenly there's a fire at their feet. Morgana looks fearfully at Merlin before she remembers what he's taught her and manages to extinguish the flame herself.

"You have magic," Gaius says, promptly, finished with Gwen's hands and moving back to observe Morgana's mottled throat.

"Morgana," Uther breathes, and Merlin remembers with horror that he's still here.

Arthur raises a hand. "Not now, Father. Morgana nearly died."

Uther's mouth trembles with shock and indignation. "You knew?"

"I think these attacks were coordinated," Merlin says loudly, talking over him and trying his best to change the subject and spare Morgana for a little longer. "I think evil magic is recruiting students at Camelot and the two students who attacked Arthur were working for them."

Gwen stares at him with horror. "Are you saying Camelot has been infiltrated by evil magic users?"

Kilgharrah lets out a heavy sigh. "That certainly seems to be the case. Might I suggest we discuss this further in my office?"

Gwen steps back up to Morgana's other side and she and Arthur help her walk towards the Dean's office. The extent of energy she must have exerted to use so much magic, and at her rudimentary level where she doesn't quite have the strength or control yet, must have been very taxing.
Merlin fidgets with his fingers and feels very unhelpful when he trails after them, trying to keep as far away from Uther as possible. Gaius walks faithfully at his side and seems to be inspecting him as well.

"Are you alright, Merlin?" he wonders.

He looks at Arthur's back almost automatically and is filled with relief so strong that his knees almost buckle. Arthur could have died. Morgana almost did. And Merlin definitely knows now that there's something wrong with his magic.

"No," he admits, feeling out of his depth. "No, I'm not."

Gaius reaches out and pats his arm while they head through Kilgharrah's open doorway together. When Kilgharrah sees there aren't enough seats for all of them, he summons the rest. Uther sits down in a huff and Merlin wonders if he's saving all his rage for Morgana at home. He really hopes not.

Kilgharrah takes a seat behind his desk and Merlin tries not to notice the way Arthur's muscles bulge when he slumps into the seat next to him, sword flat on his thighs.

"This is not common knowledge," Kilgharrah says. "But each graduating class always loses a portion of its students."

"They die?" Gwen asks, appalled, even as Morgana reaches out to take her hand. For strength or comfort Merlin can't tell.

"I'm afraid not," Kilgharrah admits. "They- change sides."

"They turn to evil magic?" Arthur asks, appalled by the insinuation. "How many of them?"

Kilgharrah frowns at them all. "It is not just Magic Users who turn," he explains. "We lose Knights to their cause as well. Those that will kill for profit, for glory, for greed."

Arthur looks extremely perturbed and Uther is too busy staring at his daughter to comment on this information. He doesn't even look like he's listening to a single word. Merlin can't believe that nobody has ever talked about this. How could Magic Users and Knights switch sides, abandon their sacred duties and nobody hear about it?

"The system through which Magic User and Knight partnerships are assigned cases and towns to protect is designed to conceal their position and identities. Not only to protect their privacy, but also to shield the public from the knowledge that we are losing more of our own to evil magic."

"How many?" Arthur asks again. "How many do you lose each year?"

Kilgharrah hesitates. "One or two usually, across the collective of magical universities. But with tensions rising recently those numbers have begun to grow."

"That's why they're here," Merlin grasps. "We're the only University that's begun to make changes in an institution that naturally alienates Magic Users and Knights from each other. We pose a threat to their ability to win more people over to their cause."

"It's possible," Kilgharrah agrees but he sounds less certain.

"Think about it though," Merlin continues. "Why else would they go for the most high profile
students at Camelot? Because they know that Uther is trying to remove the magic department. If his children had died, it's likely he would have succeeded and that could mean sending every single magic student at Camelot straight into their arms."

Arthur stares at Merlin with interest. "It's not wholly impossible," he says. "His hatred of Magic Users is well known as well as the attempts to shut down their department. How many Magic Users do you have at Camelot?"

Kilgharrah barely misses a beat. "Over five hundred."

Everyone's starting to look a little nervous now. Even Uther can understand the gravity of the situation. "That's a small army," Arthur says. "Imagine how many Magic Users they could recruit then."

"This is mere speculation," Uther snaps. "There's no basis at all for any of these claims."

"I spoke to Gilli the other day," Merlin admits. "He told me before he got accepted at Salisbury that he was approached."

That has seized Kilgharrah's attention. "Approached you say?"

"By two men," Merlin says. "They showed up at the pub where he works and Gilli thought they'd tracked him down. They'd heard of what happened at Camelot, they wanted him to come and work for them. Gilli said no."

Kilgharrah stands up. "I must talk to Mr Owen at once," he declares. "This could mean that they're approaching students and attempting to manipulate them into working against the pursuit of good magic."

Morgana clears her throat pointedly and it takes a few tries for her to get the words out. Her voice sounds scratchy and painful. Kilgharrah summons two glasses of water for her at once.

"They- stopped," she manages, gesturing carefully at Gwen before her expression clears with the realisation.

"Oh, that's right," she says while Morgana starts drinking. "Once Morgana lit that fire they backed off and left. Not before I managed to punch one though."

"Because she has magic?" Arthur says, surprised. "Why would that matter?"

Merlin thinks about it for a moment. "They probably want her on their side," he guesses. "It might be why the two strangers attacked her and not the students working for them. Morgana is well liked on Campus. Even by the Magic Users."

"Thanks Merlin," Arthur says dryly and he realises what he's just said.

Or indirectly suggested at the very least. Oh bollocks.

Merlin's cheeks pink up a little. "Oh er- not that you're not well liked."

Gwen shoots him a look that says something along the lines of good save, but with all of the unnecessary sarcasm. Merlin might be floundering a little. "But could you imagine what kind of power her name would bring?" he says quickly. "Uther Pendragon's daughter an evil magic user?."

Morgana's eyes narrow and she makes a firm slashing motion which Merlin takes to mean no
way in hell would she ever join them. He shrugs at her. "Who knows, maybe they'll try and approach you next."

Gwen squeezes her girlfriend's hand a little tighter and looks extremely worried by the prospect.

"It's absolutely out of the question," Uther snaps. "I'm taking my children home immediately."

Arthur rolls his eyes at Merlin behind Uther's back before he seems to remember that it's Merlin he's staring at and quickly looks away again. Because that won't make him feel terrible at all.

"I suggest you take a magical escort," Kilgarrah says. "I'm sure they will try again. Your home is warded is it not?"

Uther manages a stiff nod.

"Then I think you should have them increased just to be safe. Merlin can escort you home. He's more than capable."

Merlin feels his heart drop like a stone. "No, I can't."

Arthur's jaw tightens and he can't manage to meet his eyes anymore. Merlin can feel Uther's gaze burning into his skull and he's never felt more uncomfortable in his life. Kilgarrah frowns but doesn't challenge him.

"I will escort them," Gaius offers. "I'd best take another look at Morgana's throat as well. I can also increase their wards."

"Thank you, Gaius," Uther says stiffly and walks out before anyone can get to their feet.

He doesn't wait for his children to get up or even offer to help Morgana walk. What a prick.

"I'll come with you," Gwen mutters in Morgana's ear. "Just let me go and grab our things from the Library."

Arthur helps Morgana to her feet and encourages her out of the room with a final unreadable look in Merlin's direction. All in all things could have been worse.

"Merlin, a moment?" Kilgarrah says just as he's reached the door and is on the cusp of freedom.

He spins on his heel and shuffles back in, already well aware of what this is about.

"Your professors have come to me with their concerns about your application of magic this week," he says. "They've informed me that you've been having difficulty with spells that you'd have already mastered as a small child."

Merlin flushes and sinks down into one of the available chairs with a sense of finality. He's going to be lectured here he just knows it. "I've had- er some personal issues."

Kilgarrah doesn't press for more, merely folds his hands together rather perfunctorily. "If you are referring to your romantic relationship with Arthur Pendragon-"

"No!" he says hotly, horribly embarrassed now. "There is no- we're not-"

"Ah," Kilgarrah says seemingly understanding the situation. "As you are already well aware, magic is influenced by emotions and the more negative or volatile your emotions may be the harder it is to grasp your magic. Separations are- difficult and certainly put you into a state of
emotional turmoil but I assure you it is possible to clear your mind and reclaim focus again."

Merlin wishes he could use magic to escape this conversation. "Er- thanks. I'm sure I just need to take some time. After the holidays I'll be back to my usual self I know it."

Kilgharrah nods. "If you feel the need to be reassigned a new partner because of the- unique circumstances it can be done."

And there it is. The chance Merlin had been afraid of asking for because he didn't want to confront any part of what's going on with him and Arthur. But now, having the chance right in front of him, Merlin doesn't actually want it.

"I'll keep it in mind," he promises. "But I don't think it's necessary."

Kilgharrah doesn't try to convince him otherwise. "Very well. Then you are dismissed Merlin, and I hope you remain vigilant in the wake of the present danger your find yourself in."

"Sir?" he says, confused. "I'm a Magic User?"

"And you chose a Knight over your own kind," Kilgharrah explains. "That's how evil magic users will view your actions today. I think it is in your best interest to be very careful Merlin. Increase the wards at Gaius' apartment if you can."

Merlin really can't catch a break. And he still has to return to Talesin's class to collect his bag before heading back to the flat. "I will Sir," he promises. "I'll be careful."

But it's hard to do that when he doesn't have magic to rely on anymore.

After what happened yesterday it seems like the worst possible idea to attend Morgana's party on Saturday.

Even after Gaius returned to the flat last night and declared the wards on the Pendragon house were stronger than ever. Nobody at Camelot seems to be aware that two evil magic users were on Campus yesterday or that two of their own students are very likely working with them.

There are rumours flying around about the burnt patchwork quilt that is the grassy lawn outside the Library but that's mostly about Morgana Pendragon and her surprising shift into the magic department. Kilgharrah had a meeting with her Friday morning, and Gaius made her some tea to help with her throat so she's almost back to speaking normally.

Merlin met her and Gwen for lunch following the meeting and she'd explained that Kilgharrah gave her the option to stay as a Knight or to shift over to become a Magic User. After the fight she and Uther had the night before, which she said involved Arthur shouting on her behalf, Morgana decided she would stop pretending that she was ashamed of her magic.

But Merlin can't help but feel like the sudden change has a lot to do with the added joy of pissing Uther off. But despite all the tension in the Pendragon household at the moment, Uther still flew out to Dubai this morning so Morgana and Arthur have the place to themselves. And Morgana will be proceeding with her party as planned. Even with the chance that there are evil magic users nearby who wish them dead.
Gwen checked in with him all day Friday to see if he was still coming and Merlin kept trying to convince himself out of it. But even Freya joined in. And Leon. And Percival. And Lancelot and soon Merlin basically caved into the peer pressure.

Plus, it's certain that Arthur won't be there tonight which is exactly what he needs. But once he showers and dresses into jeans, jumper and a long coat to keep him warm, Merlin is already convincing himself out of it again. When he walks over to their house he nearly turns back twice but when he finally reaches their stoop, Merlin already regrets everything.

Unfortunately, Gwen seems to be outside to take a breather and he knows now that she’s seen him there’s no chance of escape.

“You came!” she cries, delighted, and moves in to grab onto his shirt in her excitement. “Freya’s here too! Don’t worry Art- I mean, he’s not here.”

“Great,” Merlin agrees unenthusiastically. “Lead the way then.”

Gwen tugs him inside and seems to have a good instinct for finding her girlfriend because she drags him over to her almost immediately. She’s in the middle of a conversation with Elyan of all people and the bruises on her throat still stand out in the minimal lighting.

“Oh hello,” Merlin says, surprised. “I wouldn’t have thought you’d be into this sort of thing.”

Elyan shrugs, putting his arm around Gwen and dragging her into an affectionate half hug. “Er- I’m not really,” he admits. “I suppose I was invited.”

Merlin doesn’t get the chance to ask by who before Lancelot is joining them and passing Elyan a plastic cup filled with what is certainly not green tea. When Elyan reaches out and accepts it with a grateful smile their fingers brush and Lancelot eyes him rather intensely before pulling away.

Elyan’s small smile before he lifts the cup to his mouth is very telling. Merlin’s not in the sort of mood to be overjoyed by all the love everybody else is receiving at the moment.

“Merlin,” Lancelot says warmly once he realises he’s there. “How are you, mate?”

That’s the last kind of question that Merlin wants to be answering. “Fine,” he says quickly. “Can’t complain.”

Elyan is frowning at him now. “Are you certain?” he wonders. “Your magic feels a little different.”

Merlin's still in denial over this even after his talk with Kilgharrah. “I’m just a bit run down,” he says shortly. “Scuse us. Got to find the loo.”

He ducks past them on the way to the kitchen just for a means of escape and that’s when he sees Gwaine and Percival standing in the hallway, leaning against the walls and talking rather intimately. Merlin stops short at the kitchen island at the sight of them, heart pumping painfully in his chest.

Leon, who’s in the kitchen behind the many bottles of booze and seems to have become the makeshift bartender, catches sight of him.

“Merlin,” he says with a hearty laugh which says he’s had a few himself already as he lifts a full cup towards him. “You fancy it?”

Merlin glances back at Gwaine, who Arthur told Morgana he was hanging out with tonight. And
since he’s not here that means he lied about it, purely for the reason that he didn’t want his sister to know. Probably because it’s something she wouldn’t approve of. Maybe he was out with another bloke then, Merlin thinks frantically. Maybe he’s already moved on.

“Merlin?” Leon calls again, to seemingly remind him that he’s there.

He lifts the cup again invitingly.

Merlin very nearly knocks into the counter he moves so fast. He takes the cup from Leon, lifts it to his lips and practically pours the whole thing down his throat. If Arthur’s on a date, then perhaps Merlin is going to drink after all. It’s not like his magic is working anyway.

Leon laughs at the performance and he’s quick to fill his cup again. Merlin’s head is already swimming so he drinks this one a little slower. Morgana catches them both fairly quickly.

“What are you doing?” she demands. “You said alcohol affects your magic?”

Merlin shrugs, taking another sip and facing the direction of Gwaine and Percival in the crowd. “You said Arthur was out with Gwaine tonight.”

Morgana turns to where his eyes are focused and her expression hardens, lips pursing with disapproval. So she thinks the exact same thing that Merlin did. “That’s what he told me,” she says, sounding annoyed. “He usually doesn’t lie.”

Merlin snorts and drains the rest of his cup, stretching it back out toward Leon who helpfully refills it with an amused laugh. Morgana only narrows her eyes at the display. “You’re the one who didn’t return his feelings,” she says firmly. “What does it matter where he is or who he’s with?”

What’s worse is that she's absolutely right. Merlin can’t even answer. “I- that is, er- you don’t-”

He sighs and feels very small all of a sudden. “I suppose it doesn’t.”

Merlin reaches past Leon to grab a four pack of Pimm’s Lemonade and Ginger Ale and cradles it under his arm, heading straight out into the backyard. Thankfully, nobody thought to head outside yet so Merlin’s alone for the time being when he squeezes behind some of the artistically cut garden hedges and finds an almost hidden area underneath the window.

Someone must use it to sit there alone a lot because there’s a chair as well and it’s just the right height to be invisible to people coming out of the house and if they were standing in the garden. Merlin’s still in his coat and it’s not too cold yet so he sits down and gets started on the alcohol he most likely nicked from someone else. Right now he can’t seem to find it in himself to care.

So Merlin sighs forlornly to himself, unscrewing the lid on the bottle before he starts guzzling for all he’s worth.

When he tosses back the rest of the third bottle he’s starting to feel a little unbalanced in the chair and his current solitude is finally interrupted by two figures stepping out into the garden.

Merlin slumps a little further down even though he can’t be seen over the hedge and tries to be quiet. He recognises their voices once they start talking.
"I figured my intentions were fairly obvious," Lancelot says. "I've been wholly interested in getting to know you better since we first met, and I also wished to discover the depths of my feelings."

Elyan inhales a sharp little breath. "I thought- well yes, I was aware of- of your intentions."

The silence between them feels weighted with promise. "May I kiss you?" Lancelot asks softly, standing closer to Elyan's shoulder than he was a moment ago. "If you don't I unders-"

"Yes," Elyan says quickly, breathlessly, even though they haven't even touched yet. "You can kiss me."

Merlin turns away when they move toward each other and covers his face with his hand, distinctly miserable. Even with tenderness blossoming only metres away. He waits until they disappear back inside together, holding hands and smiling at each other all sweetly before Merlin decides abruptly that he'd rather not be alone.

He fetches the last bottle of Pimm's, and staggers back into where it's considerably warmer.

There are a lot more bodies now and he doesn't recognise any of them. Not until he catches sight of Leon who throws an arm around his shoulder and shouts something friendly into his ear before handing him another drink. Merlin takes it unthinkingly and starts pouring the final Pimm's bottle in to mix with whatever is in the cup.

He spills a bit, but Leon only laughs and claps him hard enough on the back that he spills more before disappearing back into the crowd.

He catches sight of Gwen dancing with Morgana and manages a wave in her direction before Gwaine is sliding an arm around his waist and yelling hello in his ear. When he seems to realise that Merlin can't stand up straight on his own, he drags him into the living room and onto the couch where Percival is sitting.

Merlin doesn't exactly land gracefully but luckily by that stage his cup is practically empty so he doesn't pour it on anything.

Uther's couch probably didn't come cheap. He does however, spill his own limbs all over Percival when Gwaine tries to encourage him to sit down. It's a good thing Percival is strong because he manages to catch one of Merlin's arms and get a good hold on his hip since otherwise he thinks he might have gone flying.

"Thanks mate," Merlin grins, nudging Percival's arm when he lets go of him. "So sweet 's no wonder Gwaine fancies you."

Gwaine stiffens a little beside him. "Oh it's alright," Merlin says, patting Gwaine's hand. "Percy fancies you too, don't you Perc?"

Merlin glances back at Percival who's starting to blush. "I- er."

"I need a drink," Gwaine says abruptly, getting up quickly and vanishing into the crowd.

He shouldn't have said that right? Merlin can't remember anymore. But he starts to feel a little sick with guilt anyway. "Ohhhhhhh," he says at a whisper. "That was a secret. Oh no. Bollocks. Don't tell Percival Gwaine fancies him."

Percival laughs a little incredulously. "Right. I think you might have had enough."
“You’re right,” Merlin agrees, pouring the rest of the Pimm’s bottle into his empty cup and managing not to make a mess. “I think I’m a bit wankered.”

He drains the rest of the cup just as Percival tries to ask him for it, and that solves that problem. “Fixed it,” Merlin says, slurring a little. “I’m sober now. Wanna see some magic?”

Percival’s eyes are a little wide. “Maybe not.”

“Hmmm, yeah,” he agrees, dropping the empty plastic cup onto the coffee table and slumping against Percival’s heavy set arms. “All these muscles,” he says nonsensically. “Comfy pillows.”

Percival snorts with laughter and pats Merlin absently on the head when he closes his eyes. “Does Gwaine really fancy Percival then?” Merlin hears a second later. “How do you know?”

Merlin doesn’t bother to open his eyes but he squishes his face further into Percival’s arm to get comfortable. “Yeah course,” he sighs. “S obvious. Gwaine’s completely gone on him.”


Merlin fumbles to smack at his leg to quieten him down. “Shhh,” he reminds him. “It’s a secret.”

“Right of course,” Percival agrees bemusedly. “Do you need some water, Merlin? How are you feeling?”

“m tired,” Merlin sighs. “Think I’ll sleep here.”

His comfortable pillow starts to shake and he can hear laughter a second later. “Alright then.”

Merlin stops listening then. The music and voices are pounding in his ears but he manages to nod off against Percival for a moment anyway.

“What the bloody hell is this?” someone demands, shaking Merlin out of the doze he was in the middle of.

Arthur is looming over the both of them, hands on his hips and looking mightily displeased with what's going on in his living room.

“Arthur!” Merlin crows, thrilled, and pulls himself off the couch in order to stumble forward into his chest.

He staggers a little under his weight and Merlin slings an arm around the back of his neck with an uneven laugh. It’s pure surprise and gravity on his side that he manages to yank Arthur down and kiss him on the mouth.

He feels the familiar heat between them, if muted by the buzz in his skull before Arthur pulls away. Merlin buries his face into Arthur’s chest with a relieved sigh. He still smells the same.

“What’s wrong with him?” Arthur demands, wrapping his arms around Merlin’s back to keep him upright.

“He’s pissed,” Percival explains. “Leon said he only gave him a few drinks. But he took a four pack and disappeared for a while. I think he’s a lightweight.”

“Merlin doesn’t drink,” Arthur mutters, sounding irritated. “Why wasn’t anybody looking after him?”
“He’s fine, Arthur,” Percival promises. “He’s been sleeping it off since he sat down.”

Arthur curses and starts dragging Merlin away. He tries to help as best he can but Merlin’s feet don’t seem to want to cooperate. He’s laughing by the time Arthur’s managed to commandeer the bathroom and shut the door behind them.

He props Merlin up against the bathtub and Merlin lets his eyes fall shut again while Arthur starts running water from the tap. But he opens his eyes quick after Arthur throws the cold water in his face.

“What the-?” he splutters, wiping at his cheeks. “Arthur!”

“How much did you drink?” he asks looking directly into his eyes. “How do you feel?”

“I was fine before you- splashed me,” Merlin protests before nearly tipping backwards into the tub.

Arthur darts forward and manages to catch onto the front of his shirt, keeping him upright. Merlin realises how close he’s standing. And he hates the frown on Arthur's face. They don't mess about any more. Now they don't even smile when they're in the same room.

“I miss you,” he says, dropping his forehead against Arthur’s sternum. “Miss being with you. You don’t- you don’t even look like you care.”

“Merlin,” Arthur says gently, hand stroking against the back of his skull. “You’re drunk.”

“You said you- loved me,” he slurs dejectedly. “Why did you lie about being with Gwaine tonight? Who were you-?”

Arthur draws back, pulling Merlin back upward and turning him around to rest against the bathroom sink. Merlin manages to stay standing on his own. “That’s not fair,” Arthur says, but his expression is hard.

Merlin staggers forward and tries to push Arthur in the chest, except he mostly just collapses against him again. “This is all you fault,” he mutters, listing to the side before Arthur catches his elbow. “Things were brilliant,” he groans. “Perfect, yknow? Why’d you have to-? Now I can’t focus, can’t think- I just want-”

Arthur’s expression is a little sweeter. “What do you want, Merlin?”

Merlin lets out a frustrated noise. “I want things the before things, the way they were.”

Arthur steps back and folds his arms. “It’s not enough.”

That hurts more than anything and Merlin’s actually crying now. “I know, I’m not enough. You weren’t really in- in love with me. If it's so easy to turn off.”

Arthur gives him an incredulous look. “You think this is easy? You think every time I see you now doesn’t hurt? I feel like I’ve been run through with a sword. You don’t understand at all, do you? Well forget it, we’re certainly not discussing this when you’re so rat-arsed you can’t even stand straight. It’s no wonder you don’t drink.”

Merlin can barely follow half of what he just said but he tries to wrap his arms around Arthur again. “You’re such a prat,” he sighs, pushing his face into Arthur’s neck. “My prat.”

“I’m taking you home,” Arthur decides. “You’re a mess, Merlin.”
“Take me home,” he says, eyes still wet. “Please.”

Arthur helps Merlin out of the bathroom, even lets him hide his face in Arthur’s shirt when he pulls them through the crowd. Gwen and Morgana find them almost immediately but Merlin’s too distracted by Arthur to even look at them.

“What’s wrong with him?” Morgana demands. “What did you do?”

“What did I do?” Arthur snaps. “Where’ve you been all night? He threw himself at me, Morgana. He can barely walk. I’m taking him home.”

“We’ll take him home,” Gwen decides, trying to pull at Merlin’s arm even though he refuses to let go of Arthur.

“Oh, Merlin,” Morgana says, sounding impatient. “Really? I know you’re pissed now, but tomorrow when you’re sober you’re going to be really embarrassed about this.”

Merlin squirms at her words. He thinks he’s embarrassed right now. “Take me home,” he mutters.

“I’ll do it,” Arthur says firmly. “I’ll take him home, Morgana. He’s my responsibility.”

Merlin tries to say otherwise but he can’t quite get out a full sentence.

Arthur figures that’s the end of it and starts leading Merlin toward the door. He sees Gwaine’s finally returned to the couch because he and Percival are snogging now, wrapped around each other and completely oblivious to the rest of the world. Merlin feels a horrible twinge of jealousy in his stomach.

“See,” he says once they’re outside and freezing in the cold air. “Even Gwaine and Percival are snogging.”

“Merlin,” Arthur says patiently. “Why don’t you try and concentrate on walking.”

“I am,” he grumbles, arm slung around his waist. “Why does everyone else get someone and I don’t?”

“Merlin-“

“Do you ever feel like- some things were meant to happen?” Merlin wonders, tiredly letting his eyes close. “I just- you’re my destiny, Arthur.”

Arthur’s grip on him slips a little. “What?”

“You know, like destined,” Merlin sighs. “You’re just- and you know. That’s.”

“Can’t say I’ve heard that one before.”

“It’s not a line,” Merlin whines. “Why are you such a clotpole?”

“I still don’t understand what that means.”

The walk to his flat isn’t far and it’s quicker with Arthur practically carrying him the entire way there. Arthur pretty much hauls him through the main gate when they reach his building though Merlin doesn’t remember telling him the code.

“Gaius isn’t here,” Merlin says abruptly. “You could-“
“No, Merlin,” he says firmly. “I’m not staying over. You’re too drunk to know what you want right now. Trust me, tomorrow you’ll be saying a different story.”

Merlin groans incoherently at him even as Arthur searches his pockets for the keys.

He gets Merlin inside, shutting the door behind them and shuffles him down the hall into his bedroom. He helps Merlin out of his coat and his shoes and even turns away when Merlin wriggles out of his shirt. But Merlin panics when he takes a step toward the door.

“Don’t go,” he says. “Stay.”

Arthur is unmoved. “We’re not shagging.”

“No,” he moans because he’s not sure he could get his prick hard right now even if he tried. “Just to sleep. Come on Arthur. One last time?”

Arthur hesitates and Merlin can see that he’s torn. “Just sleep,” he insists, knowing how pathetic he sounds at the moment. “Come on. Your house isn’t going to empty out until dawn at least.”

Arthur makes a small, exasperated noise and starts removing his coat. He slips out of his shoes, tugging off his jumper and shirt and tosses them atop his coat. He switches off the light next and crawls into bed beside him.

He’s impossibly warm and Merlin practically moans in relief when he snuggles in and wraps his arms around him. Merlin sees that the door is open and tries to close it with his magic.

It shakes a bit but doesn’t do what he wants. And Arthur’s watching.

“What’s wrong with your magic?” he whispers, close to his ear. “I haven’t seen you using it much. And during our last cooperation class—”

“I can’t,” Merlin says unhappily. “Ever since you- my magic is all messed up.”

Arthur’s arm feels wonderful when it slides across Merlin’s waist and stays there. “You’re blaming me?”

“No,” he says around a yawn. “I just- I’m all over the place. Emotionally, I mean.”

“I-“ Arthur starts, and hesitates again. “I am too.”

Merlin snuggles close and hates himself for how right this feels. How much he’d missed it. They lie there in the dark, slowly nodding off when Merlin finally works up the courage.

“I think I love you,” he says, feeling his voice shake. “When you nearly died... I’ve never been so scared in my life. I- I’ve never felt like this- not with anyone else.”

Arthur doesn’t respond but his hands tighten incrementally.

“And I’m terrified of losing you.”

When Merlin wakes up his mouth tastes terrible and his bed is empty.
Arthur is gone.

He didn’t leave a note or anything either, Merlin actually checks for it. When he doesn’t find anything left behind he slumps back onto the bed, disappointed.

Then the memories of last night start flooding in, reminding him of how Arthur ended up in his bed in the first place.

Merlin made a right arse of himself. When he heard that Gwaine was actually already at the party with Percival and that Arthur’s supposed plans with him that night had been a lie, Merlin had immediately thought the worst of it. It’s no wonder he started getting on the piss.

Especially at the thought of Arthur with someone else, using Gwaine as an excuse to lie about it. It’s no surprise Merlin’s first cognitive jump was to Arthur messing about with a new hook up. Merlin can’t have meant that much to him if he was able to move on so quickly. And Arthur turning up later in the night only served to make matters worse. Merlin did not have a handle on things at all.

He was a complete mess after that. Which he can remember Morgana pointing out was the height of irony at one point since he’d insisted that he didn’t return Arthur’s feelings. Yes, he absolutely embarrassed himself. Oh and then on top of that, there's what he said when he and Arthur were alone in bed.

Merlin said that he was in love with him. Gods how much did he drink exactly to think saying that was a good idea? Arthur clearly wasn't too pleased by the new information otherwise he'd have left a note. Some kind of indication that he'd like to see Merlin in the near future.

Fat chance of that.

Merlin shuffles out into the kitchen to get himself a glass of water and is surprised to catch Gaius sitting at the counter waiting for him. "Er morning," he says, wondering what's going on. "Did I wake you up last night?"

Gaius drinks his tea without blinking. "No. You and Arthur were very discreet."

Merlin fumbles with his grip on the cupboard handle and very nearly smacks his head into by mistake. "Er- I... what did you say Gaius?"

He manages to grab out a glass without injuring himself or breaking it and fetches the filtered water out of the fridge. "Was it ever your intention to tell me that he was your gentleman caller?" Gaius wonders curiously. "You don't still believe you were cursed, do you?"

Merlin fills up the cup and then swallows it all and has to refill it again. "No," he admits. "I don't think it was a curse."

"Yes well, Arthur was very polite when he left this morning," Gaius continues. "I'm glad your-partnership is working out so well."

This is not a conversation he wants to suffer through so early in the morning. "We're not together anymore," he explains. "Things didn't work out."

Gaius doesn't respond for a moment. "If I'm not much mistaken I think Uther might be warming up to you. Well as much as that man can warm up to anyone which I suppose isn't a great degree."

Merlin laughs. "Right."
"No, Merlin I'm perfectly serious," he says. "He was very aware of how taken Arthur is with you and Morgana explained that you were the one who taught her control on top of your studies at Camelot. And when Arthur described what happened in Avalon lake and how you saved him, Uther seemed quite impressed with your magical abilities."

This couldn't be further from what Merlin wants to hear right now. "Uther wasn't the only problem," he says. "We're not together because of- other reasons."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that Merlin."

He sighs and stares into his glass of water and wonders what Arthur is doing right now. Does he regret leaving without saying a word? "I'm sorry too."

Merlin disappears into his bedroom after, fetching a fresh pair of clothes and vanishing into the shower to clean the stink of party and alcohol off him. He doesn't feel very well but Merlin also doesn't know for sure that if he tries to eat something that he won't immediately vomit. So he sticks to water for the time being.

When he's ready, he grabs his mobile and wallet and heads out to walk over to Gwen and Elyan's flat.

Gwen greets him at the door, still in her pyjamas and Merlin pretty much collapses onto the couch with a groan and resolves to live there from now on. "Oh, come on you weren't that bad," she says, seemingly figuring out what's wrong with him. "Well I mean you were bad but it's not something that you can't live through."

"Wonderful," he mutters glancing around and looking for Elyan.

"He's not here," Gwen says smiling and waggling her eyebrows suggestively.

So it looks like his partnership with Lancelot is going very well. Merlin's much too grouchy to manage a smile at the moment. Especially at the thought that everyone else's love lives are working out so well for them.

"Well you don't know the half of what happened last night," he grumbles.

Gwen raises an eyebrow. "You guys didn't-? You could barely stand up!"

"Oh no," he mutters bitterly. "But apparently I was lucid enough to think telling Arthur I was in love with him was a good idea."

She gasps, covering her mouth with a hand. "No," she says, amazed. "You told him?"

"It's not romantic if that's what you're hoping for," he says with a dejected sound. "I said I think I might be in love with him. I couldn't even commit to the idea."

She doesn't say anything at first. "But do you know if you are?"

That's where all of his problems lie at the moment. "No," he mutters, angry with himself. "And I'm not going to waste Arthur's time until I know for sure. That would make me a right arse wouldn't it? Especially if Arthur is sincere about his feelings."

Gwen nods. "He was pretty determined to look after you last night."

"Let's not mention last night ever again," he mutters. "I got all mixed up thinking he was on a date
with someone and I couldn't handle it. I can't be going around telling Arthur I love him just because I'm jealous and want to keep him to myself."

Morgana comes out of Gwen's room a second later, long silky sleep robe wrapped around her. "Why good morning Merlin," she says. "Any particularly reason you've stolen my girlfriend?"

Gwen smiles rather happily at that and Merlin can't resent them for being soft in love. Even if he wants to. "I just came to apologise for last night. Sorry if I made a mess of things. I hope I didn't ruin your party."

Morgana only laughs and sits down right by Gwen. "Oh Merlin you didn't cause any trouble, truly. You cuddled up with Percival most of the night which Arthur got bitterly jealous about."

Merlin flushes. "Right."

"It's a good thing you're here though," Gwen says suddenly excited. "See we were thinking after what's happened on Campus lately it would be a good thing to get away for a while. Uther wanted to send Morgana and Arthur somewhere remote and well, I immediately thought of you."

He's not catching on at all. "What?"

"Ealdor right?" Gwen asks. "That's your hometown? I googled it and we think it's perfect and you said you were going home for the holidays and Freya thought it would be fun to do something as a group and Gwaine and Percival are dying to get away plus Leon thought it was a good idea and Lancelot wants to go where Elyan is going, of course so it's-"

"Wait a moment," he says, slowly keeping up with the words. "You're all coming to Ealdor for the holidays?"

"Yes!" Gwen says grinning at the prospect. "I found your bed and breakfast online so we all booked in. We'll be staying with you for the next two weeks, I spoke to your mum and she was ecstatic."

Merlin's starting to smile as well. "I could introduce you to my best mate, Will," he says. "He wasn't here long enough to meet everyone last time. And Ealdor is really that small that it's unlikely any evil magic users will find us. I'm literally the only Magic User in town."

"But you will tell us if it gets to be too much won't you?" Gwen says urgently. "I know it was a bit rude of us, we didn't even ask. And there aren't many places to stay in Ealdor and your little bed and breakfast looked so perfect so we really couldn't resist-"

"Gwen," Merlin says, trying to slow her down a little. "It's fine. Perfect even. I wasn't really looking forward to spending all my time there alone. I would've just been working with Mum at the B&B, catching up with Will at night and on the weekends and then studying in between. But this-this will be great really. It's a lovely surprise."

Morgana watches him carefully. "Are you certain Merlin? You can tell us if we're cramping your style."

He snorts in amusement. "What style? Trust me, you're more than welcome. The lot of you."

"And you won't have to worry about Arthur," Gwen says helpfully. "He won't be there."

Merlin's smile is a little more forced after that. "Yes, of course."
Because it's not like Merlin told Arthur that he loved him or anything. He glances over at Morgana and wonders how much of that conversation she overheard before walking in and joining them. From the way she's folding her arms and watching him carefully, Merlin thinks a lot.

"I'm going home on the train on Sunday," he tells them. "If you want you can come down with me."

"The Knights have an essay due that night," Gwen explains. "So we've planned to train in Monday morning instead."

That's not a problem. Merlin can work around that. "That's okay. I can meet you all at the station. It's barely a ten minute walk to my house. Make sure you bring some jumpers though because the temperatures get really low at night. We're right at the bottom of a valley."

Gwen nods and fetches out her mobile to shoot off a group text to everyone else attending. Merlin can't believe that he's bringing this many friends to their bed and breakfast.

"Did my mum charge you for the two weeks?" he wonders, trying to figure out if they can afford to go that long without paying customers.

But Morgana only grins. "She tried not to," she says. "Didn't want friends of Merlin to pay, but when I explained that none of us really like you all that much and we're just here for the Ealdor scenery she was happy to take our money."

Merlin laughs and realises that they're going to have a lot of fun in these next two weeks. Maybe he can sort out whatever the hell is going on with his feelings about Arthur in that time. It would be nice to have an actual answer when it comes down to it. And he could use the opportunity to relax a little.

This will definitely be a good way to spend their holidays. He can't wait.

Merlin doesn't realise how much he's been missing home until he's on the train back to Ealdor.

He said goodbye to Gaius this morning and barely packed anything to bring back since most of his things are still in Ealdor. Soon enough the train is speeding out of London and it's lucky that Merlin got a window seat because he gets to watch when the scenery shifts from buildings and town houses to the countryside.

When it becomes impossibly green, Merlin seems to let go of some tension that he didn't even know he was carrying around with him.

His mother is waiting at the train station four hours later and Merlin doesn't even think about his backpack, he just dumps it on the platform and dives straight into her arms.

"Merlin!" she says happily and hugs him tight like he remembers, her laughter shaking through his ribs. "Oh gods have you gotten taller?"

It's one of her biggest pet peeves. That he seems to keep growing. Merlin doesn't mind that much. He just buys oversized jumpers and long jeans. The rest seems to work itself out.

"So tell me everything," his mother says letting Merlin scoop up his backpack before they start
walking back to the B&B together.

The air smells exactly like he remembers, fresh and open.

Somehow he doesn't think that the problems with his magic will have followed him out here. They chat on the walk back home. Merlin explains all of the things that have happened at Camelot lately, including the attacks against the Pendragon family and the evil magic users on Campus.

"Goodness, things certainly seem dire," she says. "I bet it's a good thing that Morgana Pendragon will be able to disappear in Ealdor for a while. One of it's useful quirks I suppose. I do hope you're doing your best to keep yourself and those around you safe, dear."

"I am," he promises. "And how have things been here?"

His mother relays back all of the charming customers in the past week and the handsome gentleman who keeps stopping by to pick the flowers from her garden though Merlin doubts that's all he's interested in. His mother gets so flustered by the suggestion that Merlin is suddenly very curious to meet him.

At least with two weeks in Ealdor ahead of him, Merlin will have the time to get reacquainted.

His mother informs him they've got three guests at the moment. A middle aged man who doesn't talk much who's checking out later on in the day and a sweet old elderly couple who told his mother they're travelling the British countryside together and will be staying on for the rest of the week.

They've only got eight rooms at the B&B, six if they're not including Merlin and Hunith's room, but they should be able to fit everyone in for the next two weeks. If a few of the couples bunk in together.

Merlin knows for a few of them they've only just started out. Two couples hooked up for the first time at Morgana's party barely a few days ago and Merlin doesn't even know for sure if Gwaine and Percival are a couple even though it's clear Elyan and Lancelot have already started dating. Throwing them all in together might cause a few problems but Merlin's confident he can figure it out and rearrange things until everyone's happy.

They are paying after all. But come to think of it, Merlin probably owes Gwaine and Percival an apology for meddling in their relationship when he was drunk the other night. That was a bit out of hand even if it did work out okay in the end. Merlin should still have a talk with them about it though. Gwaine seemed pretty upset at the time.

When they make it to the little path leading up to their home, Merlin catches sight of the elderly couple sitting out on the patio surrounded by the gardens in the sunshine with their tea.

Merlin prepares himself for some uncomfortable small talk and possible cheek pinching but the two women only smile a him warmly before the one on the left cracks a dirty joke. Her wife smacks her on the arm and pretends to be scandalised and he can hear their laughter following him all the way into the kitchen when he excuses himself to escape while his mother stands around with them and laughs too.

He passes the man on his way back to room six and he manages a sharp nod, but doesn't say anything else even though Merlin knows for a fact that his mother mentions her son to nearly every guest at the B&B whenever she can. There's no way he wouldn't have recognised him by her descriptions. Merlin's ears are distinct.
She told him on the walk over that she suspects the man is writing a novel, a crime or horror novel based off his often jumpy and reclusive behaviour these past three days but Merlin thinks it's more likely that the man is just eccentric. It's probably a good thing he's leaving tonight.

Merlin makes his way to his bedroom and sets his backpack down on the bed. His mother changed the sheets in preparation of his arrival and Merlin heads straight out to find his mother in the parlour and offer his services. Together they make up the rest of the rooms and by the time they've finished and made cucumber sandwiches to eat out in the back garden, it's mid afternoon.

"Is there something that you wanted to talk about?" his mother asks when Merlin's been quiet for too long.

"I suppose I've been wondering... when did you know that you were in love with Dad?"

She seems startled by the question but leans back in the wooden chair to think about it. "I guess I didn't," she admits. "One day I just realised that the world had changed without my knowing it, and that your father meant more to me than I could have possibly imagined."

Merlin's reminded of Gwen's words the other day, about how love isn't the same for everyone. He almost wishes it was because then he'd be able to know for sure. Then he could say what he felt without worrying that he was wasting Arthur's time.

"So are you missing your father or are you in love?" she asks a second later.

Merlin considers it. "Maybe both?"

His mother smiles and reaches out to pat his hand comfortingly. They don't say anything after that. They don't need to.

Gwen texts Merlin what train the group will be on and Merlin walks down to the station ten minutes before it's supposed to arrive.

That means he barely has to wait at all until the train is pulling into the station.

Gwen catches sight of him first, face brightening as she adjusts the duffel back slung across her shoulder and rushes forward to throw her arms around him. He catches sight of Morgana and Elyan next, followed by Lancelot who's stopped to help a woman with a pram and a small child get her pram off the train and onto the platform.

Gwaine squeezes past them but Percival's bulk is much too large for that so he patiently waits behind the woman with Freya and Leon.

Merlin loses count of all his friends when Morgana pulls him into a hug next and then they're all crowding around him and saying hello. They seem tired but otherwise cheery. Four hours is certainly a long train ride. Gwen must have passed on the message about them all walking back to the B&B because they've brought easy to carry backpacks and bags.

The platform is relatively small so Merlin stands to the side to let the rest of the travellers past, though not that many got off at Ealdor station anyway. The woman with the pram thanks Lancelot for his help before she disappears down the main road and immediately turns left. Merlin's too
busy trying to remember her name and how he knows her before he realises there's an extra person in their group.

He stepped off the train last behind Freya and Leon so Merlin didn't see him at all and he certainly hadn't expected him here of all places. Not after Merlin said he thought he loved him and Arthur wasn't there when he woke up in the morning.

But here he is, rucksack slung over his shoulder, dark sunglasses covering his eyes with a tight jaw that just pretends at not caring that he's here in Merlin's hometown right now. Or that he intends to stay in Merlin's childhood home. For two weeks. With Merlin's mother.

Bloody hell. Merlin can't believe it.

"Arthur?"
If nothing is for keeps, can I keep you just for a minute?

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Crime by Grey feat Skott.

Sorry there's been such a delay guys, hope you didn't give up on me!! Also turns out I'm not ending it at seven chapters either??

Arthur draws his sunglasses down the bridge of his nose and glares at his sister.

“So I take it Merlin didn’t invite me along after all,” he mutters, extremely displeased with the situation. “I knew I shouldn’t have trusted you, Morgana. Of course he wouldn’t-“

Merlin glances over at Morgana who’s scowling at her brother. “We shouldn’t have to split the group up just because you two have stopped shagging.”

Oh bollocks. Perhaps letting them come to stay at his home was a bad idea after all. He certainly doesn’t want to be discussing this in front of all them. At least the rest of the group has the decency to look chastened by Merlin’s expression following Morgana’s words.

Everyone but Gwaine of course. The shameless bastard.

“It’s a little bit more complicated than that,” Merlin mutters. “And you didn’t just invite Arthur to a two week getaway with a couple mates. You invited him to my home. Where my mother lives.”

The rest of them are staring at him like they don’t quite get the point but Arthur does. “I’ll go,” he says gruffly. “This was obviously a mistake.”

“Trains go on the hour,” Merlin explains, uncomfortably aware of the four hour long train ride awaiting him if Arthur does decide to leave. Merlin's not going to send him away, he's not that heartless. “And you don’t need to go. We can handle two weeks together at my house. With my mum. Right?”

Arthur pushes his sunglasses back onto his face as if that’s a proper response and purses his mouth, still angry at the situation Morgana's concocted. But Merlin understands the gist of it anyway. Really though, he couldn't have possibly believed his sister in all of this. Surely Arthur was just more willing to be tricked because that meant-

What? Coming to stay at Merlin's home after he practically fled his bed a few days ago? What does that even mean?

Merlin has no idea. Not really. But he's more or less willing to try and figure it out.

“Let’s go,” he sighs, leading them down toward the road.

Merlin walks with Freya and Leon while Arthur is at the back of the group with Percival, Lancelot and Gwaine. Morgana, Gwen and Elyan fill up the centre of the small crowd as he starts leading them to the B&B.
But all Merlin can seem to focus on is whether he should just turn around and flat out ask Arthur why he left that morning. After Merlin said he thought he might love him. There’s no way that he couldn’t have heard the words.

Merlin doesn’t know if he should even bother asking. As answers go, it’s fairly obvious what Arthur’s meaning was. Especially if he’s trying to avoid the situation altogether. That carries meaning.

It’s too late and Merlin obviously only said it because he was drunk and Arthur went on a date with someone else. At least that’s what Arthur probably seems to think.

Merlin’s not so sure.

His mother is in the garden watering the flower beds when Merlin opens the small gate and leads his guests inside.

She looks up at the sound of footsteps with a smile like the sun and Merlin steps forward to embrace her, abruptly reminded how much he’s missed her these past months. Missed being home.

They used to have their own little corner of the world here and Merlin hasn’t really thought much on what the separation would do her. He’s not usually in the habit of taking mothers for granted.

She’s startled by the strength of the hug, and lets out a little laugh that retells of the time when he used magic to cook her birthday cake when he was seven and covered himself in flour. Her laugh hasn’t changed much at all.

“Mum, these are our guests,” he says, gesturing at the group behind him.

Their expressions are open and gracious like most people get when meeting parents and even Arthur has seen fit to remove his sunglasses. Good. Those along with the expensive looking clothes and designer bag make him look like a bit of a snob. Not that Hunith would ever judge him for that.

Merlin’s a little less understanding, but that’s a different story.

All in all, his mother is delighted by all of them, Merlin can see it even if they haven’t spoken a word yet.

“That’s Freya, Leon, Gwen, Morgana, Elyan, Lancelot, Gwaine, Percival and- Arthur,” Merlin says, gesturing at each person.

Arthur locks eyes with him as Merlin says his name and the force of his gaze drives Merlin into silence. He feels warm all over for no other reason but holding Arthur’s attention for a fleeting moment. Then Merlin blinks and looks away quickly. He needs to stay focused right now, otherwise his mother will figure out exactly what’s going on.

“It’s lovely to meet you, Hunith,” Gwen says, stepping forward to take his mother’s hand.

Merlin gets his voice back. “Right. Er- and this is me Mum, Hunith.”

They say their hellos and Merlin only gets a little nervous when Arthur steps forward after
Morgana and takes his mother’s hand in greeting. He hopes it won’t be obvious that this is the bloke Merlin was talking to her about earlier.

His mother can be much too observant sometimes.

Which rings true a second later when Percival shakes her hand.

“Goodness you’re big,” she says, staring up at his bulk just as Gwaine breaks out into laughter, smacking Percival riotously on the back.

“You don’t know the half of-“

“Gwaine!” Percival cries, scandalised and dreadfully embarrassed as he physically reaches out to put his hand over Gwaine’s big mouth to silence his suggestive commentary.

There are smiles lines behind Percival hand so Gwaine’s only more amused by his embarrassment than anything else. Obviously, they got much more acquainted after that party if Gwaine's innuendo is anything to go by.

Gwen gasps a little and Leon tips his eyes towards the heavens as if requesting some higher power to send him elsewhere immediately. Arthur rolls his eyes, while Lancelot and Elyan steadily refuse to look at each other.

Morgana moves in like she wants to smack Gwaine up the back of the head before Gwen takes her hand.

Merlin does his best not to throw in the towel right then and there.

“Oh dear if you’re under the impression I’d be offended by that then you certainly haven’t spoken to Gloria yet.”

Gwaine looks to Merlin for clarification after Percival slowly peels his fingers off his mouth and lets his hand fall back to his side. Gwaine steps closer into Percival’s bulk automatically and Percival’s face softens when he slides an arm casually around his waist.

“One of our guests staying here. Our elderly guest.”

Gwaine is positively charmed by the news. “I’ll have to meet her if she’s got such a mouth as you say.”

Merlin’s mother seems pleased by that. “I’m sure she’ll love you all. She’s got a heart for mischief that woman. Now let’s get you inside to sort out the rooms you’ll be staying in and set down your things.”

She leads them into the house and goes behind the counter standing in the foyer that serves as their reception. Behind it sit the keys for the rooms as well as the phone and an outdated computer that Merlin used to play solitaire on whenever his mother needed him to man the reception desk when he was younger.

They’re an unusually large group, the largest they’ve had together at the B&B at any given time, so much that they need to squeeze to fit into the foyer.

Morgana, of course, ensures that she’s at the front of the group, standing at the counter and woe betide anyone who gets in her way. She slides a careful arm around Gwen and glares at Percival when he accidentally knocks Gwen into the counter with his elbow.
“Oh sorry there, Gwen.”

She pats absently at his thick shoulder. “It’s alright, Perc.”

Merlin ends up behind them all since he hung back to shut the door after everyone was inside, keeping the warmth in. They can get an awful draft during the morning, even with the fire going and the sun dousing the valley in golden light.

He steps into the crowd of bodies but gives up when it’s clear he won’t reach the desk anytime soon. His mother can sort it without him. But it does take him an unusually long time to figure out that small space means Arthur is now pressed up against his back.

“Oh, er-“ he starts to say, instantly flustered because it’s Arthur and Merlin can’t just pretend this doesn’t get a reaction out of him.

He hasn’t gotten over him that easily.

Arthur carefully inches back, but there’s hardly any room for movement and it doesn’t do much of anything at all. And then, he stumbles of all things, and suddenly his hands are on Merlin’s waist as he regains his balance.

“Sorry, Merlin,” he says, at his ear, and Merlin’s speechless at the rush of warmth in his gut and the heat on his neck that suggests how familiar he is with this position.

It’s been a while since he had Arthur behind him like this. Too long.

“Right,” he says, sounding much too squeaky because Arthur’s got his balance now and he hasn’t removed his hand from Merlin’s waist.

Should he say something? Or perhaps never mention it so Arthur will keep his hand there forever?

Merlin thinks silence is perfectly understandable considering the circumstances. He catches sight of his mother standing on the stool behind the counter in order to count heads. And then abruptly he remembers that Arthur’s not supposed to be here.

“Oh,” his mother says, reaching the same conclusion. “We have an extra.”

Arthur finally slides his hand off Merlin’s hip and he tries his best not to groan in frustration.

“It’s alright,” he says quickly. “We’ll make up number seven.”

His mother nods, seemingly understanding the message. Number seven is Hunith’s room, but they rent it out to guests when they don’t have enough beds. His mother usually just takes Merlin’s single mattress and he sleeps on the floor.

They can make do.

“What are the sleeping arrangements?” his mother asks politely, collecting the keys off their hooks. “I’ve only got six rooms left I’m afraid, and there are nine of you. Perhaps the couples might share?”

Merlin ignores the pang in his chest at the mention of the word couple. He does not turn to see what Arthur’s reaction might be.

“I’m with Gwen,” Morgana says. “So we’ll share. Who else wants to? Percival-“
“Is all mine,” Gwaine says with a zealous grin.

Percival’s cheeks are red but his arm is still around Gwaine’s waist, and curls over his hip in agreement. Gwaine leans up a second later to whisper something into his ear. Judging by the look on his face it’s definitely a come on and Merlin tries not to feel too regretful that he’s no longer in the business of shagging anyone.

Morgana rolls her eyes at them before searching the rest of the group. “Elyan,” she says, glancing between him and Lancelot. “Do you—”

“Elyan should have his own room,” Lancelot suggests. “He’s been working non-stop. He needs rest.”

They might not be at that step in their relationship either. Not like Merlin who fell straight into bed with Arthur without even knowing his name. Elyan stares at Lancelot carefully before he concedes with a small, thankful smile.

“I’ll go with you then,” Leon decides, talking to Lancelot. “Freya should have her own bed.”

“Oh,” she says, startled. “Thank you.”

“Wonderful,” Merlin’s mother says, passing out the keys for the rooms now that it’s been sorted.

Only three of their rooms at the B&B come with their own bathrooms and his mother gives those to Gwen and Morgana, Freya, Gwaine and Percival. The rest of them will have to use the communal bathroom.

“You’ve free run of the house, the farm and the woods outside and don’t hesitate to ask Merlin and I for anything. Though be careful around the chickens, they startle easy. Supper is at six. And there’s only one pub in Ealdor which shuts at eleven.”

“Eleven?” Gwaine protests. “Bloody hell.”

Merlin’s mother is not worried. “So you’d best purchase your own and bring it back here if you plan to make a night of it. I’d prefer you lot drinking at home than freezing to death on the street.”

Oh right. Merlin should have realised they’d all want to drink. “I’ll take you to Owen’s once you’re settled in,” he offers.

Leon and Gwaine raise an eyebrow at him.

“It’s the only liquor shop in Ealdor,” he admits, feeling even more like a village farm boy than he did when he first came to Camelot.

“What about Sainsbury’s?” Freya wonders genuinely alarmed by the idea.

“Or M&S?”

“There’s a Sainsbury’s two towns over,” Merlin admits reluctantly. “But it’s about a half hour train ride. And finding a Marks and Spencer is much further.”

The rest of the group shouldn’t be so shocked. Ealdor really is in the middle of nowhere. That’s supposed to be half of the appeal.

“Good lord,” Gwaine manages. “We’ll need reinforcements.”
Merlin exchanges a glance with his mother and tries not to laugh. They’ll be hoarding alcohol here for the next two weeks make no mistake.

“Aeron Owen is a lovely Welsh man,” his mother says. “And Owen’s Liquor is always well stocked.”

It won’t be the last time that she defends the quaintness that is Ealdor. Merlin will admit he loves the place, even if it can be outdated sometimes. Bigger cities do have a lot more to offer.

“Are you the only one in the family who likes to drink?” Arthur asks her, and Merlin does not like the thoughtful expression on his mother’s face when she looks at him.

“When the right occasion calls for it,” she admits, with a wink at Gwaine who smirks at the gesture.

Merlin truly hopes they don’t convince his mother to get sloshed with them. That’s not something he’s entirely sure he’d like to experience.

Once they’ve got their keys they disappear off to their rooms for a while and Merlin follows his mother into the kitchen to help clean up after the breakfast they made this morning. For themselves and Gloria and Rowan.

Arthur pokes his head in about twenty minutes later and looks guilty for interrupting them. There’s no sign telling him to keep out or anything though, his mother prefers to let her guests wander every room of the house, says it enriches the B&B experience in Ealdor countryside.

“Er- my apologies,” he says a little too formally for Merlin’s liking. “But I was looking for Leon.”

Merlin stares at his mother. “The one you said looked like a sweetheart.”

“Oh,” she says, remembering. “He’s in room five with that polite one.”

Oh Lancelot she must mean. But Arthur still seems lost anyway.

“I’ll take you to them,” Merlin says, setting the towel he’s been using to dry plates back onto the rack.

His mother finds that amusing somehow so Merlin hunches his shoulders and refuses to look at her. Arthur steps out of the doorway when he approaches and they head back into the hall together.

“So how long have you lived in this place?” Arthur wonders, eyeing a spot of peeling paint on the wall as they continue down the hallway.

Merlin refuses to be ashamed by his humble upbringings. “All my life.”

He can’t quite read Arthur’s expression but that’s probably a good thing because Merlin doesn’t know what he’d do if Arthur was making fun of his home.

“I wish I’d had a place like this,” Arthur admits, to Merlin’s surprise. “Growing up Uther liked to keep us moving around. For safety. For security. We’d always come back to Camelot eventually but I’ve never really thought of it as home. Not until I first set foot on Campus.”

Merlin’s never heard Arthur talk like this before but he’s glad for it.

“Ealdor has a piece of me,” he confesses. “But I know what you mean. Camelot has another. It feels like home too.”
Arthur glances at Merlin but doesn’t say anything. Not until they’ve stopped in front of the room with a number five fixed to it. Merlin reaches out to knock when Arthur just stands there and looks at him without moving.

“It’s beautiful here,” Arthur says quietly. “Perhaps later we could-?”

The door opens and Lancelot is standing there with an expectant smile. Arthur looks at Merlin one last time and doesn’t say anything. Merlin regrets knocking on the door so fast. What had Arthur been about to suggest?

“Oh Merlin,” they hear Gwaine shout from the parlour. “Where’s this bloody liquor shop then?”

It seems like he’s needed elsewhere. “Er- I’d better-”


Gwaine, Freya, Percival, Morgana and Leon are waiting for Merlin in the parlour when he arrives. Gwen and Elyan seem to have gotten comfortable in the two biggest armchairs by the fire and Arthur and Lancelot are somewhere behind him.

Merlin can hear Lancelot tell Arthur that Leon’s already left their room as soon as he set his bag down. They’re a little further behind but somehow Merlin can practically feel Arthur at his back.

“We off then?” he wonders, spotting the pot of tea Gwen and Elyan have sorted for themselves and suddenly feeling a little less enthusiastic.

He’d rather be sitting down by the fire if he’s being honest. But Merlin has to go with them. He’s the only one who knows where Owen’s is. They’ll probably get lost if they tried to find it on their own.

Morgana is wearing a stylish looking long sleeved shirt and Merlin glances past the windows to see where the sun’s at in the sky.

“You’ll need a coat,” he says. “By the time we’ll be walking back here, you’ll be freezing.”

Morgana rolls her eyes at him as if he’s being intentionally unhelpful. “Merlin, the liquor is the priority here.”

“Yes, we’d better hurry,” Freya says. “It could close soon.”

“It’s barely three o’clock,” he protests. “Owen won’t close until six.”

None of them seem to take Merlin’s word for it though because they’re already throwing on coats and heading out the door. Except for Morgana who looks smaller without the extra layer of heat protection.

He doesn’t mention that she’ll probably regret that when the time comes because it doesn’t seem like she could be convinced anyway. Merlin’s not in the habit of waging pointless battles.

Arthur disappears straight after and Merlin figures that’s his not so subtle way of trying to avoid him. Good luck with that. He’s staying in Merlin’s home after all. Is he mad?
Merlin tells his mother they’ll be back in a little while and he will help her put dinner on when they return before he hurries out after the rest of them.

Being stuck on the train for four hours appears to have given them all lots of energy because once Merlin meets them at the gate and gives them a direction to start off towards, the rest of the group falls into a brisk walk.

Gwaine is at the forefront of them all which is fitting since he suggested they buy liquor in the first place. Freya and Leon are at his side and Percival and Lancelot are lagging just a little bit behind. Though Merlin suspects that’s because Percival is having a good look at Gwaine’s arse.

“Oi! Hold on,” Arthur shouts before they’ve even walked ten metres from the B&B, jogging after them as he jerks an arm into his coat at the same time.

Merlin tries not to grin at the sight of him.

“You’d better be paying,” Gwaine calls out. “We don’t all happen to be filthy rich Pendragons here.”

Arthur doesn’t even blink. “Just for that you’ll be getting the low-quality liquor.”

Morgana only snorts with amusement at the threat.

“Ah, that Pendragon generosity knows no bounds.”

Leon breaks into laughter and even the look Arthur unleashes isn’t enough to silence him. Merlin can’t hide his own smirk even as he can feel Arthur glancing in his direction.

Aeron Owen is surprised by the sheer amount of strangers entering his shop twenty minutes later. Ealdor doesn’t usually bring in that many newcomers, considering there’s only one B&B in the whole village. They don’t even have a hotel.

His eyebrows climb high until he catches sight of Merlin at the back of the group.

“Oh Merlin!” he says, expression relaxing. “It’s good to see you back home. And these must be-“

“We’re Merlin’s mates,” Gwaine says, slinging an arm around Merlin’s neck and reeling him in like he’s attempting to strangle him with his thick arm.

Merlin struggles a little and manages to wriggle free of him.

“Oh, from University?” Owen says understandingly. “Welcome to Ealdor then. I’m certain you’ll enjoy yourselves here.”

“If we have liquor we will,” Freya pipes up from one of the back shelves, already browsing.

Merlin wonders if he should feel embarrassed by the company he’s in, but Aeron Owen isn’t the type for quick judgements.

“We were a little surprised,” Percival interjects, always the voice of gentle reasoning. “To hear there’s only one liquor store in all of Ealdor.”

Aeron’s smile is wide and bright. “Yes, it does seem a little strange when you put it like that, but I assure you I’m not going anywhere. This store is staying just where it is, so you can rest easy for your stay.”
The group seems mollified by this knowledge but Merlin is full of disbelief that they would have assumed anything different. Surely shops don’t wander off on their own. The Owen’s have owned this place for four generations.

“Perhaps you might have some recommendations?” Leon suggests when it’s clear Aeron would like to do more for them.

“Oh yes,” he says enthusiastically, stepping around the counter. “If you’ll just-“

Then he disappears down one of the aisle, Leon, Lancelot and Percival in tow. Morgana glances back at Gwaine, Merlin and Arthur before she goes straight for the vodka.

Gwaine and Arthur head off towards the ales together and Merlin feels very out of his element considering he has no designs on drinking anything in this store. Freya seems to be the exact opposite because she soon returns carrying three unfamiliar bottles with a triumphant expression on her face.

“Good pickings?” he wonders.

“I can’t believe he sells this,” Freya murmurs excitedly. “It’s kind of a rare brand. I haven’t seen this since I was sixteen. And it’s cheap as chips.”

“Looks like you’re well sorted then,” Merlin agrees, entertained by the present chaos the group at large appears to have unleashed upon the store.

At least they intend to spend a few quid here. Aeron is bound to be pleased that Merlin has so many mates. And that all of them like to drink. He’s brought in a lot of business today.

“I’m going to get another bottle,” Freya decides before vanishing back the way she’d come.

Merlin stares around the covered shelves where bottles of different shapes, colours and sizes rest and lets out a small sigh. After a moment, he realises that he’s standing there alone in the middle of the store until Arthur is reappearing from behind an aisle and piling bottles into his arms without a word of explanation. Merlin, bemusedly holds his arms out and lets him do it.

“You do know there’s a perfectly good counter behind me, don’t you?”

Arthur doesn’t even bother to look. “I’m helping you feel useful, Merlin,” he says, obnoxiously stacking another bottle on top. “Instead of standing here like a muppet.”

Merlin can tell that he’s only teasing which is why he doesn’t immediately drop the five bottles now loaded in his arms onto Arthur’s shoes and dash the consequences. “At least I’m not a pillock.”

Arthur turns to him with an air of challenge in his eyes. “Tosser.”

“Prat.”

“Git.”

“Clotpole,” Merlin retorts, feeling the bottles shift under hand before he realises the ends are poking into Arthur’s chest since they’re standing so close.

Merlin doesn’t even remember stepping forward.

“Oh er-“
“What kind of stuff does your mother drink?” Arthur wonders unexpectedly and Merlin loses his train of thought.

“What?”

“Your mother,” Arthur repeats patiently. “What does she drink?”

“Oh,” he replies, confused as to why Arthur would even be interested in such a thing. “She likes wine. Red over white usually. Though she’s been known to drink a Rosé on occasion.”

He doesn’t get the chance to ask Arthur why because Gwaine comes darting around the corner and Merlin hastily puts some distance between the two of them. Better not get caught doing anything untoward. Merlin knows what the rest of the group already think of him and Arthur. The collective eye rolls seems like a pretty consistent metaphor.

“Merlin,” Gwaine says delightedly, coming over with a twelve pack in his arms and spotting the number of drinks in Merlin’s hands. “Are those all for you?”

Merlin glances down at himself. “No- I-”

Morgana returns with two large bottles of vodka and another with the glass in the shape of a skull and sets all three down heavily on the counter. She stares at Merlin’s haul and raises an inquisitorial eyebrow as if she knows he couldn't possibly drink all of this.

That may be true but Merlin doesn't appreciate the judgement. He shuffles over towards the counter and attempts to shift them all to the surface before Morgana takes pity on him and offers her own to hands to the effort. Arthur stands unhelpfully to the side and watches Merlin with a great deal of amusement while he glares back at him every few seconds.

Gwaine squeezes in to put the twelve pack down and it looks like they'll be running out of counter soon. They can’t all possible drink all of this in two weeks, they’ll die of alcohol poisoning first.

When Leon, Lancelot and Percival come back with Aeron, all of them are carrying two more bottles of spirits or liqueurs that Merlin doesn’t recognise and they manage to pile them onto the counter. Aeron seems impressed with the amount already and Merlin wonders if he should mention that Freya isn’t even back yet.

They’re nowhere near finished apparently. Merlin doesn’t understand how this won’t satisfy their alcohol requirements as it is.

Arthur disappears down the centre aisle as if to go and find her but Freya comes out from the left instead and happily sets her drinks down to their rapidly growing collection.

Merlin stands off to the side to get out of everyone’s way since he’s not purchasing anything and Arthur quickly returns carrying another bottle which he squeezes onto the last available space on the counter.

Aeron looks like he doesn’t know where to start, but he bends down and pulls out a few empty cardboard boxes for them to carry everything in once he’s scanned their items. The whole amount comes to just about the same sum of pounds he paid for two textbooks at the beginning of term though it's a little bit more than that. Merlin winces at the price in reflex, even more so when Arthur gets his wallet out and waves everyone else away when they try to contribute.

He’s not actually going to pay for all of this is he? Merlin steps to his side. “Hold on, you don’t have to pay for everything,” he insists, well aware that Arthur’s share barely covers a fraction of
the alcohol present.

Arthur’s expression seems a little softer all of a sudden but he hands over his card anyway.

“It’s alright, Merlin,” he says calmly. “It’s only fair, since I wasn’t invited here after all.”

Morgana tosses her hair back and narrows her eyes at Arthur before they share a silent look that Merlin feels like he should be worried about. What exactly did Morgana say to convince him that Merlin wanted him here after all?

“I’d have invited you,” Merlin admits quietly before he can stop himself. “If I’d thought you wanted to come.”

Arthur’s jaw tenses slightly and Merlin thinks he got the meaning entirely. Since Arthur snuck out of his bedroom the last time they saw each other without any explanation, it’s not surprising Merlin didn’t contact him first.

And it turns out they can still be around each other if they’re not shagging anymore, can’t they? They seem to be doing an alright job of it now. Perhaps these two weeks won’t be so bad after all.

Especially since there’s so many other friends here to distract them. Aeron hands Arthur’s card back along with his receipt and everyone else thanks him for shouting them. They get the rest of it into the boxes and it’s just enough that everyone can carry it all, though Merlin had been doubtful.

He can already imagine what his mother might say about this when she sees all the boxes.

She’ll worry about where they can possibly store so many drinks and then perhaps ask if she can join them.

As soon as they leave Aeron Owen’s shop with a worryingly large number of bottles in tow and the sunlight fading on the horizon, Morgana’s teeth start chattering.

“Perhaps I should have brought that coat?” she mutters, with the kind of warning in her expression for the group at large to keep any unwelcome observations to themselves.

Merlin doesn’t say a word, merely removes his coat one handed since he’s carrying a box full of bottles and wraps it around her shoulders. Morgana offers what he might expect to be an apologetic look without admitting defeat as she slowly puts it on.

At least she’s appreciative.

He doesn’t need to tell them where to go, Leon and Percival at least seemed to have picked up on the direction home and lead the group on alongside the main road with their spoils in hand.

Merlin wades through a worn path of bluebells and settles into the startling relief and familiarity of home. At least until Arthur pointedly offers to carry some of the bottles when Lancelot nearly drops the pair nestled in the crook of his arm. He lets Arthur take two off his hands with a thankful look, and shifts his hands until he’s comfortably carrying the cardboard box full of the rest.

Merlin can’t believe how much quid they spent on alcohol. Well, how much Arthur spent.

When they reach the turn off from the main road that will lead back to the B&B, the temperature
has dropped even further. Merlin’s arms are covered in gooseflesh by then and he wishes that his magic was reliable at the moment because he could be using it to warm himself up. But he can’t exactly try a spell right now when there are so many people to witness him fail and ask questions about it.

Merlin still doesn’t have those answers.

“Here,” Arthur says gruffly, tossing something at him.

It hits Merlin directly in the face and for a second thinks it’s some kind of unwarranted attack before he catches hold of the material and realises that Arthur’s shrugged out of his coat, exposing his tight sleeved, well-fitting shirt to the open air.

“Oh- er,” Merlin starts, unsure if it’s proper of him to accept it.

He glances at the others to see their reactions but suddenly they’re all staring off in conveniently separate directions, avoiding eye contact. Even Percival, who’s got a peculiar smile on his face. It all seems very coordinated.

Except of course for Morgana, who’s turned her head so that she can frown at them. She’s the one who started this though. Morgana should have listened to him the first time around.

“Just take it,” Arthur says, no longer looking at him, hands casually twirling the wine bottle in his grip. “I can handle the cold.”

It feels like there’s probably a hidden insult in there somewhere, but the coat is warm and it smells like Arthur and this is about the closest Merlin is ever going to get to him now.

So he slips Arthur’s heavy grey coat on with his available hand, shifting the box around a bit to get it on properly and instantly feels much better.

Only now Morgana’s glaring at them.

“No need to be the hero, Arthur,” she says rather coldly for one who’s also wearing a borrowed coat.

Merlin can’t quite place her sudden irritation.

But the expression Arthur returns is nearly icy. “Well I wouldn’t have to if you’d listened to Merlin to begin with. Why should he suffer because you’re stubborn?”

Morgana’s eyes flash and it’s not difficult to see a row coming on between them.

First day here and somebody is already fighting. Merlin’s cheeks are on fire by then. “Truly, I wasn’t suf-“

“I don’t know about you lot,” Gwaine says loudly over the mounting quarrel. “But I could bloody well use a drink.”

Leon and Freya cheer and Percival starts hooting enthusiastically so Arthur and Morgana’s potential row is lost under the noise. Merlin’s grateful for the reprieve, especially since he’s still rattled and red-faced by Arthur’s fit of gentlemanly behaviour.

Arthur’s prick has been in his arse countless times, and yet somehow this is the small gesture that flusters him.
Merlin really needs to get a grip. He’s embarrassing himself.

“Oh my,” Gloria says, once she catches sight of them from the patio after they’ve come through the gate brandishing boxes full of alcohol. “Well I don’t envy your livers that’s for sure. Care to share?”

Gwaine bows at the waist, box held in one hand as he uses the other to tip an invisible hat. “But of course.”

He straightens and drags a hand down Percival’s side in such a way that makes Percival’s grip on his own cardboard box fumble. Gwaine doesn’t seem distressed by that at all. If anything, Merlin thinks Gwaine is trying to get him going, much to Percival’s mounting embarrassment.

Merlin thinks it’s working. Even if he’s not sure what kind of game he’s playing. Percival doesn’t seem like he’s complaining though. Gwen, Elyan and Merlin’s mother come out of the parlour to meet them and they’re instantly reacting to the sheer levels of alcohol present.

“Gods, did you empty the shop out?” Merlin’s mother demands, mouth falling open. “Who paid for this?”

“Pendragons,” Freya announces happily, well pleased with the situation. “And we’re ever so grateful.”

She’s only a little sarcastic, but Merlin knows Freya is wholly appreciative of Arthur’s well-meaning gesture. Arthur seems to understand that too because he snorts in amusement and waves a hand at her in a don't mention it kind of way.

“Happy to assist in the organ failure effort.”

Gwaine laughs and bounds past Gwen and Elyan, squeezing into the house. “Who wants a drink then?” he shouts, in high spirits now that his worries of a dry evening have been thoroughly crushed.

Percival glances at Gloria. “I’ll make sure he doesn’t bother you too much,” he promises.

But Gloria only smiles at that. “Who’s a bother? He’s wonderful. Especially if he’s willing to share drink.”

Merlin can respect that logic. Percival grins and disappears after his boyfriend into the house. And finally Merlin turns to his mother.

“Shall we get started on preparing dinner?” he wonders.

It shouldn’t take very long but they do have a full B&B of guests at the moment and that means more mouths to feed.

“Of course,” she agrees, turning to walk back into the house.

Merlin follows after her and sets down his box of alcohol down in the pantry for the time being, already shrugging out of Arthur's coat once his hands are free since it's much too warm to be wearing it now. When he returns to the hallway, he hangs the coat up on the rack right next to the
reception desk feeling a little bit cowardly for avoiding returning it to Arthur directly.

The others are crowded in the hall, sorting out how to manoeuvre inside with all of their boxes when Lancelot squeezes past Morgana and Freya, gripping Elyan’s shoulder welcomingly as he moves past. “Might I help with the cooking?” he asks following Merlin back into the kitchen. “I’m happy to assist in any way I can, Hunith.”

She turns her head to look at Merlin in order to gauge on his opinion. “The more the merrier,” he decides, walking up to Lance and clapping him on the back.

He finally spots Arthur shift forward in the hallway out of the corner of his eye as if he wants to help as well before he manages to stop himself. Merlin figures with the upbringing he’s had, with maids and personal chefs and the like, that he probably doesn’t know a lot about cooking anyway. He’s better off staying where he is.

Merlin reaches his mother's side and scoops his mobile out of his pocket to check that Will hasn’t messaged him again since this morning. Merlin sent a text before he met the others at the station, inviting him over later. Will said needed to stay with his mother today since she wasn’t doing too well, but he'd promised to come over in the afternoon and stay for dinner.

Merlin can’t wait to see him.

Although he’s a little worried how Will might hit it off with the rest of his friends. And if he’ll say any embarrassing things about Merlin and Arthur. Or Arthur catching them both in bed together.

Merlin just knows he’s going to say *something*, but he’s too excited to have his friend back to be overly bothered by it.

“What should we cook?” he wonders, staring at Lancelot and his mother. “I’d suggest something veggie but I doubt that will go down well with everyone.”

“I bought meat,” Hunith adds, “From Eddi this morning. She gave me all the best cuts for a good price. We could make something for the vegetarians and something for the meat eaters.”

Merlin frowns. “Mum, I think I’m the only veggie here.”

“Elyan doesn’t eat meat,” Lancelot puts in to Merlin's surprise. “Perhaps you should go around and ask what the other will eat? I can start cutting the meat up.”

“Great,” Hunith says, side stepping the both of them to get at the fridge before drawing out the vegetables and meat and piling it onto their wooden bench. “Shall we?”

Merlin fetches the pen and paper they use to take coffee or tea orders in the mornings and heads back out into the hall.

“I’ll be back,” he calls.

He finds everyone in the parlour, even Gloria and Rowan who Gwaine is currently pouring drinks for with the kind of relish of one thoroughly enjoying themselves. Merlin can’t tell precisely what it is they’re about to introduce to their livers but he can smell the alcohol in the air.

It’s not entirely unpleasant but in the warm room it’s powerful and heady. He asks around about dinner but everyone’s mostly interested in meat. Except Rowan who it turns out is another fellow vegetarian. Merlin’s not exactly surprised to hear this. He saw her out in the fields sitting with the cows this morning while reading a book.
As farms go theirs is fairly small. They have two cows, a goat and six chickens.

His mother makes homemade cheese and sells the hen’s eggs down at the market. It doesn’t make much money, but Merlin knows it’s something she enjoys doing, and she’s always giving their neighbours their fair share of eggs.

Merlin was surprised about the cows though when he saw them all out there together through the kitchen window that morning. Cassandra and Harry are usually shy with strangers. But they were happy to sit around Rowan.

“I’ll have the veggie option as well,” Gwen decides. “Do you need any help, Merlin?”

“No, we’ve got it,” he promises without looking up as he marks her down for vegetarian. “I’ll make a soup since it’s so cold. Mum will have fetched crusty bread from Mariaella’s bakery.”

“Sounds wonderful,” Freya agrees from her position in the armchair closest to the fire. She must be on her second drink because her cheeks are flushed and she’s smiling much wider than she did before.

Merlin grins back at her and takes his list back into the kitchen. When he returns Lancelot and his mother seem to have decided on roast lamb for dinner because Lancelot is covering the lamb in a marinade of garlic, cumin, lemon, rosemary, salt and pepper. Merlin’s mother is cutting up vegetables to roast in the oven with the lamb and she looks up when he enters.

“Do you know what you want to cook then?”

“Leek and potato soup,” he decides. “Have you been to Mariaella’s?”

“Yesterday. The bread is in the pantry. Sounds like a lovely meal.”

Merlin ducks out the back door and walks into the vegetable garden. He can see his mother has already picked most of the cabbages and tomatoes and that the herbs in the small plot beyond the garden have grown a little wild since he left.

Merlin finds the row of leeks and grabs the garden fork to loosen the soil around them first so that he can pull them up without breaking any. Once he’s finished, he sets the fork back against the wall and bends down to slowly draw three of the biggest stalks out of the soil.

“I didn’t realise you lived on a farm as well,” comes a voice and Merlin drops the last leek in surprise when he turns to stare at Arthur.

Merlin inspects his face carefully, but Arthur isn’t making fun, in fact Merlin can see him peering at the hen house with interest.

“Never seen one before, have you?” he wonders, scooping up the leeks and carefully navigating the garden to reach the herbs.

He bends down and starts picking chives and a couple spring onion stalks and adds them to the pile of leeks in his arms. Arthur has since walked to the edge of the vegetable garden, peering about himself curiously.

“Not really,” he admits. “Father isn’t much of a gardener. Or animal lover. I remember begging him for a dog when I was young, but he’d only allow me to have it if I used it to hunt.”

Merlin makes a face.
“Yes, exactly,” Arthur says, understanding just from Merlin’s expression. “Pets weren’t allowed in our house.”

Merlin straightens up and starts moving towards Arthur before he remembers the mint and doubles back. They’ll be using mint jelly for the lamb but a few mint leaves won’t go astray.

“You seem different here,” Arthur says unexpectedly after Merlin has fetched a handful of mint leaves.

Merlin’s not sure if that’s an accusation or just an observation.

“Well not different,” he amends. “Just more yourself.”

Is this Arthur trying to have a conversation? Merlin snorts a little and tries not to laugh when he reaches him.

“Oh shut up Merlin, you know what I mean.”

Merlin nudges his shoulder teasingly as he squeezes past. “Yes, I know. It’s different seeing someone in their home for the first time, like discovering another side of them you never knew about.”

Arthur is watching him closely.

“Yes, that’s it.”

“Come on,” Merlin says, leading Arthur back towards the house. “We’d best get inside. The temperatures drop quickly here.”

Arthur wraps his arms around himself after a shiver racks through his frame. He doesn't ask about his coat, he must have seen Merlin hang it in the foyer. “I’m starting to see your point.”

Merlin laughs a little at his expression.

“Why do you think I own so many jumpers?”

Arthur follows him back into the kitchen and when Merlin tries to set the pile of vegetables and herbs down onto the wooden island he drops a leek. Arthur reaches out and snags it before it hits the ground, setting it besides the rest.

“Thanks,” Merlin says, trying not to look at him too much when his mother is only a few steps away.

He takes the handful of mint leaves and sets them down by her vegetables where she’s left six or seven potatoes for him to use. Already peeled.

“Cheers, Mum,” he says, kissing her cheek as he picks them up and takes them back to his section.

Arthur is still standing where he left him.

“Do you-?”

“Arthur!” Leon shouts from the parlour, footsteps loud before he’s opening up the kitchen door. “You’ve got to try this stuff Freya’s drinking.”

Arthur doesn’t answer right away but a moment later he nods and moves around the counter,
sliding past Leon still lingering in the doorway. “Did you need a hand with anything?” Leon wonders, looking at the food spread out on the wooden counter with interest. “Can I get anyone a drink?”

“Oh, we’re fine, dear,” Merlin’s mother replies. “But thank you for offering.”

Leon smiles, seemingly content with the interaction before he goes to follow after Arthur. Merlin does his best not to be irked by the interruption. What had Arthur been about to ask him?

Leon could do with some better timing.

Will comes through the front door just as the roast is being put in the oven and Merlin’s got the chopped leeks, garlic and potatoes in a soup pot. They need to boil for about twenty minutes and the roast for much longer than that so they’ve got plenty of time to stand about and do nothing.

“Emrys!” he says once he comes barging through the kitchen door. “You’ve been overrun by drunken idiots.”

Merlin has only heard snatches of laughter and conversation coming from the parlour whilst they were cooking but he doubts they’ve been causing any real trouble. Will’s probably just feeling overwhelmed by the amount of people he doesn’t know in Merlin’s house right now.

“Will, this is Lancelot,” he says. “Lancelot, Will.”

Lancelot finishes washing his hands and quickly dries them first before extending a hand to shake. “It’s good to meet you.”

“Likewise, mate,” Will replies easily, much more relaxed in the familiar territory.

“And how is your mother?” Hunith asks him, looking concerned. “Merlin said she wasn’t doing well today.”

Will only shrugs. “The meds kicked in around lunchtime. She was sleeping when I left.”

While Merlin’s mother is squeezing Will’s arm, he makes it to the sink and quickly washes his own hands. They’re practically covered in herbs at the moment.

C’mon,” Merlin says, wiping them on a nearby tea towel. “I’ll introduce you to everyone else.”

Will nods and lets Merlin drag him into the parlour where the rest of the group is lounging about and otherwise enjoying themselves. Unfortunately, Arthur is walking towards them when they enter, probably leaving to get some air or visit the loo and Merlin can see trouble already.

“Oh,” Will says with a laugh when Arthur sees them both and stops, startled. “Nice to see the bloke who copped a feel of my arse in the daylight hours.”

Gwen lets out a little gasp and Morgana and Gwaine start laughing. Gloria leans over to whisper something in her wife’s ear and Merlin really wishes Will had bothered to consider keeping his mouth shut. He doubts anyone is just going to forget this.

Arthur only narrows his eyes. “I am sorry I thought you were Merlin,” he mutters ignoring the rest of the group’s reaction. “Let’s not rehash this.”
“Yes, let’s not,” Merlin agrees, glaring at Will who merely smirks.

Merlin realises abruptly that he hasn't even told him yet that the thing between he and Arthur is over. Will probably thinks he's just teasing them both.

“So this is your best mate,” Gwaine says curiously, giving Will an obvious once over. “’Spose he’s not a total loss.”

“Gwaine,” Freya says sharply, voice heavy with disapproval. “Don’t be rude. He’s perfectly good looking.”

Will looks pleasantly amused now. “He is, is he?” he asks, eyeing Freya rather keenly.

Merlin wonders if he should have warned Will off trying to shag his friends. It seems a little late for that now. Especially when Freya blushes. And doesn’t point out that she’s seeing anyone at the moment. Perhaps she fell out with the boy from Elemental101 after all. Merlin hasn’t heard much mention of him since Morgause’s party.

“So these are my mates from Camelot,” he says after a pause when it’s clear they’re not going to insult Will any further or attempt to flirt with him. “That’s Freya, Morgana, Leon, Gwen, Elyan, Percival, Gwaine and Gloria and Rowan. Arthur- you’ve met.”

Morgana laughs again and Merlin frowns at her, trying not to get agitated.

“Everyone, this is Will.”

Will nods and takes one of the empty chairs, surprised when Leon hands him a beer almost as soon as he sits down. Merlin thinks it could have been much more of a disaster than this so he’s happy. But he should probably be checking on the soup.

“Be right back,” he says, ducking out of the parlour and catching Arthur on his way back.

“Sorry about that,” Merlin tells him. “Will doesn’t know when to keep his mouth shut.”

Arthur stares at him. “It’s fine, Merlin. Don’t get yourself worked up.”

He walks on past and Merlin can't help but feel as if he’s been dismissed. Not for the first time in the past few days. Why does Arthur insist on walking away from him any chance that he can?

Is he trying to make Merlin feel worse?

Merlin is dishing soup into separate bowls when Freya comes into the kitchen.

“Can I help?” she asks, reaching his side.

Lancelot is checking the oven and Merlin’s mother is sitting with Gloria and Rowan in the parlour.

“Certainly, if you want to cut up some of the bread.”

He gestures to the baguette resting on the table and the bread knife a few centimetres away. Freya picks up her weapon of choice and happily gets started.
Once she’s finished buttering the cut pieces, Merlin’s fetched a plate for her to stack the bread onto as he starts carrying out soup into the dining room. His mother has already set the table in the meantime and since everyone is still in the parlour, Merlin sets the two bowls down at the first available space.

If he was using his magic, this task would be done with much fewer trips, he’d be levitating the rest of the bowls in after him. Magic certainly makes everything in his life easier. But only when he can control it. Not like now.

Freya sets the pile of crispy bread in the centre of the table just as Lancelot is bringing out the lamb with gloved hands to protect against the heat. Merlin does a few more trips to get the rest of the soup bowls out and his mother comes back into the kitchen for the mint jelly.

“It all smells wonderful,” she says when they pass each other by.

Merlin grins at her and makes it to the dining room where the others seem to have figured out that food is appearing and have walked in to claim their seats. Only once his mother has returned and Lancelot and Arthur have pulled out the chairs for Rowan and Gloria does Merlin think about taking a seat.

Luckily, there’s more than enough food for everyone. It’s a good thing too, because at this stage Merlin is starving.

“Don’t be shy,” Hunith says a moment later. “Dig in!”

They don’t need telling twice.

Everyone loves the food. At least that’s what Merlin assumes when silence overtakes the table besides the clinking of cutlery and the crunch of bread. The lamb must be good too, because everyone practically devours it, savouring over the vegetables as well.

Merlin lets the soup warm him inside and out and is pleased when people ask for seconds. With the sheer amount of numbers they have, Merlin feels proud of how smoothly everything goes. No one is left hungry.

Afterwards in the hallway after Merlin’s finished setting the dirty dishes into the sink for later and returned with the intention of joining the others in the parlour, does he realise that his mother is standing there alone, holding a bottle of wine and smiling to herself.

“Where’d you get that?” Merlin asks, nodding at the unexpected gift.

“Oh,” his mother says, with a wistful smile. “That golden haired young man gave it to me.”

“Arthur,” he tells her, providing the name.

So that’s what all those questions were about at Owen’s shop. Arthur had meant to buy this for Hunith all along.

“He was very polite about it too,” she says. “You know I’ll admit at first I thought he was perhaps a bit rude, but he apologised for showing up here unannounced and offered to pay double for his room.”
“You didn’t let him?” Merlin demands, aghast.

“Certainly not,” she snorts. “We have the space, he’s not at all an imposition.”

Merlin doesn’t want his mother getting the wrong idea about Arthur. He’s really not like that. Even if he can be a little obnoxious sometimes. Merlin still wants his mother to like him after all.

“Arthur’s sister- misinformed him of the situation.”

That’s the best explanation that he can give. Merlin’s not going to discuss all of the spectacle surrounding his life right now. His mother will only worry.

“Well it was definitely a kind gesture. I appreciate it.”

Sometimes Merlin marvels at how much Arthur isn’t at all like others expect him to be. And then he wonders how he could have ever been so wrong about him. Arthur's more of a Knight than anyone he's ever met, but he's also nothing like the Knights at all.

Arthur's special.

Merlin finds a seat in the corner of the parlour with Morgana and Gwen and listens to the rest of the group get steadily louder as the night progresses and the more they drink. Rowan and Gloria have cleared an impromptu space in the parlour and are slow dancing to a tune only they can hear.

Merlin catches Arthur watching them with an odd look in his eyes that he can’t interpret.

“You sure, you’re not drinking with us, Merlin?” Morgana wonders, extending her glass towards him invitingly.

Merlin shakes his head. “Not after last weekend.”

Gwen reaches out and squeezes his shoulder. “It really wasn’t that terrible, Merlin. Don’t let that turn you off it.”

He’s fairly certain if he gets some drinks in him that he’ll soon be cuddled up with Arthur on his chair and asking to share his bed in no time. Can’t have him embarrassing himself again. Or giving Arthur another opportunity to duck out on him.

“I think I’ll just stay sober for now,” he decides, thinking it’s probably safer.

Especially when Arthur is sitting in Merlin’s favourite chair in the parlour and wearing a soft blue jumper that brings out the colour of his eyes. Is that supposed to be some kind of sign?

His mother comes back in through the parlour doors a second later carrying three glasses of wine, and goes over to join Gloria and Rowan. They break apart with a crow of delight to accept the glasses and Gwaine decides to take up dancing in their absence, though he does it by himself and looks much more foolish.

Percival and Leon are in stitches when he starts shaking his arse and tries to coax Merlin’s mother into joining him. Thankfully, she has a bit more sense than that. Merlin doesn’t know if he could have ever lived their dancing number down otherwise.
They sit around for a long time. Talking about nothing really, just enjoying the warmth of the fire and the mixed company. Merlin is so at ease here he wonders at how he ever managed to leave in the first place.

Eventually Rowan and Gloria go off to bed, and Merlin realises he’s been yawning pretty much non-stop for the last hour. And no wonder, it’s nearly two in the morning.

“Right I’m off to bed,” he says, losing out to the struggle to keep his eyes open.

Freya gets up with a groan, even as Will’s eyes follow her across the room. They’ve been chatting nearly half the night and Merlin knows him well enough to be certain he’s interested.

“Me too,” she says. “I’m bloody exhausted.”

“Here, here,” Gwaine cries, raising his glass and draining the rest of it.

Percival rolls his eyes and stands up, taking the empty glass and setting it down next to the others, before gripping Gwaine’s hand and encouraging him out of the parlour. Gwaine laughs, but follows Percival out and off to bed.

Everyone seems to decide it’s time and generally moves about to get themselves organised.

“You can sleep here if you like,” Merlin tells Will, when he gets up in search of his coat.

“No, I’d best be getting home to Mum. She might need me.”

Merlin nods and pats him on the back when Will pulls him into a quick, one armed hug.

Lancelot uses the metal prong to start removing fuel from the fire, so what’s left of it will burn itself into embers soon enough. Merlin hurries over to help him, but he seems to have it handled, even with the couple of drinks he’s had. Of the rest of them, he seems the most sober.

Merlin gives a parting wave and goes to follow after his mother. He runs into Arthur on the way to his room in the hallway, and notices how he seems a little lost all of a sudden.

“Alright?”

Unexpectedly, Arthur reaches out and carefully traces his fingers through Merlin’s hair. “Course,” he replies roughly.

Merlin loses all of the air in his lungs at once, heart pounding as he swallows. When he finally manages to give Arthur a questioning look, he levels his shoulders like he’s rolling the moment straight off his spine. As if it never was.

“There was a leaf in your hair,” he offers mildly, like that’s a thing mates do. Like their hands always linger afterwards.

Merlin isn’t so convinced but there are steps in the hall and too many people in this house to ask any of the questions he wants to.

“Goodnight Merlin,” he says, and Merlin’s aware that Arthur’s standing much closer than he was before.

Merlin’s instantly distracted. “Er- night.”

He turns to follow his mother into their room and she’s standing in the doorway with a bemused
look on her face. His first thought is how long she was standing there, watching them in the hallway. Something tells him he wasn’t as subtle just then as he’d like to believe.

His thoughts prove true once he’s followed her into the room and shut the door behind him, moving to the chest of drawers to fetch out his pyjamas. Merlin’s not exactly shy around his mother, but he turns his back for politeness’ sake as he strips down to his underwear and climbs into his sleeping pants.

He grabs the sleeping bag and heavy blankets from the shelf in the corner of the room and moves towards the empty space on the floor by the bed.

“Is that the boy?” his mother asks as she’s crawling under Merlin’s sheets and he’s starting to get set up on the floor. “The unexpected arrival you couldn’t stop looking at. Arthur. Is he the reason why you’re asking about love?”

Merlin’s cheeks feel hot. “Maybe.”

She hums a soft tune as she relaxes under the blankets. “I’m sorry you won’t get to spend any time in your bed, dear.”

“Mum, it’s fine,” he promises. “I don’t mind at all really.”

“For what it’s worth,” she says after a moment of silence. “I think he couldn’t stop looking at you either.”

Merlin sighs and hits some of the lumps out of his pillow before slipping into the sleeping bag and piling thick blankets atop it.

His mother seems to take that as his answer. “There wasn’t a leaf in your hair, dear,” she says kindly.

Merlin flushes and thinks of what the next two weeks will be like, figuring out the swell of his feelings surrounding Arthur while they’re both under his mother’s watchful eye.

“I’m afraid it’s a bit more complicated than that.”

His mother lets out an agreeable noise, that’s a mixture of amusement and understanding. “Love always is.”

Merlin doesn’t know for sure. But he’s interested in finding out. He’d certainly like to know what the hell Arthur thinks he’s doing. Leaving Merlin’s bed before he wakes up and plucking imaginary leaves from his hair.

Merlin didn’t think it was possible for this to get more confusing.

Why must Arthur constantly defy expectation?
Can't think about it too much, is just this moment enough?

Chapter Notes

Chap title is *Future Friends* by Superfruit. Thanks for sticking around, I'm about ninety per cent positive that the next chapter will be the last, but let's see!

He sleeps well in his old room even lying on the floor the whole night and when Merlin wakes up, it’s sunrise and his bed is already empty.

Merlin assumes that his mother is in the kitchen making tea for herself or the guests and drops back down onto the pillows with a sigh, wondering if he can get away with going back to sleep again for a couple more hours.

The others are bound to be knackered after their big night last night. They certainly drank a lot. Merlin’s pretty confident they’ll be hungover this morning. They might not come out of their rooms until mid afternoon at least.

The comfort of the warm blankets is too much to resist, and Merlin ends up dozing for another hour.

Then his stomach wakes him.

Merlin crawls out of his pile of blankets with a groan and tidies it up, folding the sleeping bag and blankets into a neat pile, knowing his mother will do it anyway if he doesn’t, wanting to spare her the effort.

Then he staggers outside and into the kitchen to go and help make breakfast.

Merlin discovers his mother isn’t the only one awake either. Rowan is sitting out on the front patio cradling a cup of coffee and looking out at the countryside, and Morgana and Gwen are curled up together on the long lounge in the parlour with Elyan and Lancelot who are sitting comfortably on the rug, basking in the morning sunshine.

Merlin catches sight of Gwaine and Percival ambling into the parlour together, half-awake, just as he’s disappearing back into the kitchen. He certainly doesn’t envy their hangovers.

“How did you sleep dear?” his mother asks, once she spots him. “What should we cook for breakfast?”

Merlin fetches out a few grapes from the fridge and pops them into his mouth. “I slept like a log. How about you?”

“I slept wonderfully.”

“I’m not sure what we should cook. Let me ask the others-“

And he ducks out of the parlour still chewing.

“Morning,” Merlin greets them, sinking into the armchair by the door. “What would you like to eat
for breakfast?”

“Coffee,” Morgana says lifelessly.

Gwen snorts and snuggles into Morgana’s neck with a sleepy sigh. “Toast.”

“Bacon and eggs,” Percival requests. “And sausages.”

“Food,” Elyan agrees.


“Oh,” she says, smiling at him with open warmth. “Do you have any fruit?”

Merlin nods. “We’ve got plums, pear and apple trees in our garden. The apricots need to be picked as soon as possible before the frost sets in. Our mulberries aren’t in season, but the strawberries are still good. My mother makes her own yoghurt if you’d like to have that with it.”

“Oh yes, that sounds perfect. Thank you, Merlin.”

He smiles and goes to head back inside but Rowan opens her mouth again. “I hear you’ve been having problems with your magic.”

Merlin freezes. “You heard what?”

Rowan smiles and the foam in her coffee swirls delicately into the shape of a flower all on its own. Merlin’s mouth falls open.


“I’m a retired Magic User,” Rowan corrects. “Don’t have as much juice as I used to. Or well, my body can’t handle the strain of it anymore. You know the energy it can take out of you.”

Merlin remembers how much saving Sarrum cost him. He could barely lift his head up at the end of it, and he’s still young. Merlin hadn’t considered what ageing might do to his ability to perform magic. There’s so much he still has to learn.

“And Gloria?” he wonders. “Is she?”

“Believe it or not, but Gloria used to be a Knight,” Rowan says with a lively smile.

“Were you partners?”

“No, but we’d been together since University and put in a request to be partnered together when we graduated. Relationships between Knights and Magic Users though unusual, weren’t prohibited then. But a relationship between two women, wasn’t acceptable.”

Merlin’s heart feels heavy. “So they separated you.”

Rowan’s smile is wry and unforgiving. “Gloria was sent to Stornoway in Scotland. I was sent to Penzance.”

Merlin frowns. “That’s not too far though,” he says. “Surely you could have-“

“Once you’ve been assigned, you’re not permitted to leave your post until the area has been
thoroughly cleared of evil magic. We didn’t see each other for five years, and back then we didn’t have the internet and mobile phones to help us. All Gloria and I had to keep in touch was letters. And half of them were mysteriously 'lost' in the post.”

Merlin tries not to let the horror show on his face. “What happened?”

“The Knight I was assigned to had some contacts in the Allocation Department. After five years, he was able to use his influence to help us. Gloria and her partner were sent to a town not too far from where we’re stationed and we were able to see each other again.”

“For how long?” he wonders, outraged.

“We used those contacts in the Allocation Department for years, and they helped us stay as close as we could. But even we couldn’t keep it up forever. I was thirty when I decided I’d had enough, I retired and opened up my own apothecary, helping people heal with magic. Gloria didn’t last much longer before she joined me. We’ve been together ever since.”

Merlin thinks over what she’s said. “And you- you know what’s wrong with me?”

“Oh Merlin,” she says. “You know exactly what’s happening to your magic. I’ve had the same problems myself. The heart is such an intrinsic part of how we use it.”

Rowan inclines her head as if someone’s called out for her. “Your mother wants you,” she says. “Just don’t force it, Merlin. The magic will come on its own.”

Merlin’s not so sure of that.

He heads back into the kitchen to help his mother get started on the cooking. By the time the food is ready, the hallways are still empty and the others still haven’t come out of their rooms. Merlin hopes they haven’t died of alcohol poisoning. He wonders if Arthur’s still sleeping.

Merlin helps carry out the bowl of cut up fruit and yoghurt to Rowan outside and then takes a pot of coffee out to set down onto the kitchen table. Morgana gets up with a groan and drags herself over there to start pouring herself and Gwen a cup. Merlin squeezes her shoulder comfortingly and wishes he could give her a little bit of a magical boost to make her feel better.

He hasn't taught her how to use magic on herself yet, it's much more complicated than using magic on others.

Morgana yawns and nudges him gently. “How did you sleep?”

“Alright,” he shrugs, not bothering to mention he slept on the floor. “How did you?”

“Curled up in the arms of a beautiful woman,” Morgana says with a playful smile. “I slept great.”

Merlin smiles weakly, trying not to think he slept alone with his mother in the only bed and heads back into the kitchen.

His mother returns with a plate of toast, piled high and a stack of poached eggs and Merlin ducks back to get the plate of bacon and sausages. They set it all down together and Merlin hurries back into the kitchen to boil some tea while he cuts up his own bowl of fruit.

The yoghurt his mother makes is delicious and Merlin adds that to the bowl as well, with a little bit of granola thrown in as well. He pours himself a cup of green tea and carries the bowl and mug out to join the others. His mother must have already eaten because when he sits down, she’s already
gone to join Rowan outside.

Merlin can’t believe he didn’t even sense that she was a Magic User.

No one says anything when he sits down next to Gwen, but that’s because everyone’s too busy piling their plates full of food and eating.

It hits him suddenly when he’s mid bite. Gwen’s hand is against Morgana’s thigh where their fingers are intertwined and Morgana is drinking coffee one handed, casually catching her eye every few minutes or so and smiling. Gwaine seems to have eaten his fill because he’s dropped his fork and started nodded off into Percival’s neck. Percival is leaning towards him, smiling softly and happily and Elyan and Lancelot are talking quietly, heads bent in intimate closeness.

They all have each other Merlin realises, and suddenly he’s never felt so alone.

Merlin’s grown up liking his own company. He’s never had brothers or sisters, and Will hasn’t always been around, since his mother sickness meant he was needed elsewhere. Ealdor doesn’t have many residents either. It’s always been isolated and the kind of place where people get used to their own company.

Merlin’s always been alone. But it’s very rare that he’s ever felt lonely like this. It just seems like everyone has someone. And all Merlin has is someone who doesn’t quite want him.

“Hey,” Gwen says, touching his arm in concern. “Are you alright, Merlin? Is something wrong?”

He opens his mouth, unsure of what he’s about to say, certain he won’t be able to explain this sudden feeling before there’s someone dropping into the chair beside him.

“Oh food,” Arthur groans, sounding grateful. “You made all this, Merlin? I could kiss you.”

Merlin turns, surprised when Arthur slings and arm around his neck and drags him in close for a hug. His body is warm, and he smells freshly showered when Merlin’s nose is shoved into Arthur’s neck.

He struggles, half tipping out of his chair because Arthur’s grabbed him so roughly, before he’s being released and falls back abruptly only just keeping his balance. Arthur reaches out for the coffee pot, pouring himself a cup while Merlin flushes from his neck upwards in embarrassment, especially from how the rest of the group looks at him.

Merlin drops his head and tries to focus on his bowl of fruit, stomach swimming with excitement just from that small touch. His heart is beating too fast. And Arthur’s hair is adorably pushed up in a few directions.

Merlin has to resist reaching out and smoothing it down for him.

He eats his breakfast instead.

They do nothing but lounge around all day.

Merlin doesn’t mind so much. He’s been meaning to relax as much as possible during the holidays, even if most of the group is complaining about being hungover.
Leon joins them after an hour of everyone sitting comfortably out on the patio with Rowan. Freya doesn’t come out of her room until two in the afternoon and she looks half dead when she does. Merlin really doesn’t regret the alcohol induced fun he missed out on last night.

Especially since most of the group looks like they’ve been run over by a truck. It’s nice though, sitting around and doing nothing. Merlin is relaxed being at home, smelling the countryside, listening to the birds and the crickets buzz around them.

He’s idly watching the bees pollinate his mother’s flowers when Freya lets out a spectacular groan and transforms.

“What the-?” Arthur jumps out of his seat, having been sitting the closest to her.

Rowan lets out a delighted sound. “Oh dear, you look lovely.”

Freya yawns, her sharp teeth on display as her jaw opens wide. Then she bounds over Hunith’s daisy bush and curls up in the grass, tucking her wings in and resting her head on her two front paws under the sun.

A second later her eyes close.

“And why did she just do that?” Gwen wonders, eyes wide with surprise.

“Must be easier to be hungover in that form,” Elyan assumes, just as Merlin’s mother comes out with a pitcher of iced tea and lets out a gasp.


“Oh,” his mother says, relaxing a little and eyeing the great black panther curled up on the grass with interest. “Well that’s a first.”

“Wish I could turn into a panther to avoid my hangover,” Gwaine mutters, groaning afterward, half spread out across Percival’s chest as if he’s using him as a human pillow.

“Perhaps you’d like to go swimming?” Merlin’s mother suggests to the group at large after she’s set down the pitcher of iced tea on the table. “That always makes me feel better.”

Merlin groans at the thought. Even with the heat of the sun pressing down on them it’s still a terrible idea. “Mum, the river would be freezing now.”

“I don’t care,” Morgana declares, standing up abruptly. “I need to be submerged as soon as possible. Let’s go.”

“I could do with a swim,” Percival agrees, his eyes falling lazily shut.

So that’s that. With some moaning and groaning, the group gets up and heads back inside. Merlin goes off to his room to get changed and so does everyone else. He wonders how he’s supposed to handle being around a half-naked Arthur when there’s no chance of shagging involved.

He’s sure to make a right arse of himself. Especially after the way he blushed this morning.

But there’s no helping that.

They head out through the back garden once their ready, towels slung over shoulders as Merlin leads them through the safe path to avoid crushing the vegetable garden or disturbing the chickens. They disappear out of sight as soon as Freya comes slinking through the garden, eyes tracking the
It seems as if she’ll be swimming with them in this form. Whatever works.

They don’t have much of a fence surrounding their property, it’s wilted and weakened with age, so it’s no trouble stepping over it. Merlin leads them through the trees to reach the river and it’s only a fifteen minute walk with the sunlight bearing down on their backs.

When they reach the spot, half of the group is warm and sweating, ready to get straight into the water no matter the low temperature. There’s a tire swing hanging over the water, tied to the thickest branch of the tree, one that Will’s dad hung up when they were younger, and Merlin sets down his towel on the river bed where it’s dry just as Gwaine runs past, completely naked.

“What-“ Merlin splutters as Gwaine disappears into the freezing cold water, showing off his bare arse with a raucous laugh before dunking himself under.

Luckily, it’s deep enough for him to vanish completely. When Merlin glances back at the others, Percival is shaking his head, Leon is laughing, Morgana is unimpressed and Elyan looks embarrassed, but Arthur is only looking at him.

Merlin stares back, raising an eyebrow but Arthur just drops his towel and reaches up to tug his shirt off. He stalks over to Merlin, just as everyone else starts getting undressed. Merlin only just manages gets his shirt off before he’s got a face full of Arthur’s chest. “Oh,” he says, surprised. “Er-“

“Time for a swim, Merlin,” Arthur says crisply.

Merlin barely gets a chance to open his mouth before Arthur lifts him up and tosses Merlin over his shoulder.

“Oi,” he starts to protest just as Arthur walks determinedly towards the water. “Arthur!”

“Yes, Merlin?” he wonders innocently, gripping tightening so Merlin can’t get free even as he wades in deeper so they’ve almost reached Gwaine.

“Care to join me?” Gwaine calls out lazily before sinking under the surface again.

“With pleasure,” Arthur declares, dropping suddenly so that Merlin goes under with him.

The water isn’t as cold as expected but Merlin's still gasping when he emerges because Arthur is holding him close to his side like he’s expecting him to escape, arm tight around Merlin’s waist.

There’s a great deal of splashing as the rest of the group rushes in to join them. Merlin just manages to wriggle free, knowing that his skin is bright red and his awkwardness is plain to see.

Freya takes to the water like she’s made for it, black fur slick from the water as she dives under, wings flapping out and splashing everyone. Arthur is grinning and Merlin's laughing before he can stop himself, feeling cheered by the coolness of the water and the familiarity of Arthur at his side.

Then he pounces, jumping on Arthur’s back and manages to push him headfirst in the water.

As afternoons go, it’s one of Merlin’s favourites.
There’s a bit of a line up for the shower once they head back to the B&B. Thankfully, they don’t have to wait long because half of the rooms have their own bathrooms.

They have solar heating too which means they don’t have to worry about running out of hot water either. Merlin’s flushed and warm from the heat of the shower when he finally comes out, still half-dressed and throwing a warm jumper over his chest.

He bumps into Arthur in the hallway.

“Oh, er sorry.”

Arthur looks at him for a second, cheeks turning a little pink. “It’s fine, Merlin.”

He stops, staring at Arthur more closely. “What’s wrong?” he wonders. “What’s got you acting all-odd?”

“Here,” Arthur says, sounding a little strangled.

He reaches down and Merlin realises that half of his shirt is untucked, exposing the waistband of his pants and his hipbone. He lets Arthur straighten it up, with a look of bewilderment and heat when his fingers brush against bare skin.

“Thanks,” he manages, stammering a little.

Arthur can’t quite meet his eyes.

“Sure.”

The next morning Merlin is ready to take everyone out and show them around Ealdor properly.

He’s in the kitchen preparing breakfast with his mother and Gwen when he makes the suggestion.

“Oh that sounds great,” Gwen says agreeing wholeheartedly. “Why don’t you go and ask the others?”

“I’m sure the weather is on your side today too,” Hunith points out. “It’s meant to rain tomorrow.”

Merlin goes in and relays the idea to everyone else. The rest of the group is in agreement. Well, almost everyone. “Where’s Arthur?” Merlin asks, counting heads in the room to see who’s there.

“Not up yet,” Leon says, glancing about.

Merlin’s in the middle of sitting down when Morgana says, “Merlin can go and wake him.”

His head snaps up at his name, and he raises his hands in protest. “Why me?” he asks, gesturing over at Freya lingering in the doorway. “Freya’s closer.”

“I’m not going in there,” she objects, folding her arms. “Are you daft?”

Merlin looks to the others but no one comes to his rescue. He gets to his feet with a sigh, resigned to his fate. Hopefully Arthur’s not sleeping naked. Merlin doesn’t think he could survive having to witness something as unfair as that. Not when he can’t touch him anymore.
He slowly makes his way to Arthur’s room and knocks. Loudly. Hoping that the noise will be enough to wake him.

There’s no answer.

Merlin sighs and opens the door. Arthur didn’t even bother to lock it.

He’s a covered up lump in the bed and Merlin can’t tell if he’s naked which is probably a good thing. He approaches the bed slowly and tries to shake Arthur’s shoulder, thinking it should be enough to wake him.

“Arthur,” he whispers softly. “Wake up.”

His face is relaxed in sleep, even half pushed into the pillow as it is.

“Arthur,” he tries again, a little louder, shaking him more forcefully. He wonders if he should be worried about the knives Arthur usually keeps hidden underneath his pillow and whether Arthur might be inclined to use them on him.

“Merlin,” Arthur groans sleepily, moving suddenly and catching at his wrist, attempting to drag him down. “Come back to bed.”

“I was never in the bed!” Merlin squeaks, startled, but Arthur’s stronger and when he tugs again Merlin loses his footing and collapses on top of him.

“Oi,” he snaps, struggling to get free as Arthur pulls him in tighter.

His heart is already pounding, and Merlin doesn’t give a toss about Arthur's morning breath, he wants to kiss him anyway. Arthur finally lifts his head up off the pillow, hair smushed to one side and blinks sweetly at him, slowly coming awake.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he says grimly and Merlin’s heart drops.

“Well I’d get up if you’d let me go,” he shoots back, full of anger and indignation over the sudden rejection.

Arthur glances down at his arms with some manner of surprise as if they’ve disconnected from him and acted without his knowledge. “Oh,” he says softly, and releases him.

Merlin scrambles to stand up, red-faced and humiliated by how easily Arthur was able to switch over to indifference again.

“Breakfast is ready,” he mutters, voice shaking. “Next time I’ll let you sleep through it.”

“Merlin-“

He lets the door slam behind him.

Merlin takes them hiking up out of the valley, towards a rocky outcrop that looks out across Ealdor.

It makes for some very picturesque views and Merlin likes to go there sometimes to think. The
others will definitely enjoy it. At least for the photo opportunities. And the group is sober enough
this morning to feel interested in some exercise. So Merlin takes them out.

It’s about a thirty minute walk, but it doesn’t get too steep, or too strenuous. It’s a good way to get
the blood pumping. By the time they reach the outcrop, Merlin is hot and a little out of breath and
happily looking out across the fields and houses of Ealdor below.

He can see Mrs O’Flattery’s house. And the barn he lit on fire when he was fourteen years old and
drinking beer for the first time. It only looks a little charred from up here.

“Oh it’s lovely,” Elyan says, reaching Merlin’s side and looking down at Ealdor with him.

The rest of the group comes up, breathing heavily and puffing with effort. Their exclamations of
surprise and wonderment at the view makes it all worth it. They split off into smaller groups to
explore the outcrop and Merlin doesn’t even realise that he and Arthur are alone until he glances
up and sees that the rest of the group are elsewhere.

Merlin doesn’t say anything, just turns to take a look at Ealdor from this new direction.

It’s mere chance that Merlin glances over at Arthur messing about near the edge of the rock face,
close to tumbling over. He’s about to warn him to be careful when Arthur lets out a little ‘oh’ of
surprise and loses his balance, tipping over the side.

“Arthur!” he cries, stomach dropping out of his body as magic flares from his eyes and fingers.

He doesn’t chant an incantation, but Arthur reappears a second later as if an invisible force has
pushed him back up and Merlin’s already sprinting to his side, catching at his shoulder in terror
while Arthur lets out a little laugh and crashes onto his back, utterly at ease.

Then Merlin sees the second rock less than a metre below the edge, realises there was never any
danger and that Arthur tricked him. He should have known. Of all the times he’s been around
Arthur, seen him move and run and fight, he’s never once lost his balance before. Arthur
Pendragon doesn’t just fall off steep rock faces.

Merlin can’t believe he went to such an effort to frighten him. He’s still grinning too. Like it was
all a joke. As if Merlin imagining him dying is funny.

“Are you bloody mad?” Merlin shouts, fury burning across his cheeks as Arthur grin’s cheekily up
at him.

“Looks like your magic works just fine to me.”

Merlin’s never been so incredibly angry with him before. Not even when they first met.

“Is this funny to you?” he snaps, voice brittle and sharp. “Forcing me to watch people I care about
get hurt and not be able to do a thing about it?”

The humour falls off Arthur’s face and he climbs wearily to his feet. “I just wanted you to realise
your magic works fine and you’ve been worrying too much,” he says with a tender note.

Merlin glances at the second rock platform beneath the edge. “And what if it hadn’t worked?” he
demands. “You still could have seriously injured yourself.”

Arthur shrugs, like the idea of injury doesn’t bother him, that he’s come to expect it. “I know how
to fall without harming myself, Merlin. Did you forget I’ve been trained since birth?”
“Did you forget magic is tied to my emotions and upsetting me isn’t going to make anything better?” Merlin shoots back angrily.

“It worked,” Arthur insists rather stubbornly. “What else do you want me to say? I apologise for frightening you, Merlin, but your magic is a part of you, you shouldn’t just be ignoring it like this. I wanted you to see how much you’ve been overthinking it.”

Merlin shoots him a dirty look. “What? You mean like how I’ve been overthinking us?”

Arthur’s taken aback. “You’ve been- what?”

He turns away abruptly and is surprised when there’s a hand at his shoulder. “Merlin-“ Arthur starts gently, as if he’s talking to a small child, soft and sweetly, and Merlin feels like a fool for saying anything.

He jerks away from his hand. “Forget it. You’re such an *arse.*”

For once Arthur doesn’t argue. Merlin storms past him and goes to re-join the others. The group have all turned in his direction, probably heard everything just now but Merlin can’t deal with any of this.

He wants to be alone.

“Are you alright?” Freya demands. “We heard you shouting.”

“Do you remember how to get back to the B&B from here?” he asks tersely, avoiding their eyes.

Gwaine and Morgana nod, seemingly confused by the question. Lancelot keeps glancing over at where Arthur is standing.

“Right. Then I’m heading back home-“

“Merlin,” Gwen tries.

“Forget it. It’s fine. I just need to be alone for a bit.”

He turns and heads off the way he came, catching sight of Elyan quickly whispering in Lancelot’s ear before he jogs after Merlin.

“It’s really fine,” Merlin says as they start climbing down from the outcrop.

“I felt your magic,” Elyan says. “It was so strong.”

Merlin doesn’t answer straight away, focusing on getting to the bottom of the rocks safely. But it’s comforting having Elyan at his back. He’s a soothing presence.

“Arthur made me think he was about to fall over the edge,” Merlin spits out after a few minutes of tense silence. “My magic overcompensated.”

“It’s okay to still care about him,” Elyan says gently. “I’m sure he didn’t think it through properly.”

“No, he didn’t.” Merlin agrees quietly, still focusing on his feet.

When they reach the fields and start wading through the grass to get back to the house, Merlin’s stopped trembling. But he’s still furious. When they arrive back at the B&B, his mother and Gloria
are out walking through the garden. They seem surprised to see Merlin and Elyan returning so quickly without the others.

“What happened?” his mother asks, surprised at the look on Merlin’s face.

“Nothing.”

They decide to visit the pub later that night. When they go out though, Merlin’s still avoiding Arthur. They haven’t exchanged a single word since the group came back from their walk and Merlin hasn’t tried to.

He can’t believe Arthur actually did something like that. Even if he thought exposing the source of Merlin’s problems with his magic would help, it certainly hasn’t fixed anything. If anything everything feels much worse.

Merlin’s no closer to using his magic with ease, even if it came to him instinctively when he thought Arthur was in danger.

It’s a good thing they’re such a big group of people. Merlin’s able to join them at the pub, and still manage to avoid Arthur being near at the same time. Will comes out with them, and while he seems to have picked up on the tension between them, he’s more interested in trying to flirt with Freya.

Even more surprisingly though, is that Freya appears to be flirting back. Merlin leaves them to it, even when it looks like they’re exchanging numbers and when Gwaine stands up the fetch the group the first round, Merlin joins him.

He can feel Arthur’s eyes on his back when orders himself something with vodka in it.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Gwaine says, unexpectedly. “I know what Arthur did was a bit rough-“

“Just leave it,” Merlin says, after he’s paid the barman and tucked his wallet away. He drains the glass as quickly as possible and Gwaine watches him with wide eyes. He knows this is probably a bad idea, but Merlin’s too upset to be rational right now.

“Oh it’s you,” says a voice, and suddenly there’s a hand sliding around Merlin’s waist.

He jerks back in surprise before he recognises the bloke and the blood drains from his face. Merlin’s met him before, when he picked him up in this very bar last year. He doesn’t even remember his name.

“Fancy a go again?” he wonders with a voice that sounds a lot more slimy now that Merlin is sober and has better judgement.

Merlin pushes the guy back when he tries to get in close. He remembers sucking the bloke off in the bathroom, how he’d called Merlin a slut and treated him more roughly than expected. Merlin would not like a repeat of that, not since he’s been with Arthur and knows what it’s really like. To be with someone decent, who actually cares about him.

“Er- no thanks.”
The bloke is drunk, Merlin realises, when he tries to reach for him again. “Oh come on, put that mouth to good-”

“Excuse me,” Gwaine says, throwing an arm around Merlin with the kind of tone that Merlin's never heard before. “What did you just say to him?”

The bloke glances over at Gwaine and sneers. Merlin starts to feel a little nervous. And that’s when Arthur comes over.

“What’s taking so long, love?” he wonders, sliding his arm around Merlin’s waist and stepping into him.

Will is right at his back and the bloke finally seems to realise how outnumbered he is when Percival gets to his feet at their table and looks over at them.

“I’m not interested in you,” Merlin repeats for the sake of driving it home.

He doesn’t even know the guy. Doesn’t understand how he couldn’t know him in a town this small. Maybe he’s just passing through.

“Geez alright,” the bloke slurs. “I’ll find someone else to suck me off. You weren’t that great anyway.”

Merlin flushes a deep red and can’t even sputter a reply. Not even when Arthur stiffens beside him.

“You’re a right prick,” Freya says, appearing out of nowhere with a drink in her hand that she tosses in the bloke’s face.

He curses and tries to step toward her, but Freya lets out the most terrifying growl that half of the pub falls silent. The guy staggers away then, real fear in his eyes and Merlin is happy to see him go. Will stands there grinning at Freya, like it's the most impressive thing he's ever seen.

“Just for that you get another drink,” Gwaine says cheerfully, smiling broadly at Freya as well.

Merlin’s heart is beating a little fast, but he feels calmer now, knowing the others were there to help him. That they had his back.

Even Arthur.

Merlin doesn’t try to pull away from him this time. He lets Arthur lead him back to their table but when he sees the expectant looks on everyone’s faces, suddenly he can’t breathe.

“Can we go outside?” he asks. “Need some fresh air.”

Arthur takes him outside without a word. “Want to talk about it?”

“I picked him up in this bar a while ago,” Merlin explains, settling himself. “I was kind of drunk. I sucked him off in the bathrooms and it wasn’t- er very enjoyable.”

Arthur’s jaw clicks. “Did he force you?”

“No. But he called me a few names that I didn’t enjoy and was more aggressive than I expected. It wasn’t exactly fun. Hence why I wasn’t interested in another go.”

Merlin neglects to mention that if Arthur was up for it he’d be happy to take him into the dingy little bathroom and get on his knees. But it’s probably better that he doesn’t say anything. He hasn’t
quite forgiven Arthur for the stunt he pulled on the outcrop earlier.

“I’m sorry,” Arthur says suddenly. “For today. You were right I wasn’t thinking. I thought I was helping but I was really just being reckless and cruel with your feelings. I’m really sorry, Merlin.”

Merlin doesn’t answer straight away. “You know how much it terrified me when you were attacked in Avalon Lake. I told you that. Why would you-?”

Then Arthur says the most surprising thing of all. “I guess- I was just trying to prove to myself that you still care about me.”

Merlin can’t believe this. He told Arthur that he loved him a couple days ago. Even if he’d been drunk at the time, surely Arthur had remembered it. How could he possibly not think Merlin cares about him?

Where on earth did he get such a ridiculous idea?

“I care about you,” he says. “Of course I do. We might not be- what we were. But of course I care about you. You’re my friend, Arthur.”

There’s this look on his face like Arthur’s relieved but he’s also a little confused and Merlin wants to kiss him so badly.

But he resists.

“Shall we go back inside?”

Arthur nods. They head back in.

The bloke from earlier doesn’t bother Merlin again and he has a surprisingly good night since he drinks water from then on and is happy to just sit in the company of friends.

And if Arthur’s arm ends up slung over his shoulder as the evening wears on into the early hours of morning, well, Merlin has no complaints.

He dreams of sex. Of sweat slicked skin and Arthur, Arthur pushed up against him.

When he wakes, tangled in a pile of blankets on his bedroom floor, his mother is still fast asleep in the bed beside him and Merlin is flushed and aroused beyond belief.

It takes every ounce of his strength not to get to his feet and sneak down the hall to where Arthur is sleeping. Something tells him if he really asked for it, Arthur would tip him on his back without a second thought.

Merlin eases himself up as quietly as possible, adjusting the outline of his hard prick in his sleep pants and pads out of the room. He plans to head into the communal bathroom to tug himself off, but he catches sight of Arthur’s door at the end of the hall and is surprised to see it’s wide open.

Merlin distinctly remembers watching Arthur click it shut behind him last night, or this morning to be more accurate, and already he’s suspicious when he takes a step closer for a better look.

That’s all he needs to confirm it.
Arthur is sprawled out on his stomach, naked, and the blankets have been yanked all the way down the bed as if he got spectacularly hot on a night where the temperature drops below zero. The lack of blankets show off every single part of his sculpted body to Merlin’s keen eyes, as if by magic.

He can see the swell of Arthur’s arse, and flushes all over with embarrassment.

Merlin hasn’t used magic in his sleep before. But he was dreaming of Arthur, specifically *naked Arthur*, and now Arthur’s door is unlocked and his blankets have been yanked down.

Even as Merlin’s watching from the doorway, Arthur shivers and searches for the edge of the sheets to cover himself again, still asleep and trying to warm himself up. Merlin tiptoes silently into the room, catches the edge of the blankets and pulls them up until Arthur can catch it, drawing it over himself with a little shudder.

Then he sneaks out of the room, feeling incredibly flustered although no one actually realised what Merlin’s magic did while he was sleeping, or witnessed him standing in the room.

Merlin shuts the door carefully behind him and sneaks over into the communal bathroom. He doesn’t wank off as planned, just sits on the toilet seat until his prick is soft and he can hear the birds starting to sing and wake up the world outside.

He wonders if he should tell someone about this. Like Rowan or even Freya or Elyan. If they’ve ever experienced something like this before. But he’s worried that it will only lead to more questions.

If he tries to bring up using magic in his sleep they’ll ask him what his magic was trying to *do* and Merlin is nowhere near a practiced liar. Nor does he want to admit that Arthur is the object of his magic’s interest. He doesn’t want to unsettle Arthur with the knowledge, and he certainly has no intention of ever letting it happen again.

Merlin has a few books that he could read over. They might have the answers he needs. Or perhaps he should just search online.

Wherever it might lead him, Merlin intends to get to the bottom of this.

It’s too early for anyone else to be awake so Merlin slips quietly into the kitchen to boil some tea, then he steps into the parlour in starts pulling out the three magical books from the shelf that his mother bought him last Christmas and he hasn’t had the time to read through properly.

One of them is about wild magic so Merlin takes them outside onto the patio and curls up in the squishy armchair there. He opens the one titled Wild Magic and starts reading just as the sun begins to slip down into the valley.

Merlin remembers his forgotten tea when he’s three pages in, and sets the book down in a rush to stand up just as he catches sight of Arthur walking out through the door carrying two mugs.

He’s dressed thankfully, and he’s wearing a warm, fluffy looking kind of jumper that Merlin might be jealous of when Arthur sets the tea down on the table without a word and takes the seat at his side.

Merlin wonders if he’s awake because he knew that Merlin was in his bedroom, or if he finally
wants to talk about the underlining tension existing between them ever since they stopped
shagging. Ever since Arthur said he loved him.

“Did I wake you?” he wonders, nervously, unsure if he should tell Arthur about the magic incident.

“No,” Arthur says around a yawn. “I just sort of woke up all of a sudden. Strange, huh?”

Merlin flushes and buries his nose in his book.

“What are you reading?” Arthur asks, curiously peering at the cover. “Wild Magic. Is that for a
class? Surely you don’t have any assignments during the holidays?”

“No,” Merlin admits, trying not to look guilty. “I- er- I’ve been wanting to read it for ages. Mum
bought them for me last Christmas. I hadn’t had the time.”

“Well don’t mind me,” Arthur says, stretching his arms with a soft groan that tugs at Merlin, low
in his belly. “I’ll just sit here quietly.”

Merlin laughs in surprise. “Can you?”

“I can. Believe it or not Merlin.”

And then to his immense surprise, Arthur picks up the next magic book on the pile and opens it to
start reading. Merlin stares at him, open mouthed, but when Arthur does nothing but carefully turn
the pages to reach the beginning, he realises that he’s not taking the piss.

So Merlin returns back to his book.

He realises fairly quickly that Wild Magic is about the history of magic in far reaching places, of
the origins of magic in strange lands. It has nothing that might help the wild magic within himself.
But Merlin is too interested to put the book down anyway.

They pass the time that way. Sipping tea and turning pages and Arthur is a comforting presence
beside him. One that Merlin was so sure could never have possibly sat down like this and read a
book on magic with genuine interest.

“When did you know you wanted to be a Knight?”

Arthur looks up from the pages he’s reading, startled for a moment by the question. “Always I
suppose. Since I was a little kid. Father always used to tell us stories about brave Knights and I
knew that I wanted to be like them. To share in their adventures and help people.”

It’s fitting, Merlin supposes as he gazes out across the fields thoughtfully, watching the sunlight
slip through the grass as it begins to light up the valley, that Arthur was born into a legacy of
Pendragons then. As if he was always destined to be a Knight. To be a hero.

“When did you know you had magic?”

Merlin’s expression turns wry. “It’s hard to explain. But I can show you sometime?”

Arthur’s puzzled but not unwilling. “I’d like that.”

He’s surprised, suddenly, by how much of himself, Merlin wants to show him. But he’s not afraid
of that closeness, of the threat of exposure. Not anymore. Not quite like he used to be.

“This is interesting.” Arthur says half an hour later, when their mugs are empty and they’ve been
reading in easy silence for some time. “It says here that Magic Users are automatically attracted to their Knight counterparts.”


He snatches the book from Arthur’s hands and reads the line Arthur helpfully points out to him with a drawn-out smirk.

*Powerfully magic users, it reads, have been known to seek out their partnered Knights long before such partnership has been assigned. A magical attraction between allocated partners, though rare, has been well documented in history, and magic users are often unaware of this connection until it is manifested in a corporeal manner.*

A corporeal manner…

Merlin pushes the book back into Arthur’s chest, red faced and horribly out of depth. The book couldn’t possibly be referring to what happened this morning? That was about sex, and shagging Arthur- not some kind of unspoken magical attraction.

Wasn’t it?

“You think it’s true, don’t you?” Arthur insists, sounding amazed. “I was only teasing. But you honestly think that your magic-“

“Shut up,” Merlin snaps, colouring deeper, as he focuses on picking up where he left off in *Wild Magic.*

“What do you think it means by ‘corporeal manner’,” Arthur wonders innocently. “Reckon it happened when we were shag-?”

Merlin slams *Wild Magic* shut with a snap. “I don’t know,” he says. “Why does everyone keep thinking I’m meant to have all the answers about magic? I’m attending Camelot same as you. I’m there to learn. I don’t know everything!”

Arthur’s shocked by his tone for a second. “That’s alright,” he replies easily. “You don’t have to know everything, Merlin. That’s what these books are for.”

And then he goes back to reading without any further comments. Merlin’s breathing rather fast and he almost wishes that Arthur would say something else so he could demand to know what he meant about their shagging somehow revealing a magical connection.

Merlin doesn’t remember anything like that. But then again, he was fairly focused on Arthur. Not what his magic was doing at the time.

What on earth is all of this supposed to mean?

“Do you think the others will be up soon?” Merlin wonders, just to change the subject, turning back to peer into the parlour as if to see someone skulking in, with the movements of one severely hungover.

“You didn’t see how much they drank last night. They won’t be up until past noon at least.”

Merlin narrows his eyes at him. “And what about you? Cast iron liver?”

Arthur rolls his eyes, turning another page without looking at him. “I stopped drinking as soon as
that bloke came over and tried to grab you.”

He stares at Arthur sharply, and tries to remember the drinks in Arthur’s hands last night but he can’t think of any. Merlin can’t believe he didn’t notice he wasn’t the only sober one of the group.

“Why?” he asks interestedly.

Arthur shrugs. “Wanted my head on straight. In case he came back.”

Merlin feels a swell of something warm and soft in his chest, that makes his ribs tight. Before he can think better of it, he reaches out and brushes his fingers against the back of Arthur’s hand, squeezing his wrist gently.

“There you are!”

Merlin jerks his hand back, head swivelling at the sight of his mother coming through the door. “I wasn’t sure where you’d gone off too.”

Merlin lifts his book as a way of explanation, and his mother’s eyes trail over him then Arthur who smiles politely at her.

“I was going to have a spot of tea, but I see you’re already ahead of me. Would you care for something to eat?”

Arthur sets his book back atop of the other and Merlin is instantly disappointed. “Why don’t you sit down?” Arthur suggests, vacating his seat. “I’ll make some more tea. I need to stretch my legs anyhow.”

“Oh,” his mother says, surprised and evidently pleased as she takes the spot offered to her. “Thank you.”

Arthur disappears back inside and Merlin does his best not to watch him go.

“You’re not very subtle, dear,” she declares once Arthur’s out of earshot.

Merlin does drop the book then. In his lap. “W-what, Mum?”

“He’s certainly got you all twisted up in knots, hasn’t he?” she continues, smiling privately to herself. “I didn’t even know you could get this flustered.”

Merlin blushes and can’t even form a reply. His mother laughs warmly at that and waits patiently for her tea.

When Arthur returns, setting a mug carefully down on the table beside her, Merlin’s decided that he wants them to interact as little as possible. Who knows what his mother might say to Arthur. Or what Arthur might say to her.

“C’mon,” he says, standing up quickly and setting his book atop of Arthur’s on the table. “Let’s make breakfast.”

Arthur’s smile is probably the most distracting sight in all of Ealdor. And Merlin’s mother knows it too, because he can hear her quiet laughter following them both back into the hallway when Arthur nods and leads the way in.

It’s a terrible start to the morning.
He’s not expecting much when he leads Arthur into the kitchen, but it turns out he’s a remarkably proficient cook. Merlin just assumed he was incapable because of all the times they spent together and he never once saw him in the kitchen.

When Arthur skilfully cracks an egg one handed, Merlin leaves him to it and gets back to chopping up the tomatoes and mushrooms. He heads out the back door to take a few herbs from the garden, catching sight of Rowan over by the chicken pen, inspecting them through the cage just as the cows are ambling over towards her.

It’s a little too early to let them out yet. They try to keep the chickens out in the sunshine and back in their pen before dark. Rowan straightens up and turns as if she sensed him, which Merlin now knows is probably true. He waves before crouching low and collecting some chives from the garden and returning inside.

Arthur has already added the tomatoes and mushrooms to the mixture by then, whisking it all together. He holds the bowl out for Merlin after he’s washed the chives and cut them into smaller pieces. Then Merlin drops them into the bowl.

Arthur’s left the pan heating so when he pours the mixture into it, the eggs sizzles upon contact. Merlin can already smell them cooking as he goes to the cupboard and starts fetching plates.

The others don’t come out until midday as Arthur guessed. Gwen comes in the earliest, just as Arthur is dishing the omelettes onto individual plates but that’s only so she can make coffee and take it back to her and Morgana’s room.

She’s all bright smiles and cheerful good mornings though which Merlin hadn’t anticipated on top of the hangover, but appreciates just the same. Gloria and his mother join them for breakfast and Rowan comes in from the back garden.

Merlin can’t believe how quickly she’s become attached to the cows. They’re going to miss her when she and Gloria finally check out and continue with their travel plans.

He picks up a knife and fork and gets started on the plate in front of him.

The omelette is delicious.

By the time the others have resurfaced, the whole day has come and gone. Merlin’s been curled up in the parlour ever since a chill picked up outside and it started to rain just as his mother predicted and Arthur’s next to him on the lounge, the warmth of his thigh pressed firmly against him.

Merlin has finished reading Wild Magic and still doesn’t have the answers he wanted. But it was a good read nonetheless.

Arthur’s still reading his book, and Merlin’s trying to pretend he’s not admiring the planes of his face out of the corner of his eye.

“Where did the day go?” Leon wonders around a yawn, wandering into the parlour and dropping
into a nearby armchair.

“You slept through it,” Arthur says, smirking, without drawing attention from his book.

Leon blinks at him. “Are you- reading?”

Merlin smother a laugh at the incredulous look on his face. “Poetry,” he says, teasingly.

Arthur scowls at them both but still doesn’t look up from his book.

Freya and Elyan come into the room a little while later, followed by Lancelot and Gwen. Gwaine and Percival head straight for the kitchen with Merlin’s mother to throw some food together for an early dinner almost as soon as they wake up. Merlin tries to get up and follow them but his mother seems to notice and gestures him back with a wave of her hand.

He sits back down. Merlin doesn’t doubt that the rest of them are hungry. They haven’t eaten all day. The rain eases off after that, but everything is wet outside and the sky is covered in a grey sheen.

Morgana doesn’t enter the parlour until the sky goes dark and she looks like she’s been awake the entire time, utterly refreshed and alert when she glides into the room.

“Evening,” she says in a refined tone, utterly at ease as she sinks behind Gwen on the floor and wraps her arms around her waist.

Gwen leans into her with a happy sigh.

Her timing is perfect, since Gwaine and Percival come out with oven mitts carrying two casserole dishes full of hot food. They set them down in the dining room while Merlin’s mother brings in the plates and cutlery. Merlin jumps to his feet to help her, and she nudges him gently out of the way with her elbow before glancing at Arthur.

She’s not so subtle either.

He clears his throat pointedly, and doesn't go back to join Arthur on the lounge.

“We should do something,” Leon suggests, suddenly. “We lost the whole day.”

“I’m not drinking again,” Percival groans, leaning back into the chair as if he’s lost the ability to sit up straight.

Gwaine laughs and trails his fingers across Percival’s face, while Percival hums and leans in to the touch. Merlin swallows at the intimate gesture and glances at Arthur again.

“Let’s go for a walk through the woods,” Elyan recommends. “It’s a lovely night.”

Merlin sits up quickly. “You want to go wandering through Ealdor at night? It’s freezing. And it’s been raining all day.”

Arthur finally closes his book, at once, turning to eye Merlin keenly.

“You’re not afraid are you?”

“Of course not,” Merlin says indignantly. “I grew up here. I know Ealdor better than all of you.”

Gwen starts to smile. “Lovely. Then you wouldn’t mind taking us for a night stroll would you,
Merlin?

Perhaps he walked right into that one. He stares at the rest of the group, at their interested faces and realises that he’s probably going to need to put on a few extra layers. And some rain boots.

“I’ll get my coat,” he says, trying not to sigh.

The rest of them grin at him, and Merlin can’t find it in himself to feel put out.

Ealdor is rather beautiful at night. Even if it is cold enough that Merlin’s nose feels as if it’s about to fall off and his feet keep getting caught in deep puddles of mud.

He’s wearing his thickest boots and coat and even that doesn’t feel like enough. The others are in much higher spirits now they’re out of the B&B. Elyan has conjured some lights to float around their heads which is helping them avoid the worst of the water. Merlin hunkers down into his coat when Elyan uses magic so easily and confidently.

Arthur drags Merlin into his side a second later with a free laugh as if he’s trying to distract him from his own thoughts. The thing is though, it works. Merlin forgets his problems with his magic, he forgets his problems with Arthur and he lets himself relax under the stars.

It really is a beautiful night.

He worries that his magic is going to cause more problems when he finally climbs into the makeshift bed on the floor that night, but there’s no way to be sure until tomorrow morning.

Merlin drops onto the pillow and is asleep before his mother is finished climbing into bed.

Once he wakes up he heads over to Arthur’s room straight away to be sure his magic didn’t get up to any mischief while he was asleep. He’s surprised to come to a door that’s slightly ajar and a bed that looks like it was made up hours before.

His magic didn’t do anything it seems, but Arthur is certainly gone.

Merlin pauses in the centre of the room, standing right near the bed and feeling at a loss of where else he could be. Arthur couldn’t have hooked up with someone he met at the pub two nights ago. Could he? Merlin doesn't remember seeing him talk to anyone.

And he’s not entirely sure what to do with the devastating feeling that leaves sinking in his chest.

Merlin catches sight of Arthur’s sword, propped up against the wall near his bed and curiosity brings him closer. He’s been to Elyan’s forges, seen him make beautiful weapons with his magic, but Merlin doesn’t think he’s actually picked up a sword in his life. Not counting the ones he probably knocked over during his and Arthur’s impromptu shag in the weapons shed of Camelot pub.

Interested now, he carefully unsheathes the sword, trying to make as little noise as possible and gasps at the sight of it, awestruck by its beauty.
Instantly he knows this is not one of Elyan’s work, not that he hasn’t made beautiful swords himself, but the one sitting flat on Merlin’s open palm is of an entirely different calibre.

Merlin wonders suddenly where Arthur got this sword. Surely, it had to have been expensive. Even his laymen eyes can see the exquisite craftsmanship, the delicate forgery of the blade and the handle.

He can feel the magic in it too, stronger than anything he’s sensed in the swords made in Camelot. Stronger than anything.

Merlin wonders what kind of powerful Magic User made this weapon.

He thinks suddenly of what things will be like once he returns to Camelot. He will have to take Kilgharrah up on his offer to switch partners, he and Arthur have too much history between them to work well now. Merlin’s magic can attest to that.

He imagines them graduating soon enough, Arthur heading off on adventures with another Magic User who probably doesn’t understand him, or even likes him. One who bitterly resents his easy way of doing things.

One who might not even protect the broad planes of his back in a fight with evil magic. Merlin can’t bear the thought.

And neither can his magic. Because a second later his hands burn with the syrupy kind of heat of one curled up in warm blankets and drinking hot tea, a kind of heat that warms from the inside and out.

Merlin’s hands start to glow a moment later. Or maybe it’s the sword that’s glowing. His eyes widen with surprise and delight, feeling a deluge of his magic unleashed at last, as it surges into the sword.

It’s vibrating in his hands, but Merlin doesn’t fight the process, lets his magic roam wild as it imbues its own energy into the sword, giving it more power than even its first maker could ever have predicted.

When his magic eases back, the sword almost feels lighter in his hand and Merlin hurries to stow it back in its sheath when he hears footsteps in the hall. He sets it back against the wall exactly the same way it had been propped up and darts out of Arthur’s room, breathing fast.

Just as Arthur is walking towards him in the hallway in running shorts and looking every bit as if he’s just been out jogging in the Ealdor countryside. Merlin can’t believe it.

“You went running?” he asks, astonished. “Where?”

Arthur raises an eyebrow at him.

“Just around. Wanted to warm up before I train with the other Knights. Why were you in my room?”

Merlin glances back to where the door still sits ajar. “I was looking for you,” he suggests somewhat feebly.

For some reason he doesn’t think to mention the thing about the sword. Merlin doesn’t know for sure if Arthur still trusts his magic anymore. Especially after the state it’s been in lately. And he doesn’t want Arthur to think he was sabotaging his weapon or anything like that.
Arthur doesn’t answer straight away and they end up looking at each other silently for a lengthy amount of time until Merlin’s face grows hotter than it already is.

“Your mother was calling for you,” Arthur says finally, breaking the tension between them. “And I think you should drink something, Merlin. You’re all flushed.”

He nods, barely able to respond and edges around Arthur to go off in search of his mother. The fleeting flow of his magic seems dormant again and when Merlin tries to use it to sense where his mother is in the house, it fails him.

Strange.

Merlin really doesn’t understand what that means. But the words ‘corporeal manner’ keep swimming about confusingly in the back of his head.

He steps outside in search of his mother when he doesn't find her in the hall or the parlour, assuming she’s probably out in their backyard, feeding the animals.

She’s over by the cows when he steps outside into the chilly air, and Merlin heads over to Gandalf, spotting that his water needs refilling, just as Arthur appears through the door to join the rest of the Knights who’ve made some space to train at the back of their field, far from the animals and the garden.

Morgana, Gwen and Leon walk over to join Merlin’s mother, and seem to be doing their best to try to coax the cows into coming closer, just as Hunith heads over towards the chicken pen to let them out and collect their eggs.

The cows are lazily chewing but Merlin knows they’re still too nervous around strangers. It’s going to take a lot of convincing even if the three of them seem determined to appear non-threatening.

Merlin’s standing with Gandalf, just as Arthur’s starts sword training with Percival, Elyan and Lancelot. Merlin doesn’t even know where they got the long sticks from. Elyan’s not participating but he’s certainly interested in watching Lancelot work. The sticks crack like a thunderclap everytime they make contact and Merlin’s distracted watching Arthur move that he doesn’t realise the water trough he’s refilling has started to overflow until it hits his boots.

Merlin jerks back and lifts the bucket full of freshwater even as Gandalf shuffles closer to drink. The water is right at the level of the trough and Merlin hopes Gandalf is thirsty because it’s likely to keep spilling over otherwise.

His bucket is less than halfway empty now and Merlin heads over to the vegetables to water them with the rest. His mother is just emerging from the henhouse, foot on the first step and with a basketful of eggs on her arm as she descends.

Merlin turns away for a second, shaking out the rest of the water before there’s a sharp, surprised cry followed by a loud thump. His head jerks up at the sound and Merlin catches sight of his mother awkwardly sprawled on the ground, basket tipped over and broken eggs littering the dirt.

His heart drops in his chest.

“Mum?” Merlin shouts, even as Arthur drops his makeshift wooden sword at the commotion and runs towards her, Lancelot and Percival on his heels.

The bucket drops out of his hands and Merlin barely remembers not to run through the vegetables when he races to reach her. She’s moving by then, a little shocked when she tries to push herself up
on her arms, looking at the mess around her.

“Oh the eggs,” Hunith says, disappointed, and Merlin barks out a piercing laugh when he gets to her side just as Arthur is helping Merlin’s mother to her feet.

Merlin catches hold of her arm, looking her over and trying to sense any damage. “Mum forget the eggs, are you alright?”

“Oh,” she says, as if his mother had overlooked herself for a moment there. Then she’s reaching up to touch the side of her head, fingers shaking a little as she pushes her hair out of her face. “I think I’m fine. Just startled. I tripped over Medea. Wasn’t watching where I was-“

She tries to step forward to scoop up the basket, some of the eggs survived the fall, but she stumbles.

Arthur slings an arm around her waist and catches Merlin’s mother before she tips over again. “I’d say you’ve sprained your ankle,” he says seriously. “We should get you inside.”

“Oh gods,” Merlin says tremulously. “You’re hurt. I didn’t even sense it. I should have been there. My magic-“

Hunith reaches out and pats his cheek. “I’m quite alright, Merlin, don’t fret. Now if I can just get inside-“

Arthur reaches toward her with his other hand. “Do you mind?” he asks first before lifting her into the air.

“Oh,” she says, stunned as she looks around herself, scooped up in Arthur's arms. “I didn’t think it would be that easy.”

“Gwaine can you get what survived of the eggs and clean up the rest?” Arthur asks, even as Morgana, Leon and Gwen are picking their way through the field to reach them, dismayed expressions on their faces.

Merlin gaps at the sight of his mother in Arthur’s arms, even as he sets off towards the house, carrying her with ease. He shakes himself, and hurries after them, heart pounding furiously, with a lump in his throat as Arthur takes Hunith in through the back door that leads into the kitchen.

“I’ll- I’ll get some ice, gods, this is just-“

Merlin goes straight for the freezer, snatching a tea towel from the bench top and grabbing a handful of ice cubes to put in the centre. He wraps it up carefully, fingers clumsy and cold and sprints into the parlour where Arthur’s in the middle of carefully depositing Hunith in the armchair by the fire.

There’s a small ottoman before it so she’s able to stretch her legs out and rest her injured foot atop it.

“We should probably get your boot off,” Arthur tells her steadily. “In case your foot swells.”

His mother can’t reach so Arthur bends down to help her and Merlin nearly knocks into him when he rushes inside to join them.

“Here,” he babbles. “I got some ice. Mum, I’m sorry I can’t fix it- you know I’ve been having problems with my magic lately- I - gods, I can’t make this better, I can’t do anything-“
Oh gods. Maybe Elyan or Rowan could-

“Merlin,” Arthur says with a steely voice, finally wiggling his mother’s shoe off, setting it down and standing back up to face him. “Give me the ice.”

Merlin hands it over without a word, staring at his mother’s bare ankle, and the evident redness there. It’s already swollen. Merlin can sense her pain when she shifts a little in the chair and reaches out for her instinctively.

Arthur takes his hand first. “It’s alright, Merlin,” he says, looking into his eyes and purposely holding his gaze for a moment.

Merlin blinks at him.

“You don’t need magic to fix this,” he continues, leaning in and setting the ice atop Hunith’s ankle. “It’s not that badly sprained. I’ve seen worse, trust me.”

She lets out a small sigh and stretches out to pat Merlin’s leg. “I’m sure he’s right. I know you’re upset, but I’ll be okay, dear. You really needn’t worry.”

Merlin nods, biting his lip but doesn’t try and reach out for his magic again. It didn’t stir when she’d fallen, and he certainly hadn’t been able to call anything forward just then, no matter how much he’d wanted to.

“We’ll keep your mother off her feet for the rest of the day,” Arthur suggests. “I’ll cook dinner. Hunith, you can just sit and relax out here.”

Merlin’s mother smiles at Arthur rather warmly for a woman who refuses to let other people into her kitchen unsupervised. “Thank you, Arthur,” she replies to Merlin’s complete astonishment. “I appreciate the help.”

“I’ll cook dinner,” Merlin says, floundering a little in the uncertainty of his mother and Arthur cooperating so well. “You don’t need-“

“Of course, I’ll help,” Arthur says, as if that’s the end of it. “You don’t have to do things alone, you know.”

Rowan comes into the parlour a moment later with a book in hand, but she stops at the sight of them all sequestered by the fire place. “Oh dear, what’s all this?”

“Mum fell,” Merlin says, voice cracking and he doesn’t realise that Arthur still has a hold of his hand until he squeezes it.

Merlin doesn’t try to take his hand back. Although he probably should.

“Gods, Hunith are you well?”

“I’m fine,” Merlin’s mother says, embarrassed now. “That blasted chicken tripped me when I was out collecting the eggs.”

Gwaine and Gloria come into the parlour next, having probably heard of the commotion from the others outside. Rowan takes the armchair opposite Hunith and makes herself comfortable. Wordlessly she stretches out and takes the makeshift icepack from Arthur, holding it to Hunith’s ankle herself.
Arthur straightens and steps back, closer to Merlin.

At the very least Hunith will be in good company. The front door closes and Freya comes into the parlour, in the middle of taking off her coat and scarf. Merlin’s suddenly aware that he hasn’t seen her all morning.

“And where have you been young lady?” Gwaine wonders with an edge of teasing that suggests he already has the answer.

Freya’s hot flush and Will’s absence seems telling. Merlin doesn’t have the time to ask her questions about that. Before Freya can shoot back a scathing retort, she catches sight of Merlin’s mother by the fire, where Rowan is icing her ankle.

“Oh, Mrs Emrys, what happened? Are you alright?”

“Bloody chickens,” Merlin’s mother says cheerfully. “But I’ll be fine, don’t you worry.”

“Did you finish giving all the animals their feed?” Merlin wonders suddenly, thinking of the rest of the chores his mother intended to finish today.

Hunith’s brow crinkles a little.

“The cows will have to be put in the smaller paddock for the night and Gandalf needs more feed. Make sure you have all the hens in by sundown. Hecate keeps wandering.”

“I’ll see to it,” he says, already backing away, slipping his hand free of Arthur’s. “I’ll get the feed from the shed now.”

“Thank you.”

Merlin heads out of the parlour and straight into everyone else crowding in through the back door to check on his mother.

“Is she okay?” Gwen asks, concerned.

All of them look unsettled and Merlin feels a little more grateful that they’re here. “Yes, she’s just resting for the moment.”

Gwen throws her arms around him. “Are you okay, Merlin?”

“I suppose,” he says, unwilling to admit just how much that had frightened him.

His mother is all he has left in this world. Merlin couldn’t bare to lose her as well. He manages to get free of Gwen and squeeze past the others to venture back outside. His fingers are still shaking when he drags the feed out of the shed. When he comes out, Arthur is standing there waiting for him.

“Here,” Arthur says rather intimately, stepping close and pulling his arms around him.

Merlin lets out a gasp and falls into his chest, dropping the feed and struggling to get himself under control.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” he says miserably. “I couldn’t do anyth-“

“You didn’t save your mother with magic because you didn’t see her fall over, Merlin,” Arthur says kindly. “There’s nothing wrong with you.”
Merlin finds it really hard to believe that. Especially lately, but he drags himself away before his hands slip under Arthur’s shirt in order to hold him closer.

“I have to-“

Arthur bends down and picks up the animal feed easily. “I’ll help.”

Merlin lets him.

Once they’ve finished, Merlin heads back into the parlour to check on his mother but she seems perfectly happy to rest up, surrounded by people who care and seem willing to wait on her hand and foot.

Merlin’s much calmer when he reaches her side, and wraps an arm around her shoulder.

“Are you really alright?” he asks, just to be certain.

His mother kisses his cheek. “I’m really alright.”

Arthur comes back into the parlour too, and Merlin shoots him a grateful smile.

“You seem good for one another,” Merlin’s mother says at a whisper. “I didn’t spot it at first. But you complement each other well. I don’t think even Will could have calmed you down as quickly.”

Merlin flushes and looks away. “It’s still complicated, Mum. I don’t know what to tell you. Except I trust him.”

“I can see that, dear,” she says, quite reasonably. “I do have eyes, you know.”

“Er- right.”

And Arthur trusts him too, doesn’t he? So why is Merlin making this so hard for himself? Maybe Arthur really didn’t hear Merlin say he was in love with him. Or maybe he just didn’t take it seriously because Merlin was drunk at the time.

The answer seems so obvious now.

Merlin has to try again.
Merlin finishes up the rest of the chores, putting away the hens at night and heading inside to start cooking dinner when the light fades from the day.

He hasn’t been alone with Arthur since this morning and he’s been helping Merlin as best he can with the tasks Hunith had planned for the day. When he finds Arthur in the kitchen, ready and waiting to help, Merlin decides it’s now or never. “Look, Arthur,” he says. “There’s something I want to-”

Lancelot comes into the kitchen and Merlin trails off. “I’m here to help cook. Freya said she’d help as well.”

Merlin smiles weakly, and tries not to resent Lancelot’s timing. Does he always have to be so helpful? When else will Merlin find the time to get Arthur alone like this? Or the courage.

Freya comes into the room a second later, already rolling up her sleeves. “Alright. Let’s get cooking.”

And Merlin can’t exactly say no, can he?

With four pairs of hands, cooking for the entire house is a breeze. Merlin feels like he barely does anything before the two shepherd’s pies they’ve made are placed into the oven. Merlin sidles up to Freya who’s washing her hands in the sink. “So, Will huh?” he wonders, quietly, trying not to smile.

Freya has a dusting of pink on her cheeks. “Maybe a little.”

“He’s a good bloke,” Merlin promises, nudging her shoulder. “You should give him a chance.”

She dries her hands and gives Merlin a guarded look. “Maybe I will.”

That’s all Merlin can hope for. Will seems quite taken with her, and Merlin wants them both to be happy.

“Go on and sit down, Merlin,” Arthur says suddenly. “These have got to cook for twenty minutes at least and you’ve been on your feet all day.”

Merlin turns to stare at him in some surprise before he realises how bone tired he is. Then he sighs and manages a small nod. Maybe he can go sit with his mother for a few minutes before he needs to start setting out the cutlery in the dining room.

Morgana, Gwen, Rowan, Gloria, and Leon are already sitting out in the parlour with his mother when Merlin joins them. She seems a little tired but comfortable, curled up in front of the fire, and
Merlin sits down on the edge of her chair. Percival and Gwaine left for their room over an hour ago so they’ve probably been sleeping or showering.

“How are you?”


“It’s in the oven,” he says just as Morgana puts a glass full of wine into his hand.

“Er-” he starts, glancing down at the drink. He realises that the others have been drinking as well and wonders how long they’ve been going at it for. Merlin hasn’t even heard them carrying on from the kitchen or anything.

“Go on then,” Gwen says encouragingly. “You’ve had a stressful day. You should try and relax.”

Still, Merlin hesitates.

“Oh have a drink, dear,” Merlin’s mother says, surprisingly lifting her own glass to her lips. “You might feel better.”

He concedes their point. He has been terribly stressed today. Perhaps one glass won’t hurt.

“Your magic will be fine,” Morgana insists. “It’s just one glass.”

And she’s not exactly wrong. Merlin lifts it to his lips and takes a sip, sinking back into the seat. The warmth of the fire is nice too. So Merlin tries to relax.

“Supper’s ready,” Lancelot says, coming into the parlour twenty minutes later.

The others start to get up and Hunith glances about the room with a slight frown, counting heads as they make their way into the dining room. “Where’s the big one and the cheeky one?”

Merlin snorts but he knows who his mother meant. “I’ll go fetch them,” he offers, setting down his empty wine glass.

He never should have let Morgana convince him. One drink and he’s already thinking about making eyes at Arthur across the room. Not to mention having a certain conversation that’s long overdue. Though he knows Arthur won’t appreciate it if he thinks Merlin’s only saying things because he’s a little tipsy.

Merlin figures Gwaine and Percival would complain if they missed out on dinner so he heads into the hallway and walks along until he reaches their room. He stops before knocking though because the sounds reach him first.


Merlin’s cheeks are on fire and Gwaine and Percival are clearly already engaged in another activity. He can hear the bed spring getting a good work out and from the way they’re going at it, it’s a miracle they haven’t actually broken the bed.

Something tells Merlin those muscles of Percival’s would be a force to be reckoned with in the bedroom. He can’t remember how long it’s been since he’s had his cock in someone’s arse. Since he had his cock in Arthur’s arse.

“Oh shit. Harder. Harder!”
Merlin’s frozen in horrible embarrassment and hasn’t moved an inch since he figured out exactly what’s going on in that room. How long has he been standing around? Hurriedly, he goes to turn away, make his escape unnoticed but he runs directly into Arthur’s chest instead.

“Merlin,” Arthur says, surprised when Merlin jumps about a foot in the air. “What are you-?”

“Oh fuuuuuuucckkkk,” Gwaine moans, voice travelling through the door and Merlin’s grabbing at Arthur’s jumper when his eyes widen.

“They’re- they’re having,” he tries a little hysterically.

Arthur catches on quick. “Then what on earth are you standing about for?” he demands, dragging Merlin away from the door and back down the hall.

Merlin thinks he’s completely lost his wits about him.

“Gods Merlin, you perv,” Arthur mutters once they’re out of earshot. “How long were you gonna stand there for? Until they got off?”

Merlin doesn’t know that he’s planning on kissing Arthur until he leans in and does it. That glass of wine must have really gone to his head. There’s a momentary lapse of surprise before Arthur recovers himself and drags Merlin in as if it’s the only appropriate response to being jumped in the hallway.

They surge against each other and there’s tongue and bodies pressed tight together and how could Merlin ever have forgotten how incredible this is? Until Arthur pushes him back.

“I haven’t been inside you in a week,” Merlin babbles, utterly breathless and flushed. “I haven’t had your cock-“

“Merlin,” Arthur gasps, pupils darkening as he stares at him in shock.

It’s like he’s fallen straight into Avalon Lake. Merlin drops the hold he has on Arthur’s jumper and jerks back, utterly mortified by the words coming out of his mouth.

How desperate is Merlin if he’s trying to chase after Arthur for sex even when Arthur has already made it very clear that wasn’t enough? When Merlin doesn’t even have the balls to admit that he’s in love with him? What on earth has he done?

“Er- sorry,” Merlin mutters, ashamed, and takes off before Arthur can say anything else.

Merlin really shouldn’t have had that glass of wine. He’s hard now when he hurries away and this time he intends to take care of it. Merlin rushes to the communal bathroom to get himself off while the other’s presumably are in the middle of dinner.

Everyone bar Gwaine, Percival and Arthur are still in the parlour so Merlin shuts the door and starts stripping off his pants first, eager to come in his fist, thinking of Arthur and how it felt to be pressed against him after so long. Merlin has a hidden stash of lube in the bathroom hidden under a loose drawer under the sink so he goes to fetch it, getting out a small amount to apply to the ache of his cock.

He hisses softly at the first touch, it’s been some time since he’s needed to go solo and Merlin sits on the edge of the tub and starts spreading the lube along his prick until he’s sufficiently wet enough. He groans at the first pull, quiet enough not to draw attention and wonders if Arthur has thought about them since they stopped shagging.
The door swings open before Merlin can get into a good rhythm and he curses at the sight of Arthur before he slams the door shut and quickly falls to his knees. “What-?” Merlin starts, astonished at the fire within him when Arthur pushes his hands away and takes Merlin’s cock into his mouth without a word.

He keens once he’s inside that unbearable heat, instinctively pressing in until Arthur’s taken all of him. Merlin thinks he should ask some questions but he’s afraid if he does that Arthur will stop so he threads his fingers through his hair instead, heart nearly cracking free of his chest. Then he starts to move.

Arthur’s eyelashes flutter and then he’s groaning around Merlin, suckling at his cock like Merlin’s the best thing he’s ever had in his mouth. He’s a sight on his knees, as always, much too gorgeous to ever look twice at Merlin, but for reason unknown has suddenly seen fit to suck him off.

Merlin’s nearly falling over himself with gratitude as he thrusts into him, tracing Arthur’s face, his cheeks, his jaw, the nape of his neck. He can’t believe he’s allowed to get his hands on him and he’s taking every advantage that Arthur will allow. He’s missed this so much. There’s never been anyone as good for him as Arthur.

He groans when Arthur hums again, throat constricting wonderfully around his cock and Merlin can’t take anymore. He never lasts long when Arthur sucks him. Not when he does it so prettily.

When Arthur glances up and meets his eyes for the first time since he entered the room, Merlin knows he’s finished.

He’ll come. He’s going to spurt in Arthur’s mouth and he can’t believe they’re doing this in the home of his childhood days. Merlin wishes he’d never gone into the bathroom, he wishes he’d taken this to his bedroom instead. Then he might have had a better chance of getting Arthur on his back.

Would he still have followed Merlin in there even now?

“I love-,” Merlin pants, eyes screwing up as the pleasure crests, stroking Arthur’s soft hair. “Fuck, I love-“

Merlin comes. And Arthur swallows him down without pause, throat working exquisitely around him. It’s unbelievable. Merlin whimpers and jerks his cock deeper into Arthur’s mouth a few more times before his prick gets too sensitive.

Then the reality of the situation becomes apparent. He and Arthur aren’t meant to be doing this anymore. Merlin wanted to talk, wanted to confess his feelings first before they got swept up in each other again. This did not go as planned. Carefully, he eases out, past Arthur’s swollen pink lips and tries to get his breath back. Arthur’s eyes still seem hungry and Merlin really can’t read this situation at all.

“Er-“ he tries, pleasantly sated and tragically confused.

Arthur’s brow wrinkles as he looks up at him before he lets out a sigh that seems forlornly resigned. “Gods you make this hard.”

Merlin doesn’t know what to say but Arthur wipes at his mouth and gets to his feet, letting himself out of the bathroom without another word between them. And Merlin just sits on the edge of the bathtub half-naked like an idiot.

Arthur just sucked him off. After he said he didn’t want to see him again. After he said he was
done with this. And Merlin was about to tell him how much he loved him. He never even got the chance.

Merlin has no idea what just happened.

He tidies himself up a little and walks out of the bathroom in a daze just as Gwen comes round the corner.

“There you are! Dinner is being served,” she says before catching a look at his expression. “Well what’s the matter with you?”

“Arthur just sucked me off,” he says inanely, unsure how he should be feeling about it now that it’s done.

Gwen is surprised and something else but she manages to cover the rest of her reaction. “What on earth happened?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “I went to get Gwaine and Perc but they were already going at it then Arthur turned up and I said some humiliating things but when I came to the bathroom he followed me right in and- well.”

Merlin doubts he needs to explain the rest.

“So, did you talk then?”

What exactly were they supposed to be discussing with Merlin’s prick in Arthur’s mouth? How perfect Merlin thinks he is? How much he wants this to be a permanent thing? “No?”

Gwen rolls her eyes. “Boys, honestly.”

“I was going to try again,” he admits, miserably. “I was going to try and talk about my feelings.”

“The ‘I love you’ situation you mean?”

Merlin grimaces. “Yes that. But what can I do now? Arthur’s not going to take me seriously. He’s just going to think I’m lying so we can keep shagging.”

Gwen’s expression turns sad. “I’m sure it won’t be like that. Arthur knows you wouldn’t lie.”

Merlin lets out a hollow laugh. “Would he though? We all know I’m terrible with this stuff.”

“All you can do is try,” she says reasonably. “I know it’s frightening. I know the risk can seem like it’s too much, but I promise you it’s worth it.”

Gwen’s got good advice. He knows it. Just as Merlin knows that he needs to see this through with Arthur. That he needs to at least try. And he has to avoid shagging Arthur again, if he wants his feelings to be taken seriously. He has to be able to prove to Arthur that it’s not just about the sex between them.

It’s so much more than that.

And that’s what Merlin has to show him.
The sun is out on Saturday morning and Merlin is awake early so he can get dressed and ready. He knocks on Arthur’s door well before anyone else is awake. It takes him a minute or so to get out of bed and open the door and he’s bare-chested and wearing low riding sleep pants. Merlin feels out of depth already.

“Merlin,” Arthur says, a little sleepily. “What’s wrong?”

“Did you still want to see it?” Merlin wonders breathlessly, nervous and embarrassed that he’s nervous. “Where I found my magic?”

Arthur looks surprised, but he nods.

“I’ll get dressed,” he says. “Just give us a minute.”

Arthur ducks back inside and Merlin waits for him to get ready. There’s a reason why he’s woken up Arthur so early. He wants to be able to show this part of himself and that’s hard to do in a B&B full of their closest friends.

It’s much harder to get a minute alone with Arthur than he’d hoped. At least they haven’t been interrupted yet. And by the time Arthur’s dressed and ready to go, they head out past the parlour and nearly run straight into Rowan.

“Good morning,” she says, smiling privately to herself as if she’s in on the secret and Merlin flushes all the way to his ears.

Arthur manages a stiff nod, and drags Merlin outside. The air is cold but fresh, the grass dewy and Merlin shrugs his coat on as Arthur does the same, and he starts to lead him up the road.

After about a hundred metres, Merlin ducks into the long grass, the legs of his jeans getting wet as they trek deeper into the trees. Arthur is surprisingly trusting considering he doesn’t have his sword and Merlin’s behaviour is probably a little odd right now.

“How’d you sleep?” Merlin asks, subtly trying to find out if his magic was up to the same tricks again last night.

He didn’t notice anything this morning but there’s always a chance that something happened anyway. Since it seems like it’s recently wandered out of his control

“Fine. How did you sleep?”

Merlin hesitates for a brief second, thinking of the makeshift bed he tidied up and put away this morning. “I slept alright.”

“How’s your mother?”

Merlin checked on her before he left, but she was sleeping soundly. “She’s good. It’s really not as bad as I thought it was.”

“It’s okay to be afraid of harm coming to her,” Arthur says softly at his back. “She’s your mother, Merlin.”
“Thanks,” Merlin says carefully. “For your help yesterday.”

Arthur shrugs casually as if he doesn’t understand what a big deal it was. But it really meant so much to Merlin. And he’s trying to show him that. They walk for ten more minutes until they reach a clearing. The weather isn’t really on their side but some of the flowers are still there, the sunlight encouraging them to show themselves.

Arthur looks about the clearing with interest, a lightness in his eyes that shows how taken he is with the place. Merlin’s glad he brought him here. “This is what I wanted you to see,” he says. “This is where I first realised I could use magic.”

Arthur’s expression is intense. “Why did you show me this?”

Merlin figures perhaps it wasn’t so interesting after all. “Oh,” he says. “I guess you’re right. This was a bit silly- but I’ve always loved this-”

“No,” he says impatiently, shaking his head at Merlin. “Why did you show me this place?”

“Oh.” Merlin thinks about it. “Well this is the place where I first realised I had magic. I was six and I made the flowers dance. Literally. In the air. Mum thinks I’ve been using magic since I was born, strange things happened all the time at the house, but it’s not as if her first thought was to blame the baby. It wasn’t until we knew I had magic that she put it all together.”

Arthur is staring at the clearing a little differently. “So- this is the place where you first understood yourself?”

“Yes, I suppose. It was the first time I’d consciously used my magic, and realised that I was using it. Those dancing flowers. They changed everything. So this place- it’s special to me. More special than anywhere else.”

Arthur nods, and surprisingly doesn’t make fun. They stand in silence for a few minutes and Merlin can actually hear the bees buzzing as they pollinate the flowers. The sunlight spills happily into the clearing and delivers a soft haze of light above the grass and flowers.

“And you brought me here,” Arthur says finally, like he’s trying to work out some type of hidden puzzle.

Merlin feels embarrassed all of a sudden. “Er- I’m starting to realise this is just an innocuous patch of flowers in Ealdor’s countryside and not really all that interesting.”


His lips are tingling when Arthur turns away. Arthur kissed him. Just now. In the field. He startles a second later when Arthur’s fingers drift towards his waistband. Merlin steps back in surprise and Arthur draws his hand away quickly, taken aback by the look of horror on Merlin’s face.

“What?” he wonders, genuinely surprised. “Isn’t this what you wanted when you brought me out here?”

Merlin feels sick all of a sudden and takes another step back. He’d wanted to show Arthur a place that had a significant home in his heart. Something that meant a lot to him. That shaped his life enormously. Not a senseless shag.

How could Arthur not know that’s not just what Merlin wants anymore? How does he not
understand what Merlin’s trying to show him?

“No,” he manages finally, voice hard and cold as he turns away from Arthur. “That’s not why I brought you here.”

Merlin’s upset as he walks back and Arthur’s not stupid. He picks up on the new stiffness between them as they trudge through the grass towards the B&B.

“You’re upset,” Arthur says, walking faster to keep up with him. “But you were perfectly happy when I sucked you off yesterday.”

Merlin flushes. “I- you caught me by surprise. This was meant to be about- er something else.”

Arthur stops walking. “But you did want me to-?”

“Oh yes!” Merlin assures him quickly. “Of course I wanted you to do- that. I practically threw myself at you beforehand.”

Arthur’s hand is on his shoulder again and he looks confused. “Then what’s the problem?”

How does Merlin explain this then? How do you begin trying to tell someone that you love them? And that you’re not only interested in shagging them. Where should Merlin even start? “I was trying to tell you- to show you that-“

“Arthur!” Gwaine calls, waving to them from the porch. “Merlin!”

Merlin curses when Arthur waves back and jogs on over, having clearly not heard him. Gods. It’s hard enough to do this without constantly being interrupted. This is going to be much harder than Merlin thought.

He tries to think all day of what he should he saying to Arthur, but Merlin still can’t figure out the words right. And he can’t seem to get Arthur alone anyway. He doesn’t even know if words will do what he’s feeling any justice, and he wants to do this right. He wants to show Arthur how special he is to Merlin.

But how does he do that?

The others are relaxing in the parlour and Merlin’s more than happy to unwind and try to figure this out. But he ends up being a bit more distracted by his thoughts than he intended.

“Merlin? Hello?”

His head snaps up to see the others looking at him. “Er- what?”

“Did you hear me?” Lancelot wonders.

Merlin blinks a couple times. “Er- no? Sorry.”
“We were thinking of having a nice picnic outside for lunch,” Lancelot continues. “Do you know any places we could go?”

Merlin smiles immediately.

They decide to have their picnic right out in the front garden under the sun upon Merlin’s suggestion, so Hunith, Gloria and Rowan will be able to join them.

Gwen and Morgana help Merlin in the kitchen get ready while Leon and Elyan duck down to the local bakery to buy fresh bread rolls after Hunith gives them directions to the shop. Arthur and Percival climb into the attic to find some of their picnic things and come back carrying several thick blankets. Lancelot and Freya help carry Merlin’s mother outside so she’s able to keep the weight off her foot.

Soon enough Elyan and Leon come jogging back in with a large batch of bread rolls.

Gwen gets started buttering them while Morgana starts divvying up the salad, ham, and cheese to spread out on the sandwiches. Morgana separates the vegetarian sandwiches from the rest in order to keep them meat free. Merlin fetches plates and cutlery and takes them outside where Arthur and Percival are unfolding the blankets out on the grass.

Merlin sets down the cutlery quickly and goes back in to help the girls. He’s so distracted thinking about Arthur that he knocks over a set of plates from the counter, ceramic smashing loudly across the floor. “Oh bugger,” he says, jumping back in shock. “Are you alright?”

Morgana shrugs, but she’s taking a step towards her girlfriend to check that Gwen’s hasn’t been hurt.

“I’m fine,” Gwen says quickly. “Really it didn’t get me.”

Morgana runs her fingers through Gwen’s hair and leans in to kiss her cheek before glancing over at Merlin who’s fetched the dustpan to clear up the mess. “No offence, Merlin,” she says. “But why don’t you go outside with the others. We can finish the sandwiches.”

Merlin’s never been kicked out of his own kitchen before. But there’s always a first time for everything.

“Right,” he says, flushing a little as he hands Gwen the dustpan to clean up the broken plates. “I’ll just er-“

Gwen smiles at him as Merlin retreats back outside where he can’t break anything else.

“Hey where were you this morning?” Freya asks him as soon as Merlin sits down on the blanket next to her. “I tried looking for you but your mother said you’d already left?”

Merlin glances at Arthur and tries not to blush.

“Oh, just went for a walk, you know.”

“With Arthur,” Gwaine adds unhelpfully from his position, lying with his head resting comfortably in Percival’s lap.
Merlin shoots him a look to silence him but it’s probably too late. Rowan seems much too interested in this story. As does Merlin’s mother. That’s not good. Morgana and Gwen happen to come out right at that moment though, plates aloft with sandwiches and Merlin’s grateful for the distraction.

“Who’s hungry?” he wonders quickly, changing the subject.

“What are we doing tonight?” Elyan asks, after they’ve eaten lunch and the group is laying about in the sun together.

Gwaine helped Merlin’s mother inside when the heat became too much for her, and she’s now dozing in the parlour. Rowan and Gloria seem quite comfortable in the sun as they are. Merlin, who has let his eyes close under the soft heat, opens them at the sudden noise coming from Freya beside him.

She sits up, looking enthusiastic as if she’s been sitting on a suggestion for some time now.

“I say we go exploring Brookside Hall.”

Merlin’s head snaps up alertly at the name. “Who told you about that?”

She might have heard the townspeople of Ealdor talking about Brookside Hall at the pub the other night, but no one is stupid enough to actually visit there. Especially not at night. Who put this idea in Freya’s head?

“What are we talking about exactly?” Morgana wonders from within Gwen’s arms, without much interest.

“Will told me about the place,” Freya says in an excited rush and Merlin should have known. “It’s meant to be haunted.”

Merlin sighs as Gwaine, Arthur, Percival, Gwen and Leon perk up with interest. He has the feeling that he’s about to be outnumbered here. Rowan frowns a little. “Places with lingering spirits are not to be underestimated or trifled with.”

“We have no intention of disrespecting the place,” Freya promises. “But what’s the harm in exploring?”

Rowan opens her mouth, but Gloria lays a hand on her arm. “They’re young, love,” she says warmly. “Let them be young.”

Merlin winces a little as they start to talk excitedly. He might be young too but that doesn’t mean he’s interested in going to Brookside Hall at night. He went there once with Will when they were children, during the day, and Merlin hadn’t liked what he’d sensed there. But it’s not as if he’ll be the only Magic User there if they do go. They’ll be okay if something goes wrong.

Merlin trusts them all not to disturb the place. They’ll have fun and still take the visit to Brookside Hall seriously. At least he hopes so.

By the time they’ve eaten dinner and cleaned up the kitchen, it’s turned dark outside. Merlin stands by the window reluctantly as the others are getting dressed into thicker clothing so they can be
outside without freezing to death.

Freya texted Will to invite him along, and his mother has been doing well these past few days so he’s promised to join them. Merlin’s worried about going to the Hall as well as trying to figure out how to talk to Arthur at the same time.

There's way too much going on.

“Merlin.”

But apparently, it’s much easier than he thought. Merlin turns to face Arthur as he steps into the parlour, dressed in a thick jacket that might be uncomfortable right now in the warm room.

“Could we talk?” Merlin asks, throwing caution to the winds, because how else should he start this discussion? Might as well just jump straight into it.

Arthur looks surprised but he doesn’t turn Merlin away, and seems open to whatever he's about to talk about. And that helps in some small way. Merlin knows that he can speak freely.

“Yes,” he says, stepping closer. “Of course we can talk. Is this about-?”

The front door opens and Will comes stomping into the parlour a second later. He can't believe that this keeps happening so often. Merlin does his best not to curse at the sight of him.

“Hey there mate,” Will says, throwing an arm around Merlin and dragging him into a hug. “Bit surprised to hear you wanted to visit Brookside Hall.”

Merlin hugs Will back with a put upon sigh.

“I don’t. And you shouldn’t have mentioned it to Freya, you bastard.”

Will laughs as he pulls away. “Oh, come on Merlin, we’ll have fun.”

He feels a little doubtful of that, but Merlin is still willing to go along with it. The others want to have some fun and maybe he’ll get the chance to be alone with Arthur for a while. Maybe they’ll be able to talk.

Will catches sight of Arthur standing with them and to Merlin’s surprise, throws an arm around his shoulder as well, dragging him over to Merlin’s side. “See here, I’m sure Arthur will protect you.”

Merlin splutters and turns red at the suggestion while Arthur gives Will a thoughtful look.

“Merlin doesn’t need protecting,” he replies. “He’s perfectly capable of looking after himself.”

It’s a surprising admission from a Knight, even one like Arthur who tends to underestimate him. Not now apparently. Will only grins good-naturedly. “Not without his magic he’s not.”

Merlin shoves Will in the chest and he stumbles back a few steps, arm falling off Arthur’s shoulder. “Will you stop?”

Will smirks. “It’s not my fault you two can’t pull your own heads out of your arses.”

Arthur looks embarrassed now and Merlin did not want to start talking about it like this. “Shut up, Will,” he snaps, and luckily enough the others start entering the room, looking ready to go exploring a haunted part of Ealdor old buildings.
Merlin is not feeling enthusiastic at all.

Brookside Hall is on the other side of Ealdor so it takes a little more than half an hour to walk there.

Merlin’s quiet on the journey, hanging back with Lancelot and Elyan in order to avoid Will and possibly Arthur, because he’d rather not endure another embarrassing scene like what happened in the parlour. Especially if Will is gonna keep opening his big mouth.

Merlin wants to talk to Arthur, but not if Will is trying to force the issue. That’s not the point. Merlin wants to do this on his own terms, because it’s important to him and he wants it to go well. Arthur’s not going to want to date him if he thinks Merlin got pushed into it first.

Merlin has to convince him that he’s truly in love and the only way to do that is to approach Arthur himself, without outside help or influence. That’s his only chance. Merlin knows that, and he knows that’s the only way he has any hope of getting through to Arthur.

His mother gave them all the torches they have in the house, which amounted to three, and the rest of the Magic Users have conjured light into their hands so the group can at least see as they walk through the dark. The Hall looks even more unwelcoming in the night time, and Merlin’s already on edge as they head towards the stone building.

Arthur is leading the group with Percival and Freya but he turns back to look at Merlin automatically as if he’d called out to him.

He stops, torch dropping as he lowers his arm but the others don’t wait for him and the group disappears in through the main doors which haven’t been locked since Merlin was young. Sighing, Merlin walks up to join Arthur.

They’re finally alone for the first time since this morning but Merlin doesn’t want to talk about their relationship when they’re right outside an old place full of bad energy and he’s already starting to feel nauseous.

“Are you alright?” Arthur asks quietly, stepping closer to Merlin than really necessary.

Merlin wants to bury his face into his chest and hold him close. He manages not to, just barely but his fingers end up gripping the front of Arthur’s jumper anyway. “I just- don’t like this place,” he admits. “It doesn’t make me feel good.”

Arthur’s arm is around his waist now and Merlin doesn’t remember stepping closer to him. “Are you worried about it because of your magic?”

Merlin doesn’t like to talk about his magical problems, but this is Arthur and Merlin trusts him. “Partially,” he admits.

“Do you want to leave?”

And Merlin does, because he knows that if he decides to leave Arthur will come with him, will walk him back to the B&B because he wouldn’t want to leave Merlin alone. That’s just the type of bloke Arthur is. But Merlin’s afraid now, of finally getting Arthur to himself. Of telling him about
how he really feels.

Merlin doesn’t like himself for it, but he chickens out at the last minute.

And all the others went into the place without any problems, even the Magic Users. Merlin doesn’t want Arthur to think he’s a coward.

“No, it’s fine. It’s just not making me feel better knowing there’s nothing I can do if something goes wrong.”

“Nothing is going to go wrong,” Arthur promises with a confidence that Merlin doesn’t possess. “And even if it did, we’re amongst a group of Magic Users and Knights. You’re safe here, with me.”

And there’s the thing, Merlin believes that. He knows that for certain. So why is he so afraid to tell Arthur how he feels?

“Oh!” Leon shouts. “Where are you two?”

And Arthur takes Merlin’s hand then and leads him inside. So Merlin swallows the bad feeling in his gut and follows Arthur in.

Brookside Hall is dank smelling and large. There are a few pews at the back but it’s mostly devoid of furniture and only rubbish and debris litters the floor. There’s a collapsed section of the roof at the front of the hall and Freya and Will are already over there, peering up into the night sky underneath.

Merlin starts to sweat as soon as he’s inside.

The group is spread out, searching the place and Morgana flashes the torch light over into Merlin and Arthur’s faces.

Merlin realises he’s still holding Arthur’s hand and quickly drops it. The feeling of nausea has increased ever since he stepped inside the hall and Merlin feels weaker, a strangely light sensation travelling through him as he stands in the doorway. Morgana curses and Merlin catches sight of Elyan with Lancelot in the corner. From the expression on his face, he seems to be feeling exactly what Merlin is.

It gets stronger suddenly, and Merlin realises exactly what’s happening when darkness seeps into the corner of his vision. “Merlin,” Freya calls sharply, but there’s a ringing in his ears and he can’t seem to open his mouth.

Merlin faints instead.

When he comes to, he’s outside in the cold far from Brookside Hall and he’s in Arthur’s arms. Being carted around like a bride.

“Put me down,” he demands at once, getting his senses back quickly, and suddenly feeling more
embarrassed. From the looks of things he was the only one to pass out.

“No,” Arthur says stubbornly, with a bit of steel in his voice. “I should have listened to what you were trying to say.”

“I feel better now, honestly,” he insists, glancing around and seeing Morgana and Freya peering over Arthur’s shoulder. The rest of the group is gathered around them. “Am I the only one who-?”

“Fainted?” Will says, appearing at Merlin’s side. “Yeah, mate.”

“Elyan isn’t doing so well either,” Lancelot admits, and Merlin can see how heavily Elyan is leaning against him.

“I feel fine,” Freya declares from in between Gwaine and Percival. “Merlin’s the only one who toppled over.”

“Because your magic isn’t a sensitive as Merlin’s,” Arthur snaps, sounding annoyed. “Come on, let’s just get him back to the B&B.”

“I’m really okay,” Merlin promises, and he does feel better now that they’ve moved away from the hall itself.

The energy in there really is bad. Merlin’s covered in sweat, but he’s trembling. He might be complaining about Arthur carrying him right now but he’s not so sure that he could walk on his own even if he wanted. A second later Elyan hunches over and is sick in a nearby bush.

The group is quiet for a moment.

“Okay,” Freya admits bracingly. “This \textit{might} have been a bad idea.”

Elyan groans even as Lancelot rubs soothingly at his back, looking worried. Merlin lets his head fall tiredly against Arthur’s chest.

“So, Merlin fainted and Elyan had a bit of a spew,” Morgana says, waving a hand dismissively despite looking paler than usual. “Nobody died, did they?”

Well that’s true at least.

“If you want to go back, then go back,” Arthur mutters impatiently. “But the place obviously has a bad effect on Magic Users. I’m taking Merlin home.”

“We’ll come too,” Lancelot says, helping Elyan to his feet, even as he staggers a little.

“Well,” Gwaine says, clapping his hands together. “That was a right fail, wasn’t it? Shall we all get drunk instead?”

The rest of the group seems more than happy to follow Gwaine’s suggestion. Merlin lets Arthur carry him back to the B&B, but makes Arthur set him down before walking into the garden that leads up to the house. He doesn’t want his mother to worry.

The others set about getting alcohol from the stash they’ve left in the kitchen and Merlin’s still feeling shaky and sweaty enough to want to take a shower and go straight to bed. His mother tries to get up from her position in the parlour, having caught sight of his pale face but Merlin just insists that he’s tired and staggers over to the communal bathroom.

Only once he’s showered, brushed his teeth and redressed into his sleep pants, does he open the
bathroom door to walk out into the hallway.

Arthur is waiting there for him, looking worried.

“I’m alright,” Merlin insists though he stumbles a little on his walk back to his room. “It was just the bad energy.”

“But you still seem-“


Arthur doesn’t look convinced, but he walks Merlin to his door anyway. Merlin waits until he leaves to head inside and start setting up his bed on the floor, dragging out the blankets and the pillow.

His head barely hits the pillow before the exhaustion of the day catches up with him and Merlin is asleep.

He wakes up from a dreamless sleep to a knock at the door. Merlin gets up quickly at the sound, feeling much better than he did last night and rushes to answer it.

His mother’s bed is empty and has long since been made up. Merlin didn’t even hear her leave the room this morning. But Arthur is the one standing there in the hallway. “What is it?” he asks, trying to shut the door far enough that his makeshift bed on the floor is out of sight.

Arthur’s forehead creases and he pushes a hand against the door, opening it wider against Merlin’s grip on the handle as his eyes fall onto the pillow, layer of blankets and the sleeping bag Merlin’s been sleeping in every night.

Arthur’s jaw clenches and he takes hold of Merlin’s hand, dragging him out of the room and drawing the door closed with a quiet snap. Merlin’s suddenly aware that he’s only in a shirt and sleep pants. He pulls his hand free and crosses it over his chest, feeling his nipples pebbling in the cold air. The fire in the parlour must have died out early this morning. The B&B had been warm last night.

“Why didn’t you say something?” Arthur murmurs, standing closer than Merlin realised.

“What?”

“If my being here means you’re sleeping on the floor,” Arthur mutters, looking away. “Then I’ll stay somewhere else.”

Merlin snorts. “This is Ealdor. There is nowhere else.”

“Then take my bed,” Arthur insists. “I’ll sleep on the floor.”

He’s a little surprised. But Arthur does a lot of confusing things that don’t make sense to Merlin most of the time. Like taking him home when he’s drunk, sleeping over in his bed and cuddling him, letting Merlin say he’s in love with him and then disappearing in the morning without a word.

Only to show up a few days later for a two-week holiday in Merlin’s family home. Saying he wants more than sex but then sucking Merlin off in the bathroom without prompting. None of which he
ever got around to explaining. Yes, Arthur doesn’t make much sense at all.

“It’s too cold for you to sleep on the floor."

“But it’s not too cold for you?” Arthur retorts angrily.

And Merlin honestly had no idea that this would make him so furious.

He’s stumped for a second. “If it was a problem I would have found another place to sleep. Or asked for help.”

And that’s when Arthur starts to scowl. “No, you wouldn’t have,” he says, sounding annoyed. “You would have tried to fix it on your own without any kind of help from anyone. Least of all from me.”

Merlin’s taken aback at the words. Is that what Arthur truly thinks?

“Sleeping on the floor is fine, really. I always do it when the rooms at the B&B are full.”

Arthur gives him a hard look.

“You can share with me, Merlin. I wouldn’t offer if I didn’t mean it.”

Merlin doesn’t think he wants to put himself through that when they haven’t even talked about anything yet. But maybe that’s exactly what he needs, this could be the best way to get Arthur alone. The kind of privacy he’s been hoping for.

He’s hesitated too long though because Arthur’s face shifts and he turns away, looking hurt and upset. “Do what you want, Merlin.”

But that’s the thing though. Merlin does want to share Arthur’s bed. He just doesn’t want Arthur to believe that he’s using him to try and get sex. Merlin wants more than that. And he knows that Arthur deserves more than that too. So he lets Arthur go without protesting, because he’d rather him not have the wrong idea about this.

Because he does care about Arthur. More than just shagging.

Freya corners Merlin as soon as he’s on his way to the kitchen and he has to quickly wipe the troubled expression from his face. Ruminating on this Arthur problem is a real struggle.

“Are you okay?” she wonders. “How are you feeling?”

“Oh, I’m fine,” he replies, realising she’s worried about his reaction from last night. “The way my magic’s been lately, it just responded badly to the area. It’s honestly never happened before.”

Freya still isn’t convinced and looks like she’s about to apologise. “But-“

“Truly it’s not a problem. If I knew it was going to happen I never would have gone inside in the first place. Don’t feel bad.”

He squeezes her forearm gently, to show there’s no hard feelings and steps in a little closer. “So how are things with Will?”
“He’s well fit, isn’t he?” she says with a much more private smile. “I don’t see how you didn’t mention him more often.”

Merlin resists the urge to tell her that’s because he had no intention of setting Will up with any of his friends. He can be a bit of an idiot when it comes to relationships, not that Merlin is any better. But Will’s made a few dreadful mistakes, and broken a few hearts in his life.

The only heart Merlin has broken is his own.

“Well-kept secret, I guess,” Merlin says with a friendly shrug as he leads them both down the hallway.

He’s already thinking of brewing a fresh pot of tea before he goes outside to feed the animals when Arthur steps out of the kitchen with two mugs and passes one to Merlin handle first, without any indication of being bothered by their latest conversation.

Merlin takes the mug full of tea with some surprise. “Oh thanks,” he says warmly when Arthur meets his eyes.

“You might want to check on your mother,” Arthur warns. “I saw her through the window heading over to feed the cows.”

“What?” he says, startled. “She said she was going to keep off her feet for a few more days!”

Arthur’s smile is rueful. “It seems she’s almost as stubborn as you are.”

Merlin wonders how it can be so simple and yet so astonishingly difficult to talk to one person. He rolls his eyes and squeezes past Arthur’s broad frame and into the kitchen without a reply, heading straight for the back door, mug aloft as he descends the two steps leading straight out into the garden.

“Mum!” he calls, before lifting the steaming cup to his lips and blowing on it to cool the temperature a little quicker. “What the bloody hell are you doing?”

She jolts a little, and nearly upends the bucket of feed she’s in the middle of laying out in Galdalf’s feeding trough. The chickens have already been let out and Merlin hopes she hasn’t climbed into the pen to try and collect their eggs. Did she learn nothing from the fall?

“Oh, dear,” she says with a laugh. “You half frightened me to death, Merlin.”

“And you said you’d stay off your feet a little longer,” he accuses as he steps gingerly through the garden to avoid squashing the radishes as he moves towards her.

Hunith only waves his concerns away with an absent flick of her hand. “Honestly, I feel fine.”

Merlin seriously doubts that. He caught sight of her moving before he called to her a second ago and she was favouring her other leg and still limping. She should be off her feet.

“Why don’t you go back inside and I’ll finish up out here,” he suggests once he reaches her, pushing the mug of tea in her direction in offering.

She hesitates only briefly. “Oh, well alright then,” she agrees, exchanging the bucket for the mug. “But you really needn’t worry so much.”

Merlin lifts the bucket up to rest on the jut of hip bone since it’s heavy enough already and steps
forward to finish off the morning tasks. His mother gives his arm a generous pat before taking the mug and herself back towards the house at a much slower pace. He sighs a little once he’s finished filling the rest of the trough.

His mother didn’t get to the eggs it turns out so Merlin fetches the basket from the little wood hanger by the kitchen door once he’s set the empty bucket by the wall of the shed and heads back towards the pen. Only one of the hens is still in a nesting box so Merlin leaves her to it and starts removing eggs from the others.

When he returns to the kitchen, the basket is mostly full and Rowan is already making her way over towards the cows. They watch her approach with interest and Merlin is impressed by the bond they’ve already formed. She passes him with a spirited wink that Merlin feels sees more than actually shows anything in return.

Then he nearly runs directly into Morgana when she suddenly comes out of the back door, mobile phone against her ear with the kind of expression that says the call is important.

Merlin steps aside for her automatically and watches her walk along the vegetable garden with determination before she settles in the corner of the garden, well secluded from prying ears. Definitely an important call. Merlin frowns a little, but takes the basket full of eggs back into the kitchen anyway, setting them down by the counter where Gwaine, Elyan and Gloria seem to be preparing breakfast for everyone.

Merlin realises he’s one person too many in the cluttered space and lets himself out into the hall, heading into the parlour to join anyone else who’s awake at this point.

Arthur is sitting in one of the armchairs by the window, a magic book open in his hand. Merlin recognises it as the same book he was reading the other day. Arthur’s hair is still a little all over the place and Merlin doesn’t realise that he’s stepped forward to smooth his hand across the wavy mess until he’s standing by the armchair and Arthur is turning to look up at him. 

Merlin draws his hand back and covers the sudden moment of awkwardness by taking the spare chair next to him. “Is it a good read?” he wonders.

Arthur nods and passes his mug of tea into Merlin’s hands again. As if he already knows that Merlin gave his cup to his mother. “It’s surprisingly interesting,” he admits. “I didn’t realise there were so many different ways to perform magic. Suppose I’ve just gotten used to your style.”

Merlin swallows a few mouthfuls of warm tea thoughtfully before handing the mug back. Arthur takes another sip himself and Merlin’s distracted watching his throat work. “What about my style?” he asks, curious despite himself as he leans in closer.

Arthur shrugs and turns the page one handed.

“You make it seem so seamless, so simple, but here I am reading about Magic Users who need months to perfect a spell.”

It’s the kind of praise Merlin might have delighted in when they were still shagging, but would have denied showing any reaction to. “I’m still learning too,” he insists. “It’s not all easy. Obviously.”

Arthur falters for a second and Merlin can see that he wants to ask him something.

“Just ask me,” he says, wondering how demanding Arthur’s truths can come so effortlessly when he can hardly even open his mouth to return any of his own.
“How- is your magic?” Arthur wonders carefully as if he’s doing his best not to upset him.

Merlin sighs and wishes he knew. “I’m not sure,” he admits, truthfully. “Look Arthur. There’s something I’ve been trying to tell you-“

Arthur closes the book then, lifting his head up and giving Merlin his complete attention. “Right,” Merlin says, trying to recover some nerve. “When you said that you lov-“

“There you are!” comes Percival’s voice as he steps into the parlour towards Merlin and he actually lets out a little groan of frustration. “How are you feeling since last night? I spoke to Elyan and he said he's still a little unwell.”

“I’m fine,” Merlin says, surprised at the question, and thwarted once again by the interruption as Percival takes the seat on the other side of Arthur, who seems to have realised Merlin’s words were important because he’s still staring at him intently.

Merlin flushes and subtly shakes his head to indicate they’ll have to continue this some other time. If he’s feeling brave enough. Although it seems with the B&B full of so many people to constantly disturb them and defy Merlin’s hopes for privacy, that it’s more and more unlikely he’ll have the chance.

If only there was some way to get Arthur alone without making it obvious, but that’s near impossible with Arthur’s unfortunately perceptive sister around.

Merlin hasn’t got much hope at all.

“Shall we visit the ruins of Castle Fakear today?” Gwen asks the table at large as they settle in for breakfast.

Merlin looks up from his plate with interest. He’s always liked those ruins, what little of the stone is left to be seen. It’s actually a lovely spot for a picnic and the weather appears to be on their side today.

Morgana comes into the dining room last, having been on her mobile the entire time and she seems shaken and out of sorts when she drops into the chair Gwen saved for her. Merlin wants to ask, but he knows it’s the kind of situation where Morgana doesn’t want attention brought on her at the moment. So he refrains.

“We could take some food there,” Arthur suggest as if he’s plucked the thought from Merlin’s mind. “A couple blankets spread out and have lunch.”

The group is more or less in agreement and Freya looks like she’s already texting Will to invite him along as well. Merlin doesn’t mind, so long as he doesn’t try any of the meddling things he was attempting last night. Will’s heart is in the right place but Merlin really didn’t appreciate the interference, this is complicated enough.

“Sounds like fun,” Leon agrees, and then it’s decided.
The walk to Fakear Castle is nowhere near as long as the walk to Brookside Hall. Arthur and the others carry most of the picnic supplies while Merlin leads the way. The group seems happy and relaxed, laughter and conversation filling the air as they move through the countryside.

It didn’t escape Merlin’s knowledge that ever since Will arrived to join them, he’s been holding Freya’s hand. He wishes them luck. Hopefully Freya will prove much better for him than his last girlfriend.

Merlin wonders how much more he’d appreciate the smell of wildflowers in the air and the sun sinking warmly into his skin if he was walking beside Arthur, holding his hand too.

He thinks it would be a lot.

They reach the ruins of Fakear Castle and while the others are exploring, Merlin finds the perfect spot in the sunshine and starts setting up the blankets for their picnic. Once he's finished he lies down and lets his eyes fall shut, enjoying how the gentle breeze rustles his hair and he can hear the group shouting to each other excitedly, making observations about the ruins as if it's the most interesting place in the world.

For Merlin who grew up here, some of the mystery has long since gone from the place. Even if it is a lovely picnic spot. The group explores for a while and when they all become hungry, Merlin lures them back by opening the picnic basket and dragging out all of the food.

He's barely started on his sandwich before Morgana taps at his shoulder. “Merlin, can we talk?”

Merlin nods and gets to his feet, ignoring the way some of the others watch them curiously. He can feel unwanted advice coming on, but he can’t exactly refuse Morgana. She’s his friend.

But when she leads him out past the crumbled ruins of Castle Fakear, with a nervous kind of expression, not quite like she looked when he’d first discovered her magic, Merlin realises that this isn’t about Arthur after all.

“Are you alright?”

Morgana glances back at the others first, as if to be certain they’re out of earshot. Then she speaks in a rush. “I have a sister.”

That’s unexpected.

“What?”

“A half-sister, actually.” Morgana continues quickly. “My mother had a child with her husband first before she cheated on him with Uther.”

Merlin is even more confused than a second ago. “But aren’t you Arthur’s-“

Morgana glares at him impatiently. “We don’t share the same mother. We’re only half-siblings. Uther’s managed to keep the affair quiet for years though I’d bet he’d be against broadcasting anything that painted him in a negative light.”

An affair certainly seems like something that could reflect negatively on him.
“So your sister-“

“Half-sister.”

“How did you find out about her?”

“I found some old letters of my mother’s months ago,” Morgana explains. “Vivienne mentioned her in them, and I hired a private investigator to find her.”

Merlin can’t even imagine how impossible it must feel to discover a secret sister you never knew you had. “And what happened?”

“I wrote her a letter,” Morgana admits. “I asked her if she had magic like me and if she wanted to meet.”

“And did she?”

Morgana glances over at Arthur who looks as if he has half a mind to come over and find out what it is they’re talking about. “She never responded. But I- I found out that she goes to Camelot same as us.”

“A Magic User?” he wonders. “Or a Knight?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I wanted to ask you, Merlin. Have you heard of a woman called Morgause?”

Merlin laughs at first. Before he sees the look in Morgana’s eyes. “Morgause is your sister?” he demands, gobsmacked. “Are you joking? She’s hates Knights. She’s the one who kicked Gwen out of her party months ago purely because she didn’t possess magic!”

Morgana’s eyes narrow and Merlin sees some of the vulnerability in her eyes vanish. “She did what to Gwen?”

“She’s one of the Magic Users most against interacting with Knights. She and her friends would only love to increase the schism between Knights and Magic Users at Camelot.”

Morgana doesn’t speak for a moment and Merlin realises he probably should have given the information a little more gently. Morgana might have been looking for a comrade, a true friend to understand what it’s like to grow up with magic whilst being connected to Uther. A sister. But Merlin’s not entirely sure that Morgause is that person.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “That’s not to say that she can’t be reasoned with. Perhaps you might be able to get through to her, to help her see past her prejudice.”

Morgana turns to look at her girlfriend. “Gwen never mentioned anything-”

“And she’s not one to complain, is she?”

Morgana’s mouth flattens into a line and she looks most displeased. Merlin hopes he hasn’t ruined things for her before she’s even had the chance to get to know her sister.

“What’s going on?” Arthur demands, jogging over to reach them. “What have you said to Merlin?”

But Morgana is already turning away. “Nothing,” she says. “I was just thanking him for his-insight into a problem I’m having.”
And then Merlin’s positive he shouldn’t have said anything at all.

He sleeps fitfully that night.

Merlin can’t seem to relax which is ridiculous because he’s slept on these floors more times than he can count. It's just that what happened with Morgana keeps rattling around in his brain. Not to mention the discussion he had with Arthur this morning. The problem is, is that now he knows there’s another offer for a place to sleep.

One that he can’t seem to be able to ignore.

Arthur’s room is only down the hall.

Merlin lies on his back and stares at the ceiling for a while before he makes a decision. He gets up as quietly as possible and slips out of his room, shutting the door behind him so as not to wake his mother.

Then he hurries down to Arthur’s door and knocks as lightly as he can. Arthur mustn’t be sleeping because Merlin hears his feet touch the floor almost immediately before the door opens. He’s shirtless, his hair is fluffy from the pillows and he looks sweetly confused for a moment before his eyes fall on Merlin. Then he steps aside without another word.

Merlin flushes, and feels like he needs to explain himself further but Arthur doesn’t ask and it’s easier not to. He goes straight for Arthur’s untucked side of the bed because it’ll be warmer and slips under the covers with a small sigh. Arthur peels back the other side without any complaints and the bed dips under their collective weight. But he doesn’t move in any closer. Merlin wasn’t expecting them to spoon or anything but he’s a little disappointed anyway.

He wants to say something, to start talking about the problems between them now but he knows that Arthur doesn’t want to talk at the moment. The fact that he hasn’t spoken since Merlin came inside is fairly telling.

At least the bed is comfortable. Merlin relaxes and listens to Arthur’s breaths as they start to even out.

Then he’s asleep.

He wakes up with his arms around Arthur’s waist, face pressed into his chest and on the vestiges of a lovely dream that leaves him sleepy and content.

Arthur’s eyes are open, have been open for some time, Merlin realises, and it’s nothing but foolish hope and love that has Merlin leaning up unthinkingly to kiss him. Morning breath be damned.

The kiss lingers, soft and wonderful and Merlin draws away, satisfied to have had this small thing before he tells Arthur the truth. “Listen,” he tries. “There’s something we need to talk about-”

But Arthur’s already fumbling for Merlin’s sleep pants. Startled by the sudden warmth encasing
his prick, Merlin jerks into Arthur’s sure hand with a gasp. What happened to everything that Arthur said? Why does he want this now?

“I thought-” he pants, struggling to speak as Arthur begins to stroke him. “I thought you didn’t want to have sex without- without-”

“Oh, sod it,” Arthur mutters into his ear. “I don’t care. I want you.”

Merlin shudders, and he’s not strong enough to resist. He wants it too badly. But when Arthur tries to tip him onto his back, all Merlin can think of is the intensity of eye contact that will it bring between them. The way Arthur might look at him now after everything has changed between them and his heart twinges at the image.

Merlin knocks his hand away before he can really get started, and rolls over onto his stomach, pushing his hips up so Arthur can press up against his back and settle in, even as he draws Merlin’s sleep pants and underwear off his narrow hips. Arthur gets rid of the rest of his clothing with a practiced speed but Merlin doesn't bother to take his shirt off or push his pants past his knees. He can't wait.

Arthur fumbles around for his lube for a second and Merlin shivers with anticipation, arguing against all reason in his mind telling him that they shouldn’t be doing this. Not until he’s told Arthur that he loves him. That he wants them to be together. But Merlin loses his ability to fight against any intrusive thought when Arthur’s fingers trail against his arse.

He bites his lip and spreads his legs quickly and lets Arthur get situated while his heart pounds in his throat. When Arthur pushes a finger inside, Merlin groans into the pillow and does his best not to beg for more. It seems Arthur has no head for teasing this out today. Because soon enough he’s stretched and spread open and Arthur’s prick is pressing up against him.

“Merlin-“ he says, as if he knows just as well as Merlin does that this is a terrible idea.

“Do it,” he sobs, clutching the pillow desperately between his fingers as Arthur slots his cock against Merlin’s hole and pushes inside.

He gasps and whimpers at the feel of Arthur prick driving into him, the way it feels as if Arthur is a part of him now. He’s inside Merlin, inside everything and the separation is going to hurt so much more this time around.

In the next moment Arthur’s panting and rolling his hips nice and slow as if he’s certain Merlin will feel everything so much more this way. He’s not wrong. Merlin moans and grabs at one of Arthur’s hands where it’s braced against the mattress. He scrambles at his fingers, struggling to push them together and Arthur relaxes his fist and lets him.

When their fingers interlock and Arthur pushes their joined hands into the pillows right by Merlin’s head, something in his heart swells with possibility and desperation curls in him. He wants this so badly, he realises. Merlin wants the hand holding, and the sleeping over, and the spending time together even when they’re not shagging and Arthur.

Merlin wants Arthur. So badly.

Only he’s not so sure that Arthur is interested in that anymore.

There’s heat behind his eyes and Merlin’s crying before he really understands what’s happening. He presses his face further into the pillow so Arthur won’t see because he doesn’t want him to know he’s reacting like this, doesn’t want him to stop. But it’s like Arthur can sense Merlin’s
overwhelmed, because he gentles his thrusts, slows it down until he’s just a slow drag inside him, soft friction nudging up against his prostate.

Merlin moans, but his voice shakes, tears wetting his face and dripping down his chin, but he rocks back into Arthur, takes as much of his cock as he can even at this slow pace. He wants this to last forever, but Arthur’s good with his prick, seems to have bothered to learn exactly what Merlin likes. And his resolve to last is helpless under that determination.

Merlin can already feel it building, in his thighs, in his balls and knows he’s going to come soon. Before he’s ready. Before he’s ready for this to be over.

“Arthur,” he says, and his voice is trembling, wobbly from crying.

Arthur pushes in deep, dropping fully onto Merlin’s back, pushing him harder into the mattress, and starts to come. The shock of it inside him sends Merlin straight over after him. He comes with a drawn-out moan into the pillow, clenching Arthur’s fingers tightly.

There’s a moment of silence after where reality creeps in and there’s no prospect of pleasure to keep them reckless anymore. “Merlin,” Arthur says, panting through the aftermath of shagging Merlin within an inch of his life. “Give us my hand back.”.

As if it was just some common mistake that Merlin grabbed at his hand and interlocked their fingers while they were fucking. Surely Arthur doesn’t believe that? Or maybe this is just the quickest way of letting him down gently. This was a goodbye shag for Arthur. And it doesn’t seem like it meant anything to him.

Merlin lets him go with a weak noise and feels his heart plummet. Suddenly he doesn’t want to look at Arthur, doesn’t want Arthur to see his tear stained face. He’s been humiliated enough now, hasn’t he? Arthur rolls off him next and throws some pants on, disappearing into the nearby closet to fetch clean clothes with a sigh. Merlin can hear him riffling through his clothes but can’t help but feel that the importance of what just happened has been lost on him.

Merlin can also hear his mother voice, singing a happy tune in the kitchen, and magic surges up out of nowhere, coming to his rescue for the first time in what feels like an eternity. When he opens his eyes, he’s standing in the communal bathroom, where a new set of clothes and a fresh towel are piled impossibly neat by the sink.

Merlin can’t help it. It’s like receiving a phone call from a friend who’s forgotten his existence for a few weeks.

He slips his pants off properly until they pool around his ankles and tosses his shirt into the corner of the room. He steps straight into the shower with a grateful sob, feeling shaky and overwhelmed by his emotions.

When the warm water is running down his face, Merlin can’t tell what’s water and what’s tears, but he stands there until he doesn’t care about figuring it out anymore.

Merlin enters the kitchen alone and makes himself a cup of tea without a word. His mother is still humming softly to herself as she cuts up a bowl of fresh fruit and Merlin joins her quietly, more as an excuse to avoid the uncomfortable feelings in his chest.
He's not entirely sure what just happened. But Merlin feels worse than he did yesterday. He feels like he's been used. Or that he used Arthur, and neither of those feelings make the sudden shag in Arthur's bed worth it. Why didn't he just wait until he told Arthur that he loved him?

"Merlin?" His mother says suddenly, finally catching sight of his expression.

"Oh," he says, laughing and clearing his expression. "I'm starving. Is there yoghurt in the fridge?"

She's frowning, but Merlin turns away sharply, terrified of her asking any questions but thankfully it doesn't come to that. Merlin makes a bowl of fruit and yoghurt for breakfast and eats on the front porch with his cup of tea. He can hear Arthur's voice in the hall plus Gwaine's laughter so he must be avoiding Merlin for the time being.

The way he'd walked into the closet without a word to Merlin afterward had felt very final. Is that really all it took for Arthur to give up on him?

Merlin heads inside when a chill enters the breeze, and takes his empty bowl and mug into the kitchen to clean up. He takes a seat in the parlour afterwards, by the window, picking up another one of his magic books and settling in to read. A few of the others are in the parlour already, Morgana, Elyan, Lancelot, and Leon but everyone else is still in their rooms.

Merlin doesn't think he wants to talk to Arthur just yet, but he knows that he has to at some point.

They shagged again. Even after they said they wouldn't. That demands a conversation. When he glances up from the page he's reading, there's a limo parked out the front of the B&B.

Merlin lets the book fall shut and gets up from the cushy armchair to approach the window. "Er-who called for the limo?"

Morgana’s head snaps up immediately like she’s sensing danger. “Oh no.”

Gwen takes her hand and they move together toward the window to join him. They're all watching when the driver gets out and hurriedly opens the door for someone. Merlin inhales sharply at the sight of Uther Pendragon walking up the path towards his house.

“What the bloody hell is this?”

“Arthur,” Morgana calls loudly, moving away from the window to shout down the hall. “You’d better get in here.”

Arthur comes out a few seconds later, freshly showered after his and Merlin’s roll around and looking utterly calm and unchanged. Not at all how Merlin feels. “What is it?”

“Uther’s here,” she hisses, looking paler than usual.

Merlin glances between them nervously. “He did know the both of you were staying here, didn’t he?”

There’s a knock at the door and Merlin rushes out to stop his mother from answering it. “Merlin,” she says, shocked at the sight of him as he jumps in between her and the door. “What’s going-?”

Merlin wrenches it open.

“Er- what?”

Uther steps into the hallway without invitation. “There’s been another death threat,” he explains. “I would prefer to remove my children from danger at once.”

“This is Ealdor,” Merlin’s mother says, surprised. “You couldn’t find anywhere safer.”

Uther glances at Hunith with an unwelcoming look on his face and Merlin steps in at once. “This is my mother, Hunith,” he says firmly, willing Uther not to be an arse. “This is Arthur’s father, Uther Pendragon.”

“Pleasure,” Uther says without even bothering to look at her.

Merlin clenches his hands into fists.

“I’m not going.”

Merlin spots Morgana standing in the parlour doorway with Gwen. Her arms are folded and she looks stubborn.

“Now is not the time for discussion,” Uther says as Arthur steps into his line of sight. “Ah yes, Arthur. Get your things. You’re leaving.”

Arthur glances at Merlin and doesn’t move.

“Now Arthur,” he says, a sharp edge in his tone.

Merlin can see it on his face, that he’s wavering. That soon enough Arthur will bend to his father’s whims like always. “Can I talk to you?” Merlin demands, pushing past Uther and dragging Arthur out into the hall so that they can be alone.

“What?” Arthur starts as soon as they’re out of earshot. “You heard my father. He won’t drop this until I’ve gone with him.”

“Don’t go,” he says softly, reaching out and touching Arthur’s face.

He pauses then, and really looks at Merlin for the first time since this morning and suddenly seems torn. Merlin leans in and kisses him, throwing his arms around his neck, trying to put himself on the line for this. Arthur’s arms come around his waist, holding him close as the kiss deepens. Merlin’s heart is pounding in his throat and he doesn’t want Arthur to go. Not without saying what needs to be said between them.

“Arthur,” Uther calls from the next room. “Get your things now.”

"I'm sorry-" Arthur starts.

And Merlin starts to panic. “I love you,” he blurts out. “I’m in love with you. That's what I've been trying to tell you but every time someone else was there first or the moment wasn't right.”

Arthur blinks, mouth parting on a soft gasp and he takes a step forward to touch Merlin maybe, to do something just as Uther comes stomping into the hallway looking murderous.

“Arthur,” he hisses violently. “Now.”

Merlin jerks his gaze between them, and knows there’s a pleading look on his face. “Arthur-“
Uther reaches out and grips Arthur’s forearm, physically dragging him away and Merlin knows that’s the end of it. Arthur won’t fight his father on this. Not now.

“I’m sorry,” he says again, but Merlin’s already turning away from him.

He doesn’t watch Arthur head back to his room and empty everything into his duffel bag with his father standing guard by the doorway, arms crossed. Nor does he hear the angry shouting match between Uther and Morgana before he gives up on trying to take her too. He doesn’t join the others standing tensely in the parlour wondering what on earth is going on.

Merlin retreats quietly to his own bedroom and shuts the door behind him.

And doesn’t watch Arthur go.
The driver takes Arthur’s duffel bag and moves to stow it in the boot of the car. Uther doesn’t move towards the car until the driver has opened the door for him and Arthur pauses at the edge of the limousine after his father climbs inside, jaw clenched with the effort not to turn right around and go back to Merlin, the consequences of his father’s rage be damned.

But Arthur thinks of what his father will do if two of his children disobey him so overtly in front of such a large group of people and knows the following wrath of his father’s temper unleashed isn’t worth all the trouble it would bring.

“Arthur,” Uther calls softly, and the warning in his voice is plain.

He glances back at the bed and breakfast, but he can only see Morgana and their friends silhouetted in the window. Merlin is nowhere to be seen. And Arthur knows exactly why. And what it is that’s wrong with this picture. Merlin tried to let him in after so long. It was everything that he had hoped for and still Arthur had abandoned him.

“Get in the car, Arthur.”

What if Merlin can’t forgive him for this? What if he doesn’t say how he feels about Arthur ever again? Was this Arthur’s only chance? His father edges forward on the back seat so that he can meet Arthur’s eyes. The anger in his expression promises future complications.

Arthur swallows and climbs into the car. The driver gets into the front seat and starts the engine without a word. Uther pours himself a glass of wine and settles into the seat. Arthur looks away and stares out the window as Ealdor’s countryside starts to roll away from him.

As Merlin gets further away. Already an edge of anxiety has settled in the pit of his stomach worrying about this situation and what it might have ruined. If only his father hadn’t tried to insist on being a parent today of all days things could have gone so much differently. Arthur might be with Merlin right now, they could be together.

They sit in silence until Ealdor is far behind them.

“Everything I do is to protect you,” Uther says lightly, as if he is expecting Arthur’s apology. If that’s what he’s hoping for Arthur has no intention of being forthcoming. “Your sister is wilful. If she wishes to betray and distance herself from this family-”

“Not doing what you say does not constitute a betrayal, father,” Arthur snaps, his own anger at the situation rising up.

“I expect your obedience-“
“We’re your children,” he says. “We don’t exist to be obedient to you. You should hope that we are loyal to you out of love, not blindly following everything you do.”

His father scoffs and drains the rest of his glass without even looking at him as if Arthur’s words don’t even warrant his full attention. Arthur tries not to let any of his frustration show but it’s near impossible. “You’re upset because I dragged you away from playing house with that boy-“

Arthur clenches his hands into fists and struggles to keep his temper under control. “His name is Merlin,” he says firmly. “And you have no idea what you interrupted.”

Uther pours himself another glass and Arthur slumps in the seat, trying to resist the urge to yell. There would be no point as his father never takes him seriously when he raises his voice. No matter how reasonable Arthur might be about a situation, his father will always only do things his way. It’s utterly infuriating.

“This school boy crush is-“

“I love him,” Arthur says, trying to keep his voice level. “And we were perfectly safe in Ealdor and you know it. No one else was aware of our being there. And the threat against us mustn’t have been that high if you left Morgana there on her own, your own flesh and blood. So why are you here?”

His father must have some ulterior motive. He would never have permitted Morgana to stay in Ealdor if the danger was so great. Arthur knows that at the very least. “I want you home,” Uther says simply. “There’s an interview that-“

“You dragged me out of there for a bloody interview?” Arthur shouts, forgetting himself completely. “Do you know what you ruined?”

Uther’s mouth twists into a sneer. “You can fool around with the spellbeggar any time you-“

Arthur cringes at the word now even though it was one that he himself used to address Magic Users as. The maliciousness of it is so clear to him now and he wonders how he went so long without noticing it. “His name is Merlin.”

“Stop interrupting,” Uther snaps impatiently. “I will not tolerate this kind of disrespect from my own son.”

Interestingly enough, respecting his own son’s wishes, interests and opinions never seems to be a big concern of Uther Pendragon. “If you would just listen-“

“All I can hear are the immature ramblings of a boy unwilling to think past his obsessive desire for a magic user who does not even regard you as worthy of him.”

Arthur stares at him, surprised into silence by the observation. What on earth is his father talking about now?

“I’ve watched you together,” Uther continues, with an air of derision. “That magic user has you wrapped around his finger. It’s a wonder you haven’t realised that he’s enchanted you.”

The thought brings out a laugh.

“Merlin hasn’t used his magic on me,” Arthur says trying his best not to think of all those times they’ve shagged and Merlin used magic to speed the process. Or when his magic came out in an uncontrollable expression of his pleasure. The rest of the time Merlin’s magic is under complete
control and Arthur knows exactly what it feels like if it is ever used on him.

Why would Merlin enchant him anyway? His father seems to be losing it altogether. Uther sighs. “You’re being naïve, Arthur.”

It becomes clear a second later that his father can’t conceive that Merlin might genuinely like him. How could his prejudice run so deep when he himself married a Magic User?

“Merlin told me he loved me,” Arthur says. “That’s what you intruded upon, father.”

Uther seems surprised by the fact.

“I know what it meant to him to say that. I almost didn’t think he- but told me his feelings and I trust him.”

His father merely sips at his wine glass and ignores him. It’s not the first time that Arthur’s words have fallen on deaf ears. When his father’s mobile rings, Arthur looks out the window and drags his phone out of his pocket.

Merlin hasn’t tried to ring him. Or left him any messages. He knows what that means. He must have hurt Merlin deeply leaving so abruptly and without even properly responding. Arthur didn’t even tell him that he felt the same. What if Merlin thinks that in all the time they’ve been apart that Arthur doesn’t love him anymore? And it’s not the kind of thing he should be sending in a text right? Merlin wouldn’t appreciate it like that.

But Arthur has to do something.

Hey, he starts typing. I’m sorry I had to leave. If I hadn’t my father would have made everyone regret it. Can we talk about what you said when we’re back at Camelot? I want this too.

He hopes that is enough. That Merlin won’t think too badly of him for what happened. Arthur recognised the look on his face when his father seized him and pulled him out of the room.

The last thing he ever wanted was to disappoint Merlin. Especially not after he admitted there might be more to them than just shagging each other spectacularly whenever they get the chance.

Merlin sits on the edge of his bed for what feels like forever before there’s a knock at the door.

Gwen enters, looking nervous, as if she’s not quite sure how she’ll be received. Merlin can’t even find the energy to look at her. “You told him, didn’t you?” she guesses. “That’s why you’re so upset that Arthur left.”

Merlin can only manage a nod and feels a painful twinge in his chest, thinking of what just happened. “Oh Merlin,” she says sadly, taking a seat next to him on the bed and throwing an arm around his shoulder. Merlin sinks into her with a shudder and feels slightly sick. “I’m so sorry.”

Morgana pokes her head into the room, glancing about with interest before her eyes land on Merlin on the bed. “So this is why Arthur looked so devastated. Did the two of you even try to sort this thing out?”
“I told him!” Merlin cries, with a sudden energy that startles Gwen beside him. “I said how I felt and Arthur- left. And he didn’t say anything back.”

Morgana frowns.

“Well it was hardly the time, wasn’t it? When Uther was dragging him out of the place.”

Merlin’s furious now. “I’ve been trying to bloody tell him for days now but you lot kept interrupting me!”

There’s a muffled noise in the hall as if someone smacked into something. Then comes Gwaine’s voice. “Oh so that’s why he kept trying to get Arthur alone.”

Merlin tries to peer past Morgana to see into the hallway behind her.

“Is everyone outside in the hall?” he demands, indignantly.

“Look don’t give up on him just yet,” Leon calls out helpfully. “Arthur needs a moment to catch his breath. I doubt Uther is treating him very kindly at the moment.”

“Seemed bloody well enraged he did,” Freya chimes in. “I bet he’s all sorts of furious that Morgana defied him like that in front of us all. Arthur’s not going to have a nice trip back to Camelot.”

Merlin knows all of these things are most likely true, but he also thinks they might have been better dwelled on in private. Maybe. “Honestly, Merlin dear,” comes his mother’s voice and is everyone in the hallway outside at this very moment? “There’s no need to be so dramatic about it. The boy was practically dragged out the door.”

“He didn’t want to leave, Merlin,” Lancelot agrees.

This has got to be the most humiliating moment of his life. “Now that you’ve all had a laugh at-“

“Oh come on, mate,” Will says, barging past Morgana to get into the room. And how long has he been here? Did he stay over last night? With Freya? “You’re being a bit of an idiot.”

“Thanks, Will,” he sighs, flopping backwards onto the bed.

“We’ll be back in Camelot in a few days,” Gwen promises, patting at his shoulder in a comforting way. “And then the both of you will be able to talk. Properly.”

Oh yes, that’s exactly what Merlin wants to do. After it went so swimmingly the first time.

He stands up abruptly, wanting to be away, out of the house and far from all their helpful but somewhat unwelcome advice. Surprisingly, it’s Elyan’s words that stick with him the most, as he passes him on his way towards the front door.

“Things will work out as they should,” he says quietly, meeting Merlin’s gaze. “But only if you’re willing to help them.”

That’s the thing though. Merlin is willing. He’s so willing. The real question is, is Arthur?

It’s only after his mother has made him a cup of tea and Merlin has sat down in the chairs looking out over the garden to drink it, that he finally starts to settle down. The others are absolutely right. Arthur didn’t want to leave and he certainly seemed like he had plenty to say before Uther interrupted them. And Merlin hasn’t even checked his mobile to see if Arthur tried to contact him.
Merlin waits until he’s drained the mug to stand up and go off in search of it. The others seemed to have sensed his mood because they’ve given him space ever since the hallway incident and Merlin doesn’t know whether to appreciate the gesture or seek out their company for further advice.

But he locates his mobile in his bedroom and it looks like Arthur left him a message after all.

**Hey, I’m sorry I had to leave. If I hadn’t my father would have made everyone regret it. Can we talk about what you said when we’re back at Camelot? I want this too.**

Merlin can’t help but notice that Arthur never said anything about loving him back. He’s not certain if he should be worried about that. Even if Arthur said that he wanted this too. But that could mean so many things. For them to keep shagging. For them to try pursuing a relationship together. Arthur could mean anything. Merlin wonders if he should give him a call, but this isn’t the type of thing to be cleared up over the phone.

No, better to talk in person.

**We’ll talk when you get back then** Merlin replies, trusting that is a suitable response.

Returning to Camelot can’t come soon enough.

The next few days pass in a blur of confusion. Merlin doesn’t think he’s quite ready to go back to Camelot and face Arthur. To find out exactly what’s going on between them. What if it’s not what he hoped for?

But suddenly it’s Saturday and the others are packing up their things to leave and Merlin’s standing on the station platform, bag in hand, after kissing his mother goodbye. Everything seems to have happened so fast. Arthur hasn’t tried to contact him since he left either. Not even after Merlin texted him back. And Merlin has no idea what that means. Or if he should feel more upset about that.

As if this wasn’t bewildering enough.

Gaius is sitting on the lounge watching a cooking program on the TV when Merlin lets himself into their flat back at Camelot. “Merlin,” he says with a warm smile. “How was your holiday?”

Merlin drops his bag by the door and walks over to collapse onto the cushion next to him with a tired sigh. “Eventful I suppose,” he mutters, scrubbing at his face. “Uther showed up and took Arthur home.”

Gaius looks surprised. “What ever for?”

“There was another death threat made against them,” he explains, failing to keep the bitterness out of his voice. “He somehow thought Ealdor wasn’t safe enough.”

“Things certainly have to be done his way,” Gaius observes, in the most disparaging remark he’s ever said about Uther Pendragon.

Merlin can’t help but agree even if he doesn't have the urge to voice such a thought.

“And how is your magic?”
That’s probably the only upside of this situation. Finally being certain that everything is going to work out with his magical energy. “I think things are going to be fine,” Merlin says. “My magic is getting stronger again. I’m more- settled... er- emotionally, I mean.”

Gaius blinks. “Well that’s wonderful news Merlin. Is there anything I can do to help? There are some herbs that can boost your body’s receptiveness to magical energy- make your ability to strengthen your magic again much smoother.”

Even after he was able to access his magic at Ealdor, Merlin knows that he can still use all the help he can get. He’s not at full strength yet and he needs to be. “Thanks Gaius. I definitely need it.”

When Gaius climbs to his feet, Merlin watches him bustle about into the kitchen before he starts sorting through his herbs. Gaius’ flat has got to have about the strangest smells of any place he’s ever been in but Merlin actually quite likes it now. Or perhaps he’s just grown used to it.

It’s as much home as Ealdor is now.

And despite his nervousness about Arthur, Merlin is glad to be back.

On the first week at Camelot, when Arthur still hasn’t come to find him and Merlin hasn’t seen hide nor hair of the Knight, Merlin travels to Kilgharrah’s office five times with the express purpose of demanding to switch partners, thinking he’d rather not suffer through the thought of Arthur’s presence for another moment.

Except each time he can’t even manage to knock on the door. His magic seems to have accepted that he and Arthur are resolved, or perhaps is satisfied that Merlin admitted his feelings because he’s beginning to feel it in longer snatches now like a glimpse of blinding sun between densely grown trees.

Ever since it came to him in Arthur’s bedroom, Merlin has sensed that it hasn’t left for good. He knows it’s not lost forever, but even with the magic slowly returning, it might take some time until it’s back to what it used to be. On the fifth time he reaches the Dean’s office, Kilgharrah appears abruptly at his side, as if he’s just gently rippled into existence. Or sensed Merlin outside and teleported through the door.

“My, my,” Kilgharrah says evenly. “The students must be getting worse if after two weeks of holiday they cannot master the art of knocking.”

Merlin flushes a deep red. “I’ve been coming to tell you-“

“That you’d wish to change over to a different Knight,” Kilgharrah finishes cleverly. “Yes, I had thought as much.”

Merlin shakes his head vehemently, even though that’s precisely why he’s been turning up here so many times and failing to take the final step and knock. Maybe he really just came here for some advice on what to do. Kilgharrah seems to always know what he's talking about and Merlin could use some of that certainty right now.

Because even on a Campus as big as Camelot the fact that he hasn’t seen Arthur all week can only mean that he’s been avoiding him. Even after telling Merlin he wanted something more between them. Which seems like a drastic change if Merlin ever saw one. Has Arthur just vanished from
the face of the earth? Or is he planning on dodging Merlin indefinitely?

Did Uther whisk his son off to a safe house in the mountains somewhere never to be seen again? Merlin wants to ask Morgana if she’s seen her brother, but he also knows that he doesn’t want to know the answer to that question. And Gwen has been tactfully avoiding mentioning her girlfriend as if she believes she’s somehow protecting Merlin from having to think about Arthur.

But she really needn’t have bothered. Merlin wonders if there was ever a time when he wasn’t thinking about the prat. And he’s not certain he could bear to discover Arthur truly is trying to break off all ties. Kilgharrah seems surprised by his response anyway.

“You are still not set on the matter. Then I must advise you Merlin if you do wish to change your partner, the results will be permanent. You cannot switch back to Arthur again should you wish it. I can only allow such a thing in extreme circumstances and I cannot be seen changing back and forth every time you request it. It would be unfair to other students, as it would bring an influx of others demanding the same treatment. Do you understand?”

Merlin jolts at the description of permanence. Does he really want to give up on Arthur? When he finally understands how big and frightening his feelings are for him? Merlin can’t just toss him away. No matter how hard it might be to see him otherwise. It’s why he never knocked on the bloody door.


Then Merlin turns and walks away, more confused than ever. Still wondering where in Camelot Arthur could possibly be.

“There you are!” Morgana calls loudly when Merlin is on his way back to the flat, reaching out and catching hold of Merlin’s elbow in the hallway as if she expects him to make a break for it.

Merlin startles and glances back at her. “You were looking for me?”

She glares at him as if the question is offensive. “Only all bloody week, Merlin. Have you been avoiding me?”

His cheeks colour at the question. Mostly because he had no idea that Morgana was searching for him in the first place. He’s surprised Gwen didn’t mention anything but she’s been suspiciously quiet on the Pendragon front lately. “No, of course not.”

“Still panicking about Arthur?” she wonders a little too innocently in Merlin’s opinion.

“Hardly,” he mutters, desperately trying not to think of all his trips to Kilgharrah’s office as if the knowledge will somehow show on his face.

“Well anyway, he’s been locked up by Uther,” she explains. “Hasn’t been able to leave the house all week.”

“Locked up?” Merlin repeats, considerably alarmed.

Morgana’s mouth presses together into a tight line. “Well you know our lovely father, Merlin. More likely to be interested in protecting his children when it satisfies some unfathomable part of his ego. I doubt he liked the cheek Arthur gave him on the ride home either.”

This is all news to Merlin.
“He gave Uther cheek.”

Morgana looks at him like she’s genuinely questioning his intelligence. “Of course he did,” she says impatiently. “Uther dragged him out of his boyfriend’s house when everyone was having a lovely time.”

“I’m not-“ Merlin says immediately, cheeks pinking. “We haven’t established- er-“

“Dear God you’re both ridiculous,” she mutters, shaking her hair out of her face. “Here,” she mutters, shoving a bit of paper into his hand until Merlin realises it’s an envelope.

“Have mobiles not been invented yet or-?”

She rolls her eyes at him. “Uther confiscated his phone. So Arthur wrote you a bloody letter, as if that doesn’t prove he’s absolutely mad about you.”

Merlin swallows and stares at the artful loops of his name, no doubt tutors training Arthur on his elegant script since boyhood. He forgets sometimes just how much Arthur is the product of good breeding and money.

“And what does it say?” he wonders, still a little afraid of being rejected even now.

Morgana scowls at him. “Merlin, I already went out of my way to search for you all over Campus in order to deliver a letter for my idiotic brother because he pleaded with me about it so earnestly. Please don’t ask me to do more.”

“Er right,” he says, suddenly apologetic. “Thanks for doing this though.”

He leans in to kiss her cheek and Morgana’s expression softens a little before she is able to appear unruffled. “Yes, well. I was around so-“ Her gaze slides away from him and she pretends to notice something behind him. “Best be off.”

And then she’s gone, vanishing into the crowd with the rest of the Knights and Magic Users. Merlin glances down at the letter in his hand and knows that he won’t open it until he’s back at the flat. There’s no telling what it might say, or what his reaction might be.

He’d rather read it in private just to be safe.

Once he’s back home Merlin makes himself a pot of tea and takes it into his bedroom, Arthur’s letter already in hand.

He sets the mug down by the bedside table and turns the letter over so that he can pry it open with his fingers, heart pumping a little faster with equal fear and excitement.

Merlin, it reads.

I’m certain that Morgana has already informed you of the situation with my father and why I’m writing you this letter but I really hope you don’t think I have been trying to avoid you. First of all I cannot begin to explain how acutely I wish my father had never arrived in Ealdor. I’ve wanted to hear your feelings for so long and I know it must have been difficult for you, but I all I can think is how it is now, to know perhaps you might feel for me the same
that I do for you.
I know I frightened you with my honesty in loving you, and perhaps you did not find my feelings genuine or you wondered how I could possibly have come to them so quickly but Merlin, I have known with absolute certainty almost as soon as I met you. I had no idea that I could feel this way before and though I have not been in many serious relationships, already I felt things were different between us. I’ve missed you a lot since we ended things and I’m not sure what I would have done if you had not said what you did, but I just want you to know that I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it. We’ll talk soon I promise.

Arthur.

Merlin feels giddy for a moment and before he’s thought of what to do, he’s grabbing a piece of paper and pouring out his own feelings about Arthur onto the parchment. It’s amazing how easily the words come.

When Gaius enters the room to tell him that dinner is ready Merlin is surprised to realise that he’s written three pages. He stows them underneath his pillow and vows to return to them after. Arthur’s letter he keeps stowed in the pocket of his jeans and keeps absently touching the outside of his trousers throughout dinner while Gaius asks him about his day, thoughts of Arthur swimming in the back of his head all the while.

Arthur misses him. Arthur said he couldn’t stop thinking about what Merlin said. He told Merlin that he feels the same.

Maybe this is working out right after all.

Merlin’s on his way to his last class of the day that week on Friday when he runs into Gwen dressed in training clothes and still carrying her sword.

They barely exchange two words before a blood curdling scream splits the air, and Merlin’s skin feels cold as he turns toward the sound, magic rising in alarm. “What was-?” Gwen starts breathlessly and Merlin’s entire body suddenly feels like it’s awakened after a long nap.

“Magic Users,” he says quickly. “Evil magic.”

Gwen immediately touches the sword at her waist. “C’mon,” she cries, as Merlin starts to taste the fear in the air, the terror. “I think we’re under attack. We have to help.”

Gwen takes off running before he can think of anything else and Merlin is quick to keep pace, purely for the sake of backing her up. “Under attack?” he shouts, startled.

“Evil magic users,” she says impatiently, glancing about as if she's expecting them to jump out of a nearby bush. “Do you think you can sense how many?”

Merlin strains to throw his senses out a little wider in order to get a clear image of the situation and it’s not good. “A large number of them. Camelot has been invaded.”

Gwen pulls out her mobile, to call the others and warn them of what's going on. Merlin feels a jolt of fear thinking about it. They're all so unprepared for this. “My phone is dead,” she says, frowning. “It’s not working.”
“It must be magic,” Merlin realises, darting around the corner as their boots slap loudly against the stone floor.

“Where are we going Merlin?” Gwen asks, keeping pace with him easily, trusting that he knows what he’s doing.

Merlin does know where he’s going it turns out. His feet carry him on their own accord until they reach the Quad and they’re in the thick of it. There are twenty evil magic users at least, dressed full tilt in red as they advance upon the last group of Knights standing. Merlin can see the arsehole Knights who refuse to share the round table with anyone else, collapsed on the surface or on each other.

There are bodies on the ground and Merlin doesn’t know if they’re still alive, even as his heart beats to escape his chest. Then he spots Lancelot and Leon among the final group of Knights still standing, even as the evil magic users advance on them.

A woman with long hair about her waist stands at the forefront of the group and summons lightning to her palm, crackling and spiking out threateningly from it in a parody of a warning before she strikes. Lancelot pushes the other Knights back with his hands, and Merlin realises with horror that most of them aren’t carrying their weapons.

Not since Kilgharrah implemented the new changes on Campus.

Gwen is one of the few carrying her sword. Merlin barely has a moment to realise how undefended Lancelot is, standing there attempting to protect the other Knights before the woman lets out a laugh, as if relishing such a moment before rushing forward to throw the lightning directly into his chest. There is no doubt such a wound would be fatal.

Merlin’s magic surges forward but there is a ripple of something else first, and a shout of distress.

“No,” cries a voice that Merlin recognises, before fire erupts between the evil magic users and the Knights.

The fire blazes unnaturally hot, and the evil magic users flinch away from it, conjuring water in attempts to quell the fury of the flames enclosing them. A second later Elyan steps out of them, unharmed, before he stands in front of Lancelot, and urges the flames higher. Working in the forge all day has given him incredible control.

The blaze does not move, despite the grass and other flammable objects nearby, and the heat from it is strong enough to make Merlin wince from where he’s standing. The evil magic user with the lightning attempts to strike again but Elyan lashes out and a wall of flame hits her directly in the face. She collapses with a terrible scream and the rest of the magic users take off in different directions, looking to find easier targets it seems.

Two pass close to Merlin and Gwen, and one seems to recognise him because he releases a plume of dust like grey ash from his hands that Merlin knows instinctively is incredibly dangerous. Gwen is closer and Merlin cries out a warning just as Elyan turns and shoots flame directly at the ash, incinerating it before it strikes his sister.

Merlin’s shaking by the time he realises Gwen is unhurt.

The evil magic users don’t wait to see if they succeeded but Merlin raises his hands and is about to hit them with his own magic when the rest of them launch forward in a fit of distraction and the evil magic user using the grey ash takes off running. Merlin strikes the evil magic users with a
powerful gust of his will, demanding that they sleep and they crumple on the ground as one.

The evil magic user with the ash escaped as they’d intended though and Merlin ties the unconscious attackers wrists with a mere thought, but it’s a struggle to form the knots tightly. His magic is still not at its best.

Merlin rushes over to Lancelot, Elyan and the other Knights while Gwen stares at her brother in wonder. Elyan has his arms wrapped around Lancelot so tightly it’s a wonder he can breathe as his boyfriend shudders into his neck. He’s clearly alarmed by how close Lancelot came to death, trying to protect the others.

“Are you alright?” Merlin wonders breathlessly, glancing about at the other fallen students. “Are they-?”

“They’re not dead,” a Knight mutters, looking pale. “But they’ve been enchanted.”

Elyan finally pulls back, looking shaken but determined. “We need to find the others,” he says urgently, reaching out to wrap an arm around Gwen. “The evil magic users have already tried to burn down Camelot’s forge.”

Which is probably how Elyan arrived here so quickly. After he was attacked he must have immediately gone out to search for Lancelot. “Who are they after?” Gwen demands before her eyes widen in alarm. “You don’t think-?”

“They tried to talk to me first,” he admits. “To convince me of their cause against the Knights.”

Elyan’s mouth twists and Lancelot slides an arm around his waist comfortingly. “They want Magic Users,” Merlin realises suddenly with ongoing horror. “They want more of us to join them”

Elyan looks at Merlin directly and the intensity of his gaze fills him with fear. “That’s not all they want. It seemed like they were searching for someone.”

“Morgana,” Gwen says faintly, just as Merlin thinks of Arthur.

“Arthur’s not here,” Merlin says quickly, desperately hoping for it to be true. “I haven’t seen him all week.”

Lancelot looks grim.

“His father took his mobile from him. Only let him return to Camelot today.”

Merlin’s heart starts to beat faster. What if Arthur isn’t carrying a sword at the moment either? What if he’s being surrounded by evil magic users at this very moment? Merlin is supposed to be the one protecting him.

“We need to find the others,” Elyan says. “No one is safe in Camelot right now.”

A roar splits the air apart a second later, and Merlin’s head snaps up just in time to catch the wingspan of the creature longer than a building as it passes overhead, mid-flight.

“Kilgharrah,” he murmurs, amazed at the sight of the Great Dragon flying once more.

An enraged shout echoes in the air around them and Merlin doesn’t stop to think that he should wait for the others, or that his magic isn’t at full strength or they should probably get some help first before he throws himself straight into a dangerous situation.
Arthur’s here. And they’ve already made death threats against him and attempted to kill him before. Merlin runs off in the direction of the grey ash user, knowing if he manages to hit anyone with that substance that it will most likely be fatal. He barely left a few seconds ago but Merlin uses his magic to track him and soon enough is catching a flash of dark hair as the evil magic user sprints off towards the west lecture theatre. Merlin’s panting, thighs burning but he manages not to lose him. And it’s impossible not to hear the words the evil magic user calls out next.

“Arthur Pendragon,” he shouts over the sounds of fighting and screams and Merlin nearly loses his footing. “Face me Arthur Pendragon. Or are you a coward like your father.”

Merlin prays that Arthur is still far away enough not to have heard that but the evil magic users continues shouting Arthur’s name anyway as he runs forward. The challenge is direct and foolish, but he must know what Arthur Pendragon is like and it's a surefire way to grab his attention.

And then Merlin sees him.

He’s standing at the opposite side of the lecture theatre as if he's just returned from the training grounds and Merlin’s heart clenches, face falling at the sight of him with his sword drawn and surrounded by so many evil magic users. Merlin startles into a frozen position at his first glimpse of Arthur since he left Ealdor and then he sees an evil magic user gathering natural energy into her palm. A second later she unleashes a crackle of fire.

Merlin launches forward with his hand out and manages to redirect it before it embeds itself in Arthur’s chest. Arthur turns at new magic as if he somehow senses it’s Merlin and steps in a graceful arc, sword gleaming as it swings through the air.

Merlin feels a welcoming thrum of something else echo in his chest as they look at one another. Some kind of strange energy. Arthur starts towards him determinedly and Merlin discovers that he couldn’t move even if he wanted to. His feet are firmly rooted to the ground. Merlin squares off against the next evil magic user when they try to attack and before long Arthur is standing at his side and they are fighting together.

“Merlin,” he says, in that soft tone that he knows Arthur uses only for him and what is he’s supposed to do with that information?

“Arthur,” he says quickly, seeing how outnumbered they are. “You have to run.”

Arthur’s sword almost seems to glow brighter in his hand as his jaw sets into a grim line. “I won’t leave you.”

The fire user is summoning again and Merlin doesn’t have time to respond before he’s redirecting her magic again, splitting a nearby tree apart with it. She’s sharpening her attack too, Merlin thinks she’ll be summoning lightning soon. And it will be much more powerful than the previous magic user's was.

“You’re a traitor,” the closest evil magic user clothed in a dark cloak hisses, eyes glinting maliciously. “You stand against your own kind.”

Merlin raises his chin, feeling the power in his every breath, the buzz of magic under his skin. “I stand with the innocent and good magic and if you continue with this attack I will defend myself.”

The evil magic users laugh and Merlin merely rolls his shoulder’s determinedly, prepared to face them. The one with greying hair eyes him closely for a moment before realisation overcomes his face. “This is the magic user who defeated Nimueh and Mordred.”
For a second Merlin has no idea what they’re talking about. “The pool,” Arthur says suddenly. “In the Avalon building—”

“The ice,” Merlin realises with a faint degree of disgust.

Mordred and Nimueh must have been the ones in Camelot recruiting students for evil magic all along. And they tried to drown Arthur, to kill him. Is this the only reason that they came to Camelot to begin with?

When the evil magic users try to advance on them, Merlin can see how wary they’ve become with this new knowledge. If only his magic were as strong as his reputation.

They begin to channel together, hoping to overwhelm him, but Merlin can focus on more than one attack at once and Arthur attacks with his sword at any opportunity to remind them that magic isn’t the only danger right now. They press onwards but Merlin constructs a shield around them and Arthur stays strong. Even though he’s sweating from the run earlier Merlin feels energised and determined to do this.

He doesn’t see the evil magic user with the grey ash that he was chasing earlier until it’s too late. Suddenly he’s on Arthur’s flank and there’s a handful of dust soaring through the air. It fades through Merlin’s magic shield like it’s mist and he lunges desperately at Arthur, hoping to push him out of the way but doesn’t get there in time. Arthur throws an arm up automatically and Merlin lets out a cry of horror as it sinks into the skin of his hand.

Arthur makes a pained noise and his sword drops with a clatter as if he’s no longer capable of holding it.

Merlin freezes as the flesh of Arthur’s hand rapidly starts to lose its colour as if the very life is draining out of him and he can see how Arthur trembles when it swiftly begins to spread up his arm. Merlin knows Arthur will be dead when it reaches his heart. And from the look of the seven remaining evil magic users when they push forward again, they seem to know this too.

When Arthur soundlessly drops to his knees, magic bursts out of Merlin in a panicked deluge. “No!” he shouts, and the force of his magic expelling outwards throws the evil magic users off their feet.

Merlin drops to Arthur’s side, forgetting that they’re surrounded, ignoring the fact that there are dangerous people who want Arthur dead. He takes hold of Arthur’s face and meets his gaze urgently.

“I’m sorry,” Arthur says immediately as if it’s the only thing he can say. “I didn’t want to leave either, Merlin—”

“I can fix this,” Merlin promises, voice shaking with fear. “I can fix this, Arthur—”

Arthur looks at him like he sees him, as if he’s peering directly into Merlin’s soul and he’s trying to savour as much of it as he can. Merlin’s never been more terrified. “I love you,” Arthur says, struggling to speak now and Merlin sobs, climbing onto Arthur’s lap and pushing him back onto the grass.

“It’s okay,” he says, putting his hand to the curve of Arthur’s arm where the strange grey ash is spreading. “It’s okay just hold still.”

Merlin pushes deep with his magic, presses it into Arthur like he’s an open wound and Arthur cries out when the poison within him writhes, struggling harder against Merlin’s magic and his attempt
to suppress it. “It’s alright,” he whispers, pouring more energy into Arthur, letting it soothe the pain he’s feeling, encouraging it to curl up around his heart and to protect it.

The poison under his skin is determined, fighting against the barriers Merlin has constructed with his magic, struggling to fulfil its purpose. It wants to consume Arthur completely. It wants to kill.

“Merlin,” Arthur gasps, clutching at Merlin with his uninjured hand, still surprisingly strong for someone whose life is now hanging in the balance.

The poison rails against Merlin’s hold and he can feel the evilness of its goal and fear overtakes him again just looking at Arthur’s pale face. “I love you,” he repeats, no hesitation, no overthinking just the truth of his heart. “I’ve been such an idiot-“

“No,” Arthur tries firmly, before the poison has him convulsing again, as his body tries to fight the unnaturalness invading within. Merlin’s magic flares strongly in response, until the ash begins to recede on Arthur’s arm and it finally begins to flow back towards his fingers where it first entered his body.

There is magic thumping against the wards surrounding them, but Merlin pays them no mind so focused on this task that the rest of the world might as well not exist. Colour begins to come back into Arthur’s skin and when the greyness reaches his fingertips Merlin manages to extract the poison ash once and for all. He redirects it into the grass and immediately a small patch of it withers and dies on contact with the poison.

The tension in Arthur’s body finally relents and he shudders with relief, drained and shaken by the ordeal.

Merlin finds he can barely hold his head up and drops to the side next to Arthur, using all his concentration to keep up the shield around them. Two of the seven attackers lie several metres away, unconscious from Merlin’s magic but it is increasingly clear that saving Arthur from death took up most of whatever magic he had left.

And it hadn’t really been much.

He scrambles weakly to his knees but can’t get much further than that. There’s sweat dripping on his face from the strain of protective magic and when the lightning summoner begins to gather her energy again, Merlin can taste the crackle of it in the air and knows his shield won’t be strong enough to hold up against it.

So Merlin gathers all of what’s left, the burning energy that always thrums beneath his ribcage and lets it out in what he can only describe as a small explosion. Merlin’s thrown onto his back along with the rest of the evil magic users, though it did much more harm to them. It’s clear a second later that his magic has forced them under into some kind of sleep or coma because their eyes fall shut at once and the woman trying to conjure lightning releases the magic.

The only person Merlin’s magic has not touched is Arthur. When the smoke clears Merlin can see a corner of the building has been torn out and Arthur is standing there in front of him, sword in hand and ready to face a group of unconscious attackers.

Merlin wants to laugh but he doesn’t have the energy. The beginnings of a smile start to claim his face until Mordred, Nimueh and Morgause emerge behind their fallen comrades.

“Arthur,” he calls out in warning but Mordred has already thrown a ball of red light in his direction.

Merlin throws his hands up, but he’s helpless to save Arthur from this attack now, even as Arthur
lifts his sword to defend himself. Merlin cries out but unexpectedly Arthur’s sword cuts through Mordred’s magic as if it were thin paper. Neither Nimueh nor Morgause make an effort to attack after that and Merlin knows that they are wary, wondering how a Knight could stave off a Magic Users attack.

“How could you betray Camelot?” Merlin shouts at them, infuriated by his own inability to help the situation. “You would fight your own just to serve your prejudice?”

“He is not one of us,” Mordred spits, but even he sounds less convinced than he had before.

Merlin is glad that some of his magic now resides in Arthur’s sword. It’s all that stands between them and an early death. At least it is until Morgana, Gwen, Lancelot, Leon, Elyan, Freya, Gwaine and Percival come running into the Quad. Nimueh doesn’t hesitate this time. Immediately she summons some type of green flame that Merlin knows could probably melt the flesh from their bones but Merlin can see how her gaze is focused on Arthur and Morgana, now standing side by side.

Merlin also notices Morgause’s expression tightens once she realises what Nimueh is about to do. Would she really allow her sister to be harmed? How much hate is truly in her heart?

“Morgause,” Morgana says quietly, and Gwen’s grip on her sword tightens as if she’s planning to defend her girlfriend at any cost. “Don’t do this.”

Nimueh laughs.

“Pendragons,” she spits, the green flame in her fist growing larger. “So entitled.”

And then she launches her magic straight at Morgana. The group tightens ranks, preparing for the attack as the other Magic Users gather magic of their own. But the flames barely reach them because almost immediately Morgause’s hand slashes violently through the air, ending Nimueh’s spell.

“What are you doing?” Mordred demands, summoning more magic to attack as he glances at Morgause in confusion.

Morgause merely shakes her head. “I tire of all this hate. And I will not bring any harm to my sister.”

Nimueh gasps and Merlin can see the surprise register on everyone’s faces before Morgause crosses the divide between them and joins Morgana’s group instead. “I’m sorry I never responded to you letter,” she says almost immediately when she goes to stand by Elyan and Lancelot. “I was being foolish.”

Morgana nods briefly, not taking her eyes off Mordred and Nimueh but Merlin knows that she is pleased by this. Arthur looks utterly astonished but he has the sense to keep his mouth shut. When he reaches down to help Merlin to his feet though it’s with the kind of confidence that he knew this would be the outcome all along. Merlin won’t deny he had his doubts. They were close to death and outnumbered by evil magic users barely a second ago.

“Traitor,” Nimueh hisses, but Morgause doesn’t seem swayed by the insult or even remotely interested in listening to them anymore.

Elyan steps forward. “This is your last chance,” he says. “Stop this attack and Camelot will welcome you back with open arms. Continue and you will be doomed to suffer alone.”
Mordred doesn’t even wait for Elyan to finish, there’s a flash of smoke and a loud bang and by the
time it is over Nimueh and Mordred are gone. “I had no idea,” Arthur says, looking at Morgause
now before extending his hand. “Er- welcome to the family? Though we won’t hold it against you
if you’d rather not admit any association with Uther.”

Morgause seems surprised all of two seconds before her eyes slide towards Arthur’s other hand
which is pointedly curled over Merlin’s waist. Then she seems to put the rest together quite easily
and accepts Arthur’s extended hand.

“I’d rather not admit any association either,” Morgana mutters. “It’s a family tradition.”

Percival coughs but Merlin’s quite certain that he’s actually trying to stifle a laugh. “Well,” Gwaine
says, smacking his hands together smartly after the group falls into silence. “Shall we go and fight
off some more evil magic users then?”

“Merlin’s drained,” Arthur says. “I think he needs to rest.”

Merlin wants to argue with that but his head is practically lolling against Arthur’s shoulder now
because he can hardly keep it upright. “You’d be safer to stay with the group,” Morgause says,
surprisingly. “In this state you would make an appealing target. All of the magic users attacking
Camelot know of the threat you pose.”

Merlin raises an eyebrow. “The threat I pose?”

“Kilgharrah prophesised you would unite Camelot. You have defeated powerful magic with ease
and brought others back from the brink of death. You pose a great threat Merlin Emrys.”

The group at large turns to look at him then and mostly Merlin just feels embarrassed. “Er-
thanks?”

“Alright it’s settled,” Freya mutters. “We stick together.”

Percival nudges her shoulder. “Maybe it’s time to shift into the panther.”

“It’s not a bloody panther,” she retorts, offended. “I have wings, Perc.”

“Er, right,” he agrees, colouring a little when Gwaine starts to laugh. But Freya shifts into her other
form all the same.

They move through Camelot, trying to find others to help but it turns out they weren’t the only
ones who thought to work together as Knights and Magic Users. They pass a small crowd of Magic
Users with three Knights defending their unprotected backs and the sight makes Merlin so hopeful.
Especially when they hardly need to do much to help them. Maybe it is possible for Knights and
Magic Users to work together after all.

They find Kilgharrah eventually.

He is guarding one of the dorms Merlin recognises is mostly populated by Knights, but even in his
dragon form he has sustained a lot of wounds. It seems most of the evil magic users had come after
him knowing he was their biggest threat. Merlin tries not to feel like more of a liability when he
and Arthur are at the back of the group, lagging a little behind because he can hardly walk.

Not so great a destiny now when he could barely summon a gust of wind to protect them at the
moment. There’s at least ten evil magic users and the rest of the group march into the fray without
preamble.
Merlin pushes Arthur forward, knowing how hard it is for him to just stand there on the sidelines when their friends are in danger. When Camelot is in danger. He resists at first, until he sees the determination in Merlin’s eyes and lifts his sword.

“Go,” Merlin insists, only half certain of himself. “I’ll be fine.”

He pushes again for extra measure and Arthur rushes in to help Morgana who is fighting off two evil magic users. Merlin realises very quickly that he can’t stay on his feet and sinks to the ground with an exhausted sigh. Saving Arthur really took all that he had left.

He doesn’t see the magic user until he is upon him and it’s too late to call any of the others for help. “You’re powerful,” he says, eyeing Merlin keenly. “We’ve heard of you. You could fight by our side, make a real difference in this war.”

Merlin meets his gazes squarely, aware that he doesn’t have the power to defend himself at the moment. “I will never join you,” he mutters. “Your magic is perverse. Monstrous.”

The evil magic user actually seems disappointed as if he truly believes that his request was a reasonable one. “So be it.”

Merlin feels the magic build in the air, can sense the violence in it and knows what his intentions are. He searches the crowd for Arthur, hoping to catch a glimpse of him before it’s too late. Magic bursts from the man’s palms then aimed directly at Merlin’s chest, but suddenly there’s footsteps and the slash of a sword slicing cleanly mid-air just as Merlin feels a strange burst of heat from his forehead.

A flash of blinding blue light illuminates all around them before the air explodes.

Merlin cries out as the evil magic user goes flying, the blast strong enough to render him unconscious along with two other evil magic users caught in the crossfire. Half of the group spins at the sound, shocked, and Merlin stares at Arthur open mouthed as he clutches the glowing sword in his hand. Most of the magic came from the sword, but Merlin has the strangest feeling that something came from within. Or at least from his head.

Merlin rubs at the skin there and abruptly remembers the unicorn’s blessing. Is that what it was that poured out of him?

“It was you, wasn’t it?” Arthur mutters in his ear, breathless and full of excitement as he hauls him back up to his feet. “Who put a spell on my sword? I’d recognise your magic anywhere.”

Merlin remembers how his hands had glowed when he’d held Arthur’s sword back in Ealdor. “I accidentally imbued it with my magic ages ago,” he admits. “A lot of my magic it turns out.”

Arthur laughs and wraps his arms around him and Merlin can see the rest of the group has had similar successes. The remaining evil magic users have either fled or now lie unconscious. Kilgharrah lets out a roar of satisfaction and Merlin sags into Arthur’s chest, relieved and worn out.

He’s surprised a second later when Arthur leans in and kisses him on the mouth with no warning. Merlin drags his fingers through Arthur’s hair and feels a swell of affection so strong his heart might burst.

“I know now,” Merlin says once Arthur draws away. “I know how I feel about you. I was trying to tell you back in Ealdor. Trying to show you. I know this isn’t just shagging. I know this means something. You mean something. You mean a lot, actually, gods Arthur I-“
“I love you too,” Arthur rushes out. “I feel the same, Merlin. Absolutely feel the same. I’m sorry if this has been rough on you, but after so long I honestly started to think you didn’t think the same way about me at all, and the only way I’d be able to keep you close was to keep shagging.”

Merlin lets out a pained groan.

“I was trying to avoid it because I didn’t want you to believe that was all I cared about!”

Arthur breaks out into a broad grin, the last reaction Merlin might have expected after that news. “We’ve made a right mess of things, haven’t we?”

Merlin glances around the destruction of Camelot and Arthur’s blinding grin and smiles a little shyly in response. “Just a little.”

“My father wouldn’t let me leave the house,” Arthur explains for his recent absence at Camelot though he’s already said more than enough in his letter. “After the recent threats. He took my mobile when I argued with him about it. This is the first day I’ve been outside.”

What an interesting first day back at Camelot. Arthur takes a step forward and reaches out to stroke Merlin’s cheek with his fingers. “But I’m so glad you feel the same, Merlin,” he says.

Merlin flushes at the sincerity in his voice and drags Arthur in to kiss him again.

“Oi!” Gwaine shouts afterwards. “There was a battle going on here. Snog later you shameless bastards.”

Arthur laughs at that but doesn’t pull away and Merlin’s just so grateful that no one was seriously injured. When Kilgharrah transforms back into his human form Merlin has the distinct sense that the battle is over. For today at least.

A few minutes later and a crowd of older Magic Users and Knights have joined the fray. Kilgharrah must have sent out an alert that the school was under attack. They look serious and professional when they begin combing the grounds for any remaining evil magic users and tending to the wounded. Kilgharrah closes his eyes for a moment and Merlin can feel the magic surrounding him as he pushes his senses out.

Merlin seems to know what he’s doing though and tries to encourage Arthur to lead them over to him.

“How many-?” he starts to ask before Kilgharrah has opened his eyes.

“None,” he answers and Merlin sags a little bit harder against Arthur in relief. “There are some concerning injuries however. I must see to these students at once.”

Arthur turns over to inspect his sister at those words, concerned for her wellbeing and his grip slacking for the briefest second. Merlin nearly topples over but Arthur catches him at the last second with an apologetic sound and Merlin can’t help but let out a tired laugh.

Kilgharrah inspects him closely. “You’ve over taxed yourself again, Merlin. You need to rest.”

He’s not planning to argue with that mostly because words are too much effort right now. Arthur cups his jaw and gives him a look that makes him feel hot all over. “Take me home, will you?”

Arthur nods as if he wouldn’t have it any other way.
“Let’s all go back, shall we?” Gwaine suggests, having clearly overheard their conversation.

And that’s how everyone ends up squeezed into Gaius’ flat some ten minutes later. Even Morgause came along, though she has that look on her face of someone who’s wondering how on earth they ended up here. Morgana seems happy though, even more pleased when Morgause exchanges a few polite words with Gwen. Merlin’s sharing an armchair with Arthur but he may as well be sitting in his lap, head tucked into Arthur’s neck as the adrenaline of today leaves his body.

There’s talking and some laughter and Freya disappears for ten minutes before she returns with alcohol. Merlin’s nodding off against Arthur at that point but the rest of the group seem more than happy to celebrate today’s victory. Merlin’s trying not to think of how much worse things could have been, how lucky they all were to only have some of the students escape with minor injuries.

“C’mon,” Arthur says abruptly when Merlin’s eyes have slid shut again. “Let’s get you to bed.”

Merlin’s about to agree until Arthur’s hands are coming under his legs and he’s climbing to his feet, lifting Merlin up into his arms like he’s some kind of damsel at the same time. Gwaine grins at him and Leon has a small smirk on his face as Morgana lets out an amused laugh.

“Arthur,” Merlin protests, turning bright red at the display as Arthur grins at him shamelessly.

“Oh go on Merlin let him have this,” Percival says teasingly. “He’s been cooped up all week. Hasn’t had the chance to do anything heroic.”

“Oh ha ha,” Arthur retorts, not as offended as he pretends to be when he carries Merlin into his bedroom.

“Thanks,” Merlin says when Arthur gently deposits him on the bed and turns back to close the door behind them.

Merlin tries to reach down and untie his shoes but he can barely stretch his hands past his thighs. “For what?” Arthur asks, returning to the bed and taking Merlin’s shoes off himself.

His heart feels full and content for a moment, imagining more days like this, just the two of them together. “For being you I suppose,” Merlin mutters, unable to meet Arthur’s gaze when he smiles happily and moves on to unbuttoning Merlin’s jeans for him.

Merlin starts working on his sweater at the same time, and when he finally manages to get an arm free he’s panting and Arthur has just finished dragging his jeans off his legs. “Here,” Arthur says fondly, catching at the edge of Merlin’s sweater and tugging it up over his chest with ease.

Merlin uses the last of his energy to lean up and kiss Arthur but he pulls away with a groan. “Stop that.”

He’s confused for a second, even as Arthur begins kicking off his shoes and stripping off his trousers. Merlin frowns at him. “Er-?”

“Stop being so cute Merlin,” Arthur says rather reasonably before he’s climbing onto the bed to join him. “I can’t exactly ravish you at the moment when you can barely keep your head up.”

Merlin snorts and wraps his arms around Arthur’s waist. He’s asleep before he can even think of replying.
When Merlin wakes up the others must have gone home because it’s quiet in the flat now and Arthur’s head is pressed into his chest, hair standing up in all different directions.

Merlin can’t resist stroking his fingers through it. He feels a little better after a good sleep but he could probably do with some more herbs from Gaius. Merlin manages to extract himself from Arthur’s embrace and throws on a shirt and his pyjamas. It’s slow going but by the time he manages to walk out into the kitchen Gaius is standing there brewing tea so it must be morning.

Merlin must have needed more sleep than he realised. “The others told me you were sleeping after you exerted yourself during the attack yesterday,” Gaius says, looking tired himself. He wonders how many people Gaius had to help heal yesterday and how bad their injuries had been.

Merlin manages a nod and Gaius is already passing some of that strange weed toward him again. The one that helped gain his strength back. Obediently Merlin pops it into his mouth and starts chewing. Thank God it doesn’t taste that unpleasant, Merlin would rather be weak than eat some disgusting tasting kind of herb even if it does replenish his magic quicker.

“How are the others who were hurt during the attack?” he wonders once he’s finished chewing.

“They’re fine,” Gaius says, sighing a little. “We were able to treat their wounds, but I fear Camelot will never be the same.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing,” Merlin says, thinking about it. “It almost doesn’t sound real, Knights and Magic Users working together for once to defend Camelot.”

Gaius smiles then, lifting the mug full of tea to his mouth and taking a sip. “I think you’re underestimating the effect you’ve had since you arrived, Merlin,” he says. “I believe perhaps things are now changing for the better.”

Of course Arthur chooses that moment to come stumbling out of Merlin’s bedroom, with obvious bed head, still shirtless, only wearing pants and looking sweetly confused by Merlin’s absence. “Merlin,” he mutters around a yawn, having not noticed Gaius standing at his side. “Where’d did you go?”

There’s no way Merlin can deny that Arthur slept over last night. And for once he doesn’t want to. “Gaius,” he says and Arthur finally seems to realise they’re not alone, straightening up a little. “You’ve met Arthur.”

“Yes, good morning,” Gaius says before raising an eyebrow at Merlin.

“My boyfriend,” Merlin clarifies, flushing a little at the words he’s never used before.

Gaius looks between them and seems to realise they’ve sorted out their issues. “Ah,” he says smartly. “I’m glad to hear it.”

Arthur smiles easily, but starts retreating back to the bedroom after awkwardly scratching at the back of his neck. “Perhaps I’d better put on some clothes.”

“Perhaps,” Gaius says, amused and Merlin can’t help the snort of laughter that escapes him when Arthur disappears back inside without another word.

“I’m glad that you managed to sort things out,” Gaius says once they’re alone again.
Merlin smiles to himself and pops more of that strange weed into his mouth to chew. “So am I.”

“I think I’ll leave you both to it then,” Gaius decides. “I need to visit the market and replenish my supplies today anyway.”

“I’ll make supper tonight,” Merlin suggests just for the need to contribute. “Whatever you like.”

Gaius smiles and sets his mug of tea down in the sink. “Sounds perfect, Merlin. I should only be a few hours.”

Merlin nods and watches Gaius head out towards his bedroom to collect the bags he usually ends up storing herbs in when shopping before letting himself out of the flat. He finishes chewing the rest of the herbs and goes to re-join Arthur on the bed in his room though the walk back takes him twice as long. At least Arthur didn’t come out and carry him again.

“So what should we do today?” Merlin wonders, around a yawn as he drops onto the pillow.

Arthur is eyeing him closely.

“We could- er get reacquainted.”

Merlin knows Arthur well enough to read between the lines. He grins at him. “Shag you mean?”

“I might have played my hand at indifference,” Arthur mutters, reeling Merlin into his arms with a playful tug. “But I have missed your cock.”

Merlin shivers at the thought. “I don’t think I could,” he groans unhappily. “I don’t have the strength. I can barely move or anything.”

Arthur doesn’t seem deterred by that. “Or you could just lie back and let me ride you like I’ve been wanting to since Morgana’s party.”

“Oh,” Merlin says blankly, eyes glazing over at imagining such a thing.

It really has been too long and he’s missed Arthur so much. And sex with Arthur is almost guaranteed to be worth it. “That’s right,” Arthur mutters, dragging his fingers pointedly along Merlin’s ribs where his shirt has ridden up. “We could sort things out if we’re determined enough.”

Merlin curses and kisses Arthur clumsily, already stiffening up in his pyjamas. They’re pressed tightly enough together that Arthur feels the change instantly. “See,” he says looking well pleased. “You’ve got some energy after all.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Merlin says with a laugh, but he doesn’t protest when Arthur reaches over him in search of the lube he keeps on hand for situations like this.

Merlin just watches him, heat in his eyes and doesn’t say anything until Arthur’s fingers hesitate at his own waistband. “Go on then,” he murmurs encouragingly, already clumsily tugging at his shirt to remove it.

It takes way too much effort to get shirtless and Merlin is out of breath when he reaches down to the waistband of his pyjamas to remove them. He barely shoves them past his hips before he’s distracted by Arthur’s utter nakedness. He’s already stiffening up kneeling on the bed beside him and when his gaze drops to the outline of Merlin’s cock he lets out a low groan and slips lube slick fingers behind himself, rearranging to find the right angle before they slip inside.
Merlin loses his train of thought watching Arthur finger himself and ends up with his eyes locked on Arthur’s face, observing the way his mouth parts with pleasure, and his eyes turn half lidded. “Bloody hell,” Merlin breathes, trying his best to sit up but not having the energy to pull it off.

Arthur pushes him back with his free hand and an amused smile, as if he really is planning to do this all by himself. Merlin’s already flushed all over at the thought and spaces out watching Arthur touch himself, amazed at the sight of him so free in his exploration. His cock is lying heavy in his pants and Merlin startles when Arthur has finished prepping himself and starts dragging Merlin’s pyjamas and the rest off altogether.

“You ready?” Arthur wonders, bunching up Merlin’s clothing and tossing it into the corner of the room.

Merlin can only manage a frantic nod and a pained groan before Arthur is clambering on top of him. He’s a substantial weight on Merlin’s hips but he’s already so worked up at the prospect of doing this, of letting Arthur do everything that he hardly notices it.

That is until Arthur is wrapping his fingers around Merlin’s prick. “Oh God,” Merlin gasps, moving into his touch with a small cry. “Oh bloody fuck- Arthur.”

“Going to let me get off on your cock, Merlin?” he wonders with a poor attempt at looking innocent as he starts to line them up together. “Ride you until I can barely walk tomorrow, is that it?”

“Fuck” Merlin cries, scrabbling to get a hold of Arthur’s thighs as Arthur meets his cock and starts to press down.

He whimpers at the tight heat as Arthur slowly rocks onto him, easing himself onto Merlin’s prick until he’s sitting on Merlin’s pelvis.

“How’s that?”

“Bloody fantastic,” Merlin agrees, barely able to lift his head up and watch Arthur work. “You alright?”

Arthur bites his lip but looks quite satisfied with the situation. “I’d tell you you’ve got a great cock but I don’t want it going to your head Merlin. We all know you’re the one with the ego in this relationship.”

Merlin bursts into unexpected laughter that dies off almost as quickly when Arthur lifts himself up and starts to rock his hips down in earnest. Then Merlin can hardly concentrate on anything else beyond how amazing it feels. Arthur seems to take his job of doing most of the work seriously because when Merlin struggles to stretch out and give Arthur’s prick a tug, he bats his hand away and only rides him harder.

Merlin curses when the bed starts to squeak, Arthur’s strong hips practically grinding Merlin into the mattress. “Fuck, Arthur,” he mutters, feeling his skin buzz with the early warnings of his approaching orgasm.

“I’m going to come,” Arthur pants out unexpectedly. “Merlin- I oh-“

He tightens all over before he can finish the sentence and Merlin watches him come with a soft groan, unable to express what it means to be in this moment right now together when he shoots on Merlin’s stomach. Arthur braces himself against Merlin’s chest and sits down fully on Merlin’s prick while he gets his breath back and recovers. Merlin wishes he had more energy because if he
did his hips would be moving and he’d be pushing his prick back into Arthur with a lot more enthusiasm.

“Did you-?” Arthur starts to ask after a moment.

“Not yet but I’m close.”

Arthur’s expression turns curious. “How close?” he wonders, evidently interested as he clenches and tightens up around Merlin’s cock again.

All at once the edge of orgasm rushes back to him, pushing him right back to that spot. He’s so close, if Arthur would just-

He rocks down a few more times onto Merlin and that’s all it takes. Merlin comes on a groan, hips lifting off the bed for the briefest moment, sapping the last of his energy altogether. He couldn’t clean them up with magic even if he wanted to right now. But it turns out that’s not necessary when Arthur climbs off his hips and heads off towards the bathroom. Merlin can see the come slipping out of his arse and wishes he had the energy to go again.

When Arthur returns with a damp washcloth he cleans them both up, tossing the cloth into Merlin’s washing basket before dropping back onto the mattress beside him. “Definitely worth the wait,” he says, looking sex ruffled and satisfied.

Merlin curves into him with a tired smile and falls asleep almost immediately.

When they wake up a little later Merlin realises that his mobile has run out of charge since yesterday. He barely plugs it into the wall before his phone starts buzzing.

It’s his mother. Uh oh.

“Hey Mum,” he says awkwardly, realising abruptly he should have called her a lot sooner. Arthur said the attack on Camelot was all over the news this morning.

“Oh my goodness, Merlin,” she screeches loudly into his mobile. “Camelot was attacked and you didn’t call me!”

“I’m so sorry, I’m okay. Everyone is okay,” he says quickly. “I just used up too much magic and Arthur brought me home to sleep it off.”

“Arthur brought you home?” she wonders, suddenly sounding a little calmer. “Tell me what happened. How many people were there? I’m sure it must have been so dangerous.”

Merlin tells her everything. About his magic. About Arthur’s sword. About the unicorn’s blessing. He even tells her that he and Arthur are dating now, though it’s a nice experience to see the way Arthur smiles out of the corner of his eye, clearly overhearing the conversation.

Arthur’s phone starts buzzing a second later and the smile falls off his face. Uther most definitely. He’s probably not happy that Arthur didn’t come home last night. Merlin doesn’t even know that he told his father he wouldn’t be home. Or if he informed him he was alright after the attack. Merlin doubts that his father would have given him permission to be here. Especially if he locked Arthur up for a whole week.
Arthur might have very well just gotten himself into more trouble. Merlin feels a twinge of worry when Arthur’s expression tightens. “Yes I-“ he tries. “No, father. Everything is-“

He looks defeated a moment later. “Yes, father.”

“Merlin?”

“Oh yeah, sorry Mum,” he says refocusing on the conversation.

“Will you come and visit again soon?” she asks suddenly. “Or perhaps I might come to you.”

Merlin winces. “Mum who will look after the farm though? The B&B?”

“Oh well maybe-“

“I’ll come to you,” he promises, deciding that's the easiest method for everyone. “But not this week. Maybe at the end of the month.”

“Wonderful,” she says, sounding a bit relieved. Merlin should have realised how much this attack would worry her. “And Arthur’s more than welcome to join you.”

Merlin can hear the teasing in her voice and knows that his face must be red. He wonders how much Will is going to tease him for this as well. He suspects a lot. “Yes Mum,” he promises. “I’ll er- let him know.”

“Please don’t let me find out something has happened to you from the telly again, Merlin,” she says. “I don’t think my heart could bear it.”

“I won’t,” he says, swallowing uncomfortably. “I’m sorry, Mum.”

“It’s okay sweetheart, I’m just glad to know you’re alright.”

“I love you,” he promises. “I’ll see you soon.”

“I love you too, Merlin.”

When he hangs up he realises that there are messages from Will too asking if he and everyone else are alright. Merlin knows he’s probably worrying about Freya too though it’s likely he already contacted her. He sends a quick text telling him everything is fine and by the time he glances over at Arthur he’s reaching for his trousers and slipping into them.

“Uther?” Merlin guesses trying not to sound too disappointed.

“Yes,” he agrees tersely. “I have to go home now or he’s threatened to take me out of Camelot.”

Merlin feels a spike of worry. “What?”

“He won’t actually do it,” Arthur says. “He’d hate the bad publicity that would bring and he’d rather die than be thought of as a coward.”

Merlin throws his arms around Arthur’s neck and drags him in for a kiss. “Will I see you tomorrow?” he asks once they’ve pulled apart.

“Tonight even,” Arthur offers, dragging his hand along Merlin’s jaw. “Nothing could keep me away.”
Merlin pulls him in and kisses him again because he can’t help it.

“See you later then.”

Arthur comes back just as Merlin has finished cooking dinner in the kitchen. He’s made vegetarian nachos tonight because Gaius is a fan of how spicy he can make it and it’s definitely strange when he sits down and joins them both for dinner.

Merlin’s used to him sneaking through the window and sticking around for a shag, not coming through the front door and making small talk with Gaius. That’s not to say he doesn’t enjoy every moment of it though. They curl up on the couch later after they’ve cleaned up in the kitchen and Gaius has gone to bed and watch a bit of TV.

Arthur puts on a show called Vikings that Merlin has heard about but hasn’t seen yet. It starts out pretty violent but he’s more distracted by Arthur’s arm around his shoulder, feeling the warmth of him firmly tucked into Merlin’s side.

It’s nice just spending time like this now. Not having to worry that Arthur would leave, or if he stayed too long Merlin would be giving the wrong impression. Now it just feels right. A couple of episodes in when Merlin starts nodding off on Arthur’s shoulder, he opens his eyes to Arthur dragging him upwards.

“Er- what?”


Merlin’s too tired to argue with him. Plus he’s not denying how nice it is to have Arthur in his bed. Especially when after they’ve brushed their teeth and climbed under the sheets, Arthur throws an arm around his waist and presses up against Merlin’s back, making him feel safe and loved and protected.

When Merlin wakes up the next morning Arthur is already awake and reading the letter that Merlin started writing Arthur a week ago, where he poured all his feelings out. In hindsight he probably shouldn’t have left the pieces of paper under his pillow without even bothering to seal them into an envelope.

“Oi,” he cries, making a grab for it, blushing furiously at being so exposed.

The expression of wonder on Arthur’s face makes him pause. Merlin can’t really blame him for being curious. “Merlin,” he says, so softly and sweetly that Merlin wants to kiss him, morning breath be damned. “Can I keep these?”

Merlin glances at the letters then back to Arthur’s face. “Yeah. Yes. You can keep them. I wrote them about you anyway.”

“It’s- wonderful,” he promises, sounding strangely emotional. “I love everything that you said. I
love you.”

And that’s when Merlin stops feeling so embarrassed. He doesn’t have to worry about morning breath either because Arthur leans in and kisses him straight after anyway.

Arthur heads home on Sunday after breakfast and Merlin spends the rest of the day sleeping and resting, trying to get his energy back.

He feels well rested on Monday when he returns to Camelot and Kilgharrah has called for a meeting with the entirety of the school at midday. Merlin figures he has an announcement about the attack or he wants to implement new changes to the school and its protections. For once maybe it’s good news.

Arthur and Leon find Merlin standing with Gwen outside the amphitheatre and they head in together. Morgana seems to locate them with an eerie precision as if Gwen called for her in the crowded group. Gwen takes her hand automatically and Merlin spots Freya standing with Gwaine and Percival.

He’s certain Lancelot and Elyan are together somewhere in the crowd. When they find their seats Kilgharrah is already standing at the front of the crowd, magically projecting his voice.

“For those of you were not present on Friday, Camelot was besieged by evil magic users with the intent to seriously harm our students. Thankfully those who were attacked escaped with their lives, but I’ve brought you here today to talk of uniting Camelot and your future.”

Arthur reaches out and takes Merlin’s hand, distracting him briefly for a moment before Merlin squeezes back. “If you were not already aware, Magic Users and Knights worked together to fend off these attackers when Camelot truly needed them the most. And while I can see that Camelot has many struggles ahead I am here today to commend these students for their efforts and to discuss the state of the world as we now know it.”

“Evil is everywhere,” Kilgharrah says calmly. “But I see a future of possibility ahead of us. Evil magic can be defeated and it is through uniting Camelot that we have the best chance of moving forward. Hope, love, bravery, these are the qualities that make us strong. And you have all shown us that Camelot has the capability of being much stronger. I hope you consider this in the coming days. The world is more dangerous than you have been led to believe and only together do we stand the best chance of navigating it safely.”

Merlin doesn’t doubt that at all. Without Knights, without Magic Users, he might very well be dead by now. That matters to him.

“Classes will continue as normal and the wards surrounding Camelot have been strengthened in the meantime. But my parting advice to you is this: be patient with each other, be kind and do your best to learn what you can. The innocents of this world are counting on it.”

The mood is subdued afterward, but Merlin can see that Kilgharrah’s words have sunk in. The Magic Users and the Knights seem to be considering each other differently, as if seeing one another for the first time. That little bit of curiosity gives Merlin hope that Camelot can change.

When they file out of the amphitheatre Merlin catches sight of Kilgharrah and decides now might be the best time to talk about the mess his magic has been lately. He lets go of Arthur's hand. “I'll
be a minute.”

Arthur glances over at Kilgharrah curiously and nods. Merlin hurries over to reach the Dean but he turns anyway as if he was waiting for Merlin all along.

“You have questions, don’t you?” Kilgharrah says seemingly knowing what Merlin means to ask. “About why your magic failed you. It is quite simple really.”

Merlin doesn’t exactly think it’s that simple. He's never had this kind of problem before. And never for so long. “I don’t understand,” he says eventually. “My magic-“

“You were supressing parts of yourself, Merlin,” Kilgharrah explains simply. “Your magic was simply pushed down along with it.”

His cheeks feel hot. “So you’re saying because I was denying I was in love with Arthur I was also denying my magic? How does that make any sense?”

Kilgharrah merely shrugs. “You’d twisted yourself up emotionally over this relationship quandary and your magic responded in turn. That is why it could be used in highly stressful moments, particularly when Arthur himself was in danger. All uncertainty vanished and thus your magic answered in kind.”

Merlin let his mouth fall open, speechless.

“I do hope this means you have resolved the emotional conflict within yourself and in your relationship with Arthur Pendragon?”

Under Kilgharrah’s large eyes, Merlin abruptly recalls the enthusiastic way he’d buggered Arthur up against his bedroom wall that morning before they’d cleaned up, made themselves presentable and walked to Camelot together. Thank goodness Gaius had an early class that morning.

Arthur had not been quiet during their lovemaking. He glances over at Arthur and sees the heat mirrored in his eyes and does his best not to blush. Kilgharrah raises an eyebrow and Merlin turns pink anyway. “Er- yes. That is to say things are- resolved.”

Kilgharrah straightens, somewhat satisfied with that answer. “Very good, Merlin. And though I do understand the trials and tribulations of first love, I might advise guarding yourself against such reactions should any problems between you occur in future.”

Merlin’s never felt more embarrassed. The last thing he expected was to be discussing his romantic relationship with the Dean of Camelot today. “Of course,” he squeaks, wondering if the heat emanating off his face right now could boil an egg.

He’s not discounting it as a possibility.

“What was that about?” Arthur wonders when he returns to the group, just as Morgause is joining Morgana.

Gwen told him they’ve already organised to have coffee together soon. Merlin thinks it’s probably a good idea. It would be nice to have a sibling he thinks. Will is the closest thing he’s got, but he hopes it works out for Morgana. She deserves it.

“My magic,” he mutters, still embarrassed. “I just had a question.”

“Anyone for a pint?” Gwaine wonders, sidling up to the group with Percival, Lancelot and Elyan.
The general consensus is yes. Merlin throws an arm around Arthur and they head off to Camelot pub together with the rest of the group, happy and content with the prospect of future adventures.

A week later Merlin finds Arthur easily after Elemental101 has ended, his magic tugging him happily forward to locate him sprawled out beneath a beech tree.

His smile softens at the sight of Merlin hovering over him, and becomes much more interested when Merlin extends a hand to help him up. Arthur accepts it without question. “Fancy a walk then?” he asks, feeling a little breathless when he leans in to kiss Arthur’s mouth.

They get distracted easily, and Arthur’s reply is lost in the exchange of kisses and warm tongues.

“And a shag?” Arthur adds on playfully with a suggestive wiggle of his eyebrows.

Merlin grins, feeling like one of the luckiest Magic Users in Camelot. “The shag was implied.”

“I know, love,” Arthur says, grinning now around a row of perfect teeth. “Honestly if I’d realised Magic Users were so randy all the time, I’d have asked you out the first time I saw you.”

Merlin snorts. “After I shouted at you from the window and you sucked me off in the library you mean?”

He barely takes a step before Arthur’s hand slides into his own, warm and comforting. Then his heart beat stumbles into uneven territory. “No, at that first Knight tournament,” Arthur explains. “You’d gotten up to leave and I nearly lost the match stopping to ogle you. I’d go as far back as Character Placement when you were up on the stage, but that doesn’t count since I was mostly staring at your arse the whole time.”

Merlin laughs then. He can’t help it.

“I thought I must’ve been mad to believe you were looking at me during that tournament,” he says, a little amazed. “I thought I was imagining it.”

“You made a very- distinctive impression,” Arthur admits. “In Placement and when you left the arena. Couldn’t help but think I’d bored you somehow. Hard to forget a face like yours either.”

Merlin’s blushing now. “I was only there for Gwen,” he says. “And she’d already been eliminated. I sat there too long since I got distracted watching you fight. You- you are very good at that.”

Arthur’s smile becomes more pronounced. “You know I think I’m starting to love these little compliments of yours, Merlin. Please continue.”

“You’re brave,” Merlin says without embarrassment. “You’re loyal, you’re kind though you might not always know it, and you make me feel so cheerful I didn’t know it was possible.”

Arthur takes his hand, eyes warm with unbridled joy. “I-“

“Arthur!”

They turn at the sound, and watch Uther’s approach together, even as Arthur refuses to let go of his hand. “Hello father,” he says.
“I’ve set up an interview,” Uther says, acting as if he doesn’t even see their intertwined hands. “To discuss the events of the latest attacks. Come, we must leave at once if we’re to make the appointment.”

He can’t still be trying to get rid of Kilgharrah? Not after the students banded together to fight off evil magic? Not when it seems like the Knights and Magic Users might be able to work together after all.

“You won’t be able to sack Kilgharrah,” Merlin says. “No matter how many articles you pay people to write.”

Uther narrows his eyes at him. “I don’t give a damn about Kilgharrah’s position, boy. I wish to cement my son as the leading force that drove the evil magic users from Camelot.”

“But I didn’t,” Arthur points out calmly. “Not really. I used a sword imbued with Merlin’s magic. After all the battles had already been fought.”

Some of Uther’s rudeness fades from his voice. “Merlin’s magic?”

Merlin resists the urge to waggle his fingers. Uther straightens and adjusts his suit. “Very well, then you will clarify the situation as such and illuminate the importance of your involvement.”

“No,” Arthur says cheerfully.

Uther blinks as if he hasn’t heard him properly. “No?”

“No, Father. I don’t think that I will. You see Merlin and I already have plans.”

He huffs and dismisses the words with a wave of his hand. “Nonsense, Arthur. You can meet up with your- boyfriend later. This is the Daily Mirror. You will take the interview and-”

“No,” Arthur repeats firmly. “I won’t. I have no intention of lying about what happened, including my role in the events. And if your interests were truly noble you would have included the others who were present during the attack, the Magic Users.”

“But-“

“It was this type of exclusion that created so many problems in the first place,” Arthur insists. “And I don’t intend to take part in it any longer. Magic Users are our equals, Father, they always have been. Just as mother was.”

Uther draws himself up to his full height and Merlin feels a flicker of concern. Uther does not always behave like a rational man. But to Merlin’s surprise Uther’s expression changes entirely.

“Forget the interview,” he says slowly, looking at Arthur like he’s never seen him before. “Enjoy the time you have together- now before you graduate and face danger like no other. The kind of evil magic that even the best of us do not always survive.”

Merlin’s not worried though.

“We’ll learn,” he says. “We’ll train. And we’ll be ready for what’s to come.”

“And we’ll face it together,” Arthur says, determinedly.

Uther glances between them, an odd smile pulling at the corner of his mouth for the first time since Merlin’s ever known him.
“Yes,” he decides, glancing down at their linked hands. “Yes, I suppose you will.”

But Merlin is hardly even listening to the words even as Uther turns and walks away without another word. He’s too busy staring at Arthur. Arthur, who is looking back at him with a relaxed smile on his face, the ease of one happy and content in it. Merlin knows the feeling.

“Shall we?” he asks, thinking of the friends that await them back at Gwen and Elyan’s flat.

Arthur nods and gently encourages Merlin into his arms. And Merlin falls into them without hesitation, a pleased smile from Arthur sending his heart soaring higher than any magic possibly could.

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