Does it have to be as it was before?

by Balthamos

Summary

When Arthur finally returns from Avalon he finds Merlin a little bit broken from his years waiting alone. Slowly Arthur helps put him back together, and Merlin finally starts to believe that Arthur is really there to stay. Then they find Gwen and Merlin prepares to let Arthur go, but Arthur’s decision is not the one he expects.

Notes

Written for this prompt at KMM:

Arthur returns in present day and Merlin helps him adapt to the modern world. They grow closer and closer, and just when their relationship is almost tipping past friendship into romance, the reincarnated Gwen shows up.

Merlin withdraws because he doesn't want to stand in the way of true love. Maybe he considers leaving the pair to their own devices for a while since he's uninterested in watching their love story from the sidelines all over again? But the important bit is - I want Arthur to choose Merlin over Gwen. Not because Gwen has already met Lancelot or because she isn’t interested. I want Arthur to choose Merlin because he realizes that he loves Merlin more than Gwen and can finally be with him the way he has always wanted.
Merlin sat on his little wooden chair and stared out at what used to be the lake. The water had dried up long ago and Merlin had often wondered if there was any point remaining there now that Avalon was gone. But two days ago he’d gotten a letter from Somerset council warning him that there would be a lot of work going on by his little cottage, because they were going to refill part of the lake. Something about promoting the town’s environmental stance and tourism’s effect on the economy, he didn’t really know. He was not even aware that one could refill a lake but this was the twenty-first century, he supposed many things were possible that he would not have dreamed of even forty years ago.

Merlin stayed away from most of the rest of the world, he had done his travelling and seen what he wanted to see a long time ago but in the end, he always came back to Avalon, or Glastonbury Tor as it was called these days. Something there had always pulled him back. Plus as time went by he found it harder and harder to be around other people, the problem with being immortal was everyone else died eventually.

Seven hundred years ago, when he figured he was getting too old for exploring, he had found himself a small clearing at the edge of the forest and built himself his little house. It had started as a small two-roomed cottage about the same size as his childhood home but over the years, he had added to it here and there. A little library/study when his collection of books got too large, a proper kitchen, a bathroom when plumbing was invented, and even a spare bedroom one time; when he had felt particularly hopeful that Arthur might come back. He had even made a small garden out the back, growing a collection of herbs and plants that would have made Gaius proud. His little copse of trees was the only thing remaining of the once heavily forested area, replaced by the drab concrete world of modern times long before people started to worry about the environment.

The rest of the world left him alone for the most part, he owned his land fair and square. He wasn't as easily bullied as the businessmen who sometimes turned up wanting to build shopping centres and cinemas, seemed to believe, whether he was ancient old Emrys or fresh faced Merlin. The council always tended to step in when the tycoons got too pushy, it seemed they realised how much the place had already been ruined and were keen to keep Merlin's little patch of nature there if they could.

Merlin was currently in his Emrys form, he found people asked fewer questions if he appeared to age. While this form was fine for summer, he was planning to kill it and return to youth before autumn set in. He was not going to spend another winter old.

He let himself wonder, as he stared out at the small hill, what it would mean when they filled in the lake, but he never allowed himself to hope not anymore. Not after the crushing disappointments of the two world wars. Not after all the terror at the start of the new millennium. No, Merlin no longer allowed himself to hope, but still he waited patiently.

When the workers did finally drive their tanks away, and Merlin’s home was silent again he sat on the shore all night, just in case. It was all to no avail but he had almost enjoyed looking out over the water again, it was not quite as painful as he had expected. That night he cast off his Emrys disguise as he walked back into the cottage a fresh start seeming appropriate, even if it was his twelfth such rebirth.
The lake froze up after that and remained that way all winter only just starting to thaw, after what had been a particularly cold March. Merlin was certainly glad of his young body; he couldn't have handled the seemingly endless winter with those old bones. As usual Merlin found himself sitting on the shore of the lake, sketching the old crumbling tower in the fading sunlight, when suddenly the water before him began to swell and crash heavily against the pebbled ground.

Merlin looked around frantically, there was no wind or storm and his first thought was that the council were using the lake to hide some sort of horrific water creature. The water calmed again, seeming even stiller than before. Merlin gasped as someone rose up breaking the flat surface. He closed his eyes, this was not possible but he put his sketchbook down carefully and stood up, there was no one else it could be after all. He stepped into the water, ignoring the icy bite and taking a few steps forward before opening his eyes.

It was Arthur, dripping wet and clad in chainmail just like before without a hint of rust, surging toward him as fast as he could, weighed down as he was.

"You're back!" Merlin called out running forward.

"Apparently so," Arthur replied and Merlin's heart swelled at the sound of his voice.

"You're really back," he whispered to himself, before proceeding to trip on a rock and hurtling forward.

He braced himself for the slap of cold water but it was Arthur's arms that caught him, strong and steady, hauling him upright.

"Still a clumsy idiot then," Arthur teased, almost fondly.

"Yeah," Merlin breathed staring at his king in wonder.

It made his heart sing to see Arthur's face full of colour again, cheeks pink not ashen, eyes clear and blue not clouded grey. Merlin’s eyes traced down Arthur’s body to the point where Mordred had wounded him, and he could not help but reach out, slip a hand under the mail and feel nothing but unmarked skin.

"How long was I gone?" Arthur whispered.

"A while," Merlin answered, finally shivering as the joy of seeing Arthur again calmed slightly and the cold began to set in, "come on let's get out of this water first yeah?"

"Alright then," Arthur agreed silently following Merlin to the edge of the lake.

"What's that?" he asked when Merlin bent to retrieve his books and pencils before nodding toward the trees and leading Arthur to the cottage.

"Er... my sketchbook... I like to draw," Merlin explained as they got to the door.

"Oh... why?" Arthur asked curiously, as they entered the small cottage.

"Something to pass the time," Merlin said cheerfully, taking Arthur's arm and tugging him gently into the sitting room, "wait here a tick, I'll just put the heating on and then I'll help you out of this," he
said brightly dashing into the kitchen and switching on the boiler.

He wandered into the spare room and pulled some clothes out of the drawer, before rushing back through to find Arthur standing exactly where he had left him. He was looking a little nervously at Merlin's laptop, which unfortunately had a picture of a dragon as the wallpaper. He closed it hurriedly and went over to Arthur.

"It's alright it's just a picture," he assured him.

"Alright," Arthur swallowed still looking nervous, "what is this place Merlin, where are we?" he asked.

"This is my house," Merlin replied lifting Arthur's arms the old routine still familiar after all these years.

"*Your* house?" Arthur scoffed.

Merlin was a little offended.

"Yes actually, *I* built it myself," he said perhaps tugging the chainmail over Arthur's head a little roughly.

"Built it yourself," Arthur repeated slowly standing still as Merlin wrapped his own dressing gown around him, "Merlin how long was I gone?" he asked worryingly.

Merlin did not answer, removing Arthur's boots and trousers slowly before hanging them on a radiator.

"Please tell me Merlin," Arthur said quietly.

Merlin hesitated. "I... er... I lost count because the dates weren't really recorded as well back then but er... it's been at least a thousand years Arthur, probably closer to fifteen hundred really," he confessed, eyeing Arthur worryingly.

"Over a thousand years," Arthur repeated.

"Yeah."

"But you're still here, how are you still here?" Arthur asked.

Merlin chuckled darkly. "Ah well it turns out I'm immortal, aren't I lucky?" He said quietly, it had not been easy all these years.

"You've been alive, a thousand years just waiting for me?" Arthur said, seemingly stunned.

"Yep, would you like to get dressed?" Merlin asked gently.

"Yes please," Arthur said quietly.

Merlin dressed Arthur in a warm red jumper and some jeans, ignoring his complaints about how silly it looked and how itchy the fabric was. That was absolute rubbish anyway; the clothes were actually quite expensive, only the finest for the former king. He sat Arthur on the sofa and went to change into some dry clothes of his own. When he was warmly dressed, he popped into the kitchen to see what food he could dig up he hadn’t been shopping in a while. He found some frozen bread and milk, which he thawed easily with magic and the cheese in the fridge did not look too questionable. He returned to the living room with two cups of tea and some sandwiches, sitting down next to
Arthur and handing him a plate.

“It’s just cheese and bread, I thought it would be best to keep things simple,” Merlin said before tucking into his own sandwich.

Arthur nodded and quietly ate his own food.

"Okay look, I know this is a lot to take in and I'm sure you have questions-"

"What did you do? Merlin, what did you do for a thousand years? Please tell me you weren't just waiting here, by yourself?” Arthur asked interrupting him.

Merlin was shocked that this was Arthur’s first question; he was prepared for something more along the lines of what happened to Camelot? How did Gwen cope without him? He had to think about his answer for a while.

"I travelled at first, I saw quite a bit of the world but after a few hundred years I got tired of it all so I came back here, built this place and settled in,” Merlin explained.

"But you were on your own?"

"Well yeah-"

"Merlin-"

Merlin held up a hand. "No it’s not that simple. Look there was only so many times I could make new friends and watch them die before it became too much. I'm better on my own Arthur, I promise,” Merlin said sadly.

"But what do you do? You can't just sit at the lake every day," Arthur insisted.

"Well no I don’t. I'm a writer these days actually, I write books and sell them," he explained, "that's a job I can do easily enough out here, it gets me by and I enjoy it.

“Then there's reading, I love to read, and I'm a little bit addicted to television these days. I tried to resist it for so long though; I reckon you will love it too. Oh and the internet, that's a brilliant invention and a fantastic timewaster,” Merlin informed a stunned Arthur.

Arthur looked confused.

"These are new things?” he asked.

"Yes I'll show them to you but perhaps not yet, you might be overwhelmed," Merlin suggested.

"Yes I think I would be, but what sort of books have you written? Can I read them?” Arthur asked.

Again, Merlin was taken aback, he was fairly certain Arthur did not read for pleasure, let alone anything Merlin had written.

"Er... all sorts, fiction mostly, a lot of fantasy. A shrink would probably say I’m trying to escape into my imagination but I enjoy it. You probably wouldn't like it,” he replied.

"Oh I'm sure it's absolutely awful, but I'd like to see what you've been up to without me," Arthur drawled sounding far more like himself, "what happened, after?” he asked quietly.

"Camelot flourished with Gwen as queen and she ruled for a long time, there was peace for a while.
However, in the end, more and more Saxons came and they took over and then the Normans came after that. The monarchy has changed a lot over the years, but it is still one kingdom, the United Kingdom, the one you made. We even had an empire for a while.

“Camelot is gone though, London's the capital now and it’s all quite different out there, I’m afraid. I mostly stay here though.”

"Gone," Arthur whispered, "who is the king of this London?"

"Elizabeth, she’s the queen of the UK and she doesn't really rule much, that's more the prime minister’s job, that's a sort of leader who the people elect,” Merlin tried to explain.

"The common people choose a leader?" Arthur asked sounding incredulous, but not horrified.

"Yep 'fraid so," Merlin told him, "it's not that bad, they're hardly peasants anymore and everyone goes to school these days."

"No it... it seems sort of fair," Arthur agreed.


"Never?"

"I couldn't bear it, I went home for a bit to Ealdor, mum looked after me for a bit. Then I found a ship and I was off, didn't come back for nearly three hundred years.” Merlin explained.

"Is it the magic? That makes you immortal?" Arthur asked.

"I... er... I dunno magic, destiny all seems like rubbish these days," Merlin said shrugging.

"Do you still practice it?" Arthur asked.

"I used to but not much anymore, modern technology almost puts it to shame and it's not like I have monsters to fight anymore," Merlin joked.

"I want you to tell me everything Merlin, everything you did," Arthur whispered.

Merlin was reluctant as it was such a long story but he did, he had forgotten a lot of the stuff he had done over the years but he had never forgotten Camelot. He filled Arthur in on all the times he had saved him; from bandits, Sidhe, assassins, dragons, wyverns, and of course sorcerers. Arthur listened patiently as Merlin confessed his failures, with regards to Arthur’s father, Morgana, and Mordred.

"It wasn't your fault Merlin," Arthur said softly, "I don't blame you."

"I do," Merlin confessed.

"I know, I can see it in your eyes, it's haunts you even after all these years doesn't it?"

Merlin nodded. ‘I’ve had little else to think about, it’s like I know I didn’t make Morgana go crazy but maybe if I’d tried harder to help her, or if I’d killed Mordred when the dragon said I should then you wouldn’t have died. So many fucking what ifs Arthur, it hurts,” he whispered

"I'm sorry you were alone so long," Arthur murmured.

They sat together in silence for a while, Merlin allowing Arthur to process all the information, to mourn the loss of his queen and his kingdom quietly. It was dark when Arthur spoke again.
"Merlin I'm quite tired," he said.

"Alright, I built you a bedroom, it's not quite as fancy as your old chambers, but it's nicer than outside so I'm sure you'll manage," Merlin informed him.

Arthur nodded and allowed himself to be led down the hall to his bedroom.

"Did you really build this house?" he asked when they got there.

"Yes Arthur," Merlin said rolling his eyes.

"You didn't just magic it up?" Arthur asked, genuinely curious.

"No Arthur I built it by hand, it was important I think, it helped me in a way to keep busy," Merlin told him.

"Like the books and paintings," Arthur said nodding at a watercolour of a faraway landscape that was hanging on the wall of his bedroom.

"Yeah something like that. Do you need the toilet?" Merlin asked distractedly as he rummaged through the chest of drawers for some pyjamas.

"Do I need the what?" Arthur asked.

"Oh the er... oh come on I'll show you," he said, "sleep-clothes," he added holding up Arthur's pyjamas before putting them on the bed.

He showed Arthur into the bathroom.

"This is sort of a chamber pot, press here when you're done," he said pointing to the handle.

Merlin waited outside for Arthur and chuckled to himself when the toilet flushed and Arthur burst out of the bathroom eyes wide with fear.

"Merlin that chamber pot was alive!" he gasped.

"No it's just sort of self-cleaning," Merlin tried to explain.

Arthur shook his head and marched back into the bedroom as if he hadn't just been terrified by a toilet, Merlin followed him. He helped Arthur into his pyjamas but informed him that most people, even posh ones dressed themselves these days.

"Where do you sleep?" Arthur asked as Merlin walked to the door.

"I er... I have a bedroom down the hall but..."

"But?"

"I don't really sleep anymore," he confessed.

"You don't sleep?" Arthur asked incredulously.

"I haven't slept for about four hundred years," Merlin told him.

"Why?"

"I don't know, I've had nightmares ever since you died and one day I'd had enough so I decided to
stop sleeping for a while. What harm could it do? I think I've just forgotten how.” Merlin explained.

Arthur just stared at him silently until Merlin let himself out of the room. He went back to the living room and sat down in his chair, making his plans to teach Arthur about the world, it was going to be a long process. He was thinking about how to explain electricity to Arthur when he found his eyes itching tiredly, something they had not done in so long; he allowed them to drift shut, hopeful that now Arthur was back the nightmares would be gone.
Merlin blinked awake slowly, stretching languorously, oh how he had missed a good night's sleep. He closed his eyes and sank back into the chair, allowing the sunlight to warm his face for a moment. When he opened them again, he looked over to see Arthur sitting on the settee and watching him carefully.

"You're still here," Merlin breathed.

"Where else would I be, I've no idea where here even is," Arthur said grumpily.

"No I mean you're really back," Merlin said softly, still disbelieving and his lips quirked as he observed Arthur sitting sullenly and glaring at him, "are you perhaps hungry Arthur?"

"Yes Merlin I am in fact starving and you've been asleep for hours," Arthur complained petulantly.

"Oh what time is it? And why didn't you wake me?" Merlin asked, yawning widely.

"How the hell should I know?" Arthur snapped, "you said you never slept, but Merlin you looked exhausted last night. I didn't want to wake you until you were ready," he added softly.

"Um... ok, thanks I suppose, but have you just been sitting there waiting?" Merlin asked starting to feel a little uncomfortable about Arthur's concern for him.

"I was too afraid to touch anything Merlin you have some very unusual possessions," Arthur told him.

"Well I'll teach you all about them later," Merlin said looking over at the clock, "oh crikey it's nearly nine, I slept for ages," he groaned getting out of the chair and stretching properly, his bones cracking pleasantly.

"Surely that's good?" Arthur asked standing up too.

"I suppose, c'mon breakfast," he said taking Arthur to the kitchen and sitting him at the little table.

Merlin pottered about the kitchen feeling a little unnerved as Arthur watched him without comment. He took a moment to remind himself that Arthur had just come back from the dead so he was bound to be a little quiet, while he fetched the milk from the fridge. Arthur just stared at him when he placed a bowl of cereal in front of him.

"What's this?" he demanded his tone making Merlin grin instantly.

"Breakfast, Sire," Merlin quipped cheekily.

"I am starving Merlin, I can't eat this slop! Get me some meat!" he ordered loudly.

"No one eats meat for breakfast anymore Arthur, unless they're having a fry up," Merlin argued.

"Why?"

"Dunno, it's unhealthy I guess. Anyway this is cereal is actually quite good, so eat up," he ordered cheekily around a spoonful of his own cereal.

"Cereal?"
"Yep Coco Pops, technically it's for children but adult cereal is like cardboard," Merlin informed him.

"Card Board?"

"Er... tasteless and bland, like wood shavings," Merlin suggested.

"Well that sounds delightful, is this honestly what you eat for breakfast?" Arthur asked disbelievingly.

"Well I don't really eat breakfast often, I suppose because I don't sleep I sort of lost a regular eating pattern. So I just eat when I'm hungry," Merlin explained.

"Which is obviously never looking at the state of you," Arthur said mockingly, but there was a note of concern in his voice.

"Well I'm hardly going to starve to death am I?" Merlin replied rolling his eyes.

Arthur just shook his head and dared to eat a spoonful of breakfast.

"It's sweet!" he exclaimed.

"Of course it is, what did you expect?" Merlin replied confused.

"Well it looks like mud, so I figured it would taste like mud," Arthur snapped before shovelling down more cereal.

"You thought I would serve you mud for breakfast?" Merlin asked quietly, "oh god chocolate! You've never had chocolate Arthur!"

"Whuh?" Arthur mumbled through a mouthful of food "sthis really goo!"

"I'm going to have to go shopping," Merlin said to himself.

When Arthur had polished off three bowls of Coco Pops, he finally declared he was full and allowed Merlin to show him the various technologies in his kitchen. He seemed to understand the basic purpose of the microwave and the oven although he could not understand why Merlin needed both. He was more impressed with the fridge, admitting to Merlin that it was really quite ingenious.

"Have you money Merlin?" he asked peering into the fridge again, clearly delighted by the cool air it contained, not that he would ever admit that aloud.

"Uh... yeah I've got money, quite a bit actually," Merlin told him, confused.

"This frigid cupboard, and the other ones, the warmer ones they're practically bare," he observed, "you're not looking after yourself," he said thoughtfully.

"I'm fine Arthur so stop it. Look I don't need much food for just me ok? Just drop it will you?" Merlin insisted.

"Merlin I was being serious when I said you looked half starved,"

Merlin closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose taking in a deep breath.

"Stop it," he whispered.
"Stop what?" Arthur asked confused.

"Please stop being nice, it's like you’re not really back."

Arthur raised his eyebrows

"You want me to be horrible to you?" he asked regarding Merlin like one would someone mentally unstable.

"I want you to treat me like you did before," Merlin pleaded.

"You want me to treat you like a servant, why on earth-"

"Because I miss you!" Merlin snapped his eyes shining with tears, "I miss you and you’re not being you! You’re being kind and polite and I'm sure it's because you’re scared and new to this world. I know I'm all you've got to show you around but please God stop being so nice to me!" Merlin begged.

"Why?" Arthur whispered.

"Because I let you die!" Merlin cried, "because I let you die and I lied to you for years and I should've stopped Mordred and Morgana was my fault and... and..." Merlin gasped as he dissolved into sobs.

"Alright," Arthur said quietly, calmly observing his crying wreck of a manservant, "pull yourself together, stop being such a girl!" he snapped.

Merlin smiled weakly through his tears but it faded again when Arthur pulled him into a careful embrace.

"All these years you've just been thinking how you should have done it differently?" Arthur whispered.

"Yes, always, it’s always on my mind no matter how I try to distract myself," Merlin mumbled into Arthur’s shoulder.

Arthur pulled away and regarded him carefully for a moment.

"Right, come on then Merlin, show me the rest of this house, and then we'll go to the market and fill up the cupboards," he demanded.

"Ok then," Merlin said wiping his eyes and following Arthur into the living room, “what do you want to know?" "What’s that?" Arthur asked pointing at the television.

"Er... right that’s my TV."

"What does it do?" Arthur interrupted.

"If you gave me a second I would have explained that you can watch shows on it, like plays I suppose, it’s for entertainment," Merlin explained.

"Show me," Arthur demanded.

"Alright but... it's not magic so don't freak out," Merlin warned.
Naturally, Arthur did freak out; he demanded that Merlin let the people out of the box no matter how much Merlin tried to explain that they were not really in there. Merlin decided he best wait a while before he showed him computers.

Arthur did not really understand how Merlin had trapped lightning in the light bulbs but admitted it was useful as they were brighter than candles. He was absolutely amazed by running water and how much easier it was than dashing off to the well for bath water and of course, he loved the shower spending nearly an hour in there once Merlin explained what it was for.

"I dressed myself," Arthur said proudly as he strolled into the living room hair still damp, "I still don’t like these clothes," he added.

"Well done, a task most master before the age of six, so only a thousand years out there," Merlin retorted earning himself a pillow to the face, "and those clothes are fine," he insisted.

"Let's go to the market for food, you may be content to starve yourself but I certainly am not," Arthur said sitting down to pull on his boots.

"Arthur maybe I should go by myself," Merlin said quietly.

"No I clearly cannot trust you to get the right things. You would come back with more cereals which while very nice, is hardly enough," Arthur informed him pompously.

"You don't even know what they have," Merlin argued.

"I'm coming with you Merlin," Arthur said quietly.

"Ok come on, I haven't got a car so we'll have to walk," Merlin told him, but it was not too far to the shops.

"A car?"

"You'll see," Merlin said, a little smugly.

Arthur nearly jumped a foot in the air when the first car passed them, but after a few went by he seemed to adjust quite well or at least put on a brave face.

"Are you sure it's not magic?" he asked nervously.

"Definitely," Merlin assured him, before pulling him away from a post box.

"Is magic still banned then?"

"No but people don't really believe in it anymore," Merlin said quietly, "it's all gone now except me," he added sadly.

"No more magic at all?"

"Nope, that's good though right? I bet you’re pleased," Merlin said.

"Not really," Arthur confessed.

"Huh? Even though magic is evil?"

"It's not though Merlin is it? I mean look at you apparently the last magical creature in existence and the farthest thing from evil I've ever known," he said smiling at Merlin fondly.
"You're being nice again," Merlin warned.

"Look I'm not going to be horrible to you because you feel guilty over something which I don't blame you for. To be honest Merlin all the times... most of the time when I was mean you before was because I could hardly be nice to a servant. You are not a servant anymore, so I'm not going to treat you like one. You're my friend and the only one I’ve got right now.

“I will still tell you when you are being an idiot, like right now for instance, but I'm also going to tell you when I'm worried about you, again like right now.”

"I'm fine Arthur," Merlin said tiredly.

"No you're not, and I don’t think you have been for a long time," Arthur replied, “you’ve changed I don’t think you can see it. Maybe because it’s been so long for you but it’s been days for me. Believe me Merlin you may be good at keeping secrets, but I still know you. I can tell just how much of a toll all this waiting has taken on you,” Arthur said kindly.

"Look drop it alright, I don't want to do this in Tesco’s," he snapped marching Arthur into the store.

Arthur stopped whatever he was going to say next as he stared, open-mouthed around the supermarket.

“All this food Merlin,” he whispered.

“Yep we are a consumer society,” Merlin replied grabbing a basket.

Merlin managed to pick up bread, meat and fruit without much issue other than having to drag Arthur away from the grapes. He had started eating them when he saw a child doing the same, refusing to believe Merlin when he said it was not allowed before they paid.

“But Merlin they’re good,” Arthur whined as he dragged him away, “and I’m-“

“You are not the king you can’t just help yourself,” Merlin interrupted.

“Fine!” Arthur huffed rummaging through the pocket of his hoody, “I was going to say I’m hungry actually,” he said pulling out a bread roll.

“Where did you get that?” Merlin demanded.

“Over there,” Arthur said pointing vaguely and stopping to examine the juice cartons interestedly.

Merlin picked up a couple and took the bread from Arthur, ignoring his protests.

“It’s colder in this bit,” Arthur observed.

“Yeah it’s like a big fridge, I’ll just get the milk,” Merlin explained.

Arthur ignored him turning to a woman who was trying to choose some yoghurt from the large selection on display.

“Excuse me but do you really think you should be wandering around in such a state of undress? It’s rather cold in here,” he told her.

“Arthur!” Merlin hissed dragging Arthur away before the woman could slap him, “I’m so sorry he didn’t mean that he’s-”
“Piss off!” the woman snapped before storming off.

“You can’t speak to people like that Arthur,” Merlin groaned, grabbing the milk and shoving it into the basket furiously.

“But she was almost naked! In the fridge!” Arthur replied confused.

“That’s just how people dress these days,” Merlin insisted.

“Yes I’d noticed some differences,” Arthur agreed, “The women wear these jeemies as you call them,” he said as they walked to the checkout.

“Jeans,” Merlin corrected “and well long flowing skirts aren’t really practical anymore,” he explained as he placed the items on the counter.

“Were they ever?” Arthur replied, watching him carefully.

“Well yeah for dances and banquets and stuff,” Merlin said as he packed the bags.

He paid for his shopping and picked up two of the bags.

“Arthur could you carry the last one please?” he asked.

“I suppose, I mean I shouldn’t really its hardly proper is it? But you are a weakling and I don’t want you dropping all the food” Arthur replied picking up the last bag and following Merlin out of the store, “you didn’t pay,” he accused when they got outside.

“Yes I did,” Merlin replied confused.

“No you didn’t give the man any gold,” Arthur told him.

“Oh well no I used my card, no one pays in gold anymore,” Merlin explained.

“Hmm, it’s ever so different this place,” Arthur said quietly.

“I know,” Merlin replied gently.

“I suppose, I mean I shouldn’t really its hardly proper is it? But you are a weakling and I don’t want you dropping all the food” Arthur replied picking up the last bag and following Merlin out of the store, “you didn’t pay,” he accused when they got outside.

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“I know,” Merlin replied gently.

Why am I back Merlin?"

“I don’t know,” Merlin whispered, “Kilgarrah, the dragon, said that you would return when Albion’s need is greatest but it hardly seems to be falling apart,” he explained.

“Maybe I came back by mistake,” Arthur suggested.

“Or maybe something terrible is about to happen,” Merlin replied darkly.

When they got back, Arthur allowed Merlin to put the food away and make them some lunch before continuing with the questions. What are these bags made of? What exactly is plastic? What does fizzy mean? Why can’t I try some of this coffee? Question after question until Merlin collapsed on the sofa exhausted, one night’s sleep and his body remembered exactly how it felt to be tired.

Arthur sat down beside him, shoving his legs out of the way.

“I’m sorry Arthur, I’m rubbish at this, I’ve had ages to prepare I know but it’s so different. It’s so hard to explain everything,” Merlin apologised.
“It’s alright, I think I have enough information for now,” Arthur replied fiddling with the can opener as if it were a toy.

“I’m sorry about this morning when I yelled at you and cried, I think I was just a bit in shock that you were really back,” Merlin said quietly, “I thought you weren’t ever coming back,” he admitted.

"What happened four hundred years ago, when you stopped sleeping?” Arthur asked, placing the can opener on the table.

"I told you the nightmares-"

"What changed though?"

"The magic, the last of the magic faded away. It’s all gone back to the earth now I suppose, but I can’t feel it anymore," Merlin confessed, "and I felt truly alone then, truly hopeless. I thought if the magic’s gone you wouldn’t be coming back."

“But there was always your magic,” Arthur said quietly. "The food? When did you stop eating Merlin? When did you stop trying to take care of yourself."

"I eat," Merlin replied huffily, which was true he did eat when he got hungry.

He just forgot sometimes and as he said before he could not starve to death.

"Merlin your thinner than you were when you first came to Camelot," Arthur pressed.

Merlin thought about it for a while, he had not noticed how he’d been neglecting himself but if he thought about it properly he knew that he had, he had given up a long time ago, sinking further and further into depression.

"After the war; the first one. It was even worse after the second one. It was so awful so dark I really thought you’d come back then Arthur," he whispered.

"I'm back now," Arthur promised quietly.

He whispered something else that Merlin did not catch but sounded suspiciously like I will look after you.
The Others are Back

It was slow going helping Arthur to adjust to the twenty-first century; it was not just modern things Arthur needed to learn about, Merlin also had to teach him the basic history of the world. He thought it would be easy, as he had lived through it all, but then again he hadn’t hiding away in his corner of the world. He had missed quite a bit of it too.

There had been many hurdles in the beginning, there was the time Arthur flooded the kitchen when he had tried to wash his chainmail in the washing machine. That had cost Merlin a new washing machine and a new carpet for the living room. Then there was Arthur’s first experience of chocolate, ice cream and sweets, which led to a very poorly Arthur when he overindulged.

However, the worst incident as far as Merlin was concerned was the time when Arthur, who insisted on practicing with Excalibur regularly, was dashing about at the lake. A small boy had dared to approach him and inform him of how ridiculous he looked prancing about like an idiot and Merlin had had to drag a spluttering, fuming Arthur away from the kid before he lost his head.

Arthur was still amazed on a daily basis by the things Merlin showed him. Merlin had taught him how to cook basic meals for himself which wasn’t a disaster as he expected. He was even allowed to go to Tesco’s by himself, as long as promised not to eat the food before paying for it. He was now able to use the basic features of Merlin’s laptop, although he was initially furious when Merlin set it on the kid friendly mode, refusing to be treated like a child.

He was slowly learning about the rest of the world using the internet, which was a much better teacher than Merlin in some respects. They had had some teething problems with that at first too; Merlin had left Arthur on a Wikipedia article about the Victorian era, while he went to make dinner and he came back to find Arthur on eBay placing a twenty pound bid on a blue and silver wizard hat.

"Arthur what are you doing?" Merlin had demanded dropping the oven gloves and snatching the mouse from Arthur.

"This is an online market Merlin, they have all sorts," Arthur had replied cheerfully, "I'm buying it for you Merlin, it'll suit you I'm sure," he had promised.

"Did you buy anything else?" Merlin replied clicking through the history, "a three hundred quid replica crown really? That's expensive Arthur."

Arthur had shrugged a little sheepishly but he did not look sorry. Merlin had let him keep bidding on the crown until he won it for just under four hundred pounds. He had the money these days having saved most of what he had earned over the years; he had had little need to spend it. He did put restrictions on what Arthur could do on the computer after that though, just in case tried to by something more ostentatious.

Merlin had come home from the supermarket a few weeks after the eBay incident to find Arthur in his study, Merlin hadn’t exactly forbidden Arthur from going in there but nor had he told him he could. Arthur was sitting on the floor surrounded by Merlin's books and paintings; open in his lap was one of Merlin's older books about witches and dragons. Merlin had always stuck to writing what he knew, even if had been fact not fantasy in his time. Arthur appeared to be enjoying it as his fingers stroked over the pages, Merlin had cleared his throat softly and Arthur had looked up guiltily.

"I don't really understand a lot of this," Arthur had said quietly, "but I think it's good."
Merlin had joined him on the floor and they’d read the story together, Merlin explaining the complicated parts for Arthur, the shopping forgotten; Arthur's favourite ice cream had melted by the time Merlin had remembered it but he didn’t seem to mind much.

Over the months he had Arthur back, Merlin slowly began to trust that he wasn't going to be taken from him suddenly. Although he worried that Arthur's return signalled some sort of impending disaster he tried to ignore his fears and live in the moment as best as he could, something Arthur was relieved about.

They were sitting by the lake a common pastime for them these days, Arthur was watching Merlin tapping away at his laptop, working on a new story.

“How’s it coming along?” Arthur asked.

“Quite well I think, I’m about halfway through,” Merlin told him.

“And then you send it off to these people in London who turn it into one of your books?”

“Yes,” Merlin clarified.

“But you’ve never met these people?”

“Never needed to,” Merlin said shrugging.

“I was looking up other writers on the internet, it’s not actually necessary to hide away from the rest of the world, did you know?” Arthur said.

“And I told you why I’d given up on the idea of making friends Arthur,” Merlin said sighing at the old argument.

"You seem better though," Arthur observed, “I think you were depressed.”

Merlin rolled his eyes.

“No shit,” he muttered.

“But I think you’re getting better, the internet says you should probably see a special doctor, but I think you just might be ok,” Arthur told him hopefully.

"I feel better, happier," Merlin agreed, closing the laptop and moving closer to Arthur.

It was summer now and the evening was warm, with Arthur beside him, the lake no longer seemed so lonely.

"You were so sad," Arthur said quietly, "I'm so sorry you were alone," he whispered looping an arm around Merlin’s waist.

"I know Arthur and I was depressed, I really thought I was coping fine but I wasn't. I thought it didn't matter if I didn't eat or sleep because I couldn't die, but I was barely alive either," Merlin murmured, "I think I hoped that maybe I'd just fade away like the magic. It's exhausting Arthur, living forever when you have nothing to live for, when the one thing you want is never coming back."

"But I did Merlin, I came back," Arthur whispered tightening his hold on Merlin's waist, “show me some magic,” he asked softly.
Merlin stretched out his palm and the water before them shaped itself into dragons and forests, horses and knights, and finally Camelot itself complete with watery flags, shimmering in the fading light. Sitting there with Arthur’s comforting weight beside him Merlin allowed himself to believe that Arthur was back for him, just for a moment. He relaxed further and leant his head onto Arthur's shoulder and when he did not stiffen or shove Merlin away, Merlin let his eyes to drift shut.

He woke up a few hours later to Arthur shaking him awake gently.

"Hey Merlin it's getting cold, we should go inside," Arthur said softly, helping him up.

Merlin swayed tiredly against him, but Arthur had a firm hold on him.

"My laptop," Merlin worried.

"Already got it," Arthur assured him as he pulled him into the house.

Arthur practically carried the still sleepy Merlin to his room and deposited him on the bed gently, even kneeling to remove his trainers.

"Oh how different things are now Sire," Merlin said drowsily.

Arthur just smiled at him fondly and stood up to leave but Merlin in his half-asleep state grabbed Arthur's wrist in a moment of panic.

"Stay for a bit," he whispered, "please, you keep the nightmares away."

Arthur nodded and toed off his own shoes, Merlin closed his eyes expecting Arthur to sit in the chair so he let out a surprised gasp when he felt the bed dip and Arthur's strong arms wrap around him.

"Sleep Merlin, I'm here," Arthur promised.

When Merlin awoke the next morning, he felt more comfortable and secure than he had in years. Then he realised what the heavy weight around him was and he froze. He carefully extracted himself from Arthur's arms and off the bed; he tried to get out of the room before Arthur woke up but he tripped over his trainers and fell down heavily onto the floor.

"Sneaking off Merlin?" Arthur asked from the bed, "you do realise this is your room?"

"Arthur I'm sorry... last night... I was so clingy... I just-"

"It's alright Merlin," Arthur said calmly, "look I think we should talk."

Merlin watched Arthur carefully, nervously.

"I think... lately I've been feeling that maybe-"

"No Arthur," Merlin whispered.

"No?"

"I can't... I can't."

"I'm really not going anywhere Merlin, I'm here to stay and..." he trailed off crawling forward to lean over the edge of the bed where Merlin was curled up defensively.
He shook his head in disbelief and reached forward cupping Merlin's chin gently.

"Oh Merlin," he said fondly.

"Don't Arthur, look whatever it is you're feeling it's just because I'm all that's left of your old life," Merlin reasoned.

"Alright Merlin whatever you say," Arthur said, removing his hand but his eyes betrayed the fact he saw this as a challenge, "I'll make you see," he muttered under his breath.

Merlin shook his head and scooted back away from the bed.

"So Merlin what's the plan for today?" Arthur asked changing the topic.

"Er... we're going to try going into the town, on the bus," he reminded Arthur.

"Excellent, I'll go take a shower," Arthur said pleasantly, ruffling Merlin's hair tenderly as he left the room.

Merlin sat there rubbing his chin where Arthur had touched it, the feeling of Arthur's hand on his skin still burning, until he heard the shower click off and Arthur going back into his room. Only then did he make his way into the bathroom.

Arthur did not bring up the morning the whole journey into town, and he quietly followed Merlin around as he showed him the various shops.

"Can we go in there?" Arthur asked pointing to Waterstones.

"Yes ok, do you want a book?" Merlin asked as they went inside.

"Er... just want to have a look, it's a bit different from old Geoffrey's library isn't it?"

"Yeah," Merlin agreed.

"How are the books ordered?" Arthur asked.

"By alphabetical order of the author's last name, fiction is over there, crime there and children's there," Merlin said pointing out the different sections, "Sci-Fi and Fantasy, and Non-Fiction is upstairs," he informed him.

Arthur bounded upstairs eagerly and Merlin followed him feeling a little confused. When he got upstairs he found Arthur deep in the fantasy section looking at Merlin's little shelf. He grinned at Merlin as he approached.

"These are highly recommended by the booksellers of this shop M. Emerson," Arthur informed him, his eyes twinkling proudly.

Merlin smiled at him.

"There are books about you in here too," Merlin told him.

"The ones you told me were full of rubbish like me sleeping with Morgana?" Arthur asked with a hint of disgust at the thought.
"Yeah but you can have a look if you want," Merlin offered.

"Maybe another time," Arthur said quietly.

"Do you want to get some lunch then?"

"Now that is a good idea all this shopping has made me hungry," Arthur agreed.

"We haven't actually bought anything Arthur," Merlin reminded him as they exited the shop.

Arthur looped an arm around his waist as they walked back toward the high street and Merlin just couldn't pull away, reluctantly leaning into Arthur.

"I'm not pretending Merlin," Arthur whispered, "friends or more I'm here to stay."

"Ok Arthur, I believe you," Merlin replied shaking his head tiredly, "where do you want to eat?"

Arthur frowned at him.

"Arthur?"

"You don't believe me," Arthur accused but he did not sound angry, just sad.

"I want to though, you've no idea how much," Merlin admitted, and he did but he just didn’t dare to even try.

Having Arthur back was enough for his lonely heart. He did not want to be greedy and spoil things.

They were still standing in the high street arms looped around each other.

"You may be all I have left Merlin, but that isn’t why I care for you. I care for you because you’re the kindest and loyalist man I ever met and, I will show you that," Arthur promised, "but let’s get lunch first, pizza?"

"Alright," Merlin agreed resignedly, "I need to get cash out," he said tugging Arthur over to a cash machine.

Arthur leant against the wall as Merlin sorted out the money, staring at the passers-by with interest.

"Ok done," Merlin said.

They headed back down the street when Arthur stopped suddenly.

"Guinevere," he whispered.

"What?" Merlin asked surprised.

"There that woman, it’s Guinevere look!" Arthur said pointing to a woman chaining up her bicycle, "Guinevere! Guinevere!" he called out striding forward.

Merlin rushed after him to stop him before Arthur scared this poor woman but he stopped dead when the woman looked up and smiled at Arthur in recognition. It was Gwen. Merlin's stomach dropped and he swallowed hard, trying to fight the nausea he felt rising. He knew he'd been stupid to hope that Arthur was all his this time. He stood there motionless for what felt like an age, watching as Gwen hugged Arthur, beaming at him. He started to back away from them, to leave them alone as they talked, but somehow Arthur noticed him.
"Merlin? Where are you going? Come here Gwen says she knows where Elyan is and Leon!"

Merlin groaned quietly and sucked in a deep breath before walking toward them. Gwen pulled him in for a hug and he could not help but smile at her, albeit a little weakly.

"Hello Gwen," he said quietly.

"Oh Merlin," she whispered concerned, "Arthur says you never died, that you've been alive all these years."

"Yes but when did you come back? Who's been looking after you?" Merlin asked worrying that he had already failed her somehow.

"Looking after me?" she repeated.

"Gwen was born Merlin, born in this time. I've told her how you've had to teach me all about the modern world." Arthur explained.

"Oh."

"Yeah I started having these crazy memories when I was a teenager but thankfully Leon and Elyan had already gone through it so they were there to help me, I knew I'd find you again one day," she said to Arthur, smiling at him affectionately.

"Just Elyan and Leon?" Merlin asked trying to stay calm.

He felt like bursting into tears, even though he had no right. He had no claim to Arthur.

"Yes well we all grew up together last time so it makes sense really, I always kept an eye out for everyone else but so far no one," she admitted.

"Ah well I'm sure they're about somewhere," Arthur said positively, "this place is sort of big, I can understand why it's hard to find them."

"Exactly," Gwen agreed eagerly, "would you like to grab a coffee and catch up?" she asked hopefully.

"I would, I'd quite like to finally try this coffee substance that Merlin has forbidden, but we're going for lunch so maybe another time," Arthur apologised.

"Oh alright then," Gwen said looking disappointed.

It was nothing compared to what Merlin was feeling, he stared as Arthur exchanged numbers with Gwen and made a promise to text her later in the week. Gwen nodded looking rather upset and gave Merlin a strange look before she departed.

"Lunch then?" Arthur said turning back to Merlin.

Merlin shook his head slowly. "No can we go home please?" Merlin asked his voice trembling, it was all too much.

"Merlin you're shaking," Arthur worried taking his arm, "What's wrong?"

"I just want to go home, please," Merlin begged.

"Alright, alright Merlin we'll go home," Arthur said gently leading him toward the bus stop, keeping
a steady hold on him the whole way home.
The whole journey back to the house Arthur watched Merlin worriedly but Merlin could not even bring himself to reassure him that he was fine; he certainly was not fine anyway. He felt sick, his head was pounding, his eyes hurt, and he just wanted to curl up in bed forever. He told Arthur all of this as they approached the house, Arthur half carrying him just as he had done the night before.

Arthur led him to his bedroom and lowered him to the bed carefully, making sure he was comfortable before rushing out of the room, Merlin felt another wave of loneliness as he burrowed under the covers. When Arthur returned, Merlin heard him drawing the curtains closed before he approached the bed quietly.

"Merlin?" he whispered.

Merlin pulled the covers from his face and blinked at Arthur in the darkness.

"The internet says you have a migraine," Arthur informed him softly.

"Thanks WebMD," Merlin croaked closing his eyes again.

Arthur placed a cool hand on his forehead, stroking a thumb over his eyelids.

"I'm going to go to the shop, to get you some medicine alright?" Arthur said quietly.

Merlin nodded slowly.

"I'm leaving the bin by the bed in case you're sick, I'll be back as soon as possible," Arthur said worriedly.

Merlin was certain he must have imagined the press of lips to his damp forehead before he drifted into unconsciousness. He was woken again what seemed like mere minutes later.

"Sorry to wake you," Arthur murmured, "just take these and you can go back to sleep," he urged gently handing Merlin some tablets and a glass of water.

Merlin took the painkillers and lay back down.


"Hush Merlin, I'm here," he whispered.

"You should have gone for coffee with Gwen," Merlin told him.

"It's a good job I didn't," Arthur disagreed running a comforting hand through Merlin's hair.

"No I mean-."

"Just sleep for now Merlin," Arthur said soothingly.

Merlin slept for three days but he was not aware of what was happening for most of it. The painkillers left him pretty out of it and he was sure he had hallucinated Arthur spoon feeding him on one occasion and stroking his hair tenderly on another. However, he was certain that Arthur was there in the darkness with him the whole time, and his face was a constant picture of worry. Merlin found himself wishing that he was just imaging that, that he was asleep and dreaming, he never
wanted to see Arthur worried like that.

On the third day when Merlin woke up properly in the late afternoon, his head finally clear, Arthur was asleep in the chair beside the bed, a bowl of cold soup on his lap. Merlin could barely remember what had happened but it seemed like the spoon-feeding dream was real. He certainly did not feel hungry like he hadn't eaten for days, but thankfully he didn't feel sick either. He took the bowl from Arthur gently, careful not to wake him and wandered through into the kitchen.

As quietly as he could manage, he washed up the various dirty pots and pans, which were left in the sink thinking about what he should do next. Of course everyone had come back, he could hardly be that lucky. He wondered how long he would have everyone this time before they all left him behind again.

He sighed and rubbed his face with a soapy hand. Then there was Gwen; Arthur would go back to her of course she was his wife after all. Arthur may have wanted this thing between them genuinely. However, that was while they were the two last parts of the lives they’d once had, but that wasn't the case anymore. He had his wife and his knights, but as long as he kept Merlin as a friend he thought he might just be able to bear it. Merlin knew he should save himself the imminent pain and distance himself now but he couldn't bring himself to do it, he'd only just got Arthur back, he wasn't willing to let go yet.

"Merlin?" Arthur asked from the kitchen doorway.

"Yes Arthur," Merlin replied turning away from the sink and drying his hands.

"You're awake, are you alright?" Arthur asked watching Merlin as if afraid he would keel over.

"I'm fine Arthur," Merlin promised, "all better."

"Oh thank goodness," Arthur breathed clearly relieved, "I was worried about you."

"Thank you for looking after me Arthur," Merlin said sincerely.

"Of course," Arthur said tiredly and he sat down at the table heavily.

Merlin went back to the washing up and he finished it quietly aware of Arthur watching him the whole time. When he was done, he sat down at the table opposite Arthur.

"Look Arthur-"

He was interrupted by a beep.

"Did you just get a text?" Merlin asked shocked.

"Ah yes that'll be Guinevere, I think she was wanting that coffee quite soon," he looked down at his phone, "Hmm, she's asking if we want to come for dinner, do you think you feel up to it?"

"No Arthur, but you should go," Merlin insisted trying to sound upbeat for Arthur's sake, "she's obviously been waiting," he added.

"Yes well I told her you were ill, what did she expect? For me to just leave you wallowing while we drank coffee?" Arthur asked frowning at the phone.

"I don't know Arthur but you should go to dinner. It'll do you good," Merlin assured him.

"Do me good?"
"You can't spend all your time with me Arthur," Merlin said softly.


He texted Gwen back and she replied almost instantly.

"She's going to pick me up in a bit, she has a car," Arthur said sounding surprised.

"Most people have cars Arthur," Merlin told him, "you'll want to clean yourself up," he said nodding pointedly at Arthur's current state.

"Yes of course, I smell almost as bad as you," Arthur joked as got up to shower.

Merlin remained where he was, staring at the chair Arthur had vacated until he returned dressed in clean clothes.

"Are you sure you'll be alright Merlin?" Arthur asked.

"Yes Arthur, I'll be fine," Merlin said quietly.

Arthur regarded him carefully for a minute before nodding.

"I'm meeting Gwen at the road, so I'll see you later yeah?"

"See you later Arthur," Merlin said sadly, watching him go.

He stayed sitting in the kitchen for half an hour before he snapped out of it, deciding he was not going to allow himself to get into the state he had been in before Arthur returned. He showered and cleaned himself up before curling up on the couch with his laptop. He put the TV on some documentary show for background noise, not as good as Arthur's questions, but better than silence.

He poured his sorrows into his writing, spinning far darker tales than usual, until he felt a little better about himself. He could do this, after all he had before and this time around he was just Arthur's friend not his manservant, surely that would make it easier. He wrote until his fingers ached and his eyes burned, then he laid back on the couch drifting off to the sounds of the telly.

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"Only you could sleep more after sleeping for three whole days," Arthur drawled.

Merlin sat bolt upright, wide awake suddenly. It was daytime and he was covered with a blanket. Arthur was sitting in the comfy chair watching him smugly.

"I got back last night to find you drooling all over the cushions, thought I'd leave you there, I've carried you about enough lately," Arthur teased.

"You came back," Merlin whispered.

Arthur snorted at Merlin’s obvious surprise.

"Where else was I going to go?" he asked curiously, "by the way I invited Guinevere, Elyan and Leon over today, we're going to start the plan for tracking down everyone else. Unless you don't feel up to it.”

"When?"
"They'll be here in about an hour," Arthur informed him.

"Arthur," Merlin whined, "you should've woken me up sooner,"

"Now you know how it feels," Arthur said smugly.

"I thought you might stay at Gwen's," Merlin said quietly

"Why?"

"Arthur she's your wife," Merlin said frustrated, he really did not want to have to spell this out for Arthur.

"Oh yes I suppose she was, but now... wait..." Arthur trailed off realisation dawning on his face, "please tell me you didn't think... you thought I was going to leave you," he accused, walking over to the couch and kneeling beside it.

"No I just... look it's alright, I can hardly expect you to stay here now Gwen's back and it's fine really," Merlin babbled.

"No Merlin I'm not going anywhere-"

"But it's Gwen you love her!" Merlin cried, "you still love her?"

"Yes I suppose but not how-"

"And she loves you," Merlin said crossly, wringing his hands in frustration.

"She does, doesn't she?" Arthur said worriedly.

"Yes but that's good right?"

Arthur looked confused; he ran a hand through his hair.

"I don't know," he confessed.

"Look Arthur it's fine, I'll be fine, Gwen's your true love, you should go to her," Merlin said sadly, trying to hide his utter devastation at the turn of events.

"Maybe once but not anymore I-"

He was cut off by a knock at the door.

"I thought you said an hour," Merlin hissed as he went to answer it.

Arthur shrugged at him, too busy trying to work out what was going on in his own head.

Merlin pulled the door open to find Elyan, Leon and Gwen standing on his doorstep, Gwen rushed forward to hug him and Merlin couldn't do anything but hug her back.

"Sorry we're a bit early," she apologised "Arthur said it would be hard to find, so we set off early, but it was easier than I expected. How are you feeling Merlin?" she asked looking him over with such genuine concern that made his stomach twist uncomfortably.

"I'm fine but er... Arthur only just woke me up," Merlin explained sheepishly.

Elyan and Leon laughed, Gwen looked a little cross on Merlin’s behalf.
"Come in, Arthur's in the lounge, I'll just go get changed," he said stepping aside to let them through. Before he could rush off and hide Elyan surprised him and pulled him in for a hug strong, followed by Leon. "It's good to see you again old friend," Leon said warmly. “You too Leon,” Merlin said smiling back at his friends.
Merlin dawdled in his bedroom for as long as he could, fiddling with his clothes as he heard chattering and laughter coming from the living room. Finally when he knew he couldn't put it off any longer he sighed and changed his clothes before approaching the now quiet living room, surprised to find it was empty. He tracked everyone down to the garden, Arthur appeared to be showing them his plants. Gwen spotted him standing in the doorway watching them and she waved him over.

"Oh Merlin this place is beautiful, I can’t believe you built it all," she praised.

"Yes it's very impressive," Elyan agreed.

Merlin just nodded and tried to ignore Arthur’s curious gaze as it followed him around the garden. Gwen had not wanted to show up empty handed, so she had bought with her a small hamper of food and suggested they have a picnic. Everyone agreed so they gathered around in a circle, eating and sharing stories of their memories and their current lives. Merlin even volunteered a bit about his own; but he glossed over a lot, only Arthur knew the full story of his life.

The trio had lived in Glastonbury their whole lives and seemed surprised that they had never run into Merlin. However, when Arthur told them that Merlin had become a bit of a recluse, they accepted it and did not press the matter, seeming to understand why he’d hidden away.

Gwen was working as a nurse at the local hospital; her gentle caring nature being put to good use. Both Leon and Elyan were in the police force, after deliberating between that and the army throughout their university years. Apart from their memories of their past lives, they were fairly average and that was something they were pleased about. Leon informed them that he hoped the reason they had all been brought back, was just to be friends and lead normal lives without the worry of battles, dragons and other magical terrors.

Eventually though the conversation turned to tracking down their other friends.

"Can't you locate them magically?" Leon asked Merlin suddenly.

"Er... I don't know possibly, all my old books got lost though, these days what magic I do is instinctual," he explained nervously.

"Gaius once told me that your magic was special, that you never had to learn it," Leon informed him.

"Yes that's true I was floating objects around my house before I could walk or talk," Merlin explained ducking his head shyly.

Leon smiled at that thought.

"I bet you were a right little terror for your poor mother," Arthur chipped in, smiling at Merlin.

"Do you think they're back too?" Gwen asked gently, "Gaius and your mother."

"I don't know, probably not," Merlin said shrugging.

"But my dad is the same," Gwen pressed.

"Yes but I'm eleven hundred years old, I don't need a mother anymore," Merlin muttered.
"That’s a shame,” Gwen said sadly.

Arthur shifted closer to Merlin, a comforting weight by his side.

"What about the baddies?" Elyan asked, "Morgana and Mordred?"

Merlin shuddered at that thought and Arthur, already close enough to touch, wrapped an arm around his waist. This did not go unnoticed by Gwen, who frowned but did not comment.

"Maybe,” Merlin guessed.

"I'd like to speak to Morgana again," Arthur said thoughtfully, "and resolve our differences."

"We'll find them," Leon said confidently.

"Yes I'm sure we will," Elyan agreed, "but I was wondering when are you going to be marrying Gwen again Arthur? She has been smitten with you since secondary school," he joked.

"Elyan!" Gwen snapped blushing furiously and looking down at her feet, embarrassed.

Elyan looked between Arthur and Gwen sheepishly, Merlin tried to pull away from Arthur but he would not let go.

"I'm not," Arthur whispered.

"What?" Leon and Gwen asked in unison.

"You're not?" Elyan asked slowly, confused.

"I think that it's a little cruel this reincarnation business," Arthur said quietly, "giving you these memories and these feelings, you had other lives before them and to me it just seems cruel."

"You don't love me anymore do you?" Gwen cried, "Arthur I've waited for you since I was fifteen! You only had a few months, you could have waited," she sobbed.

"I do love you Gwen, just not the same," Arthur said worriedly.

"I can't believe you," she whispered and then she turned to Merlin, “this was you, you’ve taken him from me. You finally had him to yourself and you’ve turned him against me,” she hissed.

“No Gwen I haven’t,” Merlin whispered wanting to run away and hide from the mess he’d created.

“I’ve been waiting for him to find me Merlin,” she begged, “since school, my life has been on hold since I was fifteen. I’ve waited for ten years Merlin, how could you?" she demanded.

“I waited for a thousand,” Merlin whispered before clapping a hand over his mouth before he could say something worse.

She stared back at him, the fury in her eyes fading just a little. Even in her anger, she still felt for Merlin’s pain. She looked back to Arthur.

“I can’t compare can I? Now that you’ve finally seen it, I can’t compare,” she whispered, “did I ever?”

“Once,” Arthur answered softly, “I still love you but…"
“Leave it, just… I can’t do this, I can’t stay,” she sobbed.

“Gwen,” Merlin pleaded.

However, she shook her head and left the garden wordlessly. Elyan glared at Arthur before following her, Leon waited behind.

"She'll come around," Leon assured Arthur, "it's all a bit fucked up this reincarnation lark isn't it?"

"Yeah," Arthur agreed grabbing Merlin's wrist before he could make his escape and run inside the house, "I didn't mean to hurt her like that. I didn’t think before that she loved me back, because she's only just met me, I didn’t realise how it was inside your heads," he worried.

"It'll take time, ever since she remembered you she's gone on about the day you'll come back to sweep her off her feet," Leon said sadly.

Merlin finally got free of Arthur and fled back to the safety of the little house, but he turned and stood in the doorway, clinging to the wooden frame for support.

"I must have been such a disappointment for her," Arthur said quietly, "I do still love her, as much as I ever did," Arthur confessed.

"Just not as much as someone else?" Leon asked nodding toward Merlin and smiling kindly.

"He waited for me for a thousand years Leon, he was all alone. He loves me so much it terrifies me. He needs me Leon." Arthur said, his voice pained.

"But you love him?" Leon asked, his question seeming to veil a warning.

"More than I've ever loved anyone, more than Gwen I'm afraid. My love for him dulls all my other feelings and I need him too, as much as he needs me," Arthur explained quietly.

"Then maybe you should talk to him about it," Leon suggested, almost smirking at Arthur but not quite.

"He won't let me," Arthur said brokenly.

Leon just nodded to where Merlin stood frozen in the doorway.

"I think maybe now’s your chance, while he's too dumbstruck to talk back," Leon said clapping Arthur on the back for good measure before striding towards Merlin, "give him a chance yeah?" he said softly.

Merlin just nodded speechless.

"I'm going to head off now but I'll pop back in a couple of days yeah?" Leon said gently.

"Yeah alright," Merlin croaked watching Leon walk round the house and head off toward the main road.

He stepped into the garden slowly.

"Arthur?" he whispered.

"Okay Merlin sit down, I'm going to talk and you're going to listen alright?"
Merlin nodded and sat down on the grass, Arthur joined him so they were sitting facing each other. However, Arthur remained quiet.

"Arthur?" Merlin asked again.

"Just give me a second, I'm trying to decide what to say," Arthur said, thinking carefully, "what I told Leon was true, but I know you won't believe me so I have to do this right.

"I do understand why you don't believe me though, you've been alone all this time so it's hard for you to let me back in. I can see it in your eyes Merlin; at first you thought I was just going to disappear and then you thought I would leave, so you daren't let me get closer.

"I always cared for you, you know. When we were in back in Camelot I mean, you were my truest friend, I think I even loved you. Maybe not how you loved me but I did, then I found out about you and I was angry, truly furious, but I couldn't stay mad at you for long. Not when I saw everything you'd done for me, and you didn't even tell me half of it back then. Merlin I'd never felt so loved.

"I knew I was going to die, I could feel the darkness pulling me away from you, but I held on for as long as I could because you tried so hard, you were so desperate to save me. I didn't want to see your heart break so I tried to stay for you.

"I realised I truly loved you then, how could I not? I wanted to tell you but I didn't because I wanted you to move on and have your own life. Merlin if I'd known I was going to come back, if I'd known you would wait for me all this time I would have told you then with my last breath that I loved you, so you didn't have to wait all this time without knowing that-"

"Arthur!" Merlin choked but Arthur held up his hand, he still had more to say.

"I loved Guinevere, but when we found her again you'd already taken over my heart. From the moment I came back, it was you. She had no chance. Even if she had come back with me, I don't think I would have felt the same.

"No that's not right, I do feel the same, my love for Gwen is still there but it's like... she was my light once, still could be, but Merlin you're like the sun, and it burns. Don't laugh at me but you outshine everyone else," Arthur paused waiting for Merlin to chuckle at his sappiness but Merlin just watched him wide eyed, "I need you just as much as you need me, please say you believe me," Arthur begged.

"Yes, yes I believe you," Merlin whispered.

"I'll be here with you Merlin, whether we have to fight of aliens and zombies, or just live out here like hermits, it'll be you and me," Arthur promised leaning forward and pulling Merlin into his lap.

"I believe you," Merlin repeated, "I believe you," he said like a prayer pressing his forehead to Arthur's.

"Thank god," Arthur said relieved.

He leant forward and pressed his lips to Merlin's gently and carefully just in case, but Merlin throwing caution to the wind and embracing this thing with Arthur wholeheartedly, tangled his fingers into Arthur's hair and pulled him closer, parting his lips and sucking at Arthur's mouth with abandon.

"God's Merlin," Arthur breathed pushing him down into the grass and settling on top of him, "look at you."
Merlin raised his arms and looped them round Arthur's neck holding him close. Arthur kiss Merlin again fervently, until he was breathless and squirming beneath him. Merlin ran his hands down Arthur's back greedily until they reached the hem of his t-shirt and slipped underneath to feel warm bare skin. At the contact Arthur broke the kiss and start to suck at Merlin’s jaw and mouth at his throat. When Arthur got to his ears, sucking a lobe between his teeth, Merlin could not help but twitch and whimper helplessly, which only spurred Arthur on.

Arthur finally pulled away for a breath, panting heavily, face flushed and hair sticking up in all directions from where Merlin had pulled at it. He gasped when he looked down at Merlin.

"Your eyes," he whispered running a thumb over Merlin's cheekbone, just underneath his eye, "they're golden, they're beautiful."

"Can't help it," Merlin murmured, "it's the magic, it's all... at the surface it's hot. I'm burning and cold at the same time, Arthur I need... I need…" Merlin begged incoherently.

"I'm here, I've got you," Arthur promised tangling his fingers in Merlin's hair and thrusting his hips into Merlin’s, pressing him into the grass.

Merlin groaned and moved his hands to the waistband of Arthur's jeans, tugging desperately, eager for more skin, wanting to feel Arthur.

"Merlin wait," Arthur gasped catching his hands, "maybe we should slow down," he said looking at him carefully.

"I'm not going to break Arthur," Merlin murmured.

Arthur caressed his cheek tenderly.

"No... no you're not," he agreed, "I'd never let you," he whispered sitting up and removing his shirt, smirking a little, as Merlin whined at the loss of his weight.

Merlin followed suit trying to remove his jumper and his jeans with trembling hands, until Arthur's hands joined his and steadied them.

"Can't you just..." Arthur wriggled his fingers suggestively.

Merlin grinned at him and obliged his magic desperate for an outlet at this point.

"It could have been sexier if you'd undressed me," Merlin said cheekily, "but I suppose you’re too lazy for that."

Arthur just stared at him tenderly, eyes shining slightly.

"There you are," he whispered leaning back down and capturing Merlin's mouth urgently, as if Merlin contained all the air in the world.

He groaned low in his throat and caused Merlin to shudder with want. He moved his body against Merlin's, one hand beside Merlin’s head, fingers digging into the soft ground, holding himself steady. He moved his other down reaching between them and taking them both in hand.

"I'll take care of you Merlin," he murmured brokenly, like a promise, as he held them together firmly for a moment before he began to move.

Merlin couldn’t even speak, voice gone but he grabbed at Arthur’s broad shoulders, fingers leaving
red lines on his skin. He pulled at him desperately, needing him closer, as if that was possible. Merlin could not help but thrust into Arthur's hand frantically, his skin felt like it was on fire but he was shivering, trembling, the need almost too much after so long.

"I love you," Arthur said breathlessly between uncoordinated kisses barely more than bumping lips, “I love you, I love you,” he whispered like a plea.

Those words were was all it took to send Merlin over the edge with a quiet cry of Arthur. The lights in the house blazed white for a second before going out completely and leaving the garden in dusky shadows as Merlin spilled hot between them.

Arthur sped up his hand then and Merlin lying in the grass boneless and finally content gazed up at him tenderly. In the last of the daylight, he could see the way Arthur’s mouth was slack and his eyes slightly unfocussed as he ground down against desperately. He reached up and gently pulled Arthur’s head down for a kiss. That seemed to be enough for Arthur and he came, his cries muffled by Merlin’s mouth against his. The arm supporting him finally gave way and he collapsed onto Merlin heavily.

They lay there on the grass; the only sound their heavy breathing and the distant rumble of traffic, which sounded muted and faraway, almost in a different world. Eventually Arthur managed to get his head together enough to move, rolling off Merlin and lying down beside him. He grasped Merlin’s hand and entwined their fingers.

“I love you Merlin,” he promised.

“I know, I know, I love you too, always have,” Merlin murmured.

“Always?”

“Well not always, you were a bit of a prat when we first met,” Merlin joked.

He felt so light he could float away, probably would without Arthur holding him.

“You made me better,” Arthur said quietly.

“You were always good Arthur, just needed a push,” Merlin assured him.

Arthur made an agreeing sound.

“You blew out the lights,” he said smugly.

“Magic and electricity don’t really get on,” Merlin explained.

“Let’s go inside, clean up, light some candles and curl up on the sofa,” Arthur suggested standing up and pulling Merlin with him.

Merlin was almost asleep in Arthur’s arms when he was shaken back to reality frantically.

“Whuh?” he demanded.

“I just checked my phone, look what Leon sent me earlier before you blew out the power. You got him too apparently,” Arthur said grinning as he handed over his phone.

Merlin rubbed his eyes sleepily and took it. He peered at the screen curiously, it was displaying a YouTube clip.

Merlin did and found himself watching some sort of men’s anti-dandruff shampoo advert.

“Arthur what…” he trailed off, “it can’t be,” he whispered.

“It is!”

The model running a hand through his dandruff free locks was Gwaine, working the camera like a pro.

“Oh my god!” Merlin exclaimed.

“I know, only Gwaine,” Arthur agreed.

“The others might see it too,” Merlin suggested leaning back down onto Arthur’s chest.

“Yeah I think finding them might be a little easier now, if you want to,” Arthur said hesitantly.

“Yes I do, I really do,” Merlin promised.

“Well sleep now, we’ve got plenty of time,” Arthur murmured into his hair.

So Merlin did because for the first time in a thousand years he was truly content.
Merlin had had Arthur back for fifteen years now, which compared to his years alone may seem like very little, but it was absolutely everything to Merlin. They still did not really know why he was back, nothing to threaten Albion had happened but Arthur had his theory.

It turned out that that first night in the garden Merlin’s surge of magic hadn’t just taken out the power for their house, or the town, but for the whole county, and the ones surrounding it. It had taken the workers two days to put it right, Arthur had found the whole thing hilarious. After that night, Merlin’s magic had been almost out of control sparking at the smallest things. Like when Arthur had woken him with a kiss on his nose the bed had risen a foot in the air.

He’d never really lost it over the long years alone, but he’d just given up using it, he’d neglected it. When they’d gone back into the garden the next morning Merlin’s garden was blooming as if it was the first day of spring, rather than late summer and that was just the beginning.

Merlin could feel the call of the earth’s magic again and what’s more so could others, and they flocked to Merlin like sheep. Merlin did his best to help them learn to control it and stop them being afraid. How they always used to find him Merlin did not know but he presumed that his magic sent out some sort of beacon.

These days rarely came by anymore what with the special schools the government had set up, although some still insisted on making the pilgrimage to his cottage. The country’s response had surprised Merlin, he’d feared that the new sorcerers would be taken away for experimentation, but instead the return of magic had been welcomed with open arms. It seemed to be something desperately needed to chase away the greyness and lift the spirits of the people.

Arthur theorised that Albion’s mysterious time of need was this, that the country was going to need magic in the future and Merlin needed to provide it, but for that Merlin needed Arthur.

Over the years, their little gang had grown and grown, starting with Gwaine and spreading from there. As unlikely as it was they’d even found Hunith, Arthur tracking her down for Merlin who hadn’t even tried looking. Merlin could remember the day that Arthur had driven him over to that little house in Wales. Merlin had had no idea where they were until he saw his mother waiting for him by the door, she was older than she had been when Merlin had known her but her smile was the same and her hug as warm as ever. He hadn’t had her for long but he was glad to have her at all, and Arthur was there for him when she finally passed.

They’d missed Gaius but managed to find Uther in residential care and Arthur still went to visit him regularly. The once terrifying king had already forgotten most of the memories of his former life due to his Alzheimer’s but he still remembered Arthur, and the joy on his confused face was enough for Merlin to forgive him his former evils.

Morgana and Mordred were a sadder story, which had sent Merlin into a month of darkness only Arthur could pull him out of. They had found Morgana in a psychiatric hospital; she’d been in there since she was fourteen, her memories driving her to madness. Arthur had been reluctant to let Merlin come with him to visit but he had insisted. That first visit had been a disaster; Morgana had taken one look at Merlin and screamed until she’d been sedated.

Merlin had kept going back though, he still did once a month, sometimes she remembered him sometimes she didn’t but she allowed him to sit with her, hold her hand and apologise for not finder her sooner, for allowing her to get to this state.
Just once she had been lucid enough to speak to him properly and she told him that she didn’t blame him, that this was what she deserved for her wrongs. She told him she was sorry for all that she’d done and asked for him to let her go. He could not bring himself to do that but he did remove the memories of her former life. It did not fix her, he was too far gone, but she no longer had the painful visions every time she closed her eyes. She always remembered him when he visited, always smiled and ran up to him, childlike but content. She saw him as something of a protector figure. Slowly the guilt Merlin felt for the insanity she suffered this time around eased.

Leon had tracked Mordred down through the police and they had almost been too late. The haunted boy had run away from home the day his memories returned, three years before Arthur had returned, aged sixteen. His life on the street and his memory fuelled depression had led him to alcohol and drugs. When they’d found him, sleeping rough in London he had taken one look at Arthur thrown himself under a bus. Merlin had thrown all his magic after him refusing to let him die. The explosion of the bus without a single person injured had baffled police officers.

After that Mordred had begged Merlin and Arthur for forgiveness, Arthur gave it freely but Merlin struggled for a long time, it was not until Mordred cleaned himself up, with Gwaine’s help that Merlin took his hand and told him he was free. Mordred had left after that, the memories too much for him he had fled to Australia but he wrote to Merlin once a year and Merlin always replied. Merlin swore that if they were ever reincarnated again he would be there for them, to stop that from happening. He felt that no matter what wrongs they had committed in their previous lives they were born again with a clean slate. They were just ordinary people, ordinary children, before the memories came back and leaving them to be driven to insanity over and over again would be beyond cruel.

Gwen had struggled to forgive them; she blamed Merlin for taking Arthur away from her for a long time. She did eventually come around but always kept her distance, treating them a little coolly, especially Merlin. This was until the time Merlin had called for her to pick them up from Morgana’s hospital, the first time they had visited, because Arthur was too shaken to drive them home. She took one look at them curled up together in the back seat of the car clinging to each other desperately and something finally softened. After that she was much warmer toward them. It took her seven years but she eventually found Lancelot during a bad relationship with a colleague, one which nearly broke her but Lancelot was there to hold her together.

Although the group was a little bruised and broken in parts, they were mostly alright, happy together. Merlin was still writing, under the name Merlin Pendragon this time, which was the first time he’d published anything without a pseudonym. Arthur had gotten a job too, although Merlin had assured him he didn’t need to. Merlin had helped Arthur set up his carpentry business. He had gotten him driving lessons so that he could have his own van with Pendragon Carpentry on the side, and a dragon logo courtesy of Merlin.

But while he was happy, Merlin always worried how long it would last before he lost them all again and although he tried to push the thoughts to the back of his mind sometimes they would overwhelm him and he would lock himself away until Arthur could coax him out.

He was in his study ignoring the emails from his publisher and rubbing his temples, trying to fight off a dark day for a bit longer when Arthur burst in, grinning at him stupidly.

“Good day?” Merlin asked looking up from the computer tiredly.

“Just got back from the hospital,” Arthur informed him happily.

“Why? What happened?” Merlin demanded standing up and rushing over, patting him down gently for any signs of injury.
“Oh nothing, just a minor carpentry issue,” Arthur assured him, showing him his bandaged hand, “just a couple of stitches but -”

“You should have called me,” Merlin insisted.

“Nah I’m fine but listen to this, the doctor said something interesting, according to those medical records you made up ages ago I should be well over forty now,” Arthur informed him.

“Yeah well thereabouts, you were about thirty when…”

“Exactly, but because I hadn’t been to see a doctor since the toaster incident they wanted to do a check-up,” Arthur explained.

“Oh god Arthur what’s wrong?” Merlin whispered his eyes already prickling with tears due to his already fraught emotions.

“Absolutely nothing, in fact the doctor told me I was as healthy as a twenty-five year old,”

“Well you do keep fit,” Merlin said grinning in relief.

“No Merlin look at me, do I look forty-five to you?” Arthur asked slowly.

“No,” Merlin whispered.

“No. I’ve been a bit suspicious since Gwaine was round here the other day complaining about his greying hair. He asked me if I thought you would use the same spell on him and I didn’t get it at first but you haven’t been de-aging me. Merlin I don’t think I’m ageing,” Arthur said excitedly.

“Arthur,” Merlin murmured but he looked at him, truly looked at him and he could see that he was right. Arthur looked no older than the day he had stepped out of the lake.

He placed a hand on Arthur’s chest.

“It’s because I wasn’t reborn, I can’t die like the others Merlin, am I even alive?” Arthur asked.

“Yes you’re alive, you are so alive but maybe not conventionally,” Merlin guessed. “I suppose you were already dead, and your second life in Avalon was supposed to be eternal, maybe… maybe you’re just supposed to go back.

“Well I won’t, I’m staying put. I told you so you know. I told you I was sent back for you,” Arthur said, a little smugly.

“You really are,” Merlin breathed.

“So what happens when the sun explodes then?”

“Only you would ask something like that,” Merlin said allowing Arthur to wrap his arms around him, “I think… I think one day the world really won’t need me anymore and then I’ll finally be allowed into Avalon, and we can go on our own time, when we finally get tired,” Merlin said softly.

“So we have our forever?” Arthur whispered into his hair.

“We have our forever,” Merlin confirmed.
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