Healing
by rotrude

Summary

Promising university student Merlin Emrys is involved in a car accident that leaves him in very bad shape, both physically and emotionally. It will be up to his physiotherapist, one determined Arthur Pendragon, to pick up the pieces and help him on the road to recovery. The path towards healing isn’t easy however when feelings enter the mix.

The sand smelled of the sea, fresh, spicy. Merlin closed his eyes and breathed deeply, inhaling the scent of the salty, resin-y air. When he re-opened them, he focused on the bonfire. It was lit with bundles made from the scraps of wood they’d been able to find, cardboard and other inflammables that were ready at hand. Someone had even wrapped a ribbon around the end of a piece of wood that had just caught fire. It flapped in the breeze, sparking brightly. It was pretty. Symbolic too. The end of an era and all that.

The fire was now blazing, truly alight. Freya and Gilli, like most others, were dancing round it, swaying to the music coming from Cador’s Smart Speaker.

“It’s our last uni semester, people. We should celebrate!” Gilli said out loud, improvising a dance move that made Merlin smile. He twirled Freya, describing a circle round the bonfire. His jeans jacket started to smoulder. “Oh, oh, oh,” he said, eyes nearly popping out as Freya put the first tentative lick of flame out. “That’s new.”

“Was new,” Freya said, giggles punctuating her delivery.
“Gilli, you should put down that beer.” Merlin's eyes crinkled at the corners. “Really, come on.”

Will plonked down on the log Merlin was perched on before Merlin could persuade Gilli. “Oh, let him be,” he said. “He has good cause.”

Merlin watched Will take a drag of beer and his shoulders slumped at the sight. Will was hunching in on himself, mouth turned down at the corners. There was no spark in his eyes. “You'll get there too,” he said as gently as he could. He hoped to god he didn't sound officious. “Just because you're 60 credits behind doesn't mean you won't get your degree like everybody else.”

Will chugged down the rest of his beer. “But I fucked up.”

“It's just a little more than a semester, Will,” Merlin said, making his voice sound level and reasonable. “Everyone understands.”

“That arsehole Donovan doesn't.”

“You showed up late for his lecture and talked back a lot.” Perhaps he ought to have been more conciliatory, but Merlin couldn't refrain from pointing the truth out. “ Doesn't matter now though, does it? You've switched modules. You're going to be fine.”

“My da isn't coming back, is he?”

Merlin hugged his knees to hide his wince and the tug that was tearing his heart open. “No, he isn't. But that doesn't mean you can't get it together, Will.”

Will pointed the beer can towards the flames. “I'm not you, Merlin. I'm not you.”

Merlin's palm closed tight around his shin. “What does that even mean? I know what you're going through.”

“Not the same, Merlin,” Will slurred, his words barely audible over their friends' laughter, shouts and giggles. “Not the same. I actually knew my father.”

Merlin stared back. “Okay,” he said, trying to get at Will's can. “Okay, you've had enough booze if you're spewing shit like that.”

In the ten years they'd known each other he and Will had always argued. They hadn't always been kind to each other, but there were subjects they'd never dare touch. This was one of them. “Gimme.”

Will wrenched the can out of Merlin's grasp. By doing so, he caused the rest of the contents to spill. “See what you've done, you moron.” He tore upright. “Oi, Gilli, share the booze.”

Merlin followed after. “Will, come on. Don't be like that.”

Will rounded on him. “Shut your mouth, okay, Merlin? I get it. You're always in control. You're the one with the prospects and the bright future. And what am I, uh? Nothing. The poor loser whose dad died, whose mum's on the dole, and who's a year behind in uni. Let me at least have some fun.” He turned, getting that beer from Gilli. “Arse,” Merlin heard him say.

Since Will had set off Merlin couldn't reply, though there was plenty he wanted to say. Will had joined Pell and the two were downing half a bottle of something that looked like coke. It was surely mixed with alcohol.

Merlin was in half a mind to go after him. Get a bottle of water from somewhere and get Will to stop
drinking and guzzle that instead, but Mordred came up to him and he couldn't very well drop him or tell him to get out of the way. “Want to dance?” Mordred said, and then following Merlin's line of sight, he added, “He's having fun. And he's not even that wasted, if you want my opinion.”

Merlin looked the other way.

“You don't.” Mordred said, brushing a hand down his arm. “Evidently.” His smile was pained. “But look, why don't we have a little dance? Forget about the bad things. It's not going to hurt.”

Merlin watched his friends bounce around. Gilli was chasing Freya down the duned back beach towards the promontory that crested Red Wharf bay. One of the girls from his hall had stopped picking shells and now shouted out loud, “Why don't we see if we can find peeler crabs?”

Two other girls giggled and followed after, filling the night with the sounds of their happiness. Merlin tipped his head back. The stars were shining bright and the sky was a deep velvet as transparent as fine glass.

Merlin looked back to Mordred. “Yeah, why not.”

Mordred wrapped a hand around his middle and, canvas trainers squelching on the compact sand, led him away. “Play something fun, Adam!”

The notes of *Sweet Nothing* hit Merlin’s ears and he laughed at Mordred's attempt to slow dance it.

“See, shaking some of that gloom off.”

Merlin wasn't a good dancer, but he shook around, fudged a few moves, and hopped a little.

Freya, who was dancing too and bumped into him, gave him a kiss on the cheek. Merlin made a handstand and Mordred whooped. “Way to go, Merlin!”

After he'd straightened again Merlin laughed, brushing sand off his hands. “Yeah, maybe I should try some break-dancing.”

He made it look as if he was about to vault backwards but stopped even before Freya could prevent him from making a fool of himself. “Kay, kay. I'll stop showing off,” he said.

Wearing a smile, Mordred said, “Don't ever. It looks good on you.”

Merlin wanted to come up with something about that. Mordred was being nice and he'd brought a smile to Merlin's face but he was most probably hitting on Merlin and Merlin didn't feel anything for him. Mordred wasn't bad looking but Merlin wasn't all that interested, so he opted for not encouraging him. He became even more convinced this wasn't the night for it when he looked over Mordred's shoulder and saw Will having a row with Cedric.

“Oh, okay, I've had enough, fuck yourself, I'm going!” Will was shouting.

Merlin blanched. He'd thought they'd all have time to sober off before they tried to make it home, that they'd sleep it off on the beach or in their cars. But now Will was threatening to go. That wasn't right. He was in no condition to.

Merlin pushed Mordred aside. “I'm sorry. I've got to stop him from doing something foolish.”

“How though?” said Freya with a sigh. “He seems to be dead set on making a fool of himself.”

“Not his fault he's going through a bad patch,” Merlin said, jogging away. “Got to convince him.”
By the time Merlin caught up with him, Will had almost walked back to the ridge that gave onto the road, where his car, an old, battered Smart that had been through thick and thin, was parked.

Merlin zipped up his hoodie and, arms around himself, caught up with Will. “Will, stop, please. ‘Will!’”

Will rounded on him. “What do you want? Reason with me because you're that much more grounded? I'd like to remind you that we've done all kinds of shit together, Merlin.”

“Yeah,” Merlin told him. “Yeah, but this is the stupidest, Will. You can't drive off. You're drunk. That's why you're flying off the handle.”

“I'm not,” Will said, flinging his hands out. “I just a little drunk. See, still standing.”

“That's not a measure of how sober you are.” Merlin tried to catch Will's elbow.

Will shook Merlin off, then he fished the keys out of his pocket and said in an angry but low tone, “I'm tired, Merlin. I'm tired of you telling me what I should do.”

“Will, this is a bad idea.” Merlin could resort to pleading with the best of them if it helped his friend. “You'll think differently in the morning. Swear.”

Will had opened the car and settled behind the wheel. “I'm sick and tired, Merlin. Sick and tired of you playing at being my mate. Enough. You're no better than me.”

With that Will turned the ignition off and started accelerating.

Before Will could get the car truly rolling fast, Merlin opened the door and leapt inside.

“What the fuck!” Will shouted, battering the steering wheel with his open palms. “Who told you you could fucking come!”

“I didn't want you to leave like that,” Merlin said, slamming the door shut and fastening his seatbelt.

Will jammed down on the accelerator, speeding off the shoulder and onto the road, tyres squealing. “Like what?”

Bouncing and sliding around in his seat, Merlin propped himself against the window and yelled back. “With you mad at me. Come on, Will, slow down.”

Will didn't do any such thing, if anything he sped more. They were tearing down the coastal road, shapes blurring past, headlights winking. A horn screamed, a car hurtling past in the other direction. They slashed through the night; street-lights coalescing into pools of bright orange that contrasted with the night's darkness. Merlin tried to read the landmarks, but couldn't. He only knew that they'd left Red Wharf Bay behind and that Will wasn't letting off the accelerator.

“Come on, Will, slow down, this is stupid!” He eyed the road with horror-filled eyes.

“Said the man who stole his mum's car!”

“I wasn't drunk!” Merlin was not really in a mood to go over bygones with Will. “You are. Stop the car.”

“If you want to get off, you're welcome,” said Will, an ugly grunt covering a sob. A real sob. Will was hunching over the wheel and his shoulders were shaking and Merlin knew he was crying. Merlin's heart came unstitched at that. They'd been through so much Will and he – Merlin growing
up to learn what it was to be fatherless, Will practically moving in with him and his mum because his parents needed those two jobs and Merlin's mum could better look after him, Will's dad death – and Merlin couldn't not feel anything. Will's suffering made very real pain bloom in his chest. It just shot through him. “I won't,” Merlin yelled back. “Will, we've got to talk. Slow down and we can.”

“So you can magically fix everything, eh, Merlin, Will said, thumping the wheel. “It doesn't work like that. Things never get fixed.”

“That's not true!” The car swerved and Merlin ended up bumping his shoulder against the door. “Will, stop now. We can fix it all.”

They were now hurtling down the A5 and Merlin could already see the Menai bridge glinting in the moonlight, its strong cables holding the construction aloft. Having left the low-lying fields of Anglesey behind they'd covered quite a distance and in such a short time that Merlin had to wonder how fast Will was going.

And then he couldn't because the car veered off course once more, nearly ending in the opposite lane. Somehow Will wrestled it straight again.

“We can fix everything!” Merlin was shouting by now. “There's nothing that can't be put straight if you try hard enough.”

“No, that's not true,” Will said, wiping at the snot clinging to his nose. “It can't. It's all gone to hell. All so quick. He was doing what he could. For us. You don't get it.”

A car horn blared. The engine of a big car rumbled from the opposite direction. Merlin was blinded by the glare of oncoming headlights. Too late he realised that they were too close. “Shit, Will.”

Will clutched the steering wheel, wrenching it left as quickly as he could. The car sheered in the same direction and spun on the road. Will fought to maintain control, but they careened down the wrong side of the road, heading towards the side of the bridge.

Merlin flew sideways in the seat, hitting his head hard. Time slowed down for him. Pain dulled him. He heard the squeals of the brakes, Will's curse, but regardless the car shot forward at a much greater speed than before. They'd gained too much momentum, he realised. “Will!”

The car crashed forwards past the railing and then left the road and became airborne. It flew through the air, twisting and rolling, then came hurtling down. Merlin was flung forwards. He saw Will's body flash past, the door opposite got wrenched open, and then he felt a terrible stab of pain.

His head hurt as if something had pierced his skull, a sticky liquid, fell into his eyes and he saw red. He blinked. A swathe of sky shone through the red pall. A star twinkled. “Will,” Merlin said, ribcage rattling, sound torn as if he couldn't get enough air through in his lungs. “Will?”

He turned his head. A lance of pain that made him scream ripped him apart, open at the seams. He couldn't see Will. He could only see red. He closed his eyes. “Will.”

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“Stay with us, kid.”

The voice was rough, masculine, comforting. He'd always thought his da would sound like that. He
knew this wasn't his dad. He'd never had one. But he needed to check, get a glimpse of the person speaking to him; in the far-fetched scenario this wasn't a dream he wanted to establish this couldn't be the man who'd abandoned him so long ago.

“Is he blinking?” the voice said. “I think he's blinking.”

Merlin's lids were heavy, but he made an effort to open his eyes. When he did, he saw a face hovering above his. It was a kind face, that of a man in his forties, balding, unknown. He was wearing a green jumpsuit. Merlin tried to speak but only a moan came out.

“He's conscious,” said the man to someone who was outside Merlin's field of vision. “Okay, kid stay with me. We're going to cut open the car roof. Seat belt's jammed so we're going to cut it off, all right?”

“Where's Will?” Merlin's voice was so feeble Merlin knew he wasn't all right. He did have more clues as to his being unwell too. He felt pain in his back and legs, slow waves of it that were excruciating when they hit and acceptable when they subsided. They shot up his spine and if he tried to inch either to his left or to his right it got bad. Really bad, nightmarishly so. His stomach felt liquid – at times he was sure he'd puke his guts out – and his head felt light as if little vortexes of darkness were spiralling in there and taking him out of himself.

“Verney,” the man in green hollered, “fucking hell, where are those cutters?”

Merlin's lips curled upwards at the swearing, but then he coughed. The coughing shook him and splinters of pain broke him.

“Hey, hey,” the man in green said, turning and grabbing a metallic object from a second person, “we're getting you out.”

The seatbelt was cut in two, one of its ends slotting back into place, the other hanging lose. “Shine your headlights over here,” the man in green shouted.

Headlights, with their high beams, shone in tunnel light fashion over the car. By that yellow light Merlin could see that his legs were wedged under the collapsed dashboard. The glass was shattered and caving inwards. Merlin didn't think that this getting him out of the car business was going to be easy.

The man in green – only now Merlin guessed he was a paramedic – said, “Before I move you I'm going to put this on you.”

Merlin looked sideways at the object. It was an orthopaedic collar. “Okay,” Merlin mumbled. “Kay.”

The paramedic scooted closer and placed the cervical collar around his neck. Merlin breathed through his nose to stave off another wave of nausea. He felt like he couldn't breathe, so he started pulling at the collar, trying to claw at his throat, his face twisting, his eyes watering.

The paramedic intercepted his hand, stopped him. “Don't. Don't, kid. You'll hurt yourself.”

Merlin heard another voice over his friendly paramedic's one. “Hey, Alator, do you smell that?”

“No, what should I be smelling?” Alator asked.

“It's petrol,” the other man said.

“Where are the bleeding fire-fighters?” Alator's voice was like a bark.
“On their way but I suggest we get him out of there ASAP.”

Alator gave a short nod to his colleague, then he turned to Merlin “I'm going to give you a morphine injection. Are you all right with that?”

Merlin couldn't say that he wasn't. At times he could tell himself he was fine, especially if he didn't move at all; at others pain licked up his legs, enveloped his back, and gnawed at his innards. “Yeah, okay. But where's Will?”

The paramedic snapped his fingers at Merlin. “I need you to be sure about this. Do you want the morphine?”

“Yes,” said Merlin. If it made the waves of pain recede then he wanted like nobody's business.

Merlin didn't even feel the little prick from the injection, but he was aware of the oxygen mask that the paramedic placed over his mouth and nose. “We're about to move you, boy, okay?”

Merlin tried to nod but couldn't. He tried to say yes but he wasn't sure it came out loud and clear. He was getting more and more light-headed.

The paramedics busied themselves around the car.

“Try sliding the seat back.”

“It's jammed. I'm not wasting any time if the car's leaking petrol.”

“Pull harder.”

Merlin's paramedic did, jostling Merlin. The pain registered in completely new ways. It tore at him from the inside out and it was like slowly wading through a sea of fire. His left leg throbbed agonizingly, the burning and grating sensation climbing upwards. Blood ran from his temple to his shoulder, soaking his shirt. Merlin moaned out his distress.

“I can't budge him,” said the first medic, Alator. “I can't.”

“Okay, wait for me here.” The second medic dashed away at a run. Merlin couldn't see where he was going but he was quite happy to find the man's absence meant he wasn't about to be moved again. Even the creaks and groans he heard coming from the car weren't enough to convince him that budging again was a good idea. Will and his bloody car. It had never been comfortable and now it was even less so.

A sort of loud bumping sound like a metal bubble bursting reverberated in the night.

“It's caught on fire!” Alator yelled loudly, warning his colleague of the emergency.

That was when Merlin got it. It was a bout of lucidity he didn't think would last long, but he got it. The car was about to explode and he was stuck. There was no way he could get out of this. “Get away,” he rasped to the medic. “Get away and save yourself.”

The fire from the rear of the car was reflected into the medic's eyes. “I'll get you out first.”

“Get Will and run.” Merlin had to insist his life wasn't worth two others. “You can't die for me. I won't— I don't want it like that.”

“Here,” the second paramedic said over him, having returned from his jaunt elsewhere. “Crow bar.”
Forehead lined, Alator assessed the instrument, not paying attention to what Merlin wanted to tell him. It was so frustrating that Merlin tried to tug at his sleeve, but Alator ignored him in favour of saying, “It's going to be enough.”

He slipped the crowbar between the dashboard and Merlin's body, exerting pressure while releasing an enormous grunt, his forehead all shiny with sweat, face a-glow in the fire. “Pull hard now.”

Merlin screamed. He'd never known torture like this. Bones scraped against bones; waves of agony washed over him. The pain rattled through him in waves like a huge tide. It nearly brought him under. No matter how much he wanted it to end or that he was ready to die if this just stopped, he was moved and jolted some more. He didn't think he had enough wind to scream, but he did anyway. And then the sound of his own screams were eclipsed by an enormous roar. A wall of air moved his way, ruffled his hair, caressed his face with a hot lick. Then everything tumbled upside down: the night capsized. He was thrown downwards, the weight of a body covered his. He thought he was crying, crying with the pain of it: being jolted, his bones grating in his leg, the weight bearing him down. Then everything began to become hazy, and he knew he was slipping away. A hand closed around his and squeezed. “Hold on, kid.”

His body was placed on a hard surface, his legs covered. Merlin exhaled, closed his eyes, knew no more.

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Gwaine was finishing his chicken sandwich when the phone rang.

With Sefa off to catch a wink of sleep, Mithian was the only staff nurse around and the one who got the call. “Emergency department?” she said and by her frown Gwaine could tell it was bad news. “Thank you.” She put the hand set back into place. “Gwaine,” she said, walking over to him, the lines on her pretty brow very much in place. “We have an RTC, one victim, dead on impact, one wounded.”

Gwaine wrapped up the last of his sandwich in a layer of plastic and binned it. Being a leftover from his attempt at breakfast in the morning it was no great sacrifice. The mayo had turned a colour that wasn't normal for anything egg-derived and the lettuce was drooping and browning. It had probably developed a nice colony of E-coli bacteria while he'd been waiting to nosh on it – ever since 9.25 AM. Ha, what he did for the job. “Okay, let's clear some space and, Mith, alert theatre and X-ray.”

Mithian nodded and hurried out.

By the time the ambulance team barrelled in, all noise and bustle, their jackets nearly blinding him with their fluorescence, Gwaine had had time to wash his hands and put his gloves on.

“Little help here,” Alator, whom Gwaine recognised from previous meetings dictated by similarly sad circumstances, said while pushing the gurney through the heavy doors.

Mithian and Sefa hurried over to hold them open for him while Alator and his colleague pushed the gurney inside resusc, a senior nurse and Daegal, their SHO rota doc, trailing after them.

“Can we get him over, ladies and gentlemen, please?” said Gwaine, moving to be in a better position to help transfer the patient, a young man in his early twenties, from the stretcher to the hospital gurney.

“Okay, on three,” said Alator, the veins in his neck sticking out. “One, two, three.”

With Mithian supporting the patient's head to avoid further injuries and the rest of them lifting the
stretcher from the sides, the young man was moved without a glitch.

“Pulse is 89, BP is 100 over 70, BT is 37.2, SATS are 95,” Alator fired quickly. “I've given him a
ten of morphine and 800 of saline. Boy was trapped under the dashboard. Impact did a number on
the car. Patient was conscious and alert until we extracted him.”

While Alator read him vital signs and stats, Gwaine removed the temporary nasopharengaeal airway
the paramedics had put Merlin on and replaced that it with a permanent one, connected with the
hospital's oxygen supply.

Now that the patient's continued breathing was secured, Gwaine continued on with his assessment.
The patient's colour was good so there was that at least. One less thing to worry about.

While Mithian hooked the unconscious patient up to an ECG machine and BP recorder so that they
could get quick readings, Gwaine moved on with his study of the car crash victim.

“Well, I'll leave you to it then.” Alator wheeled the discarded gurney back towards the door. “Still on
call.” With his ambulance colleague already out, Alator stopped and said, “Look after the poor kid.
Sounded like a good one. Kept asking about the other one on board – Will, I think – and the sad
truth was we could do nothing for the other boy.”

Gwaine lifted his head and held a hand up. “Will do my best, mate. Will do my best.” He wanted to;
there was no doubt about it. His patient was young, in his early twenties, probably. In spite of his
cut-glass cheekbones, his face had that softness you didn't get rid of when you entered adulthood and
his body hadn't lost the gangliness of adolescence yet. Even though Gwaine had been taught to stay
calm and collected in resusc, that fact affected him. He could see himself in him; maybe not the
himself from now but the kind of person he'd been when still a student trying to pass his third year
exams. Gwaine would fight tooth and nail to give this young man the chance he himself had had. A
shot at life. “Believe me.”

Alator nodded. “See you around, McAllister.” Alator left, a swish of doors sounding in his wake.

Gwaine focussed back on his patient. There being no blood visible, Gwaine knew the boy had no
upper chest wounds. So he directed his attention somewhere else. He put on his stethoscope to
auscultate the patient's chest.

“How many units do you want cross matched?” Daegal had just finished taking a blood sample from
the patient.

Gwaine looked up. “Seven, just in case, let's start with O neg and get me some anticoagulants.”

Sefa checked his patient's pupils, shining his mini torch on them. “Pupils are reactive.”

Mithian cut open the boys' trousers and said, “Gwaine.”

Gwaine stopped in his tracks and before he could give pelvic compressions a shot, he gave the boy's
legs a look. The left one sported an open tibial shaft fracture that was hard to miss, ortho or no. The
right one was certainly covered in bruises that made him suspect a number of other fractures was
present as well. Thank God, the bone hadn't damaged any artery and the boy wasn't spilling blood all
over the table. Still this was a matter for concern. “Okay get me an ortho down here!” Gwaine
barked.

Sefa ran to the nearest phone to get a consultant to come down.

“And get me a portable CT scanner!”
Gwaine was feeling the right leg up to establish how many fractures were present – and thinking of an osteoplastics transfer – while assessing the level of muscle and artery injury, when the machinery the kid had been attached to started playing up like the Radetzki March.

“Gwaine,” Mithian said, catching his eyes, fire shining in hers. “Pulse is 140, BP is 70 over 50.”

Gwaine’s head snapped to the machines. “Christ, he's going into hypovolaemic shock,” he said. “Okay, let's find the source of this haemorrhage.”

Daegal blanched. “Holy shit, are we losing him?”

“No, we're not.” Newbies, they panicked so easily; not that Gwaine was unshaken. But he'd never tell that to a junior doc. “We're saving him. Give him ten micrograms of norepinephrine diluted in 0.1 ml of saline.”

Shaking, Sefa barrelled into the cart to look for the right ampoules.

“Gwaine, he's crashing!”

Gwaine could see that for himself; even if all the monitors weren't beeping furiously, he could read the data all right. The emergency being what it was, Gwaine didn't rest on formalities. He jumped on the stretcher, his legs either side of the patient's mangled ones, and started CPR, mentally counting the number of compressions while snapping aloud, “Get the crash cart!”

In the background the high-pitched whine of machinery increased. “And where the hell is that norepinephrine?”

Sefa was still sorting through ampoules. To help her Daegal moved over, rummaging for the right container.

“Where's that bloody cart!” Gwaine pressed downward on the young man's chest, his arms straight, strands of sweat-drenched hair in his eyes. He pushed hard and fast.

Mithian thrust the red crash cart to the side of the stretcher and started charging up the defibrillator.

Before jumping down the stretcher, Gwaine ripped off what was left of the patient's shirt. “Set it at two hundred.”

Readying the defibrillator, Mithian prepped the paddles and then handed them to him.

Gwaine made a grab for them and placed them against the side of the patient's chest. “Clear,” he yelled, making sure everyone was standing properly aside.

As the charge entered the patient, his body rose and a dull thudding sound was released at the same time.

Everybody stared at the monitor, barring Mithian, who injected the norepinephrine into the IV line.

The monitor didn't yield better readings.

Come on, Gwaine thought. The boy was young and if Gwaine had just thought about checking his abdomen first, they might not have got to this. Come on, boy. You're too young to die.

Nothing.

“No recordable BP.” Daegal gave Gwaine a concerned look. He was white in the face and Gwaine
wondered for a fleeting moment whether this was the first patient Daegal was in danger of losing.

“Let's try again and give me three hundred this time,” said Gwaine, fingers closing tight around the pad handles.

“And done.”

Gwaine applied the paddles against the patient's chest. “Clear!”

As electricity pulsed through him, the patient jolted on the table.

The blood pressure monitor showed an increase in activity.

“BP is back to 60 and climbing.” A smile spreading on her lips, Mithian read the results. She was interrupted from saying anything further by Doctor Taliesin stalking inside. “What have we got here, McAllister?”

“A haemorrhage to find, sir.” Gwaine, strangely enough, found himself standing at attention.

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Hunith's alarm clock sounded at six AM as it did every morning. She wasn't needed at the office today. She might have slept on, but she was conditioned to wake at six by now. Having to drive all the way to Beaumaris to get into work, that was her set time, and she didn't see a reason to change her rhythms because today was a stay-at-home day. It was far too disruptive.

Adhering to her daily patterns, she drew aside the covers and walked to the clotheshorse to put on the dressing gown she'd left draped on it.

In search of her morning tea, she wondered downstairs and started the kettle. The water wasn't near boiling point yet, so she took an orange from the fridge and started peeling it clock wise. Like a silly thing, she lost her grip on the knife and cut herself. Bleeding, she rushed to the sink so as to clean the cut and wash away the blood. That was when the phone started ringing. At the same time the kettle whistled loudly, steam coming out of the pit.

Hunith was torn as to what to do, but since the kettle was old and didn't turn off automatically she dashed for it and switched it off herself. The phone stopped ringing. Well, she thought, whoever it was would try again. If it was important they would and if it was just a marketing call then good riddance.

She was pouring the steaming water into the old mug Merlin had bought her when he was eleven, when the phone took to going again. This time she put the kettle back on the trivet that was its base and shuffled towards the phone to answer. “Hello, Hunith Emrys speaking.”

“Mrs Emrys,” said a female voice she'd never heard before. “I'm Mithian Nemeth. I'm a staff nurse at Ysbyty Gwynedd Hospital in Bangor.”

Sweat ran down Hunith's back. A nurse calling her at six in the morning couldn't be good news. Nurses didn't just ring you for random reasons. And the only reasons they could contact you about weren't good ones. “The hospital in Bangor?” She remembered a time she'd been calling all the hospitals in the region for news about her vanished husband with dread and apprehension. Ever since being refused even the littlest bit of human understanding in trying to locate him, she'd been leery of hospitals and all such places, avoiding them like the plague. Now someone from just such an institution seemed to have found her.
“Yes,” Nurse Nemeth said, “I'm afraid we admitted your son into our emergency department earlier this morning.”

Hunith cupped her mouth with her hand.

“Oh my God.” A hollow opened up in her stomach. Merlin. What had happened to Merlin? That boy was always rushing where angels feared to tread. Especially when he was with Will. There was a time when he'd been perpetually ending up in trouble, including frequent visits to the A&Es, but he'd always been the one to ring, sheepishly apologising for making her worry. This time he hadn't called. She was talking to a nurse. That meant Merlin couldn’t talk. “What's happened? Where is he? Is he all right?”

Hunith sensed the nurse's reluctance to speak even before she spoke. “Mrs Emrys, I shouldn't divulge details over the phone but I think it would be a good idea if you came over.”

“Yes, yes.” Hunith's voice trembled. “I'll be there as soon as I can.”

She hung up before the kind nurse could say one more word. In a panic she rushed upstairs. Without bothering with a shower she frantically rooted through her drawers for a change of clothes, grabbing the first clean shirt she could find.

Dropping her nightgown on the floor, she yanked her shirt on, then went looking for the trousers she was wearing yesterday. When she whipped round she realised they weren't where she'd left them, draped over her chair. She could find another pair in her wardrobe, but she felt as if that'd take time. So she rushed over to the armchair opposite, flinging cushions aside to see whether her trousers had ended up buried under them. They weren't there.

“God, please. God, God.” As she continued her search, she muttered. She swept the room, but still couldn't find her trousers. Eventually she was struck by a flashback of the night before and ran towards the bathroom.

On her way there, she tripped and fell, landing hard, her hands scarcely breaking the fall. But she picked herself up and dashed into the bathroom. The trousers were carefully folded and sat on top of the laundry basket. She grabbed them and slipped them on, lacing on soft plimsolls she grabbed from the shoe rack.

Taking the stairs two at a time, she rushed downstairs, grabbed the car keys from the their hook and sprinted out the door, stowing her house keys in the pocket of the coat she'd made a grab of.

Since it was so early it was barely light, Hunith encountered no traffic and thanks to a bit of mad driving she made it to the hospital in record time. She left her car in the first free spot she found available, not bothering with closing it, and breathlessly jogged up the drive that led to the A&E's entrance.

The department itself smelt like disinfectant and was very forbidding with its garish neon lights and grey-wash walls.

The anteroom was filled with people. A few of them loud and obnoxious, staggering about and bothering the other prospective patients. She guessed they were drunks and avoided them accordingly. A girl with a cast on was waiting in a wheel chair; a boy that reminded her of Merlin – for a moment she'd hoped it was him and her heart had raced – was bleeding from the forehead. He'd lost a shoe.

A tired-looking nurse was working at the reception desk and Hunith made for her. “Hello.” She
expelled air in a rush. “I got a call from this hospital earlier this morning. My son's here. His name's Merlin Emrys.”

“Emrys?” the nurse sounded the name on her lips. “Was he admitted to the A&E?”

Hunith leant against the desk, her legs not really supporting her. She'd thought that once she was here she'd been filled in with all the information she wanted. This didn't seem to be the case and now it looked as though she would have to explain when her mind was not all there. At first this seemed like an ordeal she wasn't sure she was going to be able to stand, but then she thought of her boy, breathed out and said, “The nurse I spoke to was called Nemeth?”

The desk nurse's eyes lit with understanding. “Mithian? I'll give her a ring and get her to come down.” She lifted the phone receiver and arched an eyebrow at a line of chairs behind them. “If you'd just wait there, I'll get Mithian here in a minute.”

Hunith wanted to wait by the reception desk and make sure to catch everything that was said on the phone, but knew that was not polite. She wasn't in a mood to appreciate manners, but understood that she couldn't do without them.

So she sat in in the chair, her hands folded together, though she was tapping her feet and looking to any nurse who so much as moved her way. At last a young woman in her twenties with her hair tied in a plait came up to her. “Mrs Emrys?”

Hunith stood up and nodded. “That's me, yes.”

“I'm Mithian Nemeth, we spoke on the phone--”

Hunith grabbed Nurse Nemeth's hand. “Please, is he still alive?”

Nurse Nemeth smiled, though her eyes narrowed as if under some sort of strain. “He is,” she said. “He's in the operating theatre right now, but you'd better talk to the doctor who treated him when he came in.”

“But--” Hunith wanted to be reassured as to Merlin being fine.

“He'll tell you everything you need to know,” Nurse Nemeth wrapped a hand around her elbow and gently led her down the corridor. “He'll paint a clearer picture. Be assured.”

Hunith nodded and followed her. Nurse Nemeth poked her head into a smaller, darkened room and said, “Gwaine, you awake?”

“For you?” Gwaine yawned. “Always. Though if you promised a little incentive--”

Hunith frowned.

Nurse Nemeth cleared her throat. “Gwaine, I have Merlin Emrys' mother here with me.”

A tall dishevelled man in theatre greens, lots of scruff, and a handsome but tired face appeared in the doorway. “Mrs Emrys?”

“That's me,” Hunith said and then unable to refrain from asking after her son, fired, “How's Merlin?”

Gwaine – Hunith hadn't caught his surname – walked over to her and smiled. “He's undergoing surgery at the moment. One of our best doctors is working on him. Doctor Annis Caerleon.”

Hunith knew Merlin was undergoing surgery, but needed to know more to get an understanding of
what had happened. “Surgery?” She gulped. “What for?”

“I'm afraid he crashed in rescue,” Gwaine lowered his eyes, biting his lip. “He had a ruptured spleen so he's currently undergoing a splenectomy.”

“What do you mean crashed?”

Merlin's doctor put a hand on her arm, holding her up by it when she threatened to collapse. “He went into hypovolaemic shock. His pulse rate shot sky high, his blood pressure went down and his heart suffered from it.”

“Are you telling me he had a heart attack?” Hunith felt dizzy, as if the world was spinning around her. “He's twenty!”

“Mrs Emrys would you like to have a glass of water?”

Hunith clung to Merlin's doctor to stay upright. “No, I want to know what happened to my son.”

“We resuscitated him, Mrs Emrys.” Gwaine's voice was gentle, as if he was talking to a spooked horse. “When we sent him to theatre he was stable. I understand the news is shocking, but there's every reason to hope he'll make a full recovery.”

Hunith probed Gwaine's face for lies. “Can you promise me that?”

A muscle twitched in Gwaine's jaw; his eyes went soft and kind. “Nobody can do that. But there's no reason to think he won't make it. I spoke to a theatre nurse before turning in and she assured me everything was going fine. We'll patch him up.”

Hunith breathed out. “All right. All right.”

“There's something more,” Gwaine sounded hesitant.

“Please tell me now before--”

Gwaine led her into the room he'd been using to have a lie down. He turned the light on, tossed aside the blanket he must have been lying under and made her sit on a sofa bed. When she was so positioned, he gave her a cup of lukewarm tea, and straddled a chair he placed directly opposite her perch. “Merlin also has multiple fractures,” he said in an explanatory tone. “They're not life-threatening but they're serious injuries in their own right.”

Hunith took a gulp of that horrid tea. She could deal with non-life threatening. “I see.”

“They'll set the bones and perform more surgery later.” Gwaine had delivered it slowly so Hunith had time to process it. “When the internal bleeding problem has been fixed.” Gwaine ran his palm down his trouser leg. “He'll be in lots of pain and will need to undergo massive physiotherapy sessions, but he'll walk again.”

“Walk again?” Hunith's heart giving a painful twinge. These doctors had really a heart-stopping way of delivering news.

“We're talking about numerous fractures that will need either nailing or external fixation,” Gwaine said, “you'll understand that's going to take time.”

Hunith nodded; she could deal with waiting all the time in the world as long as she had her boy. “When will I be able to see him?”
“He'll be out of surgery soon.” Gwaine squeezed the bridge of his nose, looking at her out of tired, blood-shot eyes. “But I'm not sure they'll allow you to talk to him then and there. He may be under.”

“I see.” Feeling empty and light headed, Hunith found comfort in using the easiest units of speech. “So where do I go now?”

“Mithian will take you upstairs.”

Mithian, who'd come in so silently she hadn't noticed her, put a hand on her shoulder. “This way, if you please.”

Hunith had almost made it all the way down the corridor, when Gwaine caught up with her, trainers skidding on the floor. “I forgot something.” He wheezed. “The boy who was with him in the car... The paramedics told us he died on impact.”

Hunith wasn't sure what this young doctor was talking about. Her first priority being Merlin, Hunith had taken in so little that she wasn't sure in whose car Merlin had been when the accident happened. She only knew Merlin didn't own one anymore since his first – a used Fiesta – had broken down on him. “Which boy?”

Hunith saw Gwaine frown. “The paramedic said his name was...” Gwaine tapped his chin. “Will, that was the name. Will!”

Hunith cupped her mouth. Oh my God. Will. She'd practically raised that boy. He was always at their house. He'd gone to school with Merlin and made a point to apply to the same uni. He was only Merlin's age. He couldn't be dead. He just couldn't. And, oh God, Merlin. He'd be distraught. “What do I tell my son?”

“You're the best judge of that.”

“They're best friends,” Hunith was too shocked to shed a tear, but inside she was crying many. “Have been for years. This will tear Merlin apart.”

“I can't tell you what to do, Mrs Emrys.” Gwaine sidled. “But I might suggest not to tell him the moment he wakes. But don't hide the truth from him for long either. I'm no psychologist but I think that would be equally shocking. And damaging.”

Hunith held on to that piece of advice as though it was a gold nugget. Then she braced herself and prepared for the future. When she was shown into Merlin's room Merlin had been put in a pharmacological coma.

He slept for three whole days.

****

Pain was everywhere. It was in his legs, strong and intense, radiating upwards as if reaching for his heart. It was in his middle, where it bloomed as hot as a red poker. It was deep in his guts where it blazed bright. It was like a red haze that was dragging him down and into the cloying mire of unconsciousness. It shot through him in stupefying, continuous waves that knew no beginning or end. This pain carried him along, washing over him while he fought to wake and regain control of himself.

Whispered voices whirled through his mind and he was sure he wasn't alone. He wanted to answer.
He wanted to tell them that he was there and he could hear them. He gathered his strength. Focused on those sounds and fought to surface, to break away from the swirl of his thoughts – and nightmares – and from the cage of his body. When he came rocketing up out of his black limbo, it was to open his eyes to blinding light and a barrage of even more pain.

He was lying on a narrow bed in a tiny, whitewashed room that had no peculiar features whatsoever. White, coarse sheets were tucked up to his chest but for where they failed to cover his leg. A metal rod ran the length of it; wires were screwed into the holes in the rod, penetrating his flesh. When he tried to move it was to realise that his other leg was in a cast too. Okay, that accounted for how much he ached everywhere.

Now that he thought of it he had oxygen tubes in his nose. He turned his head. He was hooked to machinery that beeped and hummed rhythmically as well as to an IV drip that was pumping who knew what into his veins.

That at least explained where he was. A hospital, clearly. He wasn't sure he remembered why. His mind was fuzzy; he couldn't slow his thoughts down. They kept on spiralling round and round in circles that brought him nowhere.

Finding that he could and that it gave him no pain, he cocked his head to the side. His mother was slumped in a chair beside him, her head tipped forward. Her chest was rising and falling in a lulling rhythm. She was clearly asleep.

He felt dizzy, sick and tired. He had questions he wanted answered, but he wasn't sure he wanted to wake her. She looked pale and tired, smaller than usual, fragile. He didn't want to contribute to that. So he laid his head back against the pillow and tried to focus on remembering how he'd ended up in hospital with a couple of apparently broken legs to his name.

He cast his memory back. Caradoc had phoned him – yesterday probably – and told him they were going to have a beach party even though it wasn't summer yet. Merlin had agreed and... Had he got drunk? But that didn't explain the broken legs. Unless he'd done something extremely foolish while under the effect of the alcohol.

It had been a while since he'd been stupid enough to drink too much – a night out nearly a year ago with Gilli and Will. Will! Merlin tried to sit up but moaned. Will had been the arse faced one. And he'd stomped off, leaving the party. That was what had happened.

Conscious of a need to act, Merlin attempted to push himself upwards against the pillows so he could at least get to sit, but his insides knotted up, as if flaming. He whimpered and fell back against the sheets. Okay, calm down. One thing at a time. He'd get to the bottom of what had happened.

“Merlin.” His mum propelled herself off her chair to take his hand. She hesitated over the needle strapped to it, but settled for covering his fingers with hers. “You're awake.”

Merlin hadn't meant to wake her. She looked so tired. More so than when she'd been sleeping. The dark gouges under her eyes had an air of transparency about them that was frightening and her face was so drawn it was a pity to see. This wasn't who she was. She was always radiant and happy-looking, her skin as clear as that of a young woman. He'd always been proud of his mum's honest beauty and smiling eyes. Looking into them was like coming home, in more ways than one, and now all that had been erased by shadows and darkness. He lifted his arm to touch her cheek as if he could smooth away the worry lines. “Mum.” His voice scarcely did his bidding. “What's happened?”

“You were in a car accident, dear.” She was clearly fighting to rein in a sob. “That's why you're not feeling well.”
“I thought as much.” Merlin tried to wet lips that were as parched as a marathon runner's. “I remember the beach party.” He cast his memory back. “And Will.”

“Yes, dear.” His mum's face scrunched up painfully.

A terrible feeling overwhelmed him and he had to swallow to keep it down. “Mum,” he tried. “Mum, where's Will?”

His mum didn't answer and Merlin asked the question again. “Where's Will?”

His mum's eyes were getting liquid, wet. Merlin didn't need a degree in psychology to tell him she was holding something back for fear of upsetting him. “Mum, how bad is it?”

His mum shook her head; one of her tears dropped on his hand.

Merlin turned his head aside, facing the door. The monitor displaying his heart rate started beeping off the charts.

****

Leaving the craggy surfaces of Mount Snowdon behind, Balinor hiked all the way to the village of Llanberis. He walked past two B&Bs whose façades where painted in strong blues and reds, and past the information centre, before turning into a newsagents.

There he bought a couple of snack bars, a bottle of water, and a couple of newspapers, one of them national, the other the North Wales Chronicle. He asked, “Faint yw hynny?” and the newsagent, a dark-haired man with a tanned complexion pushed his eyebrows up.

“12.50,” he said, after he'd rang up the items. “So you're a local.”

“Not from around these parts.” Balinor flicked a glance at the shop window overlooking the street as if that was a stand-in for the whole town. “But I'm as Welsh as they come.”

“Thought you were a tourist come for some trekking.” The newsagent bagged his purchases. “But then you speak Welsh like a Welshman.”

“That I am.” Balinor felt like speaking up more than he'd had in ages. “I haven't been around for a very long time though. I've forgotten everything about this place.”

“Not everything, I'm sure,” the newsagent told him. “You can't forget Wales.”

Balinor would have said that it wasn't so much the country, but the people he would never be able to forget, but that would be too much. It would be over-sharing and it would be taken for the oddity it was. His silence didn't matter tough. That conversation wouldn't have gone further anyway, for he was superseded by another customer. What had he been doing anyway: he wasn't the type to pour his heart out to complete strangers.

Flicking his collar up, he walked out of the shop with his bag of purchases. He checked into one of the B&B's he'd seen lining the road. None of them looked to be up to any hotellerie standards but that suited him just fine. The simpler the place, the more peace and quiet he'd have. There'd be no well-meaning tourists asking him questions over breakfast. There'd be no nice waiters enquiring after his satisfaction levels.

He'd be left alone.
“Here’s you key, sir.”

In his room, Balinor shed his hiking boots, the sole of one almost coming off, and threw his rucksack down.

He didn't bother with the lights. He just hung his padded jacket in the wardrobe, turned on the television, and set his groceries on the shelf running around the entire length of that side of the room. Tiredly, he straddled a chair, took his snack out of its wrapper and started nibbling at it while flipping the pages of the local newspaper he'd bought.

His eyes were skimming an article titled 'Bangor Aiming for Cup Glory,” when his eyes caught on a word – a name – featured in another column. Emrys, it said.

Following the script with his fingers he started reading this second article from the top.

It was titled Anglesey Car Crash Claims One Victim. It read:

*The Bangor university student whose vehicle crashed through the safety rail of the Menai Strait Bridge in Anglesey and plunged off the structure, falling onto the island side of the bank, died on 15th March, according to the North Wales Police.
Police, fire and emergency personnel responded to the accident, with the paramedics showing up first to find the vehicle listing on its side, its front smashed. Holyhead Station PCSO Geraint Garth said that eyewitnesses have reported seeing the vehicle swerving dangerously on the tract of A5 motorway leading to the bridge.
Vehicle passenger Merlin Emrys (20) is currently hospitalised in Bangor. Reports state his prognosis is good.
PCSO Thomas said that this is the last in a series of drink driving accidents affecting our youth. New policies should be put in place to ensure that events like this no longer occur with such regularity.”

A nurse at Ysbyty Gwynedd Hospital, where police said the victim was transported immediately after the accident, confirmed a patient by that name was being treated there.

Balinor had read enough. He ripped out the page he was interested in and pocketed it. He left his room and went to the reception desk. “Can I use your computer?”

The receptionist eyed the Computer Station. “As soon as it's free.”

Balinor grabbed him by the scruff of the neck. “Perhaps I haven't made things clear. It's urgent.”

“Hey, mate,” said the receptionist, “can't chase off a guest. The lady has the same rights as you.”

Balinor grunted. “Not good enough.”

The man winced. “We have wi-fi.”

“I have no computer.”

The receptionist's throat was working; he was slightly green around the gills. “You can use my laptop. If you let me go, I'll get it for you in a moment.”

“You'd better.” Balinor was grunting, he was aware. “I need a computer now.”

The receptionist's nostrils flared. He stopped trying to get Balinor's hands off him and put up his palms. “I will, I swear.”
Balinor let him go. The man returned with his laptop. Balinor took it and settled on one of the ratty sofas the hall offered. Though battered, the laptop worked. Slowly but it did. Once on line, Balinor bought a train ticket to Bangor and then researched the name Emrys in connection with the car accident.

His research only yielded brief articles similar in nature to the one he'd found in the paper. There was no mention of the victim's current state of health, aside for another mention of his prognosis being good, or of his family members. Yet the age and the name were a perfect match.

That boy was twenty. Balinor needed no one to remind him where he'd been twenty one years ago. Whom he'd met. What he'd done. The decision he'd made on the heels of that. It was something that would be forever etched into his memory. And as to the name, it was a rare one, Emrys. It had to be her. And this boy. This boy had to be...

He couldn't even think the thought let alone say it.

After having returned the computer to the receptionist, Balinor went back to his room.

He tossed and turned all night. It didn't matter that he'd learnt to leave everything behind. He couldn't now. Once the past was in the past Balinor had learnt to forget about it. Tonight he couldn't and the what ifs tormented him. Doubt assailed him as well as fear did.

At last he did sleep some, but he was up and about at the crack of dawn and only a little while later he was on the train that'd take him to Bangor. He'd contemplated shaving on board so she wouldn't be frightened when she saw him, so that she'd recognise him when she did, but that seemed like a betrayal of all that he'd lived through in the meanwhile.

Asking directions led him to the hospital, but the biggest hurdle was facing him now. He walked up to the reception desk. “I'm here to see Merlin Emrys. I've heard he's a patient of yours.”

The nurse neither confirmed nor denied. “Are you a relative?”

“In a guise,” said Balinor.

He was treated to an eyebrow raise on the part of the nurse. “There's no such thing. If you're a family member, say so. If you're a journalist I'm afraid I'll have to tell you I can't release patient information.”

“I'm--” He couldn't say what he was. He had no proof. “Let me talk to his mother. I'm sure she'll recognise me.” She couldn't have forgotten him. They'd spent such a wonderful summer together that thoughts of forgetting were impossible. “Please,” he forced himself to say.

“I'm sorry.” The nurse pursed her lips. “I can't contact any specific visitor on your behalf, sir.”

Balinor was at a loss as to what to do when he heard a noise that made him turn around. When he did, he saw her, two bottles of water rolling away at her feet. She had to have dropped them when she set eyes on him.

“Hunith,” She was just the same as she'd always been. Her eyes were sad now, but they were the same lovely shape, the same bright blue. Her hair was perhaps a bit shorter and there were a couple more lines around her mouth than there had been, but her essence hadn't morphed. It was like travelling back twenty years in time. “I read the paper.”

“Balinor.” She didn't move. Didn't blink. “You-- I thought you were dead.”
“No.” He moved his bulk from foot to foot. “I travelled the world.”

“I see.”

“Hunith.” He unrolled the newspaper he'd travelled with and kept in his pocket. “Is he my son?”

He could see the pause she took, how she was considering what to say. He could see it in the way she held her breath and shifted his gaze from him to the corridor behind him. “Let's talk somewhere else.”

They took a turn around the car park, Balinor carrying Hunith's bottles for her, Hunith with her eyes on her feet.

“We used to take nicer walks,” she said.

“Hunith,” Balinor interrupted her. “Is he mine?”

She stopped short. “You're quite funny. You've been gone for more than twenty years. You never said a word, never let me know if you were all right or not. And now you pop up, asking--”

Balinor put a hand around her wrist. “I just want to know if he's mine.”

“He bears my name.”

“I'd never grudge you that.” Balinor's voice was rougher than he wanted it to be. He was unused to talking. Gentleness had become foreign to him. “I just want to know if he's...” That sounded selfish to his own ears so he amended what he'd been about to say. “I can help, Hunith. I'm--” He wetted his lips. This acknowledgement of his status stood against everything he'd ever believed in. It was the opposite of what he'd been trying to do with his life. “Hunith, I have money. Plenty of. I'm... rich. I can help with any kind of expense needed. Surgery abroad, private care here...”

“Of course you'd only do that if he was your son,” she said, quivering in place.

He searched her eyes. “The offer stands regardless.”

“I can't accept anyway.”

“I assume he needs help.”

“There's the NHS for that.” Hunith looked longingly to the mass of the building behind them, where he son lay in a hospital bed who knew in what condition.

“But even the NHS can only go so far.” Balinor pointing out what that he believed in as a truth. He may have left the UK behind twenty years ago, but that didn't mean he hadn't got updates from the papers. I can offer better. Private consults, top notch physiotherapy--”

“Merlin would say no himself.”

Balinor's lips quirked. “He's like you then, proud and stubborn. Never thinking of his own good.”

“His own good?”

“Yes,” Balinor wanted to stress the point. If there had ever been a time for oratory that was now. “His own good. Because this isn't about my pride or yours. I'd happily claim I have a son if I do. I'm sure you want to erase me from your personal history and I understand if you do. But this is about him and not us.”
“He’s in a bad shape.” She wasn’t crying but she was holding herself stiffly. Her admission must have cost her dearly. “He can walk again, but it’s a long way before he gets there. He may never run. We just don’t know. He’ll be losing muscle mass and the worst is.... God, I thought I’d lost him.”

Balinor's heart – which he'd thought to have shrunk to dust in the years since he'd last seen Hunith—clove in two, telling him it was very much there and as prone to hurting as it had been when he was young. He pulled Hunith to him and let her sob against his chest. “I can help.” His palm moved up and down her back. “Please accept my offer. For him, if not for yourself.”

She stepped back, held his eyes. She’d often done that back in the day. She'd done it last a few days before he left, asking if he was content by her side. Whatever she was reading in his eyes now she said, “All right. For Merlin. But I won't be explaining everything to him right now. He's too broken as he is.”

“You can say you got the money from some charity.” That was the only suggestion Balinor had to offer.

“That's not the point and you know it.” Hunith's voice sounded distant as Balinor didn't remember it to be. “Besides, he's in pain, not stupid.”

“So what will you tell him?”

Hunith looked smaller. “I don't know. Not the whole truth, I don't think.”

Even though he wanted to push and ask her to clear matters up, Balinor nodded. He knew he had no right over the boy, but he did wish Merlin could know. He did long to read the reaction in his eyes when he was told he had a father. “You're his mother. You know best.”

*****

“This is absurd!” said Arthur, re-reading the new rule book. It had just been distributed that morning and Arthur had had a cursory read over his first cup of coffee. He'd needed a second perusal to be able to believe his eyes. “That will stop us from doing our jobs!”

“Take it up to the NHS,” William Cador, Arthur's boss and head of physiotherapy, said. “What with the cutting of services to reduce costs and all the policies that go with it, this was a predictable manoeuvre.”

“This is more preposterous than anything that has gone before.” Arthur held up the booklet with distaste. He was about to expand on the subject when the clinic receptionist interrupted him. “Arthur, Mrs Miller is waiting for you in room two.”

“Yeah, tell her I'll be there in a moment.” He turned around to bin the booklet. “Can't you talk to the chief of CSP about it? Maybe they can pressure the clinical commissioning group to re-think this.”

Cador scratched at his balding head. “Not much I can do, Arthur. This change has followed a review of services. They said we were spending too much.”

“For the patients!” Arthur spat out, his blood pressure rising. “For their rehabilitation. This is no lark!”
“I know. Believe me, I do.” Cador shrugged his shoulders. “And I feel as impotent as you about this.”

“We should complain.” Arthur gesticulated. “Or we're providing a fucked up, useless service.”

Cador nodded. “I'll see what I can do and contact the Local Improvement Network.”

“You've got to go to the higher ups,” Arthur said over his shoulder as he walked over to room two. “We need to raise awareness about this.”

“Will try,” Cador called out but by then Arthur was already in room two.

Old Mrs Miller was sitting on a gurney bed, cradling her wrist. Even from this far he could tell that the area around it was still conspicuously swollen. It wasn't a surprise. It wasn't an atypical reaction. But with Mrs Miller being as old as she was that was a symptom Arthur didn't want to add to her list of ailments. Not when he could help it.

Normally, the obvious procedure for such a case would be pretty standard. Arthur would commence a range of motion exercises designed to allow the patient to regain full mobility. Those would include extension and flexion exercises as well as pronation-supination and ulnar deviation ones. The new regulations put a spoke in his wheels though.

Arthur took up Mrs Miller's chart, sat on a stool, gave the chart a read, not forgetting to have a look at the referral notes “How are you feeling, Mrs Miller?”

“It still hurts.” Mrs Miller subconsciously massaged the hurt area. “I thought the pain would go away when I took off the cast but it's still there. I couldn't even lift the tea kettle. It was my god-mother's. She gave it to me when I got married. It was considered pretty expensive back in the day, you know. Think of what would happen if I dropped it!”

“Yes, I see.” As gently as he could, Arthur led Mrs Miller back on track. “And aside from the pain, have you been able to move your wrist as you did before?"

“No.” Mrs Miller shook her head. “I can barely bend it, see.” She showed him her limited range of motion. “But luckily you're here to help. Shouldn't we go through the exercises my doctor prescribed today?”

“Unfortunately, Mrs Miller,” Arthur said, hating himself, “that's not going to be possible.”

“I'm not sure I understand why.” Mrs Miller's mouth opening a little in surprise. “Have I come on the wrong day? My daughter reminded me of the appointment herself and she's never wrong about these things. She's a good one that girl.”

“No, you came on the right day.” Arthur jiggled his clipboard on his knees. “The fact is we've been given new regulations.”

“There's new rules that say we can't do my wrist exercises today?”

Arthur rubbed at his temple. “Not as such.” He had no idea how to clear this one up. Patients expected to be treated and Arthur didn't know how to tell one of them that he couldn't help. At least not in the most obvious and accredited way, the way manual upon manual said was the best. “As per our new policies I can't administer hands-on treatment,” Arthur said.

“What do you mean?” Mrs Miller's voice rose with surprise and, Arthur thought, disappointment.
“I can’t touch you.” Arthur broke the new rule down for her.

“But that’s stupid,” Mrs Millers moved her injured arm about to emphasise her sentiments and hissing when the pain flared. “You're my physiotherapist!”

“I know.” Arthur didn't know where to look. He couldn't say Mrs Miller was wrong. He'd said much the same thing to the Head of Physio himself. He agreed. He didn't have it in him to lie to tout the official line now sponsored by NHS organisations buying healthcare services. The more so since he’d never read any research or any other form of evidence backing up this hands-off physiotherapy strategy. “I'm sorry.”

“But what can you do if you can't touch me?”

Arthur hummed under his breath. Blood rose to his cheeks and he looked down. “I can advise you on how to manage your condition. I can offer a guidance service.” Arthur flinched at how stupid he sounded quoting the booklet. “I can tell you how to look exercises up on the Internet.”

“But I don't have a computer,” Mrs Miller said in as forlorn a tone as Arthur had ever heard. “I don't know how to use one.”

Arthur hadn't suspected she knew how to. Even though some older people were good with technology, not all were. Especially in Mrs Miller demographic. “I--”

“Couldn't you perform some normal physiotherapy just for today?” Mrs Miller asked in a thin, abashed voice. “I promise I'll do my best to remember the exercises and do them on my own.” She paused. “I'll be very hush hush about it.”

Arthur ducked his head but balled his fists. It beggared belief. It really did. This woman was having to plead with him to get a service she'd have received but a week ago and all this because some bigwig fucker up at the clinical commissioning group had their head so far up their own arse they were convinced saving money was name of the game nowadays. “Don't worry, Mrs Miller. I'll do my regular thing today.” He took up her wrist, ready to test its range of motion. “Don't worry. We're going to make it fine.”

Over the next week or so more and more patients were left flabbergasted by Arthur's opening statement of, “I can't perform hands-on physiotherapy.” Or they would just get angry when they found out that services had been basically rationed so that they'd have to see their GP twice before being referred to Arthur's ward.

At first Arthur did what he could. He continued administering normal physiotherapy on the sly if the patient asked for it. Over the following days, however, he realised he was offering a better service to those who had the know how to protest the new decisions. Those who didn't think to ask for better treatment didn't receive it. In good conscience he couldn't allow that to go on so he started treating everyone the traditional hands-on way. Still, he informed the patients of the changes, asked them which method they’d prefer, and they all opted to get the treatment they'd been used to.

Acting on the sly, though, made Arthur feel bad about himself. Every day he went to work with a weight on his chest. He found there was little reason to be happy about anything work-related nowadays. He just felt miserable coping with the stress of hiding the truth from his bosses while before the new regulations were implemented he'd gone into work with a smile on his face. He'd experienced a sense of accomplishment.

An odd feeling took up in his chest and nothing would remove it. He felt sure he was doing the right thing, that he was providing a much needed service and helping people with serious and less serious
pathologies get better on a case by case scenario, but the whole situation didn't sit right with him.

Gwen, who saw him eating alone at the hospital canteen, probably not wearing the brightest of expressions, joined him. “You look depressed.”

Arthur pushed at the food in his plate. “I'm not.”

“Arthur.” She stole a chip from him. “That is roast turkey and you haven't touched a bite. It's your favourite.”

Arthur belted a sigh. “I'm just not hungry.” The turkey did look as though it'd been roasted to perfection and the potatoes were visually appealing too. But he wasn't feeling like eating. “It's nothing.”

“Arthur,” Gwen said, “you know you can talk to me about whatever this is, right?”

“It's nothing specific, Gwen.”

Arthur was treated to a downward lip turn that said Gwen didn't much believe him. And maybe she was right. He wasn't lying per se. Nothing had happened in his life to warrant his mood, but the change in his job situation was affecting him, making him see life differently, impacting him. He'd never thought career difficulties would bear upon the quality of his lifer overall, but they were. The point now was whether he should just be patient and accept the new status quo or do something about it. What was there to stop him, he asked himself. Here he was in a hospital. Most people admitted here didn't have a choice as to what happened in their lives. He did. He could change things.

Arthur checked the cafeteria clock. It was nearly two. “Cador should be in, shouldn't he?”

Gwen followed his line of sight. “Yeah, he starts at one on Tuesdays.”

Arthur got abruptly up. “I've got to go say a word to him.” He was already half way over the cafeteria floor by the time he'd let out the last word. “You can have my chips.”

“Arthur, where are you going?” Gwen shouted after him. “You're not doing something stupid, are you?”

Arthur didn't answer that one.

Cador was, as expected, in his office. “Couldn't you have knocked?” he asked when Arthur barged in.

Arthur placed both hands on Cador's desk, leaning against it so he was looming over his sitting boss. “Yeah, probably. But this is more important. Counter to the new rules, I've been practising hands-on physiotherapy for the past two weeks.”

Cador pinched the bridge of his nose. “Coming from you, that is not unexpected.” The phone rang. Cador lifted the receiver and put it back down. “Look, it's not for all cases. The direst ones can still expect to receive the good, old fashioned treatments. Besides, I've been talking to Ms Mitchell from the Local Improvement Network. Maybe we can do something to change this if we go about it in a prudential way.”

“I'm staging a protest,” said Arthur, ignoring his boss' talk of prudential tactics. They never worked anyway.
“There go my hopes of you acting wisely.” Cador's forehead wrinkled. “What kind of protest exactly?”

“I'm telling everyone that I'm done with this do not touch physiotherapy thing.” Arthur warmed to his subject as he went on. “I'm telling anyone willing to listen that the new rules are detrimental to patients' health and that I'm against them. I'll be acting according to my conscience and as I always have. Fuck rules, cuts, and costs.”

“Arthur--”

Arthur straightened and held a palm up. “No,” he said, his voice as dry as he could make it so he'd be taken seriously. “You're not changing my mind. You're not talking me round. This is what I'm going to do. This is my way of dealing with crap decisions that affect my patients for the worse.” He retreated to the door and, hand on the handle, said, “I'm staging my protest starting now.”

Over the next few days the fact that he was staging a protest became a matter known throughout the hospital. His patients – those at least who knew about it – praised him. His colleagues were quite vocal in their support though none of them was doing the same as he. His bosses merely observed the actions from the sidelines.

Overall he got plenty of claps on the back from admiring colleagues and some local media attention. When a reporter from the Nottingham and Trent Valley Journal phoned him asking for an interview, Arthur knew his strategy had been taken note of. When the story made the local radio stations Arthur felt something was stirring. But when he had to avoid the first journalist who'd contacted him because he wanted to publish his own spin on the story, irrespective of the patients' needs, Arthur understood his strategy was now getting out of hand. His protest had taken a dimension he couldn't quite control.

This was about the time the ward's Assistant General Manager summoned him to his office. “Mr Pendragon.” He spoke from behind the bulk of his desk. “Please, come in.”

Arthur did. He sat in the chair offered to him and waited for the Assistant General Manager to open the conversation. It wasn't as if he didn't know it was going to be about his protest, but he waited to see what direction the meeting took. “Sir.”

The Assistant General Manager templed his fingers. “Mr Pendragon,” he said, “you must know why I requested your presence.”

“My protest.” Arthur was at no pains to guess.

“Yes, it is about that.” The Assistant General Manager couldn't have sounded more condescending. It's putting us between a rock and a hard place.”

“As I see it you're only facing opposition from one group of people who stand against the hospital's best interests,” Arthur said. “The ones who're supplying and limiting the services we can offer.”

“It's not that simple, Mr Pendragon.”

“I imagine it isn't.” Arthur shifted his weight in his chair. “That's why I think my protest has meaning.”

“We cannot approve of it, we can't be seen to allow it to happen and we don't want more patients asking why we're not letting all physiotherapists do what you're doing.” The Assistant Managing Director pushed an envelope across the desk and at him.
Arthur raised an eyebrow. “What is this?” He didn't pick up the letter.

“A disciplinary warning.” The Director showed him his empty palms. “As I said, we can’t behave as if we approve of what you’re doing. We understand your motivations but we can’t derogate from our own policy.”

“The policy that is dictated to you a clinical commissioning group that's only thinking about the money involved, you mean?”

“Yes,” the Director said, without even trying to hedge.

Arthur pocketed his envelope; he didn't need to read it to guess its contents now. The wording may vary but this was the hospital padding their collective arses. “Consider this noted. However, I can’t back down.”

Arthur didn’t back down despite three more such warnings, a few hospital board meetings he was punitively summoned to, and a talk with a member of the CSP. He ended up being quoted by one local newspaper and indirectly by The Guardian before he was asked to the Assistant Managing Director’s office.

“Arthur,” the man said, using Arthur's given name for the first time ever, “in light of your outstanding performance and your excellent CV we've been patient with you, but this can't go on.”

Arthur had known for a while now that this day would come. He hadn’t known how he’d cope with it but he’d known. “I won’t back down. I have proof my patients are benefiting from the kind of treatment I’m giving them.” He could show them his ‘success’ charts if they wanted.

“That is beside the point.” the Director locked his hands together and expelled air. “I'm afraid that if you don't stand down you'll have to face a disciplinary action.”

Arthur's blood rushed to his cheeks. “I won't stand down.”

“Then--” the Director leant forwards, hands joined on his desk.

“I refuse to practice physiotherapy this new way.” Arthur went on a rant. “I thought physio was about helping people. That's what I studied it for. That's what I've always been working towards. I thought the NHS would help me with that, but it seems not.”

“These are hard times, Arthur.” the Director sighed. “Hard times.”

“Well.” Arthur jutted his jaw. “I can’t in good conscience alter my course of action. The only thing left for me to do is resign.”

“Unfortunately, said the director, “I do agree with you.” He rose, circumnavigated the desk, and shook Arthur's hand. “I wish you the best of luck.”

Two weeks later Arthur found the following ad on reed.co.uk:

Date: Yesterday
Bangor, Wales
£ 30.00 - £60.00 per hour
0 applications

Job Description: I am currently looking for Qualified Physiotherapists (Band 6) with orthopaedic rehab experience for work on a car crash patient. The job is on an in home basis. Skill in adult
physical rehab assessment and treatments is required. The successful candidate would be needed to start ASAP. This position is to due to be taken up as soon as possible. The length of hire is six months or until complete recovery. You must have access to your own vehicle. All candidates must be HCPC. Competitive rates of pay offered.

Please email hunithemrys@yahoo.co.uk

Since he was currently unemployed, Arthur sent a mail answering that ad. He was sure it was be the first in a long series. The private sector was highly competitive.

What he hadn't expected was a return mail to hit him within the space of half-an hour.

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End of Part One

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Part Two

“I’ve spoken with Merlin's ortho and he says your references are very good,” Mrs Emrys said.

Arthur took a sip of his tea. “I sense a but coming.”

Mrs Emrys looked out the window. “Merlin’s been rejecting everyone.” She chewed on her nail. “His external fixator was removed last week and he's been rid of the cast for longer but--”

“He's not taking well to physios,” Arthur guessed, having had a patient or two initially behave that way.

Mrs Emrys sighed deeply. “Yes. He did what they told him when he was an in-patient, but he's refused all the physios we've seen since.”

Arthur knew he wasn't helping his case, but in good conscience he had to speak up. “Why not let him receive more hospital treatment then?”

“Because it's too impersonal.” Mrs Emrys locked her hands together in a wringing motion. “He needs someone to help him. Someone to focus on him and him alone. He's gone through some other things as well as the accident. He needs a motivator. That's why I – and the psychologist who's seen him agrees with me – want him to have a personal physio.”

“I get that.” Arthur read the pain etched in Mrs Emrys' eyes. Whatever else was associated with Mrs Emrys' son current condition was saddening her too. “May I ask what it is that your son is going through?” The more Arthur knew about how best to approach his patient the better.
“I'm not comfortable sharing that,” Mrs Emrys told Arthur. “If Merlin wants to tell you it's up to him.” She pushed her mug away and stood. “Merlin will be moving back into his uni flat in a few days. I'd love for him to be able to cope with getting back to his life.”

“I'm sure that with your help...” Arthur started.

“Merlin doesn't want my help. He doesn't want to be babied.” Mrs Emrys must be thinking back to a conversation she'd had with her son. “You'll be dealing with him and him alone.”

Arthur nodded, then, like her, he pushed to his feet. “It seems fair. Building a rapport with my patients is my job.”

“That attitude of yours seems to be quite the right one to deal with Merlin.” Hunith led him towards the room Arthur assumed to be Merlin's temporary bedroom. “Maybe he'll like you.”

Arthur knew that his being hired depended on his patient approving of him, but he did want to misrepresent himself in order for this to happen. He wanted Merlin to be fine with him as he was. He didn't wish to be a last resort or to be forced on the patient. He knew the physio-patient relationship was one based on mutual trust and respect, in a way on liking as well. Respect most certainly. He knew you wouldn't go anywhere with a patient, get them on the road to healing, without setting up a relationship based on those principles.

Mrs Emrys rounded the corner from the front room and knocked on a closed ground floor door.

“Come in,” said a voice. It was low and it had no cadence to it, as if the person speaking didn't much care about enunciating.

Mrs Emrys turned the handle and stepped in. “Merlin.” She angled her body towards Arthur. “This is Arthur Pendragon. He answered the add we put in the paper.”

“The ad you put in.” Merlin refused to look at Arthur. He was lying in bed, the duvet pulled up to his lap. His head was ducked, but even so Arthur could see his features. He had sharp ones: cutting cheekbones, a straight nose, a marked chin. His hair was black and rich, curling at the sides and ends. It was swept forward a little, throwing a shadow over his eyes. Merlin's body was thin and Arthur could detect the traces of muscle loss in it. Given how he was waddled up, he couldn't see Merlin's legs but was sure that if he was hired he'd have to work towards rebuilding Merlin's muscle mass. For him to be able to return to optimum function, Arthur would have to make that one of his priorities. “I had nothing to do with that.”

Arthur hid a smile. “I thought you'd want to go back to your life as soon as possible.”

Merlin glanced steadily into nothingness. Arthur couldn't read his eyes, but he had no problem detecting the distance in his tone. “I suppose that, yeah, that's what I should want.”

“I'm not hearing any determination in your voice,” Arthur said, crossing his arms. “No trace of a will to do this.”

Merlin's eyes flashed. “Shouldn't you be trying to convince me instead of antagonising me?”

Arthur locked his jaw. He was pretty sure his eyes were shedding a fire of their own. “No, because I'm a professional. I'm not here to make nice. I'm here to get you better. No mollycoddling allowed.” That wasn't true. As a rule Arthur would be softer on his patients. But he could see Merlin needed to fight, needed to have the fire put back in him, and treating him like a fragile thing, allowing him to mope, wasn't right. It wouldn't work with him. Arthur knew that instinctively. Merlin's fire lay dormant in him but it was still there. It was in his eyes. It was just banked for now. Arthur needed to
let Merlin find it again.

Merlin caught his eyes and held them. There was a measure of surprise in them, the only light that suffused them. He pursed his lips, fingers curling and uncurling around the hem of his duvet. Arthur was expecting a fuck off, and Mrs Emrys too, given her tense stance by his side was on the look-out for a similar reaction, but Merlin didn't give it to them. “So you won't go easy on me?”

“On your limbs maybe,” Arthur said. “On your attitude, well, let's just say I'm going to go hard on you.”

Merlin looked down again. Arthur was sure he was about to get the boot. Or that Merlin would ask to talk privately with his mum so that she'd give him the boot. What he wasn't expecting was for Merlin to say, “Start next week then. I'll be moving into my old uni flat.”

Arthur's shoulders relaxed. He had this job. He'd wanted it before because he didn't like sitting idly. But now that he'd met Merlin and that he knew there was a hidden challenge in the process of getting him back on his feet, he wanted it even more. There wasn't any logic to this feeling, this little imperative, but Arthur wasn't about to question his instincts. They'd seen him through helping lots of people, lots of different cases.

“I'm fine starting on Monday.” Arthur scanned Merlin’s body once again for signs of muscular weakness or distress. “But you'll have to start working those muscles from today on.”

Merlin looked at him with a lost air.

“You'll have to start moving those joints.” Arthur knelt by the bed. “Come, I'll show you how.”

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Merlin's surgeon had said that Merlin could start putting weight on his bones. Despite the three fractures that had shown on x-ray, his right leg wasn't so badly off. But his left, the one that had suffered from an exposed fracture, was still very weak. All in all, Merlin had lost muscle mass and leg circumference. This meant that while he could stand – he'd tried it on his own a couple of times – he couldn't walk. He didn't know how to anymore. What he most certainly couldn't do was climb three flights of stairs.

Merlin took off his earphones and looked up at his old building. It hadn't changed in the least since he'd last been here. The first floor lodgers still had stickers glued to their windows. Mrs Taylor was leaning out hers as she did most days this time of year. The same noises as before emerged from the top floor flat, the one occupied by uni students. They even seemed to be playing the same song they'd been jamming to on the day Merlin last left.

Merlin bowed his head a little so he could stare at the bulk of his old place. His mouth softly slipped open.

Freya turned the car off. “Merlin, are you sure you don't want to trade places with some other friend? I'm sure we could find someone willing to swap bedsits. That way you'd avoid the stairs. This no lift thing is very wrong for you.”

Merlin shook his head. “No, I want to go back home.”

“Merlin,” Freya said again, a sigh gusting out of her together with his name.

Merlin locked his teeth. “I'm going.”
Hearing that, Arthur opened the back door, got out of the car, got Merlin’s wheel chair out of the boot, prepared it for use, and walked it to the passenger seat. Merlin couldn’t do stairs but he could shift himself from the car to the chair. Even though his legs hurt, with the right one tender where the bone was healing, he made himself do it. He might be as weak as a new born kitten, but he’d learnt a trick or two over the past months, so he now knew how to shift his weight with little to no support from his legs.

Lifting his arms over his head, he clung to the grab handle. When he thought he had it safe in his grasp, he raised himself up and to the side. The chair was close enough that with a little push from his better leg he could sit in it.

Arthur wheeled the chair closer still and wrapped an arm around Merlin’s side. “Go steady.”

Merlin could only allow his momentum to get him in place. “Doing what I can.”

“I’ll have to teach you how to do this without you putting too much weight on that leg.” Arthur steered him towards the building.

Freya closed the car and caught up with them. “Yeah, I think Merlin is being too casual with that.”

Merlin didn’t answer. He closed his eyes and tuned both Freya and Arthur out. He’d cope the way he could. He wasn’t even sure he wanted to think about coping. He didn’t want to think. He didn’t even want to be reminded of the way it had been before. His hands clutched the arms of his wheel-chair, his grip turning his knuckles white, the blue tracery of his veins standing in relief.

Arthur pushed the wheel-chair into the building’s foyer and stopped at the stairs.

Sitting there waiting for Arthur to puzzle over the logistics of getting Merlin upstairs, Merlin started to think of the past, how it had been. It hadn’t been so long that he couldn’t recollect it perfectly. And then out of the blue he thought he saw Will slide down the banister and hoot. It was an exact replay of the Monday before the accident. He even heard him shout, “Come on, Merlin. Be a little daring.”

“Don't know if that's right.”

“Come on, Merls.”

“Oh what the fuck. Yeah.”

He saw himself go down the banister just like Will had, heart in his throat and laughter bursting out of him and Will clapping him on the back and then hugging him straight off the floor. “See, Merlin, you do nag a bit, but at least you can be brought round.”

“Shut your mush.” Merlin had fake-punched Will on the shoulder.

Lost in the power of the past, he choked.

“Merlin,” Arthur said, “is something wrong? You look pretty pale.”

“I'm fine.” Merlin failed to understand why Arthur was asking the question. He wasn't worse off than a minute ago. “I'm okay.”

“Can you stand?” Arthur asked. “Remember to be honest about what you can do and what you can't.”

“I can stand.” Merlin pushed himself up. Standing was relatively easy. He'd practiced. Doing
“How do you want to approach the stairs?”

“Um.” Merlin couldn't say he'd thought that far. He hadn't gone past the need to make it clear he wanted to live in his old place and nowhere else. “One at a time?” He tried to take a step to make a short job of it. He didn't want to discuss his situation or how he was. If there was one thing he hated was questions. So he made himself do it. Except he couldn't. A red hot flare travelled up his bone and into his knee joint. His leg felt weak and crumpled under him. He fell directly into Arthur's arms.

“I'll have to teach you how to assess your condition,” Arthur said, with a long-suffering sigh. “In the meanwhile, there's nothing for it.” He slung an arm across Merlin's shoulders, hooked the other under his knees, and lifted. “Sorry about this. But I can't see any other way of doing it.”

Merlin flushed, a flush that travelled from a skin deep level to, it felt, his very bones. He couldn't lift his face and catch Arthur's eyes. He didn't want to feel this helpless, but he couldn't exactly protest this solution. “Couldn't you have at least tried a fireman carry?”

“And jiggled your legs in the process,” said Arthur, puffing a bit as he went up the stairs, a step at a time.

Merlin guessed that Arthur was strong enough if he'd negotiated the first flight of stairs without getting majorly winded and that he was fit enough overall. He supposed being a physio would help achieving that. “You sure that you can manage the next three?”

Freya jumped in the conversation and said, “Merlin, be nice to Arthur. He doesn't have to do this.”

“It is his job.” Merlin knew he was being arch, but he couldn't help himself. It helped him cover up the embarrassment of the situation. “Not specifically but he isn't doing it out of the goodness of his own heart.” Merlin bit his tongue as soon as he'd said it though. It was way too rude and not something he would once have thought himself capable of coming up with.

Freya showed her umbrage. “Stop channelling Will, Merlin.” Then got all red in the face, cupped her mouth, and sped up up the stairs, toying with Merlin's keys.

Arthur caught that runaway sentence and looked from Freya's retreating form to Merlin with a note of curiosity. He seemed, however, too busy getting red in the face and shifting Merlin in his arms to ask questions.

Merlin was quite content with that. He couldn't bear the thought of questions. Will would have called him a right idiot for this. He would have been the first one to ridicule Merlin for being too sentimental about his death. But as things stood, Merlin was simply grateful for small mercies these days. Arthur not questioning him was one of those.

By the time they sighted Merlin's landing, Arthur was wobbling badly. Merlin could feel his arms quiver around him and his quickened breath on his neck. He could sense the strain he was undergoing. All in all, it was a little disconcerting how aware he was of Arthur's body. These past few months he'd been conscious of his own, its good sides and its limitations, in a brand new way. This awareness of someone else was surprising. He could sense Arthur almost in the same way he could himself.

“Could you put me down now, please.” By his tone Merlin realised he almost seeking to apologise for his words from before. “It's only three steps left.” Once Merlin would have probably joked about how Arthur had taken to breathing like a dying elephant but now he felt that speaking too much was
like breaking a wall of silence that made him safe. It sheltered him from questions and an investigation of his mood, his psyche.

God knew he didn't like that.

“No,” Arthur said, blushing just right after having spoken the words. “We're practically clear of the stairs.”

Since Freya had preceded them, the door to Merlin's flat had been left open. Arthur put him down on the threshold, close enough to the jamb that Merlin could stand if he leant against it.

Hands on his hips, breath coming in big gulps, Arthur put him down once they were past the steps. “Are you sure you don't want to take a moment?”

“What makes you think I need to take a moment?” Merlin was clinging to the wall just to be able to stand upright. “You're the one who's winded.”

“I'll get my breath back,” Arthur arched his eyebrow. “You're the one who fugued downstairs. Not me.” The words were matter of fact. Merlin would have called them harsh if he'd thought he had feelings left to hurt. Arthur seemed to have realised this too, for he amended that to, “It's understandable, you know. You had an accident, sustained serious trauma. Going back to your former life, or what looks like it in the shape of your old flat, is going to be momentous. If you feel lost it's because the past is coming back to you.”

Merlin looked sharply away. Those words stung like insults would. After the accident he'd been made to talk to a psychologist. He hadn't wanted to or talked much at all but the experience had made him feel like such an alien. Especially since the psy had insisted on him opening up in his own time and on his own terms, as if Merlin was fragile and he needed to be told such an obvious thing. He'd even used small words for the benefit of the poor emotional wreck. Merlin had hated that. “I'm fine. There's nothing wrong with me. Okay? It's all hunky dory.”

Arthur was still giving him the eyebrow, so Merlin reverted to silence to put him off. He didn't have to do this for long. For Freya came back. “I've opened the window in your room. It smells breezy in there now.”

Merlin nodded and started bracing himself for what looked like a long trek, two whole rooms to cross to get to his.

Arthur put a hand on his forearm. “Wait, are you all right with doing this alone?”

Merlin gritted his teeth. “Want to do more carrying?”

“No.” Arthur had answered as if Merlin's hadn't been a piece of sarcasm. “I get that you hate it. I just want to get the wheelchair from where we left it in the hall. I want to have a look at your legs before you do more straining today okay?”

Merlin waited where he was for Arthur to go accomplish his task. Standing there for a few minutes while somebody else nipped downstairs might have seemed like nothing. But Merlin was all a sweat, his legs were trembling and threatening to fold under him, and he had to cling to the door jamb with all his might to stay upright long enough to not make a fool of himself.

It was long enough to impress upon him how much his life had changed.

This wasn't him, this person that wasn't in control of his body. The himself housed in this body that couldn't do things the way it used to wasn't Merlin. But then again, he guessed, that Merlin was long
gone, gone with all that would never come back. Perhaps it was just fitting.

“Here we are.” Arthur appeared at his side and set the chair down on its wheels. He pushed down on the two side rails so as to unfold it. “Try and move into it.”

Merlin closed his eyes and nodded.

“You can't make it, can you?” Even through closed eyes Merlin knew Arthur was looking at him. “You're worn out.” Merlin heard Arthur shuffle round the chair. He knew he'd moved to place himself in front of Merlin. Arthur's hand landed on his shoulder. “You've got to tell me, you know. When you're done. Or how am I supposed to work out a physio regime for you?”

Merlin opened his eyes to read the earnestness in Arthur's. “Is it going to even make a difference?”

“Of course it is. Right now you've got no muscle strength because you've been in bed so long. But you're going to build that strength back up again and get rid of any lingering pains,” said Arthur, looking surprised at the question. “That's what I'm here for.” He eased both arms under Merlin's own. “Let go of your weight. I'm here to catch you.”

Merlin's legs were trembling; his breath was starting to come short and sweat was breaking across his forehead and along his spine, yet he couldn't bring himself to move.

“Merlin, trust me, I'll catch you.”

They shared a look. Merlin didn't particularly want Arthur to understand what was going on with him, but he just instinctively searched Arthur's eyes for confirmation of his words. They were clear and looked sincere. But despite how much he wanted to trust that look and is spite of how everything was hurting right now, from the spot under his knee that kept radiating pain, to his bunched up muscles, giving in and sinking into Arthur's waiting arms wasn't easy. Merlin was too self-conscious to let himself do it. He and Arthur weren't friends. They were nothing. And here he was having to get so close as though they were friends and Arthur was trying to help him out of the goodness of his heart. He wouldn't let a friend see him like this either. There had been one he would have accepted this from but bygones were bygones.

“Merlin, please, let me help, all right?”

Merlin's will had nothing to do with it. His legs having given, he fell into Arthur's arms.

As promised, Arthur caught him. For a moment they were chest to chest, Merlin slipping infinitesimally lower. Overwhelmed at how helpless his situation had made him, how needy-looking, he grappled with Arthur's hoodie and sniffed.

All he wanted was to burrow inside himself and never come out.

Arthur's hand went up and down on his back. “Hey, easy. Easy, Merlin, it's all right. It's going to be all right.”

Merlin scrunched up his face, unable to keep a lid on what he was feeling. His face heated and his lids felt heavier, puffy. “You don't know that.”

“I know, though.” Arthur easing him down into the chair. He knelt so he was looking Merlin in the eyes. “I read your chart. I spoke with your surgeon. I know what I'm talking about.”

Merlin didn't know how to tell this man that that wasn't what he was talking about; that his prognosis wasn't what concerned him now, at least not exactly. He wasn't even sure though that some part of his brain wasn't misfiring, fixating on stuff he could never change and that was bound to make him
miserable. But he couldn't let his physio see this. And he didn't want Freya, who'd gone inside to fix things in the flat, to notice either. He breathed out once, twice and then forced himself to let go of Arthur's hoodie.

"I know."

"Merlin--"

“No, I know, sorry.” He dabbed at his eyes, feeling the wetness against his knuckles. He hated himself for it. “It's fine. I'm fine.”

Arthur's hands went to his hips, gave them a squeeze. Merlin could tell he hadn't fooled him, but Arthur accepted Merlin's lie and walked behind the chair, which he started pushing into the heart of the flat.

Unlike the building's foyer, the flat itself had changed completely. Half the furniture had been moved around, some items had been removed and an empty door blocked all access to the first room to the left.


Arthur pushed him into it, helped him out of the chair and onto the bed and then said, “Can I have a look at your legs?”

Merlin nodded.

Taking that as a yes, Arthur crouched and slipped off Merlin's shoes. He rolled up Merlin's joggers and took a look at Merlin's swollen legs, at the scars that the bone had left when breaking skin. Merlin had looked at that canopy quite often. It was a good reminder of what had happened, how much he'd failed.

Even though Merlin could read a touch of pity in his eyes, Arthur was looking at them clinically however. He could sense it in his touch as well from when Arthur ran his hands up Merlin's shin. “There's still swelling and bruising,” Arthur's thumbs skated softly up the length of the bone that had broken. “But that's normal, you know. You suffered from soft tissue injury. You bled into the muscle compartments too. That happens when your tibia fractures, especially the way yours did.” Merlin knew Arthur was trying to calm him and make him understand how common the after effects of Merlin's injury were. “And the pain you're experiencing? It might be from compromised circulation. It's partly linked to the soft tissue injury itself, but immobility may also have a part in it.” Arthur looked up, earnest and round. “I need you to move, Merlin. I need you to move more so you can get better. I know it's seems counter-intuitive but it works that way.”

Merlin wetted his lips and didn't answer. “Do we have to start now?” Merlin asked. He was feeling overpowered by the circumstances. Coming back here was what he'd wanted but coping wasn't easy. And starting working on his physio regime today was a bit much.

“Not if you're not ready.” Arthur massaged his right leg, the one that had had it worse. He was quite good at providing pain relief; the deep ache in Merlin's bone was already lifting. “We can start tomorrow but you need to want it to make it.”

Merlin nodded. He wasn't sure what Arthur meant. It wasn't as if he was in a position to refuse help, however much he'd love to be as self-sufficient as he'd been before. He was just asking for time. “I'm doing my best. Just not today, please.”

Arthur rose to his feet, looked at Merlin as if he wanted to say something, then said, “I'll help you
into bed, and then I'll go. But tomorrow we're really starting working on your physio training.”
Arthur was holding a finger up, reminding Merlin of an old teacher he and Will had used to make
fun of. Merlin turned his head away.

As Arthur manhandled him into a comfortable position, Merlin didn't say a word.

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Hunith opened the door.

“I hope it's not the wrong moment,” Balinor said, turning his battered beanie in his hands. “If I'm
disturbing you I can go.”

“I was just making tea.” She opened the door wider. She wasn't sure she wanted him in her space
after all this time but she couldn't leave him on the threshold either. He was Merlin's father. He'd
never stopped being that. “Come in.”

Balinor followed her in the kitchen. He stood by the jamb, stiff, shifting his weight. He didn't put
down his rucksack nor did he let go of his woollen hat. Before he spoke, he cleared his throat more
than once. “I was wondering about what you told him and how he was doing.” Balinor lowered his
eyes. “And you too, of course.”

Hunith placed two cups on the table. “I told Merlin I'd subscribed a private insurance when he was a
baby and that I cashed it in, allowing for fully private therapy. He didn't question it. He's questioning
nothing.” Merlin was living in a limbo that worried Hunith. He was silent and retiring now. Never
asked questions, never probed. He took things as they came. His wasn't just a coping mechanism or a
fatalistic accepting attitude. He was passive, too much so. But she wasn't sure she wanted to tell
Balinor that. It was something Merlin wasn't sharing with anybody, not even her, and making
Balinor part of this would have felt like a betrayal of her son. “We've also found him a physio.”

The kettle whistled and Hunith took it off the fire. She dunked tea bags into the waiting cups and
poured hot water into them.

“Is he any good?”

“He's the only one Merlin's said yes to.” Hunith sighed. “So that's a start.” She put the kettle back on
the range and sat at the table, locking her fingers together and inviting Balinor to sit with a look. “For
a while I thought he wouldn't want this one either. The new physio started out shelling out rather
firm opinions. He challenged Merlin. Steamed right over him and that seemed to convince Merlin to
take him on—”

Balinor laughed. “I guess he did take a little after me then...”

Hunith thought back to the past. “Yes, yes in a way he does. In that. But he's much sweeter.”
Merlin's sweetness hadn't come to the fore in the last few months, everything about him seemed to
have diminished, but Hunith hoped it wasn't a thing of the past.

“I'm glad,” said Balinor, the corner of his lips lifting. “Being like me is not something you'd wish on
anybody, let alone your son.”

Hunith pushed the tea-cup towards Balinor. “Sit and drink.”

Balinor did just that, awkward but unapologetic about his very awkwardness. “Other than that, how
is he?”

Hunith took a sip of her tea. “Sad. He's mourning his best friend.” She waited for the pang that came with the thought to pass. She missed Will too; he'd been a good boy. “Everything is a struggle for him now. He's lost muscle mass. Can't walk. Depending on how things go he could have a limp for life.”

“Let's hope it doesn't work out that way then,” said Balinor, drinking Hunith's tea even if he was grimacing at the taste.

“Merlin loved jumping around.” A sheen of tears filled her eyes and blurred her vision at the edges. “So, yes, let's hope he can go back to that.”

“If he's as stubborn as me,” Balinor said, not catching her eyes. “Maybe that's going to be a good thing.”

Hunith smiled. “Perhaps.”

*****

Arthur's alarm went off at eight o'clock. Even though Arthur was still pretty much wrapped in the fogs of sleep, he made an effort to come out of them. He wasn't all there yet, when he remembered that today was his first day really working with Merlin.

As much as he'd have loved to sleep in, Merlin had the priority. Still basically a zombie, he showered and dressed and only properly woke once he'd had two coffees and had done 50 reps push ups. He was ready set to go when his mobile buzzed with an incoming text from Gwen: “Good luck with your new patient.”

Shouldering his ruck-sack and supply bag, Arthur sighed. Having met Merlin and witnessed first hand how dejected and unresponsive he was, he knew he'd need all the luck in the world to succeed with him.

Radio on, he drove over to Merlin's, getting lost only once in the process of adapting his navigational skills to living in Bangor.

It was Freya that opened the door to the flat, saying, “Hi, Arthur!” She had a chocolate roll in her mouth and was dressed down to shoes and coat. “I was about to go out but you can help yourself to the rest of our breakfast if you want to.”

“Already had breakfast, thanks,” said Arthur, adjusting the strap of his rucksack. “Where's Merlin?”

Freya's expression darkened. “In his room. Didn't want to come out at all. Refused his food. He says he will have some after he's done his physio.” Freya sighed. “That's just not Merlin, by the way. He used to insist on having breakfast with us. He was always the first to be there. He was the one to enforce the notion that as flatmates we should stick together. And he'd make us jam toasties and—” Freya stopped talking without specifying who the 'us' she'd mentioned referred to. Arthur knew the flat had three bedrooms and that one was as locked up today as it had been yesterday, but he didn't feel like it was his place to ask questions. He let Freya tail off and say, “Well, I'll be late for a lecture. I'm leaving Merlin in your hands.”

“I'll try and make sure he has a good and inspiring first session.”
Having knocked on the door, Arthur found Merlin in bed. Though he had the duvet pulled up his legs, he was clearly awake and wearing day clothes. His shaggy dark hair and the five o'clock shadow that looked more like an eleven o'clock one told Arthur Merlin had made no effort to begin his day at all. He'd made no attempt at being presentable.

“Hi, Merlin,” he said, putting his rucksack down and marching to the bed. “How are you feeling?”

Merlin looked up at him. “ Barely alive.”

That wasn't the response Arthur had been waiting to hear. He clapped his hands together to infuse a bit of energy into Merlin. “Come on, let's try and work at building a bit more muscle and stamina.”

Merlin grabbed the duvet, his fingers tightening around the edge, until the knuckles showed white, and it pushed it off. “Right.”

Arthur's gaze met Merlin's fierce, angry blue eyes. He registered how his already pale cheeks had taken on a grey tinge. He didn't failed to notice the resentful stiffening of a body that clearly still showed the signs of having been ravaged by pain and illness both. Merlin was obviously someone who'd always been very thin but Arthur was sure he'd never looked this wasted and tired before.

It wasn't just the thinness or the scars that made Arthur's heart sad. It was the dead light in Merlin's eyes, the way he slumped and bowed his head, as if he couldn't deal with the weight of the world.

Arthur promised himself he would help Merlin get better emotionally too, but for now the only way he had of achieving that was by behaving professionally and getting Merlin's body into a shape that would allow him to take back control of his life. Pain, chronic pain in particular, altered your outlook and perception of the world around you. Arthur had had plenty of experience with that. So he vowed to make sure he'd remove that obstacle for Merlin. He was lucky enough to have that chance, Arthur would assist him in taking it. However, he didn't think it was advisable to share his plan right now. Merlin might think of it as an attack to his pride. So Arthur's expression remained outwardly as cool as he inwardly acknowledged what was wrong with Merlin.

“Let's get started,” Arthur said, infusing his tone with as much energy as he could.

Merlin nodded numbly, looking up at Arthur from behind lowered lids. “What do I do?”

“Turn around,” said Arthur in a tone he made as non challenging as possible. “Today we're only working on something easy.”

Merlin's medical file, which Arthur had studied prior to meeting Merlin, stated that his fractures had knitted back together well. His X-rays had shown there were signs of healing where the exposed fracture was. Correct alignment had been achieved and the same could be said of the 'simpler' fractures in Merlin's left leg. Yet the lines of strain grooved around Merlin's mouth and forming around his eyes were evidence of the pain he still suffered.

Arthur was sure his knee joint felt tender, his bones unsupportive and brittle, and he was probably experiencing cramps and aches of all sort, postural most of all.

Arthur's fingers itched to explore Merlin's damaged legs better than he had the day before so he could check for himself and devise a plan that would restore Merlin to full mobility. “Today we're doing some isometric exercises to strengthen your muscles and some stretching.”

“Uh?” Merlin asked.

“Isometric means that you're not changing joint angle and muscle length while you're contracting the
muscle,” Arthur explained. “We're sticking to a 30° angle.”

“I still don't get what you'd have me do.” Merlin looked hesitant about turning around and sitting the way Arthur wanted him to. “Or why.”

“I'll tell you what you should be doing in a second.” Arthur's hands reached for Merlin's hips. “As to why, I thought you wanted to get better.”

Merlin didn't reply and a hole opened up in Arthur's guts. He'd witnessed reactions like this before but usually words similar to Merlin's came from people who had reason to have given up. Merlin could make it back to perfect health. He had all the potential.

It'd take work and Arthur wouldn't promise as much now since that perfect recovery goal might be too rosy and he didn't want to disappoint Merlin, but the odds were good and Arthur just didn't understand Merlin's unwillingness to fight.

He'd noticed this yesterday, but he'd put it down to Merlin being tired from having to move back into his old place. Apparently that mood stuck. Well, first things first. “What I want you to do is to put your thighs parallel to the floor.” Though he got into a bit of a sweat to do it Merlin positioned himself correctly. Almost. “But with the feet flat on the ground.”

“Like this?” Merlin asked in a small gruff voice.

“Yeah exactly.” Arthur knelt down to make sure Merlin's socked feet were where they should be. He then placed his hand flat down on Merlin's quad. “Lift your leg up, but mind you do it with a flexed foot. Like this, yeah.” He tapped Merlin's thigh. “I want you to keep this position and tense your upper thigh muscles.” Arthur felt Merlin's muscles bunching up under his touch. He smiled. “Hold this position for 6 to 8 seconds.”

Merlin counted under his breath.

Arthur sank back onto his haunches and watched as Merlin repeated the exercise. “Breathe, Merlin, breathe.” He placed a hand on Merlin's chest to encourage its rising and falling. “Steady, even breaths will help you work your way through these exercises.”

Merlin's cheeks had puffed out, rosy. “Right.”

“Don’t hold your breath during reps.” Arthur sank once again on his haunches and carefully supervised Merlin.

Merlin's breath was whooshing out faster. “I'm getting tired.”

“Good,” said Arthur, still watching Merlin keenly. “This is a tough workout.”

“Doesn't seem like it,” Merlin said, continuing with his exercise. “It looks stupid. I used to--”

“Don't compare now to then,” Arthur knew that was the most frequent mistake his patients made. “You've been lying in a bed for six weeks and been in a three day coma. Underwent surgery. Your spleen was removed. You nearly died. It's not the same.”

Merlin dropped his leg. His face was red and his nostrils flared. “Subtle inference there.”

Arthur looked to Merlin sharply. “You know what I meant.”

Merlin didn't address that. “Am I done with these?”
“Yeah.” Arthur wanted to poke and prod, get Merlin to talk about what so evidently bothered him, but knew it wasn’t his place. He was no psychologist and wasn’t about to risk it. Damn, but Merlin made him want to flaunt professional protocol. “You are. Now I’m going to inflict some variety on you.”

“Inflict.” A slight spark of humour danced in Merlin’s gaze. “You’ve certainly got the right word there.”

Arthur rose to his feet and made space on the floor by pushing aside a chair and other furniture. “I want you to stretch out on the floor.”

“How do I get back up?” Merlin asked with an eyebrow raise.

“I’m going to teach you that too.” Arthur pushed Merlin’s rug about so Merlin would have a soft spot to lie on. “It’s going to be useful.”

“And how do I get down there?”

“With a bit of help for today.” Arthur moved to Merlin’s side and hooked an arm under his. “Okay, try to stand. I know you can.”

Merlin’s breath quickened but he stood on trembling legs. Arthur wrapped his other arm around his middle, Merlin going limp against him, and guided him a few steps back. “I’m holding you, see. But now I’m going to let go.”

Merlin’s arms were scraping at his sides, bunching up Arthur’s sports hoodie. “Okay,” he said thought he sounded scared at the prospect.

“You’re not really ready, are you?” He was starting to get Merlin. Thinking this, Arthur gave a small grin. He and Merlin were standing close Merlin couldn’t fail to see it. Arthur couldn’t possibly fail to reach him. Arthur hoped it’d encourage him. “I’m not letting you go if you don’t want me to, but it would be better for you if we do this.”

Staying on his feet on his own steam, Merlin let go of him. He was even bearing his full weight. Considering how tender his knee joint was and how swollen his legs still were in the fractures area, it had to hurt. Arthur appreciated Merlin going to the effort to trust him. “I’m helping you down now. Don’t squat. You’re putting eight times your weight on your knee when you do that. And considering that’s where the tibia—”

“Ends, I know,” Merlin said, gritting his teeth as he slowly and maladroitly, eased himself down. “Saw the x-ray too, you know.”

With Arthur’s help Merlin sat on the floor, with his legs straight out in front of him. “Now set your hands on the floor for support, and keep your back straight,” Arthur said, walking around Merlin and assessing his stance. He gave his feet a little kick to nudge them into position. “Your toes should be pointing to the ceiling.”

Merlin didn’t look too eager, cheeks puffed out in annoyance, but he complied. “I suppose like this is fine?”

Arthur would have wished for Merlin not to be shrugging this off. He wanted to see some fire in him, a will to fight to get better. That wasn’t there yet, but Arthur couldn’t wait to see it. In time. In time. For now he offered a set of instructions. “Begin with your right leg. I want you to lift it 2 to 3 inches above the floor.”
“Is this okay?” Merlin's nose scrunched up with the effort.

“Yes, splendid, Merlin,” Arthur said, walking around Merlin as he monitored him. “Now hold for 6 to 8 seconds, and release.”

Merlin followed Arthur's instructions. At least he had that going for him. “Happy?”

Arthur sighed. It wasn't him who should be happy with the outcome. “Repeat 10 times for each leg.”

Merlin finished his reps and Arthur gave him another series of exercises. At the end of their hour Merlin was covered in sweat, his hair was sticking up, and he was so red in the face Arthur thought it wise to call it a day.

“Well, Merlin, that's well done for today.”

Merlin turned his face. “Don't patronise me now. You know I'm scarcely lifting my legs.”

Arthur squatted by Merlin's side, turned his chin and made sure their eyes met. “And I told you that's normal.” He ploughed over Merlin's budding retort. “You'll have to learn patience, Merlin. Physiotherapy isn't a one time miracle.” Knowing that that realisation had to hit Merlin on its own, and having done his best to make him understand, he changed tack. “Why don't you have breakfast now?”

Merlin's jaw clenched. “Because it's a long way to the kitchen.”

“You can use your wheel-chair for now.”

Merlin's eyes lifted to the heavens in supplication. “You're just a sadistic physiotherapist, aren't you? You want to see me struggle.”

Arthur couldn't believe his ears. “You know you don't believe that yourself.”

Merlin lowered his eyes. He gritted his teeth before rising tentatively upright.

Arthur offered some of his support to make sure Merlin could stand on his own without toppling over. However, Merlin shoved him away and took two trembling steps towards his wheelchair. The muscles in his leg were obviously weakened from months of disuse and Arthur wasn't sure how far they'd take him.

There were a few more steps to go and Arthur wasn't certain Merlin could cover the distance without experiencing pain or that he should at all, but Merlin was stubborn and though his face was drawn and pale, despite his shaking from head to foot and the big drop of sweats beading his forehead, he made it. Only to fall into the chair as inelegantly as possible.

It was then that Arthur went to him. He made as though he hadn't noticed how red from the effort Merlin had gone. And he pretended not to have noticed the tears of frustration in Merlin's eyes. Merlin might have been a contrary patient, but Arthur could see how he was struggling with what had happened to him. He could see how he was coping with what he thought of as a loss of dignity. Arthur didn't know how he would have fared in Merlin's shoes, so he made allowances. He wouldn't let it show and make it too easy on Merlin, but he would let himself feel that. Professional distance was one thing, staying humane another. Heart squeezing in his chest, he helped Merlin sort his limbs out.

“I can wheel myself to the kitchen now,” Merlin said, looking glassily over Arthur's shoulder.
“There was no question as s to whether or not you're capable of doing it,” Arthur told Merlin, following him into the kitchen. “I just want to help if I can. That's my job.”

In the kitchen Merlin opened the fridge and took out a carton of milk. He turned the chair round and put the carton on the table. He made a big production of getting a napkin from the napkin dispenser, spreading it out on his knees, and taking a pull from the carton.

“Is that your idea of breakfast?” Arthur asked, nonplussed.

Merlin was wheeling himself away from the table and making for the door again. “Yeah, not hungry.”

“You can't not be hungry!”

“And how do you know that?” Merlin's eyes flashed, fingers curling around the armrests of his chair.

“Because you can't subsist on a little milk.” Arthur shook up the carton Merlin had used. “Freya said you had nothing before I came.”

“So?”

Arthur's shoulders sagged as he exhaled a big breath. “Is this because things are difficult to reach?” Arthur asked. “Because if that's the case we can re-arrange the kitchen for the time being.”

Merlin didn't say anything.

“A little bit of lower shelving and your flatmate collaborating and I'm sure the next few weeks are going to be easier on you.”

Merlin snorted. “I hurt no matter if I move or not!”

Arthur softened. “I know. That's why I'm here.”

“Then you'll know why I'm not hungry.” He encompassed the kitchen with his hands. “I can't stand the pain any longer. The last thing on my mind is food.” It was a statement, plain and matter of fact, not a complaint.

Arthur could see why Merlin hurt. He was just past the worst and while the external fixation had put his shattered bones back together, he was clearly facing other obstacles. There was still soft tissue swelling that mustn't be pleasant to deal with. Arthur had read a fair amount of clinical studies: he knew that trials had shown that the outcome of tibial shaft fractures was often less than ideal. Those breaks often healed with some angulation, rotation, or shortening, which changed a person's biomechanical load. In the long run patients still suffered from joint pain, disability, arthritis and joint stiffness. Not to mention the smaller fractures Merlin had undergone. All in all he'd been to hell and back. Still, Arthur didn't believe that was all there was to it. He was sure there was more to Merlin's despondency than pain – or than met the eye.

Arthur had tried to keep his gaze professional and only assess what was physically wrong with Merlin, but Merlin wasn't your run of the mill patient, not with his stubbornness and air of untouchable loneliness, so he couldn't help but take in other data. He couldn't not consider Merlin's emotional well being. He told himself there was nothing wrong with that since emotional and physical health were interconnected. “We'll get there,” Arthur promised. It was going to be his mission. “We really, really will.”

“It's easy to talk when you're fine.” Merlin tore his gaze away and aimed it downwards, gnawing at
his lip. “I’d like to see whether you’d be just as confident sitting here--” He patted his chair’s armrests. “--as you are standing there!”

“Why, are you jealous I’m fine?” Arthur asked. “Do you resent me? I’m fine with that. Because that would be a natural response. It’s okay to let all that out.”

Merlin’s eyes filled with tears but he didn’t shed a single one. “What, no! I’m not like that.”

“Then what’s the matter with you?” Arthur would have really appreciated an honest answer, but even before Merlin spoke again he knew he wouldn’t get it.

“Everything!” Merlin said. “Nothing. I don’t know anymore.”

Arthur fetched a breath. “Can we try and find out?”

“It’s not so easy.” Merlin looked both lost and slightly shifty and that was why Arthur was certain he knew deep down what was the matter with him. “It’s not easy.”

Arthur couldn’t let that stand without a challenge or working with Merlin would be impossible. Otherwise Merlin would always fall back on what he couldn’t do and how things weren’t working for him. He’d achieve nothing constructive. “I suggest you concentrate your energies on getting well instead of wallowing in self-pity.”

“That’s not what I’m doing.”

“I beg to differ,” Arthur said, tipping up an eyebrow. “But if you don’t want to talk about the issue yet then just say as much. I’m just begging for some honesty here.”

Merlin shrugged. “I don’t want to talk about it now. I don’t even want to think about it.”

Arthur rattled out a breath. Merlin might prefer not to deal with the subject of his woes but it wouldn’t be healthy in the long run. For now, Arthur guessed, he could let the dust settle and give Merlin time to process and open up when he wanted. Arthur would probably have to gain his trust before that happened. But he still thought Merlin should face his personal ghosts sooner rather than later. “Now let me see to making you breakfast.”

Merlin looked at him a little sceptically. “I can let you make breakfast, but I’d rather not talk.”

“As you prefer,” Arthur said, scouring the kitchen for provisions.

A while later, Arthur was staring at the groceries he’d found in the cupboard. He wasn’t a great chef and god knew he’d subsisted on a lot of pre-packaged food in his days as a hospital employee. He was eating a bit better now but that didn’t make him an accomplished cook. Still, he could make Merlin an omelette and grill some tomatoes, which he busied himself doing. Maybe Merlin would be more amenable to opening up a bit after he had eaten?

Breakfast ready, Arthur dished the eggs and poured Merlin a glass of milk. He handed him a fork and waited for Merlin to dig in.

Merlin pulled an indrawn breath and then gave him another shrug. He took a bite.

Arthur smiled.

Merlin didn’t look like he’d eat more so Arthur poured the rest of the eggs onto another plate, straddled a chair and started eating as well.
Merlin looked at him sideways, a small smile twitching at the corners of his mouth. It was the first Arthur had seen coming from him.

While Arthur filled his mouth with pieces of tomato and a helping of eggs – his second breakfast today – Merlin took his first tentative bite.

Arthur schooled his face into passivity but he was smiling on the inside. This was the first win for him at breaching Merlin's sky high defences.

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After a week of physiotherapy with Arthur, Merlin felt more or less ready to go back to uni, and talking to his lecturer about catching back up seemed to be the first step towards getting back on track.

As Gilli drove him, Merlin reminded himself of just how right this was. And he kept telling himself much the same as he wheeled himself to the lift that would take him to the correct floor. He stopped cheering himself on when he spilled out of the lift and became the object of a myriad stares.

Some were pitiful; the kind of look you'd throw at a puppy who'd been kicked out of a running car and that had been left to fend for itself.

Others looked at him with an air of curiosity as though they were itching to ask him what had got him into the wheelchair he was in.

A third group was probably wondering about the larger picture. Some of them had known Will and had to be wondering what Merlin was thinking, how he was feeling about the loss of the friend he spent most of his time with. Those faces were the ones he wished he could avoid the most, because their questions wouldn't be aimed at knowing whether he was fine, or recovering or stuck where he was. Those questions would be geared towards finding out about his emotional status. And that was to be avoided at all costs.

Stomach dropping to his knees, Merlin wheeled himself down the corridor. Unfortunately his flight was checked in that he was stopped by one of Will's old friends before he could quite seek the sanctuary of his tutor's office.

“Hi, Merlin.” Caradoc bounced from one foot to the other as he awkwardly loomed over Merlin. “How are things going?”

“Fine,” said Merlin, tucking his upper lip under his lower one. “I'm better.”

“You don't look bad at all.” Caradoc must have thought his was a complimentary tone. “So how long are you going to be sitting there? It's been months.” Caradoc blanched. “Oh god, are you going to need the wheelchair forever? I mean I hope I didn't--”

Merlin's voice was reedy thin when he said, “I'm not wheelchair bound. Not paraplegic. But I can't walk yet.” He didn't go into the specifics of why. He'd developed a distaste for medical talk
“Oh, I see, yeah, lucky that,” Caradoc said, breath whooshing out of him. “That's why you weren't at Will's funeral, is it? It was very moving.”

The temptation to wheel himself away strong, Merlin lowered his head. He knew Caradoc meant well. He couldn't have known that the mention of Will's funeral would be enough to send Merlin plunging into a dark abyss of despondency. But he couldn't help to feel some rising resentment towards him. He only had two modes left: fight or flight. He didn't know which one to resort to yet. “I was in a coma.”

“That's terrible, mate,” Caradoc said, moving his hands about as if he meant to give Merlin a pat on the back, which he couldn't do because of the relative height difference created by the fact Merlin was sitting and Caradoc standing. “I'm sure Will would have understood.”

“You don't know that though,” Merlin said, wheeling himself past Caradoc. “And he's not about to tell us whether he was pissed off by me not attending.”

Not sure whether the man had said something in reply to Merlin or not, Merlin left Caradoc behind. His ears were ringing too much for him to be able to stand more of Cardoc's chat. He had as good an excuse as any, he was still ill in a way. People forgave you when you'd been as badly off as him. Besides, he had another handy excuse: it was half past ten and his tutor was waiting for him.

He knocked on his door and was told to, “Come in.”

Merlin turned the handle, manoeuvred the chair back when the door opened, and then wheeled forward, trying to avoid bumping his leg. He'd become quite adept at that lately, if nothing else because it hurt so much you got wise enough to work around shoving your limbs against things.

When Doctor Trent saw Merlin work around the obstacle, he sprang from his chair, limber as he never had before, and held the door open for him, even if Merlin had already moved past it and there was no need. “I'm sorry,” he said, “I couldn't be sure it was you.”

“No worries, sir.” Merlin emitted a wan smile. “I can navigate most places with this thing.”

“Ha, yes.” Doctor Trent sat back behind his desk even though it was evident he was reluctant to do so, probably thinking he'd have to be on the alert to help poor Merlin, who was in a bad shape. “Of course.”

Merlin hummed. “Yeah, you get good after a while.”

Doctor Trent picked up a pencil and tapped it against the hollow formed by the gap between his thumb and index finger. “So, Merlin, I suppose you're here about your academic situation?” Dr Trent said, changing the subject to one he seemed more comfortable with.

Glad that that was the case, Merlin rolled his chair all the way to the opposite end of the desk Doctor Trent was sitting behind. “Yes, I know I've fallen behind schedule and I want to catch back up.”

“Considering your situation, Merlin,” said Doctor Trent easily, “that won't be difficult.”

“I was wondering about the specifics?” Merlin's voice lilted into the tones of a question. “I'd never fallen behind schedule before.”

Doctor Trent picked up a booklet and pushed it at him. “That's a copy of the student handbook. You'll find that it addresses most of your problems.” He gesticulated comprehensively. “Basically you'll report special circumstances.” Doctor Trent's gaze encompassed Merlin's chair. “In your case it won't matter that seven days have already expired since missing your exams. And you'll be able to
“Like a resit?” Merlin scrunched up his nose. He'd never needed to re-sit anything and he felt horrible having to start now.

“No, not like a re-sit,” Doctor Trent said in a conciliatory tone, as if he was afraid Merlin might snap. Merlin was used to his tutor – and everybody around him really – being more brisk. He feared he was being coddled and felt extreme distaste for this, but couldn't come out and say it without inviting the anger of those treating him this way. Or sounding paranoid. Which wasn't good either. “You'd be sitting your missed exam properly for the first time.”

“How about course-work?” Merlin asked.

“Well, you're obviously behind with most of that,” said Doctor Trent. “I'd suggest you take your time to get back on track. You can take supplementary assessment to redeem failure to make the necessary marks.” Doctor Trent turned the computer, typed some words into the screen that popped up, and hummed. “Yes, I see here that you have 50 credits with a 75% mark. Your overall average is also good. I can see no problem with organising supplementary assessments for you.”

“But I can't take them all together, can I?” Merlin rather doubted that.

“You could always register as an external candidate and take assessments in the modules you couldn't finish.” Doctor Trent scratched behind his ear with a pen. “But wouldn't that be more stressful for you?”

“I can take a little stress,” Merlin said with a wan smile. “I can take lots of it.”

“Merlin, I want you to understand that while unregistered candidates do not need to attend lectures – which might be a plus to you considering your current condition – there's also a downside. You wouldn't have access to University facilities, which would include the library, and you'd still have to wait for the proper examination periods.”

“What are you saying?” Merlin felt as though nothing was clear anymore. He must admit stress was doing a number on him. He didn't know which was up anymore. “I'm not sure I understand which option you're advising.”

“I'm simply suggesting you take the path of least resistance,” Doctor Trent said, “and assessment would be that.”

Merlin thought he was being treated as an invalid but couldn't tell Doctor Trent that. He half wanted to be back on the saddle and half wished he didn't have anything to think about. What he was sure of was that he didn't want any sort of special treatment. It made him feel like an alien. “Can I think about it?” Merlin didn't wish to reject Doctor Trent's proposal outright. He pocketed the student's handbook.

“Of course, Merlin,” Doctor Trent told him, rounding his desk to come over and shake Merlin's hand. “Take your time. You've been a good student and there's no reason to think you won't be one in future.”

So saying, Doctor Trent accompanied Merlin to the door, opening it for him. “I hope I've been able to help.”

Merlin nodded. “Yes, sir, thank you.”

After his meeting with Doctor Trent, Merlin went to the library to hand back books he'd failed to
return after the accident. Like Mr Trent, the librarian made excuses for him and made a big fuss over him.

“Aren't you fining me?” Merlin had a subliminal desire to push Ms Lawrence into doing just that. “I'm months late.”

“No, Emrys.” She peeked from under her glasses in a way one could almost describe as gentle, at least as far as Ms Lawrence, famous book harridan, was concerned. “I understand why you were held up.”

“I see.” Merlin huffed. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, Emrys, I am sure,” Ms Lawrence said, a little annoyed this time. She readjusted her glasses and looked past Merlin. “Now, if you'll excuse me there's another student right behind you waiting for their turn.”

Merlin left the library and propelled his wheelchair into the nearest lift. He pummelled at the wheels and nearly upended himself when he slid into the lift because he was going too quickly. On the way down he breathed in and out and by the time he'd reached the cafeteria he didn't look like a an angry harpy anymore. He was still as shaken as before but he was pretty sure he didn't look like a madman.

After months spent in a hospital pretending to be optimistic, he'd learnt that presentation was all that mattered. He could appear normal.

So Merlin did just that.

In the cafeteria Merlin went through the hoops of using his chair. For a moment he contemplated trying standing but he knew he wouldn't manage staying upright long. Plus if he got a tray that would become downright impossible. So instead of making a fool of himself, he went against his instincts and balanced his tray on his legs, making it to one of the tables.

Together with the bottle of water he'd laid side down on it, he transferred the tray to the table. Then ordered the dishes around.

He was moving bits of salad with his fork and stabbing the tines into a cheese pie, when Freya startled him. “Merlin, I wanted to talk to you.”

Merlin dropped his fork. “Must be something that can't wait.”

Freya set a pack of crisps on the table and a messenger bag overflowing with textbooks at her feet. “It's news. I talked to someone today.”

Merlin wondered whether Freya had got herself a date and that was what she was driving at. “Okay?”

“And I need to consult you about it,” Freya told him, opening her packet of crisps but not eating any. “So it's lucky you took your lunch break.”

“Did you get meet someone special?” Merlin was trying to capture the vibe he and Freya would once have had going. “Is that it?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact.” Freya picked up a crisp and dropped it back in the packet again. “Her name is Luned.”

“A girl?” That Merlin knew of Freya had only gone for boys. He probably shouldn't comment since
he'd come to terms with the fact he was gay a little later than some others might have, but he'd thought Freya had always been sure of the way she swung. “Nice.”

“Yes, she is, very,” Freya said. “She's tidy, not the type to get into messes, and always very punctual with her payments.”

Merlin cocked an eyebrow. “If that's what you're looking for.”

“Of course I am. We don't want her leaving us in the lurch, do we?”

“We? Us?” Merlin was not sure he had the thread of this conversation down. It was happening more and more these days. Admittedly it kept happening because Merlin wasn't always listening, falling back on memories or into himself, but he was ready to swear this time he'd been paying attention to Freya's words. “Are we both entering a relationship with this girl?”

“Relationship?” Freya asked with a frown. “Who was talking about relationships?”

“You!” Merlin said, pushing his food aside. “I distinctly remember you saying--”

“That I had a meeting with a girl this morning and I think she's going to be the perfect flatmate.”

Merlin wheeled his chair away from the table, cold sweat running down his back. “Flatmate?”

“Merlin, that third room can't stay empty.” Freya was clearly coaxing him. She had just that tone. “You know that. Such a big flat for just the two of us is too much. I mean splitting the rent will help. Even with the money your mum got from that insurance policy... It's better spent on your health. And we can't keep the door locked on that room as if it were some sort of pagan altar.” Freya's eyes were bright with tears. “I miss him too but we can't live in mourning like that. It's not healthy.”

Freya tried to grab his hand but Merlin shook her off. “No, no. You're not renting out Will's room.”

“Merlin,” Freya said, her voice broken as if she was crying. “You know that it's the right thing to do. Please, listen to me. No, where are you going?”

Merlin was wheeling himself out of the cafeteria, chocking back a sob, heat blooming in his face. He couldn't believe Freya was so ready to erase Will from their lives, their common history. Renting out the room meant packing up Will's things, throwing them away, or giving them back to relatives that in their grief hadn't wanted them in the first place.

He could imagine Will's books and trophies ending up in a pile destined for the rubbish bin, the pages of his comics bleaching under the sun as they lay spilled on a pavement. If Freya did this, his posters and his bottle cap collection would be gone.

The sun mocking him with its friendly glare, he propelled himself onto the ramp leading into one of the courtyards. He braked and clutched at the ramp's railing, leaning his head against the rusty construction. The paint was peeling off it but it was enough to cool his heated forehead anyway. In an attempt to simmer down he breathed in and out, in and out, but his heart rate wasn't going down. He could hear his heart hammering in his ears. His vision went a little blurry and he closed his eyes so as not to cry. He stayed put like that for ages, controlling his breathing, while his heart ran on unchecked. At last someone asked whether he was all right.

So as not to make a scene, Merlin straightened in his chair, looked at the girl who'd posed the question as if she was an alien come straight from Mars, and in a dry, emotionless tone said, “I'm fine. I'm peachy. Thank you.”
Without waiting for the girl to say more, he pushed his wheel-chair down the ramp and skidded with it into the courtyard. Then, fishing his mobile out of his shirt's pocket he dialled Arthur and said, “Hi, you know that session we had scheduled for this afternoon. Mind if I move it to now?” He closed his eyes once more and inhaled. “Would you also mind picking me up? There's a problem with my ride.”

“Merlin.” Arthur was panting as though Merlin had caught him jogging or worse mid sex. “Is that you?”

“Yeah,” said Merlin, blushing more fiercely from frustration and embarrassment. “I'm sorry I disturbed you. Or that I assumed you were free. Sorry.”

He hung up but a few moments later his phone was ringing again. “Merlin, don't be stupid. Where are you?”

“Uni.” Merlin had a hard time choking out that one paltry word as if it was a whole speech. “I didn't mean to upset your schedule I--”

“Tell me where you are and I'll pick you up.” Arthur's voice was still strained but less so now. “Is that okay, Merlin?”

“Okay,” Merlin said.

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Arthur drove into Bangor uni's parking space. In the courtyard right across from it he found Merlin. He was sitting forlornly in his wheel-chair, his face so white and his expression so haunted Arthur had no doubt something had happened. He killed the engine, secured his MPV shut, and walked over to Merlin.

Merlin smiled wanly at him. “Thank you for picking me up.”

“You know it's no big deal,” Arthur said, wanting Merlin to feel at ease with him. “Really no biggie. But, Merlin, is something the matter with you? You don't look good.”

“Do I ever?” Merlin shrugged.

“Yeah, actually,” Arthur said, biting his lip not to say more since it wasn't his place as Merlin's physio to. Merlin had a fey diaphanous quality to him that did make him look good in spite of the signs that pain had etched on his features, like the dark lines often present under his eyes, and the pallor of a body that hadn't seen the sun in a while. But he didn't say as much. Instead he said something equally true. “When you're less upset.”

“I'm not upset.” Merlin's lower lip stuck out. “Can we just go back home? Please.”

“So you'd rather have physio.” Arthur squinted against the sun. “which I know you don't like, than hang out here with your mates?”

Merlin huffed, wheeled himself down a ramp, and up to Arthur's MPV, where he had to stop because he obviously couldn't open it. “I don't have the keys.”

Arthur chuckled, dangling the sought after item before Merlin. “Fancy that. In your flight you forgot the essentials.”

“Very funny,” said Merlin. “Kick someone when they're down.”
Arthur pushed the button that clicked the car open. “Come now, Merlin. You're not like that. You're one of those fighters who'll never even admit they're down. Playing on my sensibilities is low.”

Merlin snorted, turned his head aside, giving Arthur a glimpse of a pure, stark profile, and finally laughed a little. “You git. You're politically correct seventy per cent of the time and you choose now to bag on me?”

Arthur grinned. “It takes some talent.”

Merlin opened the car door, looked to the grab handle and let out a breath.

Arthur didn't move but rather looked. The more Merlin exercised his upper and lower body, the better. He'd catch him if he fell, but he wanted to see whether Merlin could make it in the car by himself. He was hoping that Merlin would devise a way to do it that would allow him to act independently. For the next few weeks, possibly months, Merlin might not be able to move about as he was used to. These coping strategies would allow him not to feel the burden of immobility. Arthur wanted him to learn to profit by them.

As it happened, Merlin used the momentum his legs gave him to clutch the grab handle. From that moment forward he clung to it and instead of putting his weight on bones that could barely bear it, he propelled himself into the seat.

“You're doing fine without me, I see,” Arthur said, inordinately pleased while trying not to show more than a mask of professional contentment.

“Isn't that the goal?” Merlin asked, settling in his seat. “Me doing without you?”

Arthur entered the car from the other side. “Yes.” He turned the car’s ignition on and slowly smoothed out of his parking space. “It is. Though hopefully you don't loathe me that much you only want to see the back of me.” Arthur was conscious of how his patients mostly wanted just that. He knew it wasn't about him. He realised that for some people he represented a period of their lives they wanted to put behind and forget about. He was called in when someone had health problems and when seeing the back of him meant they wouldn't have them anymore, it was only natural to expect his patients would not only wish not to see him again, but be happy about the riddance. So he didn't know why he'd said that, why he didn't want Merlin to want to get rid of him this quickly.

“I don't loathe you that much.” As they emerged onto College Road, Merlin looked out the window.

“That's good to know.” Arthur had a speech prepared about trust and the patient-physio relationship but stopped himself from blurt out it out. Somehow it seemed not only stupidly formal but out of place. Merlin was young; formal behaviour would put him off in the way it wouldn't some staid old gentleman. Arthur told himself he had to adapt to the person he was working with. He couldn't just be stilted with Merlin, not if he wanted to be on the same page as him. Besides, it just would have sounded so wrong. Merlin was a brilliant lad and he didn't deserve forced behaviour from him “We can work better together that way.”

Merlin didn't reply and Arthur turned into Gorad road, or so his Sat Nav said.

They were further along it, just catching a glimpse of sun playing on water, when Merlin snapped out of his reverie to say, “You're not taking me back to my flat. I'm pretty sure I get no sea view there.”

“No.” Arthur parked the car. A tiny strip of sand was before them, a view of the bay extending this way and that. “I thought you needed to relax.”
“So you took me to see the sea?”

Arthur freed himself from his seat belt. He lent over the dashboard, appreciating the greenery surrounding the coastal road. “I find it nice and quiet here.”

“You're definitely not Welsh.”

“No,” Arthur said, scrunching up his nose. “What has that got to do with anything?”

Merlin smiled a little. “If you were you'd be so used to quiet and green and scenic that you'd be bored by it.”

“Are you?” Arthur could admit he perplexed as to what to do next. If Merlin didn't like it here, then this was a blunder. “I thought you had a bad day and weren't up for more strain just yet.”

“Haven't you got other jobs to work?” Merlin asked. “I mean I'm sure you haven't got all day to spend with me making sure my mood is fine.”

Arthur scratched the back of his had. “Actually, you're my only job. I've just moved here.”

“Oh.” Merlin ducked his head and opened the passenger door. “In that case I'm all for not going back to my flat and my room. I-- I could do with some fresh air and no thoughts.”

Arthur rubbed his hands together. “Good, I'll get your chair from the boot.”

And so he did, then proceeded to wheel it up to the open car door. He waited as Merlin moved from one seat to the other, putting as little weight on his legs as he could. When Merlin was settled, he pushed him to the little sandy strip, the chair's wheels acquiring a coating of sand.

“Thank god it's not shingle,” Merlin said.

Arthur huffed a laugh and pushed Merlin's chair up to the shore. “Is this okay or do you want me to get a blanket from the car so you can... you know, sprawl on the sand?”

Merlin turned around in his seat. “I'd rather not have sand up my arse, but thank you.”

“Okay, all right.” Arthur sat down next to Merlin. He looked out to the opposite shore, covered in trees, and breathed in the deep balmy air.

They sat in silence for some time, a silence Arthur would have judged companionable if he could be sure Merlin was feeling the same and was not just mum because he was still upset.

The sun slanted through the trees and birds waded in the steely grey water, taking flight from time to time. A busier street, civilisation, was a stone's throw away, but here nature had managed to take over.

Arthur was watching the breeze shake the trees on the opposite end of the shore when Merlin piped up.

“You look as though you're not used to, well, nature,” Merlin said in a low contemplative voice. “Where is it that you come from?”

“Nottingham,” Arthur said, thinking back on his old flat, friends and former life.

“You don't sound like it.” Merlin wiggled an eyebrow. “Pardon me, but that accent is not Notthingham.”
“No,” Arthur agreed. It wasn't as if he could do anything else. He'd certainly never picked up the Nottingham dialect, with its harsh Northern vowel sounds. And he'd never mastered the art of making one syllable words sound definitely longer than they were. “Hey, I might be a south of the Trent laddie.”

“Because there's a difference?”

“Yep, or so they tell me.”

“So where are you from?” Merlin asked, tilting his head like a curious bird. “If not from Nottingham?”

“Um, London,” said Arthur, “or just a little bith north of.”

“So how did you end up in Nottingham?”

Arthur smiled. “That was my first hire. A Nottingham hospital. It was the job of my dreams so I moved. I could have waited around to find one closer to home, but I really didn't want to wait.”

Frown lines appeared on Merlin's forehead. “Then why did you leave your dream job to get into the private sector?”


“I'm not sure I get thow the NHS could mess up so much that you'd quit,” Merlin told him, his tone serious, like he was considering Arthur's story from all angles and failing to get his choices. “If it was your dream job, I mean.”

“My dream job is helping people, Merlin.” Arthur wanted to explain his outlook and what mattered to him. He also wished for Merlin to get him. It seemed important. “Making sure they're on the right track towards healing.”

“And when you can't dp that?” Merlin asked. “What happens then?”

“It breaks my heart,” Arthur clenched his fists at the thought. “That's not you, you know? You're not going to be a failure of mine. I'm going to succeed with you.”

Merlin nodded. “But if the hospital provided you with a means to help people the way you want to then why quit? Was the pay low?”

“No, the pay was okay.” Arthur was content with little. He spoiled himself rarely and though he liked a few creature comforts his salary had been enough to provide them. “It wasn't making me rich but it was okay. But they implemented new regulations and let's say that they weren't making my job any easier.”

“Couldn't you ask they change these regulations?” Merlin asked, his brow not distending yet. “If they were so bad?”

“I did.” Not wishing to go over the details again Arthur shrugged his shoulders. He was enjoying the chat with Merlin too much for that. “But things aren't always that easy, you know. Sometimes the higher ups have other considerations in mind.”

“Then fuck them.”

Arthur laughed. “Is that a sample of Welsh directness or Merlin directness?”
“Merlin directness,” Merlin said, smiling, the shadows lifting from his face.

Arthur chuckled in response.

They sank back into silence, listening for the pauses, the silences between words, to what was not being said rather than what was. Arthur didn't feel uncomfortable; on the contrary he appreciated this interlude as much as the one that had gone before.

“You know.” Merlin put a stop to the silent moment, “I was on a beach before the accident happened.”

Arthur got a sinking feeling he'd chosen the worst possible venue to take Merlin to. “Do you want me to drive you back?”

“No.” Merlin shook his head. “I'm fine. It's nice here.”

“No.” Merlin's mouth thinned and he looked out to the water, watching a bird take flight. “I'm not sure I ever will.”

“That's all right,” Arthur said.

“Isn't that cowardly?” Merlin tilted his head, his eyes searching, as if he was depending on Arthur's to set him straight on that.

Arthur hurried to dissuade Merlin of the notion. It was vital to. “No, no it's isn't. It takes courage to get back on your feet.”

Merlin hummed doubtfully. “You're not saying that to cheer me up?”

Arthur narrowed his eyes at Merlin, but the hint of a little teasing smile played on his lips. “I haven't been mollycoddling you, have I?”

Merlin's lips curled up. “No, you haven't.”

“So, there, you can trust me.” Arthur rose to his feet and wiped the sand from his jeans.

Merlin didn't comment on the trust issue, but said something else entirely. “I loved the seaside. Swimming. That's why I was pretty happy with a beach party when they told me there was going to be one.”

Arthur fastened his eyes on a wader. “I'm sorry it had to be like that,” he said, hoping his chiming in wouldn't silence Merlin, wishing he could choose the right words. “But you can learn to put it behind you.”

Merlin didn't reply but followed him with his eyes. “Perhaps.” He sunk his chin against his chest.

After a while, in the wake of the wind rising, Arthur asked, “Time to get back?”

Merlin looked out to the sea once more, inhaled deep and long, and said, “Let's have a go at more physio. I feel ready for more torture and more of my militarily punctilious therapist.”
“All right,” Arthur said, feeling this was the first time Merlin was collaborating. “Let's go.”

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Ever since Merlin had had that quasi breakdown in uni, he'd come to tolerate his physio sessions with Arthur. They were hard. They couldn't be anything else when Merlin's muscles were almost gone and every move was a big concerted effort. But he was seeing a little bit of improvement, so he decided he'd stick to the physio.

He couldn't walk yet, but he could move more, and the swelling was better. He wanted to build up muscle and strengthen his legs so that he'd be able to walk. He wanted to reduce the ache that was always there. For the first time in months he had some hope, something to look forward to.

After a session ended he was always tired and cranky, always feeling down because he still had oceans to cross in terms of getting back to how he'd been, if it would even ever happen. But the next day, he'd consider the little, microscopic improvements he could see compared to the week before and he'd become more determined to continue.

Still sometimes the fight seemed bigger than him.

That morning Arthur came around a little earlier than their regular appointment. He was carrying a bigger rucksack than usual and wearing a rather proud smile Merlin wanted to laugh at.

“Why, what's going on?” Merlin made an effort to move himself from his bed to his chair by actually taking four steps to it. He'd put it there on purpose so he could do this and admittedly preen a bit. “Something must be.”

“Yes,” Arthur shifted his weight, his rucksack between his legs. “We're going to branch out with your physiotherapy today.”

Merlin was bending to make sure the laces of his Converse were tight in case he had to try and walk, when he heard that and straightened.

“What do you mean branch out?”

Arthur looked a bit less enthusiastic than he had when he'd broken the news. “We're going swimming.”

“Swimming?” Merlin couldn't walk, he was pretty sure he couldn't swim. “You haven't fallen on your head and cracked your skull open, have you?”

Arthur chuckled, rubbing the side of his nose before settling his hands at his hips. “I didn't mean it in an 'I'll have you do laps' way and more in a 'we'll be exercising in water where there's less resistance' fashion.”

“Mmm.” Merlin considered the proposition.

“And a swim might be fun.”

Merlin swallowed. He wasn't so sure that was a good idea though Arthur hadn't let him down so far. “So I wouldn't actually be having any fun but just strengthening the muscles in my leg?”

Arthur's cheeks coloured. “What's wrong with that?”
Merlin shrugged his shoulders. “Absolutely nothing.”

Arthur's mouth thinned a little. “And here I was thinking it was a good idea.”

Merlin wanted to explain what he felt, how he was afraid his life was going to centre around the accident from now on, but he wasn't certain he had the perfect words for that, especially since he'd been welcoming the physio but a few moments ago. Nonetheless he tried. “It's just that everything is always about exercising the muscles in my legs now.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way all the time.” Arthur moved to sit across from him on Merlin's still unmade bed. “You can have a bit of a splash around after you've done your share of muscle strengthening.”

Merlin gave Arthur a little shake of his head, his chin raised. “But, see, now the priority is always my condition.”

“My way you'll get back the full mobility of your leg while doing something that is a tad more enjoyable than routine sets.” Arthur paused, looked down at the thumbs he was twiddling. “And you said you liked the beach.”

“Are we going to the beach?”

“No, we're going to a health centre’s pool,” said Arthur, sounding sheepish. “If you swam out to sea, there’d be currents and it would be dangerous.”

Merlin dipped his head and exhaled. “Knew it was too good to be true.”

Arthur moved from the bed to come and kneel before Merlin's chair, putting a hand on Merlin's knee, where his bermudas ended and the edge of the scar that went all the way down to his tibia began. He did so without displaying any fear of hurting Merlin further and without making it look as though Merlin was some odd, fragile bird. Most people did that nowadays. They acted as though Merlin was about to snap in two, as if Merlin had taken on a new breakable quality that ought to be respected by way of silence and deflection.

Accepting this behaviour at the hands of the world was very painful. But Arthur acted around the testimonials of Merlin's current condition and past ordeal as though they didn't make Merlin any different. Maybe he could pull that off because he hadn't known Merlin from before, like the others had or because it was part and parcel of his job. The fact remained; Merlin liked him all the more because of this gesture. It made him forget. “You'll get to do that too. In time.”

By sounding so gentle and accommodating, Arthur had somehow managed to pierce Merlin's armour, to make him feel that all his ideas were right and aimed at getting Merlin better. Maybe he was being a bit patronising there, but Merlin suspected he was only doing so out of a wish to accomplish his mission, which was healing Merlin in so far as he could. Merlin experienced a warm, cosy sensation that bloomed bright and painful in his chest. He didn't care why Arthur was doing it; he only wanted to say 'yes'. “Okay, all right.”

Arthur smiled and Merlin noticed that his smile was wonky, imperfect. It inspired trust in Merlin because it looked wholly genuine and part of the man he was getting used to. “Then we're going to
Arthur nodded. “We're going to the pool.”

“It will be fun.” Arthur made that sound almost like a promise.

They drove out to the private health centre Arthur had booked. Merlin had trunks in his bag and a change in case the clothes he was wearing got wet. Despite his preparations, he was feeling quite jittery. It wasn't that he thought Arthur would let him drown or something. He was pretty confident he wouldn't, but he'd used to love water and he didn't want this experience to change that.

The accident had modified enough in his life and he didn't want it to take that away from him too. When they reached the centre, Arthur signed them in and showed Merlin into the changing rooms.

Merlin held onto his sports bag.

Arthur looked to the changing rooms stalls. “Do you want to get my help to get changed or are you doing it yourself?”

Though they shouldn't have given the context, Merlin's cheeks tinted. Getting changed here would entail getting naked. Though Arthur had touched his body plenty of times during their physio sessions, Merlin felt that being naked would be different. Not that Arthur had been anything but perfectly professional, it was Merlin's thoughts that had for a moment gone there just now. And imagining himself close to Arthur while wearing nothing heated his face and made his cock stir.

Merlin would have told himself it was the fact that he'd gone untouched for months and months that had done that to him, but while that might have been partly true, it wasn't wholly so. It was Arthur being good looking and nice to him that had done it. “I'll be changing on my own.”

Arthur ducked his head fast but then he went a bit cross-eyed with some thought that must have darted through him brain. “Yelp if you fall over.”

“I won't, you paranoid idiot.” Merlin lobbed a tissue he had had in his pocket at Arthur's head.

“Takes one to know one.”

Merlin picked up the tissue he'd hurled at Arthur aimed it back at him. By the time he had, Arthur had already managed to slam the stall's door on the incoming missile.

“Coward,” Merlin called after him, grinning when he heard Arthur mutter, “Words, words. I hear only nattering and no changing into your costume.”

Wearing that grin Merlin, made it into his stall. With some effort he pushed to his feet. Shedding his hoodie and tee was quickly done. Since he'd never stopped moving his arms about he hadn't lost much biceps mass. His arms had just been weakened a little following hospitalisation. Lifting one leg and putting it back down, a requirement of dropping trousers, was a bit harder to be done standing than anticipated, mainly because he had to put his weight on one leg only and that hurt a fair bit.

However, he was determined to manage alone.

“Everything all right there?” Arthur asked from the next stall over, voice muffled by the partition.

“Yes, totally and completely.” Merlin only hurt a little as he pulled up his trunks while labouring a sweat to do it. “I'm fine.”
“You sure?”

Merlin mustn’t have sounded too sure for Arthur to ask again. Thankfully by the time he had, Merlin had changed and pushed out of the stall.

Out there he found Arthur too, who was looking concernedly at Merlin.

Merlin's eyes latched over Arthur's swimming trunks rather than his worried expression. Arthur body was really, really pleasing to look at. His skin wasn't pale and pasty like Merlin's, but a shade darker, not rosy either, just blooming in that sun kissed way some people managed to retain while away from the sun. His chest and shoulders were wide. Perhaps Arthur's chest wasn't as chiselled and tapering as that of a swimmer, but Merlin liked it all the same. He might have had preconceived notion about what he liked to see but he felt those notions didn't apply here because this was Arthur and he had a charm of his own.

He slowly allowed his gaze to move lower, to where Arthur's red trunks began. His hips looked strong and his legs were solid with his feet planted wide in a way Merlin found oddly endearing.

“I didn't need help,” Merlin said, “I breezed in, dropped trou and changed in a second flat.”

Arthur's eyes stared him down sceptically. “You're so stubborn.”

Merlin smiled “You're starting to get to know me, I see.”

Arthur laughed, throwing his head back. “Let's get you poolside.”

They recovered Merlin's chair and Arthur pushed Merlin down a corridor and into the pool area. The pool was big and deep in some parts but not in others. It should have scared Merlin but it didn't. He trusted Arthur.

Being in control was not necessary right now because he believed in him.

Merlin braked the wheelchair close to the pool's edge. “Okay,” he said, slowly standing. “Let's do this.” As soon as he was up, he leant into Arthur. “Don't drown me,” he added, not so much because he didn't think Arthur in control but to pull his chain.

There were no steps leading into the pool. The gradient of the bottom became simply steeper so that the further you stepped the deeper you'd be in water.

Arthur stood facing him and walked backwards into pool. “Put your arms on mine.”

Merlin wrapped his hands around Arthur's forearms, bracing himself against him and advanced at the slow pace Arthur had set. “I'm using you as my cane.”

Arthur beamed. “Use away.” His eyes went comically round and he bit his lower lip.

Merlin felt incredibly pleased by Arthur's reaction but his attention was re-routed when water lapped at his calves. It was cool and a bit of a shock. The sensation was intense. Not so much because of what it was but because of how long it had been since he'd been in water.

Sure, there were no gusts of wind snatching at his trunks and no breeze pushing at him, messing his hair, as when he used to go to the beach before the accident, but it was a familiar sensation and it nearly brought tears to his eyes. “Are you fine, Merlin? I don't think the water's that cold.” Arthur's hand slipped down to his waist.
Since Merlin had stepped forward and Arthur had stopped backing towards the deeper end of pool, they got to stand chest to chest, one of Arthur's hands on Merlin's shoulder, the other cupping his hip. Merlin blushed faintly, hoping that despite their closeness Arthur wouldn't see.

“I want you to lean against that parapet now.” Arthur turned them around. “Can you do that?”

Merlin scowled. “I'm not that badly off.” Arthur slowly backed him against the wall so Merlin's shoulders were leaning against its solid bulk, and the proximity led Merlin to focus his gaze on the fullness of Arthur's pouting mouth. It wasn't that Arthur was pouting per se, it was just the shape of his lips that made it look as though he was. Merlin was still staring.

“--is that all right?” Arthur pushed up a wondering eyebrow.

Merlin wasn't sure he'd paid attention. “What?”

“I said--” Arthur shook his head and smiled in a put upon way at Merlin not listening. “--I want you to brace your arms on the side of the pool and lift your legs like you do when you're doing leg extension exercises.”

Arthur backed off to give Merlin space. Merlin missed having him closer but decided he'd better pay attention to what he had to do. He liked being in the water and he wanted to prove to Arthur he could do this without disappointing him. “Kay, how many reps?”

“Let's start with ten.”

Merlin started lifting his legs. The water opposed some resistance but it wasn't as bad as when he tried to do this at home or when he tried it with weights. He wasn't even working a sweat because the water was a pleasant temperature.

By the time he got to the seventh repetition his quads were aching but his bones were not, so he considered that a win. “Eight,” Merlin said, lifting his legs. “Nine.” He grunted a little. “Ten.” He let his feet thud back to the bottom of the pool.

Arthur waded up to him and gave him a solid pat on the shoulder. “That's great, Merlin.”

Merlin smiled. “I've been good, haven't I?”

Arthur tapped his chin. “I think you can do better.”

“You're an arsehole physio, you know.” Even though he was winded, Merlin let two dimples form in his cheeks. “Where's the praise? Where's the: 'Merlin, that's a job well done'.”

Arthur cocked his head. “Bla, bla, bla. We said we wanted results, didn't we?”

“You said that.”

“Yes, and that's what we got.”

“And that makes you right?” Merlin tipped an eyebrow. “I think it makes you lucky.”

“You're very opinionated.” Arthur came to stand next to Merlin with his back to the pool's wall. “And a chatterbox. I didn't suspect you were.”

Merlin sobered. “I used to be.”

“You are.” Arthur knocked shoulders with him. “Merlin, you're still you, you know. You don't have
Merlin webbed his hands and played with the water, pushing it away from him. “Sometimes it feels as though everything has changed and I should do too.”

Arthur looked thoughtful. “Just don't fight yourself, Merlin,” he said at last. “This version of you is a great person.” As though he'd said too much and didn't want Merlin's head to get too big, Arthur pushed off the wall and turned around. “No lazing the time away now. You've got your breath back, it's time for another exercise.”

“Okay, shoot, what's the next one?”

“I want you to do leg circles.” Arthur led him a little backwards. “It's going to to great things for your range of motion and flexibility, believe me.”

Merlin was sure his condition wouldn't improve in a day, but he was there, he was all wet, and he didn't want the day to end yet. Yes, it was just a physio session, but for the first time in a long time he wasn't feeling antsy, in the wrong place, or as if his body was failing him. He had to thank Arthur for that. He didn't, not with words, but he wanted to show Arthur his good will.

So he took up his position. Waist-deep water he put his feet flat on the ground as Arthur suggested and bent his knees, so that his thighs lay parallel to the bottom of the pool. “Align your knees to your ankles,” Arthur said- and Merlin followed his orders.

Resting his back against the side of the pool Merlin raised one of his legs off of the ground and straightened it. “Was this what you had in mind?”

“You've got it but that's too easy, isn't it?” Arthur smiled challengingly. “Now I want you to make small circles with your leg, no, keep your back straight.” He waded closer and grabbed Merlin's leg. His fingers were hot even though the water around them was cool. It made for an oddly pleasing sensation, one that Merlin wanted to cling to, and one that distracted him too, to the point Arthur had to repeat his instructions twice. “I said I want you to keep your knee extended like this.” Arthur's left hand was cradling his knee from behind, his right one was cupping his leg over the shin-bone.

His touch was light though he was making sure to position Merlin just right for the exercise. Arthur was manipulating his body bending it and arranging it in the way he thought most fit. Merlin could sense how warm his palms were and how strong his hands in general were too. He could feel his calluses as well as the smoother patches of skin. He could taste his presence as well as make out the subtle shifts in his breathing pattern. It had a cadence Merlin had come to know.

“Complete five circles clockwise and five circles counter clockwise.” Arthur guided him with his touch.

Unwarrantedly, Merlin's heart kicked against his ribs. He tried to shed the feeling, not to blush, but he couldn't quite. In order not to be found out by Arthur, he focused on the work-out. Not to would be very foolish. Arthur would probably feel offended at Merlin misinterpreting his intentions. There was zero question of Arthur's professionalism. No one could doubt it. He'd laugh at Merlin if he knew Merlin was reading him so wrong. He'd probably recoil too at Merlin starting to feel as though they were more than health practitioner and patient. Not that Arthur was rude or anything, so he wouldn't say as much, but the truth was he was in another league as far as Merlin went.

He was healthy, he was fit, he was smart and he could be fun. Yeah, sometimes he was cocky, but overall he was nice. He was fine.
He'd never look at Merlin twice because Merlin was a patient, because Merlin was broken, often in bad moods too, and because even at his best – before the accident – Merlin could never have vied for someone like him.

Will would have said, “Turn the charm on someone you have an actual chance of screwing, Merlin.”

Merlin laughed and sniffled both.

Arthur cocked an eyebrow at him. “I didn't know leg circles brought out the odd side of you.”

“Yes, it's exactly that,” Merlin deadpanned to cover up his real thoughts. “Leg circles are intrinsically poetic.”

Arthur hooted a laugh, turning his face away so he could hide his smile. When he'd managed to sober a bit he tutted. “Merlin, Merlin.”

“Am I done with these?”

“Oh, yes,” Arthur told him, good humour still in his voice. “Let's vary it up. I fear you'd start waxing lyrical if we continue with the leg circles.”

“I've got a dick for a physio.”

“Why thank you, Merlin.” Arthur snorted in a way that Merlin would have found obnoxious on anyone else, but which he kind of digged in Arthur. “I'm so flattered.” He clapped his hands together. Let's do toe raises.”

“That sounds easy for once.” Merlin let Arthur position him. “Stand with your feet apart,” Arthur told him, slipping his own foot between Merlin to help Merlin gauge the necessary distance. It was fleeting but for a moment their legs had being tangled, one of Arthur's between Merlin's. “That's right.” Arthur scanned Merlin's body stance. “Now turn around and place your hands on the edge of pool.” Merlin did as he was bid, Arthur a hair's breadth behind him with his hands on Merlin's hips. “Don't worry it if hurts a little, just slowly raise your heels off of the ground so that you are standing only on your toes.”

Arthur released him and Merlin breathed out. “So I'm supporting all my weight?”

“That's why your hands are where they are, Merlin. Yes.”

Merlin held the position for a few seconds then relaxed and started all over again. After a few repetitions he was drained. So little effort got him so tired. It was as if he'd moved mountains. He was downright panting.

“Arthur, I'm knackered.”

Instead of picking on what he'd said and making fun of him, Arthur got all serious. “That's okay. We're done for today. Let yourself float on your back.” He stepped back so Merlin had space to do just that. “I'll catch you if you sink.”

“I can swim.” Merlin let go of the pool and let the water buoy him up. As much as the water boosted him, it got in his ears muffling most sounds. He still talked on. “I used to be good at swimming.”

Arthur said something that sounded like, “You have the body for it.” As soon as he'd said it he disappeared from Merlin's horizon. Merlin understood only a few seconds later that he'd dived under. But his breath was taken away when Arthur re-emerged, eyes closed, water cascading off his forehead and plastering his hair to his skull, droplets clinging to his nose and mouth, and coursing down his chest, clinging to hips.
Eyes still cinched shut, he blew air through his mouth, then forked a hand through his wet hair and teased it back. Only then did he open his eyes grinning and Merlin. “You fine?”

In order to understand what Arthur was saying Merlin had lifted his head out of the water. That caused the rest of his body to sink so Arthur swam up behind him, draped a hand across his torso and kept it there, palm splayed wide. “Go on, no worries, I'm holding you.”

Merlin drew in a sharp breath but then sank against Arthur's chest. They tumbled for a long, long while.

*****

After a month living in Bangor Arthur had decided that it was time to buy some more furniture so he could feel more at home in his rented flat.

The flat itself had come with some basic furniture, but when it was all said and done it still looked pretty bare. It sported a bed, a sofa, a desk, some shelving. It wasn't enough to make it feel lived in.

At first he hadn't purchased anything because he wasn't sure how long he'd stay in Wales. He'd simply followed the job. Leaving Nottingham behind had been something he'd needed to do. A fresh page, a clean slate. He could now admit to himself that he'd been angry at his superiors. He'd felt betrayed. But that didn't mean he was stupid enough to decide to settle into a new town indefinitely only on the basis of one – albeit well-paying – job.

But now that he had found a second job – old Mrs Davies who paid well but didn't detract from his taking care of Merlin – he felt he could splurge a little in an attempt to make his flat look more like a home.

Hence the shopping spree.

The problem now was fitting that armchair into the lift. The lift was old and not particularly spacey. The armchair on the other hand had been bought with comfort in sight. This meant that it was pretty capacious, designed to let him sprawl before the telly when he was in the mood for such indulgence.

Arthur only hoped he could push the new article of furniture into the lift. Maybe if he turned it sideways up? Seeing no other solution and not wanting to drag the armchair up three flights of stairs, Arthur rolled up his sleeves.

Fortunately the moment he did his neighbour, Sophia, walked in. “Need a hand with that?”

Arthur looked at the stairs, looked at the lift and came up with only one conclusion. However much he didn't want to tax Sophia's strength, he wasn't going anywhere on his own. Though part of him wanted to do the chivalric thing, thank her but refuse, another part of him realised he'd have to swallow his pride if he wanted to get this thing done. “Um, thank you, yes.”

Sophia smiled, put down the bag containing beer bottles that she'd been carrying and, like Arthur, she pushed up her sleeves to mid forearm.

After having opened the lift door, she took position behind Arthur's new purchase. Together they turned the armchair on its side and with a few grunts and shoves they wrestled it into the lift. At which point they realised they would never both fit along with it.
“Tell you what,” Arthur said, sweat pooling at the small of his back. “I'll take the stairs while you ride with the thing.”

“Are you sure?” Sophia smiled sweetly at him, sandwiching herself between furniture and wall so that she could carve some space for Arthur. “You look done in.”

“Ha, no, I'm used to a bit more strain than that. I'll run right up.”

Sophia looked as though she wanted to give convincing him another try but Arthur grinned, gave her the thumbs up and closed the lift door.

Lift already moving upwards, he bounded upstairs. He met Sophia by the lift door. She stepped over the armchair and together they coordinated getting it out. “If you maybe grab that arm, I could--” Arthur was saying when his phone buzzed.

It did it so loudly even Sophia heard. “I think someone wants you.” She batted her eyelashes.

“Ha, yes,” Arthur told her, rummaging his pockets for his phone. “If you don't mind, I'll take this.”

“Go right ahead.” Sophia perched on the upended armchair. “I'll be waiting right here.”

Arthur faced around and accepted the call without checking the display. “Hello.”

“Hi, Arthur.” It was Merlin's voice. “I didn't want to disturb you or anything, but I--” Arthur cut Merlin off before he could talk himself into believing he was disturbing Arthur. “You're not, Merlin. You know you're not.”

“Well, that's good then, because there's something I wanted to ask you and if you'd been busy that would have defeated the purpose.”

Arthur chuckled. “Come on, don't dance around it and shoot.”

“I've been known to be more direct than this.”

Arthur turned for a second, grin extending from ear to ear. Merlin's self-deprecation managed to be endearing. Sophia was looking at Arthur with her head tilted, her expression curious and perhaps a tad fazed. Arthur spun around again so she couldn't read his face. “Merlin.”

“Okay right, talking circles round the subject, I know,” he said with a note of good humour that wasn't there before. “Look, I hadn't meant to ask but now that the time's coming I'm a bit nervous.”

Merlin's words worried Arthur a fair bit. “What time?”

“I've got an appointment with my ortho scheduled for today,” Merlin told him in a voice that sounded both sheepish and scared. “He's got to check me up for signs of compartment syndrome.”

Arthur drew in a sharp breath. Compartment Syndrome was serious business. It occurred when swelling cut off blood supply to the leg. It could even have severe consequences. “Merlin, if it can console you I didn't notice any sign of increased swelling. It's actually gone down.”

“Yeah, I know.” Merlin hummed a little under his breath, then continued. “I'm still a bit anxious about the results. I don't want to have surgery again. It'd undo everything we've done.”

Arthur could imagine how a set back like that would be traumatic for Merlin, who'd just learnt to fight back. “Merlin, even if that's the case, I'll be there helping you start again, even from scratch.”
Arthur heard Merlin's inhalation over the phone. “I hope we don't have to.”

Arthur tightened his grip on his phone. “Me too.”

“Yeah, and--” There was a pause that sounded like static. “And I was wondering whether you could come with.”

Arthur's heart kicked and he started pacing the length of the hall, aware of Sophia's eyes on him. “Yes, yes, I can. When is it?”


“Today?”

Merlin was so quick to reply to him he ploughed over any attempt Arthur made to reply. “I know. I've been telling myself I'd make no fuss and just go alone but I can't quite. I--”

“You want someone to be there.”

“Yeah.”

“Merlin, I'll be there.” Arthur eyed Sophia and the armchair still cluttering the hallway. “Just give me half an hour.”

Merlin breathed very loudly. “You don't have to rush. My appointment is in a couple of hours.”

“Still, I want to be there in time.”

“Thank you,” Merlin told him, his voice laced with something that melted Arthur's heart right there. “I know you didn't have to.”

“Don't be a fool, Merlin.” He had perhaps been more acerbic than he'd intended. “Of course, I'll be there. Who do you take me for?”

“It's just.” Merlin's swallow was audible even on the phone. “Well thanks anyway. It means a lot to me.”

The call ended, but Arthur stared at his mobile for a fair handful of seconds before Sophia clacking her tongue startled him. “So, who was it?”

Arthur slipped his mobile back into his pocket. “A patient.” Arthur chose to be frugal with words.

Sophia hopped off her perch. “Sounded more like a friend.”

Arthur's brow puckered. “I always try to be friendly towards my patients.”

Sophia cocked her head and waggled her eyebrows in an attitude Arthur read as sceptical. “Um, okay.”

“I really need to move this.”

Sophia eyed the armchair. “Oh, yes, after all I offered.”

Joining their efforts they pushed the armchair up to Arthur's door. Sophia dumped her end first, Arthur, as sweaty as Sophia, racked his pockets for his keys, and then threw the door open.
Before he could so much as hint at shoving his new purchase forward and into the flat, Sophia put her warm hand on his and said, “I know you're going out later. I overheard. But I'm sure you won't be working later tonight, and since I'm throwing a party, I thought I'd invite you. A few neighbours are gonna drop by. I'm sure you'll make a few friends if you come.”

“I...”

Sophia started massaging his wrist. “I didn't mean that as a dig at your social skills. I didn't offer because I thought you were a loser who can make no friends.” She danced on the balls of her feet without stopping touching him. “I'm sure people would queue to be your friends. You're just that type. I figure I only want you there.”

Arthur didn't quite know what to say. It was true that he was new to Bangor. And Sophia was cute. Her face was downright angelic and her voice was sweet. Spending time with her would do him good. But now he couldn't really think about this. He had to get his armchair inside, have a shower, and make it to Merlin's in time for his appointment with his doctor. “I'll try to make it but I can't promise anything.”

“Party starts at eight,” Sophia said, leaning over the armchair stranded in the doorway and giving him a kiss. “See you later.”

She bounded back along the corridor and ducked into her flat, leaving a cloud of fruity perfume hanging in the air.

Arthur made a last effort and pushed the armchair into his flat. Haphazardly, he positioned it right under the closest window, meaning to get back to this and find a more suitable location when he had the time. Now he most certainly didn't.

He had twenty minutes and though Bangor wasn't as big as his native London, that amount of time wasn't a lot to shower in – he reeked – and drive over to Merlin's.

Dropping all attempts at acting as though he didn't have the devil at his heels, he raced into his bathroom, shed his clothes in a messy pool and ducked under the shower without even waiting for the water to warm.

He silenced the hiss the cold water hitting his skin raised out of him. There was nothing intrinsically bad with a cold shower. It'd just make him quicker to react.

Fortunately the water warmed over the last part of his shower even though he had no time to enjoy it as he might have in other circumstances.

Clean, he dashed into his bedroom to pick out some more formal clothes to wear, leaving the discarded ones where he'd left them. Being naturally tidy, the thought niggled him and he did feel a twinge of guilt about leaving his flat in disarray.

But there were priorities in life and being there for Merlin was one.

Today would be momentous for Merlin.

Arthur was out of the flat pretty quickly after that and at Merlin's in less than five minutes.

Freya welcomed him in. “Thank you for being here. I feel like a horrible friend for not going with Merlin. But I have a thesis meeting with my supervisor tomorrow. It's the last one and I feel I need to get my ideas in order, you know.”
“No, it's fine.” Arthur remembered the days he'd been at Brunel studying for his BSc. “I know how that is. I'm only sorry that Merlin has no friend to go with.”

Arthur had been about to move towards Merlin's room when Freya wrapped her hand around his elbow to stop him. “Merlin asked you.”

At that remark, Arthur's lungs expanded in his chest in a way that made it harder for him to breathe. In a way though it felt as if his heart was doing the same. Rationally he knew that wasn't anatomically possible. Hearts didn't expand, not unless you were at risk of a cardiac arrest. But the sensation came across as real. He massaged his chest and smiled ludicrously wide. “I'm just glad if I can help.”

It fell short of what he really wanted to say – though he wasn't sure how he'd have couched that – but it was a serviceable turn of phrase that managed to sound professional.

“Well, thank you all the same,” said Freya, eyeing Merlin's door. “Merlin's lost his share of-- Well it's a long story, but I'm glad you're there for him.”

Arthur was sure that Freya had censored herself but even though he wanted to press her for more information about Merlin, he understood that wasn't his place. That didn't erase the concern he felt at her cryptic hints, but it changed his actions.

Parting from Freya, Arthur knocked on Merlin's door.

“Come in.” Merlin's voice came across as muffled by the closed door between them.

Arthur opened it and stood in the doorway. Merlin was sitting on his bed looking at his legs as if he could tell whether he had compartment syndrome by way of staring.

Arthur's heart lurched in his chest when he saw that. He made his voice gentle when he said, “Ready?”

Caught red handed moping, Merlin grinned self deprecatingly and lowered his legs, putting an end to his inspection. “No? But I guess now it's no rime to be chicken.”

Arthur smiled. “It's all right to be nervous.”

“Now don't go and say that.” Merlin scrunched his nose up. “I want you to be as antagonistic as possible.”

Arthur didn't want to kick people when they were down, not when there was no real reason like prodding them to action to make them better. Still, Merlin was right. “Right then. I want you to be all lion-hearted.”

“Oh hear me roar.” Merlin mimed doing so, then took the few steps separating him from his wheelchair with more ease than he had in the past weeks.

“I'm sure your surgeon with be impressed by your leonine attitude,” Arthur quipped as Merlin wheeled himself out of his room.

Merlin's leonine attitude didn't last long. Merlin's surgeon would receive him at the hospital Merlin had been treated at after his accident.

The place itself must be linked to painful memories for Merlin. Still there wasn't much of an outward show of that. Merlin even insisted he wanted to drop by and say hi to, “The doc who saved my life.”
This doctor didn't much look like most doctors Arthur had worked with in Nottingham. The difference was subtle and didn't only encompass looks, the overlong hair and untrimmed beard, which looked less than professional. It was about the way the man held himself and the way he joked with his patients, or ex patients in this case.

“Oh, hello, Merlin,” the doctor said, “What a ravishing testimonial to my people saving skills you are. You look good.”

Merlin smiled, the smile reaching his eyes. It was rare nowadays. “Thanks. I feel a lot better compared to when you last saw me, Dr McAllister.”

“I'm glad, but you'll have to call me Gwaine,” said McAllister, studying Arthur in confusion for a moment. “Are you here to see Dr Myles?”

“Yes.” Merlin paled a little at the reminder. “He's going to have to examine me for signs of compartment syndrome.”

“You're doing well to get that checked up.”

Merlin rubbed his chest, where his heart was- Arthur wasn't even sure he was aware he was doing it. “I'm a bit nervous.”

“Well, if you're not experiencing any numbness, pins-and-needles sensations, and if you have no swelling, tightness or bruising then you shouldn't worry.”

Merlin winced, then turned to Arthur as if for confirmation. “There's some swelling, isn't there?”

Dr McAllister looked to Arthur as though he hadn't placed him yet. Arthur answered Merlin's question instead of satisfying McAllister's evident curiosity. “A little but that's not a reason for panicking unless the doctor tells you it's CS.”

Dr McAllister agreed with a nod. “He's right.” He gestured towards Arthur, then wiggling his eyebrows at him. “And you are by the way?”

Arthur extended his hand. “Arthur Pendragon, Merlin's physio.”

“Oh, I see.” Gwaine McAllister's study of him became even more attentive.

“He's here for moral support,” Merlin supplied.

Dr McAllister's eyes focused back on Merlin. “I hope you won't need it and that you only get good news. But in case you don't, I want you to know that Dr Myles is a great surgeon.”

Merlin's mouth smoothed in something approximating a smile. “I really hope so.”

Dr McAllister clapped Merlin on the shoulder. “You need to approach this calmly.” He kneaded Merlin's shoulder as if to infuse the needed confidence in him. “Look, since you're one of my favourite ex patients, my very favourite I'll hazard, I'll escort you to the lifts myself.”

Dr McAllister was the one to push Merlin to the lifts even though Merlin objected. “Really I can wheel himself.”

“Nah, we're almost pals, Merlin, and we do this kind of stuff for pals.” McAllister said, putting his back into pushing. “Besides I love to be of service.”

McAllister's behaviour rubbed Arthur the wrong way. He only forgave it for it took Merlin's mind
off the impending examination. Otherwise he'd have taken Dr McAllister to task.

But Merlin was wearing a smile and Arthur would never object to anything that had that effect on Merlin. Objectionable behaviour or not McAllister had done some good.

Unfortunately, Merlin's smile didn't hold in the face of the door leading to Dr Tristan Myles' office. It crumpled at the corners and turned into a downward moue. “Whatever it is it's better to know about it,” Arthur said, “so you can fight it better.”


At the touch of Merlin's hand on his, Arthur's heart leapt to his mouth. It warmed him with emotions that seemed too huge for him to focus on right now, setting all his body aglow. He felt a smile slide around his lips and he just knew his expression had grown extraordinarily mushy. “I wouldn't have missed it for the world.”

It was Doctor Myles himself, a man of about fifty with straggly but short blond hair, who ushered them in. After greeting Merlin, enquiring who Arthur was and whether Merlin was okay with him staying while the examination went on, Doctor Myles checked Merlin's chart and past x-rays. When he was done with his silent study, he started questioning him. “Tell me, Merlin, are you experiencing any new pain?”

“New? Merlin's mouth contorted a little. “No, the old ones are doing enough to plague me.” Arthur heard Merlin murmur under his breath. “Persistent little shits.”

Dr Myles acted as though he hadn't heard Merlin say that at all. Arthur understood the attitude. Sometimes patients just needed to relieve their stress; being a stick in the mud didn't help health professionals develop a good relationship with the people they looked after.

“Any tightness or swelling?” This time Dr Myles looked to Arthur too as it was obvious he might know. Arthur, as Merlin's physio, would probably be the first to notice any untoward signs.

“The bruising from the accident has faded,” Merlin said, “and the swelling--” He craned his head to give Arthur a dubious look. “I think it's gone down. It's gone down, hasn't it? I'm not seeing things?”

“Since the first session?” Arthur pictured to himself the various stages of Merlin's slow recovery. “Yes, it's gone down considerably.”

“It sounds like good news,” said Dr Myles, pushing his chair back so he could stand. “Now let's have a look at your legs so I can get an idea what's going on.”

Merlin spun the chair around, braked it, and got himself on his legs. Slowly he moved to the exam table, turned around, and without putting any undue weight on his lower limbs, climbed on it.

“I see you're having consistently fewer mobility problems.” Dr Myles crossed over to the table.

“Arthur's helping lots.”

“I'm glad that consistent physiotherapy is working out for you,” the Doctor said. “Could you remove your trousers for me. I want to have a look at the swelling.”

Arthur cleared his throat. “Do you want me to leave the room?”

Merlin pinked up, a sheepish smile morphing his looks. “You've seen my legs countless times.”
Merlin was right; Merlin's body was familiar to him now. And yet the thought of looking at Merlin without working on him sent heat to his face.

Merlin slowly wriggled out of his jeans and dropped them on the side of the exam table.

When Merlin was ready, Dr Myles examined Merlin's legs, felt the swelling, asked Merlin to perform some movements and then said, “I'll just try one last test.”

“What kind of test?” Merlin's following Dr Myles attentively.

Dr Myles's voice was soothing when he said, “I'm going to use a monitor to check on your leg pressure.”

Merlin looked as though he hadn't understood what was involved but he nodded his head, signalling he was game. Dr Myles walked around the exam table, went to a cart containing medical supplies, rooted inside it, and turned, holding a needle he connected to a monitor.

“I suppose I shouldn't have said yes.” Merlin's eyes fell on the needle with a measure of horror.

Dr Myles smiled. “It's not going to hurt more than an injection, I promise.”

So saying, he inserted the needle into the area he suspected was affected by CS and turned on the monitor. He looked at it with a slight frown of attention for several minutes then disconnected the needle and slipped it out.

“So?” Merlin drummed his fingers on his thighs, then ran his palm up and down them in a frantic motion.

Arthur, too, pricked his ears.

“I see no signs of Compartment Syndrome,” said Dr Myles, clearly weighing his words. “What I do see is some swelling that can be reduced with time and further physio.”

“So I don't have to have surgery again?”

“No.” Doctor Myles inclined his head in assent. “At one point you'll need to get the screws out but there's no need for further surgery at the present moment.”

Arthur could read the relief in Merlin. His face smoothed of all lines and a new fire started shining in his eyes.

At the news he was thrilled too. He'd hoped for exactly this and he wanted for nothing better than for Merlin to be on the road to recovery, with no setbacks.

Merlin's eyes searched for his and they exchanged a long look filled with promise, optimism, a smile.

After that the examination drew to a close. Dr Myles prescribed a milder pain killer for Merlin than the one he was currently using, gave advice as to the type of physio Merlin might want to do in future and accompanied Merlin to the door. “I hope that the next time we see each other for a check up, you'll be walking all the way.”

“I hope so too.”

Arthur was listening in on the doctor and Merlin's parting words when his phone buzzed with an incoming text. He half expected it would be Gwen, making sure they didn't entirely lose touch, but quickly realised the sender was Vivian. Since Dr Myles had turned to him with the intent of saying
goodbye, Arthur pocketed his phone. “It's been a pleasure meeting you,” said Dr Myles. “You've done a wonderful job with Merlin. I think I'll be sending more patients your way if this is your standard.”

Arthur felt himself redden slightly. The praise felt good. He'd always been a bit of an overachiever he had to confess, and went he did good and was praised for it it sent him to seventh heaven. “Thank you, Dr Myles. I'll he happy to help anyone you may direct to me.”

They were back in the hospital's parking lot by the time Arthur felt it was polite enough to read his text.

It said, “so R u coming? Party's starting.”

Arthur was about to hit reply when Merlin, who hadn't noticed Arthur fiddling with his phone because he was wheeling himself ahead, said, “You know, I feel as this big weight has suddenly lifted off my chest and I can finally breathe.” Merlin did breathe then, as if he was filling his lungs to maximum capacity. “And I was wondering whether you’d like to... I dunno, come and celebrate. At the pub? I know one not far from here. We can go and have a beer.”

Arthur looked at his phone and then at the back of Merlin's head.

The silent pause got Merlin whirling around and tipping his head. He was a bit pink about the ears when he added, “Sorry, of course you've done enough for me for today. You must want to go home and have your evening off. Actually I just want to thank you for coming at all. That was great of you.”

Arthur switched his phone off and slipped it into his pocket. “I was just about to say that I'd love to have a pint.”

Merlin's grin would have melted a sterner heart than Arthur's. “Come, I'll show you the way.”

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The doorbell rang.

Merlin saved the essay he was working on and lowered the lid of his laptop. He pushed his desk chair back and made a grab for the crutches he'd left leaning against the window. Huffing, he snugged the crutches under his arms and moved forwards. He was slowly swinging down the hallway, when the door rang again. “I'm coming,” he shouted, increasing his snail pace. Maintaining his balance at increased speed seemed an impossible task and Merlin cursed under his breath.

Under the strain he realised he'd have to ask Arthur for more proprioception sessions. Moving his limbs like he’d used to, even though he was aided by the crutches, was like wrangling snakes. It made him feel slightly stupid, like someone who hadn't mastered a primary art, movement, that ought to come easy. Though the crutches themselves had given him greater mobility, and he was grateful for that, he hated them a bit too.

He was intensely looking forward to the day he didn't need them anymore. For now though that day was still far away and Merlin had to inch to the door, very slowly. “Just a second!” he added again, in case the person on the other side of the door gave up.

When he got to it, Merlin leant his weight against a single crutch, propped the other against the wall, and opened the door. A tall girl with light brown hair stood on the other side, turning a piece of
notepaper in her hand. “Fifteen B?” she asked.

“Ah, yes.” Merlin scratched the back of his head. “This is it. Were you looking for Freya? She's out.”

“Oh.” The girl's shoulders drooped. “I thought – I was supposed to get a tour of the house.”

Freya hadn't told him anything about any of that. She hadn't mentioned guests or expecting people to turn up, but the words 'a tour of the house' lit a light bulb for Merlin. “You're here for the room she's renting out?”

“Yeah?” said the girl. “I came round to have a look. She said she'd be there when I did.”

“There's probably been some problem at uni or something because Freya isn't here,” Merlin said, breathing the last word out somewhat heavily. He observed the girl for a few seconds. Her shoulders were still down and she was biting her tongue. She looked like a good sort, shy, unprepossessing. Merlin would have felt like shit turning her out. “But I'll show you around myself.”

The girl looked to his crutches. “Are you sure I'm not bothering you?”

Merlin patted the side of his crutch. “Positive, come on, come in.”

The girl smiled and slipped the note with Merlin and Freya's address into her satchel, then she entered. “So, where to?”

“Down that way.” Merlin pointed at the hallway with his crutch. “It's the last door to the right.”

“Oh, thanks.” The girl introduced herself. “I'm Sefa by the way.”

As instructed, Sefa started walking in the direction suggested and Merlin took up behind her. He stopped by the library, took a key from out a small box they kept on a low shelf, then caught up with Sefa. His heart missed a beat when he opened the door and was presented with a view of the room he'd deliberately not marched into for months.

The memories came one after the other: watching rugby matches on the telly cramming on opposite ends of that ratty sofa over there, phone pranking Gilli using wheel's old dial up phone, a relic he'd bought at a flea market. Sleeping in a sleeping bag on the floor when will was sick with the measles, which he'd caught as an adult and done a number on him, nursing the plonker back to health. He'd spent an awful lot of time in here. And in those days he'd never felt as if those days were numbered. If he'd known then maybe... Merlin shook his head. He didn't think he could have cherished that time more. And though it hurt to think about the future that would never be, he wouldn't change a thing about what had happened in the past. That was always going to be the best friendship of his life.

Sefa was turning around, looking at the room from different angles. “It's a bit stuffy in here.”

“Room hasn't been opened in a while.” Merlin had to admit that. They couldn't take a prospective renter for a fool. Freya had cleaned in here since Will had... Freya had cleaned the spac in the past months, but the window had probably been kept shut in the intervals between. The curtains were drawn too. “But let me open it for you.”

“Are you sure you're up to it?” Sefa's eyes snapped to his crutches with concern.

Merlin limped towards the curtains. “Yeah, I've learnt how to deal with my crutches. I'll be needing them a while longer so I'd better be able to do stuff with them.” Merlin drew the curtains apart and light flooded in. The place suddenly looked much more habitable.
Sefa smiled. “The décor is a little bit masculine,” she said, frowning a little at the dark blue walls and Will's trophy shaped light fixtures. “Would I be able to change them?”

“I'm sure you can change the lamps and overhead lights. As for the paint you should probably ask the landlord, but since the paint job is old --” Merlin remembered helping Will paint it a deep blue. He remembered advising him to go for something more neutral so that he wouldn't grow bored with it, or worse develop strain headaches spurred by staring at his own four walls. Will had said, “Fuck it, Merlin, that's what my ma always said. And I've always wanted a blue bedroom. Now I can have it my way.”

Merlin had snorted. “Paint it blue, then, Picasso.”

Will frowned.

Merlin had burst out laughing. “Never mind.”

“I'd love to go for a more subtle colour,” Sefa was saying, crossing her arms as she looked at the walls.

Merlin leant against one of them. “Yeah, I see why you'd want to.”

After that exchange, Merlin showed Sefa the rest of the flat: the kitchen, the bathroom, and the lounge. Sefa took in everything with an appraising air, asking polite questions that Merlin answered as calmly as he could.

When their tour was done Sefa shook his hand. “Thank you for showing me around,” she said, holding onto his palm for a while. “You've been really nice. I'm so sorry you had to trail after me on your crutches.”

“No worries.” Merlin looked down at his legs. Immobility had worsened his condition; he was still trying to get the better of the damage it had wreaked. “Movement is good for me.”

“Well, I'm glad that's the case then and that showing me around wasn't too much of a bother.”

“I can promise you it wasn't.”

Merlin and Sefa exchanged a few more words then Sefa left. He hadn't yet managed to closed the door yet when Arthur turned up on the landing, his big canvas bag hanging from his shoulder. “Who was that?”

“Girl who came to see the room Freya put up for rent,” said Merlin, making way for Arthur to come in.

“That's the room you guys never open, right?” Arthur asked, closing the door behind him.

Merlin dipped his head. “Yeah, Freya and I had a bit of a discussion about it.” Merlin breathed through his nostrils. “It used to be Will's room.”

Arthur stopped on his way to Merlin's room. “Will's?”

Merlin nodded. He knew his eyes were wet and that his smile wasn't one of his best. “Let's talk about it in my room.”

Arthur had put down his canvas bag and fished out his electro-stimulation device by the time Merlin hobbled into the room. He lay himself down on his bed and shed his joggers. Arthur spun around
and placed the device's pads on Merlin's thighs.

“Will was my best friend.”

Arthur leant over him and set the electrodes on top of the pads. “Was?”

Merlin nodded slowly, then tilted his head back. “Yup.”

Arthur waited stock still, his eyebrows climbing. “Did he move out? Did you two fall out?”

Merlin watched as Arthur turned around to connect the electrode to the TENS unit. “No. I never told you how I had my accident, did I?”

Before setting the TENS unit to low frequency, Arthur looked up, his mouth a slim line. “You know you didn't.”

“Yes, well,” said Merlin, his muscles starting contracting thanks to the stimulation. “Maybe I should.”

Arthur grabbed a stool and placed it by Merlin's bed. He pretended to have eyes only for Merlin's working muscles but Merlin knew he was listening. “I've nothing better to do for the next half hour.”

Merlin started talking. “Will, well, I grew up with him. We didn't live far from each other. He was right next door. You've seen my mum's house. It's small so I spent a big portion of my childhood out on the street, playing with Will.”

“I can picture it.” Arthur smiled. “You running wild, playing pranks on your neighbours with your friend.”

Merlin knew that his eyes were wet but this time he let himself talk past the discomfort he felt. He'd kept it all in so long he'd thought he'd never be able to voice his thoughts. But the words were coming out and he only had a small lump in his throat. “You got that right. We grew up together Will and I. Will was always by my side.”

“And then you grew up and he became your--”

Merlin laughed and shed one single tear. “You've got it so wrong.”

Arthur swiped the tear from Merlin's cheeks with his thumb. “I'm sorry. I thought it was going to be one of those stories.”

Merlin half smiled, then gritted his teeth. “It not one of those stories. We were just friends. Thick as thieves. When time for uni came we made a pact. If it was at all possible we'd go the same one. We'd agreed on three places we both wanted to go and our UCAS forms almost matched.”

“It looks like you were best mates,” Arthur said, his tone hesitant. “I've never had a best friend myself, not like that.”

Merlin resettled against his mound of pillows, watching his muscle hop under the electrodes. “You don't know what you've missed.”

Arthur nodded, lifting his shoulders. “How does this story tie up with your accident?”

Merlin winced. He knew he had to choose his words carefully. He didn't want people to blame Will and tarnish his memory. “Will had been going through a bad patch. His dad had died and between his illness and being there for his mum Will had fallen behind with his studies. He didn't get the
majority of credits he needed to finish the year and graduate at the same time as the rest of us.”

“He could have re-sat his exams--”

“Yeah,” said Merlin, remembering a conversation much like this one. “That's what I told him. He could get those credits. He wouldn't have got his degree with us but he would have got it.” Merlin flashed back to that night, to the anger and fear in Will's voice. “But I guess doing things with us, with me, mattered to him. That's what it had always been like before.” Merlin sniffed. His shoulders rose with a sob. “I just couldn’t--”

Arthur placed his hand on Merlin's forearm and squeezed. “You couldn't what, Merlin?”

Merlin grabbed for Arthur's shirt. “Be there for him. I knew he was upset. I tried to calm him, but it wasn't working.”

Arthur's hand smoothed down his arm then up again in a comforting gesture. “Merlin, you're not responsible for what happened next.”

“I should have stopped him drinking,” Merlin said, wrapping an arm around Arthur and pulling him close. “I should have known what he was about to do – because if there was someone who knew Will that was bloody me. I sh-- I should've taken the keys from him. Made his wear his seatbelt at least. I had the wrong idea. I just joined in and.... and he didn't have a fighting chance. He didn't survive the impact while I did.” He wasn't crying but he was breathing fast, his breaths drawn in raspy staggered bursts. “And it wasn’t fair, Arthur. It wasn't fair.”

Arthur's hand went to his face, rubbing his cheeks lightly with his fingertips. “It wasn't. But it wasn't your fault either. He made a stupid choice--”

“Don't--” Merlin croaked. “Just don't. He was a good mate. A good man. Don't--”

“Merlin.” Arthur brushed lips against his temple. “I'm finding it hard to forgive someone who nearly killed you drunk driving.”

“He only harmed himself.”

Arthur's grip on him became tighter. “Not true. You're forgetting who you're talking to. I see your scars every day.”

Merlin sniffled. “He didn't mean to hurt me and I miss him.”

Merlin felt Arthur stiffen, his hands clutching Merlin with all his might. “I know you do.”

Merlin buried his face in Arthur's neck. “I want you to know that Will was-- was a great guy and I want you to remember him like that too.”

Merlin's sobs started to come faster.

“It's okay,” said Arthur as you would a child. “It's okay.” Merlin would have told him it wasn't. He thought to complain about Arthur treating him like a little kid but right in this moment he was fine with this. He was wanted no one else there.

Merlin sobbed in Arthur's arms for the better part of ten minutes, grabbing at his hoodie, burying his nose in his neck, grappling with him for purchase. When his leaping breaths softened, he drew away. He knew he must look like someone who'd just been dragged through a hedge backwards. But he
felt lighter and didn't mind about all that. “Ah, I'm, uh, sorry I dragged you into this.”

Arthur ran the pad of his thumb down Merlin's face. “I'm glad you did. That you trusted me to.”

“I hadn't meant to, you know,” Merlin told him, deciding to go for the truth. “I was sure I'd never talk about Will again. But then Sefa came and she wanted to rent his room. Freya's been saying we should find another flatmate for ages, and it just all piled up.”

Arthur's hand had now slipped to Merlin's shoulder, which he was kneading. “Bottling it all up wasn't wise.”

“No.” Merlin admitted to something that had taken him a long time to acknowledge. “It was making me angry. Silence wasn't good.”

“I'm glad you came to see that.”

“I'm still not ready to.” Merlin made a hand gesture in lieu of what he meant to say, which was 'talk'. He hoped Arthur wouldn't think Merlin ready to gush about this subject much more expansively. The thought of Will still brought a pang with it he didn't want to have to think about too much. “But now and again perhaps I'll want to tell you about him. If you've got the time to listen, that is.”

Arthur's smile was very sweet when he said, “I'll always have time for that, Merlin. For you.”

That was when the electro-stimulation device stopped buzzing. “The session's over.”

Arthur detached the pads from Merlin skin's and wrapped the cable around his palm so as to safely stow his equipment away. “I've still got time to talk over a cuppa, if you want.”

It was dinner time when Freya came back home. Merlin knew she was surprised to find Arthur in their kitchen.

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Arthur jogged, keeping his stride short and landing on the balls of his feet with his knees bent, so they would absorb the shock of the run. He lightly bounced off the ground, his heel not coming into contact with the ground. He kept a good pace and breathed through his nostrils, drinking from time to time when dehydration threatened to set in.

One of the benefits of being a physio was that you knew how to treat your body right. One of the reasons why he'd become one in the first place was because he'd been interested in sports as a boy. He'd dabbled in a variety of them and that's how, injuries being somewhat inevitable, he'd got in touch with physios he admired.

Ever since then he'd dropped most of the sports he'd taken up as a boy. Mostly because he'd been busy studying first and then pursuing job related goals. But he hadn't given up on jogging.

Jogging was the only time of the day he didn't have to think about anything. When he jogged he could let his body take the lead. His mind emptied of thought and floated free. When he'd been in Nottingham he'd always jogged the same route so he didn't have to think about where he wanted to go.

Moving to Wales had shaken up his routines. He was still looking for a track that he liked better than the others. At the moment he was letting himself find his new groove, places he liked, paths he loved
and that took his mind off the wear and tear of his daily life.

The only part of his new route that had already become fixed was the last one. There simply weren't that many track variations allowing him to get to his street.

He was making his way downhill towards his building when he was taken aback by finding a figure loitering by the entrance. That figure incredibly resembled his father. Arthur stopped running and came to a halt. “What the hell.” It couldn't be his father. He was supposed to be in London, living his own life and disapproving of Arthur's from afar.

But, seeing him, the figure lifted his hand in a wave.

That could only mean one thing. It was indeed his dad. Arthur's mouth hung open for a few seconds but then he got a move on. Completing the rest of the his jog he came up to him. “Dad, what are you doing here?”

“Can't a father visit his own son?”

Arthur grabbed a hold of his foot and stretched one quad, then the other. “You never came when I lived in Nottingham.”

His dad didn't answer that. “Won't you lead me inside?”

“Sure,” Arthur said, rooting for his keys in the pockets of his hoodie. “Follow me.”

During the whole lift ride his dad didn't say anything. He only opened his mouth to speak once Arthur had ushered him into his flat and offered him something to drink. “Tea, coffee, anything?”

“This place is very spare.”

Arthur sighed and dropped his keys in the bowl by the door. “It's just new. I've only been two months.”

“Tea,” his dad said, picking up the former thread of conversation.

Arthur put the electric kettle on and rooted in his cupboards for some green tea. As the kettle gargled, Arthur found a clean cup on the draining board, upended it and dunked the tea bag inside it. “You still want it with no milk, right?”

“Yes,” his dad said, who'd taken a seat at the kitchen table after having stood with his nose up in the air for several moments, disapproving expression firmly on. “Need to watch my diet at my age.”

Arthur nodded though he didn't agree. That was a kettle of fish he didn't want to touch upon. He waited for the kettle's whistle.

He was pouring water in the cup when his dad said, “I was quite surprised when you wrote to say you were leaving the hospital and the city.”

Arthur served his father his tea and leant against the sink unit. “I had to go. They weren't letting me do my job.”

Dad's mouth curled rather nastily. He took a taste of his tea but the lip curl stayed. “Acting the way you did was naïve, Arthur.”

“What do you mean?” Arthur clenched his fists around the sink's rim.
“You should have done what they told you and kept the job.”

Arthur started. “My patients weren't being treated as they ought to.”

“And with you gone, are they?”

Arthur bit his tongue so he wouldn't say what he was really thinking. “No, but at least I’m not party to that.”

“And that's why I said your attitude was naïve,” his dad said, taking another small measure of tea. “Your patients aren't better off and you have lost your job.”

“I have another,” Arthur pointed out. He'd never discussed how much he was making or how inspiring he found his new job. He couldn't tell him he loved working with Merlin, that seeing the improvement in him put joy in his heart and a spring in his step. That sounded loony, but he could admit to being gainfully employed. “You might be forgetting but I wrote to you about my new situation.”

“But what kind of job is this?” His dad put his cup down and crossed his legs, his hand resting on top of his knee. “The private sector isn't a kind one.”

“I'm doing rather well,” Arthur said, not being more specific than that. “I've got a main job and a second part time one to round off a few more pounds.”

“Is the person you're assisting permanently invalided?”

Arthur's skin heated at the thought his dad was wishing for that to be true so that Arthur would have a stable income. “No, he's going to be completely fine in another four months or so.”

“So this is just a temporary job?”

Arthur dropped his eyes. “Yes, but when I'm done with Merlin I'll find someone else.”

“And how can you be assured of that?” his dad asked, an eyebrow tipped upwards. “In this economy? People will go to the NHS before they go to you.”

“I can cover the grey areas.” Arthur elucidated the reasoning that had led him to take up this career course. “What the NHS can't do. I'm not the only private physio there is. I can branch out into sports medicine when I'm done with that. There's plenty to do for a physio in the private sector.”

“Aren't you banking on staying in Wales?” The snort that came with that question was particularly loud and resounding.

“Yes.”

“Good luck with finding the type of occupation you're seeking here.”

“Wales has plenty of sports teams, you know,” Arthur said, his statement backed up by factual knowledge. “I won't be begging for work.”

“You won't be spoiling for it either.”

Arthur turned around and emptied the kettle of the remaining water.

“But I do have a suggestion that would solve most of your problems.”
Arthur continued in silence.

“You should move back to London with me,” his dad in the tone of a man who was sure his proposition would be accepted. “When you went to Nottingham I was against it but at least then you had a chance at a respectable career in a hospital. What's done is done now, but you going private won't stop you from submitting your candidacy to an NHS hospital in London. You know they wouldn't follow the same policy as the Nottingham board.” Father seemed to be warming to his subject. “If you live with me for the first months, your expenses would be lowered. And if you should persist with sticking to the private sector at least London can offer many opportunities than this Welsh backwater you've buried yourself in.”

Arthur's shoulders were shaking, bunching up. He felt his heartbeat pound at the base of his skull. “Are you quite done rearranging my life?”

“I'm simply injecting some good sense into it.”

Arthur dug his nails into his palm. “If you want to sleep here tonight I can put you up on the sofa.”

“I don't understand why you're being so stubborn.” His father let out an exasperated breath. “When you told me you wanted to waste your potential on being a physio I resigned myself. When you said you wanted to scuttle up North, I accepted it, but this, this is such a dumb choice.”

Arthur started washing dishes that needed no washing whatsoever. “I'll open the sofa bed for you,” he said, lathering up a bowl. “You can return back to London tomorrow in the afternoon. I'll take you to the station after I've seen Merlin.”

Father didn't say anything. He took his half empty tea cup and went to turn on the TV.

****

“So are we going to do more swimming?” Merlin asked as he looked out the window of Arthur's car.

Arthur turned left. “No, we're going to go to centre to try something else.”

Merlin turned to Arthur. “Oh, why so secretive?”

Arthur smiled at the road, signalling another turn. “I'm not being secretive. We're going to do something pretty straightforward. I just don't want you to think about it too much.”

“That sounds ominous.”

The room at the Health Centre Arthur ushered him was a wide, mostly empty room that had wall length mirrors along one side of it. In the middle there were two wooden bars that formed a mini track of sorts.

“Is that what I think it is?” Merlin asked.

“The mirrors are there so you can observe your body's movements.” Arthur put down his canvas bag. “The bars are for you to walk without those crutches of yours.” Arthur walked up to one end of the corridor. “You can grab them if you're falling but otherwise... You'll be trying to walk all by yourself. No support.”

Merlin clung to his crutches tighter. “Is this booty camp?”
Arthur smiled softly. “No, Merlin, it's you letting go of your security blanket in a controlled environment.”

Merlin wasn't so sure that was an apt simile. “Er, I really can't walk without crutches, not far.”

Arthur's gaze was soft as it limned Merlin's body. “I know that. But you'll have to start somewhere. This is called 'gait re-education’.”

Merlin winced, staying far away from the exercise bars. “I'll be sure to fall.”

“I'll catch you if you do,” said Arthur. “And I'm not asking you to just go and walk, you know. For as long as you limp, you'll have to have those crutches. Until you are able to do it without them, I want you to have some help to avoid improper gait pains. But right now I want you to start on this, a little every day, so that you can get your core muscle groups to work.”

Merlin hobbled over to the start of the bar track. “I'm only doing this because I've started believing in your physio babble.”

Arthur shrugged one shoulder, his smile confident, his eyes dancing. “You've come to recognise my wisdom.”

“You wish.”

“No. Calling it as it is.” Arthur smirked then his smirk softened at the edges, making something inside Merlin come unglued.

Heart kicking in his chest, Merlin dropped the crutches. They made a dull thud as they hit the ground. Over the two months physiotherapy period with Arthur he'd learnt to stand on his own two feet. Though his legs still trembled and odd pains shot up their length at times, he'd come to master verticality. Moving was more difficult. He usually tended to put all his weight on his crutches, using his arms – thanks to Arthur's exercises his biceps had become bigger, quite the guns – to propel himself forward.

His leg bones always ended up taking only a very small percentage of his weight. Apart from pulling himself up this was going to be the longest he'd ever stood on his own two legs since the accident.

Merlin swallowed. This was big, he told himself. And it was probably going to hurt, as all new exercises tended to.

But Arthur was smiling at him, walking backwards to put even more distance between them. His eyes were flashing encouragement and, Merlin thought, affection.

Merlin's kicking heart swelled. Who was to say he couldn't do this? He could do this and make Arthur proud.

“I want you to come to me, Merlin, all the way here.”

With a big breath Merlin took his first step. There was some pain. But it was dull and bearable, something he could defeat. Body tight with the effort, he inched forward again landing on his other foot.

“You're doing it, Merlin,” Arthur said, clapping his hands together.

Even though all his body was trembling under the strain, Merlin smiled. He felt the sweat break out on his skin, but he kept wearing that expression.
Beating a tempo in his head, his blood started racing in his veins. Hiss skin was thrumming and he felt some kind of low level excitation in the pit of his stomach.

He brought his left leg forward and then his right.

“You're mid way through.”

“I know.” Speaking was a lot of effort when all his attention was geared towards putting one foot before the other. He was hot and rivulets of sweat were coursing down his back. His shin bone throbbed where it had broken and his other leg felt so weak he was sure it would give. But it didn't and neither did the other one.

He was slowly and clumsily walking! It probably wasn't a pretty sight and there were toddlers around who could likely do better, but to Merlin this was the closest thing to having sprouted wings of his own.

It didn't matter that it still hurt or that he was going slow, because he was back on his feet.

“You can use the bars, if you're tired,” said Arthur in that voice cool voice of his Merlin suspected hid concern.

Merlin held his eyes. “No. I'm walking. I'm walking all the way over there.”

Arthur nodded as if he'd understood that Merlin's heart was really in it now. He might have been reticent to start with, but he was determined now. There was nothing he wanted more. He put his left foot in front of his right.

“Two more steps, Merlin, two more steps.”

Merlin grinned. “I know.”

“Okay, all right, you're nearly there.”

Merlin's muscles were tense with the effort, and his legs felt more hollow than usual, but then he made himself take that one final step before he stumbled into Arthur.

Arthur was quick to wrap his arms around Merlin, using his strength to support him.

Merlin let himself be held, smiling into Arthur's face because he'd made it. This was his biggest success since the accident. He'd walked on his very own without any help whatsoever. There had been a time he would never have thought his broken legs could have possibly taken him that far. But they had. He had. And all thanks to Arthur, Arthur who was bloody brilliant.

The revelation didn't hit him hard.

He didn't know what exactly it was that he was doing. He just knew that he followed the burst of sensation gushing inside him. He pressed forward and caught Arthur's lips with his, softly, asking for permission.

Arthur didn't push him away, so Merlin moved his lips on top of Arthur's, sandwiching his upper one between him. Dreading that Arthur would stop this, he drew back, but he saw no signs of distastes so he pushed his mouth against Arthur's again, nuzzling it in increments.

With a sigh that was all warm breath, Arthur's lips gave and opened. Their tongues met, slipped and slid one against the other.
By then Arthur was deepening the kiss, his tongue tracing the inside of Merlin's mouth, pressing more hungrily the longer the kiss lasted. He was getting greedy as if he, too, needed this just as Merlin did.

Arthur pulled Merlin into him by the grip he had on his hips, his hands vices, as if he didn't want to let go, ever. Merlin felt his hands move up the sides of his arms, to come to rest on each side of his face. And still they were kissing, rawer now, their breaths coming faster.

Merlin was keening into it, holding onto Arthur as if he was the most beautiful thing to ever happen to him, his blood rushing away from his head and leaving him light-headed, dizzy with the thrill of kissing Arthur.

Arthur was tracing the slope of his neck with his fingers when someone knocked on the door and Arthur jumped back, eyes round like saucers, the light of fear in them. Without Arthur's support Merlin fell on his arse, landing with an oomph.

A health centre employee poked her head in. “Oh my god are you all right?” she said when she saw him on the ground, though she'd clearly meant to announce something else when she'd entered.

Merlin didn't want Arthur to get in trouble. Falling had been entirely Merlin's fault. He should have clung to the bar. It had been entirely stupid of him not to. “I'm fine. I just lost my grip.”

“Oh, all right,” the nurse said. “These little set backs happen.” She turned to Arthur then, less sweet and more business like, though always polite. “You have only five more minutes, then I'm afraid we have another patient, Mr Pendragon.”

Arthur nodded. “Yeah, okay, right, thank you for reminding me of that.”

The nurse smiled. “Just a heads-up.”

“Yes, thank you.” Arthur raked a hand through his hair. “Thanks.”

The door closed behind the nurse.

When they were alone again, Arthur tugged at his hair, started towards Merlin, turned around again, walking away, shoulders rising and bunching. He stood like that for a whole handful of seconds, trembling in place, causing Merlin's belly to sink with the fear of having screwed everything up. Then Arthur spun on his feet again, moving to help Merlin. He sank onto his knee and offered him a hand, all the while saying, “I apologise. I should never have touched you.”

Merlin frowned and didn't grab Arthur's hand. “What are you talking about? I kissed you.” He looked down at the floor he was sprawling on, cheeks heating. “If you didn't want it, I should be the one to apologise.”

Arthur pursed his lips. “No, that's not-- Merlin, you're my patient and I kissed you. That goes against the patient-physio code--”

“Oh, please, you weren't doing anything I didn't want you to--”

“Ethics and my personal morals do count,” Arthur steam-rolled over him. “You're in pain. You were joyful because you'd just had a triumph. I'm the one who's supposed to provide relief for that pain. I'm the one you look to for help. It's obvious. You think you've developed feelings for me but it's just gratitude.”

Oh, no. Arthur had no right to reinterpret his feelings. “You don't get to do that.” Merlin fumed.
“You don't get to tell me what I feel. I know what I feel. I like you.” Well, no Merlin had to be honest here or Arthur would never believe him. “It's more than that. It's more than a crush. I think I love you. And it's not gratitude. I don't wake up looking forward to the physio--”

Arthur cupped Merlin's face as if that would urge him shut up. “Hush, Merlin. Please, hush. You don't love me. There's an explanation for everything that is going on with you. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have kissed you. I--”

Merlin felt his blood boiling with anger “Don't patronise me!” He had tears in his eyes though he held them in check. “I can take you not loving me. I've taken lots up to now. I can bear that too. Believe me, it won't kill me. But don't tell me you know what I feel because you don't.”

“Merlin-- I--”

“You don't.” Merlin scooted back on his arse and away from Arthur. “Just be honest and say that you don't like me and you didn't want things to go out of hand. Say you just want to be my physio and nothing more and I'm going to let it go.”

“Merlin,” Arthur said, chest rising and falling as if he'd run ten miles non stop, his face, in contrast as pale as if he'd seen a ghost. “I can't be your physio anymore.”

If Merlin had slinked away before, he now grabbed Arthur by the sleeve. “No, you can't do that. You can't leave me in the lurch like that.”

“Merlin,” Arthur said in a gentle tone Merlin didn't want to hear, “I'll refer you to someone. I'll find you a good substitute. But I kissed you Merlin. I kissed you.”

Merlin remembered that, thank you; his heart was breaking over it. He had the urge to flee so he could hide how much this was paining him right now. He also had a stupid, impossible wish entailing he could rewind time so he could be kissing Arthur again or just so he could avoid doing it and losing Arthur over this. Merlin had taken advantage...


“Merlin, you don't understand, I was completely unprofessional.” Arthur was talking as if to a kid and that too brought more tears to Merlin's eyes. “I went completely over the line. If we'd been in a hospital environment and someone had learnt about what happened, I would have been given the sack.”

Merlin shook his head from side to side. “But we're not. You work for me and I don't think you did anything wrong.”

“But I do,” said Arthur curtly.

And that was when Merlin knew that Arthur wouldn't be moved, that Arthur was serious and genuinely thought he was to blame for a kiss that Merlin, in his joy, had been stupid enough to initiate. He if had known he stood to lose Arthur, that he would put paid to that little bit of friendship Merlin had started to think they had going, he would never have done it. Never mind that he thought he loved Arthur. “Are we still friends?”

Merlin studied Arthur's face for a few long moments. His mouth was drawn; his forehead puckered. Arthur's own eyes were as damp as Merlin's surely were. His jaw was stiff. “I wasn't much of a friend to take advantage, was I?”
Merlin would have spoken but he saw that something was very wrong with Arthur. If Merlin really loved him, he'd stop putting him in this position.

“No, you were.” Merlin said, unable to hide how much his voice was trembling. “Whatever you're thinking now you were a great friend to me and I want you to know that you didn't do anything I didn't want.”

Arthur shook his head. He fetched Merlin's crutches and helped him up. “I'll drive you home.”

****

After helping Merlin home, Arthur walked back to his car. He should have turned the key in the ignition and driven to his place. He had things to do like take his father to the station, pop round the supermarket to get some shopping done. He had to--

He leant his head against the steering wheel and let out a sob. God, how could he even try to think about sticking to a routine? He had taken advantage of Merlin.

When he'd seen that Merlin was walking on his own steam, no chair, walker or crutches involved, Arthur's heart had just swelled in his chest, threatening to swallow him whole. He'd found Merlin lovely to look at before. He'd felt a stir before. But that had been something he could curb. Because it was a physical stimulus.

But today he hadn't.

He had allowed himself to become personally involved with Merlin. Jesus. He should have known that he couldn't have turned his feelings off and made a choice before it got there. Christ, he was old enough to be self-aware.

Instead he'd just stuck his head under the sand and acted as though no problems could ever rise. And the worst of his pathetic hiding game was that he'd been so unprofessional. Arthur had been supposed to look after Merlin, to make sure Merlin got better. He shouldn't have touched him.

He'd taken enough physio courses to know that he'd violated every rule under the sun. If someone found out, he might be accused of indulging in an indiscretion with a patient. One of a sexual nature. He could be struck off the CSP. His professional reputation would be in tatters and the mud was sure to stick.

But that was nothing. He deserved that and plenty. He'd kissed Merlin. He'd kissed Merlin and probably hurt him more than anyone ever could. He'd done so when Merlin was so, so vulnerable. Arthur had ruined it all.

He grunted. He'd done the one thing that he shouldn't have done, breached Merlin's trust, played with someone who was in a fragile state of mind, who'd been through hell.

He'd proved that he wasn't really a good professional. He'd proved how easily led astray he was. But the worst of it all was that he'd damaged someone he would have wanted to protect.


A lady crossing the street saw him swear to himself and gave him the stink eye. Arthur could see how why she would. He must look like a madman. He waited for her to pass, breathed in and out in order to centre himself enough to drive, then he turned the car on.
For as long as he was driving he didn't allow himself to think. His mind was a perfect blank though he was fairly sure he was scowling at street-lights and pedestrians equally.

When he entered his flat, he slammed the door shut and lobbed his keys at the bowl.

Head in the fridge, he stared vacantly at his provisions without taking anything out.

When his dad came into the main room he was still doing that. “Arthur?”

Arthur whirled around, fridge door left to gape open behind him. “Dad.”

“Arthur, what's happened?”

If his dad had noticed that something was wrong with him – and dad had gone through many a crisis in Arthur's life without taking note of anything – then he was in bad shape. “I--”

“Arthur?” His dad approached him as you would a feral cat. “Something is wrong, I can tell.”

Arthur's shoulder's sagged and the breath pushed out of him as if someone had just punched him in the gut. “You were right. All along.”

“That is very flattering to hear but I'm not sure I'm grasping what you're referring to.”

“Me being wrong for this job.”

His dad's eyebrow shot up. “Just this morning you were quite adamant about the contrary being true. What's happened to change your mind?”

Arthur couldn't bring himself to tell his father that he'd kissed the sweetest boy on earth, the only one he shouldn't. He wasn't brave enough to do so. However stern his dad had been, he'd always been one to believe in Arthur's sense of ethics.

So, yeah, Arthur could have told him that no man feeling what Arthur did could have resisted, that he hadn't acted in bad faith. But that was no excuse and he didn't want to hear about any. He must have no forgiveness.

He understood the implications of what he'd done very well.

“Arthur?” his dad startled him from the frantic swirl of his thoughts.

“Would you mind if I didn't drive you to the station today?” asked Arthur.

“I can easily go tomorrow,” his dad said, even though Arthur could have sworn he'd have received some opposition on that front.

“No.” Arthur shook his head. “No, you don't understand. You were right. The private sector is wrong for me.”

“You changed your mind quite quickly considering how firm you were about continuing as you were just yesterday.”

Arthur's eyes scouted over the room in search of something to do to keep his hands and mind occupied. “Yes, but I thought about it,” Arthur said, picking an apple from the bowl on the table, and then putting it back down again. “I thought about what you said. I'm following you back to London and getting back into the NHS.”
“That's good.” His dad sounded doubtful, tentative, very much so for a man who'd been advocating exactly that cause yesterday. “I'm happy you've changed your mind.”

“Yes, I have,” said Arthur, nodding his head. “I need the structure a hospital can provide.”

****

Freya having let her in, Hunith knocked on Merlin's door.

“Come in,” Merlin said in a terse voice and with a quick utterance.

When Hunith entered. Merlin was finishing those Theraband stretching exercises Arthur had shown him in the beginning of their sessions together. “Merlin?”

Merlin lowered his leg and, staying stretched on the floor, tipped his head back so he was looking at her from her feet up. “What are you doing here?”

Hunith sat on Merlin's unmade bed, wishing she could tidy the room up, but knowing full well that it was Merlin's responsibility to do so and that she wasn't there for that. He wouldn't appreciate being coddled. Ever since he was a child Merlin had tidied and looked after himself brilliantly. Hunith had never had a complaint about that.

“Can't a mother visit her son?”

Merlin lay down and relaxed his head against the mat so he could no longer look at her. “It's just very coincidental.”

Hunith's chest deflated. “Freya called me.”

“Merlin,” Merlin said, rolling onto his side, a hand splayed on the mat he was lying on. He was clearly trying to get up without putting undue weight on his most mangled leg.

“Merlin, she's your friend and worrying for you.” That poor girl truly didn't deserve Merlin's anger. She'd been there for him throughout every step of Merlin's ordeal. “And you know that, so don't give me attitude.”

Merlin changed tack. “You don't need to worry about this.”

“I'm sorry,” Hunith wasn't prepared to accept Merlin's irrational assessment of the situation. “But you're my son and I do worry.”

“I'm fine.”

“Merlin,” Hunith said in a rush of breath, “you had a life-threatening accident a few months ago. And you've been doing without a physio for a week. If Arthur's resigned, I'm sorry because he seems to have done a good job motivating you, but it's time for you to look for a new physio.”

Hunith recognised Merlin's stubborn moue even before he said, “No, Arthur showed me what to do. I'm doing this on my own from now on.”

“Merlin.” Hunith tried to keep her tone level even though she wanted to shout at Merlin for being so stupid and reckless with his health. “You don't know a thing about physiotherapy. You cannot deal alone.”
“I know the exercises by heart,” said Merlin, sitting up. “I don’t need anyone to do those. The only ones I'm missing out on are those Arthur did at the health centre but I don't necessarily need to do them.”

“Merlin.” Hunith watched as her son slowly heave himself to his feet thanks to a technique his physio had taught him. “You can't do this on your own.”

Merlin sat himself opposite Hunith on the chair. He was massaging his leg. “I won't have another physio. I just won't.”

“Merlin, please, listen to yourself!”

“No,” said Merlin and for the first time Hunith saw something that wasn’t mere stubbornness taking him over. His body was coiled tight and his eyes were sad. And just like after the accident he was holding people at arm's length. She'd thought he'd sounded better over the last months, stopped doing this, but evidently not.

“Merlin, you must put your health first!”

“No!” Merlin shouted.

The shout was so sharp Hunith's mouth fell open. This was the first time her son had ever shouted to her. Even when he'd had tantrums as a kid – and those had been rare – Merlin had been a sweet, mild-mannered child. “Merlin--”

“No,” Merlin swivelled his chair so he was facing away. “I'm not going to change my mind. I'm not going to want another physio. I – I liked the one I had. I'm not going to stop with the exercises. I'm just not going to do them with a trained specialist.”

“What if you make mistakes?” Hunith decided to try and debunk Merlin's idea by dint of logic. “You could undo all the good you've done.”

“I won't,” Merlin said. “I remember all that I have to do. And this way you'll be saving money.”

Hunith bit her lip. “There's more where that comes from.”

Merlin cocked his head at her. “Really?” he sounded unconvinced. “Because we've never been well off, or am I dreaming my childhood?”

Hunith tipped her chin against her chest. “Yes, I told you about the insurance, didn't I?”

“What kind of insurance is this again?”

When he'd been in pain Merlin hadn't bothered to ask that question. Ever since Arthur he'd been too busy following his physiotherapy regimen to think about doing so. She'd believed she was safe, that Merlin wouldn't ask. What a fool. “We have money enough to complete your private cycle of physio. That's all that matters.”

“You can use it for yourself,” Merlin said, looking at Hunith with his head still cocked. “The house needs repair. You can do that.”

“I won't put a leaking roof before your health.” Hunith was starting to believe Merlin had gone off his rocker. He knew he'd always come first with her. The roof. Ppft.

Merlin shrugged his shoulders. “You will have to. I just want you to save that money. I can look
Hunith felt she couldn't harp on the money issue without bringing up Balinor. Bringing up Balinor now when Merlin was still so fragile was out of the question. “Merlin--”

“Please,” Merlin said. “I know what I'm doing.”

Merlin's chin was sticking out and he looked red in the face. Hunith knew what that meant. Merlin was dead set on whatever little plan he had. For now he would be immovable.

“Very well,” she said, “if that is what you want. You're old enough to take your own decisions.”

Merlin looked up with a faltering smile on his lips. “Thank you, mum. Thank you for understanding.”

Hunith left feeling in turn guilty, right and wrong at the same time.

****

Arthur was putting the books he'd brought from Nottingham in a box. He made sure to place the largest ones on the bottom and the thinnest volumes on top. There weren't many. Arthur wasn't big on reading anything that wasn't related to his job, but these volumes were all dear to him, some had belonged to his mother, and he'd lugged them from place to place every time he'd moved.

He didn't want to confide them to the care of the mail service or of movers, so he was doing his boxing up himself.

He was about to place the last tome on top and closed the lid, when his dad said, “Arthur, it's midnight.”

“I know,” Arthur said, closing the box flaps with gummed tape. “I just needed to this.”

Father shuffled. “There's something you're not telling me.”

“Nothing of any importance.” Arthur lifted the box and put it on top of the other row of boxes that he'd placed against the wall.

“Arthur.” his dad moved in the half light of the gouged out living room. “it wouldn't take a genius to guess that's something very wrong with you. You're acting oddly.”

Arthur threw his head back and laughed, dabbing at his eyes to stop the hysterical tears that were making his vision less than clear. “I'm doing exactly what you wanted, like a dutiful little son.”

“And that is worrying,” his dad said, edging towards Arthur as if Arthur was a beast of the wild, slowly and carefully, waiting for Arthur to lash out. “You've never been obstinate but you've always firm in your beliefs.”

“So you complain when I don't do what you want and you complain when I do?”

“Arthur--”

“You'd rather I rebel?” Arthur fixed his gaze ahead, avoiding his dad's scrutiny. He really didn't want to engage.
“No, Arthur,” his dad said, less stiffly and more reasonably than he was wont. “I would want you to be fine with your choices. I think the one you're making is commendable and rational--”

“You suggested it.” In a slump Arthur sat on top of one of the crates he'd prepared for moving and crossed his arms.

“But I feel like you're opting for this against your will.”

Arthur's head moved from side to side in denial. “Then why would I be doing it?”

“Not because I asked,” his dad said, pacing the length of the room without taking his gaze from Arthur. “I asked many times before and you always put up a stoic opposition.”

“I'm doing what you want now.” Arthur stared at his toes. “Shouldn't you be happy about that and ask no questions?”

“I won't stop you from doing something I consider wise,” Father said. “But to be honest I'll question the spirit behind your choice.”

“You can't have everything in life, can you?” Arthur's sharpening.

“No, you can't, Arthur.” His dad's gaze softened considerably. “You can't.”

****

Merlin shuffled into the kitchen on his crutches.

Sefa and Freya looked up from their respective cereal bowls. “Gracing us with your presence finally?”

Merlin didn't say anything. He couldn't contradict them. He'd been a crappy flatmate and a worse friend. “Sorry about that.” He grimaced a little. “I'd meant to be more social.”

“That's all right,” Freya said, turning the spoon around in her bowl without catching any edibles. “We don't want to pressure you, you know that. It's just... We just want to know if you're fine.”

Munching steadily, Sefa nodded.

“Or conversely if you're not.” Freya passed her words off as an after thought although Merlin knews they weren't.

His hand closed around the barrel of his crutch. “If I behave horribly you can tell me to fuck off, you know. I'm not some delicate flower.”

“I know.” Freya sounded far too understanding for Merlin's tastes.

He leant one of his crutches against the table and shuffled to the work top. He filled a mug with lukewarm water and dunked a teabag in it. When the contents of the mug had got more or less amber, the most he could expect considering how tepid the water was, Merlin binned the bag, added milk, and three big spoonfuls of sugar. “I didn't mean to hurt you.”

“I know you didn't.”

“But I was a little bit ticked off,” Merlin continued, “seeing as the moment I stopped seeing Ar-- a
physio you called my mum.”

Freya dropped her eyes. “I know how important your physio is and when you said you wanted to do it yourself I panicked, okay?”

Sefa studiously took herself out of the conversation by making it look like she was engrossed in her breakfast.

“You're my friend,” Merlin said, slowly moving back to his chair. He sank into it with no small relief. “You should be having my back, not my mum’s.”

“Your mum loves you.” Freya wagged her eyebrows. “That's why I phoned her.”

“Well, I know that.” Merlin took a large sip of his weak tea. “But she can't understand so I'd rather she didn't try to take charge of this--” Merlin waved a hand at his legs. “Besides, she's hiding something from me.”

Freya snorted and Sefa looked up. “That kind lady from the other day?”

Freya chipped in to say, “Come on, Merlin, you can't be serious.”

Merlin thought back to the other day. The only other thing he'd been thinking about that wasn't Arthur had been his mum's odd behaviour. “I am though,” he said, putting off his attempt at having breakfast. He wasn't hungry anyway and that tea tasted like the water you wash your dishes in. “At one point she was hedging.”

“Hedging?” Freya's tone verged on the incredulous. “Are you sure?”

“We're still talking about that kind lady?”

“Yes,” Merlin told Sefa. He turned to Freya. “I know it's strange. But she most definitely was. I mentioned the money from the insurance and she wasn't direct about it. My mum is always direct.”

“You must have misunderstood,” Freya said. “I'm sure of that.”

“I'm haven't though.” Merlin prepared to explain his reasoning. Since he'd been thinking about it all night his ideas might be a little jumbled and incoherent but he wanted to air them so as to hear what Freya and Sefa thought about them. “Something doesn't add up.”

“I'm sorry.” Doubt seeped into Freya's voice. “But I'm not sure. Your mum is not a liar.”

“Not normally,” Merlin agreed, though he could think of a few instances in which she had omitted the truth. They’d once been in debt because of a loan she’d taken. Merlin had been fourteen and understood what was going on. He'd asked her if he could help, get a part time job, do anything at all. She’d said they was weren't in debt. Needless to say they had been. “But sometimes. When she thinks it's for a good cause.”

“And what do you think she'd be lying about?”

“The money,” Merlin said before he could rethink this and keep it to himself. “When she first talked to me about it I wasn't thinking.” He'd been in hospital at the time and on drugs. “She just said she cashed in some insurance money and that we could use it to get me back on my feet. But the more I think about it, the less sense it makes.”

“Why?” Sefa tilted her head. “I mean some people do sign up for insurances so they can cash in
some money if something bad happens.”

“Yeah, but the problem is,” Merlin said, going over what he’d been thinking, “that she said the insurance was on me. But I never signed anything. So it can't have been.”

Freya and Sefa looked at each other. “Maybe she struck it when you were a minor?”

“I somehow don't think so,” Merlin said. “All I know is that there's something wrong about this.”

Freya put a hand on his. “I don't think there is but I'll help you find out if by any chance I'm wrong.”

Sefa bobbed her head. “I'll ask my friends who're doing Law. Someone's bound to know how these things work.”

“Thank you,” Merlin told the girls.

For his part he decided he'd take up googling the legalities of health insurances.

****

Hunith rubbed her hands together and stared at the phone. She picked up the receiver then put it down again. She scrubbed her face then used her hands to prop her chin. She was still staring at the phone when the doorbell went.

“Right.” She pulled herself to her feet and going to get the door.

“Hunith,” Balinor said, shuffling his feet on the mat. “I got your text.”

Hunith made way for Balinor to come in and led him into the lounge. She took a seat in the chair she’d had before and raised an eyebrow at the chair opposite.

Balinor sat down. “So what's the news? You said Merlin was improving.”

“He was,” said Hunith, chewing on her lip. “And hopefully he is still.”

“But--” Balinor prompted her, rough and matter of fact as he’d always been.

“But he's no longer working with the physio who helped him so.”

Balinor cocked his eyebrow. “You said they were getting along, that it was working for Merlin and you were happy. That he was too.”

Hunith expelled a long sigh. “He was. It was working. He phoned me every other week and told me how he was improving. I really was hopeful. Then other day I dropped by to visit him and he's only using crutches now. Considering he couldn't even stand when the physio started, that's a lot.”

“He's improving by leaps and bounds,” Balinor agreed. “That seems good.”

“But how long is that going to last?”

“I'm sure he can find another physio” Balinor used cold logic, not understanding that sometimes Merlin wasn't governed by it. “Or if he's had a bad experience with a private one he can go back to NHS treatment.”
Hunith gave him a small smile. “I agree and that's perfectly logical. But for some reason Merlin has decided to continue on a do-it-yourself basis. He's unmoveable. And I'm afraid he'll undo all the good work he did with Arthur.”

Balinor scratched at his beard. “How can I help?”

“There's no way you can do anything unless we change our minds and tell him about you being back.”

“You said it wasn't wise.” Balinor didn't frown, but he did show his concern, “That he's already going through so much.”

“And I stand by that.” Hunith made sure her voice didn't break. “And I'm sorry, Balinor, but you don't have a brilliant track record when it comes to staying.”

“I know that,” said Balinor, turning his head aside, looking at the sunlight streaming in through the windows. “I should've stayed, back then.”

“I can't introduce him to his father now of all times only for him to lose you--”

“He won't,” said Balinor, rubbing his thigh, up and down, the rhythm hypnotic. “I'd stay this time.”

“Well, that's not the problem right now though.” Hunith's heart was breaking but she made herself be harsh. She was confident Balinor meant what he was saying. But sooner or later Balinor's desire to commune with nature would manifest again. And where would Merlin fit in with that? “The question is, what should I do to ensure that he doesn't do something stupid?”

“Talk to him then.” His eyes were honest and earnest. “You're a wise woman, Hunith. I'm sure you can be persuasive.”

“Perhaps.” She thought back to her last encounter with Merlin, and his dry refusal regarding hiring a new physiotherapist. “I tried that once and he wouldn't listen.”

“So what are you planning to do?”

She pointed at the phone. “I meant to recruit the help of someone Merlin likes.”

****

Merlin gave the last chapter of his textbook a second read to make sure he'd understood the concepts. But his mind drifted far off before he could.

He focused on the window instead, but he wasn't seeing what was before him. The curtains shook in the breeze but his eyes weren't on their dance. He was thinking about how much he missed Arthur.

Arthur's short laughter barks were what Merlin missed the most. And the way Arthur challenged him while knowing how to be kind and gentle at the same time. There was a softness to Arthur's touch that still broke Merlin's heart in two.

He gave a little sob. He'd thought Arthur had touched him with some kind of love. But he must have misunderstood things epically.

“What an idiot.”
Merlin would have cursed himself further and probably louder hadn't his mobile not rang out loud. Before his phone could jump off the table, Merlin grabbed it. “Hello,” he said, a skip to his heart.

The voice that came from the other end of the line wasn't one that was familiar to Merlin. There was a note of an accent to it that Merlin vaguely recognised but since it was also muffled by a series of loud background noises he couldn't be sure.

“Merlin, this is Gwaine McAllister.”

“Gwaine?” Merlin asked, half smiling, half frowning. “How did you get my number?”

“Your mum gave it to me.”

Merlin drummed his fingers on the open page of his textbook. “Mmm.” His levels of mistrust rose. “I see.”

“I know my call may not be very welcome--”

Merlin couldn't let the man who'd saved his life think that. “No, it's welcome. It's just that I know what she might have told you to say.”

“Merlin,” said Gwaine with a short huff. “If I'm lucky enough to save someone's life I keep wishing them well. And that's all I'm doing.”

“Yeah but you only called the moment my mum told you that I was refusing a new physio.”

“I didn't know before, did I?”

“Gwaine.” Merlin let out a deep sigh. “I'm really, really grateful for your concern but--”

Gwaine interrupted him. “Oh, no. Don't give me that. Look, can we talk about this.” Shouts echoed down on the line, a medical emergency Merlin thought. “I mean not on the phone.”

“Gwaine, my answer isn't going to--”

Gwaine had little respect for Merlin's sentence finishing abilities. “Merlin, come on, it's just going to be a beer at the pub. I swear I'm going to have my say, you yours, and if I haven't persuaded you, that's it.”

“Just a beer, like a normal person?” Merlin asked, wanting to be sure he wasn't going to be Dr McAllister's latest good Samaritan case. “No talking to me as if I'm some sort of stupid, sentimental invalid?”

“Promise,” Gwaine said, the sounds of the hospital covering his voice. “I'm not that kind of guy you'll find.”

“Okay,” Merlin felt the need for an outing anyway. He'd stayed cooped up too long, dividing his time between doing the exercises Arthur had shown him and catching up with uni. “All right, just say were.”

“The Albion all right with you?”

“Yeah, close to uni. It's going to do fine.”

“Meet me there in a couple of hours,” Gwaine told him. “My shift's over in forty minutes.”
“Okay, see you then.”

The Albion was cosier on the outside than it was from the inside. The food was decent; the beer nothing to talk about. What it offered was a spot of telly watching, the TV dutifully set on a channel that featured sports, and a local crowd that made the place look fuller than it was. Thankfully it wasn’t wii night.

As for the patrons, they were mostly footie aficionados who regarded sportsmanship as the highest achievement in life, though the crowd itself didn’t look particularly sporty, what with their pot bellies and sagging chins.

Useless to say, Merlin’s crutches and slow gait attracted more than a few stares. As he moved towards the corner table Gwaine had chosen, Merlin made himself ignore them.

Fingers tight around them, he fought his way through the tables, his breath coming fast as he hurried. When he sank into his chair he was grateful that the trip over was done with.

“Hi.” Merlin released a sigh of sheer exhaustion.

Gwaine slid a beer glass his way. “Here, looks like you need it.”

Before answering, Merlin took a long draught of beer, letting his Adam’s apple work while he did the swallowing. When he was done, he wiped at his mouth. “So, I guess you wanted to talk to me about what a bad boy I’m being doing my physio on my own.”

“Actually no.” Gwaine pulled a mock-offended moue.

Merlin gave him a disbelieving look. “You’re lying. That’s exactly what my mum told you to tell me. That you’ve got nothing to do with that while you have.”

“Yes, guilty as charged,” Gwaine said with an inviting, playful smile that should have angered Merlin but didn’t. “But I have my own outlook on this.”

Gwaine’s attitude was engaging, but Merlin knew what his plans were and refused to let himself be conned. “And that would be?”

“Medically speaking I have nothing against your pursuing your therapy alone,” said Gwaine. “Granted, I’m no orthopaedic surgeon, but I have an understanding of how those things work.”

“Then why are you here?” Merlin asked, lifting his glass as though he was erecting a big question mark between them.

“I think it’s a question of timing,” Gwaine said, drinking some of his own ale. “Not manner.”

Merlin couldn’t say he wasn’t sceptical. “Still at sea here. Explain better.”

Gwaine mock bowed. “Sure, what you’re doing... That’s the goal. Getting you somewhere you can do your sessions alone.” Momentarily distracted, Gwaine smirked at a waitress as she passed. She smiled back at him and a minute later a second glass appeared in front of Gwaine even though Gwaine hadn’t so much as asked. Gwaine danced his eyebrows at the waitress but once she was gone he continued talking to Merlin as if all that silent flirting hadn’t been going on. “But you’re not there yet, are you, Merlin?”

“Ha.” Without looking at Gwaine but rather at the groove on the table, Merlin scratched his nail
against the grain of the table. “I knew this would happen, that you'd say that.”

“But it's true,” Gwaine said, eyeing the door Merlin had come from meaningfully. “I watched you come in. You still can't put all your weight on your legs without hurting, can you? But then again I don't need to ask. You'd be doing it if you could. You have gait problems and if you persevere walking as you are you might make things worse.” Gwaine's eyes bore into Merlin. “In short, you need assistance.”

“I don't want another physio.” Merlin clenched his jaw.

Gwaine started on his second beer. “That's a peculiar wish for a lad in your situation.”

“No, it's not.” Why did Merlin have to explain? Couldn't he just do as he pleased. He'd love to. But he owed Gwaine his life, he knew that, he might as well fling some sort of reason at him. “At first I didn't like the idea of a private physio at all. And I didn't get along with any of the physios that applied for the job.”

“But that that Pendragon guy seemed to work,” said Gwaine, levelling his eyebrow at Merlin.

Merlin grabbed a paper napkin and started shredding it. “Yeah, he was good. He got me back on my feet.”

“But you gave him the sack?”

Merlin's head snapped up from his careful napkin shredding. “No! He said he had to go.”

“Mmm.” Gwaine tapped his chin. “Maybe he had another job lined up, but that shouldn't be a reason for you not to move on.”

“He didn't,” Merlin said through his teeth. Merlin knew he was Arthur's main job.

Gwaine touched his wrist. “Merlin, I know there's a lot you're not telling me.”

Merlin scoffed, affecting a laugh right next. “Why should I lie?”

“I didn't say you were lying,” Gwaine said, patting his wrist before releasing it, as though that would prevent Merlin from flying off the handle. “I said that there was something you're not sharing with the class.”

“No way,” Merlin said, forcing his lips to lift into a smile. “You're being a little paranoid.”

“I'd concede if I didn't think I was right,” Gwaine said. “Am I right?”

Merlin dropped his eyes.

“I'm right.” Gwaine nodded to himself. “Let's see. He was there when the ortho surgeon examined you. Now that's not in his job description, not unless you paid him extra for attending.”

“I didn't!” Merlin was quick to assure Gwaine. He didn't want Gwaine to think Arthur was acquisitive and just had an eye out for the money. “He didn't have to. He was just being nice.”

“All right, so you became friends, is that it?” Gwaine said, humming softly. “And you think you'd be betraying your friend if you went for another physio...” Gwaine seemed taken with his train of thought. He resettled in his chair and his tone grew more excited as he speculated on. “But if he's your friend, he should have told you to go find someone to replace him.”
“Me doing physio on my own is not his idea. He's not against me finding someone else to help.” Merlin swallowed. “I suppose.”

“You suppose?”

“I haven't talked to him in ten days,” Merlind didn't want Gwaine to think Arthur had manipulated him into a bad choice less than he wanted him to think Arthur was the money-grabbing sort.

“Oh,” said Gwaine, laughing into his fist. “Now I think I get it.”

Heartbeat skipping, Merlin slid forward in his seat. “Wait, do you think you know?”

“You're screwing, one of you dumped the other, I'm guessing him, and that's where it's at now.”

Merlin jumped forwards. This could destroy Arthur's reputation. He had to stop Gwaine from thinking that or spreading that rumour around the medical community. “It was nothing like that! He didn't. He didn't want me. That's the point.”

“This needs some clarification before I start to think something dodgy went down.”

Merlin coloured and ducked closer to Gwaine so he could speak lower. “Nothing dodgy went down at all. I kissed him. That's what happened. I kissed him and he kissed back for a few moments. Then he said that he couldn't be my physio anymore and basically resigned. For professional reasons. To keep his integrity.”

“This needs more alcohol,” Gwaine said without commenting on Merlin's revelation. He chugged down a good quantity of his second beer. When he'd absorbed more, he seemed readier to pass judgement. “Look, I won't say I've never fancied a patient or that I haven't done something that was borderline wrong, but since it's you we're talking about I'll say he did the right thing.”

“Nice to know that the rules that apply to me don't apply to you,” Merlin spat out before he could rethink it.

“I didn't mean it like that,” Gwaine said, his tone getting gentler. “I meant to say you're a good person and you shouldn't be messed with.”

“I wasn't messed with,” A muscle jumped in Merlin's cheek. “I think I love him.”

“Oh my god.”

“Yeah.” Merlin winced at the painful admission and sank back against his chair. “Yeah. That's where I'm at.”

Gwaine scratched at his stubble with his nail. “Are you sure you're not, you know, just grateful?”

Merlin smiled sadly. “I know myself. Don't treat me like a child just because I nearly died.”

“It's a lot to go through though,” Gwaine said, wiping at his mouth as if that gesture could erase the fumes of alcohol. “And he put you back on your feet. That's a lot to be thankful for. I remember how you were back then. It stands to reason to think that you'd develop feelings for the person that was instrumental to your recovery, that you'd be confused about them.”

“I'm not.” Merlin shook his head, lips pursed. “Now you could say that I can't know whether this thing is going to last or that I don't know Arthur all that well.” Merlind had talked so fast he'd run out of air so he took a big breath before continuing. “Though I think I know enough to think he's a good
man. Just please don't say I have no grasp of my feelings. That's so patronising.”

Gwaine held his hands up. “Hey, I was just wondering.”

“Trust me.”

Gwaine gnawed on his lower lip. “So that's the reason you don't want another physio?”

“I don't think I have it in me.” Merlin acknowledged that, however hard it was. “I trusted Arthur with the physio because I believed in him. It doesn't happen all the time.”

“I hope not.” Gwaine sniggered, then noticing Merlin's pissed off reaction, he sobered. “Okay, okay I get what you're saying but I'm going to make a suggestion, whether you like it or not.”

“Shoot.” Merlin was going to be oh so cautious about this.

“You say you love him, you likely want him back,” said Gwaine. “It seems to me that you should allow him to make a choice regarding his professional life. If he doesn't feel he can deal with you professionally, you should let him freely opt out.”

“It's not as if I'm pointing a gun to him asking him to come back,” Merlin said. “Though I did ask him to come back.”

“The point is you should ask him whether he's as into you as you are him.” Gwaine pointed his index finger at him. “And if he is... Well, I'm not such a rules stickler that I'd suggest you never ever see him again.”

“Than what are you suggesting?”

“Find out whether he wants you.” Gwaine shrugged. “And if he does, make a move. But find a new physio first so that Arthur's doesn't have to compromise his ethics to be with you.”

Merlin laughed. “You're back to square one and to getting me to do what my mum wants.”

Gwaine rubbed the sides of his nose. “No, no. That's not like that. I'm telling you to get what you want the way you can. If you ask him to do something that goes against his conscience he won't let himself. If he's the kind of guy I think he is, that is. But if you prove that you can be rational about getting healthy, then maybe you'll find him willing to take a risk.” Gwaine held up a warning finger. “But you'll have to to show that you can compromise.”

Merlin wasn't sure whether Gwaine was playing him to get him to do what he'd been asked to or not. But he couldn't say that his was such a terrible plan either. It was worth a shot. “In which case,” Merlin said. “I'm going back to the NHS.”

“With all its faults, that's still a good idea.” Gwaine toasted him.

“It would save us money.” Merlin drummed a rhythm on the table with both hands. A second train of thought struck him. “Could you do me a favour?”

Gwaine waggled his eyebrows. “Fire away and I'll tell you if I can.”

“Could you check with your hospital friends and find out if someone can subscribe an insurance in favour a third party without their knowing?”

“I have a few friends in admin that studied law and all that claptrap,” said Gwaine. “I'll ask for you, but why?”
Merlin just sighed. “It's a long story.”

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The van was big enough to accommodate everything that he had bought after moving in. It was small enough to look stocked to the gills when the mover secured the door.

“I'll be missing you,” Sophia said, brushing her hand alongside his arm and taking his hand. She pushed off her toes and kissed his cheek.

“Yeah, me too I liked Wales.” Arthur had come to love the bloody spot... and all its associations.

She squeezed his hand, her touch soft and buoying. “I know.”

Arthur's eyes went to hers. “You know?”

“It wasn't difficult to figure out,” she said, her tone brimming with understanding. “That phone call and the way you acted afterwards. I'm not stupid.” She rolled her eyes, probably at the thought someone could think her less than smart. “Anyway I'll be missing you.”

Arthur lost sight of the movers and their methodical checking out of the items on their list, to appreciate Sophia's gentle smile. “Likewise. You were the nicest neighbour I've ever had.”

Sophia pulled a strand of dark blond her behind her ear. “I'll have to admit I won't be missing the furniture shifting—”

She was cut off by the sound of his mobile trilling.

“Sorry, I'll have to get this,” he said, squeezing her wrist.

Thinking it was his dad asking him why he hadn't turned up at the station yet, he barely glanced at the screen. But a second before answering he noticed that the incoming call came from a withheld number. “Hello,” he nevertheless said into the phone.

“Arthur.” Arthur would have been able to recognise that voice anywhere. He hadn't heard it in two weeks and hearing it now was like being stabbed in the heart: Merlin.

“I wasn't sure you'd take my call so I borrowed Freya's phone,” Merlin said, hurriedly, nervously. “But there was something I needed to tell you and thought this was the best way.”

Merlin sounded pretty worried. Arthur had no idea what about. However unwise, Arthur couldn't shut him out. “Go on, go ahead,” Arthur said, around the lump in his throat. “I'm still... If you need me I'm still there to listen.”

“I--” Merlin said, and there was something strange to his tone, a hesitation that wasn't typical of him. “I found out something and I don't know what to do about it.”

Arthur could think of nothing but a health problem. Merlin had been mending but who knew if a knew physio had messed it up for him. “Wait, what, is it?”

“It turns out my mum lied to me.”

“I beg your pardon?”
“Arthur, I have a question.”

“Ask away.” Arthur moved away so nobody could overhear his conversation.

“How did my mum pay you?”

“Cheques.”

Merlin hummed. “Were they signed by her?”

“No,” said Arthur. “They were made out to me and signed by someone else.”

“Yeah, I guessed as much.”

“Merlin.” Arthur tried to ignore the street noises and the movers signing to him. “What's going on?”

“My mum's been lying to me about something big and I need your help.”

There was no mistaking the seriousness of his tone. “Tell me what I can do?”

“I need to drive over to my mum. I need to talk to her face to face.” Merlin's determination rang true and clear. “You're my proof. Please, Arthur, this is big. She isn't the type to lie.”

Arthur looked to the movers, then gazed at his watch. “Fuck it,” he said, “all right. I'm getting there I'll try to make it in twenty, that all right?”

“Yeah.” Merlin breathed into the phone. Then he added, “I know I'm not your charge anymore in any way. So, I, um, appreciate this.”

“Shut up, Merlin.”

Arthur finished his call with Merlin and bounded over to Sophia. “Sophia, can I borrow your car?”

“Why, where's yours?”

“Sold it.” Arthur had perhaps been a tad to quick to get rid of all the reminders of Wales and what he was leaving behind. “I didn't think I'd need it in London.”

Sophia searched her pockets and handed him the keys. “Here, but, weren't you and your dad meant to catch the train to London? If you do drive to the station, make sure to leave my car parked somewhere I can find it.”

“I'm not going to the station,” Arthur said, making a few mental calculations and realising it would be impossible to go and pick up Merlin, drive to Hunith's, drop Merlin back at his place, and make it in time for the train he'd meant to catch. “I'll go another day.”

“But your removed all your furniture, where are you going to sleep--”

“Something important has come up.” Arthur played with Sophia's car keys. “I swear I'll return your car as soon as I can.”

“Make sure it's there by three in the afternoon tomorrow and you'll be fine,” she said.

Arthur held up the fist he'd closed around the keys in sign of thanks. “You don't know how much this means to me. Thank you.” He kissed her cheek.
She looked up at him, shielding her eyes against the light of the afternoon sun. “I think I know how much this means to you.” She dropped a curtsy, toying with the hems of her puffy skirt. “And you're welcome.”

Arthur laughed, thanked her again then made for her car. Once he was behind the wheel he called his father. “Hi,” he said, once Uther had answered. “It's me and... look, I think there's been some sort of emergency and I can't catch the same train as you.”

“What do you mean an emergency?”

Arthur couldn't tell and he didn't think explaining what had happened would serve to calm his dad or stop him from haranguing him. “I'll tell you tomorrow, meanwhile you go ahead.”

“You have the tickets, Arthur.”

Arthur tapped his phone urgently with his nail. “They're in my mail in-box. I'll forward them to you.”

“But, Arthur--”

“Dad, Arthur said, his eyes on the street ahead. “I've really got to do this. Go home. You have a place to return to. I'll follow tomorrow at the latest.”

“But--”

“I've got to go.” He pushed the end call button before his dad could say more. He was at Merlin's in ten minutes flat. Freya had to have helped Merlin down the stairs for she was there in the building's courtyard, watching Merlin cross it on his crutches.

Arthur watched too.

An impulse shot through Arthur to go and help but he tamped it down. First of all Merlin would probably not appreciate the gesture. Secondly Arthur had given up the right. He'd left Merlin in the lurch and he had no right to act solicitously. His heart did stop a couple of times, whenever Merlin nearly stumbled.

But finally Merlin was in his car, throwing the crutches across the back-seat. He didn't say hello. “I'm not here for what you think,” he said, all drawn. “It's really all about my mum.”

“I know,” said Arthur, traitorously wishing Merlin had said that he'd missed him.

“I realise it's stupid.” Merlin fastened the seatbelt. Thank God he had that habit. “But my mum, I know her. She's not the lying type. I mean she's white lied like any mum. But this is worrying. Why lie if we were well off? Why didn't we go NHS if she had to borrow money? I don't understand what's going on with her.”

“I don't either,” Arthur had never stopped to think about where the money they were paying him was coming from because Hunith had been so nonchalant about it and had made it a non issue. Besides he'd had no special reason to pry. “I only know the payments were regular.”

“Who signed the cheques, Arthur?”

“A man with a rather original name.”

“Weirder than Merlin?” Merlin chuckled humourlessly.

“Yeah, actually,” Arthur said, remembering that signature at the bottom of the cheques he'd cashed.
“Balinor Jones, it said.”

“I don't know any Balinors,” Merlin's brow crinkled. “Sure as hell it's not a friend of my mum's.”

Arthur placed a hand on Merlin's thigh and squeezed. Then realised what he'd done and lancing heat shot through him. Bloody hell, he couldn't keep doing this. It wasn't his place to. But what he wanted above everything else was for Merlin to be okay. At least emotionally. He could do that. “I'll help you find out, okay? It might be something completely innocent though, so relax.”

Merlin gave him a look. Arthur read it as a 'thank you for trying to comfort me but it's not working' look.

Arthur agreed with Merlin's silent reproof. Reassuring Merlin without any proof was like talking out of his arse and wouldn't help Merlin any. “I'll take you to your mum's,” he said, turning the key of the ignition and inching out of his parking space. “So you can talk.”

“Thanks, Arthur, I appreciate that you didn't need to do this at all.”

Arthur said, “Oh but I did.”

They didn't speak further. Arthur didn't think there was anything he could say. But that didn't mean he couldn't take in Merlin from time to time, the lines on his face, his paleness, his pinched mouth, that he couldn't bask in him a little.

He wanted to reach out and touch, offer comfort, but knew that he'd forfeited his right by being so curt with Merlin before. He was no physio and he was no friend. He'd proved that when he'd left Merlin in the lurch.

As the road unfolded before him, Arthur's focus shifted from his guilty thoughts, to what was going on. It was all a bit weird, but he couldn't believe Mrs Emrys had done anything dishonest. He just hadn't pegged her like that. Well, there was no point in wondering. They had reached Mrs Emrys'; she would clear this up.

When Hunith opened the door, she smiled, but when she saw that it was Merlin and that she had Arthur in tow her radiance dimmed. “You didn't say you'd be dropping by.” She helped Merlin inside. “I'd have come to you if you wanted to see me.”

“Something has come up,” Merlin said, following her into the parlour, but looking behind him to make sure Arthur was coming too.

Arthur didn't plan to withdraw his support.

Hunith freed an armchair from the clutter and gestured for Merlin to sit. “Please.”

“I can stand,” Merlin said, and though he was pale, Arthur could see he was determined to do it.

“Merlin--”

“I can stand,” said Merlin again, leaning away from his left clutch and resting his weight on the right. Then without making small talk or bothering with an opener he added, “What I can't stand is secret and lies. And that you lied to me. Was it a poor Merlin thing? Because of the accident?”

Hunith joined her hands as if in prayer. Her eyes welled with tears and that was when Arthur knew she was truly hiding something and that Merlin wasn't being paranoid about it at all. “I-- it's not. I didn't--”
“Mum, please, don't treat me like that!” Merlin's eyes were getting as wet as Hunith's. “Please, be honest with me.”

Hunith wrung hands she seemingly couldn't keep still anymore. “I can't tell you.”

Merlin tipped his chin up, his jaw sticking out. For all his show of determination his upper lip was trembling. “Why?”

“Because you'd hate me now if I did,” said Hunith, cupping her mouth. “I'd thought I'd prepare you first.”

“I'm not fragile and I'm not an idiot, mum.” Merlin massaged his chest as though it hurt. “Tell me.”

Arthur backed back towards the hallway. “Perhaps I should go and leave you to it.”

Hunith nodded but Merlin said, “No, please, no. I don't think I can be alone for this.”

Arthur's chin snapped up and his eyes widened. Better appreciating that Merlin needed him, Arthur stayed, crossing his arms, waiting for what was about to happen. Whatever it was he'd stand by Merlin through this, help him console him. He'd betrayed him in one way; he wouldn't in another.

“So,” Merlin prompted his mother, “what have you been hiding from me?”

“The money—”

“The money that came from a certain Balinor Jones.” Merlin's tone was new, different, one that Arthur didn't recognise as coming from Merlin. It came deep from his ribcage, a dry and hopeless rasp.

“Yes that,” said Hunith, her shoulders slumping as the fight went out of her. “The money isn't from the insurance.”

“I guessed as much,” said Merlin, “so now I think the question is who was it that really paid and why.”

“A friend.” Hunith was not being very expansive with her info.

“An old friend?” A hopeful light shone in Merlin's eyes, as though he wanted nothing more than for this to be easily cleared up.

“You could say that,” said Hunith so low Arthur had a hard time figuring her words out.

Merlin seemed to find Hunith's response acceptable because his body relaxed as much as it could while Merlin was hanging onto crutches. Maybe, Arthur found himself hoping, the crisis was over. Perhaps the lie wasn't a major one. Hunith covering up the fact she'd had to borrow money from a friend to provide the best possible care for Merlin made sense.

But then Hunith spoke on. “Balinor was more than an old friend.” She hesitated, colouring slightly. “Though the friend part was there.”

Merlin's eyebrows twitched. “Was this Balinor an ex boyfriend of yours you didn't tell me about?”

“I'm afraid that that doesn't cover it.” Hunith was breathing loudly now, almost hyperventilating. “He-- he was eager to help me. But not for me.”

Merlin trembled in place, probably guessing what Hunith's words were leading up to as Arthur had.
“What are you trying to tell me?”

“That he’s your father.”

Merlin dropped one of his crutches and Arthur hurried over to him. He picked the discarded clutch up and tried to pass it back to Merlin. But Merlin was standing there half limp, completely unreceptive, unseeing.

“Merlin.” Arthur was hoping for a reaction but Merlin gave him none.

He didn’t for a long long time until he raked his free hand through his hair. “My father? But— but I don’t—”

“You do,” Hunith said, trying to take a step towards her son but stopping when she noticed the tears tracking down Merlin’s face. “He left when I was pregnant with you.”

“Did he know?” Merlin asked in a cracked voice that made Arthur want to wrap his arms around him. “Did he know about me?”

“No,” said Hunith, “I hadn't told him yet. I was trying to find a way because he was... He was a bit of a globetrotter. By the time he went, it was clear he wanted to be on the road again, wander. I was working up my courage to tell him about you before he went away. I didn't make it in time because I didn't want him to think I assumed things would change.” She paused, only to exhale the words “He never knew.”

Merlin let go of the second crutch to hold his head with both hands. Arthur had a hard time stopping himself from taking him in his arms. “But he knows now? He must since he’s paying!”

“He’s back in Wales,” said Hunith, rubbing her arms up and down as if to work warmth into them. “He read an article that mentioned your accident. Your name was in it. He guessed because there aren't many Emryses around and the age was right.”

Merlin bobbed his head; his tears hadn't stopped. “And the agreement was that he would, I dunno, unburden his conscience as long as you didn’t tell me he was around?” Merlin scrunched up his nose; snot coursed down it. “He wants to avoid me that bad?” Wincing, Merlin turned away so he was facing the wall.

Hunith dived for him but Merlin shook her off, sobbing and sniffling.

“Merlin, it was my fault. He didn't reject you! I told him not to tell you because I felt it would upset you too much after what had happened to you. You weren't ready and I think I was right. Look at you, dear. I didn't want you to go through this!”

Merlin’s shoulders shook. As he’d been tasered into action, he started towards the door and made it to the hallway. Without his crutches.

Arthur's mouth fell open.

“Can he?” Hunith asked.

“No,” Arthur said, grabbing the crutches and leaping after Merlin. “Not yet.”

Given that Arthur was in perfect shape and that Merlin was limping wilfully towards Sophia's car, Arthur caught up with him easily. “Hey,” he said, running and grabbing a hold of Merlin by his clothes.
Chest heaving Merlin shook him off, but stopped contorting himself to ease out of his grasp. He sagged and braced himself against the car's hood, his hands imprints clear on the metal.

“Merlin,” Arthur said, nudging Merlin into accepting the crutches. “Merlin, please.”

“Please what?” Merlin's shoulders moved to the rhythm of his sobs. “Please don't make a scene? Please don't feel like shit about this? Your father only wants to deal with you from far away if possible. Please consider that your mother only lied to you because she thinks that accident turned you into a helpless fool? Please what!”

Arthur had never heard Merlin shout like that. He'd heard harsh tones when he'd been down, true. He'd heard his laughter. But this was a complete novelty. It took him aback. He sounded so torn, so furious. He let his hand slowly descend towards Merlin's shoulder, feeling it quake. “No, none of that. Please, don't cry.”

“Why shouldn't I?” Merlin said even as he wiped at his eyes with his sleeve. “From where I'm standing there's plenty to cry about.”

“You don't know that yet.”

Merlin snorted.

“Besides, it kills me, seeing you cry.”

Merlin let out a big breath that sounded as if it had been punched out of him. “Don't lie. It's not going to work. It's not going to make me happy.”

Arthur stepped back, losing all physical connection with Merlin. “I'm not lying.”

“You are!” Merlin said, heat in his voice, some tears still slipping past the dam of his control. “It's okay. I told you I liked you. I told I – And you said you couldn't. I understand. Your career is more important. But now don't lie.”

Arthur pressed his hand before his mouth. “No, my career isn't more important. Not hurting you was. You were in a vulnerab--”

“Stop it!” Merlin was yelling again. “Don't you see that it's what everybody else is doing. Poor Merlin, he nearly died, let's treat him like he's an idiot. His father comes back? Let's hide that from him because God knows he can't process it. Merlin tells you he loves you, well, let's say he doesn't know what he wants!”

Arthur couldn't take this anymore. He pulled Merlin to him and kissed his forehead and cheeks.

Merlin gasped against him and stopped trembling. His open mouth tracked against Arthur's cheek and his shoulders rose with an intake of breath. He asked in a low voice. “This is not pity, is it?”

Arthur threaded his fingers through Merlin's hair, cupping his skull. “No, it's not pity.”

“Because it looks like it from where I'm--”

His fingers caressing the back of Merlin's skull, Arthur kissed Merlin's lower lip, slowly took his upper one in his mouth.

The kiss bloomed soft and wet. Arthur opened Merlin’s mouth with his own and slowly pressed his tongue inside.
Merlin's curled against his and their breaths fused, flowing back and forth as the kiss deepened. Holding him, Arthur sucked on Merlin's tongue until the kiss shallowed out.

Withdrawing, he licked at Merlin's teeth and then when he was free of the kiss, he touched the side of Merlin's mouth with his lips.

His face an inch or two from Merlin's, Arthur gazed at him and their eyes met. Arthur's throat ached at his loveliness of Merlin's gaze, at his strength. In a slow rhythm Arthur massaged the bone behind Merlin's ears, soothing. "It's not pity. I want you. I do. I just thought--"

"That I didn't know my mind?" Merlin murmured against his mouth.

"No, not that," said Arthur, "but you'll have to admit that you're going through a lot and I--"

"I am." Merlin nodded at his house, then his legs, as if to encompass them both. "That doesn't mean I don't know what I feel. If I was just grateful I wouldn't be doing this. If I didn't love you I'd just be pissed at you for leaving me."

"I didn't mean to leave you." Without Merlin Arthur had lived like a man whose heart had been wrenched out of him.

"I didn't want to abuse the power I had over you."

"You didn't have a whole lot. You aren't the only physio on earth, though you're one I trust," Merlin said, holding his body back now. "I like you. I wouldn't have kissed you if I hadn't wanted to. And if you'd asked and I was of a different mind, I'd have known to say no."

Arthur tried to interrupt Merlin, but Merlin put a hand on his mouth. "But now that belongs to the past. I'm going to hire a different physio, so it's up to you if you want to be my friend or more, or if you want to back out of this. But don't say it's about your job or my feelings coming from the wrong place. It's neither."

"Okay then." So far Arthur had acted on instinct, having wanted to be there for Merlin. And when he'd seen Merlin suffer he hadn't been able to refrain from trying to offer all of his love to him. The kiss had come from that. But now he was thinking again. He wasn't exactly rational. He was too in love for that. But now at least he could plan ahead. "In which case, I'm in it."

"Really?" Merlin's expression was wary and cautious.

"Yeah, really," Arthur said, kissing the corner of Merlin's eye to taste the tears that were drying there. "Truly. But that's not the priority now, is it?"

Merlin looked to his mum's house, the closed door, and then to the road as if he saw it as a means of escape. His breath left him in a whoosh and Arthur suspected he'd have wanted nothing better than not to fight this fight. Arthur rubbed his arms and that was when Merlin hung his head and indulged in a spot of self-confession. "I'm scared, scared that the worst will happen."

"And what do you think that is?" Arthur asked, searching Merlin's face. There was a red splotch on his nose and on his cheeks but he looked harder, calmer, when he said, "That my father--" He winced at the words, "won't want to see me. But you're right. I've got to face this. What's the worst that can happen?"

Arthur winced but was careful to hide it. "There's nothing you can't face. You're quite brave, Merlin. One of the bravest men I've ever had the pleasure to meet."

Merlin beamed at him though the lines on his face hadn't dissolved in the least. "Right," he said, casting one last glance at the building that had housed him throughout his childhood. "Let's go back
inside.”

“Do you want me to come in?” Arthur knew that the conversation about to happen was going to be quite private. “I can wait outside.”

Merlin took the crutches Arthur had given him and limped towards the door. “If it’s no bother to you,?” Merlin said, in answer to Arthur's question, “I’d love to have someone for me there, a friend.”

Arthur followed Merlin inside and listened as he told his mother, “Call him. Ask him if he wants to meet me.”

****

Merlin was tall and thin, reedy almost; his shoulders were set to be wide but he now sat slumped. Balinor had seen many men like him but the gauntness about him was staggering. Balinor guessed it was the accident

That accident that almost killed his son, for this boy was not a random one; not one of the young men that he’d met through his years of pilgrimage across the globe. This young man was his son, the son he'd never known he had.

His eyes were like Hunith's in shape if not in colour, except that the light in them was harsh, angry. His skin taut over puckers of lines born of deep frowns, he looked pale and drawn. There was a tension to his limbs as he sat on the sofa next to his friend that pained Balinor to see.

He'd hoped this moment would be different. When he'd learnt he had a son and that there was something he could do for him, he'd pictured this moment to be a reunion. He hadn't thought they'd become father and son from the get go but he'd dared believe that there'd be joy in their first meeting.

He supposed he had only himself to blame for this.

“--agreed to meet me at all if I didn't ask?” Merlin startled Balinor. “Or would you have vanished the moment you realised I was fine.”

Balinor turned his beanie in his hands. “Your mother and I thought it would be better if you weren't told the truth so soon after the accident. When the right time came, I'd meant to--” He'd certainly intended to meet his son, but he couldn't swear he wouldn't have got itchy feet right before. “I wanted to meet you, son.”

Merlin turned his face away; his profile made him look more vulnerable. “Would you have stayed if you'd known mum was pregnant?”

Balinor shuffled forwards, dragging his heavy boots. “Yes, yes I would have stayed for your birth.”

“Would you have stayed past that?” Merlin asked.

Hunith said, “Merlin,” trying to mend bridges.

“No, mum.” Merlin was curt but not unkind. “This is important. I want the truth.”

Balinor knew that to be right. “I would have gone.”

Merlin’s friend took Merlin’s hand. The fact that Merlin had some support helped Balinor plough on
“But I would have come back to check on you from time to time.”

Merlin nodded, chin stuck out. “I see.”

“I just want you to be fine, Merlin,” said Balinor, trying to look and sound as earnest as he could. “And I'd love to get to know you. I know it can't happen overnight but I'd be proud to.”

Merlin angled his face at him. “I don't know what to say.” He looking up at him with a lost expression. “When I was a kid I used to wonder what my dad was like. I was so sure he was dead. I thought that he'd be with me else, but I wondered still. But now…” He tapped his chest where his heart was. “I'm not sure I want a father now. I want to love you because you're my dad but you're not the person who's stood by me through everything, like mum or Will. Will wanted to be here for me. He's not because he died and not because he didn't give a fuck--”

“Merlin!” Hunith reprimanded their son.

Heart breaking, Balinor said, “No, no I understand where he's coming from. And it's not as if I like what I did or the man I've become. I'd understand if he doesn't want to see me again.”

Merlin pinched his nose. “I haven't said that. I'm not sure I know what I want yet. I needed to ask you those questions before I made a decision.” He flicked a reproachful glance at his mother Balinor felt responsible for. If he hadn't fucked up with Hunith, there'd be no strife now between them now. “But I'll try.” Merlin was going on. I'll try so hard to come to the right decision because deep down you're my dad.”

“I hope you can come to that decision,” Balinor said.

When Merlin left there were no hugs but for the first time since coming he threw Balinor a look that was more than reproach. It held a certain warmth to it, some hope.

Balinor treasured it.

****

Arthur drove his car up to Merlin's building and killed the engine.

“We're here,” he said, looking to Merlin.

Merlin nodded. He could see the building looming in the dark and those spots of the front courtyard that were thrown in the light. “Yeah.”

“Are you all right?” Arthur asked him, trailing his knuckles down the side of Merlin's face.

It was enough for Merlin. He sighed. That was as good an answer as any other. “Come up with me.”

“Merlin--”

“Are you still trying to protect me or gently letting me down?” Merlin cocked his head back and to the side so he could better read Arthur.

“Neither,” Arthur's shoulders came up to his ears. “But I was wondering if this was the right night.”

“It's going to be a long time before it's the right night,” Merlin said. “Some things are going to take a long time to settle.”

Arthur pocketed his keys. “I'll come up.”
“You say it like it's a bad thing.” Merlin waited for Arthur's to say something, feeling as though somebody was squeezing his heart in their fist. If Arthur said he wasn't eager, then they had no future. And for a moment there Merlin had let himself hope that they could be something. A couple maybe.

“No, no it's not a bad thing.” Arthur said, tapping his keys against the steering wheel. “It's... Difficult to act when I told myself not to.”

Merlin opened the car's door. “I want you to come up”. He could only make a clean breast of it, but he wouldn't wait eternally for Arthur to make up his mind. As much as he wanted him, they both had to come to this with no pressure put on either of them. He pushed one leg out of the car. “But I want you to have all the time in the world to find out if you feel the same.” He grabbed one of his crutches. “I just want you to do what makes you happy.”

Arthur gripped his arm midway between wrist and elbow. “You do.”

Merlin couldn't quite believe him. “A little ray of sunshine, aren't I?”

Arthur's grip tightened. “Don't joke. I want you. I want you bad. Do you even think I'd have kissed you, with you being my patient, if I didn't?”

There had been lots of things that Merlin had thought but with all his rationalising he couldn't sau he hadn't felt the rejection most keenly. “I don't know. I know you're a great physio and a man with lots of principles. Upright.” Merlin wetted his lips. “But--”

“I'm coming up,” Arthur said, “because what I feel for you isn't going to go away and I need to stop fighting my instincts. Because my instincts want me in bed with you.”

“Okay, all right,” Merlin said, fighting the blush that spread all over his body like a bad fever. “As long as--”

Arthur snorted, shaking his head. “For someone who wants me you're putting up a lot of opposition.”

“I just want to be sure you're sure.”

“I'm sure.”

On his way to his flat all Merlin could think about was Arthur holding his hand or brushing his body against his. All he could see were Arthur's smiles and his dancing eyes.

And when they made it to Merlin's room, with some shuffling and negotiating of corners, Merlin could only think about Arthur's hands on him.

Finding the support of the wall, he dropped his crutches with a thud. The noise was deafening and likely to be noted if his flatmates were in, but it didn't matter because Arthur was holding him up, backing him against the door and Merlin couldn't think of anything else but him. Even the dull ache in his legs meant nothing.

Adrenalin spiking through him, he moulded his body to Arthur's. When Arthur leant close and slanted his lips across his, Merlin's heart drummed in his chest so painfully he thought it would stop.

His thoughts started rarefying.

And then Arthur moved his lips.
Merlin's own softened, and Arthur's tongue darted out, sliding under his, flicking back, darting on top of his.

Merlin bunched up the fabric of Arthur's shirt at biceps level, melting into the kiss with a series of noises that were a cross between a sob and a sigh, not loud at all but there all the same. It would have been embarrassing but for the fact that Arthur responded by letting out a low moan of his own.

That sound spurred Merlin to touch Arthur more, his hands snaking their way up Arthur's sides and down his back, roaming and palming the expanse of his body, before serving as hooks to pull Arthur closer, to hold him tight.

Arthur executed a thorough sweep of Merlin's mouth, then he eased back, sucking in Merlin lower lip between his and letting go with a pop.

Both their breaths coming faster, Arthur kissed Merlin under his chin. He rasped his teeth along it, making Merlin tremble and throw his head back. With more access he sucked a bruise on Merlin's throat. Merlin's eyes slipped closed and his head thudded against the door. His hips began to making fast and shallow thrusts.

Arthur ground Merlin into the wall.


“Should get you to bed,” Arthur harrumphed, his fingers stuttering over the buttons of Merlin's shirt. “Should—” He didn't finish because he was moving his hips, rubbing himself against Merlin.

Merlin could feel the hardness of his own erection bumping against Arthur's and that sent his lust sky-rocketing. It made his thoughts spiral. Tangles of limbs presented himself to his fancy, twined legs, fat cocks, swollen mouths. Swallowing around the knot in his throat, his hands busy roving every inch of Arthur they could get at, he said, “Kay, let's do this.”

He undid Arthur's shirt and toppled it off his shoulders, placing both hands on Arthur's chest.

Arthur inhaled and then reached his hands out to Merlin. “Come.”

He walked backwards towards Merlin's bed, his hands wrapped palms up around Merlin's wrist. He matched his step to Merlin's slow one and Merlin went.

Arthur helped him down on the bed and stood back. He unbuckled his belt and let it drop. When this was achieved, he lowered his trousers, socks and shoes dropped alongside them.

At last Merlin could see Arthur fully naked for the first time. His body was as beautiful as it had been that day had the pool, finely muscled but not groomed to perfection, the product of massive gym rat work outs. He was beautiful to look at, strong, powerful, nicely built. He had guessed all that before however. The difference now was that Merlin could see his cock standing from a nest of coarse curls that were a shade darker than his hair.

It curved just the slightest little bit, its head fat and pink, the gland exposed, wet and slippery-looking with fluid.

Merlin could do nothing but touch himself through his trousers, pressing the heel of his hand against his cock, because it ached at the sight, and he wanted some relief.

Arthur stalked over.
He undid the button of Merlin's jeans and with Merlin's help he worked them down Merlin's legs. He stopped at Merlin's ankles, slackened the laces of his trainers, and pulled the lot off. Merlin was now just as naked as Arthur was.

The idea that Arthur could see him for all he was, that he was taking him in, both excited him and scared him. The thought did dart through his mind that maybe Arthur wouldn't like what he saw.

Because of the accident Merlin had lost muscle definition. His chest hadn't been much to begin with, his shoulders and forearms being his best claim to fitness.

But with the added scrawniness he now looked the same as he had at sixteen and his sixteen year old self hadn't had his pick of boys to fall into bed with. Besides he had a few more scars now. He didn't mind them when he was by himself. Actually he'd come to consider them proof of his being alive, of his ability to survive and take it all in stride. But others might not be as fond of them as he had become.

“Hey,” Arthur said, what are you thinking about?

“Nothing.” Merlin refused to share that embarrassing train of thought.

“You sure?”

Merlin wetted his lips. “Yes, completely, if you are.”

Arthur put a knee on the bed and bent to put a kiss to Merlin's abdomen scar, the one they had put there to remove his spleen. He traced it with his lips, following it from its stem in the middle of his chest to the spot where it ended a little bit below his navel. In his downwards grazing, Arthur ran into Merlin's cock. Without any hesitation he kissed it squarely, wetly, firmly, taking the tip between his pursed lips, sucking and suckling, only stopping to lick it with his tongue in fat swirls that drove Merlin crazy.

It was so incredible, Merlin gave little moans for each and every suckle; his hips twisting sideways. He wanted to bend his legs and use their leverage to push himself up and into Arthur's mouth, but he thought better not to overwork them.

Instead he gyrated his hips. When Merlin pants escalated, Arthur gripped the head of his cock with the seal of his lips.

The whole of Merlin's breath left him. “Arthur--”

Arthur eased off. “Don't worry. I'm not going to make you come so quick.” He nuzzled his thigh. “I want to stretch this out.” His mouth whispered along Merlin's length, kissing and nosing until he let go and crawled up Merlin's body, his weight on top of him, his cock hot and hard against Merlin's thigh.

Blanketing Merlin, Arthur tucked his face into his neck. His breathing came in short puffs fanning the side of Merlin's throat. His torso and belly expanded, making the contact of skin on skin even more complete with each breath, and mind-blowing, spine-meltingly perfect.

Slowly, as if he had all the time in the world and neither of them had an erection that should be attended to, Arthur nuzzled around Merlin's jutting ear, his fingers tight at Merlin's hip.

Merlin could feel the smile stretching against his skin before Arthur put a kiss to his jaw. “Arthur,” Merlin said, moving against him, inviting more. “Arthur.”
“You taste good,” Arthur said, running his mouth along his throat, shifting ever so slightly downwards to pepper kisses along his collarbones. “You feel good, you're good.” Even though Arthur was going as slow as trickle, Merlin couldn’t have wished for more. Though there was something he wanted out of this encounter, he could take the long way to it. It felt perfect this way and he had waited so long for some human touch that he couldn't ask for better. Besides this wasn't any old person. This was Arthur, whom Merlin held dear with all his heart, who was gentle and kind, and good to the marrow. He could ask for no better partner. There wasn't enough love he could give him to show what he felt. The body felt short. But he could try.

Their bodies rocked together.

His arm around Arthur's neck, pressing him close, Merlin made little sounds he'd have been embarrassed about if he wasn't so focused on Arthur. Needing him like he needed to take the next breath, Merlin turned his head, his mouth close to Arthur's, drinking in his every breath. They tasted fresh, sweet. They tasted of Arthur and Merlin was deliciously fond of every aspect of him.

Arthur shuffled his hips forward in a staccato rhythm all broken and tentative.

Through a deep inhale Merlin said, “I want more. I want you to fuck me.”

Arthur's gasped, his mouth falling open. Once again his hips shot forward sharply, helplessly.

“If that's what you—”

Merlin pinched his side, not so much as to leave a mark, but enough to convey a little warning, to tickle. “Remember, I know what I want.”

Arthur propped himself on his arm, his heaving chest hovering over Merlin’s. His face went all mauve from nose to cheeks and an endearing, confused smile appeared on his face. It was sweet and heartbreaking all at once, vulnerable and open, honest. “All right.”

Clearly embarrassed, he momentarily lowered his head, shielding his too wide, too damp eyes, then he scattered kisses on Merlin's waiting mouth, his soft and gentle on Merlin's, each touch full of a searching longing that made it seem as if Arthur couldn't have enough, as though he needed this with every fibre of his being. When he finally tore himself away, he spoke in a raspy voice, his lips puffed up and reddened from the friction. “Okay, condoms and lube?”

With a slight turn of the head Merlin nodded at his desk. “The second drawer there. They're stuffed under some notebooks.”

“Still trying to hide your sex supplies at your age?”

Merriment surged within Merlin from up his belly and he laughed. “Sometimes I still feel like the sixteen year old who lived at his mum’s.”

Arthur nodded, his smile brushing against Merlin's mouth. “Kay, right. I'm going.” Before doing so though he dipped his tongue into Merlin's mouth as a parting token, a lingering and tangled kiss following. At last however he picked himself up and padded over to Merlin's desk.

Given the benefit of this display, Merlin couldn't help but look at him and the way his body moved in the semi darkness, with the lights from outside limning his body with an orange glow that did nothing to make Arthur look garish or detract from the sheer beautiful physicality of Arthur. The lines of those muscles, the way his back dipped into that arse... He was a work of art, not nearly as finished, as ultimately unblemished, but touching and true. Merlin had rarely been as turned on as he was now.
Unaware of what was going on with Merlin, Arthur started rooting into his drawer, quickly zeroing in on the items he needed. Wielding them, he walked back to the bed. He dropped the items on the bed and then moved back to his prior position.

While Arthur had gone walkabout, Merlin's erection had flagged a bit. Arthur mounting him and kissing the hollow under his jaw and his face, did wonders to revive it. He had a way of dragging his lips along Merlin's skin that lit up his nerve endings like a fireworks night. The Fifth of November had nothing on this.

Once again, Arthur touched his lips to his. His tongue moved inside Merlin's mouth, slow, surprisingly gently considering what was about to happen. And even though Arthur's lower body pitched against his in a way that was glaringly primal, Arthur kept nibbling his lip, holding him by his neck, stroking his hair, as though they had all the time in the world and they could indulge in the softer side of things.

While Arthur touched his body, his mouth down Merlin's bared neck, his tongue laving the protruding bones, tracing and licking at the hollows, Merlin rolled his hips against Arthur's. The tips of his fingers found Arthur's flanks at the same time Arthur's mouth latched on Merlin's nipple, his careful little licks causing it to pebble.

Nearly unaware he was doing it Merlin gasped to the heavens, his head thrown back.

Teasing, he bit Merlin's skin and pulled back to look at him. “Okay, okay,” he panted, messy fringe hair sticking up, face red with effort. “I guess it's high time.”

“Bloody so,” Merlin said as they kissed again, open mouthed and raw, bodies shifting rhythmically, like waves, meshing together in a tangle that couldn't be undone, exactly like Merlin had fantasised.

Positioning himself, Arthur moved down his length, stroking his belly as he did. When Arthur got to his crotch, his lips parted. He stroked the tip of Merlin's cock with one finger, gathering pre-come, and took him in his mouth, causing Merlin to gasp as on his dying breath.

Teasingly, Arthur's tongue probed over the slit before taking Merlin further into his mouth.

“Spread your legs, if you can.” He drew back, waiting for Merlin to comply. After Merlin had done as he was told, his face burning with sudden shyness, Arthur went properly to work. He used Merlin's own pre-come to start opening him up.

“Fuck.” Nobody had ever used Merlin's own fluids for this before and the thought drove him a little crazy. Merlin had to touch himself and push upwards and into thin air so as to satisfy an instinct he couldn't quell. It didn't bring him much satisfaction. His pedestrian attempt at jacking himself off while distracted by the wonderful things Arthur was doing to him wasn't enough. It just drove Merlin's need up.

Of course, Merlin's own pre-come wasn't enough to slick him up. But Arthur rose to the challenge. He slicked his fingers with more product and slid more of them in. When he moved them, lighting a fire inside Merlin, Merlin bore down.

“I'm more than ready.” Arthur could be too thorough sometimes, Merlin found.

“Are you sure?” said Arthur, slowing down, his touch gentling, just when Merlin wanted it a little bit harder, just when he wanted Arthur's touch to mark him by.

“Yeah, trust me.” Merlin held his cock, squeezing and pulling to take the edge of anticipation off. He
didn't think he could look more expectant than this. He had an inkling he looked ridiculous but he
didn't care. Arthur could see him as he was. “I would know.”

“Okay.” Arthur slid his fingers out before securing a condom on. When he was sure the condom fit
snugly, Arthur positioned the tip of his cock and thrust in.

Heart in his throat, Merlin met his motions and Arthur slotted in.

“Am I hurting you?” Arthur's voice was cracked and raw, his eyes wide with astonishment and
pleasure when he looked at Merlin.

“Nope.” Merlin had never known a more gentle, hesitant lover. “Feeling no pain whatsoever, not
even discomfort. Unless you're counting blue balls.”

That eased Arthur's concern. He cracked a laugh. It was low and a little shy, quite endearing. And
this was how Merlin wanted it.

And now that he had Arthur in the cradle of his arms, he let desire overtake him and flow into him.
While Arthur gripped his hips tighter and tighter, a renewed kiss joining their mouths, Merlin pulled
Arthur to him.

Arthur moved hard against him, the stutterings of his breath punctuating the shortening jaunts of his
hips.

He made low noises as he slammed inside Merlin, his thrusts less and less precise. At them Merlin bit
his lip and pumped his cock. His hand worked faster until he was raw with it and about to come, the
world narrowing down to the pulse between his legs, the warmth flooding his spine, and the electric
zings that Arthur's motions woke deep in him.

The moment his cock started spasming in his hand, ejaculating stringy ropes of come, Arthur
stiffened. “Oh God.”

Merlin had no rejoinder. There was nothing he could say that could ever explain the beauty of this,
that could ever define his feelings for Arthur or for this time they had had the luck to spend together.
And to say they had risked never knowing this, never experiencing this earthly magic that bound
them together. As his orgasm reached its peak, warmth spread through Merlin from head to toe.

“Yes, fuck,” Arthur grunted, slotting his body deep into his in one sharp move, thrusting shallow
even through his orgasm. His body tensed, with tendons sticking out and muscles bulging. His face
on the other hand slackened, something like a veil descending over his eyes, whose gaze became
vacant, as if he was no longer tracking or highly confused. When he was done, face braised in sweat,
Arthur kissed him breathlessly and sank on top of him, his body lax. He was almost purring.

Merlin had never felt better.

*****

Arthur stopped the car in front of Hunith's for the second time in two weeks. “So are you sure you
want to do this?” he asked of Merlin.

Merlin drummed his fingers on the door handle before saying, “Yes, it's high time I started getting to
“You don’t have to.” Arthur’s reminder was gentle but firm. “He can’t expect you to become his son over night.”

“It's not overnight really.” Merlin had to be honest about this. “I've talked to him on the phone these past few days.”

Arthur didn’t say he wasn't sure that was enough to make up for a lifetime absence. But it wasn’t his place to say. “It's your decision.” Arthur decided not to voice his misgivings. “I'll be driving back to Bangor for that job interview but I'll pick you right back up when you're done.”

Merlin turned round and kissed his lips lingeringly. “No, don't. I'll ask my mum to drive me back.” He opened the door. “I'll see you tonight. Hope you stay.”

“I have all my furniture back,” Arthur said, wagging his eyebrows. “Bed included.”

Merlin snorted but the sound was more humorous than derisive. And with that, Merlin exited the car and made it to his mum's door.

****

Arthur's long stride helping with the pace, Merlin jogged forward and at Arthur's side. They'd started from Bishop's Mill Road, coasted the golf club and ran all the way to Penrhyn Ave, and were now continuing following the best jogging path there was in Bangor. Merlin's chest was lathered, the wind was ruffling his hair into what was probably a mad look, and his breath was coming in big gusts. But he didn't mind. He didn't mind one bit.

He felt like flying. His feet thundered over the asphalt, leaving long stretches of road behind. His legs carried him onward and onwards, wherever he liked. He could get to the coastal road if he wanted to. He could sprint all the way back home too, if he just wished.

He could touch the sky if he sprinted fast enough and high enough.

Maybe not today though, Arthur's panting would probably interfere with Merlin's plans to continue with the jog. “Merlin,” Arthur said, a word every few pauses, “I get that Percival has done a great job as your physio, but right now I'm the one who can't keep up.”

Pacing his gait to Arthur's, Merlin tried one last attempt at persuasion. “Come on, Arthur. Just a little more; it feels so good.”

“You want me dead, don't you?”

“You're the one who goes jogging every day.”

“Not for eight miles,” Arthur complained a little peevishly, though when Merlin said, “Please, it feels so good,” once more Arthur relented.

They jogged up the coastal road and that was where Arthur threw in the towel. “I'm done,” he said, leaning against a turnstile. “I give up.”

Merlin decreased his pace, turned back and walked towards Arthur. He butted his sweaty head against Arthur's neck, his heart in his throat, yet soaring like never before. “Sorry,” he said, putting a
kiss to the underside of Arthur's jaw.

Arthur combed Merlin's dripping hair back without even a wince at the sweat soaking it. “I know why running makes you happy. I'm not daft.”

Merlin wrapped his arms around Arthur's middle and purred. “It's just... That's the sea over there, Arthur.”

“I know.” Arthur nuzzled his face. His hands slipped behind Merlin's neck and came level with his shoulder blades. He started rubbing at the knots he found in his back, easing the massage when Merlin groaned. Arthur was great at finding tension spots and relieving them. Right now the tips of his fingers stroked him perfectly, feeling the bunched-up muscles and unknotting them. “And I understand that you're giddy, but that's no reason to kill poor me.”

Merlin chuckled, revelling in Arthur's warm breath on his cheek. “You're the fittest person I know.”

“I think Percival is fitter,” Arthur said with a pout. “He's getting you a bit pumped.”

“Want to be my physio again?” Merlin looked up at Arthur from under his lashes. “So you can butt your nose in?”

“No.” Arthur's arms tightened around him. “I'm content with admiring the splendid job Percival's done.”

“Mmm,” Merlin said, relaxing after the high running had given him. “I'm quite happy with the results too.”

“Besides, do you know what I really want to do?”

Merlin shook his head. Since he was wrapped around Arthur, each time he moved, his lips touched Arthur's skin. Nifty. “No, what do you want to do?”

“I want to go out there on the beach, have a swim and then have sex on the sand.”

Merlin tipped his head up. From this close he could make out the hazel flecks in the light blue of Arthur's eyes. It was a delight to be able to be so close and bask in the chance to register Arthur's features. But he wouldn't mind getting more active and doing what Arthur proposed. His lips tipped upwards. “Race you?”

The End

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