hold on to the memories (please don't ever become a stranger)

by ladililn

Summary

This is not a singular moment, despite the heaviness in the air between them, the heat, the extra layer of expectation. There have been moments like this before.

Merlin grows up in Buckingham Palace. Unfortunately, so does Arthur. One night, a moment comes along. This time, they take it.

(can conceivably be read standalone)

Notes

This work is less a sequel to a whole lot of history than a remix. I've been thinking a lot about multitextuality and fanon and überfic, and the truth is a whole lot of history took me so long and so many takes to get right that I had a lot of deleted half-scenes, abandoned branches, and alternate endings stored up (both in text and in my head). Somehow that fic, which obviously exists in the Merlin universe, had become its own little sub-universe in my mind, capable of sustaining just as much (well, almost) tinkering and what-ifs and AUs as the original.

Which is all another way of saying I'm writing AU fanfic of my own fanfic, because I guess my head is just that far up my own ass. (There was a point in this one where I thought through an entire alternate scenario that branches off late in part ii, but I won't be writing that, because: turtles all the way down, recursive nightmare, point of diminishing returns, etc.)
I can't make any promises about when all this will end, or conversely how often new fics might be added. Right now I have ideas for three other alternate scenarios, and one genuine sequel to the original. Possibly I will keep going until I've used up every Taylor Swift lyric that even remotely applies to Merlin and Arthur, which IMO is most of them. (Yes, I did nearly title this one *hold on to the memories; they will hold on to you (please don't ever become a stranger whose laugh i could recognize anywhere)* but I nobly resisted, mostly because even I can't justify using a semicolon in a title). Credit goes to her (and Troye Sivan) for the series title as well.

This one branches away between parts ii and iii of the original.

See the end of the work for more notes.

i.

Will wants Pop-Tarts.


“How is wanting Pop-Tarts hypocritical?”

“Because. You’re always going on about the defrauding of the taxpaying public by the monarchy and the blood amenities the king treats himself to while orphans starve in the street—”

“I never said it like *that*, I’m not a character in *Les Mis*—”

“—but whenever you come over, *you’re* the one who wants to swim in the royal pool and screen Tarantino in the royal cinema and treat yourself to royal Pop-Tarts from the royal kitchens.”

“It’s called redistribution of wealth. I’m a British citizen. The swimming pool belongs to the people. Technically, they’re already *my* Pop-Tarts.”

“What about crass consumerism and the Americanization of British culture? Doesn’t eating Pop-Tarts conflict with all that?”

“Fine, I’m a hypocrite. I admit it. Can we go get Pop-Tarts now?”

Merlin rolls over onto his back, so his head is hanging off the bed and he’s looking at Will upside down. He looks better upside down, Merlin thinks. More like that guy from *Gossip Girl*.

“I don’t want to walk that far.”

A pillow smacks Merlin in the face.

“Ow!”

“You’re hypocritical. You don’t care whether I stick to my principles; you’re just lazy.”

Merlin rubs his nose. “We have a perfectly good kitchen here. There’s stuff in the cabinets. Like…” He searches his memory. “Pasta? I think we have a box of penne.”

Will stands up and strides toward the door. “I’m going.”
“You’ll never find your way without me,” Merlin tells him. “You’ve got to go up three hallways and down two floors and through a door that looks like a wall and down another hallway and into—”

“It’s fine,” Will says, already halfway into the hall. “I’ll ask for directions if I get lost.”

Merlin chuckles to himself as Will’s footsteps recede, imagining Will encountering one of the under-butlers—almost all of whom, in Merlin’s experience, are exactly as snobbish as that title implies—and asking them to help him find some Pop-Tarts. Even better, maybe he’ll run into a member of the security staff. Or Morgana. Or Uther.

…Merlin had better go after him, just to be safe.

The kitchens are mercifully empty of people, the pantries full of every kind of ingredient and foodstuff imaginable—including, for some reason, several boxes of Pop-Tarts.

“Aren’t you supposed to toast them?”

“Tastes better cold,” Will says through a mouthful of Frosted Chocolate Chip, spraying crumbs.

“Sorry I asked.”

Now that Merlin is down here, though, he might as well take advantage. He goes hunting for leftover cake from the last big palace event, a slice of which Hunith brought home for him, and which has been highlighted in his dreams every night since.

“You said something about screening Tarantino?” Will says while Merlin wrestles a giant platter of cling wrapped cake of the fridge. Will leans over to try to steal a bite, but Merlin fights him off with his fork.

“I’m not watching Fight Club again.”

“That’s not even—” Will cuts himself off and tilts his head. “Do you hear talking?”

Merlin doesn’t get the chance to answer before the door leading down to the cavernous Buckingham wine cellar slams open and a gaggle of loud teenagers pours out. Far too late, Merlin remembers that today is Arthur’s birthday, and that after extensive negotiations he got permission to have his friends spend the night. (The theory, explained Hunith, is that the omnipresence of palace staff and security will stand in for parental supervision, keeping the teens from engaging in “any hanky panky.” Merlin thinks most adults underestimate exactly how sneaky and desperate hormone-riddled teenagers actually are, but it’s hardly his problem, so he didn’t bring it up.)

“Merlin!” says Leon, striding in with a bottle of wine in each hand. “There you are!”

“We thought you were busy,” Percival says, snagging Merlin’s fork to take a massive bite of cake. (Merlin doesn’t bother trying to fight him off the way he did Will; no force on earth can get between a six-foot-five sixteen-year-old and food.)

“I must have been mistaken,” Arthur says, appearing last in the doorway, expression unreadable.

It’s awkward; there’s no use pretending it isn’t. Merlin and Arthur used to be required to invite each other to their birthday parties, no matter how much they hated each other that particular week. That trailed off, of course, when they entered the teenage years, a time when (to Ygraine’s dismay) Arthur balked at sending written invitations, and even the term “birthday party” became uncool, replaced by vague phrases like “have a few people over,” always said with an accompanying shrug.
to convey minimum care. Merlin was neither surprised nor particularly offended not to be invited to Arthur’s sixteenth, but if he’d remembered it was tonight, he would’ve taken more care to stay out of the way. (It’s Will’s fault, of course. Will and his stupid Pop-Tarts.)

“Have you played the new Halo?” Leon asks, drawing Merlin’s attention away from Arthur.

“Sure,” Merlin says, then waits expectantly for Leon’s real question. Leon laughs.

“Fine, you got me. Have you played the new Mario?”

Merlin grins, and Percival laughs through a mouthful of cake and says, “Don’t know who he’s trying to kid, this one. We’ve all seen him get blown up in the first five minutes.”

“Five minutes?” Merlin says. “Five seconds, last time we played.”

“That was forever ago,” Leon complains. “Last autumn at least. I’ve gotten much better since.”

“There’s nothing good,” Sophia whines, shutting the fridge. Merlin doesn’t recognize the other two girls who hover around her like moths. “Arthur, can we order pizza?”

Merlin sees Arthur hesitate. Their eyes meet briefly, and Merlin knows, as none of the others can, what he’s thinking. They can order pizza, technically, but it’s a hassle, for the deliveryperson and the security staff and everyone else in the ridiculously long chain required to get the pizza from the site of its inception all the way to Arthur in the most intimate quarters of Buckingham Palace. Not to mention all the stress those in the chain will feel to get pizza to the prince while it’s still hot.

“Sure,” Arthur says, and the guys all cheer, Sophia breaking into a smug smile that masquerades as gratitude. Merlin, left without a fork, scrapes up a bit of frosting with his finger and licks it off.

“C’mon, let’s get back upstairs,” someone says, and then Leon is knocking Merlin on the shoulder, saying, “Coming?”

Now Merlin’s the one hesitating, unsure. He likes Leon and Percival, more than he liked any of Arthur’s pre-Eton friends (and more than he likes several of the post-Eton ones, including some here now). But Arthur hadn’t invited him for a reason, and Merlin doesn’t want to ruin the delicately-maintained balance of civility they’ve been in for the last five months or so by shoving his way into Arthur’s party. (That the civility has lasted as long as it has—five months has got to be a new record—is mostly due to the fact that Arthur spends his weeks and lately even some weekends at Eton, reducing the chances of an explosive argument through sheer elusiveness.)

“You should come,” Arthur says, breaking the silence of Merlin’s pause just as it verges on uncomfortable. Merlin searches his face for either sincerity or resentment but finds neither, just that same unreadable expression.

“I’m down,” Will says, hopping off the counter. Merlin almost jumps; he forgot Will was in the room. “Let’s get crazy, eh?”

Bringing Will to a party of extremely posh and soon-to-be quite drunk teens is about as bad an idea as Merlin has ever heard, but it’s too late to stop now. He lets himself get swept upstairs to the suite of private apartments serving as party headquarters, where they all wind up in a cockeyed circle on the floor, passing around mind-bogglingly rare and expensive bottles of wine, conversation growing looser and louder with every sip.

Sophia finishes off the first bottle to the cheers of the circle—Arthur’s Eton friends are a very cheer-happy lot, and Merlin might actually be eighty in a fifteen-year-old body because it’s starting
to give him a headache—and slams the empty bottle down with purpose.

“Spin the bottle,” she announces. Several of the lads groan, and for once, Merlin agrees with them.

“There’s eight guys and three girls,” Montague says. Merlin is reluctantly impressed by his maths; he would’ve put good money on Montague not being able to count to ten.

“What are you, a coward?” Sophia says, tossing her long blonde hair over her shoulder. Merlin forgets all about Montague in being reluctantly impressed by her. Suddenly half the guys in the room look determined to snog each other to the point of asphyxiation, if necessary.

Naturally, Sophia goes first. The bottle comes to a stop between Arthur and Montague, angle quite clearly favoring the latter, who looks pleased. Sophia, however, locks eyes with Arthur and smiles coquettishly, and when it clicks for Montague, he at least has the good sense not to protest.

It’s obvious that Arthur pulls away from the kiss sooner than Sophia would like, but she masks her disappointment well. Merlin suspects it has less to do with Arthur not being interested, and more to do with the fact that he’s an intensely private person, the concept of PDA as anathematic to him as holding a fork in his right hand. It’s a royal thing.

This, at least, he understands implicitly. The general nature of Arthur and Sophia’s relationship is not so easily grasped, even, Merlin thinks, by the participants. As far as he can tell, the two of them don’t even particularly like each other. Whatever the true origin of their relationship—an initial spark of real attraction, a vague sense of prescription, a random accident of a chaotic universe—the fact is that Arthur is the uncontested leader of his group of lads, and Sophia of the girls, and they will probably go on drifting together and apart through sheer inertial force until they leave school, when they’ll both be free to find someone they actually enjoy spending time with. Merlin would almost pity them, except it’s not like there’s anyone forcing them into it, so mostly it just makes him roll his eyes.

“Your turn, Arthur,” singsongs one of the other girls, earning a sharp look of resentment from Sophia. The girl snaps her mouth shut, turning pink, caught with the temerity of wanting the Prince of Wales to kiss her.

Arthur spins the bottle with the grim air of general mapping out his plan for war. It lands—as unmistakably as a compass needle pointing north—pointed at Merlin.

Merlin swallows, mouth suddenly gone dry. It’s okay, he tells himself, in the too-fleeting interval of time between the bottle coming to rest and Arthur looking up at him with a fixedly determined expression. You’ve kissed Arthur before. He has, that day in the library, when he was twelve and Arthur was being stupid and there was no one else in the room to see. Of course, Merlin hadn’t known he was gay then—he might’ve suspected, but he hadn’t put it into concrete terms, not even in his own mind—and now he does. He’s kissed one other boy since then, one honest and fumbling kiss, and he comforts himself with the knowledge that not all of his kisses will have been dares, self-imposed or otherwise, executed by the boy who once smashed a slice of lasagna in his face. (Just two-thirds of them, is all.)

Arthur gets on his hands and knees, and Merlin doesn’t meet him halfway because just because it’s his birthday doesn’t mean Merlin has to go easy on him. Arthur realizes this when he’s leaned as far as he can go and is forced to crawl forward a bit, and his eye roll is as familiar to Merlin as his own name.

The kiss isn’t much different from their last one. Arthur’s lips are a little surer, a little less chapped—does he use balm, Merlin wonders distantly, for Sophia’s sake?—and his hand on the back of
Merlin’s neck is surprisingly firm. It’s briefer, at least, than the last, and as Merlin settles back on his heels, he feels faintly satisfied to have made it through without any particular embarrassment or disaster. He expects Arthur to be as nonchalant, but instead he catches a glimpse of something in Arthur’s eyes as he withdraws to his place in the circle—a flash of startled recognition. If Arthur hadn’t been recalling that day in the library before, maybe he is now.

It’s Merlin’s turn, so he clears his throat and spins. The bottle points to Will, sitting next to him, and Merlin’s chest loosens a little in relief. He knows Will. He trusts Will. This will be easy.

Will betrays him.

Instead of simply kissing him, Will kisses him. He slides his hand around the back of Merlin’s neck and opens his mouth against Merlin and snogs him, with all the soft-lipped sucking and quiet noises and even some of the tongue that implies. One of the boys wolf-whistles—a girl giggles—Merlin has his eyes closed and can’t tell who. He’s aware, even without thinking the whole thing through, that he’s being used: that Will is kissing him this way to send some sort of message to Arthur, a performance laden with class-consciousness and masculine posturing and a shapeless, unarticulated point about queer visibility. More than anything, Merlin knows, it’s a power move, a tangled strand in the complex web of teenage social dynamics, the morass of which would send even the canniest politician running for the hills. Merlin knows this, and he’s not happy about it—but it is a hell of a kiss.

Will finally pulls away with a satisfied smirk, and Merlin blinks. His ears feel hot, his lips seem to be buzzing, he’s thoroughly out of breath, and it takes several long moments before he remembers to close his mouth. He must look like an idiot. He tries valiantly to compose himself—what was that word, again? Nonchalance, right—and vows, with a slight gritting of the teeth, to get his revenge on Will later, in private. He can’t exactly start a row in the middle of Arthur’s birthday party (at least not someone other than Arthur—it wouldn’t be fair).

Will’s spin lands on the girl who’d wanted to kiss Arthur, who looks apprehensive at this turn of events. Will gives her a toned-down version of what he gave Merlin, setting off the wolf-whistles all over again.

In his effort not to look—Merlin seems to have an inverted version of Arthur’s aversion to PDA, where he gets distinctly uncomfortable seeing anyone else engage in it—his eyes land on Arthur. His breath catches in his throat. Whatever message Will intended to send, it’s clear Arthur understood it perfectly. (Probably better than Merlin, who understands the way he does Shakespeare—he gets the gist, but there are nuances he knows he’s missing unless he reads one of those “translations” into modern English.) Arthur is looking at neither Will nor Merlin, but at the bottle, as though he might achieve telekinesis with the intensity of his stare.

The girl emerges from Will’s kiss looking not exactly displeased, and spins the bottle almost breezily. It lands on Leon. After the rollercoaster of the last few rounds, their kiss is blissfully standard, neither chaste nor obscene. Then Leon spins, and gets—Arthur. (Well, it’s another split—tough to call, this time, between Arthur and Percival—but before the question can be raised Arthur is already leaning in.)

Their kiss is almost identical to Leon’s last, maybe a moment shorter. Merlin’s stomach sinks with the confirmation that whatever maneuver of one-upmanship Arthur now feels the need to perform, it can’t be accomplished by kissing Leon. (Merlin’s not exactly sure how that would work, anyway, but hey, he’s never claimed to be Shakespeare.) Arthur puts a hand on the bottle, eyes darting around the circle, and Merlin tries to comfort himself with the knowledge that whatever athletic prowess and maths ability Arthur may possess, none of it can have equipped him with the
skill to spin a bottle with the perfect degree of torque to land exactly where he means it to.

Except apparently he can.

In the moment before Arthur takes up Merlin’s entire field of vision, he sees Sophia looking irritated, Leon looking bemused, Will rolling his eyes. And then there’s nothing but Arthur, who cups Merlin’s face with surprising gentleness. And Merlin knows, knows he’s being used again, knows that for the sake of his pride and dignity and general self-respect he should put a stop to this, but he’s also fifteen and queer and so untouched he feels a bit mad with it. And he’s curious, and his heart is beating right out of his skin, and Arthur always gets his way, anyway, so—so—

Arthur’s lips on his are teasing, the lightest brush. He pulls back, slightly, and then—again, there and gone like butterfly wings. Arthur keeps doing this, lingering a half-second more each time, and Merlin can tell what he’s doing, and he won’t have it, so he fists his hand in Arthur’s shirt and yanks him in, kisses him hard. Arthur’s mouth opens, probably from surprise, and Merlin takes the opportunity to slip in his tongue, feeling as he does that whatever the argument is between Will and Arthur, Merlin might be winning it. A beat passes, and then Arthur responds, coming alive under Merlin’s touch, and then—oh.

Merlin knows this feeling. It’s the same one he got his first time on Big Thunder Mountain when they went to Disneyland Paris for Arthur’s tenth birthday. It’s somehow the same one he got when he read his first properly grown-up novel and felt that he got it, not in the sense of understanding Shakespeare or something in French, but in the sense of seeing the deeper meaning, feeling everything that the author wanted him to about love and life and God and power. It’s an amplified, zoomed-and-enhanced version of a feeling he’s caught in brief snatches here and there over the years, when he and Arthur have found themselves for once in perfect accord, trading a joke or a grin or a sympathetic shoulder pat meant for and understood only by each other. It’s dizziness and butterflies and every other stupid cliché, and it gets Merlin’s blood buzzing like he never known is possible.

Arthur pulls away too soon—too soon for Merlin’s liking, and too soon next to Will’s challenge. Will snorts. Two of the girls are uninterested enough in what’s happening in the game to be carrying on an unrelated conversation. Merlin blinks his eyes open. Arthur is still so close. And Merlin can see in his face that even if no one else noticed, Arthur feels it too—a seismic shift in the space between them. There’s no going back from this. Not when they know that together they can feel like that. Merlin’s heart pounds from a combination of exhilaration and fear.

“Merlin’s turn,” someone says, but then comes a knock at the door, and a general scrambling to hide wine bottles as Montague leads the group in a chant of “PIZZA! PIZZA!” Merlin loses Arthur in the chaos, and when he finds him again Arthur is eating pizza (with extra pepperoni piled on by Sophia, who despite ordering the pizza apparently doesn’t like this kind) and playing some kind of foot war with Percival. A strange mixture of relief and disappointment washes through Merlin. Maybe there’s no going back from this, but there’s always pretending. One kiss is not the fall of the Berlin Wall.

One of the lads—Gregory, Merlin thinks? God, he’s had too much wine to bother keeping them straight—raises a bottle and starts singing Happy Birthday. “To Arthur!” toasts Leon when the song ends, and everyone—even Merlin, if not Will—cheers and drinks.

“Time for presents!” Sophia squeals, producing a gift bag from what seems like thin air.

“What for the loo,” Will mutters under his breath. He leaves out the wrong door, but Merlin can’t convince his heavy limbs to follow this time around. He’ll find a bathroom eventually, surely.
“Were we supposed to bring presents?” someone asks.

Sophia’s present turns out to be two heavy bags of expensive coffee beans. “It’s supposed to be the best,” she says. “Maybe this will teach you to actually enjoy coffee!”

“Arthur, mate, you don’t like coffee?”

Sophia giggles. “He’ll only drink it if it has more sugar and whipped cream than actual coffee. I have to let the barista think it’s for me to spare him the embarrassment.”

Montague and Probably Gregory and That Other One laugh. “Thank you,” Arthur says, and Merlin can tell how much he’s trying to mean it, how he wants the not-so-subtle dig to roll off his back like water over a duck. Merlin can’t wait to be out of all this—not just the party, but teenagehood and secondary school, these years when a kiss can be a weapon and a present can be an insult. Maybe he’s overly optimistic, but he can’t help thinking that in uni people stop caring so much about every little thing, and things can just be what they are and mean what they mean.

Leon has a card for Arthur. It references some inside joke that only the Etonians are privy to; judging by their peals of laughter and the things Merlin has known them to find funny before, he doesn’t want to know. No one else has thought to bring Arthur a present—one of the first things to fall by the wayside along with the term “birthday party”—but Arthur waves off all their apologies.

“It’s fine,” he says, as Will reenters the room. “I wasn’t expecting—”

“No, Will,” Merlin hisses, grabbing Will’s arm, but Will shakes him off easily, smirking as he tosses the box to Arthur. Arthur peels off the paper warily. Merlin tries to look composed, unbothered, nonchalant; it’s all just more of the same, typical Merlin and Arthur, oh how their mothers will laugh, nothing to misinterpret or—

“Huh,” Arthur says, looking at the box in his hand. His face is unreadable again, which is just unfair. Probably Gregory leans over for a peek, but before he can get one, there’s another knock at the door.

It turns out to be a staffer apologizing for having to turn away the Party Bus that Sophia apparently ordered without telling anyone. “We’re so sorry, but their majesties were very clear that you should not go off grounds.”
“I understand,” Arthur—who’s slipped the box into his pocket, Merlin notices—says, as the staffer rambles on about palace rules and security checks. “That makes perfect sense, please don’t apologize. Thank you for letting us know. Sorry to have bothered you. I take full responsibility. This won’t happen again.”

Sophia pouts as Arthur closes the door with a final, “Have a good night.” Merlin takes advantage of this latest distracting scenario to elbow Will in the stomach, glaring. Everyone drifts back to the wine and room-temperature pizza, quieter than before, unsure what to do next.

It’s Sophia who has the idea, of course. Hide-and-go-seek in the garden. It’s as perfect an idea as it is absurd, somehow the natural capper on a night of drinking and snogging. They are fifteen, sixteen, as eager to become adults as they are to be children again, trapped in the no-man’s land between freedom and independence. The night air is fresh and cool, and Merlin feels his senses come alive again, some of his haziness evaporating away.

No one can agree on the rules, so they wind up playing some lawless amalgamation of hide-and-go-seek and tag and sardines and kick the can (without the can) and capture the flag (without the flag). The full moon provides the only light. The noise of London is muffled by acres and acres of greenery; breathless laughter and startled shrieks from those being caught or running away provides a different kind of music.

Merlin’s smug confidence in having the advantage—he knows this garden better than anyone here besides Arthur—lasts him all of five minutes before Percival is crashing toward him through the underbrush. Merlin takes off, springing like a deer through the trees, checking over his shoulder to see whether he’s lost his pursuer—

He slams into something solid and almost crashes to the ground. A hand gripping his arm keeps him upright. It’s Arthur, hair pale and eyes shining in the moonlight, steadying Merlin against him. They look at each other for one long moment, pressed together so close in the cradling night, and then they’re kissing.

Arthur stumbles backwards—Merlin’s fault, for pressing in too eagerly, but Arthur doesn’t seem to mind, if the way his arms tighten around Merlin’s waist is any indication. Merlin makes a noise, something between a sigh and a whimper, and Arthur swallows it. Somehow they wind up on the ground, behind some bushes, Merlin half on top of Arthur. Arthur’s hands are in his hair. Arthur’s tongue is in his mouth. The last time Merlin can remember being this lightheaded, he was on laughing gas at the dentist. He accidentally elbows Arthur in the stomach, and Arthur makes an _oof_ sound, then laughs against Merlin’s mouth. Merlin laughs too. He sucks on Arthur’s lower lip, pulls away just to watch the blood rush back in. He does it again, and again, until Arthur takes him by the back of his neck and kisses him firmly, slipping his tongue back in, and Merlin is back to sighing.

Something rustles loudly in the bushes. Arthur sits up, looking around. Merlin tries to quiet his breathing. Unsuccessfully. “You sound like you’re pumping up a mattress.”

“Well, you sound like—a prat.”

Arthur rolls his eyes, then stills. “Someone’s coming,” he whispers. He reaches for Merlin’s hand, and leads him at a crouch away from the main path.

They wind up at the garden shed, which is almost certainly cheating, but the ship sailed on proper hide-and-seek etiquette long ago. Sometime last year all the outbuildings had number pads installed as part of a security upgrade, but since the crotchety old head gardener didn’t want to remember a bunch of different number strings—and didn’t see why anyone would want to break into a shed of
ancient garden tools anyway, which point Merlin could see—they all have the same code. “It’s 1-2-3-4-5,” he says helpfully, peering over Arthur’s shoulder.

“I know!” Arthur hisses, punching it in. The door clicks open, and they stumble in. Merlin wastes no time in pushing Arthur up against the nearest wall and kissing him.

They kiss eagerly, thirstily, giddily, stupidly, clumsily. Merlin steps on a rake and Arthur gets his foot tangled in a hose. They kiss until Merlin’s mouth is actually sore, then keep kissing anyway.

“Do you hear fireworks?” Merlin asks, pulling away just a fraction.

In the dim lighting, he hears rather than sees Arthur’s smirk. “I’ve been known to have that effect.”

Merlin rolls his eyes, smacking him on the shoulder. “No, idiot. Listen.”

Arthur does, and the whistle and pop of fireworks are unmistakable now. “I think there was something going on at the Oval. Or maybe they’re celebrating my birth—”

Merlin kisses him, both to shut him up and because he realizes he doesn’t care. He clammers awkwardly into Arthur’s lap, again fistng his hands in Arthur’s shirt. Arthur hums in agreement, running his hand up and down Merlin’s spine like he’s playing the cello. They kiss until Merlin forgets where they are and when they are and who he is and why anything matters beside this: the slip and slide of tongues, the little hitches in Arthur’s breath, the way his chest feels solid and warm beneath Merlin’s hands.

It feels like hours and hours later that sounds of people calling Arthur’s name reach them. Peeking out the door, they see flashlight beams from mobiles strafing the trees. “Right, I’ll go first,” Arthur says. “Wait a few minutes and then follow, but try to look like you’re coming from another direction.”


“Your hair’s a mess,” Arthur whispers.

“So is you,” Merlin says, caught halfway between so is yours and so are you. Arthur smiles. “I mean—”

Arthur kisses him, running his fingers roughly through Merlin’s hair, robbing him of all breath. He pulls away with a smirk and disappears out the door.

“Ass.”

ii.

The next day it’s a broom cupboard.

The day after, a bathroom, where they’re almost caught by a group of tourists. (There are plenty of bathrooms in Buckingham Palace off-limits to the public, of course, but this one was closer.)

The day after that is a Monday, which means Arthur has to go back to Eton. The only communication they have during the week is on Wednesday, when Arthur texts him a blurry picture of a stray cat with exceptionally large ears and writes haha it’s you. (Merlin’s response, you
never actually go to class do you, goes unanswered.) He returns Friday afternoon, and by Friday evening is biting Merlin’s ear in another broom cupboard.

It doesn’t feel so much like sneaking around as it just feels…private. Three weeks in, Ygraine sighs and says, “Well, the peace was nice while it lasted.” Merlin has a sudden fit of coughing. (Arthur helpfully pounds him on the back.) It’s true that their period of civility has ended; Merlin thinks now that it was more a period of distance than anything. (Arthur stops spending weekends at Eton unless absolutely necessary.) Now they’re back to the bickering and insults, at least in public; in private they exact retribution through nips and—well, more insults, but affectionate ones.

On an unseasonably warm Valentine’s Day—which neither of them acknowledge by name, before, during, or after—they lie on their backs in the summerhouse, holding hands and making up stories about constellations in the cracks of the ceiling. Arthur brings the hand holding Merlin’s up to muffle his laughter at Merlin’s tale of the great battle between Porkus Pigus and the Flying Squirrel, and Merlin looks over at him and grins. He props himself up on an elbow and kisses Arthur sweet and slow.

Everything is new, everything is fumbling and amazing and awkward and overwhelming. The first time they get off together Merlin comes just from Arthur’s palm rubbing him through his jeans. He would be embarrassed, except he hasn’t even fully come down before Arthur has his own dick out, coming in just a few quick strokes, gasping something that sounds suspiciously like Merlin’s name.

On their four-month anniversary—not that Merlin means to keep track, but it’s sort of hard not to be aware when it all started on Arthur’s birthday—he sneaks into Arthur’s bedroom with a bag of Nando’s. (He recently discovered that Arthur has never had it before, and knew that had to be rectified immediately if the future King of Great Britain was to have any hope of relating to his people.) Today’s revelation is that Arthur never finished that new Halo game that Leon had asked Merlin about.

“I got stuck,” he says, biting into a chicken wing. (He asked for Xtra Hot, bless him, but Merlin ordered him Medium. What Arthur doesn’t know won’t hurt him.) “On that level with the…caves. And all the marines.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Arthur shrugs. “It was months ago. Before all this.” He waves his chicken bone between them to indicate all this.

“So? You always used to let me help.”

“Yeah.” Arthur frowns. “I thought about it. It just seemed a bit weird to ask, I suppose. We hadn’t really talked recently.”

Merlin’s never really thought about it before, how easily their relationship flows between one phase and another, how the last eight years of living together has seen them in times of vicious conflict and harmless badgering and silences both purposeful and circumstantial. It’s been anything but a linear progression, with phases revisited and skipped over and lingered in and petering out. He can’t imagine that being true going forward, though. Whatever the next phase is, it will be brand new to both of them, an unavoidable advancement down some path or another.

He ends up settling between Arthur’s legs and playing Halo, Arthur’s chin hooked over his shoulder, breath in Merlin’s ear sometimes making it hard to concentrate. (He beats the mission
Merlin is the first to take the plunge—no entendre intended—and go down on Arthur. He wants to be smooth and confident, as expert at giving head as the blokes in the videos he’s bookmarked for research purposes, but he can’t keep his gag reflex from kicking in when Arthur’s cock touches the back of his throat, and his jaw starts to ache so quickly he wonders if he should see a doctor. (The brief thought of how that conversation would go almost makes him have to pull off for a slightly hysterical giggle, but then Arthur moans and nothing in the world is funny anymore, just really, incredibly hot.)

“I’m gonna—” Arthur pants, and Merlin squeezes his hips to encourage him. Arthur accidentally kicks Merlin between the shoulder blades. It’s ridiculous that even this is hot; sex is ridiculous, but here they are anyway.

It’s more than he expected, when Arthur comes, and despite his best intentions to swallow Merlin ends up choking and coughing in a way he knows is not remotely sexy. It’s worth it, though, for how wrecked Arthur looks, even through Merlin’s slightly teary eyes, and the way he hauls him up and takes him in hand with hungry, urgent strokes. Merlin comes biting into Arthur’s collarbone, stars exploding behind his eyelids like actual fireworks. (Not that he’s going to tell Arthur that; it would go straight to his already terribly inflated head.)

For several long minutes they lie there, Merlin draped boneless across Arthur’s chest, quieting their synced-up breathing and heartbeats. Then Merlin starts to giggle, muffled against Arthur’s skin.

“What exactly is so funny, idiot?” Arthur asks, the affection and post-coital contentment in his voice belying his flick on Merlin’s forehead.

“I was just thinking of The Sun.” Earlier that day, the paper had published pap photos of Arthur behind the wheel of the family Land Rover under the headline Prince Arthur’s First Driving Lesson! “D’you think tomorrow’s headline will be Prince Arthur’s First Blowjob?”

“It will if I have anything to say about it.” Arthur rolls over to grab his mobile off the bedside table. “Hello, is this The Sun?” he says gravely, fighting a hopelessly laughing Merlin off with one arm. “Mate, have I got a story for you.”

Merlin gets really into perfecting the Art of the Blowjob over the next several weeks, a process Arthur very much enjoys until the first time he reciprocates. He gets through about three minutes of Merlin’s helpful instructions—“breathe through your nose, don’t forget,” “if you start to gag, try humming,” “lick the frenulum, that’s the bit—” before Arthur pulls off and hits him in the face with a pillow.

“I don’t want to hear any noise out of you unless it’s a moan,” he says. Merlin opens his mouth to protest, but thinks better of it.

Arthur manages pretty well on his own, and even lets Merlin’s non-moan noises slide near the end (it probably helps that it’s mostly variations of his own name). He’s annoyingly smug about it, which Merlin fixes by kissing his own taste out of Arthur’s mouth while working Arthur with his hand until he’s begging for release.

Once he has perfected it—or near enough to satisfy, anyway—Merlin starts taking his research in
new directions. Instead of bookmarking *bio* and *history* videos (his code words for *blowjob* and *handjob*, in case of the awful possibility his mum should go snooping about on his laptop) he saves *applied science* videos. And he starts experimenting with brushing his fingers over his entrance while he masturbates, then with tentatively pushing in. He wants to be ready for it when he’s ready for it. (That sentence makes sense in his mind, at least.)

*As all this* approaches six months, Merlin starts thinking about getting Arthur some sort of present. (He can pass it off as a half-birthday gift, not so much because he’s afraid Arthur will be upset if he acknowledges an anniversary but because it’s become kind of an inside joke for them not to.) So far they’ve avoided talking much about the future, mostly because they’re *teenagers* and the future is murky and terrifying, but also somewhat because they’re both boys and Arthur is the Prince of Wales and those are two facts no one can do anything about. Merlin’s not about to propose marriage or anything, but he would like to give Arthur some—some kind of reassurance. Something that indicates that Merlin isn’t going anywhere, that he’ll stick by Arthur no matter what, that he trusts and supports him in whatever decisions he makes.

Ygraine dies ten days before Arthur’s half-birthday, and Merlin never works out what that gift would have been.

iii.

Merlin doesn’t know what to do.

“Oh, sweetheart, you’re not supposed to,” Hunith says, drawing him into a hug. Her eyes are red from crying. Merlin clings to her, throat tight with everything he can’t say. He *is* supposed to. His secret boyfriend, the Prince of Wales, has lost his mother, and Merlin is hopelessly, hilariously out of his depth.

He doesn’t see Arthur all week, not really. Just glimpses here and there, far away or in crowded rooms, and each time his heart drops to the floor, because Arthur looks so—leaden.

“What are you doing?” Gaius asks. They’re at the funeral reception, and Merlin is on tiptoes, trying to see over the heads of the people packed in like depressing goth sardines.

“Looking for Arthur.”

Gaius puts a hand on Merlin’s arm. “Best let him alone for now.”

That’s exactly it, though, the dilemma Merlin agonizes over: whether to reach out to Arthur or wait for him to come on his own. He doesn’t want to say the wrong thing, doesn’t want to act like nothing’s happened or treat Arthur like he’s made of glass. He can’t think of a single approach that doesn’t end in some form of disaster. There’s no road map for this.

So he nods, stops looking, waits.

Three days later there’s a knock on his door. Arthur. He’s in black—distantly, Merlin wonders whether the royals still adhere to some version of the Victorian mourning code, or whether this is a decision Arthur is making himself—and his eyes are hollow. He looks like he’s lost a full stone in the last ten days.

“Hey,” Merlin breathes, stepping aside to let him in.
Arthur moves around Merlin’s room, picking things up and turning them over, unseeing, then putting them back down. Merlin watches from bed, hugging his knees.

“How are you?” he asks, and instantly wants to kick himself.

Arthur shrugs, fingers skating over a pile of books. He picks one up and sets it down immediately, grown too restless to even pretend to be looking.

Eventually he comes and sits down next to Merlin, staring into space with the haunted look of a soldier. Merlin doesn’t know what to say, what to do. He aches to touch, but he doesn’t know if he should. He doesn’t know. He doesn’t know. He doesn’t know anything.

Arthur flops back on the bedspread, and Merlin gingerly lies down too, propped up on one elbow. Arthur closes his eyes, then opens them again, as though he’d hoped that shutting out the visual world would shut out the pain—even just dull it a little—and found there was no such easy escape. Merlin reaches out, slowly, like approaching a wounded animal, to stroke his hair.

Arthur catches his hand, and Merlin freezes, heart pounding with having misstepped. But Arthur brings his hand to his mouth instead, kissing the palm. His lips move to Merlin’s wrist, and then the sensitive skin of his forearm, his inner elbow, and then Merlin leans down and fits their mouths together.

Arthur surges up. His kisses are needy, hungry, desperate. Merlin tries his best to keep up, to gentle Arthur’s ferocity with soothing touches, soft capitulation. But it’s too much, all wrong: Arthur scrabbles at him, frantic, and they’re not so much kissing now as shoving their mouths together, and Arthur’s breath is labored, uneven.

“Shh, shh,” Merlin whispers, stroking Arthur’s side. “Shush, it’s all right, I’ve got you, it’s all right.”

He knows he’s lying even as he says it—it’s not all right, nothing will ever be all right again—but he thinks maybe that’s all comfort is, lies people tell each other in hope they’ll come true. Arthur buries his face in Merlin’s neck. Merlin pets his hair, murmuring all the sweet nonsense that comes to mind, as Arthur breathes harsh pants and then starts to cry.

Arthur sobs into his chest, and Merlin holds him, pressing his lips to the top of Arthur’s head, straining to keep together so Arthur can fall apart. After maybe five or ten minutes—not long enough, Merlin thinks—Arthur pulls abruptly away, cutting off a sob and wiping a hand over his face, suddenly tense and rigid.

“I should—go,” he says, and Merlin nods dumbly. He follows Arthur to the door, certain that this is a key moment, a time for him to say just the right thing, to help Arthur cross some bridge that will lead to healing, but he still just doesn’t know, doesn’t know anything. Arthur pauses by the door. He looks into Merlin’s eyes for the first time since he got here. He opens his mouth to say something—thank you? sorry? goodbye?—but can’t seem to get the words out, instead leaning in to give Merlin a soft, chaste kiss on the lips. And then he is gone.

Merlin sits on the floor beside his bed, numb. He hugs his knees again, resting his head in his arms, and then, like the burbling of a bath drain when the water gets low, hicups and breaks apart. Hunith knocks softly and enters, wrapping her arms around him, squeezing his shaking shoulders as he cries.

“I know, love,” she murmurs, her own tears wetting his hair, and Merlin cries harder, because she doesn’t. Because he should be crying for Ygraine, a woman who loved him like a second mother,
and he is, but he’s also crying for—for all this, what he and Arthur had together, what he’s starting to realize they will never have again: easy, carefree kisses in the summerhouse; lying in opposite directions on Arthur’s bed to revise, tangling their legs together; the wrestle/tickle fights that were some percent innocent childish fun, some percent arousing and decidedly adult, a constantly-shifting balance they were still coming to understand. He cries out of guilt and loss and resentment and remorse, for Arthur and Merlin and Ygraine and Hunith and Uther and the whole world together.

The next day, Uther takes Arthur and Morgana to Botswana to get away from the press. Merlin doesn’t hear from him in all that time, months and months, not even on his own birthday. (He hadn’t really expected to.) When they finally return Arthur has to go straight back to Eton, and that weekend he doesn’t come home.

Merlin understands why the first time he finds himself in a room with Uther. The king’s presence is stifling, his grief all-powerful and overwhelming, unbearable. And the palace, Merlin knows, can’t feel safe for Arthur now, not with his mum’s memory so ingrained in every room. Uther can’t seem to decide whether to memorialize anything his wife ever touched or get rid of everything remotely connected to her. Both choices—a portrait moved to a more prominent position, taking the place of a Raphael Virgin Mary, which gets shunted to a corner; the disappearance of her favorite lamp (a junky old flea market thing, out of place among the priceless antiques of Buckingham decor, with a cracked lampshade and wiring that went haywire at the slightest touch, which Ygraine, ever the lover of lost causes, refused to part with)—stand out like storm clouds on a sunny day. All the changes, Merlin thinks, are as though someone has driven a tank into the palace, and everyone is just going on living their lives, pretending not to see the gaping hole where the wall used to be, pretending not to feel the icy wind or trip over piles of rubble. Merlin understands why Arthur stays away. He can hardly blame him.

He’s not sure if he was right or wrong about the next phase of their relationship, that day in Arthur’s room playing Halo. In many ways they have returned to how they were before: moving in different orbits, part of the same system but as separate as Mercury and Neptune. Merlin comforts himself that it’s nobody’s fault, that many fully mature relationships have been permanently rent by grief. They were two teenagers snogging in cupboards and sneaking out to hold hands in the garden, a few months of giddy romance before an extinction-level event. They never had a chance at making it through this, and no one could have expected any different.

But it’s not exactly the same as it used to be, because now they know. They have an added layer of history between them, one more textured and rich with meaning than any that came before. It’s weird, certainly, whenever they find themselves in the same room, Merlin flushed and prickly every time they accidentally make eye contact. But he doesn’t want to go the rest of his life avoiding Arthur, either. There’s something so absurd about breakups, which require you to be in a room with someone with whom you’ve shared the most intimate possible moments and pretend to be little more than strangers. Their eyes meet in church on Easter Sunday, and instead of looking quickly away Merlin gives Arthur a small smile. Arthur returns it, and it’s just one brief moment before a procession of white robes blocks the aisle between them, but for hours after Merlin feels the warm glow of it in his chest, like just for a while everything is all right again.

iv.

It’s surprisingly easy not to be alone together in a palace staffed by nearly 500 people, visited by
half a million tourists per year. Which makes it even *more* surprising when it does happen. Like the
day Arthur and Morgana enter the private library, where Merlin is reading in peace and quiet, in
the midst of an apparently epic argument.

“It’s *gif*, Morgana. Hard g. Guh-if.”

“It is *not*. I’ve never once heard it pronounced that way. Merlin, tell him I’m right. It’s a soft g,
right? *Jif*.”

“Um. As much as I hate to agree with Prince Prat”—Arthur rolls his eyes over Morgana’s shoulder
—“I’m pretty sure it is *gif*. Hard g.”

Morgana crosses her arms, put out. “Well, *jif* just *sounds* better, doesn’t it? That’s idiotic.”

“Why don’t you take it up with the Oxford English Dictionary,” Arthur says, smug. Morgana
throws up her hands and stalks out of the room.

Which is all well and good, except she leaves in her wake a deafening silence, a creeping horror
movie realization of being left alone with the monster in the attic. (Okay, that’s not *really* how
Merlin thinks of Arthur, but “alone with an ex” does evoke a comparable amount of terror in any
reasonable person.) Arthur seems to realize it at the same time—and they’re in the *library*, too,
where they had their artless first kiss—and goes a bit pale.

“I’ll just,” he says, taking a step toward the door, thumbing vaguely over his shoulder. “Er, see you
—”

“Yup,” Merlin says, nodding far too enthusiastically to be natural. How many nods per second is
standard? *Should* he be nodding? He tries holding his head perfectly still instead. “Have a good—
um. One.”

“Abso…” Merlin can’t tell whether Arthur said *lutely* out in the corridor, or if he just left the word
unfinished.

The next time it happens, Merlin’s going down a back staircase and Arthur is coming up. It also
happens to be Arthur’s eighteenth birthday. Sometimes Merlin thinks his life is one big cosmic
joke.

“Happy birthday,” he says, halting before they run into each other. Arthur’s holding a half-full
bottle of wine, party horn in his mouth. “Meeting people?”

Arthur blows the horn in answer. He holds up the wine. “Care for a drink for old times’ sake?”

It’s almost certainly a bad idea, but Merlin hesitates only a fraction of a second before accepting.
Arthur settles comfortably on a stair, and Merlin sits to join him, passing the bottle back.

Arthur drinks, and Merlin takes a breath. “Arthur…” he begins, glancing sideways, noting Arthur’s
eyes are still clear. He hadn’t planned on saying this, possibly ever, but it suddenly seems
important. “I want to say sorry. For…pulling away. After your mum died. I should have been
there.”

Arthur pauses, then half-shrugs, taking another swig of wine before passing it back. “You pulled, I
pushed. It’s nobody’s fault.”
Merlin nods, picking at the corner of the wine label. *Nobody's fault.* Sometimes he thinks that just makes it harder, more painful, having no one to blame.

“That guy you were with the other day,” Arthur says, abrupt. “When I stopped by to see Gaius. You’re together, aren’t you?”

Merlin wonders how Arthur could have possibly guessed, just from seeing the two of them at the kitchen table working out physics equations. He nods. “We’ve been dating a couple weeks. His name’s Brian.”

“Brian?” Arthur makes a face. “What sort of name is Brian, anyway?”

“A normal one?”

Arthur swipes the bottle, finishes it off in one big swallow. “Well, I can tell you right now I don’t like him.”

“Based on what, his name?”

“Come on, Merlin. It’s my right as your ex to be unreasonable.”

Maybe it’s because they’ve never talked so openly about *all this*, never used the terminology of a relationship even when they were in one, but just hearing Arthur refer to himself as Merlin’s ex makes his stomach do a funny little flip. It’s validation, partly—that Merlin hadn’t dreamed the whole thing, it had been real, it mattered—but it’s not just that. He’d be lying if he said it was. He swallows. “Fair enough.”

“Seriously, Merlin,” Arthur says. He’s gone unnervingly serious, and he catches Merlin’s gaze and holds it. (Damn princes, always so brave at the moments any normal person would run and hide.) “I hope you know that you’re one of the most important people in my life. I’ll always care about you. I know things haven’t been normal between us since—well.” He frowns. “Possibly ever.”

Merlin smiles despite himself. “We’ve been a lot of things over the years, none of them normal.”

“The funny thing is…” Arthur’s words are careful, like he’s confessing something he’s not sure he should. “Those months with you—I think that was the happiest I’ve ever been.”

Arthur’s expression is so open and honest it almost hurts to look at. It would be easy, so easy to lean over and close the space between them. Merlin wants to. God, he wants to. (He’s not still in love with Arthur, is he? Except it wouldn’t be “still,” would it, given that he’d never come out and said those words when they were together. He has a hazy memory of meaning to, of feeling the time was imminent. Maybe he’d meant to say it on the night he finally whipped out his applied science knowledge.)

It’s Arthur who breaks the spell, pulling out his mobile and clearing his throat. “They’re here,” he says, standing. “I should—”

“Right,” Merlin says, scrambling up too. There’s that old feeling again, relief and disappointment together, now edged with a stubborn ache. Arthur hesitates, and Merlin sees him wonder if he has to—if he *should*—invite Merlin along.

Merlin answers that question for both of them. “Happy birthday,” he says again, leaning in to press a kiss to Arthur’s cheek before he can think better of it. He comes away with the empty wine bottle in his hand. “So you won’t be tempted to take it for a spin,” he says, cheeky.
Arthur laughs, taking the last few steps up backwards. “I’m so lucky to have you looking after me.”

“And no hide-and-seek!” Merlin calls after him, but Arthur is already around the corner, out of sight.

v.

To general surprise, Arthur doesn’t take a gap year. In autumn he leaves for St. Andrew’s, and rumor has it it’s because of a girl. As casually as he can manage—which isn’t very, but he tries—Merlin asks Morgana if this is true.

“Welllll,” Morgana says, like she’s been waiting ages for someone to ask her this precise question. “I think he thinks his motives are perfectly pure. It’s farther away, it’s more private, smaller, blah blah blah. And those are legitimate reasons. But…” She sighs. “Arthur has always been a romantic at heart, you know?”

Merlin nods, feeling his own heart constrict. He knows.

Still, he can’t exactly complain about Arthur’s decision: it leaves Merlin free to start Oxford with a blank slate, to claim the city as wholly his own. Assuming he gets in, of course. Even though he’s been anticipating uni for what feels like forever, its approach still manages to feel like it’s sneaking up on him. When school starts up and he realizes he only has a year left, Merlin goes into full hermit mode. He studies right through Uther’s birthday celebrations, including a parade, a 62-gun salute, an RAF flyover, and fireworks. He only emerges from his room the next day to lead a tutoring session because he has to make money somehow. He takes a shortcut to his bus stop through the Royal Mews, which (as always) serves as a bracing reminder that some people—most of the people he’s grown up around, specifically—don’t need to tutor thirteen-year-olds in maths in exchange for cash.

Case in point: he passes Arthur—Arthur’s here? Oh, of course, Uther’s birthday; shit, Merlin forgot to send a card—leaning against the family Land Rover, talking to Bertrand, who’s been Head Chauffeur for as long as Merlin can remember.

“It’s only ten years old,” Arthur is saying.

“I just don’t like the way she handles. If you ask me, the mid-decade models are a steep step down from what came before and after.”

Arthur snorts. “Don’t pretend you care what’s under the hood. We all know full well you’re shallow as.”

“I won’t deny it. And this car is as ugly as a baboon’s arsehole.”

“Hey,” Merlin interjects. “That car’s made headlines, I’ll have you know.”

Arthur stares at him a moment, wheels turning, and then he throws his head back and laughs. Bertrand shakes his head, bemused. Merlin has to get going, but he can’t stop grinning the entire twenty-minute bus ride.

The next time he sees Arthur is in late February for Uther’s Ruby Jubilee. Their paths almost don’t
cross at all, except that Elena drags Merlin out for a double date with her girlfriend and some guy she swears he’ll like. (“To help you get over Brian,” she says, and it’s such a sweet gesture Merlin doesn’t bother protesting that he is over Brian, and has been for months now.) He can tell almost immediately that this date with Julian won’t lead to anything more, but it winds up being a nice time out with friends anyway, and he’s glad he came. They’ve just finished paying the bill when they finally become aware of the excited buzz in the air, the sound of a gigantic crowd congregating a street or two away, in the direction of the Mall.

Elena figures it out first. “They’re Trooping the Colour today.”

Willow, Elena’s girlfriend, looks confused. “Wasn’t the last one like five months ago?”

“It’s a Jubilee year,” Merlin explains, “so it comes earlier.”

Julian sits up a little straighter. “Are we talking whole family? Prince Arthur on parade in uniform and what all?”

“Oh, er—” Elena says, glancing sideways at Merlin. Merlin shrugs, taking a sip of water. Sometimes having to come out as palace-raised is more bother than coming out as gay. (He should really get cards made up, printed on each side with answers to the same questions people ask every time. I was fourteen when I realized. Yes, I know the king. No, I’m not in line for the throne. Yes, I like iced coffee and Lady Gaga.)

Julian and Willow are eager to see the parade pass, and even Elena seems keen. They fight their way through an increasingly tight crowd and manage to find a decent vantage point by balancing on a low metal railing, ducking every time a policeman looks their way.

Uther passes first, solemn as stone on his horse. Then Arthur, sitting straight in his high-collared red jacket—and Merlin has to agree with Julian: it’s quite a sight to see. There’s just something about a man in uniform. He even pulls off the tall fuzzy hat with remarkable aplomb, which Merlin didn’t think was possible.

Merlin puts his fingers in his mouth and lets out a loud wolf whistle. He doesn’t remotely expect Arthur to hear. But there must be some magic in the air—a perfect confluence of wind and angle and a slight quieting of the crowd at just the right moment—because Arthur turns to look directly at him. He gives his response in sign language.

Beside (a now grinning) Merlin, Julian chokes. “Did Prince Arthur just—”

The papers argue a bit over whether Arthur really did mean to give the crowd a two-fingered salute, or if he’d been aiming for a peace sign, or if he just got caught at an awkward angle trying to push up his hat.

vi.

After that, Merlin and Arthur don’t see each other for five years.

It’s not at all intentional. Arthur is in Scotland, Merlin is at Oxford. At Christmas, Arthur is at Balmoral and Merlin is in Ealdor. Merlin does pop in to Buckingham from time to time, to visit Gaius or (on one occasion) return a book that he apparently took from the library when he was twelve and eventually found at the bottom of a trunk (Geoffrey can’t seem to decide whether to be horrified or pleased. Merlin wonders whether the trunk might not also be Royal Household contraband, as neither he nor his mum remembers owning one). But the times he’s there never line
up with the times Arthur is.

They’re not entirely out of contact. It’s not hard to keep tabs on the broad strokes of Arthur’s life through media and mutual friends. So Merlin knows when the girl Arthur may or may not have chosen St. Andrew’s for breaks up halfway through their second year. He knows when Uther installs Arthur as an Extra Knight of the Most Ancient and Most Noble Order of the Thistle (which comes with a hat that Merlin takes as long-delayed karma). They text each other Happy birthday and Happy Christmas as appropriate.

Once, Morgana creates a group chat with the three of them to share a meme she’s created, modeled after Only ‘90s kids will remember… It’s a picture of a familiar leather armchair captioned Only Buckingham Palace kids will remember…getting in trouble and being sent to the Naughty Chair. Arthur sparks a debate by insisting the more appropriate terminology is “terrible noisy sticks-to-your-legs chair of doom” and Merlin chimes in that he only ever thought of it as “the chair that Arthur’s always in.” For a week or two they all get very into making and sharing what must be the most narrowcast memes ever created (Only Buckingham Palace kids will remember…Peking Duck Tom; …Story Night; …that one weird outlet that looked like Calliou; …the ORIGINAL grumpy cat). (Merlin is briefly tempted to send Only Buckingham Palace kids will remember…snogging in the summerhouse and/or …Prince Arthur’s first blowjob, but he nobly resists. Anyway, Morgana certainly wouldn’t remember.)

The years don’t pass without a few near misses. Merlin is meant to attend some party of Morgana’s, at which Arthur will also be present, but instead he ends up in A & E getting his appendix out. Arthur visits Hunith while on official duties in Wales the week before Merlin’s term ends. (Merlin opens a drawer in his childhood bedroom to find all his socks have been orphaned, and a note in Arthur’s elegant cursive that reads A Pendragon never forgets. Merlin figures it’s a good thing British sovereigns can no longer declare war.)

It’s not like Merlin walks around with a giant Arthur-shaped hole in his life. It’s all a part of growing up, he knows: people drift away, move in opposing directions, lose touch both metaphorical and literal. It’s nothing to despair over. So while he definitely looks forward to finally seeing Arthur at Gaius’ retirement party, Merlin has no particular expectations attached to the reunion.

Which isn’t to say it’s not gratifying when Arthur spots him across the room and breaks into a smile conspicuous enough to make the Duke of Cumbria pause what he’s saying and turn to look. Arthur quickly remembers his manners and urges the Duke to continue, but Merlin knows he’s grinning stupidly as he goes to raid the dessert table for crème caramel. Arthur’s always had that effect on him.

It’s something like a Spidey Sense, this reawakened awareness of where Arthur is at all times. Merlin had forgotten how this felt, unconsciously tracking Arthur around the room as surely as a compass needle. Eventually—inevitably, with the slow pull of gravity—they find themselves in the same circle of conversation. Which becomes a square, and then a triangle, until Merlin realizes the two of them have been left to talk to each other, presumably because that’s what they were doing anyway, even with six other people standing around. In fairness, they have a lot of catching up to do. And Merlin had forgotten how easy it is to talk to Arthur, how naturally the push and pull of conversation has always flowed between them, whether they were hurling insults, whispering sweet nothings, or anything in between.

They only shut up when the Lord Chamberlain announces the time has come for speeches. Uther
goes first and Arthur follows, which is as far as Royal Protocol gets on this occasion before giving way to a general “hand the microphone to whoever wants it, even if they’re soused” practice that wouldn’t be out of place at your average parish wedding. Merlin gets up to tell the story of that time he tripped and fell backward onto his mother’s open handbag, which contained a pair of upward-facing knitting needles, and how in his subsequent panic he’d convinced himself he had (to put it indelicately) torn himself a new arsehole.

“Gaius let me suffer for a good ten minutes before he got around to telling me that my horrifying life-altering literal stab wound was a quarter centimeter deep, tops. He gave me a My Little Pony plaster—he claimed he was out of the regular kind, which I think we can all agree was a load of crock—and sent me on my way.”

The speeches are funny and sobering and heartwarming by turns, and Merlin is just thinking this is the best party he’s been to since leaving uni (which might be a depressing thought, but to be fair the crème caramel is that delicious) when the Duke of Wessex takes the mic.

Merlin and Arthur look at each other.

“Run,” Arthur hisses.

“The saddest part is, Gaius was just telling me how much he was looking forward to an early night.”

“I’ll tell you what’s sad, the death of our relationship with Canada. Father’s supposed to meet with the PM tomorrow morning. No chance of it now. Wessex will still be talking. Remember that New Year’s? How long did he speak, four hours?”

“Did you see Morgana’s face on our way out? She looked like she’d been told a litter of puppies had been sentenced to execution.”

“She’ll never forgive me for leaving her behind.”

“You can add that to the list of all the other things she’ll never forgive you for.”

“True.” Arthur kneels and pats his leg. “Come on, I’ll give you a leg up.”

“And here I thought you were proposing.” Merlin steps onto Arthur’s bent leg, hand on Arthur’s head for balance as he hoists himself up to the ladder that leads to the old hayloft above the Royal Mews. (His hand slides down Arthur’s face, smushing his nose. Arthur yelps, because he’s a drama prince.)

“Did we take the right ladder?” Merlin asks as Arthur joins him on the upper level. “It’s much smaller up here than I remember.”

“That or we’re bigger.” Arthur flops onto his back, and Merlin lies down next to him. Other than size, this hideaway is exactly as he remembers it from childhood: creaky old wood that feels like it will give way beneath them at any moment, dust motes illuminated by the setting sun through the high barred window, a scattering of hay across the floor that he suspects has been there since the 1700s.

“D’you remember when we came up here with Morgana and saw a bear cub in that corner there? And no one believed us?”
“That was a dog.”

“Yeah, exactly. ‘That was a dog.’ No one believed us, and by the time we got anybody to come look it was gone.”

“No, Merlin, I’m saying that. It wasn’t a bear cub. It was a dog.”

Merlin shoots Arthur a betrayed look. “Traitor!”

“I thought it was a bear too at the time. But in retrospect…definitely a dog.”

“Your memory’s been corrupted. It had…a snout. A bearlike snout. And little round ears. And it was gigantic. How would a dog get up here, anyway? Dogs can’t climb ladders.”

“Merlin, which makes more sense—that it was a large dog a couple of imaginative children saw from far away in poor lighting, which accomplished the somewhat improbable task of ascending one floor, or a bear—which have been extinct in Great Britain for over a thousand years—that managed to get into one of the best-secured places in the world, which happens to be in the middle of London?”

“Agree to disagree,” Merlin says snottily, looking back up at the ceiling. (He doesn’t really believe it was a bear any more than Arthur, of course, but he’ll die on this hill before admitting it.)

“I’d forgotten all about that,” Arthur says after a few moments of silence. Merlin hums. Arthur shifts beside him, settling into a more comfortable position. “Makes you wonder what other memories you’ve got stored up that you’ll never access, because they’ll just…never be triggered by anything.”

“Or what we’ve already forgotten, that no amount of triggering will bring back.” Merlin sits up, then decides that’s too much effort and lies back down. “That reminds me, actually. I found an old newspaper when I was cleaning out Mum’s attic. The Ealdor Enquirer ran a front page story on how she was moving to London to work for the queen.”


Merlin snorts. “It’s a local monthly read by about three people. A man once got on the front page for thinking he saw a wild turkey in his yard that turned out to be a chicken.”

Arthur starts to speak, but Merlin cuts him off. “Don’t say it. It’s not the same thing.” Arthur smirks, mimes zipping his mouth shut.

“Anyway, they interviewed me for the story—so Mum claims, at least, but I haven’t got a single recollection of it, and none of my answers made the final article.”

“Could it have been because you were a seven-year-old child? And not—and I mean no disrespect—a remotely articulate one, capable of forming the least coherent thought?”

“Well, apparently they asked how I felt about moving into a castle and whether I was going to be friends with the prince and all that. And I said yes, of course we were going to be friends; actually, we already were. So either my imagination was wildly out of control—”

“—or you started lying to the press at a precocious age.”

“I even said you were going to make me a prince, too, and we’d rule together. And when the reporter—who must’ve been having a grand old time—asked if I meant I was going to marry the
prince, Mum says I screwed up my face and said, serious as the grave, ‘If that’s what it takes.’"

Arthur’s laughter is big and warm, filling every corner of the hayloft. It fills Merlin’s chest, too, a comforting strum.

“Talk about ambition, eh?” he says, wry.

“If marrying me was your goal, I feel like you could have put more effort into wooing me.”


“Oh, is that what all that was? You were just after my title? That wounds me, Merlin.”

“Mhm. And I came so close, too.”

“You did,” Arthur says, and something swoops in Merlin’s stomach, like missing a step on the stairs. He glances sidelong at Arthur, trying to gauge his seriousness. It’s hard to say exactly: he’s still got that amused smile, but it’s gone a bit softer, warm around the edges, eyes far away and full of something—a little like regret, a little like sadness.

“Bad news, though,” Arthur goes on, “titles don’t work that way. You’re not a girl, so even if we did marry, you’d be shit out of luck.”

Merlin props himself up on his elbows. “Do you ever…” He swallows. “Is that something you see as a possibility for yourself? Marrying a bloke, I mean? Or even just—a relationship with one?”

Arthur closes his eyes. Merlin watches the last beams of sunlight play over his features, bathing him in a (frankly unfair) golden glow. His answer is low, slow, deliberate: “It is a possibility. But—so far, anyway—it’s only a possibility on a…need-to-know basis.”

His eyes open, and he looks tired. Merlin tries to imagine being in Arthur’s position—imagines being interested in a guy, but not yet knowing him well enough to know if he could be trusted, not being able to invest in a relationship without knowing in advance it would be worth the high price of that investment, never getting to have so much as a casual snog with a bloke without worrying whether he’ll go blabbing and bring upon Arthur’s head an apocalyptic tempest of press attention and Church of England scrutiny and questions from everyone, monarchists and republicans and all those in between, about heirs and succession and What Is To Become Of Us All. Even if Arthur manages to come out someday entirely on his own terms, he will face a lifetime of being held up as or looked down on as An Example, emblemized with everything anyone with an opinion wants to project onto him, faced with a thousand new versions of himself that crowd up the space where he could ever have been Just Arthur. Merlin can hardly fathom the weight of it all, how uneasily it must sit on Arthur’s shoulders.

“I’m sorry,” he says quietly, reaching out to brush Arthur’s hair off his face. He’s reminded, suddenly and forcefully, of being fifteen years old and making this same gesture, Arthur lying on his bed, wounded—worse than anything they’d ever imagined—but still unconquered. That Arthur is more than equal to the weight of the world, no matter how cruel or unfair, that he can take it—this, Merlin realizes in a rush of fierce affection, he has never doubted. They’ve been so many things to each other over the years. Maybe the specifics don’t matter so much as that they are something to each other, that Merlin has Arthur—Just Arthur—in his life. (Maybe he has been walking around with a giant Arthur-shaped hole in his life.)

Merlin leans down and kisses him.

Arthur responds at once, like he’s been expecting it. His hand wraps around the back of Merlin’s
neck, pulling him closer, making a pleased sound against his lips.

They’re like teenagers all over again. It’s like that first night in the garden, doing nothing but kissing, but treating that as an end in itself, as its own art form, to be taken completely seriously in its own right. Remembering how good this alone can be. This must be what they’re talking about in all those old movies where people get in the backseat of a car and start “necking.” Merlin’s arms start to ache from holding himself up over Arthur; he’s going to have a crick in his neck for ages; he ignores it all, because this so worth it, because this is so good. Just kissing Arthur is better than all the sex Merlin has had in the last year. (It’s been a very dispiriting twelve months.)

Finally, when they can no longer make out each other’s features in the deepening twilight, Arthur pulls Merlin to his feet, one arm tight around his waist to keep them flush. He kisses him, light and simple. “Come to bed,” he murmurs against Merlin’s lips.

Merlin tightens his arms around Arthur’s neck, pressing their foreheads together. “Thought you’d never ask. Don’t suppose you’ve learned any new tricks in the past eight years?”

Arthur darts in for a kiss. “Hmm.” Another. “Nothing comes to mind.” The next kiss is absolutely filthy, curling Merlin’s toes and leaving him gasping into Arthur’s mouth. Arthur pulls back with a wicked grin. “Given that we’re engaging in all this again, I’ve clearly learned absolutely nothing since sixteen.”

“Me either,” Merlin murmurs, pulling him in for one more bruising kiss before they head down the ladder.

The easy, languid, kissing-for-its-own-sake atmosphere disappears the second Arthur’s door shuts behind them, as though the click of the lock is the trigger for all pent-up desire and urgency. Arthur walks Merlin backwards across the room, and by the time his legs hit the mattress they’re both shirtless and Merlin’s fly is open. Merlin scoots back on the bed and Arthur follows, kissing him hungrily. He kisses Merlin’s mouth, his jaw, his neck, reacquainting himself with Merlin’s skin just as Merlin is with the sounds Arthur makes, with the way his hand curls possessive and tight around Merlin’s hipbone, the other running down his chest. Arthur tweaks his nipple, skating away before Merlin can do more than gasp, dipping lower to caress Merlin through the fabric of his underwear. Merlin arches into the touch.

“Speaking of things I learned at sixteen,” Arthur murmurs against Merlin’s neck, then kisses it goodbye (or more plausibly see you later). The tweaked nipple gets a quick kiss too, and the hipbone, and then Merlin is lifting his bum to let Arthur pull his trousers down, and Arthur’s breath is hot on his already straining erection.

“How does this go again?” Arthur’s teasing smile is audible. “Hold my breath, right? Lick the—what was it? Phlebotinium?”

“Arthur, I swear to God—hungh.”

There’s no preamble: Arthur takes him down to the base and swallows, and Merlin forgets everything he meant to say with little hope of ever remembering how to form sentences at all. Arthur sets a punishing pace, leaving Merlin grasping for his hair, for the duvet, anything to hold onto. He can’t quite keep himself from bucking up into Arthur’s mouth, and to his surprise Arthur lets him, hands on Merlin’s hips only restraining him from using too much force. Then Arthur’s hands leave his hips entirely, running over his arsecheeks, dipping into his cleft—fingers brushing over Merlin’s hole once, twice—pressing up, pressing in—
Merlin comes in a blinding rush, hot and intense and wonderfully incoherent. Arthur shows no mercy, keeping Merlin in his mouth just past the edge of oversensitivity. He sits back on his heels as Merlin lies panting, and then—as though it’s something he’s been taught, like holding a fork in his left hand or bowing to his father on state occasions—he delicately wipes a bead of Merlin’s come off his lower lip and licks it off the pad of his thumb. It’s simultaneously extremely refined and absolutely filthy, and Merlin makes a strangled noise, tugging him back up.

“I want you—”

“Clearly,” Arthur says, smirking.

“—inside me.”

This time the strangled noise is Arthur’s. He wastes no time in ridding them of the rest of their clothing, and even less in retrieving lube and a condom. Merlin is fully on board with his haste; he all but penciled this shag into his calendar eight years ago. Talk about delayed gratification.

Arthur starts with one finger—then two—then three—all while Merlin grinds down, trying to get him in deeper.

“Christ, Merlin.” Arthur leans up to kiss him, nipping at his lower lip. “Patience is a virtue.”

“So is chastity,” Merlin grumbles. Arthur chuckles into his mouth, kisses him again, quick, and pulls away to roll on the condom and slick himself up. And then he’s pushing in, finally, and Merlin’s done this so many times, but there’s still something incredible, indescribable, about being able to see Arthur move and simultaneously feel that motion inside his body. And it’s Arthur. (Merlin has the brief, mad thought that Arthur should never not be inside him.)

Arthur hasn’t actually moved yet; he’s buried nearly balls-deep in Merlin’s arse but is just looking at him, a strange expression on his face. Merlin glares.

“What are you waiting for, a written invitation?”

Arthur seems to shake himself, as though coming out of a daze, and grins. “You know, that’s an excellent point, we really should follow the proper protocol—” Merlin kicks him in the small of the back, sending him in deeper; they groan in near unison.

Arthur starts to move, thrusting slow and deep, then hitching Merlin’s legs up a little higher and going harder, faster. Every thrust hits Merlin’s prostate, and he begins to stroke himself in time to Arthur’s rhythm.

“Merlin, I—”

“Come on then,” he says, low and rough in Arthur’s ear, and Arthur comes inside him, muffling his cry in Merlin’s neck. Merlin closes his eyes and follows moments later, coating both their stomachs.

It should be disgusting, as the afterglow wears off and they find themselves overwarm and damp and stuck together, Arthur’s leg a too heavy weight over both of Merlin’s, stripped of the erotic soft focus lust casts over everything. It should be at least a little bit mortifying, except Arthur presses a kiss into Merlin’s collarbone, and Merlin is reminded that lust isn’t the only thing that shines a kinder light on the awkward or absurd.

“Do you think,” he says after a little while of just lying and breathing and tracing random patterns on Arthur’s back, “we ever would have gotten together if it hadn’t been for spin the bottle?”
“You mean do we have Sophia to thank for all this?” Arthur’s voice is husky, fucked-out, and it sends a shiver down Merlin’s spine (which is ridiculous; he’s already orgasmed twice in the last half hour).

“And Will. For provoking your…competitive instinct.”

Arthur makes a noncommittal sound into Merlin’s shoulder. “Well, obviously the specific circumstances would have been different, but I’m sure you would have found an excuse to kiss me eventually.”

“Oi! You kissed me during spin the bottle, both times. The second time you aimed.”

“I was provoked, like you said. What about in the garden? Who started it that time?”

“I don’t remember,” Merlin admits. He remembers playing hide-and-seek, every sense on high alert, and he remembers rolling around with Arthur in the bushes, but his memory is fuzzy on how they got from A to B.

Arthur pauses a long moment, as though he’s also trying to remember the specific micromovements of the evening, and then he shrugs and shifts, pulling Merlin more comfortably against his side. “Doesn’t matter, really. We’re here now.”

vii.

The next day Arthur has a visit to a children’s hospital. He asks Merlin to come along.

The day after, it’s a night out drinking with some of Arthur’s St. Andrew’s friends, who turn out to all be very nice and intelligent and welcoming. (Arthur has come a ways from the days of Montague and Probably Gregory, thank God.) Arthur slides his fingers along the bare skin of Merlin’s back just above his waistband while ordering a drink at the bar; Merlin’s pretty sure at least one of the St. Andrew’s friends takes notice, but Arthur doesn’t seem to mind.

The day after that is a Monday, which means Merlin has to go to work, and Arthur is up in Leeds for some official business as President of the Football Association. (Merlin had forgotten about that particular title. He dreads learning of all the new ones Arthur has picked up in the last five years without his knowing. He already has a horrible feeling that Arthur will try to use his position as President of BAFTA to bully him into seeing The Hobbit.) They text incessantly throughout the week, and on Thursday Arthur calls him up to rant about all sorts of nonsensical League business until Merlin falls asleep with the phone still pressed to his ear. By Friday evening he has Arthur pressed against him instead.

They still don’t really talk about all this, but they do talk about almost everything else, from films to Merlin’s job to Arthur’s responsibilities to politics to the relative merits of various chicken wing restaurants to which is the sexiest Bond to whether it is indeed technically plausible for a dog to climb a ladder to the weather. (People give the weather a bad rap as a topic of conversation, but people have never heard Prince Arthur try to explain how just because stormclouds are massing on the horizon doesn’t necessarily mean it’s going to rain. “Most people think cumulonimbus is just one type of cloud, but it’s actually a genus that contains two different species—or am I thinking cirrostratus? I went to a talk last month by the director of the Met Office, all about climate change and whether we’re fucked forever and that. It was surprisingly interesting. Nobody thinks about clouds usually, but that’s exactly—” (All right, people are generally correct about weather talk being extremely dull, but Merlin does love whenever Arthur gets excited about some aspect of
British life he’s had to engage with for the length of a charity banquet and winds up keeping an interested eye on it long after the banquet ends. That Arthur babbling about *cloud genera* makes Merlin want to kiss him has the beneficial side effect of getting him to shut up about cloud genera.)

Four months in to *all this: part two* (or thereabouts; as the sequel didn’t start up on Arthur’s birthday, Merlin doesn’t remember the exact date, though he supposes he could always look in his calendar for the day of Gaius’ retirement party), Merlin gets offered a job in New York. His current job counteroffers with a raise and a new title, both of which are still well below what he would get in America.

When Morgana asks, Merlin lists out the reasons he chose to stay—wanting to remain close to home and Hunith, the possibility of more upward mobility in the long term than the American company could give him, the headaches of maintaining an international work visa—and he *thinks* he means them all. They might really be the end-all be-all of why he’s chosen as he has, what he really, truly based his decision on.

And he almost entirely believes it. Except—well, he’s always been a romantic at heart.

End Notes

Thanks for reading! Feel free to drop a comment and make my day. Or come say hi on [tumblr](https://tumblr.com)! Hearing from readers and writing ridiculously self-indulgent Merlin fic are my two favorite things. ♥

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