The Student Prince

by FayJay

Summary

A Modern day Merlin AU set at the University of St Andrews, featuring teetotal kickboxers, secret wizards, magnificent bodyguards of various genders, irate fairies, imprisoned dragons, crumbling gothic architecture, arrogant princes, adorable engineering students, stolen gold, magical doorways, attempted assassination, drunken students, shaving foam fights, embarrassing mornings after, The Hammer Dance, duty, responsibility, friendship and true love...

This story was inspired by the thought of Prince William of Wales (and indeed the current Max von Hapsburg) studying at the University of St Andrews; it is also, as the title suggests, at least a little inspired by the operetta 'The Student Prince'.

Grateful thanks to Lamardeuse and DarkEmeralds for Beta and cheerleading!
Merlin would have managed to catch the bag if he hadn't been obliged to stifle his instincts and force himself to reach out with his hands, rather than with that sinuous surge of power that was always clamouring to come crashing out through the too-fragile barrier of his skin. He could feel the pulse of it uncoiling with his adrenaline, fast as a striking snake, and only the memory of his mother snapping "Hands!" at him half a hundred times a day made him master the reflex and reach up to save himself like a normal human. It all happened in the twinkling of an eye, but Hunith's training held good, and so he didn't out himself as a wizard in the middle of a busy train in Kings Cross Station by freezing the luggage mid-topple, which was good; but on the other hand, his physical reaction was a hair's breadth too slow, which meant that he still got smacked on the head by a heavy bag and went stumbling back into a cross-looking middle aged lady in a twinstet and pearls. Which was not so good.

"Sorry, sorry!" he exclaimed, clutching at a seat back with one hand for balance and raising the other one palm-open in a gesture of placation, offering her his very best apologetic smile and puppydog eyes. She glared at him, but was evidently too British to do anything other than treat him to a passive-aggressive glower. "Really," he tried again, rubbing his skull gingerly, "I'm most terribly sorry!"

"Hmph," was all he got in response, but he was distracted from his victim by a voice behind him.

"No, please – it was my fault!" He turned back to see the owner of the voice and of the bag which he'd just failed to catch: a very pretty girl in a green hoody who was biting her bottom lip and looking stricken as she clutched the offending bag tightly to her chest. She glanced from Merlin to the lady and then back again, her face the picture of mortification, and Merlin – who had been feeling a little disgruntled about the whole unexpected-rain-of-luggage scenario – took one look at her huge brown eyes and immediately wanted to reassure her that he had thoroughly enjoyed being knocked half unconscious. "I'm so sorry!" she said again. "Are you okay? God, you poor thing!" She reached up to touch the bump on his head and Merlin winced in spite of himself. "Oh! God, sorry! Again!"

"No, really, it's fine," said Merlin, smiling. "Honestly – tough as nails, my skull. Nothing to worry about. Mind you – wow – are you carrying bricks in there?"

"Engineering text books," she said, wrinkling her nose ruefully. "They might as well be bricks, though. Some of them could definitely qualify as blunt objects."

"Fresher?" She nodded. "Me too!" he said, feeling his face light up. He considered the various options and jumped at the most likely destination for this particular train. "Edinburgh?"

"St Andrews." She sounded a little apologetic. "It's forty..."

"...miles north of Edinburgh, on the Fife coast, and doesn't have its own train station. Yes, I can quote from the prospectus at length." He grinned. "Looks like we're going to be neighbours, then. Hi – I'm Merlin Emrys, soon-to-be St Andrews student."

"Oh, brilliant!" she exclaimed, looking genuinely delighted. "Hi! Er – Merlin? Seriously?" She looked like she was expecting a punchline. Merlin sighed.

"Don't bother. I've heard it all before. I promise."
"Um. Right," she said, tentatively. "Well, nice to meet you anyway, er, Merlin." She spoke the name like she was tasting an unfamiliar food and suspected that it might contain unexpected chili. "My name's Gwen."

They shook hands, and Merlin could see that she was feeling it too, this odd, exhilarating helium-in-your-veins sensation of new beginnings and infinite possibilities stretching out ahead of them. "So, Gwen, do you always carry three times your body weight in text books around with you?"

"No, of course not," she said, giggling. Then a sheepish expression crossed her face. "Oh – um. And there's a sort of – well, there's a hammer in there too, I think. Um. A small one. Sorry about that."

"Of course there is," nodded Merlin, gravely. "Who travels without a hammer in their luggage these days? One never knows when a spot of joinery might be in order." The corner of his mouth twitched. "Stop!" he said, raising one hand in front of him. Gwen blinked, and after a beat Merlin added: "Hammer Time! Doooodooodoo! Doodoo! Doo! Hammer Time!" as he improvised a quick, and truly terrible, attempt at the Hammer Dance in the cramped confines of the aisle. His newfound friend dissolved into astonished giggles, and behind him, Twinset-and-Pearls gave a disgusted snort and stomped away down the aisle. Merlin cast one last, apologetic glance over his shoulder, but he couldn't stop grinning. He felt half-drunk already on the excitement of the day, silly and reckless and brimming with the wild optimism of fresh starts and new leaves.

"I make my own jewellery," she said, nudging him with her elbow and blowing at a coil of curls which had fallen down in front of her face. "Idiot."

"Really?" He glanced at the copper earrings she was wearing, one a filigree oakleaf, the other an acorn. "You didn't make these, did you?" She ducked her head, suddenly shy, and Merlin's brows darted up to his hairline. "You did? God, they're brilliant, though! They're really good, like something from a shop!"

"Thanks," she said, glancing up through her eyelashes. "I learned it from my Dad. I sell them on etsy and ebay and stuff, when I can." She shrugged. "It's nothing special – I mean, I'm still learning..."

"Can you get a ruddy move on?" snapped a voice from somewhere behind the girl, and they both jumped, and then giggled some more like naughty children. Merlin grabbed the bag out of her hands, his breath still coming in giddy, hitching gasps as he tried to stifle his laughter, and reached up to stuff it more securely into the luggage compartment. She looked rather impressed – not to say startled – at the ease with which he manhandled it into place, and Merlin found himself wishing he could explain that it wasn't just muscle-power he was using to boost it up – but of course he couldn't. He felt like a bit of a fraud.

"Wow," she said. "You make it look like it's full of feathers! I would never have thought - I mean, not that you look like a wimp, I didn't mean that," she added hurriedly, her eyes suddenly widening in remorse, "Just, you know – wow!"

"I'm a professional dancer," he said, in a modest voice. "I'm lithe and toned and have muscles in places you wouldn't believe. It's all from doing the Hammer Dance." He winked at her, and wiggled his bum as he shoved his own rucksack into a space that was probably too narrow for it to fit into, if one paid attention to little things like the traditional laws of physics. Gwen made a helpless choking sound behind him as he sang in time to his wiggles: "Doodoo dooodoo! Doodoo! Doo! Hammer Time!"

"Oh my God, you are so totally sitting with me, you Hammer-dancing lunatic. Come on. I'll buy you a horrible coffee to apologise for assaulting you with a set of engineering text books, and you can promise to never ever try to dance ever again." Merlin blinked a little at the press of her warm dry
fingers curling around his hand, but he followed her willingly just the same. This was his brave new world, after all, and meeting strangers was going to be his main occupation during Freshers Week. No harm in getting some practice in.

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They quickly secured a block of four seats with a table in the middle, and sat down grinning across at each other.

"Hey, it's not really Merlin, is it?" Gwen asked, looking at him sidelong. "I mean – really really? You're pulling my leg, right? I mean – nobody's called Merlin. Why would any woman name her baby after an old man with a long white beard and a pointy hat? It's like calling your baby Gandalf."

Merlin looked back at her helplessly. People were always asking that, and there was simply no easy way to explain it. The truth – that Hunith had abandoned 'Gareth' and opted for 'Merlin' after the first time she'd watched wide-eyed as her brand new baby boy summoned his bottle across the room and into his chubby little fist and gurgled at her with golden eyes – was simply not the kind of thing one could admit out loud. He was lucky he hadn't been called Gandalf.

"Um," he said, with an apologetic shrug, and Gwen's smile faltered.

"Oh my God – I mean – I mean, not that it's a bad name!" she said, stumbling over her tongue in her haste to undo it. "It's a lovely name! So unique! And special! You'll definitely be remembered! Not like Gwen – loads of Gwens around, but Merlin, that's really different!"

Merlin snorted, and waved his hands in the air to stem the tide of her words. "It's a ridiculous name," he said. "But it's all I've got. I did try calling myself Mervyn for a bit, at High School, but it didn't take. Merlin it is."

"Well, I like it," she said, seeming determined to make amends for having insulted him.

"Cheers."

"Still, it's a bit – I mean. Merlin. Arthur." Merlin could feel himself starting to redden under her gaze. Will had teased him relentlessly when they discovered that Prince Arthur was going to be attending St Andrews too. Gwen's mouth was twitching irrepressibly. "Oh my God, you're going to be his best friend. You know you are. Merlin and Arthur – it's meant to be! There's no way you aren't going to get pointed out to him, with a name like that. King Arthur and his trusted advisor Merlin!" She made a noise distressingly like a squeal. "You're going to be the next Prime Minister!"

Merlin reached across the table to thwap the top of her head. "Shut UP," he said, flushing harder. He felt like his cheeks were on fire. "Although – what's Gwen short for, exactly?"

"Um."

"No, no, I don't think it's short for Um. Never heard of anyone called Gwen-short-for-Um. Is it Gwendolyn?"

"..."

He perked up, watching the way she bit her bottom lip. "Or is it, could it possibly be – am I sitting next to the future Queen Guinevere, by any chance?"

Gwen sank her head in her hands. "Shut up," she muttered to the tabletop, looking mortified.
"You are? You are! You're called Guinevere! You really are! And you had the nerve to – oh, that's priceless!"

"Oh, shut up and tell me how you take your coffee, Your Wizardliness," said Gwen, glancing up at him ruefully through her curls.

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By the time they had reached the outskirts of London, Merlin knew that Gwen Smith was the first person in her family to go to University, like him; that she had no brothers or sisters, like him; that she had only one living parent, like him; and that she'd harboured a lifelong crush on the Prince of Wales, and was feeling more than a little bit hysterical at the prospect of spending the next four years attending University in a town the size of a postage stamp with the object of her teenage sex fantasies – also like him, although Merlin wasn't sure whether he felt like sharing that particular gem just at this moment.

"That isn't why I applied there," she insisted. "I mean, I know that there must be thousands of girls who filled in their UCAS forms with St Andrews just because they're living some kind of stupid 'Princess Diaries' fantasy and they think they're going to meet him and he'll fall for them and they'll end up with a tiara and a load of corgis, but I'm serious about my career. St Andrews has an excellent engineering department. I was going to apply there long before I heard that's where Arthur was going." She sounded decidedly defensive, and Merlin suspected that she'd repeated this little mantra more than once already. He was pretty familiar with the teasing himself.

He nodded. "I always assumed he'd go to Oxbridge," he said. "Well – not that he sounds like he's much of a boffin, but I think if you're royal they pretty much just let you in, don't they? Not like the rest of us."

"Probably wanted to escape all the comparisons with his parents," suggested Gwen, tipping another packet of sugar into a cup of coffee that was only slightly less horrible than promised, and stirring it with the little plastic stirrer. Her eyes were huge and earnest as she peered over the rim at Merlin. "It's such a beautiful story, isn't it? The way they met at Oxford when she borrowed his jar of Gold Blend, not even realising he was the Prince of Wales at first because he was in the middle of shaving and she was distracted by her friend's dog...oh, they were so in love!"

Merlin took another tentative slurp of his coffee, which may or may not have been Gold Blend, but was certainly rather disgusting, and eyed Gwen dubiously. "You make it sound like a scene in a movie! It probably didn't really happen like that, you know – I mean, it's all PR, isn't it, and spin-doctoring and things? And they must have known each other for years, anyway, because she wasn't exactly a commoner, was she? And she must have known whose door she was knocking on, even if she pretended to be all surprised." She was looking at him like he'd just kicked her puppy, and his voice trailed off. "Um. And anyway, it was a long time before we were born, Gwen – I mean, she died nearly twenty years ago."

"But it's a Timeless Love Story," said Gwen, seriously, and Merlin could practically hear the capital letters. "It's just so – I mean, come on, you must've seen the documentaries, or the miniseries, or that Japanese cartoon?" Merlin shook his head mutely, and carefully didn't mention any of the books or magazines he might possibly have read about Prince Arthur and his family. Especially not the outrageously hot photoshoot in GQ magazine that he'd been hiding under his bed for the past three months, and frantically jerking off to most nights. Nope, definitely not mentioning that. Gwen rolled her eyes. "Uther and Igraine – it's like a modern day Romeo and Juliet!"

"Apart from the bit where he's still alive, and their families weren't in the middle of a vendetta, and they had a son, and..."
"Fine, fine, Captain Pedantry – not like a modern day Romeo and Juliet. God. But you know what I mean. It was really romantic, this fabulous love story, and they were both so good looking and glamorous and in love, and then she died so young..."

"Yeah, okay," Merlin conceded. "It was very sad. And romantic. And they were both ridiculously hot."

"Which is where he gets it from," said Gwen, sighing. "His Royal Hotness."

"I didn't have you down as a Sun reader!"

Gwen made an outraged noise, her eyebrows shooting up to her hairline. "Shut up! I don't read The Sun!"

"That's what they call him."

"And you would know that how? Because you read The Sun?"

"No! God! Because I see it when I'm buying The Guardian!"

"Me too. QED."

"Okay, fair enough." Merlin fiddled with his coffee cup, watching the black liquid swirl around as he tipped it back and forth. "It's weird, though, isn't it? Thinking that we might see him in person. In the street. Or at the Union, or whatever. In lectures, even – although I doubt he's doing Physics or Engineering. But – it's like someone stepping out of a movie and into your life, somehow."

"It's weird," Gwen agreed, staring out through the window and shaking her head slowly. "Really weird." She glanced over at Merlin and the corner of her mouth curved up in a crooked little grin. "You know what else is weird?" She leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table, and Merlin mirrored her movement. "This train journey...thinking about St Andrews waiting up there at the other side of the country, all old and tiny and quaint with its cobbled streets and ruined towers – well, I feel like I'm going to Hogwarts. Like this is the Hogwarts Express. I keep half-expecting someone to produce a chocolate frog card, or cast a spell." Merlin made a little choking sound. "Go on, laugh," she said, shrugging, her mouth twisted in an embarrassed little half-smile as she fiddled with a shiny ringlet of her hair. "I know it probably sounds daft, but it's just – this is so different from my life. I can't believe that this is my life, all of a sudden – a train snaking up through all this rolling green countryside, taking us North to meet a handsome prince. Or at least see him, even if we never actually meet him..."

"I know what you mean," Merlin said, ruefully, thinking about the spell he very nearly cast by accident only minutes earlier. "And I've been thinking the same thing, to be honest." He glanced up at her through his eyelashes and then looked away. "I feel a bit like Harry Potter," he admitted in a small voice, reflecting that she had no idea just how true that statement was.

"Well, you've certainly got the messy black hair for it," she said, nodding. Her irrepressible grin was back full force, and Merlin could see that she had more than half expected to be mocked. He found himself wishing he could explain about Professor Gaius and Doctor Nimueh, and about the kind of text books he had stuffed into the bottom of his rucksack – but that wasn't going to happen. Magic was secret, and secret it should stay. Nobody wanted to go back to the days of witchburnings.

"My hair's not messy!" he said instead, weakly. She raised an eyebrow. "Well – not very messy. Well – yeah, okay, it's a fair cop."

"You just need a pair of round specs and a lightning scar," she added, thoughtfully. "You don't have
"a lightning scar under there somewhere, do you?"

"Fraid not," he said, pushing his hair out of the way to prove it. "And my eyes are the wrong colour."

"You're a fan!" she exclaimed, looking surprised.

"Hey, who hasn't read the books?"

"Most of the lads at my school haven't read the books," she said. "Although they've seen the movies. Well – most of the lads at my school can't read. And they think he's gay." She looked thoughtful. "I'm not sure whether they mean 'crap' or if they think he and Draco were secretly doing it."

"They're idiots if they mean he's crap – and as to him and Draco – well, there's definitely some sexual tension there, but I'd always kind of hoped he'd get together with Ron." There – that was the awkward 'I think you're lovely and I do hope we can be friends but, oh, by the way, please don't get flirty because I'm not really in the vagina business' bit over and done with, thought Merlin with some relief. Gwen blinked at him, and then giggled.

"No way!" she said. "Harry and Ron? I was 'shipping Harry and Hermione like mad. I can't believe Rowling paired him up with Ginny Weasley!"

"Eh, I saw that one coming from Book 1," said Merlin, regretfully. "But a boy can dream."

"Yeah." She stared wistfully down into her coffee for a moment. "We're probably not going to even meet him, are we?" she said, and Merlin knew she wasn't talking about Harry Potter.

He shrugged. "Oh – he's not all that and a bag of crisps," he said, lying through his teeth. "I don't know what all the fuss is about."

Gwen's jaw dropped. "All the fuss is about how he's going to be king, and how he's brave and hot and charming and has the most gorgeous smile ever, and...um. You're kidding, right?"

"I'm kidding," admitted Merlin. "Because – yeah, thinking about Prince Arthur being just another student – just some bloke you might bump into in the chippy - that is pretty mental. Every bit as weird as meeting Hagrid or Dumbledore would be, really."

"Yes! Exactly! Because you've seen him on TV so many times, right? At Christmas and Remembrance Sunday and things like that – I mean, the paparazzi have been pretty good at leaving him alone at school while he's underage, like they promised after what happened with his mother going into labour prematurely while being chased by those bloody photographers, bastards...so he's got this whole aura of mystery going for him too, because we don't really see very much of him."

"He's probably a gigantic prat," Merlin replied, after a moment, swallowing past the lump in his throat. "He probably has bad breath, and terrible BO, and the social skills of, of, of a thing with no social skills, and a saggy bum."

"He does not!"

"He could do."

"He couldn't! His bum's lovely! It's all that football, and rugby, and horse riding, and water polo, and all that manly sport he does!"

"Oh, well, yeah," said Merlin, mentally reviewing a whole slew of photographs and swallowing
again. "Yeah. Unless he has a body double for photoshoots," he added, after a moment, grinning. "Some poor slob who's been sworn to secrecy, and can never confess that he's actually working as Prince Arthur's stunt bottom."

Gwen was in the middle of taking a mouthful of coffee at this point, and managed to inhale it, and then there were several moments of wide-eyed wheezing and spluttering and Merlin had to reach over and pound her on the back until she could breathe again.

"Shut up, you lunatic!" she choked, eventually.

Merlin twinkled at her. "I'm just saying. Nobody has an arse that impossibly peach-like. Not when they're already rich and handsome and going to be king. He's clearly too good to be true." Gwen gave a helpless laugh, pressing her hand over her mouth. "And he's definitely too good for the likes of you and me, Gwen," Merlin added, suddenly glum. "He'll be hanging out with all the Hooray Henrys and Henriettas. Tim Nice-but-Dim and that lot."

"Sloan Rangers," said Gwen, her face falling.

"Whatever. All those posh interbred types with more rooms than they know what to do with and flocks of sheep wandering around on their enormous ancient estates - that's who he'll be hanging out with. Not with a physics student from a grotty little council estate in Cardiff, or an engineering student – however lovely – who lives above her dad's garage in Wembley. Face it – we don't have our own flocks of sheep."

"He might...no, he won't, will he?" Gwen's shoulders slumped. "He'll be a stuck up git."

"He'll be a stuck up git," agreed Merlin. "An appallingly hot, appallingly rich, going-to-be-our-king-one-day, stuck up git."

They both stared sadly at the battered linoleum of the tabletop between them. "I bet you could rustle up a few sheep in your garden," said Gwen, after a while. "You're from Wales."

"Oi! Enough with the stereotyping, thank you very much! We don't all get handed a sheep at birth, you know!" Merlin said, in mock-outrage. "We could only afford a picture of a sheep, in our house. A second-hand picture. Of an ugly sheep. We were saving up to buy a plastic one to put in the garden one day, next to the garden gnome."

"You had a garden gnome?"

"Well, for a bit. But then it got nicked."

"No!"

"Yeah. Gnome-napped. It's a rough estate – no gnome is safe."

"You do talk a lot of rubbish, you know," Gwen said, shaking her head and trying not to laugh.

Merlin dimpled back at her. "I'm not always like this," he admitted, more quietly. "I feel almost drunk today – do you know what I mean? Sort of reckless and hopeful and all bubbling over, somehow."

Gwen gave him an unexpectedly shy grin. "I know exactly what you mean," she agreed. "Everything looks different today. I feel like a character in a movie, or the heroine of a book, or something. I feel like I could do anything. Unstoppable. I'm not normally quite this..." she waved her hands in the air vaguely.
"Bubbly? Friendly? Likeable? Disarming? Pretty? Prone to hitting total strangers over the head with engineering text books?"

"Outgoing!" she said, covering her laugh ineffectually with the back of her hand.

Merlin wanted to hug her, all of a sudden, but there was a table in the way, so instead he reached into his pocket and produced a slightly battered KitKat. "You're brilliant, Gwen Smith," he said. "I'm really glad you tried to knock me unconscious with half a dozen engineering text books. Chocolate?"

"Ooh! I knew I liked you for a reason!" she exclaimed. "I mean, you know, not that you're not – I didn't mean..." she stumbled to a halt, blinking at him, and then smiled. "Yes please."

"That's my girl."

And so they sat and munched contentedly in silence for a moment or two, watching the outskirts of the bustling city beyond the thumb-smeared glass gradually give way to unbounded green.
Chapter 2

The door was open a crack when Merlin reached his room in St Salvator's Hall, and he could hear voices inside, and what sounded rather a lot like The Rolling Stones. Evidently his room mate had arrived bright and early and settled in already. Room mate. God. Merlin took a deep breath and tried to soothe the butterflies in his stomach, reminding himself that he hadn't done magic in front of anyone by accident for years. Or – well, months, at least. And that had just been Will, so it didn't count.

He could do this.

Merlin squared his shoulders and stuck out his chin, conscious that there was some kind of University Security Guard bloke watching him curiously, and then pushed the door open with a sensation a little bit like stepping off a cliff onto an invisible bridge.

"Hi!" he said, sunnily – and then he almost tripped over his own feet as he registered who he was looking at: The Right Honourable Gawain Seabag-Montefiore, Kay FitzEctor, and, bending down to grab something out of a suitcase that was probably worth twice as much as Merlin's house and all its contents, that would be His Royal Highness Arthur Pendragon, Prince of Wales. Merlin would have recognised that peach-like arse anywhere, even if the sight of his two best mates, familiar from interviews and the very occasional photoshoot, hadn't given the game away.

Arthur rose and turned around in one swift, graceful movement, and then Merlin was looking straight at the subject of entirely too many furtive wank fantasies and sweaty wet dreams. He nearly swallowed his own tongue.

"Hello," Arthur was saying, smiling a polite, guarded, public sort of smile as he clasped Merlin’s astonished hand in a firm grip and his eyes raked Merlin up and down in an assessing way. Merlin just gaped at him like a stranded fish, frantically trying to remember any English words of greeting. Or any words, in any language at all.

"Mmph!" he said, articulately, feeling his entire body flushing a startled, urgent crimson.

"I'm Arthur," said Arthur, in what must have been the most entirely redundant sentence in the history of creation – because, really, Merlin was pretty sure that even Amazonian tribespeople who'd never tasted Coca Cola could probably pick Prince Arthur out of a lineup. "We're going to be sharing a room, apparently," he continued, with a heartiness that sounded only slightly forced. After a moment he glanced down at his hand and his brow crumpled in an embarrassed frown. "Er – you can probably let go now. Please."

"Oh!" said Merlin, mortified, and he let go of Arthur's hand and swallowed hard. His whole body was thrumming with adrenaline, and he wanted nothing more than to turn around and run all the way back to Wales. "Sorry! I just – er – sorry!" he said. He stared from Arthur to his friends and back again, and if his eyes weren't actually standing out on stalks they were coming as close as humanly possible to doing so. "Really?" he added, unable to help himself. "I mean – really?"

Arthur gave an uncomfortable half-laugh, glancing over at Kay and Gawain. "Er – yes. Is that going to be a problem?"

Merlin did his stunned codfish impression some more, flailing around for some way to express his utter, bone-deep astonishment at this turn of events. "No?" he ventured.

"Good," said Arthur, with just a trace of sarcasm edging his voice.
"Only – I thought – well, I pretty much assumed that you'd be staying over at New Hall. Where they have single rooms. And ensuites with all the mod cons," blurted Merlin. "Not sharing a room in Sally's. Why are you sharing a room in Sally's?"

Arthur frowned. "Because I lost a bet, if you must know. With my father." He stared at Merlin, looking puzzled and a touch irritated. "You weren't expecting this, then? They didn't get you to sign things – Official Secrets Act, all that?"

"No?"

"Oh. Bugger. Well – I expect someone will be along in a bit. That's – I don't quite know how that happened, actually." He looked increasingly annoyed, but was obviously trying to hide it. "Well – sorry if this sounds, you know, rude, but basically if you touch any of my stuff, or take photos of me or my friends, or tape conversations, or sell your story to the press, or – basically, if you act like a dick, right? Well, we're talking Tower of London, pretty much. That's the Cliff Notes version."


"Sorry?"

"Like, if you borrow my music, or spill coffee on my books, or – well, if you act like a dick, basically. Can I perform a citizen's arrest? I mean, this is a democracy, right? We're all equal in modern Britain, aren't we?"

"Oh, bloody hell, he's a communist," muttered Gawain, looking entertained. "You've got a right one here, Arthur."

"If I act like a dick?" repeated Arthur, staring at Merlin as though he'd just crawled out from under a particularly disgusting rock. "If I mess with your things?" He looked Merlin up and down, taking in his Primark t-shirt and his ancient trainers with one eloquently arched eyebrow. "I really don't think you need to worry, but if it helps I promise I'll replace anything I damage with something of equal value."

"Like a stick of gum," murmured Kay, sniggering.

"I can see why you have to swear people to secrecy, if this is how you act when you're not around a reporter," blurted out Merlin, feeling cheated. "You really are a massive prat, aren't you? A smug, self-entitled, patronising git."

Arthur gaped, but he didn't reply straight away – Merlin got the impression that he was having to force himself to bite his tongue. "Well," he said at last. "I can see that this is going to be an interesting year, Mr...?"


Arthur froze, and after an astonished moment Gawain and Kay both cracked up. Arthur closed his eyes and bowed his head, looking pained.

"Merlin?" he said quietly. "Really? You're not taking the piss?"

"Merlin," said Merlin, through gritted teeth.

"And he's Welsh," pointed out Kay, thoughtfully. "They've put the Prince of Wales in with a
Welshman. That's kind of funny, really."


"Yes, because it must suck so terribly to be rich and popular and famous and own an entire country," hissed Merlin. "And what do you mean, unwashed? I'm perfectly clean!"

Arthur looked pointedly at the coffee stain on the front of Merlin's t-shirt, and didn't say a word.

"Come on, Wart," said Gawain, standing up. "Beddy's going to be wondering where we are."

"Right," said Arthur. He was trying not to glare, but his face was still pale and angry as he pointed stiffly towards the bed. "I've taken the bed by the window – I hope that's to your liking, Mr Emrys? Not too dicklike?"

"It's fine," snapped Merlin. "Of course you'd hog the best view."

"Oh, for the love of...fine," said Arthur, marching over and moving his bag closer to the other bed instead. "There you are – it's yours. Enjoy the scenery."

"Don't do me any favours, Your Royal Highness," said Merlin, crossing his arms in front of his chest, and Arthur threw his arms up in the air.

"Fine! Whatever! Pick one, and tell me when I get back – I don't care, it's just a bed, for God's sake." He reached down to snag his iPod from the rather nifty (and doubtless criminally expensive) set of speakers, and the music cut out abruptly. "Try not to mess up any of my stuff, if that's not too much to ask, Chairman Mao?"

"I wouldn't touch your stuff if you paid me!"

"Great – that should work out nicely, then. God – come on, lads; can't keep Bedevere waiting. And I really need a drink." And with that, the subject of most of Merlin's filthiest sexual fantasies strode out of his bedroom, followed by two big, strapping, upper class rugby player-types with enough money between them to buy most of Cardiff. The door closed behind them with a finality that wasn't quite a slam, and Merlin sat down on the edge of one of the beds, his legs suddenly trembling beneath him.

"Oh my God," he said, into the suddenly quiet room, staring blankly across at the magnolia paint on the wall. "Oh. My. God."

* * *

Most students didn't have to worry about matriculating for several days yet, but Merlin Emrys was not most students, so once he'd finished hyperventilating and flailing, and had unpacked some of his things, and changed into a clean t-shirt, he set out in search of Professor Gaius.

The St Andrews Prospectus listed a fairly wide array of different schools, but The School of Sorcery was not one of them. Nevertheless, for those in the know, it was no secret that when St Andrews University had been founded back in 1411, one of its primary goals was the preservation of magical learning. Unlike the other Schools, The School of Sorcery did not have one specific location; the English Department might be happily ensconced in Castle House, opposite the ruins of St Andrews Castle, and the Physics Department might be lodged in an appropriately bright and shiny new building, but one could access the School of Sorcery from any of the University buildings in the town. There was always a door somewhere, one that normal mortal eyes would skate straight past.
One with a stylised dragon carved into the wood, or painted on, or even sketched on with chalk, if need be. Those were the doors into the School of Sorcery, and they led, so Merlin had been informed, one to the other, a network of chambers looking out onto completely different vistas. If you went far enough, and knew the right words to say as you traced the outline of the dragon, you might step into a chamber in France, or Morocco, or China, or Maine, and find your fellow sorcerers discussing levitation or the theory of time travel in half a hundred different languages or more.

So Merlin left his possessions behind him alongside those belonging, impossibly, to Prince Arthur, and slipped his key into his pocket, pulled the threads of unseeing around him and set off unnoticed through the bustling corridors in search of a red wooden door with a dragon on it. He knew there would be one somewhere in St Salvator's Hall – and sure enough, within ten minutes he'd found it. He bit his lip, drew a deep breath, and murmured the words that would make the carved dragon stretch and yawn and twist beneath his fingertips.

"Young Merlin!" it said, in a voice like a rusty gate, blinking sulphurous eyes impossibly as it writhed through the wood like an eel in water. "Back so soon?"

"What?" Merlin stared at it. "I haven't – this is my first time here, Master Dragon."

The dragon laughed, and Merlin marvelled that nobody in the corridor seemed to hear its eerie echo. "This is nobody's first time here, my boy," it said. "Have you met the Prince yet?"

"I – well, yes," said Merlin, thoroughly wrong-footed. "We're sharing a room."

"Already! My goodness, my lad, you don't waste any time!"

"What? No, I mean – no! Not like that!" Merlin couldn't quite believe that he was talking to a door, let alone that he was having this particular conversation with a door. "He's a complete pillock."

"That's what you said the last time," it croaked, sounding thoroughly amused. "I see that a leopard never changes its spots."

"You...are strange, and impossible, and seem to have quite the wrong end of the stick. Sir," said Merlin, trying hard not to be rude – he'd been told in no uncertain terms the folly of irritating the Dragon. "Um. Please can I see Professor Gaius?"

"Since you ask so nicely, wizardling," replied the dragon, smiling like a shark. "Enter in peace."

"Er. Thank you?" Merlin said, turning the handle gingerly and stepping into the room beyond.

* * *

The room before him was a warm, cosy sort of office with books lining every wall from floor to ceiling, and an open fireplace set into the middle of one such wall. The window opposite Merlin looked out onto a scene that was quite evidently not St Andrews: no narrow cobbled streets, no stark grey stone or wind-swept sea, no golf course, no students. Instead he found himself looking out over a scene that looked suspiciously like St James's Park – ah, the marvels of the School of Sorcery's intricate geography. Glancing around, Merlin saw a cluttered desk piled high with papers and books and empty coffee mugs and a disembowelled timepiece, with a laptop sitting in the middle of the chaos, ornamented by a half-eaten Jaffa Cake. And in one of the high wing back chairs arranged around the fireplace, Merlin espied a gentleman of advanced years, peering down at a leather-bound book through a pair of half-moon specs. Gwen, Merlin reflected a little wistfully, would have found this as satisfyingly Hogwarts-like as she could possibly have wished.

He waited on the threshold for a moment, but when the old gentleman failed to look up, he gave a
pointed little cough.

"Professor Gaius, sir?" he said, trying not to sound nervous. This was it, though; his teacher, Mrs Singh, had done a fine job of helping him keep his magic under control, and she had been able to give him a decent grounding in the basics despite her own limited powers, but wizardry was such a rarity these days that he'd had nothing like a proper education. He knew enough to try to keep himself, and those around him, out of harm's way. But here, now – this was the beginning of a whole new life, and Merlin was startled by the rush of nerves he felt at the thought of making a bad impression. This was where Merlin could hope to master the power thrumming in his veins, and to learn the full extent of what was possible in this world – in all the worlds. This was where he stepped up and learned what it meant to be a wizard.

"Sir?" he said again, a little louder this time, and the old gentleman's head snapped up. "Professor Gaius, sir, I was hoping I could have a quick word with you? Please?" he said, smiling hopefully.

"Office hours don't start until tomorrow," said the professor, absently, studying Merlin bright-eyed with his head cocked to one side, for all the world like a curious bird eyeing something that might perhaps be lunch. "Do I know you, boy?"


"Oh!" said Gaius, sitting up straighter and laying his book down on the fragile looking inlaid wooden table, beside a delicate cup and saucer patterned with pansies and curls of ivy. "Merlin Emrys, as I live and breathe! Hunith's boy, hmm? Yes, I knew your father." That stilled Merlin's tongue as nothing else could have. "You have a certain look of him, you know," Gaius added, nodding thoughtfully. "St Andrews, hmm? Well, well – so few British wizards these days. I seem to spend most of my time seeing bright young things from Salem and Beijing and Al Azhar University. It'll be nice to teach a local lad for a change."

"Oh," said Merlin, boggling a little. "That's – thank you, I think. Um – about that. I was wondering – do you know that they've put me in a room with Prince Arthur?" He swallowed. "I mean – I knew that I'd have to be careful no matter who my room mate was, of course, but – Prince Arthur? Quite aside from the fact that he's a smug, arrogant, self-satisfied idiot, surely that's going to mean bodyguards and, and secret service agents, and maybe paparazzi and all kinds of people watching him? And, by association – me?"

"Yes," said Professor Gaius, watching him narrowly.

Merlin swallowed. "Well, that's – I mean, that's not really ideal, you know? I've never even shared a room before, let alone had to worry about screwing up on camera and waking up to Youtube clips of me outing myself as a wizard."

Gaius blinked at him owlishly. "Then I suggest that you learn some discretion, young man, and quickly," he said.

"Um," said Merlin. "Right. But – right. So – you're okay with this, then? It doesn't worry you?"

Professor Gaius cracked a smile. "My dear child, I authorised it. If Mrs Singh is to be believed, you are far and away the most gifted wizard of your generation. The most powerful wizard in Britain is always kept close to the king – or queen – to be ready with protection or advice as needed. In time, that role will fall to you. I'm just helping you to prepare for your destiny."

Merlin felt his jaw dropping. "For my – you – the most powerful – now hang on just a minute," he
protested, his eyes opening saucer-wide. "You're saying that I'm supposed to protect that overbearing – that it's my destiny to work with him? For him? To be his, what, his court wizard? Like the other Merlin?"

"Exactly so."

"But..." said Merlin, waving his hands around frantically. "But he's an idiot!"

Gaius arched his brows, and studied Merlin in silence for several long, awkward moments. Merlin was fairly sure you couldn't be sent to the Tower of London for calling the heir to the throne an idiot, but something about the glint in Gaius's eye made him start to wonder about that. "Really?" the old man said at last. "Well, that's a shame. But he's still going to be your king, and your responsibility, so you'd best find a way to deal with it."

"Oh." Merlin swallowed. "So does he – does he know about me, then? If my destiny is to be his protector and advisor and all this?"

"As far as the prince is concerned, you are just another student. I would suggest you try to keep it that way. Any other questions?"

"Er," he said, after a longish pause. "No?"

"Splendid. Well, I'll see you for your first tutorial next Monday morning then, bright and early at nine o'clock. Do enjoy Freshers' Week, my lad – and try not to do anything irreparably foolish, there's a good boy."

And with that, Professor Gaius picked up his book and returned to reading it, and Merlin knew he was dismissed.

"Right," he said, blankly. "I'll – I'll be going, then. Thank you, sir."
Hey, Gwen – how's McIntosh Hall?

Brilliant! How's Sallies?

View good, mattress soft, roommate total plonker. Yours?

She seems OK. Sorry you got plonker. Want to meet later & go to Union together?

God, yes please!

* * *

It was the tail-end of summer, but apparently that meant something rather different on the East coast of Scotland than it did in Wales, and by the time Merlin got to Gwen's Hall of Residence he was wishing he'd brought a coat, rather than just pulling on a black v-neck jumper. It was good being back by the sea with the lick of salt on his skin again after all those hours on the train, but there was also a strangeness to looking out over a different sea; the view outside his bedroom window was of an ocean darker and colder and wilder than the one he was used to. Or perhaps that was just the magic talking; he was used to Cardiff, after all, and its particular ghosts and quirks and hot spots. St Andrews was still an unknown quantity. He was probably just projecting.

Gwen was bouncing on her toes in front of McIntosh Hall when Merlin arrived to pick her up at 9pm sharp and whisk her around the corner to the Students' Union. Unlike the decidedly Hogwarts-like structure of St Salvator's Hall, McIntosh looked like what it was: a turn-of-the-century hotel curling around Abbotsford Crescent like a drowsy cat. In front of it, Gwen was unmissable, her bright dress a shock of crimson and pink against the drab stonework; Merlin couldn't help noticing that she seemed to have acquired an outrageously gorgeous bloke in the handful of hours since he'd seen her last.

"Looks like you don't need me!" he said ruefully, and they both started a little and turned to face him. And – wow, yes, her newfound friend was absolutely stunning. Not that Gwen was looking at him now – all her attention was concentrated on Merlin, and she was beaming at him like he was her long lost brother. New guy looked decidedly less than thrilled about this, and the dirty look he sent Merlin was enough to make him burst out laughing. Fair play to you, Milady Guinevere, he thought, and grinned right back at her.

"Merlin!" she said, as if she'd known him for years, and then she bounded forward and gave him a hug. Merlin stood there like a scarecrow for a moment, wide-eyed, and then tentatively hugged her back. She felt nice – soft and curvy and strong, and her hair smelled like grapefruit and vanilla. He couldn't remember the last time someone who wasn't his mum had hugged him; he was pretty sure that getting off with random blokes in nightclubs didn't count as hugging. It was – sweet.

"Hey, you," he said into her hair, feeling something in his chest tighten unexpectedly. "I missed you."

"Me too!" she said, letting go but sliding her hands down over his arms until she was holding his hands. "I think it's absolutely stupid and wrong that you're in Sally's! You should move to Chattan, with us! That's what they call it, you know," she said, nodding knowledgeably. "Chattan."

"Chattan. Short for McIntosh? Not Tosh, or Mac's – Chattan. Right. Obviously."
"Obviously!" agreed Gwen, giggling. "We're much nicer! And then you wouldn't have to put up with your plonker of a roommate!"

"You make a compelling argument," he agreed, nodding. I'll try to put my case to the Dean in the morning. Chattan is much nicer; roommate is a plonker. Check."

"Oh, you," she said, wrinkling her nose at him. "This is Lance!" she added, directing her smile over at the insanely attractive man beside her. Merlin had to say that he was pretty damned flattered that anyone would consider prioritising a trip to the Union with him over getting better acquainted with this Lance bloke. Better acquainted in a naked, sweaty, unspeakably filthy fashion, for preference.

"Hi, Lance," he said, ducking his head in Lance's general direction. Lance smiled back – or at least, he bared his teeth, which was almost the same thing. Merlin had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing.

"Hi," said Lance reaching out a hand that Merlin rather suspected was going to be bone-crushing. He let go of Gwen and accepted the handshake, and managed not to buckle under the pressure of Lance's Very Manly Indeed deathgrip of macho posturing.

"He's going to be my Academic Dad!" said Gwen, cheerfully oblivious. "Isn't that fantastic?"

Merlin did laugh out loud then. "You make me feel like such a slacker!" he exclaimed. "I haven't even finished unpacking, and you've already got yourself an Academic Father? Bloody hell, Gwen – you don't waste any time!"

She dimpled at him. "Well, I'd been worrying about it," she said simply. "Lance is one of the Hall Wardens – he's a third year – and I was asking him about it. Because, you know, you've only got eight weeks to find an Academic Family before Raisin Weekend, and I could just imagine that I'd be the only sad little Billy Nomates left with no Academic Mum or Dad, because I couldn't see myself going up and wishing myself on people, you know? It seems so pushy." She pulled a face. "And I was asking Lance how he did it, when he was a Fresher – and then he just offered!" Her face lit up, and she beamed over at Lance again. "Wasn't that kind?"

"Very," said Merlin, grinning ruefully as he looked Lance up and down. "Well, if I'd known they were giving away hot blokes with every room, I'd definitely have put my name down for McIntosh Hall." Lance made a startled noise, and his territorial expression shifted rather quickly into something entirely different and almost maiden auntish as Gwen punched Merlin's arm.

"Shut up, Captain Hammer!" she exclaimed, trying not to giggle. "It's not like that!"

It's exactly like that, Merlin thought, watching Lance as he watched Gwen hide her laugh behind her hand, and feeling almost completely happy for her, and only a very little bit jealous. Just so long as this Lance bloke was kosher; he'd heard some pretty mixed stories about Raisin Weekend, and it sounded like having an Academic Dad who wanted to get into your pants was a decidedly mixed blessing. He fixed Lance with a gimlet gaze, and reminded himself that if the guy stepped out of line, Merlin could turn him into a frog. Literally. He'd looked that up, because it was one of the classics, and if this guy hurt Gwen he'd definitely find himself living in a pond in the near future.

"Come on, slowpokes!" said Gwen, grabbing Merlin's arm with one hand and Lance's with another. "Let's go and mingle, like proper students."

Merlin coughed, as they set off down the road together. "I'm pretty sure that mingling is for cheese and wine receptions. Proper students – I think they're more focussed on 2-for-1 special offers, and vomiting up pints of snakebite-and-black all over the neighbours' steps."
Gwen pulled a face. "Right – true, true. Well – I don't mind snakebite-and-black, but can we avoid the vomiting bit?"

"I think it's mandatory," said Merlin apologetically. "Especially with snakebite-and-black. God, have you tried that stuff? It's lethal!"

Lance gave her a slightly sheepish grin. "It's okay," he said. "I'll be your designated driver – I'm not big on the alcohol."

"I don't need a designated driver," said Gwen, looking at him sidelong. "It's a three minute walk! It would take longer to get a car started than it would to get there!"

"Right – well, designated guard dog, then. Or knight in shining armour, or guardian angel, or overprotective Dad – whatever you want to call it. I don't drink, so, you know – I'll make sure you're okay. Promise."

Merlin could feel his eyebrows steepling. "Mate," he said, staring at Lance. "Seriously? You're a teetotaler? At a Scottish University? How is that even possible? Aren't there laws against that kind of thing?"

"It wasn't on the UCAS form," said Lance, seriously. "So they let me in." There was a startled pause, and then all three of them cracked up.

"Well, fair play to you," said Merlin, a few moments later. "You must have the self-control of a saint." He shook his head incredulously. "Scottish measures, and the best whisky in the world..."

Lance shrugged. "I'm a Buddhist," he said. "It's a lifestyle thing. Well – and, plus, my dad's a Muslim, so it's not like we're big on the booze at home. I did try drinking when I was in my teens – tried pretty much everything, actually – sex, drugs and rock and roll, bacon sarnies, all that. But it was just a phase I was going through, trying to figure out my place in the world, you know? I mean, my Mum's a lapsed Catholic, my Dad's a lapsed Muslim, and I was at a C of E school...I was trying to figure it all out. And then I did." He shrugged. "Buddhism makes sense to me."

"Well – okay," said Merlin, trying not to do the stunned codfish thing. "Er – you're not a monk, though, right?"

Lance snorted. "Not a monk," he said, and glanced sideways at Gwen.

"And – hey, hang on," said Merlin, as they joined the queue of students lining up outside the Students' Union building. "If you're Gwen's Academic Dad now – doesn't that mean you're supposed to throw your kids a party on Raisin Monday? Get everyone plastered? Is it just going to be tea and cakes and incense?"

"Raisin Sunday," said Lance, grinning.

"I like tea and cakes," interrupted Gwen, loyally. "Tea and cakes would be lovely."

"If you want tea and cakes, you can certainly have tea and cakes – but I'm not against other people drinking. I was planning on doing the traditional vodka jelly, brightly coloured punch of doom, embarrassing drinking games thing, same as everyone else." He shrugged. "Just means that you'll have me looking out for you, and making sure nobody needs their stomach pumped, and that everything stays strictly consensual." He raked a hand through his hair. "Raisin weekend can be a fantastic time, but it's also an ideal opportunity to take advantage of people when they're vulnerable, you know? All those first years sloshed out of their minds, making bad decisions because they're desperate to fit in – and there are some real jerks out there. I do a lot of voluntary work with the
Student counselling service, and here at the Union, and I've seen some things that – well. Not good things." His face had gone rather white, and his mouth was a tight-lipped little line. "I try to do my bit to keep everyone safe."

"Lance is a vegan too," Gwen informed Merlin, admiringly.

"You're a teetotalling vegan in Scotland?" Merlin gasped, and Lance ducked his beautiful head a little, looking embarrassed. "Good grief – you really don't like making your life easy, do you?"

"My Dad disapproves of the veganism," he admitted, sheepishly. "But it's not so hard, really. It feels good, knowing who I am, and what I want out of life. Being mindful in all things."

Merlin studied Lance, trying not to be too damned obvious about it. He wasn't at all sure if this guy was for real, or if he was playing some kind of elaborate joke, with all this holier-than-thou schtick. There was a disconcerting intensity to the man. Merlin wanted to like him, but he wasn't at all sure what to make of him. He did seem a bit too good to be true.

"Lance is going to teach me kick boxing too," said Gwen, cheerfully. Merlin felt his mouth twitching; he had a feeling that there were going to be an awful lot of sentences starting with "Lance says..." or "Lance likes..." in the near future. He really hoped the guy wasn't trying to pull a fast one. Freshers' Week did have a certain unsavoury reputation.

"I teach classes on a Wednesday at the Union," Lance was saying, with a modest little shrug. "Gwen's already got a brown belt in Judo – it sounds like she could teach me a thing or two. But she's going to come along. You're welcome to join her?"

"No, no," said Merlin, hastily. "Not my thing, thanks."

"I.D?" Somehow they'd reached the front of the queue already, and Merlin had to fumble in his pockets for his wallet and his newly-acquired student ID badge.

"Hey, Lance!" said the girl in the doorway, a tall, slim creature with leprechaun-green hair and the body of a dancer. Her face lit up at the sight of him – although she didn't look too thrilled about Gwen.

"Hi, Elaine," he said, smiling back easily as he flashed her his I.D. Card. "How's things?"

"Oh, you know me – busy busy busy," she said, grinning.

"Elaine's my prize student," said Lance. She gave a short nod, smoothing down the sleeves of her fishnet top. "If you come along on Wednesday you can see her in action," he added.

Merlin looked at her biceps and swallowed. "Yeah – no thanks," he said, with a watery grin. "I've got a suspicion she'd crush me like a bug."

Lance laughed out loud as they walked into the union. "Well, yes, she probably would," he agreed, raising his voice to be heard over the pulse of the music. "She's very good. But that's why you should come along! To make yourself a bit less crushable!"

"I'm good, thanks," said Merlin, firmly. "I can handle myself okay, if I really have to." He had to shout to be heard; all around them people were talking, shouting, drinking and dancing, while the sound system blared out "Paparazzi" at full volume – which was kind of weirdly appropriate, Merlin thought, what with his roommate issues.

Gwen bit her lip and glanced up at them. "Would you hate me forever if I left you for five minutes?"
she asked. "I need the ladies' room. I know I should have gone before we left, but I was caught up talking, and I didn't get around to it. Can you wait for me?"

"Until the stars fall from the sky," said Lance, bowing with an elaborate flourish that made Gwen roll her eyes.

"Five minutes should do it, depending on the size of the queue," she said dryly, and swished off into the crowd. She'd changed out of the jeans and hoody that she'd been wearing on the train, and now she was wearing a little pink-and-red dress that screamed "salsa!" under a battered black leather jacket. Merlin had had no notion that she was hiding such good legs. He watched Lance's eyes follow her until she was lost in the crowd, and found himself reaching a decision.

"Look," he said, leaning forward, awkward but determined. "Don't take this as some kind of macho posturing thing, because that's really not me – but, just so we're clear on this, if you hurt Gwen in any way, I will break you." He watched Lance's eyes widen in astonishment, and then anger, and then amusement, and then folded his arms in front of his chest. "Seriously. I do not give a flying fuck if you're Bruce Lee – I know things you don't, and I can hurt you. And if you are messing around with her right now – if this is some kind of mind game thing, then I will." He shrugged. "I know it's called 'Fuck a Fresher Week', okay? And you – I mean, you seem okay, but Gwen is not just a notch for your bedpost. Just on the off-chance that you're planning on being a fuckwit. Don't."

Lance stared at him with an unreadable expression, and for a moment Merlin thought that he might be about to get punched in the face. Or in the solar plexus, or the groin, or wherever the hell you aimed for if you were a badass, kickboxing, vegan, teetotal ninja. Then Lance smiled, and Merlin felt the knot of tension in his belly relax.

"You're okay, Merlin," Lance said, reaching over to ruffle Merlin's hair, of all things. "That was – unexpectedly ballsy. Dumb, but ballsy. I mean – you know I could snap you like a twig, right?"

Merlin glared at him, unimpressed. He knew his own powers. "You could try," he said shortly. "You might be in for a bit of a surprise."

Lance cocked his head and looked at Merlin. "Well, maybe I might, at that. Cool. It's good to know Gwen's got good friends here – she's pretty amazing, isn't she?" His eyes lit up, and Merlin felt himself relaxing. "So how long have you two known each other?" Lance asked, and Merlin started to redden.

"Er," he said, sheepishly. "Nearly twelve hours? Give or take?"

Lance looked at him blankly for a moment, and then they both burst out laughing. "Oh my God!" Lance wheezed. "I thought – I thought for sure you must have known her since primary school!"

"Just since breakfast time," said Merlin, raggedly, and they both collapsed again.

"She's quite something," Lance said, gasping, a little later, and he looked so outrageously beautiful, with his face lit up like that, that Merlin would have been quite seethingly jealous of Gwen if not for the fact that (a) Lance was very very clearly straight, and (b) Gwen was just that damned nice.

"Yeah," agreed Merlin, catching sight of her as she emerged from the crowd. "She is that."

"Hey," said Lance, still smiling as he watched Gwen come bounding across the Union floor, "Look, do you want an Academic Dad too? It would be nice for Gwen, and you could make sure that my intentions are strictly honourable and all that. You seem like a good guy."
Merlin was startled by the rush of warmth he felt at this offer. "Yeah," he said, feeling a little choked. "Yeah, cheers, mate. That would be cool." Lance flashed him a smile, and Merlin could suddenly see just why Gwen was starting so many sentences with "Lance says..." and "Lance can...", because if this guy was for real, he was definitely a keeper.

"OhMyGodOhMyGodOhMyGodOhMyJesusFuckingChristOnAPogoStick!" screamed Gwen when she reached them, grabbing hold of Merlin's shoulder and Lance's elbow. She looked shellshocked and starry eyed, and she was doing a sort of frantic, involuntary Snoopy Dance of glee as she stood in front of the two of them. "He's here! He's here he's here he's here HE'S HERE!" she exclaimed, like a five year old on a sugar high. Merlin got a sudden bad feeling about this, but Lance was beaming out of her like she was made out of chocolate and kittens and pixie dust.

"Who?" he asked, foolishly.

"Prince Arthur!" Gwen squealed, and Lance's face fell. "He's actually here! In the Students' Union Bar! Like a normal person! Round the corner! Oh my God!"

"Oh," said Merlin, flatly. Gwen seemed oblivious to her companions' lack of excitement – to be fair, though, she was already excited enough for any five or six normal people – and she tried to tug the two of them in the direction of the bar.

"ComeOnComeOnComeOnComeOn!" she said in a singsong voice. "You should see him! He's sitting at a table! Drinking a beer!"

"How...remarkable," said Lance, dryly.

"Eh, he's nothing special," said Merlin, studying his hands.

Gwen stared at him. "That's not what you said earlier," she pointed out, frowning. "Or – well you did, but you were kidding. Right?"

Merlin shrugged. "I've already met him, okay? And he's a prat."

Gwen's jaw dropped. "You've already...you MET him? Like, spoke to him? And you didn't mention this?"

Merlin pulled a face, hunching in on himself. "Well, yeah," he muttered. "Kind of hard not to. He was in my room when I got there."

"He was – what?" Gwen stared at him with total incomprehension, and Merlin sighed.

"He's my roommate, okay? And he's a smug, arrogant pillock."

"YOU'RE SHARING A ROOM WITH PRINCE ARTHUR?" screamed Gwen, her eyes widening until she looked like a manga cartoon. Heads turned all around the room. "SHUT UP! YOU ARE NOT!"

"Yeah, I really am," said Merlin, glumly. "And yes, he has an amazing arse – no stunt bottom – but unfortunately it turns out that he also is an amazing arse. So can we just drop it now?"

"He's – you – he – what?" Gwen looked like a five year old whose sugar high had just been interrupted by the news that Santa, the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy had all been massacred. Merlin swallowed.

"Well," he said, reluctant to take it back but feeling like a terrible, horrible person for putting that lost
"Maybe you guys just got off to a bad start?" offered Lance, helpfully. Merlin glanced over at Gwen's devoted ninja and decided then and there that they guy was okay – because Lance sure as hell didn't want Gwen mooning over His Royal Hotness, that was obvious, but apparently he couldn't bear to see her looking so crestfallen either. Merlin offered him a grin.

"Yeah," he said reluctantly. "Maybe. Maybe he's okay. But – look, can we just not go and join the adoring fanclub in the bar right now? Please?" He looked at Gwen and sighed. "Look, I promise that you'll get to see him again. In fact I'll text you when he's in the room, so you'll know when's a good time to swing by and visit me in Sally's and meet him properly. I'm sure he'd love to pose for a photo with you, and give you his signature, and all that kind of meet'n'greet thing."

Gwen bit her lip. "Well – okay then," she said, uncertainly. "Um. So – well, we could go through into the dance bit, instead of the bar?"

Merlin smiled. "I thought I wasn't allowed to dance ever again?"

"I'll let you off just this once," she said, grinning back.

* * *

And that's how it came about that the second time Merlin saw Prince Arthur, it was while he was on stage with glitter on his chest and his legs stuck through the arms of his upside-down jumper to make DIY, very unconvincing Hammer Pants, while he led Gwen and Lance and a couple of dozen giggling and inebriated strangers through an impromptu Hammer Dance routine. Merlin was pink cheeked and almost weeping with breathless laughter when he looked up, sweat beading his face and sliding into the hollow of his collarbone, and found Prince Arthur staring at him dumbfounded from the other side of the dance floor, wearing an unreadable expression which Merlin strongly suspected was shorthand for "Oh my God why must I share a room with this sweaty idiotic loser of a peasant?"

And that was why Merlin stopped laughing, and promptly fell over his own feet and off the stage.
Merlin knew that he wasn't the only wizard in St Andrews, of course; Gaius was being cagey about the number of active sorcerers in the British Isles, but Merlin reckoned that in a nation of more than 60 million people there must be at least hundreds, if not thousands, of wizards. It stood to reason that at least a handful of them ought to be in their late teens or early twenties, and currently attending Britain's only School of Sorcery.

"But can they afford it?" Will would have asked – but then, *Merlin* couldn't afford it. That was what the St Andrews-Camelot Scholarship Fund was for: National Lottery money going to a good cause, and incidentally ensuring that the next generation of magic users received a decent education in the process.

So – Merlin knew that they must be out there. It stood to reason. He just didn't know who they were, or whether he'd even get to meet any of them once term started. If they were second or third or fourth year students – or, hell, even postgrads – well, most likely he wouldn't meet anyone unless they were around the same kind of level as him. Which had to mean Freshers. Probably.

It was even possible that he'd already met some other wizards and didn't even know it. This thought drove him quietly insane, and he took to watching strangers with a speculative gleam in his eye that got him a lot of worried looks and several rather surprising offers as he wandered around the Freshers' Fayre contemplating which clubs to join, and wondering where exactly he was going to find the time, between studying theoretical physics, philosophy and history (not to mention his daily tutorials in the use and practice of magic) to have anything approaching a social life.

He was looking quizzically at the Bubble TV stall, when he heard Gwen's laugh and glanced up, a smile already curving his lips in reply.

He spotted her over on the other side of the room, in front of a table advertising the St Andrews Fencing Society. She was standing with a strikingly pretty little brunette whom Merlin hazarded a guess might be the roommate, Sophia – apparently she had family in the town, and had spent the first night catching up with them, but according to Gwen's most recent texts she seemed cool, and from the look of it they were getting on like a house on fire. Merlin would have been surprised by Lance's absence if he hadn't already seen the guy manning the Students' Nightline stall. Lance had pressed a leaflet into Merlin's hand with a guileless smile, assuring him that the overnight phone service was also there to answer practical questions like what time the Kinness Fry Bar was open till, and where you could buy extra strength condoms at 3am – and not just to help out with personal or emotional problems.

"Um. Thanks?" Merlin had said, pondering the likelihood of him needing to make the 3am condom phone call any time in the near future. It still seemed depressingly unlikely. Perhaps if he met somebody who had their own room...somehow he couldn't really see the Prince of Wales taking kindly to being sexiled. He sighed, and then reflected that, after all, plenty of people *did* have their own rooms, and their own flats, even. With that thought in mind, he marched purposefully over to the rainbow-festooned table advertising the St Andrews LGBT Society in cheery glittering letters.

"Sign me up," he said, firmly, grinning at a bald girl with enough silver in her various cavities to sink a small ship. "I'm a card-carrying friend of Dorothy, and I'm gagging for a shag."

She rolled her eyes at him. "Aren't we all? Welcome aboard, mate! Membership's a fiver," she said, grinning back. "We meet on Monday nights at The Victoria Cafe – details down here – and we have regular clubbing trips out of town,"
generally to Edinburgh or Dundee, but sometimes we get over to Glasgow too. We also hook up with the LGBT Socs in other Scottish universities for various different events – you can follow us on Twitter, and we've got a Facebook page, and..."

"Woah! I'm sold! Where do I sign?" interrupted Merlin, raising his hands in surrender.

"Name and contact details here," she said, pushing a clipboard over towards him. "You do realise that we can't guarantee the shag?" she added, mock-earnestly, and then looked him up and down. "Although I can't see that being much of a problem. Especially if Cedric sets eyes on you."

Merlin scribbled down his details and forked out a fiver, feeling reckless and gladiatorial. Not that there was anything scandalous about joining the LGBT Society, as such – but he wasn't exactly out of the closet back on the estate, because, well, because he didn't want his head kicking in. Will knew, obviously, and his Mum, and the various guys he'd demonstrated his lack of heterosexuality with in various clubs probably had a suspicion – but being all Out and Proud about his sexuality was a new thing. It was getting easier each time, though. Brave new world, and all that.

He wondered whether Mrs Singh had mentioned this particular detail to Gaius, and whether it would have mattered; they were, after all, already courting disaster by sticking a half-trained wizard in the same room as the Prince of Wales and assuming that everything would be perfectly hunkydory. Presumably they weren't worried about Arthur being caught up in any Big Gay Love Nest scandal in the pages of *The Sun*. Although – on the other hand, maybe they just didn't know. Maybe if he wore enough pink, and snogged enough blokes in enough public locations, perhaps *then* Gaius would let him move out of His Royal Pratness's precious bedroom. It was certainly worth trying.

Arthur had still been snoring when Merlin left the room that morning. God knew what time he'd finally come in last night, but at least he'd been quiet about it. And, Merlin strongly suspected, also quite staggeringly pissed – certainly Arthur had collapsed on top of the covers fully dressed, shoes still on, and the reek of beer and cigarettes was enough to fell a bear at ten paces. Clearly a good time had been had by all – and Merlin was absolutely not interested in finding out any more about what had happened. Not in the slightest.

He had, however, been obliged to acknowledge to himself, once again, that the Prince of Wales had no need to employ a body double, or a stunt bottom. His arse remained as distractingly, biteably tight and perfect as ever, and his legs were, if anything, even longer than they looked on TV, and his hips narrower. And he had great shoulders. And – and, well, basically Merlin really needed to find a hot guy who wasn't a jerk, or his roommate, or the heir to the throne, and especially not all three, because otherwise he foresaw an awful lot of frantic early morning wanks in the shower cubicle spent biting his knuckles and trying desperately not to shout out Arthur's name for fear of being overheard by the guy in the cubicle next to his. His libido, distressingly, didn't seem at all worried about little things like Arthur being an arrogant dick. (Or, to be perfectly, horrifyingly honest, which he had no intention of being, ever, his libido might just possibly rather like Arthur being an arrogant dick. And Merlin might just possibly have had some rather vivid fantasies about Arthur demanding, in that lazily imperious tone, that Merlin get down on his knees and swallow the royal cock. Just possibly.) But that was because his libido had no taste or conscience, and it took at least two cups of coffee before Merlin was awake enough to remember why he loathed Prince Arthur, and wouldn't be remotely interested in being taken rough and hard by His Royal Hotness in the middle of the eighteenth hole bunker on the Royal and Ancient Golf Course.

"Are you okay?" asked the bald girl, waving her hand in front of his face, and Merlin felt his cheekbones start to crimson.

"Yes!" he said, as embarrassed as if she could read his thoughts upon his skin. He stuffed the bits of
paper in his pocket. "Sorry, I just – er – I was thinking about. Um. Something."

She grinned. "Oh, mate, I know how that one goes. Tall, blond sort of something? Blue eyes? Name rhymes with, er, Quince Barfer?"

"What?" Merlin was sincerely appalled. "No! What? Why would you – I don't know what you're talking about!" he stammered, crossing his arms in front of his chest and glaring at her with his chin sticking out and his spine ramrod-straight.

"Chillax, babe!" she said, arching her pierced brows in surprise. "I'm just saying – it's the Bonnie Prince that's got half of GaySoc all of a flutter right now. Me, I'd rather fuck Isabella Rosselini any day of the week, but it takes all sorts."

"Oh," said Merlin, feeling like a complete fool. "Of course. I didn't – yeah, right. Sorry."

She shrugged. "Whatever. He's not joined, by the way. In case you're wondering. Although I guess anything's possible."

"No, really," said Merlin, with feeling. "I think Isabella Rosselini's much more likely."

"I wish," she sighed. "Oh, I'm Catrina, by the way."

"Merlin," said Merlin. "No, honestly – really and truly Merlin. Since birth," he added, as she drew breath to ask. He knew that expression all too well. "Believe me, it could've been Gandalf, so I'm just grateful for small mercies."

"Merlin?" she said, shaking her head. "That is an awesome name, my friend. Although I bet you're sick of the King Arthur jokes already."

"You have no idea," he agreed, with feeling.

"Well – cheers. See you at the Vic?"

"Count on it," he said, grinning back and fixing the pin to his lapel as conspicuously as possible.

"Oh, marvellous," said a faintly familiar voice behind him, rippling with laughter. "Oh, that's just perfect. Does Arthur know yet?"

Merlin turned around, trying to place the voice, and found himself face to face with a ballerina-thin and quite ridiculously beautiful girl, who was wearing a pair of gigantic glasses which gave her an oddly charming, swan-trying-to-disguise-itself-as-ugly-duckling appearance. She was looking down at his rainbow pin with a highly entertained expression and sucking on a lollipop, and was followed by a dangerous-looking blonde girl in a lot of tight black leather, like something from 'The Matrix', with smudgy eyeliner that was apparently inspired by Captain Jack Sparrow, and a slick of very dark red lipstick. Beside him Catrina made an almost inaudible whimper.

"Er...?" he said, trying to think where he knew her from. "Sorry, are you talking to me?"

"He doesn't, does he? There'd have been even more bitching and whining if he did," she said, decisively. "Oh, this is going to be good." She reached out a hand, and Merlin found himself shaking it unthinkingly without quite knowing whether he liked her or not. "I'm Morgana," she said, watching him with an expression of considerable amusement. "We have the same tutor," she said, pointedly. "Also, I'm your annoying roommate's cousin." She nodded back at her blonde shadow without looking at her. "This is Morgause."
Merlin felt his eyes bulge, as he finally placed her. She looked completely different in jeans and Doc Martens and a moth-eaten grey cardigan, but this was definitely the same Morgana whom he'd occasionally glimpsed in pictures alongside Prince Arthur at various hoity toity events, wearing enormous hats and painfully elegant designer frocks, and smoking like a chimney. Better known as Her Grace the Duchess of Edinburgh. His mum was going to be so impressed by how high he'd gone up in the world when he finally phoned home.

"You – I – he – nguh!" he said, his brain skittering around in astonished circles for a moment, before settling on: " Bloody hell!"

"Yes," she said, grinning. "Quite." She cocked her head on one side as she studied him. "D'you want a coffee?"

"Er," he said, blinking. "Do I have a choice?" From behind Her Grace's shoulder, Morgause was looking him over with a chilly and distinctly predatory expression, as though she were trying to decide if he was worth the trouble of killing. He swallowed hard.

"Well, there's always tea. Or cocoa. Or hot ribena." Morgana raised her eyebrows and hit him with a wounded puppydog look to rival his own, and the bald girl gave another wistful whimper. "You wouldn't make me drink alone, would you?"

"No?" said Merlin.

"Attaboy," she said, hooking one slim arm through his. "We've got so many things to discuss."

* * *

Ten minutes later, Merlin was staring dazedly at the Duchess of Edinburgh from behind a mug of hot chocolate piled high with marshmallows, whipped cream and a Cadbury's chocolate flake, while she took a long drag on the menthol cigarette and ignored the tiny espresso in front of her. Merlin hated marshmallows, but somehow hadn't found the nerve to point this out as she was placing their order. He fiddled with his teaspoon and glanced over at the facade of The Doll's House Restaurant, before which they were currently seated, as if he thought that the cavalry might come bursting out at any moment to save him. Morgause, for some reason, was seated at a different table, her back to the wall and a glass of Perrier sitting in front of her. She looked poised to leap into action at any moment. It was profoundly disconcerting.

"Your friend isn't joining us, then?" said Merlin, at last, feeling baffled.

"She's my bodyguard," said Morgana, watching him with an expression of amusement. "Which isn't to say that she's not also a friend – a very good friend – but she's on duty just now. I respect that."

She flicked the ash from her cigarette and winked over at Morgause in a way that made Merlin speculate wildly about her definition of friend.

"Right," he said. "Of course. Er – do you need an ashtray?" he asked, in a desperate attempt to feel even slightly useful.

"It's no smoking," she said, entirely unrepentant. "So I shouldn't think they have any. Although I bet Richard would find me one if I asked – but the flagstones will do fine." She looked at him through narrowed eyes, catlike and disconcerting. "So then, Harry Potter – d'you fancy my annoying cousin?"

Merlin dropped the teaspoon and stared at her like a rabbit caught in the headlights. "No?" he said, without much hope, and she threw back her head and laughed out loud.
"Liar," she said, knowingly.

"No, I'm really not," snapped Merlin, sitting up straighter. "He's an insufferable, rude, arrogant, overprivileged berk, and I wouldn't suck his cock if he was the last man on earth and he was paying me, so there!"

That...might have been a tiny bit too loud, Merlin reflected. And there was probably no real need to mention Arthur's cock, even if he had been thinking about it rather a lot lately. He had a feeling it hadn't really helped him make his case quite as well as he thought it did.

Also, he'd just shouted the word 'cock' at a Duchess, he realised, rather belatedly, which was probably a hanging offense, and then he was glad that he was already sitting down, because his knees went all wobbly. He glanced over at Morgause; her attention seemed to be fixed on the passers by, but she was smirking in a way that made him wince.

Morgana just looked at him, the muscle at the corner of her mouth jumping infinitesimally. "Okay," she said, dropping two perfect cubes of sugar into her tiny doll's teaset-sized cup of ferociously strong black coffee and stirring it with a tinny tinkle of silver on china. "I believe you."

He slumped in his seat. "No you don't."

"Merlin, why would I lie? You've made your feelings perfectly obvious. You wouldn't suck his cock if he were the last man on the planet, or if he were paying you a king's ransom. Clearly this isn't something you've given any consideration one way or the other," she said with only the faintest undercurrent of hilarity in her voice.

He stared at her helplessly. "I don't even know you!" he exclaimed, fiddling with the fraying cuff of his shirt. "How can you just – look, I don't know what passes for normal among the upper classes, but for the record, this is not – I mean, we've never even met, and now here you are implying that I – that..." he stumbled to a halt, scowling at what the tabletop with what his mother would certainly have called a pout. "I'm not having fun," he said darkly, after a moment. "So any time you want to change the subject, that would be just fine with me."

"Oh, diddums," said the Duchess, looking at him in a fond manner that rather confirmed his suspicions about the pout. "Fine. We won't talk about how much you want to get into my cousin's royal boxer shorts. So – magic!"

Merlin didn't actually jump out of his chair, but it was a very close thing. He certainly gave a tiny, shocked spasm, as if someone had just attached electrodes to his toes while he wasn't looking.

"Are you actually certifiable?" he demanded, hoarsely. "You can't just go around talking about..."

Morgana watched him with the same annoying Cleopatra-like expression of calm superiority that his neighbour's cat used to wear, and it was just as frustrating on a human face as on a tiny little furry one.

"Yes?" she prompted him in ringing tones. "I can't just talk about...?"

"About ma..crame," he said, pointedly. "I had no idea that you were involved in macrame. In fact, I have it on good authority that macrame fans are generally very keen on discretion."

Morgana snorted. "Macrame," she said, shaking her head. "Oh my God, you're adorable, Merlin Emrys. I want to pinch your cheek."

"If you do, I'll turn you into a frog," he said, glowering. "Don't push me."
"Ooh – old school! I like it!" she said, looking delighted. "Will you wave a macrame needle at me? Actually, is there such a thing as a macrame needle?"

Merlin's eyes narrowed. "I guess that's one of the secrets of macrame," he said, between gritted teeth. "Not being a practitioner of macrame, though, I really wouldn't know." He paused. "I mean actual macrame. Not – not *macrame*.*"

Morgana leaned forward confidentially, planting her pointy elbows firmly on the table. "I think it's unspeakably sweet that you've made up a code name and are tripping over your tongue here with all your euphemistic stuff, but I'm going to keep right on calling it magic, because this is silly."

Merlin flailed at her helplessly, almost overturning the tower of hot chocolate in front of him. "Secret!" he hissed, feeling himself grow redder by the moment. "It's supposed to be secret!"

"Oh, sweetie – really, this isn't 'Fight Club'," she said kindly, patting his arm. "I am Jack's overdeveloped sense of discretion, blah blah blah." Her mouth twitched again. "I don't think you're going to, ah, pull the wool over anyone's eyes with all this macrame talk."

Merlin groaned. "Puns are the lowest form of wit, you know."

"But I do find them so hard to resist," she said, sunnily, leaning back in her chair and raking her eyes across the facade of the church beside them. "Like raspberry truffles, and Italian footballers, and really good shoes."

"Look, fine, forget the code word. I'm just saying that although I do want to talk about, um..."

"Macrame," she supplied helpfully, lifting the cup to her lips unfazed as he glared in her direction. "Right, yes, *macrame* - I want to talk about it, I really do, but we can't just sit in the middle of the street chatting about it where anyone might hear!"

Morgana cocked her head to one side and studied him. "Really – adorable," she said. "Like a baby duckling. Look, my improbably named friend, do you suppose for even a split second that *anyone* walking past will imagine that either of us can actually do *macrame*?" She grinned at him, making little airquote movements with her fingers as she spoke. "Or rather, to call a spade a spade, magic? Of course not – it's impossible. Magic doesn't exist. Nobody would ever take that seriously, not even *The News Of The World*. It's not a problem. If we had a whole flock of paparazzi sitting at the table with us right now, we could be blathering on about magic to our heart's content and they'd just assume that *that* was the euphemism. Or, even more likely, they'd think we were talking about a game." She grinned another feline grin and leaned across the tiny table until her mouth almost brushed the curve of Merlin's ear. "World of Warcraft," she whispered, her breath stirring his hair. Then she sat back and grinned smugly. "That's the only code word you need, my friend. World of Warcraft. You can get away with *anything* if you say it's all just World of Warcraft. Well – unless you're with WoW geeks, in which case you could try saying it's Second Life, or Blue Mars. Or LARPing, or something."

Merlin bit his lip. Surprisingly, this did make a certain kind of sense. "Huh," he said. "They're computer games too? Second Life and Blue Moon and Larping?" He knew that Will had been a big fan of WoW, although he'd never really had more than a very cursory grasp of what was involved.

Morgana's brows arched. "Well, *you've* clearly not dated many geeks," she said.

"And you have?"

She looked at him pityingly. "The geeks are inheriting the earth, Merlin. Nine out of ten disgusting
rich men are geeks, these days, and they're all over this stuff. Google is your friend. Embrace it. Long story short, though – any raised eyebrows, and we met through World of Warcraft. I mean, we're not going to have a lot of course overlap, I shouldn't think – I'm doing Art History Honours, and you're doing First Year Physics, right? Which makes your ignorance of WoW all the more shocking, but never mind – clearly you're a freak. Just remember that we're in the same WoW guild, and that we've known each other for ages, and this is the first time we've met in the flesh. And then change the subject really fast. Okay? No macrame involved."

"Okay, fine," he said, rolling his eyes. "You've convinced me, in general." He glanced over at Morgause. "What about...?"

"Oh, she knows," said Morgana easily. "Morgause is one hell of a sorceress in her own right. She graduated from St Andrews herself four years ago. She also knows eighty seven ways to kill a man with her bare hands nonmagically, and has at least twelve lethal weapons stashed about her person right now, underneath that skin-tight leather." She grinned wickedly. "It's rather wonderful, being second in line to the throne, you know."

Merlin had absolutely no idea what to say to that. "Okay," he said at last, defeated. "So – magic."

"Smashing!" She tapped the end of her cigarette, and the breeze carried the ash away and out of sight as she licked her lips and leaned in again. "Now then – word on the street is that you might actually be worthy of that remarkable name." She took a long, thoughtful drag, and Merlin watched blue curls of smoke snake out of her nostrils like she was some kind of very small, elegant dragon. "Is it true that you changed the seasons?"

"No!" Merlin said. "Or at least – well, not on purpose." He took a spoonful of the whipped cream which was sliding slowly sideways like the tiniest, gooiest model of the Leaning Tower of Pisa imaginable. "It was an accident," he said, when he'd licked the spoon quite clean, avoiding Morgana's eyes. She probably never screwed anything up. "I was ten," he added, by way of explanation.

"You were ten?" she said, incredulously; her jaded expression had vanished, and she was looking at him like he'd just grown two heads. "You turned winter into summer when you were ten? By accident?"

"Um," said Merlin, feeling thoroughly self-conscious. He took another scoop of the whipped cream. "Yes? But not everywhere," he added hurriedly. "Just in Cardiff. And only for a week. Well. Ten days. They blamed some kind of freak storm front, or pressure condition, or something. Mrs Singh was really really cross."

There was a long pause.

"Fuck a duck, Emrys, I should bloody well think she was," said Morgana at last, shaking her head in disbelief. "She was your mentor, right? While you were in school? Have you any idea how many full wizards it must have taken to fix that? Not just hedgewitches, like your Mrs Singh will have been, but proper, fully trained wizards?"

"Er...no?" said Merlin, bridling on Mrs Singh's behalf, even though she had called herself a hedgewitch.

"Four," she said, staring at him. "At least four. Maybe more."

Merlin felt like he'd casually stepped off the pavement and found himself in the middle of the Atlantic. "Sorry, what?" he said, shaking his head. "No, no that can't be right."
Morgana leaned back and eyed him speculatively. "Well, let's see – are we talking about a few unseasonably warm days? Or are we talking about new leaves growing on bare branches in the dead of winter?"

"Er," said Merlin, feeling himself get redder by the minute. "Well – yeah, the leaves did grow overnight. Um. And then the blossoms grew the next day."

Morgana grew very still. "Blossoms?" she said, calmly.

"Well, yes. The trees...well, it was because I wanted cherries. I didn't mean to, but I had this argument with my mum about cherries – we were talking about those preserved ones anyway, that are pillarbox red and full of sugar, but – well, anyway, she said 'they don't just grown on trees' and I said 'yes they do,' thinking I was so clever because there was this cherry tree next door, and she gave me a clip round the ear." He pulled a face. "I didn't really understand about them being expensive in winter, fresh cherries. And anyway, I was talking about the fake ones, that you get in cakes and on icecream sundaes, but I don't think she realised that. And then I was just so mad with her, and I wanted to show her...and then everything started growing. So, um, there were blossoms on the second day, and then by the third day the cherries were ripe." Morgana's mouth had fallen very slightly open during his little speech, and she was no longer looking even slightly aloof. "Look, it's not such a big deal," he said defensively, taking a swig of the hot chocolate as if it might somehow give him more courage. "It's only like global warming."

"It's only like global warming, he says," Morgana said weakly. "You – my God, I don't even know where to begin." She drummed her fingers on the tabletop. "Right – look, I'd heard about this, but assumed it was total bollocks, but now I have to ask – the kraken? Tell me that you didn't really...oh no," she said, as he ducked his head. "No, no, no! No way! You did not!"

"Well I didn't mean to," he said crossly. "I didn't know it was a kraken until it showed up. I just knew it was lonely. I was only trying to cheer it up."

"You – but – no, that can't be right, because that was at least five years ago," she said, sounding shaken. "You can't have been more than fourteen!"

"I was twelve," Merlin said, taking another mouthful of the hot chocolate. The marshmallows weren't so bad, really.

"OH NO YOU WERE NOT!"

"Look, I didn't know how big it was going to be," he said uncomfortably. "I heard it singing, and it just sounded so completely miserable that I felt sorry for it, that's all. Nobody got hurt. Mr Jenkins was too drunk to notice if it had eaten half the class, anyway – but it didn't, because it wasn't hungry. It was just bored, and trapped. And we were on a really boring school trip, and I felt bored and trapped. So."

Morgana stared at the table blankly. "You felt sorry for it. Right. Okay. Look, excuse me for a moment," she said, pushing her chair out and getting to her feet. A few yards away, Morgause sprang to her feet, lithe as a hunting cat. Morgana caught her eye "The kraken?" she called over. "For real. Never mind Voldemort – I'm getting the feeling this one could take down Sauron," she said, shaking her head. Morgause glanced from the Duchess of Edinburgh to Merlin with an expression of incredulity. Morgana just nodded, and then glanced down at him. "I just have to get something. Back in a tick."

Merlin watched in wary silence as she strode through the door of the restaurant, trailing smoke and Morgause, and emerged half a minute later into the bright August sunlight trailing smoke, Morgause
and a waiter, complete with a bottle of red wine and two glasses.

"Not sure if you're joining me, Boy Wonder, but I sure as hell need a drink," she said, eyeing him assessingly. Morgause slid back into her chair and resumed her scan of the street. Meanwhile the cork eased out of the bottle with a reassuring pop, and some of the tension in Morgana's face relaxed as the waiter poured a finger of blackberry-dark wine into one fat-bottomed glass and handed it to Merlin. Merlin was in the middle of feeling surprised at the stinginess of the portion when it occurred to him that they were both watching him and expecting some kind of Oz Clark wine-tasting show.

"Oh, er, no," he said, frantically, shoving it over to her. "I wouldn't know champagne from vinegar – you'd better do this bit. Please."

She swirled the glass around and inhaled, and then took a careful mouthful. Merlin was half expecting her to spit it out, like they did on TV, but she didn't. "That's lovely, Richard," she said to the waiter – or possibly the manager? "Thank you."

"Excellent taste, Your Grace," said Richard, filling her glass, and then Merlin's. "I'll fetch you an ashtray," he added, with a wink, nodding and smiling at them both. Merlin was abruptly struck by his resemblance to Graham Norton; at first he thought it was just the accent, but there was definitely something flirtatious about the grin he cast Merlin's way when he caught sight of the rainbow pin, so maybe not.

"Thanks," he said to Morgana, even though it was barely one o'clock in the afternoon. He was a student now, and he had a reputation to uphold. A reputation that involved getting pissed in the middle of the day, apparently.

"Think nothing of it," she said, and then glanced heavenwards. "Hell, you can probably turn water into wine, can't you?"

Merlin looked down at his knees, feeling obscurely guilty. "I turned Sprite into Strongbow once," he said. "Does that count?"

"Oh my...I was kidding! But you – oh, no, now come on! You cannot sit there with whipped cream on your nose and tell me that you play with krakens and turn Winter into Spring, because that's just...no, come on! People can't do that kind of magic these days. That's proper Golden Age Of Sorcery stuff! God, you'll be talking to the bloody dragon next!" she exclaimed, taking a hefty swallow of the wine and shaking her head.

Merlin wiped cream off the end of his nose self-consciously with the back of his hand and watched Morgana drinking, then took a sip himself. It tasted nice, but he couldn't really tell the difference between this and a bottle of five quid plonk from Oddbins, to be honest. Still, he wasn't paying for it. He very much hoped he wasn't paying for it.

"Talking to the dragon?" he said casually, as Morgana lifted her glass.

"Toast! Toast first, myths second. So – to macrame, magic, and World of Warcraft!" she said, clinking glasses with Merlin.

He laughed in spite of himself. "Macrame, magic and World of Warcraft," he agreed, and took another swallow. "So, er – talking to the dragon, you said?"

"Oh, you know," she said, stabbing her cigarette butt into the ashtray that had materialized on the table. "That picture you see on all the School of Sorcery doors. The one you have to touch when you do the 'Open Sesame' bit, you know? There are all these legends about how it recognises true power,
Well, I'm sure you've heard some of it from your Mrs Singh – you know: 'Tempt not the wrath of the
great wyrm' and all that guff? I mean, it's a load of nonsense, of course. It's the doors that are spelled,
not the picture."

"Right," said Merlin, feeling like someone had squeezed all the oxygen out of his lungs. "Fancy
anyone imagining that picture could talk! How daft can you get?"

"I know, right?" Morgana produced another cigarette from somewhere, and Richard the waiter (or
possibly manager) swooped outside with a lighter as though she'd summoned him. Merlin was
reasonably sure that she hadn't, but apparently the second in line for the throne could light up a fag
wherever the hell she fancied, and no-smoking laws be damned.

Merlin took a long swig of wine, and then another, and Richard topped up his glass smoothly before
going back inside to attend to the rest of his clientele, while Merlin sought around for a safer topic
than talking dragons.

"So you're in your second year now?" he asked, trying to remember what he knew about the
Duchess of Edinburgh. Not very much, really, other than the fact that she tended to dress like a
supermodel with an Audrey Hepburn fetish, and had a thing for big hats. And apparently this gem of
information was only accurate when it came to Ascot, because right now she looked pretty much like
everyone else in the town, and her cardigan could have come from Marks and Spencers, for all
Merlin could tell.

"Third year," she said, taking a long drag on her cigarette. She raised her eyebrows. "Oh – now
that's a thought! Do you have an Academic Mother yet?"

Merlin's fingers tightened around the stem of his glass. "No," he allowed. "Not yet." He took another
swallow of wine.

"Brilliant!" she cried, flinging cigarette ash everywhere. "Consider yourself adopted, then!" She
raised her voice, glancing over at Morgause: "I'm adopting him! Meet your new Grandson!"
Morgause quirked a grin at them, and then resumed her study of the street. "Morgause was my
Academic Mother," Morgana added, a little needlessly. "Ooh, I'm going to have so much fun
planning party games and dressing you up on Raisin Monday!" Her face took on an expression that
Merlin could only describe as evil. Profoundly, profoundly evil. "Heh," she said, her eyes flicking
over Merlin's face and figure dispassionately. "Oh yes. Yes, I'm already seeing a whole host of
possibilities."

Merlin was surprised to see that his glass of wine was somehow empty. He topped it up again.

"Wow," he said. "Well, that's – er – that's great. Thanks." He felt very much like he'd just been run
over by a double decker bus. "But there's just one thing, though: if you're adopting me, then you'll
have to adopt Gwen too. We're a package deal – buy one, get one free. One for all and all for one.
Hope that's okay." He wasn't entirely sure what Gwen would make of Morgana, but he was
perfectly sure that if he got himself adopted by the Duchess of Edinburgh and didn't invite her along,
she'd never forgive him.

And besides, it sounded like he was definitely going to need the moral support.

"You're blackmailing me?" said Morgana, after a moment. "That's – unexpected."

Merlin pushed his shoulders back and puffed out his chest a little, and reminded himself that he was,
apparently, very hot stuff in the world of sorcerers. Hell, the paparazzi should be chasing after him, if
Morgana's reactions were anything to go by. Move over Harry Potter.

"Yes," he said, daring her to make something of it. "Although I think that's a very ugly word."

She grinned at him. "There might be hope for you yet, my lad," she said. "Okay, package deal it is, then. So who's this Gwen person? Not your girlfriend, I'm assuming?"

"No!" he exclaimed, looking shocked. "God, no! Nothing like that. She's just a friend. But she's great. You're going to love her."

"Good," said Morgana, taking another mouthful of wine. "I'll drink to that." They clinked glasses again. "Now, tell me about this bloody kraken of yours..."
Merlin really wasn't expecting to find Arthur still in the room when he opened the door. It was six o'clock in the evening, and there were dozens of events in full swing – he was pretty much expecting His Royal Hotness to be surrounded by a crowd of adoring Yahs somewhere expensive. Instead he walked – well, possibly stumbled would be a more accurate word – in through the door to find Arthur standing barefoot in the middle of the room, listening to the Black Eyed Peas on his iPod, with its ridiculously ritzy speakers, and towelling his hair dry. Merlin ground to a halt in the threshold and stared in open appreciation at the unexpected vision of shirtlessness; the last time he had seen the Prince of Wales, he had been comatose and stinking of beer or cigarettes and Merlin had still found him appallingly shaggable. Clean, half-dressed and still moist from the shower was an entirely new level of hotness, and Merlin – who was not exactly at his most sober, after five hours of drinking with the Duchess of Edinburgh – was in danger of doing something really and truly ill-advised if he wasn't careful.

"You're here," Merlin said, which may not have been his finest ever conversational gambit, but Arthur apparently didn't mind. He dropped the towel over one shoulder and raked one hand through his still-damp hair, studying Merlin with an expression that Merlin found it impossible to interpret. And then he sighed, and sat down on the end of his bed.

"Look," he said, scowling down at his hands and then glancing quickly over at Merlin, and then away again. "There's a possibility that I may have been, ah, perhaps just a little bit undiplomatic when we first met." He pulled a face, and then met Merlin's eyes defiantly. "I regret if anything I said offended you," he said very quickly, like each word had thorns in it that prickled his tongue. "Perhaps we could start over with a clean slate?"

Merlin perched on the desk and tried not to stare at the Arthur's chest. Arthur's very naked chest. He was wondering how it would taste, if he dragged his tongue over the line of Arthur's collarbone, or down towards his bellybutton. A rather big chunk of what was left of his brain was firmly of the opinion that this was the best idea he'd ever had, but he was ignoring it staunchly, because Arthur was a prat. Important not to lose sight of one's ideals in the face of unexpected hotness: prattishness did not deserve to be rewarded with shags.

"Sorry, can you repeat that?" he said, after a pause. "I was listening, but I've forgotten what you said."

Arthur's frown deepened, and he gave an irritable huff. "I was saying why don't we try a fresh start?"

"So you're saying you could pretend not to be a dick, and I could pretend not to think you're a dick?" Merlin said, slowly.

Arthur made a frustrated noise. "No," he said, with exaggerated patience. "I mean I could say sorry for being a dick – not that I was – and you could say sorry for being a dick, and we could both take the chance to see whether maybe there are no dicks after all."

Merlin couldn't help it: he was only human, and not exactly sober, and His Royal Highness Arthur Pendragon was sitting there wearing nothing but a pair of jeans, talking about dicks in his haughty voice. Obviously Merlin's gaze was going to drift south.

"Um," he said, which was very much better than any of the more explicit answers that had come to mind. "Okay?"
"Right," said Arthur, still sounding rather cross under his attempts to be reasonable and pour oil over troubled waters. "Good. Well then – I'm sorry, okay?

"Okay," said Merlin warily, trying not to look at Arthur's crotch, where he could definitely see the outline of Arthur's cock. Not that Arthur junior was showing any signs of perking up just yet – although Merlin just bet that he could do a thing or two about that, if he was given half a chance...

Arthur coughed. Merlin realised that he was staring, and looked up at Arthur's face in a hurry.

"Yes?" he said, innocently. Well, not very innocently. But he was trying.

"So, I've said sorry. So now it's your turn, isn't it?" He was looking at Merlin rather pointedly, and his patience seemed to be on the cusp of disintegrating entirely.

Merlin frowned. "But I wasn't a dick," he explained. He liked saying the word dick. He really really liked saying the word dick to the Prince of Wales, and watching his fair skin getting pinker and crosser by the second.

...Hang on. Why was he cross again?

"Well, that's a matter of opinion," said Arthur in a tight voice. He looked Merlin up and down, and seemed to finally take in his condition. "Oh my God. You're pissed as a fart!" he exclaimed, his brows drawing together. "It's only six o'clock, and you're completely rat-arsed!" His eyes narrowed. "Are you an alcoholic? Or just a total lightweight?"

"You can blame your bloody cousin," said Merlin, with righteous indignation. "She's got the constitution of an ox, that woman!"

Arthur stood up rather abruptly. A look of consternation crept over his face, and he crossed his arms in front of his chest. "What?" he said, staring at Merlin. "What did you say?"

"I said it's Morgana's fault." He swallowed. God, he was thirsty. "Her Grace the...or is it Highness? Her Duchessness. Ess. Of Edinburgh. Her. We've been drinking since lunchtime," he added. "Although there wasn't any lunch. But we did have chips. We went to the Kinness Fry Bar and had deep fried Mars Bars and chips. And ketchup." He nodded thoughtfully. "It was disgusting. I told her we should have had a nice dinner from the nice dinner place, but she said I had to have deep fried Mars Bar. She said it was a rite of passage." He shook his head, and then wished he hadn't, because the room didn't stop moving fast enough. "She could drink the whole St Andrews Rugby Team under the table, could Morgana," he said, with feeling. "She should come with a warning."

"Oh, shit," said Arthur, covering his face with his hands for a moment and screwing his eyes shut. "You've been co-opted. She's got you spying on me already? My God, she's quick."


"Er – no, sorry, no, I don't think so," Arthur said after a moment, with some asperity. "She doesn't spend much time in Cardiff. Particularly not on the council estates there."

"Owch! I see somebody's been doing his homework! Or do you just assume that all the plebs live on council estates?"

"No," snapped Arthur. "But I know who you are, now. You're on the St Andrews-Camelot Scholarship, aren't you?" He rolled his eyes. "It's overseen by The Prince's Trust. My charity."
"Oh. Well, anyway – newsflash, your majesty: you're not the only big cheese around here! Some of us are Great Ones who can talk to dragons." He knew as soon as he'd said it that he was skating on thin ice. "That's how I know her. The Duchess. Through World of Sorcery. Warcraft. We're in the same Guild, and I've known her for ages. On the internet. So there. I just didn't know that she was related to an arrogant, self-centred, rude, priggish...prig!" As he slurred this complaint, Merlin was gradually sliding off the desk, with his legs still stretched out before him, and down towards the floor. Arthur watched him sinking with another of those unreadable expressions. "That's you, by the way," said Merlin, helpfully, as his bottom hit the carpet. "The prig."

"Yes, I'd figured that part out," said Arthur, in a surprisingly mild tone. "Er...just how much did you drink?"

Merlin frowned at Arthur. Both of him. He tried to remember. "There was the bottle," he said. "And then the other bottle. And then...lots," he said at last. "It was lots. And then it was now, and you weren't gone after all, and there was the shirtlessness, and the bare feet. I wasn't expecting bare feet," he said reprovingly. "Bare feet are cheating."

"Bare feet are cheating," repeated Arthur, slowly.

"Yes," said Merlin, leaning his head back against the desk. The desk was nice. The desk didn't spin. "It's very hot. Are you hot? I mean, obviously you're hot, but I mean hot hot. Sticky. Are you hot hot? Or not not?" He giggled without opening his eyes, and his head bounced against the desk. "Or is that just me? Ow."

There was silence for a while. Merlin quite liked the silence. Although everything was still spinning, even with his eyes closed, and he was starting to think that maybe closing his eyes had made things worse, rather than better. He pried them open and stared at the ceiling. "Anyway, bare feet are cheating because they make you look all harmless and touchable, and, and, and fluffy."

"Fluffy?" said Arthur, from somewhere, outraged. He sounded like Lady Bracknell saying 'A Handbag?' and this thought made Merlin giggle some more.

"Yes," he agreed, when he'd stopped giggling. "Fluffy." A great wave of sadness came crashing over him then, and he was glad that he couldn't see Arthur any more. He probably would be able to if he moved his head, but that seemed like a lot of effort to go to just at that moment. "And it's cheating because you don't look like a shallow, smug, mean-spirited bastard when you've got fare beet. Bare feet, I mean. You look all cuddly and likeable and human." He sighed. He felt cold, and tired, and his head hurt, and he would really like the room to stop spinning. "I liked it more when I thought you might be nice," he said in a very small voice. "Before I met you."

There was another longish pause, and Merlin sighed. God, he was tired. "I'm just going to close my eyes now," he said, and did. "But I'm not going to sleep."

"Merlin. Merlin, you can't sleep on the floor."

That was just silly. Of course he could sleep on the floor. It was easy. There was really no need to make put-upon huffing noises, or to go shaking him. Merlin curled in on himself and made an unhappy grumbling sound to indicate his disapproval of the shaking thing. He could have used words if he'd really wanted to. Honestly.

"Oh, for the love of...fine. Right. Fine. Come on then, let's get you into bed."

Merlin was fairly sure that this was an important sentence, and one that he should be properly conscious to appreciate, but that was just too damned difficult right now. And then suddenly
horizontal was becoming vertical, and he made an unhappy noise and clung onto the nearest surface with all his might. Although the nearest surface was surprisingly warm and rather naked-feeling, chestlike. He had his face pressed into a warm slab of muscle, and his fingers were digging into somebody's arms – Arthur's arms, and Arthur was a prat.

"You're a prat," he said. Or tried to say. It came out more like "Yrpat."

"Shut up, you pathetic big girl's blouse," said Arthur. His breath was whuffling into Merlin's hair in a way that was actually quite nice. And then Merlin was lying on his own bed, drooling into his own pillow, and there was a warm hand on his shoulder. "Are you going to vomit?"

"Mmph," said Merlin.

"Oh, Christ. Look, are you going to barf, Merlin? I don't want to go off and leave you to choke to death on your own sick. Can you imagine the field day the press would have with that one? Prince parties it up while sad, lonely, working-class room mate dies in pool of own vomit. Look, I'll get you some water. You should drink a pint of water, at least. Probably several pints. And have some neurofen. I've got some, hang on..."

There was an uncertain space of time, and then Merlin was being manhandled upright by someone warm and shirtless, who smelled good. Merlin knew he smelled good because he was slumped bonelessly with his nose pressed into the hollow of a freshly-washed collarbone. Because it seemed like a good idea, he licked it, and made a small appreciative sound, and then tried a gentle bite. The owner of the collarbone gave a startled hiss, and flinched away, but didn't drop him; and the voice, when it came again, was decidedly hoarse.

"Merlin, I swear, if you don't pull yourself together and drink this damned water and swallow this damned pill, I am going to find a permanent marker and draw a mustache on your face. Right now. Come on! Sit up properly and drink the damned water."

Merlin cracked his eyes open and glowered out at the world. The world glowered back and offered him a pint of water and some neurofen, which he accepted with as ill a grace as was humanly possible.

"And now I'm going to sleep," Merlin slurred, determinedly, and collapsed back onto his bed.


"Sssh."

"You are absolutely the very worst roommate ever. And if you puke on me, I'll have you hanged, drawn, quartered and flayed, and your skin made into a pair of loafers. Just so we're clear."

"Mmph."

* * *

Merlin woke up reluctantly, by inches, with the mother of all hangovers and an inchoate sense of dread. It occurred to him only slowly that there might be some connection between the gallons of sweat pouring off him and the fact that he was still, for some reason, fully dressed. He toed his shoes off as he lingered in that liminal space between dreams and reality, conscious that his skull was pounding, his eyeballs felt gritty and his shirt was clinging to his clammy skin in a really quite disgusting fashion. Also, his mouth tasted like a minty ashtray.
Another thought wandered idly through his brain, and he was faintly aware that it was significant: he wasn't alone. He was, in fact, wrapped around somebody else in the manner of an affectionate baby octopus, one leg tangled between theirs, one arm hooked firmly around a neat naked waist and his mouth pressed damply into the warm, soft-sharp curve of a shoulder blade. This definitely should be registering on the weirdometer, because although he wasn't exactly a blushing virgin, Merlin didn't generally wake up with his sexual partners. There had been the one, horribly embarrassing morning where his mother walked into his bedroom with a pile of ironed shirts and not-ironed pants, found her son sitting on top of a Polish plumber called Kris and engaged in some rather emphatic and rhythmic cuddling, at which point she had made the same stifled shriek she normally made upon encountering an unexpected spider, dropped the lot, and retired in confusion to the kitchen. Neither of them had ever mentioned it again, by mutual, unspoken, horrified consent, but from that point onwards Merlin had made a point of keeping his liaisons out of sight and out of mind. So this whole snuggling morning-after business was definitely out of the ordinary.

He burrowed in closer, conscious that they were both fairly rank with sweat by this point, but enjoying the contact anyway in a rather disgusting sort of way, and wondering why there were so many clothes in the way. And then he opened his eyes, and it dawned upon him that he wasn't in his own room after all. Then after a disoriented heart-beat he realised that this actually was his own room – just that his own room these days was several hundred miles north of Cardiff, and it was one he had to share with...

"Oh, bloody hell fire!" said Merlin, dropping into appalled consciousness so fast that it left him giddy, and then he was scrambling back and away from the heir to the throne, whom he'd apparently been using as a teddy bear, or drunkenly molesting, or possibly both. He skittered clumsily back away from the prince, making horrified hyperventilating noises, and promptly fell off the bed.

The floor was cold and hard underneath the thin layer of carpet, and Merlin lay there and stared up at the ceiling, wondering whether they had carpet in the Tower of London. Probably not. Oh, Jesus. Merlin scoured his memory for some clue as to how he'd ended up pressing Prince Arthur up against the wall of their room, in bed. If hitting the floor hadn't been such a bone-jarring ticket to full consciousness he'd have been tempted to assume that he was still dreaming, but dreams didn't usually include painful knocks to the funny bone.

There was a longish pause, and then Arthur's face appeared over the edge of the bed, heavy lidded, with pillow creases dappling his skin and his hair looking decidedly bird's-nest-like. Merlin blinked up at him in terror, and waited to be carted off by armed guards.

"I suppose that means you're awake, then," said Arthur, looking irritated. Merlin scrabbled around for some way to apologise, and found that he honestly didn't have a clue where to begin. Arthur watched him curiously, and then snorted and rolled back out of sight. "You are without doubt the most totally useless roommate in the known universe," the prince informed him conversationally. "I mean, seriously, seriously crap. Beyond crap. They will have to invent new words to convey the full crappitude that is you, Merlin Emrys. I'm going to get the Royal Dictionographer on that right away."

"Dictionographer isn't a word," said Merlin, warily, after a little while, when no SAS troops came bursting in through the window to drag him off to the Tower of London.

"It is if I say it is. Who's the Crown Prince of Great Britain? Oh, yes, that would be me." He huffed a much-put-upon sigh. "Honestly, Emrys, you're just rubbish. I'm demanding a recount. There must be some other clueless drooling yob out there with the conversational skills of a ring-tailed lemur who needs to be given a place to rest his weary head, and who wouldn't try to use me as a comfort blanket like a blithering infant when I was in the middle of trying to keep him from choking on his own
Merlin rubbed his funny bone miserably, and tried to remember if he'd actually tried to shag the Prince of Wales, or just dribbled all over him. "Sorry?" he said at last, because it seemed to be applicable in either instance.

"I should bloody well think you are," agreed Arthur, still invisible on Merlin's bed. "Do you have any idea of how much fun and frivolity I could have been having last night, while you were busy cutting off the circulation in my limbs? I'll have you know I was going to have a **fantastic** evening. There were going to be pretty girls and cheese and wine and intelligent conversation and possibly tequila and karaoke, and _lots_ of people all very eager to tell me how funny and clever and brave and important I am. Lot. Because I am in fact _very_ funny and clever and brave and important, in case you somehow missed that memo. Very."

"Oh," said Merlin in a very small voice, staring up at the ceiling.

"And instead I stayed here in this grotty little room playing nursemaid to an alcoholic communist who hates my guts and smells like an ashtray."

"Um," said Merlin, still wracking his brains to recall how he'd gone from sitting outside The Doll's House with Morgana to waking up with the Prince of Wales, and it was all frighteningly hazy. But on the plus side, he wasn't remembering any actual lunges, gropes, confessions of undying lust or assaults on the royal person. So that was good. "Oh my God, Morgana adopted me!" he said a heartbeat later.

Arthur gave a startled bark of laughter. "Oh, for the love of...well, that's just **wonderful**. We're Academic Brothers, then. Bloody hell. Did you meet Grandma?"

"Morgause? Yes. She scared the crap out of me."

"Ah, there we are – you're not a complete imbecile, then. She scares the crap out of Russian Mobsters, the IRA, Al Quaida and the CIA. And my father." There was a little pause. "Do you honestly know Morgana from the Internet?"

Merlin felt a rush of shame, but ignored it. "Yeah," he said. "But I didn't realise she was the Duchess of Edinburgh. We don't use our real names in the game."

"Huh," said Arthur. "Bizarre. Well, you're just lucky that I felt duty-bound to clean up her mess, that's all; I couldn't exactly go out partying when she'd done such a spectacular job of breaking my roommate. Wretched girl."

"Was this what you meant by dicklike behaviour?" Merlin asked eventually. "I mean, the Cliff Notes version didn't specify just exactly what it would take to get someone locked up." He bit his lip. "I really am very sorry."

"Well," said Arthur, sounding thoughtful, "as it turns out you did not, in fact, chunder on me. Which is one count in your favour. Chundering over the Prince of Wales is one of the most serious crimes in the United Kingdom, and indeed the Commonwealth of Great Britain, and it is punishable by immediate grisly execution. Boiling in oil, I believe, whilst being forced to listen to Celine Dion albums."

"Good God!" exclaimed Merlin, involuntarily. "That's just sick."

"Well then it's a punishment that truly fits the crime," said Arthur. "Anyway, no need to worry, because you very wisely restrained yourself from barfing, so it's no 'Titanic' soundtrack for you just
yet. Although I'm sure you'll come up with some other way to flout protocol in a new and offensive fashion, since you've made it perfectly clear how much you despise me."

Merlin lay very still for a while, and thought about Arthur's tone of voice, and about all their interactions so far, and about the very fuzzy memory of being forced to drink water and neurofen before he slid into dribbling unconsciousness the previous night. "I don't exactly despise you," he told the ceiling.

"Your flattery warms the cockles of my heart."

"Oh, shut up. I just think you're a smug, rude posh git," snapped Merlin, before his brain could jump in and suggest the wisdom of shutting the fuck up. He felt a little spasm of terror, and then considered this assessment and felt himself getting indignant. "Because you are a smug, rude posh git."

"No, please, don't hold back. Tell me what you really think."

"Fine: you're a plonker." Who apparently put his social life on hold to make sure I didn't choke on my own vomit last night, Merlin reminded himself, feeling an odd flutter in the pit of his stomach.

"Do the words 'pot', 'kettle' and 'black' mean anything to you?"

"You were rude," he persisted, more for the sake of it than because he was really pissed off.

"Well, so were you," pointed out Arthur.

"You started it." Even Merlin recognised that he sounded petulant.

Arthur's head swung back into view, hair sticking out in all directions. "Oh my God, Merlin," he said, staring down wide-eyed. "What are you, five?"

"No! I just – I thought you'd be different," said Merlin defensively.

A harried expression crossed Arthur's face. "Well, sorry I didn't live up to the advertising," he said, and there was no mistaking the bitterness in his voice. "Jesus. You just – you really have no idea how – never mind. Never mind. Forget it." He retreated again, and Merlin pushed himself up from the floor with a groan to sit cross legged in front of the bed, crossing his arms on the edge of the mattress and resting his chin on them as he looked at Arthur. He tried not to ogle this time, tempting as it was – tried to pay proper attention.

"What?" he said, more gently than he'd meant to.

Arthur was lying on his back, staring up at the ceiling. For a long moment Merlin thought Arthur wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of an answer. Then: "Everyone has an opinion," he said, quietly. "Everyone thinks they know me. Knows my family. Everyone I will ever meet. Can you even imagine what that's like? No, of course not, because you've always been able to be just you. You don't have to try to be anything but what you are. You don't have to second guess yourself every damn minute. You get to make choices, and take chances, and fuck up, and learn from your mistakes, and – you get to choose what you're going to be when you grow up. You have no bloody idea."

Merlin considered that for a bit, then poked Arthur in the hip. "Okay, that sound you hear? That's the sound of my heart, bleeding for your terrible, horrible, no good, very bad upper class special-English-white-boy pain. Good God - get over yourself, you great pillock. You're richer and more famous than God, and everyone wants a piece of you - well boo bloody hoo!" He rolled his eyes.
"Most of us would kill for those kind of problems. This is a load of self-indulgent emo bollocks, and it doesn't excuse being so damned rude."

"Oh, sod off," said Arthur, glaring at him half-heartedly. "You were rude too."

"Was not."

"Don't make me come over there, Emrys, because I know plenty of ways to kick your scrawny little hungover Welsh arse. And you know you were rude, you cheeky bugger."

Merlin stuck out his tongue. This may not have done a great deal to further his argument, but it seemed like a good idea at the time.

"Look," said Arthur, with exaggerated calm. "Can we agree that there was dickishness all round, and just move on already? Because this is boring, and I think you're probably all right, really, on the whole, despite being so damn prickly and pathetically incapable of holding your booze, and I'm dying for a cuppa. So – look, why don't we just agree to never again speak of this whole pathetic drunken drool-fest of yours, or of any tactlessness that I may have displayed, and just start from scratch? Pretend the past forty eight hours never happened?"

"Hmph," said Merlin, noncommittally.

Arthur snorted, and rolled onto his side, and then Merlin had some problems speaking because there was the shirtlessness, and the way that the light pouring in through the window lit up Arthur's hair like a halo of bedhead, and Merlin just hadn't been at all prepared for the double whammy of hot and disarming, and it turned out that it was difficult to stay cross with the man when he could see his nipples. So when Arthur reached out his hand, Merlin found himself accepting it before he knew where he was, and then they were shaking hands like they had on that inauspicious first encounter.

"Hi," said Arthur, smiling at him. "I'm Arthur Wales, and I'm studying International Relations."

"Hi," said Merlin, a little huskily. "I'm Merlin."

"Nice to meet you." Arthur smiled at him, and this time Merlin remembered to let go of his hand in a reasonable amount of time. "That wasn't so hard, now, was it?" said Arthur. "So – breakfast?"

Merlin considered the suggestion and winced. "Coffee," he said, gingerly, after a moment. "Just coffee, I think. And a lot of water. A very big lot."

"Right," said Arthur, grinning. "Sounds like a plan."

* * *

Perhaps half an hour later, they both emerged from their room clean and scrubbed and ready to commit murder in order to acquire caffeine. The security guy Merlin remembered from his first day at St Andrews peeled himself away from the wall and followed them in the direction of the dining room, and Merlin glanced over his shoulder nervously a few times, feeling very much the way he used to do when he got followed around HMV by a suspicious-looking rent-a-cop.

"Er – I think you've got a fan," he murmured to Arthur, discreetly. Arthur looked at him blankly, and Merlin did a sort of winking nodding subtle pointing thing which was supposed to be the Internationally Recognised Hand Signal for "I'm talking about the bloke behind us", but which apparently left Arthur baffled. "I'm talking about the bloke behind us," said Merlin at last, in frustration, and Arthur glanced back and then snorted.
"Val!" he called, and the Man In Black darted forward at once. "Meet my astonishingly dim roommate, Merlin Emrys." If the Man In Black found the notion of Prince Arthur sharing a room with someone called Merlin to be amusing, he kept it to himself.

"Merlin, this is Val, one of a crack team of exceedingly dangerous men whose mission it is to make sure the heir to the throne stays alive and kicking. He can kill you with his toenail."

Merlin gulped. "Um – hi!" he said, reaching out a hand, gingerly, and watching Val visibly assess it for threatening intent, before clapping it in a bone-crushing grip.

"Hello," said Val, without smiling. "You seem to have recovered quite well from yesterday's indulgence, sir."

"From yesterday's...oh. Oh, yeah. Right. You were outside when I – huh. Sorry. Didn't realise you were Arthur's faithful manservant. Sidekick. Um. Thingy."

"Bodyguard," supplied Arthur, wearily, as they reached the dining room.

"Right," agreed Merlin. "That. Um. Would you like a cup of tea?"

* * *

Over breakfast, as his headache gradually lapsed from a hideous drumming to a dull, distant buzz of distress, and while Arthur was getting his third round of toast, Merlin pulled out his phone and texted Gwen.

Gwen – just checking – do you have an Academic Mother yet?

Morning! And no. Why?

Just wondered whether you would mind being adopted by the Duchess of Edinburgh. Only one catch: would have to have me as Academic Brother. Also some bloke called Arthur.

Ten seconds after Merlin hit send the second time, his phone went berserk.

"If you are messing with me, I will rip your liver out with my teeth," said Gwen, in a shaking voice. He grinned. "Are you messing with me? Please tell me you aren't messing with me?"

"I'm not messing with you," he said, and then had to hold the handset away from his head, wincing. Heads turned on the tables nearby. When the shrieking seemed to have died down, he cautiously brought the phone back to his ear. "So that's a yes, then?"
"I still can't believe I paid all that money for this stupid gown," muttered Merlin under his breath. Arthur reached over to clip him around the ear without breaking his stride, and Merlin ducked and avoided the blow reflexively, grinning.

"You didn't," said Arthur. "The St Andrews-Camelot Scholarship Fund did. Along with the Prince's Trust. Which is to say, me. So stop whining."

"Oh, come on – we look like a load of Santa-flavoured drag queens," Merlin protested, glancing around at the flock of students in their thick, strawberry-bright robes who were making their way towards St Salvator's chapel for mass.

"Mao's got a point," said Gawain, mildly, fingerling one flapping sleeve. "How do you think they make the fabric bobbly?"

"Exactly!" said Merlin, bouncing. "I mean, normally you have to have a jumper for years before it starts getting these bobbly things, and you can buy sort of cutty things to remove them. Not that I'd expect you spoilt gits to know that, obviously – think of it as a free insight into the lives of us peasants. But somebody's out there specially making this fabric to be pre-bobbly, for some perverse reason. So that you need to have had it for years before it finally looks new. It's weird. And why red?"

"I blame Tony Blair," said Kay, winking over at a group of adoring girls who were all making cows' eyes at Arthur. Some of them were clearly Freshers, like Merlin and the others, but there were also plenty of older students distinguishable by the fact that they had various random-seeming objects dangling from their gowns by the so-called "raisin strings" that had been presented to them by their adoring Academic Mothers on Raisin Sunday. Merlin wondered, a little nervously, what kind of object Morgana would consider appropriate for his own raisin string. He could see a cuddly blue Stitch toy, a vibrator, a pair of wind-up teeth, a plastic cutlass, a pair of enormous boxer shorts and a miniature tequila bottle dangling from various people nearby, and none of these things filled him with very much confidence. Then an Indian girl with a diamante-studded toy iPhone dangling from her Raisin String winked at him lasciviously, before collapsing into giggles with her friends, and Merlin reddened, and looked away.

"You blame Tony Blair for everything," said Gawain, mildly.

"Well, most things are his fault."

"Shut up," said Arthur quietly. He was nodding, and smiling, and acknowledging people right, left and centre as he walked, and there was no getting away from the fact that he was the absolute centre of attention – and, by extension, so were his companions. It was rather exciting, Merlin thought. But he was glad they weren't really interested in him, because there was a rather scary, quiveringly urgent quality to it all, like the crowd of red-robed people all watching Arthur sidelong were only a hair's breadth away from Beatlemania, and tearing the clothes right off him, and then the very flesh from his bones.

"Ooh, Mao's politics rubbing off on you, are they?" said Kay, as they neared the heavy oaken doors of the chapel.

"This is a place of worship, Kay, and everyone is watching us," hissed Arthur, very softly, his smile never faltering. "So could you kindly shut the fuck up for five minutes?"
Kay pulled a face as he followed Arthur through the door, but he did at least shut up, so that was something.

* * *

"Why are we doing this again?" Merlin asked, some time later, as the tide of red-gowned students surged off in the direction of the pier.

"Because it's a tradition," said Gwen, happily. They had spotted one another in the chapel, and there had been some winking and beaming and hand gestures until Arthur elbowed Merlin painfully in the ribs, and then they had spent the service texting illicitly, while all over the room other people tried to look like they weren't taking pictures of the Prince of Wales with their phones. As they left the Chapel, Gwen had come scurrying up and nearly been rugby tackled by Arthur's bodyguard Val, until Merlin stepped in the way and grabbed her into a quick hug. There had been introductions, and Gwen had gone blushingly nonverbal for a bit, and now the two of them were walking along a couple of paces behind Arthur and his two sidekicks, with Val shadowing the lot of them unsubtly.

"It's a stupid tradition. We walk all the way to the harbour, walk down to the end of the pier, climb up onto the second level, where there's no guard rail and the waves are crashing madly into the stonework, and walk back to the start of the pier – only this time we're walking on something the width of a cream cracker, like bloody tight-rope-walkers. With no guard rail."

"You're exaggerating," said Gwen, rolling her eyes. "It's fine. I did it already, when I visited the place with my Dad. And there is a guard rail."

"Only for a few yards, then there's a whole lot of teeny tiny thin pathway twenty feet up above the stone and fifty feet up above the sea, and no guard rail."

Gwen snorted. "Chicken."

"I'm just saying it's completely pointless!"

"Oh, shut up and tell me what colour underwear Prince Arthur's wearing, so I can imagine tearing it off with my teeth," she muttered into his ear, and he made an outraged noise.

"I'm shocked that you think I'd notice such a thing. That would be invading his privacy. What kind of creepy stalker do you take me for?" he whispered back. Gwen just looked at him, and then looked pointedly at Arthur's bum several yards ahead of them, and then back at Merlin, and after a moment he burst out laughing. "White," he said, after a few minutes, when he had got the giggling under control. "You dirty-minded wretch."

"Hey, I'm not the one who was checking out his arse as he was getting dressed this morning. I knew you would be, though."

"I didn't mean to! God, you make me sound like some kind of sleazy old guy in an anorak," Merlin protested. "He was just there, in his pants. I wasn't checking him out! I was just minding my own business, and then there was random scantily-clad royalty wandering past looking for its socks."

Gwen made a rude noise as they reached the start of the pier. "Tell me you didn't make a crack about his socks appeal?"

"I didn't, actually. I wish I'd thought of it. Clearly the presence of scantily-clad royalty is damaging my higher brain functions."

"Stop boasting," she said, shaking her head.
It was a beautiful day, the sky a vivid blue overhead with white clouds scudding along in the distance, and although the sea breeze was bracing, the sun was shining bright and warm against their skin. Merlin caught sight of Lance in the distance, talking to the girl with the green hair, and waved at him. It was odd, how quickly this was starting to feel like home. Lance spotted them, and promptly grinned and waved back; and although Merlin was sure that a lot of the grin was tied in with how smitten he was with Gwen, he was also sure now that part of it was for Merlin too.

"He's a nice guy," said Merlin, nudging Gwen. "So, are you playing hard to get, or what?"

"What?" she stared up at him blankly. Merlin pulled a face.

"Well - Lance, of course," he said, tilting his head and searching her eyes for signs of sarcasm. "He's potty about you. Obviously."

Gwen laughed. "Oh, don't be daft!" she said, punching his arm. "He's just being friendly! He's practically a monk!"

"He already made it clear that he's not a monk," said Merlin, shaking his head.

"Well, okay – but, seriously, have you seen him? He's stunning! He looks like a film star, and he speaks five different languages, and knows all of Shakespeare's sonnets by heart, and he's in his Third Year – he's not going to date someone like me!" she pulled awkwardly at the sleeve of her gown to stop it from sliding off her shoulder. "And anyway, he's seeing Elaine. He's just a nice guy, that's all – honestly, you've got such a one-track mind! Sometimes people are just nice because they're nice, and that's that."

Merlin's eyes narrowed. "Has he told you he's seeing Elaine?"

"Well – no," admitted Gwen, not looking at him. "But it's obvious."

"Well, maybe it's obvious to people who are living on Planet Oblivious, yes. But to the rest of us, it's pretty clear that Elaine has the hots for him, unrequitedly, and that he's fallen for you like a tonne of bricks."

"Don't, Merlin," she said, looking at him unhappily. "Please don't."

He frowned. "But – I don't get it." He glanced over at Lance again, and sure enough the guy was gazing back at Gwen with his heart in his eyes. "What do you want, interpretive dance? Semaphore?"

"Well, asking me out on a date would be a great start," she said, tartly. "You know, something subtle and understated like that. But that's not going to happen, because blokes like him don't date girls like me, they date girls like Angelina Jolie." She swallowed. "Or Elaine."

Merlin gaped. "Are you pulling my leg?"

"I wish you wouldn't do this," she said, looking away. "Can we talk about something else?"

Merlin stared at her blankly for a long moment, and then sighed. "Okay," he said, shaking his head. "But we're going to talk about this soon, because you appear to be taking the crazy pills, and I can't be having that. But okay. Later. So, what clubs did you join the other day? I never did ask you."

They were in the harbour now, an endless snake of red-robed students making a pointless pilgrimage to the end of the pier and back again. The air smelled unromantically of fish, and the little boats tied up in the harbour were of the practical sort, rather than picturesque. But it was still a picture postcard
scene, with all the scarlet snapping in the breeze and pretty young things laughing in the sunshine. Merlin couldn't quite believe that his life had brought him here, with all these strange, careless people; for a moment, looking around him, he felt oddly furious with them all. He'd bet the meager contents of his bank account that most of these well-fed, pink-cheeked scions of the middle- and upper-classes had never had to choose between paying the gas bill and buying meat, or learn how to darn a pair of socks, or consider the possibility that they couldn't afford to go to University.

"God, this is surreal," he said out loud, and then turned to look at Gwen, who hadn't been born with a silver spoon in her mouth either. "Don't you think this is all just totally surreal? Doesn't it make your head explode? All these posh English people?" He blinked. "I mean – no offense, I know you're English too, but..."

"Merlin, some of them are Scottish," she pointed out. "It is Scotland. And some are from other places."

"And there's a reason why St Andrews is called England's most Northerly University – it's full of Oxbridge rejects and wide-eyed English girls who want to marry Prince Arthur," he snapped. "It's not like the real world, is all I'm saying – it's – they don't know they're born, half of this lot. Never had to do a day's work in their lives, and all they need to learn is how to spell their own name so they can sign the cheques when they're working for Daddy's business. It's sick-making." He was sounding like Will, he realised; sometimes he couldn't help looking around him and thinking about what Will would say.

"You know that's not true," she said. "I mean, there's you and me, for a start – but plenty of this lot aren't posh." She considered the statement. "Well, no, okay, most of them are posh, but some of them are normal."

"But don't you think it's all just – weird? Deeply weird, in a way? I mean, castles and cobblestones and the ruins of the cathedral, and a bloody walking talking prince in the middle of it all? I mean, it's mental, when you think about it!"

She smiled at him. "It's like a dream," she said simply. "It's like stepping into a storybook."

"And you're the fairytale princess," he said, feeling suddenly warm and fond, and he was surprised to see her face fall.

"No," she said seriously. "I'm really not." She bit her lip, and then grinned. "Still, you never know your luck; maybe Arthur's going to embrace the gay side of the Force, sweep you off your feet and make you his queen."

"Now who's taking the piss?" said Merlin, feeling only a very slight knot in his gut at her teasing. "Anyway, yeah – societies?"

"Tunnocks Caramel Wafer Appreciation Society, Rock Soc, Film Club, Wine Tasting, Canoeing, The Mountaineering Club and Touch Rugby," she recited, counting them off on her fingers. "And, er, Nightline. Although that's supposed to be secret and anonymous and things, so don't tell anyone, but I'm volunteering. There's a training session next weekend."

"I see," said Merlin, mildly. "Isn't Lance the Director of Nightline? I thought I saw him mansing the stall?"

"Shut up," she said, not looking at him. "Don't start with me. It's just – don't start. Oh! Hey, that's Sophia up ahead – you still haven't met her! Look, she's nearly at the steps!"
"Those aren't steps. That's a ladder made out of bits of metal bolted into the side of the pier. In no
dictionary does that constitute steps."

"Stop being so difficult. You know what I mean."

They both watched as the little brunette scrambled up the makeshift ladder, emitting occasional
squeals of distress as the wind flipped her demure skirt up around her thighs.

"I told her to pick a different skirt," said Gwen, critically. "She's going to be flashing her knickers at
everyone in the line as she walks overhead."

Merlin glanced up at the students who were already filing back towards the town along the top layer
of the pier overhead, and nodded. It was undeniable.

"Maybe that's the point," he suggested.

Gwen made an offended tutting sound. "She's not a tart!" she said indignantly. "She's a nice girl! Her
dad's a vicar!"

"I didn't say she was a tart," protested Merlin. "Just that maybe she's a bit of a flirt? Or just likes the
idea of being a bit naughty, and having plausible deniability? Nothing wrong with that," he added.
"She's got good legs, after all, and those strappy heels are doing wonders for them."

"Don't be such a pig!" Gwen said, but there were plenty of wolf-whistles as Sophia reached the top
of the pier and the wind chose that moment to perform an action replay of Marilyn Monroe's iconic
moment over the hot air vent in 'The Seven Year Itch', sending Sophia's skirts fluttering dangerously
high. In front of them, Kay burst into a spontaneous round of applause.

"Well, she's certainly making an impression," said Merlin, after a moment.

"God, she must be mortified."

"She doesn't look mortified," said Merlin, judiciously. And it was true; she looked pink-cheeked and
exceedingly pretty, with her golden-brown hair streaming out behind her and a thoroughly un-
demure twinkle in her eye as her skirts flared and fell and flared again.

"Marry me!" shouted one of the lads further down the line, dropping down to one knee and reaching
towards her with a flourish, and her peal of laughter rang out merrily over the waves.

"God, she's a bit of a corker," said Gawain, quite loudly, his voice being carried back to Merlin and
Gwen by the wind. "I think she's looking at you, Wart. You're in there, my lad."

"What do you mean, in there? His Royal Hotness is in everywhere," said Kay, sounding petulant.
"There's not a single female in this city between the ages of fifteen and a hundred and five that he
couldn't have just for snapping his fingers, the jammy bugger."

Merlin felt his mouth tightening, even though Kay's assessment was accurate enough – and even an
understatement, since it wasn't taking the penis-loving half of Gay Soc into account.

"I see what you meant about that one," said Gwen softly, leaning in to him. "What a twatwaffle."

"He really, really is," Merlin agreed, watching Gwen's roommate picking her way along a strip of
stone that looked far too narrow to be remotely sensible for walking on, and feeling rather glad that
she couldn't hear Kay.
She was directly above them a few moments later, and Arthur and Gawain were both looking 
pointedly elsewhere while Kay stared up her skirt unapologetically. Gwen was glaring at Kay as if 
she could embarrass him into looking away by sheer force of will, and Val the bodyguard was 
scanning the crowd with the unflappable calm of someone who would have remained completely 
unimpressed if every resident of the Playboy Mansion had chosen today to do the pier walk wearing 
nothing but honey and whipped cream, and had then stopped to make out in the middle of it.

And that was when Sophia screamed, and started flailing wildly at the air – at a bee, or a wasp, 
Merlin thought, squinting upwards – and lost her footing in the gorgeous strappy gold heels, and fell.

Merlin didn't actually mean to stop time, but between his frantic impulse to catch her magically, and 
his mother's remembered yell of "Hands!", all he could think, quite desperately, was that this was all 
happening too damned fast, and then – it wasn't.

Merlin swallowed hard, looking around at a whole world suddenly frozen like a fly in amber: the 
seagulls suspended soundlessly overhead; the bright red gowns hanging rigid in the breeze; Gwen's 
long curls flowing out behind her; the darkly cresting waves and the salt-white bursts of spray; the 
curdled clouds high above – all, all were suddenly still, and the sound of his own breathing was the 
only audible thing in all the world. It was one of the creepiest, most profoundly upsetting things that 
Merlin had ever experienced, and he wanted it to be over now. The thought that anyone could just 
step outside of reality in this fashion, and take time to ponder and spy in the space between the 
shifting of electrons – it was somehow far more deeply shocking than cherries blooming in 
midwinter, or krakens stirring in Cardiff Bay, or any of the countless other odd and disquieting things 
that he had done without meaning to over the years. This – this made him feel like everyone and 
everything but him was a toy or a picture on a screen. That they were all less real than him.

He wondered if this was how The Dragon lived, and the possibility scared him in a way he couldn't 
explain.

"Fuck," he said into the terrible stillness, wondering what would happen if he couldn't reverse 
whatever the hell he'd just done. Would he grow old and faded and withered and finally die, 
screaming helplessly at a world full of wax works? Would he vanish inexplicably from Gwen's sight, 
leaving her to blink and whirl and gasp out her disbelief, or would his ancient, mummylike corpse 
drop to the ground in the middle of the sunny afternoon?

"Buggering, bastardly hell," he said, finding a perverse strength in the swear words. "Right. Okay. 
Right. Not going to panic. Calm. Think, Merlin. Think."

Clearly the only course of action was to assume that he could fix it all when he needed to, and to 
concentrate on what to do about the girl who was caught in the moment of overbalancing, her arms 
outstretched, her skirt petrified mid-billow like a Georgia O'Keefe flower, and her mouth open pinkly 
in an inaudible scream.

"Hands," he said out loud, because the thought of his mother's voice was obscurely comforting. "Got 
to keep it plausible. Um."

He looked at the others in the little tableau around him: the students behind them had seen her start to 
fall, and they, like Merlin's companions, were frozen in various unflattering attitudes of horror and 
shock – and, in some cases, amusement. Arthur was actually starting to move forward, his muscles 
bunching up and his fingers straining forward as if readying for a frantic rush to try to catch her. 
Merlin snorted. She might be built like a fairy, but any human being falling from that height was 
going to land pretty damn hard, and anyone standing underneath them was going to be in for an 
unpleasant surprise.
He paused, remembering the way he'd met Gwen, and her awed expression as he'd shoved her heavy bag effortlessly into place, and then he smiled. Obvious, really.

"Okay," he said out loud, moving to stand directly underneath Gwen's tumbling roommate with his arms outstretched and his legs braced, and then he reached out carefully with the invisible, twisting stream of his power to make the adjustments he needed to reality. Just for a moment or two – nothing permanent. Tickling the laws of physics, he called it to himself. He took a deep breath and centred himself, then said: "Go!"

...and she was tumbling through the air and into his arms, light as a feather for just long enough to make it work, just as Arthur came barrelling into them both, and all three of them landed on the ground in an ungainly pile of limbs and billowing scarlet cloth, with the heavy-sweet scent of honeysuckle unaccountably filling Merlin's nostrils. The rush of noise, after the terrifyingly perfect silence, was shocking and reassuring both, and Merlin lay on the cold ground with someone's knee in his kidneys and someone's elbow jammed into his face, and felt so speechless with gratitude that he could have wept.

"Are you okay?"

"Your Highness!"

"Jesus Christ!"

"Did you see that? Did you SEE that?"

"Is she dead?"

"Prince Arthur saved her! My God, Arthur caught her! Fucking hell!"

"Move over!"

"Is he all right?"

"I know CPR! I know CPR! Let me through, I can give him mouth-to-mouth! Let me through!"

"GET OUT OF THE FUCKING WAY!" And that was Gwen, elbowing a path through the sudden crowd ruthlessly and sinking to her knees alongside Arthur's bodyguard, wide-eyed and shocky. "Soph? My God, Soph, are you okay? Merlin? Merlin? Fuck! Is everyone okay? Did you break anything? Fuck!" She was reaching out with tentative hands, gentle and careful and competent as the three of them started to untangle themselves. "Seriously – I don't think you should be moving."

"I've got this, miss," said Val, but she ignored him.

"I told you about those shoes!" she said, her voice going strange and high-pitched as Sophia pushed herself shakily upright. "Oh my God, I thought you were DEAD! All of you!" And to Merlin's considerable surprise she burst into angry tears and pulled Sophia into a hug.

Merlin gave a pained wheeze, dragging some of the air back into his lungs, and scrabbled out from under Arthur as Val and Kay pulled the prince to his feet and started to fuss over him. Around them, the crowd burst into scattered applause, and the sound of it spread and swelled in a matter of seconds, until soon the whole pier was a solid mass of clapping, cheering students, their cacophony echoing out over the waves, loud and exuberant as any football crowd. Merlin felt himself flushing crimson, and then a moment later he was brought back down to earth with a bump when he realised that they were all cheering for the prince, not for him.
"Ar-thur! Ar-thur! Ar-thur!" they yelled, a regular pattern gradually emerging out of the noise. Merlin drew in his breath with a startled hiss, and told himself wryly that it was just as well, and that he was supposed to be keeping a low profile. Nobody was supposed to suspect anything about the existence of 'macrame' in the world, after all. But when he caught Arthur's eye he was surprised to see that the prince looked mortified rather than proud.

"It was you," he said, pointing at Merlin. "You caught her, not me. My God, how did you move so fast?"

"Ar-thur! Ar-thur! Ar-thur!" yelled the crowd, as if they were expecting him to perform some kind of encore.

Arthur looked around dazedly, shaking his head. "No," he said, frowning. "No, this isn't right. It wasn't me!" he shouted, looking around at the mob. "I didn't catch her."

"Ar-thur! Ar-thur! Ar-thur!"

"Let it go," said Merlin, softly, touching Arthur's arm. "It doesn't matter. It all turned out fine."

"It does matter!" And, God, who knew that the Prince of Wales was such a stubborn bastard? "I'm not taking credit for someone else's work. That's not right."

"It's fine," said Merlin, feeling an unexpected little surge of tenderness towards Arthur at the sight of his irritated frown.

"Can you bloody men stop congratulating each other on how damned brave and self-sacrificing you both are and help me here?" snapped Gwen, her arm around Sophia's waist and a broken stiletto clutched in one hand as she stared at both Arthur and Merlin. "We need to get her home. Or, preferably, to a doctor. Now."

"Of course," said Arthur, snapping to attention. "You're right. Val, can you call for a car?" And just like that, Arthur's bodyguard was muttering into the little Madonna-esque headset that he wore, and presumably somewhere in St Andrews a chauffeur was springing into the Arthumobile, whatever the hell that might be. Nice to have minions ready to attend to one's every whim.

"No, really, I'm fine," said Sophia, blushing prettily and hiding her face in Gwen's shoulder, looking as lovely and fragile as a wild poppy buffeted by the wind. "I just feel like such an idiot, but I'm fine. Thank you. Both of you. Sorry."

Around them the crowd was pushing closer, still chanting Arthur's name, and Merlin found himself feeling claustrophobic. Gawain met his eyes, and Merlin got the feeling they were on the same wavelength.

"Right, ladies and gents, show's over," called Gawain, loudly. "Move along, move along, nothing more to see. Let's give the lady some air, and help her get back on shore. Move along, ladies and gentlemen, move along!" he continued, marching forward like a bouncer with Val on one side and Kay on the other. Sophia took a faltering step, leaning on Gwen, and then let out a piteous wail and crumpled.

"She's twisted her ankle," Gwen exclaimed anxiously. "Or worse – God, I hope it's not worse. We've got to get her to..." She was still speaking when Arthur reached around and scooped Sophia up into his arms, like a bride about to be carried over the threshold of her new home. She gave a startled, girlish little giggle, and buried her face in his collarbone.

"Not to worry," he said, sounding firm and reassuring and competent in a strangely 1940s way that...
made Merlin's toes curl and his trousers feel two sizes too tight. "I've got her." And so saying, he strode off down the pier, leaving Gwen and Merlin to follow along in the rear, with a chorus of cheers and wolf-whistles surrounding them.

"Well," said Merlin, staring after them and reviewing the past few minutes with an odd feeling of having missed something important. "That was either a remarkable piece of luck, to lose her footing right there, or it was the most impressive piece of sharking I've ever seen in my life. Or both."

Gwen gasped. "You're not suggesting she just threw herself off the pier just to get his attention? She could have died!"

Merlin's brows drew together. "But she didn't," he said. Gwen stared at him speechlessly. "I'm just saying – it might not be the Cobb at Lime, but that was still one hell of an effective way of getting Arthur's to notice her."

He should have probably expected the open-handed slap. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself," said Gwen, looking appalled, before storming off after her vanishing roommate.

Merlin lifted a hand to his cheek and ignored the cat calls from the crowd. He was thinking very hard, and trying to pinpoint what it was that felt off about Sophia.

"Persuasion? I didn't have you down as an Austen fan." Merlin's head snapped up, and he found himself looking at Morgana and Morgause. It was Morgause who had spoken, but Morgana was nodding as the bodyguard continued: "Still, you've got a point, kiddo. There's something fishy going on, and it's not just the harbour."

"Honeysuckle," said Morgana, frowning. "Something about that smell...I don't trust her." She swung her head back to look at Merlin. "And what the hell did you do, just there? I felt the ripple of...something. I don't know what."

"He stopped time," said Morgause. "The little bugger might just be as good as you said."

Morgana heaved a sigh. "Well, with Arthur to look after, he's going to need to be." She looked down at the far end of the pier, where Arthur was gently lowering Sophia into a wine-coloured Bentley. "Well, go on, then, get a move on, before she has him wrapped around her little finger. There's something not right, and you're Mr Dances-with-Krakens. Chop chop."
They were still lingering in the harbour when Merlin caught up with them, because for some reason Sophia seemed reluctant to get into the car.

"No, really," she was saying, shrinking back against Gwen and shaking her head as though the Bentley were in immediate danger of biting her. "I didn't think – I mean – no, really, it's too much trouble, I can't..."

"Nonsense," Arthur said firmly, trying to usher her inside. She gave a little whimper as he tried to push her closer, and an expression of guilt swept over his face. "Sorry! Did I hurt you? I do beg your pardon!" And then he was on his knees in a puddle, wrapping his long fingers very carefully around her slender calf as though he suspected that her bones were made of glass, and lifting her bare foot with its swollen ankle up for observation. "You've been very brave," he told her, gently, and Merlin swallowed hard. It was, he reflected, just as well that he was stone cold sober, because otherwise he might have been in danger of making embarrassing declarations about Arthur being secretly very lovely indeed, underneath all the arrogant dickishness. Apparently Merlin had no defence against Arthur being nice. So really it was just as well that they spent most of their time insulting each other, or he'd be in big trouble.

"Is she all right?" Merlin turned around to see Lance pushing his way over, an expression of concern on his face as he hunkered down beside Arthur. Evidently it had taken him some time to make his way towards them from the pier, since he had been up on the top layer. "Gwen, I saw what happened – is she okay? Sophia? Are you okay? Are you sure you should be walking?"

"Oh, thank God," said Gwen, with feeling. Merlin thought that was a little bit insulting, actually – not that he had anything against Lance, but they had been managing fine without him. Still, further proof, if proof were needed, that Gwen was quite as smitten with Lance as he was with her. "Can you help get her into the car? She's being very unreasonable."

Lance glanced up at Sophia, smiling, and it occurred to Merlin that there were very few straight women or gay men in Britain who wouldn't cheerfully sell their souls to have both Arthur and Lance kneeling at their feet like this.

"You need to get into the car," Lance said, nodding. "We'll get you back to Chattan. Or to the hospital?"

"No," said Sophia, looking tearful. "I don't want to go in the car. Really. I'm fine. I can walk."

"You can't walk," said Gwen. "Tell her!"

"Really, there's no question of you walking on that ankle," agreed Arthur. "Come on, Miss...?"

"Leanan," supplied Gwen.

"Miss Leanan. It's perfectly safe, I promise," said Arthur, coaxingly.

"I'm allergic," Sophia said, her eyes darting around the circle as if seeking a way out, wide eyed and trembling like a cornered rabbit.

"To cars?" said Kay, his incredulity clear in his voice.

"No! To – uh – to air freshener," she said, pointing at the little green fir tree swinging from the rear
view mirror. "I get a terrible reaction – it could send me into anaphylactic shock. Please don't make me."

Arthur took this unblinkingly, then bent over and reached inside, plucking the little tree from its place and handing it to Kay. "We'll wind the windows down," he said gently, as Kay looked at the green card in his hand and then threw it over his shoulder without looking. Gawain sighed and padded over to retrieve it, and went in search of a bin as Arthur continued: "I promise you'll be fine, Miss Leanan."

"But..." she said – and there was no hiding the fact that she was genuinely scared stiff. The trembling clearly wasn't feigned. Merlin was watching her narrowly, running through all the possible explanations for her behaviour and coming up with nothing remotely plausible. But one thing was certain: something was definitely weird about Miss Sophia Leanan.

Gwen darted a quick look at him, her brows raised, and then she visibly remembered that she was still cross with him and turned away again.

Merlin sighed. "Well, you clearly can't walk," he said, watching Sophia's face. "And I'm sure that Arthur would be willing to carry you home, but it really would be very silly, when he's got this lovely comfortable car right here. Come on, now. Unless – unless there's something that you're not telling us? Something else we ought to know?"

The look she shot him then was clear-eyed and hateful, and it made him recoil from the sheer strength of it.

"No," she said in her sweet, clear voice, burrowing closer into Gwen's arms. "There is nothing else I should tell you." She swallowed, and then said: "But I hate cars. They make me feel – trapped."

"You're claustrophobic?" said Gwen, sounding startled. "I had no idea! She frowned. "Okay, but – come on, Soph. You must have come to St Andrews by car, or by bus, because there's no train station, and you're not going to tell me you sailed in, or flew in!"

Merlin didn't miss the way that Sophia's eyes flashed at that – almost opalescent in the sunlight – but it seemed that nobody else noticed.

"Arthur did," said Gawain.

"What?"

"Arthur flew in."

"To Leuchars," corrected Arthur, irritably. "Only to the RAF base at Leuchars. And what's that got to do with anything? Come on now, Miss Leanan – we've got to get you to a doctor. It'll only be a few minutes."

She swallowed. "Can you just take me to Chattan? Not all the way to the hospital?" she said at last. "Just home? Please? Very quickly?"

Arthur looked torn. "You really ought to have that seen to," he began, but Gwen glared at him.

"Of course he can," she said, firmly.

"Of course I can," he agreed, under her ferocious gaze.

"And then he can fetch you a doctor. Or – well, I mean..." said Gwen, apparently realising that she
didn't actually have the authority to tell the Prince of Wales what to do. "I mean..."

"Yes, we'll fetch a doctor. Val? Get on that? A doctor to meet them at Chattan?" Arthur raised his eyebrow, and Val was already muttering into his little headset. "Now please do get in to the car, Miss Leanan."

"Sophia," she said, blushing up at him. You're stalling, thought Merlin, wondering why the hell she was so scared of the car. "Please, you saved my life – you must call me Sophia."

"Actually, that was Merlin," said Arthur, looking embarrassed. Everyone turned to stare at Merlin, as if the crowd's cheering had somehow persuaded them that the maiden in distress really had been rescued by the handsome prince, rather than by the gawky physics student.

"Oh," she said, giving Merlin a very fixed and unconvincing smile with her sharp little teeth. "Of course it was. Thank you, Merlin."

Gwen shot him a rather warmer look.

"It was nothing," he said. "Glad to be of help. Do you need a hand getting in there?"

"No!" she said, her voice sounding suddenly harsh and unmusical. "No, no. I'm fine. Thanks."

There was an expectant pause, and Merlin watched Sophia steel herself to get into the car with Gwen's help. She took very great care to keep from touching any of the frame. Beads of sweat stood out on her forehead, and her pale skin took on an almost greenish tinge as she settled down into the seat.

"Can we go now?" she asked, panting, and Gwen piled into the car beside her.

"Lance!" she said, patting the back of the front seat expectantly. "He's our warden," she explained.

"Assistant Warden," said Lance. He raised his eyebrows at Arthur. "Don't you want...?"

"No, no, you go ahead, I insist," said Arthur, with more politeness than Merlin would have given him credit for. But of course he must spend a lot of time being polite. To people who weren't Merlin.

"Just get them home safely, please. The doctor should be there any minute."

"Let's go!" said Sophia again, almost yelling, and Lance jumped into the front of the car and pulled the door closed. Arthur nodded to his driver, and the sleek Bentley tore off out of the harbour like it was trying to win the Monaco Grand Prix.

"Well," said Gawain, shaking his head. "This isn't how I thought today was going to go." He looked over at Merlin and his mouth curved up into a slow grin. "Fair play to you, Mao – you might look like a streak of whitewash, but you can move like the clappers when you need to. I've never seen reflexes like that in my life!"

"Yes," agreed Arthur, eyeing Merlin speculatively. "I don't know how the hell you did it. Good work there, Emrys. You saved that girl's life, unless I'm very much mistaken."

Merlin ducked his head, thoroughly embarrassed by how much he was enjoying the admiration.

"Managed to piss your girlfriend off in the process, though," said Kay, with a sneer. "She the jealous type, then?"

"Oh, don't give me that," said Kay. "Girls aren't friends."

"What?"

"You know it's true," he said, unrepentently. "You can't be friends with someone when you're always imagining what they'd be like in bed. And if you've already had them, then you're just remembering, and wondering what it would take to get their knickers off again. Either way – not friends."

"Don't be such a cynic, Kay," said Arthur, setting off up the hill that would take them back to Sallies. They hadn't actually done the Pier Walk yet, but at this stage it was looking anticlimactic, even without all the Beatlemania. Merlin was conscious that there were still hundreds of pairs of eyes burning into the back of his head, even if their owners were mostly keeping a respectful distance for now, and it was all thoroughly disquieting; he couldn't blame Arthur for wanting to get away from it all. Not that he ever really could, Merlin supposed.

"You know I'm right," said Kay, looking around and shrugging as he followed Arthur up the hill. "Who are you trying to impress, Wart? Tell me you don't want to shag that Sophia," he said, looking at all three of them.

Gawain shrugged. "Wouldn't kick her out of bed for eating crisps," he agreed, mildly. "She's a very pretty girl."

"Kay, you're being a dick," said Arthur, tersely, without looking back. His gown was billowing out behind him, and he was setting a stiff pace up the hill; either because of all the adrenaline, or because he couldn't wait to see Sophia again. Val was matching him pace for pace, some yards away. "She's a nice girl. They're both nice girls."

"Oh, come off it. I'm just saying that Emrys is kidding himself if he thinks he's just good friends with little Gwenny. He wants to give her a good seeing to."

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"Oh, come off it. I'm just saying that Emrys is kidding himself if he thinks he's just good friends with little Gwenny. He wants to give her a good seeing to."

"You are a sad, sad little man," said Arthur.

"Well, at least I get laid. Emrys is a pathetic little horndog who's just hoping for a pity fuck if he pretends to be a Sensitive New Age Guy," said Kay. "It's pitiful. Carpe the fucking diem, Emrys."

"You really could not be more wrong," said Merlin, from between gritted teeth.

"He's gay, you utter twat," said Arthur, at the same time. "He's a poof, all right? Aren't you, Merlin?"

Merlin went from quietly furious to gobsmacked and spluttering in the space of three seconds. Not that he was keeping the gay thing secret as such, obviously, but it was just an impossibly awkward conversation to broach with three big, strapping, rugby-playing straight blokes who could buy and sell you fifty times over and kick your head in. He'd kept meaning to drop it into the conversation subtly, somehow, reminding himself that this was his New Life, and that he was Out and Proud – but then he'd thought about how they'd react, and something inside him had crumpled at the thought of it, because he was starting to like them. Well, Arthur and Gawain, anyway. Especially Arthur. But coming casually out with the announcement that he was batting for the other team just seemed unbelievably awkward - especially after the drunken, cuddly droolfest of which they must not speak.

"What?" exclaimed Kay, cross and wrong-footed. He looked Merlin up and down, coldly assessing, and added: "Well, okay, yes – that's pretty fucking obvious, now that you mention it." An expression of distaste curled his lip. "My point stands, though – you can't be friends with people you want to fuck. So if he's an uphill gardener, he can't be friends with us."
"Yes he can," said Arthur, evenly. "And if this is your philosophy of relationships, I'm starting to see why you keep getting dumped."

"I wouldn't want to fuck you if you had a ten inch knob made of solid gold and your arsehole was the gate to Nirvana, you massive pillock," said Merlin, red faced and furious. "I can't be friends with you because you're a gibbering twatwaffle, not because I would ever, in a million years, want to shag you. Get over yourself!"

Gawain burst out laughing, and smacked the back of Kay's head. "Ten inches? God, Kay dreams of one day being a full five inches, don't you?"

"Oh, fuck you," snapped Kay, and then they were wrestling in the middle of the street, while Arthur and Merlin slowed down and watched them.

"Um," said Merlin, after a few moments of acutely uncomfortable quiet. "I didn't think that you knew. That." He darted a glance sideways, feeling suddenly shaky.

Arthur shrugged. "The GaySoc pin was a big clue," he said. "Also, your phone has a Village People tune as its ring tone. I have amazing detective skills."

"That was Will! That was my mate Will, as – it was a joke! You can't judge a man by his ring tone!" spluttered Merlin.

Arthur looked at him quizzically. "Okay," he said. "Sorry, my bad. Merlin, do you like to take it up the arse, mate?"

Merlin gaped. "What?"

"I'm asking if you like cock. If you're a homosexual. Do you like to fuck other men, Merlin, in a deeply gay sort of way?"

"I can't believe you're – you can't just ask me if I – what?" Merlin stammered, blushing so intensely that he thought his head might actually explode. It wouldn't have wrecked him coming from just any old roommate, he was fairly sure, but this particular conversation coming from Prince bloody Arthur, whose GQ photoshoot had been the focus of so many a late-night wank – well, it may not have been Merlin's single most embarrassing moment, but it was definitely in the top ten.

"Just trying to clear things up," said Arthur, watching him with a rather evil degree of amusement. "Thought maybe I'd been leaping to unfounded conclusions there."

"You – I – look, yes, right, fine, I'm gay, yes. I wasn't denying that. Yes. I was just saying that you can't go judging a book by its cover," he ended, weakly.

Arthur watched Kay pinning Gawain to the pavement with a lot of grunting and muffled curses, and Gawain pushing him over onto his back and pinning him down.

"That's profound, Merlin," he said. "Really profound. Look, it's fine – don't get your knickers in a twist about it. You like cock. Big deal. I already knew you were a mouthy, disrespectful chav with communist tendencies. And Welsh, for God's sake. After the shock of all that, the whole nancy boy revelation was small potatoes. And actually, it's good to know you're not going to embarrass yourself by trying to steal my birds." He shrugged. "So long as you don't try to give me a makeover, or force me to watch 'Sex And The City', we're good."

There was probably some kind of perfectly cool, nonchalant response that Merlin ought to be making right now, but the very best that he could manage at this moment was to stand there and not make the
ground open up and swallow him. Apparently Arthur had known about the gay thing and still not
freaked out about the whole pathetic drunken cuddling, which meant that he really was quite a lot
less dicklike than Merlin had been assuming, and earned him a whole lot of extra brownie points
right off the bat. But if he didn't stop saying the word 'cock' in that painfully upper class voice,
Merlin was fairly sure that he was going to spontaneously combust.

"Oh," he said at last. "Well. Er – good. That's good. Um."

"I'm glad that we've had this little talk," said Arthur, still disgustingly cheerful as he watched Gawain
getting Kay in an armlock. They'd gathered up quite a little crowd of their own, by this point, and
people were shouting out encouragement and suggestions.

"Um," said Merlin, who wasn't sure whether he was glad or not.

"Oh!" said Arthur, his eyebrows darting upwards all of a sudden. "Hey – look, well done back there,
mate. Catching her, I mean – seriously, bloody good work," he said, giving Merlin a smile so warm
that Merlin's toes curled. "That was amazing."

"Oh, well," he said, awkwardly, picking at the bobbles on his gown. "You know – right place, right
time."

"But you caught her," said Arthur, smiling. "You didn't let her fall. It was brilliant." He raked a hand
through his blond hair, and Merlin felt himself wishing Arthur wasn't straight with an intensity that
almost caused him physical pain.

"Thanks," he said, licking his lips.

"She's a very beautiful girl, don't you think?"

Merlin froze. "Um," he said. "Well, I think we've just established that I'm not really an authority on
feminine beauty."

"She is," said Arthur, decisively. "I should send her some flowers. Or deliver them myself – what do
you think?"

"Send them," said Merlin, nodding. "Yeah – don't want to look too pushy. Delivery service is the
way to go." He wasn't jealous, obviously. He was just deeply suspicious of Sophia Leanan's
intentions, and Morgana and Morgause agreed with him, so that was fine. He was supposed to keep
the prince safe, after all; Gaius had said it was his destiny. So he was clearly meant to throw a
spanner in the works of any wooing plans that Arthur might be hatching.

"Right," said Arthur, nodding thoughtfully. "Good thinking." He laughed, and thumped Merlin on
the back. "See, this is going to be great! God, I love being a student!"
Chapter 8

Arthur's alarm went off at six o'clock on the dot, to Merlin's absolute disgust. As the heir to the throne bounded nimbly out of bed and pulled on his tracksuit and trainers in preparation for an honest-to-god voluntary morning jog along the beach before breakfast, Merlin made a disgruntled little moan and pulled his pillow over his head. He really hadn't believed Arthur last night when he'd said he was going jogging in the morning, but apparently there was quite a lot of hard slog involved in maintaining a peachlike arse in peak biteable condition, and now that Freshers' Week was over, Arthur was going straight back to his old routine of arse-maintenance. (Although he described it as "Keeping fit," a description with which Merlin could not disagree.) Merlin approved of the end result, but couldn't bring himself to look kindly upon the whole waking-up-at-an-ungodly-hour side of things.


"I do not have porphyria, Merlin, you lazy bastard."

"Might do."

"Oh, go back to sleep, you ass."

* * *

Merlin's own alarm went off at half past eight, and when his flailing arm failed to find the damn thing anywhere on his bedside table where he had definitely left it the night before, he finally stared out blearily from under the covers at the empty space where his phone very much wasn't. The unaccountable sound of Celine Dion belting out 'My Heart Will Go On' continued to swell louder and louder by the moment, in spite of the fact that Merlin knew perfectly well it was supposed to play the theme tune to 'The Muppet Show', prompting Merlin to scramble out of his tangled sheets, blinking around frantically in search of the source of the wretched noise until he spotted it all the way over on the book shelf at the other side of the room. He snarled something very unflattering about the royal pedigree and promptly tripped over his own Doc Martens and stubbed his toe on the desk.

"Fuck fuck fuckaroooy!" he moaned, hopping and clutching at his foot with one hand as he grabbed his phone with the other and stabbed it into silence with his index finger. "Bastard!" he added, with feeling. Just because he'd mentioned how much he hated mornings, and that he invariably stayed in bed hitting the snooze button until the last possible moment, that was no need for His Royal Interferingness to go reprogramming his phone to play that hellish wailing of the damned, or indeed to go hiding it on the other side of the room.

Although, in fairness, it had been a very effective way of dragging Merlin out of bed. Merlin scratched his belly, and contemplated getting back into bed anyway, just to spite Arthur – but he was vertical, and he didn't want to be late for his first tutorial with Professor Gaius. So he grabbed up his towel and his toiletries, still muttering obscenities under his breath, and headed out to the showers, plotting all the while how and when he could acquire Arthur's iPhone and reprogram its ringtone.

* * *

Merlin paused before the door to the School of Sorcery on the brink of waking the dragon, and wondered what Morgana had meant about Great Ones. He didn't feel like a Great One. His body just did things without him telling it to, sometimes. World-changing things. He felt like a perfectly normal
bloke trying to drive somewhere in James Bond's car, and being horrified when trying to turn on the
radio made the damn thing launch a rocket grenade at the shop across the road. It probably ought to
make him feel smug and powerful, being able to accidentally summon krakens, but mostly all the
magic twining through his veins just made him feel nervous, and occasionally terrified, because it
had its own ideas about what it should be doing, and they didn't always tally with what he actually
wanted to do.

He bit his lip.

"Oh, do get on with it, boy," said the dragon, rolling its shoulders and sighing, despite the fact that he
hadn't touched it yet or said a word.

"Sorry!" Merlin said automatically, looking around as if expecting the passing students to notice him
talking to the door, even though he knew perfectly well that he'd cast the spell of unseeing properly.
"Um – do you want me to say the words?"

"You can if it makes you feel better. But I'm here. Visiting the old man in London, I take it?"

"Er - yes," said Merlin, feeling that the conversation had already got away from him. "Look – you're
evermously wise and knowledgeable about magic, aren't you?"

The dragon twitched and swirled through the wood, watching him curiously. "You could say that," it
said at last.

"Right. Yes. Well – what kind of person, or, you know, being, would be terrified of a car?"

"What is a car?"

Merlin stared at it, and then nodded. "Oh – right. Right, fair point. I suppose you don't get out much.
Well, it's a sort of, um, a horseless carriage, I suppose, made out of steel and glass and things, and
powered by petrol. It goes pretty fast."

"My goodness, how the world has changed. Well, young warlock, you should probably ask yourself
what kind of creature fears steel or glass or petrol, whatever petrol might be. Why do you ask?"

"This girl – there's something weird about her. She tried to – I mean, I'm pretty sure that she threw
herself off the pier yesterday, but that's stupid, because she nearly killed herself and Arthur both.
Only I caught her. But she couldn't have known I'd do that, so it must have been an accident,
logically. Except...there's something odd about her. But I don't know what it is." He shook his head,
feeling thoroughly frustrated. "And she smells of honeysuckle," he added, inconsequentially.

The dragon's laugh was like a rusty gate. "Oh, my," it said at last. "Has your prince already earned
the ire of the good people? He has been busy."

"Well, no, I don't think she is one of the good guys. That's what I'm saying."

The dragon stretched, and then curled itself up like a sleeping cat and studied Merlin with what
looked suspiciously like a smile curving its carved mouth. "You have everything you need to solve
this riddle, young wizard," it said, and closed its eyes. "The passage to your professor is open now."

"Oh," said Merlin, feeling disappointed. "Okay then. Um. Thanks, I guess." He pushed the door
open and stepped into Professor Gaius's room, turning the dragon's words over in his mind and
wondering what he'd missed.

"Ah, splendid!" said the Professor, looking up from buttering a crumpet. "I do appreciate punctuality,
and it's so rare a quality among sorcerers, for some reason. Come in, come in, young Merlin. Would you care to join me in a cup of tea?"

Merlin's stomach rumbled.

"And perhaps a crumpet?" the Professor added, his mouth twitching only slightly. "Dear me, have they stopped feeding you breakfast? In my day Sallies had quite a respectable spread."

Merlin could feel himself reddening. "Sorry, sir!" he stammered. "I just, er – I didn't really get up early enough to make it down to breakfast today. Late night."

It wasn't supposed to be a late night; they'd watched TV in the Common Room for a bit with Gawain and Kay and a crowd of others, but they'd both retired to their room at eleven, agreeing that they wanted to get up bright and early the next morning. Only then they'd ended up talking about – God, all kinds of things. 'Independence Day' first of all – the movie that they'd been watching in the Common Room – but that had spun off into a conversation about the guy who'd sacrificed himself to destroy the alien ship, the flakey drunken one everyone had thought was crazy, and about the nature of heroism and responsibility. And they'd talked about the army, and the RAF – Arthur had apparently joined the East of Scotland Universities Air Squadron at the Freshers' Fayre, rather than anything fun. (There was a selection process to be gone through once one had signed up, but somehow Merlin couldn't really see the RAF turning down the heir to the throne.) And then for some reason they'd been talking about Jamie Oliver, and football, and The Lord of the Rings; and then it had been half past two. Merlin didn't know how to explain the odd sense of warmth he'd felt, lying on his back in the dark room after they'd officially (and unsuccessfully) Switched Out The Lights And Gone To Sleep at midnight, and listening to Arthur's disembodied voice outlining his thoughts on how to improve the problems of failing Inner City schools, or on who was going to be top of the Premier League. (He was quite wrong about the football, and Merlin had to set him straight, which took a long time and involved a lot of shouting and some thrown objects.) It was a strange kind of intimacy that had nothing to do with sex, and Merlin, who had never had a brother or sister of his own, or had the kind of sexual relationships that involved conversations about TV shows or politics in the wee small hours, had felt intoxicated and disarmed and more than a little addicted. It had struck him then that he had been a lot more alone than most people his age, really; other than Will, he had never been close to any of his schoolmates. They'd all thought he was weird, which was a pretty incisive assessment, all in all, and between Hunith's dread of Merlin hurting himself, or anyone else, or being discovered, and Merlin's own sense of being a freak, he'd been happy enough to settle for having one best friend and a lot of wary acquaintances. But he was starting to get the impression that he'd missed out on a lot of things.

"Ah, yes, the joys of student life," agreed Professor Gaius, picking up a dainty little jug and looking at Merlin quizzically. "Milk?"

"Yes please."

"So how are you finding St Andrews so far?" he asked, as he lifted a knitted green tea cosy off a fat-bellied teapot covered in pansies and sinuous swirls of ivy, and poured a stream of fragrant liquid into the matching cup to mix with the milk.

Merlin accepted the cup poised on its fragile little saucer with a mixture of gratitude and dread; he was reasonably sure that it was just asking for trouble, giving him something so very breakable, but on the other hand he was dying for a cup of tea.

"Thank you, sir," he said, like his mother's son, sitting down gingerly on the only chair that didn't have half a dozen books or papers piled onto it. "I'm finding it..." he thought over the past week, and felt his mouth spreading into a helpless, sunshine-through-the-clouds smile. "Great. It's really great."
Gaius studied him with amusement. "Even though you're sharing a room with an idiot?"

"Oh, well – he's not quite so much of an idiot after all," Merlin admitted, ducking his head.

"Well, that's a relief," Gaius said, dryly. "I shall pass the news on to the Prime Minister. I'm sure that the civil service will all be delighted to hear that there's hope for the next generation after all." Gaius dropped a buttered crumpet onto a little side plate and handed it to Merlin, which meant that Merlin was sitting with a small plate balanced in each hand and no way of drinking his tea or eating his crumpet unless he was prepared to place one of the plates on...something. Unfortunately the entire desk between them seemed to be covered with several strata of papers, books, crystals and gadgets.

"Um," said Merlin, feeling his fingertips trembling. "Thank you?"

"Not at all, my dear boy – can't have you fainting away from hunger. We've got lots of work to get through this morning," said Gaius, sinking his teeth into his crumpet and making a happy sound. Merlin watched him chewing and looked down at his own tea and crumpet in frustration, then he sent a little snake of power over to coil around the inlaid table perched next to the hearth. It slid obediently over to Merlin's side, and he set down the plateful of crumpet, and then lifted the little teacup to his mouth and took a grateful slurp.

"Mmm," he said, happily. When he looked up, Gaius was watching him with an impenetrable expression on his face.

"So I gather you've made the acquaintance of the Duchess of Edinburgh already, and of the Lady Morgause?"

Merlin blinked. "Bloody hell – is there anyone in this place without a title?" he burst out, unthinkingly.

"Well – you," said Gaius. "And most of the population of St Andrews, both town and gown. However, you are keeping some rather illustrious company these days, that I'll allow."

"If Morgause is a ladyship herself, what's she doing being a bodyguard?"

"There are plenty of titled people who have to work for a living, Merlin," Gaius said, with a reproving frown. "Morgause is from a very old family, but they haven't two brass pennies to bless themselves with these days. And she's an exceptionally talented bodyguard, between her sorcery and her martial prowess. Uther tried very hard to acquire her for his son's team, but she has very little fondness for the Pendragons. Blames them for her family's current straits."

Merlin was reeling a little from hearing the King referred to so casually. "Right," he said. "So she turned down the King, then. But she's okay with Morgana?"

"Morgana is her cousin – oh, don't make me recount all this ancient history, Merlin. The intricacies of who hates whom and why are enough to make me tear out what remains of my hair and move to China. Suffice it to say that Morgause is loyal to a fault to Morgana, and tolerates Arthur, but she has - very marked opinions about the King."

"Crikey."

"Yes. Well, I seem to have got away from my starting point, rather. Which was that Morgana has already told me how impressed she is with your accomplishments." He peered at Merlin over his half-moon spectacles with an expression of marked disapproval. "I understand that you had the temerity to stop time during the Pier Walk?"
Merlin swallowed. "I didn't mean to! It just – happened!"

"It just happened."

"Yes! That's what it's like, with me!"

Gaius took a sip of his tea. "So Mrs Singh informed me, but I confess I had rather assumed she was exaggerating. However, I'm at a loss to know where you would have found a spell to freeze time, considering how limited I know your resources to be. You have 'Dee's Grimoir', 'The Book of Shipton' and 'Leek's Compendium', correct? No other books of magic?"

Merlin nodded.

"Well, I know for a fact that there is nothing approaching a spell of that magnitude in any of those texts. So I'm agog to know how you pulled it off." He leaned forwards, paper crumpling under one elbow.

"I just – er – well, I just thought that I needed more time to figure out what to do," said Merlin, sheepishly.

Gaius nodded. "And?"

"...and I got more time?"

Gaius sat further back. "I see," he said, after a moment, when it was clear that Merlin had nothing more to add. "Well. That's very – well." He drummed his fingers on the edge of the desk, eyeing Merlin like he was a puppy who had just let himself down on a priceless Persian rug. Merlin hunched down a little in his chair. "Right. Well, let's get started, then, shall we?"

* * *

His first lesson with Professor Gaius wasn't precisely what Merlin had been expecting. He'd thought there would be lectures, perhaps, and note-taking, and some sense of revelation, of being let in on the Big Secrets of what it meant to be a sorcerer. Instead Gaius had him sitting cross-legged on a rather dusty rug in the middle of the floor with his eyes closed, 'centering himself'. Whatever the hell that meant.

"Concentrate only on the world within you, Merlin. Listen to your pulse. Feel the blood circulating through your limbs. Be small and still."

Small and still. Check.

Merlin waited.

And waited.

"Breathe," said Gaius, and Merlin had to stifle a sarcastic retort. "Just concentrate on your breathing, for now, and relax into yourself. We're going to see how far your senses go."

Merlin sighed, and waited some more.

"Right – now, I want you to reach deep inside you and tap the core of your magic," said Gaius. "It may take you a while to find it, but you'll recognise the sense of..."

"Got it," said Merlin. Deep inside? Good lord, he should be so lucky.
"Well, yes, you may think..." began Gaius.

"No, really, I've got it," said Merlin firmly. "Now what?"

"Hmph," said Gaius, dubiously. "Once you've found it, I want you to think of your magic as another organ, another kind of sense. We're going to see how far you can stretch your awareness, or consciousness if you will, beyond the edges of your flesh. Nice and slow, Merlin – just concentrate on breathing, and see if you can gradually – Good God!"

"When should I stop?" Merlin asked, golden-eyed and unseeing, feeling the tendrils of power sliding through the walls and across London and beyond, pushing out across the land and the sea. He could feel himself – some aspect of himself – sliding through rock and trees, metal and plastic, flesh and bone, through air and soil and sea in all directions like a ghost, hearing the whispers of conversations in countless accents and languages across the city, tasting the textures of the very molecules and knowing them in some profound, bone-deep fashion. Gaius said nothing, so he kept on going, feeling the magic stretching and flowing eagerly, no sense yet of tension or needing to stop. He felt himself pushing through fish and tasting their small thoughts, through birds and tasting the exhilaration of flight, sliding through the sides of trawlers and the walls of other towns, through strata of soil and rock, licking through lightless underground water and lower, whilst simultaneously sliding up through the currents of the air and into billows of insubstantial cloud. Higher and lower, further and deeper he kept pushing his senses out, tasting new languages as he slid through minds across the channel and pushing further still, through mountains and on, ever on; hearing mermaids singing and Leviathan beyond, and the echo of the kraken; feeling the anger of ghosts in blood-rich ancient battlefields and something both old and playful brushing against him in the depths of Loch Ness. Deeper into the ground, the bones of the earth slowly softening and growing warmer; higher and higher, air growing thin and the stars growing clearer, he was a million things in a million places, growing conscious of the network that bound them all together and reaching out to touch...

"Stop! For God's sake, boy, stop! Come back to me!"

Merlin opened his eyes onto Professor Gaius's disordered little London office and felt a nauseating surge of dislocation at being bound and compressed to one point of view, one set of eyes and ears, one little room. For a moment he couldn't remember what language he spoke.

The professor was on his feet, framed in the window, staring at him like he was armed. "How did you do that?" he demanded, and his voice was shaking.

Merlin frowned. "I just did what you said, sir," he said, after a moment. His voice sounded strange in his ears, tinny and hollow, like a recording. Small.

"You just...I see," said Gaius, still wide-eyed. "You did what I said. And it took you – where? How far did you go? I could see you – but how far?"

Merlin thought about that. "The Atlantic, somewhere," he said, not very helpfully. "And somewhere in Eastern Europe, I think. And, er, I don't know how far into the earth, because it was hard to get a sense of context, you know? But I think it was the same distance in all directions, like I was the centre of a bubble, expanding out and out and out through everything. Nearly out of the atmosphere, I think. I'm not sure."

Gaius swallowed. "I see," he said, and Merlin could see that he'd shocked the old man severely. "Sorry," he said, biting his bottom lip. "I got it wrong, didn't I?"

Gaius sat down. "No," he said, evenly. "No, I wouldn't say you got it wrong, my lad." He ran his
hand through his thinning hair, looking suddenly small and lost. "I think I may owe your mentor a very big apology. I knew you were powerful but I had absolutely no idea...well, I should have listened. She told me, after all." He picked up his teacup in trembling fingers and emptied it in one swallow. It rattled when he settled it back on the saucer. "I shall need to think about this," he said, nodding. "I haven't heard of a student with that kind of power since...well, not for centuries, to be perfectly frank."

Merlin wasn't sure he'd heard that properly, but the look on Gaius's face was unmistakeable. He thought back to Morgana's words about the dragon.

"Sorry," he said again, feeling obscurely embarrassed.

"Good lord, boy, you've nothing to apologise for!" said the professor, looking startled. "But I shall certainly need to go back to the drawing board and work out an entirely different kind of teaching schedule. I'll speak to my colleagues, and we'll come up with something more – appropriate. In the meanwhile – well. Do try not to do anything too dramatic, there's a good boy." He flapped his hands in Merlin's direction. "That's it for today, lad. You're dismissed. Come back on Thursday."

"Not tomorrow?"

"Give me a couple of days' grace to rewrite an entire year's worth of planning, would you?" said Gaius, lifting his eyebrows.

"Right. Yes. Sorry, sir." Merlin stood up to go, and then had a sudden thought. "Professor Gaius?"

"Hmm?"

"What kind of being is scared of metal, or glass, or petrol?"

A pleased expression crossed the old man's face. "Oh, very good," he said. "That's more like it. Well, let's see. Fairies can't abide cold iron, of course, and vampires eschew looking glasses but have no particular horror of glass per se. Petrol...well, I suppose anything with a fear of fire would be loath to get too close to petrol. Why do you ask?"

"There's this girl," Merlin began, and then took in the knowing look on the professor's face and interrupted himself. "No! No, not like that! But she fell off the pier during the Pier Walk, and I think it was on purpose."

"Ah," said Gaius, nodding. "Yes, Her Grace did mention something about mistrusting some young lady who went near Arthur. Although I have to say that having seen how much raw power you have at your command, I do find myself feeling rather reassured about the prince's safety. Of course the dragon's magic protects him when he's on the University grounds, but one can't limit his movements entirely."

"Sorry, the dragon's magic?"

"Ah – that picture on the doors is The Great Dragon." He pointed at his own red door with its gold painted dragon. "The last of the dragons. He lived and died millennia ago, but his spirit – his soul, if you will – is bound to the bones of the university. The stones of the School of Sorcery scattered across the globe are his living skeleton, in accordance with a mighty work of magic wrought during the Golden Age, and nobody can be attacked by magic within the bounds of the wyrm." Gaius sounded very much like he was quoting from some well-known text book that Merlin hadn't read.

"His actual bones? That's – kind of grotesque."
No! Do try to listen properly, lad. His corporeal body vanished long ago, but some long-ago wizard granted the Dragon a kind of immortality within the bounds of the School of Sorcery, guarding our passageways in his timeless slumber, and protecting all the buildings which hold his doors. The school is his body now, and his magic is what holds it all together." Gaius smiled. "Well, so the legend goes, at least. Rather fanciful and romantic, I know, but it's a nice story. Either way, the buildings that hold the doors are all protected, so young Arthur is safe in most of the University buildings in St Andrews. We have rather a lot of dragon doors in that little town."

"Okay," Merlin said, deciding to think this information through properly at a later date. "Right. So anyway, this girl basically threw herself through the air – which could have killed her, and she nearly landed on the prince and squashed him like a pancake. I made her featherlight for an instant, and caught her safely, but I got the strangest feeling that she knew I'd done something." He bit his lip. "I really didn't trust her. And she smelled like flowers – this intense scent, like honeysuckle."

Gaius's face fell. "Oh dear," he said. "Oh. Oh dear me."

"What?"

"I warned him! Don't do it, I said, but did he listen to me? Oh no, His Majesty always knows best. And now look where we are!"

"What?"

"You shouldn't go disturbing these things, I told him. We'll have to pay for it. And have I not had a crack team of fifteen wizards protecting the wretched man day and night ever since? So of course they'd go on to target his family – typical!"

"What?" demanded Merlin, wondering whether it would help if he threw the remnants of his tea in the professor's face, and deciding that he wasn't suicidal enough to find out.

The professor was pacing, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his threadbare corduroy jacket and an expression of acute annoyance on his craggy features. "The Mercian Hoard," he said, as if it should be obvious. "The blessed fairy mound that some wretched farmer with a metal-detector discovered in Staffordshire last year. I've been running myself ragged ever since, trying to keep us all curse-free."

"The Staffordshire Hoard?" Merlin frowned. "That was – it was like the Sutton Hoo burial site, wasn't it? I remember it was in the papers – all that gold."

"Yes," said Gaius tersely. "All that gold. Precisely. Which the coroner declared property of the Crown. And Uther was just delighted, and would he pay any attention to my warnings about the possible consequences of stealing from a fairy mound? No. No he would not. And now it sounds like the Sidhe have sent someone to take revenge on his son. Fabulous. 'Surge Domine et dissipentur inimici tui et fugiant qui oderunt te a facie tua.'"

"Sorry?" said Merlin.

"'Rise up, Lord; may Your enemies be scattered and those who hate You be driven from Your face.' That's what's inscribed on a strip of gold right there in the middle of all the stolen treasure. I mean, really, what more does he want? 'Abandon All Hope, Ye Who Enter Here'?"

"That – doesn't sound good," said Merlin, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

Gaius laughed. "No! No, it doesn't, does it? Well, wonderful – it looks like you've got your work cut out for you, my lad. Your mission, should you choose to accept it – I don't suppose you know 'Mission Impossible', do you? Too young. Dear me. Anyway, your mission is to keep that wretched
girl away from him. Does she have a name?"

"Sophia. Sophia Leanan."

"Oh, very unsubtle," said the professor, rolling his eyes. "Right, well, what are you waiting for? Get out there and protect the Prince of Wales!"

Merlin watched the professor run hurried fingers over the golden dragon and mutter the spell of opening; it did not escape his notice that the painting remained flat and still, even when Gaius opened the door to reveal the corridor of St Salvator's Hall.

"Thank you, sir," said Merlin, and Gaius made a little flapping movement with his hands.

"Go on!" he said, and Merlin did.

Afterwards, when he was safely back in St Andrews, he turned and looked at the door set into the wall, and the dragon looked back at him.

"Did you figure it out, then?" it asked.

"She's a fairy," said Merlin, feeling rather stupid when he said it out loud.

"One of the Leanan Sidhe, perhaps?" offered the dragon, and Merlin blinked.

"How do you get rid of a fairy?" he said. "I mean, I think she wants to kill Arthur, or maybe kidnap him or something – Gaius thinks she's out for revenge."

"The Sidhe are immortal," said the dragon, studying its claws.

"That's – not really the answer I was hoping for."

"Such is life, young warlock."

Merlin scratched the back of his head. "So – so Gaius says that you're immortal. That you let your soul be bound to the School of Sorcery. That's very handy for us, but – why? Why would you let yourself be trapped like that, for eternity?"

The dragon tilted its head. "Because you promised that you would set me free," it said, and Merlin felt a chill run down his spine.

"What?"

"When you bound me here. You promised that one day I would be free to fly again."

"When I...no, but that can't be right, because, you know, I'm eighteen years old," Merlin said, his voice a little too loud, his heart suddenly rabbit-fast in his chest. "You're mixing me up with someone else," he said, swallowing hard.

The dragon only looked at him, smiling toothily.

"I have to go," he said, and turned his back on the door. But all along the corridor he could feel the hungry pressure of the dragon's regard, and it made him shiver.
Arthur looked thoroughly taken aback to find Merlin waiting for him in the quadrangle outside the lecture theatre. Kay, on the other hand, looked appalled.

"Merlin," said Arthur, eyeing him askance. "I thought you had a Philosophy tutorial?"

"Finished early," Merlin said, hurriedly. "So I thought I'd see what you lot were up to." And make sure that you haven't been kidnapped or murdered by Tinkerbell's evil cousin, he didn't say. A quick glance around revealed plenty of pretty girls (and indeed not-so-pretty girls, and several boys, and at least one little lady old enough to be his grandmother who should definitely not have been looking at Arthur with such a frankly appreciative expression) casting languishing gazes in the prince's direction, but none of them looked like Gwen's roommate. Which was a relief, but did little to assuage the gut-clenching sense of dread that possessed Merlin as he tried to imagine what Sophia might have in mind. He felt terribly out of his depth. "Thought you might like to come for a coffee, or something," he added, randomly.

"Looks like your pet chav has a little crush, Arthur," said Kay, with a curl of the lip. "Clearly he can't stand being parted from you for more than five minutes. He'll probably start dry-humping your leg in a minute."

"Give it a rest, Kay," said Arthur, frowning.

"Just being sociable," Merlin said, wracking his brains. "Oh – and thank you for this morning, by the way. Not," he added, glaring.

Arthur's mouth twitched. "Did you feel like the king of the world?" he asked.

"No, I felt like tracking my roommate down and beating him to death with my steel-toed boot," retorted Merlin, his eyes narrowing. "Next time, just hit me with the boiling oil and have done with it."

Kay looked from one to the other with mounting frustration. "What?" he said. "What are you talking about?"

"Just doing my bit to help Merlin develop the skill of punctuality," said Arthur, mildly. "Out of the kindness of my heart."

"Kindness my arse."

"Did you get to your tutorial on time?"

"Well, yes – but that's not the point!"

"Seemed like the point to me," said Arthur, shrugging.

"I didn't ask for your help, you interfering prat!"

"Now, now, Merlin – don't make me punish you for lese majeste."

"What?"

"For being rude to your betters." He leaned close, and added confidentially: "That would be me, by the way. Unless I'm very much mistaken, I believe that the current punishment makes Celine Dion
"pale in comparison – something about a singalong with Sir Cliff Richard and Andrew Lloyd Webber, while watching the International Curling Championships?"

"You are a deeply twisted man," said Merlin, with feeling. "And you're not my better."

Arthur grinned. "Shall we ask the audience?" he said, nodding towards the clump of students who were trying to pretend that they weren't lurking nearby being starstruck. "Or do you want to phone a friend? The lovely Miss Leanan, perhaps?"

"No!" said Merlin, swallowing hard.

"I don't know why you tolerate him, Arthur," said Kay, rolling his eyes and setting off across the quad.

Arthur followed him, casting a thoughtful look over at Merlin as he did so. "I think it's because I'm the patron of the RSPCA," he said, nodding to himself. "I feel this duty to be kind to dumb animals. I can't help it."

"You...God, it's a mystery to me how you ever got voted Britain's Favourite Royal," said Merlin, a trifle unwisely.

"Britain's Favourite Royal?" said Kay, looking thoroughly diverted. "Did you really, Arthur?"

"I believe I did."

'And how exactly did you come to know that, Emrys? Vote for him, did you?"

"I voted for Morgana," lied Merlin. "Because of her fantastic hats, and because she isn't a complete twatwaffle."

Arthur gave him a knowing smile. "Come on then, Merlin. Where are you taking us?"

Not near Chattan, thought Merlin. "Um. I thought I could make you a coffee? Back in the room?"
Where you're protected by the dragon's magic, and I don't have to worry about bloody Sophia pulling a magical hit and run.

"Oh, bollocks to that," snorted Kay. "Make your own crappy cup of Nescafe. We're going somewhere decent."

Bugger. "Er – right. Well, maybe 'The Dolls House'?" It was closer to Sallies than to Chattan, at least, and it was right next to a church, which might be useful.

"Are you buying, Emrys? I really think you should be buying, since you're interfering with our plans and forcing us to socialise with you."

"Stop being a dick, Kay," said Arthur. "Exploiting the poor so blatantly is just crass."

Merlin was torn between being affronted and relieved, but he decided that in this instance discretion was clearly the better part of valour, and settled for glowering at Kay.

"Come on, then," said Kay, in a long-suffering voice.

"Oh – this is Leon, by the way. Leon – Merlin, my idiot roommate." Merlin nodded pleasantly at the latest Man In Black and tried not to feel insufficiently manly. "He was the one snoring when we left this morning."
"I do not snore!" said Merlin, scandalised.

"Well then you did a very successful job of hiding some secret snorer in the bed with you."

Merlin decided to ignore this utter nonsense, and reached out a hand in Leon's direction. "Pleased to meet you," he said. Leon, unlike Val, apparently did know how to smile, which was quite nice. "Did you have to get up and go jogging with His Royal Annoyingness, then?"

Leon inclined his head.

"Bad luck, mate. How many of you lot are there, then?" he asked, feeling a sudden sympathy with Arthur's official bodyguards. It was a hell of a job, this having-to-keep-somebody-safe business.

"Four," said Leon, casting Merlin an absent grin and then returning his focus to scanning the crowd in the manner of someone who was dangerous on a professional basis.

* * *

Then why the hell is there only one of me? Merlin thought, irritably. Presumably there must be some other safeguards in place out there that nobody had told him about, because otherwise Professor Gaius and all the rest of them were just certifiably insane. It was a miracle Arthur had lived to be eighteen, as far as Merlin could see.

Merlin had spent the whole morning and most of the afternoon shadowing Arthur: first jumping every time someone new walked into The Doll's House; then tagging along with Arthur to the library while Kay headed off to his first French tutorial; then bounding gratefully back to Sallies for lunch; then fretfully accompanying Arthur and Gawain to Sallies quad and waiting until they'd gone in to their History lecture before scurrying over to his own Classical Studies lecture; and finally accompanying them back to the Hall as the sky started to darken and the evening star slipped into visibility overhead. He was exhausted, and as thoroughly on-edge as he'd ever been in his life – but all to no avail. None of the feminine shapes following them around proved to be Sophia, and by the time they were safely back in their room, Merlin was starting to wonder whether perhaps she was just a normal girl after all, and they'd all been worrying about nothing.

Which was, of course, when she showed up on their doorstep.

"Gwen!" Merlin exclaimed, but he had only a split second in which to feel delighted, before Gwen's roommate appeared at her side, smiling at him with a sweetness that he didn't buy for a moment.

"Hello there," she said, tilting her little face and batting her eyelashes up at him in a manner that reminded him of nothing so much as a call to arms. "I hope you don't mind the intrusion? I just wanted to thank you for your help yesterday. Both of you," she added, and Merlin knew, from the way that her eyes darted over behind his shoulder, that Arthur had sprung up out of his chair and was hovering around like a great big gullible idiot with a target painted on his forehead.

"Um," said Merlin, frantically. "That's nice. You're welcome. Well, good to see you both, but..."

"What Merlin is trying to say is 'Please won't you come in'," said Arthur, smoothly, his breath tickling Merlin's ear.

Sophia gave a fluting little laugh and dimpled up at Arthur, and Merlin frowned at her furiously as he scrabbled around for some way to get her off the threshold and out of the way. He knew that Gwen was looking at him with surprise and disappointment, but he really had no idea how to deal with that right now, because there was a goddamn fairy assassin – or possibly kidnapper – making Bambi eyes at the idiot Prince of Wales, and all he could think of right now was that this was not going to
happen. Not on his watch. He looked helplessly across the corridor to where Leon was leaning against the wall, but apparently recognising evil fairies hadn't been part of his training, because he just smiled like a bloody great idiot, as if having a pair of pretty girls – one of whom was evil, damn it – showing up on your doorstep was a cause for congratulations.

"Come, now, Merlin," said Arthur, closing his fingers over Merlin's outstretched arm, and Merlin realised that he was physically barring their way with his fingers still wrapped around the door jamb. "I know that chivalry isn't one of your strong points, but even you wouldn't leave a lady standing in the doorway when she's clearly injured."

Merlin's eye darted down to the bandage wrapped around Sophia's dainty ankle and he bit his tongue.

"Right," he said. "Sorry, no, of course not. Do come in."

"Thank you," said Sophia, beaming up at him viciously. As she walked through the door, the light of the setting sun made her eyes look almost crimson for a moment, and the scent of honeysuckle that followed her into the room was dizzying without being strong; it wasn't so much like being overwhelmed by someone's perfume as it was like being hit with a sudden shift of the breeze in a garden. Merlin closed his eyes and swayed on his feet for just a moment, forgetting why he was worried in the sudden rush of pleasure that the scent produced.

"Oh, but this is lovely!" exclaimed Gwen, and Merlin opened his eyes again and shook his head like a dog coming out of water. Sophia was looking at him knowingly, but Gwen was standing at the window looking out over the sea. "What a stunning view! We just look out onto the crescent, don't we, Soph?"

"That's right," said Sophia. She'd settled herself down on the end of Arthur's bed and was looking up at him like he was something delicious. Under normal circumstances, Merlin wouldn't have held that against her – well, okay, he probably would, but he'd have understood it perfectly. Considering what she was, however, he found himself feeling positively nauseated at the possibility that she might genuinely want to eat the prince. He knew that there was information about the Sidhe in at least one of his text books, but he hadn't had a moment's peace in which to do any research since leaving Professor Gaius's room. At the moment, he was completely winging it.

"I wanted to thank you for the flowers," continued Sophia, blushing as she glanced up at Arthur through her eyelashes. "That was so kind! Really, there was no need – you'd already been far too generous."

"Letting us use the car – that was brilliant, by the way," said Gwen. Sophia's smile faltered for a moment, at the thought of the car, and Merlin felt an unkind little spark of triumph.

"Yes," she said flatly.

"And, um – look, I think I probably owe you an apology," said Gwen, squirming a little. She was standing in front of their book case, pulling at the edge of her hoody and looking acutely embarrassed. "I think I was probably a bit rude, yesterday. Um. To both of you." She bit her lip and pulled a face. "I'm really sorry about that."

"Not at all!" said Arthur, waving his hand dismissively. "You were calm and competent in the face of a crisis – I was very impressed."

"Um," said Gwen, looking thoroughly flustered. "That's – um. That's very kind of you. Sorry, though – really, I can be terribly bossy, it's my worst fault. My Dad's always telling me off for it."
"You were charming," said Arthur – but his attention was clearly fixed on Sophia, and Merlin really didn't like the way his eyes were glazing over. The room seemed suddenly very small indeed, with both Arthur and Sophia perching on Arthur's bed and trying to look like they weren't thinking about the various other uses to which a bed might be put, and somehow the whole room smelt like a garden in the heart of summer. Merlin felt his mouth going dry, and reminded himself that they were under the protection of the dragon right now, and couldn't be attacked. Seduced, possibly, but not attacked.

That wasn't quite as comforting as it might have been, with Arthur staring at a vengeful Sidhe as if he'd just hit puberty and she was the only girl he'd ever met or heard of. He wasn't quite drooling, but the way that his mouth had fallen open was certainly doing nothing to lend him the impression of being an intellectual giant, at this point.

"I wanted the chance to thank you properly," said Sophia, gazing up at him. "We both did, didn't we, Gwen?"

"Yes," agreed Gwen, smiling shyly. "You were brilliant. Both of you – honestly, Merlin, if you hadn't caught her – well, it's terrible to even think of it. You were amazing." Merlin wanted to grab Gwen and shake her, and tell her not to be so damned trusting – but of course she had no idea that there were any such creatures as fairies or wizards or things that go bump in the night, and why on earth wouldn't she trust that Sophia was precisely what she appeared? God, it was frustrating!

"All in a day's work," said Merlin, tightly. "Really – anyone would have done the same thing, I'm sure."

"But I'm not here for anyone," said Sophia, still looking into Arthur's eyes. "I'm here for you, Arthur. To reward you as you deserve." Merlin watched the two of them unhappily and felt a little shock of horror when he saw Arthur's eyes flash suddenly blood-red too. He really didn't need a book of magic or the advice of an immortal dragon to tell him that that was A Bad Thing.

"We wanted to take you out for a drink," Gwen said, balling her hands up into fists and stuffing them into the pockets of her hoody. "To say thank you." If she was terrified or thrilled that she was saying this to the Prince of Wales, she was managing to do quite a reasonable job of hiding it – but Merlin felt sure that she was feeling the very same incredulous flutter of excitement and terror that he'd felt at first himself. That he still felt, all too often, if truth be told.

"No need for that," said Merlin.

"We'd be delighted," said Arthur at the same time, without even bothering to glare at Merlin. He was staring at Sophia with an expression that Merlin could only describe as love-sick. "Now?"

"Now would be wonderful," agreed Sophia. She glanced over at Merlin with an expression of catlike smugness. "The sooner the better."

* * *

The West Port Bar was bustling with people, mostly students, and it was very much not University territory. Nor were the various streets they had to navigate to get there. Granted, St Andrews was a town with barely three streets to its name and a population of 16,000, a third of whom were students, and granted that one could barely swing a cat without hitting a University building – but the fact remained that none of the places they were specifically in were under the dragon's protection. Which meant that it was all down to Merlin. As a result, Merlin spent the whole walk with his magic trembling on the edge of his skin like a heat-haze, waiting to leap in front of Arthur and try turning a Sidhe into a frog – an attempt which he felt fairly sure would end in tears. Arthur and Sophia walked
a couple of paces ahead, Arthur wearing the dazed expression of a cartoon character who has just had a piano dropped on his head, Sophia walking with a predatory swing of her hips and a confident trill of laughter that did nothing at all to put Merlin at ease. He had tried very hard to talk everyone out of this little expedition, but Arthur and Sophia had ignored him completely, and Gwen had just looked hurt and cross, and in the end he had found himself trailing miserably after the Prince of Wales and hoping that he could handle whatever was going to happen next. Leon, pacing along discreetly on the Prince's right, looked so completely, cluelessly serene that Merlin found himself tempted to turn him into a goddamned frog.

The bar was busy, but somehow a table for four was magically found when the bartender realised that he was looking at the Prince of Wales. And then Merlin found himself being marched off to the bar with Gwen to carry drinks – not to pay for drinks, as she and Sophia were quite adamant that they were paying, but assistance in carrying them was apparently acceptable. Merlin went reluctantly, his eyes fixed on Arthur and Sophia the whole time.

"Look, stop being such a bad loser," said Gwen, with asperity, as the barman poured the beers. "I mean, I get it, believe me – but he likes girls, and Sophia's a babe. It sucks, but hovering over him like an overprotective mother hen with only one chick really isn't the way forward." She frowned. "Or are you - please don't tell me that you're still thinking she set this up."

Merlin glanced away from the table for long enough to give Gwen a helpless, imploring look. "Can you just trust me on this?" he asked, not very hopefully. "I promise, I'm the good guy here. And I'm not trying to be a crazy 'Misery' type number one fan stalker person, or anything scary like that. I just – I'm worried."

"Because Prince Arthur fancies my roommate."

"Um," said Merlin. It was not, he suspected, an entirely convincing argument. "I don't want anyone to get hurt," he said at last, which was at least entirely true.

Gwen's expression softened. "Oh," she said. "Well – right. But that happens, doesn't it? In life? And in relationships? I mean – it's all about sticking your neck out in the knowledge that some bastard might want to chop your head off, and just hoping and trusting that they won't."

"Right," Merlin said, rubbing the back of his neck. "And when they do, hoping that your friends will be able to sew it on again."

"That's...okay, taking my metaphor to more of a Frankenstein-and-zombie place than I had in mind, but still, probably fair," said Gwen, blinking. "Here – the Coke's for Leon," she added. Merlin allowed himself a moment, in the midst of his big freakout about killer fairies, to acknowledge that Gwen Smith was quite possibly the nicest person he had ever met.

"You should really ask Lance out," he said, to his own surprise. "Seriously. You two are made for each other. It's almost scary."

Gwen ducked her head in confusion, and Merlin reminded himself to focus on the matter at hand: namely, fairy assassins. Fairy assassins who were immortal, and pissed off. And even if they weren't immortal, Merlin had never willingly killed so much as a spider, even when his mother was screaming and pointing and flapping her hands in misery. He'd always been more of a catch-the-spider-in-a-glass-and-set-it-free kind of guy. Progressing from that to even considering killing a living, breathing, thinking person – well, that wasn't a step that Merlin felt at all comfortable taking. There had to be another way.

"Do you ever have one of those days when you know you are completely up shit creek without a
paddle, and the only way out is going to be diving in at the deep end?” he asked Gwen, watching Sophia lean in closer and Arthur swaying towards her.

"Okay – first, ew, and second – all the time. Why?"

"No reason," said Merlin, accepting his glasses and following her back to the table. He set the glasses down, and then squared his shoulders. "Excuse me," he said, loudly and clearly. Arthur didn't so much as twitch, but Sophia did glance up at him lazily.

"Yes?" she said, smiling at him with hints of red flaring up in her eyes like the glint of fire bursting through the cracks in banked coals.

"We need to talk," he said, firmly.

Sophia tilted her head. "I don't think we do," she said, licking her lips.

"Believe me, lady – we really really do. Now." He kept looking her straight in the eyes, forcing himself to ignore the waves of honeysuckle scent pouring off her. "Please?"

She glanced over at Arthur, and her mouth curved up in a wicked little grin. "Well," she said, looking back up at Merlin, "I suppose I can afford to listen to what you have to say. But make it quick."

"Thank you," he said, heaving a sigh of relief. "Um – outside? Two minutes?"

"Very well. Two minutes." She turned to look at Arthur, smiling. "I'm just popping out for a moment, darling," she said, and Merlin wanted to slap her for having progressed to terms of endearment in the time it took him to collect a couple of beers from the bar. "Wait here for me, there's a good boy."

Gwen was looking from Merlin to Sophia and back with an expression of acute puzzlement, but when she registered that she was about to be left alone with Prince Arthur, Merlin could almost hear her inner squeal of glee.

* * *

"You've got two minutes, wizard," Sophia said, leaning back against the wall and studying him with eyes that were very much older than her sweet face. "He's mine now."

"Yes, right – he's yours. Well done. Fifty points to Slytherin," said Merlin, irritably. "But you don't really want him, do you?"

Sophia tilted her head. "Uther Pendragon has stolen what is ours," she said, clearly. "He has taken my father's gold and claimed it for his own. Many things we tolerate – no milk left out, no respect for our holy places, no offerings, no mortals who come seeking us under the hills to join our dancing. Our kin in other lands fare better – there are still sashes placed around their sacred trees, still gifts of food and drink and incense for those across the seas. For us, in Uther Pendragon's Britain – nothing. And now this. It is an insult we shall not bide. His son's life is forfeit to the Sidhe."

"Stop!" said Merlin, waving his hands in the air. "Stop, stop, stop - please stop? I mean, I get it, I see where you're coming from – they've screwed you over. We've screwed you over. Fair point. But killing Arthur won't get you your gold back."

"It will break his father's heart, and that will be sweeter than mead drunk beneath the new moon. It will be a lesson to all those who would trifle with the Sidhe," she said, in ringing tones.
"No, but it won't, though," said Merlin. "Because – and I'm sorry, I'm not trying to be rude here – the thing is that nobody believes in you anymore. So they won't have any idea that Arthur's death was fairy vengeance. Even Uther probably won't believe it. And it still won't get you your gold. We're looking at lose-lose."

Sophia studied him coldly. "What of it?"

"Well – what if I could get you your gold?"

She grew very still. "You? Why would you do such a thing, wizard?"

"To stop you from killing Arthur? Obviously? We could do a swap, see? Win-win? I give you the gold Uther stole from you, and you agree to leave Arthur alone, and go back to doing...well, whatever it is that you do when you're not stalking mortal princes. Dancing, carousing, plucking the wings off flies, whatever passes for fun and games in fairyland. Sound good?"

"If you double cross me, I will tear out his eyes and his tongue and dance him to death while you watch," she said, harshly.

Merlin swallowed. "Okay, no – there will be no tearing out of eyes or tongues or any other important bits. Which is all of them – all the bits are important! No tearing, or, or gauging or otherwise damaging. Okay? And I'll get you the damn gold. Somehow."

She lifted her chin, her eyes narrowing, and for a moment in the moonlight Merlin could not understand why anyone ever believed that she was human.

"We have a deal, wizard," she said at last. Merlin had a horrible feeling that he had just been weighed and measured to the last ounce, and wanted to reach inside himself and scrub his soul with lye. "If you keep up your end of the bargain, you will have made a friend of the Sidhe. If you fail...well, it would be most unwise to fail."

"Check," said Merlin. "No failing. We are not at home to Mr Fail, I get that." He swallowed. "So we're good? You're going to give me the chance to pull this off?"

"You have a day," she said, tersely.

"A day? One day? Oh for the love of...right. Okay. Right. A day. I can do that," he said, his mind racing. "We have a deal." He bit his bottom lip. "Look, can I ask you something? Something not about Arthur and the gold and all that?"

"You are free to ask what you will, wizard," she said, coolly. "I cannot promise to answer you, but I shall tell you no lies."

"Well then – why are you sharing a room with Gwen?" he asked. "Of all the people in the University, why Gwen?"

The smile that curved her mouth then was an entirely different species from all the expressions she had worn before. "Because she is a smith," she said simply. "By name and nature both, and one who eschews cold iron. It was the Sidhe who taught smithcraft to mortal men, and few there are who still recall the art. Mistress Guinevere honours the old ways, crafting copper and silver and gold, and it drew me to her. And, of course, she is an old soul; it was inevitable that her path would cross with his. It always has."

Merlin blinked. "Sorry?"
"The details may vary, but the pattern stays the same. You have found him. She has found him. Some stories are fated to repeat themselves without end." She watched him, cold and curious. "You must understand this, wizard. He is the once and future king, and you are his man, now as then."

"He is the – no, no, you see, it's just a name," said Merlin, feeling suddenly shaken. "It's a joke. A coincidence. It's all just – it's – don't be ridiculous. This isn't a storybook. This is real life."

"All stories are truths, and all truths are stories," she said, crisply. "You have until midnight tomorrow; if the gold is not returned, your prince's life will be forfeit."

Merlin swallowed. "But you just said he's destined to repeat himself, so, so you can't kill him at the beginning of his story," he said, his voice scraped raw.

"The details may vary," she said, and her eyes flashed crimson as she smiled. "You have until midnight."

And then she was gone, as if she had never been there, and Merlin was left with the unenviable task of making up some convincing explanation to take into the bar to Gwen and Arthur.

"Wonderful," he muttered to himself. "Bloody wonderful."
"Um...hi?" Merlin could feel his gut clenching as the dragon blinked back at him out of the worn wood; the recollection of their last conversation was entirely too vivid, and with Sophia's words still echoing in his ears from the night before, it was enough to give him a pretty serious case of the screaming heebie jeebies. He watched the wood grain shift and buckle under the peeling paint as the carved dragon flexed its wings.

"Did you kill her?" it asked, tilting its head and regarding him with dispassionate interest.

"No!" he exclaimed. "I'm not a murderer! I'm a physics student, for God's sakes! I don't go around killing people!"

The dragon yawned. "You used to be more pragmatic," it told him. "I expect you will be again."

"I...don't know what that's supposed to mean, and I don't think that I want to either," said Merlin, swallowing hard. This was exactly the kind of talk he'd been hoping to avoid. "And anyway, I thought you said she was immortal? But never mind – look, I just wanted to ask your opinion on something. You know the other sorcerers, right? The teachers, I mean: the ones who have their own doors?"

"I watch all the wizards," it agreed.

"Okay, well, that's – er, pretty damned creepy, actually, but also very handy, so we'll let it go. So – if I wanted help in stealing a priceless treasure trove of stolen fairy gold from King Uther, do you think that Professor Gaius or Doctor Nimueh would be a better bet to ask for help?"

The dragon threw back its head and gave a grating gust of laughter. "Oh, Merlin, Merlin, the years have been far too dull without you. Steal Uther Pendragon's gold and give it to the Sidhe? What a wily way of cutting through your Gordian knot, to be sure!" It shook its wings out behind its carved back and then settled itself back on its haunches very neatly, sitting up straight with its tail curling around in front of its folded legs.

"So?" said Merlin, hopefully. "Professor Gaius, or Doctor Nimueh? I haven't met her yet, but I got the impression..."

"That she'd love the chance to annoy the king?"

"Basically, yeah," admitted Merlin. He was more or less counting on Mrs Singh's third hand gossip here, because he had a feeling that Professor Gaius would be a pretty hard sell.

"There is little enough love lost between Uther and Nimueh," the dragon said. "He blames her still for Igraine's death, while she holds him responsible in her turn."

"Woah – come again?"

"Nimueh was part of the late queen's guard detail. She was supposed to keep Igraine safe. She failed."

"The who with the what now?"

The dragon cocked its head to one side and gave this utterance careful consideration. "I'm afraid that I don't quite follow you, young warlock," it admitted, sounding rather testy. "Your young language
"Sorry! I just meant – I meant: 'bloody hell'!" He raked his hand through his hair and clasped the back of his neck, staring blankly into space. "So the Royal Family do use wizard bodyguards, then? It's not just Morgana?"

"Traditionally they have always relied upon a mixture of magical and mortal forms of protection," the dragon replied. "But Uther has done little to endear the wizards to him since his wife's death. He was most – intemperate, in his grief."

Merlin's brows darted towards his hairline. "What, Arthur's dad, acting like a dick? Surely not!" He swallowed hard, then, and looked over his shoulder, half way expecting Men In Black to spring out and arrest him for insulting the king. "So Nimueh, then. Um. Although – I don't actually have the right words to access her chamber just yet. I mean, I will do, because she's going to be tutoring me, but that's next term. I think. Unless they've changed it all around? Anyway – I was wondering if you'd mind, er...

He gave the dragon a plaintive look, and it bridled. "Are you asking me to disregard my sacred trust and allow you to enter the private room of another wizard uninvited?" it asked. "A full wizard? So that you can persuade her to assist you in committing a crime against your anointed king?"

"Er..." said Merlin. It sounded a bit dodgy, when you put it like that. "Yes?"

"I should be delighted to oblige you, my dear boy," said the dragon, settling back down onto its haunches and smiling broadly.

* * *

"Morning Wart, Mao," said Gawain, yawning as he settled down beside Merlin with a plate piled high with scrambled eggs, fried mushrooms and streaky bacon. "So did you hear about the stolen treasure, then? It's all over Twitter."

"Hmm?" Arthur peered up at Gawain blankly, his knife poised in the middle of slathering unidentified-red-fruit jam over a just-buttered slice of toast. Merlin tried very hard indeed to look like someone who absolutely had not spent most of Tuesday planning and carrying out a heist of truly epic proportions with a gorgeous and terrifying woman who surely couldn't be old enough to have been Igraine's best friend, but apparently was.

"What treasure?" he ventured, taking a mouthful of Cocoa Pops and chewing innocently. Morning light streamed in through the stained glass windows, brushing streaks of jewel-bright colour over people's faces, and Merlin reminded himself that he wasn't really a modern day Ronnie Biggs, because none of the gold had actually belonged to Uther in the first place. Merlin had simply been handing it back to its rightful owners, just like somebody who worked for the Lost and Found department in a train station, he reasoned. And in the process he had saved the life of the Prince of Wales, which clearly meant that Merlin was one of the good guys, and definitely not a felon.

"Somebody's gone and nicked all the Sutton Hoo gold," Gawain explained, unscrewing the lid from a bottle of HP sauce.

Kay sighed and paused on the brink of sipping his coffee."Not the Sutton Hoo Hoard, you twit – the new one. The Mercia Hoard," he said.

"Oh, the new one? That they found last year? I saw that," said Arthur, nodding. "We were at some kind of ceremony thing to congratulate the bloke who found it." He pulled a face. "Who would go
and steal something like that? I mean, it's like pinching the Mona Lisa, or Tutankhamen's burial mask – it's not like you can sell it on and claim it just fell off the back of a lorry!" He bit off a crisp corner of his triangle of toast and munched thoughtfully. "Tell you what, though – I bet the pater's gone completely ballistic. He does like his shiny things."

"Mmm," said Merlin, fiddling with his spoon. "Um – anyone want more toast?"

* * *

"I don't know how you did it, but I know it was you," said Professor Gaius, eyeing Merlin balefully.

"What?" said Merlin, giving his very best expression of wide-eyed innocence. (Or "hopeless village idiot", as Arthur preferred to describe it.)

"Oh, don't play silly buggers with me, my lad," Gaius said, leaning back in his creaking chair and crossing his arms over his chest. "You know perfectly well what I'm talking about. His Majesty is absolutely furious. I've spent the past three hours trying to convince him that clearly no British wizard would dream of stealing treasure from the king, and that in all probability it was the work of the Sidhe. Since he doesn't believe in the Sidhe, this is a particularly thankless task."

Merlin was painfully aware that his expression was giving him away, but he couldn't seem to stop himself from blushing and looking sheepish.

"Um..." he began, and Gaius closed his eyes with a pained look.

"Don't embarrass us both by lying, Merlin, I beg you. Just – can you at least tell me that the Sidhe are no longer a threat?"

"The Sidhe are no longer a threat," said Merlin. "In fact, Sophia Leanan said that I could call upon them for help, and that they would answer the call." He frowned. "She didn't guarantee that they'd actually help, but she said they'd definitely answer, and consider my request."

Gaius looked impressed. "Well! That's – that's certainly unexpected. It's a very long time since the wizards of these Isles have been on good terms with the Fair Folk." He shook his head. "You really are determined to make my declining years as eventful as you possibly can, aren't you?"

"Um. Sorry?" said Merlin. It was a word that he found himself using rather a lot.

Gaius heaved a sigh. "Well, I should probably congratulate you. You kept the prince safe, and even went some way towards re-establishing diplomatic relations with Oberon's realm, which is something I really never expected to see happen in my lifetime. So – well done, I suppose."

Merlin smiled. "Thank you, sir! It was just Game Theory."

"It was just – is this a Maths thing?"

"Well, Maths and Philosophy, and..."

"Stop! Stop right there – I really have no wish to hear you expound upon either Mathematics or Philosophy, Merlin. Just take the compliment, and let's leave it at that. You managed to keep the Prince of Wales safe and sound, but you did also give away a priceless treasure trove of ancient gold artifacts, and you made the King very cross indeed, and wore my patience very thin. So – you're not looking at life imprisonment in the Tower of London, but neither are you top of my list of favourite people right now. Don't push your luck by rambling on at me about Maths or Philosophy. And, Merlin?"
"Yes, sir?"

"Whatever else you get up to this week, please try to be a little less...dramatic. If you could. As a favour to an old man?"

"Sorry, sir. I'll try, sir."

Gaius stared at him gloomily over the top of his half-moon specs. "I'm sure you will, my boy. And yet somehow I don't feel terribly reassured. Ah well – pick up the book over there and turn to page fifteen, will you? There's a good lad."

* * *

"Did you do something?" Gwen fixed Merlin with a deeply suspicious look as they settled down at one of the empty tables in the Union, later on Wednesday afternoon.

"Sorry?" said Merlin, mildly, picking up a pint of Coke and hiding behind it so that his guilty expression couldn't give him away.

"Sophia's gone!" Gwen said, watching him narrowly. "She packed her bag this morning – or, well, last night, I suppose? But all her things were gone when I woke up. She left in the middle of the night. Which is just the dodgiest thing I've ever heard of! I mean – one minute she's perfectly happy, and charming the pants off the Prince of Wales in the pub, and the next minute she's vanished into thin air!"

"Um," said Merlin. "Maybe she was homesick?"

Gwen rolled her eyes. "In the middle of the night. To the point of running away."

"Ah. Right."

"Or maybe she was taken out of the picture by secret James Bond types, because she wasn't an appropriate girlfriend for the Prince of Wales!" said Gwen, waving her hands around.

Merlin blinked at her, and then dissolved into gales of laughter. Gwen scowled.

"Look, really – I'm not normally a conspiracy nut, but this is just too flipping weird," she said defensively.

"So you're asking me if I, what, set some secret royal ninjas on her because I was jealous? And because I have so much authority over the secret royal ninjas? Secret royal ninjas being well known for the respect they have for impoverished physics students?"

"Well..."

"Gwen, I absolutely promise you on my mother's life that there is no secret hitsquad of royal ninjas poised to kidnap any pretty girl who flutters her eyelashes at Prince Arthur. Or, you know, gives him a blowjob, or whatever. I mean, sure, the palace is probably freaking out about the potential minefield of dating, and accidental pregnancies, and all that, but I'm positive that they aren't going to start spiriting innocent girls away in the middle of the night just on the offchance that His Royal Annoyingness might be tempted to shag them. Not going to happen."

Gwen fiddled with her mug of tea. "Well, okay, it does sound a bit silly when you put it like that," she admitted. "But still – it's creepy," she said in a small voice. "I mean, she was there when I went to sleep, and then in the morning she'd just – vanished. Like she was never there. It was like an
episode of The Twilight Zone."

Merlin reminded himself that Gwen didn't know anything about fairy gold or wizardry or any of the everyday craziness that was business as usual for him, and patted her arm comforting.

"I don't know where she is now," he said – which was, strictly speaking, true. "But one thing I do know is that she didn't leave because of you. And I'm also quite sure that she wasn't kidnapped by the SAS. She just – she had her own things to deal with. It happens."

Gwen shook her head unhappily. "The Warden isn't worried – he said that she had to leave. Something about a family emergency, or something like that. He was weirdly hazy on the details, but he seemed completely calm about it all – like it's something that just happens."

"Well, maybe it is," said Merlin, watching her carefully, and feeling bad about lying to her. "I mean – people do drop out, don't they? Even here?"

She heaved another sigh. "I know it must be okay. I mean – I mean, you're right. Royal ninjas breaking into my room in the middle of the night and kidnapping my roommate because she flirted with Prince Arthur is pretty – out there." She gave a wobbly little laugh. "But it's just so strange. And disconcerting." She glanced up at Merlin and then down at her cup of tea, with a sheepish half-smile. "You know what else is odd? I'd given her this bracelet that I made. Copper, with a pattern of linked mistletoe leaves and berries. Well – it was gone, which is fair enough because I gave it to her. But where it had been sitting, on her bedside table, there was this little wreath, or maybe a coronet, made out of woven mistletoe." She shrugged helplessly. "Mistletoe? At this time of the year?"

"Maybe it was a thank you," suggested Merlin, feeling acutely grateful that the wretched fairy was nowhere near Gwen now. He really didn't feel comfortable thinking about her getting so cosy with the Sidhe. Then another thought struck him, and he grinned in spite of himself. "Or maybe she was just trying to tell you to seize the day and ask Lance out on a date."

"Shut UP!" said Gwen, punching his arm and looking away, pleased and flustered and oddly wistful. "I've told you – we're just good friends. He doesn't see me like that."

"Mmm-hmm. And I understand that they've just spotted a flock of flying pigs nesting at the top of St Rule's Tower," agreed Merlin, gravely.

"Don't! Look, if he did like me, then he'd do something about it, wouldn't he?"

"Like offer to be your Academic Dad?"

"Like ask me out on a date," said Gwen, pointedly. "And don't tell me that I should be a good little feminist and embrace girl power and ask him out, because I'm damned if I'm going to go up to someone that gorgeous and embarrass myself to death, and make everything awkward and uncomfortable, when we've got a perfectly lovely friendship going on. If that makes me old fashioned – well, then I'll just have to be old fashioned."

"He'll ask you out," said Merlin, feeling certain of it. "I've never seen someone so head-over-heels in my life. I don't know what he's waiting for, but he will ask you out, Gwen."

She offered him a slightly watery smile. "I'm just feeling a bit pants, today," she said, shaking her head. "Sorry. I think Sophia spooked me by pulling her disappearing act."

"I can see that," agreed Merlin, guiltily, opening the packet of crisps he'd just bought and brandishing it at her like a consolation prize. "Um – crisp? They're Bacon and Brown Sauce flavour, and apparently hand made by Highlanders. Or of Highlanders." He studied the picture on the front.
"Highlanders are involved in some way, I'm not too clear exactly how."

"Oh, shut up and give me a crisp already," said Gwen, with fond exasperation.

* * *

After Sophia's departure, Merlin's life settled into a routine of sorts. He had his lectures and his tutorials, both official and illicit; he had his growing friendships with Gwen and Lance and Lance's various environmentally friendly and politically aware friends; he had Morgana inviting him and Gwen over to her plush flat in Gibson Place for tea and scones once a week, in her capacity as Academic Mother, in order to keep tabs on how they were both settling in; he had research to undertake and essays to write; and he had to concentrate very hard on not letting his understanding of magic push him into making claims about the multiverse, or about string theory, that he simply couldn't substantiate through reference to his physics text books. And he also, on top of all the chaos of being a Fresher (or Bejant, as Morgana informed him the St Andrews First Years should really be called), and a secret wizard, had to deal with the near-constant presence of the infuriating, smart-mouthed, smug, entitled, scathing and appallingly lickable Arthur, Prince of Wales, who seemed to spend the whole time alternately annoying the crap out of Merlin and then disarming him completely. Merlin found himself blaming the dickishness on Uther, and ascribing the little moments of unexpected sweetness to Igraine; but he suspected that the truth was not quite so neat or black and white. Either way, it was enough to give him whiplash.

And as if the mere presence of Arthur Pendragon, resolutely heterosexual star of at least half of Merlin's teenage wank fantasies, wasn't distraction enough, Merlin also found himself called upon, in the weeks after he'd successfully negotiated a peaceful settlement with the Sidhe's assassin of choice, to protect Arthur from an over-amorous Selkie, two vampires, a small flock of ghouls, a gargoyle, and the ghost of Patrick Hamilton, who had been martyred in front of Sallies Quad. All whilst keeping his powers secret.

"I should be getting paid for this," Merlin informed Gaius, after successfully exorcising the ghost. "Seriously. Danger money. I deserve danger money. Can you look into that for me? Or a knighthood. That might be nice. Although – no, I'd prefer the cash."

"You're already being paid," Gaius said, unsympathetically. "Do you think that scholarships to St Andrews grow on trees? You've been presented with an all-expenses-paid education at one of the loftiest institutions of learning in the British Isles, complete with free accommodation and en-suite royalty. This, my boy, is called singing for your supper, so that's quite enough of your whining. Now, tell me what you learned about redcaps in Dee's Grimoir..."
Despite the fact that he barely seemed to have time to go to the loo, let alone get involved in many societies, and despite the fact that he’d missed the first three meetings, Merlin did eventually make a point of going along to The Victoria Cafe for the weekly GaySoc meet-up. He’d been meaning to go for weeks, but kept feeling nervous about it, and worrying about leaving Arthur alone, and before he knew it he’d been a student for a full month and still not made it to any of their events. His social life was actually less exciting, in terms of snogs or shags, than it had been back on the estate, and that was just appalling, as far as Merlin was concerned.

He was, to put it mildly, rather frustrated.

And of course there was Arthur right there, under his nose, being all haughty and pratlike and occasionally undressed, which was playing merry havoc with Merlin's libido. He could feel himself starting to become a bit obsessive, staring distractedly at the delicate pink scroll of Arthur's ear as he scribbled notes in the margins of a text book, or at the scattering of toast crumbs and the tiny smudge of jam at the corner of Arthur's mouth as he ate breakfast, just before his tongue swiped out pink and wet to lick it clean. He found himself fixating on the breadth of Arthur's shoulders, or going dry-mouthed at the sight of his hands wrapped around a water bottle. And as for the sight of Arthur flush-cheeked and panting first thing in the morning, when he got back from his daily jog along the beach all beaded with sweat and emitting waves of heat like a bloody radiator – well, Merlin found this whole sweaty-unwashed-manly version of Arthur almost painfully arousing, and was getting into the habit of starting his day with a bracingly cold shower.

All of which was clearly not healthy, and was also, when you got right down to it, kind of unpleasantly creepy, and made Merlin feel guilty as hell – because in spite of all the prattishness, and in spite of Arthur's complete failure to notice that Merlin kept right on saving his ungrateful arse from various supernatural uglies – well, they were becoming friends. And Arthur knew about the gay thing, and wasn't freaking out or acting any differently, which was a damn sight more than one could take for granted from straight blokes, in Merlin's limited experience of coming out. Which made it all the worse that Merlin was still covertly ogling him like it was an Olympic sport.

So Merlin definitely needed to get laid, before he managed to fuck everything up quite spectacularly. And that meant he needed to get his arse over to one of these GaySoc meetings, and actually meet some gay blokes, rather than fixating on the straight, unobtainable, out-of-Merlin's-league and, let's say it again, straight, heir to the throne. He thought about asking Gwen to go along with him for moral support, but she was busy doing Secret Nightline Things with Lance on Monday nights, so he screwed his courage up to the sticking place and headed off on his own instead.

Under other circumstances he might have worried about Arthur in spite of himself, because His Royal Pratness did seem to have an uncanny instinct for attracting magical trouble, whether he realised it or not. But he spent Mondays over at the RAF base at Leuchars, with the East of Scotland Universities Air Squadron, and Leon was on duty – and although admittedly he'd not been able to spot a Sidhe assassin at five paces, he was generally pretty capable. If Merlin wasn't going to actually handcuff himself to the prince (although actually, that was a thought...and, crap, that, right there, was why Merlin needed to get out and meet more people) he needed to accept that there were times when he would simply have to trust the various dangerous men employed by the crown to do their job and keep Arthur's shapely arse out of trouble.

And that's how he found himself standing outside The Victoria Cafe, chewing his bottom lip nervously and wondering whether he should have worn jeans instead of battered cargo pants. God.
He'd not been out on the pull in what seemed like forever – and St Andrews was about as different from his own stamping ground as it was possible to get without actually leaving the British Isles.

"Hey there, Merlin!" said a half-familiar voice behind him. He jumped, and turned around to blink at a girl with no hair and a very great many piercings.

"Oh, hi!" he said, grinning. "Er...Katy?"

"Close, babe, but no cigar," she said. "Catrina."

"Right, right – sorry, I'm crap with names," Merlin babbled, feeling like an idiot. God. These were supposed to be His People, and he felt horribly certain that he was going to be wearing the wrong things, and saying the wrong things, and just generally not fitting in at all. Bad enough that he was a month late – now he couldn't even get people's names right. God.

"I bet nobody ever forgets yours, though, do they?" she asked, leading the way inside.

Merlin sighed. "No," he agreed, following her up the stairs and towards a small room with a bright rainbow flag dangling from the door. "Not generally."

There were already a couple of dozen men and women seated around a long table, talking and clutching pints and eating chips, and generally looking pretty much the same as the various men and women to be found in any of the other pubs around St Andrews on any given night. Merlin wasn't sure what he'd been expecting, but after meeting Catrina he had maybe formed a slightly unrealistic notion of how impressively alternative the Gay Soc members were going to be. They looked pretty much like any other bunch of vaguely-posh, mostly-white, probably-English St Andrews students, for the most part. Which was both a relief and a disappointment.

"Hey, everyone," said Catrina, snagging an empty chair and dragging it up to one of the tables. "This is Merlin. Merlin, this is everyone."

Merlin gave a nervous laugh and waved at the room in general. "Okay, wow, how self-conscious do I feel now?" he said, biting his lip.

"See, I told you you should have come along from the start of term," said Catrina, grinning at him mercilessly. "You could've learned everyone's names then, when we'd got bunches of newbies."

"Oh, give the poor lad a break," said one of the guys further down the table. "Come over here and show us your wand, Merlin."

Merlin felt his cheeks start to ache from the grin he had plastered on his face. That particular gag was a lot less original than his new-found friends might think. However, this was the price of having a truly silly name, and at least, he reminded himself for the thousandth time, it wasn't Gandalf.

"Thanks," he said, sliding in between an interesting-looking older bloke with reddish blond hair and the one who'd addressed him; the latter was whippet-thin and had a ratty little goatee and a very disconcerting gleam in his eye. Merlin swallowed. "But I think I'll keep the wand hidden for the moment, if it's all the same with you. Don't want to go getting thrown out of the pub."

"Does it grant wishes if you rub it?"

"Er – I think that's lamps and genies," said Merlin, flushing. "And no."

"I've seen you somewhere before," said the comedian, frowning at him. "I'm Cedric, by the way."
"Hi," said Merlin. "I'm – well, yeah, Merlin."

"Seriously?"

Merlin looked back at Cedric, who was wearing a remarkable lime-green shirt that gave him the impression of a cadaverous weasel wrapped in a very large leaf, and sighed. "Seriously."

"Ha! I thought you might just be trying to get to meet – OH MY GOD! That's where I know you from! You were standing with His Royal Hotness when that dizzy tart fell off the pier! When he caught her! You were right there with him!" exclaimed Cedric, almost bouncing out of his seat. Merlin felt himself sinking down into his own chair as every eye in the room turned to stare at him. He didn't point out that Arthur had not, in fact, caught Sophia, because even the people who were right there at the time seemed to get that detail mixed up in the retelling. And besides, he mostly wanted the ground to open up under him right now.

"Fair play, Merlin," said Catrina, looking impressed. "Didn't think you had it in you."

"Oh my God, have you had it in you, you jammy bitch?" demanded Cedric, his eyes bulging. "Spill! Tell us everything! What does he wear in bed? Where did you meet him? Does that yummy policeman protect him in the bedroom too?"

"Stop!" said Merlin, desperately, half laughing and half creeped out. "I'm not shagging the Prince of Wales, for God's sakes! He's straight!"

"Nobody's straight," said Cedric, rolling his eyes. "They're just confused. And too sober."


"Yeah, he's got to be straight – because he's going to be a ruler one day," quipped Catrina, and there was a general groan.

"But you know him, right? I mean, I saw you with him," said Cedric, eyeing Merlin avidly. "He was all over you."

"He was not all over me!" spluttered Merlin. "That's just – seriously, you've got the wrong end of the stick, mate."

"I know which end of his stick I'd like to get hold of," Cedric said, smirking.

"Wouldn't we all?" sighed a dark-haired guy further down the table. "God. He could make me his Queen any day."

"Er – I'm going to grab a drink," said Merlin, feeling decidedly uncomfortable. "Catrina, what can I get you?"

She gave him a thumbs up and said: "Snakebite and black, love," and Merlin got up hurriedly and headed over to the bar, wondering why the banter was making him squirm. It was nothing he hadn't said himself, more or less, before now. It was just – that was before he knew Arthur. And there was a difference between the idea of Prince Arthur Pendragon, an idea that was attached to the image in all the photographs, all orphaned and gorgeous and mysterious and romantic and appallingly hot, and the actual bloke who lent Merlin a phone charger, whilst mocking him for being a hopeless idiot who would forget his own head if it wasn't attached so firmly.

He shifted awkwardly from foot to foot while he waited at the bar, wishing that this evening hadn't
somehow morphed into being All About Arthur. Because it would be, he could just see that now, and it made him feel dirty – and not in a good way. Either he refused to talk about Arthur, and they all decided he was a stuck-up git, or else he gossiped about Arthur behind his back like he was some kind of Page 3 starlet or something. Ack. Maybe he should just go home.

"Yes, love? What can I get you?" Merlin blinked at the barmaid indecisively for a long moment, and then ordered a pint of snakebite and black and a triple G and T. He could stay for one drink – one large drink – and then go home. To his lonely room. His lonely, shag-free room. God.

"D'you need some help with those?" Merlin looked up into the face of the fair-haired guy who had been sitting next to him on the other side. He looked too old to be a student, and he wasn't nearly as pretty as Arthur – but there was something attractive about him anyway. He had an interesting face, and he was looking at Merlin with an odd intensity that made him duck his head and look down at his feet for a moment, before glancing back up.

"Er – thanks," he said, feeling his cheekbones heating up, for no very good reason.

"I'm Edwin – sorry, we didn't really do the introduction thing before. Cedric can be a little – overwhelming."

"He's camper than a Butlins factory," said Merlin, rolling his eyes.

Edwin grinned. "You're not wrong." He licked his lips. "So, I wanted to ask you something," he said, and Merlin braced himself for a grilling about Arthur's favourite breakfast cereal, or the size of his dick.

"Yes?" he said, trying to look as discouraging as possible.

"Is it true about the kraken?"

Merlin nearly dropped the pint glass that he'd just picked up, and the barmaid had to dart back over and mop up the slosh of foaming purple liquid, her lips pursed in disapproval.

"What?" he said, blinking over at Edwin incredulously.

Edwin licked his lips. "You heard me," he said, his mouth slowly curling into a smile that promised rather a lot of interesting things.

"How do you – what – um," said Merlin, trying not to do the stunned codfish expression and grimly certain that he was failing. "Is there a Facebook group that I've just not been invited to, or something?"

Edwin grinned. "There is, actually. But that wasn't how I found out – we're terrible gossips, you know, in the S.O.S."


"Save Our Souls. Or Arseholes, for short."

Merlin choked. "You did not just say that," he said. "Aren't you scared Doctor Nimueh will turn you into something unmentionable?"

Edwin shrugged. "Would you protect me?" he asked, his gaze flicking up and down Merlin's body and darting back to rest on his mouth. "I understand you're pretty chummy with her."
Merlin swallowed. "What? I've not even met her yet!" It wasn't a squeak. He was a grown man. He
didn't squeak. Obviously. "She's teaching me next term. Not now. Um."

"You keep right on insisting that, Harry Potter," said Edwin, grinning at him. "I've got your back."
He licked his lips rather pointedly. "Or I could have, if you need an alibi to prove you were busy
with a different kind of fairy when somebody made the Staffordshire Hoard vanish."

"Um," said Merlin, and took another swig of his gin.

* * *

It was probably a bad idea to go wandering off through the castle ruins – the technically locked castle
ruins - with a complete stranger who had decidedly dishonourable intentions, but Merlin had really
had quite enough of good ideas. Edwin was a wizard, and a bloke, and gay, and Merlin's age – or,
well, clearly quite a bit older, but still shaggable. And he wasn't remotely interested in talking about
Prince Arthur, not even when he knew that Merlin was sharing a room with the guy. He was just
interested in Merlin, and apparently thought that Merlin was pretty damned fabulous. And cool. And
shaggable. Damn bloody right Merlin was going to say yes when Edwin invited him to go for a
walk, after they all stumbled out of The Vic around eleven.

"We're not supposed to be here," said Merlin, matter-of-factly, as they scrambled over the wall.

"I know," said Edwin, grinning back over his shoulder, the orange streetlight painting a stripe of
colour down his face and leaving the other half in shadows. "Fun, isn't it?"

Merlin bit the inside of his cheek to stop from laughing out loud.

"It's dark," he observed, when he landed on the grass on the other side. "Should've brought a torch."

"Are you kidding?" asked Edwin, snapping his fingers. A little ball of light appeared, suspended in
the air between them, and Merlin could feel his mouth make a startled little o of surprise.

"Okay, you have got to teach me that trick," he said, looking up into Edwin's face with delight.

Edwin smirked back at him. "Oh, there's no end to the tricks I could teach you, my lad," he said
pointedly, stepping forward – and then Merlin was being pushed back against the cold, uneven
stones of the castle wall and laughing into a kiss.

* * *

It was past midnight when he stumbled back into Sallies, still half-drunk and breathless with laughter.
Leon had evidently gone to bed – Arthur's bodyguards occupied the rooms on either side of the one
he shared with Merlin, as well as the one opposite – and now Ewan was on guard outside their room
instead. Merlin gave him a wobbly little salute.

"Is His Royal Highness asleep?" he whispered, quivering on the cusp of laughter and conscious that
he probably reeked of gin.

Ewan gave a small shrug. "He got back from Leuchars two hours ago," he said. "It's been quiet since
then."

"Right," said Merlin, nodding. Arthur was generally pretty conscientious about getting to bed early
during the week. And jogging, and eating his greens. Really, he and Lance would probably get on
like a house on fire if they spent a little more time together, Merlin thought, rather randomly, as he
unlocked the door. "G'night, Ewan," he whispered, opening the door as stealthily as he could.
Once he'd stepped inside the room, of course, he was faced with the choice of whether or not to switch the light on. Tricky. Okay. He stood quite still for a moment or two, with his eyes screwed shut, and then opened them again; sure enough his eyesight had adjusted a little already, and was continuing to adjust as he waited. The curtains were half open, and there was some light coming in from outside. Merlin could probably make it to his...

He promptly fell over the chair in the dark, and landed full length on the floor with a loud, unhappy "Oof!"

"Merlin?" An instant later Arthur had switched his light on and was sitting up in bed, blinking down at him. "Are you okay? What the hell?"

"Sorry, sorry," said Merlin, scrambling to his feet. "Trying to be stealthy. Not my best thing, stealth."

"No," agreed Arthur, his mouth twitching slightly. "You're not exactly panther-like, are you?"

"I could be!"

"No, Merlin. No, you really couldn't be," said Arthur, shaking his head. In the lamplight his skin was a rosy gold, and the shadows looked like they had been painted on with ink. He wasn't wearing a shirt, and Merlin did have the grace to feel rather ashamed of himself for being so acutely aware of the shirtlessness. Apparently getting off with some random bloke – some really pretty cool bloke, who could do things with his tongue that were probably illegal in quite a lot of parts of the world – was not enough to quash his Arthur fixation after all. Bugger.

"I could be very like a panther," Merlin insisted, for no particular reason, and sank into a half-crouch, hands raised as claws and face contorted into a fierce grimace, to underline his point. "Rrrowrr!" he said, ferociously, clawing at the air.

Arthur took one look at him, and collapsed back onto his pillow, laughing. "Go to bed, you knob," he said, with a grin. "I can't believe Gwen kept you out so late on a school night."

Merlin felt himself flushing as he toed off his trainers. "Er – I wasn't out with Gwen," he admitted, wondering why he felt this weird, almost guilty fluttering sensation in the pit of his stomach. "I was out with, um, GaySoc. Actually."

"Oh," said Arthur, a shocked, bitten-off little syllable that made Merlin's heart turn over in his chest.

"Yeah," he said, turning away and pulling his shirt over his head. The atmosphere in the room had gone from warm and comfortable to oddly strained in a matter of seconds, and Merlin didn't know whether that was just his imagination, or whether Arthur was sitting there freaking out about the gayness. Crap. Merlin unfastened his trousers, with his back still to Arthur, and tried not to feel so weirdly vulnerable. Arthur probably wasn't even watching him. He was probably half asleep already. He probably couldn't care less how Merlin had spent his evening.

"Did you have fun?"

Merlin turned around at that, startled by the tightness in Arthur's voice. Oh, God. Please don't let this be one of those I'm-cool-with-gay-people-so-long-as-they-don't-go-flaunting-their-gayness-by-actually-having-a-love-life-things, he thought, miserably. It had been bad enough with Will. He didn't want to have to be the Gay Best Friend providing life lessons for liberal straight people. He just wanted to get laid.

"Er – yeah," he said, meeting Arthur's eyes and ducking his head, and then grinning in spite of himself. "I did, actually."
Arthur swallowed. Merlin could still feel the prince's eyes burning into him as took off his trousers, pulled on a t-shirt and a pair of threadbare tartan pyjama bottoms and rummaged around for his toothbrush. He padded over to the sink and bent over to brush his teeth with his back to Arthur, feeling a hot blue gaze fixed on him the whole time. It really shouldn't be a turn-on, damn it, especially not when he was fairly sure Arthur was having a minor homophobic crisis in the corner. Eventually he turned around, still working the toothbrush in his mouth, and leaned back against the sink, staring back at Arthur with his head tilted on one side. He could feel himself starting to get pissed off. Arthur was always having this effect on him. So he met Arthur's gaze and lifted his eyebrows challengingly, daring him to say something.

"Did you cop off with somebody, then?" Arthur asked, as if he just couldn't help himself. He was staring at Merlin's pink, spit-slick mouth and watching the motion of the toothbrush inside his cheek, and his breath was coming a little too fast. Merlin's eyes narrowed, and he spat out the toothpaste and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"What's it to you if I did?" he asked, crossly. "Do you have a problem with that, your Majesty?"

Arthur swallowed. "Why would I have a problem with that?" he asked, his voice sounding hoarse. "It's no skin off my nose." He looked away, his cheeks flushing a vivid, blotchy red in the lamplight, and lay back down. "Did you get your end away, then?" he asked, half a minute later, without looking at Merlin.

"Oh my God, what the hell is this, the Spanish Inquisition?" Merlin didn't know why it was bothering him. He wouldn't have minded Gwen asking – in fact, he'd have been dying to tell her. But having this conversation with Arthur was flesh-crawlingly awkward, and oddly disappointing too. He crossed his arms tightly in front of his chest and glared across at Arthur.

"Is this going to be a thing? Like, it's okay for me to be your funny little gay friend, so long as you don't have to think about whether I actually go around sucking cocks? Or whether I take it up the arse?"

Arthur made a shocked hiss of indrawn breath. "What?" he said. "No! What?"

"Because I can move out, if it's going to be a problem." Merlin couldn't believe he'd just said that. Gaius would have his guts for garters. He couldn't move out. He didn't know why he was suddenly trembling with anger either. He just – was. All of a sudden, his veins were flooding with adrenaline and his muscles were tense and he felt like hitting something, or like running a mile. All because of that shocked little hitch of breath, and the way Arthur was staring at him like he'd suddenly turned into something dangerous.

"What?" Arthur looked dazed, and then lost, and finally pissed off. "What on earth are you talking about, you idiot?"

Merlin just glared at him, his arms folded tight, trembling and shocky and not at all sure quite why. "Well?"

"Well what? Well do I want you to move out? Of course I don't want you to move out, you massive drama queen! Fucking hell, Merlin, what are you on about? I know you're gay, you pillock – big whoop! Why would I suddenly want you to move out? Other than because you're clearly off your head?"

Merlin swallowed, and suddenly got the feeling that he was, just possibly, making a massive fool of himself. "You're acting weird," he said, because he knew it was true. "About me getting off with Edwin. You're being all weird about it."

Arthur rolled his eyes. "What, because I showed a bit of interest in your sad, barren excuse for a
social life? Well excuse me for pretending to give a damn! God – whatever! Merlin, I'm really not interested in who you shag, mate. I'm just glad you're getting some. Now can you please get in to bed so I can switch the light out and get back to sleep? Or are you determined to keep me awake while you have some kind of drunken breakdown?"

"Oh," said Merlin. Which was not, perhaps, the snappiest come back in the history of come backs, but – he didn't quite believe Arthur. That was the thing. There was a discordant note that he couldn't quite place, and he couldn't shake the feeling that Arthur was lying. That it had bothered him, thinking about Merlin getting off with some random bloke. And this just hurt, because he knew that Arthur was a prat, but he'd somehow believed that, underneath all the bickering, and the insults, they were becoming real friends. That Arthur got him, and accepted him, and that even though there were all the differences between them, there was still a connection there. It wasn't so much to ask, really, when Merlin was working his arse off to keep the lazy git safe from half the contents of Grimm's Fairy Tales.

"Today would be wonderful, Merlin," said Arthur, wearily, his finger poised over the light switch. Merlin bit his lip, and thought about pushing – but maybe then he'd find himself saying things that couldn't be taken back, or Arthur would, and then he would have to move out. And he didn't want to do that.

"Right," he said, scowling, and got into bed. "Fine."

Arthur turned out the light, and they both lay there in prickly silence for several minutes. And then the combination of the hour and the remnants of alcohol in his blood stream started to do their work, and Merlin began to relax towards sleep, and to suspect that he might just have been making a gibbering idiot of himself.

"Night," he said. "Sorry," he added, after a moment.

"So you bloody well should be," muttered Arthur, drowsy and irritable. "You massive girl. Now go to sleep!"
"I cannot believe that you agreed to this," Merlin said to Arthur, watching Lance tying a disconcertingly efficient-looking knot in the silk scarf they'd borrowed from Morgana, like an overgrown boy scout earnestly trying to earn his BDSM badge.

"It's for charity," said Arthur, shrugging. "It's for my charity, for goodness' sake! I can hardly ignore a Union fund-raising event for The Prince's Trust when I'm the prince in question, now, can I?"

"Yes you can! Very easily! You totally can!"

"Stop being such a whiner, Merlin," said Arthur, moving his foot experimentally. Merlin's foot moved with it. As did his leg. Merlin felt himself start to fall, and frantically flung his arm around Arthur's shoulders, trying not to shiver as Arthur wrapped his own arm around Merlin's waist. He felt off-balance in more ways than one, and the arm really wasn't helping as much as Arthur probably thought.

"No, seriously – I had to do this stuff at school," he explained. "I was pants. Honestly. Pants. Sack race, egg-and-spoon race, wheelbarrow race – I'm just not your man for this kind of thing! I always came last!"

"Well, I always come first," said Arthur cheerfully. Merlin reflected that it was just as well Cedric wasn't there, because he'd not have been able to resist a straight line like that. "So your luck's about to change."

Merlin looked around at the rest of the people in the room, trying to see a sympathetic face somewhere ready to help him out of his predicament. He could not possibly spend an evening getting progressively less sober, with Prince Arthur locked against him ankle-to-ankle and hip-to-hip. It was cruel and unusual punishment, and he was going to lodge a formal complaint. Somewhere. He spotted Val leaning against the wall, silent and intimidating in the midst of all the giggling mass of students, and cast him an imploring gaze. Val's eyebrow twitched upwards infinitesimally, but that was all the response he gave.

"Look, Merlin, there is no way that I'm letting Morgana beat me," said Arthur, with feeling.

"Then choose somebody else!" exclaimed Merlin, waving his hands and nearly losing his balance again. "Because I promise you, this is really not some kind of fantastic winning strategy!"

Oh, God. If he'd had any idea that Lance's bloody Charity Pub Crawl was going to involve getting tied to the oblivious object of his sordid fantasies, he'd have stayed at home. Or had a cold shower. Or at least worn looser trousers.

"Oh, shut up. Morgana's already picked Gwen, and I'm not going to spend the evening tied to Kay."

"Pick Gawain!"

"Gawain's got himself shackled to Morgause," said Arthur, a bemused expression crossing his face, and his hand tightened on Merlin's waist for a moment. "He – he was actually pretty emphatic about that. About calling dibs."

Morgause and Morgana had been friends long before Morgause began her career as a bodyguard, and started working for her Academic daughter. Morgana's adopted kids were all aware that Morgause was still officially their grandmother, even though she'd long since graduated, but it was a
rarity that she lowered herself to participating in any kind of Academic family activities. Merlin was still rather startled that she'd elected to come along to something like this during her down time; he had a vague notion that she spent her off-duty hours engaged in endless Tai Chi sessions, and sharpening wicked blades, and cleaning large guns. But apparently not.

Merlin looked at Arthur sidelong. "He fancies her? I mean – I mean, she's gorgeous, even I can see that, but she's – I mean, she'd eat him for breakfast and spit out the bones."

"He says he likes a challenge."

"And isn't she – I mean, honestly, I kind of got the strong impression that she and Morgana were...?"

Arthur shrugged, his cheeks reddening. "Don't ask, don't tell," he said.

"Um. But – doesn't that mean that he's barking up the wrong tree?"

"He likes a challenge."

"Ookay." Merlin frowned. "Well, that still leaves Helen." Helen was Morgana's longtime friend and Academic sister, a fellow Art Historian with glossy dark hair, a wicked laugh, a gap between her front teeth and a truly spectacular singing voice. She had adopted Kay and Gawain, which Merlin thought showed either a very forgiving nature or a terrible lack of judgment.

"Helen's snagged Kay now. Look, Merlin, if you spend the entire night whinging I may have to ask Val to shoot you just on general principles. I'm sure I could round up people prepared to bury you on the Royal and Ancient Golf Course for me."

"But..."

"Oh, give it a rest, Merlin," said Gwen, stumbling over in awkward synch with Morgana. They had their arms wrapped neatly around one another's waists and were making this whole three legged thing look like fun.

"I'm not having fun," Merlin explained, and Arthur cuffed him round the head. "Ow! See? Not fun!"

"We are going to kick your sorry arses into the middle of next week," said Morgana, smugly. Merlin took one look at the efficient-looking man standing a few paces behind her, radiating that now-familiar aura of polite do-not-fuck-with-me, and did not need to be told that this was whoever was on Morgana duty this evening, while Morgause played at Happy Families with her Academic Grandson.

"You keep telling yourself that," said Arthur, straightening his back. "You'll be singing another tune when we get back to the Union first, missy."

Morgana made a rude noise. "Oh, please. I've seen how Merlin handles his liquor. You're completely doomed."

"She's right," said Merlin, glumly. "I really don't have a very good feeling about this."

"Remember, it's up to you which order you visit the pubs," said Lance. "You can choose any seven from the list – there are Charities Reps in all of them. Make sure you get your booklet stamped by the Charities Rep. They'll confirm that you were there, and what drink you had – to check that it was further down the alphabet than whatever you had at the previous pub. So if you order a pint of Guinness in the Cellar Bar, and go on to the West Port, you can't have an absinth – you'll need to order something that starts with a letter after G, like a Jack Daniels or something. Okay?"
Merlin put his head in his hands and made an unhappy whimpering sound. "We are so totally and utterly fucked," he said.

"Don't be so defeatist!" said Arthur, pulling his ear.

"Ow!

Merlin pinched Arthur's arm quite hard in return, and Arthur retaliated by smacking him over the top of the head.

"It's like watching Laurel and Hardy," said Morgana, sighing, and Gwen tried unsuccessfully to hide her giggles behind the back of her hand. Merlin stuck his tongue out at her.

"There's a list of drinks in alphabetical order on the back of the booklet, to help you," said Lance, smiling encouragingly. "Just in case anyone's dyslexic."

"Or hammered," said Kay.

"I can't believe that you're supporting something like this!" Merlin said reproachfully. "Isn't this kind of thing against the teachings of the Lord Buddha?"

Lance shrugged. "I'm a Buddhist, Merlin. I'm not a killjoy. And besides, it's raising money for an excellent cause."

"Honestly, though – I'd pay to not have to go on a three-legged pub crawl," said Merlin, urgently. He was all too conscious of the warm, hard line of Arthur's body pressed up against his side, and of Arthur's arm around his waist, and he really couldn't see how he was going to be able to successfully hide his growing arousal over several hours of being plastered up against the man.

"Please?" he added, in a small voice.

"Nobody's listening to you, Merlin," said Arthur, firmly. "You're coming on the piss up with the rest of us, and that's that."

Lance looked worried. "Merlin, if you really don't want to take part, that's perfectly okay," he said, glancing around. "I mean, it's supposed to be a member of your Academic Family, but I'm sure that we can find Arthur another partner if we look..."

Kay snorted. "Christ, you'll be fighting them off with sticks, if you put the word out," he said, and Merlin felt Arthur's whole body go rigid against him.

"Mer-lin," muttered Arthur, crossly. "Don't be such a pussy!" He sounded oddly upset, and Merlin thought that was a bit rich, under the circumstances.

"Look, it's not that I've got anything against getting wellied," he said, feeling obscurely guilty, and then he ground to a halt, because saying 'I'm just scared I might make a move on you' or indeed 'I'm worried I might accidentally do some magic in public if I let my guard down' were both completely impossible things to say.

"So I've gathered," said Arthur, not looking at him. "So it's just having to spend the whole evening with me that's the problem, then? Well, cheers. Good to know."

"Oh, bugger off! I just – I don't want to make you lose, okay?" said Merlin, helplessly. "You'll be all pissed off, and it's not fair because I'm warning you that I'm crap at this kind of thing, and if you don't beat Morgana I'll never hear the end of it."
Arthur squeezed his waist briefly. "You'll do fine," he said, as if he honestly believed he could make it true just by saying it. Merlin sagged, and rested his head on Arthur's shoulder. He tried not to notice how much he liked doing that.

"Merlin?" said Lance, looking worried. "D'you want to back out?"

"You don't have to drink, if you don't want. You could just go along for the craic," said Gawain.

"It's a pub crawl!" protested Arthur, rolling his eyes.

Gawain shrugged. "Morgause isn't drinking," he said, glancing down at the slender figure he'd managed to get himself tied to. She was still mostly in black, but this time the leather trousers were the colour of old blood. Merlin felt certain that she had a ridiculous number of weapons stashed away about her person, despite not being on duty at present. Apparently this was a selling point for Gawain; Merlin wished him luck, and suspected he'd need it.

"Come on, Merlin," murmured Arthur against his ear, his breath brushing warm against Merlin's skin and his lips grazing Merlin's earlobe for just a second. "I'm not doing it without you, you git. You can't make me go with some stranger, who...look, I trust you, Merlin. I know we'll look out for each other. It'll be fine. Please?"

"Oh, God, okay then," Merlin groaned. "I'm in, I'm in. But don't you dare bitch at me if Morgana beats us."

"When we beat you," corrected Morgana, cheerfully.

"Is everyone ready?" asked Lance, looking around at the mass of couples standing arm-in-arm in front the Students' Union building in the last lingering pink-red-gold rays of the setting sun.

"Everyone got their collecting tins?"

"Yes!" they all chorused back.

"Everyone got their booklets, for stamping?"

"Yes!

"You know you're looking for the Charities Rep in each pub, and that they'll be wearing a t-shirt like mine?"

"WE KNOW!" yelled someone – it sounded suspiciously like Catrina. "Get on with it!"

"Okay. On your marks, get set...GO!" said Lance, and Merlin felt Arthur's whole body clenching and releasing as he hurled himself forward, dragging Merlin into motion along with him.

* * *

They spent the first few minutes not so much running as engaging in a series of frantic falls that never reached completion, until something finally clicked and they developed a clunky kind of rhythm which was getting smoother by the moment. Merlin's heart was trying to fight its way out of his ribcage, and his jeans were already feeling way too tight, and he had a terrible teetering-on-the-brink-of-mortification feeling about it all, but he was also exhilarated to be running flat-out over the echoing pavement with his arm wrapped around Arthur's shoulders and Arthur's arm around his own. Exhilarated — and kind of thrilled. Of course, they weren't running in the same direction as Morgana and Gwen, and Merlin wasn't sure that he trusted Arthur's blind assurance that he had an unbeatable strategy for reaching seven pubs in the shortest time possible and getting back to the
Union Bar in time to claim their prize. But, honestly, winning was the last thing that Merlin was worried about. If he just managed to get through the evening without making a gibbering tit of himself, that would be awesome.

"Where are we going?" he gasped, halfway to laughing with the sheer, childish joy of feeling air burning in his lungs, the rhythm of their running matching perfectly now; and when Arthur turned and caught his eye Merlin did laugh out loud. "I can't believe you talked me into this," he gasped, as they pounded down Market Street. "You great numpty."

"Oh, shut up, Merlin. You know you love it," said Arthur. "And we're going to start out at The Raisin. I mapped it all out, and I have a cunning plan."

"Is it more cunning than a fox who's been appointed Professor of Cunning at Oxford University?" Merlin asked, giggling as the bright yellow lions in front of The Raisin came into view.

Arthur snorted. "Why yes, Baldrick; if you look up the word 'cunning' in a thesaurus, you'll find that it lists 'plan by Prince Arthur' as the best synonym." He glanced sidelong at Merlin as they neared the bar. "Actually, you'd make a great idiot manservant."

"Piss off, Blackadder!"

"It's Pendragon. And you're stuck with me, come hell or high water, so you'd better get used to it."

Merlin knew that he only meant they were stuck together for the race, just until somebody untied the scarf from around their twinned ankles, but it still made his heart clench suddenly tighter in his chest.

"How you doing, Val?" he called, in an effort to distract himself, and Arthur's bodyguard nodded in his direction as he jogged along beside them.

"Very good, sir," he said, his voice even and calm.

"Shit – both of you go jogging and work out and play sports," said Merlin, belatedly. "And the most athletic I get is the occasional game of darts. You do realise that I can't keep this pace up, right?"

"Less talking," said Arthur, clasping Merlin's shoulder briefly and slowing down as they neared the pub. There were half a dozen other pairs stumbling along behind and beside them, empty moneyboxes rattling, but Arthur was evidently determined to beat the lot of them.

* * *

Some twenty minutes later, they were in The Greyfriars Hotel Bar with a much heavier collecting tin, looking at a couple of glasses of brandy.

"Bottoms up," said Arthur, lifting his glass, and Merlin picked his own up gingerly.

"Up bottoms," he agreed, and took a mouthful. And promptly choked. "Sweet baby Jesus, that stuff's foul!" he spluttered.

Arthur raised an eyebrow and sipped his own drink meditatively. "It's not a very good vintage," he allowed. "But about what you'd expect for the price."

"Petrol has a vintage?"

"Oh my God, Merlin, don't be so, so...just, don't, okay? Please allow me to entertain the illusion that you weren't actually raised in a barn."
Merlin waved at the bar tender. "Can I have a pint of Eighty Shilling, mate?" he said. "Don't you say a word," he added, without looking at Arthur. "Beer starts with B." And he poured the rest of his brandy into Arthur's glass.

"I think that technically, Eighty is an ale..."

"Zip it, Prince Charming. That's it, by the way – I trusted you on the absinth and the brandy, and they were both pure Devil's piss. I'm picking my own drinks from this point on. Just so you know."


"Oh no you don't! That's not fair! My drink's ten times the size of yours!" protested Merlin.

"And whose fault is that?"

"Not racing you."

Arthur studied him. "Well I'm not losing half a bloody hour while you sit here nursing a pint. We're doing shorts, Merlin, you pillock, because speed is of the essence. And you've just ordered a pint."

"Fine! I'll down it in one!" said Merlin, recklessly. He didn't chug whole pints on a regular basis, but he'd certainly done it a few times.

"Really? Now that I've got to see." Arthur sounded completely incredulous.

The pint arrived in front of him and Merlin stuck his tongue out. "Piece of cake," he said, picking up his glass. "What'll you give me if I do it?"

There was a little pause, and Arthur shifted against him. "My admiration?" he suggested. "A bucket to barf into?"

Merlin lifted the glass to his lips, watching Arthur's face all the while, and started drinking. And drinking. And drinking. He watched Arthur's eyes start to widen, and his glance skitter down to stare at the way that Merlin's adam's apple was bobbing while his head tilted gradually back so that he was looking at Arthur through his lashes, and Arthur started to blush. By the time Merlin put down his empty pint glass on the bar and swiped the back of his hand over his wet mouth, Arthur's eyes were bulging, and his fingers were digging into Merlin's waist quite fiercely.

"That was – that was actually pretty impressive," he said, rather hoarsely, his eyes darting from Merlin's mouth to his throat and back again.

"I have mad skills," Merlin agreed, happily. Evidently Arthur didn't like being proved wrong, because he didn't seem to know where to look. But at least he stopped bitching about time keeping, so it was all good.

* * *

By the time they reached The Central Bar, their visits had fallen into a kind of pattern. Val would open the door and precede them into the pub before ushering them both in; they'd head straight to the bar to get the drinks in and get their booklets stamped by the Charities Rep; they'd drink said drinks; and then Merlin would raise the collection tin and start improvising a little patter at the assembled drinkers, while Arthur would try to keep them both from falling over – a task which became increasingly challenging with each new pub.

"Roll up, roll up, ladies and gentlemen, girls and boys, bejants and bejantines, semi-bejants, tertians
and magistrands!" Morgana would have been proud of him, he thought, rather smugly, as he managed to recall all the ridiculous terms she'd taught him for the various St Andrews year groups. "Good people of St Andrews, you've seen charity collections before – but how often does the person scrounging after your cash offer you anything more substantial than a warm glow of having helped a worthwhile cause? Does Kofi Anan show up in person to ask you to support UN charities, and offer to pose for photos, or record a message to wish your granny a Happy Birthday? He does not. But tonight I am collecting for The Prince's Trust, and here by my side I have the one, the only, Arthur Pendragon! Ready and willing, should you donate tonight to his charity, to give you a memento to show your grand children, of you arm in arm with the future King. And so without without further gilding the lily and with no more ado, I give to you, the seeker of serenity, the protector of Italian virginity, the enforcer of our Lord God, the one, the only... Sir Ulllrrrich von Lichtenstein! Whoops, no, my mistake – Prince Arrrrthur Pendragon!"

Merlin was finding that his sales pitch got longer and more elaborate, and his showman gestures got more flamboyant, after each drink – but it seemed to be working pretty well, all in all, so he kept right on, feeling Arthur wincing beside him. It wasn't like Arthur to try trading on his celebrity, but every person they'd approached in the first bar had said "...aren't you..?" and they'd lost a lot of time going through the Yes-I-Am two-step, so Merlin had insisted that they cut to the chase and just announce Arthur properly, and pimp him out for cash. He hadn't phrased it quite that baldly, but that was the gist of it.

"Look, you know that Morgana's going to be milking it!" he'd pointed out. "Did you see how she was dressed tonight? That wasn't her don't-mind-me-I'm-just-a-lowly-student look, that was her drool-over-me-I'm-an-It-Girl look. And she's armed herself with Gwen, so they've got a double whammy of gorgeous and adorable going on. You railroaded me into this, damn it - I thought you wanted to win this thing?"

And so Arthur had caved. And although they weren't moving through each pub as quickly as some of the other teams must have done, they were collecting an impressive amount of money, and most of didn't rattle. Of course, they were also getting quite the mixture of overly friendly and tactile people who were eager to stuff money into their collection tins while giggling blushingly up at Arthur, and the occasional pugnacious types who wanted to talk about the Scottish Nationalist Party, or the Act of Union, or in one memorable case in The Central, to simply tell Arthur that he was a fucking useless English fuck who should fuck off back to where he came from. Merlin watched as Val escorted that particular member of the Prince Arthur Fanclub out of their vicinity, and nodded thoughtfully.

"I liked him," he said. "He didn't beat about the bush."

Arthur pinched him, quite hard. "I'll give you a beating around the bush," he said quietly, his teeth still gritted in a polite smile.

"Pah. You're all talk," snorted Merlin, knocking back a tequila that one of Arthur's fangirls had pressed upon them.

"Try me."

Merlin made a rude noise. "Oh, *bite me*, Your Majesty," he said, and launched a spectacularly successful (if perhaps, upon reflection, not very well thought out) stealth tickle attack sent them both toppling off their chairs and had Arthur convulsing and yelling and flailing on the floor within seconds, to the fascination of the crowd in The Central. Merlin reflected, in the back of his mind, that it was probably a Very Good Thing that he UK press had signed that agreement to hold off on buying any paparazzi photographs or interviews relating to the prince until after he turned nineteen.
God only knew what kind of strings the king – or, more likely, Gaius – had needed to pull to make that one happen. But it was certainly just as well, because the position they were currently in was pretty damn compromising, even if it was completely innocent.

Mostly innocent. Merlin was getting entirely too much enjoyment out of being wrapped around a frantically shuddering Arthur, to be perfectly honest. The knot on the scarf had been gradually working its way looser and looser for the past hour or so, and as Arthur kicked and squirmed he managed to tug his leg free, which allowed Merlin to get even better leverage. So – definitely pretty compromising, but it was no worse than the kind of horsing around that Kay and Gawain got up to all the time, he told himself.

"Say uncle?" he said, pressing his advantage, and then there was a rather startling bendy flippy thing like something out of The Matrix (well, okay, like something out of a very low budget and quite tipsy version of The Matrix), and then suddenly Merlin was flat on his back with Arthur sitting on top of him, legs tangled together awkwardly and both of Merlin's wrists pinned to the floor.

"Oh," he said, blinking up at Arthur in astonishment. His chest was heaving from laughter and more than laughter, and Arthur had to be noticing the unfortunate warm bulge in Merlin's jeans, since he was basically sitting on it.

"You say uncle!" said Arthur, smugly, his face very close to Merlin's. His breath smelled like Jack Daniels and Coke, and Merlin was acutely aware that it would only take a little movement to brush his lips against Arthur's mouth. Just a very little movement.

He met Arthur's eyes, and saw that same realisation there, and there was a shocky little instant where the whole world seemed to freeze – although not in the silent, bugs-in-amber way that Merlin had experienced on The Pier, thank God – and Merlin knew that he could change everything if he just leaned up an inch or two. Arthur's eyes widened.

"Uncle!" Merlin said, breathless and panicky, before Arthur could recoil. "Uncle!"

Arthur rolled off him, pink-cheeked but beaming triumphantly, and the little fanclub surrounding them broke into spontaneous applause. Merlin didn't quite know what had hit him.

"Sorry to cut and run, ladies and gentlemen, but we've got to carry on with our quest," Arthur said, letting Val help him to his feet and tugging Merlin up along with him. "Come along, Baldrick."
Chapter 13

By the time that Raisin Weekend finally rolled around, Merlin felt like he'd been at St Andrews forever. His Royal Highness Arthur Pendragon, Prince of Wales, had become a perfectly normal part of Merlin's world, and Merlin could go for whole hours at a time thinking only that Arthur was hot and unattainable, or else hot and annoying, or that he had to be careful to make sure that Arthur didn't guess about the magic – and not thinking at all about the fact that Arthur was also more famous than Elvis, and was going to be King one day.

He also, although it left him feeling guilty and embarrassed and kind of miserable too, spent rather a lot of time thinking back to the fuzzy memories of the three-legged pub crawl and wondering wistfully what would have happened if he'd chanced his luck, and gone for the snog in the middle of The Central. As he was drifting off to sleep late at night, he indulged himself in fantasies of Arthur actually kissing him back, rather than being shocked and grossed out, and wondered whether it was possible that maybe, just possibly, Arthur might have been willing to experiment, and whether it might have been worth taking the chance to find out. Of course, he knew the answer to that, really: he'd have got punched in the face, and found himself kicked out of his own room in Hall and down one friend at best, and locked up in The Tower of London on a diet of cockroaches and water at worst. Or possibly molesting the heir to the throne was one of those obscure laws that overruled the whole no-death-penalty thing – like the ancient and never-revoked ruling that said that anyone on the Isle of Man could legally shoot a Scotsman seen wearing a kilt on one of their beaches. There was probably some statute somewhere that said anyone trying to get their end away with the Prince of Wales would have their head chopped off and stuck on a spike in the middle of Tower Bridge, or something. Merlin made a mental note to look that up, just in case.

Still, occasionally, when he watched Arthur chewing the end of a biro earnestly as he scribbled notes for an essay, or when he sleepily spied on Arthur stretching in preparation for his morning run, or when he lost himself in the sound of Arthur's voice rambling on about Gabriella Slomp about "Obbes and Grot-i-us and Nat-si-o-nal law and In-ter-nat-si-o-nal law," or the sight of his shirt riding up to reveal a sliver of his back and the top of shockingly perfect arse as he leaned over to tie his shoelaces...occasionally, just occasionally, Merlin thought maybe it might have been worth it. And then he thought about losing Arthur's trust, and his friendship, and he knew that it wouldn't.

As Raisin Weekend got closer and closer, Morgana took to smirking at her Academic children in a very disconcerting fashion, and randomly producing a soft blue tape measure with which she measured wrists and ankles and waists and legs and various other bits and pieces, whilst chuckling to herself. Merlin cast his mind back to the various photographs he'd seen of Academic kids being paraded through town on Raisin Sunday: hungover-looking teenagers dressed as Shrek, as Hello Kitty, as tampons, as a deck of playing cards, as the cast of The Rocky Horror Show, as a pantomime horse, as mummies and zombies and, in one memorable case, an entire formation swimming team, blue-fleshed and shivering in their swim suits and goggles on a brisk November morning, as they clutched the edge of the giant cardboard 'swimming pool' that was wrapped around them.

"She can't pick anything too embarrassing, right?" he said to Arthur, after they'd happened across Morgana and Helen on the street and the two girls had taken one look at Arthur and Merlin and burst into gales of laughter.

Arthur shrugged. "Apparently Morgause dressed Morgana and Helen and the rest of her nine kids up
as Ringwraiths, when they were Freshers. That wouldn't be too bad. But this is Morgana we're
talking about, and she's clearly evil."

Merlin glanced back over his shoulder to where the two dark heads were leaning close together.

"But you're the heir to the throne," he said, tentatively. "So she can't make it too embarrassing. I
mean, you know – we're talking Spongebob Squarepants, or Night of the Living Dead, right? Not
the Rocky Horror Show, or anything really mortifying. Right?"

"It's Morgana," said Arthur, grimly. "We could be looking at Spongebob Nopants."

"Oh, Christ," Merlin slumped. "Look – there's another thing. I've been worrying about the wine," he
admitted, in a sudden rush of nervous honesty. "The bottle of wine we have to give our Academic
Mum on Sunday, in exchange for the Raisin String. Because – I mean, I know you'll get her
something good, and Kay and Gawain will too, but I'm really not much of a wine connoisseur, you
know? Um. At all."

"Don't worry – I can tell you what to get her," said Arthur, without looking over at him. "Easy."

"Well – no," said Merlin, grimly determined to brazen it out now that he'd started. "Because I can't
afford the kind of wine she'd drink. And neither can Gwen." He could feel himself reddening.
Railery aside, Arthur didn't usually go out of his way to make Merlin feel conscious of being poor.
Or at least – he tended to treat it like an eccentric personality quirk of Merlin's, rather than something
actually important. Which Merlin had rather mixed feelings about; on the one hand, he did believe
that Arthur wasn't bothered how much or little money anyone had, and that he either liked them or
didn't like them on the basis of who they were. But on the other hand, being able to think that money
didn't matter was the kind of luxury only afforded to those who actually had masses of the stuff;
sometimes the thoughtless way that Arthur and Morgana and their friends seemed so completely
oblivious to their privileges made Merlin want to punch them. They genuinely didn't understand
about bills, or having to cut corners or make do and mend, and even though his scholarship had
given Merlin a temporary taste of some of that, it still frustrated him to death at times. But then he
tried to remind himself that he had his own privileges too – like being able to make his laundry clean
itself just by murmuring a few words in a dead language, or being able to get up and walk out of a
boring lecture unnoticed, or step through a secret door into a room in London, or Alexandria, or
Tibet. He thought about those things quite hard any time that Arthur revealed his obliviousness to the
fact that Merlin had to count his pennies and breezily suggested they go to The Vine Leaf for dinner
on one of their uncatered weekend nights, instead of getting a Pot Noodle or some chips.

Arthur was staring at him now with a faintly stricken expression, which he hurriedly tried to hide
under bluster. "It doesn't matter, you twit," he said. "God, she'll be perfectly happy with a bottle of
cheap Spanish plonk from Tesco. Or nothing! She knows you're not rolling in cash, for God's sakes.
It's not important."

Merlin drew a deep breath. "It's not important to you," said Merlin. "But I don't actually want to give
her something she thinks is shit. I like her. I'd like to give her something she likes. So I thought that
maybe I could put my money together with Gwen's, and we could buy her a bottle of gin or
something between us? Not, like, gin from Harrods, or anything – but something respectable.
Something she wouldn't mind buying herself."

Arthur squeezed his shoulder, and the warmth of his expression made Merlin's mouth go dry.

"I think that's a brilliant idea," he said. "Bombay Sapphire – she'd love that. Or even a bottle of
Bailey's, actually – she's got a secret sweet tooth, has Morgana."
Merlin sighed with relief. "Oh, thank God," he said with feeling. "At least that's one less thing to worry about. So – gin for Morgana, and organic grape juice for Lance. What are you getting for your Academic Dad?" He paused, and frowned over at Arthur. "Actually – er, wow, who is your Academic Dad?" he asked, feeling very stupid all of a sudden. "Is it somebody from your squadron?"

Arthur coughed, and glanced over at Val.

"I'm not – er..."

He rubbed the back of his head and darted a sheepish look sideways at Merlin.

"I'm not actually in the University Air Squadron," he said.

Merlin replayed this in his head twice, and then stopped walking.

"What?" he said, staring blankly at Arthur. Arthur glanced over his shoulder, saw that Merlin had stopped stock-still in the middle of the pavement, and rolled his eyes.

"Oh, God - please spare me a big drama-queen scene in the middle of town, Baldrick," he said witheringly, but Merlin knew him well enough now to recognise the shuttered, defensive expression on his face and ignore the sneer in his voice.

"Arthur?" he said pointedly. And when that didn't work he turned to Val, eyebrows raised. Val just looked over at the prince, and Arthur made an annoyed huffing sound.

"Look, fine, I'm not in the East of Scotland Universities Air Squadron. Happy now? Do we really have to talk about this?"

"But – but, Arthur, you've been going to Leuchars every bloody Monday night since the start of term, and you know I thought it was for that! It was all you talked about in Freshers' Week!"

"And I also told you that there was an interview, and a selection process, and that signing up at Freshers' Fayre wasn't enough to get you in," said Arthur, crossly.

Merlin knew he was wearing the stunned codfish expression again, but he absolutely couldn't help himself. "What the flying fuck?" He looked over at Val for some help, and then back at Arthur. "How – why – what are you talking about? You're fit and conscientious and responsible and hard-working and horribly clever, and you've had your pilot's license since you were seventeen, and you're the bloody Prince of Wales! I mean, for the love of deep fried Mars bars, what does it take to get into the RAF these days? Divine intervention? Actual wings and a halo?"

He was surprised by how furious he felt on Arthur's behalf, because of all the people Merlin had ever met, and quite regardless of his title, Arthur was just ideal for this kind of thing. He was the poster child for Officer Material, for God's sakes! It was ridiculous that the RAF had rejected him!

Arthur glanced sidelong at Merlin, looking embarrassed by this uncharacteristic explosion of praise, and also rather pleased. "Er – thanks," he said, flushing and looking away. "But it was a stupid idea. My father explained why it was impractical."

"He what?"

"Well, there's a lot of activity that's off campus, you know?" said Arthur, looking deeply uncomfortable. "I mean, there's the voluntary work they do in Erskine, and the adventure training, and – I mean, the thing is that it's not actually aimed at me. It's for people who wouldn't normally
have those opportunities, you know? If they accepted me, then they'd have to reject someone else who might never get the chance to earn their wings." Merlin had the very strong feeling that he was repeating an argument that had been put to him by someone else. Someone whose face was on the back of every coin in the land. "And if I were part of the squadron, then they'd have to start wasting time on freaking out about security protocols, and it would take the spotlight off the young people who are our next generation of RAF officers, and – well, it wouldn't be fair," he finished, doggedly. "It was a selfish idea."

Merlin stared at him. "Arthur – it's a club. An organisation. A society. It's supposed to be something you choose selfishly, because you really want to join it. Something that lets you join other people who love the stuff that you love." He shook his head. "My God, I can't believe you've been keeping quiet about this."

"I can do all that another time. When I've graduated, I can join the RAF if I still want to. It's traditional enough, doing a stint with the armed forces. I've still got that option – they haven't." He rolled his eyes. "Come on, Merlin – you know this. I can't make the same choices that other people do, because I'm not other people, and my life is more complicated. That's okay."

"If you dare hit me with that Spiderman 'With great power comes great responsibility' speech, I'm going to smack you. Just so you know," Merlin said.

Arthur looked frustrated. "But it does," he said. "It's stupid and unhelpful to pretend otherwise."

"Sweet Baby Jesus - what are you like?" said Merlin, flinging his hands up in the air. "So where the blazes do you go every Monday, then? Alcoholics Anonymous? Some secret brothel in Dundee?"

"Ew! No! I go to Leuchars, if you must know. I wasn't lying. I was just – not telling you everything. You weren't bothered about it, and I didn't see the point in going into any detail. It doesn't matter."

"So – what, you sit there with your nose pressed up against the glass like Tiny Tim, watching all the cadets having fun without you? That's...creepy and weird, frankly."

"No! God! Look, I just go and take the plane out once a week, okay? My plane, the one I flew here in at the start of term. The Lear jet. I go flying. Get away from everything for a bit. It's like running, but better – you've got the sky stretching out forever, no boundaries, no limits, no people watching you..." he trailed off awkwardly. "Look, I love flying, that's all. Can we stop talking about it now?"

He squared his shoulders and resumed walking in the direction of the Library building, and Merlin just watched him for a moment, as he strode off stiff-backed and scowling, radiating authority. Merlin could see the King's point of view, of course, because it was perfectly true that Arthur didn't need any extra help getting into the RAF. But on the other hand, he'd been so excited about it in Freshers' Week, talking about getting to know other people who loved flying, and about service to the community, and learning acrobatics, and listening to visiting speakers, and becoming an officer – Merlin was ashamed of himself for failing to register that something had gone wrong when he stopped rambling on about the squadron. God. Merlin was a crap friend. He hadn't bothered asking Arthur about his weekly visits to Leuchars beyond a casual "Did you have fun?" from time to time – too busy caught up in his own life and his own secrets to notice that Arthur wasn't subjecting Merlin to endless anecdotes about his flying prowess or his amazing leadership skills, or to think anything of it.

He bit his lip and hurried after Arthur, feeling like a complete git.

"Mate," he said, grabbing Arthur's shoulder and forcing him to look over. "I am really sorry. I've been a self-involved idiot. I should have noticed."
"It's fine," said Arthur, flapping his hand vaguely as if he could brush the whole subject away. "Really not interested in making it all into some kind of Big Deal."

"But – okay," said Merlin, with difficulty. "Okay. But, for the record, I think it sucks donkey cock that you couldn't join the only club you were really excited about."

Val made a startled choking noise.

"Thank you, Merlin," said Arthur, dryly, after a moment. "That's a very...colourful way of putting it. Perhaps I should have explained it to my father in those terms."

"Perhaps you should," said Merlin, undaunted. He rummaged in his pocket for his I.D. as they neared the library. "Speaking of fathers – if it's not someone in this wretched squadron, then who is your Academic Dad? I thought Tristan only adopted Kay and Gawain? Not you?"

Arthur heaved a much-put-upon sigh. "I don't have one," he said, quietly.

"You don't have an Academic Dad yet?!"

Given that they'd both just stepped out of the cold, bright Autumn morning and into the University Library, shouting was probably not really the best of all possible plans. Arthur slapped his forehead in frustration, looked from Merlin over to the audience of intrigued students and unimpressed librarians, and turned on his heel and walked right back outside again. Val looked at Merlin, and then at the gawping audience, and then back at Merlin.

"Interesting choice," he said mildly, before striding after Arthur.

"Oh, arse," said Merlin, and scurried off through the door in hot pursuit. "Sorry!" he yelled, stumbling along in Val's wake. "Sorry, sorry, I'm a dickhead, sorry!"

Arthur didn't slow down his pace, and Merlin found himself half-dancing as he hurried alongside Arthur, jogging backwards down the path and trying to catch his eye. "That was tactless, wasn't it? I'm ever so sorry, I was just a bit gobsmacked. Really quite very gobsmacked. Staggered, basically. Oh!"

This last was uttered in an entirely different tone of voice as the path turned into steps behind him and he put his foot down on thin air, and then started to fall backwards, arms windmilling wildly as the sky hove suddenly into view.

...and then Arthur's hands were closing around his forearms and clamping down hard, arresting his momentum and tugging him forwards, and then they were standing in each other's space again, Merlin's heart hammering in his chest, and his fingers scrabbling to hold on to Arthur's arms, feeling the muscles bunched tightly beneath the dark blue fabric of his fleece.

"Honestly, Merlin, I don't know why you bothered with University," snapped Arthur, glaring at him hot-eyed and peevish from a very short way off. "You could just have joined the circus and be done with it."

Merlin bit his bottom lip and tried to convince his body that it didn't actually need all the adrenaline after all. "Sorry," he said, sheepishly, wondering why he'd never noticed how intensely blue Arthur's eyes were and trying to think of blue things to compare them to.

"You're a complete waste of skin," Arthur informed him. "I'm thinking of trading you in for a chimpanzee. At least they just fling poo around. That would be a nice, relaxing change."
"I'm really sorry," said Merlin again, quietly, still not looking away from Arthur's drowningly blue eyes. They'd been looking straight at each other for rather a long time now, the way that one usually didn't, unless furious or flirting, and Merlin's hands were shaking a little. He glanced down at where their arms were still locked together like a freeze-frame from some kind of Scottish country dance, and swallowed hard. "I'm okay," he said, with a little laugh, because Arthur seemed not to have noticed that he had both feet firmly back on the ground again. "Thanks."

Arthur stared at him blankly for a moment, then followed his gaze down and made a surprised sound.

"God give me strength," he said, in a strangled voice, flinging his arms up in the air. "You'd try the patience of a saint, Merlin Emrys."

And with that he stomped off down the path, leaving Merlin standing there with a head full of questions tumbling like leaves on a blustery Autumn day.

* * *

Arthur was hunched over a massive tome about Hobbes when Merlin got back to the room a little later. He glanced up when the door opened, and crossed his arms in front of his chest at the sight of Merlin.

"Okay, so I suppose it's a complete coincidence that Lance just phoned me up and asked me to join his Academic Family, then?" Arthur said, grimly. "For the record, Merlin? The little moment in the Library was actually enough humiliation for one day. Did you send out a mass email to the entire student body too? Maybe place an ad in The Times?"

"Oh, shut up," said Merlin, watching him with narrowed eyes. "Lance would have asked you weeks ago if he hadn't assumed you were all parented up, and you know he would. Why didn't you just ask him, you massive eejit?"

"Did it ever occur to you that maybe I didn't want an Academic Father in the first place?"

Merlin blinked. "No," he said. "Because that would be daft." He frowned. "What's the matter? Lance not posh enough for you?"

"Oh, don't you dare start with me!" said Arthur. Merlin snagged the rickety wooden chair and sat himself down, straddling it with his fingers curled around the top of the chair back and his chin balanced on top of them as he looked over at Arthur.

"I'm sorry about the library," he said. "But I don't understand why you've not asked Lance to be your Dad. Or somebody else, even. I don't get it. What were you waiting for?"

"Look, it's really not such a big deal," Arthur said, shrugging. "I just hadn't quite got around to it, that's all."

"It's Raisin Sunday tomorrow. There's leaving it to the last minute, and there's leaving it to the last millisecond," said Merlin. "So you should just say yes to Lance, you stubborn sod, if it's not such a big deal! I mean, I thought you'd be leaving Morgana's party to go and get plastered with somebody else – that guy Tristan who adopted Kay and Gawain, or somebody from the squadron or something. But this is brilliant! You can stick with me and Gwen the whole day, and we'll all look out for each other, and it'll be great! God, why do you have to make things so complicated? Say yes!"

Arthur looked back at his book. "I already did," he said, casually, and then he snorted with laughter in spite of himself when Merlin bounced up out of his chair and punched the air.
"Yay! Aw, nice one, mate! We'll have a cracking time!" he said, beaming. Although, he reflected, getting completely pissed and playing risque drinking games in the presence of Prince Arthur was really asking for trouble...

Arthur looked up from his book, with a rueful and oddly tentative expression on his flushed face. "That's what I'm afraid of," he said, meeting Merlin's gaze; and for one insanely optimistic moment, Merlin let himself believe that Arthur might feel just as wistful about the kiss-that-never-happened too...

But that was clearly impossible, because Arthur, as Merlin had cause to remind himself on a daily basis, was straight.

Damn it.
"Where's the Dreaded Claw?" asked Arthur, as soon as Morgause answered the door of the house in Gibson Place which she and Morgana – and two other bodyguards – called their home. As they stepped in out of the crisp afternoon, a gust of laughter carried down the stairs behind Morgause, along with the sound of someone playing the piano rather badly. Morgause was, for once, not wearing leather, but instead tight black bootcut jeans and a thin scarlet jumper with a high neck and no sleeves. She was also, rather unexpectedly, wearing a black bowler hat, with two neat blonde plaits dangling down incongruously from underneath it, and generally looked like the illegitimate child of John Steed and Emma Peel. Merlin couldn't see any weaponry anywhere, but he would have been supremely unsurprised if she'd produced a scimitar from her spine or a gun from somewhere unmentionable. Hell, the hat was probably one of those razor-edged ones, like in the Bond movie – he really wouldn't put anything past Morgause.

She raised her eyebrows and gave Arthur a quelling look that Merlin wished he could manage. "He's in my room," she said, frostily. "And his name, as you know, is Mordred."

"Mordred, Claw-Dread – same difference," said Kay, shrugging. Morgause apparently considered Kay beyond her notice, but her face softened very slightly when she caught sight of Gawain looming behind him.

"He's a vicious little brute," retorted Arthur.

"Mordred? You're scared of Mordred?" asked Merlin, incredulously. "But he's a tiny wee bit of a thing! All white fluff and blue eyes! He's a baby!"

"He's an evil, anti-royalist, man-hating ninja baby," said Arthur, with feeling. "I've still got the scars from his last assassination attempt. I've given Leon orders to shoot him on sight."

"Leon doesn't strike me as a man cruel or foolish enough to offer any injury to my kitten," said Morgause, giving Leon a heavy-lidded smile that managed to combine the suggestions of both sex and extreme violence. Leon gulped audibly. Morgause's smile widened, and she turned to lead them upstairs with an aura of quiet victory.

"It isn't a kitten," said Arthur, following Morgause upstairs towards the main living room. "Kittens are sweet, adorable little bundles of fluff. The Dreaded Claw is a sneaky, murderous little bundle of teeth. And claws. Thus the name."

"Are you a dog person?" asked Merlin, trying not to stare at Arthur's bottom too obviously – but, really, it wasn't his fault when it was right there, wiggling around in all its peach-like glory just a few inches from his nose as he followed Arthur up the stairs. "You are, aren't you? God, I bet you have loads of great big slobbery dogs on an estate somewhere, don't you?"

"I like dogs," offered Gawain, mildly, from the bottom of the stairs. "My mum has a beagle called Darwin. Lovely dog."

"Dogs are man's best friend," said Arthur. "Cats, on the other hand, consider man to be just barely adequate support staff until something better comes along."

"Dogs are nonjudgmental and sycophantic. Cats are independent and picky. No surprise you'd prefer dogs, really," said Merlin, shaking his head as he followed Arthur and Morgause into the living room that looked straight out over the golf course and the sea. "God, I love that view," he said, as he did
"Boys!" exclaimed Morgana, jumping up from the piano stool and bounding forwards with an expression of delight. She was, Merlin couldn't help but notice, wearing a glittering black top hat with a silver band around it, which looked rather fabulously unlikely when paired with the bright pink raw silk dress. "My favourite sons!" Behind her, Gwen got to her feet and gave a little half-wave.

"We're your only sons," Arthur grumbled, as Morgana pinched his cheek.

"And Helen's favourite sons!" she added, ignoring him and treating Kay and Gawain to the full mega-watt Duchess-of-Edinburgh-It-Girl smile. "She's in the kitchen, with Izzy and the girls. Helen! the fruit of your loins has shown up at last!"

"Come through!" Helen called, amidst a flurry of giggles, and Kay promptly headed over to the kitchen. Gawain paused for a moment, looking rather wistfully at Morgause, who had settled herself down at the piano where Gwen and Morgana had been sitting moments before, and started playing something by Debussy. He sighed, and followed Kay.

Morgana tilted her head to one side, surveying Arthur and Merlin expectantly.

"Oh! I've got, er," said Merlin, holding out the bright bottle-carrying paper bag decorated with pink and silver stars that Gwen had picked out in 'Bonkers'. "It's from me and Gwen. Instead of bottles of wine. I hope that's okay?"

Morgana's smile was dazzling, and when she opened the bag and saw the bright blue Bombay Sapphire bottle she gave a little shriek of delight. "Fabulous! Oh, nice one, Harry Potter!" she said, and hooked her arm around Gwen's waist to kiss her on the cheek. "You're the best children ever!"

Arthur coughed, and Merlin laughed at the expression on his face.

"Yes, Arthur?" said Morgana, innocently.

"Well, I was going to give you a bottle of Chateau Mouton Rothschild Pauillac '86, but if you don't want it..."

"Shut up, you hideous tease!" she exclaimed, making grabby hands at the bottle wrapped in brown paper that he was holding. "Yum! Oh, I love being a mother!"

Arthur shook his head. "You'd be an appalling mother, Morgana. You're a terrible example, you know," he said, handing her the bottle. "God help any actual children you do find yourself having."

"They'd be adorable," she said, sticking her chin out. "I would make fabulous babies. They'd be born swearing and clutching packets of Benson and Hedges, bless their hypothetical little hearts, and railing against the patriarchy, and they'd very quickly rule the world."

"She may have a point," said Merlin, grinning.

"Good boy," Morgana said, ruffling his hair. "Now then, come and choose a hat."

* * *

Hats, Merlin was fairly sure, were not a mandatory part of the traditional Raisin Sunday Tea Party. However, Morgana had evidently decided that it should be a Mad Hatter's Tea Party, and Merlin was both surprised and charmed to find that they really were going to have tea; he knew that in years
gone by the Academic Mothers had concentrated on making sure that their 'children' got their
stomachs lined properly before going out to do violence to their livers with their Academic Fathers in
the evening, but he'd understood that mostly the modern day Tea Parties tended to be more of a
haphazard early afternoon piss-up. The Duchess of Edinburgh, however, apparently had other ideas
– at least if the beautifully laid table was any indication. Merlin did his bit towards carrying platters of
tiny triangular sandwiches and dainty little pastry puff things through to be set out on the tablecloth,
blowing at the ridiculous, ticklish scarlet plumes that sprang out of the hat Morgana had handed him.
It looked very much like a peacock and an ostrich had engaged in a bloody battle to the death, and
the scattered remnants had been haphazardly woven together into hat form. Arthur had howled with
laughter until Morgana had passed him his own towering, red and white Cat-in-the-Hat-inspired
confection, grinning evilly.

"Oh, no way," he'd protested.

"My house, my rules, Arthur!" she had said. "I know you're such a cat lover, after all."

"Chicken!" Merlin had said, pointing, and Arthur's eyes had widened.

"Well at least I'm not wearing one," he'd snapped, pulling the huge thing onto his head with a bad
grace.

Since Morgana had banded together with three of her close friends (and Academic siblings), Helen,
Izzy and Bradamante, there were more than a dozen people at the tea party altogether, all dutifully
sporting various kinds of outrageous headgear, like a 'Worst Of' photoshoot from Ladies' Day at
Ascot. Merin had met most of his Academic Cousins before, and knew some of them quite well;
generally speaking he was still a bit wary of getting pissed with other people, but it had been nearly
two months and he still hadn't come close to doing accidental magic in public - or at least, not
observably - so he thought he was probably okay. And he knew that Morgana and Morgause would
be looking out for him too. Which meant that all he had to worry about was being careful not to say
or do anything inappropriate to Arthur – and by this time, he thought he could have earned a
BAFTA award for his compelling portrayal of Platonic Best Friend. Bloody well done him. Fifty
points to Gryffindor, damn it.

Once the table was set, they all pulled up their chairs; in truth, the table wasn't really supposed to
accommodate sixteen people, so it was a bit of a squeeze, but they managed – although Merlin was
conscious that he seemed to have twice as many elbows as everyone else, somehow. There were
four china teapots of various different designs up and down the table, and when they were all settled,
with much giggling and apologising and shuffling of seats, the Academic Mothers each took a teapot
and started pouring streams of fragrant amber liquid into delicate china cups. It was at this point that
Merlin realised why there were no milk jugs on the table.

"Tell me that's not whisky?" he said to Gwen, looking down at his beautiful little teacup with a
feeling of forboding.

"That's not whisky," she said, helpfully.

He pulled a face at her. "Are you lying to me?"

"Yes, I'm lying to you," she said, grinning. "It's Raisin Sunday, Merlin. Have you met Morgana? Of
course it's whisky."

"Oh, sweet weeping mother of God," he whispered.

"Chin up, Merlin! Don't be such an enormous girl," said Arthur, bracingly, from Merlin's other side.
Merlin looked up to glare at him, and then took in the enormous red and white striped hat and cracked up instead.

"Oi! Don't laugh! You're not allowed to laugh at royalty!" said Arthur, kicking him under the table. Merlin stuck his tongue out.

"A toast!" said Morgana, in a ringing voice that hushed the giggles and chatter for a moment. "Before the celebrations get under way, I propose a toast: to friends and family, and to the ties that bind. To looking after one another, here as students, and out in the world." Her mouth twitched as she raised her teacup into the air. "One for all, and all for one."

"One for all, and all for one!"

"And now, my lovely little Bejants and Bejantines, your mothers have been working their fingers to the bone to weave you beautiful raisin strings," she continued.

"Rubbish!" muttered Arthur. "I bet she got Helen to do them all."

"Sssh! You're not too big to go over my knee for a spanking, young man!" said Morgana, raising her finger in admonishment like some terrifying cross between Mary Poppins and Anne Robinson.

"Promises, promises!" yelled Kay, and Gawain smacked him in the back of the head without looking. It was perhaps a little less effective than usual, since Kay was wearing a Viking helmet, but Kay still shut up reflexively when Morgana turned her steely glare on him, and turned his attention to a plate of crab puffs instead.

Merlin chewed appreciatively on a chicken wing, and wondered what kind of Raisin String he was going to find himself blessed with for the rest of his academic career. He carefully didn't think about the way that Arthur's arm kept brushing against him, or the way his foot occasionally bumped into Arthur's under the table.

"So, in gratitude for the lovely bottle of wine – and thanks for not giving me a pound of raisins, incidentally, because there are limits to how traditional I want to be – I present to Arthur, my firstborn son, this Raisin String. Wear it with pride, my boy," she said, accepting a box from Morgause, who was standing beside the piano, where all the shiny little boxes had been piled, like some strange miniature Christmas. Arthur looked at her warily, and then accepted the box.

"It's not The Dreaded Claw, is it?" he asked.

"Honestly, Arthur – I wish you'd rid yourself of this ridiculous notion that Mordred wants to hurt you! He's just a kitten! Now open your present, you ungrateful child!"

He prised the lid off, and then made a small, happy sound, and pulled out a little black model of an aeroplane attached to a cord of woven colours. It was a sleek, pointy little thing, and Merlin could just about make out a little squiggle of something painted on the side in silver. Arthur looked totally disarmed.

"You painted the name and everything!" he said, glancing up at Morgana and then down at the little plane like a ten year old on Christmas morning. He leaned over to Merlin, holding the plane out for his inspection. "See? Excalibur – Morgana's idea, ho ho, but that's what she's called. My plane. She looks just like this!" He looked up at Merlin with an expression of startled delight, as if he'd been expecting to be the butt of a joke and wasn't sure how to handle getting something nice instead, and Merlin got that familiar little clutch-clench of hopeless wanting.

"That's cool," he said, looking down at the little model. "What kind of plane is it?"
"She's a Lear 40 – look at all the detailing they got right, and it's so tiny!" He looked over at Morgana again, his eyes unguarded and his smile dazzling. "It's brilliant! When did you get to be all thoughtful and fabulous? Who are you, and what have you done with the real Morgana? I thought for sure you were going to give me something mortifying!"

There was an unmistakeable fondness in her gaze. "You need to have more faith in me, you suspicious little sod," she said, as she accepted another box from Morgause. "Now then – this is for my one and only daughter, who has dragged me along to kickboxing classes in my old age and tried to make me appreciate maths jokes – in spite of which, I still love her dearly."

Gwen dimpled underneath her straw boater, and reached out to take the golden box. Merlin watched with interest, trying to guess what it might contain, and grinned when she opened it to reveal a dainty silver goblet like something from a Medieval banquet, with an engraved hip flask attached by a delicate filigree chain.

"In recognition of the fast drinking, fast walking and outrageous flirting that led us to victory in the three-legged pub crawl – your very own Refillable Holy Grail!" said Morgana, beaming. Her gaze slid over to Merlin, who was starting to feel quite confident now, and to hope that he might even get something nice.

"And finally, my favourite little Welsh Rarebit, Hammer Dance expert and trouble magnet extraordinaire, the magnificent Merlin," she said, stretching out to hand him a glittering blue box larger than either of the others had been. Merlin bit his lip, and took off the lid, and promptly collapsed into giggles.

"What the hell?" said Arthur, looking at Merlin's Raisin String, and then over at Morgana. "Cthulu?"

"It's a kraken," said Morgana, smiling beatifically as Merlin extracted the plush toy from the box and started to untangle the Raisin String from its wriggling limbs. "Because Merlin's terribly fond of the Pirates of the Caribbean movies. And I understand he has a thing for tentacles. Or was it testicles? One or the other. Possibly both. Anyway, that's enough of me talking – let's hand over to the lovely Helen!"

* * *

When everyone had received their Raisin Strings, and explanations had been given, and then Raisin Strings reboxed and put safely out of the way of greasy fingers and spilled drinks for the time being, and a lot of whisky had been drunk, and tiny sandwiches wolfed down, and chicken legs gnawed, and crab puffs inhaled, and sausage rolls devoured, and picnic eggs gobbled up, they segued into their first party game, which was introduced as a "boat race". Merlin was relieved to find that it did not involve boats, or indeed necessitate getting up from his seat, as it was simply a drinking race, in which they were divided into teams and had to knock back teacups of Mysterious Blue Punch one after another as fast as possible.

"Piece of cake," he said afterwards, looking from Gwen to Arthur and then over at the other teams. "I don't know what all the fuss is about!"

Morgana smiled. "Ah, you will learn, young Padawan," she said, knowingly. "You will learn."

* * *

Three boat races, two rounds of 'Fluffy Bunnies' and one manic round of 'Fuzzy Duck' later, Merlin was starting to get her point. He was also finding the hat made him much too hot and bothered. Or possibly Arthur did. Either way, he was hot, and bothered, and well on the way to sloshed. They had
gravitated, by this point, onto the carpet – which was, today, covered with unfamiliar rugs – and were sitting in a circle, recovering from the latest game, which had been followed by a quick round of Oranges and Lemons to get them sitting in new places. The dainty teacups and saucers had been exchanged for plastic cups, because Morgana liked things to look nice, but didn't much fancy her china's chances if it was left on the floor around drunken rugby players. Merlin's face ached from laughing, and he had no idea what was in the Mysterious Blue Punch, but he was starting to find it worryingly good.

"And for our next game," said Izzy, with an expression of gleeful evil, "you'll need to stand up, remove your lovely hat, and get yourselves into groups of four with the people around you just now."

Merlin looked around, and found himself huddled together with Andi, Blanche and Perceval. Across the room, where he'd managed to get himself teamed up with Gwen, Owain and Clarissant, Arthur was looking over at Merlin with a faintly cross expression. Clearly he suspected that Merlin's group was going to whip his group's sorry arses at whatever game they were playing. Merlin looked at Izzy expectantly.

"This game is called 3D Twister, boys and girls. It's like Twister, but it's 3D."

"I could never have worked that out," said Kay, rolling his eyes.

"Shush," said Bradamante. "Now, the rules of the game are remarkably similar to the rules of normal Twister, and we even have a very professional Spinny Thing – look – with which to determine what you do next." Bradamante held up the handmade spinny thing, and they all made appropriate oohing and aahing sounds in appreciation of its impressive Blue Peter-style craftsmanship. "But rather than placing your hands and feet on different coloured circles on the floor, you're supposed to put your hands, or face, or bum, on various different parts of the other people in your team. The aim of the game is to successfully obey the game master's instructions; so long as you've got your hands, face and bum pressed up against whatever they're supposed to be on, and your teammates have too, your team is still in the game. When your team drops out, you each have to down a cup of Grandma Morgause's Blue Meanie Punch. Any questions?"

"Why did I choose St Andrews?"

"Rhetorical questions don't count, Merlin. Take a drink, sweetie."

"Fuck," said Merlin, and duly took a drink. Percy winked at him, and took one himself, in solidarity. Merlin grinned back appreciatively, and reflected that it might not be so bad; Perceval played a lot of football, and it showed. He was a smidgen shorter than Merlin, but impressively athletic, and strikingly good looking, with skin the richly burnished red-brown of a just-split conker, and dark hair in dreadlocks that fell down past his shoulders. Obviously it was going to be hellish having to lay hands upon him in a game of 3D Twister, but Merlin was a selfless soul, and he was prepared to take one for the team. Literally, if need be.

Several minutes later, Merlin was laughing so hard he could barely hear the instructions, and he and Percy and Andi and Blanche were one quivering, giggling knot of octopus-like limbs. It was, in point of fact, a lot less sexual than one might have thought – mostly it was just hilarious, as far as Merlin was concerned – although if he'd been stuck in a team with Arthur, it could have been excruciating on several levels. He could hear the other groups gasping and giggling and cursing in various bits of the room as he swayed back and forth and clutched on to Blanche's right breast and Percy's left thigh for balance. He didn't even know whose hands and knees and bums were specifically pressed where, and it didn't really make much difference, because they were all laughing so damned hard that they were bound to fall down any minute, and when Izzy called out the next
instruction, Andi's elbow knocked into Percy's knee and they all collapsed like a many-limbed concertina with an explosion of laughter and swearing.

"Out!" said Morgana. "Drink your forfeits, you pathetic losers!"

Merlin scrambled out from underneath Andi and Blanche and accepted Percy's offered hand up, still giggling.

"Oh my God, mate," he said, shaking his head. "I'm so sorry for grabbing your bollocks!"

"What happens on Raisin Sunday stays on Raisin Sunday," said Percy, philosophically. "Although I had kind of been hoping it might be Blanche who went for the nads. Ah well."

"Less talking, more drinking!" said Morgana, handing them their cups of Blue Meanie.

Merlin, Andi and Percy all piled together on the sofa, Merlin wriggling down so that his back was on the cushion, his legs hooked over the arm rest and his head pillowed companionably on Percy's thigh. Blanche sat on the floor between Percy's legs, munching tiny triangular sandwiches, and they all watched the remaining two teams.

"Bet you Kay's team win," said Andi, stealing one of the sandwiches. "He's a competitive bugger, is Kay."

Merlin looked over at where Kay was wrapped around Gawain, Ewan and Enid, and snorted with laughter. "He is that," he agreed, and then glanced over at the knot of people which included Arthur. "But up against Arthur? He's the most competitive bloke I've ever met or heard of. My money's on Arthur."

"You're on," said Andi.

"Come on, Arthur! You can do it!" yelled Merlin, encouragingly, as Bradamante twirled the spinner again.

"Left hand on right buttock," she said, sounding like a school marm, and Merlin grinned as he heard Gwen's helpless, half-stifled giggles coming from somewhere in Arthur's tangle.

"C'mon, Gwen!" he called out, encouragingly. "Grab his arse, girl! Do it for Britain! For family pride!"

"Oi, less of the cheerleading," protested Gawain, whose head seemed to be lodged somewhere under Kay's armpit. "I'm starting to feel disheartened over here."

"Well, you do have your head in Kay's armpit, mate. You're lucky you're not dying, never mind disheartened," said Merlin, unsympathetically.

"Right knee on left thigh," said Izzy, and there was another frantic, giggly convulsion as people scrambled around to obey – and then Kay's team were toppling over, hands and feet flailing as they thumped down onto the carpet, and Merlin was clapping and cheering madly as Arthur disentangled himself blushingly from his partners and then looked over in Merlin's direction with an expression that Merlin had not the faintest idea how to interpret.

***

The Chocolate Maltesers Competition was definitely Merlin's favourite so far. Partly because it involved sitting down, which was a really good plan at this point, as his balance was no longer of the
best, but mostly because it involved chocolate maltesers, and was thus clearly brilliant.

"So the winner is the person who manages to transfer the most maltesers out of their box and into their pint glass, just using the straw," said Bradamante. "You're not allowed to touch the maltesers or the glass with your hands. It's all got to be through suction."

"God, Merlin's going to win this one hands down," said Kay. "He's been in training since he was in his teens. I bet you've got specially developed sucking muscles by now, haven't you?"

"You'll never know, Kay," said Merlin, shrugging, as Gawain elbowed Kay rather fiercely in the ribs and Kay made an affronted noise.

"You don't start until you hear Morgana say..."

"Start sucking," said Morgana, in her poshest, bossiest voice, and Merlin caught Percy's eye and they both collapsed into giggles.

"And you must stop as soon as you hear her say..."

"Stop sucking," said Morgana, with unimpaired dignity.

"Oh my God. I can't do this! How can I do this?" muttered Merlin, feeling his cheeks pulling out into a huge, unhelpful grin, his breath hitching as he looked around the circle at all the earnest faces with straws poking out of their mouths and cheeks hollowing obscenely in preparation. He met Arthur's eyes, and saw Arthur's own lips twitch, and Merlin was still giggling when Morgana started the game.

He tried quite hard to focus on his own box of maltesers, inhaling frantically and raising one of the chocolates up out of the box, but then he caught a glimpse of Gwen's serious face as she carried a little chocolate globe up towards her pint glass, and giggled so hard that his malteser shot right across the circle and rolled towards Arthur. Arthur, who had already successfully moved one malteser, spared Merlin a glance as his head ducked forward and he picked up Merlin's malteser with his straw and transferred it into his glass without missing a beat, looking Merlin right in the eye with his mouth puckered around the straw and his cheeks all concave, entirely too reminiscent of some of Merlin's more vivid daydreams.

"Oi!" said Merlin, not at all sure whether to be entertained, indignant or turned on, and settling for all three. "That's mine!"

"Forty-five seconds," said Izzy, and Merlin dragged his eyes away from Arthur and tried to concentrate on getting the damn chocolates into the glass. He redoubled his efforts, sucking like it was a competitive sport, and after a wobbly start he got into a rhythm of bobbing down, lifting the malteser to the glass, releasing and swooping back down again. He was doing quite well, he thought, until he glanced up and saw that Arthur had frozen with his straw poised over his own pint glass, and was just staring at Merlin with an intensity that made Merlin flush suddenly scarlet. He looked back down at his box in confusion, but then had to look back up at Arthur again, through his eyelashes, and Arthur was still staring at him – staring at his mouth, in fact – and Merlin could feel himself getting embarrassingly turned on. He tried to focus his attention on his own chocolates and pull himself together, but then Morgana was calling out to stop them, and Merlin pulled the straw from his mouth and darted another glance over at Arthur, and Arthur was licking his lips, like – like – but clearly Merlin was having some kind of alcohol-induced breakdown, because there was no way that Arthur was giving him any kind of heated come-hither-ish looks.

"Get a hold of yourself, Merlin," he murmured, under his breath, and started to count out his
Several games and a very great many drinks later, Merlin bumped into Gwen in the kitchen. She was very wisely pouring herself a pint of water, and Merlin, who had just been to the loo and was a little appalled by how unsteady he now found himself on his feet, decided that joining her was definitely one of his better ideas.

"So, are you planning to make a move on the beauteous Lance this evening, when we go to his do?" he asked, as she gulped down her water and he waited for his own glass to fill. She lowered her pint glass and glared at him.

"Merlin, I wish you wouldn't joke about that," she said.

"Good God, woman – who's joking? You've got a thing for him, he's got a thing for you – you should seize the day! Or seize the arse! Or – look, there needs to be some seizing going on, and tonight's going to be the perfect opportunity, if ever there was one – you can always blame the alcohol, if worse comes to worst!"

"Look, I've got nothing against girls asking boys out – I think that's great, and more power to their elbows, Go Team Feminism – but, Merlin, there is no way that I'm going to ask Lance out. He's one of my best friends, and he's the most gorgeous bloke I've ever seen, and he is painfully out of my league. I'm not going to throw myself at him. And, more to the point, if he were interested, he'd have done something about it. So – no. No, I'm not going to make a move on Lance. Okay? Can we give it a rest?"

She didn't exactly slam the glass down and stomp out of the room, but she was certainly a lot more brusque than usual.


The Vodka Jelly Shot competition had been saved until everyone was reasonably plastered, for the reason that it required partial nudity. Very partial, though – just shirtlessness, or shirts rolled up to reveal a decent portion of naked belly, complete with belly button, upon which the row of three little vodka jelly shots could be upended, to rest, quivering, and wait to be eaten. Two volunteers from each team were required for this one, and it was a race to see which pair could succeed fastest.

Merlin found himself being dragged onto the carpet by Blanche, which was a bit embarrassing, but at least it wasn't Percy, say, or Arthur. (Not that Arthur was in his team, of course, thank God – but hypothetically. Merlin couldn't help but think about that particular hypothetical scenario, because he was only human, and he'd had really rather a lot to drink, at this stage.) No, he really didn't think he could have coped with lying flat on the floor and having Percy or Arthur eating jelly off his stomach. Not, at any rate, without there being a painfully obvious physical reaction. But Blanche should be okay. He lay as still as he could, watching Morgana blindfold Blanche and kneel her down at Merlin's side, and then his eyes darted over to find Arthur. His eyes did that a lot these days, whether he told them to or not. At present, Arthur was perching on the edge of his seat, watching Gwen hitch her shirt up to just below her bra and giggle helplessly while Bradamante arranged a row of jelly shots down the middle of her flat stomach, and Izzy blindfolded Clarissant and knelt her down at Gwen's side.

And then Arthur's gaze drifted over to look at Merlin, sprawling shirtless on the floor, and stayed there. And stayed there. And stayed there. Arthur kept on looking at Merlin while Izzy explained the
rules of the game, and while Morgana started it by ringing a little bell, and while Blanche's tongue slid blindly over Merlin's belly, and while she chased the shots of jelly over his skin, and while he gasped and squirmed, and while she squashed one jelly shot into pulp and had to eat it off him open-mouthed, her tongue swirling wetly into his belly button and chasing glistening blobs of strawberry goo over his hipbone. All through the longest three minutes of Merlin's life, Arthur never looked anywhere but at Merlin, his eyes sliding hotly from Merlin's hips to his belly to his chest and up to his face, where his cheeks were growing redder than the strawberry jelly, and he was biting his bottom lip helplessly and trying not to moan.

"And the winners are: Kay and Gawain!" announced Bradamante, after what felt like hours. "The rest of you losers – drink!"

* * *

By the time they got to the Matchmakers Game, Merlin had an erection the size of a small Caribbean island, and was just grateful that he could keep his shirt bundled up in his lap to make this fact a little less blindingly obvious to all and sundry. Unfortunately things went downhill when Arthur chose to come and sit right next to him. While Merlin was shirtless. Which left Merlin frozen with horrible uncertainty about whether to prioritise putting his shirt back on, or keeping his crotch decently shrouded; he settled on the latter, but that left him feeling particularly vulnerable, and he suspected that he was blushing all the way down to his jelly-smeared belly button.

"The Matchmaker Game works thus," said Morgana, producing a long, nobbly mint-chocolate Matchmaker from a box of long, nobbly mint-chocolate Matchmakers, and threading a tiny little miniature donut onto it. "You take the end of the matchmaker in your teeth, like so..." Izzy dutifully took the end of the Matchmaker in her teeth. "And then you turn to the person on your right, and lower it so that they can take the other end in their mouth..." Izzy turned and lowered the wobbling chocolate stick at Bradamante. "And then you bite off your end, and they have to repeat the process. So the stick goes around and around the circle, getting smaller and smaller. The winner is the person who gets the doughnut in the end."

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"The Matchmaker Game works thus," said Morgana, producing a long, nobbly mint-chocolate Matchmaker from a box of long, nobbly mint-chocolate Matchmakers, and threading a tiny little miniature donut onto it. "You take the end of the matchmaker in your teeth, like so..." Izzy dutifully took the end of the Matchmaker in her teeth. "And then you turn to the person on your right, and lower it so that they can take the other end in their mouth..." Izzy turned and lowered the wobbling chocolate stick at Bradamante. "And then you bite off your end, and they have to repeat the process. So the stick goes around and around the circle, getting smaller and smaller. The winner is the person who gets the doughnut in the end."

Morgana smiled around at them all, evilly. "We're going to have four Matchmakers travelling around, just to keep you on your toes."

"This is going to be like that scene in 'The Lady and The Tramp,' isn't it?" said Clarrisant, echoing what Merlin had just been thinking. He glanced sideways at Arthur, and found that Arthur was looking straight at him.

Oh God, thought Merlin. Oh, God – please don't let me come in my pants. Please. Pretty please with sugar on top. I'll go to Sunday Service every Sunday, I swear, and do the Pier Walk, and give money to charity, and live a life of blameless virtue. Just – please don't let me come in my pants. Thank you.

* * *

It should have been a great game, because Merlin was very fond of Matchmakers, but every time that Blanche turned to him with a progressively smaller stick of chocolate and he had to dart forward and catch it, and then turn to Arthur and go through the whole ridiculous process, getting closer and closer to his mouth each time – well, Merlin was getting worked up into such a state that he was on the brink of just forgetting all about the damn chocolate and jumping right onto Arthur in the middle of the living room. Which would be a Very Bad Idea. He kept reminding himself of that, even though the way that Arthur was looking at him made him feel almost sure – but it was obviously impossible – that Arthur really wanted him to do just that. God. If it had been anyone else, Merlin would have probably just gone for it, and be damned. But – it was Arthur. It was his roommate and friend – increasingly, in fact, best friend – Arthur. It was Arthur Pendragon, Prince of Wales and heir
to the throne. Who was straight. So clearly, Merlin was letting the alcohol and his wistful lust delude him, and jumping on Arthur would be a Very Bad Idea.

Blanche accepted the wobbling chocolate stick from Owain with much giggling, and tilted her head back to better avoid dropping the doughnut; dropping the doughnut, as they had swiftly discovered, was a crime punishable by consumption of Grandma Morgause's terrifying blue punch. She turned around, her eyes dancing, and reached her chin forward carefully as Merlin swooped forward to catch the end of the Matchmaker in his mouth. He'd discovered the best strategy was to trap it between one's teeth about an inch down, and then press down with one's tongue and lean one's head back to try to keep the doughnut in the air. This worked rather nicely, so long as one moved fast; it didn't take long at all for the chocolate to melt under the pressure, and the Matchmaker to go pinging away, hurling the doughnut to the ground and obliging one to drink more punch.

Merlin turned to Arthur with a good three inches of chocolate Matchmaker still left sticking up into the air and the tiny doughnut quivering against his lips in a sugary kiss, and Arthur met his eyes with the most peculiar expression. There was a tiny pause, and then Arthur licked his lips and leaned in close, closer, close enough to slide his mouth over the end of the chocolate in a way that made it look almost exactly like he was coming in for a kiss. Merlin paused before biting through his own end, to allow Arthur to duck down and slide the doughnut towards his mouth, rather than let it fall to the floor - but instead, he found Arthur was still moving towards him, closer and closer, his lips sliding down over inch after inch until he'd swallowed up chocolate and doughnut and all, and was pressing his mouth against Merlin's, swiping his tongue lingeringly over Merlin's startled lips as he stole the game.

"I win," he said, raising his arms gleefully in the air and looking away as if he hadn't just basically kissed Merlin in the middle of a room full of people, and Merlin just sat there, trembling and shocky, and then had to excuse himself and go to the bathroom on wobbly baby deer legs, where he banged his head against the door hard three times, and then, with the taste of chocolate and Arthur's lips still on his tongue, had a desperate, and embarrassingly brief, wank.
When Merlin stumbled self-consciously out of the loo a little later, Izzy's boyfriend Tristan had shown up to collect his Academic kids and was busy snogging her face off in the kitchen. In the living room, people had broken up into little clusters in preparation for the arrival of the rest of the Academic Dads, and they were talking, and drinking, and picking at crab puffs and tiny scones with clotted cream and raspberry jam. Arthur, cool as a cucumber and blessedly oblivious to the complete havoc he had wrought upon Merlin's peace of mind, was perching on the arm of Gwen's chair and seemed to be deep in some fascinating discussion with her. Which was rather frustrating, frankly, because Merlin had been hoping to grab Gwen and drag her out into the corridor to have a hurried, whispered mental breakdown all over her, and ask whether she thought that Arthur might conceivably be a little less than perfectly straight, and indeed flirting his peach-like arse off with Merlin. Only now Arthur was leaning into Gwen's personal space and listening to her like she was the most riveting conversationalist he'd ever encountered. Gwen's face had lit up, and she was looking almost painfully pretty, waving her hands around to illustrate some point and laughing, and then Arthur was leaning even closer and pushing a strand of curls behind her ear, murmuring something, and she was stumbling over her words and going wide-eyed and startled, staring up at him...

"Oh," said Merlin, blankly, and he turned on his heel and went to find Mordred.

"Are you hiding?"

Merlin looked up guiltily at Morgana, and Mordred took the opportunity to dart out from under Morgause's bed and rake tiny, glass-sharp claws over the coil of ribbon with which Merlin had been taunting him.

"Er...no?" said Merlin, scrambling unsteadily to his feet. Morgana looked unconvinced. "Why would I be hiding?"

"Because my cousin is a shocking flirt, and you're all smitten and twitterpated and generally acting like a love-struck teenager. Which I suppose you are, so fair play to you," she said, closing the door behind her and coming to sit on the edge of the bed. She patted the cover temptingly, and he sighed and sat down next to her, while Mordred wriggled his fluffy little bottom ferociously and then launched himself at the ribbon with such zeal that he tumbled head over tail and got himself thoroughly entangled in the loops of red satin.

"Am I that obvious?" asked Merlin, glumly.

"Well – yes, frankly. But only to anyone with eyes." She sighed. "I'm sorry, sweetie – I can see that he's doing your head in, but you know it's impossible."

Merlin looked up at her with a watery smile. "Ah, but that doesn't faze me, you know. I can do ten impossible things before breakfast."

Morgana gave a rueful snort of laughter. "Well, that's true. Still – can't you fall for somebody a little less..."

"Out of my league?"

She bit her lip. "Ah, now that sounds harsh. But someone more realistic, maybe? Aren't there any hot
boys in your GaySoc?"

Merlin suspected that he would sound like a gigantic slut if he told her that he'd already slept with the hottest bloke in GaySoc, so he kept quiet on that front.

"It's not – I mean, if I only wanted to shag him, it wouldn't matter so much," he said. "I mean, I want to shag Johnny Depp, and Professor Cappelen, but I'm okay with that staying in the realm of fantasy. I just – look, don't get me wrong, he can be a complete twat, but still – the thing is that I really like him," said Merlin, helplessly. "An awful lot. Like – see, we can spend whole days together, just the two of us, talking about football and politics and books and ethics and 90s TV shows and – or we can just sit there in silence, reading, or taking notes, and we don't have to talk, because it's just really comfy. Or we can be watching a movie, or a TV show – with other people, even – and we both get excited at the same point, or he says something just before I was going to say it. I mean – it never gets boring." He bit his lip. "I guess – I mean, I'm used to being smarter than my friends..."

"Hey, now wait a minute," began Morgana, laughing, and he pulled a face.

"No, I mean – at school, you know? I was always a bit of a boffin, as well as the whole magic thing – there weren't many of my mates who went on to do their A levels, never mind come to Uni. So, you know – it was always hard to fit in. Even without having to keep the magic secret, there were just so many conversations I couldn't have with anyone else, really. But Arthur's bright, really bright, and he knows all these things I don't know, and when he starts explaining them he gets all excited, and his eyes shine, and when he's talking about, oh, about flying, or, hell, even about pluralism and structuralism and constructivism and things, he makes it all sound fascinating, at least while he's talking about it, and I feel – oh, God, I don't know." He sank forward, elbows on knees and hands sliding into his hair. "I never felt like I fit with anyone before now. Not anyone, not even Will, my mate Will – I mean, he's great, is Will, and he was absolutely fine about the magic, but when I told him about the whole gay thing last year, he – well, that didn't go down so well. At all. So this friendship with Arthur – well, it's really special to me. That's all. It's just – I sort of – well, I – you know. I like him. A lot. I'm pretty thoroughly in, you know. Like. With him."

There was a little silence in the room, and Merlin resolutely didn't start using any other four letter L words, and then Morgana leant closer and wrapped her arm around his shoulders.

"Oh, Merlin," she said, sadly.

He nodded. "I know," he said. "It's shit, isn't it?"

"It is, as you so eloquently put it, shit." She squeezed him tight, and sighed. "I could shake him. He was definitely flirting with you down there, and it's not fair. It's really not fair."

Merlin swallowed past a lump in his throat. "Oh well," he said. "Plenty of other fish in the sea, eh?"

"What you need to do, Merlin, is remind yourself that Arthur is a pillock. Because he is, you know – he's a massive pillock. A pillock of truly epic proportions. Pillockzilla. You can do better."

Merlin considered this statement from all angles. "I can do better than the gorgeous, clever, wealthy future King of England?"

"You can do better than the arrogant, self-involved, careless pricklese that is my cousin Arthur."

"Right," said Merlin, nodding. He reached down and blindly scooped Mordred up off the floor to stop him from gnawing on the laces of his boots. "Yes. I expect you're right," he said, trying to sound cheerful as he scratched the kitten behind the ears. "He's a pillock. I'll just keep reminding..."
myself of that."

* * *

Arthur was a pillock.

Arthur was *clearly* a pillock, because he knew perfectly well how Lance felt about Gwen – anyone with eyes knew how Lance felt about Gwen, except, apparently, Gwen – and yet he was still spending the whole time glued to Gwen in front of the poor guy. When Lance had shown up to collect his Academic kids Merlin had seen him watch the way that Arthur leaned into her space and wrapped his hands around her waist from behind, resting his chin on her shoulder, making her giggle – and Merlin had watched the light go out of Lance's eyes then and there.

Yeah, he'd wanted to say. *Tell me about it, mate.*

It was cold outside, and although it was barely six o'clock the sky was the darkest possible shade of blue, spangled with tiny pinpricks of light. The roads were quiet, as they tended to be, but as they made their way along the pavement towards North Street occasional drifts of sound came to them from flats, and from the open windows of Chattan – mostly music, or laughter, or shouting. Gwen was still wearing her straw boater, and looking charming as hell, and Merlin wasn't really surprised when Arthur plucked it off her head and held it up in the air, making her bounce along beside him stretching and making grabby hands and giggling helplessly.

"Give it back!" she cried, dimpling at him, and Arthur gave her his snootiest, heir-to-the-throne, nose-in-the-air look of exaggerated disdain and kept right on holding it out of her reach.

"Make me," he said.

"Arthur, give it back *now!* You're just jealous because I got a nice hat, and you got a hat that made you look like a twit."

"This," Arthur observed, his long strides eating up the distance, "is really not convincing me to let you have the hat back. I think I might keep it."

"I'm warning you," she said, breathless and wicked. "I know your kryptonite, Prince Charming. Don't make me angry. You won't like me when I'm angry."

"I don't like you much now," he said, winking at her. "You want it? Come and take it."

"I'm not sure that's a very good idea..." said Lance, his brows darting together. He looked pretty much how Merlin felt: like he was trying very hard to give the impression of having a good time, and mostly wanted to be somewhere else. "Does the prince know that she's a brown belt in karate?"

Lance added, nervously, glancing over at Merlin.

"Well, if he doesn't, he may be in for a bit of a surprise," said Merlin, feeling rather pleased at the prospect. "It could be a learning experience for him. I understand University is supposed to be full of them." He glanced over at Leon. "You won't shoot Gwen if she drops him on his royal posterior, will you?"

"I'll try to restrain myself, sir," said Leon, gravely.

But instead of dropping him to the floor with some kind of nifty Jackie Chan move, Gwen darted in and tickled him. Which, okay, Merlin might have mentioned that Arthur was hellishly ticklish, but he hadn't entirely expected to see her acting on that information in a manner that could only be described as, well, as flirting, damn it. Arthur evidently hadn't seen that one coming either, because
the hat went sailing off through the air as he recoiled, swearing, and then he lunged unsteadily at
Gwen, and a moment later the two of them were rolling around on the pavement, kicking and
squirming and squealing – well, that was Gwen – and laughing like they might die of it. Merlin and
Lance and Leon all ground to a halt and just watched them; Merlin tried to smile, but when he saw
the look on Lance's face he lost the heart for it entirely.

"You know how you don't drink?" he said to Lance.

Lance looked up at him, his brows darting up in enquiry.

"Well, I think this might be a good night to make an exception, my friend."

* * *

"But what I don't understand," Merlin said, half an hour later, when they were safely ensconced
in the house Lance's friend Ben shared with two other guys, and the party was in full, disorganised,
punch-drinking swing, "Is why the hell you haven't just asked her out already."

Lance blinked at Merlin, and then looked over at the chair where Gwen was perching on the arm of
Arthur's chair and telling him some story or other that was making him laugh out loud. He was
wearing her straw boater.

"I didn't want to put her in an awkward position," Lance said, shrugging sheepishly. "I mean – you
know, I'm her Academic Father, and that's a responsible..."

"Oh, what? No, sorry, don't give me that!" said Merlin in disgust. "I mean, yes, okay, you're a great
Academic Dad, mate – but you know that most people end up dating someone in their Academic
family! That's just normal! So, uh-uh, wrong answer." He crossed his arms in front of his chest.
"Why haven't you asked her out? I mean, I know you want to. Don't try telling me that you aren't
head over heels in love with that girl, because I wasn't born yesterday. So. Spill."

Lance swallowed, his eyes darting around the room as if he was hoping that an escape route might
suddenly open up in front of him. "Um," he said, ducking his head. "Well – I mean, I've – um. Do
we have to talk about this?"

"Yes," said Merlin, firmly. "Yes we do. Because it's driving me batshit insane, and because I really
need a distraction this evening, and you, you lucky man, are it. So I tell you what, my friend - I'm
going to take this glass of delicious, healthy, organic grape juice of yours, and I'm going to find some
vodka, or rum, or something bad for your liver, and then I'm going to bring it back here, and then
you are going to man up and tell me what the problem is. Okay?"

Lance tightened his grip on his drink defensively. "Oh, fine, we'll talk about it if you absolutely
insist," he said, looking harried. "But don't mess with my juice." He looked down into his paper cup,
as if the secrets to the universe were there, and when he looked up at Merlin his expression was
uncharacteristically shy. "You remember I said that I went through a rebellious phase, at High
School? Sex, drugs, rock and roll, all that?"

"Bacon sarnies," agreed Merlin, nodding.

Lance bit his lip. "Well – that may have been a bit of an exaggeration."

Merlin looked at him blankly. Lance sighed.

"Not the bacon sandwiches – I had plenty of them. I had way too many of them, in fact. Which was
about par for the course, because I was rather a fat, spotty, unprepossessing sort of kid. And – well,
basically, dating wasn't a big part of my High School experience." He glanced up at Merlin's astounded face, and then looked back down into his grape juice, his cheeks flushing. "I haven't really had very much, ah, experience. With girls. Actually."

"Are you trying to tell me that you're shy?" said Merlin, thunderstruck. "I mean, you've asked girls out though, right? You've dated? I mean, you're not – Jesus Christ, you can't possibly be a virgin, Lance!"

"I've been out with girls a few times, here," said Lance, carefully. Which wasn't actually addressing the virginity question, Merlin couldn't help noticing. "Last year. They started paying attention to me last year, and it was a bit – I mean, it was very flattering, but also...not. Because there were girls in my Hall who wouldn't give me the time of day in our First Year, and then after I'd lost the weight, and got contact lenses, suddenly they were laughing at my jokes instead of at me. It was – not as nice as you'd think, actually."

Merlin tried really hard to wrap his head around this. "Lance, don't take this the wrong way, but you are one of the most beautiful men I've ever seen. In real life, I mean. I'm having real difficulty picturing you as a fat minger. Just so you know. It's a bit of a stretch."

Lance laughed. "Well, I don't know whether I was a minger, exactly – but I wasn't dating. And then I got into Tai Chi, and I started running, and, well, it was a turning point for me, you know? That year. Realising that Buddhism was something I could really get behind, feeling centered at last, and finding out that I was actually rather good at some kinds of exercise." He shrugged. "I hate football. And most team sports. But I found things here that I do like, and that I'm good at. Got into kickboxing, and just loved it. And – well, it was only then that girls started to pay me any attention, really."

"You – I – no, sorry, I don't think I've drunk enough after all," said Merlin, shaking his head. "I just can't see you as an ugly duckling."

"Look, it's not a big deal," said Lance, pulling a face. "It's just that I don't really do casual flings, that's all. It's not my cup of tea. But when I met Gwen – it was like she was exactly who I'd been waiting for my whole life. I can't describe it. As soon as I saw her – I mean, she just walked in and the whole room lit up. I wanted to do something amazing for her – climb mountains, slay dragons, something. Just for her. She took my breath away."

"Exactly who you'd been waiting for your whole life," Merlin repeated, slowly, remembering the Sidhe's words about patterns repeating themselves, and feeling a little sick. "Right. I could see that, actually."

"I wanted to ask her out on a date on that first day, but then I saw that she was in love with Arthur," said Lance, sighing.

Merlin stared. "You what?" he said.

"Well, when we went to the Union together, the three of us. She was so smitten – and he is the Prince of Wales."

"Are you insane?" Merlin knew that was too loud, because people were turning to stare at him. He took a deep breath and lowered his voice. "Every woman and most of the men in that building was smitten! She was starstruck, you prat, that's all! She didn't know him from Adam!"

"Yes, but now she does," said Lance, gently. "And when I realised that she was getting to know him, through you, and how much she liked him – well, it's an honour to be her friend. That should be
Merlin tried to think of a response to this that didn't involve physical violence, and downed his beer while he was doing so.

"Look, you masochistic paragon of crazy virtues," he said at last, "she likes you. She really, really likes you, and she's been eating her heart out wishing that you'd ask her out, and thinking she isn't good enough, and feeling sad, and you are the biggest idiot I've ever met – honestly, the biggest - because all you have to do is just ask her. She isn't in love with Arthur, for God's sakes!"

Lance bit his lip and nodded over towards the chair on the other side of the room with an expression that told Merlin that whatever Lance was looking at was something that he really didn't want to turn around and see. But of course he had to – and so he wasn't entirely surprised when he saw that Gwen had got her arms around Arthur's neck, and her knees on either side of his lap, and was kissing the crap out of him.

"Oh," he said. "Brilliant. That's – God, nice work there, Lance. You've handed her to him on a silver platter. I hope you're pleased with yourself, you massive great numpty." He swayed unsteadily to his feet, dropping the empty beer bottle. "I'm going to get another drink," he said, wondering whether he could find one big enough to drown himself in. "You just sit here and be all beautiful and self-destructive and crazy, okay? While the girl of your dreams gets off with the boy of m... with the wrong bloke."

* * *

He was bending over and peering into the fridge in the hopes of tracking down another beer when he felt hands close around his waist, and there was a moment, just a tiny, stupid, wildly optimistic and illogical moment, where he let himself think it might be Arthur.

"Well, Merlin Emrys," said Edwin, leaning into him, his breath ghosting over the nape of Merlin's neck. "Fancy meeting you here."

Merlin straightened up and closed the fridge door as he turned around; Edwin kept his hands loosely on Merlin's waist, travelling over his body as he moved.

"Hey you," said Merlin, feeling disappointed and relieved at the same time. He licked his lips and found himself smiling. "Looking for something?"

"I think maybe I found it."

"Maybe you did," Merlin agreed, stepping forward and hooking his hand around the nape of Edwin's neck to pull him closer.

Edwin was just as good at kissing as Merlin remembered, which was very nice to know. Of course, he wasn't Arthur, which was not so nice, because at the moment Arthur was pretty much the only thing that Merlin could think about. But Arthur, as Morgana had pointed out, was a pillock, and Merlin was best off without him.

"Pillockzilla," Merlin mumbled against Edwin's skin, smiling.

"Sorry?"

"Nothing. Come here."

The kissing was well into its stride by the time they were interrupted. Merlin was not drunk enough
to actually think that shagging in the middle of the kitchen during a party at someone else's house was a good idea, but there was definitely a lot of fully-dressed bumping and grinding up against the fridge going on, and hands sliding inside layers of clothing, and Merlin had almost forgotten why he was feeling so bloody miserable when he heard the sound of a something hitting the floor with a clatter, and pulled away from Edwin to peer over his shoulder.

At Arthur. At an Arthur who was blushing a shocked, blotchy scarlet and staring at Merlin like he wanted to punch him. Or possibly punch Edwin – Merlin wasn't entirely sure. Punching did seem to be promised, though, one way or the other.

"Er," said Merlin, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Um – hi." He looked stupidly down at the bottle and then back up at Arthur. "Lucky that didn't break," he said. "Were you, er, wanting another beer?"

"No," said Arthur, turning on his heel and marching out of the kitchen.

"Charming," said Edwin, biting down gently on Merlin's earlobe. "He always that friendly?"

"Let's not talk about him," said Merlin, in a tight voice, feeling unaccountably like someone had hollowed him out and left nothing but a shell as thin and brittle as any Easter egg.

"I'm good with the not talking," said Edwin, agreeably, and got back to being nonverbal.
Chapter 16

Merlin was dragged kicking and screaming back into consciousness by the sound of Arthur's phone playing 'I Just Can't Wait To Be King'. Under other circumstances he might have found this amusing, as he had laboriously reprogrammed the tune himself, but since he was currently more hungover than he could ever recall having been in his life, amusement seemed as distant and unattainable as Nirvana.

"Nnngggh!" he said, which struck him as cogent and to the point as he burrowed miserably deeper under the covers.

"Get up, Merlin, you slacker," said Arthur, unsympathetically. His voice was a tattered rasp, but he was clearly awake and planning on staying so. "It's Raisin Monday. We've got to go to Morgana's place."

"Mmpph," Merlin replied, shaking his head. Oh, sweet Jesus, everything hurt when he moved. His whole body was screaming out for water – it was as though he could feel each individual cell shrivelling and dehydrating more by the moment. "Can't," he said, and then felt very proud of himself for managing a word.

"There's no such word as can't," said Arthur, which was an outrageous lie, as any dictionary could surely have informed him. Clearly the Royal Dictiongraphers were not doing their job. Merlin would have elaborated on this point, but he was too busy trying to concentrate on not dying. And then, horrifyingly, Arthur was dragging the nice warm covers off him and leaving him huddled in a miserable little foetal curl, trembling like a snail suddenly wrenched out of its shell. "Up and at 'em, soldier," Arthur said.

Merlin rolled over and glared at Arthur. "Have I told you how much I hate you?" he asked. "Because it's a lot, Arthur. A very big lot." He closed his eyes. "Now kindly fuck off and leave me to die in peace."

Arthur didn't say anything for a long moment, and Merlin cracked his eyes open just a little. Arthur was staring at his throat, and he'd gone rather white. Merlin lifted his fingers stiffly and rubbed the spot Arthur was looking at, which felt sore, and Arthur flinched, and looked quickly up at Merlin's face, and then away.

"We've got to go," he said again, sounding less sure of himself. He swallowed, and turned away, gathering up his towel and his shower gel. "Come on. I've got some neurofen you can have, but we need to get going."

Merlin stared up at the ceiling, his fingers still brushing curiously at the sore spot on his neck, and started shakily trying to put the previous night together. After a moment his eyes widened, and his head snapped around to stare at Arthur; the mixture of dizziness and nausea this provoked was simply due to the alcohol, and not down to any recollections of Arthur's mouth on his, or of the sight of Gwen wrapped around Arthur like a coat. As if he could read Merlin's mind, Arthur glanced over his shoulder and met Merlin's eyes. He looked pretty rough, with his hair sticking out at gravity-defying angles, a thin layer of stubble bristling his cheeks and his bloodshot eyes shockingly blue – and somehow in spite of this, or perhaps because of it, Merlin wanted nothing more, at that moment, than to pull him down onto the bed and just snuggle the hell out of him. For a moment the tension in the room was palpable – but then Arthur turned away, and the moment was gone.

"If you're not out of bed when I get back from the shower, I'm throwing a basin of water over you,"
Arthur said hoarsely, as he padded out of the room.

"Fuck," said Merlin, gazing at the door. "Fuck fuck fuck."

* * *

The walk to Morgana's place was barely fifteen minutes, but it seemed like hours. Whereas normally they would have been chatting away idly about 'Doctor Who' (fabulous), or Kay's chances with Andi (poor to dreadful), or about the stunt that Neveen had pulled on Ashraf on Friday night (stripping his room entirely whilst he was out with his girlfriend, and setting all the contents back up in exactly the right order in the middle of the common room), instead they were walking down North Street in a prickly, hungover silence. The sky was the same drab grey as the stone facades of the buildings on either side of them, and the air was clammy and chill with the beginnings of the insidious fog that Helen called a haar blurring their occasional glimpses of the sea, and making the pavement moist and slippery underfoot.

Merlin was walking grimly, his head throbbing with each step and a cold sweat standing out on his skin. He felt fairly sure that he'd already drunk his own bodyweight in water this morning, but apparently that wasn't enough to counterbalance the effects of the previous day's revelries. Possibly he should have braved the dining room, as Arthur had done, and eaten some breakfast — but the very thought of food had made him want to cry, while barfing. Irritatingly, however, Arthur was now looking almost his normal, perky self. He hadn't been in any hurry to fling himself out for a jog along the West Sands, but he was clean shaven and looking very much less green about the gills than he had been earlier on. Bastard. Merlin pulled his beanie down tighter over his ears and his wet hair, and wondered why the hell the School of Sorcery couldn't have chosen somewhere sunnier for their UK base of operations. Or at least somewhere that didn't have completely insane traditions, like Raisin Weekend.

They padded onwards, and as they neared the house where Lance had taken them last night, Merlin found himself blushing uncomfortably, and fingering the highly incriminating love bite that Edwin had generously left on his throat. It was hidden under a scarf, but he still knew it was there. Arthur's eye was drawn to the movement, and then he flushed and looked away.

"So," said Merlin, looking straight ahead to where the portico of The New Picture House jutted out into the middle of the pavement with its faded cheesy grandeur. His eye lingered on the poster advertising 'Betty Blue' as the current Wednesday Late Night Show. "You and Gwen, then? Huh. Didn't see that one coming." Although I really should have, I suppose, he thought.

"She's a lovely girl," said Arthur, stiffly. Merlin sighed. "No argument here," he said, and they carried on walking.

"You were, ah, keeping yourself busy," said Arthur, after a moment.

Merlin darted a glance sideways, and caught Arthur looking at the love bite. He hunched his shoulders defensively. "Yeah. Well. There was a fair bit of that going around, from what I remember," he said. "Jesus God in Heaven, what on earth was in that punch?" he added, a beat later, and Arthur gave a short, startled bark of laughter.

"Knowing Morgana, everything but the kitchen sink."

"Everything but the kitchen sink distilled by Satan's own brewmaster," said Merlin, with feeling. "And then flavoured with...blue."
"It was rather strong," Arthur allowed.

"Rather strong? That's like saying that the North Sea is rather nippy, or you're rather well known, or Gawain's rather partial to doughnuts from Fisher and Donaldson. That stuff could strip the paint from the Queen Mary! It made that acidic alien blood that eats through metal in the Alien movies look like a nice cup of tea! It was pure, sneaky, unadulterated evil in liquid form!"

"Well, you certainly drank enough of it," said Arthur, his mouth twitching.

"So did you!"

There was another pause, rather less uncomfortable this time.

"Gwen's great," said Merlin, in a low voice, as they neared Chattan.

"Look, it was just a snog," said Arthur, defensively. "We were a bit pissed. Don't start matchmaking." And then he reddened, and looked away, and a heartbeat later Merlin remembered the Matchmaker game and Arthur's tongue sliding over the seam of his lips, licking away the powdered sugar from the doughnut that he'd chased there.

"Okay," he said, swallowing and looking down at his feet. "Right. So, um – what do you reckon Morgana's going to dress us up as?"

"Heaven knows," said Arthur, sounding grateful for the change of subject. "The Three Musketeers?"

"The Three Amigos?"

"The Three Stooges?"

"The Three Blind Mice?"

"Whatever it is, I'm sure it will be spectacular, and something that I never want to be reminded of ever again," said Arthur, glumly.

"Probably right."

They walked on in a companionable silence that was almost normal.

"I can't believe you're scared of Mordred," Merlin said, after a while, grinning. "You enormous great girl."

"Oh, shut up. It's a vicious little monster, and it creeps me out with those big blue eyes. I can tell it's plotting something."

"A cat can look at a king."

"Stop trying to be clever."

* * *

"Morning," said Gwen, looking at Arthur, and then at Merlin, and then back at Arthur again with an expression that didn't seem to know whether to be embarrassed or delighted. Arthur's cheekbones flushed, and he gave her an awkward grin.

"Nice outfit," he said, nodding at the shiny suit of tin-foil armour she was wearing, complete with gold plastic crown.
"It's brilliant, isn't it?" agreed Gwen, bouncing on her toes. Merlin tried not to glare at her; evidently she'd managed to drink rather more water than he had last night, or else she'd inherited her Academic Mother's constitution. She looked disgustingly hale and hearty. "Come through, come through – she's got yours laid out in the other room."

They trooped dutifully after her, passing Kay standing in the kitchen in nothing but a pair of skin-tight white leggings, grumbling under his breath as Helen busily painted him Smurf-blue. Gawain, in matching red leggings complete with white beard, red smurf hat and blue skin, was munching on a bacon roll and reading The Times a few yards away.

Merlin swallowed. "We're not Smurfs, are we?" he whispered to Gwen, and she shook her head.

"Each of the Mums is doing her own thing. Helen's got her kids as Smurfs, Bradamante's gone with a Star Wars theme, and Izzy opted for French Maids. We've...well, we've got our own theme." She sounded rueful. "They're here!" she called, as she led them into Morgana's bedroom.

Morgana bounded forward, disgustingly cheerful and unhungover-looking. "Brilliant!" she said, hugging them one after another. "You didn't choke on your own vomit, or fall off St Rule's Tower, or anything ridiculous – jolly good. Look!"

She picked up one of the garments from her bed, and brandished it at them. "This is yours, Arthur!"

"Oh, no, come on, Gwen's got a good costume!" protested Arthur, gazing at the yards and yards of star-spangled black lamé-edged velvet that Morgana was holding up for his inspection.

Morgana lifted one eyebrow. "Look, my lad, if you don't like Plan A, I have a Plan B, and it involves pink satin knickers, fishnets, and a basque. And not on Gwen."

"You make a compelling argument," said Arthur, peeling off his fleece.

"Did I mention that there's also a hat?" said Morgana, wickedly, producing the longest, pointiest wizard hat known to man. Arthur stared at it, and then over at Gwen – who was looking quite pleased with herself and brandishing a large plastic sword with a glittery plastic jewel in its pommel – and then smacked his forehead.

"It's a Merlin costume, isn't it?" he said, flatly. "She's King Arthur, and I'm Merlin."

Morgana cracked up, and produced a long white beard which she held out to him. "You bet your sweet arse it is," she said. "And you can stop all this moaning, you great moaner – I could easily have gone with the fishnets, but I'm giving you something fairly warm and even vaguely disguise-like, out of the kindness of my heart. For a while there, I was thinking of Harry Potter, Draco Malfoy, and Hermione Granger – until Gwen mentioned that her name was short for Guinevere. And then – well, come on, I couldn't resist that, now, could I?"

"You're dressing me up as Merlin," said Arthur, and Merlin tried not to ogle him, but there was approaching shirtlessness, which made it a bit difficult to remember about the not ogling thing. "And Gwen's Arthur. So does that mean...?"

"Oh, shit," said Merlin, a very long moment later, when the penny dropped and he realised why the other three were grinning at him. Hangovers did not do a great deal to improve his mental agility. He looked down at the other garment spread out on Morgana's bedspread, and then cast her an imploring gaze. "No, but, really..."

"Obviously I'm not going to force you," Morgana said, smiling her most evil smile. "If you'd prefer to choose the fishnets and basque option, I have that ready too. But this is a gorgeous dress, Merlin. I
had it specially made. The colours are going to look great on you."

Merlin was, for once, speechless.

"It's based on a painting by William Waterhouse," added Morgana, breezily. "I can show you a postcard of it, if you like?"


"It is a gorgeous dress," said Gwen, as if this was supposed to help. "And, you know, it could have been an awful lot worse. You haven't seen the French Maids. At least these costumes should all be pretty warm."

"Yes, you'll be much warmer than the Smurfs," said Morgana, waving the blue velvet gown at him. "And it's not like it's a slutty dress! And the basque-and-knickers set is still an option, of course. Actually, I bet you've got great legs, haven't you?"

"No, no, an enormous girly princess dress will be fine," said Merlin, hurriedly. "I suppose there's a crown? And a wig?"

"Funny you should ask," said Morgana, producing a long wig of lustrous black curls, and a glittering tiara. "I think you're going to look adorable, she added, encouragingly. "Plus, as previously mentioned – nice and warm. And the colours really are going to do wonders for your skin tone, I swear – this lovely vivid blue really brings out the colour of your eyes, and with the red inside the sleeves and that gorgeous golden brown border...oh, you three are going to look fabulous. It's just a shame you'll all be turning into giant snowmen within seconds of entering the quad."

"If by fabulous you mean completely bloody ridiculous, then yes," said Merlin, pulling off his beanie and running fretful fingers through his damp hair. "Oh, fine, fine – you're right that it could have been a lot worse. Thank you. I suppose." He unwrapped the long green scarf from his neck and dropped it on the bed.

Morgana raised her eyebrows. "Well! Looks like somebody had fun last night," she said, and Merlin's fingers darted up to brush the love bite, guiltily. Beside him Arthur became suddenly quite fascinated with his shoes, and Gwen glanced at Arthur and then started fiddling uncomfortably with her toy sword.

"Oh – er, well, yeah," Merlin said, meeting Morgana's amused gaze with a rueful one. "Um. Edwin, if you must know. He's a PostGrad? He, er, plays World of Warcraft."

"Oh! Edwin!" Her grin broadened. "Yes, he's rather good at World of Warcraft." Her mouth twitched. "As a matter of fact, I heard he was pretty good at macramé too."

Merlin huffed out an unwilling laugh. "Shut up!" he said, shaking his head at her.

"Are you telling me to – now, what's the macramé-approved phrase? Get knotted?"

"You weren't kidding about loving puns, were you?"

"I never kid, Merlin."

Merlin rolled his eyes. "Sure. But, yes, please do kindly bugger off, will you? Unless you're hanging around in the hopes of catching a glimpse of my manly physique – which is understandable, I suppose." He hooked his fingers into the bottom of his hoody and pulled it up, dragging his shirt
"Heaven forfend!" said Morgana, lifting her hands in surrender. "Come on, Gwen love. Let's go and see if Helen needs any help painting people blue."

She pulled Gwen out of the room with her, which Merlin took as a kindness; he really liked Gwen, but just at the moment he didn't feel very much like watching her and Arthur engaging in their little heterosexual mating dance schtick, with the blushing and the embarrassed glances and all that rubbish.

"Well, it could have been worse," said Arthur, pulling the bottle green jumper up over his head. "I'm glad I'm not a Smurf."

"You know you're having a crappy morning when the best that can be said for it is that at least you're not a Smurf," grumbled Merlin, ignoring the fact that Arthur was busy unbuttoning his crisp white shirt right next to him. He was more or less immune to the sight of Arthur getting undressed these days – or, well, no, that was a lie, but he was no longer in danger of having a heart attack every time it happened, and right now didn't want to give Arthur the satisfaction of being ogled. Not that he imagined it was much of a satisfaction – but still, Merlin was feeling prickly and cross and his head hurt and his legs ached and he'd really much rather be back in bed right now.

"So – that was Edwin, last night," said Arthur, a few minutes later. "Your friend. From GaySoc."

Merlin didn't particularly appreciate being questioned about his love life by Hottie McHotterson when he was in the act of dropping trou, but apparently the universe was not being run with his happiness in mind.

"Yes," he said, wishing that he hadn't grabbed the Thomas The Tank Engine boxer shorts in his hungover state. He had a feeling that he was really going to need all the dignity he could get, today, and the cartoon pants weren't really helping lend him much gravitas.

"Oh," said Arthur, oddly.

Merlin ignored him, and concentrated on trying to figure out how to get into the damned dress. After a couple of moments of flapping the acres of fabric around, he came to the conclusion that burrowing into it from the bottom was the way to go, like it was an overgrown t-shirt. A really, truly enormously overgrown t-shirt. With several layers, and a wide hem of embroidered golden-brown satin, and a scooping neckline that almost fell off his shoulders, and generally made him look like the world's most hopeless trainee drag queen ever.

He stared at himself grimly in Mogana's full length mirror.

"Oh, God," was all he could muster. "I make a really really ugly girl."

"I think it's the ears," said Arthur, judiciously, and Merlin crossed his arms in front of his chest and turned to scowl at the Prince. Who was now, he discovered, sporting the tackiest set of wizard's robes in the history of costume design.

"Good grief," said Merlin. "You look like the bastard child of Dumbledore and David Bowie. No, sorry, Dumbledore and Ziggy Stardust."

"You're just jealous of my beard."

"No. No, really not. It makes you look like you've got a ferret trying to shag your chin."
"And you look like Olive Oyl," said Arthur.

"Pah. Olive Oyl wishes she could afford her own bespoke velvet gowns," Merlin retorted, picking up the wig gingerly. "Um. How does this work, then?"

He tried just pulling it on, but the resulting effect strongly suggested that he'd managed to put it on backwards. In the dark. In a hurricane.

"Oh, for...come here, you oaf," said Arthur, taking off his beard and stepping closer. Merlin pulled a face, but allowed Arthur to reach up and pluck the wig off his head. "It amazes me that you manage to put your shoes on the right feet in the morning without assistance," he said, witheringly, turning the wig over in his hands.

He was standing toe-to-toe with Merlin, close enough that Merlin could have reached forward just a very little way and put his hands on Arthur's waist. Or leaned forward and kissed him. Not that Merlin was thinking about this. Obviously.

"Like this," Arthur said, earnestly, reaching down and grabbing Merlin's hand. "You hold on to the front – that's this bit – and pull it on like – yeah – right, like that," he agreed, pulling the black wig back towards Merlin's neck as Merlin pulled at the front, until it was settled snugly over his skull. And Arthur – well, Arthur basically had his arms around Merlin, at this point, and his thumbs were brushing the nape of Merlin's neck. Merlin swallowed. Arthur stared at him for a moment, frozen in position and looking incongruously like a rabbit caught in the headlights of an oncoming truck, before taking a shaky step back.

"There," he said, with forced jollity. "Perfect."

Merlin took a deep breath, and then turned and looked at himself again in the mirror. The wig did at least hide his ears, but he still made a very unconvincing girl, even with the padding in the front of the dress.

"Perfectly ridiculous," he said, sighing. "God, this thing's itchy." His eyes wandered over to Arthur's reflection, as they were wont to do any time he forgot to give them strict instructions, and he saw that Arthur was staring at the wretched love bite which was now framed by the curtain of black hair and the curving neckline of the dress.

"So – you and Edwin," said Arthur, glancing up at Merlin's face and then picking up his beard again and busying himself with it. "Are you two – you know."


"Don't be a prat," said Arthur, gruffly. "Are you – you know, seeing him?"

Merlin rolled his eyes. "You mean is he my boyfriend?" He couldn't quite believe he'd just said that. He sounded like a fifteen year old girl. There really should be a better word for it, a word that wasn't quite so embarrassing. Although actually...he dimpled wickedly at Arthur. "No," he said. "He's more of – I think the technical term is fuckbuddy."

Which perhaps wasn't entirely accurate, but it wasn't entirely inaccurate either. And it was certainly worth it to make Arthur's mouth fall open like that. He'd been back to Edwin's place once over the past few weeks, and there had been several evenings that had ended up with Merlin getting off with Edwin in various interesting locations around town. Merlin was pretty sure that Edwin would have liked to take things further – and he liked Edwin a lot, he really did, because he was smart and self-confident and he had a sly, dry wit that Merlin could definitely get used to. In fact, if he hadn't been
carrying a torch the size of the Blackpool Tower for a certain self-involved pillock of his acquaintance, he'd probably have fallen for Edwin like a tonne of bricks. If that, right there, was the problem: Merlin was having an awful lot of difficulty falling for anyone whose name wasn't Arthur Pendragon right now, so as it stood he and Edwin were just friends with benefits.

Arthur's eyes had gone wide as saucers.


Merlin shrugged. "He's thirty. Which means he's pretty sorted, and very experienced. Also, he does a lot of yoga. Tantric yoga. There is no bad to this." He watched Arthur's face colouring up. "Is that enough? Or do we need to go into exhaustive detail here?"

"No!" exclaimed Arthur, glancing at the love bite and then looking away. "God, no!"

"Good. So – is my tiara on straight?"

Arthur looked him up and down with an oddly fond expression. "You'll do," he said, picking up the wizard's hat and settling it on his head. "Come on, milady – let's go and face the music."

"Don't forget your shaving foam," said Merlin, picking up his own cans.

"Oh, no fear."

They were on the brink of opening the door when there was a knock on it. Morgana looked a little startled at how quickly the door opened, but her expression of surprise very swiftly gave way to one of delight when she took in the sight of her two Academic Sons in all their glory.

"What did I tell you?" she demanded gleefully. "Fabulous! But not quite finished." She waved a little satin bag at Merlin, and he blinked at her in bemusement. "Makeup."

"Oh, now come on," said Merlin, without very much hope.

"Don't try my patience," said Morgana, lifting her chin. "Or you'll find yourself getting a sparkly ABBA makeover, rather than getting all sexified."

Merlin stared at her with horror writ across his face. "Can I just not be all sexified?" he asked, urgently. "Please? Can we not just accept that I look like a prat, and leave it at that?"

Morgana actually looked rather injured. "You don't look like a prat," she said. "You look darling. Now shut up and sit down while I transform you into a pretty pretty princess."

"I hate you," said Merlin, in a small voice, as Morgana led him over to sit in front of her vanity. "Did I mention that already? I really hate you quite a lot. More than broccoli, even."

"You love me," said Morgana. "You voted for me in the Britain's Favourite Royal competition. Gawain told me so. Because I'm just that great. Now shut up and let me work my magic on you."

There was no way that Merlin could reply that, no, he'd actually voted for Arthur. Not in front of Arthur, and not to Morgana's face. Instead he just looked down at the array of tubes and pots and wands and brushes with despair.

"Oh, God," he said.
"I dunno – I think he actually makes quite a shaggable bird," said Owain, looking Merlin up and down in some surprise. "Nice tits."

"They're built into the dress," said Merlin, irritably. "I didn't grow them specially, you know."

"Oooh! Clever!" exclaimed Blanche, glancing down at her own modest cleavage in the skimpy French Maid costume. "Are they those chicken fillet things?" she asked Morgana, and Merlin and Arthur exchanged a look of mutual What-the-fuck?

"Yeah," said Morgana, grinning. "Feel!"

And then before he knew quite what was happening, Morgana was massaging the front of his dress like something from a soft porn movie.

"Oi!" said Merlin, feeling strangely affronted – and all the more so when Blanche took over the groping.

"God, they're brilliant!" said Blanche to Morgana. "You've got to tell me where you got them!"

"Hello? Standing right here, thank you very much!" snapped Merlin, as Kay took a photograph.

"Oh, Christ. Tell me that isn't going on Facebook," said Merlin, without much hope.

"Of course it's going on Facebook, Emrys," said Kay, pityingly.

"Wonderful."

"Oh, shut up. You actually look almost fuckable, for the first time in your pathetic life."

Merlin felt his jaw drop, and was conscious that several other heads had turned to stare at both of them. But mostly at Kay.

"Kay, just to be absolutely crystal clear - not if it was solid gold and ten inches long. Or if the road to paradise was hidden up your bum. Not ever. I thought we covered that," he said, feeling a wee bit disconcerted.

"Oh, you should be so lucky," said Kay.

"Believe me, the prospect of having hot monkey sex with a six foot tall Smurf is really not on my To Do List," Merlin said. "In fact I think I'm going to be spending the rest of my University career trying to obliterate that image from my mind. Dear God."

"Are we all ready?" asked Bradamante, looking around at the various ludicrous figures lounging around Morgana's living room.

"Think so," said Helen. Although not technically in costume herself, she did seem to have managed to get an awful lot of blue paint on herself along the way. However, the size of the blue handprints on her arse strongly indicated that she'd had some help with that.

"So – it's off to visit your Academic Fathers to collect your Raisin Receipts, and then on to Foamageddon in Sallies Quad. But before we do that – group photo!"
If Lance was pining miserably for Gwen, he was doing a – well, actually a pretty lousy job of hiding it, to be honest. The smile he wore when they turned up at his door was much too bright, and Merlin couldn't imagine that it was fooling anyone. Except Gwen. Merlin could sympathise, though – he wasn't particularly enjoying being a third wheel himself, and actually it didn't help even a little bit that, if the Dragon was to be believed, they were all trapped in repeating the same patterns again and again, and the whole Arthur-and-Guinevere-and-Lance thing had been inevitable from the get go. It still sucked, as far as Merlin was concerned. And, clearly, as far as Lance was concerned too.

"Good morning!" he said, brightly, not meeting Gwen's eyes. "Happy Raisin Monday!"

Morgana looked speculatively from Lance to Gwen and back again, and then over at Morgause, and very visibly bit her tongue. Morgause raised one eyebrow very slightly.

"Er – thanks for, you know. Seeing me home last night," said Gwen, looking distinctly flustered.

Which was news to Merlin – Arthur had been asleep when Merlin had stumbled in the night before, but if Lance had seen Gwen home then maybe all that "it was just a snog" stuff was true. Not that there was anything 'just' about it. Damn it.

"No problem," said Lance, determinedly cheerful. "All part of the service!" His smile relaxed a little. "As is giving your lovely Children a receipt for all your raisins. Or, well, organic grape juice."

Merlin looked at Lance expectantly. Tradition dictated that the receipt be written in Latin on – well, anything, basically, and the more cumbersome the better. Merlin had heard stories about people having to cart everything from inflatable sex dolls to battered old Ford Cortinas to real live goats all the way to Sallies Quad on Raisin Monday, all with the Latin words inscribed on them somewhere. He couldn't see Lance giving them a goat, because he was fairly sure that Lance would regard that as cruel and abusive treatment of an animal, but he didn't dare hope that it was going to be anything discreet and pocket-sized either.

"It's downstairs," said Lance, with a twinkle in his eye that only faded when his glance fell on Gwen. "I like your outfit," he added, trying to smile at her.

Gwen gave him an awkward half-smile, and it was all that Merlin could do to keep himself from shouting: "Kiss her, you fool! You're the one she wants!"

"Come on, I'll show you," said Lance, pulling his door shut behind him.

In retrospect, Merlin thought that he really should have seen it coming.

"It's a bin," he said, staring.

"It's a recycling bin," Lance corrected him, helpfully. "One each – metal, glass, and paper or cardboard. I know that the University provides a skip outside the Quad for people to dump their rubbish into, but this is much more environmentally sound. I've got a bloke coming to collect them once you're all finished with foamapalooza."

Morgana beamed at him. "That's a really excellent idea," she said, approvingly. He gave an embarrassed little shrug, and his eyes darted over to Gwen.

Merlin cocked his head to one side and read the large, handwritten sign that Lance had painstakingly
written on recycled paper and taped onto the side of Merlin's bin. It read:

Ego, magistrandus Lancelot DuLac, huius illustris Universitate Sancti Andreade, a te, Merlin Emrys, meo bejanto carissimo, unam livram uvarum sicarum me accepisse pro qua multas gratias tibi ago ab universitate condita DLXVIII ano

"I'm afraid that if anyone feels like being a git, they can still demand you show them the receipt and then dunk you in the fountain for the mistake," Lance apologised.

Merlin took a small step backwards. "That doesn't seem very fair," he said. "I thought Latin was one of your superpowers?"

"Oh, the Latin's fine," said Morgause. Merlin blinked. He tended to forget that she'd come away with a First herself – she was so very good at that whole lethal weapon thing. "But nobody's quite sure exactly when the University was founded. Could be anywhere from 1411 to 1415, so if they want to be perverse, they can always argue with the date."

"If anyone tries to dunk me in a fountain, I won't be answerable for the consequences," said Merlin, firmly. "But they will be dire. We're talking Apocalypse Now."

"Yeah...you're not really selling big and scary in that dress," Lance told him, with a small shake of his head. "It's a very nice dress, though. Does wonders for your complexion."

"It really does, doesn't it?" said Morgana, delightedly.

"I hate you all," said Merlin.

* * *

Merlin nearly tripped over the hem of his dress for the fiftieth time. "Why are we doing this again?"

"Because it's traditional," said Arthur.

"That's a crap reason."

"No it's not. Respecting traditions is part of what makes us British."

Merlin made a rude noise. "No, but lots of traditions are stupid. Like...like brussel sprouts at Christmas. Everyone goes a whole year never once thinking about eating brussel sprouts, and then on Christmas Day it's like they're mandatory, even though nobody likes them."

"I like brussel sprouts, actually," said Arthur.

"Oh, you bloody would do, wouldn't you? Well then – like Wales cheering for anyone who's playing against England. That's traditional. Or like Greece giving Cyprus 12 points in Eurovision, or – look, I'm just saying, let's take a stand here, people," Merlin said, dragging his wheelie bin grimly down North Street. "Let's lead the way! Let's say 'Bugger tradition!' and go out for chips instead. You know you want to!"

"You're getting over the hangover, aren't you?" said Gwen, nodding to herself. "I can tell."

"Oh, come on – what kind of daft git came up with this idea in the first place? I mean, they must have laughed themselves sick when they thought of it! 'Ooh, let's make generations of students dress up like numpties and parade around town dragging random objects behind them! And then have a fight with shaving foam! Which we haven't even invented yet!' I mean, honestly – how traditional
can a shaving foam fight be, when you get right down to it?"

"Merlin, if you don't stop whining, I'm going to take Gwen's sword and beat you to death with it," said Arthur, evenly.

"It's plastic."

"So it will take me a long time. I'm still game."

"Look, it's all right for you. You don't have to walk along pulling the damned bin while you're wearing a bloody great dress that keeps tripping you up."

Arthur made an impatient noise. "Have you seen my outfit? The only difference between what we're wearing is that yours shows more cleavage and mine comes with a beard."

"It does not show cleavage!" Merlin exclaimed, temporarily distracted. He squinted down at his chest. "I haven't got any cleavage for it to show!"

"Oh, you know what I mean. This explosion in a sequin factory that I'm wearing is just as long as your bloody dress, so stop your whining."

"Oh my God – can't you two stop bickering for five minutes?" demanded Gwen, incredulously.

They both turned to look at her, startled into silence, and then their eyes met.

"No," they both said, in synch, grinning in spite of themselves.

Merlin made a grumpy huffing noise. "Look, I'm just saying that this thing we're doing is daft. Just because lots of other people have done it, doesn't make it any less daft. If everyone was jumping off a bridge, would you? And, okay, wow, suddenly I sound like my mum. That's – weird."

Arthur sighed. "Traditions are important," he said. "They show a respect for the past, and they make us part of something bigger than ourselves. They tell us who we are."

Merlin groaned. "Well in that case, this one tells us that we're a load of lemmings. Oh, look – I'm not talking about traditions like, er, like Remembrance Sunday, or Bonfire Night, or whatever. I'm just saying – just because people have been doing a bloody silly thing for hundreds of years doesn't mean that you have to do it too. It's okay to take a stand, and say that the Emperor has no clothes. Or, in this case, that Raisin Monday is bloody ridiculous."

"But it's fun too, though," said Gwen. "The tea party and the Raisin Strings and – and – er. You know. All of it. Er." She looked as though she very much wished she hadn't started this particular line of reasoning, and Arthur had taken on a rather tense, constipated expression.

"Well," said Merlin, feeling hideously uncomfortable. "I'm not saying that it's not fun. Some of it. But I'm not loving this bit."

"At least we're not Smurfs?" offered Gwen. "Or French Maids?"

At this point an unshaven bloke with bloodshot eyes and bedhead from hell staggered past wearing a large nappy, a floral bonnet and an expression of pure wretchedness on his hungover face. He was clutching onto a naked shop window dummy covered in wobbly Latin which was bleeding ink all over his pasty skin. They all watched him lurch down the road in silence.

"At least we're not him," said Arthur, when he was well out of earshot, and Merlin felt obliged to concede the point.
They trudged on for a little longer, passing The New Picture House on their left and wandering in between gaggles of students in various flavours of hungover and ridiculously clad. Merlin's favourite costume, for a while, was a really gorgeous peacock-bright Mermaid outfit that a very glamorous young lady was wearing; then, however, he spotted a little group dressed as various characters from the 'Pirates of the Caribbean' movies, and for a while they had pride of place. But then he saw his first Arthur, and he had to stop walking and lean on his bin for a bit while he howled with laughter.

"What do you mean, it's me?" demanded Arthur, crossly. "It looks nothing like me!"

"He's wearing a blond wig, and aviator shades, and a jacket just like the one you were wearing yesterday, and a crown with a load of Latin on it for a Raisin Receipt and – oh, God, no, look! Look what they've done! It's not just him! The whole family are all you! Only different varieties, see? Look, he's Football-playing-Arthur, and he's Jogging-on-the-beach-Arthur, and she's Pilot-Arthur, and that poor bastard over there must be Water-polo-Arthur. And that one in the suit of armour is – er – do you ever wear armour?"

"That's King Arthur. Like me," said Gwen. "The other one."

"Right! Ha! That is genius! Oh my God – you should go over there and out yourself! Say 'I'm Arthur' and we could have a whole "No, I'm Arthur! No, I am, no I am, no, I am' thing! Like Spartacus!"

"I don't have the faintest idea what you're talking about. And they clearly are not supposed to be me."


"I'm not listening."

"No change there, then," said Merlin, waving over at the assembled Arthurs. The football playing version waved back.

* * *

In just over five minutes they found themselves outside Sallies Quad, along with hundreds of other ridiculously dressed people. One poor bloke in a baggy Batman suit was vomiting helplessly into a skip, and being berated by somebody official-looking, while his Academic Mother, presumably, took pictures of him with her phone. There were various normal people – residents and tourists – ranged around the edges of the crowd, wearing expressions varying from tolerant amusement to outright irritation and watching the students warily. Several of them were wielding cameras, and Merlin would have bet all the meagre contents of his bank account that they were hoping for a glimpse of Arthur in fancy dress (possibly as a French Maid) before he went inside. Merlin, Arthur and Gwen dragged their wheelie bins up to the skip and parked them there, then started to look around for their friends.

"How long now?" asked Merlin, waving at Percy, who was lugging a hatstand along to the skip.

Arthur rolled his eyes. "However can we find out the answer? If only there was an enormous clock tower right in front of us. Oh! Look! There is!"

"Yeah, all right, all right, Your Majesty! Keep your beard on," said Merlin. "Fine – three more minutes or so before they open the doors."

"Let me take another picture of you all before your outfits get trashed," said Morgana, and they dutifully posed together, grinning cheesily into the camera.
Afterwards, Merlin shook his cans of shaving foam in readiness, and held them as if they were deadly weapons. "In just a couple of minutes, you are going to be one big, sloppy blob of foam, Arthur Pendragon."

Arthur raised his eyebrows. "Oh, you are not threatening me," he said, looking Merlin up and down. "Not looking like Liv Tyler's character in 'Lord of the Rings'. Oooh. Scary."

"Hey, Arwen kicked ass," said Morgana, glaring at her cousin.

"Yeah," agreed Merlin, managing not to stick out his tongue by sheer force of will. "We'll see how smug you look when you've got foam up your nose," said Merlin. "Foamy vengeance will be mine!"

"Two minutes," said Gwen, biting her lip. "Oh! Look! There's Elaine! Hey, Elaine!" Elaine, who had evidently escorted her own little gang of what seemed to be Pokemon characters, waved back.

"Vengeance?" repeated Arthur, in incredulous tones. "What on earth have you got to feel vengeful about, Baldrick? I don't beat you, or steal your turnip, or have you locked in the stocks and pelted with rotten eggs. Although, actually, that's not a bad idea..."

"Vengeance for – for the flooding of the Tryweryn Valley to make a bloody reservoir for you English!" said Merlin, because he couldn't exactly say 'Vengeance for flirting with me and then getting off with one of my best mates, you git'.

Arthur blinked. "You do realise that I wasn't alive then, don't you?"

"So? You think that a little thing like that is going to keep you safe from foamy vengeance?"

"Oh, fine," said Arthur, rolling his eyes. "Bring it on, princess."

Merlin adjusted his tiara. "I'm a Queen, thank you very much. Get it right, you loser."

"Oh, your arse is mine, Merlin Emrys," said Arthur, his eyes narrowing. It was entirely unfair and inappropriate that those words in that husky, threatening tone should send such a delicious shiver through Merlin.

"Time!" said Gwen, as the bell began to chime and the ancient wooden doors creaked open. Arthur caught Merlin's eye with a look of such smugness that Merlin was torn between wanting to knock his hat off, and to snog him through his ugly beard. He felt himself grinning, stupidly gleeful and giddy, and he stuck his tongue out at Arthur.

"Bet you can't catch me," he said, laughing, and flung himself off into the crowd swirling through into the Quad.

* * *

Once inside the Quad, all hell broke loose. Merlin had a can of shaving foam in each hand, and all around him faces strange and familiar were streaked with colour and smudged with foam. The grass, which no foot was allowed to sully for 364 days, 23 hours and 55 minutes of the year, was suddenly slick and slippery underfoot, drifts and globs of foam clinging to the sharp little blades and smearing over the hems of capes and gowns and dresses. Merlin ran, his head back and Morgana's ridiculous wig trailing out behind him, the heavy skirts tangling his feet and nearly tripping him again and again as he darted through the fray, squirting any half-familiar face with glee and wondering whether Arthur was enough of a five year old to take him up on his dare.

He needn't have worried, because here was Arthur already, his long strides eating up the grass even
in the glittering robes, his hat already lost, and an expression of absolute determination on his face. He had a smudge of foam running down from his cheekbone to the corner of his mouth, and a lot more splattered over his costume, but he wasn't slowing down for Smurfs or French Maids or Multiple Arthurs; he was completely focused on Merlin, and he was laughing more freely than Merlin could remember ever having seen as he closed in on him.

"Fuck," gasped Merlin, darting towards a distant corner of the grass and deciding to make his stand there. It wasn't exactly the most dramatic place for a showdown at High Noon, but Merlin still struck a pose, looking as threatening as he could with foam-sticky fake hair plastered to his face and a load of blue velvet skirts flapping around his ankles, holding a can in each hand and waiting.

Arthur took this in, and didn't slow down a jot. Merlin hadn't quite realised his intention until the idiot barreled right into him and the two of them went sprawling in a tangle of flailing, overdressed limbs. And then in an embarrassingly short time Merlin found himself pinned to the grass with Arthur straddling his waist, both wrists clasped in one slippery grip above his head, and Arthur grinning down at him. The beard dangled in Merlin's face and he twisted away and blew ineffectually at it.

"Get off, get off, get off, you fucker!" said Merlin, panting and giddy and really not meaning it, and Arthur just laughed, and grabbed one of the fallen cans of shaving foam, and started to work on covering every inch of Merlin's face with the stuff. And his throat. And his collarbones, and his shoulders, and the pale dip of chest that the beautiful, devastated dress revealed. Merlin squeezed his eyes shut and squirmed fruitlessly under Arthur, feeling warm and sticky and slightly crushed, but in a good way – feeling, in fact, unbelievably turned on.

Arthur stopped squirting the gloopy stuff onto him after a while, and just sat there, panting, holding Merlin trapped still.

"Told you your arse was mine, Merlin," he said, breathless and husky, and Merlin blinked open his eyes with great caution, his eyelashes clumping together, and looked up at Arthur's face framed against the sky.

"Take that stupid beard off," he said, his voice ragged, and Arthur did. And that was a much better picture to be staring up at.

"You look like a complete prat," said Arthur, tilting his head to one side and studying Merlin as if there weren't hundreds of other people stumbling and tumbling around them on the lawn. He reached down almost tentatively and swiped some of the foam off Merlin's face again, pushing it up into the wig and then pushing the wig right off. His mouth twitched, and then he was smoothing great globs of the shaving foam up into Merlin's hair and making it into a sticky mohawk while Merlin wriggled underneath him – more because he felt that he ought to be putting up a resistance than because he wanted Arthur to move. Arthur's fingers sliding wetly over his skin and working their way into his scalp felt absolutely amazing, even if he was just doing it to make Merlin look like a prat, and Merlin was feeling fairly grateful for all the layers of velvet and lamé and God knows what else that were separating them at this point, because hiding his growing arousal would have been pretty bloody difficult in a Smurf outfit. He stared up into Arthur's ridiculously blue eyes and tried to stop laughing long enough to swear at him.

"Oi, Arthur, stop trying to fuck the chav," yelled Kay, and Merlin watched all the laughter and gentleness fall right off Arthur's face to be replaced by a shocked, half-frightened expression. He let go of Merlin's wrists and pushed himself away as if Merlin had suddenly become contagious, and Merlin felt all the sunlight vanish from the day with that jerky, horrified rejection. He just lay there in the grass for a couple of minutes, staring up at the sky after Arthur had skidded away from him, and
asked himself just what the hell he thought he was playing at.

And then Percy, in full Lando Calrissian regalia, tripped over him, and uttered a war cry as he got to his knees, and Merlin was scrambling to his feet, sticky and wigless and just a little bit broken, but hiding it well, and clutching at a can of shaving foam like it was a life line, and the battle was on.
By the afternoon the clean up crew had done an impressive job of transforming Sallies Quad from a scene of utter carnage to a mere mess, but the town still had a strange air of unreality to it, with random smudges of foam and tattered shreds of costume scattered around the streets. It struck Merlin as massively unfair that people were still expected to attend their lectures and tutorials that afternoon, once they’d all stumbled and squelched back to their respective Halls of Residence and had showers. Merlin's Physics tutorial was noticeably underpopulated, and Merlin did kind of wish he'd just let himself climb into his pyjamas and fallen face down onto his bed. Unconsciousness had been tempting for a whole host of reasons. Chief among them being Arthur, of course; Arthur, who had made a point of banding together with Kay and Gawain and Blanche and Owain to stumble back to Hall, and had scarcely looked at Merlin once the whole time. Merlin had found himself walking along with Gawain, burningly conscious of feeling that he'd just been demoted from friend to acquaintance for no good reason as Arthur railed at Kay in a too-loud voice and laughed uproariously at things which weren't really all that funny, and pointedly didn't look at Merlin.

Merlin had lost the wig, and the gown was soaked through and sticky, clinging coldly to his legs in heavy swathes of sodden velvet, which really wasn't particularly comfortable – but it didn't matter. Merlin hardly noticed. He was too busy turning Arthur's behaviour over in his head and trying to reconcile it with the friendship he'd thought they had, and he felt like he was looking at a jigsaw puzzle that had been assembled all wrong.

He kept expecting Arthur to look over at him, to catch his eye and grin – something normal. He didn't realise how much he'd come to take these casual, easy intimacies for granted, and it was shocking how isolated he felt now, just by having Arthur's attention directed elsewhere.

"Are you all right, Mao?" Gawain asked, looking down at him with a disconcertingly knowing expression.

"Yeah, sure – of course," said Merlin, hurriedly. He laughed. "Just, you know – knackered. And cold. All that."

"Mmm," said Gawain. He'd lost his red Papa Smurf hat somewhere along the way, although he still had the beard – albeit now a very bedraggled and blue-tinged beard. His skin was mottled and swirled with smears of pink and white and blue, lending him the surreal illusion of being made of living marble. The skin-tight scarlet leggings left remarkably little to the imagination, and were liberally splattered with shaving foam and, incongruously, what appeared to be baked beans. Merlin registered, almost absently, that Gawain really was, objectively speaking, a very attractive bloke indeed. He'd known this, obviously, but hadn't given it much thought one way or the other; his current state of undress, however, even with all the paint and foam and ridiculous beard, revealed a six pack of truly exceptional dimensions; he was beginning to get an inkling of why Morgause had developed a bit of a soft spot for Gawain. He was a big lad, easily half a foot taller than Arthur, and he rather reminded Merlin of one of the bouncers at his favourite club back in Cardiff. It was hard to imagine Gawain ever losing his rag, but Merlin wasn't sure that he'd put money on anyone against him, if it ever came down to a serious fight. Well. Other than Morgause, obviously.

"Interesting couple of days," Gawain said, with a half-smile.

Merlin laughed. "Interesting. Yeah – yeah, that's the word, all right. Interesting." He tried to pull himself together. "So – you lot have fun with Tristan, then?"

"There were more drinking games," Gawain said, in a tone that spoke volumes. Merlin winced.
"And then Kay got into a fight with one of Tristan's flatmates, and fell down the stairs."

"Couldn't have happened to a nicer bloke," said Merlin, before he could stop himself.

Gawain's expression was rueful. "It was a very memorable night."

"Right." Merlin swallowed, thinking about his own evening, and flushed when he realised that Gawain was looking quizzically down at the love bite on his throat. "Yeah. I know what you mean," he said, sheepishly.

"I hope you were careful," said Gawain, sounding uncharacteristically tentative. "Not that it's any of my business, obviously. Sorry. Just – you should take care."

Merlin wasn't sure whether to feel touched or insulted. "Er – okay," he said, boggling.

Gawain shrugged. "Just don't want to see anyone getting hurt," he said. "So, anyway – what do you reckon the chances are that the hot water's buggered when we get back?"

Merlin blinked. "Don't even joke about that," he said.

* * *

Arthur couldn't really pretend that Merlin wasn't there when the two of them got back to their room – but instead he was acting like they were strangers. Like Merlin were somebody he had to be polite to. It was extraordinarily awkward, and it left Merlin feeling weirdly hollow and bereft. So although a part of him wanted nothing more than to pull on a clean t-shirt and collapse onto his clean sheets, a bigger part of him wanted to get away from His Royal Haughtiness in the hopes that the next time Merlin saw him, Arthur would be acting less like a stilted Stepford Roommate and more like the prat that Merlin had come to know and love. And that was how he came to be one of the only two people who actually showed up for the Physics tutorial, and how he ended up, at 5pm, sitting in the Union with Gwen, looking glumly down at a plate of chips'n'cheese'n'gravy and hiding behind a large mug of tea, asking about Gwen's evening with Arthur. He glanced up at her, and then looked back down to the plate of chips.

"Oh, God," said Gwen, slumping in her seat and pulling a face. "Shut up!"

Merlin carefully selected a chip covered in both gravy and melted cheese, and took a bite out of the end. He didn't know why he'd brought the subject up; he really didn't want to hear about it. Mostly.

"Well, you know – I'm just asking. Can't blame me for being interested," he said, trying to sound casual. "I mean, last I saw of you, you were getting up close and personal with his tonsils."

Gwen took a slurp from her hot chocolate and pulled a face. "Shit. It was just – he was being really nice and approachable and flirty. And I thought about what you said: 'seize the arse'." She laughed at herself. "Gwen, I said to myself, you're only young once, and if you let this one get away without at least trying, you'll kick yourself for the rest of your life. Your Dad will kick you. Your grandchildren will kick you. Random people on the street will kick you. So – I did. I went for it." She looked distinctly embarrassed, but also vaguely proud. Which was about right.

Merlin nodded, carefully selecting another chip. "Well done me," he said, feeling faintly ill. "I should be a life coach!" He popped the chip in his mouth and licked gravy off his fingers. "Although," he added a moment later, "I was rather thinking of Lance, you know. When I said that."

Gwen glanced down at her hot chocolate and then looked up at Merlin with an expression that was both rueful and defensive. "I know," she said. "But – but Lance never flirts with me. I don't think he
even realises I'm a girl. And Arthur was there, being all hot and flirty, and, you know Prince Arthur, for Christ's sake. Who wouldn't flirt right back for all she was worth?" She bit her lip. "Is this weird? Are you pissed off with me? I mean – I know you think he's hot, but you're not..." She gave an embarrassed half-laugh. "You're not in love with him, or anything, right? And, you know, he's straight, so..."

Merlin sighed. "No," he said. "No, I'm not in love with him or anything." He tried to laugh. "And what kind of crap friend would I be if I got pissed off that you snogged your very own Prince Charming? I mean, God, well done you! I don't have any right to be pissed off." He pushed his plate forwards. "Here, have a chip."

Gwen wrinkled her nose dubiously. "Um – yeah, maybe not. I mean, chips and cheese – yum. Chips and gravy – also yum. But chips and cheese and gravy? I think that may be a step too far. It looks like a special effect. A really cheap special effect."

"It's salty, greasy and delicious, with crispy bits and soggy bits," said Merlin, demonstrating why he didn't have a glittering career in advertising.

"Er." Gwen hesitated, then shrugged. "Oh, what the hell," she said, and tried one.

"Huh! Actually pretty good," she said, sounding surprised, and they sat chewing for a little while in companionable silence.

"It wasn't actually a very good snog," said Gwen, after a bit. "With – you know. His nibs."

Merlin could feel his eyes bulging. "Really?" he said, astounded and thoroughly disappointed.

Gwen looked uncomfortable. "Well – sorry, no, that sounds a bit awful, doesn't it? I'm not saying that he's a bad snog, just that – er, do you want the sordid details?"

"Apparently I have a previously unsuspected streak of masochism a mile wide, so – yeah. Hit me," said Merlin. Gwen looked at him oddly.

"Well then – it was, er, technically good, but just not very – um. There was no passion. No, well, lust, really. Which was – weird. And unexpected." She frowned. "It wasn't – I mean, basically it felt like snogging my brother."

Merlin felt his eyes bulge. "You snog your brother?"

"No! No, I don't have a brother, you pillock! I mean that's what it felt like. Just – it was weirdly unsexy, and not quite right. Even though, you know: Prince Arthur!"

Merlin swallowed. "Right," he said, not at all sure what to make of that. "I see. But you – I mean, you and him, did you – er...?"

"No we did not 'er'! Not that you'd have known if I was shagging half the street, Mr Leaves-the-party-early-without-saying-goodbye! With – was that the famous Edwin I saw you with? Because I can totally see the appeal, if it was."

"That was Edwin," said Merlin.

Gwen stole another chip. "He's hot," she said. "Tantric yoga, you said?"

"Nice."

Merlin stared for a moment at a chip before biting it in half, then looked up at Gwen,cocking his head to one side. "So – look, if you had to choose, would you pick Arthur or Lance?"

"What?"

"Come on, tick tock – Chuck, Fuck or Marry: Arthur, Lance, Brad Pitt."

"Chuck Arthur, Fuck Brad, Marry Lance," she said, without hesitating.

"Seriously?" said Merlin, thunderstruck.

"Well, in this fantasy world where any of them are actually interested in me – sure," she said, defensively. "Why not Lance? Money isn't everything."

"I know that!" protested Merlin. "I didn't mean – look, Lance is brilliant, I love Lance, don't get me wrong. He's a great bloke. If anyone gets into Heaven – if there is a heaven – then it's going to be Lance. Obviously. But I just – I mean, that isn't how I thought you'd answer." He bit his lip. "The details change," he said softly to himself. "Well, that's – good. I think. Probably."

Gwen gave him a baffled look. "Oookay, well – happy to oblige. You know you're a freak, right?"


Gwen's smile faded. "Oh, Merlin – not again, please."

"No, but..."

"Merlin, I really don't want to talk about it."

"See, you're saying that, but you only think that because..." Merlin began, and then trailed off when Gwen dug her vibrating phone out of her pocket and thumbed it on, flapping a hand at him for silence.

"Yeah? Yeah, no problem." Her voice dropped down, suddenly warm. "Right. I'm here now, actually, downstairs. D'you want...right. Right, can do. Okay." She clicked it off and grinned at Merlin apologetically. "Speak of the devil! I'm sorry, love, I've got to go – they need someone to cover the phones for Nightline tonight – the girl who's down for this evening called in sick."

"Weren't you on duty last week?" asked Merlin, frowning.

She shrugged. "It's no bother," she said. "I like doing it." But there was something just a little bit too casual about her tone of voice.

"Are you going to be working with Lance, by any chance?" Merlin asked, eyeing her suspiciously. "Just the two of you together in that tiny little secret office all night?"

"Oh, Merlin!" Gwen exclaimed.

"That's a yes. Blatantly a yes," he said, waving a chip at her. "It is, isn't it?"

"It's not like that!"

"If you would just ask him, it would be," Merlin said, doggedly.
"No, seriously – I'm not having this conversation," said Gwen, setting down her mug and wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. She shook her head at Merlin. "I know you mean well, which is why you don't have a lap full of chips and cheese and gravy right now – but, honestly, I've had my fill of embarrassing attempts to throw myself at blokes who don't fancy me this week. End of story. And now I've got to go home and grab my stuff. See you tomorrow, M.C. Hammer."

"We are going to talk about this," said Merlin, determinedly. "But I swear, all you need to do is ask him out, and he'll be yours."

"Oh, shush, you," said Gwen, rising to her feet and slinging her battered messenger bag over her shoulder. She ruffled his hair just to piss him off. "I'll see you later, you nutcase."

* * *

Am texting you, since you refuse to listen.

Shut UP.

Spoke to Lance last night. He <3 you. Bigtime. But shy!

Does not. Is not. Stop taking the piss.

Swear it's true. Shockingly, is not very experienced with girls. Also, is convinced you <3 Arthur and being all stupidly noble. Because that is how he rolls.

I don't <3 Arthur.

Good. You should tell Lance this. Think subtle nuances completely lost on him. Need to make interest completely clear. Suggest nudity and whipped cream, with clear "I <3 you, Lance" banner overhead.

Shut up! Cannot think! Am on duty! Am responsible Nightliner!

With Lance?

Shut up. Not listening.

Should I text him too?

WILL KILL YOU IF YOU DO.

Go on, you big scaredy cat! Seize day!

I'll bloody seize you if you don't stop matchmaking!

Merlin stared at the screen of his phone and felt the smile slide off his face.

"Bloody stupid party games," he muttered to himself. He switched off the phone and slid it into his pocket, and wondered where the hell Arthur was. He was normally back from Leuchars by this time.

* * *

It was half past one in the morning when Arthur stumbled back into the room, propping himself up on Kay and Leon and singing an Arctic Monkeys song out of tune. Merlin, who had been in a dead
sleep until the door opened with a bang and he was treated to a not-particularly-regal rendition of "I
bet you look good on the dancefloor," made a wordless noise of protest and winced away from the
sudden brightness as Kay slapped on the lightswitch.

"Here you go, my lad," Kay was slurring, helping Arthur over to the bed. "You'll b'fine now." He
turned to glare at Merlin. "S'long's the chav doesn't try an'thing."

Merlin, squinting out through the cracks between his fingers as his brain did its usual sluggish fumble
at scrambling into wakefulness, couldn't think of anything suitably cutting to say. His eyesight was
gradually adjusting to the glare, but it always took him a few minutes to become human.

"S'fine, Kay. S'all fine. She was a bit of all righ', wasn't she?" Arthur was saying, and Kay gave a
big honking laugh.

"You did all right for yourself there, Arthur! Don't know why you didn't go back to her place! She
was gagging for a shag!"

"Nother time," said Arthur, leaning forward from the edge of the bed to untie his shoelaces, and then
having to be caught before he hit the floor. "Whoops!"

Merlin had dragged himself into a sitting position and was rubbing at his eyes with the heels of his
hands. "Oh, for fuck's sakes," he said, scowling. "What have you done to him?"

"Didn't ask your opinion, Emrys," said Kay, without looking at him. "Arthur, you can come back to
ours, you know, mate. Could bunk with me, if you don't want to stay in here. Not good being drunk
around the chav."

"Oh, you can fuck right off," snapped Merlin, looking around for Leon. "What have you done? He's
in a right state!"

"We went dancing. And drinking. And drinking and dancing," said Arthur, gamely making another
attempt to unlace his shoe, and nearly falling off the bed again in the process.

Merlin's brow crumpled. "On a Monday night? In St Andrews? Where the hell did you manage
that?"

Arthur tapped the side of his nose. Or he tried to, at any rate; embarrassingly, he was not quite able to
find his nose with accuracy, which had Merlin rolling his eyes.

"Jesus H Christ. Okay, where do you keep the neurofen?" Merlin said, getting out of bed and
wincing at the cold. Arthur made a triumphant noise at having successfully rid himself of one shoe,
and turned his attention to the other one.

"Right, well – I'll be going, then," said Kay, standing uncertainly in the threshold and watching as
Merlin rummaged through Arthur's shaving kit. "You change your mind, you can come and knock
on the door whenever you like, mate," he added, before stumbling off down the corridor.

"Got it," Merlin muttered, grabbing the little box and tossing it on Arthur's bed, then filling a mug
with water. It was a Captain Hammer mug that Arthur had bought him as a joke, because Merlin
didn't have a mug of his own and Arthur was sick of sharing. Merlin didn't have the faintest idea
where Arthur could have found such a thing in the first place, and he had a nasty suspicion that he
might even have ordered it online, or had it made especially, rather than, as he claimed, picking it up
for 20p in a charity shop. Merlin was pretty damned sure that Arthur didn't spend much time in
charity shops, one way or another.
He knelt down with the mug now and folded Arthur's fingers around it, accepting the pills that Leon had helpfully extracted from the neurofen box and pressing them into Arthur's hand. Arthur's head swung up to look at him, and he smiled a big, stupid, sunny smile that wrung Merlin's heart unexpectedly.

"Merlin!" he said, sounding surprised and delighted – as if they didn't share a flaming bedroom, for God's sakes.

"You need to drink some water, Arthur," Merlin said, loudly and clearly. "And swallow these."

Arthur knocked back the pills without even looking at them, and obediently gulped down the contents of the mug. Merlin knew he should have been pleased that Arthur wasn't giving him any backchat, but instead he found himself unexpectedly horrified.

"Did you even check what I just gave you?" he demanded. "You can't just go swallowing anything! I could have given you GHB, or E, or anything, and you just took it!"

Arthur frowned, and then gave an inelegant snort of laughter. "Stop being ridiculous, Merlin. You wouldn't hurt me," he said.

Merlin swallowed. "That's not the point," he said, feeling frustrated. "You should take better care of yourself, you idiot."

"'S what I've got you for! You, and Leon, and Kay and Gawain and Val and Ewan and Pell. All keeping me safe. Making sure I don't do anything really daft." His smile twisted slightly. "Like go off for a drive on my own, or jog down an empty beach at sunrise without a minder, or fuck the wrong person. My own personal flock of Jiminy Crickets, keeping me on the, ha, the straight and narrow." He laughed at that. "Got to remember what I owe to the name of Pendragon. Got to make the responsible choices." He nodded to himself, then smiled. "But my father doesn't mind me getting pissed from time to time, in an excess of...'boyish high spirits'. 'S okay to get pissed. And there was a girl – s'okay if there's a girl." He darted a glance at Merlin. "Pretty girl. Red hair. Truly 'normous...heh. Thingies. Knockers. She thinks I'm brilliant." He nodded again, sounding smug.

Merlin sighed. "Well, congratulations," he said. "Does she have a name?"

"Ev'rybody has a name, you oaf," said Arthur, struggling to fight his way out of his jacket. Merlin exchanged a speaking glance with Leon, and wondered whether they could get away with a quick bout of rock, paper, scissors to decide who was going to help His Royal Drunkenness get changed. Probably not. He sighed, and helped Arthur pull his arms out of the jacket, and draped it over the back of the chair.

"I'll get you some more water," he said, hoping that either Arthur or Leon would be able to deal with the jumper and jeans. "What on earth were you thinking?" he added, as he fiddled with the tap. "It's really not like you to get pissed on a Monday night. You should have been out flying at Leuchars, for God's sakes, not getting hammered! Didn't your liver get enough punishment last night, you lunatic? I mean, God, I don't think I'll be touching alcohol for at least a month, after yesterday – and you're already off on a bender! You're mental, Arthur Pendragon. Must be all that inbreeding." By the time he turned around with the mug full to the brim, Arthur was sitting on his bed wearing a Chelsea shirt and a pair of boxer briefs, staring at Merlin with a weirdly wistful expression on his face. Leon was standing next to the door, waiting to catch Merlin's eye; when he'd caught it, Merlin gave him a grateful nod, and Leon slipped back outside and left them to it. Merlin wondered whether he was going to mention having to help Arthur to get changed in his report to whatever higher-ups ran the Prince of Wales's bodyguard team.
"You going to brush your teeth? Or do the alcohol fairies trump oral hygiene?" Merlin asked.

"'Course I am. Give me that," said Arthur irritably, crossing to the sink almost like a sober person and plucking the mug out of Merlin's grasp. "I'm not a child, you know!"

"Could have fooled me."

"Yes, well – you're very easy to fool," said Arthur, testily. "Give."

Merlin handed him the mug and then hovered within swooping-in-to-catch distance, in case he was needed. Apparently he wasn't, so he padded back to his own bed and tugged the blanket around him once more. November on the east coast of Scotland was pretty damn chilly, and although the radiator in their room worked, it really wasn't all that adequate. Not for the first time, Merlin marvelled that Arthur had ended up in Sallies, rather than in New Hall. He watched Arthur brush his teeth and gulp down another mug of water, and stumble over to bed without switching out the light, and then he sighed, got back out of his own bed, crossed to the lightswitch, switched off the light, and got back into bed.

"I suppose you were off shagging that Edwin," said Arthur, when Merlin was sure that he must be asleep.

"What?"

"Tonight."

Merlin lay in the dark and turned this nonsequiteur over a few times. "Er – no, I was home working on the essay that's due in on Wednesday morning," he said at last.

"Oh," said Arthur.

There was another long silence, and Merlin had just about nodded off when Arthur spoke up again. "I don't like him."

"Sorry?"

"Edwin. I don't like him."

"You've not even met him," said Merlin, feeling exasperated and knackered and faintly unhappy.

"Don't need to."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Arthur said nothing.

Merlin punched his pillow in frustration. "Well, luckily you're not my dad, or my boyfriend, or the boss of me, so it doesn't matter whether or not Edwin has your Royal Seal of Approval. Maybe I don't like the redhead you spent the night snogging. So what? Go to sleep, you ass."

Another pause, and then Arthur said, so quietly that Merlin had to strain to hear: "It would've been better with you."

"What?"

"This evening. I meant – I meant this evening," Arthur said more loudly, his voice suddenly hoarse. "I just – I - it would've been more fun with you. There. With you there."
Merlin rolled his eyes at the ceiling. "Then bloody well invite me along next time, you git! Honestly, you have no social skills whatsoever, do you? It's not my fault if Kay's crap company. Apparently Kay was who you wanted to hang out with, so you can just suck it up if he's who you ended up stuck with."

Arthur was snoring by the time that it occurred to Merlin to wonder whether the "it" in question had been the evening in general, or the snogging in particular.

And after that, he couldn't sleep at all.

* * *

"So I have a theory," said Merlin, pouncing on Gawain as he left the library the next day.

Gawain eyed him warily. "Afternoon, Mao," he said, nodding.

Merlin fell into line beside him and leaned close, dropping his voice to a whisper. "Yesterday, when you saw the embarrassing love bite – I think you thought Arthur gave it to me."

He looked at Gawain. Gawain lifted one eyebrow, but didn't pause in his walking.

Encouraged, Merlin carried on: "I think all that 'be careful' stuff was about Arthur, not about whether I'm practicing safe sex. You thought I'd had my wicked way with him, and he'd let me."

Gawain's expression gave nothing away. "Why would you think that?" he asked, in a mild tone.

"Because I think you know something I don't." Merlin's eyes narrowed. "You've known him since you were little kids, haven't you? You know him better than just about anyone. Don't you want to hear my theory?"

"Not particularly."

"I think he likes blokes. I think he likes me."

"Of course he likes you, Mao. You're his mate."

Merlin threw his arms up in the air. "Oh come on, Gawain! Please, just throw me a sodding bone here! I don't want to hurt him, or mess things up for him – I'm just trying to make sense of all this, because it's killing me, and I think I've understood it now. He does like me back, doesn't he? It's not just me?"

Gawain sighed, and turned to look at Merlin at last. "I'm not saying you're right. But even if you were, Merlin, you know he wouldn't be able to do anything about it. Your man back there's the Prince of Wales. You haven't met his father, but – well, even without that, you should know that he doesn't get to make the same choices you do, or even I do. He's going to be King one day. Head of the Commonwealth. Head of the Church of England. That's not just about a shiny hat and getting your face on the stamps, now. It's a full-time job, and it's one that comes with a lot of rules. He's got to meet a nice girl of good family and have a great big wedding in St Paul's Cathedral and then make lots of little royal children with her – lots, to secure the succession, because Uther never remarried after Igraine's death, and Arthur has no brothers or sisters, which has a lot of people fairly unhappy."

He shook his head. "It doesn't matter what Arthur wants. You should know that. Feck knows he definitely does."

"Oh," said Merlin, feeling a lot less triumphant than he'd thought he would. He stared at the pavement. "But – oh."
Gawain sighed, and patted his shoulder. "Chin up, Mao," he said. "Worse things happen at sea."

"Fuck," Merlin said, after a minute. "I've been a bit of an idiot, haven't I?"

"There's been quite a lot of that going around. But – you see, don't you? That you should probably try to forget about any of that business, and find yourself a nice lad who's not got so much baggage? Who wouldn't be in a whole universe of trouble for acting on his impulses? And not – I mean, don't make it any harder for Wart, eh?"

Merlin nodded, and then, because apparently he was basically a thirteen year old boy, sniggered.

Gawain rolled his eyes. "You know what I mean, now. Get your mind out of the gutter."

"Yeah. Yeah, I know what you mean." The smile melted away. "Crap. Thanks. I, er - I think Morgana tried to explain this to me, actually, but I wasn't listening properly. But – right. Up to speed now. I mean, I think it's bloody ridiculous, like the Air Squadron thing, but – right. I get it. Feel a bit stupid for needing it spelled out."

"Okay then."

Merlin blinked. "I'm sort of seeing someone anyway," he said, after a moment. "Sort of."

"Well then."

"He's a PostGrad. A medic. He's researching HIV virus particle production. And he's very bendy."

"Happy for you, mate!" said Gawain, heartily. He hunkered down a little and lowered his voice. "Although I don't need to know about how bendy he is, to be perfectly honest," he added, waving his hand in the air as if to flap the knowledge away. "So – you coming over to The Vic for a hot chocolate?"

Merlin sighed, and pulled his scarf tighter around his neck. "Yeah, okay. Will it cure a broken heart?"

"My oldest sister swears by them," Gawain said. "Although my next-oldest sister prefers whisky. And swearing. And breaking crockery."

Merlin gave that due consideration. "Well, I'll give the hot chocolate a shot," he said at last. "We can always move on to the whisky and swearing and broken crockery later."
"Holy shit – isn't that Lady Viva?" said Kay, pointing across Bell Street incredulously. Merlin followed the direction of his gaze and took in the unlikely sight of a young lady in astoundingly tall shoes, a skin-tight bottle-green dress made of what seemed to be latex and crystals, and a hat shaped like a giant golf ball. She was flanked by an entourage of muscular men in leather.

"It's a pretty good likeness," Merlin agreed. "Wonder what they're collecting for."

"Likeness shmikeness – I think that's the actual Lady Viva," said Kay, still staring. "Viva the Diva who flashes her beaver! She had that concert in Edinburgh last week – I think that's her." Kay elbowed Arthur in the ribs. "If you don't want her, can I have first dibs?"

"You really are disgusting," said Merlin, shaking his head.

"Mao has a point," said Gawain.

"Shut up. I called dibs – you get your own starlet. Unless – oh, God, if Beyoncé's here too I'll cream myself right here and now. They are so totally fucking. God, I love how dirty she is in her videos," Kay added, dreamily.

"I think it is, you know," said Gawain, sounding surprised. "It looks really like her, and I think that's the manager bloke over there – you know, what's his face, old Tricky Trickler, from Pop Idol and Britain's Got Talent. That bloke. That's him, isn't it?"

"Crikey!" said Merlin, impressed in spite of himself. It wasn't unusual to see random celebrities around St Andrews, of course. Not a daily occurrence (well, unless one counted Arthur and Morgana, and these days Merlin didn't) but not astonishing either. Merlin had nodded politely at a dapper older gentleman in his first month in the town, knowing he recognised the face and assuming that it was one of his professors, and received a gruff "Good morning" in response, and it was only five minutes later he realised that he knew the face from James Bond movies, not from Physics lectures or Philosophy tutorials. He'd seen Sean Connery three or four times since then, generally with his son, and also several professional golfers, and, once, the back of Samuel L Jackson's head.

But Lady Viva, pop diva and starlet and fashion icon extraordinaire, was a whole other kind of famous.

Kay looked over at Arthur avidly. "I bet she's here hoping to meet you. I bet she wants a bit of Royal in her." His face took on a calculating look. "She'd probably go for a threeway, though. Arthur, I'm calling first dibs on any threeway action."

"You're really excelling yourself in the obnoxiousness stakes today," said Merlin, incredulously.

"I'm a pragmatist, Emrys," said Kay, with a shrug. "Nothing wrong with using the weapons at your disposal in the war between the sexes – and Arthur here is practically a W.M.D. Playing chivalrous does not get you laid."

"Kay, there will not be any 'threeway action', as you so delicately phrase it. And if there were, then I can tell you with complete sincerity that it would not involve you," said Arthur, with feeling.

Kay looked slightly hurt.

"You're a lousy excuse for a friend," said Kay, all but pouting. "God, if I were Prince of Wales, I'd definitely share my women with you."

"Then I think it's probably just as well for the monarchy that you aren't," said Arthur, firmly. "Now can we drop the subject of my hypothetical relationship with Lady Viva?"

"It's a bit rich that she calls herself Lady Viva," said Kay, still staring across the road. "I mean, she's as common as muck – just like Emrys here – and there she is just giving herself a title without so much as a by-your-leave."

"It's a stage name," said Arthur, impatiently. "Like Madonna."

"No, Madonna's actual name is Madonna," pointed out Merlin.

"Oh my God, stop flaunting your Big Gay Knowledge Of Pop," exclaimed Arthur, rolling his eyes. "Whatever. I'm just saying that if she wants to call herself Lady Viva, or Doctor Who, or Little Miss Muffet, it's all the same to me. I can't imagine we're ever likely to meet her."

"That's because you lack imagination," said Kay. "Just wait and see. She's a total media whore – there's no way she's here in St Andrews without trying to hook up with you, at least for dinner. Just think of all the publicity she'd get from that one! No, she's got you in her sights, my lad, and she's going to hunt you down. If you're not up for it, then I suggest we duck into a shop before she spots you."

"Oh, rubbish," said Arthur. But he still felt the need to turn and dart in through the open door of Beanscene for a sudden coffee right then.

* * *

Merlin hated it when Kay was right. Apparently, if one was an internationally famous pop star and sex symbol and top of Maxim's list of Most Shaggable Birds, all the security forces of St Salvators Hall and Clarence House magically melted away with the assumption that you would be perfectly welcome to drop in unannounced on the Prince of Wales. Merlin really wasn't at all sure that he approved of this lackadaisical approach to Arthur's privacy – but that was probably just his jealousy speaking.

Up close, Lady Viva was actually rather a lot prettier and younger than she tended to look on TV. This was probably because she wasn't wearing quite so many pounds of makeup, Merlin suspected. Although she was wearing a hat that seemed to be crafted from a collection of sporrans, which was about as batty as advertised, and her heels were notable for being at least five inches high and lacking any actual heels, a piece of engineering that Merlin found mesmerising.

"I'm here to see Arthur," she announced, looking Merlin up and down with an expression of disdain.

"Oh. Er," said Merlin, dazedly, taking in the transparent black lace dress through which what appeared to be space-age silver underwear was gleaming, and the huge collar made out of black and silver feathers that framed her face. Behind her, four very large, very muscle-bound men in tight black leather stood with their arms crossed. Val's eyes were darting from one to the next with an expression of professional concern, and he was whispering something into his little Madonna headset, which Merlin found obscurely comforting. Merlin swallowed, and stood up as straight as he could. "Is he – er, is he actually expecting you?"

Lady Viva cocked her head to one side, making the feathers jiggle, and the look she gave Merlin
made him feel about two inches tall. "I'm here to see Arthur," she said again, her voice rising dangerously. "Not his monkey."

Merlin glanced back into the room. Arthur was sitting cross legged on his bed with a stack of reference books in front of him and a mug of tea cooling at his side, typing onto his laptop. Or at least he had been typing, until Merlin opened the door; now he was staring over at Merlin with an expression of bemusement, which was swiftly turning into cold anger. He swung his feet off the bed and stood up.

"Right," said Merlin, backing away as Arthur reached the door. "Sorry."

"Hello?" Arthur rather pointedly did not invite Lady Viva or her small army of bodyguards into the room, but instead stood there blocking the entrance with his body, his arms crossed in front of his chest and an expression of painfully polite interest on his face. "Can I help you?"

"I decided that you could take me out for dinner," she said, around a mouthful of gum, running her eyes over Arthur as if he were something she were thinking about buying. She looked disappointed to find that he was wearing pretty much the same ensemble as Merlin: jeans and a hoody. Merlin wondered whether she had perhaps been expecting velvet pantaloons and an actual crown.

"Did you?" Arthur said, with a fixed smile full of teeth. "Well, that's very flattering, Miss...?"

Merlin drew in his breath with a hiss, and watched the inch-long eyelash extensions lower dangerously at that little cut. "Lady Viva," she said, in a tone of voice that did not seem to imply romance.

"I see. Charming to make your acquaintance, Lady Viva. My name is Arthur. I don't believe we've met."

"We have now," she said. Merlin heard several squeals in the background that rather suggested word had spread of Arthur's famous visitor. Lady Viva glanced down the corridor with an expression of distaste, and looked back at Arthur. "You could always invite me in," she said, pointedly.

"Well, yes, that remains an option," agreed Arthur. "But I'm afraid that I've already eaten this evening, Your Ladyship. Tuna Surprise – not the kitchen's finest offering, to be fair, but it was filling, in a stodgy sort of way, and the treacle pudding and custard was rather good. I really couldn't eat another bite – and besides, I'm busy with an essay that's due in tomorrow morning, so I'm afraid I'm simply not free to squire you around town. Although of course I'm heart broken about it, because there's really nothing I'd rather do with my evening." He gave her a very small, tight smile. "We do have some takeaway menus lying around here somewhere, though – Merlin, be a good lad and dig them out, would you? P M's do quite a good haggis supper, and if you've not sampled the local delicacy of deep fried Mars Bar, then The Kinness Fry Bar is the connoisseur's restaurant of choice, I understand."

Merlin couldn't take his eyes away from Lady Viva's face throughout this little speech, and he had some difficulty hiding his amusement.

"You're turning me down?" she demanded, in tones of complete disbelief. "Do you have any idea how much money Playboy offered me to pose naked?"

"No," said Arthur. "But I'd happily double it to get you to pose fully dressed. Somewhere else. Good day to you." And with that he closed the door, and Merlin burst into a round of applause.

"That was brilliant!" he exclaimed, shaking his head in wonder. "Seriously brilliant! I'd have paid
money to see that! Wow! You really don't fancy her much, then?"

"God, no!" said Arthur, with feeling.

"Kay would sell his kidney to get into her knickers."

"Kay would sell his kidney and his grandmother's kidney to get into anyone's knickers," said Arthur, picking up his mug of tea and swallowing a mouthful. "I'd rather date a troll, okay? She's an arrogant, obnoxious, self-satisfied prat," he added, with feeling.

Merlin manfully didn't say anything like 'takes one to know one' at this juncture, because he was feeling far too impressed.

"And she was rude to you," Arthur continued, stomping back over to his bed. "She can fuck right off."

Merlin gave a small huff of laughter at that, and tried not to turn into a thirteen year old girl over this display of protectiveness. "But, Arthur – you're rude to me all the time," he pointed out, feeling his heart give a stupid little squeeze.

"Yes, well – I'm allowed to be," said Arthur, crossly, sitting down again. "I'm the Prince of Wales, and you're Welsh. I can do whatever I bloody well like to you."

Merlin felt his eyes bulge a little bit at that assertion, and after a heartbeat Arthur seemed to hear what he'd just said, and his head shot up to look at Merlin. He swallowed hard.

"I mean – well, er, you know what I mean," said Arthur, flushing as he met Merlin's gaze, and held it a little too long. The pause grew, and his expression became imploring, and his cheeks started to redden.

Merlin licked his lips, and Arthur's eyes darted down to watch, which sent a wave of startled warmth rushing through Merlin as he tried to think of a reply that wasn't going to get him a clip round the ear.

"Your wish is my command, sire."

Arthur rolled his eyes. "Don't be an idiot, Merlin," he said, gruffly.

* * *

Merlin felt like a complete prat for not seeing it coming – it had been weeks since Arthur had come under any kind of supernatural attack, after all, and so he really should have been expecting the shit to hit the fan eventually. But he'd been distracted by work, and by Raisin Weekend, and by Arthur being, well, Arthur – and so one way or another he'd rather let his guard down. So it was a bit of a surprise the next day, when Arthur came bounding back to his room from a lecture with a huge, gormless grin on his face and a twinkle in his eye, singing 'That's Amoré' with more fervour than accuracy. Merlin looked up from his Philosophy text book as Arthur flung open the wardrobe door and started frantically rifling through his clothes, making unhappy little clucking sounds and tossing things on the floor.

"Have you been taking the crazy pills again?" asked Merlin, watching him with interest.

"Don't mock me!" Arthur said, sending a stricken gaze over one shoulder. "I've got nothing to wear! Shit! How can I have nothing to wear?"

"Um. Because those things you're carpeting the room with are clothes?"
"But they're all boring clothes! She won't like them!" Arthur said, miserably. "Clothes are important to her! How can I ever get her to notice me if I'm just wearing ordinary boring clothes, like yours?"

His voice was getting louder and more frantic with every word, and Merlin put his book down and sat up straight, giving Arthur his full attention.

"Shit," he muttered to himself, and then got to his feet and crossed the room in a couple of quick strides. "Arthur? Arthur, calm down, mate. What are you talking about? Or rather – who?"

"Lady Viva, of course!" said Arthur, like the very name itself were something indescribably precious and lovely.

Merlin stared. "Lady...Viva? You're worried what she will think of your dress sense?"

"Yes!" said Arthur, urgently. "You see? You see how important it is?"

"Oh, fuckadoodledoo," said Merlin, sliding his hands miserably into his hair. "Here we go a-bloody-again."

* * *

"Yes, I'm sure it's a spell. Positive. No question. Now tell me how to fix it."

Merlin clasped the phone tight as he looked anxiously down at Arthur's recumbent form and hoped that he was somehow going to get through all this without having to admit to Gaius about how he might just possibly have used magic to render the heir to the throne unconscious. He was pretty sure that kind of thing wasn't kosher.

"But, Merlin – there are dozens, if not hundreds, of possibilities," said Morgana, helplessly. "That's all you've got to go on? He didn't like her, and now he does?"

"That's all I've got to go on. But believe me when I tell you that I know magic, and this is magic. Suddenly he's all write-her-name-on-his-essays-in-glitter-pen level besotted, and yesterday he thought she was a raging harridan."

"Fuck. Merlin, I need more to go on. I mean, I'll dig through my books, but it could be – God, it could be a potion, a chant, a glamour, a curse, a hex – I mean, you're not giving me much to work with here. It could fade after a few hours, or it could be a lifelong thing – I haven't the foggiest."

"Shit."

"Yes, shit! Damn it, Kraken Boy, you've got to fix this. What were you thinking, letting some famous floozie slip him magical roofies?"

"Oh, I don't know – maybe that he already has a host of paid bodyguards, and the protection of the dragon, and somehow he's managed to reach the age of eighteen without me holding his hand 24/7?"

"We're trusting you to keep him safe, Merlin," said Morgana, in a reproachful voice.

Merlin closed his eyes and banged his head miserably against the wall. "I know!" he said. "I bloody know, all right? I'm on it! I'll fix it! Somehow!" There was a little pause. "I've got to go to Gaius, haven't I?"

"You've got to go to Gaius," agreed Morgana.

"He'll be livid."
"He'll be livid."

* * *

"You did what?" Gaius was, indeed, pretty close to livid.

"It's fine – he's fine! I left Edwin looking after him, and he's sleeping like a baby. It's all okay. I just need some help, er, working out how to undo it."

Gaius stared at him speechlessly for a moment, then rummaged around and dug out a battered-looking book and a First Aid kit from some deep recesses of The Mess that covered his desk. "Fine," he muttered to himself, scowling. "I don't believe it! Leave him alone for five minutes, and he lets some overdressed harpy hit the Prince of Wales with an aphrodisiac! It's like Mrs Fitzherbert all over again, or that bloody Simpson woman! I do not believe it!"

"Sorry," said Merlin, wondering who the blazes Mrs Fitzherbert and that bloody Simpson woman were. He had a feeling Gaius didn't mean Marge. "But you can fix it, right?"

"We'd better jolly well hope so, my lad," Gaius said, tartly. "Right, come on; show me."

* * *

It was all well and good accidentally summoning krakens, and turning winter into summer, but when you got right down to it, Merlin still didn't know very much about magic. Oh, the instinctive side of it, the freak-all-the-other-wizards-out side of it? That he had in spades. But he felt like a five year old next to Edwin and Gaius as they discussed different families of curses and hit him with questions that he couldn't answer. He perched on the end of the bed, looking guiltily up at Arthur and then over at the two wizards – the two proper wizards – and gnawed on his bottom lip. Eventually Gaius stomped off, with samples of Arthur's hair and blood and saliva, and warned Merlin darkly that he'd better make jolly sure that this Lady Viv person didn't get within a hundred yards of Arthur until they'd fixed it. Assuming that it was fixable.

"But it has to be, doesn't it?" said Merlin, grabbing onto Edwin's arm and looking at him frantically. "I mean – come on, if this kind of thing can be done, and easily, then why the hell don't they have a crack squad of wizard ninjas protecting him 24/7?"

Edwin smiled at him. "Because they've got you."

"That's not an answer! Jesus! No pressure!"

"Well – and because real aphrodisiacs are bloody difficult, and because only a complete lunatic would try using magic to marry into the Royal Family after what happened last time." Edwin shrugged. "We've got it pretty good, these days, all in all, but it wouldn't take much to tip things back to the days of witchburnings. There are plenty of easier ways to get what you want out of life, without earning the ire of the British Government and the International Wizarding Community, and finding yourself on InterPol's most wanted list." He was looking closely at Merlin, his smile a rueful little twist. "Are you okay?"

"What? God, yes, of course - I'm fine. It's Arthur who's buggered."

Edwin's lips twitched at that. "My goodness. Now that is misuse of magic."

"No! I didn't touch him!" Merlin said, guiltily. "Don't even – you know I didn't mean that!"

"I know you didn't mean that," Edwin agreed, and slid his fingers into Merlin's hair, cupping the
back of his head. "Don't worry. Really. Calm down. You can handle this, Merlin. You're brimming with power, and you're going to fix it."

Merlin tried to smile, and then got lost in Edwin's eyes and did smile. "Oh. That's all right, then," he said, shakily. "Here I was thinking we had a problem."

"Glad to have cleared that up," Edwin said, with a ripple of laughter in his voice, and he pulled Merlin forward into a kiss.

* * *

"Merlin?"

"Professor Gaius? How did you get my number?"

There was an irritated silence on the other end of the phone, and when Gaius spoke his voice was vibrating with sarcasm. "Well, let's think, how would your Magic tutor possibly track down your phone number? Perhaps through your University file? Or perhaps, just perhaps, by, let's see...magic?"

"Right, sir. Sorry, sir," said Merlin, meekly. "Did you – did you find out what the spell is?"

"I can't quite believe I'm saying this, but I did, yes, with Dr Nimueh's help."

Merlin gave a delighted thumbs-up to Edwin. "That's brilliant, Professor!" he said.

"Yes, well, I wish I could agree with you. It's very old, but it doesn't require enormous power to set it into motion, unfortunately. In theory, given the right circumstances, even a hedgewitch could do it – and not all hedgewitches are registered, which is something I've been complaining about for the past forty years – perhaps finally somebody will listen to me on the subject now. We've got a team in St Andrews right now, combing the place to track down whoever's responsible. I was able to pick up enough of their magical signature that we should be able to I.D. them without too much difficulty, I think."

"But that's great!"

"It would be, but for the fact that it doesn't actually address our main problem. Because this particular working can only be undone one way." There was an embarrassed pause. "True love's kiss."

Merlin felt his eyebrows drawing together incredulously. "Sorry, what?"

"You heard me, boy! This spell can only be undone if someone who truly loves Arthur kisses him. That will undo it. Without that, he's going to be labouring under the illusion that this Lady Viv person is the very apple of his eye. Forever. Which may do her record sales a lot of good, but which, I strongly suspect, is not going to go down very well with His Majesty the King."


"No, and no," said Gaius, flatly.

"Oh, for God's sakes!" snapped Merlin, starting to pace. "This is ridiculous! What is this, 'Shrek'? True love's kiss? What? He's eighteen, for fuck's sakes! He wouldn't know true love if it came up and smacked him over the head!"
"That would be why I'm not dancing a jig at the moment, Merlin," said Gaius, tersely. "Please tell me that despite reports to the contrary he has acquired a secret girlfriend over the past few months? Not just a casual fling, but something heartfelt and enduring? Something with the power to undo this spell? Tell me that there is some young lady somewhere up there who can help us fix this? Because however ineligible she might be, I very much doubt that it can hold a candle to posing for Playboy wearing nothing but a hat made of telephones and a tiny rectangle of crime scene tape stuck to her nether regions, which I understand is the image for which this Lady Viva is best known."

"Um," said Merlin, swallowing. "Well – um. Possibly?" Gwen had said that it felt like snogging her brother, but they were destined to be together, weren't they? So that surely had to count. "I know somebody who might be able to do it," he said, biting his bottom lip.

"Then what are you waiting for?" snapped Gaius, and Merlin jumped.

"Nothing, sir. Sorry, sir – I'll get on it right away," he said, hanging up the phone in a hurry. He looked up at Edwin and gulped. "True love's kiss. Can you believe that?"

"Well, he is lying there like Sleeping Beauty," said Edwin, nodding thoughtfully. "To be honest, I think I like him better this way. He's pretty, and he isn't being rude."

Merlin scowled. "He's not rude," he said.

Edwin just looked at him.

"Well, okay, yes, he is rude. But only to people he likes. Except when it's to people he – oh, look, I'm just saying that he can be a bit of a prat, but he's okay really. In fact he's actually kind of wonderful."

"Ah," said Edwin, looking at Merlin thoughtfully. "Right. I see."

Merlin felt his face going hot.

"Well," Edwin said, after a moment. "Let's get on with finding his true love, shall we?"

* * *

Apparently bursting into her room with a wild-eyed look and his coat on inside-out hadn't done a lot to inspire a sense of confidence in Gwen, judging by the expression on her face. Merlin paused, chest heaving, and tried to look reassuring as he wracked his brains for how to do this. He'd been worrying about it as he ran down the road from Sallies, and he still hadn't hatched anything approaching a cunning plan. Some excuse for a faithful idiot Baldrick-style manservant he was.

"Do you trust me?" he said, holding his hands up in the air before Gwen could ask him what was wrong. He looked at her with his very best puppydog eyes. "Gwen? Do you trust me?"

"Of course I do," she said, frowning at him. "Merlin – are you okay? Did something happen?"

"No I'm not, and yes it did, and I need your help. But it's going to sound – I can't think of any way for it not to sound completely insane, and like I'm taking the piss, but you have to believe me when I tell you that this really and truly is deadly serious." He was pacing back and forth, raking one hand through his hair and clenching the other one tightly in his scarf. "Look, I know it's going to seem like a joke, but I swear on my mother's life that I'm not playing some kind of mind game here, and I'm not trying to hurt you. I really do need you to do this for me. It's vitally important."

"Bloody hell," said Gwen, standing up from her chair and gaping at Merlin. "What's happened?"
"It's – okay, here's the thing: I can't actually explain it. Which is where the trust bit comes in. Will you please do this thing for me, even though you might not want to? Even though you might think it's really stupid, or embarrassing? Please?" He bit his lip. "Seriously, I am begging you here, Gwen. I'll get down on my knees if that's what it takes. If I were an intergalactic princess I'd be sending you a message with two droids, saying: 'Help me, Gwen Smith, you're my only hope!'

Gwen laughed out loud at his earnestness. "Okay, now I can't get rid of the image of you with those swirly hair things covering up your ears, wearing a long white dress. Not an image I needed. I'm still recovering from your Pre-Raphaelite gear on Raisin Monday."

"Stop! Forget the Star Wars reference! Focus! I need your help more urgently than I have ever needed anyone's help before." He drew a deep breath, and sank to his knees on the floor in front of her. "Will you help me?"

She laughed harder, baffled but charmed. "Of course I will, Merlin!" she tilted her head and looked at him with a very worried expression. "Is it about money? Or – what's happened? Did somebody hurt you?"

"I need you to come to Sallies with me," he said. "Right now. I'll explain when we get there. It's – I'm not going to lie, it will seem pretty weird, but I swear it's important, or I wouldn't ask you."

"It's fine," she said, pulling on her long black coat and looping a lime-green scarf around her neck. "Let's go."

* * *

Merlin texted Edwin when they reached the door to Sallies, asking him to lift the sleep spell. They needed Arthur awake for this to work.

"Okay," he said, pausing outside the room and taking hold of Gwen's shoulders. "It's going to seem weird. But you promised, okay?"

She frowned. "Merlin, you're starting to scare me," she said, looking at him askance.

"Just – you promised. So – you'll help me, right?"

Gwen glanced over at Val, and then back at Merlin, her eyebrows darting up towards her hairline. "I said I would, didn't I?"

He drew a deep breath, and then opened the door and led her inside, closing the door carefully behind them. "Gwen – this is Edwin. Edwin, Gwen. She's going to help us."

Gwen looked from Edwin to Arthur's sleeping form, and then her eyes darted over to Merlin, utterly baffled. "Merlin?" she said, her voice going high and uncertain. "What's going on here? Is he sick?"

"Not as such, no," said Merlin.

"Oh my God – did he take some kind of drugs? Because if you're scared, you need to forget about getting in trouble and we need to get him to a doctor now, and worry about trouble later," she said, looking suddenly frightened. "Is he – oh, God, is he dead?"

"No! Christ, Gwen! No, he's just asleep!"

She looked back down at Arthur, who was stirring on the bed from all the raised voices.
"Well, he was asleep," Merlin amended. "Now, maybe not so much. Um. Anyway, here's the thing: I need you to kiss him. Please."

Gwen stood quite still, like she was waiting for the punch line. "Sorry?" she said at last, looking from Merlin to Edwin and on to Arthur himself, who was sitting up and rubbing his eyes like a kid. "You what?"

"Please?" said Merlin, urgently. "It's really important."

"What are you talking about?" She was starting to look angry, and Merlin just knew that if he didn't do something fast she was going to march out through the door, and that was his only plan gone up in smoke.

"You promised!" he said, casting her an imploring look. "Come on – please? Just kiss him for me?"

"I thought it was Lance you were trying to fix me up with," she said, witheringly, planting her hands on her hips. "What on earth are you doing? This is creepy. You are both creeping me out, and I do not have to stand for this kind of nonsense."

"I know you don't and I – I mean, yes, I do think you and Lance should – but – oh, God, please, Gwen? You promised!"

"Fine," she snapped, her expression hardening. "I promised, and I don't break my promises. But I am not amused, Merlin. I hope you're enjoying this, whatever the hell it's supposed to be." And so saying she marched over to Arthur, who was sitting up and looking at them all with a puzzled expression, leaned down, cupped his face in her hands and planted a firm kiss on his lips.

Merlin held his breath and felt himself reddening as he watched them, completely unable to decide whether it would be worse for this to break the spell, freeing Arthur and proving that he and Gwen were destined to be together, or for the spell to stay in place, proving that at least they weren't all trapped acting out the same little story again and again – and leaving Arthur besotted with Lady Viva.

It looked like a rather good snog, from where Merlin was standing, and not very much like the kind of kiss one would give to one's brother. If one kissed one's brother on the lips, that is. Which mostly one didn't.

"Come on, come on," he muttered, glancing over at Edwin and then back at Gwen and Arthur, and biting his knuckles.

Gwen stepped back, looking down at Arthur and then over at Merlin with a pugnacious expression. "I do not have the faintest idea what that was supposed to prove," she said, her eyes narrowed, "But I can tell you now that I do not appreciate this kind of..." She waved one hand vaguely in the air. "Whatever the hell this is supposed to be."

Merlin looked anxiously at Arthur, who was rubbing the back of his hand against his mouth and looking baffled. "Um – I'll explain later? Somehow?" he said, without very much conviction. "Thanks, Gwen. You're a star."

"And you're a freak," she said, stiffly. "I'm going home." She marched over to the door and opened it, looking back over her shoulder at Merlin with an expression of baffled frustration. "I don't think I even want to know what the hell this was supposed to prove, other than that you are strange and tactless."

"Gwen..." Merlin began, but she'd closed the door and walked off, so he turned his attention back to
Arthur. "Hey there," he said, crossing the floor and hunkering down next to the bed. Arthur was sitting on the edge of the mattress with his feet on the floor and a puzzled look on his face. "How are you feeling?"

"Weird," said Arthur, nodding. "How long was I asleep? God, I don't even remember lying down."

"Um," said Merlin. "Yeah, it was rather – um. Sudden. So, you and Gwen, with the kissing," he said, encouragingly.

Arthur stared at him. "Yes, what was that about?" he asked, getting to his feet and picking his way over to the wardrobe. "That was – weird."

"Weird?" Merlin glanced over at Edwin unhappily, and then back at Arthur. "Weird how? Weird like wow-we're-soulmates-with-a-timeless-bond-and-I've-only-just-realised-it weird?"

"Just weird," said Arthur, looking over at Edwin oddly. "Have we met? I'm sure I – oh! You're Edwin, aren't you?" His polite smile shrank noticeably. "I see."

"So – no tingly rush of true love made your toes curl just now, then?" said Merlin, doggedly. "Only, I was hoping that maybe you and Gwen...?"

Arthur laughed out loud. "Gwen and me? Me and Gwen? What, because her name's Guinevere? Or because of the other day? Oh, Merlin, don't be ridiculous." He leaned into the wardrobe, sorting through his shirts once more in search of something suitably exciting and seductive. "Gwen's a lovely girl, but she's not for me! Lady Viva is the only woman I could ever love! It's written in the stars: Vivian and Arthur! A love for all time! A love stronger than time!"

"Oh, fuck," hissed Merlin, staring helplessly at Edwin. "It didn't work. Oh, bloody hell fire, it didn't work! I was thinking that maybe, deep down – but no. What now?"

Edwin gave him a rueful smile that was entirely too knowing. "I think we both know what now, Merlin," he said. "Go on. You know you want to."

"What?" muttered Merlin, swallowing hard.

"Maybe I could have something fabulous delivered," Arthur was saying, as he flung things to the floor. "Something by Jean Paul Gaultier, maybe? Or – God, I don't know enough about fashion. She's never going to love me when I'm such an imbecile about fashion," he wailed, clutching his head in both hands and staring into his wardrobe like it was the source of all the pain and suffering in the world.

"Kiss him, you fool," said Edwin, with a little shrug. "What have you got to lose?"

"But – what?" said Merlin, swallowing. "I don't know what you mean. I don't – um."

Edwin just looked at him, with one eyebrow raised, and Merlin's shoulders sagged. "Well, but – well, but he doesn't love me," he said, quietly. "I mean, he likes me, and he might have some stifled bi-curious impulses, maybe – but this is some Princess Bride kind of True Love thing we're talking about. The full monty. He doesn't love me."

"Maybe he doesn't need to," murmured Edwin. "Maybe it's enough if you love him? Come on, this is serious! We're talking about the Prince of Wales, whom you're supposed to be looking after, being enchanted into thinking he loves Kate Bush. Forever."

"Lady Viva," corrected Merlin, absently, watching Arthur's back as he rummaged through the
wardrobe with increasing urgency.

"I prefer Kate Bush," said Edwin, softly, with a shrug. "Less commercial. And you're not denying that you love him, I can't help but notice."

Merlin looked over at Edwin then, and had the grace to look embarrassed. "No," he agreed, biting his lip. "No, well – not much point in that, I suppose."

"Not really, no," agreed Edwin, with a little half-smile. "Well, go on, then. No point in hanging about."

"Right," said Merlin, nodding. "I suppose – right. Okay then." He swallowed. "He's probably going to punch me, but – okay."

He drew a deep breath, and then crossed the few steps towards Arthur and swung him around by the shoulder so they were face to face.

"What...?" Arthur began, his eyes widening, but Merlin didn't wait to have a discussion about it; he kept on moving into Arthur's space, one hand on his waist and the other wrapping around the nape of his neck and pulling him into place while Merlin darted forward and kissed him once, twice, light and tentative at first and then less so, because for some reason Arthur hadn't actually punched him yet, or shoved him away in disgust, or demanded an explanation, or any of the things Merlin had been braced for – and because this was it, damn it, and Arthur's lips were warm against his mouth, opening in surprise on an in drawn hiss of breath – and Merlin thought he might as well be thorough, since he was throwing himself in where angels would fear to tread, so he let himself lick into Arthur's mouth, sliding his tongue recklessly over the sharp-smooth edges of Arthur's teeth and deeper to lick over the warmth of his startled tongue, shaking with need and hope and nervous dread.

And then an endless instant later Arthur was kissing him back, like this was perfectly normal, like this was exactly what Arthur had been hoping for most in all the world, his large hands closing over Merlin's shoulders and sliding down over his back, strong and warm even through the fabric of his sweater, one hand pausing on his waist and the other sliding around to cup his arse and pull him in closer. Merlin made a surprised, enthusiastic sound and stopped holding back; let himself cling to Arthur and kiss him more fiercely; and then they were kissing like it was their last day on earth and they had to cram every possible moment of passion into this tiny slice of time, hands clutching at fabric, mouths pressing hungry bites onto bare skin as if they would somehow devour one another, trying to touch and taste everything at once, frantic and needy and bursting with urgent desire and the inescapable knowledge that this was finite, was stolen, was not supposed to be.

When they broke apart, breathless and panting, mouths swollen and slick, Merlin could barely remember his own name. Arthur was looking at him gleeful and wide-eyed, like he was the most extraordinary thing in the whole world, and all Arthur's; like nothing else mattered; and for one, intoxicating moment Merlin actually believed it could be true.

"Oh, God, I do love you," he said, helplessly, looking at Arthur's tousled hair and his flushed cheeks. "I really really do."

Arthur's face lit up. "You ass," he said, like the words were a kiss, and Merlin smiled back at him.

"So – not still in love with Lady Viva, then?" he asked, feeling himself dimpling.

Arthur blinked, and shook his head, fisting his hand in the fabric of Merlin's shirt and drawing him closer. And, God, yes, this was just what Merlin wanted, more than anything else, and it was what Arthur wanted too! Arthur had finally given in and stopped trying to be the man he thought he had to
be for his father, and for the good of Great Britain, whatever that was supposed to be; had stopped trying to live the acceptable lie that was expected of him. Arthur wanted Merlin, and he was going to let himself be selfish, for once, and to hell with the great responsibility that came with great power, and all that stupid, self-sacrificing crap about duty and nobility that Arthur believed in with all his stupid, honourable heart.

That Arthur believed in. With all his heart.

"That's good," Merlin said, feeling his throat closing up. "Just checking." And then his eyes went suddenly molten, and he whispered a word against Arthur's skin, and Arthur's face went slack with sleep, and he slumped bonelessly into Merlin's arms. Merlin let himself have a moment just to hold Arthur tightly, squeezing him as if just by doing that he could make everything else stop mattering, and make this much-vaunted 'true love' actually count for something in the real world. He whispered another word, and with that he sponged the memory of the past five minutes out of Arthur's mind.

"I can't quite decide whether that was the stupidest thing I've ever seen, or the noblest," said Edwin, from behind him, after a rather long pause. "Although I'm veering towards stupidest." He sighed. "Come on, let's put Sleeping Beauty back to bed."

Merlin swallowed, and let Edwin help him get Arthur gently laid out on his covers, and then he stood next to the bed and wrapped his arms around his chest, miserably, hugging himself.

"Oh, Merlin," said Edwin, shaking his head. "My God, you're so young, aren't you? You're both so bloody young. Come here." And Merlin found himself being enfolded in an embrace that was, for once, not at all x-rated. "It looked to me like he loves you right back, you idiot," said Edwin, into his hair, and Merlin made a hiccupsing sound that was definitely nothing like a sob into Edwin's shoulder. "There there, love," Edwin said, rubbing his back. "This too shall pass."

"It's not fair," Merlin muttered, and Edwin laughed.

"Well, no arguments here. I mean, granted, I'm coming at it from a slightly different angle, but, yes, 'not fair' does sum it all up quite neatly." He squeezed Merlin again, and then let go and stepped back. "Look, my lad, I think I understand why you did that, but I have to say – I don't think he'd thank you. I know I wouldn't, if someone did that to me."

"But we can't," said Merlin, wiping his nose on the back of his hand like a five year old. "I didn't really think about it properly at first – but he takes his responsibilities really seriously, and that means being the son his father wants. Of course he can't just go around having flings with other men, and causing a scandal. Not when he's got to be Head of the Church of England, and all the rest of that stuff. He's got to get married to some Duchess or Countess or something, and have lots of kids. End of story. He's been trying to tell me all along, and I just – I didn't get it, because that all seems so medieval, but – he doesn't get to do the things he wants." He drew a ragged breath. "It wouldn't be fair letting him remember this."

"That's not your choice to make," said Edwin, seriously. "Or at least – it shouldn't be."

"Well, I've made it," said Merlin, sticking his chin out. "So there. It's just me that has to know. It's easier that way."

Edwin shook his head. "You keep on telling yourself that, Merlin," he said. "Well, I'd better be going, since we seem to have successfully averted the latest crisis for the monarchy." He glanced down at Arthur, and then back at Merlin, and his expression was fond. "Call me, okay?"

"Will do," said Merlin, ducking his head. "And – thanks. For everything. You're a good friend,
Edwin. A really good friend."

"I'm a brilliant friend," agreed Edwin, ruefully, laughing at himself. "Don't you forget it."
Gwen's mouth tightened when she saw him, and she did a U-turn without slowing down, marching back down North Street in the direction of the ruined cathedral with her head held high and her whole body radiating fuck-you-very-much. She hadn't been answering his texts or phone calls all day.

"Oh, bollocks," muttered Merlin. "Gwen! Gwen, wait? Please wait?" he yelled, quickening his pace and then breaking into a run. Gwen didn't look back, but she must have heard his footsteps echoing on the pavement, because she bolted, darting past the war memorial and in through the gateway to the cathedral grounds, running along the path and then darting off sideways, over the uneven grass and towards the ruins in a pretty convincing impression of someone who did not want to talk to Merlin even a little bit. Merlin groaned, and put on an extra burst of speed, wishing that he had some of Arthur's stamina with the running.

"Gwen, this is daft!" he yelled, darting between the gravestones and weathered crosses which jutted out of the grass at odd angles. "Come on, you can't just hide! What are you, five?"

She glanced back over her shoulder, her backpack bouncing madly, and stuck out her tongue. Merlin took that as a good sign, and chased her through the grandiose and soot-mottled ancient archway and around the one remaining wall of the ruin, where he found her leaning against the stones of the cloister wall, laughing and breathless.

"I'm not talking to you, you prat," she said, but she was smiling too hard for him to take that seriously.

"I can't believe you just ran away from me!" said Merlin, his heart hammering against his rib cage. "I thought you were all about talking things through? Active listening? Isn't that what they teach you in Nightline?"

"Oh, shut up," said Gwen. She was still laughing at herself, but the look in her eyes told Merlin that she really wasn't his biggest fan right now, and he knew he was going to have to work hard to fix this one.

"Look, I'm sorry," he said. "About yesterday – the kiss thing. I realise it must have seemed a bit, ah, a bit strange, but – um – it was for a good cause?"

The smile was sliding off her mouth as she looked back at him. "I don't think I even want to know," she said, after a moment. "I just – I don't know what games they've got you playing, Merlin, but I thought you were better than that. I mean, nothing would surprise me from Kay, but you? I don't appreciate being used for a joke, or a bet, or whatever that was supposed to be." She looked away, her mouth tight. "You made me feel – cheap. And stupid. And left out. Don't do it again."

"Shit," said Merlin, helplessly. "It wasn't a joke, or a bet, I swear – it was really important, Gwen. National Security and everything." She snorted with disbelief, and the look she gave him was so disappointed that it took his breath away. "Oh, wow. I've really screwed this up, haven't I?" he said, staring at her. "I really am sorry. I just – it – oh, damn." He chewed his bottom lip, thinking hard.

"Oh, what the hell," he said, suddenly, and stepped forward to take her hand. "Look, this is secret. Really really secret – not like the location of the Nightline Office, which anyone could work out if they were all that bothered." Gwen started to protest, and Merlin raised a hand to silence her. "No, please – I mean it. Nobody knows this. I've not told anyone except my mother, and my best friend at home. Ever."
"Go on," she said, when he hesitated. She was looking at him with her head tilted a little to one side, as if she were an examiner, and this a test that he might pass or fail.

He dropped his voice to something a little more than a whisper, and Gwen leaned in closer to hear him. "Okay, well – you mustn't tell anyone this, okay? Because it's sort of, well, huge, and I realise it's going to sound a bit weird at first, but it's true. Um. I'm sort of, well, I'm a wizard, basically." He swallowed. "And what you did yesterday was helping me to break a spell that someone had cast on Arthur. It was really important."

Gwen just looked at him. "You what?" she said, after a long moment.

"I'm a wizard."

Her smile flickered and faded, and she was left with nothing but her look of disappointment. "Merlin, you aren't funny. Stop taking the piss."

"No, look, I'm not kidding," he said earnestly, stepping closer to her. She flinched away when he tried to touch her arm, and he could see that she was starting to get genuinely angry.

"I don't understand you," she said, turning her back on him. "I thought I knew you, Merlin Emrys. I don't know where this is coming from, but I don't like it. Stop being a prat. If you're not going to tell me, then don't tell me, but don't make a stupid joke of it. Don't make a joke of me" "You're not listening," Merlin protested.

"I don't have to listen to you trying to be funny about making a fool of me," she said, starting to walk around him. "I've been up all night, covering the phones, and it's been a bit of an emotional rollercoaster already, without having to deal with – with whatever this is. So I'm not going to. I'm going home, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't call me for a day or two, while I remember why we're actually friends."

"Gwen, please?"

"Merlin, I really don't like you very much right now," she said, without looking at him, and he made a frustrated little sound and bounded after her, grabbing her hand in his.

"That's because you're not listening," he said, pulling her closer, and pushing with the prickly-sweet warmth of the magic that dwelled within him like honey in a comb, letting it well up and seep out through his skin, feeling the static in his hair and the feverish tingle along his nerve endings as he stopped holding everything back, just for a moment. Gwen's eyes widened, and he could see himself reflected in them, golden-eyed; her fingers tightened convulsively against his, but she didn't try to let go. "Let me show you," he said, knowing suddenly what to do, and he pressed the fingertips of his free hand against her forehead, and reached out with his power into the secret space, the in-between place that was and was not, and made just the right little adjustments to reality that would let them both see.

"There," he said, smiling. Gwen sucked in a hissing breath almost as if she'd just been punched, and stumbled back against the wall. All around them the tumbledown remains of the cathedral had been overlain with a wavering, translucent layer of elsewhere, or rather elsewhen; Merlin could still see the weathered grey stones, but at the same time he was looking at smooth new walls that reached up to elegant ceilings of an edifice pristine and newly-built.

"What...?" gasped Gwen, her voice rough and breathless as she stared around at St Andrews Cathedral as it was six hundred years earlier. They were standing in the cloister, looking out over a
neatly manicured garden full of vivid plants; the salt sea air carried the scent of herbs towards them, along with the ghost of unfamiliar incense. In the distance Merlin could hear male voices chanting rhythmically in Latin; the occasional sound of a car or bus was still audible, but strangely stifled, as though some thick, invisible wall separated them from the world of 2010 in which they had been standing only moments earlier.

Gwen's face was comically astonished, as she looked around her. "What is all this? What did you do? How – what – I don't understand." She flinched as two slightly translucent men in long black robes walked past in silence, neither of them seeming to notice the two students in their midst.

Merlin took hold of both of her hands and looked into her eyes very seriously.

"Gwen, I'm a wizard," he said. "I really am. I can do – well. Magic, basically. Things like this. All kinds of things."

"But..." she shook her head, and didn't say 'that's impossible' or anything along those lines. "I think I need a minute," she said at last, instead, half-laughing, her eyes still shocked.

"You can have as long as you like," said Merlin, beaming at her. He glanced around, and squeezed her fingers. "We won't be able to see all this for long, though. It's – uh - it's stretching away from us again all the time, trying to snap back into place." That wasn't really a very good explanation of what he could feel happening, but he simply didn't have the words for it, and that was as good as he could come up with. "D'you want to have a look around, while we can?"

Gwen blinked, and then said: "Well, duh! Of course I do! Magical time-travelling cathedrals don't grow on trees, now, do they?"

"Not normally," agreed Merlin, cheerfully. "Shall we?"

They walked on hand-in-hand through the cloister, emerging a moment later into the unruined nave, with pale winter light streaming through stained glass windows and illuminating the painted statues of the saints; walking quietly together over the spongy twenty first century grass, and looking around them at the echo of St Andrews Cathedral as it had not looked since John Knox led the protestants to rise up against its luxuries in 1559. When Merlin glanced down at Gwen's face, he was startled to see that she was silently crying, but when he tried to apologise she just squeezed his hand tighter.

"Shush. It's wonderful, Merlin," she said, hoarsely, her eyes shining. "It's the most wonderful thing I've ever seen in my life." And to his surprise she stood up on her toes, and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you," she said, her voice almost fierce. "Thank you for trusting me with this."

Merlin bit his bottom lip, and felt almost ashamed. "You're the most trustworthy person I know," he said, ducking his head. "I'm sorry it took me so long."

Above them, in the tower that wasn't there, a bell began to ring, and then another, and another, and Gwen threw back her head and laughed with the sheer delight of it all. "My God, Merlin! How can you keep something like this secret? How can you resist doing magic all the time?"

"It's – tricky," he said, ruefully. "But I've had a lot of practice."

The walked together down the aisle, eyes taking in all the unfamiliar details.

"And nobody else knows? Not Arthur, or Morgana, or Gawain, or Lance?"

"Oh – well, Morgana knows," said Merlin, after a frozen moment, swallowing hard. "Because, er, she's one too." Shit. He shouldn't have said that, he realised.
Second in line to the throne and all that. "Um – actually, I probably shouldn't have outed her. Um. Crap – I'm not used to having to protect other people's secrets. Er – look, basically, Britain's School of Sorcery is here, at St Andrews, so although there are only a tiny number of wizards in the population of the UK, there are quite a fair number of them here. Um." He stared down at Gwen with a rabbit-in-the-headlights expression. "Please don't ask me who they are?"

"Morgana?" said Gwen, looking thunderstruck. " Seriously? Morgana? What about – no. Right. Okay. Crap, that's going to frustrate me to death, wondering who's in on it all. Argh." She shook her head and stared at the carved screen before them, which was fading more with every moment. "Okay. I can do that, though; it's only like membership of Nightline being secret. I can respect your need for privacy. Okay." She nodded, and then a moment later laughed at herself. "But it is going to drive me insane," she added, smiling at him ruefully.

"Sorry," he said. The sound of bells overhead was starting to fade, and the sky was growing more clearly visible through the walls and high, arched ceiling.

"Don't worry about it. I'll cope," she said, squeezing his hand again. "Wow. This is just – this is the most fabulous thing I've ever heard in my life." She laughed again, a sudden explosion of glee. "Oh, lord – you weren't kidding when you said that the train felt like the Hogwarts Express, were you?"


"This is mad. This is just completely mad. I'm a Muggle!" She dissolved into giggles. "Oh, bloody hell – I'm an actual Muggle! Damn it, I always thought I'd be a wizard! If it was real, I mean. Where was my Hogwarts invite? Ooh! Do you have a wand?" She wagged her eyebrows. "How many inches long is it? Heh. I bet Edwin could tell me the answer to that. Oh!" Her eyes widened again. "He was there, yesterday, when – and you said that Arthur was under a spell – is Edwin a wizard?"

Merlin stared at her, stricken, and didn't say anything, but his expression gave him away.

"Oh my God, Merlin, you're rubbish at this secrecy thing. How have you managed to keep such a honking great big secret, when you're so rubbish at the secrecy thing?"

"Because nobody believes in magic," he said, waving his hands in the air. "But once they do, and they're looking for the answer – that's a lot harder."

"Do you let Edwin play with your wand?"

"Stop making smutty wand jokes. We don't use wands."

"I think I can probably go on making smutty wand jokes indefinitely," said Gwen, looking thoughtful. "Yeah. And then there's always the broomstick jokes to, ah, fall back on."

"I'm going to regret this, aren't I?" Merlin said, unhappily, looking down at her face.

Gwen went suddenly serious, and shook her head solemnly.

"No," she said. "No, I promise you won't regret it. Your secret's safe with me, Harry Potter. Promise."

Looking into her eyes, Merlin found that he believed her completely.

* * *

"I can't believe you turned her down!" said Kay, staring at Arthur like he had two heads. "I mean,
for God's sake – are you a man or a mouse?"

Arthur shrugged, and picked concentrated on his soup. "If wanting to shag Lady Viva is the deciding factor, then sign me up for mousedom."

Merlin had been doing a very good job of not mooning too obviously over Arthur in front of people for months now; granted, discovering that his hopeless crush was intense enough to break an aphrodisiac curse, and that it seemed to be reciprocated, had been rather a lowering discovery, but Merlin was trying to deal with it. So he wasn't watching the way that Arthur's tongue darted out pinkly to lick the spoon, and he wasn't thinking any mushy thoughts about the way Arthur had automatically gathered up bread and butter for both of them on the way to the table, while Merlin collected the cutlery. And if they were sitting side by side with their knees casually, quite accidentally touching beneath the table, and their elbows constantly brushing – well, that was just because the tables were too small. And if Arthur was finishing Merlin's sentences, and Merlin was topping up Arthur's glass of water without asking when he filled his own – well, that was just polite. Because they weren't together, and they weren't going to be together, and indulging in stupid daydreams to the contrary wasn't going to do anyone any good. Being Arthur's best friend was plenty to be glad of – and he was Arthur's best friend, Merlin was sure of that. Not his oldest one, but his best one. And if they'd both like it to be more – well, Merlin understood, now, why Arthur wasn't going to do anything about that, and he was damned if he was going to be the cause of Arthur getting into trouble, and betraying his ideals, and fucking everything up, just because Merlin selfishly wanted more.

"But she's gorgeous!" protested Kay. "And filthy! And gorgeous! Have you seen the Playboy spread? And by spread, I really do mean spread!"

"No," said Arthur, testily. "And I really don't want to. She's an obnoxious, arrogant, crass, self-important little witch. And she wears silly clothes."

"None of which matters if she's naked and wriggling on the end of your cock," said Kay.

"Oh, please! Some of us are trying to eat," Merlin protested, waving his bread roll in the air like it could somehow deflect Kay's words.

"Well cover up your little gay ears – sorry, big gay ears – if you don't want to be distressed by my raging heterosexuality," said Kay, rolling his eyes.

"Kay, I'm straight, and on behalf of all the people who don't want to ever have to think about your penis ever again, I'm going to have to ask you to shut up and change the subject," said Owain, shaking his head. "Or at least try to keep it PG. Ladies present."

"Blanche isn't a lady. Are you Blanche?"

Blanche looked over at him narrowly. "Well, you certainly aren't a gentleman," she said. "But lady or not, I'm going to pour my soup over your head if you don't stop being a misogynist toser."

"God, don't get your knickers in a twist! I'm just saying that if Arthur here didn't want to nail her, he might at least have given someone else a crack. Like me, for example."

Merlin choked on a mouthful of mushroom soup, and Arthur had to pound him on the back for a moment or two.

When he looked up at Kay, he was flushed and still laughing. "Oh, Kay, she'd have made mincemeat out of you," he said, with certainty. "Seriously – Grace Jones has nothing on her. You
wouldn't have stood a chance."

And if Arthur's hand still lingered on Merlin's back a little longer than was strictly necessary to rub comforting circles long after he'd stopped spluttering, Merlin didn't have the heart to stop him – although it made his cheeks flush, and reminded him too sharply of Arthur's hands on him the night before, and made his trousers feel tight and restrictive.

"Who's Grace Jones?" asked Kay.

"She's in one of the Bond movies," said Gawain, helpfully. "She's a model and a singer. She's very attractive."

"She's got to be fifty!" said Blanche, looking taken aback. Gawain shrugged.

"Over sixty, I think. But she's a very attractive woman."

"God, I worry about you sometimes, Gawain," said Kay, shaking his head. "You're not right, mate. All this fancying MILFs who can kick you in the head, like Grandma Morgause – I mean, she's got to be pushing thirty!"

"She's twenty six," Gawain said, his voice mild.

"See – pushing thirty. Grandma Morgause - now there's a freaky-deaky feminazi if ever there was one. That's exactly what I'm talking about. You want to start looking at nice, normal women your own age! Or younger, you know? Not crazy pensioners."

Gawain's expression hardened a little, and he put down his spoon. "You'll be wanting to take that back," he said, quietly.

Kay glanced over at him, and shrugged. "Okay, fine, whatever – shag all the OAPs you like. Leaves more hotties for the rest of us."

"Take back what you just said about Morgause," Gawain said, more clearly. "It wasn't respectful."

Kay started to say something, and then looked at Gawain's expression and looked away rather suddenly. "God, I was just joking, you idiot," he muttered. He glanced over at Gawain and swallowed. "Jesus, calm down! I'm sorry I insulted your girlfriend, for fuck's sakes! Your scary Bruce Lee girlfriend! Sorry, okay?"

"She's not my girlfriend," Gawain said, picking up his breadroll and starting to butter it. "Yet."

Arthur lifted his eyebrows, but didn't look up from his soup. "Good luck with that, mate," he said, mildly. Arthur's hand was still on Merlin's back, although his attention was on the conversation; Merlin wasn't sure Arthur was really aware that he was still rubbing, quite needlessly now; or that his movements were gradually sliding into wider circles that scraped Arthur's fingers over the exposed strip of skin at the nape of Merlin's neck and then swooped all the way down to the upper curve of his bum. The movement seemed to be absent-minded, almost involuntary. It was, however, driving Merlin quietly insane. He swallowed, and reached over to pour more water into Arthur's glass with a shaking hand. Arthur looked down at it, and then glanced up and met Merlin's eyes, and started. He pulled his hand back as if it had been burnt, and grabbed the glass of water.

"She's warming to me," said Gawain, with some satisfaction. "I can wait."

"So Lady Viva showed up at your door in person, and asked you on a date, and you said no – because you had an essay to write," said Kay again, as if repetition would make it easier to believe.
"And because she's not a nice person," said Arthur, pink-cheeked and flustered. "Why would I want to spend an evening with somebody I didn't actually like?"

"In the hopes that they'd let you nail them at the end of it, you muppet," said Kay, rolling his eyes. "Honestly, I despair of you." He frowned. "Anyway, I could have sworn that I saw you with that whatsisname – Tricky, that manager chap. Didn't I? After the lecture yesterday?"

Arthur frowned, as though he were having some difficulty recalling. Merlin tried not to look too conspicuously interested in his reaction to the question; Gaius had been able to pinpoint Lady Viva's manager as the source of the spell, and he was currently being "dealt with", in Gaius's ominous phrasing. As far as Merlin had been able to glean, Arthur had only the vaguest recollections of the time he was under Trickler's influence – and certainly no recollection of being kissed by either Gwen or Merlin, for which Merlin was intensely grateful.

Mostly.

"I think – actually, yes, I think I did see him," said Arthur, looking surprised. "Outside Burns Sweet Shop. He said – er – something about being sorry she'd shown up at my door like that? Basically wanted to apologise and smooth things over, you know? He seemed okay. Even offered me some of the butter tablet he'd just bought." Arthur's face lit up. "Lovely stuff, tablet. Much nicer than fudge."

Merlin managed not to bang his head on the table, but it took an effort of will.

"Arthur, we need to have a talk about you accepting sweets from strangers," he said, in a carefully controlled voice. "In fact – I'd have thought that Val would have some reservations about you just cheerfully eating sweets out of a paper bag belonging to some bloke you don't even know!"

Arthur pulled a face. He was having some difficulty looking Merlin in the eye, for some reason. "What are you on about, Merlin? Everyone knows Tricky. He's on the telly. And he just offered me one of his sweets, for God's sake, not some of Columbia's finest! He wasn't trying to lure me into a van with the promise of puppies and have his wicked way with me. Don't be such a mollycoddler!"

Merlin stared blankly at the table and counted to ten in his head, reminding himself that Arthur didn't know how many times Merlin had already had to swoop in and save his pert little arse.

"Right," he said, at last, because there was nothing else he could possibly say. "Sorry, my mistake."
"This is a stupid idea," said Merlin, without much hope of being listened to, as he threw a second ruck sack over the iron fence into the locked cathedral grounds. "Can I just go on the record as stating that this is a thoroughly stupid idea?"

"I'm not listening to you, Merlin," said Arthur, cheerfully, from the other side. "Man up. And don't drop the torch!"

Merlin made a frustrated huffing noise, and started to scramble up over the fence himself. It wasn't quite as easy as Arthur had made it look, particularly with the damned gown flapping uselessly around over the top of all his other layers, but he was damned if he was going to give Arthur the satisfaction of helping him, so he made a little judicious use of magic to ease his way up and over. When he landed on the grass he picked the bags up again, still nervously expecting to be caught at any moment. "Why do I have to carry everything, by the way? I'm not actually your slave, you know!"

"Yes, I know," said Arthur, shrugging. "You're the pathetic loser who lost at Rock, Paper, Scissors, and so gets to carry all the bags. I'm sure that slaves are usually more obedient, and less given to insulting their lords and masters."

"You are not my lord and master, Arthur," Merlin grumbled.

"Oh, I am, though," said Arthur, in an appallingly sexy voice that almost made Merlin trip over his feet. "And you know it. I own your arse, Merlin Emrys, and don't you go forgetting it."

Merlin swallowed hard, and didn't trust himself to answer that for a moment or two. He really couldn't imagine how Arthur could hope to pass that particular assertion off as anything but flirting, but here they were still officially doing the platonic dance. He wondered whether it was killing Arthur as much as it was killing him. He'd not forgotten the look on his face, like he'd just had all his birthdays and Christmases arrive at once. He'd not forgotten Arthur's hand clutching desperately at his arse, or the feel of Arthur's nose pressing into his, or the scrape of teeth and tongue. He'd not forgotten any of it. But he was doing his damnedest to pretend that he had, because Arthur didn't remember, and because Arthur wasn't going to stop being the heir to the throne any time soon. He knew it was the right thing to do, even if it happened to suck rather a lot for him personally.

"It's still a stupid idea," said Merlin. "Just because Morgana said you'd be too chicken to do it, that's no reason to go and do it! I mean, come on, you know she only said it to wind you up!"

"I know. But if I don't do it, she wins," said Arthur, shrugging. "So off we go."

"Aren't you scared of the ghosts?"

"There's no such thing as ghosts, you ass," said Arthur, rolling his eyes. "Oh, God, don't tell me you're afraid of the White Lady? Or the Murdered Monk?" He turned to laugh at Merlin, holding his torch underneath his chin and giving himself a Blair Witch Project-esque spooky face. "Woooooo!" he added, waving his free hand around in the air and then dissolving into laughter. "You're ridiculous, Merlin Emrys!"

"I'm not scared of the White Lady or the Murdered Monk," said Merlin, crossly. But he couldn't explain that he'd already met them months ago, and that they were nothing to worry about – if
anything, they were more likely to help protect them. The ghost of Patrick Hamilton, on the other hand, had been a really bad-tempered bastard – but Merlin had dealt with him.

Arthur ruffled his hair affectionately. "Don't worry, Merlin, ya wee coowerin' timorous beastie. I'll protect you."

"Okay, you should never try to do a Scottish accent," said Merlin, wincing. "Ever. That was just embarrassing."

"Pah. Come on, now, don't fall behind."

"God, you'd think we were the bloody Famous Five," muttered Merlin, darkly, following the bobbing light of Arthur's torch across the uneven grass.

"I liked the Famous Five," said Arthur, nodding in approval as he led the way across the shadowy ground towards St Rule's Tower. "They had excellent adventures, and nobody went along with them to keep them out of trouble, even though they were clearly far too young to be off camping and flying planes and stopping robberies and things on their own."

Merlin smiled in spite of himself. He could perfectly imagine the young Arthur, hemmed in on every side by minders and nannies and bodyguards and watchers, losing himself in Enid Blyton's ridiculous stories about obnoxious little posh children being painfully English and foiling dastardly criminals between picnics. "Does this mean I can call you Dick? Although Julian was the bossy one, wasn't he?"

"If you do, I'll have to make a point of calling you George, after the girl everyone thought was a boy."

Merlin considered that. "Fair enough. I liked George. She had her own island."

"True, true – Ann, then. She was the little domestic one, wasn't she? The one who had to carry the bags and do the cooking and clean up after everyone, and scream when villains showed up. That sounds about right for you. Or – oh, no, I know! Timmy the dog! You can be Timmy. Fetch! Carry! Good Merlin!"

Merlin shook his head and looked up at the stars in disbelief. "My God, you're full of it," he said, wondering why it didn't piss him off any more. Apparently these days, when Arthur was being obnoxious, it just made Merlin want to find a vertical surface to shove him up against and kiss him into submission. Or a horizontal surface. Or a handy piece of furniture. Or a gravestone. "I wouldn't cook or clean for you, Your Pompousness, or scream when villains showed up! I'm very pro-active when it comes to facing off against villains, I'll have you know!"

"Oh, please!" said Arthur, sounding vastly diverted. "You've never met a villain in your life. If we ran into a pack of angry Neds, you'd shriek like a girl and hide behind me like that, Merlin. Or possibly faint. Or run away."

Merlin sucked in an irritated breath. "Right, well, you keep on telling yourself that, and I'll go right on being competent and brave, shall I?"

"Competent and brave – are you sure you can spell those words, Merlin?"

"Yes," said Merlin. "And I can also spell the word 'wanker,'" he added. "There's no end to my spelling prowess."

"Wonderful. Perhaps I'll get you a job as one of the Royal Dictionographers."
"That's still not a word. Which is rather ironic, actually."

"It is a word if I say it is, Merlin. Now stop slacking, and get your lazy arse over here now."

It was bitterly cold, and he was going to get in an unbelievable amount of trouble for letting Arthur stray off University property and escape from his bodyguards, but Merlin couldn't take the stupid smile off his face, because it was just the two of them out here, together, doing something they shouldn't be doing just for the hell of it. And whatever Arthur might believe about Merlin's competence or bravery, Merlin felt absolutely certain that he could keep Arthur safe from anything stupid enough to attack him. He felt like he could do anything right now. Arthur's presence was oddly intoxicating in the moonlight, with no omnipresent bodyguard keeping an eye on them.

"Okay, tokens," said Arthur, snapping his fingers. He had the beam of his torch focused on the little gadget at the front of the tower, where the tokens had to be slotted. Merlin reached into his pocket and pulled out the tokens they'd acquired earlier in the day, shivering, and handed one to Arthur, along with his bag. Arthur dragged off one glove and dropped a token into the machine and stepped inside, then turned to grin at Merlin.

"Well, hurry up! What are you waiting for?"

Merlin's mouth twitched. "Maybe I'm thinking about just turning around and leaving you to it, Your Majesty," he said; and for just a tiny instant Arthur looked crestfallen and upset, before the veneer of aloofness came back. To Merlin's absolute disgust, he apparently had no defense at all against Arthur looking sad, because he was shoving the token in and stepping inside in a matter of seconds; and he knew that it shouldn't matter that Arthur looked so relieved, but it did anyway, because unfortunately Arthur was quite right about that whole lord and master business, and Arthur being happy made Merlin feel happy.

It was, Merlin acknowledged to himself, absolutely pathetic. But he couldn't seem to switch it off.

"Come on then, Timmy," said Arthur, at his most lordly and pratlike once more, his breath making puffy white clouds in the torchlight. "Onwards and upwards."

"Stupid idea," Merlin muttered again, thumbing his own torch on and shining it right at Arthur's arse. "We have a warm bedroom waiting for us. It is November. We are on the East Coast. And you plan to spend the night at the top of a bloody tower in the open air, where we'll probably get rained on, or snowed on, or both, and be found in the morning frozen like stupid blue icicles, as a warning to future generations of St Andrews students not to be so wildly bloody stupid."

"Morgana did it," said Arthur, stomping purposefully up the spiral staircase.

"You want to bet Morgana did it in summer? Because I'm here to tell you there's no bloody way she's dim enough to freeze her shapely arse off at the top of St Rule's Tower to impress somebody."

"I'm not listening," said Arthur, cheerfully.

"This is because you didn't get to go on any of the bloody Adventure Training with the Air Squadron, isn't it?" Merlin grumbled – but then, when Arthur didn't come back with some sharp retort, he felt like a total bastard. "Yes, Merlin, that probably is exactly why he's doing this, he told himself. You wanker.

He stumbled up the staircase, hearing their echoes of their footfalls and the hiss of their breath, and all the things that he couldn't say out loud. Like: "You'd have been brilliant in the RAF!" or "Your dad's a miserable git!" or "You're going to be a great king one day."
Like: "I love you." Because when you got right down to it, that was what Merlin really wanted to say most of all. He wasn't going to, because loving someone - as distinct from fancying the pants off them – meant thinking about more than what you wanted. It meant thinking about what they wanted, and what they needed, and putting that first. Damn it. So he wasn't going to say: "I love you, Arthur. Not because you're His Royal Highness, Arthur Pendragon, Prince of Wales; not because you have a spectacular arse; not because you're bloody good looking; but because you're you. Arthur. Because you really do care about what you're studying, and worry about it, and want to use it to help change things for the better; because you get so damned excited about your stupid football team, even though they're Chelsea, and thus clearly crap; because you got me a Captain Hammer mug delivered specially off the internet, all the way from America, and then pretended that it was just some piece of rubbish you happened to find, and that you hadn't even noticed the hammer motif; because you get really upset about the news, and about the government's decisions on how to deploy the army, and have to rant at me about it for hours because you're not supposed to sound critical in public, and you know you can trust me. Because you may be an enormous prat, and dripping in privilege, and completely clueless about quite a lot of things, and English, but you are, underneath it all, a genuinely good man. Maybe not always a nice one, but a good man. And I love you for it."

But he couldn't say that, because it wasn't going to do either of them a blind bit of good. And it was probably a load of bollocks, anyway; probably he was just romanticising Arthur, and if they ever actually did get together he'd quickly realise that Arthur was actually just as crap as everyone else. Probably crapper.

It was, as Merlin had confidently expected, quite bitterly cold at the top of the Tower. But, on the plus side, the views were just as spectacular as Morgana had claimed. It was a clear night, and the blackness overhead was dusted with stars as bright as glitter. Far out along the coast, tiny specks of white like fairylights showed them the next town along – possibly Dundee? Geography had never been one of Merlin's stronger suits. He pressed himself into the corner of the square tower, standing on tiptoes and looking out over the tiny city, and even though he was shivering with cold, he had to laugh out loud for the glee of being here, where they were not allowed to be, secret and unsuspected in the middle of everything. Arthur, who had been looking out to sea, crossed over and stood behind Merlin, so close that Merlin almost thought he was going to lean forward and hug him.

"Do you feel like you're king of the world now?" he asked, laughing against Merlin's ear, and Merlin leaned back into the warmth of it for a moment and let himself relax.

"I feel like Peter Pan," he said instead. "Like, if I could just think of something happy enough, I could fly up into the air and go whizzing off to Neverland, to fight pirates and annoy mermaids."

"Second star to the right, and straight on till morning," said Arthur, ruffling his hair and stepping back out of his personal space.

"What's it like?" Merlin asked, as he hunkered down and opened his rucksack, extracting his pillow with some difficulty and dragging out the bundle of blankets.

"What, Neverland?" Merlin couldn't see Arthur's face clearly by moonlight, but his tone spoke volumes.


Arthur stopped what he was doing. "Are you telling me you've never flown?" he asked, sounding astonished. "But that can't be right. How can you possibly not have flown anywhere?"

"Oh!" Arthur sounded pole-axed.

"Hey, don't get me wrong – it was a lovely caravan, and we had some brilliant holidays in it. Belonged to our neighbours. But – not everyone goes jetting off to the Alps for the weekend, or spends Christmas in Bermuda."

"We don't spend Christmas in Bermuda! The King's speech..." began Arthur, sounding flustered and defensive.

"I know! I know, I was just – it was just an example. It's okay!"

"I can't believe you've never flown before!" Arthur went back to unpacking his makeshift camping gear, but he sounded really shocked.

"So – what's it like?"

"Well, it's – it's being free," said Arthur, after a moment, his voice uncharacteristically tentative. "And in control, and untethered. Piloting a plane, I mean. Lots to look at and think about, of course, but still – it's like driving, but better. God, it's so much better than driving..." His voice faded away for a moment, and then he straightened his back. "I'll take you," he said. "On Sunday." As the days got shorter, Arthur had gradually shifted his weekly visits to Leuchars from Monday evening to early Sunday afternoon, when he could still enjoy decent light. "Come with me on Sunday, and I'll take you up in Excalibur, and you can see for yourself."

Merlin's jaw dropped. "No, I – sorry, I wasn't angling for any favours," he said, suddenly mortified. "I didn't mean..."

"I know you didn't, you ass. But come with me anyway? You'll love it. There's plenty of space in the plane. Say yes?"

"Well – I – well then – yes," Merlin said, awkward and pleased. "Um. Thank you?"

He finished setting up his painfully inadequate bedding on the cold, hard stone and lay down on it, fully dressed, scarf and gloves and beanie and coat and gown at all. Arthur had set his own blankets and pillow out in the inadequate shelter of the wall, and lain down too. For a long moment they both stared up at the sky, and although it was frigid as hell, there was something truly wonderful about lying there under the stars in this secret place, listening to the roar of the sea.

"Jesus, it's fucking freezing," said Arthur, after a few minutes, sounding chastened, and Merlin laughed out loud. "If you say 'I told you so', Merlin, I'm going to throw you off the top of the tower."

"Okay," said Merlin, grinning even as he shivered. "I'll just lie here thinking it, shall I?"

They both stared up at the stars for several minutes, and it occurred to Merlin that he didn't have to be freezing his arse off like this; he was a wizard, for crying out loud! He thought for a moment, and reached out to make the molecules vibrate a little more. Hello there, heat energy! In a very short time he was feeling pleasantly toasty in his magically heated blanket, but he could hear Arthur shifting uncomfortably a few feet away, tugging his blanket closer about him.

"Bloody hell," Arthur said at last, half-laughing at himself. "I think my arse has frozen solid. And my toes are numb. Crikey. This stone really is pretty damned chilly, isn't it?"

"Can I say 'I told you so' yet?" asked Merlin.

"Only if you want to put your Peter Pan skills to the test when I throw you over that wall," Arthur
"God, I wish I'd thought to bring some whisky. Whisky would have been an excellent idea. Damn it."

Merlin smiled hugely in the dark. "Mmm," he said. "So, just out of curiosity, what would you give for a wee dram of Glayva right now? Hypothetically speaking? I mean, I know it's more of a liqueur than a whisky, but...?"

There was a rather pregnant silence, and then Arthur was sitting up and staring over at Merlin's shadowy form in the moonlight.

"Are you pulling my leg?"

"I'm not pulling your anything," said Merlin. *More's the pity.* "I'm just asking, in the spirit of inquiry, what the going rate would be. A knighthood, perhaps? A Caribbean cruise? A Terry's Chocolate Orange?"

"Merlin, if you have a bottle of Glayva somewhere about your person and you're holding out on me, I shall have you declared a traitor to your prince, and exiled from Wales."

"I'm already exiled from Wales, pretty much."

"Permanently! And from Scotland, and England, and Northern Ireland too! I'll have you deported to Canada, to work as Celine Dion's cabana boy."

"Oh, well now you're *definitely* not getting any," said Merlin. "God, what even *is* a cabana boy when it's at home?"

"I think it involves being shirtless and making cocktails," said Arthur, vaguely. "There may also be some moose-wrangling duties, in Canada. Possibly."

"There's a beaver joke in there somewhere, I just know it," Merlin said.

"Yes, well, luckily Kay isn't here with us this evening, so I expect we won't have to hear it," snapped Arthur. "Glayva! Now! Stop being such a wretched *tease!*"

Merlin was snorting with laughter as he produced the bottle that had been bundled up inside his pillow and several layers of blanket.

"What's the magic word?"

"Cabana boy."

"Nope. Nice try, but no whisky."

"Dungeon?"

"Still no."

"Merlin, if I have to wrestle it out of your cold dead hand, I will do so."

Merlin couldn't help thinking about Raisin Monday; he realised, with a sudden flush of shame, that he'd been kind of hoping to provoke Arthur into doing exactly that – had been angling for some more mutually enjoyable grabbing and writhing and wriggling, with plausible deniability provided by the bottle of Glayva. But once he realised what he was doing, he handed the bottle over straight away.
"I was just hoping for a 'please'," he said, awkwardly, as Arthur's gloved hands closed over his around the bottle.

"Oh," said Arthur, sounding wrongfooted. "I – well, yes – please, then. And, er, thank you."

He scrabbled at the lid for a few moments, his cold fingers clumsy under their layer of wool, and then managed to twist it off successfully.

"Er – sorry," he said, apparently realising only then that he was basically helping himself to Merlin's things. "Er – did you want the first taste?"

"You're fine," said Merlin, fondly. "Although this kind of ruthless pillaging is absolutely bloody typical of you English. But go ahead. Knock yourself out."

"Cheers," said Arthur. "Slainte Mhor." He took a deep, appreciative swallow and made a happy humming noise. "God, that's good. Merlin – look, I'm not being funny, but where the hell did you get a bottle of Glayva? It's not exactly your usual tipple, is it?"

"Gawain," Merlin admitted. "He thought it might be useful against the chill."

"You told him? About this?" Arthur sounded so thoroughly crestfallen at the thought of this silly Enid Blyton expedition not being their private little secret that Merlin had to work quite hard to remind himself why it really wasn't a good idea to seize him and snuggle him to death right there.

"I didn't need to," he said, instead. "He was there, and he heard what Morgana said, and he saw your face. Not a lot gets past Gawain."

"Oh," said Arthur. "Hmph. Well, still – that was pretty decent of him. Oh! Sorry – here!" he said, evidently realising that he was hogging the bottle. "It's very good stuff. Put hairs on your chest."

"I don't want hairs on my chest," said Merlin, firmly. "My chest is absolutely fine the way it is, thanks."


And if it hadn't been so bloody cold up there at the top of St Rule's Tower, Merlin was pretty sure he'd have been flushing to the tips of his ears just then – because he knew, absolutely knew, that Arthur was thinking about what Merlin's chest looked like. That Arthur had taken note, over the past few months, of what Merlin looked like shirtless.

God.

"Here, give me the damned bottle," he said, his voice rougher than usual at the thought that while he had been sneakily watching Arthur, Arthur had also been sneakily watching him. Arthur handed him the bottle.

"Iechyd da," he said, wrapping his mouth around the bottle where Arthur's lips had been only a moment earlier.

It was the first time he'd tasted Glayva, and he'd been braced for something like the whisky Morgana had poured from her delicate china teapot into his cup on Raisin Sunday. There were notes that reminded him of that, but it was much thicker and sweeter, like drinking spiced honey and whisky-soaked oranges, with a dash of marzipan. It warmed him through to his toes, like swallowing sunlight.
"What would you want to be, if you weren't the Prince of Wales?" he asked, randomly.

"A fireman," Arthur said, without hesitating, and Merlin choked with laughter at his promptness.

"What's funny about that?" Arthur demanded, sounding rather cross. "Don't laugh!"

"Nothing! Nothing, really. It's just – it's such a little kid kind of answer."

"Well, it's my answer," Arthur said, with dignity. "A fireman, or maybe a fighter pilot, or – oh, just something clean. Something honest. Something where what you do matters, not who you are. Where you can make an immediate difference to people's lives. Save people's lives. " He sighed. "Not just smiling and waving and smiling and waving and being a good will ambassador. I'm not – to be honest, diplomacy isn't really my best thing."

"You don't say?" said Merlin, dryly, and Arthur reached over and tweaked his ear. "Ow! Oi!"

"Don't take the piss, you piss-taker!" Arthur protested. "I'm being serious! I mean – look, it used to be that strength and courage and, and decency actually counted for something if you were going to be a king. When they were allowed to go out in front and lead the army alongside their men, with a great big banner proclaiming who they were and making them a target, and basically saying 'Bring it on, you bastards!' These days...well, one's still allowed to do a stint in the forces, but one's supposed to stay out of the line of fire. Especially if one's heir to the throne and an only child. The politicians have all the real power now – for us all that's left is diplomacy, and shaking hands, and saying "And what do you do?" and "Did you come far?" And it's bollocks!"

There was a shocked pause, as if Arthur couldn't quite believe he'd just said that, and Merlin wordlessly passed him the Glayva again. "I mean – well, no, of course it's not bollocks," he said, gruffly a moment later, sounding embarrassed. "I know that we get things done. Sometimes. But – but my father isn't a leader." His voice had dropped to a hoarse whisper, as if he were afraid of being overheard even here, at the top of an ancient tower in the middle of the night. "He's a figurehead, really. A face for coins and stamps, and a diplomatic tool – but all the really big decisions are made by the Prime Minister and the Cabinet."

"Well," said Merlin, feeling out of his depth. "They are democratically elected by the people, you know."

"I know! I know, and that's good – I think that's the right thing, really. But – what's the bloody point, then? Really? What's the point of being raised to rule, and accepting that one has great responsibility and duty and that one has to be – constrained – all in exchange for the privilege and the power? When really – oh, I'm sorry. I'm being maudlin." He swallowed audibly. "But – oh, look, I just feel like there are other people who could be better at smiling and waving and saying the right thing. And like there are other things I could do, and do better. Maybe."

There was a sheepish silence at the top of the Tower, while the waves continued their soft, grating roar and the wind whistled overhead.

"Oh, Arthur," said Merlin at last, sadly, not knowing what else to say. He bit his lip, and then said: "I think you'll be a brilliant king. But I see what you mean. And I think you'd have been a brilliant fireman too, or a fighter pilot, or, well, anything where being brave and decisive and having good reflexes count for something. Not an office job, probably, but something hands-on – well, you'd be great."

"So what about you," Arthur asked, his voice a little uneven. "What do you want to be when you grow up?"
"Happy," said Merlin, after a moment. "And useful." Because he couldn't really say: 'A proper wizard, who knows what he's doing.'

"Useful?" repeated Arthur, doubtfully. "Bloody hell, that's pushing your luck a bit."

"Oi! You can talk, Mr Figurehead-in-waiting!"

"Talking is indeed just one of my many skills," Arthur agreed, loftily. "I can also walk and chew gum. And smile and wave."

"The world is your mollusc."

"True." Arthur shivered, and he gave a short, rueful laugh. "I tell you what, though – alcohol or not, it's still a pretty bloody cold mollusc."

"Oh, God – come here, you ass," he said, half-reluctant and half-delighted, giving in to the inevitable.

"What?" Arthur sounded very slightly panicked.

"Sharing bodyheat is a tried and tested way of not freezing one's idiotic arse to death, when insane enough to go playing at Adventure Training in the dead of winter. Honestly, this is the same school of reckless bravado that sent Scott to the Antarctic with a few wooly jumpers, some figgy pudding and a couple of horses. You Englishmen are off your bloody heads, you know that?"

"I'm fine," said Arthur, but his teeth were chattering.

"You're a stubborn idiot is what you are," said Merlin, scrambling to his feet and clutching at his pillow and blanket. "And you're freezing – we both are." Not entirely true, that, but Merlin suspected Arthur would be more likely to co-operate in being looked after himself if he thought that Merlin needed protecting from the elements too. "If I let the Prince of Wales die of cold, I'm pretty sure I'll be looking at life as a Canadian cabana boy. Or imprisonment in the Tower of London. Either way – badness. And that's assuming I don't just freeze to death along side you in the middle of the stupidest adventure ever."

"It's not a stupid adventure," said Arthur, defensively.

"You're a stubborn idiot is what you are," said Merlin, scrambling to his feet and clutching at his pillow and blanket. "And you're freezing – we both are." Not entirely true, that, but Merlin suspected Arthur would be more likely to co-operate in being looked after himself if he thought that Merlin needed protecting from the elements too. "If I let the Prince of Wales die of cold, I'm pretty sure I'll be looking at life as a Canadian cabana boy. Or imprisonment in the Tower of London. Either way – badness. And that's assuming I don't just freeze to death along side you in the middle of the stupidest adventure ever."

"It's not a stupid adventure," said Arthur, defensively.

"Oh, you know it is. But I'm here, aren't I? Keeping you company and freezing my nuts off just so that you can tell Morgana that anything she can do, you can do better. I brought the whisky and I carried the damned baggage – I think that the very least you can do is help save me from freezing to death. And keep yourself alive and warm in the process. So come over here right the hell now, and we can get one blanket underneath us and one on top – I mean, do you have any idea how much body heat we're losing into all this stone? Lots. Believe me. I'm a physicist. The technical term is lots."

"My God, are you always this bossy when you're cold?" asked Arthur, sounding slightly dazed.

"No, sometimes I'm this bossy in less bollock-freezing situations," said Merlin, standing up. "Now get your royal arse over here right now, and let me share your damned blanket. I promise not to take advantage of you."

It gave him a prickly little rush of excitement to say that, and he heard Arthur draw a sharp breath at the words, but there was no denying that this was the only sensible, practical course of action. And Merlin could keep their blankets warm enough by magic that they would both be fine, in spite of the spectacular folly of the whole sleeping-in-the-open-in-the-dead-of-winter notion – although
admittedly he wasn't about to tell Arthur that.

"God, all right, all right," said Arthur. "Keep your hair on." He got stiffly to his feet and let Merlin spread out the magically heated blanket on the cold stone in the most sheltered corner, and set their pillows together. Merlin pushed out with the molten warmth of his magic and filled the tower with the stone-stored heat of the summer sun. He felt the Murdered Monk flicker into startled wakefulness down in the coiling spiral staircase, like a snail poking cautious horns out of its protective shell, and he soothed the old ghost with a gentle touch, like stroking a drowsy cat, and felt him retreat again.

"Come on, then," said Merlin, indicating the spot closest to the wall, where it would be warmest. "What are you waiting for? A gilt-edged invitation?"

"I'm not really sure that I approve of you bossing me around, Merlin," said Arthur, stepping gingerly over to the spot where Merlin was pointing and clutching his blanket awkwardly. He lay down, and made an astonished little sound at the discovery that the stones were warm. "Bloody hell!" he said. "The weirdest thing! It's actually hot here!"

"Why do you think I chose that spot?" asked Merlin, cheerfully dishonest. "All to do with molecular energy, heat conduction, surface temperatures – Physics stuff, not your cup of Darjeeling."

"That's – that's extraordinary," said Arthur, sounding quite flabbergasted.

"You see, you need to listen to me more often," said Merlin, snuggling in next to him and pushing a little pulse of magic out to tickle the molecules that formed the pillows and Arthur's blanket, feeling them warming stealthily as they settled into place. After a bit of awkwardness they found a fairly comfortable position with Merlin's spine pressed to Arthur's chest and Arthur's arm around Merlin's waist. This was, in Merlin's opinion, pushing plausible deniability to its uttermost limits – but so long as they both went on acting like this was all good, normal, platonic behaviour they could probably keep it from getting any more incriminating. And he couldn't help wondering whether it was what Arthur had had in mind all along. Perhaps not – but Merlin remembered Arthur darting over to sit by his side in the Matchmakers game, and he had come to the conclusion that Arthur Pendragon was a pretty sneaky strategist, when he needed to be.

"It is a bit of a stupid adventure," Arthur admitted, his breath brushing warm against the nape of Merlin's neck. "But it's nice getting away for once. From everyone."

"You didn't get away from everyone," Merlin said, shaking with laughter. "You brought me along! I'm part of 'everyone', you great numpty!"

"No," said Arthur, quietly, and his arm tightened around Merlin's waist. "No, you're not."

Merlin swallowed. "Oh," he said, staring unseeing over at the moonlit stones across from them. "Oh."

And it was really quite difficult, just then, to resist the impulse to turn around in Arthur's arms and find out if his lips tasted of Glayva. But Merlin managed. Just.
"Oh my God, you've got to be kidding me," said Merlin, his jaw dropping. "This? But it's huge!"

Arthur's mouth twitched. "I get that a lot," he said, waggling his eyebrows.

"Oh, shut up," Merlin said, still gawping up at the Learjet like a yokel. "I was expecting – I don't know, something like the ones in the movies – Spitfires, that kind of thing?"

"Er – no, Merlin, this is the Twenty First Century, and technology has, believe it or not, moved on a fair bit since World War II. I thought you were supposed to be a scientist?"

"Well, okay, I know that, I just – how many people can you fit in there?"

"Seven passengers," said Arthur, shrugging. "Oh! Hey, afterwards let's go and sneak a look at the Typhoon," he said. "The cadets here practice on the Grob, which isn't a bad little plane, but the Typhoon's the pride of Leuchars. They've been relying on the Tornado for years now, but in September they introduced the first of the new Typhoons at the Battle-of-Britain At-Home day. It was brilliant! She was escorted to her new base by one of the original Spitfires, the two of them flying in formation, and there was a fantastic aerobatics display by the Red Arrows, and...and then Father Christmas flew through the air in a sleigh pulled by giant chocolate bunnies," he finished, his eyes narrowing. "You're not even listening, are you?"

"Of course I am!" said Merlin, which wasn't entirely true, but he was certainly enjoying Arthur's bright-eyed excitement, even if he suspected there was a limit to how enthusiastic he could feel about a load of random planes. Arthur's fervour was infectious, and he hadn't the heart to deflate it. "I'd love to see the Typhoon," he said, and Arthur rewarded him with another of those heart-stopping smiles.

"Oh, fantastic! I know Harry'll let us check her out – he's a good egg, Harry. She's gorgeous," Arthur said, wistfully. "Cutting edge. Agile at supersonic or low speeds, carefree quadruplex digital fly-by-wire control system, PIRATE system mounted on the port side of the fuselage, glass cockpit...God, I'd love to take her out for a spin. She's the real deal – makes the Americans' Raptors look pretty sick, I can tell you."

Merlin couldn't quite wipe the fond smile off his face. "You realise that I haven't a bloody clue what you're talking about, don't you? Other than the fact that apparently the Typhoon is equipped to attack pirates, which is a bit surprising."

"No, you ass, it's the Passive Infra-Red...oh, never mind. It's a bloody good plane, that's all. I mean, Excalibur's a lovely bird," he added, hastily, for all the world as if afraid of hurting its feelings. "Best in her class for time to climb and cruise speed – she's no slouch! But, you know – she's a company jet, intended to fly the idle rich to their important business meetings." He cast a sidelong glance at Merlin and gave a wry grin. "That's me, obviously. And my father."

"I seriously cannot believe that this thing belongs to you," said Merlin, feeling completely insignificant, and a little intimidated, as his attention returned to the sleek black Learjet before him, with its name written in silver on the side. "Jesus. I don't even own a bicycle."

"Well – it's sort of a business expense," said Arthur, looking a bit embarrassed. "I mean, we're always off on state visits and things, so – um..."

Merlin just lifted his eyebrow. "Doing a lot of state visits at the moment are you? Didn't think so. So
what you're saying is that it's just sitting here gathering dust all week until you pop over on a Sunday afternoon to take it out for a spin," said Merlin. "Does this mean that your dad is flying Easy Jet when he nips over to see the Pope or Barack Obama?"


"So, basically this is your own personal Learjet," said Merlin, nodding. "God. And I was impressed that Mark had his own motorbike, and that Helen has her own car. This...this does rather shift the goalposts, you know."


Merlin nodded. "Fair point, well made."

* * *

Inside, the jet was, if anything, even more impressive. The sleek dark lines of the exterior gave way to plush creamy leather and smooth walnut panelling, and everything felt like a movie set to Merlin – clean and crisp and shiny, and slightly unreal.

"Oh my God – there's a minibar!" he exclaimed, opening the door and peering inside. "Champagne! Juice! Caviar! What, you couldn't afford Irn Bru and Pot Noodles?"

"Help yourself," said Arthur, his mouth twitching. "There should be some Smarties and Rolos in the bottom shelf, unless Leon's finished them off."

"You've got a plane," said Merlin, plumping himself down on an indecently comfortable chair and giving an experimental bounce. "You actually are pretty rich and important, aren't you? For a prat, I mean."

"Shut up, you," said Arthur, reddening. "Before I make you put on a stewardess dress and start making me lattes just the way I like them."

"I'm not putting on a dress," said Merlin, firmly. "Once is definitely enough. But I'll make you a coffee, if you like." He looked around speculatively. "Er – although if it's not Nescafe, you might have to explain how the machine works." He glanced down at all the cream-coloured leather and considered the potential for stainage. "Actually, upon second thoughts, maybe we could just stick to water."

Arthur laughed at him. "God, you're useless, Merlin," he said. "Never mind. You can grab yourself a Coke or a beer or a water, or whatever, if you're thirsty – I don't actually need a coffee. So – d'you want to see the cockpit?"

"I thought you'd never ask!" said Merlin, jumping up out of the chair again and scampering after Arthur.

The cockpit was, as it turned out, rather dauntingly full of screens and buttons and dials and gadgetry, and Merlin was more than a little worried that he might accidentally lean on an ejector seat button, or sneeze near something vital, or in some fashion manage to bugger up the appallingly expensive equipment in front of him, so he stayed in the doorway with his hands folded carefully behind his back, his eyes like saucers.

"Can it make the Kessel Run in less than twelve parsecs?" he asked at last.

Arthur rolled his eyes. "Parsecs are a unit of..."
"Distance, not time. I know. Science geek, standing right here – although, you know, they retconned that, and claimed that Han Solo actually took a shortcut around a black hole. The smuggler BoShek beat his record, but then Han and Luke beat his record."

There was a little pause. "I can't believe you know that. Actually, what am I saying? Yes, of course I can."

"Um. Sorry – I was just saying, you know – I think your plane's pretty cool," said Merlin, ducking his head and feeling oddly shy.

Arthur looked at him a little bit longer than was strictly necessary, his face wearing that tentative little-boy expression that Merlin had glimpsed a handful of times, as though Merlin were holding Arthur's heart in his hands, and Arthur half-way expected him to crush it.

"Er – thanks," Arthur said, shifting from foot to foot. "I like her a lot."

"You hide it well."

"Oh, shut up and buckle yourself in. D'you want to sit here with me, or play at being CEO of Emrys Enterprises in the back, there, with the bar and the DVD player and everything?"

"Here will do fine," said Merlin, trying to convince himself that he couldn't do any damage as he slid into the seat next to Arthur. He scrabbled at his seatbelt. "I can't believe that they let you up here alone, without Leon or Val or anybody."

Arthur's face took on a distinctly shifty expression. "Well, technically they don't," he admitted. "I'm supposed to have a copilot – they can all fly, my bodyguards – but, er, Val and I have reached an understanding, and now when he's on babysitting duty he stays in the car with Pell, and I get a bit of time to myself."

Pell was Arthur's driver; since St Andrews was really too small to necessitate the use of a bicycle, let alone a car, he didn't seem to have very much to do except polish the Bentley most days. Occasionally, Arthur and Kay and Gawain – or, increasingly, Arthur and Merlin – would pile into the car and get Pell to whisk them off to Anstruther for fish and chips, or into Edinburgh for a gig, or just out into the starkly gorgeous countryside. But for the most part, Pell's only work seemed to be the weekly drive to Leuchars.

Merlin peered out through the glass at the runway and gave another gleeful bounce in his seat.

"Seriously – I cannot believe that you have your own plane," he said.

Arthur glanced at him sidelong. "You said that already," he pointed out.

"I think I'm going to be saying it a lot over the next few hours," Merlin admitted, apologetically. "I really can't see the whole sense of oh em gee dissipating any time soon. Because you have your own plane!"

Arthur grinned. "You idiot," he said.

"Hey, I'm just being impressed by your unexpected attack of awesome," said Merlin, shrugging.

"And, come on – we're going to fly! In the air! Like the birds! I mean, even understanding the principles of aerodynamics and all that – come on, doesn't that blow your mind? The fact that humans figured out how to put a huge lump of metal in the air and keep it there?"

Arthur's smile was as wide as the ocean. "Yes," he said. "Yes, it does blow me away, every single
time.” He cocked his head to one side and studied Merlin carefully. "Do you want a job?” he asked. Merlin gulped. "Can I say no? Because if you're about to entrust me with some kind of life-or-death thing, I really want to say no."

"It's vitally important, Merlin," Arthur said. "We can't possibly fly without it. I'm counting on you to get this right."

"Um. Oh, God," said Merlin, unhappily. "What is it?"

"I need you to be in charge of the tunes," Arthur said, very seriously, pulling his iPhone out of his pocket and dropping it into Merlin's lap. "Pick a playlist?"

"Oh!" said Merlin. "Oh, for God's sake, you had me crapping myself for a minute there!"

"You're easily freaked out, aren't you?" Arthur said, with an evil grin that reminded Merlin of Morgana. "But don't worry; I'm not going to ask you to walk and chew gum at the same time just yet."

Merlin tried not to stare as Arthur pulled a little headset on over his hair, and started checking dials and screens in an efficient, capable manner that was quite disturbingly hot.

"Right," he said instead, fiddling with his seatbelt. "I'll sort out the tunes, then."

* * *

Being the official in-flight entertainment of Pendragon Air was, Merlin discovered, quite a daunting responsibility. As they taxied down the runway and Arthur talked familiarly to somebody or other through his little headset, Merlin was flicking frantically from playlist to playlist, trying to figure out what was the most absolutely perfect song to choose, and worrying about how Arthur would judge his selection.

"Come on, come on," Arthur said, as the jet gained momentum. "We can't take off in silence! It's bad luck!"

"All right, all right," said Merlin, frantically, reminding himself that they were all Arthur's own playlists, after all, and that this necessarily meant that Arthur liked all the music on them. He didn't know why he was panicking, unless it was because he felt like he ought to be contributing in some way, rather than just chasing along clinging on to Arthur's coattails. Just as the nose of the plane lifted up into the air, Merlin hit a playlist that started out with Blur's 'Song 2', and Arthur laughed out loud.

"Perfect!" he said, glancing over at Merlin and beaming like the Cheshire Cat. "Oh, perfect."

Merlin beamed right back, all but bouncing in his seat for glee again, and found himself unable to keep from laughing. "Oh my fucking God, we are flying in the air!" he yelled, feeling his stomach flip at the wild, terrifying sensation of being held aloft by this fragile bubble of metal and glass. If it had been his magic holding him up in the air he wouldn't have worried, because when he was being all Great And Terrible Wizard Merlin he knew that he was in control. More or less. But he wasn't reaching out with that second self just now; he was just being a normal 18-year-old boy, or as close as he ever got to that, and trusting to Arthur's skill to keep them both safe.

He realised that his hands had squeezed into fists in his lap, and that his shoulders were knotted rigid, and he tried quite hard to relax, but Arthur noticed anyway.
"You're not going to puke, are you, Merlin?" he asked, looking a little impatient.

"No!" said Merlin, and then promptly started imagining what it would be like in the cockpit if he did. "Don't be disgusting. Oh my God, just look at everything!" he added with a gasp. "Look how tiny it all is! Is that St Andrews?"

Arthur grinned. "Yes," he said. "Isn't it wee?"

"Wow." Merlin sat in silence as they flew out over the sea, drinking in the moment and boggling at how drastically his life had changed in a scant few months. "This is amazing," he said quietly, after a little while. "Thank you."

Arthur smiled. "You're welcome," he said, glancing over at Merlin with a look in his eye that made Merlin's mouth go dry. "Do you want to see something really cool?"

"Let me think. Hmm. No, no, I hate really cool things."

"Fine. I won't show you then," said Arthur, shrugging and looking back down at his instruments, his mouth twitching.

There was a little pause.

"Go on, then," said Merlin, after about thirty seconds. "Show me."

"No, no, you're obviously not interested."

"I am, though," said Merlin. "I was just playing it cool, but I'm rubbish at it. I'm actually gagging to know. What?"

"Are you sure?"

"SHOW ME THE REALLY COOL THING!" Merlin yelled, laughing.

"What's the magic word?"

"Abracadabra?"

"Nope."

Merlin sighed. "Please?"

Arthur grinned at him. "Hold on tight," he said. "This is called a barrel roll."

And before Merlin knew what to be braced for, Arthur was tugging the damned stick and Merlin's heart was in his mouth and his feet were darting up in the air while his head was plummeting downwards, because the whole damned plane was twisting around, around, over, upside-down, and then the right way up again before Merlin had time to feel sick.

"Oh my God!" he said, when he could speak, smiling so hard his face hurt. "Oh my God, you – we – oh my God!"

"Cool, hey?"

"Very cool," Merlin agreed, helplessly, his heart pounding fit to burst. "That was amazing! I thought you didn't know aerobatics?"
"Just a couple of tricks," said Arthur, his cheeks flushing and his eyes bright. "Although I'm not really supposed to do them – my father doesn't approve. Health and safety, only direct Pendragon heir, all that."

"That was brilliant!" Merlin said, laughing. "My God, I can't believe you've got your own plane!"

"Idiot."

"Prat."

They flew on over the sea for a while, listening to 'Snow Patrol' without talking, just exchanging gleeful grins every so often as the sun slid lower in the sky, the water shining like it was topped with molten gold, and Merlin was thinking that he didn't know when he'd ever been happier, and that, really, being Arthur's best friend was pretty damned good, even if he would have liked to be something more.

And of course that was when a sudden shift in the harmonics indicated that something had just gone rather badly wrong with one of the engines, and everything went to hell in a handbasket.
"What the – no. No, that's not - fuck," Arthur hissed, his face set and tense as he worked the controls. "There was nothing wrong with my bloody ascent, damn it – why – oh shit!"

"Arthur?" said Merlin, not liking the muffled panic in Arthur's voice one little bit. "What's happening?"

"The old 20 series used to have this kind of – but Excalibur's specs – goddamn it! I don't understand!"

"Arthur, what's wrong?"

"We've lost an engine," said Arthur, white faced. "But we can get back fine with just one – don't even need to worry about cabin depressurisation. It's – I'm taking us back, and we'll get the ground crew to – oh. Oh fuck, no, what?"

The sound surrounding them changed again, and Merlin could feel that something had just gone very badly wrong even before Arthur turned shocked eyes on him.

"Fuck! They're both – I don't know how, but they're both buggered," he said, his voice hoarse and shaking. "I don't understand. I'm going to try to bring her down – I can - I think I – oh, fuck, no. What? No! Damn it!" he said, quiet and furious, his hands moving jerkily over the controls. "Christ Merlin! I'm so sorry!"

Merlin shook his head like a dog coming out of water, his eyes growing huge. "Are we crashing? Is that what you're telling me?"

"Not if – not – I - yes, damn it," said Arthur, unwillingly. "Fuck. I don't understand! She's going down – I don't know how or why, but she is." The look that he shot Merlin was guilt-stricken and appalled, and completely incredulous. "We're going down."

"No," said Merlin, firmly, unfastening his seat belt – and everything stopped.

He'd done it on purpose, this time. It should probably be frightening, how easily he'd learnt to step outside of space and time and move into that un-place beyond up and down, truth and beauty, strange and charm – but he was growing more into his power every day, and although he still felt like a bit of an idiot when it came to normal magic – to the spells and cantrips Gaius was teaching him – when it came to using the skills that seemed woven into the very stuff of his soul, Merlin was coming on in leaps and bounds. He sat quite still for a moment, blinking out at the frozen clouds and the unmoving sea, and then he stood up, running his hands through his hair while he wracked his brains for the best way out of this.

He was sure that he had enough power to fix whatever was wrong with the engines, but it required more than raw power, and without knowing all the inner workings and specifications of a Learjet, he had no idea where to start. Arthur did love his private jet with the passion of a thousand burning suns, but right now Merlin was trying to focus on getting their arses safely home, and if that meant that the plane needed to be sacrificed – well, Merlin was okay with that, shiny though it was. He sighed. What they really needed right now was a way out – but it wasn't like they had any bloody fire exits or secret passages to go dashing down.

Unless...
"Come on, come on!" Merlin muttered to himself, pacing around in the tight space and letting his magic unfurl through his body and out beyond its borders. He hadn't done this before, exactly – not this him, at least – but if the dragon was to be believed, some part of him should remember how it worked. And although the idea that he had lived and died and lived and died before had disconcerted the crap out of him, right now he was trying to believe in it with all his heart, because he really really needed it to be true. He needed to be able to do this for Arthur. So he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, centering himself the way Gaius had told him to long weeks earlier, and pushed his awareness out and out in an expanding bubble of self – but purposefully, this time, reaching, seeking, straining, trying to find a familiar pattern like an imprint in the stones of Sallies, like an echo on the wind.

And there it was.

He held it in his mind like a wisp of smoke trapped in a jar, and felt his eyes glowing golden as he scrabbled in his pocket for a marker and started to scribble the dragon's image onto the door. When it was finished, he took the imprisoned pattern of magic and self and pushed it into the fabric of the door, feeling a sharp, electric click as it slotted into place and like called to like across the miles, and Arthur's precious jet became a part of the Great Dragon's corporeal form; spooky action over a distance, Einstein would have called it, and he'd have been right.

The rough lines of red ink flexed and swirled against the door, and the dragon turned to blink at Merlin like a cat presented with a longed-for bowl of cream.

"My wings," it said, its voice sounding crackly in the confines of the plane. "Why, young Merlin, I little guessed you'd be so swift to keep your promise!"

Merlin bit the knuckle of his thumb, peering at the dragon over his clenched fists. "You're happy with this?" he asked, trying to sound confident and dangerous and powerful, rather than half-terrified and improvising madly.

The dragon stretched its two-dimensional wings on the wall and flapped them experimentally, then threw its head back and gave a roar that made Merlin feel like the slowest baby wildebeest on a David Attenborough documentary about lions. He straightened his spine and stuck his chin out pugnaciously, and tried not to tremble.

"Well?" he said.

"You have set me free to explore this brave new world, skating once more upon the cold, clean currents of the air," the dragon said, smiling toothily at him. "And in such a fashion that I may pass unmolested by the heavily-armed humans of this age. I am content."

"Good. Then in return, I bid you open a safe passage back to Sallies for me and for Prince Arthur," said Merlin.

"Do you trust me, young warlock?" the dragon asked, blinking catlike eyes. "Are you prepared to open a door in the sky and step through, confident that your feet will find land awaiting you on the other side?"

"Yes," said Merlin, looking straight back, yellow-eyed and dangerous. "Because if you betray me, Kilgharrah, I will drag you out of existence so thoroughly that not even the faintest memory of you will linger on the earth." As he spoke, he pulled his magic around him like a cloak of light and shadow, and knew that he could be as good as his word.

How the hell did I know that was his name? Merlin wondered. But it was, unquestionably.
"Ah – I see that your ruthlessness is returning, along with your memory," the dragon said. It sounded amused. "Were you planning to mention the trouble with the engines?"

Merlin didn't flinch. "Did you need me to? A creature of pure magic?"

"I did not," the dragon allowed. "It would take more than that to keep me grounded." It smiled again. "Now, boy, come back into the flow of time with me, and collect your prince, and leave me to my new body. I promise to send you safely home – although your precious prince may be less grateful than you think."

Letting himself slip back into normal time and space was as easy as melting a pat of butter on a hot griddle. The eerie silence was replaced by the faltering reverberations of the dying engines, and Arthur's startled curses.

"Christ! Merlin? Where...?"

Of course – he must have appeared to vanish into thin air, from Arthur's perspective. Crap. He darted into the cockpit.

"Arthur? We're getting out of here," he said. "Come on."

"How the hell did..." began Arthur, and then visibly dismissed this line of questioning as not a good use of his limited time. "Yeah, you're right. The radio's buggered too, damn it – can't alert the Tower, which means nobody knows we're plummeting into the North Sea. Which is just brilliant." He was unfastening his seat belt and springing to his feet as he spoke, and then striding out of the cockpit and yanking open a cupboard to reveal half a dozen parachutes. "I don't suppose you've ever worn a parachute?" he asked.

Merlin looked at the bulky parachute and shook his head. Jesus. How to explain this?

"Look, Arthur," he said, taking a deep breath. "This is going to sound crazy, but I'm a wizard," he continued, without much hope. Arthur looked up and met his eyes then, and Merlin flinched at his expression.

"Yes. I realised that when you disappeared," he said, and his voice was icy.

Merlin goggled at him. "You're not – I mean, I was expecting this to be a harder sell, to be honest. You believe me? About magic? Just like that?"

"Get on with it, Merlin," Arthur said, tightly. "Do you have a cunning plan or not?" It should have been friendly, this reminder of their shared joke, but Arthur poured nothing but frigid contempt into the words. Merlin felt himself flushing with shame and confusion, but he nodded anyway.

"We have to open the door," he said, his voice shaking slightly. "That's all."

"Open the door at 45,000 feet?"

"Yes. It'll be okay," Merlin said, feeling desperate. He had imagined a lot of different reactions from Arthur, if he ever discovered the truth of Merlin's powers, but this chilly contempt had not been one of them. "I know it sounds..." he began, but Arthur's disgusted expression made him grind to a halt. "It'll be fine," he finished, shakily. "It's just – it's just a leap of faith."

Arthur's nostrils were flaring, and there was a torrent of unspoken words trapped behind the tight line of his lips – but all he did was grab hold of Merlin's hand, stride over to the door and override the safety. He looked completely unfazed by the fact that there was a piece of animated graffiti on the
"Prince Arthur," said the dragon, in a rusty voice that gave way to a creaking laugh. "It's been a very long time indeed."

It took a particular kind of mindset and upbringing to be able to treat a magically animated icon of a dragon like a panhandler, but apparently Arthur had it in spades. He ignored the dragon completely, keeping his eyes fixed on Merlin, clasping his fingers tight around Merlin's hand as he opened the door.

It swung open easily, for all the world as if they were still on the runway, and the door fell forward, steps unfolding neatly into a narrow stairwell that led, impossibly, into a corridor in Sallies. Arthur's fingers tightened painfully around Merlin's as he dragged them both down towards the familiar scuffed floor, letting go only when they were both standing on firm ground.

"You're – you're taking this very calmly," said Merlin, watching Arthur for some clue to what was happening in his head. The snarl that greeted these words was really not encouraging. Merlin swallowed, and reached over to close the door, but it was already pulling itself closed, bringing him face to face with the dragon once more.

"I am a creature of my word, young warlock," it said, licking a tongue of paint over its claws like a finicky cat, and glancing up at him coyly. "I am pleased to find that that is still something we have in common."

"Um – thanks," said Merlin, glancing over at Arthur's shuttered face and biting his lip. "That was great – really, great. But, er, I think I've got to go now."

Arthur was positively vibrating with anger as he marched down the corridor towards their room. Merlin followed after him, worried and baffled but not quite daring to say anything in public. There was a very tense and prickly moment while Arthur fumbled with the key, his hand clumsy with wrath, and then they were both back in the privacy of their room with the door closed and Arthur pressing his back up against it, his arms crossed in front of his chest and his hands clenched into fists, as if he were afraid that he might grab Merlin by the throat if he didn't restrain himself. Merlin eyed him warily.

"So you're a bloody wizard," Arthur said, blue eyes fierce and bright in his flushed face.

There was an awkward pause.

"Er – well, yes," said Merlin, helplessly. "Because, um, magic is real, and..."

"I know that," Arthur said, cutting him off. "Do you think I'm an idiot? Obviously I know that magic is real."

"You – do?" Merlin felt the ground beneath him turning into quicksand. "What?"

"Of course I bloody know, Merlin!" Arthur snapped. "What, you think they don't tell the bloke who's going to be king this kind of tiny little titbit? That they were planning to wait until my father popped his clogs, and then drop the whole 'magic is real' thing on me when I was dealing with bereavement? OF COURSE I know that there are wizards and all that weird shit. I just. Didn't. Know. You. Were one."

He was stepping closer and closer, punctuating each word with a step, and Merlin found himself backing away and swallowing hard.
"Oh! But – oh." His heart was racing, and he was squirming under the intensity of Arthur's regard. "I didn't know you knew about – about all this." He waved his hands in a vague gesture intended to encompass the School of Sorcery, the Dragon doors, the Sidhe and vampires and ghosts and ghouls and aphrodisiac spells and kraken and all. Arthur watched him flailing and stepped closer still, stopping only when his shoes bumped into the toes of Merlin's tartan Doc Martens. Merlin flinched back, conscious of Arthur's pent up anger and not understanding it at all.

"You lied to me," Arthur said, very coldly. "I trusted you, and all this time you've been lying to me." He narrowed his eyes. "Have you been playing at bodyguard too, along with Val and Leon and all the rest of them? Have you? Were you told to follow me around, like my own personal guard dog?"

Merlin looked at him helplessly. "It's not like that," he said.

"But it's no coincidence that we're sharing a room, is it? It wasn't just for a joke, because of your daft name; they put you in here to watch me. To pretend to be my friend, and – and, my God, I am such a fucking idiot," he said, shaking his head in disbelief. "It's so bloody obvious, now." He turned and walked away, and began pacing up and down the little stretch of space in between their beds. "You were assigned to me," he said, hoarsely.

"No! Not – well, sort of, but not the way you're making it sound," Merlin protested.

"Sure."

Arthur stopped pacing and turned very sharply, his face going from blotchily flushed to suddenly colourless as some thought struck him. "Have you cast any spells on me?" he asked, his voice a horrified rasp.

Merlin blanched. "Er – well," he said, temporising, and he swallowed hard. "Well – well, technically yes, but only…"

He didn't get to finish the sentence, because he found himself on the receiving end of a very impressive right hook, and as he staggered back the edge of the bed caught the back of his knees and made him fold up automatically, so that he was suddenly sitting on the edge of the bed.

"I don't believe you!" Arthur said, wide eyed and shocky. "I fucking trusted you! I even thought – I actually – I – but, oh, Christ, this is messed up."

They just stared at one another for a long moment, Merlin clutching his aching nose and trying to understand what had made this whole situation go plummeting so rapidly downhill.

"Arthur – you can always trust me," he said at last, sounding miserable and desperate to his own ears. "I wouldn't do anything to hurt you."

"What, like lie to me?" Arthur snapped back, his voice hard as nails. "Like lose my plane?"

"No! I didn't – Arthur, I wasn't lying to you. I was just – leaving some things out. Like you did about your Air Squadron."

"Except not really all that like," Arthur spat. "I never pretended to be your friend. At least with Leon and Val and the rest, I know it's about work – that they're being paid to shadow me around. I don't go imagining that we're friends or that – or anything else. God. God, I can't stand to look at you right now, you duplicitous fucker." He shook his head. "Well, sorry if this screws up your annual evaluation, or whatever you get, but I'm out of here, Merlin Emrys. If that's even your name."

"Of course it's my bloody name," snapped Merlin. "Don't – don't – what are you doing?"
"Packing an overnight bag," said Arthur, tersely. "I'll send somebody to collect the rest of my stuff tomorrow."

Merlin felt his jaw drop. "No, that's – no, don't go!" he said, reaching out a hand automatically and then dropping it when he saw the look on Arthur's face. "You've got this all wrong, damn it!" he said.

"You lied to me. You worked magic on me without my permission. You are not the man I thought you were," said Arthur, tightly, shoving his toothbrush into the half-packed bag and opening his underwear drawer. "Don't come near me again, Merlin. I don't want to see you. Ever."

"But..."

"Get out of my fucking way." Merlin was blocking the door now, and Arthur looked absolutely ready to deck him. "I'm warning you."


"I'm not your mate," Arthur said, his tone thoroughly withering. "I'm not even a fucking acquaintance. I don't know who the hell you are, and I don't want to. Now get out of the bloody way."

Merlin just stood there for a moment, quivering with frustration and anger and misery, scrabbling around for the words that could fix all this and make Arthur see that Merlin was still Merlin, and that they were still friends. But the words didn't come, and instead he found himself stepping aside and watching as Arthur Pendragon, his best friend, stupid love of his stupid life (and perhaps of his past lives too) marched furiously out of the room and slammed the door behind him.
"Professor Gaius?"

"Merlin? Merlin Emrys? This isn't really a very good time, my boy. Can it wait until our tutorial tomorrow?"

Merlin stared blankly at the wall in front of him, his fingers wrapped tight around the phone. "No?" he said, after a moment.

"Oh, very well then – get on with it. What?"

"Um." Merlin tried to sort the whirlwind of his thoughts into some kind of useful order. "Arthur knows I'm a wizard, and he's very pissed off indeed. And I sort of turned his plane into part of the School of Sorcery. Or turned The Great Dragon into a plane, depending on your perspective. Although at least it was only the Learjet, and not one of those Typhoon things, dripping with weaponry and pirate-detectors."

There was an astounded silence on the other end of the line.

"Professor Gaius? Are you still there, sir?"

"Yes, Merlin," said the professor in a very even voice. "I'm just having a bit of a sit down. Will I regret asking why you decided to help a dead monster to possess the prince's private jet? We'll leave aside the mindboggling question of how for the moment."

"It was crashing into the sea," said Merlin, simply. "The jet. With us in it. We needed a way out – I thought that would do it."

"I see," said Gaius. "And this is the first method that sprang to mind? Not, for example, a simple teleport spell to move you off the plane – or, come to that, to move the plane to the runway?"

"Er – I haven't really learned them yet," Merlin said, sheepishly. "This seemed easier."

"It seemed easier," said Gaius. "Of course it did. An impossible task once performed in the Golden Age of sorcery 'seemed easier'. I suppose I should be grateful you didn't turn him into a kraken."


He was sitting on Arthur's bed with his back pressed to the wall and his knees folded up in front of his chest, and saying this out loud made it all seem far more real and final. "He thinks I lied to him, and manipulated him, and so he's moving out. Moved out. He's gone."

"What? Where?"

"He didn't say. Probably to crash with Kay and Gawain, or with Morgana."

"Where are the bodyguards?" Gaius demanded, tersely.

"I don't know – still next door, I suppose? I don't think he'll have stopped to collect them, the mood he's in. Val's still at Leuchars, I should think, with Pell and the Bentley."

"I don't believe it! Oh, hellfire and brimstone," said Gaius. "I'd better sort that out first. Well, sit tight, Merlin. You did a good job of keeping him safe, at least, and that's the main thing."
Merlin wasn't at all sure that Arthur would agree with that right now, but it was something to hold on to.

* * *

"Hello, this is Nightline, how can I help you?"

"Hi – just wondered if Gwen was there? She's not answering her mobile."

There was an awkward pause. "All our volunteers are anonymous, I'm afraid."

"But I know she's in Nightline. She's my best mate. I know Lance too. Look, just – is she there?"

"..."

"Oh, for fuck's sake," said Merlin, punching the wall and then wincing. "Look, if I said that I had to speak to a woman because, ah, because it's a gay thing, and I don't trust you aren't going to be a judgmental and homophobic straight bloke, could I speak to a female volunteer?"

"None of us would be judgmental or homophobic – I'll be happy to listen to whatever you want to talk about."

"But what if I only want to talk to a woman. Can I?"

"Well...yes."

"Right. I only want to talk to a woman. Who may or may not be called Gwen Smith."

There was another pause, and Merlin could faintly hear something being mumbled in the background before a familiar voice filled his ears:

"...Hello, this is Nightline, how can I help you?"

"Oh, thank God. Gwen, it's Merlin."

"Merlin! What are you playing at? We can't take personal calls on the main line – it's for people with real problems!" She sounded scandalised.

"What about distressed calls from people who need advice to help them cope when their lives are falling down around their ears?" Merlin asked, his voice shaking. "Can you take calls like that?"

"Did something happen?" she asked, suddenly gentle.

"Yes," said Merlin, clutching his mobile more tightly. "Yes, you could say that. Arthur's – he's moving out."

"He what?"

"He found out about the magic, and he went ballistic because I was lying to him, and then he moved out."

"Fuck!"

"Yeah." Merlin wiped his nose with the back of his hand. "He – basically, I think he pretty much hates my guts right now."
"I'm sure he'll get over it. It's probably just the shock. I mean, it's a lot to take on board all at once, finding out all about, er, what did you call it? Dungeons and Dragons?"

Merlin was startled into a laugh. "World of Warcraft."

"Right, that. And finding out that you're basically Frodo, or whatever."

"I'm not Frodo!"

"Look, I fell asleep half way through the movie. You know what I mean, though – it's a lot to take in, that's all I'm saying. No wonder he overreacted – but I'm sure he'll get over it. You two are like peas in a pod."

"But – but it's because I lied to him, Gwen. He thinks I was just pretending to be his friend," said Merlin, his throat closing up. "Because I was supposed to watch over him and keep him safe – I mean, that's why they put me in with him in the first place, but that doesn't mean I was just protecting him because of that, or that I was just spending time with him to protect him! He's got it all wrong, and I don't know how to make it right again. And I – I – oh, Gwen," his voice hitched, and dropped to a whisper. "I bloody love him. Actually. Love him. Quite a lot. In a probably-permanent sort of way."

"Oh!" said Gwen, drawing a sharp breath. "Oh, bloody hell! Really?"

"Yeah. Hey, are you allowed to swear at callers?"

"Only the ones called Merlin."

"Fair enough, then." There was another little pause. "So what should I do?" Merlin asked.

"What do you want to do?"

"Say sorry? Explain better? Tell him I love him? Make him understand?"

"And what do you think he wants?"

"Well – me to fuck off, at the minute. But – but I know he likes me, even if he isn't admitting it. I mean – I mean like like. Like I like him. In, you know, a probably-permanent kind of way. He just doesn't remember the kiss."

Gwen drew another deep breath. "Merlin, sweetheart, I think you'd better go back to the beginning and fill me in on all the gossip I've evidently been missing."

* * *

Merlin knew it was probably pretty emo to go for a long, lonely walk down the West Sands on a cold November afternoon just because he knew that Arthur always went there for his morning run, but he did not care. If he wanted to be emo, he was bloody well going to be emo and nobody was going to stop him. There were plenty of black-clad teenagers with black-dyed hair and chipped black nail polish out there in the world who were listening to gloomy music and writing bad poetry with far less justification for being miserable than Merlin currently had.

He could see Morgana's flat as he walked alongside the golf course towards the beach, and he couldn't help wondering whether Arthur was there, and, if so, what exactly Morgana might be telling him.
The North Sea was almost black, and the wind that whistled in off it was bitterly cold. Merlin was wearing a long-sleeved t-shirt under a short-sleeved t-shirt under a jumper under a hoody; the hoody was Arthur's, and Merlin was not one bit sorry he'd appropriated it for the purposes of his emo walk of emo, because it was warm and cozy and it smelled like Arthur. As he walked along, his hands balled up into cold fists in the pockets of the hoody and his beanie tugged down over his ears, Merlin tried to pinpoint which of his choices had led to this point, and how he could have done things differently. And what he could do now to make Arthur want to see him again.

He was still no closer to knowing how to fix everything when he reached the far end of the West Sands, where the colony of seals – and occasional selkies – could sometimes be seen. Looking back, the proud facades of the houses and Halls and Hotels of St Andrews looked like Toy Town in the distance; it was an iconic image associated with the movie 'Chariots of Fire', according to Arthur, who had got quite worked up when Merlin said he'd never watched it, and didn't think a film about running sounded very interesting.

Arthur.

Merlin sighed, and perched on the sparsely grassy slope that led up to the Royal and Ancient golf course, and looked out to sea.

"It's not fair," he whispered hoarsely, where nobody could hear him letting his inner twelve-year-old out. "It just isn't fair."

And he was still sitting there alone, staring miserably out to sea, red-eyed and snot-nosed, when the kraken showed up to try and comfort him.

* * *

Merlin was a little bit damp despite his best efforts, and smelled rather unfortunately like calamari when he finally got back to Sallies, but he was at least smiling again. It was early evening, and he was having some trouble believing how many different things he'd managed to cram into his day already. Arguably being dragged half way through Poseidon's realm in a warm, rubbery bubble of air and light by a well-meaning sea monster had probably been the least upsetting part of his day; the kraken really was a rather lovely singer, and when it wasn't busy devouring the various creatures of the deep it seemed to have quite a good relationship with them these days. Evidently it had taken Merlin's advice to heart. He was a little bemused by the sight of the mermaids – terrifying creatures with their razor-sharp teeth, swirling seawrack hair and spindly fingers – busily braiding the kraken's smaller tentacles together, and was adjusting his ideas about sharks to encompass a hammerhead that had been trained to fetch tossed branches of coral. It had certainly not been a dull afternoon, and although there was still a bone-deep unhappiness gnawing away at him, he was no longer moping, and had almost started to relax.

All of which, of course, came to a rather abrupt end when he got back to his room and found Arthur waiting for him.
"You came back!" said Merlin, because apparently stating the obvious was one of his superpowers.

Arthur glared at him fiercely from his position on the chair, his arms crossed in front of his chest like a low budget Bond villain.

"Close the bloody door," he snapped. His voice was pitched low, and he sounded like he'd quite like to take another swing at Merlin right now.

"Right," said Merlin, swallowing, and obeyed. "I'm – I'm glad you came back," he said, feeling stupid. He didn't know what to do with his hands.

"Are you wearing my hoody?" Arthur asked abruptly, looking startled and wrongfooted.

"Oh! Er - yes. Er. Sorry?"

Arthur digested this piece of information. "For some kind of magical reason?"

"Er. No," said Merlin, flushing from the warmth of the room after the chilly evening air, and not at all because he'd been caught acting like a love-struck extra from Twilight.

Arthur raised an eyebrow. "Morgana trusts you, which is the only reason I'm here. She told me about Sophia," he said. "And about the potion Trickler put on the tablet." He flushed. "And something about a pair of vampires?"

"And an oversexed selkie, a small flock of ghouls, a gargoylce, and the ghost of Patrick Hamilton," Merlin added, since apparently the secrecy ship had pretty much sailed now.

Arthur nodded, his eyes widening only fractionally, and drummed his fingers on his upper arm.

"Well, you're clearly earning your wages," he said, tonelessly.

"I'm not getting any wages, you wanker," said Merlin, suddenly cross.

"Really?" Arthur didn't look convinced.

Merlin rolled his eyes. "Well, I'm getting the Camelot scholarship, obviously, because I'm a wizard – we all get that, to get us up here. So there's that. But that's now why I've been keeping you safe, you stupid stupid man."

"Why, then?" asked Arthur. His voice was surprisingly quiet, and he sounded sincerely desperate to know.

"Because I love you, you twat," Merlin said, taxed beyond endurance. "All right? Not just because Gaius nagged me into it – because I bloody love you. How can I not want to keep you safe, when I've got the power?"

The silence that followed this admission was deafening. Merlin stared at Arthur, replaying what he'd just said and trying to remember why this was supposed to be a secret.

Arthur got slowly to his feet, his face still fierce and unsmiling. "Really?" he said, flatly, taking a step forward. "And I'm supposed to believe that, am I?"
Merlin swallowed. "Yes?"

Arthur wasn't slowing down, and Merlin found himself being backed right up to the door until he bumped into it, and Arthur stepped closer still – so close that Merlin could feel his body heat bleeding in through all the layers of clothing.

"Then you won't mind telling me precisely what bloody spells you cast on me, and undoing them," Arthur said, each word bitten off neat and sharp and deadly.


Arthur looked slightly surprised, but still suspicious. "Good." He was standing right in Merlin's space, close enough to wrap his hands around Merlin's throat and squeeze, and from the expression on his face it seemed that he was at least a little tempted to do just that. "Well then?"

"Well, when I realised you were all, you know, twitterpated about Lady Viva, I – er, well, I basically knocked you out," Merlin admitted, sheepishly. "Just so I could buy a little time to get help in figuring out what she'd done to you, before you went rushing off and proposed marriage, or something. Um. Sorry."

Arthur looked at him narrowly. "And?"

"Well – okay, and there was one other thing, but it was just – I – Morgana told you about the spell? The Lady Viva spell? And, er, the only way to cure it?" Not that Morgana actually knew who had done the curing, mind you. Although she probably had a pretty damn good guess.

"Yes," said Arthur, tightly.

"Right. Well – I thought you probably wouldn't want to remember that," Merlin said, blushing red as a pillar box. "Um. Sorry."

Arthur's expression became very set. "That really wasn't your choice to make, was it?" he said. He looked at Merlin expectantly. "And?"

"Er – and nothing. That's it."

Arthur did not look convinced. "Right – well, I'm sure you'll be okay with using this, then," he said, tersely, producing a pale chunk of crystal from his pocket and eyeing it with an expression of distaste. "Morgana says she's charged it up, whatever the hell that means, and that if we're both touching it at the same time it will neutralise the effects of whatever magic you did on me, and glow with a blue light to show it's done." His expression grew colder. "Unless you cast something on me that's too powerful for it to deal with. Something dark. Then it glows red."

Merlin looked down unhappily, and then back at Arthur's face. "I wouldn't do that," he said. "The spells I did cast – I was only trying to help."

"Messing with my head? That's not helping," Arthur said, looking pointedly at the crystal he was holding out to Merlin. Merlin sighed and laced his fingers with Arthur's, feeling the cupped crystal sharp and hard between their hands.

"I'm sorry," he said. He kept his gaze fixed on Arthur's eyes, wondering just how pissed off he was going to be and waiting to see whether the memory of kissing Gwen, and of kissing Merlin, was going to write its changes on Arthur's face as he felt the magic flaring up icy and potent between
their palms, sending static shooting out across their skin and making Arthur gasp. Merlin bit his lip as
Arthur pulled their hands apart and looked down at the crystal; he kept his eyes fixed on Arthur's
face, knowing already what colour it must be.

"Blue," Arthur said, sounding dazed. He looked up at Merlin, his brows drawing together. "So – it
wasn't Gwen? Morgana told me about – she said Gwen had helped you undo the spell, and I
thought..." He swallowed hard. "I thought maybe you'd done something to my head, on that first
day, when you walked in, because I felt – I've never felt like that before. I thought it had to be –
but..." He shook his head, his eyes huge and his expression oddly defenseless. "And it was bloody
you all along! You broke the spell, not Gwen!" He stared at Merlin, swallowing hard. "You're in love
with me!" he said, like it was an accusation.

Merlin stared back at him with his heart in his mouth, boggling madly. "You thought I'd cast a spell
to make you fancy me?" he said, after a long, astounded moment, trying to reconcile the thought of
Arthur being smitten with the rude, glaring, overbearing person he'd first met. Although Arthur was
pretty damned defensive at the best of times, and subscribed to the theory that attack was the best
form of defense, so...

"Of course I did, when you told me you'd cast a spell on me - you stupid stupid sod," Arthur said,
with feeling, and he grabbed Merlin by the collar and dragged him into a furious kiss.

In the back of his head, Merlin was still faintly aware that this was a bad idea, but for the life of him
he couldn't think what could possibly be more important right now than the hot crush of Arthur's
mouth against his, or the frantic press of Arthur's leg jammed between his thighs.

"Stupid!" gasped Arthur, hoarsely, running a hand down Merlin's side to rest at his waist and biting
at Merlin's bottom lip so hard Merlin was surprised he didn't taste blood in their kiss. "Bloody stupid
interfering idiot! Don't you fucking dare mess with my head again!"

"Sorry," Merlin said, the word getting lost in the indent of Arthur's lip. And then for a while there
wasn't any talking at all, just the hot, frantic stutter of moist breath and tangling tongues, while hands
slid and clutched and fabric tugged and slithered. Merlin was panting as if he'd just won a race –
'Chariots of Fire' really had nothing on this, his back jammed hard against the unyielding wooden
doors and Arthur Pendragon wrapped around his front, grinding up against him like the best kind of
daydream. Merlin had one hand buried in the soft clean hair at the nape of Arthur's neck and the
other clutching tight at the curve of Arthur's arse, squeezing hard enough to bruise, and he could feel
the hard line of Arthur's arousal rubbing hotly up against his hip through their jeans. Arthur's mouth
was skating over his skin, pressing breathless, open-mouthed kisses onto his jaw and angling
Merlin's head so he could nuzzle against the cool skin of his throat, licking at the salt left by the
North Sea wind.

"You smell like seafood," said Arthur, sounding baffled and disapproving but not slowing down one
jot, and Merlin thought back to the caverns of the sea and the bittersweet delight of floating fathoms
deep through water like forgotten tears, listening to whalesong and watching shoals of glinting fish
scatter at the kraken's approach, and he laughed out loud.

"I had a busy afternoon," he said, and then sucked in a breath as Arthur thumbed open the button of
his jeans.

"It's about to get busier," Arthur said huskily, and it was all that Merlin could do not to come right
then and there.

"Fuck," he said, swallowing.
"That's – the – general – idea," Arthur agreed, fumbling with Merlin's zip and then yanking it down and dipping his fingers inside, only the taut cotton of Merlin's boxer briefs separating Arthur's questing hand from Merlin's cock.

"Jesus!" gasped Merlin, grabbing Arthur's hips with both hands to steady himself and panting hard as Arthur cupped him through his underwear and started to stroke experimentally. "Oh, God – yes, please please yes!"

"Do you have any idea how much I've been wanting to do this?" asked Arthur, breathlessly, his voice rumbling in his chest. "Watching you getting dressed – watching you padding around fresh from the shower in just your bloody towel, with rivulets of water sliding down from your hair, and your eyelashes all clumped together – trying not to stare at your bloody hipbones and your fucking nipples all pink and tight in the cold - Jesus, Merlin, you have been killing me."

Merlin normally prided himself on having pretty good stamina, but his dick had spent the past three months in a state of high alert, frantic to get near Arthur Pendragon, and listening to Arthur spilling these secrets in his plummy, educated voice as his fingers twined tightly around Merlin's erection, even through the cotton, was rather a lot more than he could cope with – and before he knew quite what he was doing it was already too damned late, and he was coming, damn it, pathetically soon, hard and helpless and still fully dressed, with Arthur's wicked mouth swallowing his gasps and Arthur's fingers stuffed awkwardly down the front of his jeans.

"Shit," he gasped, his head lolling back on the stem of his neck and a mortified blush stealing up over his skin. He slumped back against the door and accepted Arthur's hungry kisses in a daze, his knees trembling and his pulse pounding fast and frantic in his veins. "Fuck, Arthur," he said, raggedly, as Arthur pressed kisses onto every inch of his face and throat like it was territory he was claiming for the British Empire. At last he found the spot on Merlin's neck where Edwin had left a mark, and then Arthur really went to town, all tongue and teeth and suction as his fingers slid up inside all the layers of shirts and hoody to smooth over Merlin's bare skin.

"I want you naked," said Arthur. "Now. I want to see you."

Merlin swallowed. "Okay," he said, shivering. And then Arthur was tugging him over to the bed – to Arthur's bed – and scooping the layers of warm fabric up, over Merlin's shoulders, over his head and dropping it down to pool on the floor, leaving Merlin feeling deliciously exposed to Arthur's avid gaze. There was another little space of time where they had to do some more of the urgent kissing, Arthur straddling his lap and grinding down onto him, warm fingers exploring all the planes and angles of Merlin's back and chest and shoulders, lingering over his nipples like they were the best toy ever and wringing shocked, filthy sounds from Merlin's throat.


"God, you're pushy!"

"And you're only realising this now?"

Merlin snorted with laughter. "Fair point," he agreed. "Kind of difficult to take my trousers off when you're sitting right there, though, you horny bugger."

Arthur made an impatient sound and climbed off Merlin.

"Get on with it!" he said, in that familiar, peremptory voice that always made Merlin want to grab his shoulders and just bloody show him. He half-rose off the bed, hitching his jeans down, and then found himself stuck with a load of denim around his ankles when his tartan Doc Martens got in the
"Oh, fuck!" Merlin said, frustrated, and he collapsed backwards, sprawling out on the bed with his bare legs stretched out, ending in a messy heap of scrunched denim and a sturdy pair of boots.

"Oh my God – you are such a loser!" said Arthur, with laughter warming his gruff voice. "You totally fail at the basic skill of undressing. Toddlers can do this better than you. Chimpanzees can do it. You are totally, pathetically useless, Merlin Emrys," he said, licking a curving line over the pale skin of Merlin's chest and biting down gently on his right nipple, sucking until Merlin arched up off the bed with a wordless, urgent sound. And then Arthur slid down to the floor and sat between Merlin's parted knees.

"Do you know how many filthy, unspeakable, probably illegal things you're going to have to do to thank me for abasing myself like this?" Arthur said, conversationally, as he untied Merlin's laces with deft fingers and pulled off the Doc Martens one by one, and the socks too. "Lots. I mean, really, lots and lots. Right. There." He rose smoothly to his feet and looked down at Merlin through his eyelashes. "Now proceed with making nakedness happen."

Merlin stood up shakily and shucked off his jeans and his underwear and stepped right into Arthur's space and wrapped himself around him, reveling in the feel of Arthur's eager hands exploring the smooth expanse of his back and curling possessively over the cheeks of his arse.

"Love you," said Merlin, his heart brimming painfully with delight, and Arthur made a sound in the back of his throat and pushed forward, carrying them both down onto the bed where they lost several more minutes in desperate, urgent licking and kissing and suckling and grappling, and Merlin found himself starting to laugh for no very good reason beyond the fact that he was simply just that happy.

"Look, Your Royal Toppiness, this would work a lot better if the nudity was mutual," said Merlin, after a while, feeling frankly frustrated that he wasn't getting to do his fair share of ogling, and that his groping opportunities were at one remove.


Merlin shuddered at the way Arthur was using his fingers to punctuate the words, and closed his eyes for a long, blissful moment.

"God, that's – fuck!" he said, incoherently. "Yeah!" It occurred to him that he had had a point, and that that point had involved getting Arthur's kit off. "But, no – hang on," he said, half-drunk on sensation but still aware that he was a man with a mission. "Stop being so bloody dressed, damn it!"

He pushed himself up and off Arthur, and then dragged Arthur to his feet and kissed him again, very thoroughly indeed.

"Take it all off," Merlin said, breathlessly, when he finally broke away from Arthur's mouth. "I want to lie here and watch you stripping everything off, for me. So I can fuck you senseless. Your Royal Highness."

Arthur gave a full-body shiver at that, and palmed himself frantically through his jeans as Merlin stepped back and lay down on the bed, his thighs slightly parted and his hand tugging at his half-hard cock in a leisurely fashion as his heavy-lidded gaze travelled from Arthur's tousled blond hair to his kiss-swollen lips, and then lower, to rest pointedly on the bulge in his jeans.

"Oh, bloody hell," said Arthur, in a shaking voice, unable to take his eyes off Merlin. "You should be illegal, Merlin Emrys!"
"Less talking, more stripping," said Merlin, sliding his free hand up over his chest to pull at one peaked pink nipple. Arthur made an overwrought noise and toed off his shoes at the same time as he was pulling his jumper and the crisp, open-collared white shirt up over his head together. Merlin watched the shirt's progress with open enjoyment, taking in the firm flat belly and the fine treasure-trail of blond hair that led down into his jeans as they were revealed, and then gazing his fill at Arthur's chest. He wasn't as buff as Gawain, but Merlin liked him all the better for it – it made him look more human and approachable. More fuckable. More real.

Arthur bit his lip as the jumper dropped to the floor, leaving his hair sticking out at stupid angles. He was staring at Merlin's hand, watching it moving over Merlin's growing erection like this was the most fascinating thing he'd ever seen.

"Come on, you lazy git," said Merlin, frowning. "This isn't Spearmint Rhino. You're not going to be getting a better tip by milking the tease part of the strip tease. Just get your bloody kit off now and get your arse back over here!"

Arthur let his gaze slide on up over Merlin's belly, lingering a little on the love bite at his throat and on his rosy, bitten mouth before meeting his eyes. And he never took his eyes away from Merlin's as he shucked off his jeans and his underwear and balanced on first one foot and then the other, pulling off his socks. Merlin made an inchoate sound sodden with lust at the sight of him, and his hand started jerking more quickly.

"Get over here," Merlin said, hoarsely. "Right the hell now, damn it!"

"Thought you'd never ask," said Arthur, smiling wickedly, and in two short strides he was straddling Merlin's lap again, acres of naked skin pressing warm and firm against Merlin's flesh. "Now where were we?"

* * *

"So just what exactly did you do to 'Excalibur', then?" Arthur asked, at some point before dawn, his face burrowed into the nape of Merlin's neck.

"Er," said Merlin, pushing languorously back into Arthur's embrace and enjoying the shocking novelty of all that warm and naked skin. "I sort of turned it into a dragon," he admitted.

There was an interested pause.

"Into a dragon," said Arthur at last. "You're going to be the most unpredictable boyfriend ever, aren't you?"

There was another pause, whilst Merlin turned that sentence over and over in his mind, and had a bit of a moment. "Boyfriend?" he said, when he could trust his voice.

"Do you prefer girlfriend?" Arthur asked, and Merlin could hear him smiling.

"Oi! You can't go impugning my manhood after I..."

"Yes, yes, fine," Arthur interrupted, sounding embarrassed. "So – boyfriend, then."

Merlin felt like his face was going to crack from smiling. "Oh," he said, eloquently. "Okay."

He wriggled around in Arthur's arms and kissed him quite hard for quite some time, which led to rather more than kissing, and one way or another the conversation got put on hold for a while. When it was resumed, they were both fairly sweaty and disgusting, and Merlin was aching very pleasantly
"Boyfriend," he said again, shaking his head in the darkness and wondering if he'd ever stop smiling.

"Yeah," said Arthur. There was a little pause. "Only – only we'll have to keep it secret, of course," he added, awkwardly.

"Oh," said Merlin, feeling his heart drop. Which was stupid, because of course he'd known that Arthur wasn't going to bound out onto the street and proclaim himself a raging poof too all and sundry. Nothing had changed. Arthur was still the Prince of Wales, and still expected to act the part, and so it was utterly ridiculous to feel disappointed. He swallowed hard and tried not to mind.

"Right."

"Sorry," Arthur said, miserably. "I mean - it's not that I don't want to - to - but, oh, fuck, you see how it is, don't you? I just can't."

"No, no, of course," said Merlin, brightly. "I understand. I mean, that's why I cast the stupid memory charm in the first place. I know you can't really be - I mean, I get it. It's fine. It's more than fine. And it's nobody else's business, anyway."

Arthur rolled over and scooped him into another kiss - sweeter, this time, and penitent. Tender.

"I love you too," Arthur said, the words pressed into Merlin's skin like a secret. "I never thought I could have this. Have you. But - I love you too."

And that, Merlin told himself, fiercely, really ought to be more than enough for anyone.
"They fired Val."

Merlin had known as soon as he set eyes on Arthur that something must have gone wrong since breakfast time; to be perfectly honest, Merlin hasn't been able to concentrate all that well on either of his lectures that morning, and it wasn't just because he had to sit down rather gingerly, wincing at various well-deserved aches. The physical distractions were the very least of it – although admittedly he'd been unable to stop rubbing at the spot on his neck where Arthur's massively ill-advised love bite was hidden by the loops of his green scarf. When he walked back through the door of their room and saw the look on Arthur's face, there was a horrible moment where his heart suddenly sank down to his boots, and he was sure that Arthur was going to tell him it was all a horrible mistake, and he'd realised he wasn't really gay at all, and that it would be best for all concerned if they stayed Just Good Friends. So it took him a couple of moments to process the import of what Arthur was actually saying, because a good chunk of his brain was busy thinking: "Oh thank God oh thank God oh thank God!"

"They fired Val? Who fired Val? Why did they fire Val?" he asked.

Arthur looked as mortified as Merlin had ever seen him. "My father," he said. "Because of me. Because I'd talked him into staying in the car – which was completely my fault, only Father says that it was his responsibility to stay with me at all times, regardless of my orders. But it's stupid, because it wouldn't have made a blind bit of difference if he'd been with me! The engines were buggered, and Val couldn't have done anything to change that! And if you hadn't been there, he'd have just died with me, which would have been completely pointless." He raked a hand through his hair, looking so lost that it was all Merlin could do not to walk right up and enfold him in a hug – but clearly he wasn't quite done with his ranting yet, so Merlin held off.

"Is he okay?" he asked instead.

Arthur threw his arms up in the air. "For a given definition of 'okay' that encompasses getting thrown out on one's ear without a reference, and probably blacklisted, knowing my father – yes, he's fine. Peachy. Fit as a fiddle."

"But he's not – I mean, they're not going to lock him up in the Tower for dereliction of duty, or whatever, right?"

"For showing a tiny bit of human empathy and letting me have five minutes to myself once a week? Or less than that, even – because it was only his turn to babysit me at Leuchars once a fortnight. God. It's so unfair! My father can be so damned – I mean, God, it took all I could do to stop him from sacking Pell too, and all he'd done was drive me to Leuchars, exactly like he's supposed to!" Arthur shook his head incredulously. "I mean, how the hell do you justify that? Sometimes he's just so – God. God!"

Merlin bit his bottom lip. "Well, you are his only child."

"Oh, really? Good heavens, I hadn't noticed."

"No, sorry – I just mean, you know, he loves you. He must have been terrified when he realised how close he came to losing you."

Arthur stopped pacing, and stared at Merlin for a moment. He looked like he was about to say
something, and then thought better of it. After a moment he said, in a different voice: "You're right, of course. I know that's why he's being such a complete arse about it. I do know. But I wish he could take a step back and be reasonable!"

"He's your dad," Merlin said, awkwardly. "Freaking out when you have a near-death experience is part of his job spec."

Arthur gave a stifled little half-laugh in spite of himself. "Well, yes, okay, I suppose so. But – God, I feel so bad for poor bloody Val! I mean, I saved Pell's job for him, at least – although they've confiscated the car. No plane, no car, and the way Father was shouting I think I'll be lucky to get my own tricycle before I turn thirty. But, you know – at least Pell's okay. And he's married with kids, so that would have been dreadful. But Val – God, I just hope Father doesn't blacklist him. I mean, he's a bloody bodyguard, for goodness' sake! That's his career path pretty thoroughly stuffed, if word gets out that he was fired for letting me nearly get myself killed." He sat down on the bed and stared at Merlin unhappily. "And that's my fault. Just because I was being selfish, and he let me be – he's completely buggered. God."

Merlin sat down next to him. "Maybe you could give him a reference?" he suggested, after a moment.

Arthur's face lit up. "Oh! Oh, God, I'm an idiot – I could absolutely do that, couldn't I?"

Merlin nodded, smiling to see how Arthur's face was transformed. It was like watching the sun come up, and it made Merlin want to kiss him quite urgently. Which, he realised a heartbeat later, was perfectly acceptable now, so he did.

"Mmm," said Arthur, a little later. He grinned at Merlin. "Hey, I tell you what, though – the pater thinks that you're the bee's knees. Apparently he had no idea that my roommate was a wizard, but he thinks that we should spend lots of time together." His mouth twitched. "I think the phrase he used was 'joined at the hip'. Do you think you could cope with that?"

Merlin grinned. "It's a dirty job, but I suppose somebody's got to do it."

"And by dirty job, you mean porn. Right?"

"Oh, definitely," said Merlin, with feeling, leaning back in for another kiss.

* * *

McKay's Bar and Restaurant was not their usual watering hole, but it had the incontestable advantage of being right next door to the New Picture House, and thus an excellent place to meet up with friends before going to catch the Wednesday Late Night Show which was, on this occasion, 'The Princess Bride'. After a fair bit of bickering, the lads had been persuaded to come along because Lance assured them that the fight scenes were great, and that it was funny, but Kay was still quite suspicious about it being a chick flick. They were waiting to meet the girls, and while they did, conversation had turned, as conversations inevitably will, to football.

"Oh, don't give me that! Drogba was blatantly offside! The fucking ref must have been blind!" Kay protested, lowering his pint to the table so he could underline his point with a lot of hand waving.

Arthur leaned back against the saggy upholstery and gave a placid shrug. "You're just a sore loser,
Kay. Face it: Man U are shit, and Chelsea kicked their arses for them, thus proving that there is, in fact, a God. "Unseen, Arthur's foot found Merlin's ankle under the table and started rubbing lazy circles against it. Merlin swallowed, and his fingers tightened around his gin and tonic as he tried very hard indeed not to react.

"Rubbish!" Kay said, almost bouncing in his seat with frustration. "That goal should never have been allowed."

"Que sera sera," said Arthur. "And anyway, we were already beating you one nil."

"If Neville hadn't been on the bench with that stupid bloody knee injury..."

"But he was," said Lance. "And even if he hadn't been, they really weren't playing well. Malouda was bang on form, passing to Cole with real style, and then Cole punched it into the goal."

"Oh, mate, that was a thing of beauty!" said Arthur, beaming at Lance. It was, Merlin reflected, completely bloody predictable that the two of them would bond over football, when they'd never really connected all that well on other things. Arthur was clearly a bit bemused about the Buddhism and the vegetarianism, and although he approved of the kickboxing in principle it wasn't really his thing - but when it came to talking about running, or about football, they could go on for hours, waxing lyrical about Chelsea until Merlin found himself never wanting to hear the word again.

"Yeah, all right, all right, that's enough of that," grumbled Kay. "Stop rubbing it in." He glared over at Merlin. "I don't know what you're grinning about," he added. "Cardiff aren't even in the Premier league!"

"He doesn't support Cardiff," said Arthur. "He supports West Bromwich Albion, for some bloody silly reason." He wasn't even looking at Merlin, but the toe of his shoe was drawing random patterns up over the calf of Merlin's jeans.

"The Baggies?" Kay said, his voice laced with disdain. "Good God."

"It's not a bloody silly reason!" Merlin said, unevenly. "They were the first team I ever watched, when I was little. They're a proper team, not like your bloody Big Four, all made up of foreigners you've bought in. They're like one of those manufactured boybands, Man U and Chelsea, with no bloody soul! Albion's a proper British team!"


"Yeah, okay, fine – but at least twenty of them are local lads. That's twice as many Brits as you've got in bloody Chelsea."

"We celebrate diversity. And the ability to kick the ball into the net. You might want to look into that, Merlin," said Arthur, at his most annoyingly pratlike, barely paying any attention to Merlin as he tapped away at his iPhone.

"You wait and see," Merlin said, pink-cheeked and flustered as Arthur continued with his unrepentant game of footsie under the table. "Albion's got the, the spirit of greatness, and one of these days they're going to just show you all!"

Kay cracked up. "Oooh, yeah, I'm sure Gary Neville's just crapping his pants. Get a clue, Emrys, for God's sakes! If you're going to support a team that's not your own town, at least don't pick a bunch of sadsack losers."

"The Baggies aren't a bad little team," Gawain said, mildly and Kay threw a Scampi Fry at him.
"Gawain, you support the bloody Crusaders, who aren't even a real team. You're not allowed to have an opinion."

"They are so a real team," Gawain said, unoffended. "Get away with you! They could kick your lads' arses for them."

"Oh come on, who the hell cares about the Irish Football League? A handful of farmers and terrorists kicking a pigskin around - that's not the beautiful game!"

Merlin's phone vibrated in his pocket. He glanced over at Arthur, who was leaning over and talking to Lance and Percy about Lampard, and then thumbed the button.

Want u 2 suck my cock

Merlin stared at the screen, feeling quite certain that there was a big neon sign hanging over his head that read "Why yes, I am fucking the Prince of Wales! Ask me how!" He darted guilty eyes over to Arthur again, and then looked over at where Gawain and Kay were discussing the merits of the Irish Football League. Nobody seemed to have developed sudden powers of telepathy, which was lucky.

He swallowed, and tapped in a quick message.

You want U2 to suck your cock? Crikey! I had no idea you fancied Bono.

And then he took a sip of his gin and tonic and tried to pay attention to Gawain's conversation. Out of the corner of his eye he was aware of Arthur pulling his phone out of his pocket, and then making a stifled choking sound and tapping something furiously onto the screen. It was all Merlin could do to keep from laughing out loud.

A moment later, his own phone vibrated again.

No you numbskull I fancy bonING.

Merlin bit the inside of his cheek and typed back quickly: And they say that romance is dead.

Look Baldrick I'm treating you to dinner & a movie & u r supposed to put out.

You didn't buy me dinner! We ate in Hall!

Technically The Prince's Trust paid for that.

Skinflint! No sex for you!

But all I can think about is your mouth wrapped around my cock right now. It's very distracting. You should help me with that. I might die.

Blue balls never killed anyone. And I can't give you a fucking blowjob in the middle of the pub, your Royal Stupidness.

What about the loo?

Arthur, you're off your head.

No, I just WANT head. Go on. Say yes.

I am not blowing you in the bogs
You know you want to

Do not

Fucking liar.

Merlin kicked Arthur quite hard in the shin, and then took an innocent sip of his gin and tonic. Arthur glanced over and glared at him, his mouth twitching, and tapped something hastily onto the screen of his phone.


As if. Merlin replied, rolling his eyes.

"I've just got to go for a slash," Arthur told Percy and Lance. "Back in a tick." And he squeezed out around the table and off to the gents' without looking at Merlin. Merlin watched him go, dry mouthed, and was supremely unsurprised when his phone buzzed in his hand a few moments later.

Come on damn it. Don't make me wank myself off alone in the loos just imagining your filthy perfect mouth on my dick. Come here now!

Merlin shivered. His jeans were feeling quite uncomfortably restrictive by this point.

You're the one who wants us to be discreet. This is not discreet! he typed, feeling very put-up-on.

So come here and suck my cock discreetly, Merlin. Please? Pretty please with sugar on top?

Merlin bit his lip and got to his feet.

"Yeah – me too," he said, trying not to look too screamingly obvious. "Too many cups of tea today, and it's a long movie, isn't it?"

He could feel Gawain's eyes on him all the way to the door of the loos.

* * *

Arthur was washing his hands at the sink when Merlin walked in, and their eyes met in the mirror. There were three stalls, all with the doors open, and nobody else in the room. Merlin swallowed, and then shook his head, his eyebrows darting up to his hair line.

"This is – look, Arthur, this is a really bad idea," he began, but Arthur was just looking at him with this blistering intensity, and obviously Merlin wasn't against the idea of having hot monkey sex with the Prince of Wales per se – just not here and now. Arthur licked his lips, and Merlin made a stifled whining sound in the back of his throat. "No, really," he said, sounding completely unconvincing. And then Arthur was swinging around and grabbing him, and Merlin's breath came out in a startled little oof as he was pushed back against the wall behind the door, his head bumping into a picture frame, and Arthur's hand was cupping Merlin's dick through his jeans.

"Suck me off, Merlin," Arthur said, licking a wet stripe up Merlin's throat, his voice low-pitched and smoky, making Merlin's toes curl. "I want to fuck your mouth. It's such a pretty mouth, and you look so hot with it wrapped tight around my cock and your cheeks all hollowed out. I can't stop thinking about it. Come on, Merlin. You fucking love me, you know you do."

"You're not playing fair," said Merlin, his voice in tatters as Arthur squeezed and rubbed and nibbled...
in the most completely distracting way imaginable. "I'm trying to be sensible here! Why am I suddenly the sensible one?"

"Because you drive me crazy," Arthur muttered into the hollow of Merlin's throat, shoving his hand down the front of Merlin's jeans and wriggling it down inside his boxer briefs, and Merlin could feel Arthur's smile against his skin as he gasped. "You just undo me, Merlin. It was bad enough before, but now - God, you're all I can think about. Come on. Come on, quick, before someone comes in."

"Oh, Jesus Christ," said Merlin, helplessly, bucking up against him. "Fine. Bloody - fine. Oh, God, yeah, do that again!" His eyes fluttered closed, and Arthur laughed and stepped back, withdrawing his hand and plucking at the button of his own fly instead. Merlin dragged his eyes open and looked dizzily at Arthur. "Oh, you idiot – not here! At least get your arse into the cubicle – come on, plausible deniability is getting flimsier by the second. Come on," he added, grabbing Arthur's hand and dragging him over to the furthest cubicle and shoving him inside.

"Well, this is romantic," said Arthur,

Merlin just looked at him, and then got on with the business of helping His Royal Ridiculousness to unzip his fly and slide the denim down around his thighs, freeing Arthur's cock. His mouth watered as he knelt down, but he still managed to cast a disapproving look up through his eyelashes at Arthur.

"This is a bloody silly idea," he hissed. "We have a room, for God's sake!"

"Shut up and suck my cock now," Arthur said at his most imperious, sliding shaky hands into Merlin's hair and pulling his head roughly forward, so that Arthur's erection slid over Merlin's cheek, trailing moisture over his skin.

Merlin shivered, and rubbed his face against the hot, silky surface of Arthur's cock for a delicious moment before turning his head and swallowing it wetly up. And then it was a race, all urgent suction and Merlin's slippery tongue painting patterns over Arthur's flesh, conscious that they had to make it quick but still, stupidly, never wanting it to end. Merlin looking up at Arthur's flushed cheeks and saw that he was biting his fist and trying to stifle his panting breaths, and he smiled and sucked even harder, his cheeks going concave and his lips tightening. He had one hand cupped around Arthur's arse, fingernails biting little half-moon indents into his skin, and the other was frantically working inside his own shucked-down pants, and it didn't take long at all before Arthur was coming, his hips slamming forward so hard that Merlin half-choked around his cock, and then Merlin was coming into his own hand too, and then they were jammed together in a cubicle in the gents' toilets in a pub in the aftermath of their orgasms, sweaty and shaking and stinking of sex, and Merlin really had no idea what had happened to their sanity or self preservation instincts. None. But he still couldn't stop smiling like an idiot.

Arthur pulled him to his feet and kissed him open-mouthed and messy, tasting himself in their twining tongues and chasing the flavour around Merlin's mouth. Their jeans were half way to their knees, and there was rather a lot of skin against skin, Arthur's muscled thigh brushing against the sensitized surface of Merlin's deflating cock and making him shiver.

"That was - that was really stupid," Merlin muttered, and Arthur pressed another kiss onto the corner of his mouth, like a prize.

"I know," he admitted, hitching his underwear and his jeans back up and having the grace to look rather embarrassed, now that he'd had his bloody way. "We really can't do that again. I just – I wanted to know you're mine. I wanted to know I could have you. Now, or whenever I want."
Merlin paused in the middle of fastening his own jeans, and smacked the back of Arthur's head. "I can't believe you," he said. "Yes, yes, I'm yours, you massive pillock. Now stop courting disaster." He turned around awkwardly and unfastened the cubicle door. "Do you have any idea how lucky we are that we didn't get caught?" he said, just as Lance walked in through the door.

Merlin froze, and Arthur walked out of the cubicle behind him, smiling, and Merlin watched Lance's jaw drop.

"Oh, fuck," Arthur said, behind Merlin's shoulder, just half a moment too late.

"Um," said Merlin, groping around frantically for some kind of plausible excuse that did not involve the Prince of Wales getting blown by another boy in the toilets. "Um – this isn't what it looks like?"

Lance stared from Merlin to Arthur and back again, his eyes huge.

"But – but – does Gwen know?" he blurted out, which wasn't quite the response Merlin was expecting, but probably should have been.

"No," said Arthur, after a pause, walking over to the sink and putting as much distance as he could between himself and Merlin. "Ah – no." He swallowed. "Nobody knows, Lance. You're not going to tell anyone, are you mate? I mean – I mean, you're Mr Nightline, you know about secrets and anonymity and all that, right?" He hadn't taken his eyes off Lance, and his voice had taken on that irresistible note of command that always went straight to Merlin's cock. "We can trust you, can't we?"

Lance looked slightly shell-shocked. "I had no idea," he said, looking over at Merlin again. "I mean, I knew you – but I didn't guess – good lord." He shook his head, as if trying to clear it. "So – Gwen doesn't know?"

"No. I mean, er, she knows that I'm kind of, er, head over heels for Arthur, but she doesn't know that it's reciprocated. She doesn't know about, um, this," said Merlin, very much doubting that he could get any redder.

"Because I thought that you and she..." Lance said, looking at Arthur in bafflement.

"Me and Gwen? Oh, God, no! I mean, she's a lovely girl, and we did have one ill-advised and drunken snog on Raisin Sunday – but she's mad about you, Lance," said Arthur. "Anyone can see that. You should definitely ask her out. Tonight would be a good time – I mean, she's coming to the movie, isn't she?"

"Yes," said Lance, blinking like a bunny in the headlights of a double decker bus. "She's just arrived, actually, with the other girls."

"There you are, then. You should go for it." Arthur bit his lip. "And – and you won't tell anyone, will you? About, er – about this?"


"I think that at this point she's about ready to smack you over the head with a blunt instrument and drag you back to her room by the hair," said Merlin. "Seriously – seize the day, Lance."

"Right," said Lance, looking at nothing in particular and nodding to himself. "Right – yeah. Thanks, lads."
"Any time," said Merlin. He nodded at the door, and Arthur took the hint and headed out first, while Merlin washed his hands. Walking out together would just be the cherry on the cake of stupidity. "Thank you," he added, looking sheepishly at Lance. "We shouldn't have taken a risk like that."

Lance shrugged. "Love makes fools of us all," he said, and Merlin laughed.

"You never said a truer thing, mate," Merlin said, with a sigh, and headed out to find Arthur.

* * *

Many hours later - after they'd all left the pub and queued up to buy tickets, after they'd claimed their seats, after they'd had a popcorn fight, after they'd watched 'The Princess Bride' and then made their way home over the frosty pavement, doing Inigo Montoya impressions, after they'd bid their friends goodnight and closed their bedroom door and tumbled into Arthur's bed and Arthur had fucked Merlin efficiently through the mattress – Gwen sent Merlin a text. Arthur was already snoring lightly, and Merlin was drifting off to sleep with Arthur's face pressed into his shoulder, one princely arm slung around his waist, when the phone buzzed on his bedside table. He stretched out carefully to snag it, and thumbed the button for messages, and the little screen lit up.

OMG are you awake? Lance kissed me! Like in movie! Most romantic thing in whole life! Did not come into my room for "coffee" after, but still most amazing snog ever – OMG, so good! Has asked me out on proper date!!!! OMG!!!

Merlin set the phone back down on the bedside table, grinning so hard it hurt, and pressed a kiss onto the top of Arthur's head, at which Arthur made a vague, not-particularly-verbal noise into his collarbone, and snuggled closer into Merlin's side.

"I love you," Merlin whispered, soft and heartfelt and still more than a little astonished that he was getting to say this out loud. "Oh, God, I really do love you, Arthur Pendragon."
In many respects, being Arthur Pendragon's boyfriend was, to Merlin's surprise, indistinguishable from being his best friend. They still took the piss out of one another constantly, they still finished one another's sentences sometimes, Arthur still stole Merlin's food if he wasn't looking, and Merlin still seemed to find himself losing at Rock, Paper, Scissors far too often, and then having to do stupid chores at Arthur's behest. The only real change was what went on after lights out in the privacy of their room – and only there, because Arthur had been suitably chastened by the shock of outing himself to Lance in McKay's, on the one occasion they were so lost to sanity as to indulge in vaguely public sex. In fact, if anything, once they started this whole secretly-dating business, they were careful to try paying less attention to one another in public, not more. Merlin could go whole evenings giving his undivided attention to Gwen, or to Morgana, or Percy, or Gawain, and appear to be quite oblivious to where Arthur was at any given moment, or who he was talking to. It was only seeming, of course; he could no more lose track of Arthur than he could one of his limbs. But seeming was enough for now. Arthur, for his part, went back to paying more attention to Gawain and Kay than had recently been his wont, and his teasing of Merlin became, if anything, more pointed than ever.

Somehow Merlin managed to keep his mind reasonably focussed on his studies too, both official and unofficial, and occasionally he even made it to a GaySoc meeting, or went out for coffee with Edwin or Catrina. At Arthur's urging, he did go along on the clubbing night to Edinburgh, and had a pretty great evening too, even though it would have been a damn sight better if Arthur had been with him. He spent quite a lot of the time that night with Edwin, until it occurred to him that he was basically flirting with no intention of putting it out, and that he knew Edwin really liked him, and that this made him a Grade A dickhead, at which point he stopped flirting altogether, and went to talk to Freya instead. Edwin took it in his stride, and if he suspected who had replaced him in Merlin's bed, he had the grace to say nothing about it, and Merlin was profoundly grateful for that.

So the days stayed much the same as they had been, and the nights – well, the nights left them bruised, and sated, and wrung-out, and baggy-eyed. They didn't talk about the future. It loomed before them, oppressive and terrible, an elephant in the middle of their small room which each of them was determined to ignore. Instead they wrung every last drop of enjoyment out of their days – and if their love-making took on a desperate edge at times, or they clung a little too tight in the aftermath – well, neither of them acknowledged it. And so day followed day as the last few rattling ghosts of autumn fell from the skeletal branches of the trees across St Andrews, and the Scottish winter set in with a vengeance, all slate-grey skies and damp, aching cold that chilled one through to the bone.

"Oh, brilliant," Arthur said, in a voice far too gleeful and awake for this ungodly hour.

Merlin had been vaguely conscious of Arthur untangling himself from their embrace and getting out of bed, but the combination of light and sound still made him wince. He blinked over at the window, where Arthur had pulled back the curtains to reveal a world like a Christmas card cliché, every tiny twig and sharp gable layered with white like thick whipped cream. It had been promising to snow for days. It was probably very pretty, but Merlin was still at the curmudgeonly Need-more-sleep stage of returning to consciousness, and so he just snuggled down into the warm space Arthur had left in the bed, and made an incoherent grumbling noise. Arthur, however, wasn't having any of it.
"Get your lazy arse out of my bed right this minute now, Baldrick. We have to get dressed right now. I'm texting the lads. Snowball fight!"

* * *

Half an hour later, Merlin was clean but unshaven, rosy-cheeked and laughing, with snow caking his eyelashes and soaking through his gloves and his beanie pulled down over his ears, as he and Arthur waged a two-man battle against Gawain and Percy and Kay. The lawns were no longer immaculate, although Merlin was still deriving a childish delight from every time he ran out over a pristine stretch of whiteness, leaving the prints of his Doc Martens pressed deep into the crisp snow. He was laughing so hard he couldn't speak, his breath puffing out in silvery clouds in front of him, and he was having so much fun he was almost not being distracted by the sight of Arthur looking appallingly hot. Arthur treated a snowball fight like an actual skirmish, and kept shouting out instructions to Merlin which were undoubtedly very important and strategically brilliant, but Merlin was mostly concentrating on trying to make snowballs as fast as possible and fling them as hard as he could in the right general direction. More than that he was not prepared to attempt.

"Cover me!" Arthur said, in a deadly serious voice, just before he flung himself out from behind a tree. Merlin was fairly sure that this was his cue to start flinging snowballs at Gawain's head, but he was too busy snorting with laughter at Arthur's earnestness. "I said cover me, you bastard!" Arthur protested, as Gawain and Percy and Kay all hurled their snowballs at him with deadly precision, caking his face in seconds. "Oi! Merlin!"

"Sorry, sorry!" said Merlin, still giggling, and he stuck his head around the other side of his own tree and flung a series of not-very-well-aimed snowballs in the general direction of The Enemy. One of them hit Percy's nose, which would have made Merlin very proud if he hadn't actually been aiming for Kay. "I never claimed to be any good at this.

"You're rubbish!" said Arthur, scrubbing snow off his face and scrambling to his feet. "Oh my God, you're so rubbish!" He was flushed and laughing, his eyes startlingly blue against his pink cheeks, and Merlin had a suspicion of what he intended just before he grabbed up a double handful of snow and ran after Merlin.

"No! Oi, no fair – we're on the same bloody side, you prat!" Merlin shouted, laughing helplessly as he legged it.

"I think it's time I changed my allegiance to someone less completely useless at throwing a bloody snowball!" Arthur said, breathlessly, gaining on him while the others took potshots at them both.

"No! No no no no n-oh fuck!" said Merlin, as Arthur grabbed his hood and yanked him to a halt, and proceeded to stuff two handfuls of melting snow down his back as he writhed and squirmed, patting him hard on the back once it was all gone. Merlin turned around slowly and just looked at Arthur. "Oh, you are asking for it, you git," he said, ignoring the snowballs that Kay hurled with irritating accuracy at his head. He kept his eyes fixed on Arthur, narrowing them as he shook his head. "Your arse is mine this time, Pendragon."

Arthur's eyebrow darted upwards. "Bring it on, Baldrick," he said, and before Merlin quite knew what he intended he'd dropped to the ground, grabbed another big handful of snow, bounced back to his feet, pulled Merlin's beanie off and rubbed the snow into his hair. "You do not stand a sodding chance."

Merlin ducked down and grabbed two handfuls of snow, uttering a gleeful war cry as he got back to his feet.
"That was fab," Merlin said, some time later, when they came tromping back into their room, trampling snow into the carpet. He was still breathing hard, his skin tingling with the cold, and there was melted snow trickling down his back from his sopping hair, and his jeans were soaked through from rolling and tussling on the ground as he tried to make Arthur eat snow. And he felt fanfuckingtastic.

"I've got a lecture in half an hour," said Arthur, sounding rather wistful.

"Ha! I don't have anything until twelve," said Merlin, gleefully, pulling his jumper over his head and dropping it over the radiator to dry. "I think I might have a hot shower."

"Mmm," said Arthur – and Merlin knew that tone. He turned around, feeling his blood suddenly start to rush south – and, yes, Arthur was looking at him like he was a four course meal, and Arthur hadn't eaten for a week.

"What are you thinking?" asked Merlin, licking his lips.

"Come here," said Arthur, his voice almost a growl. "Take off your shirt, and come here now."

Merlin flushed to the tips of his toes, and tugged his shirt over his head, half-laughing, before stepping into Arthur's embrace. Arthur's hands were hot against the skin of Merlin's back, ghosting over the wings of his shoulders and tracing the path of his spine down to the dip at its base. Merlin wrapped his arms around Arthur's neck, ignoring the snowmelt from Arthur's coat that trickled chilly and wet against his skin, and licked at Arthur's wicked smile. Arthur made a stifled groan against him and then they were kissing like it was going out of fashion, Arthur's tongue tracing elaborate patterns inside his mouth; and then Arthur was pressing sharp little kisses onto his cheek, and his jaw, and biting at his ear, tongue darting out hot and slick to swirl around the cool pink shell of it for a moment, before darting back around to capture Merlin's mouth and do some serious kissing for a while. And, okay, Merlin wasn't a big fan of cold or wet, but Arthur's body was like a furnace underneath all the layers of clothing, and Arthur had evidently learned about kissing from some kind of kissing guru.

"Oh, God," Merlin said, as Arthur plunged a hand down the back of his jeans and cupped his arse more tightly. "Uh – this lecture, are you sure you really have to...?"

"Merlin, are you trying to talk me into skipping a lecture? I don't think you're taking your education very seriously," Arthur growled, licking Merlin's mouth. "God, I love your face like this, with all the stubble. But – beard burn would be a bit of a difficult one to explain away, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah. Damn," said Merlin, cursing his slovenliness.

"Ah well," said Arthur. "Let that be a lesson to you, my lad: be clean shaven when I get back from my lecture, or else."

"Or else?"

"Or else you won't be allowed to kiss me on the mouth. Although I'll certainly be able to think of other places, but I've been growing rather fond of your mouth, so shave, damn it."

"Okay," said Merlin, sliding his hands up inside Arthur's shirt and resting them flat against the heated skin of his back. "And in the meanwhile...?"

"And in the meanwhile I have another idea – but it requires a condom. And some lube. Would you
happen to have such commodities to hand, Baldrick? And, incidentally – why are you still not naked?"

"Stop nagging!" said Merlin, unzipping his jeans and hiking them down, then stepping out of the puddle of wet denim and cotton and shivering in his damp socks and nothing else. "In my toiletries bag," he added, as Arthur scrabbled through a sock drawer hopefully. "And there's – yeah," he said, as Arthur pulled a sachet of lube out of the little bag and turned to prowl towards him with a thoroughly predatory expression. Merlin swallowed hard, and Arthur quirked Merlin a smile that was very difficult to read, and then the next thing Merlin knew, Arthur was back in front of him, trailing his hands over Merlin's body, thumbs sliding idly over pebbled nipples and poky hipbones and then around to cup his arse, and leaning in very close.

"So what I want," he whispered in Merlin's ear, his mouth brushing against it tantalisingly, "Is to bend you over your desk and fuck you into your text books. So that the next time you use them – in a tutorial, or writing an essay, or whatever – you'll be thinking about my dick buried in you up to the hilt, and the way you were squirming around begging me for more. I want you to remember that, every time you look at any of these books, and every time you sit at this desk."

"Fuck!" said Merlin, shivering, dropping his hand urgently down to pull at his own erection as he blinked over at the desk in question – which was, admittedly, looking more and more like the one in Gaius's office every day. "You – I – okay."

Arthur smiled, and pressed a surprisingly chaste kiss onto Merlin's forehead, before dropping smoothly down to his knees and taking Merlin's erection in his mouth without warning. Merlin gave a bitten-off groan as he felt Arthur licking over the crown of his cock, and then starting to scribble sloppy patterns along the underside of it.

"You – oh my God, Arthur," Merlin said, shakily, sliding a hand down into Arthur's hair, and he felt Arthur's mouth twitching into a smile. He was vaguely aware that Arthur was doing something with his hands, but didn't realise the full import of it until his fingers came back around to cup Merlin's arse, slick with warming lube, and he had to bite his knuckles quite hard to keep from being embarrassingly noisy when Arthur circled the tightly furled entrance to Merlin's body with one slippery finger and then pushed on inside at the same moment that he redoubled his suction on Merlin's cock. Merlin moaned into his knuckles, his hips stuttering helplessly as Arthur worked him from both ends, and when Arthur slid a second finger in to join the first he found himself wondering where the hell Arthur had learned how to do all this. Not that he cared, other than wondering whether he ought to be sending somebody a major Thank You card; still, there was nothing reluctant or amateurish about Arthur's mouth on his cock, and Merlin was startled at how far down Arthur was able to go, the cold point of his nose sliding against Merlin's belly as he sucked Merlin down his throat, all slick, crushing, perfect pressure.

"I'm going to – oh, fuck, Arthur - I – fuck – I'm not going to last long like this," he admitted, with considerable embarrassment, and Arthur slid a third finger inside him and started thrusting faster. It was an awkward rhythm they'd set up, but Merlin was helpless in the grip of his own desire, and it was all he could do to hold off coming down Arthur's throat for as long as he could.

And then he looked down, and met Arthur's intense blue gaze, and took in the sight of Arthur's bossy, regal mouth being gagged quite effectively by Merlin's flushed cock, Arthur's lips stretching redly and saliva sliding down his chin, and Merlin gave a helpless moan and sank his fingers into Arthur's soft hair, and started fucking his mouth with abandon, half-afraid that this was all some impossibly perfect, deliciously filthy dream from which he might wake at any minute.

He came in Arthur's mouth a very little time later, with Arthur's slippery fingers buried in his arse,
and he couldn't stifle his cries.

"Jesus – fucking - Jesus, Arthur, you're just – that was – fuck," he said, coherently, and Arthur kissed him in spite of the stubble, and then moved him, pliant and rubbery, over to the desk, and bent him over it. The papers and books were uncomfortable underneath him, and almost intolerably sexy, and he was still quivering and languorous from his orgasm. He heard the sound of the condom being torn open behind him and gave a full body shiver, and then a moment later he felt the blunt head of Arthur's now-familiar cock nudging at the curve of his arse, and Arthur's slippery fingers splaying his cheeks, and then Arthur was pushing inside him, hot and hard and uncomfortably big but perfect too, making him gasp and writhe like some kind of slutty porn star and push back with a sinuous movement of his hips until Arthur was buried in him balls-deep, and he was panting feverishly.

"God, you're beautiful like this," Arthur said, skating cool fingers over Merlin's sides and settling them around his hips. He leaned forward, the fabric of his coat scratchy against Merlin's bare skin, and bit the nape of his neck hard, and Merlin shuddered. And then Arthur set up a rhythm that was fierce and frantic and took no prisoners, slamming into Merlin with an audible slap of skin against skin, hitting the sweet spot again and again in a way that made Merlin see stars, and Merlin just clung onto the desk and took it with a string of wordless gasps and moans.

"You're all mine, aren't you?" said Arthur, hoarsely, at last. "Not ever going off with that bloody Edwin again, or anyone else – just mine."


And apparently that was all it took, because a moment later Arthur was coming, his breath harsh and his fingers clenched bruisingly tight about Merlin's hips.
They were drinking hot chocolate in The Vic – or at least Merlin was drinking hot chocolate (with whipped cream and a Cadbury's flake, but no marshmallows) while Arthur slurped down some kind of coffee with a silly name, and Percy and Owain drank what they laughingly referred to as "Builder's Tea" (and Merlin called "tea"), when Merlin saw Cedric. He was with Catrina and her girlfriend Freya, and Merlin was already waving when he registered that Cedric had a black eye and what looked like a broken nose. Merlin's jaw dropped.

"What the – excuse me," he said, without looking at Arthur, and got hurriedly to his feet. They were placing their orders at the bar, and Merlin was over by their side in seconds.

"Bloody hell, Cedric," he said, instead of the customary 'hello'. "Tell me this isn't an injury you sustained while dancing? I mean, I've seen you on the dance floor, and it's pretty damned scary, but I wouldn't have thought your flailing was that bad." He was trying to keep it light, but he had a pretty good suspicion of what must have happened, of course – Cedric was definitely someone who subscribed to the Quentin Crisp school of in-your-face fashion. Merlin himself only tended to set off people's gaydar if they were already fairly alert, and Arthur was arguably the straightest gay bloke Merlin knew, but Cedric was camp as tits 24/7. This was not always a very safe thing to be.

"Oh, hello ducky," Cedric said, his voice thick with bravado. "Still hogging Prince Charming, I see? Or should that be porking?"

"Don't be daft," said Merlin, burningly conscious that now his protests were a lie, and hoping it didn't show on his face. "He's my roommate, not my boyfriend – as you know perfectly well. God, I should be so lucky, you know? But never mind that – what's all this?" His gesture took in the black eye and the broken nose, and as Cedric shifted Merlin realised that his leg was hurt too.

"The price of fabulousness," Cedric said, shrugging. He was dressed to the nines once again, hovering somewhere between clownish and cutting edge, like an extra from 'Ugly Betty' who'd put their wardrobe together from charity shops, and there was a rainbow-striped scarf wrapped defiantly around his neck like a red rag being waved at any bulls who might happen along.

"Some fuckers jumped him on the way home from the meetup on Monday," said Catrina, her voice thick with bitterness. "Chickenshit little bastards – they followed him back to Gatty, along the East Sands, where there aren't any street lights."

"I've bloody told you about going back that way," added Freya, and Cedric shrugged.

"It's the quickest route, and it's beautiful – all the stars like sequins sewn onto a velvet curtain, and the roar of the waves. It's much more picturesque than walking back along the road. I'm an artist. I care about these things."

"Jesus," said Merlin, feeling sick. It wouldn't have surprised him at home so much, but here everything seemed so quaint and posh and civilized that somehow he'd been thinking stuff like this didn't actually happen. "Do you know who...?" he asked awkwardly. "I mean, was it locals, or...?"

There had been problems in the past with gangs of teenaged lads getting pissed on White Lightning and deciding that they'd had more than enough of all these arrogant, overprivileged English tossers puking on their doorsteps. Merlin couldn't entirely blame them, but this was chilling.

"They weren't Neds," said Cedric, his smile tight and lopsided. "Students – one of them was..."
definitely English. Sounded like something off Eastenders. There were five or six of them – I don’t
know who. Couldn’t see their faces. Clearly they were jealous of my beauty.

"They kicked the shit out of him," said Catrina.

"I'm a lover, not a fighter," said Cedric, shrugging.

"Shit," said Merlin. He tried to imagine how it must have felt, being out there alone in the dark with
footsteps echoing behind you, coming closer; how it must have felt to know that there was no special
well of power you could call upon to push your attackers away, or turn them into frogs; how it must
feel now, knowing that any of the faces you walked past might be theirs. That it could be someone in
your lectures, or in your Hall. Could be someone right here in The Vic, watching you blankly and
laughing inside. Merlin felt a surge of unaccustomed rage boiling up inside him.

"Did you go to the police?" he asked, after a moment.

Cedric shrugged elegantly. "Yes – for whatever good that will do. Mind you, fair play to them – they
weren't too bad. And I do love a man in uniform."

Merlin tried to smile, as Cedric was clearly asking him to, but he knew he was doing a pretty lousy
job of it. He looked from Cedric to Catrina and swallowed hard.

"Shit," he said again, uselessly. "That's terrible."

Cedric shrugged. "Could have been worse," he said brightly. "At least they didn't steal my wallet, or
my shoes. Perish the thought! Now that would have been a nuisance. I love those shoes." He stuck
his chin out and Merlin had a feeling that Gwen would have been better at this than he was, because
mostly right now he just wanted to rant and rail, and Cedric clearly didn't want to be seen, or to see
himself, as a victim. He was a survivor, and he wasn't going to change a bloody thing about how he
dressed or acted. Merlin found himself feeling ashamed about having been annoyed and dismissive
about Cedric too many times in the past. He could be a bit of a twat, to be sure, and Merlin did find
him a bit overwhelming, but he didn't deserve this.

"You, my friend, have balls of solid steel," he said, meaning it. "Good on you."

Cedric nodded in acknowledgment of this, and accepted the hot Ribena that the barmaid was passing
to him. "Balls of solid steel and a prick to match," he said.

"Haven't seen you at the Monday meetup for a while," said Catrina, raising an eyebrow. "You and
Edwin have a bit of a falling out, did you?"

Merlin reddened. "Er – something like that," he agreed. He had been trying quite hard not to lead
Edwin on, which had meant taking a bit of a step back from GaySoc activities – but he was starting
to realise that might have been a mistake.

She pulled a face. "Well, he shouldn't get to keep all your mates in the divorce! Come on, don't be a
drama queen. Hey, we're going clubbing in Glasgow next week – a last big hurrah before Christmas.
You coming?"

Merlin's thoughts darted to Arthur, and then it struck him that he really should still be doing all the
same things he'd done before, so as not to give rise to any suspicion about the two of them. Gwen
had been perfectly right about him – he really did suck at keeping secrets, which was pretty bloody
unlucky, all things considered.

"Sounds great," he said. "Details on the Facebook page?"
"You know it," she said, grinning.

"Cool. I'll check it out." He glanced back at Cedric and nodded sheepishly over to his table, where Kay and Gawain had just arrived. "Sorry – I should probably be getting back."

Cedric rolled his eyes. "Can't keep His Royal Hotness waiting."

"Don't you get tired of being the token poof?" asked Catrina, glancing over at Arthur and his friends with an expression of incomprehension. "All that testosterone and rampant heterosexuality – doesn't it make you want to scream? Or is it a turn on?"

"Er," said Merlin, not quite sure how to answer that. He thought of Will, who was pretty much his only actual mate until he came to St Andrews, and of Gwen, and Lance, and then he shrugged. "Some of my best friends are straight?" He thought about it some more. "Most of them, actually."

"Hmm," said Catrina. "Well – whatever floats your boat, I suppose. Anyway, you should come clubbing next week." Her mouth twitched. "See if you can talk your roommate into coming along, and they'll probably erect a statue to you."

"Oh, I'm sure we could muster up an impressive erection in your honour," chimed in Cedric. "And his."

"Ooh! Actually, bugger that – if you can drag that Lady Morgana of yours along, I'll name my first-born child after you." She met Freya's eyes and Freya gave a truly filthy giggle. "We have plans for the Duchess of Edinburgh. They involve clotted cream and warm caramel sauce..."

Merlin's mouth twitched. "Okay, that is in fact TM of the I. But I'll ask her. Just don't hold your breath, eh?"

"We live in hope," said Freya, and Catrina slapped her bum and made her giggle harder.

"See you later," Merlin said, nodding to Cedric again.

* * *

"What happened to him, then?" asked Owain, glancing over at Cedric when Merlin had slid back into his seat.

"Bloody gaybashing fuckwits happened to him," said Merlin, tightly.

"Shit," said Percy. "Really? Here?"

"Yes, here," said Merlin, not daring to meet Arthur's eyes.

"Well, come on," said Kay. "Is there any bloody wonder?"

Merlin counted to ten silently. "I'm sorry – what?" he said, when he could trust his voice.

"Well, have you seen him? God, there's swishy, and then there's The Return Of Julian Clary." He shrugged. "I'm just surprised it's taken this long for somebody to kick his head in, frankly."

"Easy now," said Gawain.

"Oh, bollocks. I saw him walking around a bar wearing a purple smoking jacket one day," Kay scoffed. "He was totally asking for it."
Merlin stared at his hot chocolate for a long moment, waiting for Arthur to say something. Waiting for anyone to say something. When it became perfectly plain that nobody was going to object to what Kay had just said, Merlin got jerkily to his feet.

"I'm sorry, I can't listen to this," he said, picking his gloves up off the table.

"Ah, come on, now, Mao! He's not saying the feckers were right to beat the shite out of your man there!" said Gawain. "Obviously they're scum. Just – he's been a mite provocative, you know? Lot of people find that kind of thing upsetting."

Merlin stared at him. "What – smoking jackets?"

"Aye, well – there are some headcases out there," said Gawain, shrugging. "He might be better off keeping his head down a bit more, that's all."

Merlin blinked, and then turned his back on the table. It wasn't that he didn't get it; he'd thought the same thing himself, for God's sake, because Cedric really did seem to have embraced the cliché with a vengeance. But seeing Cedric unbowed, with his black eye and his earring and his rainbow-coloured scarf, Merlin had been thoroughly chastened. This was a kind of courage too, although he hadn't thought of it quite that way before, and Cedric shouldn't have to disguise himself as a straight boy to avoid offending anyone's sensibilities. That was just fucked up beyond belief.

"Merlin!" said Arthur, and Merlin couldn't help turning back and meeting his gaze. Arthur looked embarrassed, and more than a little ashamed – but he still wasn't speaking up. He didn't have to out himself damn it! He could just tell Kay that he was full of shit. Merlin couldn't understand why he was holding off. He turned on his heel and walked out of the bar, feeling like somebody had scooped out his heart, and went to talk to the dragon.

* * *

"What do you think of Justin Bieber?" asked the dragon.

Merlin's greeting withered in his mouth. "Sorry – what?" he said, blinking.

"I have radio now," the dragon explained, swirling around in the battered old wooden door in Sallies. "It has been most instructive. I rather like the World Service, and Al Jazeera. But I like Radio One best." His painted face crumpled into a frown. "I do wish I could control what music they play, though. I think I want one of those portable devices that all the young people seem to be using these days – you can control the music then, can't you?"

Merlin stared. "You want an iPod?" he said, dumbfounded.

"That's the ticket," agreed the dragon. "I want an iPod. Can you get me one?"

"Er – well, they're a bit outside my price range, to be honest, but I could have a word with Gaius. I mean, you saved Prince Arthur's life – I should think that some sort of reward ought to be in order," he said, boggling. The dragon looked delighted with this information. "Wow," said Merlin. "This really is not the conversation I was expecting to have."

"Life is full of surprises," the dragon said comfortably. "How far do you suppose Uther's gratitude would extend? Because this body does feel rather fragile, and I can't help noticing there's a lovely metal beast called a Typhoon down there which is far better suited to housing a creature of my stature."

Merlin choked. "Um – explaining that 'Excalibur' has got a mind of its own is already a pretty hard
sell. Somehow I can't see Uther going for the idea of making a heavily armed warplane sentient."

"But think what a magnificent weapon I could be," the dragon said, coaxingly.

"That's just what I am doing!" said Merlin. "A weapon against who, though?"

"Whom."

"You're evading the question," said Merlin. "And there's no way he'd go for it, not in a million years."

The dragon's smile broadened. "Ah, but I have a million years. Uther does not. We'll see what we shall see." It cocked its head and surveyed Merlin with a thoughtful expression. "Were you planning to go somewhere?"

"No," said Merlin, sighing. "Not really. I just, er, I wanted somebody to rant at, about something secret that I can't really rant at anyone about."

The dragon eyed him narrowly. "And you thought that I could send you somewhere to find such a person?"

"Er," said Merlin. "Well, actually, I kind of thought that maybe..." his voice trailed off. "Have you ever been in love?"

"My goodness, young warlock! What a personal question!"

"Sorry! I just thought – I mean, have you?"

"I have been a ghost, or an echo, or whatever I am now, for more than a thousand years – and I was the last of my kind," said the dragon, and Merlin felt quite a lot like an idiot. "But, yes, I have been in love. She was hacked to death by little men in iron suits."

"Oh," said Merlin. There was an awkward little silence. "You – you don't really want to hear me talking about my love life, do you?"

"'No' seems such a flimsy and inadequate little word to express how very little interest I have in hearing you rambling on about that particular topic," said the dragon. "Your mating rituals are roughly as fascinating to me as the eating habits of snails."

"Right," said Merlin. "Fair enough. Um. Oh! Oh, Lance knows, actually – er, would you happen to have a short cut to Chattan?"

"I certainly would," said the dragon, graciously.

"That would be brilliant," said Merlin, beaming at him.

* * *

Merlin was sitting on his bed reading a nice light book by Michio Kaku when Arthur got back. He pointedly didn't look up when the door opened, but every muscle in his body tensed up.

"I'm sorry," said Arthur, as the door closed behind him. There was an awkward little moment, and then Arthur crossed the room to stand next to Merlin's bed. Merlin still didn't look up at him. Arthur sighed. "I fucked up. I'm sorry."

Merlin turned the page. "You didn't do anything," he said, evenly.
"I know – that's the problem, isn't it?" Which did show a little more awareness than Merlin had really been expecting.

He looked up. "Yes," Merlin said. "You didn't do anything."

"I panicked," Arthur admitted, looking mortified. "I just – panicked. I felt like everyone had to know – like they were just waiting for me to say something in defense of your mate, and it would confirm all their suspicions. I mean – I mean, they weren't, but that's all I could think of."

"Kay's a dick," said Merlin. "I don't understand why you put up with him."

"He means well," said Arthur.

"He does not mean well! You just get to ignore all the ways he's a dick because you're a rich white bloke, and passing as straight!"

"No, that's not fair," Arthur said, crossly. Merlin just looked at him until he crumbled. "Well – well, okay, I suppose I can see your point. But I've known him forever, and he's been a good friend to me. I trust him."

"Does he know you like cock?"

"I – well, I mean, you know, at Eton most people – I mean, there were no girls. Um. But that didn't really count. He wouldn't think it counted. So – well, no, not really."

"So you don't trust him."

Arthur raked a hand through his hair. "He's – look, I know why you don't like him, and I'm not saying you're wrong, but Kay never lies to me, and I know he isn't trying to use me to get something, and I know that he'll always have my back. Maybe that doesn't sound like much to you, but to me – there haven't been all that many people I could say that about, in my life, and – it counts for something. It counts for a lot. Even if he is kind of a dickhead."

Merlin considered this. "He's a bully."

"No – well, no, he – well." Arthur bit his bottom lip. "Well, yes, okay. He is a bit of a bully, but if you stand up to him he's fine."

"If you're the fucking Prince of Wales and you stand up to him, he's fine. I mean, I'll give you one thing – he's an equal-opportunity dickhead. He's just as likely to be a raving twat about gender, sexuality, race, class, nationality or religion."

Arthur looked like he would have liked to argue, but instead he sagged a little, and sat down on the bed next to Merlin.

"I should have said something. I bottled it."

"You totally bottled it," Merlin agreed, more gently. "You should have said something. God, when I thought you were straight – you would have said something, a month ago."

"I wasn't fucking my roommate a month ago," said Arthur, in a low voice. "I wasn't terrified of being caught out." He looked up at Merlin again, through his lashes. "Forgive me?"

Merlin closed his eyes. "You're cheating. I'm pretty damned sure this counts as cheating."

Arthur cocked his head and his mouth curled up into a tentative smile. "No, I think that cheating
would be if I got down on my knees and offered to blow you." He licked his lips. "Or asked you to take it out on my arse."

Merlin made a choking noise. "Don't go making offers like that, Arthur," he said. "You might find yourself getting tied up and spanked." Arthur's cheeks flushed, and Merlin gaped a little. "Oh my God – your bloody pervy Public Schools have a lot to answer for! Do they still cane you?"

"Not officially," said Arthur. He looked up at Merlin and licked his lips. "Really – I am sorry I fucked up. Your friend – what's his name?"

"Cedric."

"Cedric. How's he doing?"

"He'll mend," said Merlin, shortly.

Arthur nodded. "It's messed up, what happened to him," he said, awkwardly. "I'm sorry."

Merlin sighed. "You didn't do it," he said, and some of the tension went out of his shoulders. "It's just – I feel like everything in my life is a lie right now."

"I'm sorry about that too," Arthur said, tentatively wrapping an arm around Merlin's shoulders. Merlin considered resisting for a moment, and then melted. It felt too good, leaning into the warmth of Arthur's shoulder and feeling his arm tightening around Merlin's body. It felt safe. It felt like home.

"I'm not your fault," he said, reluctantly. "Not really. I know it's complicated. It's just – it's not right. If it had been me, they'd have been paté, the homophobic fucks. They'd have been frogs. But what's the point of having all this power, if I can't help keep people safe? If it's just for stupid selfish reasons? Messing around? I should be making better use of it. I should be helping people more."

"You will do," said Arthur, seriously, cupping Merlin's cheek and turning his face so he was forced to look into Arthur's eyes. "Merlin, I know you. You're just starting out, but I know you're going to do great things. Hell, you've already saved my life half a dozen times – and saved me from getting engaged to Lady Viva, which would have been a fate worse than death. I know you'll figure this stuff out."

Merlin was taken aback by the earnestness of Arthur's tone. And then Arthur was leaning in to kiss him, fervently, like he was something unspeakably precious, and Merlin forgot how to be cross altogether.
"Oh, crap – Val's got a present for me!" Arthur was staring down at the screen of his phone with a comically embarrassed expression when Merlin looked up from his porridge.

"That's nice," said Merlin.

"Well, yes – it's very nice, but the thing is I haven't got him anything – I mean, I usually give the bodyguards a bonus at Christmas, but I didn't think – I mean, I wasn't exactly expecting to see him, and he's not really working for me now, and – oh, bugger. Well that's going to be awkward. What do you think it could be? I mean, if it's something big, and I just show up with a card and a packet of After Eights, then I look like a twat – but if it's just a tie pin, and I show up with a gift certificate for a week in Claridges, then I still look like a twat. Argh. If you were a fired former bodyguard, how flashy would the present be that you were giving the guy who got you fired and then wrote you a glowing reference? Not very flashy, right?"

Merlin shrugged. "I don't really have much of a context for this one," he said, apologetically. Arthur looked over to Blanche for help, but she was only on her first coffee, and thus was not yet fully human.

"Oh, arse," he said, glumly. "I'm better off giving him something nice, aren't I? Um. Do you think you can print gift certificates for Claridges off the internet?"

"Again – not really something I've had much occasion to find out," said Merlin, patiently, adding more sugar to his tea.

"No – no, right. Fuck. I hate Christmas."

"You can't hate Christmas!" Merlin exclaimed, outraged. "It's Christmas."

Arthur rolled his eyes. "Yes, the time that the whole family gets together, and Uncle Scrooge sees the light, and Tiny Tim gets the biggest bite of the goose, and all that. Well, you haven't met my family."

"I've met Morgana."

"Morgana is a she-wolf in chic clothing," Arthur said, more from reflex than anything else. "Well – no, she's all right, really, I suppose, but she's a bit of a ball-breaker. But it's generally just the three of us."

Merlin frowned. "Well, mostly it's just mum and me for Christmas day – but it's still Christmas! Turkey! Bread sauce! Chipolata sausages wrapped in bacon! Christmas pudding! Crackers! Presents! Cheesy movies! Tinsel! Fairy lights! Little chocolate Father Christmases hanging off the tree!"

"Oh my God – I bet you're like a five year old on crack, aren't you?" said Arthur, suddenly laughing out loud. "Do you still hang your stocking up at the bottom of the bed?"

"Kinky! I'll have you know that I don't own any stockings, Your Royal Perviness!"

"You astonish me."

Merlin dimpled at him. "Anyway, we keep the presents under the tree. Aww, come on, you great grumpy Grinch – how can you not love Christmas?"
"He has a point," said Blanche, nodding.

Arthur sighed. "Well, it's not like the food at home is ever exactly beans on toast, you know? And twelve course dinners lovingly prepared by the finest chefs in the country – well, we do get a fair bit of that kind of thing, on State Visits and so on, or whenever we're hosting important people. Which is most of the time. So – I mean, obviously Christmas Dinner is nice, but it's not exactly special. And you know that saying "What do you buy the man who has everything"? Well – that's generally my problem, when trying to figure out what the blazes to get for the pater." He shrugged. "Morgana's easier, because her personal shopper can usually pick out something in the hats or shoes line for me to give, and she wraps it up and everything, but – eh, it's a bit of a headache. And then there's the King's Speech, of course, which journalists spend Christmas Day talking about, and critiquing, and then Father spends the afternoon grumbling about the press, and threatening to behead the Director General of the BBC." He snagged one of Merlin's unguarded pieces of toast and started buttering it.

"Oi!"

"Oh, shut up – it'll be cold by the time you finish your porridge. I'll get you another one, you whiner." He dipped his buttery knife into the jam, getting crumbs everywhere, and slathered sticky red blobs over the toast with some satisfaction. "And of course, this year I've got to do my own interview thing. Oh joy."

Merlin raised an eyebrow. "You're giving your own Christmas Message? Seriously?"

"No! Well – no, not like that. But it's part of the deal they cut with the press – that the journos and paparazzi would back the hell off while I'm a student, in return for several pre-arranged photo-opportunities over the year, and three interviews. This is going to be the first one. There's a full-length interview with the Beeb, and a Q and A session with, well, pretty much everyone and his Aunt Fanny, I think. They're throwing me to the vultures for half an hour or so."


"Yeah – not so much, really. But it's part of that. But it's part of the deal they cut with the press – that the journos and paparazzi would back the hell off while I'm a student, in return for several pre-arranged photo-opportunities over the year, and three interviews. This is going to be the first one. There's a full-length interview with the Beeb, and a Q and A session with, well, pretty much everyone and his Aunt Fanny, I think. They're throwing me to the vultures for half an hour or so." Merlin thought again of Lance walking in on them in McKay's and blanched. "Yeah," he said, weakly. "I can see that."

"Come, boys, let's all be gay, boys, for education should be scientific play, boys!" trilled Kay in a grating falsetto, setting his tray down across from them. "Oh, Jesus, you would not believe the shite that Gawain insisted on watching last night."

Merlin felt his hand clenching around his spoon into a fist, and forced himself to relax.

"What's that, then?" asked Arthur, glancing over at Gawain, who was half a step behind Kay.

"Morning, Blanche," said Gawain, smiling. "Mao. Eh, he's just bitching because I wanted to watch 'The Student Prince'."

"There's a show called 'The Student Prince'?!" said Blanche, looking up from her Cocoa Pops. "Seriously?"

"No, no – it's an old movie. My old Nana had a terrible crush on your man Mario Lanza, and she was forever playing these old records when we went over for tea." He shrugged. "I was curious."
"Cruel and unusual punishment, I'm telling you," said Kay, spearing a piece of bacon with his fork. "Pass us the ketchup, Emrys."

Merlin's mouth tightened, but he passed the ketchup along. Kay noticed his expression and laughed.

"Oh, for fuck's sake – have you still got your satin knickers in a twist just because I insulted your ratty little poof pal? Cheer up, emo queen!"

"Kay," said Gawain, without raising his voice or looking up from his scrambled eggs, and Kay flinched a little.

"Oh, fine, fine, whatever. Anyway, Gawain forced me to watch this thing at gunpoint, and it was the most ridiculous thing ever – you know how people just suddenly burst into song for no good reason, like it's all perfectly normal, and everyone suddenly starts doing a choreographed dance – God, I hate that shit. It was pretty damn funny, though – all about some German prince with no social skills who goes to University, drinks his bodyweight in beer and starts fucking this hot barmaid called Kathy – and, man, she was seriously fuckable, even with all the silly dresses. And she had an endless supply of beer, so she was basically the ideal woman. Apart from all the singing. Still, I could have found a better use for her mouth."

Arthur looked over at Gawain and lifted one eyebrow. "I'm going to go out on a limb and guess that the imdb synopsis probably doesn't look quite like that," he said.

Gawain shrugged. "Well, less x-rated, but that's about it. It's a sweet wee film, and Ann Blyth is a lovely girl, so she is."

"It was completely gay," said Kay, rolling his eyes. "But the barmaid was hot. The prince was a fucking idiot to go off and marry the princess at the end. I mean, all right, Kathy was basically a chav, but he could have taken her back to Karlsburg and kept her on as his mistress, for fuck's sakes! No need to go marrying her, but it was a waste to just leave her lying around. Twat."

Merlin had frozen at some point during this little speech, staring fixedly down at his porridge and trying not to react too obviously. It occurred to him that sitting with a spoon clenched white-knuckled in his fist was probably not all that discreet, and after a moment he managed to raise the next mouthful of porridge to his mouth. It tasted like glue.

"So we've decided you should start flirting with barmaids, to get us all free beer," Kay continued, cheerfully. "Drink! Drink! Drink! To something something something..."

"Oh, God, you're useless," said Gawain. "It's: 'Drink! Drink! Drink! To eyes that are bright as stars when they're shining on me! Drink! Drink! Drink! To lips that are red and sweet as the fruit on the tree!'"

His tenor voice was quite pleasant, and certainly loud enough to be heard all around the dining hall; after a startled moment, there was a smattering of applause, which he modestly acknowledged.

Merlin stared down at his half-finished porridge and his cooling piece of toast, and found that his appetite had deserted him entirely.

"Tell you what, the princess he was supposed to marry wasn't nearly as hot as the one you're supposed to marry," said Kay, and Arthur dropped his spoon.

"Don't be stupid," he said, frowning over at Kay. "Father isn't going to railroad me into marrying Charlotte."

own career too, so she can keep herself in pin money and not come whining to you for new shoes every five minutes? All those years of competitive riding must have given her thigh muscles like nobody's business, and that sexy French accent – oh, it's all good, my friend, and you know it. No need to be modest.”

Merlin was progressing quite swiftly beyond loss of appetite and into active nausea. Not that he hadn't heard the rumours about Arthur and Princess Charlotte – the press had had a field day when he was pictured laughing with her at the Grand Prix in Monaco the year before. But the press creamed themselves any time they managed to get their hands on a picture of Arthur in a public, acceptably photographable position within a 50 mile radius of a pretty girl. And Arthur hadn't said anything about her, not once.

"We're just friends," said Arthur, tightly. "She's a very interesting woman."

"She's beautiful," said Gawain. "And she's a good writer, too – I liked her column in The Independent. Excellent horsewoman." His eyes glazed over a little. "I'd love to see Morgause well seated," he added, more to himself than anything else. "Sure, I bet she's a marvel in the saddle."

"Well, if you're not going to do anything about it, you should hook me up," said Kay, shrugging. "I could definitely handle being a kept man. Didn't she get an island for her fifth birthday?"

"I hardly think I'm in any kind of position to be hooking anyone up with Charlotte Casiraghi. You're off your head," Arthur snapped.

"Don't be daft – aren't they visiting you lot for Christmas this year?" said Kay.

Arthur blinked. "What?"

"I'm sure I heard that Princess Caroline of Hanover and her lot were spending Christmas here? The Daily Mail's already got you and Charlotte secretly engaged. God, you really don't pay any attention to current affairs, do you?"

"Not to stupid scurrilous gossip, no," said Arthur, crossly. "We don't have any company for Christmas. Father would certainly have mentioned it."

Kay rolled his eyes. "Yeah – because he's so good about keeping you in the loop. Stop whinging! There is no bad here! You're always moaning that it's just the three of you rattling around at Christmas time – well, now you have houseguests! And one of them's a hot chick!"

"I've got to go," said Merlin, getting to his feet, unable to take any more. "Early tutorial. See you later," he added, managing to smile at Gawain and Blanche. He couldn't quite bring himself to look at either Kay or Arthur, but he could feel Arthur's eyes follow him all the way out of the dining hall.

* * *

"Can I go and sit in the plane for a bit?" asked Merlin.

The dragon blinked at him lazily. "Are you planning to take over piloting it, and force me to land? I'm not of a mind to play nicely with Uther's men."

"No! God, no, I wouldn't know where to start – you're definitely the captain. I'd just like somewhere to sit and feel sorry for myself, if it's all the same with you. Somewhere I won't be interrupted."

"Have you talked to Gaius about the iPod?"
"Er – well, no. Not yet. But I'll see him today – we can talk about it then." He frowned. "Actually – I'm not entirely sure that he realises you're, you know – you. That you're talk-to-able."

"No, he doesn't," agreed the dragon. It smiled. "I'm not normally so garrulous. Although I can use the plane's radio to talk – now this is a wonderful thing, this technology. I've been chatting with humans in little towers all over the place. They find it rather disconcerting, trying to understand where I am – their machines are so easy to confuse. And there are some radio shows that run something called a "phone-in" – did you know about those? I've participated in several now."

Merlin's jaw dropped a little. "Okay. Wow. Well – I guess that's good, then. So can I go through, please?"

"Oh, what the hell," said the dragon, giving a little shrug that pushed its wings up high. "Very well. But don't put your dirty feet up on the upholstery. And don't spill anything."

"Right," said Merlin, and he opened the door into Arthur's plane.

It was always disorienting, passing through one of the dragon's doors into another place, but going from the quiet hallway in Sallies to the interior of Arthur's plane 'Excalibur', wherever it might be, was an entirely different kind of strange. There was a noticeable shift in the pressure as he stepped inside – not gradual, as it had been when Arthur piloted them up into the air, but weird in its immediacy – something a little like being plunged underwater. The quality of the light was different, dazzling in its intensity, and the whole world was full of the rumble of the engines. Merlin threw himself into one of the plush leather chairs, his legs sticking out awkwardly, and flung his head back.

"If you press that little button on the side, it reclines," said the dragon, helpfully, after a moment. Merlin scrabbled around and pressed the button obediently, and was delighted to feel the chair sliding backwards.

"Thanks," he said, and then just lay there, lost in his thoughts. Around and around like a mouse on a wheel his brain kept recycling the same little chain of things: Arthur laughing with the beautiful Charlotte; Arthur's determination to keep their relationship secret; Arthur's paralysing sense of duty; Arthur's inability to stand up and tell Kay that he was being a dick. It hurt his heart to think of Arthur as being cowardly, and he told himself that it wasn't cowardice – that it was selflessness that was motivating him, and that if he'd only got himself to think of, and not what he owed to his position, that he'd have been proud to walk down Market Street holding Merlin's hand, and kiss him in full view of everyone.

He must have sat there for at least half an hour, quietly turning things over in his head and trying to come up with some way that this thing with Arthur could end in anything but tears, until at last the dragon apparently lost all patience with him.

"Oh, for God's sake, stop pouting," it said, at last. "It's depressing. Here." And a moment later the sound of the engine was lost beneath the sound of Lily Allen singing on the radio, and Merlin almost jumped out of his socks.

"Hang on a minute," he said, torn between laughing and feeling cross. "What?"

"As guests go, you're not exactly sparkling, are you?" said the dragon.

"Well, I'm sorry – I thought you didn't want to listen to me talking about human mating rituals," Merlin retorted, feeling rather put-upon. He stared out of the window, looking down at the layer of feathery cloud far below, and wondered whether they were even in British airspace anymore.
"It isn't precisely the zenith of my ambition, no," the dragon admitted. "But watching you gnawing on your lower lip and rending your hair is rather dull too, as it happens. Perhaps you should toddle on and see your professor instead – and tell him about the iPod while you're there."

Merlin got to his feet. "I'm not seeing him until ten," he said. "I don't know why you don't talk to him yourself, though."

"I can't, without you there. And I'm not generally inclined, even when you are," it replied, shrugging elegantly. "He brought a couple of engineers through here, you know, after you first placed me in the plane." It looked at him disapprovingly. "You gave him the password to get in here."

"Er – well, yes," said Merlin, feeling embarrassed. "They were nervous, after the accident, and everything. And the prospect of a plane flying around on its own rather worried people, for some reason – something about plane crashes?"

The dragon snorted. "Oh, ridiculous – as if I can't sense those dead metal beasts long before they get anywhere near me. As well to worry that a shark might forget how to swim properly, and accidentally bump into a reef. Anyway, he brought these little mortals on board to try to tinker around with my innards. You could practically see their knees knocking, particularly when they read the fuel gauge." It laughed. "I think they wanted to establish what was wrong with the engines – which was rather a waste of time, since I'd fixed them already. They concluded that your prince is a dreadful pilot, and there was nothing wrong with the plane when you abandoned it. Fools."

Merlin cocked his head to one side. "What was wrong with the engines?" he asked, frowning. It shocked him that he hadn't given this more consideration himself – but admittedly he'd been a little bit distracted by what happened immediately after their near-death experience.

"Sabotaged," said the dragon, calmly. "But not very well. Nothing I couldn't fix, with carefully applied magic. When it comes to using magic to keep airborne, it would take an awful lot more than that to stop me."

"Sabotaged?" said Merlin, his eyes bulging. "What? Somebody was trying to – what?"

"Well, obviously," said the dragon. "He's really quite a good pilot, your little princeling. The metal remembers."


"I'm not sure about the why, but it was that muscle-bound fellow with the short dark hair. The one who's usually trailing around behind you both. You know."

"Val?" said Merlin, feeling adrenaline surge through him like fire through bone-dry grassland in a draught. "Val did this? Val tried to kill Arthur?"

"Yes," said the dragon, calmly. "I believe that's his name."

"Jesus fucking – open a passage back to Sallies now!" Merlin yelled, suddenly terrified.

"All right, all right – no need to shout, young warlock," said the dragon, sounding offended."

"NOW!"

* * *

Arthur wasn't in their room. He wasn't in the dining hall. He wasn't in the common room. And he
wasn't answering his phone.

"Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck!" Merlin muttered to himself, staring at the screen of his mobile blankly and scrabbling around for ideas. He was sure he was probably missing something really obvious, but he felt like his brain was frozen.

"Gaius," he said out loud, after a moment, and dialled the number. It was engaged. "Damn it!"

He threw the useless phone down onto his bed and ran his hands through his hair, trying really hard not to panic. "God damn it, there isn't bloody time," he snarled, feeling his magic building up inside him, pent-up energy swelling greater and greater by the moment, and he closed his eyes and let it all come flooding out – not gently, the way he had in Gaius's office, but furious and torrential, an explosion of power that swept out from the core of him and surged out through the walls and ceiling and floor, crackling with potential, power like burning honey, thick and viscous, sweet and lethal, Merlin's consciousness expanding with the bubble of his power as sparks flew from the light fitting overhead and an instant later all the electricity flickered out along North Street and beyond. Merlin was aware of the raised voices and muttered curses throughout the town, but they were as inconsequential as birdsong; all his attention was focussed on trying to find one familiar, beloved, infuriating mind out of thousands.

It was always difficult to judge the passage of time when he was in this state, but Merlin didn't think it could have taken more than a few minutes before he found Arthur down on the sheltered little beach beneath the castle, alone with Ewan and Val. And Merlin knew at once, if he'd harboured any doubts, that the dragon was right – he could taste Val's intent, and it sent a wave of fury through him, with terror hard on its heels. He was going to be too late. He could see the thoughts behind Val's smile, and he knew he was going to be too late, because it was only a matter of seconds before Val shot Ewan, and then Arthur. He was only waiting for Ewan's attention to dart away, looking for threats further afield, confident that Arthur was safe enough with Val.

Seconds.

He still hadn't learned how to teleport, but if it could then Merlin could bloody well do it, he told himself savagely. Space was an illusion of sorts anyway, as much as light or time, and when he concentrated Merlin knew instinctively how to cut through the membranes of reality and make here become there. He couldn't have explained it to Gaius any more than a caterpillar could have explained how it knew how to form a chrysalis – he simply knew that if he pushed like that, and reached out like this ...with no sense of transition at all he was suddenly standing in the sand between Arthur and Val, just as Ewan crumpled to the ground with an astonished expression on his face, and blood blossoming on his crisp white shirt front like spilled wine. Val was turning already, his gun levelled at Merlin and his features contorted in shock, and Merlin could hear Arthur shouting something behind him, but none of it mattered because he was here after all, and Arthur was safe, damn it, and staying that way.

The gunshots were as swift as Merlin would have expected – Val was a professional, after all – but Merlin was faster still, and instead of bullets bursting towards him with each flex of Val's finger, it was bees that flowed out of the muzzle of the gun. One, two, three – and then a rush of angry little bodies, golden brown and fuzzy, their delicate wings catching the light like fragments of broken glass as they filled the air in their dozens, then hundreds, and Val had dropped the gun but it made no difference at all – still the bees came pouring out in a ceaseless stream, the hum of their wings filling the air as the swarm grew and grew, as big as a man and bigger yet, forming a living shield between Valiant and Merlin, with Arthur safe behind him.

"Christ," said Val, his voice thick with shock, and although Merlin couldn't see him with his eyes, he
knew that the man was turning to flee.

"No," he said, flinging his right hand forward as though he were throwing a blade, and at that gesture the wall of bees swept down on Arthur's former bodyguard with a roar, covering so thoroughly as he ran that the contours of his flailing form were only loosely human. He screamed at first, a horrible sound, but it was stifled in seconds as his mouth swiftly filled up with bees busily stinging his tongue and the roof of his mouth and crawling down his throat on their little legs. He flung himself into the sand, rolling over and over and scraping uselessly at his body as if he were on fire, leaving countless little bodies lying scattered like confetti in his wake, their lives ending with their stings – but there were more, and more still, pouring out from the muzzle of the gun in a merciless stream, and it didn't take long at all before Valiant's spasms slowed down to sluggish, agonised twitches, and then stopped entirely.

Merlin stood quite still, panting, feeling the fire inside him gradually guttering and the gold in his eyes blurring back to blue. He was shaking, both from the aftershocks of channelling so much raw power, and from the paralysing fear of being too late. His gaze travelled from Valiant's motionless body over to the place where Ewan sprawled in the sand, and a terrible guilt seized him; before the magic could recede, he pushed another honey-thick wave of it at Ewan, finding the fading brightness of his soul that was stuttering smaller and smaller, and holding on tight, refusing to let it go. He hadn't a clue quite what he was doing at this point – only that nobody else was going to die if Merlin could help it, no matter what. He felt light-headed with it, and there was sweat standing cold on his skin, but he kept on feeding light and energy and life back into the little spark that was all that remained of Ewan, and gradually he felt it starting to grow stronger.

"My God, Merlin," said Arthur at his side, sounding both awed and appalled, staring down at Val's sting-swollen corpse. "What did you do?"

Merlin turned to look at him, swaying a little on his feet as his awareness contracted down to one fragile little human frame, and the inferno of his magic retreated once more to banked-down coals. Arthur was looking at him wide-eyed, like he'd never really seen Merlin until that moment and didn't know him at all. Like Merlin was something terrible.

"He sabotaged the plane," Merlin said, or started to say; but the roar of the waves was growing greater and greater in his ears, hurting his head, and the world was contracting still further, going dark around the edges, until all he could see was Arthur's frightened face.

Merlin didn't realise he was falling until Arthur caught him, and then he knew nothing at all.
Chapter 30

The first time Merlin woke up, he had no idea where or when he was. The bed felt unnaturally soft, the sheets too smooth and clean, the textures of his clothes all wrong. There was a frightening moment of dislocation where he felt sure he should be polishing armour, of all ridiculous things, which must have been the lingering remnants of a dream, and when Morgause's face came into view, solemn-eyed and unsmiling, he knew a spike of sudden terror and mistrust.

"Merlin," she said, her hair swinging forward as she leaned over him, and he shrank back into the pillow, magic welling instinctively in his palm – and then she was fading, and everything sank back into darkness.

* * *

The second time Merlin woke up, he was alone. It still took him long, sluggish moments to claw his way back towards consciousness, and in the liminal space between sleeping and waking he was aware only that his bed was too big, and too empty. It was dark when he opened his eyes, and the faint scent of lavender reminded him of a bed and breakfast in Rhyll where he'd once stayed with his mother, when he was nine or ten years old. He closed his eyes, puzzled and lonely, and slid back into sleep again.

* * *

The third time Merlin woke up, the first thing he saw was Professor Gaius, his collar loose and his tie half-unfastened, with bags under his eyes and the slightly-bruised look that exhaustion can lend someone's face. Merlin sat bolt upright in bed, his heart suddenly racing.

"Oh my God – is Arthur okay? And Ewan?"

The professor closed his eyes for a long moment, and if the smile that he offered Merlin a moment later was genuine, it was also rather strained. "The Prince of Wales is fine," he said. "Ewan is the bodyguard? Well, here's the peculiar thing: he swears that Valiant shot him, and there does indeed seem to be a bullet hole through his shirt, and a distressing quantity of blood. And yet the only mark on his chest is a scar which looks years old." The professor eyed Merlin narrowly. "Which is remarkably fortuitous, since anyone examining that shirt would be forgiven for supposing that he'd been shot through the heart at point blank range, and should be dead as a doornail."


"Isn't it?" said Gaius. He took a long sip of something from one of Morgana's delicate china teacups, and settled it back into its saucer. "Almost as if somebody had done the impossible, and stopped his bleeding, and magically mended all the damage then and there, and cheated death of its victim. Of course, with a wound so thoroughly fatal that kind of intervention requires so much raw energy that it tends to kill the spellcaster, so I'm sure that nobody would be so stupid as to fling themselves in where angels fear to tread." He rolled his eyes.

Merlin looked sheepish. "I'm glad he's okay," he said.

"As we all, I'm sure. So, do you feel up to filling in all the blanks for us, young man?"

Merlin met Gaius's gaze and let himself think beyond the immediate fear for Arthur and Ewan, and knowledge that he'd been holding at arm's length came rushing in upon him then, and made him wrap his arms around his chest.
"Oh my God," he exclaimed, his voice going suddenly high with shock. "I killed a man." He drew in his breath with a hiss and stared at the wall, trying to make sense of that, trying to fit his sense of who he was around this new thing. "I killed a man. I used my magic for that." Not for forcing a tree to bear fresh cherries, not for giving the dragon wings. To kill.

"Yes," said Gaius, and when Merlin looked back at him he had no idea what thoughts were hiding behind his eyes.

Merlin bit his thumbnail, staring blankly straight ahead as he remembered the steps that had led him to taking someone's life. He felt like throwing up, and like he'd lost an innocence he hadn't even realised he had – because the thing was, the really awful thing was, that he would do it again in an instant. He knew that. Not casually – but he'd known with absolute certainty that Val was on the brink of murdering Arthur, that he'd felt no compunction about murdering Ewan; if he had to do it again, Merlin knew that he wouldn't hesitate. For Arthur – or for Gwen, or Morgana, or his mother, or for Cedric, come to that. Merlin would not stand by and let innocent people become victims. Not when he could stop it.

But – he had killed a man. Somehow the concept of this was more horrifying to him than the actual memory of Val's death. He didn't want to be a murderer; he couldn't quite believe that he'd become one. Unlooked-for, the memory of Arthur's horrified expression suddenly surfaced, and Merlin swallowed hard. God. He was a killer, and Arthur knew it.

"Are you all right?" Gaius asked, watching him carefully.

Merlin laughed shakily. "I don't know," he said. "I never thought I could do something like that. I never wanted to."

"On the whole, I think most people would consider that to be a good thing," said Gaius.

"Yes. But – but it was easy." He swallowed. "It shouldn't be so easy to do something so – big. So final."

Gaius's smile was rueful, almost bitter. "Oh, Merlin. With magic or without, it is always dreadfully, dreadfully easy to do something so big. And bigger. This is the terrible lesson which we never learn from history: hurting other people is never hard, even though it should be."

"Have you ever hurt someone using magic, sir? On purpose, I mean? Have you ever – have you killed anyone?" Merlin couldn't quite believe he was asking such a thing – but he desperately wanted to know that he wasn't alone in this.

Gaius looked away. "I would like to say no, Merlin. But I'm afraid that would be a lie. Sometimes one does not have the luxury of being the person one would like to be. And sometimes there are no honourable options, and one must choose the least dishonourable."

"I'd do it again," Merlin said, very quietly, half hating himself.

"Well, to be honest I think that the king is rather counting on that," Gaius said, with a sad smile.

Merlin tried not to think about the implications of that. He scooted up the bed, pushing the pillow out of the way and leaning back against the headboard, frowning as his eyes darted around the room.

"Actually – er – where are we? This isn't my room."

"No getting anything past you, is there? What a detective you'd make. No, this isn't your room in St Salvator's Hall, Merlin; this is a room in the Duchess of Edinburgh's flat, where you've been recuperating. She insisted."
"Oh!"

"Anyway, you were about to explain just what exactly took place on Castle Sands yesterday."

"Yesterday? I've been asleep for a day?"

"Evidently you outdid yourself with your reckless use of magic, and then swooned rather melodramatically," said the professor. Merlin blanched. "I didn't swoon," he protested. "Barbara Cartland characters swoon! I might have passed out in a very manly fashion after being terribly heroic, but I'm sure I didn't swoon."

"Mere sophistry, surely? But call it what you will. You've been unconscious for a little over twenty four hours."

"Bloody hell."

"Yes, well – I gather you were busy rewriting all the rules of the universe again. That sort of thing does tend to take its toll." The professor leaned back in his chair and heaved a sigh. "Have you actually read any of your text books?"

"Yes!" Merlin protested, and then crumpled under Gaius's dubious expression. "Er. Some of them?"

"But not, I gather, those sections of Dee's Grimoir which pertain to interfering with fatal wounds, or the transformation of matter?"

"Um." Merlin wracked his brains. "Well – no. To be perfectly honest."

The professor sighed again. "God give me strength. Well, we shall discuss your work ethic when it comes to your studies in some detail once you're up and about, my lad. In the meanwhile, why don't you explain to me quite how you came to burst out of thin air and save the Prince of Wales from being shot by his former bodyguard?"

Merlin closed shaky fingers around a glass of water that was sitting temptingly on the bedside table, and brought it to his lips. He hadn't realised quite how thirsty he was until that moment, and he surprised himself by downing the whole glass.

"Right," he said, trying to organise his thoughts. "Well, the dragon told me that you'd taken engineers aboard Arthur's plane, but they were stuck in the cabin, because he was flying around at the time, and they decided that the engines were fine, and that we'd made a bit of a fuss about nothing. Only actually the dragon had fixed them magically, after Valiant sabotaged them, and..."

Gaius raised one hand. "Sorry – am I to understand that you have actual conversations with the Great Dragon?" he interrupted, in a tight voice.

Merlin nodded.

Gaius closed his eyes for a pained moment. "I see. And it didn't occur to you to mention this earlier?"

"Er – I thought this was obvious? When I told you that I'd put him into the plane?"

"Obvious. That once again you were doing the impossible. Well, yes, I suppose when you put it like that, it should have been. We are going to need to have words about this too, quite soon. And I suspect that I'm going to need to speak to the dragon in person. With your assistance, I suppose. Carry on."
"Um. Sorry? Well, he said that – oh, er, actually I should probably mention that he wants an iPod," Merlin added, awkwardly. "As a reward for services rendered to the crown. The dragon."

Gaius licked his lips and looked down into the teacup. It was one of Morgana's more elaborate designs, decorated with gold scrollwork and a fantastical pink pattern including roses and bluebells and forget-me-nots. "I think perhaps I should have supplied myself with something stronger than Earl Grey," he said, sadly. "The Great Dragon wants an iPod. Of course he does. Any other requests? A Big Mac, perhaps?"

Merlin frowned. "He wouldn't be able to eat it," he said, and Gaius just glared at him. "Actually, he does seem pretty keen on being put into a fighter plane, but I've explained that it's out of the question. I think he misses being able to breathe fire and rain down destruction whenever he feels like it."

"Good God," said Gaius, faintly, looking appalled.

"Yes, I know – that's what I said. But the iPod seemed safe enough. Although his musical taste is – a work in progress."

"I'll requisition an iPod today," said Gaius. "Although I shudder to think quite how I shall explain the necessity on my requisition form – but I fear we're straying from the point at hand. The dragon told you that Valiant had sabotaged its engines?"

"Yes. And I felt like such an idiot for not wondering more about what had happened, and getting totally sidetracked by – by – er, by other things." Merlin's face flamed, and he didn't dare look at the professor lest Gaius somehow determine precisely what those other things might be. "And, er, anyway, once I realised what Val had done I panicked, because I knew that Arthur was going to see him today. Yesterday, I mean. So I went rushing back to Sallies, and when he wasn't there I sort of – well, it was like that time in your room, only more urgent? I sort of – I stretched out until I found him, down by the castle, with Ewan and Val, and I knew what Val was going to do, I could taste it, and I knew that I'd be too late, and so I just sort of – er – well, I took a short cut."

The professor drummed his fingers on his knee, studying Merlin's face. "It wasn't a teleportation spell, was it? The magical signatures you left were – distinctive. Teleportation is an exchange of matter, even if it's simply air molecules being swapped for your flesh. What you did was something different."

"I just – pushed," said Merlin, helplessly.

"You just pushed. Right. Well, we'll come back to that – I should probably be making a list of all the things we need to come back to, in fact. More to the point, we're unable to question Valiant, since he seems to have been the unfortunate, not to say highly unlikely, victim of a conveniently concerted attack by several thousand suicidal bumble bees. In the dead of winter."

"Um," said Merlin. "Yes. Sorry."

Gaius just looked at him.

"He was going to kill Arthur!" Merlin said, defensively. "Obviously I couldn't let him!"

"Obviously. And the king, by the way, is exceedingly happy about that. He was quite adamant about giving you a knighthood for a while there, until the impossibility of justifying honouring an ordinary eighteen year old student in such a way was brought fully to his attention. As it is, he is prepared to pay you your bodyweight in gold, or thereabouts, to retain you as the prince's personal assistant, or whatever other title we can come up with that means you're officially working full time as Arthur's
Merlin's brows rose and then crumpled.

"I'm – I'm not sure how I feel about that," he said slowly. "I'm not sure how Arthur would feel about that." He couldn't forget the look on Arthur's face – like he was only then realising that Merlin was some kind of monster. Or the way he had reacted when he believed Merlin was working for his father. Merlin swallowed hard.

"I'm sure that the Prince of Wales will see the exigencies of the situation," said Gaius, firmly. "He's a sensible lad. Now, more to the point - can you enlighten us as to just what the blazes caused one of Arthur's bodyguards to go rogue in this fashion?"

"Money," said Merlin, tightly. "It was just the money. It was for some splinter group of the Provisional IRA, but Val didn't care about the cause – he was just doing it because they'd offered him such a lot of cash. It was supposed to be the first of several key strikes, but he didn't know what the others were going to be." He shook his head, remembering the crawling sense of horror. "He could have done it any time, you know – he'd been ready to act for months, and was just waiting for the word to strike. God. If I hadn't been in the plane with Arthur that day – I mean, it was so close! And if he hadn't decided to get stupidly fancy and sabotage the plane – if he'd just shot Arthur on his morning run one day..." his voice trailed off, and Merlin shuddered.

"The first of several key strikes," repeated Gaius, looking almost ill. Merlin nodded. "I see. I'd better relay that little gem straight away." He got to his feet, surveying Merlin thoughtfully. "Is there anything else that I should be aware of right now?"

"I don't think so," said Merlin. He bit his lip. "Um – where's Arthur, though? And why am I at Morgana's flat?"

"Arthur, as should be perfectly obvious to anyone with a whit of common sense, is presently with his father, protected by more heavily armed men than one could shake a stick at. And by Dr Nimueh."

Merlin stared. "I thought she hated Uther?"

"Oh, she's no fan of His Majesty the King, but she loved Igraine, and she'll not let any harm come to Igraine's son on her watch. You surely didn't imagine that Arthur had been bereft of magical protection until you came along?"

Merlin blinked. "Well," he said. "I thought you said that the wizards were pissed off with Uther?"

"Oh, the King is not exactly going to be winning any popularity contests among the wizarding community, but he's always had magical security staff."

"Oh. So – Arthur's gone? He's in London? Not staying on to finish the term?"

"I think that at the moment he's probably concentrating his energies on convincing His Majesty to allow him to finish his studies, never mind worrying about the last week of lectures before the Christmas break. The king was – quite vocal about his concerns."

Merlin tried to wrap his head around the idea that Arthur might actually be forced to curtail his studies. That he might not see Arthur again. Or, worse – remembering the horrified expression on Arthur's face – that Arthur might not want to see him again.

"Did he leave me a message?"
"No message."

"Oh," Merlin said, in a small voice, tightening his fingers on the edge of the blanket. "Is Morgana still here?"

"The Duchess of Edinburgh is very well able to defend herself, if push came to shove, even without the assistance of her bodyguards – but the king is not aware that she is a witch, and for the moment we've seen no cause to enlighten him on that point; her powers were rather late in blossoming. As a result of His Majesty's understandable fears, she found herself ushered back to the safety of London as promptly as Arthur was; they landed a helicopter on the Royal and Ancient Golf Course to whisk her away – now that didn't go down well with the club, I can tell you. But His Majesty was not in the mood to brook any defiance." Gaius sighed. "Diplomacy is – not one of his best things."

"No," agreed Merlin, thinking back over the various news items he'd seen over the years. "Not so much." He frowned. "So – she just left me in her apartment?"

"The Lady Morgause has been watching over you," said Gaius, and Merlin's jaw dropped.

"Wow. I bet she just loved being left behind as my nursemaid," he said.

Gaius raised an eyebrow. "I believe that she volunteered, actually. Although she hasn't been doing much actual nursing – more keeping an eye on you. I've dropped in a couple of times myself, but it's all been rather busy in London, as you might imagine."

"Right."

"Speaking of which, I really must be going. I'm glad to see you looking so much recovered, my boy," he said, patting Merlin's shoulder. "Do try not to do anything too melodramatic over Christmas, there's a good lad. And – don't beat yourself up about doing what you did. You saved people's lives – try to concentrate on that." He cocked his head. "I rather suspect that in the New Year you'll be finding yourself with an official job offer – although probably not a knighthood, I'm afraid. It really would be too difficult to explain how it was merited."

"Professor," said Merlin, before Gaius could leave the room. Gaius paused on the threshold and looked back at Merlin, and Merlin forced himself to ask the question that had been hovering in the back of his mind. "What happened to Val's body?"

"We happened to it," Gaius said, and for a moment he didn't look at all like a kindly old gentleman. "Don't worry yourself about that – we're very good at tying up loose ends, when we need to be. Now get some rest."
Merlin stared at Arthur's message on the screen of his phone for the five thousandth time, and told himself to stop overanalysing things. There was no way he could know whether Arthur had freaked out about the magic (or the murder – let's not forget the murder). There was no way to know whether Arthur was trying to give him the brush off. Not without talking to Arthur. Speculating wildly and imagining the worst was a really stupid waste of time. Granted, that sounded like the kind of message you sent to somebody you weren't planning to spend the rest of the holiday talking to and texting furiously, or else why that 'Merry Christmas'? But maybe it was supposed to be sarcastic, implying the lack of merriness Arthur felt at being unceremoniously dragged away? Unless it was supposed to be a pointed don't-bug-me-with-texts-you-murderous-freak kind of full stop? But Arthur loved him, damn it! Or at least – he'd loved Merlin when he just thought Merlin was a bloke he fancied who could do cool things; surely he had to understand that Merlin wasn't dangerous? Or only dangerous to people who really and truly deserved some danger?

Of course, Merlin was pretty damned sure that if he'd just seen somebody he was sleeping with turn around and kill somebody they both knew – kill them really quite horribly, and whilst they were trying to run away, at that – well, he'd probably have been a bit horrified himself. But if it were Arthur – oh, if it were Arthur, Merlin would still have loved him anyway. He just didn't know how to switch that feeling off. But maybe Arthur didn't feel that way. After all, Merlin was kind of skinny, and funny-looking, and he didn't know the right fork to use, or how to ride a horse, or any of the stupid posh things that Arthur thought were normal. He made Arthur's already-complicated life even more complicated. Maybe Arthur was having second thoughts.

Obviously, what Merlin needed to do was just pick up the damned telephone, call Arthur up and speak to him.

He'd got as far as the picking-up-the-phone part.

"Oh God!" he said, dropping the phone into his lap and dropping his head into his hands. What he really needed was a confidante to give him a sense of perspective; but Lance didn't know about the magic, and Gwen didn't know about the big gay affair with the Prince of Wales, and he couldn't really see himself telling either of them about the whole becoming-a-cold-blooded-killer-and-freaking-Arthur-out thing, because he was really having trouble accepting that himself. The dragon, on the other hand, would be completely unfazed by the whole cold-blooded-killer business – but Merlin didn't really want to talk to the dragon about whether or not he was being dumped. He had a feeling that the dragon would find it either irritating or funny, and Merlin didn't much relish the thought of either of those responses.

He got out of bed, leaving the phone lying on the pillow like a discarded toy, and helped himself, shivering, to the large bathrobe and stupid bunny slippers that somebody had helpfully laid out for him to borrow, before venturing out of the bedroom.

"Hello?"

He felt distinctly uncomfortable about being alone with Morgause in her own house; although technically he'd known her as long as he had Morgana, she was always in the background, observing quietly. It was a strange, stilted sort of intimacy which left her knowing far more about him than he did about her.
"Hello? Is anybody – oh!" Merlin's voice cut off when he reached the door to the kitchen and found Morgause putting ground coffee into an expensive-looking machine. Not for the Duchess of Edinburgh or her cousin the humble jar of Nescafe, evidently. "Um – hi," he said, giving a stifled little wave. "Thanks for – er, you know. Letting me crash here. I suppose they didn't want to have to explain things to a doctor, or to the staff at Sallies?"

"It seemed simplest and safest to bring you here," she said, her eyes too knowing. She was off duty, but apparently even in the privacy of her own kitchen she still tended to dress like a Ninja trying to pass as a Sloan Ranger; the chunky, cable-knit sweater with its heavy roll-neck was black as pitch, as were her jeans, and the leather boots beneath them looked both practical and lethal. "Will you have a coffee?"

"Thanks. Er – I was wondering if you happened to have a spare toothbrush? And a towel? I'd really like to get clean, if that's okay?"

"I think that would be an excellent idea," Morgause agreed. "There's a toothbrush under the sink, and a clean towel hanging behind the bathroom door." Her mouth quirked a little into what passed for a smile. "Would you like a bacon roll to go with your coffee?"

"I love you!" Merlin blurted out, his stomach rumbling at the prospect. Morgause met his gaze and arched an eyebrow, and he found himself blushing. "That is – I mean, you know, that would be great. Um. Yes please. I'll just, er..." he waved vaguely in the direction of the bathroom, and then scurried away.

* * *

Morgause was reading a Russian edition of 'War and Peace' and dangling a piece of string with a feather on the end for Mordred to pounce at when Merlin made his way into the living room with a mug of fresh coffee in one hand, the other holding onto one of Morgana's dainty plates which bore a large bacon roll dribbling brown sauce.

"Thanks. Again," he said, awkwardly, putting the mug and plate down on the table and pulling up a chair.

"Welcome," said Morgause, quietly, and then she went back to reading her book and absent-mindedly taunting the kitten.

Merlin took a bite of his sandwich and his eyes fluttered closed for a moment, while he made a helpless humming noise of pleasure. He had to stop himself from wolfing the whole lot down at once, and take time to chew each mouthful.

"God, this is great," he said, beaming over at Morgause so sunnily that she grinned back in spite of herself. There was a comfortable little interval, while Morgause sipped coffee and read her Russian novel, and Mordred wiggled his fluffy little bottom and practiced his ferocious stalking skills, and Merlin enjoyed the simple pleasure of food, and tried very hard not to think about Arthur.

After a while he became conscious that she was looking at him, and he lifted his head and looked back quizzically.

"Was that your first kill?" she asked.

Merlin stopped chewing and gave himself a moment to come to terms with the implications of that question. He swallowed his mouthful of sandwich with some difficulty.

"Yes."
"If you take the job on officially, you know it won't be your last," Morgause said, watching his face. Merlin felt himself growing pale. He put the sandwich back down on his plate, half-eaten.

"I don't want to kill people," he said, his voice sounding rough and uneven.

Morgause studied him, and he had no idea how to interpret her expression. "No," she allowed. "I see that. But you will, if you have to. And sooner or later you'll find that you have to."

"I'm not a killer."

"You're whatever Arthur needs you to be," she corrected him, gently. "Not only that, of course - but beneath all that wide-eyed idealism you've got a pragmatic core, Merlin Emrys. You'll be as ruthless as you need to be, so long as it keeps him safe."

Merlin wanted to deny it, but her eyes seemed to see through the lies he didn't even realise he was telling himself. He stared back, feeling trapped and resentful.

"Have you...?" he asked, lifting his chin.

"Oh, yes," she said, and her smile shocked him. She reached down and picked up Mordred without looking, scratching him behind his little white ears and making him purr. "Do you want to know how many men I've killed?"

"No!"

"Some men need killing," she said, watching him. "You know that. You could have let Valiant live."

Merlin flinched as though she had struck him in the face. "No," he said.

She smiled at him. "Yes. You made a choice, Merlin. It was brutal, but it was efficient, and it kept Arthur alive. You'd do it again in a heartbeat, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," he admitted, after a long pause, staring down at the table cloth. He felt like he hardly knew himself any more, and when he looked up at her again he could feel himself on the brink of crying – which was clearly the result of exhaustion, because he wasn't a bloody ten year old girl.

"That's good," she said approvingly. "Somebody has to make the hard choices, Merlin."

He lifted one hand to his mouth and bit at the skin of his knuckles, unthinkingly. "I don't think that Arthur wants it to be me," he said, softly, after another pause. "We're – friends. I don't think he wants to think of his friends as killers."

"The question is, though, whether you're prepared to trust his safety to anyone else, isn't it?" Morgause asked. "Maybe it's more important that you be his protector than his friend. He can always find other friends."

She wasn't coming out and saying anything directly, but the intonation in her voice made it gently clear that she knew exactly what he and Arthur were to one another. Had been to one another.

"But..." Merlin protested, feeling his heart cracking in his chest. "But – I want to be his friend. Not just his employee."

Her smile twisted ruefully, and he wanted to bite his tongue after the words had left his mouth, because of course Morgause knew exactly what she was talking about from first hand.

Suddenly bold and reckless, he said: "You and Morgana, are you two...?"
"No," she said, without hesitation. "Not now. She needed a guardian more than she needed a – friend."

Merlin swallowed. "Oh," he said, in a small voice.

She smiled. "Oh, God, you're so young, aren't you? It's fine. It's good, in fact. We understand each other very well. Life doesn't have to be all 'Romeo and Juliet', you know, unless you let it be. It can be 'Twelfth Night' instead, and everyone can stay alive and have their cakes and ale, even if they don't end up with the one they thought they wanted."

"Not everyone," said Merlin, shaking his head.

"Well, no. Not everyone," she said, after a moment, and took another sip of her coffee. "But you don't have to sit like patience on a monument, smiling at grief. I'm sure that Edwin could put a smile back on your face, if you let him."

Merlin didn't know he was going to stand up until he'd done it.

"I have to go," he said, abruptly. He glanced down at the half-eaten sandwich and felt embarrassed, but didn't take the words back. "Thank you for, um, everything."

"No problem, kiddo," Morgause said, her expression sympathetic. He hated it. "Take care of yourself out there. Try to stay out of trouble for more than five minutes, eh?"

* * *

Two days later, Merlin still hadn't phoned Arthur, or texted him. He was constantly on the brink of doing so, but then his throat would close up, and he'd wonder how he could bear to hear the confirmation in Arthur's voice that things were not okay between them. That Merlin's magic – and Merlin's ruthless use of that magic – had killed whatever was between them. And then he told himself that he was imagining problems, and that everything was fine, and that he'd saved Arthur's life, damn it – and he'd be on the brink of calling again, and then he'd ask himself whether he could be a secret boyfriend and a proper bodyguard. He thought so – but Morgause thought not, and she ought to know. And if he had to choose between keeping Arthur safe, and keeping Arthur his...

So two days had gone by since Arthur left, and Merlin still hadn't phoned or texted. And neither had Arthur, beyond that first, ambiguous message.

* * *

"What would it take to make you stop loving Gwen?" Merlin asked, and Lance nearly dropped his spoonful of ice cream. There was a school of thought that held ice cream was a dessert fit only for summer; that school of thought had clearly not visited Janetta's Ice cream Parlour. Lance had dragged Merlin down to the end of South Street to prove this point, both of them bundled up in coats and scarves and hats to brave the frigid air. They were not the only people so dressed to be sitting in the cafe clutching their ice cream sundaes in gloved hands, though – Janetta's had a well-deserved reputation far beyond St Andrews. In spite of which, Merlin found himself picking at his scoops of Turkish Delight ice cream and Irn Bru sorbet half-heartedly, and blurting out this question.

Lance stared at Merlin like he'd just sworn at him in Swahili. "What?"

"You love Gwen, right? You're in love with her? In a probably-permanent sort of way?"

"She's the only woman I could ever love," said Lance. It should have sounded overwrought, but he made it something matter-of-fact, and Merlin envied him his certainty.
"Right. Well – what could make you stop loving her? I mean – if she cheated on an exam, or on you, or if she robbed a bank or – or if she shot a man, or something. What would it take?"

Lance looked unhappy. "Why are we having this conversation? Gwen would never do something like that."

"No, but just suppose," Merlin said, leaning closer and not noticing the sorbet dripping down onto the table. "Suppose that, that something happened, and she had to do something you really disapproved of. Something terrible. But she had to do it, and you were – shocked. And disgusted. Would you stop loving her?"

"No," said Lance. "I'll always love her."

Merlin stared at him. "But you're – oh, God, you're not a normal person, Lance." His shoulders sagged. "Of course you'd still love her. Never mind."

Lance took a spoonful of marzipan flavoured ice cream, and then dipped that in the Ferrero Rocher flavoured ice cream, and brought the spoon to his mouth, looking at Merlin speculatively all the while. "Is this about Arthur?" he asked a moment later, licking his lips.

"What? No! What? Why?"

"Merlin, subtlety isn't actually one of your strengths. You've been moping like mad since he went back to London out of the blue the other day. Did you two have an argument?"

"No! Er – no. Not as such." He swallowed, and tried to think of some sneaky way of explaining the situation, and then abandoned it. "But I think he might be mad with me. Or – disappointed. About – something. Er. That I can't tell you about."

Lance took another spoonful of ice cream, and accepted Merlin's rather unhelpful response without question. "Merlin, I can't speak for Arthur, but one thing I have realised is that you should never assume you know how somebody else feels. Especially when it comes to love. You should talk to him, if you're worried."

"Right," said Merlin, nodding unhappily. He licked Irn Bru sorbet from his spoon. "I should talk to him. Of course."

* * *

I miss you.

Merlin stared at the screen of his phone, his finger hovering over the send button. That was safe enough, wasn't it? They were still friends, even if Arthur was having second thoughts about anything else. Surely? He could send that message without it being too much, or too little. He bit his lip, and then stabbed down at the button with his fingertip before he could think better of it.

"Oh, God," he said, as soon as he'd done so, burying his face in the pillow. Arthur's pillow, in Arthur's bed; it still smelled faintly like him, and that was all Merlin had to hold on to right now. "I should just phone him. This is stupid."

But instead he chewed his bottom lip, and lay in the dark and waited for an answer.

And waited.

And waited.
He was drifting off to sleep when the phone vibrated, and Nathan Fillion's voice filled the air:

"These are not the hammer; the hammer is my penis."

Merlin gave a watery chuckle; Arthur had done that, as part of their ongoing telephone battle, after Merlin had set the Monty Python Camelot song as Arthur's ringtone. He thumbed the button, and peered at the little screen.

Me 2. *Hope to see u in the New Year.*

That was – not very promising, Merlin thought, his heart sinking sickeningly. That was something you might say to anyone. Not something you'd say to a boyfriend. Not something you'd say to a *lover*. Surely? Or was it just that Arthur was a lousy communicator?

"I should just phone him," Merlin whispered, miserably. And didn't.
Chapter 32

The train from Leuchars down to Kings Cross was packed with students bundled up in layer upon layer of clothing, hefting rucksacks and suitcases and cello cases and cat boxes and, in one memorable instance, a six foot long pencil. Merlin managed to get a seat next to Gwen after the judicious use of his elbows and a tiny bit of magic, and the two of them settled down for the long journey home.

He still hadn't telephoned Arthur, and Arthur still hadn't tried to contact him by text or email. As a result, he was having a difficult time maintaining a facade of good cheer – but since he wasn't supposed to be having an affair with his royal roommate, let alone worrying that said roommate was on the brink of dumping him because of his murderous ways, he couldn't exactly justify looking miserable about going home for Christmas.

"It's not that I don't like them – I mean, they are family, and they've always been good to us, but I just hate going there cap in hand, you know?" Gwen was saying, as she settled into the aisle seat.

Merlin nodded, and tried to look attentive. The cold was bleeding in through the window, and outside the world was all grey and white and black, countless feet having trampled the snow-covered platform into dirty slush.

"But they're Mum's family, and I never really knew my Mum; and although they're always really nice about it, I know that they feel sorry for us. We're not as posh as they are – they think that Mum could have done better for herself, I just know it. Dad doesn't have some big house with a big garden and a piano and a second home in the South of France and..." she trailed off, and gave an embarrassed little cough. "Sorry. I'm ranting."

"No, no, you go right ahead," said Merlin. He was wondering where Arthur was right now, and what he was doing. It was five days since he'd seen his face. He wasn't even certain Arthur was going to come back next term – although surely he was, because they could hardly justify keeping the bloke under lock and key for the rest of his life. And the King supposedly wanted Arthur and Merlin to be joined at the hip, for God's sakes. But – but perhaps Arthur didn't. He shook his head and looked back at Gwen, trying to smile. "Your aunt is clearly a cow. I hate her already – she's right off the Christmas card list."

"No! God, no, she's not a cow!" said Gwen, looking mortified. "Oh, God, I'm horrible. No, she's a perfectly nice woman, really. They're all nice. When I was little I loved them to death! Only – I can never quite forget that they're all being kind, you know? And that they all think of me as "poor dear Gwen". It makes me want to choke on their bloody organic turkey."


Gwen gave a little laugh. "You daft sod. Well, anyway, when Lance told me about how he was going to be working with 'Crisis' on Christmas Day I thought: "Yes!" So that's what I'm doing. Dad's going over to Aunt Felicity's, but I'm going to join Lance and help out in the soup kitchen, instead of feeling like the poor relation yet again and getting legless on mulled wine."

Merlin smiled. "Good for you!" he said, meaning it.

She dimpled back at him. "What about you?"

"Oh, you know – same old same old. I'm spending Christmas with Mum, so crackers and party hats
and a turkey crown from Iceland, and presents under the tree. It's a plastic tree," he added, grinning. "I'm sure Lance would approve of how environmentally friendly we are, unpacking it every year and wrapping it in the same tinsel. We'll eat ourselves into a coma and then watch something on the telly, and then we'll drag ourselves down to the Coach House, and Mum will have a Babycham, or port and lemonade, and Mr Skorzelski will put on a Christmas CD, and then we'll go home and drink tea and eat mince pies, and fall asleep."

"And for New Year? Lance and me are going to meet up on the South Bank to watch the fireworks – d'you want to come? Percy's coming, and Blanche, and some people from, er, from the Union."

"You mean Secret Nightline People, don't you?" Merlin whispered, grinning.

"No?" said Gwen, with an almost comical expression of dismay. She stared at Merlin like a bunny in the headlights for a moment, and then covered her face with her hands. "Well – yes, but don't tell them I told you. Go on – say you'll come? You can crash at my place, if you don't mind sleeping on the floor? I mean, the sofa might be free – I think people are going to have to arm wrestle over who sleeps where. It's not exactly a palace. But it's a roof over your head, you know?"

Merlin found his heart lifting a little at the prospect. "That sounds great. Can I bring my mate Will?" he asked. He hadn't been doing a very good job of keeping in touch with Will, beyond the occasional line on Facebook, but he was hoping that things were still okay between them. It had never gone back to being quite the same since Merlin came out, but they were still friends – a little bit uncomfortable and prickly, but friends nevertheless. He'd been expecting to spend New Year's Eve wandering around Cardiff with Will, but London sounded pretty good as an alternative.

"Of course!" Gwen beamed at him, and then got a bit of a twinkle in her eye. "And you can invite Edwin too, if you want."


"Oh, bugger – have you two fallen out? Is it about your crush on Arthur? I thought you were over all that?"

This is the problem with telling lies, thought Merlin glumly. It was all well and good spilling his guts to Gwen when he was miserable, but then once he and Arthur actually did become an item, he'd not felt able to tell anyone. It only made it more awkward that Lance knew, and was keeping it secret even from Gwen. She thought he was still having an on-off thing with Edwin.

"Um," he said, his cheeks flaming. "Well – no, we've not fallen out. But I think he's busy for Hogmanay."

"Oh. Right. Hey, how weird will it be watching the King's Speech and knowing that's Arthur's dad?" Gwen laughed to herself. "I actually find myself forgetting that he's, you know, the Prince of Wales. Imagine that! And it feels weird remembering when I used to have a bit of a crush on him, because, you know – he's just Arthur, really. Not Brad Pitt, or whatever." She glanced at him sidelong. "Are you two okay again now? I mean, I know you were really upset a few weeks ago, and when he found out about Dungeons and Dragons..."

"World of Warcraft."

"Right, that – well when he found out about it he was a bit funny with you. But you sorted it all out, didn't you?" Her face was anxious. "I did worry a bit, when he went home early like that, but it was just for Important Royal Things, wasn't it? Not because – you didn't do anything daft, did you?"
"Who, me?" said Merlin, forcing a laugh.

"Yeah, Captain Hammer, you."

"No, no," he said, smiling so hard he thought his face might crack. Did killing someone with bees count as daft? Probably not. Horrifying, excessive, impressive, dramatic, surreal – sure. Daft – not so much, maybe. "So tell me more about this Crisis thing you're doing."

* * *

It was dark and cold when Merlin finally got to Cardiff train station. His rucksack felt too heavy, and the pavement was slippery underfoot, and there was a tiny hole in his left boot, so his sock was already soaked through and his toes were freezing. Gwen was already home with her Dad; she'd texted him when she arrived back at her flat a couple of hours ago, all exclamation marks and smiley faces. He was smiling to himself as he trudged to the bus stop and waited for the bus to Ely, thinking about Lance and Gwen, and feeling tentatively hopeful about New Year's Eve.

* * *

The lights were still on, and the sight of his mother's house cut through the lingering remains of Merlin's gloom. He almost broke into a run, but felt a bit embarrassed about looking like an eejit so simply quickened his pace instead. And then he was ringing the doorbell, and he could make out his mother's silhouette through the frosted glass, and a moment later he was holding her tight, startled again that she was so much smaller than she should be and losing himself in the familiar smell of her hair and the warm press of her arms.

"Oh, my boy!" she said, fondly, and for a moment he couldn't speak. There was so much he wanted to tell her – about his magic, and about Arthur, and about Morgana and Gaius and Gwen and everything that had happened to him since she waved him off at the train all those months ago. But he couldn't find the words, and he had a lowering suspicion that if he did try to explain himself he'd end up in tears.

"Merry Christmas, Mum," he said into her shoulder, after a long moment. "Did you miss me?"

"Of course I did!" she said, ruffling his hair and pulling him over the threshold. "Do you have to ask? Now, tell me you haven't brought me four months' laundry to wash and iron, like Mrs Skorzelski's boy did when he came back from the University?"

"No," he said, laughing as he closed the door behind him. "No, I'm still cheating at the laundry."

She made a tutting sound, looking him up and down. "Merlin, you have to be careful."

"I know! I am careful! Very careful! Usually." His eyes darted away from hers for a moment. "And I've learned so much, Mum, and – it's brilliant, it really is. I'm having a great time. Hey, is there any tea in the pot?"

He darted on ahead, before she could ask him about this great time in more detail, but she was hard on his heels, and she knew him entirely too well.

"Merlin?"

"Seriously, I'm parched – nobody makes a cuppa like you do, Mum," he said, dropping his ruck sack on the floor and rummaging around in the cupboard for his favourite mug. "And I'd kill for a Hobnob," he added, unthinkingly, and then felt suddenly sick at his thoughtless turn of phrase.
She saw him flinch, and reached out to close one hand over his wrist, demanding his attention. He looked up unwillingly and met her eyes, trying not to look like a murderer.

"Merlin, what's happened?"

"What?" He didn't really know why the hell he was trying to fool her, because she could always read him like a book, but he didn't want to have to think about it, and maybe if he just didn't think about Val or about Arthur it would all magically become okay again. "Nothing's happened! What are you talking about?" He smiled at her, bright-eyed and guileless, feeling his cheekbones growing pink.

"Oh, cariad, who went and broke your heart for you?" she exclaimed, looking into his eyes and seeing him far too clearly, as she always did.

"Oh, Mum," he said, his breath hitching, and then she had her arms around him again, and he let himself stop pretending everything was fine, at least for a little bit.

* * *

It was two days before Christmas when Morgana phoned him out of the blue. Merlin was in his room, doing some last-minute wrapping up of presents when his phone rang, and he'd picked it up and answered it automatically before he even had the chance to start worrying about who it might be.

"Merlin?"

"Morgana! Hey!" His pulse sped up at the belated thought of Arthur. "How are you? How's..."

"Oh my God, Merlin, did you know?"

"...sorry?"

"Did you know what he was going to do?" she hissed. He could hear voices in the background, now that he concentrated, and somebody shouting. He had a buttock-clenching suspicion that the shouting somebody might actually be Arthur's father. The king. The king was shouting right now, somewhere in the background of his phonecall. Merlin swallowed hard, and put down his roll of sellotape.

"What? What who was going to do? Has Arthur done something? What's happened?"

"You didn't know? Bloody hell fire, I never thought – Uther's going absolutely ballistic. I don't think they're going to show the whole thing on the Beeb after all – at least he's trying to stop them from airing it, but they're quoting the Royal Charter back at him, and it's all on tape, and they've got an army of lawyers, and he can't actually have Mark Thompson or Martin Bashir beheaded, however much he might want..." her voice was stifled suddenly, and Merlin strained to pick up what was happening. "Shit – sorry, got to go. Look, if they air it – you'll want to watch it."

"Watch what?" Merlin yelled – but she'd already hung up.

Merlin stared at his phone blankly.

"Shit," he said. "What the hell was that?" He bit his lip, and then typed in a message.

*Are you okay? Morgana just rang, sounded freaked out. Hope everything all right?*

He typed Arthur's name into the address space and pressed send before he could start overanalysing things, and then he waited. And waited. And waited some more.

Half an hour later, when he'd given up on the waiting and gone back to wrapping up presents, the
message alert went off, and he snatched the phone up from the carpet.

*Everything alrightish. Do not think pater likes his Xmas present much. Please watch Bashir interview tomorrow if it airs? Am v. sorry about all of this. <3*

Merlin stared at the screen for a long time, and tried not to get too overexcited about the less than three, and wondered what the hell kind of trouble Arthur had managed to get himself into this time.
"He looks like such a nice young man," said Merlin's mum the next day, beaming at the television screen as the Panorama Title sequence played itself out over images of baby Arthur being held by his newly-widowed father, Uther red-eyed and hard-faced while the baby gurgled at the cameras; images of Arthur as a toddler, waddling determinedly after a slightly taller and much skinnier figure with long black braids; images of Arthur in the ridiculous uniform of Eton, pink-cheeked and still vaguely cherubic even on the brink of his teens; images of Arthur on horseback; in football gear; playing water polo; playing rugby; laughing with Kay and Gawain; wearing his St Andrews gown.

"I can't believe you actually know him!" his mother added. "I was telling Mrs Evans down at the chippy how well you'd done for yourself, getting that scholarship and then meeting the Prince of Wales! On first name terms and everything! *Friends!*

Merlin squirmed on the sofa, and pulled a threadbare cushion onto his lap as though this was some kind of effective shield from scrutiny. "He's a very nice bloke," he said, weakly. "Um. Very – down-to-earth." Which was rubbish, really, but Merlin didn't have the faintest idea how to put any of the tumultuous thoughts in his head into words. And if he did, then his mother would immediately realise that they were more than just roommates, because he was a pretty terrible liar, really, when you got right down to it.

"He looks very handsome in that jacket," Hunith added, approvingly, as a photograph of Arthur and Charlotte at the Grand Prix flashed across the screen. Merlin swallowed. The program hadn't even started yet, and he was already freaking out. "I bet he's going to admit he's secretly engaged to that Princess Charlotte," she added, shooting a glance over at Merlin. "Do you know anything about that? Has he told you anything? You can tell me, you know."

"No," Merlin said, his voice hoarse. "He hasn't said anything to me about Charlotte."

"They were saying on Breakfast TV this morning that the King tried to stop the BBC from airing the interview, and that there were 'shocking revelations.'" She looked over at Merlin wide-eyed. "If it isn't a secret engagement to Princess Charlotte, is there some secret girlfriend up there at St Andrews? Has he got somebody pregnant? Oh, go on, Merlin – I know he's your friend, but I'm your mother! The suspense is killing me!"

"Mum, I don't know what the fuss is all about," he insisted, crossing and recrossing his legs and chewing at his thumb nail. "It's just supposed to be an interview about being a student, and growing up without his mum, all that kind of thing. He didn't tell me about anything else."

But, oh, God, Merlin was speculating. Oh boy, was he ever speculating. His heart was in his throat as he riffled through the various possibilities. Foremost in his mind was the possibility that Arthur was going to announce that he was leaving St Andrews, and going straight into the RAF. *That* would piss off his father, and no mistake. And it would make sense. Then there was the possibility that he was going to mention bloody Charlotte Casiraghi; Merlin didn't imagine that Arthur was secretly in love with her, but if he was trying to make a break from Merlin, or, or – oh, God, the suspense was killing him.

"I don't know," he said again, in a whisper, trying not to hope for anything, and his mother looked at him thoughtfully.

On the screen, Arthur was shaking hands with the journalist Martin Bashir, and then sitting down in a chair that looked like something off the Antiques Roadshow, in front of a ridiculously elaborate
baroque fireplace that was decorated with tasteful swags of holly and ivy punctuated with tartan ribbons. He didn't look at all self conscious; seeing this tiny slice of somewhere incredibly posh (Clarence House? Buckingham Palace?) where Arthur clearly felt perfectly at home – where Arthur was, quite literally, at home - made Merlin realise, as nothing else had, how very far apart their lives truly were. He glanced around at his own living room, taking in the little plastic Christmas tree in the corner, and the collection of ceramic ballerina figurines that his mother had bought from 'Family Circle' in five easy monthly installments of nine pounds ninety nine pence. She loved those little statues. Merlin had a strong feeling that the elegant figurine on the mantelpiece behind Arthur was worth a bit more than five installments of nine pounds ninety nine pence, even if it didn't come with a genuine certificate of authenticity.

"He looks really normal!" Hunith said, sounding surprised. "He isn't even wearing a tie!" Merlin nodded, his eyes glued to the screen, taking in the crisp white shirt worn open-collared beneath a navy blue v-neck jumper that Merlin had stolen more than once.

"Sshh," he said, his hands curling up into fists in his lap. The camera panned over Martin Bashir's earnest face, taking in the unobtrusive charcoal suit, the pink and red striped tie, the flecks of silver in his hair, before returning to linger on Arthur, straight-backed and blue-eyed, his hair in an artful disarray that was probably the result of much painstaking work before a mirror with a great deal of product, but still looked almost exactly the same as it did when Arthur collapsed onto the mattress under Merlin, in a tangle of sweaty naked limbs.

Merlin bit his lip.

"Thank you very much for agreeing to meet with me, Your Highness," said Bashir off camera, and Arthur's mouth twitched very slightly.

"That's the deal, isn't it?" he said, smiling. "Thank you, all of you, for allowing me to pursue my studies in peace. I do very much appreciate the courtesy that the press have so kindly extended to me."

Merlin swallowed. Arthur sounded so formal and controlled – so professional. Staged. This was the Prince Arthur he'd been expecting, the first time he set eyes on the man. Charming. Polite. Guarded. A mask, although he hadn't realised it back then. A form of self-defense.

"How are you finding life as a student?" Bashir asked, his voice warm and attentive. Arthur smiled.

"Obviously I have quite a heavy workload, with essays and presentations and things – International Relations is fascinating, but it's not exactly a walk in the park." He laughed. "And my other subjects are just as bad! I'm afraid I've spent a lot of late nights in the library – that's a bit sad, isn't it?"

"It sounds admirable," said Bashir. "Although I believe that St Andrews boasts more pubs per square foot than any other place in the United Kingdom?"

"Well, I've spent plenty of nights in the pub too," Arthur said, with a disarming grin. "St Andrews has an awful lot of pubs. No clubs, but there are beach parties, and house parties, and cheese and wine evenings, and people put on plays at The Byre Theatre. We keep ourselves busy!"

"I believe that you brought some familiar faces along with you, to St Andrews?"

Arthur gave a self-deprecating snort of laughter. "I'm very lucky to have two of my oldest friends with me at St Andrews! We always called ourselves The Three Musketeers, even when we were just scabby-kneed little scrubs in short trousers at Ludgrove School, and then we were at Eton together too. It seemed natural to come on to Uni together. But I've found that everyone's been very
accepting, and I've been lucky enough to make some very good new friends too."

"Like you!" Hunith said, grinning over at her son. Merlin tried to smile. He didn't do a very good job.

"And of course your cousin, the Duchess of Edinburgh – she's also a student at St Andrews."

Arthur's smile looked very open and natural, if you didn't know what Arthur's unguarded smiles really looked like. "Yes, Morgana's actually been what we call an 'Academic Mother' at St Andrews. It means she's officially supposed to boss me about and make a fool of me in public, so of course she was quite desperate for the job."

Bashir laughed along with Arthur. Merlin's hands were balling up into fists, his bitten nails biting into his palms. This wasn't the Arthur he knew, not really, and he hadn't realised quite how frustrating it was going to be to watch him performing like this, whilst still not knowing how things stood between them.

"Tell us about this tradition of Raisin Weekend?"

Arthur did laugh then, a proper laugh that burst out of him, his eyes dancing. Merlin's heart gave a painful twinge.

"Raisin Weekend! God! Well, what happens is that your Academic Mother – that's Morgana, in my case – gives a sort of alcoholic children's tea party on the Sunday, and everyone makes a gibbering fool of themselves. And then one's Academic Father scrapes whatever's left of one up off the floor, and whisks one off to another party, just to make absolutely certain that the hangover on Monday is as excruciating as it possibly can be." Bashir laughed. "And then on the following morning all the poor hungover Freshers – or Bejants, we call them, at St Andrews – are dressed up in embarrassing fancy dress, paraded around town, and then they have a massive foam fight in the quad."

"That sounds like fun!" said Merlin's mother, beaming over at him. "Did you do that, cariad?"

Merlin nodded, unable to find the words to describe the delirious glee of being chased breathlessly over slippery grass by Arthur, and finally pinned down squirming and laughing and covered in foam, and thinking that maybe, just maybe...

"And how did the Duchess of Edinburgh choose to dress you up?" Bashir asked, his voice warm with laughter.

Arthur grew a little pink, his eyes darting down and then up again. "As – as a wizard," he said. "Long beard, pointy hat, the full monty. But at least it was warm."

"Wonderful!"

"It was – it was a very memorable day." This was the public face coming back, the measured tone. Arthur sat up very straight, his eyes impossibly blue above the navy jumper.

"So you've evidently got a good network of friends there. I understand you're staying in one of the Halls of Residence, like a normal student?"

Arthur gave a little half shrug, ducking his head. "Well – more or less like a normal student. There are always bodyguards, and so forth, but I do my own laundry and burn my own toast, like anyone else. It's been – I really have appreciated the discretion of my fellow students. Of course, I do get small children coming up to me for autographs, and tourists sometimes – and there was one little old lady last week who asked me if I could tell her a good place to buy underwear, which was a bit
unexpected. But by and large people do let me just get on with being myself, which I really appreciate."

"And did you have any good suggestions for where to buy underwear in St Andrews?"

Arthur laughed. "I really didn't!"

"He is so down-to-earth, isn't he?" Hunith said, sounding delighted. "What a lovely boy!"

Merlin couldn't meet her eyes.

"You sound like you're thoroughly enjoying life as a student," said Bashir. "Do you have any plans yet for what you'll be doing next?"

Arthur gave him a level look. "Martin, surely you're not asking me what I want to be when I grow up? Because I'm fairly sure that I'm expected to go into the family business."

Bashir gave a surprised-sounding huff of laughter. "Yes, I dare say you will. No – no, there's been some speculation about whether you'll be doing a stint in the armed forces, as your father did. With your well-known love of flying, a lot of people have rather assumed that you'll be wanting to join the RAF?"

"Ah," said Arthur, and he looked away for a moment, and swallowed. "Well – yes, I would of course have loved to join the RAF. Would love to." He tried to smile, and it probably looked pretty convincing to people who weren't Merlin. "There's the question of my safety, you see, which – one doesn't want to cause trouble, and be a drain on resources, but there are always safety concerns around the heir to the throne." A damn sight more right now, I'll bet, Merlin thought. Valiant's defection must have given them all a hell of a jolt. "A damn sight more right now, I'll bet, Merlin thought. Valiant's defection must have given them all a hell of a jolt. "I'd like – if I were to join the forces, I'd want to go where the men went. To be deployed along with them, not kept back to be mollycoddled." He swallowed. "We'll have to see whether that's possible once I've completed my studies. No point jumping the gun."

"No, no, quite," Bashir agreed. "Well then – perhaps you won't mind me asking the question that's clearly uppermost in many people's minds: is there a girlfriend on the scene?"

Arthur gave a short, uncomfortable laugh, and the colour rose in his cheeks. Merlin wanted to die.

"After all, St Andrews does boast a higher incidence of graduates marrying fellow graduates than any other British University, and the number of applications from female students did rise rather dramatically when news broke that you had been accepted there," continued Bashir, good-humouredly. "But perhaps you've been too busy? There was some talk about Lady Viva, when she was in the UK...?"

"No!" said Arthur, with tactless haste, and then his face really flamed, and Merlin wondered whether he was remembering that first kiss, frantic and panting and reckless, just outside the closet, ankle-deep in shirts and jackets, under Edwin's watchful eye. "Er – no," he said again, swallowing, trying to backtrack. "Ha. I like her music, but I don't think she's the, uh, the girl for me. Although I'm sure she's a lovely girl."

"Or perhaps – well, of course I understand that Princess Caroline's visit with her family has been curtailed, but I'm sure you're aware that there are a lot of people speculating about your friendship with Charlotte Casiraghi...?"

"Charlotte and I are just friends," Arthur said, smiling, but to Merlin's eyes he looked quite harried. "Nothing more – really, I don't know where people get these ideas."
"Or perhaps your cousin Morgana..?" Bashir continued, delicately, and Arthur was startled into another genuine laugh.

"Dear God, no! She's practically my sister – Morgana and I would never – good God!" He looked relieved to have a real reason to laugh, and his cheeks were very pink now. "No, no, really no. She'll die laughing when she hears that."

"I see," said Bashir. "I hope you don't mind me asking? But of course the romance between your parents is something that so many people have grown up with..."


"The famous jar of coffee," Bashir agreed, his tone apologetic. "And of course you've inherited your parents' good looks, so it's only natural that so many people are on tenterhooks waiting to see if there will be another fairytale romance. But you're still a young man, and I'm sure you don't want to be thinking about getting married just yet."

"No," Arthur agreed, and his expression was impossible to read. "No, not just yet." He looked away again, and raked one hand through his hair.

"I'm sorry – I've offended you."

"No," said Arthur, looking back at Bashir at once. "No, you haven't offended me." He bit his lip, looking down at his knees, his Adam's apple bobbing. When he looked up again, his eyes darted off camera, and Merlin suddenly wondered how many more people were there in the room with them. "Actually – actually I'm not sure whether I'll ever get married."

Merlin' hand flew to his mouth, and he bit down on his knuckles hard. His mother looked over at him, and then back at the screen.

There was a startled pause. "I'm sorry?" said Bashir, his warm, confidential tone rising on a questioning note. "I don't think I quite...?"

Arthur pushed his shoulders back, looking out beyond the edge of the camera again, and then back at Martin Bashir. His nostrils flared, and he had that look on his face that Merlin knew meant trouble – meant that they were going to be breaking into St Rule's tower in the middle of the night, or stealing Morgana's bra and hanging it from a flagpole, or having sex in a bunker in the middle of the Royal and Ancient golf course while their friends roasted marshmallows on the West Sands.

"My parents were very deeply in love," Arthur said, carefully, looking down at his hands and then back up at Bashir. "I think we all know that. My father has made it very clear that he could never think of marrying another woman after my mother died. It broke his heart. That's – that's a difficult act to follow."

"I suppose it is rather a lot of pressure," Bashir agreed, kindly. "And of course nobody is really expecting you to emulate their example – you're still very young. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked. I'm sure that when you're older..."

"I don't know whether I'll ever get married," Arthur said again, firmly.

"But – but of course, the succession...?" Bashir said, laughing uncertainly.

"Yes. The succession," Arthur said, with a tight smile. "You know my father is the Head of the Church of England," he continued, after a moment.
"Yes, of course..." said Bashir, sounding slightly thrown.

"And one day I should follow in his footsteps. Head of a communion of eighty million people across the globe. That's – quite a responsibility." Arthur drew a deep breath. "I know that he takes it very seriously. I've been thinking about this a lot, lately, and – I don't know whether I'll ever be able to get married."

"But – but, I'm sorry, I don't think I understand? I mean, of course it's not reasonable to suppose you'd meet the love of your life over a jar of coffee at University – nobody's expecting that, but I'm sure that one day..."

"You see the thing is, Martin, that although Lord Ali successfully added an amendment to the Equalities Bill earlier this year that permitted same-sex civil partnership ceremonies to be held in places of worship if the relevant religious group permitted it, the Church of England is still quite adamant in their stance upon gay marriage. So I although I feel confident that I might one day be able to have a civil ceremony, I don't feel very confident about whether we would be able to call it a marriage."

There was another, staggered silence.

"I'm sorry – I'm – am I to understand – Your Highness, are you saying...?"

"I'm really not expecting to meet the girl of my dreams over a jar of coffee, because I'm gay, Martin," Arthur said, each word clear and deliberate.

"Oh my God," Merlin gasped, his eyes glued to the screen. His heart was pounding like he'd just run all the way to the end of the West Sands.

And then Arthur turned, and looked directly at the camera for the first time, with his chin shoved forward pugnaciously and a reckless gleam in his eyes. "I know it's rather inconvenient of me, in the circumstances, particularly with the whole business of the succession, and being Head of the Church of England – but I'm afraid it won't stop being the truth just because it's inconvenient, and I really don't believe that any good can come of lying to the nation about something so fundamental. I am – gay." He bit his lip, and Merlin caught just a glimpse of the terror Arthur was feeling, before he hid it again.

"You're – I'm sorry, Your Highness, you're using this interview to publicly announce that you are a, uh, a homosexual?" Merlin had never heard that particular combination of astonishment and stifled glee.

Arthur's eyes were following something off camera, and he looked almost like he expected somebody to punch him. He gave a stifled half-laugh with an edge of panic to it, and looked directly over at Martin Bashir. "I'm gay," he said again. "I always thought – I've been raised to think that when my father's great-uncle, King Edward VIII, chose to put his love for Wallis Simpson ahead of his duty to the nation, he did a terrible thing. That duty should always come first. Because we have so much privilege, all these palaces and estates and cars and jewels and servants and things - and all that comes with a price. A king should not put his own selfish desires ahead of the needs of his people. I do believe that with all my heart." He looked down at his hands again, and then back at Bashir. "But I also believe that what makes us worth keeping, in this day and age, when real government is in the hands of elected officials – and quite rightly so – is that we stand for something greater than ourselves alone. We provide a link with the past, but also a link with the future, and we should be the very best we can be. A king should be a man of honour and integrity, and he should not hide safe at home while other men stand in the front lines. I do believe that. I can't – I know that I can't turn back time. I think that I would have been rather good at that old kind of kingship, where
they wrapped you up in a few layers of steel and set you on a horse at the head of your men, with a banner flying overhead declaring where you were, and you put your money where your mouth was. But those times are gone, and they aren't coming back, and there will always be other people ready to jump in front of a bullet for me, whether I want them to or not. Whether it's fair or not. I can’t change that. So what I can hold on to is this: I can be honest. I can take a stand for my people, for the people like me, the ones in the front line. The ones who don't have bodyguards to protect them from ignorant, hateful bullies, who don't have money and privilege to insulate them from unkind words. I can have the courage to stand up and be honest about who I am, and who I can love, instead of taking the easier path, the expected path. I know that this is going to hurt and disappoint a lot of people. I know that this may mean that I cannot become the Head of the Church of England – that, conceivably, it might even mean I am required to step down from my position as heir to the throne.” He sat up straighter, and his voice was shaking just a little, but he kept going. "I never imagined that I would ever give rise to a constitutional crisis, and it does shame me profoundly to be the cause of any such difficulties." His voice grew firmer and more certain, then, and Merlin had never wanted to kiss him more in his life. "But it would shame me more to continue to allow innocent men and women to go on suffering insults, and abuse, and violence, and loss of basic human rights on a daily basis, without joining them on the front line, where an honourable man should be. Where a leader should be. Because I am one of them. I am a gay man, and that isn't going to change."

Merlin was on his feet, applauding, before he knew he was going to move. He wasn't quite sure when he'd started to cry, but apparently he was doing that too, the screen blurring before his eyes into a salty sludge of colours.

"Merlin? Merlin, did you know? Merlin?" his mother was asking, but Merlin couldn't speak. He just hugged her, and hugged her again, the two of them on their feet in the middle of the living room, with the lights from the Christmas tree flickering pink and green and blue against the wall, and Arthur's face filling up their little TV screen.

"Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God," Merlin said, again and again. "Shush. Sorry, shush, there's more." And he sat down again, rubbing the back of his hand over his snotty nose. "Oh my God."

"Your Highness, this is absolutely extraordinary," Bashir was saying, and Merlin knew that what he really meant was: "Scoop of the century! Scoop of the century! Scoop of the century!"

Arthur gave a little laugh. "That's probably not the word that everyone's going to be using," he said, his expression rueful. "But – but it had to be said."

"I see," said Bashir. He gave a short laugh of his own. "So then I suppose that the question I should be asking is: is there a boyfriend on the scene?"

Arthur's face went suddenly shuttered. "I don't know," he said. "I – perhaps I could get back to you on that one?" He gave another huff of laughter that was more nervous than amused. "Because I think the repercussions of this little interview are probably going to be – interesting. It wouldn't be very kind to ask anyone to step into the limelight like that right now, would it? Especially anyone that one – well. That one cared for."

"No – well, perhaps not," said Bashir. "So there is...?"

"I'll get back to you," Arthur said, firmly, his eyes darting to the camera, looking out of the screen right at Merlin. "I hope that there will be, though," he said softly, and his voice was suddenly awkward and uncertain, and Merlin was blushing scarlet in his living room, just as if Arthur really could see him.

"Merlin?" said Hunith, her voice going suddenly shrill. "Merlin? tell me you didn't seduce the Prince
of Wales? You're not having an affair with Prince Arthur, are you? You're not, are you? Merlin?"

He was smiling so broadly that his cheeks hurt, and when he dragged his eyes away from the screen she made a shocked sound at the expression of dazed delight on his face.

"You're having an affair with Prince Arthur!"

Merlin looked down at his toes and then back up at his mother again. "I really, really am," he said, in a very small voice, grinning helplessly. "But please don't tell Mrs Skorzelski, or Mrs Evans down the chippy."
"OH MY GOD YOU'RE HAVING A SECRET AFFAIR WITH ARTHUR!"

Merlin held the phone away from his ear and shook his head like a dog coming out of water. When Gwen's voice had dropped to a more manageable level he cautiously brought the handset back to his ear.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, but even he could hear the massive Cheshire cat grin coming through into his voice.

"Don't you try pulling the wool over my eyes, you wool-puller. You and Arthur! Together! Boyfriends! Secret boyfriends! And you didn't even tell me, you rat!"

"Gwen, it's secret. It was secret. You know about secrets."

"Yes! I know about secrets, and I'm excellent at keeping them! I thought we were past this lying business! You told me all about the secret kiss, and how you'd wiped it out of his memory, and then you left me to believe that it was the love that could not be! You said that you were moving on! That you and Edwin had a thing! And all the time you were secretly shagging Arthur's brains out! You big fibber!"

"Oh, don't you dare," said Merlin, collapsing backwards onto his bed and staring at the ceiling. "It wasn't my secret to tell, or I would have."

There was a little pause. "Well," she said, sounding mollified. "No, I don't suppose it was."

"Thank you."

"That said – OH MY GOD, MERLIN! YOU'RE CINDERELLA!"

"I am not Cinderella!" Merlin exclaimed, scandalised.

"You are totally Cinderella," Gwen said, undeterred. "You're a big-eared, trouser-wearing, penis-having, magic-wielding Cinderella, if ever there was one."

"I – you – what are you like? I'm not Cinderella!"

"You're Cinder-fella."

"Stop now!" he said, snorting with laughter. "That's quite enough."

"Oh, come on! Your boyfriend is a handsome prince, Merlin!"

Merlin stared up at the ceiling, and then cracked up. "He really is, isn't he?" he said, feeling like a naughty kid. "Oh my God. I'm Cinderella."

"You should have Doc Martens made of glass, and a Rolls Royce made out of a pumpkin. In fact, you could probably do that yourself! You don't even need a fairy godmother! In fact..."

"If you make a fairy joke, I'm going to turn you into a frog. I even know how to do that. It's a classic."

There was a little pause. "You wouldn't really turn me into a frog," Gwen said, uncertainly.
"Try me."

She blew a raspberry down the phone. "Spoilsport."

"Deal with it. Now get off the phone, would you? I – um. I need to make a call."

There was a heartbeat of silence. "Aww, Merlin! You're going to call him?"

"I had just bolted into my room with the intention of calling him, yes – only then some interfering busybody who wants to be turned into a frog went and called me before I could dial his number."

"Sorry! I'm going, I'm going. Oh, God, I wish I could reach through the phone and hug you, you secretive pillock. I'm so chuffed for you both! This is brilliant!"

"Well, yes – well, I've got a feeling that his father probably won't agree, but – yeah. Yeah, it is pretty brilliant, isn't it? Now go away."

"Okay. Love you. Oh! Give Arthur my love!"

"Put the phone down!" Merlin shouted, laughing helplessly, and she did.

He drew a deep breath, and dialed Arthur's number with trembling fingers, trying to figure out where to begin and thinking that it probably didn't matter all that much at this point, still grinning like an idiot while he waited for Arthur to answer.

And waited.

And waited.

Ten minutes later his grin had faded, but he couldn't quite bring himself to let go of the helium-in-the-veins sensation of glee. He stared down at his telephone, frowning, and then called Morgana instead.

"Merlin?" She was almost whispering.

"Oh, thank God – is this a good time?" he asked, wondering where she was and who was listening.

"Not brilliant, but it'll have to do." She sighed. "I'm not supposed to be on the phone, really – mobile lines aren't properly secure, and the bloody paparazzi are probably listening in on all of this, knowing my luck. Hello, boys, if you're out there."

Merlin's eyes widened. "They can do that?" he asked, dropping his voice pointlessly to a whisper.

"They can do that. I mean, not very legally, but they're not unduly worried about that, when they've got a sniff of a good story – and, fair play to Arthur, he's just handed them the story of the century. Hopefully the, ah, macramé experts have the place adequately screened and protected from snoopers, but at this point I'm not counting any chickens, in case they hatch out breathing fire."

"Yeah," said Merlin, feeling a little dazed. "Okay. Wow. Well, er, give him my – I mean – er – tell him I say, um, hello? And that I – um – that I hope he's okay?" Merlin swallowed, trying to decide what he could safely say if their whole conversation was being recorded by sneaky James Bond-style paparazzi types. "He was brilliant. He was – really, he was just brilliant. I'm really proud of him."

Morgana sighed. "Me too. I mean, I do quite want to smash him over the head repeatedly with a chair, but I'm very proud of him too. It wasn't an easy thing that he did, and he's going to get hell for it, bless him. Probably for the rest of his life. But it was the right thing to do. Not – not a convenient thing, or a wise thing, but an honourable thing." She laughed, unwillingly. "He's always been too
honourable for the twenty first century, has Arthur. I probably should have seen this coming, in retrospect."

"Well I definitely didn't," said Merlin, with feeling, and they both laughed.

"Me neither. I clearly fail at women's intuition, because I had no idea he was actually – I mean, I thought, maybe he was a little, um, curious, but I had no idea..."

"Oh," said Merlin, blushing quite hard. "Um. Right. That bit wasn't such a surprise. Um."

There was a very pregnant pause.

"We're going to have to have a conversation in person quite soon, aren't we?" Morgana said at last, carefully, in a tone that spoke volumes. "In private. Mother-to-son."

"Um – yeah," said Merlin, squirming. He really really hoped nobody was recording this conversation. "Um - is he okay?"

There was a little pause, and Merlin sat bolt upright in his bed, staring across at the football poster on the front of his wardrobe. Shit. Shit shit shit.

"Well, more or less," she said, eventually. "I wouldn't say that the atmosphere around here is exactly festive – I mean, I've definitely had less stressful Christmas Eves. Uther was locked up with David Cameron and Nick Clegg for hours once the Beeb had legged it yesterday, and there were some rather worrying shouts and muffled bangs from the room where they were all, um, talking – never a good plan to have Uther near priceless vases when he's in this mood. They were both rather white when they left. He's still got to redo the whole King's speech yet, for tomorrow – I think they might even go with a live broadcast, because obviously he's got to comment on this, and all the stuff he'd pre-recorded about the new coalition government, and about the Olympics, and all that stuff is a bit overshadowed by the enormous scandal and the whole thing of suddenly being on the brink of a constitutional crisis. He's – well, it's all a bit of a mess, to be honest. And he's confiscated Arthur's laptop and his phone and he keeps talking about calling for a squad of Beefeaters to march him off to The Tower in chains, but I'm fairly sure he doesn't mean it." She paused. "Are you okay?"

"God, yes! Yes, I'm fine! I'm brilliant!" Merlin said, bouncing on the edge of his bed. "I mean – you know, obviously I'm sorry that Arthur's in so much bother." He paused. "He's in quite a lot of bother, isn't he?"

Morgana gave a hollow laugh. "Well, let's see – we've got half a dozen ambassadors from various Commonwealth countries camping out in the foyer, clamouring to leave the Commonwealth post haste; the press has gone absolutely insane, to the point that a Daily Mail journalist tried to sneak in by disguising himself as a housemaid – not even a footman, or anything, but a housemaid, all Toad-of-Toad-Hall – a reporter from CNN very nearly got in by claiming to be Obama's publicity advisor and no less than three paparazzi types have tried scaling the wall; the Archbishop of Canterbury is apoplectic; the Pope has cancelled his visit to the UK – so I suppose that's a perk – and we've been getting hate mail and phonecalls from crazy people ever since the first rumour surfaced – which was about three minutes after Martin Bashir left the building yesterday. Some rent boy has sold his story to The Mirror, which I understand is going to be tomorrow's front page article – Arthur is adamant that he did not pay for a night of filthy passion with this twink from Hampstead, but said twink from Hampstead is apparently quite photogenic and has a YouTube following as a karaoke singer, or something, so The Mirror's happy to run the story anyway. They're calling Arthur 'The Princess of Wales.' So that's marvellous. The Sun's headline tomorrow morning is apparently "Ponce Charming", whilst The Daily Star is leading with "Arthur or Martha?" and the Mail has the slightly more restrained "Christmas Gay!" over a picture of Arthur in that pink shirt." She paused and drew a
deep breath. "Also, if the government decides that Arthur has to stand down, the way they did with Edward VIII – well, and even if they don't, assuming that Arthur doesn't have any children, or that any such children will be fathered out of wedlock - I'm going to be first in line for the throne. Which actually wasn't on my to-do list for the Christmas holiday."

"Oh my God, so you are!" Merlin exclaimed. "Shit!"

"I know! Tell me about it!" Muffled voices rose in the background, and Merlin was almost sure that one of them was Arthur's. When she spoke again, her voice had dropped back down to a whisper. "Oh, crap - I've got to go. Look – look, I'll see you next term, probably? Merry Christmas, Merlin."

"Merry Christmas. I'm sorry it's all gone a bit – you know. Pete Tong."

Morgana made a stifled sound somewhere between a hiccup and a laugh."It has all, as you say, gone a bit Pete Tong – but somebody has to take the first step, after all. Of course it would be Arthur."

"Give him my – my, um. Paparazzi, Merlin thought, unhappily. Paparazzi possibly listening for a clue of whose door to go and surround. And then he sat up straighter. "Oh, fuck it. Tell him I love him, and of course he still has a boyfriend. If he, um, wants one. Wants me. Tell him I love him, okay? Please?"

"Oh, Christ. Discretion? We don't need no stinking discretion! Right, I'm hanging up now, you incorrigible brat."

"Tell him?"

"I will! But I've got to go!" The voices in the background were getting louder, and one of them was definitely Arthur's. Merlin was pretty sure he other one was the king.

"Thank you!" Merlin said, just as she hung up.

* * *

Merlin was in the middle of making a pot of tea when Gaius phoned.

"Merlin?" It was remarkable what a universe of disapproval the professor could manage to squeeze into two little syllables.

Merlin swallowed. "Yes?" he said, torn between nerves and defensiveness.

There was a frosty little pause. "Would I be right," Gaius asked, carefully, "in supposing that you were not quite as surprised by Prince Arthur's, ah, revelation, as the rest of us?"

"What are you asking?" Merlin said, straightening his back even though there was nobody else in the kitchen with him.

"I'm asking, Merlin, whether the rumours that I'd heard about a young lady called Gwen Smith assisting you in breaking the aphrodisiac spell might, just possibly, have been misleading?"

"Ah," said Merlin. "Well, she did help," he said, stiffly. "I mean - she tried to help. I thought she would be the one who could help, but, ah – she wasn't. As it turned out."

Gaius sighed. "And here I was thinking that the thing I had to prepare His Majesty for was the eventuality that Arthur would be marrying a commoner. Not ideal, that, but no longer unprecedented, at least on the continent. It didn't occur to me that perhaps I should be preparing him for quite so
dramatic a break with precedent as we have just found ourselves plunged into, however. A heads-up would have been appreciated."

Merlin couldn't quite find a question in there, so he kept quiet.

"So – you broke the spell."

That still wasn't a question, so Merlin didn't say anything.

Gaius sighed again. "This isn't just a teenage fling between the two of you – this is something strong enough to break a disturbingly powerful spell. So we're in it for the long haul, aren't we?"

"Um," said Merlin, blushing and sticking his chin out. "Well, er – well. Yes, as it happens. It was me who broke the spell, because – well, because I love him. And he loves me. And I'm not going anywhere – not if Arthur wants me to stay."

Gaius gave a sour laugh. "If? I think, in light of the gesture he's just made, that we can probably take that as read."

Merlin put down the mug he'd been holding and reminded himself that there was nothing to be gained from getting angry. "That wasn't about me," he said, after a tense pause. "I might have been the, the catalyst, but this was about Arthur doing what's right. Because he's a good man." He took another deep breath, and forced himself to lower his voice. "It matters. It matters a lot. And not just for me."

"Oh, keep your hair on, Merlin. I'm simply saying that as romantic gestures go, this is as good as it gets. He's ready to give up his throne, if need be, so that he can hold hands with you at the Pride march. The young idiot." Merlin could practically see Gaius rolling his eyes. "At the moment His Majesty is still adamant that he wants you employed as Arthur's chief factotum and bodyguard, glued to the prince's side twenty four seven. When he understands quite how closely you've been, ah, guarding his body – well, he may be a little less enthusiastic about this plan." He sighed. "The prospect of trying to reassure the king that you have not, in fact, slipped his only son and heir a magical roofie to forcibly wreck his previously unsullied heterosexuality is, frankly, not something I'm relishing."

"I wouldn't do that!" Merlin exclaimed, genuinely shocked.

"No, Merlin. If I imagined for an instant that you would do any such thing, you would certainly not be wandering around free right now. Convincing the king of this, however, will be another matter." He made a tutting sound. "Really – do you stay up late at night trying to work out the most stressful thing you can throw at me?"

"No!" Merlin said. And then he felt a wash of guilt, because Gaius was an old man. "No, sir. Sorry, sir."

"When I asked you to try to keep out of trouble over Christmas, this really wasn't what I meant, you know."

"But this isn't my fault!"

"And yet here you are in the middle of it again, Merlin."

"Well – well, yes. Um. Sorry, sir."

"You are an only child, aren't you, Merlin? I mean, I won't be looking at a collection of Gandalfs
and Harrys and Sarumans and Voldemorts toddling up to St Andrews over the next few years?"

"No!" Merlin exclaimed, choking with unexpected laughter. "No, sir, I'm an only child."

"Well, I suppose that's something," he said, with a sigh. "Merry Christmas. Not that you can get much merrier than you are at present, I suppose."

"Merry Christmas, sir."

* * *

Merlin woke up on Christmas morning with a nerve-wracking feeling of having forgotten something vitally important, and as he dragged himself sluggishly back into the waking world he had several long moments of flaily panic about whether he was supposed to catch a train or meet somebody or sit an exam or what the great big earth-shatteringly important thing lurking on the edge of his consciousness was.

And then he remembered that Arthur had outed himself on television in front of the entire planet, and that Arthur was hoping that they were still a couple, and that his boyfriend was a handsome prince who had decided that loving Merlin was no longer a dirty little secret, and he punched the air in astonished, blushing glee.

* * *

"...and a very Merry Christmas to our viewers! This morning, the topic everyone's talking about: Arthur or Martha? After yesterday's shock revelation that the Prince of Wales is gay, everyone has an opinion on whether or not Arthur should be allowed to inherit the throne and represent Britain on the world stage. We'll be joined here on 'The Wright Stuff' by Peter Tatchell, from Stonewall, and by a representative of the Archbishop of Canterbury, as well as Dr Joseph Nicolosi, an American psychologist and founder of the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality, who claims that he can cure homosexuality. What do you think, viewers? Should Prince Arthur have stayed in the closet? Is he flaunting his sexuality needlessly by coming out on Christmas Eve? Should he be allowed to be crowned king after his father? Or do I mean crowned queen? Can he be allowed to remain as Head of the Church of England? Should he be allowed to marry another man? If so, should it be in St Paul's Cathedral, or in a civil ceremony? We'd love to hear your thoughts on the matter, and we'll be taking your calls on this number..."

Merlin glared at the TV set, his forgotten baked beans congealing quietly atop the toast in front of him.

"Have you seen this?" he demanded, in outraged tones. "They've got some bloke who thinks he can cure people of being gay! They're suggesting Arthur shouldn't be king!"

"They're just asking people what they think, love," his mother said, shrugging. "Some people are idiots."

"Flaunting his sexuality? He wasn't flaunting his bloody sexuality! Wearing a sequined rainbow t-shirt and singing show tunes whilst going down on Martin Bashir, that would have been flaunting his sexuality! He was just being honest about who he is!" Merlin rested his elbows on the table – narrowly missing sending beans everywhere – and put his head in his hands. "Why do people have to be so crap, Mum?"

"Lorraine Kelly was very sympathetic on 'GMTV," she said, helpfully. "While you were in the shower."
"Oh," he said, squinting at her through his fingers. "Well, I suppose that's something."

"Come on, don't let your breakfast go cold," Hunith said. She winked at him. "Don't you want to find out if Santa's been?"

Merlin smiled in spite of himself, and sat up properly. "Sorry." He picked up his knife and fork again, and started cutting up his toast, trying to feel festive. But it was rather difficult to concentrate on Christmas Day, even with tinsel wrapped around the lampshades and the smell of turkey filling the kitchen, when all he could think about was Arthur. It was driving him quietly insane to be unable to talk to him.

"Mind you, I think he's only supposed to bring presents for the good boys and girls – and seducing the Prince of Wales and causing a constitutional crisis probably counts as naughty," she added, her mouth quirking up at the corner. "He might think you've already had all the presents you need this Christmas, my lad."

"I have," Merlin said, blinking stupidly and unable to stop the grin from plastering itself all over his face again. "Oh my God – I really, really have."

"I wonder what the king's going to have to say for himself, then," his mother mused, squirting ketchup onto her fried egg. "Your friend said that – you know, I can't get over you being friends with the Duchess of Edinburgh! With all those lovely hats!"

"Mu-um!"

"Sorry, cariad." She sounded completely unrepentant. "You'll have to give me a while to adjust, that's all. But she said that the king was going to make a live broadcast today?"

"She thought so."

"Mmm. Well, that should be interesting," she said, mildly. "Three o'clock, isn't it?"

* * *

They didn't normally have Sky News switched on on Christmas Day, but under the circumstances what Merlin wanted more than anything, and especially since he couldn't phone, was to know what was going on with Arthur. So instead of Silent Night and Good King Wenceslas, the soundtrack to Christmas Day in the Emrys household featured the dulcet tones of Colin Brazier and Dermot Murnaghan as they grilled Sarah Hughes and Alastair Bruce about what they were calling 'Arthurgate'. Merlin peeled the potatoes to the sound of Sarah Hughes rambling on about Arthur's supposed flirtation with Princess Charlotte and the question of whether or not he could be allowed to adopt children, or have them out of wedlock. When they started talking about turkey basters, and hypothesising about possible royal babymamas, he had to cover his ears and sing "lalala" for a bit, while his own mother laughed and laughed and laughed.

They were almost on the brink of plating up their dinner, and the kitchen was full of delicious roasting smells, and the Iceland king prawn ring with the thousand island dressing that they were sharing for a starter was sitting in the middle of the table, with a pile of bread and butter triangles next to it, when Merlin's attention was drawn back to the television by sudden breaking news.

"Reports are coming in that Prince Arthur's long time friend Kay FitzEctor has just assaulted a journalist," said Dermot, his head tilted a little to one side as somebody clearly fed information into his ear. "Yes...yes, apparently a reporter for the Daily Mail offered him an unspecified sum for an exclusive interview about the prince's private life and Mr FitzEctor responded by punching the man
"Oh my God!" said Merlin, freezing in the middle of carrying knives and forks to the table. He scurried over to stare at the television.

On the TV screen, Dermot turned to the Royal reporter, Sarah Hughes. "Would you say that this is typical of Mr FitzEctor, Sarah?"

Sarah screwed up her face, looking very solemn. "Well, of course he has been very close to the prince since they were children, and Kay is known to be a keen Rugby player with a rather fiery temperament. I'm not entirely surprised that he'd lash out like this, in the circumstances."

"We have a crew on the scene now," said Dermot. "This is coming in live, ladies and gentlemen."

The image cut to slightly grainy footage of Kay, in his St Andrews Rowing Team hoody, standing in front of a doorway that looked like it should be on a National Trust building, with a rather heavyset older gentleman behind him who had to be his father – he looked just like an older, fatter version of Kay with a mustache. Kay was red in the face, and as furious as Merlin had ever seen him.

"Clear off, the lot of you!" Kay's (probable) father was shouting at the camera, as somebody helped a man up out of the snow. "This is private property, and you are all trespassing!"

"He hid be!" said the snow-coated man, pressing wet fingers ineffectually at his bleeding nose and glaring at Kay. "He hid be id de dose! For dothing!"

"I'll do more than that, you bloody muck-raking oiks!" Kay yelled, lunging forwards and almost escaping his father's restraining grasp. "I'll stick your bloody camera where the sun don't shine, you scum! Offering me bloody money for dirt on Arthur! You're not worth the mud under his shoes, you leeches, even if he is a bloody poof! He's our bloody poof!"

"What my son is trying to say is that we all support the Prince of Wales, whatever his lifestyle choice, and that we fully respect his privacy," said his father, calmly. "And that if you are not all off our property within the next three minutes, we shall be obliged to release the dogs. Good day to you."

The picture cut back to the studio, where Dermot seemed to be having a little difficulty controlling his facial expression.

"Bloody hell," said Merlin, realising that his mouth had fallen open and pulling himself together. "Well, I'll be damned. I never thought anything could make me want to cheer for Kay. I'm sure I'll get over the impulse in a minute, but – bloody hell."

"Is that the rude one?" asked Hunith, glancing up from the sprouts. "He didn't seem so bad."

"Oh, he is," Merlin said. "Generally speaking he's a complete git."

"Nice that he's so loyal to his friend, then."

Merlin nodded, his eyes still bulging. "It is, isn't it?"

Hunith pinched his cheek. "Now leave the idiot box for five minutes, and come and carve the turkey for me, cariad."
They had eaten their own bodyweight in prawns and turkey and potatoes and roast vegetables, and Merlin had complained loudly about the brussel sprouts, as was traditional, and they had drunk a bottle of wine between them, and they had sat in front of the tree opening presents one at a time and giggling, and drinking sherry, and now they were sharing the box of Quality Street that Santa had left for Hunith, and fighting over the green triangles and the purple ones with the hazelnuts in the middle.

"Right," said Hunith, unwrapping a green triangle victoriously. "Let's see what your future father-in-law has to say for himself."

Merlin inhaled his mouthful of sherry and made helpless wheezing sounds for a few minutes, whilst his mother thumped him on the back. When he'd got his breath back he rounded on her with watering eyes and gasped: "Don't say things like that!"

Hunith grinned at him. "I thought you told me it was serious? I mean, it looks pretty serious, if he's outing himself before the nation for you, cariad."

That wasn't for me," Merlin objected, with a scowl.

"Whatever you say, my lad," said Hunith, her eyes twinkling. "Whatever you say. Tell you what, though – His Nibs must be in a right old mood, to go stomping off to ITV instead of letting them broadcast the speech on the BBC!"

Merlin winced. "Yeah," he said unhappily. "Yeah. That – doesn't really bode well, does it?"

"Oh, I'm sure you'll be able to charm the pants off him when you finally meet him in person," Hunith said cheerfully, taking another swig of sherry. She frowned. "Well, not the actual pants, obviously – he's a handsome man, but I don't think your boyfriend would be too thrilled about that."

"Mum!" spluttered Merlin again, scandalised, as the ITN announcer explained in a grave tone that this year's Royal Address was being broadcast live from Buckingham Palace.

On the screen, to the strains of 'God Save The King', Buckingham Palace looked like an elaborate doll's house encrusted with snow as thick as the hard white icing that layered the Christmas cake on the kitchen table. Merlin tried to wrap his head around the notion that this was Arthur's house. In fact, just one of Arthur's houses, really. He tried quite hard, but it still felt a bit too ridiculous to take seriously. The image on the screen cut to a picture of the royal standard fluttering gamely against a bright blue sky, each gust of wind hiding or revealing the curves of the red dragon of Wales who seemed to be roaring at the three English lions all frozen mid-pounce, while below them the red lion of Scotland was rearing up as if about to start playing upon the Irish harp. The sky looked unfeasibly blue behind the flag, and Merlin wondered whether it was a stock photograph, and he was unsurprised when it was followed a moment later by a sequence of clips of King Uther opening parliament; inspecting the guard; watching a group of Maoris performing the haka; helping feed a cross-looking baby orangutan; nodding earnestly whilst listening to representatives of the Women's Institute; shaking hands with various members of the public.

"He's been keeping himself busy," Hunith observed, topping up her sherry glass.

And then the screen cut again to show Uther Pendragon standing in front of a Christmas tree. The room behind him was decorated like a gilt-edged wedding cake, and Merlin would have been ready
to bet that they didn't use pins or bluetack to stick up the Christmas cards they received every year.
He bit his lip, looking at the face familiar from stamps and coins and the TV news, and tried to see
traces of Arthur in his father's features. He looked tired, Merlin thought, surprised by a sudden
moment of sympathy. Tired, and older than he was in Merlin's head, but he stood up straight and
stiff-necked, and looked right at the camera as if he were facing a firing squad.

"This is not the speech that I expected to broadcast on Christmas Day, but it is one of the most
important ones I have ever made." He gave a rather tense smile. "Two thousand and ten has been a
year of many changes for Britain. We have a new government in place, a coalition of two different
parties, working together to overcome differences in the name of the greater public good. I have had
many meetings with Mr Cameron and Mr Clegg, and feel confident that together they will help
Britain to move forward into a brighter tomorrow. Earlier this year I attended a meeting in Trinidad
and Tobago along with the Heads of all the Commonwealth countries, and I had the great good
fortune to meet some of the young people from these different nations: young men and women of
myriad different faiths and philosophies, living in different economic circumstances, but all united in
their hope for a better future, a future which will bring peace and stability for themselves and their
families.

"I am sure that you join me in hoping and praying for a swift and peaceful resolution to the troubles
in Afghanistan, even as we honour our servicemen and women from Great Britain and the rest of the
Commonwealth – well over thirteen thousand of them, from Canada, Australia, New Zealand and
Singapore – for their great courage, and dignity, and resolve." He looked down at his hands for a
moment in a gesture that reminded Merlin almost painfully of Arthur, and then looked back at the
camera. "And it is of courage, and dignity, and resolve that I must speak now."

Merlin's knuckles were white around his empty sherry glass. He set it down on the carpet a little
shakily, and pulled his knees up in front of his chest, wrapping his arms around them. On the screen,
the king pushed his shoulders back and looked directly out of the screen once more.

"In two thousand and ten, I am proud to say that Great Britain is a far more tolerant and liberal-
minded country than it was when I was a child. The world has changed around us in many ways,
and things that were once unthinkable are now unremarkable. Britain has always been an
amalgamation of different cultures and traditions, and modern Britain is more multicultural than ever
before. Today our armed forces welcome gay and lesbian volunteers, and honour them for their
courage and resolve in being prepared to fight for the country they hold dear. Earlier this year Dr
Jeffrey John, a clergyman of great integrity and compassion, became Britain's first openly gay
bishop, when he was ordained to the diocese of Southwark. He has received great support from
some corners of the community, and has handled the criticism of his opponents with courtesy and
aplomb. Meanwhile, overseas, Iceland last year elected the first openly gay head of state of the
modern age, Ms Johanna Sigurdardottir."
"Astonishingly, the world did not come to an end. She continues to lead her country with integrity
and wisdom, and earlier this year she married her long time partner, Jónína Leósdóttir, in a ceremony
which I was fortunate enough to attend."

He drew a deep breath, and then continued: "And as I am sure you are aware, yesterday the BBC
aired its recent interview with my son, the Prince of Wales, in which he revealed that he is gay."

"Here we go!" said Hunith, putting down the box of Quality Street and rubbing her hands together.
Merlin buried his face in his knees, and then looked up again, biting his lip.

"...an interview in which he comported himself with unquestionable courage, dignity and resolve,"
continued Uther. "It does not surprise me that the substance of this interview has given rise to much
speculation and debate, since naturally it has implications for the line of succession, as well as for the
future king's role within the Church of England. To my people, and to the men and women of the rest of the Commonwealth, I say this: the Prince of Wales is a young man of deep integrity, who takes his duties as a leader and as a role model very much to heart. He is a young man of considerable intelligence, as evidenced by the fact that he was able to earn his own way onto a rigorous degree course at one of the country's oldest and most reputable centres of learning. He is a young man of great bravery, as I have long known from his earnest wish to serve in the armed forces, and as I am now seeing afresh, as he steps forward in the knowledge that simple honesty will cause some people to treat him with contempt and hatred.

"Are you sure he was throwing crockery at David Cameron?" Hunith asked, looking over at Merlin with raised eyebrows.

"Shut up, Mum!" said Merlin, waving a hand vaguely at her in a vague hushing motion, while trying to concentrate on what King Uther was saying on the screen before them.

"Let me make this absolutely clear: Arthur is, and will remain, the heir to the throne. Whether the Church of England finds the prospect of him eventually becoming Head of the Church of England to be tenable or not is of course a matter for the Archbishop of Canterbury and his colleagues to discuss, and it is possible that when he succeeds me as king he will not succeed me as Head of the Church." Uther's voice dropped lower, and his expression grew sterner. "But succeed me he most certainly will."

"Woohoo!" said Hunith, bouncing in her chair. "Looks like your boyfriend still has a job with the family business!"

"Oh, thank God!" said Merlin, shaking his head. "I thought – I was afraid – oh, thank God!"

"Certainly my life, and no doubt his own, would have been simpler if he were able to fall in love with a suitable young lady and provide me with half a dozen grandchildren, as I, and no doubt you, have long expected to be the case," Uther continued. "I feel sure that in previous generations, there would have been no question of being honest with the public in this way; but I am very proud indeed that I have raised a son who would scorn to live a lie, however inconvenient the truth might be." He ducked his head slightly, his mouth quirking up into another brief smile. "On a purely personal note, I have not given up all hope of one day having grandchildren, but I accept that if I am to become a grandfather, it will not be by the traditional method. In terms of the succession, however, I am secure in the knowledge that my niece, the Duchess of Edinburgh, is in excellent health – and although the immediate circle of Pendragons is rather thin on the ground, the House of Pendragon was so-named only in 1917. We have many cousins in Europe who belong to our extended family of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, and I am confident that regardless of whether or not my son raises a family of his own, the line of succession will be perfectly secure.

"Christmas is a time for family, a time for supporting and accepting our loved ones and renewing the ties that bind us together. Our families may surprise us, and they may not always grow in the way that we wish or expect, but they remain family, first and foremost. I hope that we can all honour the spirit of Christmas as a nation, and within the greater family of the Commonwealth, and I wish you all a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year."

The strains of 'God Save The King' filled the air once more, and the camera panned over to the Christmas tree.

"Ooh, no," said Hunith, shaking her head in disapproval. "I don't know about importing random Germans to be king! No, no, you'll have to sort something out with a surrogate mother, or adopt a Romanian orphan or something."
"Mum, I'm eighteen!" said Merlin. "I don't want to start a family yet! And neither does Arthur! And I wish you'd stop acting like we're getting married, because, you know – he's just my boyfriend." He found himself grinning in the middle of his complaint, though, at being able to say that out loud.

"Well, we'll see," she said, grinning. "I thought that went quite well."

Merlin nodded, almost trembling with relief. "Surprisingly well," he agreed.

* * *

Are you sure he was throwing vases? He seemed really cool about it all!

Bloody minded is more like it. And, yes, 3 vases.

How's Arthur?

Whisked off to Balmoral in secret yesterday, to try to get him out of the way of the press – I've hardly seen him at all.

Balmoral??!!?

Merlin closed his eyes. "Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!" he yelled, and Hunith popped her head around the doorway and looked at him quizzically. "Sorry, sorry – I'm fine," he said, blushing. "Just texting Morgana." He bent his head back down to the phone and typed quickly.

Damn it, Morgana, if I don't get to speak to him soon I'm going to end up forcibly kidnapping him by magic, and then we'll all be in trouble!

Can you do that?

I'm very good at improvising. I'll come up with something.

Contrary to public opinion, the king is still VERY PISSED OFF. Gaius and Nimueh and various others managed to calm him down and get him to see it as brave and kingly kind of gesture, but still – pissed off.

Merlin stared at the telephone screen miserably. But I miss him! LOTS! he typed. How can he not have a phone? He's the Prince of Wales! Everyone has a phone!

Everyone doesn't have the king pissed off with them. But he did leave you a message.

OMG!!! What???

It's all cloak and dagger. Idiot doesn't even trust me, which is VERY ANNOYING. He says he'll see you for Hogmanay, though, if you want to meet him. Think he's planning some kind of gaol break. Because his father isn't cross enough right now.

WHERE???

I quote: "Second star to the right, and straight on till morning. Another stupid adventure. Come and be king of the world?" Does that make any sense to you?

Merlin screwed up his face, and then broke into a grin.

Yes!
On Boxing Day, after they got back from Mrs Skorzelski's place, and after Merlin had stopped having mini heart attacks every five minutes out of worrying that Hunith was on the brink of announcing that the Prince of Wales was now her sort-of son-in-law, and after they'd told the carol singers looming on their doorstep that two lines of 'We wish you a Merry Christmas' didn't count as a whole carol, and they weren't getting any money unless they sang at least two actual Christmas carols all the way through, and the carol singers had made some rather pointed remarks about the number of windows in their house, and the ready availability of bricks, and Merlin had abused his magical powers just a tiny bit, but not to turn them into frogs or erase their memories, so it didn't really count as abuse, and was surely acceptable, since now they were all in such good moods and feeling so helpful and generous that they were busy shoveling snow out of old Mrs Thomas's driveway – after all of that, Merlin retired to his bedroom, and made himself a magical door.

He realised belatedly, as the dragon blinked and stretched on the white paintwork of his bedroom door, that he hadn't quite thought this one through properly; in all honesty, there were times that a person wanted to have a little privacy in their bedroom, particularly if they were pining frustratedly for their absent boyfriend, and having nonstop observation and commentary from their door was not, actually, ideal.

He smacked his forehead with his open palm. "I am an idiot," he said.

"Well," said the dragon. "I wouldn't go that far. Although at times I do wonder. I take it that you're responsible for all the furore about Prince Martha?"

"Oh, don't you start!" Merlin said, glowering.

The dragon gave an elegant shrug, its wings flaring out behind its back. "You never let him do anything quite this publicly rash before," it said. "Still, the times they are evidently a-changing. Have you got anywhere with my iPod yet, by the way?"

"Oh!" Merlin pulled a guilty face. "No, sorry, not yet – but I know that Gaius ordered it! It's on the way. Um. Are you sure about Justin Bieber?"

The dragon settled back on its two dimensional haunches and started to lick carefully between its claws. Which was odd, because Merlin really couldn't think of any way that it could need to groom itself – but perhaps it was a reflex. "Actually, I'm over Justin Bieber," it said. "But I really want to download the Rolling Stones' back catalogue. And the Sex Pistols – I think I really like the Sex Pistols. And Iggy Pop. Have you heard 'The Passenger'? Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant."

"Oh!" Merlin perked up. "Well, that's good. I'll nag Gaius for you – sorry I don't have it right now."

The dragon gave a long-suffering sigh. "I gather you've been rather busy. The peasants really are revolting these days, aren't they? All this 'Ponce Charming' business – Uther would have had them hanged, drawn and quartered, back in the old days. If they were lucky."

"Oi," said Merlin, feeling vaguely that he'd been insulted. "Peasant, thank you, sitting right here!"

"Oh, well, I suppose you are, technically. Still, you're Bee Eff Efs with the prince, aren't you? You're his secret squeeze?"

"Oh my God! what have you been listening to?" demanded Merlin, aghast.
"Everything. More or less everything," said the dragon, smiling. "It's marvellous. Very thought provoking. The number of phone-in shows quadrupled overnight, you know, after 'Arthurgate' – I've had some fabulous arguments with stupid people. Very exhilarating. I made one woman sob like a baby! It was almost as invigorating as breathing flames all over a screaming maiden."

"Don't joke about that kind of thing!" said Merlin.

"Who's joking?" asked the dragon, cocking its head to one side and regarding Merlin through narrowed eyes. "You really did throw the cat among the pigeons, didn't you? Or, well, your prince did, with his Ellen DeGeneres moment. Speaking of Ellen, I understand that she's supporting him on Twitter like crazy, as is a gentleman called Stephen Fry. The top hashtags on Twitter are currently 'Gay Prince', 'Prince Arthur ftw'."

Merlin found himself unequal to the task of responding to this. He sat down carefully on the edge of his bed.

"Eff Tee Doubleyou stands for 'For the win', which is apparently a term of approbation," the dragon added, helpfully. There was a little pause. "I'm still not entirely sure what Twitter is, though," it admitted, with some reluctance. "Or hashtags. But it certainly seems to be getting people quite excited."

"I've created a monster, haven't I?" said Merlin, staring at the animated figure incredulously.

"I think that, technically, I was already a monster," the dragon replied. "Now I am a monster with social networking skills. Or I would be, if I had a Twitter account. And possibly a Facebook. Do I want a Facebook? Is it a book of faces? Is it the same as MySpace? Which of course begs the question: what is MySpace?"

Merlin swallowed. "I think – I think for now we should stick to the iPod. We can maybe work up to getting you a Twitter account later. Somehow. I don't know how you'd access it – but I'm getting the feeling that you'd find a way."

"I'm very resourceful," the dragon agreed, happily. "And I definitely think that I want to get onto the internet. It sounds like precisely the kind of brave new world that I should be exploring. I understand there are trolls? And you can flame people? I do like the Twenty First Century!"

Merlin swallowed. "Well, be that as it may, it will have to wait until next term."

The dragon made a noise that sounded suspiciously like Gwen did when she blew a raspberry at him. "You are no fun, do you know that?"

"I'm starting to get that, yes," Merlin said. "Anyway, I just wanted to make sure I could do this, because I'm going to need safe passage to St Andrews in a couple of days' time. Not right now, though."

The dragon looked at him in silence for a moment. "So you don't want to go anywhere?"

"Well – no. Not really."

"Hmm."

There was an awkward pause, as Merlin realised that he had basically just created a roommate for himself. One who didn't sleep.

"Fancy a round of 'I Spy', then? Or perhaps 'Mornington Crescent'?" suggested the dragon.
New Year's Eve was bitterly cold in St Andrews, and Arthur was clearly the biggest idiot in the history of idiots to go suggesting the top of St Rule's Tower as a remotely sensible place for them to meet. Quite how the devil Arthur had been planning to break in without tokens, Merlin hadn't a clue. As he'd made his way down the road from Sallies, listening to music and laughter and shouting pouring from pub after pub, and from window after window, he'd turned this over in his head and considered turning the little barrier and the token machine into dust, but that seemed very rude when it didn't belong to him and he wasn't at all sure he could fix it. And besides, the prospect of tromping up all those steps and then pacing around at the top of the tower in the freezing cold was about as appealing as a not-very-appealing thing, so once he'd sneaked inside the cathedral grounds Merlin hovered around the tower for a bit, in the snow – just long enough to establish that Arthur wasn't there already - and then scampered back to the gateway on North Street through which he thought Arthur was most likely to be entering.

And that's why Merlin was standing invisibly in the shadow of the war memorial, shivering and stamping his feet, when the Bentley came roaring down to the deserted end of North Street and drew up outside the cathedral gates. Merlin's jaw dropped. Arthur came bounding out of the passenger door and then turned around to open one of the back doors. He was bending over, reaching inside to get something or other, when Merlin dropped the shroud of spells keeping him hidden and marched up, torn between being overjoyed and thoroughly indignant.

"My God, don't you learn anything?" he snapped, and Arthur jumped and banged his head on the door, then spun around, wide eyed – at which point Merlin's rant about discretion and safety and the Provisional IRA and really really obvious cars with royal standards displayed on them for all the world to see was suddenly derailed by the sight of Arthur right there, with his blue eyes startled and his mouth falling open, and Merlin had to put his diatribe on hold so he could lunge forward and shove Arthur back against the car and kiss the living crap out of him. Arthur made a startled sound as his spine was arched back against the Bentley, but his arms were around Merlin at once, one hand around the base of his neck and another grabbing his arse and pulling him in tight, and their noses were bumping together awkwardly for a moment, and Merlin was laughing against Arthur's skin, adrenaline fizzing through his veins, and then his mouth was on Arthur's and they were kissing like it was the most important thing in the world. Like it mattered more than breathing. And, oh, God, Merlin had missed this so much, and had worried and worried that he had lost this, that the warmth of Arthur's lips and the hard familiar line of Arthur's hips and belly and ribcage smashed up against him was all going to be nothing but a memory – had worried, in the back of his head, even after Arthur outed himself on television, even after Morgana's text messages, because real life wasn't a fairy tale, after all, and surely he wasn't going to get to have this? To keep this? But Arthur was here, now, holding on to him with bruising force and kissing him hungrily, frantic and half-clumsy, and it wasn't the romantic reunion at the top of the tower that Arthur had apparently planned, but it was better, it was perfect, it was Arthur in his arms again, alive and warm and his, and Merlin was never planning on letting go.

In practice, though, they had to come up for air eventually. Arthur broke the kiss first, laughing breathlessly against Merlin's cheekbone. He had one leg hooked around Merlin's thigh, and there was absolutely no question in Merlin's mind that Arthur was happy to see him.

"I missed you," Arthur said, his breath puffing warm against Merlin's skin. "Oh, God, I really did miss you."

There were probably some more things that needed saying at this point, but Merlin had to go back to kissing Arthur again rather desperately, and doing some very serious grinding, and in fact he was just wondering whether perhaps a little bit of invisibility would be in order, so the grinding could
progress in a more satisfactory fashion, when there was an embarrassed coughing sound, and it occurred to Merlin that Arthur had stepped out of the passenger door, not the driver's door. His head jerked up, and he looked across the top of the Bentley to see Ewan peering awkwardly over in the direction of the Castle Tavern.

"Oh," said Merlin, blushing. "Um. Hi?"

"Merry Christmas, sir," said Ewan, sounding amused. He met Merlin's eyes. "And thank you. For the thing with the bullet."

"Oh! Oh, God – sorry, are you okay?" Merlin asked, feeling like a complete bastard for not asking sooner.

"I'm better than ever," Ewan said, with a smile. "Which is down to you. So – thank you."

Merlin looked back at Arthur, still leaning his weight onto him and enjoying the press of Arthur's familiar body against his. "I can't believe you dragged Ewan into this," he said, disapprovingly. "He's going to be in masses of trouble, you know! I mean, I know you like stupid adventures, but this one really takes the biscuit. Rushing off in the middle of the night with only one bodyguard, in a completely obvious car, on the busiest night of the year, when anybody..."

Arthur rolled his eyes, and let his head fall back. "Oh my God, it's like having a nanny all over again," he said, but he wasn't doing a very good job of sounding irritated, with the smile still tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Don't be such a fishwife! It's fine! It's all fine! Probably. Morgana spelled the car to be – not invisible, but something like that? Unremarkable?"

Merlin blinked. "But I can see it perfectly well. It looks the same as ever."

"Well, you were looking for it, you great numbskull!" Arthur said impatiently. "Honestly, she was unbearable – nagging and nagging and refusing to give me a moment to myself because she was convinced I was going to do something stupid, and in the end I had to explain my plan, and then she insisted that she was going to let the cat out of the bag if I didn't let her help." His eyes narrowed. "Did you know that she was a wizard?"

"Um," said Merlin, guiltily. "Yes?"

Arthur closed his eyes. "Are there any other things I need to know?" he asked, in a level voice. Merlin was reassured by the fact that he sounded rueful and amused, rather than infuriated.

"Er – no?" he said, after a moment's consideration. "Well – I don't really play World of Warcraft – that's just the code word Morgana came up with to explain about how we knew one another. Um. The Great Dragon wants a Twitter account. My mum thinks you're a lovely boy. Gwen wants to be my bridesmaid. And – I'm in love with you. I think that's it."

"Right, then," said Arthur, and went back to kissing Merlin. "I did have a plan, you realise, which you've gone and ruined," he added a little later. "I had champagne, and you were supposed to be waiting at the top of the tower, and it was going to be very romantic, and we were going to watch the fireworks. But of course that was supposing that you could follow orders, which was obviously a bit over optimistic of me."

"It was a stupid plan," said Merlin. "You've obviously watched too many soppy movies. The top of the tower is freezing, and there are about a million steps, and I don't need silly romantic gestures." He swallowed. "Well, that is – I mean, you know, you're probably not going to be able to top the one you already made." He felt suddenly shy. "That was – that was amazing, by the way. You're
amazing. God, I love you."

Arthur's mouth curved into a smile. "Well – good," he said, both hands tight around Merlin's waist. "Because it would have been really, really rubbish if this had given you second thoughts. I did worry that maybe..."

"Are you certifiably insane?" interrupted Merlin, smacking the top of his head. "What, I'm going to dump you after that? I don't think so!"

Arthur beamed at him, and then looked down for a moment. "That's – that's a relief," he said, half-laughing at himself. "But you know – it's going to be pretty intense. Pater's being rather amazing, all things considered – I mean, he's ready to strangle me, but he'll pretty much behead anyone else who says anything disparaging. But, um – there are already lots of angry people demanding to know who "turned me gay". As if I was perfectly straight, and then somebody pressed a button and broke me. Idiots. Some people have been really brilliant, but some people – some people haven't."

Merlin glowered. "Do you honestly think I give a crap about what stupid people think? They can all fuck right off!"

Arthur gave a startled snort of laughter. "We're going to have to do something about teaching you diplomacy, I see," he said, grinning.

"And anyway, most people don't have their knickers in a twist about it, really. The Sun did that poll yesterday, asking for people's opinions, and 76% of their readers didn't care whether you were gay, and 6% thought it was a good thing! And that's The Sun!"

Arthur pressed a kiss onto the corner of Merlin's mouth. "It's definitely getting better – although apparently I've been getting a steady stream of hate mail too. But a lot of people on TV have been really supportive, and some of the papers have been pretty good, actually, once they got over the reflexive urge to make snide puns. And there have been a lot of letters and phonecalls in support too, which have been pretty amazing – kids, especially, but older people too, saying how much it meant to them. A lot of people have been coming out as a direct result of my speech, which is – God, it's all a bit unbelievable, really. It's a big responsibility. But – it's rather wonderful too. It mattered. It was the right thing to do." He swallowed hard. "What I'm saying is that if – you know, if you're going to be with me, publicly, I mean – well, it's going to be a lot of pressure. And not just on you – on your family too. It's – it's a pretty big ask, really."

Merlin spluttered with laughter. "Arthur, have you met me? My God, seriously – can you think of anybody on the planet who's better suited to looking after themselves, and their family? Who's better suited to looking after you right now, and keeping you safe? Bring it the fuck on! Seriously!"

There was a pause, where neither of them mentioned the bullets turning into bees, or Val's body lying in the cold sand. Arthur looked torn between worry and delight. "You do realise that you aren't allowed to go turning people into frogs if they insult me, don't you?" he said, cautiously. "I mean – there's a lot of smiling and waving and smiling and gritting your teeth and being polite."

"I can do that!" Merlin said, staunchly. "I'm not stupid."

Arthur closed his eyes. "Oh, God," he said, his voice quivering with suppressed laughter. "This is going to be a nightmare, isn't it?"

"Oi!" said Merlin, pinching him. "Oh ye of little faith! It's going to be brilliant! We're going to be brilliant!"
Arthur opened his eyes and looked over at Merlin, smiling like he was never going to stop. "Right then. In that case, how do you feel about coming back to Balmoral and meeting the pater?"

Merlin swallowed. "Oh God," he said, faintly. "Meeting – seriously?"

"Seriously." Arthur was smiling, but there was an edge of tentativeness to his expression that undid Merlin entirely – as though he were more than half expecting Merlin to back out of it all even now.

"I'd love to," Merlin said, in a firm voice, and Arthur's smile lit up the whole street.

FINIS

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