You have got to be kidding me

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You have got to be kidding me

by [Diamondmask](http://archiveofourown.org/users/Diamondmask)

Summary

Arthur Pendragon, son of the famous and wealthy Uther, finds himself in the wilds of Donegal due to an awkward professor and a lot of goofing off in university. Stuck in the backend of nowhere, (as he calls it) Arthur finds himself looking at life in a different way. Especially when it wears rubber and looks like Merlin. A tale of friendship, a possibly sentient car, cake, and cock-blocking donkeys. (Actually only one donkey) (And a scout troop) (And a microwave). With a bit of angst and some trauma.

Familiar characters may have different names.

April 2015 - now being edited and generally tidied up by JustCatchMe24, who has my eternal gratitude

http://archiveofourown.org/users/JustCatchMe24/pseuds/JustCatchMe24

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
“You have got to be kidding!”

Arthur Pendragon was not a happy bunny. He was, in fact, not any sort of bunny unless it was a homicidal were-rabbit with a deep desire to rip college professors into pieces.

“I am sorry, Mr. Pendragon,” the secretary said. Arthur noticed her mascara was smudged, a small detail which irritated him. The secretary continued. “The information about course criteria was posted on the module website and regular reminders were sent out for every language course.” She did not add that Professor Kilgarrah had specifically said that she was to ensure that there was “no way in hell that that arrogant prat, Pendragon, could weasel out of the module requirements.”

Arthur growled but he knew he was snookered. The requirements of the Celtic languages module did insist on six weeks of residential language courses over two years. He had done none. Now, if he wanted to avoid repeating a whole year he would have to give up his summer. And he had plans.

Which may have included Barbados.

Not Doonshee in Donegal.

And that made it worse. Not only did he have to spend his summer at a language course, he had missed out on choosing which one he went on. He would have chosen studying Breton in Rennes – because, well, at least it was France and there was the possibility of some good weather and the occasional visit to Paris. He had even missed out on Welsh in Cardiff and the Scots Gallic course in the Highlands. Instead he was stuck with Irish Gaelic in Donegal.

“Where is Donegal anyway?” he snarled.

“Ireland,” said the secretary succinctly.

“Got that. Where?”

The secretary shrugged. “North I think. Or west.”

So, Arthur now found himself standing on a footpath in a typical Irish one street town, staring at the low building in front of him with the sign ‘Coláiste Duns’ emblazoned in rather tacky signage on the front. It was not how he intended spending his summer.

He had been relieved that he could fly to Donegal, even if it meant spending time in small local airports. Then a 30 km drive through narrow roads had turned that relief into annoyance. Had he been less pissed off, he would have acknowledged the beauty of the landscape around him, but Arthur was in no mood to be positive. His mood continued as he walked into the shabby building.
There was a receptionist sitting at a scruffy desk just inside the door. When she looked up, Arthur was aware of the warm appraisal in her eyes, the gleam his appearance garnered from most females around him, but he ignored it. Since Sophia, since breaking up with Sophia, since the reason he broke up with Sophia, Arthur did not feel comfortable flirting, even casually. It was with a forbidding, grim expression that he walked towards the desk.

“Arthur Pendragon,” he said brusquely. “I am enrolled here.”

He was not sure if he was gratified or annoyed that the appreciative gleam in the girl’s eyes faded at his brusque tone.

She answered him in Irish.

Arthur did his best ‘Englishman abroad’ impression and looked at her blankly. It was true he had ‘done’ the introductory tutorials on the language but at the time he had also ‘done’ rugby and rowing training, and, to be blunt, Sophia. That had left very little time for a language he didn’t want to ‘do’ in the first place.

And by little he meant none.

As a result the receptionist might as well have been speaking Klingon for all that Arthur understood. In fact he would have had a better chance at Klingon after all the Star Trek marathons he had watched as a kid, though he would never let his team mates know that. Watching old sci-fi shows would do nothing for his credibility in rugby, though privately he thought Klingons would make good rugby players. Maybe forwards.

The receptionist read his face and switched to English.

“I am afraid I can’t find your name on the college list. Are you sure you are enrolled here?”

Arthur felt momentary relief. If the college had screwed up his reservation, would it count as a by? Could he dodge the six week bullet and get a decent holiday in the Caribbean? The memory of Professor Kilgarrah’s face as he pointed out Arthur’s deficiencies in the module as a whole made him pause. It was quite possible the cranky old So-and-So would use this as an excuse to fail him and that would not be acceptable to Father. No Pendragon ever failed at anything he set out to do. Through gritted teeth Arthur said, “Check again.”

The receptionist was still talking. “It’s strange ‘cause your name is really familiar, like I know I read it before like, and I know it must be here somewhere.... Oh.”

Her tone changed and throwing Arthur a worried look, she checked a different folder. “Oh!” she said again, and raising nervous eyes to him went on, “You’re not twelve.”

“Evidently,” said Arthur with some impatience.

“Oh!” said the girl again and then, with some agitation she excused herself and went into a small office off the atrium. In a moment a fair-haired women with a definite air of command came into the hall.

“Arthur Pendragon?” she asked, and without waiting for a reply, continued, “You are not twelve.”

“I know,” said Arthur, feeling that he had dropped through the Looking Glass.

“That is a problem,” the woman continued.
“Not for me,” Arthur said flippantly. He had hated being twelve. It had been before his growth spurt and he had been smaller and frailer than his peers. It had not been a gentle year.

“It is for us,” the woman said. “It appears that you have been enrolled in the beginners class.”

“That would probably be accurate,” Arthur admitted with an honesty he did not often show.

The woman ignored his comment and continued, “The beginners class is generally for 12 to 14 year olds.”

Arthur took a breath to interrupt but she went on, “That is not the problem. We can enroll you in the Third level group without difficulty. The problem is accommodation. You have been assigned a bed in Mrs Brennan’s house with five teenagers. Obviously, that is not good.”

“Obviously,” said Arthur. He was not sure if he was through the Looking Glass or just plain crazy but he decided to roll with the crazy.

“So,” said the woman, “We have to find you somewhere not so illegal to stay. But because of the music festival, every bed in Doonsee is taken. If you have a car, I could find something in Letterkenny...”

She paused as the receptionist interrupted with ‘Ooo Ooo’ sounds. When the Scary Boss Lady (as Arthur resolved to call her) turned to her, her ‘Oooos’ turned to ‘Eeek’ and Arthur wondered if she made a practice of using only vowel sounds in conversation. The glare from her boss seemed to give her the confidence to use consonants. “Cal,” she said, “Um, Calum. Calum Kavanagh. I think. Er... I think there is a spare bed in the ...in his ...house.”

Arthur noticed the hesitation before ‘house’ and resigned himself to an unusual experience. The Scary Boss Lady looked reflective but at that moment a bell rang and Hell descended. Doors opened and the atrium filled with hordes of teenagers of various sizes all either shouting (their version of speaking) or gesticulating wildly. Arthur flinched back but the other two seemed to take the chaos in their stride.

“Ah!” said the Scary Boss Lady, “Calum, Anseo!”

A non-teenaged man emerged from one of the rooms and responded to the call. After a rather heated discussion which included quite a lot of gestures, making Arthur wonder if gesturing was a peculiar Irish thing, or just a Donegal thing, the Scary Boss Lady turned to Arthur and said emphatically, “Everything is sorted. Talk to Calum,” before leaving dramatically. Arthur admired her dramatic flair but was rather flummoxed as to what he was supposed to do next.

Before he could look too confused, the other man sighed and said, “It looks likes you’ll be rooming with us for a while. I’ll tell you how to get there but I’ve got to warn you that the Ritz it ain’t. Mezzer should be there still and he can give you the tour, ok?”

Arthur really couldn’t figure out how he, Arthur Pendragon should be standing in a faint drizzle half way up a mountain in a God forsaken part of the world that even the natives seemed to have abandoned. Calum – whoever he was - had given directions that sounded as if they were in a Disney version of Ireland and included phrases like “It doesn’t look like a road but it is, never mind the rushes,” and “Turn left at the thorn tree with the beer bottle on the middle branch.” And here he was in front of the “It’s the only building there so you can’t miss it” house.

He now understood the receptionist’s hesitation when she mentioned it. A low Irish cottage, with one window either side of a central door, it huddled under the side of the mountain. To say the
thatch had seen better days was a misnomer. It had seen better centuries. There were rushes growing from the roof that were taller than those on the road and frankly, either thought was depressing. Arthur mused longingly on warm Caribbean beaches with tall cocktails in the sun.

FML did not adequately summarise his life at this point.

A battered Ford Fiesta stood by the door, the only sign of potential occupation. As Arthur moved closer, he saw a pair of legs sticking out from under the car. Arthur wondered at the etiquette of addressing legs and then decided that his day had been too shitty to worry about the niceties. He gave the nearest ankle a light kick and called “Oi! Are you Mezzer?”

The legs convulsed slightly and then, with a wriggle, their owner appeared from under the car, face smudged with engine oil. He was a faun. Or at least an elf, Arthur decided, looking at the shock of dark hair and very eldritch ears.

“Calum’s not here,” said the legs’ owner, wiping his hands. “You’ll find him down at the Colaiste in Doonshee.”

Wondering if he was in Narnia or Middle Earth kept Arthur from replying immediately but after a brief but awkward pause, he said that he knew that Calum was not there.

“Why would you think I was looking for Calum?” he asked.

“Elementary, my dear Watson,” the faun/elf replied. “Only Calum calls me Mezzer. Ergo – you are a friend of Calum.”

Arthur disputed the logic. "I only met him half an hour ago."

“Ok,” said the Faun/Elf. “So why are you here? And more importantly, do you know anything about cars? Specifically what would make a car go ‘whirr clunk clunk thud’ and die.”

Arthur thought of the long hours he had spent in garages and workshops learning the practical mechanics of everything that moved in the vain hope that his father would approve. He could probably diagnose the fault from the clunk but his feet hurt, he was not in Barbados, and he was feeling mean.

“No,” he said shortly.

Not-Mezzer sighed. “I guess I’ll be walking down to the village then,” he said. “Which brings us back to why is a complete stranger standing in my yard having walked from the village in very unsuitable shoes.”


Not-Mezzer’s eyebrows raised and Arthur noticed his eyes were blue and laughed as he spoke. Then he noticed himself noticing and stopped angrily.

Not here. Not again.

“Whose bed?” Not-Mezzer asked.

Arthur lost patience. “Look,” he said. “A scary boss lady pushed me off here to cover up some idiot mess-up with my room but if you don’t have a spare bed, I will go back to London right now.”

“Not from here you won’t,” Not-Mezzer commented, then went on, “I take it you’ve met the White
Witch then. Scary boss lady is very descriptive.”

‘Narnia then’ Arthur thought randomly as Not-Mezzer continued. “About yay high? Blonde, makes you feel extremely nervous when she looks at you?”

Arthur nodded.

“Morgause O’Donnell, head of the college, owns the hotel, and my boss. If she says you’re staying here, you’re staying here. I hope you like top.”

Arthur froze but Not-Mezzer carried on regardless. “Calum and Guillaume claimed the two bottom bunks ages ago. I have the top by the wall which leaves top by the window for you.”

Arthur found himself listening to his accent as he spoke. The linguist in him identified it as Northern Irish but he could not get more particular. Not Donegal anyway. Five hours ago he had never heard the Donegal accent but the non-stop chatter of the taxi-driver who had brought him from the airport had ingrained it on his ear. This was not necessarily a good thing.

Not-Mezzer turned suddenly. “I’m Merlin by the way. Merlin Balinson.” He held out his hand.

Arthur looked down and reluctantly gave his own. “Arthur Pendragon,” he said shortly, waiting for the usual ‘Are you related to...’. When he did not get it, his sense of confusion increased. This was the third time in a few hours that no one recognised his name. Was Ireland another planet? Or another dimension entirely? Although part of Arthur was a bit chagrined, another part, the part that noticed the crinkles around Merlin’s eyes, was quite happy.

“I’ll show you the Palace then,” said Merlin, leading the way towards the battered cottage. “It won’t take long.”

He opened the plain green door and ushered Arthur in.

They walked straight into a room, about three metres by four. To the left, Arthur noted the gable wall was a large fireplace, with two sofas at right angles to the fire. This could have been impressive had the sofas not been two seaters, and, as Arthur noticed, rather shabby. Straight ahead was another plank door with a kitchen sink beside it. To the right a third plank door stood half open.

“This is the living room, kitchen and general dump everything room,” said Merlin. “We have a hot plate, a microwave and a kettle, but only one socket. It can get fraught in the morning with Guillaume craving his coffee and Calum jonesing for porridge. If you want hot, you had better get up early or wait to hit the eateries of Doonshee. I am a cornflakes and cold milk man myself so I keep out of it.”

“Doonshee has eateries?” Arthur queried. “It barely has a street.”

Merlin gestured at takeaway menus pinned to the wall. “Pizza and Chinese will deliver but only once in a night so check with everyone before you order. We don’t want a repeat of the Great Pizza meltdown. The chipper on the main street does the best chips in Ireland but avoid the burgers – nasty. There is a coffee shop that does all the fancy sandwiches but it closes at four thirty. Oh and five pubs, all of which do food. Two of them relatively edible food. And the hotel, but we don’t go there ‘cause it is beyond our budget.”

Arthur picked up on one point. “Five pubs? Really?”

“Yes,” said Merlin, “It’s a small town.”
Opening the door on the right, he beckoned Arthur in. “This is the bedroom,” he said.

Arthur registered the definite article for the first time. One bedroom. For four of them. This whole house would fit in his own bedroom at the Manor. Right now he hated Kilgarrah. Looking at the room, he realised Merlin had not been joking about the bunk beds. Two sets of bunk beds took up most of the room, with barely a metre between them.

Arthur had never slept in a bunk bed, not even as a child, and even though now, Arthur Pendragon of Pendragon Enterprises would claim to prefer a King size bed in a suite at Claridges, the child Arthur who had never played pirates on a bunk bed was secretly exhilarated.

He hid it well.

“This is your bunk,” said Merlin, pointing at the top bunk by the window. It was covered in bags, clothes, and was that really a surf board? Just this morning Arthur had been sipping coffee in Chelsea and now he was contemplating sleeping with a surf board. He looked at Merlin and raised an eyebrow known to have sent servants and slow waiters into a frenzy of frantic activity.

Merlin shrugged. “Most of that is mine and I’ll need it this afternoon. Anything left just dump it on the floor. It is probably Calum’s and he won’t notice.”

He turned around and went back into the living room. Arthur looked at his accommodation and reached for his phone. With an urgency he had not felt for years he sent a text to his father’s secretary. ‘Find house to rent in Doonshee. Now. Urgent.’ Once he pressed send he relaxed and followed his host into the bleak main room.

Merlin was standing by the back door of the house. “This,” he said “is the piece de resistance,” as he opened the door. The linguist in Arthur was impressed at his French pronunciation, but that was forgotten when he moved through the door.

Inside was an ablutionary palace, a sybaritic fusion of marble tiles and recessed lighting.

“The loo,” said Merlin inadequately.

A sunken bath took up one corner while a shower with more buttons than a starship console glittered in the other. Twin marble basins gleamed in the reflection of gently lit mirrors and the whole room would not have looked out of place in a Hollywood mansion. Arthur looked from the vision in front of him to the mildewed and shabby room he had just come from.

“Is this the Tardis?” he asked, resisting the impulse to rub his eyes.

“If it is,” said Merlin, “We are definitely driving it with the handbrake on.”

Something in Arthur’s heart warmed at that comment. “As long as you don’t stroke the walls and call her Sexy,” he quipped in response.

“I’m no Doctor,” Merlin replied with a grin “And She’s too cold to be sexy,” he went on. “The plumber who built this place ran out of money before he could renovate the house – and he left out one thing. No hot water. Just cold. And when I say cold I mean straight-from-a-mountain-stream-freeze-your-balls-off cold. Freya swears that even down in Doonshee, she can hear Calum scream when he hits the shower.”

Arthur sighed. The luxury bathroom almost-but-not-quite made up for the dilapidated house. He hoped Ms. Brown would find a house quickly. This nightmare was just getting worse and worse.
Merlin looked at his watch “Hate to break up the whole tourist thing, but I have to get to work. You going back down to the village?” Arthur took another look at the mildewed living room and nodded. Staying here was not an option. He watched as Merlin went into to the cramped bunkroom and came out laden with two large sports bags and a surf board.

“You want me to help you carry those, don’t you,” he said resignedly.

Merlin’s mischievous eyes peered out from the load he carried. “Are you going to?” he asked. “There could be cake?”

Part of Arthur, the part who had had a bad day, and was in fact cruising for a bad year, wanted to say no and walk off, but the other part knew he could not refuse to help someone who had made a relevant and detailed Doctor Who comment. He sighed. “Pass me a bag,” he said. “And the board.”

They headed down the lane. “A surf board?” said Arthur. “You? Not my idea of the type.”

“You mean I am not bronzed, buff and wearing Hawaiian shorts?” Merlin retorted. “I’ll have you know that here, apart from one or two days a year, Hawaiian shorts would give you hypothermia and wetsuits, although really good at the non-freezing thing, seriously mess up the bronzing – even if the rain didn’t do that. But the waves... The waves are among the best in the world. Here I can ride the ocean and yeah, I surf.”

Glancing at him as he spoke, Arthur was impressed by the passion in his voice and the light in his eyes. “Hey,” he said, “No offense.” He didn’t know why it mattered to him to make peace with the man beside him, but it did.

Merlin smiled. “Sorry,” he laughed. “A bit too defensive there. Touchy subject. My friends know to use that to wind me up. It’s my kryptonite.”

Arthur laughed. “Superman doesn’t need Hawaiian shorts,” he joked, and was relieved when Merlin laughed too. It would be okay.

And it was. Talking with Merlin, Arthur decided, was how he imagined flying to be. The conversation soared and swooped and sometimes got dangerously near the ground but it was exhilarating and... fun. Arthur Pendragon was having fun carrying a heavy bag down an unpaved country lane in the rain and he didn’t want it to end. They talked of Doctor Who, (Arthur preferred Eleven while Merlin argued for Ten), they discussed the relative merits of different superpowers and in the course of the discussion Arthur learned a little about his companion. Merlin was a student at Queens in Belfast, but was working for the summer as an outdoor instructor at the Doonshee college.

When they reached the main road, Merlin pointed at the beer bottle stuck in the tree. “That was my idea,” he said. “Do you know there are fifteen turns off this road and all of them have a thorn tree at the corner? My first week here, I got lost nine times. The council may call it littering but I call it the poor man’s sat nav.”

Once back in the village, Merlin led Arthur to the only coffee shop. It was a haven of warmth and cinnamon scent and Arthur sighed appreciatively. Merlin went over to the blonde girl at the counter and pointed at Arthur. “This is Arthur,” he said. “He’s staying at the Palace with us and has just seen his accommodation. Plus he carried my board all the way down the valley. He needs caffeine and deserves cake. Special cake.” He smiled back at Arthur. “The cake is not a lie,” he said and Arthur felt a warm laugh settle in his chest which dissipated slightly when the girl gave Merlin a warm smile as she replied, “Special special cake? You want me to give him some of your
“Elena, he knows Doctor Who, though he is confused as to which doctor is best, and he’s seen Firefly. Special cake. Definitely,” Merlin paused. “Even if it is the last slice. I had to tell him about the unfinished bathroom. Speaking of which...” he raised his sports bag and looked enquiringly at the girl. “Can I use yours?”

“Mer, you’re going to get me fired,” Elena laughed but nodded and Merlin moved into the back of the shop.

“So how long have you known Merlin?” Elena asked as she prepared a cappuccino. Arthur looked at his watch.

“About two hours,” he said.

The girl laughed. “Really?” she said, “You must have made an impression. He doesn’t risk the last slice of cake for just anyone.”

Arthur felt warm at her words. Even in less than two hours, he felt a bond with the dark haired surfer and felt a frisson of pleasure at reaching cake status.

When Elena served the cake, that pleasure increased exponentially. “Chocolate fudge cake with bits,” she declared as she put a plate with a large slice of dark richness on it before him. “And don’t tell Merlin but there is still more.”

The first mouthful was sheer bliss and Arthur was about to enter heaven with a second when Merlin emerged from the back wearing a wetsuit. Arthur nearly choked on chocolatey goodness and a pheromone surge. How he could have imagined Hawaiian shorts and Merlin in the same thought defeated him. Merlin was made for a wetsuit, his lean form outlined by smooth rubber and Arthur felt his breath catch in his throat as he saw him. No! Fuck no! he thought. Not again not here. Arthur tried to bury his embarrassment in his coffee cup but was saved by a ping at the shop door and an influx of high-pitched giggles.

There were only six of them, but they filled the shop with noise and the scent of fake tan. Tripping into the shop, the pack of teenagers made straight for Merlin.

“Hi, Merlin.” “Do we have you now, Merlin?” “Will you teach me to roll, Merlin?” “Merlin, I can roll now, can’t I?” The voices seemed to have reached octaves usually only reached by dog whistles. Merlin did not seem to be too phased though his cheeks were pinker than they had been.

“Hi Niamh. No, Lydia, I am not teaching your group now. Sarah, you have to learn to sit in a canoe before you roll. Emily, it only counts as a roll if you get back to upright, otherwise it is called drowning. Now, I have to get to the harbour,” Merlin did not run for the door but he definitely used very large strides to get there.

Through the mirror behind the counter, Arthur watched him run across the road to the harbour, then double back and re-enter the coffee shop.

“Sorry,” he said, slightly out of breath, “I forgot. If you want to get back to the house, you’ll need this.” He put a key on the counter by Arthur’s cup and exited as fast as he had the first time.

Arthur felt six heads snap towards him and six pairs of eyes devour him. He tried unsuccessfully to disappear into the cappuccino as the onslaught began.

“Do you know Merlin?” “Are you a new instructor?” “Is that the key of the Palace? Are you
staying there?” then one voice drowned out the rest.

“Oh My God. Do they, like, actually have a talent hunt for that house? Seriously? I mean there’s hunky Calum, sex on a stick Merlin, that smouldering French bloke and now you, blond and gorgeous. Are you going to be teaching us?” The voice lowered into what was meant to be a seductive tone but sounded more like a Jack Russell in heat.

“I could learn a lot from you,” she continued. Arthur felt a hand reach around and stroke his back, while before him he had a faceful of teenage cleavage. He almost yelped and mouthed a silent ‘help me’ to Elena, who was doing her best to maintain a straight face behind the counter. She took pity on him and said something in Irish which made the girls look anxiously over their shoulders and, taking up their coffees and cakes, rush out of the cafe.

Arthur huffed into his froth. “That was terrifying,” he said.

“But funny,” Elena replied. “Very funny. Your face when Lydia boob-groped you...” she broke into giggles and Arthur blushed. He had not blushed since puberty. Except for that time with Sophia. He did not know but his expression closed and Elena noticed.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “I forgot you are new. Though if you are going to work with Mer, you had better get used to it. Are you an outdoors instructor?”

“Language student,” said Arthur shortly.

Elena looked surprised and he hoped she would not comment on the fact that he was not twelve. “Really?” she said, “a senior? But you’re not the type. Not if you have to live in the Palace. Most seniors are rich arrogant gits who rent holiday homes or stay in the hotel. One guy even had his chauffeur drive him from Rathmullen each day. I’ve never met a senior who was an ordinary poor student like the rest of us.”

Arthur had never heard anyone using the words ‘ordinary’ and ‘poor’ as a compliment, but he assumed she meant well, and much to his surprise, he did not want her disapproval, did not want her to think he was a ‘rich arrogant git.’ He harrumphed his agreement with what she said and drank his coffee.

“As a senior, you won’t have much to do with Lydia and her crew, so you should be ok,” Elena smirked. “Just don’t go out alone and remember, they hunt in packs.”

Arthur gulped wildly. “What is this place?” he asked in frustration.

“Not what you expected?” she asked. Arthur shook his head. He did not know what exactly he had expected coming to the wilds of Donegal, but predatory teenagers, mildewed accommodation and perplexing baristas had not been in the running.

And certainly not a dark haired surfer with laughing eyes who quoted Doctor Who.

Elena smiled sympathetically. “You’re feeling homesick, I know, it’s normal for students in the Gaeltacht. Though you are a little old.”

“Yeah, not twelve. Got that,” said Arthur.

“Thing is,” said Elena, “this is not exactly the normal Gaeltacht experience.”

“There is normal?” queried Arthur.
“Well, yes, and this ain’t it. See, most Irish teenagers at some stage of their teenage existence spend three weeks or so in the Gaeltacht, officially learning Irish and unofficially doing all the firsts that are age appropriate, first time away from home, first crush, first kiss, first...”

“I get the picture,” interrupted Arthur.

“Well, you see, the other colleges – colaiste I should say are very strict about behaviour and suchlike. One strike and you’re home to mammy and daddy with no refund. Even speaking a sentence in English would get you sent home in most colaiste. But Morgause O’Donnell saw a gap in the market for kids whose parents don’t send them to learn Irish, just to get them out of the house. They don’t want junior sent home for breaking rules. I don’t know what a kid would have to do to get expelled, but it would probably involve world domination and a side order of torture. Ms O’Donnell would take the kid from The Omen if his parents paid in full in advance. So... Lydia. And others. She is not actually the worst. She is just normal teenage hormones let run wild.”

“Fuck,” said Arthur uncharacteristically, “I’m in St. Trinians.”

Elena grinned widely. “Pretty much,” she said, “but it got Merlin a job. He knows practically no Irish but he is a great instructor and you saw he is good with the kids.”

“He still ran,” commented Arthur.

“I said he was good, I didn’t say he was stupid.”

Just then the bell pinged and Arthur braced to face another onslaught. Instead Calum stood in the doorway.

“Caffeine me,” he called as he moved in. “And cake me – special cake.”

“It’s all accounted for,” Elena said as she prepared the coffee.

Calum pointed at the few remaining crumbs on Arthur’s plate. “He had some!” he sputtered.

“Yes,” she said calmly, “and now it is gone.”

Calum looked properly at Arthur. “Oh,” he said. “It’s you – the guy from this morning ... Alfred?”

“Arthur,” said Arthur.

“Right,” said Calum.

“Calum Kavanagh,” laughed Elena. “It is polite to know the name of the guy you are going to be sleeping with tonight.” Both of them looked daggers at her.

“Elena, shut up,” said Calum. “I have to spend the next three hours hiking with Lydia and her posse. I am so screwed.”

“I hope not,” said Elena, “I am pretty sure that would be illegal.” He glared at her again and took the coffee and paper bag she proffered. “Double chocolate muffin and a cinnamon Danish as a peace offering,” she said placatingly.

“It’s not enough,” Calum said gloomily. “I need armour. And possibly a taser,” he sighed and made for the door. Turning suddenly he lifted his arm and declaimed dramatically, “We who are about to die salute you,” and left.

Elena and Arthur stayed silent for a moment then Elena sighed. “Calum is not so good with the
Kids,” she said.
“Now,” she went on, “you will be wanting to rest and relax so just sit in the window seat where the comfy cushions are and look at the view while I get you a Panini. Chicken and tomato ok?”

She didn’t wait for a reply but bustled off and Arthur, feeling managed somehow sat where she had pointed. The view was spectacular. The Atlantic Ocean filled the horizon while in the foreground was a tiny beach harbour reminiscent of Cornwall, with canoes and kayaks in the water.

And Merlin.

Watching him work with the kids, Arthur could appreciate Elena’s point. He was good with them. Even without hearing him, Arthur could see he had control and patience and, it seemed, eyes at the back of his head. Once he looked straight across the road and Arthur thought he saw a half wave of recognition before he focused back on the task at hand. Arthur found himself drawn in.

“Great view isn’t it,” said Elena with the food. Arthur was surprised (and relieved) to note that chargrilled chicken and sundried tomatoes had made it to Donegal and the rest of the afternoon was spent in casual banter with Elena when she was not busy and not so casual observation of the lesson in the harbour. Arthur tried not to feel like a creepy stalker but failed. It did not stop him watching.

Later, Elena came over carrying a bag and a travel mug. “Do me a favour, will you? I have to close up but I am pretty sure Merlin did not eat today so could you bring this over to him? He should be finishing up soon. Oh and there are two pieces of cake there – one for you.”

Arthur looked at her in surprise. “Calum-” he began.

“I told him it was accounted for,” she laughed. “You and Merlin need it more.”

Arthur took the bag and crossing the road, sat on the little harbour wall.

The students had gone to change and Merlin was putting away the equipment. Arthur found it strange that even though he had only met Merlin a few hours ago, he could read his body language. He was tired. No, more than that, he was weary. His shoulders slumped and his eyes were dull.


“Hi,” said Merlin. “Elena look after you?”

“And you,” said Arthur, lifting the bag and mug.

Merlin laughed. “She’s sweet,” he said, “I just have to change.”

“Aren’t you going to surf?” asked Arthur.

“There’s no one out right now. Safe surfing. Don’t surf alone,” Merlin’s words were pragmatic but he looked lost.

“I could be your beach buddy,” said Arthur impulsively. He did not know why he said it, but he found he hurt looking at Merlin’s despondency. “I know enough about life saving to pull you out, hopefully before you drown.”

“Really?” Merlin’s eyes shone and his voice lifted. Arthur felt a glow he had not felt himself. “Are you sure? We could go down to the beach. It’s not that far. If you are sure? I mean I don’t want to-”
“Come on,” said Arthur. “Let’s go.”

The beach was farther than Arthur had expected, but when he saw the sands, he gaped. “Yeah,” said Merlin, “Donegal has probably the best beaches in the world. If this was in the Mediterranean, there would be thousands of people here instead of you, me and a dog walker.”

The golden sands stretched for miles and the surf pounded on the shore with white foam. Merlin was soon in the water and Arthur watched as he rode the waves.

Merlin did not stay out too long. He surfed for a while then had a wipeout and came in. “Tell me you didn’t see that,” he laughed.

“My job to keep watching,” said Arthur blandly.

“Ok. Tell me you didn’t laugh,” said Merlin.

“I didn’t laugh,” Arthur said. “I never laugh at something I can’t do.”

Arthur saw how Merlin’s eyes were shining and something in his heart responded to the joy he saw. “Sit down,” he said. “Elena will be mad if you don’t eat her food. And her coffee. But the second piece of cake is mine.”

They sat in companionable silence on the beach, watching the ocean surf pound the sand and munching on Elena’s supplies.

“You love the sea,” Arthur said. A statement not a question.

“Yes,” Merlin paused. “Even though I know I am not good at it. Middling Merlin. That’s what my aunt called me. Middling at everything. And it’s true. I am never the best at anything. Never will be. But when I catch a wave, I can feel the power of the whole ocean at my call. Then I don’t feel middling. I am someone. It’s like magic.”

Arthur watched as Merlin looked out to sea, his eyes almost unfocused. He was surprised that he could see the brokenness within the man at his side and something within him wanted to give comfort. He held back. Merlin stirred. “Want to get back to the Palace?”

They left.

The walk back to the Palace was friendly but quiet. Arthur found himself wondering about his sudden connection with this man – and wondering if he should end it before it went any further. When they reached the cottage, Merlin looked bleakly at the car sitting in front of the door. “I’m not sure what to do with her,” he said. “I can’t afford to get someone to fix her.”

“I’ll have a look if you like,” Arthur startled himself saying. Merlin looked at him quizzically.

“I still could be,” Merlin riposted.

“Nah,” said Arthur. “If you were, you would have succumbed to temptation when that blond kid tried to capsize the whole class.”

Merlin nodded. “Truth,” he said. “I have to get rid of the salt. Ignore any screams from the bathroom. Here are the keys,” he tossed the car keys to Arthur and went into the house.

Arthur found himself looking into the bowels of an elderly Fiesta wondering why he was not
thinking FML. In fact he was happy. And that made him worried. He was never happy. Happy did not happen to Arthur Pendragon. He could be ecstatic or pleased or glad or any synonym you could think of but Arthur Pendragon would never be happy repairing an ancient motor for someone he barely knew.

But he was.

When Merlin came back, Arthur was streaked with oil and the car was purring.

“She lives!” Merlin cried as he heard the sound, “My Betsy lives!”

“You named your car?” Arthur looked incredulous. “You named your car: Betsy?”

Merlin looked abashed. “She looks like a Betsy. She certainly drives like a Betsy and... Wow! She drives!”

Arthur spread his hands. “I’m that good,” he said and revelled in the ‘thank you’ in Merlin’s eyes.


And Arthur entered the Tardis.

When he came out, convinced that the water in the shower was filtered straight from the Arctic, Merlin had made tea. Very domestic, but hot, and therefore good. And there were biscuits, slightly soft but Arthur found himself appreciating the gesture rather than scorning the fact – something that surprised him. They were sitting sipping tea when the peace of the room was dissipated by a sudden arrival.

“FUCKING TOMMY HIGGINS!” Calum yelled as he entered the house.

Merlin laughed hollowly, “Why so mad?” he asked “I had to put up with him for the afternoon, not you.”

“I met him on the way up here terrorising the new kid, Jack Whatisname... the one that acts like the weird kid in Glee. The poor kid was crying! Actually crying! Not but that he’s asking for trouble practically parading about with a hand bag but that Tommy is a bastard and...”

“I think I left the pizza menu inside, I’ll just get it,” said Merlin, virtually running into the communal bedroom.

Calum stood transfixed for a moment. “Fuck!” he said and moved for the door of the other room, leaving Arthur puzzled as to what had just happened. Before he had time to think, the front door opened and a dark-haired man with an aura of confidence entered. He looked at Arthur, comfortably ensconced on the shabby sofa.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi,” said Arthur.

“You’re with...?” the newcomer asked obliquely.

“I live here,” said Arthur.
“Right,” the stranger said.

“CALUM!” he yelled. Calum emerged from the bedroom looking flushed. “Is there something you should be telling me?” the stranger asked, pointing at Arthur.

“Oh,” Calum sounded a little flustered. “Yeah, Guillaume, this is Arthur... Arthur... Pender... he’s staying here, mix up at the collage, yada yada yada, Arthur this is Guillaume Dulac, fourth bed.”

Arthur did not correct Calum on his name, the mistake seemed to be serendipitous. Since no one seemed to know his family here, it didn’t matter to keep the family name out of everything.

Guillaume looked at him, eyes narrowing.

“You smoke?”

“No.”

“You eat potato crisps with noisy packaging in bed at three in the morning?” Arthur was too startled to reply.

“It was one time,” Merlin said, re-entering the room. Guillaume shrugged and went on, “You know the ordering rule?” Arthur nodded. “Fine. You can stay. Don’t stand on my face getting into bed.”

“Again, one time,” said Merlin.

“Twice,” said Calum. “I still have the marks.”

Arthur smiled but he noticed that Merlin looked strained. Normally Arthur Pendragon was oblivious about the emotional well being of anyone around him, but now he knew that Merlin was hurting and it unsettled him, both because Merlin was upset and because he noticed. Reflecting on this made him not notice the silence in the room.

It grew, as silence does until breaking it seemed to be the end of the world.

“Ah feck this!” said Calum loudly, “Pub?”

Guillaume nodded. “I expect you want me to drive,” Merlin said, “Betsy’s better thanks to Arthur.”

“Grand,” said Calum, nodding at Arthur. “We’ll keep you.”

The awkward silence had faded into activity as jackets and wallets were sought for. Arthur stayed sitting. In London, he was always sure of his welcome – more than sure – he knew his presence was positively desired and sought after. But here in the wilds of Doonshee, he found himself unsure and a little shy.

“You’ll need a hoodie, you know,” Merlin’s voice drew him back. “I know it's summer but it will be cold by the time we get back.”

He was included. Arthur felt a warm rush of something in his chest and scoffed at himself desiring the company of people he would not have looked twice at yesterday. But he did get a jacket (not a hoodie – he still had standards).

The drive to the village was a lot quicker than the walk but it emphasised the potholes on the unpaved lane rather painfully. The rushes in the centre of the lane did provide interesting sound effects as well as, Merlin asserted, keeping the undercarriage clean. Having spent some time in
As they drew up to the pub, the others attempted to explain to Arthur the etiquette of pub choice. “Two of them are Old Men Pubs,” explained Calum. “You know, the sort of place that always seems to have three oul’ fellas and a dog and when you walk in, they all look at you and you feel that there is about to be a ritual sacrifice and you’re it. One of the others has all the kids of Doonshee trying their luck with fake ID and mini skirts, and the other has all the mammies and daddies of Doonshee hiding from their escaping teenagers. Which leaves this place as an oasis for everyone else.”

“Plus the food is good,” contributed Merlin.

“Correction, the food is edible,” said Guillaume. “Good is beyond them.”

The food was good, despite Guillaume’s protestations, and Arthur got his steak and was content. In fact he was happy. Again. He realised he had not been happy for months. Not since Sophia. But here, stuck between Merlin and Guillaume in a lounge bay drinking Guinness for the first time, (“Dude, you’re in Ireland, you have to have Guinness,” Calum had said, plonking a pint in front of him), Arthur was happy. There was a lot of laughter, most of which Arthur did not really understand. Elena joined them early in the evening. (“Is this a boys’ night out or will you shove up for a tired stray who can dispense coffee?” They shoved up.)

The conversation ran wild and Arthur found himself noticing there was no gossip, no sly digs at mutual acquaintances not present, though plenty of abuse of those who were present. He and Merlin had a heated debate on the merits of DC and Marvel and not only did the others not roll their eyes in disgust, they joined in, with enthusiastic ignorance (“Isn’t Batman useless? I mean he has no superpowers.” “Seriously dude, how can a guy who doesn’t know that underwear are worn, like, under, be a superhero?”). Arthur loved it. The linguist in him gloriied in the diversities of accents, Northern Irish, various other Irish, French, and his own Chelsea English (he objected to Sloane on principle).

When he commented that Merlin was still sipping a rather dull orange juice, Calum jumped in. “Don’t you go corrupting Merlin. He is a good teetotaler and we all want him to stay that way.”

“What he means is,” said Merlin, “I am the designated driver.”

“And we all love you ver’ much,” said Guillaume.

“You don’t drink?” Arthur asked incredulously. In his circle in Uni, no one did ‘not drink’.

“What can I say?” said Merlin, “Presbyterian upbringing.”

“God bless it,” said Calum raising a glass and joined by the rest of the table. Arthur decided that Ireland confused him very much, but his confusion was much allayed when they left the pub, avoiding the drizzling rain by settling comfortably into Betsy for the journey back to the Palace.

As he settled down to sleep on a mattress that was far too lumpy to be comfortable, Arthur, stared at the ceiling, with its very dubious stains and close proximity which made sitting up in bed an impossibility, and reflected on the day. It had been just about twelve hours since he arrived at Doonshee. It could have been a lifetime.

Unknown to Arthur, Merlin lay awake, a few metres across the room. He had never felt such a sudden affinity, mental and physical, as he had felt for the new arrival and it confused him. It was some time before he slept.
The next morning set the pattern for the rest of the summer. Calum and Guillaume bickered over who got to breakfast first. Arthur avoided the clash by waiting and getting breakfast in the coffee shop when it opened. He found Elena’s croissants and danishes were nearly as good as special cake and the coffee was not bad either. After the second day, Merlin joined him, though he was a tea and toast man. After breakfast they all went their own ways, Calum to teach, Guillaume to learn, Merlin to surf, and Arthur to turn up at class.

Arthur did not see anything wrong with his fellow students, the ‘seniors’ Elena had been so scathing of. In fact, in looking at them, he saw himself. It was easy to slip into the familiar patterns of speech and behaviour, easy and comfortable, and by lunchtime of the first day, Arthur was right at home – albeit still struggling with the language.

As they left the college building, the seniors called to Arthur to accompany them to a neighbouring village which had a five star restaurant. Arthur was about to agree when he noticed Merlin, surfboard and bags in tow, outside Elena’s coffee shop. Something made Arthur pause and suggest a rain check.

“Isn’t that one of the monsters’ instructors?” asked Harry, one of the seniors.

“One of my housemates,” said Arthur.

“You are staying with... them?” the tone was incredulous and suddenly Arthur understood Elena’s point of view. For the first time in his life, someone judged him and found him wanting for no reason other than his perceived position in life, and Arthur bristled. ‘Arrogant gits’ was an accurate summation of his thoughts. He joined Merlin at the coffee shop.

“Are you getting lunch?” he asked. Merlin hesitated but then nodded. Arthur smiled and the two entered the coffee haven where Elena met them with the sad news that a bus load of tourists had taken all the special cake. Lunch was still good. When they were leaving, Merlin asked Arthur what he was doing for the rest of the afternoon, and Arthur realised that he was faced with a bleak few hours. Without transport, he was trapped in Doonshee and though another afternoon watching Merlin at work was not an unattractive option, it was a bit pervy.

“Are there any hire cars in Doonshee?” he asked. Both Elena and Merlin gave him a look. “So, no, then,” he said.

Merlin gave a tentative shrug. “You have a full licence?” he asked, and then, without waiting for an answer, he continued, rummaging in his pockets, “You could take Betsy. Just don’t ... dent her or ...”

He pulled out a set of keys and tossed them at Arthur. “After all, she wouldn’t be driving if it wasn’t for you...”
Arthur, who normally would not be seen dead in a car more than two years old was suddenly flattered. A man’s car was, well, his car, and this was a big thing. He took the keys with reverence. “I promise to look after her,” he said with conviction.


Arthur felt a surge of pride which he had never felt before. He did not know why, but this mattered, being trusted. He took up the keys and thanked Merlin with a look, which was understood and reciprocated. Arthur had never been good with non-verbal communication, but after one day with Merlin, it was easy.

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And the day was good, though Arthur became convinced that most drivers in Donegal were maniacs who viewed the Rules of the Road more as guidelines, or even suggestions. The hair raising experience of being passed at high speed on a bend could only be matched by the scariest rollercoaster ride and Arthur wondered why the council didn’t charge for the thrill. The fact that he hated rollercoaster rides and thought that near death experiences should be confined to movies was beside the point.

The thing that made the day good was the scenery, wild and magnificent, albeit at the back end of nowhere. Arthur drove along narrow, single lane roads, with the mountain, vast and black against the skyline always in sight.

In London, all height was man-made and Arthur found the city skyline exhilarating. But here the mountain loomed; not made, just there, existing by right, not apologising for its place on the landscape. Arthur respected its power but he loved the way, on a bend, there would be a quick glimpse of the sea, on this golden day, blue and glittering with promise. No one had ever accused Arthur of having any appreciation of anything that was not designer made, but that was because no one, not even himself had asked. On this day, he felt something new grow and he thought he liked it. The day was warm and the sun shone brightly, and Arthur began to feel that staying at Doonshee was not a total disaster.

When he returned to the village, the coffee shop was closed and Merlin had begun to pack up his equipment. Arthur parked and wandered over to the harbour, noticing the group of teenagers heading up the ramp towards him. One stood out, a fair-haired boy, tall and well grown who appeared to be dominant in the group. He laughed as he passed and Arthur felt that the boy reminded him of someone, but he did not dwell on it, instead calling out to Merlin, who was struggling with a kayak (a lot less fun then it sounded). Merlin’s eyes lit up when he saw him, and though Arthur did not know if the expression was for him or for the fact that he had returned Betsy with four wheels and no visible dents, he did relish the feeling.

“Pizza?” said Merlin inquiringly.

“Sounds good,” Arthur replied.

Pizza-in alternated with pub-out as evening events, and the days settled into a pattern.

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One afternoon, as Arthur pulled up to the harbour, he realised that Merlin was sitting on the low wall instead of loading gear. When he got out of the car, he saw Merlin’s hand was bound up with an ice pack and his face looked pale.
“Mind driving me back to the house?” Merlin asked. “I had a bit of an accident and probably shouldn’t drive.”

Arthur looked at him quizzically, but Merlin did not add to this and was uncharacteristically silent on the drive back to the cottage. He stayed quiet for the evening, not even taking part in the by-now usual pizza topping debate. He took to his bunk early.

Merlin slept fitfully, conscious of the deep throbbing ache in his hand, which was punctuated by sudden spikes of agony when he moved. Involuntary, quiet groans and whimpers escaped him, but he was barely aware of this.

In the bunk opposite, Arthur was acutely aware of the sounds coming from the other side of the room. As he tried to sleep, his imagination worked and, half dreaming, he saw his own hands, exploring Merlin’s lean body, earning those cries with soft touches in secret places. He fought a losing battle with his own body not to respond. Arthur spent a hard and uncomfortable night.

The morning came with avoidance of eye contact and long (cold) showers. Merlin looked pale and his hand was very swollen, but he did not speak of it. Arthur was determined not to spend time with Merlin, but his determination gave in very quickly. Calum was the catalyst.

“Mez,” he said. “Dude, you will have to do something with that hand. I am not putting in another night with you groaning like a porn star on top of me.”

Coffee hit the far wall in a commendable splatter, joining the mildew spots, as Guillaume spluttered wildly. Arthur choked. Merlin blushed beetroot red.

Calum looked around at the stunned expressions staring back at him. “Uh,” he said slowly, “that sounded waaaay worse than I thought.”

“You think?” Guillaume said dryly. “But Merlin, you do need medical attention for that hand. I will bring you to the hospital.”


He did not know what made him volunteer. Arthur Pendragon was known for not helping but somehow he wanted to be the one who looked after Merlin.

“You called her Betsy,” Merlin said with a slow smile, the blush still shading his face.

“I still think you are an idiot to name a car, but I have come to believe that the car is....”

“A person?” Merlin laughed.

“Possessed. When I open the air vent, the windscreen wipers come on. The lights won’t work when the radio is on. Aaaand,” He paused for effect, “The radio turns on and off for no reason.”

“She likes you. I knew she would. Because I... Well, she likes you... oww, shit,” Merlin moved his hand suddenly and tried not to scream.

Arthur took his elbow in his hand. “We need to get to the hospital now,” he said. “Any idea where it is?”

Betsy behaved herself on the drive to the hospital – possibly doing more than that when the car suddenly lost power in a bend, just in time to stop in front of a flock of stoical sheep, wandering across the road. Arthur looked at Merlin, slumped in the front seat, clutching his arm.
“Was it an accident?” he asked suddenly.

Merlin hesitated. “That it was my hand was an accident,” he said softly.

“The kid that Calum talked about?”

“Tommy Higgins,” Merlin said. “He was trying to capsize another kid. I was quick enough to stop that but not quick enough to get my hand out of the way.”

Arthur was angry. “You have to do something about him. You can’t let him get away with it.”

“Suggestions?” Merlin asked, wincing as a spike of pain surged through his fingers. “Ms. O’Donnell will never send him home and I have nothing I can threaten him with. I can only protect his victim.” Merlin sighed. “Tommy Higgins wasn’t too bad last year; but now he is vicious.”


“Jack Hennessy,” Merlin confirmed. “He doesn’t deserve this, Arthur. I have to try to help,” Merlin’s voice was full of pain that did not come from his hand.

Arthur said nothing but the car radio suddenly came on and the windscreen wipers gave a perfunctory swipe over the glass before settling back into place. Both driver and passenger shrugged and shared a glance.

The A and E was not crowded when they got there (after a few unintended detours – “Seriously, have the Irish never heard of sign posts?”). It still took a few hours for Merlin to be assessed, X-rayed and treated. The time was lightened by the pretty doctor who looked after him. She was from London and quickly built a rapport with Arthur. If he had not been in hospital with an injured friend, Arthur would have admitted to flirting. It was fun. It was safe.

Eventually they were back in Betsy for the journey home. Merlin held his hand awkwardly in front of him. Only two fingers were broken and they were bound together giving Merlin a perpetual pontifical blessing, should he choose to use it. The rest of the hand was termed ‘soft tissue injury’ which Merlin took to mean ‘hurts like hell but not actually broken... We think.’ On the plus side, Gwen, the nice doctor, had given him strong pain Killers and he began to feel them kicking in as they drove home.

“She’s nice,” Merlin said. “The doctor. She’s nice.”

“Yes, Merlin.”

“You like her. I could see. You should get her number.”

Arthur did not say he already had.

“You can take Betsy if you want to drive to her. Or I could drive you...”

“Merlin, you can’t even drive now,” Arthur exclaimed in an exasperated tone as he negotiated a particularly bad bend in the road.

“I wanted to do medicine,” Merlin continued, his voice low. “Didn’t get the A levels. Sixth form was... well, I didn’t get them. Middling Merlin. Just okay, not great. Never great. Never get...” he stopped and turned to the window.

“I’m going to lose my job,” he said flatly.
“Why?” said Arthur.

“Can’t be a hands-on instructor with only one working hand. Your doctor said it would take two to four weeks to heal. Morgause O’Donnell will never wait that long. She’ll replace me.”

Merlin went silent. The job at Doonshee barely covered his living expenses at Uni - and even then only if he was frugal. He was already aware of how the frequent coffee shop lunches were eating into his potential savings, but had decided to take the hit. Losing half the summer pay and the end of summer bonus would mean taking another loan. He lifted his hands to his face, only to be confronted with the offending fingers pointing at him in judgement. Misery poured over him and if he had another cause for the misery, it added to his feelings.

“I can be your hands,” Arthur’s voice interrupted his self reproaches. “I know boats and water safety. I am not that used to the sea, but you can be right there giving instructions. I’ll just do the hands-on part.” He paused as Merlin looked at him. “You can do the teenage angst stuff. I am not up for that shit - but the rest? I can handle.”

Merlin said nothing.

“What?” Arthur demanded. “Don’t you think I can do it?”

Merlin shrugged. “I am just surprised that you want to,” he said, and then his face turned to Arthur with a hesitant smile. “Are you serious?” he asked with a tiny tremor in his voice.

“Yes,” said Arthur emphatically. He surprised himself with his own certainty. Arthur Pendragon did not do nice. He made a point of it. Everyone in his life knew better than to ask him to do anything for them. But Merlin didn’t ask. And Arthur felt a need to help, a need he had never felt before. This was right. And Merlin was smiling. Somehow that mattered.

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And it worked. Working as a team felt right. Merlin drew up lesson plans which suited working with two people and somehow it all worked. On the first day, Arthur balked at wearing a wet suit. Given the effect Merlin in a wetsuit had on him, he was reluctant to try it, though the actual reason was a niggling doubt that his rugby/rowing frame would ever look okay in clinging rubber.

After a few hours, chest deep in the Atlantic Ocean, clad only in a tee-shirt and shorts, he couldn’t have cared less. When he came out of the water, his shirt and shorts clung revealingly to every contour – much to the delight of Lydia and co, sitting on the harbour wall. Arthur’s embarrassment at the way his clothes left nothing to the imagination was hardly mitigated by the fact that after total immersion in freezing Atlantic water, it would take imagination to see anything at all. Arthur could not stop shivering and Merlin flustered around him like a black clad mother hen. Only much sexier.

“I told you to wear the wetsuit,” Merlin said, as he tried to rub feeling back into Arthur’s legs. Arthur very much feared where feeling might return, but did not know how to say no.

“I concede that you were right about this,” he admitted. “Now can we get home?” The word surprised him. When had the Palace become home?

Merlin suddenly jumped up and ran across to the coffee shop. When he returned a few minutes later, he had, not the expected coffee, but a key. “There’s no way you can face our frigid shower,” he said, “so Elena has agreed to let you use hers on a once-off basis. She has the flat over the coffee shop.” Merlin made whooshy signs with his hands as he spoke, propelling Arthur across
A few minutes later Arthur was relishing in the newly remembered glory that is a hot shower. His joy was slightly diminished when he realised that Elena had not left out a towel, and he would have to wear a rather short playboy bunny robe to reach his bag, which he had dumped in the adjoining bedroom in his rush for hot water.

He was in the middle of his bunny run when Elena stepped into the room.

“It’s been a while since I had a naked man in my room,” she said meditatively, “I really should do something about that.” She went over to the ancient dressing table in the corner and began to look for something, leaving Arthur feeling very slightly insulted that she was showing no desire to do anything about it right now. Had he lost his mojo? Not that he wanted to start anything with Elena but still, a guy likes to feel wanted. Or at the very least noticed.

He was about to say something scathing to support his drooping ego when his gaze fell on a small and battered pink bear nestled among the pillows of the bed. Arthur smirked. This was gold dust. Then he saw Elena looking at him with narrowed eyes which may have been predatory, but not in a good way.

“His name’s Bluey,” she said flatly. “I had naming issues when I was a child. And you should be careful what you say next because your future consumption of special cake depends on it.”

Arthur closed his mouth. The threat was a serious one, but he was also influenced by the remembered existence of a small, bald, one-eyed bear (named Bear – he also had naming issues), currently residing at the bottom of his luggage. Going on the premise that only he who was without bear could cast the first slur, he turned the subject away from childhood friends.

“I’d really like to get dressed now, if you don’t mind,” he said, rather proud of the almost humble tone he managed.

“Go ahead,” Elena answered, then looking at his face, “Oh you want me to leave? Right. Okay. But it is my room. Just saying.” She made for the door as she spoke and gave him a wink as she got there. “Don’t worry, you do look hot in the robe,” she laughed as she ducked out.

Strangely Arthur felt a bit better as he opened his bag, an emotion which lasted a nanosecond when his rummaging did not produce his clothes. With momentary shock, he realised he had picked up Merlin’s bag by mistake. The prospect of going down to the coffee shop in his current attire really did not appeal, not least because he feared Lydia would, quite literally, jump him. He leaned over to pull Merlin’s jeans from the bag in the hope that they might fit enough to give him some dignity

“HOLY SHIT!”

Arthur spun around to see Merlin standing at the door, Arthur’s bag in his hand and the white bandaged fingers of the other pointing accusingly. Merlin dropped the bag, and muttering inaudible apologies, backed away, running down the stairs.

Arthur, tugging at the robe, realised he had inadvertently mooned Merlin, but shrugged it off, happy to have his own clothes back. When, ten minutes later he entered the coffee shop and Merlin blushed deeply, he realised that perhaps Merlin was embarrassed for him. Arthur dealt with embarrassment the way he dealt with everything. He bulldozed through with charm, and ignored any elephants that happened to have set up home in the room, and after a few minutes of the Pendragon charm at full throttle, Merlin was smiling, and Arthur decided the little interlude was forgotten.
He was wrong there.

After that, Arthur wore a wetsuit, and put up with the salacious comments of Lydia and her chorus. They even began to emerge as personalities and not just echoes. Sarah, Arthur realised, was actually terrified of water, and Niamh was very self conscious about her weight. He even found that he warmed to Lydia. It was true that she could see innuendo in things even a teenage boy wouldn’t see (and Arthur could remember when he was a teenager he could find sex in practically everything), but there were other sides to her. She was kind, in a bossy way. Her barbed comments were never directed at Niamh, and with Sarah she cajoled, encouraged and commanded in equal measure and rejoiced when Sarah took her first solo run in a kayak.

The younger class was just as interesting. They were much more physical, splashing and pushing to the verge of seriously dangerous. Arthur was glad of Merlin’s calm voice bringing them back from their wilder moments. He even found himself liking Tommy Higgins. The boy was adventurous and had a ready wit and a quick brain. Arthur wondered if it reflected badly on himself that he thought Tommy Higgins, when not being a bully, was a good guy.

To make it worse, he did not warm to Jack Hennessy, Tommy Higgins’ victim. Hennessy was whiny and irritating and personified so many clichés it would be funny in a different context. As it was, he made Arthur feel uncomfortable.

But overall, the whole thing worked. Until Morgause found out.
They were just finished a class when Morgause turned up at the harbour, wrapped in a blue pashmina (‘so last year,’ Arthur thought).

“Mr. Balinson,” she called, standing at the harbour slip. “Why is someone else doing your job?”

“No. Eh... It’s not... I mean. I have...” Lost for words, Merlin stopped, his usual gift deserting him.

“Erm. My fingers...“ he tried again, holding up his still strapped hand as evidence of something. She did not look impressed and Arthur stepped forward.

“Merlin was injured while doing his job, so I have been helping out,” he said, pointedly stressing the job aspect. His father may have cursed at safety in the workplace laws, but his obsession meant that Arthur was very familiar with the language. It had no effect.

“And who are you?” Ms O’Donnell asked scornfully, then, looking more closely, she appeared to recognise him. “You are a student!” she said incredulously. “You’re that senior who was...”


“Pendra... as in ...” Ms. O’Donnell’s voice rose an octave.

“My father,” said Arthur shortly and watched as Ms O’Donnell’s eyes gleamed with a look with which Arthur was all too familiar.

“Really?” she said with satisfaction. “You must come to dinner soon – I am having a little party next week, just a few like-minded friends, do come.” Her voice was smooth as honey but had an edge to it. The edge increased as she continued.

“As for you Mr. Balinson, I shall ignore this for the moment, purely to save Mr. Pendragon embarrassment. But since you’ve only being doing half a job this week, you’ll only receive half pay,” she nodded curtly to Merlin, and then smiling at Arthur, added “Mr. Pendragon, Arthur, I will be in touch with date and time. So glad to meet you.”

And she was gone in a haze of blue wool and strong perfume.
Merlin sighed. “I suppose that could have gone worse,” he said. “But, how come she knows you?”

Arthur was expecting the question. “My father... is a businessman. He knows many people.” His voice was not open to more and Merlin, recognising this, did not pursue the topic.

The topic of Morgause O’Donnell was, however, pursued vigorously in the pub that night. Calum was especially indignant, calling her the boss from Hell and other less attractive names. Elena was more measured, though she promised that Ms O’Donnell would never taste special cake should she ever deign to enter the coffee shop. This was real violence for Elena, who was in a mellow mood, having decided to do something about the lack of naked men in her life. The something was named Val and was a Garda in the local Station. He was large, gentle and currently off duty and indulging in both a pint and Elena.

Merlin mentioned that Arthur had been invited to the O’Donnell house and there was instant interest.

“But no one gets to go there!” Elena exclaimed. “My Aunty says that no ordinary locals are ever invited to one of her ‘dos.’ The nearest we get is occasionally doing catering.”

There was a contemplative pause as everyone thought of Elena’s cakes.

“Yeah, I get that,” Calum said.

“Yeah, but the thing is, my aunty says that she only invites people she thinks are important. She’s collected two TDs and a Minister so far, as well as the bosses of every business in the area.”

This led to much speculation as to why she had invited Arthur. Elena suggested it was his blond hair and blue eyes – a comment which caused Arthur to splutter in his Guinness. Merlin gave a little smile and Arthur fake-glared at him, not knowing that the Guinness moustache he sported just made him look endearing not threatening.

At least to Merlin.

Calum ventured that it was his name. “I mean – ‘Arthur.’ Who is called ‘Arthur’ these days?”

“I am,” Arthur said shortly.

“I rest my case,” Calum laughed, and Arthur glared again. Calum was not finished though. “You’d think she’d have picked Merlin. I mean, he’s not blond, but he has the whole weird name thing going for him. Where would you get the name ‘Merlin?’ Seriously?”

“From my grandfather,” Merlin was impassive as he answered.

“Your Grand Da? You have two. What about the other one?”

“Emrys.”

“Ah, dude you were screwed comin’ and goin’” Calum slurred.

“My Grandmother was called Assumpta,” said Elena. “That’s why I am called Elena.”

“Your parents had taste,” said Calum pointedly. Merlin disappeared into his orange juice.

Calum turned back to Arthur. “So what’s your middle name then?”

“William.”
“You have the whole royal thing going for you, don’t you?” Calum laughed. “Guillaume here got stuck with Lancelot – the Breton connection.”

“Give it a rest, Calum,” Val interposed, with surprising strength.

“You can talk,” Calum retorted. “Valentine? Don’t deny it.”

“Percival actually. I was Percy for six years until my sister got a pink pig for Christmas. I’ve been Val ever since.”

Val, Percival, stood up. He loomed.

“You have a problem with that?” he asked pleasantly.

“No,” Calum was quick to respond and the others swallowed their laughter.

“Grand,” said Val. “My round. What’s everyone having?”

As the conversation segued into Six Nations rugby, Merlin pulled back a little.

“You not interested in rugby then?” Arthur asked, noticing his introspection.

Merlin smiled. “I watch as far as Ireland’s Call, then hasta la vista baby.”

“But you’ll be back,” retorted Arthur.

Calum and Guillaume took a drink. It turned out that apart from Merlin, everyone else was interested in rugby and the conversation became detailed and heated.

Merlin did not join in. Before they had headed to the pub, Arthur had asked for a loan of Betsy for the next night. Merlin knew he had a date with the pretty A&E doctor, and as a friend, he knew he should be happy for him. But he was not happy and he knew it. He also knew he had no right to be unhappy and that made him feel worse. Orange juice and talk of rugby scrums did not make him feel better.

He felt even worse when Arthur came in at three thirty in the morning after his date, smelling of floral body wash. The next morning, Arthur said nothing about the night before, and no one asked. Merlin had gone back to taking his classes alone. His fingers were not quite healed, but he feared Ms. O’Donnell’s reaction if Arthur continued to work with him, so he reworked his lesson plans to limit the pain in his hand, and carried on.

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Most of the group’s attention was on Arthur and his upcoming visit with Morgause. Two days after the incident at the harbour, a gold-trimmed, embossed invitation had been hand-delivered to Arthur by Freya, the vowel obsessive receptionist. Since his first meeting with her, Arthur had discovered that she could talk, when not nervous or – to be blunt - terrified of her boss. Calum talked of her often, but they were only together in groups, and though she was part of their pub party, she rarely joined in the lively conversation. When she handed over the invitation, Arthur could have sworn she bowed, but he was sure she would deny it if asked.

The invitation itself, dressed up with fancy accoutrements, specified formal dress, which caused Arthur some issues. He had not packed a dress suit. When he brought up his suitlessness, Calum did not see a problem.
“Just hire. Like everybody else.”

Arthur’s admission that he had never hired a suit caused amazed stares from everyone except Merlin and Guillaume.

“What about your Debs?” Freya ventured before mentally scuttling into silence.

“They don’t have Debs in England,” Elena said emphatically.

“But... they have proms in America? Don’t England do that?” Freya sounded heart-broken. “I loved my Debs,” she added wistfully. “I had a pink dress and got my hair done and everything.”

There was an awkward silence. That was the longest sentence Freya had ever said in the group, which, as they all found themselves reflecting, was rather sad.

“I bet you looked gorgeous in pink,” Calum said, breaking the silence. Elena quickly agreed and then turned the conversation back to Arthur’s suit. The merits of different types were discussed with considerable ignorance, and Arthur did not want to tell them that he had been at formal events since his teens and owned many formal suits from black tie to white tie to tails. He did however agree to go with Merlin to hire a suit. Plain. No frills.

The next day they headed to Letterkenny, Betsy on her best behaviour. The suit hire place was near a nightclub that Merlin pointed out to Arthur as being the locale for their very occasional wild-night-out. Arthur was not impressed, though he admitted that the outside of nightclubs rarely impressed, especially in daylight.

Inside the suit hire shop, Arthur found himself trying on many suits. The experience was illuminating for both of them. Arthur worried that he enjoyed parading before Merlin in different suits, gaining his approbation. The appreciation in the surfer’s eyes made him feel ten feet tall and ready for anything.

For Merlin, despite his obvious physical attraction, or maybe because of it, the afternoon was torture. He knew his place in the world and it wasn’t watching Arthur.

Or being near Arthur.

And being reminded of that hurt more then he could have imagined.

Merlin tried not to show how out of sorts he was, but he was quieter than normal when they returned to the palace. He, Calum and Guillaume sat in the living room, leaving Arthur to primp in the bedroom.

“Pimp” was Calum’s comment, but it passed unnoticed. Calum too was out of sorts – his usually good-humoured comments coming with a barb. Finally Calum broke.

“Mez? Will you talk to Jack Hennessy?”

“I talk to him at class every second or third day,” Merlin replied coolly.

Calum huffed. “You know that’s not what I mean,” he said.

“So what do you mean, Calum?” Merlin’s tone was expressionless, but his body radiated tension. Calum glanced at Arthur, who had entered the room.

“You’re... good with kids,” he said in a muffled tone. “You can do this.”
Merlin seemed very controlled when he answered, but his voice showed tension that belied his words. “Cal, I’m not a counsellor – just because...” he paused for a moment, then resumed with a note of pain in his voice, "Why are you asking me?"

Calum stood up angrily. “Because I’m afraid that some morning we’ll wake up and find that the sad bastard has topped himself, and you might be able to help.”

Merlin drew a deep breath and then nodded, looking straight at Calum, whose worried expression relaxed slightly. “Thanks,” he said.

Merlin just looked away. “But I don’t know what to say,” he whispered. “I don’t know how to make it better.”

The tense atmosphere was broken by a pointed cough from Guillaume. “I appreciate that this is important but, Merlin, you have to bring our Cinderella to the ball and it is getting late.”

Merlin picked up Betsy’s keys and tried not to notice how well Arthur looked in a dress suit. Arthur too was distracted. His date with Gwen had gone amazingly well, except in the way he intended. She was smart and funny and had kind eyes and he had enjoyed having dinner with her. Afterwards there was dancing and they had kissed and there had been a definite physical reaction.

But he had asked her out to prove to himself that he was not attracted to Merlin, and that had not worked. He had found himself thinking of Merlin at odd times during the evening, and when he was driving her home, he was a little resentful that she was taking Merlin’s seat. Betsy too seemed to have issues, running through her whole repertoire of radio/lights/windscreen wipers and even once the horn before he reached Gwen’s apartment. And despite his arousal at her kiss, he was not even slightly disappointed she did not ask him in. He just wanted to get home.

To Merlin.

Dammit.

The afternoon in the shop had not helped. He was back where he started.

Merlin misread his introspection. “You don’t have to go through with this, you know. You can make an excuse. Ms. O’Donnell has probably forgotten me by now.”

Merlin did not believe she had, but he had the uncomfortable feeling that he was pimping out Arthur to save his job, and that did not sit well.

“Don’t be an idiot, Merlin,” Arthur replied. “I’m looking forward to good food and wine. Much though I have come to appreciate gourmet efforts of fast food in Doonshee – and really the merits of curry chips have to be tasted to be believed - I am hoping Ms. O’Donnell will have a meal with real food.”

Merlin snorted. “You’re going into the castle of the White Witch. Watch out for the Turkish Delight,” he said, his eyes narrowing. Arthur laughed and was still laughing when he entered the ‘witch’s’ home.

He was not disappointed. The food was excellent, and the wine was good. The conversation, however, was stilted and pompous and Arthur began to long for the good-humoured, meandering chat in the pub. By the time the meal was over, he wanted to leave, but could see no polite opening. Morgause ("No really, call me Morgause ... Arthur") pressed him to have another drink and offered a fine port. Arthur drank but as he did so, the sweet taste made him think of Merlin’s Turkish Delight and he slowed his pace.
Although the stuffy conversation continued, Arthur found it difficult to keep up. He felt a little dizzy and his vision was slightly blurred. Excusing himself, he went out to find a bathroom, but instead found Morgause, who directed him to a bathroom upstairs. When he came out, she was still there, full of concern.

“You are not well, Arthur. Let me help you. You need to lie down.” She gently propelled him into a bedroom, where it seemed a decorator had attacked everything with pink roses. Through Arthur’s eyes, the roses danced across the wall, undulated over the bed linen and scuttled across the carpet. He really did not feel good – and that was putting it very mildly.

He was carefully pushed on to a chair – he supposed – by now he was finding it hard to focus on anything. He was thinking through a fog and through that fog, he seemed to feel the zipper of his trousers being undone, and a hand reaching in, and then a mouth, warm and wet, licking, and it felt good, but wrongwrongwrong, and he tried to think through the blur that was his mind, but his thoughts were as slippery as the mouth making him hard, and then there was a noise somewhere else, and the mouth pulled back, and a hand petted his face, and a voice spoke, “You look so good honey, so sweet. We are going to get on so well. And when you wake tomorrow in my bed, we will have such an interesting conversation. Now don’t you go getting soft on me – I will be right back.”

There was a swirl of perfume, and then he seemed to be alone with the dancing roses, and all he wanted was to go home, and the idea of home arranged itself around a face, and in a brief moment of clarity, he knew he had to get to Merlin.

The dancing roses were no help, and the lady with the mouth had used the door, so he contemplated the windows. Windows were good. He could do windows. There would be a drainpipe or something and it would all work out. Arthur stood up and took a step – promptly falling over. His trousers were around his ankles. How did that happen? He couldn’t remember. His boxers too – that was embarrassing. Could he have... He shuddered at remembered feelings and unremembered reasons and fixed his clothes. The cloud was starting to descend again, fogging his thoughts. Only the face that meant home was left. He got to the window.

There wasn’t a drainpipe. There was a roof. And a bin. And quite a few torn clothes and a bit of torn skin. Once on the ground, he set off for home, picking a random direction across the fields. After a while, he dimly heard voices calling behind, but he ignored them. They were not home. Home was... ringing in his pocket. He knew that ring tone because it fitted the face. He took out the phone, and by pure luck, answered.

“Arthur, sorry for disturbing your party, but will you be wanting me to pick you up? No problem if you do but if-“

“Merlin? Merlin! Please... can’t think... please....“

Arthur couldn’t find words to say what he needed. He could hear Merlin’s voice asking questions, but he couldn’t think of answers. “Please,” he said in desperation, “I can’t crawl,” and Merlin understood him.

“I’m coming,” he said. “Are you at her house?”

“Not in a house, I can see the stars. Does that mean I am in a gutter? I should be in a gutter. Please...”

It took nearly an hour for Merlin, Calum and Guillaume to find Arthur, huddled by a stream up a tiny boreen. In the end Merlin became convinced that it was Betsy who found him, because he was not focused on driving, instead hearing the increasing incoherence of Arthur’s voice on the phone.
They manhandled him into the car, where Arthur’s incoherent mumblings gave little idea of what had happened, though they did work out that Arthur had felt it necessary to leave the house by a window.

“Arthur never gets this drunk,” Calum commented, trying to keep Arthur awake.

“Is he drunk?” Guillaume asked, and in the pause which followed, Merlin turned the car.

“We’re going to the hospital,” he said firmly.

In the A&E Arthur would have been triaged as drunk, but for Merlin’s insistence that he could have hit his head. This prompted a more urgent track, and Arthur got to see the doctor on call. It was Gwen. Horrified to see him in that state, she nevertheless checked him out for any injuries. Apart from grazes, there did not seem to be any visible signs, but she ordered scans, just in case.

Arthur did not really recognise her, but he was talking anyway.

“You’ve pretty eyes,” he said, slurring his words. “They crinkle at the edges. I like crinkly eyes. Merlin has crinkly eyes. They laugh even when his mouth is serious. I like Merlin’s mouth. My father doesn’t have crinkly eyes. He doesn’t laugh. He wouldn’t like Merlin. He wouldn’t like me liking Merlin. I think I’m going to be sick.”

As she reached for a bowl, Gwen pondered on what she had heard. If she was right, it would explain why there was biology but no chemistry on her date with Arthur. She had liked Merlin when he had been in earlier and she had to agree, he did have nice eyes.

Once she was sure that Arthur was recovering, Gwen called the three others into the treatment area, and had a moment of sheer female overload as they crowded the narrow cubicle. She reassured them on his progress, and then said “One of you can stay for the rest of the night,” emphasising the ‘one.’

Merlin responded before she was finished speaking, but Calum shook his head. “Sorry, mate, but you’re my transport back to the wilderness, you have to drive.”

Merlin pulled out his car keys and pushed them into Calum’s hand. “Take Betsy, you can go.”

Both Calum and Guillaume stepped back and drew a breath. With widened eyes, Calum held out the keys. “Mez, there is no way I am driving Betsy. That fucking car hates me. The last time I drove her, she conked out at the back end of nowhere with no phone signal, and when a car finally passed, it was two American tourists who thought I was a serial killer, and it took another hour before Val turned up, and then the fucking car started sweet as anything. Seriously, that car will kill me.”

With the exception of Arthur, who was finally asleep, all the occupants of the cubicle stared at Calum with varying expressions ranging from ‘Are you crazy’ to ‘Oh, yeah, that’s true.’

Merlin sighed, and Gwen took pity on him. “He will most likely sleep for the rest of the night. You could come back in the morning.”

Merlin still hesitated but Guillaume sat down in the only chair and said “I will stay” in such a definite tone and a uncharacteristic French accent that no one argued with him.

Before he left, Merlin quietly asked Gwen to do a blood test for drugs, intimating that Arthur may have been slipped something. Gwen was surprised but agreed.
The following morning Arthur awoke with a headache and no memory of anything that happened after he arrived at the dinner party.
I like to see you. But then again..

Chapter Notes

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When Arthur got back to Doonshee, life continued as before. He sent a dozen roses to Morgause O’Donnell, thanking her for dinner and apologising for his sudden departure due to ‘illness.’

He visited the hire shop and paid for the ruined suit.

Gwen got the results of the drug tests and confirmed the presence of a rohypnol type substance. Arthur refused to go the police. He remembered nothing, so there was nothing to remember. It didn’t stop the thoughts. Alone in his bunk, he worried about what could have happened at a dinner party to make him think that leaving through a window was a good idea, but he never spoke of it. The evening was forgotten by everyone. Except everyone who knew. It just was not talked about.

The suit hire incident did bring about another revelation to Arthur. While Arthur paid the bill without a thought, Merlin, who accompanied him to the shop to pay for the tattered suit, was horrified at the cost.

“We could all chip in, you know – I could help. That is a huge amount,” he had said.

Arthur did not respond to the offer, but it made him notice things a little better. Like how Merlin always had the cheapest item on the menu at the coffee shop, and how stressed he had been at the thought of losing his job. Arthur had spent his life among those who never asked the price of anything, (or possibly never knew the value of anything), and he suddenly realised that Elena’s comment about being ‘poor and ordinary’ meant looking at money as a limited resource. But Merlin had volunteered to share and Arthur’s heart swelled at the thought.

Merlin cared. And Arthur cared that he cared.

Arthur resolved to do something about this unaccustomed caring. He started by buying Merlin’s lunch that day, which worked fine. Until he discovered the next day that Merlin had paid for both their lunches before he left the coffee shop. Since Arthur had had soup, a panini, two slices of special cake and a large cappuccino, and Merlin had had the soup and bread special, this was not a fair exchange. Cursing Ulster pride, Arthur switched to Plan B.

Plan B involved making sure that Betsy never ran out of fuel. Arthur became acquainted with every filling station in the area and topped up every day before giving Betsy back. He knew he was overdoing it when Mr. Brennan, proprietor of the ancient filling station in Doonshee, called him over when he went in to pay for his top up.

“Son,” Mr. Brennan said. “You know there’s a three litre minimum on the pump?” Arthur didn’t, but he nodded anyway. “Son, you just got less than a litre. Why don’t you just drive around for a
Arthur sighed. Looking after Merlin was time consuming.

A scheduled excursion for the teenaged students gave Arthur the opportunity to plan something appropriate. Merlin would be free for the afternoon, and Arthur considered a trip to Letterkenny that did not involve the hospital. Maybe the cinema? Though that would look a little like a date and Arthur was not planning a date.

He wasn’t.

His non-plans changed when, the day before the free afternoon, Merlin asked a simple question. Getting into the car after Arthur returned to Doonshee, Merlin threw his bags in the back and said, “Where do you go every afternoon then? Betsy is purring when you get back.”

Arthur rolled his eyes. “It’s a car, Merlin, and purring just means she’s running well, thanks to my regular maintenance,” he said imperiously.

Merlin’s lips quirked in a tiny smile at the use of ‘she,’ but he patted the steering column gently, saying, “Don’t you listen, Betsy, that’s just Arthur, you know he loves you really.”

Arthur laughed, a full-throated laugh the situation did not deserve, but he felt happy, so he laughed. The windscreen wipers briefly joined him. Merlin ignored both of them. “Seriously,” he said when the laughter died down. “Where do you go? Do you have a secret gambling den you head off to? Or do you morph into a superhero and save the world?” he said smilingly.


Merlin’s eyes lit up, but his voice was measured. “Yeah,” he said, “I could do that. Nothing else on.”

The following afternoon, Arthur raced from class to the coffee shop, where he ordered practically everything to go. “You feeding an army?” Elena asked as she packed, but Arthur just smiled at her. A car horn announced the arrival of Betsy, and Arthur took his packages and went to meet Merlin.

“Can I drive?” he asked tentatively. Unless incapacitated, Merlin always drove. Merlin handed him the keys and took the passenger seat.

“Right,” he said, “Where are we going then?”

Suddenly Arthur was unsure. He hadn’t planned anything other than a picnic. What if Merlin didn’t like his places? Merlin noticed his hesitation.

“Second star to the right and straight on til morning?” he asked nervously, but Merlin was already out of the car.

He drove towards the ever present mountain, choosing the road that had the most bends as they allowed for a view of the sea as well. Finally, he took Betsy up a narrow boreen until the road petered out. “Will you walk?” he asked nervously, but Merlin was already out of the car.

A slender path led into the mountain, and they walked in silence among the heather. The path forked, one side heading high on to the mountain proper, the other, now barely a trail, followed a mountain river upstream through a cut gorge. The river gurgled and splashed as they walked beside
It, the sun glinting in its clear water. Around a bend they came to Arthur’s place. Facing them was a rock cliff with a waterfall cascading into a deep plunge pool. It was not Niagara, or Angel Falls, but the music of the water and the way it flowed past the ferny walls as stunted mountain ash trees bowed to it, had made Arthur’s heart stop the first time he had found it.

As always, he paused when he saw it first, glorying in the sound and image. Merlin stopped beside him, and Arthur was afraid to look at him. Never in his life had he shared something precious, something that had meaning for him, and he didn’t know how he would cope if Merlin laughed or made little of it.

Merlin gave a slight hiss. “Oh,” he whispered. “That is... that’s... oh.”

Arthur let out the breath he didn’t know he was holding, and looked at Merlin. Merlin’s face looked as he did when he faced the ocean, and Arthur exulted. Merlin understood, and the world was full of puppies and kittens, if he liked such stuff. Which he didn’t. Not at all.

They ate the sizable picnic on a high outcrop beside the waterfall, near enough for occasional spray to hit them. Arthur sat, chewing meditatively on a bread roll, and felt a whole new emotion creeping over him. He struggled to identify it, then decided it was contentment. Never mind Betsy, if he could, he would purr.

Merlin stirred. “I thought you were a city guy not...” he waved his chicken wrap in the general direction of the valley.

“Yeah, me too,” Arthur agreed. “Seems Donegal has eaten my brain.”

“Nah,” said Merlin. “No zombies here.”

Arthur agreed to that too. The sun was warm. The food was good, the water splashed with a sound that spoke of magic, and Merlin was there. Arthur realised with a sudden start that this was a perfect day, and he wanted the moment to last forever.

Forever lasted another hour, and then they returned to the car, who welcomed them with a haze of flashing lights. Arthur drove again and set off for another favourite place. The drive took them along the coast, with the changing colours of the sea at the side. Merlin stared with rapt attention.

“Would you prefer to surf?” Arthur asked abruptly.

Merlin gave his slow smile. “Not today,” he said softly. “Today I’m happy to look.”

Arthur drove to another favourite place, a harbour down the coast. It wasn’t pretty or picturesque like Doonshee. Working trawlers pulled up at busy quays and the whole place buzzed with activity. Arthur had found that, in a strange way, it reminded him of London, the hustle and bustle making him feel at home, despite the fishy smell. He and Merlin watched the trawlers returning with their catch as the evening drew in. Feeling unjustifiably hungry, they bought fish and chips and sat in the car in companionable silence, savouring the taste.

With a sudden sense of shock, Arthur realised that this was a date. Okay, it was not like any date he had been on before. For a start, he had enjoyed it more, and there was a lot less sex.

And now he was thinking of sex with Merlin and that was just wrong.

Arthur felt tense again, the relaxation of earlier gone. He tossed the car keys to Merlin. “You want to drive back?” he said shortly.
“Oh,” Merlin seemed surprised. “Yeah, okay.”

Calum was in when they got back, and when he suggested that they all go clubbing instead of pubbing, Arthur readily agreed. Merlin sighed, but faced with Calum’s best puppy dog look, he nodded and after time for careful dressing, they set off for the not-so-bright lights of Letterkenny.

The nightclub, with chrome and stained upholstery, did not impress but the lighting was good enough to make the chrome shine and the stains look like shadows, so all could be ignored. It was cocktail night but as Arthur examined the cocktail list, Calum pulled it from his hands.

“All cocktails,” he said, “are made of alcohol mixed with alcohol, sliced with fruit and topped with an umbrella. Just start at the middle of the list and work your way up or down. Don’t do both.”

“We don’t?” Guillaume asked.

“Cos after half a list, you stop having fun,” Calum responded.

“After quarter of a list, you stop being fun,” Merlin muttered. He was sitting at the bar, sipping his orange juice and looking wrong. It was not, thought Arthur, that he was a fish out of water, more that he was a mackerel in a shoal of tropical clown fish.

Arthur quite liked mackerel.

Dammit. This crush was getting ridiculous.

Resolving to do something practical to distract himself, Arthur scanned the room for potential targets. In a moment he fixed on a trio of girls across the room. He caught the eye of one, and with an eyebrow slightly raised in question and a half smile, he called them over. Calum and Guillaume looked at each other in recognition of a master. The girls were local, with perfect spray tans and barely there dresses and having checked them over, Arthur decided on the red-head. With practiced ease, he cut her from the pack, leaving her friends with Calum and Guillaume. He didn’t look at Merlin, still sitting alone at the bar. He was on the pull, and there was no time for sentiment.

He moved the girl to a corner of the bar, ostensibly so that they could talk. Arthur wasn’t interested in anything she could say – he didn’t expect to even have to listen. He had the whole process timed, from first contact to your-place–or–mine, and he was right on schedule.

The girl flicked her hair and Arthur got the scent of perfume. Suddenly he felt nauseous, and mentally cursed the multicoloured concoctions he had been drinking. He normally had a hard head and a tough stomach, but it would appear that umbrella drinks were a weakness.

The girl, whose name, to Arthur’s disbelief, was Tiffany – though how the name came to Donegal twenty years ago he would never know – asked him if he was okay. This worried him. He never stopped in the middle of a plan. But the nausea grew as she leaned closer, and he excused himself and dived for the bathroom.

The men’s room was hardly a place of refuge, but Arthur felt a little better. He splashed cold water on his face, ready to go back to Tiffany, but his body hesitated. A tiny whimper entered his mind, like a soldier unwilling to go over the top. He held onto the sink like a drowning man, and noted his phone glowing in his pocket. It was a text from Merlin.

From Merlin: Do you want to go home now?

It was uncanny how Merlin knew. Uncanny and intrusive and controlling, and Arthur was typing before he finished the thought.
From Arthur: Yes

The reply came almost instantly.

From Merlin: Ten minutes. Arthur smiled as he prepared to disappoint Tiffany.

On the way home Guilaume fell asleep while Calum complained bitterly about being dragged out.

“That’s the second time you’ve done that Mez” he moaned. “You’re worse than my Ma”

“You know you would have stayed chatting til closing time then found a reason not to go with her” Merlin said with experience.

“What about Freya” Arthur asked. The nausea was gone but he was definitely drunk and felt his brakes were off. “Thought you liked her”

“She’s not interested” Calum said with a slight slur that showed he was not immune to cocktails.

Merlin looked at him sideways for brief moment. “You think that, do you?” he asked, his accent strong. “Maybe,” he hesitated as he continued “Maybe...Well she’s quiet and a bit shy and you’re so confident, so sure of yourself. Maybe.. she is sure you don’t want her and is afraid of hurting. Or maybe.. she doesn’t know how to say anything, doesn’t know the words. It’s not natural to everyone, charm I mean”

Calum harrumphed as Merlin started talking, then laughed as he went on. “All girls know what to say Mez, its a thing”

“Right” Merlin said quietly his eyes firmly on the road.

The next day Arthur didn’t feel like driving in the afternoon. He sat in the coffee shop for a while then walked to the palace for a cold shower.

That evening Calum raced into the Palace and hugged Merlin, much to Merlin’s surprise.

“You are a miracle worker” he said in a jubilant tone. “Er.. yes?” Merlin said, “Why?”

“Jack Hennessy punched Tommy Higgins and told him to fuck off out of his life” Calum said triumphantly. “I don’t know what you said Mez, but it worked”

“I never said for him to do that” Merlin stammered but Calum was jubilant. “Whatever you said” he said, “I can stop worrying about the little fecker, He’ll be grand now. Hey, tonight is ceili night . You guys have to come down for the laugh”

“What’s a ceili?” Arthur asked not really interested. “A dance.” Calum answered. “I mean a party with lots of dancing. Irish dancing. In groups. The kids end up loving it and it tires them out so we love it too. And it is part of the whole Gaelteacht thing. You have to come”

Calum was insistent but Arthur was doubtful.
“Will Morgause O’Donnell be there?” Merlin asked, glancing at Arthur. Calum replied that she never turned up at the ceili and reluctantly Arthur agreed to go.
Betsy chugged as they drove down the boreen and she stopped completely as she passed the beach. “We can walk from here.” Merlin said and they set off to the low hall where music was already pouring into the night. On the way, groups of teenagers passed them, in varying degrees of display. Tommy Higgins walked alone, without his usual coterie. Calum commented on the change but Merlin remained tight lipped.

The hall was filled with noise and the smell of sweat and cheap aftershave. The teenagers formed squares and approximate squares and danced with vigour but little skill to the rhythmic music. Lydia and her posse alternated between standing back, disdainfully commenting on the dancers and enthusiastically throwing themselves into the dance, tossing their hair and looking around to see who was watching them. Jack Hennessy seemed to have found a new place as Lydia pulled him with the others into the dance. Merlin smiled as he saw the boy laugh as he stumbled through the steps, pushed into place by Lydia and her friends.

Arthur clung to the corners of the room but quickly moved away when he saw the twelve year olds with locked lips occupying every dark space. He would have been righteously disgusted but for the memory of Tiffany and her lips which made him realise that he had no right to judge twelve year olds.

Even if he wasn’t twelve.

In one of the less dark areas, Arthur noticed Tommy Higgins standing by himself, leaning against the wall. There was a definite not-talking-not-looking area around him, a cordon sanitaire which left him looking small and lonely, though his slouch was defiant. Arthur felt sorry for him, caught on the wrong side of teenage politics and abandoned by his former friends and so when the opportunity arose, Arthur spoke to him.

“So,” he said, “Do you think O’Driscoll will be fit enough to play this season?”
The boy’s eyes, dull and lifeless, lit up and he flew into an animated conversation on the merits of Irish rugby and the possibilities of the coming winter. Arthur warmed to him. Anyone who felt so passionately about rugby could not be all bad, he thought before moving off.

As the dance went on Arthur saw Calum pull a blushing Freya into the set and smiled but other than that, Arthur did not get caught up in the dancing. The music was catchy and the energy almost tangible but the fact remained that this was a room full of teenagers doing what was essentially a series of mating dances and Arthur was bored. He moved to the door and slipped out.

Merlin was outside and he smiled when he saw Arthur. “You fed up too?” he asked and when Arthur nodded he gestured towards the sea. “I was going to pick up Betsy and go back to the palace but the sea looks so... I was just going to walk for a bit” He didn’t say anything else but his tone
implied that company would not be unwelcome and they set off along the perfect sands.

They didn’t talk much at first, a few casual words about the summer evening and the fact that it was not actually cold for once. Then the conversation turned to the teenagers they had just left and Arthur commented on how isolated Tommy Higgins looked. Merlin stopped.

“Why are you so concerned about Higgins” he asked . Arthur hesitated. He was not sure why he had reached out to the boy. “He looked lonely” he said at last.

“He deserves it” Merlin said and Arthur was surprised at how cold that sounded. Merlin was usually the one sticking up for the underdog.

“You said yourself that he was nice enough last year” Arthur ventured, “It was only when the Glee kid showed up he changed”

Merlin stopped. “The Glee kid?” his voice was even colder now. “He has a name. Though maybe you think that because he is self-evidently gay he should just put up with being picked on?” Arthur tried to speak but Merlin was still talking, the volume rising “I’m gay, Arthur, maybe it was only right that a whole pack of Tommy Higgins made my life hell in Sixth form? Maybe they were nice guys too”

Arthur stood very still, the roaring in his ears coming from his own heartbeat and not from the surf pounding the shore. He looked out to sea, trying to slow his speeding heart. “You, you’re” he started but could not say more.

In the summer twilight Merlin could see Arthur’s breathing, shallow and fast. “You didn’t know” he said flatly. “I... but you didn’t know” Instinctively he reached out but Arthur stepped away. Merlin sighed and also took a step back. “I’m gay, Arthur, I’m not a predator. It’s not like I’m going to jump your bones at the earliest opportunity.”

In the mingled light of dusk and moon, Arthur could see the white froth of the waves far out to sea. The ocean looked infinite, full of startling potential, every ripple a possibility, every flicker of spray a ghostly option of light and promise. Here, at this moment he felt himself to be at the fulcrum of his life, poised to move the world.

“What if I want you to” he said softly, turning his head.

Merlin was completely still, though his breathing was also shallow and quick.. “Do you?” he asked uncertainly.

“Yes”

Merlin took an uncertain step forward. “Please don’t be messing with me” he said quietly. Arthur
reached out a cautious hand and cupped the man’s face in his fingers. He touched the evening stubble and was startled at how good that felt. Leaning in he brushed Merlin’s cheek with his lips.

“Please be real” Merlin whispered and then they were kissing – proper kissing and it was going to be okay. Everything would be okay.

But it wasn’t.
They lay together in the sand, moonlight creating shadows and highlights across their entwined bodies. Merlin sighed, sated and happier than he had been for years. His arms tightened around Arthur, pulling him closer. Arthur did not respond.
Arthur looked out at the sea, no longer glittering but full of unknown menace. His thoughts fought each other in a confused jumble, focusing on the sound of the surf pounding the shore. He felt the sticky feeling of semen on his body, and the sensation both attracted and repelled him equally.

He did not dare look at the warm body beside him. At that moment Merlin did not exist for him except as an abstract ‘thing’: a problem to be solved.
Merlin stirred again and laughed. “Sex on a Beach may be a good cocktail, but the reality is a bit too gritty to be comfortable,” he joked. Arthur did not laugh.

“I can’t,” he said, hesitating. “I can’t do this. I can’t be this.” He stood up abruptly, pulling his trousers closed and buckling his belt.
“I can’t. Be. This,” he said again and Merlin recoiled at the disgust in his voice. Without another word, Arthur set off down the beach, moving with long strides until he was lost in the darkness.

Merlin was still for a few moments, then as the full import of what had just happened hit him, his stomach roiled, and he dry heaved into the sand.

‘This’
The word echoed in his ears.

‘This’

And the pity of it was, Merlin understood. He had heard the same tone in the sly comments in Sixth Form College, the careful digs, casual jibes, ("Only a joke, mate"). He had heard it in the phrases declaimed from the pulpit, pronouncements of politicians in the press, comments on radio phone-ins. They all despised ‘This.’
And he was ‘This.’
Merlin found himself running towards the sea, the foam still visible in the moonlight. The sea was home and safe, and in the sea, he was clean and strong, and the sea did not comment on ‘This’.

He felt as if he was underwater, pulled in by a big wave, tossed around like a piece of seaweed, not knowing which way was up, which way was out.
He did not know if he wanted to get out.

The water raced around his knees. The sea would accept him, hold him, she would not reject him.
He took another step and his mother’s face came into his mind, worried, and tense as she so often was. He felt all she had been through to prove to him that he was loved and he knew he would not keep walking, would not surrender to the power of the sea.
But he did not have the strength within him to go back to the world. For a long time he stood, as the sea slowly withdrew from around him, as if even she could not bear his touch. At last, he fell to his knees, a broken statue in the moonlight.

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Arthur moved off along the beach, his legs dragging in the deep sand making him work for each step, slowing his pace even as he ran. He planned as he moved. He would go back to London in the morning, back to normal life. He would find Sophia, get her to return to him, convince himself that the whole gay thing was over, that he was back. She would accept it, be eager to resume their relationship, make a show of forgiveness; after all it was he who had ended it, not her. There would be no scandal, nothing for the gossipers to work with. He would make sure there was nothing.
There would be nothing.

Nothing.

No Merlin.

And that should not matter because a few weeks ago, he did not know Merlin.
And it mattered.
Oh God! It mattered.

Arthur did not notice he had stopped. The dunes loomed over him in the darkness, large and threatening, and his breath caught in his throat as he stood between them and the vastness of the sea. It mattered.
Merlin mattered. Arthur found his breath coming in short gasps.
Merlin mattered. More than Sophia, more than gossip, more than his father.
No one had ever mattered more than his father.
Arthur shuddered. What had he done? What had he thrown away? He knew whatever he chose, he would lose – but what to lose?
Without conscious thought, Arthur realised, he had turned and was walking back along the beach.

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Through the gloom he barely made out the figure slumped at the shoreline. Arthur tried to find the words that would make things right but he failed. How could he explain how he felt to Merlin
when he did not understand it himself? The only thing he was not completely unsure of was that standing here, on the wet sand with Merlin was better than being almost anywhere else without him. He said the name that brought him back. “Merlin.”

Merlin was silent. Awkwardly he rose to his feet, his jeans soaked through with salt water. He ignored the hand Arthur held out to balance him and walked up the beach. Arthur followed, the silence between them as vast and deep as the ocean they had turned their backs on.

When they reached the car, Merlin opened both doors and waited for Arthur to get in before starting the engine. Betsy gave a long, spluttering whine and stopped. Her silence added to the silence inside the car.

“You ran from me.” Merlin’s voice was low and dull, stating a fact, not asking anything.

Arthur felt the weight of unspoken emotions lie on him. “I think.. I think maybe... I think I was running from me,” was all he managed to get out before his insecurities tied his tongue again.

“Do I... Were we... that disgusting?” Merlin whispered.

Arthur tried again to get his thoughts together. “God, no, Merlin, you have to understand, this is easy for you, you’ve been out since you were in school, you know what you’re doing. You had a choice but I’m only figuring things out and I am terrified.”

Merlin gave a snort of humourless laughter. “A choice?” he said roughly, “When I was seventeen, my pastor saw me outside a gay bar with a friend draped over me. The next morning, in church, with my parents and everyone I knew around me, he denounced me as a pervert and a degenerate and declared that I was going to hell. That was my choice, Arthur. And you know what was really funny? You know what makes it just plain hilarious? I was never in a gay bar. My friend was straight, and drunk and in the ‘I love you man’ stage, and I was trying to get him home before he collapsed. I never... I still never... until tonight... you...,” his voice broke slightly as he finished speaking, and he put his head on the steering wheel, resting his cheek. “You’re scared?” he went on, barely audible, “you have no idea.”

Arthur could not move or speak for a moment. His own fear of gossip, of comment, was morphed into a huge mountain as he listened to Merlin. When he could move, he groped for Merlin’s hand. “Why didn’t you explain?” he asked softly. “Tell them?”

Merlin pulled his hand away. “Because it was true, you idiot,” he said. “Because it may not be what I do, but it is who I am, and I won’t deny that, and because...” he paused and took a deep breath. “Because my mum, who turns off Strictly if she thinks they’re not wearing enough clothes, my mum who lived for the church social and the bazaars, my mum stood up and said that if her boy was going to hell, then she was too, because she would not go where I was not welcome, and my dad, who wouldn’t even read the newspaper on a Sunday because it was sinful, put his hand on my shoulder, and said right there that he would stay with his family, and that he was proud of me. And they walked with me out of that church, past all the judging eyes...” his voice choked and Merlin swallowed a few times before continuing. “How could I deny the truth when they gave up their lives to support me?”
Arthur, who had felt nothing but horror at Merlin’s story now felt a tiny wisp of jealousy. He knew enough of his father to know that Uther would never face the imagined censure of the world for his son. Merlin was lucky in his family, despite the pain. And then, slow as a glacier, the true import of what Merlin had said hit him with the force of a thousand city blocks worth of bricks.

Merlin ‘had never.’

That made Arthur, with his furtive fumbles in locker rooms, and the brief but intense make out with the barman at that society party - that made him the experienced one. Merlin ‘had never.’ That had been his first time, and Arthur had dumped him and walked away. A cold feeling swept over him as he realised what he had done. Despite his automatic assumption of superiority, Arthur had never been cruel in his relationships. Even in his breakup, he had not been harsh with Sophia, though he knew she was only mourning the loss of a good fuck with a deep wallet and good prospects, not a soul mate. But with Merlin, he had given his own insecurities free reign to hurt and destroy. He fumbled for words to make it better.

“Merlin... I... You have to know... when I ran... It wasn’t ...”

For a linguist, Arthur was amazingly bad with words. Give him pages to translate and he was fine, ask him to articulate his feelings and he was a floundering mess of "em's" and "er's". He knew he was failing and took a breath to start again, only to be interrupted by Merlin’s quiet voice in the gathering darkness.

“If you are going to give me the, ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ speech, I swear I will break off this handbrake and beat you to death with it.”

Arthur smiled. That sounded like Merlin, the real Merlin. He risked a joke. “Betsy might object to that,” he said.

Merlin sighed. “Even my fucking car likes you.” Merlin didn’t often swear, but tonight he felt justified.

“No? Like me?”

“At this moment I fucking hate you so much,” he paused and drew a breath, “but I don’t know how I’ll feel in ten minutes.” Another pause, another breath, with a sob behind it. “Tonight has messed up my head...” Merlin stopped, unable to say more.

Arthur wanted to say something but sorry seemed too inadequate. “I came back,” he whispered.

“Why?”

The truthful answer, the real answer was that he did not know, but somehow, with a newborn sensitivity, Arthur knew that would cause more pain. That, and possibly a desire to avoid a handbrake related concussion made him think. Why had he come back? And then he knew.

“For you.”

“Why?”

Arthur mentally squirmed as he reflected that the conversation, as painful as it was, had the potential of turning into an endless toddleresque whyfest. But the question made him explore his own feelings further.

“Because even if I am not sure what I want, I am sure what I don’t want and I don’t want to lose you,” he said as if working out a translation in his head. “If I didn’t know that before, I know it now and I...”
“Arthur?” Merlin’s voice was tired. “Shut up. I can’t handle your issues right now. I...”

Merlin stopped, suddenly hit with the enormity of what he had almost done. He was tired and more than anything he wanted a hug, manly or not. The fact that the only person available to hug was the one person he couldn’t ask made it worse. Part of Merlin wanted to turf Arthur out of the car and drive all the way to Belfast, to his mum, but another part knew that he did not want to let go of Arthur. Merlin took a deep breath and tried to man up, as Calum would say, and tell Arthur how he felt.

A sharp rap at the darkened window beside him made Merlin jump, hitting his knee on the steering column, and causing the radio and the lights to alternate sound and lighting effects with great gusto. “FUCKING HELL! OWW!” he yelled. Before he could gather his thoughts, Calum’s face loomed at the window. “Betsy acting up?” he called and Merlin nodded, unsure of his voice. Calum opened the back door and settled in. “Just as well for me then,” he said. “Try her again.” When the key turned in the ignition, Betsy roared her willingness to resume transport-related duties. “Home, James,” came a lordly voice from the backseat. “And don’t spare the horses.” Arthur growled.
The thing about angst-ridden, emotional nights is that they tend to be followed by awkwardly embarrassed mornings, and this was no exception.

Merlin had not slept, and he looked rumpled and tired when he emerged from the bunkroom. He had lain awake listening for Arthur and – well – yearning.

Yearning was such a girly word, though Merlin could not imagine a girl like Lydia yearning for anything other than perhaps a pair of Jimmy Choos. Merlin was embarrassed to admit to feeling it - but he did. Unrequited feelings, he was used to, they were his life. Partially requited ones left him more vulnerable than ever he had ever felt before. He yearned.

Arthur did not go to bed at all, staying in the living room to ostensibly watch a movie on Calum’s laptop. Having stared unseeingly at the small screen, he eventually slept. He had woken slumped over on the sofa, back stiff and sore from lying at an unnatural angle, and feeling as if he had been punched in the gut a few times.

When he remembered the night before, he wished he had been punched. Grey and dull, the weather settled gloomily around the little house. It was Sunday, so no work or coffee shop to dilute the tension. Breakfast was strained – mainly because both Merlin and Arthur were trying not to be strained in front of an oblivious Calum. Finally the not talking got too much for Arthur. He slipped into the bedroom and tapped out a simple text.

Are you okay? He pressed send.
In a moment he got a reply from Merlin.

No

Can we talk about it?

Obviously not

Later. Please?
Why?

Arthur sighed. Even in text, Merlin could be annoying. Arthur tried to work out what to say that might prevent another why, and so stop Arthur from beating Merlin with a cereal spoon. And that thought distracted him because, really? Eating cornflakes was the least sexy thing a person could do in pyjamas, but just looking at him made Arthur want to jump over the cereal box and kiss his mouth until it was swollen. And that reminded him of last night and what he had done and why they needed to talk.

He replied,

Because you are not okay

R U?

Arthur looked over at Merlin and shook his head. They exchanged a tense look over the head of Calum, then Merlin nodded briefly.
“I was hoping to surf today, you willing to be buddy?” he said, directed at Arthur. Arthur agreed readily, and tried to hide his satisfaction when Calum scoffed at them for going out at all in the grey weather.
“It doesn’t matter,” Merlin said. “Sea or rain, water is water.”

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Arthur tried to start a conversation in the car but he was stopped by Merlin’s brusque, “No talking when I’m driving.” Given that Merlin generally chattered freely as he drove, Arthur took this to be a snub. It was going to be more difficult than he had feared to talk with Merlin, and it didn’t help that Arthur was not terribly sure what he would say. His confusion grew as Merlin changed into his wetsuit. Really, if he tried, Merlin couldn’t do anything else to so completely mess with his head. At least mostly his head.

Arthur drifted down the beach and worked on thinking of ice bergs and glaciers and icicles – no, not icicles, that didn’t help at all… He groaned. How could he figure out how to talk about the whole situation when just a quick glance at Merlin’s body made him hard? It was not as if Merlin was doing it deliberately.

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Merlin was totally doing it deliberately.
His long, wakeful night had clarified a lot of things for him, and he was sure of what he was doing. He took his time changing into his wetsuit, then sat on a sea smoothed boulder, and waited for Arthur to join him.

“What do you want Arthur?” Merlin’s voice was steady, but he could feel his heart beating fast as he spoke. Arthur was silent. What did he want? Honesty was all he had left.
“I want you in my life, but I want my life to stay the same. I don’t want to come out, to change things, and I know that is selfish and unrealistic and not fair to you, but I don’t know how to live my life this way and...”

“You haven’t asked me what I want,” Merlin interrupted.

Arthur was startled “What?” he said, and Merlin took it as the question he was waiting for. He took a deep breath, focusing on all the thoughts that had crystallised in his mind over the long hours of the night.

“I want you in all the ways it is possible for one person to want another. I want you so much that I will take whatever you can give me, even if it is just the remains of the summer, even if it is your friendship only. I won’t out you or push you. I have no pride. I can’t afford it. I offer you myself. All of me. No strings. No conditions. No promises to break. Just me. If you want me.”

Merlin did not risk looking at Arthur while he spoke. He kept his eyes down, fearful of what he might see. When Arthur did not reply, Merlin felt his heart sink. It wasn’t going to work. He had offered everything and it wasn’t enough. He wasn’t enough. He was never good enough. He sank in on himself, fighting tears that came unbidden into his eyes.

Arthur was pondering his answer. When someone - and Merlin was not just ‘someone’ - offered you their whole life, ‘Thank you’ seemed a bit... inadequate. ‘Thank you’ was what you said to your aunt when she gave you that jumper at Christmas – the one with Rudolph and the flashing eyes. ‘Grazì’ didn’t work either, nor ‘Mercì.’ The Irish ‘Go raibh maith agat’ translated as you are good, which was accurate but not quite right, and suddenly Arthur was aware of the unnatural glitter in Merlin’s eyes as unshed tears lingered, and Arthur knew his silence was causing Merlin pain. Reaching over, he twined his fingers around Merlin’s, ignoring the sentimentality of the gesture in the sheer joy of touching Merlin again.

“Me too,” he said. “What you said, me too.” As declarations went, it would hardly win the most romantic category, but judging by the way Merlin’s fingers convulsively gripped his, it was effective.

Merlin let out a long shuddering breath he had not known he was holding. “What now?” he asked hesitantly.

Arthur really tried to engage his brain to mouth filter, but too much was happening further south for it to work. “Sex,” he blurted and then blushed. And then felt embarrassed for blushing over sex because, well, because.

“Yes, please,” said Merlin with the mischievous look in his eyes that made Arthur want to kiss him.

“I want to kiss you.” Damn that faulty filter. Not that Arthur usually stated his intentions so bluntly, a quick smoulder from his eyes was enough to send his potential partners into an ecstasy of anticipation. Refusal was never an option.

“No,” said Merlin.

“What?” said Arthur, feeling as if his train of thought had jumped right off the rails and over a cliff. “Why?”

“Because Tommy Higgins is walking along the beach straight towards us.”

“Fucking Tommy Higgins!” muttered Arthur, pulling away from Merlin’s hand and reaching over
for a discarded sports bag.

Merlin smiled. “Didn’t take long for you to see it my way,” he said, then holding a strategically held surf board, he nodded to Tommy Higgins as he got nearer, and made for the surf line. Arthur pulled the sports bag onto his knee to avoid traumatising the kid, who sat down on the just vacated rock.

“Don’t you surf?” the boy asked. Arthur replied that rugby and rowing were his sports, trying to be polite and not at all distracted.

“Why aren’t you off being active in some organised activity?” he asked in turn.

Tommy Higgins looked at the sand at his feet, and did not reply for a few moments.

“Sunday is family day. I... There’s nothing else planned so I...”

Arthur had a sudden vivid memory of sitting alone in his public school dorm while the rest of the class went to greet their parents for Parents’ Day. It wasn’t that Uther didn’t care, Arthur knew, it was just that he was busy, had really important stuff to do. Arthur looked at Tommy Higgins properly and noticed the dark circles under his eyes, the strain in his face. The kid was hurting and Arthur could not fix it because he had never learned to fix his own hurt. He did what he usually did in difficult circumstances, he deflected.

“So, do you think England will win the Six Nations this time?” he asked, and allowed the talk to turn to the safe subject of rugby as he watched the slim form own the waves of the ocean.

Tommy did not reply at first. When he did, it was not really a reply. “He looks like he’s flying across the sea,” he said so softly Arthur hardly heard him.

“He is,” Arthur found himself saying with affection. He had watched Merlin surf before but now he really saw him, saw the power and the love and the passion, and he wished he were alone to savour the feeling that all of those could be directed at him. Briefly, he basked in that feeling, but then he looked at the face of the kid beside him (and although Tommy Higgins would have scorned at being called a kid, looking at him made Arthur feel old). Tommy Higgins was looking at Merlin with a face so bleak and lost, that Arthur, for all his noted lack of empathy, wanted to enfold him in a hug.

He didn’t.

Tommy Higgins shrugged and then turned away from the sea. “I prefer mountains,” he said. “You can get lost on mountains, they are so big and empty.”

On the waves, Merlin toppled and Arthur felt his heart tug for a moment, restoring only when Merlin re-emerged clutching his board. The sight of Merlin striding out of the water like some sort of Bond vision caused even more groin tension for Arthur, and he held the bag even closer as camouflage, looking up to check that Tommy Higgins had not noticed. He need not have worried, the kid was not looking at either of them, he was walking away, down the beach, head bowed, hands in his pockets. Arthur felt a little pang of pity then turned to greet Merlin.

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Arthur had never thought of the logistics of sex before – it just happened and everything needed was readily available. Now he found himself assessing his stock of condoms and wondering about lube. The pharmacist in Doonshee (called ‘the chemist’ in local parlance) stocked both, clearly, on the front shelf. But you had to then hand them to Mrs. Brennan, the proprietor, who looked like
everyone’s idea of a grandma. Arthur cursed himself as he turned into a comedic cliché, leaving the shop with a packet of cough drops and a hot water bottle. The thing that curdled in him was that had he been intending to use them with Sophia or any other girl, he would have had no difficulty, grandma or not. Arthur realised he still had a lot of issues, which he tried not to show to Merlin.

Over the next few days, it seemed to Arthur that the entire population of Donegal was trying to cockblock him. Certainly, with four people in a two-roomed house, privacy issues could be expected, but when you have driven thirty miles along a barely-there road in a blind valley in the ass end of nowhere, some modicum of alone time could be expected. What he and Merlin did not expect were two French hikers with neon jackets and sturdy walking boots, looking for directions, or an ancient man on a bicycle that looked like Noah had borrowed it from his grandfather to get to the Ark. The old man said “Dia Libh” as he passed, and mumbled something about the weather, but was not as annoying as the full scout troop which practically surrounded the car, appearing, it seemed from nowhere. One of them even rapped on the by-now muffed glass as they passed. When a donkey leaned over the nearby wall, and brayed loudly at the window, Merlin gave up, and with a fit of giggles, started back to Doonshee.

Arthur seethed all the way back, both with sexual frustration, and the knowledge that this was his own fault. Were he not so obsessed with secrecy, there would not be a problem. Arthur was very sure that the friends he had made in Doonshee would accept their relationship without blinking, but he just could not do it. And the universe seemed determined to punish him for it. Even the donkeys.

Merlin was also frustrated – but happy. Knowing Arthur wanted him so badly was like wine to him. Not that he had ever had wine, but he assumed from the way Elena went on about it that it felt good. And this felt good. It felt so good to be wanted, to see in Arthur’s eyes an expression of lust mixed with something deeper, something Merlin was afraid to explore too much in case it wasn’t really there. For the first time in his life, Merlin felt desired and it was good. Admittedly doing something about it would be better, but for now it was enough.

A few tumbles on the beach took the edge off the frustration, but confirmed Merlin’s point that sex on the beach was satisfying but gritty. When the weather turned into a real summer, with clear blue skies and warm sun, even the beaches became crowded and Arthur growled more. Other opportunities were rare.

One such opportunity arose when Guillaume took Arthur aside for a serious conversation. Of the whole group, Guillaume was the hardest to read: quiet and intense, Guillaume kept his own counsel, joining in with the general companionship, but always on the outside. Despite this, or maybe because of it, Guillaume was universally popular, loyal and honest. When he asked Arthur for a private conversation Arthur was a little worried.

He need not have been. Guillaume had not noticed anything about Merlin and Arthur. Instead he shamefacedly admitted that he had fallen very hard for the A&E doctor Arthur had dated. Now he felt he had to confess for having broken the bro code. Arthur was surprised and relieved. He had almost forgotten his date with Gwen, so much having happened since then. He had liked the young doctor but had no interest in her and was happy if she was comfortable with Guillaume. And more importantly, their relationship would mean that Guillaume would be spending much more time in
Letterkenny. One fewer person in the house.

And so, with Guillaume with Gwen and Calum on ceili duty, Arthur and Merlin had the palace to themselves for a few hours, hours they did not intend to waste. They started with cuddles. Arthur was not a cuddle-man. He was more of a provoke-to-passionate-intensity-to-the-brink-of-unconsciousness-then-roll-over-and-go-to-sleep type. But Merlin liked cuddles with his kisses, and kissing was better than Arthur had ever imagined so the cuddles grew on him.

They had found through their beach experiments that though Merlin knew the theory, he was not experienced in practice, and Arthur, for all that most of his experience came from girls, tended to take the lead. Tonight, Merlin was a little more adventurous and Arthur thrilled as Merlin slid down between his legs and, with a great deal of nervousness which Arthur found both endearing and annoying in equal measure, set about using his mouth. Thereafter Arthur concentrated on the sensations he felt as he watched the dark head move between his legs. Then it all changed. Snatches of another head, blonde not dark. A feeling of wrong, of disorientation, of...

“GET OFF ME!” Arthur roared as he violently pushed Merlin away, sending him skidding across the narrow room.

Chapter End Notes

So sorry *Ducks and runs*

Next chapter will be up at the weekend
Chapter 7
Arthur stood up, his head filled with a mixture of confused images in which he struggled to find meaning. He shook his head to try and gain some clarity, then saw Merlin, still lying where he fell, his face showing that his world had been shattered into pieces. Again.
By Arthur.

He so wanted to saying something, anything to fix this, to dissipate that devastated look, but his mind was filled with too many conflicting pictures to be coherent. His mouth was dry, and he shook his head to try to get clarity.
“I remember,” he choked and Merlin’s face changed.

“She did this,” he snarled. “Morgause, she did this to you.”

It was a statement, not a question, and Arthur nodded. Merlin got to his feet with more grace than Arthur thought possible and stepped closer. He was angry, and Arthur realised he had never really seen Merlin angry before. Had he thought about it, he would have assumed that Merlin would blaze out in fierce fiery anger, but now he saw that Merlin blazed cold, and it was terrifying and glorious, and Arthur was glad he had not earned that fury.

“You must go to the police,” Merlin snapped, though his face showed he considered that not harsh enough for her.
Arthur shook his head and backed away. “No,” he said. “I won’t...it was..”

“It was assault Arthur, go to the police.”
Arthur lifted his hand to his face, noting with dismay he was shaking. This was nonsense. He did not shake. He was a man, godamnit he ...
Needed to sit down.
Now.
He half sat and half toppled on to the sofa behind him.

“I will not go to Val and accuse an attractive woman of giving me a blow job,” he said in a dull tone.

Merlin hesitated for a moment, then sat beside him, tentatively touching his wrist. When Arthur did not move away, Merlin began to gently stroke his arm. Arthur felt he should be embarrassed at being petted like a cat, but in truth, it was comforting. Merlin’s fingers were roughened with sea and sand, but Arthur found his touch was gentle, and slowly he began to feel something he rarely felt.
Safe.
They sat in silence for a while, fingers linked, while Arthur tried to bring the swirling images in his head together. Finally he was able to speak.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Merlin turned his face so that Arthur could see him clearly. “No,” he said, “you shouldn’t be.” Arthur felt a little spike of anger mixed with shame. “I... You... hurt,” he said marveling at how inarticulate he had become. How his professor would laugh, he thought, the voluble Arthur Pendragon made speechless by the memory of a blow job. “It was a stupid reaction,” he continued, “and I hurt you.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Merlin said softly. But what Arthur heard was that Merlin was used to it, used to being pushed away. He saw it in the fleeting pain in his eyes, the momentary tension in his shoulders, and although Arthur felt a little bit of pride that he actually noticed the tells, he found himself thinking that life was much less painful when he was oblivious to the hurt of others. “It does matter,” he said. “I should have had more control.”

“Catch yourself on!” Merlin said fiercely, his accent pronounced. “You are entitled to be upset. You were assaulted by yon bitch.”

“It wasn’t like that. It wasn’t ... what you said,” Arthur tried to be calm, but his voice wavered, and he wondered if being totally inarticulate would have been better.

“You didn’t give consent, it was assault,” Merlin said in a gentler voice.

“I don’t know if I gave consent. All I have is scattered flashes of memory, nothing solid. I don’t know...”

Merlin tensed. “Fucking hell Arthur! You climbed out of a window to get away from her – that screams NO to me,” he said vehemently.

Arthur tried to gather his wayward thoughts. He remembered the window, wanting to ...wanting...

“I don’t think I was getting away from her,” he said as he grappled with the imperfect memory. “I think I was trying to get to you.”

“Oh,” said Merlin softly. His fingers found Arthur’s again, winding together. He sighed. “You still have to report her,” he said in a reasonable tone. “She has access to kids, she has to be stopped in case she does it again.”

Arthur was silent for a moment. “No,” he said, then pulling together what memories he could, he continued. “I don’t think she would. I don’t think it was about sex. I think it was about me.”


Merlin was still. Arthur had never offered, never talked about his family or much of his life that did not involve Uni, rowing or rugby. Merlin had felt the omission. He craved a part in Arthur’s life, but as they had grown closer and Arthur still did not speak, he realised that either Arthur had secrets he did not want to share, or he saw Merlin as a temporary fling to be discarded at the end of summer with no risk of stalking. Merlin hoped that it was secrets, but knew that he had agreed to be thrown away when he had made his declaration to Arthur.

“I said I wouldn’t push,” said Merlin. “I figured you’d tell me whatever you wanted me to know.” Arthur turned to him. “My father is Uther Pendragon of Pendragon Enterprises.” He waited for a reaction.

Merlin looked at him blankly. “Pendragon Enterprises?”

Arthur sighed - and exulted. Merlin really did not know who he was, and that was a little scary and
very wonderful. Merlin wanted to be with him, not with Uther Pendragon’s son. Or at least he had. He tried again. “Did you have a TETOR as a kid?”
“Didn’t everyone, it was…”
“Yes the must-have toy for five Christmases in a row, and the first of a long line of inventions that keep gadget geeks thrilled, yada yada yada,” Arthur finished for him.

Merlin went on, “They say the inventor came up with the prototype in his garage and…oh.”
“And that,” said Arthur, “is the sound of the penny dropping.”

Merlin was looking at him with a strange look - almost calculating - and Arthur’s stomach wrenched. Merlin wasn’t any different after all. In a colder tone, he continued. “My father has doubled his fortune pretty much every year since then. The Forbes list is his guest list.”
“So you are really rich then?” Merlin said contemplatively. “Stinking rich in fact?”
“My father is,” Arthur agreed with sinking heart.
Merlin narrowed his eyes and glared at Arthur. “You are so paying for the pizza from now on.”

Arthur stared for a second, jolted by something he had not felt before, and then he tilted his head back and laughed deeply, somehow breaking a dam of tension inside him so that he could not stop. Merlin looked at him with consternation. “What did I say?” he asked. “I mean, I know you have been keeping Betsy filled with petrol when you use her, and I’m really grateful, but I just thought…”

Arthur laughed harder and pulled Merlin into a strong embrace. As he held him, he leaned into the dark hair beside him. “You,” he said, “you are so wonderful.”
“You are you,” Arthur said softly. “Just you.”
Merlin relaxed into Arthur’s arms then tensed again as he remembered. “You still have to tell the police,” he said gently.
“No,” said Arthur. “I have more to tell you.”
“More than being mega rich and owner of the first TETOR?” Merlin quipped but he felt uneasy. Arthur laughed a little grimly. “I never had a TETOR. My father was too busy. And yes, there is more.”

Merlin stretched his hand out to Arthur’s cheek at the bleakness in his face when he spoke of his father. Merlin thought of his own Dad, fundamental and strict, but equally fundamental and unequivocal in love. He decided he had the best of the bargain. He almost didn’t hear as Arthur began to speak again.
“My father was a self-made man, but he married power. My uncle still has it. He is Agravaine Dubois.”

Merlin fell off the couch, landing in a sprawl of long limbs and shock. “Him, I know” he said eventually. “He… He’s the real power in Parliament. He decides who gets to be Prime Minister. The biggest player in politics. They call him The Kingmaker.” The familiar phrases tripped off his tongue like a TV presenter’s spiel. “You are related to someone who is on the telly!”
Then he paused. Getting up from the floor, he sat carefully on the couch, not touching Arthur. His voice was expressionless as he spoke.

“You want to be a politician like your uncle. That’s why the secrecy. No scandal. No us. You…”
“I want to make changes not money, yes,” Arthur agreed. “And I am no good at making toys or
investing money. My uncle has a safe seat waiting for me in a few years. I plan on getting involved more actively when I graduate. He thinks... he said... there may be a place for me, a path, even with the disadvantage of wealth. He thinks I might make it, go all the way.”

Arthur was a little breathless. He had never really admitted this to anyone outside his uncle’s circle, but he really wanted the political life, political power.

Merlin stayed very still. “There are openly gay politicians, Arthur,” he said softly.

“Not in my uncle’s stable. Not in the constituency he has picked for me. When most of those constituents were our age, what we’re doing was a crime. It takes a lot to get over that.”

Arthur stood up, restless energy driving him forward. “I could maybe get elected somewhere else, but I would be the token. The oh-look-we-are-liberal-see-who-we-voted for MP. I don’t want that. I want people to vote for me for what I stand for, not what I am.”

He paused and realised that, in that sentence, he had, for the first time, actually admitted to himself that he was gay. The realisation shook him and stepping over to the opposite sofa he sat down, hunching himself down into the lumpy cushion.

“People aren’t that bad,” Merlin said, then cursed himself for speaking when he saw the bitter look Arthur cast at him.

“Really?” Arthur said in his patrician drawl. “And you had a wonderful time in sixth form college, did you? And your parents? Still have all their friends, do they?”

Merlin flinched, pain and guilt flowing over him in equal measure. “I guess I deserve that,” he said quietly and then, as he felt unbidden tears begin to form in his eyes, he turned away.

“I’m just going to make tea,” he said. “My Mum swears it cures everything.” He got up and went over to the corner they called the kitchen and leaned over the sink to fill the kettle, his back to Arthur.

Arthur had seen his eyes fill, and pretended he didn’t. Merlin didn’t deserve that. Nor did he deserve this furtive hiding and sneaking around. He deserved someone who would be proud of him, proud to be with him.

And Arthur was proud to be with him, but he knew he would not be with him publicly, and that meant he would not apologise, because apologies implied change, and Arthur would not change.

Merlin was fiddling about in the ‘kitchen,’ crashing mugs and doors. Arthur decided to be noble for once. He stood up resolutely and went over to the ‘kitchen.’ “Do you want me to go – to get out of your life,” he began, “You should have...”

There was a crash of crockery in the kitchen sink as Merlin whirled around, his face full of fury.

“Dammit Arthur, you don’t get to do this again!” he yelled. "I stripped my soul open for you and offered you everything – you don’t get me to do it again.” His voice was furious, but his eyes were filled with a sort of desperate despair mixed with something else. “What do you expect Arthur? For me to gift wrap myself and roll over with a bow on my...”

Merlin paused for breath and Arthur looked at him. Merlin stood, quivering with tension, his face infused with passionate intensity, and suddenly Arthur wanted to either laugh or cry, he was not sure which.

Merlin stood before him, head tilted to one side, eyes blazing, and Arthur felt again the sense of safety he had felt earlier. Caring for Merlin was not dangerous. This man would not hurt him, and
He opened his arms and interrupted Merlin’s rant.
“Gift wrapped sounds good – as long as I get to unwrap…” he began, and instantly he found himself with an armful of Merlin, kissing wildly. Arthur didn’t mind.
“You know, for a sober, serious, potential politician, you have a few kinks,” murmured Merlin, nibbling his earlobe.
“Only with a seriously sober Ulsterman,” he replied, and then the kissing deepened, and with a little crab-like shuffling, they managed to collapse on a sofa without disentangling – a feat Arthur was quite proud of. He lay on his back, his legs spread, Merlin straddling him and Arthur sent a glorious ‘At Last’ to the Universe when...
BANG!

“Oh crap!” Merlin exclaimed. “I think I’ve blown up the microwave!” He jumped up to check the damage, leaving Arthur hard, horny and hating the Powers That Be.

Before Arthur had time to move – even if he had wanted to – there was a knock at the door. No one ever knocked at their door, and Arthur swung around in surprise just as Elena stuck her head around the door. “Hiya,” she called. “It was dead boring in the pub. Val is working and there was no one in. So I thought I’d take a walk up into the wilds. It’s a lovely evening.”

She stepped into the room and Arthur noticed she was carrying bags. “I brought food. Chinese ok? They know your order down at the Golden Palace, so I just added my bits.” She dumped the bags on the table and started to remove the contents.

Arthur realised that he had never before thought of being grateful for post traumatic stress, emotional angst and exploding kitchen appliances. He turned to look at Merlin, whose eyes twinkled with a similar thought and who shrugged ruefully. “I’m afraid nothing will be heating up tonight,” he said pointing at the microwave, but looking at Arthur. “It’s grand,” said Elena. “It’s still warm.”

“Yes, it is,” said Merlin, blushing slightly as he helped her with the foil containers and sounding, to Arthur’s ears, a little sad.

Arthur was more than sad, but he settled for beef in black bean sauce. It appeared to be the only spice he was going to get for the rest of the night.

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After that evening, Arthur gave in, and let the Universe do what it wanted. He became accustomed to frustration and cold showers, and gloried in the rare but wonderful moments when he could get Merlin alone and in private.

The plus side was that they did get to talk: in the coffee shop, in the pub, walking along the beach, wherever and whenever they could. Arthur had found his first conversation with Merlin to be like flying, but these talks were different. Oh, they still had the occasional argument about who was the most effective of the X-Men (Wolverine, obviously, though Merlin insisted on Jean Grey) but
much of the time, they spoke of things Arthur had never revealed, even to himself. Merlin learned
of the lonely boy who missed having a daddy, and who never felt good enough to please his father.

“That’s why you picked Linguistics,” Merlin had said, surprising Arthur with his insight. “You
picked a field he had no interest in so you could excel without competition.”
“Are you planning to be a psychologist then?” Arthur had joked, and that had opened a door into
Merlin’s hurt at the loss of his hopes of being a doctor, and his dissatisfaction with the career that
lay before him in biomedicine.

They spoke of this one evening as they walked on the beach, the setting sun turning the distant sea
clouds into a haze of pink, purple and gold. Merlin had stared out at the sunset as he spoke of his
lost dreams, never once looking at Arthur, and for once Arthur had risked tangling his own fingers
with Merlin’s, trying to pass on a comfort that would never be enough.
And through it all Arthur could feel their time in Doonshee winding down.
Chapter 8
The first indication of ending came when the Senior course began to wind down. To mark the last tutorial, all of the class were going to dinner in the five star restaurant in the neighbouring village. Technically all of the staff of the Colaiste were invited, so Arthur took the opportunity to ask Merlin to accompany him. (He was a little ashamed that he also asked Calum to deflect attention, but was relieved when Calum had been on Ceili duty).
“So this is a date then,” Merlin said when the prospect was put before him.
“Sort of,” Arthur was mentally toeing the carpet and looking sheepish. Outwardly he was his usual impassive self.
“With no touching or acknowledging of any sort?” Merlin went on. Arthur nodded – the sheepishness starting to leak out into his face.
“Sounds like pretty much every date I’ve been on then,” Merlin said. “Though admittedly that is not a large number, and on quite a few, neither party actually knew it was a date. So, hey, I’m already on a winner.”
“At least I’ll get to feed you properly,” Arthur commented. “You’re still way too thin.”
“I have a wetsuit to fit into,” Merlin huffed, “and you are starting to sound like my Mum.”
Merlin’s Mum would have approved of him when they set out for the restaurant in the light of a bright summer’s evening. Merlin scrubbed up well, (though a wetsuit was definitely his look). He had shunned the ubiquitous student uniform of jeans and a hoodie for something that Arthur would consider fairly smart casual (for a given meaning of smart) and what Calum called “Jaysus – goin’ posh Mez?” Guillaume did not comment. His Gallic fashion sense was injured by all of them all of the time.

But on the night, even Betsy looked spruced up with a recent car wash and wax. The summer evening was soft and the road to the restaurant was filled with the scents of late summer. Arthur felt good.

Despite his initial reservations, Arthur had gotten on well with his Senior classmates. They were, as Elena had noted, rich and arrogant, but then, so was he, and he fit right in. He could have met any of them at school or at Uni or at a party in Chelsea. But they never talked about Batman or
understood the relevance of Firefly. Arthur was beginning to realise that he was at least two people and the two were very different.

Seeing Merlin with the class added to this feeling. Technically they were all University students of a similar age and could be expected to have at least some similar interests. In practice, they did not fit.

As they gathered in the restaurant bar for drinks, Arthur realised this. Merlin was immediately the target of Harry Greyson, a Cambridge student whom Arthur had considered a friend (in a limited way). Through snips and comments and throwaway remarks, Harry chipped away at Merlin. And Harry was funny. Had Merlin not been the target, Arthur would have laughed as long and as loudly as the rest. As it was, Arthur watched as Merlin smiled – though not with his eyes – and tried to look as though the barbed comments did not hurt him.

Arthur was not fooled. Sometimes he wondered at how fluent he had become in the body language of Merlin. Watching everyone else was like receiving a text-speak message in Chinese, but with Merlin, he could read each slumped shoulder and each clenched jaw. He saw that Merlin was stressed, and could do nothing to stop it without causing notice, and he felt a failure.

When they moved to the dining room, the mood shifted. The restaurant was comfortable not pretentious, befitting its international reputation and the group soon settled at their table. When their waiter appeared, both Arthur and Merlin started.

“What are you doing here?” Arthur blurted out without thinking.

“I work here,” Elena said calmly. “Tuesdays and Wednesdays. And occasional weekends when needed. Your menu, Sir, and would you like the wine list?”

“Yes, no, what?” Arthur was lost for words but Merlin relaxed, and the meal progressed. Harry was still an ass, but Merlin was seated away from him, and so was spared the brunt of his words. Elena was not.

Harry commented every time she served them, his comments getting coarser with every glass of wine he downed, and there were many. Arthur snapped at him and some of the other students began to remonstrate with him, but he brushed them off and continued with his salacious remarks until Elena was bright red as she served the last course.

Arthur was fuming in his place. This should not be happening, he thought. There were rules, and groping and abusing the staff went out with child labour in the mines and putting servants in the stocks. Harry Greyson needed to be taught a lesson. Before he worked himself up to be the teacher, events escalated. As she was collecting plates, Harry reached out and pulled her over, his hand reaching under her blouse. Elena went very still.

“Get your hand off my tits, or I will take your hand off at the wrist,” she said coldly giving up any pretensions to the civility of the place. Harry laughed but gasped when she pulled a knife off the top of the pile of plates. Before she could try to carry out her treat, he pushed her and she staggered, losing her balance and falling in a cacophony of crashing china and rattling cutlery, hitting her head on the corner of a nearby table.

Arthur had sprung to his feet when he had first seen Harry’s wandering hand, as had most of the table. He pulled his arm back for a blow, but as he was about to strike, he saw a blur of movement beside him. Without warning, Merlin lurched forward, and with a strong punch left Harry reeling back clutching his face.

“My toof! You broke my toof, you Irish bastard! I’ll have you for this!” Harry’s roar filled the startled silence and was followed by Elena’s muffled groans as she struggled to stand while still covered in dishes slimy with leftover food and the blood coming from her forehead.

“Ulster bastard,” muttered Merlin, holding his hand.

The manager strode over and pressed Elena into a chair, giving her a napkin to staunch the flow. Then turning, he went over to Harry.
“I want you to call whatever passes for police in this godforsaken place!” Harry roared. “I’ve been assaulted!”
“Sir,” said the manager, “I have already called the Gardai. They will be here momentarily.”
Harry subsided and Merlin slumped in his chair.
“I think I’ve broken my other hand,” he whispered to Arthur.
“You are an idiot,” Arthur replied fiercely. “What were you thinking?”
“The same as you?” Merlin said with a rising tone. “Don’t deny it.”
“He’s an ass,” Arthur spat. “But...” he paused. Why did he think it was his job to deal with Harry? Why did he feel that Merlin should have stayed out of it – that his action was... a disappointment? That somehow he had thought better of Merlin?
Merlin looked at his face as he held his sore hand. He hesitated telling Arthur why he had reacted so forcefully. When he saw Arthur’s face as he stood up, he had suddenly seen tomorrow’s headlines. ‘Pendragon heir in restaurant brawl over waitress,’ and his stomach had flopped. That could not be. He had to intervene, to stop it. But now the expression in Arthur’s eyes made him fear to speak. He shrugged.
“Shut up, Arthur,” he said gruffly. “Pot and kettle.” Arthur did not reply.
It was about a half an hour before the Guards arrived. More specifically, one Garda. Even more specifically, Val.

When he entered, he saw Elena, still sitting with a bloody napkin to her head surrounded by sympathetic wait staff. He caught the eye of both Arthur and Merlin, but they saw nothing in his expression but a determined need to get to Elena. On his way across the room, he was intercepted by the manager, who pulled him aside for a sotto voce conversation. Val then spoke softly to Elena before turning to Harry Greyson.
“I believe you wish to make a complaint,” he said formally.
“I do. That man assaulted me. Look! My tooth is broken! I want him charged.”
“Indeed,” said Val impassively. “Let me see if I have the outline of events. According to the manager, this gentleman,” gesturing at Merlin, “punched you in the mouth after you had groped my girlfriend and pushed her hard enough to cause her to fall, injuring herself. Now if you could accompany me to the station, I can record your perspectives of the alleged assault. I’m afraid the Sergeant has been called away, so I will be alone manning the desk, but I am quite sure I will be able to give you all the attention you deserve.”
Harry had paled slightly at his words, and Arthur was very impressed at how Val’s tone never wandered from totally professional and friendly. Harry did not seem to think so. He blustered slightly until Andrew, one of the other students took pity on him.
“You’re an arsehole, Greyson and you’re not pressing changes. Sit down and shut up,” he said and turned to Val. “Just a misunderstanding. I hope the young lady is all right.”
“She has the right to make a complaint too,” the manager intervened, but Elena shook her head. “I’m grand,” she said. Later, she would admit that seeing Harry Greyson with a gap in his front teeth was much better than a court case, but at the time, she came across as sweet and kind and gained loads of brownie points from everyone there except Val, who wanted some form of retribution.

While his fate was being sorted out, Merlin sat very quietly, holding an ice pack to his hand. He was wondering how this would impact on the ‘thing’ he and Arthur had. He feared that he could not tell him why he had practically thrown himself in front of Arthur, since that would imply that he was counting on a future for them – and he had specifically not pushed for that. On the other hand, not telling Arthur could lead to lots of misunderstandings, judging from Arthur’s face. And thinking of other hands reminded Merlin of his own hand which, despite the ice, was starting to swell.
When the crowd started to dissipate, he took his car keys and went over to where Arthur was talking with Andrew. “Do you think you could drive?” he said, holding out the keys. “I’m a bit...” he waved his hand then put it by his side as Arthur looked at him coldly. “Um. If you’re busy I can
manage...” his voice faded out.
“I’ll drive,” said Arthur brusquely. He had forgotten Merlin had been hurt, and felt guilty for
forgetting. Guilt made him angry, and anger made him arrogant. Taking the keys, he walked out in
front of Merlin, waiting at the door for him to catch up.
“Idiot,” he said. “At the very least, you should learn to punch without crippling yourself.” Merlin
said nothing.

The drive to Letterkenny was silent and awkward. Arthur was annoyed and was not sure what he
was annoyed at. Sophia was so much easier. All she wanted was to be seen by the right people in
the right places and to have good sex.
Not at the same time, though Arthur had wondered about that. When they had a row, a present of
an expensive bauble did the trick. Only Arthur’s feelings after his brief but embarrassing interlude
with the barman broke them up.
Merlin was different. He did not ask for anything. In fact he made a point of not asking, not
expecting, ever. And yet Arthur felt more pressure to give Merlin what he wanted than he had done
with Sophia. And letting Merlin down, even in his own mind was painful. Being with Merlin was
work.
Except it wasn’t, and Arthur found it all very confusing and ... annoying. It was a quiet and grumpy
Arthur that pulled into the by now familiar car park of the hospital.
“Gwen is going to kill me,” Merlin moaned. Since Guillaume’s ‘confession,’ Gwen had been a
long distance member of their group. They had all met up in Letterkenny, and Calum adored her so
much he had taken to bringing her sprigs of mountain heather whenever they met – much to
Guillaume’s irritation. At their first dinner together, Arthur found himself looking at Gwen with a
detached eye. She was smart and intense, but Arthur realised that he liked brains and intensity
wrapped up with a ready wit and deprecating humour. He had been very relaxed about his choice.
Now insecurity nibbled at his choices.
In the A&E Gwen did ‘kill’ them. “Can you not stay out of trouble even in a posh restaurant!” she
complained as Merlin was examined. Luckily his hand was not broken – just more of the
mysterious ‘soft tissue damage’ and he was sent home with a brace and a ticking off.
Arthur drove again, still taciturn, still brooding. Merlin bore it as long as he could, then,
emboldened by the pain-killers Gwen had given him (and really, that was the only upside to being
one handed again – even though he knew his stomach would not appreciate the drugs later), Merlin
spoke.
“So, what did I do that you’re not talking to me?”
“I’m not not talking to you,” Arthur said, sounding even in his own ears like a petulant schoolgirl.
“Yes, you are. You are so not talking to me. You are sitting there all broody and not talking to me,
and I want to know why.” Merlin decided Gwen’s painkillers must do something to his voice,
because it seemed to be running away on him.
“You’re an idiot! That’s what’s wrong,” Arthur snapped. “You took a punch at a highflyer in front
of a restaurant full of people. You are dammed lucky you are not sitting in a police station right
now waiting to be charged!”
“Pull in,” Merlin said with restraint. Arthur looked over at him with a surprised expression.
“Pull in Arthur, pull in and stop the car,” Merlin repeated.
“Why?”
“Because I am going to shout at you, and I don’t want you to be driving when I do. PULL IN!”
Arthur was startled. Merlin did not shout. And really, who warned a person they were going to
shout? Oh yes, that would be Merlin. He spotted a gateway and stopped the car.
“ARTHUR PENDRAGON, YOU ARE AN INSUFFERABLE, ANNOYING, ARROGANT
CHUMP, AND IF I DIDN’T LIKE YOU SO MUCH, I’D PUNCH YOU RIGHT HERE, EVEN IF
IT MEANT THUMPING MY OTHER HAND!”
Arthur’s eyes were wide with shock, but he said nothing. Merlin barely paused for breath before
“If I had not jumped in, you would be the one at risk of getting charged – you were all ready to hit him. I saw you. STUPID! What would your father say if he read about your brawl over a waitress in The Sun?”


Merlin huffed a laugh then stopped. “What about your uncle?”

Arthur was silent.

“Don’t you get it, Arthur? You can’t be stupid if you want to be great. You just can’t. You have to be perfect if you want your dreams. You have to be...” Merlin was growing more incoherent as emotion and painkillers kicked in. “You have to be... it’s important. You can be great... I won’t have my heart broken for anyone less than the Prime Minister. You can’t let them bring you down... you-”

“Heart broken?” Arthur said.

Merlin tried to get his thoughts together. “I know I said you can walk away anytime, and I hold to that because, well, because... even if it is at the end of the summer, I understand, I do, and you will be great, I really do believe that... it’s just, I won’t be walking away. Not ever. That’s just me. The way I’m...”

Arthur did not understand most of it, but he felt the sentiment. He decided to defy the possibility of scout troops and donkeys and leaned over, kissing Merlin on the mouth. It was much easier than speaking. What he wanted to say was that he was both scared and proud to be the object of such faith and devotion, and that he found it all very overwhelming. What he said, when he disentangled lips was, “I think you might be a little bit high. I’ll get you home.”

Merlin sighed and Arthur restarted Betsy and drove off.
Two days later, the opportunity for fun times that Arthur had so longed for finally came – courtesy of Calum’s grandmother.

“She’s eighty, you know. Can’t miss her party, being favourite grandson and all,” Calum explained as he packed a bag and set off for the four hour bus journey to Dublin. It had taken all his charm to get two days off, and Merlin had agreed to take ceili duty, but as far as Arthur was concerned, it was a great idea. Guillaume did not take much encouraging to pop over to Letterkenny to see Gwen, and the palace was theirs for one, whole, empty night. Perfect.

“So,” said Merlin. “Are we doing this then?” his voice was calm, but his knee bounced erratically as he sat.

“If you want. I mean, if you’re sure.”

“Are you sure? You’re the one with nerves.”

“I’m sure. Are you sure?”

“We’re going round in circles here,” Merlin sighed. “So, we’re doing this? Yes? You’ve done this before?”

“Not with... not really. But how difficult can it be? Insert tab A into slot B. We’re both smart people. We can work it out.”

“Aye,” said Merlin. Arthur had noticed that when he was under pressure, Merlin’s accent was stronger. Right now, his accent was in the running for the Mr. Universe of accents.

“The thing is,” Merlin continued. “Which slot and what tab?”

Arthur was startled into incoherence. “I thought, I mean I....”

“Oh aye, I thought you thought,” said Merlin, “and now you are thinking again, aren’t you?”

Arthur hesitated. “If you want... if...um”

“We can experiment,” said Merlin firmly, but with a smile.“Y’never know, it could be fun.”

“Rock, paper, scissors for first choice.”


Arthur was confused. Even in the most cryptic conversation he had ever had, which this was, this left him muddled.

“Ach, no,” Merlin laughed. “There can’t be any fucking, you’re not a real nerd.”

Arthur relaxed as the tension left him. It would be all right. As long as they could laugh, they would be alright.

“I can learn, I’ll be good, teach me,” he said, his voice rich with laughter. And suddenly, Merlin was holding him.

“You’re perfect,” Merlin gasped as he gave rather hit and miss kisses. “How can someone so perfect want me?”

“My thoughts exactly,” said Arthur, then hearing what he had said he added, “I mean, I think you’re... damnit Merlin, you know.”

“Show me,” said Merlin. And Arthur did.
Logistics, of course, made things difficult. For a start, cramped bunk beds did not lend themselves to much creativity in the positions department, and only the innovation of a pile of duvets on the floor between the beds allowed for experimentation without damage. And there was a lot of experimentation. Afterwards, both found that there were several items of furniture they could not look at without blushing. Or at the very least, without a knowing smirk.

The late summer dawn saw them exhausted and happily sore, tangled together in a nest of duvets on the floor. Arthur woke with the light coming through the grubby window, and took the moment to look at the sleeping man beside him.

Despite having spent the summer sleeping in the same room as Merlin, Arthur had never actually seen him asleep, and he found it disconcerting.

He realised how much of the Merlin-ness of Merlin came from his eyes. Merlin’s eyes showed everything, his joy in life, his compassion, his half-hidden sorrow and his mischief. With his eyes closed, he seemed to be missing and Arthur did not like it. He wanted those eyes open and looking at him with the passion he had seen in them only a little while before. His hand dropped and he felt that Merlin was soft. Gently he began to stroke. Without opening his eyes,

Merlin moved his own hand and swatted him away.

“Nuh, uh,” Merlin said. “I’m too tired for a repeat performance, and Calum will be back here later anyway.”

“We have time,” Arthur coaxed, but Merlin seemed resolute.

“Time for sleep,” Merlin insisted. “You know, that thing we did none of last night? And then we have to clean up this house. I shudder to think what kind of mess we made.”

“It was good,” Arthur said reflectively.

“Mmm,” said sleepy Merlin.

Arthur rolled over on to his back and gazed at the cracked ceiling. There was a spider’s web in the corner that looked as if it had webs of its own.

“Formal classes end tomorrow. Just bits and pieces after that. There’s a flight on Friday I thought of taking.”

He felt Merlin’s body tense.

“I’ll leave you at the airport if you like. I can do it on the way to Belfast.”

“Yeah, okay. That would be good. Thanks.”

The silence grew between them.

“Remember you said you wouldn’t be walking away. Did you mean that?”

“How many times do I have to say it for you to believe me?”

“You only said it once.”

Merlin turned over and stared at the ceiling Arthur found so fascinating. “I meant it,” he said.

“I was thinking. I don’t... I think... I don’t want to walk away either,” Arthur knew he sounded hesitant but could not help it.

“What about your plans?” asked Merlin in a neutral tone.

“I still have my plans. It’s just... I think I want to have plans with you in them too. I just don’t know how.”

Merlin smiled. Arthur didn’t know how he knew Merlin was smiling without looking at him, but he knew. He felt it.

“We could experiment,” Merlin said, with the smile still in his voice. “We’re good at experimenting.”

With that, he rolled over until he was lying on top of Arthur. Arthur noticed he was definitely doing more than smiling. “I thought you were tired,” Arthur said.

“Hope springs and all that,” Merlin replied obliquely, and Arthur laughed as he was pulled in for a kiss.
It was much later when they got dressed and set about restoring the house to its usual state of chaos. The cleaning was more complicated than they had thought.

“Seriously, though,” Merlin said with dismay as he wiped around the main room. “How did we get that up there?” Arthur just looked smug.

Merlin was still spraying air freshener when Arthur set out to meet Calum at the bus stop – a favour Merlin had promised but Arthur preferred to take on rather than stay with the smell of chemically engineered ocean fresh – and really, how does one engineer the smell of the ocean, and why doesn’t it smell of salt and seaweed with undertones of fish? These thoughts kept him occupied as he drove, contemplating making his fortune creating real scents for homes, and trying to avoid the fact that a long drive was probably not the best idea after the night they had had.

On the drive back, he tried to hide his discomfort from an uncharacteristically quiet Calum, and had to admit that the journey never felt so long. They were met with an empty house and a note, “Gone to pub.” Arthur was rather surprised, but he brought Betsy down to her regular space by their favourite pub. Inside, Merlin was sitting with Elena, Val, Guillaume and Freya, but the atmosphere was far from fun.

“Who died?” Calum said as he pulled up a stool. His tone changed at the bleak faces that turned to him. “Oh, sorry, did someone really die?”

“Merlin was fired.”

Arthur looked sharply at Merlin as Elena finished. His head was down and he did not meet Arthur’s eyes.

Calum was indignant. “Why?” he demanded.

“Because he’s gay,” Elena spat. Merlin made a tiny sound and examined the surface of the table.

“I know,” Arthur responded, still looking at Merlin. Val held out a hand to Guillaume.

“Really, guys? Is this the time?” Elena snapped out. “Your silly bet can wait.”

Merlin raised his head. “What bet?” he asked. Arthur could hear the strain in his voice.

Elena shrugged. “Val said Arthur already knew. Guillaume said no.”

“That’s illegal,” Arthur said.

“Betting?” said Elena. “No, it’s not.”

“Firing someone for orientation.” Arthur was firm.

“Firing someone for orientation.” Arthur hated the defeated look in his eyes. He remembered the spark of mischief in those eyes that morning and wanted to see it again.

“It’s as good as,” Elena said firmly, but Merlin shook his head. “She had the right,” he said softly.

“Jack Hennessy’s parents came down yesterday. The kid filled them in about how a chat with Merlin here changed his life. They complimented O’Donnell and next thing you know, Merlin gets a text saying he’s fired for unprofessional behaviour and acting beyond his capacity,” Val’s account was succinct and to the point but brutal. Calum paled.

“Damnit Mez, that’s my fault. Listen mate, I owe you half, okay, no argument.”

Merlin just shook his head. “I’m not taking your money, Cal” he said softly, and Arthur noticed how pronounced his accent was.

“You’re only down a few days, surely,” Arthur said. Calum, Elena, and Freya shook their heads.

“It’s the bonus,” Elena said. “Their pay is shite, but if they stay for the whole season, they get a bonus,” she went on. “Double bonus on the second year. It’s so the bitch doesn’t have to do loads of recruiting if she finds people.”

“Exactly. So if we split it, then we both get the same as last year. We managed, Mez. Please? I fucked up pushing you to talk to the kid. We split the bonus, yeah?” Calum sounded desperate, but Merlin shook his head.

“You need the cash, Cal, I know you have that set aside for Uni registration. I’ll manage. I’m good at it. And hey! I get an extra few days holiday. It’s all good. And anyway, I’m not sorry I spoke to him. You were right and I am not sorry.”
Although Merlin put a good face on it, Arthur could feel the tension in his voice, and wanted nothing more than to hold him close and soothe out that tension. He cursed the part of him that refused to let him do that.

The rest of the evening passed in a blur of sympathy, verbal abuse (of Ms. O’Donnell) and orange juice, so much so that their table looked like a testing site for Del Monte as everyone who heard sent Merlin a drink. Merlin himself was quiet, and didn’t even laugh when Calum and Guillaume admitted that they had based a drinking game on the frequency of Arthur and Merlin exchanging nerd-culture references. “The night you guys got on to Batman,” Calum remarked, “I could barely stand.”

Arthur remembered that night, remembered how good it had felt. Even with all the ‘experimental’ sextimes, (and Arthur mentally blushed even to think that term) bantering with Merlin was high on his list of favourite things. Higher even than snowflakes and geese, and Arthur knew that even Merlin would have groaned if he’d said that out loud. But Merlin was not bantering, and it seemed as if their experimental session had happened to two other people in a galaxy far far away. Damnit, he was missing Merlin while he sat beside him.

The mood was not lifted when they left the pub. The perfect summer weather had broken and the coast was being battered with an Atlantic storm that seemed to be determined to dump half of the ocean on their bit of land. Betsy’s windscreen wipers made a valiant effort, but the rain was so heavy that neither Merlin nor Arthur could see, and the journey back to the palace effectively was done at walking pace.

As he lay in his bunk staring at the ceiling a foot or so from his face, Arthur listened to the wind and rain pounding the cottage and tried to hear if Merlin was sleeping across the room. He knew he wasn’t, and though that morning he had hated to see Merlin asleep, now he wanted more than anything to ease the anxiety that was keeping him awake. Arthur knew Merlin would never accept money from him, but he had become increasingly aware of how tight Merlin’s resources were. He resolved to fix everything, and spent most of the rest of the night working out how.

The next morning, the rain was still falling. Arthur asked Merlin for a loan of Betsy, and felt quite guilty when he realised that Merlin would be stuck in the palace without transport. He took the car anyway.

The trip to Letterkenny was difficult with some parts of the road streaming like a river, but he got what he needed and returned to Doonshee without mishap.

Fate was with him as he found a parking spot right outside the main door of the Colaiste, and was able to make a run for it without a drenching. He had dressed with care, a suit, crisp shirt (bought in Letterkenny to avoid ironing and maybe not his usual style) and a silk tie. He knew he looked every inch the society executive his uncle wanted to mould. He strode to the desk and with a lazy drawl, insisted that he speak with Morgause O’Donnell.

Freya gasped when she saw him, and reverted to her inarticulate self, but she did show him into the inner office. Ms O’Donnell was alone, shrouded in her blue pashmina and perfume. Although Arthur had seen her at a distance, this was the first time he had seen her face to face since the night of her dinner party, and he hoped he was strong enough to ignore that.

“Mr. Pendragon.” Her tones were clipped and precise. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Arthur would not be outdone on the formality stakes. “Ms. O’Donnell, it’s good of you to see me,” he began. “I believe you have had a ... misunderstanding with one of my roommates, Merlin Balinson.”

“Not a misunderstanding, Mr Pendragon, a termination of employment. Mr. Balinson has hardly been employee of the year and I would be remiss if I allowed this incident to pass.”

“I wonder if you might reconsider,” he said softly.
She smiled coldly. “That is not likely. Parents do not like having their children advised on matters of orientation by people of Mr. Balinson’s proclivities.”

Arthur pulled in his rage at her comments, and stuck to the script he had worked out while avoiding floods on the way back to Doonshee.

“I thought you might say that,” he said, putting a manila folder on her desk. “Perhaps this might cause you to rethink.”

“What is this?” she demanded, opening the folder.

“The results of tests taken on me on the night of your oh-so-lovely party, Ms. O’Donnell, showing trace residue of rohypnol. The effects of the drug are felt within 30 minutes, and since I was fine at the main course, I can only assume I was given it at your table. I wonder what parents would say about a head mistress who uses roofies.”

The silence in the room was so deep, Arthur could hear the ticking of his watch. For a moment he caught a scent of her perfume and felt nausea rising. But he was stronger than that. Arthur Pendragon had learned early how to ignore painful emotions.

“There is no proof this substance came from me,” Ms. O’Donnell said through gritted teeth.

“You are right. There is no proof. But there is enough to go to court. I would be embarrassed. But you would be ruined. That doesn’t have to happen.”

“Blackmail,” she dropped the word like a stone.

“I prefer to think of it as a mutually beneficial proposition,” Arthur said.

“And you want...?”

“Merlin Balinson gets his job back.”

“I’ll give him the bonus, that’s all.”

Arthur paused for a moment as if considering. “Agreed,” he said.

He felt a very Michael Corleone feeling in the pit of his stomach, and was surprised and rather horrified to find he liked it.

“I’m keeping this,” Ms O’Donnell said, picking up the folder and standing.

“You can,” said Arthur, “It’s a copy.”

Ms. O’Donnell looked at him. “Why are you doing this?”

Arthur smiled. “I am very protective of my friends,” he said, though he knew it was not true. He had never felt the slightest desire to protect any of his friends in school or Uni or London. But, here in this crazy land with its mountains and rain, and cock-blocking donkeys, he had felt a connection with people he had never felt before. Even had it been Calum, not Merlin, he still would have helped, though maybe it would have hurt more.

“I heard your father was ruthless in business, I see you take after him,” her voice was bitter, and a shade admiring.

“The difference between me and my father,” said Arthur, “is that he is ruthless in his business life, I am ruthless in the rest. I thank you for your time, Ms. O’Donnell,” Arthur turned and left the room, repressing the desire to run. He nodded to Freya, went out to Betsy, and was rewarded by an instant start.

It was a good day.
Rescue me

Arthur had to pull in on the way home because his hands started shaking but Betsy obliged by cutting out and he got understanding waves from locals as he sat in a lay-by ostensibly trying to start the car but actually trying to restart his brain. It worked; and by the time Betsy allowed herself to start he was back to himself. In fact he was feeling a little smug. He had faced a dragon for Merlin and if she did wear blue wool and had reading glasses, that was simply a sad lack on the part of the times. Dragons took different forms these days but it still took guts to face them. Arthur had never known he had guts (except in a physiological sense) and discovering he had – with the right motivation made him feel good about himself in a way he had never felt before. He put aside the thought that he was feeling good about blackmail and drove on.

Arthur was still feeling smug as he arrived back at the Palace and that feeling increased when Calum greeted him.

“Jaysus! Arthur, what’s with the posh gear? You look like you’re all set for a photo shoot – looking for another job dude?”

“I had business in Letterkenny” Arthur did his best to maintain his poker face, but as he always lost at poker he had some doubts as to his ability. And, if he was honest with himself, he was preening. Especially at Merlin’s expression, which if not drooling was definitely appreciative.

“Mez, take your tongue off the floor and tell Arthur your news” Calum was grinning and Arthur braced for some serious acting.

Merlin spoke and Arthur wondered that the sound of his voice, strong and resonant was enough to make him half hard.

“I got a text from Morgause O’Donnell. She’s going to pay the bonus anyway”

“That’s brilliant, Merlin, The White Witch must have a heart after all” Arthur was proud of the steadiness of his voice but was very conscious of the narrowing of Merlin’s eyes.

“Yeah,” said Calum, “We should celebrate – what about cooking something?” Merlin was startled.

“Cook? You mean food? Real food? Here?”

They all turned to look at the hot-plate and microwave which had never recovered from Merlin’s accident. Calum sighed. “You’re right” he said “Anyone for Chinese?” he asked as he took out his phone.

Merlin unobtrusively pulled Arthur to one side. “I don’t know what you did but if I find that something you did has endangered your future I will be so mad at you.” he took a breath, “But I’ll still thank you”

His eyes said more than his words and Arthur realised, with a feeling of both trepidation and joy, that he would never be able to hide anything from Merlin and never wanted to.

He wanted to kiss him right there and then, ignoring Calum and the whole pretence thing and got so distracted that he could barely answer when Calum he asked about noodles or rice. Calum wasn’t impressed and Arthur ended up having some sticky concoction Calum thought was a good idea. But it was worth it to see the smile back in Merlin’s eyes and the lilt in his voice as he complained about the food.
They had just reached the who-gets-the-last-fortune-cookie-and-who-likes-fortune-cookies-anyway stage of dining when Calum’s phone did its little dance to say he had received a text.

Merlin shoved away the foil containers with irritation “Cal” he said “would you ever change your message alert? Or take off the vibrate at least. Having your phone wiggle across the sofa while making farting noises is putting me off my dim sum.”

Calum laughed as he reached for the phone but his faced changed when he read the message.

“Shit!” he exclaimed “ We have a critical incident!”

“What’s a critical incident?” asked Arthur, thinking it sounded like politically correct–speak for a nuclear explosion. There was no answer.

Merlin had jumped up when Calum spoke , then sat down stiffly. “I’m not staff” he said but Calum dragged him by his arm.

“Stuff that” Calum said , “There’s a kid missing. Everyone’s needed”

“Who?” Merlin asked as he reached for his a jacket.

“Tommy Higgins never arrived back at his house. His Bean an Ti called it in when no one could contact him”

“I’m coming too” Arthur surprised himself saying. He found himself remembering the boy’s face as he stood on the beach looking out to sea. No one should look that bleak. Arthur had never really bothered with the feelings of others, except to manipulate them, but the kid had got to him in some way and he felt a wave of fear at the thought of what might have happened.

The familiar drive to the village was difficult. Fallen branches and huge puddles made the journey treacherous but Merlin got through without accident to find the Colaiste building lit up, with many cars around the main street. As they drew up, Arthur saw Val, striding into the building, fielding questions from the locals. Inside Val took charge. He informed the assemblage of staff and locals of the facts.

Tommy Higgins had left the building with the rest of the students but had not arrived at his house. His phone was not answering and no one knew anything. Arthur thought bitterly that since Tommy Higgins had been isolated by his former friends, no one would have noticed if he was there or not. He felt guilty that he did not say anything and as he looked at Merlin’s face he saw the same emotion there. Val divided the area into search blocks and allocated people to each area with priority given to the coastline. The Gardai were stretched but willing and the help of all volunteers was important.

Arthur thought of Tommy Higgins on the beach and drew Merlin aside. “I don’t think he’s gone to the sea” he said, “I think he heading for the mountain” He nodded at the giant shape of the Mountain visible against the stormy sky. Merlin looked at Arthur and then nodded. He did not ask how he knew but reached for his car keys. “Tell Calum which direction we are going. I’ll get Betsy”

The rain had started again and driving towards the mountain was a nightmare. Even with the windscreen wipers on full it was practically impossible to see with the force of the rain. Merlin could feel the wind tug at the car as he drove and he his hands were white knuckled on the wheel. He drove as much by luck and instinct turning on to the boreen that was the only road to the mountain foot. As the terrain got rougher Betsy whined and groaned like the living thing Merlin
always insisted she was. Finally she stopped, quite abruptly and would not restart.

“Do we keep trying? Or get out and walk?” Merlin asked.
Arthur felt a need for hurry. “Walk” he said hesitatingly. “I will go on foot, you stay here and keep trying”

“Don’t be daft” Merlin said as he got out of the car and into the rain. Arthur looked on in astonishment as Merlin went around to the back of the car and matter-of-factly took out rope, torches, a backpack and a pair of hiking boots which he proceeded to put on.

“Were you expecting this?” Arthur blurted.

Merlin smiled narrowly. “My father and I don’t have much in common, but practically every weekend since I was four we have gone hiking in the Mournes. I love the sea but I know mountains. And I don’t trust them. So: the kit. Here”

He handed Arthur a high vis jacket. “No point in us getting lost” he said with a smile “’Fraid I don’t have boots in your size”

Betsy had cut out on the boreen leading to the waterfall path and some instinct led Arthur that way. Although he had been there many times, it was very different now. The wind was deflected by the valley walls but the quiet river was now a raging flood that slopped over the path in a fast flowing current. Merlin and Arthur clung to the valley sides as they made their way along the flooded path.

“Are we crazy?” Merlin shouted above the roar of the water.

“I just.... I have a feeling.” Arthur thought that maybe they were crazy but he really needed to keep going.

When they rounded the bend the full effect of the flood was visible. The waterfall pounded over the rocks in a torrent of noise and white spray. And on the outcrop where they had had their picnic a figure stood, arms outstretched, dwarfed by the power of the water. Arthur jolted forwards and opened his mouth to call but Merlin held him back.

“A shout could startle him, send him over” he said into Arthur’s ear. Arthur nodded. Neither said anything about whether such a fall would be accidental.

Suddenly a fierce spurt of water dislodged a rock and sent it hurtling in to the boy. He fell, his cry snatched away by the sound of the flood. Arthur and Merlin ran, splashing through the water to the rocky outcrop, then climbed the slippery rock to the flat surface.

Tommy Higgins lay on the outcrop, holding his left wrist in his right hand. Now that they were closer they could hear him swear as tears mingled with the spray on his face.

“Fuckfuckfuck” he keened and Arthur knelt before him causing him to jump in shock

“It’s okay kid” Arthur said, because that is what you say to people when you are in the middle of rescuing them. Tommy Higgins looked at him as though he knew that it was a lie.

“We’re not going to get back the way we came” Merlin said looking at the river. The rock had loosened others and the river bed was now a rolling and heaving mass of stone and water, spreading over the trail and filling the valley from wall to wall.

Tommy Higgins suddenly became aware of Merlin’s presence on the rock. “No!” he wailed, “Nononononono. What are you doing here!”
“We came to find you” Arthur said.

“Why?” the kid responded instantly, his voice breaking.

“Beats me” said Arthur deadpan and the kid stopped wailing and stared at him for a moment, then started to laugh. The laugh had a definite note of hysteria in it but Arthur decided that on the whole, he preferred hysterical laughter to hysterical crying. And anyway, Arthur was distracted by a realisation that Merlin was not looking at them but at the valley wall.

“You’re not thinking of going up there” Arthur said firmly.

Merlin looked at him. “There’s no signal here.” He said. “And that won’t be the only rock the waterfall chucks at us. Up is the only option.”

“I’ll go” Arthur said instinctively and was a little miffed when Merlin’s face broke into his vastly amused smile.

“What’s so funny?” Arthur demanded and was not mollified when Merlin just shook his head in amusement before resuming his scan of the valley.

“Look, there is a trail – up there, see?” Merlin was pointing above the outcrop they were on and Arthur knew what he was pointing at. At some stage either an inquisitive rabbit or an impatient tourist had beaten a small trail up the valley side. It was most certainly designed only for going up, and even in good weather Arthur had never risked it.

“That would give a goat vertigo” he yelled through the noise but Merlin merely laughed again and, hitching the rope across his shoulders, started climbing.

Arthur had heard the phrase ‘heart in mouth’ before but now he lived it. He felt every beat of his own heart as he watched Merlin move with agonising slowness up the steep face of the valley. Once Merlin’s foot slipped and Arthur was only aware, from the sharp intake of breath from the boy beside him that he was not breathing. At last — after at least three centuries, Merlin pulled on a stunted ash tree and swung himself over the edge of the valley. A momentary disappearance was followed by a familiar tousled head peering down at them. Over the roar of the water Arthur could just about hear Merlin’s voice.

“There’s still no signal” Merlin called, “I’m going to try a little further on and see if I can call for help”

At that moment a rock the size of a microwave bounced off the outcrop, centimetres from Tommy Higgins. Arthur saw Merlin jolt and shouted up “No” We have to get the kid up” He saw Merlin nod and the rope appeared in front of him.

Arthur may not have had experience of mountains but he did know knots and he was quite proud of the harness he made for Tommy Higgins. The boy cooperated, but insisted that he could climb up by himself. This turned out to be unnecessary as they found that by a series of moves worthy of a circus troop, and by standing on Arthur’s shoulders, and ultimately his head, (which hurt more than Arthur thought it would) the boy successfully found himself on solid if damp ground.

Which left Arthur on the outcrop.

He looked up and saw Merlin’s face looking down at him. Arthur just knew that he was worried so he gave a casual wave up to put Merlin at ease. Bad move. His unsuitable shoes (that he had never replaced) slipped on the wet surface of the rock and before he had time to even be surprised he had fallen.
Up until that moment Merlin had been completely in control of his emotions. As he had said, he knew mountains. Apart from the lifetime of weekly hikes, he had regularly gone rock climbing and had even trained with Mountain Rescue. At Queen’s, mountains were nearer than waves and though they were not his passion at least he felt a part of the Elements on a mountain. This crisis had called on all his instincts and his training and so far that had gone well.

But when he saw Arthur’s blond head disappear off the rock, everything went. He dropped the phone he was holding and without taking time to think he jumped down on to the outcrop: only in midair realising how stupid that was. But he didn’t care. He landed awkwardly but his surfer’s balance kept him from falling and immediately he lay down and looked over the edge. He was dreading what he might see, or worse, what he would not see. Images of Arthur’s battered body swept downstream by the treacherous flood almost overwhelmed him as he peered into the gloom. But there it was. Arthur’s florescent jacket, making a garish splash of colour directly below him, about two metres down.

Arthur had obviously slid rather than fallen directly, and he was now lying on a flat rock sticking up from the fast flowing current. The rock had water flowing over it, but not much. Merlin called him and saw movement. His heart relaxed.

“Arthur? Arthur?”

Arthur heard the voice above the roar of the waterfall. It was Merlin and he sounded worried and that was not right.

“I’m okay” he called back, because again, that was what you did when someone was worried. But then he moved and felt the bones in his leg crunch.

“FUCKING HELL!” he yelled. Merlin called down “Are you okay?” which Arthur decided was a stupid thing to say.

“It’s broken” he called “My leg. It’s broken”

“Oh” said Merlin and again Arthur felt that this was a somewhat inadequate response given the circumstances.

“I can’t reach you” said Merlin “You have to stand” Merlin sounded calm again, in control and Arthur felt furious.

“Did you miss the part about my leg being broken? ” he yelled.

“You can still stand” Merlin was implacable.

“Fuck you!” Arthur screamed into the roar of the water.

“It’s only pain, Arthur, it doesn’t matter. What matters is standing up. You have to stand up” Merlin still sounded so calm and Arthur wanted to hit him. He moved on the rock and got his good leg under him. Then he tired to stand. It hurt. God it hurt.

“I can’t” he gasped loudly, “It hurts”

“Stand the Fuck up, Arthur Pendragon! That pain is nothing! Stand up! I am not fucking losing you now! Up!”

The sheer shock of hearing Merlin swear at him gave Arthur the impetus to stand and in a moment he felt Merlin’s hands grip his arms.
Merlin had never wished for Arthur’s powerful shoulders before but now he felt that his own were being pulled from their sockets. His own words bit him: “It’s only pain, it doesn’t matter” and it really didn’t because this was Arthur and that was all that mattered and then it was okay because Arthur got his arms on to the outcrop and could pull himself up and Merlin pulled him to himself, cradling him, holding between his legs, in his arms.

“I have you” Merlin said into Arthur’s ear. “I have you and I’m never letting go”

“Yes” said Arthur, “You have me” and then “Can I pass out now?” Merlin leaned over and kissed Arthur firmly and passionately.

“Do you want to?”

Arthur stroked Merlin’s face “I’m not sure now” he murmured, and Merlin stole another kiss. In between kisses, Arthur looked up and saw Tommy Higgins looking down on them. ‘Oh well’ Arthur thought, but somehow it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered but Merlin’s arms and – fuck it- the really horrendous pain in his leg. He decided to pass out anyway.

Merlin held him close and tried to breathe. He had known how he felt about Arthur but seeing him in danger made it visceral. Only contact made it better. A rational part of his brain kept screaming that they were not safe, stuck on a rock in the middle of a flood, during a storm but the part attached to his arms was happy and that was what he was concentrating on. A shout from above drew his attention. It was Calum.

“Hey” said Calum. It seemed a totally inappropriate greeting but Merlin couldn’t think of anything better. “Hey” he said.

“So” said Calum. “This rescuing business. Not so hot at it then?”

“So it would seem” Merlin replied.

“Just as well Mountain Rescue are here then” Calum’s words made Merlin sigh with relief.

“We’re going to be okay” he whispered in Arthur’s ear as the sound of shouts from above indicated action.

It didn’t take long to get them up – even with the awful weather, the valley wasn’t Mt Everest, though Arthur’s broken leg caused some professional manoeuvring and a few manly yelps. Arthur sincerely regretted coming to before they started the move.

Calum stood with Merlin as the team worked.

“The mountain rescue were in the area when kid called. But we still wouldn’t have found you if Betsy hadn’t started hooting and flashing lights like the demented motor she is” Calum said idly. “Course the kid helped, running down to direct us when he saw the torches”

Merlin just nodded as he watched the team carefully raise Arthur from the ledge.

“Maybe the kid’s not that bad” Calum ventured. “Did he say why he came up here?”

“We didn’t have time to chat” Merlin replied absently. Arthur had groaned as he was carried and Merlin was distracted.

“Yeah, I get that” Calum said. He nodded towards Arthur, “The prince going to be okay?”

Merlin gave a little laugh. “You found a nickname for him then?”
“It seemed obvious.” Calum was matter of fact but he looked at Merlin with an expression of worry that Merlin rarely saw on him.

“We have to get him to the hospital. Then we’ll know.”

Once up top, there was some delay as the team worked out how to get Arthur down the mountain.

“Can’t get the helicopter because of the wind and there’s no road so you’ll be carried” the chief rescuer said and Arthur waited while they brought the stretcher up. Tommy Higgins sat beside him, his arm in a sling. He was quiet but Arthur knew he wanted to talk. Eventually he did.

“So you and Merlin?” he said

“Yes” said Arthur

“So you’re?”

“Yes”

Arthur figured this had to be the most oblique coming out in history when the boy changed tack.

“But you can’t be. I mean, you play rugby! You know all about sport! And Merlin..” his voice caught in his throat “he’s .he’s . .”

“Yes he is” Arthur agreed, looking at where Merlin’s lean figure was outlined against the sky as he pored over a map with the rescue team.

There was a moment of silence and then, with a sob Tommy cried “So I don’t have to be like Hennessy?” and Arthur’s heart broke for the boy.

“You be who you want to be” he said, wishing he could follow his own advice, wishing the world would let him. “You do what you want. You’re okay as you are”

The boy let out a shuddering sigh and his eyes turned to Merlin, who just then looked up and smiled at Arthur. Glancing at his companion Arthur realised he was not the only one who appreciated Merlin.

“You’re very lucky” Tommy said. “I am” Arthur agreed softly.
Arthur did not feel so lucky when Gwen saw him being wheeled into A&E with Merlin, Tommy Higgins and Calum in tow.
She stood with arms folded and lips pursed and Arthur felt a deep instinctive need to run. He never thought flight or fight could be provoked by folded elbows. Not that he wanted to fight. That would just be plain stupid. Gwen could slay him a guilt-inducing look.

“Arthur Pendragon. And Merlin. What a surprise to see you in A&E. Again” Gwen’s tone was taking no prisoners. “And who or what did you get the wrong end of this time?”

“Ahh in fairness, Gwen” said Calum deserving a medal for gallantry, “They are sort of heroes, even if the kid they rescued had to rescue them”

Tommy blushed and Gwen smiled at him “Are you one of this gang of idiots now? She asked.”

“Yes” said Arthur and Tommy smiled.

After that they were all separated, Tommy to get his wrist seen to, (sprained not broken) and to meet with his parents, Arthur to have his leg sorted out (definitely broken) Calum to the coffee machine in the foyer and Merlin to sit quietly and ignore the pain in his shoulders. Just another spell in A&E.

It was mid afternoon the next day when the trio was met by Guillaume, who had stayed in Letterkenny and missed all the excitement. (When Calum said as much, Guillaume commented that he had been quite excited himself, a comment which earned him a clip on the ear from Gwen)

The four headed back to Doonshee. All were weary and Arthur sported a cast in neon pink. The nurses had said they were out of every other colour but Arthur suspected Gwen. “At least we can’t lose you” Calum quipped when he saw it. “We won’t lose you” Merlin had responded with more seriousness than the words deserved.

Both Arthur and Merlin were quiet on the journey home, for similar reasons. Both had seen the other in danger and had come face to face with the intensity of their own feelings and both were feeling a little overwhelmed. Gwen’s painkillers added to the unreality.

The unreality continued when they arrived at the palace, the taxi driver complaining bitterly about the rushes.

“Guys, does that thatch look a bit funny to you?” Calum asked as the left the car, Arthur struggling with crutches and cast. “It always looks funny” he bit out as he tried to keep steady on the muddy ground.

Inside, Arthur gratefully fell into a sofa, propping up his pink leg on the armrest. Merlin – in typical Merlin style, made straight for the kettle

“I’ll make tea, then” he said unnecessarily as Calum headed in to the bunk room. It was all comfortably normal until Calum backed away from the door.

“Eh, guys. We have a problem” he said.

Arthur and Merlin came over, Arthur with difficulty. The bunk room looked normal if you disregarded the way the ceiling, was lying, in soggy lumps over the furniture, with the contents of the attic as garnish. Arthur assessed the situation and acted decisively.

“Okay” he said “Hotel, I pay, Calum, stop the taxi”

Luckily, the taxi had got stuck in the mud and was willing to take them back to the village in return for help with the constantly spinning wheels.

Unluckily, there was a wedding booked into the hotel and there were no rooms. Guillaume
wandered off with his phone and Arthur was sitting in the foyer with his pink leg on a sofa while Merlin and Calum debated the viability of broom cupboards with the receptionist when a vision in lilac appeared before him.

“Yer one of the lads that picked that wee boy from the Glenuisce falls?” the vision said, coalescing into Mrs. Brennan from the Chemist shop. Arthur was suddenly relieved he had stuck to cough drops.

“I know you” she went on “Youse are up beyond in the old Ferry house” Arthur nodded, hoping it was the right response. He really hadn’t a clue what she was saying and trusted that was a result of Gwen’s wonderful pain meds and not a hitherto unnoticed head injury. Mrs. Brennan turned to the receptionist.

“What’s the problem Katie?” she inquired moving between Merlin and Calum like Moses through the Red Sea.

“Ah, Mrs Brennan” Katie the now named receptionist said. “I was just telling them. The rooms is all gone”

Mrs Brennan looked at them narrowly. “And why would youse be looking for a room?” she asked. Calum explained about the ceiling now residing on the furniture. Mrs Brennan tutted, then looked at Katie. “There’s the room we booked for Aine’s cousin Maire from Crelough who couldn’t come because her wee one caught the german measles which would never had happened if she’d ha got the child done by the doctor as I told her.” Mrs. Brennan paused for breath then went on “We were going to put the youngest bridesmaids in there but sure they can share as was planned and youse can have the room. It’s a double but I’m sure youse can manage.”

Calum, Arthur and Merlin were left open-mouthed as she swept by them, tinted hair glowing slightly in the light. As she reached the door to the function room she turned, “And youse had better come in to the afters as well. My daughter won’t mind, sure half the world is in here and we’ll be at it for hours yet so youse won’t be sleeping.” They stood staring at her then responding to her emphatic beckoning they hurried, or in Arthur’s case hopped to the door, picking up a puzzled Guillaume, who mentioned that Gwen had offered to put them up.

In the function room Arthur wondered had he entered another dimension. The discarded detritus of wedding paraphernalia lay around the room. Tables, once prettily decorated were pushed to the sides of the room, leaving a dance floor filled with people. A band played on a low dais, with one guitar, drums, a keyboard, a singer and for some reason Arthur could not fathom, an accordion player.

The four refugees found a table, where the lack of drinks on the table and bags or jackets on the chairs gave an indication of vacancy and sat down. When no one objected they stayed. Calum went to the bar to get drinks because as he said “ The world will end if we sit at the wedding with no glasses in front of us. We don’t have to drink them”

They sat and watched the proceedings. Granny Brennan gave them a nod as she gyrated by, dancing with her great granddaughter who looked about five and was wearing a dress that matched Arthur’s cast, and not long afterwards drinks began to appear on their table accompanied by friendly comments that Arthur could not decipher but presumed were complimentary. There was no chance the world would end at any rate.

The guests were a broad mixture of types. There was Mr. Brennan of the filling station who danced with his wife with the accomplished ease of a ballroom dancer. Elena’s aunt, whose carefully
coiffed hair was wilting in the heat, made a good effort at rock n roll. To one side were a gang of giggly girls who danced in a circle, eyes flicking around to see who noticed. Calum definitely did notice when he saw Freya among them and he gradually insinuated himself into the group, ignoring the hungry eyes eating him up. Guillaume was quickly snapped up by a group of his fellow music fans and disappeared into a corner where occasional sounds of a bodhran were heard. Arthur and Merlin remained.

Arthur had been to weddings. As a boy he had been pageboy for quite a few of his father’s friends, because he looked good in photographs. The friends of his father’s were really only connections and Arthur, even at five or six felt he had been traded out as part of a business deal. It didn’t give him a good impression of weddings.

Later he had attended the weddings of some of his own cohort, slightly older acquaintances ready to settle down. The weddings were held in large country houses, with themed decorations and impressive guest lists. Arthur had enjoyed them in a champagne kind of way but they were nothing like this. This was joy in a close fuggy function-room, smelling of alcohol and poor cologne and filled with people who were happy just being happy. They danced, they sang along with the music, they talked at high volume and Arthur felt his blood thrum with the sheer fun around him.

Or it could have been Gwen’s painkillers.
And the drink sitting in front of him that he hadn’t asked for but had obviously enjoyed.

Whatever it was Arthur relished it. As he relished seeing Merlin, whole and happy, sitting with an orange juice in front of him on the opposite side of the table, his eyes shining with the joy and the reflected light of the amateur light show rigged up by the band. Said band was now belting out Neil Diamond classics with more enthusiasm than finesse and the guests loved it, yelling out each chorus with great volume and accompanying percussion produced by hands, feet or glasses. Or all three.

The noise was impressive and Arthur understood what Mrs. Brennan had meant when she said they wouldn’t sleep much in the rooms above.

“SWEET CAROLINE” THUMP THUMP THUMP. “GOOD TIMES NEVER SEEMED SO GOOD”

Arthur looked over at Merlin. “Don’t you want to be dancing?” he asked.

“No.” Merlin said, twiddling a glass in his hands. “I’m saving my energy for the hike to pick up Betsy tomorrow. She won’t be happy being left on a mountain side all this time”

“You do know that she is just a car Merlin?” Arthur said and kept his superior look despite Merlin’s glare, hiding a laugh as Merlin bristled with indignation.

“If I didn’t know you talk to her all the time, I’d make you pay for insulting my baby” he huffed, his eyes laughing.
Guillaume came over just then, relaying the news that he had met up with some guests who were driving back to Letterkenny that night and had offered him a lift. Arthur smothered a laugh.

Guillaume was leaving for France in a few days and was already pining for Gwen. Arthur did not want to think of his own feelings in the same circumstances.

The music was marginally quieter now, the band having switched to Elvis. Couples were dancing – Gwaine passed by with his arms entwined around Freya, and Arthur and Merlin exchanged glances. Something deep stirred in Arthur as the song flowed over him.

“WISE MEN SAY ONLY FOOLS RUSH IN...”
He saw Merlin sitting quietly, drinking in the scene before him, sharing his feeling through his eyes, sharing his feelings with Arthur and something broke.

“I want to dance with you” Arthur said abruptly, “Here. Now”

“CAN’T HELP FALLING IN LOVE WITH YOU”

Merlin looked at him with a smile in his eyes. “I don’t think Granny Brennan would be up to that” he said lightly “and you can’t dance with that leg”. His look grew serious as he read Arthur’s expression. He leaned closer. “You’re too drugged up, Arthur. This is not the time”

Arthur looked at him. “I am, you know. What the song says. I am” He swallowed. He’d never said that to anyone, never thought it, never felt it, but here in this sweaty dance hall he knew it was true.

Merlin looked at him gravely, holding his eyes with his own. Then he smiled widely, his eyes disappearing into cracks that made Arthur shiver. “I have” Merlin said, “I already have”.

Arthur wondered if the others could feel the charge in the air between them. He was almost surprised the drinks on the table didn’t start to boil and pondered if bubbling orange juice would be a public way of coming out. He was still staring when Calum came over and dropped the room keycard on the table

“Hey guys” Calum started “Freya, well, she’s got this thing in her place after the wedding and I sort got roped in and well, here” He took a slug of a drink he had left on table and swayed back to Freya, waiting on the dance floor. Arthur and Merlin stared at the keycard and then at each other.

“You know” said Merlin huskily “I’m really tired. All that rescuing and stuff. I think I’ll go to bed”

“Yeah” said Arthur “Me too. The drugs are starting to kick in. I need to sleep it off”

“You first” said Merlin. Arthur reached for his crutches and stood up.

“Leaving already?” Mrs. Brennan asked as he passed, very conspicuous with cast and crutches. He mentioned his pain killers, turned on the Pendragon charm and made for the room.

It was not a suite – just a small double backing on to the service areas but Arthur suddenly realised that it had hot water in the shower and the thought of a hot shower became a priority. He shed his clothes and limped to the bathroom where he discovered the logistics of showering with a cast. He whimpered and wobbled as he tried to keep his cast dry and the rest of him wet and contemplated what Gwen would say if he turned up at A&E with a shower related injury. Just as he was about to give in and hobble off defeated, hope came in the shape of a very naked Merlin in the doorway of the bathroom.

“Want a hand?” Merlin said and at that moment Arthur most definitely needed a hand – and not to keep his cast dry. Merlin was beautiful and before Merlin, Arthur had never used that word for a man. His lean body looked strong against the lighted doorway, the white skin of his torso and legs contrasting with the weather-worn skin of his face, hands and feet. An inverse tan pattern, Arthur thought inconsequentially, but what he felt was amazement that this beauty was his to touch. He held out his hands.

What followed involved a lot of deep breathing and not a little teetering on the edge in every sense. Arthur was about to update his fear of Gwen to include both of them arriving at A&E when Merlin
whispered hoarsely in his ear.

“You know there is a perfectly good, perfectly large, bed next door and that is one thing we haven’t experimented with” he said. Arthur agreed and they stumbled into the bedroom.

Once, a more adventurous Arthur had dated a gymnast and in a moment of madness had decided to see what could be accomplished while sticking to the traditional Hollywood idea that both parties had to have one foot on the ground at all times while together in bed. It had been a memorable if exhausting evening and Arthur had not known that so many positions existed. It was however, tame, in comparison with working out how to manoeuvre a cast, one bruised back, two bruised wrists and a pair of strained shoulders. They managed to take experimentation to a whole new level of creativity and as he drifted off to sleep, much later, Arthur wondered if they should produce a manual for similarly afflicted souls. Merlin had no such thoughts. As he fell asleep, legs tangled around Arthur, head resting on his chest, Arthur’s heartbeat acting as a lullaby, Merlin knew, for the first time in his life he was completely happy.

Arthur awoke with the dawn, feeling rested and safe. When had he thought about it at all, which was hardly ever, he had wondered why people made such a big deal about being home. Arthur had a home of course – since his father’s fortune had taken off he had several – but he felt the same there as he did at school or in his rooms at college. But here, at this precise moment, lying in a hotel in the ass end of nowhere, with a sleeping Merlin drooling on his chest he suddenly understood what home was about. He gave a deep satisfied sigh and as he did so, Merlin grunted and rolled over, snuggling into the pillow. Arthur smiled and carefully wriggled out of the bed and hobbled over to the window.

As he admired the view of the roof of the kitchen, he mused that were he still in a 1940s Hollywood movie he would now be smoking a cigarette and looking smug. The cigarette was a non starter but as he looked back at Merlin the smugness was a definite maybe. But then if his life was a Hollywood movie, Merlin would be a voluptuous blonde and Arthur was very happy with the lover he had.

The thought made him still.

Lover

One who loves and is loved.

Arthur had and was a lover.

The words of the song from the night before echoed in his head, “Shall I stay? Would it be a sin?”

And he wondered what would happen if he did, if he stayed here, stayed with Merlin. If Merlin was home would it be enough? Merlin stirred in his sleep making a quiet meep and Arthur heart gave a blip of joy at the sound. Would it be enough to be able to hear that every morning? To sleep every night in the warm safety of entangled arms? Would it be enough to compensate for giving up on his dreams? And there, as Hamlet would say, was the rub. His father always said that you were never beaten until you gave up. Would he feel beaten if he stayed? Would he blame Merlin for the loss of his dreams? Would a life without his dreams satisfy him?

As he stood in the window he knew the answer to the last question. He was young and the hunger to be something more, to achieve something great was strong in him. Being in love was wonderful, intoxicatingly wonderful but it did not satisfy that hunger. He would not be staying no matter how
wonderful love was.

The thought made him sad and, as if in response, Merlin woke and looked over at him, silhouetted against the window.
“S’matter?” asked Merlin sleepily.

“Nothing” Arthur said, then thought better of it. “We don’t have much time left” he added.

Merlin sighed “I know” he said as he reached for his phone on the bedside locker. “It’s 7.30am” he went on “And we don’t have to be out of the room until half past ten. Would you like to come back over here and make the most of that time? He held out his arms and Arthur thought it the sexiest sight he had ever seen.

In his hurry to get back into the embrace of those arms, Arthur forgot that one leg had the mobility of a block of wood. With a startled oath he fell on to the carpeted floor, staring balefully at the bottom of his crutch and a packet of condoms that had fallen off the bed in their gymnastic exhibition of the night before.

In a moment Merlin was beside him, all long limbs and pale flesh, laughing once he realised that only Arthur’s pride was hurt.

“Well, at least I know that you really have fallen for me” he murmured and Arthur resisted the urge to smack him.

“That” said Arthur, “Is the worst pun ever”

“Then why are you rolling on the floor laughing then?” said Merlin in a deliberately reasonable tone, designed to irritate. Arthur rolled his eyes and reached out for the crutch, only to be held down by Merlin’s strong grip. “Who said I’m laughing” Arthur said rather more waspishly than he intended. Merlin straddled him, gripping his wrists with strength that Arthur had only felt at the waterfall. Looking into his eyes, Arthur saw an expression he had not seen before. Merlin looked as fierce as his hawk namesake, his gaze direct and forceful. He looked at Arthur’s face as if recording every feature.

“Tell me” he said. “Say it in words. Say it just once. Say it”

Arthur was confused. Say what? Surely this was the point of having a partner with stubble? Not being expected to know the answer to questions when you don’t even know the question. No condemnation for not being psychic. Not being always wrong because you don’t understand why you’re wrong. In short no female mysteries. He looked at Merlin feeling exasperated, a complaint on his lips as he watched the face leaning above him.The fierce look was still there, combined with something else.... Comprehension grew as he met that fierce gaze.

“You are my lover” Arthur said. “You are my lover because you are the one I love and you love me”

Arthur felt the arms holding him relax slightly then tense again. The intensity of the gaze grew stronger if anything as Merlin drew in and claimed Arthur’s lips with his new ferocity.

“See” Merlin said, “Now you understand.”
Friday

And then it was Friday.

At the last minute Arthur changed his flight from the local airport to one leaving from Belfast. It meant sitting in Betsy for three hours, but that was three hours more with Merlin so it was worth it.

Betsy was loaded to the coat hooks, Arthur’s designer luggage nestling with Merlin’s kit bags and household equipment:
“‘You’re not bringing the microwave”
“But it’s mine”
“It doesn’t work. You blew it up”
“But it’s mine! My Mum will expect me to bring it back”
“Merlin!”
“What? I don’t just throw things out when they’re broken”
Arthur had sighed and made room for the microwave. With Merlin’s surfboard strapped to the roof-rack, Betsy chugged as she took the hills outside Doonshee.

It was early in the morning and there was no one to see them off.

They had said goodbye to Calum the day before. The Colaiste organised a bus to take those students whose parents could not collect them back to Dublin and Calum was the designated adult on board.

“It’s a free ride home, but four hours in a bus with Lydia and co may just kill me” Calum had moaned. Arthur and Merlin saw him off and as they stood by the coffee shop watching the bus load up they had been surprised when one of Lydia’s coterie ran over and presented Merlin with a little bear, dressed in the Donegal colours of green and gold.

“For you. I don’t care that you were fired, you’re a great teacher and you never laughed at me, even when I put the wetsuit on wrong and anyway thanks” she said in one breath, and then ran back to the bus. An embarrassed but delighted smile spread over Merlin’s face as he held the tiny bear. He was even more embarrassed when Lydia, in full Queen Bee mode, sashayed over to him, and kissed him roundly on the lips. When she pulled back, ignoring his shocked look, she patted him on the shoulder. “Jack told me all about you and I’m cool with it but I just wanted you to see what you’re missing” She had stepped on the bus, sighing “What a waste”

Arthur, sitting in Betsy’s front seat looked at Merlin’s fingers, wound around the steering wheel, knew from wonderful experience that Merlin was not wasted, not at all.

Merlin glanced over at him “What’s the smile for?”
“Just thinking of Lydia”

“Hmm. Yes. Good kisser”

“Really?” Arthur tried to get as much patrician scorn as he could into his voice.

“You jealous Arthur?” Merlin said lightly

Arthur laughed. “No. But you’re lucky it wasn’t Tommy Higgins jumping you”.

Merlin stiffened at the wheel. “What do you mean?” he said, his voice sounding rough. Arthur realised that he had not spoken with Merlin about the cryptic conversation with Tommy Higgins. It hadn’t been avoiding it, the topic just hadn’t come up.

“He likes you” Arthur said carefully. “He likes you the way I like you”

There was silence for a moment then Merlin smacked both hands on to the wheel.

“Shit. SHIT SHIT SHIT!” The car did not swerve but it did speed up. “I didn’t know. I didn’t see. Shit! I was a bastard to him!”

“Merlin. Slow down!” Arthur tried to keep his voice calm as he saw the scenery whizzing past. “I was there. I worked with you. You didn’t treat him any differently than any of the others. Trust me Merlin”

Merlin did not relax, but Betsy slowed slightly. “I was a bastard to him in my head” he said softly. Arthur began to respond but Merlin turned briefly to him. “Don’t say that doesn’t matter. Not you. Don’t you say that that doesn’t matter. It matters. It does.”

Arthur was silent. If Merlin meant what he thought he did then it did matter how you thought of people. But he wasn’t going to say it. Not while Merlin was hurting and especially not while going at speed on a main road.

“I’m supposed to be... the one thing I thought I could do... I thought...” Merlin was getting incoherent. “Do we have time... Would you mind if we stopped for a bit?” Arthur didn’t mind at all. He would miss any number of flights if it meant putting Merlin back together again. And getting there in one piece. Betsy seemed to agree. As they approached a lay-by she turned on her hazard lights and cut out as soon as her wheels left the main road surface.

Merlin sat staring straight ahead. “I never noticed. He must have been so lonely and hurt and I never noticed. That was my thing. Who I am. Crap at everything but being nice. But I wasn’t.” Merlin’s voice broke. You were. I saw the stuff he did and I thought he was a dick, but you saw him and asked why”

Arthur did not want to admit that he saw what Tommy Higgins did and saw himself.
He looked at Merlin, who was leaning his head on the steering wheel and sighed. Merlin was right. He the one who was nice and who understood people. Arthur was not and right now he was floundering in a sea of confusion, while sitting in a lay-by on the A6. This is what a relationship means, he thought, as Betsy absently flicked her windscreen wipers at nonexistent rain. It meant trying to figure out what somebody else was feeling while not being terribly sure what you were feeling yourself, and to be honest, (and Arthur was honest with himself. Mostly) it sucked.

Arthur and took out a bag of jelly babies Elena had given him. She had insisted that chewing was important on a plane and if you were going to chew you might as well chew person shaped sugar. “Have a jelly baby” he said.

Merlin looked at him as if he had offered him a real baby.

“Did you just offer me a jelly baby?”


Arthur pulled back the packet. “If you don’t want one...” he started. But Merlin was laughing. And crying. And trying to climb over the hand brake, which was very gratifying but causing problems or the gymnastic kind. Or the chiropractor kind depending on which way you looked at it.

“Arthur Pendragon you are the most gorgeous, annoying, wonderful, perfect whovian that ever existed and I love you so much” Merlin pronounced while trying to avoid impalement on Betsy’s gear stick. Arthur was happy but puzzled. He had obviously done something right – as shown by the passionate Ulsterman now clinging enthusiastically to his lips – but he was not sure what. He decided to go with the flow and kiss back.

There was a sudden crack and a jerk and the seat flopped backwards. “Betsy!” Arthur squawked as he found himself lying flat with Merlin perched on top of him.

“Should I be jealous of my car?”

“Nh uh” Arthur murmured, his mouth occupied with Merlin’s ear. This was an unexpected development and Arthur was not going to let it go to waste. Then he realised that between the laughter Merlin had tears in his eyes.

“You know how to fix me when I crack up” Merlin said.

As Arthur really did not know what he had done he said nothing and continued to caress Merlin with his lips.
“We can’t do this you know” Merlin’s voice was muffled and his body belied his words but he still wriggled out of Arthur’s grasp. “This is a main road. The police could be along at any time to see if we need help and that could be hard to explain” He started to make the difficult move back across the dangerous territory of gear stick and handbrake when Arthur, mentally sighing at the end of this diversion, stopped him.

“You know you could just get out the door this side and walk around, don’t you?”

Merlin looked at him through narrowed eyes and then did just that. Arthur did his best to get the seat back upright, coming to the conclusion that it was never designed to back at all. He was giving an extremely quizzical look at the dashboard when Merlin got back into the car.

“So are you going to give that jelly baby then?” he asked. Arthur passed him and bag and he started decapitating jelly people with gusto.

“I am going to have such a sugar rush” Merlin said, “I didn’t have any breakfast” Arthur had noticed that but said nothing. “And you won’t be there when I crash” Merlin paused. “You won’t be there at all”

Arthur was silent.

“It’s been nice having you around”

“Nice?” Arthur tried not to let the dismay he was feeling filter into his voice. “Nice?”

“Yes, nice” Merlin sounded thoughtful. “I mean the sex is great, more than great, not that I have anything to compare it too but, yeah, great but.” He paused “It’s been nice being able to look at you when Calum does something daft and know that you get it, or to say some stuff and not get a ‘you’re weird’ look- to know that you get me.” He paused again, his accent getting stronger. “It’s just nice that you get me, that you see me and get me and I don’t have to pretend. That you’re there and you’ll be there and... I guess...”

Arthur reached for Merlin’s hand and held it. “Yeah” he said “Yeah, It’s nice”. They sat for a little while looking out at the Ulster scenery but not seeing any of it. If Arthur had been overwhelmed by the realisation that he had a lover, he now felt a warm knot inside at the knowledge that he had a friend.

“D’you think he’s okay?” Merlin asked. “Tommy Higgins. Do you think he’ll be okay?”

“He left with his parents”
“That doesn’t mean he’s ok”

Arthur knew it didn’t. “He’s got a chance.” he said. “He’s got a chance now. It’s up to him to take it. And he’s got good taste” he took at glance at Merlin, taking in his face, cheekbones sharp in profile. “He likes you. He’ll do okay”

There was a silence

“Lydia likes me”

“My point exactly”

“So liking me is a sign of being a bad ass?”

“Are you calling me a bad ass?”

“No, I think your ass is gorgeous”

And Arthur threw back his head and laughed till he hurt. After a second, Merlin joined him. Even Betsy got in the mood by turning on her indictors one at a time.

When the laughter wore off, Arthur found he was still holding Merlin’s hand. “I’m going to miss this” he said, not specifying what this was.

“You can still have sugar highs in London” Merlin said lightly.

“That’s not what I mean and you know it”

“Yeah. You’re going.” Merlin looked at his phone. “Shit. If we don’t start now you won’t be going” He turned the key but Betsy didn’t even chug.

“I guess she doesn’t want to move” Merlin sighed, as he turned the key again and again.

“Me neither” Arthur felt the honesty of his words cut through him. “Merlin. I ... I’m sorry. What I’m asking of you... What...” His voice faded.

Merlin gripped his hand tightly and pulled. “No, Dammit, NO! Arthur! No. Don’t do this. You have this idea of me being some sort of martyr. Well I’m not. I’m totally selfish. I want you and I’ll take whatever I can of you. And even if you were as out as Graham Norton, you’d still be going back to London and I’d still have a year to do in Queens so stop guilt-tripping and ..”

Merlin trailed off but Arthur was silent. He remembered the fierce Merlin who had claimed him in the hotel. He wondered if he should be intimidated but instead he felt a flood of desire. Arthur had always seen himself as an Alpha male but suddenly he saw Merlin the same way and the thought of being wanted by someone powerful made him feel valuable in a way he had never felt before. More than anything he wanted to pull Merlin to him but Betsy chose that moment to roar into life.
Merlin quickly put her into gear and looked at Arthur.

“So” he said, head on one side. “Belfast?”

Arthur nodded, unable to speak.

“We talked about this” Merlin said.

And they had. The previous night – their last in Doonshee – had been taken up with (mostly) talking. Arthur had booked single rooms for all four of them, an easy task once the wedding was over. Merlin had avoided this by bringing his laptop and a collection of DVDs to Arthur’s room and inviting Calum and Guillaume to a Doctor Who marathon. Their expected refusal meant that Arthur and Merlin had one more night together. They even watched some Doctor Who.

After some initial experiments, during which they had discovered that a cast was not a limiting as they had thought, Merlin had settled down to serious talk.

“We need to negotiate. About our relationship. What we do after this” he had said.

“You mean... like ... bondage and leathers and stuff?”

Merlin’s jaw had dropped. “Eh, no? I was thinking more, you know, phone calls,texts, emails... but I’m getting that we have waaaaay more to talk about. Sometime. Not now. Really. Not now.”

Merlin smiled. “But we will be talking”

They had talked. About phone calls and emails, though before they started Arthur could swear that he had blushed purple, not sure if it was embarrassment or something more... embarrassing... or ....

So now, as Betsy got ever closer to the airport, Arthur knew that they had a plan. They knew (roughly) where they were going.

The rest of the journey was mostly in silence. It was not an awkward silence but rather one where everything important had been said and everything else would take a life time to say. By mutual agreement Merlin stopped at the drop off point, only giving Arthur a few minutes to grab his bags and leave. They had decided that long goodbyes would be too much so when Betsy pulled up Arthur jumped out with only a quick touch of Merlin’s hand. With his bags at his side Arthur leaned to the car window.

“So... See you?” Merlin said

“Yeah”
Betsy growled and Merlin revved her a little.

“You’d better go.” said Arthur hoarsely.
“Yeah” Merlin was just as hoarse. Arthur turned and walked towards the door. He heard Betsy grumble and did not look as she pulled away behind him.

Summer was over.

Chapter End Notes

This has taken ages, partly because, after the pressure of producing weekly episodes for 'Under a Comfort' my discipline wandered off for a holiday and partly because my muse got stuck in the lay by on the A6.
I do know what happens after this and I have the rest of the story plotted should anyone want to read it. Thank you for coming this far!

Note: the jelly babies is a Doctor Who ref - Tom Baker used them all the time and they have been a recuring motif.
Chapter Summary

Arthur has returned to London

Being back in London was alarmingly normal for Arthur. Although it was a cliché beloved of fairytale writers he had thought that falling in love would change his life dramatically but it didn’t. Of course part of the reason for that was that he didn’t want his life to change but still he was slightly scared to realise that he fitted back in to the groves of his life without a single jolt. The fact was there was no Merlin-shaped hole in his London life and so there was no reason to miss Merlin

He did though. He had spent less than a handful of nights with Merlin and yet each night he found himself reaching for a man who was not there and each morning he regretted the absence of cornflakes related incidents. They had agreed not to phone or text for a week “To let things settle” Merlin had said but Arthur didn’t think he’d make the week. He had already bought extra milk for Merlin’s breakfast much to the bemusement of the housekeeper and he had not slept for two nights.

Sometimes Arthur felt embarrassed that he still lived with his father but in practical terms it was useful. The Chelsea house, which his father had bought with his first profits, was central and comfortable and since he was eleven, between Eton and Uni he had spent only a few weeks each year there. He preferred the country house but Chelsea was... practical.

The downside was compulsory breakfast with his father – when his father was in town, which wasn’t often. Uther had very few fatherly instincts but someone had once told him the importance of families eating together and he had taken it to heart. Lunch was out - much too busy and dinner was generally with friends or business acquaintances, where Arthur would be a nuisance. Which left breakfast. Arthur hated it. No matter what time he had crawled in in the morning he had to be sitting bright-eyed and awake when his father emerged from his room. Mrs. Hudson the current housekeeper sympathtised and had come up with some of the most effective hangover cures he had ever tried – one or two had even worked- but still the morning ritual grated.

His father was away the weekend Arthur returned so it wasn’t until Tuesday morning he had to turn up and be civil over the toast and orange juice. He didn’t even like orange juice.

“How was France?” Pendragon senior asked while buttering.

“Ireland” Arthur said baldly. His father did not like to be corrected.

“Ireland” The voice was bland but had an edge.

“It rained a lot” Arthur could out-bland anyone. He had had a lot of practice.

“Anything interesting there?”

Arthur thought of Merlin, striding out of the sea like a lithe, rubber clad merman, of his lips working over Arthur's body, his hands...
No, not at the breakfast table.
He thought of Morgause O’Donnell and his arrival in the ranks of blackmailers, of Tommy Higgins and his identity crisis, of the minutes under the waterfall...

“No. There was a storm near the end. Rained a lot” he said.

“I merely ask because your leg seems to be in a cast of a rather obvious shade of pink” Uther sounded uninterested but Arthur had to give him credit for trying. This was one of the longest conversations they had had in months.

“I slipped in the rain. This was the only colour they had in the local hospital”

“Get it checked out now that you’re back in civilisation. Wouldn’t want any permanent damage because a hick doctor missed something. And get the cast changed. People might call you a poof” Uther reached for the marmalade and Arthur swallowed his toast and his pride, neither going down well. He took up his post, presented naturally on a silver salver and tried not to feel that his whole life was a lie.

The first letter he opened was a confirmation from the university that his Graduation date was in two weeks. He had arranged it before Kilgharrah had pulled his hissy fit and Arthur was glad to see that his late qualification had not bumped him from the list. He opened his mouth to tell his father but then closed it again, not trusting his voice.

The next piece was a postcard. Arthur didn’t think people still sent postcards but here was evidence they did. It had nothing written on it but the address and was a picture of the beach at Doonshee. With the swirl of emotions he was feeling, Arthur’s first thought was that someone knew. His stomach knotted. Then he saw that the postmark was Belfast and he relaxed. He looked more closely at the picture. If you had excellent eyesight – which Arthur had – and you had personal knowledge of various parts of the beach – which Arthur did, then it was possible to see a few tiny x’s along the sands. Arthur snorted over his coffee. Only Merlin could by-pass the no phones no texts rule and still manage to turn him on.

“Something interesting in the post?” His father was on a parenting roll today. Arthur handed him the university letter and Uther made a note of the date.

“If nothing else comes up I should be there” he said and Arthur nodded. Something had always come up in the past so he didn’t hold out much hope. And the way he felt right now he would prefer if his father did not show. He returned to opening his letters.

The next was a note from Agravaine Dubois. Growing up Arthur had not seen much of his maternal uncle apart from rare visits at Christmas and even rarer birthdays. When Arthur started showing promise in his teens Dubois had been more interested, sending occasional gifts – mostly political biographies or commentaries on current affairs. His uncle had been surprising support when his father had objected to his choice of college courses. Uther had expected Arthur to take engineering or business or finance course. He saw linguistics as a waste of time. Uncle Agravaine probably agreed and probably would have wanted Arthur to read politics or economics but he had given tacit support to Arthur in those tense days and Arthur was grateful.
It was Agravaine Dubois who suggested that Arthur, still in his teens, should attend the party conference and, two years later had actually spoken to him at that year’s conference - in public too, a fact noteworthy enough to get into the newspapers albeit as a snippet. Now, in his note he suggested that Arthur leave the dates of the conference free and that they should talk – perhaps at his Graduation - about his future. Arthur felt a surge of hope. His uncle did nothing lightly. His suggestions were orders and his idea of talking about Arthur’s future was tantamount to a job offer. As he read the note again Arthur was elated despite the orange juice, toast and his father’s comments. Merlin wanted him to remember and doors were opening to his dreams. He ignored the tiny doubt that they were mutually exclusive.

Later that day Arthur noticed a postcard in a touristy newsagent and couldn’t resist getting it. He posted it immediately surprising himself by knowing Merlin’s Belfast address without needing to look it up. Just as he turned from the post box a perfectly manicured hand tapped him on the shoulder. He spun around to face Sophia, dressed in the height of fashion and with a predatory gleam in her eyes.

“How was Barbados?” she asked coyly.

“There was a change of plans. I went to Ireland” Arthur was brusque but not rude. Sophia put her hand on his jacket sleeve.

“You’re good at changing plans. Nothing with you is set in stone” Her hand moved down to his. “I missed you, Arthur” she said. “It’s just not fun without you. Remember that time at Gilbert’s party? We had fun didn’t we”

Arthur did remember Gilbert’s party – at least some of it. And he and Sophia had had fun. Quite a lot of it, mixed with alcohol. Probably with a cherry on top.

“Gilbert’s having another party on Friday. His birthday. I know you’ll be going, so maybe I’ll see you there. We can remember together.” She smiled brightly and walked off undulating in her Manolo Blahnik heels. Arthur had forgotten Gilbert’s party but he knew it had been in his diary for months. Gilbert’s parties were famous. Although Arthur had met him at Eton, Gilbert lived only a few streets away and for parties the whole mansion was open. Arthur could remember some serious shenanigans in the pool when they all had been teenagers and alcohol a new toy. Gilbert’s parties provided dining out anecdotes for the rest of the year. Going to Gilbert’s party would get Arthur back into the swing of things though he was reluctant to get back into the swing of Sophia. It worried him that the sight of her hips swaying down the road still did things to him. He thought he was over that. Wasn’t that what being gay meant? Arthur was confused. He also thought the shoes were overkill.

Despite his hurt at his father’s words Arthur did go and get his cast changed for a less obvious colour. Part of him wanted to keep the pink and paint on it ‘Why yes I am a poof’ but he never would. And pink really wasn’t his colour. So it was with a plain, unobtrusive cast and non NHS crutches he turned up at Gilbert’s party. His father had left a note on Thursday saying he would be in New York for a week so breakfast would not be an issue and Arthur was prepared to party.
He was welcomed at the door by Gilbert himself, full of bonhomie and champagne. “Arthur! What did those Irish thugs do to you?” He grasped Arthur’s hand and shook it strongly. “I heard you had to go to some godforsaken place but really Pendragon, coming back on crutches? Bad show”

Arthur laughed and moved into the party. The room was full of beautiful people: girls with perfectly groomed long hair and pale tans, most of whom were wearing dresses that barely covered their firmly toned asses, young men with equally perfect hair and tans, wearing open shirts and total confidence. Arthur fitted right in.

His mobility restricted by the cast, Arthur took possession of a chair and a bottle of champagne and settled in for the night. His corner was visited by his friends who regaled him with stories of their adventures while he had been gone and he laughed uproariously at the tales. Sophia, who had chosen to dress in something fluffy rather than slinky draped herself around him like a pink fluffy cloud. It was fun.

“Hohmygod! It is SOO good to see you two together! It just SOOO perfect!” Arthur looked up to see Millie, or Mollie, or Mandy – one of Sophia’s interchangeable friends – gaping in front of them, her glass tipping over. Arthur realised his arm was ensconced behind Sophia who was practically sitting on him. It felt utterly normal and totally wrong. He did not want soft fluff he wanted strong lean muscles and clear eyes that wrinkled when they laughed and when they cried and only showed either when the emotion was truly felt. He looked around at the party. The music was loud and everyone was clearly having fun. But it all seemed forced- as though all the party-goers were playing the roles of being party-goers. He thought of the Brennan wedding and the sheer exuberance he had seen there and suddenly wanted to leave and go home. He just wasn’t sure where that was.

Sophia smiled up at Millie/Mollie/Mandy, who turned out to be Caroline, and agreed with her shrieked comment. Arthur tried to disengage his arm, a task which made easier when Sophia rose and went off with Caroline for euphemistic nose-powdering, giggles and gossip. Arthur took the opportunity to escape and tried not to think of it as escape. He blamed his leg, made his excuses to Gilbert and called a taxi. He was on the steps of his father’s house in fifteen minutes.

Arthur had forgotten that his father was away. As he entered the house he thought of the irony of his situation. For weeks he had been in a cramped space with three others and longed for privacy and now he had a four-floored house to himself and longed for company. He limped and hopped his way to his room and lay on the bed. The ceiling was pristine white – probably some expensive designer paint with a pretentious name. There were no spider’s webs – Mrs. Hudson would have been insulted at the thought. Arthur felt tears come into his eyes. He missed the spider’s web.

With a sudden oath he pulled out his phone, checked contacts and called. The phone rang. After three rings Merlin answered.

“Hey” Merlin said. Arthur answered with the same word.
“Are you okay?” The voice was husky with sleep but as familiar as home.

“Yes” Arthur was unexpectedly tongue tied.

“Are you drunk?”

“Why would you say that?”

Merlin chuckled. “Because, my love, it is 2.30 in the morning and you are calling me. If it’s not a crisis then it a drunk dial.”

“I’m not drunk” Arthur was indignant, but then honesty caught up with him. “Maybe a little. Can it be both? A crisis and drunk dial”

“What’s wrong Arthur?” The worry in Merlin’s voice sang through the phone and Arthur warmed to it.

“Nothing” Arthur said. “I just... I miss you.”

“Me too” the Ulster accent was thick in two syllables.

Arthur settled down in the bed. He could live on those syllables, but he wanted more. He stayed silent and it worked, Merlin spoke again. “My Mum knows. Not who you are but she knows.” Arthur made a small inarticulate sound and Merlin continued. “When I got home she sat me down with tea and scones and asked if I was in love. She said I sounded different on the phone and when I got in she saw it.”

“And what did you say?” Arthur did not want to sound anxious.

“I said yes. She didn’t ask any more. I don’t think she’s ready for more. She just buttered a scone for me and said as long as I’m happy she’s happy. And I am happy”

Arthur could help feeling a spike of jealousy, comparing Merlin’s welcome with his own. He supposed he should think himself lucky his father had noticed the cast at all even if the only thing he seemed to care about was the colour and not the broken bone it held together.

“How is your Mum?” he asked, trying to break the silence.

“She’s well, really good. I think she has new friends. She’s even started knitting again” Arthur made some sort of vocalisation and Merlin gave a half laugh. “I can’t believe I’m taking to you about my Mum’s knitting” he said.

“It’s nice” Arthur said. “I like hearing you talk” And that was true. Merlin could read the shipping forecast and Arthur would like it. And Merlin sounded so happy. That was good, wasn’t it? That Merlin was happy? Except Arthur did not feel happy, not even listening to Merlin talk about his mum.

“I’m glad you’re happy” Arthur forced himself to say it but the effort came over in his voice and Merlin noticed.

“Arthur?” Merlin sounded worried.

“I’m happy too” he said, but he wasn’t. “It’s just. It’s scary how normal everything is. I mean.. it’s
not like I expected brass bands or rainbows or anything but...” Arthur stopped. He didn’t know what to say next. “I went to a party tonight. It was just like it used to be, everyone – all of them – Sophia was there. She... It was...” He paused, unable to go on.

There was silence on the other end of the phone.

“Arthur” Merlin said slowly. “Why did you call me?”

Arthur pressed the phone to his ear and closed his eyes. “I needed to hear you” he said “I need to know you are real”. He could hear Merlin’s breath through the phone and could imagine him beside him.

“I’m real” Merlin said quietly. “Are you?”

The question hit Arthur like a steel tipped needle driving into his mind. Through the fog of champagne, he felt the empty house close around him. He thought of the house in Gloustershire where he spent his childhood summers – just as tastefully decorated, just as empty.

He thought of the party he had left, and how he had fitted in, knowing what to say, knowing what was expected, knowing that the smiles, like the tans were expensive fakes. He had never felt more alone.

“I’ve never been real” he said. “I don’t know how. If that’s what you want ... I can’t” he heard the huff of Merlin’s sigh and to imagine his face but something stopped him. More than anything he wanted to be touched – not sexually, just a human touch. He remembered Sophia, soft and eager, pressed against him. She would still be there, still eager.

“I told you, I want you.” Merlin said, his voice strong. “I want you, and I will take what you can give me. I want..” Arthur stopped him, his voice breaking.

“I just want someone to hold me” Arthur hated that his voice sounded like a small boy looking for a teddy bear, but he was.

“I am holding you” Merlin said. “Feel me, that’s my hand in yours, feel my cheek on yours, my arms around you. Feel it Arthur”

And Arthur did.
Interlude: Variations on a Theme

Chapter Summary

Back home, Merlin settles in

Chapter Notes

This chapter was not the one I intended to write, but Merlin insisted on having his side included. I'm only the author, I do what my characters tell me.

This is more or less the first week back from Merlin's POV ending with the phone call with Arthur.

Merlin found it hard to leave Arthur at the airport. The sight of him standing with his incongruous cast was burned into his mind as he drove off. He knew Arthur would manage luggage and crutches – Arthur would always manage. He was the most capable, personable just plain competent man Merlin knew and that perfect man loved Merlin. It was a good thing that Betsy knew the way from the airport to his home because Merlin was not really conscious of the journey.

When he pulled up to his home he saw the net curtains in the front window flick slightly. His Mum was looking out for him. She opened the door as soon as he reached the step but was very decorous as he brought his stuff in. Mrs. Balinson would have no public displays of affection for the neighbours to gossip about. It was different when he dumped down his bag and shut the door. She grabbed him into a hug that turned into a her checking him for obvious injuries.

“It was on the News, Merlin, on the BBC. A report on the storm and it mentioned the rescue,. You were on the News Merlin, it was that bad!”

It took Merlin a little while to convince his mum that he was indeed fine, that nothing was broken and that it had just been a slow news day. By that stage his mum had led him to the kitchen where the kettle was boiling for her cure-it-all cup of tea, and her comfort-giving freshly baked scones. When he had just taken a mouthful of tea when she said, very calmly “So you’re in love then” With great presence of mind, Merlin managed not to spray his tea over her hand knitted tea cosy. “Mum!” he protested, but she just gave a little smile.

“You rang me up to tell me you nearly got drowned in a flood that made the news and yet you sounded as if you had just been given the Keys to the Kingdom. I think you’re in love.”

Merlin could feel himself blushing and pretended it was the hot tea. His mum looked at him, undeceived. “Are you still happy, son?” she asked. He nodded. “Well that’s good then” she said and proceeded to butter a still warm scone for him. He took it and she went on to talk about her how Mrs. Moore next door had her windows done and how the Council were finally fixing the
pavement outside the Post Office. Merlin, full of tea, scones and contentment listened to the sounds of home.

Later that night Merlin was less contented. Arthur had not called. Or texted. Of course they had decided not to communicate for a week but though he was determined to be strong, he had thought Arthur would break it. When his phone pinged he jumped at it and stared bleakly at the screen.

FROM CALUM – Made it 2 Dublin didn’t kill Lydia deserve a medal.

It was not what he wanted. His glance fell on a postcard of Doonshee he had brought back with him to remind him of the sea. Now if reminded him of the beach and all that had happened there.

The memory of the rejection of the first night still hurt but so much had grown between them since then he could not remember it with bitterness. And the other events had been entirely pleasurable – if gritty. He found himself examining the picture, seeking out specific places. With a pencil he marked in a few more important places and in a sudden impulsive move he wrote in Arthur’s address, stuck on a stamp and walked down to the post box at the end of the road before he could change his mind. They hadn’t said anything about snail mail anyway so it didn’t count.

That Saturday Merlin’s father asked him to go Hill walking as usual. Merlin did not feel like it. He was still sore from his adventures, in the Waterfall and elsewhere and the thought of walking for miles across the mountains did not appeal. He was about to say so when he caught his mother’s eye. He knew she wanted him to go, and he knew in his heart that though his father had welcomed him with a grunt and a wave rather than a hug, walking with his son was important to him. With an unsounded sigh, Merlin agreed and the next morning instead of having a well deserved lie in he was tramping through the morning mist on the Mournes.

They did not speak much on the walk – they rarely did more than exchange comments about the weather, or changes in the terrain, but when they stopped for the tea in a flask Mrs Balinson always sent them off with, Merlin’s dad cleared his throat. This meant he was going to say something of import.

“You know Mike McKinny of the Mountain Rescue?”
Merlin nodded.
“Well he knows a man in the Donegal Mountain rescue and McKinny said this mon said that you did a good job in yon rescue that had your mum away in the head. He was very complimentary said McKinney – his exact words – very complimentary”

“Oh” said Merlin, “right” He didn’t know what else to say.

“Aye” said his father “very complimentary.. Mc’Kinny said I should be proud of ye.” He looked over his tea cup at Merlin who found the ground very interesting. So many fascinating little stones...

“I said that I always knew my boy could keep a steady head in a crisis and that I always have been proud of him, of you” Merlin looked up, and met his father’s eyes for a moment. His dad nodded once then, putting the cup back on the flask, coughed again, the signal that talking was over.
“We’d better get a move on if we’re to be back for tea. Your mother does fret if we’re late” He
moved off up the hill.

“Dad?” Merlin called. His father turned his head, “Thanks” Merlin said and his dad gave a short nod and headed on his way. Merlin followed, his aches forgotten.

There was still no contact from Arthur and Merlin began to feel niggles of worry. Maybe Arthur had changed his mind – or come to his senses. The no contact past seemed stupid and destructive but then, deep down they had both known it was to test their attachment. Knowing that didn’t help at all.

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Merlin thought he could get used to being served a cup of tea in bed first thing in the morning but when his mum sat on the side of the bed after putting the cup down, he knew he was in for a Talk. Merlin sipped his tea and waited for an uncomfortable few minutes. Talks in the past had included Santa Claus (not a surprise), girls, later, boys (that was uncomfortable for both of them) and once when he was ten, the importance of fibre in the diet. He still cringed at that one. This time his mum got straight to the point.

“You’ll be wanting a job when you go back to Queens” she said. Merlin took a second to reflect that if he had any other parents that could be a hint that cash would not be forthcoming in the future but Merlin had faith in his family. She would not have an ulterior motive, so he answered her honestly.

“I didn’t want to in my final year, but yeah, I’ll have to” Those extra lunches and takeaways while he had gloried in Arthur’s company had really eaten into his savings and he knew he wouldn’t manage for the year.

“Well” she said, “Mr. Anderson, the taximan, his wee girl is off with a baby and she did the sending out of the cars so he’s looking for someone and I said you’d be back and he said he’d give you a try. He’s a decent man is Mr. Anderson so he’ll see you right. Promise me you’ll give him a chance son, give me your promise.”

Merlin promised and later that day he walked into the dingy dispatch office of the local taxi service. He had not known his mother used taxis so often as to get chatting with the boss but it seemed she had joined a knitting club a few miles away and needed transport. She never used buses. It was a Thing.

The office was poorly furnished- a few chairs against the window and a large library style desk for the dispatcher. A man was sitting at the desk, though sitting was probably the wrong word. He loomed. His bulk – and it was considerable and all muscle- was decorated with colourful tattoos, many of which had dodgy political connotations and these continued up his neck towards his shaven head. Merlin quailed inside but stayed calm outside.

“I’m looking for Mr. Anderson” He said.

“That’s me” Tattoo-muscle man answered, “ But most people call me Kenny”
Merlin decided he was not most people. He also wanted to leave but could not think of a way that would not have his mum look at him with disappointed eyes. They were her greatest weapon and he avoided them where possible. But he had no idea how to start a conversation that didn’t involve ‘My mammy sent me’. He was saved when not-calling-him-Kenny spoke.

“You’ll be Mrs Balinson’s son. The poof up at Queens”

Merlin’s hands balled into fists at his sides. He wasn’t ready for this, not now that he was starting to feel good about himself. He was about to turn and walk out when he remembered his mother sent him there and held his promise. He would walk through fire for her. He could endure this. He stayed.

“To do this job you have to be able to answer a phone without sounding like an eejit, take down an address without screwing it up, send a car – and only one car to each call out and keep the drivers happy. Think you can manage that kid?”

Merlin nodded. He didn’t want to speak.

“Right. First shift on Friday, six to midnight, come in at five and I’ll show you what to do” Kenny Anderson looked back down at a magazine on the desk and Merlin felt dismissed. And angry.

He was still angry as he reached home. He slammed the door and headed straight for his room, not wanting to say something harsh to his mother. That plan backfired when he found her standing outside his door, a pile of papers in her hand.

“You have a job then?” she said.

“I thought you said he was a decent man?” Merlin exploded. “Decent man- your exact words?. His mum spoke softly. “He is decent, Merlin. And you need to look closer and see it”

Merlin opened his mouth to speak then stopped. He suddenly realised that he was about to tell his mammy about the boy who called him names. His pride struck him dumb. He had not even told her about the Sixth form stuff, though he thought she knew. He would not speak now. She did.

“Son, in the last few years, my definition of decent has got so much bigger – and a bit smaller. Decent is as decent does. Give Kenny Anderson a chance. Trust me”

Merlin sagged. He didn’t understand but he wouldn’t argue with her – not her. His looked down, not wanting to meet her eye and he saw the corner of a postcard in the bundle in her hands. He pointed to it wordlessly.

“Oh yes, you have post.” She thrust the bundle into his hands, and he extricated the postcard from the sheaves of ads for gyms, windows, car sales and dog grooming. It had no writing but the
address and the picture was simply a cocktail glass, complete with swizzle stick and cherry. Merlin gave a shout of laughter. Given their shared experiences of experiments on the beach this was the closest thing to porn he had seen in the post and only he and Arthur understood that. He felt a grin grow across his face. Arthur understood, had replied. Arthur wanted him. Arthur Wanted Him. It would be all right.

“Good news then” his mum said. He grinned at her and nodded.

“So” she said casually, “He loves you too?” if she hesitated on the ‘he’ Merlin chose to ignore it. He thought briefly of prevaricating, making up some story of winning a game or something but he was done with lying.

“Yes” he said. “He does”

“Ah well,” his mum replied. “It’s no surprise he does. Who wouldn’t” There was no hesitation in her voice this time and Merlin had no hesitation in hugging her. Life was good and no Kenny Anderson would spoil it.

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He kept reminding himself of that when he showed up at the dispatch office and was introduced to the heavily pregnant blonde at the desk as “Mrs Balinson’s son the poof” The girl didn’t turn a hair just smiled at him and told him she was Kenny’s daughter and not to mind him. Holly, as she turned out to be called, gave him a quick lesson in what to do, with Kenny looking over their shoulders giving advice.

“Car number five – that’s Christy. You don’t ever send him to the Blackthorn estate, even if he’s the only driver free” she said at one point. Merlin asked why.

“Cause he’s a Taig, that’s why” Kenny answered. “They’d kill him up there on a bad night and they’re not above tricking him in.” He paused. “If you have issues working with a Catholic you can feck off home with ya. Christy is a good driver”

Confused, Merlin said he had no issues.

“Car seven is Yang,” Kenny continued. “He’s a chink but his English is okay. Just talk slow. You with your poofy posh Queen’s accent should be fine. Keep him out of the Blackthorn too”

Merlin was even more confused. Anderson was rude, insulting and probably every ‘ist’ you could come up with but Merlin was discovering that disliking him was a lot more complex than that. Anderson cared for his drivers and obviously adored his daughter – who obviously adored him. He plonked a pizza in front of Merlin half through the shift, said “Eat.” and left. And at the end of the shift, when Merlin had made at least four serious mistakes and so many small ones he’d lost count, Anderson said nothing. Well, not nothing. He said “You screwed up but you didn’t do the things I told you not to which means you listen so there’s hope. Next shift on Wednesday. Now feck off home” Merlin decided to reserve judgement. His mother had called the man decent and though Merlin did not agree he had to admit that her view was not entirely unjustified.
Merlin was exhausted when he got home. He crashed into bed and was asleep in minutes and was thoroughly annoyed to be woken after only an hour and a half by the sound of his phone ringing. He was about to turn it off when he realised it was Arthur. He roused himself awake.

“Hey” he said and waited for Arthur to talk. When he responded with one word Merlin got anxious. “Are you okay?” he asked but was not sure if he believed him when Arthur said yes. He decided to push a little. “Are you drunk?” he said. It worked. Arthur seemed to wake up and really answered. Okay so he just asked why he said it but still it was something. Merlin gave a deep chuckle. It was so good to hear Arthur, to actually hear his voice after a week of separation. He answered with a lighted hearted comment about the early hour and drunk dialling but realised after he had spoken that he had called Arthur love. He waited for a response but there was none. Arthur just denied he was drunk. Merlin began to worry and worried even more when Arthur admitted that he might be both drunk and upset. Merlin had a sudden memory of holding Arthur as he shook, remembering his assault. Had it happened again? He could not keep the worry from his voice “What’s wrong Arthur?” he asked.

“Nothing” Arthur said. “I just... I miss you.”

Merlin felt his throat close with incipient tears – whether of joy or longing he was not sure. “Me too” he said thickly.

Arthur didn’t say anything and as the silence grew, Merlin defaulted to babble – his usual defence for awkward moments. He said the first thing that came into his head. “My Mum knows. Not who you are but she knows.” Merlin heard what couldn’t possibly be a squeak from Arthur which caused him to babble even more. “When I got home she sat me down with tea and scones and asked if I was in love. She said I sounded different on the phone and when I got in she saw it.”

“And what did you say?” Arthur sounded anxious and that made Merlin even more nervous. At this rate he could babble for an Olympic medal. “I said yes.” he said “She didn’t ask any more. I don’t think she’s ready for more. She just buttered a scone for me and said as long as I’m happy she’s happy. And I am happy”.

And he was. His heart was doing a tap dance in his chest and mouth wouldn’t stop talking but Arthur was listening and that was enough to make his world happy.

There was another silence then Arthur spoke, asking about his Mum. Merlin took the opportunity to chatter but beneath his chatter he began to feel that something was wrong. Arthur was too silent. Maybe he was not listening. Maybe he had something to say and Merlin’s chatter was slowing things down? “I can’t believe I’m taking to you about my Mum’s knitting” Merlin said.

“It’s nice” Arthur said. “I like hearing you talk”. There was silence again. “I’m glad you’re happy”
Arthur did not sound happy. The sense of dread in Merlin’s heart, grew. “Arthur?” he asked, unable to say more.

And then Arthur did speak. About how he was fitting back into his normal world or parties and friends.
And Sophia. Merlin felt his heart grow cold. In vino veritas, Arthur had realised that Merlin was just a fling, an aberration, something to be discarded once he got back to his real world. Merlin had known it would happen, he just didn’t think it would be so soon. But he needed to hear Arthur say it.

“Arthur” Merlin said slowly. “Why did you call me?”

The response was not what he expected.

“I needed to hear you” Arthur said “I need to know you are real”. Merlin drew a shuddering breath as he understood that Arthur was even more fearful and lost than he was. He wanted to give comfort, to wrap Arthur in a hug that would envelop him in Merlin’s love but he had only words.

“I’m real” he said quietly, but his insecurity could help adding “Are you?”

Arthur’s answer; that he was not and had never been real and did not know how to be made Merlin’s heart break for him. He tightened his arms in an imaginary embrace of his lover, this proud and vulnerable man who wore so many masks he had forgotten which one was his own face. If the intensity of wishing made wishes come true then Merlin would have been at his side in an instant, touching him, showing him that the Arthur Merlin loved was true and real and very very human. He tried to explain but his words, for once, failed him only his tone conveyed the strength of his feeling.

“I told you, I want you.” he said. “I want you, and I will take what you can give me. I want..” but Arthur interrupted him sounding like a small child alone in the dark.

“I just want someone to hold me” Arthur said and Merlin felt himself reach out, felt his love make his imaginary touch into something more.

“I am holding you” he said, meaning it. He felt Arthur’s fingers twined in his, his strong body beneath him, his breath on his cheek. He tried to explain.

“Feel me, that’s my hand in yours, feel my cheek on yours, my arms around you. Feel it Arthur”

And Merlin knew he did.
The Times they are a changing

Chapter Summary

Being in love does not stop life from going on. Arthur has a whole future about to start. Will he find a place for Merlin in it?

The run up to Arthur’s Graduation ceremony passed in a flurry of suits and phone calls. Arthur decided that graduating deserved a new suit so he called to his tailor for a fitting. Ruefully he had acknowledged that a summer of Elena’s special cake and a diet of takeaway had expanded his waistline a little more than a bit. In fairness, he had tried to exercise it off with Merlin but obviously it would take much more such exercise to work and Merlin being at the other side of the Irish Sea made that difficult.

The alternative was a new suit but as Arthur was being measured (and ignoring the tut tutting of his tailor who had known him since he was nine,) Arthur remembered the last time he had a suit fitting, in the Suit Hire shop in Doonshee. In hind sight he now recognised the look on Merlin’s face when Arthur was posing. He had seen that look many times afterwards, usually as a precursor to serious sexy times and remembering that now was not a good idea. He had to fake a text and head off on a hobble around the block to ensure no embarrassment for his elderly tailor. It just served to remind him of how much he missed his surfer.

The phone calls were more interesting. The morning after the party, Arthur woke with a mouth as dry as the Atacama desert where a lama curled up and died. He also had a vampire-like aversion to light. He opened his eyes, closed them again, rubbed his dry tongue over his chapped lips and reached for Merlin who he could hear breathing beside him. The bed was empty. Arthur opened his eyes again. His phone lay beside him where he had held it as he drifted off to sleep, Merlin’s soft whispers growing fainter as he too dozed.

After that they had settled into an ad hoc situation where one or other called every night. When, one night they had missed each other six times and Arthur had panicked slightly, Merlin instated The Rules and peace was restored. The Rules said that no matter what time they got in, they would talk every night. Arthur usually did the calling for the very mundane reason that he had more money.

Sometimes they were both tired and used the call just to say goodnight. Other times they talked for hours, mostly on inconsequential topics. Arthur began to look forward to coming home to an empty house as it meant there were no pointless courtesies to go through before he got to talk to Merlin. It was almost like coming home.

The night before his graduation Arthur did not go out and join in pre-grad partying, but nor could he sleep. Merlin had a shift at the dispatch office so it wasn’t until after 1am that Arthur could call him. Merlin sounded tired when he answered but Arthur could hear him change gears within seconds.
“Bad day?” Arthur asked, “Want to talk about it?”

“Maybe tomorrow” Merlin said, “Tonight I want to be taken away from here. What have you been doing?”

“Picked up my new suit” Arthur said and felt the warmth of ordinariness sweep over him. This is what being loved is, he thought, having someone who is interested in the little things that go into a day, a life. Merlin harrumphed a laugh into his ear.

“Was your waistband getting a little tight?” he said.

“No!” said Arthur indignantly then paused, “Maybe. I blame Elena. And cakes in general. And you because I sat there eating cakes and watching you” He laughed as Merlin called him a stalker.

“We should have been exercising more” Merlin said. “We could have worked off those extra pounds”

“Not pounds Merlin!” Arthur grumped, “and exploding microwaves didn’t help. How is it by the way?

“Mum chucked it out” Merlin sounded distracted. He was silent for a few seconds then said “I want you Arthur. It’s been a month and I know I’m some sort of needy whiner but I want you” Arthur groaned. “Don’t Merlin, don’t do this. No tacky phone sex, we have too much dignity” There was silence on the other end of the phone.

“That was me searching for my dignity” Merlin said, his voice light but his accent strong. “Nope, no sign, it’s gone. I have no dignity when it comes to you. You know that. You’re my new Kryptonite”

“Merlin” Arthur choked. He was already hard.

“We haven’t talked about those kinks you mentioned” Merlin said in a matter of fact tone.

Arthur was defensive. “ I never talked about... Oh” he remembered a mention of negotiation and actually blushed, alone in his bedroom.

“So” said Merlin “I’ll give you a picture, then you give me a picture and we’ll see how we go on.” His Ulster accent rolled out the words and Arthur felt he didn’t need pictures at all, just the sound of Merlin was enough. Then Merlin spoke again and Arthur could swear that his voice got at least an octave deeper, which wasn’t at all fair for Arthur’s self control.

“I see you” said Merlin, “ handcuffed to the bed, your golden body helpless beneath me, waiting...” he changed tone. “that’s just the still frame, now give me yours”

Arthur was breathing faster at Merlin’s still, but overcame his shyness and gave his own “I see you bound with silken rope, making patterns on your skin,” he began, then paused.

Merlin spoke practically “You know, if you are handcuffed and I am bound, neither of us will get any action. We need to...”

“Experiment” chimed in Arthur and he could hear the grin in Merlin’s voice as he said the word.

“Thanks to you..” said Arthur, “ I get hard every time I hear the word experiment”

“You think you’re bad” huffed Merlin, “I’m a science student!” They shared a laugh then went
silent. Merlin’s register lowered again. “So, do you want the full version?”

Arthur’s breathing increased again “Yes please” he whispered, and felt his body respond as Merlin described in detail how he would use his hands and mouth for Arthur’s pleasure.

Arthur came twice that night, before drifting to sleep. He awoke to Merlin’s raised voice in his ear.

“Arthur? Arthur! Wake up lazy! You have a big day ahead of you!”

Arthur was not a morning person, even with Merlin. “Did you just shout at me?” he complained.

“Yes!” said Merlin, “It’s daylight. Time to be up and at’em. You know you should get those automatic curtain things that can be remote controlled and give me the code and I could open the curtains for you and let you welcome the day”

“You would, wouldn’t you” Arthur grumbled as he stirred, “You obnoxious, annoying, infuriating person, you. What has you so energetic? You..” he revisited what he was about to say “You got as little sleep as I did, why so cheerful?”

“Because my love..” said Merlin, and Arthur thrilled to his casual use of the word, “Because quite apart from the mind blowing sex, while you are off graduating and joining the grown up world, I have a day off and will spend it in typical student fashion, sleeping”

Arthur wished Merlin was in the room so he could throw a pillow at him.

“Arthur?” Merlin’s voice was more serious now.

“Yes?”

“Thank you for last night. I needed... well... thank you.” His voice became more confident “congratulations on being a graduate and...” he paused “Love you” Merlin disconnected the call before Arthur could reply.

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Both his father and uncle turned up for the Graduation; more family in one place than Arthur had since his Great-aunt’s funeral when he was six. It was not a comfortable occasion. Uther Pendragon and Agravaine Dubois, each successful in his own field had nothing in common except Arthur, and neither knew Arthur well enough to sustain a conversation with each other. They sat stiffly, ignoring the fascinated glances of the crowd, eager to see two of the most important men in England. Arthur was relieved he did not have to sit with them.

He did have to sit with them for the interminable lunch which followed the ceremony. Both men were on their best behaviour which meant the topics of conversation were limited to the weather and the food. Finally Uther Pendragon had to get to a meeting he had postponed for the ceremony. Despite himself Arthur was impressed. He couldn’t remember another time his father had postponed anything to be with Arthur so this was meaningful.
Arthur knew his father loved him in the same way that he knew photosynthesis was a thing with plants. It was not something he saw or thought about. The glossy magazines attributed Uther’s success to his inventions but that was not true. There were thousands of clever inventors who never made it out of their garages. Uther Pendragon was a consummate businessman, with a keen eye for a good deal and a ruthless determination to get what he wanted without consideration of anyone else.

Arthur did not fit into that world. When he was a child he was a distraction from the real world of business deals and investments and could be safely left with nannies and prep school. As he grew both Arthur and his father realised they had little in common. Arthur’s efforts to learn the inner works of a car engine to gain the approval of his engineer father were scorned by Uther the highflying entrepreneur. Uther’s cold-blooded pursuit of profit at the expense of people was despised by Arthur, who also despised himself for living off those profits. But there was still love, buried so deep that neither could get to it though they both knew it was there.

After Uther had left in his unostentatious but smoothly expensive chauffeur-driven car, Agravaine Dubois settled into discussing Arthur’s future.

“Can I assume that you will be at the party Conference?” He said over coffee. Arthur confirmed that he would.

“And that your ambitions remain the same” Agravaine Dubois’s tone was very calm but very commanding. Arthur’s heart beat faster as he assured his uncle that yes, indeed his ambitions were as they had discussed in the spring.

“You will not sign up for any talks, you will not get involved in anything. For the duration of the week you will shadow me. You will not speak. You will not take notes. You will watch and listen and at the end of the week we will talk.” Dubois stood up. “I congratulate you on your degree, but now you are entering the real world. Do so with the knowledge that you know nothing and I may be able to mould you into a success. But you must put yourself entirely into my hands. Your life will be mine. Think about that. At the end of the Conference tell if you are prepared to do it.” He put a small box on the table. “For your graduation” he said and left.

Arthur opened the box to find a pair of silver cufflinks, small and discreet, bearing the Dubois crest. A strange feeling of being owned came over him, washing away some of the exhilaration he felt at having a future mapped out. He shrugged away the feeling. The Conference was in a week’s time and he now had something to look forward to.

He looked around the expensive restaurant at the happy graduates and their families who formed most of the clientele. Slowly he came to the realisation that he had the rest of the day to fill and no one to spend it with. He knew of at least three parties that night, and knew he would be welcome at all of them – but there was no one at any of the parties he wanted to see.

He ended up taking a taxi back to London. He was briefly tempted to drop into his local
fashionable bar but the thought of making nice with smiling Hooray Henrys made him change his mind. They used to be his friends and now he did not want their company and the change bothered him. He ordered takeaway and watched Dr. Who and waited for Merlin to finish his shift so that he could call and talk. It was not how he had imagined celebrating his graduation.

Two days before the conference began Arthur got rid of the cast. He had to wear a boot, which gave him a slightly listing gait but at least he could walk without crutches. This, he decided was A Good Thing.

The evening before the Conference he arrived at the faded seaside town whose turn it was this year to host media circus that was a Party Conference. In the foyer of the hotel he was met by his uncle’s PA, a slim young woman in a svelte suit and carefully pulled back hair who introduced herself as Ava Renney. Arthur was struck how the combination of pale skin, dark hair and blue eyes reminded him of Merlin but the resemblance ended there. Ava had curves where Merlin was all angles but there was nothing soft about her. She was brisk and business like but where Merlin’s eyes were warm and inviting, Arthur felt that she was weighing everything about him, from his bespoke suit to his newly cut hair. He wanted to like her but didn’t.

The Conference was everything he wanted it to be and more. He had been at previous party conferences, taken part in some minor seminars, and had even spoken briefly in the main hall. But with Dubois he got to see the real workings and it both fascinated and delighted him.

He quickly realised that the real world of politics was like the world he had grown up in. Nobody showed their true face but ‘face’ mattered above all. In place of the ‘right’ schools and the ‘right’ clothes of his world were the ‘right’ connections and the ‘right’ policies. The only people who were what they seemed to be, were those without power or influence and who were never likely to have either. Arthur felt his whole life had been training for this world and he loved it.

His uncle had the charm of a predator and Arthur watched as he wove through the would-be leaders, distributing his company like treasure. Arthur saw the importance of a nod across the crowded foyer of the conference centre which would change policy for the next five years. He witnessed the quiet conversations out of the eye of the media and learned that though no one lied, no one ever told the truth. He loved every minute of it.

Arthur tired to explain this to Merlin in one of their, of necessity, short, phone calls but by the way Merlin’s silence rang across the aether he knew he failed.

“You don’t like it” Arthur said

“It’s not my world” Merlin replied. “But if it is yours and you’re happy then that’s good”

“But...” Arthur stopped in frustration. He couldn’t read Merlin’s voice. He needed to see him, read his body, know by the slope of his shoulders, the way he held his head, the life in his eye what he
was really feeling. He didn’t like Merlin not feeling part of his world but then...he wasn’t part of it, was he? By Arthur’s choice.

“Arthur?” Merlin sounded nervous. Arthur could get that much from his voice alone. “You’re not saying anything. It’s freaking me out. Arthur? You know we have our own world, don’t you? Arthur?”

Arthur gave a rueful smile at his phone. Trust Merlin to know what to say. “You mean that don’t you?” he said.

“Course I do” was the cheerful response. “I know you” Merlin became more solemn. “I know you Arthur Pendragon. You’re a fixer, you want to make things better. Okay, so you’re not that bothered how you get there, but, I know the heart is right.”

Arthur was suddenly serious. “If my heart is right” he said. “It’s because it’s yours.”

For a moment there was silence. Then Merlin gave a half laugh. “If it is” he said, “I’ll keep it, and remind you of it if you get too caught up in that world”

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The next day, while with his uncle, Arthur felt his phone vibrate and hoped that it might be Merlin. As soon as the meeting his uncle was attending broke up Arthur excused himself and checked the display. To his disappointment the missed call was from Calum. Curious, he returned the call.

Calum greeted him with a flood of enthusiasm. “Arthur! me oul friend how are you? It’s been ages, how’s things?”

Arthur winced. Calum was in forced friendliness mode which meant he wanted something. In Doonshee that often meant the last slice of pizza but since that wasn’t an option Arthur was forced to cut the preliminaries and just ask.

“What do you want Cal?” he said, doing his best not to sound brusque. There was a pause and Arthur could imagine Calum working out whether to continue the bonhomie or get to the point. He decided on the latter.

“You know me too well.” He sighed. “See, here’s the story. I managed to get me hands on a ticket for the Leinster match next month, the one in London, and see, here’s the thing – I got one of them super low cost flights, which kinda cost more than super low so my budget for accommodation is gone so I said – who do I know in London who has a couch I could use for a night or so and I thought of you.” Calum paused. “Cause you’re great” he added awkwardly.

“Do you think fake flattery is going to work” Arthur asked incredulously.

“It always did with the pizza” Calum replied.

“No it didn’t” said Arthur indignantly. “You just have longer arms you great ape!”

“So does that mean I get the couch” Calum asked hopefully.

Arthur did not reply. He and his father had a sort of unwritten agreement not to bring others home. It wasn’t a family thing, more a security issue and had been highlighted when Arthur was quite young and one of his father’s lady friends had taken note of the security code and tried a break in.
Of course she had been stopped. Uther Pendragon may live in a relatively modest house but the
security systems would put SHIELD to shame. Nevertheless neither of them had ‘friends’ over
since. Arthur did not want to break the pact for Calum though he did decide to fund a hotel if he
was allowed. Now if it was Merlin...

And suddenly Arthur had an idea worthy of the Machiavellian minds of his relatives.

“Why not make a reunion thing?” He said casually. “I’ll contact Guillaume as see if he can get
here and you ask Merlin. A palace get together. What do you say?”

“You want me to ask Merlin?” Calum asked, sounding puzzled.

“Yeah is there a problem?” Arthur could see Ava heading towards him her high heels clicking on
the marble floor.

“No” said Calum, “I just thought.... have you guys...” Arthur interrupted him.

“I have to go. Text me with details” and he cut the connection, sent a quick txt to Merlin (-say yes-
) and gave Ava his attention.

Later he checked his phone and found a whole storyline of texts and missed calls.

FROM Merlin –what to?
FROM Merlin. Missed call
FROM Merlin – Do you mean Calum?
FROM Merlin – What are you up to?
FROM Merlin – Do you want me to come
FROM Merlin - to London
FROM Merlin – I said yes.
FROM Calum - Mez is in. Dates to follow.
FROM Merlin – Is that okay?
Arthur laughed, contacted Guillaume and dressed for dinner.

It was three in the morning when he got back to his room to call Merlin and Arthur was too tired to
think, so he was not in the mod for talking, even to Merlin. Merlin however seemed to need to talk.

“I thought you didn’t want me in London?” Merlin said with doubt. “Wasn’t that the plan?”


“Oh” Merlin reply was subdued. “Right. No big.” He paused. “Look, you’re tired and I have
college in the morning so let’s just call it a night, ok?. So, ‘night Arthur, talk to you tomorrow”
And the call disconnected.
Arthur looked at the screen in disbelief. Merlin had hung up on him. Okay, so they had never gone in for the ‘you hang up no you hang up’ nonsense but still this was abrupt even for the early hours of the morning.

He lay on the bed and stared into the dark. Why had Merlin hung up? It was not a phone-slamming-I-hate-you hang up but... What had he said to cause that? Didn’t Merlin want to come to London, to see him? Arthur ran through a series of scenarios, each worse than the last until, as dawn broke, he fell into an uneasy sleep.

When his alarm woke him his mind started going in circles again. He resolved to stop it and called Merlin whose surprised voice gave him focus.

“Are you okay? What’s happened” Merlin was anxious but Arthur ignored it.

“Well, don’t you want to come to London?” Arthur didn’t wait for a reply. “Because I really want to see you and this seemed like a good idea at the time but if you...”

“I want to see you too” Merlin broke in. “I do. But... I’m kind of having breakfast with the parents right now and...”

“Dammit!” interjected Arthur, “I have a breakfast meeting! I have to go.” He paused. “But you will come? You’re the point of it all”

Merlin was smiling when he answered, Arthur could tell by the sound of his voice. “I’ll be there.” he said, and it was enough to get Arthur through the rest of the day.

The last day of the Conference was busy and Arthur began to see the subtleties of politics in action. A single shake of his uncle’s head during the leader’s speech told Arthur that there could be a leadership change in the near future. A casual nod to an up and coming MP told Arthur who would be the contender.

At the end of the whole show, Agravaine Dubois sat down with Arthur and went through his impressions of every meeting, every discussion. Arthur felt like he was in school being grilled and was glad that his memory still worked well. Finally Agravaine looked at him with something approaching respect.

“You’ve got a good mind and a keen eye” he said. “And you have not let me know what you think about anything. You have a career ahead of you if you do what I say.” He mentioned a constituency near the Pendragon country house. “The MP will be resigning at the next election. I want you to make yourself visible in the community. Attend party meetings, village fetes, that sort of thing. Be seen with the current MP. He’s popular but aging. And when you get back to Town, Ms. Renney will liaise with you on personal issues” Before Arthur could speak Agravaine stood
up. “I’m not a man of sentiment” he said “But if I were I would be proud that my sister’s son is on the fast track to political office.”

He strode away confidently and Arthur was left pondering what he meant about Ms Renney and personal issues. It cast a damper on what had been a good week.

As he left the hotel, the bag over his shoulder emphasising his limp, he bumped into a familiar figure.

“Professor!” he said with surprise and a little resentment. Although going to Doonshee was well in the running for the best thing that had ever happened to him, he still objected to being forced to go. It was a purely Arthur thing. “What a coincidence you being here”

“Not really” said Kilgarrah, “Since I came to see you” Professor Kilgarrah was a modest man in every obvious way. Of modest height and build, he could disappear in a small room. People did not notice him. But when he spoke, every word was carefully chosen for maximum impact. As a linguist he knew the value of words and used them sparingly – but effectively. Even before the language course fiasco Arthur had been at the receiving end of more than one of the Professor’s strategically competent dressing downs and even with his degree firmly recognised he still shook slightly at the idea that Kilgarrah was looking for him.

“Really? Professor, Why?” he managed to say without any tremble in his voice. He was quite proud.

“I want to offer you a job” the Professor said. “Oh, congratulations on your First. I expected it but it is nice to see expectations fulfilled”

“A job?” Arthur was so far beyond confused he was off the planet.

“Yes. I need an editor and you fit the bill” was the laconic reply.

“Why me” Arthur squeaked, though he would deny it to his dying day.

The Professor looked at him keenly, a look that was known to have sent University dignitaries into nervous paralysis.

“Three reasons” he said “First: because the job needs someone with a good knowledge of the discourse and practice of linguistic research and though you are an arrogant git, when you get off your high horse and stop acting like some sort of medieval potentate you are one of the best students I have ever taught, Second: the pay available is so low I would be embarrassed to offer it to any one relying on the dole because it would be less than that. I have no problem offering it to you, you have resources, Third: I know your ambitions do not include a career either in academics or business. But having a period of gainful employment in a well known college in a prestigious University could be meaningful in political context. Do you want it?”

Arthur was sure his jaw was dropping but he could not help it. He closed his mouth and thought. He did not act on impulse. His whole philosophy was based on consideration not impulse. The last time he had acted on impulse was on a beach in Doonshee and that had nearly led to disaster.

But didn’t.

“Yes” he said “I do”

“Good” the Professor’s response was clipped. “I will contact you with the details. Goodbye” He turned away, then turned back “There is something good in you, Arthur Pendragon. I look forward
Arthur stood on the steps of the hotel staring after Kilgarrah’s disappearing back. He wondered would Ms. Renney consider this a ‘personal issue’ then shrugged it off and headed to the train station.

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He found out two days later that Ms. Renney did consider taking a job a personal issue. By then he had the details from the Professor – two days a week in college, the rest by email – the pay as lousy as he was told. Arthur was happy with this. Considering that most of his Chelsea set were ‘looking’ for work – a euphemism that meant waiting til Harvey Nick’s had a position or daddy got generous. The job he had wasn’t much better but at least one third of the reason he got it was merit.

Ms. Renney approved of the job. That was not the problem. Ms. Renney had other issues.

“We need to look into your connections” she said “Other than family of course. Mr. Dubois has already checked them”

“Connections?” asked Arthur “Do you mean friends?” He was meeting with Ms. Renney in a rather exclusive, rather dark eatery not far from his house. The meeting was not of his own volition. A text from the said Ms. Renney had pronounced it as a royal command and had his uncle not mentioned his meeting with her, Arthur would have sent a scathing reply and not gone. As it was he sat over a steaming cup of coffee and a cake (that did not come close to Elena’s finest) feeling every glare from her baleful eyes.

“I mean what I say” she answered snippily “Politicians do not have friends – merely contacts. For example ...” she reached over and grabbed his phone, lying on the table before them, “Who is Balinson, M? – your call log records quite a few calls to that contact”

Arthur willed himself not to react. “A friend” he emphasised the word despite himself. “I’m arranging a rugby weekend – he’s the other contact” he said, remembering the lesson he had learned – never lie, but don’t tell the truth.

“Rugby?” she sniffed. “It’s a good idea for a politician to give the impression of supporting a sport. Most of the others choose soccer – a few on this side too – Rugby? It’s not as elitist as it once was but it still has some social cache in the Shires. Hmm?” She considered . “It might just do.”

“Good” said Arthur coldly “I’m not giving up my friends”

“Your uncle won’t be pleased”

Arthur tried to stay calm. “I’m quite sure my uncle will understand” he said, but as he spoke he tried to recall either his uncle or his father ever putting any thought into anything outside their career. He couldn’t.

Ava Renney looked at him with a hint of something, which in someone else might be called sympathy but in her looked more like the expression of a hungry restaurant patron looking at a lobster.

“You must understand” she said “Even now, with your background the paparazzi will be sniffing around. And if they don’t catch something now, when you are elected the trawls will start and they will find it. We don’t want you to do something stupid and have it blow up in your face in five or ten year’s time. Mr. Dubois plays the long game. Family or not he’ll cut you loose if you don’t play by the rules.” Her voice was cool but firm and Arthur felt his skin crawl.
“I understand.” He said “I’ll behave. But I’m not cutting out my friends” He suddenly thought of some of his SW3 crowd and hesitated “Or at least not all of them” he added. Ava Renney smiled widely.

“I knew you would be sensible” she said with a vaguely triumphant smile. “Shall we go through your list now?”

Over the next two hours, Arthur had his personal life pulled apart and forensically examined. He had to justify every ‘connection’ he had, every friendship he thought mattered. At the end he felt violated and grubby and, as he walked away from the restaurant, for the first time Arthur doubted his chosen life. When he had expressed his irritation to Ms. Renney, she had been scornful. “Do you want to make the headlines of the gossip columns or the News?” she’d asked.

“There haven’t been any sleazy scandals involving politicians for years” he’d reasoned. She had looked at him as if he had been a child.

“That, Mr. Pendragon, is because most successful politicians have someone like me working with them, avoiding the shit instead of shovelling it as they used to. In politics you don’t get a private life, you get a career. Choose which one you want”

Now, as he walked, Arthur was thinking of that choice. He had been surprised at the friends he had clung on to despite Ms. Renney’s scorn. Among them was Gordon Denny, an Eton fellow student, a bit dim but very...nice. He had gone to work on the family land and Arthur had seen him twice in the last five years. And yet Arthur couldn’t imagine a life without considering him a friend. Even Gilbert had a place in his life, though Ms. Renney had warned him off attending anymore parties. All of them were not necessarily good people but they were people and though a week before he scorned their company, now he resented having to justify it.

He didn’t even have to think about Merlin. Or even Calum and Elena, Val, and shy Freya. They were non-negotiable. He began to wonder what else in his life was non-negotiable.

Passing a mobile phone shop Arthur impulsively went in. A little later he came out, with a new pay-as-you-go phone.

When he called Merlin that night he gave him the new number. It was better to be safe he thought.

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The weekend started on Friday. Arthur met Calum at Victoria station and used public transport to get back, having gladly been freed from the orthopaedic boot a few days earlier. Many of his peers ignored public transport but Arthur quite liked it around London.

Arthur had mentioned the visit in passing to his father at the obligatory breakfast and had got a grunt in response. Technically Arthur had his own flat at the top of the house, but since it shared a front door with the rest that was irrelevant. And since his ‘flat’ had no guest bedrooms the main house had to be called on. Guillaume had pulled out, citing work and begging to be included in any further reunions, so only two bedrooms would be needed.

Arthur wished it was one.

Calum’s reaction to the house was quite phlegmatic. His only comment was: “You know Prince, if I had know you were loaded, you would have been buying all the pizza”

They got on quite well that night, using Arthur’s living room and chatting about this and that. The next morning Calum had breakfast in Arthur’s flat and Arthur skipped communal breakfast – which actually gave him an unexpected pang.

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Calum was meeting some old school friends before the match so he headed off after the late breakfast. Arthur went to collect Merlin from the airport. He decided to drive.

The house came with two garage spaces, one a little distance from the house. That was his. He had not driven for many months, between Donegal and the cast, but he had someone to check on his car on occasion so he knew it would be fine.

Arthur loved his car. He would not admit it of course, but to himself, he knew. He loved his car. Most of his contemporaries drove the top of the range, latest models, SUVs, in the county, compact in the city. Arthur’s car was a gift from his father – the only gift Arthur had ever asked for or cared about. It was a vintage MG Roadster – scarlet.

There were times when he froze in a typical British summer and thought of his friends with their climate controlled-heated-everything-all-bells-and-whistles motors but then he would remember the looks his car received when he drove by and he put up with the discomfort. His Beauty was worth every frozen minute. And he wanted to share his car with Merlin.

As he stood at arrivals, Arthur watched as families and friends greeted each other with enthusiastic hugs, Arthur felt a tinge of envy. It wasn’t that he never hugged. On the contrary practically every greeting in his set included the obligatory grope, with additional ‘mwha mwha mwha’ from the females. It was that none of it meant anything. Watching a cockney family eagerly welcoming their soldier son back was a revelation in hugging and Arthur wanted that for himself. He wanted to hug Merlin like that.

And then he saw Merlin, looking slightly hesitant as he glanced around the crowded area. Arthur felt his breath catch. Merlin was real. To Arthur his tall lean figure stood out from the crowd of chattering people. His hair was longer, and a little tousled, as if he had been running his fingers through it and, oh! Arthur wanted to do that, to feel his hair between his fingers.

And then Merlin saw him. A smile started in Merlin’s eyes and grew until his whole face seemed to glow with joy. Arthur started with something akin to shock. That smile, that glowing smile was for him. It was his, his smile. Without conscious thought Arthur stretched out his arms and Merlin reached into them for a hug. At the last second, Arthur pulled back and turned the hug into an awkward bro-shake. Merlin’s smile wavered a little and then resumed, and if it seemed that it didn’t quite reach his eyes it could be just a trick of the lights.

“Good to see you” Arthur said “How was the flight?” He spoke stiffly as if a crowd of reporters were standing next to him, taking down every word.

“Good” said Merlin, with a false tone “Calum meeting us at the game?”

Arthur answered and they continued to spout small talk as they headed for the short stay car park. Arthur felt that he was reading from a script and all his real lines were in his head but he could not say them. It was uncomfortable.
As they drew nearer to his car Arthur had another worry. What if Merlin scorned Beauty? It was possible. Of course, even if Merlin disliked his car it wouldn’t be the end of the world and who was he kidding. He would be gutted if Merlin rejected his car. His steps grew slower as they got nearer.

Merlin was talking about his job when he interrupted himself. “Cool car” he said, pointing ahead. Arthur preened and silently crowed.

“Mine actually” he said walking briskly over and stepping in.

“A birthday present” Arthur said, mentally avoiding a My Precious tag, though the car absolutely was.

Merlin was silent for a moment and sounded a little strained when he spoke. “Good present” he said and threw his bag into the seat well and climbed in.

The drive back was mostly silent – partly because they both had too much to say and partly because talking in a low sprung vintage convertible on a motorway involved lots of shouting to very little effect.

When they reached the point where Arthur had to turn off the motorway in the direction of the stadium he gave into temptation.

“We going to be late” he said. “Traffic is bad. We’ll miss the start.”

“That’s the only bit I like” Merlin said lightly.

“Maybe we should simply head for the house” Arthur suggested, and Merlin readily agreed. A quick text to Calum confirmed that he had met his old school friends and was fine and Arthur pointed the car towards Chelsea.

After settling Beauty into his garage, Arthur brought Merlin into the house. If he had hoped to be alone, he was undone by Mrs. Hudson’s kindness. Hearing he had guests (or as she put it ‘was bringing friends home’) she decided to come in on Saturday to ‘do’ for them. Arthur gritted his teeth and was grateful. Although Mrs. Hudson had not been the housekeeper when he was a boy (that had been three housekeepers ago) she had quickly shown herself to have a soft spot for Arthur. She nagged him about eating properly but often made his favourite cakes, and was always interested in his day, should he want to talk. Sometimes he actually did.

She welcomed Merlin with enthusiasm and commiserated with them on missing the match. As she worked around the kitchen, preparing a meal, Arthur, looked at Merlin, awkward and wide-eyed, and pondered whether he had the courage to take Merlin to his bed right now, defying discovery. Mrs. Hudson broke in on his reverie. “This could be a good thing” she said, “you two could go out, do the tourist thing for the afternoon. It will do you good.”

Less than an hour later they were in Covent Garden. As they wandered through stalls, shops and street performances, Arthur felt the tension between them ease gradually. They looked at gag gifts and joked over which of their friends they would suit. Arthur checked out antiques stalls and even went so far as to buy a small vintage tie pin with a tiny sports car, picked out in blue, as a feature. He didn’t say it but the blue reminded him of Merlin’s eyes, now looking happy again.

When he realised that Merlin hadn’t eaten all day (“I didn’t want to be plane-sick, and I was right, we hit turbulence”) they adjourned to a small cafe and indulged in a late lunch. With cake.
On leaving the cafe, Merlin whispered to Arthur “You know that this is the most gay thing we’ve done. We’re practically holding hands”

Arthur, thinking momentarily of a few passionate nights in Doonshee, was pretty sure that Merlin was wrong in his assessment but the mention of holding hands caught his attention. Suddenly he wanted to clasp Merlin’s hand in his, twine his own fingers around Merlin’s strong but gentle, feel the warm connection of palm to palm in palmer’s kiss. All round he saw couples touching, sharing, just being close and he yearned for that. They walked on practically in step, hands by their sides, not touching but acutely aware. Arthur grew bolder. It was a busy place. If hands clasped quietly no one would see. No one would notice. His hand moved closer to Merlin. It was safe. It was....

“Mr. Pendragon. Enjoying the sights?” The voice was like a bucket of cold water to his soul.

“Indeed, Ms. Renney” he said in his most ‘friendly’ tone. “What a coincidence meeting you here”

She ignored the opening. “Are you going to the shire for the fundraising dance? That is tonight isn’t it?”

“Next week” he replied matching her casual tone. Merlin stood to one side idly looking at the packets of fudge piled up on a stall in front of him and making it clear he had no part in the conversation.

“Of course” she said. “This is your rugby weekend with your friends from Ireland” she looked at Merlin but Arthur did not call him to make introductions. “but surely” she continued, “the match has started?”

“I was delayed” Arthur said smoothly. “We’ll all catch up at dinner.”

“How unfortunate.” She paused and then resumed as if she had just thought of something. Arthur grudgingly admired her performance. “I am holding a brunch tomorrow for a few people I know, perhaps you would like to come. There are a few useful introductions I could make”

Arthur was surprised both that he felt a pull to meet Ms. Renney’s useful introductions and that he had no compunction in refusing. He could see her eyes darting towards Merlin and resolutely refused to make that introduction. Something in him revolted at the thought of Merlin being exposed to her world.

I’m afraid I have commitments tomorrow but I thank you for your invitation. I’m afraid I’ve taken up your time, Ms. Renney, don’t let me delay you any further. I am sure I will see you next week. I look forward to it” Arthur nodded smilingly and walked away. After a moment Merlin followed. They were no longer in step.

“Fancy a drink?” Arthur asked but did not wait for a reply before steering into a pub. He ordered an ale and an orange and they sat in a corner. Arthur did not feel like talking which ironically meant his mouth was on autopilot. He spoke of the weather, and the ubiquitous tourists, how good the ale was and the difficulties of getting real ale these days and all the time his brain was screaming ‘NO! this is Merlin, we don’t talk like this to Merlin’ Eventually his brain succeeded in shutting down the dross, but it was too late. Merlin’s eyes were no longer happy.

Arthur looked at him over his glass. There was a bitter taste in his mouth that did not come from the ale. It was a mistake, trying to have his two worlds come together. He should never have asked Merlin over, never have tried to have it all. Merlin looked at him tight lipped. Arthur’s phone beeped and he checked it automatically. A royal command from his father for he and his friends to have dinner at home that night. Great. Now three worlds were colliding. This was turning out like
an episode of Doctor Who only with fewer Daleks, and the only person who would appreciate that thought was sitting opposite him and he couldn’t say it.

That thought gave him pause. Merlin was the one person with whom he could share his thoughts, share his ‘crazy’. Merlin matched him in every way. And suddenly he knew that if he had to choose just one world, though losing others would grieve him, he would always choose Merlin. He raised his glass.

“To us” he said “Fuck the begrudgers”

The corners of Merlin’s mouth turned up a little at the Irish phrase. His eyes looked at Arthur warmly. “Yeah” he said lifting his own glass “Yeah.”

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The journey back for dinner was companionable but quiet. As they entered the house Mrs. Hudson reminded Arthur of his father’s dinner.

“I did think there would be three of you though” she said with a question.

Arthur affirmed that Calum would be there and then, using the need to look at highlights of the game, brought Merlin to his flat.

Once through the door Arthur pulled Merlin into the hug he had deprived himself of in the airport. Merlin fitted into his arms as if he was meant to be there, though his evening stubble was rough against Arthur’s cheek.

“That’s going to mark” Arthur commented as he gently stroked the bristly fuzz.

“Good” said Merlin firmly and then his lips were on Arthur’s, soft and warm, open and inviting. Arthur breathed into the kiss which quickly moved from warm to passionate. There was fumbling which turned frantic and included an unexpected ping – but what right had jeans to have such an awkward button anyway? Merlin was repeating his name in tiny groans as he nipped and kissed, and Arthur, who had never liked his name, now thought it better than a thousand symphonies.

He was conscious of the sound of his phone ringing at the other side of the room where he had thrown it. He was determined not to even think of it. This was his time, his and Merlin’s and no phone call was important enough to interrupt.

But then Merlin’s phone, stuck in the pocket of the recalcitrant jeans began to ring and vibrate.

“That’s Calum” Merlin gasped, as Arthur touched and stroked him. “I should get that”

Arthur sighed and agreed, pulling away enough to let Merlin answer the call.

“Mez?” Calum’s voice was strained. “Erm, is Arthur with you?” When Merlin answered yes Calum asked to speak with him and Arthur reluctantly disengaged his arm from where it was twined around Merlin and took the phone.

“So,” said Calum, “Here’s the thing. I kind of forgot your address and I may have gone up and down this road three times, but feck’s sake Arthur all the houses look alike but that’s not the thing. The thing is I may be being trailed by a very suspicious policeman and if you don’t find me chances are you’ll have to bail out to turn up to your Da’s dinner” He hardly broke for breath as he spoke but he was more stressed than his words allowed.
“You’ll have to go” said Merlin quickly.

“Yeah” sighed Arthur, handing the phone to Merlin and reaching for his own phone and keys. “Tell him I’m on my way and then tell him to hang up” he said, trying to fix it so that he looked slightly less debauched.

Merlin did what he said and he could hear Calum’s “Sorry Mez” as he got to the door.

Chapter End Notes

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/43/MGB_Roadster.JPG

Arthur's car
Chapter Summary

This is a short interlude looking at the first part of the visit from Merlin's perspective.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Merlin stared around the empty flat as the sound of the door closing reverberated in his head. This trip was turning out to have more highs and lows than the plane journey over the Irish Sea. And that had made him nauseous.

Merlin’s unease at the trip had begun when Arthur had first spoken of it. Arthur’s statement that it was just a rugby thing cut Merlin to the heart. It had taken all his self control not to snap and say something hurtful in return and though Arthur had redeemed himself the next day any glow surrounding the trip was gone.

The glow came back the moment he saw Arthur standing in the Arrivals terminal, appearing stoical, but looking, to Merlin’s eyes, slightly wistful. Arthur had reached out his arms when he saw Merlin and for a moment Merlin’s whole world was focused on those arms.

Then Arthur dodged the hug and Merlin knew that the weekend would not be the perfect meeting he hoped for.

As they had made their way to the car park, Merlin was only half listening to the inanities Arthur was saying. Mostly he was trying to understand. They had not seen each other for months and here Arthur was, being polite.

Polite like a politician.

Merlin did not feel any better when he saw the car. God, it was beautiful, sleek and confident, just like Arthur. Merlin thought of Betsy, with her crazy electrics and eccentric engine. For a moment he wondered why Arthur had ever lowered himself to drive her after this beauty.

And it was a present. The most expensive present Merlin had ever received had been a 5.4.3 wetsuit for his twenty first birthday. His parents had gone to great expense to get him the best they could, suitable for Atlantic cold waters. He doubted if the price of the wetsuit would pay for a wheel on Arthur’s car.

Arthur’s world was very different from his.
This feeling grew when he saw the house, and the housekeeper. Everything was Grand in an understated way, a world where expectations became reality and needs and wants were pretty much the same thing and both were met.

Merlin was miserable as they headed out to do the ‘Tourist thing’ but the fact that Arthur automatically took public transport relieved him a little. This was the Arthur he loved, who ate cheap takeaway and wasn’t too posh to walk. The market at Covent Garden had been fun and Merlin began to believe that his unease was unwarranted. They smoothly fitted back into the relationship they had had in Doonshee, relaxed and comfortable. Merlin had even made a gay comment without provoking a response.

And then she appeared. And Arthur went back to being the politician again. Merlin had stepped aside, not wanting to intrude but it became obvious that Arthur did not want him to meet this beautiful woman or be part of their discussion. He bought a packet of fudge for his mum and tried not to feel superfluous.

His Arthur did not return to him. Arthur had told him about the world of politics, about how everyone spoke a lot but said nothing, about how everyone hid all the time. He just had never thought Arthur would do that to him. The stiff talk, just like at the airport reminded Merlin that he was an extra in Arthur’s life. He sat over his orange juice in the pub Arthur had dragged him to and tried to ignore the pain he was feeling.

But Arthur had changed again, flipped back into the man Merlin loved. By the time their passionate groping was interrupted by Calum’s plea for help Merlin was pretty much seasick from the swings of mood.

Merlin wandered into Arthur’s bedroom. This was Arthur’s space, Arthur’s bed. Merlin felt a sudden feeling that it should be his – and that was far too fast they had only known each other for... forever it felt ... but even if it was fast, Merlin felt his place in this house was here and not in the, admittedly luxurious almost suite on the floor below.

In bed there was no confusion between them. Merlin knew that despite the fact that he was not a sports car human, Arthur desired him. The frantic disrobing at the door was evidence of that – and he really ought to find that button...

The trouble was, a long distance relationship based on nothing but sex, no matter how good that was, was not going to last. Not even with phone sex.

Merlin blushed as he thought of it. Arthur lay here when he...

Okay, stop thinking.

It was all because of Billy Ballard anyway.

Billy Ballard. Merlin remembered the four year Billy, still sucking his thumb, standing beside him on the first day of school. Because of the alphabet location of their names they spent their whole school career beside each other. It was not inevitable that they would become friends, but they did. Ballard and Balinson did everything together through primary school and into secondary. They were always there for each other. So it was to be expected that when Billy found himself appalling drunk and lost in the middle of Belfast he would call his best friend for help. And it was natural
that Merlin would show up to carry him home. They were there for each other after all.

But Billy hadn’t been there on the Monday after, when the Sixth form college was flooded with ‘Did you hear about Balinson?’ and “I always knew he was queer”. In fact Billy was never there for him again. He did not actively join in the name calling, the comment designed to hurt, but he did not stop them. Merlin over heard him once explaining how the ‘fag’ had fooled him. That was probably the lowest day Merlin had ever had. Even including the beach at Doonshee.

So, when on a normal evening in the taxi office he heard Billy Ballard’s voice ordering a taxi it had been a shock. Hearing that the taxi was to take Billy to the hospital in time to start his shift as a trainee doctor broke him.

That night Merlin needed to feel wanted, to feel that he had a purpose and the only purpose he could think of that was valued was making Arthur come.

It should have made him feel cheap but somehow the connection with Arthur stopped that. They had laughed, and shared fantasies and for that time he could forget that he was ‘Middling Merlin’ and be Arthur’s Lover. He had imagined falling asleep with Arthur’s arms around him and woke happy.

Merlin ran his hand over the bedcovers and smiled as he caught sight of a scruffy one eyed teddy bear in the corner of the room. Silk sheets and balding bears seemed to sum up the contradictions in Arthur. Merlin loved all of him but after this weekend he didn’t know if he could take the highs and lows of the journey through the world that was Arthur.

And he didn’t know if he could take not taking that journey.

He started as he heard the front door close and steps and voices on the stairs. Arthur and Calum were back.

He left the bedroom, wondering if he would ever see it again.

Time to put on the mask.

Smiling, he waited in the empty living room for the show to begin.

Chapter End Notes

These last two have been a bit angsty. I am hoping the story will let the two get their act together in the next chapter and start dealing with things.

But just when I think it's safe to get back in the story a plot point hits me over the head.
Arthur was laughing when he came in, a slightly shamefaced Calum in his wake.

“You’ll never believe it, Merlin, he was on the wrong bloody street all the time!” he said in his most superior tone.

Calum was glum, “You’re never going to let me live this down, are you?” he said.

“No.” Arthur said, “It’s too good to let go”

Merlin laughed and then asked were they expected to dress for dinner. Arthur did not say that as far as he knew his father expected them to be dragging their knuckles on the ground, saying begorrah a lot and talking of potatoes. Or, alternatively, dragging said knuckles, saying ‘brits out’ and talking about guns. Uther Pendragon had made his millions by being very focused and Arthur had often been dismayed at the abysmal ignorance he could show at the simplest of things.

They did have to dress for dinner though.

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As it turned out, Arthur need not have worried. The recent (and ended) boom in Ireland had put it onto Uther’s radar and he had a reasonable knowledge which did not include clichés. It soon became apparent that Calum when not getting lost and needing rescuing from policemen could be absolutely charming. Usually Uther Pendragon lost patience with anyone who sought to charm him, but one or two comments Calum made about the global business made Uther take notice. Both Calum’s parents had set up small businesses and it seemed that Calum had caught some of their entrepreneurial spirit. The conversation flowed freely and it was not really noticeable that Merlin said very little.

Arthur noticed.

Although Arthur had planned on gaming and chat in his flat after dinner, Uther insisted that they stay for brandy and coffee, while he and Calum argued over the future of the world economy, the merits of quantitative easing and the importance or not of regulation. Arthur was interested in most of it; what his father saw as business Arthur saw as politics and a three way conversation went on for some time until Arthur realised again that Merlin was doing little more than listening.

It wasn’t that Merlin couldn’t keep up, Arthur knew; Merlin could talk intelligently on pretty much any topic. Arthur had asked him about it in Doonshee having seen him move from discussing cattle feed with Mr. Brennan to a conversation on a famous Irish poet with one of the lecturers at the colaiste, to a debate on ethics in science with Calum, all in the space of an hour.
“I suppose it’s because I’m interested” Merlin had said and Arthur had been struck by it. It was a fundamental part of Merlin, being interested. He was interested in everything and everyone.

So why was he silent now? As the evening broke up and they drifted to their (separate) bedrooms Arthur felt he had let Merlin down in some important way – he just wasn’t sure how – or how to fix it.

He had just about got in to bed when his phone rang. He reached for it only to realise that it was his ‘Merlin’ phone. The pay-as-you-go phone he had bought as a reaction to Ms. Renney’s snooping had only one number in it and only one person called it. Arthur kept it topped up (using cash – he was becoming paranoid) and charged but never used for anything else. He answered.

“Hey” Merlin sounded tired.

“It seems strange to be talking to you when you are only downstairs” Arthur said. Unspoken was the thought that if it was strange why wasn’t Arthur down there.

Merlin was subdued “This seemed the only way we could talk”

“Oh” Arthur was tongue tied. “I suppose that’s...”

“I don’t think I can do this again Arthur. It’s too much...I” Merlin stopped and the silence between them grew

“Are you? Are we... Is...” Arthur could not find words. His heart was racing and he felt sick. “Are we breaking up?” he finally got out.

“No!” Merlin was emphatic but then hesitant “Unless you want to...?”He paused, then went on. “I just can’t... do this...all this being polite and not really talking and I know in Doonshee we weren’t groping every minute of the day but at least we were real and I can’t cope with you not being real. It’s too hard, Arthur. I thought I could but I can’t bear seeing you and not being yours and Arthur I am lying here staring at the ceiling and knowing that you are right above me and I can’t touch you and I can’t do this again. I might as well be in Belfast”

While he spoke Merlin’s voice was getting more and more broken until Arthur could not bear it any longer.

“I’m coming down” he said, getting up from the bed. “I’m coming down”

“What about... you can’t Arthur, your father...” beneath Merlin’s concern was a tiny echo of hope.

“Let’s roll the dice” said Arthur, meaning it. If disclosure was the price of comforting Merlin right now he would risk it. It was with a strange feeling of exhilaration that Arthur dressed quickly in trousers and shirt, (he would meet his fate clothed, he decided, it was hard to be dignified in sleepwear) and crept out of his flat and down the stairs.
He felt almost James Bond-like as he carefully avoided motion sensors and creaky floorboards to arrive at the door to Merlin’s guest room.

Merlin was waiting anxiously for him. “This is crazy” Merlin said “I feel like one of the fourteen year olds at the Colaiste sneaking around after hours”

“If you were fourteen I wouldn’t be here” said Arthur facetiously, then looked at Merlin, really taking in the tension in his eyes. Arthur realised that that tension had been there most of the time since Merlin’s arrival. Only for the few hours in Covent Garden had it dissipated.

“We need to talk” Arthur said.

“Yes, Definitely, totally, we need to talk. Absolutely” said Merlin “But can we be kissing now? Because we can talk on the phone and we...” He leaned in and kissed Arthur, deeply and Arthur moved closer until there was not even a millimetre between them.

Merlin was wearing very respectable ‘visiting’ pyjamas that Arthur was quite sure his mother had chosen for him. He had after all seen Merlin in scruffy tee-shirt and shorts every morning for weeks. The pyjamas he decided would have to go. This time he was more careful with the buttons and even with careful backsteps it was a matter of seconds before Merlin was bare and spread beneath him on the bed.

Merlin was too thin. Arthur felt his ribs as kissed and touched. There were dark shadows under Merlin’s eyes too and Arthur feared he had helped put them there. He wanted to make up for that, to make it better.

“You remember that phone call” he said “Remember all the things you wanted to do with me? Well, I am going to Experiment” he emphasised the word “on doing them on you”

He felt Merlin’s heartbeat under his hand and gently rubbed circles across his chest. Merlin moaned then cut the sound.

Arthur was impressed at his discipline but in his current reckless mood wanted to break it. He used his hands and his mouth to coax involuntary groans from Merlin.

“You’re so good at being quiet” he murmured as Merlin bit off a choked sigh.

“You try being a teenaged boy living with parents in a Semi-D” muttered Merlin “Arthur, if you don’t stop playing I will start on you”

“Threat or promise?” Arthur said and the response made him very glad his father had gone for sturdy guest beds.

Later they lay together.

“Was that good?” Merlin asked softly.

“You have to ask?” said Arthur in to the dark hair nestled under his chin.

“Just making sure” said Merlin and Arthur wondered what was going on in that complex and wonderful mind he loved. Why would Merlin need to make sure? He was going to ask but soft
measured breathing told him that Merlin was asleep.

Arthur tightened his hold and allowed his mind to drift. He knew that in the hotel in Doonshee he had decided that this would not be enough for him. But right now, a little part of him would not have minded if his father and a posse of paparazzi burst into the room. At least he wouldn’t have to constantly choose.

He fell asleep with Merlin in his arms and woke to Merlin poking him in the shoulder.

“Wake up sleepy” Merlin was saying but Arthur merely brushed him off with “Nagh” and tried to get back to sleep.

Merlin kept poking.

“Merlin, you’re doing it again, that irritating cheerfulness in the morning. Stop it and leave me alone” Arthur tried to burrow under the covers but Merlin stripped them off.

“Nope, not stopping” he said “and it’s not morning. I’m throwing you out. Come on, get up”

“Donwanna” Arthur wailed. He was feeling childish – but he really did not want to go.

“Up” said Merlin firmly and practically pushed him off the bed. “Your clothes are...” he looked around “Well your shirt is over there” he waved towards the door. Arthur padded in the general direction, finding his shirt and Merlin’s discarded pyjamas. He raised an eyebrow.

“My mum picked those” Merlin said defensively.

“Thought so” said Arthur. “Don’t wear them again, they’re not you”

“What is me?” Merlin asked, head on one side and a half joking half serious look on his face.

“As you are” said Arthur, looking at the complexity before him. He could see that despite the quips and laughter that were so obvious, there was a core of sadness in Merlin and he feared that he was not making it less.

“Naked and on the bed?” said Merlin lightly and Arthur laughed.

“Exactly” he said, finding his trousers.

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Arthur tiptoed back to his own room, feeling like a character in a West End farce. He was sure the creaky board outside the other guest room was extra loud when he trod on it and he rather expected to find his father standing stern-faced at the door to his flat, but all was as quiet and empty as it always was.

They had arranged that the three of them would share breakfast in the flat and then head for the airport. Merlin and Calum had different flights but close enough in time to make separate travel arrangements difficult.

Merlin arrived first, and Arthur, who had been fully resolved to be restrained, pulled him into a kiss the moment he came through the door.

“Missed you” he said, and it was true

“It’s been three hours Arthur” said Merlin laughing
“I miss you all the time when we’re not together” said Arthur, not afraid to be totally soppy.

“Me too” murmured Merlin as they kissed again.

There was a cough at the doorway. They looked up to see Calum standing there.

Arthur jumped away from Merlin, feeling his face flush. Merlin stood still as Calum came into the room.

“Oh for the love of Jesus will you two stop hiding in corners like a pair of nervous nellies. I’m not some nineteenth century maiden aunt that’s likely to faint at the sight of two dudes kissing!” Calum exclaimed.

Arthur imagined his expression would look the same if he was staring at the front of an on-coming train. He said nothing. Calum continued.

“I mean, it’s not like I don’t know. I mean...Jaysus you two made enough noise last night to make a maiden aunt deaf. I had to put on heavy metal on my ipod to cover it”

“You like heavy metal” Merlin murmured

“Not the point Merlin. The point is... well just stop acting coy” Calum said.

Arthur could feel the colour draining from his face. This was it. He was Out. He did not know if he was more terrified or relieved. He felt long lean fingers twine with his own and drew strength from the touch.

Merlin spoke. “Arthur’s Dad doesn’t know” he said softly “About any of it – him, me... and Arthur wants... He’s going into politics. Here. So... “ his voice trailed off.

“Fuck” said Calum with feeling “You’re still in the closet, you’re just in there together” he paused. “Which is actually quite kinky”

“Calum!” said Merlin indignantly.

“What are you going to do?” Arthur asked in a dead tone

“Do?” Calum was incredulous “Do? I’m not doing anything. D’you think I’m going to head off and get a banner headline in The Sun?”

Arthur knew his face betrayed him. That was exactly what he thought.

“Jeez Arthur, what sort of people do you hang around with?” said Calum with disgust. “You’re my friend – at least I think you are, and if you want to live in fucking Narnia it’s none of my business”

Arthur was startled. He had never expected this reaction and did not know what to do. Merlin kept his fingers wrapped around his and that was his lifeline on reality.

“Listen,” said Calum in a quieter tone. “I’m no good in the morning without food and I happen to know that treasure of a housekeeper of yours filled your fridge with the makings of a good Irish fry and I for one want to eat.”
He went into the living room, where Arthur had a tiny but well equipped kitchen (rarely used). Arthur and Merlin followed, Arthur in a daze. He took out a frying pan and set about cooking sausages while Calum made coffee. An incautious swish caused the oil in the pan to catch light and Arthur watched the flame, as one part of his mind told him to be calm and not to put it near water and another part screamed that yes calm was good but DO SOMETHING. The flame burnt out and Arthur realised the whole incident took only a few seconds.

“Did you just set fire to our breakfast?” Calum asked as Merlin swooped over to check his (undamaged) hands.

“Sit down” said Merlin and Calum pushed a mug of coffee in front of him.

“Right” Calum said. “You are going to tell me why you are sneaking around like Mr Bean in heat” Arthur snorted into his coffee mug. He wasn’t sure if he was light-headed or hysterical.

“I told you” Merlin said indignantly “Politics”

“But...” began Calum but Merlin interrupted.

“Not in Arthur’s part of the world”

“Oh right” said Calum, “Still in the 1950s hunting shooting fishing, twinset and pearls sort of thing”

“Something like that” said Arthur feeling that the only thing that could make this conversation more surreal would be the appearance of a White rabbit with a pocket watch.

“So are you two going to hide forever then, in your Enid Blyton world?” Calum asked.

“I always thought Fatty was gay” interjected Merlin. Arthur decided that the White Rabbit would make things less surreal, all things considered.

“No, Seriously guys, you need a time limit” Calum said and Arthur heard him, the words breaking through the fog.

“A year” he said to Merlin. “Give me a year” Merlin reached for his hand, still clutching the coffee mug. “Ego much Pendragon?” he said “I’ll give you five years” Arthur looked and Merlin’s eyes were sincere and had a hint of tears.

“GOD ALMIGHTY!” Calum said “Are youse mad? Youse have been together for a few months and you’re already setting things on fire. You won’t last till Christmas at this rate. The way you’re going you’ll either pine to death, cause an accident or get caught shagging in Hyde Park. You need an actual plan”

“We’ve managed so far” Arthur was surprised to hear himself speak.

“You think so?” said Calum sarcastically “ Do you really think I wanted all those Ceili nights? My grandmother nearly had a heart attack when I showed up for her birthday. She thought I knew something she didn’t and she was going to die. Guillaume could feck off to Gwen’s but Freya thought I was some sort of creeper inviting myself onto her couch after the wedding do.” Calum paused.

Arthur was sure that his own mouth was open and he could see Merlin looked stunned.
“What?” said Calum “Look, you needed space, fair enough, but if you guys thought you were secret...”

Suddenly it was all too much for Arthur. He started to laugh and could not stop. At first the others looked at him anxiously but then they joined him.

They were still laughing when Mrs. Hudson came in to investigate the suspicious burning smell. She scolded Arthur over his (lack of) cooking skills and proceeded to take control of the kitchen. By the time she had left, having served up steaming platefuls of food, Arthur could think again.

That didn’t last.

“So” said Calum as soon as the door shut. “I get why you” he gestured towards Arthur “want the hiding and all but...” the fork he was holding now moved over to Merlin, the sausage on it wobbling precariously “I know you. You’re the straightest guy I know”

He heard what he said and rephrased “If you know what I mean. You can’t say you like this hiding and stuff”

“I don’t...”Merlin began then changed tone “I mean, I’m okay with it. It’s just...” he turned to face Arthur “Please. Don’t hide from me. Not from me.”

Merlin sounded desperately sad and Arthur was puzzled. How could he hide from Merlin? This man saw him, saw into him, in a way that no one else could.

“Of course not” he said holding Merlin’s fingers in his own “I won’t. I promise” Merlin smiled wanly.

“Aw, that’s so sweet” said Calum in a gushing tone.

“You are such a girl, Cal.” said Arthur mockingly.

“It has been said” laughed Calum, “It’s why I grew the beard – so’s that I wouldn’t get mistaken for one of my sisters”

He stopped to chew for a moment then said “That’s what I am amn’t I? I’m a beard with a beard. But hey, that’s fine and” he took another bite and looked thoughtful as he chewed. “This rugby thing could work for you guys. Between the three of us and Gui, we have three of the Six Nations, and at least three clubs, Leinster” he pointed at himself, “Ulster” the fork wavered over to Merlin “Saracens?” he gestured to Arthur. Arthur shook his head, “Wasps” Arthur said.

Calum gave him a pitying look “Really?” He shrugged and went on. “Anyway that should give us plenty of scope to arrange more weekends – and not like this – no offence Arthur – but we can book budget hotels, where you pay for the room not the person ‘cause Mez and I are impoverished students, though, come to think of it, Mr. My-father’s-a-millionaire-but-I-didn’t-say-anything you can pay. Wicked weekend trysts, Sorted.” He munched into his toast with satisfaction while Arthur and Merlin looked at him with stunned expressions.

But it could work Arthur thought. He remembered Ms. Renney’s grudging approval of rugby as a suitable political ploy. It could work. Then he remembered Merlin’s declaration of the night before.
“Merlin doesn’t want...” he began but Merlin interrupted him.

“I do, I mean I think it would work. If you are there. Really there”

“Of course I’d be there” Arthur said reaching for Merlin’s hand and clutching it. Merlin looked so sad and Arthur could not figure out why. He gently touched Merlin’s face and Merlin leaned into the touch. Calum coughed.

“Not that this isn’t sweet and all, and I am totally down with the whole beard thing but could you hold off on the PDAs for a while? I’m still eating here. Oh, and you do know you will have to actually show up at matches for this to work, don’t you?” He smirked at them. “Just call me Cupid” he quipped.

Arthur looked at Merlin. “I just got an image of Calum in fairy wings and a tutu” he said.

“That’s actually quite disturbing” said Merlin seriously but with a twinkle in his eye that Arthur had not seen this visit.

Calum stood. “I leave you guys to your disturbing image. I’m going to pack”

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After breakfast they had planned to take a taxi to the airport since Arthur was forced to admit, wonderful though his car was, it could not take three. That led to Calum demanding to see said car and a detour was arranged.

Calum was in awe of the car. He looked for permission then ran his hands over the smooth paint work.

“This car” he said reverently “is a work of magic. I don’t care what we do but next time I’m in London you are taking me out in this”

Arthur agreed, Merlin said nothing.

Somehow it was accepted that Arthur would accompany them to the airport and the three set off in a ubiquitous Black cab.

In the airport Merlin’s flight was called first. At the departures area Arthur was again faced with a hugs-istential dilemma which was solved when Calum stepped in and enveloped Merlin in a bear hug, ending with a fist bump. “Don’t go thinking Ulster can beat Leinster now Mez” he said in farewell. Arthur took his place, and if he took a second or three longer in the hug and whispered “Miss you already” in Merlin’s ear, Calum pretended not to notice.

And then Merlin was gone, a lone figure disappearing in the lines of security. Calum turned to Arthur.

“My flight won’t be for an hour or so. Fancy a beer?” he said. Arthur nodded and a few minutes later they were sitting over pints in a generic airport bar.

“You mind how you go with Merlin” Calum said and Arthur noted the use of Merlin’s actual name. “Merlin has more issues than the National Geographic and it took me and my sister two days to haul out my Grandfather’s hoard from the attic”
Arthur was losing track of the conversation but he picked up the one thing that mattered. Merlin did not have issues. Merlin was the most stable man he knew. Then he recalled the sadness he had seen in Merlin and asked “What issues?”

“Well for a start” said Calum, “he has an issue with your car”

Arthur huffed in surprise. “Merlin hasn’t said a word about my car” he said indignantly.

“Exactly” said Calum. “Your car is every guy’s wet dream – in fact forget guys, even my sisters would trample Mother Theresa to get that car. But Merlin hasn’t said a word. Issues.” He took a sip of his beer. “I think he has issues with a lot of your stuff”

Arthur was thoroughly confused. “What stuff?”

“The fact that you have stuff. You’re a fucking millionaire Arthur, you have a lot of stuff”

“He didn’t have a problem in Doonshie”

Calum took a moment to respond. “That’s cause it was just you. Here it’s you and stuff”

Frustrated Arthur snapped out “Stop saying stuff. And you don’t have a problem” Calum sighed.

“I’m a Celtic Cub, Arthur, reality may have pulled the rug out from under us but we were brought up on that rug. We know what it feels like and no one will ever make us believe we don’t deserve it back. Merlin’s not like that. D’you ever meet his parents?”

Arthur shook his head.

“I met them once last year. They’re nice people. Seriously nice people. As in. Serious. Their idea of conspicuous consumption is having an extra biscuit in the Marks and Spencer cafe. I swear Merlin brought a packed lunch to college every day in his first year.”

“He might have had reasons for that” Arthur murmured, remembering some of the things Merlin had talked about on their long walks around Doonshie.

“Yeah, well, we got him to loosen up and live a little – and then you turned up and gave him all his fantasies on a plate so to speak”

Arthur felt his face heat up as Calum continued.

“And bringing him here just shoved his face into all the things you guys don’t have in common. So, yeah, issues”

Arthur disagreed. He and Merlin had everything in common. Calum was wrong. He wanted to say – he loves me and I love him and that’s all that matters – but he was a man talking to man about another man and in such conversations the word love was only used in connection with food or drink. Or maybe superheroes.

Before things got awkward Calum’s flight was called and they made their way towards security.

This time Arthur had no difficulty giving a hug, though it was slightly shorter and a lot less intimate. Calum spoke as they separated. “I’m serious Arthur, you hurt Mez and the tabloids will be the least of your worries”

For a second Arthur felt a wave of bitterness pour over him. No one would ever seek to defend him
like that, he thought. Then that feeling was followed by a flash of memory of Merlin, blazing coldly in fury at Morgause O'Donnell. Merlin would defend him, would stand with him, he felt that certainty as sure as breathing. And he would never hurt Merlin. He said as much and Calum moved off,

“I’ll sort the next match weekend” he said as he went. “Try to get the lazy French bastard to make it” he disappeared into the crowd.

And the weekend was over.
Merlin really struggled to find a Christmas gift for Arthur. What do you get someone who had – or could have everything he wanted?

Not that Merlin knew what Arthur wanted.

Except for one thing.

For reasons inexplicable to Merlin, Arthur Pendragon wanted and desired Merlin Balinson’s body, and Merlin Balinson was happy to give it to him. In many positions. Whenever he wanted.

It was just...
No there was no just.

Which left the problem of the Christmas present. Merlin couldn’t exactly wrap himself up in tinsel and lie under Arthur’s tree. If Arthur had a tree.

And there was part of the ‘just’.

Merlin was realising how little he really knew about Arthur. Seeing his house, his car, how he lived highlighted that fact. Though the trip to London had to be considered a success, Merlin had felt distance between them. Arthur’s world had no space for him. Except in bed. That’s where he belonged.

It was just...
No.

It was a little easier now that they were no longer hiding from Calum. The day after Merlin had returned from London Calum had called him, an unusual act in itself. Theirs was an odd friendship. They had know each other for almost three years but their friendship meant living practically in each other’s pockets for two and half months each year and having no contact the rest of the time. Arthur had changed that just as he had changed everything else in Merlin’s life.

Merlin had been open with Calum when they first met at initiation in the Colaiste. He was still raw from his treatment in Sixth Form College and though Uni was better, he wanted to get the rejection in first and save the heartache of losing friends. Calum had given him a measured look.

“Do you fancy me?” he said.

Merlin was thrown off balance “What? No. What?” he blurted.

“Cos, all the houses around here have holiday lets which are way above my price range, but I found this place – it’s pretty crappy but the rent would be manageable with two as long as there was no pining” Calum said deadpan.

Merlin assured him there would be no pining and that was how they ended up in the Palace. Their friendship was cemented a few hours later, in the pub, when Calum suddenly said “Why don’t you fancy me? I mean, I’m a bit insulted here” That was the first time laughter forced Merlin to splutter his orange juice.
It was the Calum of Doonshee that called him, worried about the whole ‘thing’ with Arthur.

“I won’t be arranging anything if it’s going cause you grief Mez” he said.

Merlin was surprised and a little exasperated at the sentiment. “I can look after myself, Cal” he said “I’m a grown man”

“I know that Mez” Calum said patiently “I also know that when it comes to your friends you can be bloody stupid so I’m only looking out for you”

“And Arthur? Are you looking out for him too?” Merlin asked sharply.

“No” said Calum. “I assume you’d do that.”

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Calum did arrange another weekend – in Cardiff. Merlin drove to Dublin through a driving rain, grateful that Betsy allowed him to use the windscreen wipers for the purposes the manufacturer intended. From Dublin they both travelled to Cardiff. Guillaume took the train to London and then accompanied Arthur across country. Calum booked two rooms and the travelling partnerships switched when they arrived.

Merlin was very nervous about seeing Arthur again, but it was good – great even. Calum insisted that they all went to the match and Merlin was not bored. He found himself watching as Arthur got caught up in the game, shouting comments and exchanging analysis with Calum and Guillaume. Like the rest of the stadium Arthur was dressed in jeans and warm jacket, muffled up against the cold and Merlin felt himself relax beside him. This was Arthur, real and present.

After the match they had retired to a pub where Merlin broke with tradition and had a ginger beer. Calum laughed. “Can you get any more Enid Blyton?” he said.

Arthur smirked “You are showing yourself up, you know, admitting you read those” he said. Calum just looked at him over his beer glass.

“You are sooo Julian you know. Guillaume here is obviously Anne – totally confused but basically decent. Merlin is Dick, and I am definitely George. We don’t have a dog.”

Merlin was about to jump in and defend his right to be George rather than then constant sidekick when he hesitated. How did Arthur feel about it? Was he laughing? Would he mind if Merlin did?

While he hesitated Guillaume, as confused as Calum said demanded an explanation of why he was now a girl. Arthur (Arthur!) came to the rescue with a full explanation of the Famous Five which resulted in Guillaume insisting that he would rather be the dog. Merlin left himself out of the chat puzzled as to why he had hesitated in the first place.

Later that night Merlin got to show Arthur exactly why he was worth the effort, and if when they came down to breakfast the next day they both looked shell-shocked it elicited only a smirk from
Calum and a “Finally” from Guillaume. Merlin wondered if they had succeeded in keeping the relationship from any of their friends and was about to launch into the oath of secrecy mode when Calum broke in.

“Nah” he said “I got it. I got your back”. He pulled Guillaume aside for a conversation.

Arthur had looked across the bacon at Merlin and Merlin saw something soft, something almost childlike in his expression.

“He has, hasn’t he” Arthur said “He has our backs. I’ve never...” he took a breath “It feels good to have friends”

Merlin hadn’t thought of it that way. Despite the nightmare that had been the last year in Sixth Form College, he always had people who liked him. But friends? Friends who had his back? As an adult he had not felt that, but Arthur was right, he felt it now.

“Yeah” he said “It does”

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After Cardiff Merlin felt much better about the relationship. He knew, with more assurance than ever that Arthur wanted him and he was fairly sure where he fit in. Which brought it back to the gift dilemma.

Arthur had already given him a gift – not for Christmas, just casually. When Merlin had returned from London after the first ‘rugby’ weekend he had, with typical student ease, dumped his washing for his mum to find. She, with typical mum ease, had sewed a new button on his jeans (without comment, thank goodness, because that was not a conversation he wanted to have). Before doing so she had rescued the usual pile of wallet and key from his pocket. With them was a small gold tie pin, with a blue vintage car on it. Merlin recognised it immediately as the one Arthur had bought in Covent Garden. He held it carefully and remembered how Arthur had looked as they walked around the market and blushed as he felt his Mum’s eyes on him. She said nothing, merely patted his hand and smiled. Merlin wanted to give Arthur a gift that could make him feel.

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On this cold winter afternoon he was still racking his brain to find the perfect gift as he walked through town to get the bus to bring him home. Betsy had abandoned him, refusing absolutely to even turn over. Merlin was sure she just didn’t want to drive in the cold. Not paying attention he walked through a group of young men standing on the footpath. As he passed them he heard the first hissed word and felt his heart contract within him.

“Faggot!”

“Oi! Faggot!

Merlin kept walking, his head down. He knew them. Or at least knew two of them who had been a school with him. He reached his bus stop but did not stop walking, conscious that they were following.

“Hey! I’m talking to you Nancy boy” It was George Millan. He had been a leader when they were
boys but had left school at sixteen. Merlin had seen him occasionally in the distance but never this close.

“Is the shirt-lifter deaf as well as fucked” another of the men called. Merlin felt a hand on his shoulder and his fists balled to defend himself. Before he could do anything he was swung around and his face smashed into the concrete doorpost of an empty shop. For a moment he felt nothing but a sharp jolt. His vision blurred and was aware of the taunting voices but far away. Then as his vision cleared he saw Millan looming over him. Merlin tried to raise his own fists to meet the face in front of him but before he could gather his thoughts enough to do so a voice broke in on them.

“What are you boyos up to there. Leave the wee lad alone!”

Millan and his crew laughed and sauntered away, leaving Merlin leaning on the bloodied doorpost.

“Are you okay there?” The voice broke in on him. His rescuer was looking at him anxiously. She was an elderly lady about four feet high pushing a shopping stroller. Merlin’s humiliation was complete. He thanked her, assured her he was fine and turned back the way he came. He did not want his mother to see him bleeding.

When he reached his college room, he checked his face in the mirror. One side had a bad graze along the length of it and a bruise was starting to appear on his cheekbone. Merlin sighed and set down to cleaning up. Suddenly the memory of the voices came back to him and he raced for the bathroom, just making it before he was sick. He sat on the bathroom floor and felt tears sting the still bleeding graze.

This was his life.

That night he did not mention the incident to Arthur during their phone call. He did not intend to omit it but when it came to it he could not bear to speak. Had they been together – really together Arthur would have seen him, held him, helped him clean his wounds. That would have been natural. Saying it baldly would be admitting to Arthur that he was right, that the world was a shitty place and that hiding was the best option.

Merlin did not want to accept that but since it hurt to smile, he could not find it in himself to be positive. He used the excuse of an assignment due (which was the truth) to keep the phone call short. Afterwards he lay on his bed staring at the ceiling wondering what was so wrong with him that going to catch a bus was a hazardous activity.

Merlin used the assignment excuse to avoid going home also, hoping that the bruising and grazes would heal quickly and he could spare his parents the pain of knowing that they could do nothing. He avoided college also but did manage to get his assignment finished. Not well, but Merlin was resigned to that.

Middling Merlin

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The one thing he couldn’t avoid was his next shift at the taxi office. Three days after the incident he went to work, his face still bruised and sore.

Keeping his bruises to the wall Merlin avoided comment when he arrived in the office but Kenny
still noticed.

“I hear there was an argy bargy with some scutters up in Hill Street last week.” He said. Merlin made no reply. He didn’t know how Kenny knew everything but he did.

Kenny stepped over to the desk. “If yon wee bastards come at ye again you call for a cab here. We’ll come and get ye, ye know that”

Merlin nodded but knew he would not be asking for help. Kenny put a piece of paper on the desk in front of him.

“That’s a friend of mine. He’ll be expecting you on Wednesday at seven. Don’t be late. Remind him you’re a friend of Kenny ”

Kenny left and Merlin wondered when Kenny had become a friend. He accepted words from Kenny that made him sick to hear in the street. Maybe it was because Kenny really did believe in equality. He was equally abusive to everyone. But if you earned his respect he would stand by you no matter what – calling you every name under the sun in the process. Of course that meant that some of his friends could be on the dubious side and Merlin looked at the piece of paper with some trepidation. He would consider carefully before he went – if he went – despite his friendship with Kenny.

His resolution was shaken when he went home. He always stayed over at the family house when he worked a shift as it was nearer to the taxi office and he could find no excuse not to do so this time. Usually he would get in around one in the morning, call Arthur and sleep without seeing anybody. In theory he could creep out early and not meet his parents but that would cause more questions so Merlin gritted his teeth and went to breakfast.

His mum pounced as soon as he entered the kitchen, demanding to know what happened, did he see a doctor, did he need anything, her hands fluttering over the raw graze and now blackening bruise. . His father looked over his newspaper and looked at him intently

Merlin had intended to come up with a cover story of a simple fall but faced with his mother’s concern and his father’s steady gaze he could not lie. Instead he chose to downplay it.

“It’s fine” he said lightly “Looks worse than it is. Just a close encounter with a wall. Nothing to worry about”

“Accident?” Merlin’s father asked bluntly. Merlin shook his head.

“Oh Merlin” his mum keened. His father folded the newspaper, stood up and walked towards the door. He paused for a moment beside Merlin, gripping his son’s shoulder tightly before leaving and saying more in a gesture than a less taciturn man would say in a thousand words. Merlin looked back at his mum. She was crying. He had made his mum cry. What sort of a son does that? Sickened by himself he sat down and resolved to go to Kenny’s friend even if he turned out to be an illegal paramilitary with a history of kneecapping.

On Wednesday, he turned up at a converted industrial unit in a small industrial estate. He wasn’t sure what to expect . What he didn’t expect was a unit converted into a open space with mats and
flyers promoting martial arts.
The instructor came over to him and Merlin spoke first.

“Um... I’m Merlin Balinson? Kenny Anderson sent me” he gulped

“Ah, right” said the instructor. “Call me Andy – it’s not my name but it’s what everyone calls me. Kenny’s arranged for individual instruction.”

Merlin tried not to look shocked. He had given up karate after the first lesson left him limping. That had been when he was ten though... maybe things had improved.

“Oh, what type of... I mean instruction in what” he managed to say

“What do you know of Krav Maga?” was the reply

Merlin actually did know this “Isn’t it the lethal Israeli self defence fighting” Merlin said.

Call Me Andy laughed. “Well, it’s Israeli” he said “but the rest...” he paused. “The idea of Krav Maga is to stop a situation as soon as possible, with as little damage as possible but if there is damage, to ensure it doesn’t happen to you. Kenny said you were motivated. So, do you want to learn?”

Merlin didn’t hesitate. “Yes” he said “I want to learn”

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He didn’t tell Arthur about starting the class, mainly because he was afraid that he would inadvertently say why he wanted to join.

He hated that he was keeping secrets from Arthur. Although each phone call was a joy he now found there were things in his life that he did not talk about and that felt totally wrong. He wondered what secrets Arthur was keeping from him and the thought hurt far more than his now healing face.

On the up side he now had figured out what to get for Arthur. The one thing he was sure Arthur loved was his car. And though Merlin knew little about cars (Betsy did not count – she did her own thing no matter what he did with her or for her) he resolved to get Arthur a car related gift. More specifically: a keychain. Call Me Andy had a rather fine one which prompted Merlin to do his research and find a dragon keychain, silver and far more expensive than he had budgeted for but this was for Arthur and he really didn’t need Starbucks coffee anyhow.

Merlin had often teased Arthur about his name but Arthur had stoutly asserted its Cornish roots –“By Tre, Pol and Pen shall ye know all Cornishmen” he had quoted before shamefacedly admitting that as far as he was aware his family came from Gloucestershire. Merlin made much of the Celtic origins they all had – he with his Ulster Scots (and Welsh) Calum, Irish, Guillaume from Brittany and Arthur from Cornwall. The dragon didn’t exactly celebrate that but it at least acknowledged it. Merlin bought it online and waited eagerly for it to arrive.

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With the Christmas season coming closer the taxi firm was busy and Merlin was picking up more shifts. He was happy about it. Apart from the money, which was very welcome since he seemed to have developed expensive tastes, the scruffy little office had become a haven. Merlin was comfortable there – or as comfortable as was possible with a cheap office chair and an electric heater.

Sometime before midnight Kenny came in – to Merlin’s surprise. Kenny often visited the office but tonight he was taking a relief car to allow one of his drivers some family time.

“Take me off the call rota for a wee minute” he said sitting down on one of the straight backed chairs in the outer office used by the occasional customer off the street. His broad face looked pasty and he was unconsciously rubbing his stomach.

“You ok Kenny?” Merlin asked, worried.

“A wee bit of indigestion.” Kenny said “I’ll take a wee tablet and it’ll be grand”

Merlin looked at him closely, really looked and made a decision. He took the phone and called 999. “Ambulance” he said at the prompt and gave the address. Kenny looked at him.

“What do you think you’re doing boyo?” he demanded crossly. “Cancel that, or you’ll be the one needing it”

Merlin came around the desk and stood beside him. “If I’m wrong, I’ll work for free all over Christmas but you are going to A&E to get checked out.” he said. For a moment he remembered his own trips to A&E in Donegal and felt again the fear he had felt when Arthur was drugged and incoherent. Was that when he first loved him? He didn’t know and he mentally shook himself to focus on the task at hand.

Kenny was grey faced, with sweat on his brow. Merlin did not know what to do but he stayed beside him until the ambulance came. Then there was a flurry of calm competence and Kenny was swept up on a stretcher and taken off. Merlin could not leave the office untended but he rang Kenny’s daughter and sent a taxi to her to meet the ambulance at the hospital. Then he waited.

His replacement didn’t come in at one so he stayed overnight, giving Arthur a quick call to say he couldn’t talk. By 7am when the morning shift came on he was exhausted and worried. As he got his coat he saw Kenny’s daughter come in, sans bump.

“Ach, Merlin love, you’re still here” she said “I was just checking in. Dad will want to know” She looked tired, dark circles under her eyes. Merlin knew he didn’t look much better.

“Are you off home” she asked “Or would you have time for breakfast?”

He went with her to the local cafe and had a full Ulster Fry. In the absence of sleep, meat, salt and fat seemed a good alternative despite the object lesson currently in hospital.

“It was a heart attack” Holly began. “They said he was lucky he came in when he did. It limited the damage but it will be a while before he’s back to normal” She took a sip of her tea. “Dad’s really pissed off with you, for calling the ambulance” Merlin was startled. Didn’t she say it was a heart attack? She continued.

“Did your Ma ever tell you how she met my Da?” she asked. Merlin had assumed it was through calling taxis but now he wondered.
“My Ma, she was in the hospice for a while before she... well she was very sick and my Da, he was working all the hours in the day to keep things going, the business, us kids, the whole thing and all he wanted to do was to sit with Ma. Your Ma volunteered at the hospice,”

Merlin vaguely knew that. His mother was a serial volunteer. Before his Outing, she volunteered for the church but after, it was more community based organisations and he did not keep track.

Holly continued “She would sit with Ma, read to her, help her knit, all sorts of things. Da would come in and Ma would be able to tell him about her day, the things she did, and one day he came in and your ma was still there and he heard my ma laughing and he said afterwards that at that moment he believed in angels and that is not something my Da would say. After that he would do anything for your ma but she never let him. She would even take a free taxi fare – always paid. Drove Da mad. The only thing she ever asked him about was you and Da though finally he could pay her back. You make it hard cos you’re actually good at the job and now you go and save his life. He is so pissed”

She stopped and Merlin had to laugh. “I’m not sorry” he said and Holly patted his hand.

“Nor am I” she said softly. “You saved my Da. Now I owe you” Merlin laughed again.

“I like Kenny” he said

“And Da likes you. Da’s funny about family. Like, my uncle George down Mill road, he’s not family to Da for all he’s kin, but you and his drivers and your ma, they’re family. Family looks after family” she said firmly. She looked at his now fading bruise. “You remember that Merlin Balinson. You’ve got family”

As he walked home in the gathering dawn Merlin pondered whether he should be happy or terrified at being adopted by Kenny Anderson. But it felt good in a way he was only starting to realise was possible. Only in Doonshee had he felt this sense of acceptance and now he felt it in his home town. He smiled as his breath froze in the morning air.

Walking in his garden gate Merlin met the postman about to enter. He greeted him eagerly and took the post from him, saving the chilled postman a few steps extra. The package was among the window envelopes and flyers for new windows. Once inside he pulled open the wrapping and associated bubble wrap and held up the key chain, the silver glinting in the early morning light. The dragon glared at him, a little like Arthur he thought and he smiled.

“Oh did the postie come then” his mum called as she processed down the stairs. Though it was early, She was fully dressed, down to the single row of pearls she wore around her neck. Dressing gowns, according to Mrs. Balinson were only for ‘if you happen to be misfortunate enough to be taken short in the night’.

“Ooh” she said catching sight of the key chain “That is nice” she paused “Is it for your...” a breath “boyfriend?”

Merlin nodded.

“It looks expensive” she said looking closer.

“It was” admitted Merlin “But I can manage” he went on.

His mum looked at him “I know you can son” she said “He means a lot to you, this boy” Merlin
“Your Dad and I have been talking” she said, gently propelling him in to the Kitchen “and we’ve decided, I mean we’d like... I mean... If you’d like to have him to stay over Christmas he’d be welcome” She paused for breath. “but... he didn’t say anything mind, because he wouldn’t but for your father’s peace of mind, could he stay in the spare room?”

Merlin felt like laughing and crying at the same time. A sudden intoxicating vision of Arthur, sitting down to Christmas dinner in their overstuffed dining room hit him. Arthur and his father would talk about allotments and the importance of sowing veg at the right time and Arthur would compliment his mother’s roast potatoes and pull crackers and wear a silly hat. He was completely convinced that Arthur could do it. There was no place he, with all his charm could not fit into, no world that did not have an Arthur-shaped space for him to occupy. Merlin felt a deep longing for his vision to come true.

“I’ll tell him” he said gruffly, trying not to let too much emotion bleed into his voice. “But I don’t think he’ll come. He’s...” he hesitated “He’s not out you see, and his family...” he did not go on.

“Oh” said his Mum, and then in a different tone “Ohhh. The poor boy. He must be so lonely”

Merlin knew of Arthur’s vulnerabilities but if he were honest with himself he saw only advantages for Arthur in hiding. At least he did not risk getting his face shoved into doorways. But with his mother’s words he saw another side. He felt again the joy (yes it was joy he realised) at Kenny’s ‘adoption’, his comfort at his mother’s nervous invitation. Arthur had none of that. He did not have people who saw him and loved him. Merlin suddenly understood why Arthur had seemed so awed by having Calum stand by him. Merlin felt a lump come to his throat.

“Yes” he said “He is”
The weather outside

Chapter Notes

I apologise in advance...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Uther Pendragon did make a point to spend Christmas with his son, which meant that of his 24 years Arthur had had 16 Christmases with his father – not all of them good. This Christmas Uther intended to fly in from Singapore early on Christmas Eve and leave for New York the day after Boxing Day. Arthur felt vaguely privileged to have been given two and a half days.

They decided to have Christmas in Gloucestershire. If there was one place that Arthur nearly called home it was the Cotswold stone manor, nestled in the hills. Even though he had spent less time there then almost anywhere else, most of his precious memories were born there. He remembered working in the converted stables that housed Uther’s cars, learning what he could under the careful tutelage of Alfred, the chauffeur. He knew, with a child’s quickly acquired knowledge, all the best places in the grounds and in the house, from the great Yew tree he climbed as a boy to the secret hiding place under the window sill in his room. For the last four Christmases they had managed to spend together they had gone to the manor and Arthur was glad of it.

This year, Arthur decided not to drive to the Manor. Though the trip normally only took about two hours, the forecast was poor. And much though he loved his car he had to admit driving with a lap full of snow was not a prospect that enticed him. He took the train to the nearby town where he was met by Alfred, now retired but willing to do the occasional trip.

“Is Mister Pendragon a-gumin down t’day?” he asked as Arthur loaded his luggage into the car. Arthur explained the arrangement. Alfred looked at the sky.

“Sky dunt look good” he said. “Snow bevore morning”

At the manor, Arthur met the caterers who were filling the fridges and pantry. Since Alfred retired Uther did not keep a permanent staff, instead relying on a cleaning service and caterers from Tetbury. They too commented on the weather, as they showed Arthur where various food was stored. They were due back on Christmas morning to prepare lunch, slipping into the kitchen unobtrusively. Arthur thought of them as house elves. Only with clothes.

The house was part Tudor, with one Georgian wing. Uther’s addition had been a working central heating system which tried its best to counter the lack of insulation in the ancient walls. Uther also insisted on broadband, specially engineered, since the local system often failed. Uther Pendragon could never be out of contact. Arthur’s contribution to posterity was satellite TV. For the sports.

Arthur settled in for the night, making sure he had reception for his phone call to Merlin. Technology and old places did not always mesh and the hills may be picturesque but they caused problems with signal. Despite this he managed his regular good nights with Merlin. Arthur sometimes pondered what had happened in his life that he could not sleep well without being metaphorically tucked in by a voice from across the sea. He wasn’t too upset about it.
The snow that Alfred had predicted came in buckets of the gigantic variety. By evening the ground had disappeared and the whole landscape had been softened and blurred. By midnight even the blurs had blended into one seamless white covering with only the trees sticking up like the masts of long drowned ships in a frozen sea.

Arthur, despite his verbal tucking in, slept poorly, the unaccustomed light outside keeping him aware. As night stretched deep into morning, he heard his phone beep and reached out for it. A text. From his father. Never good.

FROM: UThER PENDRAGON
Heathrow closed due to snow. Won’t make it. Heading straight for New York.

Arthur stared at the screen with an absurd desire to laugh. The irony was this was not his worse Christmas. If the electricity stayed on it would not even make the top five worst.

Another beep.
FROM UThER PENDRAGON
Happy Christmas.

Arthur felt the unexpected pricking of tears in his eyes. Why would he do that? He didn’t have to do that. It just made it worse.

Arthur pulled the duvet from the bed and wrapping it around his shoulders he looked out at the now unfamiliar landscape. It was still snowing. There was no way he would make it to London – he doubted he would make it to the village. He sighed. It was going to be a long few days.

That day was passed in a blur of phone calls, texts and more snow.

First a text from the catering company explaining that, unless there was a sudden and dramatic thaw they would not be able to cater on Christmas day. They would however email cooking instructions. Arthur was not impressed with the last point. He remembered the burnt sausage incident and decided that the five hundred year old building did not deserve to burn. He resolved to survive on microwavable food from the freezer. It may not be festive but it had a non incendiary advantage.

The phone call was from Alfred, checking firstly whether he was needed to drive to the station and secondly asking if Arthur needed anything. Arthur, looking at the by now above-welly-height snow, wondered at Alfred’s optimism. Despite being old enough to draw a State Pension (supplemented from Arthur’s trust fund) Alfred saw it as his duty to look after The Family at The
Manor. For two hundred years the family had been the Thorpes but Uther had seen the Manor for sale soon after he had made his first fortune and had stepped in to buy it, history and all. Uther liked to tell people that his grandfather had been born there. He did not tell them that Tom Pendragon had lived in one of the tied cottages and that the purchase of the estate had been his one sentimental move.

Alfred, having served the Thorpes as a boy, had adopted the Pendragons, father, and especially son. For a time when he was young, Arthur had wished Alfred was his father. Eton had cured him of that but he never lost his affection for the old man. Now he was impressed by the seventy year old asking if he needed help. He know that if he said yes Alfred (and it was always Alfred, not Mr. Brown. He wore his name as an honorific and everyone in the village knew him) would struggle through the snow to get to him. Arthur, while thinking it foolish, appreciated the sentiment and said he was fine.

The afternoon was taken with Season’s greeting phone calls to various constituency and party people to ensure he was not forgotten. Ava Renney even wished him happy Christmas which made him shudder slightly for some reason.

The last phone call was to Merlin. Arthur knew he was taking the Christmas Eve late shift at the taxi company so he rang early. To his frustration the Cotswolds mobile phone system, already having difficulties, finally couldn’t cope with the snow. After a few dropped calls, and ‘can-you-hear-me-now’ conversations, they gave up and texted their Christmas wishes. Arthur felt frustrated. He wanted to hear Merlin’s voice, have his solid Northern Irish accent tell him that despite the evidence to the contrary, the sky was not falling.

On Christmas Day, Arthur stayed in bed until hunger drove him up. His father’s heating system valiantly tried to overcome the vicious cold but was defeated by the 16th century mullioned windows in the main house. Dressed in layers which may have included his sleep wear, Arthur retreated to a small study, lit a fire and nested with a bottle of Chateau d’Yquem. He wasn’t that interested in the wine but the temptation of raiding his father’s special occasion wine cellar had been too great.

He was alternating between feeling hard done by and mellow when he got another text.

FROM MERLIN BALINSON
When would you be free to talk?
Arthur replied NOW and prepared to defy the odds and call when a message came in.

FROM MERLIN BALINSON
Skype. Now.

Arthur struggled to find a laptop, to find the settings and press the right buttons but a half an hour later he was looking at Merlin.

“Why didn’t we do this before?” Merlin asked.

“Because usually we are both so tired getting a phone to work is almost too difficult” commented
Arthur dryly. It was good to see Merlin, to see his eyes light up and his grin cover his face.

“Arthur, you look...?” Merlin hesitated. “What ARE you wearing?” he wrinkled his nose as he spoke and Arthur scolded himself for thinking it adorable. Then he looked at the inset of himself and understood the comment. He had not shaved for two days and wore a golden stubble that did nothing for him. Over his sleep pants he had pulled tracksuit bottoms, and on top he had layered sports hoodies and jumpers. If he met himself on the street he would give himself a penny. Or not.

“I’m on holiday” he said defensively “I’m entitled”

“I thought your father is a real stickler for dressing for dinner?” Merlin said with a query in his voice.

“He is” Arthur said shortly.

“Arthur” Merlin was very serious and his eyes looked straight at him from the laptop. “Arthur, why are you dressed as a hobo when your father doesn’t approve?”

Arthur didn’t want his pity but he would not lie.

“He’s in New York. He didn’t make it. The weather.”

Merlin looked at him. “Arthur, are you on your own on Christmas day?”

“Nope.” Said Arthur. “I have Chateau d’Yquem to keep me company” he waved the bottle.

As Merlin flooded him with a combination of horror and consolation Arthur occupied the time in looking at the Ulster man. Merlin looked good. His hair, often shaggy in Doonshee had been tamed to a respectable form. He was in shirt and tie – the latter a particular shade of blue which matched a certain tie pin. Arthur smiled when he saw the tie pin and Merlin stopped in mid word. Fingering the tie pin he smiled in response.

“My mum got me the tie to match” he said shyly. Arthur approved and the conversation flowed easily. It felt natural to talk to Merlin like this – better than natural because he had no distractions so he could concentrate on the movements of Merlin’s face. He became fascinated with the tiny quirks at the corner of his mouth, the half smiles, the different expressions of his eyes. Arthur had known these before but now he had a legitimate reason to stare and he was making the most of it.

They didn’t notice a few hours going by until Arthur heard a voice on Merlin’s end.

“It’s Dr, Who in ten minutes” said Merlin. “I don’t have a telly in this room”

Arthur was suddenly disappointed that the conversation was over. “Right. Okay” he said. “maybe later”

“Do you have a TV in the room?” Merlin asked.

“Why?” Arthur asked. He knew there was a home cinema in another room in the house but he was reluctant to move. There was a small TV in a faux cabinet in the study so he said yes anyway.

“Point the laptop at the screen” said Merlin patiently. “We will watch together”

And they did. Later Arthur would think it quite surreal to be sitting on a couch watching TV with a laptop but at the time it seemed so natural. He and Merlin commented and bickered over the plots and the costumes, and he enjoyed every moment. As the show neared the end he noticed that
Merlin’s comments were fewer and farther apart and when the credits rolled he turned the laptop to ask why.

Merlin had managed somehow not to faceplant on the keyboard – but just barely. He was asleep, his face leaning on his arm. Arthur did not begrudge him. He knew Merlin had been working double and triple shifts to help the taxi firm stay open and to allow those with kids to have critical times over Christmas. He looked at Merlin fondly. He remembered how he had once needed to have Merlin open his eyes to be him but now he could look at his sleeping form and feel only protective love. He noticed the eye lashes, thick and dark as they lay on his crumpled cheek. He noticed a series of healing marks on Merlin’s cheek, fading but visible this close.

Arthur had seen enough rugby injuries to recognise healing grazes, and these looked as if they had been quite extensive. He tried to remember Merlin mentioning being hurt but couldn’t. He would be embarrassed if Merlin had told him and he had forgotten. He hoped he remembered everything Merlin said.

He was still musing when Merlin stirred, opened an eye and looked at him.

“Did I fall asleep?” he said groggily.

Arthur smiled broadly “For a little while” he said.

“Have you been watching me?” Merlin asked. Arthur nodded.

“I should think that really creepy but I don’t!” Merlin went on. “I’ve been twillighted” Arthur looked perplexed and Merlin laughed. “I am actually glad you don’t get it” he said. “Now tell how Dr. Who ended – I can’t believe I missed it”

They talked for a while then Arthur casually asked about the marks on his face. “I had a close call with a doorway” Merlin said lightly. If he had been on the phone that would have been enough, but Arthur saw the way his shoulders tensed at the question, the stress in his eyes as he spoke.

“Merlin?” he asked “What’s wrong? What happened”

“Fine!” said Merlin and he seemed angry though Arthur did not know why. “You are right, then. The world isn’t perfect, and okay, so Belfast has more issues than most but...” while he was speaking another voice interrupted and he looked away from the camera.

“Merlin love” the voice said “Your Auntie Anne is here and she came all this way in this weather...”

Another voice broke in “Merlin! where is my favourite nephew!”

“I have to go” Merlin said desperately “I will talk to you later” and the laptop was closed.

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Arthur pondered what Merlin might have meant by issues and being in front of a laptop he proceeded to Google. He knew historically Belfast had been violent but he had not seen it in the news in his lifetime. Now looking closely he find that the violence was still there in small patches. Then he found a headline “Homophobia is the new sectarianism” and he felt a chill that had nothing to do with the icy cold outside.

Was this what Merlin meant about the world not being perfect? Was this what happened to him? Arthur felt a little sick – and not from the wine. He had learned to think that if he didn’t like the world he should change it. It was why he wanted politics. But changing attitudes was a lot harder than changing policies and took a long time. Arthur wasn’t even on the bottom rung of a very long ladder. He wanted to talk to Merlin about it – and he had just realised that when the power went off and this officially entered the top five worst Christmases.

The power stayed off. Arthur hoarded the charge in his phone and sent Merlin a text warning him of the change of power status. He then looked for and failed to find candles because it was too dark. The heating was also off and Arthur could not face a night in his chilly room. Gathering as many duvets as he could find in the dark, threw more wood on the fire and snuggled down.

The power was off for nearly three days. Arthur found candles, discovered that char grilling over an open fire involved grilling (and charring) more than the food. By the time a thaw set in and the roads and railways were open Arthur was more than ready to return to civilisation.

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Back in London, one of Arthur’s first appointments was with Ava Renney, arranging his schedule for the coming months. Arthur was quick to include his rugby dates which passed Ms. Renney’s inspection with demur. She insisted on some other occasions.

“This dinner next month” she said, indicating a formal function in one of the fashionable London hotels, “It would be advisable for you to attend”

Arthur looked at the details. Apart from party contacts there seemed to be no reason for him to go and he said so.

“It is sponsored by Aristotle Redin” she said. “You will inevitably meet him. This would be positive”

Arthur schooled his face not to respond. Aristotle Redin was a self declared media mogul with a taste for destroying anyone who dared put a head over the parapet of mediocrity. His papers had brought an end to many careers, both in the arts and in politics, though no doubt Ms. Renney would argue their demise was self inflicted in that they provided ammunition for Redin and his ilk. She did not have any sympathy for anyone who got caught with pants anywhere other than firmly buckled.

“Shouldn’t I just stay away from him?” Arthur asked, proud that his voice showed no nerves.
“No. He will be curious about the Pendragon heir seeking a political career. It is better to court him than be hunted by him. He is only dangerous if you have something to hide” she paused and looked at him straight in the eye “and you don’t” she added with a raised inflexion which could be taken as a question.

“I’m not ashamed of anything in my life” Arthur said firmly. “I’ll go to the dinner and play nice with Redin, but I will not court him. He and his kind...” he paused to try and think a suitably vile word but then didn’t bother. It would never get through to Ava Renney.

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Rugby came before anything else and it came to Dublin with a Six Nations match. Arthur flew into Dublin airport and since Merlin was driving from Belfast and the airport was on the way he and Betsy did the transport thing.

Arthur was now master of the Bro-hug as patented by Calum. He had even practiced it in London with no raised eyebrows so there was no tension when he saw Merlin at the arrivals gate. They moved quickly to the car and as they walked through the curving parking structure Arthur could hear a car horn sound in the distance.

“Guess where I’m parked” Merlin remarked gloomily.

In the direction the noise was coming from Arthur could see flashing lights.

“Lots of car alarms do that” he said consolingly.

They came closer. “That would be fine if I had a car alarm” said Merlin as they reached the twitching car. “I blame you. She only gets this excited when you’re around”

“She likes me” said Arthur a little smugly.

“Or you drive her crazy” said Merlin dryly.

“It’s the same thing” remarked Arthur. Merlin looked at him sideways from the driver’s seat.

“Yes it is” he said softly.

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Getting out of the airport was interesting and at one time they almost headed for Belfast before Merlin realised and swerved into the correct lane. They then went round the same roundabout three times as Arthur, who was navigator, tried to decide which way to go. Finally he just pointed “Take that one” he said.

“Are we supposed to be on a motorway?” Merlin asked as Betsy chundered along in a cold rain.

Arthur peered around him. “Probably” he said.
“Arthur Pendragon, have you gotten us lost?” Merlin gave him a sidelong glance that was both affectionate and irritated.

“We are not lost” said Arthur with determination. “We know where we are” he gestured towards a road sign “And we know where we are going” he waved the page that had the name of the hotel on it. “We are simply not sure how to get there”

“Oh” said Merlin, then stopped speaking. Silence filled the car. Merlin’s eyes remained fixed on the wet motorway ahead.

“Sometimes that feels like being lost” he said very quietly.

Arthur had never been known for his perception but he felt that somehow the conversation was no longer about getting to the hotel. Merlin’s hand gripped the steering wheel tightly and Arthur could see the white of his knuckles.

“We’ll get there” Arthur said softly “I promise you. We will get home.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter refused to to be written. First it got stuck in the snow so I cut some of it, then instead of having a nice light hearted journey in Betsy they insisted on having a deep conversation. I have spent the last three hours trying to get them off the motorway so I have cut my losses and cut the chapter.
They drove further, the winter light turning to dark. A sports car cut in front of Betsy, red and gleaming and oozing power.

“That’s like your car” Merlin said, without inflexion.

“No” said Arthur, “Mine is older and the soft top leaks”. As he spoke he remembered Calum saying that Merlin had issues with his car.

“It was the first thing I ever had that was really mine” he said softly. “I saw it and I haggled for it and I bought it”

“I thought... you said it was a gift” Merlin said hesitatingly

Arthur tried to swallow his feelings. “My father said I was to get a car. He put the money in my account. He never enquired about the actual car”

Merlin drove carefully, eyes ahead.

“Oh” he said. There was silence for a moment.

“You know my mum says you are welcome to come home with me any time, not just Christmas” Merlin blurted out.

Arthur felt ridiculously warm. For a moment he fantasised about a visit, then remembering, he mentally shook himself. “You know I can’t” he said and then, because it was true added “Yet” He did not say that ‘can’t’ was not true but he knew it. He wasn’t ready ... yet.

Arthur’s stomach rumbled. Somehow he had forgotten breakfast and missed lunch and he was hungry. Merlin laughed at the sound.

“Hungry?” Merlin asked.

“Are you inquiring or do you have food” said Arthur

“There’s a packet of mints in the glovebox” Merlin laughed.

Arthur opened the glove compartment and found the packet of mints – a little sticky. He also found a brochure for Colasite Doonshee, a menu from the Chinese takeaway on Doonshee Main street and a half full packet of condoms, slightly sandy. He actually remembered putting them in there after an interrupted tryst on the beach at Doonshee.

“It was a good summer” he said waving the menu at Merlin but meaning more than that. Merlin nodded and Arthur was pleased that the corners of his mouth twitched into the secret smile that Arthur loved so much. Arthur took a mint and did not appreciate it.

“Seriously Merlin, Mints? That’s the best you can do? You’re a pathetic sweet supplier. Not even jelly babies”
“In my defence” said Merlin, “They are my mum’s”

Arthur took out the pack of condoms and held them so that Merlin could see. “Tell me she did not see these in there” he said half seriously. “Because if she did, I will never be able to look at her, when I do visit.” Arthur startled himself with the use of when – not because he used it but because he suddenly knew he meant it. Someday he would visit Merlin’s parents and see his home. This would happen. He was certain.

He glossed over his epiphany with a complaint. “When was the last time you cleaned out the car, Merlin? Betsy deserves better”

Merlin chuckled. “She thinks she’s your car, you can tidy her” he said. Arthur huffed, secretly delighted. They were bickering and they continued to bicker as they drove into the night. In Cardiff, Merlin had been quiet. Oh, he had been fierce and passionate in the bedroom but Arthur had wanted him to fiercely defend his last piece of bacon which Arthur tired to filch. He had wanted him to passionately argue for his place in the Famous Five. He had wanted *Merlin* and here, watching the motorway roll out before him, he had Merlin.

Before he brood on it, Merlin’s phone rang and, as it was in the pocket of his jeans, he called on Arthur to get it out. Gingerly Arthur hooked two fingers into the pocket to ease the phone out without groping.

“Quit being so careful” Merlin said “You’re the only one who does get to touch. No need to be coy”

“I was trying not to distract the driver” said Arthur haughtily, secretly delighted “Because crashing often offends”. He held out the phone but Merlin gave him a pointed look and nodded towards it. Arthur answered it.

“Hey Mez” Calum’s voice rang in the car.

“It’s Arthur” said Arthur

“Of course it is” laughed Calum. “Now finish off whatever you guys are doing, get yourselves respectable and come down to the lobby. Me and Elena should be there in about fifteen minutes to bring you to dinner” Another voice chimed in: Elena’s.

“And Dancing! So get your groove on”. Both Merlin and Arthur groaned.

In sync.

Which made them smile.

“We’re not in the hotel yet” said Arthur “we’re on the motorway”

“Fuck’s sake!” exclaimed Calum “Where?”

Arthur looked around for a road sign “Bray?” he suggested, finding a sign. The chorus of expletives which filled the car told them they may have gone the wrong way...

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More than an hour later and after a few moves that were quite frankly illegal and one that Arthur
was convinced was physically impossible (Betsy did it anyway) Arthur and Merlin finally reached
their city centre hotel where Elena and Calum were waiting.

“You guys need a sat-nav” was Calum’s opening comment. Arthur looked pointedly at Merlin. His
Christmas gift to Merlin had been a sat-nav, and he knew the results.

“I have one” Merlin said, not meeting Arthur’s eyes, “Betsy doesn’t like it. She went ballistic when
I used it first – everything on, wiper, lights, everything ...”

Elena interrupted “You really should get the electrics looked at”

Both Arthur and Merlin looked at her as if she had suggested dissecting a puppy. Merlin continued.
“After that she just wouldn’t start if it was in the car – even if I put it in my pocket. So....”

“It is just a car, you do know that?” Elena’s words caused all three of them to turn to look at her.

“Ignore the crazy person” said Calum. “Food calls”

As they walked through the narrow and crowded streets of Temple Bar, Arthur found himself
walking with Calum.

“I’m after telling Elena about you two” Calum said conversationally “So there won’t be any
awkwardness”

Arthur sighed inwardly. The concept of secrecy seemed to be beyond Calum’s understanding.
As if reading Arthur’s mind Calum went on. “Sure it’s grand, she won’t tell anyone”

Arthur thought he deserved a medal for not saying ‘Just as you didn’t tell anyone?’. He just looked
at the crowds around him, still looking happy despite the cold night. Calum was worth it, and he
did not fear Elena. He said nothing.

They ate, surprisingly well for Arthur, whose previous experience with Irish cuisine had been
limited to coffee shop and takeaways. Arthur relaxed and enjoyed himself. He had been looking
forward to spending time with Merlin alone, but he found that being with friends who knew and
had no issues was... like living in a world he had not believed possible. Calum and Elena talked and
joked and teased and part of Arthur felt that he was in Narnia.
Except he knew Narnia.
He loved how Merlin chatted and laughed – not quiet and restrained as he had been in Cardiff but himself. Arthur felt something bubbling inside him and suspected it may be joy. It was not something he was familiar with.

Calum brought them to a nightclub and despite his initial reluctance Merlin was dragged up to dance. Arthur was more cautious. Ava Renney had made him paranoid; he feared the consequences of a casual photo on the dance floor which could make him look drunk, and he ensured he was not by switching to soft drinks when they arrived. Arthur sat in a booth as he watched the others on the crowded dance floor.

For someone who could be so graceful on a surf board, Merlin looked like a demented giraffe on the floor, all knees and elbows. He soon had an audience and acknowledged the laughs with broad grins. Arthur looked closely and realised that Merlin was faking it – he was being the clown deliberately. Arthur wondered why but recognised the skill. When Merlin looked his way he saluted him with his glass and nodded. Merlin half raised a hand in recognition and gave a rueful smile. Arthur decided he would ask later the reason for the deception.

He was so caught up in looking at Merlin that he barely noticed when Elena sashayed over to him and sat beside him, cocktail in hand.

“So, you and Merlin, huh? So happy for you. Merlin is such a dote”

Arthur immediately felt defensive. “Are you going to give me the ‘if you hurt him I will kill you’ speech” he asked with a tinge of bitterness.

Elena laughed “Did Calum do that to you? D’you know he did that to Val? It was HIGH-larious. Val just sat there and listened and then he got up and leaned over Cal and said ‘good to know’ and walked off. Cal was practically shaking. It was sooo funny. But kinda sweet too.” She sounded a little wistful. “I don’t have any brothers y’know”

“Neither do I” said Arthur meaning more than he said.

Elena looked at him. “I forgot that” she said “You, me and Merlin, a bunch of onlies” She looked over to where Merlin was laughing with Calum “But us blonds should stick together” she paused “Want a sister then?” she said .

Arthur laughed but she looked as serious as she could be, carrying a cocktail glass with an umbrella in it. With a cherry on top.

“I mean it” she said. “I always wanted to be a big sister”

“Hey, I’m older” protested Arthur. Elena waved him way.

“This is a onetime deal” she said “Big sister or nothing. I promise I won’t make you eat worms. Though I make no promises about doing your hair. You have pretty hair”

Arthur laughed, then nodded. Elena stood up, a little unsteadily. “And now I’m going to warn Merlin if he hurts my little brother he’ll have me to answer to” Arthur pulled her back down onto the seat.
“Perhaps you should wait until he sits down” he said but he still felt a warm feeling inside. Elena may have been slightly tipsy but her actions still made him feel wanted in a way he had not felt before.

++++++
Finally they were alone, in their hotel room.

Arthur touched Merlin’s cheek gently.

“You never told me how this happened” he said

Merlin didn’t move from the touch.

“I wasn’t going to tell you about it at all” he said. “I’m not very good at keeping secrets”

“Why would you want to” Arthur was puzzled.

Merlin turned away slightly and Arthur sat on the edge of the bed. Merlin was silent for a moment then spoke.

“There was no need. It wasn’t about you. It would have happened if I wasn’t with you. You didn’t need to know”

Merlin stood, his eyes firmly fixed on the carpet. Arthur pulled him close so that he stood between Arthur’s knees

“Don’t I get to care?” Arthur said very quietly.

“Do you want to?”

“Do you doubt it?”

“Not here. Not now” Merlin put his hands on Arthur’s shoulders. “But...” he took a breath “You still have a choice. You don’t have to live in the world with the name calling and people pushing you into walls. You can stay as you are.” Merlin’s hands dropped to his side. “I was afraid. I didn’t want to remind you that you have a choice”

Arthur felt a wave of sorrow for Merlin. He wrapped his arms around Merlin’s hips and pulled him closer.

“You idiot,” he said reaching up for a kiss, “I have chosen”

As he claimed Merlin’s lips, he tried to drown with kisses the realisation that in truth, he had not yet committed to his choice.

++++++

The next day was the match, which provided a variation on a theme when Elena took Guillaume’s
ticket (the Frenchman had cried off claiming work but Arthur was convinced that Gwen was visiting Paris). Elena proved to be an interesting addition to the party.

“OH MY GOD HE JUMPED HIM!” Three minutes in – the first tackle.

“Why are they all scrooged up like that?” - The first scrum.

“WHY ARE THEY GANGING UP ON HIM!” The first try.

At half time Arthur thought he was very restrained not to have murdered her. And possibly Merlin, whose shaking shoulders were the only indication that he was thoroughly amused. Calum took Merlin aside.

“Look, she’s great really, but I swear, one more comment and I will end her” Arthur heard him say. Merlin just laughed and said that Elena could take care of herself.

The game resumed

“OH MY GOD LOOK AT THE ASS ON HIM!” Every eye in a radius of two metres turned and looked at her. Elena smiled at them “What?” she said “He does have a great ass” A slow titter of laughter rolled across the stadium.

Arthur, sitting down, put his head in his hands. Merlin stopped trying not to laugh and gave in to hiccups of laughter. Calum stood transfixed.

“I don’t even know who she’s talking about” he said

“O’Gara” said Arthur

“How do you know that? No I don’t want to know how you know that. Dammit we missed a try!”

As they left the stadium Elena was bouncing. “Guys, that was great. Count me in for the next one. Never saw so many gorgeous guys in tight shorts before, seriously guys, I am sooo into rugby now”

Calum sighed. “Do you think Val would mind if I killed her?” he asked. “The dude is big y’know”

“Never mind him” said Arthur “I’ve adopted her so I’d be irked”

“Irked? Irked? That’s the best you can come up with to defend me?” Elena huffed. “Some brother you are”

“Sorry, sis” Arthur said, suddenly feeling good. Was this what having family felt like? He asked as much.

“If you mean being embarrassed by females then yeah, it is” said Calum gloomily “I have five sisters, what Elena did doesn’t even come close”

Elena proved her sisterly worth when she pushed Arthur and Merlin towards a train station.

“You two get the Dart back to the city centre” she said pulling Calum way.

“Can we trust them not to get lost?” Calum said plaintively “I mean, they were half way to Wexford yesterday”

Elena looked at Arthur contemplatively. “If you get to Howth, you’ve gone too far.” she said and grabbing Calum by the arm started to walk away. “He’s a Londoner, if he can figure out the Tube
he can figure out the Dart. There’s only one line for crying out loud!”

They didn’t get lost and soon made it back to their hotel. Merlin suggested eating in but Arthur wanted more.

“I ... I’d like to have dinner with you. Out. In a restaurant” he said

“Like ... like a date?” Merlin hesitated as he spoke and Arthur smiled both at the hesitation and at the fact that that was exactly what he wanted.

So they had a date.
In a restaurant.
With proper table cloth and little candle and Arthur, watching the light flicker across Merlin’s lean face knew he was being utterly soppy but he loved every minute. They didn’t quite hold hands across the table decorations but Arthur was close to it.

Later, back in the hotel, they did more than hold hands....

+++++

Leaving the next morning was difficult. Their loving had been less frantic than Cardiff, with more laughter and when he woke with Merlin’s snuffling breathing beside him Arthur did not want to let go. He wondered if all long distance relationships were like this or was it just him, making things complicated.

He sighed when he saw the time. He had to get a morning flight to be back in London for one of Ava Renney’s power lunches. He carefully disentangled himself, gently tucking Merlin in as he left to shower.

He came back into the room drying his hair but wearing nothing else. It was not that Arthur was an exhibitionist (though privately he would maybe admit he was). He would defend his habit of wearing nothing by saying that too many locker rooms and communal showers had inured him to nakedness but actually it was because he loved the way Merlin looked at him. The frank admiration combined with lust and a touch of something else made Arthur feel wanted and loved and he courted that look. He hoped Merlin was awake for his entrance. He did not expect to see him sitting on the opposite side of the bed, his back to the bathroom door and his hands over his eyes. When he turned, Arthur could see his eyes were red-rimmed and he looked distraught.

“Merlin? What? Are you...?” Arthur rushed over, vainly wishing for clothes. It was difficult to try and be comforting while naked.

Merlin gave him a weak smile. “I’m ok really. I woke up and you weren’t there, and... I don’t know how much more I can do this”

Arthur sat heavily beside him “This?” he asked with a look at their shared bed.
“Saying goodbye” said Merlin. “Since Doonshee that’s what we do most, even on the phone at night, there is that silence after you’ve gone and ...”

Arthur felt a lump in his throat. He understood.

Merlin looked at him, eyes brimming “How do you manage? How does it not break you?”

Arthur took a breath. He wanted to say – because I am already broken – because my life is full of goodbyes and you give me hello – because....

“You” he said. “Because it’s you”

Merlin looked confused and Arthur was frustrated that he did not seem to understand how important he was. Arthur decided to change tack. Ever since Christmas day when he had researched Belfast he had wanted to bring Merlin to London. He had worked out how but was waiting for the opening to say it.

“What about coming to London?” he began. “You graduate this summer, you could do your post-graduate studies in London – I’ve researched some courses, and Queens is one of the Russell group so you should get a good college, I could find you a flat – there’s a few I’ve got my eye on and...” he swallowed, the idea of having Merlin a Tube ride away was overpowering.

“You want us to get a flat together?” Merlin still looked confused but a little less sad.

“For you, obviously” Arthur said enthusiastically, “I think Imperial College should be your choice – they have some courses that would fit in with what you are doing now and you could get a flat nearby – practically on my doorstep and I know I have to spend most weekends in the constituency but apart from that and working, we could see each other at least once a week together if we were careful”

“Careful” Merlin repeated quietly.

“Exactly” Arthur said conscious of the time slipping away. He was relieved he had had a chance to talk to Merlin about his dream. “I can send you the prospectus and mark the courses that are suitable. The career options are great too, cutting edge stuff”

“Arthur” Merlin’s voice was very quiet “I’m not that good really. I haven’t been thinking post-grad” He paused for a moment “I’m not sure what I’m going to do”

Arthur huffed as he searched for his clothes, cursing the eagerness which had led him to disperse them around the room last night, and wondering if going commando on a plane could be classed as an act of terrorism. “This Irish ‘Thing’ you all have of talking yourselves down – you really need to let it go” he said finding underwear in the bottom of his bag. “You are brilliant, this weekend was brilliant because of you, last night was brilliant, the date... it was all...”

Merlin looked up at that, a bemused expression on his face.

“And” Arthur continued as he pulled on trousers “I won’t have anyone implying my boyfriend is anything but brilliant”

“Boyfriend?” said Merlin in an incredulous tone. Arthur was suddenly unsure of himself.

“Is that not the word?” he said nervously “I don’t know these things. Is there a protocol of something? Does it mean something different? Because...” He was talking faster to overcome his nervousness “For me there’s no one... and you said... in the car... you implied... Fuck, have I
messed things up?”

Merlin had been silent but now he stood and held his arms out to Arthur.

“No,” Merlin said. “For me too, no one else... Arthur? Am I your boyfriend?” he looked both hopeful and terrified and Arthur was utterly surprised.

“Of course you are, you idiot” he said “I mean... do you think I feel all this for anyone? You’re more than anyone...”

The room phone rang: a harsh shrill sound.

“Dammit,” said Arthur “That’ll be my taxi. I have to go. If I’ve left anything, bag it and keep it for me” He pulled Merlin close for a kiss that wanted to become lingering but broke off with a soft whine. “Must go. I’ll call tonight, we’ll talk”

He left, closing the door with a soft snick, Merlin still standing by the rumpled bed.
Merlin

The drive back to Belfast gave Merlin the first chance to think about the weekend. He had a lot to think about.

For one brief, glorious, heart-stopping nano-second of a moment Merlin believed that Arthur was suggesting that they move in together. Of course that was not what he suggested but Merlin was surprised and not a little scared that his instant response was ‘yes’. If Arthur had meant that, Merlin knew he would leave for London without hesitation at the possibility of not having to say goodbye to Arthur again.

But Arthur was not talking about living together.

At least Arthur did want him to come to London. That had to mean something, didn’t it? And Arthur had called him ‘boyfriend’. Yes, it had clichéd teenage connotations but even so as a word, it meant something.

Merlin admitted to himself that he had been the one who had insisted he did not want promises, did not ask for commitment. But now, more than half a year in, he knew the uncertainty was breaking him, piece by piece. He knew how he felt, what he wanted, but not knowing Arthur’s feelings – not being sure of Arthur’s feeling turned his hopes sour.

But Arthur had said ‘boyfriend’ – just casually, just like that, as if it were the most normal thing in the world and as he drove through the rain the thought warmed Merlin through and through.

Which was just as well as, for this journey Betsy had decided that he could have lights or heat, but not both. Merlin had decided that dying from hypothermia was less likely than being hit by a truck driving with no lights. Betsy also hated saying goodbye.

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Life back in Belfast was busy. In the second half of his Final year college work just kept piling up. Added to that he was still taking extra shifts at Kenny’s while the eponymous owner recovered.

He was in the office one chilly evening, manning the phone while typing an assignment on his laptop when said owner appeared at the door. Merlin did not know whether to cheer or scold so he settled for saying hello.

“I hear you’ve kept the place going” Kenny commented as he came around the desk to check the bookings book. “Oh Aye,” he continued “I hear everything”

Merlin knew that Kenny’s drivers took turns to visit him every day, keeping him in touch with his life.
“Have you ever thought of being a driver?” Kenny’s words surprised Merlin, who hadn’t. “Because if you do, you’ll have a slot here, no problem. You’re a good driver, even if you do drive a clunker and my friend Andy says you’re fair on the way to being able to take care of yourself in a corner.”

This was true. Working with ‘Call-me-Andy’ had been very educational for Merlin. Andy had quickly realised that Merlin was not interested in the ‘art’ part of the martial art and had no intention of going to shows, and had adjusted the training accordingly. The first task had been ‘How Not To Get Shoved Into Walls’ which was followed by ‘How Not To Get Pushed Over’ and ‘How Not To Get Punched’ They were working on ‘How Not To Get Stabbed’ Merlin knew that no amount of lessons would teach him How Not To Be Hurt When Politicians Stand Up On TV And Call You Unnatural For Loving Someone’ but it still helped.

And now, in an oblique way Kenny was offering him a job. Merlin had never considered taking a car out but it did make him feel wanted. “My wee grandson cut his first tooth yesterday” Kenny said, changing the subject. “And he’s sitting up and all. He’ll be crawling before we know where we are”

Merlin nodded in a way he hoped was suggestive of total interest and enthusiasm. He knew little of babies but he knew Kenny was besotted with Holly’s boy.

“I was sitting with him t’other day and I could feel the tooth plain as anything in his gum. My grandson, and him growing up” Kenny paused reflectively.

“You know, the medicos in the hospital were talking and they said it was touch and go in the ambulance – only for them I’d not be seeing the wee boy growing up – and only for you that ambulance would’na been there. So...”

Merlin interrupted to put Kenny out of his gratitudinal misery “Anyone would have called them” He said quickly.

“I wouldn’t” said Kenny. “But I’ll remember that you did, Merlin”

Merlin was startled. As far as he could recall, it was the first time Kenny had used his name.

Merlin did not take up Kenny’s offer, having more than enough on his plate, though he did mention it to Arthur in their nightly call. Arthur had joked about it for a few days, making some rather interesting suggestions about taking Merlin’s cab, but he really was caught up in his own adventures.

He told Merlin about the charity dinner with Ari Reddin, and how he had spoken to the pale-eyed mogul. Arthur sounded both worried and exhilarated afterwards.
“He knows things. Things about me.” he had said to Merlin “He asked about Sophia, made comments about Ava Renney. I’ve barely started in this game and he already had me researched”

Merlin had reminded Arthur that he had been in the sights of the gossip-mongers for longer than that, probably for much of his life. Uther Pendragon had a notoriously litigious relationship with the press and this had protected Arthur while he was growing up but now that he had placed himself (potentially) in the public eye, he was fair game.

Arthur had agreed. “It means we will have to be extra careful when you come over to London” he said.

Arthur often mentioned Merlin moving to London. At first it gave Merlin a slight thrill every time he heard it but as time went on he began to wonder. Arthur’s schedule was very busy. Most weekends were spent in the constituency while two days a week were spent with Professor Kilgarrah. Merlin wondered what would be left for him.

Apart from Arthur, Merlin knew no one in London, and though he knew Universities were good places to get to know people he also knew that he would have to be as Arthur put it ‘careful’ Both Calum and Guillaume had guessed about their relationship almost before it had started and Merlin knew he would have to keep people at arm’s length to be safe. He began to imagine a lonely life in London, with only a weekly booty call from Arthur to keep him from going insane. It was not a bright prospect.

If he could look forward to an interesting Course that might change matters but nothing he read in the many prospectus Arthur sent to him raised a flicker of interest. He simply did not like the field he was in. He knew he would get the degree – it was not that he could not do the work, just that he was not interested enough to bother much. He knew it was valuable and of great fascination to his fellow students but he could not get enthusiastic. He only stayed on because he was Merlin and he finished what he started. The idea of doing more study in the area made his stomach churn.

It didn’t help that Arthur had thrown himself, with his usual zeal, into the search for a course for Merlin. One evening, on Skype, Arthur admitted that he had been researching the choice while working for Professor Kilgarrah.

“I said I was doing research in to Third level education” Arthur said “The Prof was fine with it – more than that, he gave me ideas – did you know that only about 35% of UK school leavers go on to University? he went on. Merlin did and said so.

“That needs to change” Arthur went on. “We need to look at why that is. Why there are so many young people not in education or in jobs.”

“Do you really care Arthur?” Merlin asked. Arthur stopped for a moment and looked as if he was thinking.

“I do.” He said “I really do”
Merlin smiled. “I think you’ve found your thing” he said “Every politician needs a thing. Can you get all passionate about it and argue with Jeremy Paxman on Newsnight?”

“There’s no point in being passionate without having something to say” Arthur said “I need to know more – talk to people. Have ideas. I don’t even know what the problem is”

“But you want to know” Merlin interrupted.

“I want to know” Arthur agreed softly.

Merlin felt a sudden spike of pride. This is what Arthur could be, a real leader who wanted to understand before changing things. This Arthur was worth the pain.

Arthur didn’t forget the original reason for his interest. He still bombarded Merlin with course outlines until Merlin felt he was in a nightmare of online prospectuses each one less attractive than the last. The more he thought of continuing his studies the worse he felt.

Merlin did not convey much of this to Arthur, partly because he was still trying to think things through himself and partly because Arthur was like a puppy with a new toy. Merlin could not bear taking the toy from him.

A week or so after talking to Kenny, lightening struck. Well, Merlin had to admit, more like a slow sizzle that had been burning for some time but he had not noticed.

In a careers display in the college foyer he saw a brochure. Without thinking he took it up and realised that it clicked with half conscious thoughts he had had for weeks.

He took the brochure home, read it, did some research online and made some phone calls. For the first time since he held his A Level results in his hand and knew Medicine was beyond his reach, he actually knew what he wanted to do with his life.

The thought should have given him great satisfaction but Merlin found that it hurt. Or more specifically what hurt was the knowledge that this would hurt Arthur because if he took this path, he would not be going to London for quite a while.

Merlin decided to break it to Arthur gently, bit by bit. Mondays were good. Monday nights, Arthur was usually home and had time to Skype. On a Monday Merlin could see the reaction his words were having.

That didn’t happen.
In their Saturday phone call Arthur, just in from a Constituency meeting, began to ask about the College courses.

“Which applications have you sent in?” he asked. “You will have to send a few just in case” I have started looking online for a flat for you. They are a bit pricy around here.

Merlin had also looked online. ‘A bit pricy’ was so far out on his league to be in another universe. He tried to dodge the question but Arthur persisted.

“The deadlines are coming up fast and it is much better to get them in before rather than jump at the last minute. It looks more organised”

“Says the man who forgot to take the compulsory residential part of his degree” deflected Merlin lightly. Arthur laughed but did not let go.

“Exactly. You are far more organised than that.” His voice changed, becoming softer. “I know you are under pressure work wise, Merlin, but this is important. It is your future”

Merlin heard the words ring in his mind. ‘It is’ he thought, ‘It is my future’. He took a deep breath.

“Arthur, About that...” he began.

“I’ve been thinking about it. I... Those courses, I mean they’re good but I.. And I’m really grateful that you went to all that trouble but... I...They’re not me. The thought of more study... You know I never wanted to study Medicine for the science. It was always the people...and I ... I want to do something meaningful, something im...”

“Important” the word was barely whispered in his ear.

“Yes, I want...”

Arthur interrupted him.

“You’re not coming to London are you” It was more of a statement than a question.

His voice was cold – colder than Merlin had ever heard – not his politician voice which was full of charm and bonhomie that only Merlin could tell was artificial.

“No” Merlin said quietly. “Not yet. Not if I do this. ” He wished he could Arthur, see what was wrong. The cold voice chilled him to the bone.

“I see” the voice again toneless. “And were going to let me know what ‘this’ is?”

Merlin took a deep breath. He wished he was not doing this now. Something was wrong with Arthur and he knew he was making it worse with every word – but he had started now and there was no way out.

“I want to train as a paramedic” he said.
“I already have some of the skills and I know I can do it. But to enter I need two years on-the-job experience. I checked and they are hiring now. If I get it, I start in the summer. I haven’t applied yet though”

He added the last to try and show Arthur that he had not made a final decision but in his heart he knew he had.

“On the job?” Arthur sounded warmer, less strained. “In a hospital? You could...”

“On an ambulance” This time it was Merlin who was interrupting.

He heard a snort of derision over the phone.

“An Ambulance driver? Really? Are you ten? I wanted to be a train driver when I was five but I got over it” Arthur’s tone was scathing and Merlin physically recoiled from the phone.

Arthur continued, voice dripping with scorn.

“You have a degree! You could make something of yourself, Be. Something, and instead you want to spend your time ferrying old ladies to appointments. Really Merlin? That’s what you think is important?"

Hearing Arthur put every ounce of his patrician upbringing into his voice as he continued to speak, Merlin felt cold fury sweep over him.

“Yes” he said bitterly “That is what I think is important. Obviously we don’t agree. And if you can’t bear thought of being with someone who hasn’t a Master’s degree, if you can’t cope with a ‘Boyfriend’ who drives for a living then you....”

His brain caught up with his mouth and he stopped.

“Arthur” he said, breathing deeply, “Please, We can’t talk to each other like this. Can we just stop for now? I will call you tomorrow and we....”

“Don’t bother” The words rang through the phone and stopped.

Merlin stared at the Call Disconnected flashing on the screen.

Had he broken up with Arthur? Had Arthur broken up with him?

What just happened?

Chapter End Notes

Short but to the point. Please, hate me but don’t hate Arthur....
It was a garden party. It had not been planned as a garden party – it was far too early to assume anything, but the English climate had decided to bring summer early (or only, one never knew) and the casual brunch turned into a garden party. Arthur strolled among the tables, watching the ladies, heels sinking into the soft grass as they flirted their way around the space. This was politics, local style.

“Arthur! Do come over” Clarissa Williams called him. She was the wife of George Williams, the sitting MP Arthur was shadowing, and, in Arthur’s view, by far the better politician. He crossed over to her.

“Let me introduce you to Mark Armstrong, Mark practically runs Barchester Land”

Clarissa ran on and Arthur wondered why he always met the same people, the land owners, the self made men, like his father, the established elite. He knew the constituency included many labourers, and the area had quite a few local authority housing estates but he never went there. When he asked, Clarissa pointed out that there were no votes there. Arthur, thinking about it, was not surprised, though he wondered; if those areas always voted for the loser, did that mean they were never listened to? It was a poor showing for democracy in that case, but Arthur had no choice in the matter as long as he was the hanger-on. To change things, to actually make a difference he had to get in to the exclusive club and that meant smiling at men like Mark Armstrong.

Arthur smiled. It was important.

On occasion over the day he checked his phone for calls and texts. He resolutely did not check his Other Phone. There would be nothing.

Throughout the day he pushed aside the thoughts of what had happened the night before. He cultivated a ball of anger, unwilling to let it go because he knew that if he stopped being angry he would break. So he smiled and shook hands and was charming to all the political types while not allowing the anger either to dissipate or to explode. It was making him sick. Literally. Despite the polite cup of tea in his hand he had not eaten all day. Anger is not good sauce.

After the brunch Arthur drove straight to College rather than going back to London for a day. There was no need. There would be no Skype conversation. Usually he stayed in a friendly and up-market B and B when working, the cost of which equalled all his earnings. Because he came early he had to take for the night, a room in a very efficient chain hotel. He knew the moment he entered his room that it was a mistake.

As he looked around the perfectly commercial room Arthur was brought back to the one memory he had been pushing aside since the phone call.

New York. He was eight. It was Christmas. The one Christmas that always made the top of the
worst Christmases list. Uther had come to New York to make contacts, build his business and he set out to do so with his usual thoroughness. Having a child in tow was not useful. He had more important to do. Arthur spent three days with a remote control and a room service menu. He did not open the store wrapped presents that were not from Father Christmas but from Macys.

But it had been important. Pendragon Enterprises had been born that Christmas and Arthur had learned that ‘important’ was not him. The lesson had been repeated many times.

Arthur crossed the room and sat on the perfectly bland bed. He felt his eyes burn. A lump settled in his throat. For a while he had imagined that he was important to Merlin. Now he knew he was wrong. He lay back on the bed and curled up tightly, hugging himself in his misery, allowing himself to do what Child Arthur had never done. He sobbed.

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The next morning Arthur Pendragon was back.

The Professor was surprised to see him a day early but had no difficulty with him working.

“Unless” he said “You want to continue your research into education”

Arthur shook his head “It’s a fool’s game” he said “Nothing to be gained from it” The Professor gave him curious look. “It that what you really think?” he said in his most calm voice.

Arthur was convinced that the professor asked questions not to know the answer, but so that Arthur would know the answer. It was irritating.

Arthur ignored the educational research and concentrated on the job he was paid (very little) to do. The anger fuelled him and he was savage in his editing.

“This paper is a disgrace!” Arthur raged into the Professor’s office. “I found three errors of fact and the theories just do not stand up. I could do better!”

“But you did not and he did. I will of course inform the author of the factual errors and should you wish to refute the theories, you are free to write your own paper”

Professor Kilgharrah was annoyingly calm but Arthur was rather proud, firstly that he had accepted without question Arthur’s assessment of the errors and secondly that he considered Arthur capable of writing a refutation. For a brief moment Arthur considered it – considered engaging in a purely academic argument with no political aspects. It would be good. But it would not be important. He shrugged off the impulse.
That night he went out with some of his University friends who were up for Examinations. He did not hold back and staggered back to his usual B and B in the early hours of the morning. Giving in to temptation he took out the Other phone and stared at the screen. He did not know if he was wishing for it to ring or not. Twice he reached out to take it up and text but each time he drew back. What was there to say after all?

He did not sleep well, despite the alcohol. He tried not to think that he needed the sound of an Antrim voice saying Goodnight before he could sleep.

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When Arthur drove back to London it was raining and the rain matched his mood. Mrs. Hudson greeted him when he returned, chiding him for being so wet.

“If you ask me a car with no roof isn’t a car” she said as she sent him off to change.

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A shower and a change later Arthur was sitting in his flat trying to get up the will power to do something when Mrs. Hudson called on the intercom.

“There is a young person at the door who says she knows you.” She hesitated. “A blonde”

Arthur had a sudden vision of Sophia. If it was, should he ask her in? Start again? The mere thought sickened him.

“I’m not up to visitors Mrs. Hudson” he said. His own phone rang. He answered without looking. It was not his Other Phone.

“Arthur Pendragon if you don’t get your ass down here now I will kick it six ways to China. I am drowning here”


Arthur quickly told Mrs. Hudson to let her in then rushed down the stairs. Elena stood in the hallway dripping on the porcelain tiles with a curious Mrs. Hudson offering to take her coat. She didn’t have a coat.

“What are you doing here” Arthur blurted out

“My Auntie lives in Wimbledon and I was visiting so I thought I’d pop in. Didn’t plan on it lashing though. I’m ruined.”
That didn’t really answer Arthur’s question but he realised that Mrs. Hudson was still hovering.

“Would the young lady like some tea?” Mrs. Hudson said as if prompted by Arthur noticing her. “I can bring a tray into the drawing room”

Arthur was about to refuse when Elena gave a brilliant smile.

“Oh tea would be lovely. Thanks, Milk no sugar. You’re a life saver”

“We’ll have it in my flat Mrs Hudson if it’s not too much trouble” Arthur said eager to get Elena away from curious eyes. Mrs. Hudson’s eyes immediately became more curious.

Once in his flat Arthur turned to Elena and tried again.

“Why are you here?” he asked in his most Patrician tone.

“I told you about my auntie” Elena said evasively.

“I got drunk dialled by Merlin”

The words hung in the air between them.

“Merlin doesn’t drink” Arthur snapped out

“Congratulations Sweetie, that’s another cherry you popped”

Arthur reeled back at the crudity of her words but then his anger grew again.

“No” He said “I won’t take that on me. Merlin is an adult and he makes his own decisions.”
“Yes he is, and he does” Elena said sweetly, but with a note of triumph. “That’s the point, isn’t it?”

The anger worked through Arthur. “What has he been telling you” he barked.

Elena kept her voice casual but her eyes looked quite fierce.

“Between the tears and the throwing up you mean?” she said “Turns out, Merlin is a sloppy drunk. Who knew?” She shrugged and continued.

“ I’ve held people’s hair as they dealt with alcohol overload but never over the phone. I hope the boy has a good phone package or he will have to mortgage his soul when he gets the bill, we were on for hours.”

While she talked Elena wandered around the living room.

“Nice place you’ve got here – God, isn’t that such a cliché – but it is nice. Bit restricting though, with that sweet lady guarding the door”

At that moment the sweet lady appeared, with a tray, puffing a little. Arthur would have more sympathy had he not known that the dumbwaiter was used for all trays. Elena though was very sympathetic.

“Oh you poor dear, carrying that all the way up here, let me take it, Arthur clear the table, really you should be carrying this” Elena did not pause for breath and Mrs. Hudson visibly warmed to her as she spoke.

“Make sure the young lady dries out properly” she said to Arthur as she laid out the tea things, “Just ring if you need anything else”. She gave Elena a bright smile and left. Arthur waited to give her time to get down the stairs.

“What did he say?” He knew his voice was cold but wasn’t feeling friendly.

“Do you want to know what he said or what I heard? Cos they’re not the same.” Elena was not intimidated by his voice though it had been known to send strong men scurry for cover.

“Elena!” Arthur almost shouted in frustration.
“Okay then, I’ll give you both. He *said* that he always knew he wasn’t good enough for you and that now you knew it too and he told me all about what he wants to do and what you said. But you know what I heard? I heard that this wonderful caring man finally found a career that suits him and you insulted it. That’s what I heard Arthur”

“I should have known you’d be on his side!”

Elena swirled around and faced him, eyes blazing.

“Aren’t you?” she said loudly, then in a slightly lower tone “Isn’t that what happens when you love someone? You’re on their side no matter what?” She moved a step closer and looked at him directly. “Come on Arthur, you loved Merlin last week. Tell me you don’t love him now!”

Arthur said nothing. His breath was coming in short gasps as if he had been running. He felt the anger that had been keeping him functioning, rise up to confront her but beneath the anger was the harsh truth that his love was still there.

He looked at Elena but could not meet her steadfast gaze. He wanted her out of his house, out of his life but something prevented him from ordering her to leave.

“You would have his back in anything else” she said softly “Why not this?”

Arthur felt mauled, as if he was being punched and beaten. He wanted to hit something but didn’t.

“If you feel so strongly about him, why aren’t you in Belfast” he spat.

“Because you didn’t drunk dial me” she said quietly “Because it’s wounds that don’t bleed cause the most pain.”

Arthur felt tears well up in his eyes and turned away, ashamed.

“Merlin is messed up” Elena went on. “Are you?

Arthur put the heel of his hands over his eyes to drive away the tears.

“Get out” he said fiercely

“No” she said firmly.

“GET OUT!” Arthur raised his voice “Get out or I’ll make you”

“Don’t believe you. And if you do I’ll just sit on the steps and get arrested. That’ll be fun”

Elena stepped closer to him. “Don’t you understand, I adopted you. I may have been a bit drunk at the time but I meant it.” She put her hand on his shoulder and gently turned him.
“Arthur?” she said. “You’re messed up too and Merlin is, well we need to fix this”

Arthur pulled away in anger. “Fix what?” he said “Define it. Because seems to me, Merlin is one you should be talking to. He decided to...” he stopped, unable to say more.

“He decided to take a job?” Elena queried and Arthur lashed out.

“That’s not it and you know it! Or maybe he didn’t tell you that I wanted... that I wanted....”

Elena pushed him on to the sofa. “Oh Sweetie, What did you hear?” she asked “Cos Merlin told me you wanted him to come to London. He kept saying he let you down, But what I heard was that you wanted to keep him in a doll’s house and take him out to play with him”

Arthur recoiled from her but before he could order her out again she spoke.


“I wanted him. To be with him. But that obviously was not important enough for him” he spat out.

“And is he important to you?” Elena said.

“I told I wanted him here. Is that not enough?”

“But it wasn’t here was it? Not actually Here” she gestured at the flat.

“Is that what he was expecting? What all of you expect. You all want me to give up my...” Arthur stopped. He did not want to say more.

“Is that what you are afraid of? Cos if it is...” Elena turned to face him and paused. A strange expression came over her face as she looked carefully at him. “Or is that what you want?” she said very quietly. “Oh Arthur, oh dear...” her voice trailed away.

Arthur felt her words hit him and he wanted to curl up and hide.

“Why won’t you leave?” he whispered, not looking at her.

“Because I am a pushy bitch who never takes no for an answer” Elena said abstractedly. “But Merlin isn’t. He isn’t pushy at all. He is the least pushy person I know and my friend Jane once got trampled by a five year old in a queue for ice cream. Merlin isn’t going to push you, no matter what you want. The first summer I knew him he was so damn grateful when anyone was nice to him it was painful. Me, I go after what I want – I mean, I never gave Val a chance, but Merlin never seemed to want anything that wasn’t, you know, being helpful and stuff. He never wanted anything for himself. Until you. But he won’t push even if he does want you”
“I don’t know what he wants!” Arthur snarled out in frustration.

“I know what you mean” Elena said sadly. “I mean, one minute Val is all over me and the next it’s all ‘I have a job to do’ and he’s off even when he’s with me and sometimes I just want to hit him with a frying pan and drag him back to my place and keep him there and OH MY GOD that’s what you were doing with Merlin! You were sooo going all caveman on him! You’ve got Caveman instincts!...” Her voice was filled with triumph which quickly changed “Fuck it! So have I...I’m a cave... person too”

Arthur listened with half an ear. He did want to protect Merlin.

“Did he tell you he was beaten up?” Arthur tried to sound detached.

“No. I mean, was he? Really? That’s shit”

“What would you do if Val was beaten up?”

“Realistically? I’d call an ambulance for them cos they wouldn’t be walking anywhere”

Arthur huffed a half laugh then stopped it.

“Merlin can’t do that”

“He’s stronger than you think” Elena replied. “He’s strong enough to stand up to you”

The thought of Merlin having to stand up to Arthur broke him entirely. He put his head in his hands.

“I don’t know what to do” he said quietly. He was defeated.

Elena patted his head gently.

“Long term? We’ll talk. But right now what you are going to do is point me in the direction of a shower, get me some towels (preferably fluffy) and a hairdryer – in that order – ”

Arthur looked at her in bemusement. What was she talking about?

“Arthur, I’ve had it sitting in these wet clothes. Shower. Towels. Hairdryer. Then you are going to take me somewhere to eat cos we did not get to have the tea. Somewhere posh I wouldn’t get to normally. Don’t worry I have a dress in the bag so I won’t disgrace you. OH! OH! I can be a...”
Mystery Blonde! Oh I wish I had a fur coat. Do you have a fur coat? Mystery Blondes should wear fur. We could get paparazzied. Do the paparazzi follow you? Maybe we could get in the papers. ‘Arthur Pendragon with Mystery Blonde’ Merlin would be so jealous!"

Arthur totally confused by her flow of speech, suddenly came to life.

“No” he said “Merlin wouldn’t be jealous, he’d be hurt”

Elena turned on him with a beaming smile that he used to see on the faces of other boys’ mothers when they won the egg and spoon race on Sport’s day.

“See” she said softly “That’s why you’re my bro” She leaned over and placed a small gentle kiss on his forehead. “You remembered. When you love someone you always have their back no matter what the threat” She tapped his face with her fingers. “But I’m serious about the shower. I’m starting to freeze here and I am leaving an embarrassing wet spot on your couch”

While she showered Arthur sat, utterly confused. He felt as if he had been run over by a whirlwind, but, for the first time since he had cut off the call with Merlin, the knot in his stomach was a little looser.

A discreet knock on the door of his flat announced the presence of Mrs. Hudson. She always treated his door like a Front door.

“I just thought I’d collect the tray” Mrs Hudson said, “Save you the trouble”

Arthur had had mugs in his flat that had set up whole ecosystems and Mrs. Hudson had left them in situ, respecting his independence. He sighed but let her in anyway. She quickly noted the unused tea cups and heard the sound of the shower from the bathroom. She smiled broadly as she picked up the tray.

“Such a nice young lady” she said. “I do like her. Though I did think...” She brought the tray to the door, “Pity she’s Irish” she said as she left.

For a moment Arthur was nonplussed at her words. He wondered what she would say if she knew that the one he wanted in his shower was both Irish and male. On reflection though, he had to admit that Merlin, the Ulster Scot, would insist on being British.

As he reflected, Elena came out, wearing his robe, thankfully longer than the one he had borrowed from her.

“I’ll need something to calm my hair” she demanded. Arthur denied having anything but Elena gave him the same look his nanny had given him when he had denied putting the frog in her bed.

“Don’t even try to tell me that hair stays like that naturally” she said. Arthur took out his hair products.

“Don’t forget to book the restaurant” she reminded him before disappearing to transform. He did
what he was told.

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Elena, as she said herself, scrubbed up well. As they set off to eat she insisted that they would not talk of their respective significant others “Because we don’t want indigestion” she said. “And you can feed me strawberries in champagne while the peasants look on” Arthur laughed.

As it turned out they talked of nothing but their others and though there were strawberries and champagne, Arthur refused to feed them to her. Elena was elated when she received curious glances from some of the diners, many of whom greeted Arthur by name.

“Am I doing the Mystery Blonde well” she asked, putting on what she said was a sultry expression but which Arthur told her made her look like a constipated cat.

“Who’s the one over there giving me the evil eye?” she asked half way through the meal. Arthur looked up.

“That’s Sophia Sidcup.” He said, proud of his casual tone. “My ex” he added.

“Oh” said Elena without expression, which was quite a feat for her. “Did you fancy her? I mean did you... you know...”

“Yes” said Arthur not even bothering to ask why it was her business. This was Elena.

“Oh” she said. “Does Merlin know that you... she... you ... like.....”

“Yes” said Arthur. It was one of the things they had spoken about on their long frustrating walks around Doonshee.

“Oh” said Elena again. “Poor Merlin”

“That’s three oh’s in a row” said Arthur “And why poor Merlin?”

“Well, I get all insecure when I know Val is going somewhere with lots of girls cos I know they all fancy him and he is not blind. If I had to worry about every *person* jumping him I’d be shattered.”

“I wouldn’t cheat on Merlin” Arthur said firmly.

“Why not? I mean, he’s far away and he doesn’t know anyone here, he’d never find out?”
“I just wouldn’t. Why are you asking” Arthur said, getting irritated.

“Because you need to know why” she said and Arthur wondered if, by some trick of the cosmos she was related to Professor Kilgarrah. He thought about answering her as she peered over the menu and looked at him intently.

“Because” he began” because when I am with him I don’t feel lonely, I feel right, but when I am with anyone else, even you, there is an absence, someone missing. Why would I settle for that emptiness?”

Arthur was a little startled when Elena’s eyes filled with tears.

“That is so sweet” she sighed “I wish...” she sighed “What did Merlin say when you told him that?”

Now Arthur was even more startled. “I never have” he said. Elena huffed in annoyance.

“See, that is what I don’t get about two guys together” she said “I don’t get how it works. Not the ...” she made a gesture with her fingers that made Arthur blush and hope fervently that no one had noticed. Oblivious Elena went on “Not that I would mind you telling me about that part... preferably with illustrations.” Arthur did not think he could blush a deeper red.

“ But I don’t get how two guys talk. I mean, I can barely tell when Val is broody, silent and happy from when he is broody, silent and miserable. I have to check his neck muscles for tension, would you believe, and it takes ages to get him to talk about it. But two guys would both be silent and broody and never say anything except...” Her voice went deeper “ ‘The match is about to start, I’ll get the beer’” she brought her tone back to normal “And they wouldn’t even look at the neck muscles so how does it work, the talking?”

Arthur looked at her.

“Oh right” she said. “That’s why I’m here.” She sighed. “This is going to be harder than I thought. I need more champagne”

“What do you talk about?” she asked after the first course arrived. “No actually, you’ll just say Doctor Who” she added. Arthur was actually thinking of a particular Skype conversation on the timeline of River Song. That had included pictures and a vigorous discussion about backwards or forwards. But Elena was still talking and Arthur refocused.

“Start thinking about what you don’t talk about” she said. “And I don’t mean nuclear physics or how they get the bounce in basketballs” Arthur laughed but did think.
What did they not talk about? He tried to think. They didn’t talk much about feeling – though more than Arthur had ever done before so that didn’t count. They did talk about Arthur’s work and the constituency and Ava Renney and ... Arthur began to see gaps. They rarely talked about Merlin’s work – only when he had a funny story, usually with himself as the butt of the joke. They never chatted about his college work – even when he said he had an assignment he never went into details. As he chewed Arthur tried to figure out why Merlin was so secretive, after all, he answered every question Merlin asked. And with a bitter blaze of understanding he realised the problem. He never asked. Merlin was full of casual questions and prompts – ‘read anything interesting at work’ ‘Did the fundraiser go well?’ ‘Who did you meet?’ and Arthur filled them but did not return them.

He closed his eyes for a moment and opened them to see Elena’s kind eyes looking at him.

“That’s the face of a guy who knows he’s fucked up” she said sweetly. “And by the way, the green stuff on your plate is edible. Eat it, there’s a good boy”

Arthur laughed at the abrupt segue “You’re not my mother” he said poking at the salad.

“No” said Elena “Cos if I were you’d eat your lettuce. Now tell me what you figured out”

He did.

They talked through the courses with Elena punctuating her more emphatic comments with a waving fork which Arthur found rather intimidating

Tucking into a chocolate tort, Arthur commented that it was not as good as Elena’s Special Cake.

“You do know I didn’t bake the cakes” Elena said, a little embarrassed. “My Auntie is the baker I just sell the stuff”

“And very well too” Arthur said gallantly. Elena was looking at him with a look that portended fork waving.

“Why were you so annoyed with Merlin driving an ambulance?” she said in a neutral tone. Arthur was not deceived. She was fishing again but the threat of the fork made him honest and – for a change – articulate.

“Because Merlin is brilliant. He is smart, and he thinks around corners and he can learn so fast and ...”

She interrupted him. “Do you think he will stop being those things at the wheel of an ambulance?” she asked. “Don’t you think that someone first at an accident should be able to think like that” she went on relentlessly.

Arthur remembered Merlin at the waterfall; His calm strength so comforting in the crisis, his sheer competence driving away fear. He nodded.
“Arthur” Elena was a little hesitant. “If I didn’t go to collage. If I worked full time at the coffee shop... would I be sitting here now, with you?”

There was silence.

Elena sighed. “You’re an intellectual snob Arthur Pendragon, and you had better get over it or give up politics. The world has had to put up with too many politicians who think they’re better than everybody else. Now, I need to go home to my Auntie. She is probably sitting up in dressing gown and slippers watching Graham Norton waiting for me.”

Arthur took her home to her aunt, who was waiting up. When he eventually got back to his own place he sat on the edge of his bed exhausted. The knot that had settled on his stomach had sassed somewhat but he knew nothing had actually changed. He took out his Other Phone and looked and the still blank screen. He wanted to call but still did not know what to say. His fingers found the text buttons. With instinct he typed the familiar word.

He pressed send.

He waited.

The phone sparked to life. A text in reply.

From Arthur Pendragon
= Goodnight=

From Merlin Balinson
= Goodnight=

Arthur stared at the word as if it was a gift. He went to bed clutching the phone like a teddy bear.

Chapter End Notes

This was meant to go up on Wednesday but when I looked at it I decided the middle was wrong - in the midst of the rewrite I got hit with the Lurgy and so this is disjointed and un proofed and probably the result of fever induced haze.

So sorry.
Mirrors in the sun

Chapter Notes

So sorry for taking so long with this. I had two thirds of a chapter written but writing it was painful and eventually I had to go with my instinct which says if something is hard to write it is because it didn't happen. I tried again from another POV but it still didn't work. So I left it and on Friday afternoon I knew what happened. I wrote this in two days so I apologise in advance for crazy errors. I now have to do the work I should have been doing....

PS. the things that are said never changed - only the circumstances of saying them

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Belfast
The next day Arthur woke with his euphoria dented. Two words may have broken the drought but they did not constitute a conversation – and he still did not know what to say in such a conversation. If being in a state of Not Talking to Merlin was terrible, the thought of actually talking to him was terrifying. What would he say? He didn’t exactly have a good track record in talking to Merlin. Not about real things anyway.

He drove down to the shire, carefully avoiding speed cameras and traffic police who loved to stop an MG. He was, he decided, feeling Not-Quite-Better-But-Not-As-Bad-As-He-Had-Been. It was, on the whole, a win.

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As he left the meeting a short rotund gentleman accosted him, waving a newspaper. Arthur vaguely recognised him as the editor of the local Gazette, and so put on his meet the press face as he tried to remember the man’s name.

“Mr. Pendragon! Did you see our photograph of you at the garden party? Would you mind a quick interview for a follow up piece?”

Arthur sighed but agreed. This would become an occupational hazard and a local paper was hardly a London Tabloid. He answered the usual questions about background and school, managing to limit the appearance of privilege with carefully practiced phrases. The editor (Victor, that was his name, Victor Something... plays golf likes dogs- Arthur’s mental filing system threw out the information as he fielded questions). Was he local? Arthur brought up his Great-Grandfather. Did he live locally? He mentioned the village the country house was in but gave a nod to the Gazette by saying he was keeping an eye on the property pages. This was in part the truth. He would have to have a house in the constituency but the thought of buying a house implied a permanence that was vaguely terrifying.

“And will we be seeing Mrs. Pendragon any time soon?” The question shouldn’t have taken Arthur
by surprise but it did. He reacted defensively.

“My mother died many years ago” he said coldly. Victor-the-editor blushed and stammered an apology.

“Do forgive me Mr. Pendragon, not really my forte asking questions, inclined to be clumsy, cutbacks you know. Had to send our reporter to the fire at Much Wending, so sorry”. He was rambling and Arthur began to have sympathy for him. “What I mean to ask was is there someone special you plan on introducing to the good people of the area?” Victor may have rambled but he still got his question in.

Suddenly Arthur felt a deep desire to speak – to say; yes, but I don’t know how he would fit in here. The words came to his lips but he turned them to a cough. A reciprocal text was not a solid fix. He was pretty sure that Merlin was his ‘someone special’ but he could not be sure that the Antrim man felt the same. He shook his head in answer to Victor’s question and let him take what he wanted from it.

Clarissa Williams appeared at his elbow as though she had materialised from a Transporter and Arthur wished he could say that. She patted Victor on the shoulder

“Victor, My Darling” she drawled, “Mrs. Armitage has a new hat and your photographer is trying to get a photograph. Shouldn’t you be there? Remember what happened the last time!”

Victor fluttered, made his apologies and ran off in the direction Clarissa pointed.

“Such a dear man” she said after he was out of earshot. “You know he votes for the other side? That is why is so good to us in the Gazette. He sees it as fair play. He is a sweetie” She turned to Arthur and gave him a gaze that could make Medusa seem like a pussycat. Arthur momentarily had an image of Clarissa facing off against his uncle and mentally shuddered. Clarissa was still speaking.

“So why, Arthur Pendragon, did you look like a bunny rabbit about to become rabbit stew when you were talking to him? It is not a good look for you”

Arthur tried to deny but Clarissa was relentless.

“Really Arthur, if you can’t face the editor of the Gazette, who is practically a rabbit himself, what use would you be meeting Ari Aredin?”

“I’ve met him” Arthur interjected.

Clarissa raised her perfectly groomed eyebrows. “Really?” she said “And how did that go?”

Arthur thought about the terror – and exhilaration he had felt at the meeting and said as much. Clarissa made a face.
“I’m impressed, Bunny, but you still need to school your face better. Don’t show weakness to the press, even rabbits. You never know when they’ll bite”

Arthur looked at the elegant and carefully constructed woman before him.

“Why didn’t you go for election Clarissa?” he asked bluntly. She looked at him directly, with a clear gaze.

“Oh darling, didn’t you know? I did. But at the time the people here were a bit reluctant to elect a woman. So I married George and got them to elect him instead. It worked out well enough, though the poor dear has less ambition than I had hoped.”

Arthur looked at the confident woman before him who had lived a life of coffee mornings and pony club gymkhanas.

“Why don’t you run? When George retires, why don’t you run instead of me?”

She patted his cheek in a way that was both maternal and patronising. She smiled.

“But I went and fell in love with the silly sod and when he retires we will do all the things we didn’t do because of constituency meetings or Parliamentary sittings. He will play golf and I will complain about him playing golf and we will visit gardens and argue about pansies and petunias and we will be together. I want time not power Arthur. I have finally worked out what is important. The seat is yours Arthur Pendragon.”

She stopped and looked around her.

“But you will need a Me to do all the other stuff? Any girl in mind? I must say Sophia Sidcup would not do”

Arthur thought of Merlin. “No” he said “No girl”. He may have been more emphatic than he intended because Clarissa looked at him sharply.

“I see.” She said slowly, nodding to herself. “In that case it might be advisable to escort some of the local fillies to the county events. Never more than two in a row though. No need to break hearts.”

Arthur looked at her, his stomach clenched. What had he done? Clarissa patted his hand gently.

“Go for it Arthur Pendragon. Be an MP. Be what I couldn’t.” She looked at where George Williams was waving at her. “But then I got George. Swings and Roundabouts.” She strode off, towering on her high heels, leaving Arthur confused and unsettled.

As Arthur drove back to London he felt the whole weekend working through him. The previous night he had more than doubled the texting – ‘Goodnight’ had been joined by ‘Sleep well’ and the response ‘you too, Goodnight’ had made Arthur’s heart beat faster. But it still wasn’t a fix.

He drove through the countryside unmindful of everything until he saw signs for Heathrow. His
heart beat faster. A plane could get him to Merlin in hours. He could know, know for sure. Without volition the car took the turn and he headed for the airport.

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Getting the ticket was easier than he thought. He also booked a quick return, just in case it did not work out. The flight was easy. It was all easy....

Standing in the Arrivals hall Arthur set out or the sign saying taxis and then suddenly stopped. He had Merlin’s home address but was Merlin there? He stayed in Uni during the week and and Arthur had no idea where.

The implications of his impetuous action swept over him. The last time he had acted on impulse had been on the beach at Doonshee, watching the vastness of the ocean wash through a infinite number of possible futures. Now here he was, in one of them, still at sea.

He took out his phone and noted, almost absently, that his hand was shaking. He carefully sent a text.

From Arthur Pendragon
= I don’t know if you want to see me but I am at Belfast airport =

He stood in the terminal, as people flowed around him, each one confident of their destination. At that moment everything was focused on the phone in his hand.

A beep. A flash.

A text.

An address.

Arthur went to the taxis and gave the address.

His hand was still shaking.

As the taxi drove through the suburbs, Arthur wondered where he was going. Would Merlin introduce him to his parents? Despite the tension between them, a tiny part of Arthur yearned to see a family that accepted him as he was. The taxi pulled up at a comfortable suburban house on a street of similar houses and Arthur noticed how, though each house was the same design, each had subtle differences, windows, colour, garden plants, all efforts to show individuality in uniformity. This was Merlin’s world.

Arthur was still nervous as he walked up the path. The garden of this house was carefully manicured, straight flowerbeds, with compulsory roses and marigolds, the lawn edged and cut neatly, a testament to restraint and caution. He rang the doorbell.

Merlin answered and gestured him into the hallway.

“Mum and Dad are at a wedding” he said. “They’ll be staying over”
Arthur felt a stab of disappointment. So he wouldn’t get to meet Merlin’s mum after all. He followed Merlin into a neat living room, newspapers and a coffee cup disturbing the order and showing that Merlin had been there. Arthur hoped Merlin wouldn’t ask him why he was there. The impulse that had driven him to the airport had worn off and he was out of words. Again.

“You’re a bit of a bastard, Arthur Pendragon” Merlin said very casually, as if he were talking about biscuits or the colour of the furniture. Arthur was still relieved Merlin hadn’t asked why he was there.

“It has been said” he replied in the same tone. It had actually had been said – usually in a much more expressive tone and with many additional comments – but only by ex lovers and opposing team players. Arthur wondered at the correlation.

“Maybe you should listen then” Merlin said, still conversationally. Arthur felt the accustomed thrill at Merlin’s voice but conceded the point. He knew it was his turn to speak. He had studied language, analysed conversation, knew all about the etiquette of turn-taking but he could not think of a single word. Too much had been said already. Finally he understood.

“I’m listening now” he said quietly. And he was.

Merlin pushed him down on to one of the matching armchairs.

“Sit” he said. “I’ll be back”

Arthur smothered a Terminator reference, thinking this was not the moment. Merlin returned with a letter in his hand. He gave it to Arthur. “Read that” he said.

Arthur read the letter, confirming that the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service were offering Merlin Balinson the post of Emergency Medical Technician, pending successful completion of training. Training was scheduled to begin in eight weeks.

“That’s what I’m going to be doing for the next two years Arthur, and after that I’m going to train to be a paramedic. That is what is going to happen. Can you deal with that?”

Arthur felt a huge sigh of relief building inside him. Merlin was asking him. Merlin was giving him a chance. Mindful of the mess that led to this he ran all of his potential responses through his Merlin-filter, a little proud that he now had one. He deleted most of what he was going to say.

“Yes” he said. Merlin sighed but not unhappily.

“You’re still a bastard” Merlin said.

“Can you deal with it?” Arthur asked in a facetious tone that masked his real anxiety. This was the real question – the one he had been afraid to raise by text or by phone call. He was still Arthur Pendragon. Would Merlin accept that?

Merlin pulled over a small footstool and sat in front of the armchair, touching Arthur’s knees.

“I got drunk you know” he said. Arthur nodded.

“I heard”

“I was sooo sick. I had to come home for a shift but I couldn’t go in. The first time I let Kenny
down. My mum cried when she saw me. She pretended she didn’t but I saw her. My Dad looked disappointed. He hasn’t looked disappointed in me since I was six and lied about who broke the bathroom window.” Merlin broke off and part of Arthur wondered where this was going. Another part envied him his parents.

“I love you Arthur but loving you is like being on a roller-coaster, all ups and downs, high speed and constant terror”

Arthur could let that rest, he interrupted before Merlin could say more.

“Why are you terrified? How do I frighten you?” the question burned him, souring his stomach. Merlin sighed again.

“I’m terrified I’ll lose you. That you’ll find someone better” he said flatly.

Arthur looked at him in shock. “But I couldn’t” he blurted out.

“You could find someone with a Masters and a fancy-ass job” Merlin said. “I’ll be driving an ambulance” - he laid familiar emphasis on the words that made Arthur wince – “… for the next two years. I’ll be in uniform not a fancy suit and I’ll be cleaning up blood and vomit and shit on a daily basis. Is that what you want as a …” he hesitated “…boyfriend”

“Elena said I was a snob” Arthur said “and I am. But I am learning and I learned that I don’t don’t want to be without you and whatever you want to be I will be proud of”. Unbidden, an image of Merlin in uniform sprang into his mind and elsewhere. He decided not to mention it just now, but the thought was there and it was … intriguing. He changed tack a little.

“I’ve seen you in action. You cleaned up after me when I was drugged and you pulled me out of that flood. You already were my hero but I was too caught up in other things to see it”. He wondered if that was too schmaltzy to say but for once he decided not to be British and restrained and instead just tell the truth. “The last week has been Hell, Merlin and I don’t want to feel that again. I need you in my life and I really don’t mind the uniform” The last bit slipped out but he was relieved to see the corners of Merlin’s mouth lift in response.

Suddenly he knew that the time was right and the resolve that had been building in him since the interview, and that had kept him awake the night before, pushed him on.

“I want to share my life with you Merlin. Tomorrow I have a brunch with my Uncle and Ava Renney and some other Party bigwigs. I am going to tell them about you, about me, about us. No more hiding. I’m proud of you and I want to show it”

There was silence in the room. Arthur could hear the ticking of the large clock on the mantle. It ticked for quite a while and Arthur got restless.

“I don’t want you to do that” the words dropped into the ticking silence like stones on a mirror. The world cracked. Arthur felt as if the clock, the armchair, the whole room was tilting. He knew his breath was coming faster but he couldn’t help it. Merlin didn’t want him. He made to stand up, his defences coming into play. His automatic responses queued up for him to speak but he was unable yet. Merlin didn’t want him.
Merlin stood also and held Arthur’s arm.

“Please Arthur, don’t run, don’t close down, don’t go all Pendragon on me, please Arthur, just listen” Merlin said tensely. He pushed Arthur back on to the chair and Arthur allowed himself to be pushed. Merlin sat on the footstool, between his legs and held on to Arthur’s shirt as if holding him in place.

“Please listen” Merlin said again. Arthur looked at him blankly but didn’t move.

“I have been hearing all about your life, Arthur” Merlin began “and it’s wonderful and I am so happy for you that you have something that drives you and a job doing what you love – and don’t tell me you don’t love working in the University because I won’t believe you” Merlin paused for a moment and took a breath before going on. “And I didn’t realise I was jealous until, well until we...” he paused again and Arthur injected.

“You want politics?” he asked incredulously. Merlin shook his head vehemently.

“I’ve been drifting Arthur, for three years and I only realised it when you started to push about London. You have a whole plan of where you want to be in the future and you are building a way to get your dreams and I have been living in a fog of someone’s else’s dreams for the last three years, wallowing away. You woke me up and now...” he stopped again and Arthur could see the strain in his eyes as he worked out what to say. “I don’t want to share your life Arthur because it wouldn’t be sharing it would be me living your life and I want one of my own – I want to be able to share my life with yours but to do that I have to have one” Merlin sat back a little and looked even more nervous “And I can’t build my life as with the paparazzi looking over my shoulder as Arthur Pendragon’s boyfriend”

“So you want out” Arthur said coldly, feeling the familiar tendrils of anger build.

“No” said Merlin, “I want to stay as we are”

There was the ticking silence again. This time Arthur broke it.

“You want us to stay secret?” Once again he felt that peculiar feeling of the whole universe shifting sideways somehow.

“Yes”

“Fuck!”

And suddenly the incongruity of it all hit the tension inside him and Arthur began to laugh. He knew it was bordering on hysterical but he could not stop. Merlin looked at him in bemusement and Arthur took pity on him.

“You have to admit, we’re pretty fucked up” he said. Merlin nodded, his eyes moist. Then with a brief awkwardness Merlin was on his lap, straddling him.
“You don’t hate me?” Merlin asked, staring intently.

“That’s about the only thing I’m sure of” Arthur said, his hands on Merlin’s hips. “We are so fucked up” he said again and Merlin began to laugh quietly.

“yeah” he murmured.

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After, there was tea, because Merlin firmly believed in his mother’s mantra that tea could fix everything. And there were scones because they deserved them, and Arthur agreed that Mrs Balinson made the best scones.

There was no sex. And that was good. Arthur never thought he would ever think that being with Merlin without sex would be good, and he was sure he would never tire of exploring Merlin’s body, but it was good to sit at Merlin’s mother’s kitchen table and eat her scones (dripping with butter) and talk. It felt right to see Merlin’s disapproving glare when Arthur took a third scone (with extra butter) and hear his muttered comments about an expanding waistline. It was natural to watch Merlin, literally at home in the kitchen, as he fussed over saucers (“Really Merlin? Do you think I’m my Great-Aunt?”) and tried to hide takeaway cartons.

It was dawning on Arthur that, since their relationship had moved from friends to lovers, almost every moment they had been alone together had been about sex – either the act or the logistics or the preliminaries. Arthur wasn’t knocking it. He definitely wanted to explore the uniform possibilities (who knew that would turn him on?) but right now, at this table, he was happy.

There was talking; enough to make Elena proud. Merlin did most of the talking; Arthur took his plea to heart and was content to listen and he slowly came to realise that the image he held of his lover since Doonshee was not the full picture. Merlin was strong, yes, but unsure of his place in Arthur’s affections, maybe a little lost. Arthur looked at him in wonder and thought of the many ways he had seen him since he had first glimpsed the pair of legs underneath the car, to now, sitting opposite with a scone crumb stuck to his stubble. Merlin was his. The thought grew like a bubble.

This was Merlin and Merlin was his and he was Merlin’s and that was the Universe set right.

Finally Merlin was talked out and the scones were all gone. Arthur knew he would have to set off for the airport soon to catch his plane but he needed to speak.

He cleared his throat, sounding like a nervous schoolmaster in front of an unruly class.

“Tomorrow” he said “I think I’ll tell them anyway. I’m sick of lying”

Merlin put down the tea pot he was about to put away.

“Will they cut you loose” he asked.

Arthur stared out at the neatly cut privet hedge. “Probably” he said. “My uncle will”
“And the constituency, will you lose that?”

Arthur stayed looking out the window. “It won’t be politically correct but they’ll find a way to get me out. I’m not official”

“And does that matter? Going to another constituency?” Merlin sounded calm but there was an insistent tone in his voice that required an honest answer.

“I ... not at first... Now? I know them. The people, their problems. But there are still things I want to find out. Do you know my party has held that seat for thirty years now but there are areas that they never go, not even in elections?”

“Sounds like Belfast” Merlin said. He stood behind Arthur and wrapped his arms around Arthur’s shoulders. “What do you want to find out?”

“What makes them tick” Arthur said honestly. “I have no idea of their lives” He felt Merlin’s face, in need of a shave, brush against his.

“You are going to be a great MP” Merlin said. “No lies is good – but unless they ask, say nothing, get elected. They can’t get rid of you then. For the sake of the people you noticed, Arthur, get elected”

“Are you saying Don’t ask Don’t tell” said Arthur bitterly.

Merlin flinched. “I’m saying don’t lie but don’t push... I think” he said. “But if you’re asked...”

“If I’m asked I’ll tell the truth.” Arthur insisted, “But don’t worry, I won’t name you,”

“No” said Merlin, moving around so that could face Arthur. “That’s not what I meant. If you...” He paused then resumed “Not alone Arthur. Together? I’m not that much a wimp. We face the paparazzi together. Deal?”

Arthur looked at him. When had Merlin grown so much? Arthur couldn’t argue with that determined look. He nodded. “Deal” he said. “Now about that uniform...”

Merlin laughed and kissed him and any tension between them was gone.

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Two weeks later they were in Dublin. Elena was celebrating an unofficial engagement with Val and had invited the small Dooneshee crowd to a party. Even Freya came, mush to Calum’s (not unhidden delight).

Although Merlin and Arthur had arrived together, when Arthur took a seat on the sofa in the narrow living room, Merlin moved over to the bar stools opposite. Calum followed him

“I thought you guys were back together?” he said. When Merlin nodded he became a little heated. “For God’s sake Mez, we are all friends here, we all know, can yis not even sit together?” he said in a frustrated tone.
“It only takes one picture” Merlin said softly “One innocent picture posted online and our lives become public property. And his career could be ruined. I won’t do that”

“Do you really believe that that would happen?” Calum asked seriously.

“It could” said Merlin. Calum sighed but left him.

A little later Val came over, carrying a bag. “Phones in here” he said. Merlin looked at him suspiciously. Val nodded towards the bag. “I’m heading for Special Branch” he said “and I don’t want my career fucked by someone seeing pictures on Facebook. Not saying that any of you would but I have a lot at stake here so hand over the mobiles and we can all let our hair down” Merlin caught a glance from his eye and suddenly smiled as he handed over his phone.

There was some comment when Arthur put in two phones.

“You know that’s a sign of a drug dealer” commented Val good humouredly.

“It’s not a thing” Arthur said defensively.

“Yes it is” said Merlin, getting up and plonking himself half on the sofa and half on Arthur’s knee. Arthur froze briefly then pulled him in. Merlin sighed happily and nodded when Calum met his eye.

A little while later Elena, having spent some time fiddling with boxes around the TV declared with some aplomb that she had a statement,

“Since, thanks to my beloved fiancé, we are now a shame free zone, I declare the karaoke open!”

“No” wailed Freya, “Calum sounds like a pig in heat!”

“Really?” said Val, sounding interested “What does a pig in heat sound like” Freya looked at him with puzzlement.

“Like Calum” she said.

When the laughter had died down Elena called for a volunteer and Merlin stood up. He sorted through songs for one he wanted and pressed play.

The music began with Spanish guitar and the others looked at each other, trying to figure out the song. Then Merlin began to sing,

“When marimba rhythms start to play, dance with me, make me sway”

His voice was not conventionally good, a musician would find fault with him, but with that beat, pitched low, his voice sang to the soul. His hips moved and with his eyes fixed on Arthur he went on.

“Like a lazy ocean hugs the shore, hold me close, sway me more”

Without conscious thought Arthur stood up and moved closer,

“Like a flower bending in the breeze, bend with me sway with ease”

Merlin’s arms reached out and Arthur entered them like a homecoming,
“When we dance you have a way with me, stay with me, sway with me”

Arthur was aware that Merlin was still singing but all he really knew was the sensation of the arms around him, the rhythm of the music he was moving to and the eyes, which had not left his own.

“Make me thrill as only you know how, sway me smooth, sway me now”

Arthur had never been called graceful but he had seen Merlin on a surfboard and now he seemed to borrow some of his grace. They moved as one, without thinking, without volition, just propelled by the rhythm.

“When we dance you have a way with me, stay with me, sway with me”

The music faded and both became aware of the silence in the room.

“Holy Fuck” said Elena. “That was hot. Seriously guys, bottle that and you’ve got it made”

“Er, Guys?” Freya called from behind the sofa. “Someone’s phone is having a fit in here” She raised the bag of phones which was looked vaguely as if something living was trying to get out. Calum looked in.

“Arthur? It’s yours – seems like someone...” he coughed “...else loves you”

Arthur reached for the phone which had stopped ringing. Eleven missed calls from Ava Renney. He called back.

“Where are you!” she demanded. “I’ve been calling non-stop”


“I don’t even know why. George Williams has had a stroke. He’s in hospital. Get back now!”

Arthur remembered Clarissa’s face as she looked at her not-ambitious husband.

“Is he okay?” he asked thickly. He felt Merlin’s hand on his waist, grounding him.

“I don’t know, yes, probably” Ava Renney sound peeved at being asked. “The point is, you know that no matter how he is Clarissa Williams will make him resign now and not wait for the next general election. We need you back now. There is a good chance there will be a by election called very soon.”

Arthur assured her he would be back as soon as possible (which was his flight the next morning). Ending the call he turned to Merlin who was standing beside him, worried but silent.

“There’s a good chance I will be an MP before the autumn” Arthur said.
Thank you for reading this far!
The next period in their lives was marked by pictures and moments.

A picture of Arthur on the campaign, taken for the Gazette. He was dressed in a formal suit, with tie loosened for effect, a party rosette on his lapel. But Merlin saw only him, his gaze to the side of the photographer, his head tilted slightly back in a characteristic trait. He was laughing – his real laugh, Merlin could tell, not his politician laugh. Merlin loved this picture.

A picture of Merlin, in formal suit and academic gown at his Graduation, flanked by his parents. Arthur was a little wary of the picture. It reminded him of his own preconceived notions that had become prejudice and had almost cost him the man in the picture. But he loved the way the couple in the picture – looking slightly awkward – were so obviously deeply proud of the man standing between them. The picture reminded Arthur of what he could have.

A picture of Merlin, taken by one of his colleagues the first time they allowed him to drive the ambulance. He is climbing into the cab, and, caught by surprise, looks straight at the camera a shy grin on his face. Arthur loves it. It shows all the parts of Merlin he knows, the strength, the vulnerability, the humour and the new-found confidence. Plus it had Merlin in uniform. He has another photo of Merlin in uniform – a formal posed shot where Merlin looks faintly defiant and has his arms folded defensively. Arthur knows the whole history of their almost break-up is in this photo so he keeps it safe. But it hurts to look at it.

A formal picture of Arthur being welcomed to Westminster by his party leader after his by-election win. They are posed in the traditional handshake and it took three attempts before the photographer was satisfied. Neither Arthur nor Merlin particularly liked this picture. It is too posed, too fake.
A YouTube clip of Arthur’s maiden speech. By tradition a maiden speech should be short and uncontroversial. Arthur kept to the relatively short part, but after doing the obligatory thanks to his predecessor (which was heartfelt – George Williams was making a good recovery and Arthur wished him well), Arthur carefully and precisely demolished the minor amendment to an Education bill that was being debated. His arguments made obvious loopholes in the amendment which would have led to massive inequalities and with one speech he turned an uncontested motion into a battle ground. The House was mostly empty when he rose to speak but even before he sat down word had gone around – there was a new player in town.

When Merlin came home to his dingy flat after a hard shift, he would sometimes watch the video and remind himself that sharing Arthur with the country was worth his loneliness.

A whole skew of pictures of houses in the constituency. Some were chocolate box cottages straight from Midsommer Murders, others more ordinary. Arthur sent links to them all to Merlin to check out on line. He would not even visit a house Merlin has not approved, though it hurt both of them that Arthur bought without Merlin setting foot over the threshold. The house is chocolate box but Arthur spends little time there. It is not home.

Some pictures are less personal but tell their own stories. Pictures of Calum in New Zealand – with Freya. Pictures of Calum at Ayers Rock with Freya, pictures of Calum in Sydney on his own...

Pictures of Gwen and Guillaume looking proud and happy. And one picture that Arthur treasured. Gwen had come back to London. She said that Donegal was lovely but she missed the big city. She did not say that London had a direct link to Paris but neither Arthur nor Merlin were surprised when they received invitations to a wedding in London. It was a very small wedding – a short ceremony in front of a registrar and a dinner for friends and family in a London restaurant. Calum was still in Australia so Merlin stood in as Best Man. One picture had the bride and groom, Gwen’s two bridesmaid’s and Merlin and Arthur. Arthur called it their first official photo because when it was taken they were holding hands under the table. Merlin said that Arthur’s tie was crooked.

Some things did not have pictures. When Agravaine Dubois stormed into Arthur’s room after the maiden speech incident there were no witnesses. Stormed, may have been the wrong word. Agravaine Dubois did not storm. He insinuated himself carefully into every situation. This time, despite his care he was incandescent with rage.

“That bill was supposed to pass uncontested” he began. Arthur said nothing. “You were supposed praise your predecessor, talk about the scenery and sit down, not send the Bill back to the committee stage”

“The amendment, as written, would have caused misery” Arthur modulated his voice not to sound defiant – but he was.

“That is irrelevant” Agravaine’s voice was cold. “Play by the rules Arthur or you will not play at all” He left and Arthur wondered whose rules should he abide by.
Some moments left marks but not pictures. Merlin was walking back to his flat after a late shift when he heard a familiar voice call a familiar phrase.

“Faggot!” It was Millan. Merlin turned around. It was déjà vu – the same gang of thugs with the same stale repertoire of insults. But Merlin was not the same.

Not-getting-pushed-into-walls dealt with Millan, much easier than Merlin had expected. Not-being-tripped-up turned into Tripping-up-the bad-guy and left one of the others sprawling on the concrete path. Breaking the swing of a punch may have involved almost breaking fingers (not his own) and Merlin saw an opening and walked quickly away, breaking into a run when he was out of sight.

Once back in his flat he sat on the bed, shaking. This was déjà vu but this time he was not the one hurting. But he still was sick. Merlin had never been violent, not even as a child and though he had continued the KravMaga with the express intention of defending himself, actually doing it disturbed him deeply. He reached for his phone to call Arthur but remembered that he had a late sitting of the House. Instead he called Kenny.

“Good job son” Kenny said as he answered the phone. Merlin was pretty sure he didn’t want praise. He didn’t even ask how Kenny knew. Kenny knew everything.

Merlin did not feel he had done a good job. “Were they hurt?” he asked, again trusting that Kenny would know.

“Not lasting, - but they’ll remember you. They won’t be at you again. And I’ll tell Andy you’re a good student. Always knew you had fight in you”

Merlin sighed. He didn’t want to have to have ‘fight’ in him. He didn’t want to have to fight. He remembered George Millen from school. They’d even been paired together for a field trip once and had had fun. It was not beyond the realms of possibility that they could have remained, if not friends, then at least friendly acquaintances, instead of taking turns to beat each other up.

This time he told Arthur.

Some moments were public record

Arthur gained notoriety after his maiden speech. He did not get involved in every debate but when he did people took note. It became obvious that Arthur Pendragon did his homework before he
spoke and when he got to his feet it was not merely skilled oratory he showed, but a clear grasp of facts which he used to great effect. This took work and Arthur spent long hours in his office, researching and making calls.

He did network within the Commons, but there was little time to socialise outside. The exception was occasional dinners with Gwen where they commiserated with each other over the trials of long distance relationships. Those who knew the fun loving Arthur Pendragon barely recognised him and his attention to duty above all else gave him the nickname The Monk among a certain coterie of Backbenchers.

For Arthur gained a following. Young MPs like Lional Chevelin and Eliot Grace saw in Arthur a voice they had been unable to forge. They began to work with him on unfashionable issues that had major impact, rediscovering their own idealism, their own reasons for seeking office. Without conscious effort Arthur was their leader.

That did not mean he ignored the Party system. The maiden speech incident had angered Agravaine Dubois but he also made him realise that although Arthur could not be manipulated he could be useful. Arthur was charming and persuasive and having him grease the wheels of proposed legislation was very helpful. They formed an uneasy alliance, both aware that each was using the other and both prepared to go along with it. Sometimes the tensions came to the surface.

“Why are you supporting this amendment to the Education Bill?” Agravaine demanded. “You got pretty much everything else you wanted, why push for this? It could hold up the whole thing if people take it as a matter of conscience. And anyway it is covered in the whole section on bullying. There’s no need to be specific”

The amendment was a simple one making it mandatory for teachers to challenge homophobic language in the classroom.

As usual Arthur had done his homework. He explained how he had spoken with Teacher’s organisations and teachers themselves. “Some teachers are intimidated at speaking out. The subject is too controversial among traditional parents. By making it mandatory we take the pressure off the teacher. Make them free to react.”

“You’re going to get a hiding, boy, and it’s not worth the hackles you’ll rise against you. You may need them some day. It’s only language. A few words won’t hurt and it’s mostly in fun”

“Tell Eliot Grace that someone calling him nig-nog is only fun and I’ll agree” said Arthur, keeping his voice level. “A friend of mine had his school days ruined by words. I’m not giving up on this”

Agravaine sighed “Your problem, is that everything is personal. You won’t survive here with attitude. Politics is about what you can win not what you want” He rose “And you have very strange friends” he said as he left.

The amendment passed

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Some moments were painful.

Arthur had had a full slate of meetings and calls as well as a House debate he was involved with. He was exhausted when he got back to his flat. He still kept the flat at his father’s house and had not looked for another London home. He decided to rest before calling Merlin.

Their nightly ritual phone call had been disrupted by late nights and Merlin’s shift work but without fail they set aside one hour in every twenty four to talk. Sometimes, when they were both tired there was more silence than speech and once when Merlin had had to take a dead child from a car accident he had sobbed down the phone while Arthur soothed him. The connection was sacrosanct.

Absently he looked at the phone as he put it down and froze. There were five missed calls from Merlin. Arthur frantically called back but the phone went straight to messages, implying that Merlin was at work. Arthur worried. What could have made Merlin call? There was no voice mail but that did not surprise him. Merlin never left voice mail with paranoia at phone hacking stories.

Arthur had seen the BBC News and knew that Belfast was experiencing one of its periods of tension and he feared that Merlin had been caught up in what the reporters called a disturbance: which could be anything from a few drunken teenagers shouting slogans to a full scale riot. In Belfast you could never tell. Arthur fretted until Merlin answered his phone.

Merlin sounded tired but said he was fine in answer to Arthur’s frantic questions.

“You don’t call me five times when you are fine” Arthur insisted. Merlin was silent and Arthur could hear his breathing, shallow and fast until he spoke.

“I think it was the bear – Emily’s bear? I had it on the dashboard- I don’t know why, so stupid - and it had the Donegal colours – and they... There was a riot. Over something. I think they saw the colours and got mad. Others weren’t touched...” Merlin was rambling but Arthur had learnt that interrupting and asking for the point just upset him more. He stayed silent and listened.

“They burned my car Arthur. They burned Betsy”

Arthur felt a cold wave pass over him. The rational part of his brain said it was just a car and that losing it was a sentimental loss and an inconvenience but the rest of him mentally howled in grief. He heard Merlin’s voice break through the phone and knew he was crying.

“Merlin... I ...” As usual, his words failed him. He switched to logistical mode. “If I can get a flight first thing I could be over by mid morning. I have to be back for a meeting tonight but we could...”

“No” Merlin said. “I need to sleep and tomorrow I have to work. I’m a grown man. I have to deal with it. But...” he paused “I needed to hear you, to know that someone knows. Everyone has been so nice and saying ‘that’s a shame’ but you *know*”

“I know” said Arthur with his heart.

“She likes you... liked you” Merlin said. “I think she wanted to be your car”

“She liked *us* ” Arthur replied. “She approved”

Arthur understood what he meant.

They spoke for much more than their hour.

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Some moments involved new friends.

Arthur was working in his office when his secretary rang to say that security had a visitor for him.

“You did not put any names on the list today so I said to hold him until I had spoken to you” Martin said. Martin was a new addition – the workload made having an assistant in Westminster a necessity. Ava Renney had obliged and Martin had proved himself very efficient. Arthur cursed his efficiency when he heard who was waiting in security. A few minutes later Merlin was standing in his office, his hair wet from the perennial rain, looking disreputable enough to justify Security’s concerns, dressed in jeans and a (damp) hoodie and wearing a two day beard and carrying a rucksack. Arthur thought he looked beautiful.

Martin was hovering by the door as Arthur strode around his desk and gave Merlin a hug, polished by more frequent use.

“I thought you would not be finished until tomorrow” Arthur said. Merlin had been attending an intensive two day course and they had hoped to meet for a few hours before his flight back the next day.

“The instructor was ill. Gave us the day off. Bit of a farce really. So I got a bus and here I am.”

“Yes” said Arthur, drinking him in with his eyes. “yes you are” Just then his tiny office was invaded by noise and bulk as Lionel Chevlin and Eliot Grace bounded in with unaccustomed joie de vivre.

“Ready for lunch Arthur?” Lionel said then started when he saw Merlin “Oh sorry I didn’t know you had a meeting” he said in an embarrassed tone.

Arthur had forgotten he had agreed to have lunch with the two fellow MPS. Usually he had a sandwich at his desk but Eliot had just won a minor victory on a local matter and wanted to celebrate. Arthur felt churlish to refuse. Now he wished them both gone – anywhere but here.

“You’re busy” Merlin said softly “I’ll just do the tourist thing around for a bit and maybe we could meet up later?” he sounded hopeful but resigned and Arthur wanted to kick something in his frustration.

“No, I’ll... we can...” Arthur was stuck and he knew it. He looked bleakly at the two MPs and formally introduced Merlin - an old friend. “unexpectedly in London” as he watched the two suit clad MPs assess the jeans and hoodie and try to assess the man. They surprised him.

“Why don’t you ask your friend to join us” Eliot said kindly “We won’t be talking business and it is quite a revelation to know that the Monk has friends”. Merlin looked up sharply and Lionel explained the nature of the nickname. Merlin laughed.
“Arthur Pendragon a monk? Interesting concept” he joked and Eliot, eyes lighting up, asked for stories. Lunch was a fait d’accompli.

A little while later they sat down in a smart restaurant (Merlin having changed into slightly less disreputable gear). Arthur thought it would be awkward but it wasn’t. Merlin regaled the others with the tale of how he and Arthur met and described in graphic detail the glories of the Palace. As he spoke, Doonshee came alive in Arthur’s for the first time in many months. He felt it had been so long ago – a time when all he worried about was missing a trip to Barbados and responsibility was just a word.

Suddenly a thought struck him. What if he had been responsible then? What if he had fulfilled all the course requirements and had not need to go to Donegal, if he had gone to Barbados and returned and done the Chelsea fun circuit, what would have become of his life? His ambition had been set- he was fairly sure he would still be in the position he was – but he wondered if he would be the same man. As he listened to the soft accent he heard in his dreams he realised that knowing Merlin had given him the push he needed to believe in himself. He smiled at the thought and Merlin, in the middle of describing the Palace shower, smiled back.

The conversation moved on and Lionel asked Merlin what he did. Arthur with his still instinctive (but acknowledged) prejudices watched their faces to see their response.

“I drive an ambulance” Merlin said provocatively.

“Oh, an EMT” said Eliot, and when the others looked at him, added “Emergency Medical Technician. My mother was a nurse” He turned to Merlin. “Do you like the job?” he asked. “You’re on the front lines”

“I can’t say I love my job” Merlin said reflectively “I see people when they’re hurt and in pain. But if I do my job right, people live who otherwise could die and that is real job satisfaction”

Merlin’s face lost his usual grin, his eyes did not laugh, he looked faintly sad but very determined and as Arthur watched him he felt a wave of love more definite than he had ever felt before come over him. This was not lust – he did not need to touch Merlin to be satisfied, instead he looked at the man who held his love and was complete.

Eliot’s voice broke into his reverie and he did not notice Lionel glancing at him.

“My mum said the same” Eliot said softly. “She said her job wasn’t about the blood and mess, it was about being there when people needed help” Merlin nodded and smiled at him, the conversation shifted.

“Calum’s a lot more upset about the breakup with Freya than he lets on” Merlin said and told them about Freya’s adventures with an Australian stockbroker. “I have leave coming up next month and some cash saved and I thought I’d go out to him”

Arthur knew the cash was what Merlin had put aside for Betsy’s upkeep and felt the sorrow again. He pushed it aside for both their sakes.
“No one goes to Australia for a week, Merlin” he said sharply. Merlin merely smiled.

“They do if a friend needs a hand” Merlin said.

“Wait a minute – isn’t Calum in Sydney now?” Arthur said “There are beaches there. Surfing beaches...” He raised an eyebrow at Merlin who looked innocent and so totally guilty.

“Calum may have mentioned a beach or two” he said. Arthur laughed.

“So how much comforting Calum do you intend to do then?” he said.

“If you came too, you could do the beer and comfort while I surf” Merlin quipped and added wistfully “I’ve never surfed in water that wasn’t freezing”

“You should go Arthur” Said Eliot suddenly. “The only way to stop you working would be to send you to the other side of the world”

“Yes” said Lionel “Even monks take a break sometimes”. Merlin grinned at him.

“Not appropriate at all” he murmured then asked “Would you come Arthur? Take a break?” Arthur looked at him and once again felt the compulsion to act on impulse. “Yes” he said and was rewarded with one of Merlin’s brilliant smiles.

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Some moments were private

They lay together in Arthur’s flat. Surprisingly Eliot had offered Merlin a spare bed but Arthur’s couch won. Not that Merlin stayed on the couch.

Eliot had showed Merlin around Westminster when Arthur had returned to work and the two arranged dinner and a show for all four of the evening, insisting that any way of separating the Monk form his work had to be good. Arthur was a little put out that he would miss time alone with Merlin but the evening was good. Arthur enjoyed seeing Merlin relaxed and happy after Betsy and it felt comfortingly normal. Afterwards Merlin commented that Arthur’s friends were very nice and Arthur was surprised. He had not really thought of Eliot and Lionel as friends; they were colleagues he worked with but now he saw them in a more human way. Merlin had that ability, to bring out the human, he reflected.

Merlin had shaved his beard at Arthur’s insistence “I am not going into the House of Commons with beard burn Merlin” he said. Merlin had laughed and said that that implied that something would be happening that could cause beard burn.

“Damn sure it will be” Arthur growled and pulled him in for a bruising kiss

Now they lay in bed. They were quiet, resting, both relishing the fact of being together. Staring at the ceiling, Arthur broached a subject he had been waiting for such a moment to raise.

“Where do you want to live Merlin. After?” he said quietly.

Merlin shifted position. “You know I’m tied to the ambulance service for a while” he said cautiously. Arthur did know, though the ties were mostly Merlin’s own ties of loyalty.

“After” Arthur repeated.
“My skills will be transferable” Merlin said. “I could go anywhere. Why ask now?” He sounded curious not worried.

“Gwen and Gui are having problems” Arthur admitted. “Gwen won’t work in France and Gui doesn’t like London. It’s causing tension”

“Oh” said Merlin drawing a deep breath. “Well, I like the country, and the pictures of your house are lovely but” he paused. “I want to work and my work is most useful in cities”

“So... London then?” Arthur said, trying not to sound hopeful.

“London is okay” Merlin said in an equally neutral tone. “But not here”

“No” Arthur agreed. “I had to get the country place to have a permanent home in the constituency but I didn’t want to ...”he hesitated “I didn’t want to get a place in town without you. I can wait. We can get a place together”

The tips of Merlin’s fingers touched his, the only point of contact. Given that they had touched each other pretty much every where that could be touched, Arthur was surprised to find the intimacy of the fingertips overwhelming.

“It is so very real now” Merlin said. “When did I grow up? I was a student paying rent for a flat I didn’t like and now I work and study and it wasn’t different but...” he paused “A place together – a real home...with you....us...” another pause. “It is so very scary”

“Don’t you want it?” Arthur asked anxiously.

“I do. I really do. That’s what’s scary. I want to have a home with you and be domestic and worry about who’ll buy the loo paper. I want to come home after work and be home. I want all that and I don’t know when I started wanting but I know I want it with you”

He rolled over so that they were closer and looked at Arthur intently. “I don’t do interior design though” he said “You can choose the curtains yourself – but I want to be able to see the sky from our bed”

“I want to be able to see you” Arthur said secretly delighting in the idea of ‘our bed’.

Later. Much later. Merlin snuggled as close as he could to Arthur – every possible inch of skin touching,

“Will it be bad? When we...” he asked.

“Yes” said Arthur

“Are you going to say it will okay because we are together?” Merlin asked

“No” Arthur was reflective “No, it would be easier to deal only with our own hurt.” His arms tightened around Merlin. “But easy isn’t better and this” he breathed in deeply “This is what I want”

“Me too” said Merlin, holding his hand on Arthur’s chest. “This. This is all”
Some moments made laughing obligatory

In Sydney, Merlin tried to teach Arthur how to surf. It could be assumed that someone familiar with the boats and the sea would be capable of some sort of coordination but Arthur showed the same aptitude at surfing as a dolphin would show at ballroom dancing. Calum, watching from the beach, in his own words “creased himself” with laughter.

“Lads, that was the best therapy” he said when he was able. “Seriously you should market that – make a fortune you would”

“Wasn’t that bad” Arthur huffed

“It was so bad it was brilliant” Calum gasped, overcome with laughter “Especially when you ... and Merlin... and then... “ He filled in the gaps with gestures and collapsed again with laughter. Arthur looked at Merlin.

“Was it that bad?” he pleaded.

Merlin tried to be diplomatic. “You fell over very well” he said. Arthur sighed

“Stick to the day job then” Arthur said but Merlin laughed.

“I’ll get you on a surf board eventually” he said. Arthur was sure he would. Not necessarily on the water.

The local paper picked up on it but luckily for Arthur only had a picture of him coming out of the water, looking like Daniel Craig in an Andress moment. The resulting article had Arthur praising Australia but admitting that he should stick to what he knew. The photo became a pinup.

Merlin never admitted to having it.

Some moments were part of history.

General Election

HEADLINE: PENDRAGON DOUBLES MAJORITY

Arthur’s win was spectacular but his party was in Government.

HEADLINE: PENDRAGON FOR MINISTRY.
“Can we trust him?” Aredin asked.

“I doubt it” his sub editor replied. “The man is addicted to cocaine and needs the money. Chances are he would say he slept with the Pope if he thought we would pay him”

“We’d print that” Aredin said “But this? Pendragon is popular. This would seem like a smear. We need more."

“How do we get more?”

“Honey trap. Set it up”

And it was done.
Merlin locked his bike and went into work. After Betsy he couldn’t bear to get another car – and could not afford it either as insurance did not cover riot damage. Instead he saved up for a motorbike. It was useful in traffic and prepared him for future paramedic duties.

He was nervous as he went in. His experience of the ambulance service had been generally good but two months before he had been both shocked and horrified to find that George Millen was the new trainee he was supposed to be escorting. To be fair, Millen was just as shocked.

“I’m not getting in a ambulance with yon faggot!” he exclaimed.

The dispatcher had been impatient “Catch yourself on” he’d said “Y’don’t have to fuck him, just work with him!” Merlin knew it was well meant but he still had felt humiliated. For his sake another EMT switched and he did not have to ride with Millen but the damage had been done.

At first it could have been considered playful: a pink tutu at his place in the Rec room, a Hollister bag tied to his locker, little things that could be laughed at.

Merlin did not feel like laughing.

“It’s just teasing” Holly had said when he had dropped into Kenny’s Cabs one evening. “There’s no harm in it. You’ll get used to it.”

“I don’t want to get used to it” Merlin muttered. “That would make it normal” Holly shook her head. She didn’t understand.

What made it worse was that Millen was not responsible for it all. It happened even when he was not on shift. Others were involved. People Merlin had worked with, had shared trauma and joy, people with whom he had, almost literally, waded in blood. Merlin felt a familiar feeling of hurt and betrayal when he thought about it.

He tried not to think about it.

But it became harder.

The ‘pranks’ became more overt: a blown up condom tied to the wheel of the ambulance he was about to drive, a pile of used condoms in his cubby box, the word ‘faggot’ in indelible pen scrawled across his locker. Each one another reminder that they did not see him as one of themselves.

Merlin only allowed himself to break when he spoke to Arthur.

“The worse thing is that I don’t know” he said over the phone. “Yesterday I was out on a job – a wee bit of trouble and there were stones and a few petrol bombs. And someone was hurt and I was sent forward”

He heard the intake of breath from Arthur and cursed his folly at mentioning danger but went on
anyway “...and that’s my job Arthur and I know that and I’d go no problem – but I didn’t know was I sent because I was next on the rota or because I was the most qualified or because they didn’t mind if I was hurt. I need to know they are with me and I don’t know that. I can’t be sure they’ll look out for me. I can’t trust them”

Even saying it out loud shook Merlin. But it also caused a thought to crystallise within him. This time he could not allow the bullies to control his life. He had to fight back.

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Today seemed to be okay. No booby traps, no nasty surprises.

The day was average. Two suspected heart attacks, one mystery pain and a road traffic accident that took up the rest of the day. Next week Merlin knew he would be on his own on a motorbike, his first shifts as a single paramedic. He looked forward to it. He found it hard to talk to his colleagues now, not knowing if they had been involved in the ‘jokes’. He distrusted their smiles and heard lies in their friendly comments and hated himself for doing so. Some of them may have been innocent but he doubted that any of them didn’t know. None of them spoke to him at any rate.

When he got back to his bike at the end of the shift he found that the day was not okay.

“Fag” was spray-painted on the tank of his bike. Merlin despaired at their lack of originality but also worried about riding through some of the dubious areas he had to get to on his way to his flat. He took a chance and called Kenny, asking if he had any paint remover could he give to a driver heading his way. Merlin went across to the late night cafe across the road to wait.

Kenny himself showed up with the remover. The back of his office held an amazing amount of cleaning products. Merlin had wondered at it when he first worked there; until he had seen the condition some of the taxis returned in.

Merlin showed Kenny the bike and with practiced ease the older man set about cleaning off the offending words.

“D’ye want me to get the bastards” Kenny asked conversationally “There’s a few lads that owe me. These fuckers could get a right hiding with no questions asked.”

“I tried that way” Merlin said. He felt very tired all of a sudden “It didn’t work”

“You’re too nice, Merlin, they need a good seeing to”

Merlin shifted his gaze to the now clean bike.

“I’m thinking of making a formal compliant” he said.

“You’d be a grass” Kenny said immediately “Nobody likes an informer. Nobody’d want to work wi’ye”

“I want it to stop” Merlin said quietly. “I just want to be able to come into work without all this shite around it” Kenny put his hand on Merlin’s shoulder.
“Let me fix this for you, boy” he said, “A couple of baseball bats and these fuckers won’t be doing any more art work”

Merlin turned to him bitterly “Aye, because violence has done so well for Belfast” he said angrily. Kenny looked at him with surprise and Merlin felt both fear and pride at his actions.

“I have to fight my own battles” he said “And I have to fight them my own way”. He looked at Kenny “Would you think I was a grass?” he asked.

Kenny shrugged. “The bike’s clean now. I’ll see you around Merlin”

The next day Merlin made a formal complaint of harassment to his employers.

The repercussions were less dramatic than he feared. He had photographs of the ‘pranks’ and the powers that be did not dispute the fact. Equality legislation was strictly enforced and no employer, especially in the public sector wanted to be seen to ignore bullying. Merlin wasn’t sure exactly what was done but the ‘pranks’ stopped and a few of his colleagues even apologised. Merlin was embarrassed when they did so but he also felt a certain hidden anger. Did they not know what had been happening? If they felt badly now could they not have said something before. He held his tongue. Others, the majority simply let him be. Merlin had become used to being alone though his nature meant he would never enjoy it.. The atmosphere was uncomfortable but Merlin was not sorry for his actions. For the first time he felt he had done something positive – made others look at themselves and consider what they had done and if the price was being solitary he would pay it.

Another possible effect was that George Millen did not pass his probationary period. Merlin could not help feeling guilty about that, though he did not know if his actions had contributed to it and he had not singled out Millen in his complaint.

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Merlin was walking home from work after a late shift. He had stayed on to finish some paperwork and the streets were empty. His bike had refused to start that morning and he had taken a bus to work but he had missed the last bus home and walking was his only option. He became conscious of a car slowing beside him and Merlin felt a sudden burst of fear. He started to walk faster when a familiar voice called him,

“Why are ye walking this late boy?” Kenny said.

“Bike wouldn’t start” Merlin stayed on the pavement unsure of his welcome.

“Want me to have a look at it?”

“Would you?” The question was loaded but Kenny gave a grunt of agreement

“In the morning. Hop in. I’ve no job on, I’ll leave you home”

Merlin sat in the car feeling almost as he had when he first met Kenny. He had not spoken to him since the incident with the paint and did not know how Kenny felt about him. It would seem that Kenny was talking to him after all. Except he was not talking and the short journey took place in silence. Pulling up outside Merlin’s building Kenny asked what time Merlin was in the next day. When Merlin told him he said “I’ll leave you in and take a look at the bike after” and then he drove
off. Merlin looked at the tail-lights and realised that was as fulsome a declaration of friendship he was ever likely to get. He went in feeling happier than he had in months.

The following night Kenny picked him up again and reported on the bike. The health of his motor bike was of vital interest to Merlin because he had a few days off and planned to go to Doonshee and surf. He rarely got the opportunity anymore and he ached for the sea.

“The ignition is fine – came right back when I fixed everything else but your brakes were shot to hell. If you’d gone out with them you would have gone over the car in front at the first traffic lights.” Kenny wiped his hands. “I can show you the basics but you need to learn how to know when somethin’s wrong” he changed his tone “I hear you’re going on holidays”

Merlin nodded, mentally shrugging. Kenny knew everything. “For a few days” he said.

“Aye, that’s good. When you get back I’ll have a lock up garage ready for the bike” Kenny said. Merlin was curious “Do you think the rain caused it?” he asked.

“Aye, the rain. Maybe. Take care Merlin” and Kenny was gone.

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Merlin did take care on the cross country ride and there was no problem with the bike – apart from running out of petrol as he came close to Doonshee. Merlin had thought he had kept an eye on the fuel gauge but he was obviously mistaken and ended up coasting into Brennan’s filling station.

Mr. Brennan welcomed him gladly but was surprised at the motor bike.

“I didn’t recognise you in the leather gear” Mr. Brennan said. “You always seemed more of a hoodie guy to me.”

Merlin laughed. “Coming from a city, that’s not a compliment”. he said “And things change”

“Not in Doonshee, boy, We don’t change – we just grow a bit” Mr Brennan patted his stomach as he spoke “My daughter keeps saying I should be losing the belly. I tell her I will if she will – she’s on her third now – fifteen grandchildren now – a full Gaelic team!”

“And a rugby team” Merlin said absently as he paid for the fuel. He looked at the hand painted drawings that filled the notice board behind the till. Mr. Brennan was so obviously proud of his family. For the first time Merlin really acknowledged the fact that it was highly unlikely he would never have children.

He had not thought of it- having a child was not something he actively wanted, but as he got back on his bike and rode down the familiar winding roads of Doonshee he wondered if it was something Arthur had expected. Arthur never showed any signs of doting over children and had never expressed a desire. But he did often talk about his family line and Merlin now worried that Arthur might want an heir.

Stopping in front of the small B&B he was in which he was staying, he saw toys lying on the front lawn; another reminder. His landlady, another Mrs Brennan but no relation – or at least not a close relation, welcomed him warmly

“Ah sure you are almost a local now,” she said though Merlin knew that even twenty years full time residence would never make a local. Still the people were warm and friendly, even to
outsiders and Mrs Brennan (no relation) was no exception. She showed Merlin to his room, fed him with potato cakes and boiled ham (sundried tomatoes hadn’t made it to this house) an gave him a spare key. (“You’ll be wanting to see the surf – I know you boys”) and all the time Merlin was thinking of family names and relatives.

Arthur spoke of his great grandfather and of the Pendragons having come home. He once showed Merlin a crest, which dated back centuries. As Merlin chewed the ham and swallowed the potato he became convinced that Arthur would want to continue the line.

And if that is what he wanted – no matter how he wanted to do it, Merlin would not let it break them – they could work through it. He wanted to talk to Arthur about it, but he knew tonight would only a phone call and he did not want to raise such an issue without being able to see Arthur. Merlin had learned that Arthur’s words were not enough – Merlin needed to see his face, read his body to know exactly how he felt about anything. The conversation could wait for Skype, or better yet until they met.

Merlin wished that was now. He wanted to see Arthur. Who was he kidding? He wanted to touch Arthur, wanted Arthur to touch him. He wanted to feel Arthur’s fingers gentle him, feel Arthur’s mouth trace a path down his torso, he wanted to see Arthur come, knowing he had done that. He wanted Arthur and wanted to know that Arthur wanted him.

By the time he went for a walk along the beach at Doonshee he was thoroughly horny. It wasn’t summer and no one was there. The surf was good (though the sea was bitterly cold) and the beach was still empty.

Merlin sat on the sands and waited to call Arthur.

Arthur did not sound quite as tired as he had lately. While Merlin had been working through his crisis, Arthur had been busy, though he had still managed to dig up masses of information on equality cases and previous actions. Merlin believed he should have been a lawyer. On days like this when Merlin was feeling frustrated and lonely he wished he had been.

“Tell me what you see” Arthur asked quietly when Merlin told him where he was. Merlin looked around in the declining light and tried to describe the huge emptiness of the ocean, the power of the white tipped waves rolling up the sands, the golden beach becoming grey as the light slipped away. His words failed him.

“It’s Doonshee” he said finally. “And even without you I still feel you here”

“I don’t think I ever left” Arthur said, Staring out to sea Merlin could almost feel Arthur beside him.

“I know” Merlin said. “We can go out and fight our dragons but here there is only us” He heard Arthur murmur his agreement.

The sea flowed up the sand, each wave a little closer, the white edges just visible in the declining light.

Do you still want me?” Merlin asked, sure of the answer but needing to ask the question.

“I want you” Arthur said.

“How do you want me” Merlin pushed, and Arthur obliged, quietly detailing all the ways he wanted Merlin. Merlin sat in the growing dark and knew he was loved.
The next day Merlin planned to surf, but his evening on the beach made him nostalgic and he took the chance to visit some of their old haunts. The coffee shop was open, Elena’s aunt back behind the counter. She cheerfully cut him a slice of special cake, (to go) and chatted to him of Elena and others.

“Did you hear Morgause O’Donnell left for Spain and the hotel’s been taken by the bank?,” she said. “Seems she wasn’t a well off as she thought” she continued “but sure, who is, really. There are more For Sale signs around here than B&B signs and that can’t be a good thing”

The surf was good that day and Merlin felt renewed by the sea – all the stress of the complaint, the stored up humiliations, the many tiny hurts were washed away by the power of the Atlantic waves and Merlin felt powerful again as he mastered those waves. He had loved Australia but this was his sea, his waves and they welcomed him back.

When he finally left the sea he felt stronger than he had done for months. He dried off, changed and followed through on an idea that had some to him in the coffee shop. The next day he returned to Belfast with a purpose.

It was a few days later, when all was settled, he explained the purpose to Arthur.

“You know you say I don’t do things on impulse” he said. He was looking at his computer screen where Arthur was looking back.

“You are the least impulsive person I know” Arthur said decisively “You are even less impulsive than me and I take a week to decide what tie to wear” Arthur looked meditatively at the screen before him, “But some of my impulses have been good” He paused. “So what did you do?”

“I may have been impulsive” Merlin said.

“May?” Arthur raised an eyebrow

“Was” Merlin said and continued in response to another raised eyebrow. “I bought a house”

The image of Arthur went very still and Merlin saw him turn into the politician. “That’s... that’s good” Arthur said with forced jollity. “I thought... but it has been a long time and... yes it is good for you...”

“I bought the Palace, Arthur, I bought the palace at Doonshee” Merlin saw a break in Arthur’s facade and went on. “I went up to see it and it was for sale. It is exactly the same – I mean exactly-even the takeaway cartons and the cups we didn’t wash are still there. And I talked to the estate agent and it is a distressed sale and it’s going for a song, because it’s just a bathroom attached to a demolition site but I just wanted it and I have a job and I didn’t think I’d get a mortgage but I did.” Merlin paused for breath “Oh God, Arthur I bought a house. I am a home owner!”

Arthur was trying not to smile – but failing. “Turning respectable in your old age then Merlin?” he said

“Shush Old man” Merlin laughed. “We can use it as a holiday home”

“We?” Arthur said and Merlin huffed.
“Don’t tell me you doubted it” he said and looked closely at Arthur “You did!” he exclaimed “for a moment you doubted me!”

Arthur shook his head. “In this whole world” he said seriously “you are the one thing I do not doubt”

Merlin smiled. He had wondered how Arthur would take him making such a commitment but it was all right. “I’ll fix it up bit by bit and we’ll be able to holiday there” he began but Arthur intervened

“Let me just clarify that doubt business” Arthur said “I love you completely but I have absolutely no faith in your DIY skills and I refuse to stay in a house you have ‘fixed up’. Get an engineer. Wait til the house falls down and get a builder. Do not even try to do it yourself”

Merlin laughed. After the anxiety of the harassment and the making of the formal complaint, Doonshee had worked its magic and he was able to laugh—and to make Arthur laugh. He looked at Arthur who wore the tensions of office very lightly for those who did not know him well. For those who could read his face he looked tired and drained.

“Arthur? The papers...” Merlin was hesitant “They say you are going to contend the leadership”

“They have said that about a lot of people” Arthur said. Merlin looked at him seriously and saw Arthur sigh. “The PM is going – probably by the autumn, those health issues won’t go away and he wants the next leader to have a good run before the election. There are quite a few ready to put their hats in the ring and some people mentioned my name” Arthur said.

“And?” Merlin prompted.

“And I haven’t decided yet” Arthur said. “If I was thinking of it I would have said”

“The people... the ones who mentioned your name, do they want you to run?” Merlin asked. Arthur nodded. “Why?” Merlin persisted “If you are not sure why are they?”

Arthur looked thoughtful “They believe I can do something” he said at last.

“Could you win?” Merlin asked.

“I doubt it” Arthur replied “but...”

Merlin looked at his face and felt a surge of love and need. But he also knew his lover.

“You’re going to try” It was not a question nor a command but rather a statement of fact. He could see the thought moving across Arthur’s face.

“High stakes” Arthur said.

Merlin nodded. “Nothing less than a Prime Minister” he whispered and actively stopped his hand from reaching out to touch the image of Arthur on the screen. He felt very far away at that moment.

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Chapter End Notes
This is the beginning of the Endgame
Arthur had a cold. He could feel the tickle at the back of his throat, the irritation in the lining of his nose. He tried to fight it. He had Question Time later that week and there was debate coming up in which he was to speak. He had to have a voice. He swept into his private office in a cloud of tissues and bad temper.

“Ah Sir, a list of your phone messages, I’ve highlighted the most urgent, I’ve sent responses to the simpler emails but there are some which require your input and Mrs. Williams has prioritised a meeting”

Arthur was constantly impressed with Martin’s efficiency. He ran his constituency business so smoothly Arthur could concentrate on everything else. Right now all he could concentrate on was not sneezing.

“I can have a honey and lemon drink sent up” Martin remarked. Arthur smiled gratefully. The man was a treasure.

Arthur’s alarm beeped. It was time for his call to Merlin, who would just be back from a shift. The pattern of late nights and 12 hour shifts mean that daily alarms were not just usual but vital. Arthur carefully shut the office door and waited for Merlin to pick up.

When Merlin had told him about the harassment Arthur had felt both anger and guilt. The anger was obvious – Merlin was one of the kindest men he knew and to see him hurt and humiliated made him burn. But the guilt was new. He realised now that what Merlin had faced in school could not be attributed to the actions of a few kids. It was everywhere and Arthur could see in Merlin the effects of it and felt guilty that he himself did not have to endure it. It was not that he wanted to be abused, just that wondered had he the right not to be.

That day there were no problems for Merlin and they talked of ordinary domestic matters. Merlin advised Arthur to take garlic for the cold.

“How do you want people to avoid me in the House, Merlin?” Arthur “Garlic stinks!”

Merlin laughed. “If I were ten I’d say it wouldn’t make any difference” he joked.

“If I were ten I’d say the same to you” Arthur responded “But I’m glad we’re far too mature for that. In fact I have rather adult thoughts about you right now” he sipped his hot lemon drink with a faint slurp and could feel Merlin giving him a ‘Look’ through the phone.

“It is far too early in the morning for that” Merlin said sternly, “You need to be thinking serious thoughts”
“I am” said Arthur, “I’m seriously missing you”

“Paris” said Merlin. Arthur sighed but agreed. Paris was still a few weeks away. They had arranged to visit Guillaume and meet Calum on his return from his adventure down-under. (‘How can you accidentally book a plane ticket for Paris instead of Dublin?’ ‘It was 2am I was drunk leave me alone’)

After the phone call Arthur felt a little better and said so. Martin preened that his personal honey and lemon concoction had worked and hustled Arthur through his morning’s work. This was enlivened slightly when Arthur received a link from Merlin. He trusted Merlin not to send him anything not suitable for the office, but was puzzled when he found a YouTube clip of a 1920s singer. He laughed when he played it.

“Listen, big boy,
Now that I’ve got you made,
Goodness, but I’m afraid,
Something’s going to happen to you;
Listen, big boy,
You’ve got me hooked, and how,
I would die if I should lose you now!

Button up your overcoat,
When the wind is free,
Take good care of yourself,
You belong to me!”

Merlin had found a way to say what he felt and that worked much better than any cold cure. Arthur was quite buoyant when he abandoned his usual sandwich and left for lunch.

Lunch with Clarissa was interesting as always. She advised him to take vitamin C and zinc (“Always works Darling, I promise”) and regaled him with her adventures with a slightly frail George. Clarissa still had her contacts in the constituency and she was an invaluable ally. As they were starting on dessert (“I can indulge now Darling, no one notices the bulges”) they were approached by a very handsome man, dressed sharply in a carefully tailored suit.

“Clarissa! So glad to meet you! How is George?”
Clarissa looked puzzled for a moment then her face cleared. “Mike, Mike Rovere. Of course. Are you in town for business?” he answered her and she introduced him to Arthur.

“Mike has been so helpful to George, you know” she said. “He’s in the travel business”

“I do this and that” Rovere said as he shook Arthur’s hand. “Call me My” he said “and you’re the Monk of Westminster” he grinned at Arthur and Arthur grinned back. For the first time since Merlin Arthur found himself actively appraising a man. And he was worth it. Clear dark skin and brown eyes to drown in were added to by a warm expression, with just a hint of mischief. Arthur liked him.

“I heard the Monk never left the monastery” My was saying “What drew you out”

“I never turn down a chance to lunch with Clarissa” Arthur said and My agreed, turning the full
wattage of his charm on her. She invited him to sit with them for coffee and the three chatted until Arthur realised the time and excused himself.

“Maybe you’d leave the hallowed halls and eat with me sometime” My suggested as Arthur left. Arthur was non committal but did not dismiss the idea.

+++++++ Over the next few days Arthur had little time to remember the fascinating man. Despite all the advice his cold did develop though he still managed a triumphant appearance on Question Time (with a voice that sounded like a rake over gravel). Arthur was good in direct argument. He could defend what he believed in with great fluidity and more importantly did not appear weak when accepted that some things did not work. Nothing discombobulated opponents more than agreeing with them, and then demolishing their solution. No matter what, he did not get rattled and always appeared confident and reasonable. Doing all that with a temperature, a make-up covered red nose, and practically no voice was a feat in itself.

Merlin congratulated him when he called that night, and argued some of the points he thought Arthur had gotten away lightly on. Agreeing never worked with Merlin. But it was obvious Merlin’s heart wasn’t in it and finally he said why.

“They did it again” Merlin said. “My bike, paint” He drew a long breath. “I think I will have to make a formal complaint”

Arthur knew what it cost him to say that. Merlin was an intensely private person, he hated having any part of his private life known, let alone having his sexuality on display. But Arthur understood that Merlin had learned from bitter experience that not to confront the bullies would wound him more than publicity. He agreed with Merlin’s choice but was angry he had to make it.

Merlin’s decision helped to coalesce his own ideas. He was beginning to see what he must do and though it daunted him he began to work out ways to prepare.

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Although Arthur wanted to help Merlin all he could, he was prevented from doing much by a crisis in his own ministry which threatened his peace of mind.

Thousands of people were affected and Arthur struggled to find out, through a flood of excuses, exactly what happened. To make matters worse, it was a slow news day and by lunch time the whole mess was the lead story on all the channels. It was obvious the Secretary of State was passing the responsibility on to him. He was on the firing line.

He was fine with that; it was his ministry, his position, his job to fix it. Within hours he had received four memos and six unofficial notes from Civil Servants detailing how to explain how it was not anyone’s fault, how it wasn’t really a problem, how it was all the previous government’s fault and how, if anyone was to blame it was probably a computer fault, or some Junior officer who misplaced a comma.

Arthur tore them all up and called all department heads and affected personnel to a meeting. They sat and stood around the large open plan office, many with arms folded defensively, faces
shuttered and unreadable. Arthur stood before them. He had spent most of the previous night reading about the debacle and checking and rechecking reports and files. He knew he looked crumpled and though he had managed to shave in the office he hoped fervently no paper got a picture. He had made a point in his career of always appearing perfectly groomed. He raised his hand to gain attention and the low buzz around the room died down.

“We have a problem” he began cursing himself for being obvious when he heard a muttered “no shit Sherlock” from somewhere in the room. Arthur could sense the hostility and tried to change tack.

“Look, forget about blame and finger pointing, we all know I’m going to take the flak anyway so can we work together to figure out how to fix this mess.” His own research had given him a fair idea of what caused it and he didn’t want to go into that.

“We can’t fix it in a month” That was Mr. Brown, senior Civil Servant. Arthur looked at him.

“Give me one reason why not” he said firmly. Mr. Brown blustered.

“There are procedures, everything must go through the system, it takes time”

“Change the procedures” Arthur said bluntly. Some of the attendees looked at him curiously.

“Let me make something clear,” Arthur said “We are not here to write reports and take minutes and file everything in triplicate, We are here to ensure that other things, important things, happen. If they don’t happen, it doesn’t matter how many pages have been filed and how many procedures followed, We Have Failed.” He looked around the room. “This is not an exercise in ass- covering, this is about fixing things so people out there are served by their government. We have brains, think outside the box, think outside the system”

There was silence.

“That’s not our way” Mr. Brown said, gaining a chorus of agreement. But one hand was raised, a young woman in a corner. Arthur did not know her name. She looked terribly nervous and blushed when Arthur gestured for her to speak.

“I have an idea” she said, almost swallowing the words. Arthur was tempted to send her into the office and have only a few people listen to her but he had called this meeting to bounce around ideas and one person’s shyness could not stop that.

“Go ahead” he said trying not to sound gentle. Merlin warned him he appeared patronising when he did that.

She spoke, gaining confidence as she went on an no one contradicted her. When she finished there was another silence, and then a flood of speech. Everyone had something to say but filtering the comments before he called for order, Arthur recognised that many were positive – or at least not negative. The young woman sat down hurriedly and Arthur raised his hand again, calming the confusion. A sudden mischievous impulse came over him. He wished Merlin was there to appreciate it.
“It’s risky, but it just might work” he said to his own personal satisfaction. He had always wanted to be clichéd in context. Merlin would probably have given him a clip on the ear and told him off but it was still fun. He gave himself a metal shake and got back to the matter in hand.

Over the next few hours the idea the young woman (whose name was Marnie, Arthur learned) had put forward was refined, altered and pummelled in to a usable plan and Arthur went to face the ordeal of the evening news shows with something to say.

It wasn’t easy.

But if he had wanted easy he would never have entered politics.

“So, Minister, have you got an answer for all those people left wondering what will happen tomorrow”

Arthur mentally thanked Marnie that he had an answer. He outlined the response the department had put in place and received a grudging dismissal in return, more than he had hoped for.

“So will heads roll at the ministry after this debacle?”

Arthur ran through the usual script in his head ‘full investigation’ ‘those responsible..’ ‘held accountable’ and rejected it.

“No” he said “No one will lose their job over this” The presenter angrily huffed another question but Arthur knew he was right. He went on.

“No one failed here. The system did exactly what it was meant to do. This was an unforeseen side effect.” he said channelling some of the frustration he had felt when his reading had led him to this conclusion. “No one deserves to lose their job for doing their job” he added.

The presenter was indignant “Surely someone should have seen these consequences” he said.

“That’s the thing about unforeseen” Arthur replied. “They are not seen.” He paused for impact and looked straight at the camera “The combination of circumstances was not expected and not catered for. No one has a crystal ball. We just do what we can with the information we have and if we mess up we fix it”

Despite the studio glare, Arthur felt the presenter look at him curiously.

“And you, Minister, will you be taking responsibility and resign?”

I have taken responsibility” Arthur said firmly “But I will not quit. If the Prime Minster thinks it is better to have someone else step in I will move aside. Until then I will work with my people to fix this. That’s my job.”

After the broadcast was over the presenter came over to Arthur who was being de-miked in a corner of the studio.

“Interesting piece” the presenter said. “You kept your cool very well. But I was easy on you – I didn’t ask about the leadership rumours going around.”

“Just as well” Arthur said “I wouldn’t answer.

He did three more interviews that evening and was exhausted when he finally get to speak to
Merlin about his own crisis.

“I’m only one man” Merlin said “My problems are tiny. You don’t need to worry about me. Concentrate on what is important”

Arthur commented that Merlin was important to him and the conversation moved on but the idea remained with him that night, keeping him awake. He realised that the problems of one man had to matter, otherwise the many could not. Because the many, like the people who had been affected by his department’s blunder, all had their own issues and each one was slightly different.

Having decided that Star Trek was wrong, he managed to fall asleep.

The next week was busier than anything he had ever experienced before – even the election. Conversations with Merlin were short, not because he didn’t want to talk but because, by the time he got to talk to him, he couldn’t form a coherent thought.

“Paris” he said to Merlin. “We’ll have Paris to catch up” He felt guilty, knowing that Merlin was facing the aftermath of his complaint but Merlin did not grumble. He agreed about Paris.

On the one occasion he did go out, dragged to lunch by Elliot and Lionel who feared he was not eating at all (which blatantly wasn’t true – he had energy bars stuffed in his briefcase for emergencies) he met My Rovere, who was dining in the same small restaurant. Arthur introduced him to his fellow MPs and he ended up joining them. He was very good company, avoiding anything that could be considered controversial yet still managing to be interesting. Both Elliot and Lionel liked him and the latter invited him to an informal gathering in his house later in the month. Arthur actually looked forward to meeting him again.

Finally the work load reduced to manageable levels and Arthur was able to spend some time on constituency matters. Martin had of course kept up to date with all his correspondence and Arthur had done his best to stay current with Martin’s daily reports. He still had a paper mountain to climb when he reached his desk. Arthur sighed when he saw the heap. He thought computers were supposed to stop this, but he had already spent hours going through the email cascade. Now here was more.

He pressed for Martin and ordered sandwiches. “I may be here a while” he said.

Martin arrived with bacon butties, wonderful coffee and a cream doughnut that had Arthur salivating just looking at it. Merlin would not approve; he was on a healthy eating drive but Arthur had had a tough week and there had to be some advantages to a long distance relationship. He thanked Martin profusely and settled down to indulge in his fat fest. He may have moaned happily quite a bit as he ate but Martin did not complain.

Martin was a good worker and Arthur started to find it easier to talk to him as they worked through the pile. Okay, yes he had no sense of humour and looked at Arthur blankly when he had sighed and wished for a time turner (which was worrying – who in his generation did not know Harry Potter?), but he could talk sensibly about other things and he had brought bacon. Arthur liked him.
As the day wore on the pile got smaller and the list of phone calls to be returned got shorter. Arthur sighed and stretched. He wondered if he would confess his bacon and doughnut lunch when he spoke to Merlin but decided not to. Merlin had enough to worry him. It would be cruel to add cholesterol to the load. And if he didn’t confess he could do it again tomorrow.

Martin stuck his head in the door. “Do you need anything” he said. Arthur shook his head.

“It’s just... well I ... a few of us... going for a drink if you’d like to come?” Martin spoke nervously and Arthur wondered what was bothering him.

“Not tonight” he said “You enjoy yourself. I’ll finish up here and then head home,” He looked at Martin, standing like a hopeful puppy in the doorway. “You deserve to let your hair down. You’ve done a good job during this whole mess, really made a big difference”

Martin beamed. He didn’t often smile – he usually looked as if the weight of the world was on him, but the smile was good. Not like Merlin’s smile which started in his eyes and went to his toes, but still better than before. Arthur went back to his work and Martin slipped out.

It was much later when Arthur checked the time and realised he wouldn’t get home before it was time to talk to Merlin. He stretched and walked around the office. It didn’t take many paces to cover it. The world saw the drama in the theatre that was the House of Commons but the real work took place in pokey offices like this one. Except in the case of his uncle, he contemplated – with him business took place in corridors and restaurants and even the street. Agravaine had taught Arthur a great deal about how politics worked. He had also shown him what not to be.

Arthur looked around the office again. It was so very impersonal. But that didn’t matter. This time next year he would not be in this office. His alarm pinged and Arthur felt the tension leave his shoulders – suddenly aware of how tense he had been. It was time to talk to Merlin. He sat down and let the chair fall back. He wanted to relax into this.

The phone rang. Arthur answered.

“Hey” he said and was greeted with a corresponding “hey” from Merlin. They would never win prizes for emotional hellos he thought.

“I’m on the beach at Doonshee” Merlin said. Arthur was startled. That was today? He had forgotten that Merlin was going back. He knew Merlin need to recharge, to pull back the strands of his life and he knew he needed the sea to do that. He was glad Merlin had that chance. Closing his eyes he remembered the sounds of the sea.

“Tell me what you see” he said. Merlin started to describe the scene but he stopped

“It’s Doonshee” he said. “And even without you I still feel you here”

Arthur kept his eyes closed. He could faintly hear the sound of the wind and the waves through the phone and with his eyes closed he could see the rest. He felt as if a part of him was still there, had always been there, at the moment his life began.

“I don’t think I ever left” he said,
Merlin answered him and Arthur made a sound in agreement. He felt the tensions of the days of crisis ease out of him.

Do you still want me?” Merlin asked. Arthur was surprised he needed the assurance.

“I want you” Arthur said.

“How do you want me?”

Arthur took a breath. “I want to feel your tongue in my mouth and your taste on my lips. I want to scrape my checks on the ridiculous stubble that grows like triffids, I want to put my lips to your pulse and feel your heart beat in time to mine” He could hear Merlin breathing and went on. “I want to see you hard and wanting me and know I did that. I want to take you in my hand, my mouth, my body, feel you come, see you.

Arthur heard a groan from Merlin “Arthur...”

Arthur continued in the same vein. They did not often do this but after the weeks they had had Arthur was not sorry.

“I want you in my bed and in my life” he concluded hearing Merlin sigh.

“Even with stubble?” Merlin said lightly.

“Especially with stubble” Arthur said firmly. “And ears”

“Hey,” laughed Merlin “Don’t start on the ears!” Arthur chuckled. Merlin was touchy about his elvish ears.

“Faun” Arthur murmured and was rewarded with a fake indignant snort from the phone. Just then a noise in the building reminded him where he was. He rarely called Merlin from work and never like this. He felt uncomfortable.

“I have to go” he said, trying not to be abrupt. “Work”. He heard Merlin sigh but he did not protest.

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Chapter End Notes

The nature of the crisis Arthur works on is deliberately vague. I admit to being lazy. If I picked a specific Department and an actual problem I would research the hell out of it to make it real - and wouldn't finish the chapter for months... so sorry for the vagueness.
The Last time I saw Paris

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Paris was – well Paris was.... not a disappointment obviously because there was probably a law somewhere that said you could not call Paris a disappointment, especially when you were in Paris with your lover. It would probably call down the wrath of every Love God ever known to say that Paris plus lover was a disappointment. But.....

For a start Arthur had planned for an extra long weekend but had to settle for a train on Friday evening and a return on Monday morning. Given the tense situation he had been involved in he saw this as a win – at one stage he had feared that he would not be able to get away at all – but it was still a reduction in expectations.

When he arrived in Paris he found Merlin, red nosed and sneezing.

“I hab a code” Merlin said, stating the obvious.

“Have you tried garlic?” Arthur asked, in revenge. Merlin looked at him with narrowed, if runny eyes.

“I will if you insith” he said sharply. “Serb you right for being mean to a sick man” Arthur smiled. Even with a red nose he still thought Merlin was beautiful. He moved closer for a hug but Merlin back stepped dramatically.

“Stay back!” he exclaimed “I hab the plague! Unclean! Unclean”

“Don’t be such a girl Merlin!” Arthur laughed and pulled Merlin to him.

“Dare you say that to Elena” Merlin muttered as he allowed himself to melt into the hug. “And if you get this bug and the world ends cos you’re too sick to save it don’t blame me”

“I don’t save the world, Merlin” Arthur sighed. It seemed that a sick Merlin was a grumpy Merlin but going on the principle that a Merlin in the hand was better than a Merlin on the phone, Arthur refused to let go.

“You could do if you wanted” Merlin mumbled “You could be a superhero if you wanted to be” Arthur wondered if cold remedies could make a person high but decided to go along with Merlin.

“I could be a superhero” he agreed manoeuvring Merlin on to the rather stiff couch in the living room of Guillaume’s apartment. Merlin sighed and snuggled closer, seemingly forgetting about not passing on the plague.

“I’m sorry I’m sick” Merlin said quietly. “I’m ruining your only weekend off”
If someone had suggested this scenario before this moment, Arthur would have agreed that the weekend was ruined but here, with Merlin snuffling in his arms “It’s not ruined” he insisted as he pressed a kiss into Merlin’s hair. “Not at all”

Merlin argued vainly that Arthur should take the spare bed in the room designated for Calum but Arthur was adamant he would stay.

“I did not come to Paris to sleep with Calum” he huffed. “And I swore when we left The Palace that I would never sleep in the same room as him again – the guy snores worse than you do!” Merlin relented.

That night, Arthur realised with a slight shock, that he had never cared for a sick person before. After a few hours of it he was pretty sure he hated it. He pursed his lips together and said nothing when Merlin asked for a drink one minute after Arthur had sat down after getting him an extra sweater. He actively did not sigh as he passed the tissues and listened to Merlin mutter about how sore his nose was. He positively did not groan when Merlin wondered (aloud) if a hot drink would help. He did what he was supposed to do when looking after a sick person you love. And that pursed his lips and stopped his sighs and suppressed his groans. Having someone to care about made the annoying part bearable. Just about.

Sex was out of the question. Arthur was totally Not Disappointed.

The next day was Not Disappointing either. Gwen was supposed to have travelled with Arthur but she had taken an extra shift and was due to arrive that morning. From the look on Guillaume’s face, this was not the first extra shift she had taken and Arthur worried about his friends. He mentioned his fears to Merlin, still in bed and sipping another hot drink.

“I wonder..” Merlin said between sips. “You and Guillaume, you are so comfortable in other languages – I mean Gui never had any difficulty in Donegal, even with the accent – and he understood my accent too. His English is perfect. And you have no problem with French, do you? You can understand everything. Gwen and me, we’re ordinary mortals. Maybe it’s not France she has problems with, it’s French. I couldn’t work here, even if the job is same everywhere. I’d be lost here”

Arthur looked at him, sitting up in bed, hair askew and nose still reddened and felt pride. “Maybe you could suggest that to Gui” he said. “I wish I had your ability to see things from other people’s point of view”

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Because of the change in plans, Guillaume went to the station to meet Gwen and Arthur was designated to meet Calum. They could have left him to find his own way of course – he had just
navigated his route around the world, but he had let slip it was his birthday so they thought it
callous to have his return to Europe unmarked by a friendly face. (‘How could you forget it was
your birthday?’ ‘Did I mention it was 2am and I was drunk?’)

Merlin stayed in bed with paracetamol and magazines.

Arthur considered himself a master at the bro hug now and had no hesitation in giving Calum a
hug as he came through arrivals. Calum looked more or less the same, though his beard was a little
more substantial and his hair was longer. He embraced Arthur enthusiastically.

“So where’s Merlin then?” Calum asked after Arthur told him where Guillaume was. When Arthur
said Merlin was in bed Calum gave a loud guffaw.

“Arthur, mate, you’ve had him one night and he can’t walk? What did you do to him – no don’t
answer that! You’re some fuck Arthur! ” Arthur had forgotten how bracing Calum’s brand of
‘slagging’ could be and could feel himself blush. Calum, organising his bags, looked over at him
and patted his cheek.

“That is so cute!” he said, “You know, it used to take me ages to make you blush – you’ve gotten
way too sensitive without me, Pendragon.” He pushed his trolley forward. “Now tell me what’s up
with Mez”

Arthur explained the plague and its effects and Calum bemoaned the possibility of returning home
with a cold. “I’ve spent a year wandering the world without a sniffle and you guys will germ me up
before I get home. If my mother says one I told you so when I get back I am packing up and
moving in with you”

“Why not Merlin? He’s got the bug” Arthur queried

“You’ve a nicer flat” Calum said.

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In deference to Merlin, who had now stopped dripping (which was obviously a Good Thing) but
had starting coughing which made him sound like an asthmatic performing seal (not a Good
Thing), dinner was in Guillaume’s apartment. Unlike the takeaway food at Doonshee, Guillaume
had a local restaurant which delivered real food so they did not suffer from the change of plans.
Gwen was quiet, but Arthur noticed she stayed close to Guillaume throughout the evening and
wondered if Merlin had talked to their Parisian host.

Merlin came to dinner draped in a duvet with a cap on his head. At the three fixed eyes on him he
just shrugged. “What?” he said. “I’m cold. And I’m sick. Don’t judge me”. He sat at the table like
a demented caterpillar overseeing the Mad Hatter’s tea party and Arthur felt more content than he
had for months. Calum kept the conversation going, regaling them all with his adventures over the
year. He even mentioned Freya once or twice, which Arthur thought was a good sign.

“You should have seen Arthur on a surfboard” Calum was saying, “He had all the grace of a
dolphin learning to tango. I thought I’d split myself laughing”

“Hey!” Arthur protested. “I wasn’t that bad”
“It’s alright” Merlin laughed, “We can’t all be good at everything” Guillaume looked sharply at him but then relaxed. Merlin gave another barking cough and Calum chuckled.

“Don’t you just want to throw him a fish!” Calum’s laugh was contagious and they all joined in while Merlin huffed in between barks.

“If there’s to be fish, I demand salmon” he gasped. “Preferably smoke grilled ”

“Ah Jaysus, Mez, it’s far from that you were reared!” Calum joked

“With dill and lemon” Merlin went on. Guillaume joined in with his own recipes and suggestion and Gwen got involved extolling cod and chips. An argument about the merits of national food broke out.

“Potato cakes are the food of the gods!” Merlin insisted. Guillaume snorted.

“You say that in Paris?” he said attempting to be scornful.

“You haven’t tasted my mam’s potato cakes – with a Ulster fry...” Merlin’s eyes glazed over. They all decided that mothers’ cooking didn’t count as that was always the best, and feeling that they had solved all the problems of the United Nations, the subject moved on.

Later, Calum started to sing for some reason and the night turned into a international song contest, still based on food. Arthur did not know there were so many food themed songs or that it was possible to remember them when marinated in good French wine. They kept going until laughter made breathing difficult, never mind singing.

Arthur, with Merlin tucked beside him like a singing Mummy who sang like a freight train in a tunnel, felt happiness curl up like a kitten on the cushion of his heart.

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That night Merlin was still barking and Arthur propped himself up and supported Merlin, holding the still germy Ulster man in his arms, dark head tucked under Arthur’s chin and long legs stretched between Arthur’s own. It should have been uncomfortable but Arthur felt the bubble of happiness settle and grow inside him.

“Gwen seemed happier” he said “Did you talk to Gui?”

“A little” Merlin admitted “I don’t know if that was an issue but he hadn’t thought of it. You geniuses tend not to think of the limitations of us ordinary people.”

Arthur tightened his grip. Merlin was not remotely ordinary. He just wanted to be.

Merlin went on “They’ve been thinking of having a child” Arthur nodded into Merlin’s head.

“Gwen said” he replied “I know it’s their business but I think they should sort out where they live first” The thought made him think of something else. “I never told you, Lionel and Jane have asked me to be godfather for their daughter. Me a role model!”

Merlin went very still in his arms.

“Do you want that, I mean really that?”

“Be a godfather? Or be a role model?” Arthur was puzzled. Merlin mumbled into the duvet and
Arthur couldn’t hear him and said so. Merlin raised his voice, sounding faintly defiant.

“Do you want to be a father? I mean really? ‘Cause I know you have a big thing with the name and all, and you have totally the right to have an heir and I know you have that option because, well I know... you... I’m mean I couldn’t except, well... but you can if you want and I want you to know that if you want it’s okay and I’m okay and...”

Arthur could feel Merlin’s heart beat faster as he spoke and tried to interrupt.

“Merlin.”
“Merlin!”
“Merlin!”

Merlin stopped. Arthur spoke

“What are you talking about?”

“Do you want children?” Merlin said bluntly.

Arthur was silent. He had never really thought about it. But if he was honest, his vision of himself in twenty years time included a little Arthur. The realisation was a shock.

“I don’t... I don’t know” he said honestly.

“Oh” said Merlin

“ You know I’ve had my life planned out since I was seventeen” he could feel the tension in Merlin’s body. “and I’ve achieved every step so far – faster than I hoped”

Merlin turned his head into Arthur’s chest. “You’re better at making plans work than I am” he said quietly.

Arthur remembered how Merlin’s plans had been derailed when he was seventeen and bent to kiss his forehead as an unspoken apology.

“My point is” he said to Merlin’s hair, “You weren’t part of my plans”. Merlin twisted in his arms.

“Well, who’d plan me?” he said irritably. Arthur ignored him and carried on speaking to the hair.

“And everything I planned has turned out just as I planned it” he said, holding Merlin very tight. “But you, you came into my life and are better than all the parts of it I planned. Everything else ....” he choked a little “Having you makes losing everything else bearable”

“I don’t want you to lose anything” Merlin turned in his arms so he could look at Arthur. “Don’t you understand? I don’t want you to lose anything for being with me. I don’t want to have a price, Arthur, I never did”

Arthur looked at him, pink nose and scruffy hair and pleading eyes and knew that the price was worth it.

“Well,” he said “If you get what you want, I won’t get what I want” Merlin looked puzzled as he tried to work it out. Arthur shifted uncomfortably. “And right now” he added, “Your elbow is trying to dig a hole in my chest”. Merlin moved off, which caused something else to dig in somewhere much more interesting, pausing the conversation.

Disappointment was no longer an issue.
Later, after Merlin had had another fit of barking (‘One more fish joke and I will end you’) Merlin returned to the question. Arthur snuggled into Merlin, reversing roles and was too relaxed to argue.


“What I was trying to say before we got distracted...” he said, “was that I don’t want to make plans – if good things turn up without plans, then... maybe we just see what comes up”

Merlin gave a sound somewhere between a snort and a chuckle.

“I think we just saw that” he said. Arthur laughed. It was definitely a laugh not a giggle, because giggles were unmanly and he would not giggle. At all.

It took a few minutes before Merlin brought him back to serious thoughts. He spoke very quietly, “I do mean it, Arthur, if you want...”

“Let’s just see what happens for us” Arthur said.

“Nothing will happen Arthur, unless, well...” Merlin became hesitant.

“Unless you have a major biological mutation you mean”

“Me!” Merlin was indignant. “Why me? You can have the mutation!”

“I’m not getting pregnant Merlin!... and did I say that? What have you done to me?”

“Nah” said Merlin, “You were crazy before I met you, otherwise you would never love me”. Arthur looked at Merlin.

“I glad you finally understand I love you” he said. Merlin leant in for a kiss, but then started to bark again.

Arthur rolled his eyes, “I think a mutation has already started” he remarked “A seal, definitely a seal”

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According to the clichés, returning from Paris was always going to be a letdown. Arthur did not really find it so. He felt renewed, reinvigorated, and filled with new born courage. He could look at the future and give it a nod, without too much trepidation.

On his return he was met with conflicting attitudes from his colleagues. On the one hand, he was in charge of the branch of a department which had inflicted the worst PR event the Government had faced since it came to office. On the other hand, his handling of the crisis had won him grudging plaudits from the media and even from the opposition. Arthur realised his fellow party MPs did not know whether to shun him or court him. The resulting carefully choreographed dance would have been entertaining to a sociologist but Arthur found it irritating. People he had considered allies now avoided him whereas fellow MPs who had barely acknowledged him before now made it a point to be friendly.
He realised this when he was accosted by Vivien Palmer, a fellow high flyer, on whom he knew his uncle had an eye. She congratulated him on his adept avoidance of disaster and invited him to lunch to discuss areas of interest. Arthur was slightly stunned and accepted. He had considered Vivien a rival and assumed she felt the same. This approach was unexpected.

Lunch with Vivien was an experience Arthur would never forget. She was beautiful, blonde and lithe, pushing every button he had until he discovered he had a whole new set of buttons. And she oozed confidence and power, qualities Arthur recognised. Lunch grew to dinner two days later and Arthur could tell that breakfast was not out of the question. (Not that he had ever stayed for breakfast).

As they duelled over the hor d’oeuveres, Arthur caught a glimpse of a possible future with Vivien. The arguments over control, the collaboration to gain power, the potential that was there, just lying beneath the surface. As rivals they were strong, as allies they would be formidable, together they would be unstoppable. The prospect was intoxicating, especially when Vivien held his hand a little too long when they met at the door and her foot accidently (but constantly) met his leg.

But Arthur did not allow himself to become intoxicated. He smiled at Vivien, tentatively floated a few ideas which she cautiously embraced, agreed with a few positions she raised without qualms and parted as political allies – but nothing more.

As he left the restaurant, he ran his fingers over his dragon key fob and felt the keys hanging on it. The key to his MG, carefully stored and unused, the key of the sober and respectable car he now drove, the key of the Chelsea house: and one other.

Before they had left Paris, Gwen and Arthur to take the train to London, Calum and Merlin to fly to Dublin, Merlin took Arthur aside. Merlin was dressed in more layers than the Michelin man and was wearing a tight knitted hat and his ubiquitous hoodie. As Mrs. Hudson would say, you would give him a penny. Merlin saw the look in Arthur’s eyes.

“Don’t judge” he said. “I’m cold, I told you” Arthur continued to look at him “Alright then” Merlin conceded, “I may have bought a few wee things for my mam and I only have the one bag so I’m wearing everything I can’t fit.”

“You look homeless Merlin” Arthur said impassively.

“But I’m not” Merlin said, his voice, despite the hoarseness, sounding light. “And neither are you. I mean, I know you’re not, with that fancy cottage and all, but...” He searched deep in his pocket and drew out a key. It was an ordinary key, nothing special but Merlin handed it over with reverence. “They sent me the keys before I left. This is yours” He dropped the key into Arthur’s hand. “The Palace”

Arthur closed his hand around the simple piece of metal and to his surprise felt his eyes fill. Arthur had had keys given to him before, mainly of hotel rooms. Occasionally he had even used them. He did not know why the key of a derelict shack in a remote part of another country should fill him with emotion. Merlin looked at him, head on one side like a curious cocker spaniel in a bad hat.
“What?” Merlin said “Is it okay? It won’t be fixed up for ages but we could camp by the bathroom – I mean running water is pretty good. I think I’ll fix the boiler first thing – we’ll have no roof but I’ll make sure we have hot water”

Arthur laughed through the gathering tears. The contrast to his constituency house could not be greater and he loved it.

“It’s home” he whispered, drawing Merlin closer and touching his forehead with his own.

Merlin sighed at his touch. “It’s ours” he said softly. They stood together for a moment until Arthur became aware that Gwen and Guillaume had finished their goodbyes and Calum looked as if he had counted every tile on the floor and was starting to count the cracks in the ceiling. He stirred a little and Merlin responded, pulling back slightly and picking up his present-filled bag.

“Cal, What do you think of Arthur camping in Donegal?” he called.

Calum snorted a laugh “No way! Him? Cooking baked beans and scorched sausages over an open fire? Even when we had a kitchen he had the takeaway on speed dial. He didn’t even make tea!”

“I made tea” Arthur said indignantly cuffing Calum playfully across the back of the head as they went out the door of the apartment building. “You just preferred beer. AND you never put away the empties”

“No,” said Merlin coming up behind them, arm in arm with Gwen “*I* did, and I made the tea. You lot did nothing”

Guillaume shrugged “I drink coffee” he said mildly, to stares and laughter.

And then it was awkward.

“So... bye then” Merlin said, throwing his bag over his shoulder. Calum hugged Arthur

“Thanks for coming, Arthur. It meant a lot seeing friendly faces again. It’s been a while” he choked.

Merlin and Arthur just nodded at each other. They had said their goodbyes, to touch again would be painful. Arthur did not look back as he Guillaume and Gwen set off for the station but he held the key in his hand like a talisman.

The talisman stayed with him attached to his Dragon, a reminder of what he had.

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After a session in the House where he faced (and dealt with) some fierce questions from the Opposition, Arthur was unusually willing to be persuaded to go to lunch. On the way he bumped into My Rovere, who seemed to be a constant visitor to Westminster. Arthur acknowledged him and even stopped to talk, surprising himself in the process.

“So I hear the Monk and the Ice Princess are working together now” My said with a gentle smile. “You make a lovely couple”

Arthur was irrationally irritated. “We’re not a couple” he said shortly “We have similar interests”
My smiled again, more knowingly and Arthur’s irritation grew. He was tired and stressed and if Mike Rovere made one smart ass comment he would get the full force of a Pendragon Put Down. With extra Scathing comments on the side.

But My’s smile became warm and all he said was a soft “Good”.

Arthur was surprised. My’s smile was infectious and Arthur smiled back. They chatted about mutual friends, laughed affectionately at Clarissa’s choice of hats, and discussed with anticipation the upcoming party Lionel was planning. Arthur felt himself relax into the conversation: it was easy without being bland. It was fun. It was almost like talking to Merlin.

Almost.

Arthur began to look forward to seeing My Rovere again.

Arthur didn’t have much time to think of future parties. His ministerial business still used up all of the available working day leaving constituency business to be dealt with in the margins. He was glad he could manage on very little sleep – and Martin.

Martin continued to run his constituency affairs with organised efficiency, and there were times when Arthur felt like an interloper in the office, disturbing the carefully arranged files. Not that Martin was anything but welcoming – just that Arthur felt awkward being welcomed into his own office. Martin was like an eager puppy, desperate for Arthur’s praise and Arthur felt uncomfortable with that. Hero worship was something Arthur had got used to in school and college but this was ... uncomfortable.

So it happened that on occasion he came into the office late at night to catch up with paperwork. Not that he was avoiding Martin. Simply... well yes he was avoiding him.

And it was during one of these late nights that he saw the letter. Having gone through the paperwork left out for him he began to trawl through the unopened mail. Most of it was mundane and he was relieved Martin dealt with the bulk of it but one letter drew his attention. It was from a constituent thanking him for his support in a local dispute. Arthur was aware of the dispute. Clarissa and his own instincts had warned him away. He certainly had not endorsed one of the disputants, and yet here was evidence that the man believed he had.

With a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach he searched through the files. At three am he found it. A letter, on headed paper, from him, taking a clear side in the dispute. At the bottom, his signature was clear.

Except he had not signed it.

He kept searching. He found twenty two more letters, each signed by him, none of which he had seen. Most were in response to minor matters, but a few committed him to positions he did not hold. He cursed himself for his inattention and waited for Martin to arrive.

Martin was surprised to see him at his desk, unshaven and dishevelled.

“Ah, Sir, I didn’t expect to see you?” he opened then saw the letters carefully laid out on the desk. “Shall I file these for you?” he asked sweeping the letters into a pile.

“You already did” Arthur said. “You did more than that. How long have you been using my signature?”

Martin looked blankly. “ A while?” he said. “Every good PA should be able to sign for the boss” He smiled at Arthur. “It saves so much extra work”

Arthur sighed. “I’m sorry I gave you the impression I did not want to work” he said quietly “but I
cannot stand over these. You have committed me to positions I do not hold and people I do not support”

Martin expression darkened. “Well, maybe you should – there’s nothing there illegal or immoral – not like some. And if you go back on them you will look like a hypocrite. There’s nothing there that can hurt you. I was careful”

“Obviously” Arthur said “And I wasn’t” He took a deep breath. “Take three weeks leave in lieu of notice, but clear out of the office today”

“You’re firing me?” Martin was incredulous “Why?”

“I can’t trust you” Arthur said bluntly. “I will sort out this mess, somehow, but you can’t be part of it.”

Martin looked betrayed and Arthur wondered if he were acting on his own feelings rather than Martin’s actions but the fact remained that he could never trust the man again.

As Martin left, Arthur wasn’t sure if he had rid himself of a potential villain or shot a puppy. Either way it was not good.

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In a coolly outfitted office across town Ari Aredin examined a series of photographs laid out on the table in front of him.

“Is this all you have?” he asked.

The man beside him shrugged. “He’s not called the Monk for nothing” he replied. “We got these from Paris”

“They’re not much” Aredin tossed the photographs aside “Do we know who the man is?”

“We’re working on it. We know he’s Irish” The man pulled the photos together – two pictures of Arthur Pendragon embracing a tall dark man, taken at different times, another of the same man touching Pendragon’s cheek, another showing Pendragon laughing and touching the head of the same man. They all hinted of an intimate relationship but... .

“Get more” Aredin ordered.

Chapter End Notes

This is longer than I intended - and is mostly fluff with a few necessary plot points.

The office part was rushed to fit into this chapter rather than the next so I apologise if the rushed writing is obvious.

Due to me messing up the formatting there may be issues....
He Ain't heavy.

Chapter Notes

Lots of plot points and some red herrings.

Flying with Calum was not a case of beer and skittles. Though a case of beer may have been used along the way. The moment Merlin and Calum hit the airport in Paris Calum dropped the happy mask he had been wearing, ordered a beer and everything went downhill from there.

“The thing is, Mez” Calum carefully enunciated after the third pint “I left Dublin cos I had no job and living with the parents was getting to me. Now I’m going back to living with the parents, no job AND no girlfriend. And I’m older. It fucking sucks”

Merlin didn’t know what to say. A morose Calum was a volatile Calum and Merlin did not want to carry a drunk and weepy friend on to the plane. But what he said was true and Merlin couldn’t say otherwise.

He groped for comfort.

“You could go back to college” he said without much hope. Calum gave a derisive snort.

“I’ve a mate with four degrees and he’s on the dole. Elena is working in Starbucks. Five years in college and it was her talent for making coffee that got her a job. I’ve a smart mouth and a useless degree and I have no fucking idea what I want to do.” Calum raised his hand for another beer but Merlin stopped him.

“What you don’t want is to be drunk on a plane” he said as Calum half snarled at him.

“Fuck you Mez,” Calum growled “I could out drink the Aussies”, but he gave in and left the bar. It didn’t help his mood. Calum practically sulked until they were almost approaching Dublin. Merlin was resigned to being ignored as Calum sat beside him with his headphones on so he was startled when Calum spoke to him, his voice low and toneless.

“The thing is Mez, I messed up bad in Oz. I mean I’m clean now, but it was touch and go there for a while but, see I never really used in Dublin but a lot of people I knew did and I know how to get stuff and I’m afraid...” his voice trailed off and Merlin sat very still. He knew Calum had had a relaxed attitude to using drugs but he had assumed that stage was over.

Merlin spoke impulsively “You’re not that stupid Cal, you need...”

“I need a fucking job Merlin, that’s what I need” Calum broke in. “And everybody is that stupid sometimes. Fuck’s sake Mez even you got drunk so don’t preach to me!” Calum paused. “I’m not an idiot. I know... I just want something in my life... I want a reason to get up ...”

By the time the plane landed in Dublin Merlin was exhausted. He had known that Calum had taken
the break up with Freya hard, but he had not realised that there was more to his melancholy than that. Calum did start to look better as they descended.

“Clouds” he said “God help me I missed clouds. I missed being able to bitch about the weather every day. I’ll be grand Mez, once I’ve something to complain about”

Merlin wasn’t convinced but he was more hopeful when they reached the Arrivals hall. Calum looked embarrassed. “I can’t believe they did that” he exclaimed as he saw a banner with ‘Welcome home Calum’ in glowing letters draped over the security barrier. “You’d think I was away for a year. Oh wait, I was!” He ran over to the waiting crowd and Merlin remembered that Calum had six sisters – most of whom seemed to be there, some with children in tow. His parents were behind them, waving enthusiastically. Merlin had hope for Calum but felt a sudden disinclination to be sociable. He slipped away, sending Calum a text to tell him where he was. He caught the bus for the city centre and the train home.

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Grateful to find a seat on the crowded train, Merlin flopped down beside two older women, heading for Newry with demented trolleys. With his own bag squashed under his feet, he hoped that the trinkets he got for his mum wouldn’t be flattened and settled in for the journey.

Talking with Calum had been difficult but as he thought of his responsibilities as a friend he became aware of what Arthur had taken on. Arthur did not simply share the common human care for the person, he was one of those who was responsible for fixing the whole problem.

Privately Merlin admitted, that despite Arthur’s chosen profession, he still held the view shared by most people that politicians were either power hungry egotists with a tendency to be corrupt or eager zealots willing to sacrifice anyone for their cause. Arthur was neither. He enjoyed the cut and thrust of politics but retained his aims. He championed causes but not at the expense of reason.

Merlin knew that he would hate that job and most people he knew would agree. Having spent the last few hours feeling helpless in the face of Calum’s problems, Merlin realised the courage it took to stand up and attempt to tackle big problems. He decided he would definitely appreciate Arthur more.

When his head stopped aching and breathing was less of an issue.

He huddled in his corner as the women gossiped about their neighbours and compared grandchildren and imagined Arthur’s arms holding him. Arthur the man he had always appreciated.

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When he arrived in Belfast it was dark and raining and Merlin sighed as he left the station and headed for a bus stop. It was all very well having romantic assignations in Paris, albeit with associated friends and unwelcome coughs, but real life still meant cold rain and late buses. He wondered if he should go back to his parents’ house which was closer, but Calum’s dilemma made him sensitive about that and he decided to go to his flat. He was fairly sure he had pizza in the freezer. Fairly sure.

A car stopped beside him and he recognised one of Kenny’s cabs. Kenny was driving.

“Get in” he said shortly and Merlin did not hesitate. Kenny drove off and Merlin sighed as he realised that he was heading towards the family house.

“Ah, no, Kenny, listen, it’s alright, I was heading for the flat, I’ll get a bus no problem” he said and was a little surprised when Kenny did not slow down.

“No, You’ll stay at your Ma’s tonight” Kenny said causing tendrils of annoyance to grow in Merlin. Kenny was a good friend but Merlin had a father thank you very much and he did not need to be controlled by anyone, friend or not. He was about to say so when Kenny turned into a narrow side road and pulled in to the side of the road. Kenny turned to him and in the dim glare of a street light Merlin could see his expression was stern, even cold. The annoyance turned to something else.

“Have you been doing anything to get up the noses of the Boys?” Kenny demanded and Merlin felt his heart sink to his stomach.

“No!” he said too loudly “I haven’t. God, Kenny, what’s...” Merlin’s voice disappeared into his throat, fear closing it more effectively than the cold had done. The old organisations whose tattoos Kenny still wore had not disappeared with peace. The men who led them still had power. Some chose to use it in politics but others still used force. Coming to the attention of the Boys was never good.

“People have been around asking questions about you, where you live, where you go, the sort of questions that mean that someone is interested in you. I want to know why”

Merlin knew that Kenny’s loyalty to the cause was long gone, the makeup of his taxi crew proved that, but he also knew Kenny and knew that the man’s loyalty to people once given, never wavered. If his old mates were after Merlin, Kenny would be hard put to choose, but as he watched the rain drops on the windscreen flow together into a single current Merlin was sure old loyalties trumped new ones.

“What are you going to do?” he managed to croak out before his voice left him again.

“Depends on who’s asking. I’ll poke around, see what’s what.” Kenny looked at him again, his expression a little kinder “You’re not political, Kid, so unless you’ve done something seriously stupid to one of the big lads, you should be all right. I’ll let it be known you’re still on my crew. You just be careful out there”

Merlin was pathetically grateful for Kenny’s support but only said so briefly. Kenny did not like thanks. The car started up again and they drove in silence to the leafy suburban road of his parents’ home. It seemed so far away from any threats.
His Mum was glad to see him, though Merlin noticed she had to shove off a collection of ironing from his bed before preparing it; his room was gradually being reabsorbed into the house. She gloriéd in the Parisian gifts he had brought her and fusséd over his cold, making him tea and searching for scones. His Dad nodded to him from across the sitting room and invited him to sit. They talked of the mountains and his work and Dad’s allotment and Merlin relaxed into the feeling that was home. The veiled threat of mysterious questions did not belong in this cosy home.

It was only when he was in bed that the word ‘political’ hit him with a meaning that was not euphemistic. Arthur was Political in the real sense of the word. Could this be related to him? Merlin knew they had been less careful in the last while, but the habit was still there and he could not recall any potential giveaways. He resolved to warn Arthur the next day.

The next day was very rushed. He had to get to his flat to change into his uniform and still be in time for work. And work was busy. His second call of the day was a high speed motorbike accident and it was not pleasant. He had known the job would have bad days but he had never imagined picking up body parts to be part of it. Merlin struggled not to throw up but when a PSNI officer, older than him and who had been in the RUC and had seen far worse, lost his lunch in a nearby hedge, Merlin gave up and joined him.

He had stopped heaving when William McIlwaine came over to him. He one of the ambulance crew also called to the scene and Merlin knew him.

“You done?” McIlwaine asked and Merlin nodded, wiping his mouth. “I have some water in the van” McIlwaine added and led to the open door of the ambulance. “The time to worry is when you don’t feel sick” he said as he handed Merlin a bottle of water. “Look at all these” he gestured around at the ubiquitous crowd of onlookers, kept away from the details by police. “They wouldn’t be so eager to see if they knew the details” Merlin looked at the crowd of avid faces, showing concern and curiosity and sighed. He could never be part of such a crowd again. As his glance scanned the people he thought he caught a glimpse of Millan in the crowd and wondered which he felt. He looked again but the face he thought was Millan wasn’t there. He gratefully sipped the water McIlwaine gave him then handed back the bottle.

“I have to get back” Merlin said “I’m still on call.” As a paramedic he could be needed elsewhere. There were no lives to be saved here.

“You good to go?” McIlwaine inquired and when Merlin nodded added “Good lad”. Merlin felt irrationally pleased with the praise.

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The rest of the day was less traumatic but just as busy and by the time he let himself in to his flat he felt sick and tired.

There was no pizza in the freezer after all so he settled for beans on toast and sat down to go through the pile of post sitting waiting for him. Most was the real life equivalent of spam but among his post was a stiff envelope and Merlin, knowing what it was opened it quickly.

He had known for months that he had passed all exams and was qualified but this was the certified confirmation. As he held the stiff piece of card Merlin felt pride. He hadn’t thought it would matter but it did. For the first time he had achieved something he wanted. This rather plain cert
took away the sting of his A levels and was worth more to him than his degree. He was in a good mood when he called Arthur and was glad when Arthur shared his joy, especially as Arthur seemed a little grumpy.

“I’m missing you” Arthur said when he asked why “And I have whole new landscape to work out here – alliances are forming and reforming so fast it’s making me dizzy”

“That’s probably a fever – you’ve gone and caught my cold. I warned you about the plague!” Merlin said and Arthur laughed.

“It was worth it, Typhoid Merlin,” he said “Now what are you doing to celebrate your achievement?”

Merlin told him about the toast and Arthur laughed.

Two days later the postman delivered a gift to Merlin. It was a picture frame and Merlin was puzzled until a text came from Arthur which simply said ‘To hang in pride of place on our wall’.

Merlin smiled as he read it but wondered when Arthur would stop obliquely apologising for the ambulance driver incident. It was over. But the frame was nice. And the idea of ‘our wall’ was a comforting one.

He said so in the next phone call and learned all about Vivien Palmer.

“She’s a female you” Merlin told Arthur. “She’s ambitious, gorgeous and blonde”

Arthur laughed but afterwards said quietly “I’m really not as ambitious as you think Merlin” a phrase that worried Merlin.

He had seen how Arthur was making more and more references to their future, to being together but he had not said how it was to be possible. Merlin was nervous.

“He’s the sort of self-sacrificing idiot who would charge a dragon with a paper sword if he thought it would save the world” he grumbled to Elena when she came to Belfast (without Val) for a weekend. She disagreed.

“Your Arthur would have a proper sword. And a fire hose. And reinforcements around the back. He’s a planner that one”

That was what worried Merlin. Arthur had not discussed a plan. Even dinner with Elena did not ease his worry – though that could have been because she pined for Val the whole time.

“I know it’s important, what he’s doing” she mourned, “but we had planned this weekend for ages and now it’s all spoilt”

“Thanks very much” said Merlin wryly. She poked him with her bread stick.

“You know what I mean” she complained. “You’d be grumpy if Mr. Smartypants Pendragon didn’t show for one of your weekends, admit it”

“Last time I was grumpy anyway” retorted Merlin and told her about his plague ridden time in Paris. That reminded him of Calum. Merlin had been in touch through text or phone every day but
it was still hard to see how Calum was. It was impossible to tell if he was being sarky because he was miserable, being sarky because he was taking the piss, being sarky because he was being clever or just being sarky because he was Calum. As a friend, he was worth the effort – but it was effort. He asked Elena how he was.

“I don’t see that much of him” she replied. “He’s looking for an internship I think” Merlin already knew that.

“He is getting paranoid though” Elena went on thoughtfully “The last time I saw him he swore that someone was following him. He accused a guy in a bar of taking photos of him. I mean – everyone takes pictures these days. If the world ended the remaining people would be standing looking at with phones in the air, taking pictures.”

Merlin thought for a second, then risked asking.

“Do you think he’s using?” he asked quietly

“He’s not going to tell me” Elena said seriously “He’d never put Val in that position. But yeah, I’d be worried”

“Fuck” said Merlin and Elena looked at him, startled.

“You’re really worried?” she said in surprise

“He’s my friend, of course I am”

She patted his hand. “I’ll look into it, Merlin” she said. “We have to look out for each other. No one else will”.

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Merlin had no idea how it happened. One minute he was walking through the canteen carrying his tray and the next he was staring at a heap of Spaghetti Bolognese as it slowly oozed down his shirt front. This was familiar, but not in a good way. For some reason his body had heard of hand/eye coordination but had decided it was a new fangled adaptation that he did not need. Hence the tray now vertical and the spaghetti now dripping reddish brown down his torso.

He was despairing at the realisation that he had not replaced the spare shirt he usually kept in his locker when he got a sudden vision of the accident he had helped clean up. He gagged – then ran for the bathroom, ignoring the looks of his co-workers as he passed them.

When he came out a few minutes later he carried his crumpled shirt in his hand. He is tee-shirt was also stained but he wasn’t going bare.

“They really do get upset about their clothes don’t they” he heard as he passed one table and felt his stomach churn again for another reason. He took a glass of water and looked around for an empty table, but finding none, he sat at the end of one table and tried to settle his stomach with sips of water.

“Did the shirt mean that much to you then” said an EMT sitting opposite. Merlin ignored him but was surprised to see McIlwaine plop a tray in front of him and sit at the remaining seat.

“Our Merlin was first at that RTA the other day. Motor bike versus truck. We were combing bits
from the tarmac for hours.” He turned to Merlin and put a plate of salad in front of him. “Spag bol probably wasn’t the best choice son” he said. “You stick with the green stuff – no bad memories”

“I don’t know about that” one of the other men said “Y’can get pretty hairy stuff in vegetation . I remember one time....”

He continued with his reminiscences, much to the groans of the rest of the table who were still eating. Sally Graham, an EMT with whom he had trained was sitting beside him and in a conspiratorial whisper said “Are you going to the retirement do Saturday week?” Merlin shook his head.

“I wasn’t planning to” he said. Since The Incident (making a report qualified for capital letter, even in thought) he had not socialised with his colleagues which had severely limited his already limited social life. It wasn’t for nothing he got unsocial hours payments.

“Ah, you should” she said. “You’ll get to hear all these stories again only with alcohol so they’ll add in more details. You should see the wives and girlfriends...” she paused “and boyfriends” she added “They all go as green as your lettuce when the old ones start with their stories”

“You make it sound very tempting” Merlin said with a smile and Sally grinned at him. It was nice to sit and joke and feel comfortable and Merlin felt so much better when he headed out for his shift. He even considered going to the retirement dinner...

++++

It was Monday so Merlin set up his laptop and called. Arthur looked serious on the screen but there was a suppressed energy about him that made Merlin curious.

“Merlin” Arthur said “There’s something.. something happened”

Merlin looked closely, Arthur looked strained but not damaged, it could not be that bad.

“Sounds serious” Merlin replied, “What?”

Arthur looked away for a moment and Merlin had the disconcerting feeling that he was politicianing himself for the talk. Arthur never did that with him, not anymore. Merlin began to feel nervous.

“I ... Well, just remember that with an overview it was a good thing” Arthur began and Merlin felt his heart sink. He was getting the political spiel – the spin. A tense ball of anger grew within him.
“Arthur?” he said “Tell me. ME. Not the voters”

He could tell by Arthur’s face that he understood. Arthur looked straight at the camera and said, with some hesitation. “I kissed... I kissed a man”

Merlin knew his heart stopped. He closed his eyes to block out the image of Arthur looking straight at him but out of reach.

“Oh” he said.

Arthur took this as encouragement and continued “Rather, he kissed me... but this was a good...”

Merlin broke in involuntarily “A good kiss?” he said knowing that his voice was tinged with bitterness.

“No, yes no, not the kiss but that it happened”

Merlin thought he was hearing through cotton wool. Meaning became fuzzy in his brain. And he could not process what Arthur was still saying.

“I didn’t know if it was just you or was it me and now I know it’s me... but it’s you” Arthur was still speaking but not making sense. Merlin shook his head but that just made him dizzy and didn’t help at all.

“You kissed a man” Merlin’s own voice sounded to him as if it came from far away.

Arthur touched the screen as if reaching out “Merlin?” he said

“And this is good” Merlin felt coldness creep into his voice

“Merlin” Arthur’s political calm deserted him.

“Was he better... did....” Merlin stopped unable to go on.

Arthur was back to his incoherent self, “It was and then it wasn’t... he wasn’t you... it felt all
wrong... and I knew... right then I knew. You’re it, You feel right... please...”

Merlin was silent, trying to process what Arthur said. If it had been a woman he would have been gutted but resigned. He could not compete with that. But a man? He looked at Arthur’s face, distorted by the size of the screen and could not think. All he could see were those lips touching another. He tried to cling on to reason but reason had left and only pain remained.

“Can I take a little while – to think” He knew his voice sounded pitiable but he just wanted to shut off and be quiet. “I love you but can I be alone?”

Arthur looked pained but nodded and the connection was broken. Merlin stared at the blank computer and took deep breaths. He was being illogical and emotional but that is what love is and he needed to allow his pain to howl before he went back to being ruled by reason.

It took an hour.

Arthur had said this was good but Merlin couldn’t see how. He had a Doctor Who moment of menacing robots saying ‘this is a kindness’ and felt an urge to whack something with a hockey stick. He had never held a hockey stick so the impulse was new. But he knew that only Arthur would appreciate the reference and that hurt too.

Arthur had kissed a man. It hurt more than anything else. All the insecurities he thought he had beaten, flooded back. Was He better looking? More sophisticated? Just generally better?

One kiss? Or more? Many?

As he let the pain run through him he wondered if this was something he could add to his list of things he could bear if he could only have Arthur. Was love strong enough? He looked at the phone beside his laptop. He would ask. He owed Arthur that. He owed himself that. He pressed call.

Arthur answered almost before the first ring ended.

“Merlin? Please, Merlin” Arthur sounded frantic and Merlin realised that his need for time had caused Arthur pain. He was sorry for the pain but not guilty.
“I’m here.” He said.

“Are you?” He heard the undertone of doubt in Arthur’s voice and hated it. His own doubts faded (though the pain did not). Love was strong enough. He answered the true question.

“Always” he said firmly. “Always yours” and heard the faint sigh of relief from Arthur. It provoked him to push a little more.

“But if you kiss anyone other than me I will end you.”

Merlin joked but his heart wasn’t in it. His heart was limping, bruised and concussed some distance behind his brain. He drew a mental breath and added “Now tell me everything. I can take it.”

Arthur told him of My Rovere and how charming he was. He spoke of a party at Lionel’s where My was friendly and easy to chat to after a difficult week. He admitted to drinking a little more than he should, relaxed in the company of friends. He described how My (Mike Merlin mentally altered the name - Michael, Mick – he hated Arthur calling this man ‘My’ it was – possessive), how HE had stepped close as they stood by the door getting air, how He had swept a speck of dust from Arthur’s shoulder then leaned in and claimed his lips.

Merlin heard each word and added pictures. He saw this man, handsome and charming, suave and elegant, fitting into Arthur’s world, into his life and though his heart did not allow itself to be battered again his own ego took a beating. Would ‘My’ (oh he hated the name) be better for Arthur? Would Arthur be accepted if he were seen to have chosen someone so suitable instead of a lanky introvert with anxiety issues?

“I won’t lie Merlin, the first touch was good – but then – it was wrong. I felt... do you remember when I pushed you away in Doonshee?”

And suddenly Merlin stopped thinking about his own ego.

“Arthur! – are you okay? Are you... did he.... did you...” Merlin knew he was rambling but the recollection of how devastated Arthur had looked that day in Doonshee, how the memory of the assault had broken him brought out every protective bone he had

“If you’re asking did I punch him then no. But I did sort of push him into the flower pots” Arthur was saying.

“Sort of pushed?” Merlin kept talking to try and keep his mind from racing.
“He didn’t fall. May have bruised a plant or two. Merlin, I swear I..”

“No. Don’t. I don’t doubt you and I never did” Merlin didn’t say it was himself he doubted. “But how can you say it was a good thing?”

“I tried to explain. I didn’t realise that I needed to know...”

And Merlin understood. “You needed to know if you were attracted to other men. If other men were attracted to you”

“Yes”

“And you are and they are”

“Yes”

“And”

“And I love you.”

Merlin sighed. “I know” he said knowing Arthur would get every meaning. There was a brief silence. “Arthur?”

“Yes”

“Are you a little bit smug that I am having a jealous hissy fit over a kiss?”

“Yep” and Arthur, now that he was no longer worried, did sound smug.

“What I said before, about you kissing some else? I mean it. Don’t. I don’t do jealous well.”

Merlin wanted to say more but he couldn’t. He needed Arthur to understand that he didn’t live on highs and lows – he lived in the middle and had now discovered that jealousy burned him.

“Only you, Merlin” Arthur said warmly “Only ever you”

Merlin sighed. They would get through this, though he did wish they didn’t have to.

+++++

Unknown to Merlin, in an office in London Aredin was examining a video on a large screen on the wall. The scene he watched was at night but the images were clear. Arthur Pendragon stood outside a house, glass in hand, a man beside him. They are talking.
“Is there audio?” Aredin paused the images and asked.

His companion shook his head.

“Quality was poor” he said “But I can get a transcript”

“Do” Aredin said and resumed the video.

Arthur Pendragon was laughing, evidently at something the other man said. The other man stepped a little closer. They continued to talk. The other man reached out and brushed something from Pendragon’s shoulder, then left his hand there- slowly pushing up to Pendragon’s face. He leaned in, lips touching Pendragon’s. Pendragon closed his eyes.

Aredin froze the image.

“We could use this” he said.

“Not if you want it to withstand legal challenge” his companion said.

Aredin pressed play.

The kiss continued. Pendragon’s hand crept around the other man’s waist, not quite touching. Then: Pendragon’s eyes flew open, the hand which had been relaxed pulled back and pushed, the other man staggered back, hitting his calves against a cluster of ornamental pots causing him to lose his balance and sit down suddenly. Pendragon was speaking forcefully.

“Fuck” said Aredin. “I need the transcript”

“Yes Sir” his companion said.

“Tell me about it” Aredin demanded

“It was real. All of it. Both the kiss and the disgust. I know when someone is faking and he wasn’t. Both were real. I don’t know what that gets you”

“Not far enough” Aredin sighed. “Did we find the man in the Paris pictures?”

“Yes. He’s Irish”

“Explains why we haven’t caught them before”
“We’ve had someone on him for a while. What do you want?”

“Everything. I want to know his full life story. And his family. Get me the dirt. I want to know if his father has speeding tickets, if his grandmother cheated on her taxes. Everything. Get me the dirt”

“Yes Sir” his companion moved to the door. “Sir? Arthur Pendragon is not the worst. Why him?”

“He’s one of them. Politicians set themselves up, it’s our job to bring them down.” Aredin spoke as if he were propounding a glorious creed. “And his father likes legal battles. This is one he won’t win”

Aredin smiled and his companion inwardly shuddered. “Do I go back to him?” he asked.

“Yes. See if you can get him to talk. You said it was real. Work on it”

Michael Rovere nodded and left the office.
Cat's cradle

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It hadn’t gone as badly as he feared, telling Merlin. And it wasn’t that he had actually cheated. Or even wanted to cheat. And Merlin was right, it make him feel – not smug but gratified that Merlin was jealous. Merlin was so good about giving Arthur space – allowing him time, not standing in his way, it was, yes, gratifying to know that when the chips were down (or lips were on) Merlin could be as jealous as the next man.

Arthur saw My Rovere a few days later at a function. The man nodded to him and then came over, leaving Arthur with no option but to maintain social convention and greet him. In truth, Arthur did not know whether to he wanted to punch him or run away. Merlin would be glad he did not have any lingering desire to kiss him.

My was warm, apologetic and charming. “I am sorry for misreading the situation – I had too much to drink – and to be honest, you’re a very attractive man and I was lonely. Can you forgive me? I know you won’t want to stay as... were we friends? hope we were”

Arthur pitied him. He remembered himself and the furtive groping with the bartender. If he had not Merlin, like a bright beacon in his mind, how would he feel? Would he want a bond with an attractive friend? He forgave My in his mind and smiled to show it.

“So? Is there a chance for me?” My asked lightly.

Arthur shook his head. “No” he said gently “Not at all” He was going to say more – make My feel better - but Elliott came over with champagne and gossip and the moment passed. Arthur wondered if he would tell Merlin he had ‘made up’ with My Rovere, then he dismissed the thought. Of course he would. Merlin must know and if Merlin was upset, Arthur would deal with it. He was surprised he got a certain masochistic joy in having someone (who wasn’t just someone) with whose moods he had to deal. He didn’t even notice the soft smile that came over his face.

++++++

Arthur felt drained when he entered the Chelsea house. It had been a tiring day made more difficult by the lack of Martin. Arthur had replaced him but the new secretary was still learning the nuances of constituency relationships and Arthur was doing much of the work himself. He feared that even when she knew more he would still keep that up. Trust is very easy to lose and hard to build again. But he was tired. It was not that there were not enough hours in the day – there were – as long as sleeping was not a priority. It was nearly midnight and it was still the earliest he had been home this week.

Arthur was surprised to see that his father was in residence; the main house was lit up. He wondered tiredly if he should make an effort and greet his father when the decision was taken from
him by his father's voice calling from the drawing room.

Uther Pendragon was sitting in an armchair, a large glass of brandy by his side. He motioned Arthur to enter then reached for a remote on the table in front of him. He pressed a button and the room was filled with Arthur' voice, describing in careful detail what he missed about Merlin. Arthur knew he paled and felt his mouth go dry.

"Your voice" Uther stated.

"Yes" said Arthur through dry lips. "How did you...?"

Uther turned off the sound. "It would seem your judgement in hiring staff is as poor as everything else. Your former secretary came to me with this, seeking money”

Arthur took a sharp breath “No.” he said, shaking his head, “Don’t...”

“I have paid him, and given him a position. He will not speak.” Uther sounded bitter.

“I don’t want that” Arthur managed to say.

“Don’t mistake me. I paid for me not for you. I want to protect my family name, which unfortunately you share”

Uther stood up. “I shall be leaving for New York in the morning. I will be gone a week. When I return you will be gone from this house.” He looked at Arthur who was shaken by the coldness his eyes.

“Father?” Arthur choked

“I shall be polite in public but as far as I am concerned I have no son” Uther said and moved towards the door. Putting his hand on the handle he turned slightly.

“You were always a disappointment. Now you disgust me” he said without turning his head. He then walked out.

Arthur felt that the air in the room had become lead, settling in his soul. Of all the reactions he had envisaged his father having, this had been his nightmare. He tried to regain control of himself, be once again the impassive 'Monk' his coterie demanded but in his head a little boy cried for his Daddy and the cries echoed through his thoughts, making all else fade away.

He rose to his feet – barely aware that he had been sitting. Slowly he went out to the hall and picked up the briefcase he had left down a few minutes before. With deliberate steps he reached the front door and went out. The sound of the door closing, quiet though it was, had a finality that stunned him. Although never a home in the way others described home, his father's house had
been one place he belonged, one place where, hidden though it was, love existed. Now there was no love.

Arthur walked blindly down the road feeling tears prick at his eyelids. He refused to give into to them. Arthur Pendragon, MP, Minister, did not cry. He tried to clear his head and think but his instinct was telling him to curl up in a corner and avoid the world.

He hailed a taxi instead.

He rang ahead to a hotel near Westminster he had used before, realising as he did so that cost and money would be something he would have to consider in the future. He had no doubt his Trust would be wound up but he didn’t really care.

Checking in easily, just over an hour after he shut the door on his father’s house he stood in the well appointed hotel room.

“You were always a disappointment, now you disgust me”

The words rang in his head and cause his stomach to roil. He ran to the bathroom and threw up.

Sitting on the cold tiled floor of the hotel bathroom Arthur knew there could be no comfort in a world made of points and angles. In his pocket a phone vibrated.

Merlin.

He reached for it then placed it on the floor. Suddenly he did not want to talk to Merlin. A feeling of jealousy swept over him. Merlin’s father was proud of him. His parents saw him and loved him. Arthur remembered the graduation photo and the looks on the faces of Mr. and Mrs. Balinson. His father had never looked at him like that. And now he never would. To the accompaniment of the harsh sound of the vibrating phone, Arthur sobbed.

It was more than an hour later when Arthur, stiff and sore from sitting on the bathroom floor finally got up and answered the phone.

“Oh Thank God!” Merlin exclaimed. “Arthur are you all right? You didn’t answer - It kept ringing... Arthur? Say something!” Merlin sounded quite desperate and part of Arthur knew he should feel guilty for causing that but there was too much guilt there already to allow it room.

“I’m fine” he said, knowing his voice was thick. “Something came up, that’s all. I’m sorry. I’m fine”

“Arthur, I need to see you. Go to Skype” Merlin demanded.

“No laptop.” Arthur said peremptorily.

“You’re not at home? Where are you?” Merlin’s voice was soft, as if he were talking to a child. Arthur didn’t mind.

“In a hotel” he said. The part of his mind that was detached wondered if that looked bad – ignoring the call for an hour in a hotel room. He didn’t want Merlin to think that, to feel bad “I’m alone” he
"There’s isn’t anybody”

“I didn’t think there was” Merlin said gently. “Will you talk to me?”

Arthur swallowed. He felt as if his throat was closing. “I can’t” he said. “Not now”

“Is it time?” Merlin asked very quietly.

“Maybe” Arthur said “Please, not now. Please...” he knew he was begging but he was seconds away from breaking down again. “I have to go.”

He took a breath. Suddenly he needed to be reminded. “Do you love me?” he asked abruptly.

There was no hesitation. “With everything I am” Merlin said firmly.

“Goodnight” said Arthur, and ended the call.

A text came through almost immediately.

From Merlin: Who?

He could do this. There were no emotions in texts unless you put them in. He answered

From Arthur: My Father

From Merlin: I’m coming

Arthur wanted to say no, to say not to come, to say that it was not needed but he was too tired. He let the phone slip from his hand and lay back on the bed. He stared at the ceiling and listened to the sound of the fan until he fell into sleep.

+++++++++

The next morning Arthur was functioning again. He had meeting with constituents, departmental meetings and an afternoon in the Commons and he worked through it all with his usual calm demeanour. He refused to allow his feelings to interfere with his work. Emotions were fine in their place but their place was not in his office.

He had a working lunch with Lionel, discussing common approaches to upcoming legislation and Arthur was proud of how he stayed focused. He was startled therefore when Lionel said “You’re worried about something. Can I help?” . For a moment Arthur thought of sharing everything but he was not yet ready.

“I’m in the process of moving” he said, giving the edited version of the truth. “I want to find a flat quickly”

“Why not use my flat while you look. It would take the pressure off” Lionel said sympathetically. “I’ve been commuting every night and considering the way your god-daughter is reacting to teething I will be commuting forever. If there’s a late Sitting I’ll stay over but other than that the place is empty.”
Arthur contemplated the offer. The hotel room was bland and featureless and without hope and he hated the thought of another night there. Something must have shown on his face because Lionel leaned over and said firmly “I’m not taking no for an answer. Here’s the keys, move in tonight” Arthur automatically took the keys.

Lionel walked with him back to the office, meeting Elliott on the way. Elliott was uncharacteristically excited.

“Have you heard?” he said “The PM is going to announce his a date for his resignation”

“That was said before.” Lionel said scathingly. “It didn’t happen”

“But now the grey men in the Committee want him out. They want a new face to be established before the next election. He can’t keep putting it off”

Arthur felt them both look at him with anticipation and unasked questions. Not today he thought I can’t cope with this today, Don’t ask me today, please not today. Today I’ll say no, today I’ll hide

Lionel spoke “Arthur, you will...” He was interrupted by Arthur’s new secretary on her way to lunch in a flurry of coat scarves and umbrellas.

“Oh Mr. Pendragon, I left a message on your desk. A Mr Balinson called. Said he was in London for a few days and asked if you had time to meet. I did say your schedule was tight so there’s no obligation” She trotted off, in a clatter of sensible heels.

Arthur stilled his heart for a moment.
He had come.
Merlin had come to him.
Arthur had not heard from him since the last text and had not dared to look at his phone since. The pain of the night before hit him again at the prospect of comfort and he could feel his mask slipping.

“Is that your friend from Belfast? The ambulance guy?” Elliott asked and Arthur nodded.

“I didn’t know he was coming to London” Arthur said truthfully, barely managing to get the words out without breaking. He admired Merlin’s strategy. No hiding, no subterfuge. An appointment set up with his secretary, no need to hide.

“Good” said Lionel emphatically. “You should meet up for dinner. Get out of this hothouse for a bit.” He drew Arthur away as Elliott called out to a passing MP. “Tell you what” Lionel continued. “There’s a nice Indian place just down the road from the flat. You could go there and have a casual night. You could go back to the flat for a night cap, though now that I come to think of it, you’ll have to buy your own booze”

“Merlin doesn’t drink” Arthur said automatically Lionel looked at him seriously.

“I don’t know what has happened Arthur, but something has. You need to fix it. We need you back in the game. If Elliott is right there is a lot at stake. Take some time, but not too long. Talk to your friend.”
Lionel turned away then turned back. “We are with you Arthur. We need to know you are with us” He walked down the corridor to catch up with Elliott. Arthur stood looking after him.

+++ Later that day he stood outside the Parliament building watching the traffic cross Westminster bridge and thinking of nothing. He saw a familiar figure, tall and thin, dressed more cautiously than usual emerge from the Underground station across the road. Merlin was here.

And then something shifted in him. He remembered with cruel intensity his father’s face as he listened to Arthur verbally fuck Merlin. He felt all the shame of that moment, heard again his father’s voice “you disgust me” and knew he had not the strength to see that face, look at that body without breaking. Impulsively he pushed out his hand to hail a passing black cab. As he drove off he caught a glimpse of Merlin’s face looking shocked as he stood at the side of the busy road.

Arthur went first to the hotel to check out and then to Chelsea to pack his things. Every time he blinked he could see Merlin’s face in his mind’s eye and he turned his phone off in a petty attempt to avoid answering for his actions. He sorted clothes, packed a few personal items and then left a note for Mrs. Hudson to have the rest of his possessions boxed. He noted dully that his whole life could fit in two suitcases and a few boxes. All the time he moved automatically, folding and storing and trying not to see.

It wasn’t until he stood in the small lobby of Lionel’s flat that he turned his phone on again. Three missed calls. And texts.

From Merlin : At W. Bridge. Thought I saw you but it wasn’t. Let me know when you are ready.
From Merlin : Figure you are delayed. Can you call or text?
From Merlin : Still at bridge
From Merlin : Rain is bad and I’m getting funny looks from a policeman. Going to find a coffee shop. Will text with name.
From Merlin : Caffe Nero
From Merlin : Third cup. Are you on the way?
From Merlin : Ok they are closing. What do you want me to do?
From Merlin : I guess it was you I saw. I was pretty arrogant thinking I could just waltz into your life and think I could fix things. Sorry
From Merlin : Sorry.
Arthur stared at the screen.

The last message was two hours ago.

It hadn’t even been twenty four hours since his life imploded and he had thrown away the best thing in it. He ran his fingers over the keypad, desperate to send a message but unsure what to say. He sat on the floor of the tiny lobby, his suitcases beside him and contemplated the wreck of his life.

A sharp ring at the doorbell above his head stirred him to move. The apartment building had open access and each flat had its own front door. Arthur didn’t even wonder who would be calling so late – he had lost the ability to care. Pushing to his feet he opened the door to see Merlin, wet and bedraggled standing on the doorstep.

“I had convinced myself that you don’t want me here, that coming to London was a mistake but someone said that maybe you needed me so...” Merlin shrugged “So you’ll have to tell me to go to my face. Do you want me to go Arthur?”

Mutely, Arthur shook his head and stepped aside. Merlin came in and shut the door. Arthur, as if in a dream gently touched Merlin’s face then broke. “Please” he said “Please, don’t leave me. Please... not you”

Merlin led him in to the utilitarian living room and unceremoniously pushed him onto the couch.

“I’ll never leave you” he said. “I’m here for as long as you want me and more. But you have to let me in Arthur. You can’t keep running”

Sitting beside Arthur he pulled the broken man into his arms. “Shh” Merlin whispered. “I’m here. Let me in Arthur, Let me share”

It took more than an hour of patient coaxing (Merlin) provoking silences (Arthur) and occasional shouting (both) for the details of Uther’s reaction to be told, and much more time to allow actual conversation to take place.

“To be fair” Merlin mused when talking was possible “If my dad heard the way we talk, he’d probably freak out”

Arthur looked at him with both affection and scorn. “And say you disgust him?” he said with an inward wince.

“Maybe” said Merlin, “If he was caught off guard”

“He was” Arthur pointed out, “Very much so. And he chose to publically claim you. And my father chose to privately disown me” His heart lurched as he spoke. He would never be able to think of it without pain, though he knew he would be able to hide it.

“I never told you” Merlin began, as he ran his fingers through Arthur’s hair. By this time Arthur
was lying with his head in Merlin’s lap, exhausted with emotional strain. “But my dad didn’t speak to me for two weeks after the whole Church thing. He wasn’t mean or anything but he didn’t talk. Mum said later, he needed time to think before he spoke and he had a lot to think about. Maybe with time... maybe if your father had more to think about?”

Arthur looked up fiercely, raising his hand and holding Merlin’s jaw “Don’t you even think of going to my father” he said warningly “Promise me”

Merlin smiled gently “No” he said “But I really do have to go back tomorrow. I have a late shift tomorrow night. He moved his hands to stroke Arthur’s shoulders, letting his fingers move over the tense muscles and down his chest. “What are you up to Arthur?” he murmured, “What have you planned. I know you. I mean I hope I know you and I think you have a plan”

He looked at Arthur but his lover was asleep, breath coming deep and slow. Merlin watched every rise and fall, noting that Arthur looked so young when he slept, a slight frown on his face, his lips in a pout. Merlin held him close as if to protect him from the world that could never see this Arthur. This Arthur was just for him and that was sad, because this Arthur was beautiful in the human vulnerability that he would never let anyone see. As he held him, Merlin vowed to be shield for this man, though he knew Arthur would never allow that. Arthur had his own sense of honour, of duty, and Merlin feared where it would take him. He leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss to the furrowed brow. The world could wait ’til morning. Merlin would hold vigil.

Chapter End Notes

I know they need to talk but every time I drafted the conversation it was wrong - until I realised that was because Arthur fell asleep....

Characters these days, won't do what they're supposed to....
The next morning Merlin woke with his face smushed against the arm of the couch. He was conscious that he had drooled and fervently hoped that the rather vivid colour on the couch cover hadn’t run – he didn’t look forward to having a purple cheek to add to the corrugated look he knew he was sporting.

Arthur was in the kitchen of the flat, his bed hair – or more accurately couch hair - sticking up at startling angles. Merlin’s heart lurched at the sight of him.

“Morning” Merlin said sleepily, moving stiffly off the couch and stretching out the aches from the cramped position he had been in. “What’s for breakfast?”

Arthur looked perplexed, opening and shutting cupboards like a Morecambe and Wise sketch but staying worryingly empty handed.

“There’s cornflakes” he said “but no milk. Tea, ditto, I think I saw a packet of biscuits... There’s marmalade but no bread...”

“Coffee” said Merlin “Tell me there’s coffee”

“Instant”

“That’s fine. Coffee me and I’ll be happy. Actually no, coffee and shower, that will make me happy”

Arthur leaned over the breakfast bar and kissed him lightly.

“Ok. Now I’m happy” Merlin purred, “But coffee me anyway”

“You’re easy to please” Arthur chuckled “But I think the shower is also necessary”. Merlin grabbed Arthur’s arm and firmly kissed his wrist.

“I love you, with or without coffee,” he said lightly. Arthur nodded slowly and poured the coffee, then unceremoniously dumped a packet of biscuits in front of both of them. “Hobnobs count as breakfast, yes?” he said.

Merlin grabbed the packet. “Oats? Oats are breakfast” he said. He started munching, watching Arthur and trying to avoid crumbs. Arthur still looked stressed but not as broken as he had done the night before. But the elephant in the room was trumpeting loudly and Merlin could not ignore it any more.

“So what now?” he said softly. “What do we do now?”

“WE do nothing” Arthur answered. “You go back to Belfast and stay there”. Merlin looked suspiciously over the hobnobs packet at Arthur who was sipping his coffee and trying not to make faces as he did so.

“You’re going public” Merlin said flatly.

“Not yet, but yes” Arthur did not look at him as he spoke.
“I don’t want you to”

Arthur thumped the counter in front of them, causing biscuits and coffee to go flying and startling Merlin so much he slipped off the stool.

“My father was blackmailed Merlin! Blackmailed! Blackmail only works when there are secrets. I can’t be that vulnerable!”

Merlin had never seen Arthur so agitated and he tried to keep his own voice level as he replied. “What if the secret is keeping you safe”

“It’s not” snapped Arthur “Is blackmail safe? I left myself open to that”

Merlin shook his head. All his fears crowded his brain until it was difficult to form words. “I ... you...” and then it came “Hatred can only be targeted when you know who to hate, When I was seventeen I was the same person on Monday morning as I had been on Saturday night but on Monday they knew they were supposed to hate me.”

Merlin could feel the emotions growing in him and he could not stop. He didn’t realise he was pacing as he spoke. “My ancestors are mostly Scots or Welsh. I probably have more genes in common with Calum than with you” He could see that Arthur was confused but he kept going. “We even look similar in a sort of a way so if he walked into some of the dodgier areas of Belfast there wouldn’t be a problem. Unless he spoke. Because then they’d know he’s not one of them and they’d know they’re supposed to hate. Hate needs a target Arthur, it needs something to cling on to – something to say ‘that one’s different it’s okay to hate that one’” He looked at Arthur, remembering how he had looked the night before, the pain he had suffered at his father’s rejection. What more was in store for him? More than anything Merlin wanted to keep him from more pain.

“You shouldn’t have to paint the target on your own back, Arthur, I don’t like secrets, but why should we have to advertise?” Merlin went around the counter and stood before Arthur, gently rubbing his thumb over Arthur’s hand. “I don’t want you hurt” he said in a voice just this side of breaking.

“It can’t be worse” Arthur said just as quietly “It can’t be worse than... It can’t be”

“You can lose everything you worked for – all your dreams” Merlin felt the echoes of his own broken dreams. He knew that part of him hoped that one of them could have it all – that the world would let one of them have the dream.

“I’ve known since Doonshee that I wouldn’t be able to keep it. I’ve gone as fast as I can but I’ve known I’ll lose it all” Arthur sounded so resigned, so unlike himself that Merlin wanted to scream. This was wrongwrongwrong and he wanted to kick and scream and shout. And then he saw his role – the part he played in Arthur’s life. He pulled away from Arthur’s touch and stepped back.

“If only you hadn’t met me” he said bitterly. “You would have more choices” Arthur looked shocked and reaching out, grabbed Merlin and dragged him until he was standing between his knees. There were tears in Arthur’s eyes and Merlin felt guilty for having put them there.

“I want the *world* to be different, Merlin, “Arthur said, stumbling a little “Not me, not my life. I’m not sorry I’m...Is it so hard to accept the idea of me after I fall?”

Now it was Merlin’s turn to be shocked. How could Arthur imagine that he would... No! He tried to think what to say. Part of him was so full of guilt he wanted to run from Arthur, leave him to
have his life. Another part wanted to hold Arthur close, protect him from all threats and all of him was shaking both with emotional overload and with cold -

“Arthur I...” he started but could not continue. Finally he said “We are seriously screwed up” and rested his head on Arthur’s chest, hearing his heart beat.

“Yes we are” sighed Arthur “Seriously”

They held each for a few minutes until Merlin gave in to the coffee craving that was made worse by the scent rising from the cooling mugs. He disentangled himself and reached for the mug nearest him.

“That’s mine by the way” Arthur said mildly, making no effort to stop him. “I thought you were a tea-for-breakfast-man anyway”

“Night shifts” Merlin said succinctly and took another gulp. “So, when are you planning to ...when will be Time?”

Arthur slid off the stool and fumbled with the flex of the kettle. “The PM will announce his departure very soon. If asked, I will run...”

Merlin interrupted him “You said that before - he didn’t go”

“He will now” said Arthur “And after the vote, win or lose I’ll call a press conference”

“After!” Merlin spluttered. “They’ll crucify you – probably literally! Arthur you’re asking to be destroyed!”

“Blaze of glory” said Arthur without feeling.

“No! That’s building the pyre, handing them the matches and saying burn me! There’s got to be another way!”

Arthur stopped fumbling and began pacing through the tiny living room. “I know it’s vanity to want to know how far I’d go, I know that!” he said running his hands through his hair.

“They will tear you to pieces Arthur. Merlin said.

“I know!” Arthur shouted, then moderating his tone said “What would you have me do, Merlin? Not run for the job? Give up the Ministry? Give up the Seat?”

Merlin felt his stomach clench and sought forgiveness from every deity because, yes, that was what he wanted. His world was private and limited and he was happy there. But as he saw Arthur pace around the room, hair askew, last-night’s-clothes crumpled and mishapen, unshaven, unshowered he realised that this man was not made for the shadows. Something must have shown on his face because Arthur’s expression closed.

“It’s simply another form of hiding, Merlin” Arthur said. “Must I always be hiding?” His voice broke and Merlin realised how raw his emotions still were. He moved around the counter to face Arthur, trying to build his own courage.

“No” he said. “I don’t want that for you. But your idea...it...I thought you would have a plan”

“I have”
“A* real* plan?”

Arthur looked at with his patrician look. “What do you suggest?” he said. It was Arthur at his most supercilious.

“I don’t know, us holding hands when you go see the Queen to be Prime Ministered? Provided you win that is” Merlin was joking but Arthur’s eyes lit up with an expression of both mischief and purpose.

“Would you do that?” he asked then corrected himself “No, you’d hate it, I won’t have you involved”

Merlin decided to take offense at the word. “Involved? I am involved. We are involved. What we have” he wiggled his finger emphatically between the two of them, “is being involved. Either both of us are involved, or we’re not involved.” He could see Arthur practically going cross eyed as he worked it out but Merlin couldn’t stop. “But not the Queen though. That would be a wee bit too much” Then something clicked in Merlin’s mind and he saw possibilities. Merlin had never seen himself as a campaigner. All he ever wanted was a quiet life and the brief moment when he reported the bullying was a blip. But now he saw an opportunity and he tried to control his instinct to run away and speak instead.

“We could do it.” He said “Not the Queen, not that – but if after the vote I simply moved in – if we stopped the hiding – if I was there, No press conference, no statements in the House. Just us....”

“It wouldn’t change the outcome” Arthur said baldly. “There would be a feeding frenzy”

“Yes, but they’d have to say it” Merlin became more eager to get his idea across – which usually meant the connection between brain and mouth got confused. “I mean ... if we... if ... they couldn’t pretend – it wouldn’t be you standing up saying Mea culpa and yes I know some Latin stop looking at me – it would be them and they’d have to say it. They would be the ones who’d have to come out – admit their prejudice...”

Merlin stopped. Arthur was looking at him with an unreadable expression and shook his head. “That wouldn’t stop people Merlin, My father...”. But Merlin was not allowing interruptions.

“That’s not the point – the point is .. they would be public ... they...not you, not us...” Merlin ran out of words and slumped against the high stool. “I know... crazy .. I know” he stumbled over the words.

Arthur was looking at him intently, as if drawing out his very soul. “Would you do that?” He asked. “Would you stand with me?” Merlin walked over to him and put his arms around Arthur’s waist.

“Always with you.” He said “I’m your Tardis. Only not like ... a box... or a girl... or...” But Arthur was laughing and holding him close.

“So we have a plan?” Arthur said with a laugh.

“A cunning plan” Merlin agreed, his face in Arthur’s shirt, aware of the fact that Arthur definitely needed a shower. He didn’t mind. This was his, he thought, unwashed, unshaven, unkempt, just Arthur. His. Merlin sighed and closed his eyes, drinking in the sensation, then a sudden thought of what he had agreed to hit him. He opened his eyes with a start “You will help me?” he asked “I have no idea what to do”
On the plane back to Belfast the fear returned. Multiplied by ten. In a fairly short time he was going to be the centre of a media feeding frenzy. Him, Merlin Balinson. Who blushed buying a bus ticket. It took some work not to hyper-ventilate at 30000 feet.

Panic was also an option when he reached Belfast and found he did not have the money even for bus fare home. The mortgage on the Palace, small though it was, took most of his pay. What was left was for rent or food. The flight had taken the meagre savings he had and Westminster coffee had taken most of his spare cash. Now even searching the deepest recesses of his pockets turned up nothing. Facing the thought of a long cold walk, Merlin did what any independent twenty-something in trouble would do. He called his Mum.

She did what any self-respecting mother would do when called on to help an adult son on a cold and rainy afternoon and three quarters of an hour after he called Merlin saw his father drive up to the pick-up point.

“We didn’t know you were away” His father said as Merlin climbed into the car and turned the heater to high.

Merlin wondered what to say and decided on the truth. It was a relief. “Arthur needed me” he said. His father nodded and Merlin knew he was uncomfortable and felt guilty. It was a very familiar emotion.

“Oh Aye” said his father and Merlin knew it was taking great self control to accept what had been said as normal. The difference between his father and Arthur’s was not in upbringing or education but in love.

“And would ‘Arthur’ not give you the price of a bus ticket?” his father said without expression. Merlin knew what that meant.

“You wouldn’t tell the one who stakes his life on you that you haven’t the money for a bus” Merlin said somewhat bitterly.

His father stayed silent for three traffic lights and one set of road works. Merlin was used to silence. His father rarely spoke.

“So” he said “Do you love this man?” Merlin nearly choked hearing his father say that. It was like hearing a DC fan asking about Marvel. He ignored the shock and concentrated on the question.

“I do” he said “I do love him”

His father was silent for another set of traffic lights. Then he spoke. “See, son, love is all about trust”

“I trust Arthur” Merlin interjected.

“Aye, but...” His father stopped at a pedestrian crossing and Merlin noted that taking seemed only possible when the car was moving. The pedestrians moved off and his father began again. “Trust, you see, you have to trust yourself. You have to trust that you are good enough.”
Merlin started. How did his father know his doubts? His father drove with eyes fixed on the road ahead. “I spent years doubting I was good enough for your mother and other then she threatened me if I did not marry her, I’d be doubting still. Does yon ‘Arthur’ not think you good enough?”

Merlin had never heard his father speak so personally about his relationship but it did not stop Merlin thinking of an answer. He remembered how he had last seen Arthur, showered, suited, coiffed and groomed, every inch a Minister. At the door of the flat, Arthur had pulled him into a tight embrace, burying his head in Merlin’s neck. “You make it worth it” he had said, “You beside me...”

Merlin coughed at the memory. “He does” he said “I think he does”

“Good” his father said “Now you start believing it son. You’ll need to” He switched on the radio and the introduction to the hourly news came on.

“The headlines: The Prime Minister has announced he will resign as leader of the party in...” Merlin barely listened as the report when on to give details of the procedure for electing a new leader and names of those who had already expressed an interest. “Amongst those named as potential candidates is Arthur Pendragon who if elected would be the youngest ...” Merlin switched off the radio.

He had never overtly told his father what ‘Arthur’ did but his father’s silence hid a quick mind and Merlin could see by the set of his shoulders that he knew the importance of what they had heard.

“That man better know what he is doing” Mr. Balinson said quietly.

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Merlin swung back into work, starting that night, and the world of Westminster seemed far away, real only in the reports from Arthur each day. He did get into the Newspaper though, something he would have preferred to avoid. He had been called to a car accident where he found a woman and a dog. The woman was untouched but the dog was in cardiac arrest and despite his protests that they did not treat animals the woman pleaded for him to help. Which is why a photo of him doing CPR on a dog ended up in the local paper. Merlin didn’t know who had taken the picture but there was a crowd of onlookers applauding when the dog coughed back to life. Merlin could have sworn he saw Kenny at the back of the crowd, giving his a thumbs up. He even saw George Millen glaring away at the edge.

Merlin’s superiors didn’t know whether to award him or fire him and settled for a ‘What did you think you doing” talk and a note in his file. When it turned out that the dog was an autism assistance dog for the woman’s son even the note disappeared. Merlin faced a few days of good humoured dog jokes and the occasional gift of dog biscuits but he didn’t mind. This was about something he had done not something he was. It was different. And when the grateful mother sent a trolley load of cupcakes to the station Merlin was a hero. He even ended up with a nickname. He feared it would be Fido, or Lassie (and it was touch and go for a while) but when McIlwaine called across the canteen for “The Vet” to bring him a cup of tea, the new name was set. It felt good to belong.
A phone call from Calum also eased his mind. Merlin had been texting Calum every day, usually with a joke or a comment, just something to get a reply. He had tried calling everyday but Calum wasn’t impressed so he eased off. It was a surprise then when Calum rang for a chat.

“I got news, Mez” He started with. “I got an internship. Long hours and no pay but, hey! It’s something new!”

Merlin thrilled to hear the enthusiasm in Calum’s voice – it had been missing for so long.

“That’s great, Cal” Merlin said. “It’s a start. You can build on it if you make sure you take it seriously.”

“Don’t go all lecture-y at me Mez, just tell me when you can get down here to celebrate my non paying job”

Merlin hated having to say he wouldn’t be able to make the trip to Dublin for a while, but quite apart from pressures of work, he had to rebuild his bank balance. He decided that being a grown-up sucked.

Luckily Calum understood the intricacies of being broke, though he did make some rude comments about people who went and bought houses without thinking of the effects on their friends social lives.

“And there is someone you might like to meet – though now that I come to think about it maybe it’s just as well you can’t come to Dublin because you and she don’t really get on”

Merlin was intrigued but Calum kept him waiting until finally “Lydia”

Merlin choked. “Lydia as in Lydia? As in crazily scary Lydia? As in *Underage* Lydia?”

“Feck that, Mez, she’s twenty one! And she was the one who came over to me! I didn’t even recognise her. But, yeah, she’s still scary. In a good way tho...”

“Nononono!” Merlin hissed “No details! That’s Lydia! Shh! Calum! What are you thinking!”

Calum laughed over the phone “Calm down Mez. You know you love her really. And she made me go for this internship. You should have seen her go over my CV. I never knew what could be done with paper. They would never have read my old one, she made me sound so good”

After the call Merlin felt much happier about Calum though the thought of Lydia still terrified him. But Calum seemed rooted and that was good.
Merlin was willing to pay the price, he resented that there was a price at all.

Nevertheless, Merlin knew he needed to prepare for that future. The first thing he did was talk to his mother.

He headed home for the weekend (coincidentally bringing his washing- because he could) and took the opportunity to talk to his mum in between her volunteering stints.

“Mum? You know that guy on the telly you like?”

“Benedict Cumberbatch?” she said.

“What? No! Ew! No! Mum” Merlin wailed. This was not going the way he planned. “The politician, the one who went on TV and took responsibility”

“Pendragon” she said. “What about him”

Merlin took a deep breath. “He’s my Arthur” he said flatly. He felt a faint thrill at the possessive pronoun. His mother went very still.

“He’s?...But He’s on the telly. He’s a minister, a Westminster Minister! He’s ...he could be...”

“He’s Arthur. He’s my Arthur ” said Merlin again..

She looked at, her eyes full of sympathy. “Oh Son, that’s why all the hiding?” Merlin nodded and she enveloped him in an all embracing hug.

“Not just that. I told you his family didn’t know. Well now they do, he – Uther Pendragon, knows and he is not happy. I mean Arthur is a grown man but... well he’s been thrown out of the family”

Again his mother stilled, then resumed her flurry. “Well he must come here – I’ll make up the room, he...” . She looked at Merlin and went quiet. “It’s not going to be easy, is it son?” she said

“It’s going to get bad, Mum,” He said and told her what was planned. “In a while there could be reporters camped out in the garden”

“Your father won’t like that” his mum said absently. “I’ll make scones” she added. Merlin looked at her in bemusement. “They’ll want scones, those reporters” she said.

Merlin had images of his mum feeding the paparazzi and shook his head. “You can’t give them scones” he said. She looked back impassively. “They’re doing a job, no need to be nasty” she said. She looked quite reflective.

“Do you think your Arthur could get Benedict Cumberbatch’s autograph?”

Merlin sighed.
Merlin wondered about preparing Kenny for the reveal, though he did wonder if Kenny would still be talking to him after everything blew up. Their relationship had been a little strained for a time until Kenny had reported back that ‘The Boys’ did not want him hurt and that no one was quite sure who was asking questions. After that things settled down. Merlin would drop in to the office when he had a chance and even on occasion worked for a few hours to allow Holly or Kenny to get out. There were times when Kenny was passing his flat and would call him out for food and more organised times when Merlin went for coffee with Holly. It was ... good.

But Kenny would never forgive him for taking up with a ‘poncy London politico who prances around fucking up things for ordinary people’ – which was Kenny’s generic description of Westminster politicians (His description of Northern Ireland assembly members tended to be much more graphically personal). Finding out that Merlin had chosen an English politician over good Ulster stock would not go down well.

Merlin began to realise that though Arthur had more obvious things to lose, his own life had its own little tales and glories and he would miss it. He was sad at the thought but not regretful. It was time.

If only Kenny would not punch Arthur when he met him...

One of the good things in his life was the growing sense of camaraderie with his colleagues. He had been surprised that he was able to find someone to cover for him in his panicked journey to London and even more surprised when they had not taken advantage of the dog incident. He began to consider about the impossibility of getting any job in London in the wake of the potential fall-out from Arthur and wonder how Arthur would take commuting to Belfast. There was so much to think about and time was ticking on...

Despite the belonging – or maybe because of it Merlin did not go to the retirement dinner. So many people wanted to go Merlin decided to volunteer to take a shift to allow another get the chance to go. He didn’t expect to see them all until the next day but just after midnight Dispatch sent him to the hotel where the dinner was being held. There he was first on scene and found smoke billowing from the hotel reception rooms. People were milling about coughing and Merlin had barely time to dismount his bike when two units of the Fire brigade swept in. Setting up a triage Merlin gauged injuries, which were slight, with no serious smoke inhalation. The worst was Roy who had burns on his hands.

“It started in the car park” he said “I was just heading for my bike when I smelled something, and the next thing a petrol tank blew. I thought it was a fucking bomb!”

The next day the station was subdued. McIlwaine announced that the PSNI were treating the fire as arson and would want to speak to all who were there. Roy was off work for a month and his shifts had to be covered and the whole incident cast a pall of gloom over the station.

To add to the general gloom the weather turned nasty and though Merlin was well covered in leathers, the constant rain still made riding uncomfortable. Merlin would never admit to being an adrenalin junkie – he liked a quiet life thank you very much. But secretly he loved the charge he got when he put on the siren and wove through traffic to get to a call. The combination of speed and skill and urgency was powerful and though he got great satisfaction from the rest of his job, this bit he loved.
He wasn’t so sure he loved it tonight. Merlin had two hours left on his shift but he was bone achingly tired. Flu had hit the station and they were thinly stretched. This was his third shift in a row and so far he had answered four calls, two of them drunk. They were the worst, trying to treat someone still hyped on alcohol who didn’t even know they were hurt. Merlin had been punched more than once on calls like that but his reflexes were faster now and he had learned to dodge.

He hoped this call wasn’t a drunk. The dispatcher simply said there was a report of a man lying on the edge of a school sport’s field. Merlin knew the field – at the back of his old primary school. He debated the route. The GPS would send him around the main road, through the school entrance and around the back to the field. But being a local he knew that it was possible to get to the field by cutting through a housing estate, and going through a series small laneways at the back of houses. It was a lot shorter.

While he was debating internally, Dispatch came through with more details. The report had been anonymous, which moved the victim from potential drunk to something much more sinister. Merlin decided to take the short route. He knew an ambulance would never make it but even with his wide bike he would. He swung into the estate, siren silent but lights flashing and headed into the maze of alleyways, his headlight blazing into the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Lots of dots to join.. next chapter should add to them.

For Non UK readers

biscuits = cookies only bought not made.

Hobnobs are a particular brand of biscuits.
Like brother to brother

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Arthur left the flat to get to an eight thirty meeting he knew his wounded heart had stopped bleeding.
Or at least stopped bleeding much.

He had not realised how deep in despair he had been until he saw Merlin’s bedraggled figure at the door. Like a tiny flame in a sea of darkness he clung to Merlin as his last hope. He was barely aware of being guided to the couch, of weeping like the little boy he wasn’t, of revealing his soul in disjointed, choked off sentences. He was aware of the strong arms supporting him as he cried, of the heartbeat beneath his head as he lay exhausted and he felt more loved than he had ever felt before. It was not a substitute for what his father had taken; it was something else, something stronger and more lasting.

In the morning Arthur had felt renewed but aching – and not just in his heart. Falling asleep while tangled together on a couch may have had teen romantic credentials (Though even as a teenager, Arthur’s romantic notions included a Jacuzzi and at the every least a king size bed) but the reality had too many elbows and knees to be comfortable. And wonderful though he was, Merlin’s elbows and knees were extremely pointy and tended to dig into places that shouldn’t have bruises. As Arthur disentangled himself he had looked down at his sleeping lover, face pressed into the arm of the couch. There had been no sex, and kisses had been chaste and affectionate rather than deep and passionate but Arthur had never felt so close to Merlin.

As he walked to the Tube, Arthur felt the same closeness. Merlin had called himself Arthur’s Tardis and Arthur knew how his thin frame held such an amount of passion and strength, comfort and kindness, combined with courage and the willingness to use all of them. Definitely bigger on the inside.

Though Arthur was quite happy with all sizes on the outside too.

He descended the escalator and joined the throng of morning commuters, his mind still on the ‘full and frank’ discussion they had had. He still had to accept that Merlin would be with him at the end. Of course Merlin had said that before but Arthur had assumed it meant in a comforting capacity. It took his breath away to think that his shy lover was willing to face a public storm. Although Arthur did not court the media he did not mind publicity and had no objection to being headline news – for the right reasons. This was different. He looked around at the faces beside him, some sleepy, some driven, all facing into the coming day, and wondered what would be behind those faces when the storm broke. Would they be scornful? Maybe they would think it nothing. He did not dare to hope that it would be nothing. He was angry that he did not dare to hope.
As the anger took hold, he thought again of his father. He had told Merlin that the coming storm could not be worse than what he had already faced and that was true for him. There were few others whose opinion mattered enough to hurt him. Clarissa suspect, Professor Kilgharrah would probably cheer – or, since he was not given to emotional outburst would more likely nod. Alfred, the ex chauffeur he was not sure of and other than him there was no one else.

Except.

There were some in the House who had won his respect and whose good opinion he valued. He did not know how they would react. The crowds around him surged onto the train and Arthur, pulled with them decided to take the pain in one go. It was better than waiting.

In Westminster, an air of tension was palpable as the morning wore on. MPs huddled in groups having animated conversations until finally the long expected announcement was made and the race was on.

The first to seek to contend the position was an elder statesman with strong opinions an da good media presence. Arthur was not worried about him. He was popular, in a personal way but had tried for the leadership too often before. He was not a threat.

Another was obviously the candidate of the more conventional wing of the party. He was a dinosaur but Arthur had great respect for dinosaurs. Their namesakes had lived for tens of millions of years and had only succumbed when an asteroid killed off most of the planet. Dinosaurs were survivors and Arthur recognised him as a rival.

The third was even more of a threat. James Fraser was old enough to be seen as steady while young enough to fit in the ‘young’ category. He espoused many of the policies Arthur supported while keeping a tight party line. He was the one to beat.

Arthur did not put himself forward yet. Until he did the publicity and aftermath was theoretical. But he knew he could not delay for long. By the evening Elliott and Lionel had asked for a meeting. He knew what it was for and knew what he had to do. He dreaded it.

The meeting took place in his office. It was empty, his new secretary not believing in Martin’s long hours but still managing to get the work done.

“You know what we’re going to say” Elliott began. Arthur sat down

“Say it anyway” Arthur said.

“We want you to contest the leadership.” Lionel was blunt and to the point.

Elliott added his own input, “And not just us. There’s quite a number willing to sign your nomination”

Arthur heard them as if from a distance. This was another of those moments when time and space waited on one decision. And though the decision had been made, this was the moment when the word had to be spoken. He needed more.

“Why?” he said softly.

“What?” said Elliott looking confused. Lionel sat up.
“Tell me why you want me to run”

Elliott frowned and Arthur knew he thought Arthur was looking for an ego boost, but Lionel stepped in and in a few sentences outlined the skills and qualities Arthur had which they considered to be important. Arthur said nothing but stood up and walked to the window of the shabby office as he spoke. Somewhere out there, the Thames was flowing, ignoring all the human issues obsessing those around it. Somewhere out there, Merlin was returning home, having pledged his life to Arthur. Somewhere out there his father contemplated no longer having a son. Arthur turned abruptly.

“If nominated I will run. But before you sign any nomination papers I will tell you, that, whatever the outcome, I will be living with my partner after the election.” Lionel looked at him sharply.

Elliott huffed. “It is the Twenty First century” he said, “I know we stand for old fashioned values but I don’t see that as being a problem”

“Balinson?” Lionel said. Arthur, was surprised but nodded. “So he did find you then” Lionel added. Arthur realised with a shock that he had never asked how Merlin had turned up on the doorstep of Lionel’s flat and his own epiphany made him almost miss Elliott slow dawning comprehension.

“Balinson? From Belfast?” Elliott barely got the words out.
Arthur nodded again. Words were superfluous when friendships end. “You’re...” Elliott went on. Arthur did not bother to nod this time.

“This changes everything” Elliott said. “When are you going to announce it?”

“Why should I?” Arthur said. “No other candidate will”

“But they’re normal” Elliott blurted out.

“So am I” Arthur said quietly but firmly, feeling as if his insides had been scooped out.

Lionel who had not said anything since his first contribution, now spoke.

“It doesn’t change a single one of the reasons why we want Arthur to lead us, Elliott”

“But we have to be pragmatic!” Elliott snapped.

Lionel looked at him. “We I was a kid I was the only one in my class who wanted to go into politics. They thought politics was dirty business. They all wanted to make the world better by being lawyers or PR consultants or Advertising executives. I wanted to help make decisions and you know what, I am sick of making decisions based on pragmatism. For once I want to make a decision because it’s the right thing to do, not because it’s pragmatic. That’s why I want to follow Arthur. He supports policy when he believes it’s right and fights he when he doesn’t. He plays the system but isn’t played by it. I want Arthur to lead us because of old fashioned values, like honour, justice, loyalty”

“What about honesty?” Elliott argued.

“I have never lied” Arthur said, angry that he seemed to be defensive.

“By omission?” was Elliott’s response.
“It’s not omission if it’s not relevant.” said Lionel. “I never revealed that I’m left handed”

“That makes no difference!” Elliott said

“It did in the Middle ages” Arthur said drily.

Elliott huffed “This isn’t the Middle Ages”

“No” said Lionel “It is, as you said, the twenty first century” He walked over to Elliott and put a hand on his shoulder. “Elliott, do you think it is right that this could stop Arthur Pendragon leading us? I am asking the man, not the politician. I’m not asking if it is pragmatic or politic or even wise. Is it right?”

Elliott stared at him for a still moment then shook his head. Lionel sighed. “Well then, will you stand for what is right?”

“For right” Elliott said

“For Right!” Lionel repeated. They looked at Arthur, who bit his lip as sign he could not speak. The last few days had been an emotional rollercoaster and it was having a strange effect. He had an insatiable desire to say “For Frodo!” and for once was glad Merlin was not beside him, for he had been Arthur would have dissolved into giggles. It would not go down well when his colleagues (friends, maybe?) were proposing risking their careers for him.

Just as soon as it came the inclination to laugh left him and he felt his throat tighten with the need to cry.

He didn’t.

He fought down the tears as he had the laughter and kept his face impassive as Lionel and Elliott discussed strategy. Already he felt detached from them and the thought frightened him. He dragged himself in to the conversation.

“This could break the party” Elliott was saying.

Arthur spoke calmly in response but he felt righteous anger grow.

“If the party cannot accept people as they are, maybe it deserves to be broken” he said, then added “But if it is, I promise I will be there to rebuild it.”

Lionel looked at the fierce intensity in Arthur’s eyes and smiled. He looked over at Elliott and pointing at Arthur, said “And that, my friend, is why we follow him”

Arthur said nothing. He wasn’t sure he understood, but Elliott smiled and said “Yeah, I get it”

+++++

Afterwards, when they were leaving, Arthur pulled Lionel aside. “You knew?” he said.

Lionel shook his head “I suspected. I saw how you looked at him that evening at dinner. I’d only ever seen that expression on one person before: my grandmother when she was looking at a picture of my grandfather. And then when I saw him looking like a miserable drowned rat outside the Tube station I thought you might need him. I took a chance.”
Arthur shuddered at the sudden thought of the previous night – without Merlin. “Thank you” he said. It said everything.

+++++

Report on the BBC “Arthur Pendragon has answered speculation by announcing his intention to contest the party leadership. Nominated by fifty two members of the Parliamentary party, Pendragon is the youngest candidate ever to contest a leadership race....”

++++++++

The first ballot was tense. Arthur waited, schooling his features to show no emotion. After all he was the Monk and had a reputation to uphold. He maintained his calm as the results were read out.

James Fraser came out on top. That was to be expected.

Arthur came second. That was not.

The Elder statesman had the fewest votes so he would be eliminated for the next vote. Arthur breathed again. The Elder Statesman’s support was personal and how his supporters would vote in the nest round was anybody’s guess. Some would go with the dinosaur as familiar but the more radical MPs would be attracted either to Fraser or Arthur. It was all to play for.

Arthur tired to keep the triumph out of his voice when he called Merlin the next morning but he knew he failed when Merlin asked him if he did a private happy dance after the result was announced.

“I don’t do a happy dance” Arthur said in a deliberately pretentious voice. They were not on Skype but Arthur knew that Merlin was smiling, his eyes slitted in amusement.

“Oh Aye” Merlin said “Remember after the first time, when you were dancing in the loo ...”

“You said you’d never mention it again” Arthur said in mock indignation.

“I lied” Merlin said “You’re lucky I didn’t record it. You were adorable”

“I was not adorable, Merlin. I am never adorable. Ministerial maybe, regal, possibly. Not adorable”

Again in the silence he heard Merlin smile.

“That’s because you’re not adorable looking in the mirror. You’re adorable looking at me” Merlin said and Arthur felt that if ever there was a time he wanted to do a happy dance it was now. He felt his breath quicken and heard Merlin call his name.

“Shut up” Arthur said. “I’m being adorable”

+++++

The next week was spent in subtle campaigning. Most MPs, especially those of the old school, resented methods they used on the general electorate being used on them. Canvassing therefore had to gentle, general, and sometimes covered in brandy.

The rules stated that the two highest placed would go to a vote of the general party membership.
Elliott proved to be surprisingly adept at this schmoozing, discovering a new talent in smooth talking as well as an instinct in knowing what needed to be said. By the time the second ballot came around Arthur knew that he and the Dinosaur were neck and neck. When the vote came in Arthur was on tenterhooks. He let out a breath he had not realised he was holding when it was announced that he had beaten the dinosaur by two votes.

He was in the final battle.

After the vote he sent a text to Merlin

FROM Arthur . The countdown starts now.

FROM Merlin I’ll start packing

+++++

Somewhere in London Ari Aredin looked at a headline in one of his own newspapers detailing the upcoming ballot of the party membership. He rolled the paper in a ball and threw it down.

“Wait two weeks after the ballot papers have been sent out: start the campaign. Slow burn – build it.

“We still don’t have enough” the editor said. “The barman has gone back to Australia – we have no contact information.”

“What about the lover?”

“Bit of a development. He has a girlfriend”

“Does she know he swings both ways? Aredin looked interested. “If not, that could be used. And try a sting to get a response. Get it done”

+++++

Arthur found it strange to be canvassing his own party but he had a month to persuade the members that he had the qualities needed for leadership. He was careful answer every question honestly, not using the usual politician-speak of deflection and obscurity. He found it strangely liberating.

He said as much to Merlin in one of their phone calls. Merlin laughed.

“You are going to be a very unusual politician, Arthur, if you go around telling the truth all the time.”

“It’s still not the whole truth” Arthur pointed out.

“Truth never is” Merlin said, mildly. “Speaking of which, did you change your other phone number now that you’re important?”

“I’m not important. Yet” Arthur said. “Why?”

“Just something Calum said. Did you know he’s seeing Lydia? She’s just as scary as she used to be. She grabbed the phone from Calum and told me exactly what she thought of me. It was very disturbing!”
“That’s what you get if you insist on wearing skin tight rubber for a summer” Arthur quipped.

“Oh I know what I got” Merlin replied with a purr under his voice, “Now, Arthur, how do you feel about leathers?”

Arthur choked. “Fuck!” he said more loudly than he intended. “Merlin! I have to go to a meeting after this. You are making it very difficult!”

Merlin chuckled. “Think of cold showers” he said.

Arthur thought of the shower in the Palace, of sharing the shower in the Palace... “You’re not helping Merlin!” he moaned.

Arthur was late for his next meeting.

+++++++ After the first week Arthur returned to London exhausted but happy. It had been the best week of his political life. He had met views and ideas that stretched him, made him think beyond his own ideas. He was exhilarated and broke his monkish habits by heading to the bar with Elliott.

As usual he had one drink then switched to water; there was no point in providing ammunition to his rival. He was mingling as was his habit when he bumped into My Rovare. Arthur felt sympathy for the man. In another world, if there was no Merlin, if he didn’t know what a true connection was, he might have been tempted. That him in an alternate universe made him feel affection for My so he greeted him affably.

They chatted about the general things – not the campaign but Arthur became aware that My was uneasy. He thought he knew why and did not ask.

With a sudden movement My Rovare put his drink on the table and turned to Arthur. “Next week, Ari Aredin will go with the story that you are gay” He said shortly. Arthur stopped breathing for a moment but schooled his face to remain impassive. Although inside he was screaming that it was too soon, he managed to keep his voice steady.

“Why would he do that?” he said.

“He has pictures from Paris, a name, it’s all circumstantial, they are setting up a sting to confirm it, but they will go anyway”

Arthur felt rage rise up inside him and fought to control it. They knew about Merlin? And how did they get a photo from Paris? Merlin hardly left his room let alone the flat. The thought took a fraction of a second to pass through his mind before another, more urgent question possessed him.

“How do you know this?” he asked coldly.

“Because I work for him”

If Arthur had not faced a deeper and more personal betrayal this statement would have broken him. As it was he simply turned away from Rovare and walked to the door, acknowledging greetings on autopilot but stopping for no one. He walked through the echoing corridors until he came to his own office.

+++++++ Arthur sat in the darkened office. Everyone had gone home and it had the abandoned look of a room that was meant to be full of activity. He knew he should not feel betrayed. Michael Rovare
had meant nothing to him.

Except he had.

He had represented a freedom Arthur had never known, a brief innocent flirtation that made him feel valued, feel that he brought something other than a name to Merlin. But it had been a lie. Was everything in his life a lie?

His mind played over what Rovare had said. Could he fix it? He doubted it. He would be forced to defend himself – something which grated on his soul. He felt the reins of his own life almost fall from his fingers and felt like crying in frustration. His instinct was to talk to Merlin but he did not. He knew Merlin was on a night shift and they were not due to talk until late the following evening. He did not want to disturb Merlin with bad news, he guessed Merlin had not had much sleep in the last week with extra shifts. He resolved to find out as much as he could and keep to their schedule.

The phone rang, making Arthur jump. He knew the answering system was engaged so made no effort to answer. The answering machine picked up.

“Mr Pendragon?” the voice was female, nervous and had a Northern Irish accent. “Oh! It’s a machine what will I say?” The voice seemed to have turned away from the mouthpiece. “Mr. Pendragon, Arthur, we haven’t spoken but… Well, Merlin… There’s been… he asked for you… please…” the voice took a breath and there was a whispered exchange with someone else. “Oh, my name, yes, I’m Hilda Balinson – I – There’s been an accident. When you get this please call me… What? oh yes the number – it’s 028 …” The voice went on but Arthur was not listening.

Arthur’s heart had lurched when he heard her speak.
An Accident?
Merlin?
But he steadied as he thought of it. This was it. This was the sting Rovere had warned him of. Reporters could do anything. They had even pretended to be the Queen in a phone call. He would not be fooled. He reached over and deleted the message and walked out of the office.

Chapter End Notes

If you need a explanation of the voting process just message me. I swear fanfic out do's any university in the amount of research required!
In and out go dusty bluebells

Chapter Notes

Some reference to injuries: just a heads up

Not much humour here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Merlin opened his eyes. It was dark. There was pain. He heard a voice. Kenny? How? Merlin closed his eyes.

Merlin opened his eyes. The sky was flashing blue. Familiar voice. McIlwaine.

“Merlin, we’re getting you on the backboard now, just a little movement”

Why was he saying that? That was Merlin’s job. He turned his head.

Pain
Merlin closed his eyes

Merlin opened his eyes. Bright light. Many voices.

“CT, Chest, pelvis, I’ll need limbs as well” voice fades. Face close. Female.

“Merlin? I’m just going to cut off these leathers”

Pain
Merlin closed his eyes.

Merlin opened his eyes.
Lights, moving, No. He was moving. Faces. Mum? Dad?

“Son, they’re taking you to surgery, you’re going to be fine”

Mouth dry. Move lips.

“T’ Arh’ur”
Merlin closed his eyes.

Merlin opened his eyes.

Low light. Ceiling. Many beeps. Beeps are good. Beeps mean life. Only silence is death. Turn

Beep Beep

Merlin closed his eyes.

Voices. Mum and Dad.
Merlin did not open his eyes.

“Any response?”

“I left the message. But... he’s a busy man. ”

“I didn’t think he’d be too busy for..”
Sobs

Merlin wished he could close his ears.

Merlin did not open his eyes again for quite some time.

++++++

Arthur was still staying in Lionel’s flat, though he had started looking around for a place of his own. He really wanted to house-hunt with Merlin and so was dragging his feet. He was feeling a little bit smug at having recognised the sting set up by Aredin, though that thought was tempered by the reminder of Rovare’s betrayal. But at the back of his mind came the thought of the voice on the phone. The slight break in the voice when it said “he asked for you”, the fear masked by formality at the cliché “There’s been an accident”. He knew it wasn’t real but it was very well done and it made for an unsettled end to the night.

Arthur was so unsettled he rang Merlin early the next morning. The call went straight to voice mail. That was not unusual. Merlin had taken to turning his phone off when he needed to sleep as Calum had an annoying habit of pocket dialling random numbers at any time. Arthur went back to his many meetings with only a slight disquiet at the back of his mind.

By evening the disquiet had grown. Between meetings, when he was due to hear from Merlin he stared at his phone, begging it to ring. It did not. Arthur started calling, getting the voice mail each time. This was unusual but not impossible. Merlin had occasionally been called into work at strange hours. Arthur kept calling anyway.

Before he had to go back into the public eye he decided to call Calum. Maybe Calum would know what was going on.

Calum answered quickly, for which Arthur was grateful.

“Hey!” Calum said, “You still have your old phone! How come?”

Arthur remembered something Merlin had said about phones, but he could not remember the
details. He just made an affirmative noise and tried to ask about Merlin, but Calum was still talking.

“I got this text, see, from you, at least it said it was you, but it was a new number and then I got a text saying you missed me and could we get together, which, No! so I sent a reply saying you got the wrong dude but wasn’t it you then?!

Arthur listened and found his brain working at top speed. Calum got a text from him, which wasn’t. He began to put the pieces together. It sounded like a very badly arranged sting. But why would they target Calum? He struggled to understand. Then it hit him with a Holmesian realisation. ‘Pictures from Paris’? He had not met Merlin at the airport in Paris, he had met Calum, greeted him as he would greet one he had not seen for months. The sting had been on Calum. Which meant...

(“There’s been an accident”) Arthur felt a coldness seep into his bones. Could it be true? In his mind he heard again the voice on the phone, heard the tones, the words: he felt his breath speed up.

“Merlin” he gasped

“What about him?” Calum said. Arthur barely heard him

“I don’t know” he said, then groaned as he heard the sounds of company in the anteroom. “There’s people coming” he said, “I... can you?.. Merlin... accident...find”

For the first time ever Calum sounded decisive, “I find out. I’ll call you in an half an hour” he said, then hung up. Arthur stared at the phone, then, taking a deep breath he put on a smile and went to meet his constituents.

After a little more than a half an hour he felt his phone vibrate and smiling apologetically he excused himself and took the call.

“You’re not going to like this” Calum said bluntly. “I got on to Radio Ulster.” He began to speak in the ubiquitous voice people used when reading. Arthur only caught highlights..

“Paramedic” “incident” “PSNI investigating”. He concentrated on the last part of what Calum said. “Royal Victoria hospital” “Critical but stable”

“Merlin”.

“Can you get there?” Calum asked

“I don’t know” Arthur said without emotion. He felt numb. “I’ll let you know” he added and hung up. He stared at the phone as it went black. What should he do now? Yes. Flights. He searched and
looked blankly at the screen as it showed that he had missed the last flight to Belfast. His hand started to shake.

From Arthur Pendragon: Missed last flight

From Calum: Get to Dublin. I will get you to Belfast.

Arthur felt tears spring to his eyes. This was friendship. He booked a flight, checked his pocket for his driving licence and ordered a taxi to the airport. Luggage was irrelevant. All he wanted to do was to get to Merlin.

He received a text.

FROM LIONEL: Where are you

FROM ARTHUR: On way to airport. Merlin hurt.

There was a pause.

FROM LIONEL: Okay. Could change things.

FROM ARTHUR: Doesn’t matter. Aredin knows. Will publish something. It’s over

FROM LIONEL: Only when you give up

FROM ARTHUR: I have

FROM LIONEL: Look after Merlin. I’ll work on the rest.

++++

At Dublin airport Arthur was surprised to find Lydia was with Calum waiting for him. It seemed that everyone was in on their secret – not that it mattered anymore.

Lydia looked.... scarily the same as she had when he had last seen her – especially so when she dragged him into a hug, with very friendly hands.

“Lydia!” Calum hissed.

“What?” she said. “Groping the gay best friend is totally on the free list”

They walked out towards the parking building, Arthur following.

“Does that mean I get to groove your gay friend?” Calum was saying.

“Sure” Lydia replied, “You might lose your hand if you’re lucky but fire ahead”
Arthur heard their banter through a fog. He could remember walking through here with Merlin, Betsy flashing lights in welcome.

(“He asked for you”). He could still hear the phrase from the deleted message. Was Merlin waiting for him? Did he think that Arthur did not care? He was stirred out of his thoughts when they reached the car and Lydia got in the driving seat.

“You’re driving?” he asked.

“My car” was her response. Of course it was. Calum hadn’t got a car after he returned from Australia. Arthur had not given a thought as to how he would make good on his word to bring Arthur to Belfast. It didn’t matter. All that mattered was getting there.

It took less than two hours and Arthur felt every minute.

++++++

Calum and Lydia left him at the hospital and returned to Dublin and Arthur went in alone. The hospital was quiet but Arthur sought out Critical Care. He stopped at the nurses’ station.

“Merlin Balinson” he said. He had hardly noticed how dry his mouth was, but now he found it hard to speak.

The nurse looked at him as if he had emerged from the depths and Arthur was suddenly aware that it was the middle of the night.

The nurse did not throw him out or call for security but she did shut him down.

“Family only” she said.

Arthur wanted to shout out that Merlin was his family – the only family he had – but that was not possible. He stood irresolutely, not knowing what to do. His whole purpose since he had realised his mistake had been to get to the hospital. Now, a few metres separated him from Merlin and he could not see him. He had no alternative, no Plan B. He was totally lost.

A door opened and a man stepped out. He was thin, with dark hair and a lived-in face. His eyes glanced over Arthur and moved on, but then he started and looked back.

“Arthur?” the man said.

Arthur nodded. He searched the man’s face for some familiarity and in his bone structure he saw Merlin. Then he remembered the graduation photograph. “Mr. Balinson?” he said.

“We didn’t think you were coming” Mr. Balinson said without any emotion. Arthur struggled with what to say. How could he say that his own paranoia made him doubt the truth? How could he tell him about the threat from the tabloids?

He settled for, “I’m here”
Balinson nodded. “Coffee?” he said, obviously a man of few words.

“I want to see him” Arthur said bluntly. Balinson stood in silence for a moment.

“His mother is with him. Have coffee with me” he said firmly.

Arthur realised that this was not an offer, Balinson was guarding the gate – he needed to judge Arthur, evaluate him. Given his late arrival he had to agree. With a long look at the closed doors that held his world, he followed Merlin’s father down the empty corridor.

Coffee came from a machine which produced brown water with a vaguely coffee smell. Balinson took his paper cup and sat on a plastic chair, gesturing to Arthur to join him. Arthur looked at him blankly.

“Tell me what happened” he said.

“He came off his bike” Balinson answered. “We don’t know more”

“But” said Arthur, “the police”

“Haven’t seen them” Balinson said and Arthur knew he was waiting for Arthur to ask about Merlin. Suddenly he was afraid. As long as he didn’t ask, as long as Merlin was behind those closed doors in the unit, Arthur could pretend he was fine. He closed his eyes for a moment, remembering Merlin’s arms around him, comforting him. He owed Merlin more than pretend.

“How is he?” he said softly, and waited for his world to end.

Balinson looked at him with sympathy in his tired eyes. “He’s got a broken pelvis and a broken femur. He’s been in surgery for those. Some ribs are cracked and he has a broken wrist. And his lung collapsed” Balinson swirled the brown ‘coffee’ in his cup. “They ... they have to wait until the inflammation goes down before we know if there is damage to the spine.”

Arthur stared at him. In his mind’s eye he could see Merlin, coming from the sea at Doonshee, board under his arm, eyes laughing as his long loping stride took him up the beach.

“Spine?” he said.

“There’s some nerve damage but they have to wait and see” Balinson replied to the un-articulated question.

“Merlin told us what you intend to do. It can’t happen like that now you know. No matter what way it goes, Merlin will be spending a long time in this hospital. He won’t be with you” Balinson
stopped and took a sip of the muddy water.

“You could walk away” he went on. “You could slip away, get a plane back to London and stay silent. You can have your life back.” Balinson did not look at Arthur as he spoke, his voice expressionless.

Arthur looked at him in dismay. In a second he saw the life that would entail and rejected it out of hand.

“He is my life.” He said simply “Nothing else matters”

Balinson gave him a sharp look. He stood and, throwing his coffee cup into a nearby bin, moved down the corridor, giving Arthur a glance as he did so. Arthur took the unspoken invitation and followed him.

At the CCU a small woman was coming out of the ward. She was worn and tired, dressed untidily but Arthur could see in her the mother in Merlin’s photograph. She stopped in front of him and looked up.

“You weren’t here” she said.

Once again Arthur was faced with explanations he could not give. He felt a hand on his shoulder.

“He’s here now” Balinson said. Mrs Balinson looked at him through red rimmed eyes that seemed to read his soul.

“Good” she said.

The nurse approached, shushing them with her hands even though every conversation had been conducted in whispers.

“Family only” she said reproachfully “And it is the middle of the night”

“He is family” Mrs Balinson said, taking Arthur firmly by the wrist. “We won’t disturb him” She led Arthur the few paces to the door. “He’s heavily sedated” she said “He won’t wake”

She opened the door and Arthur went in.

The room was dimly lit with the lights of various machines looking bright in contrast. There were beeps and other sounds that Arthur realised was a respirator . He shuddered.

Merlin was lying still, one tube down his throat and many others linking him to other equipment around the bed. His face was un-bruised and Arthur was surprised. He wanted to stroke that unblemished cheek and make Merlin open his eyes. Arthur had often seen Merlin sleep but now he felt again the sense of wrongness at not seeing the light in the laughing eyes. He choked back a sob.
“I’m here love” he said “I’m here now”

After a few minutes (or hours, Arthur couldn’t tell) Balinson came in and put his hand on Arthur’s shoulder.

“I’ll watch him now” he said “Go get some rest”

“No!” Arthur said in a whispered shout “I’m not leaving”

“You are, son” Balinson said firmly. “He won’t be waking tonight. You’ll be back later and maybe we might get his mother to go home. Please son. Come with me”

Arthur felt the repetition of ‘son’ burn him. His father never called him son and now never would. Numbly he followed Balinson out.

Mrs Balinson gripped his hands. “You come with me, get some food and a bit of sleep. Merlin would never forgive me if you weren’t looked after” she said in a motherly tone and the tone broke Arthur who had never heard it directed at him. A long shuddering sob broke from him. Mrs Balinson hugged him tight, her head just reaching under his chin.

“He’ll be fine” she said fiercely “He’ll be fine and you are home, Arthur. You’re his so you’re ours too,”

His arms tightened around her and he sobbed. He felt a hand grip his shoulder and felt Balinson’s stoical support. Arthur pulled himself together and controlled his breathing.

“I’m sorry” he said but Mrs Balinson handed him a tissue and patted his cheek.

“You go wash up” she said “You’ve had a hard day. I’ll look after you”

Wordlessly Balinson showed Arthur to the washrooms. Arthur knew from Merlin that his father rarely showed emotion and Arthur was embarrassed at breaking down in front of him. He apologised again but Balinson brushed it off.

“It made her happy.” Balinson said “She knows now you care. Let her take you home and feed you up. It’s the only way I’ll get her to leave. Sleep for a while and she’ll let you take over later if you push” Arthur noted the tiredness and worry in Balinson’s eyes. “Son,” Balinson continued. “Let her take care of you. It’s doing her head in being helpless. Let her be a mum”

Arthur dried his hands and tried to think.

“I never had a mum” he said very quietly.

Balinson coughed slightly. “You have now, son” he said. “I hope you like scones”

+++++

In the taxi Mrs Balinson was quiet, looking out at the dark city but once they reached her own
“Now I know it’s late, or is it early? I’ve lost track... You must be hungry. Would you like a fry? I could do a fry” She had bustled into the kitchen and was holding a frying pan as she spoke. A few minutes before Arthur could have sworn he would never eat again but now he felt a sudden craving for salt and fat. He nodded and she set to cooking.

“You’ve been here before” she said abruptly, looking at him. Arthur blushed.

“Didn’t Merlin tell you?” he said

“Merlin talks his mouth off but he’s quiet when he hurts. He’s like his father for that” she replied. Arthur felt guilty.

“I’m sorry I hurt him.” He said. She nodded, fluttering a teacloth.

“Aye, and now it’s him hurting you, the silly boy falling off like that, what was he thinking...” her voice broke and tears welled up in her eyes. Arthur stood up and, throwing the stiff upper lip to the winds enveloped her in a hug.

“I should go back to him” she sobbed “he needs me” . Arthur resisted agreeing with her and knew what Merlin would want him to do.

“The sausages are burning” he said softly and she squeaked and lifted the pan.

After that it was easier. Arthur ate and she drank tea and they talked, mostly of Merlin. Arthur had dreamed of this and to have his dream in such a circumstances was bitter, but still special. As he asked her about specific points and got involved in conversation he noticed her watching him.

“Merlin talks about me” she said suddenly “You know things”

“He loves you” Arthur responded and added “And he knows I love hearing it”

She smiled at him and Arthur saw Merlin in her and was dazzled.

“I’m glad you’re here” she said. With that Arthur felt the need to tell her everything – and why he had not come before. She listened in silence with only a few interruptions. When he was finished Mrs Balinson stood and brought the tea pot to the counter top.

“Seems to me, son, that you’ve spent your life trying to be somebody but you’ve never sat down and worked out who you wanted that somebody to be” she said quietly. Then, moving briskly she turned around.

“Now when do you think those reporters will show up? I have a batch of scones in the freezer and I’ll need to defrost them. They’re not as nice when they’ve been frozen but if the reporters trample the garden they can make do”
Arthur recognised Merlin in her words and barked out a laugh and was gratified when she laughed too.

“He’s going to be okay” she said firmly. “He’s going to be okay and he’s going to come home to us”

+++++

Mrs Balinson insisted that Arthur sleep and put him in Merlin’s room, sweeping up an armful of un-ironed laundry as she ushered him in.

Arthur did not settle down. This was Merlin’s room. He knew Merlin lived in a flat across town but this was the room that made him. Merlin had looked out that window when he dreamed of a future that didn’t happen. He had stared at these walls when his dream crumbled. Merlin became Merlin here and Arthur unashamedly snooped. He saw the marks on the walls where posters had been and wondered what they were. He saw the model cars on a shelf, beside a collection of shells. Tucked inside one of the shells was the corner of a photograph. Arthur pulled it out. The original had been cut in half but this part showed Merlin, in his surfing gear, laughing, eyes scrunched up against the sun. With a start Arthur realised he could remember this, on one of their days on the beach at Doonshee. He held the picture in his hand as he lay on Merlin’s bed and fell asleep.

+++++

When he awoke it was mid morning. Arthur got up hurriedly but found when he opened the door that Mrs Balinson had left a pile of towels on by the door with a note on the individual traits of the shower. Obeying the implied order it was later when he made it downstairs to find Mrs. Balinson, neatly dressed but hollow eyed, waiting for him. It took some emotional blackmail to persuade her not to go back to the hospital.

“He’s my boy” she said in a tone that wasn’t quite a wail.

“And mine” Arthur said. “please, let me be with him”

After that she agreed.

“I’ve ordered a taxi” she said and with that the door bell rang and she was running to open the door. Arthur followed her and recognised the man immediately.

“Kenny” he said involuntarily

Kenny looked at him through narrowed eyes and Arthur noticed his cheek was reddened and bruised.

“Do I know you?” Kenny said aggressively.

“This is ...” Mrs. Balinson began but then hesitated and Arthur realised she did not know how to introduce him. He decided this was as good a time for a first public Outing as any.

“I’m Arthur” he said “I’m Merlin’s partner”

“Oh Aye” said Kenny “Not business then?”
“No” said Arthur shortly

“Where’ve you been” was Kenny’s reply but Mrs. Balinson defended him saying he had been travelling. Kenny did not seem convinced.

“You coming to the hospital then?” Kenny said to Mrs. Balinson but she shook her head.

“She needs to rest” Arthur said with emphasis.

“Aye” said Kenny nodding “You’d mind the world if you could.” He added fondly to Mrs. Balinson. “I’ll bring that man of yours back and you can rest safe”. Mrs. Balinson held the door for them as they left and Arthur saw her looking small and lonely as she closed the door.

Kenny led Arthur to the car and indicated the front seat. Obviously conversation was on the cards.

They had barely pulled away when Kenny started.

“I’ve seen you on the telly. You’re a poncy politician”

Arthur was tempted to say ‘aye’ but feared what Kenny would do if he thought he was being mocked so he settled for a yes.

“What does a posh fancy bastard like you want with Our Merlin?” Kenny demanded

Arthur hesitated on what to say. “Do you *know* Merlin?” was his final choice and he saw a tiny twitch to the side of Kenny’s mouth which could indicate approval.

“No” Arthur said “Beginning to” Arthur said “It’s a lifetime’s work”

“Will you be around for that? The boy will be in the hospital for a long time. It’s not much fun doing the hospital thing for the long haul”

Arthur stared at the traffic around them. “Merlin is all the ‘fun’ I need” he said dripping scorn on the word. Kenny glanced at him.

“Tell you what” he said “If you’re still around in a year, I’ll believe you”

Just then the radio bleated into life.

“Dad? Are you there?” the voice said unprofessionally. Kenny answered and the girl – obviously his daughter pleaded with him to come to the office.

“I have a customer” Kenny said but the girl cried and Arthur said to go to her. Again, he knew Merlin would want it.
The taxi office was much smaller than Arthur had imagined, made more crowded by the two police officers sitting in the corner.

“Dad” Holly said as Kenny went in, Arthur behind him. Kenny saw the PSNI men and actually growled.

“What have you done to her” he said “I know you young Robbie, what are you doing scaring my girl”

One of the officers bristled but he one called Robbie did not seem phased.

“This is a courtesy call Mr. Anderson” the other officer said “Just checking to see if you wan to amend your statement”

“And why would I do that” Kenny said.

“Because the doc says Georgie Millen has a broken jaw, a broken nose, two broken ribs ans he says you tried to twist his head off” Robbie said

“If I tried, his head would be off” Kenny threatened.

“We didn’t find a rope, Kenny” Robbie said. Kenny looked furious.

“I’m telling you there was a rope. I saw it. And I saw that bastard and if he hadn’t got in a lucky punch while I was distracted by the bleeding body in front of me I would have got him then”

“As opposed to four hours later at the back of the Sheds?” The other officer said.

“I’m saying nothin’..” Kenny said “Are youse arresting me?”

“No” said Robbie

“Fine” said Kenny “Cause I’ve got a job” He turned his back on the officers and marched towards the door. Arthur stepped out hurriedly, his mind reeling.

Once in the car Kenny looked at him.

“You were listening” Kenny said. Arthur did not bother to deny it.

“And?” Kenny demanded

“Tell me” Arthur said.

“It wasn’t an accident”
(Merlin opened his eyes. The lights were bright. A figure slumped in an uncomfortable chair. The light caught the figure’s blond hair. Merlin closed his eyes. He felt safe.)

Chapter End Notes

I am not a doctor so I do not claim medical knowledge about treatments or injuries. I did do research so that it won't be beyond the realms of possibility. And seriously, is there any other medium that involves so much research? I know more than I ever wanted about surfing in Donegal, waterfalls, how to become a paramedic (including shift patterns) Parliamentary party elections, houses in the shires (including internet access) homophobic attacks, and car mechanics among many others. I did not do this much research for college. There should be acknowledgment of the learning that is fanfic!

PS it is 2 am. I may be spacey.
Arthur felt that he was becoming fused to the plastic chair, molecule by molecule. He wondered were hospital chairs designed to give the maximum amount of discomfort with actual bodily harm and he had plenty of time to find out. It had been hours since he had sent an exhausted Balinson home with Kenny, leaving with Arthur nothing to do but listen to the regular beeps and whooshes of the various machines around Merlin and think.

What he thought about was Kenny’s revelation.

Arthur had heard the part of the news report that said the PSNI were investigating the incident but it had not registered. Now he had time to brood on it.

Kenny had told him what he knew with a succinct and practical approach which spoke of frequent police statements.

One of Kenny’s drivers had seen the paramedic bike turn into the laneway and had called Kenny. Kenny liked to know what was going on in his patch and as he was close by he had as he said “Wandered over to take a look and maybe help out”

Wandering over meant going through a house; (“Mrs. Ervine’s oul lad was a mucker of mine so she’d no problem”), picking his way past her bins, garden shed and rhubarb before getting to the back wall and looking over it into the lane.

There he had seen a man, with his back to him, rolling up a rope which seemed to be tied to a post on the other side. The light was poor but to his right he could see the silhouette of the paramedic bike, on its side, its blue light still shining and casting an eerie glow over the scene. Kenny climbed over the wall, startling the man with the rope, who turned around.

“It was that fucker Millen. I’d know him anywhere. I’ve seen him around all his life. I knew it was him” Kenny insisted, though Arthur was not arguing with him.

Kenny had called to Millen but then, glancing to his left he saw a body, still helmeted, lying on the ground. It distracted him and Millen got in a punch to his jaw before running away.

“I let the fucker go. I should’ve followed him, grabbed him. But I knew it was Merlin Balinson lying there and..”

“I’m glad you stayed” Arthur had said softly but Kenny was not accepting that.

“Those sad bastards in the police have no clue. They say they can’t arrest him cos they’ve no evidence. I know there was evidence. I saw it. The fucker tried to murder the lad and if I hadn’t been there he might’ve finished the job. And now he’s going to get away with it”
“The police will find evidence to link him to it” Arthur had said automatically.

Kenny took a step. “Oh Aye? You’ve great faith in the peelers. Me, I believe in this” he raised a fist. Arthur remembered what the officer had said about Millen’s injuries.

“I take it you found him later” he said without expression.

“I’m sayin’ nothin’” Kenny said and went back to the car, leaving Arthur to go to the ward alone.

Now he sat in the shadowed lights, listening to the artificial sounds that marked Merlin’s heartbeat, wishing he could rest his head down and hear the real beat.

He tried to stay logical and think out why this man, this Millen would have hurt Merlin. The name was familiar but he could not place in the tapestry of names in Merlin’s life. And he was hindered by the way his mind kept jumping to the crash. In his imagination he could see Merlin, speeding down the dark lane, eager to help; then hitting a taut rope pulled across the way. His mind’s eye made him watch as the bike shot forward, momentum keeping it going, while Merlin was slung back, hitting the ground with a crash. He had not been there. He did not know if that is how it happened, but he felt every moment and it hurt.

As he reviewed it again he was startled by a noise from the bed. A grunt, no more but Arthur was on his feet and looking intently at Merlin’s face before he had time to think.

Merlin’s eyes were open. Arthur smiled and the eyes responded. Arthur wanted to shout, to cheer, to blow bugles and call up a full trumpet voluntary because this was Merlin, tubes and beeps notwithstanding, Merlin was here.

“Hey” said Arthur. “Welcome back”

Merlin made a sound and the eyes looked distressed. Arthur realised what happened.

“You have a breathing tube in. You can’t talk yet. I’ll get a doctor,” The eyes demanded that he return “I will be back”

In a moment the room was full of medics who whooshed Arthur out.

“We’re going to take out the tube and see how he’s breathing. We’ll call you when necessary”

Banished from the room Arthur went outside and for the first time in what seemed like a lifetime, he checked his phone. He had turned it off when he had arrived in Northern Ireland and did not believe that phone memory could hold so many missed calls. He summoned up all his courage and called Lionel.

“Oh Thank God!” Lionel said “Where are you? No. How is... how is ..”

“Merlin” said Arthur. “He may be regaining consciousness. The doctors hope he can breathe on his own now”

Lionel was silent for a moment. “I didn’t realise he was that badly hurt” he said eventually. “I’m sorry but...”

Arthur moved his phone to his other hand, and leant against the cold door post “What has
“Fraser.” Lionel said. “The debate” Arthur drew a long breath. Since the beginning of the campaign Arthur had been putting pressure on Fraser for a one-to-one debate on the ongoing issues. It seemed that those chickens had come home to roost.

“He’s accepted” Arthur said blankly.

“Yes” said Lionel “But he has conditions”

“Of course he has” Arthur would have conditions if it were the other way around, it was a way for reasserting control. “Tell me”

“Friday. On Newsnight”

Arthur held the phone away from him as if his emotions could be conveyed through the ether.

“I can’t” was his instinctive response.

“I know” said Lionel “But if you don’t, we may as well throw in the towel. The polls are neck and neck and there is little enough to separate you. Your advantage is you Arthur, you in person. If you want to win, you have to be there on Friday”

Arthur felt a coldness creep over him that did not come from the door post. Did he want to win? Did he still want to compete?

“We don’t have to reply until tomorrow.” Lionel said. “Give an answer then”

Arthur did not know what answer he would give. Once he would have relished the idea of a televised debate but now it faded into insignificance against the eyes that waited for him inside that darkened room.

He and Lionel exchanged civilities and hung up.

On returning to the CCU Arthur found the room empty. Frantically he looked around until a nurse took pity on him.

“He’s been moved to the High Dependency unit” She said “he’s breathing by himself now”}

He found Mr. Balinson at the HDU, talking to a doctor. From what he could hear, they were reducing the sedation and Merlin would be more conscious now. Arthur went in to him; Balinson would fill him in on the medical details and from the glances he was sending Arthur’s way, the doctor was not comfortable talking in front of him.

Merlin was still hooked up to the Starship Enterprise but the whoosh of the ventilator was gone. Merlin looked at him.
“Hey” said Merlin. His voice was a hoarse whisper from disuse and misuse.

“Hey you” said Arthur in an answering whisper.

“I’m sorry” Merlin said, to Arthur’s astonishment.

“Why?” he asked, puzzled.

“For messing up your life again” Merlin said looking at him steadily.

“You haven’t messed it up” Arthur said automatically.

“You mean...” Merlin hesitated, “It’s still on... the vote... you could still...”

Arthur interrupted him. “It’s still on” he said. He didn’t have the heart to tell Merlin about Aredin. Merlin’s face lit up.

“I’m glad” he said “I glad you still have a chance” He yawned

Arthur took his hand and noticed a flicker of expression move over Merlin’s face before he yawned again. “So sleepy” he murmured.

“Sleep” Arthur said, staying beside him.

Arthur looked at Merlin’s still form in front of him. He looked almost alien with all the attachments and dressings but it was still Merlin beneath. A thought struck him. Would the doctors say something about the possibility of a spinal injury? Did they still not know?

Arthur felt the thought grow. He gloried in Merlin’s body and knew that Merlin relished his worship. What if that was no longer possible? Could he... could they still be what they were to each other?

Merlin made a tiny snuffling noise as he slept and Arthur smiled through his fears. He did not know how he would feel in a month or a year, but right now, at this moment, if all he could have of Merlin was this touch, that sound, it was enough. He rested his head in his hand and watched over his sleeping love.

He jumped slightly when he felt a hand on his shoulder. Balinson had returned. Arthur briefly reflected that he had been touched more (outside of bed) since he had come to Belfast than at any time of his life. Mrs. Balinson was a very tactile person, punctuating her speech with pats on his arm or hand. Mr. Balinson was more restrained but not averse to putting a fatherly hand on Arthur’s shoulder, as now. Arthur would never have described himself as touch deprived and would, if asked, have considered such touches as out of place. Here, with his emotions stretched to their limits, he found it comforting. He did not move away as he looked up at Balinson.

“He’s asleep” Arthur said, stating the obvious. “He was awake but he’s asleep now”

Balinson did not seem phased by the inanity of the comment. “The doctors said he would that” he said. “He has a lot of healing to do. Sleep is good”

“What else did they say?” Arthur asked, without emphasis.
“Time” Balinson was succinct “He needs time. That’s all for now. It’s good that they have reduced the sedation and he’s breathing himself. Everything else is time”


Balinson nodded but gestured for Arthur to follow him into the corridor. With a sinking heart Arthur did so.

“See, son,” Balinson began “I understand you giving Merlin your time, but don’t you have an election to win?”

“I was never going to win” Arthur said, with some bitterness. “It was always meant to be a suicide run”

“But you have to fight it” Balinson said. Arthur wanted to ask why but stayed silent. It didn’t seem to matter now. Balinson went on “You can’t fight here, you need to be in London.”

“Are you telling me to leave?” Arthur said coldly, deliberately misinterpreting what was said.

Balinson looked at him sadly. “I’m asking you to think about how you should use your time son” he said.

Arthur was angry and bit back a response. Truth to tell, though he did want to stay with Merlin, another, equal part of him did not want to go back to London. He did not want to face into a campaign that was going to end in a media explosion. He did not want to face the ritual humiliation that was coming. He wanted to stay in the quiet room with Merlin, listening to the sounds which narrowed his world down to a comforting beep. The deepest truth? He was scared.

So he was angry.

Mr. Balinson sighed and went back to his sleeping son. Arthur followed in silence. They sat together for a few moments when they were disturbed by the arrival of a senior nurse with two PSNI officers in tow. Arthur recognised them from Kenny’s office. He made to move away but Balinson put out a hand to stop him.

The nurse addressed Balinson. Arthur had become invisible – it was easier than dealing with who he was. She explained that they had come to take Merlin’s statement and, since it was time for his medication, she had let them in.

“I’m sure they won’t mind if you stay” she said pointedly while she checked the various machines and drips.
Merlin woke easily and smiled at his father and Arthur. He even gave the officers a glimpse of his friendly grin.

“I’m not sure if I can help you” he said “But I’ll try”

The officer who was not Robbie began the questions.

“We know you got a call to attend to an incident at the back of the school playing-fields” he said “Can you tell us why you went down that particular alleyway when the school gates are on the main road?”

Merlin looked at him blankly “It’s a short cut. Cars wouldn’t make but a bike could”

“And would this be common knowledge then” The officer’s voice was cold and Arthur disliked his tone. Merlin just answered and Arthur realised this was not the first statement he had given. Assault was not unusual in his job.

“I don’t know about common” Merlin said “But anyone who went to school there or lived in the area would know it”

“I do” Robbie pointed out to a scowl from his companion. Robbie went on.

“Just tell us what happened when you got into the lane”

Merlin was silent for a minute, his eyes showing that he was trying hard to remember.

“I rode in, I remember there was something wrong with the throttle, she was slowing down and I kept pulling on it to try and get more power.” He paused. “Is that what happened? Is that why I crashed?”

“We don’t know” said Robbie. “What’s the next thing you remember?”

Merlin sighed “Lying on the ground – lights, voices... it’s all a jumble”

“Did you see anyone in the alley?”

Merlin tried to shake his head but he was still braced. “No” he said “I don’t remember seeing anyone. I’m sorry”

Robbie put away his notebook but the other officer did not.

“Do you know there was no body on the playing-fields, the call was a fake and untraceable.” he said without a question “It has been put to us that you knew about that call – that you planned to go to that laneway to meet with someone – maybe to have a…” he paused “An assignation that your type do in the area”

Arthur felt fury rush through him. He wanted to rise up and punch the man but a strong hand on his shoulder kept him down. He did not know if the fingers digging into his collarbone were for his
benefit or to stop their owner from punching the police officer himself.

Merlin just looked sad.

“Don’t judge me by your standards” he said slowly “I don’t know what you do when you’re in uniform but when I put on my gear, I’m at work and I do my duty. I was sent by my dispatch on a call and I went. You may think it okay to break off and have a quick shag in a laneway, but *I* am not that type”

Merlin did not sound angry, merely resigned but Arthur wanted to jump up and cheer for him. Despite being helpless and broken Merlin had kept his dignity. It was beautiful. He was beautiful.

And Arthur knew he would have to go back to London

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Merlin slept for a long time after the police left. He had said nothing to Arthur about the interview but Arthur could see the tension in his eyes and knew it was reflected in his own. Arthur wanted to take him in his arms and keep him safe. Instead he held his hand and watched him sleep until Mr. Balinson sent him home for food.

Arthur liked the idea of ‘home’.

Mrs. Balinson fed him with home cooked food (occasionally scones) and put him to bed with a hot water bottle (still Merlin’s, still strange). She took the night shift. She said she didn’t want to talk to doctors (avoiding, Arthur thought with sympathy) and could doze very well in a chair. Arthur suspected the nurses on the night shift provided her with cushions and footstools but did not begrudge it.

He needed her approval before he thought of going back but he did not know how to bring up the subject.

They were sitting at the kitchen table, Arthur full of food to a point just beyond comfortable. He tried to start but kept hesitating. Even more than Merlin, he never wanted to hurt her. Merlin, his Merlin, would strike back, she never would.

“Mrs...” he began but she raised a admonitory finger. She had told him not to call her Mrs. Balinson but he could not bring himself to call her mum or mother. It felt like stealing- claiming something that was not his. That pretty much left coughing to gain her attention. He looked at her seriously across the gravy boat.

“You need to go back” she said softly “And you are afraid to say it”

Arthur wondered if telepathy was in the family.

“Yes” he said “I don’t want to ... but...”

She smiled at him and patted his hand across the table. “We’ll mind him for you. You go and do what you need to do.”

Arthur liked the patting but felt the approval more. Now there was only Merlin.
The next day Merlin was more awake, but also for the first time, in pain. He had a morphine drip but did not want to use it.

“I want to be able to think for you” he said and Arthur felt guilty. It was a familiar feeling which did not make it better.

“Someone has to do the thinking” Merlin went on tiredly. “And I know you won’t” He sighed. “I’m going to be here for a long time. You can’t stay with me. You have things to do”

Arthur clutched Merlin’s hand but did not get an answering grip. “I don’t want to go” Arthur said.

“And I don’t want to be here” Merlin said. “The ceiling is dull and life sucks and ...” he drew a breath that was close to a sob “I want for this not to have happened, I want that you don’t have to go to London to face the ghouls but...” Merlin closed his eyes, his face showing the pain he was feeling – both physical and emotional. Arthur bent forward and kissed his brow and Merlin smiled sadly.

“Promise me” Merlin said “Promise you won’t give up. Promise you will fight. You have to give your best when you go back Arthur, you have to, or it will mean nothing.”

Arthur looked at the passion in the eyes staring back at him. Definitely telepathy he thought. He had spent an uncomfortable night, alone in Merlin’s bed, fearing the future. He feared the humiliation to come, but now, more than that he feared winning – feared taking on more when Merlin needed him so much. Merlin knew.

“Arthur, you have to be the best you can be, or they will just say... they will ...” Merlin’s voice was fading but Arthur understood. He had to fight with all he had so that when he fell, and he knew he would, the reason for the fall would be clear. For the blaze to be seen it had to be high.

“I’ll fight” Arthur said. “I promise. I’ll go back and fight” he gently kissed Merlin again “Now sleep”

Merlin slept.

The next day Arthur was on a plane to London.

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On the way from the airport Arthur suddenly thought to ring Calum and warn him about the photographs. He had forgotten about Calum in his fear for Merlin and expected the call to be awkward. He did not expect Calum to find it hilarious.

“They think you have the hots for me? Really? Wow. I’m flattered mate” Calum said with enthusiasm.

“I don’t” Arthur said drily.

“No shit” Calum said. “But still...”

Arthur warned about media intrusion and Calum was gleeful.

“Let them come” he laughed. “My friends have been thinking I’m paranoid saying I’m being followed. They’ll owe me big time now. I won’t have to buy a pint for months”

Somehow Calum’s attitude helped Arthur. It was impossible to be scared in the face of such confidence.

He called Lionel. The campaign was back on.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry that nothing much happens - but waiting in hospitals is a whole lot of nothing much happening combined with terror.
Chapter Notes

This chapter is from Merlin's POV and so may seem bitty and disjointed - most of that is deliberate.

Some is because I am going away for a few days and wanted to put this up before I went so it is being posted more raw than usual.

Merlin was tired. That pretty much summed up how he felt. He was tired of pain, of being still, of being afraid, of the antiseptic smell of the hospital, he was tired of the incessant sounds that surrounded him and regimented movements of nurses and doctors, checking and turning and monitoring. He was tired.

He had managed to persuade his parents to give up on the twenty-four watch, partly because the guilt of watching his mum sit up all night was causing him more pain than his injuries, and partly because he needed time in the middle of the night to cry.

Merlin was no fool. He could keep up the stoical front during the day but he worked in health care and he knew that even in the best case the injuries to his leg and pelvis would mean it would be at least three months before he could walk. And that would be if he was lucky. Since he already felt every dragging second of each interminable minute three months was a life time.

That was not why he cried.

The first time it had happened – or rather not happened - he had hoped it was the drugs. The second time, when he had seen Arthur reach over and hold his hand but felt nothing he had pretended he had. But hours of sending demands to his fingers to move with no feedback filled him with despair. When the doctors came to test him he watched their faces beam when he was able to twitch his toes, when the fingers on his right hand moved despite his broken wrist. He waited and saw the faces change as there was no response from his left hand. He listened as they muttered about time and rest.

“It’s biker’s arm” he said. “I know what it is”

The doctor looked at him with pity. “Brachial Plexus injuries can heal themselves” she said gently. Merlin knew it was true. He also knew it was true that many did not and paralysis and pain could be permanent. He could see by her eyes that she did too.

It was that that had him howling silently in to the dark; mourning the loss of a future he thought he was building.

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He missed Arthur with an ache greater than the pain that cut through his bones, an ache that
morphine did not reduce. Arthur called twice a day but because of all the sensitive equipment he had to use the ward phone, which a nurse brought to Merlin, usually hovering in the background to return it. Merlin did not feel free to ask questions or express his love and stilted, one sided conversations did not satisfy. He could not see Arthur, ask him for details; he could not be there. It was not enough.

Sometimes he imagined he was lying in Arthur’s arms and this was all someone else’s nightmare.

He always woke up.

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He did not tell Arthur about his arm. It was not deliberate refusal – it was simply that he did not have the strength to speak about it without support – and a telephone was not support. Speaking made the heavy reality so much worse. He stayed with the silence.

He spent a great deal of time sleeping- or pretending to sleep. The drugs made things fuzzy, though they did not stop the pain, and it was easier to close his eyes and pretend he was anywhere else rather than look at the world that was now his.

His mum and dad still came every day. Dad told him about the world – what was making headlines, what was changing. Mum was more about keeping up with people: What was happening in the neighbourhood, who said what.

Merlin tried very hard to be interested in both – but failed.

Sometimes his mum would hold his dead arm and rest her head against his and promise him that all would be well. He would smile and agree.

He did not believe it.

And through it all – the Pain.

He hated how the morphine made him feel but he hated the pain as much. Sometimes he felt that all that was left of him was pain and hate.

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Kenny visited and told him about George Millen. Merlin listened with attention. He even asked intelligent questions. But when Kenny left he felt the despair well up inside him. Kenny was convinced that Millen wanted to kill him. Merlin knew that Millen had no objection to hurting him. He had felt the effects of that before – but murder? He did not want to believe Kenny, who was convinced his own investigations surpassed those of the PSNI.

“I think it was that fucker messed with your bike that time – remember? The brakes were fucked up. That was him, I bet’”

Merlin said nothing. What could he say faced with the idea that someone hated him enough to
work out complicated ways to kill him? That sort of thing happened in movies; it didn’t happen to people who were middling at everything. In the depths of the night he wondered if he was being punished for daring to love Arthur and being loved in return. The nights were very long.

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There were times he could see Arthur. It was a slow news period, no one was blowing up or burning down anything, there were no exceptional murders and what wars there were, were old, so the news programmes filled their space with the leadership contest. The debate that had called Arthur over had been postponed due to Fraser’s sudden acquisition of laryngitis, a circumstance which Arthur publicly acceded to with grace but privately seethed over.

“He has political laryngitis” Arthur complained to Merlin on the phone. “He thought I wouldn’t agree to the debate and he’d get the credit without having to turn up”

“He’ll have to turn up for the re scheduled one” Merlin murmured.

Arthur grumbled “But it probably won’t be televised” he said.

It made Merlin smile. “You’re on the telly a lot already” he said. And he was. Arthur made the news very often, photo-ops and sound bites mostly. Merlin drank in every one. At first Arthur looked strained but now he was relishing every moment and Merlin could see how he was enjoying it.

That added to the middle of the night guilt – that Arthur would have to give up something he so obviously loved.

Arthur had always been good at campaigning, though even in the sound bites Merlin noticed a difference in him; there was less of the politician and more Arthur. There were times that Merlin even thought he could vote for him and Arthur laughed when he told him that. It was a good moment.

One of the photo-ops was in a youth project. Merlin worried that putting Arthur with a bunch of teenagers would just highlight his own youth but he needn’t have worried. Even in casual clothes he looked in control and the segment on the news showed that he wasn’t simply looking over shoulders and asking ‘what do you do’, he was getting involved, allowing the teenagers to shine. Merlin remembered their impromptu classes in the harbour at Doonshee and saw that Arthur had learned a lot.

The reporter called Arthur over. “Isn’t this project a pet policy of the previous government?” she said in a challenging way.

Arthur smiled at her. “But it’s a good idea” he said. “I was elected to help govern the country not to score points off the opposition. Politics isn’t about playing political games it’s about making policy and wherever the ideas come from, if they’re good, they should be supported. Everything should be judged on its merit not on its source and I will not apologise for thinking this project is a good one”
The nurse changing the drip over his bed glanced at the TV. “That’s a change” she said, “They’re usually all about bashing the other side” She took another look. “Isn’t that...” she said with a query in her voice.

“Yes” said Merlin.

“Oh right” she said “You two... are you...?”

Merlin found his lips were dry. He did not know if it was from disuse, or meds, or fear. He thought it was fear.

“Yes” he said.

“Oh” she said again, continuing her task, “That’s nice. We did wonder. He was so worried. Your mam likes him you know, that’s a good thing.” She finished hanging the drip and stood at the foot of the bed. “You, know when my cousin brought her girlfriend over at Christmas, my aunt went ballistic. You know what my cousin said? She said ‘you wanted me to go out with a doctor, I’m going out with a doctor, get over it!’ And my aunt did. Mind you, the bottle of brandy helped”

Merlin listened with resignation but as she spoke he felt hysteria bubbling in him. It couldn’t he that easy could it?

He gave a sudden giggle that was almost a sob.

“Ach! That’s a good sound!” the nurse said. “We’ll have to tell you jokes, or make you watch the funnies. Or maybe...” She sounded a little sly, “Maybe you should watch the news. He’s easy on the eye – we all had a crush on him, you know”

That night was less bad. And from then the news was always shown in his room.

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Accident investigators came to interview him. They were brisk and impersonal and very professional. Merlin did his best to recall what happened but his memory had not improved and he could give them very little. They did say that they could find nothing wrong with the ambulance bike to explain his loss of power.

“Whatever it was” the older investigator said “It probably saved your life. If you had come off the bike at a greater speed – well, you’re a professional, you’ve cleaned up the aftermath”

Merlin had. He remembered.

That night there were nightmares about the past not the future.

The dreamed he was driving Betsy along the laneway that led to the palace in Doonshee. He knew that Arthur was waiting for him and the thought was like a beacon in his mind. And then it was dark and he was in the alley at the back of the school riding his motorbike. Standing in his path were Billy Ballard, George Millen and the cop from the interview, taller and darker than in real life and they were laughing and Merlin knew Arthur was behind them, somewhere in the dark but he couldn’t see him. He tried to stop, to pull on the brakes but his arms wouldn’t obey. He felt the panic rise like bile in his mouth. The bike fell and he fell and there was pain and dark...

Merlin awoke covered in sweat, his heart beating rapidly, monitors bleakly beeping that fact to the room.

“Just a dream” he said when the nurse came in. She patted his good arm gently and fixed the
monitors. After that he was sedated more often.

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The police came back – at least Kenny’s acquaintance, Robbie came back. Merlin wondered about his companion; if, traction and a paralysed arm notwithstanding, he had thought that Merlin would proposition him for an ‘assignation’ and so refused to come to the hospital. He did not ask.

For a laconic police officer, Robbie was quite enthusiastic.

“We’ll get the bastard now” he said “Kenny gave us enough to get a search warrant. I swear that it was the first time Kenny Anderson ever made a statement that helped the police, he must like you!”

“So you found the rope?” Mr. Balinson said. It was his turn to visit and Robbie did not object to him staying.

“Not a trace” said Robbie, “No, we won’t get him for this incident – though he had pictures of you” he nodded at Merlin “at lots of different accident scenes. The guy been stalking you for ages” Merlin shuddered., his nightmare remembered.

Robbie continued. “No, we found accelerant and detonators at his flat. We can link them to...

“The hotel fire” Merlin interrupted “Was that my fault too?”

Robbie looked at him with compassion. “I don’t know if he was after you or after the ambulance service” he said “I think the guy is batshit crazy but I can’t put that on an official form. Your bosses think it was because they fired him and they’re happy to go with that”

Mr. Balinson snorted – a very uncharacteristic sound. Robbie looked at him with understanding.

“I know it seems as if he’s getting away with hurting your son, but we can get him for arson and maybe attempted murder. He’ll be put away for a long time”

Merlin closed his eyes. It didn’t matter to him what happened to Millen. In prison or free, Millen was in his mind, lived in his dreams, his nightmares and nothing would change that. He could hear his father whispering to Robbie but didn’t bother to try to hear what they said. It wouldn’t change anything.

Merlin still slept a great deal. The medications he was on left him groggy anyway and thinking was an effort. The doctors now allowed him to eat but he felt humiliated at having to be fed. The only sensation in his left arm was pain and his right wrist was still in a cast so he was helpless. Sleeping was better than facing up to the fact that he could do nothing for himself.

One day he woke and realised he had dropped off while his father was talking. He apologised immediately but his father shook his head.

“You need the sleep to heal, son” he said. “I don’t mind you sleeping”. He stopped but he looked seriously at Merlin. “But you’re not just sleeping son, you’re hiding” Merlin said nothing and his father sat in silence. This had always been a feature of their interaction.
When he was younger and still living at home his mum would come in when the two of them were engaging in active silence, like a very slow game of chicken – seeing who would speak first and maybe reveal an emotion. She would chatter and ask them both questions on inane matters until they both had said something innocuous, then she would get up and walk out, leaving them to deal with their issues. She was not in the hospital room and Merlin was determined he would not be the one to break.

Surprisingly his father did not pause long. “Son, you need to accept two things” he said with his bureaucrat’s logic. “First you must accept how you are and deal with it. You life isn’t going to be the same and it isn’t going to be what you expected. That’s what life is – getting on with the unexpected”

Merlin thought of his father’s life, overturned by a single sentence in a Sunday sermon.

His fault.

But his father was still speaking.

“The second thing you have to accept is that you did not make this happen. You are your own person. How people deal with you is their business, their problem. From what I heard, I imagine, thirty years ago that Millen would still have been planting bombs and ambushing people. He’s the sort that needs to have someone to blame for his own misfortune. You’re a bit like that, Merlin except you blame yourself. You have to stop. You’ll do your head in worrying it to pieces. You’ll never be able to get on with what’s happened if you keep blaming yourself.”

It was the longest speech he had ever heard his father give and Merlin found himself thinking of that almost more than the content.

“Your man...” His father continued, nodding towards the blank TV, “He’s going to need you” he said, reaching out and holding Merlin’s left hand.

“I can’t feel that” Merlin murmured.

“I know” his dad said. “But I can. You have to believe in that”

That night Merlin dreamt of Billy Ballard. In the dream, they were still friends and Merlin felt the joy of the connection. Then the dream changed and Billy called him names and laughed at him. “I haven’t changed” DreamMerlin said “Why have you?”

He woke weeping.

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Merlin’s birthday came around. He was not eager to mark it – what was there to celebrate after all? - but his mother had other plans. She came in unannounced, carrying a cake with candles, in flagrant flouting of dozens of health and safety regulations. To Merlin’s embarrassment she recruited the nurses to sing Happy Birthday, leaving Merlin blushing wildly and exchanging despairing looks with his father, who simply shrugged as if to say, Put up with it. Merlin did not eat the cake, but he did blow out the candles. His father approved.
Arthur did not sing to him. Arthur had sent a gift through Mrs. Balinson, who discreetly delivered it in the morning, before slipping away. When Merlin opened the small box his heart went cold. It contained the Dragon key fob he had once given Arthur. His mind raced; was Arthur returning his gifts? Was this a way of saying that he had had enough? Merlin refused to believe it. He picked up the key fob and looked at it closely. It was the same fob he had bought but it had a key on it. An MG key.

There was a note. As usual Arthur was terse.

‘I could not give you something that means a great to you, so I give you something that means a great deal to me’

Merlin had a vision of a red car, exuding the idea of speed and power. It symbolised Arthur. How could it be his?

The note had a postscript.
‘PS You must come to London to collect’

Merlin felt his mouth pull into a smile. He would do that. He would go to London and take ownership of the car, even if his useless arm meant he could never drive it. He would claim its raw power, its sleek elegance, its extreme confidence because it was Arthur’s and Arthur had given it to him.

That evening, on the phone, as the nurse stayed irritatingly close, he simply said “Thank you”.

“You do understand?” Arthur said anxiously.

“It’s you” Merlin said and the sigh on the other end of the phone spoke volumes.

“You do understand” Arthur said quietly.

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That night Merlin had the dream again: the laneway at Doonshee turning in to the alley in Belfast. But in this dream he was in the red MG and Arthur was driving. The usual threatening figures appeared but this time the car gave a whoosh and spit out flame which sent them scattering. DreamMerlin laughed and the alley turned back into the lane at Doonshee.

Merlin slept and did not wake until morning.
I faced it all

As soon as he landed in London Arthur was back in the campaign. He went straight from the airport to a brunch with key local party leaders, feeling as if he had taken a blue pill and had been transported to a gilded world, far from the stillness and anxiety of his vigil by Merlin’s bedside.

But there was a difference. Arthur was now sure what was important and that knowledge, combined with the knowledge that he could not win, made him freer than ever before. The skills he had learned as a politician were abandoned. If he was asked for something impossible to deliver, he did not give a series of platitudes to cover up his refusal. Now he said no. Occasionally he said why. He became used to the bemused looks from those he spoke to, but he saw it as a victory.

Ava Renney noticed the change.

“Are you trying to lose” she asked bluntly at a reception for both candidates, after Arthur had cut down a constituency chairman who proposed an immigration policy slightly more strict than Nazi Germany.

“I know the truth is novel for you” Arthur replied, “But I think people can handle it”

“Misquoting movies? How pop-culture of you” she answered. “But people want to be told that there are rainbows and kittens and lollipops for all. They know it’s not true but they like to be indulged”

“If they want lollipops they can go to a sweet shop” Arthur said coldly. “I’m not playing anymore”

Ava Renny gave him a cool smile and moved on. Arthur assumed that she was working with James Fraser. He knew for certain that his uncle had washed his hands of him and he was quite grateful for it. Lionel was his de facto election manager and he was full of enthusiasm, more enthusiasm than Arthur could cope with on occasion.

“The polls have you ahead with the younger members but we need to win over the more traditional members in the shires” he said the next day while bouncing in to Arthur’s office like an exuberant golden retriever, carrying a sheaf of papers instead of a stick.

“I’ll never win over the traditionalists and you know it” Arthur said realistically “And I will lose the more traditional of the younger ones after..” he left the after unsaid.

“Has anyone ever told you that you can be very depressing sometimes” Lionel said. “We have a chance as long as we don’t give up”

Arthur looked at him incredulously. Lionel was older than he was, with a wife and two children. He had so much more to lose than Arthur and yet he bubbled with zeal for a cause Arthur saw as lost.

“Why are you still here?” Arthur asked, really wanting to know. “Why do support me knowing that I will lose?”
Lionel put down the papers on Arthur’s desk and met his gaze with a clear look of his own.

“Don’t you know” he said “Don’t you know what you represent? You give me something to believe in. Do you know how rare that is? Fuck it Arthur! People these days believe in aliens and superheroes and sparkly vampires because there’s nothing else to believe in. You want to change things, make thing better - you want to try. I can believe in you- you will actually try to stand up and be counted and maybe that makes me crazy but it is a good kind of crazy and I know this may all may end badly but sometimes you have to go into things because they are right not because you can win...”

Arthur gave a harsh laugh. Lionel was an idealist in a cynical world. He would be destroyed and Arthur did not want to be part of that destruction.

“What does Jane think of this?” he asked cruelly. He had met Lionel’s wife a few times – most notably when he had stood godfather for their daughter. She seemed a typical MP’s wife, eager and organised, if a little frazzled around the edges from doing too many things at once. She could hardly support his quixotic support for Arthur.

“She loves me” Lionel said “And yes she’s scared and you’re a bit of a bastard for reminding me but we have talked and she agreed. This is right”

Arthur felt overwhelmed that this woman he knew only as an accomplished hostess thought he was worth the risk to her security.

“What do you want from me?” he asked carefully “You must want something from me”

Lionel raised his hands in the universal ‘de rien’ gesture but Arthur was having none of it.

“No, you have to want something” he demanded, “There has to be something”

Lionel sighed. “I don’t want it to end” he said quietly. “I don’t want you to fade into the background and disappear. I don’t know if we have started something but you said you would be there to fix it, build it. That’s what I want.”

Arthur stared into space. He had promised that, he had said he would be around to rebuild what he was breaking. And he meant it. But now, that fire had been subsumed by another need, much more urgent. He thought of Merlin, as he last saw him, smiling through pain he never spoke of, ignoring the unmentioned fears, trying to make Arthur feel better despite his own obvious misery.
Arthur shook his head. “I can’t give you that” he said, his voice choked with emotion. “If it were just me I would – I owe you that, but...” he hesitated for a moment and drew a breath. “I don’t know how much of my time Merlin will need but I will give him all of it if that’s what it takes. I can’t make promises to you, because he’s there first, even if he will never ask”

“Will his recovery be that long?” Lionel said.

With shock, Arthur realised that his hands were shaking. He sat down suddenly. “He nearly died, Lionel. He nearly died and he’s not even close to being better yet. All this” he waved his shaking hand at the office with its piles of election stationary. “All this is like a dream and I am ignoring reality”

“Why are you here then?” Lionel said, echoing Arthur’s words.

“Because you asked. And because Merlin doesn’t want me to give up”

Lionel gave a short laugh. “I knew I liked him” he said. “So, we don’t give up, we keep going and when it’s over, you do what you have to do and then come back”

Arthur knew he looked doubtful “it’s not that easy” he said.

Lionel snorted. “If it were easy, Arthur Pendragon, you wouldn’t be bothered”

Arthur wondered what it was about him that made people think he wanted life to be a challenge. Yes, he did like a challenge, but he also liked lazy mornings in bed, with Merlin snuggled beside him hugging three quarters of the duvet and grumbling in his sleep when Arthur tried to pull it away. He liked Dr Who marathons with Chinese food and Merlin’s commentary on the villains even when it interrupted crucial moments. He liked sitting on a beach at sunset, watching the waves break and feeling the glory of togetherness that came from intertwined fingers. Challenges were good, but he realised that he hadn’t had nearly enough ‘easy’. He sighed and put the thought away. There would be no more ‘easy’ for a long time.

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Two days after he returned he received a phone call from Mrs. Balinson. He saw her name come up on his screen with some apprehension and despite the circumstances being awkward, answered immediately.

“Is he...” he started to say but she interrupted him.

“Don’t fash yourself” she said “He’s fine. Or,... ” she sighed and Arthur read long nights and deep worry in the sound. “I want to hear how you are” she went on. “Merlin says you’re away from home, I know how lads can get. Are you eating right? What about laundry?”
Arthur ignored the implied sexism and thought ruefully of the diet of pub sandwiches, takeaway and canapés he had had since he came back. He didn’t want to think of the mountain of dirty clothes in one corner of his flat. He had been working through his whole wardrobe and hadn’t run out yet.

“Yes I’m eating” he said “Everything’s fine”

Mrs. Balinson gave a deep Hrmmm and although Arthur had only known her for a short time he understood it to express severe doubt. Just then Elliott’s voice came from the other room, calling him back.

“You have to go, I understand” Mrs. Balinson said “You make sure you call me if you need anything. You need to be looked after”

She cut the call and Arthur went back to his meeting.

Arthur felt strange after the call. He had never had anyone call him up to see if he had done his laundry. It was ... strange. He liked it.

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It was probably because he liked the feeling that he plucked up the courage to call Mrs. Balinson a few days later. Faced with the imminent end of his clean shirts Arthur resolved to deal with Mount Laundry. He had one evening to do so and he set himself the challenge to master the washing machine – wryly considering his desire for easy. The machine turned out to be fairly practical but the multitude of symbols on his shirts defeated him. He could have Googled – instead he called.

Mrs. Balinson answered with good humour, gave him lots of information on laundry symbols and ended by telling him to have some cocoa, go to bed and buy a new shirt in the morning – because, “You’ll never remember any of that and you need to be properly dressed”.

Throughout the call Arthur felt as if he had been wrapped in a furry blanket and given a teddy bear. It was a feeling he tried to describe to Merlin the next day but he found Merlin tired and uncommunicative on the phone and Arthur cut it short.

“I’m sorry” Merlin said. “I’m tired and it’s hard to talk. I’m glad you like my mum. I promise I’ll be better tomorrow”

Arthur’s heart ached at the thought that Merlin felt he needed to be better for Arthur.

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Despite his misgivings, Arthur was enjoying himself (though he felt guilty for it). His enjoyment was tempered by his sense that Merlin was not doing as well as he pretended. Merlin had told him that the doctors were pleased that he could wriggle toes and fingers and Arthur felt a wave of guilty relief as he spoke. He was glad for Merlin and for himself. But after that call Merlin did not seem to get any happier. It was growing harder and harder to talk to him and Arthur grieved at that.

Through their time together the phone had been their lifeline, holding them together and ensuring that no matter what they talked. The sound of Merlin’s voice was more familiar than his own, and it was painful to hear that voice, weak and lifeless, exchange platitudes without real meaning. Every phone call chipped Arthur’s heart a little more. He needed to get back but he had promised to fight on and the struggle was painful. They had always been apart but now it hurt much more.

After the laundry incident Arthur had taken to calling Mrs. Balinson every so often. She did not tell him more than Merlin but she filled him in on domestic things in the ward. It made Arthur feel he belonged there, that he had a part in Merlin’s life. In one call she reminded Arthur of Merlin’s birthday. He had not realised it was close, though he had bought Merlin’s gift – a game he had been longing for, some weeks before. Now the game seemed trivial and irrelevant.

Arthur wished he could give Merlin what he really wanted – to change things so that he had never gone into that alley, never crashed. That was impossible, he knew but he had seen enough Sci. Fi. to wish it were.

The gift had to be something that mattered to Merlin he decided, but he could not think what. He was sitting staring at the blank wall of a hotel room trying to come up with something suitable when his phone bleeped and flashed. Every call made Arthur nervous but it was only Elena, who checked up on him with as much proprietorial concern as Mrs. Balinson. He confided his present worries to her.

“I want to give him something he loves, but how would a surfboard or new leathers be of use where he is now?”

She gave an unladylike snort. “The problem is, you’re missing the point.” She said. “What he loves is you. You could turn up at his bedside with a bow on. You be his present”

“Did that once” Arthur said meditatively.

Elena squeaked. “Too much information little bro!” she cried – then after a moment’s reflection continued “Actually, No, carry on, tell me all”

Arthur laughed but didn’t tell her, instead saying, “I can’t go to Belfast. I promised him I’d keep up the campaign. And isn’t a bit arrogant to say ‘I’m your present?’”

“Works for me” Elena said “I’m a romantic, give me your heart and I don’t even need beans and Chianti.”

Arthur groaned. “Don’t ever tell Merlin you said that” he said, but as he thought about what she said an idea came to him. Something that would show Merlin what he meant to him.
“I know what to do” he said to Elena but despite her pleading refused to tell her.

“Merlin first” he said and she conceded.

“Just so you know, Next time I see you, you are getting a thump right after I hug you. I hate suspense!” she declared before ending the call.

Arthur fretted after he sent the key fob, wondering if Merlin would understand, but once he heard Merlin’s voice he knew he had. Merlin was himself again; tired, depressed, but Merlin and Arthur felt he could breathe again.

For later phone calls, Mrs. Balinson began to run interference with the nurses and real conversation was more possible. Merlin told him about his arm and Arthur spent a lonely and tearful night in front of his laptop, googling brachial plexus injuries, noting that they could be permanent, would be painful, and should be treated seriously. He understood why Merlin had been so bleak and as he researched through the night he shared Merlin’s loneliness. He wept that night, but the next day he was upbeat when he talked to Merlin, so much so that Merlin snapped at him.

“It’s all right you being so positive! It’s not your arm!”

“It is” Arthur said and before Merlin could get indignant, he went on “We’re an us which means you’re a me so yes it’s mine”

There was silence on the other end of the phone.

“That was completely crazy” Merlin said in a very patient tone. “Are you sure you’re not on the same drugs as me? And if it’s true – can I have your ears?”

Arthur sighed with relief. Merlin was definitely back.

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With the feeling from Belfast more positive Arthur was more confident in his campaigning. He went from TV photo-ops to country hall meetings and shook more hands than he knew existed and all without a drain of energy. When he got back to London he had a charity function to attend and he went eagerly, donning his dress suit and practicing his smile.

Arthur did the rounds, greeting and smiling and playing the politician, his trademark glass of water in his hand. As he circulated he saw his father in a corner of the room talking animatedly to a rather bored looking woman. He had known Uther was back in London and should have expected him to be here, since the charity was one Pendragon Enterprises supported. Still, his presence was a jolt.

Arthur had expected that the first time he saw his father again would cause the same emotional tsunami as when Uther had rejected him, but as he watched the familiar figure, he felt, ... nothing. It was as if in that terrible night in the hotel he had cried out a lifetime of grief and loneliness and there was nothing left. He watched the man who was his father with detachment.
When the currents of the reception brought them together Arthur was composed.

Uther nodded to him, in keeping with his word that he would be polite in public.

“Mrs. Hudson tells me you have fully moved out” he said.

Arthur inclined his head to indicate assent. “How is Mrs. Hudson?” Arthur asked. His father looked at him as though he had asked after the well-being of the piano. He did not answer.

“Do you intend on keeping up your ... relationship... with that...” Uther said abruptly.

Arthur gave a bitter laugh. “Merlin” he said quietly “Merlin is the most important relationship in my life.”

Uther started and glared at him. “I had hoped you would have reformed” he said with some heat. Arthur looked around but their conversation was not getting any attention.

“There is nothing to reform” Arthur said “I am...” he was about to continue when the bored looking lady bore down on them. Arthur muttered excuses and moved away to regain his composure.

Almost immediately he ran – literally – in to Michael Rovare. For a brief second Arthur channelled a complaint to the universe. Hadn’t he expressed his need for easy?

“Arthur” Michael Rovare said.

“Rovare” Arthur answered. He was not in the mood for a conversation, but knew he could not break away without notice.

“The sting didn’t take” Michael Rovare said as if he was discussing the winner of the village flower show. Arthur had to appreciate his technique.

“They are going ahead on Sunday – full spread” Michael Rovare continued. Arthur felt a cold chill solidify into a strong resolve. He had a deadline. He looked straight at Rovare.

“They?” he said.

“I do a job. We feed off each other, your kind and mine, but this time, I choose not be part of it”

“Why?”

Rovare gave him his full smile, beautiful and sincere. “You showed me it could be done” he said and allowed himself to drift in to another group. Arthur looked after him with puzzlement and a little sadness.

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Saturday was the night of the postponed debate. The BBC had declined to host the rescheduled date, presumably in a huffy attempt to show who was in charge. As a result Arthur found himself driving to his old college on the Saturday morning. The debating society had offered to host – ironically both he and Fraser had attended the same college and had both been member of the Deb Soc – though not at the same time. Arthur had a sense of his life coming full circle as he drove through the ancient streets. He had chosen politics and all that that meant, but he had been happy here, and it was fitting to be back.
He lunched with Professor Kilgharrah in his rooms. The Professor, who was still as enigmatic as always, welcomed him and Arthur relaxed in his company. After talk of language and University, Arthur, acting on impulse told him about Doonshee, and what it had led to. Kilgharrah was silent.

“I can’t say it is a complete surprise” was Kilgharrah’s measured response. “I admit to being surprised that you are still with this young man. Such consistency was not a feature of the student you were.”

“I’ve changed” Arthur said.

Kilgharrah stirred his tea methodically. “No, you’ve grown. I have seen it. You always had the potential to be more than Uther Pendragon’s son. Now you are stepping into that potential. It is an interesting progression”

Arthur was pensive. “It’s all due to Merlin” he said “If I’ve grown it’s because of him”

Kilgharrah shrugged. “You chose him” he said “That is to your credit.” He paused. “I would like to meet this man who made Arthur Pendragon mature”

Arthur stared at the fine carving of the doorframe. “He’s hurt” he said. “There was an acci...no” he shook his head and continued in a stronger voice “Someone hurt him – tried to kill him”

“For who he is?”

Arthur nodded “That’s his life” he said “Has been for years. Mocked, pointed at, insulted, attacked...”

“And you feel guilty because it is not yours” Kilgharrah said impassively. Arthur blushed.

“I should be with him” he said with force, deliberately ambiguous.

“Why aren’t you?” Kilgharrah dropped the words like stones.

Arthur stared at the table cloth “I have to... I have to finish this...” he said. “I promised. But... I...” Kilgharrah looked at him as he spoke. “You must do what you think is best”.
“I don’t know what is best!” Arthur stood and let all his despair and doubt fill him.

Kilgharrah did not react. “Well then, you must make the best of what you do” he said.

Arthur sighed and Kilgharrah changed his tone. “Now, sit down and finish lunch. There is Bakewell tart for pudding, it is quite good, and while we eat you can tell about your young man. Is he also interested in languages?”

Arthur sat and spoke about Merlin. He talked of Merlin’s love of the sea and how he tried to teach Arthur to surf. He used Merlin’s descriptions of the life of a paramedic and his dedication. As he spoke he felt closer to Merlin than he had felt since he left Belfast. At last he stopped with an embarrassed sigh.

“I’m sorry for rambling on” he said. “But it is good to talk about him”

Kilgharrah looked at him seriously. “I think you should be talking of him more often” he said firmly.

Arthur met his gaze. “I know. It’s time” he said.

The Professor nodded. “And when the dust has settled, bring your Merlin to tea. The dining room does a very good apple crumble on Tuesdays”

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The Hall was full, every centimetre covered with humanity. On the dais a podium stood and James Fraser and Arthur sat behind it. This was not a normal debate, with motion and opposition, instead, both speakers were given three minutes to outline their vision, with no interruptions. Only after both had spoken would questions be taken.

Fraser went first. He spoke well, of the need for identity, for ensuring that party policies were distinct and clear. Arthur had expected it.

When Arthur spoke he pushed his own idea of policy before party, ending simply.

“As some of you know, my partner was assaulted a little while ago, in an incident that is still under police investigation. As I sat by his bedside I had plenty of time to think about what makes this country great- and what doesn’t. I saw how his colleagues rallied round him, how the medical staff, worked together to deal with every crisis. That is what we do best - work together in crises, use the blitz spirit as you might say. But at other times we create crises by not working together. I want to hear all the voices – I want to open a debate that is not about scoring points but about building ideas, creating dreams that satisfy the many and not the vested interests while still allowing individuals to be themselves. That is my vision.”

Arthur sat down and waited.
Arthur stared at the ceiling of the professor’s spare room. It was a very uninteresting ceiling but he could not close his eyes. He felt – underwhelmed. When you dare disturb the universe you expect a little more than a few questions and a fire alarm. He knew the morning would bring the storm but – he felt lost.

He wanted to talk to Merlin but he knew that no ward nurse would take kindly to a phone call in the early hours. He had texted Merlin before the meeting starting – a simple text –

FROM ARTHUR
It’s time. Tonight.

It was only afterwards he remembered that Merlin did not have his phone. Arthur wondered where it was. Did his parents have it? Had it been shattered in the crash? Had it fallen unnoticed for some teenager to find as he took a short cut across the fields. Wherever it was, Merlin did not have it and Arthur could not contact him.

The ceiling said nothing.

Arthur stared at his phone. Without someone to call it was simply an expensive alarm and he resisted the urge to throw it. He scrolled through his contacts stopping at one name. Without thought he called.

Elena answered after a long number of rings.

“Someone better be dying” she growled and then her tone changed “Bloody hell! Arthur? He’s not... it’s not...”

“Merlin’s okay” Arthur said, already regretting ringing. “I’m sorry, I’ll let you sleep”

“Fuck that, Arthur, you’re ringing me at three in the morning, you need to talk. What’s up”

Arthur was tongue tied. What to say?


“Oh. Kay” Elena said in a measured tone “Did you mean to?”

“Yes” Arthur regained his confidence “Yes. It’s time” He knew he sounded defiant. “It’s just I...” He could not finish because he did not know how he felt.

Elena took control. “Right, so, give me details. Every moment, play by play”
So he told her. He did not describe the feeling of relief he had when he sat down. He felt that the other shoe had fallen, Damocles’ thread had been cut, there was nothing left to lose. So he was utterly perplexed when his speech drew the usual polite applause and the first questioner asked Fraser about his position on the EU. The second question puzzled him even more – a solidly dull question on fiscal policy. He wondered had the universe slipped in to another dimension, or had he imagined what he said.

He started when the next question was directed at him.

“Mr. Pendragon” the young woman asked “Do you stand over everything you have said tonight?” It was an innocuous question but Arthur took it seriously.


“Thank you” said the young woman with a meaningful nod, before sitting down.

The questions continued without any controversy, and with their normality, Arthur’s sense of unreality grew. The closest any one got to the point was an obviously pre-prepared question put to Fraser on marriage equality. Arthur already knew his views so he was not surprised when Fraser denied any desire to discriminate but said he believed that marriage was between a man and woman. Fraser added;

“I do think it’s important not to change the law for every media fad that comes up. I mean this issue causes a great deal of upset and given the lifestyle choices involved probably wouldn’t be needed anyway”

Arthur closed his eyes briefly. He was beginning to suspect that Fraser had not been listening closely to Arthur’s speech. Judging by the very quiet but distinct murmur in the hall, others felt the same. Fraser opened his mouth to say more but was interrupted by a thin wailing that indicated the fire alarm had gone off. The debate organisers called on everyone to exit (“Walk don’t run)” and Arthur joined the groups of people milling about outside.

In the crowd the young woman who had first questioned him approached.

“Can I take it you would have different views?” she asked pointedly.

“On equality?” Arthur asked. “Equality just is. There are no categories, equal in dignity and rights without distinction of any kind”

“I believe you’re quoting” the girl said with a smile.

“I believe I am” Arthur said and she merged back into the crowd. It was the only time in the whole night that he felt a connection. He started as he felt a touch on his shoulder and turned abruptly. It was the professor.

“Come on” the professor said. “They won’t resume the meeting. I’ve had your bags brought to my rooms. You’ll stay in the spare room.”
Arthur had arranged for a room for the night but didn’t argue. If this was how the universe wanted
to play it he would go along for the ride.

+++++
“So” said Elena when he had finished recounting the non events of the evening. “You rang me at ,
yup, 3.20 am, to tell me nothing much happened.” She didn’t allow him to answer. “You’re lucky I
adopted you or I’d kill you for that. I may still kill you. Hang on! Did you say they were students?”

Arthur nodded, then realised she couldn’t see him. “It’s a college Elena. There are students” he
said trying (and failing) not to sound sarcastic.

“No shit? Really?” Elena responded in kind “but just wait I...” There was the sound of thumps and
bumps “OW! FUCK” Arthur heard, then “Shit, sorry, hair brush, now just a moment for...
seriously this is sooo slow....OHHHH!”

By now Arthur was completely confused.

“Arthur, you’re trending. Seriously, you’re trending three ways.”

Arthur made an inarticulate ‘huh’ sound.

“Twitter, Sweetie.” Elena said. “They’re students. They weren’t talking because they were all on
their phones tweeting. You can safely say your cat is out of the bag and running amok with the
pigeons.

Arthur made another sound – more ‘Ugh’ this time.

“You know, for a young guy, you’re very middle aged.” Elena commented. “You need to stay in
more and get to know your technology. Anyhoo, do you want to know what they’re saying?”

Arthur didn’t but what came out was a ‘yuh’ sound. Single non verbal syllables seemed to be all he
could produce.

“Well, you’re trending under #ArthurPendragon, #Pendragongay and #Ilovearthur. I like the last
one, don’t you? You can talk you know, speech defines us as human...”

“Duh” said Arthur.

+++++
It was 4.30 when the call finally ended, Elena declaring that she had to be in work in three hours
and it would take that long to make her look respectable after her night of computer shenanigans.

Arthur stared at the ceiling again. He didn’t want to look for himself, read for himself, and he
suspected that Elena read out mostly the positive tweets but his sense of futility had been replaced
by a sense of purpose and he could breathe again.
At a more respectable hour of the morning he finally got to call Merlin. Merlin sounded tired and he made few interjections as Arthur told his story.

“Does this mean you’ll kiss me when you come back?” he asked at the end of the tale.

“I’ll always kiss you” Arthur said with a smile.

“Good. I like kisses.” Merlin’s voice was very low and Arthur was conscious of the effort he was making.

“You sleep for a bit” Arthur ordered. “You need your rest”

“Yes” Merlin said “I am so tired” he took a breath and then spoke again. “I’m sorry Arthur. We planned that I’d be beside you” he stopped as if running out of air.

“You are” Arthur said firmly “And in one week I will be beside you”

“Good” Merlin said and Arthur knew he was smiling. “Miss you.

“Soon” said Arthur and Merlin sighed again.

“Sleepy” he said slurring the word.

Arthur felt uneasy after the phone call but he pushed it aside. Professor Kilgharrah called him to breakfast and insisted Arthur ate while he went out for a walk. Despite his tension Arthur did so and found that bacon and eggs had never tasted so good. The professor returned with all of the Sunday papers; a feat not to be sneezed at. Arthur was impressed. Carrying that lot was an achievement worthy of a weight lifter not a humble linguistics professor.

But he feared that what was in the papers would be heavier. He kept eating, mechanically chewing, reaching for another slice of toast and buttering it slowly. He really did not want to know.

Finally, “So, what’s the verdict?” he said to the professor who had disappeared in a tent of newsprint.

“Not bad at all. It seems the lions do not yet know how to eat you” Kilgharrah replied. “They are very restrained and a little bit cautious. Probably didn’t have time to digest it. Most parts of Sunday papers are printed in advance so they didn’t have time to go big. Except for...”. He held up one paper, Aredin’s pet project, the Sunday Yell.


Kilgharrah held up the paper. The story was not on the front page, what was a teaser: “INSIDE! PENDRAGON’S SECRET GAY LOVER. Pages 4, 5, 8,10. Arthur opened the paper. It showed grainy pictures of his meeting with Calum in Paris. It also included details of his travels, including Paris, Dublin and the brief trip to Australia. It even had pictures of Calum partying in Dublin,
proving once and for all that he was not paranoid about stalking photographers. Even though none of the pictures were in any way explicit, the accompanying text managed to create a thoroughly unpleasant image. Arthur sighed. This was going to be difficult to deal with.

“Is that your Merlin?” the professor asked.

Arthur shook his head. “But if I say he’s only a friend it will sound sleazy” he said.

“Doesn’t matter what the truth sounds like, as long as it is the truth” was Kilgharrah’s laconic response and Arthur wanted to shout at him that that was all very well in academia, but in the world of sound bites what things sounded like really mattered.

Looking at the photos and the article again Arthur felt a rush of irrational anger that it was about Calum not Merlin.

Of course Calum would be noticed. Handsome flamboyant Calum, at the heart of every party – he would always get attention. It was crazy to resent Calum for being stalked, but it seemed that no one but Arthur saw the gold that was Merlin. Merlin was always in the shadows, and though Arthur knew that Merlin never wanted centre stage, he should at least be on the stage. Merlin was not Middling to him. And no, he did not want Merlin to be exposed to the scrutiny of the gutter press, but... He crumpled the paper in frustration at his own illogical emotions.

He took a minute to control himself and sat down to read every article about him in every paper. It took him some time and at the end he was surprised at how not-negative they were. All of the articles were small: tucked away as a side bar. The most negative was a headline

PENDRAGON ADMITS TO SAME SEX RELATIONSHIP IN SPEECH.

Some were neutral. REFERENCE TO PARTNER IN COLLEGE SPEECH

The one he liked best said: DEBATE CUT SHORT BY FIRE ALARM.

The professor was looking at his expression when he finally looked up.
“I thought it would be worse. I thought... but I suppose I’m not that important.” He was a little shocked to notice that he sounded slightly petulant.

The professor gave a sound that was a cross between a harrumph and a laugh

“You thought the sky would fall and the world would end, did you not?” He said “I told you, they haven’t decided how to spin it. They are waiting for you to make the next move. It’s highly unusual to wrongfoot the media hacks. But then you have never been usual have you Arthur?”

Arthur reflected that from anyone else that could be taken as a slur, but from the professor it was a definite compliment. He took out his phone and drew on his courage to turn it on. After his protracted conversation with Elena he had turned it off to dodge news, good or bad, now he knew he had to face it.

Sure enough there were a string of texts and missed calls, mostly from numbers he did not recognise. He scrolled down to find the earliest he did know. It was Lionel.

FROM LIONEL
Early papers not too bad

FROM LIONEL
Oh god the Yell.

FROM LIONEL
The pictures are not. Call me

FROM LIONEL
Call me now.

With a sudden jolt Arthur realised that Lionel feared he had been lying about Merlin, about their relationship. He would have to call, after he checked the rest of his messages. He scrolled again. There was one from Calum

FROM CALUM
YouTube link
FROM ELENA
You Tube link
Watch it.

FROM ELLIOT
You Tube link
Did you know about this?

FROM LIONEL
You Tube link.
I’m not sure if this helps.

FROM LIONEL
It helps me.

Arthur clicked on the link and to his surprise he saw Calum. The video had obviously not been put together in a hurry, it was carefully crafted, but still amateur enough to make it real. Arthur did not recognise the background but it looked like a living room. There was music in the background, a melody Arthur knew but could not place, but much more immediate was a beat from someone off screen. Then Calum started to rap. He was not the most skilled, but what he lacked in virtuosity he made up for in passion and words. The gist of his rap was the stupidity of gossip papers in general and the Yell in particular. And then he started to sing. Again not the greatest voice but he had made his own lyrics to the now speeded up but recognisable song. “I’m not that guy” Calum warbled before going back to his rap. It was, to use a cliché, so bad it was good.

The whole video was only a few minutes long but by the end Arthur was laughing. Judging by the hits count, others also found it funny. Arthur realised it would never win favour among the more sedate party members but it was a good answer to the Yell’s spread. Arthur wouldn’t have to say a thing – it had all been done for him. With a musical cherry on top.

He turned off his phone again and looked at Kilgharrah.

“I have to back to London” he said.

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The motto for the rest of the week was business as usual. Arthur did not intend to take on any interviews that he had not already agreed to. He found it easier than he thought. He cultivated two looks – one: the open eyed ‘who me’ look and the other the blank faced neutral look that had served him well in school, especially during the stink-bomb-in-the-staff-lavatory-incident in D block, year 11.
The first worked well when a journalist asked if he expected the revelations of the weekend would change how he was welcomed through the country. Arthur looked at the man and asked; Why? He was proud of himself that his tone was puzzled and curious rather than defiant. The journalist fumbled with his response and though Arthur knew his answer made him look like an idiot, the journalist also looked silly so it could be counted as a nil all draw.

The second he used in a Newsnight interview.

The presenter was getting frustrated at Arthur’s insistence on talking about issues and not himself. “Can you honestly say that you don’t believe your sexuality does affect politics? he asked aggressively.

Arthur gave him the blank look. “I can honestly say that it does not affect my politics. I can’t speak about how orientation affects the decisions of others ” he said. The presenter spluttered and Arthur inwardly rejoiced. Another draw.

Only once did a reporter break his mask. It was a young reporter from a local paper and her question was innocuous. “How is your partner recovering?” she asked and Arthur felt his composure slip.

For the truth was, he did not know for sure. Merlin always sounded tired: once when he rang the nurse reported that he was in x-ray. She refused to give him more details; he was not next of kin and that hurt. Mrs. Balinson was not her usual chatty self. She told him that Merlin was fine and praised Arthur for how he was doing but it all seemed... Fake. Arthur worried but when he protested Mrs. Balinson simply reminded him that he would be there next week and he had work to do. Arthur hated it. There were times, particularly at three in the morning when he simply wanted to run to Belfast but loyalty kept him in place. He had created the storm, he had to weather it.

One part of the storm was neutralised early on. On the Monday, The Daily Yell tried to continue the story its sister paper had begun. But many of its rivals had chosen to publicise Calum’s YouTube clip and the Yell just looked ridiculous. One intrepid reporter even tracked Calum down and got a brief interview, which played on TV and then went viral on the Internet again.

“Are you going to sue for defamation?” the brave reporter asked Calum.

“For what?” was the reply “Look, I never studied Law – that was my sister, seriously, she’s been talking nonstop – but anyway, defamation means they damaged my character. Now it seems to me that the only part of saying that a good looking, powerful, rich guy has the hots for me that damages my character is the part that it’s not true. And you do not what to hear what my girlfriend suggested.” There was a giggle off screen.
“Shut up, you did!” Calum said “I might” he went on emphatically “go after them for invading my privacy, damaging property, personal injury... but not defamation. And seriously guys, I appreciate that you knocked at the door like decent civilised people but would you mind fecking off now because the neighbours are getting worried.”

Arthur thought Calum would do a much better job of handling the media than he did. Judging from YouTube hits, Calum would probably get elected as ruler of the world. Arthur would vote for him.

On the whole Arthur did not think his political career would survive but it would make a pretty corpse which was more than he had expected.

Then he heard a squawk which meant there was a message on his ‘Merlin’ phone. His main phone was off most of the time to avoid media intrusion. Those he wanted to contact knew to leave a message. Only Merlin had the other number.

-Come at once

The message glared balefully on the screen.

Chapter End Notes

I got stuck for two days on one line of this chapter - then I applied my rule: if it's hard to write then it didn't happen so I cut the scene and wrote the rest, only to find it had a hole in it because although my cut scene didn't happen something did and I had to go back and rewrite.

So, yeah, this is what happened. I may not have described it well.

(This one was supposed to be easy darn it!)
Mrs. Balinson sat staring at the health promoting posters on the wall opposite her. Her hand was clutched in that of her husband. He was her rock she thought, as she was his. Throughout all the troubles in their lives, they had held on to each other, just as they did now. On that Sunday that had changed their lives they had drawn strength from each other – and it had been enough to allow them to claim their son as theirs in the face of everything they had ever been taught. Together they had grieved to watch that mischievous, gregarious son turn in on himself, become wary of strangers, wary even of family. They had held hands as they drove to the hospital that night only a few weeks ago. And here they were again, waiting.

She had noticed the slight hesitation in Merlin’s breathing a few days before and it had bothered her.

“It’s just a wee cough” Merlin said but the doctors put on concerned faces and prescribed antibiotics. Later, they looked even more concerned and spoke of pneumonia.

“It can happen after the use of a ventilator. But he’s strong, we’ll get him through this” they’d said. She worried.

Merlin fretted as both the illness and the medication made him weak. “Promise me you won’t tell Arthur” he insisted. “If you say anything he’ll coming rushing back and I don’t want that. He has to finish it or he’ll feel guilty for the rest of his life Please, promise me”

At that moment she resented Arthur for causing Merlin to worry when he was so weak but her husband’s touch reminded her that love gave as well as took and both of them promised.

Merlin had lain back, exhausted by the effort of speaking. From then on he kept all his energy for his phone calls with Arthur but Mrs. Balinson felt he was not fully convincing and that Arthur suspected. She tried to avoid talking to Arthur. She never broke her word but she would not lie.

But Merlin was getting better – a mother’s eye could see the tiny improvements. Then one morning, when she came in, Merlin was crying. Merlin did sometimes cry when he thought himself alone and no one could see and the nurses, with kind discretion gave him privacy and asked no questions, but this time she sensed something else.

“What’s wrong son” she’d asked softy.

Merlin sobbed, “It hurts Mum. It hurts so bad.” He tried to grope at his leg with his one moveable arm, still in a cast. Mrs. Balinson called the doctors, whose concerned faces became worried as they poked and asked questions. Merlin was whisked off for a scan and she could hear one of the
nurses fielding a call from Arthur. She felt like a traitor to him for not grabbing the phone and demanding he come but she could not betray Merlin’s wishes, remembering his pale face tense with pain as she saw him wheeled away.

And so they were here, in the waiting room, watching posters of the food pyramid and chubby babies thrilled to be vaccinated. The scan was inconclusive but there were indications of infection. The doctors, with faces even more worried, prescribed more antibiotics but as Merlin writhed in pain they shook their collective heads and decided they would need to open up his leg again.

“If we’re lucky the infection is only in the soft tissue” they explained. Their faces said they did not believe in luck. “If it’s in the bone we will have to get more aggressive with the treatment”

Mrs. Balinson clung to her husband’s hand and tried not to think of aggressive treatment.

The door opened and both of them looked up sharply, but it was not a doctor, rather Kenny, carrying two steaming cups, which he handed to them.

“Still no news?” he asked. Mrs. Balinson shook her head.

“How did you know” she asked.

Kenny looked a little awkward, as if revealing secret knowledge.

“Well,” he said “it seems one of the nurses is best friends with the cousin of Holly’s falla’s sister”

Mr. Balinson barked a laugh. “Good to know the grapevine is working” he said without malice.

Kenny didn’t know what to make of Mr. Balinson. He respected the man, true enough, but he was never quite sure why. Balinson worked with a pen, had never had any part in any actions in the Troubles. He appeared mild mannered and quiet and yet Kenny felt there was steel beneath it all. Kenny walked to the window and looked out at the blank darkness.

“So where’s the poncey English guy then” he asked.

Mrs. Balinson sniffed and Kenny felt guilty. Had the posh git run off at the first sign of trouble?

“He’ll be here next week” Balinson said coolly.

“Merlin doesn’t want him disturbed” Mrs. Balinson added.

The door opened suddenly to the chief surgeon. Kenny shifted to a corner of the room but Balinson indicated that he should stay. Kenny zoned out much of what the doctor said. He hated hospital and doctors. Apart from his own brush with mortality, he remembered their words when his wife was ill. All the ‘hopefully’ and ‘if/then’ that they put into everything to make it sound less deadly.
He gathered that it was wait and see time – another favourite phrase of doctors. Mrs. Balinson was crying and Kenny slipped out, getting a nod of acknowledgement from Balinson.

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As he made his way to his car Kenny thought of the blond Englishman who had promised to stick by Merlin. Kenny would have punched him if he had let Merlin down but it seemed unfair that he didn’t even get the chance to do that. The thing about Merlin was that he was all about looking after other people, which was all very well, but what if the other people didn’t want to be looked after?

Kenny sat in his car and thought about it. The thing about Merlin – the real thing about Merlin was that you couldn’t help liking the kid. He was just so ... nice... and not in a net curtains and pinky holding a teacup kind of way. No Merlin was more a -do an extra hour of a shift because Holly was tired - or - buy bacon rolls for the drivers who came off a shift - nice. But he didn’t see that. That was the thing about Merlin.

The thing about Merlin was that he reminded Kenny of a dog he had as a wee boy. He had been a whippet or a lurcher or some such breed and young Kenny had taken him in off the streets and kept him, and God! How he loved that wee dog. But despite never having a hand lifted to him by Kenny, he still had a look in his eye that expected to be hurt every time an arm came near him. And when the hand petted him and pulled his ear and scratched his head he would wag his tail with so much gratitude that it broke Kenny’s heart.

And that was the thing about Merlin. Merlin expected to be hurt and was surprised and grateful when he wasn’t. And as far as Kenny was concerned, that did not lead to good decision making.

Merlin didn’t talk about his boyfriend to Kenny ( and Kenny still had issues thinking the word) but he did talk a little to Holly and Kenny could see how much he meant to the boy, and, despite being a English ponce, Merlin’s Arthur seemed to feel the same.

Because the thing about Merlin was that he understood love. And Kenny could understand that in the boy.

But the thing about Merlin was that he wasn’t a boy anymore, he was a man, a man who had stood up to Kenny over that being a snitch thing – and not many men stood up to Kenny. But Merlin hadn’t shouted or threatened or pleaded, he had just gone and done his own thing. And he took the consequences.

And that was what Kenny was going to do.

Kenny went home and rooted through the pockets of his parka. He had not worn it since Merlin’s crash and it still had blood stains where he had wiped his hands. But in his pocket were the remains of a phone. He had dropped his own after he had called the ambulance and when he had reached for it in the dark he had found broken pieces which he scooped up into his pocket. His own phone had shown up in a puddle to the side of the alley and in the fuss of replacing it Kenny had forgotten the other. He took it out now. It was obviously completely destroyed as a phone but he carefully took out the sim card and, after ensuring it was dry put it in his own.
A quick check of the contacts proved it was Merlin’s phone. He saw his own name, and Holly’s and others he knew from Merlin’s chat. But he did not see the name Arthur. He scrolled down twice to check but did not find it. He was wondering why when the phone burped and delivered texts sent since it died. He recognised some of the names; Calum, Elena, he had heard Merlin speak of. Others he did not know. One name had sent a series of texts the night of the crash but only one since, “It’s time. Tonight”. Kenny thought it sounded a bit dodgy but the name it was under: Doonshee, rang a bell. He took a chance.

To DOONSHEE
Come at once.

It took a few minutes before a reply came.

From DOONSHEE
Merlin?

Kenny pressed call.

That night he met Arthur at the airport.

+++++

Mrs. Balinson sat staring at the health promoting posters on the wall opposite her. Her hand was clutched in that of her husband as she thought of her son. She added a new word to her vocabulary. Osteomyelitius. Infection of the bone. She really was working on her medical terms. They had taken out the plate in Merlin’s leg, cleaned it, packed him full of antibiotics and replaced it. He was in recovery they said. The surgery had gone well. The prognosis was good. It all sounded so very... clinical, which was very appropriate but did not comfort her.

The door opened and Arthur stormed in like a Norse god in an elegant suit. There was a moment of mutual staring until Mr. Balinson rose and said with a sigh, “I’m glad you’re here son” and led Arthur to a seat.

Arthur had been full of recriminations at how they had not told him but when he saw the faces before him, the strain in their eyes he felt nothing but pity and fear.

Afterwards when they had told him all, the fear grew. He was not angry with them for not telling him, in truth, all he could have done was sit in this arid room waiting with them. But he resolved never be in a position of not being told again.

An hour or so later a nurse came and said Merlin had been moved from Recovery to CCU. He was still asleep but one visitor would be allowed.
Mrs. Balinson stood up and tottered to the door on sleep deprived legs, but then turned and looked at Arthur.

“I think you should be the one” she said. Arthur looked at her tired face and shadowed eyes and somehow understood what she was giving him. He stood for a moment beside her and she gently touched his cheek.

“I’m glad you’re here too” she said before going back over to the plastic chair beside her husband and reaching blindly for his hand.

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“You’re an idiot” Arthur said conversationally as he entered Merlin’s room and sat down. As before the beep beep of the various monitors provided an accompaniment to everything he said. The still form on the bed did not move.

“You’re an idiot for thinking that there is anything in the world more important than you” he went on.

“But you’ve always thought that, no matter what I say or do and that makes you an idiot” Arthur looked at his hands, illuminated by the glow of LED displays.

He spoke again “Because you are the most important thing in my world and yes that makes me sound like a cheesy romance novel but that’s my direst secret, I’m a closet romantic” he paused and took a breath “It’s starting to build, love. That lull was deceptive, The knives are out, in the party at least and I won’t have a career when they are done.” He looked at the bed. “And the truth is, I don’t mind. I really don’t. For so long it was all I wanted, my goal and even after I met you it still was but now... You know you once said I studied languages because my father didn’t and lately I’ve been wondering if I didn’t want politics because it wasn’t business, it was a game that was bigger than my father’ game ... I don’t know if that is why but .... maybe that’s why it doesn’t hurt that much ...” He looked across at the bed.

“Elena said I was middle aged and I don’t know if I am but I want to be... I want... I want to sit at breakfast with you and squabble about whose turn it was to get the milk. I want to have lazy evening in, sharing pizza and beer and watching re-runs of Morse.... okay maybe not Morse but you have to admit it’s a very nice car. I want to share Doonshee with you and pore over plans and argue about where the light sockets should go. I want to share out all those jobs your mum keeps telling me that have to be done...” He paused.

“Except ironing. I don’t like ironing – that can be your job and I want to fight you about it. I want to make the Ordinary ordinary for me. It never has been you know. I didn’t notice before I met you – I thought my life was normal because it was all I knew. But now, I want ordinary and I know that is so selfish of me but... I want”

Arthur’s voice was low but quick, speeding up as he spoke, words running from words in a race to escape, he knew he was babbling but could not stop himself – he had to say this.

“There’s a dream I’ve been having for a long time now – a nightmare really. In the dream I don’t turn back on the beach in Doonshee, I go back to London but it’s strange, because in the dream I’m watching and see what happens to Other-Me and he goes on and does what I did and I watch as his career grows and he marries. But it’s strange because she does not have a face that I can see, just a
presence and they have two children and the children are faceless too and all the time I can feel what other me feels and he’s hollow, just Hollow. And then the dream becomes more real. It’s the one part in colour.”

He drew a breath.

“Other-Me is at a party – a political gathering with lots of mingling and I’ve been to so many and I can see every detail, every smile, every head shake and it is so familiar. And Other-Me is there with faceless wife and they smile at everyone and he’s still hollow and though I do not see her smile I know her smile is fake.”

Another breath, which sounded like a low sob

“And then you are there, in your suit. You know, The Suit. It even has the tiny mark from where you snagged it on a chair at the wedding and Other-Me sees you. And you go over and you smile and your smile is not fake; it is your smile, your real smile and you are introduced to Other-Me and you say that you’ve already met and Other-Me puts on the fake smile and says “Ah yes, it’s Marvin, isn’t it” and you correct him and your smile has changed and it’s the one that hides when you’ve been hurt and I want to scream as you turn away because I can feel Other-Me’s emotions and he is so full of pain and longing and hurt and you move out of sight and faceless wife asks “who was that” and Other-Me just says “Someone I used to know” and he’s so hollow and I wake with my face covered with tears and I have to check that you are in my life, that I am not that Me...that I do not have that hollow life”

Arthur stopped, the horror of his recurring dream returning to him with the telling of it. He stared at the still figure that was his comfort and shuddered at the fragility of that comfort.

He controlled his voice and spoke in a low but firm tone.

“Never doubt that having you in my life is immeasurably the best part of it, and knowing that you are is my greatest triumph.”

There was a movement on the bed.

“Whachoosay?” a weak voice mumbled.

Arthur moved so that he could be seen by Merlin.

“I think I was saying I love you” he said softly.

“Good” said Merlin a little more strongly “Me too, you”

Arthur laughed. “Merlin, your grammar is atrocious” It was an ongoing joke between them.

Merlin smiled “Grammar nazi” he said and huffed a tiny laugh which ended in a cough. His expression changed, becoming frustrated, and Arthur noticed the arm in a cast moving slightly. He realised Merlin was reaching for him and gently put his hand on Merlin’s pulse point.

“I’m here” he said

Merlin sighed. “Us” he said tiredly “no words”

Arthur nodded. “Yes, we don’t need words” he agreed.

Merlin eyes fluttered. “Don’t wan’ sleep” he murmured “Wan’see you”
“I’m not going anywhere” Arthur whispered. “I’m staying right here”

Merlin closed his eyes and slept. Arthur sat down again. He would be there when Merlin woke.

Chapter End Notes

Arthur's dream was the genesis of this behemoth - a short story about a successful politician meeting up with a man he'd had an intense relationship with years before and brushing him off while breaking his own heart.

That led to sketching out the scene on the beach in what became ch 5 which led to the preceding chapters telling how they got there - but then Arthur insisted on turning back and their lives (and mine) got complicated. Hopefully I will get the rest in one chapter. If they behave.
1.

EXTRACT FROM BBC REPORT ON THE LEADERSHIP BALLOT..

The results of yesterday’s ballot show James Fraser has won the leadership contest by a margin of 52% to 48% after a campaign marked by Arthur Pendragon’s revelation that he has been in a same-sex relationship for a number of years. How this influenced the final result is unknown but the closeness of the figures indicates.....

2

LETTER FORWARDED TO ARTHUR PENDRAGON BY LIONAL SHEVLIN

Dear Mr. Pendragon.

I don’t know if you remember me but you rescued me from a rock in Doonshee and broke your leg. I guess I should have said sorry before this but anyway, sorry.

I wasn’t going to jump from the rock, but I know I really didn’t care if I fell. That summer was the worst in my life up until then and I really didn’t see the point in going on. I know you saw I had a crush on Merlin Balinson. He was my first crush on a real person and not someone I saw on TV and I hated myself for it.

You guys were so brave and strong that night – like heroes in a movie and then I saw you kiss and it felt like the last piece of me fell into place and I was okay. I wasn’t even jealous.

I never told you that or said thank you but I guess it changed how I felt about myself so you really did save my life in more than one way.

I saw the reports of your speech and I really liked it and you said your partner was hurt. I don’t know if you are still with Merlin but if you are and he was hurt I hope he’s okay. I haven’t seen him since that night but I guess I’ll always have a crush on him.

My boyfriend and I held hands today. It doesn’t sound like a big thing but it was the first time we held hands in public and it was scary but not as scary as your speech must have been. But you have been through the waterfall and survived. And I suppose I have too.

Anyway, thanks for saving my life in loads of ways and I hope everything works out for you and if you do still know Merlin tell him I was asking for him.

Thomas Higgins
3.

HEADLINE FROM THE DAILY YELL

“PENDRAGOFF: CONSTITUENCY PARTY DITCHES GAY MP”

4.

EXTRACT FROM LETTER SENT TO ARTHUR PENDRAGON FROM CONSTITUENCY OFFICE.

‘At an Emergency General Meeting of the Association, a vote of no confidence in you as Member of Parliament was passed.

Consequently this Association will not be endorsing your candidature in the next General Election....’

5.

STATEMENT FROM ARTHUR PENDRAGON

I note with concern the vote of no confidence in me passed by my constituency association. Although elected by voters of all parties, I cannot in conscience continue to represent an Association which has declared no confidence in my abilities. Consequently I have spoken to the Chancellor and have signalled my intention to resign my seat, effective immediately. I will not be contesting the ensuing by-election and I wish my successor well.

6.

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH ARTHUR PENDRAGON

Q. Does your personal life have anything to do with your decision?

A.
I have stated the reason for my decision to leave politics at this time. I will admit that I am looking forward to having time to spend with those I love. My life has been very busy over the last few years and my work life balance may need adjusting.

Q. Was your sexuality the reason for the vote of no confidence?

A.
I wasn’t there, I know nothing about the discussion they had. The letter I received was the same as your information and no one has approached me personally. I make no assumptions. I am the same man I was a month ago, I have the same policies, propose the same positions. I have not changed.

Q. Is this the end of your political career?

A.
I do not rule out a return to the political arena, in time, should I be asked.

End of press conference.
7.
EXTRACT OF ARTICLE FROM LOCAL CHRONICLE

ASSOCIATION IN DISARRAY

The local party Association is in disarray tonight as prominent members resigned after a fraught meeting held in the Duck and Quail. Clarissa Williams led a walkout of members protesting at the emergency meeting which had led to the resignation of sitting MP Arthur Pendragon. In a statement Mrs. Williams declared that she had lost confidence in the leadership of the Association and would be resigning her party membership....

8.
EMAIL FROM CALUM KAVANAGH TO MERLIN BALINSON (forwarded by Arthur Pendragon)

You won’t believe this but I’m after getting a job out of the YouTube thing. Seems someone thinks I’d be good at promoting things. Who knew? Job is in London tho and Lydia is mad. This long distance thing worked for you guys, yes?

9.
HEADLINE IN DAILY YELL

GOV LOSE SAFE SEAT

The government party turned a healthy majority into a major defeat in the first by-election of Fraser’s term of office. The seat vacated by Arthur Pendragon after his spectacular Outing by your Yell, went to the Opposition with a majority 30%. With a low turnout the ....

10.
EXTRACT FROM LETTER FROM CLARISSA WILLIAMS TO ARTHUR PENDRAGON.

As you saw the idiots lost the seat. They put up Mark Armstrong who made a hames of the campaign. Mind you, he did not have me to help so that may have been an issue. Jack Morris who won it is a characterless worm who wouldn’t have won a raffle if people hadn’t been angry so...

11.
PICTURE ON THE MANTELPIECE OF MR AND MRS. BALINSON.

Merlin, seated on a couch, his leg on a footstool in front of him. It is garnished with tinsel. He is slumped against Arthur who has his arm wrapped around Merlin. Arthur has a paper hat over one ear and half covering his eyes. He is wearing a Christmas jumper with a reindeer just visible beneath Merlin’s head. Both are asleep. The photograph is inscribed “My Boys”

12.

EXTRACT FROM EMAIL SENT BY ARTHUR PENDRAGON TO GWEN DULAC
Yes, Merlin is back in the hospital. They only let him out for Christmas. He is pretty depressed I think. The doctors want more surgery to see if they can improve the feeling in his arm. Merlin is set against it and I don’t know if that is because of the infection thing – and I don’t blame him, that was a nightmare, but I’m afraid that he has just given up – that he’s convinced nothing will help. I don’t know what to say to him. He has been hurt so much...

13.

LETTER FROM SOLICITOR TO ARTHUR PENDRAGON

I can confirm that the Trust fund set up by your father for you when you were seventeen is yours entirely and without prejudice.

The fund is substantial and would provide a yearly income which, though not extravagant, could be called comfortable. (See enclosed accounts) ....

14

EXTRACT OF EMAIL FROM PROFESSOR KILGHARRAH TO ARTHUR PENDRAGON

Yes I do think it is a good course, though it will be a new departure for you and you may find that rather more challenging than you imagine. It will take discipline Arthur, and though I have every confidence that you will not shirk a task once it has begun, I do hope you do not find it too onerous on top of your other responsibilities. ....

15.

EXTRACT OF LETTER FROM ERIC BALINSON TO Uther PENDRAGON

I am not going to say you don’t know me but. I am quite sure a man of your connections has learned everything you can about my son and his family. I have the advantage though, I have come to know and admire your son. You have not had the privilege of knowing mine. That can be remedied. Arthur is a fine young man, honourable and decent and you can be proud of your part in his rearing. I am proud of my son and I am glad he has found a life partner who is worthy of him.

Arthur has not told me what passed between you two but I know the estrangement hurts him. I can sympathise with you. My upbringing was not such that made it easy to accept my son. But I realised that my son is and always has been good. He is not evil or wrong in any way no matter what I was told in my youth. I hope that you can overcome the prejudices of our era and see again the goodness that is your son.

To that end I wish to tell you...

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Reactions
When Arthur got the letter from the constituency association his first instinct was to head straight there and beat them all to a pulp. His second instinct was to punch something else, which he did. Luckily he was at the Balinson’s at the time and the sofa could take it.

Arthur was hurt on many levels. Firstly his pride: if he were honest, mostly his pride. Arthur was used to being a success. He had a successful father, he was a successful student, he became a successful politician. He was popular, in demand. Failure- exclusion had never happened to him. To be a pariah hurt more than he could say.

But he had considered these people, well maybe not friends, but certainly friendly colleagues. He had worked with them, socialised with them, had bonded over cheap cava and simple canapés at innumerable fundraisers. They knew him but they had still rejected him. The betrayal was painful.

And with that came the knowledge that this was it, this was his life. This was what he could expect from now on. Arthur put his head in hands. He had sought this out. This was the life Merlin had lived – that he had wanted to share. Now the reality bit him and he felt every part of it.

The front door opened and he heard Mr. Balinson enter. As before, they were taking shifts in the hospital and he was just back from his time.

“Arthur?” Mr Balinson said quietly. Had Arthur been in bed asleep he would not have heard.

“Here” he said

Mr. Balinson entered the room, looking worn and tired. Arthur looked at him with a question.

“No change” Balinson said. “But that is good. The doctors are happy”

Arthur nodded. It was good. Merlin was heavily sedated but the constant monitoring showed that the infection was being successfully fought. Merlin was recovering. But he was asleep.

Arthur sighed. He needed Merlin right now.

“Are you alright Son?” Balinson’s voice was almost startling in its revelation that Arthur was not alone. He considered for a moment and then, without a word he handed the letter to Mr. Balinson, who read it impassively.

Mr. Balinson looked at him over the letter. “What do you want to do?” he asked.

Arthur drew a long breath. “I don’t know” he said. “I don’t know what to do for the best”

“That’s not what I asked” Balinson said patiently “What do you want?”

Arthur didn’t know – now that the impulse to punch something had died down. He didn’t know what he wanted to do.

“I think you need a cup of tea” Balinson interjected. “And I suspect there are scones in the kitchen”. He left the room and Arthur gave a silent laugh. In this house scones solved everything.

The next day Arthur was on his way to London, statement in hand.
“Merlin will be furious” Balinson had said.

“Why?” Arthur asked in bemusement

“He doesn’t want you to lose anything through being with him” was Balinson’s response.

“’I’m not” Arthur said instinctively and Balinson smiled.

“I agree son” he said, “But you’ll have to convince him”

+++++

It was three days after Arthur returned that Merlin was well enough to fight with Arthur.

“You quit” Merlin said accusingly when Arthur entered his room.

“Yes” said Arthur, because it was true and he was good at accepting the truth when he had a few days advance warning.

“I never asked you to” Merlin snapped.

Arthur looked closely at him and smiled. Merlin looked so much better and his voice, angry though it was, was strong. Arthur didn’t mind the anger.

“No,” he said “ You didn’t”

“I don’t want you ...” Merlin began but Arthur interrupted him. The flights from and to Belfast had given him time to prepare. He was ready. He allowed heat to enter his voice.

“This is all about me” Arthur said “And I know it is selfish but you always said I was a pampered brat who always got his way and I suppose I want to keep that up so I am doing what I want”

Merlin made a face but Arthur did not allow him to speak.

“I’ m not a saint, Merlin, I’ m not that good. I *want* to quit. I want to spend time with you. I want to come home to find you there. I want to wait at home and know you will be coming in. I’ m sick of phone calls and planes. I want home. I want you” His voice grew quieter as he spoke and he knew that he was no longer working from a prepared script. He pulled the chair closer to the bed and touched his hand to Merlin’s face.
Merlin moved into the touch, then, getting a breath in he asked “Why?” and Arthur could see the puzzlement on his face.

Arthur didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. No matter what he said or did Merlin never seemed to believe that Arthur wanted him. Arthur settled for pressing a kiss to his forehead.

“You’ll never understand” He said “But I’ll spend my life trying to make you see”

+++++

And in a fairy tale that would be it. But there was a next morning and one after that and Arthur found that though he was ready for the anxiety of waiting for Merlin to recover, he was not ready for the boredom.

At first it was terror and boredom as Merlin went through the ups and downs of fighting the infection but as Merlin slowly recovered, boredom won. Even when Merlin was well enough to be transferred to an ordinary ward, the relief was tempered by the fact that visiting times now applied and there was more time to be bored. Arthur found there were only so many scones he could eat though he actually gave in and learned to make them. And make other things. Mrs. Balinson tolerated him in the kitchen as she would a small child and Arthur was grateful. But it was not enough.

For the first time since he was six and went to prep school he had nothing to do and loads of time to do it in. He walked a lot, until Kenny quietly took him aside and said he was just asking for trouble.

“Not cos you’re a ponce y’know, just cos you’re an English Politico” he said and Arthur was confined indoors again.

He wondered about finding a job, worrying about living off the Balinsons but his solicitor assured him that he still had some money. He was actually a little sad when he heard that. Being broke would mean he would have to find something to do.

The one bright spot should have been Christmas. Arthur had fantasised about Christmas with the Balinsons, though the phrase ‘be careful what you wish for’ came to mind when the doctors agreed that Merlin could come home for a few days. This was not how he imagined being with them. Merlin himself was quite cynical about it.
“They just want to clear out the ward so they can go home” he remarked but his mother shushed him.

She was thrilled having him back but it was not a comfortable time as the extent of Merlin incapacity was shown up. Arthur and Mr Balinson had brought a bed downstairs for Merlin since he could not manage the stairs and Arthur slept on the couch to tend to him. Dinner was a tense affair as Merlin shuffled his food around the plate one-handed, refusing help. Mrs. Balinson had pulled out all the stops with food and crackers and all the traditions but Arthur was glad when they sank on to the sofa and Merlin slumped against him.

“I’m so tired” Merlin whispered.

“I think it’s obligatory to sleep on Christmas Day” Arthur whispered back and he felt Merlin relax for the first time. They slept.

They even slept through Doctor Who and watching it later did not have the same impact. It was Arthur’s Dream Christmas with everything wrong, and out of focus.

It was almost a relief when Merlin returned to the ward, a feeling that left Arthur very guilty.

And the boredom returned.

It was Holly, Kenny’s daughter, who pointed his way to assuaging his boredom. She chattered about her online computer course on one of her visits to Merlin and curiosity led Arthur to look up online education when he returned to the Balinsons. A few hours later he was immersed in the Open University prospectus. At first he looked at linguistics, his own area but it all looked too familiar. Then, he looked at Law.

As a politician he had made laws but he had never studied how they worked – a gap in his education he felt many times during his short career. He never wanted to practice law but he found now a longing to know more about it. He sought Kilgharrah’s advice about the course but really he had already decided to take on the challenge of a Master of Laws. In a short time he found himself composing essays sitting at Merlin’s desk, in Merlin’s room. The only thing lacking was Merlin.

Merlin’s recovery was slow. He finally agreed to the surgery, postponing his departure from hospital even more. Arthur worried about the listless way Merlin had decided to allow the doctors to operate. He was as if he didn’t care what they did to him.

Arthur buried himself in his studies and tried not to think of the future.
The Beginning

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who has read this since its beginning so long ago - the discussions and comments have made this a wonderful learning experience for me and it never ceases to amaze me that people are reading my writing! Thank you!

Note that I have posted two chapters together, in case you missed the last one

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Get in the chair”
“I’m not getting in the chair!”
“We don’t go if you’re not in the chair”
“Fine then. Let’s not go”

Arthur sighed and sat down. “Okay then.” he sighed again “Do you want to play scrabble?”

Merlin looked at him as if Arthur had turned into a Dalek and was tap-dancing to a Shirley Temple number.

“What?” Arthur said innocently.

“You’re talking about scrabble at a time like this?”

“You like scrabble” Arthur said reasonably.

Merlin’s expression, which had been mutinous, changed to sad. “Don’t you want to go?” he asked plaintively.

“*I* do” Arthur said firmly. “But only if you use the chair”

Merlin now looked as if he were fighting tears. “I hate the chair” he said quietly.

Arthur knew that. For a moment his memory wandered back to Merlin’s first days home.

Merlin had hated the chair from the moment he had left the hospital. The damage to both arms meant crutches were out of the question and his leg could not take his weight. That meant a wheelchair. But even with it he was not independent – he could not use the wheels to push it.
He and Arthur were staying with his parents, (Arthur in the spare room, which made him feel like a teenager) and Mrs. Balinson spoiled them with home cooked meals and fragrant fluffy laundry but Merlin got more and more silent.

His time in the hospital had quenched some of the essential Merlin-ness of him but Arthur had hoped being home would bring it back. It didn’t, though it was a week or so before Arthur realised that Merlin did not ask for anything – not even to pass the salt. When no one directly spoke with him he sat in his chair, silent and closed in. Mrs. Balinson’s cheerfulness and Merlin’s quick grateful responses to any help masked the fact Merlin did not ask for assistance, did not even initiate conversation.

It was only when Arthur remembered Paris; remembered a cold-ridden Merlin asking for cough drops and demanding cuddles, that Arthur saw the how unlike himself this Merlin was.

Things came to a head one day when Arthur came into the living room and saw Merlin sitting miserably in front of a TV showing only snow. The remote lay on the floor a little way from the chair.

“Dammit! Merlin!” Arthur exclaimed and be bent down for the remote. “Don’t be such a bloody martyr. Ask for help!”

“You’re the fucking martyr! Merlin snarled and Arthur backed away in surprise. This Merlin didn’t react like that. Since the crash Merlin had been subdued and quiet. Arthur was about to respond when Merlin’s face closed down again, his eyes fixed over Arthur’s shoulder. Arthur turned and saw Mrs. Balinson standing in the doorway. She looked sharply at both of them.

“I’m going out” she said “I won’t be back before tea. You carry on yelling. There’s a lot more yelling that needs to come out” She turned around abruptly and left.

Arthur found the break in tension very funny and turned to share the joke with Merlin. But Merlin was not laughing. His face was stormy and he looked away not meeting Arthur’s gaze. Confused, Arthur moved closer. He still had the remote in his hand and he tentatively put it on Merlin’s lap. To his dismay, Merlin pushed it off with an angry shove.

“I hate this” Merlin said loudly. He hit the arm of his wheelchair with his right arm. His voice rose as he continued. “I hate being in this. I hate having to be in this fucking chair, having to wait to pick up a fucking remote. I hate the pain. God I hate the pain and I hate that this happened and god help me, sometimes I hate you because you are strong and fit and you have the world and you fucking gave it up! You had everything and you gave it up and I hate you and then I hate myself
for hating you because you are so good to be and I hate that too and I…” Merlin was sobbing now, his breath coming in erratic gasps, his eyes and nose running.

Arthur could feel a sting in his own eyes. “I’m not good” he said hoarsely “I’m not trying... I don’t want... I... All I want is to be with you. And I hate what’s happened too and I wish it hadn’t but dammit Merlin, I’ll take you any way I can”

Merlin gave a choked sound. “But you haven’t” he said brokenly. “You haven’t taken me. You haven’t touched me...like that ...not since” his voice faded and Arthur looked at him in shock.

“You don’t…” he started “You don’t believe I don’t want to?” he went on, pausing at the bleak look on Merlin’s face. “You do believe I don’t want to” he said blankly. “Oh God, Merlin, no, God... I ... You have no idea. I have been in your house ... in your bed and you were so ill and this is your parents’ home and , oh God Merlin no, don’t…”

Merlin made an inarticulate sound somewhere between a sob and a whimper and Arthur dived on him seeking both to comfort and be comforted.

They soon found that passionate embraces in a wheelchair could be painful.

“Bed” Arthur said and Merlin nodded. Quickly Arthur manoeuvred the chair out. The stairs were not a problem anymore as, much to Merlin’s vocal dismay, his parents (with Arthur’s help) had had a stair lift installed before he came out of hospital. For the first time Merlin welcomed it, the slow pace giving time for moving kisses.

There was a logistical crisis on the landing as Merlin wobbled getting off the chair and had to be caught by Arthur. Arthur sized him up speculatively.

“If you pick me up and carry me” Merlin snapped “I will bite you”

Arthur laughed. “Promise?” he said and holding Merlin by the waist helped him hop and limp to the bedroom.

Arthur looked at the bed and looked at Merlin and pondered the practicalities.

“It’s not like we haven’t managed this sort of thing before” he thought out loud. Merlin flopped down on the bed and gave a wolfish grin.
“We can experiment” he said and Arthur, though he denied it forever, giggled.

It was easier then. Arthur undressed Merlin swiftly, welcoming each piece of exposed skin with feather kisses until Merlin was moaning softly. Arthur lay on top of him but Merlin pushed at him with his right arm.

“Nah” he said “You too. I need to see that you are real, that you aren’t a dream”

Arthur stripped quickly and unromantically and then resumed his place, taking time to examine his prize. Merlin was thin, he had lost not just weight but muscle tone during his long stay in hospital and his skin was paler than ever. There were no tan marks, but there were scars from injury and surgery. He was hard and straining and Arthur gloried in the sight, wanting to worship him with his eyes.

“Hey” said Merlin forcing his left arm to stroke along Arthur’s thigh. “Less looking, more touching”

And Arthur obliged.

Some time later Arthur held a naked and sleepy Merlin in his arms. Merlin’s childhood single bed barely held them and Arthur wrapped his arms and legs around Merlin like a safety belt keeping him safely on the mattress. He was snuggling even closer when his phone gave an irritating chirp. It took careful manipulation before he managed to get an arm free to reach out for it and check the message.

It was from Mrs. Balinson;

“I will be home in about half an hour. Be a love and put the kettle on”

With even more care Arthur disentangled himself from the now sleeping Merlin, who was exhausted from the unaccustomed exertion of their cautious but enthusiastic lovemaking. Padding to the bathroom, Arthur took a quick but necessary shower, and dressing quickly made sure the kettle was on. Returning to the bedroom he looked at the sleeping figure in the bed. He could see tiny flecks of grey in Merlin’s hair; stress induced, he thought, and noted the lines on Merlin’s face that did not come from laughter. He knew he should wake him and get him to a shower but instead he lay beside him on the covers and wrapped Merlin in his arms again.
“Mmmm” Merlin murmured “Wassamatter?”

“Your Mum will be back in a few minutes” Arthur whispered and felt Merlin wake himself up.

“I love my mum” Merlin sighed “Mum and Dad – they’ve been - I love them so much. But we need to move out”

Arthur gave a great sigh. “Oh Thank god” he said “I was afraid you wouldn’t...I mean I love them too but...” he stroked Merlin’s leg very gently “I really want to do this every day.” He continued “and we can’t do it here...We could find a flat close by. Unless you? I mean we never did go through with the London flat”

Merlin had turned and was looking at him with puzzlement “But you have a house” Merlin said.

“So do you” Arthur laughed. Merlin’s expression closed again, back to the one he had worn for months.

“I have a bathroom” he said in a tight voice. “But you’re right. We can look around”

Arthur felt a strange sensation of Elena standing behind him poking him with a stick. Something was wrong and he was not sure what but it had to do with the house...

“Well, the country house is ready to live in” he said hesitatingly and was rewarded by a hopeful look in Merlin’s eyes.

“Would you, I mean, do you mind if I ...I mean it is yours not... ” Merlin said incoherently and Arthur saw the whole minefield he had barely avoided reflected in the hope and doubt in Merlin’s eyes.

“It would be perfect” he said firmly “It would give your parents a break and it’s a quiet village so you could rest and...”

Merlin leaned over and claimed his lips as he spoke and Arthur mentally thanked Elena for teaching him to notice things. In the process he didn’t notice the sound of the front door opening or the footsteps on the stairs. Only the loud creak of a wonky floorboard on the landing broke in on his attention.
“Bloody hell” he whispered as Merlin opened his eyes with a expression of laughing panic.

“We really do have to move out” Merlin murmured.

“We have to do something first” Arthur said “And I won’t take no for an answer”

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+++++++
+++++++ Arthur broke out of his reverie to see Merlin looking at him with his puppy-in-the-rain look.

“You know I hate the chair” Merlin repeated again and Arthur stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Merlin. “I know, Love,” he said. “Use it to get there and then leave it” Merlin buried his head in Arthur’s chest so that Arthur could feel him nod. Arthur pulled away.

“Your tie is crooked” Merlin remarked, reaching out with his good arm (or as he called it, his less bad arm)

“It’s a cravat” Arthur retorted, helping the reaching fingers to straighten it.

“Your posh tie is crooked” Merlin said emphatically, patting the cravat into place. The pearl grey silk smoothed easily under his long fingers.

“I thought you were going with the red” he remarked absently brushing imaginary dust from the shoulder of Arthur’s light grey suit.

“Not really me” Arthur smiled. Merlin sat in the chair,

“Well” said Merlin, gesturing at his own dark grey suit, cut in a much simpler style than Arthur’s, set off by a blue tie with matching tie pin. “This isn’t me. Jeans and hoodies have my heart”

“I thought I had your heart” Arthur remarked as he pushed the chair.
“Yes” agreed Merlin “But only in jeans and a hoodie”

“Fine with me” Arthur said, manoeuvring through the door frame. “Easier to get off” The tips of Merlin’s ears went pink to Arthur’s joy.

They got a cab, glad it could accommodate the chair easily. They were silent on the journey, which did not take long. Arthur watched the familiar streets move past in a kaleidoscope of memories. These were his streets. He had walked through them, driven them, even staggered through them. His youth was here and now he had come back.

They had hoped for Doonshee but they had found that the bureaucracy involved was slow and now that they had decided neither wanted to wait. Merlin had ruled out Belfast, for reasons he did not share and Arthur did not want to risk their new accord to push. Merlin was still healing, physically and mentally and it was not always smooth. Arthur knew that Merlin hated him being careful but nevertheless he still didn’t take Merlin’s emotions for granted. He let it go when Merlin vetoed Belfast.

So, London it was, Chelsea specifically.

They drew up to their destination and Arthur stepped out first. Across the street he saw a dark car with tinted windows, parked by the kerb. The chauffeur was visible; the passenger was not but Arthur felt a fierce gaze from inside the darkened glass. He stiffened and stared across the busy road. Briefly the window opened and Arthur met his father’s eyes. For a moment the two shared a look, then Uther gave a brusque nod and the window closed. Arthur saw the car pull out into the traffic and drive away. He realised he was shaking.

“Are you okay?” Merlin’s anxious voice called him back. Merlin was still in the taxi, restricted by his chair.

“I’ll tell you later” Arthur said as he brought the chair out. That conversation was not one he wanted at the side of the road. Merlin looked at him worriedly but said nothing.

“No reporters” Merlin said as they came to the door.

“They’ll be here when we get out” Arthur said. “They have these things timed and run on deadlines” His hand was resting on Merlin’s shoulders as he pushed the chair and he felt the tension. “We can go out the back when we leave” he said.

“No” said Merlin covering Arthur’s hand with his own. “I agreed.” He smiled up at Arthur. Arthur loved the smile but the angle hurt him every time, distracting him from Merlin’s murmured comment.

“Sorry,” Arthur said. “What did you say?”

“I said” said Merlin patiently, “That I owe Tommy Higgins that much” Arthur had shown him the
letter and it had made him very thoughtful. Standing there, Arthur wondered if that was why Merlin had chosen London.

“You’ll hate it” he said bluntly. Merlin smiled up at him again and again Arthur inwardly winced at looking down at that smile.

“You’re just afraid I’ll steal the limelight” Merlin laughed and Arthur relaxed. Merlin was determined to be happy and a determined Merlin could not be stopped.

“You would you know” he said pushing the chair inside. “Ready?”

“Ready” Merlin agreed.

Inside they were guided to their room, golden and glowing in sunshine that somehow had found its way in despite the city gloom. Rows of chairs were lined up leaving an aisle between. There were enough empty chairs not to make any one absence obvious but Arthur was happy with those that were filled.

Mr. And Mrs. Alfred had come up from the country, he wearing the suit in which he had been married in 1955 and which had been taken out for Very Important Events ever since.

Mr and Mrs. Balinson sat ramrod straight, she with her eyes shining with unshed tears. Elena sat with Val, her arm on his as if to stop him running off on some work related thing. Calum, somehow managing to make his suit look crumpled, sat with Lydia beside him. She did not need an arm on his to show her claim.

Lionel and Jane were minus children and were very much at home, as was Gilbert, looking every inch the playboy. He stood beside Kenny, incongruous in a suit, his tattoos barely showing above his collar. Holly looked elegant on his other side and held her own with Clarissa, who was sporting a very avant garde hat. Her George just looked bored. Professor Kilgharrah looked no different than he had in a lecture theatre and beside him was Merlin’s colleague Mcilwaine, in full dress uniform, looking rather shy.

No Eliott, though he had sent good wishes privately.

Arthur helped Merlin to stand and gave him the crutches they had brought. Walking was still painful and very awkward but Merlin had been practicing every day so that he could do this.

They walked together. Merlin’s gait was ungainly and clumsy and Arthur thought it the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. He held his stride to keep time and it was slow progress to the top of the room.

Arthur looked at Merlin and thought of every painful step that had brought them here. They grasped hands and smiled at each other barely hearing what was being said to them. Then Arthur spoke.

“I Arthur Pendragon hereby pledge to spend my life openly with you Merlin Balinson...
Chapter End Notes

I had every intention of leaving it here but somehow I have done an Alice and looked through the door into the garden beyond... in other words I have already started recording the next bits of their lives ...

But this story is too long as it so I will have to put the rest separately - and I intend to write a buffer so I don’t suffer mini breakdowns every week not wanting to let anyone down.

But there will be more.

Thank you again to all those that have read this

End Notes

Donegal is beautiful but the bits here are an amalgam of lots of places. Look at google images to see the the beaches. The Doonshee collage is entirely fictional. No Gaeltacht collage would be like that. But it's true about the firsts.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!