The rainbow has many colours

by amy_lupin

Summary

Arthur needs a date to Morgan's wedding. He isn't feeling particularly loving towards his traitorous sister lately, so he thinks it'd serve her right if he brought her ex, Merlin, as his plus one.

Notes

Written for Kink Me! Merlin

I fell in love with this plot the minute I read it and absolutely had to write it. I'm putting the whole plot at the end notes for those of you who don't want to be spoiled, but feel free to check it if you're too curious to wait.

Thank you Matt for brainstorming and for helping me with the Star Wars references (I know next to nothing about the series, shame on me).

Thank you Lala for editing and for being so sweet to me.

See the end of the work for more notes.

“You did what?” Arthur asked, disbelieving.
“You heard me the first time,” Morgana said, continuing rolling the screen of her phone completely unfazed.

“And you’re just telling me that now?”

Morgana gave him an eye roll, finally putting her phone down. “You act like this is such a surprise when she’s been my best friend for over a decade! In fact, Gwen was my friend before you started dating her. Anyone with half a brain would have figured out I would ask her to be my maid of honor.”

“Any sister with half a heart might remember what her best friend did to her brother!” Arthur accused, getting up from Morgana’s couch and stomping to the kitchen to pour himself some whiskey. He found only gin and tonic instead. He should have guessed.

“It’s been a year already, Arthur, get over it!”

Arthur poured himself a dose anyway. “Tell me, Morgana, would you get over it that easily if you caught Leon with, say, Morgause on the day before your marriage? And don’t tell me she would never do this to you because we both know she would.”

Morgana shrugged. “I’d castrate Leon and have the party to myself. It would be such a shame if all go to waste after all the work I’m having with the preparations.” Her last words were said between gritted teeth as she picked up her phone again. “Why are there so many flowers to pick? They look all the same to me!”

“So I should have crippled Lancelot and be done with it just like that?”

“Of course not, I wouldn’t have let you touch a finger on Lance nor Gwen! They’re perfect for each other. He makes her happy like you never could, what with you trying to please our dead father by working yourself to insanity.”

“Morgana...” Arthur said in warning.

“Oh, and just in case you haven’t figured it out by yourself yet, Lance’s coming too.”

Arthur abandoned his full glass on the counter and went to retrieve his jacket from the coat hanger. “Alright, that’s it, I’m not coming. Tell Leon I’m sorry but—”

“I’ll tell Leon no such thing!” Morgana was up on her feet and pointing an accusing finger at him in a blink. “I can easily get over my only family abandoning me on the most important day of my life, but I won’t allow you to let Leon down like this, you hear me? He’s your friend!”

“Lancelot was my friend too!”

“And he saved you from an unhappy marriage, like friends are supposed to do. Now don’t you think you’ve felt sorry for yourself enough already? It’s about time for you to move on, so you better start now.” She turned her back to him and grabbed his abandoned glass, downing it in one go. “Oh, and make sure to bring a date.”

Arthur gaped at her back for a moment. “You know I don’t have a date!”

“Then find one. You have one month. I’ve seen you win lost cases in less than that before, just to impress our father.”

Arthur made sure to slam the door as he left.
It had been some time since he had forsaken working until the late hours in order to go to a pub, but after his talk to Morgana he felt like indulging himself. He had considered calling Leon, but decided against it, since he would probably take his fiancée's side and it was the last thing Arthur needed right now.

He sat by the bar, ordered his drink and proceeded to scroll over his emails until he got bored and started looking around. The pub was crowded and noisy. Most of the girls looked like underfed students and Arthur suddenly felt too old for this.

He was about to finish his drink and call it a night when something about the profile of the guy sitting next to him called his attention. The boy was distractedly rolling a pint bottle while checking his phone and when he smiled at something on the screen, Arthur felt like being slapped in the face.

“Merlin?” He asked, as if seeing a ghost.

The boy’s head jerked up in a startle and then his eyes got round and big as if he was experiencing something similar. “Arthur?”

Arthur shook his head at the contradiction of emotions turmoiling inside of him. Merlin had been Morgana's boyfriend for about a year back when she was an art student at Oxford. They were so different from each other that Arthur had no idea how they had lasted that long as a couple. Merlin was wet behind the ears - he was three years younger than Morgana, which also made him one year younger than Arthur himself -, an incurable optimist and annoyingly friendly to people and animals alike, while Morgana was self-assured, caustic and ruthless. After their breakup, Merlin had disappeared as if whipped off the face of the Earth.

It wasn't as if he had missed Merlin, the boy was infuriating with his sassy remarks, his childish smile and questionable sense of humour. He also had the annoying habit of disagreeing with everything Arthur said and somehow turning the argument on his favour, making Arthur look like a fool in front of his own friends.

Still, Arthur had felt personally offended when Merlin vanished without so much as a goodbye note and even as the years passed, Arthur sometimes remembered their constant arguments with something close to fondness.

Something must have shown on his face, for Merlin offered him an uncertain smile, averting his eyes for a moment.

“Well,” Merlin said, flashing another forced smile, “first I got transferred to Newcastle, then moved to Edinburgh after finishing my courses, then I came back to London a couple of years ago.”

Two years ago? He had been in London all this time and hadn't bothered to reach any of them?
“I see,” Arthur said instead of confronting him about that. It wasn’t like they were friends, after all. And then a thought occurred to him. “Have you talked to Morgana recently?”

Merlin looked ashamed as he averted his eyes, shaking his head. “No.”

“Does she know you’re back in London?”

Merlin frowned. “I don’t think so, no. We kind of… lost contact after…” He trailed off, going back to rolling his pint on the bartop. He shrugged, “yeah, I don’t think she knows.”

Arthur smirked as a thought started to form in his head. He signaled for the bartender to come closer. “You know what, this calls for a celebration. Let me buy you a drink.”

The next morning, Arthur was cursing the moment he decided to step in a pub on a Thursday night as his head thumped with each step he took around his bedroom while getting ready for work. He was bloody late and he would hardly have the time to eat some proper breakfast before heading for the meeting with his client. His shirt was wet on his back where he had failed to towel in his haste to get dressed and his necktie was hanging untied around his shoulders while he searched for some aspirin. That’s when his phone buzzed with an income text.

‘I hope your head is hurting like hell,’ he read from an unknown number.

Arthur frowned, punching in the answer. ‘Who is this?’

‘It’s Merlin!’

Merlin! The memories from last night started to flood his mind, although they were a bit confusing. Arthur had half a mind to ask ‘Merlin who?’ in reply when a thought occurred to him.

‘How did you get my number?’ he wrote instead.

There was something itching his mind, something he was supposed to remember, but he couldn’t put his finger on it and he would be damned if he let his client waiting because of Merlin of all people. Merlin, who had disappeared from their lives for nearly a decade and now was messaging him at seven a.m. as if nothing had happened.

‘Of course you don’t remember,’ came the reply and Arthur waited for an explanation while trying to make himself some tea and fix his necktie at the same time. ‘You grabbed my phone from my hand last night and punched in your number.’

‘Did not,’ Arthur typed while washing the aspirin down with a sip of hot tea and scalding his throat on the process.

“Bugger!” he cursed out loud.

The reply came in separate sentences.

‘Did too.

‘Without my consent.

‘So I thought I might as well make sure you had a nasty hangover.’

‘Hurray,’ Arthur answered sarcastically.
‘Indeed,’ Merlin wrote back and Arthur could almost picture his cheeky smile.

Arthur groaned and threw the rest of the tea down the sink before grabbing his coat and keys and leaving.

.oOo.

It wasn’t until that evening that Arthur finally remembered. He was massaging his temples trying to will away the migraine he was nursing all through the day while attempting to read a new case he had just received when it popped in his mind.

Arthur fished for his phone and found Merlin’s texts from that morning, pressing call to the phone number. “I invited you to my sister’s wedding!” He exclaimed before Merlin could say anything.

“Oh, now you remember,” Merlin didn’t hesitate to shoot back. “Do you remember my answer as well or should I remind you?”

“As my date!” Arthur continued in wonder.

“Yeah, you were quite sloshed. I tried to tell you what an awful idea it was, but-”

“But it's brilliant!” Arthur cut him off, feeling proud of what he had managed to come up with while utterly drunk. “I'm dying to see Morgana's face when she sees us together.”

There was a brief hesitation before Merlin’s reply. “Um, Arthur, I can't talk right now, I'm actually in the middle of something?”

Arthur rolled his eyes, still too thrilled to be bothered by the dismissal. “Why did you pick up, then?”

“Because I thought it might be-” Merlin sighed. “You know what, it was a terrible idea, I must be really stupid.”

“I never thought the day would come that I'd agree with something you said.”

“Call me later or delete my number, I don't care.” The line went dead.

Far from being discouraged by Merlin’s apparent disinterest, Arthur made a victory gesture by punching the air. He couldn’t believe his luck. What were the chances that he would find the perfect way to get back at his sister just like that? Arthur didn’t believe in fate, he believed in his flair for turning a situation in his favor and in seizing the opportunities life presented him with and he was certain that it’d be the perfect chance for pay back.

Besides, it wouldn't be too bad to watch Merlin suffer through Morgana's wedding as well, especially after his vanishing number.

Arthur’s phone buzzed and he picked it up again, smirking at seeing another text from Merlin.

‘The answer is still no, just to be clear,’ it said.

“We’ll see, Merlin,” Arthur said confidently, adding the number to his contacts list. “We’ll see.”

He had been craving for a real challenge for a long time now, the kind only Merlin used to pose him back in the old days. He secretly hoped Merlin hadn’t changed that much, otherwise he would be seriously disappointed.

.Merlin.
It took some perseverance, but Arthur finally managed to arrange for them to meet for coffee at the end of that week, although Merlin insisted on picking the place. Arthur complained about his choice on principle, although the coffee wasn’t half bad.

Never one for conventional choices, Merlin decided on a smoothie, despite the chill brought by the rain outside and Arthur had to struggle not to tease him for drinking it from a straw like an overgrown child.

“Come on, Merlin, just promise me you’ll consider it.”

“I have nothing to consider. I already gave you my answer. Repeatedly.”

Arthur shrugged. “I won’t stop pestering you until you change your mind, then. You know, I can be very persuasive when I want to after so many years as a lawyer. I must warn you, I hardly lose a case.”

Merlin pointed to Arthur's suit. “Is this part of your intimidating plan? Cause you don’t look threatening at the least, you just look silly. I told you this was nothing like the posh places you’re probably used to attend.” He leaned over to suck his smoothie, making his cheeks hollow and his cheekbones even more prominent.

Arthur glared at him. “I came straight from a meeting with a client, I didn't have the time to change. And even if I had had the time, I certainly wouldn't have dressed myself… well,” Arthur made a vague gesture towards Merlin, mimicking the way he had dismissed Arthur's outfit just moments before, “like this.”

Merlin let go of the straw to glare back at him, but the effect was ruined by the drop of pink milk hanging on his plush lower lip.

“And by God, Merlin, can't you drink like a grown man?” Arthur handled him a paper napkin, which Merlin accepted with an eye roll before wiping his mouth with it.

Merlin hadn't changed much over the years, apart from gaining some muscles, but there was something different about him, something Arthur was trying to grasp, but it kept slipping through his fingers.

“It's a good thing you won't need to pretend to take me as your boyfriend then,” Merlin said, throwing the used napkin on his face and grinning like a five year old.

“I'm certain you can at least pretend to be mature for one night.”

“Says the man who's holding a grudge on his sister for… what is it this time, anyway? Did she embarrass you in front of your little friends?”

“Very funny. Honestly, you surely must know how much of a bitch my sister can be after dating her for almost a year! I can assure you she hasn't changed at all, except it's possible that she has become worse.”

“Not my problem.” Merlin finished his smoothie and removed the straw from the cup to lick the last of the milk from its length.

Arthur stared at it unbelieving until Merlin smirked at him, proving Arthur's suspicions that he was doing it just to get a reaction from him. Arthur straightened his spine, stopping himself from making any comments about his appalling manners.
"I can make it your problem, you know?" He said. "I have one month until the wedding, I know your name and, most importantly, I have your number now. You’d be surprised with the amount of things I can uncover with that."


"You can certainly try to sue me if you’d like, you’d hardly be the first, but we both know it would be a waste of time and money."

Merlin shook his head, looking around. "I’ve almost forgotten just how much of an asshole you can be."

"One more reason for you to team up with me. I assure you it's the easiest and quickest way to get rid of me." Arthur leaned back on the chair crossing his arms and waited. Any moment now.

All too soon, Merlin sighed. He placed his elbows on the table and leaned over. "What would I gain from this, anyway? And if you try to offer me money…" He pointed the straw at him menacingly, his eyes narrowed.

Arthur snorted. "Are you threatening me with a straw?"

"I'm sure I'll think of somewhere to stick it up into."

Arthur chose to ignore the rude answer, leaning forward as well and trying for persuasion again. "This is your chance for payback! I don't know why my sister dumped you, but-"

"Why are you assuming she was the one that dumped me?" Merlin snapped angrily. "For all that you know, I could have been the one to break up with her!"

"As if! You would never break up with a woman like her on your own free will." Arthur dismissed it. "She's way out of your league. Anyway, just think of her face when she learns that you're with me and how happy we are together! Then she'll start to wonder if you turned out gay because of her and-"

"Oh my God." Merlin ran his hand through his hair in exasperation. "I can't believe I'm actually hearing this!"

"Is it because I'm a guy?" Arthur asked curiously. "Aren't you artists supposed to be open minded?"

Merlin didn't even blink before shooting back, "Aren't you lawyers supposed to be tactful?"

"I'm not just a lawyer, I'm a businessman!"

"Well, I'm not an artist, I'm a web designer!"

Far from being discouraged by Merlin's quick retorts, Arthur was feeling more determined by the minute. "Look, I'm not gay either, so what? One more reason for everyone to be shocked."

"It's not about that!" Merlin was becoming desperate, Arthur knew the signs very well. His arguments were starting to get weaker, his resolve was wavering and he was starting to unconsciously resort to Arthur's empathy rather than his reasoning.

Only Arthur knew this game better than anyone. "What is it about then?" He asked.

"I'm not keen on lying to Morgana or any of her friends like this. I actually care a great deal about
Arthur scoffed. “Forgive me if I fail to believe your words when you all but disappeared from her life for years without sending a bloody Christmas card and now you won't even consider going to her wedding?”

“And how would me pretending to be your date just to spite her on her wedding day make it any more believable?”

Well, maybe it was time for Arthur to use Merlin’s own weapons against him. He sighed, averting his eyes just to keep things more relatable. “It's not just that, alright? She invited my ex-fiancée.” Arthur paused for effect, watching Merlin's eyebrows raise before adding, “and her current boyfriend, who also happens to be my ex-third-best-friend.”

Merlin’s eyebrows disappeared below his fringe as his eyes got rounder with understanding. “Oh,” he said stupidly.

Arthur raised his coffee cup in a mock salute. “Cheers!” He didn't particularly like when people pitied him, but he wasn’t below using Merlin’s sympathy in his benefit.

Merlin cleared his throat, looking a bit uncertain of what to say. “That, um, that must have been pretty harsh.”

Arthur could almost smell his victory, but he knew better than to gloat too soon. “The understatement of the year.” He said, keeping the I'm not fine, but I'm too stubborn to admit it’ posture. “Well, I intended to show her that I’ve moved on and that I’m happy, but I guess I'll just prove to her the big failure I am at this whole relationship thing.” He stood up and grabbed his suit jacket from the back of the chair. “I guess I’ll be going then. It's actually been good to see you again, Merlin.”

He turned his back on Merlin and started his way towards the door in the most calculated pace: not too slow that it would look reluctant, not too fast that he would be too far to listen when Merlin called him back, which would happen in three, two...

“Wait!”

There! Arthur paused, keeping his back to the boy for a moment and trying not to split his face in two with a shit eating grin. He had to force his features into something resembling innocent curiosity when he looked back.

Merlin sighed. “Alright, let's do this.”

Arthur’s frown deepened just a tad as he took a step back. “Are you sure?”

Merlin shook his head. “Nope! And I'm a shit liar, just so you don't say I didn't warn you but, well…”

Arthur finally allowed a smug smile to slowly take over his face. “Don't worry, I've been told I'm a hell of a good lawyer.” He winked teasingly.

Merlin groaned, his eyes rolling to the back of his head. “I'm so going to regret this.”

“I'll call you again next week, then, so that we can meet again.” Arthur said. He made it to turn around but stopped midway. “Oh, and you can consider this our first date! I'll see you soon!”

Arthur turned his back on Merlin’s dumbfounded face and threw his jacket over one shoulder. It was
Their next meet was on a restaurant of Arthur's choice on the following Wednesday evening. Merlin had been reluctant to agree at first, but Arthur argued that it was only fair since he had chosen the last place and they needed somewhere less noisy and crowded so they could properly talk. Besides, Arthur was paying, so that settled the issue for good.

“Please tell me they serve actual portions of food here, not just samples. I'm starving!” Merlin said, examining the menu. “I didn't have lunch today, so…”

“We can have a five course meal if you’d like?” Arthur said, refraining from teasing him just yet.

Merlin snorted. “You’re not actually intending to keep me here till midnight, are you?” Merlin's eyes rounded at Arthur's raised eyebrow. “Oh my God, you are. Arthur, I have to work tomorrow!”

“So do I!” Arthur assured him. “And don't worry, Cinderella, I’ll let you go early if you promise not to make a fuss on our next date.”

“Our next-” Merlin's eyes bulged. “Arthur, we barely arrived and you're already bargaining about our next date?”

“Well, you can be very stubborn when you want to and you better accept now that this is going to happen a lot on the upcoming weeks if we want to make this right.”

Merlin opened his mouth - probably to object about his personal wishes on that matter - but thankfully the waiter chose that moment to arrive and the sommelier after him, so they were busy giving their orders for the next minutes, since of course Merlin knew nothing about quality food and had to ask about everything on the menu. They finally settled for a three courses meal and a bottle of wine recommended by the sommelier.

“Arthur, what is the actual purpose of this dating thing?” Merlin asked once they were left alone again.

Arthur gave him an eye roll. “I thought it was obvious, but never mind.” He leaned forward on the table as if preparing to explain something very important to a very young child. “You see, Merlin, we haven't seen or talked to each other for almost a decade and therefore there's plenty we don't know about each other's lives. The purpose of these dates is that we get to know each other better to make it easier to pretend we’re going out. If you don't recall, my sister can be very observant and she'll certainly be suspicious, so we’d better be prepared to convince her that we’re actually a couple. Besides, you said it yourself that you're an awful liar and from what I recall from years ago I’m not going to object with that, so it'll be easier for you to keep the fake-dating pretence if we actually date and such. Is it clear now or do I need to be more specific?”

Merlin had been shooting daggers at him through his eyes from the first half of the speech and he continued glaring after Arthur was finished.

Arthur took it as a yes. “Good, now tell me about yourself.”

“How about I start telling you about yourself and how much of a self-absorbed and overbearing prat you pretty much continue to be?”

Arthur sighed. “Alright, we’ll start with myself then. What do you want to know about me?”
“Do you still walk around with that donkey costume of yours?”

“Oh, for fuck's sake, I told you I lost a bet, alright? And would you take this seriously for a change?”

They were interrupted again by the sommelier bringing their wine and Arthur allowed the tasting to calm him again. He gave Merlin a pointed glare over his glass once the man was gone.

It was Merlin’s turn to roll his eyes. “So,” he said after clearing his throat, “you’re still working for your father?”

Arthur put his glass down. “My father passed away six years ago.”

Merlin winced. “Oh, I’m... sorry to hear that.”

Arthur shrugged. “I own the company now, so technically I work for myself.”

Merlin snorted. “God, I wouldn't want to be in your employees shoes. You must be really hard to put up with as a boss.”

Arthur glared at him, but was actually thankful Merlin had accepted the change of subject without making a big deal of it. “As must you, as an employee,” he scoffed right back. “Alright, your turn now. You're a web designer, you said?”

“Yeah,” Merlin finally took a sip of his own wine, licking his lips. “You can say I’m my own boss as well, since I work from home as a freelancer for a software company.”

Arthur frowned. “Wait, you work from home and didn't get to have lunch today? And you're saying I'm the unreasonable boss?”

Merlin gave him an eye roll. “Yes, well, I make my own schedule and get paid by job, but I sometimes get a few side jobs as well to make some extra money, so basically I work myself to exhaustion on a good day and forget to have my meals on a bad one. Since I agreed to come have dinner with you this evening, I had to rush to finish the first part of the interface I’m working on to send to my client.”

“So, basically, you’re saying I’m the reason why you skipped lunch today?”

Merlin shrugged taking a bigger gulp of his wine now, although Arthur though he could see a small smile on the corner of his mouth.

Arthur had a sudden memory. “How about your mother? Did she stay here in London when you moved to Newcastle?” He remembered Merlin mentioning being raised by her and never having met his father.

Merlin seemed surprised by the question. “Um, no,” Merlin looked down at his glass. “She went back to the village I grew up. It's a two hours bus ride from here. I sometimes visit her on weekends.”

Arthur suspected there was more to this story, but the waiter chose that moment to arrive with the starter and by the time he left, the topic changed again.

They took turns talking about their past lives and about themselves, as well as bickering and teasing each other all through main course. Arthur ended up learning a great deal of things about the other boy and, mostly, he had fun like he hadn't had in a long time.
Arthur was in such a good mood the next day, not even his sister got to ruin it by barging into his office unannounced around lunchtime.

“You’re buying me lunch today,” she said, disregarding Arthur's secretary's apologetic stutter.

“It’s alright, Sefa,” Arthur assured the girl, then turned to Morgana when Sefa left them alone. “No, I’m not. I have to finish reading this case before two in the afternoon, when I'll be meeting a client, which means I don't have time to waste. Now if you’ll be so kind,” he gestured for the door and turned his attention back to the computer screen.

He was supposed to have read it last night after his date with Merlin, but they had lost track of time and it had been close to one in the morning when he arrived home. He had made an attempt to read the case then, but found himself unable to concentrate and ended up going to bed.

Morgana snorted. “Nonsense, I didn't come all the way here for you to ditch me like this.”

“I’d have told you not to come if you had cared to call before showing up. Besides, I sincerely doubt you would come all the way here just to have lunch with me.” Arthur sent a pointed look to the bags his sister was carrying.

Morgana didn't seem bothered by being caught. “Well, yes, I had some business nearby, but I chose to come now so that I could have some quality time with my little brother.”

“Sorry to ruin your plans.” Arthur said in a flat tone.

“But I did call your home yesterday and you didn't pick up. I tried calling you in here as well, but your secretary told me you left the office early yesterday, even though you didn't have any appointments for the evening.” Morgana paused for a moment. “That she knew of.”

Arthur looked up to see her eyeing him suspiciously. “Why, did she invite you to see my schedule for yourself or did you invite yourself?”

Morgana placed a hand on her chest theatrically. “I would never!”

Arthur simply arched an eyebrow at her while picking up the phone to dial his secretary number.

Morgana gave him an eye roll. “It was right there on the table and she was talking on the phone! All I had to do was turn the page and have the answer for myself without bothering her with the question.”

“How absolutely kind of you,” Arthur said sarcastically, but put the phone back down. “Morgana, I’m sorry I didn't pick up your calls, now would you please let me work?”

Morgana sighed but got on her feet again and left without saying goodbye. Arthur should have guessed she wouldn't give up that easily, but it had completely slipped his mind by the time his phone buzzed. He checked it to see a photo of Merlin wearing a t-shirt with a doodle of a butterfly on it, holding a cup with a very realistic blue butterfly print and grinning like a lunatic. Arthur smiled remembering what Merlin had told him last night about a client who was obsessed with the insects and had commissioned a digital animation for her website.

Merlin said she had given him very specific directions of how it should be and Merlin had spent a whole week watching butterflies at the park and documentaries about them. In the end, she had been so pleased with the result she wouldn't stop sending him souvenirs with butterflies, as if he was the
one obsessed with them, instead of her.

' How do I look? ' Merlin asked after sending the photos.

' Like a creepy entomologist. ' Arthur typed back. ' This shirt is begging for a butterfly pin, though. I'll make sure to order one specially for you. '

' Don't you dare! ' came the answer in a matter of seconds.

Morgana chose this exact moment to come in again carrying two boxes of food and Arthur quickly forced his features into a scowl.

Not quickly enough though, judging by the look Morgana sent him. “Am I interrupting something?”

“Oh, I don't know, my work perhaps?” Arthur was starting to get really annoyed. “What's all this?”

“Lunch, obviously!” Morgana said with a scowl of her own. “And don't waste your time trying to talk me out of this now. You know the quickest way to get rid of me is indulging me, so…”

Arthur knew better than to argue about that. It was a family trait after all.

“So, why didn't you pick up my calls again?” Morgana said once they started eating.

“Jesus, Morgana, I wasn't home, now get over it.”

“You know what's interesting? You haven't left work early in ages and when you do, either you have an appointment with some client after working hours or you're taking work home. So are you going to tell me who is she or will I have to guess?”

Arthur snorted. “You’d never guess.”

“I knew it!” Morgana slapped her hand on the desktop in victory. “So you are actually seeing someone!”

Arthur shrugged in reply. He had to tread carefully now if he really intended to go through with his plan. Of all the people he hadn't been completely honest to, Morgana had always been the hardest to convince. She was far too perceptive and the fact that she knew him since he was a toddler didn't help either. She could always tell when he was pulling an act.

“Do I know her? No, don't answer that, I definitely know her or you wouldn't be looking so smug. Is it Vivian?”

Arthur pulled a face. “No! I'm not that desperate! And I told you you’d never guess, so don't bother trying.”

Morgana considered him for a moment while chewing. “Is it serious?”

One thing he had learned about keeping a pretence was that the more honest you were when answering a question, the more convincing you’d sound, so he considered the question as if his sister had asked him about his relationship with Merlin in general. Did he intend it to get to the next level? Did he want to become real friends with Merlin?

“Maybe? I don't know. It's probably too early to tell. Ask me again at your wedding.”

Morgana smiled like a predator. “You bet I will!” Her smile became fond all of a sudden then. “You know, I'm happy for you. I haven't seen you so carefree in a long while.”
For the first time since that night when Morgana had told him about inviting Guinevere to be her maid of honour, Arthur felt a stab of guilt for his petty scheming.

“I sincerely hope you don't fuck this up this time,” Morgana completed next and the guilt was gone as fast as it had came.

Merlin.

The next time they met, it was Merlin who picked the place and insisted that it was his turn to pay. Arthur wasn’t so sure about the pub at first, but at least it seemed clean enough and the beer wasn't half bad.

“Do you live alone?” Arthur asked as they shared some fries.

Merlin nodded. “Yes. I generally don't like sharing, although I did share a flat with a friend in Edinburgh. His name is Will. He moved in with his girlfriend when I came back to London. You?”

Arthur shrugged. “Always lived alone. I mean, after I left my father's house, of course. Sometimes I think about getting a dog, but I don't think it's fair to the poor thing, since I don't spend that much time at home.”

“I had a cat once, but it died.” Merlin pursed his lips, keeping his eyes down. “His name was Kilgharrah. I mean, he wasn't that young when I adopted him and he was a bit grumpy, but I got used to having him around.”

“Ever thought about getting another one?”

“I don't think I can go through it again. The loss, I mean. So I just content myself with feeding the neighbor's cat some snacks sometimes. She's a bit skittish, Aithusa, but I don't mind. She’s not very pretty, her front paws are a little shorter than the hind. Her owner says it’s because she was mistreated when she was a kitten. Maybe that’s why she won’t allow that many people close to her.”

“Oh, that’s too bad,” Arthur said. “I'm not much of a cat person, actually. I don't know, I have this feeling that cats don't like me very much. And I think they're too cold. Dogs are more loyal.”

“Cats can be loyal as well! Dogs are too messy and filthy and they're such asskisser. Actually, I think they suit you better, come to think of it.”

“Shut up.” Arthur threw a fry at him. “So, do you have any more friends besides this Will fellow? Anyone here, from London?”

“Well, there's Freya, who I met at college. We still hang out sometimes. There's Gili from the company I work for now, and my boss, Alator, who's a really nice person. There's also Gaius, who's an old friend of my mother, but he’s been really nice to me, so I sometimes go help him at the bookstore he owns. How about you? Do you still hang out with the guys from back when we first met? Leon and Gwaine and the others?”

“Yes, well, Leon's actually Morgana's husband to be.”

“No shit! Are you serious?”

Arthur told Merlin about his old friends and some of the new ones, like Percival and Tristan. For obvious reasons, he didn't mention Lancelot nor Guinevere and Arthur was glad Merlin didn't ask about them either.
“So, do you have any hobbies?” Arthur asked next. “What else do you do besides working and helping your mother's friend at this store you mentioned?”

“Um, I like to read and watch some TV?”

Arthur snorted. “Do you ever go outside? Like, to a pub or the gym or something?”

Merlin didn’t seem bothered by Arthur’s tone. “Sometimes I meet my friends for drinks, or join the guys from the company in a happy hour. I don’t get that much free time of late anyway. Just because I work from home doesn’t mean I get to laze around all day.”

Something crossed Arthur’s mind. “The night we met last week, were you waiting for someone at the pub?”

Merlin averted his eyes again. “Yeah, well, they didn’t show up.”

Arthur backed off as if punched. “Wait, are you dating someone? I mean, for real?”

“Oh, now you’re worried?” Merlin scoffed.

“Are you?” Arthur pressed, annoyed. He had a sudden memory of Merlin texting and laughing to his phone at the time. “Cause you didn't seem that upset for someone who had just been stood up.”

Merlin sighed. “I was set up by a friend, so I was actually relieved. And I was texting said friend to say how much of a terrible matchmaker she is.”

Arthur relaxed after that. Not that it would have been that much of a deal if Merlin had a girlfriend, but it was better this way.

“Well, I’d say the poor set up girl must be relieved as well, but she'll probably never know what she escaped from.”

Merlin glared at him. “Well, you had been drinking by yourself too. What's your excuse?”

Arthur shrugged. “I needed a drink. And I could have found myself some company if I intended to. I probably would have if you hadn't been there, scaring the girls away.”

Merlin put a hand on his chest theatrically. “Oh, I’m sorry, perhaps I should leave you to it now, then. This way you can find yourself a more suitable date for your sister's marriage. Have a good life.”

Merlin started to get up, but Arthur held his forearm with a smirk. “Shut up, Merlin. And stop trying to back away from this. You agreed to help me.”

“I knew I was going to regret it though, and guess what? I was right!” Merlin offered his glass in a salute before taking a sip. “Don't you think your friends are going to suspect this is a farce? I mean, they know you’re straight, right?”

Arthur shrugged. “People turn gay all the time, don’t they?”

Merlin gaped at him for a while. “They don’t turn gay, it's not like flipping a switch or something. They figure things out about themselves, things which have always been there.”

Arthur made a dismissive gesture with his hand. “Whatever. It's all about convincing, anyway. And I’ve been told I can be very persuasive when I want to.”
“Right.” Merlin didn't sound convinced in the slightest, but Arthur wasn't worried. There would be plenty of time to work on that.

“So,” Arthur found it best to change the subject, “what kind of TV shows you like to watch?”

“Oh my God, where do I start?” He raised his hand and started counting. “Doctor Who, The Big Bang Theory, Sherlock Holmes, Game of Thrones, Stranger Things—”

“Jesus, can you be more of a nerd?”

“Well, actually—”

Arthur raised a hand to stop him. “Don’t say it, your favourite movies are Star Wars?”

Merlin shrunk his shoulders and pursed his lips. “Amongst others, yes.”

“Geek.”

“Cabbage head.”

“At least my head’s the right size, unlike your—” Arthur gasped. He leaned forward and grabbed Merlin's chin, ignoring the boy’s startle look as he manhandled his face to one side after the other. “Your ears! I knew there was something different about you! What happened to them?”

Merlin looked sheepish all of a sudden. “Well, do you remember Gaius, my mother's friend I told you about? He’s a retired doctor and he knows lots of people. He got me a plastic surgery for free, so…”

“But…” Arthur couldn't explain the sense of loss washing through him. “I never thought you were bothered by them. I mean, I used to tease you a lot about it, but you never raised to the bait.”

“Well, I wasn't really bothered, but the surgery was for free and it's a very simple procedure, so I thought, why not?”

“They used to give you personality,” Arthur continued complaining, unwilling to accept it just yet.

“As did your crooked teeth, and still you had it fixed as well,” Merlin threw back and it was Arthur's turn to look away.

“It made me look silly. I can't afford to look silly in my profession.”

“I see.”

They stood quiet for a moment before Merlin shifted in his seat, checking his phone screen.

“I should probably go,” he said.

“Alright,” Arthur finished his beer and stood up when Merlin did. “Let’s get us a taxi.”

“Oh, I don't need one,” Merlin said as they walked out of the pub. “I live five blocks down. I'll walk.”

“Well, in this case, I’ll walk with you.”

“You don’t have to—”
“Oh, come on, just show the way already.”

Merlin glared at him, but complied. They walked in silence for the first half block, side by side, when Arthur had a sudden idea. He took his hand out from his pocket and reached for Merlin’s.

Merlin jolted in surprise and took his hand away. “The hell are you doing?”

“Holding your hand, of course.”

“And why would you do that?”

“Because,” Arthur reached for his hand again, but Merlin took a step back, taking it out of his reach, “I can't have you looking like you've been struck by lightning every time I touch you, now, can I?”

Arthur tried again and grabbed Merlin's hand in a tight grip. “The sooner you get used to it, the better.”

“Ouch! You don't have to cut off my circulation, alright?”

“Fine, but only if you promise not to let go.”

Merlin huffed and grumbled but ended up sagging. “Fine.”

Arthur offered him a grin and resumed walking, pulling Merlin lightly before easing his grip on his fingers. “So, tell me more about your friends.”

“Why should I?”

“Because you already know most of my friends and I know none of yours. It's only fair.”

“God, you're pushy.”

“And you're whiny.”

Despite the complaining, Merlin started talking about his friends, both from London and Edinburgh. His hand was soft and warm on Arthur's, it felt kind of nice. It had been some time since Arthur had done something as trivial as this. Besides, Merlin wasn't so awful to have around. Not that he would ever admit it aloud, but perhaps it wouldn't be so bad to pretend to be gay with Merlin.

And if Arthur kissed him on the cheek before turning back to get himself a taxi, it was only to watch Merlin nearly pop his eyes out in astonishment before pushing him away, cursing.

Arthur had a persistent smile on his face all the ride back to his place.

. Merlin.

They met again on the weekend and during the next week. They went to the movies and the museum and walked around the park holding hands - Merlin was almost used to it by now, only seeming a bit awkward during the first five minutes or so. It felt so good to talk to him and tease and banter and laugh... Sometimes, Arthur caught himself staring at Merlin’s lips while he talked, or getting distracted by the crinkles at the corner of his eyes when he smiled. More than once, he found himself wondering how nice it would be if Merlin was a girl. It would have been good to actually date someone as quick witted and fun and challenging as him, someone with whom Arthur could be himself and count on them to keep him in line when he was starting to act like too much of an ass.

Morgana kept showing up at the office unannounced or calling him after working hours just to see if he would pick up. Arthur evaded all of her attempts to get some information from him and was
careful not to mention Merlin's name to anyone, in case she had been asking around - he wouldn't put it past her.

Suddenly, Arthur realized there was only one week left until the wedding and he decided it was about time they stepped things up. He left the office at 6 PM on the dot and drove to Merlin's, making a stop to pick some Chinese to go - which happened to be Merlin's favorite food. The food was still hot when he arrived at Merlin's door.

“Arthur?” Merlin exclaimed at seeing him. “Did something happen?”

“Yeah, I got really hungry.” Arthur grinned as he showed the plastic bag. “I hope you don't mind some company?”

Merlin’s expression turned from surprise to annoyance in a heartbeat. “Arthur, I told you I had to work-”

“No, you said you couldn't go out tonight, which is why I'm here. Besides, it's Friday evening, no one should be working now. So, are you going to invite me in or what?”

Merlin huffed in disapproval, but opened the door all the way and walked back to where Arthur figured his bedroom would be. “I'll just save what I've finished and be right back.”

Merlin’s flat was very small, with a narrow kitchen and a living room which consisted of a loveseat and TV set. Arthur couldn’t see what was beyond the door Merlin had disappeared through, but it couldn’t be more than one bedroom and a bathroom. Arthur put the bag on the four seater dining table and set to search for plates in the cabinets.

Fortunately, Merlin came back soon enough and shooed him off, offering for them to eat by the couch instead.

Arthur was glad to comply. He slipped his hands inside his jeans pockets and started looking around the place.

“Who’s this?” Arthur asked at noticing the pictures on the shelf on top of the TV. Merlin had his arm around the shoulders of a sandy haired young man and they both had a wicked smile.

Merlin took his head out of the cupboard to look at him. “Oh, it's my friend, Will.”

“Your friend from Edinburgh?” He remembered Merlin telling something about him staying in Edinburgh and moving in with his girlfriend. “You seem pretty close.”

“Yeah, well, we know each other since we were kids. We grew up in the same village. We met again in Newcastle and he offered for us to share the rent in Edinburgh after we graduated.”

Arthur frowned, not sure about how he felt at hearing that. How much he still didn't know about Merlin's life? He scanned the other pictures. Most of them had Merlin by himself, or with his mother, except for one with a beautiful brunette girl.

“And this is Freya, I guess?” He asked.

Merlin handed him chopsticks and a napkin. “Yeah, we were both still in Oxford when we took this picture.”

They sat down on the couch with the boxes of food and Merlin turned the TV on.
“So, is she your girlfriend?” Arthur blurted out before taking a bite of his Sweet and Sour Pork.

Merlin raised an eyebrow at him. “We’re just friends. I told you I’m not seeing anyone.”

Arthur rolled his eyes at him. “Do you want to, though?”

“Nope.”

“Is there someone you’d like to be dating?” Arthur pressed on, curious.

Merlin sighed. “No. I haven't had the time for dating lately. How about you?”

“I wouldn't have asked you as a fake-date to my sister's wedding if there was someone, now, would I?” Arthur teased, but he felt like Merlin deserved an honest answer. “No, I haven't dated anyone since… you know.”

“I can't believe you were engaged only one year ago,” Merlin said. “I mean, you're, what, one year older than me?”

“We're not teenagers anymore, if you hadn't noticed. Besides, you don't seem surprised Morgana's getting married.”

“Yeah, but she's always been mature for her age.”

“Are you calling me immature?”

“If the shoe fits…”

They remained in silence for a few seconds before Merlin turned at him again.

“I'm sorry, I didn't intend to make light of what you went through. I guess it must have been really hard to be ditched for your mate.”

“It was, at the time. But maybe it was for the best.”

“Yeah. You guys could have gotten married before she figured out she didn't love you all the same,” Merlin offered.

Arthur sighed. “Actually, we were together for so long I didn't even realize what I felt for her wasn't the same anymore. We were good friends. I guess it was only a matter of time until one of us fell in love with someone else. And then Lancelot came back from Venezuela and-”

Merlin coughed and put his hand over his mouth until he swallowed. “Lancelot? Wait, you were engaged to Gwen?”

“Yes! Who else would I be?”

“You mean you were together since back then?”

“Why the surprise?”

“I don't know, I just didn't realize it until now. I mean, now it makes so much sense! Lancelot was head over heels with her when I met him, anyone could see it.”

“Yes, but she chose me!” Arthur stated angrily. He knew Guinevere and Lancelot had had a thing before they started dating, but she had assured him it was in the past.
“And I never understood why!” Merlin said. “It's a good thing she opened her eyes in time!”

Arthur gaped at him. “And what a great timing it was! The day before our marriage!”


Arthur cursed, sliding his hand through his hair. “Yes, you heard it well. She actually cheated on me with him. On the day before our marriage.”

“You never mentioned that,” Merlin said in a small voice.

“Because I didn’t want you to pity me the way you’re doing right now,” Arthur said, annoyed. He looked away, putting his food down.

“It doesn't sound like something Gwen would do,” Merlin said. “Let alone Lance!”

“But they did,” Arthur said bitterly. When he spoke again, the words came out more regretful than angry. “Lancelot had been back for about a year by then. Gwen should have told me before it came to that.”

“I’m sorry,” Merlin’s tone was gentle.

Arthur shrugged. “It’s not like I’m still hurting.”

“Well, perhaps it's about time for you to move on, then,” Merlin said matter of factly as he put aside his own barely finished food.

“Great, now you sound like my sister. By the way, I’ll kill you if you mention any of what we said here to her.”

Merlin sighed. “You know, maybe we should just call it off. This fake-dating thing.”

“No!” Arthur shouted. “Don't even try to back off now.”

“I’m not!” Merlin insisted. “I’m giving you a chance to think this through. The way I see it, you don't have to do this just to get back on Morgana nor Gwen. They have been friends since forever, it's not like Morgana has asked your ex to be her maid of honor out of spite. And it's never too late for you to start over. Maybe you should ask someone you actually can stand talking to. Someone you want to be with.”

“I told you there's no one,” Arthur said angrily. He sighed then. “I want you to go with me, Merlin. I wouldn't have asked if I didn't. And you're not that terrible to have around.”

Merlin's expression softened. “Alright, then.”

Arthur averted his eyes, reaching for his food again. “Do you have anything interesting for us to watch?” He asked and regretted it the next second, when a slow smile spread out on Merlin's face.

And that's how Arthur ended up watching three of the Star Wars films in a row.

.oOo.

“So, what are you doing this weekend?” Arthur asked once the third movie was finally over. He had Merlin's feet on his lap now, but it had been the other way around at some point during the second film.
“Besides finishing the work I should already have finished by now?” Merlin said sarcastically.

Arthur turned to face him. “You mentioned you used to visit your mother on weekends whenever you could, but I haven't seen you leaving your work the last few weeks.”

“Yeah,” Merlin sighed, reaching for the remote to turn down the volume. “I don't know, I really need to finish this work, otherwise I won't get paid 'till the next week.”

“Pitty,” Arthur said, holding one of Merlin's toes and twisting it around softly as if massaging it. “I was willing to offer you a ride.”

Merlin propped himself up on his elbows. “What? Are you serious?”

Arthur shrugged. “This way you could pay her a quick visit and get back to finish your work.”

“But why?”

“I remember your mother being a hell of a baker.”

He remembered Merlin used to bring some homemade goods whenever he and Morgana went to visit their father.

Merlin laid back down with a huff. “Of course.”

Merlin.

Hunith was a very kind and sweet woman, just like Arthur pictured mothers should be. She alternated by hugging Merlin and scolding him for not visiting in a long time.

“Arthur?” Hunith squinted at him while shaking his hand after the introductions. “Aren’t you Morgana's brother?”

Arthur felt suddenly unsure about his decision to come see the woman. “Yes, that's me.”

She turned to smile at her son in wonder. “Oh my God, Merlin, I’m so glad you finally got in touch with them again!” She turned back to Arthur. “Merlin used to talk about you a lot!”

“She meant I complained about you,” Merlin cleared out. “A lot.”

“Yes, well, that too.” Hunith waved her hand, smiling. “Oh, please, come in Arthur!”

She took him to the kitchen and made him some tea while Merlin moved around the house.

"How is your sister, by the way?” Hunith asked. “It's been so long since I heard from any of you!”

“She's, um,” Arthur cleared his throat. “She's getting married next weekend.”

Despite Arthur's fears, Hunith seemed pleased by the news. “Oh, but this is great! Merlin, did you hear that?”

“Yes mom!” came Merlin's voice from somewhere inside the house.

“He's coming to the wedding,” Arthur explained. “With me.”

“Really?” Hunith seemed surprised. “But it must be a really fancy party! Merlin, have you gotten yourself a suit yet?”
There was a noise of something falling to the ground. “Um...”

Arthur straightened his spine in alarm. “Merlin?”

They heard footsteps and then Merlin showed up at the door to the kitchen, looking guilty. “I... forgot about that.”

“You forgot you’d have to get dressed for the wedding?” Arthur exclaimed. “Were you planning on going in jeans and T-shirt?”

“I forgot I’d have to dress like a snob!”

“Hey-” Arthur started, but Hunith stopped them.

“It's alright, we can ask for Mrs. Taylor to borrow you one of her late husband's suit.”

“Great, then I'll look like an old-fashioned snob,” Merlin said, sarcastic.

Arthur intervened before Hunith could scold her son again. “There’s no need to, Mrs. Emrys. I invited him, it's only fair that I get him dressed.” He turned to Merlin then. “We’ll go shopping on Monday.”

Merlin pointed a warning finger at him. “You’re not going to buy me clothes for a fucking wedding!”

“Language,” Hunith warned.

Merlin didn’t seem to listen to her. “I can rent something by myself, thanks. It's not like I'm going to need a tux again in the future, anyway.”

He disappeared after that, leaving Arthur gaping at the empty door frame.

“He’s touchy when it comes to money, dear,” Hunith excused her son's behavior. “It's been like this since his first job as a gardner to the Fosters down the block. And he was only ten at the time. He thinks he should be the man in the house and provide for me.” She looked down at her hands.

Somethings started to make sense in Arthur's head, like the way Merlin overworked himself while living in a cheap apartment and keeping his expenses to a minimum. “He sends money to you, doesn’t he?”

“Almost every week,” Hunith gave him a sad smile. “I used to work as a typist, but my hands are ruined now.” She raised her hands and only then Arthur noticed they were shaking uncontrollably.

“Does it hurt?” Arthur asked, noticing how swollen her fingers looked.

“Sometimes,” she shrugged, although Arthur didn't believe her. “I can still make a living selling some of the goods I bake, but he won't listen to it. Instead, he works from Monday to Monday and doesn't even have the time to visit me anymore.”

Arthur felt touched for the woman's condition, but proud at Merlin at the same time. “I’m sorry about your hands. I can't blame Merlin, though. I'd do the same if I were in his shoes.”

Hunith's smile became fond. “I knew there was a reason for him to have missed you so much, my dear.” She got up from the chair before Arthur could say anything after that. “I’m not totally useless, though. And I hope you’re hungry, for I’ve been baking and cooking since this morning!”
“Oh my God, I think I ate my weight in cookies,” Arthur said as he helped Merlin with the boxes of food he had brought from his mother's.

“I think you might not be far from the truth,” Merlin said, supporting one box on his hip to reach for his keys. “You can keep my cookies if you'd like.”

“No, thanks. I think she gave me enough for the week.”

They left the boxes on the dinner table and Arthur sighed. “Well, I should leave now.”

“Do you want to stay, have a drink, watch some more movies...” Merlin wagged his eyebrows suggestively.

Arthur groaned. “Maybe some other day. Besides, I know you're just asking to be polite, so I'll leave you to your work. I also happen to have a stag party to plan for. Are you sure you don't want to come?”

“Nah.” Merlin wrinkled his nose. “It would ruin your surprise to the wedding.”

Arthur shrugged. “So what?”

“I can't go, Arthur. I have to get some work done before the week's over, since you're already dragging me to a party next Saturday.”

Arthur raised his hands in surrender. “Alright, I won't mention it again.”

Merlin followed him to the door. “Thank you for what you did today. I probably wouldn't have gone to see my mom so soon if it wasn't for you.”

“It was no problem. Are you sure you can manage to chose your tux by yourself? I mean, I can go with you, if you want a second opinion.”

It was Merlin's turn to groan. “You're not going to leave me alone if I don't agree, are you?”

Arthur simply grinned in reply. “I'll call you so that we can schedule it.”

He leaned in to peck him in the cheek, but changed his mind on the last minute and kissed him on the lips instead. Merlin let out a surprised sound, but didn't move away. In fact, he seemed to have frozen in place.

Arthur let go slowly, his lips tingling at the sensation as he backed off just enough to look into Merlin's round eyes. “Don't look so shocked, it's just a kiss,” he made light of it, although his own heart was racing.

As if startled out of a trance, Merlin took a step back. “What did you do that for?”

“I told you already, I can't have you freezing like a deer caught in headlights every time I touch you. We're supposed to be boyfriends, remember?”

Merlin frowned, but his cheeks were slightly pink when he looked away. The word “adorable” crossed Arthur's mind.

Arthur cleared his throat. “I'll see you soon.”
He left before he started to blush as well.

Merlin.

“Seriously, Arthur, you’ve got to stop treating me like a girl,” Merlin complained after Arthur opened the door for Merlin on their way out of the shop.

Arthur came to a halt to look at him. “I’m not!”

“Yes you are! You keep buying me things and walking me to my house and opening doors and stuff—”

“You’re carrying your tux!” Arthur pointed at Merlin's arm, where said tux was bent in its plastic package.

“I have two arms!” Merlin waved the other to prove his point.

“Is this because of the kiss?” Arthur gave him an eye roll and resumed walking towards his car. “It was nothing, really. Honestly, if you hadn't dated my sister, I’d suspect you never so much as snogged before. Besides, we’re supposed to be—”

“Dating, I know.” Merlin cut him off. “It’s not about that. It's just that's not how gay couples work. Well, not as a rule, anyway.”

They had reached his car now and Arthur had been about to open the door for Merlin when he caught himself. He scowled. “And how would you know?”

They entered the car and slammed the door shut, one after the other.

Merlin turned to face him. “It’s simple. I'm not a girl and I don't like to be treated like one. Besides, you call that snogging?”

Arthur stopped before turning the engine. “What?” He said stupidly.

“I'll show you what snogging is,” Merlin said, then grabbed him by the back of his head and pulled him in for a kiss.

No, not just a kiss, Arthur realized when Merlin pried Arthur's lips open and slipped his tongue in.

“Hm!” Arthur managed to sound outraged, but allowed Merlin to have his way with his mouth. It wasn't like Merlin didn't know what he was doing, anyway. In fact, he was quite talented. So much so that Arthur found himself placing his own hand on Merlin's nape to keep him from moving away.

At least until he started to get a boner, when he grabbed Merlin's hair and pushed him away.

“Alright,” Arthur said, slightly out of breath. He tried not to look at Merlin's glistening lips, but it was as if his eyes kept being drawn to them. “I got your point. Now put your seatbelt on.”

Arthur started the engine and tried not to think.

Merlin.

The rest of the week flew by and Friday evening found Arthur knocking on Merlin's door with dinner again.

“I brought indian,” Arthur said when Merlin answered the door.
Merlin eyed the tux bent over Arthur’s arm. “I thought the wedding wasn’t until tomorrow evening!”

“It is, but we still have two more Star Wars movies to go.”

“Three,” Merlin corrected him and Arthur groaned. “Actually, there's more, but we're starting with the two first trilogies.”

“You see?” Arthur got tired of waiting to be invited in and stepped up, forcing Merlin to take a step back to make room for him. “One more reason for me to be here early.”

“Arthur, we would have to spend the night watching for you to finish it all.”

“I came prepared!” Arthur showed his backpack.

“Jesus…” Merlin slipped his hand through his messy hair. “Alright, you can stay, but only because you brought food.”

“I knew you would be thrilled,” Arthur teased.

“So, how was the stag party?” Merlin asked as they sat to eat. “Tell me everything, starting by explaining that photo of Gwaine hanging on the chandelier. How did he get there?”

Arthur laughed. “Oh, you’ll never believe this…” He started to fill Merlin in on the sordid details.

.oOo.

“What are you doing?” Merlin asked about eight hours - and three films - later, when he came out of the bathroom to find Arthur sitting on his bed, dressed only in his sleeping pants.

“Getting ready for bed,” Arthur said simply.

Merlin crossed his arms over his pajama T-shirt. “If you think I’ll sleep on the couch while you-”

“Of course not, you’ll be sleeping here as well, in your bed. With me,” Arthur complemented, watching Merlin's chin drop.

“Wha- But-” He sighed. “Alright, what’s the excuse now? No, let me guess. Is it so that I don't have to lie when people ask if we’ve slept together?”

“Cause you’re such a bad liar!” Arthur feigned astonishment. “Why, Merlin, you’re not as dumb as you look like, after all.”

“And you’ve already picked your side of the bed, as I can see.”

“I always sleep on the right,” Arthur stated in answer.

Merlin glared at him, uncrossing his arms and walking to the bed. “Fine, but if you push me off my bed or steal my blanket, I swear I’ll paint you whiskers with permanent marker.”

“Oooo, wicked!”

“Have I mentioned it’ll be a pink permanent marker?”

Arthur laughed out loud.

.oOo.
The first thing Arthur noticed after waking up was the heat of another body pressed to his arm. The second was the butterflies pattern on the curtain, only visible by the sunlight filtering in. Oh, Arthur was so going to tease Merlin about that.

He sighed, closing his eyes again. For a moment, he simply enjoyed the sensation of having someone in bed with him. He had missed the intimacy of those moments, the feeling that he wasn’t alone and that he trusted someone so deeply he didn’t mind to be with them when he was most vulnerable.

He hadn’t mentioned it to Merlin, but he had missed him there at the stag party. He would have spent the whole party texting Merlin and sending him pictures if Percy and Elyan hadn’t snatched his phone away from him halfway through it. He almost had let Merlin’s name slip on more than one occasion while talking to his friends. It wasn’t surprising, given that Arthur had spent most of his free time with Merlin lately, talking to him on the phone whenever they couldn’t meet, or texting him whenever he got the chance. Maybe the proximity was starting to mess with his head. Maybe it would be wise to take a break from him when the wedding was over, try to get himself a real date, like Merlin had suggested last weekend, but for now…

For now, he would indulge himself some more in the comforting feeling of closeness and companionship with another human being.

He must have fallen asleep at some point, for he woke up again with Merlin moving around. Arthur turned on his back and looked to the side to find Merlin lying on his stomach, his eyes closed and his face relaxed.

“You snore,” Merlin croaked, surprising him.

“No I don’t,” Arthur said in outrage, although the effect was ruined by his sleepy voice.

Merlin cracked one eye open. “I thought you might say that.” He turned his head to the other side and reached for his phone on the nightstand. “And that’s why I recorded it on video. Can you hear that?”

He showed his phone screen to an apoplectic Arthur. “You filmed me in my sleep? How dare you! I could have you sued for this!”

“Then I’ll have to put it on Twitter just to make it worth it.”

“You little shit!” Arthur cuffed him in the back of his head.

“Ouch! I honestly can’t decide if you’re more annoying while awake or asleep, snoring like a pig!!”

“I’ll show you the pig,” Arthur said and kicked him out of bed.

Merlin yelped as he fell, then scrambled to his feet saying something about finding his pink marker. Arthur tried not to grin too hard so as to nearly split his face in two.

.oOo.

“How am I supposed to- fuck,” Merlin said as he tried to button his cuffs and failed. “I’m definitely not cut out for this shit.”

“Here, let me,” Arthur said, offering to help him. He was already dressed and had just finished gathering his things.

Merlin kept his stubborn frown as he held his arms up for Arthur to button it for him. “I have no idea
how I’m supposed to fix the bowtie.”

“It’s a very complex process, I’m sure you could learn it in a two years course, but I’ll help you out this time,” Arthur joked as he grabbed said tie and stepped closer to fix it. Merlin was smelling of soap and aftershave.

“I don’t know how you manage to look so at ease in this bloody thing. It’s so stiff and awkward! I feel like I’m in a medieval armour.”

“You’ll get used to it. Now quit nagging. It’s highly unattractive.” Arthur adjusted his lapel and run his hands through it, taking a step back to assess him as a whole. “There. You’re not too bad.”

Merlin’s shoulders sagged. “Arthur, are you really going through with this? I know you didn’t ask my opinion, but I think it’s a complete waste of time. Morgana won’t buy it for a minute! And believe me, I might not have seen her in a long time, but I can tell you for sure. She won’t. Believe it!”

Arthur was about to ask why he was so sure, but he had a sudden vision of Merlin in bed with his sister, making her scream in pleasure and scowled. “Well, you might have known my sister very intimately, but you haven’t seen me in action yet. People say we’re made of the same stubborn and persistent material, so…” he kissed the corner of Merlin’s lips and tapped his chin, “have a little faith, will you?”

He stepped around Merlin and stopped at the door, gesturing with his hand. “Shall we?”

Merlin sighed, but went ahead anyway.

.Merlin.

Arthur had to admit that his friend’s reaction wasn’t nearly as shocked as he expected. They were so glad to see Merlin, they took some time to notice the way Arthur kept a possessive hand around him whenever he wasn’t hugging or being hugged by someone else. Even Lancelot had dared come closer to say hello to Merlin, after not showing up at the stag party.

“Where have you been?” Leon asked Arthur once they got over interrogating Merlin and introducing him to the newest member of their group, Percival, as well as Eira and Kara, Gwaine’s and Mordred’s girlfriends. “You weren’t answering your phone since yesterday afternoon! I tried calling your home as well. Morgana was furious, thinking you’d stand me up.”

“She even convinced him to take me as second best man, in case you didn’t show up,” Gwaine threw his hair back, seeming amused. “Gave me a pair of borrowed rings and all.”

“I spent the night at Merlin’s,” Arthur said simply, earning a gasp from the others.

Gwaine’s eyebrows shot up. “You mean you’re actually together?”

“Yes.” Arthur took the chance to throw his arm over Merlin’s waist again and bring him closer to kiss his nape. He didn’t dare look, but he could almost feel the heat emanating from Merlin’s face.

“Atta boy!” Gwaine said, grinning and messing with Merlin’s hair.

“Would you mind?” Merlin said, trying to escape Arthur’s grip as he fixed his hair, but Arthur turned him around to help him put it back in place.

“Aww,” said one of the girls - probably Eira.
“So he’s the secret date Morgana has been on about?” Elyan said pensively.

Arthur frowned at him. “And how would you have heard about that?”

“Oh, you know how it works,” Mordred gave him an eye roll. “Morgana told Gwen, who told Elyan, who told everybody else.”

“Besides, she’s been fishing, in case we knew something,” Percival complemented.

“She and Gwen will freak out when they see this,” Elyan said, pointing at Arthur and Merlin’s joined hands.

Merlin threw Arthur an uncertain look before looking away.

Arthur gave his hand a reassuring squeeze. He scanned his friends’ faces then. Except for Leon, who had a deep frown on his forehead, the others were smiling with something akin to pride. Including Lancelot.

“So, are you guys fine with this?” Arthur asked just to be sure.

Deep inside, he was a little annoyed that his friends didn’t have trouble accepting the fact that he was in a gay relationship. Except perhaps for Leon, who had started to pace back and forth - although it might have been out of nervousness for the upcoming ceremony. On the other hand, it would help him with going through with his plan, so he might as well let it pass.

“Sure,” Gwaine shrugged. “Why wouldn’t we be?”

“You guys always bickered like a married couple, after all,” Elyan commented, making the others laugh.

“You look so cute together,” commented Eira, smiling at them.

Arthur couldn’t help a smirk as he searched for Merlin’s eyes with a raised eyebrow. Merlin rolled his eyes at him, but Arthur could tell he was fighting a smile of his own as he looked away.

“Alright, how about we get in the church now?” Leon said after checking his watch for the millionth time. “It’s almost time!”

“Alright, alright,” Arthur said, kissing Merlin’s cheek before letting go of his hand. He addressed the others as he walked backwards towards the church. “Would you guys keep an eye on Merlin for me please? Make sure everybody knows that he’s taken? He’s too hot to be wandering around on his own.”

“Of course,” Gwaine said, throwing an arm over Merlin's shoulders while bringing Eira closer with the other. “He’ll be safe with us. Besides, we have so much to catch up about. Right, gorgeous?”

Merlin threw a murderous look at Arthur’s direction and Arthur had to look away before he changed his mind and dragged Merlin along with him.

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The ceremony was beautiful and Morgana was too busy being radiant and in love with the groom to waste too much time and effort glaring at her brother. She and Leon disappeared with the photographer after the ceremony, so Arthur helped ushering the guests to the reception hall.

Guinevere saw Merlin first while they waited for the just-married couple on the foyer of the
ballroom. She squeaked in delight, throwing her arms around him and shooting question after question until Merlin was a little disoriented. Arthur and Lancelot shared a look and then they both turned away, although for different reasons. Lancelot clearly looked as if he was ready to apologize and Arthur was annoyed, both at the man and at himself, since he suspected he couldn’t help but forgive his former friend if he asked.

Morgana didn’t get to see Merlin until she and Leon arrived at the reception hall a few minutes later. Her steps faltered, as well as her smile. “Merlin?” She gasped. Her eyes bulged in surprise for a moment before her expression became fierce as she strode straight to Merlin in a determined pace.

Alarmed at his sister’s reaction, Arthur was about to step between them when Lancelot grabbed his arm, stopping him.

“Arthur, wait.”

“What the bloody hell-”

“Look!” Lancelot gestured with his hand.

Arthur stopped struggling to get free when he noticed Morgana bringing Merlin to a ribs-crushing hug.

“How dare you disappear on me like this for years!” Morgana scolded, backing away just enough to look him in the eyes. “You better have a great excuse for not even calling!”

“Um,” Merlin tried, still looking shocked, but Morgana didn’t allow him to say any further.

“Oh my God, I’ve missed you so much!” She said as she wrapped him in another painful looking hug.

Arthur got rid of Lancelot's hand still in his arm and searched for Leon's eyes in a silent question.

Leon cleared his throat before touching his bride softly on the shoulder. “Come on, love, our guests are waiting.”

“Allright, alright,” Morgana let go of Merlin and whipped the corner of her eyes. She pointed a finger at Merlin. “Don't you dare disappear on me again. And you,” she turned her finger towards her brother. “You’re in deep trouble and you know it. We’ll definitely talk later about your vanishing number.”

She lifted her chin, grabbed her groom's arm and they both strode inside the room and into her party.

Arthur exchanged a dumbfounded look with Merlin.

“I think it’s possible she didn’t get what you being here with me really means,” Arthur said.

“Oh,” Guinevere exclaimed, “you mean, you two…” she trailed off, covering her mouth with her hand.

“Yes, we’re together,” Arthur said, putting an arm around Merlin's waist and bringing him closer. “Any problems with that?”

“No! No, no, not at all! I mean, it's great! It's just… unexpected, I guess.”

“Come on,” said Lancelot, pulling Guinevere to the ballroom. “We should get inside as well.”
Merlin raised an eyebrow at Arthur when they were left alone. “Well?”

Arthur shrugged. Instead of letting Merlin go, he nuzzled at his neck. “I guess we'll have to make sure my sister gets it.”

“Arthur, I don't think—” Merlin started to say, but Arthur shut him up with a kiss. The kind which would leave their lips swollen, their clothes wrinkled and their breathing shallower.

“Come on, love, let's dance!” Arthur said pulling an astounded Merlin in.

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Merlin was a bit hesitant at first, but he soon let go and started to have some fun. He wasn't half bad a dancer and he refused to drink more than one cocktail at a time. His cheeks were rosy right after he drank them and his smile was a little goofy, but Arthur didn't feel like making fun of him for it.

Arthur made sure to always touch and smile at Merlin, whispering things in his ear just to make him blush and kissing him whenever he felt like doing it - and he certainly felt like doing it all the time. Arthur blamed it on the drinks and on Merlin's stupidly girlish mouth. For some reason, his teeth were also kind of mesmerising when he smiled.

Merlin played along quite naturally, despite his previous claims that he was a bad liar. He mostly let Arthur answer the questions about their relationship. He also welcomed Arthur's kisses and bantered and teased right back at him.

Sometimes, Arthur's heart felt constricted that it would soon come to an end, that he would have to tell the truth about them to their friends. He never expected it to be so hard to let go of his fake boyfriend, but he felt reluctant to even think about it. Maybe they could keep the pretense a little longer? He wondered if Merlin would be up to that, although he seemed really bothered by all the lying and deceiving, even though Arthur didn't think it was that big of a deal. It wasn't any of their business anyway, whether they were an actual couple or not.

Merlin didn't share his opinion on the matter, thought.

“Remember when Arthur was trying to sneak into Prof. Monmouth’s office and Merlin got him caught?” Gwaine said when they were all sitting together after the cake was served.

“It wasn’t on purpose!” Merlin defended himself while Arthur shook his head.

“How could I forget?” Arthur raised an eyebrow at Merlin.

“What were you doing there anyway?” Mordred asked Arthur.

Merlin rolled his eyes. “He missed the deadline for a paper and was trying to sneak in so that he could place it with the others.”

“And I would have managed it if it wasn’t for Merlin barging into the room and bumping into me like the gracious swan he’s always been,” Arthur shook Merlin’s shoulder affectionately to make sure he knew he was just teasing. “Suddenly there were papers flying everywhere and we were still arguing over whose fault it was when Monmouth came in. I didn’t get the grade and Monmouth made us stay until we had sorted out the papers back in order.”

“I lost Freya’s birthday party because of that,” Merlin complained, punching Arthur on the arm.

“Oh, and remember that time Arthur tricked Merlin into smearing those stinking berries on his face
and arms?” said Elyan.

Merlin groaned and the others laughed.

“Oh, right!” Gwaine said amusedly. “How did you manage it again?”

Arthur was trying to suppress a smug smile while Merlin downed his drink, shaking his head.

“Elyan somehow managed to lock himself in the basement of his father’s house,” Arthur remembered.

“The door got stuck,” Elyan explained. “I was alone at home, Gwen had gone to a girls night with Morgana. Luckily there was a phone my father had installed down there when my uncle lived with us, so I called Arthur asking for rescue.”

Arthur intervened again. “I took Merlin with me, since we had both been ditched for the night, and I told him there was only one little problem. Elyan’s doberman.”

“Loki?” Eira asked. “But he’s a-”

“A lamb, yes,” Arthur said as the others laughed further, earning another groan from Merlin, who had hidden his face in his hands now. “Only Merlin didn’t know it. So I told him we should smear the berries on us so that Loki wouldn’t attack us.” Arthur reached for Merlin’s nape, caressing it in sympathy.

“I reeked for a week!” Merlin shook Arthur’s hand off. “Besides, I nearly had a heart attack when the dog came running and jumped at Arthur. It took me some time to figure out the dog was trying to lick his face, not eat it.”

Arthur had a sudden realization and reached for him again, bringing him towards his chest. “I can’t believe it, you were actually trying to save me instead of running for your life!” He nuzzled Merlin’s nape.

“Aww,” Eira said with a fond smile. “That’s so sweet.”

“Yes, they were always at each other’s throats back then.” Gwaine had a similar expression on his face. “But anyone with eyes could see they really cared for each other.”

“And they continue to be at each other’s throats, as I can see,” Percival teased, raising his drink in a toast and the others cheered with him.

As if on cue, Merlin disentangled himself from Arthur’s arms, averting his eyes as he fixed his hair.

“Who’s up for another dance?” Mordred asked, already getting on his feet.

The others followed and Arthur searched for Merlin’s eyes, but he was suppressing a yawn.

“Sorry guys,” Merlin said shaking his head, “I’m knackered. Didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“Atta boy!” The others catcalled and patted Arthur’s shoulders in congratulation. Arthur didn’t even try to disguise his smugness this time as he leaned back into his seat, keeping an arm around the back of Merlin’s chair.

“Should I tell them the real reason why I didn’t sleep?” Merlin asked once they were out of reach. “Or I could just show them the video.”
“Shut up,” Arthur said and pinched him on the side.

Merlin squirmed away, but his smile didn’t reach his eyes this time.

“What’s wrong, love?” Arthur asked holding Merlin’s chin.

Merlin shook his head, forcing another smile. “I guess I didn’t remember how much I missed them until now.”

“And they missed you,” Arthur said caressing his cheek with his thumb, marvelling at the softness of his skin and the deep blue of his - now sad - eyes. “Don’t trouble yourself with that. You’re here now and it’s almost like you never left. You know they don’t really blame you for leaving.”

Merlin frowned, reaching for Arthur’s hand to stop him and keeping it between both of his. “Arthur, I feel bad for lying at them like this. It’s not right! They’re good people and they trust us. They trust you. Even Gwen seems happy for you, haven’t you noticed it?”

Arthur sighed, looking away. “We’ll tell them tomorrow, alright?” He tried to sound annoyed but the truth was he was starting to feel a bit guilty as well.

Merlin didn’t seem appeased by the prospect, but he didn’t say anything as he let go of his hand and got up, excusing himself to the loo. Arthur watched him leave with a frown, but was distracted when someone flopped down on the chair Merlin had just vacated. Someone with a puffy white dress.

“I’m thirsty,” Morgana announced, grabbing Arthur's martini and downing it. She was flushed from too much dancing and drinking. Arthur had caught her gazing at him and Merlin a few times with an evaluating look on her face, but he had stopped paying attention at some point.

“Hey!” Arthur was quick to take the chance to blame someone for his sudden sour mood. “Just because you’re the bride doesn’t mean you can be rude to your guests.”

“I could get away with murder tonight, darling,” Morgana said, handing him his empty glass. Her voice was a little slurred. “Now would you mind toning down the PDA? You'll give your uncle a heart attack.”

Arthur smirked slowly, leaning back on his chair. He was reminded once again of the real purpose of his plan. “Why, big sister, are you jealous?”

Morgana snorted. “It is my wedding. Leon and I shouldn't have to compete to be the cutest and most passionate couple on the dance floor.” She grabbed the olive from Arthur’s empty glass and popped it into her mouth. “Leon told me you spent the night at Merlin’s yesterday. Does he live in a cave? Because that’s the only reason I can think of for you not to answer your damn phone.”

“I was busy, forgot to charge it.” Arthur had a hard time suppressing a smug smile. “By the way, Hunith sends her love to you.”

Morgana stopped chewing for a moment, her eyes narrowing. “You went to see his mother?” She asked, disbelieving.

“Last weekend, yes. She baked me some cookies and all,” Arthur said, watching Morgana arch an eyebrow at him. “So, are you going to admit I was right? You would never have guessed who it was.”

Morgana shrugged. “I probably wouldn't have believed you if you told me either. I never thought you would actually pull your head out of your ass and take my advice to heart, in the first place. I
thought you’d ask some random girl to come with you just to rub it in my face. And Gwen’s as well.” She assessed him for a moment. “But after what I’ve witnessed this past month and specially tonight, I must admit that I'm thoroughly impressed.”

Before Arthur could show any reaction to her unexpected admission, she reached for his hand and squeezed it, looking too sober all of a sudden. “I know I’m a shit big sister and all, but I’m proud of you for giving yourself a chance to be happy, Arthur. And I sincerely hope you don't screw up this time, or I’ll have to kill you for breaking Merlin's heart.”

Arthur was confused out of words. What the hell was she on about? Did Morgana actually buy it? Had his and Merlin's acting been this convincing? And if it was, why wasn't she mad or annoyed or even raging about him having turned her ex-boyfriend gay?

He searched for any sign of sarcasm on his sister's face but found nothing. She seemed honest, which caused another pang of guilt deep inside Arthur's gut for leading her on like this. For leading everybody on, as Merlin had pointed out.

Before he could say a word, though, Morgana looked up and smiled fondly.

“Oh, there he is! We were just talking about you and how dashing you look tonight.”

Merlin shrugged, seeming sheepish. “You're not bad yourself,” he said with a teasing smile.

“Are you kidding me? You’ll never see a bride as stunning and elegant as me. Ask my husband, he’ll tell you.”

“And he’ll probably be right,” Merlin agreed with a beaming smile.

Arthur felt a sudden need to remind them of his presence. He reached for Merlin’s hand and pulled him down, making him yelp as he sat on Arthur’s thighs. “Hello, gorgeous,” he said and held Merlin’s face as he kissed him full on the lips.

“Oh, gross,” Morgana said in forced distress. “Get a room already.”

Merlin pushed Arthur’s face away, his cheeks coloring from embarrassment. “Sorry,” he said to no one in particular.

Arthur held him by the waist, chest to back, keeping him from getting up.

“Oh, shush,” Morgana said with a soft smile. She reached for Merlin’s hand and squeezed it. “I'm glad you finally got your shit together and told Arthur how you feel about him, Merlin.”

Merlin stopped struggling at once.

Arthur froze as well, not sure if he had heard it right. “What?” he asked, once again wondering if his sister was taking the piss on him.

Morgana gave him an eye roll. “Oh, don’t act like it’s such a big revelation. I don’t get it either how Merlin could have fallen in love with you back then, but I guess one can’t change how one feels. Not even with time, as I can see.” She patted Merlin’s cheek and got up. “Anyway, I gotta go save Leon from his awful relatives, if you’ll excuse me.”

And just like that, she was gone, leaving Arthur to play her words over and over in his head trying to make sense of them.
This time, Arthur didn’t react when Merlin got up, his arms falling limply beside his body. Merlin turned around, his mouth open as if he was about to say something, but he ended up closing his eyes and shaking his head before turning his back on Arthur again and moving away with his head down.

Arthur watched him leave unresponsively for a few moments before realizing Merlin was heading to the exit. He sprang into action with a sudden sense of urge. He had a feeling he would never see Merlin again if he allowed Merlin to get past that door now.

“Merlin, wait,” Arthur said as he reached him at the entry hall. Fortunately, there was no one else there to witness the desperation in his voice.

Merlin’s step faltered for a moment, but he resumed his path again. “Arthur, please, don’t—”

“She’s joking, right?” Arthur asked, trying to make light of the situation. “You loathed me back then.”

Merlin stopped at that, but kept his eyes down. “I wish I did.”

Arthur swallowed, his heartbeat thumping loud in his ears. “Is this why you two broke up?”

Merlin sighed and shook his head, pressing his nose bridge. “We were never together to begin with.” He looked up at Arthur with a sorrowful expression. “I'm gay, Arthur. And Morgana knew it.”

“What?” Arthur asked under his breath, now more confused than ever. “But—”

“It’s just that you assumed we were a couple and Morgana thought it would be fun to keep the pretence when she was actually seeing Alvarr.”

Arthur’s eyes narrowed at the familiar name before they bulged in shock. “The… the drug dealer?”

“He wasn’t—” Merlin cut himself off. “Never mind. It doesn't matter now.”

“You mean she pretended to be dating you for almost a year?” Arthur pressed, taking a step closer to Merlin. “Why would she do that?”

Merlin put his hands in his trousers pockets. “To provoke you, I guess? Because we didn’t get along? I honestly don't understand how this relationship between the two of you works and I don't think I want to. I'm out of this game now. I should never have agreed to it to begin with.” He made it to the door again, but Arthur ran to block his path.

Arthur hesitated before making the next question. “If what Morgana said is true,” he said slowly, afraid of jumping into conclusions and losing Merlin for good, “why did you leave, then?”

Merlin seemed pained all of a sudden as he averted his eyes again. “Because you were with Gwen and you are straight and I couldn't bear to look at you anymore.”

There it was. The admission. It was a real thing now and it was also fucking terrifying.

“And you still feel the same way about me?” Arthur asked, because he couldn’t help it. He needed to know for sure.

Merlin hesitated before nodding slightly. “I thought I was over you, but…” his voice dropped until it faded out. He looked up briefly, flashing a small smile. “Don't worry, I don't expect you to do anything about that. In fact, you can forget I ever walked into your life again. It's better if we both forget this ever happened.”
Arthur felt cold inside at those words. He hadn't realized how much he feared losing Merlin again until now. Merlin started to walk around Arthur, but Arthur reached for his arm, forcing him to stop again.

"Can't we be friends?" Arthur could hear his own despair.

Merlin was shaking his head no, seeming oblivious to Arthur's inner turmoil. "I don't think I can do this, Arthur, I'm sorry. I need to move on with my life. I need to at least try to be happy."

"Were you happy before? Before you met me again at that pub?"

Merlin averted the question by shaking himself free of Arthur's hold. His eyes were shining when he turned his back on Arthur, this time for good. "Please, don't call me again."

Arthur had to blink to ease the sting in his eyes. He left the party without saying goodbye to anyone.

Morgana and Leon left for their two weeks honeymoon and Arthur resumed living and breathing his work. He ignored his friends' calls to get together and took in Leon's cases to keep his mind busy.

It worked just fine for the first week, but it started to take its toll soon enough. Arthur had trouble sleeping and he caught his mind wandering whenever something reminded him of Merlin. Only everything seemed to remind him of Merlin lately. Like the butterfly patterned jotter he had found at the back of his desk drawer while searching for a paper clip.

The first thing he did at seeing it was throw it in the trash. He couldn't stop thinking about the bloody thing, though, and he ended up rescuing it by the end of the day and throwing it back into the drawer. Now the little jotter stood at his desktop next to the cup of - now cold - tea Sefa had brought him earlier. Arthur's eyes were unfocused as he stared at it, thinking about things he couldn't change.

His friends had invited him - and Merlin, since Arthur hadn't mentioned their “split up” to any of them - for a drink on Friday night, but Arthur offered them some excuse about an upcoming audience. They seemed so sure Merlin and him were a good match that Arthur didn't want to admit it was over, even if it had never truly begun.

At first, Arthur had been angry at Merlin - and Morgana, by extension, but when wasn't he angry at her? Merlin had claimed to feel bad for lying to his friends for one single night and yet he had managed to fool Arthur during a whole year in the past and hadn't cared to clear things out once they met each other again?

Merlin had claimed to be such a bad liar, and yet Arthur had fallen for it unsuspecting. Suddenly, a lot of things made sense, like the way Merlin seemed to know a great deal about gay relationships. Arthur wondered if that childhood friend, Will, had been more than a friend after all. Also, that night at the pub, Merlin had probably been waiting for a man, and instead he found Arthur.

What hurt the most was that Arthur had been completely honest with Merlin during the past month, believing that Merlin was doing the same!

Arthur was still mad at Merlin, but now he was starting to feel a deep sense of loss. Ever since he had found Merlin that night, it had never crossed his mind that he could lose him again, as a friend. He had taken Merlin for granted and now he was forced to face reality. Merlin hadn't moved from London this time, but he had shut Arthur out of his life again and it felt like another kick in the gut.

By the end of the second week, Arthur had been staring blankly at the jotter when Sefa barged into
his office white as a sheet. “Mr. Pendragon-” she started, but was interrupted when someone strode in after her.

“Thank you, Sefa,” Guinevere said softly, placing a hand on the girl’s arm, as if afraid that she would break into sobbs. “It will be just a minute, I promise.” She looked up at Arthur. “Besides, Arthur can throw me out of his office by himself, if he’d like.”

Arthur sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. The last thing he wanted right now was to deal with Guinevere. He let his hands drop at last. “It’s alright, Sefa. Leave us.”

The secretary didn’t have to be asked twice. She retreated silently, closing the door.

Guinevere flashed him an uncertain smile. “I’m sorry that I came unannounced, but I feared you would refuse to see me otherwise.”

“What do you want, Guinevere?” Arthur asked tiredly.

She hesitated before looking down at her hands. “I know nothing I might say can excuse what I did to you and I won’t even ask for you to forgive me.” She looked up at him again, seeming to gather her resolve. “I just wanted you to know that I’m truly sorry for what I did. I should never have let it come to that. I should have said no when you asked me to marry you, but I didn’t and I’m sorry.”

Arthur frowned, taken aback by her honesty. He couldn’t stop the bitterness from his voice when he answered, though. “Alright. Noted. Anything else?”

She took a deep breath. “Actually, there is one… well, two more things. I know my blessing might not mean that much to you these days, but I also want you to know that I’m happy for you and Merlin. I think if someone can make you happy it’s him. More than I ever could, anyway. I mean, I know how much he cares for you and for what I could see at the wedding, you care a great deal about him too and-”

“What do you mean, you know how much he cares about me?” Arthur inquired, unable to stop himself. “Did you know something? I mean, back then?”

“Well…” She bit her lower lip. “I didn’t know it for sure at the time. I mean, I suspected he was gay, but-”

“You did?” Arthur asked, unbelieving.

“I guess I didn’t want to face it that he loved you back then,” Guinevere said, as if reluctant to admit it. “But deep down I knew it, and then Morgana confirmed my suspicions after he left. Then I felt guilty for keeping you to myself and, at the same time, relieved that he was gone, and then guilty for feeling relieved- I-I mean, I should have backed off then, but I still thought that you were the one for me and-”

“Gwen,” Arthur said, confused. “I don’t think I’m following-”

“Anyway,” Guinevere said, gesturing for him to allow her to finish it. “I’m happy that the two of you got a second chance after all this time. I… I’d also like to ask you not to blame Lance for what happened between us. He never wished to hurt you or betray your friendship. I was the one who took advantage of his kindness, knowing how he felt about me. He still can’t forgive himself, and since he saw you at Morgana’s wedding, he’s been quiet and sad all over again. I understand if you don’t want to see me or talk to me ever again, but he’s still loyal to you and he misses you guys terribly. The night of Leon’s stag party, he was a complete wreck. He didn’t want to impose himself on you and he’s distancing himself from his friends again because he doesn’t believe he’s worthy of
Arthur arched an eyebrow at her. “And what exactly do you expect me to do?”

“Well, you can show up at the pub tonight. I managed to convince him to go, but only because they said you wouldn’t be there.”

Arthur exhaled. “Look, I can’t go! I happen to be very busy, as you can see.”


She left before Arthur could say anything after that.

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Arthur nearly snarled at the happy couple giggling at the entrance of the pub as he moved past them. The place was crowded and noisy, as it was only to be expected on a Friday night.

He found their table by following Gwaine’s laughter. “Oh, look who’s graced us with his royal presence!” Gwaine said at spotting him. “Come join us, Princess.”

“Um,” said Lance, going a little pale as he put his pint slowly back on the table. “I guess I should go.” He started to get up.

“I fail to see why you should,” Arthur said, sitting across from him.

Elyan put a hand on Lancelot’s shoulder and pushed him back into his seat. “Yeah, I wouldn’t have put it in so fancy words, but Arthur’s right. You should stay. Specially when Arthur’s paying the next round.”

The others cheered and Arthur rolled his eyes but fished for his wallet, placing a couple of tens in Percival’s extended hand.

“Where’s Merlin?” Mordred asked, looking over his shoulder towards the bar.

Arthur averted his eyes. “He couldn’t come.”

“Oh, right, he mentioned something about having to finish some urgent work this evening,” Gwaine said unconcernedly.

Arthur frowned at him. “Have you talked to him recently?”

Gwaine shrugged. “Of course. I called him, since you said you wouldn’t be able to come, just to make sure he knew he was welcome to come alone, if he’d like to. He doesn’t have to deny himself some quality time with his friends just because you guys are dating now.”

Arthur was still trying not to dwell on the fact that Gwaine had Merlin’s phone number when Elyan patted him on the shoulder, offering him a smirk. “You know what they say, better late than never!”

“Yeah, I honestly had lost hope of Merlin ever acting on it,” Gwaine said, tossing his hair to the side.

Arthur turned to fix him with a frown. “Wait, what? You mean, you knew he was gay? Did he tell you?”

Gwaine shrugged. “He didn’t have to. I assumed this much after I noticed the big crush he had on
“Same here,” Elyan said, raising his pint in a toast. “Merlin wasn't very good at hiding it.”

“Yeah, he's always been a terrible liar.” Gwaine arched an eyebrow at Arthur. “I think the real question here is how come you never knew?”

“He was- I mean, I thought he was dating my sister!”

“What? Of course not!” Gwaine said, as if it were the silliest thing.

Mordred frowned. “Wasn't she dating that guy who dressed himself like a pimp?”

Arthur gasped. “You knew that too?”

“You mean Alvarr?” Elyan seemed surprised, but not that much.

Arthur gaped at his friends. “Did you all know about Merlin?” He fixed Mordred next.

“I saw him kissing a guy at a party at our first week of college,” Mordred said.


“Oh-ho, someone's jealous!” Gwaine said to Elyan.

Arthur ignored them, waiting for Mordred’s answer.

Mordred shrugged. “I don't know. Never saw the guy again.”

“What did I miss?” Percy said as he placed the beers on the table.

“Arthur being jealous over Merlin's college hook up,” Elyan supplied.

Arthur grabbed his drink and took a few large gulps.

“How about you?” Arthur asked Lancelot, the only one who hadn't answered yet, since Percival hadn't known Merlin back then.

Lancelot averted his eyes for a moment before facing him with a grimace. “He told me.”

Arthur growled, leaving his unfinished pint behind as he got up.

“Where are you going?” Gwaine asked, alarmed.

“To the bar. I need something stronger.”

.oOo.

Arthur tripped over the last step of the stairs to Merlin's apartment and cursed over the eco reverberating on the narrow corridor. When he looked up, the corridor was empty except for a white, small cat fixing him from Merlin's door.

“Shh!” Arthur told the cat and watched it wag its tail lazily, still staring him with its head hunched between its shoulders, as if ready to attack. “What are you looking at?” He asked, daring. “First the bloody moving stairs, now the cat acting like McGonagall.” He pointed an accusing finger at the cat. “This is not a Harry Potter movie, just so you know, so quit the superior act. Now piss off!”
The cat didn't move an inch. Arthur took a step forward and nearly tripped again, bracing himself on the wall.

The cat turned it's back on him and walked to the opposite door, perhaps more to avoid being fallen over than out of fear. There was something off with the way it seemed to limp as it walked and then Arthur had a memory.

“Hey, you’re the crippled cat, right?” He snapped his fingers, trying to jog his memory.

The door opened then and Merlin came out of his apartment wearing his plaid pajamas and carrying a bowl of cat food. “Aithusa, what are you-” He came to a halt noticing Arthur still struggling to get upright. “Arthur! What- what are you doing here?”

“Well, you said I shouldn't call you, but you never mentioned anything about me coming to see you in person,” Arthur tried to sound smug, but his words came out a bit too slurred.

Merlin hesitated before putting the bowl on the floor and taking a step closer with a frown. “Are you drunk?”

Arthur snorted. “Of course not. I hardly had a couple of drinks.”

Merlin crossed his arms, looking skeptical. “A couple of handfuls, more likely.”

Arthur shrugged. “Who was counting?”

Merlin sighed, dropping the stern act. “Come on inside or you'll end up waking up the whole building with the racket you're making.”

“See?” Arthur told the cat as he passed it towards the door. “I told you to be quiet.”

The cat ignored him, limping back towards the bowl of food.

Arthur stumbled on the step at Merlin's door and would have landed flat on the floor if not for Merlin catching him.

“Careful!” Merlin said as Arthur stumbled forward. He ended up pinned to the dinner table by Arthur's body. “Arthur?” Merlin asked, his eyes round with surprise.

Arthur hadn't done it on purpose, but now that he had Merlin trapped, he didn't feel like moving away. He raised his hand to cup Merlin's chin as he assessed him intently.

“You shouldn't have fixed your ears,” he said grudgingly. “I liked them the way they were before.”

Merlin's features hardened and he turned away from Arthur's hand. “Well, you never asked my opinion before fixing your teeth either. Arthur, would you-”

Arthur was too busy sniffing Merlin's neck to realize he was trying to push him away. “You smell so good.”

“Um… Arthur?”

Arthur leaned over Merlin, forcing him to lean back and put his hands on the table behind him to keep his balance. “You know, I've always wondered why Morgana kept you as her boyfriend.” Arthur nuzzled on Merlin's neck and felt him shivering.

“Jesus,” Merlin breathed out.
“And when you kissed me in my car I thought I was starting to understand it.” He pulled back to
stare him in the eyes. “But it was all a lie, wasn't it? All of it?”

Arthur didn’t wait for him to answer. He dove in for a desperate and clumsy kiss. God, how he
missed this. Merlin's lips were as soft and welcoming as ever and Arthur was starving for them. He
allowed his hands to wander down Merlin’s nape, then down his spine through the soft fabric of his
pajama until he grabbed Merlin’s tight ass, making him jump up with a startled sound. Arthur had to
hold himself on the table not to fall, but he somehow managed to keep snogging Merlin.

When Arthur slid his right hand to the front of Merlin’s pants, he had just enough time to feel the
outline of Merlin’s hardening length when Merlin reached for his hand, stopping him.

He forced Arthur to back off as he leaned away. “What are you doing?” He asked, looking equally
surprised and worried.

“Giving you what you want,” Arthur stated and tried to go for another kiss, but Merlin stopped him
with a firm hand on his chest.

“A pity fuck?” Merlin huffed, incredulous. “This is definitely not what I want.”

“It’s not a pity fuck!” It was Arthur’s turn to show indignance.

“What is it, then?”

Arthur was starting to feel unsure. “I thought you wanted me!”

“And then what?” Merlin’s brow furrowed with something close to anger. “You thought you’d come
er here and offer to make my dreams come true, if only for one night. Well, it sounds like a pity fuck to
me, especially when you had to be sloshed to do so.”

“I’m not sloshed!” Arthur said, while still holding on to Merlin’s clothes.

Merlin simply raised his eyebrow at him and Arthur puffed, averting his eyes. Things were definitely
not going the way he expected on his ride here.

“Alright, forget it,” Arthur said, stepping away. “This was a mistake.” He tried to move for the still
open door, but ended up miscalculating and smashing his shoulder on the threshold.

He heard Merlin sigh and then felt his hands on his shoulders. “You can’t leave like this.”

“Of course I can,” Arthur insisted, but allowed Merlin to pull him back inside.

“Of course,” Merlin said after closing the door, guiding him to the sofa. “You can also fall down the
stairs and break your neck, then leave me to deal with the mess. You’re staying on the couch tonight.
We’ll talk this through in the morning.”

Arthur grumbled and argued, but once he was lying down and the world was spinning around him,
he lost all the strength to fight.

“I’ll stay here just one minute, then I’m leaving,” he said, putting his arm over his sensitive eyes. His
head was starting to throb.

“Sure,” Merlin said, patting him on the shoulder.

Arthur blacked out in a blink.
Merlin.

Arthur fled the next morning. He woke up with a terrible headache, but as soon as he realized where he was and what he had done the other night he felt sick in a way that had nothing to do with his hangover.

What had he been thinking? What was he planning to do? Get on his knees and suck Merlin off? He had never hooked up with a man before! He should probably be grateful that Merlin had stopped him before it came to that and saved him the embarrassment.

Arthur would have spent the whole weekend working if it wasn’t for Morgana showing up at his place on Sunday morning.

“Weren’t you supposed to be laying on a beach chair somewhere?” Arthur asked after letting her in and moving to the kitchen. He could make good use of some coffee.

“It’s good to see you too, little brother,” Morgana said sardonically, hanging her coat and walking around the living room. “My honeymoon was great, thanks for asking. And you would have known we came back yesterday if you cared to pick up your damn phone.”

Arthur shrugged. “Something must be wrong with the line. I didn’t hear it ringing.”

“Of course.”

“Coffee?”

“Do you really have to ask?”

Arthur set to prepare two cups, only half listening while she prattled on about her trip.

“What about you?” Morgana asked once they were sitting on the couch, blowing their cups.

Arthur averted her eyes. “Oh, you know… Busy.”

“I can tell.” She paused. “How’s Merlin?”

“Good.”

“And how would you know it, since you haven’t been charging your cell phone and you unplugged the landline?”

Arthur’s head snapped up to look at her. “How-”

“I checked while you were sticking your head in the cabinet,” she said with an eye roll, placing her cup on the center table. “Come on, what’s going on?”

“Nothing’s going on.”

Morgana huffed. “Listen, I’m in a rare good mood, so you better not spoil it by being obtuse. Last time I saw you, you looked ten years younger, laughing and looking like you were having the time of your life with Merlin. You even had a light tan for spending some time outside! Now you look like you haven’t slept in weeks, you’re cranky and has been drowning in work again, pushing your friends away… One doesn’t have to be a genius to figure out something’s going on or take a guess at what it might have to do with. So, unless you want me to find out through Merlin, you better start telling me now.”
Arthur narrowed his eyes at her. “Have you been talking to him as well?”

“Of course I have!” Morgana said. “I said I wouldn’t let him disappear on me again and I meant it.”

Arthur clamped his teeth in an attempt to refrain from making any comments. Apparently, he was the only one Merlin had cut ties with.

“Why did you lie to me before?” Arthur asked instead. “Why did you pretend to be dating him?”

“I didn't pretend-”

“But you led me on!” Arthur cut her off, losing his temper. “You knew I thought you two were dating and you didn't correct me. Why? Was it just so you could laugh at me?”

“Of course not,” Morgana said dismissively.

“Then why?”

She assessed her brother for a moment. She shrugged then. “Because I knew he had a big crush on you and I suspected you felt the same.”

“What?”

Morgana snorted. “You’re a jealous bitch when you get your eyes on someone-”

“Hey!” Arthur started to protest, but Morgana didn't give him the chance.

“...and I thought it might help you figure things out and make a move if you thought you had some competition. But of course I underestimated your fear of disappointing our father.”

“But you know I’m not- That I wasn't- I mean, I was with Guinevere!”

Morgana placed her hand on Arthur's shoulder. “I hate to break it to you, but you lost interest on Gwen as soon as Lance got out of the picture. You just kept her because it was convenient and you know it. As for you not being gay, the rainbow has many colours, dear brother. You don't have to pick one. All you’ve got to do is allow yourself to be happy with the person you feel attracted to!” She patted him a couple times before getting up. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have three bags to unpack. And if you haven't figured out yet, I’m giving you the chance to try and fix things with Merlin before I step in, so you better use your time wisely. See you!”

Arthur was still staring blankly at her vacant place on the couch when he heard the door closing. It was absurd! Arthur had never been attracted to Merlin. He was annoying and stubborn. Not to mention awkward and way too skinny.

Not that Arthur would have been interested if Merlin was bulky, he had never been into muscles besides his own. Although he had to admit that Merlin was less awkward now and he had filled quite nicely to his frame. His body wasn't exactly unpleasant to look at. Or grab, as Arthur had recently discovered. His stomach was firm as well and maybe Arthur had wondered how it would feel like to slide his hands under his shirt a couple times just out of curiosity. And he was a hell of a good kisser, especially when he didn't hold back on the tongue-

“God!” Arthur pressed his hands over his eyes until he saw white, trying to will his hard on away.

Dammit, he was attracted to Merlin. When had that happened?

.oOo.
If oblivion was bliss, then consciousness was a bitch. Arthur could no longer concentrate on anything besides his recently admitted attraction for Merlin.

He was angry at Merlin and his stupidly endearing smiles and smart wit; at Morgana and her proneness to being annoyingly right all the time; at his friends and their freedom to talk to Merlin whenever they pleased; and last but not least, at himself for ruining his chances with Merlin.

He could never explain how it came to that, but somehow he found himself calling Lancelot and arranging to meet him in a nearby cafe - he thought it best to avoid the temptation of getting sloshed again. After an awkward start and an even more awkward exchange of apologies, Arthur teared his heart open in front of his former-and-back-again friend - it turned out no alcohol was needed after all.

“Why don't you let him know how you feel about him?” Lancelot said, as if it was the easiest thing to do.

“Because he doesn't want to talk to me ever again. He forbid me to call him on his phone and turned me down in person when I showed up on his door.”

“Well, perhaps it was because he thinks you are straight and you were drunk. He might be willing to listen to you if you're sober and honest, just like you are right now.”

“But what would I tell him?”

“Exactly what you told me!”

Arthur shook his head. “I can't!”

“Come on, it's not that big of a deal.” Lancelot leaned over. “You already got through the hardest part, which was admitting it to yourself. And you know he feels the same, so-”

“But what if he's moved on already?” Arthur interrupted him. “He said he needed distance so that he could get over me. What if he's already dating someone else?”

“You'll have to take the risk, I guess. I don't think he has moved on, thought. I mean, perhaps he hasn't been pining for you all these years, but all it took was a month to revive his feelings. I don't think a couple of weeks would be enough for him to fall out of love with you again.”

“But what if he doesn't believe in me? I mean, I didn't even know I could be attracted to a guy until yesterday. What if he thinks I'm leading him on or- or confused, which I'm not entirely sure isn't true. God, why did he have to push me away like this? It would have been so much easier if we stayed friends until I worked things out!”

“For you, maybe. But try to be in his shoes for a moment. He still thinks you're unattainable. Besides, what is it that you're so confused about? You seemed pretty sure of how you felt just moments ago. If I understood it correctly, drunken you was ready to blow him.”

“Ugh,” Arthur grunted, hiding his face behind his palms. “Well, sober me isn't so sure he can do that!”

“What is sober you ready to do, then? Does it involve something sexual at all, or is it just platonic?”

Arthur slid his hands through his hair and instantly regretted it when he remembered his latest dreams and his shower that very morning. “Uh, it's definitely not platonic.”

Lance offered him an understanding smile. “Then I think you have already figured out the most
important part. He might be able to help you figure out the rest.”

Arthur sighed, looking away. “You know, I can't blame Merlin for trusting you with his feelings. You always were a good listener.”

Lancelot smiled at him. “Thank you for trusting me with yours as well. I really appreciate it that you called me.”

Arthur nodded. “You’re a good friend, Lance.” He raised his coffee in a toast and Lancelot did the same.

.oOo.

Since Merlin had forbidden Arthur to ever call him again, Arthur decided to write him an email. He started by apologizing for running away on Sunday morning and asking for them to talk. He might have begged shamelessly, but he feared he would be blocked if he did any less.

It took some agonizing time for Merlin to reply, but fortunately he agreed on meeting him for a coffee on Monday afternoon, choosing the same coffee shop from their first meeting. Arthur was too glad not to be turned down to care.

He arrived half an hour early and was on his second beverage when Merlin arrived, joining him with his smoothie in hand.

“Hi,” Merlin said, his smile too tight to be natural. “Sorry I’m late. I had a work meeting.”

“No problem,” Arthur said, offering him a forced smile as well. His heart was racing, as it had been from the moment he spotted Merlin entering the coffee shop. “I'm glad you agreed to come anyway.”

Merlin shrugged while taking a sip from his straw. Arthur suppressed a loud moan at just how much he missed seeing him like this - no, scratch that, at seeing him at all. Arthur longed to reach out and touch his hand over the table, lace their fingers and just stare at him like a dork. Which he seemed to be doing anyway, judging from the way Merlin was eyeing him. “Are you alright?” He asked, looking slightly worried.

Arthur cleared his throat. “Sure. I mean, it's good to see you.”

“What is it you wanted to talk to me? It seemed urgent.”

“Yeah, well, I just wanted to apologize for fleeing, the other day. I shouldn't have left before thanking you for treating me decently instead of just kicking me out like I deserved.”

“Oh,” Merlin frowned, then his face became blank. “Well, is that everything you regret? Leaving before thanking me? I mean, do you even remember what happened?”

Arthur refrained from sighing. “Well, alright, I’m sorry I showed up at your door after you forbid me to contact you ever again. Drunk, on top of everything else. And yes, I remember what happened. I hope I didn't offend Aithusa. Do you want me to apologise to her as well?” Arthur realized he was being sarcastic, but it was too late to take it back now.

Merlin scrunched his nose and grabbed his smoothie. “Alright, fine, apology accepted. Now you can put your conscience at rest. If this is everything-” He was preparing to get on his feet, but Arthur reached out to stop him, panicking.
“No! This is not why I wanted to see you. I mean, this isn’t everything.” Arthur sighed then, letting him go as he rubbed at his own face. “Listen, I miss you, alright? And I know you said we can’t be friends, so I'm hoping you'll give me a chance to be more than that?”

Merlin just stared at him for a couple of seconds. “What?”

“I'm asking you out. For real, this time.”

It was Merlin's turn to sigh. “Arthur, I told you this is not what I want. I don't want you to pretend to be interested just so-”

“I'm not pretending!” Arthur interrupted him again. “I'm not acting out of pity either. I really miss you! And I want to try this with you.”

Merlin looked even more confused. “But you’re straight!”

“Am I? I mean, do straight guys usually get hard just by kissing another guy? Do they want to keep kissing them until their mouth get sore? Do they want to hold hands with another guy and ask him to go to the movies with him?”

Merlin arched an eyebrow at him. “You want me to go to the movies with you?”

Arthur squirmed on his seat, looking away. “I heard there's a new Star Wars film premiere this week.”

Instead of looking delighted, Merlin seemed even more worried. “Arthur, why does everybody still thinks we're dating for real? Why haven't you told anyone it was a farce? Not even Morgana?”

“Because it doesn't feel like it was a farce to me. It feels like we were actually dating, only I didn't realize it until I screwed it all up. And now I want another chance. I want to make it up to you.”

“Aren't you saying this just because you want us to be friends again?” Merlin asked. “I mean, maybe I was too hard on you. We still have friends in common after all. Maybe we could try-”

“No. I don't want to be just friends. I want it to go back like it was before the wedding. I want to take you out to dinner or to a walk on the park and watch nerd films cuddling on your couch and kiss you goodnight. I don't think I can keep my hands off of you now that I know how it feels like to hold you.”

Merlin seemed shaken, but still a bit unsure. “Are you serious about this, Arthur? Cause I don't think I can handle it if you realize you're not into guys after all.”

“You said it yourself, people don’t turn gay, so I'm guessing they can't unturn as well. It just took me too long to figure this out, but now I can't go back to being clueless again.” Arthur leaned over just so that he could lower his voice and still be listened. “I want you, Merlin. Please, give me a chance to prove to you just how much I want you.”

Merlin swallowed hard but nodded. “Alright. I’ll go to the movies with you.”

Arthur released his breath in a relieved laugh. “Great! I’ll pick you up at seven on wednesday.”

.oOo.

It was hard to concentrate on work after that. Especially since Merlin had started to text him again, which also turned the wait a bit less agonizing. Fortunately, Morgana didn’t show up again, only
calling once a day to make sure he would pick up and asking about trivials, probably taking her own conclusions simply by the intonation of his voice, the annoying witch. For once, Arthur didn’t care about her prying, too busy looking forward to his date with Merlin.

As much as Arthur tried to reason that it wasn’t their first date, when the time finally came Arthur had his palms sweating and his heart racing with nervousness. If Merlin noticed it, he didn’t let it show and made sure to act like nothing out of ordinary was happening. Maybe because he was a nerd and couldn’t help but act like one at seeing so many cosplays of his favorite movies at the premiere. Fortunately, Arthur knew enough of the universe to tease him about it without sounding like a bigoted ass.

The movie was entertaining enough and so was the conversation over dinner right after. Arthur soon had no recollection of ever feeling nervous about the whole dating thing once they finished their meal.

“I thought it was brilliant,” Merlin said about one of the cosplays.

“Well, I thought it was silly,” Arthur said just to tease him. “Not to mention inconsiderate. If you’re using a helmet that big in a movie theater, the least you could do is seat in the last roll. I doubt anyone sitting right behind him got to watch the film at all! Besides, how did he manage to watch it himself with that thing, I wonder.”

Merlin gave him an eye roll. “He probably took it off during the film, genius.”

Arthur narrowed his eyes at him and rolled his paper napkin into a ball before throwing it on him. He aimed for his face, but miscalculated the air resistance and the ball landed harmlessly on Merlin’s chest, rolling over the table.

Arthur had a sudden thought. “We should cosplay next time.”

“Next time?” Merlin asked incredulously, then frowned. “Cosplay? We?”

It was Arthur’s turn to roll his eyes at him. “Yes, that’s what I said. And you say I’m the idiot?”

“It’s just I can’t begin to imagine you in a costume.”

“I don’t have the same problem,” Arthur said, giving him a once over. “In fact, I think you’d make a great Princess Leia.”

“Oh, you-” Merlin threw the paper ball right back at him, and it would have hit Arthur in the face if it weren’t for him ducking in time with an indignant huff.

“Come on, you’ve got to admit. It fits you perfectly!”

“And what would you be, then? Chewbacca? A temperamental wookiee fits you perfectly as well,” Merlin pushed back.

Arthur pretended to consider it. “He’s a great mechanic and he’s pretty clever, but I’m not sure if it’s adequate for me.”

“You’re probably right. Perhaps Darth Vader’s more adequate, then. A heartless and bitter sociopath. What do you say?”

Arthur pursed his lips. “Sith Lord, Supreme Commander, ex-Jedi General…” He shrugged. “Not bad at all.”
Merlin let out a snort. “I should have guessed. Only you would be flattered to be compared to Darth Vader.”

“I have another suggestion, though. Since we're dating and you're going as Leia—”

“I'm not—”

“I obviously must go as Han Solo. He's brave, charming and charismatic.”

“You forgot to mention arrogant and inconsequential and didn't exactly have a happy ending.”

Arthur waved Merlin's last comment away. “Anyway, it's settled. We’re going as Han Solo and Princess Leia and we’ll pretend the last trilogy never happened.”

Merlin shook his head and averted his eyes. When he looked back up, Arthur could see him smiling. “You know, it might be a while until the next Star Wars premiere.”

“I'm not planning on going anywhere,” Arthur said with a crooked smile. He had a sudden remembrance of Merlin telling him he was leaving for Newcastle eight years ago and all his previous amusement died out. Then he remembered Merlin admitting he had left because of him. “Are you?” He asked, pretending he wasn't dreading the answer to that question.

Merlin seemed to realise his apprehension, for he sobered up in a blink. “I'm planning on sticking around as well.”

Arthur breathed out, relieved.

They asked for the bill and left soon after that. Once outside the restaurant, they decided to share a taxi and Arthur gave Merlin's address first.

“Do you want to come inside?” Merlin asked when they were only a few blocks away from his building.

Arthur's eyebrows shot up at the unexpected invitation and he was speechless for a brief moment.

Merlin must have taken it as reluctance, for he averted his eyes, shaking his head. “You know what, forget it. It's probably too soon. Besides, we both have work to do—”

Arthur snapped out of his stupor in a heartbeat. “It's hardly our first date, Merlin.”

Merlin offered him a tight lipped nod and it was settled. They split the taxi and Arthur managed to keep his hands to himself all through the two flights of stairs to Merlin's apartment.

Once inside, Arthur attacked Merlin's lips with his own and for the first time he allowed himself to enjoy it freely, rid of all the guilt and self-denial. And it was even better than he remembered. He pressed Merlin against the door, earning a surprised sound from him.

Arthur froze, suddenly afraid. “Please tell me this is what you had in mind when you invited me in.”

Merlin cleared his throat. “Well, I actually pictured I'd be the one pressing you against the door, but this is fine by me. Don't stop on my account.”

Arthur laughed and kissed him again, running his hands over Merlin's face and scalp while Merlin grabbed his clothes to keep him from pulling away.

Arthur moaned when Merlin pressed his groin against Arthur's and suddenly Arthur's hands were on
Merlin's ass, grabbing and pulling until Merlin's legs were straddling his hips, supporting half of his body weight on Arthur and half on the wall.

“Fuck,” Arthur cursed and abandoned Merlin's lips to catch his breath, burying his nose on the curve of his neck. “I hate you.”


“For wanting me sober. At least when I was drunk I thought I knew what I was doing.”

Merlin chuckled, letting his head bump on the door behind him. He untangled his legs from around Arthur's hips and stood up, ignoring Arthur's protests. He flipped them around, pressing a pouting Arthur against the door. “Hey,” he said, holding Arthur's face between his palms and keeping their faces close. “Don't worry, I've got this.”

Merlin kissed Arthur's lips one last time before moving away.

“Where are you-” Arthur started to ask, but cut himself off when he noticed Merlin pulling him by the hand with a crooked smile on his lips.

“Come with me.”

Arthur followed Merlin to his bedroom, his heart thumping noisily. He wasn't sure if he was more apprehensive about possibly screwing up somehow or just because of the thrill of the anticipation. Probably both.

Merlin must have caught something on his face, for he stopped in front of the door to look at him with uncertainty. “Look, if you're second guessing this-”

“I'm not,” Arthur said quickly, stepping right into Merlin's personal space again just to prove his point.

Merlin looked relieved. “Thank God,” he said and pushed Arthur by the collar of his shirt until the blond was lying on his back on the bed.

“I'm sorry, I've waited too long for this,” Merlin said, riddim himself of his shoes as he climbed on as well.

Arthur had half a mind to chuckle, but he ended up letting out a choked sound as he watched Merlin pull his own T-shirt off. His chest was surprisingly fit for someone so slim-framed. Arthur had feared to be put off by the dark chest hair, but it turned out he had nothing to worry about that. In fact, the view had the very opposite effect.

“Jesus,” Arthur said under his breath just before his mouth was attacked again.

Merlin started to unbutton Arthur's shirt while they tangled their tongues in a sensual dance. Arthur had his senses overwhelmed by desire once again, as it tended to happen whenever Merlin kissed him. Merlin let go of his mouth to trail down kisses on Arthur's chest and lower. Arthur cursed again when he realised where this was going and for a moment he feared he might embarrass himself, ending it too soon. Anyway, he was so desperately horny he didn’t even have the strength to stop Merlin when he took Arthur's cock in his mouth.

And what a glorious mouth it was.

“Wait,” Arthur said, reaching for Merlin's hair and pulling it gently so that he would look up.
Merlin swallowed and wiped his chin off his saliva. “What?” He asked with a frown on his forehead.

“I want to suck you as well.” He actually needed a distraction so that he could get ahold of himself.

Merlin's frown deepened. “You mean like a sixty nine?”

Arthur blinked, his cock throbbing at the mental image. “Yeah, I guess we could try that.”

Merlin's eyebrows shot up, but he ended up propping himself up on his hands and knees. “Alright, I think it's better if we flip over, then. You can stay on top. You'll have more control that way. Okay?”

Arthur shrugged. “Sure.”

Merlin laid back on his back and started unbuttoning his jeans, but Arthur soon sat up to help him and finish undressing himself. When they were both completely naked, Arthur climbed on top of Merlin in reversed position, his face directly above Merlin's groin.

Arthur leaned down and grabbed Merlin's erection, but hesitated on what to do next. “How do you like me to-” He cut himself off when Merlin grabbed his cock and licked its head. He looked down to see Merlin smiling reassuringly at him.

“Don’t worry too much, just do whatever you feel like doing. I'm sure I’m gonna enjoy anything you choose to do.”

Arthur nodded and tried not to grunt when Merlin raised his head to take him in his mouth blissfully deep. He spread his thighs a bit to ease Merlin's access, supporting himself on his elbows and concentrated on his own task.

He started by lapping on Merlin's cock head, testing it's taste and smell. Then he started to suck it slowly, exploring the feeling on his mouth, tongue and hands. He tried taking more in as he gained confidence, caressing Merlin's thighs and balls, mimicking some of Merlin's actions.

All the while, he kept acutely aware of every little move and sound Merlin made, struggling not to get lost in the sensation they provoked deep within his gut. Arthur allowed his hand to wander further and touched Merlin's perineum, eliciting a surprised sound from him.

“Is this alright?” Arthur asked, looking down on Merlin.

“It's good,” Merlin reassured, his cheeks flushed with desire.

Arthur's cock twitched again just from seeing him. He licked the tip of his finger before resuming his caresses. He touched Merlin's opening and circled it, earning a muffled moan from Merlin, whose mouth was stuffed full with Arthur's cock. Arthur pushed just the tip of his finger in while sucking the underside is his cock and Merlin let go of him, cursing.

“Fuck, don't stop,” Merlin asked, slightly short of breath.

Arthur had no intention of stopping, only he started to get really distracted with the way Merlin kept bobbing his head, fucking his own mouth with Arthur's cock.

“Shit, I’m close;” Arthur confessed, touching his nose on Merlin's thigh as his own balls tightened in anticipation.

Merlin let out a sound and tapped Arthur's thighs lightly. “Lie down on your side,” he instructed hoarsely.
Arthur complied and they rearranged themselves until they were both on their sides. He tried to reciprocate when Merlin got down to business again, but he suspected he wasn't doing that great of a job, his mind fogged with his impending orgasm.

Merlin let go of his cock just a second to warn him not to hold back and then it was a matter of seconds until Arthur was coming. Merlin didn't seem to mind, swallowing and licking every drop of his seed.

“Fuck,” Arthur said, laying down on his back, his heart racing. He looked at Merlin's still hard cock and grunted. “I'm sorry, I literally suck at this. Isn't your jaw sore?”

Merlin chuckled, sitting up. “Yes, a bit. And you were not bad for a first-timer.”

Arthur sat up as well. “Maybe I could give you a hand?”

Merlin shrugged. “Sure.”

Arthur gestured for Merlin to come closer and watched as he straddled Arthur's hips, sitting on top of Arthur's softening cock. He grabbed Merlin's erection and gave it a few tugs.

Merlin moved as if to lean down and kiss him, but hesitated mid-move. “I'm probably tasting of jizz.”

“I'll be the judge of that,” Arthur said and pulled him down by the neck for a messy kiss, while jerking him off.

It didn't take long for Merlin to come, panting hard on Arthur's neck. He rolled off and offered Arthur his shirt to clean up the mess on top of his stomach.

“Do you still hate me?” Merlin asked, pillowing his head on Arthur's shoulder.

Arthur closed his eyes feeling sated and happy like he hadn't felt in a long time. His muscles were lax and his limbs felt too heavy to move further than to caress Merlin's hair. “Ask me again tomorrow.” He snapped his eyes open then, suddenly tense. “I mean, if you don't mind me staying the night.”

Merlin snorted. “It would hardly be the first time. Only I reserve the right to push you off the bed if you start snoring too loud.”

Arthur rolled his eyes at him. “I don't snore.”

“Still have the video in my phone, you know.”

“The one you recorded without my consent?” Arthur shrugged. “It's probably edited to look like I'm snoring, I definitely wouldn't put it past you to do just that. I can prove it to any judge and get you sued for slander and forgery of evidence any time. You should delete it or get a lawyer and prepare to be crushed.”

Merlin looked up at him with a crooked smile, while caressing his chest hair. “Oh, I’ve got a lawyer already.”

Arthur arched an eyebrow at him, hiding his amusement. “He better be good.”

“He’s great at everything he does,” Merlin sighed, closing his eyes. “Just don't tell him I said that, otherwise it will go to his head.”

Arthur chuckled and kissed the top of Merlin's head before closing his eyes.
One year later…

Arthur looked up when the door to his office opened and had a glimpse of Sefa’s worried face. Just when she was preparing to say something, Morgana walked past her and right into Arthur's office.

“Don't bother, sweetheart, I'll take it from here, thank you,” she said and closed the door on the secretary's face.

Arthur sighed and pressed his nose bridge. Some things never changed. “What now, Morgana?”

She turned her fierce stare at him. “Is there a problem with your phone? Cause I've been trying to reach you since Monday!”

Arthur waved the file he was reading at her. “I'm busy, can't you tell?”

“Well, unless you’ve been living in this office twenty four-seven, I can't see why you couldn't find the time to return one of my calls.”

“Morgana, I really don't have time for this. I have a case tomorrow and I haven't-”

Morgan's eyes narrowed and she crossed her arms. “What did you do this time?”

Arthur frowned. “What?”

Morgana raised her chin at him. “Merlin isn't picking up my calls either, so you must have done something wrong.”

Arthur rolled his eyes, putting the file down. “He's taken the week off from work and he's keeping his phone turned off most of the time. He's probably ignoring his voice mail, so it's nothing personal. Look, it's been a very busy week for us-”

“He's taken the week off?” Morgana interrupted him. “What for? And why are you here? Shouldn't you be spending time with him?”

“I was! But I have this hearing tomorrow and the client insisted I took this case, so I have no choice. Now can you please leave me so I can get this done as soon as possible and go back to Merlin? Unless you have another reason to be here beyond meddling with my perfectly happy love life.”

Morgana seemed about to argue, but ended up huffing and tossing her hair back. “I could have said it over the phone if only you guys would answer it. I'm hosting a dinner party next Wednesday and I expect you and Merlin to be there. Or else...” she trailed off menacingly.

“Next Wednesday?” Arthur shook his head. “No way. We already have plans.”

“Well, then you'll have to reschedule them.”

“I can't reschedule,” Arthur said, indignant. “It's a film premiere! Merlin's been talking about going for weeks. Actually, we've planned for this since our first date!”

Morgana opened her mouth, but Arthur stopped her by raising his hand.

“No, no, no, you stop right there, Morgana. Don't even think about insisting on this. This premiere is really important for him and I wouldn't dream of letting him down nor will I allow you to talk him into giving it up. If it's so important for you that we show up at your party, you'll have to reschedule
it yourself.”

It wasn’t that common for Morgana to look surprised nor speechless, but there was no other definition for the look on her face once Arthur was finished with his speech. Before he could comment on it or take any advantage of the rare situation, his phone buzzed and he picked it up without hesitation.

There was an incoming picture from Merlin, one with what looked like a butterfly shaped wall clock. Arthur snorted.

‘Oh my God, look what I found!’ It said under the picture. 'How about we hang it on our entrance hall, right above the butterfly shaped rug I can't seem to find yet? (Who would say it’d be so hard to come by? Such a tasteful piece of decoration!)'

Arthur laughed out loud. He then realized Morgana had walked around his desk and was reading it over his shoulder. “Hey!”

“'Our entrance hall?’” Morgana asked. “Is there something you forgot to tell me, little brother?”

Arthur shrugged. “We’re moving in together. That's why Merlin took the week off. We're decorating our new apartment.”

Morgana looked about to smile fondly at him, but she soon straightened up her spine. “Well, I’ll see if I can move the party to the next week. And you better pick up your phone when I decide.” She moved to the door, but turned back around last minute. “Oh, and tell Merlin to call me back tonight. I need to have a word with him about his decoration choices.”

“He was being sarcastic, of course!” Arthur said. “Oh, and by the way, do you happen to know somewhere I can find a Han Solo costume?”

“A what?”

Arthur waved his hand at his sister. “Never mind.”

‘Go ahead and buy it already, babe,’ he sent back to Merlin with a soft smile once she was gone. ‘It will match perfectly with the living room curtains!”

.oO The end Oo.

End Notes

Plot: In an iteration of the same, tired, worn, ADDICTIVE trope, Arthur and Merlin are people who know (and loathe) each other purely through Morgana (Merlin is her ex, whom she broke up with for "unspecified" reasons/ Arthur's sister). Arthur needs a date to Morgana's wedding and thinks it'd be a lark if he dragged Merlin (who does NOT want to come) to the wedding. Maybe he wants to see Merlin tortured throughout the whole thing.

Merlin comes with, and somehow agrees to the whole fake-dating thing, and they argue and jibe at each other the entire time, Merlin seeming more sad and exhausted by the minute, until Morgana finally gets some time alone with them after the wedding and says:
"I'm so glad you got your shit together and finally told Arthur how much you're in love with him, Merlin."

And Arthur has Revelations(tm).

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