Summary

Merlyn Emrys is an exceptionally gifted student. In the summer, before the start of her senior year of high school, she's been accepted into the prestigious school: Camelot High. Moving from the small town of Ealdor to the big city of Albion, and staying with her Uncle Gaius; she's in for a whole new experience. Especially since her engineering idol, Dr. Drake Khilgharra, has personally chosen her to take on as a mentee...she couldn't be more thrilled.

Arthur Pendragon is Camelot High's star basketball player. He and his "knights" are currently coming into their senior years, and this is the year where they make an attempt for the Inter-City Basketball Championships; to leave behind a legacy at Camelot. The chance for eternal glory and, most importantly, scholarships to Albion University, they all have something to fight for. With everyone's expectations riding on him, and a father who wants him to take over the family business, it seems like he's carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Two complete opposites. But from two sides of the same coin. The graduating class of 2017 is sure in for a fun ride.
Hi there,

So this is my first ever attempt at writing fanfiction (so please take it easy on me!) I’ve been reading fanfiction for years, and I have loved all of them. This is my rendition of the famous and very beloved relationship between BBC characters: Merlin and Arthur, along with their cohorts. I just recently got an account on here so I’m not too familiar with any of the techniques of posting so please bear with me. If you have any comments please feel free to leave them. Any tips would be great too.

I've seen a lot of stories that've been "beta'd" but I'm not sure how to go about getting that done. Any info on that would be great too.

Aside from that, I really do hope you guys enjoy my work.

Thank you,
-P

***I do not own any of the BBC characters mentioned here. This is merely for writing/enjoyment purposes only***
Ealdor was a quiet little town that bordered the countryside and city. The summers that graced this town bathed one in a hazy, relaxed feeling; crickets chirping, birds singing, and the lake gets warm enough to swim in. But the winters, which were a complete juxtaposition, were harsh and tested one's grit to preserve. Luckily, for Merlyn Emrys, Ealdor was experiencing one of their best summers yet. She was on her way back from the local market, both arms wrapped around the large, brown paper grocery bag—that was filled to the brim. The nice thing about living in a small town was that nearly everything was in walking distance; the school, the hospital, the market, a small strip mall, etc. Everyone knew each other, and nothing can happen to you without the whole town hearing about. If Merlyn was honest with herself...it was getting kind of old.

"Don't drop the eggs." Merlyn mumbled to herself while walking up the last block towards her and her mother's house.

Merlyn Emrys was currently a high school student, coming into her senior year at Ealdor High. But, every day since summer break started, she has been repeatedly checking the mail to see if her acceptance letter for Camelot High has arrived.

Camelot High is an extremely prestigious school. So much so, that students who wish to apply there have to fill out an extensive application form, submit three referral letters (none of which can be from a family member or close relative), create a student academic portfolio showcasing your strengths, and have the marks to prove their ability to not only keep up with the rigorous Camelot curriculum, but to excel in it. Merlyn sent in her application last year when she heard that Dr. Drake Khilgarrah was hired on as the new Robotics Programming teacher, and she'd love more than anything to get a chance to go to Camelot High; just to even get to see him in person. But it has been weeks into the summer, and there was only 2 more weeks before school starts up again...Merlyn was losing hope.

"Mom! I'm home!" The door clicked shut behind Merlyn, and she kicked off her flip flops.

She heard a '...kitchen dear!' and headed towards the kitchen. Merlyn walked in to see her mom standing over a steaming pot that smelled like her favorite chicken soup, and placed the brown grocery bag on the kitchen counter.

"Hi dear, how was-"

"Mom, you wouldn't believe the massacre that happened at the market!" Merlyn said while beginning to unpack the groceries.
Hunith was always amused by the stories her daughter told, not necessarily for their content, but more so the dramatic flair she adds into them.

"...and Old man Simmons actually started an argument with me on how much the oranges cost. I told him, the sign above them said '.99 cents for a dozen.' But did he believe me?" Merlyn was currently brandishing a bunch of celery at her mother, who looked on with fond amusement.

"I'm guessing no?" Hunith said while adding more pepper to the soup.

"Yeah! He was accusing me of trying to scam him for his oranges. His oranges mom. Why exactly would I want to scam oranges anyway?!" Merlyn threw her hands up in exasperation and continued to pace around the kitchen to put stuff away.

She was so caught up in her story telling that she failed to noticed a large manila envelope laying on the counter beside the fruit bowl—which ironically had one orange left in it.

"You know." Merlyn turned abruptly while slamming the snack cupboard shut. "I think Old Man Simmons is still out to get me."

"Hmm? Please do explain dear." Hunith said distractedly while placing two bowls of hot soup down on the kitchen counter, and made an attempt to move the letter discreetly to try and catch Merlyn's eye.

"It's because he still blames me for breaking his window," Merlyn said, "but it wasn't my fault, Will had to go and be a clot pole and duck when I threw the basketball at him. How was I suppose to know that that window belonged to his cat's room?!"

Merlyn washed her hands, and dried them on the towel and sat down across from her mom.

"Yes dear, how very unfair." Hunith's eyes were dancing with amusement, and she could barely suppress her smile.

"I'm starving mom, and this smells ama-" Merlyn glanced sideways and felt her throat go dry.
A silence filled the kitchen, and the only sounds were from the faint ticking of the clock hanging over the water cooler. Merlyn raised a shaky hand to grab the envelope. On the front there was a stamped picture of Camelot High's school crest, a lion rearing up on its hind legs with its paws in the air. Below the crest was the school motto written out in neat cursive: United We Stand. Divided We Fall.

"I-I-Is this..." She trailed off, and looked up at Hunith.

"It was delivered right after you left to go get groceries. Open it up." Hunith said while nodding encouragingly.

Merlyn paused mid-rip, and looked up at her mom. "What if."

Hunith shook her head sternly, and said, "no ifs. You started it, you finish it guns blazing."

"Right." Merlyn nodded and tore the rest of the envelope open. Hunith watched as her daughter began to read the contents of the letter, and worried her lip.

CAMELOT HIGH

AUGUST 18, 2016

Director Geoffrey Monmouth

100 Albion Way N.W.

Albion City, A0PM1E

Dear MS. EMERYS,

I am pleased to inform you of your acceptance into CAMELOT HIGH. After examining your impressive application we are thrilled to have such an academically outstanding student join our school.

"MOM I'VE BEEN ACCEPTED!" Merlyn leapt out of her chair and frantically jumped up and down.
"Oh congratulations sweetheart!" Hunith ran around the counter and threw her arms around Merlyn's shaking frame.

"Does it say anything else?" Hunith asked.

Merlyn quickly went back to reading the letter, and nearly fainted at what she read next.

"Upon further examination of your student academic portfolio Dr. Drake Khilgarrah has personally requested to take you on as his mentee and provide additional tutelage should you be so inclined to accept-I ACCEPT! I ACCEPT!" Merlyn threw her arms up and ran around the kitchen while waving the piece of paper over her head.

"I'M GOING TO CAMELOT HIGH! I'M GOING TO..." Merlyn trailed off when she turned to look at her mom. "Mom?"

Hunith quickly wiped her eyes of the tears of both happiness and sadness off her cheeks. "I'm fine sweetheart. Just caught up in my own emotions."

"I could-" Merlyn began.

Hunith stopped short of a glare, but waved her finger towards Merlyn nonetheless. "You will not decline this offer Merlyn. You're a hard working student, and I am filled to the brim with pride that you've been accepted into such a fine institution. We both knew that Ealdor High would not be able to sustain a mind like yours. This." Hunith reached out and grasped both of Merlyn's hands that were clutching onto her acceptance letter.

"Is a once in a lifetime chance, and I will not let you throw it away for fear of leaving me alone," Hunith's voice turned soft as she gazed down at Merlyn, "your father would have been so proud of you."

Merlyn felt her throat swell, and nodded her head while smiling. The two of them stood in silence for a moment, this usually happens whenever the topic of Balinor Emrys was brought up. Merlyn's father passed away about a year and a half ago, his death took a toll on the two of them. But time passed, wounds scar up, and the two of them realized that life goes on and they can move on together.
Hunith swiped at her eyes again, and gestured to their untouched bowls of soup. "Well we can't let lunch go to waste, let's eat!"

Merlyn nodded and went back to her seat. As they were eating in silence, Merlyn couldn't help but observe Hunith. She's definitely gotten older, she could see lines of exhaustion mixed in around her eyes; the same eyes that Merlyn inherited. Most people said upon meeting them that Merlyn looked quite like her mother; fair skinned, sharp cheekbones, blue eyes. But there were smaller details that she got from her father; hair as dark as the night sky, and ears that unfortunately...stick out just a bit. Merlyn felt the tips of said ears go red at the thought of being made fun of again for them.

"...so you'll of course be staying with your Uncle Gaius." Merlyn snapped out of her own thoughts and focused on what her mom just said.

"Will that be okay with Uncle Gaius?" Merlyn said while blowing on her soup spoon.

"Of course dear. He'll always keep his door open for you. It was unfortunate that he couldn't have been one of your references for your application. You'd probably have gotten the acceptance letter much quicker since he works at the school as the head physician." Hunith wiped her mouth with a napkin.

"It's okay. It's better this way, I know I got into the school based on my own merit alone." Merlyn glanced over at the letter, and felt another surge of excitement and happiness rush through her.

"Yes. But you'll have to behave yourself Merlyn." Hunith's voice took on that stern tone of a mother's and began to list off a million things a minute.

So the plan was that Merlyn would be taking a red eye bus tomorrow night in order to arrive in the morning on Saturday, where she will meet Uncle Gaius. It was quick, but the sooner she gets out there the quicker she can become familiarized with her new environment. The two of them spent the rest of the afternoon packing, and after a quick phone call with Uncle Gaius; to confirm the plan, the two of them ate a quick dinner and after began to get ready for bed.

"Guess what dad?" Merlyn held up the picture frame containing a photo of the three of them standing in front of the house when it was first built. Balinor had little 6 year old Merlyn up on his left shoulder and Hunith wrapped tightly around the middle with his right arm. It was Merlyn's
favorite photo, and now that she can look at it without crying she felt a sense of peace with all the memories that it invoked. "I got in."

She gently placed the picture frame in her suitcase and zipped it up. The nerves were swirling around her stomach. Do I want to throw up? Merlyn thought while laying face down on her pillow. But the nerves she felt were mixed in with excitement and it was a miracle that she was able to get any sleep at all.

The next day Merlyn spent running around the house, frantically trying to pack last minute things, and made sure everything was set so her mom didn't have to worry about looking for the house paperwork, or which bills need to be paid first and which ones had more of a leeway. Once mid-afternoon hit she realized that everything that needed to be packed was packed, and that there was nothing else left to do but wait.

Merlyn decided to take one last walk around Ealdor, something to remember when she was home sick. The sun was slowly moving across the sky, birds were chirping happily from their nests, the heat of the morning was slowly disappearing and Merlyn felt drowsy. Merlyn found herself stopped in front of Ealdor High and contemplated going in. The building was old looking, made of old red-brown bricks, and the windows were tinged grey from all the dust that never seemed to disappear. The inside of the school didn't look must better; narrow hallways, old, almost rusted over lockers, a couple of trophy cases, and old wooden doors that creaked loudly if you stepped in the right spot on the ground.

"Don't know if I'll even miss the school..." Her voice trailed off.

Merlyn started to have flashbacks of some of the meaner jokes the kids played on her during the school year. She walked past the janitor closet she was locked in during her first week of Grade.9. Under the archway where some of the girl had strung her clothes to mid-way through the year. She glanced out the window from the second story floor, at the lake that was used for swimming classes in gym, her textbooks nearly drowned in that lake the months following the archway incident. Honestly it wasn't so bad during that year, she had Will to look out for her most of the time. He was a senior though at the time, and once he left for Albion University Merlyn found ways to adapt.

The kids didn't hate her or tease her because she was mean to them, but a lot of them just didn't like how smart she was. She's learned over time how to blend in and try not to bring much attention to herself in class. Will always reprimanded her for this, telling her not to hide her talents just because other people didn't understand. Merlyn stopped in front of one of the glass trophy cases and peered in.

William Turner
Will Turner was like a big brother to Merlyn, even though she's an only child. He looked after her and Hunith when Balinor passed away. Merlyn was excited to be able to see Will more often now that she'll be moving out to Albion. He gets to come back during the summer to visit for a few weeks before having to go back to work. He left some time into July and Merlyn couldn't wait to surprise him once she gets into the city.

Merlyn found herself sitting under the willow tree that grew beside the lake. She glanced up at the school building, no immediate feelings of sadness appeared...or any at all for that matter. But what she will miss was how clear, and blue the sky is, how simple life is in Ealdor. The warm wind gently brushed against her skin and she felt herself dozing off.

BZZZZZT

BZZZZZT

Merlyn jolted upright, she looked around confused. She quickly remembered where she was and noticed that the sky has become significantly darker. Merlyn's phone was still buzzing away in her pocket, which meant someone was calling her.

"Hey mom." Merlyn said while getting up off the ground and brushed off her jeans.

"Sweetheart do you know what time it is?!" Hunith rushed out. Merlyn moved her phone away from her ear and glanced down at the time. SHIT!

"Sorry! I'll be home real quick!" Merlyn quickly hung up and began to sprint home. How could she have fallen asleep for so long?! As she pounded down the sidewalk and hung a sharp left she nearly ran over Old Man Simmon's cat. It hissed violently at her and she just nearly avoided the cat's sharp claws.
"Sorry!" Merlyn called out while Old Man Simmon's said some very colorful words in her direction.

Dinner was eaten later than usual, and they had to eat quickly, because it would take about an hour to drive out to the bus station. Merlyn and Hunith loaded the trunk of their old family car and headed off. Hunith had to calmly remind Merlyn to watch her speed every now and then when she would become distracted and step too hard on the gas pedal. Ealdor became smaller and smaller as their car ate up more kilometers.

They got to the bus station with 15 minutes to spare, and the two of them took a seat on the benches near the bus loading zone once they dropped off Merlyn's suitcase.

"It's a shame no one else is here to see you off..." Hunith said while tucking a strand of Merlyn's hair behind her ear.

Merlyn shrugged. "Wasn't really that well liked mom. Not that surprised."

"You'll do wonderful out in Camelot. I just know it." Hunith said while giving Merlyn a hug.

"Thanks mom." Merlyn whispered.

She felt the stinging heat behind her eyes, and the swelling of her throat. Don't cry! Merlyn thought while hugging her mom tighter. The announcement came on overhead that Bus 8 was now boarding for Camelot. The two of them separated and Merlyn picked up her backpack.

"I miss you already." Hunith had unshed tears in her eyes, but there was a big smile on her face.

"Me too. " Merlyn said, "remember to stay the night at the hotel. I don't want you to drive back in the dark. Oh I also left instructions on the fridge on how to fix the appliances in the house if they break down. Remember to turn the TV off before unhooking the wires at the back, also-"

"I'll be fine sweetheart. You better get going." Hunith started to wave Merlyn off.
"...I don't have to go." Merlyn said while glancing over her shoulder at the bus and back towards Hunith.

"Yes you do." Hunith said sternly.

Merlyn let out a shaky breath. "If anything were to happen to you..."

Hunith pulled Merlyn forward and placed a kiss on her forehead. "I'll know where to find you. Now hurry dear, there's only a few people left."

"Okay. Okay. Bye mom!" Merlyn called out over her shoulder while waving. "I love you!"

"I love you too." Hunith whispered under her breath and waved goodbye.

The overnight bus was filled with very...interesting people, Merlyn thought while taking her seat at the very back of the bus. She placed her bag below her feet and tugged on her hoodie, she removed her sneakers and curled up in her seat; one of the many perks of being petite, you pretty much fit anywhere. Once the bus pulled out of the station, she felt herself start to tear up and Merlyn was glad that the bus wasn't packed, because no one was sitting beside her to see her cry. After a few minutes she collected herself, and wiped her eyes dry.

"It's not like I won't see mom again." Merlyn muttered while rolling her eyes.

The bus speaker system crackled to life, and she heard the voice of the bus driver come through.

"The estimated time to Camelot is 6 hours. Please enjoy your rest." Merlyn leaned back in her seat and put her headphones into her ears and closed her eyes. She hit play on her phone and started to drift off.
Hi there!

So this chapter is longer than the first one I posted. I haven't really decided how long I want each chapter to be necessarily, but I'm kind of going off of a 'it's going to be as long as I need it to be' basis. Personally I love when fanfiction writers wrote long chapter so there was lots of stuff for me to read, so I also want to be able to do that as well. I haven't figured out what kind of posting schedule I want just yet, but I also don't want to leave you guys waiting for weeks, so I'll figure something out!

I have tried to edit this chapter as much as I could. Any mistakes I've missed I'll probably catch the next time I read through it.

Again I hope you guys enjoy this chapter. Comments would be appreciated, but not necessary.

Thanks!

THWACK!

"OW!" Merlyn cried out, while clutching the right side of her head.

A couple people woke from their slumber due to Merlyn's outburst, and a few experienced what Merlyn had experienced. Which was the bus hitting a large pothole and causing it to jolt and shift violently.

Merlyn blinked and rubbed the sleepiness from her eyes, the throbbing where she hit her head against the glass window was now a dull ache. She quickly pressed her face against the window when a large green sign caught her eye that said:

**ENTERING CITY LIMITS:**

**WELCOME TO ALBION CITY**

"We will be pulling into the bus terminal in 20 minutes. Welcome to Albion." The bus
speaker clicked off once the driver made his announcement.

Merlyn yawned and stretched out in her seat, she pulled out her cell phone and saw that the time was only 7AM. Merlyn noticed that she already received a message from Hunith.

Mom: Arrive yet?  Sent: 5:30AM

Merlyn typed back her response. Yeah, 20 minutes till we get to the bus stop! Are you home already?  Sent: 7:00 AM

Hunihth's reply was almost instantaneous, Merlyn could basically feel her mom's sense of relief.

Mom: Yes. Left around 430 this morning, couldn't sleep. But glad to hear you arrived safely.  Sent: 7:00 AM

Merlyn scowled at her phone screen and began to type a little harder than necessary. There were more cars now that were driving alongside the bus, which meant they were getting further into the city.

That wasn't a safe decision mom. It's still pretty dark on the roads around that time.  Sent: 7:02 AM

It took a little longer for Hunith to reply back to Merlyn. Merlyn just knew her mom was chuckling to herself and was purposefully taking her time to reply back to her.

Mom: Yes. Yes. Sorry dear, I'll know better next time. Okay, I'm going to get ready to head into the office. Take care, my love will always be with you. xoxo  Sent: 7:15 AM

The bus pulled to a stop in front of a red light and Merlyn responded to her mom.

Love you.  Sent: 7:15 AM
Albion City was extremely busy, Merlyn thought while pulling her backpack up from the floor and hugging it to herself. There were lots more cars, and it was 100x's louder than Ealdor; people littered the streets in packs, and many of them were hailing for a taxis-if they weren't already driving in their own vehicles. Plenty more buses were on the road, and the roads themselves were much bigger than the ones back home. Even the stores were bigger, some were built high, and some were built for width; lots of people were going in and out of these buildings as well. A lot of them looked brand new, and well kept, no aging wood or dusty windows in sight.

'This must be the Pendragon Enterprises building Will told me about...' Merlyn craned her neck while pressing into the glass to see the lavish building. It was easily the tallest building in downtown Albion City; it looked like it was made entirely of glass, and as the bus drove past it, Merlyn could see a large golden P embellished onto one side of the building. The building captivated Merlyn, it was like a showcase of Uther Pendragon's fame and power. You'd have to have lived under a rock if you didn't hear news of Uther's success, Merlyn thought while she followed the building with her eyes as the bus exited onto a bridge.

"We will be arriving in 10 minutes." Merlyn peered into the aisle way and noticed other passengers were getting up to pull their bags down from the overhead storage nets. Some of the people were grumbling and groaning about how long the bus ride was, she was just getting excited to get off the bus and step foot into the city.

Merlyn was the last to get off the bus, and also the last one to get her luggage from beneath it. She followed a small group of people into the bus terminal and instantly felt lost; thousands of people were hustling from one terminal to the other, others were holding up signs and calling out the names on them. Merlyn went up onto her tip toes to see if she could spot Uncle Gaius through the sea of people.

"Uncle Gaius?" Merlyn called out while trying to move through the wall of people. She pulled out her cell phone and held it up to her ear, and tried to block out all the other voices around her.

"HELLO? MERLYN?!" Merlyn winced and quickly lowered the volume.

"Yeah it's me, Uncle Gaius, where are you?" She scanned her surroundings, trying to locate the familiar head of white hair.

A small shuttle bus honked at Merlyn, and she quickly jumped out of the way.
"I'M AT ENTRANCE 8! SORRY IT'S VERY LOUD HERE!" Merlyn looked up at the overhead signs and saw that she was at Entrance 5.

"I'm at Entrance 5 Uncle Gaius. I'll walk over to you." Merlyn said while pulling her suitcase forward.

"PARDON?"

"I'LL MEET YOU AT ENTRANCE 8!" Merlyn's ears turned red when she noticed an elderly couple jumped away from her shouting. She nodded her head and smiled apologetically and hurried forward.

"Sorry...." Merlyn mumbled, "excuse me."

As she got closer to Entrance 8, Merlyn began to break out in a slight jog. Merlyn looked left and right trying to spot Uncle Gaius, when said man came into view she raised her right hand and began to wave energetically.

"Uncle Gaius!"

Gaius turned towards the voice who called his name and smiled; he opened his arms just as Merlyn rushed forward to hug him. She has grown taller, he thought, and Gaius could see how much she looked like Hunith when she smiles."Merlyn! It's been so long, you've grown so much!"

Merlyn smiled. "It's good to see you again, Uncle Gaius."

Gaius patted her on the shoulder. "Good to see you again too Merlyn. You look so much like your mother."

"Yeah, that's what everyone back home said too," Uncle Gaius gestured for her to follow him to the parkade.

"Kind of uncanny. Almost like living with my sister again," Uncle Gaius pretended to shiver in fear, and Merlyn let out a laugh while nudging him with her shoulder.
"Uncle Gaius!" He held up his hands and smiled.

"Only joking."

The two of them chatted idly while waiting for the cross-walk light to turn green. Merlyn couldn't help but notice that the years she hasn't seen Gaius has somewhat caught up with him. His hair was slightly longer, and there was more white in it now compared to before. The last time she saw him was at her father's funeral; it was a hard day for everyone. Especially for Uncle Gaius, he was the best man at the wedding...he was dad's best friend. The light turned green and the two of them crossed the road. Once inside the parkade Merlyn followed Uncle Gaius to his black Jeep—well at least some things don't change, she thought.

"I don't believe I've offered you my congratulations Merlyn. Camelot High." He clapped a hand on her shoulder once they reached the Jeep and he opened the trunk. "Hunith and I are beaming with pride. Your dad would have been proud too."

"It's no big deal Uncle Gaius." Merlyn blushed, and she smiled when Uncle Gaius gave her the famous eyebrow raise...yeah some things are best kept the same, Merlyn thought with a smile.

The car ride to Uncle Gaius's apartment took 15 minutes, they caught up with what has happened in each other's lives. Gaius was now the head physician at Camelot High, and he expressed his unhappiness when he was told that he wasn't allowed to be Merlyn's reference (which made Merlyn happy that he wanted to be in the first place). Merlyn told him how Hunith was now the new head of Human Resources, and then Merlyn pulled out a couple of her robotics blueprints to show Uncle Gaius. He glanced over at them when they were stopped at a red light and marveled at the amount of detail and thought that went into those designs. After that, Gaius began to point out important places for Merlyn to remember while driving.

Merlyn watched as the hustle and bustle of people thinned a bit as they turned onto a quiet looking neighbourhood. There were tall apartment buildings that lined both sides of the street, with a matching cedar tree planted in front of each one; it was very picturesque to what Merlyn was expecting. They pulled up to apartment building number 12, and Merlyn unclicked her seatbelt and got out of the car. She threw her backpack onto her shoulders and went to the trunk to get her suitcase.

"I've got it Merlyn! Just head to the front door." Uncle Gaius closed the trunk of his Jeep and gestured for Merlyn to go ahead.
"Er...are you sure Uncle Gaius?" Merlyn hesitated while reaching out for her suitcase handle, "I'm more than capable of-"

"I'm not that old Merlyn." Uncle Gaius's eyebrow rose, and Merlyn quickly about faced and scurried up the steps to the apartment door.

"If you ever find yourself forgetting the key, I have one hidden under that fern." Uncle Gaius whispered while unlocking the front door. "But, then again, with that memory of yours Merlyn...you might not need it."

Merlyn nodded and followed him inside to the foyer, they took off their shoes and began to climb up another small set of stairs (these ones were carpeted) with the suitcase thunk-thunk-thunking up each step. He pushed open a red door and walked right in.

Uncle Gaius's apartment gave off a very cozy feeling, Merlyn thought while walking into the living room; just on the left upon entering. There were random piles of paper, books, and knick-knacks, of varying sizes, littered around the apartment; it appeared that Uncle Gaius tried to tidy up in anticipation for Merlyn's hasty arrival.

There was a TV hanging above the small fireplace in the living room, and above it on the mantel were dusty looking picture frames. Merlyn wandered over and peered at each one. There was one of Uncle Gaius and her mother when they were younger, one of Merlyn blowing out the candles of her birthday cake at her 7th birthday party, there were photos of Gaius and his old classmates graduating from medical school; even one of Gaius and his on-again off-again girlfriend Alice. Merlyn paused at the last one, and felt the need to pick it up. It was a photo of Uncle Gaius with her dad on his and Hunith's wedding day; dad had his arm thrown over Gaius's shoulder and was beaming at the camera while holding an exploding bottle of champagne over their heads. Uncle Gaius looked like he was laughing his head off and was hugging her dad around his torso trying to pick him up. She placed the picture frame back in its spot and turned back to exploring the apartment.

"Your room is on the second floor, first door on the right, I've already placed your suitcase in there." Uncle Gaius said while walking back down the stairs.

"Thank you!" Merlyn said while walking into the kitchen.

"Cups are over the coffee maker, pots and pans are in this cabinet." He pulled open the beige cabinet door and waved his hand vaguely at some pots. Merlyn, out of curiosity, pulled open the fridge to see what was inside...which wasn't much.
"I don't usually have much time to go grocery shopping during the week..." Uncle Gaius said sheepishly while scratching the side of his head.

"You can leave that to me Uncle Gaius!" Merlyn beamed up at him and closed the refrigerator door. "Mom warned me that you weren't much of a cook."

"I have managed to feed myself these past 20 odd something years. I can cook." Gaius said while ruffling Merlyn's hair. Merlyn laughed and walked out of the kitchen and towards the staircase.

"I'm going to go take a shower Uncle Gaius!" Merlyn called over her shoulder and climbed the stairs up another level.

Uncle Gaius's voice sounded muffled, but Merlyn heard something along the lines of, "I'll be in my study!"

Her room wasn't anything extravagant; there was a full sized bed pushed up against the left wall of the room, a small desk sitting beside it, and a desk lamp placed on top; all of which were located below a window, a medium sized, chestnut colored dresser was beside the door, and a small closet to her far right. Merlyn immediately threw herself face first onto the bed.

"This. Is. Amazing!" Merlyn squealed into her pillow and rolled over.

She grabbed the second pillow beside her and hugged it to her chest. This feels like a dream, Merlyn thought and lightly scratched her hand. She pulled out her cell phone and unlocked the screen, she scrolled down her contacts list (which wasn't much to begin with) and hit call when she found her mom's caller ID.

"Hi sweetheart!" Hunith greeted. In the background she could hear phones going off, and paper being rustled about.

"Hey mom." Merlyn said while smiling up at her ceiling.
Uncle Gaius decided that it would be best if they just ordered pizza for an early lunch, and Merlyn quickly agreed, she wasn't exactly sure what could have been made with half a jug of milk, half a stick of butter, and a jar of pickles that resided within the fridge. They sat in the living room on the comfy black leather couches and watched a movie together in silence.

"Dr. Drake called." Uncle Gaius said taking a sip of his Coke.

Merlyn choked on her bite of pizza, and spun around to face Gaius. "What?"

"Yeah, he asked me if you would be able to go into school next week so he could show you around the Robotics Lab." Gaius said while wiping his hands.

Merlyn slid forward on the couch, and looked at him with wide eyes. "And did you tell him yes? What did you say exactly? What did he say exactly? How did he know I was in town? Of course I want to go see the Robotics Lab! Maybe I should bring my blueprints-oh! But what if that's jumping the gun? I should-"

"Probably take a breath Merlyn." Gaius said, while moving Merlyn's can of Coke out of the way before her hand could knock it over onto the TV remote.

Merlyn pulled in a deep breath. "Right. Okay done. So did you tell him yes?"

"Of course I did," Gaius grabbed another slice of pepperoni and pineapple pizza, "he said for you to meet him at 11 in the morning, and for you to bring some of your work in for him to see."

"H-He wants to see my work?" Merlyn started to bounce her leg up and down.

Gaius watched as Merlyn began to nervously bite her lip, and bounce her leg. He almost found it amusing, and he reached over to stop her leg. "It will be fine Merlyn. Calm down. Getting worked up will do you no good."

"Right. Right. You're right." Merlyn nodded her head and took a deep breath, she popped the last bite of crust into her mouth and chewed.
"Drake is a good man, you have nothing to worry about Merlyn. Just be yourself," Gaius stood up and grabbed the his empty can of Coke, "well I'm done. How about you?"

Merlyn nodded, and swallowed. "Thanks, Uncle Gaius."

"I'll clear everything away. You go finish unpacking, sorry I can't take you into around the city today; lots of reports I have to catch up on, but tomorrow we can go get some school supplies and I can show you around the city then."

"Okay, that'd be great!" Merlyn stood up, and carried her paper plate over to the trash and threw it away.

Merlyn didn't really have many items in her possession. Her suitcase contained mostly clothes, and a few items from home. Like the picture frame that contained a family photo, a couple of her favorite books (varying in genres), her laptop, a couple of her robotic prototypes she built, and the alarm clock Will got her when he first moved to Albion; it had the Excaliburs basketball team logo etched onto the top of it. But Merlyn thinks Will got it for her as a form of punishment (she had the tendency to sleep late and sleep in a lot).

"Speaking of which..." Merlyn crawled over to her phone charger and unplugged her phone.

RIIIING

RIIIING

"I can't believe you didn't call me as soon as you arrived into Albion!" Will drawled, "my feelings are hurt."

Merlyn laughed. "Sorry Will, been settling in at Uncle Gaius's."

"S-S-Sure..." Will yawned, and Merlyn could hear faint typing in the background.

"Are you at work? Isn't it Saturday?" Merlyn squished the phone between her right ear and shoulder. She shook out one of her t-shirts and began to hang it up in her new closet.
"R&D has been trying to work overtime so we can be ready for the Christmas launch." More typing could be heard as Merlyn listened to Will talk.

"Oh! You know, I saw the Pendragon building today. It looks even more impressive in person compared to the photo you sent me." Merlyn was currently deciding which side of the closet her sweaters should go on.

Will snorted. "Yeah. The outside looks pretty good, but I'm in the basement so don't really see a lot of those suit and tie types down here."

Merlyn rolled her eyes. "You're so hospitable Will."

"You fucking bet I am! Sharing my office currently with 4 other people because of renovations and SOMEONE KEEPS STEALING MY PENS!" Merlyn started to laugh and put her socks into the dresser beside the door.

"Have you had lunch yet?" Will immediately changed subjects.

Merlyn hummed, and hung her scarves up. "Yup! Uncle Gaius ordered us pizza."

"Ah, okay. How about I take you guys out for dinner tonight then? I'm off at 6, but have to finish some paper...work," Will shuffled some things around in the background, "I should be out by 6:30 the latest."

"Okay, sounds good. I'll go tell Uncle Gaius," Merlyn knelt down and zipped her suitcase shut. "Do you know where Uncle Gaius's apartment is?"

There was a sudden loud crashing noise and someone shouting in distance. Merlyn could hear Will furiously rolling around in his office chair.

"OI! I'M WORKING ON THAT!" A muffled response.
"GO OFFER YOUR HELP TO JENKINS THEN!" More muffled responses.

"LEAVE MY PENS ALONE!" A drawer being slammed shut.

"Will?" Merlyn tried to get his attention.

"Uh...I've been there once....shit... no, okay text me the address. It's like what, number 21 something... something street, right?"

Merlyn paused, and shook her head. "12...Will. His apartment number is 12, please don't go to apartment 21."

"Right. Right. 15, got it. Look, text me the address and I'll be there by 7 tonight."

"Okay by-" CLICK.

Merlyn scowled at her phone, more specifically she glared at Will's stupid face that linger on the screen. Clot pole, she thought while heading back downstairs.

'Uncle Gaius might have gone back to his study.' Merlyn walked down a different hallway that was beside the living room in search for the study. She saw a door at the end of the hallway that was slightly open and saw light shining through.

"Uncle Gaius?" Merlyn called out while approaching the door.

"In her-come on in Merlyn." Gaius gestured for her to come into the study.

"Doesn't look much like a study Uncle Gaius..." Merlyn trailed off while rolling a cart of medical supplies off to one side of the room.

The room was similar to a doctor's office; there was a bed for the patient to sit on, 3 cabinets placed side by side on the wall directly across from Merlyn's spot-along with the various medical supplies sitting in the carts with wheels on them. On the right side of the room there was a mahogany
desk for Gaius to work in that faced a window, and several tall metal drawers standing against each wall that was on either side of the desk. Merlyn gazed at the walls which were covered in various awards and certificates that Uncle Gaius has won; his degree was the one closest to his desk, hanging on the wall right behind it.

"Some of the neighbours like to come by for medical advice," He gestured vaguely around the room while looking down at a folder, which Merlyn guessed was probably a patient's file.

"So many people kept coming that I opened a mini clinic here—which reminds me," Gaius looked up to see the Merlyn peering into one of the medicine cabinets, "patients usually only come on a need be basis, so don't be shocked when there's random people in the apartment."

Merlyn nodded. "Gotcha. But this is pretty cool Uncle Gaius, everyone in the neighbourhood must trust you a lot if you were able to open a small clinic."

"Thank you for the compliment Merlyn, is there something I can help you with?" Uncle Gaius placed the file down and turned to look at her.

"Oh right! I came down to tell you that Will invited us out for dinner tonight. He'll be here around 7." Merlyn glanced down at one of the letters in the filing tray.

"How nice of him. Does he need the address?" Gaius moved to grab one of the letters out of the tray that normally held all the bills that needed to be paid.

"Already on it," Merlyn sent the apartment address to Will, "should really consider online banking Uncle Gaius, it would be much easier."

"Too many odds and ends, I'm better off sticking to the archaic ways of doing things. So what will you be doing for next little while before dinner?"

Merlyn shrugged. "I was thinking about going for a walk and checking out the neighbourhood, maybe see if I can walk to school."

"Actually the school is close by here. Walk down the block until you reach the stop sign, turn right, and then it's just a straight walk for 5 blocks. It should probably take you—"
"15 minutes right?" Merlyn finished the mental math in her head.

Gaius smiled and nodded. "Yeah, about 15 minutes, give or take a couple."

"Okay, I'll be back in a bit Uncle Gaius. I have my cell, so call me if you need anything." Merlyn pulled the door open and walked out.

"I left your copy of the key hanging by the door, remember to grab it on your way out....oh! And be careful Merlyn, don't get yourself into any trouble." Merlyn didn't have to turn around to know that Uncle Gaius had his eyebrow raised. She waved her hand over her shoulder to acknowledge him and continued down the hall.

Merlyn was almost at the door when she realized she forgot her headphones and ran back upstairs to grab them. Once she got back downstairs, and made it down to the foyer, she pulled on her sneakers and put the landyard with her key on it around her neck.

The summers in the city weren't so bad, Merlyn thought as she put her headphones in while walking down the sidewalk. It was a little cooler compared to back home, but still very enjoyable. As she walked down the block she saw various people coming out of their apartments, Merlyn smiled and waved at a few of them. Some returned her gesture, others just turned their backs and ignored her.

At the end of the block she saw the stop sign and turned right, Merlyn figured that it'd be easier to go to the school first and see what's around there, then go explore everywhere else. At the halfway mark she noticed that there was actually a park with a playground and large basketball court located near her. She saw that there was a group of six guys playing a game at one of the basketball nets. Merlyn was tempted to get closer to watch the game, but decided that she just better keep her distance.

It looked like they were having a 3 on 3 scrimmage; Merlyn couldn't really see how tall each guy was, but from a distance they looked like they could all easily tower over her. One team consisted of a tall, gigantic, muscular looking guy, another shorter-but equally muscular guy with dark skin, and a more toned guy who was around the same height as the other guy with dark skin, except this one looked like he had naturally tanned skin. The other team had a guy with red hair around the same height as the giant on the other team-but he wasn't as muscular, then there was a guy who was darting around the court so quick Merlyn could hardly keep up, his dark brown hair
must have been quite long considering he had it tied up in a small ponytail. But who really captivated Merlyn, was the tall, blond guy who was currently dribbling at the top of the key. He was wearing a black beater, and red basketball shorts; he wasn’t overly muscular, but his arms...Merlyn felt her ears go red and quickly walked away.

BZZZZZT DIIING

Merlyn jumped slightly, and pulled out her phone, and saw that Will messaged her.

Will: How much do pens normally cost?

Merlyn rolled her eyes. Honestly, would it kill you to just share a couple of your pens?

Will: IT IS THE PRINCIPLE OF THE FUCKING MATTER!

Merlyn sighed, and moved a little to the right for a mother and her baby stroller to pass her. You can buy more pens Will.

Will: AT WHAT COST TO MY PRIDE MERLS? AT WHAT COST?!

You're a working professional Will...are you sure you're turning 23?

Will: Your words are so hurtful.

Merlyn laughed and sent a laughing smiley face in response to Will.

When Merlyn reached the end of the fifth block, still idly thinking about the blond guy from earlier, she saw Camelot High standing in all its glory. In comparison to Ealdor High, Camelot blows it out of the water. The school almost resembled a castle, it was a creamy white color, and the building looked both old and new at the same time. With its gigantic, metal gates at the front, to the classroom towers that looked almost like turrets, but didn’t quite round off correctly. Merlyn looked left and right before crossing the road and came to a stop outside of the gates. Even the windows looked immaculate from where she stood, they were almost floor to ceiling if Merlyn could guess;
now that she was closer, Merlyn could see the school emblem hanging above the front doors, and the school motto written on the doorway's arch. Merlyn wrapped her hand around one of the bars on the black metal gate and gave it a small push.

"Damn... locked." Merlyn mumbled, while putting her hands back into her hoodie. She looked back up at the school. "Guess I'll explore it on Monday."

Merlyn was trying to decide if she wanted to walk back the way she came and start exploring the neighbourhood from there, or keep walking and loop around the school. If she happened to see the blond from earlier...well that wouldn't be so bad, Merlyn thought while leaning against the metal gate. But she started to blush at the thought of being caught staring by those guys and continued to make her way around the school. She turned the volume of her music up on her phone and continued walking.

The neighbourhood was very nice, and the quietness of it, the further in she walked, reminded her of Ealdor somewhat. There were a few houses here and there, but there were more apartments compared to houses it seemed. After about an hour of aimless walking, Merlyn decided to turn back around and head back home. The walk back seemed quicker, but only because Merlyn knew where exactly she was walking to. As Merlyn approached the park she wondered if the guys were still there playing basketball. Merlyn picked up her pace, but felt disappointed when she saw that the court was empty.

As she locked the front door and kicked off her shoes she decided to see if Uncle Gaius needed help with anything to kill some more time. Merlyn turned off her music and pulled out her headphones and wrapped the cord around the phone's body. She pocketed it and went up the stairs.

"Uncle Gaius! I'm back!" Merlyn called out while closing the door. There was no response, which meant he might still be in his study.

Merlyn knocked on the door 3 times. "Come in!"

"Hey Uncle Gaius," Merlyn walked in and sat down in one of the smaller chairs in front of his desk, "how's work coming along?"

"Good. Just have to go over some patient reports. How was your walk?" Gaius glanced over at Merlyn and then back down the report.
"It was fine. But, you didn't mention that there was a park near here." Merlyn started to swivel the chair back and forth.

"Oh right, that's Park Avalon. What did you think of it?"

"It's really pretty. The playground looked big, and the grassy field looked like it went on for miles. It had a basketball court which was cool." Merlyn was now idly spinning one of the pens on the desk around on her fingers.

"That park has been around for awhile now. They just finished the renovations last summer. They added tennis courts in behind the basketball court, but the nets don't go up until the school year starts." Uncle Gaius slide a somewhat thick stack of receipts towards Merlyn.

Merlyn glanced down confused. "If you have time to idly spin a pen, maybe you could help me total these up."

"Sure." Merlyn began to read the first total, and began to flip through the receipts. "Speaking of the basketball court...when I walked past, I saw some guys there having a scrimmage. Two tall ones, four around the same height...one of them was blonde, another had red hair, one looked like he ate tree trunks for breakfast...."

Gaius looked up briefly, and then realization dawned on his face. "Oh, yes I know who you're talking about. It must have been Arthur and his group of friends you saw there."

"Do they go there often?" Merlyn was half way through her pile of receipts.

Gaius nodded and signed off on a report. "Yes. Those boys are all on the Camelot High basketball team. They're all quite good actually, very dedicated bunch."

Merlyn nodded, and felt kind of disappointed with Gaius's lack of detail. "Oh."

"You'll probably see them at school on Monday when you stop in. They usually have practices four times a week."
"Practice?" Merlyn paused mid-flip of a receipt. "I thought basketball season usually starts in the winter?"

"You know, Camelot is not just an academic based school, Merlyn. Its athletics department holds just as much weight. Especially the basketball team, they train throughout the summer and fall in preparation for the season to begin. Those boys are all working towards one common goal." Gaius opened a drawer beside him and pulled out another patient report.

"What goal?" Merlyn wrote the grand total of the receipts onto a yellow sticky note, "also, the total comes out to be $3306.52."

"My word. Hunith was not lying when she told me that Ealdor would no longer be able to sustain that mind of yours. I am impressed." Gaius took the receipts, with the sticky note total, and placed them in a different paper tray.

Merlyn blushed, and twirled the pen around her fingers, "thanks Uncle Gaius."

"So what exactly are they working towards?" Merlyn redirected the conversation back to the original topic. She liked knowing things, and it didn't hurt to know more about her potential classmates right?

"Scholarships to Albion University. If they manage to impress enough scouts then they will all get a scholarship to play on the university team throughout their schooling."

Uncle Gaius closed the patient report he was reading and faced Merlyn. "Speaking of further schooling. Do you have any plans of what you would like to do once you graduate?"

"Erm..." Merlyn trailed off and shrugged; surprised by the sudden change of topic, "I haven't really decided. I mean, I could do something similar to what Will is doing; Research and Development seems fun. But I also kind of like designing too. Both would require me to go into something like engineering, but I...haven't really decided yet."

"Well, if and when you do decide, my home—however small it may be—is always open for you to stay."

Merlyn beamed and felt a warm kind of happiness spread throughout her. "You're the best
Uncle Gaius.

Gaius smiled, and then pointed to the boxes stacked in the corner of the room. "Now, if you are not busy, would you mind helping me unload those boxes back there?"

Merlyn pulled a face. "I knew there had to be a catch."

Gaius laughed, and Merlyn couldn't hide her smile. "If you start now, you'll be done by the time Will comes over."

"Yeah. Okay. I'm on it." Merlyn said while rolling up her sleeves.

Merlyn spent the rest of her day in Gaius's study helping him with paperwork, and tidying the space up. A couple patients actually stopped by to see Uncle Gaius, and she had to go open the front door to let each one in. Around 7 PM, Will texted her and said that he was pulling up onto the driveway. Uncle Gaius said he was going to quickly go change, and for Merlyn to open the door for Will. Merlyn raced down the stairs and pulled open the front door before Will could even get a chance to ring the door bell.

"WILL!" Merlyn cried while throwing her arms around him.

"MERLS!" Will returned her hug, and lifted her up into the air.

"Missed you kiddo." Will ruffled up her hair, and she swatted his hand away. "Congrats by the way," Will walked in and took off his shoes, "Camelot High...I'm proud of you Merlyn."

"I just transferred schools Will." Merlyn said while walking up the stairs, and waved her arms in a way to down play it.

"I'm not proud about you getting into the school Merlyn." Merlyn raised her eyebrow in a very Gaius-like manner. "I've always known you're brilliant. But, what I mean is--"
"-Good evening Will!" The two of them turned and saw Gaius coming down the stairs and putting on a beige jacket.

"Evening Gaius." Will walked forward and shook Uncle Gaius's hand. "Long time no see."

"Yes indeed. How have you been? I heard that you're now working in Research and Development for Pendragon Enterprises?" Gaius asked.

Merlyn rocked back and forth on her feet. Now that she thought about it, she was really hungry. She looked down at her hoodie, and decided that maybe she should change into something else more appropriate for dinner.

"I'll be right back!" Merlyn called out while dashing up the stairs, leaving Will and Uncle Gaius to chat.

Merlyn opened her closet as she was pulling off her hoodie; she rifled through her sweaters, and decided maybe a nice cardigan would do. She pulled out her blue cardigan and threw it on overtop of her white tank top. She pulled the closet door open a bit wider and looked at the mirror hanging on the inside. She thought she looked acceptable: dark, faded jeans, a white tank top, and her blue cardigan; her hair, she decided, was going to be left down and hanging past her shoulders. Merlyn nodded, and decided that this should be good for wherever it is they're going.

"Where are we going to go eat Will?" Merlyn jumped down the stairs.

"I made reservations at Cesario's. How does Italian sound?" Will gestured towards the door.

"Mmm...pasta." Merlyn said while going out the door first.

"Sounds wonderful." Uncle Gaius followed right behind.

Will drove a Ford SUV, but normally he liked to ride his motorcycle, because it was easier to find parking with it. For obvious reasons though, tonight wouldn't be the night he drove the motorbike, Merlyn thought with a sense of disappointment. They all loaded into the SUV, Uncle Gaius in shot gun, and Merlyn in the backseat. She was very careful not to crush any of the blueprints she saw laying around in the back. Merlyn picked up a random one and examined it.
"Oh cool! Will, is your department trying to design a new phone battery?" Merlyn shuffled forward in her seat, the seatbelt digging into her right shoulder.

"Yeah, that's the prototype we're working on. We want it to last longer on one charge, but the long term idea is to design a battery that is self-sustaining for a certain length of time." Will signalled left at the stop sign.

"Self-sustaining as in how many years?" Merlyn asked. "1? 2?"

"Uther wants to try for 5 years." Will merged into traffic heading downtown.

Merlyn let out a whistle. "5 years? That'd be amazing."

"Indeed it is. Think of the amount of help that would be for hospital equipment." Uncle Gaius leaned back in his seat to take a look at the blueprint as well.

"Of course you'd need to find the proper alloy to construct the battery out of. Something that is not only economically feasible, but also environmentally friendly. If not, you'd want a material that can be easily recycled back into production to keep costs low." Merlyn said while looking back down at the blueprint.

"There's that brilliant mind Merls." Will chuckled, "yeah we're still in the research phase for that project. The plan is to design the phone battery first, and from there see if we can branch off and design that self-sustaining battery prototype."

"Maybe I do want to go into R&D..." Merlyn mumbled to herself while sitting back in her seat.

The rest of the drive was spent with Merlyn listening to Will and Uncle Gaius discuss what has been happening in the news lately. She kept herself entertained by looking at some more of the blueprints in the backseat. As she did that, she also watched the downtown city come to life as they went further in. Merlyn sat upright in her seat when she saw that they were pulling into the restaurant's parking lot. Her stomach growled and she unbuckled her seat belt.
"There's a spot over there!" Merlyn cried while pointing forward towards the left side of the parking lot.

"Since when did you become so good at finding parking spot?." Will chuckled when Merlyn huffed.

"I have my license too you know-hurry! Before that car takes it!" Merlyn smacked the driver seat furiously and started bouncing her leg.

"Merlyn." Uncle Gaius rose an eyebrow. Merlyn knew she was being reprimanded for unbuckling her seatbelt so early.

"Ah. right." Merlyn quickly sat back down in her seat and waited as Will parked.

When the three of them walked in she was immediately hit with the smell of warm bread and pasta sauce, she could feel her mouth start to water. Next thing she realized was how busy this place was when people kept bumping into her on either side. Merlyn grabbed onto the sleeve of Will's leather jacket so she wouldn't get pushed to the back of the line. He tugged her forward and she poked him in the back to let him know she was there.

"Gaius, you wait here. Merlyn and I will go see if our table is ready." Will gestured for Gaius to take a seat on one of the benches.

Uncle Gaius nodded and sat down. Will started walking forward, and Merlyn held on for dear life trying to get past the large families, or groups of business men and women waiting to be seated.

"Welcome to Cesario's. My name is Linda. May I take your name?" The pretty hostess had her flaming red hair cascading around her face, and her green eyes were framed with thick lashes covered in mascara. She was just as petite as Merlyn, but more curvaceous in a way that made Merlyn glance down and contemplate where the rest of hers was. Linda batted her eyes at Will, and he smiled down at her.

"I actually have a reservation. William Turner, party of three." The hostess, Linda, looked down at where Merlyn was holding onto Will's sleeve, and she put on a polite smile.
"Looks like your table to ready." Linda looked up, and avoided glancing at Merlyn, and smiled at Will.

Merlyn immediately let go of Will's sleeve, and cleared her throat. "I'll go back and get Uncle Gaius. Be right back!"

Linda's expression immediately changed, and she began to bat her eyelashes at Will again. Will looked down at Merlyn and shot her a quick wink, Merlyn pulled a face and shrugged her shoulders; she turned back around and tried to weave her way back to where they left Uncle Gaius. Merlyn could see where Linda found the appeal in Will; short brown hair that matched his face structure, plus he stood at a good 6ft, and went to the gym quite often so he was fit, and filled out that leather jacket he called a 'babe magnet.' Merlyn rolled her eyes, yeah she definitely can see why the hostess was attracted to Will. Too bad he didn't have his motorcycle helmet, that would have sealed the deal, Merlyn thought.

"Excuse me...sorry!" Merlyn muttered as she nearly collided with a short, round looking man who huffed and stepped out of her way. Okay, focus, Merlyn thought.

Merlyn looked up through the sea of people and saw that Uncle Gaius was standing up, and it appeared that he was talking to someone. She was so caught up in trying to see who he was talking to that she tripped on an outstretched foot and flew forward.

"Ah!" Merlyn cried out. It seemed like everyone knew at that exact moment to part ways and she flew straight out of the crowd and collided into Uncle Gaius's back. She immediately grabbed onto him, and pulled back so that they wouldn't go crashing to the floor.

"Merlyn! Are you al-" Gaius was startled by the sudden movement.

"Sorry! I tripped!" Merlyn righted herself, and straightened out her cardigan. Uncle Gaius looked at Merlyn worriedly, but she shook her head; indicating that she's fine. "Our table is ready, Uncle Gaius."

"Oh right, okay then." Uncle Gaius said, and turned back around. "It was nice talking to your Arthur. Have a splendid evening. Give Uther my greetings."

Merlyn nearly froze and glanced up at who Uncle Gaius was talking to. It was the same blond guy Merlyn saw earlier today, except this time there wasn't half a field and chain-link fence
separating them. There was so much more detail that Merlyn missed then, compared to seeing him up close now. For instance, his hair was much more blonde with hints of brown in it, his skin was slightly tanned (probably from playing basketball outside), and his eyes...they were like the color of the sky on a warm summer's day. Arthur was looking down at Merlyn, and she could see a slight smirk on his lips. She realized, then, that he probably found her accident amusing. Merlyn scowled slightly in embarrassment, and turned away while gently pushing Uncle Gaius forward. She could feel his gaze on her as they wove through the crowd, but she was very determined not to turn around.
Camelot High

Chapter Notes

Good evening!

So I just finished the chapter, I edited a bit, but I will be going through a couple more times to see if I missed anything else. I just wanted to get this chapter up. Thank you for taking the time to read my story, it means the world to me. I hope you enjoy this next chapter.

Thank you

-SS

"Is it normal for me to suddenly feel like puking Uncle Gaius? Am I coming down with something? Quick, feel my forehead." Merlyn reached out and grabbed Uncle Gaius's hand and placed it on her forehead. "I think I have a fever."

"Merlyn..." Uncle Gaius rose his eyebrow. "You are not ill in anyway. Now hurry up and go before you're actually late for your meeting with Khilgharra."

"I can't breathe! Uncle Gaius what do I-" Merlyn started to dramatically grasp at her throat.

"Calm down Merlyn." Uncle Gaius gently batted her hands away from her throat. "You will do fine. Now, are you sure you don't want me to drive you?"

Merlyn took a deep breath and nodded. "Yeah, it's better if I walk. If I change my mind half way, I can just throw myself into oncoming traffic..."

"I sincerely hope you're joking." Uncle Gaius started to direct Merlyn towards the door. "The paperwork alone would be frightening...not to mention Hunith would have my head."

"Yeah, mom would probably come after you with the fire poker." Merlyn added thoughtfully.
"She told you about that story from our youth?" Merlyn nodded and giggled.

"Well then you should be safely on your way. You have everything?" Uncle Gaius said while walking Merlyn down the stairs.

"Yeah I have some of my best blueprints with me. Do I look the part?" Merlyn asked while hopping on her left foot to get her right sneaker on.

"You look fine Merlyn. You didn't have to dress business casual for this. Your normal attire would have sufficed." Uncle Gaius sighed with a tone of fondness lurking in the background. "Drake knows you're still only just a high school student."

Merlyn waved her finger in the air at Uncle Gaius while squinting her eyes. "You see, that's the answer that makes me feel as if my outfit choice was the correct one. Okay I'll be off now! Bye Uncle Gaius!"

"Best of luck!"

Merlyn jogged down the front steps and walked down the small driveway onto the sidewalk. She adjusted the strap that was attached to the long canister (holding her blueprints) on her back and continued to walk.

It felt like Sunday went by in a blur, and suddenly her alarm rang this morning at 9:00 AM and she wanted to throw up, in fear? Excitement? Anticipation? Merlyn was currently debating which one of those emotions was winning the war inside of her.

On Sunday, Uncle Gaius took her around the city just like he promised, and showed her where the grocery store was (making sure to buy real food so that they wouldn't have to order pizza again), and where the Albion Mall was (it was a bit further from the apartment compared to the grocery store). They went into the mall for a bit to get some school supply shopping done for Merlyn, and she was marveled by how big the building was. It had 3 floors of shopping, and a movie theater built right into the side of the mall. So far, Merlyn was honestly loving the city life; it was a pain though-how far away everything was, but Uncle Gaius offered to lend her his Jeep whenever she needed it, and the transit system didn't seem too complicated.

On their way back home, Uncle Gaius pointed out that there was a small coffee shop on the other side of their apartment building, and they both stopped in to get a quick cup of coffee (tea for
Merlyn, because she wasn't a huge fan of coffee). By the time they unloaded the groceries, and Merlyn made them dinner (spaghetti with meatballs and stuffed roasted peppers), she was already anticipating the arrival of Monday, and drifted from wishing for it to come quicker, and hoping a meteor would crash into her.

"Hi Dr. Khilgharra. My name is Merlyn Emrys. Pleasure to meet you..." Merlyn groaned, "of course he would know who I am. Who else is he meeting? I should have asked Uncle Gaius to help me prepare a speech."

Merlyn was now two and a half blocks away from the school, and was currently walking past Park Avalon. She stepped to the side, off the sidewalk, and stuck out her right hand for an imaginary handshake.

"Good morning Dr. Khilgharra. Thank you so much for this opportunity. I am so humbled that-" Merlyn groaned again, "-what am I? A peasant? 'so humbled'..."

"Mommy, why is that lady talking to herself?" A little girl with pig-tails tugged on her mom's sleeve and pointed in Merlyn's direction.

The mother scowled at Merlyn, as if what she was doing was setting a bad example for her daughter. "Nothing dear, let's just keep walking."

Merlyn blushed a deep red, and tried to open her mouth to say something, but nothing could come out. Instead of embarrassing herself further, Merlyn continued to walk to the school. The sight of Camelot High still took Merlyn's breath away, but she was able to snap out of her awe quicker after having seen the school once already. It still looked the same: tall, castle-like, and gave off an impenetrable feeling, but the only difference today was that the black metal gates were no longer blocking the entrance, and were now open wide.

"I can do this...I can do this...." Merlyn whispered to herself. She walked into the front courtyard, and up the main school steps. The front doors looked normal, and not as imposing as the rest of the school. They were just plain, black, metal doors, Merlyn thought and felt oddly relieved.

"United we stand. Divided we fall." Merlyn read the school's motto on the door's archway out loud, and with a sudden burst of determination pulled the left side of the door open.

There was a long hallway that greeted you when you first walked in to the school. Rows of
lockers began a quarter way down, and were lining both sides of the hallway. It seemed never ending, and Merlyn debated on just walking back out the front door and going back to Uncle Gaius's apartment. Without even realizing it Merlyn had walked to the main office; the only reason she knew it was the main office was the metal sign that was sticking out above the doorway indicating where she was.

'Drake said to meet him in the main office on Monday'. Merlyn clutched the strap of her canister even tighter and took a deep breath-debating on whether to open the door.

"You know Ms. Emrys, there are plenty of squirrels dead on the road because they couldn't make a decision." Merlyn nearly jumped out of her skin at the sound of a deep, rumbling voice behind her.

She spun around, and looked up to see the looming figure of Dr. Drake Khilgharra. In person he looked nothing like the stoic photos of him Merlyn had seen online. Seeing him up close, Merlyn could see the laugh lines around his mouth and eyes. His shoulders were more broad looking to Merlyn, and she chalked that up to the buzz cut he had now, compared to the photos of him from last year (where he had shaggier looking hair). His eyes though have not change, and matched his hair in color to the tee. Dr. Khilgharra's eyes were almost...reptilian like, and they were strongly emphasized by the striking hazel color of them. Merlyn could see that he had stubble all along the bottom of his jaw, and the smile on his face was largely increased by how thin his lips were. Immediately she was trying to think of what to say, and blurted out the first thing she could think of.

"Would you sign my blueprints Dr. Khilgharra?" What. The. Hell.

'Oh fuck me...of all the things...' Merlyn felt her face and ears go scarlet, and looked down at the shiny, white hallway floor-hoping it would swallow her up.

She heard Dr. Khilgharra chuckle, and reached around her to open the office's door. "After you Ms. Emrys."

"Merlyn." Merlyn glanced up before turning to walk into the office. "You can just...call me Merlyn."

"Alright Merlyn." Dr. Khilgharra smiled down at her, and Merlyn could see how sharp his teeth looked in person. "It's a pleasure to meet you."
"The pleasure is all mine, Dr. Khilgharra." Merlyn smiled and tried to discreetly wipe the sweat off her palms.

"Please have a seat in one of those chairs. I have something to discuss with Principal Annis. I'll be right back, make yourself comfortable." Dr. Khilgharra's voice, when it's not taking Merlyn by surprise, was sort of raspy if you really listened closely to it.

She nodded, and took a seat in one of the plush, deep red chairs. Merlyn watched as Dr. Khilgharra disappeared through the large red door with the name plaque 'Annis Caerleon.' Merlyn sat there in silence for a few seconds, and her mind started wandering off.

'Wait a second...how did Dr. Khilgharra know who I was?' Merlyn immediately sat up and tried to peer through the frosted glass windows into the Principal's office, but could only see his silhouette. She leaned over so far that her canister fell off her shoulder and knocked into her knee.

"Oh...that's how." Merlyn remembered that on her blueprint canister she had her name engraved onto it, M. Emrys. It was a birthday gift from her dad from years ago, it was when she first really got into designing and creating things. Mind you, the things she created were mostly made out of popsicle sticks she finished eating (that was a good summer, her tongue was blue up until the start of grade.9). As Merlyn was reminiscing she heard someone open the door, and watched as two large boxes with a pair of legs walk in.

"Don't...fall. Don't...fall." She could hear a soft female voice from the other side of the boxes. "Don't...NO!"

Merlyn saw as the bottom box gave out form the weight of all the papers inside it-now currently falling out onto the floor. She quickly got up and began to gather the pieces of paper for the poor girl.

"Oh!" The girl, who was behind the box, jumped back slightly at the sight of another person in the office.

Merlyn could see that this girl was very flustered, given how her braid was nearly undone and there were pieces of her dark brown hair flying everywhere. The girl had a very dainty appearance, her face matched her body shape and was also very small, and when she looked up at Merlyn with big brown eyes...for some reason Merlyn thought she resembled a small kitten. The kitten-like girl quickly put the boxes down and knelt across from Merlyn. The long skirt she was wearing billowed outwards and scattered some more papers around, which made the poor girl blush even more.
"Sorry, didn't mean to scary you. Thought you could use some help." Merlyn smiled, trying to make the girl feel better, and continued to stack the papers together.

The girl's expression morphed from surprised to gratefulness. "Thank you, yes I could. I have such terrible luck and as you can see I'm...clumsy as well."

"No worries, everyone has off days. I'm Merlyn, by the way, Merlyn Emrys." Merlyn paused in her paper stacking and reached out to shake the girl's hand.

"You wouldn't that say if you had as many bad days as I've had. I'm Freya," She returned the handshake meekly, "Freya Felein."

"Nice to meet you Freya. Well, I hope your day takes a turn for the better." Between the two of them they managed to collect all the fallen papers off the ground, and Merlyn helped Freya lift the box that wasn't broken onto the counter behind the front desk.

"Thank you." She said with a small smile. "Wait, I'm sorry, did you say your last name was Emrys?"

Merlyn nodded. "Yeah? Do you know anyone else by that name?"

"Oh no, it's just..." Freya trailed off and a light pink color appeared on her cheeks, "I saw your student transfer files..." she shook her head, "...sorry, you must think that's a gross invasion of-"

"No! No way!" Merlyn shook her head, and leaned forward on the front counter with an eager expression. "I'm actually fascinated. What did my file say?"

Freya looked up surprised, she wasn't used to someone new speaking to her for so long, and with such interest in holding a conversation with her. "Oh...erm....well mostly the normal stuff...name, age, address, birthday... but I did notice that you're really smart."

Merlyn blushed and waved her hand in the air as if to brush off that statement. "I'm just as smart as anyone else Freya."
Freya shook her head earnestly. "No! You're more than just smart, you have to be really smart if Dr. Khilgharra personally requested to have you placed in his Robotics Program, and make your schedule for you."

"He made my schedule for me?" Merlyn asked.

Freya nodded. "Yeah, here let me..."

Freya wheeled her chair over to a tall filing cabinet and pulled out the second to last drawer. She began to scurry her tiny fingers over each file tab and Merlyn watched her as she mumbled under her breath.

"Emrys...Emrys....Emrys..." Freya tucked a loose strand of hair, that fell out of her braid, behind her ear. "I swear I just...here it is!"

She wheeled back over towards Merlyn, and the chair nearly got stuck on the way. Merlyn was about to jump out and catch her, but Freya caught herself at the last moment. The both of them let out a sigh of relief.

She smiled nervously. "Happens all the time. I've gotten used to it by now."

Merlyn nodded and smiled. Freya was a nice girl—very quiet, and shy, but she seemed like a nice person nonetheless. Freya stood up, Merlyn noticed that they were about the same height—except maybe Merlyn was an inch or so taller, and laid out what looked to be Merlyn's time table in the space between them.

"I technically shouldn't be showing you your schedule before school starts, but since yours is a special one, I don't see why I can't." Freya looked like she was trembling with excitement at the idea of doing something against the rules, and Merlyn had to hold back her laugh.

"Why aren't students allowed to see their schedules before school?" Back in Ealdor, all their schedules were mailed to them a week before school started, Merlyn thought.

"It's to prevent students from coming in early and asking to be switched into a certain class
because either their friend is in another class, or they like a certain teacher better." Freya said. Merlyn had to lean in a bit when Freya talked, because she was so soft spoken.

"Oh..." Merlyn nodded, "that makes sense."

Freya nodded, but she sighed. "But that still doesn't stop them from coming in during the first week of classes, and asking for a transfer."

"Sorry to ask this, but do you work in the reception here?" Merlyn asked while angling her head to get a better look at her schedule. "It's just that you know so much about this stuff, and I kind of thought you'd be a student like me."

"Oh! I am!" Freya piped up, but immediately reverted back to a shy kitten voice. "I just like to help out in here, I've been doing it since grade.9, and the secretaries here are really nice to me."

Merlyn glanced around the empty looking office, Freya saw and quickly added. "They won't be back until school starts. I'm just here to help sort out the paperwork for them so there's less to do when all the students come back."

"Oh right." Merlyn said and then glanced down again at her schedule.

Freya looked too, and began to point at each one of the time squares while explaining them to Merlyn. "So this is your first semester schedule: from Monday-Thursday you have your normal classes you signed up for on the student application: Math 30-1, Biology 30-1, Social Studies 30-1, English 30-1, Physical Education 30. The Fridays of your week one you get to miss the 90 minutes of homeroom to have your Robotics class. But in week two you have to come to homeroom, and I guess your Robotics class will be an after school class."

"Hang on a minute Freya." Merlyn moved the schedule so it was directly below her now.

"Sorry was I going too quick?" Freya asked nervously.

Merlyn shook her head. "No. You weren't. I caught everything you said, but I have a problem with the schedule."
"Oh? What is it?" Merlyn slid the paper back towards Freya, with her finger overtop of the problem on her schedule.

"Why do I have PE? I thought gym became optional after gr.10?" Merlyn was hoping this was a mistake (she distinctly remembered not checking off that box), and that Freya would be an even nicer person and remove that class from her schedule.

Freya turned towards Merlyn and had an apologetic look on her face. "Maybe gym was optional at your old school Merlyn, but it's a mandatory class here at Camelot."

Merlyn groaned and tilted her head up to the ceiling. She glanced sideways at Freya and saw her nodding her head.

"I know how you feel...PE is my worse class." Freya looked as if she was reliving some unspoken nightmare.

"Well...it's not that I'm bad in gym..." Merlyn mumbled while pinching the bridge of her nose. She wanted to rub her eyes, but she didn't want to ruin the mascara she put on. "I'm just...too competitive for my own good." Merlyn had Will to blame for instilling in her the same competitive nature he had when it came to any kind of sport or physical activity involving someone winning and someone losing.

"That must be nice." Freya said softly while looking down at her knotted fingers.

Merlyn decided to quickly change topics so she didn't have to look at a wounded kitten. "Erm...so do we have any classes together Freya?"

Freya jumped slightly at the question, as if the question was spoken in a foreign language. "C-Classes? With me?"

"Yeah," Merlyn glanced down at the piece of paper and back up at Freya, "it'd be nice to at least have one class with a friend."

"Friend?" Freya's soft voice got even softer. Freya didn't have many friends to begin with, since she was so awfully shy. The only other people she normally talks with in school was Gwen and Morgana. So it was a surprise, a nice surprise, that Merlyn was so open and friendly.
Merlyn blinked and realized that she might be overstepping boundaries. "Sorry...I didn't mean to be so forward."

Freya shook her head vigorously. "No! You're not! It's just...why are you so nice to me?"

Merlyn was taken aback by the question, and wasn't sure how to answer it. "Well...maybe it's because I can't help it, but mostly because I like you."

Merlyn grinned at Freya, who was blushing and peering up at Merlyn with those kitten-like eyes of her. "I think you're a nice person, and that's good enough for me. So...friends?"

Freya's smile was small, but there nonetheless. "Friends."

"So, do we have any classes together?" Merlyn repeated her question from earlier.

"Yeah, we have the same homeroom teacher, gym together and we have English together. But all the other courses I'm in are 30-2, and I'm only taking general Sciences" Freya said.

"Okay. So homeroom, English, and gym. This'll be fun." Merlyn said.

"You don't wonder why I'm in the 30-2 classes?" Freya asked quietly, and looked up from her knotted fingers.

Merlyn glanced over at Freya and shrugged her shoulders. "Sure I'm curious, but unless you wanted to tell me, then it's really none of my business right?"

Freya smiled at Merlyn; she felt so happy to have made a friend like her. Merlyn looked over at Freya, and held up her schedule.

"Do you mind if I keep this?" Merlyn waved her schedule up in the air, "or should I give it back to you and pretend as if I've never seen it before?"
Freya giggled. "You can keep it, just don't go showing it around to everyone."

"GOTCHA." Merlyn nodded, and folded it up into a smaller square so she could pocket it.

"You know, aside from you, only the athletics team and Morgana have such a crazy timetable." Freya was in the midst of sorting through the stacks of paper and putting them into whatever order they were originally.

"Morgana...?" Merlyn trailed off while looking at Freya to finish her sentence.

"Oh!" Freya looked up, "Pendragon."

"Oh? Uther's daughter?" Merlyn vaguely remembered seeing a TV station doing a story on Uther and his family.

"The one and only." Freya nodded. "She's been the school's president for 3 years running—this would be her last year. Her brother Arthur is the captain of the basketball team and it's his last year too."

"Oh right, that prat..." Merlyn grumbled while leaning her head against her left arm. Merlyn remembered how amused he looked when she nearly ate the tiles of the restaurant and almost brought Uncle Gaius down with her.

"Prat?!!" Freya gasped, "you didn't call him that did you?"

"Didn't meet him long enough to get the chance." Merlyn glanced over at the frosted glass windows again and wondered when Dr. Khilgharra would be finished.

"Oh Merlyn, you really shouldn't—" Freya was cut off by the Principal's door opening.

"Thank you for your time Annis." Dr. Khilgharra nodded at her and walked over towards Merlyn.
"Sorry for the wait Merlyn." Dr. Khilgharra smiled his dragon-like smile, and came up beside her.

"Not a problem." Merlyn said with a smile, she kept reminding herself to stay calm and not act like an idiot.

Dr. Khilgharra glanced over at Freya and nodded at her. "I see you've met Ms. Felein."

"Yeah. She's super nice." Merlyn looked over at Freya and smiled.

"Has she given you your schedule?" Merlyn paused, and debated internally on what kind of answer she should give so she wouldn't get Freya into trouble.

"Yes I have Dr. Khilgharra. I even explained to her the flips that happen on alternate Fridays." Freya said. Merlyn saw Freya give her a small nod, and she took that as a good sign.

"Splendid! Now Merlyn, let me take you to the Robotics lab." Dr. Khilgharra swept his hand towards the door, and Merlyn turned towards it.

"Bye Freya! See you later!" Merlyn waved goodbye, and Freya waved back.

"See you!" Freya called out

Merlyn quickly walked after Dr. Khilgharra and tried to think of something to say to break the silence between them. She repositioned the canister strap so that it went across her chest and was not just hanging over her shoulder. As the two of them walked down the long hallway, and past several lockers, Merlyn noticed that Dr. Khilgharra's strides were long, and she almost had to jog to keep up with his fast pace. It was almost like he had wings and they propelled him forward, Merlyn thought.

"Well Merlyn, let me start off with how excited I am to have you as an addition to my Robotics program." Dr. Khilgharra did not break his stride as they turned right through a set of open double doors.
"Thank you, Dr. Khilgharra." Merlyn took in her surroundings and saw that they were passing through a large atrium, and when she looked up she could see the second floor. The afternoon sunlight shone through the windows on the ceiling, and Merlyn again was awe-struck by how beautiful this school was.

"You can just call me Khilgharra if you like." Dr. Khilgharra glanced down at Merlyn with a smile. "Almost everyone does."

Merlyn wanted to ask if her dad ever called him that, or if Dr. Khilgharra even remembered him. She remembered watching the news with her dad once, and when they did a story about how Dr. Drake Khilgharra was a rising star in the Robotics industry, her dad told her that he went to school with him back in the day. Merlyn had many different things she wanted to ask, but instead she responded with. "O-Okay."

"The lab is at the end of this hallway. If you ever find yourself lost, there are metal signs above each door telling you the room number or name." Khilgharra gestured down another brightly lit hallway that was under a set of stairs. They both continued forward, and Merlyn could see various classrooms as they passed that were dark and empty.

Khilgharra slowed his pace down as they passed a shorter hallway. "This hallway leads to the door to the gym locker rooms."

Merlyn peered around Khilgharra and could see a set of double doors. If she squinted really hard she could just see the words 'Locker Rooms' written across them. She could faintly hear the sound of people running in the gym.

"The senior boys basketball team is currently having their practice." Khilgharra answered Merlyn's unspoken question, and resumed walking.

"Uncle Gaius told me they have practice 4 times a week." Merlyn said, and followed after him.

Khilgharra let out a loud sigh, which caused his voice to rumble. "They do. It drives me insane."

"How come?" Merlyn asked.
"One of my students is on the team. Elyan Smith. You will probably meet him some time or another. He has a good future in Robotics as well as you Merlyn-

"-Looks like we have arrived." Merlyn looked at the set of large, steel, double doors. It had the words 'ROBOTICS' written out above it in big block letters. Khilgharra pulled out a key fob and waved it in front of a scanner beside the doors. The light flashed from red to green, and Merlyn heard the doors unlock. "My apologies if my version of a tour around the school was so little detailed. I hope this makes up for it somewhat."

As the door opened Merlyn was almost blinded by how bright the room was. After a few moments her eyes readjusted and her breath was taken away. The room was Merlyn's dream come true, there were various artist tables around the room meant for designing blueprints (all titled at various angles from their previous users). The ceilings were about 20 feet high, and the piping system for this room crawled up the walls with it. All around the lab there were large steel tables bolted down for actual building purposes and various stools at each station. She could see on the far left side of the room various shelves containing different sizes of metal sheets, along with different building materials; a bunch of bins labelled with their respective items within; nuts, bolts, screws. Merlyn noticed random scuff marks on the floor, walls, and tables-most likely from people doing tests on their projects, she thought. On the wall closest to her, it had a huge array of tools hung up on it, like different sizes of hammers, screwdrivers, wrenches, Merlyn could go on and on. At the back of the room there was a raised platform that overlooked two small rows of desks, and on each desk were individual computer screens. On the platform there was a large SMARTboard hooked up with a desk right beside it. Merlyn guessed that that was where Khilgharra will be giving them their lessons.

"So what do you think Merlyn?" Merlyn snapped out of the awe-struck trance and turned excitedly towards Khilgharra.

"It's amazing!" She breathed, and could hardly hold herself back from running around the lab in her excitement. But, she knew that the number one rule of any lab is: no running.

"I'm glad you like it. Now let's head over to my desk." Khilgharra waved his hand towards the back of the lab where the desks were located.

Merlyn nodded, and the two of them headed over to the large desk on the raised platform. Khilgharra gestured at his desk seat for Merlyn to have a seat. She glanced down at the chair a little apprehensively, almost wondering if she'll suddenly be strapped down in it. But, her curiosity won over her apprehension and she took a seat. Khilgharra tilted his computer screen (which was attached to the desk) so that it was level with her head; he then pushed down on the rectangular cut out on the surface of the desk, and a wireless keyboard flipped into view.
"Cool..." Merlyn said under her breath. Khilgharra hit the space bar and immediately the computer screen turned blue, and a large amount of coding began scrolling up the screen.

"Find the coding error. Fix it. Then tell me what the coding sequence is for. You have 5 minutes. Your time starts now." Khilgharra took a step back and leaned against the wall.

"What?" Merlyn was taken off guard, but all Khilgharra did was look at the screen.

Merlyn jolted upright on the spot, and started to read the code. Her heart rate picked up, and she felt a surge of adrenaline rush through her. After a few seconds she realized that the code was stuck in an infinite loop, which meant that there actually was something wrong with the code. Merlyn darted her hands to the keyboard, and immediately began to re-develop the coding system; she didn't have to look at the screen any more to see the infinite loop sequence, she could pull up the image in her mind as she continued to type in different commands and their variables.

"Change the command variable, and...DONE!" Merlyn threw her arms into the air and spun the desk chair around to face Khilgharra. She felt her palms start to sweat slightly now that she had a moment to relax.

Khilgharra stared at the screen first, then down at his watch, before turning to look at Merlyn, who had a self-satisfied grin on her face. "The first word in your variable sequence was left open, and based on the rest of your coding requirements, that first word no longer met them. So I closed it off, and now the code knows to translate this saying back to English."

"And what does it translate to?" Khilgharra's face was stoic, giving Merlyn no impression that she actually impressed him.

Merlyn looked Khilgharra straight in the eye. "None of us can choose our destiny, and none of us can escape it."

A silence lingered between the two of them, and Merlyn held her breath—not sure what this test means, or if she even passed it. Khilgharra reached his right hand up and began to stroke his chin. After a few moments, he broke the silence between the two of them.

"I am impressed Merlyn. More so than I was before..." Khilgharra reached past Merlyn and put his computer back to sleep, "many of the students in this class struggled with this code when I first presented it to them. It took them long after the 5 minutes I gave them to crack it."
Merlyn opened her mouth to give a reply, but was stopped when Khilgharra continued to speak. "But yet, you managed to solve it in under the 5 minutes...3 minutes and 37 seconds to be exact."

"Beginner's luck?" Merlyn mumbled feebly while shrugging her shoulders.

Khilgharra stood up and smiled. "It must be handy."

"Handy?" Merlyn asked and tilted her head slightly to the left.

Khilgharra chuckled, and raised a finger to the side of his head and tapped on it. "To have an eidetic memory."

Merlyn felt herself starting to sweat slightly, and decided to try and play dumb. "Eidetic memory?"

"I believe the common term it is known by is a 'photographic memory?"' Khilgharra stared down at Merlyn with such an intense gaze that she broke eye contact.

Merlyn was really starting to feel herself panic now. Not a lot of the kids and teachers at her old school really understood this ability Merlyn had; they couldn't fathom how she was able to recall images, words, and information quickly-after only being exposed to them for a short period of time. Some people argued that she was only smart because she was able to remember everything without having to work hard for it. Others (like Will for instance), thought that, although this memory is like a gift, it does not define who she is, and she should not be ashamed of it.

"Rest assured..." Khilgharra began, "that I believe you are smart all on your own merit, and that you just happen to have a photographic memory. I do not just take in any student for my Robotics program. I see real promise in you Merlyn."

Merlyn felt her heart swell, and nearly explode in her chest from how happy Khilgharra's words made her. "So does this mean I pass?"

Khilgharra smirked, and raised his eyebrow. "Pass?"
Merlyn nodded. "Yeah...you know...wasn't this like some sort of test?"

Khilgharra chuckled. "I believe there was some confusion Merlyn. I just said to solve the problem. You could have just as easily refused Merlyn."

Merlyn could feel a blank look settle onto her face...maybe she should reconsider how much she looked up to Dr. Khilgharra. He was still chuckling to himself as he reached down and opened the desk drawer beside Merlyn. Khilgharra pulled out a white key card, and placed it on the desk. Merlyn could see that her first initial and last name were printed onto the card: M. Emrys.

"This card will give you access to this lab. So I strongly recommend not losing it."

Khilgharra slid it over towards her, and she took it graciously.

"Now, let's take a look at some of your designs." Merlyn quickly pulled off her canister, and took out the blueprints gently.

"Erm...so."

Merlyn stayed at the school till about two o' clock. Khilgharra praised her on some of her designs, and offered his suggestions on some other ones. At the end of their meeting, Khilgharra had Merlyn crack one more of his codes before walking her to the entrance of the school. She has never felt so welcomed by a teacher before, and she wanted to stay longer to listen to Khilgharra and learn more things from him.

"If you would like," Khilgharra was holding one of the doors open while speaking to Merlyn, "you may come to the lab for the next remaining two weeks to familiarize yourself with the equipment."

"Really?!

Merlyn lifted up onto her tip toes, and her blue print canister swung forward slightly. It was as if he read her mind.

Khilgharra nodded. "Yes. I might even have some more codes for you to crack."
Khilgharra let out a bark of laughter when he saw the look of apprehension cross Merlyn's face. She tried to smile quickly, but he saw right through her.

"Have a good day Merlyn." Khilgharra said while letting the door slowly swing close.

"Thanks! You too Khilgharra!" Merlyn called out. She felt a rush of nerves go through her when she called Dr. Khilgharra, 'Khilgharra' without the ;Dr.' in front of it.

Merlyn rushed back home as quickly as she could. She wanted to tell Uncle Gaius everything that happened at school and call her mom to also give her a play by play of what happened. When she got back to the apartment, Uncle Gaius was with a patient, so she had to pace back and forth in the living room and wait for him to be finished.

Gaius could see that Merlyn was anxious to give him a rundown of what happened at the school, and tried to finish up with his patient. She watched him with hawk-like eyes as he walked Miss. Stueby down the stairs to the front entrance. The moment Gaius came back up the stairs and re-opened the front door, Merlyn pounced.

"Uncle Gaius! Today was amazing..." Gaius walked over to the couch and took a seat in his large recliner and listened fondly to Merlyn explain her morning to him.

Merlyn went back to the school every day till the end of the week. She usually went around lunch time, and first went to the coffee shop to get herself and Freya some iced passion teas. The first time Merlyn did this, Freya was so shocked that she nearly dropped the drink (luckily Merlyn caught the drink in time). After that Freya would bring some baked goods so they could have a mini snack session in the office before Merlyn headed off to the Robotics lab.

It was the greatest experience Merlyn has ever had, and the most challenging. Khilgharra constantly pushed her to perform her best, always one code after another to develop or fix. If it wasn't coding that he made her work on, she was given parts to a machine to assemble together without instructions. He never spoke much when he gave her a task to do, and it was only after she finished, did he give her his feedback. By the time she realized that her days were going by so quickly, it was already approaching the last weekend before school was suppose to start.

"Are you excited for school on Monday?" Freya asked as the two of them walked down
from the second floor to the first floor. Freya had just shown Merlyn where their homeroom was, and
was giving Merlyn a tour of the school (a proper one, and not like the short one Khilgharra had given
her).

"Yeah, I actually am," Merlyn answered with a smile. Which wasn't a rare thing for her to
feel. Merlyn has always loved school, but it was this school in particular that made her feel extra
excited.

The two of them were walking back from the other side of the school. Merlyn could already
foresee herself being late to classes due to the sheer distance she'll have to cover just to get to each
classroom. Freya was in the midst of telling Merlyn about this TV show she should consider
watching, when the two of them stumbled upon a group of four guys at the end of the hallway.

It looked like they were picking on a much smaller looking kid, who was jumping up and
down between the three of them trying to get back...his glasses? Merlyn squinted a bit to try and see
what the object was. It was kind of difficult to see the guys' face's, because the late afternoon sun
was beaming in from the windows and hit Merlyn in the face. Freya tugged on Merlyn's sleeve and
motioned her head sideways.

"Let's go around." Freya's normally soft voice, went even softer.

Merlyn gently pushed Freya's hand away and shook her head. "I'm going to help that guy."

Freya's eyes nearly bulged out of her head. "Merlyn, are you insane? Do you know who
those guys-"

Merlyn didn't wait for Freya to finish her sentence and strode off towards the group of guys
who were laughing as they tossed the poor kid's glasses back and forth. When Merlyn was within
reach, she quickly snatched the glasses out of the air before the guy beside her could catch it.

"I think that's enough." Merlyn turned to glare at the guy who threw the kid's glasses and
froze. She instantly recognized the head of blond hair, and blue eyes that took her breath away when
she first saw him. It was Arthur Pendragon.

For a split moment Merlyn was taken by surprise. But that vanished when Arthur stood up
taller and walked towards her with that arrogant smirk on his face. She scowled and put herself
between the small boy and Arthur.
"Oh? And what exactly are you planning on doing?" Arthur asked while coming to a stop in front of her.

"I'll report you to the Principal." Merlyn was feeling bold. But judging by the way the other two guys were laughing at her words...she felt a bit foolish.

Arthur leaned in close to Merlyn, his face a few inches from her. "I'd like to see you try."

"Oh? You don't believe me you prat?" Merlyn didn't back down. It just wasn't in her nature.

Arthur blinked and pulled back slightly. "What did you just call me?"

"A prat," Merlyn's scowl turned into a glare, "want me to give you the definition of that word, or just bring you to the closest mirror?"

Arthur let out a bark of laughter, and looked down at Merlyn with amusement all over his face. "You can't speak to me like that."

"I'll speak to you however I want," Merlyn said, and turned to give the boy his glasses back before she crushed them in her fist. She heard him mumble a 'thanks' and scurried away....leaving Merlyn in the middle of the circle that has now formed.

"Do you even know who you're talking to?" The guy on Merlyn left took a step closer towards her.

"Yeah, do you? This is Arthur Pendragon, captain of the Camelot Knights basketball team. Our school's golden boy...and you're just a nobody." The guy on Merlyn's right took a step towards her as well.

Merlyn glared up even harder at Arthur, who, for some strange reason, looked uncomfortable by the other two's words. Before she even had a chance to think of what she should say to get herself out of the center of attention, her mouth was already moving.
"I'd rather be a nobody, than a coward." She never broke eye contact with Arthur, who suddenly looked very angry.

"I'm warning you Merlyn. Stop while you're still ahead." So he does remember her from that night at the restaurant, Merlyn thought.

"Wow. And what exactly are you going to do if I don't? You stupid prat?" Merlyn was uncomfortably aware how close the other two guys were getting to her.

"I told you, you can't speak to me like that." Arthur was now gritting his teeth, but he broke eye contact with Merlyn to look over at the two guys. "Stop trying to cage her in."

Merlyn didn't register what the last part of his sentence meant, and slightly bowed, while letting as much sarcasm she held in her body drip into her next words. "Oh I'm sorry, how should I speak to you then...my lord."

Arthur suddenly lunged towards Merlyn, his hand outstretched. Merlyn, out of sheer panic, did what Will always told her to do if someone came charging towards her. She reared her right hand back and punched Arthur in the face. He jerked midair and then fell backwards onto the ground. Arthur looked up at Merlyn in shock while holding his left cheek (Merlyn didn't exactly aim when she threw that punch). Her fist throbbed slightly, but Merlyn was taken by surprise when the guy, who was on her right earlier, was now behind her, and put her into a Half-Nelson. She cried out in shock when he tightened his arms.

"Hey! Let go of her you idiot!" Arthur scrambled to his feet while glaring at the guy behind her. Merlyn realized then that Arthur wasn't lunging at her earlier, he was lunging at the guy who was behind her.

"WHAT IS GOING ON HERE!" Immediately the arms holding her in the Half-Nelson disappeared, and she saw both guys run the opposite direction from the loud voice.

Only Merlyn and Arthur were left standing there when a very strict looking woman with long flowing brown hair marched up to them. Merlyn could see Freya jogging behind the woman, and saw a look of relief cross her face when she saw that Merlyn was unharmed.

"Pendragon. Emrys. My office. Now." Suddenly, all the courage Merlyn had while standing up to Arthur drained out of her, and she hung her head while following after the Principal (there
wasn't much chance that this woman would be anyone else, Merlyn thought).

Merlyn glanced up at Arthur from the corner of her eye, and saw that he looked just as ashamed as she felt. Freya walked up beside Merlyn, and tugged on her sleeve. Merlyn discreetly nodded her head, hoping Freya would take that as a message saying she's fine. The four of them walked in complete silence to the office. Once they were inside the secretary area, Principal Annis told Freya to stay behind as the three of them continued on into her office.

'Fuck. I can't believe I'm in the Principal's office before school even started...' Merlyn wanted to groan, but instead she just quietly sat down in one of the two chairs facing Principal Annis's desk, and wrung her hands together.

Merlyn, once again, looked over at Arthur, who was leaning back in his chair with his left hand near his lips. She could see that he was nervously twisting a ring that was on his left index finger, and looking at the wall in front of them.

"Now." Merlyn sat up straighter and looked at Principal Annis for the first time. She looks like a very stern woman, Merlyn thought. Principal Annis's lips were pursed in displeasure, and her deep blue eyes did not look amused. In fact, she looked like she wanted to put Merlyn and Arthur into the stocks...figuratively speaking of course.

"What exactly happened in that hallway?" Merlyn looked over at Arthur, who in turn glanced at her briefly. But neither of them said a word.

Principal Annis leaned forward while resting her elbows onto her desk, and placed her chin on top of her hands. "I'm waiting. But If neither of you wish to say anything, then I'll have to call your parents and get them to come in."

Merlyn opened her mouth to speak, but Arthur beat her to the punch. "It was my fault."

Merlyn closed her mouth, and looked over at Arthur in surprise. Principal Annis turned to look at Arthur, and waited for him to elaborate. Merlyn could see a faint blush make its way onto Arthur's face and how uncomfortable he seemed, she immediately looked back down at her clasped hands.

"I was joking around...and was just having some fun with Peter...and his glasses...then Merlyn jumped in to help Peter get his glasses back." Merlyn couldn't believe her ears, was Arthur
taking the full blame by himself?

"That is very disappointing to hear, especially from you of all people Arthur." Principal Annis had a look of disapproval and disappointment on her face. Merlyn could see Arthur clench his jaw, and nod tersely.

Principal Annis let out a sigh. "Arthur, if you acted alone in this then I will have to call your father and let him know...I'll even have to tell Caerleon about this."

Arthur hung his head further, and he was now twisting the ring on his finger vigorously. He took a deep breath and nodded his head.

"...it was all my-" Merlyn decided to cut in then.

"It wasn't just Arthur!" The two of them turned to look at Merlyn.

"There were two other guys involved as well," Merlyn spoke with urgency, "they ran before you could get to us Principal Annis, and left Arthur there to take all of the blame. It wasn't just him. Yeah sure what he did was wrong, but it wasn't just him." Merlyn could feel Arthur's gaze on her, but she looked pleadingly at Principal Annis.

Annis studied Merlyn for a moment; she could tell that Merlyn was telling the truth, and was intrigued that Merlyn was willing to defend Arthur, especially how tensed the two of them looked when she arrived at the scene. After a moment of silence passed, Annis gestured with one finger over at Arthur.

"And how exactly did that bruise appear on Arthur's face?" Merlyn blinked, and when the words registered in her mind she felt her cheeks and ears go red.

"I...erm..." Merlyn mumbled, and Arthur let out a cough and looked away from the both of them, his face going slightly pink as well.

"I punched him...so I guess...I'm not entirely not at fault," Merlyn said while looking up at Principal Annis through her lashes. Merlyn swore she saw a small smile on Principal Annis's lips, but it was gone before she could confirm it.
"Why exactly did you punch Arthur?" Principal Annis calmly asked.

"Well...mostly because he's a prat." Arthur turned his head around quickly and glared at Merlyn, who glared back in turn. "But, it was a misunderstanding...I thought he was trying to grab me, but he was actually trying to grab the guy behind me who put me into a Half-Nelson..."

Principal Annis took a sharp intake of breath, and turned to look at Arthur. "I'll be expecting you to give me the names of those two boys."

Arthur nodded slowly, and he stopped twisting the ring on his finger. Principal Annis let out a sigh and rubbed the bridge of her nose. Merlyn reconsidered her initial thought of Principal Annis being a very stern woman, aside from looking and being strict...it did seem like she cared. Especially since she hasn't called either one of their parents yet (or in Merlyn's case, hasn't called Uncle Gaius). She could almost see the disapproving eyebrow Uncle Gaius would give her for physically attacking another student.

"Normally, I would give you detention and call your parents to have a discussion with them, for causing such a ruckus at the school. Especially in your case Arthur," Principal Annis gave the two of them a hard look and continued on, "but seeing as how school starts on Monday...I'll let you two off with a warning."

Merlyn sat up straighter, and looked at Principal Annis hopefully, which she immediately crushed. "But the two of you will stay and help our custodian, Jonas, clean the classrooms in anticipation for classes resuming next week."

Merlyn thought this was unfair. "But I didn't do any-"

Arthur sat up and opened his mouth to speak. "-Principal Annis, I have practice-"

Principal Annis held up her hand and cut Arthur off. "I will speak with Caerleon, and inform him of why you will be missing practice tonight."

Arthur nodded his head in defeat, and slumped back down in his seat. "Okay."
"As for you Ms. Emrys," Principal Annis turned towards Merlyn, "this is your punishment for using physical violence to solve your problems. I hope in the future, that I don't find you in the middle of such messes again. Director Geoffrey gave his expectations on with his approval of your application, and Dr. Khilgharra spoke very highly of you. Although it was very courageous of you to stand up for a fellow student...foolishness is not bravery."

Merlyn nodded, she wanted to say more, but decided it was best not to push her luck. "I understand Principal Annis."

"You two may head down to the basement. I'll call Jonas and tell him to be expecting the two of you." Principal Annis turned to the phone on her left, and pressed one of the buttons. She picked up the receiver and waited.

Merlyn and Arthur both took that as a sign to get up and leave. When they got to the door, Arthur opened it and gestured for Merlyn to go first. They both didn't make eye contact with one another as they left the Principal's office.

"Merlyn!" Freya whispered loudly when walked past the counter. Merlyn shook her head and made a texting gesture with her hand and walked out the second door Arthur held open for her. Freya nodded and slumped back in her seat; she started to bite her fingers and watched as the two shadows walked out of sight.

The basement of Camelot High, was nothing like the main level. Where it was bright, warm, and spacious up top, the basement was dark, cold, and cramped. Merlyn followed quietly behind Arthur (she had no idea the school even had a basement), and wrapped her arms around herself in an attempt to keep warm. The ground and walls looked damp; Merlyn could hear water droplets falling, their footsteps echoing around them, and the groaning from the pipes within the walls.

"It's almost like we're in a dungeon." Merlyn mumbled out loud to herself. She heard Arthur scoff (so he was aware that she was still behind him), but he didn't turn around to acknowledge her.

They went down another narrow passageway, and Merlyn pulled a face when the air started to become more foul smelling. It must have smelt terrible to Arthur too, because she saw him raise his right arm and cover his mouth and nose. Merlyn looked up at Arthur's broad back, and realized how tall he looked in such a cramped space. Obviously he was taller than Merlyn, that much she knew, he was maybe around Will's height, if not an inch or so less. But, then again, everyone seemed tall to Merlyn, who was only a good 5'3 (5'4 on good days). She could see the red t-shirt he was stretch across his upper torso, and the material looked strained from the way his arm was bent,
so he was fit as well...so what? It's not like his looks could excuse his poor behaviour, or the fact that he was a prat. It was practically his fault she was stuck having to clean classrooms on a Friday night! Why she even bother try to defend his stupid ass earlier, she'll never know. But, what bothered Merlyn the most was that he tried to defend her earlier, and was willing to accept full responsibility for something two other people had a share in.

Merlyn was so distracted, she wasn't prepared when Arthur abruptly stopped. "Ow!"

This time Arthur finally turned around to look at her; she was rubbing her nose from the impact. "We're here."

She glared up at him, and looked around at the door they were now stopped in front of. It was nothing spectacular, if anything it just looked old and worn down. Arthur reached up and knocked on the door twice. They heard shuffling behind the door, and when it opened Merlyn had to try very hard to hold back her urge to gag out loud, and it looked like Arthur was struggling with that as well. The waft of air that hit them was a mixture of rotten garbage that has been sitting out in the sun on a hot summer's day, mixed with expired milk, and Merlyn couldn't think of anything else that could smell as bad as this.

"Looksss like my new workerssss haavve arrived." The custodian, Jonas, was...Merlyn couldn't find a word to describe him without sounding too mean in her head, so she settled with...creepy. He had a slight under bite, and his teeth were a dull yellow color. His face and hair were both greasy, and he had beady brown eyes that darted from place to place. Merlyn wasn't sure if the rancid smell was coming from him, or the room he was standing in. She started to take small quick breaths, but it was hard, considering each breath was of the awful smelling air.

"Pleasse come in." Jonas beckoned Arthur and Merlyn into his office, which really wasn't an office. It was essentially a large supply closet with a small desk crammed into one corner of the room, and a small television set resting on top of it. Every other available space was taken up by racks of cleaning supplies and the like.

"I haavve your sup-p-plies." Jonas spoke with a very distinct lisp, and occasionally stumbled over a few words. He turned his back to the two of them and hobbled over to one of the racks in the far corner of the room. Arthur gestured for Merlyn to go first, and she immediately shook her head. She motioned for him to go in first, and he shook his head as well.

"Ladies first." He said quietly with a smirk.

"As if, you prat. You be a gentleman, and go first." Merlyn hissed while trying to breathe as
Arthur leaned forward slightly and plastered on a fake smile. Before Merlyn could catch on to what he was doing, she felt his hand on her lower back, and the next second she felt him push her straight into the room. Merlyn stumbled slightly from the shock, and turned around to glare fiercely at Arthur, who looked amused. She turned around and stomped over to the rack Jonas was standing by.

"What do you-AH!" Merlyn jumped back at the sight of floating eyeballs sitting in a jar of green fluid.

"Thesse are for the Biology classs to dissect." Jonas grinned madly, showing off his yellow teeth.

Merlyn nodded, and tried to put a smile on her, but it felt more like a grimace. She looked around and saw various jars and containers around her labelled for different things that did not relate to cleaning. Merlyn took a hesitant step back when she saw a yellow bucket on the ground filled with a thick brownish, green liquid. Jonas noticed Merlyn looking at it, and bent down to stir it with a large wooden stick.

"It'sss my new creation." Jonas cackled gleefully...Merlyn was really freaked out now. Arthur cleared his throat, and pointed towards the shelf we were in front of.

"So what do we have to do?" As pissed off as Merlyn was at Arthur, she was glad he brought Jonas back on track. Jonas quickly stood up, and grabbed a spray bottle off the shelf, and a large bag of white towels. He shoved both those two items into Merlyn's hands. She was glad that although Jonas was kind of a dirty looking fellow, the supplies themselves were very clean.

"You will clean the whiteboardss. S-S-Start in Room one, and f-finish in Room hund-d-red." Merlyn nodded quickly and, not even asking if she could leave yet, ran out of his office.

Merlyn was halfway down the awful smelling hallway when she heard footsteps running up behind her. She didn't have to turn around to know that it was Arthur, and he followed Merlyn's lead and ran out of that supply closet as quickly as they could. Once she made it to what she deemed the 'safe point' she took a deep breath of damp, basement air. She heard Arthur doing the same thing, and suddenly she remembered how he shoved her head first into the supply closet/office. Merlyn turned and whacked him with the bag of white towels.
Arthur jumped back surprised and glared at Merlyn. "The hell was that for?"

"For pushing me into the room!" Merlyn swung the bag again, but Arthur was quicker and moved out of the way.

"I swear, you are the stupidest prat I have ever met!" Merlyn tried to swing the bag at him again, but he caught it mid-air.

"Will you stop that!" Arthur growled, and pushed the bag back towards Merlyn.

Merlyn glared at him, and squared her shoulders to face him. Arthur looked down at Merlyn in anger and confusion. "What do you want?"

Merlyn cleared her throat. "I want an apology."

Arthur rolled his eyes. "For what?"

"For getting me into this mess!" Merlyn cried and shook the bottle of whiteboard cleaner at him. "It's all your fault you know."

"My fault?" Arthur asked. "You were the one who hit me! I should be the one asking for an apology!"

"I ONLY HIT YOU FOR SELF-DEFENSE PURPOSES!" Merlyn yelled while waving her arms in the air. Both their emotions were escalating quickly.

"YEAH, YOU WERE DEFENDING YOURSELF AGAINST THE WRONG PERSON, STUPID!" Arthur's face was turning red, and he towered over Merlyn.

"STUPID? YOU'RE THE STUPID ONE...YOU PRAT!" Merlyn threw the 'prat' insult in there again, because he really was one, and she was so angry she couldn't form fully coherent thoughts.
The two of them were now in an all out shouting match trying to outdo the other one in volume and insult. It didn't help much that they were both still in the dark and cramped basement hallway; both their voices echoed off the walls, and carried down the hallway. Arthur tried to intimidate Merlyn by using his height, but Merlyn just stood toe to toe with him and continued to glare up at him.

"WHAT ARE YOU T-T-TWO DOING!" Merlyn and Arthur both turned and saw Jonas hobbling over towards them.

"Nothing! We'll be going now!" Merlyn called and quickly ran the other direction. She refused to smell that stench again.

Arthur thought the same thing and turned to leave. The problem was, the hallway was only big enough for each person to move in a single file line. Which meant Merlyn and Arthur both got stuck bumping into each other. Arthur glared down at her, while she glared up at him. Arthur put his right hand on her head and tried to shove her behind him, but she threw her left arm in front of his waist to try and push him behind her. The two of them were basically wrestling while standing upright, until Merlyn got the advantage over Arthur (it sometimes paid off to be short) and ducked under his legs. She quickly sprinted away from him while sticking her tongue out at him. Merlyn could see that he was shocked at first, but then he smirked and looked mildly amused.

Merlyn remembered where Room one was because Freya showed it to her earlier that day, so she started to head towards the other side of the school. It was an awkward and silent walk as Merlyn was hyper-aware that Arthur was walking behind her, but neither of them said anything. But, it was probably for the best since they'd only start yelling at each other again.

They both got to the classroom, and Merlyn headed over towards the whiteboard at the front of the room, and Arthur walked over to the back where the desks were stacked. She finally noticed the small chisel in his left hand, and realized he was stuck on gum-removal duty. He kicked a small garbage can over to the closest table, and sat down in one of the desk chairs. Arthur looked up, and caught Merlyn staring; she blushed and turned her back to him and started to spray down the large whiteboard.

The two of them worked in silence, the only sounds that could be heard was the clocking ticking, Arthur's chisel clunking away at pieces of gum, and Merlyn's towel swishing back and forth across the long whiteboard that went from wall to wall. After awhile Merlyn got bored of what she was doing, and pulled out her phone to check for any messages.

Freya: Are you okay? Did you get into any trouble? Text or call me when you get the chance!        Sent: 2:30 PM
Merlyn chose not to reply to Freya right now, and decided to call her when she got home later to tell her everything that happened in better detail. She scrolled down to the next message, while continuing to wipe the board with her left hand.

Will: Want to come over to my place this weekend and hang out? Can order Chinese takeout and play xbox? Sent: 3:45 PM

Merlyn typed out her reply with one hand. Yeah, sounds good. Have to rant to you >:( Sent: 4:30 PM

Merlyn moved down along the whiteboard, and paused to spray some more of the cleaning solution on it. Every time she finished with the lower half of the whiteboard, she had to climb up onto one of the chairs so she could reach the top half. She felt her pocket vibrate and she took it out.

Will: Lol...what happened? Sent: 4:33 PM

Long story. Met a stupid clot pole. Got into trouble. Currently cleaning whiteboards at school...>:( Sent: 4:33 PM

Will: ...but you're okay though right? Sent: 4:33 PM

Yeah, I'm fine. I'm bored though, and I think I smell... Sent: 4:34 PM

Will: Tell me when you come over tomorrow. I'll pick you up at noon. Sent: 4:34 PM

Okay. Sounds good Sent: 4:35 PM

Merlyn discreetly tried to sniff herself to see if any of the stench from Jonas's supply office transferred onto her. It has been bothering her for a while now, and she can't decide if it's real, or if she's just imagining it.
"You stink." Merlyn jumped at the sound of Arthur's drawl. Merlyn spun around to glare at Arthur who was leaning on his hand that was resting on the table beside him.

"No I don't," Merlyn growled, "you're the one who stinks. I can smell your stupidity from all the way over here."

Arthur rolled his eyes, and continued to chip away at the gum with a scowl on his face; it seemed like his good mood disappeared. Merlyn huffed, and spun around and finished wiping off the last portion of the whiteboard. Once she finished, she grabbed the spray bottle, along with the bag of cloths, and walked out of the classroom and onto the next one. By the time she finished room two, Arthur was just coming in to it, and they didn't acknowledge the other person as they passed each other-except to glare at one another. Once she reached the last classroom, Merlyn was so bored she even stopped listening to the music on her phone. This room took her slightly longer since there was more than one large whiteboard to wipe down, and Arthur managed to catch up with her. Merlyn was kneeling on a long book shelf to give herself a boost to reach the top half of the second whiteboard. At this point, into their cleaning, her bad mood has ebbed away. Merlyn looked over to see how far Arthur was in his task; she noticed that Arthur was flicking each piece of gum, he scraped off, into the garbage bin a few feet in front of him. He hit every shot, and Merlyn had to admit...she was impressed.

"Bet you can't go for distance." Merlyn decided to take a break and sit down on the low bookshelf.

Arthur turned to look at her for a second, and smirked. He scooted his chair back, further away from the garbage bin, and chipped off a grey looking piece of gum. With a quick flick of his wrist, the small piece of gum zoomed through the air, and hit the inside of the garbage bin with a 'THUNK.' He turned towards her with a smug look on his face.

Merlyn held up her hands to admit she was wrong. "Okay, I'll admit...that was impressive."

Arthur snorted. "Thanks. It's not as if I'm the team captain or anything."

"My god, do you have to be so arrogant?" Merlyn rolled her eyes. "You know, your arrogance is what got you into this mess in the first place, and you managed to drag me into this as well, you prat."

Arthur went silent. In fact he was so quiet, Merlyn started to wonder if she had stepped over some arbitrary line. She was about to try and back-pedal her way out of this awkward silence, when Arthur spoke up. "Yeah...I know."
Merlyn blinked, and was surprised he sounded ashamed. "You were right..."

"About what?" Merlyn asked.

"...I am a coward." Arthur mumbled and chipped off another piece of gum. He flicked with such accuracy that Merlyn was almost distracted enough not to reply.

Another awkward silence filled the space between them. Merlyn probably figured Arthur felt embarrassed for saying something so self-revealing to a complete stranger, and Merlyn felt a bit guilty for saying such mean things to him in the heat of her anger. Yeah she called him a coward, but it's not like she knew what he was going through. It was a bad trait of hers, to use her anger as some form of invisible weapon against other people. Merlyn rubbed the back of her neck, and decided to try and clear the tense atmosphere.

"It's not like being a coward is a bad thing." Merlyn said. Arthur looked over at her and raised his eyebrow.

Merlyn elaborated. "I think to be brave...or even a good person in general...you have to know what it means to be a coward. That way, you know how to make better choices later on...or...you know...something like that."

Arthur stared at Merlyn, really stared at Merlyn. To the point where she felt her ears go red under his scrutiny. Finally he broke the silence. "...there's something about you Merlyn..."

Merlyn scoffed, and quickly went back to cleaning the whiteboard. Once she finished, she noticed that Arthur was just finishing up as well. Merlyn collected her (now dirty) bag of cloths, and nearly empty spray bottle; dread suddenly filled her stomach when she realized they would have to go back down to the smelly basement to return the cleaning supplies. The two of them walked in silence back towards the basement. It smelled just as bad as it did when they first came down there, and when they reached Jonas’s office they quickly knocked on the door, and nearly shoved all their supplies into his arms, so they could run back upstairs.

Merlyn pulled out her phone and noticed that it was well into the evening (almost 8 o’ clock), she had a missed call from Uncle Gaius and she winced...she'll have the disapproving eyebrow raise to greet her when she gets home. Merlyn saw Arthur take a different turn and head towards the locker rooms, away from the front doors, and she nearly called out to ask what he was doing, but she realized that it's not like he was obligated to tell her anything.
"Well...see ya," Arthur turned and waved his hand awkwardly.

Merlyn nodded. "Have a good night."

The two of them went their separate ways, and neither turned back around. Merlyn enjoyed walking around at night, she knew the dangers of it, but there was just something about how still everything seemed when there was no longer any sunlight around. The air was cooler, but had this calming effect on her, she rolled her hoodie sleeves back down and pulled up the hood. The walk back home didn't take long, but she took her time walking up the stairs, and held her breath when she opened the front door.

"Merlyn Emrys..." Ah. There it was. The disapproving eyebrow.

"Uncle Gaius. I can explain!" Merlyn quickly closed the door, and began to give him a play by play of everything that happened.

When Merlyn finished, Uncle Gaius's facial expression went from upset, to concern, to disbelief. "You...punched Arthur in the face?"

"Why is everyone so keen on that fact?" Merlyn asked, exasperation in her voice, and threw her arms up in the air. "Yes I punched him. Did he deserve it? Probably not. Do I regret it? Kind of."

"Well, I'm glad you're alright Merlyn. Come, you must be starving. I made some beef stew for dinner." Uncle Gaius ushered her into the kitchen, and made her have a seat at the small wooden dinette table.

"Thanks Uncle Gaius..." Merlyn felt exhausted, and she still had to call Freya to tell her what happened as well.

"For future reference Merlyn, please call ahead and let me know when you decide to stay out late. Just so I can have some peace of mind." Uncle Gaius no longer seemed upset, or disapproving. But his tone of voice made Merlyn feel so guilty.

"I understand Uncle Gaius...and I'm sorry," Merlyn said quietly while looking down at
the random patterns of the wooden surface.

Uncle Gaius placed the steaming bowl in front of Merlyn, and patted her on the shoulder. "It's alright. It's over now. Will managed to contact me and told me you were at the school."

"Oh..." Merlyn nodded, she blew on her spoon and put a spoonful of stew in her mouth.

"Merlyn," Merlyn looked up at Uncle Gaius in question, "what exactly is a clot pole?"
Hi everyone!

Sorry for putting out an update so late. I've been busy with school (second year and still kind of confused lol). I hope the length of this chapter will make up for my absence.

I've gone through the chapter a couple of times to make corrections to my grammar and punctuation, but I probably still missed a bunch. So I'll be going through the chapter periodically to make more corrections.

I do hope you guys enjoy this chapter though!

Thank you!
-SS

"Morning...U-U-Uncle Gaius..." Merlyn yawned and took a seat at the kitchen table.

"Good morning Merlyn," Uncle Gaius placed a warm bowl of instant oatmeal in front of her, "I see you're bright eyed and bushy-tailed for classes."

Merlyn nodded with her eyes closed, and reached for the spoon she saw on the table a second ago. "Mmm...very."

"You didn't stay out that late with Will. I saw him drop you off around 7 last night...how on earth are you so tired?" Merlyn opened her eyes slightly and saw Uncle Gaius glance at her from overtop of his newspaper.

"Couldn't sleep...was so excited..." Which was true. Merlyn was so excited for the start of classes that she spent all night tossing and turning. She kept waking up at various times throughout the night because she kept dreaming that she either overslept her alarm and was late, or she completely missed an entire day of school.

Uncle Gaius chuckled, and continued to flip through his newspaper. Merlyn began to slowly eat her oatmeal, and she started waking up with each bite. When she finished, she got up and took her bowl to the sink; after rinsing it she put in on the dish rack to dry. As Merlyn was drying her
hands, she craned her neck so she could read the paper over Uncle Gaius's shoulder.

"Is Pendragon Enterprises really shutting down some of its warehouses?" Merlyn asked.

Uncle Gaius hummed. "Yes. I believe Uther is planning on moving towards cleaner alternatives for manufacturing products."

"Wouldn't this decision put a lot of people out of work?" Merlyn asked while grabbing a water bottle out of the fridge.

"For the time being, yes it will. Which is why the paper is saying that Uther plans on shutting down certain factories in sequences." Uncle Gaius glanced up at the clock hanging in the kitchen.

"You better hurry up and change Merlyn, or we'll both be late for school." Uncle Gaius glanced back at Merlyn, who was still in one of her oversized t-shirts, and a pair of boxer shorts.

"Right. Going!" Merlyn exclaimed while sprinting back upstairs to her room.

Merlyn pulled off her shirt, and dropped her boxers. Before going to bed last night, Merlyn had laid out what she wanted to wear to school today. She started pulling on her dark wash skinny jeans, navy blue long-sleeved shirt, and finally her favorite blue scarf. Merlyn quickly went to the bathroom, and curled her lashes; then applied a thin layer of mascara. Merlyn had adequate skills when it came to makeup, she knew how to apply the basics, and had a small collection of makeup. But the problem always came down to her time management skills in the morning. She usually only left enough time to put on mascara, and leave the house.

"Merlyn!" Uncle Gaius called from the bottom of the stairs. "Time to go!"

"Coming!" Merlyn called back while lifting her hair up into a ponytail, but decided to leave her hair down instead.

Merlyn ran back to her room and grabbed her black backpack off her desk chair, and threw the water bottle in, before sprinting back downstairs. Since today was the first day of school, Uncle Gaius didn't have to go in early to his office, which was why he was going to drive the both of them to school. Uncle Gaius offered to drive her every morning, but that's only if Merlyn wanted to be up before 6 in the morning to catch a ride with him...Merlyn decided that she would rather walk.
The two of them got in the Jeep and backed out of the driveway. Normally it took 15 minutes to walk to school, but driving took them not even half the time. As they drove past the front gates towards the entrance of the parking lot, Merlyn could see an exponential increase in the amount of people on the school grounds. Many were either getting off the school bus, or being dropped off by their parents, or, some were just walking from their homes. Uncle Gaius drove past what looked like the student parking lot at the side of the school, and Merlyn was basing her assumption off of how many teenagers were getting out of their vehicles. When she saw a familiar head of blond hair get out of his car, she immediately ducked down lower in her seat, and pulled her scarf up. Uncle Gaius glanced at her in confusion, but didn't say anything. He drove around to the back of the school building to the staff parking lot. Once he put the car in park, Merlyn was almost halfway out the car.

"Merlyn," Merlyn stopped mid-way and turned to look over her shoulder, "have a good day at school."

"Thanks Uncle Gaius. You have a good day too." Merlyn grinned, and closed the passenger door. As Merlyn was walking towards the back entrance of the school, she took out her cell phone and texted Freya.

**Hey! Just got to school. Where are you?**    **Sent: 7:10 AM**

Freya's reply was almost instantaneous.

**Freya: I'm outside the main office! Stop by now to get your gym strip before the mob gets here.**    **Sent: 7:10 AM**

Merlyn turned half-way down the hallway to get back to the front of the school where the main office was located. The once spacious hallways were now filled with swarms of teenagers. Merlyn could hear bits and pieces of conversation as she manoeuvred her way through the crowds. The topic as mostly on what each person did over the summer, and how quickly it ended.

"Freya!" Merlyn called out when she saw Freya standing outside of the main office. She hiked up her backpack, and slipped in between two groups of people standing in the middle of the hallway.

Freya looked up and smiled brightly at Merlyn. She had on a long, yellow sundress with a matching colored headband in her hair. Freya had a pink, single-strapped satchel for her backpack, it was smaller compared to Merlyn's backapck.
"Good morning!" Freya greeted.

"Mor-" Someone bumped into Merlyn's shoulder, she turned and glared at them before looking back at Freya, "-ning."

Freya giggled. "Come on, let's get our gym strips before heading to home room."

Merlyn nodded, and followed after Freya. The two of them entered the office, and it looked like utter chaos and mayhem was happening. The phones were ringing, some students were waving stacks of papers around and trying to out-talk the secretaries, the fax machines were ringing and beeping. Merlyn looked back at Freya, who didn't seemed at all phased by what was happening, so Merlyn took this as a normal first day back occurrence. She led them over to another small desk, where a little old lady was sitting and was crocheting what looked to be a hat. The woman had medium length brown hair with wisps of grey in it; she had quite a few wrinkles on her face, especially around her light blue eyes. When she caught sight of Freya and Merlyn she smiled.

"Good morning Ms. Cailleach." Freya said.

The old woman smiled. "Good morning Freya, how good to see you. Are you both here to pick up your gym strip?"

"Yes. This is Merlyn Emrys." Freya gestured over at Merlyn. Merlyn raised her hand and waved.

"Emrys..." The woman said and smiled. "How good to meet you. I hope you settle in well here at Camelot High."

Merlyn blinked...how did she know Merlyn was a new kid? Before seeming rude, Merlyn quickly responded. "Thank you."

"What sizes will you both be needing?" Ms. Cailleach turned around and opened three boxes.

"Extra small for me please." Freya said.
"A small for me please." Merlyn glanced back over her shoulder towards the office door, and saw more students piling in and heading their way.

Ms. Cailleach handed them their gym strips, they both thanked her, and then ducked out of the line quickly. Merlyn looked at the clock above the doorway and saw that it was 7:15 AM.

"So we just go to homeroom first right?" Merlyn asked Freya as they headed down the hallway.

"Yes. We normally go to homeroom first every morning to check in for attendance. It's only on Fridays where homeroom is longer, because the classes are shorter." Freya jumped out of the way of two guys play fighting...well, Merlyn hoped they were play fighting.

The two of them walked up the stairs to get to the second floor where their homeroom was located. When Merlyn first walked into the classroom, her eyes immediately zeroed in on the whiteboard she cleaned on Friday. She felt a sense of pride by how clean it looked thanks to her...well thanks to the cleaning solution, Merlyn thought. The two of them took a seat at one of the tables on the far left side of the room, that was in front of the door, and was beside the windows. Merlyn started talking to Freya avidly about the show she recommended to her. On the weekend, when Merlyn was at Will's apartment, she brought up the show to Will, and he freaked out at her when she said that she hadn't started watching it yet. He then ended their xbox match, and the two of them binged two whole seasons.

"I really like the mob boss." Merlyn said.

Freya gasped. "But why?! The lawyer is definitely the better character."

"That's what Will said too, but you guys aren't seeing the bigger picture!" Merlyn rolled her eyes, and smiled at Freya. "I guarantee the mob boss has paid out not only the jury, but the judge as well."

"No way! Look at all the evi-" Freya was cut off by the 5 minute warning bell ringing.

Groups of students began to pile into the classroom, and Merlyn watched with mild interest at the people coming in. There were very distinguishable cliques, Merlyn thought. She was aware that Freya was still talking to her about the show, and she was listening, but she just liked to people
watch as well. A large group of guys walked into the classroom next, and Merlyn could see two girls with them as well. But, when she caught sight of Arthur, she immediately turned her head away and looked at Freya instead.

"Honestly, the lawyer's case is—oh!" Freya turned to look at the doorway. "Looks like Gwen and Morgana are in our homeroom as well."

"Who?" Merlyn didn't catch what Freya said, she was too busy trying to think of ways to blend into the wallpaper. It's not as if she was on bad terms with Arthur...she just felt awkward looking at him. She did punch him after all, and before she turned her head away she noticed that his cheek was bruised in the same place her fist hit.

"Morgana and Gwen, the two girls over there with the boys." Freya nodded her head towards the back of the classroom. Merlyn discreetly looked over, but immediately she saw eight pairs of eyes looking at her. Her face lit up in flames, and she turned to look at the white board.

"I guess...they heard about what happened on Friday..." Freya whispered.

Merlyn stiffly nodded, and felt like someone was holding a flame to her ears.
"Yeah...well...."

"Oh look...Gwen and Morgana are heading this way." Freya said in a hushed tone.

"Hi Freya!" Merlyn assumed the dark skinned girl was Gwen (she's seen Morgana on TV before, so she knew what Morgana looked like). Gwen had a 'girl-next-door' vibe about her; warm brown eyes, long eye lashes, a smattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks, and a kind smile to match. The way she dressed though was very cool, Merlyn thought. Some of the clothes she was wearing, Merlyn has never seen in stores before. For instance the purple leather jacket she was wearing, or even the long, grey skirt she was wearing with swirling patterns down each side.

"Hi Gwen." Freya smiled, and waved at the two girls.

"Who's your new friend Freya?" Morgana looked down at Merlyn with vivid curiosity.

Where Gwen was the 'girl-next-door' Morgana was the super model imported from overseas. She had intense features, actually, everything about her was intense, Merlyn thought. From her
charcoal colored hair, that offset how pale and porcelain-like her skin was, to the thick dark lashes that framed her striking emerald colored eyes—which were still staring down at Merlyn.

"I'm Merlyn Emrys. New kid." Merlyn waved her hand at them. Gwen smiled and waved back, but Morgana smirked while taking a seat across from Merlyn.

"My name is Guinevere Smith—but you can just call me Gwen, and this is Morgana Pendragon."

"Nice to meet you." Morgana said, and rested her chin on her interlocked hands once her elbows were on the table.

'I wonder if she knows...' Merlyn kept a polite smile on her face, but in all honesty she felt herself slowly breaking out into a cold sweat.

"So you were the one who punched my idiotic brother?" Ah...so she does know.

"Uhm...well you see...he technically started it." Merlyn was scrambling for words.

'Of course that prat had to have the world's most intimidating sister!' Merlyn's face felt hot, and she nervously tugged at her scarf.

Morgana suddenly burst out laughing, getting the attention of everyone in the class—including Arthur. Merlyn caught his gaze, and immediately decided that she'd rather take her chances with making eye-contact with Morgana. Morgana leaned forward and winked at Merlyn. "I think we'll get along just fine, Merlyn."

"Wait...what?" Merlyn was confused. Freya and Gwen were both giggling, and Morgana was giving her a full-blown genuine smile.

"My brother has everyone at this school practically worshipping the ground he walks on." Morgana rolled her eyes, and waved her hand. "It's good for him to meet someone who knows how to put him in his place, aside from us that is."
"Especially you, Morgana." Gwen shook her head while trying to hold back a smile.

Morgana shrugged. "Can I help it that I'm such a dotting sister?"

Merlyn was very confused. Here Merlyn was having a conversation with the sister of the guy she punched not more than 72 hours ago. Back home, if Merlyn had done something like this (which she kind of did, but that's beside the point), she'd be shunned and hated by her fellow peers. Why were these girls treating her so nice? Apprehension slowly worked its way in Merlyn's overwhelming pot of emotions. Gwen must have noticed the inner turmoil Merlyn was currently experiencing and smiled at her.

"Don't mind her, Merlyn, she looks meaner than she actually is. We both know you weren't the one at fault." Merlyn felt this unconscious ball of nerves relax within her at those words. They didn't just put the blame on Merlyn off the bat, in fact, they found it amusing. For the first time, in a long time, she felt her guard slowly lower, and smiled back at Gwen.

"Good morning class." Everyone turned towards the voice up at the front of the classroom. "I am your homeroom instructor. Mr. George Brass."

There were a few murmurs around the classroom, and Merlyn could probably figure out what they were whispering about. Mr. Brass was a very polished looking man (no pun intended), He was wearing a crisp looking, black suit, and stood with his nose pointed in the air. His hair was combed and gelled to the extent that no hair was out of place. Merlyn wondered how long he spends in the morning ironing his clothes, or if he spends the night before doing it.

"You all may call me, Mr. George. There will be no 'Mr. G,' 'G-man,' 'G-money,' 'Brass man,' it will only be Mr. George to the lot of you." Some people snickered as he listed off more names we could not call him by. Even Merlyn had to laugh at how ridiculous this teacher was.

Mr. George ignored the snickering, and lifted a large brown box onto his desk. He took the clipboard that was on top of it, and turned to face the class.

"I will be calling out your names for the attendance. When I call your name, please come up and get a lock that has your locker number and combination on it. Understand? Okay let's begin...Abby Abernathy."

Merlyn went back to talking with Freya, Gwen, and Morgana. She could see in her
Peripheral vision that Arthur was staring at their table, but she refused to make eye contact with him again. Just because Morgana approved of what Merlyn did, doesn't mean she's not embarrassed by it slightly still.

"Merlyn Emrys." Merlyn stood up, and grabbed her backpack. She felt people staring at her, and she tried her best to ignore them. Merlyn knew this was something she had to be prepared for, being the new kid and all.

"New student?" Mr. George asked while placing a lock into Merlyn's palm. She nodded, and quickly turned to leave before he could make her do introductions.

Merlyn heard Freya's name get called next, and waited for her outside of the classroom doorway. The two of them walked down the row of lockers that lined the side of the wall closest to the classroom. Both, Merlyn and Freya's, lockers were right beside each other, and they both put their extra belongings into them. Merlyn tossed a couple of chocolate protein bars on the top shelf of her locker and pair of yoga pants.

"Do we get gym lockers Freya?" Merlyn asked while leaning back a bit so she could see Freya behind her locker door.

Freya nodded, "yeah, but I heard we won't be getting them until next week."

"Okay, guess I'll put this back in my bag." Merlyn shoved the plastic bag with her gym strip back into her backpack.

"When you're done with your lockers, please come back to class." Mr. George was standing outside of the classroom and was watching everyone like a hawk.

Merlyn and Freya both had English together first period on Mondays, and they said goodbye to Morgana and Gwen (they had Social Studies together) when the bell rang. English was on the second floor, so Merlyn felt relieved they didn't have to go back downstairs. When they got to the classroom, Freya pointed to one of the circular tables at the back of the classroom. Merlyn noticed this last Friday, that certain classrooms had different shaped desks compared to other ones. They sat down and began to chat idly, Merlyn asked Freya what she thought of this teacher and Freya seemed to really love her.
"Oh, it looks like Arthur's in our English class." Freya glanced away from Merlyn and towards the door.

Merlyn looked up, and over, toward the door. She saw Arthur walking in by himself and look around the room for a desk to sit at. He glanced at her and Freya's table and started heading in their direction. Merlyn, for the briefest moment, wondered if he was going to come over and sit with them.

"Yo! Arthur! Over here!" Guess that answers it, Merlyn thought. She watched as Arthur changed directions, and took a seat at the table beside theirs.

It turned out that there were enough tables in the classroom for everyone to sit at and completely avoid Merlyn and Freya's table. It didn't seem to bother either of them, in fact, Merlyn internally rejoiced because this meant there was a seat for her backpack. She immediately moved her backpack off the floor, and into the empty seat beside her. When a short, plump woman walked in with a large stack of papers, everyone in the room went silent. Merlyn observed how the woman's thick, black hair was tied up with a grey head wrap, and was wearing a cozy, grey-knitted dress. The woman turned and smiled out at the class.

"Good morning kids!" She walked over to the window and pulled the blinds up higher to let more sunlight in. "I'd like to start off by saying welcome back to all of you. I hope you've all had a wonderful summer vacation."

Merlyn liked this teacher already, she seemed genuinely happy to be here to teach them. The woman walked back up to her desk, and leaned against it with a big smile on her face.

"For those of you who are new to my class, you may all address me as Ms. Finna." It was her eyes, Merlyn thought. Merlyn liked how they crinkled when Ms. Finna smiled out at them, and conveyed that she's generally a very happy person.

Ms. Finna clapped her hands together, and gestured to the tall stack of papers. "So! Seeing as how today is the first day of classes, I felt that it would be highly unethical of me to start assigning work, so I thought we could do a little ice breaker!"

Merlyn let out a sigh, and slumped down in her seat. She hated doing ice breakers, or any of those activities the teachers usually made them do during the first day or week of classes in order to get to know each other. It's not that Merlyn's antisocial or anything, she just finds this was an ineffective method of getting to know people, and well...okay yeah she's just a bit socially awkward when first meeting people.
"Okay, everyone come up and get one piece of paper each. Then find a partner and work your way through the interview question!" Ms. Finna smiled so wide and was so genuine that Merlyn felt a bit guilty for internally rejecting her idea. So she got up and told Freya she'll be back with two sheets for them.

Merlyn walked up to the front of the classroom and waited in the line that formed behind the desk. Once she got to the front of the line, she quickly grabbed two sheets of paper, and scurried off before Ms. Finna could look closely at her. On the way back she had to come to an immediate halt when Arthur stood up from his seat. They shared an awkward moment when they both moved in the same direction to bypass each other; Merlyn quickly ducked to her right, and moved around Arthur. Neither of them said a word to each other, and in Merlyn's case, it wasn't because she was still upset at him, it's just that she wasn't exactly sure how to interact with Arthur. They weren't friends, nor would they be considered close acquaintances; in fact, Merlyn wasn't sure what they were.

"Here you go!" Merlyn said while sitting back down and sliding one worksheet over to Freya.

"Thanks Merlyn." Freya smiled, and looked down to read the questions.

The two of them spent the rest of the class time asking each other the interview questions on the paper. When Ms. Finna walked around the classroom, Merlyn pretended that this was the first time she has met Freya, and quickly changed the topic so Ms. Finna wouldn't get the frightful idea of asking Merlyn to stand up and introduce herself to the whole class as the new student.

"Favourite colour?" Freya asked and glanced over at Merlyn's outfit. "I'm going to guess blue?"

Merlyn laughed. "Yeah, blue's my favourite color."

"What's yours?" Merlyn twirled her lead pencil around her fingers.

"I like the colour yellow," Freya said and further elaborated, "but not just any yellow. I like the yellow that only appears on the wild flowers that bloom in the summertime by my family's cottage."

Merlyn smiled and wrote that down. "Sounds like a nice place."
"I love it up there." Freya said, with a wistful look on her face. "What is Ealdor like?"

Merlyn rest her chin in the palm of her hand, and leaned against her arm. "It's a pretty small town, couple fields, a few businesses, and my old high school. The winters are pretty harsh, we get a lot of snow fall since we're near the mountains. But the summers are really nice too. My friend, Will, and I would go swimming in the lake there, or he would make me join a summer sport recreation league with him."

Freya glanced down at the worksheet. "Oh, that leads us into our next question. Do you play any sports?"

"Uh....well," Merlyn said, and scratched her head, "I've played quite a few sports. Will, was pretty much my only friend growing up, so I just played whatever he played...not that he gave me much of a choice."

"Are you any good?" Freya asked curiously while doodling in the margins of the paper.

Merlyn shrugged. "I'm a pretty decent athlete when I need to be. I wasn't joking when I said that I get pretty competitive when it comes to sports."

Merlyn rolled her eyes as memories of her childhood came flooding back. "Will, couldn't stand losing to anyone, so he made sure I felt the same way too."

"Do you plan on trying out for any teams?" Freya looked over at Merlyn shyly.

Merlyn shook her head. "Nah. I prefer watching sports, compared to actually playing in it. I'm more academically inclined. Besides, I don't think my schedule would allow me to take on a sport."

"Oh right, you'll be in Robotics most of your spare time." Freya said while nodding her head.

"Yeah... oh right! I forgot to tell you this Freya." Merlyn excitedly leaned forward in her seat. "Khilgharra emailed us and said that he's re-vamping the Robotics Program. Now instead of only Fridays, I'll have to go in for 30 minutes every day after school, starting next week. He said something about implementing a year-long final project."
"Ooo, any idea on what he's going to make you do?" Freya asked.

Merlyn shook her head. "No idea, but I can't wait I-

"Arthur's favourite color is blue, like the color of his eyes, obviously." A very striking blonde stood up from her chair, and stared down at a petite, but equally stunning, red-haired girl.

"No, his favorite color is gold, like the color of his hair. Right, Arthur?" The red-haired girl turned and placed her hand on his arm, and stroked it while batting her eyelashes up at him. Merlyn saw Arthur smile slightly, but she noticed how uncomfortable he looked, and turned away to snicker.

"Uh...actually my-

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"Saved by the bell." Merlyn whispered to Freya, and nodded in Arthur's direction. Freya laughed softly and nodded her head.

"What do you have now?" Merlyn asked as the two of them packed up, and walked out of the classroom.

"I have Science now." Freya answered and stepped off to the side of the hallway. "What do you have?"

"Biology," Merlyn said, "we have gym together before lunch right?"

Freya nodded. "Yes. I'll meet you by the locker rooms?"

"Okay, sounds good. See ya!" Merlyn turned and headed for the classroom her Biology class would be held in.
Merlyn wished that Freya could have been in all of her classes. That way she wouldn't have to sit by herself, or find someone new to be her partner for labs. Merlyn sighed, and ducked out of the way when the two girls from English earlier tore past her, while still arguing about who knew more about Arthur. Merlyn remembered from her schedule which room number she was supposed to be in for Biology, and luckily made it there right when the bell rang. It seemed like only a few students managed to make it here first (the teacher was already sitting at the front of the classroom), and Merlyn felt relieved, because that meant she got to choose her seat first. She quickly made a beeline for one of the tall, wooden, bench desks at the back of the classroom, beside the windows. Merlyn sat down in the stool-chair beside the aisle, and took out her notebook and lead pencil.

"Come sit with me, Arthur." Merlyn's head snapped up so quick, she almost got whiplash.

'He's in my Bio class too?' Merlyn was in disbelief.

"No. Come sit with me, Arthur." The blonde from English earlier tugged on one of Arthur's arms.

Both girls, were smiling up at Arthur (who was making a vain attempt to try and get both arms back). They both looked like sharks going after a piece of meat, Merlyn thought, and went back to staring down at her notebook and twirling her pencil around her fingers. The teacher, that was sitting at the front of the classroom, practically hissed at the three of them. Merlyn heard the teacher saying something, and their bickering stopped. There was a sudden movement on Merlyn's left, and in the blink of an eye she felt someone sit down in the seat next to her. She glanced over at Arthur in confusion, and he quietly opened his binder without making eye contact with Merlyn. She decided not to ask him why he was sitting next to her, when clearly, there were two other offers that were made. The two girls looked over at Merlyn and glared hard at her as they took their seats on the opposite side of the classroom. Merlyn looked back down at her notebook and rolled her eyes. Great, Merlyn thought, already a nice start to class.

"Yo! Arthur!" Merlyn looked up in time to see two familiar guys walk into the classroom, and take a seat at the bench desk in front of hers. Why was everyone so keen on sitting near her? Merlyn thought, as she quietly scooted over in her seat away from Arthur. She didn't want to intrude on their conversation.

"Hey Percy," Arthur fist bumped the two guys, "hey Lance."

"Damn. Can you believe our luck? We have The Creature teaching us Bio." The giant, who looked like he ate tree trunks for breakfast, said under his breath while resting his enormous forearms on Merlyn and Arthur's desk.
Merlyn took a peek at the stool he was currently straddling, and wondered if the chair would be able to hold him up. Merlyn discreetly looked back over at the guy, ‘Percy’ and wondered how much milk he must have drank in order to get so big.

"I'll be lucky not to get sprayed by his spit when he talks." This one was Lance, Merlyn thought.

Both guys were good looking in their own ways. Percy had a body builder's body, and a short buzz cut, which made him look as if he should be in the military; his muscles made him look as if he was rough, and full of sharp edges. But his smile though, made him look like a soft giant, Merlyn thought. Lance, on the other hand, had movie star good looks; wavy, dark brown hair, naturally tanned skin, dark features, and warm brown eyes. Merlyn wondered if a guy had to be good looking in order to be on the basketball team.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Lance's apology caught Merlyn's attention, and she looked over at him. "Forgot to introduce ourselves. I'm Lancelot DuLac. But, just call me, Lance."

Merlyn was taken aback by Lance's smile, and overall friendliness. But she reached out and shook Lance's hand (to be polite), and smiled. "I'm Merlyn Emrys."

"Nice to meet you, Merlyn."

"this big guy here is, Percival Stronghold."

Percival rolled his eyes at Lance. "Did you have to tell her my full name?"

Percival reached over and engulfed Merlyn's hand in a handshake. "Just call me Percy, or Perce. Either is fine, Percival, is when my mom's pissed at me."

Again, Merlyn was surprised by how nice these two guys seemed. A part of her wanted to be suspicious, but she didn't get a bad feeling from either of them. So instead she smiled, and nodded her head.

"Are you the new kid?" Percy asked, and shifted in his seat so that Merlyn was now somehow apart of their unspoken circle.
“Yeah. I just transferred here.” Merlyn answered, and glanced over at Arthur, who had been quiet through the introductions.

“Arthur, aren’t you going to introduce yourself?” Lance nudged Arthur’s shoulder. Arthur scowled at Lance, and looked over at Merlyn.

Merlyn cleared her throat. “We...technically already met each other.”


“Dude...I think she's,” Percy started to rapidly tap on Lance's right arm, “the one who gave Arthur the bruise.”

Merlyn and Arthur both coughed. There was a split second of dead silence between the four of them, before Percy and Lance lost it. The two guys were in hysterics, and that's when Merlyn decided to look over at Arthur's face. Ah. The bruise looked darker now compared to last Friday night. It was worse, seeing it up close, compared to staring at it from a distance in homeroom. Arthur turned his face to look out the window, and his shoulders went ridged.

“How did you guys find out?” Merlyn asked.

Lance caught his breath first, and smiled. “Arthur told Morgana, and she told all of us.”

“Good hit by the way!” Percy patted Merlyn's shoulder. Okay, Merlyn will admit, she nearly flinched, because...well he's big, and she's tiny. Merlyn thought for a moment that Percy would send her flying through the window if he actually punched her in the arm.

“Er...thanks?” Merlyn said in a confused way. She was about to tap Arthur on the shoulder, and give him an apology for hitting him, but the teacher's voice made everyone turn in their seats and go quiet.

“Attention!” The guys were right, Merlyn thought. This teacher really did look like a creature. “You will all address me as Mr. Manticore!”
Mr. Manticore was a frightening sight to behold. He was a short, shifty looking, bald man. The skin around his neck has started to sag from his old age (Merlyn was assuming this), and his skin tone was a dull grey. His eyes were what spooked Merlyn, they were a slight tinge of yellow, instead of the normal whites, and this made his irises look pitch black. As, Mr. Manticore was speaking, Merlyn couldn't help but grimace at the amount of spit that came out of his mouth as he spoke. It seemed like he had the tendency to drag his sharp, fang-like teeth over his lips as he talked, because they were a deep shade of red, almost purple. He worried his hands together as he walked around the room talking to them, but Merlyn was hard-pressed to really focus on what he was telling them. Mr. Manticore was droning on and on, about some kind of rare venom he found during his summer. In the midst of her own thoughts, Merlyn felt Arthur's knee nudge hers.

Merlyn turned slightly to look at him in question, and whispered. "What?"

"I'm still waiting for my apology." Arthur answered in a hushed tone, and pointed at his bruise.

Merlyn narrowed her eyes, and kept her voice hushed. "Technically, it was an accident. I misread the situation."

Arthur scoffed. That caught Mr. Manticore's attention and he glanced in their general direction. The two of them ducked their heads, and Merlyn glared even harder at Arthur.

"Will you keep your voice down!" Merlyn hissed, "he's scary enough from a distance. Do you really want him coming over to us?"

Arthur glared back at Merlyn, and opened his mouth to respond, but she cut him off. "But, I'll admit that I shouldn't have hit you. So, fine, I'm sorry for hitting you."

Arthur blinked, and had the audacity to look surprised. Merlyn snorted, and rolled her eyes at how gobsmacked he looked. Suddenly, Merlyn felt a cold shiver run down her spine, and she slowly turned to her left. Mr. Manticore was looking down at her with an unimpressed look.

"Would you be so kind and share with the class, what it is you're talking about?" Merlyn tried very hard not to immediately wipe the spit that landed on her off. Everyone had turned to look at them, and Merlyn felt her ears go red.

"We weren't talking about anything..." Merlyn mumbled, and looked up into Mr. Manticore's
piercing eyes.

He stared her down, and Merlyn refused to break eye contact. Mr. Manticore broke eye contact first, and walked back up to the front of the classroom. Merlyn let out the breath she was holding, and she heard Arthur do the same. She quickly swiped at her face where she felt the spit land, and rubbed her sleeves onto her jeans.

He grabbed a stack of papers off his desk, and began to drop smaller stacks on the benches at the start of each row. "Take one, and pass the rest on."

"I want these done by the end of class. Work by yourselves. Or in groups of no more than four. Hand in one booklet at the end of class." Merlyn's grimace turned into a look of disgust at the sight of spit coming out from the sides of Mr. Manticore's mouth as he spoke. Most of the words that had a consonant at the beginning had spit attached to it as well.

A boy in the far corner on the other side of the classroom raised his hand and spoke. "What if we don't finish the booklet?"

Mr. Manticore, for the first time since class started, smiled (showing a lot more of his fang-like teeth) and Merlyn shuddered. "Then you stay back to finish. Textbooks are at the back"

Everyone quickly got up, and went to the back of the classroom to get a textbook. Merlyn glanced down at the booklet, and realised it was just a revision booklet on Biology 20. She flipped it open, and began to read the questions to answer them. Percy spun around in his chair, and put his binder down in the space between Merlyn and Arthur. Merlyn didn't see Lance, and assumed he went to get the textbooks. The questions weren't necessarily hard, but Merlyn remembered a lot from Bio 20, so this booklet was an easy task for her to do.

"I swear he got creepier over the summer..." Arthur said, and moved his binder over so Lance had room for his stuff.

Lance laughed, and dropped a textbook down in front of Percy. "It looks like he got a tan though."

The three guys laughed, and Merlyn covered her mouth while laughing quietly with them. She was already on the last page of the booklet, but the other three didn't notice yet. But, then again, Merlyn wasn't even sure if they wanted her in the group. So she quietly doodled on the back page of
"Dude, Coach is really going to lay it on us today, since we're back." Percy leaned back in his seat, and cracked his neck.

Lance and Arthur both groaned and nodded. Arthur yawned and scribbled randomly on one of the pages. "Bet you we're running lines today."

"Shit..." Percy moaned.

"Guess I won't be seeing Gwen much now..." Lance sighed, and glumly flipped through the textbook.

"Man, we're talking about running lines, and the first thing you bring up is not being able to see your girl?" Percy smacked Lance hard on the arm.

Lance chuckled. "Priorities, Perce."

Percy rolled his eyes, and said sarcastically. "Yeah, I see where they are."

The three of them started talking about the upcoming basketball season, and Merlyn noticed that not a lot of writing was being done by any of them. Lance occasionally wrote down one or two answers, but he was just as invested in the group conversation as the other two were. They weren't deliberately ignoring Merlyn, because it wasn't as if she was participating in the conversation in the first place. But, Merlyn was debating on whether or not she should say something to them about the review booklet needing to be done before class ended or else they wouldn't be able to leave.

"Fuck!" Arthur looked up at the clock, "we only have 10 minutes left in class."

All four of them turned to look at the clock hanging above the door. The three of them quickly started flipping through the textbook, and Merlyn noticed everyone in the class was currently panicking too.

"Sorry, Merlyn," Lance said while looking up at her, "we wasted time talking."
Merlyn blinked, and shook her head. "...no it's fine."

"Shit." Percy grumbled, and tried to flip to the back of the index.

Merlyn felt bad for them, and glanced down at her completed booklet. She decided that it wouldn't be the end of the world if she put their names beside hers. Lance apologized when he didn't have to, and they were pretty decent guys in general. So, with that decision, Merlyn flipped her review booklet over and wrote down: Percival, Lancelot, and Arthur, beside her name up at the top of the page. She slid her booklet over towards them, and pointed to their names at the top.

"We can just hand in my copy." Merlyn said, and looked at the three of them for affirmation. "Okay?"

"You...finished it already?" Arthur asked, while looking at her with a shocked expression.

Merlyn nodded, and answered. "Yeah. So are you guys cool if I go hand this in now?"

"Are you sure you want to put our names on it as well?" Lance asked, but he had a look on his face that was a mixture of relief, and hopefulness. He is such a nice guy, Merlyn thought.

"Yeah, I don't mind. Be right back." Merlyn picked up her booklet, and brought it up to the front of the classroom.

"Completed?" Mr. Manticore sat up so quickly in his seat, Merlyn flinched back a bit.

"Yeah. My group is done." Merlyn said, and tried to strategically place the booklet down to avoid the spit droplets on the desk.

"How interesting..." Mr. Manticore mused, and snatched the booklet out of her hand. "Why is it only in your writing?"

Merlyn shrugged. "I have nicer writing? You did say we could just hand in one booklet
Mr. Manticore let out a breath that sounded eerily similar to a hiss, and nodded his head. "Very well, your group may leave when the bell rings."

"Thanks, Mr. Manticore." Merlyn smiled, and quickly walked away before he could send more spit flying her way.

When Merlyn got back to her spot she started to pack her belongings up so she could make a hasty get away when the bell rang. She looked up at the three guys when she felt them staring at her.

"Yes...?" Merlyn asked slowly, waiting for one of them to elaborate.

Percy rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly, and broke the silence. "You...aren't mad that we didn't do any work...are you?"

Merlyn laughed, and shook her head. "Honestly, is that why you guys are looking at me as if I'll bite your heads off?"

The three of them slowly nodded their heads. Merlyn rolled her eyes and smiled. "It's fine, I'm not mad; I don't see why I would be in the first place. Besides, we technically were a group of four." Merlyn made a vague gesture to their seating arrangement.

Lance smiled. "We'll be better next time."

Merlyn nodded, and shouldered her backpack. The bell rang at that moment, and Merlyn waved goodbye to them. She quickly weaved her way out of the classroom, and into the hallway before the other students could swarm out of their classes. The gym and locker rooms were on the first floor, so Merlyn headed to the nearest staircase and went down one level. She pulled out her phone and messaged Freya.

Do we go to the gym first? Or locker room? Sent: 10:20AM

Freya: We change in the locker rooms first, and just carry our stuff with us into the
Okay!

Merlyn put her phone back in her pocket, and squeezed between two large groups that had congregated in the main hallway to talk during the 10 minute class change. It didn't take her long to get to the locker rooms, and she saw Freya waiting outside for her. Merlyn waved, and quickly sped walked over.

"So, what's our gym teacher like?" Merlyn asked while holding the door open for Freya to walk through.

"Mr. Tristan is really nice, he used to be a track star." Freya answered, as the two of them went to the back of the locker rooms, and took out their gym strips.

"Why is he teaching then?" Merlyn pulled her long-sleeved shirt up over her head, and tugged on the red gym t-shirt that had the words CAMELOT written across the back in big yellow letters. Even though the shirt was a small, it fit a bit bigger than Merlyn had expected. It took her a couple of seconds to tug her skinny jeans off, but she managed to, and changed into the black gym shorts.

"He met Mrs. Isolde, and decided to teach in order to be with her," Freya said, and sighed the next bit of her sentence, "it's so romantic."

Merlyn chuckled, and stuffed her regular clothes into her backpack. "So, I'm guessing this, Mrs. Isolde, is the same one who teaches Social Studies? Since I have her after lunch."

Freyal nodded ecstatically. "Yeah! You're so lucky Merlyn, she's fantastic. I mean, Mr. Caerleon is great too, but he usually goes off on basketball tangents."

"Oh yeah, I wanted to ask you this last week, but I forgot. What's the relationship between Principal Annis and him? They have the same last name." Merlyn straddled the bench and waited for Freya to finish changing.

"His first name is actually Robert," Morgana answered, while walking over towards them
with Gwen in tow. "Everyone just calls him by his last name."

"Hey guys!" Gwen greeted, and walked to the other side of the bench they were at. Merlyn nodded in understanding at what Morgana just told her, and waved at Gwen.

"I'm glad you guys are in our gym class." Gwen started to change out of her clothes and into her gym strip.

"Yeah. I thought we'd be stuck with those two airheads," Morgana said, and took her shirt off, and sat down on the bench. She's not self-conscious about her body at all, Merlyn thought.

"Morgana..." Gwen said with a reprimanding tone, "be nice."

Morgana rolled her eyes, and winked at Merlyn. "You'd be thinking the same thing too, if you spent an entire semester with them last year. Just because they're on the girls volleyball team they think they can team up against everyone else."

Gwen sighed and nodded her head. "At least the bright side is that the guys are in our gym class as well."

"All of them?" Freya asked while packing her dress away.

Morgana nodded. "Yup. Guess we all got lucky, especially you Gwen. You get to see Lance running around, working up a sweat, then dripping."

"Morgana!" Gwen exclaimed, but Merlyn could see that a flush of pink appear on Gwen's naturally dark skin.

The three of them laughed at Gwen's blushing expression. Merlyn already knew that Gwen and Lance were a couple, since Lance mentioned it in Bio, but after meeting them both, she could see why they were together. Aside from the aesthetics, it seemed that Lance and Gwen were both genuinely nice people that had good hearts. In Merlyn's opinion, these kind of people were made for each other.
"What are you guys laughing about?" Merlyn turned towards the voice, and saw the blonde from English and Bio walking over towards them, with the red head following behind.

"None of your business, Vivian." Morgana sneered, and zipped up her bag.

Vivian smirked, and turned her head away. When she caught sight of Merlyn, her expression turned sour. "Don't think that just because you get to sit beside Arthur that you have any chance with him."

"Yeah! You're definitely not his type." The red head added.

"Oh? And what do you know about his type, Sophia?" Morgana stood up, and to Merlyn's surprise, the other two backed up slightly.

"Don't act so cocky, Morgana! You're only Arthur's half sister." Vivian spat, and looked up slightly. Morgana was a good couple inches taller than these two with her long, model-like legs.

Morgana put on a fake smile. "I'm his sister nonetheless, and unless you want me to rip out your extensions to give to Arthur, you better hurry up and go get changed."

It was at the end of Morgana's threat, that Merlyn decided to never get on her bad side. It was intimidating to see a vexed Morgana, but also amusing to see the two girls trying to go toe-to-toe with her. Merlyn looked over at Gwen, who rolled her eyes in exasperation and shrugged her shoulders in a 'what can you do?' sort of way. Freya laughed quietly behind her hand, and turned back to watch the spectacle unfolding in front of them.

Vivian stepped forward, but there was a sudden loud knock from the outside of the locker room. "CLASS IS GOING TO START IN 2 MINUTES!"

"Ah. That's Mr. Tristan. He's not fond of gym starting late, because it throws off the switch." Freya explained in a rushed voice, and tugged Merlyn towards the door. It seemed like that knock broke the tension between Morgana and the two girls, and they separated.

"Switch?" Merlyn said, and looked between the other three to get an explanation.
"The girls class get the first 45 minutes of gym, and the boys class get the last 45 minutes of gym." Gwen explained as they made their way into the gym.

"What? Why...whoa." Merlyn stopped her sentence short when they walked into the gymnasium.

Camelot High's gymnasium was designed to be an athlete's dream place to play in. High ceilings that made the entire space bigger; so every step taken it echoed slightly, shiny hard wood floors, and bleachers on both sides of gym. The gym smelt clean (which probably wouldn't last long, Merlyn thought), and the high ceiling lights made everything appear brighter than normal. It seemed like everything about this school outshined Ealdor High, Merlyn thought, as she followed Freya, Gwen and Morgana to the bleachers closest to them.

They all took a seat, and waited for Mr. Tristan to begin talking to them. Merlyn lifted her right foot and braced it against the seat below her to tie her shoes. The doors on the other side of the gym opened, and Merlyn looked up from her task to see who was coming in. It was Arthur, Lance, and Percy who came in first, followed by three other guys. Merlyn had already saw the other three with them before, so it really was the whole group. The guys looked over at them, and threw up a two finger salute.

"Hey, Merlyn!" Percy waved, and caught Merlyn by surprise, but waved back nonetheless.

"So what was Vivian talking about when she said you and Arthur are sitting together in bio? Is this chemistry I'm seeing?" Morgana wiggled her eyebrows suggestively while nudging Merlyn.

Merlyn laughed at the joke. "No, he just randomly sat down beside me. I think he didn't want to sit with the other two. Lance and Percy sit in front of us."

"Lance texted me about what you did for them. You should be careful how nice you are to them Merlyn, they might become spoiled." Gwen said while braiding her hair.

"I thought you would want me to help your boo." Merlyn grinned, and laughed some more when Freya and Morgana ooo'd at Gwen.

Gwen rolled her eyes and smiled. "I love him to death, but he'll get no sympathy from me if he starts failing his classes."
Merlyn didn't believe that for one second. Not with the way the two of them stared at each other from across the gym, as if they were the only two people in existence. She smiled at how cute the two of them were; she felt someone's gaze on her and turned her head slightly. Arthur's head moved so quickly that Merlyn wasn't sure if he was staring at her or if she imagined the sensation. But, now that Merlyn noticed how the guys were sitting on the opposite end of the gym (on the other set of red bleachers), she remembered what her question was originally.

"How come we're divided?" Merlyn asked Morgana and gestured to the guys with her chin. She saw even more guys come into the gym, and head over to the bleachers.

Morgana rolled her eyes, and let out a huge sigh. "Apparently, it's to make the class more fair. But, it's just another sexist attempt to make us girls look weak, and appear as if we can't keep up with the boys."

"Ah....I see." Merlyn nodded her head, while gathering her hair to tie up in a ponytail.

"It's so stupid," Morgana said, "we can just as easily share the class with the guys, and be done with it sooner."

Gwen giggled. "You're just not happy that the girls can oogle at Leon when we switch with them later."

Merlyn was surprised to see a faint blush appear on Morgana's naturally pale complexion. "Well, there's that too. But it's the principle of the matter, Gwen."

"Are you and Leon dating now?" Freya asked while scooting forward to close the group up so no one would hear their conversation.

Morgana coughed, and shook her head slightly. "N-No...but we're just....taking...our time?"

"Which one of the three guys is Leon?" Merlyn asked while looking across the gym. "I've met Percy, Lance, and Arthur."

"He's the red head. The other guy is my brother, Elyan, and the guy sitting beside Percy is Gwaine." Gwen answered while taking a seat on Merlyn's left.
"Oh, I didn't know you had a brother, Gwen?" Merlyn said in a shocked tone.

"Yeah, he's a year younger than us, but he got to start school early. Which is why we're both in the same year," Gwen explained, "my dad thought it would be nice if we got to go to school together, in case neither of us made friends."

"Oh...well, I mean that's nice of your dad?" Merlyn chuckled when she saw Gwen roll her eyes in exasperation.

Merlyn looked over at Leon, and then glanced at Morgana. "You guys would make a cute couple."

"W-What?" Morgana spluttered. This was surprising, Merlyn thought. For a sharp-tongued girl like Morgana to get flustered over this guy, he must mean a lot to her.

"Alright! Ladies!" A loud, masculine voice called out, followed by the sound of a whistle. "Gather here please!"

"Mr. Tristan?" Merlyn asked Freya in a hushed tone as they made their way over to the center of the bottom row of bleachers.

"Yeah," Freya answered, "come on."

"Pretty good looking too..." Merlyn said quietly as an afterthought.

Freya laughed, and shushed Merlyn. Gwen and Morgana chuckled as well, and the four of them stood together. The girls formed a half circle around an average-heighted, blond man. Merlyn only thought he was average-heighted because he wasn't that much taller than her compared to all the other guys she's stood beside. He definitely had a runner's physique, Merlyn thought, and rocked back slightly onto her heels. Mr. Tristan looked very young to be a teacher; he had a few laugh lines on his face, but overall he was a pretty good looking man. His eyes were a light shade of brown, and the color was brought out more from the sun-kissed tan he had. Merlyn now wondered what Mrs. Isolde looks like.
"Since today is the first day, I think we should just have a nice game of dodgeball." Mr. Tristan announced in a loud voice. "We have enough girls, so everyone team up into groups of ten. Once you have a group move to opposite sides of the gym."

"I guess we just need six more girls," Gwen said, and waved at a pair of girls standing off to the side, "want to come join our group?"

The two girls nodded eagerly, and scurried over towards the four of them. Afterwards, when they managed to form a group of ten, they started to walk over to the left side of the gym, but Vivian and Sophia's group cut theirs off on their way there. Morgana clicked her tongue, and glared at their group, but Sophia just turned around to smirk. Merlyn wasn't exactly sure why there was such animosity between Morgana and the two girls (aside from obvious personality clashing), but the tension was so thick, Merlyn felt shivers run up and down her spine.

"Morgana's side, against Vivian's!" Mr. Tristan called from his spot on the high platform. "Morgana, your team's on this side."

"Feeling competitive yet, Merlyn?" Freya whispered between the two of them as their group headed over to the right side of the court (based on where Mr. Tristan was standing). He had place rubber dodgeballs down on the black half court line. and was standing off to the side (near the guys).

Merlyn shrugged. "Not really? We aren't keeping score are we? It's just a game for fun."

"Uhm..." Freya said, while casting a wary glance towards the other side of the gym. "It...might not be so fun."

All the girls took up a position on their side of the court and waited for Mr. Tristan to blow the whistle. Merlyn was standing beside Gwen and Freya on the black baseline, but Morgana had moved to a more 'strategic' location on the line, in order to get a direct line to the ball and Vivian. She was very aware that all the guys were avidly waiting for the game to start, and were watching them like hawks. Merlyn was debating on whether or not to rush the line for a ball, or just hang back and wait it out. She's normally extremely competitive, (stupid, Will...), but dodgeball wasn't exactly a sport in her opinion. Merlyn could see how hyped up everyone was on both sides (minus Freya, who was nervously tugging on her braid).

Mr. Tristan explained the rules to them. "All hits must be below the shoulder. No crossing center line. You get hit, take a seat on the bench; catch a throw mid-air you can bring back a team member and make the other person sit out."
Merlyn decided at the last second, to just hang back, and not make a run for the line. It seemed like it was a good decision, because it was a bloody massacre for the balls. She swore she saw a couple elbows flying in every direction, and that wasn't even Morgana. Merlyn side-stepped a few of the balls flying in her direction, and picked one up off the ground beside her to use as a shield. Gwen was near the middle, and was actively participating in trying to reduce the other side's numbers. Morgana on the other hand...was out for blood; she was probably the main offense for their side, and took out several players.

Merlyn reached out and knocked a ball off course with her own, so it wouldn't hit Freya. "Hang in there Freya, we need the numbers."

"Oh, Merlyn, I just want to be hit and be done with it." Freya said while ducking towards her.

"Yeah. But, if we get sent out, then Morgana and Gwen will be the ones holding down the fort." Merlyn twisted her body so that it nearly missed the incoming ball.

"Right. Right." Freya sighed, and scurried away.

"Hey! Satellite ears! Are you just going to stand there the whole game?" Merlyn knew it was a guy's voice that said it, and she looked over and glared at a mean looking boy with a buzz cut. Everyone turned to look at the spectacle, and the gym almost died down in intensity.

"Shut the hell up, Val!" Percy said, and stood up from his spot.

"Fuck you, Stronghold!" Valient called back.

"VALIENT!" Mr. Tristan bellowed, "TO THE PRINCIPAL’S OFFICE!"

The mean looking guy, or 'Valient' stood up and smirked at her. Merlyn looked away in anger, she wasn't going to let that comment get to her. She's had many people pick on her for the size of her ears, and he won't be the first or the last. Merlyn saw Gwen give her a sympathetic look, but
what caught Merlyn's eye was Sophia's smirk, and in the next second, she was rearing back her arm. Merlyn took off towards Gwen, and threw her hand out.

"GWEN! MOVE!"

It happened very quickly. Merlyn saw the look of shock on Gwen's face. She felt her hand make contact with Gwen's shoulder, and pushed hard enough to make Gwen stumble back a few steps. In the following seconds, Merlyn felt the rubber ball make contact with the left side of her face, and the impact caught her off guard. The hit didn't actually hurt that much, but landing on the gym floor kind of did. If anything the sound of the ball hitting her, was probably the more embarrassing thing in Merlyn's mind. Her immediate reflex, was to grab and cover the side of her face that was hit, and she took a moment to reorientate herself.

"Merlyn!" Gwen gasped, and in her next breath she was right beside Merlyn. "Are you alright?!"

"Yeah." Merlyn said, and blinked away the tears that were forming. "I'm fine."

"THAT WAS A DIRTY MOVE, SOPHIA!" Morgana hollered, and she heard her footsteps stomping across the gym.

TWEEEEEEET

"Morgana! Don't put Sophia into a headlock!" Mr. Tristan called out.

"It's turning red..." Freya placed a hand on Merlyn's shoulder. Her expression was full of worry, and it looked like she was about to cry on Merlyn's behalf.

Merlyn chuckled. "Guys, really, I'm fine. I'm so pale, everything looks worse than it actually is."

"Are you okay?" Mr. Tristan knelt down beside Merlyn, and tried to move her hand further away from her face. "You're the new student right? Merlyn Emrys?"
Merlyn nodded. "Yeah, I'm okay. It just took me by surprise that's all."

"Would you like to sit out the rest of the gym period?" Mr. Tristan said in a soft voice.

Merlyn shook her head, and felt a sudden anger claw its way to the surface. "No. I can still play."

Mr. Tristan looked hesitant, but Merlyn was already pushing herself to her feet. She repeated herself. "I can still play."

"Alright." Mr. Tristan nodded, and smiled slightly. He turned and walked back off the court.

Merlyn felt someone's hand on her shoulder, and she turned to face Gwen, who looked extremely grateful. "Thank you, Merlyn."

Merlyn grinned, and patted Gwen's hand. "Anytime."

A sudden applause broke out, and the girls turned to look over at the bleachers. A familiar group of guys were cheering and clapping; even Arthur was clapping (but in a more conserved degree). Merlyn laughed, and waved at them. She turned when Morgana stomped back over to their side of the gym, and was practically radiating murderous vibes.

"You...okay there, Morgana?" Merlyn asked hesitantly.

"I saw Vivian give a signal to Sophia." Morgana said through clenched teeth. "But, I didn't know what her game was. If I had known, you wouldn't have gotten hit, Merlyn."

"Then let's crush them." Merlyn said, in a serious tone. She held up her fist. "It's five against six now. We can win this."

A devious smile appeared on Morgana's face, and she bumped her fist against Merlyn's. "With pleasure."
The game was getting hectic, and the guys were cheering from the bleachers. Even though Merlyn didn't consider dodgeball a sport, she was pissed that Vivian and Sophia would pull such a dirty move. She weaved through the incoming balls, and rapid fired two balls to the other side. One ball made contact with a hip, and the other one a shin. Now, Merlyn isn't one to brag, but she is a pretty decent shot, and not to mention her arm strength packs a punch (the bruise on Arthur's cheek can testify to that). But, when she gets competitive...she kind of...loses all sense of mercy for the other team.

"Morgana!" Merlyn tossed a ball over to her, and ducked out of the way of an oncoming one.

"Thanks!" Morgana said, and whipped the ball across the line. It whizzed through the air, and smacked one of the other girls in the thigh.

Merlyn ran to the right side of the court to get a ball, but couldn't dodge an incoming ball in time, and it hit her left hip. Mr. Tristan blew his whistle, and signalled to the bench.

"Shit." Merlyn cursed under her breath, and ran to their bench.

"You're doing so well out there, Merlyn!" Freya said, and patted her on the shoulder.

"Thanks, Freya." Merlyn shot her a quick smile, and was bouncing her knees up and down while anxiously tapping her fingers on the bench.

She was thrumming with adrenaline and excitement. Their side was currently leading with three-no wait, make that a tie with two people on each side. On their side it was Morgana and Gwen, and on the other side it was Vivian and a girl Merlyn didn't know, but had a pretty good arm on her as well (Sophia was sent to the principal's office). Merlyn was anticipating for either Morgana or Gwen to catch a throw so she could go back into the game.

"Merlyn," Mr. Tristan began, "you have to remain in contact with the bench."

Merlyn flushed, and knelt down on the ground while placing a hand on the bench. "Right. Contact."

Mr. Tristan smiled and shook his head, he turned to watch the game, and blew his whistle once. "Clean catch. Morgana pick-"
"Merlyn!" Merlyn was already up and sprinting towards a ball.  

The odds were back in their favour, and the game was going to end soon (their gym time was coming to an end and the boys were going to start theirs). Merlyn kept aiming for the other girl, instead of Vivian. After a few back and forths and near misses, Merlyn managed to get the girl out, but not before she managed to get Gwen in the arm. She was in the process of getting another ball, when Morgana let out a loud curse.  

"FUCK!" Merlyn felt that sentiment, because that meant Vivian got her, and she was out.  

"Language, Morgana." Mr. Tristan reprimanded and shook his head.  

TWEEET  

"Alright, ladies," Mr. Tristan said, "let's call it a ti-"  

Merlyn was slightly panting, but interrupted him. "Sudden death! First hit wins the game."  

"Merlyn, it's just not a-" Mr. Tristan tried to finish his sentence, but Vivian stepped in.  

"Let us have a showdown!" Vivian demanded, and glared over at Merlyn, who stood defiantly in her spot.  

Mr. Tristan sighed, and looked at his watch. "Alright. We can have a showdown. Each of you gets two balls, and first hit takes the game for their side."

"WHOO! COME ON, MERLYN!" Lance cheered. He originally was cheering for Gwen alone, but after Merlyn took a hit for his girl, he began to avidly cheer for her as well.  

Merlyn grabbed her two, and Vivian did the same. The gym suddenly went very quiet and everyone watched with excitement to see who was going to win. Merlyn's heart was racing, face was flushed, and her ears were red like cherry lollipops, but she wanted to win so bad-she could almost
"On my whistle, you guys can make your shots." Mr. Tristan said, and raised his whistle to his lips.

Although it seemed like Merlyn was a good athlete, her strengths—when it came to sports, was her strategic skills. In her mind, it didn't matter how great of a player a person can be, if they went into a game with no strategy in mind, their opponent will crush them. Merlyn knew she wanted Vivian to make the first throw, but the same can be said for what Vivian wanted. She had to play this smart, and play it quick.

TWEEET

As quick as she could, Merlyn threw the ball in her hand straight up into the air towards Vivian. Everyone on the sidelines gasped, but it got the desired results Merlyn wanted. For a split moment, Vivian looked up at the ball, and Merlyn took that chance to kick the second ball beside her foot up off the ground, and into her hands. She whipped the ball as hard as she could over across center line at Vivian. Her breath caught in her throat as she watched and waited.

THWACK

"YES!" Merlyn exclaimed, and threw hands up into the air. Vivian sent her the nastiest glare she's received up until that point.

Everyone (except Vivian's team) erupted in cheers, and her team rushed over towards her. The ball had made contact with Vivian's shin. When she realized what was going on, she tried to quickly move out of the way, but couldn't dodge it quick enough. Morgana got to Merlyn the quickest and threw herself at her.

"THAT WAS AWESOME!" Morgana crushed Merlyn into her arms, and shook her wildly back and forth. "WE WON!"

"We won!" Freya, who was naturally soft spoken, raised her voice loud enough to be heard.

Gwen just squealed and threw her arms around Merlyn and Morgana while jumping up and down. Merlyn felt herself beaming with pride, and the smile on her face felt like it would be
permanent. Back then, she was never treated as part of a group in school, so she didn't bother participate at all in gym (the least likely of places where anyone would welcome her). It was only when Will decided that she needed 'proper' gym experience, did she become slightly good at a variety of sports. But, standing here, cheering with her classmates because they won (even a simple game of dodgeball) made Merlyn reconsider that maybe...gym...this school in general...wouldn't be so bad.

TWEEEET

"Girls time slot is over! Go get changed!" Mr. Tristan said. "Boys! five laps around the gym!"

Merlyn could hear the guys groan, and saw them all trudge down from the bleachers. She followed after Freya, Gwen, and Morgana as they headed for the locker rooms. Suddenly a large mass clapped Merlyn on the back, and started to vigorously rub her head.

"That was awesome, Merlyn!" Percy said.

"Thanks, Percy." Merlyn tried to hide the grimace on her face...the man hit hard.

"Mighty impressive, Merlyn." The guy with long hair, who Merlyn recognized, said and held out his hand. "I'm Gwaine, by the way."

"Nice to meet you." Merlyn said, and placed her hand in his, expecting a hand shake. But, he turned her hand over and placed a kiss on top.

Merlyn flushed a bright red, and quickly pulled her hand back. "Pleasure is all mine, Merlyn."

Percy rolled his eyes. "Ignore him. He's just a big flirt."

"I...uhm-yeah." Merlyn pointed over her shoulder. "Have to go get changed. See you guys."

Merlyn quickly dashed off to catch up with the other three, who had just exited the gym
doors. Her ears were burning, and she tried to calm herself down. Honestly, she was just taken by surprise by how bold Gwaine was. She's seen guys like him before, but have never experienced it firsthand.

"Did Gwaine do the whole 'pleasure is all mine' act on you, Merlyn?" Morgana was in the process of changing out of her shorts and into her jeans.

Merlyn nodded, and quickly went to change out of her gym strip. As she was changing she felt someone's gaze, and looked up to see Vivian glaring daggers at her. But, before Merlyn could mention it, Vivian turned away and began to gossip with the girl beside her. Gwen lent everyone her spray on deodorant, and once they all finished getting changed and went to the bathroom they were the last ones to walk out of the locker rooms.

"So do we just head back in?" Merlyn said, and jabbed her thumb in the direction of the gym doors.

"We could-" Morgana said, and Merlyn could see an evil glint in her eye.

Gwen stepped in and admonished Morgana. "And we will. Morgana, you are going to be running for student council president for the last time this year. Do you know what skipping will do to your reputation?"

Morgana sighed, and nodded her head. "Yes. You're right, Gwen. Like you always are."

"She's Morgana's vice president." Freya whispered to Merlyn.

"Okay, let's go back to class." Morgana rolled her eyes in an exaggerated fashion, and ushered the three of them forward.

Merlyn could see the benefits of having split times in gym. The most obvious one, was that they got to watch the guys like how they got to watch the girls. She tried to evenly spend her time looking at all the guys playing dodgeball, but her eyes kept drifting back to Arthur, and how attractive his arms were when he threw the ball. He was extremely athletic that's for sure, with the speed he was moving around on his side, and the strength behind each throw. Arthur's side was winning, and the time on large digital clock built into the scoreboard was indicating that class was almost over.
Merlyn didn't want to make her gawking obvious, since Morgana and Gwen were both avidly talking about the upcoming election season— even Freya wanted to help out this year, and Merlyn (having the least amount of connection to any of them) kept herself floating at the edge of the conversation. She wasn't sure where she stood with Gwen and Morgana; she would like to be friends with them, but she might just be considered an acquaintance at this point. Merlyn tended to over think things a lot, and she dwelled on many things in her mind.

"Do you want to join our committee as well, Merlyn?" Gwen asked, and gave her a kind smile.

Merlyn blinked in surprise. "Er...are you guys sure you want me to join your committee? I'm still just the new kid...and all."

"So what if you're the new kid, Merlyn?" Morgana said, and gave her a deadpanned look—as if what Merlyn just said was redundant. "We like who you are. We're all friends now. Join our committee."

Merlyn blushed, and smiled. "Okay...I'd like to join."

"Oh, but, I don't know how much help I'll be. I'm in the Robotics Program, and have to meet with Khilgharra more often." Merlyn added, and rocked back in her spot.

"That's fine!" Gwen said. "We can work around it. Elyan's in that program too, and he has to help us every year during the campaign part. So you'll be fine!"

"Oh right, Khilgharra mentioned that," Merlyn said, "I'll see-"

TWEEET

"GAME OVER BOYS!" Mr. Tristan yelled. "CLASS DISMISSED!"

"Thank god it's lunch time!" Morgana said, as they proceeded to walk down the bleachers.

"Let's go get a table before everyone rushes the lunchroom." Gwen said, and picked up her
"I'm so hungry..." Merlyn said.

Freya nodded in agreement. "Me too."

The lunchroom was very large, but nothing too spectacular. It had a similar layout to her old lunchroom, but the scale of everything was bigger. The food selection was better though, Merlyn thought, and grabbed a juice box from the ice bin. More people were filing into the cafeteria now, and the line up was growing longer behind Merlyn. Once they got their food, and paid, they sat down at a long circular table near the windows. Merlyn was mid-bite of her chicken sandwich, when she felt someone sit down beside her on her right (Freya was on her left).

"Why, hello again, Merlyn." Gwaine winked, and slid his chair closer to her.

Merlyn kept chewing, but waved back at him, and to the other guys who were taking seats at their table. Lance immediately went to sit beside Gwen, and they drifted off into their own world, Leon casually took the open seat next to Morgana (after she glared at Percy, who nearly took the spot), Percy sat down beside Freya, and Elyan sat on the other side of Gwen. Merlyn waved at them, but her wave kind of faltered when Arthur took the seat across the table from her. They both kind of awkwardly stared at one another, and Merlyn didn't know whether to wave, or just ignore him.

"You were so kickass today in gym, Merlyn!" Percy said, and leaned around Freya to give Merlyn another pat on the back.

She wanted to wince, but held it back. Instead, she smiled. "Thanks, Percy."

"Yeah, you're really quick." Leon said, and unconsciously put an arm around on the back of Morgana's chair. "You're the new kid right?"

"Yeah I-oh, right," Merlyn said, "I wasn't introduced to you guys. I'm Merlyn Emrys."

"Leon." He smiled, and shifted his body closure towards Morgana's when she did the same
"Elyan." Elyan said and gave Merlyn a two finger salute.

"And, we've already met." Gwaine wagged his eyebrows suggestively, and Merlyn had to laugh at that...he kind of reminds her of Will.

"Nice to meet you guys." Merlyn said with a big grin.

"That was a risky move you tried at the end there," Arthur said, out of the blue, "kind of stupid really."

Merlyn narrowed her eyes, and shot back a smartass comment. "Takes someone stupid, to apparently see stupid everywhere."

Everyone at the table laughed, and Arthur glowered at Merlyn. He sat up straighter in his seat, and pointed a finger at her. "The only stupid one here, is the person who decided to stop a ball, with her own face."

Merlyn felt her cheeks grow warm, but sat up straighter in her seat as well. "That was for the greater good!"

Arthur pointed to Merlyn, and then at his cheek. "And what exactly was this then? Charity work?"

"A testament to your royal pratness...my lord." Merlyn said the last part sarcastically, and rolled her eyes.

"I'm not a prat!" Arthur huffed, and looked like a chicken who's feathers were ruffled up unpleasantly.

"Yes. You are." Merlyn said.
"Am not."

"Are too."

"AM NOT!"

"ARE TOO!"

"WHY ARE YOU SUCH A CHILD?!" Arthur was standing out of his seat now, and leaning forward on the table.

"I AM NOT A CHILD! IF ANYONE'S A CHILD YOU ARE! YOU...YOU...CLOT POLE!" Merlyn mimicked Arthur's position.

"THAT'S NOT EVEN A WORD!" Arthur shot back, and leaned forward some more.

"IT IS A WORD, AND THAT'S WHAT YOU ARE!" Merlyn was so close to Arthur now; she could see how long his eyelashes were—and quite frankly it was distracting her sudden spark of anger.

"Oh my..." Gwen said, and leaned into Lance's shoulder with an amused smile.

"How interesting..." Morgana smiled that devilish smile of hers, and looked up at Leon, who simply shook his head and laughed.

"Dammit, there goes my chances!" Gwaine sighed, and leaned back in his seat to take a bite out of his apple.

"Uh, guys?" Elyan said hesitantly (not wanting to get caught in the cross fire).

"WHAT?!" Arthur and Merlyn snapped in his direction.
Elyan pointed to his left. "Might want to tone it down a bit...we're not your only audience."

It was as if the two burning entities were doused with cold water; the *entire* lunchroom was watching their spectacle with interest. Merlyn swore she saw a couple phones out recording their argument. Arthur and Merlyn both immediately sat back down in their chairs, and ducked their heads. Everyone at their table started to laugh even harder, and Merlyn continued eating her chicken sandwich with her ears burning brightly like a neon sign. For the rest of the lunch period, Merlyn and Arthur both ignored each other, and finished eating their lunch quietly.

When the bell rang, and the lunch period was over, Merlyn got up with Freya to throw away her garbage. She put the red tray on top of the other ones, and they both left the lunchroom. Merlyn had Social next, and Freya had Science, so they both went separate ways. Luckily, when Merlyn got to the designated classroom, there were only a couple other students in the room. She was heading to the back corner of the room beside the windows, when a very beautiful woman stopped her.

"Ms. Emrys?" Ah. This must be Mrs. Isolde.

"Just...Merlyn is fine..." Merlyn said, and she was awestruck by Mrs. Isolde's beauty. There was no question in Merlyn's mind anymore about why Mr. Tristan would become a teacher to be with his wife.

Mrs. Isolde smiled, and her eyes lit up with happiness. "Of course, well it's great to have a new student in the school. Would you like to do an introduction to the class before I begin the lesson?"

A look of pure terror appeared on Merlyn's face, but she wasn't sure how to say 'no' to Mrs. Isolde without sounding rude. But, Mrs. Isolde read the fear on Merlyn's face correctly, and chuckled quietly.

"Or not. I completely understand." She patted Merlyn on the shoulder. "Just have a seat. I won't pick on you."

"Thank you..." Merlyn breathed out in relief, and nearly ran to the back of the room to take the corner desk.

Once she sat down, she put her head down on the desk in exhaustion. Having gym before lunch was basically a double whammy. Merlyn's exhausted from running around, but she's almost in
a food coma from lunch. How is she suppose to stay awake? Maybe if she closed her eyes for a bit she can get a really quick power nap in before class started. Merlyn could hear other students coming into the classroom, and taking seats at various desks around the room. She didn't bother look up when the desk ahead of her was taken; she was too tired, and didn't want to sit up until she absolutely had to. The restless night she had was finally catching up with her, and the only bright side was that this was the second last class of the day. As more students piled in, the chatter in the classroom grew, and Merlyn decided that she might as well sit up. The familiar sight of blond caught her off guard.

"Why are you here too?" Merlyn asked blatantly. To say she was surprised would be an understatement. Arthur has been in every single one of her classes so far, and Merlyn didn't believe that it could be this coincidental.

Arthur didn't bother to turn around to answer her, but his tone was filled with annoyance. "It's not like I asked to share all my classes with you."

"Well, sorry, you're so inconvenienced, sire." Merlyn said sarcastically, and rolled her eyes-even though he wouldn't see her doing so.

Arthur scoffed, and crossed his arms. Merlyn guessed he didn't feel compelled to turn around and cause another scene with her. Which probably was for the best, Merlyn thought, and pulled out her notebook. Every desk in the room was filled now, and Merlyn was idly twirling her pencil around each of her fingers. Mrs. Isolde sat on top of her desk, and crossed her jean-clad legs.

"Welcome class!" Mrs. Isolde greeted everyone in a happy tone of voice. "I hope you've all had a wonderful summer break!"

Everyone murmured bits of agreement, and nodded their heads. "So, I thought, that instead of doing the generic introduction ice breakers, we could have a little bit of a trivia game. As a kind of introduction to Social 30."

Merlyn's interest was piqued. She liked trivia, and even more so, this spoke deeply with her competitive nature. "I'm going to divide the class in half."

Mrs. Isolde made a parting gesture with her hands. "Then, I'll be asking a series of questions to everyone. Only the person I called on may answer the question. For every right answer, that side gets a point. Whichever side gets the highest points will get a prize at the end. How does that sound?"
The classroom was slowly buzzing with excitement. A kid on the other side of the room raised his hand. Mrs. Isolde called on him. "Yes, Kay?"

"How will you be picking us?" Kay asked.

"With this." Mrs. Isolde held up a clipboard that had the attendance sheet on it. "That way I can re-familiarize myself with everyone. I'll be randomly choosing up and down the list. Alright, shall we begin?"

Merlyn sat up in her seat, and eagerly awaited to be called on. She noticed vaguely that Arthur slumped down further in his seat, but it didn't concern her. Maybe this way, Mrs. Isolde will call on her. The first few questions went to the other side of them room, and they only managed to answer two out of the four questions. Some of the kids looked angry at the two students who didn't get the answer right. Merlyn was getting impatient, and wanted Mrs. Isolde to pick her already so their side could get at least one point. She watched as Mrs. Isolde closed her eyes and slid her finger up and down the attendance sheet. Merlyn let out a breath of defeat when she saw that Mrs. Isolde's hand was nowhere near the top of the attendance sheet (it was near the middle).

"Arthur," Ms Isolde said with a smile, "what was the state of military and political tension called, after World War II?"

Everyone spun in their seats to look at Arthur. People on their side of the classroom were whispering words of encouragement to Arthur, and were egging him on to get their side a point. Merlyn could see the back of Arthur's neck go red, and she felt bad for him. She saw him sit up in his chair slowly, and because she was in close proximity to Arthur, she could see his knuckles go white from the grip he had on his seat. So, in a split moment's decision, she slowly slid back in her seat, and slouched her shoulders so that she was laying back on her desk.

"Uh..." Arthur began, "I..."

"The Cold War." Merlyn whispered loud enough to Arthur's back so he could hear her. But not loud enough that anyone else could.

Arthur paused. Merlyn really hoped this prat didn't also have hearing problems, as well as being a cabbage head. "The Cold War?"

Mrs. Isolde smiled, and clapped her hands together. "Excellent! That's correct! You've just
earned your side their first point, Arthur."

"WOO! ARTHUR'S THE MAN!" A guy a few seats ahead of them cheered, and threw his fist in the air. Everyone on their side followed in the cheering, and Mrs. Isolde had to calm them down before continuing.

Arthur slumped back down in his seat, and leaned his chair back so it was closer to Merlyn's desk. He was quiet for a few seconds, before he managed to awkwardly say something. "Thanks..."

"Don't mention it." Merlyn mumbled.

With Merlyn's current position, and the way Arthur was leaning back in his chair; she couldn't help, but catch the faint scent of Arthur's shampoo, and realized she liked the smell of it. They both quietly sat, and waited for Mrs. Isolde to continue around the classroom. Merlyn noticed that at the end of this selection process, Mrs. Isolde's hand was near the top of the attendance sheet.

"Merlyn," Mrs. Isolde called out, "could you give me a definition for the word 'liberalism'?"

Merlyn sat up slightly so Mrs. Isolde could see her from behind Arthur, and answered. "A political or social stance advocating for the freedom of the individual."

"Another point for the left side of the classroom!" Mrs. Isolde said, and moved on. But, not before she gave Merlyn a quick wink. Merlyn smiled, and went back to her original position.

In the end, Merlyn's side of the classroom won. Mrs. Isolde passed around a large tub of chocolate and candy. Once her side got their prize, Mrs. Isolde passed the large tub around to the other side of the classroom as well. Merlyn figured Mrs. Isolde was too nice to withhold treats from the other students, and a small part of Merlyn was glad that at least they had the knowledge that their side won. The bell rang, and signalled for the last class switch of the day. Merlyn packed her backpack up quickly, and hustled out of the classroom before everyone could crowd the door. She was particularly excited for this last class, only because it was Math (which she was really good at) and Khilgharra was the designated teacher for this period. When she got there, Khilgharra was sitting at the front of the classroom reading the newspaper.

"Good afternoon, Khilgharra." Merlyn said, and stood in front of his desk. She felt a rush of excitement about not having to call Khilgharra with his title (kind of lame, but it was important to her).
"Afternoon, Merlyn." Khilgharra grinned, and put his newspaper down. "Excited for the day to be done? Any plans after school?"

"Kind of. I plan on taking a nap." Merlyn said, and let out a small yawn.

Khilgharra chuckled, and nodded his head. "Excellent plans. So, did you happen to receive my email?"

Merlyn nodded. "Yeah, so we're meeting for thirty minutes each day after school right? Starting next week."

"Yes. I plan on having you guys work in the lab more in order to prepare you for the exhibition at the end of the year." Khilgharra explained.

"Exhibition?" Merlyn said.

"It's something new I'm implementing. I'm currently speaking with a bunch of universities and asking their engineering heads to come down at the end of the year to see your works. If the athletes of this school can earn scholarships for playing a sport, I don't see why our more academically inclined students aren't offered the same thing. But, I'll explain more about it in the next coming weeks." Khilgharra grinned his dragon-like grin, and gestured for Merlyn to take a seat.

Merlyn nodded, and turned around to find a seat by the window. Unfortunately, a lot of students had come into the classroom as she was speaking with Khilgharra, and all the spots by the window were taken. She wasn't even surprised at this point when she made eye contact with Arthur (he managed to get a window seat...prat). Merlyn sighed, and went to take a seat in the desk closest to the door at the front of the room. She wasn't sure if she should even take out her notebook, or just leave it in her backpack. Every teacher at this point had been doing introductions or review, so she hoped Khilgharra would be doing the same thing.

When the last bell rang, a few more students shuffled in, and went to the back of the classroom. Khilgharra stood in front of his desk and leaned against it. His eyes scanned the class, and everyone was watching him silently.

"So," Khilgharra said, "Isolde told me during our lunch break, that she was going to have a little trivia game in her class for a prize. Did she?"
Merlyn, and everyone else in the class nodded their heads. Everyone was probably wondering if Khilgharra was going to do the same thing.

Khilgharra stroked his chin. "That's not a bad idea."

Khilgharra suddenly pushed off his desk, and walked over to the whiteboard. The class watched quietly as he uncapped a black dry-erase marker, and began to write on the board. Merlyn could see that the first thing was a binomial, followed by a polynomial function. She figured he wanted someone to divide the latter with first part.

"So, I plan on doing something a little different than what Isolde did." Khilgharra said, and turned back to the class. "I'm going to make a wager with you guys."

Quiet murmurs broke out in scattered parts around the class. "If one of you is able to divide this polynomial with that binomial, and give me the quotient, the divisor, the dividend, and the remainder...I'll let the entire class out thirty minutes early."

The murmurs grew louder in excitement, and Khilgharra's grin grew in size. "But, let me set the rules. Only one person is allowed to make an attempt on this question. If they get it wrong...I'll give the class a worksheet to do for tonight, and be due tomorrow in class."

Everybody groaned, and some of the braver kids at the back booed. Khilgharra chuckled, and waved a red dry-erase marker in the air. "I think this is a fair wager. So, any volunteers?"

Merlyn knew how to solve the question. But, the problem she faced was whether or not she was brave enough to volunteer herself for it. Someone on the other side of the room tried to stand up, but their friend immediately pulled her back down into her seat. That's the thing...no one wants to be the person who mucked this up for the entire class. Merlyn decided that she was fine with waiting out of the whole period, in fact, there wasn't any downside to this decision.

Khilgharra tapped his foot, and smiled. "Shall I choose a volunteer?"

"But...why can't we just wait out the period then?" A girl sitting behind Merlyn asked.
"Where's the fun in that?" Khilgharra said, and started to walk around the classroom.

Every time he came close to a student's desk they immediately ducked their heads, and avoided all eye contact. Merlyn didn't even know Arthur could make himself look so small for someone as tall as him. Khilgharra was currently walking around the back row desks, and when he looked up he made eye contact with Merlyn. She quickly spun around and knotted her fingers together. She could hear his footsteps coming closer and closer to her desk, and she held her breath.

'Please don't-' Merlyn thought, but suddenly the red marker appeared in her line of vision.

"Care to take my wager, Merlyn?" Khilgharra asked, and Merlyn could see the amusement in his eyes.

"Uhm...could I n-..." Merlyn began quietly, but stopped. She wanted to decline, she really did, but there was another part of her that wanted to impress Khilgharra. Merlyn knew he was presenting her with this challenge, because he knew she could do it. So...why not?

"Okay." Merlyn took the marker from Khilgharra. The dragon grin was back, and Merlyn knew she made the right choice.

But...that didn't mean she wasn't breaking out into a cold sweat as she walked up to the whiteboard. Suddenly, she wondered why she thought wearing a scarf was a good idea. The back of her neck was burning, and she swore she felt her ears sweating. Merlyn uncapped the marker, but paused before writing on the board. She turned her head towards Khilgharra, and tried to keep her voice steady.

"Can I use synthetic division? Or do I have to do long division?"

Khilgharra's face was a picture of amusement, and waved his hand at her. "Whichever you prefer."

Merlyn nodded, and turned back to the board. She neatly drew out the lines she need, and wrote out the coefficients. The hardest thing about being up there wasn't the math problem, it was how quiet everyone behind her was. No one made a sound, and all Merlyn could hear was her heart beat, and breathing. She drew arrows as she carried her work, and circled and labelled the items he wanted identified. Once Merlyn finished, she re-capped the marker, and turned around to let Khilgharra and the class see all her work. She held her breath as Khilgharra glanced over the
"Why did you choose two to work with?" Khilgharra said.

"Er...I..." Merlyn cleared her throat. "It's two, because that's what will make the binomial zero if you plug it in."

Khilgharra nodded understandingly and turned to face the rest of the class. "Very good. Well then, I guess I'll have to hold up my end of the wager, guys. You'll all be dismissed twenty-

"Thirty." Merlyn blurted out, and blushed when Khilgharra turned to look at her with an amused expression. "...you said thirty."

He turned back to the class, and chuckled. "Right. You all may leave thirty minutes early."

The classroom broke out in cheers, and Merlyn quickly dashed back to her seat. Khilgharra gave her a pat on the shoulder as she passed him.

"Excellent work, Merlyn." Khilgharra said, and walked back to his desk. Merlyn felt herself swell with pride, and sat down in her seat.
Year Long Project

Chapter Notes

Hi guys!

Sorry it's been so long since an update! I promise I haven't stopped writing. I just recently finished my midterm and skills assessment week, which means I'll have more time to write. Once again I've fixed as many mistakes I was able to catch, but I will be going through to fix small ones I've overlooked. I hope you guys enjoy this chapter!

-SS

"I am happy to see so many returning faces for my program, and a couple of new ones." Khilgharra said from the top of the platform.

Merlyn was sitting eagerly beside Elyan (who appeared just as excited), and the whole lab was filled with murmurs of excitement. Merlyn had been on edge all throughout her classes today, in anticipation for her robotics lesson with Khilgharra. He had her undivided attention, as he pulled up PDF files on his computer, which was transmitted onto the SMARTboard. The first was a formal letter, with Camelot High's crest at the top of the page. The next PDF appeared to be a set of guidelines, and the last one was a list with a bunch of university names. Elyan nudged Merlyn's arm, and pointed to the right side of the room.

"Khilgharra must have convinced Principal Annis to talk to the school board, and expanded the budget. Those are new wall rigs."

"Oh...that's awesome. I thought the lab already had those!" Merlyn said in a hushed voice.

"No! Just wait till Khilgharra's done. I'll show you around the lab." Elyan whispered, and kept quietly pointing things out around the lab to Merlyn. She didn't mention that, technically, she's already been given a tour of the lab. But, Elyan was so nice to her, and Merlyn wasn't about to turn down a friend's offer.

Last week had went by uneventfully, after that interesting first day. Not a lot of people found out she was the new kid, and by now no one really cared (which was a good thing, in Merlyn's opinion). It was nice just having Freya, Gwen, and Morgana to hang around with at lunch, and in
gym; the guys were all really nice too, and Arthur was easy to tolerate...if they both kept their
distances from one another. After their screaming debacle, and pretty much their lack of ability to be
civil for long periods of time to each other, the only other option Merlyn could think of
was...strategic avoidance. Which was hard considering how he was in every. Single. One. Of. Her.
Classes.

"So, this year, as every one of you can see around the lab, we've managed to get some new
upgrades." Khilgharra said, while making a grand sweeping gesture around the room.

Everyone started to nod their heads, and Khilgharra continued. "With these new upgrades.
I'm planning on creating more opportunities for you guys."

"This year, I will be introducing Camelot High's first Robotics Exhibition. Starting from now,
until the end of your senior year, you will all come up with your own original design to present at the
exhibition. Along with your design, I would like for you all to make a prototype to be presented.
This means, not only will it involve some ingenuity, but some marksmanship to go along with it."
Khilgharra said, and was casually leaning against his desk while looking out at all of them.

A boy on the far right side of the room raised his hand. "Yes. Gilli?"

"What exactly makes this exhibition so important?" Gilli asked.

Khilgharra grinned, and moved the wireless mouse around the desk and clicked on the next
PDF. "I'm glad you asked that. What makes this exhibition so important, are the people coming to it.
Here is the master list I've compiled."

Khilgharra moved the mouse up and down the document. "As you can see, the names on this
list are of all the engineering departments from different universities across Albion. I have discussed
with them, the potential for, academic scholarships to be handed out to the students that they find the
most impressive. Each of the dates on here is reflective of when they will be coming to the school."

"So we'll be presenting more than once?" Elyan asked out loud.

Khilgharra nodded with a smile. "Exactly."

Merlyn raised her hand, and spoke when Khilgharra looked at her. "But, what if we don't
have a finished project in time?"

"When I selected everyone for my program, I did it based on my firm belief that each, and every single one of you, are capable of great things," Khilgharra glanced at the SMARTboard, and then at the class, "and it will be my duty to shape you into those individuals that can do great things."

Those were some very inspirational words, Merlyn thought, and sat back in her chair. She continued to listen silently as Khilgharra explained to the class what the guidelines are for the project. Essentially, they were:

**Final Robotics Project 2017**

1. **IT MUST BE AN ORIGINAL IDEA**
2. **ALL IDEAS MUST HAVE A BLUEPRINT CREATED FOR IT**
3. **CALCULATIONS MUST BE DONE THOROUGHLY**
   - You must calculate the cost of production for the design
4. **BUILD THE PROTOTYPE FOR YOUR DESIGN**
   - Note: Materials are provided by the school. Any additional materials needed will be under student's discretion.
5. **OPTIONAL: DESIGN A PITCH FOR YOUR PROTOTYPE**
   - Make it seem as if you are actually trying to get a company to back your design
6. **HAVE FUN WITH THIS.**

"This project will be ongoing throughout the rest of the school year, up until the last exhibition date. But, don't let your guard down, I will be giving you guys a run for your money with projects and assignments as well." Khilgharra grinned, and winked at the class.

Merlyn felt a bunch of different emotions flowing through her. But, the best one, she thought, was the nervous excitement that made her nearly bounce in her seat. Merlyn glanced over at Elyan who looked just as excited, and was already eyeing one corner of the room. Everyone was murmuring to their seat neighbours, and the voices slowly grew louder.

"Alright," Khilgharra said, "I can see I'm about to lose everyone's attention. So I'll end here for today, and let everyone roam around the lab."
Elyan nearly leapt out of his seat. "Come on, Merlyn. Let me show you where the welding room is!"

Merlyn quickly grabbed her backpack, and scrambled to catch up to Elyan. The two of them spent the last 15 minutes of lab wandering around to all the different stations. Merlyn couldn't help glance at the 3D printer sitting at the very far corner of the room still in its packaging.

"Do you think Khilgharra will let us use it?" Merlyn said, and gestured with her chin in the printer's direction.

"Man I hope so." Elyan sighed.

"That printer should be set up in the next few weeks." Merlyn and Elyan both jumped when Khilgharra magically appeared behind them with his arms crossed, and spoke as if he was there the whole time. "Still have to wait for Principal Annis to get back to me about the cost of letting students use it."

"If I can get the attending universities to back the program, you guys might only just have to pay a $50 fee to print. But it might be limited to how many uses, we'll see what I can work up." Khilgharra said, and abruptly walked away from the two of them.

Merlyn watched as he came up behind other groups, and frightened them with his silent presence. She turned to look at Elyan. "Has he always been this..."

"Weird?" Elyan finished. "Yeah. He has, but you'll get used to it. Hey, check out these new compressors."

By the time they were all dismissed, the class had managed to look at every station. Merlyn had met some new people, and introduced herself, but they already had their set group of friends. Elyan was probably the only person who stuck beside Merlyn the whole time, and it was nice to have at least one friend in this class. Elyan and Merlyn both started walking out of the school together, and were avidly discussing potential ideas for their exhibition projects.

"Do you live in this direction as well, Elyan?" Merlyn suddenly asked as they were walking.
Elyan shook his head, and pointed in the opposite direction they were walking. "No. Gwen and I live in the other direction from the school."

"Then why are you going this way?" Merlyn said and creased her eyebrows together.

"The guys are at Park Avalon. I'm going to meet up with them." Elyan said, and turned his phone so Merlyn could see the text from Lance. "Practice was short today, and I missed it; so they're going to run through the drills with me."

"Oh..." Merlyn said while dragging the word out, "that makes sense. But, now that there's Robotics after school, won't you always miss at least 30 minutes of practice?"

"Yeah, but our practices usually go on longer. Coach Car is okay with me missing 30 minutes of it." Elyan said as they were approaching the park, he nudged Merlyn's arm. "Want to come play a game with us?"

Merlyn could see the group of guys under the same basketball net the first time she saw them. They were all having another scrimmage, and the teams were an odd number without Elyan there. It looked like they were all having fun, and weren't actively keeping score, but, if Merlyn joined, she would make the teams an odd number again.

Merlyn shook her head, and gave Elyan an apologetic smile. "Nah, thanks though. But I kind of just want to go home."

Elyan nodded. "Okay, see you tomorrow, Merlyn!"

"Bye!" Merlyn said, and continued to walk forward.

"HI MERLYN!" Gwaine shouted, and waved ecstatically at her. The other guys turned to look in her direction.

Merlyn smiled and quickly waved at them, her cheeks warmed up slightly from the sudden attention she got. She made eye contact with Arthur, but quickly looked away, and continued walking. It sort of embarrassed her, to admit, that she thought Arthur looked cute with the front of his hair sticking up from the sweat, and the fact that, when he swiped at it with his arm band, made it stick up even more, was just plain adorable. But, all that didn't matter, Merlyn thought, as she
continued her walk home.

"Strategic avoidance." Merlyn mumbled. "Strategic avoidance."

It was around 9 o’clock in the evening, when Uncle Gaius knocked on Merlyn's door. Merlyn paused the movie she was watching on Netflix (Will's account, because she's a student who can't afford such luxuries) and spun around in her chair to face the door.

"Yeah?" Merlyn said.

Uncle Gaius opened the door, and stepped into Merlyn's room. "Done your homework?"

Merlyn nodded. "Yup! Finished it earlier!"

"Oh excellent," Uncle Gaius said, and took a seat on Merlyn's bed, "I have a present for you."

"Present?" Merlyn said, and sat up quickly in her chair. "What kind of present?"

"Well, I'm not sure if you will-" Uncle Gaius said, scratching his head nervously.

"I'll love it." Merlyn interrupted, and rubbed her hands together.

Uncle Gaius smiled, and pulled a worn-out looking book from behind his back. Judging by its size, Merlyn would guess it was a sketchbook, or photo album. He handed the book to her, and when she grabbed it, she was almost caught off guard by how heavy it was. Before Merlyn could open the cover, Uncle Gaius spoke up.

"This sketch book...belonged to your father."
Merlyn froze, and quickly let go of the cover. She stared down at the book with different emotions, and for some reason, she felt as if she wanted to cry. Merlyn slowly lifted up the book, and a second later, she crushed the book into a hug.

"When you were telling me about that Robotics Exhibition, it reminded me about this book." Uncle Gaius said. "Balinor forgot about it when he moved out of the first apartment we lived in. To be quite honest with you, I'm surprised I still had it, what with all the times I've moved. But, I'm glad I did."

"W-W-W," Merlyn cleared her throat, swallowing the lump that was forming, "was that when he moved in with mom?"

Uncle Gaius nodded, and tapped on the cover of the book with his index finger. "It was the sketch book he always carried around when we were in university together. It might be a bit well-loved, but it was his nonetheless."

"I thought it might be a good source of inspiration for your project." Uncle Gaius said, while standing up.

Merlyn quickly put the book down on her desk, and stood up to hug him. "Thank you, Uncle Gaius."

Gaius could hear Merlyn sniffle, but returned the hug regardless. They stood there silently for a moment to let their emotions settle. Gaius could feel Merlyn trembling, and it broke his heart to see how much pain the thought of Balinor still caused her. He remembered how she was when Balinor first passed, and it was why he was apprehensive at first to give this book to her. But, maybe it'll be a good thing, Gaius thought.

"Do...you still miss him?" Merlyn asked, in a voice so small, that it reminded him of when she was younger and was still afraid of the monsters in her closet.

"He was my best friend," Gaius said, "and I still wish it wasn't the past tense."

"He met mom, because of you." Merlyn said as they broke apart from the hug.

"And then they had you. Which is a gift all in itself." Gaius lightly messed up her hair, and
smiled. "Now, don't stay up too late. You still have school tomorrow."

Merlyn laughed, and wiped her eyes. "Okay. Okay. Uncle Gaius. I get it."

"Good. Goodnight." Gaius said, and closed the door behind. Swallowing the lump of emotions in his throat.

Merlyn stood there for a moment, in the comfort of her room, and glanced down at the book on her desk. She took a deep breath, and opened the cover. With each page she turned, she was reminded about all the small details about her dad that she almost forgotten over the years. Like how he only wrote in cursive when he was getting too lazy to write normally; or that he always liked to use his coffee cup as a page holder, and it left very obvious coffee rings on random pages. This book reminded Merlyn how much she actually still missed her dad, and how little of him she actually got to know about him. Merlyn could see random math equations every couple of pages, and little notes underneath to remind him of what page the previous equation to an answer would be. Sometimes a page would just solely be dedicated to a sketch he was working on, like the one of mom in her younger years. Merlyn always knew her dad was a good artist, because there were still some of his drawings hanging around their house, but to see his early work and growth on these pages...touched something inside of her. Part way through the sketch book, she had to stop and blink away her tears.

Merlyn. There was a quick sketch of a Merlin falcon in the center fold of the book, and a prominent coffee ring in the bottom right hand corner of the page.

"I miss you, dad." Merlyn whispered, and closed the book up. She'd save the rest for another night, and decided then to go to bed.

The rest of the week went by without any problems. They had different assignments assigned from their teachers. Some were due next week, others were due the week after. All in all, classes were fine, and she was able to handle the workload. But, the best part of the week was seeing Merlyn's plan of strategic avoidance was working exceptionally well. Any time Arthur would get close her (during classroom switches) she would perform some daring maneuver and zip off into their next classroom before he could catch up. In class she made sure to focus solely on note taking, and avoided looking in his general direction (the people on the opposite side of the classroom was starting to look a little freaked out by how much she was staring in their direction). At lunch, Merlyn waited for Arthur to specifically pick where he was sitting so she could sit out of his line of sight. For a split moment, it looked as if Morgana clued in on what Merlyn was doing, but Merlyn quickly diverted Morgana's attention to Leon, and that worked out successfully. As convoluted as Merlyn's plan was, it definitely paid off, because her and Arthur didn't get into another yelling match, and by the end of the week, everyone practically forgot about their first one.
Will: Want to go see Shakespeare In The Park this weekend? They're doing Twelfth Night. Albion City Park is having a huge charity event.  

"Oh I love that play!" Freya said, and Merlyn looked up from her phone. Freya blushed, and knotted her fingers. "Sorry, I didn't mean-"

"Pft," Merlyn said and waved her hand in the air, "it's cool, it's not like I was hiding it. Want to come with me and Will to see the play?"

Freya looked stunned by the request. "Oh! I wouldn't want to intrude."

"Intrude on what?" Merlyn said and scrunched up her eyebrows. "It'll be fun. Will's really into the Shakespeare stuff, so you and him will have lots to talk about."

"Well...if you're sure..." Freya said shyly.

Yeah sure. Freya's going to come with us too!  

Will: Cool. I'll pick you both up from Gaius's at 10:30 Saturday morning.  

"There," Merlyn slid her phone over and grinned at Freya, "now we have plans together for this weekend."

"Okay," Freya said with a smile.

"You know," Merlyn began, "Will was the one who lent me his copy of The Merchant of Venice."

"So I wasn't joking about how you two would have a lot to talk about." Merlyn said, and pulled out the copy of the book to show Freya again. "In fact, you might be the only other person I know, aside from Will, that likes English literature that much."
"What's not to like," Freya sighed with a wistful look on her face, "the way stories were portrayed back then, is no different than how we write stories now."

Merlyn nodded, but there was a distinct look of mild confusion on her face. "Yeah...Will says that to me all the time. But...you know...it kind of just-

Merlyn moved her right hand over her head, and made a whoosh noise. "-over my head."

Freya giggled. "Well, maybe it'll do you some good then, to see it in person."

"Right," Merlyn said, and rolled her eyes in an exaggerated manner, "we'll see about that."

Merlyn and Freya laughed; the two of them were working on the poetry booklet Ms. Finna assigned them, and they were nearly finished. Merlyn glanced over at Arthur's table, and saw Vivian and Sophia both clinging onto Arthur's arms on each side, and trying to over talk to each other. She let out a snort of laughter, and for a split moment felt bad when Arthur glanced up over in her direction to scowl. Merlyn turned her attention back to the handout of poems, and pointed out another line for Freya to copy down.

RRRIIIINNG

"Want to come over to my place, and work on homework?" Merlyn said, as the two of them walked out of the classroom.

"Oh! Okay," Freya said, and followed after Merlyn.

"We can hitch a ride with Uncle Gaius." Merlyn said as they walked to the doctor's office. "He's usually done by now."

The two of them blended into the large wave of students rushing downstairs to the first floor, and it was apparent why everyone was in hurry, from their excited chatter about the upcoming weekend. Merlyn and Freya both made it down with ease, and slipped off down a different hallway (away from the front doors) towards Uncle Gaius's office. Merlyn could see the late afternoon sunlight spilling through the open doorway, and popped her head in.
“Knock. Knock!” Merlyn said, and beamed at Uncle Gaius, “Ready to go yet, Uncle Gaius?”

“Just about, Merlyn, oh hello there, Freya.” Uncle Gaius said, and waved in her direction while sliding several manila colored files into his briefcase.

“Hi, Dr. Gaius.” Freya said shyly, and returned his wave.

“Freya's going to come over, and we're going to do homework together. Is that okay?” Merlyn asked, and threw herself into the nearest chair.

“Of course. You're always welcome.” Uncle Gaius said.

“Merlyn, would you hand me that document on that pile of paper over there please?” Uncle Gaius said, and gestured to the tall stack of papers on the desk beside Merlyn.

Merlyn passed Uncle Gaius the piece of paper he was asking, and waited for him to finish. Freya took a seat beside Merlyn, and watched Dr. Gaius scurried around the room putting things into his briefcase.

“Alright,” Uncle Gaius sighed, “I'm all finished. Shall we?”

The three of them headed to the back of the school, to the staff parking lot, and loaded into the SUV. Merlyn was listening to Freya talk about how excited she is for the next unit to begin in English (which just so happened to be the Shakespeare unit). Merlyn was an overall academically talented student, there wasn't a subject she couldn't excel at. But, that isn't to say there are some subjects she understood to a greater depth, than others. Math being the most obvious example, and if Robotics counted as a subject, then that too. English was a subject that she enjoyed, but not so much as Freya does. But-that does not mean, she wouldn't listen wholeheartedly to Freya's love for the subject.

Once they got back to the apartment, and settled in Merlyn's room they both started to work on the homework that was assigned for the weekend. Merlyn helped Freya with homework from all her other subjects aside from their shared class together. After awhile they were both distracted by the new episode of the new season of their crime show being released. The two of them were so caught up in it, that by the time it was finished it was already dinner time. Merlyn asked Freya if she
wanted to stay for dinner, but, unfortunately, Freya's dad was already on the way to pick her up. So the two of them agreed that next time she'll stay for dinner, and went downstairs to wait for Freya's dad.

"Hi, Mr. Felein, I'm Merlyn Emrys," Merlyn said as Freya was climbing into the passenger seat.

"Nice to meet you, Merlyn." Mr. Felein smiled.

"See you tomorrow, Merlyn." Freya said, and waved goodbye.

"Bye, Freya!" Merlyn called out while waving at Freya as her car backed out of the driveway.

Merlyn went back inside, and started to make dinner; she decided to make a quick fried rice with the leftover chicken and vegetables in the fridge. As the skillet was heating up, Merlyn grabbed a few eggs out of the fridge and cracked them into a bowl. She glanced down the hallway as she was whisking the eggs, and could hear Uncle Gaius speaking with one of his patients. Merlyn drizzled a bit of oil into the skillet, and coated the bottom before dumping the leftover rice in; the scrambled eggs went on top next, and she began to mix it all together. Once the rice and egg mixture was somewhat combined, she tossed the leftover vegetables and chicken in with it.

"Thank you so much, Dr. Gaius. I know it's late and-" It sounds like an older gentleman, Merlyn thought, and tried to place a face to the sound of his voice, but couldn't.

"It is not a problem, if Mordred feels worse, then please bring him by to see me. The children Tylenol should help with his fever." Merlyn leaned back a bit to see who this new patient was, but all she could get a glimpse of was a head of wavy brown hair at the door.

"Of course. Have a good evening, Dr. Gaius." The man's voice drifted, as his footsteps echoed down the stairs.

"Was that a new patient, Uncle Gaius?" Merlyn asked, when Uncle Gaius came into the kitchen.

Uncle Gaius shook his head.
"No, he's actually the parent of one of my patients. I used to see them more frequently when they lived in the building, but they just moved into the new condos built near the downtown area a couple of months ago. His son was diagnosed with severe asthma, so he's a bit more sensitive case."

"Oh," Merlyn said, and placed a bowl of fried rice in front of Uncle Gaius, "I see."

"Dinner smells fantastic, Merlyn." Uncle Gaius stretched, and took the spoon Merlyn was offering.

"Thanks, Uncle Gaius. Dig in." Merlyn said.

After dinner, Uncle Gaius told Merlyn he will do the dishes, and sent her off to bed. Merlyn told him about her plans for tomorrow with Will and Freya, Uncle Gaius nodded and told her to have fun, and to bring him back some mini doughnuts. She went upstairs to take a quick shower, and brush her teeth. Once her hair was dry, she settled into her bed with her laptop and opened up Netflix. Before putting her phone down to charge, Merlyn quickly set an alarm to wake her up tomorrow, and plugged her phone in. Merlyn wasn't sure when, but eventually she passed out midway through her movie.

"Merlyn."

Merlyn grumbled, and was telling whoever was calling her name to, "go away."

"Merlyn, your alarm has gone off twice now."

More grumbling, but no coherent sentences were formed.

"Freya will be here soon."

"It's...Satur...day," Merlyn mumbled, and rolled over in her bed. She squinted in the general direction of Uncle Gaius's voice.
"Merlyn, I do think you should wake up now," Uncle Gaius said, "unless you don't plan on going out today. I have plenty of boxes I need help unloading."

Merlyn immediately shot up in bed; her hair was a fluffy mess, and she felt the room spin slightly as blood rushed back up to her brain. "I'm up! I'm going! No more boxes!"

Uncle Gaius chuckled, and walked out of her room. Merlyn picked up her phone, and nearly had a heart attack when she noticed what time it was.

"I OVERSLEPT!" Merlyn said, and jumped out of bed-making a mad dash for the bathroom.

"I tried to wake you up earlier," Uncle Gaius said from the bottom of the stairs, "but you wouldn't wake up no matter what I did."

Merlyn quickly squirted some toothpaste onto her toothbrush, and started to rapidly brush her teeth. She stuck her head out of the bathroom doorway, and spoke around her toothbrush.

"Next...time...just throw," Merlyn turned back to the sink to spit, and stuck her head back out, "next time just throw something at my head, Uncle Gaius!"

Merlyn could hear him chuckling in the kitchen, and said something vaguely like 'I'll keep that in mind.' The doorbell rang, and Merlyn quickly splashed some water on her face to wake herself up. She ran back to her room to change, and started to rummage through her closet.

"Merlyn! Freya's here!" Uncle Gaius called from the staircase.

Merlyn was hopping on her left foot trying to get her right one into her pair of skinny jeans. She hopped to the doorway, and tried to multitask putting on pants, and talking.

"I'm...almost...re-SHIT!" Merlyn slipped and fell onto floor. Her right foot was halfway in, and there was a split moment of relief when Merlyn realized she didn't rip her jeans. The ground vibrated from the impact, but the fall didn't hurt...much.
"You okay, Merlyn?" Freya's soft voice called up to her, and was full of concern and worry.

"Yeah!" Merlyn said, and quickly rolled back up, and pulled her jeans up and buttoned them. She ran back to her closet, and flipped through her sweaters and jackets.

"Sweater? Jacket?" Merlyn said in a rushed voice, and decided on a thin sweater.

"Merlyn! Will's here!" Uncle Gaius announced.

"Coming!" Merlyn said, and snatched her phone off her bed, and a pair of socks out of her drawer.

Merlyn bolted downstairs, and came to a halt beside Freya-who was blushing a bright pink color. Once again, Merlyn found herself trying to multitask; hopping from one foot to the other, trying to put her socks on, and introducing Freya to Will.

"Freya, this is..." Merlyn struggled with her left sock, "Will."

"Will," Merlyn said, and leaned against the banister to put on her right sock, "this is my friend, Freya."

"Hi Freya!" Will said, and grinned at her while offering his hand to shake.

Freya looked up from her eyelashes, and returned his handshake while blushing a deeper pink. "H-H-Hi."

"It's so nice to finally put a name to a face, wouldn't you say so?" Will walked over to Merlyn, who was currently trying to catch her breath from all the running, hopping, and jumping she did, and pulled her into a headlock.

"Because, Merls here, told me all about you." Will began to give Merlyn a noogie. "But failed to introduce us!"
"OW! WILL! YOU ASSHOLE! LET GO!" Merlyn shouted and tried to pull her head out from his arm.

"It's just like her!" Will spoke overtop of Merlyn's shouting. "Oversleeping. Late introductions. Such an inconsiderate one, isn't she?"

Freya immediately shook her head, she wasn't sure whether to be amused or frightened. "N-No! Merlyn isn't-"

Will grinned and started to laugh. "I'm just kidding, Freya."

"I'M GOING TO GO BALD, WILL!" Merlyn has moved on to kicking Will in the shin.

"Don't be so dramatic, Merls. It'll give Freya the wrong impression. I'm a wonderful person." Will said, and released Merlyn from the headlock he had her in, and patted her on the head.

"He's a horrible person, Freya." Merlyn said while glaring at Will, and pointed at the tuft of hair now sticking up. "Don't let your guard down around him."

Freya watched as Will was standing beside Merlyn, and was quietly mocking her as she spoke; Merlyn kicked him again in the shin, while sticking her tongue out at him. Freya covered her mouth, but a fit of giggles burst through. She could see how comfortable the two of them were around each other; there was a bit disappointment that settled into the pit of her stomach, when it occurred to her that a guy like Will, likes girls like Merlyn, and not quiet girls...like her. Not that she was interested...or anything.

"Shouldn't you guys be heading out now? There won't be any parking left if you don't leave soon." Uncle Gaius said, and took a sip of his coffee.

"Right," Will said, "come on ladies. Let's go, shall we?"

"Is my hair okay, Freya?" Merlyn said as they walked to the door, and was patting the area down.
Freya nodded. "Yup, looks great."

The three of them walked outside, and towards the SUV parked on the driveway. The weather was perfect today, sun was shining, skies are blue, the air was a bit cily, but overall it was still perfect. A couple was walking past the driveway with their dog, and a few kids were playing street hockey across from them on the road.

"Freya gets shot gun!" Will said, and hit the unlock button on his keys.

"Pardon?" Freya said, and Merlyn could hear the shock in her voice.

"Guests, *always* get shot gun, Freya." Merlyn grinned, and gently pushed Freya towards the passenger side door.

The three of them left close to 11 AM (because, yeah, it was *technically* Merlyn's fault for sleeping in). The downtown area was getting busy, and they had to circle around twice to find a parking spot. Will put his company parking pass on his rear-view mirror, and the three of them got out of the car.

"One of the perks of working for Pendragon Enterprises. The parking pass can be used anywhere downtown." Will said.

"So where do you park your motorcycle?" Merlyn said, and hit the button for the crosswalk.

"Underground parkade at work. Can't afford to expose her to the elements." Will answered.

"You have a motorcycle?" Freya said, and looked up at Will.

Will looked down and winked at her. "I like to live a little dangerously from time to time."

Freya went pink, and nodded her head. There were large masses of people that crossed the street with them towards Albion City Park. As Merlyn, Freya, and Will drew closer, they could hear
music playing, children running around screaming, and announcers over the loud speakers. Merlyn could see that the change in seasons was quickly approaching, as the trees had yellows and oranges creep into their green. The grass was drying, and slightly crunching under her runners as she walked, and the air was more crisp. A jacket might have been a better option, Merlyn thought, and shoved her hands into her sweater pocket.

"The performance should be starting soon, let's grab a bite to eat and head over." Will said, and slowed down to walk behind the two of them.

Freya turned her head slightly in confusion, but didn't ask why Will was now walking behind them. Merlyn knew that it was his way of keeping an eye on them, and made sure no one would snatch them up or trample them. She also knew that he would never admit to being a big, overprotective, softie, and would just say that there wasn't enough room, on the pathway, to walk side by side in a group of three. The smell of greasy, deep fried food was calling out to Merlyn like a siren, and she immediately turned to look up at Will.

"Will, I want a corn dog, please." Merlyn said with a big smile.

"Sure, what would you like, Freya?" Will asked.

"O-Oh, uhm, I can-" Freya said, and frantically tried to reach into her bag.

Will gently put his hand on her shoulder, and shook his head.

"It's alright, Freya. I'm paying for today."

"I...well. Thank you." Freya said, and looked up from her lashes.

Will grinned. "Alright, so what would you like?"

"A corndog as well, please." Freya said softly.

Will nodded. "Okay. I'll go get us food. The two of you go wait over there by the balloon stand for me."
"We're not little kids, Will." Merlyn said. "We won't get lost and kidnapped."

Will scoffed, and wagged his finger at Merlyn. "You're lucky I don't get those Lost Kid tags for the both you."

Will turned to walk away, and was muttering under his breath. "Won't get lost...you're both so tiny...I could sneeze and you guys would tip over."

"We can hear you!" Merlyn said, but Will was already out of ear shot.

The two of them walked over to the balloon stand, and stood under the tree beside it. Merlyn was captivated by how big this park was, and how many people showed up today. Events back home didn't get nearly as busy or populated as this one. There were people of all age groups roaming around; little kids with their parents, teenagers with their friends, and even a few elderly people were out for a stroll. This park is the perfect place to people watch, and Merlyn decided she would have to figure out how to transit here by herself once she got home. In her attempt to soak her surroundings in, Merlyn nearly missed what Freya said, but managed to catch the sentence.

"He's a very nice guy."

"Will?" Merlyn said turning to look at Freya. Freya nodded.

"Yeah," Merlyn said, and glanced over in the direction Will headed in, "he's a really good guy. But, don't tell him I said that, he'll use it against me later."

Freya giggled. "So how long have you guys been dating?"

"What?" Merlyn said. Her eyebrows furrowed, and her mouth was slightly open.

"Oh," Freya said, and furrowed her eyebrows as well, "are you two like Morgana and Leon? Just taking things slowly?"
Merlyn furiously shook her head, and waved her arms in front of her. "No! No! No! Not like Morgana and Leon. Definitely not like them. Will and I aren't dating. He's my big brother."

"Well, of course, not by blood. But, like I said, I grew up with him. He's my family. No way would we date each other." Merlyn was rambling off her sentences quickly.

"Oh..." Freya said quietly, and her cheeks turned pink, "so...he's single?"

"Yea-why?" Merlyn asked, and when she saw Freya's blush turn darker, a grin slowly appeared on her face. "Are you interested in Will, Freya?"

"Oh! What? Me?" Freya said breathlessly, and knotted her fingers together. "N-N-No! But...I don't mean...I do think he's...very attractive, and he's older...so he wouldn't...not with me anyways."

Merlyn smiled, and patted Freya's shoulder. "He's a good guy. Just go with that for now."

Freya nodded, and smiled shyly back. "Okay."

Merlyn and Freya both watched as Will made his way over towards them with an armful of food, along with their corndogs. Once he reached the tree they were standing under, he handed the large amount of food out evenly amongst them, and lead them towards the area sectioned off for the performance. Merlyn immediately bit into her corndog, and happily chewed as they were looking for a place to sit. It seemed, to Merlyn at least, that not a lot of people were interested in watching the play, but that didn't matter too much; it just meant that there were better seats for them. Merlyn could see on both Will and Freya's faces that they were both excited to see the performance, and Merlyn was content with her corndog. She could see movement behind the long, red, velvet-like curtains, and she tried to see if she could catch a glimpse of the actors. Merlyn could see that Will was finishing up his hot dog, and Freya was on her last bite of her corndog.

"Did you know the Albion theater recently hired this group of actors to perform at least once a month there?" Will said, and popped a French fry in his mouth.

"Yeah," Freya said, "my dad is one of the stage directors there and he was on the hiring committee."

"Your dad is a stage director? That's so awesome, Freya!" Will said while leaning around
Merlyn to talk with Freya.

"Do you get to see all the productions they put on?" Will said, and shoved Merlyn's head back slightly to have a clearer view of Freya. Merlyn glared at Will and bit into her corndog; she tried to angrily chew at him, but he didn't seem to notice.

Freya nodded excitedly. "Yeah, last month it was-"

"The Phantom of the Opera!" The two of them said in unison, with excitement lighting up their eyes, and voices.

Merlyn watched, and continued to chew on her last bite of corndog, as the two of them got into a discussion about intricate themes of the opera, and eventually that broke off into different tangents that all revolved around English literature. Most of it Merlyn knew about, if not from Will, then from Freya, but there were some topics that kind of zoomed over her head, and was lost. When Merlyn finished her corndog, she immediately started in on the nachos sitting on her lap.

"I didn't think a high schooler would be so interested in stuff like this." Will said, and leaned back in his seat to stretch out. This time Will pushed Merlyn's head forward so he could continue speaking with Freya.

Merlyn swatted at his hand and gathered the food in her lap and stood up. The two of them looked at her amused, and waited for her to say something. Merlyn gestured for Will to slide into her seat.

"I just want to eat my nachos in peace." Merlyn said.

Will laughed, and shuffled one spot over. Merlyn took Will's seat, and continued to eat her food. Freya laughed softly, and turned to continue her conversation with Will.

"I'm surprised too," Freya said in her soft voice, "I don't know a lot of people who love literature as much as I do."

Merlyn decided to chime in now. "Will, did a double major in university. Engineering and English Literature."
"Really?" Freya said in a breathless tone of voice. She looked up at Will with new found reverence.

"Yeah," Will said, and ruffled Merlyn's hair, "it started out with a random arts option I needed for my engineering degree, but turns out...I really liked it. So, I did a double major."

"That's amazing!" Freya said, and blushed when she realized she raised her voice.

Will grinned. "Thanks, Freya."

A small smile played around the edge of Merlyn's lips as she observed the two of them. They would make a cute couple, Merlyn thought, and popped another chip into her mouth.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Please have a seat, the show will begin momentarily!"

Merlyn turned to face forward, and waited for the show to begin. Off to her side she could still hear Freya and Will whispering quietly to each other, but stopped when music began to play, and the actors walked onto the stage. Merlyn tried to very quietly chew her food so no one would hear her still eating, but she felt bad and put her nachos down beside her in the vacant seat. She quickly washed down all the greasy food she ate with a big gulp of Coke Zero and put the large cup down onto the seat beside her nachos.

Overall, Merlyn enjoyed the play, and clapped loudly with everyone else when they finished. Freya and Will immediately launched into a discussion about the characters, and how the angst created in the love triangle could have been avoided. Merlyn listened as best as she could, but she wanted to roam around some more. Will had to occasionally tug her back towards them when she nearly got swallowed in by other large groups.

"Hi there!" A tall, busty brunette said, nearly popping out of nowhere.

"Hi." Will said with a smile on his face. The three of them had to stop in front of the brightly decorated booth, since the girl stepped in front of them.
"Would you like to hear about our sorority?" The girl batted her eyes flirtatiously at Will.

Will glanced down at Merlyn and Freya. "You guys want to hear about it?"

"Aw," The brunette cooed, "how sweet, you're out with your little sisters! They're so cute and tiny."

Merlyn bit her lip to stop herself from making a snide comment. There is nothing wrong with the girl's cause, and maybe she didn't mean to sound so condescending, but that didn't mean it didn't piss Merlyn off. Will's hand gently squeezed Merlyn's shoulder, and she let out a breath and turned to look away. Freya looked uncomfortable as well, and nervously knotted her fingers together.

"Thanks," Will said, "but we'll just go now."

"Oh!" The brunette pouted. "At least take a Frisbee!"

"Thank you." Will said, and grabbed the neon pink Frisbee from the girl's hand, while quickly ushering them away.

"Did she slip you her number?" Merlyn asked, and glanced down at the Frisbee.

Will shrugged, and said. "Probably."

"Hey!" Will said with a large grin on his face, while spinning the disc in his hand. "Go long!"

"What?" Merlyn deadpanned.

Will made a throwing motion with the Frisbee, and raised his eyebrows. "Go long!"

Merlyn rolled her eyes and sighed. "Will, I'm not-"
"And...Go!" Will shouted, and threw the Frisbee with such force that it flew high into the air above the sea of people's heads.

Out of instinct, Merlyn took off down the pathway and ran to catch the Frisbee. For a brief moment, Merlyn regretted her decision, because now Will is going to make fun of her for chasing after a Frisbee like a dog would. She watched overhead as it spun in the air, and was gaining momentum. Merlyn was so focused on watching the Frisbee, that she didn't pay attention to where she was running to...or at.

"MERLYN! HEADS UP!" Will shouted.

"What?" Merlyn said, and turned to look ahead of her.

But, it was too late.

One moment she was running for a Frisbee, and the next moment she felt herself make impact with the person who was standing in the middle of the pathway. The two of them fell onto the grass, and for once Merlyn acknowledged that this fall hurt like a bitch. She quickly did a mental assessment, and it didn't seem like anything was broken. Her arms were sore from bracing herself, and her knees felt banged up, but nothing felt broken...thankfully.

"Ow..." Merlyn groaned, and pushed up off the stranger's chest.

"The fuck...?" Arthur hissed, and blinked up at Merlyn-who was shocked beyond words.

Merlyn immediately scrambled off of Arthur, and brushed the bits of grass off of herself. She immediately reached a hand out to help him up, but he didn't see it, since he was already in the process of sitting up, and climbing to his feet. Merlyn noticed that he had headphones in (well one in, and the other was dangling now), and that was probably the reason why he didn't hear her footsteps earlier. If she was lucky, she could get out of this and stick to her strategic avoidance plan.

"I'm so-" Merlyn began.

"Are you always this much of a lunatic?" Arthur snapped, and glared down at Merlyn.
Merlyn took a slight step back at the question, but immediately the fire in her was lit. Fuck strategic avoidance, if he wants to throw down, let's go down fighting, Merlyn thought. "Are you always this much of an idiot?"

"How am I the idiot, when you're the one who ran into me?" Arthur said while standing up taller to tower over Merlyn.

"Who in their right mind just stands in the middle of a pathway with headphones on and basically says 'fuck it!' to the world!" Merlyn raised her voice and started to wave her hands around angrily.

"Standing around is what normal people do! Merlyn!" Arthur began to raise his voice too. "They don't just run around like a...HEADLESS CHICKEN!"

"Well," Merlyn said, "at least I don't stand around like a...like a...BONE IDLE TOAD!"

"WHAT IS THAT EVEN SUPPOSE TO MEAN?!" Arthur shouted.

"IT MEANS, YOU CLOT POLE, THAT IF YOU HAD JUST MOVED YOUR FAT BUTT TO THE SIDE, I WOULDN'T HAVE RAN INTO YOU!" Merlyn snapped, and glared up at him.

"WHY DO I HAVE TO MOVE, IF YOU'RE THE ONE BEING A CRAZY PERSON RUNNING AROUND IN A CROWDED PLACE!"

Arthur was waving his arms around angrily like Merlyn was, and they were both attracting the attention of several people.

"IT'S CALLED HAVING FUN! YOU SHOULD TRY IT SOMETIME, YOU PRAT!"

"YEAH OKAY! I'LL TAKE ADVICE FROM A SHORT STACK LIKE YOU WHEN PIGS FLY!"
"OH! YOU FLY? HOW WONDERFUL! DOES THE AIR SMELL BETTER UP THERE?" Merlyn was screaming just as loud as Arthur was, but her sarcasm was not lost.

"YOU ARE SO-" The two of them were about to say something, but Will's voice cut Arthur off, and his shoulder squeeze stopped Merlyn.

"I think, we have a bit of a misunderstanding on our hands." Will said, and gently pulled Merlyn back to his side.

Arthur looked Will up and down apprehensively, and glanced at the hand on Merlyn's shoulder. Will stuck his hand out towards Arthur, which caught him by surprise. Who was this guy? Arthur thought.

"I was the one who threw the Frisbee, and made Merlyn run after it. My apologies for what happened afterwards." Will said in a very business-like manner, and gave Arthur a polite smile.

Merlyn could see that she was right, Will was slightly taller than Arthur, by maybe an inch or so. But, she could also see how unhappy Will was currently (even though he had a smile on his face), and the tension between him and Arthur was thick. After an awkward moment of silence passed between them, Arthur reached out, and shook Will's hand.

"S'not a problem." Arthur grumbled, and held eye contact with Will.

Freya walked up beside Merlyn, and gasped. "Your sweater, Merlyn."

Merlyn looked at Freya, and then down at her sweater and saw a huge rip separating her sleeve from the body. She internally groaned, and began to take the sweater off. This was one of Merlyn's favorite sweaters, and she just had to go and ruin it. When she bundled the sweater back up, she noticed that Will and Arthur were both still holding each other's hands, but their grips had tightened. Merlyn nudged Will's arm, and he glanced down at her with a 'you're interrupting me' look. She rolled her eyes, and returned his look with a 'stop trying to out piss one another' look. Apparently, the look worked (for once) and Will was the first one to let go of Arthur's hand.

"Merlyn! Freya!" The two of them turned towards the sound of Gwen's voice. "How great to see you guys!"
"Hi Gwen," The two of them said in unison.

The entire gang was heading over towards them; Lance, Percy, Gwaine, Elyan, Leon and Morgana. Merlyn waved at them, and shivered slightly when a breeze blew by. A familiar leather jacket wrapped around her shoulders and she looked up at Will with a smile.

"Thanks, Will." Merlyn put her arms through the jacket sleeves, and relished in how warm it was.

Will rolled his eyes, and ruffled her hair. "You're such a troublemaker, Merls."

"Am not!" Merlyn said, and gestured at Arthur, "He started it!"

"Hey!" Arthur snapped, but stopped when Morgana walked up to him, and punched his arm.

"We leave you for 5 minutes, and you somehow manage to start a fight with Merlyn?" Morgana said in an exasperated tone.

"It wasn't my fault!" Arthur said, and crossed his arms.

As much as Merlyn hated to admit it...Arthur was right.

"It wasn't his fault, Morgana," Merlyn said, "I wasn't looking where I was running...and crashed into him."

Arthur gave Morgana a 'see! I told you so!' look, but Morgana just rolled her eyes, and smiled at Merlyn, then glanced at Will.

"Oh, right." Merlyn said. "Will, these are my friends from school: Lance,"

"Hello," Lance said, and wrapped his arm around Gwen's waist.
"Gwen."

"Hi!" Gwen, the ever cheerful person, was all sunshine and rainbows with her smile.

"That's Percy, Gwaine, Leon and Elyan." Merlyn gestured to each guy respectively.

"Yo!" The four of them raised their hands in unison.

"Hi Merlyn," Gwaine winked, and Merlyn laughed while waving at him.

"This is Morgana, and..." Merlyn trailed off slightly, before finishing off her sentence, "...Arthur."

Will looked down at Merlyn, and raised his eyebrow. Merlyn knew he was silently saying 'oh? so that's the boy you've been complaining to me about.' She pretended as if she didn't understand what he was speculating, and turned to look back at everyone.

"Everyone, this is Will, my-" Merlyn said.

"Nice to meet you guys!" Will interrupted, and threw his arm over Merlyn's shoulder. "Where are you guys heading off to?"

Morgana regarded Will with a long stare, and Gwen decided to jump in when an awkward pause settled between them. It looked like all the gears in Morgana's head was working overtime, and she was really staring down Will. But, Will just easily grinned at her, and didn't look at all uncomfortable by her look. Which was impressive, Merlyn thought, considering how she would wither like a piece of grass if Morgana gave her that look.

"Down to the basketball courts, there's a charity basketball event," Gwen said, "the guys are playing in it!"

"Oh? How fun, well we won't be keeping you guys then," Will said, and pulled Merlyn into his side, and started to walk in the opposite direction.
Merlyn wiggled in Will's grasp. "Will, I can walk by myself."

"Nonsense!" Will said in an exaggerated manner. "Come on, Freya, let's go!"

Freya laughed, and quickly scurried after the two. Freya and Merlyn waved goodbye and wished the team good luck.

"You're acting so weird." Merlyn said, and was quiet enough so only Will could hear her. "Why are you acting like...such an adult?"

"Because I am one?" Will said. "Duh."

"O-kay there," Merlyn rolled her eyes, and tried to move out from Will's arm. "Can you stop leaning on me now? You're so heavy!"

Will grabbed his chest, and immediately fell further onto Merlyn. "Oh, the gravity has suddenly increased."

Merlyn rolled her eyes, and tried to balance Will's body on her shoulders while walking. Will was laughing loudly as Merlyn kept struggling to keep his weight up. Eventually, she decided to push him off of her, and stuck her tongue out at him. Merlyn glanced back at where everyone was, and saw that everyone in the group was chuckling, and watching the two of them with amusement; except Arthur was staring at the ground and scowling. She shrugged, and continued to keep walking, she threw her ripped sweater over her shoulder, and wondered if she could send this back home to her mom and get it fixed.

They didn't happen to run into everyone again throughout the rest of the day, and by the time they left the sun was setting, and the park was becoming less crowded. The three of them went back to Will's car, and got in. Will was planning to take them out for dinner, and was driving further into the downtown area to a donair place he likes. The radio was playing quietly in the background, and Merlyn hummed along to the latest pop song playing.

"So, about that Arthur kid, Merls," Will said, and put his signal on to change lanes, "I can see
what you mean by him being a bit of a drama queen."

"See!" Merlyn said and sat forward in her seat. "Thank you!"

"But," Will continued, "why does he get under your skin?"

Merlyn paused, and tried to form a sentence as the thought was forming in her head.

"Because he's a pompous, supercilious, condescending, imbecile, and he just pushes all my buttons!"

Freya laughed quietly, and turned to look at Merlyn with amusement. Even Will was glancing at her in the rear-view mirror with a smirk on his lips.

"I don't know, Merls..." Will began, "from where I was standing...seemed like you both were having the time of your lives egging each other on."

"No way!" Merlyn said, and flopped back down in her seat. "How could you even think that?!"

Will chuckled, and shook his head. "Same old Merlyn I see..."

The three of them had a quiet dinner, and by the time Will dropped Freya off at her house, Merlyn was falling asleep in the back seat. She managed to mumble a goodbye to Freya, and said she'll see her at school on Monday. Merlyn wasn't sure when Will arrived at the apartment, but she woke up slightly when he was carrying her up the stairs and into her room. She woke up just enough to grab her pjs and go to the bathroom to change and brush her teeth. When she came back out, Will was leaning against the wall in the hallway, and was just about to leave.

"Night, Merls." Will said softly, and ruffled her hair.

"G'night...Will." Merlyn said as she went up to hug him. "Thanks for today."
"Don't have to say thanks kiddo. Sleep tight."
Hi, guys!

Finals are coming up quickly. I'll be pretty occupied until those are over and done with. But, I didn't want to make you guys wait until the middle of December for another update so I hope you guys enjoy this new chapter!

As always, it'd be great to have some comments or leave a kudos behind if you enjoy it.

Thank you so much for reading my story!

-SS

By the time Monday rolled around, Merlyn slipped into a comfy pattern of living. On weekdays it would be wake up, stumble around her room half-awake to get ready for school, grab a bite of breakfast, and walk 15 minutes to school. At school, she would hang out with Freya, Gwen, and Morgana, and occasionally the guys would be around as well (but usually they spend most of their time in the gym or basketball court outside since basketball season is about to start). In her classes, Merlyn was performing exceptionally well, and the teachers were impressed with her (and Merlyn would be lying if she said it didn't enlarge her ego). All in all, things were going great...and then Murphy's Law.

"For the upcoming weekend, we will be having a class camping trip." Merlyn's head snapped towards Mr. Tristan so quick that she nearly gave herself whiplash.

"It is a mandatory trip, so please have the permission form signed and brought back to me by Wednesday. We will all be leaving Friday morning, so you guys are excused from your classes."

"This can't be happening..." Merlyn whispered in horror, and quickly scooted up beside Gwen, "Psssst, Gwen,"

"Yeah?" Gwen leaned over towards Merlyn.
"What is he talking about? Mandatory camping trip? Since when are field trips a mandatory thing?" Merlyn rushed out.

"It's a tradition, every year he'll take his class on some sort of field trip to teach us survival skills," Gwen said under her breath.

"Survival for what?" Merlyn, for the first time since getting to Camelot, was beginning to regret her choice.

"Just be glad we're not the class that has to go mountaineering. That's in the dead of winter." Gwen shuddered and refocused on Mr. Tristan.

Merlyn sat back and wallowed in her newfound misery.

Immediately at the end of the day, after Robotics was let out, Merlyn quickly called Will. She was in the middle of speed walking down the hallway to get to the front doors, and rounded the corner too fast and ran into someone's shoulder. Merlyn turned and saw a sweaty Arthur give her a dirty look, which she returned by narrowing her eyes and sticking her tongue out at him. She watched as he disappeared down the other hallway towards the gym, and remembered that the guys still have practice going on. Which explained why he was wearing his gym clothes, Merlyn thought.

"Yo! What's up, Merls?" Will's voice caught Merlyn by surprise when he picked up the call. But, she immediately responded.

"Can I come over to your place?"

"Sure...I'll come pick you up, I'm just about to clock out now...why do you sound so urgent?" asked Will.

"I'll explain when I get to your place. You won't believe what happened at school today." Merlyn was already exiting the front doors, and jogging down the steps to wait for Will.

"Did that Arthur guy piss you off again? I don't see how much more you could tell me about him," said Will in as amused tone.
"No, not this time. But, you're wrong about that, there's so much more I could tell you. Did you know, during class change today, the prat had the audacity to call me short! And that was after he ran into me! Then it happened again, and he just gave me a dirty look!"

Will chuckled and Merlyn could hear his keys jingling in the background. "Let's face it, Merls, you're pretty short."

"I know that! But, he doesn't have to point it out to me!" Merlyn was pacing beside the bike racks. Her sudden annoyance was swirling inside of her, and she needed to vent it out.

"Ha! Okay. Okay. I'm going to hang up now, I'm getting onto my bike. See you in a bit."

"Kay. Drive safe."

Merlyn hung up and sat down on the edge of the bike racks to wait for Will. Thirty minutes later she heard the familiar sound of Will's motorbike pull up to the school, and she felt a rush of excitement go through her. Will pulled up beside Merlyn, and got off the bike long enough to toss her the spare helmet from his backpack. Merlyn adored the all matte black motorcycle and the sleek look of it; if she managed to convince her mother to let her get her motorcycle license, she would get a sporty motorbike just like Will.

"You tell Gaius?" Will's voice was slightly muffled behind his own helmet.

Merlyn nodded and buckled the strap under her chin. "Yup! Let's go!"

For all the dangerous reasons Merlyn knew about motorbikes. Or, that drop in her stomach when the bike does that first lurch. Even the rush of adrenaline coursing through her veins, trying to keep the fear at bay...she loved being on the back of Will's motorcycle. It was like flying. Merlyn thought as Will sped down the road, and towards the exit for the highway. She has loved this feeling ever since Will first got that beat up dirt bike, and took her for a spin. Merlyn could remember vividly, how pissed her parents were when Will and her crashed into a ditch. The scar on her neck has faded quite a bit now, and it can only be seen if someone got close enough to her to see it. But, it meant more to Merlyn, being able to have this feeling than to never experience it again.

Merlyn could see Will's apartment complex come into sight, and she held on as he drove his motorbike down to the underground parkade. They pulled up beside his SUV, and she waited for Will to put his feet on the ground first to stop the bike, before getting off. As they walked to the
elevator, Will threw his arm over her shoulder and gave her a side hug. Merlyn returned it by wrapping her arms around his waist and hugged back.

They don't ever mention it anymore. But, part of the reason why Will even got another bike after crashing his first one was to cheer Merlyn up after her dad passed away.

But...they don't mention it anymore.

Right when they got into Will's apartment, Merlyn began explaining to Will, why exactly she wanted to see him, as she marched right into the living room, and tossed her backpack down beside the couch, and flung herself onto it.

"Why," Merlyn groaned, and stretched out on Will's couch, "it's not fair, Will!"

"You're just going camping, Merls, it's not the end of the world," Will said as he took a seat in the recliner beside her, and flipped on his TV. Merlyn looked up and saw that the screen was left on the main page of the game he was currently playing.

Instead of looking at her as he continued to talk, he kept his gaze on the TV screen to focus on his game. "Besides, you loved camping with me and Ma all the time."

Merlyn gave Will a dirty look, but he chose to ignore it.

"I didn't love going camping. You dragged me along every time!" Merlyn said, "and each time I went I always came back with a cold!"

Will rolled his eyes and smirked. "You just don't pack for it properly. You need to have basic survival skills, Merls. That's what the school is probably trying to promote."

"But, why does it have to be a mandatory thing? Back home, we never had to go camping in the year I even had gym or camping in general. What are they even going to teach us? How to catch fish with spears?" Merlyn said, in a grumpy tone.

"Basic survival skills..." Merlyn grumbled, "what are we preparing for? The zombie
apocalypse?"

"It'll be fun, Merls. Besides, you never participated in any of the field trips back home. You might think they're a waste of time, but field trips are fun. Not a lot of schools can afford to have them you know." Will said, and lifted his right leg up to gently kick Merlyn's without turning away from the screen.

"We, as humans, have evolved over the span of millions of years, to get out of living in nature. Why, pray tell, must we venture back into it?" Merlyn said, and rolled onto her stomach and buried her face into the throw pillow.

"I hope you get chased by a bear or something," Will chuckled, "might teach you a lesson."

"You're so unsupportive, Will, here I am, having a crisis, and you're on your phone texting...who are you texting anyway?" Merlyn asked and sat up, "You never pause your game to respond to texts unless they're from me, and I'm right here."

"Huh?" Will glanced up at Merlyn, and then back down at his screen, "Oh, I'm just texting Freya."

"I'm sorry...what?" Merlyn blinked, and cupped her hand behind her ear. "I didn't catch that, who?"

Will rolled his eyes. "I'm texting Freya, Merls, have a problem with that? Jealous?"

Merlyn clicked her tongue and shook her head. "No. No. No. I'm just curious how you have her number?"

Will was typing out a long reply, and Merlyn knew that was a rare sight to behold since he barely even sends her long paragraphs. Merlyn impatiently bounced her knee up and down and started to nudge Will's leg with her foot.

"Tch," Will said, and looked up at Merlyn, "alright, alright, it was when I was driving her home that day we went to go see Shakespeare In The Park. You were sleeping like a dead log in the backseat, so the two of us made conversation."
"Okay..." Merlyn dragged the word out, "but how did making conversation lead to a phone number exchange?"

"You know, we just got to talking about more English Literature stuff, and I told her how I dabbled with the idea of being a play writer; instead of becoming an engineer, and she told me that she'd want to read some of my stuff sometime," Will said.

"Continue," Merlyn said and waved her arms in a circular motion.

Will sighed and gave Merlyn an exasperated smile. "So, I told her to put her email into my phone, and I sent her some of the rough edits I had, and eventually I thought it would just be easier to talk over text, so I asked for her number."

"So...whatcha guys talking about now?" Merlyn asked like a kid in a candy store.

She felt diabolical in a way, knowing about Freya's interest in Will, and seeing Will unconsciously open up to Freya. It was a beautiful sight to behold, and Merlyn almost wanted to cackle. Even though he doesn't see the phone number exchange as anything other than an innocent gesture between friends; Merlyn was hoping it will lead to something more. But, she kept all of her feelings to herself.

"She showed one of my scripts to her dad, and he wants to meet with me," Will said and glanced down at his phone screen.

Merlyn's desire to laugh diabolically disappeared and she immediately started bouncing in her seat in excitement. "Do it! Will, you have to meet with Freya's dad!"

"I don't know, Merls..." Will sighed, "it's honestly just a hobby of mine."

"But, you love it!" Merlyn said, "and I know you'll regret it if you don't at least just meet with the man."

"I guess," Will said, "let's just drop it for now."
"Okay, but promise you'll think about it?" Merlyn asked and held out her pinky.

Will nodded and indulged Merlyn with a pinky swear. "Promise."

"So," Merlyn said, and flopped back down on the couch, "about my camping dilemma. How fast do you think I can come down with pneumonia?"

Will scoffed and rolled his eyes, and went back to his game. "Not soon enough apparently."

Merlyn hated the cold.

She hated being cold and wet.

Which is what her current dilemma was. The so-called 'sunny-weekend' was starting off with rain. Merlyn stood behind Percy, in an attempt to block the wind and rain; she was shivering and was growing more miserable as time ticked away. Mr. Tristan was in the process of taking attendance, and Merlyn wondered why he couldn't do it once they were all on the bus, where it was warm and dry. Morgana, Gwen, and Freya were all huddled up beside Merlyn as well, and the four of them shifted in time with Percy as he moved. There was a moment, where Merlyn swore she heard Morgana growl when Percy moved two steps too far from them.

"Sweetheart," Mrs. Isolde walked up to Mr. Tristan, "I think the kids would be happier if we let them onto the bus."

"Right, okay," Mr. Tristan said.

TWEEEET

"Everyone! Form a single file line, and head onto the bus."
"Thank god!" Merlyn exclaimed, and made a beeline for the bus doors.

Merlyn was at the front of the line when she felt a violent tug at the back of her jacket, and she was flung backward. She crashed into someone and was thankful they managed to catch her, since both her hands were tucked into her jacket. Merlyn looked up to see who grabbed her and saw Valient smirking with his friends, who were now at the front of the line. Her already foul mood took a deep plunge, and if it wasn't for the fact that she might lose her new spot in line, she'd have tried to scratch Valient's eyes out.

"Thanks..." Merlyn turned around to see who caught her and was glad to see Elyan glaring at Valient on her behalf.

"No problem, you okay?" Elyan said, and made sure Merlyn had her balance before letting go of her arms.

"Yeah, he's a dick, though," Merlyn grumbled, and glared at the back of Valient's head.

"You got that right, Merlyn," Gwaine walked up beside her, and threw his arm over her shoulder, "want to sit with me on the bus?"

"I'm going to be sitting with Freya," Merlyn said and looked around for her.

"Aw," Gwaine pouted, "I was hoping you would cuddle up with me, and we could keep each other warm."

"You seem like you have plenty of company already, Gwaine," Merlyn said with a smile.

Gwaine furrowed his eyebrows, but there was a faint smile tugging at his lips.

Merlyn further elaborated. "What with that big imagination of yours, I'll feel like I'm intruding."

Gwaine fully grinned and winked at Merlyn. "I'd always be glad to make room for you."
"Duly noted," Merlyn said, and walked onto the bus.

Turns out, Freya had somehow managed to make it onto the bus without Merlyn noticing. She took her seat beside Freya, and the two of them immediately huddled together to keep warm. The seating pairing worked out to be: Leon and Morgana, Gwen and Lance, Gwaine and Percy, and finally Elyan and Arthur.

Once everyone was on the bus, Mr. Tristan walked down the aisle doing one last headcount, and when he was satisfied with the number, he told the bus driver to head out. Merlyn immediately kicked off her damp runners and curled up into a ball (one of the many perks of being small) to conserve her warmth. It was during these cold times, that she wouldn't mind having someone like Lance or Leon, to steal warmth from (Gwen and Morgana looked so cozy).

'Go camping, Will says. It'll be fun, he says. Merls, you don't participate enough, he says.' Merlyn was having bitterly cold thoughts and glanced over at Freya to talk with her, but Merlyn noticed she was very focused on her phone.

"Who ya texting there, Freya?" Merlyn asked quietly enough so only she would hear her.

Freya jumped slightly at the question and turned to look at Merlyn with a blush on her face. "U-Uhm...Will..."

Merlyn slowly nodded her head, and gave Freya an 'oh I see' look. "Interesting,"

"Is it okay with you?" Freya said, and the worried look on her face caught Merlyn off guard.

"Am I okay with what?" Merlyn asked.

"If, I...text, Will?" Freya answered quietly.

Merlyn waved off Freya's sentence. "You don't have to ask me that, Freya, Will's not my property. You guys can text all you want, I'm just being nosy."
"Oh okay," Freya said shyly and smiled.

"But, on a more serious note," Merlyn said, "what do you think my chances are at faking horrible cramps so I can stay on the bus all weekend?"

Freya giggled and shook her head. "Not good, Vivian and Sophia try that every year, and Mrs. Isolde isn't impressed with it."

Merlyn sighed, and slumped her shoulders. "Yay, camping."

Merlyn wasn't sure how the rest of the bus ride went because she fell asleep within the first 10 minutes of driving. She vaguely remembered resting her head on Freya's shoulder, and pulling her hood over her head tighter (she didn't want anyone to take a picture of her sleeping). Merlyn woke up for a minute or so each time the bus hit a pothole, and she vaguely registered that the weather was getting sunnier the further out of the city they went.

"We're almost there, Merlyn," Freya said quietly and patted Merlyn's arm.

"O-O-Okay," Merlyn yawned and rubbed her eyes.

Merlyn stared out the window with bleary eyes and tried to refocus them. The bus was quiet, but she could hear people slowly waking up. Mrs. Isolde was walking down the aisle, and gently waking the rest of the students up. She smiled at Merlyn as she passed, and continued on.

Once the bus pulled to a stop, in what looked to be the docking area, everyone unbuckled their seatbelts and were waiting anxiously for Mr. Tristan to let them off the bus. Merlyn was getting anxious as well, but mostly because she's been sitting for so long and well...she had to pee. Mr. Tristan listed off what the current plan was, and it seemed like they had to walk a bit of the way to the actual campsite. The impending fear that hit Merlyn, at the thought of not being allowed to pee for the next little bit was intense. But, luckily, Mr. Tristan is letting everyone have a bathroom break at the sign-in center before they began their trek.

"Why do the guy's bathroom never have a lineup?" Gwen said and was anxiously bouncing on the balls of her feet.

"Because life isn't fair, Gwen," Merlyn said in a desolate tone and was losing all hope of
"Should we just sneak in the boy's washroom to pee?" Morgana said quietly and glanced around to see if anyone was watching.

"Be my guest," Merlyn gestured for her to go ahead, "I'm too scared to actually see what's inside let alone sit down on anything."

Morgana groaned and nodded her head. "You're right."

"Maybe, there's another bathroom?" Freya said hopefully.

"We can't risk losing our spot in line," Merlyn said. She wished she wasn't being such a downer, but so far, this 'camping experience' was starting to suck.

"The line's moving!" Gwen sighed, and moved up.

After what seemed as if an entire lifetime passed, the four of them made it into the bathroom. Merlyn almost wanted to cry at having the chance to finally pee. When they finished and were washing their hands, Merlyn's mood improved slightly. They left the washroom, and headed to the bus to grab their belongings; most of the camping gear Merlyn brought belonged to Will (because he actually likes going out into the wilderness), and she was thankful he lent it to her.

"You girls sure took your time," Gwaine was biting into an apple, and straddling his backpack.

"We had to wait in line. We can't all have dicks, Gwaine," Morgana gave him a withering look. Leon, Elyan, and Percy (the ones standing close enough to hear) chuckled.

Gwaine was mid-chew but still smiled. "That is true, Morgana. That is true."

"All right class! Please line up in pairs. Once the last few students return from the washroom, we will be heading out to our campsite." Mr. Tristan's voice carried loudly, and everyone grabbed their belongings.
Merlyn hefted Will's hiking backpack up onto her shoulders, and almost toppled backward under the weight. Luckily, Percy caught her and pushed her back upright. He offered to help her carry her backpack, but Merlyn declined. She may dislike this whole idea of being out in the wilderness, but she was someone who knew how to stick it out.

Mr. Tristan did one more headcount, and when everyone was accounted for, he began to lead the forward march. Merlyn was walking beside Freya, who was happily admiring the scenery around them, and decided that she might as well try to make the best of this trip.

The sun was shining brightly, and there was a small breeze every now and then to keep them from overheating. Merlyn glanced up at the sky and saw no sign of a rain cloud anywhere, and the sky was so blue, Merlyn couldn't help but begin to enjoy the walk.

"Arthur," Vivian's voice traveled up to Merlyn's location in the line, "Can you help me with my bag, pretty please."

Merlyn looked over her shoulder, and she could see the annoyance on Arthur's face. But, he was still reaching out to take her bag. Suddenly, and Merlyn had no idea Morgana could even move that fast, Morgana was at the back of the line where Arthur was with Elyan, and glared at Vivian while pushing Arthur's arm back towards him.

"Everyone has to carry their own weight," Morgana said.

Vivian smirked, and looked Morgana up and down. "You definitely are."

"Hey!" Both Pendragon siblings stood side by side and towered over Vivian with menacing looks on their faces.

Vivian plastered a sweet smile on her face and batted her eyelashes. "I'm only joking, no need to lash out, Morgana."

"Come on now! Everybody keep up!" Mr. Tristan's voice called from the front of the line.

"What's Arthur's relationship with Vivian and Sophia anyways?" Merlyn said in a hushed
"Well," Freya said, "the three of them technically had a thing in grade 10."

"A thing as in...?" Merlyn waved her hand in front of her and shrugged.

"They dated briefly," Freya said while tapping her chin, and looked like she was trying to remember if that was indeed the truth.

"At the same time?!" Merlyn's eyes grew wide and quickly glanced around to see if anyone was listening to her.

Freya shook her head, but she looked very confused to Merlyn. "N-Y-well...I don't think they did?"

"Huh," Merlyn said, and glanced back at Arthur; who was getting what looked to be a lecture from Morgana, "interesting."

The campsite that was sectioned off for their class was fairly large, but if it was supposed to accommodate forty students, then it made sense. Merlyn and Freya both walked over to the group and waited for further instruction from Mr. Tristan and Mrs. Isolde. It seemed like Morgana's lecture was interrupted when Leon walked over and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. Arthur shared a look with Leon, that seemed like he was saying 'fucking thank you!' or, that's what Merlyn thought it looked like. She quickly looked away when Arthur glanced in her direction and pretended as if she didn't see or hear anything. Merlyn missed the first bit of what Mr. Tristan said, and hoped it wasn't important.

"As for tent arrangements, you guys will be grouping off into groups of either 3 or 4. Boys with boys, and girls with girls. Once you have your groups, come and grab a tent!"

"Us four then?" Merlyn said, and gestured to Gwen, Morgana, and Freya.

"Why of course I'll sleep with you, Merlyn!" Gwaine appeared out of nowhere, and threw his arms around her, and roughly pulled her into his chest.
"Can't...breathe...Gwaine...." Merlyn gasped, and tried to push out of his hold.

Merlyn made eye contact with Percy and blinked rapidly. "Percy....help....!"

Percy rolled his eyes and smiled in exasperation. "Gwaine, let go of Merlyn before you kill her."

Gwaine pouted, and nuzzled the top of Merlyn's head. "I would never dream of hurting a hair on your head."

"Thank...you...now...let...go!" Merlyn tugged harder and managed to break free. Gwaine chuckled along with the rest of the guys, and Merlyn had to re-adjust her beanie,

"Come on, Merlyn, let's go grab our tents," Morgana said and looped her arm through Merlyn's.

Once the four of them got their tent, they went to off to set it up. Everyone seemed to pick their spots based on how close it was to where the bonfire would be. Merlyn was about to suggest they do the same thing, but then a morbid thought crossed her mind that their tent could catch fire and they would be roasted like marshmallows. So that was out of the question, Merlyn thought and continued to follow behind Morgana.

"Should we set up here?" Gwen gestured to her left and right.

Merlyn, Morgana, and Freya both shared a look while nodding, and decided to set up their tent in the grassy area near the edge of the woods. The boys caught up with them and set their tent up a few feet away from them. Merlyn pulled out a set of instructions and quickly skimmed over them. She opened the bag of poles she was carrying and pulled them out one by one. Morgana and Gwen were both unfolding the actual tent and laying it out on the spot they were going to set it up on.

"These are our structural poles," said Merlyn, "and these are the inner network ones. They're collapsed right now, so we just have to lock them together first before building."

"Do you go camping a lot, Merlyn?" Freya asked while locking the pieces of the poles together like how Merlyn showed her.
"Ugh," Merlyn groaned and rolled her eyes, "more than I would like to admit. Will loves camping."

"He does?" Freya asked softly with a smile.

"Another thing he has in common with you, I'm guessing," Merlyn nudged Freya's shoulder and grinned.

Freya blushed and continued to put the poles together. It didn't take long for the four of them to put their tent together and secure it into the ground with the metal pegs. The guys, on the other hand, took longer because they were goofing around and not focusing on the task. Merlyn was just coming out of their tent after setting up the sleeping bags when she heard someone call her name.

"Merlyn and Freya!" Merlyn turned to look over at Mr. Tristan. He gestured for the two of them to come over to him.

"Yes, Mr. Tristan?" Merlyn asked as they came closer.

"Would you and Freya be so kind as to collect some more firewood for tonight?" asked Mr. Tristan.

"Okay," Freya nodded and Merlyn followed after her into the woods.

"Wait, I haven't explained what to look for," Mr. Tristan called out.

Merlyn waved a hand over her shoulder. "It's fine. We can figure it out!"

The two of them tried to keep to the more noticeable paths, but they were getting sidetracked. Between the two of them, they both actually knew how to collect firewood, and were on the lookout as they headed further into the forest. They managed to gather a good amount of sticks after awhile and were about to round back to the camp site, but the sound of water caught Merlyn's attention.
"Do you hear that, Freya?" Merlyn turned to her head to try and see what direction the sound was coming from.

"Yeah, there's a river down a little further," Freya said and turned her head to gesture the direction the sound was coming from, since both her arms were occupied.

"We'll probably go there eventually for one of Mrs. Isolde's lessons."

"Is she going to teach us how to catch fish with spears?" asked Merlyn sarcastically.

"No, she doesn't do that anymore. Two years ago someone nearly lost a toe trying to catch a fish." Freya answered in a serious tone.

Merlyn was so shocked by that answer, that she didn't even know what to respond with. The two of them went back to the campsite and dropped off the firewood they collected. Merlyn could see on Mr. Tristan's face that he was impressed, and he thanked them for completing the task. The two of them then went to go look for Gwen and Morgana. As they walked over to what looked to be a dining area, Merlyn could see that the guys were in the process of unloading a truck.

"Freya?" Merlyn said while pointing in the direction of the truck with her eyebrow raised.

Freya followed Merlyn's finger. "Oh, that's probably the food."

"So we're not going to hunt for our own food?" asked Merlyn.

Freya's face showed that she was both confused and concerned. "Uhm...no...why would you think that?"

Merlyn blushed, and realized that this camping trip was not going to be similar to the ones she went on with Will and his mom. She awkwardly laughed and waved her hand in the air dismissively.

"Oh...no reason!"
They spent most of the afternoon setting up the campsite and going over basic survival rules. Merlyn was amazed at how much Mrs. Isolde knew about surviving in the wilderness; she was even more impressed when she showed them the proper way to cut a large block of wood with an ax. Merlyn could see some of the other guys in the class were impressed too, but mostly they were all focused on how Mrs. Isolde looked in just a muscle tank top.

Mr. Tristan had set up skill stations while they were all enthralled with Mrs. Isolde's wood chopping abilities. He told everyone to work their way through the stations, and that they needed to be signed off for a participation mark. Merlyn decided to go to the rope tying station first because she had some knowledge on how to tie knots. Gwen and Lance followed after her and the three of them worked on making the knots shown on a piece of laminated paper. Mrs. Isolde walked by and signed them off on the sheet when she saw that they were able to make at least 3 of the 7 knots. Lance wanted to try starting a fire next, and Gwen followed after him; they both asked if Merlyn wanted to come, but she politely turned them down because she wanted to stay and practice some more.

"Okay, see you in a bit then!" Lance and Gwen both waved, and walked hand in hand to the fire making station.

Merlyn waved back and then returned to her knots. She was in the process of figuring out the fifth knot when she saw someone sit down beside her, and grab a piece of rope out of the bin. She had to hold back her surprise when she saw Arthur sitting across from her, and was working on one of the knots she just finished. The two of them didn't say a word to the other, and both of them worked silently. Merlyn watched from the corner of her eye, as Arthur expertly flew through the diagrams, and finished making all the knots before she did. But, what caught her attention was the ring he usually wore on his finger was no longer there. She didn't get a chance to ask him, because once Mrs. Isolde came by and signed Arthur off, he wordlessly left the station and moved on to the next one.

Merlyn finished up a few stations and was in the process of walking over towards the mapping station, to talk with Morgana, when she stumbled over someone's foot.

"Watch where you're goin', ears." sneered Valient.

Merlyn glared and snapped back. "Watch where you put your big feet then!"

Valient took a menacing step forward but stopped when he caught sight of someone behind Merlyn.
"Everything okay guys?" Mrs. Isolde placed a hand on Merlyn's shoulder and smiled at them.

Valient smiled a disgusting fake smile. "Yeah. We're good. Right?"

"Yeah...just peachy," Merlyn said and turned to walk away.

"Hey Morgana," Merlyn said as she sat down beside Morgana.

Morgana looked up from the map in her hands and let out a sigh of relief. "Hey, Merlyn. Thank god you're here, grab a compass."

"Need help?" Merlyn asked as she grabbed the second compass from the box.

"We have Google Maps. How do you even read this thing?" Morgana said in frustration and shook the map out.

"Here. Let me show you," Merlyn took the map, and laid it flat on the makeshift table (it was just a large wooden crate turned over).

Merlyn began to explain to Morgana how to find their location and use the compass to navigate her way around to different points on the map. She could see the look of concentration on Morgana's face as she watched and listened closely; Merlyn couldn't help but observe Morgana and ask silent questions to herself. She wondered how Arthur and Morgana were half-siblings. Merlyn also tried to look for similar features that they shared. Morgana must have felt Merlyn's stare and looked up.

"Have something you want to ask me, Merlyn?" asked Morgana with a small smirk.

Merlyn blushed slightly at being caught and stammered out. "Well...I...I don't have...it's not really a question...I'm just curious...is all, about how you and Arthur are..."

"Related?" Morgana chuckled and leaned forward on the table.
"Yeah," Merlyn nodded and quickly added, "but, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to. I'll completely understand."

Morgana giggled and rolled her eyes. "It's fine, Merlyn. I don't mind telling you. Remember how that airhead Vivian said Arthur and I were half-siblings?"

Merlyn mutely nodded.

"Well, she's right about that. We have the same dad, but different moms," a faraway look slipped onto Morgana's face, "our dad, had a drunk one-night stand with my mom, and married Arthur's mom a couple months later. If you're ever looking for ammo against Arthur when the two of you bicker like an old married couple, mention how I'm the older sibling-it'll drive him mad."

Merlyn had no idea what to say to that. Or if there was anything to say. She kind of wanted to giggle at the age comment, but she wasn't sure if that was appropriate, considering the circumstance. She also wanted to say that she does not bicker with Arthur like an old married couple. Morgana must have seen the look of utter terror and confusion on Merlyn's face at not knowing what to say and laughed.

"Don't worry, Merlyn. It's in the past." Morgana waved her hand in the air.

"So..." Merlyn started, "how did you end up...?"

Morgana sighed and twirled a dark lock of her hair. "My mom got really sick, and that's when I found out about who my father was-is," she corrected herself, "after she passed away, Uther took me in. I think...I was around ten at the time."

All the air in Merlyn's lungs seemed to have left her, and she felt a cold weight had settled into her stomach at the mention of death. But, she kept her composure and pinched the skin between her fingers to remain focused.

"And Arthur's mom knew all about it?" asked Merlyn.

Morgana glanced over at Merlyn and shook her head. The sharp look Morgana usually had changed into a softer one, and she turned towards the class. Merlyn realized then that Morgana was seeking out Arthur in the crowd.
"Arthur's mom passed away a month before mine did."

It was like another huge weight settled on top of the other one in her stomach, and Merlyn found it almost hard to breathe. She didn't want to know any of this, but yet here the information was. Morgana looked perfectly at peace, talking about her past and losing someone she loved. For that, Merlyn was envious, because that stage of acceptance was something she was still struggling with.

"Are you..." Merlyn cleared her throat and spun the compass in her hand.

Morgana nodded and smiled. "I already went through the moody, rebellious phase of my life. That part's over...sort of."

"It must be nice," Merlyn said under her breath.

"Hmm? Did you say something?" Morgana leaned closer. But, Merlyn quickly shook her head and smiled.

"You're very strong, Morgana."

Morgana sat up straighter and deviously grinned. "Of course I am, Merlyn. Thank you for noticing."

Merlyn giggled and spun the compass on its edge. Suddenly, Merlyn's original question came back into her mind.

"Oh yeah, I wanted to ask, what happened to the ri-"

**TWEEEET**

"Alright, guys!" Mr. Tristan's voice boomed throughout the site. "Time to pack it up!"
"I swear if Mr. Tristan keeps blowing that whistle of his we're going to get attacked by the animals in the forest just because the sound of it is so annoying." Morgana huffed and began to fold up the map.

Merlyn's question slipped from her mind, as she nodded in agreement with Morgana's statement. The two of them quickly cleaned up their station and brought it back over to the large canopy beside the bonfire.

As the sun slowly set over their campsite, the temperature began to drop as well. Merlyn was already wearing a long-sleeved shirt with one of her sweaters over top of it, but she was freezing. Another group of students was just walking back from the washroom station (the same one they used earlier that day) after they brushed their teeth. Merlyn's group had gone earlier, and now she was standing beside the large fire to keep warm. She could feel her teeth chattering, and her knees were knocking together slightly. Suddenly a large hoodie landed on her head and Merlyn's vision went dark; the familiar smell of it told her who's hoodie it was.

"Thanks, Gwaine," Merlyn said with a smile and pulled his large hoodie on. Immediately she felt much warmer, and stuffed her hands into the front pocket,

Gwaine winked and went to go sit down beside Leon and Percy, and joined in their card game. The hoodie was substantially large on Merlyn, but she was happy from the kind gesture. Merlyn felt the strange sensation that someone was staring at her, and she looked across the bonfire. She ended up locking eyes with Arthur, but he immediately looked away and continued to talk with Lance.

"Thirty minutes until lights out!" Mr. Tristan announced. Merlyn mentally groaned and was already dreading having to leave the warmth of the fire.

Sleeping in a tent wasn't so bad. It helped that having four people in a tent made it relatively warm, and she still had Gwaine's hoodie which kept her cozy. Merlyn learned some interesting things about her friends, though. Like, how Freya sleeps curled up in a ball-Merlyn was still going to stick with her cat theory about Freya, or how Morgana snores quietly, Gwen on the other hand, was an active sleeper. Which showed Merlyn how deep of a sleeper Morgana was, because there was a point in the middle of the night when Gwen rolled over Morgana to the other side of the tent and she showed no signs of waking up. It took awhile for Merlyn to actually fall asleep because her mind kept having morbid thoughts about their tent being attacked by a bear and their chances for survival looked slim. But, when she did fall asleep, it felt like she had only closed her eyes when suddenly it was morning.
"GOOD MORNING EVERYONE!"

"Jesus fucking Christ," Merlyn groaned and rolled onto her stomach and pulled her pillow over top of her head, "why?"

"RISE AND SHINE!"

"Mmm..." Morgana mumbled and scrunched up her face while rolling over onto her side.

"Come on girls!" Their tent suddenly started shaking and Merlyn could see the shadowy figures of the guys running around their tent.

"Wakey! Wakey!" Gwaine is too fucking cheerful, Merlyn thought bitterly.

Miracles must exist, Merlyn thought as she brushed her teeth. After looking at her phone (which was slowly dying) she couldn't believe the time. It was Saturday for crying out loud. Morgana mirrored her exact thoughts, and then two of them were bitterly brushing their teeth in front of the mirrors in the washroom, as Gwen and Freya both got out of the shower stalls. They all dried their hair with the hand dryers and walked back up to the campsite together. Mrs. Isolde was handing out plates of breakfast and that was probably the highlight of Merlyn's morning thus far.

"Today we will continue with our survival lessons," Mrs. Isolde announced. Her voice was soft, but also loud enough that everyone listened. Merlyn really admired the way Mrs. Isolde held herself and she also loved the way Mr. Tristan watched her with eyes of adoration.

"To start it off, we will be going on a hike on a nearby trail up the mountain."

Everyone groaned, but Mrs. Isolde just smiled and began to explain the importance of knowing the landscape and being able to navigate it during the day. Merlyn listened as she finished her breakfast; which consisted of scrambled eggs, two pancakes, bacon and sausage, she kind of wished there were hash browns, but that was a minor thing. Once they cleaned up after breakfast, they all gathered in a large group and started for the trail. Merlyn was walking beside Morgana when she tripped again and nearly ate gravel, but she caught herself.
"Don't fall to your death, ears," Valient smirked and walked past her with his group of friends.

"Val, you're such an ass!" Morgana sneered. All Valient did was flip them off over his shoulder, and that riled Merlyn up.

"He better watch himself," Merlyn grumbled and was already plotting Valient's demise.

The opportunity presented itself when Mrs. Isolde stopped the class at the midway point up the mountain and showed them how to identify certain plants based on their geological location.

"These are called Gaia berry bushes. They're indigenous to this area, but they mostly prefer to grow near a water source like a river. The berries give off a foul order, so I wouldn't recommend trying to eat them. But, during this time of the season, there are not many berries left on the bushes. Be careful, though, aside from bad smelling berries as a form of defense, the thorns on the bushes are very sharp."

Merlyn saw Valient standing in front of Gwaine and Percy. She quickly ducked down and slowly maneuvered her way over to them; Gwaine and Percy both kind of jumped when they felt someone brush in between their legs, but Merlyn held a finger to her lips. She reached in between Val's legs, careful not to touch him, and untied his shoelaces. Percy and Gwaine both caught on to what Merlyn was doing and quickly moved so that they blocked her from sight. Merlyn quickly re-tied Val's shoe laces together and tightened the knot (I guess knot tying was a survival skill, after all, Merlyn thought). She was in the process of moving back to Morgana, but she stumbled onto her knees and into someone's shins.

Arthur looked down at Merlyn with his eyebrow raised and smirked slightly. She blushed at having been caught and quickly moved around him.

"What did you do, Merlyn?" Morgana whispered once Merlyn was standing beside her again.

"Wait and see," said Merlyn in delight while rubbing her hands together. Once their group started walking again, Merlyn held her breath and waited for Valient to start moving.

It was beautiful.
Valient tried to take one step forward, and let out a loud yelp when he ended up falling flat on his face. There was a split moment of silence as everyone turned to see who, or what, made that noise. Then everyone started laughing, Merlyn was laughing so hard her sides started hurting, and Morgana had to lean onto Leon (who was also laughing) to keep herself upright. On the other hand, Valient looked pissed, and he started to yank at his shoelaces to untie them.

"Who fucking did this!??" Valient shouted and stood up glaring at everyone.

"Valient! Watch your language!" Mrs. Isolde moved through the crowd with ease and looked at him unhappily.

Val looked like he wanted to shout at Mrs. Isolde too, but he was smart enough to hold his tongue. Merlyn saw him angrily retie his shoelaces separately and stand back in with his group.

"If everything is okay here, let's keep moving." Mrs. Isolde announced.

For the rest of the hike, Merlyn felt very self-satisfied. Valient kept shooting everyone nasty glares, but she tried to keep herself as innocent looking as possible. Gwaine and Percy casually walked up to her and gave her a fist bump. Even Arthur looked slightly amused when Merlyn glanced at him as he walked past her.

They finished the hike around lunch time and walked back down to camp. Mr. Tristan was waiting for them with food prepared and everyone stood in line to get some. Merlyn was sitting with Morgana, Freya, and Gwen off to the side away from everyone else as they ate and quietly whispered about what happened to Valient. Mr. Tristan and Mrs. Isolde gave the class two hours free time to do whatever it is they wanted, and the girls sat in the sun chatting.

"He's staring at you, Merlyn," Freya said quietly.

Merlyn kept smiling and casually shrugged. "I just have to act natural...that's all."

Around mid-afternoon, Mrs. Isolde had everyone gather around and grab a pair of rubber boots.
"We'll be going down to the river to collect plant samples for Mr. Manticore." Mrs. Isolde explained.

There were low groans coming from people, but Mrs. Isolde only smiled slightly and gestured to the rubber boots inside a big bin.

"Grab a pair in your size, and meet me over at the tree line."

After everyone put their rubber boots on, they all walked down to the river. Merlyn thought the scenery was very nice and was kind of looking forward to collecting plant samples if it meant she got to play in the river. She rolled up the sleeves of her own hoodie (she had to give Gwaine's back to him eventually) and tied her hair up. As they continued to walk, they came across a large fallen tree in which they had to climb over. Merlyn and the girls struggled with this slightly and needed assistance from the guys to give them a boost over it.

The river was a sight to behold. Water rushing down from the mountains, lush green plants along the edges, and the tall trees surrounding them and nearly blocking out the sunlight. Merlyn looked over at Freya, who was enraptured by the beauty of it all.

"Alright class, please split up individually and grab a collection kit." Mrs. Isolde gestured over to where Mr. Tristan was unpacking white plastic kits.

Merlyn selected a kit at random and the instructions inside told her which plant to look for specifically. She had to walk into the shallow part of the river to hunt for it, and she kept her eyes peeled. Everyone was occupied with doing the same thing, and time seemed to pass by quickly.

"Which plant do you have, Merlyn?" Elyan asked as he walked up to her with his collection kit.

"This one," Merlyn held up the photo for Elyan to see, "what about you? Any luck finding yours?"

Elyan shook his head. "I don't even know if mine's a plant or a damn bug. It just says it should be near large rock formations."

Merlyn nodded up the river. "There's a bunch of rocks up ahead. Take a look there and see."
"Okay, thanks, Merlyn." Elyan gave her a two finger salute and walked away. But quickly turned around, "try looking for yours down the river more, I think I saw something like that by some Gaia berry bushes."

"Kay, thanks!" Merlyn scooped up her kit and followed the river downstream away from the class.

Merlyn settled into a new position, and she saw the large clump of Gaia bushes Elyan mentioned. They must have overgrown and moved into the river, Merlyn thought as she hunched over and looked into the water to try and find her plant. Suddenly Merlyn felt herself getting pushed forward, and she landed face first into the water. The fall didn't hurt that much, but that's because she threw her hands out to catch herself. But, the water was so cold, it felt like her hands turned to ice just from touching it, and it was seeping into her clothes; hoodie wet, jeans drenched, hair damp.

"You're the one who fucking tied my shoes together, weren't you!"

Merlyn turned to glare at Valient as she was trying to get up out of the water, but Valient shoved her back down. For a split moment, Merlyn felt genuinely scared.

"ANSWER MY FUCKING QUESTION!"

"I-" said Merlyn while glaring.

"Lay off, Val. She didn't do anything." Merlyn turned to look up at Arthur, who was extending a hand towards her. For some reason, she felt this immediate sense of relief wash over her at the sight of him.

"Oh what, the pretty boy coming to save the day? Is big ears here your damsel in distress?" sneered Valient.

"I'm not a fucking damsel in distress!" Merlyn snapped and grabbed Arthur's hand to pull herself up.

"You're about to be, out of my way Pendragon," Valient took a step towards her, but Arthur
moved so that he was fully in front of Merlyn.

"Val, I said lay off. Merlyn didn't do anything."


"Make me," Arthur said in a calm voice and stared evenly back at Valient.

They both quietly stared each other down and Merlyn was growing wary about what was going to happen next. She stood there shivering from being drenched in cold river water and was trying to think of a way to divert the situation so they could go back to the class. But, a small part of her was hoping Arthur would knock Valient's lights out...one could hope. Merlyn saw Valient look down quickly at Arthur's neck and smirked. In the blink of an eye, Valient seized the front of Arthur's shirt, but Arthur quickly grabbed Valient's wrist and held his ground.

"You think you're some tough shit, Pendragon? Just cause you're the school's golden boy you get to walk around like some knight in shining armor? You're just a little pussy, aren't you?"

Merlyn snapped at Valient's rude comments and rushed forward to shove him.

"You're such an asshole!"

"Merlyn, back off," Arthur said and looked down at her with an exasperated expression.

"Yeah, ears. I'll deal with you later." Valient said, but never took his eyes off Arthur.

"Deal with me now!" Merlyn tried to shove Valient again, but this time he was prepared and body checked her with enough force to knock her off her feet and back into the water.

"Hey!" yelled Arthur. Within a second he reared his arm back and punched Valient across the face.
Valient retaliated and punched Arthur on the opposite side of his face. Merlyn looked up in time to see Valient's other hand (the one holding onto Arthur's shirt) yank Arthur down, and throw him into the water. Something silver around Arthur's neck caught Merlyn's eye as Valient snapped it off.

"Only pussies wear jewelry, Pendragon!" Valient said and chucked the object in his hand into the river.

"NO!" Arthur shouted and scrambled to his feet. He pushed Valient off to the side and ran further into the water and plunged his hands into try and find the necklace (Merlyn's best guess) that was thrown in. When Arthur's frantic search came up empty, he turned back around to look at Valient.

"VALIENT!" growled Arthur in the most animalistic voice Merlyn has ever heard. Faster than Merlyn could even comprehend, Arthur rushed back towards Valient and seized him with both hands by the front of his shirt and lifted him up in the air.

"YOU FUCKING BASTARD!" Arthur slammed, with tremendous force Merlyn might add, Valient down onto the shallow part of the river and began to pummel him.

From all their fights that Merlyn participated in, she's probably known on some unconscious level that Arthur wasn't actually that angry with her. At most, he's just annoyed, and Merlyn felt the same way. But, as she stood off to the side and watched as Arthur repeatedly throw punch after punch...she could see that he was livid. His anger didn't scare her, but it did worry her because he would be in trouble. Merlyn tried to take a step towards the two, but she couldn't get her feet to move.

"Dude!" Lance's voice brought Merlyn out of her panic. She watched as Lance, followed by Leon, rushed up to Arthur and dragged him off of Valient.

"LET GO!" Arthur struggled and tried to rush back at Valient, who was laying on his back with a look of fear on his face.

"Are you okay, Merlyn?" Morgana asked and pulled Merlyn into a hug. "What happened?"

Merlyn nodded and turned to Morgana. "Val...he threw something of Arthur's into the river."
Morgana's eyes widen and turned to look out into the river. "The ring?"

Before Merlyn could say anything, Morgana rushed out into the river and began to do what Arthur was doing mere moments earlier. Merlyn wasn't sure what to do because she had no idea how things escalated so quickly.

"Pendragon, you motherfucker!" Valient spat and sat up and wiped the blood coming out of his nose with his hand.

"Shut the fuck up, Val!" Leon glared at Valient while holding onto a struggling Arthur with Lance.

On second thought, Merlyn knew exactly what she wanted to do. She stomped over to Valient and reared her right hand back.

"Hey!" Merlyn called out.

"Wha-" Merlyn's fist connected with Valient's face with a loud crack.

Valient fell back down into the river and grabbed his eye. Merlyn kicked his thigh and was venting all her anger out on him.

"You. Piece. Of. Shit!" Merlyn huffed and punctuated each of her words with a kick, "Leave. Me. Alone!"

"Merlyn?" Leon said her name carefully, but also kind of amused.

"Almost done!" Merlyn called back and continued to pummel Valient.

"Stop hitting-" Val stomach crunched up and tried to grab Merlyn, but she slipped his grasp and punched him again.

"STAY DOWN!" Merlyn growled and walked away while shaking her fist out. She silently
mouthed 'ow' and flexed her hand.

"What on earth is going on here!" Mrs. Isolde exclaimed while running up to them.

"They fucking ganged up on me! That's what!" Valient sat up and sneered at them.

"That's not true, Mrs. Isolde!" Merlyn said, "Valient started it!"

Mrs. Isolde looked like she was not impressed. "I don't care who started. I'm ending it. You guys are lucky if I don't decide to tell your parents about this! Go back to the camp site, and I'll have a talk with each one of you later."

Everyone silently headed back to the campsite with Mrs. Isolde following behind them. Merlyn saw Morgana walk up to Arthur and place her hand on his arm.

"It's gone, Arthur," Morgana said softly.

Arthur brushed her arm off and stomped quickly back to the campsite. Morgana, Leon, and Lance both shared a quiet look; Merlyn didn't know what was going on, but she knew it had to do with what Valient threw into the river. She slowed down to Morgana's pace, and Morgana looped her arm through Merlyn's.

"Uhm...Morgana," said Merlyn softly, "why did...is he..."

"He doesn't like to wear the ring when he's worried it might come off his finger, so he'll put it on a chain and wear it around his neck," Morgana explained quietly and tightened her hold on Merlyn's arm. There was never a need to prompt Morgana on a question, Merlyn thought. Whether she wants to give you an answer is always her decision.

Merlyn wanted to ask what was so special about the ring, but she was too nervous to hear the answer. So she silently accepted Morgana's explanation without further questions.

To say Mrs. Isolde and Mr. Tristan were not impressed...would be an understatement. They talked to Merlyn, Arthur, and Valient separately. But seeing as how Merlyn and Arthur's stories both
matched up, only Valient was getting reprimanded. He should have gotten a suspension too, Merlyn thought angrily as he walked past her smirking and pulled his ears out to mock her. But since he didn't throw the following punches, he only has a week's worth of detention when they get back. Obviously, Gwen and Freya were worried out of their minds and fretted over Merlyn. But, all Merlyn could focus on was the look of helplessness on Arthur's face.

"Hey...Gwaine?" Merlyn walked up beside him to toss her plate. Everyone was just finishing up their dinner and getting ready for lights out.

"Yeah?" Gwaine turned and grabbed Merlyn's plate from her and tossed it.

"Thanks," Merlyn said quickly and continued, "so you know how Val tossed Arthur's ring into the river?"

"Yeah, the fucking bastard deserved more of a beating," hissed Gwaine and his normally cheerful demeanor darkened.

"I agree..." Merlyn trailed off quietly, "but I wanted to ask you...why is that ring so important to Arthur?" she finished softly.

Gwaine looked down at Merlyn with a soft expression and then glanced at Arthur, who was sitting off in the distance by himself. Even though he was looking down at his clasped hands, the emotion he was feeling was clearly visible. Vivian didn't seem to notice the foul mood Arthur was in, or the more likely...she didn't really care and walked up to Arthur anyways.

"Arthur, come sit with me by the fire," Vivian purred.

"I'm not in the mood." Arthur's response was quick and sharp.

Vivian fluffed her hair and smiled. "I think you'll change-"


Vivian took a step back in surprise, but her expression changed and she glared at Arthur.
"It was just a stupid ring, Arthur, don't act all butthurt over a worthless piece of jewelry," Vivian looked like she wanted to say more, but suddenly Morgana was making her way (very quickly, Merlyn might add) towards the two of them. But, Vivian's unspoken words hung in the air.

'It's pathetic.' In that moment, Merlyn knew why Morgana had such a hatred for Vivian.

"It was his mom's ring," Gwaine's voice brought Merlyn's attention back to him. It took her a second to process his words, but one last look at Arthur drilled the words into her mind.

Guilt. That's what Merlyn was feeling. It bore down on her so quick and immediately she felt her eyes tearing up. She turned back to the garbage bin and blinked rapidly. Gwaine's hand on her shoulder surprised her.

"Hey, don't blame yourself," Gwaine said and squeezed her shoulder.

"How can I not? If he," Merlyn glanced over her shoulder at Arthur again, "didn't decide to come help me, then Val, that piece of shit, wouldn't have-"

"Val has always been out to get Arthur and he'll always be a piece of shit. Him pickin' on you wouldn't have made a difference, man. So don't look so sad, one person moping is all we can handle." Gwaine tried to lighten the mood, but the guilt was still there.

"I guess...thanks for telling me, Gwaine." Merlyn smiled and patted Gwaine's hand on her shoulder.

Gwaine winked. "Anytime, sweetheart."

Merlyn's group was the second to last group on the list, which meant they were the ones next to go to the washrooms (once the guys were done) and she gathered her things from the tent. Morgana, Gwen, and Freya were both waiting for her at the start of the trail. As they headed down the gravelly hill, Merlyn's thoughts were consumed about Arthur and the ring. Speaking of which, Merlyn caught sight of Arthur and the rest of the guys walking back to the campsite. She made eye contact with Arthur and was about to say something to him, but he looked away as he walked past Merlyn.
"Don't take it to heart, Merlyn," said Morgana, "he's just upset with himself."

"But I-" Merlyn couldn't think of what she wanted to say next.

"Didn't he ask Mrs. Isolde if he could go back to the river and look some more?" Gwen said.

"Yeah, he immediately disappeared with her when they finished talking," said Freya.

Morgana nodded. "Yeah, but he couldn't come up with anything. Then it was time for dinner."

"Why didn't he ask us to help?" Merlyn would have gone. She definitely would have.

"He's too stubborn to admit when he needs help," Morgana sighed and rolled her eyes, "come on, let's go get ready for bed. Maybe tomorrow Mrs. Isolde and Mr. Tristan will let us go look for it during free time."

Merlyn couldn't sleep.

The last time she looked at her phone (before it died) it was around midnight. But, apparently, the feeling of guilt does not know it was bedtime. Merlyn looked to her left and saw Freya curled up in a ball sleeping quietly, and to her right Morgana was softly snoring, Gwen was beside her originally, but she rolled over Morgana again to the other side of the tent. Everything sounded so quiet outside of their tent, even the wind was still tonight. Though, try as she might, every time Merlyn closed her eyes all she could see was the same scene over and over. She felt terrible for Arthur. She could only imagine what he was feeling because she didn't know what she would do if she lost her dad's book.

"Fuck it," uttered Merlyn under breath, "it's the last day anyways."

Merlyn slowly climbed out of her sleeping bag, and quietly pulled her runners on; she also tucked the flashlight they kept at the front of their tent in the front pocket of her hoodie. The hardest part of sneaking out of a tent was the stupid sound of the zipper, Merlyn thought. She quickly
pinched the zipper between her thumb and index finger to dampen the noise and slowly opened the flap to their tent. Once she was outside and the flap was zipped shut behind her, Merlyn navigated her way to the rubber boot bin (without the flashlight on because it might wake someone up) and quickly grabbed a pair. She hid her runners behind a tree and started to walk down to the river.

It was very eerie, the forest was dark, but at the same time, the moonlight bathed certain parts of it with light. This would look nice if it wasn't-okay it was scary, Merlyn thought as she continued to walk alone through the night. Merlyn pushed on, she knew she was going in the right direction when she saw the large fallen tree. To climb over it, she had to turn off her flashlight and pull herself over with all the upper body strength she had.

"Go camping, Will said. It'll be fun, Merls, Will said. How is this fun, Will?!!" hissed Merlyn as she hopped down off the tree.

After that part, the rest of the walk was relatively easy. She followed the sound of moving water and found her way to the river in no time. Merlyn retraced her footsteps back to where she was earlier in the day and closed her eyes trying to pull up the images in her mind.

"I was standing here," Merlyn said, "Arthur and Valient were standing...there," her eyes were closed, but her hand (with the flashlight) pointed to where the two guys were fighting.

"Val grabbed the chain and threw Arthur to the ground...over here," Merlyn opened her eyes and shifted slightly to her right. Her boots made splashing sounds as she maneuvered her way around the points in her mind.

"Valient threw the ring out there..." Merlyn shone her flashlight out further into the river.

"With the velocity of the river...angle of his throw," Merlyn glanced down the river, "it shouldn't have made it that far."

She quickly walked down further towards the large mass of Gaia bushes. She was hoping that her guess was right and that this wasn't a lost cause. Merlyn rolled up her sleeves, and shivered, it was fricken cold out tonight and she could see her breath with each exhale. But, now was not the time to turn back.

"Come on, Merlyn," she whispered to herself, "you can do this. Don't start having morbid thoughts...like what if there was a flash flood? Well, then I'd be doomed."
Merlyn hunched over and shone her flashlight down into the gaggle of thorny branches. She went slowly and was very meticulous with her sweep. It seemed like she was out there a long time, but the length and height of the bushes made it hard to get through and in between to look closely for a small ring. Also, it didn't help that she was still having morbid thoughts of her own demise out here...in the cold...all alone...in the dark.

"Or, there might be some creature that lives in the river and only comes out a night to hunt and likes the taste of human flesh. Good thing I'm short then, I'll be quicker to eat."

"These morbid thoughts are not helping..." Merlyn sang as she talked to herself.

Something glittery caught Merlyn's eye just then. She moved her flashlight back and saw something reflect the light back at her. She didn't want to get her hopes up, but she'll only know if went into the bush to find out.

"Holy crap!" stuttered Merlyn, "c-c-cold!"

Merlyn had sunk down to her knees to try and climb into the Gaia bush. Immediately her knees were soaked through. She stuck the small flashlight between her teeth and leaned forward onto her hands.

"GAAAH!" Merlyn's muffled displeasure was only heard by the flashlight occupying her mouth.

"Ow," one of the thorns on the bush scratched her ear, "ow!" another one got her forearm, "fack!" that thorn got her chin. She felt her hair being pulled and occasionally catching on a thorn.

She was almost able to reach the shiny object with her arm, only...a little bit...further.

"I GAW EH!" Merlyn wasn't cheering for anyone to hear, but the happiness she felt at feeling a ring within her hand...was an awesome feeling. She slowly started to crawl backward out of the bush.

"Ow." Her other ear, "ow." her other forearm. "eh tho thupid!"
Once Merlyn was free from the thorns, she quickly took the flashlight out of her mouth and shone it down onto her palm. His ring! Merlyn thought excitedly. The chain was broken pretty badly, though, but the ring looked fine. She quickly dried it off on her hoodie and walked out of the river with it tightly grasped in her fist. Merlyn wasted no time to head back to the campsite and was contemplating going to Arthur's tent to wake him up and surprise him.

"Guilt fre-AHHHH!" A sudden figure stepped out in front of Merlyn, "mmph!"

"Will you stop screaming?" Arthur? Merlyn looked up and saw Arthur glaring down at her.

Merlyn began to snap at Arthur, but all of it was muffled since his hand was still over her mouth. She quickly elbowed him in the gut and pushed his hand off her face to glare at him.

"WHAT..." Arthur held his finger to his lips while looking around them frantically and Merlyn adjusted her temper and lowered her voice, "the hell! Are you trying to scare me to death?"

"I wasn't doing anything, you just started screaming like a crazy person!" hissed Arthur.

"Any normal person would scream when some psycho just appears out of nowhere in the middle of the forest at night!" Merlyn hissed right back.

Arthur let out an aggravated sigh and looked up at the night sky as if silently asking why is it always her? "What are you even doing out here, Merlyn?"

"I could ask you the same question!" Merlyn's heart was still beating really fast in her chest and she lost sight of the current bigger picture.

Arthur gave her a deadpan look and rolled his eyes. "I asked you first."

Then it clicked for Merlyn and her anger evaporated so she could tell Arthur the good news.

"Gwaine-" Merlyn was about to explain how Gwaine told her about the ring and went to go
look for it, but Arthur cut her off.

"Jesus Christ," Arthur dragged the word out and ran a hand through his hair, "you snuck out just for Gwaine? You do know that idiot is a shameless flirt? He's back in our tent sleeping like a dead log. I thought you were smarter-"

"You fucking toad!" Merlyn punched Arthur as hard as she could in the arm.

"The fuck-" It didn't look like her punch had much effect on him, except maybe pissing him off more. But, Merlyn had to voice how unhappy she was.

"I wasn't finished!" Merlyn snapped, "I was going to tell you that Gwaine told me how much that ring meant to you! I felt so fucking guilty that I was part of the reason why you lost it, so I snuck out to go try and find it for you!"

Arthur looked taken aback by Merlyn's reason and he didn't say anything else. Merlyn held her fist out and opened it to reveal the ring to Arthur; his face morphed from confusion to shock in an instant.

"The chain's all warped because Val's an ass and just yanked it off your neck. But, the ring is fine-oomf!"

Merlyn was suddenly engulfed in Arthur's arms. Her hand clenched back into a fist around the ring and fell to her side. Once the shock wore off, her first thought was how warm Arthur was.

"Thank you," Arthur said and hugged her tighter to him, he sounded so sincere, Merlyn thought. She felt awkward just standing with her arms to the side, so she raised her arms to return the hug.

"Uhm..." Merlyn said softly, "no problem.."

They two of them stood there quietly hugging and if Merlyn was quite honest with herself...it felt nice.

Merlyn and Arthur broke apart like the other person was scalding hot water. They both turned and saw an amused looking Mrs. Isolde. She was standing in front of them with her arms crossed and a smirk on her lips.

"I believe the rules were no students out of bed past lights out? To fraternize isn't an exception to the rule you guys." Mrs. Isolde said with amusement.

"What? Frater...nooooo!" Merlyn dragged the word out and looked up at Arthur, who was shaking his head.

"We weren't-" Merlyn began.

"Fraternizing, Mrs. Isolde," Arthur finished and took a step away from Merlyn at the exact time she stepped away from him.

"Mmhmm..." The disbelief was clear in her voice, "so what were you two doing then?"

Suddenly the amusement was gone on her face and she looked over at Arthur.

"You weren't thinking of going back to the river to look for the ring were you, Arthur? Because that is reckless and quite frankly stupid. It's late and dark, who knows if-" Arthur and Merlyn shared a quick look.

"It was just a dare, Mrs. Isolde." Arthur lied, "Merlyn and I dared each other to take a walk in the woods and see who chickened out first...evidently, it was Merlyn."

If Merlyn wasn't grateful for what Arthur was doing, she would kick him in the shin for calling her a chicken. Mrs. Isolde looked at Merlyn, and Merlyn quickly nodded along with Arthur's lie. She hoped Mrs. Isolde wouldn't look down at her knees and see how wet they were.

"Alright, well you two go back to your tents. If Tristan catches you guys, he won't be as lenient. Especially with the fiasco that happened today, you both should stop looking for trouble."
Mrs. Isolde waved her flashlight between the two of them as if she was wagging her finger and turned around to head back to the campsite.

Merlyn and Arthur both stood kind of shell shocked. Merlyn snapped out of it first and whacked Arthur's arm closest to her. Out of reflex he grabbed it and stared down at her.

"I am not a chicken," Merlyn snapped and glared at him.

Arthur let out a bark of laughter and covered his mouth as his body shook with silent laughter. Merlyn scowled up at him and grabbed his hand to shove the ring into it.

"Here."

Merlyn then proceeded to stomp back up the path to the campsite. She was aware that Arthur was walking behind her at the same pace as her (stupid long legs on tall people, Merlyn thought) and she felt his gaze on her back as they walked in silence.

"I can feel you laughing at me," Merlyn didn't turn around to look at him. Mostly because she was worried she would trip and then Arthur would have more reason to laugh at her.

"You're imagining things, Merlyn," said Arthur with a smirk (well, Merlyn pictured it in her mind that he was smirking.)

When they got to the fallen tree, Merlyn had to pause and contemplate what to do. Arthur walked up beside her and looked down at her with amusement all over her face. She was too prideful at this moment to ask Arthur for help, but she wanted to get back to bed, so she might as well—did that asshole just leave her stranded? Merlyn thought as she watched Arthur climb over to the other side of the tree with ease.

"Hey!" Merlyn called out, hoping to get Arthur to turn back for her.

Arthur suddenly popped back up on the tree, and he smirked. "Hey. Need a hand short stack?"
Merlyn scowled, but she knew she did need the hand. So she reached up and grabbed Arthur's hand and was surprised when he pulled her up with ease. She sat down on the tree and spun around so her legs dangled off.

"I'm not that short you know," Merlyn knew she was lying and so did Arthur.

"Well then, I'm not a toad," Arthur shot back.

Merlyn gave Arthur a sarcastic smile and patted him on the shoulder. "That's a matter of perspective."

She hopped down off the tree trunk and continued back to camp. Before heading back to the tent, she had to go return the boots she took and get her runners back. Merlyn was kind of surprised when she saw Arthur standing by the bin waiting for her to put her runners back on. She was even more surprised when he walked with her back to the tent.

"Well...goodnight then," said Merlyn awkwardly.

"Night."

Merlyn turned to open her tent, but Arthur cleared his throat. She turned back around with a 'yeah?' look on her face. Arthur looked down at his fist and then back at Merlyn.

"Don't leave me hanging," said Arthur with a pointed look.

Merlyn rolled her eyes, but humored him and bumped his fist with hers. "Night."

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TWEEET

"I'm going to kill someone," Merlyn grumbled and smothered herself with her pillow. Didn't she just get to bed?
"Mmm," Morgana grumbled and rolled onto her other side.

"WAKEY! WAKEY!" The flap to their tent was suddenly unzipped and Gwaine sprawled out on top of them.

"Oof!" Merlyn grunted and lifted her pillow high enough to glare at Gwaine.

"Come on girls!" Elyan poked his head into the tent and threw a twig at Gwen, who was already sitting up.

"Ow! Shit Morgana! Cut your damn nails!" Gwaine complained, and rolled off of them.

Leon popped his head into the tent and chuckled. "I told you not to bother her when she sleeps, Gwaine," Leon squatted and patted Morgana's sleeping bag, "Your group is up next for the washrooms, better get a move on guys."

Merlyn sat up and buried her face in her hands. The cold morning air was drifting into their tent and Merlyn couldn't sleep anymore even if she wanted to. There were too many spectators and she was starting to realize how uncomfortable the ground is.

'Last day. Last day.' Merlyn chanted in her head and grabbed her toiletry bag.

The morning sun was bright and the sky was a beautiful blue, but Merlyn felt like she was dying. It was either the harsh fluorescent lights above them, that was mixing in with the morning sunlight. Or how loudly everyone was talking and the sound was echoing off the walls. But, Merlyn was pushing through with whatever energy she had left to brush her teeth and not pass out in the sink.

"So you snuck out last night to go look for the ring?" Merlyn nearly choked on her toothbrush.

"Wah?" Her response came out a bit garbled with the toothpaste in her mouth.
Morgana stared Merlyn down hard with those piercing eyes of hers, "You snuck out of the tent last night, and somehow Arthur's ring is miraculously on his finger this morning."

Merlyn spat out the toothpaste and rinsed her mouth slowly. Mostly to give herself more time to think of what to say to Morgana, who wouldn't look away. Merlyn slowly wiped her mouth and face, but that didn't do anything either. To start, how did Morgana even know she snuck out last night? Merlyn thought all people who snore were heavy sleepers...

"I didn't...how did you-" Merlyn guessed that that logic doesn't apply to Morgana (not that anything does...apparently)

"Okay, yeah I snuck out and found the ring," confessed Merlyn, finally cracking under Morgana's stare.

"You went down to the river by yourself?" asked Morgana as she turned around to lean against the sink behind her.

Merlyn nodded. There was a look of judgment on Morgana's face, but Merlyn wasn't sure if it was the good or bad kind.

"That was a dangerous thing to do, Merlyn," Gwen admonished as she walked out of the shower stall wrapped in a towel. Freya followed her out and nodded in agreement.

"Who knows what could have happened to you?" Gwen continued.

"But guys, nothing did happen to me and Arthur got his mother's ring back. It's a win-win situation," Merlyn said and unwrapped her hair from her towel.

"What exactly did you win from this?" asked Morgana with an intrigued look on her face as she passed Merlyn her hair brush.

"Well I-" Merlyn paused and thought it over, "I mean...technically," she gnawed on her bottom lip, "I guess I won't feel guilty anymore?"
"Part of the reason why he lost the ring in the first place was because he was standing up for me...so the least I could do was try and find it for him."

Morgana leveled Merlyn with another one of her looks, "You did all of that...just for Arthur?"

Merlyn shrugged and made a 'guess so' face, "It was important to him and if it were me in that situation...I'd hope someone would help me out as well."

Gwen and Freya both looked at Merlyn with their warm, indulgent, 'you did a good thing' smiles (even though they still thought it was reckless of her), and Merlyn felt her cheeks and ears warm up. Even Morgana smiled a different kind of smile for Merlyn.

Once the four of them came back to the campsite, Merlyn stumbled into their tent and nearly passed out on her sleeping bag. Gwen, a morning person (to Merlyn's dismay), shook Merlyn's leg and told her that she needed to get up and have some breakfast. It seemed like everyone was excited that today was the last day. All the guys were getting restless and the girls wanted to get back to civilization. Mrs. Isolde and Mr. Tristan were both handing out breakfast to everyone, but Merlyn was too exhausted to want to eat a proper breakfast, so she grabbed an apple juice from the ice bin and a slice of toast.

"Merlyn," Mr. Tristan walked up to Merlyn as she was mid-bite of her toast.

"Yweah?" said Merlyn while trying to swallow her mouthful of bread.

"Could you go and unhook the cooler hanging from the tree over there for me, please? I need more eggs."

"Uh...sure?" Merlyn said and made her way out of the campsite to the tree the cooler was hanging in.

"Why do you have to be so high up?" Merlyn asked out loud once she realized this might be too difficult a task for her.

She observed the height the cooler was strung up to and looked down at where the rope was connected to. Merlyn was tempted to just unhook the damn thing, but she knew better than that. She
didn't want to be responsible for making that big of a mess; so, she rolled up her long sleeves and tried to pull the rope back enough to give her some room to untie it and slowly lower the cooler. But, that didn't go so well.

"This is so stupid," Merlyn grumbled as she dug her heels into the ground to get some traction.

"One would think it's a bad idea to camp if the fact that you have to tie your food up in a tree so bears won't come and eat you...would be a good reason not to do this!"

Suddenly two arms appeared on either side of Merlyn's head and pulled the rope back with ease. She turned her head back to see who it was and was surprised to see Arthur standing behind her.

"How do you expect to survive a bear attack with an attitude like that, Merlyn?" Arthur asked while untying the rope from the peg with one hand, and the other hand was still holding onto the rope. She felt a bit envious at that moment for her lack of strength and Arthur's abundant amount of it.

Merlyn shrugged and sarcastically replied. "Technically, I would just have to run faster than you. So my odds look pretty good."

Arthur took Merlyn by surprise when he laughed. Like full on, head tilted back, sharp jaw line and everything laugh.

"Are you calling me fat, Merlyn?" He looked at her with amusement as he slowly lowered the cooler.

Merlyn shrugged and tried another taunt. "I mean, I would say if the shoe fits, but it might not for you."

Arthur rolled his eyes, but instead of looking annoyed like he usually does...he was smiling. What the hell was happening? Merlyn wondered and pinched herself. Okay, not dreaming, she thought.

"What?" Arthur raised an eyebrow at Merlyn when she kept staring at him with a confused
"I should be asking you that. Why aren't you retaliating?" Merlyn asked and waved her hand between the two of them.

Arthur was now smirking at her. "Hmm?"

"Ugh!" Merlyn rolled her eyes, "you know how this works. You're supposed to say something like," Merlyn lowered her voice stood up on her tiptoes, "well Merlyn, judging from how short you are, you'd probably only take three steps before the bear catches up to you and eats you."

Arthur was full out laughing again, and he let go of the rope he was holding since the cooler was now back on the ground. Merlyn didn't want to admit that it was a mesmerizing sight to see, she's only seen him smile or laugh with the guys or around Gwen and Morgana...never around her. When Arthur caught his breath, his smile was still on his face.

"Good to know you know how to insult yourself in my place, Merlyn," Arthur said her name with more sarcasm in it.

"Hmmphf!" Merlyn didn't know how to respond to this new Arthur or the fact that, yes, she did insult herself in his place, and turned to grab the cooler.

'It's heavy' Merlyn thought as she struggled to find her balance with the cooler.

"Here," Arthur reached over took the cooler out of Merlyn's hands.

"Uh...thanks?" Merlyn said out of courtesy and surprise, "I can hold half with you?"

Arthur gave her a look that said 'that's counter-productive' and so she just quickly followed after him. As they came back into the campsite, Merlyn glanced down at Arthur's left hand and saw the ring on his index finger again. She smiled and felt happy for Arthur...but he didn't need to know that. Merlyn glanced up at Arthur and was surprised when he was already looking down at her; she quickly wiped the smile off her face and scowled at him. Arthur's lips drifted between a smile and a smirk.
"Thanks you guys. Sorry Merlyn, I should have realized this cooler might have been too heavy for you." Mr. Tristan apologized and took the cooler from Arthur.

Merlyn nodded and turned to head over to where Freya, Gwen, and Morgana were. She glanced over at Arthur quickly when she realized he was walking beside her.

'Twilight zone. This is definitely a Twilight zone.' Merlyn decided.

For the last day on the campsite, Mr. Tristan, and Mrs. Isolde decided to take them on another hike. Merlyn felt exhausted still from her lack of sleep, so she hung out at the back of the group. Everyone in her group must have decided they liked her idea because they were walking at the back with her. Morgana and Leon were both talking about a new movie coming out, Gwen and Lance were both being lovey-dovey with one another, Freya was pointing out different flowers to Merlyn, Arthur, Elyan, Percy and Gwaine were all talking about the upcoming basketball season. Will was right...camping wasn't as bad as she thought.

TWEEET

Merlyn was ready for this. She booked it out of her sleeping bag and quickly rolled it up. She gently shook Freya and Morgana awake.

"We're going home!" said Merlyn excitedly.

Merlyn began to stuff her sleeping bag back into Will's backpack and zipped it up. All she needed to do now was pack up her toiletry bag, and she was good to go.

"Come on guys, let's go. Quicker we get ready and take down the tent, the faster we get back to civilization." Merlyn patted their sleeping bags.

"Mmm!" Morgana whined and scrunched up her face.

The entire class got back down to the loading area before noon. Merlyn has never been happier to see a bus. She was bouncing on her toes waiting to get on. Her phone was in her pocket and was charging (Elyan lent her his portable charger), but right when it turned on earlier she texted Will and told him what time she will be back at school. Will agreed to pick her and Freya up, and said he'll take them out for lunch. The class began to board the bus and Merlyn walked towards the
back to grab a seat for her and Freya.

"It was such a nice long weekend," Freya sighed happily.

Merlyn turned away from the window and locked eyes with Arthur quickly, before looking away to answer Freya.

"Yeah. It was."

School the next day was a welcomed activity for Merlyn. It meant that they were no longer stuck in the woods, and she got to sleep in her bed that night with both her blankets and pillows surrounding her. It was a wonderful day. It seemed like a lot of her classmates mimicked her attitude and were in higher spirits.

"Hey," Merlyn looked to her right and up at Arthur, who was smiling down at her.

"Hi..." said Merlyn slowly and she managed to catch herself from giving Arthur a bewildered look.

"We have Social first, right?" Arthur asked as he kept pace with her.

Merlyn nodded. "Yeah, we do."

"Kay, thanks. See you in class!" Arthur lightly punched her shoulder and headed for the gym locker room.

"No problem?" Merlyn called after him and waved. That was weird, right? Merlyn wondered.

That was not the only weird interaction with Arthur all day. In class, Arthur would talk and be civil with her. Not that he's rude to her on a daily basis, but usually in class they would just ignore each other as best as they can so they don't start a fight. Biology was an exception since Lance and
Percy were there. Merlyn knew her 'strategic avoidance' plan was failing, but what was she suppose to do? There was no backup plan!

"Hey Merlyn, can I borrow your pencil?"

"Sure?"

"Thanks,"

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"Merlyn! Wait up!"

"Yeah?"

"Nothing, we have English now don't we?"

"Mhm? And?"

Arthur looked down at Merlyn as if she was the weird one. "And...let's walk there then? You feelin' okay there?"

"Wh-" Merlyn didn't even know where to begin, "yeah sure, why not?"

People were staring at them, or more correctly they were staring at her and wondering why she was walking with Arthur. That was probably the weirdest part of her day, and by the end of it, Merlyn was already used to being stared at by random students. Merlyn was looking down at her phone playing a game when she felt someone standing in front of her desk.

"What're you playing?" asked Arthur as he leaned forward to look down at Merlyn's phone.
'Tetris,' Merlyn answered without looking up, "but I'm losing this level..."

"Use the block piece!" Arthur leaned further onto Merlyn's desk.

"I'm trying!" The urgency was evident in Merlyn's voice.

"Ahem!" Merlyn quickly looked up to her left and back down at her phone when she caught sight of Vivian. Arthur must have done the same thing, but he was now reaching over trying to point out which piece to use next in the game.

"Hi Arthur," Vivian said, and by the sound of her tone...she wasn't happy about being ignored.

"Hey Viv," Arthur answered quickly and turned back to face Merlyn, "Merlyn, why would you use your Tetris piece so soon?"

Merlyn shrugged quickly and began to tap rapidly at the screen. "I panicked."

Vivian let out a huff and tapped her foot. Merlyn glanced up at Arthur and then looked over at Vivian, hoping he would get the message. She obviously was not here to see Merlyn of all people and least of all...she's not even suppose to be in their class right now.

Arthur sighed and turned to face Vivian again. "Yeah, Viv?"

"So I'm not busy this weekend and decided that you can take me out," Vivian spoke with such finality that Merlyn widened her eyes and looked at her screen with more attention than necessary. Was Vivian actually telling Arthur to take her out on a date? Merlyn smirked stealthily to herself.

"I have practice with the guys," said Arthur, and Merlyn didn't have to look up at him to know he was annoyed.

"Then later on."
"We're practicing...all weekend," Arthur emphasized.

"Tch," Vivian clicked her tongue, "fine then. Go play some stupid game with the boys, see if I care."

"Kind of sounds like you do, Viv," Merlyn sang under her breath.

"Shut up, ears," hissed Vivian.

"Viv!" snapped Arthur.

Merlyn shrugged and rolled her eyes. *Of course,* she'd use the stupid insult Valient calls her, thought Merlyn.

"Vivian," Khilgharra's voice was a welcomed thing as Merlyn closed the Tetris app, "I don't believe you're in my math class are you?"

"Oh...I'm just leaving Mr. Khil-" Vivian turned on her sickly sweet charm into overdrive.

"Doctor." Khilgharra corrected, "I didn't go through all that schooling just to be a mister."

Vivian's face dropped slightly in disdain, and Merlyn thought it was hilarious that Khilgharra was giving her crap. Merlyn looked over at Arthur and even he looked amused by it.

"Right," Vivian sniffed and turned to look at Arthur, "I'll text you if I change my mind." Then Vivian strutted out of the classroom.

' Hmm...' Merlyn thought with disdain. There was a moment of silence between the three of them.

"Fortune cookie?" Khilgharra opened his hand and in his palm were two fortune cookies
wrapped in plastic.

"Uh... thanks, Khilgharra," Arthur said awkwardly and walked over to his seat by the window.

"You know," Merlyn said as she took the other one out of his palm, "these aren't the healthiest snacks, Khilgharra."

Khilgharra popped a small piece of the cookie into his mouth. "The fortunes are what I enjoy reading. They're very insightful."

Merlyn, just to humor him, opened her fortune cookie and read her fortune out loud.

"Your great trial has just begun..."

Something suddenly occurred to Merlyn and she looked up at Khilgharra accusingly.

"Hang on... don't tell me all the sayings you had me decode in lab are from fortune cookies."

Khilgharra shrugged, but Merlyn could see his lips tugging into a smile. "I have no idea what you mean by that, Merlyn, but keep in mind I am a professional." With that, he turned and walked to his desk.

"Professional oddball more like," mumbled Merlyn. What exactly did she idolize about him again? She wondered.
Hi, guys!

So I did say I would be posting after my finals (which start tomorrow and ends Friday), but thanks to my procrastination (: I have written the next chapter. So I hope you guys enjoy it! I personally really enjoyed writing this chapter, and I know I always say this about each chapter, but this is the longest chapter I've written so far...lol. Something to tie you over for this week.

I'll be working on more chapters once my winter break begins.

Comment if you enjoyed this chapter! Or leave a kudos if you really liked it (: 

***I have edited this and will probably go through a couple of times to edit more.

-SS

"Excellent work, Merlyn." Mrs. Isolde said and handed Merlyn her pop quiz back. In the top right-hand corner, there was a 100% written in red marker.

Out of reflex, Merlyn nearly reached out to tap on Arthur's shoulder to ask him how he did because she always asked Freya and the other guys as well, but immediately pulled her hand back. Of course, Merlyn's 'strategic avoidance' plan was no longer valid, since coming back from camping they've managed to become civil towards each other. But, that didn’t mean she had the sudden right to start asking him such intrusive questions. She was in the middle of sitting back down in her seat when she caught sight of his quiz mark. It wasn't an entirely bad mark, he did still pass, but Merlyn could tell with the way his shoulder kind of stooped down and his quiet sigh...he felt defeated. A part of Merlyn wanted to comfort him, but...what position was she in, to even offer well...anything?

As Merlyn walked into school on Monday, she could see a bunch of colorful posters being hung up on the bulletin boards. Several students were gathering around them and chatting excitedly about them. It piqued Merlyn's interest; she stopped in front of one, just to see what it said and it turns out everyone was excited for the first basketball game of the season. The date on the poster said that the first game would be two weeks from now.

"Are you going to come to the game, Merlyn?" Gwaine's sudden appearance beside Merlyn
nearly stopped her heart.

"Gwaine!" Merlyn exclaimed and jumped back slightly. "The hell! Don't scare me like that! Have you ever heard of saying 'hello' first?"

"Hi, Merlyn," Gwaine said and seductively leaned against the wall.

Merlyn rolled her eyes and laughed. "Hi, Gwaine."

"So, will you be coming to cheer us on? I'll play extra hard if I know you're in the stands watching me." Gwaine winked and made kissing noises at Merlyn.

"I don't know," Merlyn said and glanced Gwaine up and down, "I might be too much of a distraction. You might end up scoring a point for the other team if I start breathing in your direction."

Gwaine threw his head back and laughed. "You're right!"

"But, it seems like everyone is super pumped for it," Merlyn said and continued walking down the hallway.

"Of course, it's the first game of the season," Gwaine said and easily kept pace with Merlyn, "and it's against those shit faces at Essetir Prep."

"I'm guessing there's some sort of deep-seated rivalry with them?" Merlyn said and glanced up at Gwaine with her eyebrow raised.

"Fuck, do we!" Gwaine said, "those bastards rub it in our faces that they've won the Inter-City Cup for the past two years."

"Inter-City Cup?" Merlyn said.

"It's a gorgeous piece of work, Merlyn," Gwaine said, and Merlyn believed him, considering how he was practically salivating.
"It's the holiest piece of work ever to grace the realm of high school basketball. The team that wins the Cup gets their names engraved on this large plaque, and the Cup gets placed on display at the winning school." Gwaine explained with so much enthusiasm that Merlyn felt herself get pumped up for it.

"So Essetir Prep has won the Cup two years in a row?" Merlyn said and grabbed her bio textbook out of her locker.

"Yeah," Gwaine said, "but this year is different."

"How?" Merlyn asked.

"Because," Gwaine answered with a wide-spread grin on his face and winked at Merlyn, "this year, we're on the senior boys team, and we have the princess leading us as captain."

Merlyn couldn't help return Gwaine's grin with a smile of her own (he's a very infectious person), but it occurred to her, although she didn't say it out loud, that it seemed like it was a lot of responsibility to put on one person. The two of them headed to homeroom together, and Merlyn listened attentively to Gwaine talk more about the Inter-City tournament. When they went into the classroom, they sat down with everyone else at what was deemed 'their table' and immediately Gwaine's attention was redirected to the guys, and they were all hyping each other up for the first game. The guys were discussing strategies and how they should meet up at Park Avalon afterschool. But, surprisingly, Arthur looked like he was going to be sick.

"It only gets more chaotic from here on out, Merlyn," Morgana said, and took a sip out of her coffee cup. Merlyn turned away from Arthur to look at Morgana.

"It'll be 24/7 basketball until winter break," Gwen sighed and lovingly ran her hand through Lance's hair. He paused briefly and then turned to give Gwen a quick peck on the cheek.

"It's also against Essetir Prep," Freya said and it almost took Merlyn by surprise that even Freya was into the whole school rivalry thing.

But, it seemed like everyone—even the teachers, were fired up for Camelot High to win. Merlyn spent the day hearing bits and pieces of conversations about how excited everyone was for the game. She even saw a lot of people approach Arthur in class to tell him how thrilled the school
was to see him lead the team to their first victory. From what Merlyn could see, he had the perfect poster boy response for every one of them, and people were eating it up. And yet, the way his smile was tense around the edges, or how his eyes had this panicked look in them, even the way his shoulders slumped when everyone walked away showed how he really felt...Merlyn could see that the expectation was eating Arthur alive.

By the time they were in their last class of the day, the excitement had died down somewhat and everyone moved on to discussing other things. They were nearing the end of the lesson and Khilgharra just assigned questions for them to do in their math work books.

"Merlyn," Khilgharra called from his desk.

Merlyn looked up from her work book and stood up when Khilgharra gestured for her to come to his desk. She tossed her pencil into the book and headed to the front of the classroom.

"Yeah, Khilgharra?" Merlyn said and leaned against the side of his desk with her arms crossed.

"Could you do me a favor," Khilgharra asked and pulled a large stack of papers out from one of the desk drawers, "and take these papers to Isolde for me?"

Merlyn nodded. "Sure."

"Splendid, just drop them off for her, and she'll give some forms in return for me," Khilgharra said.

"Okay," Merlyn grabbed the stack of papers and headed out the door.

On her journey to Mrs. Isolde's classroom, Merlyn began contemplating what she wanted to do this weekend. She could ask Freya, Morgana, and Gwen if they wanted to go to the mall and see a movie. Or, she could ask Will to take her to the R&D department and see if she could get some inspiration for her Robotics project. Merlyn walked past a couple of students who were most likely skipping class, but she didn't pay them much attention. When one of the hall monitors asked her if she saw that same group of students, she shook her head and shrugged. The hall monitor nodded and continued his search. The classroom numbers ticked down and Merlyn knocked on the one for Mrs. Isolde's class.
"Come in!" Mrs. Isolde's voice carried through the door.

Merlyn balanced the papers in one arm and opened the door with her free hand. Her ears immediately went red when she saw a majority of the class staring at her. But, the most important thing was making it to Mrs. Isolde's desk without tripping and dropping the papers.

"Hi there, Merlyn," Mrs. Isolde greeted as Merlyn walked up to her desk, "I see you have the papers I asked for from Khilgharra."

"Yup, all here," Merlyn said and blushed slightly at Mrs. Isolde's smile.

"Wonderful, let me give you the forms in return. Just one moment." Mrs. Isolde got up from her desk and walked over to the tall filing cabinet in the corner of the room.

"Pssst! Merlyn!" Merlyn turned towards the familiar sounding voice and waved at Gwaine.

"Hi, guys," Merlyn said and walked over to where Gwaine, Percy, and Leon were sitting.

"Hey, Merlyn," Leon said and held out his fist. Merlyn tapped it with her own and leaned against Percy's desk.

"Are you guys working on the booklet?" Merlyn said and made a pointed gesture to the booklet on their desks.

"Yeah," Percy sighed, "but it's going slow."

"You wouldn't happen to have any answers, would you?" Gwaine wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Merlyn rolled her eyes with a smile on her lips. "Starting from questions 19-29, the answers are: true, true, false, true, false, false, true, false, true, true. Does that help?"

"A bunch!" Gwaine said and was scribbling in the last answer.
Merlyn could see Percy and Leon also quickly jotting down the answers she rattled off. She looked over her shoulder and saw Mrs. Isolde walking back to her desk with a bunch of forms.

"Looks like I have to go now, bye guys," Merlyn said and waved.

"See you later!" Percy said and gave her a two finger salute.

Merlyn walked back up to Mrs. Isolde's desk and waited patiently for her to organize them. She glanced at the clock hanging above the door and saw that the bell would ring any minute.

"Here-" Mrs. Isolde said while looking up, but was cut off by the bell.

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"Oh, I'm sorry for keeping you, dear," Mrs. Isolde said and gave Merlyn an apologetic smile.

Merlyn shook her head. "No worries, I don't mind. Can I take these to Khilgharra now?"

"Yes. Yes. All the forms should be there, but tell him to call me if I'm missing some." Mrs. Isolde handed the smaller stack of papers to Merlyn.

Merlyn quickly walked out of the classroom before everyone flooded the door, and managed to squeeze out just in time. The hallways were quickly filling up with other students, and Merlyn tried to stick closer to the wall to get through. She was hoping that by the time everyone in class left, she'd be the only one in there and can pack her stuff up in peace, and head to the Robotics lab with Khilgharra. As she was about to turn into the classroom, Khilgharra and Arthur's voice made her stop in her tracks.

"Please Khilgharra, I have to be able to play in the first game of the season!" Merlyn immediately spun on her heel and flattened herself against the wall beside the doorway.

"Arthur, I understand how important this game is for you-" Khilgharra said in his usual calm
"Then, isn't there anything you can do? Can't you let my mark slide until after the game? I promise I'll bring it up after!" Merlyn could hear the desperation in Arthur's voice.

Merlyn knew she shouldn't be eavesdropping. She should leave, like, now. But, her feet were stuck to the ground, and she didn't know where she could run off to without having to come back and rescue her backpack.

"I wish I could. But, you know the rules, all athletes must maintain an average of no less than 70% if they wish to remain on the team," Khilgharra said.

Merlyn could hear Arthur sigh, and for some reason, she could picture him running a frustrated hand through his hair.

"I know. I know. I'm just...having a hard time with the material," said Arthur softly. So softly that Merlyn almost didn't hear him.

"You could ask for help from one of your friends," Khilgharra offered, "they might possibly help you understand the material better. Or, we could work out tutor times."

'He's too stubborn to admit when he needs help.' Morgana's words rushed back into Merlyn's mind.

"I...it's okay. I can do it on my own," Arthur said.

There was a moment of silence in the classroom, and Merlyn had to hold herself back to keep from peeking into the room. Finally, she heard Khilgharra's chair groan and she knew that he's either leaning back in his chair or sitting up from it.

"Alright," Khilgharra said, "I'll give you a chance to boost your mark before the first game."

"Really?" Arthur let out a loud breath. Merlyn didn't even realize she was holding her breath as well until the relief hit her lungs.
"It won't be easy, Arthur," Khilgharra warned, "these booklets I'm giving you are a combination of review of material I've covered in class so far, and some stuff I have yet to. Also, with where your mark is currently, you'll need to get at least 80 percent on the next unit test, which just so happens to land a day before the first game if you wish to play in it."

"I understand, Khilgharra, thank you," Arthur said.

"You can hand these booklets into me on the day of the unit test."

There was some shuffling of paper, and Merlyn heard footsteps coming closer to the door. She immediately ran back down the hallway and ducked behind a corner. Merlyn watched from her spot as Arthur walked past and she noticed how tired he looked. Some part inside of her wanted to help him and tell him that it's okay to ask for help, but they just recently entered civil territory, and she didn't want to risk burning that bridge before it was even fully built. Merlyn waited until Arthur turned the next corner before coming out of her hiding spot and walking back to the classroom.

"I have the forms from Mrs. Isolde, Khilgharra," Merlyn said and placed the stack of papers down on his desk.

"Thank you, Merlyn," Khilgharra said.

"No problem," Merlyn replied and went back to her desk to pack up her stuff. She was in the middle of zipping up her backpack when Khilgharra spoke.

"I'm not one to allow other students to eavesdrop on another student's academic problems," Khilgharra began.

Merlyn froze, and felt the back of her neck and ears start to grow hot. How does he even know?

"But, now that you have heard, what do you plan on doing about it?" Khilgharra finished.

Merlyn turned around to face him and felt her palms get sweaty. Khilgharra was watching her intently, and his head was slightly tilted to the side. For all intents and purposes, Merlyn was
thoroughly confused and had no idea what to say. Her expression must have spoken volumes because Khilgharra broke the silence.

"One cannot run from their destiny, Merlyn," Khilgharra stroked his chin.

"Have you been getting extra fortune cookies in your Chinese takeout, Khilgharra?" Merlyn said and tried very hard not to roll her eyes.

"It comes with being a regular. So, will you help Arthur?" Khilgharra asked.

"I...well...why me?" Merlyn scrambled for an answer, "what does this have to do with me?"

"I thought, what with the way you two talk in class now and the both of you are now speaking so familiarly, that you two were...friends?" Khilgharra gave a slight shrug.

"Well, I mean we are on better speaking terms, but up until recently we didn't even really like each other!" Merlyn said and desperately flapped her arms to help try and prove her point.

"One cannot truly hate, that which makes it whole," Khilgharra read off a small white slip of paper.

"You really should consider other dining options, Khilgharra," Merlyn said, and there was a slight tone of worry in her voice, "all those fortune cookies can't be good for your health."

'Or mine, for that matter.' Merlyn thought idly.

"I would just like you to consider offering your help, that's all," Khilgharra said, "you're a bright student, I might even be tempted to say the brightest this school has had in a long time."

"Can't someone else help him? I mean, anyone else would be fine, right? In fact, I could help him find someone else!" Merlyn rushed out.

Khilgharra had that dragon-like smile on his face and changed the subject, "shall we head to
the lab now?"

Merlyn let out a defeated sigh and nodded. After having spent so much time with Khilgharra already, she was used to their silences when they walked together. But, today, his silence made her feel guilty. It's not that she didn't want to help Arthur, it's just she didn't even know if he wanted her help. Also, it would be admitting that she overheard his supposed 'private' conversation with Khilgharra and that might upset him.

For the rest of Robotics, Merlyn spent most of it in a daze. She was lucky that all they were working on was creating different coding sequences to make their robots perform mundane tasks, like move from circle A to circle B. Elyan didn't seem to notice her lack of focus, and was going on about how much the team hates Essetir Prep. Merlyn nodded along where it was appropriate, but her focus was elsewhere. Even in her daze though, both her and Elyan managed to make their robot start dancing in its circle, which impressed Khilgharra. As their lab time was coming to an end, everyone started to clean up their stations.

"You guys are all dismissed!" Khilgharra announced, "please remember to finish the bridge calculations I sent out to your emails by the end of the week."

Elyan and Merlyn walked out of the lab together, and she thought that the walk home would do her some good and help clear her mind. Elyan said his goodbyes as they passed the gym; the sound of bouncing basketballs and squeaking sneakers reminded her-once again-how much is at stake for Arthur.

"Why do I even have to do anything?" Merlyn mumbled to herself and violently kicked a pebble on the ground.

"He could ask anyone else to help him!" Merlyn said and continued to kick the pebble.

"Mommy! It's the crazy talking lady again!"

"Pay no mind to her, sweetie."

Merlyn wasn't even aware when she got back home and was still in autopilot mode. She greeted Uncle Gaius and went to the kitchen to get started on dinner. Merlyn was still talking to herself as she was chopping celery.
"Why does he have to be so stubborn anyways?" Her knife came down sharply onto the cutting board.

"I beg your pardon, Merlyn?" Uncle Gaius paused at the kitchen threshold as he walked past.

Merlyn waved the knife around in her hand. Completely unaware that Uncle Gaius was standing behind her-looking utterly confused.

"There is no shame in asking for help," She stated as she rapidly chopped the length of celery into bits.

Gaius stood there for a moment and wondered if Merlyn was alright. He watched as she continued to have a discussion with what looked like...thin air.

"But, I guess, why shouldn't I offer him my help?"

Gaius saw Merlyn throw her head back and groan.

"Because, that would mean Khilgharra's fortune cookies are getting to me!"

"What is with that whole 'destiny' crap anyways?" Merlyn loudly groaned, "You'd think a man with a doctorate degree in mechanical engineering would know not to take advice from the fortune cookies he gets with his order of Kung Pao chicken!" Merlynfuriously peeled the carrots next.

Gaius decided to clear his throat. "Merlyn?"

"Huh?" Merlyn spun around to look at Uncle Gaius. "Oh, hey Uncle Gaius.

"You...alright there?" Uncle Gaius asked and raised his eyebrow.

Merlyn nodded and waved him away.
"Yeah, I'm fine. Dinner should be done in an hour."

Uncle Gaius lingered for another second; Merlyn raised her eyebrows and tilted her head to the side. Uncle Gaius shook his head and continued down the hallway to his office. She finished chopping the vegetables and added them to the casserole pan. Merlyn realized she should stop spacing out so much when she nearly burnt her arm as she was putting the vegetable chicken casserole into the oven.

"I'll think about it..." Merlyn mumbled as she set the oven timer, "I can't feel guilty if I didn't even agree to anything."

For the first two days, Merlyn couldn't stop observing Arthur every chance she got. There were instances where she nearly caved and almost confessed she heard his conversation with Khilgharra, but self-preservation won out each time. The hardest part about her constant staring was making sure none of their friends caught on that she was staring at Arthur. One would think, what with Merlyn's intelligence, she'd be able to lie and fool everyone—but no, she can't.

"What are you staring at, Merlyn?" Lance asked and looked across the table in Arthur's direction.

Everyone that heard shifted in their seats to try and see what Lance was looking at. Merlyn immediately panicked and shot up in her seat while gesturing randomly over Arthur's shoulder.

"A BEE!" Merlyn exclaimed, "there-there's a bee!"

Arthur looked confused and glanced over his shoulder. Everyone else tried to spot the imaginary bee and came up empty-handed. Merlyn fake coughed and waved her finger randomly in the air while looking up at the ceiling, and then towards the open cafeteria window.

"Oh look...there it goes..." Merlyn said and awkwardly laughed, then started to drink her apple juice.

That was probably one of her more believable lies. But, it was getting harder trying to lie to
their friends; she started ducking out of lunch early to go and spy on Arthur, who would leave 10 minutes into the start of lunch to go to the library.

Why was she doing this? Merlyn wondered as she was hidden behind one of the bookshelves at the very back of the library. Maybe she's hit a new low in her life, and this was her punishment, Merlyn thought and crouched down onto the floor.

Merlyn watched as Arthur flipped through the various booklets Khilgharra gave him, and she could see the frustration build on his face as he looked at those and the textbook. It was a sight to behold—not Arthur studying, but how hard he was working. Merlyn had to admit she admired that personality trait a lot, and for what it was worth...it showed Merlyn how wrong she was about Arthur. She turned and quickly left the library before she was caught.

After a total of four days of spying on Arthur, and lying to her friends...Merlyn started having nightmares. Now, normally, when she had nightmares, they were usually the generic kind; monsters, things chasing her and she can't seem to run fast enough, ghosts, vampires, etc. Those nightmares don't freak her out because most of the time she was able to figure out that it was a bad dream and wake up from it.

No. The real nightmares for Merlyn were school related; showing up to class with no pants on, and everyone watching her as she was putting pants on, failing a test she wasn't even aware of, or walking into a test she didn't know was that day. Those ones were too realistic, and Merlyn always woke up with a start and could never go back to sleep afterward.

These new nightmares she was having involved Arthur; it would start out with them in class together and then morph so that they were in the gym with the whole school cheering Arthur on as the game was about to start. But, each time, before the referee would do the jump ball, two security guards would come marching in with Principal Annis and they would drag Arthur off the court. Everyone would start booing, and Merlyn found herself running onto the court and asking why he wasn't allowed to play.

The two security guards would respond with. "It's all your fault!"

"How is it my fault!" Merlyn exclaimed while looking around at the team, and everyone on the bleachers.

"All your fault!"
The chanting grew louder as a bunch of faceless people began to converge on her.

"All your fault!"

"All your fault!"

"All your fault!"

Merlyn jolted awake and shouted into the darkness of her room.

"It's not my fault!"

When Merlyn's shout was met with the silence of her room, she knew it had been a nightmare. But, that didn't stop her heart from racing, or the cold sweat that quickly spread over her body. She didn't know what to feel at this point; it's been the same nightmare for the past two -Merlyn glanced at her phone-make that three nights and it was starting to wear her out. The time on her phone said that it was just nearly 4 AM. Merlyn waited to see if sleep would wash over her, but after a few minutes...she was wide awake.

"I swear," Merlyn grumbled and flung her blankets off while sitting up in her bed aggressively, "if this is some weird fortune cookie, mumbo jumbo, black magic, voodoo stuff Khilgharra is pulling on me, I'm going to egg his car."

It took less than a second for Merlyn's laptop to turn on, and she clicked on the Microsoft Word icon. Merlyn was painfully aware that she was not going to go back to sleep anytime soon, so she might as well do something productive.

"If this doesn't stop the nightmares..." Merlyn mumbled, while rapidly typing out explanations to her equations. She'd fill in equations later when she switched her laptop to tablet mode.

By the time she was finished with her document, she saved it and tiptoed quietly downstairs to Uncle Gaius's office. Merlyn waited as the printer booted up and she printed off all the pages of her document. One of the many perks of having an office sized printer, Merlyn thought and gathered up the pages. She hole punched them and put them into a black duotang. Once she finished that, she walked to the kitchen to get the coffee maker started for Uncle Gaius.
"M-M-Morning, Uncle Gaius," Merlyn yawned, as they crossed paths on the stairs. Speak of the devil, Merlyn thought.

"Dear lord, Merlyn, why are you awake so early?" Uncle Gaius glanced down at his watch and then back to Merlyn.

"Had a nightmare. Couldn't go back to sleep," Merlyn rubbed her eyes and stretched, "can I hitch a ride with you to school?"

"Of course, but are you sure you don't want to go back to bed for another hour?" Uncle Gaius said.

Merlyn nodded, "I might sleep in and miss school."

"Alright," Uncle Gaius said, "I'll be leaving in half an hour, so get ready and come down for some breakfast."

Merlyn yawned again and nodded her head. She walked back up to her room and put the black duotang into her backpack. After some awkward fumbling around her room, she grabbed a clean outfit out of her closet and went to the bathroom to get ready. The bright side to all of this was that it was Friday, and she can sleep in tomorrow. Merlyn finished getting ready, and went downstairs with her backpack and sat down at the table with Uncle Gaius.

"Want to tell me what your nightmare was about?" Uncle Gaius looked up at Merlyn over the morning newspaper and took a sip of coffee from his mug.

"Oh, you know...just...stuff..." Merlyn trailed off and took a bite out of the buttered toast in front of her.

Uncle Gaius nodded skeptically. "Right. Stuff."

"Exactly," Merlyn said and took a sip of apple juice.
Camelot High looked very different in the early hours, compared to when Merlyn usually walked to school. Once Uncle Gaius parked, and the two of them went into the school, Merlyn glanced around to see if there were any students here yet.

"You know, this kind of looks like a scene out of a horror movie and the killer is waiting behind one of the corners," Merlyn said.

Uncle Gaius chuckled, "Well, I certainly hope not. I have a lot of paperwork to finish today."

"I never really understood why you come to school so early, Uncle Gaius," Merlyn said.

"I mean, only the teachers come this early, and what are they going to do? Get a paper cut and bleed to death?" Merlyn turned the corner with Uncle Gaius.

"You'd be surprised, Merlyn," Uncle Gaius said, "it's not only the teachers. The sports teams have early practices as well. In fact, the basketball team's practice started 10 minutes ago."

"What? No way?" Merlyn said and glanced down the hallway that would take her straight to the gym.

"Yes. Which is why I come early just as a precaution." Uncle Gaius explained.

"Huh," Merlyn shrugged her shoulders, "interesting."

Merlyn turned back to look at Uncle Gaius. "Can I take a nap in one of the patient beds?"

Uncle Gaius shook his head and smiled. "Of course, take the one by the far wall. I'll wake you up in time for class."

"Thanks, Uncle Gaius!" Merlyn said and nearly flung herself onto the bed.

Uncle Gaius kept his word and woke Merlyn up 15 minutes before her first class, and she thanked him before getting up to head out. It was hard sitting in class with Arthur, and not give him
the duotang she made for him. Merlyn was waiting for the most opportune moment to hand it to him, but there wasn't a good enough time. Also, she kept chickening out because she wasn't sure what to say to him in regards to this duotang.

'Hey, so I heard you're not doing too good in Khilgharra's class, so here's this study guide I made for you because I keep having nightmares involving you and the basketball game.' Merlyn shook her head and let out a loud sigh.

The three guys turned to look at her confused, but she quickly waved her hand and played it off as lack of sleep. The three of them nodded their heads and went back to working on the lab assignment Mr. Creature, er, Mr. Manticore gave them. Near the end of class, Merlyn gave them her lab to copy down the rest of the answers they didn't have. She kept watch as Mr. Manticore shuffled around the class to make sure no one was just copying off another student. Which was stupid, in Merlyn's opinion, the fact that they had to write the answers out in full is still technically learning. But, this was not the time to get into schematics, Merlyn thought. She decided that during lunch, when Arthur goes off to the library, she would follow after him and give him her study guide. That way, Arthur wouldn't be embarrassed, and if he got mad at Merlyn...they would be in the library and she'd at least make an effort to not yell back at him.

"Hurry up," Merlyn said from the corner of her mouth, "he's almost here."

BRRRIINNG

"Why isss, it, that guyss, always mange to finish on time?" Mr. Manticore peered between the four of them with his beady eyes.

"Efficiency?" Merlyn said and leaned back to avoid his spit.

"Hmmph!" Mr. Manticore said and held his hand out for the assignments.

The four of them handed their booklets over and quickly packed up their belongings. Some people (like Vivian and Sophia) watched jealously as they left the classroom and headed down to the cafeteria. Merlyn was hyper aware of Arthur's position in relation to hers, and she kept a watchful eye on him before he disappeared.

"Hey, I'll catch up with you guys later," Arthur said and started to break away from their group.
"Where you goin' man?" Percy said, and pointed over his shoulder, "it's lunch."

"I have to meet with Mrs. Isolde about something, right, Merlyn?" Arthur said and quickly turned to look at her.

Merlyn started and stammered. "U-U-U...yeah! T-The thing...she was mentioning something about it...in class...earlier...to you...and not me. That thing."

Arthur blinked, and Merlyn knew that look on his face meant he was not impressed with her lying skills, but what was he expecting? He took her by surprise! Luckily, Percy and Lance were both too distracted by the idea of food and accepted the terrible excuse.

"Catch you later, bro!" Percy waved, and headed down the hallway.

"See you in gym." Lance fist bumped Arthur, and nudge Merlyn's arm, "let's grab a table before they run out."

Merlyn nodded and glanced over her shoulder at Arthur's retreating form. "Yeah...sure."

The three of them got to the cafeteria first, and Percy went to grab a table which meant Lance was the one getting their lunch. Merlyn looked around and decided it would be easier to ditch just the two of them instead of the whole group once they made it to the lunch room. With that thought in mind, she quickly thought of a lie.

"Oh no!" Merlyn said and her voice sounded a bit robotic, "I forgot my pencil in bio!"

Lance looked at her in confusion as he grabbed two juice boxes from the ice bin.

"What? You left your pencil in bio?"

"Yeah! Exactly! So, I'm just going to go back to grab it." Merlyn said.
"Can't you get it later? It's lunch now, Mr. Creature probably left the classroom," Lance said and grabbed two plates of pizza off the food warmer.

Merlyn internally groaned but decided that she'd already started digging the hole, might as well finish it.

"It's a really lucky pencil, Lance. I just have to go back for it, or else it'll get mad at me and if that happens I'll fail my tests." Merlyn explained...or well, lied.

"Uh..." Lance was extremely confused at this point but slowly nodded his head. "So...no lunch?"

"I'll just grab..." Merlyn scanned the ice bin, "these."

She grabbed a chocolate milk for Arthur and an apple juice for herself.

"And...these sandwiches! See you later, Lance!" Merlyn said, and quickly turned to walk out of the cafeteria.

"Hey! Why are you getting so much food?" Lance called out, "aren't you coming back?"

Merlyn slowed down slightly and turned to answer him. "In case I get lost along the way! I'll have a snack!"

"Get...lost?" Lance said and at this point, it looked like he was wondering if Merlyn was having a mental breakdown.

"Exactly! See ya!" Merlyn said, and nearly sprinted for the doors. She quickly shoved all the food in her arms, into her backpack, and maneuvered around the incoming students.

Merlyn was halfway down the hallway that leads to the library, when she caught sight of Freya, Morgana, and Gwen. She quickly ducked into a tight corner and waited as they passed. Of course, a part of her felt somewhat guilty-sneaking around wasn't honest work by any means. But, it wasn't her place to bring up Arthur's problems to anyone else except him.
The silence of the library was comforting to Merlyn, and she smiled at the librarian as she walked past. Merlyn was hoping that Arthur was in the same spot, and luckily enough he was. She stood in the same spot she's been hiding behind for the past four days and tried to gather her courage up. Unfortunately, her courage was a fish, and it kept slipping out of her grasps. Maybe she should just wait till next week, or another time, Merlyn thought as she slowly backed away.

"God, I'm hopeless," That did it. Merlyn froze at the sound of those words.

Whatever fear, hesitancy, or nervousness she had that was holding her back vanished at those words. She squared her shoulders and walked out from behind her hiding spot. Arthur looked up and appeared startled when he saw Merlyn walking towards him.

"What are you-" Arthur said.

Merlyn immediately took the seat on his right and looked him square in the eye. "There's no shame in asking for help.

Arthur was confused. "What-"

"I overheard your conversation with Khilgharra," Merlyn said.

Arthur paused and wanted to say something, but Merlyn cut him off.

"I know I shouldn't have eavesdropped. I know it's probably none of my business. I know all of that, but I also know that you're too stubborn like a mule to ask for help when you actually need it," Merlyn continued.

Arthur clenched his jaw and he opened his mouth to say something, but Merlyn butt in.

"There's no shame in asking for help," Merlyn said firmly, "if someone offers to help you, it means they care about you. So you should learn to accept it instead of sitting here and drowning in your own misery."
Arthur looked at Merlyn and then let out a sigh while running a hand down his face. He looked up at the ceiling and then over at Merlyn.

"Are you going to let me say a single word? Or are you just going to spend the lunch hour lecturing me?"

"I could probably do that, but more importantly I'm here to help you. So do you want it or not?" Merlyn said while folding her hands in front of her to look more business-like (in theory this should work).

Arthur rolled his eyes, "Something tells me you wouldn't take no for an answer anyways."

Merlyn shook her head. "No. No, I wouldn't."

There was a moment of silence between them. Arthur stared at Merlyn and she stared right back. It was kind of uncomfortable for Merlyn to hold eye contact for so long, but she was too competitive to look away first. Finally, Arthur let out a loud sigh while looking away and slowly slid the booklet he was working on towards her.

"Here..." Arthur mumbled and avoided turning back to look at her.

Merlyn happily took the booklet and began to flip through the contents. She reached into the front pocket of her backpack and pulled out her pencil (the one she 'left' behind) and began to go over Arthur's work. She could tell from how much the booklet was completed, that Arthur was struggling, but, the questions he did manage to answer (or attempt to answer), showed that he had the basics there. He just needs some further explanation, Merlyn thought.

"Look," Arthur began while nervously twisting the ring on his finger, "I know I'm not as smart as you are, but-"

"You don't have to be as smart as me," Merlyn said calmly and tilted her head slightly to look at him.

Arthur blinked and closed his mouth. He continued to watch silently as Merlyn made small tick marks beside certain questions and answers in the booklet.
"Okay," Merlyn said, "from what I can see so far, there's quite a bit we need to go over before the unit test. But, with that said, the questions you did have answers for showed me that you have a good grasp of the basics."

Merlyn scooted her chair closer beside Arthur and turned the booklet so it was in between them. She gestured to the first completed question.

"Let's go over how to do the questions you did make an attempt on, so you have a good understanding of those and afterward I'll help you with the other questions. Okay?"

Arthur glanced over at Merlyn quickly and nodded. "Okay."

"So, with this question here..." Merlyn began.

They spent the first 30 minutes into the lunch hour going over the questions Arthur did know how to do (to some extent), Merlyn corrected certain steps in his solving method, and showed him easier shortcuts.

"If you ever want to be sure of your answer, you can always put the polynomial into your calculator and graph it," Merlyn said, and showed Arthur what she meant.

"Oh...that's smart," Arthur leaned in closer to see.

"Works the opposite way too, so if you know the answers, you'll have an idea of where to begin factoring." Merlyn slid Arthur's calculator back towards him.

Arthur started to punch in the equation and Merlyn had to admit he looked cute when he was very focused on something. Suddenly, Merlyn's stomach voiced its unhappiness at not being fed. Merlyn's face lit up and she awkwardly coughed while looking over at Arthur.

Arthur glanced over at Merlyn and she could see a small smirk tug at his lips, but it disappeared when he saw the time on his phone.
"Sorry, you had to miss lunch." said Arthur awkwardly.

"It's-oh wait!" Merlyn said, and quickly reached into her backpack and pulled out the food she put in there earlier.

"I grabbed us food before coming here," said Merlyn excitedly, "here. I got you chocolate milk like usual and a sandwich."

"Thanks..." said Arthur in a mildly surprised tone, "how did you know?"

"That we would miss lunch?" Merlyn asked and took a sip of her apple juice. "Well, I kind of figured-"

Arthur shook his head. "-no, I meant...how'd you know about the chocolate milk?"

Merlyn shrugged and started to open her sandwich. "I've seen you drink one every day at lunch, didn't think today would be any different."

"You...watch me?" Arthur asked slowly and looked over at Merlyn as he was opening the carton.

"Well, not in a creepy way," Merlyn said, and pulled a face, "but, I notice things."

Arthur didn't say anything after that, and the two of them ate their lunch silently. Merlyn kept glancing over at her backpack and decided it was now or never. She reached in and pulled out the black duotang, then slid it across the table to Arthur.

"Here," said Merlyn.

Arthur raised his eyebrow and glanced down at the duotang, then looked back up at Merlyn.

"It's a study guide I made for you," explained Merlyn, "I wrote out a bunch of equations at the beginning, along with other sample questions, and there's an answer key at the back with details
on how I solved each one...I thought...you know...it'd help."

"You made this for me?" Arthur said in awe.

"Yeah." Merlyn nodded and mumbled the last part to herself, "it was either that or more nightmares."

"What?" Arthur leaned over slightly-not hearing what she said.

"Nothing! Just use that as a study guide. I picked questions that Khilgharra will most likely mimic on the unit test. If worst comes to worst, just memorize the steps needed to solve the question," Merlyn said.

"Okay," Arthur said.

Merlyn chewed on the bottom of her lip and debated on whether or not she should give him her cell phone number. Ah...fuck it, Merlyn thought and reached out quickly for the duotang; she scribbled her phone number in and slid it back to Arthur.

"That's my cell, if you have any questions just call or text me," Merlyn said and began to pack up her stuff. Lunch was coming to an end soon and there was no more time to continue today.

"If you want, we can meet in the library at lunch next week too so I can help you with all of those," Merlyn said while pointing at the fairly substantial stack of math booklets.

"I...yeah," Arthur sighed and ran his fingers through his hair, "if...you're okay with that..."

Merlyn nodded and stood up from her chair. "Okay, that's settled then."

Arthur stood up too and scooped up his papers, then placed them inside his gym bag.

"Hey, Merlyn?"
"Hmm?" Merlyn looked up at him and quickly remembered. "Oh yeah, don't worry, I won't tell anyone about this. Your secret is safe with me."

Arthur had a small smile on his face, but he shook his head. "That's good to know, but what I wanted to say was...thanks."

That took Merlyn by surprise, as evident by her sudden speechlessness. Merlyn blushed, and rubbed the back of her neck. "Oh...uhm...no problem."

An awkward silence settled between the two of them, and Merlyn wasn't sure what to say to dissipate the awkward tension. Arthur coughed, and then smirked.

"So...am I allowed to call you anytime I have a problem?"

Merlyn nodded her head but quickly looked up at Arthur with narrowed eyes. "But, if you prank call me, I'll block your number."

Arthur let out a bark of laughter and ran his hand over his lips. "Fair enough."

The two of them walked out of the library together and headed for the gym since that was their next class. Both of them started to play this weird version of eye tag, where one would look at the person, and then look away if they're caught staring.

"So, what excuse did you give Lance and Perce?" asked Arthur.

"Oh..." Merlyn trailed off and shrugged, "I told Lance that I left my lucky pencil in bio, and had to go rescue it.

Arthur scoffed and smiled. "That's such a crap excuse, Merlyn."

"Excuse me," Merlyn said, and took offense to his comment, "at least my excuse was more believable."
Merlyn lowered her voice and stood up on her tip toes to do her best impression of Arthur.

"I'm Arthur Pendragon, and the best excuse I can come up with is that I have to talk about a thing with a teacher. What thing? Who's thing? Why must you talk about things?" Merlyn rattled off and waved her arms in an exaggerated manner, "I don't know, but I'm Arthur Pendragon, and that excuse makes sense to a clot pole like me."

Arthur threw his head back and laughed, then gently shoved Merlyn to the side.

"I don't sound like that, Merlyn."

Merlyn smiled sarcastically and bumped his hip with her own. "Yes, you do actually."

Arthur snorted and rolled his eyes in exasperation, but the smile on his face was still there nonetheless. Merlyn and Arthur went their separate ways to the locker rooms as the bell rang. She paused when Arthur held out his fist towards her, but quickly bumped it with her own.

"See ya in class," Arthur said and continued down to the boys locker room.

"See ya," said Merlyn in a quiet voice.

There was a moment, during the class switch in gym, when Lance asked Merlyn why she never came back to the lunch room. Merlyn and Arthur both shared a quick look, and she hoped no one, but him, would notice the look of sheer panic on her face. She immediately started in on a large and convoluted story about having to hunt down Mr. Manticore, and running from the staff room, to the main office, to another teacher's classroom just to find him. Everyone looked confused, but it seemed like they bought her excuse; the one person that Merlyn was worried for the most was Morgana, but it seemed like she didn't know much about Mr. Manticore and believed Merlyn's lie. Arthur (the prat) had to look away and silently laugh at her expense. By the end of the day, Merlyn went home with less weight bearing down on her shoulders.

Merlyn was thankful that she didn't have anything planned for the weekend, and spent her Saturday and Sunday at home with Uncle Gaius. Today was Sunday and that meant Uncle Gaius got
his shipment in and so she helped him unload more boxes and cleaned the apartment-so she was productive that's for sure. By the time she finished and had dinner in the oven, it was already around 7 PM.

"I'm going to go take a shower, Uncle Gaius," Merlyn said, "I'm covered in dust and dirt."

"Alright, I'll take the roast out of the oven when the timer goes off." Uncle Gaius waved her off.

After grabbing a new change of PJs from her drawer, she went to the bathroom and turned the water on before she stripped so it could warm up properly. Merlyn considered taking a bath, but dinner would be done soon, and she didn't want to make Uncle Gaius wait for her to eat-so a quick shower it was. Once Merlyn was finished and was wiping the steam off the mirror, she heard her phone going off in her room. She immediately opened the bathroom door and ran down the hallway to her room. She was hoping she would reach it before it went to voicemail.

"Hell-OW!" shouted Merlyn.

Her phone fell from her hand and slid under her bed, as she reached down to grab her foot that she just rammed into the corner of her desk. Merlyn hopped on her left for a little bit, before realizing she had picked up the call. Her hair was still dripping from her shower, and this was becoming a disaster, Merlyn thought.

"Oh, crap!" Merlyn flattened out onto her stomach and reached under her bed to grab her cell phone that was glowing in the darkness.

"Why did you have to fall so far back!" Merlyn huffed and did the stupid finger dance to try and pull her phone into grabbing distance, "my arms are too short for this!"

When Merlyn managed to grab hold of her phone, she let out a 'yes!' and quickly put the phone back to her ear.

"Hello?" Merlyn said in a breathless voice.

Merlyn was met with silence on the other end and she was confused. She moved her phone to see who had called her, and saw that the call was still active, but it was a number she didn't
"Uhm...I'm sorry, I don't have your number in my phone. Do you have the wrong-" It was the sudden burst of laughter that stopped her.

When Merlyn realized why that laugh sounded so familiar, she rolled her eyes.

"Hi, Arthur."

"H-H-Hey," Arthur sounded like he was trying to recover from laughing so hard.

"It wasn't that funny," Merlyn deadpanned.

"My arms are too short for this!" More laughing from his end of the line.

Eventually, Merlyn had to admit that it was funny and started laughing with Arthur. Once the two gained their composure, Merlyn sat down on her bed and started to dry her hair with her towel.

"So, why have you decided to summon me, my lord," said Merlyn with an eye roll.

Arthur chuckled and Merlyn could almost picture his smirk. "I have a question about number 20 in the study guide."

"Okay, shoot." Merlyn put her phone on speaker and continued to towel dry her hair.

"Why did you factor the binomial at the end instead of at the beginning?"

Merlyn could vividly recall that question when she made the booklet and knew the explanation.

"It's just easier to work with that specific binomial as 'one' variable, instead of splitting it up
into two separate ones. If you see that on the test, Khilgharra can't mark you wrong if you factor it in the beginning, but he could take marks off if you forget to simplify the answer at the end. If you want, you can do it the way the textbook shows you." Merlyn said.

"No...I think I like your way better. I just wanted to double check," Arthur said.

Merlyn gasped. "Why, sire, I'm so touched."

Arthur chuckled and Merlyn realized she liked the sound of his laugh. With that realization, she was glad he wasn't actually in the room with her so she could take a moment and enjoy the sound of his voice. She knew that a lot of people usually sounded different on the phone than in person, but she really liked how deep Arthur's voice was on the phone and in person. There was a lull in their conversation as she listened to Arthur write something down.

"Merlyn! Dinner's ready!" Uncle Gaius called upstairs. Merlyn quickly muted her cell.

"Coming!" Merlyn answered and hit the mute button again to turn it off, "Hey, can I answer the rest of your questions tomorrow at lunch?"

"Yeah, sure. Night, Merlyn," Arthur said, but he sounded distracted.

Merlyn wanted to poke fun at Arthur again, but she decided he deserved a proper response from her.

"Night...Arthur," said Merlyn softly and she hung up.

Merlyn got up from her bed and hit the home button on her phone. A sudden idea popped into her head and out of amusement she went back into her phone log. Arthur's number was at the top of the recent calls list and Merlyn hit the little information icon. She scrolled down to the 'add to contacts' button and proceeded to type in Arthur's information.

"Cabbage...head," Merlyn snickered and decided to also add an emoji beside his name.

Monday.
"Where you goin' Princess?" Gwaine asked as Arthur stood up from the lunch table.

"Principal Annis said I forgot to submit some things and need to see her." Arthur lied, and shared a quick look with Merlyn.

"What things?" Morgana asked, and turned away from her conversation with Leon.

Merlyn had to smile smugly at Arthur, but he had to keep his composure.

"Just...things," Arthur said and Merlyn's 'I told you so' face almost made his laugh, "stop asking so many questions you harpy."

Morgana scoffed and turned back towards Leon and continued their conversation. Merlyn waited 5 minutes after Arthur left the lunchroom and slowly stood up.

"Where are you heading off to, Merlyn?" Gwen asked.

"Uh...washroom," Merlyn said and whispered the next part, "I have cramps."

Gwen had that knowing sympathetic look on her face that all girls give to other girls when they hear the universal word 'cramps.'

"Do you need...?" Gwen whispered under her breath.

Merlyn shook her head. "No, I'm good, thanks. See you later."

Merlyn quickly scurried off before anyone else at the table could ask her where she was heading, and made for the library to meet up with Arthur. When she got there, he already had a chair pulled out for her and she sat down to begin their tutoring session.

Tuesday.
"Dude, you're leaving again?" Leon said and gave Arthur a 'what the hell?' look.


Freya let out a horrified gasp; Merlyn had to give Arthur a 'really?' look, and patted Freya's shoulder to quell the shock.

"Ms. Finna told me to go get a new one at lunch." Arthur finished and waved goodbye.

Again, Merlyn waited 5 minutes after Arthur left and quickly stood up from her seat.

"Merlyn?" Freya said. Morgana, Gwaine, and Gwen both looked in Merlyn's direction as well.

"Uncle Gaius said he wanted to see me at lunch...something about a..." Merlyn trailed off.

"Thing?" Morgana supplied with a hint of sarcasm.

Merlyn snapped her finger and nodded. "Exactly! See you in English, Freya!"

**Wednesday.**

"Bro! We're just in the middle of talking strategy!" Elyan exclaimed.

Arthur shrugged apologetically. "Khilgharra asked me to come help him with something in his class."

"What did he exactly ask you to help him with?" Morgana leaned forward on her elbows, and gave Arthur one of her piercing stares.
Arthur shrugged again. "The hell I know. Don't ask questions with no answers, harpy."

"But, why wouldn't he just ask Merlyn?" Elyan asked with a look of confusion and nodded at Merlyn, "she's like his favourite student."

Merlyn froze mid-sip of her apple juice and gulped it down while looking at Arthur. He didn't miss a beat and smirked.

"He could just be sick of her," Arthur shrugged and dramatically frowned at Merlyn, "maybe you're more annoying than you thought, Merlyn."

"As if! You prat!" Merlyn snapped and chucked her apple juice lid at him.

Arthur plucked the lid out of mid-air; he smiled, and turned to walk out of the lunch room. Merlyn knew he didn't mean what he said, and to be honest she was kind of amused by it. But, in order to keep up their ruse, she had to bicker with him as if nothing has changed. She tried to discreetly get up from the table, but Morgana's voice stopped her.

"Going to go somewhere to do something, Merlyn?" Morgana asked in a sing-song voice.

"Uh...yes," Merlyn said slowly, "I have to...grab a textbook...my bio textbook, before class. Bye guys!"

Everyone at the table shared a sceptical look, but they were all amused by how Arthur and Merlyn were acting. They watched as Merlyn quickly left the cafeteria with her backpack in tow.

**Thursday.**

"So...is anyone else going to mention how shady those two have been acting?" Percy spoke the words that have been on everyone's mind since they caught on to the disappearing act Merlyn and Arthur have been pulling on them.

"Ten bucks, says they're in a supply closet making out," said Gwaine with devious look in his eyes, "should we go try and hunt them down?"
"Maybe they actually do have somewhere to be?" Lance said, ever the optimist.

"Arthur's lies I can probably let go," Percy said, "but, Merlyn's lies..."

"Kind of suck." Leon finished and popped a chip into his mouth.

Morgana scoffed. "I'm more interested in Merlyn's lies than my idiot brother's. I've grown up with him, I know when he lies. What's more interesting is how he got Merlyn to lie with him."

"I think Merlyn has a good reason," said Freya quietly.

"We all think that, but aren't we all a little curious as to what that reason is?" Gwen said.

Everyone around the table nodded their heads. There was a moment of silence between all of them, before everyone chimed in at the same time.

"Do they like each other?!"

"I told you they could be making out in a supply closet!" Gwaine said triumphantly.

Merlyn and Arthur sneezed at the same time. Merlyn rubbed her nose and glanced over her shoulder towards the library doors. They've been sitting at the same spot at the back of the library for days now and it seemed like everyone knew not to take their table, or even sit near them for that matter.

"I think our friends are talking about us behind our backs."

"Probably, your lies still suck by the way." said Arthur as he continued to work on the math problem.

"I'm running out of options here!" said Merlyn in a defeated tone. "You are too by the way."
Morgana is totally suspicious of the both of us."

"She's always suspicious of me," Arthur said and erased a line of his work, "you get used to
it after awhile."

Merlyn glanced at Arthur sideways. "Hmm...you do seem like the shifty sort."

Arthur laughed and shook his head. "If anyone is shifty, it's probably you, Merlyn."

"No way! I'm an open book." Merlyn laid herself out on the table and watched as Arthur
worked on the problem.

Merlyn pointed at the line he was working on. "If you do addition here, it'd make X positive
instead of negative, it'll be easier to work with."

Arthur nodded and grabbed his eraser again. "Okay."

"How do you feel for the unit test next week?" Merlyn asked and looked up at Arthur
through her lashes.

"Fuck, I'm trying not to think about it," Arthur groaned and ran a hand down his face, "if I
can't get over 80, Coach is going to bench my ass for the first game, or worse he'll kick me off the
team."

"You seem very stressed." stated Merlyn.

"You think?" Arthur scoffed. Normally, Merlyn would bristle at his tone of voice, but after
spending a couple days with him she's realized that he's kind of like a grumpy teddy bear.

"I'm just saying," Merlyn began in a calm voice, "that you should focus on your smaller
victories for now. Like how you're halfway through this pile of math booklets and you're getting
through the questions at a quicker pace."
"Also, you don't need me to explain as many concepts; you showed a lot of improvement over the week. So, you should look on the brighter side of things. As for the unit test, I have complete faith that you'll get more than 80." Merlyn looked back up at Arthur and blushed when she saw Arthur staring at her.

"Glad to know I have the smart kid's vote," joked Arthur and Merlyn could see an aborted smile on his face.

Merlyn rolled her eyes and smiled. "Obviously, I can't let you tarnish my good reputation now, can I, my lord?"

Arthur laughed. "No, guess you can't."

Friday.

"So guys!" Morgana squeezed her way between Arthur and Merlyn.

"At lunch, we're all going to meet in the Fashion room to work on some campaign stuff."

"But..." Merlyn stopped her sentence when she realized what she was about to say.

"But what, Merlyn?" probed Morgana. The devious look in her eyes worried Merlyn.

"But...nothing," Merlyn smiled and tried to wave it off. She was out of excuses, and she tried to subtly blink at Arthur to see if he had an excuse ready.

"Actually, Merlyn and I-" Arthur said.

"-are surely not both going to be busy, right? I mean, that would just be too...coincidental. Wouldn't you say so? Dearest brother of mine?" Morgana smiled sweetly up at Arthur while fluttering her eyelashes. Never before did Merlyn think mascara could look so deadly.

Arthur glanced sideways at Merlyn and shrugged his shoulders, which Merlyn translated to
'well, we're fucked.'

"Excellent! So I'll see you guys there. Ta!" Morgana abruptly changed directions and walked by down the hallway.

"I told you, your lies are starting to suck." Merlyn shook her head, and tsked.

Arthur rolled his eyes. "They don't suck, you're just a bad wingwoman."

"Am not!"

"Are too."

"Am not!"

"Are too."

"Clot pole."

"Short stack."

"I'm not that short. You're just too tall!"

"Merlyn, I could use you as an arm rest. See?" Arthur demonstrated his statement and put his arm on the top of her head. Just to further emphasize his point, Arthur leaned down slightly to her level.

"Perfect height ratio," said Arthur with a smirk.

"Yeah?" Merlyn grumbled while scowling up at him, "I'm also the right height to kick you in the balls too, should we try that as well?"
"Man, short people are so temperamental," Arthur said and moved his arm down to her shoulders and lead her in the direction of their next class.

"Apparently, it's because we're closer to hell. So you should be aware of that," offered Merlyn.

At that, the two of them had to laugh and continued through the mass of students. Merlyn glanced up at Arthur and wondered how to bring up the topic that was currently in her mind. He noticed her staring and looked down at her and waited for her to say something.

"Want to come to over after school and I'll tutor you then?" Merlyn said. Might as well get to the point.

"Uh...are you sure that's okay?" asked Arthur and pulled Merlyn into his side so they could squeeze past a large group of students standing in the middle of the hallway.

Merlyn nodded. "Yeah, it's not like we're going to get any work done at lunch now. Do you have practice after school?"

Arthur shook his head. "Had it this morning. You had Robotics with Elyan during homeroom block right?"

"Yup! Elyan and I got to race mini cars we built," Merlyn said excitedly, "I totally kicked his ass, if you didn't know."

"Heh," Arthur grinned, "I'll be sure to bug him about that at lunch."

"So after school then?" said Merlyn as they headed into Biology.

"Yeah, if you're cool with it," Arthur said.

Once they entered the classroom, Merlyn became aware of Arthur's arm still around her
shoulders, and it seemed like he noticed too. The two of them automatically moved away from each other and headed for their bench at the back corner. Merlyn could literally feel the daggers that Vivian and Sophia were shooting her way and she had to try very hard to not make eye contact with them.

"Hey guys!" Percy came in and fist bumped Merlyn and Arthur.

"Where's Lance?" Merlyn asked and glanced at the doorway.

"He's in the hallway making kissy faces with Gwen," Percy started to over-exaggerate and pretended he was making out with someone.

Arthur must have caught sight of Lance walking in, because he immediately joined in with Percy. Lance strolled in with a love-struck expression on his face, but right when he saw their section he rolled his eyes at Percy and Arthur. Merlyn giggled and waved in his direction.

"Ah, the King of Romance graces us with his presence!" joked Arthur.

"The man kisses like he's starved of air," Percy said with an exaggerated flourish of his arms.

"That's so poetic, Percy," Merlyn said while clutching her heart, "it's like watching a Shakespeare play."

"Ha. Ha. Ha." said Lance, his voice dripping with sarcasm and put his textbook and binder down, "you guys are the funniest people I've ever met."

Merlyn nodded with a smile on her face. "We know."

"Don't let Gwaine hear you say that," Arthur said, "you might break him."

"Speaking of breaks, where are you going to go today for the lunch break?" Lance asked innocently.
Merlyn subtly nudge Arthur's knee with her own, 'I told you so' Merlyn hoped that translated well with one nudge. Arthur didn't miss a beat and groaned.

"Aren't we all looped into helping the harpy with her and Gwen's campaign?"

"Oh, so you guys are going to be there?" said Lance. He straddled his seat, like Percy was doing, and put his elbow on their bench to lean on.

"Of course, why wouldn't we be there?" Merlyn played dumb and she swore Arthur looked mildly impressed when she didn't miss a beat either.

Percy shrugged and played dumb as well. "Dunno, we were all just thinking you both would pull a Harry Houdini and just whoosh."

Percy wiggled his fingers and Merlyn laughed. Before they could keep giving Merlyn and Arthur crap for ditching them every lunch hour this week Mr. Manticore stood up from his desk, and started today's lesson. Lance and Percy both turned back around in their seats and opened up their binders.

"See, I can totally be a wingwoman." Merlyn said loud enough for only Arthur to hear.

"Yeah, sure there. You keep thinking that, Merlyn." whispered Arthur.

At lunch time the whole group went to the cafeteria to grab food, and afterwards headed to the Fashion/Art classroom. Merlyn had never really spent much time on this side of the school, and was amazed that the classroom was just as big as the Robotics Lab. Instead of walls of tools and machinery, the entire room was covered in fabrics and paint. There were giant rolls of paper, all of which were of varying colors, on one side of the wall, stacks of canvas organized by size along another, with easels propped up beside them. Dozens of mannequins were set up around the room, some were bare, some had half finished designs on them, and others had fully completed projects. At the very back there were several sewing machines stationed side by side with large drapes of fabric thrown haphazardly over a few.

Right when they settled into the large tables located right in the center of the room, Morgana began to delegate tasks for everyone to do. The boys were in charge of folding all of the campaign leaflets, and the girls were in charge of writing out the campaign slogan on the posters in sharpie. Gwen and Freya scurried off to get all the supplies they needed and Morgana went to print off the
leaflets the boys will soon be charge of folding.

A thought occurred to Merlyn and she quickly shuffled over to Arthur and whispered.

"Are we going to tell Morgana?"

"Tell her what?" Arthur whispered back and leaned down closer to her.

Merlyn rolled her eyes and tapped her foot impatiently. "Won't she be curious why you aren't driving her home after school?"

"No? Because she normally rides with Leon and goes to his house after school?" explained Arthur with a confused look on his face.

Merlyn blinked and took a step back. "Oh."

"Thanks for thinking ahead though," laughed Arthur and he quickly pinched her nose.

Merlyn scrunched up her face, and scowled at Arthur. He looked down at her with an amused expression; Merlyn quickly turned and walked away from him towards Freya and Gwen.

"Is this the dress you're working on right now, Gwen?" asked Freya as she stood in front of a lilac colored dress that looked 3/4 completed.

"Yeah, it's for my Halloween design show. My theme is based off of the medieval ages." Gwen said, and pulled out a sketch journal from her bag.

"Design show?" Merlyn said and tilted her head sideways so she could see the sketches.

A look of realization crossed Gwen's face, "Oh right! I never did tell you did I, Merlyn?"
Merlyn slowly shook her head, "No...tell me what?"

"I'm part of the Fashion Club," Gwen explained and gestured around the room.

"And Art Club," Freya added, "oh! And the Photography Club."

"She's also on the Yearbook Committee," Morgana threw in as she walked past them with a large stack of papers in her arms.

"Wow..." Merlyn whistled, "and you're running for VP too? That's so impressive, Gwen."

Gwen's mocha colored skin turned a lovely shade of pink, "Oh stop it guys! I just like to help out wherever I can."

Merlyn decided to spare Gwen from the sudden spotlight and gestured back down at the sketches, "So, the design show?"

Gwen immediately straightened and beamed proudly, "Yeah, it's going to be on the weekend of Halloween. It's just a small showcase show, nothing to serious. The big one is in Christmas, so I'll want all of you guys there for it." Gwen motioned for Lance to come over and pointed down at one of the sketches.

"It looks like none of us will be in town for Halloween this year," said Freya with a thoughtful look on her face.

Merlyn turned towards Freya with an incredulous look.

"What? Why? When was this mentioned?" Merlyn also wanted to add: Why was she not informed of this?

"We discussed it at lunch on Wednesday," Morgana explained, "oh but, you and Arthur both had things to do."
"Speaking of which," Gwaine butted into the conversation, "did those things involve a supply closet by any chance?"

Merlyn furrowed her eyebrows and frowned slightly. "...supply closet?"

Gwaine sighed. "Damn it. So close."

"Anyways!" Gwen continued and gave Gwaine a very pointed look while shooing him and Lance away, "we're all doing something that weekend. I have my show, Morgana has a debate to go to, and Freya has plans at the theater."

"So...the guys?" said Merlyn while jabbing her thumb over her shoulder.

"Lance and Elyan are driving out with me so they can help with set up. Leon has never missed one of Morgana's debates. Gwaine and Percy have this tradition where they go ice fishing with Percy's father on Halloween," explained Gwen.

"So...realistically...." Merlyn began, but stopped when Morgana quickly rushed back up to them.

Morgana and Gwen broke off into a different tangent, and it looked like they forgot what the original conversation topic was. Merlyn leaned over to Freya and whispered.

"So, I'm guessing Will's going to the theater with you?"

Freya blushed and nodded her head shyly. "I-I asked him to go, the theater is having a large Broadway showcase and...would you like to go as well? I could-"

"Of course not, Freya, you and Will love this stuff. There's a reason why you asked him first and not me," said Merlyn as she took out her pencil and a ruler. Then she pulled one of the large pieces of poster paper towards her and carefully measured out the distance on the poster paper to fit the slogan Morgana showed them earlier.

"You're not upset?" asked Freya.
"I'd be upset if you guys didn't go, because somehow you think you're trying to spare my feelings, if that's what you're asking," Merlyn grinned and winked at Freya, "Hey, does this look crooked to you?" Merlyn leaned back in her seat and squinted at the poster paper.

"I think the left side is a bit higher," Freya said, "so then what are you going to do on Halloween?"

"Dammit, you're right," Merlyn sighed, and started to eraser the line, "I'll probably hand out candy and take a nap."

"You know, I think Ar-" Freya began, but was cut off by Morgana's loud shriek.

"WHY ARE YOU GUYS FOLDING THE LEAFLETS BACKWARDS!"

All the looks of absolute fear on all the guys faces made Merlyn laugh, along with Gwen and Freya. So for the rest of the lunch hour, they all spent it making things for Morgana and Gwen's campaign. Merlyn's hand felt extremely cramped by the end of lunch, and was glad they had gym, because she didn't think she could take notes after all the writing and drawing she did.

The rest of the day went by smoothly (minus the hard time Vivian and Sophia gave Merlyn in gym), and once the last bell rang, everyone got up and nearly sprinted for door. Merlyn had seen Uncle Gaius in the hallway on her way to her last class, and he told her that he was going to be staying late in his office today. She understood, and told him that Arthur was going to be coming over to their apartment to study. Merlyn could vividly recall the look of surprise that crossed Uncle Gaius's face, but once that passed, all he said to Merlyn was: "I hope you both will be on your best behaviours."

"So I'll just meet you at my place," Merlyn said, and got up from her seat, "you got the address I texted you right?"

Arthur turned around and looked at Merlyn as if she just spoke another language.

"Uh...how are you getting there, Merlyn?" asked Arthur.
"...by walking?" answered Merlyn slowly as if Arthur was being slow-witted.

Arthur scoffed and shook his head while mumbling under his breath. "And you're supposed to be the smart one."

"Hey!" exclaimed Merlyn indignantly.

"I'm going to drive us," Arthur said and guided Merlyn out the door since they were the last ones to leave the classroom.

"Oh, it's fine I can-" Merlyn started, but stopped when Arthur gave her a 'shut up, Merlyn' look.

They both walked out of the classroom, and headed for the student parking lot. Before that though, Arthur had to stop by the gym to speak with Coach Caerleon, and grab the game book. Merlyn waited for Arthur outside of the gym, and saw that the school was practically deserted.

"Ready?" Arthur's voice snapped Merlyn out of her daze and she nodded.

"Is that the game book?" asked Merlyn as they headed for the parking lot.

"Yeah, Coach wants me to look over the plays before next week." answered Arthur as he reached into his sweat pants and pulled out his car keys.

"Oh," Merlyn said, and walked over to the passenger side door, "so...does he know?"

Arthur didn't say anything at first and just nodded his head. When they both got in his car he responded.

"He wasn't happy with me at first. But he told me that he'd be even more unhappy with me if I didn't put the same effort I do into basketball, into my studies." Arthur let out a sigh and rubbed his face with both hands.
Merlyn decided that she should try and change the topic now. She looked around at the interior of his car.

"This is a nice car by the way."

Arthur paused before putting the key into the ignition and sighed. "Thanks...my dad got it for me."

Merlyn nodded and shut her mouth. Right, Arthur and Morgana are technically rich kids, Merlyn thought as she buckled herself in. The interior of the car was just as nice as the exterior, all black leather with red decals thrown in. She ran her hands over the dashboard and fiddled with some of the knobs she saw. Arthur started his car and began to reverse out of the parking space. Merlyn decided to entertain herself with trying to find a station to listen to on his satellite radio.

"Stop changing channels, Merlyn," Arthur said in exasperation, "just pick one and stay on it."

"But, you have *satellite radio*!" exclaimed Merlyn; her eyes were filled with glee, and she was leaning forward in her seat, "how can I just pick one?"

Arthur rolled his eyes, but didn't say anything else as she kept exploring through each station. Merlyn glanced up from the radio to point out the directions to the apartment.

"It must be nice to have your own car," Merlyn said, and sat back in the comfy, leather seat.

Arthur shifted in his seat and remained silent. Merlyn looked over and saw how uncomfortable he was and realized that maybe his family's wealth was something of a touchy subject for him.

Merlyn cleared her throat and lightly punched his arm. "You know I don't care right? I'm just making a statement."

Arthur glanced sideways at her, and raised his eyebrow, but didn't say anything. Merlyn told Arthur to slow down as they approached the apartment, and he pulled up onto the driveway. She unbuckled and got out of his car.
"You know," Arthur began and locked his car, "you live pretty close by Gwaine."

"Really?" Merlyn asked and gestured towards the front porch.

Arthur nodded and pointed down the road. "Yeah, he lives maybe three blocks down from here."

"How come he drives to school then?" Merlyn asked and unlocked the front door, "I thought he drove because he lived pretty far away. Didn't Percy mention something about his car sounding like an angry bull?"

Arthur smirked and kicked off his runners. "I told you before didn't I? He sleeps like a dead log. Coach gives him crap all the time for coming to practice five minutes late."

"Let me guess...you're one of those disgusting morning people..." Merlyn pulled a face and started to walk up the stairs to the main floor.

Arthur chuckled. "Early bird gets the worm, Merlyn."

Merlyn made a gagging noise and shook her head. Once they reached the top of the stairs, she opened the door and gestured for Arthur to go through first. Merlyn could see Arthur glancing around the main floor.

"Living room. Kitchen. To the right down the hallway is Uncle Gaius's office. Upstairs is where the bathroom and bedrooms are."

Arthur glanced down at Merlyn. "You'd make a great tour guide...you know that?"

"Ha. Ha." Merlyn rolled her eyes and smiled, "Come on, we can work in my room," she pointed up the stairs.

"Do you have no sense of self-preservation, Merlyn?" Arthur asked with exasperation at the
Merlyn furrowed her eyebrows and squinted her eyes slightly. "What do you mean?"

"I'm a guy, short stack," Arthur said in a tone like he was speaking with a child.

"So?" Merlyn shrugged, "your point is, prat?"

"Do you just casually invite guys up into your room when no one is around?" Arthur asked in disbelief.

Merlyn rolled her eyes and mouthed the word 'dramatic' up towards the ceiling.

"I'm not being dramatic!"

Merlyn sighed and turned to look at Arthur. "To answer your question, no, I don't randomly invite guys up to my room. I'm inviting you, because I trust you. Now, are we going or not?"

"I-well," Arthur was at a loss for words and followed Merlyn up the stairs quietly, then down the hallway.

"This is my room," Merlyn said and tossed her backpack onto her bed.

"Looks different than Morgana's room," said Arthur as he scanned the room with his eyes.

Merlyn realized, at that moment, maybe Arthur had a point about inviting someone into her room at random. The books she normally keeps on her desk were scattered around haphazardly and some of them wouldn't necessarily be a problem, if the other ones weren't sappy romance novels...sappy erotic romance novels. The only other person to have seen them were Freya and it didn't surprise her because she already had those copies at home.

"What does her-" Merlyn said quickly in an attempt to distract Arthur and give her a chance to discreetly collect her books off her desk.
"-cool you have a fire escape!" Arthur walked over to Merlyn's window and opened it. Oh thank god, Merlyn thought and nearly ran to her desk.

"It's not that cool, clot pole." Merlyn started to casually collect her books, making it look like she was just clearing space for them to work on. But her heart was still beating quickly and her ears were getting warmer with each book title came into view, as she stacked them one on top of the other

"What do you mean? Have you tried going out on it?" Arthur was already putting one of his legs out of the window.

"No. And I don't plan on it. It's called a fire escape for a reason. The last time I checked, there's no fire to escape from." said Merlyn sarcastically with an eye roll. Okay that's the last one, Merlyn thought and quickly started to walk over to her closet where she could dump them for the time being.

"Don't be like tha-SHIT! MERLYN!" shouted Arthur and it was followed by a loud thump.

Merlyn's head snapped towards the window; all her books suddenly hit the floor with quiet thuds as she dropped them in surprise, and she immediately ran over to the window.

"ARTHUR!" Merlyn cried out and stuck her head out of the window to see where he was.

Shock and then annoyance flooded through her. She glared down at a laughing Arthur who was sitting on metal grate landing and slammed the window down with enough force to rattle the frame.

"I HOPE YOU FALL TO YOUR DEATH! YOU TOAD!" shouted Merlyn as she stomped back to her fallen pile of books.

Arthur came back in through her window laughing and ducked when Merlyn chucked one of her books at his head. She made sure it was a murder mystery one and not one of the sappy erotica books.

"Oh come on, that was funny," laughed Arthur as he gently tossed the book back to her.
"So funny," drawled Merlyn as she caught the book and brought them all to her closet and put them on the floor in the corner.

"Now, sit and continue with your work, or I'll push you over the fire escape myself." Merlyn pointed sharply at her desk chair and stomped over to her bed.

"Feels good to give orders, doesn't it, Merlyn?" Arthur asked and sat down in her desk chair.

Merlyn turned around and pinched her fingers together slightly with a smile on her face. "A bit."

Once the scene settled out, the two of them worked together quietly on their homework. Merlyn sat on her bed with her back against the wall as she read the next few scenes of Hamlet out loud for Arthur, since Ms. Finna assigned it to their class. Arthur listened and worked on the math problems in the current booklet. Occasionally he would open Merlyn's study guide to the back to look at the answer key for an explanation to one of the questions he was working on. Merlyn mentioned how he could just as easily ask her for help since she's sitting right here, but his response was that he wanted to be able to try some on his own.

"You won't be able to sit with me through the test..." Arthur trailed off as he continued to read over the explanation, "so as much as I want to ask you. I have to try my best."

It took Merlyn off guard. Normally when she helped tutor younger years back in Ealdor, the kids always bombarded her with question after question. She's even mentioned it to them before that she wouldn't be able to write the test for them and they would need to not only be able to understand it, but also be able to do it by themselves. I was wrong, Merlyn idly thought as she glanced at Arthur again from the corner of her eye. There's more to him than just being an annoying clot pole, Merlyn decided.

She has noticed (on more than one occasion) that Arthur had some interesting quirks about him. Like how his stress can be gauged by the messiness of his hair (he ran his hands through it a lot), or how he scowls at the questions as if he could bully them into making sense. When he starts to twist his ring though, that's when Merlyn knows he's getting nervous.

*It was nice*, Merlyn thought as she turned to the next page. Sitting here quietly with Arthur and not actually fighting with him.
"What are you smiling about?" Merlyn looked over at Arthur and saw him leaning on his arm while staring at her.

"I just thought it was kind of nice...us not arguing." Merlyn said and gestured between them.

Arthur smirked and nodded his head. "Yeah...kind of."

The time on her phone caught Merlyn's attention and she quickly excused herself. She went downstairs to the kitchen and opened the freezer. It was a good thing she pre-made meals so she didn't always have to cook from scratch, Merlyn thought while opening the tray of lasagna. Merlyn hit the pre-heat button on the oven and waited for it to warm up. While she waited she went and grabbed two bottles of water out of the fridge for herself and Arthur.

Will: Hey, you sure you don't want to come to the theater with us? Halloween is a couple weeks away and I think Freya might be able to get another ticket.                   Sent: 6:30 PM

Merlyn typed out a reply as she took a sip from her water bottle. Honestly, sometimes Will's so oblivious, Merlyn thought.

Yeah. I won't appreciate it as much as you guys would. Have fun!                     Sent: 6:30 PM

Once the oven was pre-heated, Merlyn put the lasagna in and started the timer. As she was heading back upstairs the front door opened and Uncle Gaius walked in.

"Hi, Uncle Gaius," Merlyn said and waved.

"Hi, Merlyn," Uncle Gaius shrugged off his coat and hung it on the coat rack beside the door, "how is the studying coming along?"

"Good. I have dinner in the oven, should be done a little white." said Merlyn and she gestured over her shoulder into the kitchen.
"Will Arthur be joining us?" asked Uncle Gaius as he headed towards his office.

Merlyn shrugged. "I'll ask and see."

"Alright, I'll see you in a little while then, I'll just be in my office." Uncle Gaius smiled and turned his back.

Merlyn went back upstairs and into her room. She noticed that Arthur was still in her desk chair, but he was fiddling with her alarm clock.

"Don't push random buttons. If I'm late for school because of you I'll poke your eyes out," said Merlyn from the doorway. "Here. Catch."

The water bottle flew in an arc towards Arthur and he caught it with one hand.

"Thanks. I didn't know you liked the Excaliburs?" Arthur completely ignored her threat and pointed down at her alarm clock.

Merlyn nodded. "Yeah, they're the top team in the association right now."

"Who's your favorite?" asked Arthur.

"Oswald. He's auto-" Merlyn started.

"-matic with his free throws, the man makes 85% of them from the line." Arthur finished with a smile.

"Do you like the Excaliburs too?" Merlyn sat back down on her bed and leaned against the wall with her legs stretched out in front of her.

Merlyn could see the look on Arthur's face change slightly as he ran his fingers over the
Excaliburs logo on the front of the alarm. It looked like there was so many thoughts going on inside of Arthur's mind, but all he responded with was a small answer.

"Yeah...I do."

'Time to change the topic.'

"Want to stay for dinner?" Merlyn asked.

Arthur looked up and blinked slowly at Merlyn. "Uh...nah it's e-"

"I made lasagna. Mind you, it's one I made and froze, but it'll still be homemade," Merlyn said in an attempt to convince Arthur to stay.

"Are you sure? Does Gaius..." Arthur trailed off when he saw Merlyn shake her head to say 'no'.

"Then it's settled, you're staying for dinner. How many questions do you have left in this booklet?" Merlyn scooted over towards him, and nodded at the booklet on her desk.

"I still have two pages," Arthur said, and flipped them over for Merlyn to see, "but I don't get how to solve for the points," He looked over at her, "Are you sure-"

"Yes, you clot pole, now stop asking. Oh okay, so on the formula sheet, there's that slope formula. For this question," Merlyn tilted her head sideways to read the question, "you have to actually plot the point they give you first..."

Merlyn helped Arthur finish the last of that booklet, and once they finished she heard the oven timer go off. She hopped off her bed and gestured for Arthur to follow her. She watched as he packed up his things, and lifted his duffle bag onto his shoulder. The two of them walked downstairs together and headed into the kitchen. Merlyn watched as Arthur awkwardly stood at the entrance of the kitchen and twisted the ring on his finger. She rolled her eyes and nodded at one of the chairs.

"Have a seat, your majesty." Arthur rolled his eyes and smirked at Merlyn's comment.
"You know," Arthur began as he took a seat in the chair beside the one Merlyn normally sits at, "I thought the name calling would stop by now."

Merlyn laughed as she put on her oven mitts. "What on earth gave you that idea?"

Arthur over-dramatically sighed and shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know, thought that since we're friends now, you'd lay off on all the names."

For some odd reason, Merlyn felt a sudden rush of happiness go through her at the mention of the word 'friends.' But, she kept her composure as she took the lasagna tray out of the oven, and moved it onto the cooling rack.

Merlyn turned to smirk slightly at Arthur. "I don't think we'd be friends, if I didn't call you names."

Arthur scoffed and smiled. "So what, you calling me all those names is the reason why we can be friends?"

Merlyn nodded her head. "Exactly. I mean, who else will keep that fat head of yours in check? Plus, like I said before, I'm a good wing woman. So really, you're getting quite the deal here."

"Ha!" Arthur threw his head back and laughed. "As if!"

"Just you wait and see, when the time comes and you need me to back you up I'll totally come through." Merlyn grabbed three plates from the dish cabinet.

"Okay there, Merlyn," Arthur said with a smile, "if that time ever comes then God save us all."

"Mer-hello there, Arthur," Uncle Gaius said as he walked into the kitchen.

"Hi Gaius," Arthur said quickly and stood up from his seat, "thank you for having me over."
"Please sit my boy, no need to get up," Gaius gently patted Arthur's shoulder as he walked past and smiled at him, "Merlyn, do you happen to remember where I put the old order forms?"

"The blue ones for the medical supplies that get shipped here? Or the orange ones for the ones that go to Principal Annis to submit?" Merlyn asked as she cut into the lasagna and put a piece onto a plate.

"The blue ones, but if you happen to know where the orange ones are as well I'd be glad to hear it." Uncle Gaius opened the fridge to grab a bottle of water.

"They should be in the third filing cabinet, second drawer from the bottom, in the far corner of your office. Will you be eating with us or in your office?" asked Merlyn as she put a plate down in front of Arthur and held Uncle Gaius's plate in her hand.

"I'll eat with you both, just give me five minutes. Feel free to start without me," Uncle Gaius put his bottle of water down and left the kitchen quickly.

Merlyn grabbed three forks and sat down beside Arthur. She passed him a fork and then proceeded to take a bite out of her piece. The two of them quietly ate and the only thing that made a sound was their forks hitting the plate. At one point she thought maybe she should make conversation, in case Arthur felt awkward sitting in silence. But with a quick glance in his direction she saw how relaxed he looked.

"You're a good cook," Arthur broke the silence first.

Merlyn blushed and wiped her mouth, "thanks."

"Gaius is lucky to have someone at home to cook for him," stated Arthur as he took another bite out of the lasagna.

"Doesn't anyone-" Merlyn abruptly stopped and widened her eyes when she realized what she was going to say.

Arthur looked up at her and smiled as he shook his head. "Nah, Morg can't cook to save her
Merlyn already knew about their family situation and the problem she was faced with now is how to talk about it. Could she even talk about it? Isn't there some sort of principle that prevents her from bringing stuff like that up? Arthur glanced up at Merlyn again when he noticed the sudden lull in their conversation.

"Did the harpy not tell you about our family background?"

"Uh...well yeah the har-Morgana!" Merlyn quickly corrected herself and glared at Arthur, who was smirking, "-she did...but how...I'm not sure..." Merlyn stammered the last part feebly.

Arthur's smirk was still on his face as he continued to chew his food and watched Merlyn with amusement.

"You could help you know," Merlyn scowled, "I'm trying not to be awkward here."

Arthur's shoulders shook with silent laughter as he swallowed. "Nah, you're doing just fine."

Merlyn rolled her eyes and shook her head. She opened her mouth to give him a snarky reply, but Uncle Gaius chose that moment to come back into the kitchen.

"I'm famished," Uncle Gaius sighed and took a seat in his chair opposite of them.

After that the three of them just made idle conversation until they finished dinner. Arthur offered to help with the dishes, but Uncle Gaius adamantly refused and told Arthur to go home and get some rest.

"I'll walk you out," Merlyn said and headed to the door with Arthur.

The two of them walked down the stairs to the foyer and put their shoes on. Once they stepped outside Merlyn left the door slightly ajar so she could come back in. Arthur readjusted his duffle bag and headed down the porch steps.
"Thanks again..." Arthur started and rubbed the back of his neck. "you honestly didn't have to..."

Merlyn looked up at him and furrowed her eyebrows when Arthur abruptly stopped talking. "Didn't have to what?"

"All of this," Arthur waved at his duffle bag and back towards her house, "tutoring me, asking me to stay for dinner, especially not since I was such-"

"A clot pole?" Merlyn offered with a smile and bumped her hip against his. "You said so yourself right?" Merlyn crossed her arms over her chest when a small breeze blew by, "we're friends. Isn't this what friends do for each other?"

"Even though I'm a...clot pole," Arthur said the word with so much sarcasm that Merlyn giggled a bit. "Especially because of that," said Merlyn with a grin, "if you want you can just come over tomorrow and I'll help tutor you some more?"

Arthur ran a hand down his face and sighed, "I should. Shouldn't I?"

"But?" added Merlyn with an eyebrow raised.

"I'm going paintballing with Morgana, Gwen, and the guys tomorrow."

Merlyn nodded understandingly. "Oh okay."

"It's against Cenred and his team. He's the basketball captain for Essetir Prep," Arthur had a
disgusted look on his face and Merlyn knew that, even though he was stressed about not being able to play in the game, he must also have a deep-seated hatred for Essetir Prep, "it's a yearly thing we do before the first game of the season."

"I see," Merlyn said, "well you can stop by afterwards if you want. I'll be home all weekend."

Arthur looked down at Merlyn with a smile on his face, "You're such a good little nerd."

Merlyn snorted and bowed her head slightly, "Thanks for that compliment, sire."

Arthur laughed and held out his fist towards Merlyn. Again, just to humour him, Merlyn bumped it with her own.

"See ya," Arthur unlocked his car and tossed his duffle bag into the back while he was getting into the driver's seat, "hey, actually...want to come tomorrow?"

It was Merlyn's turn to scoff. "No thank you! The only thing I'm good at in paintball is running for my life."

"Oh, so no different than you are now?" Arthur joked. But it was the innocent look he tried to give Merlyn that made her laugh.

"Have fun shooting each other tomorrow!" Merlyn called over her shoulder and skipped up her porch steps. She heard Arthur's muffled laughter and a second later his engine starting up.

'Friends.' Merlyn thought as she locked the door...who would have guessed?
"Who the hell..." Merlyn growled from under her pillows and blankets. She reached out blindly and grabbed her cell phone. She rolled onto her side so that her other hand could disconnect the charging cable.

"Hello?" Merlyn said into the phone, a bit too forcefully, but whoever had the nerve to wake her up should have been prepared for it.

"Thank god you picked up, Merlyn!" Morgana's voice was filled with relief.

"Morgana?" Merlyn pushed up onto her elbows and rubbed the sleep from her eyes, "what's the matter?"

"Gwaine's going to come pick you up in ten minutes. Wear something comfortable to run in and no bright colors," Merlyn could hear shuffling in the background and she thinks she heard Morgana shout something along the lines of 'Gwaine's closer to her. Do you know how stupid it would be for us to go the opposite direction to get her?' at someone.

Merlyn sighed and continued to rub her eyes. "Morgana, I'm sorry, but could you please fill me in on what's going on? I'm so con-"

"Eight minutes, Merlyn! Quick steps now! See you in a bit. Ta!" The line disconnected at that moment and Merlyn was left in a daze.

"10 o'clock..." Merlyn groaned and started to count out how many hours of sleep she got, and considering how she didn't get to bed until almost 4 AM last night...it wasn't much.

"I need new friends," grumbled Merlyn as she climbed out of bed and went to the washroom to brush her teeth.

Merlyn decided to wear a pair of black leggings and a grey long-sleeved shirt. Morgana wasn't exactly specific on why she couldn't wear bright colors, but Merlyn decided it was best to just obey her orders than have Morgana throw a fit. She grabbed her wallet and shoved it into her side
"Morning, Uncle Gaius," Merlyn yawned and opened the freezer to grab two frozen waffles.

"You're up early, Merlyn," Uncle Gaius observed and refilled his coffee cup, "you normally sleep in late on Saturdays."

"I wish I could," Merlyn cradled her head in her hands and watched sullenly as her waffles were being toasted in the toaster, "Morgana just called me and said a bunch of confusing things, and now Gwaine apparently is picking me up in...2 minutes, and I didn't even get the chance to ask how he even knows where I live, and I'm not suppose to wear bright colors...and it's Saturday!"

Uncle Gaius chuckled and was in the process of heading out of the kitchen. "Well, my dear girl, I hope you have fun with your friends today."

BZZZT

BZZZT

BZZZT

"Hi, Gwaine," Merlyn said and grabbed her waffles as they popped up.

"Hi, sweetheart!" said Gwaine with enthusiasm, "I'm on the driveway!"

"Kay coming," said Merlyn as she took a bite out of her waffle; she hit the end call button and headed for the front door.

"BYE, UNCLE GAIUS!" shouted Merlyn as she opened the front door. She heard a muffled response and took that as his reply.

Merlyn pulled on her runners and locked the door behind her. Before she turned the corner,
she could hear how loud Gwaine’s car was. Not only did his engine sound like an unhappy monster (Percy was right), but Gwaine had his music blasting through his open windows. The car he drove was an old school blue mustang and that was all Merlyn could really tell from her limited knowledge about cars. Right when Gwaine saw her he grinned and started to wave. As cranky as Merlyn was from being woken up early (early for her) she had to admit that Gwaine’s enthusiasm to see her always brightened up her mood.

"Morning, Gwaine," greeted Merlyn.

"Mornin'" Gwaine winked and immediately put his car into reverse. He turned the wheel forcefully and the front of the car flipped around to face the road. He revved his engine and the beast shot forward.

Merlyn quietly settled into her seat and leaned against the seatbelt strap.

"So...where are we going?" asked Merlyn.

Gwaine turned to grin at her, "Paintballing."

"What." Merlyn’s expression dropped and she sat up in her seat and turned to look out through the back window. "Go back. Take me back home."

"No can do, sweetheart!" Gwaine said and proceeded to chuckle.

"Why am I being kidnapped for this?" Merlyn asked and crossed her arms with a slight pout on her face. She should have known that’s why Morgana called. She should have been suspicious from the get go. But no, she had to unknowingly get into Gwaine’s car and be taken prisoner.

"Those Essetir bastards added another person to their team and we need to keep it even or else we can’t play and lose by default." Gwaine abruptly took a sharp right turn.

"And how does that involve me?" Merlyn wondered for a split second how Gwaine ever managed to pass his driver's test, "can't you add someone else to the team?"
"They added another girl to their team. So we needed another girl in order to balance it out, that's why...ta-DAH!" exclaimed Gwaine and he flourished his right arm in her direction.

Merlyn rolled her eyes, "So how did I manage to draw the lucky straw? Actually, better question, how did you know where I live? Arthur told me yesterday that you lived close by me, but-

"How did Arthur find out you live close by me, sweetheart?" Gwaine threw her a mischievous grin.

'Ooh shit,' Merlyn panicked and tried to casually backpedal her way out of her slip up.

"Well, we were just talking in class and I mentioned how I live with Uncle Gaius and...yeah," Merlyn finished lamely and shrugged; she was mentally praying to whatever deity would listen to her that Gwaine wouldn't ask her to elaborate.

"Well Morgana knows where everyone lives, which means you aren't an exception. One of the many perks of having Freya help out in the secretary office," Gwaine said and Merlyn was relieved that that was the reason.

"You any good at paintballing?" asked Gwaine. Merlyn saw him exit off the highway and head towards...well what looked like the middle of nowhere.

"No, Gwaine, I'm absolute crap at it," Merlyn said seriously and groaned, "which was why I asked you to take me back home."

"Shit," sighed Gwaine, but he quickly recovered and grinned brightly at Merlyn, "well don't worry, I'll protect you, my lady."

Merlyn gave him a deadpanned look, but his grin was infectious and in the next moment she couldn't help but smile. The two of them spent the car ride singing along to the songs on the radio; loudly and obnoxiously, but Merlyn loved every minute of it.

She knew they were at their destination when they passed a large metal sign that had 'Valley of Fallen Kings Paintball' written on it in gigantic, cartoon, bubble letters. Gwaine pulled up beside Arthur's car and put his car in park. Merlyn unbuckled her seatbelt and climbed out of his car.
"So...what are we playing for?" Merlyn asked and glanced up at Gwaine who was whistling and twirling his keys.

"Glory," Gwaine said and chuckled when Merlyn rolled her eyes in exasperation, "okay. Okay. We're playing for ice cream vouchers."

"Ice...cream...vouchers," said Merlyn slowly as they walked up a large wooden plank that lead to the front entrance.

"Best ice cream shop in Albion and it'll taste even better knowin' we destroyed Essetir." A devious look appeared on Gwaine's face and Merlyn had to laugh at how ridiculous he looked.

"Great! You guys made it!" Morgana exclaimed and rushed forward to hug Merlyn.

"Hi...Morgana," Merlyn wheezed and sucked in a breath of air when she let go.

"Cenred and his team are already gearing up," Morgana rushed out and pulled Merlyn forward.

"Is Perce here yet?" asked Gwaine and was in the process of tying his hair back into a bun.

"He's with the guys getting changed. Hurry up and go change!" Morgana snapped and shoved Gwaine in the direction of the guys changing room.

"And you're coming with me, Merlyn," A sharp tug and Merlyn was dragged in the opposite direction Gwaine was pushed in.

"Uh...I should probably tell you that I'm not good at paintballing, Morgana. So maybe-" Merlyn found herself in a small off-white change room with random paint smatters around the room.

"Nonsense. You'll be fine," Morgana said and let go of Merlyn's arm, "if anything, just don't get hit and keep our numbers up."
"Hi, Merlyn!" Gwen's cheerful voice called out, "I have your gear for you,"

"No, guys, I'm serious. If you put me out there-" Gwen quickly walked up to Merlyn and all but shoved the paintball gear into her arms.

"These should fit you, we're about the same size I think," Gwen worried her bottom lip and looked like she was trying to mentally fit the gear in Merlyn's arms onto Merlyn's body.

"Come now, Merlyn, hurry and change. We still have to go get our guns," Morgana pulled on a black padded long sleeve, "I don't even think we have time to do an equipment check."

"Guys, I-" Merlyn was getting the impression that she was going to have to play regardless of what she says...if they even let her say anything.

"Do you need me to help you strap the pants in?" Gwen asked and was in the process of reaching for the black pants in Merlyn's arms.

Merlyn groaned. "No. No. It's fine. I can change into this."

She quickly pulled on the long sleeve that looked identical to Morgana's and tightened the straps on the sides so it fit to her form better. Next, Merlyn kicked off her runners and pulled on the black padded cargo pants. These ones were similar to the ones Will makes her wear, Merlyn thought and pulled the adjustable straps inwards so they were tight to her legs. Merlyn knew if Will was here he'd laugh his ass off; she's been paintballing with him a couple of times in the past, but it was something that Merlyn never took to. It probably had something to do with all the anxiety, aiming, and ducking that was involved and all of that had to be done while carrying a heavy gun.

"Here I brought you a pair of boots as well," Gwen placed a pair of black combat boots onto the bench beside Merlyn, "this vest should give you some extra protection as well."

"Thanks, Gwen," said Merlyn as she sat down and quickly laced on the boots and shoved her arms through the padded vest.

Morgana was in the midst of pacing back and forth as Gwen and Merlyn were both finishing
up with their gear. "We can't let Nimueh or Kara catch us today."

"Who's the new girl they added?" asked Merlyn as she tied her hair up (not like she knew who those other two girls were, but it was good to ask).

"Some girl named Lamia, but they are such cheats," sneered Morgana, "thinking that I wouldn't be continuously checking the team roster. They honestly thought they could add another team member without me knowing and expecting us to forfeit because we'd be a player short."

Gwen reached over and patted Morgana on the arm, "Now. Now, Morgana."

"You guys ready?!" Elyan's voice echoed throughout the change room.

"Coming!" The three of them yelled back.

Merlyn was quickly shoving her runners and bag into the locker Gwen opened; she pulled on the padded gloves and headed out of the change room with the two of them. Merlyn was slightly envious of Freya at the moment, since she's probably having a blast with her parents at their cottage and not walking towards paintball bullets. She knew she should have accepted Freya's offer when they were in English, but no she didn't. At this point Merlyn has stopped asking herself how any this happened and accepted her fate.

There was a large wooden board stationed in front of the goggles bin and Merlyn quickly scanned it to memorize the layout of the land. She noticed Morgana and another girl from the other team talking with the coordinator of the paintball site. Merlyn glanced down at her attire and felt herself break out into a cold sweat. Memories of running through the forest to avoid being pelted by paintballs were rushing forward vividly. The only thing Merlyn was good at, in regards to paintball, was running for dear life.

"Glad to see you survived Gwaine's driving," Arthur's sudden appearance spooked her. Probably not a good idea to space out, thought Merlyn. She tightened her belt that held the compressed gas tank.

"You're not...scared, are you, Merlyn?" Arthur asked with a smirk, so he did see her jump.

"Thanks," said Merlyn sarcastically and accepted the gun Arthur handed to her, "and no, I'm
not scared."

Arthur suddenly leaned down to her level and placed his hand on top of her head. "Good. Can't have you curling up into a ball out there. Just do what you told me yesterday...run for dear life."

Merlyn rolled her eyes and gave him a disgruntled look. "Har. Har. Har."

"Finish gearing up. We start on the line." Arthur nodded towards the big black line that was spray painted onto the grassy field that faced the forest line.

"Gotcha, my lord," Merlyn watched Arthur grin and turn away. She realized then that he had placed something on top of her head and reached up to grab it.

Merlyn looked at the red bandana with confusion and glanced up to question Arthur what it was for, but he was already heading to the line with Leon and Lance. Everyone was in the midst of putting on their goggles and tying red bandanas across their faces. Merlyn quickly followed suit and secured the knot she tied with the strap of her goggles.

"Hey, Merlyn," Elyan called out and jogged up to her.

"Hi, Elyan, what's up?" Merlyn wiggled the goggled so they got a better seal on her face and pulled down her bandana so she could talk.

"Do you know how the gun works?" Elyan was in the midst of attaching the gas tubing to his gun, "none of us have time to go through a check. But if you've never played-"

Merlyn nodded and did the same thing. "Yeah. I understand how the gun works."

"Can you do a test shot for me?" Elyan reached down and twisted the small gas nozzle on Merlyn's tank.

"Elyan, honestly, I do know how-shit!" Merlyn hit the trigger by accident and released a bullet.
Morgana let out a shriek and wiped around to see who took a shot at her. The bright red paintball splattered onto one of the wooden beams and everyone turned to see who let loose a rogue bullet. Merlyn hesitantly raised her hand and waved feebly.

"Sorry..." Merlyn called out. Merlyn saw Morgana nod and turn back towards the group.

"Right..." Elyan said, but Merlyn could hear the slight worry in his voice, "well I'll give you a pair of needle-nose pliers...just in case, you know. It'll be good to do repairs in the field."

Merlyn nodded and blushed. "Thanks, Elyan," She's done equipment repairs in the field before, and it was because Will was adamant about her learning it.

"Guys, come on!" Leon called out and waved at them to come over.

Merlyn didn't get the chance to see what the Essetir team looked like, but the obvious things she could see were: they had the same number of people on their team and they wore blue arm bands instead of bandanas. It always freaked Merlyn out a bit seeing the neck guards in place, because how dangerous does this make the game? There was a giant digital scoreboard off in the distance and Merlyn could see that it was nearly 11 o'clock and it had two team names written on it: Team Essetir and Team Camelot. Merlyn could see her group gathering and she quickly pocketed the needle-nose pliers and squeezed into the group beside Lance and Leon.

"Okay. Once we make it to the tree line I want everyone to split up. Then try to get as far away from each other as you can. It'll be harder for them to take us out if we put distance between everyone, Morgana," Arthur turned to look at her, "I want you to take the outer perimeters by the large boulders. Lance,"

Lance stood up a little straighter, "Yes, captain."

Arthur spared a quick smile and continued, "I need you to take the high ground and try to get as many of Cenny's team members out. Odin likes to use the overgrown bushes for cover, so take him out before he can get to them. Everyone else keep low and keep running."

A silence settled between them as everyone turned to look at Arthur. Merlyn realized that they were waiting for an inspirational speech.
"Guys, if we fall today, we fall fighting. Fighting for Camelot’s pride. Fighting for our glory. Fighting...for our team. So, let’s go out there and give them hell," Arthur’s voice went deeper and had this growl-like sound to it that made a shiver run down Merlyn’s spine.

Everyone nodded their heads and Merlyn could feel the air shift from nervousness to adrenaline-filled excitement. Suddenly a loud countdown sound came on overhead and Merlyn turned towards the board and saw it counting down from thirty seconds.

"For the love of Camelot!" shouted Arthur.

"FOR THE LOVE OF CAMELOT!" cheered everyone...including Merlyn. The grin on Merlyn’s face was so wide that her cheeks hurt.

Merlyn went and stood on the spray painted black line. She felt someone tap her shoulder and she turned to look up at Arthur with her eyebrow raised in a silent question, even though he probably couldn’t see it with her goggles on.

"Don't trip and fall out there," Arthur said with a smirk.

Merlyn scowled, "Don't worry, I won't," and tugged her bandana up to cover the lower half of her face.

"Hey short stack," Arthur said and nudged her with his elbow.

"What?" Came her muffled reply. There was 5 seconds left to the countdown.

"The bandana," Arthur nodded down towards her bandana while slowly tugging his up.

Merlyn gestured for him to continue, because she’s getting confused and at this point she’s so confused that him being cryptic was not helping.

"Red looks good on you."
Thank god the bandana covered up her face, because Merlyn felt like her face was now the color of the bandana.

Merlyn cleared her throat and tried to come up with a retort.

DING

"GO! GO! GO!" Arthur shouted and swept his arm in a forward motion.

Merlyn felt herself being shoved forward into a sprint and she booked it for the tree line. All the guys (with their long legs) ate up the distance on the field to the tree line like it was no big deal. The girls on the other hand were a couple of seconds behind them and even then when Merlyn made it into the forest she broke away from the pack just like everyone else.

The idea of time was lost to Merlyn as she was running and ducking through the trees. Her cell phone was currently locked away in a locker and she didn't own a watch, so she had no clue how much time has passed since the start of the game.

"I'm going to die..." panted Merlyn as she threw herself behind a large rock formation a second before a large onslaught of paintballs came in her direction.

She started army crawling on the ground and quickly left that spot in fear of getting ganged up on.
When she made it to a gathering of trees, she shot to her feet and continued to run further into the forest. There were dozens of trees and tall rocks all around Merlyn as she continued to sprint and find a safe area to hide in. Something whizzed by her head and she immediately threw herself forward and into a bush.

"Fuck!" exclaimed Merlyn when she realized there was a small hill on the other side of the bush and she began to roll down the slope.

Merlyn rolled to a stop in a thicket of bushes and she took a moment to catch her breath. This seemed like a good hiding spot, thought Merlyn as she pressed her hand into her right side to help ease the stitch that was forming. She was deliberating, maybe no one would notice her if she just, you know, stayed here? Thousands of thoughts were swirling through Merlyn's mind as she laid, hidden in the bushes, on the hard ground. Her gun was still full and it didn't look like it took any damage from her tumble and was currently resting on her chest. Nothing felt broken or sprained; there were some twigs and leaves in her hair, but she could live with those. Merlyn shifted slightly and moved the pliers in her pocket over a bit so it would stop jabbing into her thigh. She could hear the sound of paintball guns going off and loud cursing from everyone, but the idea of going back into that was not at the top of her to-do list.

"Did Cen catch up with Arthur yet?" A random male voice started talking really close to Merlyn; she froze and slowed her breathing down.

"Fuck if I know, but when he does he plans on doing a public execution," snickered another male voice.

"Good thing we jammed his gun earlier. Cen told us to avoid Pendragon at all costs so he doesn't get the chance to fire his gun until it's too late."

'Cheaters.' That thought infuriated Merlyn as she laid there in secrecy.

"Even if Cen can't execute him, someone else will get him." The two guys gloated and walked past Merlyn's hiding spot.

Very carefully Merlyn sat up and watched as they walked a couple feet away from her. She got into a crouching position and very carefully aimed her gun at their backs. She took a deep breath, held it, and fired twice.
"The fuck?!" Both guys turned around, but Merlyn was already sprinting away.

"Gotta find Arthur, Gotta find Arthur," Merlyn chanted and ducked through the trees as she continued to run back up the hill.

"Merlyn! Down!" A sudden weight crashed into Merlyn's back and brought her down to the ground.

"Oof!" All the air was pushed out of her lungs. But she remained still as whoever was on top of her was shooting at the enemy.

"You okay?" Leon's voice was muffled from his bandana, but Merlyn understood and took the hand he offered.


"Keep your head down," Leon looked up at the trees and scanned their surroundings, "that Lamia girl can climb trees. Morgana told me earlier when we saw each other."

"Thanks, Leon," Merlyn realized she can't waste anymore time standing around and it looked like Leon thought the same thing.

"Are you going to look for Morgana?" Merlyn quickly asked.

Leon's eyes crinkled behind his goggles and he shook his head. "Nah, my girl's a force to be reckoned with. Everyone should be afraid of her looking for them."

Merlyn giggled and nodded her head. "Right. Okay, see you at the end," Merlyn turned to keep running.

"Head down!" Leon called out and was taking off in the opposite direction.

"Crap..." cursed Merlyn slowing down slightly, "I should have asked Leon if he saw
Well too late now, Merlyn thought and spun behind a tree when she caught sight of someone from the opposite team. She waited for the person to keep walking and right when they were out of sight she took off again. Merlyn knelt behind a rock and quickly closed her eyes and pulled up the map she saw earlier into her mind. She was currently in the NE quadrant of the map based on the direction she ran in earlier and the fall she took down the hill. Strategically, if Merlyn was on the opposite team and knew Arthur's gun was jammed...where would she try to herd him to?

"The valley..." Merlyn's eyes snapped open and she quickly looked around her to spot any enemies. She leapt to her feet and changed the direction she was running in.

The ground was slowly sloping downwards and Merlyn knew she was heading in the right direction based off her theory, but whether that theory was correct...well that's a bridge she'll cross when she gets there. She leapt down one small ridge to another and crouched down to see if anyone knew she was there, when there was no movement or shooting for that matter, she got up and continued forward. Merlyn stuck close to the trees and the large rocks to hide her presence, but the silence surrounding her made her become hyperaware of everything.

It was the red that caught her eye first, followed by Arthur's blond hair next. Merlyn nearly ran out of her hiding spot on the small ridge that was about five feet off the ground, but stopped when she caught sight of two dark figures heading towards Arthur. She saw them raise their guns and without even thinking she took off towards the edge of the ridge.

"ARTHUR! LOOK OUT!" Merlyn flung herself off the small ridge.

Arthur only had a split second to look up towards Merlyn's rapidly falling figure, "What the hell are you-" before the two of them collided and hit the ground.

Suddenly paintballs were rapidly being fired at them. Before Merlyn even had a chance to regain her senses from that small jump, she felt herself getting hauled to her feet by the back of her padded shirt and dragged into a sprint. Merlyn spun around and quickly started to run beside Arthur. She could hear their enemies pursuing and really focused on not tripping as they jumped over logs and bushes. But, one moment she was vertical and running, the next moment there was a sharp tug and she was horizontal on the ground with Arthur on top of her.

"Ar-MMPH!" Arthur's hand clamped over top of Merlyn's mouth and he made the universal gesture of 'SHHHH!' with his other hand. The sound of running footsteps approaching clued Merlyn in on what was happening.
"WHERE THE HELL DID THEY GO!?" An angry male voice growled.

"Will you shut the hell up and be quiet, Cenred?" A velvety girl's voice spat, "you're going to attract attention."

"Who the hell was that? I almost had him," Merlyn was going to guess the angry male was the Cenred she heard about.

Merlyn looked up at Arthur and then at their current location (upside down of course). The ground sloped down a little more drastically and there were two large rock formations right above them blocking them from sight. There was more cursing and whispered shouting going on from the two people.

"They're probably out of the valley now. So shut the hell up and let's go," The girl snapped and it sounded like she was storming off.

Merlyn saw Arthur move onto one knee and slowly look around the rock. Merlyn was getting impatient and started to tap on his arm. Arthur sharply glanced down at her and held his finger over his mouth; Merlyn could see he was glaring at her through his goggles and she couldn't help but glare back.

Arthur's hand lifted off of Merlyn's mouth and she immediately moved her head to the side.

"Finally," sighed Merlyn as she tugged her bandana down so it sat around her neck, "can you get off me now you prat?"

"What the hell were you thinking, Merlyn?" Arthur asked in exasperation while moving off of her and took a seat on her right. He moved his goggles up onto his head and pulled his bandana down.

"I was thinking I was trying to save your stupid ass. I overheard some guys on Cen...Cendred's - "

"Cenred," corrected Arthur and he held up his hands up when Merlyn moved her goggles up
to glare harshly at him.

"Anyways," Merlyn continued, "I overheard them talking about how Cenred," the smirk that tugged at Arthur's lips did not go unnoticed by her, "jammed your gun and you were basically running around defenceless."

"He what?" Arthur snapped and looked down at his gun. Those guys were right, Merlyn thought and guessed up until this point Arthur hadn't made an attempt to shoot anyone and that the other team's plan to avoid him and trap him at all costs would have worked if she didn't get to him first.

"Yeah and they were basically trying to capture you and do a live execution," explained Merlyn.

"That fucking piece of shit," Arthur started to pat his pockets and groaned when he came up empty, "I dropped my pliers."

"I still have mine," said Merlyn as she took off her belt and handed her gun to Arthur, "here. Take my gun and stand watch while I see if I can fix the jam."

Merlyn swapped their guns and took the pliers out of her pocket and placed them on the ground. Before dismantling the gun, Merlyn made sure to turn the gas source off. Then she unscrewed the barrel and checked it for any damage; Merlyn never took to paintball, but she's always been good at fixing things. She was mentally thanking Elyan for giving her the pliers before the game started.

"They bent the latch," mumbled Merlyn as she tried to gently bend the latch between the body and the barrel back into place.

"How did you know where to find me?" Arthur asked.

Merlyn glanced up at Arthur and back down at the gun. "I just thought what I would do if I was hunting down a defenceless opponent. Hence...the valley," Merlyn haphazardly gestured around her and unlocked the paintball hopper, "you were in a low vantage point."

"That's smart," Arthur said and suddenly frowned, "but also stupid. Why did you come
looking for me? You could have been taken out and we'd have lost our numbers. Do you ever do as your told?"

Merlyn shrugged and kept her focus on reattaching everything. "No. But, you said it yourself right? We're a team. I couldn't just leave you, now could I?"

A silence settled between them. Merlyn, being the oblivious person she is sometimes, didn't catch the look Arthur gave her. She was more focused on screwing the barrel back into place and turning the tank back on. Merlyn pointed the gun at the ground and pulled the trigger; a red paintball shot out of it and splattered on the ground.

"There," Merlyn grinned, "all fixed."

"Guess you're a pretty useful nerd to have around as well."

Merlyn scoffed and gave Arthur her best offended look, but he didn't look apologetic; instead he grinned. The two of them quickly swapped their guns back and buckled the belts around their waists.

"I'll run ahead first and see if I can draw anyone out," Merlyn pulled on her boot laces to tighten them up a bit more and slid her goggles back into place.

Arthur opened his mouth to say something, but closed it.

"Don't think you're sparing my feelings, sire," drawled Merlyn, "even I know strategy. If you get taken out trying to protect me, then our team is going to lose one of their power players."

To her surprise, a small blush crept its way onto Arthur's cheeks. In order to avoid any awkwardness, Merlyn quickly pointed up at the trees.

"Morgana told Leon, who told me, that the new player, Lamia, can climb up pretty high in the trees. So be aware of that."

Arthur nodded and reached forward to ruffle Merlyn's hair. "Got it. Now remember to keep
your head down."

Merlyn stepped back from Arthur's reach and smirked. "Gotcha," she turned to walk back up the small slope, but paused and glanced back at Arthur before pulling her bandana up.

"Hey prat," called Merlyn.

"What?" smirked Arthur and Merlyn could see him roll his eyes through his goggles.

"Impress me." Merlyn threw him a two finger salute and took off in a sprint while pulling her bandana back up.

"Should have brought my cell phone," Merlyn grumbled and continued to crouch lower as she hid behind a pile of rocks, "how long have I been out here? Why am I talking to myself? Oh I don't know, Merlyn, maybe it's because it's probably past lunch time and all you had was two waffles for breakfast?" Yeah...Merlyn needed to eat soon.

The sound of a branch snapping caught Merlyn's attention. She lowered her head and slowly peered around the edge of the rock. Arthur! Merlyn very nearly ran out of from her hiding spot towards him, but she stopped when she noticed the way he was crouching down into the bushes with his gun raised.

"Come out, Pendragon," Cenred called out, "I know you're there. I know you can hear me. You're out of paintballs now thanks to my team," Merlyn could see Cenred from the corner of her eye slowly surveying his surroundings with his gun raised.

"You sacrificed your team members just to get to me?" Arthur spoke quickly and Merlyn watched as he moved locations before Cenred's paintball could catch him. "That's pathetic."

Cenred shrugged and resumed his pacing. "All for a good cause. Besides, you're the last man standing, I made sure my team was able to take down your guys before you fixed your gun. Now take your loss like a man."
'Last man standing?' Merlyn was confused. She was still here? Oh! She's still here! Merlyn crouched lower to the ground and stayed out of sight.

"Coming from the guy who jammed my gun just to get the chance to beat me? You're even stupider than I remember, Cenny," taunted Arthur. Merlyn lost sight of Arthur, but she knew where he was relative to his voice.

Cenred spoke through gritted teeth. "Don't fucking forget who's school has the Cup, Pendragon."

"Not for long you guys won't."

In the blink of an eye Arthur dove out from where he was hiding, barrel rolled and aimed his gun at Cenred. The red splatter of paint would have been such a satisfying sight to see on Cenred...if he didn't manage to dodge it. *Fuck*, Merlyn mentally cursed and looked over at the tree covered in red paint. Cenred's laughter was like a cheese grater being rubbed back and forth over Merlyn's nerves. But, that didn't change the fact that he now had his gun pointed at Arthur, who was in the process of moving his bandana and goggles out of the way.

"Nice try, Pendragon," Cenred sneered, "now get up. We're going back to the field and I'll have the pleasure to execute you."

"Didn't know you fancied me that way, Cenny" Arthur drawled and got up from the ground, but he threw a quick glance in Merlyn's direction.

Does he know I'm here? Merlyn wondered and tried to see if she could catch his gaze.

"Shut the fuck up and move!" Cenred snapped and shoved Arthur with his hand.

Arthur gritted his teeth and stumbled back a few steps, but he turned around and began to walk. Merlyn caught the quick pointing gesture Arthur made towards Cenred. She quickly spun around and moved towards the other side of the rock she was hiding behind and ducked down lower to hid behind the tall bushes. Merlyn kept pace with them and was careful to avoid any branches in her path. When she was side by side with them, she raised her gun to fire at Cenred. The sudden quick shake of Arthur's head made her stop and lower her gun; what the hell does he want me to do? Merlyn wondered and continued to follow beside them.
"Your perfect hair getting in your eyes there, Pendragon?" Cenred's voice dripped with contempt.

Arthur grinned and Merlyn almost wanted to laugh at how hard he was goading Cenred.

"You think my hair is perfect?"

"I should just fucking shoot you right now," growled Cenred and Merlyn raised her gun again when she saw him do the same, "but I want everyone to see you lose to me."

"And I get called the dramatic one," Arthur said this loudly and Merlyn smiled when she realized that comment was directed solely towards her. Merlyn caught on to what Arthur was telling her: execute Cenred once they get to the field.

"You will be when my team crushes yours in the game this coming Friday," Cenred smirked and kept his gun trained on Arthur's back.

"Don't forget, Cenny, my team crushed yours when we were juniors," Arthur stated, "all the seniors from Essetir have graduated. The Cup will be ours."

"We'll fucking see about that," Cenred spat, "walk faster!"

Merlyn rolled her eyes. Boys and their stupid pissing contests, she thought while ducking under a low hanging tree branch. The field was coming into view and a huge wave of anxiety blindsided Merlyn...Arthur was expecting her to execute Cenred. But...what if she misses? Or worse...she hits Arthur instead? Merlyn began to have morbid thoughts of disappointing everyone and being humiliated in front of an audience. I can't do this, Merlyn thought and began to breathe a bit faster. She could hear the beating of her heart and felt a cold sweat breakout over her body. Immediately she looked up towards Arthur to try and get his attention to tell him that she can't go through with this, that they needed to abort the mission. But, the look on Arthur's face quelled her sudden anxiety; his head was held high as he continued to walk forward and the features on his face was smooth and even-not a wrinkle of worry in sight.

'...he really thinks I can do this...' Merlyn was stunned.

"Hey!" Cenred called out once they broke through the tree line, "guess who I found!"
Everyone was sitting near the black line that they started on earlier. They all turned towards the sound of Cenred's voice and immediately stood when they saw Arthur; Team Essetir began cheering loudly while Team Camelot (even from a distance) looked furious. It was now or never, Merlyn thought with a gulp.

"Guess I can't let him down," mumbled Merlyn as she crept out as far as she could, but still remained hidden by the trees. She raised her gun and took a deep breath.

"A public execution, Pendragon," Cenred sneered and raised his gun to Arthur's chest, "how does it feel to lose to me in front of everyone?"

**THWACK**

Arthur stepped out of the way when Cenred fired his gun out of shock. The blue paintball whizzed through the air, but didn't manage to find a target and landed on the grassy field. The red paintball though, shone like a beacon across Cenred's back.

"I don't know, Cenny," Merlyn said his name in a sing-song voice, "how does it feel to lose to Camelot?"

There was a moment of silence as everyone took in what just happened. When Merlyn lowered her bandana and grinned, all hell broke loose. Morgana rushed towards her, along with everyone else, but Arthur was the one to reach her first.

"WE WON!" Arthur cheered and clapped Merlyn in the back.

Merlyn pulled off her goggles and waved them in the air in victory. Suddenly she felt herself getting lifted up onto someone's shoulders.

"Whoa!" Merlyn flailed her arms a bit, but managed to balance herself out on Percy's shoulder.

"Mer-lyn! Mer-lyn! Mer-lyn!" chanted Percy as he walked her around in a circle. Everyone else chimed in and began to do some weird circle dance.
"THAT'S NOT FAIR!" Cenred bellowed, to Merlyn's surprise, and began to throw a temper tantrum on the field. Everyone stopped and turned to watch the spectacle that Cenred was making himself out to be.

"Uh..." Merlyn glanced down at Arthur and then over at a red-faced Cenred with a silent question on her face.

Arthur shrugged and gave her a look that said 'I told you I wasn't that dramatic' even everyone on their team wasn't surprised by his behaviour. Merlyn slowly nodded and watched as Cenred's team came up to him to drag him away; except one of the girls stopped and looked up at Merlyn with dazzling blue eyes. They look like sapphires, Merlyn thought and raised an eyebrow at her.

"What do you want, Nimueh?" Morgana took a few steps forward and crossed her arms; her entire posture radiated hostility.

"You're Merlyn Emrys, right?" Nimueh ignored Morgana's question and continued to stare at Merlyn with such an intense look that she almost wanted to add to her blush. She was the girl with Cenred earlier, Merlyn recognized that velvety voice.

"Uhm...yeah?" Merlyn phrased her response like a question.

"You should consider transferring to Essetir Prep," Nimueh smiled and the whites of her teeth and her porcelain complexion was enhanced by the blood red lipstick she was wearing, "someone as smart as you are...is wasted with the likes of them."

"Screw off, Nim!" Gwaine booed and moved to pat Merlyn's shin (she was still on Percy's shoulder), "Merlyn is staying with us. If she went to your shit school she'd get a stick shoved so far up her ass she'll start walking around like you."

Nimueh pursed her lips at Gwaine, but turned to smile at Merlyn again. "My mom is on the school board and knows one of the secretaries at Camelot. She'd be more than happy to help you with the transfer papers."

"Thanks!" Merlyn grinned. Everyone turned to look up at Merlyn in shock, even Nimueh looked extremely pleased and smiled at Morgana.
"But," Merlyn continued and tugged off her bandana, "I'm going to have to decline. Apparently, red looks good on me."

Gwen, Morgana and all the guys laughed and started cheering loudly (the weird circle dance started up again). Nimueh's expression turned cold, but she managed to smile at Merlyn one last time.

"My offer still stands if you ever change your mind," said Nimueh as she turned to walk off the field.

Merlyn cupped her hand over her mouth and called out after Nimueh. "But it won't!"

"That was weird right?" Merlyn asked and looked down at Morgana, "why would she ask me to transfer to Essetir? I don't even know who she is?"

Morgana had a displeased look on her face, "Nimueh and her mother both love power. Her mom probably caught wind of your academic portfolio and told Nimueh to try and recruit you to their school."

"But...I never applied for Essetir Prep?" said Merlyn, "how does her mom even know about me?"

"They have their ways, Merlyn," Morgana turned and glared at Nimueh's retreating figure. There was a moment of silence in the group, until Merlyn looked down at Percy.

"Can I come down now, Percy?" asked Merlyn.

"Dude, you won us the game! I'd carry you back to the change rooms if you wanted!" Percy shook her slightly and Merlyn laughed.

"I think I'd rather walk myself," Merlyn let out the breath she was holding once her feet were back on the ground.
"Come on guys, the quicker we change the quicker we can go get ice cream!" Gwen said excitedly and looped her arm through Merlyn's and pulled her forward,

"Man, I can't wait to see the look on Cenred's face next week when we crush those guys in the first game of the season," Elyan said.

"He'll be at the mercy of Team Camelot, isn't that right, Princess?" Merlyn looked over her shoulder and saw Gwaine clap Arthur on the shoulder.

Arthur didn't miss a beat and grinned, "hell yeah!"

He glanced at her just then. The two of them silently acknowledging the proverbial 'elephant in the room.' Morgana cleared her throat and raised her eyebrow at Merlyn, there was suspicion written all over her face as she glanced between the two of them. Merlyn smiled and pretended as if she didn't know what was going on. She tuned back into the guys' conversation.

"That Lamia chick was intense," Percy rubbed at a spot behind his neck, "she managed to get me between the shoulder blades.

"She got me on my shoulder," Lance tugged his shirt's neckline over and everyone ooo'ed at the nasty looking purple splotch forming. Gwen stepped away from Merlyn and went over to console Lance.

Leon walked over beside Morgana and smiled down at her. "Morgana got her before she was able to get me."

"Well," Morgana sniffed, "I wasn't about to let you be taken out by just anyone. But she managed to get me as well."

Merlyn's eyes widen when Morgana pulled her bandana off (everyone's bandana was covered in paint at this point); there was a dark purple bruise forming at the base of her neck in the shape of a nearly perfect circle. Leon's expression immediately shifted into a worried/pissed off one; Morgana noticed and quickly went up onto her tiptoes to whisper into his ear. Whatever she said to Leon immediately had him blushing and coughing.

"Nice play out there, short stack," Merlyn looked up at Arthur and rolled her eyes.
"No thanks to you, what kind of signals were you giving me?" asked Merlyn as they walked back into the building.

Arthur scoffed, "The good kind?"

"What the hell does," Merlyn waved her hand and then shook her head, "that even mean?"

"It doesn't matter what they mean anymore. We won the game." Arthur patted her on the head while giving her a condescending smile.

"I can't believe, even after I saved your fat butt, you still managed to get captured," said Merlyn in exasperation.

"I was the reason why the rest of his team was taken out. You should show me some more gratitude, Merlyn," said Arthur in a cocky tone.

"Okay there, dollop head," Merlyn said sarcastically with an eye roll.

Arthur let out a bark of laughter. "That's not even a word."

"Yes it is," stated Merlyn matter-of-factly.

"Describe it then," Arthur looked up at the sky and shook his head, but there was a hint of a smile on his lips.

"In what? Like say...two words?" Merlyn smirked mischievously.

Arthur shrugged and waved his hand in front of her. "Go for it."

Merlyn had a hard time keeping a straight face.
Merlyn was going over the last math booklet and checking over each question carefully. Arthur, in the seat next to her, was currently looking over the study guide. The unit test was next period...suffice to say that the amount of stress coming from Arthur was almost tangible. Their lack of focus on the current lesson went unnoticed because they were watching a movie rendition of Hamlet. Freya was completely enraptured and paid the two no attention as she mouthed the lines along with the actors.

"You need three significant digits for this answer," whispered Merlyn as she slid the booklet back over to Arthur, "other than that everything looks good."

Arthur nodded and quietly pulled out his calculator. The look of utter fear and stress was evident on Arthur's face, not from his facial expression, but from the look he had in his eyes. Merlyn took a risk and gently placed her hand on his forearm and leaned in to whisper quietly to him.

"You'll do fine, Arthur, I believe in you."

It was unnerving, Merlyn thought, how was he able to maintain eye contact for so long?

"You do know the unit test is next period right?" grumbled Arthur in a quiet voice as he looked back down at the booklet.

Merlyn smiled and nudged his shoulder with her own. "Good thing we have lunch after. You can drown your sorrows in chocolate milk."

Arthur tried not to smile, but Merlyn could see the ghost of it lingering around the edges of his mouth. She was trying her best to take his mind off of how much is riding on this test for him and it looked like it was working until the bell rang.

BRRRIING
The lights flicked on at that moment and Merlyn was nearly blinded by them. Ms. Finna paused the movie and clapped her hands together.

"We'll finish the movie tomorrow in class, and then I will go over the project I will be assigning." Ms. Finna's plan was met with a chorus of groans, but she just smiled and shooed everyone away.

"Good luck on your unit test, guys!" Freya said and packed up her belongings.

Arthur blew out a breath and nodded his head. "Thanks, Freya, I'll need it."

"See you at lunch!" said Merlyn with a wave over her shoulder and walked out of the classroom with Arthur.

Merlyn glanced up at Arthur once they were in the hallway. He must have sensed her gaze and looked down at her and raised an eyebrow.

"You nervous?" Merlyn asked.

Arthur turned his face frontwards again. "I don't get nervous, Merlyn."

It was Merlyn's turn to raise her eyebrow. "Really? I thought everyone got nervous."

Arthur rolled his eyes. "Shut up, Merlyn."

"Yes, sire," came Merlyn's reply.

Everyone in their math class filed in slowly and the tension in the room sky-rocketed. Khilgharra gave everyone a big grin, and to everyone else that was not Merlyn, it looked like a bad omen. Merlyn heard Arthur take a deep breath in, let it out, and walk up to Khilgharra's desk to deposit the bundle of work booklets they've been working on for the past week and a bit. Afterwards, he walked to the other side of the room to where his desk was. Merlyn took her seat by the door and pulled out her cell phone before Khilgharra told them to put all electronics away.
Hey Dollop head!  

Merlyn shifted in her seat to try and get Arthur's attention. Khilgharra was in the process of handing out the tests to everyone in the room. Arthur eventually looked her way and mouthed 'what?' at her. She raised her phone, gestured at it, and then pointed at him. Arthur caught on (he still looked confused, but caught on nonetheless) and pulled out his cell phone. Merlyn could see him physically typing back a reply and the grey dots appear in their message window.

Cabbage head: What, short stack?  

Her fingers quickly typed out her reply and she hit send.

Impress me.

"All electronics away. Hats turned backwards. No talking. Calculators out and on your desk without their covers," Khilgharra announced and placed the last test booklet onto Merlyn's desk.

Everyone did as they were told and when the class settled down again they turned to the front where Khilgharra was standing. Merlyn saw him glance at the clock and as if right on cue the bell rang.

With a wave of his hand he announced to the class, "You may begin."

Merlyn looked over at Arthur one last time and was surprised he was staring at her already. She wasn't sure what he was looking for from her, but she smirked at him and nodded. Merlyn hoped her thoughts were conveyed to him—judging by the answering smirk on his face...it was. She looked back down at her test book, twirled her lead pencil, and then opened it.

'If \( P(x) = -3x^2 + ax + 8 \) and \( P(1) = -9 \), then find the value of \( a \)...'

The scratching of pencils filled the silence of the room. Merlyn worked her way through the problem and substituted 1 in the place of \( x \) and solved for \( a \). She got -14 as answer and circled it. The next question had her filling out a chart that had various polynomial functions and it required her to state their degrees and types. Camelot High really did expect a lot from their students, thought
Merlyn as she graphed the next two polynomials on her calculator. The tests were longer and the questions asked for so many things. This test alone (compared to the quiz they had a week or so ago) was five pages in length—double sided.

When she reached the end of the test she looked up at the clock and saw that it was already 15 minutes into class time. Merlyn was used to being the first one done during tests and exams, but she always liked to wait an extra 5 minutes at her desk before getting up to hand things in. She looked up to watch Khilgharra mark Arthur's booklets and was not surprised that he was already halfway through marking them.

'Checkmark. Checkmark. Checkmark. Check—wait why is he circling something?' Merlyn unconsciously sat upright in her desk—potentially insulted that there could be something wrong.

Khilgharra glanced up at her and raised his eyebrow with a smirk on his lips, as if he was silently challenging Merlyn. He knows, Merlyn thought and quickly looked back down at her test to blush. Once 5 minutes passed, she got up and handed her test in; she could feel the eyes on her as she walked up to Khilgharra's desk and placed her test down.

"All finished?" Khilgharra asked quietly and pulled her test towards him, "name at the top?"

Merlyn nodded with a small smile and walked back to her desk to pack up. She carefully glanced over at Arthur and saw the look of intense concentration on his face. He'll be fine, decided Merlyn as she walked out of the classroom and into the hallway. She leaned against the wall on the side of the doorway and slid down to the ground.

'Time to wait,' She thought and pulled out her cell phone.

At the quarter to mark, more students began to file out. Some glanced down at Merlyn when they saw her sitting on the floor outside of the classroom, but others paid her no mind as they headed to the cafeteria for an early lunch. Merlyn looked up each time she saw someone come out—hoping it was Arthur. Eventually she figured that he was the last one left writing the test.

Suddenly the familiar sight of his runners came into view. Merlyn quickly scrambled to her feet.

"Arthur!"
Arthur quickly looked to his right and was surprised to see Merlyn there. "What are you-"

"-how did the test go?" interrupted Merlyn as they moved off to the side she was standing on.

"I think it went alright?" Arthur said while running a hand through his hair.

"Khilgharra is probably finishing up the marking as we speak. Let's wait." said Merlyn as she slid back down onto the floor.

Arthur mimicked her and the two of them sat side by side, waiting for his results. After a few minutes of silence passed, she felt him nudge her shoulder with his.

"Yeah?" Merlyn turned to look up at him.

"Why'd you stick around? You could've went to lunch early," asked Arthur.

Merlyn gave him a bewildered look, as if what he was asking was the most absurd thing she's ever heard.

"Because I didn't want you to feel alone."

Silence settled between the two of them and Merlyn could see the faint pink blush appear on Arthur's cheeks. She even started to blush when she realized what she said was very honest and forthcoming of her to admit. But before Arthur could say anything back to her, they both heard footsteps approaching the doorway.

"I must admit," Khilgharra began and watched as the two of them scrambled back up onto their feet, "I am very impressed with you, Arthur."

"How'd he do?" asked Merlyn.

Khilgharra glanced at her in amusement and Merlyn immediately flushed to the tops of her ears. She glanced up at Arthur who was smirking slightly.
"Erm...I mean...not that it's really any of my business...technically," She added.

Khilgharra chuckled and turned to Arthur. "You got a 100% on all the booklets and it has boosted your class mark."

Sheer joy and excitement rushed through Merlyn; she grabbed Arthur's hand and squeezed while smiling up at him. Arthur had a look of amazement on his face as he let out the breath he was holding and returned Merlyn's hand squeeze with his own.

The amazement faded as he kept his gaze on Khilgharra, "But...what about my test mark?"

Merlyn's smile faltered the tiniest bit, and she turned to look up at Khilgharra in anticipation. Khilgharra let out a deep sigh and leaned against the door frame. Merlyn gulped and didn't know what to make of his posture and facial expression.

"You know, Arthur, that you have made tremendous improvement these past two weeks. If not by the tell of the booklets, then certainly by your ability to participate in class," Khilgharra glanced down at the test in his hand (obviously Arthur's) and looked over at the two of them.

"All athletes must maintain an average of-"

Arthur cut in quickly, "No less than 70%," and nodded his head for Khilgharra to continue. Merlyn felt him squeeze her hand tighter and she held on firmly.

"And if you remember, I did tell you that in order to bring your mark up to that 70 you would need a minimum of 80% on this unit test. Which I'm sorry to say you didn't get an 80..."

"What?" Merlyn said and took a step forward, "no way. Khilgharra that's not possible! Arthur, he," She turned to look up at him and felt something grab hold of her heart at the defeated look on his face, "he's worked so hard! I've seen it with my own eyes! Can't you reconsider?!"

Merlyn frantically waved her free hand in the air around her and began to bargain. "I'll keep tutoring him! I'll make sure he brings up his class mark and keep it up. I'll...I'll help with extra assignments. Just...you have to let-"
"Merlyn...it's okay," Arthur said quietly and blinked in surprise when Merlyn whipped around to look at him.

"No it's not! You worked so hard! I refuse to believe that you can't play in the game just because you didn't get an 80 on the test! That's such a stupid rule!" Merlyn felt so cheated. This wasn't fair!

"Merlyn," Khilgharra called out and Merlyn almost snapped at him for the amused look he had in his eyes, "if I may continue?"

She scowled, but closed her mouth. She still respected the man a great deal and she knew it wasn't his fault that that athletics rule existed.

"I did say that Arthur didn't get an 80 on this test..." Khilgharra said and then flipped Arthur's test around to them and Merlyn's eyes narrowed in on the number, written near the top right corner, in red ink.

"I got an 82..." Arthur breathed out.

There was a moment of silence...before Merlyn let out an excited squeal and turned to throw her arms around Arthur.

"YOU DID IT!" Her arms squeezed him extra tight as her happiness for his achievement all but consumed her.

"I...I..." Arthur was at a loss for words, but suddenly he snapped out of his shock and he returned Merlyn's hug and lifted her up into the air and spun her around

"I CAN PLAY IN THE GAME!"

"Congratulations to you both," chuckled Khilgharra, "now if you'll excuse me. My takeout should be here any minute. Extra fortune cookies in this order. Have a good lunch."
"Thank you!" Merlyn and Arthur called out.

"Oh and," Khilgharra looked back at them, "good luck in the game tomorrow, Arthur."

Arthur grinned and nodded his head in thanks.

The two of them looked at each other with big smiles on their faces. It lasted for a few seconds, but the reality of their surroundings came rushing back. Merlyn and Arthur were both still wrapped up in each other's arms, looking at each other with smiles on their faces, and if anyone were to come by and see them...it'd look pretty intimate. It was as if that thought occurred to the both of them and they immediately pulled away from one another.

Arthur coughed and the faint pink blush was back. "Uh...so..."

"So..." Merlyn's ears felt like they were on fire and she looked down at the ground bashfully, "lunch?"

"Yeah," Arthur said with a nod and gestured ahead of them, "lunch."

Merlyn grabbed her backpack off the floor and put it back on. She started to quietly walk down the hallway and was acutely aware of Arthur's presence beside her. It's not as if she'd never hugged a guy before, Merlyn scolded herself for being so awkward. In the middle of her own self-musings about how awkward she was as a person, Arthur's fist caught her attention from the corner of her eye.

"Thanks, shorty," Arthur smirked and pointedly looked down at his fist.

Merlyn rolled her eyes and tried hard not to smile. She raised her left hand and bumped it against his. "No problem, dollop head."

"Now you can crush Cenred's team tomorrow," said Merlyn in excitement, "he'll probably cry!"

Arthur let out a bark of laughter, "You know, he actually did cry last year when we were on
the junior team.

Merlyn giggled and covered her mouth, "No way?"

"Yeah, you'll see tomorrow at the game..." Arthur looked at Merlyn quizzically, "you are coming to the game tomorrow, right?"

Merlyn blinked and rubbed the back of her neck, "Um..." Was she going to go to the game? She wondered. Technically, she's only ever been to Will's games back when he was team captain, but the year he graduated was the year Merlyn stopped going to them.

Arthur suddenly hip checked Merlyn and she stumbled to the right; she turned to glare at him.

"You should come," Arthur said with an amused grin, "it's the first game of the season."

Merlyn put on a thoughtful look and slowly nodded her head, "I should. Shouldn't I? I mean, I have to make sure all my hard work paid off, right?"

"Yeah," said Arthur sarcastically with an eye roll, "all your hard work."

"Exactly. Glad you understand," Merlyn said cheekily and mockingly patted his arm.

Both of them laughed and headed into the lunchroom right when the bell rang.

The entire school was buzzing with excitement the next day; all the students wore some article of red clothing to represent Camelot's colors, and the teachers all had matching red Camelot hats on. Even Merlyn joined in on the festivities and chose to wear a red scarf to school. And she wasn't surprised that her friends got into the spirit as well; Freya had a silky, red ribbon braided through her hair and matching red flats on, Gwen, seeing as how she's Lance's girlfriend, wore his spare jersey and painted her finger nails red with his jersey number on each ring finger as an accent. Morgana wore Leon's spare jersey, but denied them being in a relationship and the reason was because all her red shirts were in the wash currently. But, Merlyn noticed how Morgana applied bright red lipstick at her locker before class started and asked Merlyn to draw Leon's number under
"The guys had an early practice this morning, right?" Freya asked as the four of them stood by their lockers.

"Yeah, I had to iron Elyan's dress shirt this morning before we left the house," Gwen was in the midst of trying to decide whether or not to tie her hair up or leave it down, granted it didn't help that Morgana's locker mirror was a tiny little thing.

"Oh," said Merlyn, "the guys, here, have to dress formally on games days too?"

"Yeah," Morgana sighed and had this far away look in her eye, "it's a total power play."

"Uh...okay?" Merlyn said confused and looked at Gwen for answers, but she just shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh look!" said Freya softly, "there they are now."

Merlyn turned to look in the direction Freya was staring in and felt her mouth go dry. In that moment, Merlyn totally understood what Morgana meant when she said it was a power play, because holy shit did the guys look good. All six of them were wearing red dress shirts of varying shades and black dress pants. Gwaine was the first person she saw and he had his hair tied back, but wisps and strands of it fell out and it gave him a devil may care look, the next person she saw was Percy and boy did she see him. Percy's shirt looked like it was holding on for dear life and it just accentuated how muscular and big he is; the material of his dress shirt made it look like he was constantly flexing.

Elyan was standing beside Percy and he looked the complete opposite (not the bad kind, but the good kind), he looked extremely charming, and had this perfect gentleman look about him—especially with the white bow tie he had on. Leon and Lance's appeal could be gauged by the awe-struck sighs from their girlfriends (or 'not' girlfriend in Morgana's case) on Merlyn's left. Lance looked like a dashing hero coming out of a romantic movie, ready and willing to sweep Gwen up onto a horse and ride off into the sunset together. Leon, who normally lets his semi-long, wavy hair fall in front of his face like Gwaine did, had it partially gelled back (Morgana was seeing stars).

"Hey shorty," Arthur pinched her nose and grinned.
Merlyn pulled back and rubbed her nose while scowling at Arthur. But, she was thankful for the distraction, because...wow. Arthur looked...amazing. The crimson dress shirt he was wearing made him look more regal and imposing—as if the entire room should bow down to him, the fact that it made his arms look even more muscular...well that's just a bonus. The gold tie he had on just added to that prince-like effect. His hair, which usually looked soft and fluffy to Merlyn, was done in a way that looked as if he didn't put any effort at all into it, but still appeared as if some type of product was used. If Merlyn was quite honest with herself, she's never been this...turned on by a guy's appearance...ever.

It took her a moment to realize that she didn't respond to Arthur's greeting and quickly replied.

"Your tie is crooked, dollop head," Well...that's one way to respond, Merlyn internally winced.

"Shit, actually?" Arthur asked and tugged on the tie, "I thought it looked fine."

"Here, prat," Merlyn reached out and began to loosen his tie to re-do it, "let me."

Arthur jutted his chin upwards and if it weren't for his jaw line distracting her, she would have commented on how cute and child-like he looks right now. Merlyn undid the whole knot and re-aligned the tie; she was good at tying ties only because she's had to do it for Will so many times growing up that she's perfected the art.

"Say..." Percy began, "when did you two become..."

"So chummy?" Gwaine finished and it was the way he phrased that word made Merlyn fight off a blush.

"What are you two idiots implying?" drawled Arthur with his chin still raised and looked over at them from the corner of his eye.

"I don't know. Hey, Merlyn," Morgana said in a sing-song voice, "what do you think?"

Merlyn casually shrugged while folding the front of the tie downwards, "No hablo Ingles?"
She felt Arthur's body shake with silent laughter and everyone else around them chuckled. Just to mess with him, she tightened the tie a little harder than necessary. Arthur let out a choked/strangled noise and stepped back from her to glare. Merlyn grinned and blinked at him innocently. Arthur gently pulled the knot down so he could breath and rolled his eyes at her.

"Aw, how sweet," Valient's sneer nearly caught Merlyn off guard, "ears tied your tie for you."

"Lay off, Val," Elyan took a step forward closer to Merlyn.

Valient held his hands up and plastered on a fake smile, "I'm just here to wish the team good luck in the game today," then he turned to look at Arthur, "everyone is expecting you to lead us to victory."

Merlyn could see the stressed look in Arthur's eyes and quickly stepped in. "And he will. Along with everyone else on the team. They're in this together."

Valient gave her a look of disgust and scoffed, "Well aren't you a walking Hallamrk card, ears."

"Don't you have a rock you have to crawl back under?" Morgana said with as much hatred behind her words as she could muster.

Valient rolled his eyes and flipped her off while walking away. That upset Leon and Lance had to grab a hold of him before they made a scene...well an even bigger scene.

"Bell's going to ring soon," Lance said while letting go of Leon, once the latter calmed down, "we should head to class."

The gang nodded, the good mood was no longer there. Everyone said their goodbyes and broke off accordingly based on which class each one had with the other. Since Merlyn and Arthur both had the same schedule they headed off to Social together.

"You know," Merlyn began and looked up at Arthur, "I have a good feeling that you guys
are going to win today."

Arthur cracked a smile and humored her, "Oh? And how do you know that?"

"Well, because I'm going to be there," stated Merlyn as if it was the most obvious answer.

"Ha!" Arthur threw his head back and laughed, "God helps us all then."

"Hey!" Merlyn smacked Arthur's arm, but couldn't keep her straight face and laughed with Arthur, "I'll have you know I'm a good luck charm."

"Really now?" Arthur questioned and gently moved Merlyn closer to the wall to avoid the mass of students heading their way.

"Yes, really," repeated Merlyn, "Will even said so himself. He made me go to all of his games when he used to play, but then again..." Merlyn tapped her chin thoughtfully, "Will is also weirdly superstitious."

"Will? The guy that was with you at the park when you mowed me down like a semi-truck?" asked Arthur.

"Yea-hey!" snapped Merlyn, "I did not mow you down like a semi-truck!"

"Sure felt like it," Arthur mumbled and turned to look down at her, "so, uh...is he your-"

"Arthur! Good luck in the game today!" A boy, who looked to be either a freshman or sophomore, came up to them. The boy was the definition of overwhelming excitement, he looked up at Arthur as if Arthur was a god.

There's that poster boy smile again, Merlyn thought and looked away to give them privacy.

"Thanks! You comin' to watch the game?" Arthur's question was genuine, but Merlyn had an inkling that Valient's comment from earlier triggered his nerves (even though he claims he 'doesn't
"Oh boy, am I! Everyone in the AV club is super excited! I'm going to be the one manning the camera! I'll make sure to get your good side, Arthur!"

"Uh.." Arthur coughed and smiled, "thanks man."

"Arthur," Merlyn cut in before the overenthusiastic boy gave Arthur a stress ulcer before the game, "we're going to be late for Social."

"Oh sorry! I'll leave now! See you at the game later! Good luck! Even though you don't-"

"Thanks for your enthusiasm!" Merlyn chipped in and proceeded to push Arthur forward, "means a lot! Best be getting to class now! Bye!"

Merlyn could feel Arthur's body shaking with silent laughter. When they were far enough away she rolled her eyes at him.

"You really shouldn't let people stress you out like that," Merlyn stated.

Arthur glanced down at her and his smile dropped slightly, "I'm not stressed, short stack."

"Could've fooled me, dollop head," sighed Merlyn, "but, for what it's worth, win or lose, you'll still have people there supporting you."

"Even you?" Arthur asked and Merlyn read the seriousness on his face as a prelude to a joke at her expense, so she smiled and prepared to banter with him.

"Especially me," Merlyn emphasized, "I mean, who else can read the stress on your face and lead you out of danger?" She threw a pointed look over her shoulder.

Arthur rolled his eyes and smiled, "Okay there. What do I look like stressed?"
Merlyn squinted her eyes at Arthur's face, as if she was trying to picture the look on him. The two of them walked into the classroom and headed for their desks in the far back corner. Once they took their seats (Arthur sat sideways so he could still talk with Merlyn for now) Merlyn snapped her fingers and made a wide gesture on her face.

"You kind of get this look on your face like a toad being violently squished and his eyes would bulge out like this," Merlyn dramatically widen her eyes, "and his mouth would open like this," she opened her mouth and pulled it down into an exaggerated frown.

Arthur looked caught off guard for a second, but he threw his head back and laughed hysterically. He tried to cover his mouth, but that just made him laugh harder. Merlyn had to join in with his laughing fit, just because of how hard he was laughing. At some point though they both stopped, because Mrs. Isolde looked over at them with an amused look. Even some people in the class were giving them odd looks, but Merlyn chalked their confusion up to the fact that they normally see them yelling at each other-not laughing with each other.

But, as Merlyn settled into her seat and opened her notebook to begin taking notes, she couldn't help but feel a sense of accomplishment.

'At least he's no longer stressing out.' Merlyn thought with a smile.

"Come on, Merlyn, we have to hurry if we want good seats," Gwen grabbed hold of Merlyn's hand as they made their way through, what felt like, the entire student body.

"Right," Merlyn said and squeezed between two guys.

"This is so scary," gasped Freya as she tugged Gwen closer to herself.

"SINGLE FILE LINE!" ordered Morgana as she lead their little convoy forward.

"The guys are so lucky they got to leave last period early," grumbled Merlyn as she glared at another guy who stepped on her foot because he couldn't see her.
"We're almost there!" Gwen said.

When the four of them finally made it to the gym it was packed. Dozens of Camelot students created a sea of red on one side of the bleachers and a dozen more of Essetir students created a sea of blue on the other half. There was music playing over the speakers and people were shouting to one another just to have a conversation. Merlyn wasn't sure how Morgana managed to get them seats near the court, but she wasn't about to question it. Merlyn watched as both teams began to warm up and go through quick drills. As great as the basketball jersey's looked, all red and with gold and silver accents, Merlyn kind of missed the dress shirts and dress pants. Each jersey had the standard format: on the front it was just their number, and on the back it was last name at the top and number right below. Merlyn looked for each of the guys and their numbers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DuLac</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knightly</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stronghold</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pendragon</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why did it not surprise Merlyn that Arthur's number would be one? She smirked to herself and shook her head. Merlyn felt a bit guilty about not paying much attention to the other eight players on the team, but she didn't really know them well enough. Some of the guys she recognized because they were in one of her classes, but other ones she'd never even met before.

"The game should be starting soon," Morgana said and sat up a little straighter to look at Leon.

Merlyn found herself searching for Arthur and was, again, surprised to see him already
staring at her. He was dribbling the ball between his legs and looked at her with a question on his face. Not knowing exactly what he was asking she smirked and mouthed something to him.

"Im...press....me."

That must have done the trick, because he smirked and walked back to the bench before the buzzer rang, signalling the start of the game. Morgana and Gwen didn't notice the interaction between her and Arthur, because they were both wishing their players luck. Freya on the other hand was watching her steadily with her cat-like eyes. Merlyn blushed and tried to say something, but Freya just giggled and patted her on the arm.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" A female voice came on over the loud speaker, "boys and girls! Welcome to the first game of the season! And boy, is this going to a spectacle or what! There's no secret that there's a deep rivalry between The Camelot Knights..."

The Camelot side erupted in ear-splitting cheers and screams.

"and The Essetir Mercenaries,"

Everyone that attended for Essetir cheered and screamed just as loudly.

"Today marks the first day of not only our season, but the start of the Inter-City Tournament, for the illustrious Inter-City Cup! Now, as everyone knows, the Cup still resides at Essetir Prep, but all that can change this year with Arthur and his Knights fighting for it!"

The Essetir section booed at the mention of Arthur and everyone. Merlyn looked over at the Essetir team line up and spotted Cenred right away. He was booing with everyone else on the team and Merlyn frowned at their poor sportsmanship.

"Now, without further delay! Let's have the first line out and do our jump ball!"

Merlyn sat up straighter in her seat as she watched Arthur, Gwaine, Percy, and two other guys step out onto the court. Arthur was going to be the one to do the jump ball with Cenred; the referee must have told them to shake hands, because Arthur held his hand out amicably, but Cenred just slapped it and got into a crouched stance. Arthur mimicked his pose and the ref walked up between them and held the ball. Everyone else on the court arranged themselves accordingly with a
3:1 formation on each side.

TWEEET

Her breath caught in her throat as she watched the ball go straight up into the air. Arthur and Cenred both jumped for it.

"YES!" Merlyn cheered along with everyone else when Arthur got the ball.

THIRD QUARTER

The game was now underway and they were in the third quarter. There was 2 minutes left on the clock before the buzzer goes off to start the last quarter. Merlyn's throat felt sore from all the cheering she was doing, but it was such a close game. Plus, it didn't help that Essetir played dirty; Merlyn glanced over at Lance who was on the ground trying to stretch out a Charlie horse in his thigh and felt both sympathy and anger.

It was the first time that Merlyn saw Gwen nearly lose her shit on someone else. Suffice to say, when Lance hit the ground in pain earlier (one of the Mercenaries rammed their knee into Lance's thigh), Gwen somehow leapt over the four rows in front of them and rushed over to Lance in record time. It was almost comical, the look of shock on Uncle Gaius's face when he was beaten to a patient. When he confirmed that Lance was okay and Lance, himself, got up (with help from Elyan and Gwen) did Gwen go ape shit on the other player. The ref had pulled a yellow card out of his shirt pocket, but was unsure who to give it to...the other player or Gwen. Merlyn and Freya both had to rush down to the court to pull Gwen away before she could hold the game up any longer. Morgana had stayed back to guard their seats, but she was yelling just as loudly from there as well.

KNTS 79

MERCNARIES 77

Gwaine had the ball and was dribbling outside of the three point line-looking for someone to pass to or a clear shot. Merlyn was amazed by how fast Gwaine could move with the ball and if she had blinked in that moment, she would have missed the crossover he did and broke his opponent's
ankles (figuratively speaking, of course). Gwaine took the three and everyone lost it when the ball went through the hoop.

**KNIGHTS 82**

"GO GWAINE!" Merlyn cheered and waved her scarf in the air.

Cenred and Number 13 both quickly grabbed the ball and went to the baseline. Number 13 was going to check the ball in to Cenred. Arthur and Elyan were doing a hard press; which meant they were the only ones that didn't run back over half court. Cenred somehow managed to get the ball, thus forcing Elyan and Arthur to hustle back on defence. Number 13 rushed back down the court and got back into position. Cenred dribbled up the court and tried to get around Arthur, but Arthur wouldn't give an inch which meant the only other option was to pass the ball off.

"NO!" yelled Merlyn as she watched Cenred pass to one of the posts and they managed to make the shot outside of the three point line.

**MERCENARIES 80**

"COME ON, GUYS!" Morgana shouted and had cupped her hands over her mouth.

**BZZZZT**

"It's okay. It's okay," Merlyn chanted while wiping her palms down the tops of her thighs, "there's still one more quarter left. We're still ahead by one basket."

Morgana nodded and looked over at Merlyn with a crazed look on her face, "Yeah. Yeah. You're right. The boys have got this."

"We'll win. We will!" Freya said positively, but her fingers were knotted together.

"I'm going to see how Lance is doing," said Gwen as she got up from her seat.
Merlyn looked up at the large digital scoreboard and saw the two minute timer counting down. All the guys were at their benches getting a drink of water and huddled together to talk strategy. Even from a distance Merlyn could see how tense the team looked, especially Arthur—if the rigidness of his shoulders was anything to go off of. She could see the exhaustion on their faces, even feel it, but it was overtaken by the sheer determination to beat Essetir in this game. Gwen, the ever doting girlfriend, was currently coddling Lance and helping him massage his thigh. Well at least someone's enjoying the game, Merlyn thought.

Two minutes came and went. Arthur was not on the line going back in, and he took a seat on the bench. Leon, Elyan, Percy, and two other guys were starting; no one bothered to call out an opponent's number because they were doing zone defense (which meant they guard whoever enters their part of the court). It was Camelot's ball and Number 15 was checking it to Elyan.

"FUCK!" cursed Merlyn as Number 8 on the other team intercepted the ball and did a lay-up.

Merlyn clasped her hands together and squeezed them tightly. Please, Merlyn silently prayed to whatever it was that apparently made her a good luck charm, please let our team win, she finished her thoughts.

7 minutes left.

TWEEET

The ref blew his whistle and signalled for both teams to sub their players. Arthur, Gwaine, and Lance both ran onto the court while their counterparts ran off. Arthur immediately went to guard Cenred as Number 9 on their team checked the ball in. Cenred managed to get the ball and began to dribble down the court. Arthur beat him to the net and blocked his shot, but the ref called a foul: 1 hit forearm, he raised two fingers, two shots. Merlyn hated seeing that look of smug satisfaction on Cenred's face as he walked to the top of the key. But, Arthur looked livid and moved to stand closer to the half court line. Everyone lined up accordingly for a free throw and the ref checked the ball to Cenred.

"First shot."

The entire gym went silent as Cenred dribbled the ball a few times before stopping and crouching down slightly. In the next moment he extended and released the ball. Merlyn glared at the
ball, in an attempt to make it miss the net...but no such luck. The Essetir side of the gym broke out into cheers and excited screams. It all settled down, when the ref checked the ball back to Cenred.

"Last shot."

All the guys got into ready positions and watched the net to grab the rebound. Are you for real?! Merlyn thought and was again deafened by the screaming coming from Essetir. Merlyn caught the smirk Cenred gave Arthur and it riled her up.

KNIGHTS     82

MERCENARIES     84

The game resumed and the guys were being hard pressed by Cenred and his men. It was almost like watching a ruthless battle on the court, only things missing were the swords and horses. Merlyn glanced over at Coach Caerleon for the first time since the game started and was surprised when she saw how calm he looked. He was an older looking gentleman, with salt and pepper colored hair, a well-trimmed beard to match, and a slightly paunchy look about him. His eyes though, were like those of a general leading his troops into battle: calculating and determined. There wasn't a look of worry on his face and he stood stock still by the scorekeeper's table.

It seemed like Merlyn underestimated the strength of Essetir, they were pretty tough opponents, Merlyn thought grudgingly. The ball kept transferring between sides, but no one was able to make a basket yet. Coach Caerleon called a time out at one point to re-focus the team, whatever it was he said must have worked, because there was a new fire in all the guy's eyes'.

Merlyn glanced up at the clock and saw that there was only 1 minute left to the game. Where the hell did the time go? Merlyn frantically thought and refocused on the game. The score hasn't changed, but the ferocity of both teams did. Team Camelot was pushing for another three pointer to win the game and Team Essetir was trying to stall out the last minute. Arthur had the ball and was coming back up half court, all while scoping ahead to see which play he could call.

Maybe it was all the adrenaline in her system. Maybe it was the numbers rapidly decreasing on the clock. Or, maybe it was the burning desire in her to see her school and team win; the feeling was so strong that she could almost taste the victory on the tip of her tongue.

Which was why Merlyn suddenly stood up and cupped her hands over her mouth while
yelling at the top of her lungs.

"WILL YOU HURRY UP AND TAKE THE DAMN SHOT, YOU PRAT!"

Everyone, minus the guys on the court, turned to look at Merlyn. Who was the only one standing...and has just finished yelling at Arthur. The gym suddenly went silent and only the sound of squeaking sneakers and the ball being dribbled was heard. The blush that formed, crept up her neck, splattered over her cheeks, and pooled in her ears. She accidentally made eye contact with Coach Caerleon and she swore she saw him smile behind his beard. Merlyn saw all the guys smirk at her. In the next moment Arthur did a crossover which brought Cenred to the ground; he moved a step back and took the shot. A stray thought crossed her mind when she decided that Arthur's form, when he was shooting, looked beautiful.

BZZZZT

KNIGHTS 85

MERCENARIES 84

"And The Camelot Knights win!"

"WE WON!" Morgana leapt to her feet and threw her arms around Gwen and Freya, who were both jumping up from excitement.

Merlyn was happily clapping and cheering with everyone in the stands. But her breath caught in her throat when she saw Arthur look over at her and beam. He gave her a look that said 'impressed yet?' Merlyn continued clapping and nodded her head; she knew she had a big, dopey smile on her face, but she could care less...they won!

And true to Arthur's words...Cenred was crying.
Happy Holidays Everyone!

Things have been so hectic these past few weeks. Finals went really well for me. Work gave me a bunch more shifts than I had planned for, but money is always nice to have.

I'm sorry to have left you guys waiting in the dark for so long. I wish there was a broadcasting system on this site that allowed me to post news updates or something (maybe there is and I just don't know where it is).

I hope you guys are enjoying this slow burn between the two leads. Personally, I love a good build up before the inevitable happens, so I hope you guys are willing to stay on this ride with me.

Comment if you enjoyed. Leave behind a kudos maybe. Thanks for reading.

All the best wishes to everyone in this new year. Make your mistakes. Learn to love them. Forgive yourself.

Sincerely with lots of thanks and gratitude,
-SS

"How are things in Ealdor, mom?" Merlyn had her cell phone wedged tightly between her shoulder and left ear. She was in the midst of mixing her cookie batter.

"Oh you know, same old, same old, nothing too exciting ever really happens here. How are things for you, sweetheart?" Hunith asked.

Merlyn poured the chocolate chips in next. "Things are great, mom! You know, Arthur and the guys totally crushed Essetir at the game last Friday. The score ended up being 85 to 84, it was so close!"

"That sounds fun," Hunith said, "I'm so glad you've settled in nicely."

"Yeah," Merlyn smiled, but added softly, "I still miss you a bunch, though..."
"As I you," said Hunith in her soft motherly voice, "but, I'll be coming up for Christmas, along with Will's mum. So you'll see us then."

"Oh? Is she back from her trip?" Merlyn started to roll the dough into little balls. "She was still on vacation when I left Ealdor."

Hunith hummed slightly and Merlyn could hear paper rustling in the background. "I believe her flight gets back in next week. I'll be driving out to pick her up from the airport."

"Tell her I said hi." Merlyn grabbed the box of dark chocolate wafers and opened it.

"Oh yeah, mom," said Merlyn as she grabbed the container of sea salt, "do I put the sea salt on before or after the dark chocolate wafers?"

"They stick to the dough better if you put it on before," explained Hunith. "What are the cookies for, dear?"

"Morgana and Gwen are having a bake sale as part of their campaigning strategy. I'm part of the campaign team and my job is to help make the baked goods. Morgana is not happy that Vivian plans on running against her. Apparently, Vivian is having a kissing booth as part of her campaign strategy, something about a kiss for a vote." Merlyn put a pinch of sea salt on each cookie and then shoved the dark chocolate wafer on overtop.

"Oh my, what else are they doing for their campaign?"

"Well, the guys have to help hand out flyers for them...oh ha!" Merlyn suddenly remembered and tried not to dissolve back into a fit of laughter. "Morgana is trying to bully Arthur into wearing a donkey costume to attract more voters. She thinks it'll appeal to the general public."

"How...nice," Hunith said while trying to hide her chuckle.

"Yeah," Merlyn giggled, "I told Arthur he should do it since he's as stubborn as one. You should have seen the look he gave me!"
"So, Arthur and Morgana are..." Hunith trailed off.

"Half-siblings. Same dad, different moms," Merlyn explained while opening the oven and sliding the tray of cookies into it.

"Although, Morgana is older than Arthur by a couple of months, speaking of which..." Merlyn mumbled off-handedly, "her birthday is coming up."

"Their age gap is also a sore point for him too," said Merlyn as she switched her phone to her other ear. "But, then again, he's so easy to poke fun at, because he gets riled up so easily. The other day in Social we were looking at this hierarchy pyramid people had back in the day, and he thought, since his name was Arthur, that he'd be a prince or king-like from the legend. So, when Mrs. Isolde pulled up a picture of a peasant with blond hair, I pointed to it and whispered 'look. It's your ancestor.' Merlyn tried to contain her giggle. "He was so offended, mom."

"Merlyn, dear," Hunith said with a hint of amusement in her tone.

Merlyn took a bite out of one of the brownies she made earlier. "Yweah, mom?"

"I'm glad you've managed to make such great friends," Hunith changed what she was going to say at the last second, and even though Merlyn couldn't see it, she knew her mom was smiling. "Also, Arthur sounds like such an interesting boy," she added.


Hunith chuckled. "Whatever you say, dear."

By the end of Sunday night, Merlyn had managed to fill two boxes full of baked goods. Occasionally she caught Uncle Gaius slip into the kitchen and grab a few treats before retreating to his office, but she didn't think Morgana would mind a few missing treats. The only downside to this was that Merlyn had to wake up early tomorrow to go to school with Uncle Gaius in order to transport the two big boxes. She hummed quietly to herself while folding the box lids.
Merlyn went to bed early that night and made sure everything was ready to go for the morning so she could sleep until the last possible moment. Even so, the next morning when her alarm clock went off, she still woke up in a daze and fumbled around her room disoriented. It was a miracle she even managed to make it to the car dressed and unscathed (there was a close call with the stairs). Merlyn took a quick power nap on the drive to school and asked Uncle Gaius to drop her off at the front doors before going to the parking lot.

"Are you sure you don't need any help carrying these boxes in, Merlyn?" Uncle Gaius said over his shoulder as he watched her unload the two big boxes from the trunk.

"I'll be fine!" Merlyn's response was muffled from behind the boxes, but he caught it.

She closed the trunk (with some difficulty) and started to walk towards the front steps. The two boxes stacked on top of one another was nearly the same height as Merlyn and she could barely see around them, let alone over top of them.

"Need some help there, shorty?" Suddenly the box on top disappeared and Merlyn could see ahead of her.

"Thanks, dollop head!" Merlyn grinned and followed after Arthur. "Early practice today?"

"Yeah. Coach has stuff to do after school," Arthur said while shrugging his left shoulder to re-adjust his duffle bag.

"Morning, sweetheart!" Gwaine said cheerfully as he ran up beside the two of them.

"Hi, Gwaine," Merlyn suddenly felt dwarfed standing between the two guys.

All the guys were standing at the tables set up in front of the office, Merlyn headed over and put her box down, and Arthur moved beside her to set his down.

"What's in the boxes anyways?" Arthur asked while nodding his chin to the box he carried in.
'Hey, Merlyn, don't tell the guys what task I assigned you, okay?' Morgana's words replayed themselves to Merlyn.

"I don't see why I can't," Merlyn muttered under her breath. They were nice enough to help set the tables up early and everything. What an odd request, thought Merlyn.

"What?" Arthur leaned down. "I didn't catch that."

"Oh, I said, it's just the baked goods for the campaign today. Morgana asked me to make treats to hand out to people." Merlyn was in the process of opening the box in front of her when the sudden silence caught her attention.

"Guys?" Merlyn said and turned to look at the group.

"So..." Percy began and took a step forward.

"What you're saying is..." Elyan shifted slightly so he was now between Merlyn and Arthur.

"There's baked goods...in both these boxes?" Leon glanced between the two boxes with a predatory look in his eyes.

Merlyn nodded. "Yeah. Took me all weekend to finish. I have cookies, brownies, oat-fudge bars, Oreo cupcakes. I made almond brittle instead of my mom's peanut butter one, because of aller-hey!" Merlyn turned her head in time to see Gwaine pluck her box out from under her hands.

"Mmm..." Arthur moaned as he took a bite out of one of the brownies.

"Hey!" Merlyn exclaimed and tried to squeeze past Elyan and Lance. "You guys aren't allowed to eat these! They're for the campaign!"

"Dude, try this one," Percy lifted Merlyn out of the way and accepted the cupcake Lance was holding out.
Percy let out a filthy moan. "Oh God!"

"Guys!" Merlyn called out and tried to push her way into the circle the guys formed.

"These are for the other students!" She tried to squeeze in between Leon and Gwaine, but Gwaine hip-checked her out of the circle.

"These are so good," Percy spoke around his mouthful of brownie. If Merlyn wasn’t so desperate to stop them from eating all the baked goods, she would have been impressed by how fast Percy was devouring everything in sight.

"At least leave something for us to giveaway," Merlyn said in exasperation as she tried to push against Arthur's back. All he did was push back in response and ignored her.

None of the guys paid her any attention, they were too consumed with trying all the treats Merlyn made. She noticed her chance to get into the middle of the circle on her third attempt around them. Merlyn dropped to her knees and dove between Percy's legs, he backed up slightly in shock, but she was already through and maneuvered her way in front of the boxes. She quickly put whatever plates the guys pulled out back into the two boxes, and pushed the flaps down.

"Hey!" exclaimed all the guys.

Merlyn turned around and held her hand up. "Stop! You savages!"

All six guys paused and stared down at her little form. Merlyn gulped and realized that she technically was no match for them, especially, since Percy could easily pick her up again like she was a feather. The smirks on their faces told her that they were thinking the exact same thing and they all took another step towards her.

"Wait! Wait! Wait!" Merlyn extended her hand again and quickly looked over at Leon, stalling until she could think of what to do next.

"Leon! You should be on my side," Merlyn said, the words rapidly tumbling out of her mouth, "I mean, it is Morgana we're talking about here. Do you honestly think she'll be cool when she finds out you guys ate away her campaign?!!"
A thoughtful look crossed Leon's face, but then he shook his head and shrugged. "I'll deal with that bridge when I get there."

They all took another step forward and Merlyn pressed herself back into the table and boxes. Then she looked over at Lance.

"Lance!" He was her last hope. "What about Gwen?"

"What about Gwen?" repeated Lance as he looked around Merlyn at the boxes.

"She's running as Morgana's VP!" Merlyn said indignantly. "How do you think she'll feel if she finds out you guys did such a thing?"

Lance blinked and nodded his head gravely. Merlyn let out a sigh of relief. Oh good-

"I'll make sure I apologize to her tenfold. Perce." Lance made a pointed gesture in Merlyn's direction.

What.

"Guys!" Merlyn was out of options as they closed in on her.

"Come on, shorty, out of the way," Arthur grinned and reached out for her.

TWEEET

"BOYS! PRACTICE HAS STARTED! GET YOUR BUTTS IN GEAR!" Coach Caerleon hollered from down the hallway.

Oh happy day, thought Merlyn as she let out a sigh. She smiled smugly at the guys and tilted her head in the direction of the gym. She had to play defense as each guy tried to reach around her to
grab another treat, but she managed to swat their greedy hands away. They all let out a dejected sigh.

"Run along now you savages," said Merlyn as she turned back around to her boxes. She was grinning in victory and mentally thanked Coach Caerleon for stopping them.

It took her off guard when someone's arm wrapped around her and pulled her into their chest. She looked up and saw Arthur reaching into the box with his other hand; he managed to grab another cookie and popped it into his mouth as he released her. His movements were so quick that she didn't even get a chance to register what just happened until it was too late.

"Clot pole!" Merlyn said and scowled at him as he walked away.

Arthur threw his head back and laughed while waving at her over his shoulder.

Merlyn managed to set the table up with all the treats she made, and she even hid a separate plate away for the boys later when they finished practice. Gwen and Morgana arrived ten minutes after the whole debacle, with arms full of decorations, flyers, and posters. Merlyn managed to keep it under wraps that the boys ate a small chunk of the pastries, and Morgana was none the wiser.

"A little higher on your right, Merlyn," Morgana said as she eyeballed the poster Merlyn was currently trying to put up.

"Here?" Merlyn had to push up onto her tip toes and extend her arms high over her head.

"Eh..." Gwen grimaced slightly while tilting her hand up and down, "maybe a little higher."

"Guys," Merlyn groaned with both her arms, extended to their max, above her head, "I don't have much 'higher' to go, I'm only so tall."

Arthur's voice was all of a sudden behind her. "That's cause you're such a short little gremlin, here."

The poster shifted up to a higher spot than Merlyn could ever hope to reach. She turned around and saw how close Arthur was to her back; he looks even better sweaty, Merlyn thought
absently and blushed at her own thoughts. Arthur managed to tape the poster into place and took a step back from Merlyn. He was now wearing red basketball shorts and his jersey, compared to earlier when he was in his gray sweats and blue t-shirt, observed Merlyn. She looked over and caught the curious look on Morgana and Gwen’s faces.

"I am not a gremlin, you...turnip head!" Merlyn was trying to hide how flustered she was.

Arthur rolled his eyes. "I'm not a turnip then."

"Aren't you suppose to be practicing?" Merlyn said and changed the topic. "Don't start slacking off now, my lord."

"Pft," Arthur scoffed and smirked at her. He managed to pinch Merlyn's nose before she had a chance to bat his hand away.

"Stop that!" snapped Merlyn as she took a step back and scowled.

"See you girls later!" Arthur said and jogged back to the gym, but stopped at the water fountain before he went through the doors.

"What was that about?" Morgana looked over at Merlyn with her signature piercing look. Both siblings have the same smirk, Merlyn thought.

She played dumb and tilted her head to the side. "What was what about?"

"Merlyn," Morgana started with her eyebrow raised.

"Where should the next poster go?" Gwen interjected and held up the red and gold poster. That read 'Vote Pendragon."

"I'm thinking on the pillar at the end of the hallway," said Merlyn as she gestured to her left, glad for the topic change.
Morgana sighed and rolled her eyes, but humoured them with the topic change. Merlyn had the feeling that this topic will come back sooner or later to bite her in the butt (she was sincerely hoping for later). "We should also put some near the entrance of the school, as well."

The three of them managed to put up all the posters and set up the tri-fold beside the baked goods. Freya came later on and helped string up the streamers above their table. By the time all the other students came, their table was primed to be an eye-catching attraction. Morgana, ever the leader, drew people to them and began to share what her platform was going to be this year. Gwen, her second in command, didn't draw attention like Morgana did, but instead she was able to hold the crowd's interest with her sweet smile and kind nature. Merlyn was impressed with the duo's combined powers. Her task was to hand out the treats, while Freya handed out flyers.

"Can-" Arthur leaned over to try and pluck a brownie out of the tray in front of Merlyn. She quickly stopped him with a glare.

"No." She shifted them out of his reach. From the corner of her eye, she saw Morgana nod her head and turn back to the crowd in front of her. The guys stood in front of Merlyn (having just come out from practice) looking so dejected that she decided to put them out of their misery.

Merlyn quickly leaned over towards the guys and whispered. "I left a tray in the box over there for you guys. Don't let Morgana see."

"Thanks, short stack," Arthur grinned and fought with the other guys to try and get to the box she gestured at.

"I'm not that short," Merlyn grumbled to herself. She turned back to the crowd and smiled as she passed out more treats.

Their group was only allowed to stay for so long before they had to pack up and get ready to head to homeroom. The boys were in charge of taking down since they weren't much help earlier because they were in practice. Everything was going smoothly until Morgana looked at them suspiciously when she saw crumbs on Leon's shirt, but she didn't get a chance to question them because the warning bell rang.

"Merlyn," Elyan sat down beside her and pulled out his binder, "did you finish the C++ assignment Khilgharra sent us over the weekend?"
Merlyn nodded. "Yeah, want to see it?"

"Please," Elyan held his hands together in front of him, "you're a life saver."

"I kind of got confused when he wanted us to translate the code three different times. But, I think I got it right in the end." Merlyn pulled out several sheets of paper and handed them to Elyan.

"I don't get why he makes us write the code out," Elyan said while looking at Merlyn's paper and his own, "it's such a waste of time and paper."

"I just don't get him in general." Merlyn shrugged.

"It looks pretty cool written out," Arthur mused while leaning over Merlyn to look at the sheets of paper.

"But, you're not the one having to write it out, turnip head." Merlyn rolled her eyes and gave Arthur a pointed look.

Arthur returned her look with a serious one. "Yeah, but I heard gremlins make the best servants. Maybe that's what Khilgharra is training you for. Then you can help me write my English essay."

"Pft," Merlyn couldn't hide her smile, "okay there, my lord. As if I was born to serve you."

"Who knows," Arthur shrugged and nudged her shoulder with his own, "maybe you are."

Merlyn shook her head in exasperation, but the grin on her face matched Arthur's. Everyone at the table was silently fascinated by the scene in front of them, but no one said anything about it—which was surprising, considering Gwaine was there.

When the bell rang, Freya, Merlyn, and Arthur headed off to English together. As of recently, Arthur has been sitting at Freya and Merlyn's table, and she'd be lying if she said no one in the class has noticed this change—especially, Vivian and Sophia.
"Arthur," Sophia purred and leaned against the table with her arms pressed up underneath her chest, "good morning."

Merlyn looked over at Freya and the two of them shared a mildly impressed 'huh' look. Arthur noticed their exchange and awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck. Everyone could see how gifted Sophia was in that department of her body.

"Yeah, Sophia?" He said. "What's up?"

Sophia moved so that she was now beside Arthur and leaned against him. "Oh, I was just thinking, it's been so long since we've gone out together and had some...alone time."

There was a moment of silence as her words settled over them. Arthur coughed and quickly looked over at Merlyn and Freya. The two of them suddenly became very fascinated with the ceiling tiles.

"Uh...I've been busy with practice," Arthur said and tried to subtly shift away from Sophia. "Coach is working us hard this season."

"Well," Sophia followed his movement fluidly and placed her hand on his shoulder, "I could always give you a massage."

"Uh...I...no thanks, I'm good," said Arthur with a sharp nod and gently pushed her hand away.

Merlyn didn't realize she was smirking until Sophia caught sight of it and sneered at her.

"What are you smirking at, Merlyn?"

At the sound of her name, she turned and blinked at Sophia. The smirk slipping off her face.

Merlyn shrugged and tried to sound as innocent as possible. "Nothing really. Why? Do I
need a reason to smirk? What do you think, prat?" She looked over at Arthur in amusement, and she could see that there was a ghost of a smile on his lips.

"Just because Arthur's sitting at your lonely little table, doesn't mean you can start having these wild fantasies about him," Sophia saw their exchange and was baiting Merlyn. Lord, help her if she didn't have some form self-control.

"Sophia," Arthur began as he looked between the two of them, but mostly at Merlyn. Even he could see this might get nasty. Freya was staring at them silently with wide eyes and knotted fingers.

"I'm pretty sure we're," Merlyn gestured between herself and Freya with a fake smile on her face, "not the ones feeling lonely here. You've heard the saying, two's company, three's a crowd, and well..." She put on a fake look of curiosity, "four's just an inconvenience...isn't it?"

If looks could kill, Merlyn thought and tried not to smile. It wasn't as if she was purposely trying to provoke...okay maybe she was trying to provoke Sophia-just a little bit. But, what did Sophia expect? She insulted their table, and sure, maybe this interaction wouldn't have happened if Arthur stayed at the table he was at originally, but what difference does it make if he changed seats? Merlyn just didn't like how Sophia was insulting her and Freya at the expense of Arthur's so-called 'popularity.'

"I can't see why you want to sit with them, Arthur," Sophia said with displeasure.

"You don't have to see anything," Merlyn started talking before Arthur could say something, she tilted her head in his direction. "he has his own eyes."

Sophia's mouth curved into a small smile. "But, not his own mouth?"

Shit, point for Sophia, Merlyn thought angrily and couldn't hold back her glare.

"Maybe it's best you talk so much, Merlyn," Sophia rolled her eyes and waved her hand in the air dismissively, "because it's not like you'll use your mouth for anything else that'll be satisfying for Arthur."

Freya let out a small squeak and covered her mouth in shock. Arthur, at that moment, was
taking a drink out of his water bottle, but his eyes widen slightly and he ended up choking. Merlyn felt the heat start to rise and pool in the tips of her ears and on her cheeks. She clenched her hands into fists under the table to try and redirect the blood flow. Sophia reached over and patted Arthur's back to stop his coughing. He tried to wave her hand away and get himself under control.

"Little. Virgin. Ears." Sophia stated in a sing-song voice and gave Merlyn the most malicious smile she's seen thus far.

Sophia took Merlyn's lack of response as verification to her newly announced sexual status to the table. But, even if Merlyn had denied that statement, it'd be a lie anyways. The satisfied look on Sophia's bothered Merlyn to no end. It's not like she's ashamed that she's a virgin, and she sure as hell won't let Sophia walk away from this with the last words.

Merlyn smiled and she knew it caught Sophia off guard from the look of surprise on her face. "I'm so flattered, Sophia."

"Why?" said Sophia with disgust.

"Because," Merlyn fluttered her eyelashes and placed a hand over her heart, "I never knew you cared so much about my private life. I'm so glad that there's someone out there worrying on behalf of my sake, so I don't have to."

Now that Arthur was no longer nearly choking to death on his water, he let out a bark of laughter and shook his head while looking at Merlyn with a smirk on his lips.

"You're so fucking weird, Merlyn," sneered Sophia. With a dramatic flourish of her hair, she turned and walked back to her table.

Which means...Merlyn got the last word. She grinned and looked over at Freya, who was quietly clapping for her with a smile that matched Merlyn's upbeat attitude.

"Not bad, tiny," Arthur gave her an impressed look, "you handled that like a champ."

Merlyn rolled her eyes and gave Arthur a 'really?' look. "Thanks, bigfoot, I'm pretty good at fighting my own battles."
Arthur held his hands up and silently agreed with what Merlyn just said. Ms. Finna came into the classroom at that moment all flustered and hair flying out of her bun. She apologized for not being here earlier and went on to explain why. Merlyn turned her focus to the front of the classroom and waited for the lesson to start. Ms. Finna continued on explaining how everyone should have a rough draft of their essay outline ready to present to her by the end of class. Merlyn glanced down at Freya's outline and was impressed by the sheer amount of text on it. Arthur nudged her knee with his own, she looked over at him and nodded her head in acknowledgment to his silent thank-you. Merlyn had him email his outline to her last night so she could help him go over it; their phone call consisted of insults and outline corrections, but she had to admit it was fun just talking with Arthur.

"See you in gym, Freya," Merlyn said as she got up with Arthur.

"Bye!" Freya said and headed for the door.

Merlyn and Arthur both headed to Biology through the large mass of students. She was going to try and squeeze her way between two big guys, just as they blocked her path when Arthur redirected her in front of the open space he had. Another thing Merlyn has come to appreciate about having Arthur around was the fact that he never loses track of her. What she means by that is, well, having him around means she doesn't have to duck and dodge her way through the big crowds. She doesn't know if he's even conscious that he's doing it, but he'll gently put his hand on her lower back and guide her through in front of him. Or, he'll have her walk closest to the wall and he takes on any incoming hallway traffic. The first thing she appreciates about Arthur? Well...Merlyn glanced up at him as fast as she could and looked away before he noticed...she's happy they're friends.

"Hey, guys!" Merlyn said as she took her seat behind Lance and Percy.

"Sup?" Percy held his fist out. She tapped it and leaned forward in her chair.

"Ready for the lab today?" Lance put his binder back into his backpack once he pulled out his pre-lab.

"I heard the Creature breeds these frogs just so we can dissect them," Arthur leaned forward onto his arms and spoke in a quieter voice.

Merlyn pulled a face. "That's disgusting and cruel."
"But, very Creature-like," Percy said in an tone that no one could argue with.

"Prelabssss in!" Mr. Manticore called out from the front of the room. "Lab coatssss on!"

Lance collected their pre-labs and went up to hand them in, while Arthur went to grab them lab coats hanging on the hooks at the back of the classroom. Merlyn and Percy went to grab the dissection kits and gloves for their group. Once they were all set, Mr. Manticore went around with a large white bucket and a pair of tongs, he pulled out one frog for every group of four. Some of the girls and guys squealed quietly as their frog was plopped in the dissecting tray in front of them. Merlyn couldn't help but scrunch up her nose when their frog was delivered because the strong smell of formaldehyde was so unpleasant; it brought into focus that this frog was very much dead. She looked at its offset greenish, slightly gray-tinged, skin, and how its limbs laid limply on the side; she didn't want to be mean to the poor dead thing, but...it looked quite ugly.

A spark of inspiration hit Merlyn, in that moment, and she nudged Arthur with her elbow. He looked down at her and raised his eyebrow.

"How are you feeling about this whole dissection thing?" Merlyn asked and tried to keep her smile contained.

Arthur looked at her in bewilderment. "Fine? It's already dead, Merlyn."

Merlyn nodded her head. "No. No. I know. But, I just thought you'd have some objections to this, that's all."

Percy and Lance watched on with burning curiosity.

Arthur looked up at the ceiling and then back down at her. "And why would I have objections?"

"Because," Merlyn picked the frog up with her gloved hands and turned it slightly so that it would technically be 'staring' at Arthur upside down, "you're going to be dissecting one of your kind. I just thought you'd be against manslaughter-well in this case, frogslaughter."

A beat passed between the four of them as Merlyn's words sunk in. Lance and Percy suddenly burst out laughing. Merlyn giggled and moved the frog back and forth in her hands so its
limbs flopped back and forth. Arthur blinked at her and kept his expression neutral, but she could see how hard he was trying to fight the smile on his face.

"Heh," Arthur started to laugh, "shorty, I told you, it can't be manslaughter when it's already dead."

"How mean of your brethren to say such things," Merlyn said while placing the frog back into its tray.

"Focusss," Mr. Manticore hissed as he walked past their table.

The four of them quieted down and started dissecting their frog. Things were going smoothly, minus the fact that Merlyn and Arthur kept bickering about which way they should make each incision. Eventually, Lance grew impatient and took the scalpel from them, he shared a look with Percy before continuing on with the lab. Merlyn got demoted to drawing duty, and Arthur was stuck with the clean-up afterward.

For the rest of the day, nothing else interesting happened for Merlyn in her classes. They were all assigned more homework in every class, and Arthur looked more miserable as their assignments grew. By the time the bell rang and dismissed them from their last class of the day, Arthur looked like he wanted to pitch himself into oncoming traffic.

"Hey, shorty, wait up." Arthur caught up to her in three steps and they both walked out of Math together. Merlyn noticed from the corner of her eye, Khilgharra lifting his head up to look at them.

They silently walked together until they reached the main hallway leading to the front doors. Right as they reached them, Arthur tapped Merlyn on the shoulder with the back of his hand to get her attention.

"Hmm?" Merlyn looked up at Arthur.

"Doin' anything now?" Arthur asked.

Merlyn nodded and stepped out of the door as Arthur held it open for her.
"Yeah, I have plans with-"

"Merls!" Both Merlyn and Arthur turned towards Will's voice.

Will's voice also caught the attention of other people, but they were more interested in his motorcycle. He did look pretty imposing, she observed from a distance. Black leather jacket and his dark-washed jeans because he had today off from work. Some girls were giggling and whispering to each other near him, as he stood there trying to look all manly with his arms crossed and leaning 'casually' against his bike. She almost wanted to roll her eyes at Will's antics, but instead, Merlyn smiled and waved at him in response. She turned to look back up at Arthur and noticed the slight frown on his face as he looked over at Will.

"What's wrong?" She tilted her head to the side slightly.

Arthur blinked and looked down at her. "Uh...nothing."

"Oh right, you were asking me a question," Merlyn remembered and gestured over at Will, "I have plans with Will, we're going to go see that new racing movie that came out last week."

"Oh..." Arthur said and trailed off while nodding his head, "sounds fun."

"Want to come with us?" Merlyn said and quickly added. "You'll have to meet us there, though. Since Will didn't drive his SUV today."

"You know, motorcycles have a higher death rate than cars do," Arthur stated while looking back over in Will's direction.

Merlyn rolled her eyes and laughed. "I've heard that before." She reached out to nudge Arthur's arm with her own. "So, want to come?"

Arthur rubbed the back of his neck and shook his head. "Nah. I'm good. You have fun, though."
For some reason, Merlyn couldn't understand the disappointed feeling that settled on her shoulders. Arthur noticed the slight drop in her demeanor and reached out to pinch her nose.

"See ya in class tomorrow, short stack," Arthur said with a grin and walked towards the student parking lot.

"Why do you always do that!" Merlyn snapped and rubbed her nose with the back of her hand and scowled at Arthur's back. She saw his shoulders shake from his silent laughter, but he didn't turn around to acknowledge her question. She sighed and headed over towards Will and his bike.

"So..." Merlyn knew that tone in Will's voice all too well.

"Let's go. I don't want to miss the trailers." Merlyn held out her hands for her helmet with an expectant look on her face.

Will smirked and she could see the amusement, mixed with interest, in his eyes after witnessing her interact with Arthur. He held the helmet out in front of him, she reached for it, but at the last minute, he pulled it back out of her reach.

"Hey!" Merlyn said and scrunched up her eyebrows.

Will tilted his chin towards the student parking lot. "Why didn't you invite him to come with us?"

"I did, but he didn't want to go. Now let's go before we miss the trailers!" Merlyn huffed and reached for the helmet again. Except, Will held the damn thing high above his head and continued talking as if they had all the time in the world.

"Did he say why?" Will said and glanced down Merlyn.

Merlyn shook her head. "Funny enough, Will, he didn't. But, at the same time, he's not obligated to."
"Wow...not even your nosy little troublemaking self is interested in why?" Will asked with a grin.

"I'm more interested in making our movie time. So can we go?" Merlyn pushed up onto her tiptoes and stretched her arm out to grab the helmet, but it was still out of her reach by quite a lot.

Will rolled his eyes and brought the helmet back down to her level. "You need to drink more milk, Merls."

Merlyn had the helmet halfway on her head as she retorted. "That's not a proven fact."

"Wouldn't hurt to try." Will shrugged and got on his bike.

"Wouldn't hurt to try," Merlyn mocked from inside her helmet.

"Keep that up and I'll drop you in a ditch, kiddo," Will chuckled and put his helmet on.

"You're so mean, Will," Merlyn said with a smile, even though it went unseen.

"It's because I love you." Will grinned and patted the left side of his chest.

Merlyn tried to sarcastically nod her head since she knew her sarcasm would be lost in her muffled words. Will got the gist of it and plopped his fist on top of her head quickly before gesturing for her to get on.

The movie was great, and Merlyn really enjoyed it, plus she does honestly love spending time with Will, which was nice. It was close to dinner time when Will dropped her off at home. Merlyn told him to stay for dinner, and he immediately agreed. She knew he was too lazy to ever cook (even though he knows how and is actually pretty good at it), and he prefers to order Chinese takeout a lot. Merlyn was suddenly thankful that Will actually hates fortune cookies and tells them to leave those out of his order.

After dinner, Will decided to stick around for a little longer and help Merlyn brainstorm some ideas for her final project. She brought her dad's book down to the living room and showed it to Will.
She was too consumed with showing him all the different pages within the book and how much each one of them meant to her, that she missed the soft look he gave her when she told him who the book belonged to.

Will has been in Merlyn's life for as long as he can remember. But what he remembers most, was how broken she became after Balinor passed away. Seeing her now, talking about her dad and sharing stories from the past, makes him realize that she's maturing.

Will sighed and rubbed the top of Merlyn's head. "You're growing up too fast, you little troublemaker."

"I'm not a troublemaker, Will," Merlyn said and frowned deeply at him, while mid-flip of a page.

"Whatever you say, Merls" He chuckled and continued to list off different ideas.

The night crept up on them, and eventually Will had to go because he had work the next day and Merlyn had school. As she got ready for bed later that night she decided to read one of her romance novels and went into her closet to grab one. Merlyn settled into her bed and opened the book from where she left off last. She was a few chapters in when her phone started vibrating.

"Hey, dollop head. What's up?" Merlyn said and unhooked her charger.

Arthur huffed. "I'm not a dollop head...whatever that is."

"Could've fooled me." She smiled and laid back onto her bed. There was a moment of silence on the line, and all she could hear was her own breathing along with Arthur's.

"So...how was the movie?" He asked. She could hear some shuffling in the background and what vaguely sounded like a bed dipping under pressure.

"It was great!" Merlyn said with excitement. "You have to go see it. There's this one scene where-oh." She caught herself and pressed her lips together.
"What? Why'd you stop talking?" said Arthur in confusion. On the other line, he was getting comfortable in his bed and shoved his other arm under his head.

"I don't want to spoil it for you if you're against that sort of thing," Merlyn explained as she laid flat on her back while throwing her other arm over her forehead.

Arthur chuckled, and Merlyn was again grateful to be alone in her room to appreciate the sound of his voice. "Nah. Go for it. Tell me about the movie."

Merlyn almost shook from excitement. "Okay!"

The next morning, Merlyn stumbled out of bed like she was half-drunk. She ended up staying on the phone with Arthur longer than she expected. He listened to her re-tell all the exciting parts of the movie to him, and she listened to him explain his night to her (mostly spent shooting hoops in the backyard). But, she didn't regret that decision...

"Ow!" cried Merlyn when she ran her shoulder into the doorway. Okay, maybe she did just a little bit.

"Sleepy..." Merlyn said as she stumbled downstairs for breakfast.

It was a miracle she managed to dress, and an even bigger one when she made it to school without nearly breaking her neck on the walk there. Merlyn slowly climbed the front steps and stretched as she walked in through the front doors. She slipped through the mass of students and headed for her locker; it was a good thing she left chocolate protein bars in there for when she's still hungry. Merlyn unwrapped one and took a bite out of it.

"Hey, short stack," Arthur leaned against the locker beside hers.

"Mworning," Merlyn said around her mouthful of the protein bar.

"Whatcha eatin' there?" said Arthur as he looked down at her hand.
She swallowed and replied. "Chocolate protein bar." She held the bar up slightly, "Want some?"

"Sure," Arthur moved his head towards the bar.

Now, Merlyn, in all honestly, she thought Arthur was only going to take a small bite out of the protein bar, because that's what normal, sensible, well-mannered people would do...right?

"YOU'RE SO GREEDY!" exclaimed Merlyn as she pulled her, now, half-eaten bar away from him.

Arthur let out a bark of laughter and covered his mouth so he wouldn't spit crumbs out. He saw the indignant look on Merlyn's face and started to laugh harder; once he calmed down he continued to chew and smile.

"Haven't you heard, Merlyn, sharing is caring?" Arthur said while leading her into homeroom.

She furiously took another bite out of the bar while scowling up at him. "We are not kindergarteners, prat. That's a void statement."

Arthur tsked and shook his head at her as they took a seat at their table. "So stingy..." He leaned over towards her and opened his mouth again while looking at the bar expectantly.

"Stingy..." Merlyn grumbled as she moved the bar so he could take another bite out of it, "I'll show you stingy."

He smirked in amusement at her, but this time took a smaller portion (so Merlyn could have the last bite of her bar, and she will not be charmed by that). The two of them weren't aware of it, but everyone that was in homeroom, at that time, was watching their interaction with vivid curiosity and were whispering to each other at what they just witnessed. All their friends slowly filed in, and, unfortunately, missed the spectacle that is Merlyn and Arthur.

"Are you sure I shouldn't bring the extra trunk, Lance?" Gwen worried her hands together
and turned to look at her, very patient, boyfriend.

"Yes." Lance took her hands into his and held tight. "There's no need to bring so much, plus there's no more room in the car, even if you wanted to bring it."

Gwen nodded. "You're right. I'm just so nervous!"

"The show's this Saturday right?" Merlyn asked.

"Yup. Halloween night." Elyan answered as he took a seat across from her. "We're driving out early on Friday."

"If we're going to the same area we could've carpooled," Leon said as he took a seat beside Arthur.

They all started to discuss the upcoming weekend. When everyone was deep into their conversations, Arthur pulled out Merlyn's notebook and handed it back to her. She took it back and turned to shove it into her backpack.

"What was that?" Gwaine turned his head towards them.

"What was what?" Merlyn said and raised her eyebrow.

Gwaine gestured between her and Arthur. "He just handed you something."

"It's called a notebook," drawled Arthur as he leaned back and threw his arm over the back of Merlyn's seat.

Merlyn nodded her head. "We are in the same classes, after all."

"Must be nice," Gwaine said and wagged his eyebrows at them while resting his chin on top of his hands.
"You're joking, right?" Merlyn and Arthur said at the same time.

Merlyn turned in her seat to look at Arthur while repeating Gwaine's words. "Must be nice, being stuck in all my classes with a turnip head, like you."

Arthur matched the smirk on Merlyn's face and leaned forward. "Sucks to be me, having to put up with a little demon, like you."

"Oh heaven forbid your inconvenience, my lord," Merlyn said sarcastically with an eye roll and mockingly put her hand over her heart.

Arthur chuckled, and Merlyn covered her mouth while laughing. See? It's fun having someone match her sarcasm, instead of getting offended by her words (even though he does get easily offended by the weirdest things), it was actually kind of...a turn on. Everyone at the table looked on with amusement; the tension building around the two of them was almost palpable. But, it was as if the two of them weren't aware of it themselves. Once Mr. George took attendance, and then the bell rang, they all headed for their first class of the day.

"Alright class, please bring your essays up and put them in a nice pile on my desk," Ms. Finna announced from the front of the room.

Arthur stood up and gathered Merlyn and Freya's essays for them. He made his way to Ms. Finna's desk but was stopped twice by Sophia and Vivian. Merlyn and Freya shared a look and giggled quietly to themselves. For their next unit in English, Ms. Finna was having them read 'A Streetcar Named Desire.' Merlyn remembered watching it once on TV with Will and enjoyed it, so she was excited to start reading.

Coming to the end of class, Merlyn was hit with the sudden urge to pee. She stood up and walked to Ms. Finna's desk. She asked for a bathroom pass and left the room at a faster pace. After a few weeks at Camelot, Merlyn realized that certain washrooms were better than others. She preferred to use the girl's washroom at the west end of the school because it wasn't occupied as much and was cleaner looking. But, it meant she had to walk quicker in order to get there and back before class ended. A wrench was thrown into her plan when she saw Jonas putting up occupied signs in front of the boy's and girl's washrooms and headed into the girl's washroom with a mop and bucket.

"Crap," Merlyn said while changing directions, "of all times..."
She quickly started back down the hallway to find another washroom, before her bladder burst. Eventually, she saw the washroom signs overhead and ducked around the corner into the room. It took her a moment to realize why everything seemed off about the washroom she was in.

"Urinals?" Merlyn said out loud in confusion, but she quickly realized her mistake. "Oh fuck," She immediately spun on her heel and headed for the exit.

Merlyn was just about to walk out when the sound of pounding footsteps caught her attention. She looked around the washroom quickly and decided at the last second to run into the stall; she locked the door behind her and pulled the seat lid down. Right when she heard voices enter the bathroom, she hopped up onto the lid and sat quietly with her knees tucked under her chin.

"Did you get it?" Valient? Merlyn's ears perked up at the sound of his voice.


Merlyn shifted slightly to try and look out of the sliver of space between the stall and door. She could make out Valient's form and two other guys around his height; she squinted and leaned forward to see the fourth, much smaller, guy...Peter?

"H-H-Here, V-V-Valient," Peter's voice quivered and he flinched when one of the other guys pretended to lunge at him.

A quick glimpse of a green bottle, and the sound of something rattling was all the detail Merlyn could get through the small crack in the door before Val pocketed whatever it was. Valient gestured at Peter again and the other two guys grabbed him and shoved him out of the washroom. Merlyn hated how she couldn't do anything for Peter, but she hoped that the two guys were just getting rid of him and then coming back, instead of doing something else. Luckily, it was the former.

"So you're really going to do it, Val?" Now that Merlyn could see the two guys faces, she recognized who they were.

Valient turned sideways and smirked at Edwin (he usually sat on the other side of the room in Bio). "Pretty boy's going to get what's coming to him."
Merlyn wanted to gasp, but she knew she had to keep quiet and hidden. What did he want with Arthur now?

"You think he's going to fall for it?" Cedric asked. Merlyn knew of him from Morgana, he was in her Chemistry class and always tried to hit on her...the creepy slime ball.

"Why wouldn't he? He trusts everybody," Valient turned on the tap and quickly got his fingers wet and ran them through his hair, "and that's his flaw."

"Come on," Valient turned to leave, "let's go before that old lizard gives us detention."

In her shock, Merlyn leaned back and the seat groaned slightly. Absolute fear struck her as the three guys stopped at the sound. Merlyn held her breath and started to pray to everything and anything she could think of.

"Did you hear that?" Edwin said and turned towards the stalls.

Valient and Cedric both paused for a second to listen for the sound again, but when the sound didn't appear, Cedric snickered and pointed at Edwin.

"Dude, you're such a pussy. You believe those ghost stories about the washrooms being haunted?"

"Shut the fuck up, asshole! I heard something!" growled Edwin.

"Yeah. Your balls shriveling up," sneered Valient, "now let's go."

The three guys left the washroom. Merlyn sat completely still, for fear of one of them coming back, and tried to process what she just witnessed. Valient was planning something and it involved Arthur. But, what that plan was...Merlyn didn't know. One thing she did know was that she had to get out of the boys' washroom.

"Coast is clear," Merlyn said quietly to herself and came out of the stall.
She quickly exited the washroom and it was a good thing she did because the bell rang right at that moment. Immediately the hallways filled with students and she had to fight her way back to English, the need to pee was forgotten. As Merlyn drew nearer to the classroom, she caught sight of Arthur standing outside of the door, holding her backpack and sweater.

"Did you fall in the toilet, shorty?" Arthur said with a questioning smirk on his lips.

Merlyn didn't have time to rise to his bait. "Arthur, I need-"

"Your backpack and sweater, I know," Arthur rolled his eyes and held both items out towards her, "don't worry. Your look of gratitude is all the thanks I need." He patted the top of her head.

"Thanks," Merlyn said hurriedly and grabbed her backpack if she wasn't so flustered she'd have given him a snarky response, "but I have to-"

"Yo, Arthur!" Merlyn spun around and felt her heart plummet straight into her stomach.

Merlyn turned and grabbed onto Arthur's arm. He nodded at whoever called him and then turned to look down at Merlyn. Arthur must have seen the urgency on her face and he raised his eyebrow.

"Are you okay?"

"Don't do whatever it is Cedric is going to ask you," Merlyn rushed out.

"What are you talking about?" Arthur asked.

"They're planning something," Merlyn continued quickly.

Arthur shook his head and furrowed his brows. "Planning what?"
"I-I don't know," Merlyn hated that she didn't know, "but it's something bad. I just know it."

"You're not making any sense, Merlyn," said Arthur with exasperation in his tone.

"I wouldn't lie to you," stated Merlyn as she looked up into Arthur's eyes, "just believe me. I can explain."

The two of them stared at each other, Arthur gave her a look that said 'well? Go ahead.' but Arthur broke eye contact first when Cedric and Edwin reached them.

"Hey man," Cedric was now standing beside them, along with Edwin on Merlyn's right.

Arthur lifted his chin and bumped his fist with Cedric and Edwin.

"What's up?" Arthur said.

"Just wanted to say congratulations on the win last Friday," Cedric said and his voice was dripping with grease and oozing fake pleasantness. "Sick three-pointer man. Everyone's still talkin' about it."

Arthur grinned. "Thanks, man."

"Arthur," Merlyn hissed and urgently tugged on his sleeve.

"Just wait, Merlyn," Arthur spoke through the corner of his mouth.

Cedric and Edwin looked at her for a second but turned back to talk with Arthur-completely snubbing Merlyn.

"You doin' anything for Halloween?" Edwin asked.
Arthur shrugged and shook his head. "No. Probably not."

"You should come to Val's house. He's having a huge party. Both his parents are out of town." Cedric looked over at Merlyn, before turning back to Arthur and adding. "Just you, though."

"Oh yeah?" Arthur raised his eyebrow. "Didn't think ol' Val would want me at his house."

Cedric waved his hand as if it brush off Arthur's comment. "You know Val, he likes to talk a lot of shit. He even told me personally to invite you, and he's so sorry about what happened during the camping trip."

"Arthur, you can't go!" Merlyn whispered and tugged on his arm.

Arthur looked down at her and Merlyn could see the slight annoyance on his face. But, she was glad to see that he was also confused as well.

Edwin scoffed. "I didn't know your girlfriend made decisions for you, Arthur."

"She's not my girlfriend."

"I'm not his girlfriend!" The two of them spoke at the same time.

"Sure looks that way," Edwin nodded down at Merlyn's sweater that was in Arthur's hand, "kind of pussy-whipped there, ain't cha?"

"Hey!" Merlyn snapped and took a step forward, but stopped when Arthur shoved her sweater into her arms.

"Pussy-whipped, Pendragon!" Edwin laughed and Cedric joined in.

Merlyn looked down at her sweater and then back up at Arthur, who was clenching his jaw tightly. She tried to make eye-contact with him, but he looked away...ashamed. It felt like someone took a knife and was skewering it through Merlyn's stomach, but she had to try one more time. To
get him to listen to her, if she tells him what she heard in the washroom he'll have to trust her...right? The worst part of all of this was that she couldn't say anything about what she heard *in front* of the people she was eavesdropping on.

"Arthur...please," Merlyn said softly, "just listen to me. I can explain..."

"Pussy-whipped! Pussy-whipped!"

Other students were staring at them now, some in confusion, some in annoyance (they were holding up traffic in the hallway), and others in amusement. Merlyn could see Arthur's neck go red and the muscle in his jaw ticked outwards more prominently. It wasn't like she didn't feel embarrassed either, but she was willing to push that aside to just keep him out of Valient's plan (whatever it was).

In a last attempt to calm him down and, quite possibly, qualm her fears, Merlyn reached out to touch his arm again. His reaction told her everything she needed to know. Arthur jerked his arm away and turned to glare down at Merlyn.

"Will you quit it?" Arthur snapped and mumbled the next part quietly, but Merlyn still heard him, "everyone's staring....just-"

"Please?" Merlyn breathed and tried to implore him to just accept what it is she's saying.

"Please!" mocked Cedric in a high pitch voice.

"What are you? His own little puppy? Stop chasing after him like a bone, ears." Edwin sneered, "or...maybe you do want his bone. Little virgin ears here wants Pendragon's bone!"

"WILL YOU SHUT UP YOU ASSHOLE!" Merlyn snapped and glared at Edwin.

It was that line that pushed Merlyn past her limits. She didn't care if Sophia made fun of her for it the other day in class, and didn't care that she was a virgin. But, she cared that other people were getting involved in her business and trying to use her own decisions as a weapon against her. Merlyn hated feeling like this, like a...spectacle.
Merlyn whipped her head back around to glare at Arthur. "If you don't want to listen to me, then fine."

With that, Merlyn stormed through the mass of people and headed to Biology. She was so angry that she could literally hear her pulse beating in her ears. There was heat pooling behind her eyes and she immediately looked up at the fluorescent lights to stop herself from forming tears. No, Merlyn thought angrily, she will not give them that satisfaction.

Lance and Percy were already in the classroom, they waved at Merlyn when she walked through the door. They both looked at her in bewilderment when they noticed her expression. She didn't make any attempt to explain herself and just took her seat quietly after greeting them. Arthur walked in at the sound of the bell and looked over at Merlyn.

Merlyn didn't know what was worse: Arthur not believing her, or the fact that she got her hopes up hoping he would. Some small, more reasonable, part of her mind told her that there's still a chance he will, that she just needs to explain it to him properly, instead of the broken and rushed words she used. But, her pride, the part of her that's always been at the forefront of a majority of her decisions...told her to tell him to go to hell.

The moment Arthur took his seat, Merlyn saw him turn towards her to say something but she abruptly stood up and slid her chair as far over to the edge of their bench desk as possible and sat back down. This did not go unnoticed by the guys, but none of them knew what to say and the hostile atmosphere that appeared around Merlyn...kind of terrified them. The bell rang before anything else could be done and Mr. Manticore began his lesson; Merlyn took her notebook out to begin taking notes.

For the first half of the lesson, Merlyn was fuming and her poor notebook took the brunt of her emotions. How dare he! Was Merlyn's first and most prominent thought followed by the embarrassment she felt from that scene. This was exactly the reason why she implemented her strategic avoidance plan, it was like the past couple of weeks of their friendship just went up in flames! Acting like she was embarrassing him. It wasn't like she had many friends, or any at all, back home in Ealdor, but it wasn't as if she didn't know what it means to be a good friend. Freya was her first friend here in Camelot, then came Gwen and Morgana, and the guys shortly after. She got along with every one of them and it was effortless just being around them. But, Arthur and she just happened to have coincidences that lead to them being friendly to each other. He said they were friends. She believed him. Why did she believe him? Merlyn wondered with an edge to her thoughts.

All at once, after she finished that thought, the tension drained out of Merlyn's body so quickly that she felt somewhat exhausted. Why did she believe him? Merlyn repeated to herself, but with less venom. Mr. Manticore paused his lesson to go and grab something from the class next door.
"Are you okay, Merlyn?" Lance, being the empathetic guy, asked in a tone that implied 'you can answer or not, up to you.'

All the anger had fizzled out and she gave him a small smile. "Yeah. I'm fine. I was angry, but...I'm not anymore."

"I thought all short people were always mad since they're closer to hell?" Arthur said jokingly. She knew he was testing the waters and trying to see if she would rise to his bait.

Merlyn glanced at him, but didn't laugh, or smile for that matter. She just shrugged and looked back down at her notes. Percy and Lance didn't know what to say so they just turned back around to their desk. Her response, or lack thereof, must have made Arthur feel guilty because she could see the way his shoulders slumped from the corner of her eye. But, in the next moment, they went stiff and Arthur turned to look down at his binder.

'Fine.' Merlyn thought.

Two days. They haven't said a word to each other since Tuesday, and today is the third day of their silent war. Merlyn didn't want to admit it, in fact, she'll try and take this to her grave, but she missed talking to Arthur and even more so, just bantering with him. Everyone could see that something happened between them, but no one asked what had happened. Merlyn wasn't even so sure why she was so upset by his reaction. Will would know what to do, Merlyn thought and pulled out her phone to text him.

Can I come over tomorrow? Before you go to the theater? Sent: 2:55 PM

Merlyn refocused her attention back to the board and continued with her notes. It didn't help that Arthur sat in front of her in this class, which meant he was still an ever looming thought in her mind. Funny enough, it was Gwen who approached her and asked what happened between the two of them when they were sitting in the gym after the group switch happened. Merlyn told her they just had a disagreement and that now they weren't talking. The more she thought about it, she didn't know what Valient's end game was and she wasn't sure what her gut feeling was telling her anymore. It caught Merlyn off guard when Morgana sided with her and said 'Arthur can be such an idiot sometimes.' Of all the people she wanted to tell, aside from Arthur, Merlyn wanted to tell Morgana the most, but she was hesitant...if Arthur didn't believe he was in danger, then maybe Merlyn overreacted. Her phone vibrated and she unlocked the screen to open Will's message.
Mrs. Isolde was just finishing up her lesson and was telling everyone they can pack up and leave early. Before Merlyn could even say anything to get Arthur’s attention, he was already packed up and heading out the classroom door. It seemed like everyone packed up as quickly as Arthur, and Merlyn was the last to leave which she didn't mind. The hallways started out packed and noisy, but because it was a Friday, within moments it was nearly deserted and her footsteps echoed slightly around her. Merlyn decided to head to the Robotics lab to see Khilgharra, she already saw him earlier in the morning during the homeroom block for their lab time, but she was hoping he would still be around to just...talk.

"Khilgharra?" Merlyn called out once she got into the lab.

There wasn't a response. She sighed and ran her fingers through her hair while looking up at the ceiling, hoping for her turmoil to disappear. Instead of leaving right away, she walked over to one of the work benches and climbed up onto the chair. To be honest, she's used to the lonely feeling that settled onto her shoulders, but it wasn't something she welcomed. It's so stupid, though, Merlyn thought and picked up a stray bolt. Why should I feel obligated to do anything? Merlyn wondered.

"I shouldn't have gotten involved in the first place," Merlyn grumbled.

"Ah. If only it were that easy, Merlyn" Khilgharra's voice suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

"Gah!" Merlyn exclaimed and nearly toppled over in her seat. "How do you do that?"

"No, better question, why do you do that, Khilgharra?" Merlyn asked breathlessly while clutching her chest.

Khilgharra chuckled and held his palm out towards her, "fortune cookie?"

"Uh..." Merlyn began, but the skepticism was evident in her voice, "I don't think this is a good time for that, Khilgharra."
"Nonsense," Khilgharra shook his head and held the cookies out further, "destiny doesn't keep track of time."

Merlyn blinked and took the cookie, just to appease him. "Was that line from a cookie?"

"Actually, it's the new slogan on their pamphlet." Khilgharra grinned and took a seat opposite of her on the workbench. "Twenty-four-hour delivery."

Merlyn nodded and tried not to look unimpressed. "Right..."

They sat quietly together, and she knew he was waiting for her to say something. But...where to begin?

"I pride myself on my observation skills." Khilgharra mused, "As it seems, you and Arthur do not appear to be on speaking terms any longer?"

Frustration. Self-doubt. Chagrin. If Khilgharra was bringing it up, then that really does mean everyone knows that the two of them were no longer speaking, thought Merlyn.

"You know, Khilgharra, your fortune cookies were wrong," Merlyn said softly as she turned the cookie in her palm over a few times, "I helped Arthur because you said I should and I did. I honestly thought that things would be different. But look at what's happened? He's angry with me now because I embarrassed him in front of people. And quite frankly, I'm angry with him too."

"Was that the only reason?" Khilgharra said and cracked open one cookie.

"Well, I yelled at him in front of people too, if that's what you're implying," Merlyn added begrudgingly.

Khilgharra let out a small laugh and shook his head. "No. I meant, was the only reason why you helped Arthur because I told you so?"

"Y-N..." Merlyn sighed and squeezed her eyes shut for a moment.
When she opened them again, she looked at Khilgharra and shrugged. "It doesn't matter anymore. He hates me and I'm not fond of him either."

"A half cannot truly hate that which makes it whole," Khilgharra read the fortune out loud.

'Great. More fortune cookie riddles.' Merlyn thought. Why exactly did she want to see Khilgharra, again?

"Merlyn," Merlyn looked up at Khilgharra, "the truth of the matter is, no matter the obstacles. Paths that are meant to lie together, will always come back to one another."

"So..." Merlyn trailed off perplexed, "are you saying I should pick a path? Or my path is already chosen? Do I get a say in if I want to stay on this path?"

"Open your fortune cookie and let's see what it says." Khilgharra looked at the cookie in her hand.

"I don't think-alright. Alright!" Merlyn said and hurried to open the packaging at the look Khilgharra gave her. Raising his eyebrow as if she was holding up a process, Merlyn thought spitefully.

She cracked open the cookie and pulled the small white slip of paper out. She cleared her throat and read aloud.

"This is not the end. It is the beginning."

Merlyn blinked, that's it? What is that even suppose to mean? She looked at Khilgharra for answers, but he appeared to be deep in thought as he stroked his chin.

"That's a good one. I'll need to remember that."

Well. That's enough for today, Merlyn thought and got up. "Thanks for the talk, Khilgharra."
"Anytime, Merlyn." Khilgharra gave her his signature smile and she waved goodbye as she walked out of the lab.

Merlyn stopped by the office on her way out to talk with Freya. She didn't stay long because Freya looked very occupied with sorting out paperwork for the secretaries. She decided that the walk home should help clear her mind. It would have been nice if she could have talked to Gwen or Morgana, but the two of them left early for their events and Merlyn didn't want to disturb them with 'maybes' and 'I think.'

"Why are you such a prat!" Merlyn growled and kicked a random rock on the ground.

All day Saturday felt like limbo, she kept losing focus and making small mistakes around the apartment. Uncle Gaius, at one point, had to check her temperature, because he was worried about her continuous spacing out. Merlyn left the apartment around 7:30 PM, once she handed out the last of their candy, to head to Will's place. She had to be very conscious as she drove because there were a lot of kids and parents out trick-or-treating. The thing Merlyn enjoyed most about Halloween was that candy goes on sale for 50% off the next day and that's pretty much it. She was finishing up the mini chocolate bar just as she pulled into a parking spot in front of Will's apartment. The underground parking at the back was for tenants only. Merlyn saw a few kids walking past as she got out of the car and texted Will she arrived.

"Hey, Merls," Will greet as he opened the door for her, "what's up?"

Merlyn wasted no time beating around the bush as she strode past him and kicked off her sneakers. "If I told you not to do something. You would listen to me right?"

Will looked at her with fond amusement and followed after her. "Well, depends on what I suppose, what exactly am I not allowed to do? And why can't I do it?"

"No. No." Merlyn shook her head. "Not you. I meant 'you' in the figurative sense."

"Okay..." Will dragged the word out, "so what exactly is figurative me not allowed to do?"

"That's the thing!" Merlyn threw her arms up in the air in exasperation. "I don't know!"
"So you don't know, what exactly it is, I'm supposed to know not to do? But, I'm still not supposed to do it," Will said slowly.

"Exactly! I just know something bad is going to happen if you do it. I don't know what the bad thing is," Merlyn worried her lip between her teeth, "but, you would take my word for it, right?"

Will took a seat in his recliner and stretched his arms over his head. "You talking in all these hypotheticals...I'm going to take a wild guess and say that this is about that Pendragon kid?"

Merlyn nodded and quickly took a seat on the couch. "I overheard some guys in the washroom talking about giving Arthur 'what he deserves' and-"

Will held his hand up quickly to stop Merlyn. "Why were you in the boys' washroom?"

"It was an accident, but not important...ish," Merlyn corrected herself and continued, "and they didn't mention what this so called 'plan' is, but these guys are bullies Will, especially Valient, he hates Arthur. I don't know why he does, but he does and nothing good can come of this. He invited Arthur to his Halloween party tonight and I just know something bad is going to happen!"

"This the same Valient kid who started shit with you on that class camping trip you went on?" A dark look crossed over Will's face.

Merlyn nodded. "Yeah, the same one," she sat upright, "which is why-"

"Stay out of it, Merls," Will said abruptly and clasped his hands together in front of his face while looking at her, "don't get involved. It doesn't concern you."

Merlyn was flabbergasted. "But, Will!"

Will looked at Merlyn sternly. "No, buts. Stay out of it."

"Did you hear anything I just said!" Merlyn said while waving her arms out in front of her.
"I heard enough, alright, and I will not have you go try and be reckless for the sake of some guy you barely know," said Will.

"How can you say that! He's my friend, Will!" Merlyn cried out in frustration.

"The two of you were ready to take each apart a couple of weeks ago," mused Will.

"I-I know, but...that was before I got to know him" Merlyn furrowed her brows, it wasn't as if she wasn't aware of that fact, "but he didn't listen to me when I told him not to listen to Cedric," she felt the emotional knife push deeper into her stomach, "and we were both embarrassed in front of everyone, god I'm still so mad...it's just...I know what I heard."

Will sighed and reached over to ruffle Merlyn's hair. "Did you at least have some proof, Merls?"

"You don't believe me?" Merlyn asked in a soft voice.

Will chuckled and lightly hit her on the head with his fist. "When have I not believed you?"

Merlyn blushed in embarrassment and pulled her knees up under her chin. "Sorry."

"You have to understand that I grew up with you," Will said and leaned against his right arm, "I know you and the kind of person you are. Don't start doubting yourself now. You're both still kids and you guys feel things at both extremes. Whether that prat of yours believes you or not, comes down to how well he wants to know you."

"I'm going to turn eighteen in February," Merlyn said under her breath, "I'm not a child, Will."

"Ha!" Will laughed and leaned over and flicked her on the forehead, "you'll always be a snot-nosed brat to me, kiddo."

"Ow!" Merlyn rubbed her forehead and scowled at Will.
"Come on, let's go," Will stood up and cracked his neck. "You should just go back home and enjoy your Saturday night. Don't over think things. Whatever it is that might happen, can't be as bad as you imagine it."

"But my gut feeling, Will," Merlyn said desperately.

"Is probably leading you into danger like it always does. Please, for my peace of mind, just don't get involved, Merls," Will said and reached around the corner to grab something off his kitchen counter.

"Here," Will tossed a hockey mask at Merlyn, which she caught, "maybe go trick-or-treating or something. Just occupy yourself with something other than that Pendragon kid."

Merlyn rolled her eyes. "Would it kill you to just call him Arthur, even when you're annoyed with him? Also, I'm too old to trick-or-treat, Will."

Will smirked and ignored the first part of what she said. "Yeah, but you're short enough to maybe pull off being a middle schooler."

"That's so insulting, Will," Merlyn said with a withering look, "I hope you're nicer to Freya than you are to me."

"What are you talking about?" Will laughed and clutched his heart. "I'm such a nice person."

Merlyn pulled a face and silently mocked Will. He laughed and pulled her head to his chest in a one-armed side hug. She felt him press his lips into the top of her head.

"You're a good person. I just don't want you to get hurt because of that," Will said in a soft voice.

This is why Merlyn loves Will so much. He always looks out for her, and she can't remember a time where he didn't. Merlyn was grateful to have him in her life. Best big brother ever, Merlyn thought quietly to herself.
"So," Merlyn began as she pulled her sneakers back on, "are you going to pick up Freya?"

"Yeah, I'm so nervous," Will confessed and tugged at his tie, "it's the first time I'm meeting her dad. God, I hate wearing ties."

"Christ, let me," Merlyn batted his hands away and started to fix his tie.

"I've been to conferences, prototype proposals, and design meetings. But I think I might actually throw up," said Will as he straightened out his sleeve cuffs.

"Freya's dad seems like a nice guy, you'll be fine. Besides, Freya will be there and she already supports you," She said.

"Yeah, she's a great girl," said Will with a smile on his face.

Merlyn casually observed him and smirked to herself. Well, keep on pushing, Freya, she thought and tightened the knot.

There," Merlyn stepped back to admire her work, "now that's a great knot."

Will grinned and grabbed his suit jacket. "Thanks, Merls. Let's go."

Merlyn and Will went their separate ways; Will towards the back of the building, and she went back to the Jeep. Merlyn looked at the hockey mask in her hand and scoffed before tossing it into the passenger seat. The drive back home didn't take too long, since traffic was sparse. Merlyn locked the Jeep and headed back into the apartment. She knew Uncle Gaius was probably still in his office since that's where he was when she left earlier. Merlyn twirled the mask on her finger as she went upstairs to her room and tried to convince herself to stop having morbid thoughts about Arthur.

"My imagination is making this worse than it actually is," repeated Merlyn unconvincingly to herself.
She decided to try and take her mind off of the situation by tidying her room. She turned her laptop on and started playing a random movie off of Netflix as she picked up the books lying around her room. Next she tossed the dirty clothes by her desk chair into her laundry hamper. She looked down at the basket full of clothes and huffed, might as well do laundry, she thought and hauled it down to the laundry room, after she paused her movie. Merlyn stayed down there for the entire wash cycle and transferred her wet clothes into the dryer. Merlyn began to fiddle with things around the room and tried to focus on the sound of the dryer. She started to pace around the room and was writing coding sequences in her mind to keep herself occupied. Once that grew tiresome, she took her phone out and started to play Tetris.

Finally, the dry cycle finished and Merlyn brought all her clothes back up to her room. She flipped the basket upside down, resumed her movie, and sat down on her bed to fold her clothes, all while focusing on the voices of the actors coming from her laptop. Merlyn tried her best to fold as slow as possible, but within the blink of an eye, all her clothes were folded neatly back in the basket.

"Uggghhh....." groaned Merlyn in frustration as flopped back onto her bed, "maybe I just need to read a book."

She got up and grabbed her dad's sketchbook and sat down at her desk to read through it to calm her nerves. Merlyn propped one knee up and leaned against it with the book placed on the edge of her desk and opened to a random page; she paused the movie again and decided that she probably won't ever finish it. She tried to focus on the pictures and words in the book, but she couldn't stop glancing over at her clock. Eventually the inevitable happened.

"The party should have started," Merlyn said while biting her thumb nail and looked at the clock, "but I shouldn't do anything."

Merlyn abruptly stood up and began to pace around her room while talking to herself.

"I promised Will I wouldn't get involved," she punctuated that point by hitting her palm with her fist, "but, did I actually promise? No. I didn't."

"So..." Merlyn trailed off while looking at her clock, "technically...oh fuck me!"

"He is such a goddamn prat," grumbled Merlyn as she quickly grabbed her cell phone. She went into her Instagram app, clicked on Morgana's page and into her friend's list, and began to choose people at random to see if they've posted about Valient's party.
"Bingo!" She quickly tapped on the photo and lucky for her the person put their location on it.

Merlyn waited for the address to pop up in her Google maps; when it did, she realized that Valient lived in the residential neighborhood next to her community. She wasted no time and grabbed her navy blue hoodie hanging by the door; she was a quarter way out of her room when the hockey mask on her bed caught her attention. She bit her lip, and with an annoyed sigh, she decided to take it along with her.

"Merlyn? Where are you going, my dear? It's nearly midnight?" Uncle Gaius said as Merlyn skidded to a halt at the end of the stairs.

"There's something important I have to do, Uncle Gaius!" Merlyn said while running to the door. "I promise you I'll be back as quick as possible!"

"Merlyn!?" Uncle Gaius called out.

"I'll explain everything when I come back!" Merlyn said loudly as she jogged down the stairs.

Merlyn locked the door behind her and ran down the driveway. Fuck! Keys! Merlyn thought as she patted down her pockets. With an aggravated sigh she continued down the driveway and turned left. What would have taken her a ten-minute drive, has now turned into a twenty-minute run. She couldn't risk going back into the apartment because Uncle Gaius might stop her and she'd lose the small bit of courage within her and decide to stay home.

"If I'm wrong," Merlyn panted as she looked down at her phone and swung a right, "I'll put myself on house arrest."

There were no longer any trick-or-treaters out and the streets were empty and devoid of any sound. Merlyn could hear her feet striking the sidewalk as she ran and the sound of her breaths coming out in small pants. There's a reason why she could never do track and field, and the stitch in her side was screaming at her why.

When the apartments switched to houses, she knew she was in the right area. Merlyn took a few more turns and once she was on the correct street she started looking for the right house. A car drove past her then and she could hear music and laughing coming out from the open windows. She
watched as it drove up a few more houses and parked. Four people got out of the car dressed in brightly colored costumes. Merlyn looked down at the hockey mask in her hand and decided that maybe it was a good idea to bring it; she put it on and pulled the elastic strap over her head. Her field of vision shrunk significantly and it was uncomfortable breathing through the small holes where her mouth was, but if it helped her blend in...then so be it.

As she got closer to the house she saw more and more cars parked along both sides of the road. Merlyn scanned up and down the road to try and spot Arthur's car, but she turned up empty.

"Paaaartaaaay!" That person's drunk, thought Merlyn as she side-stepped said person dressed as a pirate. She glanced over her shoulder and saw him pass out on the lawn and hoped he'd be okay.

Valient lived in a bungalow style house; it was painted a beige color with dark accents on all the windows and trimming. Before Merlyn made it to the front door, she could hear loud music blaring through the house. People were strolling in and out freely, holding plastic red cups, and there were even a few people smoking on the front porch. Merlyn pulled her hood up and quickly ducked inside.

"Holy crap," said Merlyn in disbelief. It was like a clown car effect; on the outside, it didn't look like there would be many people, but now that she was actually inside...damn.

"Hey! Watch it!" Vivian sneered when Merlyn bumped into her by accident.

"My bad," said Merlyn under her breath and turned to walk away.

"Wait," Vivian grabbed Merlyn's shoulder, "don't I know you from somewhere?"

"Uh..." Merlyn falsely lowered her voice and avoided eye contact with Vivian, "no hablo Ingles?"

Vivian sniffed and turned her nose in the air. "Oh. Exchange student."

Merlyn nodded and quickly left before Vivian could ask more questions, like for instance, why would an exchange student come to Val's party? He's such an asshole to them, Merlyn doubted any of them would even want to breathe the same air as him, let alone come to his party.
"Focus, Merlyn," She scolded herself and continued through the house looking for Arthur.

"Once you see him, and see that he's fine, you can just leave." Merlyn rounded the corner and into the kitchen.

Valient was standing by the keg with Cedric, and they were both laughing about something. Merlyn quickly blended into the crowd and stayed hidden from them. She's positive that no one could recognize her with the mask on, but she also didn't want to take that risk. She could see, even from a distance, that Cedric was pretty much wasted at this point, but Val was either somewhat sober or buzzed; Valient made a gesture and Cedric followed after him out of the kitchen. Merlyn slipped out the other way and followed after them, she saw them head towards an office area. She took her chances and came in as close as possible just as they walked into the office and dove behind a small settee just as Val turned around to shut the door.

"Ar...thur isn't...here," Cedric laughed and walked further into the room.

"Oh, he'll be here. After you and Edwin made him a laughing stock, he'll come for sure."

Evidence! Merlyn suddenly thought and discreetly reached into her pocket for her phone. She made sure it was on silent and went into her voice recorder app. She placed it on the floor and slid it as far out as she possibly could, using the settee as a cover and kept it in the moonlight's glow to hide the light from her screen.

"Ced, when Arthur gets here, you need to bring him to the kitchen and get him to start drinking. That way Edwin will have a reason to take his keys." Valient paced back and forth in front of the large desk.

"Yes, sir!" Cedric saluted Val but swayed slightly on his feet.

"Lay off the alcohol. I need you sober enough to go through with the plan," said Val. Merlyn could see the displeasure on his face as he looked at Cedric.

"Yes, sir!"
"These better be the right pills," Val sneered as he reached into his back pocket, "or I'm going to pummel Peter."

Merlyn saw the bottle again, but because the office was dark and the only source of light was, the moonlight, coming in through the window she couldn't read the label. She tried to keep her breathing even and was trying to keep her nerves at bay. With the way, her heart was beating she'd be lucky if the two guys didn't hear it.

"Once we get golden boy unconscious...that's when the real fun begins," Valient said with an evil look on his face.

"Are we really-hic!...going to....shave-hic!...all his hair off, Val?" Cedric rubbed his hands together and cackled.

"Hair grows back," Val said in an off-handed way, "but that's the least of his worries. We're going to record a bunch of shit. Everyone on the soccer team wants a chance at him. Fucking, just because he's a Pendragon, they make it seem like whatever he does is so damn perfect. It's like there's no other sports teams at our school besides his...what a fucking joke. He's such a pussy, he has Viv and Soph throwing themselves at him and he picks to hang around with a freak with big ears!"

Merlyn had to grit her teeth and remind herself to not blow her cover. One thing was for certain though...there's no way Merlyn was going to let Valient do anything to Arthur, not if she can help it. There was a loud commotion outside of the door and voices shouting in excitement.

"ARTHUR!" Merlyn squeezed her eyes shut in frustration. The stupid clot pole actually came to the party.

A crazed look reached Valient's eyes and he clapped Cedric on the back. "Showtime."

Merlyn had to crawl around the settee as Val walked back over to the doors, to avoid being seen. Cedric followed behind him like a puppy, observed Merlyn spitefully, the comment from Tuesday still lingering in her mind. She grabbed her phone and stopped the recording.

"Hold up," Val was in the midst of closing the office doors, "gotta lock this. Dad'll kill me if I let people come into his office and trash it."
"Oh, crap..." Merlyn scrambled to her feet and stumbled over to the door, she reached for the handle. She let out a groan of frustration when the handle didn't give way.

"What the hell am I supposed to do now!" She growled and kicked the door. The music in the house grew louder, which meant no one would hear her bang on the door—but that wasn't even an option to begin with. The window was her only other choice, but it was a very small choice, since it didn't even look like she could fit through the frame (even considering how small she is).

Merlyn pushed the hockey mask up onto her head so she could see and breath properly. This was so frustrating! She thought as she walked over to the window. She glanced down at her phone and contemplated calling Arthur, but his name on her screen took her off guard.

Cabbage Head: I'm sorry. Sent: 12:25 AM

All the high-strung emotions within Merlyn died off. It wasn't much of an apology, by no means, but...it was still something.

"You're so..." She sighed and hit the dial icon. She waited while it rang, on the seventh ring she realized he either has his phone on silent or is no longer on him. She pocketed her phone and looked at the window frame in front of her.

"Come on," Merlyn grunted and tried to pop the window open.

It felt like an eternity being trapped in that office. No matter how much force she used to try and pop the window open, the stupid thing wouldn't budge. The more time passed, the more anxious Merlyn grew. She started pacing back and forth while rubbing her fingers together over her palms.

"Think, Merlyn, think," She repeated over and over, "think your way out of this."

An idea popped into her head and she walked over to the office desk. She rifled through the various drawers, trying to find a ruler, and came up successful. Merlyn gripped the ruler tightly in her hand and rushed back to the window. She pressed up into the frame to raise the window slightly, once a sliver of space appeared, she jammed the ruler into the small space and began to lever it up and down. Merlyn gritted her teeth together, this was going to take a combination of both her
ingenuity and strength (hopefully the former and not much of the latter).

"YES!" She cried out when the window popped open.

Merlyn abandoned the ruler while lifting the window up higher. She went out feet first, then had to suck her stomach in as much as possible, the biggest problem she faced was trying to get her shoulders through the small opening. She was thankful that Valient's house was a bungalow, because she wouldn't have been able to go through with this escape plan if she was actually high off the ground. When she was upright and on the other side of the window, she took off for the front of the house. It seemed like in the time she was stuck in the office, more people showed up for the party.

"WOOOO!" Merlyn side-stepped a girl dressed like a hula dancer.

"Where are you?" Merlyn mumbled while pulling her hockey mask back down over her face.

Someone bumped into Merlyn when she wasn't paying attention. "Watch it!"

Oh shit. Val. Merlyn quickly tried to walk away, but a hand shot out and grabbed her arm tightly, and holy crap did it hurt. She had to bite back her yelp and came to an abrupt halt.

"Aren't you goin' to say sorry, pipsqueak?" He sneered closely to her mask. His breath reeked of alcohol and cigarette smoke, Merlyn had to fight the urge to gag.

"Sorry," She mumbled in a deeper tone while averting her eyes from his. She had to also avoid making eye contact with him, or else he might recognize her.

Val glanced at her up and down with a look of displeasure. "The fuck are you anyway? I don't remember inviting a wimp like you to my party."

He tried to reach for her hockey mask, but Merlyn quickly moved her hand to the mask and shifted her head away. Val took it as a sign that she was going to remove her mask, and Merlyn was trying to think her way quickly out of this situation.

Luckily, she was saved...kind of.
"Yo, Val! Tell Arthur he can't drive home after drinking!" Edwin's voice somehow carried over the loud music and took Valient's attention off of Merlyn.

"Tryin' to cause an accident, *Golden boy*?" taunted Val as he released his strong grip on Merlyn's arm, and headed for the kitchen.

'Ow!' Merlyn internally complained and rubbed her right forearm tenderly.

She didn't have time to dwell on the throbbing in her arm, she had to follow after Valient. Once she made it through the mass of sweaty bodies, and into the kitchen, that's when she saw Arthur for the first time. He was dressed casually, dark jeans and a black sweater. It seemed like they were pumping a lot of drinks into him as quick as they can, if the shot glasses, crushed cans, and red cups around him were any indication. If whatever Valient plans on giving Arthur doesn't take effect, the amount of alcohol that'll catch up to Arthur, in a moment, will. Merlyn saw Edwin pocket Arthur's car keys and shove another shot glass towards him. Has Arthur never learned to pace himself while drinking? Merlyn wondered, but immediately shoved that thought aside.

"Focus." She pushed her way into the kitchen and tried to get to Arthur. When she was about three people away from him, she felt a rush of relief go through her. Merlyn reached her hand out to try and grab his arm.

"POOL SACRIFICE!" One moment, Merlyn was standing and about to reach Arthur. The next, she was in the air and in a fireman's hold over some random guy's shoulder.

"PUT ME DOWN!" Merlyn screamed behind her mask.

The guy ignored her and continued to walk out to the backyard. Merlyn started to freak out when she caught sight of Valient talking to Arthur and leading him out of the kitchen. That's when she really started to fight the guy. They were down the back porch steps and a few feet away from the pool, when Merlyn completely lost it on the guy carrying her.

"I. SAID. PUT. ME. DOWN!" She hollered and ripped at the guy's hair while repeated bashing her fist into his skull.

"OW FUCK!" The guy dropped Merlyn without warning. But, she managed to catch herself before face-planting into the ground.
She scrambled to her feet and booked it for the house before she could get grabbed again. When she made it back inside, she saw Edwin hand over Arthur's keys to Cedric (which he put into the back pocket of his jeans) and head after Valient. Merlyn worried her bottom lip, she looked between Cedric and the direction Edwin was heading off to. Arthur is obviously more important, thought Merlyn as she took a step in Edwin's direction, but...she paused and turned towards Cedric, they need those keys.

"Think, Merlyn, think," She said under her breath and looked around the kitchen. There has to be a way to get the keys from Cedric.

Merlyn's chance came in the form of a girl standing next to her boyfriend (her incredibly jacked boyfriend). She grabbed a random red cup that was filled, with hopefully a drinkable fluid, and snuck up behind Cedric; she waited for the exact moment Cedric was mid-sip of his drink, and tossed her drink at the unsuspecting girl from behind. Merlyn mentally apologized to the girl, who was a completely innocent bystander, but thanked her for the greater good. The desired effect happened instantaneously, the red-head let out a loud shriek and whipped around towards Cedric, who was standing there looking confused.

"WHAT THE HELL!" She screeched and back-handed Cedric so hard his entire body moved.

"Pft," Merlyn had to choke back her laugh.

The redhead's boyfriend rushed in next, he grabbed Cedric by the front of his shirt and lifted him a foot off the ground. Merlyn took that as her chance and came up behind Cedric.

"The fuck you think you're doin'?" The man sounded like a gorilla, Merlyn thought as she carefully reached into Cedric's back pocket.

"Hey...hicc! Look man...I didn't..." Cedric said, but his words were slurred. Now that Merlyn had the keys in her hand, she noticed that Cedric was starting to look a bit green around the edges.

'Time to go.' Merlyn thought and got away just in time, before Cedric threw up on the guy.

"Good luck," She said and took off in the direction she saw Edwin go.
She pushed her way past people and shoved Arthur's keys into the front pocket of her hoodie. Where did they go? Merlyn kept wandering around, as the seconds dragged on into minutes she was growing more anxious and worried.

It was the movement she caught in the corner of her eye, that drew her attention down a smaller hallway. She saw Edwin carrying a tripod and video camera into one of the rooms at the end of the hallway. All the air in her lungs rushed out and she made a beeline for the room, but before she could make it the door was shut. It was quieter in this hallway and Merlyn could hear the lock click into place. Merlyn immediately pressed her ear up against the door and listened hard,

"...put him on the bed..."

"should...or tie him down?"

"set the camera up..."

Merlyn needed to get them out of the room. She ran back out of the hallway and back into the main area, she needed a commotion...a really big one. People were swarming in by the dozen, and things were getting really up close and personal. Merlyn shrugged and decided to re-implement her previous plan.

"HEY, UGLY!" hollered Merlyn in a deep voice and body checked into a random guy's back. She immediately ducked out of the way and blended back into the crowd.

The gigantic guy, dressed like a football player, whipped around and grabbed the closest guy he saw and hauled him face-to-face by the front of his shirt.

"The hell was that for?" Football guy grunted.

"Hey, look man," The ginger guy said, "it wasn't me."

Football guy moved his face in closer. "You callin' me a liar?"
Before the other guy could respond, he was punched in the eye. Merlyn didn't stick around to see the aftermath and continued her way through the house to wreak havoc. She pit girls against other girls, and groups of guys against other guys. Sometimes, it paid to be small and unnoticeable; she realized she needed one last thing to really escalate the atmosphere. That's when she noticed a flower vase perched on a shelf. Now, Merlyn doesn't condone reckless destruction of property, but...

She pressed her hands together in a praying motion and squeezed her eyes shut. "I'm so sorry," she apologized to the innocent vase, and pushed it off the shelf.

**CRASH.**

Ceramic shards scattered across the floor and water exploded outwards. People nearby jumped in shock, and turned to see what happened. Merlyn backed away from the scene of the crime and held her breath, hoping this last stunt had the desired effect.

"WOOO! PAAAARTAAAY!" Yup. It did.

The music was cranked up louder and people were chanting: 'fight! Fight! Fight!' to various groups of people hashing it out with one another. Merlyn ran back down the small hallway and back to the door, she wasted no time and began pounding on it with her small fists.

"FIGHTS STARTED! PEOPLE ARE TRASHING STUFF!" She hollered and quickly ducked into the corner a few feet away from the door. She heard running footsteps, and then the door was jerked open. Valient looked around the hallway before cursing up a storm.

"Fucking hell!" He spat. "EDWIN! GET YOUR ASS OUT HERE!"

"What?" Edwin sneered.

"People are trashing my house," Val said and grabbed Edwin by the shoulder and tried to drag him down the hallway.

Edwin shrugged off Val's hand. "How's that my problem? Go deal with it yourself!"
Val leaned in close and said in a menacing tone. "Either you come and help me. Or I'll fucking post those pictures."

Merlyn could see a mixture of anger and fear on Edwin's face. He grudgingly nodded his head and closed the door behind him as the two of them ran down the hallway and into the chaos that Merlyn created. Immediately she ran into the room and turned to lock the door behind her, her breaths came out in pants as the adrenaline pumped through her system. The music was so loud that she could feel the door vibrating under her fingertips. She turned around and scanned the room, first thing she saw was the video camera and tripod half set up, and the next (more obvious) thing was Arthur laying flat on his back on the bed. Merlyn quickly ran over and knelt on the bed beside him. Along the way she kicked over a box with an electric shaver in it, and she saw a bucket with a bunch of sharpie markers, scissors, and random objects in it.

He looked like he was sleeping, and if Merlyn didn't know better, she would have left him alone. But, here they were, both of them locked in a room at Valient's house and the green bottle of pills laying nearby. She reached over and grabbed the bottle off the nightstand, the label was somewhat torn, and even when she squinted she couldn't make out the words. Merlyn shoved the bottle into the same pocket she put his keys in earlier and moved back to Arthur.

"Arthur?" Merlyn said softly and tapped on Arthur's cheek. "Come on...wake up! Arthur!"

He didn't respond, or even flinch when she tapped on his cheek. Panic set in, and she honestly didn't know what she would do if he didn't wake up. She grabbed his shoulders and began to violently shake him, but got no response. Then she shook his head from side to side—also no response.

"Look, you're not the only pompous, supercilious, condescending prat in this world. But you're my friend, and you will wake up this instance or so help me I'll..." Merlyn trailed off as she formed an idea in her head.

She sat upright and looked between her right hand and Arthur. She'll find amusement in this later, and reared her hand back.

"I'm kind of sorry for this!"

THWACK
Arthur jolted awake, like he broke through the surface of water and gasped. He looked around and blinked rapidly. Merlyn could see him trying to figure out what was going on, but a glazed over look was slowly coming back. Merlyn ran her thumbs over his cheeks, and then her fingers through his hair.

"Arthur!" She breathed in relief.

Arthur tried to focus on her, and he had to squint slightly. She could see that he was trying to form words, but he was having a hard time processing his thoughts.

"M...M-Mer..lyn?" His words were sluggish.

"Come on," Merlyn pulled him upright with all her strength, "we have to go."

"M'sorry," Arthur swayed back and forth, but Merlyn held him steady, "don't...want...mad...me."

"Look, we can discuss that later." Merlyn hopped off the bed and tried to pull Arthur to his feet. She had to dig her heels into the carpet to get enough purchase to even get him a few inches off the bed.

"You...great...friend," Arthur leaned forward as Merlyn pulled some more, but sat back down when she lost grip, "M'prat."

"Arthur!" Merlyn clasped his face between her hands and stared him down. She was getting frustrated and worried at the same time. This would almost be comical, if they didn't have to leave, now.

"Focus." For emphasis she held his head tighter. Arthur's eyes met Merlyn's and she held eye contact as she spoke.

"I need you to stay awake for me, or there's no way we'll get out of here. Val's going to come back soon and realize his plan has gone to shit. But, we need to be gone before he realizes. Do you understand?" Merlyn spoke slowly and clearly.
Arthur sluggishly nodded his head and tried to get to his feet. Merlyn threw his arm over her shoulder; she half-dragged and half-carried him to the open window. She climbed out first and helped Arthur out. Then, the two of them began to make their getaway.

"Dizzy..." Arthur moaned and swayed heavily to his right.

"No. No. No. No!" Merlyn rushed out and tugged harshly to the left. "You can't pass out on me, dollop head! Just make it to your car, please!"

He shook his head and looked like he was trying to clear the fog out of his mind. Arthur absently patted his pockets at the mention of his keys. Merlyn started to pray to whoever was willing to listen that Arthur stayed awake long enough for her to reach his car, because physically, she won't be able to carry his weight if he passes out. She reached into her pocket and heard the bottle of pills rattle around as she took out the car keys.

BEEP

Arthur's car lit up momentarily and made a sound. End of the block, thought Merlyn as she continued to pull Arthur along. The two of them hobbled down the sidewalk as quick as they could. There were moments, again, when Arthur would sway so violently to one side that it nearly brought them to the ground, and Merlyn had to quickly compensate each time. Out of sheer luck they managed to make it to Arthur's car. She moved him so that he was leaning on the car as she opened the passenger door. Arthur's legs suddenly gave out from under him, but Merlyn was quick enough to catch him by throwing her arms under his shoulders. It was essentially a very...very awkward hug. This brought them face to face, and, if the situation didn't make Merlyn feel so high-strung right now, she probably would have blushed.

Arthur stared at her for a moment and then mumbled. "Eyes."

"Come on," said Merlyn, not understanding what he meant, "let's get in the car."

"Mnn..." grunted Arthur as he tried to stand upright again.

With some more effort, Merlyn managed to get Arthur into the passenger seat of his car and buckle him in. Before she closed the door, she saw him fumble with the seat latch, and to put him out of his misery, she reached down and lowered the back of the seat for him. Once she closed his door, she ran around to the driver side and got in.
"Freakishly long legs," grumbled Merlyn as she pulled the seat forward so her feet could reach the pedals. Next, she re-adjusted the rear-view mirror and turned the car on.

Merlyn was aware that she didn't have her license on her and she knew if she was caught without it then she'd be in big trouble. But, if she drove at the proper speed and obeyed all the laws...she'll be fine. Now, the problem was where should she go? Merlyn glanced over at Arthur and then quickly back to the road. Hospital? Merlyn shook her head, she didn't know if that would be a good decision.

"Uncle Gaius it is," Merlyn shifted the car into drive and pulled out onto the road.

Her heart started to beat rapidly as she turned onto the main road. He'll be fine, we'll be fine, just...stay calm, Merlyn thought as she tried her best to maintain the speed limit. She retraced her route from earlier and had to keep reminding herself not to step on the gas. At a red light, Merlyn looked over at Arthur to see if he was still breathing, and after a terrifying thought crossed her mind, she quickly pushed two fingers into the side of his neck to see if he had a pulse. Merlyn let out a breath of relief when his pulse was still strong.

"You, literally, have taken ten years off of my life, dollop head," Merlyn huffed and released the brake when the light turned green.

Merlyn's statement was answered by Arthur's silence. This time she knew that he wouldn't wake up no matter how hard she slapped him. Emotions were running high for her and she couldn't help the tears that formed in her eyes. She wasn't sobbing, or in hysterics, her eyes just teared up, but a smaller part of her was glad Arthur was safe and she managed to keep him out of harm's way. The relief she felt when she turned onto the street was indescribable, but the relief that hit her when she saw Will's motorcycle on the driveway...insurmountable. Merlyn put Arthur's car in park and pulled out the keys.

"Will!" Merlyn breathed out as she climbed out of the driver's seat and ran over to him.

Judging by Will's posture...he wasn't impressed. His arms were crossed tightly, and even though he was leaning against his bike, Merlyn has never felt smaller in her life. They both quietly stared at each other; Will gave her a hard look, and Merlyn looked at him in contrite. After a minute or so passed, Will let out a sigh and rolled his eyes while standing up to pull Merlyn into his chest.

"You're such a troublemaker, you know that?" reprimanded Will.
Merlyn nodded and hugged him tighter. "I'm sorry."

Will ruffled her hair. "Don't apologize for who you are, Merls. How many times do I have to tell you that."

"I'm so glad you're here, Will," Merlyn said.

"I had a feeling you wouldn't have listened to me anyways. But," Will pulled back and glanced down into the passenger seat, "when Gaius called me and told me you went running off into the night...well, I hope you're prepared to explain yourself to him."

"I am. Just.." Merlyn said and trailed off while looking between Arthur and Will, with a hopeful expression.

"Right," Will said in resignation and rolled up his jacket's sleeves, "let's get him up to Gaius."

Will opened the car door and leaned in to unbuckle Arthur, then he threw Arthur's right arm over his shoulder and lifted him out of the car. Merlyn hip-checked the door closed after them and locked the car. She jogged up to Will and supported Arthur's other side, even though Will carried a majority of the weight.

The three of them managed to make it up the stairs and to the main floor. Uncle Gaius was sitting in the living room, with the TV on playing quietly, but the moment he caught sight of them he jumped to his feet.

"Merlyn!" Uncle Gaius rushed over to them. "What on earth-"

"Please, Uncle Gaius," pleaded Merlyn, "they gave Arthur something, and I didn't know what to do."

Uncle Gaius looked at Arthur, and then at Merlyn. It didn't take long for him to quickly piece together the situation; he nodded his head and rolled up his sweater's sleeves.
"Right, well," Uncle Gaius quickly morphed into Dr. Gaius and gestured upstairs, "let's bring him to your room for now, so I can assess him."

As they were dragging Arthur's unconscious form up the stairs, Merlyn couldn't help but be extremely grateful that Will was there to help. Even though there was a lingering look of disapproval on his face, she could see the concern in his eyes when he glanced down at Arthur. Uncle Gaius lead the way into Merlyn's room and gestured to her bed; for a split second she was glad she spent the time earlier to clean up the area. Will and Merlyn placed Arthur down onto the bed, and he made no movement aside from his breathing. Uncle Gaius quickly stepped out of the room, but came back a moment later with his stethoscope. He sat down on the edge of the bed and placed the bell under Arthur's shirt and listened to his breathing.

"Respiratory rate is a bit low, but still within normal." Uncle Gaius moved on to the next assessment and repeated what Merlyn had done earlier in the car, and checked Arthur's pulse.

"Heart rate is normal," said Uncle Gaius and he turned to look at Merlyn. "What did you see him take, Merlyn?"

"Oh!" Merlyn shoved her hand into her hoodie and pulled out the green bottle. The pills rattled around when she handed it over.

"Hmm," Uncle Gaius squinted slightly at the bottle while re-adjusting his glasses, "I believe these are sleeping pills. The prescription kind."

He turned back around and placed his hand on Arthur's forehead. "Temperature seems fine."

"They put it in his drink..." offered Merlyn in a soft voice, "does that change anything?"

Uncle Gaius opened his mouth and then closed it. "By no means is it a good thing. There's usually warning labels on these bottles that tell patients not to take it with alcohol. But, it seems like Arthur is okay for now. We'll just have to keep an eye on him."

"I'm sorry!" Merlyn blurted out and knotted her fingers together while looking down. "For running out so late at night, and not telling you, and causing you to worry, and I know that was irrespon-"
Merlyn felt the warmth of Uncle Gaius's hand on the top of her head. She sheepishly looked up and gnawed on her bottom lip.

"You don't have to apologize, Merlyn." Uncle Gaius looked back at Arthur and then at her with a gentle smile on his face. "I know it's in your nature to care about everyone. I'm not upset."

"Thank you." Merlyn threw her arms around him.

"She's still such a little troublemaker though, isn't she, Gaius?" Will drawled.

Merlyn looked over and mock scowled at Will.

Uncle Gaius chuckled and patted her on the head. "That part of her will probably never change."

"I'm right here, guys," huffed Merlyn as she pulled away from the hug.

"Well then," Will began and made a pointed nod towards Arthur, "that means you're in charge of watching over Pendragon tonight."

"What?" Merlyn said and looked up at Will. "Aren't you stay-"

Will pulled a face and waved his hand in front of it, as if what Merlyn just suggested was the most absurd thing he's ever heard.

"No way. I'm going back home to my bed. This," Will actually pointed to Arthur this time, "is your responsibility. There's probably a lesson to be learned from this. Arthur's all yours for tonight, Merls."

"But-" Merlyn said and then turned to look at Uncle Gaius. "Uncle Gaius--"

Uncle Gaius stretched and cracked his back. "Well, will you look at the time?" He glanced at his watch, then reached over and patted Merlyn's shoulder. "Wake me, if anything changes."
"Night, Merls!" Will threw her a quick salute and turned towards the door with Uncle Gaius.

"I..." Merlyn trailed off as she watched both men exit her room and chuckle to themselves as they walked down the hallway.

She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. Her room grew silent as the whole ordeal caught up with her. She aggressively walked over to her bed and grabbed her blanket. Arthur's chest rose and fell softly with each breath.

"You," Merlyn began and pointed at Arthur, even though she knew he wouldn't be responding, "are such a hassle, you know that?"

"Getting yourself into a situation like that. Not listening. Being a prat, and ignoring me for two days. Sending apology texts," Merlyn grumbled as she tucked her blanket around Arthur.

As Merlyn looked down at Arthur and saw the unguarded look on his face as he slept, she couldn't help but feel that pang inside of her heart. What if she hadn't gotten to him in time? Merlyn wondered as flashbacks of what she saw in the room earlier came rushing back into focus. She cringed and opened her eyes to look at him again. He's arrogant, condescending, and such a clot pole...but, by no means did he deserve any of this.

"Honestly," Merlyn said softly as she sat down beside him, "I was so worried."

'He trusts everybody. That's his flaw.'

Merlyn hesitantly reached her hand out and gently brushed her fingers through his hair.

"I don't think it's a flaw," Merlyn whispered quietly to herself. "You're..."

She sighed and shook her head in exasperation. "You're a good person."

Silence filled the room and Merlyn contemplated what she wanted to do next. One glance at
her clock told her that it was close to 2 AM. Merlyn looked down at her cell and gnawed on her lip...should she? She clicked on Morgana's name in her messages and started typing.

**Hey, Morgana. Are you awake?**  **Sent: 1:45 AM**

Merlyn sat quietly beside Arthur as she waited for a potential reply. Her phone suddenly started to vibrate, which caught her off guard.

"Hello?" Merlyn said.

"Is everything okay, Merlyn?" Morgana sounded awake and alert.

"Uhm..." Merlyn hesitated and looked over at Arthur, "define okay?"

"What's wrong? Did some-"

"Arthur's unconscious in my bed and it's because Valient drugged him with sleeping pills," blurted Merlyn. Well...at least no one could say she beats around bushes.

Morgana was silent for awhile, and it made Merlyn feel very uncomfortable. Well, it *seemed* like a long time, but that's because Merlyn could feel her wrath slowly come to a boil over the line. Merlyn knew her message got through loud and clear, but lord was she a bit terrified about what was to come. So it came as a surprise with what Morgana asked next.

"Is he okay?" Well, it wasn't that much of a surprise, he is her brother after all, thought Merlyn as she heard Morgana's voice grow soft.

"Yeah, Uncle Gaius said he'll be fine. I'm just going to keep an eye him till morning," Merlyn said. "I just wanted to tell you, because well..."

"Thank you, Merlyn," Morgana said.

Merlyn could hear her talking to someone in the background and realized it was Leon when
she recognized the male voice.

"We'll be back by the morning," Morgana said.

"Okay," Merlyn nodded, even though no one saw her do it, "I'll see you guys in a bit. I'll explain everything to you then."

"Merlyn?" Morgana said.

"Yeah?"

"I'm glad we have you." Merlyn flushed to the tips of her ears. "I'm glad he has you."

"Uhm..." mumbled Merlyn bashfully.

Morgana laughed softly. "Ta, Merlyn. See you in a few hours."

After the call ended, Merlyn sat in the silence of her room for a little longer before she felt exhaustion wash over her. She stumbled out to the hallway closet and grabbed another blanket for herself and walked back into the room. She flicked the light switch and plunged the room into darkness; the only light was coming through her window, and she used it to navigate her way back to her bed. Would it be better to sleep on the floor? Merlyn wondered as she hugged the blanket to her chest. She looked down at the floor and then scowled, why should she be reduced to sleeping on the floor? Besides, how can she monitor Arthur, if she's laying on the ground?

"Just so you know," Merlyn said out loud, "I'm not taking advantage of you."

She managed to push Arthur over far enough on her bed, so that she had enough room to curl up into a ball beside him. Merlyn laid her head on his chest and tucked the second blanket around herself. She looked up at his face, one last time, before closing her eyes; the slow rise and fall of his chest, coupled with the steady beating of his heart, lulled her to sleep.
"Morning!" Will's cheerful tone caused Merlyn to have very angry thoughts.

"Go away..." Merlyn curled up tighter into a ball and buried herself between the solid mass beneath her and the blanket.

"Come now, Merls," Will said and tugged on her blanket. "You have guests."

Merlyn cracked one eye open as she held tight to her blanket. Everything was blurry for a moment as her eyes re-focused themselves. The first person she saw was Will, and then she noticed Morgana standing at the doorway with Leon. All the events of last night caught up to her sleep fogged mind and she immediately sat upright and looked down at Arthur. Her panic was quelled when she saw him still sleeping peacefully and that he looked the same.

"Should probably let his sister see him," Will whispered quietly to her.

Merlyn nodded her head and stood up. "Morning, guys," She looked over at Morgana and Leon and gave them a small wave.

"Morning, Merlyn," Leon said as he walked over to her and patted her on the shoulder. He glanced over at Morgana, who immediately rushed over to Arthur's side, once Merlyn stood up.

"Hi, Merlyn," Morgana looked...well, she looked sad, observed Merlyn. Her normally pale complexion made the dark circles under her eyes more prominent, along with the minimal amount of makeup she had on, Merlyn got to see, for the first time, a fragile Morgana.

Morgana turned back to Arthur and slipped her hand into Arthur's hand. "You're such an idiot," She said breathlessly and ran her fingers through her hair..

Arthur groaned and scrunched up his face. "Merlyn."

Everyone that was looking at Arthur turned to look at Merlyn, who was blushing scarlet. Will reached over and ruffled her hair with a small smile. She didn't know what else to do, so she decided to go and get Arthur a cup of water. Merlyn gestured silently to the door, Will nodded and followed her out.
"Are you awake, man?" Leon said as he walked over to the bed and sat down near Arthur's legs.

Everything felt sluggish to Arthur. His mind was foggy, and his head was throbbing. Arthur wondered why he felt like this and tried to remember what happened last night. There wasn't much that came to mind at first; he remembered shooting hoops at home, getting ready to leave the house, sending Merlyn an apology text from his car, before going to Val's party. Val's party, Arthur thought and reached up to rub his eyes. What happened at Val's house? Arthur tried very hard to remember. Once he opened his eyes and blinked away most of the fog in his mind, he looked around and tried to sit up.

"Morgana?" Arthur groaned and massaged his temple. Morgana wrapped her arms around him in a hug. It weirded him out whenever Morgana was affectionate like this, it meant something actually scared or worried her enough to drop the tough girl act.

"You're okay?" She asked quietly.

Arthur nodded and yawned while hugging her back. "Yeah...I'm good. Hey man."

Leon tapped his fist against Arthur's and sat back quietly. "Had us worried there. When Merlyn called Morgana last night, and told us Val drugged you...Morgana almost got a speeding ticket on the way back."

Morgana pulled back and glared at Leon. "But we didn't, did we? So I don't see what your point is."

The two guys chuckled and didn't argue with her. It was a welcomed distraction from the actual topic of the conversation. Arthur glanced around the room and realized it belonged to Merlyn. Leon's words a moment ago registered in Arthur's mind and he was beginning to remember, Cedric gave him a couple of drinks, along with Edwin, and so did Val. He mentally groaned and realized he should have been more cautious; Merlyn was right...he shouldn't have listened to them. The guilt he's been feeling for the past two days settled heavier in the pit of his stomach. He sincerely hoped Merlyn would forgive him. There were voices coming towards the room, and Arthur recognized one being Merlyn's.

"I'm so happy for you, Will!"
Merlyn entered the room first, followed by Will and Uncle Gaius. She immediately locked eyes with Arthur, who was sitting upright in her bed-looking a bit haggard. Everyone silently observed the two of them staring at each other; Merlyn was the first one to snap out of it and quietly walked over and handed Arthur the cup of water in her hands.

"Thanks..." Arthur said, his voice slightly husky and still thick with sleep. He lifted the glass to his lips and took a long drink from it.

Merlyn nodded and took a step back to stand beside Will. Uncle Gaius walked over to the bed, Morgana and Leon both got up to give him room. He thanked them and took a seat.

"How are you feeling at the moment, Arthur?" Uncle Gaius asked.

Arthur rubbed the back of his neck and ran his fingers through his hair. "Fine. I'm fine."

"Feeling nauseous? Or dizzy?"

"No..." Arthur shook his head. "I just feel kind of tired, still."

"Right," Uncle Gaius nodded his head and patted Arthur's knee, "that's to be expected. Most of the alcohol and medication should be cleared from your body. Just make sure you get some food into you and drink lots of fluids. If you have any concerns don't hesitate to call and ask me."

"Thanks, Gaius," Arthur said.

"Speaking of food," Will announced and looked around the room at everyone, "should we all go get some breakfast?" He threw his arm over Merlyn's shoulders. "My treat."

"I have shipment arriving soon. But, you kids go and enjoy yourselves." Uncle Gaius stood up and headed out of Merlyn's room with a smile and a wave.

"So what do you guys say?" Will looked down at Merlyn, and then over at Morgana. "Breakfast?"
Morgana gave Will her most calculating stare, but Will continued to smile at her unflinchingly. There was a somewhat tense silence that settled in the room, as the two of them had a staring showdown...until Merlyn's stomach growled. Merlyn wrapped her arms around her middle and flushed a deep red.

Will snorted and gave Merlyn a one-armed side hug before letting go. "Well that answers the question. I'll drive us."

Everyone turned to leave, and Arthur slid off Merlyn's bed. She saw him take a step towards her and open his mouth to say something, but Will reached back and grabbed her shoulder, effectively leading her out of the room. Merlyn caught the small frown on Arthur's face before she was forced to look forward. They all piled into Will's SUV, Merlyn in shot gun, and Morgana, Leon, and Arthur in the back seat, when everyone was buckled in, Will backed out of the driveway. The awkward atmosphere in the car was becoming too much for Merlyn, so she turned on the radio and began to fiddle with the stations.

"Hey, go back, I like that song." Will glanced at the radio and then back to the road.

"But I'm not done surfing through the channels," Merlyn continued pressing buttons.

Will rolled his eyes. "By the time you finish that, my song will be done."

"Is it really that good of a song anyways, Will?" Merlyn said while giving him a condescending look.

"You little-" Will clenched his teeth together while reaching over to give her a one-handed noogie. "Take that back!"

Merlyn laughed and swatted his hand. "You're so mean, Will."

Will grinned while patting his chest. "It's because I love you."

"Ahem," Morgana cleared her throat and sat forward in her seat, "why don't we listen to the new pop station."
"Oh yeah, I saw their ads around," Merlyn said and reached for the tuner, "this should be..." She stopped once the correct numbers flashed on the screen, "...it."

A popular pop song started playing and filled the car with its catchy lyrics and chorus. Well, this was better than nothing, Merlyn thought and looked out the car window. Will ended up taking them to one of the popular diners in the city, The Rising Sun, Merlyn has overheard some classmates talking about it, and she saw posts about it on her Instagram. The five of them walked in and was immediately greeted by a pretty brunette with freckles splattered across the tops of her cheeks.

"Hi there! Welcome to The Rising Sun, table for five today?" She asked Will and batted her eyelashes at him

"Yes please," Will said and smiled at her.

"Right this way please," The brunette lead them through the diner as she grabbed five menus.

Merlyn followed Will, but she could feel Arthur's presence behind her. She honestly didn’t know what to say to him, and she knew it'd only be awkward if she made it that way, but lord knows Merlyn's never been one to not make things weird. What would they even say to each other? Should she say something first? Or would he? All these thoughts did not bode well for her empty stomach.

"Actually," Will paused and glanced down at the girl's name tag, "Lina, would it be alright if we have a booth?"

Lina looked up at Will and gave him a flirtatious smile. "Of course, will this one be okay?"

"It's great," Will said and smiled at her, while ushering Merlyn into the booth, "thank you very much."

As everyone settled into the semi-circle booth, Merlyn caught the look Morgana was giving Will as he interacted with the hostess. Merlyn knew that Lina was trying to flirt with Will, but the more surprising thing for her to observe was that Will wasn't actively trying to flirt back with her. But, Morgana wouldn't know that since she doesn't know Will as well as Merlyn does, so she wouldn't find it a pretty normal interaction for him in regards to the opposite sex. The seating arrangement turned out to be Arthur, Leon, Morgana, Merlyn, and Will. Arthur and her both ended up locking eyes again and she could read on his face that he wanted to say something to her.
"Well I'm your hostess, Lina," She smiled at Will again as she handed out the menus, "your server should be with you guys shortly. If you need anything, please feel free to call me."

Merlyn quickly opened her menu and started to scan through the items, breaking eye contact with Arthur. She was aware Lina and Will were still talking to each other, but it didn't bother her, since she's used to girls trying to monopolize Will's time whenever they were out together. But, she didn't know what to do about Arthur and his staring. In order to avoid the problem, Merlyn started in on her normal routine when reading new menus; first she would look at each and every item, then narrow it down to her top ten, weigh the pros and cons of each one, then end up with her top two, and despair about it silently (because she can't finish two meals by herself) until Will asks her what she plans on ordering, and orders the other thing so she can try it as well. It was convoluted, but...how else are you suppose to order things in a restaurant?

"Good morning, everyone," A plump looking brunette walked up to their table, "My name's Daisy. What can I start everyone off with to drink this morning?"

"Can I have apple juice please?" Merlyn said as she glanced up from the menu.

Will rested his arm behind Merlyn's head. "I'll have a coffee, thanks." He glanced over at the other three in the booth and gestured for them to order. "Whatever you guys want."

"I'll have a coffee too, please." Morgana gave Daisy one of her charming smiles.

"Two chocolate milks, thanks," Leon said and gestured between himself and Arthur.

"Of course, I'll be back with those drinks and get your orders." Daisy smiled kindly and walked away.

Will leaned over and looked at Merlyn's menu. "What're you ordering, Merls."

Merlyn pointed down at one out of the two items. "Thi-"

"Why do you call her Merls?" Morgana asked sweetly and tilted her head slightly in question.
Will looked up from the menu at Morgana and smiled, before ruffling Merlyn's hair. "Because it's easier than saying her full name each time."

Merlyn rolled her eyes. "Let's be real here. You only call me by my name when you're pissed, Will."

Will shrugged. "That's true too."

Daisy came back in that moment with everyone's drinks. She handed them out, and took out her notepad to take their orders. She started on the other side of the booth this time, and took Arthur's order first. Merlyn was second to last and put in her order while handing her menu over to Daisy once she was done.

"I'll have number 25 with extra hash browns, and if I could also get an extra plate with that. Thanks, Daisy." Will smiled brightly at her and handed his menu over. Daisy smiled and took the menu from Will and left to put their order in.

Merlyn glanced down at the cup of black coffee in front of Will. She started reaching for the cream and sugar packets to mix in for him, they were a little farther on the table from her, which meant she had to stretch a bit to reach them.

"What the hell happened to your arm?" Will suddenly snapped and reached for Merlyn's arm.

"Ow!" Merlyn cried out and yanked her forearm out of Will's hold (it wasn't strong to begin with, but it was just a knee-jerk reaction).

Will jerked his hand back, for a split moment, he looked absolutely terrified that he had hurt Merlyn in anyway. But then he realized it wasn't him that caused the deep purple bruise (that peaked out when she was reaching for the sugar packets) on her forearm.

"What the hell happened?" Will repeated himself.

Merlyn shook her head and placed her left hand over her right forearm. "Nothing."
Will shifted to face her, and his expression was not pleased. "Merlyn."

Shit. Merlyn hated when he used her full name. Like she said before, he only ever calls her by her name when he's pissed...like now. Morgana, Leon, and Arthur watched them in confusion and apprehension.

"It really is nothing," Merlyn mumbled while rolling her sleeve up, "you know I bruise easily."

Morgana gasped loudly when she saw the ugly hand-print bruise on Merlyn's right forearm, it was a nasty, deep purple and the shape of it was very obvious. The guys didn't exactly gasp, but their shock wasn't well hid, Leon looked stunned, Arthur looked like he was going to be sick, and Will—oh crap, Merlyn thought as she saw the murderous expression on his face. That's when the Spanish cursing began. Back when they were younger, Will found out he had Spanish blood in him, and that lead to several summers of Spanish lessons for the both of them. He only ever uses it when he was trying to impress a girl, or in this instance, when he's pissed beyond belief.

"Will," Merlyn sighed and rolled her sleeve back down, "calm."

"I'm going to have that kid's fucking head bolted to my wall," Will growled as he moved his arm and started to shuffle out of the booth.

"Will, stop!" Merlyn grabbed his arm and pulled back.

"Merlyn, let go of me," Will said and turned back to glare at her.

Merlyn stared back stubbornly. "No. You're a full grown adult, what are you planning to do? Go and get yourself an assault charge?"

"No," He gritted out, "I'm going to fucking kill the kid who decided to lay a hand on you."

"Honestly," Merlyn rolled her eyes, "I'm fine. Valient didn't even—"
"Val, did this to you?" Morgana said in fury and disbelief, before turning to look at Will, "I'll show you where he lives."

Will nodded and tried to shuffle out of the booth again. Merlyn let out an exasperated sigh. "Guys! Will you please just drop it? We are in an establishment!"

"When will you ever learn your lesson?" Will stopped tugging on his arm. Now he was really going to lay it on her now.

"You're always doing these things, running straight into danger, your safety be damned," Will lectured with a deep scowl on his face. "You do all these things for people who don't even do the same for you!" Will paused and glanced over at Arthur while holding his hand up. "No offence to you, kid."

Merlyn could see Arthur's eyebrows furrow at the 'kid' comment.

"Who's protecting you, when you're so busy protecting everyone else?" Will finished.

"I..." Merlyn said softly and knotted her fingers together. Her cheeks and ears were bright red, she wished there wasn't an audience to see her being lectured.

"Maybe we should consider having you transfer schools..." added Will as an after-thought.

"No!" Merlyn and Arthur cried out at the same time. They both looked at each other in surprise and quickly quieted down when people turned to look at them.

Will glanced between the two of them and his expression softened-somewhat. "Maybe not..." He mused.

"We'll take care of Merlyn," Morgana said, with full confidence, and looped her arm through Merlyn's.

Will gave Morgana a sideways glance and smirked. "Well, maybe I'll be at ease now."
Leon sat up slightly, but Morgana shot him a look that made him sit back down. She turned to smile sweetly at Will. "So, what's your relationship-"

"Oh look, food's here." Will nodded in Daisy's direction and ignored Morgana's questions.

Merlyn was glad for distraction, but also because she was starving. Daisy placed their order in front of them and left with a smile. Everyone tucked into their food, this time the silence that filled the air wasn't as awkward as before. Will made conversation with Leon, and surprisingly, Arthur, about basketball. Once that door was opened the guys immediately bonded and started delving into the season. Will asked them to explain the Inter-City Cup tournament to him, and which schools they were playing. Merlyn and Morgana shared a quick eye roll when they were completely forgotten about.

"Merls," Will paused his conversation with the guys and leaned over, "lend me your cell real quick."

"Where's yours?" Merlyn said as she swallowed her food.

"Left it in the car, come on now!" Will rapidly tapped the table between them with a grin on his face.

Merlyn glanced at him sideways. "You do know what the purpose of having a cell is...right?" She waved her cell slightly between them, "It's suppose to be portable enough to take around with you, at all times."

Will grinned and snatched the cell out of Merlyn's hand. "Yeah, which is why I'm borrowing yours."

Merlyn rolled her eyes and went back to eating her waffles. She saw from the corner of her eye that Will was looking something up on her phone, and she made a mental note to consider changing her passcode, mostly just to annoy Will when he can't get in. Whatever it was Will found, he turned to show the guys; Morgana nudged her and asked Merlyn to pass her another sugar packet. She reached across the table unthinkingly, she realized her mistake when she saw Arthur look down at the bruise with a face full of guilt. Merlyn quickly grabbed the sugar packet and passed it to Morgana while trying to yank her sleeve down further. The two of them made eye contact again, and this time, Merlyn opened her mouth to tell him that it wasn't his fault, but the words died on her lips when Arthur turned away, and back to the basketball conversation. A wave of sadness washed over
her and she didn't know what to do. Is this how they're going to be from now on? Eye contact with no banter?

"Here," Will said and slid the extra plate covered with hash browns he asked for, over to Merlyn.

Her mood brightened somewhat, and she turned to smile at Will. "Thanks."

Will snorted and dropped his fist lightly on her head. "Troublemaker."

At the end of their meal, Will snatched the bill up before anyone else could reach for it. He wagged his finger at them as he entered his pin and waited for the terminal to finish the transaction. The ride back was better, Merlyn and Morgana were talking about the campaign, while Will continued to bond with Leon and Arthur, the topic was now about video games. Once they reached the apartment, they all got out of the SUV; Will headed inside after saying goodbye, while Morgana and Leon headed for Leon's car (Merlyn waved to them). Merlyn walked slowly over to Arthur's car and felt him follow behind her at an even slower pace, when she reached the driver side, she pulled his keys out of her pocket and handed it to him.

"Look, Merlyn, I'm-" Arthur was the first to break the silence. He was running his hand through his hair.

"I forgive you!" Merlyn blurted out, and cut him off quickly, she looked up at him and waved feebly. "See you at school tomorrow."

Merlyn stepped around Arthur and ran for the front door. She was conflicted, a part of her wanted to stay and talk things out with him, but the cowardly part of her didn't want to get into with him, especially not, with Morgana and Leon sitting in their car watching. Once she got past the threshold, she shut the door and slid down to the floor. Will was sitting on the steps waiting for her and nodded his head up the stairs.

"Come on, Merls, no time to mope," Will said and stood up.

"You're right," She agreed and kicked off her runners.
The next day at school was like a scene from a movie. It was like the entire student body was talking about Valient's party. Merlyn couldn't walk to her locker without hearing someone talk about the events that occurred Saturday night.

"I heard his house got trashed!"

"The cops came and shut the whole thing down!"

"He got called into the principal's office for a disciplinary meeting. I just saw Arthur go in with Morgana and their dad. I wonder why..."

Merlyn froze and turned around to look at the two girls standing behind her and her locker. They spared her a glance, but continued on their way; Merlyn almost called them back, just to hear more about what was going on, when Freya came up to her locker.

"Good morning, Merlyn!" She chirped, and if Merlyn wasn't so mentally preoccupied, she'd have commented on Freya's pretty dress. "How was your-"

"Freya," Merlyn grabbed both sides of Freya's arms, she squeaked and looked at Merlyn in confusion, "do you know why Arthur and Valient were called into Principal Annis's office?"

Freya nodded and gave Merlyn a worried look as she released both of her arms. "Apparently, from what I heard from the secretaries, something happened at Val's party and there's a chance he might be expelled for it..." Freya lowered her voice, to an even softer pitch, and looked around them, "but don't tell anyone I told you that."

"Right," Merlyn nodded and hurried the conversation along, "so is Val for sure going to be expelled?"

Freya shrugged helplessly. "I don't know, the secretaries were saying something about lack of proof on Arthur's end, but I'm not sure what happened."

"Kay, thanks a bunch, Freya." Merlyn started to head in the opposite direction from homeroom. "Can you tell Mr. George I'm going to be in the office, and will miss homeroom?"
"Yeah I can, but why?" Freya asked while scrunching her eyebrows together.

Merlyn was already trying to think of a million other different things. "I'll explain later, and you can tell me all about your date with Will, as well, I promise you'll have my undivided attention."

Freya blushed and spluttered. "I-It wasn't a-a-a d-date!"

She spared Freya a quick grin and took off down the hallway. "Right! Not a date, but really a 'meet the parent' sort of thing, gotcha!"

"Merlyn!" Freya whispered loudly, but walked into homeroom blushing.

"Excuse me. Sorry. Pardon me." Merlyn moved around the hordes of students to try and get to the one person's locker she needed to see.

"Peter!" Merlyn called out and waved him down.

He looked small, observed Merlyn, even from a distance. When she caught up to him at his locker, he shyly looked up at her (it was a rare sight to see, someone looking up at Merlyn).

"Yes?" His voice so soft like Freya's, that Merlyn had to really strain her ears to hear him.

"I don't have much time to explain everything in detail. But," Merlyn pulled them closer to the lockers and lowered her voice so only he could hear her, "please come with me to Valient's disciplinary meeting."

Peter gasped and tried to take a step back, but Merlyn held onto his arm.

"Look, I don't blame you for what you did, I know you have your reasons. But, please, don't let Val get away with this," implored Merlyn.
"I-I don't know what you're t-talking about," Peter said fearfully, "please let me go."

"Please, Peter, we have to help Arthur," Merlyn said.

Peter's eyes suddenly snapped up to Merlyn's. "Why should I help him? Why do you even want to help him? All they've done was bully me! I saw how he talked to you that day you stood up for me! Why should we even care?"

Merlyn released her hold on Peter and held her hands up in a placating manner. "I know. I know. They've been nothing but jerks. It's just... Val used those pills you gave him and drugged Arthur. They were going to do such vulgar things to him, Peter." Merlyn ran her fingers through her hair in a frustrating manner. "No one deserves that. You have your own reasons to hate Arthur and Valient, but please do this... for me?" Merlyn clasped her hands together. "I know I'm in no position to ask you for anything. I'll owe you big time, just come with me, please."

A moment of silence passed between as people continued to walk past them. Finally, Peter shook his head and stepped back from Merlyn.

"I'm sorry, Merlyn... I'm more scared of Valient, than worried about letting you down. I'm not as brave as you." Peter gave her an apologetic look.

Merlyn sighed and tugged at her hair. "What's the point of being scared?" She held her hand up to show Peter she wasn't finished. "If you can't use it to be brave?" Merlyn took a step back from Peter and turned her body. "I understand, Peter. Thanks anyways, and I'm really sorry those guys have been nothing but jerks to you."

She didn't wait for him to respond and took off down the hallway to get back to the main office. Merlyn patted her pocket and pulled her cell phone out, at least she still had the voice recording on her phone. Hopefully this would be enough evidence, she thought. Merlyn reached the main office in record time, and she burst in through the doors; all the secretaries turned to look at her, but she made a dash for Principal Annis's door before anyone could stop her. She heard loud, angry voices on the other side of the door, and nearly lost her nerve.

"YOU HAVE NO EVIDENCE TO BACK THESE ACCUSATIONS ABOUT MY SON! PENDRAGON, TELL YOUR SON TO WATCH HIS INSOLENT MOUTH!"

"HOW DARE YOU-" Morgana's voice rang outwards as Merlyn thrust the door open.
"I have it!" Merlyn said.

Suddenly, everyone in the room turned towards the door and stared at Merlyn. Don't blush. Don't blush, Merlyn thought and stepped into the room. Principal Annis looked up and pinched the bridge of her nose, Merlyn glanced over to Principal Annis's left, and was surprised to see Khilgharra standing beside her desk looking bemused.

"Ms. Emrys, what exactly are you doing here?" Principal Annis asked in a weary tone.

"Oh!" Merlyn bit her lip and held her phone up again. "Evidence! I have evidence!" She repeated stupidly, and inwardly winced at how her voice went up an octave.

"WHO THE HELL ARE YOU?" Merlyn looked over, at who she assumes is Valient's father. A short, portly looking man, with a receding hairline and bushy eyebrows, beside him was Valient's mom, a tall, leggy, blonde woman, who looked as if she was inconvenienced to be here (she was filing her nails for pete's sake).

"Mr. Kelly, I am warning you, stop yelling at my students, and get that temper of yours under control," said Principal Annis in a hard tone. She turned to look at Merlyn. "What evidence do you have?"

"Uhm, one second," Merlyn quickly unlocked her phone and pulled up the recording she took the other night. She hit play and placed her phone on top of the mahogany desk.

Everyone went quiet as Valient's voice came out of her phone. She returned Valient's murderous look with a defiant one of her own. Merlyn could feel Morgana, Arthur, and their father's stare bore into the side of her face, especially Arthur's stare. From the corner of her eye, she could see what an imposing man, Uther Pendragon was. Even sitting in one of the short, round seats, he looked like a king; his suit was tailored to fit him in a flattering way (as opposed to Val's dad's suit that was brown and pooled in certain areas). He looked fairly young for his age (if Merlyn's mental math was right), and a stray thought crossed her mind, that Arthur would probably age just as well as his father did. Arthur must have gotten his blond hair from his mother, and Morgana inherited her hair color from either Uther or her mother, since he was a brunette as well.

Merlyn didn't have time to continue her sly observations on the Pendragon family, because the recording came to an end. Before Principal Annis could say a word, Valient took everyone by surprise when he grabbed the front of Merlyn's shirt and yanked her towards him.
"You bitch," Valient said, his voice rumbled deeply and his anger rolled off of him in waves. Merlyn could see Valient raise his other hand, and for the life of her, she didn't know why she always liked to run into danger, but she met his gaze unflinchingly.

"Go ahead," She said softly, "hit me." Merlyn could see the shock in Valient's eyes, if he was expecting her to be scared...well he had another thing coming.

"Valient." Khilgharra stepped in to intervene at that moment and grabbed Val's wrist. "Release her. Now." Merlyn looked up to see a terrifying Khilgharra, his face was stormy, and his eyes were blazing in fury. It warmed her heart to see him defend her like this.

"Valient," Principal Annis said in her no nonsense tone, "what do you have to say for yourself?"

Val shrugged and took a step back from Merlyn. "Nothin'"

"It seems like your son takes after you quite a bit," Uther spoke for the first time, since Merlyn crashed the meeting. His voice was deep, but had a hard edge to it as he spoke to Valient's dad.

"What's that suppose to mean?" Mr. Kelly spat and pointed at Merlyn. "You could have faked that recording."

"Why would I? I don't have that much spare time in my life," Merlyn said with as much sass as she could manage and gave him a withering look.

Morgana covered her mouth and giggled. Mr. Kelly looked like he was ready to start foaming at the mouth, he turned to Principal Annis and began to gesture wildly.

"You heard it in the recording! My son was given those pills! He could have easily been coerced into all of this!" Merlyn had to give one thing to Valient. His dad was really sticking by him, even though it was starting to look like a losing battle.

"I'll have to speak with the student mentioned in this recording, but as-" Principal Annis kept
her voice calm and very professional sounding.

"I'm here," Peter's soft voice said from the door.

"Peter!" Merlyn breathed out and couldn't stop the smile that appeared on her face. "You came!"

"Peter, please come in, and shut the door." Khilgharra said, his spirits look lifted, Merlyn observed. Peter did as he was told and shuffled over to Merlyn's side.

"What are you doing here?" Val sneered and stood up taller to look imposing.

Merlyn stepped in front of Peter and glared up at Valient. He was not going to bully Peter out of this, Merlyn thought.

"I was the one who gave him those pills, Principal Annis," Peter confessed quietly, "him, Cedric, and Edwin threatened to b-b-break my arm if I...." His voice trembled, and Merlyn reached out and placed her hand on his shoulder in a comforting way. "If I didn't do as I was told."

"He's lying! My son-" Mr. Kelly waved his arm outward at Peter.

"Will you shut up and sit down!" Khilgharra barked. Principal Annis shot him a grateful look, and then shifted her soft gaze towards Peter.

"Thank you for telling me, Peter, but why didn't you come to me sooner?" She asked.

"I-I-I was scared," He answered in a soft voice, "I still am. But, Merlyn made me realize I don't have to be anymore."

Merlyn smiled and silently mouthed 'thank you' to Peter. She noticed a movement from the corner of her eye, and everything happened so fast.

"YOU LITTLE FUCKING PIECE OF SHIT!" Val roared and reached out to grab Peter.
"Valient!" Principal Annis cried out in shock and stood up from her seat.

But, Merlyn threw her arm out and stepped between them before he could grab Peter's neck, instead, Valient ended up grabbing the same arm he did that night at his house.

"Ow!" Merlyn cried out, and her knees gave out slightly. Arthur stood up in the blink of an eye and grabbed Val's wrist with one hand, and pulled Merlyn back with his other.

"Let her go." Arthur spoke through gritted teeth, and twisted Val's wrist to make him release his hold on her. Merlyn quickly cradled her arm to her chest and stood beside Arthur.

She could see now how tired Arthur looked and how ashen he looked up close. Merlyn wanted to make him sit back down, because it looked like standing took a lot of effort out of him. But, aside from all of that, he looked absolutely livid that Val had laid his hands on her, just like the time they went camping. Except, this time Arthur was able to control himself.

"Don't you ever lay a hand on her again, or else," Arthur spoke in a calm and collected voice. Which made his unspoken threat that much more intense; it shouldn't have given Merlyn excited goosebumps...but it did.

"Enough!" Principal Annis raised her voice. "I have had it with your violent behaviour, Valient. You are expelled from Camelot High, effective immediately."

"Principal Annis!" Mr. Kelly said, completely outraged.

She held her hand up to cut him off, and turned towards Merlyn and Peter.

"Peter, please stay. I have a few questions for you. As for you, Merlyn," Principal Annis gestured kindly towards the door, "please return to your classes."

"But-" Merlyn wanted to protest. She should be here too! The only thing that stopped her in her tracks, was Khilgharra's hand on her shoulder.
"I'll take her back to class, Annis," He said and gave Merlyn a slight push towards the door.

Merlyn's gaze caught with Morgana's, she gave Merlyn a quick smile and nodded her head, essentially telling Merlyn that she'll handle things from here and give her the details later. That was good enough for Merlyn, but Uther's gaze caught her off guard when she turned her head slightly. He raised his eyebrow at her and gave her a swift nod, Merlyn almost swore she saw a look of gratitude cross his face, but Khilgharra was ushering her out the door, so she never got the chance to dwell on it.

"What's going to happen next?" Merlyn said, once the door was shut and they headed out of the office.

"More yelling from that buffoon, some more unimpressive behaviour from Valient, and a lot of paperwork for Annis to file," Khilgharra explained as he walked Merlyn to her class.

"Oh." Merlyn nodded her head and pressed her lips together.

"I must say, I'm very impressed with you, Merlyn," Khilgharra gave her his dragon smile, "It takes a lot of courage to stand up for someone you care about. Even more, to convince others of their own bravery."

"Tha-you didn't get that off a fortune cookie...did you?" Merlyn said with a deadpan look on her face.

Khilgharra chuckled. "Too long to be on a fortune slip, Merlyn."

"Right." She smiled up at him. "Thank you."

Arthur didn't show up for school the rest of the week. Morgana filled them all in about what happened after the disciplinary meeting, to sum it up: Valient was expelled, along with Cedric and Edwin, Peter was let off with a warning, and their dad didn't plan on pressing charges against Peter, but as for the other three-well it wasn't like he was known to be a forgiving man. Arthur came down with a pretty nasty cold, which explained his sudden absence. Merlyn was kind of disappointed at not seeing him at school, even more so when he wouldn't reply to any of her texts. Some were questions about his well-being, because yeah she did care about him, other texts were just pictures she thought were funny and he might get a good laugh out of it. But, no reply to any of them, she even tried calling him-the stupid prat let it go to voicemail. It was now the last class of the day on
Friday, and Merlyn was grabbing an extra handout for Arthur from Mrs. Isolde before heading to the Art room to meet up with Morgana, Gwen, and Freya. They were lucky, since today was a half day and they were done by lunch time, the plan was to make more campaign merchandise to give out.

"Hey, Morgana," Merlyn said as she walked up to her. "Hey, Gwen. Hey, Freya."

"Hi, Merlyn," Morgana said as she continued to make buttons. The other two waved at Merlyn.

"I, uhm, brought you this," Merlyn held out a large stack of papers and her notebooks. "It's for Arthur," she explained when Morgana looked at the papers in confusion, "since he missed classes this week, I thought I would get the handouts for him. I took extra notes too, so he doesn't fall behind."

Morgana grinned as looked over at Gwen and Freya who were both smiling, then turned back to Merlyn. "You did all of this for Arthur?"

Merlyn shrugged, and nodded her head after. "Yeah, I mean, it's the least I could do. I don't want him to feel overwhelmed when he does come back to school. So will you give-

"Oh dear," Morgana gasped and touched her fingers to her cheek, "I think I'll be here for the rest of the day." She turned and placed a hand on Merlyn's shoulder. "Could you do me the biggest favor, and drop it off for Arthur at home?"

"Uh..." Merlyn said in confusion, "but I'll be here too, won't I?"

"Oh, we have enough hands," Gwen waved dismissively, "we can spare you. Go!"

"But-" Merlyn began.

"You can help Arthur go over the things we read in English. Ms. Finna did have us read ahead several scenes," Freya added and smiled at Merlyn.

"I don't even know where you guys live?" Merlyn shrugged her shoulders and looked
between the three of them perplexed as to why she was being sent on this mission.

"Oh that's an easy fix," Morgana scoffed lightly while pulling out her cell phone, "I'll text it to you. We only live like thirty minutes from the school."

"Right," Merlyn nodded her head and felt her pocket vibrate, "so, I'm not going to be staying to help make buttons for the campaign?"

Gwen patted Merlyn on the shoulder. "Your services are needed elsewhere."

"Uh huh..." Merlyn hugged the stack of paper closer to her chest and turned to walk out of the Art/Fashion room.

"Bye, Merlyn!" The three girls waved cheerfully at her as she left the room. Merlyn was still quite baffled by what just happened, and missed the knowing smiles on the three girl's faces.

The Pendragon Estate. First off, the fact that Merlyn identified their mansion was on an estate, should say *something* about how rich Morgana and Arthur were. It took Merlyn's breath away when she pulled up on their driveway; that was after she was stopped by the security guard at the gate. He asked her for a piece of ID and okayed her when he informed her that Lady Morgana called ahead and told them to put her on the secure list...whatever that meant.

The whole outside of the mansion was done in varying shades of grey, the roofing was the darkest in shade, there were brick accents on the pillars, and on the corners of the mansion. It looked like there were three garages, but Merlyn couldn't, for the life of her, figure out how three people could own so many cars to fill those spaces. She felt awkward and out of place, surrounded by all this wealth and luxury, with her backpack on, and holding a pot of chicken noodle soup in her hands.

"Well...here goes nothing," Merlyn sighed and pressed the doorbell with her knuckle. She waited patiently for someone to come and open the door for her. It was a tossup, in her mind, whether it was going to be Arthur opening the door, or, quite, possibly, a maid or butler.

When no one came to the door within a minute, she furrowed her eyebrows together and pressed the button again. She did not come all this way, with soup no less, just to make the walk of shame back home. Merlyn tapped her foot impatiently on the concrete and looked through the small glass window to see if anyone was coming. She knew she was pushing her luck when she pressed
the button one last time, the musical chime echoed through the large interior. Loud footsteps approached the door, and it was wretched open with tremendous force.

"How many times do I have to tell you to remember your key, you harpy!" Arthur exclaimed while rubbing his hand over his eyes. Which explained why he didn't know it was Merlyn.

"Uhm..." She said softly.

Arthur jolted back in shock when he finally caught sight of Merlyn. His cheeks went a slight pink. "Oh uh...my bad."

"Hi..." said Merlyn shyly and added, "before you turn me away, I brought soup." She held the pot up towards Arthur. "It's chicken noodle...Morgana said you came down with a bad cold."

And she could see it took its toll on Arthur. His hair was sticking up in odd directions, he looked pale, and he looked a bit skinnier as well; she took in his outfit and saw that he was in grey sweats and a red t-shirt. He looked conflicted about whether or not he should accept Merlyn's peace offering.

"You're not seriously going to make me drive all the back during rush hour are you? Poor little Merlyn wasted away in her car, because she was stuck in traffic. It was hard enough trying to navigate my way here. Did you know Google maps almost wasn't able to locate your house? Even though it's probably the size of a small island?" Merlyn was trying to get Arthur to smile.

It worked. He managed to give her a small smile, he shook his head, and stepped aside to let her in. "My house isn't the size of a small island, Merlyn."

Merlyn shrugged and toed off her runners. "Could've fooled me, what with the border patrol back there."

Arthur snorted and gestured in front of him. "Very funny."

"I know, I'm so witty," Merlyn said and followed after him. It didn't look like Arthur was going to give her a house tour any time soon, so she just observed her surroundings as they headed down the main hallway, away from the foyer and down a large hallway.
Arthur ended up taking her to the kitchen and stepped off to the side, letting Merlyn enter. She was taken in by how big and spacious the area was, it looked like one of those fancy kitchens on the Food Network. Merlyn walked over to the stove and placed the pot down, she turned to look at Arthur, but he was already staring at her.

"Do you want some soup now? I could warm it up for you?" Merlyn offered. Arthur's lack of response caused her to start in on her nervous rambling. "I, uhm, brought you the handouts from class." She walked over to the island (soup forgotten for now) as she shrugged off her backpack, and unzipped it. "You didn't miss a whole lot, but I made sure to take extra notes so you don't feel lost when you come back to school. While I'm here I could help you go over some stuff, there's a unit test in Social next week-"

"Oh my god! Will you please stop!" Arthur groaned and ran both his hands through his hair.

Merlyn worried her lip, maybe she just overstepped her boundaries again, and looked over at Arthur in contrite. "Or...we don't have to go over stuff now, you can just call-"

Arthur sighed and shook his head. "Please stop being so nice to me, Merlyn. I don't deserve it."

"What do you mean?" Merlyn asked and tilted her head to the side.

"God, I was such an asshole to you," Arthur said and waved his arms around before settling them at his sides. "I should have listened to you. But, instead I ignored you, and look where that got me? Look where that got you! You were hurt trying to help me. I'm such an idiot, I don't deserve to have a friend like you. You should stop wasting your time with me."

Merlyn closed the small distance between and wrapped her arms around Arthur. She felt him instantly stiffen and stop mid-rant.

"What are you doing?" He asked, both his hands were hovering awkwardly around her.

Merlyn shrugged and looked up at him. "You just looked like you needed a hug."
At Merlyn's height, she only came up to about Arthur's sternum, the lower portion of it. But, she could still hear his heart beat, and feel his chest rise and fall with each small breath. Eventually, he relaxed and wrapped his arms around her small frame; they stood there quietly, in the kitchen, hugging. Merlyn pulled back slightly to look up at Arthur again, he raised his eyebrow in a silent question.

"I'm fully capable at picking my own friends, dollop head. I don't need to be told who I should and shouldn't spend my time with. You just so happen to be one of the lucky ones that get to be my friend," Merlyn said with a cheeky grin.

Arthur scoffed, but smirked down at her. "God help me then."

"We're a team, remember?" Merlyn now raised her eyebrow in turn. "It's not about ego." She pressed her index finger into his chest. "It's about we-go." She gestured between the two of them.

Arthur tilted his head back and laughed. He started to laugh so hard, he let go of Merlyn and stepped back to lean against the wall behind him.

"That last part doesn't even make any sense, shorty," Arthur grinned and pinched her nose.

"Hey!" Merlyn swatted his hand. "It made total sense."

"Sure," He said sarcastically with an eye roll.

"So," Merlyn decided to change topics, "would you rather eat soup or get started on school work?"

Arthur groaned and scrubbed his face. "I guess school work. I haven't been able to keep anything down this week."

"Right," Merlyn nodded her head, went back to grab her backpack, and gestured in front of her, "lead the way, sire."

"Might want to consider becoming a drill sergeant," grumbled Arthur as he lead the way to
They walked through two hallways, went up a large staircase, down another series of hallways filled with doors and paintings, before coming up to a room at the very end of the hallway they were in. Merlyn looked around amazed.

"How did you even hear the doorbell ring?" Merlyn asked out loud in amazement.

"The door bell is connected to the speaker system in the house." Arthur's back was facing Merlyn, so he missed the look of disbelief and doubt on her face.

"This is my room," Arthur said and opened the door for her.

Merlyn stepped in and immediately a violent shiver tore through her body.

"H-Holy c-c-crap! It's f-f-f-freezing!" She started to rub both of her arms for warmth. Her thin long sleeve was not cutting it apparently.

Arthur walked in and rolled his eyes. "It's not that cold, short stack."

Merlyn whipped around to glare at him. "What are you? A penguin? Do you live in Antarctica or something?" She glanced over at his window. "You're sick for heaven's sake! Why is your window open!" She marched over and quickly closed it. "Are you trying to catch your death?"

Before she could turn around and demand answers from him, her vision suddenly went dark and she felt the large sweater drape over her head. Merlyn wasted no time asking more questions and pulled his sweater on. Her vision was still obscured, because she was basically drowning in Arthur's sweater. It was almost comical; the hood covered a majority of her face, both sleeves drooped over her hands, and the sweater ended about mid-thigh on her.

"Pft," Arthur was trying to choke back his laugh. Merlyn raised one of her sleeve-covered hands and pushed the hood up so she could see. She was blushing, but laughed alongside with Arthur.
"You're kinda cute," Arthur nodded his head and smirked at her while walking over to his desk.

That statement completely took Merlyn off guard, and she had no idea how to respond to it. So instead, she pretended as if it wasn't said and acted as she would normally. Merlyn walked over to Arthur's king sized bed (that was on the right side of the wall) and sat down on it. She shuffled back onto the bed and sat cross-legged, while burying herself further into his warm sweater, that smelled like him. Now that she wasn't taken hostage by the temperature of his room, she had the chance to look around. His room was painted a dark navy blue color, with hardwood floors, and all the dressers in his room were black. In the far corner of the room, Merlyn could see another door that opened into a bathroom. On the wall beside her she saw his walk-in closet. Mounted on the wall in front of his bed was a large, flat-screen TV. It must be nice being rich, Merlyn thought as she finished looking around the room in awe.

"So what subject are we starting on first?" Arthur leaned back in his desk chair and gestured for Merlyn to pick, resignation completely evident in his tone.

Merlyn rubbed her sleeve covered hands together in glee.

"Wow..." Arthur dragged the word out and dropped his controller into his lap, "how can you be so good at fighting games, but suck so bad at shooting ones?"

Merlyn huffed and swatted at him with one of the sleeves. "I told you, fighting games are basically built off of pure memorization." She tapped the side of her head. "I have a really good memory." She pointed at Arthur's TV screen, currently displaying their game stats. "Shooting games have too many moving parts."

"Uh huh," Arthur said condescendingly while bumping his shoulder against hers, "good excuse, shorty."

"I'm going home now!" Merlyn announced bitterly and stood up from the bed.

Arthur grinned and stood up. "Don't be a sore loser, Merlyn."

"Don't be a sore loser, Merlyn," She mocked and scowled at him.
"Ha!" Arthur tilted his head back and laughed.

Merlyn walked over to his desk and grabbed her backpack off the floor. Then proceeded to leave his room and head into the labyrinth that is his home. Arthur followed behind her silently, but she could feel the waves of amusement just rolling off of him. She managed to find her way to the front of the house again, and was pulling on her sneakers.

"Thanks for today," Arthur said suddenly, and it took Merlyn off guard—once again.

"No problem?" Merlyn said.

Arthur rubbed the back of his neck, and Merlyn could see the guilt creeping back onto his face.

"Don't blame yourself for what Valient did! He's a stupid toad," Merlyn blurted out.

An audible pause passed between them, before Arthur smirked and leaned against the wall by the door.

"What?" Merlyn asked and looked at him with her eyebrow raised.

Arthur shrugged and put on a mock sad expression. "I just distinctly remember someone, in this very spot, calling me a toad before too. Makes a guy wonder...that's all."

Merlyn rolled her eyes and sighed in exasperation. "Well, obviously, you're a much better looking toad!"

Merlyn pressed her lips together and her eyes widened in shock. It took a moment for Arthur to process her words, but the Cheshire grin on his face told Merlyn that what she said wasn't about to be forgotten anytime soon.

"So you think I'm-" Arthur began while pushing off of the wall to tower over her.
Merlyn held her hand up (the effect was kind of lost, on account of the large sleeve drooping over it) to cut him off, she gave him a stern look. "I heard what I said. Now, I'm going to go home."

"Alright," Arthur said with a smile while he held his hands up in defeat.

"Do you want your sweater back?" Merlyn asked.

He shook his head. "Nah, give it back to me later."

"Okay!" Merlyn said brightly and pulled her backpack on. "See you at school on Monday." She turned to head out of the door.

"Hey, shorty," Arthur's arm blocked her exit, and she turned to look up at him in question.

He leaned down closer to her face with a smirk tugging at his lips. "Ribbit. Ribbit."

Merlyn dissolved into a fit of laughter and giggles. She covered her mouth and shook her head at him. Arthur leaned against the doorframe, his body shook with laughter as well. She walked out and waved goodbye to him while still giggling.

"Glad to know our relationship is back to normal."
Hi, guys!

Lol...so....Lots of things have happened, not going to go into huge detail, but life threw some things at me from out of the blue. I know it has taken me awhile to put this chapter up, but if it's any consolation to know, I kept this chapter back because I wanted it to go a certain way. This was such an enjoyable chapter for me to write and I honestly hope you guys love it as much as I do. It took so many turns as I was writing, but the way it ended makes me really happy!

So comment if you liked it! Or leave a kudos behind!

**I'll be going through periodically to check for any additional grammatical errors I might have missed.

Thank you for your patience,
-SS

"Nothing." Merlyn smacked her head against the drafting desk. "Absolutely, nothing." The following three smacks she did were followed by, "useless. Empty. Brain."

Elyan whistled in the drafting desk next to hers. "Washed out at seventeen."

Merlyn scoffed and tried to fight off a smile when she turned to glare at Elyan. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Of course," He grinned and continued working on his rough draft.

"What am I going to do?" Merlyn groaned and stared down at the blank paper in front of her. "I don't have a single idea on what I want to do for my final project."

"Maybe you just need to let inspiration come to you naturally?" Elyan said.
Merlyn ran her hands through her hair. "It'd be nice if it came a little sooner. We've had this for weeks now," she shoved her hands back into her hair and tugged, "the panic is creeping up on me. Khilgharra wants to see a rough draft eventually."

Elyan patted her on the back. "Hang in there, man."

She face planted back onto the desk and silently wept in despair.

Jokingly...kind of.

When Khilgharra dismissed the class, Merlyn still hadn't made any progress with her project. She left the Robotics Lab feeling defeated and still uninspired; Elyan tried consoling her, and even offered to text her some ideas he had to begin with, but changed his mind part way, to see if she could draw inspiration from that. She politely declined and explained that she wanted this project to be something she thought of on her own, Elyan understood and suggested she look through the online tech forums to see what other people have thought up so far, and see if it'd spark her imagination.

"Haaaaa," Merlyn sighed and pressed her cheeks together, "I guess I'll see you tomorrow, Elyan."

Elyan chuckled and held his fist out towards Merlyn, she bumped it with her own and then continued on down the main hallway, to the front doors, while Elyan went to the gym for practice. Merlyn began her walk home, she was in the midst of putting on her headphones when her phone started going off.

"Hey, Will," Merlyn greeted.

Without any formal greeting, Will launched into a conversation topic. "What do you think about me getting a dog?" The two of them were used to this by now, lack of proper conversation manners, it just goes to show how comfortable they are with each other.

"Uh..." Merlyn said, "why do you want a dog?"

Will blew out his breath, and Merlyn could imagine him scratching the top of his head. "Well, my apartment allows pets."
"That is not a good reason to get a pet, Will." Merlyn rolled her eyes, and quickly crossed the road.

"I know. I know," Will said quickly, "but maybe I could train it to become a guard dog or something?"

"Train it?" Merlyn had a bewildered look on her face, but then her eyes grew wide. "Oh my god," Merlyn's voice went up a pitch, "don't tell me you already got one!" She threw her free arm up in the air. "Do you not remember what happened to Biggie?"

"THAT WAS AN ACCIDENT!" Will exclaimed defensively, and Merlyn could hear him close his office door, "AND I THOUGHT WE SWORE NOT TO MENTION HIM AGAIN!"

"Well considering how you plan on getting a dog," Merlyn said, "I feel like this is a great time to bring up your poor, dead, beta fish," she pointed out. "Need I also remind you, that I was the one who had to flush his body?" She added for good measure.

"How was I supposed to know that toasters counted as reflective surfaces as well?!" Will was saying mulishly.

"If you can see your own face on it, I'm pretty sure a fish can too," said Merlyn as she dug her keys out from the side pocket of her backpack.

"But, Cerberus would make the best guard dog, I just know it," Will said, and Merlyn could hear him rolling around his office.

"Oh no," Merlyn moaned and covered her eyes in resignation, "you already named it."

"You'd love him, Merls," Will said excitedly, "he's the most good-looking dog I've ever seen. All black fur, with a cute little tuft of white on the front of his chest. When he looked into my eyes, I just knew we saw each other."

Merlyn sighed and walked up her driveway. "What even brought all of this on? What made you suddenly decide that getting a dog, after having killed your fish, would be a good idea?"
"Well, Freya works at her mom's veterinary clinic. I stopped by the other day when she was on her lunch break, and that's when I met Cerberus. He was the runt of the pack, and he ended up escaping and living on the streets for two years before they saved him, Merls," Will explained sadly, "no one plans on adopting him, since he's not small and brand new...so I kind of...sort of...implied..." He trailed off.

"That, you would," Merlyn said and kicked off her sneakers. "Do you know how much responsibility it takes to raise a dog? Let alone one that's lived on the streets?" She sat down on the last step to continue her conversation with Will.

"I can handle it!" insisted Will. "If anything, Freya said she'll come over and help me with him."

"Oh she did, did she?" Merlyn said intrigued, what an interesting development. "Well then, who am I to really say that this is a bad idea?"

"Glad to hear you say that, Merls," Will said and added, "because I need you to be my co-signer on the adoption papers."

"A co...what?" Merlyn said.

"Co-signer. It's what the clinic implemented in an attempt to weed out bad owners. She told me it could be a significant other--which I don't have. Or..." She could hear papers rustling in the background.

"A family member," Merlyn finished. "So, when are we going?" She asked while playing with a strand of her hair.

"This weekend?" said Will brightly.

"Okay, I'll co-sign for you. But, let Biggie's memory be a reminder to you, that this dog can't be flushed down the toilet," Merlyn said.

"I am well aware of that!" Will squawked.
"Kay, talk to you later." Merlyn smiled. "I've been sitting on the stairs for too long now, butt's falling asleep."

"Hope you trip going up them." She laughed at Will's comment, and then proceeded to hang up.

Merlyn re-adjusted her backpack, and went up the stairs to the apartment. She was humming to herself as she twirled her lanyard around on her index finger. The apartment was quiet, but Merlyn knew Uncle Gaius was already home and in his office like always. She was mentally preparing tonight's dinner as she walked past the living room.

'Peel the potatoes. Soak the potatoes. Boil pasta. Cut chicken. Random kid in living room.' Merlyn stopped half way between: making it to the kitchen and not really making it there, but was still in front of the living room kind of distance.

She turned her head to fully look at the little boy sitting in their living room, coloring, with the TV set to a kid's show Merlyn was vaguely aware of. He couldn't have been maybe six years old? Merlyn estimated and shrugged off her backpack. The noise caught the little boy's attention and he looked up at her with an intense stare. Merlyn thought he looked cute; he had fluffy looking brown hair, sharp features that he'll eventually grow into, chubby cheeks--that showed he still had baby weight. She wanted to run over and pull him into a hug, but she knew that was inappropriate and scary. So, instead, she settled with squatting down beside him with a soft smile on her face.

"Hi there," Merlyn said, "who might you be?"

No response.

Well, he did look up at her and continued with his staring, but he didn't say a single word.

Merlyn's smile didn't falter as she held out her hand. "My name is Merlyn. Merlyn Emrys." She rested her chin on top of her knees, to make herself look smaller, and withdrew her hand slowly. "Whenever you're ready, I'd love to know what your name is." She spoke softly, but clearly.

She tilted her head to look down at the random pages sprawled out on the coffee table. There were various drawings of dinosaurs, race cars, butterflies, and rainbows--all of which brought an even bigger smile to her face.
"I like your pictures," Merlyn said. "I like to draw too. Want to see?"

The little boy looked at her and blushed, but nodded his head. Merlyn reached behind her for her backpack and opened it to look for her sketchbook.

"Now, keep in mind," Merlyn said in a serious tone, and flipped the book open to one of the drawings she did when she was watching the movie Transformers. "My pictures aren't as pretty as yours, because I don't have crayons. So please," she pressed her palms together, "be nice."

He managed to crack a small smile and excitedly took her sketchbook to continue flipping through the book. Merlyn silently watched with a warm expression on her face; she's always adored children, and especially when they're at the age where everything is still new to them.

"Mordred," His voice was high in pitch, like any child's would be at his age. "I'm Mordred."

"Nice to meet you, Mordred," said Merlyn. His name rang a bell in her head, and she could vaguely recall hearing Uncle Gaius say it once. That's right, Merlyn remembered, he's the son of the gentleman who came to see Uncle Gaius for medication, the boy with severe asthma.

"Pictures are pretty." He pointed at one of her sketches of Camelot High, it was done for Robotics when they were working on foundation calculations.

Merlyn tilted her head to the side and smiled. "Thank you very much, Mordred."

"Want to play a game of tic-tac-toe??" She asked.

Mordred nodded his head excitedly.

"Okay, can I borrow one of your crayons?" Merlyn held her hand face up and waited to see if he was okay with sharing his stuff.

A contemplative look was on his face, as he looked between Merlyn's hand and his crayons.
She smiled and was slowly closing her hand, she didn't want to force him to feel like he needed to share his stuff with her—a complete stranger.

"Favorite color?" He asked softly.

"Blue," Merlyn responded automatically.

"Blue." Mordred handed her the blue crayon and she accepted it.

"Thank you, Mordred," She said.

He rewarded her with a shy smile and the two of them started in on a game of tic-tac-toe. Merlyn is, and will always be, a great strategist; any game she plays she can figure out a way to win, any game that involved her using her own mind to win? Well...there's no question about it. Pair that up with her incessant need to never lose, well...one can get the gist of it.

"I win?" Mordred's voice held that kid-like wonder in it.

"Congrats, Mordred!" Merlyn said with a big smile on her face.

Mordred gave her a toothy smile this time and blushed deeply. Like Merlyn, because of his pale complexion, his blush stood out prominently. They continued for several more rounds; each round, Merlyn made the board harder and made it appear like she was close to winning. But, every time she lost to Mordred, the more his confidence grew.

"Mordred, son, it's time to--" The man, Merlyn remembered, from several nights ago paused mid-sentence.

Merlyn stood up and held her hand out. "Hi, I'm Merlyn Emrys. I was just playing tic-tac-toe with Mordred here."

"Dad, I win," Mordred explained, the toothy smile still in place.
His dad smiled and nodded his head. "That's great!" He knelt down to his level and ruffled Mordred's hair, Merlyn retracted her hand. "Time to say bye now, we have to get going."

"I like Emrys," Mordred stated while looking up at Merlyn. "I can come back to play?"

"Er--well, son," His dad began hesitantly.

Merlyn beamed and nodded her head. "Of course! Next time, I'll show you how to build robots."

"Dad!" Mordred's eyes lit up as he gasped and grabbed his dad's arm. "Robots!"

He chuckled and patted the top of Mordred's head. "Right. Well, please pack up your crayons and papers."

"Okay..." Merlyn smiled at the sound of childish complaining.

"Cerdan, I have Mordred's refill--oh hello there Merlyn," Uncle Gaius said in surprise as he rounded the corner to the living room. "Is it this late already?"

"Hi, Uncle Gaius," Merlyn greeted, and turned to hold her hand out once more to Mordred's dad. "Nice to meet you Mr. Cerdan."

Mr. Cerdan returned Merlyn's handshake firmly. "Nice to meet you. But please, just call me Dan."

She nodded with a smile. "Alright."

"I-I must say," Dan began while glancing down at Mordred, who was dutifully packing up his stuff, "you're the first person to win Mordred over."

"Pardon?" Merlyn said and tilted her head to the side.
"My son, he's...not really fond of meeting new people," explained Dan sheepishly, "a lot of people are sometimes put off by his quiet nature."

"Really?" Merlyn glanced down at Mordred, then looked back up at Dan. "I think he's awesome."

Mordred looked up (ah, so he was listening to the conversation, Merlyn thought) and blushed. Dan looked like he was close to tears, Merlyn panicked and glanced over at Uncle Gaius, who was smiling fondly at her--as if she just did a good thing. Once Mordred was done cleaning up his stuff, both father and son went to the front door to put on their coats. Uncle Gaius gave Dan the inhaler refill, and was bidding them goodbye; Merlyn stood behind him and waved. Mordred had his little backpack on, and was about to walk out of the door, when he paused and ran over to Merlyn. She was taken off guard when his arms wrapped around her legs in a quick hug and then he let go and ran back to Dan, who still looked surprised by his son's sudden fondness for her.

"Bye, Mordred!" Merlyn called out.

"Bye, Emrys," He said quietly.

Everyone held their breath as Mrs. Isolde walked around while handing back their unit tests. Merlyn was laying on her desk, chin resting on her forearms, while staring at the back of Arthur's head.

"What?" Arthur said, loud enough for her to hear, guess he felt her stare.

"Your hair looks really fluffy," Merlyn said in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Pft," Arthur shook his head, and then glanced over his shoulder to look at her. "Really?" He raised his eyebrow. "Fluffy?"

Merlyn nodded while slightly pouting. "Kind of like dog fur."
Arthur's expression dropped into an unimpressed look, which made Merlyn giggle quietly. "What?" She laughed softly into her arms, her mouth was slightly hidden and her eyes were half-moons.

"Dog fur," He grumbled while turning around. If Merlyn didn't know any better, she'd have thought she actually offended Arthur. But, she did know better, and she knew he was probably smirking with his back to her.

"Congratulations, Arthur, I'm really impressed. Keep up the good work," Mrs. Isolde said kindly and placed his test face down on his desk.

"Congratulations to you too, Merlyn. Good work, both of you." She smiled as she handed the last test (which was Merlyn's) back to her. Then Mrs. Isolde headed back to the front of the class to continue their lesson. Merlyn flipped the test over, saw the 100%, and smiled.

"No way..." Arthur breathed while turning sideways in his seat.

"What'd you--" Merlyn leaned forward and gasped when she saw the 89% written on his test. "That's amazing! I'm so happy for you!" She beamed at him and nearly shook in excitement.

"I..." Arthur blinked in surprise and leaned towards Merlyn unconsciously. "Wow, I didn't think I'd be able to get this high of a mark."

"What do you mean?" Merlyn said and leaned forward on her desk some more. "I totally believed you would."

Arthur turned his head and grinned at her while lowering his test. "Thanks, shorty."

"Anytime, dollop head." Merlyn matched his grin.

It was the quiet whispers of their classmates that made the two of them realize how close their faces were to each other. Merlyn blinked and blushed while sliding back into her seat, Arthur cleared his throat and turned back in his chair. The two of them went back to taking notes from the power point, neither of them acknowledging the closeness that just happened. By the end of class, the previous incident was long forgotten and they walked together to Biology--bickering as always.
"Ah. If it isn't my two favorite Chihuahuas," Percy said as he turned around in his seat to face their desk.

"Ha!" Merlyn pointed at Arthur in triumph. "Told you!"

"My hair isn't dog fur, Merlyn!" Arthur shot back. "Plus, he called you a dog too!"

"Huh," Merlyn said in contemplation while looking at Percy, "why am I a dog too?"

"Because, you two," Percy pointed his finger back and forth between Arthur and Merlyn, are always yip yip yipping." He used both his hands to mimic them, opening and closing them as if they were hypothetically 'bickering.'

Merlyn threw her head back while covering her mouth to laugh out loud, Arthur brushed his hand across his mouth, but couldn't hold in his laugh in either. Lance watched the two of them with an amused look, and Percy sat there looking proud about his joke. Mr. Manticore chose that moment to walk up to their group and slap two booklets down on the desk; the four of them sat back slightly in fear. He stared the four of them down, with his beady eyes, then he moved on to the other tables.

"He's so..." Merlyn trailed off.

"Freaky," Lance finished.

"Partner up!" Mr. Manticore hissed. "Due at end of classs!"

Lance and Percy both fist bumped and turned around in their seats, Merlyn took that as a sign that they were partnering up. She glanced up at Arthur with both eyebrows raised, he responded with a small nod. Merlyn pulled out her textbook and pencil; she glanced at the booklet, looking for a page number to open to. Arthur pulled out his materials too, and waited to see which page they had to start on. Once she found the page number, she showed it to Arthur and they both got started filling in the questions.

When the bell rang the four of them got up to hand in their booklets, Mr. Manticore, always suspicious of them, took them while eyeing them down. He wasn't exactly wrong with his
suspicions; Merlyn had swapped booklets, with Lance, so Percy could copy down the answers they didn't have, and then swapped them back before Mr. Manticore could notice. She thought it was amusing, and the guys were always grateful, since her help guaranteed they wouldn't be late for practice.

"Hey, want to come over to my house today to do homework and hangout?" Arthur asked as they walked out of Biology, behind Lance and Percy.

Merlyn gave him a bewildered look. "Why your house?"

"Why not my house?" Arthur furrowed his eyebrows together.

Merlyn tilted her head to the side with a 'yeah, true' look. Arthur smirked and tapped her shoulder with his fist.

"Wait for me when you're done Robotics. I'll come get you from the lab when practice is done."

Merlyn nodded. "Okay."

They weren't aware of it. But, Percy and Lance heard every word, both guys shared a knowing look and smirked.

Still.

No.

Inspiration.

Merlyn groaned and smacked her head onto the blank piece of paper in front of her on the drawing desk. This was so despairing! She mentally wept and made sad faces at the desk. She sensed someone standing in front of her and looked up from her one woman pity party.
"Having some trouble with the electric generator assignment, Merlyn?" Khilgharra asked.

"No." Merlyn pouted and handed said assignment over to him. "I'm finished it."

"Oh?" Khilgharra took the assignment from her. "Then...why the long face?"

Merlyn made a silent wailing face. "I can't think of what I want to do for my final project!"

Khilgharra chuckled. "Inspiration will come when you least expect it, Merlyn."

"But, why can't it come now?" She said. "Nearly half the class already has a rough draft ready to present to you. All I have is," she held up the blank piece of paper, "this."

"Hang on just a moment," Khilgharra said and walked back to his desk.

She glanced over to where Elyan was currently waiting in line for his turn at the 3D printer, he wanted to print some pieces to get an idea for his parts measurements. Elyan's idea for his final project is to design the fastest working engine; he loved cars and was hoping to become an automotive engineer in the future. Merlyn envied the fact that he knew what he wanted his project to be, but also the fact that his project was tied into his future plans. She sighed and continued to twirl her pencil around.

A medium sized book appeared in Merlyn's field of view. "Here you go."

Merlyn accepted the book, she looked at the cover and a half smile tugged at her lips. She glanced up at Khilgharra and waved the book slightly. "So, how exactly is this book, your published book, suppose to help my lack of inspiration?"

Khilgharra shrugged and gave her that dragon-smile. "Beats me."

With that, he strolled away and towards other students. Merlyn chuckled and ran her fingers down the front cover of the book: A Call To Engineering, it was even more amusing, considering
how she already owned a copy of it--currently sitting on book shelf at home. She was interrupted from her thoughts when Elyan plopped back into his seat at the desk beside hers.

"Urgh," Elyan growled and turned to glare at the line up.

"Line not moving?" Merlyn said knowingly.

"We're all suppose to have equal turns!" Elyan vented. He threw another glance over his shoulder, then lowered his voice. "But, fricken Gilli is hogging the damn printer."

Merlyn patted his shoulder. "There. There. At least you have something to print once you get to the printer."

"True," Elyan sighed, his irritated mood lifted. "Still no ideas?" He asked while looking at the mess of crumpled up papers on her desk.

"Invisible misery," Merlyn said in a fake cheerful voice while holding up the current blank sheet of paper, "it'll be revolutionary."

Elyan chuckled and rolled out his blue print to continue drawing. "Great idea--side note, you comin' to the game in two weeks?"

"Mhm!" She said excitedly. "it’s the last home game for the next little bit right?"

"Yeah. The next two games afterwards are away games." Elyan gestured for her to pass him a protractor.

"Do we get to go to those too?" asked Merlyn as she handed the protractor over.

Elyan nodded. "Yeah. It sucks that you can't bus with us there, but Morgana usually drives. They make a big show about it too; red pom poms, clappers, blow horns."

Merlyn listened to Elyan as he continued to recount all the previous away games, but a
thought occurred to her: she didn't own a lot of red clothing. The scarf she wore at the first game was really the only red she had in her wardrobe. Well, she did still have Arthur's sweater (it was red), but what would she do for all the other games? Maybe she should go to the mall and shop around.

"Merlyn?" Elyan's voice brought her out of her musings.

She sat up straighter and looked at him. "Yeah?"

He jabbed his thumb over his shoulder. "Khilgharra just dismissed us."

"Oh!" She leaned back to look at the clock. "Wow, I didn't even look at the time." muttered Merlyn, she turned to look back at Elyan. "You can go Elyan. I'm going to stay back and see if I can figure something out for an idea."

Elyan nodded. "Alright, good luck!"

"Thanks!" She called out and slumped back in her seat.

She went back to her staring and tried scowling at the paper (like Arthur does) to bully it into giving her an idea. Merlyn had mentioned to Khilgharra at the start of the lab that she'd be staying behind a little later afterwards, and he understood. He was currently sitting at his desk doing some marking. Merlyn looked up at the clock, she'd only have to wait another 45 minutes until the guys are done practice.

The blank paper stared back at Merlyn, she wondered what it must feel like to have an end goal in mind. She grabbed her pencil and began to doodle; Elyan knew he wanted to design cars in the future--hence his engine design. An exhausted sigh escaped her lips as she continued to sketch the car, Arthur's car actually, Merlyn shaded in the wheels. Merlyn knew eventually she'll come up with an idea, maybe her anxiety comes with not knowing if this choice, to become an engineer, is meant for her. She rubbed her cheeks vigorously, this was not the time to be having a life crisis!

"Oh nice, that's my car," Arthur said, his voice surprisingly close to Merlyn.

Merlyn jumped slightly. "Gah!" She turned her head back to glare up at Arthur. "Don't do that!"
Arthur smirked and pinched her nose. "Come on, let's go."

She rubbed her nose while grumbling under her breath about how much of a prat he is. Merlyn packed up her belongings and shouldered her backpack; they both waved goodbye to Khilgharra and left the Robotics Lab. They walked through the empty hallways to the front of the school; Merlyn asked if any of the guys were going to come over as well, Arthur shook his head.

"Percy and Gwaine are going to go see a movie. Lance and Elyan have volunteer stuff with Gwen. Morgana's waiting at Leon's house for him." Arthur unlocked his car.

"Oh I didn't know Lance and Elyan did volunteer work?" said Merlyn as she buckled herself in.

"It's how Lance won Gwen over," Arthur said in an amused tone, "he's always been a goody-goody. Elyan just does it to make Gwen get off his back about his resume lacking experience." He pulled out of the parking lot and onto the road.

"Hmm, maybe I should start volunteering as well," Merlyn mused as she started pressing buttons on his radio.

Arthur glanced over at what Merlyn was doing and rolled his eyes. "Do you ever just pick a station and stay on it?"

She turned her head and beamed at him. "I will eventually."

The rest of the drive to Arthur's house--mansion--was spent talking about the what the other did in their respective after-school activity. Merlyn showed Khilgharra's book to him, and he looked impressed that Khilgharra even had a published book. Arthur mentioned how hard Coach Caerleon was working them for the upcoming game. They were driving up to the main gates now, and Merlyn saw the familiar security guard ask them to stop.

"Hi, Morris!" Merlyn called out from the passenger seat.

Morris smiled and waved back. "Hi, Ms. Emrys." He nodded at Arthur and stepped back into
the vestibule; a moment later the gates slowly opened.

"Thanks, Morris," Arthur said and continued to drive up to his driveway.

The two of them went into the house and headed to Arthur's room. This time, Merlyn was prepared and pulled on the sweater she wore to school that day (it got hot in class so she took it off). Arthur looked down at her and rolled his eyes when she made an exaggerated shivering motion. She watched as he headed over to his Xbox and knelt down to turn it on.

"Ah!" Merlyn exclaimed and threw her hand out in a stopping motion.

Arthur looked over his shoulder at her. "What?"

Merlyn pointed at his desk. "Homework first."

"We can do it later," Arthur said and tried to compromise, "we can play Street Fighter IV. I practiced, I can probably kick your ass now." She knew he was trying to tempt her competitive nature, but she wouldn't budge. Also, as if he'd be able to beat her in a fighting game.

She gave him a deadpan look. "No."

"Come--alright fine," grumbled Arthur as he stood up from his Xbox and walked over to his desk, he saw the resolution on her face.

Merlyn smiled brightly and followed behind him and sat in the chair beside his. They both started on Math first, well Arthur started (Merlyn finished the assignment in class), and she helped him understand the new unit they were in. As he worked on Math, she took out her essay outline and added some more details to it; Merlyn mostly did this so he wouldn't feel bad that she didn't really have any homework to do, and just spent this time tutoring him. Eventually, she had to face her biggest challenge which was thinking of an idea for her Robotics project.

"You know, Elyan already decided on what his final project is going to be," Merlyn mumbled while flipping randomly through Khilgharra's book (she's already memorized it front to back).
"Probably has something to do with cars, right?" Arthur erased a line of work from his math workbook.

Merlyn nodded. "The next fastest engine."

"Yeah, he loves cars. He's building one with his dad right now." Arthur quietly pointed at the problem he was working on.

She leaned over to look at where he was stuck. "You have to divide the diameter first, to get the radius to plot it."

"Oh right," Arthur said and started to re-do the problem.

"What does Gwen and Elyan's dad do?" Merlyn asked.

Arthur kept working on his problem while answering Merlyn. "He's a mechanic, has his own shop and everything."

"That's cool," Merlyn sighed and crossed her arms on Arthur's desk while resting her chin on them. "Say." She began.

"Hmm?" He grunted.

"I know this is, kind of, a taboo question to ask a high school senior, but..." She looked up at him through her lashes, "what are your plans for the future?"

A brief moment passed between them, his pencil stopped moving, and his expression nearly shut itself down. The room went quiet as she held her breath, Merlyn worried this would happen when she asked that question. Arthur shot her a quick glance and went back to staring at the wall in front of his desk.

"Uhm...you don't have to--" She tried to backpedal her way out of the situation she just put herself in. "I didn't mean...sorry I'm really--"
Arthur sighed and leaned back in his desk chair while folding his arms behind his head, his eyes closed. "I want to play for the Excaliburs."

It took a second for Merlyn to process his words, and when she did, she shot upright and gasped. "Really?"

Arthur was prepared to see a look of doubt, maybe disappointment, and even judgement, he was familiar with those looks by now whenever he tells people of his future plans. There was always that tone of pity and disbelief in peoples' voices when they try and act supportive for his sake, but it was something he had grown used to. A part of him though, wasn't sure if he could handle seeing Merlyn give him those looks or pity him, for that matter. But, when he opened his eyes, he was met with Merlyn's bright smile and a look of genuine excitement.

"Yeah..." He said slowly, her smile throwing him off.

"That's awesome!" Merlyn said excitedly. "So, you'll be in the NBA and everything right?"

Arthur nodded his head dumbly, she's actually happy for me? He wondered.

Her small frame shook slightly as she squirmed in her seat. "You might even get to meet Oswald! Oh my god!" She turned to look at him with wide eyes. "You'll get to play with him!"

A laugh escaped his lips. "Uh...shorty?" He could tell that she didn't hear him, lost in her ramblings.

"You'll even meet Pellinor! His three pointers are amazing!" Merlyn started listing off other players and their stats, all of which Arthur knew, but he was impressed she knew as well.

Suddenly, Merlyn stopped mid-ramble and a concerned look came over her face. Arthur mentally sighed and was prepared for the 'is this even a real dream?' question. He knew what his chances were, and even though they weren't the best, it's still what he wants.
"Man, you'll have to work super hard," She said while looking over at him. "Especially, since you'll be in uni and on the team there. Lots of scouts go to those games, right? Plus, not to mention your degree too, that is if you want to go for a degree."

Arthur paused and blinked. "Uh...yeah, I realized that."

She tapped her chin with her finger while looking thoughtfully in the distance. For a moment, he was distracted by the look of her lips. Merlyn snapped out of her thoughts and looked over at Arthur again. The hand that she used to tap her chin formed a fist and came down into the palm of her other hand.

"You'll be able to do it," Merlyn stated while giving him a big grin.

Arthur lightly scoffed. "And how do you know that?"

"Because I'll be there helping you," Merlyn stated.

He was stunned. Be there to help him? Arthur repeated in his mind. "What do you mean by that?"

Merlyn gestured at the papers in front of him. "Well, for starters, I'm a pretty awesome tutor." She smirked at him. Arthur wasn't sure if he wanted to laugh or hug her. "Secondly, prior to firstly I guess, we'll still be friends even after high school, right?" She raised her eyebrow at him, as if silently daring him to deny it. "So I'll make sure to go to all your games, I'm a good luck charm after all. Plus, if we happen to go to the same university, we can still study together. I can--" Merlyn gestured over to the Xbox. "--still kick your butt in Street Fighter. You know, that sort of stuff."

"What university are you applying to?" Arthur blurted out. He liked her version of the future, so much more than the one he had in his mind.

Merlyn groaned and face planted onto Arthur's desk. "Please don't ask me that. I don't even have an idea what I want to do for my project. Let alone my university choice."

"That's right," Arthur said, "aren't all the engineering heads from different universities coming to see these projects? Elyan was talking about it in the locker room awhile back."
She nodded into the desk. "Yeah...and we might get scholarships if we really impress them."

"There's not a one university you're aiming for?" Arthur asked while sitting back up to continue working on his homework.

"I...well..." Merlyn trailed off while lifting her head. She stood up and walked over to Arthur's bed to sit on it. "Albion University." She flopped backwards and looked up at his ceiling, she paused for a few beats before adding. "Will went there, Uncle Gaius went there...even my dad went there. It'd be sort of nice...if I got the chance to go too," Merlyn said the last part quietly and sat up again.

"You should," Arthur said firmly, "we can all go there--together."

There he goes with that staring, Merlyn thought as she looked at him. It unnerved her, how much she liked the idea of them being together still after high school, of course with their friends as well, but just her and Arthur? She didn't get why she wanted that to be true, so badly. Tension built up, between them and inside her, the room felt smaller than it looked.

"You're just saying that so you don't lose the best tutor you've ever had," Merlyn teased while rolling her eyes.


"Hey!" Merlyn laughed.

There. Just like that, the tension faded away and things went back to normal. The two of them teasing the other and bickering. Merlyn was happy with this. Arthur went back to his workbook, while Merlyn flipped through the book some more. She kept fidgeting on his bed, trying to force some inspiration into her brain.

"Ugh..." groaned Merlyn as she hung her head upside down from Arthur's bed, and placed her book on top of her face.

"What're you doing, short stack?" Arthur spared her a glance from his desk as he punched in
Merlyn gestured between the floor, her head, and the book. "I'm hoping gravity will pull some inspiration into my brain. I need to have a rough draft to present to Khilgharra eventually, or else I'll be the only one with nothing to show to the engineering department heads when they come."

"And you think doing that will help?" Arthur gestured at whatever it was Merlyn was currently doing.

She shrugged. "Leave no stone unturned, right?"

Arthur scoffed. "Right." He scribbled in his answer before putting it into the calculator to check. "How come you never have as much homework as I do? We're in the same classes." He muttered enviously under his breath.

"Because I'm a good little nerd," Merlyn said out loud sarcastically, having heard what Arthur said.

Their conversation ended, and the room lapsed into a comfortable silence. Merlyn could hear the occasional press of a button, or the scratching of his pencil, and his steady breathing. This was nice, she mused while drumming her fingers on his bed. Her eyes were closed, and her book was still balanced precariously on her face; she heard his desk chair move as he got up and headed for...the bathroom. A moment later she heard the toilet flush and water running in the sink, when the door opened she launched into another conversation.

"Hey, dollop head?" Merlyn said, her voice slightly muffled by the book.

"Yeah, shorty?" Arthur said.

A half smile appeared on her face. "Want to go to the mall with me?"

"When?" Arthur asked distractedly as he continued writing out equations.

Merlyn shrugged and decided to roll back onto her stomach. "Not sure, maybe tomorrow? Or
later today?" She rested her chin on his bed and placed her book on the ground.

Arthur looked over at her and nodded his head. "Sure. What do you need to buy?"

"I need more red clothes to wear," She stated.

"What?" Arthur lightly scoffed and the side of his lip tipped upwards. "Why do you need more red clothes?"

She sat up and crossed her legs together. "Well, it doesn't have to be clothes," she said. A contemplating look appeared on her face. "Maybe another scarf would be okay too."

"That doesn't really answer my question," Arthur pushed away from his desk and leaned back in his chair again, with both arms behind his head.

"I need more red, so I can wear it on game days," Merlyn finally explained. "This next game is the last home game for a little while, and I guess I could re-wear the red scarf I wore a couple weeks ago. But, either way, I want to show my support for the team when we go to the away games as well." Merlyn rested her elbow on her thigh and put her chin on her fist.

"Oh hmm," She suddenly remembered again, "I could wear the sweater you lent me the other day. That was red, but," she blew a puff of air out to move a strand of hair from her face, "I'll have to eventually give it back to you."

Merlyn was so wrapped up in her musings, that she wasn't aware Arthur had got up from his desk and walked over to his closet. He rubbed the soft, silk-like material between his fingertips and glanced over at Merlyn's back. With his decision in mind, he casually walked back to his desk.

"Hey, shorty," Arthur called out, dragging Merlyn out of her thoughts.

"What--" Her vision went dark, and she could feel whatever he threw at her cover her head.

She grabbed the material and pulled it off of her face. "Will you stop chucking things at my head?" She glared at him.
Arthur silently laughed as he sat back down at his desk, and gave whatever it was in Merlyn’s hand a pointed look. With one final glare at him, she looked down at her hand as well, and was shocked to see that it was a jersey he threw at her head. Not just any jersey, it's his jersey, she thought; the familiar looking number and last name were on it. Except this was his spare one, Merlyn knew this because it looked identical to the ones Gwen and Morgana wear. The main jerseys had a solid crimson base, stitched together with gold colored thread, the names and numbers were done in a silvery white color to offset the base color. The spare jerseys' colors were flipped; a silvery white base, with the details in crimson, all held together with the gold thread.

"What's this for?" Merlyn said, she had an idea what he meant with this gesture, but she didn't want to get her hopes up if she was too presumptuous.

Arthur rubbed the back of his neck and shrugged while avoiding her gaze. "It's my spare one. You can wear that to the games, instead of buying clothes." His eyes widened a bit, when he realized what his words might come off as. He quickly sat up a little straighter and turned towards her. "You can still buy clothes if you want, I didn't mean--" The shy smile on Merlyn's face stopped whatever else he was going to say.

"So I can wear your number?" She asked softly while hugging his jersey to her chest.

He let out a sigh, his lips curving into a soft smile, and nodded. "Yeah..."

"Yay!" Merlyn squealed and pushed up onto her knees while pulling his jersey over her head.

Like Arthur's sweater, his spare jersey came down to about mid-thigh on Merlyn. The arm holes were too large, and dipped down low enough to see the sides of her chest. Its size nearly swallowed Merlyn whole, but she couldn't explain this giddiness she felt as she was wearing it.

"Well?" Merlyn looked up at Arthur. "What do you think?" She twisted her body from side to side. "How do I look?" She asked with a big grin on her face.

Arthur covered his mouth with his right hand, to suppress his grin and hide his laugh. But his shoulders gave it away with their shaking. He was bouncing between wanting to tease her, at how ridiculously large his jersey looked on her small frame, and this odd, pleasurable sensation, in the pit of his stomach, at seeing her in his jersey.
"You're very tiny, you know that?" teased Arthur.

Merlyn mockingly glared at Arthur while pointing her finger at him. "Don't go insulting your good luck charm before the game," she reprimanded.

"Oh?" Arthur raised his eyebrow and caressed his lip with his pointer finger. "So, you're my good luck charm, now? I thought you were the team's?"

"Wh--I--" Merlyn flushed to the tops of her ears. "That's what I meant!"

Arthur shook his head and smirked. "Since you're wearing my number now, technically all your luck belongs to me...doesn't it?"

She recovered from her blush. "Sure." Merlyn shrugged, playing along. "So does my sarcasm and witty jokes, just to throw that in as well."

"Deal," Arthur stated, resting elbow on the desk and placed his cheek in his hand while looking at her with slightly hooded eyes.

The room went still as two of them stared at each other, always with the staring, she thought. Merlyn wanted to squirm under Arthur's gaze, this time not in embarrassment or nerves, but just from the excitement she felt crackling in the air between them. She wondered if he felt it too? She was wondering a lot of other things also, like: does he like seeing her in his number? Does he feel this carnal sensation at seeing her wear his stuff, like she does when she wears it? When he mentioned that her luck belongs to him, was she the only one that had a sensual shiver run up and down her spine? Or if he wonders what it would feel like if they just--

DING

DING

DING
Whatever spell was casted over them broke at the sound of the doorbell ringing three consecutive times, whoever was at the door was not a patient person, Merlyn thought bitterly. Arthur furrowed his eyebrows and got up from his desk with a slight growl.

"I tell that harpy, every single time," He ran his hand through his hair.

"Oh? It's Morgana?" Merlyn slid off Arthur's bed and looked over at his door.

Arthur nodded. "Just leave her."

"Arthur," chastised Merlyn, "that's mean. I'll go open the door for her."

Merlyn walked out of Arthur's room, but was surprised when he followed behind her—grumbling unhappily under his breath—but there nonetheless. She navigated her way through to the front door, all while the door bell kept going off. She looked up at Arthur while raising an eyebrow, he responded by giving her a look that said 'I told you we should just leave her.' She smiled and shook her head.

"Finally! You always take--oh! Hi, Merlyn," Morgana said in surprise. She blinked—the confusion on her face was very apparent, but that quickly faded as she took in the sight before her. She looked over at Arthur, and then, back to Merlyn. "What a coincidence seeing you here."

"But..." Merlyn said and hesitantly added, "you live here, Morgana."

Arthur coughed, trying to cover his laugh up, and turned to look out the door. "Sup, man."

Leon's lips twitched and nodded his head at Arthur. "Sup."

Morgana rolled her eyes, but she looked at Merlyn in amusement. Her and Leon both walked into the house. "So what are you doing here?"

Merlyn pointed at Arthur over her shoulder. "Doing homework."
"So Arthur's homework now?" Morgana teased as she started walking further in the house. The implication hung in the air.

"No!" Merlyn and Arthur exclaimed loudly. They both glanced at each other and whipped their heads away; Merlyn flushed from her neck to top of her head, and Arthur's cheeks were tinged with a slight pink.

"Anyways," Leon said while giving Morgana a pointed look, she shrugged and batted her eyelashes, "now that we're all together, let's chill." Leon snapped his fingers together, remembering something. "I think Percy and Gwaine are on live right now, texted me when they left the movie, we can play Call of Duty with them."

Arthur nodded his head and gestured in the direction of his room. "Cool, let's go."

Merlyn started following after them, but Morgana stopped her when she looped her arm through Merlyn's.

"We'll be right up! You guys go ahead first," Morgana said while waving her fingers.

"We will?" Merlyn said confused.

Morgana smiled at her. "Of course. We'll bring snacks up."

"Morgana," Leon began, but closed his mouth when she gave him a sharp look.

Well, Morgana is a force to be reckoned with, Merlyn thought and mentally patted Leon on the back for trying. The guys shrugged and continued to head towards Arthur's room, while Morgana lead Merlyn to the kitchen. When they walked in, Merlyn headed for the island and hopped up onto one of the bar stools there. She watched Morgana walk around the kitchen, gathering supplies.

"We should cut some fruits," Morgana announced as she placed a large fruit bowl in front of Merlyn, and proceeded to hand her a knife.
"We?" laughed Merlyn, as she took the knife and grabbed an apple out of the bowl.

Morgana rolled her eyes and pressed her lips together, smothering a smile. "Oh alright, it'd be nice if you cut some fruits. I'll grab a plate for you."

Merlyn began to cut the apple into pieces, and worked her way around. It was like muscle memory for Merlyn, she's so used to cutting fruits in particular, that she doesn't register sometimes what she's doing. Which is why Morgana's coo took her by surprise.

"Aw! They look like rabbits!" She exclaimed and picked one up.

"Huh?" Merlyn snapped out of her daze. "Oh. Sorry, force of habit."

Morgana shook her head. "No. This is amazing, you're so talented, Merlyn."

"Uhm, thanks." Merlyn blushed while continuing to cut the apple slices into little rabbit-shaped ones.

"So I see you're wearing Arthur's spare jersey," Morgana said casually while gracefully sliding onto the bar stool across from Merlyn.

Merlyn glanced down at the jersey, as she was reaching for a pear. "Oh, yeah, he said I could wear it." She felt her blush get more red on her face.

"Why?" Morgana asked innocently while resting her chin on her hands, almost like an inquisitor would, to get their prisoners to confess their sins. Not! That Merlyn was a prisoner or anything...

"I--uh--might've mentioned that I needed more red clothes to wear for game days. So he lent his spare to me, you know, as any good friend would, to help another friend out...economically?" explained Merlyn.

"Oh...I see." Morgana nodded her head slowly. "As any good friend would."
"Exactly!" Merlyn carefully pointed the knife at Morgana and then wear back to cutting the pear. When she finished with that she started in on the oranges.

"I've been meaning to ask--" started Morgana in a casual tone.

Merlyn looked up and spoke at the same time. "How are things between you and Leon?"

"Things are fine," Morgana answered. Judging from the blush on her face...things were more than fine, Merlyn grinned.

"All done!" She announced as she placed the last orange slice on the plate.

Merlyn got up to wash her hands; Morgana had the plate, and was waiting for her at the kitchen entrance. They both went upstairs to Arthur's room, before they even got to it, they heard the boys shouting profanities from outside. Merlyn and Morgana shared a look as they walked in; Arthur and Leon were both sitting cross-legged on the floor with headsets on and rapidly pressing the controls. The girls went and sat on the bed behind them and started eating the fruits off the plate between them. Merlyn watched as Morgana grabbed one of the pear slices and held it to Leon's lips to feed him, he didn't take his eyes off of the screen, but mumbled his thanks around the fruit. She contemplated doing the same for Arthur, but was worried it'd might be weird for her to do so.

Her choice, apparently, was already made for her. "Ah." Arthur turned his head slightly to her side, eyes still narrowed at the screen, with his mouth open.

"Ah. What?" Merlyn said while biting into the rabbit-shaped apple slice.

He didn't respond (probably didn't hear her question more like), but kept his mouth slightly open still. Merlyn realized he was signalling her to feed him, her cheeks warmed as she grabbed another apple slice and put it into his mouth. His lips closed around it and she could hear his teeth bite into the fruit.

"-hanks," Arthur spoke as he chewed.

Merlyn was very aware of Morgana's stare at that moment. She turned and watched the
screen rapidly move and switch, loud shooting noises coming from the speakers, and the guys calling out different things to each other over their headsets--she was very adamant about not looking at Morgana though.

Will made plans with Merlyn to pick her up on Saturday, around noon, and bring her to the clinic to sign the adoption papers. Merlyn climbed into the SUV she was prepared to remind Will about the huge responsibility he was about to take on, but smiled when she noticed a new dog bed in the back seat, along with a large bag of dog food.

"Maybe you are ready for this responsibility," Merlyn mused while surfing through the radio channels.

"Of course I am, Merls. I'm older than you," Will snorted.

Merlyn gave him a look and finally settled on a station. They spent the car ride downtown listening to music and discussing the new projects Will's department was currently working on.

"So I was thinking..." Merlyn started, "that I might want to go to Albion University."

"They have a great engineering department," Will signalled to turn left, waiting for a break in oncoming traffic.

She nodded. "Yeah, I looked it up the other day."

"You'll be attending the family alma mater!" Will cried, pretending to be moved to tears. "I'm so proud!"

"That's if I get in," She corrected.

"You will," He stated with a warm smile. "full faith in you, kiddo."

Merlyn returned his smile. "Thanks, Will."
After three more blocks, they pulled into the parking lot of Freya's mom's clinic. Merlyn got out and waited for Will to lead the way in. The outside of the clinic was painted white, and the sign that read: Albion Veterinary Clinic, was a teal color with paw print decals on each side. Once they went inside various animal noises greeted them, Merlyn observed a variety of people sitting in the waiting room with their pets. There were birds, dogs, cats, and even a pig waiting with their owners.

"Hi, Freya!" Merlyn greeted, she strolled up to the counter and leaned against the desk.

"Hi, Merlyn," Freya said and her voice went softer went she caught sight of Will, "Hi, Will."

Will smiled and nodded at her. "Hey, Freya. How are you?"

"Good." She smiled and her cheeks went pink. "Cerberus has been groomed and is waiting at the back."

"Fantastic!" Will said brightly, he tapped Merlyn's arm. "Come on, let's go see him. I'm tellin' ya, Merls, best-lookin' dog ever!"

"Yes. Yes," Merlyn sighed and followed after Freya.

Freya led them down a brightly lit hallway, the lighting wasn't harsh--in fact, it actually gave off a home-like feel to it. Merlyn looked into each of the room cages and saw different breeds of dogs in each one; they had large beds, food and water, along with toys. She knew from this set up that Freya's mom was a really great woman. The three of them came up to the last room cage at the end of the hallway, from this distance she could see a hint of black fur pacing back and forth, as they got closer the dog came into view.

Merlyn fell in love.

"He's so cute!" She gasped and fell to her knees in front of the cage door. His fur was pitch black, and Will was right about the little white tuft of fur on the front of his chest, it enhanced the shadowy color of his coat. Best looking dog ever.

Cerberus looked at Merlyn, and then up at Will and Freya; he wagged his tail hesitantly while
standing in the same spot. Merlyn pushed her hand through the gate and lowered it to the ground for him to sniff; Cerberus slowly, hesitantly, walked up to her hand and sniffed it. After a few seconds he gave it a small lick, Merlyn took that as a sign that she could pet him and stroked behind his ear.

"Such a good boy," cooed Merlyn, "who's a good boy, Cerbi?"

"Takes after his dad," Will boasted and narrowed his eyes at Merlyn. "His name is Cerberus, not Cerbi."

Merlyn scoffed. "More like his mom Freya, right?" She looked up at Freya and winked. "Also, Cerbi is so much cuter. Nobody has time to call out Cerberus on walks. Right, Freya?"

"Oh I..." Freya blushed a deep scarlet, not knowing what to do when caught between one of Merlyn and Will's conversations.

"What does that make you? The troublemaking aunt?" Will said while nudging Freya to laugh along with his joke. "Ignore that heathen. She doesn't know good names like we do."

Merlyn pressed her lips together, in an attempt to hide her smile, and shrugged. It was more interesting for her to see Will not deny that Freya is Cerberus's mom, or that they both came up with his name together. She stopped petting him, and he whined at the loss of her hand.

"Let's get you out of here," She said and opened the latch to the gate.

"Ah, wait, Merlyn!" Freya cried out.

Too late. The moment the gate swung open slightly, Cerberus bolted out and ran around them down the hallway.

"Oh shit!" Merlyn exclaimed and started running after him. "Don't worry! I'll get him!"

She ran after Cerberus, leaving Will and Freya behind. Her two legs were working double time to keep up with his four; Merlyn was worried about the front door being open and he'd escape, her fear was realized when she heard the front bell chime.
"CLOSE THE DOOR!" She shouted and dove for Cerberus's body. "OOMF!" Merlyn grunted as she managed to get a hold of the excited dog's body. Lucky dog, thinking we're playing a game, Merlyn thought as she panted and knelt up on her knees while keeping a firm hold on him.

"Merlyn?"

She looked up at three amused faces looking down at her, three amused and familiar faces. Some people in the waiting room looked over at them for a moment, before going back to their own business. Merlyn glanced up at a lizard perched in a glass tank in Percy's massive arms.

"I didn't," panted Merlyn, "know you had a lizard, Percy."

"Iguana, actually. Hi, sweetheart." Gwaine winked while throwing his arm around Percy to enter Merlyn's field of vision.

"Hi, Gwaine," She said. "Hi, Percy." The big man grinned down at her and gave her a nod.

"You're getting a dog?" Arthur asked while kneeling down, beside a still excited but now somewhat intimidated Cerberus, to pet him.

Merlyn shook her head. "Sort of--Will's getting Cerbi. I'm just here to co-sign with him."

"Cerbi?" Arthur looked up at her with a half smile tugging at his lips.

"His name is Cerberus, Merls! Don't go giving my dog weird nicknames!" Will said as he emerged from the hallway with Freya beside him.

"If I'm co-signing, I should have a say in his name," said Merlyn as she stood up and put both her legs on either side of Cerberus. His tail was now wagging out of control, probably sensing the change in atmosphere.

Merlyn looked at Freya. "Can we put 'Cerbi' in brackets beside his name on the adoption
Freya giggled softly and nodded her head. Will scowled and placed his hands on either side of Freya's arms and lead her to the reception desk.

"Don't listen to her, Freya. I will not allow my dog to have such a nickname," He sniffed.

"Our dog," Merlyn emphasized and pointed at herself. "Co-signer."

"The hound of Hades, guard dog of the gates of hell, doesn't like the nickname Cerbi," Will said the name with a tone of unpleasantness.

Merlyn frowned at him and then looked down at Cerberus, who was still between her legs. "What do you think boy? Don't you just love the name Cerbi? Don'tcha?" She grinned.

Cerberus's entire body shook with happiness as he let out a bark. Merlyn looked up at Will and smiled smugly, with a 'told you so' expression. Will rolled his eyes, but she could see his lips twitch, an aborted smile.

"Is Javier not feeling well again, Percy?" Freya asked softly while looking around Will and Merlyn.

Percy nodded while stepping up to the receptionist desk. "He's not eating his crickets."

"We even tried chopping them up, but nothing," Gwaine added.

Merlyn had to try very hard not to gag when she heard that tidbit of information; she felt Arthur nudge her arm, and when she looked up he was wiggling his fingers at her, as if to mimic creepy crawlers. She gave him a disgusted look, but snorted in laughter.

"Rosie will get him signed in." Freya pointed to one of the friendly looking ladies behind the desk.
"Come on, Cerberus. Let's go and pick out a nice collar for you." Will placed his hands on Cerberus's back and lead him over to a wall filled with dog merchandise.

"Must be pretty serious, huh?" Arthur asked.

She turned to look up at him. "What's pretty serious? Javier not eating his crickets?"

"Pft," Arthur let out a soft laugh, "no. I meant the dog." He pointed at Will and Cerberus.

"Oh!" Merlyn said in understanding and nodded. "Yeah. I already told him that it's a big responsibility. But I think it'll be good." She crossed her arms while looking up at Arthur. "I'm glad he's happy."

Arthur stared down at her with an expression she couldn't identify, she raised her both eyebrows and waited for him to say something. He shook his head and quickly pinched her nose, she pulled back and almost hissed at him; Arthur smiled and walked over to where Percy and Gwaine were standing. Why did Merlyn get the feeling that she didn't answer his question properly?

There was a knot forming in the pit of Arthur's stomach, he wasn't sure why it was, but it was. He leaned against the counter beside Gwaine, the receptionist was in the process of checking Percy's iguana in. Arthur never admitted this out loud, but the thing always freaked him out; he wasn't a fan of scales, more of a fur only type of guy. He spared a glance over at where Will was standing with his and Merlyn's new dog. Their dog...huh, Arthur thought, the relationship must be pretty serious if they plan on getting a dog together. Arthur didn't realize he was still staring, but now Freya was standing beside Will, and the two of them were talking. From where Arthur was standing he could see that they were speaking pretty intimately to each other: long looks, standing too close, and even though he couldn't hear what they were saying, he could get the gist of what they were doing. Will was holding up two different colored collars and asking Freya to pick the one she liked; a sudden spark of irritation washed over Arthur, shouldn't he be asking Merlyn which color she wanted their new dog to have?

"Be right back," Arthur mumbled and stepped away from the counter. Gwaine waved absently over his shoulder while he continued to recall Javier's stool amount for the past week.

He wasn't sure what exactly he was doing as he walked up behind Will, but the moment he saw Freya step away and head to the back room, his feet started moving.
"You're not being fair to her," Arthur said.

He saw Will start slightly and turn around. "Oh." Will nodded his head. "Hey, kid."

Arthur gritted his teeth at the 'kid' comment. Will, the bastard, saw how it bothered him and smirked while turning around. Cerberus was now laying between his feet chewing contently on a rope toy.

"Not bein' fair to who?" Will asked while crossing his arms together.

"Merlyn," Arthur said, trying to keep his voice under control, "she's a great girl, but here you are flirting with other girls that aren't her." He sighed in frustration and ran a hand over his face. "I mean, Freya's my friend too. But Merlyn cares about you a lot. You owe it to her to give her that respect."

Will didn't respond at first, just stared at Arthur in a calculating sort of way, it reminded him of Morgana's stares. Then the bastard had the nerve to smirk at Arthur. "Ah..." Will said knowingly.

"Well, I won't disagree with you. Merls is a great girl, but don't try to make it seem like you understand our relationship," Will taunted. He was goading Arthur, and he took the bait.

"You don't deserve her." Arthur nearly spat at Will, but kept his temper just under his skin.

Will raised his eyebrow and the side of his lips tugged into a half smile. "Oh? Then...who does?"

The question threw Arthur off guard, he took a step back and blinked. He realized his mistake when Will's half smile turned into a full blown grin. Shit, Arthur thought, he let Will get the upper hand. Will clapped Arthur on the back, quite roughly, and leaned in close to his ear.

"Don't start actin' cocky, now, kid," Will whispered, a hidden threat in his tone.
Arthur jerked away and glared at him. Will continued to smile, but looked down at Cerberus, he patted his thigh while whistling; with complete obedience, Cerberus stood up, rope toy in his mouth, and followed after Will as he headed to the receptionist desk—just as Freya came out from the back with a brightly colored yellow collar. Arthur angrily stared after Will, but his attention shifted when he saw Merlyn standing over by some tanks making weird faces at the glass.

Merlyn has never really been fond of amphibians, she thinks it has something to do with the whole slimy appearance to them—even though she's heard that it's actually mucus, not slime...hmm. Even reptiles gave her the heebie-jeebies, her apologies to Javier, but that had to do with the whole scale thing, that's why she preferred furry things, like Cerbi. So it'd come across as odd, with her standing in front of a frog's tank making weird faces, if she wasn't on a mission.

"What are you doing, shorty?" Arthur leaned down beside Merlyn to look into the frog tank.

Merlyn had an intense look of concentration on her face. "I'm trying to get him to smile for a picture."

Arthur scoffed and looked at the frog. "Frogs don't smile, Merlyn."

She shrugged and held her phone up, ready to snap a picture, and continued to smile wildly at the frog. "You never know, this one might." Merlyn spoke around her smile.

"Why are you trying to take a picture of a frog smiling, anyways?" Arthur asked while standing upright.

Merlyn grinned and turned her head to look up at him. "It's so I can set it as your contact photo."

Arthur's lips twitched, he glanced back at the frog, and then at Merlyn's phone. "Alright, here." He smiled at Merlyn.

She gave him a confused look. "What are you doing?"

He rolled his eyes and gestured at her phone. "Smiling for a picture, hurry up and take it, or
I'll look stupid just standing here."

"More so than you usually do?" Merlyn teased as she fumbled with her phone and pointed it at Arthur.

Arthur rolled his eyes and repeated sarcastically. "More so than I usually do."

Merlyn giggled and held her camera up. "Say froggy!" She hit the capture button.

Arthur didn't. But, she can't say she was disappointed...he was very photogenic. Merlyn flushed at the her phone screen, that was still pointed at him; Arthur's hair was still windblown and looked wild, but it just made him look like a bad boy--what with his somewhat-crooked smile. He was still staring directly at her camera, which made it look like he was staring at her; Merlyn really loved his eyes too, she thought and brought her phone down.

"So?" Arthur grinned. "How'd I look?"

She rolled her eyes and shrugged while pointing at the frog tank. "He's more photogenic I think."

Arthur threw his head back and laughed. "Okay, your turn."

Merlyn blinked. "My turn? For what?"

She realized what he meant when he pulled out his cell phone with a smirk. Merlyn immediately shook her head. "No."

"Hey, if I posed for a photo, you should too. It's only fair," Arthur said and pointed his camera towards her.

"I'm not photogenic!" Merlyn said somewhat loudly and looked away. "Besides, I just wanted a picture of a frog."
"Yeah?" Arthur said with both eyebrows raised and phone still poised for a picture. "Well, I want a picture of a little demon, so come on now."

Merlyn whipped her head back to scowl at Arthur. "I'm not-

The camera sound went off and Arthur grinned at her. "There we go."

"Hey!" She exclaimed and reached for his phone. "I wasn't ready!"

Arthur pulled it out of reach and mockingly furrowed his eyebrows, then looked at his phone to pull the picture up; he looked at the screen, then down at Merlyn and nodded his head. "Nah. I think I got it." He turned his phone around so Merlyn could see the photo.

At least her mouth was closed, was her first thought. Next, she could see that she was scowling at his phone, well she was--technically--scowling at Arthur. Her nose was scrunched up, lips in a small pout, and her eyebrows were pulled together. Honestly...the photo wasn't that bad, but it's not as if she wanted her first photo on Arthur's phone to be of her scowling! Merlyn made another grab for the phone, but Arthur--the stupid athlete that he is--pulled it away quicker than Merlyn could reach.

"Delete that!" Merlyn stretched to try and get the phone, but he had his free hand pressing down on her head holding her back.

"Ha!" Arthur laughed while trying to keep his composure and shook his head. "Nuh uh. No way. This photo is mine."

"It's so unflattering!" She pressed up against his palm to try and move him.

"What do you mean?" Arthur said with a mock tone of confusion. "It's the perfect picture. Photo evidence of a creature of darkness."

"I'm going to bite your hand off if you keep this up," threatened Merlyn.

"See!" Arthur exclaimed, as if proving his point, but his face was full of amusement and his
eyes were lit up in excitement.

Merlyn gave up and stepped back. "You're such a clot pole," she grumbled while falling back onto her heels.

She saw Arthur's expression soften as he held his phone out to her. "If you really want to."

The gesture touched Merlyn. Through all their competitiveness to out tease each other, he was willing to lose to her in this instance. Ugh, the stupid prat, Merlyn thought as a small smile appeared on her lips as she shook her head.

"Nah," Merlyn shrugged while pushing his phone back to him. "Keep it. That way you know to never to miss my calls."

"As if I'd miss your calls," Arthur scoffed sarcastically.

"Yo, Merls!" Will called out, and waved her over. "Time to sign the papers."

"Coming!" Merlyn said and patted Arthur's arm. "Let's go."

"Yeah," He said reluctantly and followed behind her.

Merlyn walked over to the desk and knelt down beside Cerberus, he instantly started wagging his tag and licked her hand. "Ready to go home, Cerbi?"

Will let out a despairing sigh when Cerberus let out an enthusiastic bark at the nickname.

One week later. A few frantic calls from Will regarding chewed up boxers and shoes. Three unit tests and one social essay later, Merlyn was still sitting in Robotics every day after school not one step closer to an idea. They were currently watching a video in Biology about DNA sequencing and as much as Merlyn wanted to pay attention, she started making a list of potential ideas she could use for her project:
Device to cure cancer

Cure world hunger?

Space related design

Underwater exploration

Become the next supreme leader

Become the next supreme leader?

Merlyn’s lip twitched when she read what Arthur wrote on her page. She looked over at him; he was slouched very far in his seat, so the upper half of his body was draped on the table, and he smirked up at her, his hand resting between them with his pencil.

It's a nice idea

Of course YOU'D think it's a good idea

I'd make a great supreme leader

Really now?

First law: Nothing can be placed on the top shelf

Arthur snorted and had to bury his head into his arms to smother his laugh; Mr. Manticore glanced over in their general direction, but Merlyn pretended to be enraptured by the movie. When Arthur managed to get himself under control, he continued their written conversation.

Seriously though, what other ideas are you trying to brainstorm?

She let out a small sigh.
To be honest, I don't know...but I do know I want to make a difference with my idea.

He leaned over to nudge her arm with his shoulder.

*You will.*

Merlyn blushed and was about to write something back, but their conversation was cut short when Mr. Manticore flicked the lights on once the movie ended. Everyone blinked from the sudden return of light, others were waking up from their naps (like Percy). Arthur sat up and stretched while yawning, Merlyn discreetly watched the way his white long-sleeved shirt was pulled taut over his well-earned muscles. She refocused her attention back to the front of the classroom as Mr. Manticore was writing on the board.

"Oh, new project," Merlyn said with interest and sat up straighter so she could read the board.

Mr. Manticore turned around and started to pace around the classroom while rubbing his hands together. Students were ducking and dodging his spit as he explained what he wrote on the board. This project intrigued Merlyn, mostly because it's the first project they've been assigned; normally he would give out long booklets or lab assignments that are due at the end of class. Mr. Manticore stated that they could work individually or with a partner for this project; they're expected to build a DNA chain, along with transcribing and translating it, and it was going to be worth quite a hefty percent of their grade. Merlyn thought this was going to be fun, since she liked lengthy projects like this.

Merlyn tapped the back of Arthur's hand with her own. "Partners?" She whispered.

He blinked, but gave her a slow nod. She smiled and went back to listening to Mr. Manticore.

Arthur was going to be sick.

He wasn't sure what possessed him to agree to being partners with Merlyn, who was obviously one of the smartest kids in class--school even. The worksheets and booklets they do in
class are one thing, he has Lance and Percy to struggle along with (until Merlyn took pity on them and let them copy off of her). Arthur would never admit this out loud, but in the past he would have either chosen to do the project alone (and get a barely passing grade) or—to his chagrin—he’d hope one of the smart kids in class would partner with him (because of his popularity) and do all the work. But ever since he’s appeared in Merlyn’s—correction—ever since she’s appeared in his life, he’s been working harder to be a better student...better person. If the way his marks have changed, because she busts his balls about studying and doing homework, is any indication of what's she's done for him, then he owes her...a lot.

"Merlyn?"

Arthur glanced over and saw Gilli standing beside Merlyn with a dopey smile on his face. For a moment it bothered him slightly to see that head-over-heels look being directed at Merlyn. He saw her give Gilli that friendly smile of hers and raise an eyebrow.

"Hey, Gilli. What's up?" She asked.

"Want to be my partner for this project?" Gilli said.

She blinked, but gave him a 'oh, sorry' look. "Sorry. I'm already partners with Arthur." Merlyn turned and smiled up at him.

Pride and shame, both emotions were at war within Arthur. Pride, at being chosen to be her partner and not someone else, he wanted to smirk and tell Gilli to back off because she's picked him. He knew Gilli was one of the smart kids too, and if Merlyn had chosen to work with Gilli, they’d have gotten 100% no questions asked. Shame, because of the disapproving look Gilli gave him as he walked away from their table showed exactly what he was thinking: 'you're just using her for a mark.' But Arthur isn't--wouldn't-- use Merlyn for a mark. Lance and Percy both turned around, passing Arthur and Merlyn two pages, and opened their binders to start on the last minute in-class assignment the Creature just assigned.

"We should pick a day and work together on the project," Lance said.

Percy grinned. "Work together as in, 'Merlyn's going to swoop in and save our butts like always?'"

Merlyn glanced up from her assignment sheet and a half smile was on her lips. Lance blushed
slightly and held his fist out towards her, she let out a soft laugh and tapped her small fist against it. Arthur watched as Merlyn looked back down at the worksheet and started filling in the answers to the questions with ease; he looked down and got started on the worksheet as well. The first couple questions he knew the answers to, but the one he was on currently stumped him. He wanted to ask Merlyn what she wrote for it, but was embarrassed to bug her (besides, she always lets them copy down the missing answers before class ended). Arthur resigned himself to struggling through the next few questions by himself, when he saw, from the corner of his eye, her shift her paper slightly towards him. No questions. No judgement.

The one thing he liked about having Merlyn beside him?

How great of a friend she is.

By the time the bell rang, the four of them finished the worksheet and Lance collected them to hand in. Arthur followed Merlyn, out of the class, as he listened to her explain a robotics concept to him; he didn't really understand what she was talking about, but he liked how excited she gets when she talks about things that make her happy. He looked down at her, and wondered how someone so small could have so much energy in them; he was about to tease her, when a familiar face caught his attention.

"One sec, shorty," Arthur said and moved away from her.

"Where--"

He didn't have to turn around to picture the confused look on Merlyn's face, but he didn't want to miss another opportunity again.

"Hey, Peter!" Arthur called out and waved his hand in the air. He saw Peter look up at him, like a deer caught in headlights, and clutch his textbooks closer to his chest. "Wait up."

Students parted the way for him easily and he didn't even have to push his way around. He could see Peter regard him warily, and he had this look on his face that said 'should I run or stay?' But, before he could act on the former, Arthur reached him in two more steps. Peter stepped off to the side and looked up at him.

Arthur held his hands up as a peace offering. "Look, I know I'm the last person you want to see or talk to." Peter nodded his head vigorously. "But, I didn't get a chance to speak with you after
the disciplinary meeting with Annis, and then I was sick for the week." He blew out a loud breath and rubbed the back of his head. "I wanted to say thanks, Peter. For what you did for me."

"I didn't do it for you," Peter said softly. Arthur had to really focus on Peter's voice or else it would get swept away with the noises in the hallway. "I did it for Merlyn."

"I understand. I'm still thankful, though." Arthur nodded his head. The guilt he felt lessened slightly, but still weighed heavily on his shoulders. "I also wanted to say I'm sorry."

Peter looked up in shock and blinked.

"I was a jerk--probably still am. But I wanted you to know that I'm sorry for what I did to you. It wasn't fair." He felt his palms grow sweaty, but he continued. "I'm not askin' for forgiveness or anything. But I know I owe you an apology." An awkward silence filled the space between them.

"I forgive you," whispered Peter.

The surprise nearly took him off guard. Arthur sighed and a small smile appeared on his lips. "Thank you." He stood there for another second, before starting to turn around and head back to Merlyn.

"It's because she vouched for you!" Peter blurted out, only loud enough for him to hear. Arthur was taken aback by the abruptness of the statement.

"Merlyn vouched for you," Peter explained. "If someone like her was willing to stand by you...there has to be something she sees in you, Arthur."

The warning bell rang just then, which meant everyone should be in class or close to it. Peter mumbled a quiet goodbye before scurrying off down the hallway. Arthur took a moment to process Peter's words:

If someone like her

Arthur turned around and looked towards the spot he left Merlyn waiting at.
was willing to stand by you

Merlyn had that bright smile on her face. The one he gets to see when she's extremely happy about something. That something, in that instance, was him. Arthur made his way back to her, when he was close enough she looked up at him. She was right, Arthur thought, she is an open book.
	here has to be something she sees in you

The proud look on her face was all it took to lift the guilt off his shoulders.

"Oh the banner is looking great, Merlyn!" Gwen exclaimed as she walked up beside her. "You should consider joining the Art Club."

Merlyn chuckled. "Thanks, Gwen. But I'll leave 'Super Extracurricular Activities Girl' as your title."

"Such a shame," sang Gwen as she held up the camera in her hands and snapped a picture of Merlyn.

"Hey!" Merlyn cried.

Gwen giggled and skipped away. "Yearbook needs photos!"

"Well they don't need my picture!" Merlyn said as she brandished her paintbrush in Gwen's direction, careful not to flick any paint onto her banner.

Morgana had summoned another campaign meet up after school in order to prepare for the upcoming prep rally. Since the boys' basketball team will be having their last home game at the end of the month, the school decided to have a pep rally as a big hurrah. Morgana and Vivian will be giving their candidate speeches in front of the entire student body before the game, and Merlyn gave her props to the both of them (she'd probably melt into a puddle). She was the last one to get to the
Fashion/Art room since she had Robotics after school, but the girls welcomed her as if she was there the whole time.

Merlyn's assignment (as directed by Morgana) was to make the large cloth banner, which was going to be hung in the main hallway. She first wrote out PENDRAGON in big, black, block letters, and now she's going to go in and fill the letters in with shimmery gold paint. The paint-splattered, denim long-sleeve that Gwen gave her took the brute of her paint job, but Merlyn managed to get some paint all over her exposed arms, and some on her face (she thinks). Her hair was tied back into a bun, but wisps of it fell out and she had to blow them out of her eyes. Eventually she resorted to rubbing her hand over her face whenever she couldn't stand the ticklish feeling of her hair any longer.

"Merlyn." The familiar tone of exasperation informed her who was speaking, without her having to look up.

"Hi, Arthur," Merlyn said in the same tone. "What's up?"

His hair was slightly damp, which made it look fluffier than usual, and he smelled strongly of his shampoo, but it was the smirk he gave her that made her knees feel weak. "Just admiring the view," he said.

She looked around her on either side, then back up at him. "What view?" Her eyebrows furrowed together.

Arthur chuckled and walked away from her table.

"Where are you--" She started, but stopped when Arthur held up his index finger, making the universal gesture for 'be right back.' Merlyn shrugged and went back to painting in the next letter, which happened to be the 'A' in PENDRAGON.

Merlyn felt him walk up beside her and stop. "Here. Look at me."

"Why?" She asked, but turned nonetheless.

"Because you have more paint on yourself, than the actual banner, Merlyn," Arthur said with exasperation in his tone and a small smile playing at his lips.
"That's not true!" Merlyn argued.

But before she could take her argument further, Arthur reached out and gently cupped the left side of her face with one hand and started wiping the other side of her face with a wet cloth. Judging from the amount of passes he had to make...she did have a lot of paint on her face.

"This proves nothing," she grumbled.

Arthur chuckled. "For someone so smart, shorty, how did you manage to get so much paint on yourself?" He looked down at her with one eyebrow raised and a closed-lip smile.

"Have you seen how long your last name is?" Merlyn snapped and turned to gesture at her lovely banner.

A mock-thoughtful look crossed his face. "Hmm, funny enough," Arthur began sarcastically, "I do." He gently tugged her chin back, so she was facing him again, and switched hands and started cleaning the other side of her face. "Hold still, I'm almost done."

Merlyn scowled up at him, but held still—which was hard because the towel was cold. Neither of them said anything as the cleaning process went on, but eventually it occurred to Merlyn...this was all very intimate. Before she could stop herself (as if she could in the first place), a blush crept its wait up to her cheeks.

CLICK

Both of them turned towards the sound. Gwen emerged from behind the lens with a big smile on her face.

"What're you--" Arthur started.

"--doing, Gwen?" Merlyn finished.
"Oh nothing! Just some photos for the yearbook, that's all!" Gwen said and hurried back over to where Morgana and Freya were standing, she showed them the photo.

The three girls giggled, looked over at Merlyn and Arthur and giggled some more. Merlyn looked up at Arthur with a confused look on her face, and he shrugged his shoulders in response. With one last swipe across her cheek, he lowered the towel and brushed a strand of her hair behind her ear, then took a step back.

"There," Arthur said, "that's better."

Merlyn smiled. "Thanks."

"SO I WAS THINKING," Morgana said loudly to the room at large, "for my birthday we could all come to my house."

"Why don't we go out to a club?" Gwaine asked while hopping up onto one of the large art desks--Gwen wasn't pleased.

Elyan rolled his eyes. "Some of us," he pointed to himself, "are still underage."

Gwaine shrugged while blowing Elyan a kiss. "Get a fake or a sugar daddy to take you in."

"If you get a fake, dad will kill you," Gwen said in passing, arms full of paint supplies.

"So the sugar daddy option is still on the table?" Elyan said sarcastically.

Gwen looked over her shoulder and shrugged with a 'sure, why not?' look, Lance chuckled, following behind Gwen with several sheets of poster paper.

"Who's still seventeen in our group?" Leon said while looking at everyone around the room.

Merlyn, Arthur, Freya, and Elyan raised their hands. She giggled when Morgana looked over and smiled smugly at Arthur, he glared at her and gave her a look that said 'you should raise your
"If we come to my house we can drink there," Morgana said with a devilish smile on her face.

"Ooo," Percy rubbed his hands together, "Pendragon alcohol stash."

"I'm down!" Gwaine said. "I could drink you all under the table." He fist bumped with Percy, and from the lack of disagreement from the people in the room, she assumed Gwaine was a heavy weight.

"If you're not doing anything," Merlyn said and looked up at Arthur. He spared her a glance. "Want to be helpful?" She said while tilting her head towards Morgana's section.

"But you're already doin' a pretty good job there," Arthur mused while giving the banner a once over. He walked behind her to the other side and dropped his duffle bag under the table, then rolled his sleeves up. "Pass me a brush."

"What?" said Merlyn blankly.

"Pass. Me. A. Brush." He repeated slowly.

She scowled. "I heard what you said. Why do you need a brush?"

"Aren't you asking me to help you paint the banner?" Arthur said, right arm still extended with palm facing upwards.

"Uh..." Merlyn looked at him warily and then at her banner. "Is this some sort of trick question? I meant help Morgana and them over there." She tipped her chin back in the same direction.

Arthur narrowed his eyes, but his lips were twitching. "You think I'm going to fuck up your banner, don't you?"
"Well," Merlyn shrugged in an exaggerated manner.

"Pass me the damn brush, Merlyn," He scoffed, but the side of his mouth tipped upwards.

She pointed the paintbrush in her hand at him in a threatening manner. "Paint in the lines."

"I know how to paint, short stack," Arthur said and took the brush out of her hand.

"Do you, now?" She said while reaching beside her to grab another brush.

Arthur looked up at the ceiling and shook his head. "Haven't you seen how good I am with my hands?"

She had to give him that one. "True." Merlyn nodded and said without thought. "Your hands are pretty impressive."

The brush in his hand froze before it made contact with the cloth, Merlyn blinked as the words she just said out loud processed themselves in her brain. What. In. The. Hell did she just say? Merlyn internally panicked and tried to cover up her blunder by glaring at him.

"Don't--" She brandished her brush at him. "--even think about repeating that."

Arthur kept his mouth shut, but he didn't bother hide the smirk on his face; instead he just raised his left hand and wiggled his fingers at Merlyn. She laughed while rolling her eyes and resumed painting in the letter she was working on. The two of them worked on filling in the large letters with the shimmery, gold paint; He was right, she thought while watching him work from the corner of her eye. He's good with his hands, Merlyn observed, and it was somewhat embarrassing to admit that she did think his hands were impressive. The tops of them had this veiny--but not too veiny look to them, and it travelled up his forearms that were well defined along with his biceps (Merlyn wasn't sure if she had a thing for arms, or if she had a thing for Arthur's arms). Back to his hands though, from this close she could see how big they were in comparison to her dainty ones, and she never noticed the slightly-calloused look to them. But it shouldn't be a surprise, the guys all go workout together to stay in shape for basketball, she mentally justified to herself.
"You have a text from Will," Arthur said, keeping his eyes trained on the banner.

"Huh?" Merlyn looked over at her phone that was laying in front of them on the table. "Oh." She grabbed her phone and unlocked it to read his message.

**Will: Free to talk?**

Merlyn didn't bother replying and just hit the call icon beside his name.

"There's been a slight problem," Will launched into the conversation.

She walked away from Arthur and over to a random table at the back of the room.

"Problem as in, you owe the mob money? Or like, you decided to dye your hair orange kind of problem?" Merlyn said.

"I dyed it one time, Merls! One time!" Will huffed. "Anyways, no. A problem as in, work is sending me to San Francisco to give a prototype demo." She could hear papers in the background being shuffled around.

"Where's the problem in that? You love when work sends you places and--oh." Merlyn stopped mid-sentence when she figured out what the real problem was. "Aw, poor Cerbi," she said.

"Exactly. Work's sending me away for a week and my son will be left home alone...PUT MY PEN DOWN!" Will shouted loudly. "Right, so," he continued on as if he didn't just raise his voice over a pen, "I realized there's a solution to my problem."

Merlyn knew where this was going. "Uncle Gaius's apartment doesn't allow pets, Will." She thought she'd throw that little tidbit in there, even though it wouldn't be much help.

"Which is why you can come stay at my place for a week!" Will explained. "It's perfect. You can clean my apartment, water my plants, look after Cerberus, maybe even see if you can advance to the next level in my game for me. It all works out."
"What am I? A servant?" Merlyn grumbled.

"How long do I have to goad you, even though I know you already agreed, before you verbally accept?" Merlyn smiled and shook her head.

"Alright. When do you leave?" She said in mock-resignation.

"This weekend--oh gotta go! Talk to you later! Thanks, Merls!" Will rushed out and ended the call before Merlyn could get a word in.

"This--Wait!" Merlyn said sharply, but the call was already ended, she looked down at her phone and rolled her eyes. "Seriously." She pocketed her phone and headed back to the table to finish up the banner with Arthur.

Merlyn picked up the brush and resumed where she left off.

"So what did he want?" Arthur spared her a quick glance as he tried to casually ask his question without it coming off as weird.

"To annoy me," said Merlyn distractedly as she finished filling in the letter 'A,' she stepped back and placed both hands on her hips. "This is the best banner, ever."

"Pft," Arthur scoffed and rolled his eyes, "someone is getting a little full of themselves."

Merlyn grimaced and looked over at Arthur. "You're right...you've been rubbing off on me."

Arthur snorted in disbelief, he narrowed his eyes at Merlyn--insulted she would insinuate such a thing, then turned his head away to smile.

Once their group finished, they all packed and cleaned up the room. Everyone was going their separate ways once they left the school, Merlyn was going to walk home like she always does, but Arthur was adamant about driving her; 'I live fifteen minutes away, dollop head, I can walk.'
She had to concede that argument, only because Gwen glanced at her, as she was getting into her dad's car, with her eyebrow raised and giddy smile on her face.

"Thanks for the ride, prat." Merlyn leaned down to look into the car.

Arthur rolled his eyes. "Yeah. No problem, you little demon."

"Careful now," Merlyn said, a mischievous smirk playing around her lips, "I might just turn you into a toad for insulting me."

He turned and leaned towards her with a serious look on his face.

"Ribbit. Ribbit."

She couldn't stop laughing, even when the front door closed behind her.

Merlyn always thought it was the school board's way of cruel and unusual punishment when they schedule Gym before lunch. She sat on the bleachers, both elbows on her knees, and fists pressed into her cheeks, Freya was in the midst of pulling her hair back into a ponytail and she had to sit still. Morgana and Gwen were discussing their speech points to give at the upcoming pep rally, and Merlyn was idly listening (mostly staring off into space) as she tried not to focus too much on her impending hunger.

A loud whistle caught her attention. "Yo! Merls!"

"Thanks, Freya," Merlyn said and patted her on the knee. "Be right back."

She hopped down the two rows of bleachers and jogged over to Will, who was standing on the other side of the gym. Her cheeks were a bit red, since Will's booming voice caught the attention of her classmates and some watched her as she approached him.

"Do you always have to make a scene?" Merlyn grumbled while crossing her arms.
"Everyone is staring."

Will chuckled. "I do what I can." He patted her on the head, while reaching into his pocket with his other hand, then he pulled out a key and handed it to her.

"I already put his food out, along with fresh water. You can come over once you're done school, he's going to need to be walked around that time--his leash is hanging by the door." Will ran his hand down his face. "Am I forgetting anything? Oh right, he likes to have his bed in front of the TV when you're awake and doing stuff, but at night he likes to have his bed in front of the balcony doors to sleep."

Merlyn nodded. "Okay. Got it."

"I have a few packages coming next week, you can sign for them if you're there. If not, just collect the tag for me." Will started listing other things off on his fingers.

"Did you remember your passport?" Merlyn said, the incessant worrier in her felt the need to ask.

"Uh..." Will started patting himself down, and came up triumphant when he located his passport in his pocket. "Yeah. Right here."

"Don't lose it this time," Merlyn warned.

Will wagged his finger at her. "That only happened one time, Merls. One time!"

"You were stuck across the border because of that one time." Merlyn raised her eyebrow at him, challenging Will to argue with her about her point.

He held his hands up in defeat and nodded sadly. "Right. Right. I won't forget it this time." Will glanced over at the bleachers where Freya, Gwen, and Morgana were sitting. "If you want your friends can come over, you guys can hang out or what not."

"You're giving me permission to have a party in your apartment?" Merlyn raised her
Will smirked and thumped his fist on top of her head. "It's *you*, Merls."

"You make me sound so *plain,*" she complained under her breath. "I do things too."

"Ha!" Will threw his head back, then rubbed the top of her head. "Yeah, you do things. But that's only when I take you out." He waved his hand in the air. "Invite them over. Smuggle in some alcohol. Challenge them to a game of poker or blackjack." The two of them smirked at that last comment; Will's face softened and he patted her on the shoulder. "Enjoy being a teenager, Merls."

Merlyn rolled her eyes, but smiled at him in exasperation. "Fine. I'll think of something. We'll tip over a plant, just to be rebellious."

"You hurt my fern," Will narrowed his eyes at her, "I won't promise you'll make it out there alive."

"Maybe I'll have Freya take care of your fern?" Merlyn said offhandedly. "That way I won't be held accountable." She glanced across the gym and then back to Will. "Did you say bye to her yet?"

"I'm planning to. I had the day off to pack and get my presentation ready. My plan was to stop by here before lunch, drop off the key for you, say bye, and drive straight to the airport." Will explained.

"Bring me back a keychain, please," Merlyn said excitedly. "I don't have San Francisco in my collection."

"Okay." Will nodded. "Sounds good. I'm going to go say bye to--"

"William Turner?" Merlyn jumped slightly at the sound of Mr. Tristan's voice behind her. She spun around and stepped off to the side to welcome him into the conversation.

Will squinted his eyes slightly, before a hesitant smile appeared on his lips. "...Tristan..." He
held his hand out towards Mr. Tristan and looked apologetic. "I'm sorry. I'm terrible with last names."

Mr. Tristan laughed, but shook Will's hand, clearly not offended. "I'm glad you at least remember my first name. Considering how we've only interacted shortly before in the past."

"How do you guys know each other?" Merlyn said, looking between the two of them. It was a rare occurrence that she was not part of the loop.

"Tristan here tried to recruit me for the track team when I was at AlbionU," said Will.

Mr. Tristan smiled ruefully. "Couldn't get him to budge, said basketball was the only sport he was loyal to."

Will chuckled, then a look of realization crossed his face. "How is Isolde? You guys were just getting married around that time weren't you?"

"She's doing really well," Mr. Tristan said, "thank you for asking."

"Great to hear. Are you still helping the university with recruiting?" Will said, further extending the conversation.

Sometimes, okay, maybe often times, Merlyn forgets that Will was a fully functioning adult in most capacities and can actually sound mature and grown up when interacting with other adults. She stood there silently off to the side listening to this unexpected conversation; what a small world, she thought while slowly spacing out.

"So what brings you here today?" Mr. Tristan asked as he glanced between Will and Merlyn.

"He's just here to drop off his apartment key for me, so I can go be his maid while he's away for work," Merlyn answered.

"Very funny, Merls," Will said and gave her a deadpan look. She shrugged her shoulders and bit the bottom of her lip to hold back her grin.
"Well since you're here, Will. Would you like to stay for the period and we can go to lunch afterwards? I can call up your old coach and we can talk about some possible recruiter positions," Mr. Tristan said.

"NO!" Merlyn cried out, immediately she went beet red when Mr. Tristan looked over at her in confusion. Will smirked, but didn't bother say a word... jerk.

"Uhm...I mean..." She squeaked. "He has to go to the airport, or else he'll miss his flight."

"Actually," Will threw his arm over her shoulders, "I'd love to stay for lunch. Plus, I haven't seen coach in awhile, it'd be nice to see the old fossil."

Mr. Tristan chuckled. "Careful, he might make you run laps still. But, it shouldn't be too long, and you'll make your flight."

"Fantastic," Will said, "looking forward to it." He looked across the gym again, Merlyn was trying so hard earlier to casually ignore the blue, metal bin, parked in front of the bleachers. "You guys are playing basketball today?"

"Yes, indeed we are. In fact, what a coincidence you're here!" Mr. Tristan said brightly. "Well, I have to get class started. If you both will excuse me."

Right when Mr. Tristan walked out of ear shot, Merlyn whirled around and glared at Will while pointing to the gym doors. "Go."

Will placed his hand over his heart. "But, Merls...I've been invited to stay. I can't just leave, I'll look rude."

"Uh uh," she shook her head while trying to push him backwards to the exit, "don't give me that crap. You can't be here to watch me play."

He looked down at her with an amused smile, not having moved an inch from his spot. "So you did know about the basketball lesson, and what," he raised an eyebrow, "you were expecting me to not notice the bin over there?"
"Kinda, sorta, yeah. But now you have to go." Merlyn placed both hands over his crossed arms and started pushing with all her strength.

"Oh come on, what's the big deal if I watch? It's not like you don't know how to play, I mean I taught you everything you need to know." Will tipped his chin towards the court. "If anything, you'll be an ace out there."

"Not...the...problem!" Merlyn said while struggling to get some traction to make him budge.

Will rolled his eyes. "Is this because I like to give you helpful suggestions from the sidelines?"

"Helpful suggestions?!" Merlyn squawked and stopped her task, she realized people were staring at her (all her friends and some classmates). She gestured for Will to back up a few steps towards the end of the bleachers and lowered her voice. "You don't give helpful suggestions."

"I'm so insulted, Merls," said Will indignantly while mock-frowning at her.

"Shouting orders at me from the sidelines is not being helpful, Will." Merlyn crossed her arms and scowled.

He chuckled and took a seat on the last row of bleachers, the look on his face saying 'well...too late now. I'm staying' Merlyn gave him a look of disdain, and turned to walk away from him when Mr. Tristan blew his whistle to signal class was starting.

"What was all that about, Merlyn?" Gwen said, a look of concern on her face.

"You'll see in a bit here," she grumbled while sitting down beside Morgana to tie her shoe laces.

Mr. Tristan broke the girls up into two separate teams, ten on each side evenly. Merlyn walked over to their bench and waited to see if she's going to go up first or second; Morgana (the natural leader) took charge and volunteered to go first and do jump ball against Vivian. The other girls, who disliked Vivian, agreed wholeheartedly and sat down on the bench. Mr. Tristan asked for
the starters to come out onto the court and get into positions; Merlyn glanced over at Will and gave him a warning look, his response was to smile and throw up a peace sign.

"It's sort of embarrassing to play basketball with the guys watching," Gwen said nervously and waved at Lance (always looking at Gwen with that adoring smile on his face).

"It's the judgement, right?" Merlyn said knowingly.

Gwen nodded. "Yeah. I'm dating Lance, which makes everyone assume I should be good at the sport."

"Are you?" Merlyn asked out of curiosity.

Gwen shrugged and wiggled her hand slightly. "For the most part."

"Guys," Freya came up to them and spoke softly, but urgently, "please don't pass me the ball."

"I got you covered, Freya," Merlyn said with a wink.

"Thank you," she breathed in relief and scurried away to the other side.

"You'd think they have better things to stare at," Morgana said while leveling the guys with her intense stare.

Merlyn followed Morgana's stare and was met with all the guys grins; she scoffed lightly when Arthur looked at her, then at the net, while making a pointed gesture about the height difference. She narrowed her eyes at him, trying not to laugh as she took her spot on the court. Morgana was going to be doing jump ball for their team since she's the tallest of them all, Merlyn positioned herself behind Vivian, who was jumping for her team, and started mentally preparing herself. She's been through this many times with Will and his love to make her participate in everything; without a doubt it'll be like those times now. Mr. Tristan stepped up between Vivian and Morgana, ball in hand and told everyone to get ready, he blew his whistle as he threw the ball upwards. Merlyn's eyes followed the ball, and she caught it when Morgana smacked it to her; the moment the ball was in her hands she took off down the court.
"COME ON, MERLS!" Ah. Will's starting in on the shouting already, she thought as she did a lay-up at the net and scored their first two points.

"Yes!" Morgana ran past Merlyn and lightly punched her shoulder.

"WOO! GO SWEETHEART!" Gwaine stood up and took off his shirt to wave in the air.

Merlyn laughed and ran back over half court, the other girls in the class stopped and swooned at the sight of a shirtless Gwaine. Arthur rolled his eyes and said something to Percy, a second later, Gwaine was pulled back down in his seat and tugging his shirt back on. Merlyn refocused on the game and moved to the top right of the key to fill the wing position, the girl she was guarding was taller than her by a bit, but it didn't matter much to her. Merlyn watched as Vivian brought the ball up the court and looked for someone to pass to; her chance to intercept the ball came the moment she saw the slight shift in Vivian's hips in Merlyn's direction. She leapt up as the ball was passed to the girl behind her and grabbed it.

"YES! GO! GO! GO!" Will cupped his hands over his mouth to amplify his voice.

The sound of footsteps chasing after Merlyn fueled her adrenaline; she dribbled the ball, took the allotted two steps and went in for another lay-up. As she was turning to run back over half court (having made the basket), she glared at Will and mouthed to him 'stop shouting at me!' Will waved in an off-handed way and made an ushering motion which meant 'hustle!'

"Why do I even bother?" Merlyn muttered to herself and got ready.

"Why didn't you ever tell us you were actually good at this!?" Elyan said loudly from the bleachers.

Merlyn glanced over, smirked and shrugged, then turned her attention away. Vivian, now aware of Merlyn's slight aptitude for the game, chose to pass the ball to Sophia on the other side of the key and they managed to move the ball around between them. Merlyn tried to maneuver her way around, without getting stuck in the key (which was what Will was shouting about currently as well). Some shots were made--they didn't go in, but it was the fact that Vivian's team kept getting the rebounds; unfortunately Merlyn was swept up into the middle of the girls as they tried to grab for the next rebound.
"GET OUT OF THE KEY, MERLS!"

"What does he think I'm trying to do? Ballroom dance?" Merlyn said and quickly dropped to her knees to crawl out from the huddle of girls.

She stumbled slightly as she righted herself and turned to see who had the ball now. The ball bounced off the rim and came down, off to the side, into Gwen's hands. Merlyn cupped her hands over her mouth.

"GWEN!" She shouted. Gwen looked over at Merlyn, who was making a large arching movement with her arm. "LOB IT!"

Gwen reared the ball back behind her head and threw, with impressive strength, it down the court. Merlyn bounced once on her heels and took off after the ball, Vivian coming in close beside her.

"HUSTLE! HUSTLE!" Will was now standing and vigorously clapping his hands at her.

"I AM!" Merlyn shouted and shot a glare in his direction.

Her lungs felt like they were going to explode, both legs were burning from being pushed so much, with one last burst of speed she managed to beat Vivian to the ball and come to a complete stop under the net. Vivian flew past her as she dribbled once, pivoted and gently tossed the ball up on the opposite side of the net. Merlyn was panting as Gwen, Morgana, and Freya ran up to her cheering and patting her on the shoulder; she looked over at Will and mockingly clapped her hands at him. Mr. Tristan blew his whistle and told them to swap out teams.

"I'm..." Merlyn couldn't finish her sentence as she sat down on the tried to catch her breath.

Arthur was impressed. He never would have expected Merlyn to be this good at basketball, he knew on some level that she was athletic, but it surprised him to see her play so well on the court. The guys were watching the second set of girls play, but Arthur couldn't stop watching Merlyn, who was currently sitting on the bench trying to catch her breath. She's cute when she's competitive, Arthur thought with a small smile as she glared over at Vivian's team. Movement on the far side of the bleachers caught his attention and his eyebrows furrowed together at the sight of Will silently mouthing things to Merlyn. Arthur could see her respond by mouthing words and using random
gestures to talk to Will from across the gym. Their relationship bothered Arthur on an unknown level, he didn't understand how Merlyn could be so oblivious to the looks Will and Freya share, or if she did know, how could she be okay with it?

"Man it sucks how the second group of girls for Viv's team is actually on the senior girls' team," Leon said.

Arthur nodded along and pretended to be involved in the conversation, but he kept watching Merlyn from across the gym. It looked like whatever Will was signalling to her riled her up as she shook her head no. He wondered how long they've been together, he saw the key Will gave her earlier and it didn't take much to put two and two together, it was a key to his place. He wasn't sure why he was so vexed about her relationship, it wasn't his business, and considering his own love life...yeah, not in the position to say anything. Mr. Tristan blew the whistle at the next quarter mark and the girls came back on to play.

"Why is Merlyn letting Sophia come into the court that far?" Lance said while sitting forward to watch the game more closely.

Arthur was curious too and watched her guard Sophia. But, whatever it was, Merlyn managed to steal the ball and dribble down the court.

'Take a three.'

Merlyn was adamant about not making a three-pointer, she knew Will was getting hyped up watching the game and so was she (since she's playing in it), but this was neither the time nor place for her to attempt such a shot. Statistically speaking, on average she'll only make about four out of ten three point shots, 40% was not a good number to work with in her opinion--even though Will begs to differ. Aside from their different battle strategies (Will's was to attack, Merlyn's was to strategize), the interesting thing she discovered was that there is a dead spot on the gym floor.

"Come on, Merls," Sophia taunted while dribbling in front of her.

Merlyn didn't rise to the bait and waited for her to come in a little further--there!--A dead spot is created when a pocket of air is formed between the boards underneath. A person won't be able to notice it when they run over top, but when a ball is bounced over top it doesn't come back to the right height. Merlyn swiped the ball and took off down the court, she saw Morgana run alongside her on the other side of the court and passed the ball over. She cheered along with everyone else when
the ball went into the basket.

"Great job, Morgana!" Merlyn said breathlessly and high fived her.

Suddenly, Merlyn was crushed into Morgana's generous chest as she expressed her happiness at showing up Vivian's team.

"The...game...is...still...in...play..." Merlyn wheezed.

A few more switches and the girl's gym time slot was coming to an end. Unfortunately, it was obvious that their team wasn't going to win, since a majority of the senior girls' basketball team was on Vivian's side, but it didn't make it less of an interesting challenge to try and beat them. Merlyn was now being double teamed each time she goes onto the court, but it made it that much easier to have an open teammate to pass to (Freya made a basket!). Now, Merlyn was currently dribbling up the court and looking for someone to pass to, and Vivian has taken it upon herself to guard her.

"TAKE THE SHOT!"

No.

"You know, ears, you've been spending a lot of time with Arthur lately," Vivian said, her voice dripping with contempt.

Merlyn ignored her and continued to pass the ball between her legs as she moved around, trying to find an open teammate.

"MERLS! TAKE THE SHOT!"

No. Stop shouting.

"He'll get bored of you eventually, and when he does he'll just come back to me." Vivian tried to swipe at the ball, but Merlyn crossed it behind her back to her other hand.
"That's an interesting delusion, Viv," Merlyn said, not bothering to look at her. "Who he hangs out with isn't really any of your business."

Vivian sneered, but a moment later she smirked at Merlyn. "You think you're so special to him? That he'll want to pick you? Because you're his...shorty?"

"FOR THE LOVE OF--SHOOT!"

She gritted her teeth and tried to not let it bother her. Don't bite the bait. Don't bite the bair, Merlyn chanted in her head; the ball was moving between her legs so quickly now that she was riled up from Vivian's taunt. That nickname was only okay when Arthur calls her it, not anyone else, with that thought in mind, Merlyn backed up a few steps and stopped dribbling; she took a deep breath, bent her knees, took one step forward and took the shot.

The hardest part of making three point shots for Merlyn was being able to generate enough strength behind her shot. She held her breath as the ball bounced around on the rim, but eventually dropped in through the net.

Merlyn threw her arms into the air in victory. "YES!" She looked at Vivian's pissed off face with a sense of accomplishment; she then smiled and held up three fingers, taunting Vivian some more before Morgana, Freya, and Gwen charged at her to give their praise.

"YEAH!" Will cheered from the sidelines. Along with all the guys on the bleachers.

Okay. Maybe shouting wasn't all that bad.

"You okay there, shorty?" Arthur asked while leaning back in his seat, his carton of chocolate milk in the other hand that's not holding the back of Merlyn's chair. A smile playing on his lips.

"Mm," Merlyn grunted, "tired."
He chuckled and nudged her leg with his knee. "You're like a sluggish old man, Merlyn. It's just one game."

Arthur saw her turn her head slightly in her arms to glare at him. "Well you're a royal ass. Are we done pointing out the obvious now?"

"Ha!" Arthur took a gulp from the carton to hide his smirk.

"Hey, Merls," Will said as he walked up to the table.

Arthur's good mood dampened a bit.

Merlyn looked up at Will and smiled. "Hey, Will. Are you heading out now?"

"Yeah," Will said, "just stopped in to say bye."

"I'll walk you out." Merlyn pushed to her feet and looked over at Freya. "Want to come with me, Freya?"

Freya blushed and nodded her head. "Okay."

"Be right back, guys!" Merlyn said and the three of them headed out of the cafeteria. Arthur started picking at the milk carton's edge.

"I've decided to postpone my birthday party to another weekend," Morgana said to the table at large.

Leon glanced down at her as he bit into his burger. "Why?"

"It turns out Merlyn will be staying at Will's apartment for a week while he's away for a business trip," Morgana said. "We've decided to have a sleepover this weekend instead."
"Oh cool, I'll bring my Wii over." Percy pushed Gwaine's hand away from his fries, but the latter still managed to snag a couple.

"We, as in the girls only Percy," Gwen said in an admonishing tone, then she looked around the table with a warning look. "No. Boys. Allowed."

"Aw," Gwaine pouted, "that's so mean of you guys."

"Yeah, sis. We want to come too," Elyan said while tossing a rogue piece of lettuce at her.

Lance, the goody-goody, caught the lettuce before it reached Gwen and tossed it onto his tray. "You girls have fun." He gave Gwen that awe-struck smile and the two of them slipped off into their own little world.

"Well he's no help." Gwaine said while kicking back in his chair.

"You boys can find other ways to entertain yourselves," Morgana sniffed and went back to her lunch.

Arthur glanced over at Gwaine, Percy, and Elyan with a knowing look, he turned to give the same look to Leon, who smirked and nodded his head. His attention shifted when Merlyn walked back into the cafeteria with Freya, and the two of them were talking about something.

"Yeah, we probably can," Arthur said while pulling Merlyn's chair out as she came closer.

"Oh he's so cute!" Gwen gushed as she dropped her overnight bag and knelt down to scratch Cerberus behind his ears.

"Right?" Morgana reached over to give him a full body rub with a big smile on her face. Cerberus, knowing he had them hooked, flipped onto his back and wagged his tail expectantly.

"Cerbi's such a touch slut," Merlyn said with a smile as she bent down to grab Gwen and
Morgana's duffle bags.

Merlyn brought their bags into the living room and placed them down beside Freya's beside the couch. The two of them had moved the coffee table out of the way earlier, so they could sleep in the space later on tonight. Cerberus came bounding into the living room and started running around in circles as Gwen and Morgana followed behind. The four of them were all in their pajamas already; Gwen and Morgana were both in long flannel bottoms with different colored tank tops, Freya had long flannel pants as well, but she had the matching button up shirt with it. Merlyn on the other hand was in a pair of black boxer shorts (courtesy of Will) and a large Excalibur's t-shirt (also thanks to Will).

"We brought more snacks!" Gwen held up a large brown bag filled to the brim with junk food.

"Great!" Merlyn said excitedly. "I got us a bunch of ice cream for later too."

The girls set their sleeping bags out in the large space in front of the couch and recliner; Merlyn went and grabbed a bunch of pillows from the closet and tossed them around the room. They settled down in front of the television and started one of the movies on Netflix.

"How long have you and Will been dating?" Morgana asked once the credits began rolling.

Merlyn choked on her pop and began to violently cough. "W-W-W--"

"Are you okay?" Freya said while patting her on the back, Cerberus walked up to her and sniffed around, trying to see what was wrong.

Merlyn cleared her throat and collected herself. "Where did you get that idea, Morgana?" Her voice husky from coughing so hard.

"Oh?" Morgana rolled onto her stomach and lifted her head up at her with an interested look on her face. "Judging by that response, you and him aren't?" She placed her head on one of her hands and let the question hang in the air.

She shook her head. "Nooo. I grew up with him, he's like my big brother."
"And you guys never thought of changing your relationship?" Gwen hugged her pillow closer to her chest and scooted forward eagerly to hear Merlyn's response.

"Uh..." Merlyn looked around at the three of them. "No? Why would we?"

"Childhood sweethearts?" Freya offered quietly.

Merlyn took Freya's response as her silent way of asking Merlyn not to mention anything about her and Will to the other two girls. She respected that decision and continued on as if there wasn't more details she was omitting.

"True, that'd have been cute, but no we aren't dating. Never have. Never will." Merlyn said firmly.

"Childhood sweethearts...hmm," Morgana muttered softly while looking at a random spot on the ground, lost in her thoughts.

"Then, is there someone you like currently?" Gwen asked.

Morgana snapped out of her thoughts and a devilish smile appeared on her face. "Yeah...anyone? Maybe someone from our school? Someone we might even--"

DING

"Pizza's here!" Merlyn jumped to her feet, grabbed the money off the ground, and ran for the door. Cerberus chased after her and beat her to the destination.

Saved by the bell, she thought in relief. Merlyn wasn't even sure where to begin to explain that the first person to pop into her head was Arthur when Gwen asked that question. It's not odd is it? Merlyn wondered as she approached the door, he's her friend so of course she liked him...platonically.
She nodded to herself and pulled the door open, her smile dropping when she saw who was on the other side. "H--you're not pizza." Merlyn crossed her arms and leaned against the door frame. Cerberus let out one bark and ran forward, trying to sniff all the guys in one go.

"Nice observation skills, short stack. Going to let us in or what?" Arthur grinned, along with all the other guys standing behind him.

Merlyn tapped her chin. "Last I checked," she pointed to them, "you guys didn't receive an invite."

Gwaine shrugged, the pizza boxes coming into view. "Lost in the mail, sweetheart. But if it helps, we have the pizza hostage."

"Pft," Merlyn shook her head while rolling her eyes, a smile on her lips, "fine. Come in. Cerbi, let's go." She patted her thigh.

She took the pizza boxes from Gwaine and walked ahead of them (Cerberus trotted beside her happily), back into the living room. "Guess what we got with our pizza?" Merlyn announced.

"Hi, girls!" Merlyn gasped when Percy suddenly picked her up and carried her the last few steps.

"I thought we told you no boys allowed?" Morgana narrowed her eyes at them, but scooted over to make room for Leon to sit down beside her.

Gwen gave Lance an admonishing look, but sneaked a quick peck in. "You guys are terrible."

"Say what you will girls, but the real party begins now," Gwaine said while shoving Arthur forward. "Bring on the alcohol!"

The group of them arranged themselves into a large circle, Elyan pulled out a thing of red cups and handed them to Arthur, who was pouring out drinks. Merlyn suggested they have a friendly game of poker and went to grab Will's poker set from under the TV. She divided the chips and dealt the cards out, Leon seemed quite into the game as he sorted out his chips. Several rounds later (Merlyn pulled in hand after hand), paired up with an astounding amount of alcohol, the game
dwindled down to just her and Arthur.

"Your call, sire," Merlyn said, her cheeks naturally flushed from the alcohol and her body nicely buzzing.

Arthur gave her that slightly crooked smile of his and pushed all his chips into the middle. "I'm calling your bluff, Merlyn."

She grinned and followed his lead with her chips. The last two cards were added to the river and Arthur flipped his cards over triumphantly.

"Flush!" He called out, a half-smile on his face. "Beat that!"

"Whatdya got there, sweetheart?" Gwaine lifted his head slightly off of Percy's lap as he took another sip from his cup.

Merlyn scanned the group and then threw her cards down on the ground. "Aces and eights!"

"A full house? What the fuck?" Arthur cried and sat up onto his knees.

"Read 'em and weep, my lord," Merlyn said, her voice sounded slightly husky from all the alcohol she consumed.

"Shit," Arthur breathed and sat back down. Cerberus licked his face in a comforting way and Arthur reached over to scratch behind his ears.

"I'm done for the night!" Leon got up and headed for the bathroom, carefully stepping over a sleeping Morgana.

"Me too." Elyan yawned and rolled over to his sleeping bag, Lance and Gwen were right beside him, having passed out several hours earlier.

"Carry me to my chambers, Perce!" Gwaine ordered, he tried to drink some more out of his
cup, but it turned up empty.

Percy rolled his eyes and shoved Gwaine over into his sleeping bag. "Dude, your poor liver."

Merlyn started packing up the poker set, and Arthur collected the cards back into their deck. She had to gently move Freya's curled up form so it was closer to the couch, to make more room on the floor. Before she flicked the living room lights off, she remembered to pull Cerberus's dog bed by the balcony doors, he knew it was now bed time and climbed into the bed, circled around three times and dropped down. Merlyn scooted into her sleeping bag between the vent and Arthur's sleeping bag, she started to feel drowsy from all the alcohol. Everyone around her was probably dead asleep by now, so it came as a surprise when she heard Arthur's deep voice.

"Night, shorty."

She smiled. "Night, dollop head."

Every morning Arthur was used to getting up at an insane hour, people that knew he did this assumed it was to go on a run to condition himself before going to practice. Which was true...for the most part; the real reason was because he had these terrible stress-induced nightmares that wake him up, and he'd be too nervous to go back to sleep. The morning light was just creeping in through the balcony doors and Arthur laid there wide awake, listening to everyone around him breathe evenly in their sleep; he rubbed his eyes and sat up while yawning. Will's apartment was nice, Arthur grudgingly thought as he glanced around the living room again; his observations were cut short when he noticed Merlyn's sleeping form next to him.

He gulped and turned his head away. "Fuck..." he said under his breath.

Maybe Arthur had to rethink this whole 'cute at best' theory he had in regards to Merlyn, the thought occurred to him last night when they were playing poker and she had this sultry look on her face when she was goading him to make such a ridiculous call (goddamn 'aces and eights'). But he, especially, had to rethink it now after seeing her in this current state; Merlyn must have shifted her sleeping bag in the middle of the night so it no longer covered the top half of her body, but that wasn't the problem. The problem was, Arthur felt guilty for even turning his head back to take another look, that her shirt had rode up--exposing her stomach, and from his angle, the underside of her breasts. Arthur gulped and tried not to think about her lack of bra or the fact that he could nearly see...he groaned internally when all the blood in him began rushing south.
Arthur started to think of as many boring things as he can, to keep his mind from straying down the wrong path, she's taken for fuck sake's! He thought angrily while glaring at his straining lower half, thankfully hidden under his sleeping bag cover. Merlyn shifted in her sleep, and for the love of god! He slapped his right hand over his eyes to at least be somewhat of a gentleman. Right, Arthur decided, he needed to cover her up; one, because it's the right thing to do, since he knew she wouldn't want the others to see her like this, and two...he was having difficulties concentrating. Arthur glanced over at her and reached out for the rolled up t-shirt, but he stopped part way when he realized his hand would come really close to touching her if he wasn't careful.

"She's pretty pale...like porcelain." Arthur stared at the exposed skin, but immediately squeezed his eyes shut. "She's taken. Stop staring!"

This time he reached for the flap of her sleeping bag cover, but of course, Merlyn had to make things more difficult for him by sandwiching the flap between her legs. Maybe he should reconsider his options, he didn't want to accidentally wake Merlyn up and have to explain himself to her.

"Toilet," Gwaine groaned while shifting restlessly in his sleep bag and began to sit up onto his knees.

"Shit," Arthur hissed and made a split second decision while keeping his eyes on Gwaine. He reached out and grabbed the flap, tugged on it hard, and dragged it over Merlyn's body.

THWACK

"OW!" Merlyn cried out and shot upwards while grabbing her forehead.

The slap was an accident. Arthur could very well explain himself to her and she'd most likely understand, but here he was...laying on his back pretending to be asleep. He was both amused and horrified at his actions, he could vividly picture the look of bewilderment and anger on her face without having to open his eyes. Arthur could hear her shift around trying to figure out what happened, and at one point he could feel her scowling at him, it took all his will power not to crack and laugh. But, thankfully, his more prominent problem resolved itself.

"Good morning, Merlyn," Uncle Gaius greeted from his desk chair. "You're here early."
"I didn't know how long the bus would take me." Merlyn let out a big yawn. "So I left earlier to be safe."

"Well I'm glad you're here actually." Uncle Gaius pointed his pen towards a box sitting on top of a nearby table. "Would you be so kind as to bring that to the boys locker room and restock the medical cabinet in there for me?"

Merlyn nodded. "Sure...wait, am I allowed to be in there?" She looked over at him with both eyebrows raised.

"The boys should be starting practice soon, Caerleon is aware of the shipment so he won't give you any resistance," said Uncle Gaius.

"Okay," she walked over to the box, "sounds good."

"If you could bring that clipboard with you as well and get Caerleon to sign on the dotted line at the bottom to confirm he received it, that'd be great." Merlyn saw the clipboard laying on top of the box as she lifted it into her arms.

"Kay, be right back," she said and headed out of his office.

Merlyn walked down the empty hallways towards the boys locker room, she had to blow a few strands of her hair off her face as they slipped out of her bun. The box wasn't as heavy as she expected, but it still had a good weight to it and she could hear a few things shift as she walked. When she came to a stop in front of the door, she wasn't sure if she could just push on it and go in, or if she had to knock; Merlyn chose the latter and gave the locker room door a sharp knock, at least this way if someone heard they'd come out and get her--plus, it gave whoever was inside a heads up.

"Come in." That must be Coach Caerleon, Merlyn thought as she pushed the locker room door open.

It came as a surprise when the entire senior boys' team turned to look at her, her body's immediate reaction is to blush and avoid all unnecessary eye contact. She caught the guys looking over in bewilderment, eventually it morphed into grins.

"Uhm..." Merlyn said softly, her speech abilities suddenly vanished.
Coach Caerleon smiled and took pity on her. "Is that the supply delivery?"

Merlyn nodded her head while looking at him, Coach Caerleon gestured to a large, black, metal cabinet a few feet from her right. "Supplies just go in there."

"Okay." Merlyn turned and shuffled to the cabinet.

"Mornin', sweetheart!" Gwaine leaned back on the bench he was straddling and winked at her.

She placed the box down at her feet and humoured him with a small wave of her fingers. Coach Caerleon cleared his throat and gave Gwaine a reprimanding stare, Gwaine returned it with his usual impish grin and refocused on the white board. Merlyn made eye contact with Arthur and gave him a small smile when he nodded his head at her; all the other guys gave her a quick nod as well and went back to looking at the white board.

'Looks like they're going over some plays for the game this Friday.' Merlyn thought as she began to restock the supplies in the cabinet.

"Arthur, focus." Merlyn glanced over at Arthur, but his head was in the midst of turning back towards the white board, so she didn’t know what he was looking at.

Merlyn made quick work at unloading the box of supplies and finished her task within a few minutes, she picked, the now empty box, up and started to head over to Coach Caerleon to ask for a signature. He was currently going over what looked like a new play to Merlyn; she had a pretty good idea of their normal plays, after seeing them implemented at the game against Essetir, she watched and listened as he explained what he wanted Gwaine to do. Before she knew what she was doing she placed the box back down and shifted the clipboard in her arm.

"Coach?" She raised her hand and waited.

Coach Caerleon looked a bit surprised and a bit amused at seeing Merlyn raise her hand and wait expectantly to be called on, even the guys looked over at her with questioning smiles on their faces.
"Yes, Merlyn?" Coach Caerleon said.

Merlyn pointed to a specific spot he had circled on the diagram of the court. "I would move that play to the other side of the court, and have Lance run it instead if I were you."

"Sweetheart," Gwaine gasped while clutching his chest, "I'm so hurt!" He swooned backwards into Leon. "You don't believe in my abilities?"

Her lips twitched as she took in Gwaine's theatrics and shook her head. "No. I do. But this play," she gestured back to the board, "goes over top of the dead spot on the court, and it'd give the opposing team the advantage instead of our team."

"Dead spot?" Percy scrunched his eyebrows together and squinted at the board. "What's that?"

Merlyn looked back over at Coach Caerleon, who was now giving her an intrigued look before answering Percy's question. "It's a spot on the court that has an air pocket below the surface, or in the slats. Changes the bounce of the ball--Merlyn, I'm surprised you know this, do you play?"

She shook her head. "No. No. I'm more of a watcher than a player."

"Then how'd you figure it out?" Lance asked.

"The other day in gym, I noticed it when I was coming up the court, after that I used it against Sophia." Merlyn tapped her pen against her lips while looking at the board still. "You know, Coach, if you get Lance to run this play, but have Leon come up from post to take the shot in the outer wing, it'd give you a better odds to work with."

"Me?" Leon said, his eyes going slightly wide.

Merlyn nodded. "Yup. Even though you didn't make many of those shots at the game against Essetir, when you did, you made seven out of ten of them, that's about an 70% success rate in my opinion. Realistically, you guys had a higher rate of success against Essetir in the first place, since you had home court advantage, but those guys played dirty." She gestured at the board. "The plays you have are so strategically thought out, Coach. If anything it's just the dead spot you have to worry about."
The silence hit Merlyn so hard she didn't even gradually start blushing, her face went from slightly pink to bright red in less than ten seconds. All the guys were either grinning or smirking at her, and Coach Caerleon stroked his beard while looking between the board and Merlyn.

She coughed and held out the clipboard. "Signature, please," she squeaked and avoided making eye contact.

"Thank you for your insight, Merlyn." He handed the clipboard back to her, his eyes crinkled on both sides as he smiled at her.

"Mhm." Merlyn managed to respond, she grabbed the box off the ground and waved goodbye to everyone before dashing out of the locker room.

Well that was embarrassing, she thought as she made her way back to Uncle Gaius's office. Merlyn handed the clipboard, with the signed form, back to Uncle Gaius and helped him around the office as she waited for the first bell to ring.

**Cabbage Head: Where are you?**

**Uncle Gaius's office. Why?**

**Cabbage Head: Kay**

Merlyn read his reply and then went back to sorting through the large pile of paperwork in front of her. Her task involved seeing which documents were completed (with a signature) and which ones were not (still had shipment on backorder).

"How come you never told me you knew how to read basketball plays?" Arthur said as he sunk into the seat across from Merlyn, he leaned forward onto his arms and rested his chin on top of them.

She shrugged and flipped through the stapled papers in her hand. "You never asked?"
"Well Coach was impressed, was wondering if you'd want to be part of the basketball team as a manager," Arthur said while watching her flip through the papers.

"That'd be--"

"Caerleon is not taking another one of my pupils," Khilgharra announced while walking into the office. "He already has Elyan. He is not taking Merlyn."

"Good morning, Khilgharra," Merlyn and Arthur both said at the same time with amused looks.

"He thinks this is some sort of game," Khilgharra huffed while taking a seat in front of Uncle Gaius. "Hi, Gaius." He waved and placed his arm on the desk. "Think you could take another look at it?"

Uncle Gaius raised his glasses and nodded. "Acting up again is it?"

Khilgharra shrugged. "Carpel tunnel, what can I do?" He looked over at the two of them, specifically at Merlyn with a grin. "You're staying in Robotics with me. Don't let Caerleon trick you into joining up."

"Alright," Uncle Gaius smiled, then looked over at Merlyn and Arthur, "you two should be heading to homeroom soon."

"Right." Merlyn nodded and shuffled the papers back into two separate neat piles.

Arthur leaned forward and whispered. "We could always play hooky."

She looked up and gave him a reprimanding look. "You and Morgana are totally related. Skipping classes is not an option."

Arthur sighed while throwing his arms up in the air. "Such a good little nerd."
The morning passed by quickly, probably due to the fact that tomorrow is the big pep rally and last home game. It seemed like the school was being consumed by Camelot High colors; during every class change Merlyn noticed more and more decorations being put up. She was getting excited with everyone else, Arthur could barely contain his grin every time he looked over at her as she gazed at the decorations in awe. The biggest thing she's excited for though is to wear Arthur's jersey.

"Merlyn!" The sound of Morgana's voice caught her attention.

She stopped in the hallway and looked around for Morgana, a second later, the familiar striking brunette rushed up to her.

"Hi, Morgana, what's up?" Merlyn asked.

Morgana smoothed out her blouse and stood up taller. "I have a huge favour to ask you."

She nodded. "Sure, if I can do it."

"Could you make cupcakes for tomorrow's pep rally, please?" Morgana asked.

"Okay, yeah no problem!" Merlyn smiled. "I'll get started when I go home after Robotics."

"Thank you, I'll text you how many after I meet and discuss with Gwen about it," Morgana said, her face filled with the utmost gratitude.

"Well I have to go now." Merlyn gestured down the hallway that lead to the lab.

"Right." The hallway was slowly clearing out as people were heading home. Merlyn waved as she walked past Morgana, but stopped when she put a hand on her arm. "Wait." She looked up confused. "Don't tell Arthur what I just asked you to do."

"Why would I tell him?" said Merlyn.

Morgana smirked. "You guys have been practically attached at the hip this whole week. I just
wanted to make sure that there's actually going to be cupcakes for tomorrow."

Merlyn rolled her eyes, her lips tugging upwards halfway, of course she would be worried those savages would devour her campaign. "You'll have your cupcakes for tomorrow."

"Hmm," Morgana regarded her with an interested look, "fascinating."

"What?" Merlyn blinked.

"You didn't deny the first part." The devilish smile gave Merlyn the heebie-jeebies.

"Uh...lab." Merlyn pointed down the hallway and shot her another quick wave as she made a haste get away. She glanced back over her shoulder to see if Morgana was watching her, but she was no longer standing there--Morgana is a very busy girl.

"Ouf!" She crashed into a solid body.

"Geez!" Arthur said, stumbling slightly, while grabbing both sides of her arms. "Sorry, didn't see you there."

Merlyn glared up at him. "Tall monstrosity."

Arthur grinned. "Small rabbit."

"Shouldn't you be at practice?" Merlyn said while looking at the doors to the hallway he most likely came from.

"Shouldn't you be in Robotics?" He shot back.

She gave him a 'I asked you first' look and crossed her arms over her chest.
"Kay," he held his hands up in defeat, "I was actually looking for you."

"Why?" She tilted her head.

"Wanted to ask if we're goin' to your place or mine afterwards?" Arthur explained.

"Based on our rotation it should be my--noooo," Merlyn said immediately. Morgana's orders from a moment ago ringing loudly in her mind.

He pulled his eyebrows together over top of his smile. "No?"

"Yes." She nodded, but then shook her head. "I mean, no. I mean we--you--I..."

"You're not making any sense, weirdo." Arthur reached out and pinched her nose.

"I make perfect sense!" She snapped while pulling her face away. "But it's just you can't come over today."

"How come?" Merlyn could hear the slight pout in his tone. She felt a bit guilty having to lie to him, but it wasn't as if this was a big lie...it's just a teeny-tiny white one.

"Because...because..Mor....." She trailed off while avoiding eye contact, she nearly gave up her secret, trying to think up an excuse.

"Merlyn..." Arthur began slowly, a smirk forming on his lips.

"Uncle Gaius is expecting a ton of patients to come by today!" Bingo! She had an excuse, and not a moment too soon either...

"Really now?" Arthur crossed his arms with a full smirk on his face.
"Mhm!" She nodded her head enthusiastically. "So another day. I have to go now, bye!" Merlyn raised her hand quickly and scurried away before Arthur could catch her.

Arthur watched her small form retreating to the Robotics lab and chuckled to himself.

'She's lying.'

"34...35...36...37...38..." Merlyn counted off the most recent batch of chocolate cupcakes.

DING

She glanced over at the door as she swiped her hands down the front of her apron; Merlyn walked to the apartment door and jogged down the stairs to the front door--odd how there's a patient coming---shit.

"Why the sudden hostility, shorty?" Arthur pushed against the door with one hand to keep it partially open. She didn't even have to see his face to be able to picture the look of wicked amusement.

"I told you! There's a lot of patient's coming over today!" Merlyn strained as she pressed her fully body weight against the other side of the door. "You can't be here!"

"Is that flour on your face?" Arthur peered in through the small opening, his eyes widened. "Are you baking?!"

"No! It's just...makeup!" She flipped over onto her back and tried to push the door closed that way.

"What are you baking?" Arthur pulled his arm back slightly to drop the door out from behind her, Merlyn stumbled and landed on her butt, he then pushed the door the rest of the way open.

Merlyn scowled up at him. "I can't tell you. Morgana's orders."
He reached down and lifted her back up onto her feet, then kicked off his runners while waiting for her to lead the way up into the apartment. "You actually listen to what that harpy tells you?"

"Uh...yeah?" She threw Arthur a look over her shoulder. "Don't you?"

Arthur sniffed the air when the door opened and started in for the kitchen. "Cupcakes." He breathed while heading for the stack of them on the counter.

She ran forward and came between him and the desserts behind her, both arms flung out to her sides. "You can't!"

"Merlyn," Arthur warned, his voice going deeper and slightly husky as it moved around her name the way she's grown to like...a lot.

Merlyn looked up at him defiantly, but also trying to overcome the shiver of pleasure running up and down her spine. "These are for the pep rally."

Arthur raised both his eyebrows and gave her a closed-lip smile. The two of them stared each other down, both of them too competitive for their own good.

"Fine!"

Merlyn cracked first, and gestured over to the other stack of cupcakes on the kitchen table. "I was going to sneak them to you guys tomorrow. But since you're here..." she grumbled the last part.

He lit up immediately and walked over to the table; Arthur took a large bite out of the cupcake he picked up and moaned. "I love your baking."

She tried to be upset, but it was hard considering how happy Arthur looked while eating her baking. "You need to save some for the guys."
"They don't need to know." Arthur waved his hand dismissively.

"Arthur," Merlyn giggled, "you have to share with them."

"Snooze they lose." He bit into another cupcake. "Mmmm...Oreo frosting."

"It's butter cream," Merlyn added and went back to pouring the next batch of cupcakes into the baking tray.

"Even better..." He hissed out, his face overcome with joy. "Do you have any milk?" He asked while glancing at the fridge.

"Yeah." She pointed at the fridge and then to the cupboard by her head. "Cups are in here."

Arthur opened the fridge and grabbed the carton of milk inside, then he walked over to where Merlyn was standing, he stood behind her and reached up to grab a cup out of the cupboard. He stood beside her as he poured the milk into his cup, as she wiped the edges clean on the tray; the reality of the situation made itself known to Merlyn, this was all very intimate. The warmth in her cheeks started to build and build the longer Arthur stood beside her.

She looked up at him. "Hey."

"Hmm--Hey!" Arthur exclaimed, his half turned head became fully turned in her direction, followed by a sharp laugh.

Merlyn grinned and held the piping bag out of reach from him. The smear of icing sat nicely on his left cheek, his eyes though were giving her a predatory look, she was starting to have some regrets about her decision.

"Can't back out now, short stack," Arthur said, reading her thoughts clearly on her face, while taking another step towards her. "Gotta own up to your mistakes."

"But you're so much bigger," she said, lips tugging downward, while taking a step back and glancing to the kitchen entrance.
Arthur tipped his head to the side and mimicked her movements. Merlyn bit the bottom of her lip, weighing her options; fuck it, she thought and sprinted for the entrance. She had only managed three steps before Arthur's hands grabbed her waist, pulling her back towards him, and in the blink of an eye found herself lifted up into the air and pinned against the kitchen wall. A startled gasp escaped her lips, out of instinct, her legs wrapped around his waist to keep herself from plummeting to the floor, a second later his hands were at both her sides and digging in.

"Arthur!" shrieked Merlyn hysterically. "No!"

He chuckled and continued pressing into her ticklish spots. "This is what you get for trying to be a clever clogs, Merlyn." She couldn't form a response, her face contorted in agony and hysteria. "Now, have you learned your lesson?"

Merlyn nodded vigorously, pushing at his chest in a vain attempt to get away. "Y-Y-Yes!"

"Hmm..." Arthur hummed thoughtfully. "I don't think you have."

"I-I-I-" She gulped in a large breath of air when Arthur paused for a split second. "I-I have!"

"I know," He continued as if she didn't say anything, "tell me you're a dollop head and we'll call it even." The side of his lip pulled upwards as he stared down at her with half-lidded eyes.

"That's my word!" Merlyn exclaimed, laughter bubbling up from her lips.

They weren't sure when Arthur ceased his tickle torture, but all they could hear in the kitchen now was Merlyn's gasps as she collected herself, both her sides still tingling. She looked up at him through her lashes with a shy smile, this is the closest they've ever been, Merlyn thought and felt the tips of her ears grow hot; the look in his eyes made her insides light on fire and melt. Both her legs were still wrapped around him, but now Arthur's hands were gripping her, below her thighs, to hold her up instead of tickling her. Neither of them said anything, the atmosphere growing tense and thick; she wondered what was going to happen next...if he would--

"Merlyn? I heard some yelling, are you alright?" Uncle Gaius's voice drifted to them, his footsteps growing louder.
"Uhm..." Merlyn said, a slight panic in her tone. Arthur noticed the situation they were in and gently lowered her. They managed to put a respectable distance between the two of them before Uncle Gaius came into the kitchen.

"Oh, why hello there, Arthur," Uncle Gaius greeted warmly, "I didn't know you were coming over."

He nodded, one hand running through his hair. "Yeah, thanks for having me."

"Of course, my boy." Uncle Gaius patted him on the shoulder as he walked past, but paused to glance back at him. "You have a little something..." Arthur caught on to what Uncle Gaius was pointing to and swiped at the icing on his face, Merlyn giggled quietly beside him--that earned her a glare.

"Will you be staying for dinner?" Merlyn glanced up at him, nodding, and waited for Arthur to answer Uncle Gaius's question.

Arthur looked at her, then over at Uncle Gaius, who was by the cupcakes. "If that's okay?"

"Yeah, stay!" Merlyn said cheerfully, then turned to look at Uncle Gaius. "I can see what you're doing, Uncle Gaius." Her stern look did not go unnoticed.

"Just a little snack before dinner." He waved at the two of them as he shuffled past with two cupcakes in his hands. "If you need me I'll be in my office."

And just like that, the two of them were alone once again in the never Noticed how small the space was until now kitchen. If Merlyn was honest with herself, she didn't hate the position she was in earlier...at all; she peeked up at Arthur to see what he was thinking and saw this look of turmoil all over his face.

"So I was thinking for dinner, I was going to make drunken pork chops." That was her attempt to ease the tension.

Arthur glanced at her, then nodded. "Sounds good."
Merlyn patted his arm. "It is."

"Pft," He let out a puff of air between his smile, "maybe you have been hanging around me too much."

She lifted her head slightly to laugh and went over to grab the tray off the counter and put it into the oven. When that was done with, she went over to the fridge to grab the vegetables for the side dishes; there was green, red, and yellow peppers, mushrooms, and carrots. Merlyn placed them in the sink and went to grab a cutting board from the shelves below; she could sense Arthur walk up to the sink and put his, now empty, milk glass into the other side, what confused her was why he didn't go back and sit down.

She stood up, cutting board in hand, and raised an eyebrow while pulling out a large cutting knife from the block. Arthur looked at her nervously and a light pink dusted his cheeks. "Can I help?" He gestured to the cutting board and vegetables sitting in the sink.

"Y--" Merlyn paused and stared up at him.

Arthur looked at her, and his smile dropped a fraction. "Oh...are you worried I'll get in the way?" Arthur said softly while taking a step back.

Her brows pulled together. "What?" She reached out to touch his arm to stop him. "No?"

"You hesita--" She held up her hand to stop him mid-word.

"I was having a vision of what might happen to me if you somehow managed to chop your finger off and couldn't play in the game tomorrow," she explained, but patted his left shoulder. "Lucky for you, or me I guess, that I'm a fast runner."

Arthur blinked, then started full out laughing, he had to lean against the counter for a moment; he managed to collect himself and pulled in a large breath of air while grinning at her. "What do you call that earlier then?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Merlyn said innocently while washing the bell peppers first.
He smirked. "Right." He rolled up his sweater's sleeves and reached over to wash his hands.

"Have you ever cut a vegetable before?" Merlyn asked in all seriousness.

"Uh..." Arthur stalled, drying his hands with the hand cloth. "Is that a trick question?"

Merlyn's lip twitched. "Okay, I'll show you." She placed the first pepper down onto the cutting board and grabbed Arthur's arm to pull him forward, she pushed his right hand over to towards the knife. "Hold the knife like this." She moved his index finger into place and clasped her hand tightly over his. "Now, bring it down like this to cut the pepper." Arthur followed her movements slowly, there were moments where the two of them fell out of sync and met resistance, but after a few aborted attempts they fell back into a nice rhythm.

"Will's coming back tomorrow, isn't he?" Arthur said as he continued to chop the peppers without Merlyn's guidance.

"Yeah, his flight arrives tomorrow night." Merlyn continued to prepare other things while looking into the oven to make sure her cupcakes were okay.

Arthur paused his cutting and glanced at her. "You excited?"

"For my key chain, sure." She shrugged her shoulders slightly and pulled the pork chops out of the fridge, now that they were done defrosting. "Will goes away often for project proposals. Your dad pays for everything so he likes to go to as many as possible."

"My dad?" He said confused.

"Oh right...I never told you did I?" She started preparing the pan on the stove. "Will works for Pendragon Enterprises."

"He does?" The look of confusion didn't leave Arthur's face.
"Yup. Works in the Research and Development department." Merlyn glanced over at the cutting board. "Nice work cutting so far, sire."

"Oh...so he's an engineer?" The confusion turned into a different emotion that Merlyn could only describe as begrudging acceptance.

She nodded with a bright smile on her face. "Yeah! He gets to help make so many cool things. I think that's what I want to do in the future."

He nudged her with his elbow. "I'll help put in a good word for you with my old man."

"Really?" Merlyn beamed. "You would?"

"Sure. I'd tell him: you're the worst servant I've ever had." He mock-frowned at her, "By far."

She laughed and smacked his arm lightly. "Rude."

Why does it seem like there's suddenly more students in this school? Merlyn wondered as she held on to Freya's arm as the two of them formed a human chain to make their way through the mass of people (Morgana and Gwen had to go to the gym early to prepare). There were still some shocked looks on people's faces when they saw Merlyn walk past them wearing Arthur's spare jersey, but it wasn't as bad as earlier this morning (Vivian threw a hissy fit and Sophia tried to convince Arthur to take the jersey back and give it to her instead). Merlyn secretly felt extremely proud, at being able to wear his number, if the dopey smile on her face was anything to go by.

"Arthur looked like he was going to be sick."

"I wonder if he ate something bad?"

Merlyn turned to find the source of the gossip, but too many people were around them. Arthur didn't look sick this morning? She pondered, and he enjoyed the dinner last night, what did they mean he looked sick? Merlyn noticed they were approaching the boys' locker room hallway and tapped Freya on the arm.
"Go ahead of me. I'll meet you in the gym," She said while shifting to the side of the crowd.

"Okay," Freya said, "I'll save us...seats!" Her voice hitched when someone nearly collided into her.

"Thank you!" Merlyn called out and ducked into the hallway before the crowd could sweep her away.

She wasn't sure what she was planning to do. Obviously she wasn't allowed into the boys' locker room now, as opposed to that previous morning; so how exactly was she suppose to find Arthur?

"Shorty?" Merlyn spun around and saw Arthur hiding in a small dark corner, she completely missed him when she walked past.

"What're you doing?" She asked.

"I could ask you the same thing," he returned.

"I heard you weren't feeling well, is that true? If you're feeling sick I could go get Uncle Gaius and have him take a look, or I have some Midol in my locker." Merlyn started to head for her locker.

Arthur reached out and stopped her by lightly grabbing her arm. "I don't have cramps, Merlyn."

"It's for more than just cramps." She rolled her eyes.

"I'm fine. I'm just getting into the zone." Arthur waved to his dark corner.

Merlyn peered around him and then looked up at him. "So...were you planning on sitting on the ground and meditating?"
He rolled his eyes and lightly scoffed. "Something like that."

"Is this team really tough?" Merlyn tilted her head.

Arthur blew out his breath and shook his head a little bit. "No. It's just what I do before each game to calm myself."

"Oh..." Merlyn nodded in understanding.

He glanced down at her and smiled. "Nice jersey there, short stack."

Her face lit up as she held her arms out and did a quick spin. "I know right?"

"Shouldn't you be headin' to the gym?" He nodded in the direction of the gym. "Spots in the front are filling up fast." He grinned when she scowled at him.

"Har. Har. Har." She said sarcastically. "Well now that I'm sure you're not going to keel over any minute, I'll go get a seat at the front then, my lord."

"See you in a bit." He pinched her nose, turning to head back into the locker room.

Merlyn shot her hand out and grabbed his arm. "Oh wait!" Arthur turned to look at her over his shoulder; she gave him a big grin. "Impress me." He smirked and nodded his head as she let his arm go.

Camelot won: **96-85**

Merlyn's throat was sore from all the cheering.
"Okay, Cerbi, your dad should be home later tonight. I filled your food and water bowl. Walked you for a solid three hours." Merlyn patted Cerberus on the head as he laid passed out in front of the TV (he was watching Looney Tunes). "The fern is watered." She walked past the fern and into the kitchen, pulling open the fridge. "Meatloaf just needs to be heated before he eats it." Merlyn stood up and stretched. "Time to go home."

"Bye, Cerbi!" Merlyn called out from the door, she heard a soft woof and smiled.

The bus ride back home was relatively quick, but the air had slight crispness to it that warned Merlyn of the impending winter season. As she got off the bus the wind picked up and nipped at her exposed ears; Merlyn grumbled and wanted to take her ponytail down, but she decided against it since the apartment was so close, she started picking up the pace on the last block.

"Merlyn, sweetie!" She jerked to a stop in front of Ms. Stueby's house.

"Hi, Ms. Stueby!" Merlyn greeted.

Ms. Stueby is a nice little 70-something year old woman, that lives next door to Uncle Gaius; she has mostly white hair and is shorter than Merlyn, so small that she could probably fit inside Merlyn's pocket. Her wardrobe mainly consists of knitted cardigans, fuzzy slippers, and flannel pajama bottoms. Merlyn really liked her, every time she comes over to see Uncle Gaius about her arthritis, she'll always bring homemade fudge.

"How are you, dear?" Ms. Stueby asked from the top steps of her porch.

Merlyn jogged up to the end of the stairs. "I'm good. Is there something you need?"

"I was going to ask if you're busy," she said and pointed over her shoulder into her apartment. "I need some help moving things."

"Of course I can help!" Merlyn said and rolled up her sleeves. "What needs moving?"

Turns out Ms. Stueby wanted to move a bunch of her crafting supplies into another room, and turn the previous craft room into a guest room, this didn't make much sense to Merlyn, but she still started the moving process. Some things were a tough move for her, like the big, old trunks that needed to be dragged to the end of the driveway to be picked up by the garbage men on Monday.
There were about six of those and Merlyn decided to leave those for last, because 1. Too heavy, and 2. Because they were heavy it made her nervous. Her pocket vibrated and she took a quick break to read the message.

**Cabbage Head:** Hey. What're you up to?

**Nothing much. What're you up to?**

**Cabbage Head:** Pulling up onto your driveway

**What? Why?**

**Cabbage Head:** Wanted to see if you wanted to hang out?

**I'm at Ms. Stueby's apartment next door. Come over?**

Merlyn didn't see a text bubble pop up, so she assumed he read it; she told Ms. Stueby she'll be right back and was going to talk to her friend at the door really quick. She popped her head out of the door and saw Arthur heading up the driveway, she stepped out to meet him on the porch.

"Hi." Merlyn smiled and gave a little wave.

"Hey." He returned her smile, then shoved his hands into the front pocket of his hoodie. Arthur looked around her and into the apartment, tipping his chin in that direction. "Whatcha doin'?

She jabbed her thumb over her shoulder. "I'm helping Ms. Stueby move things around in her apartment. Why'd you come over?" She asked.

"I was going to ask if you wanted to go see a movie." He shrugged casually. If Merlyn had looked closely though, she would have seen the nervousness around his eyes.

"Oh I do!" Merlyn said excitedly, but her expression deflated. "But I can't." The six heavy
trunks were weighing heavily in the back of her mind, figuratively and literally.

"I mean, we'd go as friends of course," Arthur rushed out.

Merlyn gave him a bewildered look. "What're you talking about?" She pointed over her shoulder again. "I have a bunch of stuff I need to move still, probably won't be done for awhile, so there's no point in waiting for me if you're just going to miss your movie time--you could always ask Gwaine--"

"I'll help you," Arthur blurted out. Her face lit up and her shoulders lifted. "It'll be quicker with two people." He gestured vaguely at the door. "Plus we could always go see a later movie."

"Thanks, turnip head!" Merlyn patted him on the shoulder and turned to lead him into the apartment.

"Merlyn, dear, would you like some tea--oh? Hello there, sonny." Ms. Stueby walked into the hallway with a small tray filled with fudge, a small teapot, and two tea cups. "Are you Merlyn's friend?"

"Hi," Arthur stuck his hand out and gave her his poster boy grin, "I'm Arthur Pendragon. Nice to meet you, Ms. Stueby."

Ms. Stueby looked impressed and held her hand out. "My, what a well-mannered boy you are." She turned and winked at Merlyn. "Great find, sweetie."

Merlyn flushed to the tips of her ears and glanced between Ms. Stueby and Arthur (who's smile was now slightly strained). "Uhm...actually...we're..."

"Would you like some tea as well, Arthur?" Ms. Stueby was already turning around and heading back to the kitchen.

He shoved his hands into his hoodie again. "Sure, thanks, Ms. Stueby."

Merlyn coughed and gestured to the craft room. "Shall we?"
Moving went a lot quicker with an extra set of hands, evidently, even more helpful when they’re attached to a 6-foot-something tall monstrosity that can carry twice the load. When they took a break for tea, Ms. Stueby was regaling them with stories of her youth and the time she spent over seas with all her lovers, all females and in power. Arthur and Merlyn shared impressed looks and listened intently to her (apparently one lover stopped a potential war from happening by sleeping with the enemy).

"I'm hungry," complained Merlyn as they walked back over to her apartment, having finished their duty.

Arthur lightly punched her shoulder. "Let's go grab a slice of pizza before the movie."

She looked up at him. "There's still a movie this late?"

"Yeah look," Arthur confirmed, holding his phone out towards her.

Merlyn perked up. "I want to see that movie!" She rapidly tapped his arm. "Let's go." They walked up to his car, Merlyn was touched when he pulled the passenger door open for her, he pointed up at the apartment.

"Should you tell Gaius?" Arthur asked.

"I should," she agreed and pulled out her cell phone as she got into the car.

"Hello, Merlyn, will you be back soon?" Uncle Gaius picked up the call.

"Yeah, I'm actually back already, but Arthur picked me up, and we're going to go see a movie together and grab a bite to eat." She looked over at him as he started reversing out of the driveway. "Just wanted to let you know I'll be home late."

"Alright," he said warmly, "you two have fun now. Be safe."
"Will do." Merlyn nodded even though he couldn't see it.

The sky was in its transitioning phase as it went from bright yellows to soft oranges and pinks. Merlyn finally settled on a radio station that interested her and looked out of the window to watch the downtown area slowly come to focus. This was comfortable--being with Arthur, she thought, and for a brief second she wondered if she should be afraid of how comfortable she feels around him. Should it be this easy? The two of them interact as if they've been friends forever, and Merlyn entertained the idea that sometimes it seemed like they were...lovers.

"This motherfucker!" Arthur and Merlyn said angrily at the same time, the car jerking from the sudden brake. They both glanced at each other, blinked, and started laughing.

"He's such a dick!" She gave a thumbs down sign at the guy's rear view mirror.

"It's not like the turn signal is that hard to use," scoffed Arthur.

Merlyn patted his arm. "I agree."

"We're here." Arthur signalled to turn into a large plaza.

"Let's eat quick and head to the theater." Merlyn unbuckled herself in a rush. "We don't want to miss the trailers!" She rubbed her hands together, eyes bright and wide smile on her face.

He chuckled as they got out of his car. "Kay."

It surprised both of them, when they discovered that the other also likes pineapple on their pizza; Arthur mentioned how the guys and Morgana give him heck for it, and Merlyn told him about Will's distrust in her to order pizza. The pizza parlor was packed full, so the two of them had to eat at the counter standing up, along with many other people. Merlyn found it difficult having so many people crowd into her space because they couldn't see her; she almost kicked a guy in his shin for stepping on her foot, but Arthur subtly moved so that he was partly behind her, caging her between himself and the counter. This was a huge improvement, because everyone could see him and not step on her--plus, it's not like Merlyn hated having him so close to her.

The movie theater was just as packed as the pizza parlor, they had to park ten blocks away and walk because of how busy it was, and Merlyn internally despaired when she saw how long the
line up was to get tickets; they'll never get tickets at this rate, she thought, a small pout on her lips. Arthur guided her away from the long line up to the electronic ticket kiosks; Merlyn assumed he was going to wait in those lines instead, but when he guided her to the mobile pick-up kiosk she turned to look at him.

"I bought the tickets, on my phone, when we were eating," Arthur explained to her as he took his phone out and let the machine scan the barcode, two tickets were printed and he grabbed them. "Come on, let's go."

Merlyn is a huge fan of action movies, actually, she loves any kind of genre, but action movies just have this appeal to them that make her want to become a spy, assassin, or vigilante. As the two of them walked out of their theater room, into the nearly empty concession area, she kept bringing up certain points in the movie as they headed out of the movie theater.

"You know, I think I could be a spy," she said thoughtfully.

Arthur held the theater door open for her, a blast of cold night time air hit them. "With your lying skills?" His lips twitched when she gave him a sharp look.

"Lying isn't the only requirement I would need." Now began the ten block trek back to Arthur's car. "Brains. Stealth. Quick-thinking abilities," She started listing things off on her fingers.

Roads were practically empty at this hour of the night, and the air had this bite to it that was harsher than during the day. Arthur chuckled as she continued her detailed explanation on why she would be an excellent candidate to be a spy. The sidewalk they were on unfortunately had poorly lit streetlamps and a scarce amount of cars. Now, as a female, Merlyn had ingrained into her to always be aware of her surroundings--more so at night; which is why she noticed three men in the distance standing partially in the shadows. She was wary, but the feel of Arthur's arm brushing against hers was all the reassurance she needed to feel safe. Merlyn didn't stop talking during her own mental observations, so she was taken off guard slightly when Arthur grabbed her hand.

"Merlyn," he said in a quiet voice, "when I tell you to run, I need you to book it in the opposite direction."

She was confused. "What?"
Arthur didn't look at her, but she could see the impatience on his face. "Just do as I say."

"Why--" When did those three get so close?

He shifted in front of her and shoved her hard in the other direction as he shouted, "RUN!" Another voice shouted.

"GRAB HIM!"

Merlyn stumbled backwards as her mind started telling her feet to do what Arthur said, but the moment she saw the three men, who were wearing ski masks, grab Arthur, she stopped. The tallest one of the group (around Arthur's height) had Arthur's hands bound behind his back, about to secure them with nylon rope, while another one was trying to get a cloth gag on him (this one was a fatter looking one), the third guy (about the size of a midget) was ushering them towards a white cargo van parked nearby. She didn't have to think twice about what to do next.

"HEY!" Her nails dug into the tall guy's forearm and yanked back. "LET HIM GO!"

"WHAT'RE YOU DOING!" Arthur cried out in fury.

"GET RID OF HER!" The tall guy ordered.

The fatter guy, the one who failed at getting a gag on Arthur, managed to get a handful of Merlyn's hair and yanked her backwards. She screamed in pain while reflexively grabbing onto the guy's wrist as he pulled her in close, her back bumping into his belly.

"Stay out of our way." His breath stunk of stale smoke and alcohol.

"Let go!" She squirmed in his grip while watching as Arthur fought tooth and nail to get to her. "Arthur!" Stale smoke guy tightened his grip, then threw Merlyn hard to the ground.

"YOU BASTARD!" Arthur roared and kicked back at the third guy. He managed to catch the guy's lip, that didn't make him too happy. The tall man slammed Arthur's head down onto the hood of the car beside them and Arthur was knocked unconscious.
Her palms stung at the bases, even in the poorly lit street, she could just make out the scratches from the cement. Adrenaline started pumping through her system, she was trying to think her way out of this situation. With a million thoughts whizzing through her mind, she picked out the one possible thing that could help them in that moment.

"FIRE!" She screamed at the tops of her lungs, trying to attract attention from anyone listening. "FIRE!"

"Fuck," the tall one cursed and tossed a limp Arthur into the back of the van. He then marched over to Merlyn as she was mid-scramble, trying to get away. "You asked for this."

"FI-MMPPH!" One big hand clamped over her mouth as the other wrapped around her waist, she began kicking her legs out and screaming behind the hand.

"Shut the fuck up!" Tall guy hissed as he carried her to the van and tossed her in.

Merlyn hit the metal car bed and bounced slightly, she crawled over to Arthur and grabbed him trying to pull him out of the van. In the blink of an eye, she had an arm pressed tightly over her throat and a masked face inches from her face; her breaths became small pants as she tried to breathe against the obstruction.

"Stop causin' problems or we'll kill you and leave your body." She tried to swallow, both her fear and against the arm. The thing about Merlyn is that defiance was a natural look on her face.

It didn't take long for her to be bound exactly like Arthur, and shortly after, the back of the van doors were closed, plunging them into darkness. Merlyn had managed to at least get Arthur's upper half of his body onto her lap and leaning against her, his head was tucked between her left shoulder and neck, his legs were spread out in front of him; this made sure he was secured before he could be left to spin around as the van lurched to a start. It was a weird and slightly uncomfortable position they were in, but it brought her some reassurance, knowing Arthur wasn't alone, and that they were safer together...at least that's what she hoped.

"Please wake up..." She pleaded softly into his hair. The only light was coming in through a small window about a foot above her head.

Merlyn could just make out muffled voices from the front, where all three men were, she
shifted—to the best of her ability—upwards to get a look through the window. She realized that if she got enough purchase with her runners, she was able to look out of the windshield and see where they were going.

'Denaria Exit. Which means we're heading north out of the city.' They were now on the highway which meant a long stretch of road with no distinguishable landmarks.

"...Pendragon....ransom...."

"...about....the girl..."

"dump....body...."

A shiver of fear ran down her spine as she caught bits and pieces of the conversation, she sunk back down and brought her knees (and Arthur) closer to her chest. A few tears escaped and landed in Arthur's hair, she sniffed and pressed her cheek into the top of his head and squeezed her eyes shut. Small sobs escaped her lips as she started having morbid thoughts of what was to happen and what is currently happening. Seconds turned to minutes and minutes turned to what felt like hours, all that boiled into determination. Merlyn sniffed and blinked away the last of her tears.

"Stop crying," she ordered herself. "You can cry later, but first there needs to be a later." The van rumbled as it drove at highway speeds, she tried to look around in the back to see if there was anything that could help them. "Come on, Merlyn," she hissed.

Every turn the van took she felt, but she didn't start worrying until the van slowed down and went onto a gravelly road, which shook the whole car. She pushed up again and peered out of the small opening, the road wasn't properly lit, the only light was coming from the van's headlights. They were slowing down and pulling up a dirt pathway.


"Merlyn?" He said weakly, eyes half open as he squinted at her. They jolted when the van pulled to a stop.

His eyes widened when he heard the front doors of the van slam shut and the men getting out. Merlyn could see the events that just happened catch up in his mind, before he could say
anything, the back doors swung open and they were hit with bright beams from their flashlights.

Stale smoke guy climbed into the back, along with the tall guy, both of them reached out to grab Merlyn and Arthur. "Come on, get up!" Stale smoke guy's voice was gruff, and he once again took hold of Merlyn by the hair.

"LET HER GO!" Arthur sprung into action and tried to tackle the tall guy, but the area was too small and all that happened was Arthur took a knee to the gut.

"Arthur!" She cried out as she was dragged out of the van.

"We told you to move!" The third guy growled. It was a very compelling argument, especially, when a gun is being pointed to your head.

Merlyn almost forgot how to breathe at the sight of a gun, even Arthur stopped struggling, and it gave the tall guy enough time to get a hold of the rope around his wrists. Both of them were lead into what looked to be an abandoned warehouse, it was too dark outside to see what it looked like, and the inside was just as dark, but was lighted by the flashlight in the third guy's hand.

Scraps of wood were lying around, tall cement pillars were few and far between, Merlyn could hear and feel random pieces of metal under her runners as she was being shoved forward. They only brought them up to the second level of the warehouse, the midget-sized man pushed open a door. This floor had more lighting in the form of large lanterns hung on random hooks on the pillars and some were strategically placed on the ground. She began to survey the surrounding, first to the small windows, then to the two wooden chairs sitting in front of a small TV, and next to it a video camera and laptop placed on top of an overturned white, plastic bucket. What Merlyn saw next gave her some hope.

'Bingo...scrap metal.' She made sure no one saw her eye the piece of metal a few feet from the pillar they were walking towards. It had the shape of a blade, with a jagged edge on one side, if she could just somehow get a hold of it then she'd be able to--

"Sit down!" Both her and Arthur were thrown to the ground in front of the pillar.

"Let her go," Arthur said calmly, glaring up at the three masked men, "it's me you want." He glanced over at Merlyn. "She has nothing to do with this."
"I'm not going anywhere without you," snapped Merlyn.

"You think we're going to let this little loud mouthed bitch go?" The tall guy said, ignoring Merlyn, he walked away and headed over towards the TV.

The one with the gun, pulled off his ski mask as he spoke. His sweaty hair stuck up in odd places as he stepped towards them. "After you," he leered at her, "caused a scene back there?"

"What do you want from us?" Merlyn spat, glaring harshly up at them.

"You?" Stale smoke guy pulled his mask off. "Nothing. Him on the other hand..."

"Do whatever you want with me. But if you so much as touch her..." A dark shadow passed over Arthur's face.

Both men started laughing. "Jarl, the Pendragon brat thinks he can threaten us!"

Jarl, the tallest guy, walked back towards them, a large metal pipe now in his right hand. "You Pendragons think you're so special. Let me tell you a little story: Daddy owns his own company, makes billions of dollars, builds thousands of warehouses, hires people to work in them to continue making more money for him. But one day, Daddy decides to shut down his warehouses, find more environmentally friendly alternatives," his voice falsely high-pitched, "and put THOUSANDS OF US OUT OF JOBS! WHILE YOUR WHOLE FUCKING FAMILY GETS TO LIVE THE HIGH LIFE AND WE'RE REDUCED TO THIS!"

"That isn't Arthur's fault!" Merlyn said.

Jarl pointed the pipe at her. "Stay out of this girlie, or I'll lay a beatin' on you so hard no one will recognize that pretty little face of yours."

"This isn't your first kidnapping, so you know what happens next." Jarl snapped his fingers and stale smoke guy patted Arthur down until he pulled out Arthur's cell phone.

Jarl and Arthur had a stare down, Jarl's yellow-teethed smile against Arthur's stead fast glare.
"Make the call."

"Let her go first." Merlyn turned to glare at Arthur, opening her mouth to tell him to stop trying to send her away.

"You think this is a game?" Jarl waved the pipe dangerously at Arthur. "You think I care about what you have to say?" His voice was progressively getting louder. "Either you make this call or I'LL BREAK YOUR FUCKIN' KNEE!" He signalled the two guys to grab Arthur, the third guy grabbed Arthur's right knee, and stale smoke guy held both of Arthur's shoulders down.

The absolute fear on Arthur's face broke something inside of her, he violently struggled against the two guys, but he couldn't get free. Jarl reared the pipe back and brought it down. "NO!" Merlyn screamed and dove forward.

Her teeth sunk into Jarl's wrist, catching him off guard, causing him to release the pipe. The metal made a clattering noise that echoed off the walls, but that sound was drowned out by Jarl's cry of pain. Merlyn tried to bite through the skin, but he pulled sharply on her hair, making her release; in the next moment she felt a burning, white-hot pain on her right cheek as her body flew a few feet away, she rolled twice and came to a stop. Three things came to mind: 1. She was just backhanded by Jarl, 2. Her poor phone flew out of her pocket and bounced off another cement pillar nearby, and 3. She landed right on top of the knife-shaped piece of metal, she quickly tucked it in the space between her wrists.

"You bitch," Jarl snarled, stomping over to her, "I'm going to kill you!"

It was surreal. She could see Jarl's face upside down, and next she saw the underside of his large boot. He's going to crush my head into the ground, she blankly thought, no other noises registering in her ears or mind.

The boot came down fast.

'I...I'm...sc...plea...DAD!' She mentally screamed, scrunching up her face in an attempt to brace for the worse. A warm feeling washed over her in a flash, disappearing just as quickly.

"MERLYN!"
She slowly opened her eyes and blinked away the tears, glancing quickly at the boot planted firmly by the right side of her head.

Jarl's head turned to face Arthur's direction, his disgusting yellow teeth set in a grin. "Anything you say?"

"Anything," Arthur affirmed, a slight quiver in his voice, as he looked at Merlyn with wide eyes.

"Hailg, get the camera! Evan, prepare the broadcast!" Jarl grinned menacingly down at Merlyn. "We've got ourselves a little performance to make." He swooped down and pulled her up by the front of her sweater, tearing it slightly, as he dragged her back towards Arthur and dumped her down beside him.

"Merlyn!" Arthur breathed out in relief and angled his body towards her, just as she turned her body in towards his.

"Arthur!" She said relieved and tucked her face into his neck, a small whimper escaped her lips as she sucked in small gasps of air. Arthur pressed his body closer to hers, softly shushing her, and pulled his knees up to further cage her in, it wasn't much--yet she still felt safe in this small space he created for her.

Through all of this...she held firmly to that piece of metal.

"Smile for the camera, lovelies!" Jarl said in a sickly sweet voice, walking up to them with Evan trailing behind with a video camera.

Merlyn and Arthur glared at the video camera.

"Folks! May I present to you, Arthur Pendragon!" Jarl grabbed a handful of Arthur's hair and pulled his head back. "Say hi, boy." Arthur remained silent and glared up at Jarl. They stared evenly at each other, Jarl's other hand moved so fast and slapped Arthur across the face.
Merlyn lurched forward, but Halig’s hand pulled her back. "Arthur!" She cried out and gasped when Arthur turned his head back and the side of his lip was cut and bleeding. "You son of a bitch!" She shouted, hawking back in her throat and spitting at his feet.

Jarl glared at her, grabbing the camera from Evan. "Uther, you have six hours to answer our demands. If you don't," he turned the camera on Merlyn, "she'll go first."

"Start prayin' girlie," Halig chuckled darkly.

Arthur and Merlyn both looked at each other.

3 hours later

"You're so stupid, Merlyn," Arthur growled, tugging forcefully on the rope around his wrist.

"How, exactly, do you figure that?" Merlyn snapped, trying to be discreet with her movements. The angle was awkward, her palms hurt, it felt like she was making no progress with cutting through the nylon rope around her wrists.

"I fucking told you to run away, and you decide to run into danger!" Arthur glared down at her. "You're the most frustrating girl I've ever met! Why do you never do as your told!" He grunted as he attempted another sharp tug from both arms.

"What did you expect me to do? Leave you alone?!" Merlyn said loudly, her voice cracking on the last word.

"WILL THE TWO OF YOU SHUT UP!" Jarl called from his seat in front of the TV.

Merlyn saw Arthur blink, he opened and closed his mouth, but he was speechless; his body was rigid, and she could see a bunch of different emotions cross his face.
"I wouldn't have left, even if they had let me," Merlyn said softly, looking at him. "You laughed when I said 'it's not about ego. It's about we-go.' I stand by those words, because where you go, I go--wherever it is, we go together."

Arthur let out a shaky breath. "Why..."

She smiled at him. "You said so yourself. We're a team."

Arthur's face soften as his body finally relaxed and sagged beside her. It was then Merlyn could see how beat up Arthur looked, his lip has somewhat scabbed over (blood was no longer dripping from it), his cheek was still red from the slap, the side of his head (where he got slammed) had a bump on it. All of that was not including the dust and dirt that settled on the two of them from the warehouse. She could see the exhaustion on his face and the slight wince whenever he moved his jaw.

"I'm sorry..." said Arthur quietly.

Merlyn looked up at him. "Don't apologize," she said firmly. "This isn't your fault."

A broken laugh escaped his lips. "What're you talking about? We got kidnapped because I'm a Pendragon. You're in this mess because of me."

"It's not your fault that your last name is Pendragon, nor should that even matter," said Merlyn. "We're in this mess because of those horrible men. As for me?" She shifted slightly to press her shoulder against his arm. "Well, you know my answer." She saw a small smile on Arthur's lips.

"I didn't know you were so keen to die for, Merlyn," Arthur joked. It was morbid and inappropriate.

Merlyn laughed. "Believe me. Me either."

There was a pause between them, both of them shifted closure to each other, before Arthur looked down at her. "I'm glad you're here, Merlyn."
"No place I'd rather be."

Time passed between them as they sat on the cold, dusty floor. Merlyn was busy sawing away at the rope, slowly losing hope about whether or not she'd cut through; she leaned her head back against the pillar and turned her head toward Arthur.

"When Jarl said this wasn't the first kidnapping...?" She trailed off.

He nodded his head. "This is the third time I've been kidnapped."

"What happened those other times?" Merlyn shrugged when Arthur gave her a 'really? We're going to talk about this now?' look.

He shifted slightly and stretched one leg out in front of him, the other was bent towards him. It looked like he was debating on where exactly he wanted to start his story. Merlyn leaned against him and waited.

"I was about..." Arthur looked up at the ceiling, "ten, when I was first kidnapped. My dad's company was in the news twenty-four seven, and my mom was a big time model--Albion's sweetheart. Kind of expected." He let out a quiet breath.

Merlyn distinctly remembered Morgana telling her that the year she went to go live with Uther and Arthur, was the same year both their mothers passed away. In that moment, she was thankful for the childhood she had, it pained her to imagine what it must have been like for a ten year old Arthur to lose his mom, and be kidnapped by strange men all within the same year.

"I don't remember much of that kidnapping anymore, just bits and pieces. Dad kept it under wraps from the media, because they already got a hold on Morgana's story." He let out a tired sighed, his voice getting softer. "The next time it happened was during the summer before grade 10. Mith and I were--"

"Mith?" Merlyn interrupted.

He blinked, an 'oh right' look on his face. Arthur spared her a glance, just as quickly he looked away, a faint pink on his cheeks. "My girlfriend at the time."
"Oh, okay." She nodded, waiting for him to continue.

"Right," said Arthur awkwardly, shifting his legs, "we were at the theater, for one of her performances, it ended really late." His eyes glazed over as he looked lost in thought. "But I guess those guys knew...They grabbed the both of us as we came out the back way of the building to my car. There were more of them at that time, maybe five or six?" Arthur shook his head. "I can't remember now, but they kept it under wraps. These guys," he tipped his chin towards Jarl and Evan, who were sitting in front of the TV, Halig had gone outside for a smoke, "are making a scene out of it."

"Probably trying to milk more money out of your dad," said Merlyn, a deep scowl on her face.

A humourless laugh left his lips. "Yeah."

Merlyn suddenly wanted to ask so many questions, who was this 'Mith' girl? What happened afterwards? Why hasn't she met this girl yet? How could Arthur think that any of this was his fault? But all those thoughts came to a halt when she felt the pressure of the rope around her wrists...give away. She gasped and shot upright while angling her body to look at Arthur.

"What--" His expression morphed into shock when Merlyn brought her hands in front of her-free and unbound. "How did you?" Arthur lowered his voice and scooted closer to her, trying to block her with his body.

She felt around behind her and picked up the piece of metal, bringing it in front of her. "With this."

"When did you grab that?" Arthur asked, turning his back to her when she gestured for him to do so, he felt her tug and pull at the rope.

Her voice was barely above a whisper, the fear of getting caught very apparent, "when I got slapped earlier." Arthur's ropes began to loosen. "I had seen it earlier when we were brought in, but I didn't know how to get to it. I thought if we had a diversion it might work, but I didn't know how we would have been able to, until..." She trailed off, both of them knowing what she did in order to get to it.
"Stupid," muttered Arthur as he rubbed his wrists with his hands.

"Ass," she shot back. He shook out his arms when they were freed.

"Thanks, shorty." He reached over and tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. "Now, when I give you my signal, I need you to run for the exit." His face and tone showed how serious he was.

Merlyn shook her head. "No."

"Merlyn," Arthur said exasperated, "listen--"

"We're getting out of here together." She looked over at the two. "I have a plan. Follow my lead." She sat back against the pillar and put her hands behind her back, Arthur had no choice but to comply.

"I have to pee!" Merlyn said loudly.

Jarl snorted and looked over at her, then back to the TV.

"I. Have. To. Pee," she repeated even louder.

"This girl..." Jarl growled, roughly standing up from the chair and marching towards her. "I'm gunna rip your--"

Arthur leapt to his feet and threw a hard punch at Jarl's head, the tall, weasel-like man stumbled backwards in surprise. The two of them ran for the door; Jarl snapped out of it and grabbed the back of Arthur's shirt and yanked him backwards, Merlyn stopped and was turning back, but she caught sight of Evan charging towards her. She looked at the ground and saw the metal pipe from earlier, making a mad grab for it and swinging it around with all her strength; the pipe connected cleanly with Evan's forehead, knocking him out instantly, the pipe clattering a few feet away.

"Ha!" She cried out victoriously, but her victory was short lived when Arthur and Jarl's shouting caught her attention. "Arthur," she gasped and ran to grab one of the wooden chairs.
"Fuckin' piece of shit!" Jarl looked like he was foaming at the mouth, he jabbed his fist up into Arthur's gut.

Merlyn ran up behind Jarl and reared the wooden chair high above her head, squeezing her eyes shut she brought the chair down hard and fast. The chair broke into a few pieces when it slammed into Jarl, everything in the room paused--is he--Jarl swayed for a moment, then collapsed to the floor. Arthur looked over at Merlyn, both panting and shocked they were able to get this far.

"Told you we're getting out of this together," she panted.

Arthur opened his mouth to say something, but thundering footsteps echoed up to them. Merlyn widened her eyes and ran over to the door, she made eye contact with Halig as he was charging up the stairs; she threw the door closed as fast as she could and reached over to pull the wooden lever down to lock it.

"AH!" She yelped when Halig body checked the door, luckily for her she managed to get the lock in place.

"Merlyn." Arthur pulled her away from the door in a rush. "There's another way out." He lead her over to the windows without her realizing his intent.

It wasn't until he dislodged the old frame from the tract, and slid the window upwards, did she figure out what he was planning to do. Arthur reached over for her and pulled her to his side. The dizziness hit her first, followed by the feeling of her heart bottoming out into her stomach, the sight of being on the second floor of a large warehouse looking down made Merlyn want to throw up.

"You go," Merlyn said hurriedly, pushing him towards the window. "Leave me."

Arthur gave her an incredulous look. "What?"

"They don't want me. They want you, just go and send hel--" She reasoned.

"Don't be stupid now, Merlyn, let's go!" He grabbed her arm and pulled her back towards
"I-I can't!" Merlyn tugged her arm back from Arthur, taking a step back from the window, shaking her head.

"Merlyn, this isn't funny!" Arthur snapped, glancing at the door Halig was trying to currently kick down.

"I'm afraid of heights!" Her voice cracked and she blinked up at Arthur. "I can't climb down. Just go--" Arthur cupped her face and pulled it in close to his.

"I'm not leaving you." He gave her a determined look. "Trust me, Merlyn. You can climb down."

"Arthur," she whispered, "I..."

He looked out the window, then down at her. "Look, I'll go down first. But you have to promise me, you'll be following behind." Arthur pressed his forehead against hers. "I'll be there to catch you if anything happens."

That safe feeling was back, Merlyn closed her eyes and then looked up into Arthur's eyes, those beautiful blue eyes. "Okay..." came her soft reply.

Arthur climbed out of the window, balancing his body on the window sill, he reached over towards a large gas pipe that ran along the outside of the building; once he managed to get a good grip on it he started climbing down the metal rungs used to anchor the pipe to the building. Merlyn felt her hands get sweaty, and her heart beating loudly in her ears, she looked behind her and saw Jarl laying flat on his face, but something else caught her attention--Their phones! She turned away from the window and rushed over to him.

"Merlyn!" Arthur shouted, having seen her disappear. He made it to the ground, but was prepared to climbed back up for her if he had to.

She pocketed their phones and ran back over to the window, with one last look over her shoulder towards the door she was able to see part of it break from the hinges. Halig was screaming and cursing on the other side. Merlyn carefully pushed half her body out of the window while facing
the pipe, don't look down, she thought, gulping down her fears. Her arm was too short to reach the metal rung Arthur had managed to grab.

Her teeth gritted together. "Come on!"

BOOM

Merlyn looked back into the warehouse. Halig broke the door down and he was coming straight for her.

"Get back here," He snarled and grabbed her leg.

"NO!" She screamed and held on to the outer part of the window beam.

"MERLYN!" Arthur cried out in fear. He didn't know what to do, if he ran back in, she might plummet to her death, but if he didn't do something she'd be taken.

"JUMP!" He made a split second decision. "I'LL CATCH YOU!"

Her fingernails dug into the wood as she resisted being pulled back in, Halig managed to pull the lower half of her body back in from the window by one of Merlyn's legs alone. She started kicking out at him with as much force as she could with her free leg; one of her rogue kicks managed to bring him to his knees. Halig groaned in pain and pulled even harder on the leg he had hold of, and trying to capture the other one.

"TRUST ME!"

"LET. ME. GO!" Merlyn roared and aimed her next kick right at his face. The sound of bone breaking under her heel disgusted her, Halig's face went blank as he passed out, but the next sound she heard made her blood run cold.

CRACK
The block of wood she was holding on to broke off from the window entirely, one moment she was on the window sill--the next moment she began *plummeting* to her death.

"ARTHUR!" She yelled at the top of her lungs.

'This is it. This is how I die.' Merlyn closed her eyes in anticipation of the inevitable.

Arthur grunted on impact when Merlyn landed in his arms, he stumbled backwards slightly, the momentum nearly taking him off guard; he looked down at her small frame in his arms and pulled her in tighter.

"Merlyn!" He said. "You're safe! Merlyn?" Merlyn shifted in his arms.

"A-Arthur?" Tears clumped her lashes together as she blinked open her eyes. It took her a few seconds to get her surroundings in check, but when she did, she threw her arms around his neck and buried her face into his throat. "Arthur!" Her voice filled with relief. "Thank you. Thank you!" She whispered.

"I'm here," he said softly, "I'm here."

The two of them stood there, Arthur hugging Merlyn's small, trembling frame to himself, whispering reassurances to her. It was well into the early hours of the morning, the air was freezing and their breaths came out in puffs each time they exhaled.

"We have to go," Merlyn said softly, her lips brushing against his throat as she spoke.

Arthur nodded. "Yeah."

He lowered her to the ground and made sure she could stand on her own, he watched her swipe at her eyes and recollect herself; when she did, she looked up at him and smiled while holding out her hand towards him. "Let's go."
With their hands intertwined they started moving back around to the front of the warehouse. The van was still sitting there on the dirt pathway, they ran up to it and were ecstatic to see that it was unlocked, but their spirits dropped when they realized no keys.

"Did Elyan ever show you how to hot wire a car?" Arthur asked, rummaging around for a spare set of keys.

Merlyn shook her head. "Never came up actually--oh!" She reached into her pocket and pulled out Arthur's phone. "Let's just call the cops!"

"This is what you went back for?" He snapped, this girl is the dumbest smart person he's ever met!

"Don't start getting your underwear in a bunch!" She glared at him. "Mine's dead and the screen's cracked!" She pulled the phone out to prove her point. "What other choice do we have? Obviously neither of us plays enough Grand Theft Auto 4."

Arthur growled under his breath, taking his phone from her and dialled 911.

"911 Where is your emergency?"

"This is Arthur Pendragon." He cut straight to the point. "We're in Fyrien, at the closed down sheet metal factory."

Arthur answered all the questions the operator asked, but started fighting her when she said to wait there for help to arrive, 'we're not going to stay here! What're we going to do if they wake up? THEY'VE GOT A GUN!' His angry breathing slowed when Merlyn came up and tucked herself into his side, their hands still clasped together.

"Tell them we'll follow the main road," she said softly.

"We'll follow the main road," repeated Arthur. The operator tried to disagree, but to his dismay or fortune his cell phone died. "Shit. Battery died."
Merlyn pulled him forward, a soft smile on her face. "Time to start walking."

It was cold and dark, and it was because of that that Arthur felt his paranoia and insecurities creep up on him. Tonight wasn't supposed to end like this, he just wanted to go see a movie and hang out with Merlyn--not get her caught up in this mess. Flashbacks of their conversation earlier, before Merlyn cut free of the rope, came rushing back; it has been two years since he and Mithian were kidnapped. He still thinks about it from time to time, would she have stayed if it didn't happen? Did she leave him because of who he is? Was it so hard to stay? Is he going to lose Merlyn because of tonight, too? He could feel her small hand clasped tightly with his, and he wondered if this was it.

Her gasp caught his attention, she tapped his arm with her other hand. "Arthur!" She looked up at him and then up ahead. "We're saved!"

Safe. That's what he feels when he's with her. Free from his thoughts. Free from everyone's judgements. Just...free. He saw the relief on her face, along with her flushed cheeks, and nodded. "Yeah."

Everything after that was a blur. Flashing police lights. Sirens. Flashlights and too many voices talking. The two of them were ushered into one of the police cruisers, a blanket was tossed over them, and this cruiser turned around to take them back to the city, while the other two continued onwards to the warehouse. He ached all over, his head was throbbing and it gave him a headache, the cut on his lip no longer bleed, just smarted whenever he moved his mouth too much. Another chill ran up his spine when he looked at his knee, and remembered vividly what would have happened had Merlyn not bravely--yet stupidly--jumped in to save him. He would be forever grateful to her, with that thought he down at her again, her head still leaning against his arm, breathing softly, but still wide awake.

"Are you two kids okay?" The male officer at the front asked.

Merlyn looked up at Arthur, then turning to look at the front. "We're fine."

They pulled up to the police station in record time, but Arthur's unease came back at the sight of all the reporters gathered around the doors; the officer told them to keep their heads down and head straight for the entrance. Merlyn tightened her hold on Arthur's hand, having not let go since they interlocked their fingers, and followed him out of the car.

"Arthur! Arthur! What do you have to say about the kidnapping?!"
"Miss! Are you his girlfriend? If so, how do you feel about being a potential target? Dating a Pendragon?"

He felt Merlyn freeze at that reporter's question, but before she could turn around, Arthur pulled her forward into the police station, the doors thrown shut behind them. More unknown people came up to them and started asking questions, others asked for their information--mostly directed at Merlyn, he nearly snarled at one of the officers who tried to separate them; if the glare Merlyn gave the guy as well was anything to go by, she felt the same. They were brought into a spacious questioning room and sat behind the lone desk there.

A man with platinum blond hair came into the room, moments later, with a white folder. "Good evening children. I am Detective Aredian, I have a few questions for you both."

Aredian took a seat across from them and laid the folder open. "Ms. Emrys."

"Just Merlyn is fine..." Merlyn said quietly.

"Ms. Emrys," Aredian ignored her, Arthur clenched his jaw in annoyance and saw Merlyn's scowl, "I would like to speak with you first." She nodded and waited for Aredian to say something.

"What is your relation to Mr. Pendragon?" He gave her this calculating look that didn't sit well with Arthur.

Arthur sat up straighter. "We're friends."

Aredian held his hand up, eyes never leaving Merlyn. "I am speaking with Ms. Emrys first."

"We're friends," repeated Merlyn in annoyance.

"And how did you two become friends?"

She rolled her eyes. "I don't know, casual conversation? A misplaced fist? Similar things in common? My sparkling personality?" Arthur snorted in amusement, Merlyn spared him a glance and he saw a smile tugging at her lips.
Aredian cleared his throat. "I have in my file here stating that you go to the same school as Mr. Pendragon."

"Yeah, we both go to Camelot High? What has that got to do with anything?" Arthur spoke again, but Aredian didn't spare him a look.

He flipped over the first sheet of paper and started looking at the one underneath. "A man claiming to be your Uncle came into the station earlier, when the two of you appeared on the news."

"Uncle Gaius?" She said, leaning forward.

"Yes, he said his name is Gaius. Now, my question is, why are you living with your Uncle? It says here your mother is from Ealdor." Aredian pointed down at the file.

"I'm staying with him for school," explained Merlyn as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Aredian nodded patronizingly. "Yes, that is in my file as well."

"Then why the hell did you ask?" Arthur wondered bitterly.

"Are we not going to be talking about how we were kidnapped? Did you guys get them? There were three guys in total. A tall one that looked like a weasel named Jarl, a midget sized one named Evan, and a portly looking one that smells like stale cigarettes and alcohol named Halig. They grabbed us--" Merlyn spoke at such speed that Arthur nearly had a hard time keeping up.

"I am well aware of what happened earlier this evening," stated Aredian.

"Then why are you asking me stupid questions about me? When we were kidnapped?" Merlyn said, irritation clear in her voice.

"Why did they take you as well?" Arthur sat up straighter, he didn't like the way Aredian was
speak to Merlyn.

Merlyn blew out a frustrated breath. "I saw what was going on and tried to attract attention to what was happening at the time. They weren't happy, so they took me too."

Aredian leaned forward and placed his elbows on the desk, resting his chin on his hands. "So what you're saying is that you had the chance to escape, but yet you didn't?"

He saw Merlyn narrow her eyes dangerously at Aredian, he felt her flex her fingers, when she spoke next, it was with barely controlled rage. "If you're implying, what I think you're implying, then yes, I chose to stay."

Aredian raised his eyebrow. "All for Mr. Pendragon?"

She exploded in a show of fireworks and shooting stars. "WHAT DID YOU EXPECT ME TO DO? LEAVE HIM ALONE?"

"Ms. Emrys, calm down," Aredian said sternly.

"Don't tell her to calm down, you asshole!" Arthur snapped, jumping to her defence.

"Yeah!" Merlyn nodded in agreement. "You come in here with your beak-shaped nose, asking rude questions, treating us like the criminals, and basically insulting Arthur because of his family name! News flash? It doesn't matter what his last name is, you shouldn't be such a rude dickhead about it!"

Both the detective's hands slapped the table as he stood up. "Enough! You are such insolent--"

"That is quite enough, Aredian!" A beautiful blonde woman stepped into the room, dressed in a black pant suit with sharp edges. Arthur didn't look too closely because following behind her was Morgana and...his father.

"Arthur! Merlyn!" Morgana sighed in relief and rushed over to them. "I'm so glad you two
are okay!" Her voice hitched as she wrapped her arms around them.

"Son?" Arthur looked over at his dad, the business-like composure he always carried with him kept Arthur's emotions in check, and nodded his head, telling him that he's okay.

"Aredian, you are dismissed." The woman pointed at the door with an unimpressed look.

"Morgause," Aredian was at a loss for words, under her withering stare. "Yes, captain."

The five of them watched as Aredian made a hasty exit. Arthur wrapped his free arm around Morgana's trembling form and patted her on the back, Merlyn, on the other hand, somehow managed to wrap herself around Morgana and whisper to her that they're okay. Morgause stood patiently off to the side, waiting for them to finish.

"Are you going to question us as well?" Merlyn said skeptically.

Morgause chuckled and shook her head. "No, I'm just here to give everyone an update on the situation, we--"

The door to the room flew open, crashing into the wall with a loud bang. Will stormed into the room, looking disheveled and out of sorts, he scanned the room and when he caught sight of Merlyn he let out a shaky breath.

"Merlyn." He headed straight for her.

"Will," she said in a small voice.

Arthur didn't want to let go of her hand, but he had to when Will was close enough, grabbed Merlyn's other hand, and pulled her into his arms. It was petty to even think about not letting go of her hand. It was petty to not want Will to show up (Gaius came into the room shortly after). But, Arthur could see the tears in Will's eyes, as he hugged Merlyn, it made him realize that it really wasn't his place to question their relationship. Really, he had no right to her at all.
"I was so scared," Will said, burying his face into her hair. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Will." She stroked his back. "I'm here."

"Christ, Merls..." He pulled back and held onto her shoulders. "I've literally died a thousand deaths."

"Figuratively," corrected Merlyn, in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Will's expression didn't crack. "This isn't something to joke about. You were *kidnapped*, do you know how terrified I was when I was at the airport, about to board my plane, when your face appeared on the news? Reports were saying you were a hostage and that they planned on killing you? Then your mom called, in hysterics, asking me questions I didn't have any answers to." He ran his hand down his face. "I don't know what you could even possibly be thinking!"

"Hey, it's not her fault--" Will shot Arthur a look and held his hand up quickly to interrupt him.

"Look, kid, please," He shook his head, "not now, I don't have the mental capacity to deal with two oblivious teenagers."

Merlyn didn't know what to say to make the situation better, all she wanted was to go home and crawl into her bed and sleep.

"William, let's not overwhelm Merlyn now," Uncle Gaius said as he placed his hand on Will's shoulder.

Will must have noticed the look on Merlyn's face and knew what she was thinking, his face softened as he nodded and leaned forward to place a kiss on her head. "Right, sorry, Merls."

"It's okay." She stepped forward and hugged him again.

"Alright, now that both sets of guardians are here, I'll make my debrief quick." Morgause stepped up to them. "The three men who abducted Arthur and Merlyn tonight have been taken into
custody, for all intents and purposes, they will no longer be a threat to the two of you." She turned and looked Arthur and Merlyn in the eye. "Although, I do advise on remaining indoors for 24-hours, in case these three were not acting alone. You are more than welcomed to stay here, or return to your homes. Once you all are ready you may leave, I have cleared the reporters from the front."

"I take it those men will be properly charged?" Uther spoke, and again Merlyn was able to witness the powerful aura he carried with him.

Morgause nodded. "Everything will be handled. Now I will give you all some privacy." With that she strolled out of the room, leaving them alone in the silence.

"How have you been, Uther?" Uncle Gaius spoke first, easing the tension from the room.

Uther managed a genuine smile and held his hand out. "Gaius, old friend, I've been good. How are things with you?"

"Things have been well." Uncle Gaius nodded, returning the handshake. "With the exception of tonight that is."

It took Merlyn off guard when Uther turned to face her, his face still stoic, but through his eyes, Merlyn could see, showed concerned, the same concern she saw when he first stepped into the room and looked at Arthur. "Ms. Emrys, I apologize for what has happened tonight."

"It's fine..." She said, a blush on her face.

"And if I may. I hope that you will be discreet about this incident with the reporters." Uther added, not exactly tactful, but Merlyn understood where he was coming from.

"DAD!" Morgana and Arthur said in outrage.

Merlyn managed to hold Will back with the pretense of leaning her back against his front; she nodded her head. "I understand."

"Mr. Turner, it is a surprise seeing you here." Uther diverted the topic away, and Merlyn
worried about how Will is going to react.

"Yes. I can see how it would be," Will spoke with perfect control, but his grip on her shoulder tightened. "Seeing as how it has been a long night, we'll be leaving first."

He gave Uther, Morgana, and Arthur a polite smile, then ushered her and Uncle Gaius to the door. Merlyn only had a quick second to look over her shoulder towards Arthur and Morgana.

"See you guys at school." Merlyn saw the guilt on Arthur's face, but before she could reassure him that he shouldn't feel guilty she was out the door.

Merlyn couldn't sleep.

Correction. Merlyn didn't want to go back sleep.

She could hear Cerberus's soft breathing as he slept beside her on the bed, in the guest room of Will's apartment. He was adamant that she stay over at his house for the 24-hour house arrest (that's what it sounded like when Merlyn listened to Morgause's explanation). Uncle Gaius, who looked like he aged several years in the span of one night, was sent back home by Will to get some proper rest, telling him that he will take care of Merlyn for the night. She complied, and was now staring up at the ceiling, watching the morning light come in through the window.

"No charge..." Merlyn quietly groaned and laid back down, leaving her phone on the nightstand. It was one of the things she remembered to do, once she got a hold of a charging cable, to try and get it to turn on so she could call Arthur, but no dice.

A soft knock on her door got her attention. "Are you awake, Merls?"

"Yeah," she said, Cerberus stretched out on the bed, slowly waking up. "I'm up."

"I'll make us some breakfast, come to the kitchen whenever you're ready." She listened to his footsteps walk away, and waited a few more minutes before getting up.
Merlyn took her time brushing her teeth, washing her face, and brushing her hair; she applied more Polysporin to the bottom part of her palms and flicked the bathroom light off. The familiar smell of chocolate waffles pulled her to the kitchen, Will was pouring more batter into the waffle maker and listening to the news from the living room, it didn't come as a surprise when the reports were all about Arthur and Merlyn. Even though it's a Monday, and he should be at work, he took the day off to stay home and keep her company; for all the bravado and gruff nature Will has, he will always be a worrier at heart. She padded up to one of the bar stools and hopped up, grabbing one of the waffles from the stack in the process.

"Get any sleep?" Will said, rotating the waffle maker. He knows about her vivid dreams, and knew she would have nightmares.

"Sort of...maybe an hour?" Merlyn ripped pieces of the waffle off and ate them.

Will nodded, remaining silent. She could hear the thoughts he was having, and even though it was because he worries for her, it wasn't fair to Arthur.

"It wasn't his--"

"I know." He sighed and took the fresh waffle out. "Just let me have my petty thoughts for a bit."

"He tried to get them to let me go," she said, reaching for another waffle.

"And knowing you, you chose to stay." Will started cleaning up his mess.

She worried her bottom lip. "I couldn't leave him alone, Will."

"Yes. You could have." His shoulders were tense, his voice slightly trembling. "It crossed my mind last night that I would have to attend another funeral."

Merlyn gasped, hopping off the bar stool and running over to hug Will. "I'm sorry!" Tears fell from her eyes. "I'm sorry!"
Will scrubbed at his eyes and sucked in a shaky breath. "Don't apologize for who you are, Merls. How many times do I have to tell you that?"

They went silent. Merlyn pressed her face into Will's back and knew he would understand what she was trying to convey to him, 'I know it was dangerous' 'I'm sorry for scaring everyone' 'Please forgive me.'

He took a deep breath in. "So, how hard did Hunith lay into you?"

She was forgiven. Merlyn let out a depressed sound. "I'm glad she's still in Ealdor, and can't really ground me from there." That phone call last night lasted forever.

Will chuckled. "Can't just be like other teenagers your age, illegally drinking and going to house parties. Just had to go make the news."

"What can I say?" Merlyn walked back over to the bar stool. "I'm an over achiever."

The tense atmosphere from earlier disappeared, and she felt that now was a good time to tell Will about what happened. He listened intently and didn't offer up any comments, just stood there eating while Merlyn recounted the events.

"You know," she began, "when I was faced with the underside of that man's boot, I was really scared. But as he was bringing his foot down, I...I called out for dad, actually, and well..."

"So you think--" Will passed her a glass of milk.

She started to scramble for words. "Look, I know it's not the most likely, and I'm not sure what I exactly think, but it's just a nice thought--that dad was there looking out for me...that's all."

"If that's what you think, then think it, Merls." He flicked her gently on the forehead.

Merlyn smiled, about to continue with her story, but remembered her task from last night and
this morning. "Will, can I borrow your cell phone?"

He raised his eyebrow. "Why?"

"I want to call Arthur and tell him I'm okay." She held her hand out expectantly.

Will regarded her for a moment, then pushed away from the counter. "No."

"What?" Her face dropped, then her eyebrows furrowed together. "Why?"

"You'll see the kid tomorrow. Just spend today relaxing, and enjoy your day off from school." Will walked into the living room and turned on his Xbox.

"But--" Merlyn pressed her lips together when Will looked over at her.

"He'll be fine. He saw that you were okay last night. Both of you need some time alone. Here." Will passed her a controller and started loading the game.

Merlyn pulled her knees up to her chin. "I guess," she grumbled.

_I'm going to kill you!_

A startled gasp escaped her mouth as Merlyn shot up right in the bed. Her eyes moved around her room rapidly as she clung to her sheets. Just a dream. Just a dream, she thought. She looked over at her alarm clock and saw that she's only been asleep for about 30 minutes, but the cold sweat on her body told her that she wouldn't be going back to sleep any time soon. Will dropped her off at home sometime in the evening, and they had dinner with Uncle Gaius, who was glad she was back, and she reassured him that he is a great guardian, and the kidnapping was out of their control. She wished her phone wasn't broken so that she'd have something to do, but sadly it was; Will contacted a connection he has and said they could give him a deal on a new phone--Merlyn objected to Will buying her a new phone--but he ignored her and went ahead with it. The phone wouldn't arrive till Wednesday, so here she was, early Tuesday morning, laying in bed.
"I miss you, dad." She spoke to her ceiling and scrubbed her face.

Merlyn decided to get up and read at her desk, flicking on the desk lamp, she opened up her dad's old sketchbook and started to flip through from the beginning, and eventually, working her way to where she last left off. She was maybe only halfway through the book, but that was because each time she went a few more pages forward, she'd be too scared to continue--the fear of finishing the book too strong.

"Hey I remember you," she said with a smile, "Bandit." She stroked the picture gently, to prevent smudging the graphite.

Dragons were always her dad's favorite thing to draw when she was growing up, he had names for everyone of them, and gave them background stories. In fact, there were pictures of her old nursery where her walls were covered with paintings of dragon's on them (apparently dad spent the nine months productively). Merlyn found it difficult to get the right details when she tries to draw them, it had something to do with the shading and what not. But maybe, she thought while grabbing her pencil out of her backpack and pulling out her own sketchbook, she could try one more time.

She flipped to a clean page and started drawing the basic shape she was aiming for, with each stroke a more defined picture came to mind. Merlyn could feel it deep inside of her, that this was going to be it, she shaded in the wings and used her finger to smudge it slightly. Time passed, without her knowing, but she didn't feel tired at all as she continued drawing; Merlyn put the finishing touches on the front legs and put her pencil down.

"I did it..." she said astonished. But she wasn't done just yet, she needed to name it to really be done. She stared down at the little, white, baby dragon standing up on its hind legs and smiled.

"Aithusa." A piece inside of her clicked into place.

"Ugh..." Merlyn trudged her way downstairs to the kitchen, dressed and prepared for school. "Mornin', Uncle Gaius."

"My word! Merlyn! You should still be in bed!" Uncle Gaius said, putting the coffee pot back.

She yawned. "I couldn't sleep last night."
"More nightmares?" He asked worriedly.

"Kind of, but I just didn't really feel all that sleepy at the time," she said.

Uncle Gaius gestured around the kitchen. "You could stay home today as well, if you--"

"No. No." She shook her head. "I want to go to school."

"Alright, let me get ready and we can head out." He slipped out of the kitchen and went upstairs to his room.

Her eyelids drooped as she sat on the bed in Uncle Gaius's office, her head started bobbing up and down. If the guys had practice this morning then she would have gone and watched them to keep her awake, but since there wasn't she was forced to sit and wait for school to begin.

"Uhm...Uncle Gaius?" She called out from the bed.

"Yes?" He said, standing in front of a glass cabinet filled with vials of different medications.

"Could I actually..." she trailed off sheepishly, "skip school today? And stay here and sleep?"

Uncle Gaius chuckled, walking over to her and patted her on the head. "Of course."

No sooner than that, Merlyn laid down on the bed and passed out, the last thing she heard was Uncle Gaius pulling the curtain around the bed.

"Dude, you sure you should be at school today?" Lance shifted in his seat to look over at Arthur.
"You look like hell," Gwaine said, not unkindly.

Arthur glanced down at the empty seat beside him, then at the entrance to homeroom. "I'm fine, just drop it."

"He's lying. He hasn't slept at all." Morgana matched Arthur's glare, both Pendragon siblings not backing down.

"It must have been such a traumatic thing for you guys." Gwen covered her mouth with her fingers.

Leon tapped on his chin. "The last time this happened, you and Mithian--ow!" He jolted in his seat when Morgana stepped on his foot.

Arthur's hands grew sweaty, his knee bouncing up and down, staring at the empty seat with more urgency. Where was she? He wondered, it wasn't like her to not show up by now. He tried calling her that night when he got home, but the call went straight to her voicemail (her phone was dead, he remembered that), the next day he tried calling her, it still went to voice mail. This was starting to feel exactly like two years ago and he suddenly felt like the room was growing too small.

BRRRINNG

George stood up and began taking attendance at the sound of the bell, he called out the names of students and they responded. Arthur continued to look at the door, waiting and hoping Merlyn would come through any second.

"Merlyn--ah, right, she's going to be absent." George marked off her name, lifting his head up to continue with roll-call.

"Why is she absent?" Arthur blurted out.

George looked over at Arthur. "That is not something I can discuss with another student, Arthur."
Morgana leveled him with her stare. "We're her friends, you can tell us."

George, a very brave man, chose propriety over Morgana's fury and shook his head. "I am afraid not, Morgana."

"I think I saw her in Dr. Gaius's office earlier this morning?" One of the girls in the class whispered, but Arthur caught it.

"I'm going to see Gaius!" Arthur stood up, grabbed his duffle bag and headed for the door.

Not bothering to wait to hear George's reply he booked it out of homeroom and headed straight for Gaius's office. There were some students in the hallway as he ran past, but he ignored their looks and skidded around the corner and leapt down the stairs.

"Gaius!" He cried out, planting both hands on either side of the door, blocking Gaius's exit. "Is she okay?"

Gaius had jerked back in surprise when Arthur burst into his office, but caught on to what was happening. He opened his mouth to respond, but Arthur was still speaking.

"I tried to call her, but I didn't a response, and I know you're not happy that I was the reason why she was put in danger, same with Will. I'm sorry I--"

"My boy, please at least take a breath," Gaius said calmly.

He sucked in a deep breath and let it out. "Is she okay?"

"Yes." He nodded. "In fact, I was just going to say she's sleeping in the bed over there behind the curtain. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to meet with Principal Annis."

Arthur nodded vigorously, and let Gaius out around him, before making his way over to the curtain in a haste. He grabbed the curtain and flung it back quite harshly.
"Merlyn!" He gasped.

She was laying on her stomach, blanket pulled up to her waist, and hugging a pillow as she slept; Merlyn opened one eye to look at him. "Mm?" She grunted. "Can I help you?"

"You're sleeping," he stated stupidly, words escaping him.

"Great observation skills, prat. Glad to see my tutoring skills are being put to good use," Merlyn said.

"You're not leaving?" Arthur asked. He was very acutely aware that she would have no idea what he actually meant by that question.

"No?" She answered confused. "Why would I leave? You should be the one to leave. I was sleeping here first. Now go away so I can get back to it." She rolled over to the other side and put her back to him. A laugh of disbelief escaped him as he ran his hand through his hair.

She's here.

Merlyn felt the bed dip behind her and a warm mass settle in, she rolled back around, lifting onto her forearms, to look at Arthur with her eyebrow raised; he settled himself comfortably on the bed, both arms tucked under his head.

"Uh...excuse me?" She said. "What are you doing?"

He smirked. "Sleeping. What poor observational skills you have there, you little gremlin."

"I know what you're doing," she said in exasperation. "I meant why in this bed when there's other ones over there."

Arthur shrugged. "Too lazy to move."
"Ass," she grumbled, flopping back on her stomach.

"I tried calling you yesterday..." he said casually.

"Ah. I wanted to call you too." Merlyn actually forgot why she even wanted to come to school today. "My phone's broken. Won't get a new one till tomorrow."

"I see." He nodded.

She buried her face back into the pillow, looking up at him. "You're really not moving?"

"I mean, you could move," Arthur said in an off-handed way, his grin giving away his amusement.

"Right. No," she scoffed and turned her head away, going back to sleep.

And so what if she was smiling at the reassuring feeling of having Arthur beside her? They just made it through something like that together, she's allowed to smile about that.

The rest of the week was a living nightmare. Reporters swarmed the school trying to get Arthur or Merlyn to answer their questions, and if it wasn't them it was their classmates—she wanted to rip out her hair. Merlyn's only saving grace was that she now had the inspiration she needed for her Robotics project; she decided that Aithusa was going to be her thing that changes the world. Well, more precisely, a child's world, her plan was to create the first Robotic Healthcare Companion. The idea manifested itself when she showed Mordred (during a brief visit) the picture of Aithusa and he lit up with glee.

"...and I was thinking of putting in a chamber in her under belly, here." She pointed to the spot in her picture. "To hold a spare canister of medication. It'll have other features too, being able to read sign language, speak different languages, even. I want her to be able to listen to children and offer them comfort. Aithusa will be able to help so many kids!"

Khilgharra looked over her very rough draft, he met her eyes, then slowly nodded his head.
"I must say Merlyn, when inspiration hits you...it really does hit you."

"Can I take that as a 'yes your idea is plausible'?" She held her breath.

"More than plausible," he began, his dragon-smile making its appearance, "it'll be revolutionary. The first of its kind."

"Thanks, Khilgharra!" She beamed, pride rushed through her like a river.

Merlyn walked back over to her drawing desk to pack up her things, the class was dismissed earlier and she waited around so she could show her idea to Khilgharra in private, and also, to wait for Arthur to finish practice. Speaking of which, she looked up in time to see Arthur walk into the lab, hair fluffy from his quick shower after practice.

"Hey, short stack," He said, walking up beside her.

"Prat, take a look at this." She pointed excitedly at her design.

He leaned against the desk, coming in close to her to see what she was pointing at. "Cool, it's a dragon."

"Her name's Aithusa," Merlyn said proudly, "she's my final project."

"Aithusa?" His lip quirked as he looked at her.

She smiled. "Pretty name, right?"

He nodded, giving her a quick wink. "For sure. Great naming skills you have."

"Pft," she gave him a light scoff and pushed him with her shoulder, "I know. I mean, it's the pinnacle of my naming skills."
"And here I thought clot pole was," Arthur said sarcastically while handing her pencil case over to her.

Merlyn shrugged. "Eh," she made an iffy motion with her hand, "dollop head was better."

"Ha!" Arthur laughed and pinched her nose. "Come on, let's go."

"Bye, Khilgharra!" They both said as they headed out of the Robotics Lab. They walked to the front, but Merlyn stopped before they exited the doors.

"Do you think the reporters are still there?" She said in apprehension. "I'm serious when I told you I would throw my shoe at the next one who tries to ask me another stupid question."

Arthur chuckled and shook his head. "I think Principal Annis scared them all away."

"I don't understand how they can be so persistent when they know I'm just going to say 'no comment' each time." Merlyn walked down the front steps.

"Your sparkling personality?" Arthur said. Merlyn whipped her head back to mock-glare at him, trying to hold back a laugh.

"Freaky beak man deserved my sarcasm." Arthur hit the unlock button, and Merlyn climbed into the car.

"Guess we can agree on some things," Arthur said, once he was back in the car, giving her quick grin before driving over to her house.

Merlyn, in the midst of channel surfing, returned his grin. "I guess we can." She shivered while jumping to another station. "I hate how winter is practically here."

Arthur glanced up at the sky through the windshield. "The radio said it's suppose to snow tonight."
"Ugh..." Merlyn pulled a face and looked out the windshield to glare up at the sky.

The two of them worked quietly in Merlyn's room, Arthur studying for the next unit test in math, and Merlyn on her blueprint design for Aithusa. She realized that Arthur was the first person she showed her designed to (Khilgharra didn't count) and a part of her was glad for that, she wanted him to be a part of this project somehow—even if it was just him knowing about it.

He cleared his throat. "Uh...so..."

Merlyn looked up from her drawing. "Stuck on a question?"

"No, I...uh..." he said sheepishly, twisting at the ring on his finger. "My dad wants to invite you over for dinner." He cut straight to the point.

She blinked. "Me?"

"No, someone who looks like you--of course he wants to invite you!" Merlyn could see how uncomfortable he feels about asking her this.

"Why?" She said, leaning on her desk and blinking up at him.

Arthur cleared his throat, looking away from her and at the desk lamp. "I told him how you were the one who got us out of the warehouse that night, and he started asking me about you." The ring really moved around his finger now. "I told him some stuff, and Morgana filled in the rest, plus the whole thing with Val, etc. He's interested in meeting you--but you can say no," Arthur added, "if you don't want to."

"I mean, I would like to meet your dad, but if you don't want me to then I'll understand." Currently, Merlyn wasn't sure what she wanted, what with her over-active mind thinking a million thoughts a minute, Uther wants to meet her?

Arthur pinched the bridge of his nose. "It's not that I don't want you to meet him. He's just not the...he's my dad, but he sometimes..."
"When does he want to meet me?" She asked while placing her hand on his arm.

A small sigh escaped him. "Tonight."

"Do I have to wear something fancy?" Merlyn's hand hovered between her nicest cardigan and her next nicest one.

"It's just dinner at my house, Merlyn." He rolled his eyes and looked up from his math booklet.

She nodded, grabbing the nicest one. "Right, this one it is."

They spent the car ride mulling in their own thoughts. Merlyn only managed to skip through a few stations before stopping after nine of them. What was she suppose to say to Uther? Uncle Gaius told her to be herself, when she went and asked him in his office (she did this secretly without Arthur knowing). But what did being herself entail? Is she just going to embarrass herself in front of Arthur and Morgana? Or worse, embarrass them in front of their dad? Why did she agree to this again? The memory of Arthur's stressed out face gave her the answer, she had the vague notion that maybe not a lot of people stuck around to be their friends after meeting their dad (their group now was an exception).

"Hi, Morris!" She said cheerfully.

"Evening, Ms. Emrys." He smiled. "Mr. Pendragon just arrived." He told Arthur.

"Thanks, Morris," Arthur said and continued through the gate, then up the driveway. He put his car in park and unbuckled his seatbelt--Merlyn following his lead. Before he opened his door, he turned towards her. "Look, if my dad says anything that offends you at dinner tonight, I'm sorry."

"Arthur," Merlyn said, "you shouldn't be apologizing for your dad. I'm sure everything's going to be okay."

He blew out a breath and tilted his head, eyes going wide for a split second. "Yeah, right. Well, let's go."
Merlyn followed beside Arthur as they walked into the house, she headed for the kitchen, thinking that their dad was still preparing the meal and would need help. But, with a gentle tug on her elbow, Arthur steered her towards the large dining room. Ah, right, no one really cooks in their family, she thought sheepishly. The dining room was spacious, with high ceilings that had a beautiful glass chandelier hanging down, and a large window wall that faced their backyard; the walls were painted with a warm beige color, and at the center of the room there was the dining table. Morgana waved cheerfully at Merlyn, she returned it with just as much enthusiasm, but toned it down slightly when she made eye contact with Uther.

"Good evening, Mr. Pendragon, thank you for having me," she said politely.

Uther gave her a smile and gestured at the two empty chairs. "It is our pleasure to have you here. Please, have a seat. The chef will be bring dinner out shortly."

'Chef?' Merlyn wondered as she took a seat beside Uther, and Arthur took the seat on her left. She glanced across the table at Morgana, who subtly shook her head. Okay, don't question it.

"While we're waiting, tell me about yourself, Ms. Emrys." He spoke with such authority.

Merlyn blushed under his stare. "Just Merlyn is fine, and I'm not too sure what I should say about myself."

"Nonsense!" Uther gestured between Morgana and Arthur. "I've heard nothing but good things about you. Morgana mentioned you were an exceptionally bright student."

Is she on fire? Merlyn wondered briefly, why was the room so hot? "I'm just as smart as the next person," she said neutrally, trying to not come off as cocky or too humble.

"If Arthur's grades are any indication, then I must disagree, since meeting you his grades have improved tremendously." Uther looked over at Arthur. "This is a very important year for all three of you, university applications are open—"

A separate door opened just then, the chef walked out, followed by four waiters carrying plates of food. "Dinner is served!"
"Thank god." Merlyn heard Arthur mutter under his breath, even Morgana looked relieved.

Dinner in the Emrys house consisted of stories, fun discussions, and the occasional fight for the last herb and garlic biscuit (Will and his obnoxiously long arms always win), the last and most important thing about those dinners is the warm feeling Merlyn gets from being surrounded by the people she loves. But, that can't really be said about dinners at the Pendragon household, firstly, everyone sat quietly as they ate, the only sound came from their forks and knives hitting the plate; secondly, everyone looked down at their plates and avoided looking at each other--Merlyn felt like they were in a prison. But, the highlight of this dinner was the food, it was delicious, so much so that Merlyn couldn't help but be confused as to why Arthur actually agrees to stay at her house for dinner when he could have a chef come and cook him a five-star meal. It wasn't until she noticed the lonely look on Arthur's face, did she understand why he chose to eat at her house.

"Morgana also told me you're in Dr. Khilgharra' Robotics Program, Merlyn." Uther took a sip of wine from his glass.

"Oh!" She perked up at the topic, even though Khilgharra wasn't here, the mention of his name brought her comfort. "Yes. I am."

"Exceptional student indeed," Uther said, "so what are your plans for the future?"

"Pardon?" Merlyn said, eyebrows pulling together a bit.

"If you're in his program, I would assume you have plans to go into engineering in the near future," Uther pointed out as if that was the most obvious thing.

"Well, that's one possibility," Merlyn agreed, "I might explore other options as well."

"Mr. Turner is one of our leading engineers in the R&D department. He spoke very highly of you as well." Uther cut into his steak, putting a piece into his mouth, which meant it was her turn to speak.

"Oh, Will mentioned me?" She took a quick sip of water, trying to continue. "I did tell him about how I want to go into engineering at Albion University."

"Chemical? Civil? Oil and gas?" Uther probed, once he swallowed his bite.
Merlyn cleared her throat. "Mechanical, actually. Like Will, Dr. Khilgharra, and my dad."

"Your father is a mechanical engineer as well?" The interest was evident in Uther's voice. She could envision the next question being 'which company does he work for?' But sadly...

"Was. He passed away almost two years ago," she said softly.

Crap. Awkward tension. Merlyn quickly tried to get rid of it. "But, yeah! I'm considering becoming an engineer. We're currently working on our final projects for Robotics."

"What does the project entail?" Arthur gave his dad a sharp look.

Merlyn actually did want to discuss this part of her life. "We're suppose to come up with our own original design and present it to the engineering heads."

"What is your design?" He asked.

Oh thank god she finally has one. "It's still a work in progress, but I plan on designing the first robotic healthcare companion. It'll be the first of its kind and be able to help so many children."

"Is that your target demographic?" Merlyn nodded her head.

"The younger generations are our future, and the only way to have that future is to nurture them." This was something she firmly believed in.

"You know, my company has summer internships." She's shocked. Summer internship? Uther surprised her when he looked over at Arthur. "You see, son? Look at how realistic her dream is, hitting the books and getting a degree. Not some fantasy of becoming a--"

"Dad!" Arthur said angrily. "Can we not talk about that now?"
Morgana let out an exasperated sigh. "Yeah, let's just finish dinner in peace."

"We most certainly will talk about this now! How do you think I feel, knowing my son is going to waste his life away chasing after a fantasy--ball, no less!--when he can just follow in my footsteps and help run the company?" Irritation colored Uther's voice.

"It's my life!" Arthur said loudly. "I already told you I'll go to university, what difference does it make if I do something else too?"

"Enough, we have a guest--" Morgana started raising her voice.

"Because it's a distraction!" Uther's voice rose to match Arthur's. "You have absolutely no ambition--"

"I think Arthur has a lot of ambition," Merlyn said calmly, "so much that it inspires me."

The three Pendragons stopped their heated argument. Uther looked like he just remembered Merlyn's presence, he gave her a sharp look. "You honestly believe that it's easy to make it into the NBA?"

"No," she stated, looking at Arthur, then back to Uther. "But I can see how hard Arthur is working for his dream, and that is what I believe in."

"Merlyn..." The way Arthur said her name made her insides warm.

"Enough, I will not stand by and watch you throw your life away." Uther abruptly, hands hitting the table a little harder than necessary. "I'll be in my study."

She swallowed the last bite of her meal, before she could collect her dishes, the waiter from earlier appeared out of thin air and whisked them away. Morgana rubbed her forehead and said she's going to bed, complaining of a headache. Arthur wiped his mouth and stood up as well, he gave Merlyn a smile, but it didn't quite reach his eyes.

"I'll drive you home."
Okay.

It took a few nights for her to stop having the nightmare of being nearly crushed under a boot, but when they stopped she was finally able to sleep properly. Earlier on, when Arthur brought her back home, she was at a loss of words—how do you comfort someone about their own parent? Arthur had seen the dilemma on her face, chuckled and pinched her nose. 'I'm fine, shorty. Don't over think, you'll break your brain.' She laid in bed, afterwards, feeling grateful for her mom, and secondly, wondering how lonely Arthur feels.

BZZZT

BZZZT

"Hello?" She mumbled sleepily into her phone, disconnecting it from the charger.

"Merlyn?" Arthur's voice had a slight shake in it.

She pushed up onto her knees, rubbing the sleep from her eyes with her other hand. "Arthur? What's the matter? It's--" she pulled the phone away, then put it back to her ear, "--1 o'clock in the morning." She tried to keep her voice down so she didn't wake Uncle Gaius up.

"Yeah...sorry about that." She could hear a crunching noise in the background, and figured it was probably from the snow that fell on the ground earlier building up.

"What are you doing outside?" She glanced out the window.

Arthur laughed. "Damn. You really do have good hearing."

Merlyn made an impatient sound. "You're not answering my question, dollop head."
"I'm actually outside your apartment right now, under your fire escape to be exact." The crunching footsteps stopped.

"What?" Merlyn hopped out of bed and ran over to her window, the snow was coming down thickly. "What are you doing?"

Arthur looked up, she could just make out his shape through the grates on the metal landing. "Can I come up?"

"Obviously!" She pressed her lips together, remembering to keep her voice low. "Be careful."

Merlyn pulled her window open and shivered when the cold air blew in, she ran over to the heater she had dragged in before bed and turned it up to a higher number; she flicked on her room light while she was at it. Even from where she was she could hear the metal clanking as Arthur climbed up the ladder, then it was followed by his steps echoing off the metal as he walked up the remaining steps. She met him at the window, pulling him in quickly and shutting the window.

"Hey." He said, his cheeks and nose a rosy red. Snowflakes covered a large portion of his hair and clothes; he had black sweatpants and his varsity jacket on.

"Oh my god...you didn't...did you walk here?" She whispered loudly and angrily, dusting off as much snow as she could. "Are you trying to kill yourself?"

"Not the welcome I was expecting." Arthur shrugged as he kicked off his runners.

Merlyn scowled at him, dragging him over to her bed and pushing him down to sit on it. "What did you expect? Fireworks? Me to bow?"

"It'd be nice," he said, a small smile on his face. But Merlyn could see that it still didn't reach his eyes.

"Wait a second," she said and went out into the hallway, to the linen closet, and grabbed a clean towel. "Your hair is going to get soaked," she said once she closed her room door behind her. Merlyn stepped in between his legs and started towel drying his hair. "You're freezing," she said after a moment of silence, moving the towel and dropping it in her desk chair, then continued on in a
softer voice. "Talk to me."

Arthur looked up at her, a rare thing to see, but what Merlyn could see, was how sad and vulnerable he looked. "He's my dad," he whispered, "but I just..."

She hesitantly reached out and placed both her hands on his cheeks, flinching slightly at how cold they were; he stared at her, but she remained silent, waiting for him to continue. "He thinks I don't know the risks, but I do, and even then I still want it." Arthur stiffened slightly when she wrapped her arms around his head and pulled him in for a hug, his face resting on her midriff. But he got over it quickly and wrapped his arms around legs, pulling her in closer. "We've fought about this so many times that I lost count. All I want is for him to see how much it means to me."

"He will," Merlyn said in a comforting way, "eventually, he will."

There they were, just the two of them in her room while the first snow fall of the season happened just outside her window. Merlyn gently ran her fingers through his hair, most of it dry and no longer that damp, she really did like how fluffy it is. She could feel the heat of his breath every time he exhaled, and the occasional flex of his arms brought her in closer to him.

"Can I stay for a bit?" Arthur broke the silence first.

Merlyn pulled back to look at him, without saying a word, she stepped out of his arms and walked over to her light switch, with a quick flip, the room was plunged back into darkness. "Yeah." She walked to the left side of her bed and climbed under the two blankets she had.

It's kind of intimate, Merlyn thought as she watched Arthur take off his jacket, now only in his grey t-shirt, and drape it on her desk chair. He laid down on top of the blankets looked over at her.

"Do you really want to become an engineer?" He said, his voice sounding deeper when he whispers.

Merlyn thought about it and nodded. "Yeah, I do. I want to be one like my dad was."

"I'm sorry about your dad." Even in the dark, Merlyn could see the softening of his features.
"Thanks. I'm sorry about your mom," she said back.

Arthur sighed. "Dad wasn't the same after she died." He rolled onto his back, staring up at the ceiling. "She's the reason why I love basketball so much."

"Really?" Merlyn's interest piqued.

She saw him nod his head. "I scored my first basket the moment I learned how to walk, by the time I was seven, basketball went from a fun game to a sport. My mom went to all my games, she was the typical sport-mom, cheering loudly and screaming at the ref; when she passed away...my dad couldn't stand the sight of a basketball, let alone the court. I never told anyone this, but this is my way of staying close with her...is that so bad?" He ended softly.

Merlyn reached over and placed her hand on his arm. "No. I understand how you feel. It's what this Robotics Program is for me." He shifted closer to her, an unspoken acknowledgement.

"Yeah. Since then, it has been early practices, late nights, weekends spent conditioning, and calluses on my hands trying to build my frame up. I've played this game for so long that I wouldn't know who I am if I didn't, and I love it, more than I can say. But when I'm at school or on the court, sometimes I feel like I can hardly breathe. Everyone expects so much of me." Arthur confessed.

It touched Merlyn, that Arthur trusted and felt comfortable enough to tell her his feelings. She leaned forward and pressed her forehead against his shoulder, the only words that came to her mind left her lips.

"I'll help you carry that weight."

"Ahem." A cough echoed through the room. Merlyn grumbled in her sleep and pressed closer to the warm object in her bed.

"Ahem." She opened one eye.
"What's the matter, Uncle Gaius?" Came her sleep-garbled voice.

"I hope you both have a good explanation for this?" Uncle Gaius spoke.

"What's goin' on?" Arthur shifted up onto his elbows, blinking through the morning light.

The two of them stared at each other blankly at first. Arthur, looking sleep-tousled and confused, he somehow managed to move to the left side of the bed, and Merlyn, now, is currently on the right; her arms were wrapped around his left arm and they were both under her blankets. But, those were not the important things to make note of, why were they in bed together?! Merlyn and Arthur ripped themselves away from one another, she pulled up against the wall above her head, curling her knees to her chin; Arthur slid against the wall to his right and crossed his legs.

"We can explain!" Merlyn said, face almost the same shade as a tomato. Uncle Gaius looked at her with his signature eyebrow raise, she faltered slightly. "I..."

"It was me!" Arthur blurted out, nervously scratching his head. "I got into a huge fight with my dad last night, and I ran out of the house." A knowing look appeared on Uncle Gaius's face. "I walked around for a while, until I realized the only person I wanted to see was...Merlyn." He said the last part in a quieter voice.

Merlyn blinked and felt this warm feeling spread through her chest. "I was the first person you wanted to see?" She asked softly, completely off the point, but a needed thing to confirm. Arthur nodded his head, a faint pink dusting across his cheeks.

Uncle Gaius let out an exasperated sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Morgana just called my office, asking if you were here, Arthur. I suggest you give her a call when you can." Again, he mutely nodded. Uncle Gaius gestured between the two of them. "I hope the two of you already had the safe sex talk?" His doctor voice slipping through.

"W-W-What?!" They spluttered, going bright red (or Merlyn's case, redder).

She flailed her arm between herself and Arthur. "W-W-We didn't---"

Arthur sat up straighter and nodded his head. "It's not--she has--"
"Alright." Uncle Gaius held his hands up, walking backwards to the door. "Just wanted to make sure you both were being responsible young adults."

"Yeah, we are responsible!" Arthur's voice hitching slightly at the end.

Merlyn scowled and kicked her leg out, catching his shin, he jumped and turned to glare at her. "Not helping!" She hissed.

Arthur shot her a 'what am I suppose to say then?!!' look, she shrugged and waved her arms around. "What even happened?"

"I'll get started on breakfast," said Uncle Gaius, amusement evident in his tone. "Come down whenever you guys are ready." He noticed the two of them were otherwise occupied and quietly made his exit.

"I don't know!" Arthur shrugged, eyes going wide. "I just closed my eyes for a second and next thing I know, I wake up with your drool on my arm!"

"I didn't drool on your arm!" Merlyn said, but made a subtle pass with the back of her hand. Arthur noticed and smirked. She sat up, trying to block out her embarrassment, and pointed between him and the bed. "How did you end up on the left side of the bed? I distinctly remember being on that side."

"Oh...uh..." He rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. "I sleep on the left side of the bed," he stated. "Force of habit."

"I'm going to brush my teeth," Merlyn said, jumping out of her bed. "I'll get you a toothbrush when I come back." She looked away while blushing, she had to get out of here quick, before her ears melted off from how hot they were.

Breakfast was...fine, or at least Merlyn tried to pretend it was fine, spearing into her eggs. For the life of her she couldn't meet Uncle Gaius's amused eyes, nor could she stop the blush every time her and Arthur looked at each other, or when they accidentally bumped hands as they reached for a second helping of scrambled eggs--she'll never feel the same about eggs, ever again.
"So let me get this straight," Gwen said gleefully, coming up beside her, "you and Arthur slept together?"

"Shhhhh!" Merlyn reached over to cover her mouth and pull her off to the side. "Not so loud!" She scowled at Gwen. "And why do you have to say it like that? We just slept in the same bed, fully-clothed and incapacitated."

Gwen squealed and clapped her hands together. "Oh, we have to tell Freya and Morgana!"

"No!" She exclaimed, but quickly held up a random piece of paper when people in the Art/Fashion Room looked over at them in confusion. "Not Morgana. Freya's fine, but we're going to keep this from Morgana."

"But why?" Gwen said, laughing as she spoke. "She'd love to hear this."

"She's already suspicious of me and Arthur, we don't want to start adding to her delusions of grandeur," said Merlyn.

Gwen blinked innocently at her. "Is there something to be suspicious of?"

Merlyn blushed and shook her head. "No! Which is why we don't need Morgana to know."

"You guys would make a great couple," Gwen said, grabbing a swatch of fabric and holding it up towards Merlyn.

"Gwen," Merlyn sighed, "that isn't what I came here to ask you about."

She hummed, moving Merlyn's arms outwards so she could measure Merlyn's bust. Gwen's Christmas exhibition was coming up, and she wanted all of them to be her models for it; which was why Merlyn was in the Art/Fashion room getting her measurements taken. "What did you want to ask me?" She asked while holding the measuring tape along the length of her side.
"It's about Arthur," Merlyn said, "No. Not what you're thinking." Gwen pressed her lips together, eyes dancing with laughter, and shrugged her shoulders and scribbled down some numbers.

"I wanted to ask about Mithian," She continued, raising her arms above her head.

Gwen paused briefly. "Where did you hear about her?"

"Well last week, after the kidnapping, a bunch of reporters kept hounding Arthur and me about the incident. They kept asking if I was his girlfriend and if so, how did I feel about the risks associated with dating a Pendragon. Arthur mentioned her somewhat, but I'm just curious about what happened after that kidnapping." Gwen scribbled some more notes. "They mentioned it in the paper, and Arthur had this far-off look in his eyes when reading it."

Gwen sighed. "To be honest, Merlyn, this is something you should ask Morgana about. She knew them way longer than I ever did." She snapped her fingers. "In fact, how about us girls have a little get together at my place after this?"

"Sure?" She lowered her arms. "But no mention of the sleeping incident." Gwen pretended to zip her lips.

Merlyn went to class after she was done with Gwen, why did everyone assume that her friendship with Arthur was more than that? She's had her own thoughts about their relationship and it gave her a mixture of happiness and stress all rolled up into a ball; now throw in a bunch of other people and it just made thinking about it that much harder. She sat through the rest of her afternoon classes contemplating why exactly it bothered her so much when people asked her to define her relationship with Arthur.

"You're going over to Gwen's today with Morgana and Freya, right?" Arthur leaned his head back to look at her upside down.

She nodded and poked his forehead with the eraser tip of her pencil. "What're you going to do today?"

"The guys and I are going to Park Avalon to practice," he said.

"Cool, first away game is soon, right?" Arthur nodded and grinned.
"Speaking of which," he turned around in his seat to face her, "the guys want you to come with us to do some research this weekend."

"Research for what? Only we have Mr. Manticore for Biology, and we're not even meeting up till later to work on that project," Merlyn said.

"Didn't you say you wanted to be a spy?" Arthur teased and raised his eyebrow.

Now she gets it, she gave him a 'really?' look. "You want me to go spy on the other team for you guys?"


"Khilgharra said I'm not suppose to join up with the basketball team," she stated, even though she knew it was a moot point.

Arthur leaned in close to her, lowering his voice. "He doesn't need to know."

She rolled her eyes. "Fine. I'll tag along."

"I knew I could count on you, shorty." Arthur winked and turned back in his seat when Mrs. Isolde started talking again.

Merlyn laid her head down on her desk, blushing like a newborn's bottom.

"This color looks so nice on you, Freya!" Gwen gushed, making Freya twirl around.

Merlyn held the bag of sour gummy bears to Morgana as they both watched the maroon colored dress twirl in the air. "We agree as well," she said, chewing through the sticky candy.
"Really, guys?" Freya said in her quiet voice.

"Will is definitely going to ask you out when he sees you in this dress," Merlyn saw Morgana give Freya another once over as she spoke.

She had to try very hard not to show the shock she was experiencing...how did Morgana know? Freya had the same look on her face as she blinked vigorously. Morgana looked around at everyone and rolled her eyes, then giving everyone a dry look, Gwen giggled behind her hand.

"Do you guys honestly think I wouldn't figure out that Freya has a thing for Will?"

Merlyn scratched her head as she looked over at Freya. "Uh...."

"I am all knowing," said Morgana in a matter of fact tone.

Freya knotted her fingers together and mumbled. "To be honest, I don't even know if he even likes me, or if...I mean, how do you know if you like someone...as more than a friend?"

All the girls went silent as they contemplated the answer to Freya's question, Merlyn had an answer in regards to Will liking Freya (which she tells Freya all the time), but as for the last part, well considering her own conundrum...she had no answer for it.

"Lance spent months volunteering at the soup kitchen with me, before I even found out he liked me," Gwen said fondly. "I thought he was so good-looking when we first met. I didn't think to act on it, we were about to go into the ninth grade and all the guys were so immature then." They all shared knowing looks. "But, he spent all his spare time outside of practice and school volunteering with me...I guess his dedication was what lead to us being a couple today."

"I don't think I would have hung out with thirteen year old me," laughed Morgana, "it was some dark times, middle school." Merlyn nodded heavily at that. "But, Leon was just...always there. He grew up with Arthur, they're best friends, so I always saw him around, but we hung out in separate crowds." A faraway look came to Morgana's eyes. "Arthur and I had a pretty strained relationship to begin with, what with the special circumstances of our parentage, but we just either ignored each other or tried to bring the other to their knees." She smiled at a memory. "The first time I really noticed Leon, was during the summer he grew about six inches and filled out that frame of his with muscle."
"Pft," Merlyn bit back a laugh.

Morgana shrugged and wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. "What can I say? I have a thing for well-proportioned guys, anyways," she continued, "after I noticed him, I thought it wouldn't be so bad to just get to know him a little bit more. So I started tagging along whenever Arthur and Mithian went over to Leon's house." Merlyn's interest in this story time piqued rapidly at the mention of Mithian's name.

"At first, when I talked to him, I realized I didn't find him that interesting at all--he was so shy. But it didn't bother me that much at the time, I just thought I would slowly phase myself back out of their group." Morgana hugged one knee to her chest.

"So how did that," Merlyn gestured in the air vaguely to make a point, "become what it is today?"

A small smile appeared on Morgana's lips. "His mom reminded me of my mom."

Freya swiped quickly at her eyes, Gwen placed a hand on Morgana's shoulder, Merlyn tried to focus on her breathing and not cry, and Morgana chuckled. "When Leon found out I liked being around him because of his mom, he laughed and started setting up 'dates' for me and her." She rolled her eyes, fondness creeping into her tone. "I spent a majority of my summers playing bridge with his mom and her friends. But, it also gave me a lot of time to spend with him...and suddenly, one day, it became him I wanted to be around."

Merlyn nodded her head. "Lucky guy." Morgana smirked and look over at her.

"He's so kind-hearted and loyal, but I think the thing I like most about him is his patience," Morgana said.

"I'm so shy that I sometimes wonder how any guy can see me, let alone would want to talk to me," Freya said softly. "But, whenever I'm with Will, without fail, he always sees me."

"What you guys have is a mortal lock," Merlyn said with a smile, "a guaranteed thing."
Freya blushed and smiled. "I don't know about that..."

"Shall we consult the experts?" Gwen pulled out a teen magazine.

Morgana rubbed her hands together and grinned deviously. "We shall."

"Okay," Gwen cleared her throat and flipped it open to a page, "say yes to any of these questions that apply."

Merlyn popped a few gummy bears in her mouth, waiting for the questions to begin. "Question number 1. Do you get excited at the idea of seeing him?"

"Yes." Freya answered.

'Yes.' Merlyn thought idly.

"Question number 2. If he asked you, would you say yes to being his girlfriend?"

"Yes."

'Yes.'

"Ooo." Gwen sat up straighter. "Question number 3. Does the idea of him no longer being in your life upset you"

"Yes."

'Yes.'

"If you answered yes to all three questions then you for sure like this guy who's been plaguing your thoughts," Gwen read off.
"What?" Merlyn said shocked. "That's it? Only three questions? How is that enough to know if you like someone?"

Morgana blinked innocently at Merlyn. "It's really up to Freya to decide if she likes Will, unless you have something to add in, Merlyn?"

"Uh..." Merlyn glanced around the room nervously. "No...not really. Actually," she shifted to face Morgana, "I wanted to ask you something."

"Who, me?" Morgana said, an eyebrow raised.

She nodded. "I wanted to ask you about Mithian. I know you just brought her up and all, and I have a vague idea who she is. But I'm just curious what happened between her and Arthur."

"He mentioned their kidnapping to you, didn't he?" Morgana said knowingly.

"Yeah, he gave me a brief overview. It happened two years ago, the men grabbed them outside of the theater, where they were for Mithian's performance," Merlyn trailed off, that's all she knew.

"Well," Morgana began, twirling a strand of her hair between her fingers, "let me start off by saying that I only met Mithian when I first moved in with Arthur and our dad. At the time I didn't know much about her, except that Arthur was madly in love with her." She tapped her chin thoughtfully.

Hearing that kind of stung, Merlyn internally winced.

"They were childhood sweethearts. His mom knew her mom and they grew up together, it's kind of a cute story, both their mom's thought Arthur and Mithian were going to get married, but then one day Mithian's mom just up and left, leaving her and her dad." Morgana chewed on a gummy bear as she remembered. "She seemed different to me after that but, then again, I wasn't ever that close with her to begin with. Arthur noticed the change though and he worked so hard to make her happy; to his benefit, that was probably what changed my opinion of him, from a spoiled brat to someone who would give his everything for someone he loves."
Merlyn could see that aspect of him very clearly.

Morgana sighed, it sounded sad and tired. "I saw it coming, way before he did, that Mithian was losing feelings for him. I could see it in the way she behaved around him, the way she treated him, even the way she talked to him. But, Arthur being Arthur, thought it was his fault and beat himself up over it. I think," she twisted the strand of hair even tighter, "she used the kidnapping as an excuse to leave him, so that she didn't look like the villain."

"That's terrible!" Merlyn said in outrage, how could anyone do that to another person?

"Hmm..." The interested look came back to Morgana's face, "you're right, it was. Arthur didn't see it coming though, what happened afterwards. Turns out her dad was planning on leaving the country to go abroad for work, but he gave Mithian the option to stay here, in Albion, with his sister. It would've meant not having to leave all her friends behind, not having to leave Arthur behind, but she decided to pack things up."

"The worst part was that she didn't plan on telling Arthur about it," Gwen said quietly. "He found out she was leaving by accident. After days of ignoring his calls and messages, he went to go see her and saw the movers clearing out their house."

Merlyn felt this aching hole grow in her chest. "He must have felt so lonely."

"Yeah..." Morgana said, her voice going soft and sad, "he was."

I wonder if I should ask Uncle Gaius for sleeping pills, Merlyn thought as she laid in bed staring blankly up at her ceiling. How exactly did anyone expect to digest the stuff she found out today? No wonder Arthur was so emotionally stunted when they first met, he kind of still was, but that's beside the point. She wondered how it must have felt, having the person you loved more than yourself choose to leave you; Merlyn's never experienced that kind of love, she loved her dad, loves her mom, Will, Will's mom, and Uncle Gaius, but she's never know what it feels like to love someone not in her family.

'Question number 3. Does the idea of him no longer being in your life upset you?'

"Yes."
Merlyn groaned, but the ball of happiness and stress inside her unwound itself. "Oh man...I like him."

"Start getting ready, short stack, I'll be there in a bit to get you." Arthur tugged his jeans on. "Remember to bring a cap." He wedged his cell between his shoulder and ear as he hopped from foot to foot.

"That'll just make us look so shady."

Arthur chuckled. "Maybe it's because you look like the shifty sort."

She huffed. "I am an open book. You're the shifty one."

"Right, whatever you say, I'm heading out now." Arthur zipped his fly up.

"I don't understand why Gwaine's not driving me. He lives so close by, do you know how stupid--"

"--it is for me to come down your way, yeah, yeah, I've heard this before. But, Gwaine's going to pick up Perce first, and you'll be demoted to the back seat. Which means no channel surfing for you, plus, Gwaine drives like a maniac." Arthur didn't want to admit how nervous he gets at the idea of her being in the car with Gwaine--he still has nightmares after being in his car.

"Alright fine, I guess your car works too, my lord."

Arthur smiled. "Kay. See you in a bit."

"Bye."

"Where are you going?" Morgana leaned against his doorframe.
Arthur ended the call and pocketed his phone. "The guys and I are going to scout out the team we're playing next week."

Morgana leveled him with her stare. "Why is Merlyn going then?"

"She's going to help us with information gathering. She has this crazy good memory." Arthur pulled his hoodie on over his head.

"If you like her, you should do something about it, don't waste her time by being so half-assed," said Morgana ruthlessly.

Arthur froze. "What're you talking about?"

She rolled her eyes. "Anyone with a pair of working eyes can see that you're head-over-heels for her."

"I'm no--" He couldn't find it in himself to deny it, and the pointed look Morgana gave him said the exact same thing.

"What exactly is stopping you?" She questioned.

"She has a boyfriend," Arthur stated, the shitty stomach drop happened again.

"Sometimes you can be such an idiot." She threw her hands up in the air. "Is the fear of what happened with Mithian going through your brain as well?"

Arthur clenched his hands into tight fists. "I'm over that already, you harpy. Why are you bringing it up?"

"You, dear brother, have a type. You like strong-willed, ambitious brunettes that give you a run for your money." Morgana raised her eyebrow, silently daring him to deny her (correct) accusations. "Just because you were burned by one, does not mean you will again. It's not fair for
you to hold Mithian's mistakes against Merlyn."

"I'm not!" Arthur wanted to once again repeat that: Merlyn. Has. A. Boyfriend.

"Merlyn's a nice girl," Morgana said, the softer side of her shining through, "don't do something that would hurt the both of you."

Arthur sighed loudly. "I'm not going to hurt her!"

"For all the similarities that those two share, do you know the one thing that sets them apart?" Morgana spoke as if Arthur wasn't on his last straw with her.

"What?" He asked, humouring her.

She turned her body, hand resting on the doorframe and looking straight at him. "Merlyn would never leave you behind." With that, Morgana walked away.

Arthur waited on Merlyn's driveway for her to come out of her apartment, a minute passed and he saw her small figure walk down the driveway. She was wearing dark skinny jeans, a dark purple shirt with a brown cardigan overtop, and even though she thought it was shady, there was an Excaliburs cap on her head, her ears sticking out in a cute way; he noticed she was carrying a small lunch bag in her hand. Merlyn waved to him from outside of the car, and walked over to the passenger door.

"Hi, clot pole," She greeted as she got in, then proceeded to buckle herself in.

He smirked. "Hi, little demon." He saw her reach into the lunch bag.

"Here." She held a cinnamon roll in front of his face.

"Thanks." He accepted the pastry, but looked at her in confusion. "But what's this for?"

Merlyn shrugged. "You mentioned the other night that you wanted cinnamon rolls after
seeing it on TV. I had time last night and made some...ta-dah!" She flourished her hand towards him.

"You baked me cinnamon rolls...because I mentioned I wanted some after seeing it on TV?" Arthur said slowly, mostly so he could process this himself.

"Well when you put it that way," she said and rolled her eyes. "If you don't want to eat it, I could just take it back and give it to the guys." She reached over for it, but Arthur jerked his hand away and shoved the roll into his mouth, taking a big bite.

Arthur nearly choked on the large bite he took, Merlyn laughed and held out a Kleenex for him; as he wiped his mouth he saw her cover her mouth, still laughing at his near death experience. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were bright, both her dimples were showing through.

Shit.

He likes her.
Hi, everyone!

Sorry, I've been MIA for a bit, lots of quizzes and assignments appeared! This is my last semester of second year before I go into my year of practicum, which hopefully means I'll have more time to write (when I'm not at the hospital trying to save a life/not kill someone). This might be a bit of a short chapter/not super short I hope. I've been endeavoring to make my chapters a worthwhile read every time I write it, and I am grateful for everyone's patience!

Thanks for sticking around!

If you enjoyed this chapter, please feel free to leave a comment or kudos!

-SS

Will: Are we going back to Ealdor for Thanksgiving?

Uhh...I thought mom was saying something about going on a trip with your ma? They're coming for Christmas though.

Will: Oh yeah...so...you makin' the turkey this year, then?

...

Will: I want garlic mashed potatoes!

I mean...I GUESS
Will: Excellent.

"I heard somewhere that if you make faces like that, it'll get stuck permanently," Freya teased, glancing over at Merlyn as they waited for their turn to be fitted into their dresses. The two of them sat on Gwen's bed side by side.

Merlyn looked over at her and rolled her eyes, a partial smile forming. "You've been hanging out with Will too much."

Freya blushed, knotting her fingers together, and worried her bottom lip. "I'm going to ask him out to dinner..."

"Eh?" At first her words didn't register in Merlyn's mind, a moment later though, she whipped her head towards Freya. "Eh?! No way!" Merlyn grabbed both of Freya's hands and started in on a vigorous handshake. "This is...I don't even know...I'm so happy for you!" Her cheeks hurt from how big her smile was.

"I wouldn't get your hopes up too high, Merlyn," Freya said softly, "I mean...I'm not telling you this so you can go and tell Will, which isn't what I want."

"But, I could..." Merlyn trailed off at the sight of Freya shaking her head.

Freya gave her a determined look. "I want to ask him and do this for me. If he rejects me then I'll at least know for myself."

She gulped and hesitantly spoke. "Uhm...Freya?"

The thought has occurred to Merlyn, many times in fact, that if Freya and Will were to happen (that thought made her happy), or not happen (she tried not to dwell on that thought for too long), what would happen to their friendship? It terrified her, the idea of losing Freya as a friend and not knowing what to do to fix it.

"Whatever happens--if anything happens--with Will, I hope you'll still be there...no matter what, Merlyn." Freya read the panicked uncertainty on Merlyn's face clearly.
A breath of relief escaped her lips, she turned to face Freya with a big smile on her face. "Yup! Of course, I'll be there!"

"Carbon fiber exoskeleton?" Elyan said curiously, bending down to get a better look at Merlyn's project.

"Mhm," Merlyn said, keeping her focus on trying to correctly attach the next piece of Aithusa’s frame, the tweezers in her hand holding steady, "lighter build. Especially since I want to have hyperspectral cameras placed in for the eyes."

"Cool..." Elyan dragged the word out, then he shifted his attention over to the blueprint next to them. "You know, instead of lithium ion batteries, super capacitors would charge way faster."

Merlyn stood upright once the small piece was in place. "Huh, that's true."

Elyan crossed his arms, nodding at her blueprints with an impressed look. "You're a genius, Merlyn."

"Elyan..." Merlyn mumbled, face going red, "I'm just as smart as--"

He clapped her on the back. "Come on now, Merlyn! Don't be humble about this," he pointed down at the work bench, "you're brilliant!"

"Thanks," she mumbled bashfully.

Khilgharra's strong voice filled the room. "You are all dismissed!"

Merlyn and Elyan both began packing up and putting their projects away in their own designated stations. Aithusa's body was not even a quarter way completed (her coding alone terrified Merlyn), but as she looked down at the occupied space of her bin, this overwhelming sense of pride
washed over her. She wanted to stay longer and dwell, but Khilgharra was standing by the lab doors waiting for everyone to leave, apparently he has a very important meeting to make.

"Oh wait, Merlyn." Elyan grabbed her shoulder before she could continue heading to the front doors.

"Hmm?" She stopped, looking up at him with her eyebrow raised.

"Coach wants to see you," said Elyan, nodding towards the gym.

"Me?" She said surprised, blinking rapidly. "Why?"

"Wants to talk to you about the stats you took down for us this weekend," Elyan explained as he lead them towards the gym doors, the sound of sneakers squeaking and bouncing balls growing louder.

"Oh," she said, "okay."

"Give me a sec," he said and ran into the guys' locker room to change.

Merlyn waited patiently outside for Elyan to come back out, she readjusted her backpack, rocking back and forth on her heels. A minute later, Elyan came jogging out, fully changed into his practice clothes; he gestured for Merlyn to go ahead of him through the gym doors as he held it open. The smell hit her first, sweat mixed in with the woody smell of the gym— it wasn't bad, especially since the next thing she noticed was a bunch of tall, muscular, sweaty guys mid-practice...who's to complain? She saw Coach Caerleon wave at her, so she broke away from Elyan as he started doing laps around the gym.

"Hi, Coach," Merlyn said once she was within earshot.

"Afternoon, Merlyn. Thank you for meeting with me, I'm sorry if you had other plans," Caerleon apologized, eyes crinkling from his smile.

She shook her head. "Nope. No plans, why did you want to meet with me?" Her head tilting
to the side. "Were my notes not good?"

"No. No." He shook his head, holding his hand up. "That's what I wanted to speak to you about. Let me go and get them." Merlyn turned to look over at the guys, while she waited for Caerleon to come back. A huge smile appeared on her face when she saw a familiar guy jog up to her.

"Hey, short stack," Arthur said, a slight breathlessness in his voice, but a smile on his lips. His hair was pushed out of his face by a simple white headband, and rivets of sweat dripped down his face and neck, the muscles on his frame rippled and stood out in a more defined way after having been pushed past their limits...Merlyn was very sure how she felt while looking up at him.

"Hi, clot pole," she said. "Having fun?" She made a pointed look towards the court.

Arthur rolled his eyes. "Coach is having us run lines."

"Oh?" Merlyn said in mock surprise. "So...lots of fun," she added sarcastically.

"Heh," Arthur chuckled, "lots."

"Sup, Merlyn," said Leon as he jogged up to them, he held his fist out towards her and she tapped it with her own.

"Hi, Leon." She smiled.

"Whatcha doin' here sweetheart?" Gwaine popped out from behind Leon and threw his arm over her shoulder and pulled her into his sweaty side.

Merlyn pointed to her left. "Coach wanted to see me."

"About the plays." Arthur added, turning to scowl at Gwaine, "let her go, you're all sweaty man."
"So?" Gwaine purposefully rubbed himself against Merlyn in an exaggerated way. "My sweetheart here doesn't mind a little musk, do you?" He looked down at her with that devilish grin of his.

She rolled her eyes, trying not to smile. "What next? Are you going to pee on me to mark your territory?"

Leon chuckled, Arthur's scowl deepened, and Gwaine tapped his chin thoughtfully. "Now that's an idea!"

"What idea?" Percy lumbered up beside Merlyn on her left. "Hey, Merlyn."

She craned her neck and smiled. "Hi, Percy."

"What're you guys talking about?" Lance dribbled the ball between his legs as he joined the group, he tipped his chin at Merlyn and she waved in response.

Merlyn extracted herself from Gwaine's hold. "Coach wanted to talk to me about the notes I took."

"Are we having a team meeting?" Elyan said, slightly panting after having done laps.

"I don't think so, you guys just all started pooling in together," Merlyn said while making a clumping gesture with both her hands.

"Well I thought we were since Arthur came up to you?" Leon said sheepishly, as if realizing something in that moment, Arthur coughed and shrugged his shoulders silently.

"I came just for you, sweetheart." Gwaine winked and started making kissy faces at her.

Merlyn laughed and shook her head, it seemed like all the other guys on the team noticed the group and started congregating towards them. She was amazed at Arthur's ability to attract others just by his sheer presence, it was sort of inspiring in a way--his leader-like aura. Now, the entire team was gathered around her and she had nothing to say...where was Coach?
"I thought you were all suppose to be running lines?" Speak of the devil, Merlyn thought in relief.

"We were, but captain came over here, so we thought there's a team meeting?" One of the guys in the back called out.

She took a peak over at Arthur and silently admonished him, he rolled his eyes and smirked. Coach Caerleon shook his head and chuckled. "Alright, well I just wanted to speak with Merlyn here originally, but if everyone is here..." He flipped open the playbook and pointed at one of the plays Merlyn had drew over. "Why would you have Gwaine take the rear and move Percival to the front?"

"Because the other team's players are too big and too slow. If you have Percy block their advance, Gwaine will easily pluck the ball from them." Merlyn smiled victoriously, that was actually one of her favorite strategies. "Oh!" She perked up as she remembered. "You know play number 52? When Arthur brings the ball up the center," she pointed to the court and manoeuvred her way through the horde of sweaty guys. "Excuse me--" she squeezed between the last two guys "--instead of him moving to the left, have Elyan cut straight across, go into the key, and pass the ball to him for the inside shot." She was now standing where she pictured Arthur would be standing.

"But that leaves the right wing unattended," Coach Caerleon said.

Merlyn nodded. "Yeah, it does," she agreed, "but, if Percy is running a block here." She pointed to her left. "Gwaine can run both those zones. Both the players I saw, that are the left wings, they're not as strong as dribblers as Gwaine." She closed her eyes quickly, vividly remembering one of the plays she saw. "This play, can counteract theirs. They're driving force is to push you guys out of the key--in fact, I think that play of theirs is almost a mimic of play 17..."

"Merlyn?" Coach Caerleon said with amusement in his tone.

She turned her head away from the court and raised her eyebrow. "Hmm?" Why was everyone staring at her? She gulped and smiled sheepishly.

"I was curious in the beginning, but...do you happen to have a photographic memory?" Caerleon asked.

The smile on Merlyn's face dropped slightly. "Heh...?"
"Photographic memory?" Murmurs broke out amongst the guys.

"So she can what...like remember everything?"

"Yeah, I wonder how that even works?"

"Isn't that the freaky thing that one dude on TV can do?" The guy who said that received a slap on the head.

Merlyn blinked. "Eh?" She tried not to let the fear within her grow, and swallowed the lump in her throat.

"Shit! What was that for, man?!"

'Freaky...' It's been awhile since she's heard--

A warm hand settled on her shoulder and her favorite voice spoke. "I think Merlyn's brain is cool as hell."

"Arthur..." Merlyn said softly as she looked up at him.

"She's the best person in this gym." She could feel Lance stepping up behind her, flanked by both Leon, Percy, and Elyan.

Gwaine stepped up on her other side and smiled, but there was an edge to it. "Anyone want to disagree?"

"Guys..." Merlyn said, blushing bright red, "really it's..."

"N-N-No! I didn't mean it that way!" The guy who made the 'freaky' comment from earlier stammered. "I just..."
"Alright! Ten laps around the gym!" Coach Caerleon's voice boomed out, followed by a sharp blow on his whistle.

All the guys surrounding Merlyn lightly punched her as the left to go run their laps, she scowled at them, but they grinned at her in return; she rolled her eyes and nodded her head, she got the message loud and clear:

'We have your back.'

"My apologies, Merlyn," Coach Caerleon said as she walked back up to him, she could see the guilt in his eyes, "I didn't mean to bring--"

She shook her head and smiled. "It's okay..." she turned to look at her friends, "I'm good actually." There was a slight pause between the two of them as they watched the guys do one lap around the gym.

"I will agree with Arthur though," Caerleon said, "that brain of yours is something else. Are you sure I can't persuade you to join the team?"

"Heh...I don't think Khilgharra would be very happy if I did..." Merlyn said hesitantly with a small smile on her lips, picturing in her mind Uncle Gaius's eyebrow raise paired with Khilgharra's frown of disapproval, she shuddered at the image.

Coach Caerleon grunted. "That old dragon...thinks this is some sort of game..."

"Funny enough, he thinks you think the same thing?" Merlyn offered with a shrug.

He threw his head back and laughed. "Right, well my offer still stands. We're going for the Cup, and it'd be even more fun if you joined us as well."

"More fun..." she repeated, a warm blush spreading across her cheeks.
"Coach," Gwaine moaned from across the gym, "don't you think three laps is enough?"

"Seven more to go!" Coach Caerleon hollered, loud enough to echo throughout the gym, it was met with a resounding groan from all the guys.

Merlyn covered her mouth and giggled. "Well, if that's all for today, Coach," she gestured over her shoulder, "I'll be heading home now."

"Right," he nodded, throwing a quick wink her way, "think about it some more. What that old dragon doesn't know won't hurt him."

She laughed as she turned away. "Okay, will do. Have a good practice."

The sound of footsteps running up behind her is what made her slow down and stop, thinking it was just Arthur coming up to her to confirm their study plans. "Yes, Arthur it's my place--oh, my bad." A blush crept up her neck and spread to her cheeks. "Sorry, I thought you were--"

"Nah man, I should be the one saying sorry." Merlyn searched her brain, trying to see if she knew this guy's name.

"Justin, I'm in the social class before yours and captain's," he said meekly. A part of her felt kind of guilty for not knowing who he was, but another part of her felt wary about his presence--what did he want?

Merlyn perked up. "Oh! I remember now." But her mood deflated slightly, remembering his words from earlier.

He immediately raised his hands up in a placating gesture. "Ah! Look," he started waving his arms slightly, his expression a mixture of awkwardness and embarrassment, "I-I, what I said earlier, I didn't mean to insult you. In fact, I think you're a pretty cool chick and all; my boyfriend tells me all the time that I don't think before I speak. So if I hurt your feelings I'm sorry."

His apology touched Merlyn and she smiled. "Thanks, Justin, I appreciate the apology."
Justin rubbed the back of his neck and blushed. "Yeah..." he trailed off, "plus, I'm scared of what captain'll do to me if I insult his girl..." that last part was muttered quietly to himself.

"Pardon? I didn't catch that last part." Merlyn cupped her ear and leaned forward.

He started to wave his arms even faster and bite his lip nervously. "Ah! Er... It's cool! I'm going back to my laps now. See ya!" Justin took off with a start.

"Uh! Bye!" Merlyn said in a rush, trying to get a reply back to him. Did she just meet someone as awkward as her?

Arthur jogged up to her, passing Justin on the way; he slowed to a stop, panting and sweating, even more, he gestured over his shoulder. "What'd Justin want?"

"He apologized to me," she said with a bright smile.

"Better have," grumbled Arthur, crossing his arms in front of his chest and looking back at Justin.

Merlyn gave him another admonishing look. "Be nice, Arthur. He did know he was in the wrong."

He grunted and turned back to her, face softening. "You heading home now?"

"Yup," she said, "you're still coming over after practice, right?"

"Yeah." He reached over quickly and pinched her nose. "See you in a bit, short stack."

She scrunched up her nose. "Bye, turnip head," she said distastefully. Arthur laughed and waved at her, running back to the team.
"Man, I can't believe how many assignments we have before the long weekend," Arthur groaned and laid his head down on Merlyn's desk; she admired the fluffiness of his hair, and she almost reached out to run her fingers through it, but aborted that idea at the last minute.

Merlyn patted his shoulder in a comforting way. "You'll be fine. You're almost done the English assignment."

"That's because you helped me with most of it." His words were slightly muffled by the desk.

"You still did the other bit," she offered, trying to lighten his mood.

"Heh, thanks for trying to make me feel better, shorty." Arthur turned his head to look at her.

She grinned. "Think of it as my way of saying thanks for sticking up for me."

"Pft," he scoffed, "you think I was just going to stand there and let my teammate bad mouth you?"

"No," she shook her head, "I meant for complimenting my brain," her voice dripping with sarcasm, "of course it's because you stood up for me, dollop head." With a quick eye roll, she leaned forward on her arms and rested her chin on top of them. "Is your favorite part about me, my brain?" She asked out of curiosity.

Arthur smirked, looking down at her. "You are a good little nerd, I'll admit that."

"Come on," she laughed and lightly hit his shoulder, "I'm serious."

"Alright." He leaned back with his arms up in defeat. "I do like your brain, you're the smartest person I know. But..."

'There's a but?' Merlyn wondered, her entire face felt like it was on fire.

"...it's not the only thing I like about you," Arthur finished in a softer voice with a hint of
Merlyn perked up. "There's more about me that you like? Like what?" She leaned forward eagerly, wanting to hear what he has to say.

He coughed, a light pink dusted his cheeks. "I--uh...you know...like how nice you are and what not..." Arthur was wondering how exactly he managed to back himself into this corner.

"That's it?" Merlyn pouted slightly. "You wrote more for the English assignment."

"What about you?" Arthur shot back, sitting forward in her chair.

Merlyn blinked. "What?"

"What do you like about me?" He questioned, looking just as eager as Merlyn was--except he played it cool.

"What makes you think I even like you?" Her sarcasm is really going to get her into trouble one day, she thought as Arthur smirked and raised his eyebrow.

"Uhm...er...how did we manage to get to this topic?" She said awkwardly, trying to buy herself some time as her face was going as red as a tomato. Arthur remained quiet and stared at her, waiting for an answer.

"You know...I like..." she trailed off. How do I tell him just one thing? When it's everything about him that I like? Merlyn wondered. "How tall you are."

"Pft," he let out a sharp laugh, "...you like how tall I am? Aren't you giving me crap about not having enough detail?"

"Well!" She pushed up on her arms and sat up onto her knees, about to defend herself. "It's not because you're tall, it's how you make me feel because you're tall." Arthur looked at her with interest and gestured for her to elaborate; Merlyn's ears felt like they were on fire, and she sat back down on her bed, knotting her fingers together. "You make me feel safe...and I like that...a lot."
Neither of them said anything, the silence hung between them like a giant neon sign; both of them were playing their weird eye-tag game. Merlyn wanted to say something—*anything*—but the words evaded her.

Arthur cleared his throat. "Merlyn, I--"

There was a soft knock at the door, followed by Uncle Gaius as he poked his head in. "Kids, dinner is ready."

The two of them jumped slightly at the interruption, but Merlyn was the quickest one to recover, she turned towards the door. "Coming, Uncle Gaius, thanks!" He smiled and quietly shuffled down the hallway.

"Shall we?" She gestured to the door, trying to calm her blush.

"Uh..." Arthur coughed and nodded his head, "yeah."

Whatever Arthur was going to say was left forgotten in Merlyn's bedroom.

"Ow!" Merlyn complained as she felt another sharp poke at her hip.

Gwen looked up, several more pins held between her lips, and gave her an admonishing look that translated to 'if you stopped fidgeting, I wouldn't be sticking you with these pins.'

"Easy for you to say, Gwen," Merlyn grumbled, "you're not the one being a human pin cushion."

"You look great though, Merlyn," said Morgana, glancing up from her fashion magazine, "Arthur's going to trip over his tongue when he sees you in that dress."
"W-W-What?" spluttered Merlyn, her face immediately going red. "Why would he--"

Morgana hummed casually. "I'm just saying," she sang, "don't you think so too, Gwen?"

"Mhm," she agreed and giggled quietly, taking one pin out of her mouth and putting it in place through the dress fabric.

"We are going to be spending the night in a hotel for the fashion show," Freya said excitedly, "don't you think it would be the perfect time for the two of you to confess your feelings for one another?"

"Guys," Merlyn said in exasperation, "Arthur doesn't like me in that sense."

"Hmm," Morgana said skeptically, "what makes you so sure of that?"

"I mean...we're friends and all," Merlyn fidgeted, but jumped when she felt another sharp poke, "ow! Sorry," she apologized to Gwen. "Right, well we're friends, we've known each other for about two months now."

"Stating the obvious is always a good start," Gwen said as she placed the final pin in place.

"I have a point!" Merlyn said defensively.

"What is it?" Morgana leaned forward, eyebrow raised and a smirk on her lips.

"After everything that's happened so far, and what he's carrying with him..." her voice softened as she stared at a random spot on the carpet. "How do I know I'm enough?"

"Merlyn," Freya said in that quiet voice of hers, "does this mean?"

Merlyn nodded. "Yeah...I like him," a sigh escaped her, "a lot."
All three girls squealed in excitement, which eventually transitioned into a large group hug--of course Merlyn wasn't allowed to move her arms, at the risk of pulling out all the pins. She could hear bits and pieces from everyone's discussion.

"I can't wait to see his face when he finds out!" Gwen's eyes were alight with excitement.

Freya nodded. "They're perfect for each other!"

"Leon owes me five bucks," Morgana smirked.

Merlyn had to quickly de-escalate the situation before it snowballed too far out of her control. "Whoa now, guys, wait, I'm not planning on telling him anytime soon."

"What?" The surprise and disappointment were not lost in Morgana's voice. "Why not?" Both Gwen and Freya shared Morgana's look of confusion.

"Because I don't know if I'm ready to tell him yet," she mumbled, her blush growing darker. "I want to tell him, really, I do. But, I want to do it when I'm ready, so it's fair to me and him."

"Oh, Merlyn," cooed Morgana as she rushed forward and pulled Merlyn's head into her chest, "you're so cute!"

"Careful of the pins!" Gwen said as she quickly went to grab the rest of the materials she needed.

"You won't tell him, right?" Merlyn managed to speak, even though her face was smushed up.

Morgana cackled. "And miss out on all the fun? No way! This is going to be so interesting."

"What're you smiling at, bro?" Leon leaned over to look at Arthur's phone while tying his
"Merlyn sent me something funny, here, look." Arthur moved his phone so Leon could see.

Leon chuckled. "You are stubborn like one."

Arthur rolled his eyes. "You two have been with the harpy too much."

He stood up and ran a hand through his damp hair. All the guys were in the midst of showering and changing back into their regular clothes. Arthur looked at the time on his phone and turned towards the guys as he headed for the locker room doors.

"Catch you guys later!" Arthur threw them a quick wave and left.

"So," Leon said, once the door shut firmly behind Arthur, "Morgana told me that Merlyn likes Arthur."

"CALLED IT!" Gwaine shouted in triumph as he walked out of the showers, one towel wrapped haphazardly around his waist, and the other being run vigorously through his hair.

Percy tugged his t-shirt over his head, all his muscles rippling in doing so. "About time. You guys don't have a class with them, but it's like they're ready to jump each other's bones."

"Yeah. Sometimes I think they forget Perce and I are there." Lance uncapped his deodorant and started applying it; his hair was still wet as droplets of water raced down the planes of his torso and disappeared at the towel's edge.

"He's probably going to the lab as we speak," Elyan said, pulling his jeans over the defined muscles of his calves, "which means they're going to go over to his house today."

"Arthur was acting all weird the other day when he came over to my house. He started asking me all these 'hypothetical' questions, something about telling someone you like them and not having it ruin your friendship," Leon ran his towel over his hair. "Even something about potentially ruins the girl's relationship with another guy, and if he'd get struck by lightning if he does."
Gwaine smacked Percy's chest hard with the back of his hand. "Dude! I called that too!"

Percy grunted as he rubbed the sore spot. "Called what?"

"The princess totally has it bad for my sweetheart, and as much as it breaks my heart, she likes him just as much too." Gwaine laid himself out on the bench, posing in an absurd way.

"Man, cover yourself up, no one wants to see that." Elyan grimaced and tossed his towel over Gwaine's chest. Then turned to look at Leon, "why does Arthur think Merlyn's taken or something?"

"At first I thought she was with that Will guy," Lance piped up, "but after seein' them interact a bit, they kind of remind me of siblings."

"Yeah, reminds me of how Gwaine's sisters treat him. Annoying and a little brat." Percy pulled on his sweats.

Gwaine laughed and quickly sat up. "Let's start a pool, twenty dollars a person. I bet Arthur's going to be the one to crack first. He'll confess to Merlyn by Christmas."

"Nah man, I think Merlyn's going to initiate it, Arthur's too much of a worrier," Elyan said and added, "my money's on Merlyn, after Thanksgiving."

"Me too," Leon agreed, "he's my bro and all, but between the two Pendragons, Morgana's the enforcer."

"So what you're sayin', Leon, is that Morgana's the one who wears the pants in the relationship?" Gwaine smirked devilishly as he finally started putting on his clothes.

Leon held his hands up. "What can I say? He shrugged and smiled. "She's powerful and I'm in awe of her."
"Okay. Okay." Elyan waved his ball cap. "Enough with this poetry, place your bets."

"I'm going with Arthur," Lance said as he shouldered his gym bag.

"Me too. I've known you long enough to know not to bet against you." Percy said the last part towards Gwaine, who grinned and winked.

"But, guys, don't you think it's rude of us to bet behind their backs?" Lance asked as he pulled out his wallet.

"Such a goody-goody like always," Gwaine sighed, "they're our dearest friends. We just want to see them happy. Think of this as an investment into that warm and fuzzy feeling."

"But--"

"Alright, as enriched as I am with your presence, fork over the bill, Mr. Goody-Goody. The lot of you too, come on now. Chop. Chop." Gwaine held his hand out to collect from the guys.

The locker room door opened and in walked some of the freshmen from the JV team, most of them were talking excitedly about something, and they were speaking loud enough that the guys overheard.

"Captain Pendragon said hi to me!"

"He smiled at me in the hallway during lunch break and asked me how the season's going so far!"

"I just ran into him and his girlfriend in the hallway, he was smiling and laughing with her, man, I wish I could be as cool as him."

"Normally, he's kind of...scary, but now I can ask him for tips and he'll hang around and talk with me. Think it's got anything to do with Merlyn?"
“Merlyn?”

“His girlfriend, numbskull! The beautiful snow maiden!”

“What the hell are you smokin’? Snow maiden?”

“Anyways! I just think it’s nice how happy Captain Pendragon is! You, asshole.”

A knowing smile was on each of the guy's faces' because it's true, they're all glad that Arthur found his happiness.

“You know,” Merlyn began as she sat down on Arthur's bed, "your duffle bag is really..." she glanced down, into the bag, "messy."

Arthur scowled from his kneeling position. "It's fine."

"Is it?" She grimaced. "Is it, really?"

"I know where everything is, Merlyn, so what's the big deal?” said Arthur as he took a seat beside her on his bed.

She shrugged. "I'm just saying, it might do you some good to clean out some of the old papers you don't need anymore."

"Why would I waste my time doing that?” Arthur drawled and unconsciously leaned closure to her.

"The poor papers,” Merlyn said under her breath.
"Fine," he reached over and quickly pinched her nose, "you have to help me, though."

Merlyn rubbed her nose with the back of her hand. "Uh...I didn't exactly sign up for that?"

"You don't have a choice." Arthur grinned and opened his bag up further, pulling out piles of crumpled or wrinkled papers from it.

"Hmph," Merlyn said and accepted the first pile.

A comfortable silence between the two of them as they sorted through the mess of papers, Merlyn thought back to the other day in Gwen's room, when she admitted out loud her feelings for Arthur. She peeked up at him and wondered why she doesn't just confess her feelings to him now? Arthur glanced over at her and raised his eyebrow, she quickly shook her head and looked back down at the piece of paper in her hand...because she's a coward, who has never liked anyone in that capacity before--what should I do? Thousands of thoughts whizzed through her mind, until she decided that it'll be best to deal with this another time and to focus at the task at hand. Merlyn blinked down at the paper in her hand and smiled when she read the contents off the wrinkled sheet.

"Heh," she giggled as memories flooded her mind.

"What're you laughing at?" Arthur leaned over so he could take a look.

Merlyn held up the questionnaire Ms. Finna had them fill in on the first day of class. "Remember this?"

He blinked, but then a half smile appeared on his face. "God, I hated that so much."

"*His favorite color is blue, like his eyes.*" Merlyn batted her eyelashes at him.

"Ha!" Arthur threw his head back and laughed. "Or gold, like my hair, right?"

She giggled, "it's kind of funny, now that we're looking back on it." Merlyn waved the paper at him. "But, they really didn't know you that well, if they didn't know what your favorite color is."
"Oh?" He raised his eyebrow in interest, "and, you know, what my favorite color is?"

"Red," she said confidently, smoothing out the wrinkles on the paper, his silence is what made her look up at him, "what?" He looked at her with an expression that was a mixture of shock and something else that made her heart beat faster, Merlyn chuckled. "I told you, I'm very observant."

"Yeah...you are," he agreed, a soft smile on his face.

"Do you know what my favorite color is?" Merlyn asked, she's just kidding, and didn't actually expect an answer--let alone a correct one.

Arthur mumbled something under his breath, Merlyn leaned in closer and cupped her ear; he ran his hand through his hair and cleared his throat. "Blue looks good on you...it matches your eyes."

"Oh." Merlyn blinked rapidly while blushing. Crap...her feelings are overflowing out of her. "Uhm...Arthur, I--"

The door to Arthur's room flew open and in walked Morgana, followed by Leon. "Hi, guys~!" She sang. "How are things?" She strutted over to the bed and sat down forcefully beside Arthur, jostling the bed. "Oh my...I didn't interrupt something did I?"

"Morgana," warned Leon. She waved her hand dismissively in the air and winked at him as if they knew something that Merlyn and Arthur didn't.

"H-H-Hi, guys!" Merlyn said, her voice hitching at the end. How embarrassing! She was almost caught in the act. Wow...what a dark look, Merlyn thought as she caught Arthur's expression that is currently being directed at Morgana, who--incidentally--looks like she's having the time of her life.

"I just downloaded a new movie, let's all go watch it together!" Morgana said and patted Arthur's shoulder as she stood up and grabbed Merlyn's hand. "Come on, Merlyn, you can come sit with me."
"O-Oh...okay," she said and followed after Morgana.

Morgana turned and smiled at Leon and Arthur. "You guys get the popcorn, okay?"

Leon let out a sigh, shaking his head, but a smile on his lips nonetheless. "As you wish."

Once the girls disappeared out of sight, Arthur let out a loud frustrated growl while running both his hands through his hair. "That damn harpy."

"Now. Now." Leon said hesitantly while laughing. "Let's just go get the popcorn."

Will: We should have yam fries too. You know the ones you made last year?

How much food do you think the three of us can actually eat...?

Will: I NEED MY NUTRIENTS!

Right...

Merlyn shook her head and switched back to her list app and added yams onto her shopping list, even though it's super long at this point! She thought.

"What're you doing?" Arthur's head suddenly appeared beside hers.

She jolted in her seat. "Gah!" Merlyn clutched her chest and turned to scowl at him. "Don't do that!"

"Pft," Arthur laughed, "you're so jumpy, short stack."
"Am not!" She said.

"Are too." Arthur grinned and sat down beside her.

"What're you doing here anyways?" Merlyn looked around the Robotics Lab. "You're supposed to be in homeroom." She said the last part quieter, trying not to draw any attention to them, lest Arthur gets in trouble.

He gave her a quick shrug and leaned forward on his arms, a slightly crooked grin on his face. "I'm skipping."

"You're terrible," she admonished him, a smile tugging at her lips. "How did you manage to convince Khilgharra to let you into the lab?"

"I have my ways," he whispered, then nodded at Aithusa, "the frame is almost done."

Merlyn nodded excitedly and shifted in her seat so he could have a better view. "I know! Isn't he the cutest? I'm trying to decide what kind of material I want for the skin, but that'll come after I'm done with the tail."

"Cool," Arthur said. Elyan came up to the table and greeted them. "Sup, man?"

"Just got done with showing Khilgharra my rough draft," Elyan smirked knowingly at Arthur, "you think George noticed you giving him the slip?"

"Who knows, he was givin' a couple other students crap in class when I slipped out." The two guys laughed and bumped fists.

Merlyn shook her head. "Tsk. Tsk."

Arthur looked over and quickly pinched her nose. "You're such a good little nerd."

"Gee, thanks, my lord," Merlyn said distastefully, rolling her eyes. Arthur smiled.
"Oh! Printer is open! Be right back!" Elyan exclaimed and all but sprinted for the 3D printer station. "GILLI! WE HAVE TO TAKE TURNS!"

"He's been waiting for the printer for awhile now," Merlyn explained when Arthur blinked in surprise, it's a rare sight to see Elyan raise his voice. "I wouldn't put it past him to sit on Gilli so he can finally have his turn on it."

"Heh...interesting. Anyways, what were you making a list of earlier?" Arthur said.

She sighed in a tired way. "It's a grocery list that won't stop growing."

"Grocery list for what?" He lifted one arm and supported his chin as he leaned on the desk.

"Thanksgiving," Merlyn said, "I'm in charge of it this year." She turned to look at him, "speaking of which, what're you doing for Thanksgiving?"

"Oh...uh..." Arthur said awkwardly, "we don't really celebrate it...not somethin' we do anymore..." he trailed off.

"Do you want to come celebrate it with us then?" Merlyn blurted out. Arthur leaned back slightly, shocked with a lingering look of happiness, and she could see him about to decline. "It'll be fun! I'll even bake whatever you want for dessert!"

"I don't want to bother--"

She shook her head. "You won't! You, definitely, won't," she said adamantly. He paused and nervously twisted the ring around his finger.

"Cherry pie," Arthur said and a faint pink crossed his cheeks. "Can you make that?"

"Of course!" Merlyn smiled, all her teeth and dimples showing. "Leave it to me!"
Fridays were the best days of the week, in Merlyn's opinion. She packed up her binder as Arthur stood beside her desk and waited. The two of them walked to the gym together, since the senior boys still had practice before their away game tomorrow. Coach Caerleon had asked Merlyn earlier in the day if she wouldn't mind stopping by for their practice to go over their plays one last time before they were implemented.

"Hi, Coach!" Merlyn greeted as she set her backpack down on the bench.

"Afternoon, Merlyn, thank you, in advance, for coming." Coach Caerleon gave her that eye- crinkling smile of his.

She smiled and waved her hand in the air quickly. "No, it's not a problem."

"Well, since you've been to so many of our practices this week. Here's my last pitch for you to join the team as a manager." Coach grinned and reached into the box he had beside him on the table.

"Still tryin' to win Merlyn over, Coach?" Arthur walked up beside her, stretching both arms over his head...Merlyn was temporarily distracted.

"Can't blame me for trying. Here you go, Merlyn." He handed her a palm-sized box.

Her excitement overwhelmed her as she quickly took the lid off, what she saw increased her giddiness 100%, she looked up at Coach Caerleon with a big smile on her face. "A whistle? For me?"

"If you take on the role as manager, then it's all yours," said Coach Caerleon.

"Really, Coach? Don't you think--" Arthur was about to criticise how lame Coach's idea was.

"I'll do it," Merlyn stated, cutting him off. "I'll join the team."
"Excellent!" Coach Caerleon let out a boisterous laugh that shook his body.

"Is the whistle that nice?" Arthur said curiously and reached out for it. "Lemme see."

Merlyn shifted herself quickly to keep the whistle out of his reach, she frowned at him. "Mine."

"Oi..." Arthur said, furrowing his eyebrows together, "I just want to see it, don't be so stingy, shorty."

"Stingy...eh?" Merlyn said, giving him an evil smile. She put the whistle to her mouth and blew on it sharply.

TWEET

"Three laps around the gym!" Arthur's lips twitched as he raised his eyebrow, looking between her and Coach Caerleon.

Coach Caerleon threw his head back and laughed some more. "Well, you heard the new manager. Everybody! Three laps around the gym!"

Merlyn rubbed her hands together with glee, after having put the whistle around her neck. "Hehehe..." she said diabolically.

"Don't get drunk off power now, shorty," Arthur said with fondness in his voice and pinched her nose before running off to do laps.

Merlyn watched as all the guys obediently started running around the gym, everyone seemed to accept the idea of her becoming their new team manager easily--she wondered why that was? Actually, before she could dwell on that question, there's a different one on her mind.

"What did you give Uncle Gaius in exchange, Coach?" Merlyn said as she glanced up at
"Whatever do you mean, Merlyn?" He's trying to play it cool, she giggled quietly.

"He's the only one you could have asked for information, on how to get me to agree to do something. Now, I'm curious as to what you gave him as payment in return," she explained.

Coach Caerleon coughed. "Two weeks of lunch supervision duty."

"Ah," she said knowingly. "I see. Well, it's like you said," he turned and raised his eyebrow, "it'll be fun, right?"

"Of course." He gave her a quick wink and tapped the side of his nose.

She started turning her head back to watch the guys finish up their warm up, when Coach Caerleon's next words shook her to her very core.

"Starting with a 7 AM practice tomorrow morning, in preparation for the game."

"Ha...?"

Mornings are a difficult concept for Merlyn to wrap her mind around. First off, why can't the day start mid-morning? When the sun is actually up and shining? Secondly, why is it that no matter how many layers she wears in this weather, she's never warm? She practically slept walked to Arthur's car when he arrived to pick her up.

"Morning, shorty," he said in a tone that was way too alert for this hour in the morning.

"Nnngh," she grunted in response, eyes closed, and managed to buckle herself in.

Arthur chuckled. "Not a morning person, right."
"Cold..." she complained and curled up into a ball in the passenger seat.

"Here," Arthur reached into his backseat to grab his navy blue zip-up hoodie, "put this on later."

Merlyn half-opened her eyes and smiled. "Thanks, dollop head."

It was a peaceful drive to the school, neither of them said anything--well, technically in Merlyn's case she might have blacked out for the entire ride. Once she stumbled out of the car and hurriedly put on his hoodie and zipped it up to her chin, they went inside the school to the gym. Most of the guys were there already and were lazily shooting hoops to kill time before practice began. Merlyn managed to make her way over to Coach Caerleon and stood beside him as he looked over some forms. She closed her eyes for a moment to try and get as much down time as she could.

"Is she...sleeping while standing?" Arthur smirked when he overheard one of the guys whisper.

He looked over at Merlyn and couldn't contain the grin on his face. She had her chin tucked into his zip-up (that was way too big for her, like all his clothes were) and she looked like she was fast asleep--except, she would answer questions like she were awake. God, he was so far gone, Arthur thought as he looked away from her; it didn't help that Leon had that stupid knowing look, the one that the harpy usually gives him, on his face (he shouldn't have asked all those hypothetical questions). But, what was he suppose to do? He nearly confessed his feelings for her that day in her room, it was a spur of the moment decision that was backed by the idea that if Will didn't know how to treat her right...then he could. Arthur ran his fingers through his hair in frustration, but he can't do that to her, not when she cares so much for that bastard.

"Alright there, Merlyn?" Coach said, glancing over at her. Arthur immediately turned to look back at her.

Merlyn nodded, eyes still closed and slightly swaying on the spot; so help him if he had to catch her if she actually fell asleep. "Mhm...just peachy, Coach," she said in a sleepy tone.

"Alright, I want to go over some of our main plays for today, I will try and keep this practice short, but I don't want you guys to think this will be a normal thing!" Coach Caerleon said. "The
buses will be here at exactly 10:30, and I want the lot of you ready and packed by then, understand?"

"Yes, Coach!" Everyone said in unison.

Coach Caerleon looked over at Merlyn. "Anything to add, Merlyn?"

She blinked open her eyes and a mischievous smile appeared on her face. "Five sets of lines to warm up." All the guys groaned, but secretly they were glad—normally Coach would double the amount she assigned. Arthur made eye contact with her and hoped his thoughts were conveyed.

"I'm not power hungry," she said innocently, "I'm just practicing for when I become the new supreme leader." She smiled and waved him off (her hand covered by the long sleeve of his zip-up), he scoffed and rolled his eyes. Arthur is probably going to have to take this to his grave, but he really did like how she looked in his clothes, especially when she looked all soft and sleepy—god was he done for.

"WOO! Did you see those punks faces when we wiped the floor with them?!" Gwaine leapt up onto the cement divider and ran along it to the light post and swinging himself down.

Perce rolled his eyes. "If you break something, Coach is going to make you run laps in crutches."

"All that negativity, man," tsked Gwaine as they headed over to Lance's house.

"It helped that Merlyn was there, along with that brain of hers," said Elyan.

Gwaine nodded his head and clutched his chest. "Yes. My sweetheart is amazing."

"She's not your sweetheart, Gwaine," Arthur snapped. All the guys went quiet and shared knowing looks.
Lance coughed, breaking the silence. "You okay there, bro?"

"I'm fine," said Arthur as he let out a huff and walked up the driveway, "why wouldn't I be?"

"Probably has something to do with Maverick on the other team asking Merlyn out in front of—ow! What the hell, Perce?" Gwaine rubbed the back of his head.

"Don't add to the problem," Percy admonished.

"I'm not!" Gwaine said defensively. "Just because the Princess, here, is throwing a temper tantrum, doesn't mean—ow! Elyan!" He turned around and glared.

Arthur twisted his ring and waited for Lance to unlock his front door. They all walked in and kicked off their shoes and made sure they were neatly put away before heading inside (his mom hates when they leave a heap of shoes in front of the door). Arthur went to the kitchen to grab something to drink and opened the fridge.

"Hey, grab me a coke!" Percy said and lumbered up the stairs to Lance's room.

"Me too! Thanks, Princess!" Gwaine followed after Percy with Elyan and Lance on their heels.

"Might as well grab everyone one." Leon reached out to help Arthur carry two cans. Arthur silently agreed and closed the fridge when they had enough drinks. "What's buggin' you, man? You know Gwaine's just joking around like he always does."

He sighed. "I know." Fucking hell does he know.

"Then why the sudden hostility? You were fine before and during the game?" Leon said in that therapist voice of his.

"You sound like Morgana," grumbled Arthur.
"Speaking of which, she wasn't impressed with your behaviour either. Especially towards Merlyn." Leon gave him a disapproving look.

"Look," Arthur said in a frustrated tone, "I know, alright? I didn't mean to snap at her, it wasn't her fault, I know that, okay? I'm an ass and now she's pissed at me, I get it!" The cokes clattered on the counter's surface.

Leon could see the rigidity of Arthur's shoulders, the frustration written all over his face, and he knew the self-doubt is about to settle itself in. "She'll forgive you, just explain yourself and she'll understand." Arthur understood the underlying message: tell Merlyn you like her.

"I can't," Arthur said, "and I won't. It'll just complicate things for her."

"Because you think she's in a relationship?" Leon has known Arthur for nearly his entire life...sometimes he worried about how oblivious the guy really is.

"What do you mean think? Everyone knows she's in a relationship with Will." Arthur turned and leaned against the counter.

That was the problem--well, not problem, but the subject at hand that caused Arthur to snap at Merlyn. He was just irked that Maverick would go and ask Merlyn out like that, the guy had a horrible reputation and he'd be damned if he let a guy like that go after her. He didn't mean to accuse Merlyn of two-timing Will, because he knew she was already in the midst of turning the guy down, but it just came out wrong and he's still at fault. If Arthur really, really, thought about it, he was just jealous and Merlyn shouldn't have to pay the price for his idiocy.

"You should talk to Morgana about that," Leon said. Screw the bet, he thought, the poor guy is in shambles here.

He pulled a face. "Talk to the harpy?"

Leon rolled his eyes. "It might be good for you, learn something new. But, maybe before that, call Merlyn and apologize." Arthur nodded and scrubbed one hand down his face.

"You're right," sighed Arthur, "since when did you become my therapist?"
"Therapist?" Leon scoffed. "I just need to make sure you're in the right frame of mind when we start the game. I can't afford to fork over another twenty dollars to Gwaine."

"Another twenty?" Arthur asked, his eyebrows pulling together over his frown. "Did I miss out on a betting pool?"

"Uh...what?" Leon rushed out. "No idea what you're talkin' about. I'll bring the drinks up first!" He might have forsaken the bet, but if it's still on, exposing the bet is grounds for automatic disqualification.

Arthur looked at Leon as he rushed out of the kitchen without another backward glance; now that Arthur was all alone, he stood in the kitchen, listening to the faucet drip and the cat clock ticking in the background. He pulled out his cell and went into his call history, finding Merlyn's name at the top of it in a flash, he took a deep breath and tapped her name. The call started pending and he held his breath, hoping she would pick up, but wouldn't fault her if she didn't.

"You were very mean, clot pole," Merlyn said in lieu of a greeting.

He let out a relieved sigh and softly said, "I know. I'm sorry."

"For?" Merlyn said, her tone suggesting he better further elaborate.

"For being rude to you, when you did nothing wrong," he said.

"Okay," she accepted, "I forgive you," Arthur opened his mouth to say something, but she continued, "if you admit you're a big dollop head." He rolled his eyes when he heard her giggling on the other end of the line.

"In your dreams, shorty," he drawled, followed by a chuckle, "it's not even a real word."

"Hmm," she hummed, "that's what you think. Are you at Lance's now?"
Arthur picked at a stray thread on his shirt. "Yeah. You guys at the mall?"

"Mhm, going to the food court for some food now, but I have to go now." He heard some shuffling in the background. "Have fun with the guys!"

"Have fun at the mall," he said with a smile on his face, then ended the call.

It wasn't until later in the evening, when the guys finally finished their game-a-thon, did Arthur get home and change into a comfy pair of his shorts and mustered up the courage to knock on Morgana's room.

"Come in." Arthur gulped and rubbed the back of his neck, did he really need to talk to the harpy that badly?

"Arthur, you might as well come in, Leon called me already." That bastard. Arthur scowled and opened the door.

Morgana's room reflected every aspect of her personality; in one corner there were stacks of books and papers, in another, there were random, faceless dolls with different outfits on them (that phase she went through in middle school still gave Arthur nightmares), and random posters of her underground bands she listens to. She spun around in her desk chair to face him, like an evil villain would in a movie (no need to deny it, when they both know it); he walked over and sat down on her bed.

"You have something you want to ask me?" Morgana blinked innocently and leaned against her arm.

Arthur scoffed. "Who're you tryin' to be? The Godfather?"

"I could be, for all you know, brother dearest." There's that diabolical smile of hers...how does Leon handle her?

Morgana laughed. "Leon is a very patient guy, plus he loves when--"
"ENOUGH!" Arthur covered his ears and glared at her. "I don't need to know!"

She threw her head back and laughed, clutching her sides the more hysterical she got. "Okay. Okay." She wiped under her eyes. "Seriously, what did you want to ask me about? Merlyn's already forgiven you for your little temper tantrum hasn't she?"

"Yeah, she has," Arthur said and glared at her, "it wasn't a temper tantrum," he said mulishly.

"You really think you can convince me otherwise?" She grabbed her nail file and began filing her nails. "So, what's buggin' you, little bro?"

Arthur shifted uncomfortably in his spot, a faint pink colored his cheeks, and he looked around the room to try and avoid making eye contact with her. Morgana looked up from her filing and a small smirk appeared on her lips, she knew what he wanted to ask, but the question is: does he have the guts to?

"Is Merlyn's relationship with Will...that serious?" He asked and nervously twisted his ring.

"Hmm...have you tried asking her this? And what does the word 'serious' mean to you?" She tapped her chin with the file and then proceeded to move on to her other hand.

"Oh I don't know," the sarcasm thick and heavily laid on, "maybe because it'd be weird if I did? Also, how can you not see it? He gave her a key to his apartment, they got a dog together, and they spend holidays together?"

"Firstly, that was for the week he was gone in San Francisco. Secondly, sarcasm doesn't suit you. Thirdly, don't use Cerberus as an excuse. Fourthly," Morgana sat up straighter, "Merlyn told us how she's in charge of making Thanksgiving dinner for her, Gaius, Will, and...you."

"What's with that accusing tone of yours?" Arthur grumbled, but suddenly feeling guilty, as if he was a prison of war.

"Trying to hog Merlyn all to yourself. You've always been the selfish sort," she sniffed and put the nail file away. "But, anyways, I came up with a brilliant idea."
Arthur let out a quiet groan. "Oh shit." He knew exactly where this is going.

Morgana clapped her hands together gleefully. "I decided we should have Thanksgiving at our house as one big group!"

Arthur fell back on her bed and ran both his hands through his hair and then down his face.

"Is this something you guys have to do every year? This check up?" Merlyn asked as she stood beside Lance, who was waiting in line to go next.

"Yeah, it's just something Coach has us do. All they do is take our measurements, weight, and a set of vitals," Lance explained as the two of them watched Arthur get his chest measured, Merlyn paid extra attention to that.

"That makes sense." She nodded and looked down at her clipboard, she was in charge of signing everyone in and now, that she was done with that task, she wandered around from station to station to see if they needed help.

She hoped that all of this would finish soon, not that being in a room full of topless, fit males was a problem, she just wanted to make sure she got back in time to hear Freya recount her date with Will--she, absolutely, cannot miss that, and once she hears Freya's story...well, Will knows her well enough by now to know what's coming.

"Hmm." Merlyn picked up the information sheet with interest; she glanced between the paper and the height measurement station. "I'm curious..." She shuffled over to the station and waited patiently for her turn.

"Nex--oh? Merlyn, is something the matter?" Coach Caerleon asked, looking down at her.

She shook her head, a big smile on her face. "No. But, I was wondering if I could get my height measured as well."
He chuckled, the crinkles on the side of his eyes showing. "Of course, stand right here." He gestured to the green tape on the ground.

Merlyn placed her paper down on the table and stood with her back to the metal stand, both of her arms at her side and she stood as straight as possible.

"Ready?" He asked with amusement in his tone.

"Yup," she answered and took a deep breath and held it, hoping it would help--hey, you can't blame a girl for trying. She closed her eyes and started to wish for maybe a couple extra millimeters, and if whoever was feeling especially nice, maybe another centimeter would be good too.

"There we go," the metal bar slid back into its stand, "all finished."

"Well?" Merlyn asked excitedly.

Coach Caerleon scribbled in the height box and handed her sheet back to her; Merlyn took the paper and scanned for her results and gasped when she saw it. "No way..." She looked up at Coach Caerleon and waved the sheet slightly. "Are you serious, Coach?"

He blinked and slowly gestured back to the stand. "We could always..."

She shook her head. "No. No. I'm good! Thank you!" Merlyn scanned the room to look for the guys, who were grouped together and was watching her with interest, and quickly rushed over to them. "Guys! Look!" She waved the sheet in the air. "I grew two inches!"

Arthur choked on his laugh, trying to downplay it as a cough, but his eyes gave away his amusement. "Congrats, short stack." All the other guys covered their mouths, but their shoulders shook from their silent laughter.

"I'm so happy," Merlyn breathed, "Oh! I have to show Uncle Gaius! And Freya, Gwen, and Morgana too...catch you guys later!" She turned, ran back over to Coach Caerleon and handed him her clipboard with all the forms she had and headed for the door.
"Hey, shorty! Wait up!" It only took Arthur five steps to catch up to her in the hallway.

"Yes, dollop head?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Lance was thinking we should meet up today after school to work on the bio project, so we don't have to do it this long weekend," he explained.

"Oh..." Merlyn nodded her head, "that's a great idea. I fully agree, plus, I have to go buy some last minute Thanksgiving stuff on Friday since we have it off, so the quicker we do it the better."

"Want me to come with you?" Arthur offered.

A huge smile appeared. "Okay!" They both stood there for a moment, just smiling and staring at one another. Merlyn started blushing under his look and pointed over her shoulder. "Uhm...I'm going to go show Uncle Gaius my results. See you in class?"

"Oh yeah, kay," Arthur rubbed the back of his neck, and tapped her shoulder with his fist, "wait for me in the lab when you're done. I'll come get you after practice, if you're not going to stop by."

Merlyn nodded, still smiling. "Gotcha."

Percy let out a loud groan and smacked his head down on the table, which was currently littered with scraps of paper. "How do you do it, Merlyn?"

"Do what?" She asked as she handed Arthur more colored sticks to glue onto their DNA strand.

"I'm so fed up with this project." Percy lifted his head and pressed it into his hand. "I honestly don't know how we would have even gotten this far without you."
She giggled and shook her head. "Thanks for the compliment, Percy, but you guys did a lot of this yourselves."

"I guess the good little nerd can be humble, when she's not going power hungry with her whistle," Arthur threw in that sly comment.

Merlyn gave him an unimpressed look. "I am not power hungry."

"Could have fooled me." Arthur pulled a face at her, and she laughed.

"You're such an ass," she laughed and was careful how she shoved him.

Lance suddenly stood up. "I...have to go to the washroom. Excuse me." He gave Percy a pointed look and left the room.

Percy mimicked him and got up quickly. "Yeah...I have to take a leak as well. Be right back."

"At the same time?" Merlyn said and looked at him in confusion.

"Arthur has like twenty toilets in his house...nothing wrong with that. Gotta go!" Percy made a hasty exit.

"What's gotten into them?" Merlyn wondered out loud and started cutting out more colorful sticks and pairing them off.

Arthur let out a breath and placed the hot glue gun down, he glanced over at Merlyn and tried to muster up the courage to ask her outright about her relationship with Will. He decided that he was going to tell her, damn the consequences, because at the very least he'd get these consuming feelings out of him and she'd know and reject him properly. Or, with the smallest glimmer of hope, he entertained the idea of her reciprocating his feelings and was willing to leave Will and give him a chance.
"Can I see your phone?" Okay. He chickened out.

She shrugged. "Sure, my passcode is my birthday, 0229."

"You're a leap year baby?" Arthur asked as he punched in the numbers.

"Yup!" Merlyn grinned. "I'm just that special."

"Don't get too full of yourself," he chuckled.

"When's your birthday?" She said. Arthur held up her phone and pointed to her contacts, she nodded and gave him permission to open it.

"January 1..." was his response as he looked at the list.

"You just have to be a New Years baby, didn't you?" She jokingly narrowed her eyes at him and shook her head.

"Merlyn..." Arthur glanced up from her phone screen.

"Hmm?" She said.

"Why is my name in your phone...Cabbage Head?" Arthur said this in the most disdainful way possible.

He saw her blink and press her lips together, honestly this girl is going to be the death of him, Arthur thought with amusement and fondness. A moment later she broke out into a laugh and had to grab hold of her sides and placed her forehead down on the table.

"S-S-Sorry!" Her response was muffled by the table.
"Also, this emoji isn't cabbage, it's a head of lettuce," he deadpanned and rolled his eyes, which made her laugh even harder.

Once she calmed down she leaned over towards him, their hands just barely touching each others, and looked at her phone screen. "It's what I put in at the beginning, when I first got your number, but you can change your name, if you like. I just thought it was funny."

Arthur paused and looked over at Merlyn. "...am I the only one with a nickname in your contacts?" Not even that bastard Will has one, he thought victoriously. He could see her think it over in her mind, and the surprised look that followed confirmed his suspicions.

"Actually, yeah! You're the only one I have a nickname for. Here, I'll just change it back." She reached out for her phone, but Arthur pulled it back away from her.

"It's fine. Just leave it." He wasn't upset at all about the name, in fact, he's quite pleased that he was the only one she thought to give a nickname to. She shrugged and went back to her task.

That small victory was all he needed to give him the courage to ask this next question. "I was wondering," he cleared his throat, "how long have you and Will been dating?"

"What?" Merlyn snapped her head towards him so quick that it took him off guard. Shit, wrong question? He thought in a panic. "Where the hell did you get the idea that Will and I are dating?"

Wait.

What?

"You guys aren't...dating?" Arthur spoke slowly, trying to wrap his mind around this and trying to not get his hopes up to quickly.

"Uh...no?" She said in a tone that implied 'isn't that obvious?'. "Why would you think we were dating? Why does everyone think we're dating?"
Arthur shrugged and tried to make it seem casual. "It just seems like you two are really close, that's all."

"Well, obviously, we are," Merlyn said. "I grew up with him. He's like my big brother. We've been terrorizing each other since I can remember."

"Like my big brother." The words rang loudly in his mind. Never has a sentence brought such joy to him.

"Oh," his voice hitched slightly, "so you and him...never considered?" He asked while waving his hand in the air.

Merlyn pulled a face and shook her head. "Nope. Never considered it. Besides, he's interested in Freya--" she abruptly stopped and glared at him. "What I just said doesn't leave here, got it?"

Arthur smirked and raised both his eyebrows. "So, Will's interested in Freya?"

She took a deep breath and gave him a look of warning. "Yeah. Freya likes him too. But, again, zip." She made the zipping motion across her lips and pointed at him.

"Right, so you and him are not, have not, and will not be dating anytime soon?" Arthur nearly winced at how eager he sounded.

Merlyn rolled her eyes, fed up with everyone's weird assumptions of her relationship with Will. "No. We aren't. It would be weird considering how I like--" Arthur sat up straighter, extremely interested in what she has to say next.

She coughed, face going red. "--the idea of liking someone. Yeah," she nodded her head, "I like the idea of liking someone," she repeated meekly.

"Oh," he said and rubbed the back of his neck, "right. That is a good thing to like." He internally winced at how lame he just sounded, but with this new revelation he decided that now was his chance, he looked at her. "Merlyn, I--"
"Guys! I'm starving!" The atmosphere shattered at the sound of Percy's voice. "Can we order pizza?"


Arthur groaned and smacked his head on the table.

"I'll go hand in our projects first, okay?" Merlyn said as she held up hers and Arthur, alongside Lance's and Percy's. "Then you guys can meet me in class once you pick up your registration packages from Coach."

"Sounds good, thanks, Merlyn!" Lance said and all three guys waved goodbye to her.

Merlyn walked down the somewhat populated hallways, the guys didn't have an early practice today, which meant she didn't have to wake up early (thank goodness!), but they did have to stop by Coach Caerleon's office to pick up their registration packages for the Intercity Cup Tournament. Apparently, it's just so for the outlying cities they'll be going to and they need to have it signed off as a safety precaution. She's the manager, so she fell under a different category, and Coach said he would take care of her papers.

"Projectssss?" Mr. Manticore hissed from his desk when he noticed her standing at the doorway.

"Yes," Merlyn said as she held up the two DNA structures, "mine and Arthur's; along with Percy's and Lance's."

"Why iss, it, that you guyss, always mange to finish together?" Mr. Manticore peered at her with those black, beady eyes of his.

Merlyn shrugged. "Good timing?"
He huffed and gestured to the table in the corner of the room for her to place their projects. She sent him a smile and headed over to the table, where a few other students were in the midst of depositing their projects.

"Good morning, Merlyn!" Gilli said cheerfully.

She gave him a smile. "Good morning."

"Your project looks great!" He complimented.

"Thanks!" She held up the DNA strand. "Arthur and I worked very hard on it."

Gilli's smile morphed into a more mocking one. "You mean, you worked very hard on it. That air-head probably didn't lift a single finger."

"Hey! Now hold on--" Merlyn had a look of outrage on her face. How dare he insult Arthur!

He continued on. "All he does is ride off of someone else's coat tails and gets to take credit for stuff he didn't do. The guy doesn't even know the meaning of hard work--"

"Enough!" She snapped. "Stop bad mouthing him in front of me!" Gilli took a step back when he saw the angry look on her face. "You know nothing about him! Arthur worked so hard on this project, and I will not stand here and let you discredit his efforts. Just because you don't like him, doesn't mean you have the right to say any of those things!"

Gilli looked over Merlyn's shoulder and his face went pale, but she was on a roll still. "If I ever hear you saying bad things about him again, so help me I'll...I'll...I'll never help you in Robotics, ever again!" She glared at him, "got that?"

"Y-Yeah! Sorry, Arthur!" He spoke at a higher octave and scurried away when he was done.

"Arthur?" Merlyn said, blinking in confusion. "What's he--"
"My hero." That deep laugh, the one that makes her insides turn to mush, could only belong to one person. Her blush overtook her face in less than a second, she turned around and looked up to see Arthur smirking down at her in amusement.

"Hi..." she said softly.

"Hey." He grinned and tipped his chin in the direction Gilli scampered off to. "Looks like you have been hanging out with me too much, if you're starting to use scare tactics like that."

Merlyn pulled a face. "Oh dear...you might be right about that." Arthur threw his head back and started laughing, the kind of laughing that made Merlyn happy that she was able to put such a look on his face.

"Uh, guys?" Percy butted in on their moment.

"Shouldn't we be heading to homeroom?" Lance said.

Arthur composed himself, but the grin on his face didn't drop in size. "Come on, shorty, let's go."

"Yes, alright, okay, I understand, I won't forget about the potatoes," Merlyn sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Will, for someone who's not making the Thanksgiving dinner, you're micro-managing it like no tomorrow."

"As I should!" Will said, "I can't have you forgetting the important things!"

"Hmm," grunted Merlyn as she followed behind Arthur down the vegetable aisle. "Anything else you want to add?"

Will hummed on the other end of the line, but decided he was done for now. "Kay, catch ya
"Bye!" Merlyn said quickly before Will had the chance to add more things.

"There's a lot of food in here, shorty. Are you sure you'll be able to do all of this?" Arthur said as he manoeuvred the cart around.

"The girls will be helping out," she explained as she tossed in a bag of potatoes.

Arthur stopped the cart and looked down at her with a dead serious expression. "You just mean Gwen and Freya, right? The last time the harpy tried to cook something..." he trailed off, in the midst of remembering something, and suddenly turned back towards her. "You do know the fire marshal told our dad to consider switching to electric burners instead, right?"

"Arthur," she reprimanded him, "you can't be--"

"I'm dead serious, Merlyn." She could tell by the expression on his face that he means it. "If you saw the state of our kitchen when it was burnt down to the ground you would understand. Dad almost couldn't put the insurance claim through, because they thought it was done on purpose."

For some reason, Merlyn could definitely see that happening. "Okay then, duly noted, Morgana won't be near the stove tomorrow," she said, then added, "but hey, speaking of your dad," she looked up at him. "He is coming tomorrow, isn't it?"

"Uh..." Arthur hesitated and pushed the cart back towards the aisles.

Merlyn's smile dropped. "He isn't coming?" The sadness, ever so, present in her voice.

"It's not that he isn't," Arthur said quickly, "I mentioned it to him already, but I wouldn't get my hopes up if I were you...he's always busy," he said the last part in a softer voice. Even then, Merlyn could see the loneliness in his eyes.

She placed her hand on his arm. "Well, it'll still be fun with everyone there," there's that look again, Merlyn thought and felt her heart beat faster, "I've always wanted to ride in a fire truck," she
"Pft," he scoffed and turned his head away to laugh.

They walked down each aisle together, with Arthur grabbing all the items Merlyn was listing off from her phone and Merlyn organizing their cart. This feels so domestic, she thought and the usual blush appeared on her face. Just the two of them at the grocery market getting the ingredients to prepare a meal for all their friends and family, if she were truly honest with herself...she wouldn't mind if this was a permanent thing. Her feelings for Arthur excited and terrified her, he's the first guy she's ever liked in this capacity; wanting to be with him, seeing him smile and laugh, entertaining the idea of them being more than just friends. All of those feelings put a smile on her face, and why shouldn't it? She should be honest with herself and Arthur, it's the fair thing to do. But, is she really going to confess her feelings for him in the middle of the grocery aisle? Merlyn looked at Arthur's back as he reached up on the top shelf to grab a box of bread crumbs.

_I like you._ She mouthed the words out in silence, as a quick practice for the real thing she's about to do. With her decision made, she took a deep breath. "Arthur, I--" He looked over his shoulder at her.

"Oh, Merlyn dear!" Her sentence stopped midway.

Both the tops of her ears felt hot. "Hi, Ms. Stueby." The little old lady pushed her cart up next to theirs.

"Good afternoon, sweetie, it's so good to see you!" She brightened when she Arthur. "Oh, how nice to see you again too, Arthur."

"Hi, Ms. Stueby, how are you?" He gave her his poster boy smile and held out his hand.

"I'm doing just fine, thank you for asking dear." She smiled and patted his hand, she took a step back and looked back and forth between the two of them. "My. My. What a lovely sight to see, I always thought young couples who shop together are just the cutest of things." Merlyn blushed to the top of her head and looked at Arthur, who was also at a loss for words.

"What're you shopping for today?" Merlyn asked, trying to change the subject, as she glanced into Ms. Stueby's cart, the sight of it shocked her. Her and Arthur both shared a quick look, that was a lot of alcohol in one cart.
"Oh, the girls and I are preparing for a quiet trip to Vegas this weekend. I'm in charge of getting a little bit of the alcohol as a warm up," Ms. Stueby said with that warm smile of hers.

"Erm...that's great, Ms. Stueby!" Merlyn exclaimed, she subtly tapped Arthur's arm to get him to say something.

"Hope you have a safe flight." He smiled.

"Thank you, you two have a good day now, and have a good long weekend!" She said and slowly shuffled away with her shopping cart, exiting the aisle.

The two of them glanced at each other and wordlessly continued with their shopping. Merelyn internally sighed, walking beside Arthur, and silently wallowed in her disappointment at her interrupted confession. She could try again, but maybe Ms. Stueby was the universe's way of telling her to not try and confess to the guy she likes in the condiment aisle of the grocery store. Her thoughts came to a halt when she was suddenly hip checked by Arthur, she stumbled sideways but managed to catch herself before tipping into the adjacent aisle. She whipped her head around to glare at him, he smirked and raised his eyebrow as if challenging her to make a scene; Merlyn huffed and walked back up beside him.

"She isn't wrong, you know," Arthur said out of the blue. She looked up at him in confusion, "Ms. Stueby," he elaborated, clearing his throat, "we do look like a young couple going shopping."

"O-Oh..." Merlyn knotted her fingers behind her back and blushed, "that's true," she agreed.

Now if only the couple part was actually true.

"Gwaine!" Gwen snapped and brought her wooden spatula down on Gwaine's hand. As her attention was diverted, Arthur snuck in and quickly snatched the plate of butter tarts away and popped on into his mouth. He made eye contact with Merlyn mid-chew and held his finger up to his lips for her to keep quiet, she rolled her eyes and turned her back to him and continued talking with Gaius.

"Ow!" He whined and pouted, "That hurt, my lady." He held his injured hand out. "Kiss it
Gwen shook her head, a faint smile on her lips. "Go and play with the boys, you're in the
way here."

"I'd much rather play with you." He winked and blew her a kiss.

"Can you not hit on my girlfriend while I'm here please?" Lance said tiredly, accepting the
inevitable that is Gwaine, while grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge.

Gwaine nodded. "Understood. I'll hit on her when you're not around."

"Thanks," said Lance sarcastically as the two of them walked out of the kitchen.

"HEY!" Gwen shouted. "Who stole the butter tarts?!

Arthur and the rest of the guys started laughing and went back to their game; all of them were
told to remain in the living room until it was time to eat, which was fine--except it should be illegal to
have such good smelling food so close and not be able to eat it. Which is why the plate of stolen
butter tarts sat on the coffee table between them. He caught sight of Will chuckling and shaking his
head, Arthur was no longer sure how to act around the guy, because he practically accused him of
cheating on Merlyn, in their nonexistent relationship; Arthur gulped and quickly looked away when
Will caught him staring.

"You guys are all friends with Merls, correct?" Will said as he leaned forward, placing both
arms on his knees.

"Yup! She's my sweetheart!" Gwaine chirped.

Will chuckled. "Right, so, out of curiosity, did you guys all assume she and I were dating?"

"Uh..." Elyan said, "kind of, but we all figured out in the end that you guys weren't." He
spared a quick glance in Arthur's direction. "Well...some of us."
Arthur's mouth dried up and he lost the ability to talk...did that mean he was the only one who didn't know this? These bastards, he thought as everyone looked at him with wicked amusement. Morgana sauntered into the room and took a seat beside Leon.

"Why do you ask?" She spoke as if she was part of the conversation the entire time.

"Merls has brought it to my attention that some people," everyone turned to look at Arthur, which made the pink on his cheeks grow darker, "were under the impression that we're a couple. I just thought I'd...clear the air. What with it being Thanksgiving and all."

Morgana giggled. "I wonder who was oblivious enough to believe that?" There was nothing Arthur could say to defend himself, because there really was no excuse. Which is why he had to sit here and take everyone's taunts.

Leon leaned back and sighed, "they must really have their head in their ass to miss something like that."

Arthur glared at him. "Oi..." Some best friend this guy is.

"I mean who could blame them? As my sweetheart likes to phrase it, they can be such a clot pole." Everyone broke out in laughter. Arthur covered his face as he felt it grow hotter in embarrassment.

"Food's ready!" Merlyn poked her head into the living room, her brows pulling together over her frown. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing, Merls!" Will said loudly and ruffled her hair as he walked past and into the dining room.

Everyone followed suit, chuckling to themselves as they passed her. When Arthur came in closer she tilted her head and blinked. "Did I miss something? Why is everyone laughing?"

"It's nothing," Arthur said hurriedly and nudged her towards the dining room, "let's eat."
Merlyn gave him a suspicious look, but nodded. "Okay..."

Compared to the first meal she had in the Pendragon household, this one made her feel all warm and fuzzy inside. Everyone was chattering about random topics and the food was delicious. She looked around the table and the overwhelming feeling of home hit her, I hope Arthur feels this too, she thought and looked over at him. The look on his face told her that he did, in fact, it seemed like everyone shared that look as food kept getting passed around. Something--er--someone caught her attention from the corner of her eye, she looked over and nearly froze when she caught sight of Arthur and Morgana's dad standing in the threshold.

"What's wr--" Arthur looked at her first and then followed her gaze. "Dad!" He said a bit shocked, "You're home."

"I thought you had to work late at the office?" Morgana said, there wasn't as much surprise in her tone, but she was just that good at concealing it.

"Things at the office were wrapped up. But I still have some paperwork I need to look over. Now if everyone will excuse me," Uther said stiffly and was in the midst of walking away.

Merlyn scrambled out of her seat. "Aren't you going to join us, Mr. Pendragon?"

He blinked and gave her an awkward/polite smile. "It is alright, Merlyn. I really must get this paperwork finished. You guys enjoy yourselves."

Something ached inside her chest at the sight of Uther trying to decline sitting with them, maybe no one else saw it, but there was this sad look in his eyes when he saw everyone sitting down together at the table as he stood awkwardly at the threshold.

"I'll put a plate aside for you!" She said. Uther blinked and remained silent. "That way you can have it later." She beamed at him.

"That is...thank you, Merlyn." He nodded at her, with that, he disappeared out of sight. Merlyn sat back down, a sense of pride washed over her as she scooted her chair back into place. Everyone at the table saw the scene and were smiling to themselves; she tapped Arthur's arm.
"Pass me another garlic roll."
Hey, guys!

I just finished my midterms last week. So in celebration, I've written this chapter, and not to spoil anything but...I think a lot of people have been waiting for this chapter, myself included. I hope you enjoy it as much as I enjoyed writing it. I'll be going through and doing some additional edits tomorrow probably since it's really late here on my end.

If you liked this chapter leave a comment or kudos!

Thanks for sticking around,

-SS

"And the long awaited results are in," Principal Annis says as she opens the small white envelope, "your next student body president is..." she smiles (and Merlyn swears she saw a flicker of relief in her eyes), "Morgana Pendragon!"

"Yes!" Merlyn exclaims and in her excitement grabbed Arthur's hand. The entire gymnasium erupted in applause and cheers.

He glanced down at her with a smirk tugging at his lips, looking at their joined hands, Merlyn flushes a bright red and starts to pull back, but is stopped when Arthur tightens his hand around hers. She gives him a small smile and turns her attention back to the stage and watches Morgana walk, elegantly, up the podium. A stray image crossed her mind of herself in Morgana's exact position, except Merlyn would have probably tripped and flew across the stage...thank goodness it's Morgana and not her.

"She's going to be gloating about this for weeks," whispered Arthur close in her ear. Merlyn had to contain the excited shiver that raced up and down her spine, like an eager puppy demanding attention, so he wouldn't notice the effect he has on her when he does something like this.

Merlyn felt a wide grin stretch across her face. "Like you did, when you guys won against the Horsemen last week?"
"That was different, shorty." She could hear the exasperation in his voice, what was it with the Pendragon siblings and their need for outdoing one another? She rolled her eyes, her grin still in place.

"Oh really?" She turned to face him and was prepared to start in on their usual banter, but what she wasn't prepared for was his close proximity. Her heart nearly stuttered to a stop when their noses bumped each other's lightly. Merlyn forgot how close he would have to be in order to whisper in her ear, and it seemed like Arthur wasn't anticipating for her to turn and face him.

"Sor--" Both of them began as they pulled away from each other, a blush slowly forming on their cheeks, but their embarrassment was short lived when, out of the blue, Gwaine's head popped in-between them.

"Whatcha guy's talking about?" That carefree grin on his face a permanent fixture as he looked back and forth between Merlyn and Arthur.

"Nothing!" Merlyn quipped, letting go of Arthur's hand, and faced the stage, once again, to listen to Morgana's well-prepared acceptance speech.

She vaguely heard Arthur mutter something under his breath, but she's just assuming it's about Gwaine and his poor timing, but was it really poor timing? Merlyn wondered, the warmth of Arthur's hand still lingering on hers.

The assembly ended with Principal Annis giving an inspirational speech about looking forward from this point in their lives, and the ability to believe in yourself is something that we all have inside ourselves and that is what Camelot nurtures. She finished off by addressing the seniors and spoke about how the diplomas are a daunting time, but that should we make it out of it, we will be that much more enriched. Everyone clapped and then each class section filed out of the gymnasium.

"Man, I forgot that diplomas are coming up soon," Elyan groaned and stretched his neck.

"Not to mention the tourney is picking up now," Lance added with a dejected sigh.

Percy scrubbed a hand through his hair. "Why are they worth 50% of our final mark?"
"I bet once we graduate they'll change how much they're worth," Gwaine said in a very displeased way.

Merlyn listened and understood the qualms the guys had, she didn't have much to say in terms of the diplomas, which were essentially final exams at the end of the semester in all the core subjects. She, plus everyone else, knows how smart she is and knows she'll do fine on the exams. But, the guys have to find time to study outside of their numerous practices and games; Merlyn looked around at the guys and thought to herself that if it were anyone else she'd be more worried, but she knows them and knows they'll all make it through this.

"Ow..." Merlyn mumbled when someone knocked into her shoulder. This is what happens when people don't watch where they're walking, she thought bitterly and tried to move her way through the crowd. Suddenly she felt herself get tugged sharply to her right and into someone's side, she looked up and blinked when Arthur gave her a look.

"It's hard to keep track of someone as tiny as you." She opens her mouth, a retort on the tip of her tongue. "So stay by my side."

If anyone were to ask her why she's blushing it'd definitely wouldn't be because of what that dollop head...definitely not.

The best part of having assemblies is that they get to miss a majority of whatever class it's scheduled in. As much as she enjoys being in Mrs. Isolde's class, she loves being in Math with Khilgharra; Arthur, on the other hand, not so much.

"What did you guys think of my acceptance speech?" Morgana's voice nearly spooked Merlyn when it appeared out of nowhere. She turned and opened her mouth to respond, but was confused why Leon was making gestures behind Morgana's back towards Arthur.

"It was awesome?" Merlyn said as she continued to observe Leon.

Morgana beamed and turned towards Arthur with a mildly displeased look (but then again, they always look displeased towards the other). "Well?" Leon's gestures grew frantic and Merlyn tilted her head to the side.

"I'm glad you won and not Viv," Arthur said, almost robotic-like, but there was an undertone of genuineness in his voice, "you damn harpy," he said that last part under his breath. Leon let out a
relieved sigh and gave Arthur a thumbs up.

Oh, she gets it now. Merlyn giggled quietly behind her hand, turns out the Pendragon siblings do like hearing congratulations from their counterpart. Poor Leon was just signaling to Arthur that he better say something nice, or else Leon would have to console an upset Morgana. She now understands the compliment Morgana gave Arthur after their away game last week, albeit, they're a handful...they really do care about the other.

"What're you laughing about?" Arthur asked as they headed down the east hallway towards their Math room.

She looked up at him and grinned. "I'm sympathizing with Leon."

"Hmm?" He furrowed his eyebrows, but since she didn't further elaborate he rolled his eyes and shook his head at her.

They both walked into Khilgharra's classroom and Merlyn starts to turn and head for her seat; Arthur, surprisingly, follows after her. She looks back and tilts her head slightly. "What?"

"How come we don't sit together in this class?" He said and sat in the desk behind hers.

"You know," she began while pointing to the desks by the windows, "I was originally aiming for one of those desks, but on the first day someone," she gave him a pointed look, "took the last seat there before I could."

"Ha!" Arthur laughed and leaned forward. "Not so quick then, are you, short stack?"

Merlyn gave him a displeased look. "Shouldn't you be over there now? You're in Kelly's desk."

"I could always swap with them," he said with a smug grin on his face. The unspoken sentence lingering between them: *they would swap if it's with me.*

She tried to hold the displeased look on her face, but it's hard considering how amused she is.
"And you think I'm power hungry."

"Uhm...Arthur?" Speak of the devil, Merlyn thought, turning towards a very confused Kelly.

Arthur's poster boy grin appeared in all its brilliance. "Hey, Kelly. I was wondering if you'd be cool if we swapped desks?"

"Uh..." Kelly blinked. "I mean...that'd be cool with me, but you have a window seat." All three of them glanced over at Arthur's desk. "Why would you give that up?"

He chuckled. "I kind of like the view over here better."

'Fucking hell...' Merlyn went beet red so fast it's probably a new personal record. She looks over at Arthur with a scowl on her face, blaming him for her sudden embarrassment; the worst part of it all? The damn clot pole had the audacity to wink at her!

"Oh...uhm...heh," Kelly laughed awkwardly, feeling the phrase 'three's a crowd' linger in the air, "I'll just go...and sit in my new seat. See ya, guys."

"Bye, Kelly," Arthur said, not taking his eyes off Merlyn.

"Bye, Kelly," she mumbled and tried to focus on not staying red the entire class. "That's abusing your popularity, clot pole." He chuckles and shrugs his shoulders.

At that moment Merlyn's heart went from a steady rhythm to a loud thumping one. Thankfully, in some way, Khilgharra walks into the classroom with his dragon-like grin and proceeds to start the lesson; there was a split moment when he looked over in their direction in confusion, but then his grin grew in size. She tried her hardest to focus on Khilgharra's lesson, but Arthur's words from earlier wouldn't stop repeating itself in her mind--she'd be lying if it didn't make her feel extremely giddy.

"Pssst, shorty," Arthur said softly.

Merlyn leaned back in her seat. "Yeah, dollop head?"
"Why is it seven over three, and not the other way around?" She turns in her seat to point down at his notes.

"He's doing opposite over hypotenuse based off of this angle here," she circled the angle and pointed out the sides, "that's why it's seven over three, make sense?" Her soft voice masked under Khilgharra's booming one. Arthur nodded his head and scribbled in the equation.

"Thanks," he said with a shy smile.

Merlyn returned his smile. "No problem."

Once the class finished, Merlyn and Arthur both packed up their belongings and headed out of the classroom. She turns to him at the end of the hallway. "I'll be in Robotics, but since you don't have practice you don't have to--"

"I'll wait for you to finish," Arthur said and lightly tapped her shoulder with his fist, "then we can have a Street Fighter rematch."

"I'll still kick your ass you know," Merlyn threw that comment over her shoulder as she headed for the lab.

Arthur laughed and shook his head. "We'll see about that!"

***

"Your calculations are so amazing, Elyan," Merlyn says as she flips through the extensive booklet filled from top to bottom with equations and sequences.

Elyan sheepishly rubbed the back of his neck. "Thanks, man. I spent so many hours on it that I almost can't stand looking at it anymore."

"Ugh," she groans, "I know what you mean. I've done so much coding on Aithusa that I'm
starting to dream about it."

"Can you believe we're meeting the first wave of uni reps before winter break?" Elyan said and then lets out a loud yawn while stretching his arms high above his head.

"I'm so nervous." Merlyn picked at the hem of her shirt. "I was telling Arthur the other day that if I'm not dreaming of coding sequences, I'm dreaming about meeting the uni reps. I'm not sure why they always look like giant rats though..." she muttered the last part to herself.

"Speaking of Arthur," Elyan began in a casual tone, "I'm guessing he's waiting for you?"

Merlyn nodded her head. "Yeah, I think he's in the gym practicing while he waits for me."

"Interesting..." he continues with, "so are you two a thing now? Or?" The question is left to hang in the air.

Her head snaps up in surprise. "Elyan! W-W-Why would you think...I mean it's not what you--Really, we're just..."

Elyan pretends to scratch the side of his head in confusion. "I just thought something was different between the two of you guys? Like...maybe Arthur could've been the reason for it?"

"No. No." She shakes her head vigorously. "Everything's sti--is the same," she said firmly.

'Dammit.' Elyan thought, on one hand, the bet is still on and his team might win the pool. But, he's probably going to lose his money to Gwaine, Christmas is coming soon and there's too much time in between for Arthur to confess before Merlyn does. He subtly texts Leon to give him the bad news.

"I'm going to ask Khilgharra if there's any more vinyl," she says and scrambles up from her seat.

"If it's you, Merlyn," blurs Elyan before she could move a step away from their desk, "then everything will work itself out in the end." He had to be very careful, or else he would be
disqualified from the bet.

"Thanks, Elyan," she mumbles sheepishly and walks over to Khilgharra's desk.

***

When Robotics let out for the day Merlyn headed straight for the gym to look for Arthur. She knew she guessed right when she heard the familiar sound of a basketball echoing off the gym floor. Merlyn quietly snuck in, wanting to watch Arthur play, before making her presence known. A small sigh left her lips as she watches in awe, like the first time she saw him in Park Avalon, as he moves smoothly and quickly over the court. Almost like a dancer, she thought. She really does love watching him play, because in those moments, when he's only focused on the game, Merlyn feels so inspired by his ambition and dedication to this sport--the sport he loves so dearly.

Arthur is mid-dribble when he catches sight of her, he's shocked at first, but that easily gave way to his smile as he jogged over to her. "Hey, shorty. Why are you just standing here?"

"I like watching you play," she says honestly, looking up at him with a smile on her face.

He blinks, raising one eyebrow. "Why?"

"Because you look happy when you do, and it makes me happy seeing that," she answers in the most obvious way.

'It's the way he looks at me,' she thinks as her cheeks warm, 'as if I'm the only person in the room.'

'When she looks at me I feel like I'm the king of the world.'

Arthur's eyes, the blue that has now become Merlyn's new favorite shade, were looking at her with this warmed expression. He slowly raises his hand towards her face, stopping(for a second) to ask for her permission, to touch her cheek; she nods her head slightly and she feels the warmth of his palm add to the warmth of her blush.

"HEY GUYS!" Elyan's breathless voice echoed around the gym, along with the gym doors being loudly pushed open.
Both of them jump apart from each other as if they were electrocuted. Merlyn nervously bites the bottom of her lip as she looks up at Arthur, who's currently looking at Elyan as if contemplating murder was worth it. She couldn't deny the sentiment.

"What's up, man?" Arthur sighs in defeat...guess murder is off the table.

Elyan, who appears to have ran quite a distance--if he was this out of breath, gave them a shaky smile. "Forgot to mention...Leon wants us to come over and chill."

"I have plans with Merlyn," he makes a pointed head tilt towards her.

"Well, obviously, you're invited too, Merlyn," Elyan said, "the girls are over as well."

"I swear to--that harpy--" Merlyn places her hand on his arm and he stops mid-rant with an aggravated sigh.

"It'll be fun, let's go," she says with a smile and heads towards Elyan.

'Maybe I should just pull a move from one of my romance novels and just shout my confession to Arthur...' Merlyn thought as they sat in Arthur's car.

Elyan and Arthur were both talking about something, but she was lost in her thoughts as she skipped through various radio stations. What if he doesn't like me like that? That moment they just shared in the gym? Well it was pretty intimate, but they have a lot of those moments, she internally rationalized.

"I think Lance's family is going somewhere over Christmas break." Merlyn blinked, that one word caused her to refocus on her current surroundings.

That's right, she thought. Christmas is coming soon. She carefully peeks over at Arthur, maybe she could confess to him during the winter break? That way no one would be able to interrupt them, and they can spend more time together? Maybe she could get him a gift and have it convey her feelings to him? Merlyn lets out a breath and looks out the window, she could just ask the girls what to do, but there is this part of her that wants to figure this out for herself. The car slows down as they
enter a new neighbourhood that Merlyn's never been to before, but she does see Gwaine's car parked in front of a old Victorian style house, which means they're in the right place. All three of them exit Arthur's car and head up the driveway, with Elyan taking the lead and the two of them trailing behind.

"You've been quiet, shorty." Arthur's voice brought her back out of her thoughts.

Merlyn looks up at him. "And that's a bad thing?" She questions, raising one eyebrow.

He half shrugs and smirks at her. "I'm missing your usual prattle."

She gives him an unimpressed look, which makes him laugh, and walks up the front steps. Once they got inside they could hear all their friends chatting, Gwaine was especially loud, and the three of them followed the voices to the living room.

Gwaine caught sight of Merlyn first and jumped up from his spot on the couch and barreled over towards her. "Hi, sweetheart!" He pulled her into a bone-crushing hug and squeezed all the air out of her lungs.

"H-H-Hi..." she wheezed, eyes wide and bulging, "can't...breathe..."

"Will you stop before you kill her, Gwaine?" Arthur scowled, but kept eyeing her worriedly.

"I just love seeing you so much, Merlyn!" The room at large looked at them in amusement. "I could just confess my undying appreciation for you all day!"

"Gwaine." Arthur and Leon both spoke at the same time, but the warning each one had in their tone differed slightly.

Merlyn could feel him chuckle and give her one last squeeze. "Fine."

Everyone spread themselves out in Leon's living room. Merlyn took a seat beside Morgana, looking around and observing everything in the space around them. It reminds me of home, she thought happily, a warm sensation washing over her. Pictures of Leon in varying stages of his life
were hung and set up on practically every surface; a bunch of trophies sitting above the fireplace and in a glass case by the TV. From the family photo, sitting on the table beside her, she figured out that Leon's an only child.

"He's super spoiled," Morgana said in a gentle voice while looking over at him. "His parents only wanted one kid to spoil for the rest of their lives."

"I didn't know he's an only child?" The guys were busy setting up the game console so all their controllers synced into the game.

Morgana looked over at her and smirked. "He doesn't like other people finding out how much his parents coddle him." A mischievous smirk tugging at her lips. "It's kind of cute, actually."

"But he turned out just fine," Merlyn leaned back into the couch, "all things considered."

"Are we talking about Leon or Arthur?" Morgana joked and nudged her shoulder against Merlyn's. Merlyn laughed and the two of them shared a look.

Eventually, after some coaxing from the guys, the girls were tagged in to play with them and they were broken off into teams. Merlyn internally despaired when she realized it's not going to be a fighting game, Arthur noticed her look and laughed quietly. She turned her head away and snubbed him for that, stupid prat; he only managed to win himself back into her good graces when he spent the entirety of the game covering her from enemy fire. Time passed and, after awhile, everyone decided to order pizza and have dinner over at Leon's house.

"I have pop down in the basement," said Leon as he glances sideways towards the basement door and then back to the TV.

Merlyn stood up. "I'll get it!" She says this eagerly, only so she doesn't have to keep seeing herself get killed in the game--her poor ego can't take it anymore.

She skips to the door and flicks the light on and descends to the basement. Whoa...it looks like a maze, Merlyn blinked and felt taken aback by how large and spacious the space was; there were large shelves located every few feet.

"It's like I'm at the grocery store," she mumbles while trying to find the aisle with the pop.
She manoeuvred through about six different aisles before stumbling onto the correct one "Ah! Found it!" Merlyn pushed up onto her tip-toes and tried to grab the box from the highest shelf; when that didn't work she climbed up one of the shelves and stretched her right arm up while holding herself steady with her left one. "Almost--whoa!" The aisle shifted slightly under her weight and in her shock she let go.

"I got you." Arthur's left arm wrapped around her waist and he took the weight of her body easily. "Are you always looking for trouble, Merlyn?" He teased while reaching up past her to grab the box of pop.

"I would have had that you know," she said while turning slightly to face him, a grin spreading across her face.

He smirked and rolled his eyes. "Would it kill you to say thank you to me?"

"Thank you," she said and her cheeks warm slightly, "I'm always safe when you're around." The smirk on his face disappears as he stares at her with a serious expression, his eyes roaming over her face.

"Merlyn, I--"

"GUYS!" Leon and Gwaine both skid to a halt in front of them, each of them pushing and shoving the other out of the way.

Merlyn and Arthur both jolt away from each other, he makes sure she has her balance before letting go of her waist. The two of them look at each other quickly and turn their heads away.

"Hey guys," she sighs in resignation and smiles at them, "what're you doing?"

"Did--MMPH!" Leon claps his hand firmly over Gwaine's mouth as he gives them a strained smile.

"Nothing. Pizza's here, let's go eat." He forces Gwaine to nod his head and gestures for Merlyn to walk ahead of them. She eyes them as she walks past and wonders how she managed to end up with such odd friends; Leon lets out a loud yelp when Gwaine licked his palm and slaps him upside the head. She laughs as she walks back upstairs, right...she'd want nothing but these guys in
"Okay everyone here knows the drill, right?" Morgana held the small bowl, filled with small slips of paper, out in front of her.

"What about Merlyn and Arthur?" Lance asks as he reaches in first.

A devious smile appears on Morgana's face. "They get their own special bowl."

All the little white slips with everyone's names (minus Arthur and Merlyn's) were assigned to their choosers. Morgana had called for a meeting without the other two's knowledge so they could start their Secret Santa tradition. Before Merlyn had shown up, every year, they would have a blitz pot and do a combination of getting secret gifts and doing a white elephant where they can steal them. This year however, much to Morgana's glee, Merlyn came into the picture and the numbers are now even for everyone to have one person...and she knew exactly who they're getting. They all quickly go to the lunch room afterwards, the guys especially antsy to get there, and sat down at their table. By the end of the day she has put all the preparations in place for the first phase of her plan.

"Merlyn! Hang on a minute!" Morgana called out over the sea of people.

She looked over her shoulder towards Morgana and stopped. "Hey, Morgana, what's up?"

That adorable smile on her face made Morgana feel more diabolical...it's a wonderful feeling.

"So I'm sure Gwen or Freya has filled you in on our yearly Secret Santa thing, right?"

Merlyn nodded and blushed.

"I'll understand if--"

Morgana waved her hand. "Nonsense. Anyways," she pulled a different bowl out of her bag, "it's your turn to pick."

"Oh." Merlyn blinked and nodded. "Okay." she reached in and grabbed a slip of paper.

Morgana watched the blush on her face grow darker as she read the name on the slip of paper...she's
like an open book.

"The rules are the same: No switching and no telling." Merlyn made an agreeing sound and waved as Morgana strutted away.

Step 1. Done.

Intimidation has always been her best asset.

"Morgana!" Riley squawked as he tugged his basketball shorts up.

"HEADS UP! MORGANA'S HERE!" Harvey shouted as he walked past, pulling his jersey over his head.

Arthur stood up from the bench and pinched the bridge of his nose. "How many times do I have to--"

"Time to pick." She shook the bowl in front of him. He glared at her and she glared right back, everyone watched silently as they waited to see which sibling would win this time.

"Fine!" He huffed and reached in while grumbling under his breath. Gwaine and her share a knowing look when Arthur's grumbling stops as he reads the name on his paper.

She puts the small bowl back into her bag and waves at everyone. "I'll be off now! Ta!"

"Wait," he says and looks up, "what about--"

"Hi, Leon, see you at home," Morgana whispers seductively as she runs her hand down his chest, he immediately looks flustered, poor guy just walked out of the bathroom with no clue as to what's going on.

"ENOUGH!" Arthur exclaims while waving her away in distress.
Morgana smirks, always so easy to deceive you, dear brother, she thinks as she walks to the change room doors.

Step 2. Done.

Intimidation has always been her best asset.

***

"Ow!" Merlyn exclaims and shoves her index finger into her mouth to stop the bleeding.

Gwen walks past with an armful of fabric. "Patience, Merlyn."

"Evee fer you to sway." Merlyn pulls her finger out to inspect the damage. "How come you make this look so easy? And I," she waves her injured fingers, "look like a pin cushion?"

"I'm an aspiring fashion designer, you," she says as her lips twitch, "and my brother prefer tools than needles. He calls them pointy abominations."

"I can't disagree. They hurt less," Merlyn mumbles unhappily while going back to her stitching.

After she drew Arthur's name from the Secret Santa bowl she spent the rest of the day trying to contain her glee, this is the chance she's been waiting for! It took four days after that to think of what she wanted to give--er, well, make--him for his Christmas gift, but it involved asking for Gwen's help.

"Thanks again, Gwen," Merlyn said as she scowled at the needle and thread, "I really appreciate your help."

Gwen watched Merlyn as she concentrated on getting the next stitch perfect, a warm smile on her face. "I'm glad to be of help. You know," she began while casually moving some fabrics around,
"if I didn't know any better, it seems like you're using this gift as a way to...confess to Arthur?"

Merlyn instantly flushes as she nervously bites on her lips. "Erm...no?" Her voice gets unnaturally high at the end, "Because that would mean I broke the rule of the Secret Santa game by telling you who I got?"

"Oh! You're so cute~!" In the blink of an eye her face was crushed into Gwen's chest as she hugged her vigorously...almost like what Gwaine does to her on multiple occasions. "But," she pulls away and nonchalantly adds, "wouldn't you rather Arthur be the one to confess?" She's not part of the boy's betting pool, but Lance is, and well...she's his girlfriend.

"I...it wouldn't be the worst thing...if he did..." she trailed off while biting her lip and sighs, "but that's to say if he--"

"I think Merlyn should be the one to confess first." This was how Morgana announced her presence to the room at large (thank god she missed the first part of the conversation), with Freya shaking her head in amusement as she followed in behind her. "The person who confesses first sets the tone of the relationship, you know?" Morgana and Gwen both brightly smiled at each other, but for some reason Merlyn sensed a weird competitive tension between them.

"Lance confessed first for our relationship."

"I confessed to Leon first for our relationship."

The two of them had a stare down. Freya quickly leans in and whispers urgently in Merlyn's ear. "Run, Merlyn."

"What?" She raised her eyebrow.

"Merlyn, you need to confess first!"

"Let Arthur make the first move!"

The shock of having two people shout things at her at the same time caused Merlyn to poke
herself again with the needle.

"OW!"

***

"Arthur!" Percy barked over the headset with the sound of buttons being rapidly hit in the background. "Man! Where the hell is our air strike!!"

"Huh?" He looks up from his phone and back at his TV screen. "Oh shit!" The air strike was called in the nick of time. "My bad..."

"Focus man, I can't listen to Gwaine brag for a week straight if we lose today," Percy huffs and his character moved to a new location.

"Right." He nods even though it wouldn't be seen.

The reason why Arthur was so preoccupied at the moment was because he's trying to figure out what to get Merlyn for Christmas since he pulled her name from the Secret Santa bowl. He's determined to tell her his feelings--even though it seemed like the whole universe was making a laughing stock out of him and interrupting all his attempts. But what should he get her? Arthur pressed the buttons on his controller a little more forcefully than intended and mentally groaned, how do I even go about telling her my feelings? He wondered.

"ARTHUR! MY MAN! ARE YOU EVEN LISTENING?! I'VE BEEN SHOT!" Oh shit. Arthur quickly made his character run over to Percy's and gave him a first aid kit.

***

One of the best parts of her childhood was always having Will there to be a part of it. She didn't have many girlfriends in Ealdor, so she never got to experience the whole sleepover shebang growing up. But she also never felt like she missed out on much, Will and her would have their own sleepovers and although it didn't involve makeup and nails much (he has very steady hands--but don't mention that to him), she loves spending time with him.
"Pass me the box of fried noodles." Will tipped his chin towards the large brown takeout bag while stroking Cerberus's back.

"Did you get my spring rolls?" Merlyn asked as she pulled out each box from the bag, passing the noodles over to him.

He rolls his eyes. "Yeah, kiddo, plus the extra plum sauce."

"No fortune cookies, right?" Will scoffed and gave her a disgusted look.

"Those abominations are terrible for your health, Merls, you shouldn't be eating them," he stated while pointing to the kitchen. "I got us ice cream and cake."

"Good." Merlyn blew out a breath and placed the last container down on the coffee table. "There, last one."

Will took a large swig of his beer while looking down at her fingers. "Do I want to know why your fingers are covered in Band-Aids?"

"Heh?" A nervous laugh left her lips as she clenched her hands into fists. "It's nothing?"

"Nothing...eh?" Will nodded his head slowly while surfing through the various movies on selection. "Must be somethin' if you're willing to keep me in the dark about it."

*Shit. I don't want that.* She worried the bottom of her lip. "I..." her sentence is stopped short and a long silence passes between them. *But where do I begin?* She opens her container of spring rolls.

"Does it have to be him?" Will wonders out loud to himself while giving her a sideways glance, as he gives a small piece of chicken to Cerberus and reaches for a dumpling.

"What?" Merlyn asks around her spring roll, obviously missing the question.
"Nothing, Merls," he tips his chin at the TV, a wry smile on his lips, "what movie should we watch?"

Best part of her childhood? Having Will there to look out for her.

"Ha!" Arthur lets out a hopeless laugh, dropping his pencil onto her desk. "I'm going to fail my diplomas..."

"Come on now, dollop head," chastised Merlyn, "you'll do fine on them. I know you know the answers, you're just stressing yourself out.

"50% of our final mark...and it's on everything we've learned." He leaned back in her desk chair and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his palms. "I'm so fucked."

Merlyn pursed her lips and racked her brain for inspiration, how is she going to drill an entire semester of information into his head? She looked around the room as Arthur continued to dramatically despair over his hopeless situation. That is until she caught sight of his basketball peeking out from his gym bag.

"Got it." She stood up and patted his arm. "Come on, get up and put on your jacket."

He moves his hands to look at her with his eyebrow raised. "Why?"

"I have an idea." A mischievous grin on her face. Normally he would be wary, since Morgana gives him that same look when she comes up with ideas that are questionable in nature, but the excitement in Merlyn's eyes made him get out of the chair and grab his jacket.

"Why are you bringing my gym bag?" The two of them head down the stairs to the front door.

Merlyn brings her index finger up to her lips, eyes sparkling. "Secret."
Winters in the city weren't as bad as the ones in Ealdor, Merlyn will admit that, but the cold never really agreed with her. She huddled up beside Arthur as they trekked through the snow towards Park Avalon; he reached around her and pulled her into his side while rubbing her arm. Merlyn steered them towards the basketball court and planted his bag on the bench while taking out his ball. It's nice that the city clears the snow off the courts, that's another thing Albion has over Ealdor.

"What're you doing, shorty?" He asked as she tugged him towards the key and stepped back from him with a wide grin.

"I'm challenging you to a game. One on one, first person to make twenty points wins."

"Pft," his lips twitch as he looks down at her small excited frame, "are you...sure?"

She nods. "Yup, and I'll win."

"Uh..." he coughs to hide his laugh, "not to be accused of being arrogant again, but I'm the captain of the senior varsity team..."

Merlyn rolls her eyes, grin still in place, and checks him the ball. "Here is the only rule: you have to make the basket--ah!" She holds up her hand to stop him from interrupting, "--and that basket will only count if you're able to answer the question correctly."

He looks at her intrigued and dribbles the ball between his legs. "Okay, short stack, what do I get when I win?"

"Well when you lose," she giggles, "I was thinking you buy me dinner."

"Deal," he accepts immediately, but a new expression appears on his face, a more serious one. "When I win, I want you to listen to what I have to say to the very end."

She nods. "Deal. First question: the interaction of a chemical with an odour receptor protein first causes the movement of what? Go!"
Merlyn reaches in to try and swipe the ball from Arthur, but he quickly sidesteps her, causing her to back up and play defence. He moves the ball so fluidly and quickly between his legs and behind his back that she almost has a hard time keeping up. Luckily, for her, she’s played this so many times with Will that she’s determined to keep her winning streak. Arthur smirks and manages to get past her and go in for a lay up, catching the ball once it goes through the net.

"Nice try, shorty." He smirks.

She turns around and crosses her arms while raising an eyebrow. "Oh yeah? So what's the answer? Oh great one?" She dramatically flourishes her hand outwards and bows.

"Shit," he says and checks the ball to her. A closed lip smile appears on his face when Merlyn giggles.

"The answer is: sodium ions move into a sensory neuron. Okay, score is still zero-zero and I'm up, ask away...my lord."

"Any subject, right?" He gets into a defensive stance. She nods and starts dribbling the ball.

"Which variable means a horizontal translation?" Merlyn tries to get past Arthur, but he manages to keep up with her and cover the same distance with less steps. "Come on, short stack, get past me." She almost slips up when she sees the dark, hungry look in his eyes directed at her.

"Careful what you wish for," she taunts and bounces the ball between his legs and steps around him to grab it and going in for the lay-up. That move gets Will every time. "The answer is $h$. Your turn." She checks the ball back to Arthur.

Back and forth they went, she's leading in points, but eventually Arthur manages to catch up and ties their score. She no longer felt the cold nipping at her, instead her whole body feels like a furnace. "Next basket wins," she pants.

"Watch this." He dribbles and walks backwards to the half court line. "If I make this shot I win this game by default."
"Hey!" She exclaims, followed by a laugh, "That's not part of the rules!"

"New rules, short stack." An intense look of concentration was on Arthur's face as he dribbles the ball in front of him.

Merlyn watched with bated breath, she hates losing, but she also really wants to hear what Arthur has to tell her. A few more dribbles and he stops to line up for the shot, she cups her hands over her mouth as an idea pops into her head.

"Impress me!"

He smiles, licks his lips, and jumps up to take the shot. "WHOA! SHIT!" Merlyn gasps loudly when she sees him slip and fall backwards onto the cold concrete.

"ARTHUR!" She rushes over to him and falls to her knees, then begins to pat him down, his body shaking. "Are you okay? Are you hurt? Is anything broken? Oh my god, you have a game next week!" She pauses when he rolls over and she sees him laughing.

"I-I..." he chokes on his laugh, "sorry...but the look on your face..."

"YOU. ARE. SUCH. A. TOAD!" Merlyn pouts, punctuating each word and begins to wale on him with her small fists. "How dare you!"

"Glad to know you care about me." He grins and sends her a wink.

She scowls at him, grabs some leftover snow on the court, and smothers his face with it. "Prat. Clot pole. Dollop-head. Royal ass. Cabbage head!" Each name was emphasized by drilling her hands (and the snow) into his face; he keeps laughing and grabs both her wrists carefully, moving them away from his face.

"You done?" He looks up at her, his eyelashes clumped together from the snow.

"Yeah," she says and sits back on her heels; she looks over her shoulder at the net, the ball was so close to making it into the net but it bounced off the rim at the moment of impact.
"I missed the shot," he sighs loudly as he sits up and follows her gaze.

Merlyn looks back to him with a warm smile on her face. "But you'll make it one day and I can't wait to see it." A pause passes between, his eyes flicker down to her lips and she does the same to his.

"Hey, Merlyn?" Arthur's voice drops into a low rumble, his eyes get all dark, smouldering, and her heart beats wildly in her chest.

"Yeah?" She says in a quiet whisper.

He leaned in towards her, or she leaned in towards him. Either way...they were both closing that distance. "I really--"

"HOW CAN YOU GUYS BE OUT IN THE COLD LIKE THIS?!" Gwaine exclaims while running over towards them and nearly bowling them over with his hug. He was secretly glad that Morgana activated the Find My Friends app on Arthur's phone...the bet is still on.

"I can't feel my toes." Elyan shivers as he walks towards them with the rest of the guys.

She internally sighed while looking up at them, a smile on her face. "Hey, guys."

***

"Gwen!" Arthur jogged through the crowd of students that automatically parted for him. "Gwen!"

Said person leans away from her locker and closes the door. "Yes, Arthur?"

"Are you busy this weekend?" He leans against the locker, re-adjusting his duffle bag. A nervous smile on his face.
She's actually meeting with Merlyn later on in the day to finish putting together Arthur's gift. "Uhm...I'm free in the morning and early afternoon. What's up?"

"Oh," he furrows his brows, "crap, do you have volunteering stuff to do?" She makes an 'eh, sort of, but not really' face, which prompts him to continue. "Well, I was hoping you'd come to the mall with me?"

"The mall? Why do you need me to go to the mall with you?" She questions.

He chuckles nervously and rubs the back of his neck. "I need some help with my gift?"

"I'm not your Secret Santa, am I?" Unlike Merlyn, Gwen was a pretty decent liar...when she needs to be.

"What?" He scrunches up his face. "No? I just need help with M--yyy, my gift." Gwen quietly laughs behind her hand as she nods,

"Okay, I'll go to the mall with you."

"Great, thanks, Gwen, you're the best." He grins.

"You and Gwaine both know I've been dating Gwen for four years, right?" Lance wraps his arms around her waist and looks over at Arthur. "You guys could at least ask her out when I'm not within earshot."

Gwen giggles and leans up to kiss Lance's cheek. "Going on five, baby."

"Right," Arthur said with a smirk and gives them a two finger salute, "I'll catch you in bio, man, see ya guys."

Once Arthur was out of earshot, Lance rests his chin on Gwen's shoulder. "They're both so clueless."
"They'll get there at their own Merlyn and Arthur pace." She pats the top of his hand and snuggles in closer to his chest.

"My twenty bucks is hoping Arthur's a little quicker," Lance mumbles into her neck. Gwen giggles and shakes her head.

Albion mall is one of the biggest attractions this city has, the Pendragon building is another one, but the reason why was because there is never a slow day at this mall. Arthur picked Gwen up around noon and treated her to lunch before they went to do what Arthur asked her to come along for. As he leaned back in the food court chair, the ones built into the tables, he couldn't help but be silently amused, reminiscing about the past.

"Are you thinking back to the last time you and I were at the mall together?" Gwen steals a fry off his plate.

"Lance was such a nervous wreck." He shakes his head and takes a sip out of the straw from his drink. "He looked like he was about to throw up."

"You and Mithian were the safety net that day..." she trails off while biting her lip. Arthur saw the panicked look on her face when she realized who she brought up.

He shrugs. "It's cool...Mith wanted to be there. We all had a betting pool going, to see if Lance was going to faint before asking you to go...in his words 'steady' with him."

"Do you miss her?"

Arthur went silent as he bounced his knee up and down. A contemplative look on his face. "For the first while? Yeah." His voice stayed steady. "But now, after all this time?" He shrugs. "She doesn't cross my mind anymore."

'I'm too busy thinking about that annoying little shorty.' He smirks as he takes another sip. Gwen watches quietly, mentally cheering on both her friends.

Once they finished Arthur lead them to the store he's been pacing past every day. Gwen covered her mouth with her fingertips, trying to suppress her smile.
"So you need my help to enter Build-A-Bear?"

"Uh...it's not that I need help goin' in..." he hedged, "I just don't know how it works and I don't want to make myself look like an ass."

"You really need to work on the whole 'being too stubborn to ask for help' part of you," Gwen said and gives him an admonishing look while pulling him into the store.

"Funny...that's what Merlyn tells me too," Arthur said under his breath.

The store overwhelmed Arthur, he's always been a shit gift giver (according to Mith and the other two girls he dated briefly), and it worried him that he might mess up his confession to Merlyn if this gift falls through. He walks beside Gwen as she points out different animals and bears that he could pick, but nothing really reached out to him in a way that felt right.

"Maybe I should get he--aaaah," he drags the word out awkwardly, "--a different present?"

"Are you sure? There's still more of the store to check out," She said while raising her eyebrow. "I think this is a really good idea, Arthur."

He turns and gestures around the store. "It's just...none of these bears really say what I want them to say...except that one." Arthur blinks and stares at said bear on the shelf. "Gwen, that's the one."

"Aw, it's so cute," she gushes as they walk over to the middle shelf kiosk.

This bear, soon-to-be Merlyn's bear, had shaggy, golden-colored fur, but the feature that caught his attention was the mildly grumpy look on this bear's face. It was dressed as a mechanic, screwdriver in one paw and work goggles on the top of its head; the only thing he would change about the bear was the outfit he had on.

"Hey, Gwen," he glances down at her, "think you could do me another favor?"
She smirks, looking between the bear and Arthur. "I have a pretty good idea what you're going to ask me, but yes, I'd love to help."

"Thanks," he said gratefully.

"Besides, getting to see you do the heart ceremony is all the payment I'll ever need." She pats his arm and laughs as she roams the rest of the store. Arthur groans and scrubs his hand down his face... no wonder Gwen and that harpy are best friends.

"Alright, so who do we have here today?!" The cheerful store employee exclaims.

Gwen chokes back a laugh and covers her mouth, as he rubs the back of his neck. "Uh...Arthur."

"Arthur! What a nice name!" Jesus Christ she's loud, he thought. "Now, is this bear for a special someone today?" The worker looks over at Gwen.

He quickly halts her in her tracks. "It is, but not her."

Gwen rolls her eyes. "I'm so glad you're always this nice to me, Arthur."

"Hey, I've got to cut Lance some slack somewhere," he says, the side of his lips tipping upwards into a half smile.

"Alright, so who is this special little bear going to then?"

"To..." he trails off, Merlyn isn't his girlfriend--yet--so what does he say? "To someone who is very important to me," he admits.

The worker smiles and hands Arthur the small, red heart. "Let's begin shall we? First, you rub the heart against your funny bone, so your bear will have a good sense of humour."
He nearly snorts at how ridiculous this is, even Gwen is silently laughing at him off to the side. But for the sake of keeping up with the store's appearance...he rubs the heart over his elbow. The worker claps her hands together in glee.

"Next, rub it against your ear, so your bear will be a great listener." Merlyn's a good listener, he thought as the heart traces his outer ear, there's nothing he can't tell her. She'll listen to all my problems and then some...

*I'll help you carry that weight.*

"Rub the heart on your tummy so your bear never goes hungry!" Arthur chuckles and does a quick circle over his stomach...if Merlyn was here she'd call him fat.

"Now on your head so he'll be super smart!" This part actually made him pause and smirk, he rolls the heart between his fingers and purses his lips. "Is something wrong?"

"Huh?" He snaps out of his thoughts. "Uh, no, nothing's wrong...it's just...the person who's getting the bear, well...they're crazy smart already. But, nevermind." Arthur shoots her his poster boy grin and does what he is told.

"Okay, we're almost done! Now rub it over your heart so it can be filled with lots of love." Gwen nearly swoons from how cute Arthur looks while doing all of this.

"Oh! I have a call, be right back!" Gwen quickly steps away from them and picks up her phone.

The worker's smile grows bigger when she looks back up at Arthur. "Finally, give it a big kiss and make a wish!"

He was not going to kiss a fake heart in the middle of a store. The worker on the other hand waited patiently for him to obey her orders. Arthur sighs in defeat and brushes the silky texture over his lips and decides to humor the girl and made a wish.

'Let this finally work.'
"Wonderful! Now we'll just put the heart inside and close your bear up!" A nearby stand catches Arthur's eye and he stops the worker before she closes up the bear.

"Actually...there's one more thing."

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Merlyn nervously tugs at the back of her blazer and keeps the smile on her face. The department heads from Mercia Institute of Technology silently discuss and look over her project proposal, she just finished her pitch and the cold sweat was just about settled on her body. Elyan looks at her from over the shoulder of one of the reps and holds his thumb up, she hopes the expression on her translates well.

"Thank you for time gentlemen," Khilgharra said with a smile and shakes their hands. Merlyn hastily shakes their hands as well and bid them farewell. "I think that went well, don't you think?"

"I think I'm going to throw up." She covers her mouth and blinks rapidly.

Khilgharra chuckles and shakes his head. "Gaius told me to be on the lookout for that and to offer you my best wishes, but to not let you leave no matter what."

"Uncle Gaius is cruel," she complains while wringing her hands together.

"You guys are all doing great." He places a strong hand on her shoulder and continues to walk around to everyone else's stations.

Elyan steps up beside her once Khilgharra's gone and gives her a strained smile. "Gwen threatened to hide my snacks if I pretended to be sick today."

"Uncle Gaius told me that unless I collapse, he won't let me into the sick bay."

"We have people who love us so much, right?" Merlyn nods with a an overly bright smile on her face, even though her throat had a lump in it.
Once the homeroom period ended everyone cleaned up the Robotics Lab and put their projects away, ready for the next wave of representatives once they come back from winter break. Aithusa wasn't fully completed, there were still lots of things Merlyn needed to add and clean up-- this can also be said for nearly everyone else in the Lab. But, Khilgharra said that no matter what stage they're in, so long as they can back their own ideas then the representatives have no right to fault you.

Merlyn bit her tongue as she disinfected her hands, her injured fingers stinging when the alcohol came into contact with them. She pulled out the small box of Band-Aids from her backpack and put them back on her fingers; she only took them off for the presentations, so she could look more professional. The warning bell for first period rang and she quickly grabbed her bag and left with Elyan; he parted ways with her in the hallway when Arthur met up halfway with them.

"How'd the presentations go?" Arthur asked.

She blew out a breath. "Well? I mean..I didn't throw up? So that's good, right?"

"Pft," he chuckles and pinches her nose, "yeah, pretty good. It was really good when you showed it to me the other day."

"My nose might actually come off one day," she grumbles while rubbing it with her hand.

Arthur did a double take and reached out, carefully, to grab her hand. "What happened to your fingers?"

"Eh?" Her voice hitched and she tugged her hand back, "Nothing!"

"What do you mean nothing?" He demanded and pulled them off to the side of the hallway. "All your fingers are covered with Band-Aids!"

"I'm fine, dollop head!" Merlyn said earnestly. "Everything is fine!"

"How'd this even happen? I thought the school is suppose to protect students against stuff like--" He was starting to look more and more pissed off. Merlyn realized that he thinks she got these
injuries from Robotics.

"It's not what you think!" She blurts out; he gives her a sharp look and waits for her to elaborate. "I...I can't tell you yet, but I will tell you, later...okay?" She bites her lip and looks up at him through her lashes. Arthur opens and closes his mouth before letting out a low growl and nodding his head.

The two of them head to class and the subject of her bandaged fingers come to a close (sort of, she could see him glaring at them every chance he got). For the rest of the school day all the teachers spent it doing review for their upcoming diplomas; Merlyn enjoyed it, like always, and Arthur volunteered enough so that he didn't get randomly called on.

"Kay, I'll see you at my place later?" Merlyn shifted slightly so a group of students could get past her on their way to the front doors.

"Yeah, what're you doing now anyways?" Arthur squeezed his water bottle and it squirted into his mouth with precision.

She smiled and held her finger to her lips. "Secret."

"Why do you have so many of those lately, huh, shorty?" He gives her a half smile and pinches her nose.

"Well you'll find out soon enough. But I really have to go now so bye!" She gives his arm a quick squeeze and heads to the front doors.

Merlyn looked both ways before running across the street to hop onto the bus before it left. She dropped her change into the collector and the bus driver gave her a transfer slip. If she timed her trip right then she should be able to make it to the mall and back to her place in time before Arthur's practice is let out.

"Hi! Welcome to Things Engraved. How can I help you?" A peppy worker greeted Merlyn the moment she stepped into the store.

She smiled and awkwardly motioned to behind the counter. "I'm actually here for pick up? Merlyn Emrys?"
The worker's face lit up with understanding and moved behind the counter. "It was just finished this morning. Here," a 30x36 black frame was placed in front of her, "take a look at the engraving and if everything is okay I'll package it up for you." She nods and smiles while looking down at the small silver plate in the bottom right hand corner of the frame.

Merlyn really hopes that this will work.

"Uhm, miss? I'm just curious, but...what's a dollop head?"

Ah. There it is...her instant blush.

Buses in the city are so packed, Merlyn thought as she clutched her frame closely to her body and tried not to get trampled. It's times like this that she wishes Arthur would have been able to go with her, because then he would make sure no one would step on her--well, actually, he'd probably just drive to begin with. Her pocket started vibrating and she had to wiggle her arm free so she could grab it out of her pocket.

"Hi, mom!" Merlyn said excitedly.

"Hi, sweetheart, how are you?"

"I'm good--great, really--how about you? Are you coming down soon? What time's the flight?"

Hunith chuckles. "Yes we'll be coming down soon. I believe Gloria and I will be arriving the day after your diplomas are done."

"Awesome, I can't wait to see you." Her cheeks hurt from how hard she's smiling.

"Speaking of seeing. It crossed my mind the last time we talked...will Arthur be coming over for Christmas?"
"Uh..." That's actually a good question, "I'm not sure, mom. He might be doing something with his dad and sister."

"Well if he isn't tell him to come over. I would like to meet him." Why did Merlyn feel so nervous all of a sudden?

"O-Okay, mom."

"Well, I just wanted to call and see how you were doing; I have to get back to some work now if I want to earn my vacation days. Take care, sweetheart, see you soon!"

"See ya, mom." She ended the call and shifted in her seat, excitement overwhelming her, mom's coming soon! But the sudden realization hit her again and she gulped...oh god...mom wants to meet Arthur.

"There, it's perfect," she gasps as she looks into the, now occupied, frame.

PENDRAGON

1

It took her days, along with her blood, sweat, and tears (mostly a lot of blood), to stitch Arthur's name and jersey number onto this new black jersey. The same black that the Excaliburs wear and the white letters were outlined in the same navy blue stitching. It was the reason why she might die happy if she never saw another needle...ever again. She felt really proud, because if anyone were to look at this jersey they’d think it was an authentic jersey belonging to one of the members on the team (or that's what she hopes). Aside from her bodily fluids going into this jersey it contains all her feelings for him in it too.

"This has to work," she said softly as she holds the frame up in front of her.

The loud footsteps coming up the stairs jolted her from her thoughts. "Hey, short stack, Gaius let me i--"
"DON'T COME IN YET!" She scrambles to put the frame back into the shopping bag for now and pops her head out of the door when she hears hesitant steps.

"Is everything--"

"GIVE ME LIKE TEN SECONDS!" Once the gift was secured safely in her closet she shuts the door and leans against it when Arthur walks into the room with both eyebrows raised.

"You're acting shiftier than usual," he says while taking a seat in her desk chair. The receipt! She rushes over, dives onto his lap, and clamps one hand over his eyes.

"Whoa!" The chair rolls slightly from her momentum. Out of reflex his arms wrap around her to make sure she doesn't fall off and he plants his feet on the ground to keep the chair from tipping backwards.

Merlyn snatches the receipt off the table and, with nowhere else to put it, she shoves it into her bra. "What part of 'wait, give me ten seconds,' do you not understand, you prat?"

"Uh...you do know how long ten seconds is...right?" He responds sarcastically, he gently moves her hand and looks up at her, a scowl etched onto her face.

"You are such a bad listener," she said.

"When have I not listened to...okay, fair enough," he said and rolled his eyes. Merlyn smiles triumphantly and shifts on his lap...wait, why was she still on his lap?!

"Erm..." Her eyes widen and she scrambles off his lap, her facing going bright red. "Sorry!"

Arthur leans back and rubs the back of his neck...he didn't mind the position she was in. The awkward silence nearly suffocated her, but she suddenly remembers her conversation from earlier. "My mom was wondering if you're doing anything for Christmas?"

He blew out a breath and blinks quickly. "I don't think so. Our group is having our party on Boxing Day and my dad takes Morgana and I out for dinner on Christmas Eve."
"Do you want to come over here and spend Christmas with me?" she asks shyly; Arthur looks up at her with that look...again, her blush gets deeper. "And my family of course, we have this massive dinner and afterwards we all go see the Christmas fireworks..." she babbles.

"Yeah," he said, his voice deep and husky--just the way she's grown to like. "I'd like that."

"Great."

The room shrinks down to just the two of them.

Another thing she's grown to like.

Arthur stares down at Merlyn's gift and then up at the apartment, he gulps and wonders why the building (the one he's visited so much now) suddenly looks so imposing. He can't even believe that he let Morgana talk him into letting her dress him for today, but he can't say he's not grateful, considering how he was so nervous he almost left the house without pants on. She put him in one of his thicker red sweaters and dark-washed jeans; internally he's hoping Merlyn's mom isn't expecting him to show up with a dress shirt and slacks. Merlyn's gift was taunting him, he can feel it, it's sitting there silently asking him if he's going to sit in his car for the rest of the day. Arthur sighs and decides to go for it, at least after today he'll finally have an answer.

DING

He runs his unoccupied hand through his hair while holding the box behind his back. The sound of rushing footsteps could be heard from where he was standing.

"Coming!"

A moment later the door swings open and his breath is taken away. Merlyn's hair, which was normally left down or--on rare occasions--tied up into a ponytail or bun, had soft curls for the first time. Her eyelashes, which were already hellishly long (Arthur's noticed them on multiple occasions when they're studying), were coated in mascara and she had eyeliner on. These were just the small details he picked up, but the one that took his breath away was the red dress she had on. The material looked soft and silky, clinging to all the curves on her body; its color matched the same shade Arthur
was wearing and it made her look...beautiful and desirable all at once.

"Merry Christmas, Arthur," she said with that big smile of hers.

"Merry Christmas, Merlyn," he breathes out and returns her smile. He sees her try and look behind his back and he smirks. "Don't be so nosy, shorty."

"You shouldn't be saying that to me." She wags her finger at him, and to his relief, the bandages were gone. "Come on, food's nearly done!"

"Okay."

The two of them head upstairs with Merlyn trying to peak at the gift behind his back and eventually he has hold her head forward so she can't keep turning around. He chuckles, she's obviously pouting.

"Hey, Merls! Where you at?" Oh right...of course Will is here.

"Coming!" She pats the hand he has on her head and rushes through the door and towards Will. Arthur takes this chance to stash her gift in the corner so she doesn't see it.

"I take it you're the Pendragon kid my boy's told me about." Arthur nearly jumps out of his skin and turns around to face a short, yet fierce-looking, woman. She was surprisingly shorter than Merlyn by maybe three inches, had light brown hair (tied back in a ponytail) and familiar looking brown eyes.

"Good evening, my name is Arthur Pendragon," he smiles at her and holds out his hand, the thing about growing up in the Pendragon household is that you're taught to always be on your guard, "Merry Christmas."

"Hmm," she spins the toothpick in her mouth around and looks him up and down, shit, Arthur's never felt this intimidated, "what're your inten--"

Merlyn instantly pops back into the picture, grabbing Arthur's arms and looked around him.
"Auntie Gloria, can we please not get into this now? It's Christmas."

"Get into what, kiddo?" Gloria points her toothpick at them. "What exactly is--"

"Come now, Gloria, you can help me bring up the albums from the basement." Gaius shuffles past them and ushered the fierce woman ahead of him. "Merry Christmas, Arthur." Gaius gives him a knowing smile as he walks away.

"Merry Christmas, Gaius."

"Sorry about that," Merlyn apologizes, "Will's mom can be pretty intense." Everything made sense now to him. "Hey, come with me, my mom wants to meet you!" All the worrying and nerves he had earlier in his car came back and nearly ran him over.

Arthur's first impression of her mom was that she looked just as delicate as Merlyn did. The same pale skin and sharp cheekbones but it was her eyes that eased his nerves, she looked at him with such warmth that he almost forgot how to breathe. Fuck, he thought while automatically smiling, he can't remember what it feels like to have a mother smile at him like that.

"Hello there, you must be Arthur." He holds his hand out towards her, but freezes when she steps up and hugs him, like the first time Merlyn hugged him. "Merlyn's told me a lot about you." She smiles and cups his face in her hands. "Thank you for treating my daughter so well."

"Your welcome," he said and was surprised he even managed to respond. "But it's her that treats me well. So I should be thanking you."

He looks over at Merlyn and sees her looking up at him bashfully...fuck, why did he have to start having those thoughts now? Hunith steps away and touches her fingertips to her lips and glances between the two of them.

"Momma Hunith," Will whined as he walked into the kitchen, "can we eat yet? I'm starving!"

Hunith shakes her head at Will, a look of fondness on her face. "Just about," she turns towards Merlyn and Arthur, "why don't the two of you go and set the table." Merlyn nods and tugs him into the small dining area by the living room.
"You could help too, Will," said Merlyn as she nudged him as they walked past.

Will clutched his stomach and grimaced. "I'm too hungry to work." He stands upright when Arthur's in front of him, they both silently stare at each other until Will claps his hand down on Arthur's shoulder. "Merry Christmas, kid."

"Merry Christmas, Will." They shared another look, coming to an agreement.

Merlyn rolled her eyes at them and continues walking away. "And you call me dramatic, oh tiny one," Arthur said with a laugh.

"Just for that comment I'm not letting you have any cherry pie." She grabs the festive placemats and mockingly frowns at him as she walks around the table, but he could see the mischief in her eyes.

"Fine by me," he says in retaliation and puts a plate down on the mat, "I'll just take some off your plate." Her pink lips, her very kissable pink lips, turned into a half smile. He can't help but steal glances at her as they move around the table and when they both ended at the other end he reached out to grab one of her curls, causing that cute blush of hers to appear. "You look very pretty today. I've never seen you in a dress before..."

"Thank you," she said softly and looked up at him, "Auntie Gloria got it for me." Thank you, Auntie Gloria, he thought.

"How come Will's dad isn't here?" Arthur looks into the living room to see if he missed the man by chance.

A sad look appeared on her face and he started to panic; Merlyn gives him a small smile and places her hand on his arm. "Will's dad passed away when he was young."

"Oh." God, he feels like such an ass for asking that.

"He was KIA," Will announced from the doorway, he was holding a silver tray with a large turkey placed on top. "Killed in action overseas...not a bad way to go, right, kid?"
"Will," she stresses his name as if it should mean something.

"I'm just saying, Merls, I thought he'd want to know more about the people you care about in your life." Will looks over at him with a smirk in place.

Arthur squared his shoulders and nodded. "I do."

"Heh," Will grins, and Arthur feels like he passed a test, "not bad. So what do you want to know?"

"How did you end up in Ealdor with Merlyn, if your dad was in the army?" He will not back down from Will's challenge.

"My parents did a lot of the moving around business before I was born. Ealdor was where they decided to make it a permanent home. It was my dad's last tour before he came home for good. And well," Will shrugged, "turns out it was his last tour."

*But he never came home.* Those unspoken words lingered in the air.

Will clapped his hands together and winked. "Well, that should give you some idea what you're up against, kid. I'm a decent shot, but my Ma?"

"Can take the skin off your back with her eyes closed," Gloria finished as she walked in with a large bowl of mashed potatoes, "there's still more dishes to bring out, William."

Will made a face. "I hate how you only use my first name when I need to do stuff. I'm a grown man, Ma."

Gloria had a loud and deep laugh. "If you know I need you to do something then go do it!"

Arthur watched Will interact with his mom and was suddenly hit with feelings he thought he has long since accepted. He loved his mom and he'd give anything just to see her one more time, but
those were feelings he has accepted and moved on from. It's just...sometimes he wished for one more moment, to remember how it felt to have a mom in his life. Arthur jumped slightly when he felt Merlyn's hand on his arm, he looked down to see her giving him a warm smile.

"I could always share mine with you."

God. He's in so deep.

The thing is it's not that he hates eating dinner at home with his dad and Morgana--it's not. But when the entire meal consists of silence and discussions about taking over the family business, well then, the meal doesn't seem as enjoyable. Arthur cut into the turkey on his plate and listened to the conversation around the table, he even liked talking to Will (when the bastard wasn't poking fun at him). He can also see how much everyone at this table loves Merlyn, but it caught him off guard how easily they welcomed him in their circle.

"So my boy here tells me you're the captain of the basketball team, Arthur?" Gloria's plump cheeks were rosy red from all the wine.

"Yeah, but it's not that big of a deal really," he said sheepishly, trying to not be arrogant in front of Merlyn's family.

"Nonsense!" The wine in her glass sloshed around and it was by some miracle none of it spilled. "That's a great accomplishment! Tells me what kind of man you are, and from what I can see you're a pretty fine man already." She throws him an exaggerated wink. Gaius chuckles and raises his glass at Arthur.

"Ma..." Will deadpans, she waves him off, and he goes back to shoveling more food into his mouth.

Merlyn laughs quietly beside him and he knows she's onto him about the whole downplaying his arrogance thing. "I agree. You seem like a fine young man to me, Arthur." He nearly freezes at the sound of Hunith's voice and her words wash over him like a warm blanket.

"Thank you," he said earnestly. Hunith smiles at him from across the table and he knows his cheeks have gone stupidly pink.
"Alright. Alright." Will rubs his hands together. "Since dinner is over, let's go break out the poker set."

Poker? Arthur glanced down at Merlyn, who had her lips pressed together and shrugs her shoulders. This little liar, he thinks while shaking his head in exasperation. Everyone gets up and clears away the table and once it was clean Will came back with his poker set. The buy-in was $15 and they gave Arthur the choice if he wanted to participate or not...he handed his money over to Will. He had some suspicions that he'd probably lose his money by the end, but he'd be damned if he backed out in front of Merlyn.

"Her whole family are card sharks.' He thought as he glanced down at his cards. Arthur was down to his last couple of chips and was probably going to get taken out this round if the next two cards in the river aren't a five and ten. Two things happened then, one, Merlyn trailed her foot along his leg, two, he was somewhat embarrassed that he got a semi that quick. He looks at her to see what the big deal was, but she was staring straight ahead at the table, the perfect poker face in place.

"Merlyn?" Gaius tipped his chin at her.

"I fold," she said and tosses her cards. Arthur felt her brush her foot against his leg this time, and instead of getting fully hard (thank god the table cloth draped over his lap), he caught on to what she was doing.

"Arthur?"

"I'm all in." He pushes the last remaining chips into the center. Hunith, Gaius, and Gloria all got taken out of the game early on.

Will laughs and shoves his chips in as well. "I'm all in too."

Gaius flips over the last two cards and Arthur almost jumped up out of his seat in excitement. "Yes!" Will exclaims and flips over his cards. "Trip Jacks! Whatcha got, kid?" Arthur flips his cards over and he couldn't contain his grin.

"FULL HOUSE! HOW?" Will stands up in outrage. Then he looks over at him and Merlyn, narrowing his eyes. "Merls, you helped him...didn't you?"
"Why would I help him when I'm after the pot as well?" She said innocently and pushes Arthur's winnings towards him.

"I'VE BEEN HAD!" Will wails and leaves the room. Everyone else at the table begins to laugh and stand up from their seats, announcing the end of the game.

Gaius gives them his eye-crinkling smile. "You guys can wait in the living room while we get ready to head downtown to see the fireworks."

"We can split the pot," Merlyn said and begins to divvy up the money.

He reaches out to stop her. "Nah, it's yours, shorty. I only won because of you."

She smirks and tucks the money away. "And I would have taken you out as well."

"How do you even do it?" He asks as the two of them head to the living room, he sees the contemplative look on her face, and jokingly adds. "You did promise, that, you'll tell me your secrets."

"I can count cards," she said and looks over at him when he's too shocked to speak. "I promised you no more secrets." She's cute when she blushes, Arthur thought as he took a seat on the couch and she sits beside him. They sit there in silence and he feels his palms start to sweat as he eyes her gift sitting in the corner beside the couch.

"I-I.." she stutters and clears her throat, "I have a gift for you. I'll go get it." She hastily stands up, but before she could leave, he carefully grabs her wrist.

"Wait. Before that, open mine first," he blurts out.

***

Merlyn looks back at Arthur and blinks. "You got me a present?"
She sees him roll his eyes and smile. "Don't act coy, Merlyn, it doesn't suit you. I know you've been eyeballing it all night."

"Have not!" She said, trying not to smile.

"Have too." Arthur grins and reaches over to grab the box. "Here. Open it."

"Bossy," she grumbles, but excitedly takes the box from him.

The box was wrapped in really nice gold wrapping paper with a large silver ribbon on top. Merlyn tried to guess what the gift was based on the size and weight of the box, but she was stumped. It wasn't super heavy, nor was it feather light...what did he get her? Arthur makes an impatient sound and she sees his knee bouncing up and down nervously, his eyes were telling her to hurry up. She giggles and rips at the wrapping paper.

She gasps. "You got me a Build-A-Bear!" Her fingers move quicker to remove all the paper and she opens the top of the box shaped like a house. "It's so cute!"

The bear had golden-color fur that felt super soft and tickled her fingers and a slightly grumpy looking face; it had a screwdriver in one paw and mechanic goggles on its head. But the cutest part about this bear was the basketball jersey he had on that was identical to Arthur's uniform, except in a miniature version.

"I, uh," he clears his throat, "wasn't sure if you'd like--"

"I love it!" She breathes and hugs it to her chest. "What did you name it?"

Arthur shrugged. "I thought you'd like to name it."

Merlyn nods her head in excitement, then holds the bear in front of her, the name came easily to her. "Arthur Jr."

"What." He gives her a deadpan look, causing her to burst into a fit of laughter. "Why?"
"Because he is you, dollop head," she teases while waving the bear in front of him. Arthur huffs and slightly glares at the bear as if searching for the similarities (aside from his jersey). "Oh, there's a voice box?" She feels the hard plastic under her fingertips and presses the button.

"Actually, wait--" Too late. She bites her lip and gives him an apologetic look as a voice comes out of the bear--Arthur's voice in fact.

Merry Christmas, shorty A quick sigh.

Look, Merlyn... A short pause. Then Arthur's voice from the box rushed out the next part.

I like you. I like you so much I don't know what to do with myself and this is my way of telling you that.

Both of them go quiet. Arthur covers the bottom half of his face and twists his ring on the other finger and Merlyn's gone so red she's wondering if she forgotten how to talk.

"Y-You...like me?" Her voice was barely above a whisper as she turns to face him.

He nods and reaches out to cup her face. "I meant everything I said."

"Everything you said, or everything Arthur Jr. said?" She says in a breathy voice as he leans in closer to her face.

"No one likes a clever clogs, shorty," he smirks and looks down at her lips.

"But you do?" She questions, her insides warming from the way he's looking at her with hooded eyes and a small smile at the corner of his lips. She took that look as a yes, Merlyn I do, now can I kiss you? "Wait," she places her hands on his chest, Arthur stops immediately and opens his mouth to apologize, "before that," her cheeks grow warmer as he starts to grin, "can I give you your gift?"
He gives her a shy look and rubs the back of his neck. "I'll be right back." She gets up and runs over to the hallway closet where she stashed Arthur's gift last night and rushes back over to him. "Here."

"Do you always get a kick out of trying to best me in everything?" Arthur said while looking at his present and then at her.

She waves off his comment. "Open it."

Arthur chuckles and tears the blue wrapping paper clean down the middle. Merlyn could see the grin on his face disappear and a shocked look takes its place, she nervously bites her lip and waits for him to say something...anything really. She watches him trace his fingers over the small plaque in the bottom right hand corner.

*I'll always be your biggest fan*

"Even though I'm pretty short," she says softly, trying to get him to laugh and not look like he forgot how to breathe. In the blink of an eye he put the frame down and pulled her into his arms.

"Merlyn." The way he says her name against the skin of her neck does things to her that she's never experienced before. He pulls back and tilts her head up towards his and pauses an inch away from her lips. She closes her eyes and leans into the close the gap.

"Hey teenagers! Time to go!" Will shouts from the front door stairs.

The two of them jump at the sound of Will's voice. Interrupted *again*, Merlyn thought bitterly, the look on Arthur's face told her he thought the exact same thing. He sighs and gives her a smile, she returns it and they both get up off the couch and head to the front door. Merlyn stared at Arthur's back as they descended the stairs, growing more irritated with each step.

'Fuck it.' She thought and grabs the back of his sweater. "Arthur."

He turns around with his eyebrow raised. "Y--mmph."
She had the advantage on the stairs, because, for this one moment, she was at the perfect height to grab his face and kiss him. They break apart quickly when she pulls back. "No more interruptions," she says seriously, "I like you, Arthur. I really, really like you." With that she quickly brushes past him (frozen like a statue) and runs down the last couple of steps and put her shoes on and heads out to Will's car.

They both quietly sit in the backseat of Will's car. Neither of them saying anything, and luckily Will wasn't able to question them about it either since he got a call from one of his coworkers. Merlyn jumps slightly when she feels Arthur take her hand in his, the heat from his hand warming hers up; she smiles and quickly looks out of the window to hide her blush.

It didn't take long for them to get to Albion City Park and it was a Christmas miracle that they all managed to find parking. There was heavy foot traffic as they made their way through the gates, everyone trying to find a good spot to stand or sit. An announcer comes on over the speakers and informs them that the fireworks will begin any minute. Merlyn tries to make it through the crowd, but there was just so many people! She ends up stepping onto a patch of black ice and nearly would have slipped and cracked her head open if Arthur wasn't there to catch her.

"Here, this way." He leads them through the crowd easily and manages to find an empty spot for them to stand.

Merlyn looks around them and realizes they got separated from her family. "Where's--" The first loud explosion diverts her attention as she looks up at the sky and sees the first firework. Arthur brushes her hair behind her ear and cups the side of her face.

"It's like you said," he leans down and this time she's prepared for it, "no more interruptions."

Her first kiss she gave to Arthur.

Her second kiss...well that's still happening.

Fireworks lit up the night sky.
Hi, guys!

It's been awhile and even I was anxious to know what happens next. My semester is coming to an end in 3 weeks. Then I'll have a three-week break before I start my third year of practicum. Hopefully, all goes smooth and well. But I won't bore you guys with the details.

This chapter is my first ever attempt at writing a specific scene...you'll know when you get there. Please take it with an open mind lol.

If you enjoyed this chapter please feel free to leave a comment behind or a kudos!

Thank you so much,

-SS

Merlyn rolls towards the wall and ignores her phone, hugging one of the many pillows on her bed to her chest. A moment later the buzzing stops and she wondered if she has dreamed the whole incident, she was just in the midst of returning to sleep when...

"You know, that call could have been life or death, short stack." Wow. Her dreams are getting more and more vivid if she's able to get Arthur's voice down to a tee. "Scoot over."

"Mmm," she whined and buried her face into her pillow, "go away...so annoying...not real..."

He chuckles, and the bed dips under his weight. "You're a mean little thing in the morning aren't you?" He grabs a strand of her hair and twirls it around his finger.
She raises her head and blinks sleepily. "Arfur?" She mumbles and pushes her hair out of her face as he lets go of it. "How'd you get in?" Her sleep-addled brain is having a hard time catching up to her.

"Fire escape." He smirks when she shakes her head at him.

The time on her alarm clock took her off guard. "It's 6 o'clock in the morning...."

"Early bird gets the worm, Merlyn." She glares at him and rolls back to her original spot, deciding it was best to ignore that statement.

Her body was hyperaware as he climbed over her under her blankets, the memories of yesterday making her blush and feel all giddy. When they all came back home last night from the fireworks display the two of them didn't get a chance to be alone again to discuss what happens now after they've kissed...two--er, actually, three times--her ears go red at the memory. Will had to go and be all annoying and not leave them alone as she was saying goodbye to Arthur at the door, so he left as they awkwardly waved goodbye (she glared at Will the whole time they walked back up the stairs). She had decided to call it an early night and went to her room, only to get scared to death when Arthur was waiting for her outside her window on the fire escape.

*Are you trying to get yourself killed, you stupid toad!*?

*Relax, shorty, I just wanted to say goodnight to you.*

*Didn't we already do that?* She looked over her shoulder and then back at him.

He grinned. *I wanted a proper one.* She blushed and pushed up onto her tip toes as he leaned down, their lips meeting each other half way.

*Night, Merlyn.*

*Goodnight, Arthur.*

Merlyn's toes curled as she tried to keep her happiness within herself. *He likes me back!* She
hid her face from him so he wouldn't see the huge smile there. Arthur moved around and got himself comfortable as she peeked over at him. "My bed can barely fit the both of us," she mumbles and blinked her eyes sleepily.

He shrugged and looks around himself. "I dunno seems fine to me."

"That's because you have more surface area to work with," she mutters under her breath.

Arthur blinks, a scowl slowly forming on his face. "Are you calling me fat, Merlyn?"

She presses her lips together and composes herself. "Well, it's not like I'm calling myself fat, am I?" Both of them go silent as her words linger in the air; Merlyn cracks first, "pft," she looks at him with half-moon eyes and starts laughing into her pillow. Eventually, Arthur gives in and starts laughing with her and the two of them try their best to keep their voices down. "Is there something important you need to tell me, that couldn't wait till later on today?"

"Not really." He wraps his arm around her waist and pulls her into his side. "Do I need a reason to visit my girlfriend?"

"Girlfriend?" Merlyn blushes and looks up at him shyly.

"We've waited this long haven't we?" She snuggles closer to his extremely warm body, those words making her heart beat quicker. "Unless..." he trails off awkwardly.

She shakes her head. "N-No," her voice quivers in her attempt to contain her giddiness, "I like it."

"Don't you mean you like me?" He reaches over and brushes a few stray hairs out of her face.

She rolls her eyes and scoffs, trying not to smile (his head is only going to get bigger). "Arrogant." A yawn escapes her lips and she rubs her eyes. "Sleepy." She settles into his side and yawns again.
"Oi...shorty," Arthur cranes his neck forward to look at her, "aren't you falling asleep too fast?" He tightens his arm to get her attention.

"Warm..." she sighs happily and wraps herself around him like ivy, a moment later, her breathing evens out and she's out like a light.

'Shit.' He covers his mouth with his free hand and tries to fight off his stupid grin. 'She's cute.' The room lapsed into a silence and slowly, but surely, Arthur fell asleep as well.

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Hunith stood in the doorway of Merlyn's room, her fingertips hovering over her lips as she tries to contain her amusement. From the conversations she has had with her daughter, over the course of a few months, she could tell that Merlyn has grown to like this boy a lot. And Hunith didn't even have to worry about Arthur not reciprocating those feelings, especially since he couldn't take his eyes off of Merlyn all of last night. The two of them suited each other, or maybe that's just a hopeful mother's wish that her daughter's first love gives her everything she got when she met Balinor. But because she's a mother, the fear and worry that her daughter will get hurt lingers in her mind. Her deepest fear becoming a reality that day she saw Merlyn's face on TV as a hostage.

'Pendragon...' She shakes her head and reminds herself of what she taught Merlyn all her life: a person is not defined by their name alone. 'This boy deserves the same chance as anyone else.' With that thought in mind, she quietly slips away from the door, closing it behind her, and knocks on the wall outside in the hallway.

"Merlyn, dear, breakfast is ready!" She quietly chuckles when she hears muffled whispers and loud shuffling from inside the room.

"Coming, mom!" Came her daughter's frantic reply.

She went back downstairs to the kitchen and set another plate down on the table. A few minutes later she heard the doorbell go off and she waited in the kitchen as she heard--before she saw--her hurricane daughter as she jumps down the stairs and rushes towards the door.

"I'll get it!" She said and disappeared in a flash.

Arthur Pendragon will grow into a good looking man...when he's not scowling at my daughter, Hunith observed as she divided the slices of turkey bacon onto everyone's plates. He stood
a good length above Merlyn, and Hunith had to mentally apologize to her daughter for the short genetics she inherited. It looked like he was reprimanding her about something, Hunith figured it out a moment later when she followed the direction of Arthur’s glare and saw the red mark on Merlyn’s knee. She chuckled softly as she took the blueberry muffins out of the oven, the poor boy is going to have his handful if he decides to worry about all the mishaps that Merlyn runs into, or in this case...falls down from.

"I'm fine, dollop head." Merlyn rolled her eyes as they approached the kitchen.

His scowl deepened. "Yeah, this time," he huffed, "next time just walk like a normal human being."

"Coming from the oversized monkey that likes to climb fire escapes," she retorted.

"Good morning, Arthur, how nice of you to join us for breakfast." Hunith brought them out of their own world and the two of them blushed when they realized it wasn't just them in the room.

"Thank you for having me, Mrs. Emrys," Arthur said politely.

"Hunith," she corrected with a smile, "any friend of Merlyn's is more than welcome in our house."

"Boyfriend..." In all the years she's watched her daughter grow up, there were only a handful of times she's seen her daughter get extremely flustered and embarrassed. "He's my boyfriend, mom." The look on Arthur's face was a mixture of happiness, smugness, and shyness all mixed together.

"Oh," she said in a false surprised tone, "I had no idea." She blinked at Arthur, who now looked like a deer caught in headlights. "Well then, I have a question for you, Arthur."

"Yes." He stood upright and waited.

There's nothing for her to worry about, she smiled. "Do you like your eggs scrambled or sunny side up?"
All four of them settled in for breakfast, and Gaius (having been busy in his office) was also informed of the couple's relationship as he took a sip of his coffee. The man raised his eyebrow, but continued reading the newspaper as if this wasn't brand new information; Hunith shook her head in exasperation, sometimes her brother was so dense, she kicked his shin and gave him a pointed look.

Gaius furrowed his brows but caught on a moment later. "Oh. Oh? Oh," he looks over at Merlyn and Arthur, "congratulations to you both. It wasn't as if everyone was expecting--ow! Hunith!"

"More syrup you two?" Hunith smiles innocently and changes the topic.

Gaius got up three-quarters of the way through breakfast to see a patient that came to visit him, and the three of them finished up shortly after that. Merlyn announced that she's going to change before they left to go to the super market to get stuff for their friend's party later on. Which left Hunith with Arthur, who was staring after Merlyn in a panic, her daughter is a pretty impulsive person...poor boy.

"I'll just clean up, you can wait in the living room, Arthur," said Hunith as she picked up one empty plate.

Arthur abruptly stood up and started gathering the rest of the empty plates. "I can help!"

She smiles, her eyes crinkling up at the sides. "Thank you."

Warm water poured into the left side of the sink, Hunith poured in the dish soap, and bubbles started forming. She started washing the plates, then handed them over to Arthur to rinse. Having Merlyn for a daughter means she has gotten used to reading various emotions off her face when she knows something is up--Arthur is not an exception to this, and so, she waited for him to speak first.

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'Don't drop the fucking plate.' His palms were getting hot like they do when he's getting ready for the jump ball at the start of a game. "Mrs. Emrys?" He winced at the slight tremor in his voice.

"You can just call me Hunith, dear." She gives him a gentle, motherly smile.
Arthur nods dumbly and lowers his voice, "Hunith." He coughs and tries to continue, "I just..." He trails off and clenches his jaw, why is this so hard?

Hunith looks up at him patiently as she washes her hands and dries them off on the towel. "Just what, dear?"

He stood up straighter, dried his hands and clenched them into fists. "I just wanted to let you know that I meant what I said yesterday. I'm thankful to have Merlyn in my life, and I want you to know that I respect her a whole lot. You may have doubts about me because I'm a Pendragon and I know my family has a reputation, but I'll protect her, like she protects me. I--" His voice stutters to a stop when she reaches up and places her hand on his cheek.

"If it's my blessing you're asking for...you already have it."

***

"What were you and my mom talking about earlier?" Merlyn asked as they walked out of the grocery store and back to his car. She's been dying to know, when she left him to go get changed he had this panicked look in his eyes, but when she got back he looked completely at peace.

Arthur smirked at her and hit the unlock button on his key fob and popped his trunk open. "She told me how lucky you are to find someone like me." He laughed when she gave him an unimpressed look. She shivered from the cold, but started to grab the shopping bags out of the cart; Arthur stopped her. "Go wait in the car, I'll do this." He handed his keys over to her.

"I can help--" She pressed her lips together when he gave her his signature shut up, Merlyn look. So, begrudgingly (but also kind of touched), she went and sat in his car while he loaded the bags into his trunk. It's so nice that he has an automatic car starter, she thought happily; his car was already warm when she got in and all she had to do was put the key into the ignition to start it and the vents continued blasting warm air. She also gleefully started in on her radio channel surfing.

BZZZT

Merlyn glanced down, into the cup holder, at his phone and saw that he got a text from Lance; she quickly looked away when she heard the trunk slam shut, a few moments later the driver door opened and Arthur got in. He put the car into reverse and slowly backed out of the parking spot.
"You have a text from Lance." She pointedly looked down at his phone.

He was in the midst of shoulder checking as he responded to her. "Read it to me."

She hesitantly reached out for his phone. Merlyn has a very strong sense of privacy when it comes to going through other people's phones, yeah she's extremely nosy, but she always asks for permission before going through certain things. Arthur noticed her hesitation and chuckled before grabbing his phone, unlocking it with his thumbprint, and pressing it into her hand.

"The password is my birthday, whenever you want to unlock it." He let out a grunt when another group of people walked behind his car.

"Okay." A pleased smile appeared on her face as she went into his messages and opened Lance's.

"He's asking you what time you'll get back home and if you plan on picking me up...why does he want to know if you're picking me up?" Merlyn wondered out loud, furrowing her eyebrows at the screen.

"I stopped asking questions about stuff like that." He finally got his car out of the spot and now they're leaving the parking lot. "You'll never get an answer."

She shrugged. "True. Hey!" She looked over at him with a big smile. "What apps do you have on your phone? Can I look?"

"Sure." He reaches over and quickly pinches her nose, laughing when she growls at him.

Merlyn swiped through the phone, it mostly had workout and fitness apps, but there was also the NBA app, and the same social media apps she has on her phone. She tapped on a few of them to see what the contents were but didn't stay long enough since she lost interest.

"Oh," she blinked when she accidentally tapped on one of the apps, "you have this app turned on too?"
He glanced over at her and then back at the road. "Which app?"

She turned his phone screen for him to see. "That Find My Friends app." She sat back in her seat and tapped on various names to see where they were.

"What?"

"It's this app that lets you track your friend's whereabouts, I never even knew it existed until Morgana showed it to me and made me activate it," she explained and added, "I don't get the point of this app, it's kind of freaky don't'cha think? Being able to--"

"Those bastards..." Arthur's deep growl both excited and confused her at the same time.

"What's wrong?"

He kept one hand on the steering wheel and pinched the spot between his brows with his other one. "I know about that app. We only ever use it when we want to fuck with each other."

"Uh...fuck with each other...how?" She said curiously.

"Now I know how all the guys knew when we were together...I'm going to pummel them," Arthur said the last part with such a serious look on his face that Merlyn couldn't help but giggle, he looked over at her with a glare. "This isn't a laughing matter, short stack."

"I don't see how this app has anything to do with us?" She tilts her head and presses her lips together to suppress her laugh.

He groans. "Yesterday wasn't my first go at trying to tell you I like you." Merlyn thought it was cute when Arthur gets embarrassed.

"Me either," she said; Arthur looked over at her with an incredulous look. "I tried confessing to you that day we were in your room, but Morgana came in and interrupted me."
"You mean I've been stressed these past weeks for no reason?!" Luckily, they were at a red light.

"Well, it's not like I wasn't stressed out either!" She said defensively. "You're the first guy I've ever liked and I've never confessed to anyone else before you!"

Arthur blinked slowly at her, which didn't help her blush at all; the car behind them honked when they didn't move once the light turned green. He turned his head back to the road and released the brake. Merlyn waited for him to say something--anything--but he kept quiet and covered his mouth with one hand. She leaned in and narrowed her eyes at him.

"Are you smiling?" She said in disbelief.

"Heh," he moved his hand and a full out grin was on his face, "So I'm the first guy you've ever liked?"

Merlyn flushed to the tips of her ears and sat back down in her seat, crossing her arms and looking out of the window. "No!" She said childishly. "I'm not talking to you anymore!" And she will not admit that she loves when he laughs that deep, rumbling laugh of his. "Stupid prat..." she grumbles.

"Aw come on, short stack," he says with a smile in his voice. "You can't choose that be upset over, Merlyn." He reaches over and lightly pushes her back and forth. "There are plenty of others things you can be a baby about, shorty." She is resolute in her silence, not even her favorite nickname will crack her. Nope. It won't. "Babe," he drags the word out while grabbing her hand, to hold in his and resting it on his thigh closest to her, and rubbing his thumb in small circles overtrop.

She paused at the mention of that word...babe? Her lips press together to stop herself from smiling. It doesn't replace shorty as her favorite nickname, no way, but it made her heart flutter all the same because it's another term of endearment that shines a light on their relationship. As it turns out, Merlyn is a complete sucker for it.

"You're so arrogant," she said and narrows her eyes at him. He grins and winks at her quickly before looking back at the road, his hand still holding hers firmly.

"So, are you up to get some payback on those bastards?" Arthur asked with excitement.
Merlyn raised one eyebrow. "Those bastards are our friends, aren't they? But," she casually shrugs, a smirk on her lips. "I'm game if you're game."

"I knew I could count on you, shorty." She's an absolute sucker.

They got to Arthur's just as Freya was getting dropped off by her dad; Merlyn waved enthusiastically at Freya's dad and he returned it with a smile. Arthur unlocked the front door and they went inside, Freya got her shoes off first and continued further into the house, Merlyn lingered behind when he gently grabbed her arm.

"You know the plan?" He said in a low voice.

She rolled her eyes. "It's not much of a plan since we're just waiting our opponents out."

"That's the point," he chuckled, "if we can get them to crack first and tell us about the bet then we win!"

"I do like winning," she grudgingly agreed and then looked up at him, "so from this point onwards we pretend like nothing has changed?"

Arthur's expression softens and he runs his fingers through her hair and pulls her in closer. "Yeah...but don't forget that things have changed, okay?"

She likes how he can easily read the emotions on her face. "Okay."

All of their friends were none the wiser that the two of them knew there was a betting pool going on, and Merlyn was pleasantly surprised by how much fun she was having messing with them. But, there were moments, when she looked over at Gwen and Lance, who were acting like their lovey-dovey selves and there was no sense of the word 'personal space' with the two of them, Merlyn couldn't help but secretly want to do that kind of thing with Arthur. Which is ridiculous considering how they just confessed to each other yesterday, established their relationship today, but it's just they've waited so long! She forced herself to snap out of it and turned her focus back to the video game.

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"I think they're on to us." Gwaine pulled Percy off to the side and spoke in a low tone.

Percy scratched his head. "Why do you think that?"

"First, they're sitting *way* too far apart from each other, that's the most obvious thing. Second, the princess looks too at peace with himself. Third, my sweetheart keeps lookin' at Gwen and Lance as if she's jealous of their PDA. Hence...I think something has happened between the two of them." Gwaine ticked off three fingers and held them out towards Percy.

Percy shrugged and a 'well what do we do about it?' look. "How are we suppose to prove it?"

A diabolical grin spread across Gwaine's face. "Leave that to me, my friend. Leave that to me."

***

Merlyn glares harshly at the TV screen when her character was shot...*again*. Her ego wouldn't be this badly wounded if her and Arthur were on the same team. she huffed and waited for the respawn timer to finish counting down. She has to admit that it's nicer to be on a team with Arthur so he can cover her from enemy fire, compared to her just moving her character around awkwardly and cursing under her breath when she gets shot. Suddenly she felt someone sit, really closely, down beside her.

"Hi, sweetheart." Gwaine winked and rubbed up against her.

She let out a laugh. "Hi, Gwaine." From the corner of her eye, she saw Arthur's head snap over towards them and he sat up slightly.

"Want me to help you?" Before she could even respond to his offer he already wrapped his arms around her and placed his hands over hers on the controller.

"Uhm..." Her voice hitching a bit at his close proximity. It's not like this was brand new information, Gwaine's always a touchy-feely type of person, she should know this exceptionally well, considering how she's always on the receiving end of his affections. But now that there's Arthur--speaking of which, poor guy looks like he's about to break his teeth from how hard he's clenching his jaw. She's wavering between wanting to laugh and feeling bad for him.
"You know," Gwaine began, "this isn't a very comfortable position." Merlyn was about to nod her head in agreement, but he caught her off guard when he fully shifted his body so that his legs were on either side of her and her back was to his front. "There! Much better," he said brightly and continued to manipulate her fingers on the controller.

"Hey!" Arthur squawked.

"Is something wrong, brother dearest?" Morgana batted her eyelashes while stroking one hand down Leon's arm, the other hand was resting below her chin.

Arthur opened and closed his mouth and glances sharply over at them. "Nothing. Gwaine just shot my character for no reason."

"It's called winning, princess," Gwaine said and hugs Merlyn tightly to his chest. "Isn't that right, sweetheart?"

"Pfft..." she laughs nervously, "yeah?" That's right, the whole point of this was to win the bet, so she will stick it through.

Having Gwaine help her through the game improved her stats tremendously. But in her excitement, she could potentially win the game! She didn't notice the amusement in the room as everyone watched Arthur glare at Gwaine, and due to his attention being focused elsewhere, he's letting his character get killed off each respawn. Eventually, the video game ended and they were looking for something else to do.

"Merlyn, can you help me with drinks?" Morgana stood up and gestured for her to follow.

She scrambled out of Gwaine's hold and nodded. "Okay!" There was a quick commotion as she was leaving the living room, but she missed it.

All she heard was Elyan's voice, "Arthur, my man! Where do you think you're going?"
"You need to step it up a notch, Gwaine," Morgana said as she stood outside of the washroom he just came out of.

Gwaine grinned. "You do know Leon might be out twenty bucks if I step it up a notch?"

Morgana sniffed. "Or you could be the one who's twenty in the hole. Either way..."

"This is getting interesting," they both said at the same time with matching evil grins.

***

A shiver raced down Merlyn's spine, why does she feel something ominous is about to happen? She just finished passing the last cooler out and was about to sit down when someone--oh, Gwaine--pulled her into his chest with one arm. Arthur instantly sat upright and glared at where Gwaine's arm was resting.

"Oh look, sweetheart," Gwaine said with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

Merlyn gave him a perplexed look. "At what?" She followed his gaze, her lips twitching when she saw what he was holding above them. "Mistletoe?"

"Mistletoe." He nodded his head. "And you know the rules."

"But Christmas is over!" She laughed.

"Hey," Gwaine shrugged in an exaggerated manner, still firmly holding onto her, "it doesn't say it's only applicable on Christmas." She giggled and hit him lightly on his chest. "The rule states that you must kiss whoever is under the mistletoe with you, and I don't make the rules, so what do you say?" He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively and puckered his lips.

Technically...she's already given her first kiss to Arthur, she thought. Plus, if they wanted to beat their friends at their own game this is one way, besides, it's Gwaine--it's no big deal. Merlyn sighed and closed her eyes and waited for Gwaine to kiss her. She heard movement happen around them and suddenly she heard everyone gasp. She opened her eyes, wondering why Gwaine hasn't just kissed her to get it over with.
"Wha..." She covered her mouth in shock as she took in the spectacle before her.

Arthur had Gwaine's head in his hands, but that wasn't the spectacle...Arthur was kissing Gwaine! She blinked rapidly, trying to decide if this was really happening or not. Arthur pulled back and quickly let go of Gwaine's face.

"There," he swept his hand up at the mistletoe, "you got your kiss."

Gwaine smacked his lips together, a contemplative look on his face. "Eh..." he made an iffy gesture with his hand. "That was ight. Not the best, in my opinion." Then he gave Arthur an exaggerated frown.

"Pft!" Merlyn tried to hide her laugh behind her hand. But when everyone else in the room broke out in laughter she had to join them. In the process of being laughed at Arthur lightly shoved Gwaine off to the side and stood beside Merlyn with an exasperated look on his face and a smile trying to fight its way onto his lips.

"So who confessed first?" Freya spoke in that soft, kitten-like voice of hers, but everyone in the room went silent to hear the answer. It seems like they're busted now.

Merlyn cleared her throat, trying to keep the false charade up. "What? N--"

"I did," Arthur stated with a smug smile on his face. Merlyn blinked up at him as Gwaine, Percy, and Lance all threw their fists into the air and cheered loudly, while the other two guys groaned.

"TEAM ARTHUR TAKES THE POT!" Gwaine clapped his hands together gleefully.

"Excuse me? Team Arthur?" Merlyn glared up at Arthur when it clicked into place. "You figured out the bet, didn't you? And you were going to let my team lose." A wide smile appeared on his face as he held his hands out on either side of him. "Tch." She clicked her tongue against her teeth, then turned and faced everyone. "Arthur's lying, he didn't confess first. I did."

"Whoa! Hang on a minute, you're just making things up now, short stack." Arthur reached
out to grab her shoulders, but she childishly turned away and placed her hands on her hips. 

"Am not."

He crossed his arms. "Are too."

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

"You didn't even say you like me! Arthur Jr. did!" She waved her arms in the air to emphasize her point.

"Aw! You named him Arthur Jr.?" Gwen cooed, remembering the bear she helped Arthur pick out, but the two of them ignored her, or rather they didn't even hear her. The rest of their friends did and watched the scene in front of them avidly.

Arthur's eyes widened and he scoffed. "Who's voice do you think was coming out him? George Clooney's?"

"That's...that's beside the point!" She's trying so hard not to get flustered. "The logistics of the bet is who confessed first and I was the one to say it out loud and in person! So Team Merlyn should win the bet!"

"But you opened my gift first, so Team Arthur won," he pointed out.

Merlyn pouted. "I would have been first if you didn't stop me! That should be taken into account as well. Plus in my confession I told you I really, really like you, extra points should be given to my team!" Gwaine opened his mouth, about to point out that the bet wasn't using a points based system, but Leon clamped a hand over his mouth, effectively stopping him.

"Oh yeah?!" Arthur raised his voice. "What do you think I meant when I told you that I like you so much I don't even know what to do with myself?!"
The whole room lapsed into silence as the two of them stopped bickering and stared at each other. Merlyn felt her blush creep its way up her neck, onto her cheeks, and pooled in her ears. Morgana, Gwen, and Freya were all giggling gleefully behind their hands, while the guys shared knowing looks.

'I guess...for once...' Merlyn thought while looking up at him.

"Team Arthur won the bet," she said softly and knotted her fingers together behind her back.

"YES!" Gwaine clapped Leon on the back roughly. "Told you the princess would pull through!" Leon let out a loud, agonized moan and shoved Gwaine away from him.

"I told you to not bet against Gwaine, you'll never win." Percy tipped his cooler at Leon and tilted his head back to take a long drink from his bottle.

"Let's watch a movie now, instead of playing a game." Gwen changed the subject while patting Lance's shoulder. "That's enough excitement for one day."

Everyone agreed and spread out around the living room. Merlyn zeroed in on one of the smaller couches that had a blanket on it, she's mentally telling herself that losing once in awhile is good for her, keeps her humble...next time there's a bet she totally going to have her team win. She was in the midst of getting herself settled in comfortably when Arthur's large body came up beside her and moved to sit behind her.

"Hey," she gave him a small frown, "you're too big to sit here. It won't fit the both of us. What did we say about your surface area?"

He rolled his eyes. "For someone so smart, shorty." Arthur moved his legs so she was between them and pulled her back so she was laying directly on his chest and draped the blanket over both of them. His arms wrapped themselves around her waist underneath the blanket; the edge of her sweater rode up slightly, leaving a sliver of skin exposed and his thumbs rested on that spot.

She takes it back. She takes it all back! Maybe she wasn't meant for this kind of public display of affection. Her face felt so hot that it might melt off her face! Gwaine chuckled and winked at her when she looked over in his direction. Arthur's chest vibrated when he grunted and pulled her in closer while glaring at Gwaine. She giggled and smiled, momentarily distracted from her earlier embarrassment. It seemed like the only person who was over thinking this was her.
The intro to How the Grinch Stole Christmas appeared on screen, she settled herself against Arthur and relaxed. Hearing the steady beating of his heart and the slow rise and fall of his chest brought familiar feelings back to her when she remembered the last time she was in a somewhat similar situation. A few minutes into the movie she waited for a specific scene to come on before she lifted herself up off his chest and whispered into his ear.

"Look. It's you." The Grinch turned around and the scene panned out to show his scowl.

Arthur was silent at first and looked slightly shocked, but then he choked back a laugh and tightened his arms around her as he buried his face into her hair to continue silently laughing. Pleasure radiated through her body when his thumbs lightly stroked her skin and she squirmed against him. Things got worse when she felt his body respond to her squirming and she went still; Arthur played it off and just hugged her to him and continued to watch the movie, so she followed his lead.

Was it naughty of her to think that the next bet could be when they finally have sex? She pulled the blanket up higher to cover her face and stared at the TV, feeling like some spirit might hear her request and make it come true.

It felt like this winter break wasn't so much a break as it was a period of high stress events condensed into a small time frame. Merlyn was currently sitting on Gwen's bed with Freya as they waited for Morgana to come back from the washroom. Freya had a Cosmopolitan magazine open and they were both reading the various articles in there when the door opened, Gwen coming in first followed by Morgana.

"Wow," Merlyn breathed, eyes wide and mouth slack, "you look gorgeous, Morgana."

"Yeah..." Freya agreed.

The long, flowing, red gown cascaded over Morgana's body, held in place by the zipper and the gold chains clasped behind her neck in a seductive way. Her shoulders and the upper part of her back were left exposed; a thorn-like belt, decorated with gold leaves, was cinched around her waist, emphasizing her curves.

Morgana grinned. "Thanks, girls. But, a special thanks goes to you, Gwen." She winked at
her and blew a kiss.

"I do what I can." Gwen smiled and turned to eye Freya next. "You're next, Freya."

Freya squeaked and hopped off the bed and followed after Gwen to the washroom, leaving Merlyn alone with Morgana, who was admiring herself in the long mirror propped up against the closet.

"Leon's one lucky guy," said Merlyn with a grin.

Morgana looked at her through the mirror with a closed lip smile. "So is Arthur once he sees you in the dress Gwen designed."

She blushed and knotted her fingers together. "I won't look as good as you though..." she mumbled.

"That's crazy talk, you and Freya are both so cute," stated Morgana in her no-nonsense tone.

"But I don't want to be cute...I want to look desirable like you do in your dress." Her ears felt hot as she confessed her thoughts out loud.

A slow, diabolical smile stretched across Morgana's face. "Desirable? My, my, my, Merlyn, is this what I think it means?" She gave Morgana a shy smile and nodded her head. "Oh this would be hundred times more exciting if it wasn't about my br--"

"What did we miss?" Gwen asked as they entered the room again.

"Our little Merlyn is growing up! And thinking about sex!" Morgana said excitedly.

Merlyn sat upright and frantically blinked. "Now hang on a minute--"

"Did you and Arthur already do it?" Freya hiked up her maroon-colored dress and scurried over to Merlyn and sat down on the bed. "Did it hurt? Or is it like what they said in the magazine,
"Lance was so gentle our first time," said Gwen with a wistful look on her face.

Morgana tapped her chin with one of her manicured nails. "Leon is surprisingly s--"

"Guys, wait!" Merlyn exclaimed and covered her cheeks with both hands. "W-We didn't have sex yet...we just started dating, and I mean I would like to..." she shook her head. "What I mean is...there hasn't been a proper time...really..."

"His birthday is coming up, and birthday sex is great sex, in my opinion." Gwen held up the dress bag that belonged to Merlyn. "Your turn, Merlyn."

Birthday sex?! She nearly tripped over her feet following after Gwen into her sewing room. Merlyn felt a little embarrassed when she stripped out of her normal clothes and down to her undergarments. Gwen, on the other hand, was too preoccupied with getting the dress ready to notice.

"I find putting on sexy lingerie helps with that desirable feeling you want," Gwen said as she unzipped the dress and waited for her to step in.

Merlyn blushed deeper. "Sexy lingerie?"

"The ones you're wearing now are fine, there's something about the way cotton looks on an untouched body." Merlyn held the front of the dress while Gwen went around to zip it up. "But, you can never go wrong with lace." She leaned in and whispered quietly, "don't tell Arthur I told you this, but he has a thing for lacy, red lingerie."

Merlyn was keeping mental notes of all the things Gwen was divulging to her, when her next thought doused her excitement with ice water. "Uhm...Gwen?" Said person looked up at her while attaching the last piece of the dress. "Do you know that because of...Mithian? And all the other girls he's dated?"

"Would it make a difference if I said yes?" Gwen asked warily.
"...no," came her reply once she thought it over, "it doesn't."

"Does it bother you that Arthur's slept with other girls?"

This Merlyn could answer without a second thought. "No. It doesn't." She elaborated when Gwen raised her eyebrow in surprise. "He's his own person. I can't fault him for sleeping with other girls before we started dating, for all he knew this relationship didn't exist. His past is his past. Who he is now was born from that, and that's who I'm with."

Gwen gave her a warm, closed lip smile. "So you don't plan on waiting till marriage?" She teased, eyes sparkling with mischief.

"My virginity isn't really that important to me," she said honestly. "I know that there's people who want to wait till marriage, and that's perfectly fine. I also know people who give it up as quick as they can, which is also fine. I think I sit somewhere in the middle of that, I just want it to be with someone I trust...and I trust Arthur," she said the last part quieter.

"Aw!" Gwen, Freya, and Morgana cooed (the latter two came over since they were taking too long).

"Fantastic!" Gwen stepped back with a flourish of her hand. "Everything fits!"

Merlyn was in the process of turning around to look at herself in the mirror when Gwen's dad called them downstairs to have lunch. Guess she'll have to look another time, Merlyn thought as they three of them stripped out of the dresses. Morgana and Freya finished first and headed downstairs before her and Gwen.

"Hey, Merlyn?" Gwen stopped her by the arm.

She looked over. "Yeah?"

"It was Lance who told me Arthur's dirty little secret," she said, and how she managed to not have an evil grin on her face (like Morgana when she's scheming), Merlyn will never know. "The boys really like betting against each other. Sometimes the rewards are...interesting."
"Thanks for the information, Gwen." She flushed to the tips of her ears and followed after Gwen as they left her sewing room.

"Make do with it however you want." Ah...there's that evil grin.

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"AHA!" Arthur shouts as he sits up slightly. "I'M FINALLY GOING TO--"

"SPECIAL MOVE!" Merlyn exclaims as she rapidly hits the four buttons on her controller in a consecutive manner.

Arthur sucks in a deep breath. "FUCK!" His controller falls harshly to the ground.

"YES!" She drops her controller onto her lap and throws her arms up in the air.

"I swear I almost had you!" The game pulls up her character on the screen as the word WINNER appears overhead.

"Almost had me?" Merlyn places one hand on her chest while looking at him with an eyebrow raised. "As if!" She throws her head back and laughs at the pout on his face. "Did you think that just because we're dating now I'm going to take it easy on you? I didn't come here to lose." He grumbles under his and crosses his arms; she gives him a soft look. "For what it's worth, you always beat me when we play Call of Duty."

A beat passed between them before he slowly nods his head. "True," he accepts mulishly.

She giggles and leans back against his bed and sighs. "It's nice how you get to practice whenever you want since you have a console. I only get to play whenever I'm here or at Will's place." His lack of response prompted Merlyn to look over at him. "What's wrong?"

"Does it bother you?" He asks turning to face her.

Her brows furrow overtop of her slight frown. "Does what bother me?"
Arthur gestures to his room at large. "This." Then hesitantly at himself. "Me." He sighs when she still looks at him with a blank expression. "My dad is a wealthy person."

She nods her head slowly. "O...kay? Is this suppose to be new information...?"

"I’m a rich kid," he states, looking at her expectantly--as if that explains his sudden weird behaviour. Merlyn tilts her head to the side and bites the bottom of her lip.

"Arthur...what're you trying to get at? I already know all these things you've pointed out?"

He runs his hand through his hair. "Does it bother you that I have all of these things?" The softness in his voice is what prompted Merlyn to reach out and touch his cheek.

"You're such an idiot sometimes, dollop head," she says with such fondness; he pouts slightly, but she gently rubs her thumb over his cheek. "Do you honestly think that I wasn't aware of what I was getting myself into when I started to like you?" She glances around the room quickly. "Sure you're from a wealthy family and that'll always be a part of you, but that isn't just who you are."

"But all these things--" Arthur tries to frantically point out all his belongings. "--my dad he--"

"Isn't it a form of his love?" She says softly. "He does what he does because he loves you and Morgana dearly. All of those things are a part of his love and who he is."

"So it doesn't bother you?"

"Arthur..." she sighs and gives him an admonishing look, "I like you because of who you are. Not, what you can give me or what you own. Understand?"

Suddenly Merlyn finds herself being lifted onto his lap, both his arms wrapping around her slender frame and pulling her in close as he leans in towards her. "Yeah," he says in a quiet, breathy voice, "I do."
"Good," she laments and places both of her hands on his cheeks. "What even brought that on?"

He half-heartedly shrugged. "Gwaine likes to give me crap about it from time to time, and I just got to--"

"Over-thinking?" She raised one eyebrow. "I thought that's my job?" Arthur laughs, closes his eyes, and presses his cheek further into her hand. The atmosphere shifts when he opens his eyes to look at her, the blue turning a darker shade and he gives her that look.

There's a part of her that's nervous--not because of Arthur--but of the newness of the situation she's in. Ever since they've both confessed to one another, and the conversation she said at Gwen's house earlier today, they haven't had any more intimate moments up until now. Merlyn would be a complete and total liar if she said she didn't consider what could possibly happen between them...all alone...in his room...by his bed.

"Merlyn?" Arthur asks softly as he leans in close, their lips just barely touching and their breathing now in sync. He's looking at her with that warm expression on his face. All they needed was that small nod from her and her lips closing the last millimetre separating them and they were lost in themselves.

Both her hands move from his face and into his hair, running her fingers through the softness that she has wanted to touch since the first time she thought about it. This is where I want to be, she thought as Arthur's strong arms pulled her into his chest, narrowing the distance between them even more. The warmth from his body transferring over to her cold greedy one as their lips moved against each other; hers with a slight shyness and absolute giddiness, his with experience and restrained control. When they broke apart for air, Merlyn's breaths came out in small pants as Arthur leaned forward and continued to shower kisses on her jaw and down her neck.

"Oh!" She gasps as his lips move over a sensitive spot on her neck that she wasn't even aware of, until now. Her fingers tighten themselves in his hair as she presses her chest against his, she shifts slightly on his lap and her body flushes as she presses down on his erection.

Arthur moans against the spot he's lightly sucking on and his hands dart under her shirt and up her back. She sucks in her breath as she waits for him to reach her bra hook and felt his fingers lightly trace the band with his thumbs. He pulls back away from her neck and looks up at her with hooded eyes, a silent question lingering between them; he's putting the ball in her court. Her whole body's thrumming with electricity and she feels breathless and she's 100% certain that he could see how much she wants this, because she can see it on his face as well. "Yes," she whispers leaning into his hands.
They both lean back in for a kiss.

The hook gives way and Merlyn feels the strap tension disappear from around her chest.

**BANG**

"Arthur! I need--" Both of them jumped at the sudden intrusion; Merlyn gasps and immediately crosses her arms around herself and clamps down on her bra, her face turning a new shade of red, Arthur pulls his legs up more to provide cover for her.

"Morgana," he growls as he moves his arms to shield the rest of Merlyn's body.

"Oh..." A knowing look appears on Morgana's face as she smirks and shoots him a wink and a quick thumbs up sign. "Hi, Merlyn. Long time no see." They actually saw each other a couple hours ago, before Leon drove them over to his house.

"Hi..." she responds meekly, too embarrassed to turn around--but to her amusement...it seemed a certain part of Arthur was no longer excited.

Arthur's signature scowl appeared. "What do you want?"

"Leon needs a tie for dinner tonight, so I'm going to grab one of yours." Morgana turns and walks straight into the closet.

He lets out an aggravated sigh and rubs his temples tiredly. "I didn't know we're going to dinner with dad tonight?"

"We aren't. Leon and I are." Morgana's voice growing louder as she steps out of the closet with one of Arthur's ties in hand, a triumphant smile on her face. "Well, I'll be taking this and I'll let the two of you get back to business." Merlyn flushed to the tips of her ears and Arthur growls while pointing to his room door. "My regards to you both~!" She sang as the door shut behind her. "I have extra condoms in my washroom if you need them~!" Her cackle echoed back to his room.
"WILL YOU JUST GO ALREADY!" Arthur shouted while rubbing a hand down his face.

"Pft," Merlyn giggles quietly, trying to keep her composure, but the harder she tried the harder it became. Her giggling eventually turns into a full blown laugh. The scowl was still sitting on his face as he unhappily mutters under his breath while placing both hands on his knees. Eventually her infectious laugh broke through his grumpiness and he started to chuckle. "I wonder if we'll always get interrupted?" She glanced back at the door and then at him.

"Shit," he groans and tilts his head back against his bed, "I hope not."

"Uhm...we could..." she stutters to a stop and bites her bottom lip while looking down at his chest. Oh my god, she thought, am I actually trying to ask for sex right now?

"Hey," says Arthur softly while cupping her cheek, "look at me, Merlyn." He leans forward to try and catch her gaze, she blinks slowly and looks at him shyly. "If you don't want to do anything you're not comfortable with you can always tell me no, you know that, right?"

"But--"

"We're only going to move at your pace," he says seriously, "not mine or anyone else's. If you're not comfortable with something just tell me no. Okay?" Arthur searches her face for understanding.

A small smile makes its way onto her lips as she nods. "Okay."

"Welcome to the Fischer King Hotel, good to see you back again this year, Ms. Smith. Are all your friends going to be participating in the YAD event again?" The event coordinator asked while giving them all a polite smile. Gwen beams and nods her head while lapsing into conversation with the beautifully dressed man; his light blue hair slicked back with gel that accented the ivory color of his tuxedo.

Merlyn tapped Arthur's arm to get his attention and he leans down to her level. "YAD?" She whispers and tilts her head slightly.
"Young Aspiring Designers event. Gwen's been coming to this event since the start of high school. This will be the last one she can attend since we all graduate this year." He gently nudged her so that they could follow after everyone. "She's made us be a part of it as her models."

"You? A model?" Merlyn teases while looking him up and down.

His lips twitch and he reaches over to pinch her nose. "I bet you'll swoon at the sight of me later, short stack. Just you wait and see."

"Tsk. Tsk." She shakes her head. "So arrogant."

"So yours as well," he whispers in her ear and she could hear the smile in his voice and she flushes bright red because of it.

'Prat' she thinks fondly. But now, of course, she has to win the bet.

The coordinator hands them off to one of the hotel representatives and they hand out the room keys to everyone. Merlyn tried not to look too disappointed when Arthur took his room key and headed off with Elyan. She was sort of hoping that the two of them would get a room to themselves...and get some...alone time, but in retrospect it wouldn't look proper for them to sharing a room...especially not with the kind of thoughts she was having. The only consolation was that when he looked back at her the same disappointment was on his face.

Both of them tried to sneak off to spend some alone time together, but no dice. Either their friends would follow after them, or they wouldn't be able to find a private spot--this time Merlyn thinks it's just the universe messing with them, and not their friends or the hotel staff. She went to bed that night so incredibly sexually frustrated that she felt like she was going to explode from being denied all day today.

'Tomorrow's another day,' she thought and was determined to get some alone time with Arthur.

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"Do I have--"
"Yes." Gwen cuts Gwaine off as she tightens the red cape.

"Sis," Elyan says while shifting uncomfortably, "I can't breathe."

"Suck it up," she replied without looking at him.

"Is chainmail suppose to chafe?" Percy raises his arms and looks under his arms. "Guys, I think I'm chafing!"

"Here." Lance hands him a bottle of baby powder.

Gwen looks over sharply. "Don't overdo it, Perce."

He gives her a two finger salute. "Roger that." A moment later a big puff of white powder exploded in Percy's vicinity. Gwen let out a cry of outrage and quickly begins to fan the powder away from them.

Arthur discreetly tugs on his armor and tries to not think about how he's baking in it, or how heavy the chainmail is. He glances over at Leon, who looked just as miserable since he was caught in the powder crossfire, and then over at a frantic Gwen, who was trying to lint roll the powder off Percy's cape before it settled.

"Arthur," Gwen said, wheeling around to face him. For some reason he stood up straighter at the sound of his name. "I need you to drop this off in the girls change room for Morgana. It's the door at the end of this hallway." She holds out a gold colored belt that was decorated with leaves.

"Uh...can't Le--" He shut his mouth when Gwen gives him the darkest glare he's ever seen on her. Lance mouthed an apology behind her back.

"I mean, I'd love to," he says hastily while taking the belt from her and quickly leaving the room before his head gets bitten off. Gwaine was a lucky bastard, getting sent to get all their props from the storage room and didn't have to get snapped at by Gwen.

He walks down towards the end of the hallway and is very careful not to move too quickly or
else the chainmail will pinch him in places he doesn't want to be pinched. As he approached the door at the end of the hallway he wondered where Merlyn was and if she was finished changing, maybe they could sneak away for a couple of minutes before going down to the showroom, he liked this idea a lot and decided to just chuck the belt at the harpy and leave to find Merlyn. Arthur did one quick knock on the door and then proceeded to open it; he heard some shuffling in the room and when he peeked around the door his mouth went dry, lips going slack, and all the blood in his body rushed southward.

He found Merlyn.

More accurately: he just walked in on a practically naked Merlyn.

'Holy fucking hell...' He knew he should close the door and knock again, or at least look away, but there wasn't enough blood going to his brain to execute any rational thoughts. Also, to be perfectly honest, at this very moment...he forgot his girlfriend even had a face.

There she was, standing off to the side of the room in a pair of lacy black panties and a matching bra. Arthur stood there gaping and watching as she wandered between two benches that had various articles of clothing tossed over them. He's always had a thing for legs and fuck did he have a new thing for her legs. Her breasts looked like they were the perfect size to fit in the palms of his hands and christ...her ass...

"Merlyn, can you see if Gwen dropped off my belt for me?" Morgana's voice called out from the adjoining change room.

Merlyn looked to her left towards the sound of Morgana's voice with her brows furrowed. "Kay! But I think Freya went to go look for her to get the last pieces of your guys--Arthur!" She gasps and looks at him like a deer caught in headlights.

"Uh..." He stammers out while holding the belt in his hand like an idiot. They both make eye contact, then Merlyn glances down at her body and flushes bright red.

She ducks behind one of the benches and peeks overtop of it at him. "W-W-What are you doing here? Wh-Where's Gwen?"

"Uh...she...problem...Percy and Leon--p-powder!" His voice hitches and he feels his face growing hot and the lower part of him still demanding attention.
"O-O-Oh!" She nods her head as if his jumble of words made complete sense.

"Is Gwen back--what are you doing here?" Morgana walks into the room, her heels clicking loudly on the tiled floors come to a halt.

Arthur coughs and tosses the belt at Morgana. "Here! Special delivery! See you guys later!" He spins around and slams the door shut behind him; a moment later he hears the damn harpy's cackle come through from the other side.

"Shit..." He ran his hand through his hair and flinched when the chainmail pinched his skin.

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Is it possible to be both mortified and curious at the same time? Merlyn wondered as she fidgeted behind the Morgana as they waited to enter the showroom. She was still preoccupied about the change room fiasco...Arthur saw her in nothing but her undergarments! Merlyn wanted to bite her lip or cover her face, but she couldn't do either because: 1. She's wearing lipstick and 2. Gwen did her makeup earlier, and judging from how on edge she is trying to get everything in order...Merlyn didn't have a death wish. But there's a smaller part of her that's curious about what Arthur thought of her body? She definitely knew how she felt about his body--okay, now is not the time! She reprimanded herself and readjusted her dress.

Earlier when Gwen finished zipping her up and turned her around to the full length mirror, Merlyn almost didn't believe the girl looking back at her was...well...her. The dress material felt soft and silk-like, almost reminiscent of the red dress Auntie Gloria got her for Christmas. Except this one was longer and made her feel like a princess; the midnight blue brought out the paleness of her skin, but offset the lighter blue of her eyes and made them reflect a different shade than they normally do. The sweetheart line (as Gwen explained) gave Merlyn a more ethereal look combined with her hair in soft curls and half of it braided into a crown with blue LED lights weaved in, compliment of both hers and Elyan's ingenuity, she felt so beautiful.

"I think I'm going to throw up," Freya whispered while trying not to hyperventilate as they approached the set of double doors leading to the large showroom.

Morgana turned around and fluffed Freya's dress up. "I find that if you hold your head up high and think about murder the whole room will be yours."
"Murder?!" Freya squeaked as Gwen moved them into position.

"Okay girls, the doors will be opening on my count. Ready?" Gwen whispers while raising her hand up to signal the doormen.

'Right, okay. Head up high.' Merlyn lifted her chin up. 'Think about murder.'

"Go!" The doors to the showroom open on command and the three of them started walking in.

Merlyn's breath was taken away by the sheer magnificence of the room. The high ceilings had gold banners hanging down from them with fairy lights cascading downwards towards them. It was like a scene from one of the medieval shows that she watched with Will and Freya a couple weeks back. There were hundreds of people in the room and all of them turned to watch their entrance, photographers began to snap dozens of photos—to the point where she thought she might go blind from the flash. Merlyn followed Morgana, who was leading the way like the natural born leader she is, towards the stage on the left side of the room.

"How do you handle it, Morgana?" She spoke around her smile, a few photographers turned to take pictures of the next wave of girls walking in, but a large portion of them were still snapping pictures of her, Freya, and Morgana.

"Handle what?" Morgana gave one of the photographers her signature smirk.

"All these people staring...all their eyes on you," Merlyn gulped, but kept the smile on her face.

Morgana gave her a half smile and winked. "I agree it can be overwhelming, but there's only one person that matters most to me that's watching my every move and the same can be said for you." Merlyn blinks as they come to a stop on the stage; the mischief sparkling clearly in Morgana's green eyes as she leans over to whisper in her ear. "He hasn't taken his eyes off you from the moment he saw you walk in through those doors."

She blinks again and looks out to the sea of people, looking for that one familiar face. Her breath catches in her throat as she makes eye contact with Arthur, who was standing on the other stage across the room. He looks like a king, Merlyn thought as she gives him a shy smile. Arthur blinks at her and she could see him realize that he should smile back or do something, but Leon
navigates him to the other side of the stage before he could. All the guys were in matching knight outfits, armour and chainmail, with red capes that bore Camelot’s crest on them. Arthur’s statement piece was the gold crown on his head as he lead his knights to the center of the stage.

"After this freestyle round things are going to get hectic," Freya whispers as they all flourish their dresses for the cameras while the guys brandished their swords.

This was not a lie.

It was a dizzying array of people, cameras, and questions thrown towards them from all angles—the miracle of it all was that she was able to keep up with everything. Gwen appeared and disappeared as if on cue based on who was asking questions or a photo op; all of them were then ushered through a different set of doors to go change for the next round. Merlyn stumbled in her heels slightly while trying to chase after Morgana, Freya, and Gwen, but a hand reached out and grabbed her arm to steady her.

"I got you," Arthur said as he pulled her off to the side.

Merlyn smiled up at him. "You look great."

"You look..." He did a once over, then another one, and another one, as he tried to form the proper words. Merlyn giggled and gave him an amused look.

"I thought I was suppose to swoon at the sight of you?" She teased. "Guess I won the bet."

Arthur raised one eyebrow while looking down at her with hooded eyes, a smirk tugging at his lips. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," she says in a soft voice while leaning into him, the cold metal of his armour against her flushed skin did things to other parts of her body that she couldn’t even begin to explain.

"Think we could sneak off for a bit?" He whispers while leaning down to her level.

"And do what?" She asks as her fingers curl around his forearm to pull him closer.
He half shrugs. "I liked what you were wearing earlier." She immediately flushes at the memory and wrinkles her nose at him.

"No fair, you're cheating!" She laughed while shaking her head. "I won the bet. You're not allowed to try and seduce me!"

"Do I really have to try?" His eyes darken as he smiles at her.

Okay, she thought mischievously, two can play at this game. She leans up closer to his ear and whispers, "if we manage to get some alone time later...I'll let you try all you want." Arthur's entire body freezes under her hands and she could hear an audible gulp from him. She giggles and steps back from him. "Bye, babe." With a quick peck on his lips she scurried off down the hallway to try and catch up with the girls, leaving a stunned, and speechless, Arthur behind to pick up the pieces of himself.

Turns out...they weren't able to get any alone time, she thought in frustration as they finished off the final round and were ushered back to the change rooms. Merlyn fumbled around, trying to get the dress off her quickly so she can try and find Arthur. Success! She mentally cheered when she managed to get out of the dress and started looking around the room for her normal clothes.

"I got us our swimsuits!" Gwen announced as she walked into the change room.

Merlyn's eyebrows pinched together as she tilted her head. "Swimsuits?"

"The after party is being held in the hotel's pool," Morgana said as she strolled past her in her undergarments to get the bathing suit, "it's the best part of the event! Lots of food and swimming."

"We talked about it last night, remember?" Freya handed Merlyn her swimsuit and quickly went to go change.

"Heh!" Merlyn laughed nervously, "right, I remember now." She rubbed the back of her neck and accepted defeat.
'It's a bit revealing,' Merlyn thought while readjusting her bikini top, she could see the same thought on Freya's face as they all walked down to the poolside. She looked around to see if she could spot Arthur and maybe get a chance to sneak away with him.

She turned to ask Freya something as they passed a large wooden pillar, but suddenly a hand clamped over her mouth and she was pulled off to the side. "H--mmph!"

"Merlyn?" Freya turned around and wondered where her friend disappeared off to, but her attention was diverted when Gwen called her over to their table.

Arthur let out a relieved sigh, his hand still over her mouth. "I thought we'd never get to be alone." Merlyn started speaking, but it all came out muffled...this was very reminiscent of that time during their camping trip. "Oh shit, sorry," he apologized and quickly moved his hand. He looked around the tall pillar to see if anyone has noticed them.

"You could have told me you were going to pull a stunt like this," she said with a scowl, "do you get a kick out of nearly scaring me half to death?"

He smirked and wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her in closer. "Where's the fun in that?"

"Prat," she said while raising her arms and moving them behind his neck. He let out a soft chuckle before leaning down towards her.

"Finally, she thought as their kiss deepened. Merlyn lifted up on her tiptoes to maintain contact with him, but it was hard trying to focus on two things at once; Arthur must have noticed her dilemma because, one moment she was on the ground, in the next moment she was lifted up into his arms and her legs wrapped themselves around his waist. A quiet moan escapes her as she tightened her hold on him as his tongue moved against hers. His fingers play with ties of her bikini top and her body flushes even more as she squirms against him.

"Out here?" She says breathlessly as they pull apart, the excitement evident in her voice.

Arthur pulls back to look at her, his eyes bright and lips a darker color from kissing her, "do you want to?"
She bites her lip around a smile and nods her head. "Y--"

"CANNONBALL!" Percy shouted.

A huge wave of water explode out from the pool and completely drenched Merlyn and Arthur. It took them a moment to realize what just happened, but when they both looked at each other, hairs soaked and water droplets dripping from almost everywhere...they broke out laughing. Guess this was a sign, she thought while brushing her wet hair out of her face, she signalled for him to let her down and he did with a resigned sigh. They both walked out from behind the pillar and towards their group.

Gwaine let out a loud whistle. "Whatcha doin' hiding in a place like that, sweetheart?" He gave them a suggestive look that made her blush.

"None of your business," Arthur deadpanned and lead her in a different direction.

"Where are we going?" She looked up at him in confusion.

Arthur tipped his chin forward. "Food."

A lot of it apparently, she thought as they approached the huge buffet line, she grabbed one of the plates and waited for her opportunity to get some food. Arthur decided to make the decision for them and planted himself in the line so she wouldn't get pushed past as he ushered her forward to get food. She gave him an exasperated look as she started putting food on her plate, it took her by surprise when he reached around her and added way more than she could possible eat.

"I can't eat all of this, dollop head," she said while looking down at her plate in absolute horror.

He plopped another piece of steak onto her plate. "We're sharing." Oh...that makes sense. They followed the line until they reached the drinks area, Merlyn internally despaired that she's not legal yet to drink in public.

"Two bottles," Arthur said while pulling out his wallet and placing a couple of bills on the counter.
What? Merlyn blinked as the bartender walked over to them. "ID?" He grunted. Arthur pulled out his license and slid it across to him.

"You?" The bartender raised his eyebrow at her.

"It's not for her," Arthur said with his poster boy smile in place.

The bartender started to move his eyes over her body. "HEY!" The two of them snapped. "Eyes up here!" Arthur looked livid as he tightened his arm around her waist.

"Right," he said and rolled his eyes while sliding two bottles of beers towards them and walked away.

"Creep," she muttered under her breath. Arthur glanced down at her and let out a soft laugh.

"Come on, let's go back. I'm hungry." He grabbed the beers and turned back around.

Merlyn followed beside him and held onto their plate of food. "So how'd you get a fake ID?" She asked casually.

His lips twitched. "Contrary to what you think of me, Merlyn, I'm actually a pretty popular kid..."

"What?" She gave him a bewildered look. "No way?" He laughed and rubbed his thumb against his side.

She waited for him to elaborate. "I might know some people in my dad's company that are willing to help the son of the CEO..."

"And you think I abuse my power when I make you guys do lines," she laughed while nudging him with her shoulder.
They both walked back to where their friends were sitting; Merlyn spotted two unoccupied lounge chairs and headed over to them so they could both sit down and eat. He took her by surprise when he sat down in the chair she was heading towards and pulled her down onto his lap. Her entire face went red as all their friends turned to look at them with smiles on their faces; Arthur seemed unfazed by the attention and opened both their beers and handed one to her then proceeded to eat from the plate.

He turned his head towards her. "You like celery, right?" She mutely nods and her blush gets deeper when he spears a piece of celery and holds it out for her.

"God, don't you just miss the days when they were so oblivious to their feelings for each other?" Gwaine mused while taking a sip from his red cup.

'No...I don't,' she thought while getting comfortable in Arthur's lap.

"Hmm..." Merlyn scribbled furiously into her sketch book.

She’s currently trying to decide on what to get Arthur for his birthday that's coming up in two days. Her fingers twirled her pencil around and around, trying to spark some inspiration. A soft knock on her door caught her attention and she spun around in her chair.

"Mordred!" Her face lit up. "Hi!"

"Hi, Emrys," he said shyly and stood at the doorway with his hands behind his back.

Merlyn walked over to him and knelt down with her arms open, he rushed forward and hugged her. "I didn't know you were coming over to today."

"Dad's nose is filled with sniffles." She squeezed his small frame and felt her heart about to explode from how cute he is.
"Well then," she pulled back from the hug, "how about you and I do something fun while we wait for him?"

Mordred nodded eagerly. "Okay."

Both of them went back downstairs to the living room area; Merlyn grabbed a tarp from the closet and laid it out while putting painting supplies down on top of it. Mordred eagerly sat down and waited for her to finish setting up, she handed him a large sheet of paper and squirted out a couple of colors onto a large palette.

DING

"I'll be right back," she said and he nodded while grabbing a brush and dipping it into some green paint.

She jogged down the stairs to the front door and pulled it open. "Arthur?"

"Don't look so surprised to see me, babe." He smirked and stepped over the threshold.

Merlyn rolled her eyes, but stood up on her tip toes to give him a kiss. "I'm happy to see you, prat. But I thought you and the guys had practice today?"

"We did..." he said and kicked off his shoes. She furrowed her brows and tilted her head. "The practice was at six this morning." He smirked when her jaw dropped. "What did you do today?"

She closed her mouth. "Well I slept like a normal human being," he snorted and a smile tugged at the edge of his lips. "Why didn't coach ask me to come?"

"Don't worry, it's just his way of making sure we keep up with our training. It would be mean to make you get up that early, short stack." Her eyes widen as she nodded her head in agreement.

"What did you do after practice then? Before coming here?" They both headed up the stairs.
"The guys and I went to go see a movie," he answered and held the door open for her as he continued to talk.

"Emrys, who's that?" Mordred rushed up to her and hid behind her legs.

"Oh, Mordred this is my...friend, Arthur," Merlyn gave him a hesitant smile. Arthur blinked at her and gave her a look that said your friend?

He's a child, Arthur, what do you want me to say? She shot him a look and rolled her eyes when he scowled at her. "Mordred comes over from time to time to see Uncle Gaius," she explained while running her fingers through his dark curls.

"Oh, I see, nice to meet you little man." Arthur squatted down and held his hand out.

Mordred looked at Arthur's hand, then up at Merlyn, and turned away to head back to the living room. "He's really shy," she whispered and patted Arthur's arm consolingly. "Give him some time and he'll warm up to you."

He blew out a breath and rubbed the back of his neck. "Cute kid..."

"See if you can win him over with that charming smile of yours," she said with a laugh and headed to the living room.

Arthur winked at her. "You think my smile is charming?" She shrugged and smirked at him.

All of three of them sat down on the tarp, she passed Arthur a large sheet of paper and handed him a brush. They all started painting and it warmed Merlyn's heart when she saw how hard Arthur was trying to win Mordred over. The house phone started ringing in the kitchen, just then, so Merlyn got up to go answer it.

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"So, what do you like to do--" Arthur began while looking over at Mordred.
"Emrys is mine," he cut off Arthur's question. "Go away."

He blinked and nervously smiled...this is just a little kid, he thought. "Hey now, little man, we're all friends here aren't we?"

"Emrys is mine." Mordred pouted and looked like he was on the verge of tears. "Don't take away."

"Hey. Hey. Hey." Arthur held his hands up in a placating manner. "I'm not trying to take Merlyn away." Mordred's frown deepened, and Arthur briefly wondered how his girlfriend could manage to win everyone over; he silently chuckled and realized that it's because she's Merlyn and there wasn't anyone else that he wanted, but her. "She's an amazing person and I know that she won't leave you behind. So how about," he leaned forward and held his hand out, "we share her?" Mordred blinked, but slowly nodded his head.

"Do you guys want some cookies?" Merlyn's voice grew louder as she walked back to the living room.

"Ye--" Her gasp stopped Arthur mid-answer.

"Oh, Arthur, how did you manage to spill all that red paint?" He gave her a confused look and glanced down at his paper--luckily he moved in time before the paint could touch his jeans.

"I--I didn't...I," he glanced over at Mordred, who was looking far too pleased with himself. This little brat, Arthur thought.

"Kay, well we're going to have to clean that up quickly. Next time we should move the paint cans so you don't knock it over," she said while grabbing a roll of paper towels off the coffee table. He has never felt more betrayed than in this moment.

Mordred stood up. "Pee-pee."

"Oh!" Merlyn handed the paper towels to him. "Want me to--"
"Do by myself," said Mordred in a determined manner.

She smiled and pointed out where the washroom was and the little brat scurried away. Arthur had a deep scowl on his face as he cleaned up the red paint while grumbling under his breath.

"You're so easy to tease, dollop head," said Merlyn fondly as she helps him wipe up the paint. Arthur gave her a petulant look and didn't grace her with a reply. "Want me to kiss your ego better?" He pretend to think it over and nodded his head while tapping at a spot on his cheek. She giggled and leaned forward to give him a quick peck, but he caught her off guard when he turned his head slightly and pulled her in for a deep kiss.

They pulled away a minute later. "Is your ego better now, my lord?" He would be a liar if he said he didn't like the way her eyes give him this sultry look every time after they kiss.

"Yeah...it is," he said.

"Speaking of your ego..." Merlyn sat back on her heels, "what do you want for your birthday?"

"Aside from you?" He chuckled when she glared at him and blushed. "You don't have to--okay, okay," he held his hands up, laughing, "just give me whatever you want."

"That's such a terrible answer." She rolled her eyes while letting out a loud sigh. "But I guess I'll think of something."

"Don't you always? Since you're a good little nerd." He ducked when she threw the roll of paper towels at him. "Speaking of...Morgana said you and the girls will be sleeping over?"

Merlyn glances over at him shyly. "Yeah..."

He rubs the back of his neck. "Okay."
Luckily the little brat came back to distract them from the elephant in the room.

"Wow...there's so many people," Merlyn said as her and Freya walked through the mansion.

Freya nodded. "Arthur's birthday is a huge deal every year since he's a New Year baby. Morgana throws the party on the 31st and we all try to do a countdown."

"Try?" said Merlyn in amusement.

"If anyone's awake after I get through with them then we can have a countdown. Hi, sweetheart." Gwaine winked and pulled her into his side.

She smiled. "Hi, Gwaine. How are you?"

"Better now that you're here." Freya giggled at his antics and he grinned at the both of them before heading into the living room towards a couple of guys on the team. "If you're wondering...the princess is in the kitchen with Leon and some of the JV guys."

"Thanks, Gwaine!" Merlyn said and headed in the direction he just mentioned with Freya following beside her. "I can't wait to give him his gift." She felt the two key chains sitting comfortably in the palm of her hand.

"Those key chains were so cute!" said Freya, her eyes crinkling from how big she was smiling.

She blushed. "Thanks. I hope he likes it."

"You put so much thought into it. Of course he will!" She patted Merlyn's arm encouragingly as they approached the corner that lead to the kitchen. "Will told me how you spent all of last night at his place trying to finish up the gift."

Merlyn nodded. "I wanted to share this with him." There was more to it, but she wanted to
tell Arthur first before anyone else.

"That matching couple stuff is kind of cheesy." Arthur's laugh echoed in the kitchen. Merlyn froze and her finger unconsciously curled inwards as if trying to protect her feelings.

Oh.

A few voices started laughing along with him and she wasn't sure what to do. Her chest ached and pressure was building up behind her eyes. Merlyn looked down at the key chains in her hands, they weren't necessarily matching since they had different numbers on them...but...why did she suddenly feel so sad? Freya's expression was a mixture of shock and anger as she looked between Merlyn and towards the kitchen. Merlyn shook her head, signalling her to not say anything. She turned and quickly left before anyone could realize she was outside the kitchen, leaving Freya to stand there and watch her run away. She should have stuck with her gut feeling, it was a stupid idea to make jersey key chains with their birthday numbers on it, she should have just bought something like everyone else did. The first tear surprised her, and by the time she realized she was crying she had already hidden herself in a dark corner at the side of the mansion, the sun had set awhile back.

"This is so stupid," she bit out quietly, "why am I even crying?" She swiped under her eyes and was glad that on some unconscious level she decided on waterproof makeup. "You're overreacting." She took a deep breath in and decided to rationalize what she heard.

One. Her gift is perfectly fine. Two. It's not as if Arthur is obligated to like it. Three. But goddamn did she want him to like it. She looked up at the dark night sky and rolled her eyes while exhaling, her breath coming out in a large puff of smoke, the cold winter air bit at her cheeks and she felt the tears on her eyelashes grow colder with each blink. It seemed like quite some time passed, but Merlyn couldn't bring herself to return to the party--or to Arthur's side for that matter. Her phone vibrated a couple of times, but she ignored it and stared down into her hands.

"Aren't you cold, sweetheart?" Gwaine's sudden weight and warmth took her off guard.

Merlyn jumped. "Gwaine!" She said. "Don't do that!"

"Why're you out here by yourself?" He asked. The normal flirty and playfulness tone in his voice was absent, replaced fully with concern, which is probably why she decided against lying to him.
"Arthur thinks that matching couple stuff is cheesy..." she began and held out Arthur's would have been gift for Gwaine to see. "I should've just bought a gift, like a normal person would," she mumbled and looked forlornly down at her open palm.

"The princess is a fuckin' idiot." He abruptly snatched the two key chains out of her hand, stood up, and towed her with him back inside. The two of them--Gwaine, mostly--stormed through the mansion and stopped when they came up Leon and Arthur. "Think before you open that big mouth of yours!" Gwaine growled and slammed Arthur into the wall behind him with tremendous force.

The two key chains clattered as they hit the floor, but no one noticed due to Gwaine's sudden outburst.

"The hell..." Arthur gave Gwaine a pissed off look, but his attention was immediately diverted when he noticed Merlyn's expression. "Babe? What's wr--

Gwaine stepped between them. "No. You don't get to speak to her until you fuckin' realize what you did wrong." He looked over his shoulder at her. "Come on, we're going, Merlyn."

She didn't have it in her to object and followed after Gwaine without looking at Arthur. Both of them went up the stairs and down a familiar hallway and ended up in Arthur's room. Merlyn stood in the middle of the room and watched as Gwaine paced back and forth in front of her fuming; she felt so touched in that moment, she has always known that Gwaine is a great friend, but as of this moment she'll always know how loyal he is too.

"Thank you, Gwaine." She smiled and wiped the last of her tears away.

He shook his head. "You don't have to thank me. That stupid princess--"

"--is still your friend," she finished with a small laugh.

Gwaine ran both of his hands through his hair and let out a frustrated sigh. "How am I even friends with him?"

"He's a good guy," he gave her a mock skeptical look, "with his own flaws," she added.
"I can't believe you're defending him after he upset you. The princess is so stupid sometimes."

"You're right." Both of them jumped at the sound of Arthur's voice coming from the doorway. Merlyn locked eyes with him and suddenly felt very nervous. Without taking his eyes off of her he continued to speak. "Gwaine, out." He stepped to the side.

Gwaine crossed his arms. "Hang on a minute."

"Now." Arthur's tone was serious, which made Gwaine roll his eyes and head out the door, he gave Merlyn a quick salute and disappeared.

Arthur stepped into his room and closed the door, effectively damping the sound of people talking downstairs and the music playing from the speaker system. Merlyn fidgeted on the spot and nervously bit her lip, his expression softened and he took a step towards her which prompted her to take one back.

"I hurt your feelings, didn't I?" He said softly. Merlyn gave him one nod. "I didn't mean to...but I know I did and I'm sorry." She absently started rubbing her arm. "They look really good," he held out the key chains, "one of them is for me, right?"; Her eyes widened and she quickly reached out to take them back.

"No! I'm going to buy you something instead!" Stupid athlete with stupid quick reflexes, she thought when he pulled them out of her reach.

Arthur pulled her into his chest and lifted her up, he walked them over to his desk and sat her down on top of it, planting both his hands on either side of her. "Freya told me you heard what I said in the kitchen earlier..."

She looked away. "It's not like you're not allowed to have your own opinions..." Her voice came out as a whisper and she bit her lip, not sure if she wanted to say anymore.

"Hey," he moved to get her attention, "talk to me."
Those words brought back memories of when she first used them on Arthur and it chipped a small part of her hesitance away. "It's just...that day when I asked you what you wanted for your birthday, and you said you wanted me.." she reached over and grabbed the hand holding onto the key chains, "well this was my way of doing that. I've collected these for a long time and I thought I would share something I like...with you."

"God I'm such an idiot," said Arthur in frustration and pulled her into his chest.

"Look, you don't have to keep it. I don't want to force you to do something you don't want to do," she mumbled into his shoulder.

He pulled back and shook his head. "No. I want to keep it--if you'll let me. I like it. I like you. Let me make it up to you, I'll do anything."

She could see the sincerity in his eyes and her sadness melted away. "Like admit you're the world's largest cabbage head?"

"As long as you forgive me. I'll even let you enter me into the county fair," he responded.

"Ha!" Merlyn burst out laughing, he grinned and leaned forward to rest his forehead against hers.

"Forgive me?"

"Oh you silly prat," she said and pressed her lips against his, "when have I ever not forgiven you?"

He smirked. "Let's not find out."

They both stayed in that position until the door flung open and Morgana clapped her hands loudly. "Alright! Times up! There's a party downstairs and the guest of honour is missing!" She turned and headed back down the hallway.

"That damn harpy," Arthur grumbled and glared over his shoulder at her.
"It is your party. Come on let's go before Gwaine drinks the JV boys under the table."
Merlyn hopped down from the desk and grabbed his hand and pulled him to the door. He quickly put the key chains down and followed her.

"Want to bet and see who the last guy standing against Gwaine is?" She looked over her shoulder at him and grinned.

The party was in full swing by the time they both got back downstairs; music was blasting, drinks were circulating, and everyone looked like they were having a blast. Merlyn accepted the red cup Morgana thrust into her hand and started drinking the fruity concoction. Arthur took a sip from his red cup and lead them further into the party. Morgana's guest list consisted of a couple of their classmates that she recognized but never really spoke to until now, and the entire JV team. Merlyn was prepared for people to question her about her relationship with Arthur, but no one did? Which confused her since Arthur had his arm wrapped around her waist as they went up to individual people and talked to them...why did no one seem surprised?

She didn't bother to dwell on that thought and continued to enjoy the party. Eventually the guys brought out a large beer pong table and started setting it up. Merlyn had a nice buzz going on so she decided to just sit off to the side and watch the game instead of joining in. She felt before she heard Arthur come up behind and wrap his arms around her.

"Babe?" He leaned down and whispered in her ear.

Merlyn tilted her head slightly. "Hmm?"

"Stay in my room tonight?" He placed a small kiss on the nape of her neck. His eyes were hooded and his cheeks were slightly pink from all the alcohol he's drank.

Her alcohol blush got a little more pink as well and she looked up at him. "Okay," she said softly. Before he could walk over to the beer pong table she grabbed the hem of his shirt. "Arthur?" He turned and raised his eyebrow, waiting patiently, "Happy Birthday." She smiled. He gave her a closed lip smile while leaning down to give her a kiss.

A couple hours passed, spilling into the early hours of the morning, and by now everyone was pretty much trashed and passed out on random surfaces. Merlyn snuck off at one point when all the guys were playing beer pong to brush her teeth and shower, since she was planning on sleeping over at their house, she had brought her duffle bag, full of her stuff, over the other day intending to
sleep in Morgana's room, but...change of plans. Her ears were slightly ringing from the loud music once it was shut off and the house was plunged back into silence. She'll admit that she was a bit nervous to sleep in Arthur's room with him...would they finally...?

"There you are," Arthur said and walked over to where she was standing by the window. His hair still slightly damp from his shower, whereas hers was basically dry; he had a red t-shirt on and a pair of black shorts (she assumes he's fully clothed for her sake).

She giggled and looked up at him over her shoulder. "Did you forget where I was in the time it took for you to brush your teeth?"

"M'not drunk," he pouted and wrapped his arms around her waist and tucked his chin into her neck.

"Of course not," she said in a false bright tone, "especially not since you won every game of beer pong earlier."

"Were you impressed?" He kissed her neck and she leaned back further into his chest.

Merlyn hummed and tapped her chin. "Lance gave you a run for your money during the second last round if I remember correctly."

He grunted. "No he didn't. I was better."

"Yes. Yes. Which is why I betted on you and not against you," said Merlyn.

"Good." Well, looks like he's easily pleased, she mused.

"But, considering how you lost our bet, you're not exactly full of wins," teased Merlyn.

Arthur went quiet for a second. "I want a rematch," he announced, "right now."

"Now?" She turned around in his arms. "I don't think there's anyone left that can drink.
Gwaine demolished them all about an hour ago."

"New bet." Suddenly, she was lifted up into his arms and she found herself sitting on his desk once again. "New game."

She raised one eyebrow. "Oh? What did you have in mind?"

"A kissing game," he grinned, "a kissing, but no touching game."

"Are you sure you're not drunk?" She questioned with a smile and reached up to play with the hair at the nape of his neck.

"We kiss, but our hands can't touch each other. First person who does loses and does whatever the winner wants." Merlyn looked up at him intrigued. "You game, shorty?"

She moved her hands away from him, trailing her finger around the front of his shirt and dipping it into the collar, pulling him closer and she could see the half smile on his lips. "Bring it on, dollop head."

He sealed his lips to hers and deepened the kiss. Merlyn curled her fingers over the edge of his desk and held on firmly, this no touching business was a lot harder than she thought it would be. She really likes touching him now that she can, and she especially likes kissing Arthur, his kisses were firm, yet gentle enough not to make her feel overwhelmed, but instead excited in certain parts of her body. The smell of his shampoo made her heart race and all she wanted to do was run her fingers through his hair. All her experience with kissing comes from the romance and erotica books she reads, and thinking about them now reminded her that there were certain things she wanted to try.

Her legs wrapped around his hips and pulled him closer; he pulled back slightly, but she followed after him. "You said hands, not legs."

"Cheater," he chuckled and kissed his way down her neck and to the sensitive spot on her neck.

"Arthur!" Her knuckles turned white from how hard she gripped the desk. She felt him smile against her neck and continued to suck on the same spot.
To get revenge on him, she scooted to the edge and pressed their cores together; she got the desired effect when he froze slightly before moaning and bucking forward. Maybe it was the alcohol she drank earlier that gave her this new found courage, but feeling how much his body wants hers made her feel so powerful. He left wet kisses on her neck as he went back up and returned to her lips. She nipped his bottom lip when he got close enough and gently licked it to soothe the pain; he looked down at her with hooded eyes and pressed forward. His tongue slides into her mouth and moves against hers, in that moment she remembered something she read from her book and decided to try it out. Merlyn gently sucks on Arthur's tongue and after a few seconds releases it and pulls back to look up at him.

"Arthur," she says in a husky voice while licking her bottom lip.

He's slightly panting and his eyes were filled with lust. "Fuck it. I lose." Arthur grabs her arms and wraps them behind his neck before lifting her off his desk and carrying them over to his bed.

Merlyn's back hits the mattress and her excitement increases tenfold. They go back to kissing, except this time it's more frantic, her hand moves down Arthur's chest to his waist, pushing the elastic band of his shorts down, and reaches for his straining member. She only stops when he wraps his hand gently around her wrist and breaks apart from their kiss panting. "Wait..."

"We've been waiting," complains Merlyn as she squirms underneath him, her brain is filled with lust and thoughts of Arthur, "no more waiting."

A shaky chuckle leaves his lips as he gives her a quick peck. "We've been drinking, shorty. You've been drinking," he states.

She looks up at him and tilts her head slightly. "So?"

"I don't wan--oh," he moans as she gives his straining member a gentle squeeze. For a moment it seemed like she lost him as he bucked into her hand, brows furrowed and teeth gritted. "I ca--We can...wait," his voice hitches at the end when she squeezes again, "when we h-haven't..."

Merlyn lifts her head up to whisper in his ear. "I could say the alphabet backwards, to prove to you I'm not drunk, if that'll make you happy?" Now her hand was stroking his cock through his boxers, which meant he had other things on his mind. "I want this, Arthur." She leans back to look up at him. "I want you...don't you want me?" Her voice gets quieter at the end as her insecurities get the better part of her.
"Fuck," he breathes out and pulls her body into his, recapturing her lips for another kiss, "of course I do!" And she can see it, the desire in his eyes--directed solely at her. It added to her burning desire.

"Then no more waiting," she says as she pushes and tugs at his shorts and boxers to remove them.

Next, his shirt; when he made a noise as she let go of his cock to pull his shirt off over his head...well she's never felt more wanted. Next was her top (her bra was off the moment she switched to PJs), followed by her shorts, and instead of taking off her panties he moves so his hand cups her mound over them. Her back arches and their chests press together; her nipples growing more taut as they brush against the hairs on his chest. His fingers lightly stroke her, the panties a thin barrier and the wet spot growing, and the heel of his palm applies a steady pressure over top of where her clit should be.

"A-A-Arthur!" She keens and bites the bottom of her lip, her legs reflexively pull inwards, trapping his hand, the pleasure overwhelming her.

"I got you, babe," he whispers as he sucks kisses down her neck and back to the overly sensitive spot he likes to pay extra attention to.

She's not sure when her panties were moved, but the gasp that leaves her lips when his finger slides through her wet folds, no longer blocked by cotton, drove her lust to a new level. He teases her opening and trails upwards slowly, searching, and finding her clit; her arms tighten around him, pulling him in closer. She drags her blunted nails down his back, as he draws small circles around the sensitive nub, he moans and she made a mental note that one of Arthur's erogenous zones is his back. Merlyn unconsciously moves her hips against his hand. The stimulation driving her upwards to a high peak, and then she crashes over, his name leaving her lips in a breathless cry.

First it's one finger he slowly slides into her opening, before she's even come down from her high, and he pauses to let her adjust to it--the aftershocks of her first orgasm have her clenching around the invasion. His fingers are so much bigger than mine, she thinks as her muscles bear down, feels so different...feels so good! Their lips find each other again as they lose themselves in each other; Arthur swallows her moan as another finger is added, a couple of thrusts, followed by another. It felt weird at first, being stretched open like this, it took her a couple of thrusts before the discomfort turned to pleasure. He breaks their kiss and his mouth trails down her body to her breasts and sucks her right nipple into his mouth. A moan pushes past her lips and she gets wetter, his fingers moving even easier through her opening.
"Now, Arthur..." she's panting and growing needier. He shakes his head and kisses her again. "Arthur," she whines and thrusts against his fingers, her nails digging harder into his back.

"I'm big." he doesn't say this in a cocky way, no smugness or pride in his rough voice, just a matter-of-fact. She wants to argue with him, like they always do, but he flexes his fingers inside of her and she loses her train of thought.

His words, though, were able to remain--even with the lust fogging up her mind. Merlyn glances down at his impressive cock and bites her lip. Earlier, when she had her hand wrapped around it, she figured it was going to be a tight fit, regardless, but now that she sees it...will it actually fit? Both her hands move away from his back and clutch at the bed sheets beneath her when he places his thumb against her clit.

"I'll go slow," he murmurs, as if sensing her sudden apprehension, "but I'll stop if you want me too," his voice got deeper--huskier--as he moves to her other nipple to give it attention.

Merlyn shakes her head. "No, don't stop!" Her walls clutch at his fingers hungrily.

Arthur chuckled roughly and looks up at her, his eyes dark with lust. Power hungry, shorty.

"Yeah," she agrees abruptly and reaches for his cock, "I am. Give it to me."

He was quicker and his fingers left her to grab her wrists and pull them up above her head, effectively pinning her under him. "I will. When you're ready."

This new position they were in with Arthur's body and full weight on her, holding her down in place and making her completely powerless to him shouldn't turn her on this much...but it does. She ignores what he's saying and tries to rub herself against him; he smirks and looks at her with hooded eyes, but she could see the warning in them 'only when you're ready.' Merlyn struggles slightly, trying to prove to him that she is ready and groans when she realizes that he has her fully under his control, which adds to the fire building inside of her as she lets out small pants and she looks up at him. Arthur narrows his eyes slightly as he slowly, carefully, tightens his hold on both of her wrists...as if testing this new found source of her sudden spike in arousal; Merlyn squeezed her eyes shut as her body instinctively arches and shudders against him. Her nipples brushing up against the light smattering of hair on his chest once again.

'Christ...he's the luckiest bastard in the world.' He moans and recaptures her lips in a hot,
wet, plundering kiss. With one hand still holding her wrists, the other trails down her left arm, over her breast, and back to her needy mound.

She couldn't take it anymore! At this rate he'll give her a second orgasm before he's even been inside of her. Taking one last tip from her books, she looks into his eyes and bites her lip. "Please, Arthur? I want you." Her inner muscles flexed around his fingers and it seemed like she managed to break the dam on his control; he reached over and opened the drawer of his nightstand and pulled out a gold, foil condom packet. Arthur bit one corner while tearing it open with his hand.

"Tell me if I'm hurting you and I'll stop," he says firmly while rolling the condom on.

She nods quickly and watches as he positions himself at her entrance and slowly starts pushing forward. It felt weird at first, the pain was there, but it wasn't exactly pain so much as the opening wasn't used to something so big; Merlyn was glad that he actually took the time beforehand to stretch her with his fingers.

"Relax," he murmurs against her lips, "deep breath." She nods and does what she's told. The moment the head of his cock gets past her opening he begins to push forward a couple inches at a time, pushing back and forth to open her up. He moans against her lips and deepens their kiss as he more of him enters her.

Merlyn gasps when his hand trails up her leg and opens her up wider for him, he moves his hand along the inside of her thigh and brushes the sensitive folds before finding her clit once more. He must have used that as a distraction because she barely felt him push past her hymen, or if it was still intact, all she could think about was him and the weight of his body on hers as he holds still for her to adjust to his size. She dug her nails into his back and dragged them downwards, wondering if she'd get the same reaction like before...she does, he tenses and the muscles in his back shudder under her fingers.

"Can...I move?" He pants while pulling back slightly, she tightens around him unconsciously and he moans.

She nods. "Yeah..." she shifts her hips to try and adjust some more. Arthur pulls back until just the tip of him was inside of her, they both pause, and he thrusts back in. "Oh!" A gasp escapes her lips, she could see him hesitate and the worry in his eyes that he hurt her. "Don't stop, keep going," she pants and plants wet kisses along his jaw to his earlobe, she bites it and then gently sucks on it, she felt him shudder against her. Arthur took that as his cue to keep going and he started moving with more vigour.
"Oh! Oh! Oh!" She moans in his ear.

Considering how they're both horny teenagers their lust consumed one another. Arthur had a firm grip on her hips as he continued thrusting into her; Merlyn was completely unaware that she was leaving marks all over his body as she matched his pace. With every one of his strokes out she would clench her muscles, and relax when he pushed back in; it was awkward at first trying to get a rhythm going between the two of them, but when they did...holy crap. A thin layer of sweat formed on their bodies as they moved against each other.

"Merlyn...I'm close," Arthur said with his teeth gritted.

"Me too," she moans and arches upwards.

"You first," he whispers against her neck and his thumb finds her clit again and moves it in small circles.

Initially, it felt like a wave she couldn't quite get on, but once he matched the pace of his thrusts with each circle he drew over her clit, that wave came much quicker. So quick that she wasn't prepared when it crashed over her and had her seeing stars behind her eyes. Merlyn bit down hard on his shoulder to keep from yelling out in pleasure, it registered in some far, dark recess of her mind that she left a mark on him, but her second orgasm won out. Her core clenched down on Arthur's cock and he froze, also taken by surprise, when his orgasm hit him. He tried to keep moving, but all he could do was hold onto her hips as ropes of cum came out into the condom. They both held onto each other tightly for a few more seconds before both of them relaxed and let go; Arthur's body pushed her deeper into the mattress and she wrapped her arms around his back. He leaned down and gave a few soft kisses before pulling out of her and getting up out of the bed.

"Be right back," he said softly and headed to the bathroom, grabbing his boxers along the way.

Merlyn sat up and winced slightly from the tenderness she felt, but it wasn't something she couldn't get past. She grabbed the closest shirt she could find and it ended up being Arthur's, she gave up trying to find her shorts and just settled with being able to find her panties--his shirt was long enough to cover her anyways. She heard him turn the water off and watched as he came out of the bathroom, on his way back to bed he went over to his light switch and flicked the light off. Arthur climbed back into the bed and pulls her into his side, she throws one leg over both of his and rests her left arm on his chest. In that moment she felt so vulnerable, but wasn't sure what to say.

Arthur broke the silence first. "Are you okay? Did I--" He sounded nervous--and Arthur
doesn't get nervous--she smiled and placed a kiss over his heart.

"I'm glad it's you," she said softly. He wordlessly pulled her in closer and gently stroked her back.

They both fell asleep in silence of his room and the comfort of each other's arms.

***

Merlyn shifted in her sleep and slowly blinked open her eyes...why is she waking up? A moment later, she realized why...she needs to pee (always the case after an entire night of drinking). It didn't help that Arthur was spooning her and she's never felt more comfortable and warm, but her bladder was having none of that; she slowly and carefully extracts herself from his arms and carefully climbs off the bed. She tip toes over to his bathroom and quickly shuts the door. Once she finished with her business she decided to brush her teeth since she was already there. Merlyn wipes her face with her face cloth and looks in the mirror to see if anything has changed. Her eyes look brighter...like all her happiness from within her was spilling out, she's read in books that a girl is suppose to get this glow on their face when they lose their virginity, but Merlyn didn't feel any different? The tenderness was still there, but she still felt like her old self?

She gasped when she zeroed in on the dark mark on her neck...he gave her a hickey! She was both shocked and slightly pleased at the same time, and that in itself confused her. That's what the prat was aiming for, she thought in amusement. Merlyn shivered slightly from the cold morning air and decided she would much rather be in bed with Arthur, she flicked the washroom light off and scurried back to him. She slowly climbed back into bed and under the covers, wiggling back into her spot, except this time she was facing him.

"Can I help you?" He mumbles, his eyes still closed but a closed lip smile was stretching across his face.

"You gave me a hickey," she stated. He cracks one eye open and looks down at the spot on her neck.

"Mmm..." he tightens his arm around her, "looks good."

Merlyn pouted. "You're such a savage."

He smirks and shifts his head on his pillow to fully look at her. "Are you sure about that?"
She nods. "Then I wonder how I got all these marks on my back." He rolls them further towards the wall and Merlyn sits up slightly to peer over his shoulder.

She gasps. "I did that?" She blinks down at him, he looks up slightly and smiles as his shoulders start shaking. "Oh I'm sor--mmph!" Arthur fully pins her under him and seals his lips over hers. Her fingers slide into his hair, just as his hands move under his shirt and up her back.

"It's hot. I like it," he says with a wink. Merlyn looks shyly up at him and blushes.

She tilts her head slightly to the side and her shy look becomes a mischievous one. "You're getting kinda heavy, sire."

He raises an eyebrow. "Are you calling me fat, Merlyn?" She presses her lips together and shrug. "Alright then," he rolls onto his back which meant Merlyn was now on top of him and straddling the lower part of his stomach, "you be on top."

"Prat," she mumbles without any heat and lightly trails her fingers over the small hairs he has on his chest. His eyes darken as he plays with the hem of the red shirt and slowly inches it up over her head. Merlyn tries to contain her blush as she's now practically naked in front of him and sees him look up at her with that dark and hungry look of his. He sits up and gently kisses her collarbone and shoulder.

"Do you think we can--"

"BRO! I NEED TO BORROW YOUR TOILET!" Gwaine shouted as he threw open the door of Arthur's room.

A loud yelp leaves her lips as she crosses her arms over her chest to hide her nakedness and Arthur quickly pulls his blanket up to cover her. "Gwaine," he growls, "leave." The named intruder blinks in surprise and takes in the scene in front of him.

"Hohoho..." He gives Arthur a sly look and winks. "Looks like you got a happy birthday after all, princess. Morning, sweetheart."

"M-Morning," she stuttered and felt the tips of her ears burning.
"Gwaine." This time the threat sounded pretty real in Arthur's tone. Gwaine rolled his eyes and turned to shut the door.

"Your panties are probably on tighter than Merlyn's," Gwaine threw that comment over his shoulder before the door fully closed.

Merlyn covered her mouth with one hand. "Pft," she giggled. Arthur snarled and chucked his pillow at the door, which made her start laughing even harder.
Hi everyone!

So, it's practically 4 AM where I come from. My flight leaves at 8 AM for my family vacation. I'll be gone for 8 days. But I wanted to make sure you guys wouldn't be left in the dark that much longer! I'm pretty much exhausted now. Trying to edit as best as I can but my eyes are exhausted. So I'll most likely go back again once I come back.

I really enjoyed writing this chapter (I say that about every chapter). But I really did enjoy growing their relationship.

***DISCLAIMER***

There's more smut in this story than the previous chapter. I'm in one of those moods. But keep in mind I'm still working on my sex writing skills so please bear with me.

As always if you enjoyed this chapter please feel free to leave a comment or a kudos!

Much appreciated,

-SS

"MOM! MOM! MOM!" Merlyn charges back upstairs taking two steps at a time and bursts through the main foyer and scans the room at large.

Hunith, having been in the same spot she was in for the past hour, in the living room, glanced at Merlyn from over the rim of her teacup and placed the book she's currently reading down in her lap. "Yes, dear?"

"My diploma results are in!" She waved the torn open manila envelope around in the air, the paper making that violent crinkling noise from being shaken in a way it's not supposed to.

"Ah," her mother said in a knowing manner and smiles, "and how did you do?"

Merlyn raised both arms over her head while holding onto the envelope. "I got perfect
scores!" Her dimples shining through on either side of her lips.

"That's wonderful, dear." smiled Hunith as she stood up from the recliner. "We must celebrate!"

"Can you make me a cake?!" She was bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet as she felt her excitement consume her. Hunith laughed quietly behind her hand and nodded her head, wondering vaguely if her daughter has been scoping out the mailman's delivery route to see when he would drop off her mail.

"What's with all the shouting?" Uncle Gaius appeared out of the hallway leading to his office with his signature eyebrow raise.

Her face lit up as she charged towards her uncle. "UNCLE GAIUS!" The envelope shook once again in protest.

After that happy announcement, with her test results more than satisfactory, she ran back upstairs to her room; which was perfect timing too since her cell phone went off just then and the familiar face that made her heart beat faster appeared on the screen.

She picked up the call and they both ended up speaking at the same time "Did you get your results?"

"Yeah!" She laid down on her bed. "How'd you do, turnip head?"

The line was silent for a second and Merlyn could picture Arthur running his fingers through his hair. "I...I got 90% in all of my classes, babe..."

Merlyn gasped and kicked her feet in the air while squealing. "I'm so happy for you! I knew you could do it!"

"Thanks," he said, the smile clear in his voice, and she was left once again to silently admire the deepness of his voice in the privacy of her room. "I would ask how you did but I probably already know."
"Oh?" She said and raised both eyebrows. "And since when did you know me that well?"

"Look at the good little nerd trying to be sarcastic," he drawled.

Merlyn scoffed and bit back a laugh. "Well, this good little nerd is getting a cake to celebrate her results, and I guess, if you wanted, you could come over and have some with me?" Her voice got a bit shy at the end...technically she's now inviting her boyfriend over to celebrate together.

"Crap," Arthur groaned, and she could hear the disappointment in his voice. She waited patiently for him to continue. "My dad wants to take me and the harpy out to dinner to celebrate our diploma results."

"Oh." Merlyn blinked. "That's great...what's the problem?"

She heard him sigh over the phone and mutter something that sounded like 'I want to spend more time with you.' "Nothin' I guess..." He said begrudgingly.

"We can spend time together before second-semester starts," she said and giggled when he loudly groaned.

"Don't remind me about that." She heard some shuffling over the phone.

"It'll be fun," she said and repeated, "I'll make sure we spend lots of time together before school starts." Arthur groaned again and she laughed while rolling over onto her stomach and laid her head down on her pillow. They stayed on the phone longer and continued talking, the topics they chose weren't immensely interesting--just casual stuff about their day or the game on TV last night--but to Merlyn (and Arthur) this was the best part of their relationship.

The sound of thundering footsteps in the hallway caught her attention and she looked over her shoulder to her doorway. "Yo, Merls!" Will leans against the doorframe. "I heard you got perfect scores on your diplomas, congrats kiddo!"

She held up her finger quickly and turned back to her phone. "I'll call you later okay? Have fun at dinner with your dad and Morgana!"
Arthur chuckled. "You have fun too. Bye, short stack."

"Bye, babe." She grinned and hit the end call icon.

"Bye, babe," Will said mockingly and sat down beside her on the bed. Merlyn rolled her eyes and turned to look at him.

"Hi, Will." She tried to sound as bored as possible.

Will laughed and gave her a light noogie. "I guess you and the Pendragon kid are finally together?" She blushed and nodded her head. "Congrats to you on your first boyfriend...if he fucks up I'll hang his head in my living room," he added the last part with the most malicious smile.

"Will," she chided and shook her head in exasperation.

He looked off into the distance as if he could picture it already...the death of her boyfriend. "His head'll go right above my TV, that way I'll always be able to see it."

"Can you not discuss the death of my boyfriend as if it's a guaranteed thing, please? It's creepy," She said warily.

"No promises, Merls." He patted her on the shoulder. "Anyways, let's go out and celebrate your achievement... and don't give me that crap excuse that we're celebrating it at home."

She closed her mouth and furrowed her eyebrows. "But...we are...mom's making me a cake...I love cake."

'Ooh my god,' he mouthed to the ceiling and then looked back down at her. "We need to discuss your lack of going out...it worries me."

"I go out!" She said defensively. "Doesn't Freya tell you about all the times we've been out during winter break? Also, she texts me about others things too. Things you've yet to mention to me."
"She does," he agrees with a smile and ignored the last part, "and this'll be another time. Come on now, up and at 'em! I made reservations at the new Italian place downtown."

"Oooo," she sat up quickly, "pasta!"

"Am I the best? Or am I the best?" Will said and looked extremely pleased with himself.

"You're probably just sick of having Auntie Gloria nagging you at home," she laughed.

Will blew out a loud breath and nodded. "Christ, Merls, let me tell you this, I love my ma--I do. But goddamn am I excited for her to head back to Ealdor."

"I'm going to miss mom when she leaves," said Merlyn softly as she bit the bottom of her lip.

"Aw, come on now, kiddo. You know I don't mean it like that," said Will as he pulled her into a one-armed hug. "You try being a fully grown man having his mother stay with him and tell him off that he isn't doing the dishes right."

She looked up at him with a serious expression. "Technically, she's right--OW! WILL!" He had her in a tight headlock as he started rubbing his knuckles over her scalp. "YOU ASSHOLE!"

"What do you have to say about my dish washing skills?!" He spoke loudly overtop of her. "WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO SAY?!" As always she started laughing and tried to push herself out from Will's strong hold of her.

"When the two of you are finished we'll be waiting downstairs," said Uncle Gaius with a smile as he shuffled away, having just finished changing into a nice cozy looking sweater.

After Will finished tormenting Merlyn (he begs to differ) he went downstairs so she could change into nicer clothes before going to the restaurant. She debated wearing her normal outfit choice; which consisted of: dark-washed skinny jeans, a nice long sleeve, and a scarf that matches. But, mom got her this really pretty pink lacy dress, and it would break her heart if Merlyn didn't at least wear it once for her to see while she's here. With that thought in mind she grabbed the dress off the hanger and slipped it on, she squirmed uncomfortably when she tried to pull the zipper past her
"Dammit.." she grunted while jumping up and down to pull the zipper up, "too tight!" The zipper fell from her fingers as she decided that it wouldn't be the end of the world if she just...didn't wear a bra--besides it wasn't that cold outside--she quickly unhooked it and tossed it into her laundry hamper. She debated on putting on some makeup, opting to only put on some mascara; luckily the hickey Arthur gave her had healed enough these past couple of days that, with some handy work on her end, it was covered up with concealer and foundation.

"CLOCK'S TICKING, MERLS!" Will's extremely loud voice carried up to her room.

She rolled her eyes. "COMING!"

***

Merlyn lied to herself.

It's cold.

Will looks down at her with one eyebrow raised and a smirk tugging on his lips, 'this is what you get for choosing beauty over practicality.' Merlyn scowled and returned his look with her own 'I'd rather die of hypothermia than admit that out loud.' He raised both hands up while giving her a mocking frown, she turned her head away and snubbed him. She made eye contact with her mom, who was giving her that eye-crinkling smile whenever she sees them interact with each other. Merlyn was just secretly glad no one noticed she didn't wear a bra in this cold weather. When they approached the glass doors of the restaurant there was already quite a line outside along the building, but Will just ushers them forward through the doors to where the hostess podium was. Auntie Gloria beamed proudly up at Will when he gave his name for the reservation and the pretty hostess said that their table will be ready soon.

"Look at my boy," she said while roughly smacking him on the back, "all grown up and living the city life."

"Ma..." he said while rolling his eyes, but Merlyn could see the pleased look on his face.

"Yet he still doesn't know how to properly wash dishes," she mumbled under her breath.
Will's head snapped over to her, and she eagerly prepared herself for another throw down. "Don't test me, Merls, I will put you in the tightest headlock so help me--"

"Gaius?" Both of them froze at the sound of the familiar deep voice.

"Uther," Uncle Gaius greeted, "what a nice surprise to see you!"

Merlyn's heart rate picked up when she realized that if Uther was here that means...A large smile took over her face when she felt Arthur's warm hand wrap around hers.

"Hi," she said softly while looking up at him (the beige booties she was wearing did nothing to help her height).

He gave her a big smile and she could see the excitement in his eyes. "Hi." She realized, a moment after, that they had an audience; immediately her face went up in flames as she turned to face everyone.

"Hi, Morgana," she greeted sheepishly (the wicked smile on Morgana's face did nothing to help her either) and looked up at Uther, "Good evening, Mr. Pendragon."

Uther glanced down at their entwined hands, blinked, and Merlyn swears she saw the side of his eyes crinkle, the slightest bit before he greeted her in his usual tone of voice. "Good evening, Merlyn. I believe I have you to thank once again for Arthur's exceeding marks." She blushed harder and tried to subtly extract her hand from Arthur's, but he tightened his hold.

"I didn't really do much," she said and tried not to mumble, "it was all of Arthur's hard work." It looked like Uther was going to say something and, at the same time, Auntie Gloria opened her mouth to say something. But before they could the pretty hostess came back.

"Mr. Turner your table is ready." Oh, thank goodness.

"Why don't we all sit together and mingle some more?" What? Merlyn blinked rapidly at Morgana, who was looking around at everyone for confirmation. The hostess waited patiently for their answer.
Uther nodded. "Yes. That would be excellent." He held his hand out towards Hunith. "We have not been formally introduced, I'm Arthur and Morgana's father, Uther Pendragon."

Hunith smiled and returned the handshake. "Hunith Emrys. Merlyn's mother."

"Gloria Turner. Will's mum and Merlyn's aunt. Pleased to meet you as well." Merlyn tried not to laugh when Auntie Gloria nearly crushed Uther's hand in a handshake. She had to give Uther props, the man didn't even flinch or shake out his hand when they both released. The Pendragon men really don't crack under pressure, she thought.

"Shall I take everyone to the private floor then, Mr. Pendragon?" Maybel asked politely, that's her name, Merlyn thought when she finally caught the name on the small silver name tag.

"Yes. Of course," he nodded and gestured for Hunith to go first, "after you."

They all followed after Maybel as she lead the way upstairs to a more secluded look area. Merlyn looked up and shared a look with Will, he gave her an impressed eyebrow raise and a look that said 'hey, if my boss is willing to pay for our meal...who am I to turn it down?' Her lips twitched and she fell in step with Arthur, who looked like someone just took a huge weight off his shoulders. He kept glancing down at her, the first few times she let it slide, but after the next couple of glances she was curious. She didn't catch on at first, but she finally noticed when he craned his neck slightly to look at the other side of her.

"Stop trying to look for the hickey!" She hissed under her breath and squeezed his hand and tugged sharply on his arm.

His lips twitched, but his eyes were dancing with wicked amusement. "No idea what you're talkin' about, short stack." She narrowed her eyes at him, trying not to smile, and continued walking.

At first nothing seemed out of the ordinary as they walked down a large dimly lit hallway. Auntie Gloria, mom, and Morgana passed them chatting (which isn't surprising since they're fast walkers), Will followed a step behind them at a leisurely pace (stupid long legs). None of that bothered Merlyn, but she had to draw the line when even Uncle Gaius passed them as he and Uther were both reminiscing about something or other.

"Why--" Her question was cut off when Arthur pushed them into a darker part of the hallway and pressed his lips to hers. She relaxed in his arms and brought her arms up and around his neck--
aware that she couldn't exactly mess up his hair.

He gently pulled away, after a couple of seconds, and gave her a few quick kisses before smiling at her. "Missed you, babe."

She gave him a shy smile. "I missed you too."

It went unspoken earlier during their phone call, but they actually haven't seen each other for a couple of days since his birthday. Merlyn wanted to spend more time with her mom because she'll be heading back to Ealdor soon, and coincidentally (or not) Arthur's training schedule picked up, with the start of term was looming around the corner and the first game is a week after they get back, Coach wanted to work them harder. Merlyn didn't want to be the first one to admit that she felt lonely not seeing him in person, since, realistically, they've spent a good majority of their days together leading up to their newly acquired status as boyfriend and girlfriend. But it was very reassuring that he felt the same way too...maybe even more than her...

"Auntie Gloria?" He asked while fingering the lacy material, his voice going a bit huskier as he eyes her dress with newfound interest.

Merlyn shakes her head. "My mom got it for me."

He let out a low whistle. "Send her my regards..." She scoffs lightly and rolls her eyes while smiling.

"We should catch up to them," she peered over his shoulder, "they'll get suspicious." He made an agreeing sound but made no effort to move, instead he kept running his fingers over the material of her dress. "Arthur..." she said while playing with the hair at the nape of his neck.

"Shhh," he murmured while leaning his head down so their lips were just touching, "trying to remember."

Her brows furrowed. "Remember what?" She tilted her head to the side.

"You in this dress and to make sure that's all you have to wear." Merlyn flushed to the tips of her ears, pulled back, and she scowled at him. Arthur smirked when he got the reaction from her that he wanted. "Just teasing you, babe."
She raised one eyebrow, two can play at this game, she thought while pushing up on her tip toes so she could whisper in his ear. "You know what else you can remember?" He chuckled and played along by shrugging his shoulders. "I'm not wearing a bra under this dress." Arthur's entire frame went stiff; Merlyn giggled quietly in his ear and gave him a quick peck on the cheek before ducking out from behind him, jogging slightly to catch up with their group.

"...right, Merlyn?" Phew, good timing, she thought while trying to look only slightly confused.

"Sorry I missed the first part of the sentence, got stuck behind Will." She gestured to Will's back, who (evidently) heard what she said and snapped his head around to stare at her suspiciously. He knows that she only uses that excuse when she heard absolutely nothing of the conversation because she snuck off somewhere she shouldn't have.

Maybel lead them towards a large open space with windows that overlooked the city. Merlyn's breath was taken away by how beautiful it looked; she tried to focus on where she was going but she couldn't take her eyes off the city skyline.

Her foot fell off one of the small steps she wasn't even aware existed. "Whoa!" Both her arms flailed outwards slightly.

"I got you." Arthur's arm wound around her waist, lifted her up slightly, and placed her down on the ground.

"Thank you," she mumbled while blushing.

He smirked and pinched her nose quickly before guiding her to their table. Everyone started taking their seats and Merlyn chose the one closet to the windows, leaving only one open spot beside her. But she had to reconsider her seating choice when both Arthur and Will reached out to grab said seat. There was a tense moment between them as they had a silent battle; Will gave Arthur a 'kid, don't start getting cocky now that you two are dating,' this-is-my-seat look and Arthur returned it with his own 'she's my girlfriend. I should be allowed to sit next to my girlfriend,' get-your-hand-off-my-chair look. Merlyn looked up at the ceiling in exasperation and scooted over into the seat they're fighting for which meant both seats on either side of her opened up for them to sit in. Will took the seat on her right and Arthur took the one she was just previously in--both guys were unhappy of the compromise she made for them.
"How did your diploma exams go for you, Merlyn?" Uther's voice dissipated whatever childish game Will and Arthur were getting into.

Merlyn perked up and smiled. "I did well."

Will subtly shook his head at her and turned towards Uther. "She got perfect scores across the board."

"As expected of Merlyn." Morgana beamed and winked at her.

She blushed and knotted her fingers together. "Morgana got perfect scores too!" She blurted out in an attempt to take the attention off of her.

"That's wonderful, Morgana!" Hunith beamed. It was a rare sight to see Morgana suddenly become shy, but she did from that unguarded smile.

Menus were passed around as glasses were being filled with water or champagne. Merlyn subtly looked over at her mom when the waiter came by and poured the bubbly, pink alcohol into her champagne flute. Hunith's lips twitched as she gave her a sideways look before returning to her discussion with the grownups.

"I'm surprised the good little nerd is breaking the rules," whispered Arthur into her ear.

Merlyn spoke through her lips. "Apparently, I'm a little risk taker tonight." Her smile grew when she heard his sharp intake of breath, obviously remembering her words from earlier about her current lack of support under her dress.

Morgana eyed them suspiciously before switching her gaze to her menu; Merlyn did the same thing and began the long process of what she wanted to order for her main meal. For a split moment she wished it was just her family at the table, not because she didn't want to eat with Arthur's family, but because she didn't want them to find out her odd way of ordering things. The first time she ate with Morgana and Arthur was way back during the Val incident and Will nearly caused a scene which was a good distraction. However, this time she didn't know if it would be appropriate to discuss with Will which meal he should consider ordering so she could get a bite of it as well.

"Which two have you narrowed it down to?" Will leaned over and stared down at her menu.
Arthur glanced over at them with a confused frown.

"Uhm..." she hummed and pursed her lips and pointed down at the first meal. "This one...and....this one."

Will nodded his head. "I've been in the mood for salmon lately." Then he glanced at the other option. "You sure you're actually going to eat the carrots? They'll be cooked, you know..."

She blushed when Arthur turned to listen to the conversation, she quickly closed her menu and looked at Will. "I'll eat them, it'll be fine." Will raised his fingers slightly off the table at her with the most dubious look was on his face and turned to have a conversation with Uther about project deadlines.

"So do you and Will always order together?" Arthur asked (in the most casual way ever).

Merlyn nodded. "He does it so that I can try different meals...does it..." she trailed off and looked up at him through her lashes.

He was silent for a second before he reached over and brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. "Next time...I want you to rely on me too, kay?" She blushed and nodded her head.

CLICK

Both of them looked up towards Morgana, who had her cell pointed at them, she gestured for them continue whatever it is that they were doing. Arthur scowled at her and flipped her off, whereas Merlyn covered her mouth to laugh. Their table's waiter came back and took everyone's orders and left with a polite smile. As time passed, while they waited, various conversations were taking place between everyone. She played with the hem of her dress and rubbed the material between her fingers to distract herself from her increasing hunger, it caught her off guard when Arthur reached over and held her hand under the table, running his thumb over top in slow lazy circles.

That simple action did not go unnoticed by Will, who chose, at that moment, to lean over and whisper to them. "Has it occurred to the both of you that this is, technically, a meeting of both families?" Morgana's insane ability to hear everything was proven correct when a wide grin broke out across her face.
Both of them blinked at his words.

Arthur snapped out of his stupor first and he leaned back in his chair while running his other hand over his mouth, trying to hide his pleased smile. Merlyn, as always, blushed and glanced over at her mom and Uther having a discussion about something on the news recently. This was all brand new to her, and it was both exhilarating and nerve-wracking at the same time. Was this too soon? Isn't it suppose to be a gradual thing? From all the books she's read, meeting each other's families happens much later in the relationship. Does this mean something's wrong? Or is she over-reacting? Is she seriously having a mental crisis before appetizers were brought out? Maybe all of this panic was stemming from her lack of garlic bread.

All of her internal musings were cut short when she felt Arthur gently squeeze her hand, reminding her that he's right there beside her. That's right. This was them for Pete's sake! She realized that between the two of them--Merlyn and Arthur--things have never been normal for them! During their first official meeting she punched in him in the face! Now, here they were, illicitly, holding hands under a table while their parents talked about the sudden need for more programs in schools.

'This is fine...er--no...more than fine,' she thought while looking up at her boyfriend.

This is us.

***

Much later...as in, Merlyn's never eaten so much in her tiny life, both families bid each other farewell and headed in opposite directions to their cars. She didn't get a chance to give Arthur a hug (Morgana cut him off and hugged her instead), which left an unhappy pout on his face as they went separate ways.

Cabbage Head: Can I come over tonight?

Merlyn flushed and discreetly looked around her as they loaded into the car before texting back.

Yeah

The drive home was interesting, Auntie Gloria was on the fence how she felt about the
Pendragon family, mainly Uther and Arthur, Morgana very clearly won them all over. She kept asking Merlyn questions about their relationship like: how did she and Arthur originally meet?...how do you explain to someone that when you first met your soon-to-be-boyfriend you punched him in the face for being a prat? She wondered while trying to not grimace or laugh at the memory. The thing that bothered her the most was Will's lack of contribution to the conversation.

"Coming up, Merlyn?" Uncle Gaius looked back over his shoulder and raised his eyebrow.

"Uhm...in a second, I just want to talk to Will first." Uncle Gaius nodded as he followed after Hunith and Auntie Gloria (she needed the bathroom after all that champagne) into the apartment.

"What's up, kiddo?" Will gently dropped his fist on the top of her head.

She looked up at him. "What do you think about my relationship with Arthur?"

"Ah...I knew you wouldn't let it go," he mused while leaning against the side of the apartment. "Is there anything specific you want me to think?" She shrugged her shoulders and waited for him to continue. "What would you do if I told you I hated the kid and that you should break up with him?" Her eyes widened and she felt her heart stutter to a stop. Will saw the look of utter devastation on her face and chuckled. "I'm joking, Merls."

"That's so mean." She pouted, but felt relieved all the same.

He sighed and gave her a soft look. "Are you happy?"

"Overall?" She questioned with a slight tilt of her head.

"Does this kid make you happy?" He explained while gesturing for her to answer with one hand.

She nodded. "Very much so." He does...he really does, she thought. Her insides going all warm and fuzzy.

"Then that's that." He shrugged. Merlyn gave him a slightly dubious look. Will smirked and
shook his head. "All I'll ever want is for you to be happy, Merls. That'll never change. If you choose him then I believe in your choice."

"I want you to be happy too!" Merlyn blurted out while blinking rapidly. "Always."

The side of Will's mouth turned up into a half smile as he crossed his arms. "We've both become such saps now that we're dating people."

"What're you talking about?" She smiled. "You've always been a sap."

"Look who's forgetting that they're the shorter one in this conversation," he said darkly while narrowing his eyes at her.

Her smile grew at the tone in his voice. "Auntie Gloria really likes Freya, doesn't she?" She bounced on her toes, she has had to hold that in the whole night. Will rolled his eyes while trying not to smile, but nodded his head. "Yay!" Merlyn threw her arms up and hugged him. "I knew it. Freya's text told me everything."

He gave her a displeased look when she pulled away. "You and Morgana share some similar characteristics, you know that?" They both laughed and said goodnight to each other as Auntie Gloria came down the steps, she gave Merlyn her famous bone crushing hug and congratulated her once again.

***

Merlyn stared up at her ceiling through the darkness of her room and waited patiently. The sound of her window being slowly opened brought a smile to her face; she rolled onto her side and watched as a familiar shape climbed through, the street lights catching in his hair and illuminating the blond color. He wordlessly kicked off his runners and closed the window before walking over to her bed, removing his jacket first, then his shirt, he paused at his sweats, raising one eyebrow while looking at her, she nodded and buried her face into her pillow when he took them off—leaving only his boxers on. Her cheeks warmed up at the sight of his body and certain parts of her squirmed in excitement as he climbed over her and under covers.

"Don't you have your own bed?" She teased while rolling the other way to face him, then moving into his arms when he opened them for her.

She could see his smile even in the darkness. "Yeah, but it's missing something...can't really
figure out what.” He leaned over and placed a kiss on her forehead. Merlyn was thankful for the darkness of her room to hide her blush.

"Doesn't your dad get suspicious when you leave the house this late?” She lightly stroked the soft hairs on his chest.

He shrugged. "He probably did at one point. But after the fight he had with the harpy back then...I think he prefers to stay out of it."

"What did Morgana do?” She looked up and saw the disgusted look on his face.

"She stayed the night at Leon's..."

"Pft," she choked on her laugh, "is that all?"

"Is that all?" He said under his breath and she felt his arms go under her shirt and up her back, pulling her shirt over her head. He lightly scratches the spot on her back where a bra should be, but still isn't there.

"This is probably why you get teased all the time," she murmured while pushing herself closer to him. "You always get so riled up."

"Oh?" He brought his face closer to hers and brushed their lips together, "Easy to tease am I?"

"Mhm." She brought her hand up to run through his hair as their lips meet.

This kiss is different from all their other kisses. It wasn't desperate or needy like when they first had sex, or the quick and cute ones they share when they think no one is looking. This kiss was slow and sensual, building itself up, and at the same stoking the fire within them. One of Arthur's hands moved down and grabbed her ass and pulled her in tighter so her core was pressed snugly over his erection. God, if she wasn't already getting wet she definitely is now. She moved her hips and rubbed against him, both of them biting back moans. Dry humping was fine and dandy to her but she wanted him inside her...like now.
She pulled back slightly and gazed up at him with slightly hooded eyes. "Condom?"

He nodded and rolled her over onto her back to grab his sweats, but not before rocking his hips against hers once more. Merlyn bit her bottom lip as she tried to not make any unnecessary noise. She watched as he leaned over her bed and rifled through his pockets; her excitement eventually gave way to bewilderment when his search became more frantic and he even lifted his sweats up and shook them out. Arthur let out a hiss disbelief before he rolled back over and ran his other hand through his hair.

"Fuck," he said, keeping his voice low but the aggravation was there. She realized what happened. "They probably fell out of my pocket or they're in my other sweats." The fact that he spoke about more than one condom (meaning he had planned for a long night) had her sexual frustration wailing in despair that she didn't have any of her own.

A small pout formed as she went back to lightly tracing his collarbone. Damn I guess...she stopped herself short from her disappointed thoughts when a new--naughty--thought crossed her mind. She trailed her fingers slowly down his chest, alternating between gentle touches with the pads of her fingertips, to small scratches with her blunted nails. From the sparse amount of light coming from her window, she could see the line of hair that pointed to the end goal under his boxers. Arthur didn't catch on to what she was doing until she gave that line of hair a sharp tug.

"Merlyn," he growled, a warning very clear in his tone, but it made her wetter and more excited.

"So I was reading one of my books the other day...and I want to try something out," she said casually and traced the outline of his cock through his boxers.

Arthur tightened his grip on her ass and gave it a punishing squeeze. "Shorty," his voice going deeper, huskier, and the vibrations traveled throughout his chest.

"I think it'll be fun," she continued mischievously and dipped her hand under his boxers, pushing them down, before he could stop her.

*My god he's huge,* she thought while running her tongue over her bottom lip. Her fingers could just barely wrap around the width of his cock, and the hardness of it took her by surprise. This was inside of her? She wasn't able to fully explore the last time they were intimate, but now she's genuinely curious and wants to delve into his pleasure. Arthur contained his groan, he didn't want to give away that the idea of Merlyn experimenting on his body made him ache with pleasure. It was harder to keep quiet when she started to slowly stroke up and down the length of him. He sucked in
a sharp breath when she squeezed the head of his cock and ran her thumb over top to collect the precum dribbling out.

She was so focused on his pleasure that she didn't even notice when his hand slipped under both her shorts and panties, coming into contact with her slit. "Christ, you're so fucking wet," he breathed while running his middle finger up and down. He hummed his approval when she opened her legs more to give him better access.

He dipped into her folds and teased her opening before drawing some of her wetness up and circling her clit with his thumb. "A-Arthur!" She whimpered before biting down on a spot on his chest. Her hips started to rock against his hand, trying to maximize her pleasure.

"Greedy," he chuckled darkly before inserting one finger into her opening, followed quickly by another. He tilted her head up towards him and sealed his lips to hers in order to silence her moans. "That's it..." he murmured against her jaw as he sucked wet kisses down her neck. Arthur could pretty much cum at the erotic sight of Merlyn's flushed face and her small whimpers at trying to keep quiet. Or, he could also cum from the feel of her wet, hot, core tightening around his fingers every time he withdrew, he remembered what it feels like around his cock and he throbbed in her hand. "Want to play a game, babe?" He swirled his thumb over her clit.

"Huh?" She blinked up at him. He'd be a liar if he didn't feel his ego inflate from the sight of her lust-filled fog on her face.

"See which one of us will cum first?" He smirked and pinched one of her nipples between his fingers while thrusting his other fingers a bit quicker into her.

"N-No fair!" She whimpered, "cheater..."

"Am I so easy to tease now?" He saw that quick look she gave him as it broke through his little girlfriend's sex-fueled mind, 'I'm going to get you back ten times harder' and fuck if that didn't turn him on some more. Merlyn bit her lip and tucked her face into the crook of his neck as he picked up the pace. "I got you, babe," he whispered in her ear as she let out a small, muffled, cry.

"Arthur!"

Merlyn was seeing stars...well not really seeing stars, but it felt like she was. Her whole body tensed and she tightened around Arthur's fingers as her orgasm consumed her. The prat had to go
and play dirty, instigating a game when she was hanging on the precipice of her orgasm...just you wait and see, she thought as she was coming back to her senses. Her body trembled from the aftershocks, and Arthur hugged her to his body and kissed her shoulder. The first time she had sex the aftermath left her so compliant and relaxed that she fell asleep in his arms. But this time? She smirked without him seeing and leaned forward to place kisses on his neck and down to his collarbone, the excitement and adrenaline running through her veins. He wasn't suspecting anything, just thought she was feeling especially affectionate after cumming on his fingers. Arthur's ego will be the death of him, she thought in amusement.

"I guess I won," he said smugly. She made an agreeing sound while subtly pushing him onto his back; he complied and she continued to place kisses on his chest and moved her way down as quick as possible before he caught on. "Now the score is..." she was aware he was still talking quietly but she had other things in mind. "Merlyn!" He quickly covered his mouth to keep himself from crying out.

"Hmm?" She said while running her tongue up the length of his hard cock.

"W-What're you..." He clenched his hand into a fist and bit into it when she swirled her tongue over his tip.

She moved to kiss the length of him. "Giving you your reward, sire." All his thoughts left him when she looked up at him, the dark blue of her eyes showing from the light shining through her window had him at her mercy. "I also read this in my books and wanted to try it out."

He watched through the poorly-lit darkness of her room as she wrapped her small hand around the base of his cock, her head ducking down to lick the underside of it once again. She traced the veins on either side of his erection and moved her tongue in a slow zigzag pattern. Arthur fist her sheets, trying to not scare her by bucking up into her mouth when she started sucking on the head, when really that's what his body was screaming at him to do. But, unconsciously, he did remember that he's Merlyn's first everything...and he sure as hell wasn't going to push her if she's not ready. Which is why it caught him off guard when she grabbed his right hand and brought it to the side of her face, nuzzling his palm.

"Show me," she said, giving him a hot look and nipping his thumb quickly.

'How did I get so lucky?' He wondered as he threaded his shaky fingers through the softness of her hair and began guiding her mouth back down his cock.

Merlyn tried to remember all the things she has read about giving blow jobs: use your tongue,
breathe through your nose, suck hard. She heard him groan quietly when she started steadily sucking the upper part of his erection, that in itself turned her on. But...there was something else she was curious about.

Arthur's breathing was becoming laboured as he held out and tried to let Merlyn explore as much as she wanted. He stuttered out a sound that was a mix between a moan and a gasp when she continued sucking further down, taking more of him into her mouth. *Holy crap is she...*his guess was cut short when he felt the head of his cock hit the back of her throat, and instead of choking or gagging, she *swallowed*.

No gag reflex.


"Babe..." he whispered urgently and let go of her hair for a second to tap on her shoulder, giving her the universal indication that he's going to cum. Her only response was to suck harder. Arthur lost it and he clenched his teeth as he let himself go.

Cum tasted different than what Merlyn had pictured in the mind. Firstly, it didn't really taste like much, but still had a distinctness to it that she could identify. Sort of like how there's a specific taste to water that she could never explain. From what she learned in health class and her own research, it's normal for it to not have much of a taste if the guy lives a healthy lifestyle, drink lots of water, and eats his vegetables. She giggled to herself as she sat up and straddled Arthur's hips, licking her lips. So that must mean he tastes like this because he's a good boy.

"Do you like pineapples?" She had to remind herself to keep quiet or else they'll be in big trouble.

Arthur looked like he was still recovering from his orgasm, but he still managed to give her a breathless smile. "You curious about that too?" She nodded her head excitedly. "Kay, I'll work on it."

Speaking of which...she tucked her chin in slightly and gnawed on her lip. "Was I okay?" He blinked up at her and she flushed darker. "What I m-mean is..." she stuttered to a stop when he ab-crunched and brought them face to face and furiously kissed her, stealing all the air in her lungs.

"Fucking fantastic," said Arthur in a low-growly voice when he pulled away. She felt a
He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her down on top of him, quickly readjusting his boxers before having her settle against his side. They both lapsed into a comfortable silence; Merlyn drawing small, random, shapes on his chest, and Arthur twirling a strand of her hair around his finger.

"Do you remember when we first met?" She broke the silence first this time.

He scoffed and then chuckled. "Which meeting do you count as our first? The one where you nearly bowled over Gaius or the one where you nearly gave me a black eye?"

She smiled. "The better one, of course." Their bodies shook with silent laughter. Once she collected herself she continued. "Do you think we still would have met each other if things worked out differently?"

"Different how?" He wondered.

"Like, for example, that day when I saw you being a complete prat," she made sure to give him a quick kiss on his chest so he doesn't start pouting. "Freya was trying to convince me to walk away and to not get involved. If I did...would we still be here?"

"Of course," he answered with full confidence, "you would still fall for me. I know it."

"Heh," she laughed and snuggled closer to steal his warmth, "goodnight, you royal prat."

"Night, Pigeon."

Her eyes were closed, but a wide smile spread across her face. "Pigeon?"

"I needed a new nickname for you, since you have like twenty for me." Arthur mumbled into her hair. "Thought you'd like it."
"I'm your winning card?" Her heart is beating so loudly she wondered if he could hear it.

She felt him kiss the top of her head. "Yeah...and more."

*Does this kid make you happy?*

**Very much so.**

***

*Failure*

*Disappointment*

*No future*

*Alone*

Arthur jolted awake and blinked rapidly up at the ceiling. It took him a few seconds to remember where he was; when he did he glanced over at Merlyn's small form fast asleep beside him. He blew out a breath and ran him right hand through his hair. Just another nightmare, he told himself, just another nightmare.

"M'here." He watched as she shifted in her sleep and wrapped her arm around him, burying her face in the space between his neck and shoulder. "T'okay." His racing heart slowed back down as he held her.

*Do you think we still would have met each other if things worked out differently?*

Yes. Because he would do anything just to have her in his arms like this.

***
Mornings were pretty dark since it's still winter. But Arthur could see her sleeping face as a dim, lazy blue filtered through her window. Just to amuse himself he took a strand of her hair and tickled her nose, it had the desired effect, she scrunched up her face and weakly batted his hand to get it to go away. He tried not to laugh but she looked adorable so he did it again.

A whine left her lips as she burrowed her face into his shoulder. He bit the bottom of his lip and brushed the strand down her cheek.

"--top it," she grumbled. Now he just has to do it one more time. Merlyn growled and viciously spun out of his arms, tucked her hair to one side, and rolled to the other side of her bed and hugged her pillow to her chest.

"Ha!" He covered mouth, trying to not be too loud. The grin didn't leave his face as he followed after her and spooned her to his chest, she tried to wiggle out of his hold (to be a little spiteful) but there was only so much room on her bed and he's substantially larger. "Aww...don't be mad, babe." She gave him no response. "Come on, forgive me? Please?" He murmured into her hair.

The response was muffled but he could make out the, "no," clearly.

Arthur leaned down to kiss her neck, ready to tease her some more, but stopped at the sight of a long scar. "What happened here?"

"Hmm?" Came her sleepy question.

"This scar here," he kissed it, "how'd you get it?"

She yawned. "Dirt bike accident with Will when we were younger....Bike went into a ditch. Helmet had a sharp edge. He has a scar on his calf from where the kickstand went through." Arthur sucked in a sharp breath and tightened his arms around her. "S'okay."

He wound himself around her and pressed his face into her neck. "No it's not."

Instead of arguing she just snuggled back into him. "...sleepy."
Safe. That's what she feels when she's in his arms, she thought. It felt like hours have passed but, realistically, maybe only half an hour or forty-five minutes did. Merlyn was aware that Arthur's been awake and was holding her while she sleeps (which she isn't complaining about) so she shifted around to face him.

"Morning." She blinked up at him, then rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

He gently nuzzled their foreheads together. "Morning."

It would have been the most picturesque moment, just the two of them, in each other's arms, waking up to one another...but no. The knocking at her door jarred them both into reality.

"Morning dear, breakfast should be ready soon." Hunith's muffled voice travelled through the door and sent a shiver of fear down her spine.

Both of them leapt out of her bed and scrambled around her room. She found her shirt and tugged it on over her head while pushing Arthur towards the window. He was hopping on one foot while trying to get his leg into his sweats, trying to make as little noise as possible.

She held onto him so he wouldn't fall over. "Coming! Just a minute!"

They were just in the clear when Hunith spoke up again. "You know, dear, I'm not one to tell someone how to live their life but...there's probably, oh I don't know, a much safer alternative for Arthur to get into the apartment?" Her words froze them on the spot. "Like...maybe the front door?" Merlyn gulped and Arthur blinked down at her with a 'what do we do?' look. The pause was broken by Hunith. "Will you be joining us for breakfast, Arthur?"

He looked at her and raised his hands in question; she returned it with a shrug of her shoulders and a wide-eyed look. "Uh...yes please?" Hesitation colored his voice and he quickly adds. "Thank you!"

Hunith chuckled. "See you both down soon."

They both stared at the door and listened to the sound of retreating footsteps. Merlyn blinks
slowly and taps her chin. "Hmm...I need to be more strategic. Mom's getting good."

"Strategic?" Arthur manages to get his sweats back on.

She nods. "I need to plan my booty calls better." The Cheshire grin on her face had him bursting out laughing.

"And here I thought I was your boyfriend?" He says while rolling his eyes.

"Eh," she shrugs, "that's debatable." The feral look in his eyes had her running for the exit. But the tall monstrosity managed to hook his arm around her waist and spin her around, lifting her up in the air. "You ass," she says with a slight breathlessness to her voice. Both her legs wrapped around his waist as her back softly hits the door.

One corner of his lips tug upwards as he leans in to kiss her.

A big yawn escapes Merlyn's lips as she stands in front of her locker...man she forgot how hard it is to wake up for school after break. She wasn't even sure why she opened her locker, they haven't even gotten their schedule or textbooks yet, but it was something to do and that's all that matters.

"Morning, short stack." Arthur comes up behind her and wraps his arms around her waist.

She rubs her eyes and leans back into his chest. "Morning, cabbage head." He chuckled and rested his head on top of hers. "Since when did I become a head rest?"

"I told you before we're the perfect height ratio." She blushed when he planted a kiss on the top of her head.

"I don't know whether I should be flattered or offended," said Merlyn sarcastically and tilts her head back to look at him; she taps on her lips, a small smile forming, and he smirks as he leans down to oblige her silent request.
"Ah...I'm glad we don't have bio together anymore," Percy said in an off-handed way as he passed them to get to homeroom.

Merlyn and Arthur break away from their kiss and both turn towards him with amused looks on their faces, but before either one of them could make a retort, Morgana’s voice piped in. "They seem to enjoy each other's biology very much, if what I heard from Gwaine is correct."

"Morgana!" Arthur snapped, whirling around to face her; Merlyn on the other hand went a flaming scarlet and tucked her chin into her scarf to hide her face.

The raven-haired vixen smirks and walks into homeroom while blowing them a kiss. Percy's laughter could be heard from inside the class. She's thoroughly amused as she watches her boyfriend scowl at his sister as they take their seats at the group table. Today marks the first day back from winter break and she was excited to be back. Khilgharra had sent out practice problems for them to complete so they could go over them today in lab.

"Class," George announced from the front of the room.

"Did he get a new bronze tie clip over the holidays?" Elyan said under his breath.

Apparently, George has super hearing abilities and gave their table an unimpressed look before continuing on. "I have here all of your schedules. Please come up as I call each person out, and remember that there is no swapping classes just to be with your friends."

One by one they all went up and got their schedules; Merlyn watched as Arthur got his and headed back to their table. Back then she used to think 'how is it possible he's in all of my classes?' or 'why is he in all of my classes?' Now she hopes they have at least one class together.

"Look!" She said, bouncing in her seat and tapping his arm. "We have nearly every class together!"

"Nearly?" His eyes grew wide and he leaned over her shoulder to scan between the two sheets of paper. "How?! We had every class together last semester! Why wouldn't we be in all the same ones this semester?!"
"You have Physics right, Merlyn?" Elyan asked while looking up from his schedule.

She nodded and handed the schedules over to a very unhappy Arthur, who was scowling at them like usual as if he could bully them into matching. "Yup, second period. And do you have Calculus with Khilgharra?" Elyan nodded and held up three fingers. "Yeah I have him third period today too!"

"WELL WOULD YOU LOOK AT THAT!" Gwaine clapped both hands down on Arthur's shoulders and shook him slightly before moving over to Merlyn; George gave their table a wary look. "We have the exact same schedule my sweetheart."

"Gwaine," growled Arthur, but said man just waved him off and took the open seat on the other side of Merlyn, grabbing her hand in the process.

"Nice to meet you. My name is Gwaine. We'll be working very closely together this semester." He winked and wagged his eyebrows at her.

Merlyn laughed and returned his handshake. "Nice to meet you too." Sometimes you just have to go with Gwaine's flow.

"What're you doing man?" Leon rolled his eyes and threw his arm over the back of Morgana's chair.

Gwaine put on an exaggerated look of offence. "I'm just trying to get to know my schedule partner. How else is she going to know I like long walks on the beach and the crust cut off my peanut butter sandwiches?"

"You hate the beach because the sand gets stuck in your hair and you're allergic to peanuts," Percy said in a bored tone. Gwaine winked at him and touched the side of his nose.

"See? That's something she never would have known if we didn't have this little chat, right sweetheart?"

She grinned. "Of course. Glad I know now." Amusement was dancing in his eyes as he reached over and ruffled her hair.
"And now you're pouting," sighed Morgana as she threw her brother an exasperated look.

"I'm not pouting!" He snapped and went back to glaring at their schedules.

"It's just Calculus and Physics that we don't have together," said Merlyn with a warm look on her face. It's touching that he wanted them to be together for all their classes just like she did.

"I guess..." he grumbled while scooting his seat closer to hers. "Don't sit next to Gwaine in those classes." He glared at said male as he spoke. Gwaine returned his sentiment by grinning maliciously at him and began waving his schedule around in the air, the proverb "rubbing salt on his wounds" ringing loudly throughout their table.

Merlyn laughed and put her schedule away in her binder before packing it up into her backpack. All the guys started talking about the game next week and the girls were discussing about a 'Welcome Back Pep Rally' for the school. When the first warning bell went off everyone got up from their seats and headed for the first class of the day.

"Is Hunith and Gloria leaving today?" Arthur asked as he lead them through the crowd of people.

She nods and sighs. "We're going to take them to the airport tonight." He gives her a silent look. "I'm fine," both his eyebrows go up, "honest! It just sucks having to say goodbye to them."

Arthur pinches her nose. "Can I come with you?"

"Tch," she feebly bats his arm, he grins and waits for her to continue. "You'd really want to come?"

"Yeah. I do." She blushes under his look and nods her head.

"Wow...Perce and Lance were right...it's like you guys forget the world exists when you guys talk to each other," said Gwaine with a look of disbelief on his face.
She giggles and waves at him. "Hi." Arthur rolls his eyes, but his lips twitch slightly.

"I've been walkin' behind you guys since homeroom and not once has either one of you noticed." He pouts and crosses his arms over his chest.

"Our apologies," she says while patting his arm.

A diabolical grin appears on his face. "You can make it up to me, sweetheart." Before she could even ask what he means or finish blinking. "Right now." She gets lifted into the air and Gwaine starts running full speed down the hallway while carrying her in his arms.

"GWAINEd Arthur shouts and takes off after them.

Both of them start laughing.

They make it to their first class of the day together which was Chemistry. Arthur sits down at one of the lab benches and crosses his arms, obviously pouting but will deny such an accusation. Gwaine nudges her shoulder and rolls his eyes while mouthing 'you need to fix him.' She nods and heads towards the seat beside him, without looking at her, he wordlessly pulls out her chair and goes back to crossing his arms.

Her mouth opens to start the conversation but he beat her to the punch. "I'm not pouting." She tries to hide her frown of disbelief. "I'm not." This time she holds her hands up in defeat.

"Okay," she said and sits down while glancing down at her seat, "thank you." He gives her his signature grunt.

"The princess was just picturing what the rest of this semester will look like for the two of us. Because we share all our classes together." said Gwaine with a deep, sultry voice and a diabolical grin on his face. He rests his chin on his arms as he straddles the chair in order to talk to them.

"You're not helping the problem," said Merlyn, her lips twitching as she tries to pretend she's reprimanding him. "Arthur's mood is justified..."
Arthur glances over at her. "You're a terrible liar."

"I'm not!" She said defensively, choking back a laugh. "I'm so genuinely trapped in my wallowing despair that we're not in every single class together and that I'll have to spend every single period for the rest of my semester with my friend Gwaine and not my--"

"--wonderful," he cuts in.

She looks up at the ceiling quickly. "wonderful boyfriend Arthur."

"Oh my god! So the rumors are true! Arthur and Merlyn are an actual couple!" If the girl sitting three rows behind them is trying to be discreet...she's not doing a very good job of it.

Arthur sits up and looks completely mollified. Gwaine, on the other hand, gave her a very serious look. "You do know what you got yourself into, right sweetheart? He's the neediest bastard, ever, and that's when he's not being a princess about everything." Arthur lets out a squawk of outrage.

Merlyn had to grab hold of her sides from laughing so hard.

***

"You have everything, right?" Merlyn fiddled with her mom's purse. "There's nothing else you need?" She glanced down at the small carryon suitcase.

Hunith smiled her motherly smile and brushed a strand of Merlyn's hair behind her ear. "I'm all set dear, no need to worry."

"Okay," she nods and lets out a shaky breath, "okay."

"We would have stayed longer if we took the overnight bus instead of--" Merlyn shakes her head and laughs.

"You know Will hates the overnight bus. The only way I got away with it is because it was a
last minute decision." Hunith nods in agreement and places her hand on her daughter's cheek.

"I'm so proud of you." Crap. Merlyn starts to rapidly blink back tears. "And I'll always be proud of you."

Maybe... "What if I go back to Ealdor with you?" Her voice sounded watery.

Hunith gives her a disapproving look. "That's just the momentary sadness talking. Your life is here in Albion." She cups Merlyn's face. "If these past weeks here have shown me anything it's that you're flourishing here. You're doing spectacular at Camelot High, not that I'm surprised, you've made wonderful friends, Will and Gaius love having you around, and..." she trails off and turns Merlyn so they could look behind her at Arthur, Will, and Auntie Gloria having a conversation. "Arthur needs you."

She sniffs. "Mom...he doesn't need me. He's capable without me."

"I see the way he looks at you," she said and continues on, "You both belong at each other's side. I've seen how much he needs you, how much you need him. You're like two sides of the same coin."

A half cannot truly hate that which makes it whole

Wow. Khilgharra's fortune cookies are still haunting her even now. "I've heard someone say that about us before." Merlyn pressed her lips together and threw her arms around her mom and squeezed hard. "I'm going to miss you."

Hunith returned the hug. "I'm going to miss you too."

"Come now you two," said Auntie Gloria as she wrapped her arms around the both of them. "Always the sappy ones."

"Will's sappier," said Merlyn in retaliation, and for that she got a flick in the back of the head from the named man himself.
"Well then Merly, come say goodbye to me too." Auntie Gloria lead her away and wrapped her up in a bone crushing hug she's famous for.

***

Arthur watched as Merlyn, Gloria, and Will were talking about something, his attention was diverted when he felt Hunith place her hand on his arm. "You'll grow into a fine young man, Arthur."

He blinked, unsure of what to say. "Thank you... normally I'd have doubts about that. But now that Merlyn's here...I promise I'll be a better person for her."

"And for you," adds Hunith as she gives him a warm, motherly smile.

Afterwards all of them headed to the security gate to say goodbye. He watched from the corner of his eye how hard Merlyn was holding in her tears. In that moment he realized how much he hates not being able to do anything for her when she's sad like this. They reached the checkpoint and said their goodbyes, him and Will both turned and walked away but Merlyn stayed in her spot.

"I know you want to go comfort her, kid. But now isn't the time," Will spoke softly and lead them away from the gate.

"But..." He looks back over his shoulder, something inside of him ached to see her small form standing there alone.

Will shook his head. "Something you should know about her, she likes to be alone sometimes." He tilts his chin in her direction. "This is one of those times."

"Why?" Arthur said.

A sigh left Will's lips. "She has always been independent. That's another thing you should know about her too." He gives Arthur a wary look. "If you think you're suppose to save her from something...I wouldn't hold your breath."

"I'm not," Arthur answers truthfully. 'If anything...she saved me.' But he wants to be able to do something for her too...
"Hmm," Will regards him with a new look, "you're not too bad, kid."

"I'm not a kid." He glares but the bastard only gives him an amused smile.

"Can we go home now?" Arthur jolts slightly from Merlyn's sudden appearance at his side.

Both of them nod and head back out to the airport parking lot. They say goodbye to Will and head to Arthur's car. He watches her as they get in the car and as he drives out of the spot. Things didn't seem out of the ordinary, she still surfed through over a dozen radio stations before stopping on one she liked, but she didn't say much through the rest of the car ride. It wasn't until he pulled up onto her driveway that she finally spoke.

"I'm fine," she says while looking out of the window, "I'm just sad."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" He asked. Even if Will told him that she's independent...he wants her to rely on him.

She goes quiet for a moment before turning to look at him shyly. "Stay over tonight?"

He smiles. "Okay."

If that's what he can do for her then he'll do it.

As much as she would have liked to say that the second semester started off with a bang...she would be lying. The first week back there wasn't much except for the standard start of lessons and homework being assigned. Having all her classes with Gwaine was fun, she's always liked him and being able to talk and joke around with him made her classes go by quicker. Arthur puts on a pout every time he sees them come into class together, but it was amusing to see. It wasn't until the start of the second week that things started picking up since the coming Friday would be the first game back after the holidays and it was extra exciting since it's a home game.
Coach Caerleon handed Merlyn a clipboard. "Could you look over some of these stats for me please, Merlyn?"

"Of course," she nods and starts flipping through the pages.

"5 MINUTE BREAK!" He hollered as he walked over to the equipment storage room.

Every one of the guys ceased running and stopped the drill they were performing. Merlyn glanced up and saw Arthur look over at her, she smiled and waved and went back to her task. All the guys immediately started goofing around and tossing the ball back and forth, even some of the players (Arthur included) decided to show off how versatile they are as an athlete and juggled the basketball like a soccer ball. She rolled her eyes and the edge of her lips tugged upwards as she circled various player names on her clipboard and partnering them up with a name from someone on the other team.

"DUDE! HEADS UP!" Before she could even blink or look up she heard the sound of the ball make impact on something...er...someone's face.

The boy instantly fell to his knees and grabbed his nose. Everyone froze, but Merlyn leapt in action, grabbing one of the towels on the bench beside her and rushing over to the unnamed boy.

"Are you okay?" She said while carefully reaching out with one hand to hold his shoulder and the other hand brought the towel up to his face.

"Ow...shit...yeah...I think...." He graciously took the towel and brought it up to his nose. Good thing too since he looks like he's about to bleed out from his face.

Footsteps approached and Arthur squatted down beside her. "Shit man...you okay?"

The brunet nodded and kept the towel on his face and started to tilt his head back. "Stop," she said and held his head, "you should tilt forward." He nodded and followed her order. She turns to Arthur, "could you tell Coach I'll be back. I'm going to take him to see Uncle Gaius."

"Okay." Arthur nods.
She looked at him warmly. "Can you stand?" He blinks, almost as if he's in a daze, and nods his head.

"Great," she smiles, "let's get you fixed up." All three of them stand up. "I'm Merlyn, by the way."

"Daegal." He tries to smile but ends up grimacing.

"Nice to meet you." With her smile still on her face she gestures for him to lead the way. Leaving Arthur staring after them.

Since school finished awhile ago the hallways were completely deserted, meaning it was just the two of them walking together. "What were you doing in the gym?" She wasn't comfortable with long silences, unless he was Arthur--then that would be a different case.

"Jorgy wanted me to go ask Coach Caerleon for the JV boys roster," explained Daegal.

Merlyn tilts her head slightly. "You're on the JV basketball team? How come I haven't seen your name?" It was nice that he was only maybe a couple inches taller than her, unlike Arthur, who towers over her...but then again that's something she likes about that dollop head.

Daegal shakes his head. "No...I...uh," he shifts the towel, "I'm on the baseball team. Our season hasn't started yet. But Coach Jorgenson wants to see the new players."

"Oh..." she nods her head. "Gotcha. Does that mean you're a junior?"

"Uh..." he blushes, "...yeah."

She claps him on the back. "One more year for you. Stick it through." This is what inspirational seniors are suppose to say...right?

"Thanks..." he mumbles while looking at her shyly.
"Well, we're here." She knocks on the doorway and pokes her head in. "Uncle Gaius? You in here?"

Uncle Gaius leans back in his chair and looks over at the door. "Yes, Merlyn." He smiles. "Something the matter?"

"We had a little mishap in the gym." She nudges Daegal forward. "I think it's just a minor bloody nose."

"My word!" Uncle Gaius sits up and shuffles over to Daegal, leading him to one of the beds. "Here. Have a seat while I get you cleaned up." He gestures for Merlyn to go and help him. "A minor bloody nose?" He spoke in a hushed voice.

She nods and gives him a blank look. "What?"

"He's already soaked that towel three quarters of the way through..." He said.

"Eh...well...I mean..." she shrugs and grimaces. "I've survived through worse, maybe my injury judgement is a bit skewed, I'll admit that." Gaius wasn't sure if he should laugh or lecture her.

She stands off to the side as Uncle Gaius goes back and starts to clean the mess of blood on Daegal's face. "How did this happen?" He asked curiously.

Daegal opened his mouth to respond, but someone else beat him to it. "It was my fault I...kicked a basketball into his face." Arthur rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly while leaning against the doorway. "Sorry man."

"S'okay," he mumbled while taking the ice pack from Uncle Gaius.

Uncle Gaius gave Arthur his stern eyebrow raise and disposed of his latex gloves. "Well, lucky for the both of you there's nothing broken. It is just a nose bleed." Merlyn smiled smugly, feeling proud of herself for knowing nothing was broken. "But," he gives her the stern eyebrow raise as well, "it is going to be swollen and bruise pretty badly. So remember to ice it as much as you can." That last part he directed towards Daegal...for obvious reasons.
"If everything's okay we'll just head back to the gym now," she said and smiles at Daegal. "You're in much more capable hands now. See you around!" He waves at her, but quickly nods at Arthur when he made eye contact.

Merlyn leaves with Arthur and they both head back to the gym. He reaches out and grabs her hand, she squeezes it and they both walk side by side.

He gives her a wary look. "You're not going to yell at me for nearly breaking that kid's nose?"

She returns his look with an unimpressed one. "His name is Daegal, a junior on the baseball team. And no I'm not. It was an accident...one that could have been avoided." Okay. She couldn't help but through in that remark.

"Yeah," he scoffs, "if he ducked in time he wouldn't have gotten hit." She lightly hits his arm.

"Not what I meant! But it was good of you to go and check up on him." She smiles and nudges his arm with her shoulder, interlocking their fingers in the process.

Arthur couldn't admit out loud that he was jealous of the attention Daegal was getting from Merlyn, which is why he went to the infirmary...but she wouldn't be happy hearing that so he nodded his head. "Yeah."

***

"Congrats on the win on Friday!"

"Yeah! Sick three-pointer!"

"Leon, you and Lance are like on a whole other planet!"

"Are you kidding? It's like Percy and Gwaine can read each other's minds!"
"We'll definitely win The Cup for sure!"

Merlyn took a sip of her apple juice and popped a French fry in her mouth, watching in amusement as a bunch of different students came up to congratulate Arthur and the rest of the guys on their win at the game on Friday. There's that poster boy smile, she thought as she bit into her pizza—ow! Hot! She started fanning her mouth and chewing as quickly as possible.

Arthur turned towards her in alarm. "Are you okay?!"

She nods vigorously while fanning the inside of her mouth. "H-H-Hot!" He grabs some napkins and hold them out to her.

"Oh..." a disgusted voice said, "so the rumours are true."

"What do you want, Sophia?" sneered Morgana. Gwen and Freya also gave Sophia cold looks.

Sophia flicked her hair back. "I just wanted to come congratulate Arthur for winning the game on Friday."

Phew. Close call. Merlyn swallowed the bite of pizza and took a sip of her apple juice.

"And what are we? Chopped liver?" Elyan looks around the table at the guys.

She rolled her eyes and places a hand on Arthur's shoulder. "I could congratulate you later on too, Arthur. You know...just us." She winks.

Arthur blanches and shifts out from under her hand and glances over at Merlyn, who was blowing on her pizza to cool it down. Sophia ignores his blatant snub and leaned over the table towards him and pushed her chest out towards him. "What'dya say?"

"I-I-I..." He shifts back and forth between everyone's amused looks. "No!"
"Of course he'd say no to you. Because he'll say yes to me..won't you, Arthur, my little love monkey!" Vivian cooed while hip-checking Sophia out of the way.

"Pft! Ha!" Luckily, she didn't take another sip yet or else she'd probably have apple juice coming out of her nose.

Arthur scowled. "I'm not a monkey!" He could already see the gears turning in his girlfriend's mind.

Gwaine hopped up on his chair and started mimicking a monkey. "Oooh oooh ahh! ahh!"

Everyone, minus Arthur, Sophia, and Vivian, started laughing. The two girls frowned in disgust and walked away from their table whispering to each other. Merlyn catches Arthur's eye and giggles.

"What now?"

"Weren't you jealous?" He grumbled. Ah...so that's it.

She shook her head. "Because I trust you," she explained when he opened his mouth to complain. That shut him up and he went back to eating lunch...looking extremely pleased.

January was going by too slowly in Merlyn's opinion as she clicked away on her keyboard in her digital media class (one of the options she chose). The weather didn't look like it was going to give way to Spring anytime soon either, she sighed and hit the backspace key. The door to the computer lab opened and a blast of cold air entered the room, causing goosebumps to appear on her arms.

"Too cold..." she complained under her breath. Gwaine reached over and tossed his sweater over her shoulders. "Thanks, Gwaine," she smiled.

He winked. "Anytime, sweetheart."
"Do you have any plans today after school?" Merlyn said while turning her head slightly towards him.

"Asking me on a date now? Arthur's not one to share, but I won't tell him." He makes a 'shhh' gesture and grins at her.

She laughs. "Okay. But I'm just curious since the tourney is picking up, Coach is going to increase the hours of practice in the coming weeks to prepare for the back to back games. Also, he mentioned something about a mock-tourney being held at one of the other schools."

"Yeah," he nods and rubs his hands together, "we'll crush those bastards so bad their future children will carry the family shame."

"How nice..." she said and trailed off with a smile. "But I guess you guys are going to be super busy soon."

Gwaine nudged her hand. "Going to miss the princess?" She blushed, trying to deny his claim. He chuckled. "You're adorable, sweetheart. But, Valentine's Day is coming soon, and you know what that means..." he raised his eyebrows suggestively.

Why does she get the feeling he's going to say...

"Flowers and chocolate sex are pretty good, in my humble opinion." The thing about being in all the same classes as Gwaine? He always makes her laugh.

***

"So..." Gwen and Freya flock to either side of Merlyn as they headed off to lunch.

"So..." Merlyn repeats and gives them a hesitant smile, "..hi guys?"

"What do you and Arthur have planned for Valentine's Day?" Freya said excitedly
She furrowed her brows. "Uhm isn't that still a few weeks away? But...I don't think we have anything planned? I might just go over to his house, probably play video games or check out that new show on Netflix?"

"Not even dinner or a movie?" Gwen navigates them around a crowd of students.

"There's no new movies out that I want to see and restaurants get super packed on Valentine's Day." She only knows this from all the times her and Will try to go out and eat on that day, only to be turned away because the place is packed full of couples.

Morgana appeared out of thin air and continued with the conversation topic like she was on a mission. "What did you do in the past on Valentine's Day?"

"Duuuh..." She began and scratched the side of her head. "This is my first Valentine's with a boyfriend...actually...Arthur's my first everything," finished Merlyn sheepishly.

"Aww," all three girls cooed.

"Keeping in mind!" She felt flustered and felt the need to explain herself. "Back when we were younger Will used to beat up all the guys who would even try to give me a Valentine's Day card...so if anything I have him to blame for my lack of experience on this day.

Freya patted her arm. "At least he didn't threaten Arthur."

"Well..." Merlyn and Morgana both trailed off while sharing a look and then bursting out in laughter.

"He'll get bored of you eventually, you know that right?" Vivian stepped in front of their group, her nose held high as she smiled smugly at Merlyn. "And when that happens what will you do?"

"Shut your mouth, Vivian!" snarled Morgana. "Don't just come into our conversation!"

She fluffed up her hair. "I'm just saying, ears here shouldn't be getting too ahead of herself."
Vivian let out a high-pitched laugh. "I mean, come on now, like you're not even his first girlfriend!"

"Neither are you," said Merlyn as she calmly stared her down. Vivian blinked and then glared at her.

"He's slept with other girls too, you know? I've even slept with him and let me tell you he's so great in bed. Like a complete sex machine!"

Merlyn smirked. "I know." This conversation needs to stop. Because she's not one to broadcast someone else's sex life, or her sex life, to the general public. "It doesn't bother me. Never has."

It seemed like all her responses were pissing Vivian off more and more, seeing as how she's not getting a rise out of Merlyn like she must have wanted. "You'll never be his first anything! All the other girls got to it before you and there'll be more after you!"

"How Arthur lives his life is completely up to him," Merlyn said and rolled her eyes. "But if you're so keen on the details," she grins, "it must drive you insane knowing he picked me over you." Freya, Gwen, and Morgana started grinning, then eventually laughing. Vivian snubs her nose in the air and stormed off down the hallway, letting them pass and get to the lunch room.

But, if she was completely honest with herself, some of Vivian's words got to her.

As soon as she got into Arthur's house she made a beeline for his room and went straight under the covers, shivering to warm herself back up. Her ears picked up the sound of his footsteps as he approached his room, she shifted under his covers and peered at him from overttop of his blanket.

"C-Cold!"

He tries not to smile, but then a dark, hot look took over his features. "I know a way that could warm you up..." he says while walking over to his bed, it dipped under his weight as he put one knee on the edge, leaning in to kiss her.
"Ah." She stops him by putting one finger to his lips. "We have homework."

Arthur blinks and tries giving her his poster boy smile. "Why don't we do that later? Much later." He kisses her finger.

"No can do, dollop head. You know we shouldn't," said Merlyn with an impish grin.

A moment passes between them.

Eventually, he sighs and heads to his desk. Merlyn smiles in triumph and rolls onto her side so she could watch him. "Don't you have homework too?"

"Finished it in Digital Media. Mrs. Cecil always lets us have free time." She hugs his pillow to her chest.

"Lucky..." he grumbles.

"Why did you want to continue with Sports Medicine?" When she first saw it on his schedule it intrigued her.

He gives her a half smile and opens up his notebook. "I signed up for it to show my dad that I don't have to inherit his company. That I can make a future for myself...kind of sil--"

"--that's wonderful," she said softly and gives him a warm smile. "I'll believe in that too."

Arthur shifts in his seat and gives her another lustful look. "Are you sure we can't--"

"The answers to the lab report are on pg. 345." There's that pout again.

She wasn't sure when it happened, but she ended up falling asleep watching Arthur work on his lab report. The warmth of his bed, the softness of his pillow, and the smell of him lulled her in with a sense of comfort and security.
"Scoot over." Arthur lifted her over on his bed with one arm.

"Hmm?" She blinked her eyes sleepily.

He mutters to himself under his breath. "Making me jealous of my own pillow."

"Are you done?" She yawns and settles into his side.

"Yeah." He wraps his left arm around her and puts his right arm behind his head.

They both settle into a peaceful silence; Merlyn drawing shapes on his chest, and Arthur tracing the outer part of her ear. "Are you doing anything on the 10th?" He broke the silence first.

"In February?" She tilts her head up. He nods. "What day is that?"

"A Friday. We have a long weekend. Professional Development Day on Monday."

She shakes her head. "Don't think so. Why?"

"Well...I was...uh...wonderin' if you'd want to sleepover?" He lifts his head up when she doesn't respond right away. "If you're okay with that and, obviously, if Gaius is okay with that."

"I am. I was just wondering about Morgana and your dad?"

He grins, but then he grimaces as he remembers something. "Morgana and Leon are going up to his cabin with his parents for the long weekend."

"To do what?" She laughs when he glares at her. "Kidding!"
"And my dad is going to Asia for a conference with some stockholders," he continues on.

"So we'll be alone?" She says in a low voice.

The blue color of his eyes darkens as he tilts her chin up further to kiss her. "Yeah. Just you and me."

*You'll never be his first anything!*

Well...we'll just have to fix that won't we, she thought as he rolls them over and pins her beneath him, pressing their lips together.

Definitely jinxed myself, she thought while furiously typing and scribbling on a scrap piece of paper. Why did she ever think this month was going by slow? She looked over at Elyan, who also looked like he was in distress. Khilgharra had assigned two projects and one assignment over the span of three days--and she's ready to pull all her hair out. It was worse for Elyan since he not only had the stress of Robotics but also the stress of basketball since Coach upped their practice hours. Honestly, if she didn't have the relaxing memory of her and Arthur laying in his bed, she'd have questioned if they were even in a relationship...considering how they've yet to see or hang out with each other since the start of the new week. But, on top of that too she had another mission to deal with.

"How are things going, Merlyn?" Khilgharra walked past her bench with that dragon-like smile of his.

She tries hard not to scowl. "Just peachy."

He chuckles and taps the side of his head. "Always good to stretch the old noggin!"

"Then maybe I just pulled a muscle," she said and furiously typed her equation into her calculator.

"How are things going with your side project? Manage to run into them yet?" He questioned
while looking down at her work.

"Not yet. But I've been going there every day after Robotics. I feel like maybe I'm just not lucky." She erases a line of incorrect coding.

"I see in you a great destiny, Merlyn. Keep trying. Today just might be the day." He pats her on the back as he walks away.

She leans back and calls out. "Do they give you an extra discount on the holidays with the fortune cookies?" The man laughs.

After what seemed like an eternity she finished the assignment and two projects. Elyan managed to scrape by too without emotionally breaking down like some of their classmates did. Khilgharra nodded at them as they handed their stuff in before turning back to help their classmates with the problems.

"Oh man I can't wait to run laps," groaned Elyan, stretching his shoulders.

Merlyn raises one eyebrow. "That's a first."

"Running doesn't--" he yawns, "--require thinking."

"True. Coach must be really focused on whipping you guys into shape if even I'm allowed to take some time off." They turned down the main hallway.

"Coach just doesn't want Arthur to be distracted or try too hard to impress you," Elyan stated with full confidence.

"Me?" She blinks in surprise. "But--"

He held his hands up. "Hey. It's the truth. Whether you see it or not he loves doing whatever he can to make you look at him."
"But I'm always looking at him--oh!" She covers her mouth and instantly blushes. Elyan smirks down at her as she looks up at him through her lashes. "Please don't tell him that...his ego will get even bigger."

A chuckle leaves his lips and he smiles. "Don't worry. I got your back, Merlyn." He holds his fist out.

"Thanks," she smiles and bumps her fist against his. "Have fun at practice!"

"See ya!" He waves and disappears into the gym.

Now it's time for her to go on another recon mission.

***

Technically, she's not a stalker...she's not. Even if she's sitting in the parking lot of the Albion Arena waiting for the Excaliburs to show up. So to fill in the blanks. She decided that she wants to go to one of the Excaliburs home games with Arthur, considering how they both love this team it'll be a good gift. But the problem is that the next home game lands around her birthday (well before her birthday, since she's a leap year baby and all). All the tickets were sold out and even then they were expensive--unlike Arthur--she doesn't come from an insanely rich family. But, no worries, she's always been able to think her way through all sorts of things...hence her sitting in Uncle Gaius's Jeep while she waits and sees if the team has practice today in this arena.

"Come on Khilgharra, you said today was going to be the day." From this mission she also found out, through some research and digging, Khilgharra was one of the point men for the construction of the arena and she pleaded and begged him to tell her which entrance would give her the highest chance of running into the team or anyone representing the team for that matter.

A gasp left her lips when she saw Alator, the team's manager. He had a nicely pressed, black suit and the signature Excaliburs colors on his tie. He had an ear piece on and is currently carrying a briefcase. The man looked like his photos on the team's website. A short, slightly pudgy man with a bald head.

She unclipped her seatbelt and sprinted across the parking lot. "Mr. Alator! Mr. Alator!" She saw the man pick up his pace. "Please! I just need 1 minute of your time!" She managed to run ahead of him and cut him off from the door. "Please..." she pants, "just hear me out and I swear I'll leave."
"Miss...I could very well call security on you." He regards her with an impassive look. What in the world is this small woman thinking...

She nods, still gasping for breath. "I know. I know. I'm sorry. My name is Merlyn Emrys and this is not how I wanted to introduce myself to you. And it'll be even weirder when I ask what I have to ask--no **plead** you for." Merlyn recollects herself. "Please is there any way I can have two tickets to the Excaliburs home game at the end of February?"

"Ha!" He laughs and points his pen at her. "The nerve you must have to come right out and ask such a thing! Do you know how many people ask me the same thing on a daily basis? What makes you any different?"

"I'll offer up my services in exchange!" She blurts out. "I'll clean up the gym. Sweep the court. Wipe down the locker rooms. Even re-inflate the balls. Just please don't turn me away."

It's the earnest look in the girl's eyes, Alator thought while pinching the bridge of his nose. How could he turn someone, who looks like a wounded puppy, away? "You are aware that nearly all the men on the team are happily married to their wives? So if you think this is your chance at scoring a rich husband then you can forget it."

"What?!" She exclaims. "No! I'm not looking for a rich husband! I already have a boyfriend, who I'm happily with! I'm doing this because he loves this team and one day he'll play for this team too."

Alator gave her an intrigued look. "Play for this team?"

She grins. "He'll be your top scorer. You can bet on that and I'll sit courtside at every game cheering him on."

The man sighed, he's grown soft with old age, and gestured for her to follow after him, he can't turn this eager and genuine girl away after seeing how her face lit up talking about the future. Merlyn had to bite her lip to keep from losing her cool.

"The team's training schedule is not disclosed to anyone, that includes you. I am only going to humor you on your request. I have some paperwork to deal with and will be here for only three hours. If in that time you manage to do all the tasks you listed off earlier...I'll consider your request. Understood?" He gives her a stern look.
"Yes! I completely understand." Holy crap...she didn't expect to get this far.

He pointed out where she could start and she began immediately. It was hard work, but she was determined and that alone was enough to fuel the fire burning within her. The time kept ticking away, but she couldn't lose her focus...

"Time's up, Ms. Emrys." She flopped down on the locker room bench, exhausted from running around.

"I lost..." she says, hunching over onto her knees and running her fingers through her hair. "I'm sorry to have wasted your time."

Alator regarded the defeated looking girl with curiosity. He has never met someone, aside from the men on the team, who works so hard for something, and this something isn't really even for her. The doubts and suspicions he had about her disappeared as he cleared his throat. "Tomorrow you may try again."

Her head snaps up. "What?" She blinks rapidly and shakes her head. "I mean...really?"

"I'm here till the end of the week. You have until then to show me if this determination of yours can garner two courtside tickets."

"C-C-Courtside!" Her whole face lights up. "I'll come back! I'll definitely come back!"

And she did.

Also..guess what? She's now the proud owner of two courtside tickets for the Excaliburs home game.

It's okay that Arthur's slept with other girls. She clicked the next link. If his skills in bed are from trial and error...Merlyn didn't mind reaping the results. But goddammit why did Vivian's stupid
words have to haunt her? She knows she's not his first. And it's so stupid how she's bothered by it. Not emotionally bothered by it, but competitively bothered by it. Not his first anything...I'll show you what his first with me will be, she thought aggressively while scrolling through the second link.

Merlyn has made the executive decision that she wants to be kinkier in bed. And for that reason, she has begun her extensive research on the internet and her smutty romance novels. Through all of the research, she's done over the past few days (after acquiring those holy tickets) the topic that intrigued her the most was...BDSM. Some of the things she saw were a bit too intense for her liking (with her current sex experience), maybe she'd experiment in the future with Arthur if they were both curious, but for now, the idea of tying someone down had her interest. But not just someone, the idea of tying Arthur down had her dripping wet.

"Hey, shorty!" Arthur appeared in her doorway. How did she not hear him come up the steps?

She snaps her laptop close and swivels to face him, putting it behind her back. "Hi!"

He looks at her in amusement while spinning his basketball on one finger. "What're you up to?"

"Nothing!" She says and tries to change the topic. "How was practice? We haven't seen each other in a few days!"

"Fine. Lance might be rotated into the point position for a few games." He glances at her arms behind her back.

She sits up. "Oh. Coach is implementing my suggestion? Have Lance at point and Elyan right wing?"

He nods, pushing his tongue against his cheek as he spoke. "Yeah. He wants to shake the other teams up...what're you hiding from me?"

"Nothing!" She said while narrowing her eyes at him. "I'm not hiding anything so there's nothing."

"If there's nothing why're you hiding it?" He throws back at her and begins slowly walking
towards her bed, like a predator trying to catch his prey. He drops his duffle bag and basketball by her bed.

Merlyn gulped and tried to think of another lie. "It's time of the month stuff!" Eh...kind of shitty excuse, but it could work.

"You finished your time of the month last week!" He says the last part louder when he pounces on her and traps her beneath him. "What's your next excuse?"

"How'd you know I had my period last week?" She said while squirming beneath him.

He smirks. "You only carry chocolate on you when it's your time of the month. Also...you're more sarcastic towards me when you start getting moody."

"I am not!" She said defensively. "I'm always sarcastic towards you no matter the month!"

"Ha!" He smiles. "That's true. Still cute too. Always fun to see a short person get angry. You even said so yourself...you guys are closer to hell."

She gives him an unimpressed look, but that changed in a second once she saw that he managed to get a hold of her laptop. "Wait!" When did he get a hold of her wrists? He chuckles and places the laptop on her chest and opens it, scanning the contents. She watches as he goes quiet and the amused expression on his face disappears

"Babe?" She can see the question in his eyes, but she's too embarrassed to say anything so she turns her head to the side. Since obviously, she can't cover her face...prat had to go and hold both her wrists with just one hand to show off his strength. He nudges her leg with his knee.

She closes her eyes and wishes for her bed to swallow her whole. "Talk to me." Dammit...he has to go and use that voice.

"I wanted to spice up our sex life..." she mumbles under her breath, turning back to look at him.
The hurt look in his eyes took her off guard. "I'm boring you?"

"What!?" She tries to sit up but he still has her pinned. "No! It's not like that!"

He lets out the breath he was holding and waits for her to continue, the hurt still lingering around his eyes—waiting to come back.

She takes a deep breath and whispers. "I was afraid you would get bored of me." Her look cuts him off before he could interrupt. "You're my first. But, you've slept with a bunch of other girls, so obviously I'm not yours."

"Does it bother--"

"No." She shakes her head. "It doesn't bother me. But it's because I lack that experience that I'm worried you'll one day get bored of me experimenting on you..."

He leans in and kisses her hard on the lips. "Experiment on me all you want." His serious look warmed her insides. "There's something else...isn't there?"

Merlyn frowns and formulates how she wants to explain this. "Let me start off by saying that I don't care about what comes out of Vivian's or Sophia's mouths' a majority of the time. But...this time Vivian's words got me thinking." She looks into his eyes. "I want to be a first something for you."

"A first something?" He questions.

"Yeah. I'm determined to find something that you've never had or done with any of the other girls you've dated." Confidence built up inside her as she made that declaration.

His lips twitch. "You're really competitive...you know that, short stack?"

She scoffs. "You're way more competitive than I am." The side of his mouth tips up in agreement.
"How about we try for a first now? I liked what I saw on that tab." He gives her a sensual look and leans down to kiss her.

"No." He freezes an inch from her lips. "You don't get to see what I've learned from my research until I'm finished."

"But..." He says, eyes wide, and to further emphasize his point he grounds his erection into the side of her hip.

"The long weekend." Both of them stare into each other's eyes as her words sink in between the two of them.

A shaky sigh leaves his lips as he flops down beside her on the bed and spoons her. "Okay." They lay there silently before he leans over and mumbles into her neck. "I can't stay long."

"I know," she said and tried not to sound too forlorn. "Coach is really cracking the whip on you guys."

"Heh..." Arthur's attempt at not laughing was futile since she burst out laughing too. "Nice one, Merlyn."

"Of course, my lord."

"I wish Coach would let you come to the extra practices..." he sighs while squeezing his arms around her tighter.

*Coach just doesn't want Arthur to be distracted or try too hard to impress you. Whether you see it or not he loves doing whatever he can to make you look at him*

*Then I promise to only look at you.*
Merlyn’s been kidnapped.

No. Nothing dangerous...unless you're someone who considers Morgana Pendragon as a threat...then yes she's in danger.

"Uhm...guys? Are you sure all of this is necessary? I think Arthur and I are just going to grab a slice of pizza before heading back here to hang out." Merlyn gripped onto Morgana's vanity table as she pulled the curling wand through her hair.

Freya looked up from her nails. "Of course! You guys haven't even had a proper first date yet since you've officially become a couple."

"We have! Ouch!" Merlyn saw the reprimanding look Morgana gave her. She knew she shouldn't fidget as much as she is...but she's getting antsy. "We hang out at each other's houses and we spend time together that way!"

"As adorable as that sounds. Sometimes a proper date is also good for couples," Gwen said while applying a coat of pink lipstick on Merlyn's lips.

"Arthur's been mulling this over for weeks now, you know," Morgana said, "so maybe humor that idiot when he gets you."

"He hasn't told me anything about this?" She would know and definitely remember.

The three girls share a knowing smirk. "All the more fun," she says and curls another strand of hair.

A small sigh escapes her as she accepts her fate and allows the girls to dress her up. Besides, it would make things easier later when she shows Arthur her surprise. She glances over at her backpack and hoped all the things she packed would be okay until she gets back later with him. Uncle Gaius didn't react badly when she asked if she could stay over at the Pendragon household for the long weekend, he just told her that he trusts her and that he hopes she'll be responsible. He made sure to give her his stern eyebrow raise as he gave her that little speech and now here she is...practically glued to a chair--how much trouble can she get in?
"Ow!" She jumped as another hair strand was tugged out.

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Holy shit...she's beautiful.

Arthur watched Merlyn come down the stairs towards him. Her hair had soft looking curls and she's wearing a red dress, similar to the one she had on at Christmas. He was speechless, and he wondered briefly if this is what it'll be like for the rest of their lives...Merlyn taking his breath away every time she smiles at him.

"You look great, cabbage head."

"Thanks. I know." He winks at her.

She giggles. "So arrogant."

"And you're so beautiful." He watches as she instantly goes bright red and scowls at him.

"Cheater."

He laughs and leads her out the front door. "I take my points where I can get them."

Most of the time when guys let a girl walk ahead of them it's to check out their ass...his actions were no different. The nerves these past couple of weeks drove him insane, about this fancy dinner and if she'd like it. But the idea of getting back home and seeing what she had prepared for their later activities had him wondering if they could rearrange the agenda a bit. He opens her door for her and she smiles up at him...yeah, he wouldn't mind being knocked breathless like this for the rest of his life.

He had booked them a private room at the restaurant they had eaten at over the holidays with both their families, remembering how much she liked it there. The look of realization of her face when he pulled up to the restaurant was priceless, he handed his car keys to the valet attendant and ushered her inside and away from the cold.
"Not sure if you're curious or not. But," she pushes up onto her tip toes to reach his ear, "I'm actually wearing a bra tonight," she whispers.

Fucking hell.

He glares at her as they get taken to their private room. She'll be the death of him...he knows it. They get seated at their table and he likes the way the candlelight dances over her skin.

Merlyn looks around the room once the waitress gives them their menus and leaves. "This is so extravagant, Arthur...thank you."

"You're welcome." He leans his arm against his chair while looking over at her. "A king always takes care of his queen." He could see her blush come back and the shy look on her face. But the mischievousness in her eyes had him on his toes.

"And this queen will make sure she returns the gesture...tenfold." Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. He thought. How fast is he allowed to rush her through dinner without looking rude?

***

The closer they got to Arthur's house the more nervous she got. After spending days of planning and collecting information she could use, it all depends on if she can execute it all properly tonight.

He walks over to her side of the car and opens the door. Neither one of them said a word, the anticipation from both parties hanging in the air. They walk upstairs and head to Arthur's room, the first thing she sees is her backpack laying by his nightstand (she had moved it earlier out of Morgana's room). She walks over and reaches into the side pocket, pulling out the black silk rope, courtesy of Gwen after Merlyn made a quick stop by the Art/Fashion Room.

Merlyn looks up at Arthur through her lashes and bites her lip, holding the silk rope between her fingers. His lusty look, momentarily, gives way to a confused one before he catches on to what she wants from him.

"You want to tie me down?" He breathes. She nods her head and glances between the bed and him. "I thought..." his voice trails off when she gives him a sexy, pleading look.
"Please?...it'll be fun...I promise." Arthur opened and closed his mouth before giving her a relenting sigh, taking off his dress shirt, and laying down on his bed. She quickly straddles him before he could have second thoughts and smiled down at him. He looked up at her with a hot look with some mild amusement mixed in, he lifted both his arms above his head and waited for her. She leaned forward and made fast work threading the silk ropes through the metal poles of his bed frame and securing his wrists together.

"I guess that camping trip was worth it." They both said at the same time. Merlyn looks down as Arthur looks up, they blink, and both of them burst out laughing.

She pressed her lips together. "You were such a toad back then...still are too."

"And you just kept appearing everywhere in my life," he said softly, the warmth in his eyes caused her to blush. "Kind of annoying, but still cute," he adds. Well then...she clicked her tongue against her teeth and narrowed her eyes at him while tightening the ropes (just enough to prove her point).

"The trip down memory lane is over." She scoots down so she could sit on his knees and plays with the button on his jeans, he went from semi-erect to fully erect with that simple action. "Want to have some fun now?" She gives him a sultry look and tilts her head slightly while tracing her finger over the bulge in his jeans. Both her hands make quick work at getting his jeans undone and she pulls them down three quarters of the way. He gulps and begins to nod rapidly.

With that she gets off him entirely and her lips twitched when he lets out a noise of protest. "Where're you going?" His eyes follow her as she makes her way to his bathroom.

"I need to get cleaned up first." She bats her eyelashes at him as she leans against the door frame.

"Why?!" He says while tugging slightly on the ropes. To her relief the ropes hold and so does his erection.

She gives him an innocent look. "I thought I should at least be clean before I get dirty." Arthur narrows his eyes at her as she turns and shuts the door to his bathroom.

Merlyn immediately flattens herself against the wood and pressed both her hands to her cheeks. "Holy crap...did I just...and without stuttering?" She mumbles quietly while curling her pink-
"Merlyn." The growl mixed with the warning in Arthur's voice had a shiver of excitement running up and down her spine and other parts of her getting wet.

The red dress fell to the floor followed by her undergarments. She turned on the shower, grabbing her bag of toiletries from under his sink that she stashed there earlier on in the day. It was the quickest shower she ever took, rinsing off her body and brushing her teeth (just so her breath was minty fresh), and moisturizing so her skin was ultra soft when he touches it. Luckily, for her, Arthur wasn't the most observant person and failed to notice the black shopping bag she stashed under his sink a couple days prior; the red and lacy material had her squirming in excitement. The sound of metal loud groaning could be heard from the room--another warning from her impatient boyfriend to hurry up and come back!

"Just changing!" She teases, and giggles when the bed groaned again.

Again he sounds so offended. "Why?!" If Arthur had it his way she would be naked and under him right about now.

His obvious desire for Merlyn gave her all the confidence she needed to slip on the skimpy red outfit. She wiggles into the red, lace bustier and shifts the cups until her breasts settled nicely. Next, came the matching g-string, tied together on both sides with silky, red ribbon. Finally, she attached the straps on the bustier to the g-string and turned to look in the mirror. There was no time to touch up her makeup, so she simply fluffed up her curls, gave her hips a warm-up wiggle and threw open the door, strutting into the room as if she did not care in the world…

Inside, Merlyn was shaking. And she couldn’t bring herself to look directly at him.

She had to ignore the strangled, wheezing sound that Arthur made and nervously crossed his room to turn on his lamps to the lowest setting, then she went and turned off the light, plunging them into a softly lit atmosphere. Finally, she looked over at Arthur.

Everything inside of her froze, even her breath caught in her throat.

All the muscles in his body were drawn tight and he had a steel grip on silk ropes, his chest moving in slow, but huge heaves. His gaze, previously on her body, switched over to make eye contact with her. Merlyn held her breath, swallowing nervously, her mind going blank.
She's damn lucky he was tied. Something told her that she had flipped a switch. Merlyn already tempted Arthur and now he's just wild...the best part of it all? She hasn't even started yet! Suddenly, she was worried if what she had planned was such a good idea after all.

"Turn around," he ordered, his voice thick with lust and need, and he ran his eyes back over her body.

She placed one hand on her hip and cocked it to the side. "I'm the one giving orders." No backing down now, this will be her and Arthur's first kinkiest Valentine's Day of their relationship, she thought with pure determination. After all...she did want to be his first something.

Merlyn straddled his hips, low enough to tease his cock but high enough to be just out of reach. Arthur glared at her and she gave him a cheeky grin and leaned forward to place a kiss on his chest. The soft glow from the lamps emphasized just how muscular he is. Abs have never actually made it onto her list of attractive features on a guy, nor did it bother her that he doesn't have them. But that doesn't mean he wasn't essentially a large frame of muscle, and god that made her wet just thinking of the size differences between their bodies. Every muscle in his arms were pulled taut as he held tightly to the ropes as he waited to see what she would do next. She slowly slides off the bed and tugs his jeans the rest of the way down and turns so he could get a view of her from behind.

What she did next was one of the boldest things she has done in her life thus far.

She slowly bends down to her bag, acutely aware of Arthur's hiss and the bed frame rattling when his body arched and settled back down. Merlyn plays with the black blindfold as she stands upright and turns back to him.

"That's enough of the show," she says in a seductive whisper. Arthur blinks up at her rapidly, his 'what? I want to see more of you' look spurred her on. The blindfold fitted nicely over his eyes and she stepped away.

Now, according to her research, all his other senses are heightened after she cut off his sense of sight. She grabs her backpack and pulls all her hidden objects from it without rushing, but also with an urgency...her panties were nearly soaked through. The sound of the objects being place on his night stand catches his attention and he turns his head towards the sound. Merlyn giggles and finishes her preparations; Arthur's lips firmed and she knew he was both hating and loving the sense of anticipation. Once everything was in place she climbed back over top of him, careful not to sit down just yet. She releases the straps of the bustier and gently tugs on the ribbons on either side of her hips and the g-string came off without a hitch.
She trailed the lacy material up his abdomen and chest. "What's that?" He asked, his voice going ragged when she brushes it past his nose.

"Guess," whispered Merlyn as she continues the slow, lazy path.

Arthur caught her off guard when he manages to grab hold of her panties with the corner of his mouth. "Lace." He looked smug with the corner of his lip biting down turned up.

It was her turn to smirk. "Mhm," she agreed and added in a hushed voice, "from where?" She brushed it past his nose, again, slowly as he takes a deep breath in.

"Fuck..." He growls and releases his hold on her panties. To emphasize her point, she leans forward onto his stomach to let him feel her, skin to skin. So he could feel how excited she is.

He tugs more harshly this time on the ropes, causing his bed to shake from the sheer force, but after a moment he takes a deep breath and relaxes. Merlyn eyes the ropes around his wrists worriedly, scared they could possibly hurt him. She leans forward and inspects them, letting the bustier material brush against face, it seemed he had a firm hold on the knots and his wrists looked fine--except made a bit pink from all the movement. Her tongue flicks out to soothe the area and she places small kisses on his forearms, the feature she loves the most on him. The feeling of the cool skin of her thighs brushing against the burning hot skin of his torso sent another shiver of pleasure down her spine. She settles back onto his legs and gives the trail of hair on his abdomen a small tug.

"Stop teasing, shorty." The muscles in his jaw were working overtime.

She giggles and gently drags her blunted finger nails down his chest. "I haven't even started yet." Arthur lets out a shaky breath and she could see the edges of an aborted smile.

Time for the first part of their session. She reaches over to the nightstand and picks up the fluffy, white feather. Merlyn started at his arms, lightly tickling her way from his hands to his elbow and then slowly zig-zagging her way down to his neck. Arthur tries to shift his neck out of the way, his body twitching all the way down to his flexed toes. She moved the feather to the front of his chest and then down to his nipples, tickling ever so slowly and delighting in the goose bumps that started to appear on his skin. The feather tickled the sensitive flesh at his side and he tried to flip her off with his hips. With a force she didn't even know she had she pinned them down and slapped his stomach, the smart sting echoing between them as his body jerked from the sudden, sharp change in sensation.
"Sorry, sire," she murmurs and leans down to kiss the spot and running her tongue around the area to add another different sensation. She knew that slap didn't hurt him, much like any of her attacks.

Deep down she knew it would have been cruel to brush the feather down his thighs since he's already hanging by a thread. Instead, she slowly kisses her way down, letting the lacy material of her outfit brush against him, as well as her hair, then she kissed the skin sitting right at the edge of his boxers, grabbing the material with her teeth and pulling it up a bit before letting it snap back against his skin. Arthur sucked in a quick breath between his teeth. Merlyn took her time exploring the strong muscles in legs, first his thighs and then his calves; she never realized how physically fit he is all over his body, and that just made her wetter.

Arthur lifted his head. "What're you doing?"

"Second surprise." She settled back up on his body and popped the lid to her tupperware container, she dipped the spoon in and lowered herself so she laid her chest on top of his; it was a good thing the ice pack kept the dessert cool till now. "Open wide." The hesitation was clear on his face so she leaned forward and kissed him. "Please, my lord." Arthur opened his mouth; she smiled and fed him the spoonful of chocolate pudding. "Good boy." She felt him tense slightly from the praise...hmm, turns out Arthur has a thing for being tied down.

"Chocolate pudding," he moaned and opens his mouth again, eager for more. She humoured him and fed him a couple of spoonfuls before continuing on with her game.

On her next pass she purposefully missed his mouth--by just enough. "Oops," she bent her head and licked the pudding from the side of his lips. "How clumsy of me." He opened his mouth in protest when she sat up. "Let's try again." The next drop fell on his chest. "Oh dear, let me clean that up."

Maybe it was the chocolate giving her a sugar high or the growl that rumbled through his chest that made her core quiver with need, but she's never felt sexier in her entire life.

"Where're you going?" He turns his head.

She giggled. "Last surprise."
"Are you fucking with me?" Arthur asked genuinely.

"Not yet," she answered and trails her index finger down the line of hair and stopping at his boxers.

Arthur mutters a few choice words under his breath as he focuses on getting his jeans the rest of the way off from around his ankles. She turns her attention back to her task and opens the two thermoses and for a fleeting moment decided she needs to leave raving reviews on the company's website after tonight. The smell coming from one of the thermoses caught Arthur's attention as he sniffs the air and just to divert his attention she shook the other thermos in her hand slightly. Merlyn had to press her lips together when his body jerked and he swung his head towards the noise.

She smirked as she climbed back onto the bed. "Nervous?"

"I don't get nervous, Merlyn." His voice had that false confidence in it.

And now that they're together she can call him out on it. "Liar," chuckled Merlyn.

A grin appeared on his face, "Maybe a bit."

Fantastic.

Merlyn took one of the semi-melted ice cubes out and popped it into her mouth to give it a quick suck, to make sure it wouldn't have the chance to stick to his skin. Starting at his face, she trailed the ice down the bridge of his nose and across his cheekbone, loving the sharp intake of breath he took. He groaned and she could see his thoughts on his face... *how mean is my girlfriend going to be?* Especially, since she knew he could smell the hot chocolate in the other thermos.

The next stop was his lips, but he took her by surprise when he stole the ice cube from her, crunching it between his teeth with a smug smile. Her eyes narrowed as she grabbed the sides of his face with her right hand and sealed her lips over his, kissing him deeply. Arthur moaned as she stole back a couple of ice fragments and instead of going for his neck she went straight for one of his nipples.

"Shit!" He cried out as she pushed the ice around the taut flesh and sucked at it with her cool lips. His thighs tensed beneath her, almost like he was ready to toss her off.
She kissed his chest. "Punishment is fun too, isn't it?" After retrieving another ice cube and sucking on it, she continued her path from earlier, leaving a cool path from his neck, down his chest, and when there was only a little sliver of ice left she let it disappear beneath his boxers.

His hips bucked and a devious smile appeared on her lips as she pulled his boxers all the way down. Arthur went completely still--not even his chest moved--he didn't make a single sound. Then she proceeded to grab another ice cube, loudly crunching it between her teeth, his cock jerked at the sound but he didn't say a word. Butterflies erupted in her stomach as she leaned down and licked the underside of his erection.

He sucked in a lung full of air and his whole body jerked. She took his thick, leaking head in her mouth and slowly swirled the crushed ice.

"Fuck!" He exclaimed in a breathy voice.

Merlyn gave into her lust. She took more and played more, covering his long, hard erection with a combination of her saliva, the melted ice, and his pre-cum. When all the ice was gone she reached over for the hot chocolate and took a big sip and made sure to warm up her mouth and lips. Then, with her second sip, once the hot chocolate was luke warm she sealed her lips over his cock again and this time took him as deep as she could go (which she learned from last time was all the way).

"Ahhh! Fuck!" Arthur moaned, arms twisting from side to side as he moves himself back and forth in her warm mouth. She swallows most of the warm liquid and starts to warm him back up from base to tip.

And then she switched back to the ice.

Arthur arched his back. "Merlyn!" He growled, the warning clear in his voice, but she continued sucking, taking pleasure from his arousal. An idea crossed her mind about warming him back up by sliding onto his cock, wondering how much he would enjoy the extra hot warmth of her body. But would he be able to feel it through the condom? With that thought in mind she decided against it and finished with the ice.

...Now time to warm him back up.
I wonder if I'll be turned on by hot chocolate from now on, she wondered as she swirled the warm liquid around in her mouth and bending down to suck on him. Her lips slipped a little and the liquid spilled free down his length as she sucked on the head.

'I want him to see me,' was her next thought as she swallowed the liquid.

Merlyn reached up and tugged off the blindfold, his dazzling blue eyes immediately settled on hers. She let him watch as she lapped up the spilled droplets, trailing up his length and flicking her tongue once she reached the tip and finally taking him as deep as she could go.

The bed jerked again and the loud ripping noise as Arthur broke free of his restraints took her by surprise. She sat up in alarm, eyes wide and jaw dropping as he reached for her with a snarl and flipped her beneath his body onto her back--effectively pinning both her arms to the bed with one hand. Puffs of air left her lips as she tried to keep her racing heart from beating out of her ribcage. Nervousness and excitement coursed through her as she watched Arthur wretched open his nightstand and pulled a condom out, tearing it with his teeth and rolling it on.

He shoved her legs opens, pushed one finger into her, to check if she's ready, before he plunged straight into her, hard and deep.

"Ah!" She cried out and arched her back. Arthur froze, afraid he had hurt her.

It didn't hurt. In fact, it's exactly what she needed...wanted. She felt full and the adrenaline from earlier still coursing through her veins had everything standing on edge. Merlyn bucked her hips against him, telling him that he didn't hurt her and that she's turned on.

He didn't hold back.

Arthur pounded into her hard and fast. Both her arms pinned above her head. And she was still wearing her bustier. Merlyn wrapped her legs around his waist as he picked up speed and drove her deeper into her lust. She was hanging there on the edge, ready to go over with him as his orgasm was approaching.

"Please, Arthur," she begged and he lost it, both of them cumming at once. Arthur buried his face into her neck as he let out broken gasps with each uncontrollable jerk inside of her. Her breaths came out in pants as he released her wrists and she wrapped her arms around him tightly as her mind recovered from her orgasm.
"Are you okay?" She whispered after a bit.

A breathless, surprised laugh left his lips and tickled the side of her neck. "Are you?" He placed a soft kiss on his favorite spot.

"Definitely more than okay." That vulnerable feeling was back and all she wanted to do now was cuddle in his bed.

He rolled onto his back, taking her with him as he carefully withdrew from her body. Instead of going to the washroom to throw the condom away like last time, this time he just threw it into the garbage bin by his bed, tugging his boxers back up in the process. Merlyn snuggled into his side and stroked the soft hairs on his chest.

"Did you like it?" She asked into a soft voice, feeling kind of self-conscious now.

Arthur chuckled and tilted her chin up so he could kiss her deeply. "That was amazing. Definitely my all time favorite firsts." She smiled. "But maybe not every day..." She tilts her head and furrows her brows. "I don't think my body could handle it," he elaborated. Her blush climbed up to her ears.

A realization hit her and she pushed up onto her arm. "I can't believe you ripped the silk ropes." She inspected his wrists and was happy that there wasn't any damage, just red marks from all the tugging. "I tied them pretty well..." He shrugged and smirked. *He knew he could have ripped through them at any minute.* That's not fair.

"Best. Valentine's. Day." He twirled a strand of her hair around his finger.

She gasped and quickly straddled his hips. "Right! I almost forgot!" He gave her a perplexed look and rubbed her hips with his thumbs, eyeing her bustier.

"Forgot what, short stack?" His fingers toying with the lacy material.

"Your gift," she said and reached over onto the nightstand where she put the envelope earlier.
His expression softened as he looked up at her. "You got me something? You didn't have to."

"Well you didn't have to plan such a wonderfully lavish dinner. But you did anyways."

He silently agrees and gives her a closed lip smile. "I thought this was my gift?" Arthur tugs at her bustier and gives her a suggestive look.

She shakes her head. "That," she smirks, "was just plain fun. This," she taps the envelope against her lips and hands it to him. "is my gift."

"You know," he began, "I used to get a lot of cards in elementary on Valentine's Day, the girls just couldn't stay away." Then he winked at her.

"Did you also get a lot of cavities from your overly sweet personality?" She smiles and blinks innocently at him.

"Ha!" He throws his head back and laughs, jostling her slightly as she sits on his hips. "So what did you get me?"

"Open it and find out." She nods at the card.

He smirks and eyes the frog illustration on the front of the card with amusement. "Are you taking me to the aquarium to see my extended family?" Merlyn bursts out laughing, his joke catching her off guard, and has to try her hardest to collect herself enough to shake her head no. "Maybe another date then..." he muses as he opens the card and the two tickets fall out onto his chest.

"Tickets?" He says and picks them up off his chest. It took him a few seconds to realize what they were for. Merlyn could see his eyes widen as he looks at the tickets and then up at her. "These are..." He trails off.

Merlyn bites her lip and gives him a shy look. "It's what I was doing during our time apart. The Excalibur training schedule is kind of sporadic so it took me a few tries before I finally managed to track down the team manager, Alator...I thought it would be fun for both of us to go see
a game together. Do you like it?"

Arthur sits up in a flash, the tickets falling to the ground, and pulls her in for a kiss. She moans and presses into him. He pulls back and kisses his way down her neck. "I love it. Thank you." He kisses his favorite spot. "Thank you," One hand grabs a fistful of her hair and tilts her head so he could kiss her again, while the other hand grabs her ass and shifts her over his crotch.

"Again?" She pulls back from the kiss in surprise. He looks at her with hooded eyes and a lazy smile and nods. "B-But..." she stammers, "we haven't even cuddled yet!" Her cheeks become flushed.

"I'll cuddle you after I show your body how much I like your gift." Her lower parts quivered.

"Okay!" She was taught to always be appreciative of someone trying to repay her.

And holy crap did he ever.
Hi everyone!

Sorry, I’ve been MIA for a little bit, the start of my practicum year was more hectic than I thought it would be! But, like I mentioned in the comments, I promised an update by the end of this week and well...here you have it! There are some edits that I'll need to do that I'll slowly work on this following week, but I hope you enjoy what this chapter has to offer!

As always, if you enjoy it please leave a kudos or a comment (:)

Much thanks,

-SS

"Mornin'..." Strong arms wound themselves around her middle as Merlyn poured a tall glass of chocolate milk.

A smile lights up her face as she tilts her head back. "Morning."

Arthur gives her bedroom eyes. "Missed you in bed..."

"I was surprised I woke up before you actually," she said sheepishly, blinking up at him through her lashes.

God...does he have to look so good this early in the morning? How is it fair that he looks even better with bed head? Merlyn's heart didn't stand a chance. Clad only in a new pair of navy blue boxers, she was treated to the glorious sight of his body. Broad shoulders, muscular arms, and the look he reserves only for her to see, there wasn't anywhere she'd rather be than right here in this moment. He glances down at her body at what she's wearing, which was his white t-shirt and gray boxer shorts (rolled up several times at her waist), a smile tugging at his lips.

She crosses her arms as a light blush colors her cheek. "If you'd stop throwing my clothes so far away from the bed I wouldn't have to keep taking yours."
He chuckles and leans down to kiss her cheek. "I like seeing you in my clothes. Looks good."

"There's a Neanderthal comment in there somewhere." Soft wisps of hair tickle her fingers as she plays with the hairs at the nape of his neck.

A dark look appears on his face and, in the next moment, Merlyn finds herself getting lifted up and placed on the counter. Arthur starts slowly kissing her neck and collarbone while toying with the hem of the t-shirt.

She gasps and grabs both his hands, pulling back to scowl at him. "No!" He laughs and leans forward so both his arms trap her on either side. "We're not going to do it in your dad's kitchen! Bad Caveman Arthur!"

"Pft," he grins and gives her an amused look, "I like waking up to you, wish we could do this always." The confession threw her off guard.

"Always?" She asks in a quiet voice.

The grin on his face slowly fades away and a cautious look appears. "Don't you want to?"

"Of course I do!" She says in a rush, hating how she put the worry in his eyes. "It's not what you're thinking!" He doesn't say a word and waits for her to elaborate. "I just thought that things would go...differently? Not that I don't like the way things are going...but I sort of pictured that relationships were more...you know...?" She helplessly shrugs.

"Oh..." he nods once, "I'm guessing you had a plan?" The light teasing in his tone gave her a sense of relief.

She shrugs once more while biting her lip. "Well...not really...not a concrete one. I pictured one-day meeting someone I'm really into," she gives him a pointed look when he coughs and points at himself, "and we'd date for awhile. Of course, I plan on both of us finishing school, then maybe...I don't know...I imagined that we would both have our own places and then move in together, then spend a few years sharing a single space, and afterward maybe something else..." she lifts her shoulders once more.
The idea of the future scares her—it always has—but the look of certainty in Arthur's eyes has her considering that maybe wanting things isn't so bad. That maybe wanting what they have now is fine.

Arthur lays his head against her chest. "Want to go for breakfast?" His soft bed head tickles her cheek as she nods. "Where do you want to go?"

"Any place that doesn't put carrots in their omelets." She pulled a face.

"Cooked carrots taste fine, shorty," he laughs.

She makes a disgusted sound at the back of her throat. "Says the guy who eats everything in sight."

"I am not fat!" He cries out and, out of spite, hauls her off the counter and proceeds to spin her around.

Merlyn throws her head back and laughs while hanging on to him as tightly as possible. Once he stopped, and they both re-orientated themselves (giggling the whole time), he lowered her down to the ground and she went upstairs to get changed while he finished the chocolate milk. These past few days staying over at the Pendragon household had been one of the best moments of her life. It showed her that although their newly acquired relationship status is still in the honeymoon phase they would be able to move forward together.

Breakfast consisted popping into a small diner and sitting in one of the tables in the far back. Merlyn scanned the menu and went through her process of picking what she wanted to order. The despair slowly hit her when she realized she can't possibly eat two meals by herself.

"Do you want some of my omelette once I order it?" She gasped and he glanced up at her from his menu.

She could hardly contain her grin. "That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me." He smirked and looked back down at the menu while reaching for his drink. "Hey, look...they have chocolate pudding." The light casualness in her voice caught him off guard.
Arthur choked, water spewing out of his mouth, and started spluttering.

Her smile grew.

*I like you so much*

***

"We should all go out clubbing for Merlyn's birthday," Morgana announced to the table at large. "Since she's the last of us to turn eighteen."

Arthur saw Merlyn look up from her lengthy Physics assignment. "Sure, why not?" Then she went back to her conversation with Elyan and Gwaine. The three of them had to finish it before the end of the day.

Gwen clapped her hands together. "Oh, it'll be so fun! We can have a--" She stops mid-sentence when she noticed Arthur subtly shake his head. Luckily, Merlyn's attention was elsewhere.

He didn't want to ruin the excitement. This will be something he'll take to his grave, but Arthur ended up begging Morgana to help him plan a surprise party for Merlyn. The damn harpy laughed when he actually followed through with her order...she'll never let him live that down. He glances over at Merlyn with a fond look on his face, but because it's her...he'll definitely make it the best one.

She groaned, her forehead hitting the table, and she slid her thick Physics textbook towards Elyan. "Oh my god...Elyan just hit me with the textbook and hope the answer pops out." Even Gwaine looked put out from working on it.

Elyan picked up the book in amusement, but immediately put it back down when he caught sight of the dark scowl on Arthur's face. These two might be the death of him, he thought while holding his hands up in surrender. "Erm...let's just see if Google has an answer..." He said, both sides of his lips twitching while pulling out his cell phone.

Completely mollified, Arthur leaned back in his chair while reaching over to twirl a strand of Merlyn's hair around his finger. Everyone around the table shared amused looks before going into different topics. Leon and he were in a deep conversation about the upcoming mock tourney when the sight of Daegal walking up towards Merlyn caught his eye.
"Hey, Merlyn?" She looks up from her assignment and that smile of hers lights up her face.

"Hi, Daegal!" Her pencil pauses and she puts it down. "What's up?"

Arthur shifts his body towards them. Daegal notices and nervously smiles while waving at their table. "I-I...uhm...I was wondering...i-i-if you're part of t-t-he mentor program?"

She tilts her head. "Mentor program?"

"That's what I was supposed to ask you this morning!" Gwen gasped and shot up from her seat and scurries around to them and plops down into the seat beside Elyan. "It's what the seniors have the option of taking part of in their last semester of school. Mostly you'd just tutor or give advice to the years below and George is the one who runs this program. He asked me the other day and asked me to ask you, Merlyn, but it's completely slipped my mind! What with the Yearbook Club getting so busy, and not to mention the deadlines..." Gwen continued rambling on while Daegal stood there awkwardly nodding along.

"I mean.." Merlyn pursed her lips, "I would if I could, but I'm already super busy with Robotics and the basketball team that I don't think I can be like Gwen," she looks over at the still rambling girl, "and take on so many extracurricular activities...why do you ask?"

"W-Well I just thought I could ask you about Dr. Khilgharra's Robotics Program...that's all." He sheepishly glances away and makes eye contact with Elyan. "But! I could also ask you the same thing too Elyan! Sorry!"

Elyan held his hand up and shook his head. "Nah, s'all good."

Arthur leans over and throws one arm around Merlyn's shoulder and casually pulls her in close to his chest while looking at Daegal. "Well it's unfortunate but my good little nerd is too busy--"

"But you can always come ask me questions," she said with a smile, "I'm happy to help."

"Thanks!" Daegal's face lights up like a kid in a candy store. Morgana clears her throat and
crosses her arms, giving off her natural imposing aura. "Er...I'll just go now. Thanks again, Merlyn." He nervously waves goodbye to everyone.

"No problem," she said and waves back as he turns around and walks away from their table.

"Did you really have to do that, shorty?" He couldn't keep the disdain out of his voice.

She rolls her eyes and tilts her head back to look at him. "Did you have to go and mark your territory like that?" They both glance at his arm that was still hooked around her shoulders.

"It's the way he looks at you..." He mumbles in her ear, "I don't like it."

"He looks at me like any normal human being would look at another human being," she says while patting his arm.

He grumbles while pouting. "You're too nice. Most people would take advantage of that part of you."

A smile lights up her face as she tilts her head back to look at him. "Good thing I have you here to prevent that, don't I?"

"Of course." Arthur looked extremely pleased with himself and goes back to eating his lunch. Merlyn and the girls share a knowing look and giggle quietly behind their hands.

"IT WORKS!" Merlyn threw both her hands in the air and felt the accomplishment and victory rush through her.

Elyan leaned down and reached out to touch the shiny silver metal. "Wicked! You got Aithusa's egg to work!"

Merlyn collapsed against the workbench and sighed. "I could cry right about now...I might actually be tearing up!" She exaggeratedly dabs under her eyes. "Nothing could ruin my mood
now."

"Don't jinx yourself," Elyan said while nudging her. She nods and looks back down at Aithusa's egg, a.k.a her charging dock. The blue LED light flashed intermittently and she knew her capacitors were fully charged since not too long ago the LED was flashing red.

"Well done, Merlyn." Khilgharra appeared out of thin air (like always) and gently tapped the egg. "I'm thoroughly impressed."

Pride swelled up inside of her as she accepted his praise. The amount of time and work she invested into creating this charging dock took quite a bit out of her, if it wasn't for Will helping her with it...she might have just went with a USB cable as a charger and Aithusa would have just had to live with an unsightly spare tail.

"The representatives for Mercia Institute of Technology comes tomorrow and the both of you will blow them out of the waters." Khilgharra gave them his dragon-like grin and sauntered off to the next work station.

A silence settled between them as they both thought about the significance of MIT coming to Camelot High to see their Robotics Program. It was one of the last few schools left on the list Khilgharra had shown them at the beginning of the year. A good portion of their classmates have already received offers from the engineering departments that have already visited them. Elyan and Merlyn have also received scholarship offers as well, but they both wanted to wait. Especially since the last school to visit is the most important to their entire group. But it was also the riskiest move for them to wait it out until the very end, due to the possibility of losing their other offers and not getting one from the university they want the most.

"Hey, Merlyn?" Elyan turns back to look at her and holds his fist out. She peers up at him through her lashes. "Albion University or bust?" A grin takes over her face as she bumps her fist with his.

"Or bust."

Once Khilgharra dismissed them, Merlyn and Elyan both packed up their belongings quickly so they could head to the gym--the displeased look on their teacher's face did not go unnoticed by her--which was still amusing. Both of them made their way towards the gym and locker rooms discussing the last parts of their projects when Elyan stopped dead in his tracks.
"Oh yeah!" Elyan exclaimed while scrambling to get his backpack off. "I almost forgot!"

"Forgot what?" She tilts her head and offers to hold his bag as he searched around for it.

"Gwen asked me to give you the camera so you could take pictures of the team for the Yearbook Club...do you know what she would have done to me if I told her I forgot to get that done?" He muttered to himself as he managed to finally pull the camera out of his bag.

Merlyn waved her hand around in front of her face. "Gwen's a sweetheart, she--"

"She shrunk all my clothes once when I forgot to pick up her fabrics..." The blank look on his face paired with the fear in his eyes had her reconsidering her words.

"Er..." she bit her lip to try and hide her smile.

"Not to mention what she did to Lance when he accidentally bleached the shirt she made for him during their second anniversary..."

"You know..." she said and hesitantly took the camera from his hand, "how about I just do what Gwen has asked of us." He nodded in agreement, but there was still this far away look in his eyes as he reminisced about all the past horrors his older sister inflicted upon him.

She went ahead of Elyan and into the gym as he went to go change for practice. Merlyn scurried up to Coach Caerleon so she could see what needed to be done from her.

"Could you go to the equipment room and grab some pylons for me please, Merlyn?" He handed her his set of keys and she placed the camera down gently before she dropped her backpack down on the bench.

"Mkay!" She dashed off while waving to the guys along the way. "Pylons...pylons...where are the pylons?" Merlyn began singing softly to herself as she searched the equipment room. Once she caught sight of the bright neon orange her stomach dropped to her feet. "Oh no...why are they all the way up there?"
A large shadow appeared from the doorway. "Need help, shorty?" The sight of Arthur's sweaty, muscular, smirking form leaning against the door frame did wonders for her overactive imagination.

Merlyn snapped her mouth shut and scowled. "Nope. Go away." He is not going to get the satisfaction of this, she thought spitefully.

"Heh..." He pushed off the frame and sauntered over towards her, "you sure?"

"Mhm," she nods and proceeds to climb up onto a metal cage filled with miscellaneous equipment. "I got it." The cage rattled and shook under her weight and shifted side to side as she reached up to grab the stack of pylons. Her small fingers brushed the edge of the plastic but it was just out of reach. "Erm..." she bit her lip, "maybe I do need a bit of help..." The lack of response from her boyfriend made her turn her head, "Arthur?"

"Huh?" He blinked and looked up at her. She glanced down to see what he was staring at and flushed to the tip of her ears when she noticed her shirt had ridden up and exposed her legging-clad behind to him.

"Pervert," she mumbled while turning quickly to sit down on the metal cage.

He leaned forward, placing both arms on either side of her. "Aren't I allowed to perv on my girl?"

A teasing smile appeared on her lips. "Hmm...let me get back to you on that," she says this while trailing a finger slowly down his left arm.

Both of them jumped when they heard a cough from the doorway. "Uh...guys?"

"Y-Yes, Lance?" Oh god... her cheeks were burning.

"Not to interrupt or anything but...Coach might notice you two are missing soon...might want to hurry it up a bit." Lance rubbed the back of his neck.
Arthur drummed his fingers on the cage and sighed while nodded his head. "Thanks for the heads up man."

Lance threw him a two finger salute. "Yeah. Hurry back or else we're running laps outside."

"Gotta go, short stack. We're going to your place today, right?" She looked up at him and nodded, he smiles and gives her a quick kiss. "Watch me, kay?" With that, he tapped their foreheads together and ran back out to the court.

Don't I always?

***

CLICK.

CLICK.

CLICK.

"GET MY GOOD SIDE, SWEETHEART!" Gwaine lifts up one side of his jersey and holds it between his teeth while hooking his thumbs into the waistband of his shorts. He gave her his signature sultry look and teased the faintest hint of that V-shaped part of his lower abdomen (you know, the one only super fit people get).

She rolls her eyes, but just to humor him she snapped a couple of shots of his pose...hey, the student body will thank her later.

"GWaine!" Arthur hollered while lobbing the ball at said person's head. "FOCUS!"

He catches the ball with ease. "You're just jealous Merlyn's turned on by my body and not yours, Princess!"

An indignant squawk left Arthur's mouth as he stomped over to Gwaine and they started in on this chasing game, with all the guys laughing in the background (she managed to get a couple
pictures of that). Coach Caerleon lets out an exasperated sigh and looks up at the ceiling before blowing his whistle and getting the guys to run the play again from the top.

For the rest of practice, Merlyn tried her best to keep out of the way as she took photos of the team and as it turns out she has a favorite subject...any guesses who? After a few more plays Coach called all the guys in for a huddle and started discussing the upcoming mock-tourney. Merlyn took a few shots of that and then turned the camera off and packed it up. Just as she placed the camera bag down her phone vibrated.

Will: So was thinkin' for your birthday...if you got your learners I'll teach you how to ride a bike

Merlyn gasped and dropped her phone. All the guys turned towards the sound as she rapidly scooped it back up, waving sheepishly, then sent a reply back.

YEAH! OKAY! I'LL DO IT! I'LL DO IT! YOU'RE THE BEST!

Will: As if I was anything else

No way! She mentally fist pumped, today must be her lucky day! Will never asks her stuff like this--he has this delusion that she's too reckless--so she definitely has to take him up on this offer before he comes to his senses. The excitement coursed through her as she rushed to pick up all the equipment. Her eyes met Arthur's as he raised one eyebrow and the side of his mouth quirked in a silent question.

Tell you later! She mouthed while running the pylons back to the equipment room.

Coach Caerleon dismissed the guys and they headed to the locker room to shower and change. Merlyn rushed over to Arthur and the guys to give them the great news, her body could barely contain all her excitement. This means so much to her and she wants to share it with them.

"What's got you all hopped up, Merlyn?" Percy lightly bopped her on the head with his fist.

She held up her phone. "Will said that if I get my motorcycle learner's he'll teach me how to ride!"
"Awesome! I'll go with you!" Gwaine popped around Percy's large frame. She turns to look at Arthur, he'll definitely want to--

"No." The smile slowly drops from her face. "I won't allow it."

"...you won't...allow it?" She said while blinking rapidly, her brain not being able to comprehend what's going on. Wait. Wait. Wait. Maybe he just doesn't realize how that sounds, she internally rationalized.

"It's dangerous. I don't want you to do something like that. So no, you're not going to." Arthur bent down to untie his shoes.

She tried to laugh it off, but it sounded forced even to her own ears. "When exactly did I need your permission to do something?"

"I'm your boyfriend," came his reply as he shrugged and went to untie his other shoe.

Is he serious?

How dare he?

"Arthur," she began, eyes hard and tone going cold, "I'm only going to give you one more chance to change the way you're phrasing this."

"I don't plan to?" He furrows his brows and a slight frown appears. It felt like thunder and lightning were crashing about inside her mind.

"You do know that I'm going to do it regardless of what you say," she said.

Arthur rolls his shoulders and glares at her. "Merlyn, I'm not going to repeat myself."
"I always knew you were a prat," she smiled maliciously, "but this is taking it to a whole new level."

The muscle in his jaw ticks. "Oh? So we're going there now?"

"Uh...bro?" Leon hesitantly steps up between them with his hands raised. "Maybe we should just forget this conversation ever happened?"

Arthur clicked his tongue against his teeth and spared Leon a quick glance before making eye contact with her again. "I'm not going to sit here and watch you go and get yourself hurt! That's a stupid idea, even for you!"

"Arthur!" Gwaine tried to step forward, a look of outrage on his face, but Percy grabbed his shoulder.

Merlyn's entire body shut down as her face went blank. "Then you can watch me walk away." Simple as that, she turned on her heel and walked out of the gym, the last thing she saw was Arthur's frozen form.

***

Three days.

That's how long she's been giving him the silent treatment.

Arthur looked across the classroom to where Merlyn was sitting, but she adamantly refused to meet his eyes. Shit...he's really fucked up this time hasn't he? He wondered. It's not as if he didn't have a point in their fight--yet he didn't know how to get his point across properly without sounding like a jackass. The other day he tried to visit her and he knew how far he had fallen out of her good graces when even Gaius lied to him.

"Sorry, my boy...Merlyn's...not home currently"

Next, he tried the fire escape, but her window was locked and the curtains pulled shut with a sticky note saying 'GO AWAY' on it.
It didn't help that Leon, his bastard of a best friend, went and told Morgana everything that happened after practice and she wouldn't stop lecturing him like no tomorrow. A sigh escapes his lips and his fingers massage his forehead...she's definitely going to be the death of him. He looks over at her and sees everything that caught his attention since day one. The way her hair falls around her face, or how her eyelashes are long enough to brush the tops of her cheekbones. If he really thought back on it, her physical features were fine and all, but the thing that got him then and has him now is that head strong personality of hers.

"Fucking hell I'm going to lose this to her too?" He muttered to himself.

With one last look at her he resigned himself to his final thought.

Yeah...I'll lose to you any day.

***

"HOW DARE HE SAY THAT TO ME!" Merlyn's currently on a rampage through Will's apartment; she spun on her heel and throws her hands up in the air. "AS IF HE HAS ANY RIGHT TO TELL ME NO!"

Will leans back against the couch and calmly sips his bottle of beer as he waits out the small hurricane in his living room. He had a vague inkling that this might happen if he brought up his motorcycle...the kid never looked too fond of it to begin with. But to go as far as to try and stop her from getting her motorcycle license--he wasn't sure if he felt annoyed or...slightly impressed.

"Did you guys at least sit down and talk it out?" That question earned him a sharp look.

"What is there to talk about?" She said with a slight growl at the end. "He straight up told me no...not even a let's talk about it just plain no. URRRGGGG! I'M SO MAD AT HIM RIGHT NOW!" Her fingers curled, lips pulling upwards into a snarl, and eyes a blazing blue.

Will's lips twitched as he listened to the list of expletives leave her mouth. He's not keen on the idea of any guy Merlyn ends up being controlling of her, because he knows that deep down she's made to run free. But, in this instance, he can see where Arthur's coming from and is silently reconsidering his offer too.
"Do you really want to get your license?" She stopped mid-rant and turned to look at him with her eyebrows raised. "There's something about riding...I'll give you that much. But think about it, Merls...is that worth more to you--winning this argument--than coming back safe?"

She sucks in a sharp breath. "How can you ask me that? When you still ride and you're with Freya now?" She took a seat next to him.

He yawned and stretched out. "Was actually thinkin' of quitting..." She turned to look at him with wide eyes. "Not cause Freya asked me to or anything...but because I want to make sure I'm around to be with her. My bike's not worth more than my future."

"Oh," Merlyn placed her hand on her chest, "that's the sweetest thing I've heard!" Her anger momentarily forgotten about.

"You're such a hopeless romantic," he snorted and finished the rest of his beer.

She grinned. "And you're such a sap."

He mockingly smiled at her. "Gee thanks..."

"So if you're planning on quitting...why did you offer to teach me for my birthday?" She said and her brows pulled together over her confused frown.

"I know what riding means to you. How it makes you feel, and I just thought since you're finally turning eighteen...you know I've...I've..." He takes a deep breath and rubs the heel of his palms against his eyes. "Your pops won't be here to celebrate it with you...and he taught me..." Merlyn places her hand on his shoulder.

Her eyes shone brightly as she blinked. "You shouldn't feel guilty about the time you spent with him."

"It's not fair," he scrubbed his face, "I got to spend so much time with him and you didn't, but he was your dad. You should have been able to have all these different moments with him. Him taking you to your first dance. Showing you how to change a tire. Teaching you how to drink. Scarin' away stupid, horny, teenage boys... taken you for your first ride, instead of me...but--"
The hug caught him by surprise. "--I got all of those moments with you, Will, and for that I'll always be grateful to have you in my life. I miss dad--that won't change. But having you in my life is something I also wouldn't change for the world."

Will sucked in a deep breath and messed up her hair with the arm closest him. "No wonder I'm such a sap...it's all your fault."

"You were born like that," she said, her voice muffled in his shoulder.

"So is that a no to riding then?" The room went silent as she contemplated his question. Merlyn buried her face deeper into his shoulder.

"Mm."

***

"Merlyn still isn't coming to practice?" Lance said in a hushed voice while he bent down to tie his shoelaces.

Elyan grimaces and nods. "Should've seen the cold atmosphere around her and Arthur during class exchange..."

"I can imagine...remember the last time he pissed her off? She somehow put a wall between the two of them...and that was before they were dating," Percy says, a look of pity on his face.

The door to the locker room opened and the three guys looked up in time to see Arthur and Leon walk in. No one had the guts to say out loud how miserable Arthur looked...hair a mess, bags under his eyes, and he's been wearing the same shirt for two days.

"We should just keep quiet...according to Leon, he hasn't been sleeping well again," Lance whispered. Percy and Elyan both nod quickly and break apart.

"Wow," Gwaine walks out from the washroom, having heard nothing of the three's previous conversation, "you look like shit, Princess!" He manages to dodge Percy's incoming hand.
Arthur blinks over at him, scowls, and walks over to his locker. "Shut up."

"To think," Gwaine begins while sitting dramatically down on the bench, "all of this," he gestures at Arthur as a whole, "could have been avoided if you didn't decide to be a dick."

"I wasn't trying to be a dick!" Arthur snaps.

Gwaine shrugs. "Didn't look like that to me."

"Gwaine," Leon sighs while pinching the skin between his brows, "man, could you please...?" He gives him a pointed look.

"Oh? So it's my fault now that the princess here fucked it up with my sweetheart?" He lifts his arm and blocks Percy's hand. "You guys were all there, weren't you? You heard what he said. What exactly were you thinkin'?"

Arthur spun around and slammed his locker shut, blazing eyes focusing on Gwaine. "I WAS THINKING OF KEEPING HER SAFE!" His voice echoed off the walls and came back to their group--the rest of the team have yet to arrive. "What's so wrong about that?!"

"Other than the fact that you thought it'd be okay to give someone like Merlyn a direct order?" Leon rolls his eyes at Gwaine's words and steps between them.

"Look, how about we just go to practice?" Lance suggested as the atmosphere grew more tense.

Leon nods and shares a look with Percy that said 'carry Gwaine over your shoulder if you have to.' "Yeah. Coach is going to have our assess if we're late."

"Why do you always take his side, Leon?" Gwaine looks around at them. "What is wrong with you guys?"
"I'm just letting them sort their problems out like any normal couple would," said Leon in a calm voice. All the guys were used to Gwaine's theatrics by now.

Gwaine scoffs. "But they're not a normal couple, are they?"

"Watch it, Gwaine." Arthur cracks his knuckles and rolls his shoulders. The lack of sleep has worn him down to his last nerve.

"Leon," Gwaine looks over at said man, "tell me something." Leon nods his head tiredly and waits for him to speak again. "What happened the last time you gave Morgana a direct order?" A sharp gasp escaped Leon's lips.

The entire locker room fell silent, and Leon's body froze on the spot--eyes wide and mouth gaping. He remembers everything that happened, like it happened the other day. A normal Morgana is already intimidating...an unhappy, extremely proud, and pissed off Morgana was...terrifying! Lance patted him on the shoulder, Percy managed to finally get a hold of Gwaine's head, and even Arthur forgot their argument so he could reach over and shake his best friend's stiff form. Elyan looked up at the ceiling before turning to look at Gwaine, who--evidently--was now in a headlock.

"Great...see what you did now? You broke Leon." Even Gwaine had the smarts to look ashamed.

"My bad, man," he apologized in a sheepish tone. Percy shakes his head and leads them out of the locker room.

Lance placed his hand on Arthur's shoulder. "You really should talk things out with Merlyn."

"Especially since we have the tourney coming up! Ow! That hurt, Perce!" Gwaine's voice echoed back to them.

Arthur snorted in amusement but nodded his head nonetheless. "Yeah...I will."

"Come on, Leon. Small steps buddy...you know Gwaine was just messin' with you." Elyan lead a still petrified Leon towards the locker room doors. "See you guys on the court."
"M-M-Morg..." stammered Leon as he stumbled in Elyan's hold. "N-Never...again."

"Yes. Yes. We know, bro...we know."

Arthur rubbed his eyes. "I really feel for him sometimes, ya know?" Lance nodded his head and stretched. "That harpy had Leon jumping through so many hoops just to get back in her good graces..."

"Makes me glad that Gwen just gives me the silent treatment when I upset her...but anyway," he turns back to look at Arthur, "talk things out with Merlyn, because as much as Gwaine likes to live a dramatic life...he has a point about the tourney coming up."

He gave Lance an unimpressed look. "You too, bro?"

Lance shrugged and had the good graces to look apologetic. "Hey...it's not like you haven't been there at the practices...even Coach looked a bit concerned the other day when Jefferson got you on the cross over."

"The court glare got me in the eye!" said Arthur indignantly. Lance laughs and starts to head out of the locker room.

*Fuck...he misses her.*

***

"Uh...at the risk of getting my head chopped off..." Gwaine throws his arm over Merlyn's shoulder, "...you and the princess still not talkin' to each other?"

"What gave you that impression?" She said while scribbling in a few last minute answers into her Calculus workbook.

Gwaine blew out a long breath and chuckles. "For starters...you're not sitting at the group table, and, second of all, I might actually have a death wish with my arm around you like this." He leans over and nuzzles his cheek against the top of her head. "But, secretly, I don't mind..." he whispers in a loudly exaggerated manner in her ear.
Both of them ignored the sudden screeching of a chair a few tables away.

"Pft," she covers her mouth and tries to suppress her laugh, "now you're just being mean, Gwaine."

"Are you planning on talking to him soon?" He asks while leaning back in his chair, a serious expression on his face. "He's been miserable to be around these past couple of days. Been mopin' around at practice, can't focus when we're on Live--Leon, bless his soul, is out twenty bucks because Arthur couldn't cover the bunker in the last round the other day. He misses you, sweetheart, and even though he's an idiot..he's sorry."

Merlyn went silent and her smile disappeared as she listened; she has had a lot of time to consider their argument. After her talk with Will the other day she put some more thought into it and agreed that maybe it would be best for her to not to get her license...BUT! That doesn't mean Arthur's allowed to forbid her from doing things he doesn't like!

"Is that why you're here sitting with me? Because you wanted to tell me that?" said Merlyn with a slight pout on her lips. "I already told the girls to sit at the group table to give me some time to think about it."

Gwaine flashed her his million dollar smile. "I'm here only for you, sweetheart."

"Smooth talker..." she grumbled while nudging him with her shoulder.

"Heh," he grinned some more while sliding his workbook towards her, "wanna help a smooth talker out? Please, and thank you!"

She rolled her eyes but gave him a fond smile. "I guess..."

As the bell rang and everyone got up to leave she caught Arthur's gaze; the words were hanging silently between, but neither said them out loud. The hardest part of all of this? This would be their first real fight as a couple and she didn't know how to bounce back from it. Merlyn dug her nails into her palms and walked out of homeroom with Gwaine--Arthur's presence not that far behind them. What is she suppose to do? She's already unlocked her window, but he hasn't come by to see her.
I miss you. Her eyes squeezed shut momentarily as she forced herself to keep moving forward. *I miss you. I miss you. I miss you.*

But this wasn't something they could just overlook, she can't move forward with the thought that if there's something in the future that she wants to do and he disapproves he'll make her give it up. She knows Arthur isn't that kind of person...and all she wants is for him to show her that...tell her that.

"Careful," Arthur gently nudged her to the side and took the brute of the oncoming students.

Her thank you was on the tip of her tongue, but it fell short when he turned right and to his first class of the day that they didn't share. Gwaine saw the forlorn look on her face and ruffled her hair and lead her down the hallway to their class.

"He's hurtin' too. He's just too emotionally constipated to say anything about it." He threw her a wink and nudged her with his elbow.

She managed a small laugh but it didn't quite settle with her.

They continued the rest of their day like that, neither one of them saying a word to the other. Morgana's words from lunch kept flooding her mind *don't back down from this. He needs to know that you're his equal, not his pet.* Merlyn had to try very hard to keep the pout off her face as she avoided talking to Arthur.

Her feelings almost got the best of her when they were at practice and she nearly ran up to him to give him a hug, because he looked so lost and alone...he may not be that touchy-feely...but she is, and lord help her if she didn't just tackle him to the ground.

Practice went by and at the end of it she cleaned up and walked home, like she's done for the past couple of days. Arthur would hover and come near her, not wanting her to walk home when he can drive her, but the silence spoke volumes between them. Even the guys would awkwardly share looks and open their mouths to say something. The walk home did her some good though, it gave her the chance to clear her thoughts and focus on the brisk weather.

Uncle Gaius, as usual, was in his office when she got home so she went and got started on dinner. She sighed and started pre-heating the oven. *We are equals in this relationship...aren't we?*
"My, it's already this late," Uncle Gaius paused at the entrance of the kitchen. "Welcome home, Merlyn."

"Thanks, Uncle Gaius," she smiled. "Dinner should be ready soon."

"Thank you." He shuffled over to the cupboard. "Will Arthur be joining us this evening?"

Merlyn bit her lip and shrugged. "I'm not sure actually..."

"You two aren't still fighting by chance are you?" He peers over at her as he pours himself a glass of water.

"How did you know we were fighting?" She blinks slowly as her brows pull together over her slight frown.

There's that signature eyebrow raise of his..."I'm more observant than you take me for, my dear."

She blushes and gives him a smile. "Right. That's very true."

"For what it's worth..." he says while making his way out of the kitchen, "no one will know how you are feeling if you don't say your thoughts out loud." He taps the side of his head. "The last I checked, mind reading still isn't in the realm of possibilities yet."

Why did she feel like crying? "Mm." She nods. "I get it." Her eyes crinkle as her grin widens.

Uncle Gaius smiles back and quietly shuffles back to his office. Merlyn turns and gets back to her task and puts the frozen lasagna into the oven and sets the timer for 30 minutes. Once that was done, she grabs her backpack off the floor and heads up to her room get changed. Okay, I'm going to tell Arthur how I feel, she decided as she opens the door to her room.

The soft sound of the window closing would have signaled to her that someone came into her room if she didn't already see Arthur's large frame standing in front of her. Neither of them said
anything at first, Arthur's eyes didn't leave hers as he spins the ring on his finger. She really did miss him, everything about him; from his soft, fluffy hair, to his strong arms underneath his hoodie, and the smile he shows only to her.

Her backpack slips from her fingers as she lets it fall to the ground.

"I'm going to hug you," she says and takes a running start towards him. Arthur's arms open without hesitation as he takes her weight as if she was just a feather; he presses his face against her neck. "I miss you," she says softly, her cheek resting on top of his head as her arms pull him in close, she wraps herself around him like ivy.

He lets out a small groan and kicks off his shoes while marching them over to her bed. "I almost went insane this week," he mumbles into her skin at the spot that tickles her the most.

"Glad to know you missed me too," she giggles when he peppers her neck with small kisses.

He pulls back and shifts so he's hovering over her. Merlyn reaches up and runs her fingers through his hair and gently pulls his face down to hers. Their kiss started out hesitant, both of them trying to get a feel for the other after all the time they've spent in limbo. But just as quickly their kiss turned passionate; arms clinging tightly to one another, each fighting for their own dominance. Liquid fire ran through her veins; the weight of his body, his freshly washed hair mixed with his natural scent, and the warmth of his body transferring over to her greedy cold one.

"Why do you never do as you're told," he pants as he shifts his hips against hers.

She moans and bites his bottom lip in retaliation. "Because then you'd be bored." They both smile and she tilts her head. "Besides, would you still want me if I was obedient?"

"Yes." He answers straight away. The complete honesty in his eyes did her in and all her anger faded away.

"It wasn't ever about the motorcycle...you know that right?" she says softly while running her fingers through his hair.

He rests his forehead against hers. "I know. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to come off as controlling...I'm just worried you'll get hurt."
She nods. "I understand. Which is why I'm not going to get it."

"What?" Arthur's eyes widen.

"Oh! Don't look so pleased, sire." She rolls her eyes as a smirk slowly forms on his lips.

Arthur gives her forehead a quick peck. "What changed your mind?"

"You," she answers truthfully. "And making sure I can always come back to you...guess I
like you more than I thought," she sighs dramatically while batting her eyelashes at him. His
expression, both warm and serious, caught her off guard. "What?"

Instead of answering he leans forward and kisses her. Not a quick kiss either. It was the kind
of kiss that made her toes curl and her legs wrap around his torso in an attempt to keep her from
floating off into the clouds. When they broke apart her lips felt swollen and her lungs were no longer
screaming for air.

"Yeah..." he pants, "you're it for me too." The blue color of his eyes darkened as he tugs on
the hem of her sweater. She nods and raises her arms up.

"Merlyn? The lasagna's finished!" Uncle Gaius's shuffling footsteps got louder as he
approached her room.

Both their eyes widen. "Shit," he curses and picks Merlyn up off her bed--again, like she
weighs nothing--and plops her down in her desk chair before sitting back down on the edge of her
bed and hugging her pillow to his chest. She quickly pats her hair down and throws open one of her
textbooks. The urge to laugh at Arthur's lower predicament was put on hold when Uncle Gaius
knocked on her door.

"Oh! Hello, Arthur, I didn't even hear you come in." Uncle Gaius smiled and waved.

Arthur coughs. "Hi, Gaius...yeah I just got here a few minutes ago."
"Then you'll be joining us for dinner then?" Merlyn looks over her shoulder and nods her head.

"I'll put another plate out then," Uncle Gaius said and turned to leave.

Both of them listened and waited for his footsteps to fade. "Pft," she covers her mouth, shoulders shaking. Arthur glares at her while shifting around and putting her pillow back down. "That went well," she hiccups around her laugh while getting out of her chair, "come on let's go have dinner." She reaches out and takes both his hands in hers and pulls with all her strength.

Arthur smirks and tugs sharply, bringing her down into his lap. She flushes to the tips of her ears and she gives him an admonishing look. "So we good?" He tucks a strand of hair behind her ear.

She sniffs and turns her face to the side. "I guess..."

Neither of them could hide their smiles.

***

Weekends were her favorite days of the week. They were the only days where she didn't have to be "on" as a student and could enjoy the wonderful world of sleep. Sure, she could hang out with her friends, who are otherwise pre-occupied with things in their lives, or her popular boyfriend, who--evidently--is at a training day with the rest of the team. Ah...nothing beats some well deserved alone time...

"HAPPY EARLY BIRTHDAY, MERLS!"

She's going to die.

Will straightens his body over hers, their backs to one another and only her blanket separating them. She tried to squirm out from underneath him, but it was no use.

"I...can't....breathe..." she huffed, "...get....off...you...fat...potato...." she wheezed.
"I was thinkin'," he spoke as if he didn't weigh a tonne and was crushing her into her bed. "We should go out today and celebrate your birthday." She gave him a muffled response. "Ha?" He cupped his hand over his ear. "I can't hear you. Speak up!" Merlyn said some very colorful words but her pillow got the most of it.

"Anyways!" Will continues, "I was thinkin' the two of us can hang out." He finally decides to roll off of her and moves to sit in her desk chair.

She groans and sits up while scratching her head. "Okay. Okay." She yawns and stretches. "What brought this on all of a sudden? Aren't we all just going out for my birthday in a couple of days?"

"Yeah. But wouldn't it be nice to celebrate together... like old times?" Well when he puts it like that, she thought while rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"Love you, Will," she grumbles while getting up to get ready to go out.

He chuckles. "Love you too, kiddo."

Once she got herself dressed and ready for the morning she went downstairs and saw Will and Uncle Gaius chatting. They both asked if Uncle Gaius wanted to come along with them but he declined since he's planning to go to a medical conference downtown later on in the day. So the two of them got into Will's SUV and started their day together.

"So what did the kid get you for your birthday?" Will said while passing her the Bubble Tea she just ordered to her.

She looks up at him through her lashes and rolls her eyes. "His name is Arthur and he doesn't have to get me anything, like how you don't have to either."

"Ha. Ha. Ha," he laughed and while giving her a false smile, "I'll pretend I didn't hear that. You know I give the best gifts...there's no way I'm going to let that kid out-gift me--over my dead body." The dark glint in his eyes would worry Merlyn if she hasn't known him her entire life.

"Right..." she drags the word out and takes a sip of her drink.
"But, speaking of which, I need to stop by the mall to pick up some things," said Will as they head back to his car.

Merlyn spoke around her straw and raised one eyebrow. "Some things, hmm?"

Will winks at her while tapping the side of his nose.

A comfortable silence settled over them as they let the radio play in the background. Nostalgia crept up on her as she remembered all the times over the years that she's spent her birthday with Will. It was hard the years after her dad passed away and even harder being reminded that he's no longer here...but, she looks to her left and smiles, she's never been alone.

"What did you get me for my birthday? Oh great gift giver?" She says while batting her eyelashes and placing one hand over her heart.

Will sits up and the side of his lip tips upward. "You'll see."

***

"I admit defeat," Merlyn sighed while leaning against the wall of the store they were standing outside of. "We've walked the whole length of this mall and I absolutely have no idea where my gift could be coming from."

"Heh," Will grins, "you never could win against me, Merls."

"Yes. Yes. I know." She nods. "I'm going to go into the bookstore while you go to whatever store we've probably passed 10 times to pick my gift up."

Will messes up her hair. "And here I was hopin' to get another lap out of you." She bats his hand away and scowls up at him while turning and walking away.

"I swear I almost had it this time," she muttered to herself as she walked into the bookstore and started wandering around through each aisle. "How does he always get the better of me? It wasn't a new pair of headphones, or clothes, or a new book...what else is there to get me of all
people?" A couple of people glanced over at her when they saw her muttering to herself. She pulled a random book off the shelf and started skimming through its contents.

By the end of her so called 'browsing' Merlyn found herself with her arms full of new books she wanted to read and pay for them at the counter. The weight of something heavy thing and the sound of a crinkling bag had her looking up towards her head.

"I let you roam around for not even ten minutes on your own and this is what happens." She shifts her head out from under the plastic bag in Will's hand.

"It's an addiction, okay? Thank you," she says the last part of the nice girl at the register and grabs her bag of books.

Will chuckles and nudges her along and they head out of the store. "Yeah okay, well let's go grab a bite to eat now."

"Is that my present?" She leans around him to try and get a look into the black bag.

"Ah!" He shakes his head and shifts it away from her. "Not until later."

She pouts. "Fine....stingy," she mutters under her breath.

For the rest of the day she spent trying to get a peek into the bag. Will was just as amused and played along, letting her think she got the best of him but not really...Eventually, she put it to the back of her mind, mostly because the times she spends with him are precious to her.

"And just like that the day is done," he says and puts the SUV in park. They both get out and head into the apartment.

"Thanks, Will. I had a lot of fun today." She leans over and hugs him.

He ruffles her hair and kisses the top of her head. "Anytime, kiddo. Come on, let's go up and I'll let you open your gift."
"Race you!" She takes off and flies up the stairs two at a time and make it to the top just before Will could grab her and push her to the ground.

"You little cheat," he said while collapsing onto the couch.

She smiles at him and holds her hands out. "Gift, please."

Will rolls his eyes but pass her the black bag. She quickly opens it and, at first glance, she thought he bought her another book, but as she takes it out she realizes it's a photo album. Merlyn tilts her head and blinks at him.

"I got some help from Gwen. Open it," he nods at the album. She does what he says and at the sight of the first picture, she felt her eyes start to tear up.

The first few pages were of her and Will and everyone in their family, even one from the last birthday she had when her dad was still alive. But it slowly changes to photos of her and her friends, their Thanksgiving together, Christmas, New years. Even photos of the other times they've spent together that she wasn't even aware was captured.

"You've grown up a lot this past year. New city. New school. New friends." He reaches over and pats the top of her head. "I'm so proud of you, Merls."

"WILL!" She lets out a loud sob, closes the album, and dives into his arms to hug him.

He hugs her back. "I'm the best gift giver, aren't I?"

She sniffs. "The absolute best."

"Okay, you can stop crying now, you're getting snot all over my shirt," he says teasingly, but if anyone were to look closely they'll be able to see the softness in his eyes. "I'm stopping by Freya's place later to meet with her dad."
In retaliation she rubs her face into his shirt some more.

***

*Something's burning*

Merlyn rolled over and burrowed further under her covers.

*What is Uncle Gaius cooking?*

She sniffed the air again, trying to figure out if she's going to have to call the fire department or just burn down with the rest of the apartment...she could picture Arthur's scowl at that thought. But in her defense they had a rough week at school, what with all the unit tests and projects due.

*On second thought...it doesn't smell like smoke from a fire...almost smells like Chinese herbs...*

"No way..." Merlyn sat up and rubbed the sleep from her eyes and scrambled out of her bed. She flew down the stairs and stopped at the entrance of the kitchen. The familiar sight of white blonde hair, fashioned into a side braid, took her by surprise and she immediately lit up.

*AUNTY ALICE!"

A warm, cuddly woman turned and smiled. "Merly, my darling! Come give me a hug!" Merlyn rushed forward and snuggled up into Aunt Alice's arms. She was one of her favorite people to hug, because she always wears these fuzzy cardigans or sweaters that were extremely soft and fluffy, making it feel like she was hugging a large teddy bear.

"I didn't know you were back?" Merlyn said and pulls back from the hug.

Aunt Alice goes back to stirring whatever it was she was brewing in the black pot on the stove. "My flight just got in last night and I couldn't wait to have you and Gaius try all the new remedies I learned overseas! I swear I make this trip yearly and I'm still learning new things each time."
Apprehension hit Merlyn so fast she had to remind herself to subtly extract herself from this new found predicament. "H-How was your trip to Asia?" She hoped Aunt Alice didn't catch the crack in her voice as she inched closer to the kitchen entrance.

"Oh it was wonderful, darling. I spent a few weeks in a temple with these monks, who showed me the benefit of boiling these special herbs with sparrow’s saliva to improve liver function." Ah...so that explains the burning smell.

She back-pedaled and smiled politely. "I'll...go get Uncle Gaius to come down. You guys probably want to catch up for old time's sake."

"Merlyn, what on earth are you cooking?" Speak of the devil. Merlyn turns and smiles widely as Uncle Gaius appears in his sleep shirt and flannel bottoms.

"Look who's here, Uncle Gaius?"

Gaius blinked. "Alice?"

"Gaius." Alice smiled warmly and had stars in her eyes. "How have you been?" There was a lingering moment as they gazed longingly into each other's eyes. Anyone could see that there was a long standing--unspoken--history that exists between the two of them.

"I've been doing as well as I can. You look great, Alice...travelling suits you." Both sides of his eyes crinkled as he smiled.

She touched her side braid and bats her eyes. "And you've always been the one to stay."

Merlyn coughed and rubbed the back of her neck. "I'm just going to go get cleaned up. Please take your time catching up!" She hurries past Uncle Gaius.

"Oh Merlyn! Wait! Won't you have some of my home remedy?" Aunt Alice went back to stirring.

"Uh...I...." she blinks rapidly at Uncle Gaius. SOS. SOS! Uncle Gaius got the hint and took
"Have you brushed your teeth yet, Merlyn?"

She snapped her fingers. "Oh dam! You're right! I haven't brushed them yet! I'll go do that now, see you in a bit, Aunty Alice!" Gotta go. Gotta go. Gotta go. She thought and booked it for the stairs, but stopped just when she was out of sight.

"Well then you have some first," Aunt Alice said while pouring some of the dark liquid into a mug.

Uncle Gaius sighed and smiled. It was the kind of smile that made Merlyn's heart melt, because she's only ever seen it when he's with Aunt Alice. The two of them have loved each other for as long as she could remember. Merlyn watched as Uncle Gaius took a sip of the concoction and she was amazed that he managed to keep a straight face.

"Isn't it wonderful, Gaius?" Aunt Alice said while taking the pot off the stove.

He nodded and took another sip. "As always you never cease to amaze me, Alice."

*I wonder if that's how Arthur and I'll be in future?* Merlyn instantly blushed bright red at that thought.

*Too far ahead. Too far ahead!*

She quickly climbed the rest of the stairs and went to go get ready for the day.

Turns out Aunt Alice brought back a lot of cool things from her trip to Asia--Merlyn managed to distract her from the liver function improving liquid. She brought back a bunch of knick-knacks for Merlyn and little trinkets for her to take apart and put back together. Uncle Gaius got a bunch of books on medicine written in Chinese that *I'll never be able to read these, Alice* but her response was *there's pictures! And a picture is worth a thousand words!* Merlyn laughed quietly to herself as she took apart a mini robot so she could put a new battery inside.
"We should all go out for dinner tonight. It's not every day one turns eighteen," Aunt Alice said while taking out more souvenirs from her suitcase.

"You remembered that it's my birthday?" Merlyn said while raising one eyebrow.

"I may have been gone for awhile, but I would never forget your birthday, Merly...even though technically it's 3 days past."

She blushed and smiled sheepishly. "Thanks, Aunty Alice, but my friends were planning on taking me out tonight...well I mean I could always ask them to postpone--"

Aunt Alice waved her hand. "Oh nonsense! You go and celebrate with your friends! Be young and reckless!" She patted Uncle Gaius's arm while smiling. "Gaius here will just have to accompany me for the evening."

He gave her his famous eyebrow raise. "I am?" She gave him an unimpressed look. "I mean...yes, of course I will."

*Pft...if you guys wanted to go on a date then just say so,* Merlyn thought as she cleaned up after herself.

**DING**

The three of them turned their heads towards the main door.

"I'll go see who it is!" Merlyn scrambled to her feet and ran to go answer the door.

Uncle Gaius cupped one hand over his mouth. "Don't run, Merlyn, or you'll--"

"WAH!" A loud crashing noise travelled up the stairs.

"--fall down the stairs again..." he sighed and rubbed his forehead. Aunt Alice covered her mouth and giggled.
"I'm okay!" She called out from the bottom of the stairs and swung the door open.

Arthur pinched the skin between his brows and shook his head. "Babe...why?"

"Why what?" She says and wraps her arms around him.

"The stairs...you...walking is safe...why do you need to run?" He gestures wildly between them and the stairs.

She pats his arm. "I have no clue what you're talking about, but I'm glad you're here. There's someone I want you to meet!"

There's no getting through to her, he thought while kicking off his runners. "Is something burning?" He sniffs the air as they walk up to the main level.

"Ehehe..." she laughs while scratching her head, "something like that..."

"Who's at the door, Merly?" Aunt Alice called out as they reached the top of the stairs.

"Merly?" Arthur said, both brows pulling together over his smile.

She looks up at him and wags her finger. "You're not allowed to call me that."

"Oh...my...what a handsome young man," Aunt Alice was in the midst of drying her hands on a towel and places one hand on her cheek. "And who might you be?"

Arthur's poster boy smile lit up his face as he steps forward with one hand outstretched. "Arthur Pendragon. Merlyn's boyfriend. Pleasure to meet you."

Her lips twitch as she reaches out to shake his hand. "What a charismatic boyfriend you have here, Merly. Quite impressive you are...Arthur Pendragon." Arthur stood taller and basked in Aunt
"Don't mind this cabbage head. He thinks he's far more interesting than he actually is," said Merlyn with a teasing smile.

"Okay there, shorty." He reached over to quickly pinch her nose. She bats his hand away and rubs her nose while scowling at him...his response was a large grin.

Uncle Gaius appears on the stairs. "Good morning, Arthur. Nice to see you, I see you've met Alice." He nods and smiles politely. "Well I'm going to my study," Uncle Gaius announced while shuffling past them.

"I'll join you!" Aunt Alice hurries after him and they both slowly make their way down the hall.

"Who is that?" Arthur tipped his chin forward while watching the two fluffy couple walk together.

Merlyn smiles. "That's Aunt Alice, she's Uncle Gaius's on-again, off-again girlfriend."

"Girlfriend?" His eyes widen and he takes another look down the hallway. "Go Gaius," he comments with a low whistle. Merlyn rolls her eyes and swats at his arm.

"So what're you doing over so early? I thought we're not meeting until tonight?"

He grins. "Do I need a reason to visit my girlfriend?"

She narrows her eyes at him. "Now I'm suspicious." Arthur throws his head back and laughs while leading them up the stairs.

Her suspicions were forgotten as the rest of the morning passed and they just hung out in her room watching a movie on her laptop in bed. For obvious reasons they had to keep things PG, which meant above the blankets and the door wide open. Throughout the morning she kept noticing Arthur would check his phone more often than not.
"Are you waiting for a text from your second girlfriend?" She snuggled closer to him.

He jolts and looks down at her. "My what?"

"You just keep looking at your phone like you're waiting for the most important text of your life...so I'm just guessing at what it could be." She shrugs and tilts her head so she could see his face.

He glared at her. "And a second girlfriend is what you come up with?"

"Well I mean--" She was interrupted by the ding from his cell.

Arthur instantly sat them both up. "Okay. Time to go!"

"Go where?" She asks while getting lifted to her feet.

"To meet my second girlfriend," even with her back to him she could picture him rolling his eyes. He started pushing her forward and out of her room.

"Hey!" She squirms against him. "Where are we going?"

"I just told you," he said in the most obvious way. Down the stairs they went and to the front door.

"Wait! I need to tell Uncle Gaius and Aunt Alice we're leaving!" She tries to turn around, but Arthur kept her moving forward.

"We can call them from the car."

"Arthur!"

He opened the front door for them once they put on their shoes and she locked the door
behind them. When they got in his car he turned and held out a black blindfold.

"Here. Put this on." Without waiting for her to answer he put the blindfold over top of her eyes and secured it behind her head.

"Wa--" Arthur started the car and pulled out of the driveway. After a few minutes of silent driving (she can't see the radio), she spoke up, "...uhm...Arthur...?" Merlyn blinks behind the blindfold. "Is this suppose to be a kinky lead up to something?" She feels around with her left hand for his hand on the gear shift.

Arthur presses his lips together and tries to suppress his blush. "No, shorty. I just have something to show you."

"That sounds highly suspicious with a sexual innuendo thrown in." She turns her head towards him.

He pulls up to a red light and leans over to give her a quick peck on the lips, catching her by surprise and making her blush bright red. "Humor me." She nods quickly and sits back in her seat.

It felt weird not being able to see anything, she thought as the car followed the natural curve of the road. Merlyn was suspicious when Arthur came over so early in the morning, and that suspicion grew when he wouldn't stop looking at his phone, and now with the blindfold?...what exactly is she not allowed to see? All their friends have been acting suspicious this week too, asking her weird questions and what not. She knew it had to be something related to her birthday, but she can't quite figure out what it is.

"We're here," he announces and puts the car in park. "Wait here, I'll come open your door for you."

Merlyn blushes. "Y-You don't have to--" The driver's door shut behind Arthur and she could hear his footsteps come around to her side of the car. She unbuckles herself and was prepared to get out on her own when the door opened but she suddenly found herself being lifted into his arms. "W-What are you doing you prat?!" Her ears felt ready to explode!

"Sweeping you off your feet," he says. Merlyn could tell if he was teasing her or if he was completely serious.
Arthur started walking, he went up a couple of steps and she heard a door being opened. She would still have been in the dark if the familiar smell didn't immediately register in her mind. "What're we doing at your house?"

"Damn," he said under his breath, "I was so close too." Merlyn was confused by what he meant, but toed off her shoes as he took his off. "Just wait a little bit more."

"Okay?" She said and shifts slightly in his arms, trying to subtly push the blindfold off. Her efforts were instantly squashed when Arthur's hand came around and held the piece of cloth in place. "What?" She says innocently while smiling. He grunts and carries her further into the house.

If her guessing skills were correct then Arthur has now stopped near his living room. He gently lowers her to her feet and turns her slightly to face a different direction.

He leans down and whispers in her ear. "Now you can take it off."

Her neck and ears go red at the order. She could just picture his smirk, knowing he got her with that sexual innuendo. She lifts the blindfold off and was blinded for a few seconds when the lights in his living room were flicked on.

"SURPRISE! HAPPY BIRTHDAY, MERLYN!"

Merlyn looks up at Arthur in shock, there was that same old cocky look on his face that he usually has, but mixed in was this shy nervousness at the edges asking her 'do you like it?' She smiles hugely at him and launches into his arms.

"I love it! Thank you!" She could hear her loudly beating heart as she looks over at everyone. "Thank you, everyone!"

Gwaine jumps up onto the couch. "TIME TO GET THIS PARTY STARTED!" Suddenly, loud music fills the room and everyone starts hustling about.

"Hey, short stack, I--" Arthur gets cut off mid-sentence when Morgana wedges herself between them and grabs a hold of Merlyn.
"I'm going to be borrowing her for a little bit! Please go mingle with the guests brother dearest." She smiles brightly at the dark look on Arthur's face.

"Heh..." Merlyn turns her head away to laugh.

"Arthur~! Over here~!" Gwaine beckons him with an over-exaggerated wave. "Come help me entertain Aunt Alice!"

He sighs and rubs a hand down his face. "Right."

Once he was out of ear shot Merlyn nudges Morgana. "There's another bet going on isn't there?" All she got for a response was a devious smile and a wink.

***

"Ow! Ow! Ow!" Merlyn dug her fingers into Morgana's vanity table.

Gwen pats her on the shoulder. "Morgana's almost done."

"All the adults have gone home," Freya says while walking into Morgana's room.

"Morgana, please, how many more curls?!" She might be bald by the end of this.

"Almost done...just one more...strand..." The curling wand moved upwards and was pulled through her hair. "Finished!"

"Oh thank god," Merlyn sighed and sat back in the chair.

"Now it's time for you to change into the outfit I made for you!" Gwen clapped her hands and ran over to Morgana's closet.

Merlyn, already accepting her fate, stood up. "Can I at least go to the bathroom first?"
The girls were gushing over what they were going to wear to the club tonight so Merlyn took that as her 'yes' and left the room quickly before they could change their minds. She found her way to the bathroom and was in the midst of closing the door when a large figure pushed his way past and shut the door behind him.

"Uhm...don't you guys have a bunch of other bathrooms in the house you could use?" Arthur held one finger over his lips and pressed his ear to the door.

"Crap! Where'd he go? I can't let Leon win the bet!" Gwaine's distressed voice carried through the door. That piqued her curiosity and she quietly walked up to the door and listened.

"Let's go ask the girls," said Percy and their footsteps disappeared.

"I knew there had to be a bet," Merlyn said while glancing up at him, "do you know what it is?" His warm look caught her by surprise and she tilted her head slightly while pouting. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

He leads her away from the door and lifts her up onto the bathroom counter. "I wanted it to be more romantic. But I don't think I'm going to get another chance like this."

"Chance?" Her greedy fingers make their way to his hair as she plays with the soft strands at the nape of his neck. Arthur pulls out a small, white, average-sized box from his back pocket and hands it to her. "Oh, Arthur...you didn't have to get me--" She stops when she opens the lid and sees what's inside of it.

"Happy Birthday, Merlyn."

"Arthur," she gasps, closing the lid, but rapidly opening it once more to look at its contents, "I can't accept this...it looks so expensive!"

He smiles and tucks a curl behind her ear. "You don't like it?"

She shakes her head and holds the box to her chest. "I love it! But I can't--"
"Please accept it," he says in a soft voice while looking at her with that warmth on his face that makes her belly fill with butterflies. "I want you to."

"I--..okay," she nods, cheeks a burning red, and opens the lid once more.

Resting on the black velvet material was a dainty silver chain that sparkled even with the bathroom lighting and resting at the very center of the chain was a small, egg-shaped pearl that mimicked Aithusa's charging dock, even the natural shimmer to it made it look so realistic to the original muse that she had to blink a few times to make sure what she was seeing was real. So many emotions were running through her and they all concluded with how much she likes Arthur and how there's no one else but him that can fill her mind and heart like this.

*If this was it, just them and no one else, then there's no place she'd rather be.*

"Do you like it? I had them try and get it down to the tiniest details." He plays with the ring on her index finger while biting his lip.

Her response was to hug him. "It's perfect. Thank you. I promise to cherish it."

"Want me to help put it on?" She leans back and nods her head while gathering up all her curls and holding it up away from her neck.

For a moment she wondered if he'd have trouble with something so small in those large hands of his, but the coolness of the necklace settled nicely on her collarbone. She looked down at it and then up at Arthur with a big smile.

"It looks great on you," he says while brushing the back of his hand over her cheek.

She closes her eyes and when she opens them there's a naughty spark in them. "I wonder how it would look if I only had this on?" The blue in his eyes darkened as he leaned towards her with a smirk on his lips and a promise in his eyes.

**BANG**
"ARGH!" Gwaine's loud entrance took them by surprise. "I CAN'T BELIEVE IT!"

Leon's head poked in around the corner and his eyes grew so wide it worried her for a moment. "I WON! I FUCKING WON!" He shoves Gwaine out of the way. "SUCK IT! I WON!"

"Morgana would have me hanged if I sucked it!" He snapped mulishly and stalks off down the hallway.

"Thanks guys!" Leon rushed in and shook both hers and Arthur's hands, it almost looked like he had tears in his eyes. "I couldn't have done this without you both! ELYAN!" He hollered over his shoulder, "WE WON THE BET!"

"NO FUCKING WAY?!" Came Elyan's reply as Leon charged out of the bathroom and stomped back to Arthur's room. "SUCK IT, GWAIN!"

"GWEN WOULD HANG ME FOR THAT TOO!"

Both of them looked at each other before bursting into a fit of laughter.

"Alright," Morgana was next to appear, "we still have to get ready, so please hurry it up the both of you!"

"Yes. Yes," she sighed and waved Arthur away, "I'll be back in just a moment."

"You can't let us have just one moment together can you? You damn harpy," he grumbled and walked away. Morgana gave him a haughty look and headed back to her room.

Merlyn couldn't have asked for better friends.

***

"This feels so nice, Gwen!" Merlyn smoothed her hands down the silky red top and down a few inches over her leggings before shifting over to pull Freya beside her. "Freya you look so sultry
in that dress! Will's going to pass out."

The red top was long enough to cover her butt, but the racy part about it was that it had a deep plunge in the back (hence her wearing cutlets instead of a bra). Freya's dress hugged her nicely and had a cross-hatch design on either side of her and exposed small parts of her skin.

Freya flushed and knotted her fingers together. "R-R-Really? You think so?" Merlyn nodded. Both of them turned to Gwen to give her their thanks.

"Wow..." Merlyn's jaw dropped, "you guys look fantastic!"

Gwen has always had this 'girl next door' look to her that Merlyn's always liked, but tonight she looked like the girl you wished lived next door. Her natural curls were pinned off to one side and she paired that off with a dark, smoky look with her makeup, giving her this edgier feel. Her leather jacket and leggings added to that look; all Merlyn could think of at this moment was that Lance was a lucky guy.

"Ready to go girls?" On second thought...Leon's a pretty lucky guy too.

Morgana looked like she was out for blood tonight--figuratively, of course...sort of--what with those killer looking stilettos on her feet. Now, keeping in mind, Merlyn has always been short in comparison to her, that's not brand new information. But with those heels...well she couldn't help but wonder if the air was better up there. And that little black dress she was wearing accentuated how long her legs were and they looked like they went on for miles.

Gwen linked her arm through Merlyn's and pulled them forward. "Yup! Let's not keep the guys waiting any longer."

The excited butterflies were fluttering at top speed in her stomach.

Even more so when she saw Arthur waiting for her at the bottom of the staircase.

He was laughing and talking with Lance about something, but she didn't put much thought into what they were talking about because...damn...Arthur looked really good. His hair was styled to look the perfect amount of messy/done up and for some reason his jaw line stood out more prominently. Instead of a red dress shirt (she assumed they were going to match) he had a black dress
shirt on that had a couple of the top buttons undone and the sleeves rolled up. His arms, she thought while trying to keep her dirty thoughts to herself when she noticed how nicely his jeans fit him.

Around the same moment she finished checking out her boyfriend, he caught sight of her coming down the stairs towards him. The smile on his face slipped away and suddenly she saw him rushing towards her.

"Whoa!" Her view of the world went from right side up to upside down as he carried her away.

"Arthur!" Morgana shrieked. "We don't have time for this barbaric display!"

"One minute you damn harpy!" Was his reply.

Uh...what just happened? She wondered when he set her back down on her feet in one of the reading rooms and looked her over several times.

She tilted her head to the side. "Is something wrong?"

Arthur groaned and hung his head while supporting himself with both hands resting on her shoulders. "You look amazing."

"...thank you?" Why was he acting so weird?

"Would you get pissed if I asked you to change into something else?" She blinked and looked down at her outfit.

"But...I like how I look in this," her voice went quiet and she gnawed on her lip.

"Shit, no, I didn't mean it like that!" Arthur scrambled for words. "I meant it when I said you look amazing. I just don't want anyone else to see how amazing you look..."

Merlyn pouted while looking up at him through her lashes.
He ran his hand down his face while looking up at the ceiling. "This is going to be a long night."

"And it'll be fun!" She said excitedly and drags him back out to the front entrance. "Now let's go!"

They ended up taking three cars. In Will's car it was him, Freya, Gwen, and Lance. Leon was driving himself, Morgana, Percy, and Gwaine. Finally, in Arthur's car it was going to be him, her, and Elyan. The destination was a new club that opened up in the downtown area called 'The Veil' and this establishment quickly made its way up the ranks of cool spots to party at in Albion City. That much was apparent when they just barely managed to find parking close to the building. The guys didn't care if they had to park far, but they took into consideration that it was still winter and the girls were not as well equipped as they were.

"ID?" This man could give Percy a run for his money, she thought while handing her driver's license over. He peered at her over his sunglasses and she smiled smugly in return. Yeah, she's short but she's legal so in your face! He hands her car back to her and lets them in. "Next!"

"Don't look so smug, shorty," Arthur said in a low voice in her ear. That was pretty much the last thing she heard before the loud bass drowned everything out.

Everything about this environment screamed sins and indulgence; people were in different stages of intoxication, some were flat out wasted and were being escorted out by the bouncers. Others were happily enjoying their buzz and flirting with other people in the same boat. Merlyn found all of this fascinating and kept people watching as Arthur lead them through the sea of sweaty bodies towards a booth in the back.

Will bought them all their first round of drinks and they toasted to her birthday and their last semester of school. At one point she lost track of what round they were on and happily indulged in the atmosphere. Morgana got up and rounded up the girls to go dance and the guys took it as their cue to talk about the NBA All-star weekend that just passed.

An unknown amount of time passed as the girls danced through each song. One of the guys would always come by and hand them drinks and disappear back into the crowd. The loud music made her ears rings and she could feel the bass vibrating through her warm body. This is so fun! She thought and threw her hands up above her head and started swaying her hips. There was no way her body could move like this if she was sober. Thank goodness for the invention of alcohol that helped her overcome any of her hesitations. Large hands settled on her hips and she instantly froze before relaxing when she realized it was Arthur standing behind her.
"Your face is going to be stuck like that if you keep scowling!" Merlyn shouted over top of the music. His eyes kept darting around and his face kept getting darker and darker.

He grunted and continued to glare at all the people, who were apparently giving her lecherous looks. Merlyn giggled and stretched up onto her tippy toes (the distance was shorter thanks to her heels) to place a kiss on his cheek.

"Merlyn!" She turned her head and saw Gwen make the universal sign for 'let's get a drink!' She nodded and signalled to Arthur she was going to go off with Gwen.

Freya and Morgana both disappeared a few moments ago to go to the washroom and so that left the two of them to stick together as a pair. Both girls manoeuvred their way through the mass of people as best as they could, and for a fleeting moment Merlyn entertained the idea of using her heels to step on some toes out of spite. Finally, they managed to make it to the bar and order their drinks, Gwen insisted on paying since it was Merlyn's birthday celebration after all.

With drinks in hand they headed back to the dance floor, until someone bumped into Merlyn's shoulder roughly causing her to stumble back and lose sight of Gwen in the crowd.

"Ow! Watch it!" She snapped and moved her drink just in time before it spilled all over her top.

A clearly intoxicated red-headed male leaned forward and grabbed her hand. "I'm so--hic--sorry little miss. Wasn't...hic!...watchin' my steps!"

She grimaced and pulled her hand back. "It's fine. Bye." If she hurried she could catch back up with Gwen.

"N-N-No! No!" He shook his head and grabbed her arm. "Lemme...hic! Make it...up to you! We can--hic--play together."

Now she's starting to get pissed. "I said no!" She tugged on her arm but he held tight.

"Come on! Play with me!" In retaliation, she threw her drink in his face (she'll buy Gwen an
"I SAID NO!"

The red-headed guy seemed to sober up slightly from getting a cold drink thrown in his face and he sneered at her while tightening his hold on her wrist and pulling her forward. "You little bitch! Try playin' hard to get.." He leaned in to try and kiss her but she swung her free hand around to slap him.

*Shit.* She thought when he caught her hand before it could connect with his face.

He grinned maliciously. "Come'er ya little prude!"

Merlyn sucked in a deep breath, ready to scream bloody murder, in order to get this guy away from her, when a fist came flying out of nowhere and hit him squared in the nose. She was close enough to hear the bone break, but--unfortunate for her--he still had a hold of her arms and so when he went stumbling backwards to the ground he took her with him.

The next sequence of events happened in slow motion around her, partly because of all the alcohol she's drank and the adrenaline in her system trying to sober her up. Someone grabbed her around her waist and pulled her up off the ground and away from the creep, only so someone else could jump on top and start beating on him. A crowd formed around them to watch what was happening and she couldn't for the life of her recognize who was crouched over and beating the creep to a pulp in front of her. There was a feral look in his eyes and a nasty snarl on his lips as his fist continued to come down on the man's face, he looked like the angel of death, she thought with her alcohol-hazed brained.

"Oh shit." That's Percy voice, she tilted her head back and realized that the one who pulled her off the ground was him since his arm was still around her waist. "Bouncers."

"We need to get out of here!" Leon had a happy and slightly loopy Morgana hanging on his arm.

Lance was carrying Gwen, who was singing loudly to the music still. "You try getting through to him in this mess."
"Are you okay, Merls?" Will appeared in her line of vision carrying a passed out Freya. She managed to nod and was slowly sobering up.

"Arthur stop!" Gwaine and Elyan tugged as hard as they could but he couldn't make him budge.

Arthur? She blinked when it finally occurred to her who the angel of death was from her thoughts.

"We're going to be so fucked!" Elyan ducked and just nearly caught an elbow to the eye.

Leon ushered them forward. "Let's get the girls out of here and come back to clean up the mess."

"If Coach finds out about this..." Lance lifted Gwen into his arms and hurried past them. Will nodded at Percy, giving him a look that said 'you better have Merls right on my tail' as he carried Freya to the exit.

That's right. She can't let something like that happen to Arthur.

Merlyn squirmed out from Percy's hold and walked up to Arthur, who saw nothing but the man below him. His eyes were wild and she could clearly see the intent behind them. She knew that in his current state if she were to raise her voice it wouldn't help, nor would it snap him out of his murderous thoughts. So she calmly reached out and placed her hand on his shoulder.

"Arthur." He froze and his eyes snapped over to hers, both his pupils were dilated and he was panting for breath. She smiled and touched his cheek. "Take me home." He blinked a couple of times and slowly stood up. Gwaine and Elyan looked at her in surprise but quickly gestured for them to get a move on.

The four of them rushed out of the building and just barely missed being caught. There's this thing some people call 'birthday luck' that Merlyn never really thought much about until now as they hurried back to their cars.

"You bring Merlyn home, I'll hitch a ride with Will," Elyan said while waving goodbye to them.
Arthur unlocked his car and the two of them got in. She saw the ridge set to Arthur's shoulders and reached forward to touch him but he flinched. He gave her a sad look, but she just smiled and sat back in her seat, the alcohol having been driven out of her system long ago. The ride back to the apartment was a quiet one and it pained her to see how hurt Arthur was, both mentally and physically, his knuckles an angry shade of red and was in the process of bruising. As he pulled up onto her driveway she noticed that Uncle Gaius's Jeep wasn't there, which meant he was still out with Aunt Alice.

"Come up with me?" She said softly and waited for him to unbuckle his seat belt before closing the door.

Once they got to her room she had him sit down on her bed and went back down to Uncle Gaius's office to grab the first aid kit. She came back and started to clean up the cuts on his knuckles and bandaged them up; he kept watching her the entire time and once she secured the bandaged he engulfed her in a hug. It took her by surprise, but she quickly returned it.

"You know I would never hurt you, right?" It was the first time, in a long time, she has heard him sound so lost.

She stroked his hair. "Of course I know that...what would make you think I thought otherwise?"

"Weren't you scared when you saw me...lose it?" His voice cracked at the end of his sentence. "You aren't...worried?"

"Understand this, Arthur. The only thing I was worried about was your safety." She pulled back so she could sit and straddle his lap. "I told you before that I'm safest when I'm with you and I still think that. I know you would never hurt me," she placed a small kiss on his lips, "you're still my favorite clot pole. But," she lifted up his bandaged hand and held it to her cheek, "I would never forgive you or myself if you got hurt like this again."

He gave her a warm smile. "My hand will heal, babe."

"I won't let you take that risk," she said in a serious tone. "You need both of your hands to make it to the NBA and nothing should get in the way of that."
With his good hand, he tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. "When I saw that guy grab you like that...I got so angry with myself...I shouldn't have let you get that close to danger--" She leaned forward to kiss him.

"You don't need to be my bodyguard 24/7. Things will happen and you can't blame yourself for it. Okay?" He slowly nods, she could see the disagreement on his face, but his eyes gaze at her lips before giving her his bedroom eyes.

She felt her lower parts quiver in excitement and she slowly unbuttons his shirt. "Technically...it's still my birthday."

He grinned. "Your birthday passed already."

"And yet I didn't get birthday sex...should we remedy that?" Merlyn gives him a mischievous smile and pushes his shirt off his shoulders and runs her hands down his chest and to the button on his jeans.

"Greedy," he smirks and tugs her shirt off.

As they laid breathless and panting on her bed, with the moonlight trickling in from her window, Merlyn couldn't help but entertain certain thoughts in her mind. Maybe it was the lingering effects of all the alcohol she drank or maybe it's the endorphins flooding her brain after all that amazing sex, but a part of her wondered....

_Is this what love feels like?_

***

"Ladies and gentlemen, we will be landing in Albion City very shortly. As you can see our captain has turned on the seatbelt sign so if everyone could, please, return to their seats and turn off all large electronics. Cabin crew prepare for landing."

A pretty brunette gazed down at all the lights and brushed a stray strand of hair behind her ear, completely lost in her thoughts.

An older fellow that shared similar features as the brunette leaned over to look out the
"It's been a long time. Are you excited to be back?" He glanced over at her, "Mithian?"

"Hmm? Oh," she smiled, "yeah I am, Dad."

"You'll get to see all your old friends again! Won't that be exciting?"

"Of course!" She beamed and looked back out the window.

*I've missed you.*
Hello, lovelies!

Sorry for the long wait and I'm also sorry for the length of this chapter. Not one of my longest. But there's a certain pace I'm aiming for and that means a shorter chapter. I hope everyone still enjoys it though. I know everyone is curious to know Merlyn's reaction to Mithian's arrival and well...I hope it doesn't come as too much of a surprise on how she reacts to her presence--so far.

As always, if you enjoyed this chapter please leave a comment or kudos behind! Much appreciated (:)

Now I must start working on the next chapter.

-SS

"We just need twenty more signatures on this petition and the school board will have to cave and give us a bigger budget for the graduation ceremony." Gwen paced back and forth in front of the white board.

Merlyn raised her hand. "No," Gwen answered without looking at her, "you can't forge the signatures." She lowered her hand. Morgana patted her arm while nodding her head 'I was thinking the same thing as you' was the look she gave her.

"What if we just get the boys to go ask some people for their signatures? Gwaine alone could get us 100 more," Freya said.

Merlyn and Morgana looked at each other and nodded in agreement.

Gwen pursed her lips and tilted her head. "Yes. That's true...but he's a wild cannon. I don't know what'll happen if we send him out to the unsuspecting student population."

"He has a date with Kimi, you know, the pretty half-half girl in dance, I don't think a lot of the dancers signed the petition, which is odd considering how --you know--we're petitioning for a dance," said Morgana.
"Oh?" Freya furrowed her brows. "Wasn't he seeing Dean, the guy who's always wearing a tool belt for Shop class? He's cute."

Gwen touched the side of her lips. "It's those dimples of his."

"How do you guys even know who he's interested in?" Merlyn said while looking between the three of them. "I have every class with him and I can hardly keep up."

"You have to look for this move." Morgana ducks her head, downcasts her eyes, gives them a half smile, and runs her fingers through her hair. "That's his signature move." Gwen and Freya giggle behind their hands.

Her brain started pulling up memories of when she has seen Gwaine pull this specific move of his and the sheer volume of it had her wondering why she's never put much thought into this before.

Gwen snapped her fingers. "Oh! But if he pulls that move three times in a row that's when you know he's head over heels with that person."

Head over heels?

But, she's only seen him do that with one person...

"So does that mean--" her question was cut short when the door to the Art/Fashion room opened and the guys strolled in.

"Guys~!" Gwaine laid himself out on the table and smirked when Gwen gave him her look of disapproval, "I'm hungry...let's go out to eat!"

Percy walked over and lightly smacked his head. "Isn't Anna coming home today? She'll throw a hissy fit if you're not there. Stop tryin' to poke the bear." Gwaine grinned and rolled over onto his back while pushing his hair back out of his face. Percy rolled his eyes but a small smile tugged at the corner of his lips.
Merlyn watched the scene in front of her with a new found fascination.

*Interesting.*

"See something interesting?" Arthur leaned over and nudged her head with his own.

She shrugs. "...sort of," she smiles and tilts her head up. He regards her with wary amusement and raises his eyebrows suggestively while looking between her and the door.

"Don't you dare think you can take Merlyn away before we're done our committee meeting," Gwen said while walking past them with her arms full of paper.

She giggled quietly as she saw his expression drop and he rolled his eyes while taking a seat next to her. He noticed the opened bag of chips in front of her and leans over with his mouth open. Merlyn feeds him a chip and slides the bag over to him for him to finish; he takes the bag wordlessly and shifts his seat closer to hers.

"Should we go with a really fancy theme? Like ball gowns and tuxedos?" Morgana grabbed one mock poster and held it up. "Or," she points to the other one Freya lifts up, "should we go retro?"

"Wouldn't either one be okay?" Gwaine rests his chin on both his hands. "I look damn good with my hair slicked back either way."

Gwen pats him on the head. "Yes. Yes. But let's be considerate of the rest of the student body."

"What do you think I'm doing?...who wouldn't want to see me in a tux? Sweetheart?" He looks over at her and bats his eyelashes.

Merlyn laughs softly and pretends to swoon against Arthur. He rolls his eyes and holds a chip up to her mouth. Everyone continues to discuss potential dance themes as she and Arthur both crunch along on her bag of chips.
At some point an idea hits her and she raises her hand. "What about a Hollywood theme? We can mix classy and retro in one go?" The girls gasp and all start nodding while discussing how to further that idea and the guys start to grow impatient from their hunger.

Eventually, they call it a day and start heading out of the school. "Hey one sec, I forgot to grab the playbook from Coach."

"Kay," she says, "I'll wait for you in the main hallway." Arthur nods and runs ahead of her.

"Hurry, Princess!" Gwaine calls out, "Or I'll die of starvation!" It didn't take much for her to imagine the look of exasperation on her boyfriend's face as the locker room door closes.

"You guys head out first," she waves them ahead, "we'll meet up with you."

Everyone agrees and head towards the front entrance.

"Didn't your dad want you to stop by the office?" Merlyn overhears Leon as he walks past her with Morgana.

"Oh right...well he can wait till he comes home to tell me whatever it is he wants to tell me," she says and loops her arm through his.

Leon chuckles. "Okay."

She likes them together...well whatever their version of together means to them. Same with Lance and Gwen...it's the way they look at each other that warms her heart. Even watching Freya, who's typing furiously away at her phone, keeps her entertained. But now there's another pair that intrigues her and her curiosity is trying to get the better of her as she watches the two interact.

"I don't get why you want to go for sushi." Percy rolls his eyes. "You're allergic to pretty much half the menu."
"Only some things! Not half!" Gwaine squawks indignantly and the two of them share a quick look.

Percy pats a pocket on his backpack. "Yeah, I got your EpiPen right here."

"Thanks, man," Gwaine says with a large grin on his face.

As the group exits the double doors Merlyn's left standing in the hallway waiting for Arthur. She pulls out her cell and starts aimlessly scrolls through her social media accounts when someone clears their throat in front of her and it was the familiar scent that clued her in on who it is.

"Can I help you, Sophia?" Merlyn glances up from her phone and pockets it. She notices the costume piece Sophia's wearing and is able to conclude that she has dress rehearsal. Vaguely, in the far recesses of her mind, she remembers Morgana mentioning that Sophia is in the Drama club.

The red head gives her a closed-lip smile. "As a matter of fact, yes." She bats her eyelashes. "Do you know how much longer you and Arthur will be together?"

Merlyn rolls her eyes. "I'm thinking for quite awhile. Sorry to burst your bubble," she adds the last part with as much sarcasm as she could muster.

"Hmm?" Sophia hums while smirking.

She didn't want to admit it but the look on Sophia's face is bothering her. *I know something you don't know* is what she can get from it and that chipped away at her in an unpleasant way.

"If there's something you want to say then just say it," she says and raises an eyebrow.

"And ruin the fun? No. No." She lightly shakes her head. "Besides...it won't be just you that's surprised once it happens."

"And what exactly is it?" She puts air quotes around the last word. Sophia smiles again and taps her lips in a secretive way and turns to leave. Her costume gown twirls with her and trails behind as she walks away.
"Enjoy your time together~!" She says in a sing-song voice. "It might not last long~"

Merlyn clicks her tongue and her mouth pulls down into a frown. Before she got the chance to say something—*anything*—because she wants the last word, Arthur comes up beside her and blocks her view of Sophia.

"Got it," he waves the playbook, "ready to go?" She looks up at him and spares another glance down the hallway before facing him again and nods.

Sophia's words lingered in Merlyn's brain as they got in his car and headed out to meet up with everyone else. Even throughout the first part of their dinner she couldn't stop thinking about it, but as the meal progressed and the warm atmosphere grew she decided that it would be better to just let it all go...because it didn't matter what Sophia said to her. Merlyn glances up at Arthur, who was in the midst of a wasabi eating contest with the guys, and smiles.

*Yeah...it doesn't matter.*

"YO WE WIPED THE FLOOR WITH THOSE PUNKS!" Justin ran through the locker room while waving his towel around.

"If you slip and break something Coach will make you run laps even if you're hobbling," Arthur said while running a towel through his hair.

Justin had a thoughtful look on his face and then he grinned. "That's fine. It just means Ray'll have to nurse me back to health."

"*Ooo,*" Gwaine decided to chime into the conversation, "the good ol' I'm helpless and injured bit. I like the way you think, Jus, my man." The two of them winked at each other causing all the guys to chuckle.

"Naw, you know what works? The sick card. That way you're just aching all over and they'll spend the day babyn' you," Russell added as he walked out of the showers.
Heath snapped his fingers. "My girl loves when I ask her if she can help me work out the kinks in my shoulders after a game, something about touching my muscles."

"Are you sure that's not your kink as well?" Leon ducked and avoided the towel with a laugh. All the guys started whistling and rubbing themselves.

"Shut up you assholes," Heath said without any bite to his tone, "as if none of you guys have any dirty kinks you're hidin'—you especially, Lance." He turned and wagged his eyebrows at a now bright red Lance.

"Why Lance?" Arthur asked.

Gwaine smirked. "It's the quiet ones that get ya." Lance continued to dry his hair but it was mostly so he could hide behind his towel.

"Y'all suck with this relationship talk," Oscar's voice echoed towards them from the showers. "Some of us are still single!"

"Then find someone!" Elyan laughed.

"YOU'RE SINGLE TOO, YOU JERK!" Oscar had freakishly good hearing like Merlyn does, Arthur thought while grabbing his gym bag out of the locker.

"I like when Ray wears my clothes," Justin said while tugging his team hoodie on. Arthur silently agreed with him on that thought, Merlyn looks the best in his clothes.

Leon spoke next. "I think half my closet is in Morgana's room."

Arthur pulled a face. "Man, stop...the images."

Gwaine raised his hand. "I'm a big fan of curiosity!"
"You mean like a virgin?" Heath's brows furrowed.

Out of shock, Arthur dropped his shirt and quickly bent down to grab it but smacked his forehead on the edge of the locker in the process. "Ow! Shit!" He cursed and grabbed the tender spot.

A devious smile appeared on Gwaine's face as he stared at Arthur's back. "That too," he replied.

"You mean like girls who read?" Leon muttered while rubbing the back of his neck. Arthur made eye contact with him and they both had to look away to hide their blushes.

"Reading is the best thing ever invented. I mean how else are you supposed to know things?" Gwaine leaned back and stretched with an amused smile on his face.

"It's scary when you realize that out of all the guys in school, Gwaine is probably the male version of Merlyn," Justin said while tying his shoes.

Arthur scowled. "No, he's not."

Justin shot him an apologetic look. "Sorry, man, didn't mean it that way."

"Don't mind the princess. He's still bitter that I have all my classes with my sweetheart." Gwaine puckers his lips and winks. "We've gotten very close--Ow!" The towel cracked like a whip and left a large and already red looking welt where it managed to strike.

"I tell you not to poke the bear and what do you go and do? For someone so smart, I worry more about you," Percy said and rolled his eyes. Gwaine pouted and rubbed the red mark on his stomach. Percy gave him a wry smile and stands up while pushing his hand against the injured spot. "What am I going to do with you?" He mutters quietly under his breath and heads out of the locker room.

Elyan waves his cell around in the air--having not heard Percy's last comment. "The girls are rushing us!"
All the guys finish changing and head out of the locker room. Arthur walks up behind Merlyn and wraps his arms around her waist. She tips her head back and smiles upside down at him but just as quickly she gives him a questioning look and taps on her forehead.

"Gwaine," he grunted and she quietly giggles while reaching up to run her fingers over the still noticeable red mark on his forehead.

"If the happy couple is ready we can all go eat now," Morgana says while walking past them and giving Merlyn a wink.

"Harpy," he says under his breath.

Merlyn laughs and tugs him forward. "Play nice. If you annoy her she'll just make sure to crash our study session tomorrow." The look of disgust on Arthur's face makes her laugh even harder as they head out to the parking lot.

***

"How come you don't have to study as much as I do?" Arthur grumbled while slowly working his way through the recent chapter in Chemistry in preparation for their unit test on Monday.

Merlyn idly flips another page of her textbook and taps the side of her head. He nods and smacks his head on her desk. "Maybe I shouldn't have improved so much..."

She laughs softly. "So that way when you do slightly better it looks more like a mile instead of an inch?"

He grins into the desk. "Not the worst thing, babe." She hums thoughtfully and keeps reading through the chapter.

"Hey, so my dad wants you to come over for dinner again." Merlyn glances over at him and notices the tension in his shoulders.

"Okay," she nods and sits up so she could rest her chin on her desk. "Any particular reason why?"
His shoulders rise and fall as he sighs and turns his head to rest his cheek on the flat surface. "I'm never sure with him."

"When does he want to have dinner?" She reaches out and runs her fingers through his hair.

"Next weekend I think."

She smiles. "Okay."

*This is nice,* he thought while staring at her as she went back to reading.

Arthur wasn't much of a sappy guy (or so he likes to believe), but if say he was a sappy guy, who's completely taken by the girl sitting in front of him...then maybe...just maybe...he's willing to admit that he's the happiest bastard in the world.

Eventually, he stops studying when the words and numbers start blending into one another. He reaches over and opens her laptop to put a movie on or something to take a break. There were other things on his mind...but Gaius and Alice are both home and he didn't want to risk it. Her most recent tab caught his attention and he turns the screen towards her.

"Are you planning on going somewhere during the summer?" He dips his head towards the laptop.

Merlyn looks up from her novel and closes it. "Oh that," she said while scooting over to her desk. "Yeah. I was thinking it would be fun if we got to go to the beach this summer. Or maybe even see if I could save up some money and we could fly somewhere."

"Oh? So you and Will want to travel?" He asks while looking at the different destinations she looked up.

*Dad has a place here. I could--*
"I was actually thinking about us going somewhere..." she said in a shy voice. Her cheeks turning pink as she looks up at him through her lashes.

Arthur blinks and is almost at a loss for words. "You were planning a trip for us?"

"Is it too soon?" She said worriedly and starts to ramble. "I just thought it would be fun, you know? I realized after my birthday that I haven't really travelled much before and I've always wanted to see as much of the world as I can. We're both really young so it's the perfect time to do it. Start off small and work to the bigger places. When I thought about who I wanted to do this with...well, you were the first person I thought of to share the experience with but I mean--mmph!"

His body moved before the rest of his brain could catch up with him. The euphoria swept through him like a tidal wave, washing away all his insecurities and self-doubts. She wanted to travel together--be together--and have him be by her side. God...why was that so reassuring? Arthur pulls her in as close as humanly possible and even then it wasn't close enough.

Merlyn tilts her head up to catch her breath as he kisses his way down her neck. "We...should...door," she fumbles through her sentence.

He makes a sound in agreement and picks up her easily in his arms while walking over to gently kick her door shut.

"How should we go into class today?" Gwaine mused as he navigated the two of them through the hallways.

"Didn't Percy say not to provoke Arthur?" She gave his abdomen a pointed look.

Gwaine waved off her comment. "Percy just likes to make friendly suggestions," he snapped his fingers, "how about I do this," he wraps one arm around her waist, "and then," he nuzzles the top of her head with his cheek.

Merlyn rolls her eyes and awkwardly shuffles beside him since this new position left her with little options. "He's going to make you run laps."
"Not if you say something," Gwaine says with a happy grin on his face, "he'll listen to you no matter what."

"I don't know, Gwaine," she says in an exaggerated manner as she pats him on the back.

He chuckles and sniffs her. "You smell good. Percy's mom uses the same detergent brand."

"How long have you guys known each other?" It was easier to just continue with a normal conversation and not focus on all the looks they were getting.

"Since we were kids," he answered and, with impressive strength, he lifted her up into his side to avoid walking into a puddle of spilled coffee.

"Thanks," she said while looking over her shoulder at the puddle. Then she turns back to look up at him. "And how long have you--"

"Gwaine..." A deep, familiar, rumbling growl cut her off from behind them. Judging from the wickedly amused grin on Gwaine's face...he knew who it was too without needing to turn around.

"Hi, Princess!" There's that cheeky smile, she thought with amusement. He spins them around and pulls her in tighter to his side. "Fancy seeing you here."

"Fifty laps at practice today." If Arthur glared any harder his eyes will cramp up.

Gwaine pouted and cuddled up to Merlyn some more. "Sweetheart, he's being mean."

She patted his arm and shook her head at Arthur. "You guys do know we have a unit test right now?"

"Exactly," Arthur agreed and stepped forward to extract her from Gwaine's arms, "Gwaine!" He snapped when the amused male wrapped himself around her like ivy, "She's not a stuffed animal, let her go."
"Aww, but she's as cute as one," he cooed.

Arthur snorted. "Small as one too."

"Uh...I'm right here guys?" She said while looking between the two of them, who were smirking at each other.

"Boys...please let Merlyn come and write the test," Mr. Bowman said from the door in exasperation.

The guys shrug in agreement and Gwaine shuffles them into the room. Merlyn rolls her eyes and settles herself into her seat at the lab bench and gives the two of them an admonishing look. It's hardly fair that they both grin at her and dazzle her with their looks.

"Hi, Gwaine." Lily, a pretty blonde with beautiful brown eyes, came up to Gwaine's desk and waves at them.

He gives her a crooked smile. "Hi, Lil, what's up?"

"Nothing much," she twirls a strand of hair around her finger, "I was wondering if I could sit with you today?"

"Hmm..." he mused and looks down at the seat beside him, "You could. But...if you sit here...where's my backpack going to sit?" There it was. That subtleness to Gwaine that not everyone sees or appreciates.

Lily's lips twitch and she shakes her head. "Alright, I understand." She waves and walks back over to her previous seat.

"Dude..." Arthur gives him a pointed look.

Gwaine smiles and shrugs. "My backpack needs a seat."
That's what Merlyn admires most about Gwaine, his ability to live selfishly for himself. She's seen it the first time they met and even now. Other people probably view it as rude, but to her, she sees it as a strength.

"Alright, clear your desks. Pencils and calculators out," Mr. Bowman announces while walking around the room placing the test booklets on desks.

Merlyn twirls her mechanical pencil around her fingers and waits for her test booklet. She feels Arthur bouncing his knee and she gently nudges it with her own and rests her head against his shoulder. He returns her silent gesture by resting his head on top of hers and his leg stops bouncing.

"Am I going to have to separate you two?" Mr. Bowman muses as he places two booklets down. A deep blush appears as she sits back up and shakes her head. Beside her, Arthur chuckles and slides one booklet over to her.

Mr. Bowman walks back up to the front of the room and nods his head. "You may all begin."

The sound of paper rustling fills the room as everyone starts in on the test. This will always be her element, she thought as she burns through the first three pages, front and back, with ease and has about two more pages before the written portion. From her angle, she could see Gwaine keep pace with her and she tries not to laugh at the sudden competitive nerve rush through her system. Arthur, on the other hand, went at his own slower pace and works through the problems with less of a scowl on his face than when he was working on them in her bedroom.

At the end of her test, she closes her booklet and leans her head against her hand and watches everyone else in the class. Mr. Bowman makes eye contact with her and glances between her and her test with one eyebrow raised. She nods and gives him a thumbs up which makes him smile.

By the time everyone hands in their test there are only 10 minutes left in class.

"So how was it?" Merlyn nudges Arthur's arm.

He nods. "Not bad, better than I thought it would have gone."

"I'm hungry," Gwaine states and leans forward against their desk.
"We have lunch after next period...just hold out," Arthur said and starts packing up his things.

"I think they have tacos today!" She said in excitement and gathers up her things too.

"Alright, class!" Everyone looks up to the front of the room. "I have a new student to introduce...."

Thank god I didn't have Mr. Bowman when I was the new kid... In the midst of her thoughts, she didn't notice Arthur stiffen beside her.

"She has just transferred here from a school overseas. Please be nice--"

She's pretty...Merlyn mused and can't help but feel mesmerized by this girl's beauty. A petite face with big brown eyes, a cute nose, and rosy pink lips. Her hair looks soft to the touch as well and for some reason, Merlyn felt the need to run her fingers through it.

"Mith..." She turns to look at Arthur in confusion. The word didn't register at first with her but that didn't matter. Not with the way his face looks as if he has seen a ghost and the way his fingers curled tightly around the desk. It didn't take long for Merlyn to figure out who this new girl is, not with the way the girl is staring at Arthur as if she's seeing the sun for the first time.

"Everyone please welcome, Mithian Nemeth."

What?

"You may have a seat next to Gwaine." Mr. Bowman gestures in their direction.

"But my backpack, Bowman!" Gwaine cries. He doesn't get a verbal response--only an eye roll.

Mithian walks gracefully over towards their section and stops at the seat beside Gwaine. "Hi,
Arthur," she says softly.

*Why is my heart beating so fast? I can't think of what to say*

"Hi, Mithian, right? I'm Gwaine." He holds out his hand and shows off that smile of his. "Nice to meet you." Mithian shakes his hand.

"Hello," she smiles and turns to look at Merlyn. "Nice to meet you too."

"Oh! Yes!" She sits up straighter. "I'm Merlyn."

"It's been awhile," said Mithian as she takes the seat next to Gwaine and smiles at Arthur.

He nods. "Yeah. How are you?"

"I'm good. You?"

Does anyone else not think this is awkward? Merlyn continues to pack up her things, she notices Gwaine looking at her and she smiles--hoping she looks normal.

"Did your dad get transferred back?" Arthur asks politely. Mithian answers but Merlyn doesn't really feel like listening to this conversation anymore.

*Come on...ring you stupid bell.*

**BBBRRRING**

She shoots up from her seat and makes a break for the door. She reasons with herself that she's not being a coward or anything by running away, because it's her life and if she doesn't want to be around that awkward environment then she doesn't have to–hey!
"Hey!" Merlyn snaps while squirming against Arthur's hold as he easily manoeuvres them through the crowd and to a quiet area. "Arthur, I need to get to class."

"You have nothing to worry about," he blurts out and places both of his hands on her shoulders. "Nothing. You hear me?" He leans down to look into her eyes.

"I--" She pauses for a second and sees the sincerity on his face. "Okay," she says softly.

"You trust me, right?" He asks while tucking her hair behind her ear.

She smiles. "Of course I do, you insufferable prat." He smiles and kisses her on the forehead.

"Let's go, shall we, sweetheart?" Gwaine throws his arm over Arthur's shoulder and shakes him roughly before gesturing a few feet away. "I think Mithian needs you to help her find her way to class."

"Why couldn't you help her?" Arthur scowled at him.

Gwaine beams at him. "Not my job." Merlyn opens her mouth to reprimand him but he continues. "Plus, I think she has all her classes with you. Schedule looks the same."

"Oh," he says and looks over at Mithian, who's awkwardly standing around.

"You should go help her. We'll see you at lunch," she says while touching his arm.

Arthur looks at her once more. "Right. I'll see you, okay?"

She nods and watches him walk back to Mithian and lead her down the other hallway. "Are you worried?" Gwaine asks and it's almost a shock to see the serious look on his face.

"Why should I be?" She wonders out loud. "I trust him to do right by me."
"And this is why you're so cute, sweetheart." He pulls her into his side and leads them away.

As much as she loves Khilgharra, she's having a hard time focusing on his lesson. Isn't this some sort of cliché plot twist that only happens in her books and movies? The guy's first love suddenly comes back into the picture and they're going to fall in love with each other again....She shook her head and scowled. She trusts Arthur, there's nothing for her to worry about if he says there's nothing for her to worry about.


Merlyn's lips twitch as she reads the message in their girls group conversation.

Gwen: It's not true is it?

Freya: The secretaries didn't even mention anything to me!

I think she's pretty. She discreetly types her reply.

Freya: Merlyn!

What? It's true.

Morgana: Doesn't it bother you that they have every single class together? Meaning you have most of your classes with her?

I have almost every class with Arthur. Besides, he told me that I have nothing to worry about.

Gwen: Well...if he said that then I guess there isn't anything to worry about.

Freya: Are you sure you're okay with this?
Morgana: You trust that idiot?

I am. I believe him.

***

Why is everyone acting so awkward? She wonders while trying to enjoy her tacos.

It didn't help that Mithian is sitting on Arthur's right and Merlyn on his left, leaving him stuck in the middle of the weirdest situation ever. She tries to eat her lunch but the obvious staring from the guys, combined with the subtle glances from the girls was making it difficult.

"So Mith...long time no see. How have you been?" Leon breaks the awkward tension first.

"I've been good. It really has been a long time, Leon. The last time I saw you I swear we were almost the same height," she says with a soft smile.

Morgana sniffs and looks at her in disdain. "Yes. He really grew up didn't he?"

"You haven't changed, Morgana. You're still as pretty as ever."

Even if everyone asks Merlyn how she is and what she thinks of Mithian, assuming she would be jealous or hate her. How could she? This girl, who is not only beautiful, she's a genuinely kind person as well.

"Hey, Merlyn, are you done with the calc calculations Khilgharra assigned us?" Elyan asks, separate from the group's conversation.

She smiles, grateful for the distraction. "Yeah, here." She digs through her bag and pulls out her booklet and hands it over to him. "Can you check over my number 16? I got the answer, I believe, but I used a different method."
"Ooo," Gwaine says while sliding his seat closer to Elyan. "Lemme see them too."

"I get to see first," Elyan complains while shoving Gwaine's head out of the way as he tries to go through the booklet.

Gwaine starts fighting with him. "Why are you first? I have every class with her. By default it should be me."

"Well I have had Robotics with her for almost the entire school year, so back off." Elyan elbows him in the ribs.

For some reason their banter put her mind at ease and she laughs while watching them. Arthur quietly plays with her hair, almost as if reminding her that he's there beside her. Merlyn looks up at him and smiles.

"You two have almost been dating for three months now, haven't you?" Morgana announces to the table at large.

"Morgana," Leon says while looking at her.

She waves him off and smiles at Merlyn. "Any plans for the three months?"

"Uhm..." She says nervously.

"You harpy, don't put her on the spot," Arthur said while glaring over at Morgana.

Mithian gives them a smile, but Merlyn could see the strain around the edges. "So you two are dating then."

Arthur rubs the back of his neck. "Yeah. Merlyn's my girlfriend."

"You two look great together. I'm happy for you both." She smiles and goes back to her lunch.
God. There's no way Merlyn could hate this girl.

The awkwardness stayed the same for the rest of the day as they went through their classes. Arthur was polite and showed Mithian where all their classes were and Merlyn walked quietly beside them. Thankfully, she had Gwaine loudly chatting away and it made up for her lack of words.

Will: What is this I hear about the kid's ex-girlfriend coming back into town?

Uh...she just transferred here because of her dad. It's not a big deal.

Will: ...right. So what are you going to do about it?


Will: Well, remind him that the space above my TV is still empty and I'm looking for something to fill it.

You're so dramatic

Will: Don't insult me

"Should I wear this or this?" Merlyn holds two different shirts up to show Arthur.

He leans back on his arms on her bed and looks her over. "Do you want an honest--right," he chuckles when she gives him a pointed look, knowing exactly what he was thinking. "The purple one."

"I like this one too," she said and quickly hangs the grey shirt back up. "What time are we suppose to be at your house?"
"Around 8? Dad said he has a business meeting that might run late." Arthur lays down on her bed.

"Does it bother you that Mithian's back?" Merlyn asks while changing her shirt, her back towards him.

Why was there a lump in her throat? She swallows and tries to focus on getting ready to go over to his house.

"I'm surprised," he said while putting his hands behind his head. "I didn't think she was ever going to come back here."

But she has...so what happens now?

Merlyn walks over to her bed and sees Arthur mumbling to himself. "I wonder why she even wanted to come back..."

"Shall we go?" She said while taking a seat on the side of the bed.

"Huh?" He blinks and then smiles softly when his eyes focus on her. "Yeah, okay."

They drove in silence to Arthur's house--well, mostly silence--Merlyn flicked through several different stations rapidly. Arthur didn't even bat an eye at this and waited patiently for her to decide on which channel she wanted to listen to. Her palms felt sweaty as she sat back in her seat and looked out the window, too afraid to say anything or really...she didn't have anything to say.

Why did she feel so bothered?

Whenever Vivian or Sophia talk to Arthur or make pointed jibs at her she could careless and sometimes she even found it amusing. But...why did she feel like her chest was about to collapse in on itself?
Christ...I'm being so dramatic. Growing up with Will and now being with Arthur is changing me into an over-dramatic person.

"Evening, Arthur, Merlyn," Morris said while looking into the car.

"Good evening, Morris!" She turns and smiles at him. He waves at her and smiles while gesturing for Arthur to drive up.

"Huh...who's car is that?" Merlyn wonders out loud while unbuckling her seatbelt.

"Fuck..." Arthur sighs and runs his fingers through his hair. She looks over at him in question and he glances at her. "Sorry in advance, shorty."

She wanted to ask him what he meant by that but her question was soon answered by the people getting out of the unknown silver car.

Mithian....and her father.

"Arthur, my boy! It has been so long! Look at you!" Mr. Nemeth claps both of his hands down on Arthur's shoulders and gives him a light shake. "You're all grown up!"

Mr. Nemeth looked like the years have caught up to him, not necessarily in a bad way, but he definitely has the grey hair to testify his age. He stood around Arthur's height, maybe a bit shorter, but him and his daughter both share the same dark brown eye color.

"Good evening, Mr. Nemeth." There's that poster boy smile. "Shall we head inside?"

"Hey, Mithian," Merlyn greets.

She smiles. "Hi, Merlyn."

"Oh my apologies," Mr. Nemeth turns around and extends his hand. "Rodor Nemeth, and who might you be?"
"Merlyn Emrys," she returns his handshake firmly, "I'm a friend of Morgana and Arthur's."

"She's my girlfriend," Arthur cuts in as he opens the door for them.

Merlyn looks at him with wide eyes...why did he feel like he needs to explain that to Mithian's dad?! Mr. Nemeth just smiles at her and gestures for her and Mithian to enter the house before him. He didn't seem fazed when she tries to scold him silently with her eyes, instead he leads them to the same dining room they ate in when she first had dinner with Uther.

"Merlyn!" Morgana rushes up to her and gives her a big hug.

"Hi...Morgana," she manages to get out while having her face crushed to the other girl's chest.

Mr. Nemeth steps into the room. "Morgana Pendragon..."

"Mr. Nemeth," she said in polite and casual voice, "how have you been?"

"I've been well. The two of you sure have grown a lot," he said while sharing a quick hug with Morgana.

"Well a lot can change after two years," Morgana said with a pleasant smile on her face. But, if anyone else was looking as closely as Merlyn did, she noticed the slight malice hidden in her tone.

Do you know how much longer you and Arthur will be together?

Why is Sophia's words popping up now of all times?

The door to the dining room opens again and Uther walks into the room with a big smile on his face. "Ah. Rodor, old friend, how have you been?"
"Uther!" Mr. Nemeth turns with his arms wide open.

Dinner was...well...sort of awkward. Even more so than at school. How does one eat peacefully while sitting across her boyfriend with his ex-girlfriend sitting beside him? Conversation flowed between everyone but it was only the teenagers in the room that noticed the awkwardness of the seating arrangements and situation.

"So, Merlyn," Mr. Nemeth turns and tips his glass of wine at her, "how are the university prospects looking? It is the final year of high school for you guys."

The best thing about meeting new adults is that they will always, by default, ask her this question. What do you plan on doing for school? Why engineering? What other plans do you have for the future? All great questions in their own right and she understands the need to ask them, but it always makes her break out in a cold sweat when this happens.

She swallows her food and gives him a closed-lip smile. "Very good. A couple of schools have given me their offers for their engineering programs."

"But?" He asks while raising one eyebrow.

"I'm hoping to hold out for Albion University," she answers truthfully.

"Is it your family's Alma mater?" Everyone starts staring at her and she has to internalize all her panic.

She nods. "Yeah. My dad and uncle went there and I'm hoping to go as well." A part of her wanted to mention Will, but this man wouldn't even know who he is.

"I know the chairman of the selection committee. I could speak with him and see if he will come to the school early--" Uther begins, coming into the conversation, but she politely cuts him off.

"With all due respect, Mr. Pendragon, as grateful as I am for such an offer...I would like to wait until their scheduled to come see us. I want to earn a spot with my own merit." The genuine look on her face takes everyone off guard.
Uther nods and gives her a proud look. "Very well. Then the best of luck to you, Merlyn."

"Yes. Best of luck indeed." Mr. Nemeth raises his glass at her.

"How about you, Mithian? What are your plans after this year?" Uther turns the room's attention to her and Merlyn sighs quietly.

Mithian smiles politely. "I'm hoping to get accepted into Julliard."

Merlyn catches the soft look on Arthur's face at the school's name.

"How wonderful," he says.

Mr. Nemeth asks Arthur and Morgana what their future plans are but Merlyn was too occupied in her own mind to really listen. When can she go home? Was it rude of her to think that? A familiar dark and twisted feeling started growing in her mind, the kind of feeling where she wants to be irrationally angry at everything and nothing at once. Immediately, she shakes that feeling away and buries it as far back in her mind as possible.

She can't do that to herself again.

Not this time around.

The rest of dinner goes by quickly, Merlyn thanks whoever made that happen. Morgana can see the relief on her face and squeezes her hand under the table as their dishes are cleared. Everyone gets up from their seat and Merlyn reaches for her jacket, ready for Arthur to take her home so she can sleep this night away.

"Rodor, you must stay so we can catch up," Uther said while gesturing out of the dining room to, what Merlyn's assumes would be, the study room.

Mr. Nemeth smiles. "Of course, Uther. How can I deny that?"
"Dad..." Mithian said softly, "I'm feeling tired."

"Oh..." Mr. Nemeth said and blinks at her while he thinks of what to do. He suddenly turns to Arthur and smiles. "Arthur, would you be able to drive Mithian home? You remember where our house is right? Just a few blocks from here."

"I--" He glances over at Merlyn.

Uther cuts him off. "Of course he can. It shouldn't be a problem."

Merlyn keeps quiet the entire time and maintains that calm look on her face.

Not again.

And, especially, not now.

"I can drive you home, Merlyn," Morgana announces in a sickly sweet voice. Reminding the adults that their suggestion is callous and not thought through.

"Right." Uther nods and gestures to the door, "now that that is settled. Shall we?"

Merlyn waits until the men have left the room before she starts following after them.

"I can drive Merlyn home. It'll be quick," Arthur said as they made their way to the front door.

"Sorry for the inconvenience," Mithian apologizes and looks at everyone sheepishly.

"It's fine. Morgana said she can drive me." Why does she suddenly have a headache?

"Yeah," Morgana loops her arm through Merlyn's and pulling her close, "I already offered,
plus I want to talk to Merlyn about grad stuff. So you just drive Mithian home." She waves them off with a smile on her face.

"Are you sure?" He looks at Merlyn and searches her face.

Merlyn smiles. "Honestly, Mithian's tired. Stop making her wait around."

"I--right, sorry," he mumbles and opens the door for Mithian.

The two of them watch as Mithian walks out the door with Arthur following. Right as the front door closes, Merlyn lets out a deep sigh and Morgana drops her smile.

"It was cruel what my dad put you through," Morgana said while glaring at the door.

Merlyn chuckles and shakes her head. "He didn't know. Cut him some slack."

"Even more cruel that that idiot brother of mine didn't outright deny Rodor." Her pursed lips dip into a frown.

"Morgana..." she chides, "he's just being nice. Don't be so hard on him. There's no way he could have said no."

"Yes there was and he should have," she stated while going to the closet to grab her coat. "Don't defend him to me when you're straining yourself to be okay with all of this."

Merlyn blinks and opens her mouth. "I'm...I'm not..."

Morgana turns and reaches out to brush a strand of her hair behind her ear. "You can talk to me anytime you're ready."

No other words could come to her in that moment, except...
"Thank you."

Late that night, she ended up falling into a deep sleep, her brain not wanting to go through more stress meant she didn't have a single dream that night. Which isn't always a bad thing. A part of her was worried she would have nightmares about Arthur or Mithian or even school. She was so deep into her sleep that she didn't hear her window slide open or the soft padding of footsteps or even her bed shift under a tremendous amount of weight.

The early morning light slowly seeps into her room.

She wakes up partially and feels Arthur's body next to hers on her bed, his breathing even and undisturbed. Merlyn quietly curls in tighter to him and settles back into her sleep.

*There is nothing for me to worry about.*
The thing about trust is that it involved a lot of self-confidence.

Something Merlyn wasn't sure if she had at this moment.

"Arthur and Mithian sure look great together." A girl Merlyn has never met before spoke casually with her friend. Neither of them knew that Merlyn was within ear-shot of their conversation.

"I went to the same middle school as them, they were just as cute then as they are now." The girl's friend responded with a dreaminess to her voice.

"Do you think Mithian still likes Arthur?"

...

"Oh my god...what if Arthur still likes Mithian?"
She knew the girls weren't trying to be malicious towards her, they were simply just gossiping and stating their opinions. But, damn, did it hurt to hear her insecurities out loud. Merlyn wondered if she would have felt the same way if Arthur hadn't bonded with Mithian so quickly. It kind of took her by surprise how easily he forgave her for what she did to him and how quickly they became friends. It has only been two-weeks since Mithian's arrival and she was starting to wonder if all her bravado was fading.

"Is it me?" She mumbled and directed it to no one in particular.

"Is it you what?" Elyan asked as he sat back down in his seat across from her and Gwaine with their new work booklet.

"Hmm?" Merlyn snapped back into reality and blinked at Elyan. "Pardon?"

His eyebrows pulled together. "You--"

"Is the booklet due at the end of class?" Gwaine cut in and flipped to the first page. "Shall we divvy up the pages?"

Elyan shot him an unimpressed look. "The last time we did that you suggested I take the front half and Merlyn take the back half."

Gwaine leaned on his hand and a lazy smile played at the edge of his lips. "And what was wrong with that?"

"You spent that entire period sleeping!" Merlyn had to cover her mouth to keep from laughing too loudly at Elyan's outburst.

"No. No," Gwaine wagged his finger back and forth. "I was resting my eyes. Have to keep them sharp and focused for practice."

"I'm going to punch you." Elyan gave him a dirty look, in which Gwaine blew him a kiss.

It didn't occur to her until they were nearing the end of the period, that Gwaine jumped in as
a distraction to keep her mind occupied from having to listen to the gossip. Merlyn kept pace with the boys as they headed towards the Chemistry lab—Elyan's English class was two rooms down from theirs.

"Bye, Elyan!" Merlyn waved at him and he gave her a two-finger salute.

"Bye, buddy!" Gwaine mimicked her as he threw his arm around her shoulders. Elyan gave him a mock frown and turned away. Merlyn laughed quietly behind her hand and headed for the classroom.

Her amusement died the moment she walked in.

She's in my spot.

"Hey, guys!" Mithian waved at them as they approached the lab benches. Arthur grinned and nodded his head at them.

"Hi." Merlyn smiled and took her backpack off and tried to not eye her spot with too much ferocity.

Gwaine pulled the chair beside his seat out in a grand gesture. "For you my lady!"

A genuine smile appeared on her face. "Thanks, Gwaine."

"Oh!" Mithian perked up. "I'm in your spot! Sorry!" She started packing her things up with haste.

"It's okay." She waved her hand in the air and gently stopped her. "I don't mind. It's just a spot."

Arthur leaned forward and chuckled. "Am I really hearing this from you of all people, shorty?"
"I'm humbled to have you sit beside me, sweetheart. *Like we do in all our classes.*" He winked at Arthur, who started scowling.

Too many emotions were running through her that she just smiled once more and sat down in her new seat. She tried her hardest to ignore them throughout the class, she kept reminding herself that Arthur is a good guy and that forgiving Mithian was such an *Arthur thing to do.*

But she'd be lying if it didn't drive her up the wall.

"Wait...I don't get it...why is he using Copper?" Arthur asked. Merlyn perked up at that and started to turn around...only to stop when Mithian answered his question.

"You should tear him a new one." Gwaine's voice was so low that Merlyn almost thought she imagined his words. She blinked at him and saw that serious look on his face, the one that's so rare and hardly used, that it's presence spoke volumes.

Merlyn sighed and went back to her notes.

"Okay, class!" Mr. Bowman announced at the front of the room. "Let's have a fun game of Jeopardy to help prepare you for next week's unit test!" Most of the class groaned, but Merlyn felt a spark of excitement run through her. "I'll divide the class. Everyone from Kelly's row and the two rows up will be on the left side of the room. Everyone from Merlyn's row and up will be on the right side of the room."

"Care to fancy a wager, Princess?" Gwaine extended his hand out. "Losing side has to do whatever the winning side wants."

Arthur placed his hand in Gwaine's. "You're on." He looked over at Merlyn and grinned. "Game on, shorty."

"Bowman! That's not fair! You're literally putting the two smartest kids in class on the same team!" One of the guys at the back complained as he moved seats.

"Oi! Jefferson, keep your mouth shut. I need Merlyn if I plan on slaughtering the Princess here," Gwaine narrowed his eyes at the boy as he possessively lead Merlyn to the other side of the room.
"May the best team win, Merlyn!" Mithian said with a smile.

Merlyn nodded her head. "Yeah. May the best team win."

Once everyone divided into their teams, Bowman pulled up his digital Jeopardy game and hit start. Normally, she'd be so consumed with the competitiveness that that's all she would think of, but now seemed different as she looked over at Arthur sitting next to Mithian and felt the urge to stomp over there and claim her spot next to him back. Gwaine squeezed her shoulder and directed her into the closest seat and sat down beside her. Merlyn took a deep breath and shoved the dark feeling back into its box.

Their side was demolishing the left side of the classroom...but yet...

"You're staring," whispered Gwaine as he casually leaned closer to her ear.

"I can't help it..." And she couldn't. Not with the way Arthur threw his head back to laugh at yet another funny thing Mithian said--or didn't say--Merlyn hasn't been able to decode any of their well-known communicative facial expressions yet.

"Merlyn?" Mr. Bowman called out and stared at her expectantly.

Oh crap...I wasn't listening!

"Uhm...what is..." She slowly stalled while trying to figure out the answer.

Gwaine rested his chin on her shoulder and cracked his neck. "Iron."

"Iron, " she repeated in a louder voice.

Mr. Bowman nodded his head and smiled. "400 points to Team Magic."
"And Strength!" Gwaine chirped and raised his hand to wave.

A small chuckle managed to pass her lips as she turned to look at him. "Where did you even come up with that idea anyways?"

He leaned over and knocked his head with hers. "Somewhere between world domination with you, and me as your sidekick, and helping one of Percy's brothers with his History project on the old legends of the past."

"I love the King Arthur legends," she said and then paused and looked back at Arthur.

Gwaine followed her gaze and sighed.

Does it bother Merlyn that Mithian is about a head taller than her?

No. No, it does not.

Does it bother her that practically everything Mithian does is encompassed by an imaginary halo-like glow?

No. No, it does not.

Does it bother her that whenever Arthur and Mithian are talking it feels like she's the third wheel?

NO, IT FUCKING DOES NOT!

"Ha!" Arthur's laugh echoes around them. "Do you remember when Leon and I broke the window to your dad's greenhouse?"
"Oh god," Mithian laughs (why does it sound so cute?) and swats at Arthur's arm, "how could I forget? You guys dropped a ladder through the window and ruined his azaleas."

"To be fair, it was Arthur's fault," Leon points out and laughs with them. Morgana levels him with a look but he doesn't pick up on it.

Mithian laughs harder at the outraged look on Arthur's face.

Breathe, Merlyn, Breathe.

Her nails dug deeper into her palms and she stares blankly at her lunch. No amount of mental convincing could bring her appetite back. Thankfully, for her, today's lunch was some form of stew and it had cooked carrots in it--which gave her the perfect excuse on why she has hardly touched it.

Why is she even here?

This is so stupid.

A quiet sigh leaves her lips as she makes up her mind to leave the lunch table. "I'm--"

"Hey, Merlyn," Elyan says while standing up, "can you come with me to the Robotics Lab? I need help with some last minute calculations for my design."

"Sure!" She shoots up from her seat and walks around to him. Not bothering to say anything to Arthur.

"I want to come!" Gwaine said excitedly while getting up from his seat.

Percy rolls his eyes and pushes him back down.

Elyan shoots him a dramatic 'too bad' look on his face and speaks with a fake frown to goad
him. "Only we're allowed in the lab." Gwaine shoots him an ugly look of his own.

"Sorry, Gwaine," she says with a grin, "maybe I'll sneak you in next time. See you in class." She waves over her shoulder at everyone. "Bye guys." She sees Arthur smile and tips his chin at her before going back to his conversation with Leon and Mithian.

An unpleasant taste sits at the back of her throat and she has to turn away quickly to swallow it. The two of them leave the lunchroom and she forces herself to keep looking forward because turning back to look at their table was not an option she will allow. She starts to trap herself in her thoughts and emotions as they walk down the hallway to the lab. It is almost as if there's a monster lurking in the periphery of her mind, waiting to be let loose.

"Do you...uh...want to talk about it?" said Elyan hesitantly, his voice bringing her out of her stupor.

She blinks and nearly walks into a garbage can in the hallway, luckily, Elyan grabs her arm and pulls her out of the way. "What?"

He gestures vaguely over his shoulder while looking at her. "Arthur's being a prat to you."

"He's always a prat to me," she said automatically and tried to smile.

"You cut him too much slack." Elyan shook his head.

"How much do you think she means to him?" She asked out of the blue.

Elyan saw that wide-eyed look of hers and almost felt the need to lie.

"She's his first love. Always has been. Always will be. There's nothing that'll change that fact." But he can't do that to her. He can't lie to her just to cover up Arthur's actions. Nor does he want to sugar coat it. He knows she deserves the truth.

A moment of silence encompasses them as they approach the lab. Elyan wonders briefly if she knows that he was lying about needing her help with calculations; everyone at the table could see
and feel the tense emotions building up inside of her as Arthur spoke with Mithian. So he did the only thing he could think of to help her get out of there.

They stop in front of the lab and she turns to smile up at him. "Thank you."

He blinks and furrows his brows. "For what?"

"I haven't ever said this to you before, which is ridiculous when I think about it, but you're one of my best friends, Elyan. From the first day of Robotics together till now...thank you for being my friend and everything in between."

Elyan rubs the back of his neck and feels his cheeks grow warm.

Merlyn runs her access card over the scanner and it flashes green. "And for what you did for me back there...I'm grateful."

*So she did know*, he thought while following after her.

Both of them work silently on their individual projects and their previous conversation hangs unspoken in the air. Merlyn fiddles with Aithusa's coding and watches as the little dragon robot happily moves from checkpoint to checkpoint. Normally, Aithusa could brighten her mood and make her day instantly, but today she feels sick to her stomach.

If she starts doubting Arthur...does that mean she's starting to doubt herself?

"What am I even thinking?" She whispers in outrage and sits up in her seat. "How can I sit around and mope if I haven't even tried to tell him how I feel?"

That's right. What was it that Uncle Gaius told her when she was mad at Arthur?

*No one will know how you are feeling if you don't say your thoughts out loud.*

With her decision made she quickly cleans up her station and gives Aithusa a hug before
Want to go see a movie today after school?

The bell rings and she hurries out of the lab with Elyan. Everyone begins to flood the hallways and she has to stick close to him in order not to be swept away. Her phone vibrates and she quickly reads Arthur's reply.

Cabbage Head: Sure. What do you want to go see?

A smile lights up her face and she types back her reply. It didn't matter what movie they go see, she decides and lets the warm, happy feeling wash over her. Merlyn pockets her phone and strolls into Physics with Elyan and sees Gwaine wave at them from his desk. Class starts off like it normally does with their teacher telling them to work on the problem on the board; the three of them manage to work through it together and they start fooling around on their phones.

"What's got you in such a good mood, sweetheart?" Gwaine said while leaning over to peek at her phone. "Sweet, are we all goin' to a movie after school?"

Merlyn smiled apologetically. "Sorry, Gwaine, only Arthur and I are invited."

"Aww," he cooed while leaning over to nuzzle his head against her shoulder, "okay. I'll let it go this time, just cause I can see how excited you are to spend some alone time with the Princess." He winked and went back to his phone to continue his text. Elyan glanced up from his phone, saw the pink on her cheeks, and smirked at her.

The end of the day couldn't come soon enough; the moment the last bell rang, Merlyn was up and out of her seat and making a mad dash for the front doors. She ended up beating the usual rush of students and she moved off to the side so they didn't run her over. Her eyes darted through the crowd as she searched for the familiar face and head of hair.

"You're really quick, you know that?" Gwaine saddled up beside her and leaned against the wall.

A laugh escaped her but her eyes kept surfing the crowd. "You should tell Arthur that, he
never believes me when I say it." She turned away from the mass of students and smiled up at him. "Glad you side with me."

Gwaine tapped his nose and winked at her. "Always, sweetheart."

"Oh hey, guys!"

Merlyn froze and blinked at Gwaine before she turned around and saw Mithian as she walked up to them with Arthur in tow. "Hi, Mithian," she recovered and smiled.

"We should hurry and get to the movies before we miss the trailers!" Mithian smiled expectantly and gently clapped her hands together. "I love watching the trailers!"

Arthur rolled his eyes and half-smiled. "You and Merlyn have that in common..."

The rest of the conversation was lost to Merlyn as she tried to force the hollow sound out of her eyes and keep her expression as neutral and pleasant as possible. Her fingertips went cold and she balled her hands up to warm them up.

*How could he?*

"Ready to go, babe?" Arthur reached over and pinched her nose. "Hope you don't mind, but Mithian said she wanted to see this movie too," he whispered in her ear.

She snapped out of it and just barely caught her anger. "Actually--"

"--Gaius needs Merlyn's help in his office." Gwaine cut in with an easy smile. "He asked me to catch her before she left the school."

"Oh...so should we go to the later showing?" Mithian asked with a big smile. "I'm okay with it if you guys are."

*I can't breathe*
"How about you two just go?" Merlyn suggested, the words left a bitter taste in her mouth and a hard lump to swallow in her throat. Arthur's brows furrowed as he tilted his head and looked at her. "I mean," she waved her hand carelessly in the air, "I don't know how long I'll be with Uncle Gaius and it'd be a shame to miss this movie. So you guys go!"

"You sure, shorty? I don't mind watching a later one."

**Angry. I'm so angry and I want to cry. Just GO ALREADY!**

She shook her head and smiled. "Nah. Just give me the spoilers tomorrow. Hurry now or you guys will actually miss the trailers."

"Okay..." Mithian said hesitantly, the side of her lip pulled down slightly, "if you say so, Merlyn." She turned and started heading out the main doors but spared her one more cautious look before the door closed between them.

"I'll buy you that box of chocolate mints you like." Arthur leaned over and gave her a quick hug and followed after Mithian.

A few seconds passed as she stood in the nearly empty hallway and tried to control her breathing. Suddenly, her vision went dark and she smelt the familiar scent of Gwaine on his hoodie that now covered her head. She took that as a cue to let her tears flow and she quietly sobbed, grateful to be hidden.

"Sad or mad tears?" He questioned as he leaned against the wall.

"I'm...I'm so...angry." She whispered vehemently and sucked back another sob. "I hate how angry I am."

Gwaine's expression was both serious and dark as he stared at the main doors. "You're allowed to be angry...hell...you're supposed to be angry. The Princess is such an idiot."

In that moment, Merlyn couldn't find it within her to defend Arthur.
"Maybe I'm overreacting." Her voice cracked and she tried to swallow past the lump in her throat again.

"Don't do that. Don't make yourself the villain." He stood and pulled her into a hug. "You're the best person I know."

More tears fell and she hugged him back.

"Hey, Merlyn...?" Freya's tentative voice shook her out of her stupor.

"Yeah? Sorry, I spaced out there." Truthfully, her mind has been on autopilot for the past three days.

"Has Will been in contact with you recently?"

Merlyn furrowed her brows and pulled out her cellphone and glanced at her messages. "Not recently, no. But he does that sometimes, he's a crappy texter. Sometimes he just looks at the message and replies in his mind and forgets about it. Just text him a hello and he'll usually respond."

"Oh," she knotted her fingers together and gave her a small smile, "okay."

"Is something wrong?" How come it has taken Merlyn so long to notice that worried wrinkle between Freya's forehead?

Freya shook her head. "No. It's nothing. I just...I...thought for a moment there I upset Will."

"Upset him?" Merlyn said with a frown. "There's no way you could do that."
"Thanks, Merlyn." Freya smiled and went back to her book.

That simple motion had her thinking about all the things she has been neglecting these past couple of weeks since Mithian's arrival. She hasn't spent a lot of time with everyone, but in her defense, Morgana and Gwen have been extremely busy with their extracurricular activities, Freya's been busy with helping out at her mom's clinic and at the theater with her dad. Lance and Elyan have been doing more volunteer work. Percy's parents have been pulling more overtime shifts so he has to go home right away after school to look after them, and if she considered what Percy meant to Gwaine then she completely understands why Gwaine tags along to help him babysit.

That left her with Leon, Arthur, and Mithian.

And, unfortunately for her, she was the odd one out.

"You guys want to come over to my house today? Since it's a half day?" Leon asked the table at large.

Is it a half day?

"Sure, we haven't hung out as a group for so long!" Gwen exclaimed and clapped her hands together.

"You up for it, babe?" Arthur leaned over and grabbed a strand of her hair and twirled it around his finger.

Merlyn automatically smiled and nodded her head. If she was honest with herself...she just wanted the day to be done so she could go home and sleep this dark feeling away. But, no, she can work through this, she thought. There has to be something she can do to make this feeling go away. Arthur likes her.

She glanced over at him and saw him laugh at something Mithian said and her heart started to ache.

Does he still like her?
Did something happen between you and Freya? Merlyn subtly sent the text to Will and went back to her autopilot mode.

The school day passed her by in a blur. Merlyn wondered at one point how the dark, twisted feeling managed to wrap itself around her like a warm blanket and make itself comfortable. She was aware of the worried looks Gwaine kept shooting her whenever she would smile and laugh along with Mithian and Arthur. When did this become her life? She wondered as they all walked out to the parking lot.

"Shotgun!" Mithian called out in glee as she sprinted (damn her legs are long) to Arthur's car.

"Uh, Mith? That's--" Arthur started but Merlyn cut him off.

"It's cool, I'll sit in the back." She smiled and opened the door to the back seat. Arthur gave her a puzzled look but didn't get to question her when Mithian honked at him.

As they started the drive to Leon's house, Merlyn couldn't help but hate the way Arthur used his nickname for Mithian. She couldn't stop hating a lot of things that happened recently and she had to dig her nails into her palms to distract her from the ringing in her ears. They all got settled into Leon's living room and waited as he surfed through the channels for something to play in the background.

"Leon, could I get a glass of water?" Mithian asked as she stood up.

"Sure, the glasses are in the third cabinet above the second water cooler by the back door to the porch..." He trailed off when he noticed the lost look on her face.

Arthur got up from his seat. "I'll show you where they are."

"Thanks!" She beamed and followed after him.

"Merlyn..." Morgana said as she watched the two of them leave the room.
Merlyn shook her head. "It's fine."

Gwen sat up. "But..."

"I just...don't want to think about it," she sighed and reached into her backpack and pulled out her dad's book and began to flip through it. Everyone else took that as a cue to tread carefully around her and went back to their conversations.

Leon ended up settling on an old action movie that came out the year before and had it play in the background as everyone started talking about their upcoming graduation. Arthur and Mithian both came back at one point, but Merlyn wasn't even sure when it happened.

A few hours in she had to put her book down and go to the bathroom, as she dried her hands on one of the many decorative towels Leon's mom has in their washroom her phone went off and signalled a text.

**Will: I broke up with Freya**

Shock ripped its way through her as the text shook her to her very core. *What? When did this happen? Why did this happen?* Merlyn tried to flip through her memories to see if there was anything that could have lead up to this. There's just no way it could happen like that out of the blue...Will's crazy about Freya and Freya...

"Freya..." Merlyn said and quickly rushed out of the washroom and made her way back to the group. "Fr--"

She stopped dead in her tracks at the threshold of the living room when she caught sight of Mithian looking through her book. She didn't know what was worse...having Mithian touch something that belonged *only* to her and no one else or that Arthur was sitting beside her and *allowing* it. The dark and twisted feeling inside of her screamed in rage and rattled loudly inside her mind. How could he? *HOW COULD HE?* Before she could stop herself she stormed up to them and ripped the book away from Mithian.

"DON'T TOUCH IT!" Both Arthur and Mithian froze and stared up at her in surprise. In fact, everyone in the room looked at her in surprise. Merlyn clutched the book as tightly as she could to her chest as she breathed heavily while glaring at them.
"I'm sorry..." Mithian apologized. "I didn't mean...it was just here...and I thought..."

"Well, you thought wrong!" She snapped and curled her fingers inwards around the spine of the book.

"Babe...calm down. It was a mistake, Mith didn't mean any harm," said Arthur as he tried to placate her.

The sheer amount of hurt that struck her broke the last string that was holding her emotions in check. "It was a mistake.." she repeated slowly, "a mistake...HOW DOES PICKING UP MY BOOK WITHOUT MY PERMISSION, A MISTAKE?"

Mithian opened her mouth to speak but stopped when Merlyn leveled her with a cold look.

Arthur stood up while staring at her in confusion. "Come on, Merlyn, don't be like--"

"Don't be like what?" She asked softly while blinking up at him. His eyes widened at the look of anguish on her face. Her lower lip trembled as she stared up at him. "I can't do this anymore."

"What..." Fear twisted around in Arthur's gut.

"I'm breaking up with you."

Everyone in the room remained silent but the tension in the air shifted to utter shock. Arthur blinked and his whole stature froze up. Merlyn sniffed and turned to grab her backpack and shoved her book back in as she headed for the front door. The cold winter air nipped at her cheeks when she stepped out and headed towards the driveway.

The sound of crunching footsteps made her break out into a run but a large hand caught her shoulder before she could pick up momentum.

"I'll drive you home."
Merlyn spun around and looked up at the person who has been standing by her through this. "Gwaine," her voice watery from the unshed tears.

"Come on," he said and directed her to his car.

The moment she buckled herself into her seat, Arthur came bursting through the front door. "MERLYN!"

"Gwaine, go. Please." She whispered and turned away from the look of panic and fear on Arthur's face.

Gwaine didn't need to be told twice and threw his car into reverse and peeled out of the driveway at an alarming speed. Both of them ignored Arthur's plea to stop and Merlyn avoided watching him chase after them in the rearview mirror. She pulled out her phone and hit call beside the name of the one person she wanted to see.

"Hey Merls, look I--"

The tears spilled over the second she heard his voice. "Will..."

There was a pause on the other line. "Where are you?"

"Gwaine's taking me home." She choked on a sob and sniffed.

"Kay." He disconnected the call and Merlyn wiped the tears from her face.

The two of them sat in the car in silence and for that she was grateful. She only wanted Will at this moment, he would know what to do, what to say, what to make all this pain inside of her disappear. More tears pooled in her eyes but she didn't want to cry in front of Gwaine, more than she already has, and she bit her lip to keep them from spilling over. This proved to be more difficult when a familiar name appeared on her phone screen along with their picture; she hit the power button twice on her phone and rejected the call.
Gwaine made it back to Uncle Gaius's apartment in record time and pulled up onto the driveway. He put his car in park and looked over at her. "Do you want me to come up with you?"

She shook her head and unbuckled herself. "No." The cold air blew in when she opened the door. "Thanks for the ride, Gwaine."

"Anytime--" The door slammed shut and cut him off, he sighed, "--sweetheart."

Uncle Gaius and Aunty Alice greeted her at the door. "Oh, Merly," Aunty Alice reached out for her but Merlyn ducked out of her arms.

"I'm going to my room," she said and headed for the stairs. She paused at the foot of the stairs. "If...If Arthur shows up..." her voice cracked slightly, "...don't let him in. Please."

Uncle Gaius's expression softened. "As you wish, Merlyn."

Her room once brought her so much comfort. It was her sanctuary, a place that was just hers. Then it back a place for her and Arthur, where they studied, hung out...slept together, and now she couldn't remember a time where her room belonged solely to her. She stood at the threshold and gripped the frame tightly to block out the screaming pain. There wasn't a single thing in this room that hasn't been touched by Arthur's presence...and now she needs to purge it.

"I hate him..." She locked her window and pulled the curtains shut and blocked out the afternoon sunlight.

She went to the linen closet and pulled out one of the empty boxes on the ground and threw it on the ground in the middle of her room. First, it was the photos of the two of them that she chucked into the box, next were all the shirts and sweaters of his that she pilfered. She fumbled with the clasp on her necklace and threw it back into its box and it followed after his clothes.

With each item she tossed the angrier she got. "I hate him...I hate him...I hate him. I HATE HIM!" She cried and fell to her knees by her bed and sucked back a sob. When she looked up she made eye contact with Arthur Jr. sitting on her bed. Merlyn reached for him and sat back down on the floor. "You have to go too." Her fingers brushed through the soft fur one last time and set him on top of everything in the box and kicked the whole thing into her closet.
Merlyn sat back down on her knees and sniffed while wiping her eyes. Her room hasn't looked this empty since she first moved here. The quietness was suffocating and it reminded her of a time she didn't want to remember. Loud footsteps caught her attention and she looked over at her door.

"Will..." She breathed out and scrambled to her feet.

Will opened his arms and caught her. "Hey, kiddo."

That's when Merlyn let all her anguish go and started to wail.

Will carried Merlyn to her bed and sat down on the floor as he held her close. The sounds of her sobs broke his heart and he hated himself for not being able to prevent this. He gently stroked her hair and stared up at the ceiling.

"I'm here..." he said softly, "...I'm here."
Hey everyone!

Didn't expect to see me again so soon hey? Well, I have some good and not so good news. The good news is I got out another update--YAY! The not so good news, depending on how you look at it, is that this isn't a Merthur related chapter. I know a lot of you want to know the future of those two, but it'll be just a little bit longer before we get there.

This chapter is actually a very special chapter, I've been wanting to write this chapter ever since I first conceived the idea of this high school AU. One of my dearest characters I love is Will, and what he means to Merlyn and what she means to him. I really hope you guys do enjoy this chapter.

If this chapter does touch you in the way it has touched me then please feel free to Comment & leave behind a Kudos.

Happy New Year to all my beloved readers (:)

-SS

Will was five and half years old when he first met Merlyn.

"But, dad...I don't want to go!" Will complained as his father put gel into his hair.

"Now, William," Tom said, "these people are our friends and they are very excited to meet you."

"But, the Batman movie!"

"Tom! We're going to be late!" Gloria called from downstairs.

"Coming, my love!" He responded and lifted William up into his arms. "Come on little man, let's go. And I promise we can go get ice cream after when we come home." Will perked up at the sound of ice cream and shut his mouth. "Besides, there's a new friend we're excited for you to meet!"
"Is he faster than a speeding bullet?!" Will asked excitedly.

Tom blinked and chuckled. "Er...not quite."

"Oh..." Will pursed his lips. "Can he shoot webs from his hands like Spiderman?!" He demonstrated his web-slinging skills.

"Uh...well..." His dad hedged and scratched his neck.

"Can he do anything fun?" Will said as Tom locked the front door.

"Well she," Gloria emphasized and took her son from her husband, "is the cutest little button and you guys will be great friends!"

Will made a disgusted face. "Ew...cooties."

"Now, Will.." Gloria gave him a reprimanding look as Tom chuckled quietly behind them.

*She looks like a troll.*

This was Will's first thought when he saw the baby bundled up in a fuzzy blanket in the tiny cot.

"Hi, William." A pretty woman with brown hair and blue eyes knelt down in front of him and opened her arms for a hug. "Do you remember me?" He shook his head and hesitantly stepped back. "I'm Hunith. I'm one of your mom's friends."

"Oh...okay." He nodded and stepped into her arms for a hug. He snuggled in closer when the hug reminded him of his mom's hugs.

"I see you've met our baby bird, William." A large bear-like man knelt down beside the cot...
and smiled warmly at the troll inside of it.

Will nodded and felt slightly intimidated by the man's large form. "She's not a bird. She looks like a troll."

"William!" Gloria gasped when she overheard him.

Balinor, Hunith, and Tom broke out into loud laughter. "Your son has your rude mouth!" Balinor laughed and clapped Tom on the back.

"The kid has got a good eye for things," Tom said and ducked out from Hunith's hand.

"Trust me, kid." Balinor knelt back down in front of Will. "Merlyn here will be the best friend you've ever had."

"When she doesn't sleep most of the day," Hunith pointed out while rocking the cot to keep Baby Merlyn asleep.

"And will she play Superheroes and Villains with me?" Will asked and glanced back into the cot.

Balinor winked at him. "You bet."

Four Years Later

Will is now nine and a half and Merlyn is currently celebrating her fourth birthday on a ranch just outside of Ealdor.

"Stop following me!" Will complained as he jumped up and over several barrels of hay with ease.
"But daddy said to play together!" Merlyn huffed as she scrambled up onto the first barrel of hay and started to tackle the second one. Her pretty pink dress now had pieces of hay clinging to random parts and the edge of the dress was covered in dirt.

"I don't play with little kids!" He snapped and hopped down from his spot and started to head out to the large grassy field.

Merlyn slid off the last barrel of hay and chased after him. "Will! Wait for me!"

"Ugh..." Will rolled his eyes and broke out into a sprint.

"Will!" Merlyn shouted after him. "Mommy said not to play in the field!"

"Stop telling me what to do!"

"But, Will!"

It bothered him how both sets of adults expected them to be friends. How could they expect him to be friends with a little girl? He didn't even want her to come to the farm with them. It was supposed to be him and dad and mom this weekend, but then she had to tag along. He's almost ten years old! He doesn't want to get stuck with a snotty kid.

"WILL!" Merlyn screamed.

But it was too late.

One moment both of his feet were on solid ground and the next moment he began to plummet straight down into a hole. As it turned out, Hunith had a very good reason as to why the kids shouldn't play in the field and it's because of the abandoned wells that were in the process of being filled up. Will panicked and splashed around, trying to stay afloat.

"Help!" He cried and spat out a mouthful of cold water. "He...lp!"
"Will!" Merlyn shouted and her voice echoed down to him.

He scrambled and flailed in the water. "Merlyn!"

Merlyn, although only being four years old, was an exceptionally smart child; she looked around and saw a bundle of rope hanging from a nearby tree and ran over to grab it. It took everything in her small frame to lift the rope off the rusted hook and drag it back over to the well's opening.

"Grab the rope!" She cried and tossed one end of it down to Will and held onto the other end.

"Got it!" He said and gave the rope a quick tug. "Pull me up!"

"I'm...trying...." She gritted her teeth and pulled with all her strength.

"Merlyn!" Tom cleared the distance from the house to where they were in under a minute when he noticed them in the field.

"Uncle Tom help!" She cried and kept pulling.

Tom reached out and grabbed the rope and started pulling Will up with ease. Balinor was two steps behind Tom and came around to the other side of the well and lifted Will out of the opening the moment he was within arm's reach.

"Dad!" Will cried and reached out to Tom.

"William," he breathed and wrapped his jacket around his boy's soaked body, "are you okay? Christ...I thought..." It was a rare sight to see his dad, his all-time hero, scared, and it made him realize how dangerous what he did was. If Merlyn had been the one to fall in...

"Yeah," he nodded and gestured for his dad to put him on the ground. He turned and walked up to Merlyn. "I'm--"
"WILL!" Merlyn broke out into a loud wail and wrapped her arms around him in a tight hug. The water that was dripping off Will started seeping into her dress.

The hug took him by surprise but he returned it. He wasn't sure what was required of him, as a nine-year-old boy, to console a four-year-old little girl but he tried his best to emulate his mom. "There. There." He patted her on the head. "I'm here...you big baby." That last part he threw in for good measure.

Tom and Balinor shared a look, shook their heads, and grinned.

Five Years Later

William is now fifteen and Merlyn is turning eleven years old

"How do you know if you like someone?" Merlyn asked from Will's bed as she was reading through his science textbook.

Will glanced over at her. "Do you like someone?"

She shrugged. "There's this boy in my class and I think he's funny."

"You're ten..you don't know what it means to like someone." He shoved her with his sock-clad foot.

"Don't be a prat," she complained.

"Okay. Okay. Besides being funny, what else about this guy do you like?" He said with an exaggerated frown and put the word 'like' in air quotes.

Merlyn contemplated her answer and tried to put her feelings into words. "He's smart and I like that. He doesn't make me want to hide how smart I am."
"You've always been brilliant, Merls. That's why you do grade six work, even though you're a year below. That's something to be proud of." Will tossed his foam basketball at her.

"But the other kids call me a freak because of...because of how smart I am." Will let out a small sigh when he saw the sad look on her face.

"Want me to beat them up?" He offered. "If I break a few noses then they'll stop bothering you."

She laughed and rolled her eyes. "You can't solve problems by hitting people."

"Whatever you say, Merls. My way gets things done."

"And when you get suspended, what will your dad do? What will your mom do? Aunty Gloria on her no-coffee diets is scary...I can't imagine what she would be like if you got suspended." She chucked the ball back at his head.

"Mom's all bark and no bite," he plucked the ball out of the air, "and dad has a worse track record than I ever will."

"Speaking of Uncle Tom, isn't he coming back soon?" She sat up, eye wide and a large grin on her face. "Are you excited?"

Will tried to play it cool, since he's supposed to be the older brother figure and be her role model, but he couldn't and perked up. "Hell yeah! Dad promised to take me driving when he got back!"

"Lucky," she said, "I wish I could get my learners. I already memorized the whole book."

He flicked her forehead. "Be patient." She rubbed the spot with a glare and he grinned. "You'll be the first person to ride shotgun, kay? I'll even let you fiddle with all the controls."
"Yes!" She cheered and high fived him.

Three Weeks Later

The first time William experienced loss

"Merls...I'm still sleepin'..." Will grumbled into the house phone.

"It's ten o'clock!"

Will groaned and buried his face further into the pillow. "I'm a teenager."

"But today's the first day of the robotics convention! Dad's going to take us to see the bot fights!"

"Mmmrg..." He scrubbed his face against his pillow and sat up on his knees. "Okay. Okay. I'm up. I'll be over in ten minutes."

"Yes! DAAAAD! WILL SAID HE'LL BE HERE IN TEN MINUTES!" He yawned and hung up the phone.

Will sat on the edge of his bed and yawned, then smacked his lips together while he surveyed his room—for no good reason other than to just wake himself up. He rubbed his eyes and stretched his arms out before he stood and got ready to meet up with Merlyn and Uncle Balinor. Finally, when he felt as if he pushed his luck with his time, he got up from his bed and went to go get changed. The familiar sight of a black sedan caught his attention from his bedroom window and he realized who the vehicle belonged too and who was home.

"Dad!" He exclaimed quietly and booked it out of his room.

His footsteps thundered down the staircase as he shouted loudly, not sure where his mom was at the moment. "Mom! Dad's back! Dad's back!" He used his momentum to spin off the banister with one hand and skidded to a stop a few feet from the front door, that was already open.
It was surreal. Like time had slowed down.

To hear his mom wail.

Will definitely recognized the car...but that was not his dad at the door.

"Dad?" The men at the door looked over at Will and he could see the words on their faces before they even said them.

"William...we're--"

Two Weeks Later

William is still fifteen and currently standing beside his mother at his father's funeral.

He can't cry.

Not with everyone staring at him. Not when his mom hasn't stopped crying for two weeks. His throat hurt from the lump that sat there. His knuckles screamed in pain from how tightly he clenched his fists. Merlyn stepped up quietly beside him and clutched at his suit sleeve, he blinked back the heat in his eyes and continued to listen to the priest.

Dad! I got my learners!

Woo-hoo! Time to get you behind the wheel then, my boy! When I get back next year I'll teach you everything I know about driving.

Promise?

I promise.
"You promised me..." He whispered as he watched the coffin be lowered into the ground.

The rest of the funeral passed by in a blur, Will was vaguely aware of the people who came up to him to give their condolences but he couldn't remember what he responded with. He saw his mom at one point speaking with fellow soldiers in uniform and it broke his heart when none of them was his dad. He wondered if he passed the mark of not being able to cry anymore after he held it in for so long he didn't know if the tears were even there.

The ground was still soft from the freshly laid dirt, Will sat down in front of his dad's tombstone, not caring if his suit was getting ruined. He shakily reached out and touched the cold surface and felt his lips tremble.

"Mom can't stop crying, dad...what do I do?" His voice was thick with unshed tears and he could hear his pulse in his ears. "What do I do?"

Small arms wrapped themselves around his neck tightly and he felt Merlyn lean into his back. He reached up and grabbed her forearm. "What do I do, Merls?" He choked on a sob, Merlyn responded by holding onto him tighter.

"I'm here..." Her soft voice was what broke the dam behind his tears and he started to sob loudly and freely.

This was the first time William experienced loss.

**Six Months Later**

*William is still fifteen and has taken a dark turn in his life.*

"FUCK YOU!" Will spat and threw a punch at the big guy in front of him.

"STAY DOWN, TURNER!" Randall, the biggest bully in Will's school, sneered as he threw another punch.
Will gave him a feral smile and shot up from the ground and threw his fist up against Randall's chin, that one move effectively knocked the kid out. All the boys that were surrounding them paused and stepped back in fear. He spat on him and turned to walk away but stopped at the sight of their Principal stomping towards them.

"IN MY OFFICE!"

Merlyn got to the middle school first, only because her elementary school is located up the hill from them, which meant they walk home together after school. The first week he started getting into fights, Merlyn was worried for his well-being, and for her worry, he snapped at her and said something along the lines of if you can't stop worrying about me then just leave me alone. Now, she knew better and just sat down beside him on the bench outside of the Principal's office and handed him the ice pack from her lunch kit.

Randall sneered at them from the opposite bench. "I can't believe you need a girl to take care of you, Turner. Pussy."

Merlyn blinked at him and held her hand out for the ice pack the moment Will launched himself across the hallway. Randall let out a high-pitched squeal and jumped up onto the bench. Will didn't get very far, not with his mom grabbing the back of his shirt and pulling him back.

"William Turner..." Her voice instilled fear in all three kids.

It was a long drive home--and that was saying something, considering they lived within walking distance of both schools. "A two-week suspension..." Her knuckles turned white as she gripped the steering wheel. "What on earth were you thinking? This is the eighth fight you've gotten into this month!"

"I get it, mom," he sighed in irritation and glared out of the window.

She glanced at him in the rearview mirror. "Do you? Because I've lost count of how many times we've had this conversation in this car."

"Thirty-three..." Merlyn said quietly but immediately pressed her lips together when Will whipped his head towards her.
That started his mom in on the thirty-four time they've had this conversation in the car.

Will couldn't remember when sleeping became a problem for him as he stared up at his ceiling. The painkillers he took earlier for his hands were wearing off and he felt the dull throb start to ache.

*Maybe getting suspended for two-weeks wouldn't be too bad,* he thought as he sat up and headed downstairs for a glass of water and probably another painkiller.

"Hunith...I don't know what else to do." He paused at the foot of the stairs. "Will's in so much pain and I don't know how to reach him." Warmth pooled behind his eyes as he quietly sat down on the step. "God...I don't know. I miss Tom so much..."

*She's crying again*...He rubbed his eyes and clenched his jaw.

"And now I feel like I'm losing Will."

He got up and snuck back to his room.

**1 Week Later**

"Will! Will!" Merlyn ran up the stairs to his room. "Get changed!"

He glanced at her from over the top of his comic book. "Why?"

"It's a surprise!" She spun around the room and started to throw random articles of his clothing at him.

"Hey!" He ducked past a t-shirt and caught a pair of his jeans. "Okay. Okay. Okay!" He said and got up from his bed. "I'll get changed. Go wait for me downstairs."

She beamed at him. "Kay!" Then turned and left his room.
Will took his time walking downstairs and nearly tripped over Merlyn when she ambushed him from around the banister. "Look!" Whatever it was she wanted him to see he couldn't because she was waving it too fast.

"Can you..." He grumbled and rolled his eyes as he snatched the pamphlet, containing the tickets, out of her hand. His eyes widened as he read the large text on the front.

"I remembered how much you wanted to go and dad took the weekend off to take us!" She said happily.

"You guys should hurry if you want to get a head start driving to Camelot." His mom's voice carried over to them from the living room.

CAMELOT'S 10TH ANNUAL CAR EXHIBITION

He did really want to go see this show...when his dad was still alive to take him. Will crushed the pamphlet in his fist and felt the dark and feral feeling inside of him snap.

"Hey! You're ruining--" Merlyn started to complain but the blazing look in his eyes stopped her short.

"Why did you even bother?" He growled.

Merlyn stammered out a response. "I...I thought...you know...it would make you happy. I thought...since Uncle Tom isn't here...I could share my dad with you."

"Happy?" He sneered. "You think this," he shook the paper in her face, "would make me happy? DAD'S NOT HERE TO GO WITH ME! I DON'T WANT TO SHARE YOUR DAD, STUPID!" In his anger, he ripped the pamphlet in half and another half and threw it on the ground at her feet. Merlyn's lip trembled as she frowned and blinked back her tears.

"OH MY GOD! WHY ARE YOU ALWAYS CRYING?" He was having a meltdown and didn't know how to stop it.
"William!" Gloria rushed out of the living at the sound of shouting. "What's going on?!"

"I'm...I'm..." Merlyn started to cry, "I'm sorry, Will."

"STOP SAYING YOU'RE SORRY!" He shouted and glared at her. "ALL YOU DO IS CRY. YOU'RE SO ANNOYING!"

"WILLIAM!" His mom shrieked and stared at him wide-eyed.

"But, Will..." He felt guilty and afraid when Uncle Balinor quietly picked up the torn pieces of the pamphlet and stepped behind Merlyn and placed his hands on her shoulders.

"We'll head home for now. We apologize for upsetting you." Uncle Balinor gave him a sad smile and gently guided Merlyn to the door.

His mom pointed upstairs. "To your room."

It took him an hour, sitting alone in his room, to finally calm down.

Another hour before all the mean words he said to Merlyn slammed into him like a truck and made him hate himself.

A soft knock at his door caught his attention. "May I come in?" His mom held up a steaming mug of hot chocolate as a peace offering.

He nodded and shifted over on his bed to make room for her. She handed him the mug and sat down beside him. Will stared down at the hot liquid and felt even worse from all the silence in his room.

"I'm sorry..."
Gloria smiled softly and ran her fingers through his hair. "Oh, my beautiful baby boy."

A few stray tears fell down his face. "I'm not a baby anymore," he grumbled.

She chuckled and nodded her head. "That much is true." A soft sigh left her lips. "What am I going to do with you?" He didn't know what to say and shrugged his shoulders. "Hey," she touched his cheek, "talk to me. Tell me how you feel."

"I'm just..." he squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again, "...so angry...all the time."

Gloria reached over and placed her hand on his. "Do you know what the hardest part of not having your dad around is?" He felt an ache in his chest as he shook his head. "It's all the times I forget he's no longer here." She let out a shaky breath. "I can remember the smell of his cologne, how he likes his coffee in the morning, all the lyrics to every song he has ever loved. But, some mornings I'll wake up and the first thing I'll think of is I need to remind Tom to pick up some milk on the way home and a second later I realize it's just me, in our room, alone and desperately trying to keep myself together."

Will wasn't sure when he started to cry or if he even stopped at one point, but hearing his mom's pain cut at him deeply. Gloria moved the mug to his nightstand and enveloped him in her arms. "And then I remember, if I'm in all this pain...how much pain is my son in?" He sobbed into her shoulder. "I know you're hurting. I wish you weren't, but you are and all I want to say is please don't shut me out. I'm here, Will. So is Aunty Hunith, Uncle Balinor, and Merlyn. We're all here and we're all trying to cope with our loss. Don't be angry by yourself."

"I was so mean to Merls." He sobbed some more. "I wasn't mad at her. I just..." A loud wail left his lips.

"Shhh," Gloria whispered softly into his hair, "it's alright."

"What if she hates me now?"

She chuckled. "How could Merlyn hate you? She absolutely adores you. Aunty Hunith invited us over for dinner...do you want to go?" She pulled back to look at him.

He sniffed and wiped his nose on his arm and nodded.
When Will walked into the Emrys household he was reminded of the first time he came here and met Merlyn when she was a baby. It was ironic that he didn't want to meet her back then and now here he was trying to think of how to phrase his apology so he could get his best friend back.

"Isn't it time to put that away, sweetheart?" Hunith placed the freshly baked lasagna on the table.

"I'm almost done, mom," Merlyn said with an intense look of concentration on her face. "I just need to tape this last piece on. Do you think they'll still take the tickets even though they're taped up, dad?"

Balinor glanced over at Will from the kitchen doorway and smiled. "They probably will, I don't see why they wouldn't. So you're not upset at Will for yelling at you?" Will held his breath and felt his palms get sweaty.

Merlyn placed the last piece of tape on the ticket. "It was my fault I made him mad..." The air rushed out of his lungs and he felt the guilt in his stomach seize up. "I'm always crying and making things harder for him--"

"You big baby." Will walked into the kitchen and rolled his eyes as he gently hit her on the head with the box of chocolates he got her as an apology. "Don't apologize for being you."

"Will!" She exclaimed and got up to hug him but hesitated.

He rolled his eyes again and opened his arms. "Come here." She grinned and wrapped her arms around him tightly. "I'm sorry, Merls..." he whispered in her ear and squeezed her tightly.

"I forgive you."

The adults in the room shared a look and carried on with dinner.
1 Year Later

William is now sixteen and Merlyn is about to enter Grade. 7

The large cloud of smoke was eerily calming as Will watched it fade away in the sky.

"Smoking will give you lung cancer, kid." Will choked on his spit and quickly dropped the cigarette and crushed it with his sneaker.

"Uncle.." he coughed and cleared his throat, "Uncle Balinor, what're you..."

Balinor took a seat beside him on the electric box in the alleyway of the Emrys household, the perfect hiding spot for anyone looking to avoid prying eyes, and took a cigarette out of the box and put it to his lips. "You got a light?" Will blinked and slowly took out his lighter and handed it to Balinor. He took a long pull and exhaled deeply into the cool night air. "Damn, I forgot how great this feels."

"Uh..." He wasn't sure if he was going to get a lecture or if he should take another one out for himself.

"I quit smoking years ago, but it's like riding a bike." Balinor took another pull.

Will decided to take his chances and lit another cigarette for himself. "Why'd you quit?"

Balinor chuckled and flicked the ashes to the ground. "Hunith doesn't date smokers. Let alone marry one." He turned to look at Will. "Do you know how hard it is to quit cold turkey and hope to God no other guy asks out your future wife before you can?" Will laughed and shook his head. "It's damn hard I'll tell you that." He gently shook the cigarette in his hand. "Where'd you get the smokes from?"

"Oh uh..." Will rubbed the back of his neck. "One of the upperclassmen is already eighteen and bought them."

"Ah..." Balinor nodded and sat back quietly.
Will cleared his throat. "You're...not going to tell mom...are you?"

He smirked and gave Will a sideways look. "I won't rat on you if you don't rat on me." He winked and took another pull. Will laughed and nodded his head. "How've you been holding up, kiddo?" Will's amusement faded as he sat back on the box.

"I'm fine." That was always his reply.

"I heard your ma saying something about your grades dropping. Need a tutor?" Balinor flicked more ashes to the ground.

Will clenched his jaw. "No. I don't need a tutor."

"I figured. You have always been a smart kid, got that from your mom. Definitely didn't get that from Tom that's for sure." Balinor chuckled fondly.

"Don't talk about dad that way." Will snapped.

Balinor gave him a small smile. "You're right. I shouldn't. But that's what best friends do, they talk shit about each other...even when that bastard was supposed to come back."

The sad look on Uncle Balinor's face was all Will needed to see for his anger to disappear. "You...never talked about it..."

"Tom and I grew up together. We used to get into so much trouble. He'd come up with these elaborate plans for these legendary pranks, and I would be the one to make those plans plausible."

_Grief took on many shapes_, Will thought as he listened to Uncle Balinor talk.

It caught him off guard when Uncle Balinor turned to look at him with sad eyes. "I'm sorry for how much time I got to spend with him and how little of your dad you got to know. I know how much you loved him and how much he loved you."
He swallowed the lump in his throat. "It's--"

"--but if you'd be willing..." He placed his hand on top of Will's head, the same way his dad used to. "I would be honored to take up Tom's mantle."

"N--I mean...you don't..." Will stumbled through his words as he tried to understand what was happening.

Balinor chuckled and dropped the finished cigarette onto the gravel and crushed it under his boot. "Think about it." He stood and pocketed the box of cigarettes; Will opened his mouth to protest but he got cut off. "These are cancer-causing monstrosities. I hope it doesn't become a habit."

"Don't worry. Merls doesn't know I smoke. I'm trying to be a good role model for her." Will said with reluctance and mentally said goodbye to his box of cigarettes.

"Trying?" Balinor stretched his arms over his head and then placed one hand back on Will's head. "I've always known you'd be the best role model for my baby bird."

Will was left speechless.

Balinor smirked and headed back into the house.

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2 Years Later

William is about to graduate from high school. Merlyn has just entered middle school.

"William?" His mom stood in his doorway.

He looked up from his project that was sprawled out on his room floor and half smiled. "Hey ma, what's up?"
"Hi, Aunty Gloria!" Merlyn half turned and waved over her shoulder.

Gloria smiled. "Hi, Merlyn. May I come in?" He nodded and she took a seat on the floor across from him and diagonal from Merlyn. Gloria took the opened envelop out from her back pocket and held it in front of her. Will's smile disappeared and he waited for the lecture to start. "Are you planning on enlisting?" Her voice was soft and there wasn't any anger behind it.

"Yeah.." He said and put his hot glue gun down. Merlyn quietly stared down at her fingers to give them their privacy.

Gloria nodded and let out a shaky sigh. "I see."

Will cautioned a look at her. "You upset with me, ma?"

There's a look that Will hated when he saw it on mom's face. It hurt worse than the disappointed look she used to give him when he got into fights in middle school. It was a mixture of sadness hidden behind a strong facade, it was her way of saying that she loves him...but that his choice broke her heart.

"Whatever you choose...I will always be proud of you." Was her response and she got up and left his room.

Merlyn stared after her and then turned back to Will. "Do you really--"

"We're not going to talk about this again, Merls." He went back to gluing the cardboard pieces together.

"But--" She frowned and bit her lip when Will gave her a stern look.

After that encounter, they never spoke of that letter again. Will thought about telling his mom that it was just something he was considering and that it wasn't a for sure plan yet, but he couldn't get her hopes up like that. He knew she would be upset but it still didn't stop him when he submitted that application form.
"So I heard you plan on enlisting?" Balinor handed him a screwdriver.

Will blew out a breath and used the screwdriver to tighten a bolt on his beat-up dirt bike. "Plan on lecturing me too, pops?" Balinor shrugged and stroked his beard, that had strands of white mixed in with the dark brown hair.

"I was thinking you'd consider going to Albion University. Considering how you have the marks for it."

He raised one eyebrow. "Your alma mater? For what?"

"To become an engineer like me...or whatever designate you want," he added the last part while cracking open a can of beer. "I always thought you'd--"

"Be a good man like my dad was." Will rolled his eyes and sat down on a wooden crate. "I know it's selfish of me to do this to Ma."

Balinor smiled and shook his head. "No, you're allowed to be selfish, I just...I always thought you'd live a longer life than he did." He walked past Will and placed his hand on his head. "Think about it, kiddo."

1 Week Later

"You ready, Merls?" Will asked as he fit the worn-out helmet on her head.

She nodded and gave him a thumbs up. "Good to go!"

"Wicked." He grinned and mounted the dirt bike. He had a frustrating time getting the bike to start and Merlyn leaned over his shoulder.

"Maybe dad was right..." she muttered under her breath. He grunted and shrugged her off. "I'm just saying...didn't dad say this bike won't be ready to ride just yet?"
"I finished tuning up the engine with him. This bike is good enough for a quick test run." As if to prove his point, the engine roared to life on his last kick-start. Will looked over his shoulder to give her a smug look. Merlyn rolled her eyes and settled herself on the bike. "Let's see what my baby can do!" He pulled in the clutch and moved the gear shift into first, the bike lurched forward and started to move on the dirt path.

"This is awesome!" Merlyn cried as they began to pick up more speed.

Will grinned from behind his helmet. "It can go faster!" He shifted through each gear faster and faster.

"Uh...Will?" Merlyn called out. "I think..."

The loud popping noise made both their hearts drop into their stomachs. Will immediately tried to pull the brakes but they wouldn't respond, next, he tried to drop into a lower gear but the gear shift was jammed. The front wheel started to pull and wobble and it took all his strength to keep it under his control.

"WILL!" Merlyn screamed.

He looked up just in time to see the pothole in the dirt road and swerved to avoid it.

Unfortunately, he overcompensated and sent the both of them flying into a nearby ditch. For a moment his mind blacked out, a defense mechanism that kicked in at the most impromptu moment. He blinked and felt his ears ringing, it took him a moment to recollect himself and remember the situation he was in. Immediately, his eyes darted around and landed on Merlyn's body, her unmoving body and the helmet cracked in two beside her head...

"Merlyn!" He gasped and pushed himself up with his arms. He tried to stand but let out a loud cry of pain when he tried to move his right leg. The kickstand of the bike went clean through his calf and he nearly threw up at the sight of it. It took a lot of strength and maneuvering but he managed to pull the bike over enough so he could reach her body. "Merls," he gasped and touched her face, "hey, Merls, wake up." He lightly hit her cheek. "Open your eyes."

He placed his hand behind her neck and panicked when he pulled away and saw blood. Will scrambled all over his body to find his cell phone and thought that someone must be watching over
him when the phone turned up unscathed and he was able to make an emergency call.

Will and Merlyn both ended up getting air-lifted to Albion Medical Center due to the severity of their injuries. It turned out that the helmet she was wearing when it broke created a deep laceration at the back of her neck and might have possibly done something to her spine. That was all Will managed to hear before they wheeled him into surgery to get the kickstand removed from his leg.

Before the anesthesia took over...he couldn't help but let his guilt consume him.

_Take me instead...please...don't take Merlyn._

The doctor said it would take a month at a minimum for his calf to heal, another month after that for it to go back to fully functioning. Will wasn't sure what was worse, knowing he'll be benched for part of the basketball season or seeing his mom look at him as if she's losing dad all over again. Obviously, he knew which was the correct answer.

"My baby," she whimpered and hugged him closer.

"How's Merlyn?" He choked out and sat up on the hospital bed. "Where is she? Can I go see her?" He tried to move but winced in pain.

"Take it easy, William." Gloria held him down. "Merlyn's still in surgery. No one is allowed into the surgical suite."

Tears pooled in his eyes. "Is she? Will she..."

Gloria touched his cheek. "The doctors said the cut was deep but it wasn't deep enough to hurt her spine. They're just going to clean out the wound to make sure there's no shrapnel from the helmet that got in and they'll stitch her right up."

"William?" Hunith and Balinor walked into his room.

"Uncle Balinor," he tried to sit up again, "Aunty Hunith," he struggled against his mom, "I'm sorry. This was all my--" Hunith wrapped her arms around him, followed by Balinor.
"We're so glad you're okay," Hunith cried.

Balinor put his hand on his head. "Thought we'd lost you there, my boy."

"I'm sorry..." he whispered as more tears fell. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

3 Days Later

William is now able to maneuver himself out of the hospital bed but still needed a wheelchair to get around.

"William, are you sure you won't like some help getting to Merlyn's room?" Gloria hovered towards him but he shook his head.

"Nah, I'm good. Let's go, ma. I want to be there when she wakes up." He released the locks on the wheels with ease and started to push himself forward.

It helped that her room was on the same floor as his and that the medical team decided not to transfer her over to the Children's Hospital. Will realized something in his three days cooped up in that dull room...he didn't want to put his family through any of this ever again. He promised himself that the moment they got back to Ealdor he's going to rip that letter up and put it through the shredder.

"Hey, baby bird. Look who's here to see you." Balinor pointed to the door and helped Merlyn shift her head so the stitches didn't pull.

Merlyn smiled as wide as she could. "Hi...Will..." her voice dry and weak. The adults quietly left the room to give them some privacy.

"I'm so sorry, Merls." Will rolled himself up to the side of her bed and pushed himself up onto his arms and his one good leg. "I swear I didn't mean for you to get hurt." He gently sat down on the bed so he didn't disturb her. "It was irresponsible and I shouldn't have risked your life like that--"
She reached out and touched his hand. "I forgive you."

He choked on a sob and covered his mouth. "Merls..."

"You big baby..." she teased and smiled at him.

He swiped at his eyes and laughed. "Hey, guess what?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm going to stay." He said and squeezed her hand.

Merlyn perked up. "Really?!"

He nodded. "Yeah. I'm not going to put us through this ever again."

2 Years Later

*The second time William experienced loss.*

"I'm sorry...but the cancer has progressed too far for us to operate."

Will felt himself go cold. He was vaguely aware of Aunty Hunith's wail echoing through the room, his Ma falling back against the wall with her hands over her mouth to cover her sob, and Merlyn falling to her knees in shock.

"What about a lung transplant?" Gaius, Aunty Hunith's older brother and Uncle Balnor's best friend who lives in Albion City, asked.
"As one doctor to another...the chances of a donor appearing within the next little while to save Mr. Emrys's life is slim."

Will's chest ached; he knelt down beside Merlyn and placed his hand on her shoulder and gave it a squeeze. He saw the tears fall from her eyes but no sound left her lips.

"Doc...please..." Will said, "he's...he's all we have."

As those words left his lips, so did Merlyn's sob. The doctor gave him a sad look that said *I'm sorry but there's nothing else*. It took everyone in the room off guard when the first wail escaped Merlyn.

And the ones after that broke their hearts more.

**2 Weeks Later**

"Hey, Merls," Will said as he walked into her room and took a seat on her bed.

"Hey..." Her voice was soft and her figure looked even smaller as she sat in front of her window and stared out at the rain.

"How're you holding up?" He asked.

She shrugged and didn't look at him. "I'm fine...I guess."

"Your mom said you haven't been eating..." And he could see it, there was a different kind of frailness to her that he has never seen before.

"Did she also tell you that she hasn't been sleeping?" Was her bitter response.

Will nodded and sighed. "I know how hard this is..."
She turned her head to glare at him. "Do you? Do you know how hard it is to watch your dad slowly die in front of you and there's nothing you can do to stop it?"

"No. But I do know what it's like to lose a father," he said calmly.

Tears started to pool in her eyes. "Sorry...I...I didn't..."

He walked over and sat on the other side of the window seat by her legs, he gave her ankle a squeeze. "Talk to me, Merls."

Her lips trembled, a shaky breath escaped her, and she looked up at him lost and broken. "I feel like I'm drowning...and no matter how hard I kick, no matter how much I fight...I'm losing..."

Will shifted on the seat and opened his arms. "Come here." She dove right into his arms and started to cry.

"It's not fair, Will!" She screamed into his chest. "DAD DID NOTHING WRONG!" She grabbed fistfuls of his shirt. "WHY IS HE BEING PUNISHED!"

He gently stroked her hair and let her scream out her frustrations and misery.

Hospitals in the dark of night were surreal. Different alarms go off and Will has no idea what any of them are for and hoped for the person on the other end to be okay. His body felt exhausted and frozen as he sat in the uncomfortable bedside chair. Merlyn has finally fallen asleep while holding Uncle Balinor's hand; his mom, Aunty Hunith, and Gaius went to the hospital cafeteria to get some coffee.

"Kid?" Balinor's raspy voice startled him.

"Uncle Balinor..." Will whispered and moved to the side of the bed.

"Long time no see...how long...have I been out?" It frightened him to see how thin and


"I got in a few days ago. Aunty Hunith said you collapsed a week ago," he spoke quietly.

Balinor smiled, his nasal prongs (that were providing him with extra oxygen) shifted slightly. "How's AlbionU treating you? Is becoming an...engineer...all you thought it would...be?"

His eyes glossed over as he smiled. "You're a damn liar, you know that, Uncle Balinor? These three years have been fucking hell."

A devilish grin appeared on his face, and it reminded Will of how the man used to look when he was healthy. "You'll thank me later...when you can...afford a down payment...for that new bike..."

"You took me on my first proper ride when my leg healed." Will pressed his lips together but his tears fell as he reminisced about the past.

"I couldn't...have you...scared...can I?" He said.

Will glanced down at Merlyn. "I finally get it now..." He looked back at Balinor. "It's not fair how much time I got to spend with you...how much you've shown me...and Merlyn...she'll..." He coughed and wiped his eyes.

Balinor shakily reached up with his other hand and placed it on top of Will's head. "She'll have you."

It burned. The tears. The lump in his throat. The agony in his heart.

"Please...don't leave us."

Three Days Later

William is standing off to the side as Merlyn and Hunith are saying their last goodbyes.
"My love..." Balinor shakily stroked his hand down Hunith's cheek.

"I love you," Hunith said in a breathless voice. "I will always, always love you."

Balinor smiled. "Thank...you...for giving...me...your love." Hunith let out a sob. "A...beautiful fam...family....our Merlyn...."

"DAD!" Merlyn wailed and threw herself on to him. "DON'T GO!"

"Merlyn...everything will...be okay..." It hurt to watch Uncle Balinor struggle this hard to speak. Will wanted to look away but he couldn't.

Merlyn shook her head and sobbed. "NO, IT WON'T! YOU'RE DYING! IT'S NOT FAIR!"

"What will we do without you?" Hunith brushed her fingers through his hair.

"...live..." He worked hard to swallow.

"Don't leave...please don't leave...stay..." Merlyn begged and cried.

Balinor placed his hand on her head. "My...baby bird...you will...move...on from...this." Merlyn shook her head and cried harder. "Live...a great...life...and tell me...all the...stories." Will clenched his jaw and swiped at his eyes while holding his mom to his chest.

"Gaius...old friend..."

"You could not have waited, could you? So you could be my best man?" Gaius wiped his eyes on his sleeve.

Balinor smiled. "Save me...a seat...at your wedding. I want...head table..."
Gaius swallowed painfully and nodded his head. "Alright."

"Will..." Balinor looked over at him.

He wiped his eyes and walked over to the bedside. "Yeah, pops?"

"I'll tell Tom...what a great...great man...you've become."

Will leaned over the bed to hug him. "And I promise you'll have nothing to worry about here. I'll look after Merlyn and Aunty Hunith and Ma."

Balinor smiled and touched the top of Will's head one last time.

1 Year Later

William is kneeling in front of Balinor's tombstone, located beside his father's

The piece of paper, a photocopied version of his Engineering degree, in his hand, felt heavier than anything he has ever held. He half-smiled and placed it down in front of the grave, along with a new box of cigarettes and his old lighter.

"Thanks, Uncle Balinor...for everything." He touched the cool stone. "I'll take it from here."
Well...what can I say?

I hit a bit of a rough patch a while back. Had some losses. I graduate in a month and a few days ago I had a mental breakdown about job prospects.

BUT, with all that said, I've managed to pick up the pieces. A lot of it had to do with all you wonderful readers leaving comments and asking for the next chapter. Good things happen to those who are patient, that's what I've learned these past few weeks. I just did one interview at one hospital site and I have one this Friday at another site. Things are looking way up.

I don't plan on leaving you guys hanging, I promise. I know it sucks how long it takes me to update. But I'm hoping that with graduation looming around the corner and possible job offers to come in the next little bit, once April's storm passes I'll have all the time in the world to finish Merlyn and Arthur's story.

And I will finish their story. You have my promise for that as well.

I love all you guys who have stayed and waited so patiently for me.

I sincerely thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

-SS

Will sat quietly beside Merlyn as she blew her nose and sniffed. He leaned back against her bed and pulled one knee into his chest. Merlyn felt hollowed out after crying so hard like there was nothing left inside her that ached.

He broke the silence first.

"Do you want me to pick up the pieces...or can you do it?"

Merlyn wiped her eyes and felt how swollen they were. "It hurts. I hate it. I hate this. I hate everything. I hate...him." The last confession left a bad taste in her mouth, and she wasn't sure if it
was because she didn't mean it or if she did mean it.

"It's because she's only eighteen," he said and looked up at her ceiling.

The sudden declaration confused her, her mind needed a second to register what his words meant. But she started to protest once she realized who he was talking about.

"Hang--"

Will smiled and held his hand up slightly. "She's wonderful, kind, caring...her smile makes everything better." He sighed, his smile still in place, and ran his hands through his hair. "Ma loves her." A warm look appeared on his face. "I...love her." Merlyn's heart jumped for joy in her chest at the sound of those words, but the reality of Will's situation crashed into her like a truck.

"Then why?" She asked. How could you love someone and still leave them? How can love make you put someone through all this kind of pain? Then, she wondered if she was projecting herself onto Will.

"She reminded me of you." Merlyn's brows furrowed together and her lips turned down slightly. "Because you're both still so young."

Her expression didn't change, except maybe her frown deepened. "Uhm...how old do you think you are?"

He chuckled and shook his head in resignation. "You're right. But, I've still lived more of my life than you guys have and still have yet to. That very life you'll both be starting once you graduate in a couple more months." He stretched one side of his neck. "Remember that night of your birthday?"

There was a lot about that night that she remembered and they all involved Arthur, the hollowed out feeling in her chest caved in on itself. Merlyn nodded her head and waited for him to continue.

"Well, Freya drank so much that she ended up blacking out." Will grimaced slightly. "When I was driving her home--scared shitless, mind you--said my goodbyes and everything the closer I got to her house."
"Pft..." A laugh managed to find its way out of her.

"She told me she loved me..." Merlyn's breath caught in her throat. "Mind you," he tilted his head the other way, "she probably wasn't even aware she said it. But...me...Merls, can you believe that?"

Merlyn sniffed and wiped her nose. "You say that as if you're hard to love." Her voice cracked in random places as she tried to get her normal volume back.

He smiled and reached over to place his hand on her head. "Thanks, kiddo." She waited for him to continue his story. He sighed and cleared his throat. "Her dad found out about us...well..." Will clicked his tongue against his teeth, "apparently he knew the whole time. Freya doesn't keep secrets from her parents." He looked over at her. "Do you know what her dad said to me after I put her in bed?" She waited for him to continue. "He told me that of anyone he wants his daughter to be with...it'd be me."

She gasped and gave his arm a squeeze. "Will! That's great!"

"Yeah.." he smiled ruefully, "but he also said that, like any parent, he's worried about her future and what being with me meant."

Her expression dropped. "What do you mean 'worried about her future?' You'd give Freya a great future!"

"Glad I can always count on you to be on my side, Merls," he chuckled and shook his head. "But that wasn't his point. The point he was trying to make was that he didn't want his daughter growing up faster than she needed to--and I understand where he's coming from."

"How?"

Will ruffled her hair and smiled. "Because I have you and your future will always mean the world to me."

That did it.
"Will," she breathed and started to sniff and wiped her fresh tears away.

"You big baby," he whispered and smiled softly.

*Please, Gaius...I just want to talk to her!*

Merlyn froze at the sound of Arthur's voice coming from downstairs and felt a frisson of fear run down her spine. She wasn't ready to confront him or hear what he has to say, but something clicked in that moment. She turned toward Will and saw that familiar look on his face, the one that screamed *murder* and *I want his head*.

Will shot to his feet and Merlyn scrambled to grab him. "Will, don't--" He didn't listen to her and pushed her back onto her bed with one hand and disappeared out of her door.

Arthur ducked past Gaius and headed for the stairs. It happened in the blink of an eye, one moment he was going up the stairs and the next moment he felt himself get grabbed by the neck and *hauled* out of the apartment. Will dragged him down the porch steps with one hand and threw him with tremendous force.

Arthur stumbled and fell to the pavement, he re-orientated himself and got back up to his feet. "Will, please just--"

"*Leave.*" He snarled, both his hands clenched tightly into fists.

"Just let me see--"

Will punched him in the face.

Arthur cringed at the copper taste of blood from the cut on the side of his lip and glared at Will. If the man wouldn't let him through then he'll just have to force his way through. He charged at
Will and the two of them went at it.

Will ducked Arthur's punch and landed one in his gut.

"Fuck!" Arthur coughed and stumbled back a few steps. His next hit managed to catch Will in the eye and the man lost his footing.

"Will!" Merlyn gasped and leaped off the porch.

Arthur looked up and headed for her. "Merlyn." Will blocked his advance and shoved him back a couple of feet. "Get out of my way, Will!"

"I said leave!" Will said and pushed him back once more.

"Just let me talk to Merlyn!" Arthur was growing more frustrated. He tried to look at her but Will stepped in front of him again.

Will seized him by the front of his shirt and slammed him into the side of the apartment. "And tell her what?" He asked in a dark voice. "I expected more from you, kid." His voice dropped in volume but the imminent threat was still there. "You need to get the fuck out of here before I decide to do something we'll both regret."

He leveled him with a stare. "Not until I speak with Merlyn--"

With great strength turned and threw Arthur once again. This time Arthur couldn't quite catch himself and he slid and scraped his palms on the pavement.

"Enough!" Merlyn cried out and pulled on Will's arm. "Stop it! Both of you!"

Will pulled her hands off of him, not taking his eyes off of Arthur. "Stay out of this, Merlyn. Go back inside."

"No!" She said and tugged on him again.
Arthur pushed himself off the ground and took this chance. "Merlyn, please, can we just talk-"

She shot him a deadly glare. "There's nothing to talk about!"

He tried to take a step toward her, but that only made her back up and Will tried to lunge for him again. "Please....I--"

"I DON'T WANT TO HEAR ANY OF IT!" She screamed and moved so she was in front of Will. "I don't care what you have to say. I don't care if there's an explanation for what happened. JUST LEAVE ME ALONE!" Her body shook with rage and she searched behind her with one hand for something to hold. Her fingers latched onto Will's hand tightly, as if she'd never find solid ground again.

"Merlyn..." He felt like he was suffocating. That all of this was some sick and twisted nightmare he'll eventually wake up from. But the anguish on her face was too real...too raw. It ripped and tore at him and burned him alive.

Her next, and last, words to him struck him to the ground.

"Just stay away from me."

Desolate.

If Arthur had to pick a word to encompass him then that would be it. He sat on the edge of his bed and watched as the light of day slowly faded to night. His mind was like a TV filled with static, no matter what came to mind next, he couldn't focus on a clear thought. The silence in his room was deafening and everything felt wrong and out of place. He has finally managed to calm down and couldn't find it within himself to care about the state of his room. It was almost like he was caged inside his mind like a feral beast, with no way out and the cage kept getting smaller.

The lamp shattered to pieces when he threw it against the opposite wall, left a pretty impressive dent in it too. All the random knick knacks on his desk were violently swept to the floor.
He nearly broke the picture frame containing the jersey Merlyn had made for him and that was when
he snapped out of his rage.

"Whatever you have to say, Morgana...I deserve it." He didn't bother turning to look at his
doorway, he expected her eventually and...quite frankly...he wanted her to say whatever it was she
planned to say because he wanted to be punished. No, deserved to be punished.

"What the hell were you thinking, Arthur?" She stepped into his room and rounded on him
with her hands on her hips and a scowl on her face. He opened and closed his mouth before he
settled with running his hands through his hair.

Morgana blinked and took a step back when she saw how small Arthur looked; she hasn't
seen him like this since..."Did you want to get back together with Mithian?" The softness of her
voice tore at him. As if the guilty inside of him needed more gasoline to burn.

He pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes and sighed. "No...Christ...is that what
everyone thinks?"

"It's what it looked like," she said and sat in his desk chair and crossed her arms.

He tugged at his hair and then looked up at her with a serious expression. "I don't want to get
back together with Mithian. Never have. Never will." The side of his lip was swollen, but at least the
bleeding stopped and the bruise was forming slowly.

She pointed to the same spot on her lip. "You should at least ice it."

"It's fine." He waved it off. "I deserved it."

"I can't argue with you there," she agreed and narrowed her eyes at him. "Why were you so
nice to Mithian? Why did you treat her as if nothing happened? Like that girl didn't just up and
abandon you. As if Merlyn didn't even cross your mind--did Merlyn even cross your mind?
Honestly--"

Something inside of him snapped at the mention of Merlyn.
"I was thinking of her the whole fucking time!" He said with blazing eyes.

Morgana scoffed and rolled her eyes. "Yeah, obviously she missed that. What were you even thinking? Putting her through all of that pain?"

That cage in his mind grew smaller and he snapped. "I WAS THINKING ABOUT HOW ANGRY I WAS!" Morgana blinked and sat back in the chair and watched him. "AND HOW I DIDN'T WANT TO BE ANGRY ANYMORE!" He slammed his fist down on his nightstand and the drawers rattled under the pressure. Morgana didn't even flinch and waited.

"You think I wanted to be nice to Mithian?" He laughed darkly. "You didn't think it crossed my mind to let all those years of anger and self-hatred out onto her? Fuck, when I first saw her I remembered how fucking depressed I was when she left me..." He deflated and hunched over some more. "I remembered how everything felt when she left me. How much I hated her and myself. I started asking myself why did she leave me? Was it because of who I am? What about me was not good enough for her to stay? All those thoughts came back and I thought they were going to kill me."

Her expression softened again as she leaned against her hand. He sighed and scrubbed his hands over his face. "Then I thought about Merlyn, and how everything has changed because of her. For the first time since I've been with her, I realized that I didn't have to be angry anymore because I could finally put Mithian behind me in my past and move forward with Merlyn beside me."

Arthur looked over at Morgana. "I didn't realize I was fucking up with her until it was too late...and I'm having a meltdown trying to figure out how I can get her back."

"You idiot," she said quietly and rolled her eyes, "what is with you and all that goodness?"

"What?" He scoffed. "You want me to be like you? Suspect everyone and turn them away?" He winced at how rude those words sounded.

Morgana's lips twitched and she gave him an overly enthusiastic smile. "Let's remember, dear brother, who the single and heartbroken person in the room is."

"I deserved that," he muttered under his breath.
She huffed and shook her head. "It's a wonder how Merlyn puts up with you." He glared at her but it had no effect and she continued. "But...I guess I shouldn't make a jab at your goodness, Golden Boy Pendragon," she rolled her eyes and smirked, "you have quite the reputation, that's for sure."

"I hate that nickname," he grumbled. "Why are you even bringing it up?"

"I'm bringing it up because I want you to think about why you get called that. Everyone likes you, Arthur. In more ways than I would care to admit." She laughed quietly at her own joke.

"What does everyone liking me got to do with any of this?"

She rolled her eyes and stared him down with an unimpressed look. "You can't go around being the same kind of nice you are to Merlyn with everyone else. You have to show her that even if there's a whole sea of people waiting for you...the only person you're waiting for is her."

It made sense.

Arthur hated how it made sense.

"Does Leon spout this poetry to you?" He said while pinching the skin between his brows.

Morgana leaned back and smirked. "All the time. In bed, while I"m--"

His other hand shot out. "ENOUGH! STOP!"

She laughed and gave him an amused look. "Besides, what did I tell you about Merlyn and Mithian?"

"...that Merlyn would never leave me behind."

"You guys will figure things out. You wouldn't be Merlyn and Arthur if you guys didn't." Her lips twitched as she paused with her hand on her chin, she looked over at him and gave him a
very rare--not often shown on Morgana's face--sincere look. "I know you're both hurting from this, but don't make it harder on either one of you, okay?"

His chest ached as he frowned at her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You'll find out at school on Monday."

After that, Morgana sat quietly in his room with him and kept him company. The Pendragon siblings had a hard time with their emotions, not that either of them would admit that out loud, and only they knew how to comfort one another when all else seemed lost. Arthur was glad to have her there to keep the dark feelings from consuming him and to know that he was not alone.

Morgana, for all her bravado, hated seeing Arthur hurt.

Which was why when the first tear slid down his cheek, she went and sat down beside him on his bed and held his hand without saying a single word.

"Do you plan on rotting the entire day away again?" Will crossed his arms and leaned against the doorframe.

The Merlyn-shaped mass of blankets shifted in response. If it was any other circumstance that had her in this position Will would find it amusing to go over and yank all the blankets off of her, but he knew better than to do that at this very moment. He walked over and sat down on the edge of the bed and made an educated guess on where her head was located and placed his hand over top of it.

"Come on," he said gently, "time to get out of bed." Again, the Merlyn-shaped mass shifted side to side and tried to escape his hand. "At least consider a shower. Rotting in your own filth will only make yourself feel worse. Take a hot shower and let it burn everything away. I even brought over one of my large hoodies for you to wear so you don't get cold."

He heard soft sounds of sniffling. "...can..." more sniffing, "...can you blow dry my hair?"

He chuckled and the edges of his eyes crinkled. "Yeah, kiddo, I'll even paint your nails." The
mass shifted closer to the edge of her bed. "Time to get up."

Admittedly, the hot water felt wonderful as it warmed her from the outside in. Merlyn closed her eyes and let everything wash away from her, the tears that stained her cheeks, the congestion in her nose and chest from all the crying, and--temporarily--the pain of leaving Arthur.

"Alone is better," she whispered quietly to herself as she continued to scrub her hair and worked up a lather. "I've been here before. I can live here again." Her lips trembled and she quickly ducked under the hot water and looked downwards while taking deep breaths.

This was it.

The need to run away from everything and everyone grew. The ache in her chest was agonizing and the thought of Arthur was like igniting the edges of her wound. She focused her emotions into scrubbing her body, her skin turning pink and red in some areas. Maybe if she scrubbed hard enough she'll come out of this shower a new person that's no longer hurting. A new person who doesn't remember the pain of leaving someone she thought she lo--

"You'll be fine. Just fine. Move on from this, Merlyn." She swallowed past the lump in her throat and turned the heat of the water up.

Eventually, she had to end her shower. One, because she didn't want Uncle Gaius or Aunty Alice to not have any hot water when they showered, and two, because she was starting to feel lightheaded from the heat. She dried herself off and bundled her hair up in her towel once she changed into a fresh set of clothes. Will's scent on his hoodie made her feel safe and sad all over again, because if she wasn't lying to herself--which she is--she wanted someone else's hoodie more.

"Feel better?" Will asked once she stepped back into her room.

Merlyn blinked a few times and frowned. "Can I have a hug?" Will opened his arms without a word and hugged her tightly to his chest.

"...was...was this how you felt...when Evy..." Merlyn trailed off and sniffed.

Will finished her sentence for her. "When Evy broke up with me?" She nodded against his chest. He chuckled and sighed a moment after. "Man, I haven't thought about her in a long
"She was your first love."

A fond look appeared on Will's face as he reminisced. "Yeah...she was. Sixteen year old me was so in love with her...well," he let out a sharp laugh, "as in love as a sixteen-year-old guy could be."

"You cried when she broke up with you." He paused and stared down at the top of her head. "It was the only other time I saw you cry."

"Love does that to you," he said and patted her head softly.

Merlyn gripped his shirt tighter. "Why?"

"Hmm?"

She sat back on her bed and crossed her legs. "Why did she leave you? Why did you let her leave?"

A knowing look crossed his face. "Right, I never told you, did I?" She shook her head. "Well, I mean...we were so young," He paused and tried to think his words out carefully. "At one point, I wasn't what she wanted in her life anymore."

"That's not fair though!"

He exhaled through his nose. "It's not about fair or unfair, kiddo. It's about doing what's best for you. You can't expect to force someone to stay with you solely out of obligation. Now, that would be unfair."

"But you were so angry.."

"Of course I was," he rubbed the back of his neck, "I was such an angry kid back then. But,
looking back on it, I get why she left me. She wanted someone to dote on her all the time, that was something I couldn't do or give her."

Merlyn swiped at her eyes. "Was it because of me?"

"No." He said firmly. "It was never because of you. Get that out of your head." She sniffed and nodded, her fingers knotted themselves together. "Here," he gestured for her to turn around with her hair dryer, "move the towel."

_I'm grateful._ Merlyn closed her eyes and let the warm air blow around her as Will moved the dryer and brush through her hair. _I'm grateful to have you in my life._ A single stray tear slid down her cheek as she pulled her knees to her chest.

"You started smoking when she broke up with you." Will's hand briefly paused in her hair before he continued to dry it.

"Funny enough...I'm not even surprised you know about that." A small smile played at the edges of his lips.

Merlyn huffed quietly. "You thought you were so stealthy."

"What gave me away?"

Her fingers ran along the edge of the worn out hoodie until she found the small hole she was looking for. "Knew it from the moment you lent me this back then. Leave it to you to horde your old hoodies."

"Damn, you know, that's another reason why I quit smoking--kept ruining my clothes." Will tugged gently on the hole and then went back to combing his fingers through her hair. "Why bring that up from the past?"

Her breathing started to become uneven. "I don't know how to cope...I'm scared, Will."

He turned the hair dryer off, set it down beside him, and hugged her from behind. "You're
not alone, okay, kiddo? I'm here. I'll always be here."

She trembled and shook in his arms but managed to nod.

"Are you sure you don't wish to stay home, Merlyn?" Uncle Gaius set a warm bowl of oatmeal in front of her.

She shook her head and picked up her spoon. "No..I don't have a reason to not go to school."

"Sometimes," Aunty Alice began as she brushed a strand of Merlyn's hair behind her ear, "it's good to just take a mental health day."

Her breath came out shaky as she nodded. "I'll remember that when I need one."

Both adults shared a quiet look but respected her decision. Once she finished breakfast she placed her bowl in the sink and went upstairs to get changed. Her mind felt fuzzy as she changed into her clothes for the day, a part of her was terrified of going to school and seeing Arthur. What if he made another scene? She absolutely did not want to cry in front of the student population--more importantly, not in front of their friends--which started her in on another thought.

"What if they're not my friends anymore?" She sat down on her bed at that sudden realization. They were Arthur's friends to begin with...she just came into the picture recently...what if...

Her phone chirped and vibrated from her desk.

Freya: Will you be coming to school today? If not, I can get Gwaine to give me all the handouts?

She pressed her lips together and the edges tipped upwards.
Yeah, I'll be there soon. Thanks, Freya

"Merlyn, dear!" Aunty Alice's voice carried up to her room. "A very handsome boy named Gwaine is here to pick you up for school!"

"Gwaine?" She said and furrowed her brows. "Uhm...okay! I'll be right down!" She stood up and snatched her backpack off the ground as she ran out the door.

What was I thinking?

"Morning, sweetheart!" Gwaine grinned while wagging his eyebrows and waved at her from the bottom of the stairs.

A laugh escaped her and it felt great. "Good morning."

They're my friends too.

"Would you like some breakfast, Gwaine?" Uncle Gaius poked his head out from the kitchen. "It's still really early for both of you to go to school."

Gwaine yawned and groaned as he stretched. "Oh man, I know, Gaius. But, Coach has us on a new training schedule."

"Caerleon would be shocked to see you at practice on time for once."

"I'm hoping it'll win me some points," Gwaine said as he tapped Merlyn's shoulder with his fist once she walked up beside him.

"The last tourney starts soon, doesn't it?" She asked.
He smirked and his eyes were shining. "It's what we've all been waiting for...The Inter-City Tournament."

Like always, there was something about Gwaine that made Merlyn excited for everything.

"Well, have a good morning, kids." Aunty Alice walked up and gave Merlyn a big hug. "I'll be home all day, okay, Merly?" Aunty Alice whispered that last part in her ear and pulled back from the hug and tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear.

"Thanks, Aunty Alice."

She smiled and gently nudged Merlyn towards the door.

The crisp winter morning air had her shivering the moment they stepped out onto the porch. Merlyn made a beeline for Gwaine's car and waited as he unlocked it and relished in the warmth from the heaters as she shut the door behind her.

"Thanks for picking me up, Gwaine." She said as he backed out of her driveway.

"You don't have to thank me, sweetheart. It's what a knight in shining armor does." He winked and started driving down the road but not towards the school.

She blinked and looked over at him. "Gwaine, the turn--"

He held one finger up to his lips. "Shhh. We've got plenty of time before school starts."

"Won't Coach be mad that you're playing hooky?" The turn they were supposed to take, came and went in the blink of an eye.

"Eh. Maybe. But, he's a softy, so he'll let me off easy."

"You think doing fifteen laps around the school is being let off easy?" His cheerful demeanor dropped slightly.
"Fifteen, eh?" He glanced over at her. "Think you could put in a good word for me, sweetheart?"

"Pft," she covered her mouth and laughed. It felt good, being in Gwaine's presence, like all the sadness that weighed her down was lifted--well, momentarily.

Reality doesn't like being pushed to the side.

It was odd.

"I know you're worried about me...but I'll be fine." Merlyn turned and stared out her window.

"It'll be a shit show, those vultures at school will eat this right up," he said and glanced at her from the corner of his eye. The mood in the car changed drastically.

She nodded. "Yeah, I wasn't expecting anything less."

He chuckled and shook his head. "You're strong, Merlyn."

"You think so?" She tilted her head to look at him.

"I've always known that about you," he lightly smacked his fist against her arm. "If the Princess goes for you, I got your back."

She bit her lip and clenched her hands into fists. "I told him to stay away from me."

Gwaine continued driving around aimlessly through different neighborhoods. "As you should. Doesn't mean he won't try."

Anger.
The emotion burned its way through her veins and ravaged her body. It wasn't bright or heated. It was a dark, feral, and consuming, everything about this emotion reminded her of a time so far back in her past that it shook her very core.

"There's nothing for him to try." She clenched her fists tighter. "I'm done."

Gwaine stared at the road. "Hmm..." he whispered to himself.

The first thing Merlyn did when she got inside the school was head down the main hallway and made a beeline for the office. Buried behind mountains of paper and surrounded by receptionists chatter, there--in the middle of it all--was the person she wanted to see.

"Freya." Merlyn hesitated at the door.

There was a sadness lingering around her eyes that Merlyn understood--could relate--and yet there was something else about Freya that Merlyn knew she did not have at the moment. "Hi Merlyn." A pause passed between them before Freya leaped up from her seat and ran into Merlyn's arms.

"I'm sorry," she said and returned the hug with vigor. "I don't know what to say."

Freya stepped back and gave her a smile. "Don't say anything. What has happened, happened, and I'm okay with it."

Something about the hopefulness on Freya's face tugged at Merlyn's heart. "How can you be?"

"I'm not sure," she knotted her fingers together, "but deep down...I know I'll find my way back to Will and he'll find his way back to me."

Merlyn saw the slight tremble in Freya's hands, but she also heard the determination in her voice and it left her in awe. She reached out and took Freya's hands in her own.
"Then I believe in you, Freya."

Hushed whispers followed her every step. No matter where she was, the curious voices of her classmates lurked around every corner, every hallway, every stairwell, but she tried to shut them out. If she could just make it to homeroom without seeing him then everything will be okay.

"Shorty.." Her steps faltered and her breath rushed out of her.

*Move.* She commanded her feet. *Stop standing still.*

"Please...can--"

An arm landed heavily on her shoulders. "There you are, sweetheart! I was looking everywhere for you!"

"Gwaine..." she said softly and looked up at him, but he was looking over his shoulder at Arthur.

"Let's get to homeroom, shall we? George is in one of his moods today, apparently, someone broke his 'Polishing is life' mug in the teacher's lounge." He pulled her forward and she blindly followed.

"Wait--" Arthur reached out for Merlyn's arm but Gwaine tugged her sharply into his side.

He looked over and glared. "Hands off, Princess."

"Gwaine," he gritted out, "stay out of this. This isn't any of your business."

Gwaine leaned in with a sneer. "If it involves Merlyn then it is my business." Arthur stepped forward and seized the front of Gwaine's shirt.
It suddenly felt like she couldn't breathe.

"Guys," Morgana stepped in and pushed them apart, "enough. You're making a scene."

Both guys glanced around at them and saw a small crowd starting to form and more hushed whispers surrounded them. Gwaine huffed and pulled Merlyn alongside him into homeroom.

"I'm going to sit over there," said Merlyn, her voice too soft for her liking.

He nodded and steered them over to the table by the windows. "Good choice. I could use some sunlight." Freya quietly followed after them and sat on the other side of Merlyn.

The whispering didn't stop, even when homeroom started and George started in on his usual morning lecture. What did she expect? She wondered as she played with her pencil. Everyone noticed how she wasn't sitting at their normal table or in the spot beside Arthur, and sure, maybe it did sting a bit to see Mithian still sitting next to him, but she convinced herself to let it go.

It was hard enough this morning when she tried to convince herself to get out of bed, she woke up extra early to make it look like she didn't spend the entire weekend crying and bawling her eyes out with Will. There was no way in hell that she was going to let her classmates see her cry, her pride won't allow it.

"...all I want to add is that everyone should make the most of these next couple of months. It'll be the last time you'll get to walk these halls as seniors." George said with impeccable timing because the bell rang right at that moment.

Merlyn got up from her seat and headed out the door for their first-period class. Gwaine matched her pace and rested his arms behind his head. "You know, sometimes, George has a way with words that really makes you think, huh, sweetheart?"

"You think he's a stick in the mud," she said with some mild amusement.

"Okay..." he said and rolled his eyes, "he's not a stick that deep in the mud."
"Pft." she shook her head.

There it was. Those effortless feelings that Gwaine fills her up with.

"Uhm...Merlyn?"

And there it goes.

"Hey, Mithian." Gwaine leaned over and gave her a polite smile.

"Could I...--we" Mithian glanced over at her and then back at Gwaine.

"If--if it's about what happened on Friday...I...uhm...I don't...it's fine--I mean," said Merlyn in a rush. Her palms grew sweaty and it was difficult to swallow, she blindly searched behind her back, her hand opening and closing. The sight of Mithian put her off balance and she felt like she was thrown out to sea with no life raft until it closed around Gwaine's hand.

A troubled look crossed Mithian's face and she tried to say something else, but Gwaine jumped in. "Shouldn't we be getting to class? I don't want a tardy from Bowman, isn't that right, Princess?"

It hurt.

Seeing Arthur and the sadness that surrounded him.

He's having nightmares again. She saw it in his eyes, the dark circles, and the wrinkled clothes he was wearing. Everything about him radiated his pain and it dug deep into her heart.

And why wouldn't it?

...when he means everything to her?
"Come on, let's go," Gwaine whispered in her ear and gently pulled her away.

That's when the warmth pooled in her eyes and she had to quickly blink it away. She took her seat beside Gwaine and pulled her notebook out, she was hyperaware of Arthur's every movement and a part of her hated how awkward everything is going to be since they have nearly every class together.

At that moment, Mr. Bowman strode into the class. "Ah. Don't get too comfortable guys," he waved a sheet of paper in the air, "it's seat change time!" The whole class groaned and started to pack up their stuff.

For a split second, Merlyn wondered whether or not someone was going to play a cruel trick of fate or take pity on her. Mr. Bowman started listing off new and old pairings as he walked around the room and pointed to the tables.

He got to the very front of her current row and pointed to the desk beside him, "Merlyn...and..." he shook out his sheet, "Gwaine."

"Woo-hoo!" Gwaine threw himself around her and nuzzled the top of her head. "You're the best, Bowman!"

Mr. Bowman shook his head and looked up at the ceiling briefly with a smirk on his lips. "Yeah. Yeah."

"I'm not cursed..." Merlyn said under her breath as she gathered her things. Someone or something has taken pity on her.

As the two of them moved seats Merlyn had to remind herself several times to not look back over her shoulder--no matter how desperately she wanted to. Because she already felt Arthur's gaze on her back as she moved desks and it made her wonder if things would have turned out differently had she stayed in her seat beside him. She wondered about a lot of things, how heartbroken people were able to pick up the pieces of themselves as they laid at their feet. How did they know what pieces mattered and what pieces didn't?

"Arthur and Mithian, you guys can stay there. Next..."
"I'm cursed..." she said and sat down.

Gwaine leaned over and nudged her shoulder with his own. His quiet solidarity helped keep her dark thoughts at bay.

"Hey. Hey. Did you hear? Arthur broke up with Merlyn!"

"I heard it was because he wanted to get back together with Mithian, you know, his first love."

"Damn...that's messed up. I feel sorry for Merlyn. I can't even imagine how shitty that must feel."

Merlyn's hand trembled as she put the book into the return bin. The small group of people that were gossiping about her and Arthur didn't notice her presence, but that wasn't anything new...She was only in the library by chance because she offered to return Freya's book for her because the office secretary needed her help over the lunch break.

This sucks...

She swallowed the lump in her throat and headed for the library doors. There was a bitter taste in her mouth as she wandered past other students and headed for the cafeteria. Whispers followed her like her second shadow and the pitiful looks from them rubbed her the wrong way. The dark thoughts she was having swirled and bubbled in her mind, it fueled her anger but at the same time it made her chest ache.

Suddenly, she found herself getting pulled off to the side near the main hallway lockers. "Merlyn."

Her mouth went dry.
Arthur reached out to place his hands on her shoulders and moved towards her. "Please--"

"Don't touch me!" She flinched and stepped backward and felt the cool metal lockers block her escape. She wasn't sure if she had the willpower to stay mad at him if she was reminded of his touch. It took everything in her being to not forgive him at the sight of pain on his face.

The broken look on Arthur's face cut into her deeper than she wanted to admit. He took a step back and dropped his shoulders and let out a shaky breath. "I'm sorry."

Merlyn squeezed her eyes shut and turned her head away from him. "Don't."

"What do you want me to say?" He pleaded. "Whatever it is I'll say it. I know it was my fault that I made you think my feelings for Mith--" He stopped short of the name at her glare. "--but they haven't and never will, so this was all just a--"

"A misunderstanding?" She said with more bite and a harsher glare. She stepped around him and clenched her hands together. "Do you know what the worst part of this was?" She didn't give him a chance to respond. "If it was me..." her shoulders caved inwards as she swallowed the lump in her throat.

"I would have picked you without hesitation."

He let out a small puff of air. "Merlyn..."

She shook her head. "I can't do this...I don't want to do this." Her feet started moving backward. "Just...stop."

He reached for her again. "I--"

"You heard her, Arthur." Gwaine's arm wrapped around her shoulders and he pulled her into his side. "Stop while you still can."
"Gwaine." Arthur's eyes narrowed and his teeth were the slightest bit barred.

A feral grin spread across Gwaine's lips. "Oh? Is that a challenge, Princess?" Arthur's knuckles cracked as he clenched them into fists. "If you throw down the gauntlet...I'll be more than happy to pick it up."

"Stop." Merlyn pushed out of Gwaine's hold. "Just stop it. You guys are friends, don't do this. Not for me."

"Sweetheart--" She shook her head and stepped backward.

"Enough. I just...I want to be left alone." She could almost taste her anxiety, her heart raced in her chest and the clamminess grew on her palms. "Please," she looked at them, "leave me alone." She didn't wait for them to respond, she turned and headed for the front doors.

Aunty Alice was right.

She needed a mental health day.

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