Historic Recurrence

by KlavierWrites

Summary

Every 500 years or so, Merlin would meet a reincarnated Arthur, Morgana, Gwen and assorted knights. Every time, Merlin and Arthur would become friends, Morgana would betray them, and Arthur would pick Gwen. Merlin was getting kind of sick of it, actually. (Merlin/Arthur, university fic)

Notes

I initially wrote this fic with absolutely no plans to ever upload it anywhere, but I grew fond of it. It was written in tiny amounts in between exams and such like, so the fluency left a lot to be desired and it's been one hell of an editing job.

Please excuse any dumb mistakes, I'm pretty sure I got them all this time but you can never be sure. Also, Albion Uni was originally Cambridge but I became too scared I'd got stuff wrong (despite having visited the city a few times)

Rated T for mild swearing and some sex references.

This is the first time I've actually posted AO3, so bare with me.
The problem with history being doomed to repeat itself was, as Merlin quickly discovered, was that even the little bits of history, things that should be insignificant in the grand scheme of things, repeated too. And that... well that kind of sucked.

It had been approximately 1,500 years since Arthur had died at the lake of Avalon, and every 400 or so years, children were born with an extraordinary likeness (read: usually identical) to those who grew up in Camelot. Not everybody, and sometimes, the ages didn't quite work or something went a little wrong, appearance wise. But it could be counted on that there would be an Arthur, and a Guinevere, and a Morgana. Somehow, Merlin just knew there always would be.

The first time, there had been a shockingly red-haired Leon and an Elyon and - Merlin discovered several years after his death - a Gaius. The second time there was a Percival, a 20-years-older Lancelot, a Mordred and a Hunith. The last one hurt the most, because this time his mother married a merchant and died in childbirth, leaving her son with the name Merlyn. Merlin and Merlyn had nothing in common except Hunith's nose, and Merlyn never knew about his older almost half-brother.

Merlin watched his friends come and go, never ageing unless he wanted too, never dying.

Merlin quickly discovered that relationships had a habit of repeating themselves, too. When there was a reincarnation almost everybody found each other somehow - this included finding Merlin. Merlin had been forced to watch as, both times, Arthur had placed his trust in Morgana, who betrayed him. Both times, Morgana and Arthur had been siblings, or something like it. Both times Gwen and Morgana were friends. Whichever knights were reincarnated became close friends and took up a close relationship with Arthur, and usually Gwen and Merlin, too. Both times, Arthur ended up married to Gwen. Both times, Merlin had ended up taking up his original role as Arthur's best friend, Arthur's close companion. Both times, Merlin had let himself age, slowly.

Merlin had lived three lifetimes with Arthur. None so short has his first. He had watched Arthur die three times, but it never became less painful.

Merlin and Arthur. How funny that people remembered them. They got the stories wrong, (Excalibur) made new ones up, (The Holy Grail?) spelt names wrong (where the hell did "Morgan Le Fey" come from, and why spell it "Gawain"?) and completely misjudged ages - to be fair, most of the mistakes would have been avoided if Merlin hadn't been so secretive. And then, of course, they thought it was all fiction. All his adventures, Arthur's legacy, Camelot itself, all dismissed as children's stories. Magic nothing but an abstract concept, long gone from the land. The only magic left was in Merlin.

It was the year 2013, and Arthur was late.

A lot had changed since Arthur's last reincarnation. The industrial revolution, for a start. The world was moving at a ridiculously fast pace - after years of monotony it was a shock. Not only that, but people were coming so far. Merlin wasn't so optimistic as to state that the modern world had achieved equality, but it had make one hell of a move in the right direction.

But despite everything, Merlin was still bored. He was a twenty-something again, this time deciding to pass as eighteen in order to go back to university and study English Literature at Albion. He was good at reading old texts, having been around to watch the language develop, and
he hadn't been a Literature student in ages.

Albion was a prestigious University and so far, Arthur had only reincarnated as a member of the upper-class. It was also a long shot, but Merlin was getting slightly desperate.

Merlin had had a long time to think (far too long to think) and the truth was, he was a sick of the way things repeated themselves. He hated watching Morgana's relationship with her friends and family deteriorate and watching her become miserable, and he couldn't bare that way they would all look at him for the first time, no recognition or familiarity in their eyes. Most of all, however, he was sick of Arthur always choosing Gwen.

Queen Guinevere. Kind, loyal, and the love of Arthur's lives (plural intentional). Social class and laws be damned, they found a way - he was happy for them, he really was. In a lot of ways, Gwen and Arthur were perfect for each other. And if it killed Merlin knowing that Arthur would never want Merlin, love him in the way that Merlin loved Arthur, that that wasn't important, not really. It wasn't Arthur's job to indulge the wishes of a manservant he'd forgotten he ever had.

He got into Albion University through a mixture of magic and forged A-Level results (something he'd had to do so many times he'd stopped feeling guilty) and settled in easily. He'd lived in Albion city years ago (he was drawn to it mostly because of the name) but had been avoiding the place so he wouldn't be recognised. It was nice to be back, although the small city was barely recognisable.

Four weeks into the new term, Merlin walked into the Apple shop and bumped right into Arthur, making him drop the bag he was holding. His breathless elation (he KNEW his instincts were right about Albion!) quickly turned to embarrassment as he realised that once again he was going to make a bad first impression.

"You idiot!" Bellowed Arthur, picking up his bag. Oh, great. Nice to see the prat again. Arthur looked exactly like he used to, dressed in a tight white t-shirt, blazer, black jeans and... Combat boots? Not what he'd have expected. Merlin felt that familiar, almost-forgotten urge to fling his arms around the blond man and kiss him senseless. But even if Arthur didn't currently see him as an absolute stranger, that would still be a bad idea.

Merlin settled for glaring at him instead (an equally familiar impulse). "You weren't looking where you were going."

Arthur seemed oblivious to the shoppers whose exit he was blocking. "Yes I was. It was you who-" Merlin pulled him out the way of the doors.

Arthur yanked his arm away, looking shocked. Ah, awkward, con-contact Britain. "Either way, I have to be going." He turned to leave.

"Arthur, wait!" He couldn't just go - Merlin hadn't got any details he needed. Stupidly small city or not, Albion was big enough that if Arthur left now, Merlin may not find him again for years.


"I'm magic." Double shit.

Arthur was walking back towards him. He raised a mocking eyebrow "You're magic?"

"No. But my dad's mate does work at the university." Said Merlin, still improvising wildly. "I recognised you from your file."

He narrowed his eyes. "I didn't send in a picture." So Arthur was studying at Albion, then.
"Background checks!" He lied. "Albion checks the Facebook of their potential students." Arthur nodded, apparently trying to look on top of things. And then looked at Merlin curiously, and there was an awkward silence that lasted far too long before Merlin blurted "Want to go for coffee?" He nodded to the little Costa across the shopping centre.

"Er, sure?"

"Great." Merlin spun around and marched off towards Costa, trusting that Arthur's startled confusion would be enough to make sure he'd follow. And sure enough, he turned around and there he was.

"So. You apparently know my name. I'm not going to ask how you even remember it, because I'm sure the answer will be weird." he smiled grimly. "What's yours?"

"Merlin Emrys."

"Merlin?"

"Yes." Once again, Merlin wished that "Merlin" had caught on. Harry Potter was a famous wizard, but that didn't stop hundreds of baby Harrys being born every week - why did his name have to make him stick out?

"Are you messing with me?"

"There are better ways to mess with somebody, don't you think?"

Arthur huffed at him and the two of them joined the line for coffee. There was a moment of silence in which Arthur examined the price list on the boards behind the counter, and Merlin examined Arthur.

His blond hair was cut almost identically to how it had been back during his first life, but it was artfully ruffled in a way that must have taken at least half an hour in front of the mirror. His eyes were a steely grey - they seemed the only feature that had changed at all. And God, he was attractive.

"What d'you want?"

"What?" Merlin pulled his eyes away from where they had wondered to Arthur's lips (also unchanged) and tried to listen the words they were forming.

Arthur rolled his eyes. "To drink, Merlin."

"Oh. I asked you here." Merlin pointed out. "I should order for you."

"Yes, but I am ahead of you in this queue and judging by what you're wearing, I undoubtedly have more money than you. What do you want?"

Merlin registered vaguely that he should probably feel offended but instead he grinned. He'd even missed Arthur's general prattishness. "Hot chocolate, then. With cream and marshmallows."

"Very mature."

Merlin stuck his tongue out at him.

Within a few months, Merlin had found Morgana. She was studying Medicine at Kings, with
Arthur - they were step-siblings this time. He had also found Gwaine, who worked in the Costa on weekends (and hadn't that been a shock when Merlin had gone to order a week ago and Sir Gwaine was serving him.) Gwaine happily chatted about his plans to start a business with his girlfriend as he made their coffee. He slipped his number under Merlin's cup with a joking wink, and Merlin realised he'd really missed the man who had once been one of his best friends.

Merlin was happily considering how he would stop Gwaine from flirting with Morgana when the group of them met up for drinks that evening when he realised the girl who was chaining her bike up next to him had very curly black hair. Very familiar curly black hair. He knew it would be Gwen before she even turned to look at him.

"Can I help you?" She asked, her tone polite. She was wearing a stylish brown coat and a pair of wide, round glasses.

"No. Well, yes. I'm looking for the Disney Store?" Well, he'd said far worse things under pressure.

She laughed. "It's down there, next to the opening to the Spirella Centre." She said, pointing. He hoisted her bag higher onto her shoulder, clearly about to leave.

"No, I'm hopeless at directions. I need you to take me." His tone was meant to be playful but he knew how Gwen would take it almost as soon as the words were out of his mouth. She was predictable like that.

"Oh gosh, I'm not - If you're trying to flirt with me - I'm taken. I mean, not that I think you were but if you were then sorry. I'm not interested. I'm sure you're lovely and if I wasn't - no, actually I probably wouldn't you're not my type. Oh! I'm sure that you're somebody's type... Oh, now I've embarrassed myself, Lance is always saying I need to be less nervous. Sorry. Let's try again. I'm Gwen, what's your name?"

"Merlin." He said, grinning ear to ear. "Who's Lance?" Her boyfriend, probably. It didn't matter if he was, they'd break up within a month of Gwen meeting Arthur.

"My fiancé, actually." Fiancé? She flashed an understated silver ring in front of his eyes for a moment. "I wasn't going to joke! I'm pretty sure that'd be incredibly hypocritical considering my name's Guinevere and my fiancé's called Lancelot, like in the legends. Look, Merlin, I've actually got to dash, I'm meant to be meeting him. It's been nice meeting you." She pulled a notepad and fluffy pen from her bag and scribbled down directions to the Disney Store along with her name and number, which she then handed to Merlin. "I'm staying at Newham college, text me if you want to meet up. You seem cool, I could use a Merlin in my life. All I need now is an Arthur!" She giggled. And then she hurried off, leaving Merlin clutching her number and swearing repeatedly in his head.

Lancelot? Gwen was engaged to a man named Lancelot. It had to be THE Lancelot, Merlin's Lancelot. Nobody named their kid Lancelot these days, it was almost as uncommon a name as his. Merlin supposed he shouldn't be surprised; he'd had often wondered who Gwen would have ended up with if Arthur hadn't been an option. Lancelot was... sweet. Actually, he was kind of perfect for Gwen and if it wasn't for the fact that Gwen was going to meet Arthur and break Lance's heart Merlin would be happy for her. But it wouldn't work out, because history was kind of a bitch like that.
Merlin trudged down to the Disney shop, figuring he might as well go there now Gwen had so nicely helped him out. He kept folding and unfolding her number in his hands, in a state of nervous shock. There was a large poster on the window of Merida, Pixar's new princess (Merlin may or may not have seen Brave more than once. Hey, he'd been a loyal Disney watcher since the beginning. Even if The Sword and the Stone had made him cringe.) Merlin stared at it for a moment, thinking about how the big, curly hair was probably how Gwen's would look if she grew it out a little. Then he remembered how, with his long hair, Lancelot may have looked like Flynn Rider. He couldn't actually remember much about what Lancelot looked like. It was like that with reincarnations - Merlin forgot the details of their face, only to remember them in perfectly clarity once he saw them once again.  

"You planning to go in or are you just ogling the redhead?" Came a voice from his right.  

"Gwaine!" Merlin spun around to see him leaning on the glass, smirking.  

"We still on for drinks tonight? D'you mind if I bring Elena?"  

"Your girlfriend? Sure." Elena reminded Merlin of the girl Arthur had almost married once with the same name. She was gloriously cheerful and quite ditzy and they made a nauseating cute couple - Merlin half wondered if it was the same girl he had met in Camelot, but he hadn't got that bizarre clarity of memory feeling he normally experienced when seeing reincarnations for the first time. "We'll make it a getting-to-know-you party."

Elena herself then wondered out of the Disney Store (Gwaine had clearly been waiting for her) clutching a Spiderman mask. "Merlin!" She launched herself into his arms for a hug. "What have you got in your hand?" She asked as she pulled away, handing Gwaine the mask. He put his other arm around her waist immediately.  

"Oh. It's the number of a girl I just met." Elena pulled the number from his hands while Gwaine whistled appreciatively. "Not like that!"  

"You know Gwen?"  

You have no idea. "Just barely."

"She's a Newham girl - her room's near mine."

"Small world." Said Gwaine. "Hey Elena, what's with this mask?"

Elena started babbling about how you didn't need a reason to buy a Spiderman mask but Merlin wasn't really listening anymore. He'd pulled out his phone and was inputting the number.

Hey I'm going out for drinks tonight with some friends including Elena. She says she knows you? Want to meet up? Lance can come. There'll be an 'Arthur' there :)  

- Merlin (that guy you just bumped into)

The response was immediate. "It's destiny!"

"This is Arthur, Gwaine, Morgana and you know Elena. You guys, this is Gwen and Lancelot."
There was a tension in the air - or was that just Merlin's nerves - when Arthur and Gwen looked at each other. Arthur was wearing what Merlin once dubbed his "Guinevere-face" but Gwen wasn't wearing the one that usually corresponds. In fact, there was nothing but a polite cheerfulness in her features.

"Oh, that's just sickening cute." Drawled Morgana. "Lancelot and Gwen."


"That's perfect! Arthur, no trying to steal this girl away. I know what you're like."

Arthur made a noise of indignation, but pulled is eyes away from Gwen. Gwen flushed in embarrassment, clinging onto Lance's arm and scooting a little closer to him. Lancelot, his hair a little lighter than Merlin remembered, a light stubble across his jaw, smiled fondly at her.

Merlin scooted over to allow space in the booth and Lance and Gwen sat down. Conversation was a little difficult at first, since not everybody knew each other, but Elena prompted Gwen to tell the story of how she met Lancelot and the atmosphere softened. A fiancé was a new obstacle in Arthur's relationship with Gwen - was Arthur already smitten, Merlin wondered? It didn't look like it. In fact, Arthur kept shooting glances at Merlin, not Gwen. Merlin smiled awkwardly when their eyes met, and Arthur looked down immediately, like he was embarrassed to be caught in the act.

Weird.
Arthur

Chapter Notes

Ok, A fast update because it's a bit shorter and I couldn't wait to post :3 The next one might take a little longer.

Disclaimer: There characters are not mine (and any views they express may not be my own either)

There was something about Merlin. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on.

It wasn't the attraction. Fair enough, Arthur had got a bit of a shock when he started fantasising about a bloke, but he was a liberal guy (no thanks to his father) and just put it down to "sexuality is fluid" and all that bullshit.

No, it was something about the way Merlin had looked at him. When they first met, there was none of the guardedness is his expression that you'd expect upon meeting a stranger. On the contrary, his eyes had lit up with something that had to be more than shock at their collision, and he had smiled in a way that made Arthur think he hadn't even realised he was doing so. Whenever Arthur caught Merlin looking at him, it was with his eyes warm with a familiarity that felt too intimate for their casual friendship.

He had wanted it to mean that he was something special to Merlin, somehow. He was bitterly disappointed when the same expression was on Merlin's face when he first met Gwaine. The shocked smile and grin as though Gwaine was the best surprise gift he'd ever been given. He'd been more than a little put-out, unable to stop the jealousy that rose in his chest as Merlin practically flirted with the guy despite Arthur being right there. He'd felt a bit better when Gwaine bought up Elena. A bit.

He'd started to think that was just how Merlin was. But his expression when he met Morgana was the complete opposite. It was as though the two of them had met before and and didn't get along, Merlin's expression was so guarded. Even Morgana wasn't as quite charming as usual. He'd asked her if they'd already met later, and she'd laughed before her expression had turned pensive.

And now, with this new couple, Gwen and Lance, Merlin looked at them as though they'd been his friends for years, even though he'd just told Arthur he'd met Gwen only once.

Gwen was beautiful. She was, without a doubt, the exact kind of girl Arthur would go for, although she was nothing like any girl he'd ever dated. But the ring on her finger and the way she looked at Lancelot made her well and truly off-limits. Any attempts at seducing her would be a lost cause, not that Arthur minded too much. His mind was too full of Merlin.

He normally used his time with Merlin sneaking glances at said man - Jesus, what was wrong him? -and contemplating what a mess his sexual orientation had become. Morgana was always preaching that labels didn't matter - she was the one to give him the "sexuality is fluid" speech and make him sit through several episodes of The L Word when they were sixteen. Even so, he'd liked being straight until proven otherwise. It was easy. Stupid Merlin, messing that up for him.
That wasn't the only thing Merlin was currently messing up. The idiot was staring at him, making Arthur self-conscious and making it much harder to sneak glances. It was annoying.

Merlin gave him that ridiculous smile when their eyes met and Arthur - to his dismay - blushed. He focused his attention on Gwen and her fiancé, who he soon realised were an unfairly cute couple. Also, they were genuinely nice people - Lance sickening so. Apparently, they'd met in Tesco and started dating during Lance's second year of university.

"Lance proposed over dinner at the start of term." Gushed Gwen, holding out the ring for Morgana to examine. "He said that since he knew he never wanted to be without me-"

"Why wait?" Finished Lance. All the girls at the table made cooing noises, and Arthur glanced at Merlin, half expecting him to coo too. But there was a little crease between Merlin's eyebrows and his lips were pursed closed.

"Ok, so that's all lovely, but I still don't feel like I know you yet." Said Gwaine, pulling his arm from around Elena's shoulders and placing his hands on the table, in an attempt to look serious. "Name, age, sexual orientation, go. I'll start." There were groans around the table and Elena rolled her eyes.

Crap. What could he say? "I don't have a clue right now, get back to me later" wasn't going to cut it.

"Gwaine, 22, straight." He nudged Elena, who shot him a fondly exasperated look.

"Elena, 23, straight."

"Morgana, 19, gay." Arthur almost spat out his drink.

"Since when?"

Morgana smirked, and challenging glint in her eye. "Since forever, Arthur. I already told you."

She did not! He'd have remembered something like that. But then - "You told me you liked, and I quote 'the fairer sex'. That's not the same thing."

"Everybody else understood." Merlin, Gwaine, Elena and even Gwen (how the hell did Gwen know?) all nodded. "Why is it such a big deal Arthur? Are you a little more similar to our bigoted father than I originally thought?"

There was some uncomfortable shifting about around the table: things had just gotten rather personal. He wasn't sure if it was irritation at Morgana or the strangely disappointed look Merlin was giving him, but the words left him before he could quite consider what their impact might be. "Arthur, 19, bisexual."

Arthur was only vaguely aware that Morgana was making furious spluttering sounds. He was staring straight at Merlin.

Merlin, who was currently looking at him with shock, confusion and something Arthur couldn't identify. He raised his eyebrows in silent question - Are you ok with this? Does this bother you? Merlin give him a small smile. Arthur smirked back.

Gwaine clapped his hands together and cleared his throat pointedly. "Well, I can't say I wasn't expecting that. Arthur, mate, it was really obvious."
"What? That Morgana's a lesbian or that I'm- or the other thing?"

Gwaine smirked. "Both. But the game must go on! Merlin, you next."

Merlin's face was, for once, unreadable. "Merlin, 18, and I prefer not to label myself."

Gwen, who'd been awfully quiet, smiled encouragingly at this. "Good for you, Merlin. Not everyone has to fit in a box."

"I like this one." Said Morgana, who appeared to have recovered herself. "I'm going to keep you around, Guinevere."

Arthur's mind was reeling, trying to interpret Merlin's words, and mentally cursing himself for not saying something similar. It was Lancelot who spoke next.

"Well Merlin, I think we'd all be interested if you attempted to specify what you're interested in. Obviously, only if you're comfortable doing so."

Gwaine clapped Merlin on the back. "What he said."

A slight embarrassed flush coloured Merlin's cheeks and Arthur ignored the bit of his brain that was squealing like a thirteen-year-old about how adorable that was. "I suppose I've simply not been interested in enough people to know yet. I mean, I've only ever liked two people. A girl called Freya, but that was ages ago, and then- then there's one man I've been in love with for what feels like forever."

A man. Merlin was interested in a man. Arthur was filled with equal parts hope and jealously. "Do I know him?"

"In a manner of speaking." Merlin's expression was calculating.

"Intriguing."

"Is it?"

"Very."

Merlin's expression switched to one of exaggerated innocence. "I don't think so."

"Well I do."

"There's nothing intriguing about it at all, actually. Forget I said anything. You don't know him. At all."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Merlin."


They glared at each other. There was a pointed cough. Gwen and Morgana looked on the point of hysterical giggles and Gwaine was smirking again. Arthur realised he was leaning a lot closer to Merlin than he'd realised, and jerked back. The tense atmosphere lessened, and Gwaine's getting-to-know you game continued. But Arthur wasn't paying attention anymore.
"I'm not drunk!" Objected Arthur as Merlin pulled his glass from his hand.

"Yes you are."

"Merlin, 'm really not. Stop bothering me."

"Well then, if you're not drunk I suggest we keep it that way." Merlin handed the full pint to somebody on the table next to them with a murmured explanation and Arthur spluttered indignantly.

As the evening had gone on, the group had kind of drifted apart. Lancelot and Gwen had long since gone home, and after Gwaine reached the point of drunkenness that he'd forgotten who he was dating and started flirting with Morgana, he'd been dragged away by a furious (if slightly amused) Elena. Morgana herself was chatting to the woman behind the bar. Arthur was left with only Merlin for company, not that he minded. But then Merlin declared that he was drunk.

"It's really not good to overdo it on the alcohol, Arthur."

"You're the worst person to go out for drinks with ever. 'N that includes Lancelot." Lancelot, they had discovered, did not drink, and had ordered only orange juice all evening.

"And you're slurring your words. You've had enough. We should get you home."

"You can't order me about, Merlin!" But Merlin close that moment to put his hand around Arthur's wrist to pull him up, and Arthur's brain momentarily stopped forming cohesive thoughts.

Merlin dragged him from the pub and then grinned at him. "Lead the way."

"I can walk home alone!"

"I'm being a responsible friend!"

"You're being ridiculous!" But he started walking. Merlin's hand was still on his wrist, it was very distracting.

Arthur spent the walk home rescinding to Merlin's cheerful babble and trying desperately not to think about the implications bringing Merlin home with him. Merlin was into somebody he'd known "forever". Merlin had not known Arthur "forever". Merlin did not think about Arthur the way Arthur thought about him. That should really be the end of it.

Of course Merlin, being Merlin, thought it was necessary to enter his dorm with him. "You shouldn't leave a drunkard alone."

"Merlin I'm not-" he was fighting a losing battle. And anyway, the blurriness was already fading from his thoughts. Might as well wait it out, Merlin would realise he was practically completely sober soon enough. "Fine. You can stay for a while." Arthur sat down on his bed.

"Just until you're sober." Said Merlin as he joined him.

There was a brief pause in which Merlin looked around at the room and Arthur quietly freaked out because Merlin was in his dorm.

"Sooo..." said Merlin, dragging the vowel sound out. "What did you think about Gwen?"

"She's... Very nice." Merlin's face fell. Arthur wondered what he did wrong.
"Oh."

"I mean, I don't know her all that well - she was pretty much glued to either Lance or Morgana all evening. I think she'll be good for Morgana, actually."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Morgana needs a friend who's the exact opposite of her - I think Gwen might be that."

Merlin looked thoughtful. "I suppose you're right. Do you think Gwen would be good as your friend?"

"Honestly, Merlin. I dunno - I don't know her yet."

"So no love at first sight? No mad urge to punch Lance in the face and run away with her?"

"Sometimes I just don't get you. Ok, Gwen's lovely, but..." If he'd met her a few years ago, when she was unattached maybe he would have been interested. She was certainly beautiful. There was a sense that she was going to be someone special to him - or that she had been, once upon a time (however that worked). He couldn't explain it, but he tried to. Merlin went very quiet.

Of course, the main reason Gwen didn't appeal to him is that he was head over heels with a guy he'd only recently met. But he wasn't telling Merlin that.

"This is wrong." Merlin muttered. "Something's gone wrong." There was that crease between his eyebrows again.

"Merlin?"

"What do you mean about thinking she used to be somebody important? Have you met her before?"

Arthur couldn't understand the expression on his friend's face. It was almost... Sad?

"No, but I might have. Mock me and you'll experience a world of pain, but it's like I've known her in some other life."

Merlin's eyes were so wide, he looked like a scared rabbit. "It must be déjà-vu." He said, his tone falsely bright.

"I kind of felt the same way when I met you, actually-"

"There you go then. You're just, um, unable to tell the difference between meeting somebody before and meeting them a first time and getting on with them." Merlin was looking anywhere but directly at him.

For the first time, Arthur considered that Merlin might really have something to hide. Not something silly and ordinary like who this guy was he had a crush on - something big.

Because, apparently, Arthur was unable to keep his mouth shut, he continued "Only with you, Merlin, it was like we still had some big future together. I-"

Merlin cut across him. "You seem pretty sober. I'll go." He practically leaped off the bed and headed to the door.

"Merlin-"
"I'll text you, ok?"

The door slammed, and Arthur winced. Maybe he'd gone a little too far with the creepy déjà-vu stuff.
Merlin

Chapter Notes

Final chapter - I hope this isn't too clunky. I rewrote the ending like three times.

This has been my first time posting to AO3, and I'll probably be writing some more and moving some of my older fanfics from FF.net to here.

Not for the first time, Merlin wished he had Gaius to turn to for advice.

Arthur wasn't in love with Gwen. In fact, he'd seemed pretty certain that while Gwen meant something to him, he wasn't interested in her that way.

But he had to be, that was how it went! Merlin was so used to that feeling of broken-heartedness that is was almost routine to him. Arthur would always love with Guinevere. End of.

Merlin tried (and failed) to stop the fantasies entering his brain. But it was hopeless: keeping Arthur from his mind was an impossibility.

All four Arthurs he'd met danced through his brain while he slept: mocking him, laughing at him, kissing him. Declaring undying love for him. Doing... other things.

The dreams, along with being equal parts awesome and disturbing, made him realise something: This current Arthur was subtly different from what the others were like when he first met them. This Arthur seemed a little wiser, a little more selfless, a little less pig-headed. This Arthur was a lot more like the Arthur who had died in Merlin's arms at the lake of Avalon, not the spoiled, rude prince he had once been.

It was almost as if current Arthur had skipped the bit he was supposed to be a genuine jerk. And sure, that worked out fine for Merlin but it also worried him - partly because he'd always imagined it was he and Gwen's influence that had made Arthur grow up. And here he was, already mature and having weird moments of déjà vu. And, apparently, bisexual.

He wondered if Arthur had always been bi, in every reincarnation. Probably. This was the first time he'd reincarnated in a world it was completely safe to say so, after all. And why would he kick up a fuss if he was in love with Gwen, a woman, anyway? The thought made Merlin both sad and a little hopeful all at once - because this time Arthur wasn't going after Gwen.

It was enough to give Merlin a headache. He tried to brush off, acting natural around Arthur and denying that anything was wrong, but he could tell that neither none of his friends were buying it.

"I think you should talk to this guy you like." Gwen remarked over coffee. They'd met up in the town centre again, and headed to the Costa in the Spirella Centre on the off-chance that it was Gwaine's shift.

"Why?"

"Because you clearly miss him." said Gwen, swirling the straw around her frappichino and giving Merlin a knowing look. "I'm assuming he lives back wherever you're from..."
"London." Well, it was where he had lived last.

"So I'm assuming he either lives in London or has gone off to uni or college, so you don't see him very much. You should message him or something."

"It's not that simple, Gwen."

"I'm not saying it is! But you should think about it. You're really miserable at the moment."

"I am not!"

Gwen just gave him a look. "Talk to him."

It was quite good advice really. He wondered if there was any way he could bring up with Arthur that he was in love with him, without bringing up Camelot. Something told him that "Hey Arthur, I know I've only known you a few months but you're actually the guy I've been in love with forever" wouldn't go down well. "I'm just a tad in love with you, sorry about that." was no good either. He could phrase it like it was just a crush, pull him to the side and say he had something important to tell him...

"You have something important to tell me."

"Arthur! What are you doing here?" Arthur held up his takeaway coffee.

"Same as you." Gwen went to pull a chair over for him but he shook his head. "I need to talk to Merlin, but I can't say here, I've got to rush - got a date with the library."

Merlin downed the last dregs of his hot chocolate and gave what he hoped was an expression of polite, friendly interest. Gwen raised her eyebrows.

"We were just finishing off anyway and I've got some shopping to do." she said.

"Excellent." Said Arthur briskly. "Merlin, you can come with me."

"And what if I don't want to?"

"Of course you do."

Gwen grabbed her bags from under the table and gave them both a cheery goodbye. There was an awkward pause.

"Arthur-"

"Merlin, I need to apologise." Merlin gaped at him. "You've been acting weird around me since you walked me back to my room and it's probably because I freaked you out with that déjà-vu stuff."

Merlin pondered this for a moment. "A bit, yeah."

Arthur grabbed Merlin's coat, which he'd been about to leave behind, and flung it into his arms as they left. "If it's any consolation, you're hiding something from me so really we're even."

Merlin bit his lip. "I suppose."

Arthur's face was surprisingly serious. "I'm not going to ask you to tell me your secrets, but if you could tell me one thing: is it about me? The thing you're hiding?"
"Yeah." He sighed. There was no point making Arthur more suspicious now by trying to lie.

"Oh." There was another awkward pause but when Merlin looked at him, he realised Arthur was failing spectacularly at hiding a smile.

"If Arthur kissed you, how do you think you'd react?"

Merlin made an indignant squeak that made somebody shush him and the librarian shoot him a dirty look. He was studying in the library with Gwen - as it turned out being there for the opening of many of Shakespeare's plays and even meeting the bloke didn't excuse him from having to write an essay analysing the progression of political ideas in his plays and his use of humour to allude to them.

"Kiss back, I guess." whispered Merlin, ducking his head.

Gwen giggled. Merlin could kill her. "Things not going so well with the mystery man in London, then?"

"There is no mystery man anymore." hissed Merlin. He'd made the executive decision the night before to give up on the whole act - it wasn't worth the confusion of remembering what he'd said to everybody.

"Aw, why?"

"He got a girlfriend." Said Merlin, impressed at his own improvisation. He was getting better.

"Oh no, Merlin, you must be heartbroken." Gwen looked so genuinely sorry for him Merlin considered confiding in her that he'd made it all up, but then he'd have to explain why. He softened the blow instead.

"But it's ok. I've moved on, really. Met someone else." Dammit. Ok, maybe he wasn't getting any better at improvisation after all.

Gwen's eyes glistened mischievously. "Who? Arthur?"

Well, he was already in too deep. What could it hurt, really, having Gwen know? He sunk his head onto his arms so he was staring resolutely at the book in front of him and not at her. "Yes."

Gwen's resulting excited "I knew it!" was enough for both of them to get official warnings that if they made any more noise they would be removed from the library. They shut up, but it wasn't long until Gwen was murmuring "he likes you too, you know" and Merlin was trying to work out if she could possibly be telling the truth.

In attempt to do the sensible thing, the next time he saw Arthur he told him, outright, that he would quite like to snog him senseless.

Ok, so he may have been hideously drunk. And it may have been over the phone. And actually, overall, it may not have been the sensible thing to do.

But when Arthur barged into his room with takeaway coffee and demanded he explain, Merlin couldn't find it in himself to even be appropriately embarrassed.

"Merlin, you really shouldn't over do it on the alcohol, you know." he smirked.

"Oh shut up."
"No, I'm serious. When you drink, you're not in control of your actions."

"Who says I'm not?"

"Merlin, you drunk dialled me."

There was a long pause while Merlin sipped on his coffee and Arthur looked at him expectantly. This was it. It could go either way. Arthur could either accept or reject him but something told Merlin that either way, this reincarnation would be different. "Apparently..." His said, "Apparently I'm at my most truthful when I'm drunk."

Merlin's mouth was ridiculously dry, like he'd just swallowed sand. "Do you even remember what you said to me?" asked Arthur, stepping a little closer.

"Confessed what a giant prat you were?"

"No."

"Admitted my secret fear that Morgana will take over the world?"

Arthur's lips twitched up at the edges. "No."

"Well, it's a very legitimate fear. All too legitimate."

"Merlin-"

"Ok, ok. Did I tell you I wanted to kiss you?"

"I believe the actual wording was 'snog you senseless'." There was a wide smile spreading over Arthur's face.

Merlin grinned back, giddy. "And what do you think of that?"

Arthur stepped closer still, pulling Merlin's coffee cup from his hands and pushing it onto the nearest surface (the edge of Merlin's very messy desk). "Oh. You know, Arthur, that's really not an answer."

Arthur rolled his eyes and pressed his lips to his. Merlin realised a little too late he had absolutely no idea what he was supposed to be doing with his hands. They hovered awkwardly by his sides for a moment before they decided to entwine them in Arthur's hair without so much as consulting Merlin.

It was a nice kiss, really. Kind of rough and a little wet and much, much better than he could even have imagined. Well, up until the point Arthur suddenly pulled back.

"Merlin?" His eyes were wide with shock.

"What is it?"

"I remember." Merlin had approximately 0.2 seconds to register what Arthur had just said before Arthur's eyes glazed over and he collapsed where he stood.

"Arthur? Arthur, please be ok." Merlin had laid Arthur on his own bed and was currently leaning over him, panicking just a bit.
Arthur's eyelids flickered open and Merlin breathed a sigh of relief. "Merlin." He threw his arms around Merlin's neck and pulled him close. Merlin, a little bewildered, hugged him back. It was one hell of an awkward position, but Merlin just didn't care.

Arthur pulled back, propping himself up on one arm and gave Merlin once over. "Can't believe I forgot. Merlin, how could you let me forget?"

"Forget what, Arthur?"

"Please tell me you remember, Merlin. Tell me you remember Camelot."

Merlin's hand flew to his mouth. "How?" he whispered. "How can you remember that?"

"How did I forget? I was- am - King Arthur, aren't I? And you're Merlin. The Merlin - my Merlin."

Merlin nodded, tears threatening to overwhelm him. "My King, Arthur."

"How are we here? I died at Avalon, didn't I? Morgana, she-"

"Morgana got Mordred to kill you."

"I know. I forgive her. It all seems so real, yet not real at all."

Merlin nodded. "I suppose it must."

"When did you remember?"

"I'm- how best to put this, Merlin wondered. "I'm the same Merlin. I have to wait for you to rise again each time."

Arthur pulled him close again, resting his head on his shoulder. A slight wetness on his neck alerted him that Arthur was crying, and he knew he was, too. He didn't know how long they stayed like that, crying silent tears, but it was Arthur who pulled away.

"I am so sorry."

Merlin wiped his eyes. "It's fine." He said in a thick voice. "I've been happy to wait for you."

Arthur put his hands on Merlins shoulders, his face serious. "I'm not in love with Guinevere."

'Neither am I.' Said Merlin, mock-serious. Arthur chuckled and the tense atmosphere was broken. "Shift over."

Arthur did so obediently and Merlin wiggled down next to him. "How much do you remember about Camelot?"

"Everything."

"I'm jealous." murmured Merlin. "It's been so long, I'm forgetting. How does it feel? Do you remember your other reincarnations?"

"Kind of... it's blurred. But you, Merlin, you let me marry Guinevere every time!" he poked him in the side, and Merlin writhed away, almost falling off the narrow bed. Arthur grabbed him before he could slide off entirely.

"Hey! I only wanted what was best for you. Up until now, history has always repeated itself."
There was a long silence in which Arthur apparently contemplated this and Merlin sat in silence, picking at a loose thread on his hoody.

"Do you think Gwen will be happy with Lancelot?" murmured Arthur.

"Yeah. They're good for each other."

"And Gwaine will be fine, too. Will they ever remember, do you think?"

"About Camelot? Who an say."

"And what do we do about Morgana?"

"Wait and see, I guess. Maybe it'll be different this time."

"Ok, final question." said Arthur, and Merlin made a big deal of looking put-upon.

"One more." He agreed.

"What do we do about this?" Arthur gestured between the two of them.

Merlin's only response was to kiss him again. And this time, they did fall off the bed.

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