A Modern Manservant

by Mamalazzer

Summary

A modern magical comedy very loosely based on Ugly Betty. Publishing king Uther Pendragon has had enough of his playboy son seducing every female assistant he has ever had so he hires Merlin, a man he is sure Arthur will never sleep with. Merlin would be more insulted by this fact if he wasn’t so busy trying to juggle his duties, save Arthur’s skin from ruthless fashionistas and keep his magic a secret at the same time. Expect appearances by oil-lathered knights, the occasional mad druid, a perverted Will and a mental caretaker who lives in the basement and keeps harping on about coins and destiny.

Notes

Written for Paperlegends 2013. This story is essentially a mad bunny that latched onto me after a friend threw it at me. I struggled to overcome its fluffy nature but it prevailed in the end. Merlin is Betty, Arthur is Daniel and everyone else is fabulous, darling. Huge thanks to my amazing artist Mithborien for all her hard work and, of course, the_muppet , who has been an absolute star throughout this entire Big Bang.

Art: Please go to this link to see the wonderful website Mithborien created for the story. The art post for this fic is here.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Merlin Emrys was, without a shadow of a doubt, the worst interviewee on the face of the planet and that was all there was to it.

When he wasn't late, he got lost in the building and when he wasn't lost, he thought he might be and ended up wandering the halls until some kind soul took pity on him and escorted him to the right room.

He talked when he should have stayed silent, stayed silent when he should have talked, hiccupped when he was nervous and only seemed to own the one suit - a brown corduroy monstrosity that had belonged to his father, smelled like mothballs and made him sweat so profusely that he looked like he had been swimming laps in it.

To add insult to injury, even Merlin's limbs seemed to conspire against him during interviews by flatly refusing to do what he told them to. They flailed without his permission and when they weren't flying back to injure him in some way, they elbowed water glasses off tables, made him trip over rugs and one memorable time, caused him to accidentally set fire to an interviewer's eyebrows.

Then there was the magic.

It was an instinctive energy that sat inside him and tingled under his skin like a constant buzz of electricity in his blood. Liquid hot, it pulsed waves of warmth through his veins and pressed impatiently against his ribs like a barely caged animal; wild and golden and crackling impatiently for release. From levitating things across his room when he was feeling lazy to saving Will's life when he fell out of their tree house when they were eight, Merlin's magic ranged from the mundane to the downright spectacular. It could let him do something as ridiculous as juggle eggs at the breakfast table for his mother's entertainment to giving him the power to control the weather
with just a snap of his fingers.

It was intuitive and eager to please and seemed to anticipate what Merlin wanted before he knew it himself, explaining many a freak snowstorm on a school day and why his broccoli always used to hop cheerfully off his plate and onto Will's.

It also had a strange knack for animating everything Merlin owned, from his self-drying umbrella that shook off water like a dog to his running shoes, which got so excited when he deigned to wear them that they took him haring up the street before he could get his bearings.

Another bizarre side effect of his magic was the fact it attracted all manner of creatures to him, as proven by the class hamster that had escaped its cage to make a home in Merlin's rucksack and that camping trip to the woods that had resulted in him waking up surrounded by woodland creatures like a scrawny male Snow White. The most persistent of all the animals that had ever stalked him, however, had to be a rather shrewd-looking barn owl that had been at it for so long now that it just sat on Merlin's windowsill like it owned the place, looking disapproving of everything he did. No amount of shooing had got it to leave so Merlin had simply resigned himself to the nest of old socks that sat in the corner of his room and named the bird Archimedes.

So when all that was taken into account -- the magic, the animated objects and the love-sick members of the animal kingdom -- there really were more than a hundred reasons why Merlin was a walking hazard as a job seeker. And it was why, when he got the call from his godfather Gaius about an open design position at the prestigious Pendragon Publications, his initial joy was soon quashed by a terrible feeling of dread.

He had a feeling it was all going to go horribly, horribly wrong.

"No, it isn't, you numpty," Will had scoffed on the morning of the interview, loudly crunching on a bowl of cereal on the other end of the phone. "Just tell the pretentious wankers what they want to hear. 'No, I don't steal. Yes, I did graduate in the top of my class. Of course I'll blow you if you want me to'. See? It's simple."

Merlin wrinkled his nose.

"If I knew what they wanted, I'd already have a job, Will," he pointed out to his best friend, who he had a sneaking suspicion was still sitting at their kitchen table in his usual breakfast attire of cartoon y-fronts, a Davey Crockett hat and nothing much else. Trying to forget that mental image, Merlin shifted his ancient Nokia to his other ear, triple-checked the address in his hand and turned another corner.

His suit was clinging to him already and his A1 portfolio, like everything else he owned at present, was going through a rebellious phase and was doing its damndest to whack every person Merlin past.

"Oi, stop that!" he hissed at it briefly, trying to look stern. His portfolio, unimpressed by his glare, turned its handle up at him rudely, as though flipping him off.

"You found the place yet or what?" Will asked impatiently as Merlin's portfolio sent a fourth consecutive old lady hurtling into a lamppost. "I'm missing Jeremy Kyle for this."

"Oops! Sorry!" Merlin called sheepishly over his shoulder at the blue-rinse brigade who were angrily brandishing their handbags in his direction. "And no, not found it yet. Maybe it was on the street before? Am I even holding these instructions the right way around? Christ, why am I so cack with directions?"
"Why are you so cack at using your fancy powers?" Will countered through a mouthful of Coco Pops and Merlin credited their years of friendship to the fact that he understood every word. "All you have to do is waggle your fingers and poof! You can do anything you want. Hell, you could just teleport yourself there like Star Trek. Like Shatner. Aw, mate, that would be fucking brilliant."

"Yes," said Merlin, looking at the cheerful tourists on either side of him, who were snapping mundane things like lampposts in wonder. "Disappearing in a puff of smoke would go down really well in the middle of Covent Garden."

Will made a noise that sounded a bit like what a scoff and a snort would produce after a drunken night out and no protection.

"Hopscotching Jesus, Merlin, you really are the lamest wizard in the world."

"Hey!" Merlin said, affronted by the slight to his wizardhood. He then paused to remind himself how much he hated the term 'wizard' when an imposing glass methuselah of a building came into view.

Merlin almost dropped his phone at the sight.

"Oh god, it looks like The Shard on crack," Merlin breathed.

"Fuck how the building looks," Will returned obnoxiously. "Can you see any fit birds?"

"Why would there be fit birds?" Merlin asked with confusion. He then took a deep breath, sent a prayer to both heaven and hell to cover all bases and entered the rotating doors.

"It's Pendragon! Of course they have fit birds!" Will exclaimed as though Merlin was being dense on purpose. "They're the ones who do those titty mags! Came-a-lot, right?"

"That's Camelot, Will, and it's a fashion magazine," Merlin corrected, trying not to sigh in a put-upon way as he was greeted by the swankiest reception he had ever seen.

Double the size of the apartment Merlin shared with his mother and Will, the entrance oozed with a grandness that only something as stuffy as old money could truly emulate. Enormous chandeliers defied gravity as they hung from the ceiling and anything that wasn't gold was equally as pretentious in white marble. It made Merlin stop himself from leaning on anything, just in case he sullied it with his touch.

"Fashion magazine?" Will humphed from the other end of the line, still talking a mile a minute. "Get with the programme, Merlin, that's just code for titty mag. Anyway, get us one while you're there. And some beers if you're passing by a Tesco. And porn."

"I'm not buying you porn again, Will," Merlin hissed, earning him a look from the severe-looking woman sitting at reception. Merlin tried to smile winningly at her. He was well aware he looked slightly deranged. "Um, look, I have to go. Talk to you in a bit, yeah?"

"Yeah, yeah, tell me about it after," Will said, waving a nonplussed hand that Merlin couldn't see. "Good luck and all that bollocks. Try not to fuck it up, we need the money!"

"It's not like I try to fuck it up," Merlin replied but Will had already hung up and the dead line didn't seem very moved by Merlin's argument. Staring at his phone, Merlin shook his head. Sometimes even he wondered why he loved Will as much as he did.

"Can I help you, sir?" said the receptionist in a nasally voice that clearly conveyed that she didn't
have the slightest intention of helping him at all.

Merlin swallowed hard, pocketed his brick of a phone and let out what he hoped was his most charming of smiles. The receptionist didn't look particularly charmed by it.

"Hi, I'm Merlin," he said, thrusting a slightly damp hand in greeting, which she just eyed imperiously. Slightly abashed, Merlin lowered it, coughed and valiantly rallied himself to try again. "Er, right. So. I'm here to see the Head of Operations, Gaius? For an interview?"

The receptionist looked him over, from his protruding ears and the sweat patches on his suit, to his portfolio (which twitched menacingly in her direction) and looked like she had already made a sound conclusion about the outcome of his upcoming interview. Fortunately, she didn't articulate it aloud.

"Surname?" she asked instead and Merlin briefly marvelled at her ability to inflect so much passive aggression into one word.

Before he could answer, however, his portfolio -- which suddenly seemed to remember that it was a nuisance -- decided to wake up, act up and randomly walloped an innocent passer-by to the ground without any provocation.

"What the-?!" the unfortunate victim yelped, his voice outraged and startled as both he and his sharply-dressed posterior lay sprawled on the marble floor without the foggiest idea how they had got there.

Merlin's eyes grew to the size of saucers in mortification.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry about that!" he cried out as he pulled back at his portfolio's handle like it was a leash. Struggling as it continued to flail like a wild animal, Merlin tried to smile apologetically, even as it snapped back to thwack him in the face. "Ow! It... er, sort of has a life of its own, you know? Here, let me help you-"

"Get off me, you clumsy oaf!" the man snapped with as much dignity as one could when they were sprawled legs akimbo on the ground and had a pair of fancy sunglasses hanging off one ear.

He was about Merlin's age, blond, had the general physique of a Greek god and if the public schoolboy accent and the glinting Rolex on his wrist were any indication was incredibly rich. He was also, apparently, a bit of a tosser by the way he slapped Merlin's fingers away as they skittishly tried to dust him off and pull him up at the same time.

"You absolute bloody moron! Do you have any idea how much this suit costs!?" the man demanded furiously, pulling off his dangling aviators and looking down at the dirt on his sleeve with so much horror that Merlin might as well have unzipped and taken a leak on it. "Why the hell don't you look where you're going? Are you blind? Because you can hardly be deaf with those dinner plates attached to your head."

Merlin frowned, his ears feeling horribly offended on either side of his head as the anger he had directed at his portfolio began to dissipate. Now Merlin was lamenting that it hadn't hit this idiot harder.

"Look, mate, I said I was sorry," Merlin said tersely.

"Mate?" the blond repeated, looking at Merlin like he was something unpleasant he had found under his shoe. "Do I know you?"
On impulse, Merlin stuck out his damp hand again and momentarily cursed his mother for instilling such good manners in him.

"I'm Mer-"

"So I don't know you," the man cut across him, staring at the hand with so much revulsion that Merlin had to briefly check he didn't have something unpleasant stuck to it. "And yet you called me 'mate'."

Merlin lowered his hand, his patience at an end. He had a feeling even someone with the forbearance of Mother Theresa would have smacked this pillock.

"My mistake," Merlin said, shaking his head and momentarily sympathising with the poor woman who would eventually end up married to this guy. "I could never be mates with such a massive arse-wipe."

The man spluttered with indignation, revealing a set of slightly crooked front teeth that Merlin was convinced had become so from being punched in the face on a regular basis.

"You... you can't address me like that!" the stranger demanded with such a heavy dose of self-entitlement in his voice that he must have practised it on his rich parents for years. "Do you have any idea who I am?"

"Oh, I know who you are. You're a prat," Merlin returned matter-of-factly because, really, someone had to say it to him. And then, because he was on a roll, "And you're a royal one at that."

The royal prat looked genuinely taken aback, as though he was surprised that someone had finally noticed he was one before shaking out of his stupor and declaring,

"I'm not the idiot attacking people with crappy-looking portfolios."

Merlin's portfolio, which had been behaving uncharacteristically well by his side for the past minute, suddenly lunged into action at this slight, hurling towards the blond with such fury that Merlin let out a stream of expletives, dug in his heels and try to rein it back.

The man jumped backwards, the mounting realisation that he had been conversing with a potential psychopath slowly bleeding onto his face.

"Good god, you are completely out of your mind!" he announced like a proclamation.

"And you're an ass!" Merlin returned just as loudly but the stranger had already slipped his sunglasses back on, dusted himself off importantly and said,

"Right, I've had enough of all this nonsense. I'd send you my dry cleaning bill but you're brain-addled and poor and obviously couldn't afford it. So I'll give you a warning instead - the next time I see you and your Wedgwood ears in the building, I'm calling security. Understand? Good. Now get out of my way, weirdo."

Then shoving Merlin aside, the man smoothed down his blond hair, made the receptionist swoon by simply nodding at her in acknowledgement and sauntered off out the large revolving doors with a strut that couldn't be taught.

Two seconds later, a girl in three-inch heels and a highly inappropriate outfit for the workplace tottered after him, rolling a suitcase behind her and calling out,
"Artie, darling, wait up!"

Merlin stared after their glamorous departing backs, briefly wondering if that had really just happened, when he felt a sudden pressure against his leg.

Looking down at where his portfolio was now trying to affectionately nuzzle him, Merlin looked unimpressed.

"Don't think that's going to work," he warned, pointing at it with an accusing finger. "It's the mothball cupboard for you when we get back home."

He then lifted his head and caught the receptionist's gaze. He didn't think it was possible but she somehow managed to looked even less impressed with him than she was before.

"Mr Richards will be down to see you in a moment, sir," she said, disconnecting from her call. Merlin assumed her sudden super efficiency was so she could get him and his brand of crazy out of the building as quickly as possible.

Luckily for them both, Gaius was a stickler for punctuality.

"Merlin, my boy! There you are!"

A wave of relief washed over Merlin as an elderly gentleman exited the main lift, his face wrinkled but his voice sprightly and fond. Merlin almost tripped over his feet to get to him, beaming happily as he did.

"Gaius!" he said, his earlier frustration melting away as he allowed himself to be pulled down into a warm hug by his mentor. "I'm early!" he pointed out, mainly because Merlin was still astounded by this fact himself.

"So miracles do happen," Gaius returned wryly but he had an affectionate smile on his face. "My dear, dear boy, it's been far too long. How is your mother?"

"Fine. Great. Still working at the library in Ealdor. Probably a little more grey than when you last saw her but that's because Will and I run her ragged."

"I can well believe it. Your mother has the patience of a saint," Gaius said, shaking his head. "How you boys haven't driven her out of house and home yet I honestly do not know."

"Oh, come on, Gaius, we're not that bad!" Merlin had laughed but his smile briefly teetered in the face of his mentor's dreaded eyebrow. Gaius' amused cheek twitching, however, soon brought Merlin's grin back out.

"So, are you interviewing me then?" Merlin asked hopefully.

"Sadly not," Gaius conceded, sounding genuinely regretful. "But I have faith that you'll do just fine. You're a remarkably talented boy, Merlin - the likes of which I've rarely seen. So talented, in fact, that I'm sure you know better than to flaunt it all out in the open."

Gaius gave Merlin a pointed look that had Merlin smiling nervously.

"I promise to try and control the magic, Gaius," he said quietly, his voice earnest as the tips of his ears went red.

"I know you will, my boy," Gaius responded but he seemed to relax a little with the reassurance.
"Now, come with me. I'll take you to the main floor in a moment but first I want to introduce you to-"

"Gaius!" a new voice thundered, doing so with such authority that every hair on Merlin's body obediently stood to attention.

"Ah, Uther," Gaius returned, bowing his head respectfully at the stern-looking man who stormed towards them. "I didn't realise you had returned from New York. You look well."

Uther, who Merlin assumed was someone important simply by the sheer power he emanated, was greying at the temples, had a hairline scar over his eye and possessed a thin, unforgiving mouth. Had he seen him, Will would have called this man a stuffy old tosspot. Merlin, personally, thought all he needed was a white cat and he would have had all the makings of a Bond villain.

"I arrived ahead of the rest of the party," Uther replied curtly, his voice and eyes as cold as the Arctic. "And it appears to be a good thing I did. Morgana informs me that my son has run off to Bali with yet another assistant. Is this true?"

"I'm not entirely sure if it's Bali-" Gaius said mildly but he was soon cut off by the hand the other man raised. It was so authoritative it could have stopped an army mid-charge.

"I will hear no more excuses," Uther declared abruptly, his tone as final as the apocalypse. "This is the third time he has disobeyed me and I have had enough. He is the new editor-in-chief, not a boy in a sweet shop. This magazine is not a dating agency, nor is it here for his every whim and fancy. You will contact this girl he has disappeared with and inform her that she is fired. I will do the hiring from now on."

"Perhaps you'd like to wait until Arthur returns before any final decisions are made...?" Gaius tried to suggest diplomatically. Uther, apparently, was not much of a diplomat.

"No, Gaius, I will not wait," he said icily, his voice so unflappable that Merlin doubted anything on earth could change his mind. "I am not wasting any more valuable time. Starting tomorrow, you will have HR put an ad out for a male assistant. That will put an end to all this nonsense once and for all."

Uther then blinked, as though he had only just spotted Merlin.

"Who is this boy?" he asked Gaius, pointing at him in case Gaius had missed him as well.

"That's Merlin, sir," Gaius elaborated as Merlin watched them talk about him as though he wasn't there. "He's my godson. He is applying for the design internship."

Uther's forehead lined.

"Godson?" he said, looking between the two men and trying to work out exactly how something like could have happened. He paused with a considering look on his face and said, "So I assume he is trustworthy?"

"Oh absolutely, sir," Gaius said firmly. "I trust Merlin with my life."

Merlin's heart swelled with emotion. Uther, in comparison, didn't look very moved.

"Yes, yes, that's all very touching, Gaius," Uther said with a bite of impatience that revealed just how touching he really thought it was, "but can he type?"
"Eighty words per minute," Merlin suddenly piped up. Uther snapped his head around to look at him, his expression steely enough to put a Gorgon to shame. Gulping, Merlin slinked back into himself and considered hiding behind Gaius. "Um, sir," he added quickly, just in case it helped his cause.

Uther looked him over appraisingly, his eyes lingering over the brown suit. Whatever conclusion he came to, however, was strangely positive.

"He'll do," he said in a short, offhand sort of way. "He can start next week."

Gaius looked taken aback but pleased.

"Thank you, Uther," he said, genuinely grateful.

Uther bowed his head once, like a king pronouncing a judgement.

"Good," he said succinctly before walking away. He then stopped momentarily to say, "Oh and Gaius? Burn that suit and get him a new one. If the press catch wind that Arthur's new assistant dresses like a homeless person, we'll all be out of a job. I'll see you upstairs for our debrief in an hour."

Gaius' already pallid skin went almost translucent at Uther's words.

"... Yes, sir," he replied hesitantly but Uther had already strolled off, a stream of yes-men in dark suits suddenly materialising around him and following in his wake.

Merlin stared at the backs of their slick heads as they walked off like a squad of professional hit men, his face dazed and slightly confused. He then turned to Gaius.

"I... I have a job?" he eventually managed after a minute of slack-jawed amazement, not quite believing it.

From his expression, Gaius didn't appear to believe it either. Instead of looking pleased, though, he just looked troubled.

"Not quite the one I would have wanted for you but yes, it would appear so," Gaius confirmed as his frown deepened, the wrinkles on his forehead beginning to look like crevices. He opened his mouth hesitantly and asked, "Merlin, other than what you've read in the papers, what exactly do you know about Arthur Pendragon?"

Merlin blinked.

"Who's Arthur Pendragon?" he asked.

Gaius sighed deeply, as one often does when carrying a great burden (or knowing someone who was one) before clearly mumbling, "Only you" under his breath a second later.

He then took Merlin by the arm, guided him to the lifts in a way that made Merlin feel as if he was being led to his own funeral and said flatly,

"We have a lot to talk about."
"Arthur Pendragon?! The Arthur Pendragon?" Will wailed with delight before thumping Merlin on
the back like he had just won the lottery. "You jammy bastard, you get to shag his leftovers! Hell,
maybe I get to shag his leftovers after they take a look at your ears and run away screaming. Oh,
this is brilliant!"

Touching an ear self-consciously after its second slight of the day, Merlin frowned across at Will
and tried to remember why he put up with him again.

They were standing at the bar of their usual haunt The Rising Sun and had been waiting a frankly
ridiculous amount of time to get served another round. The lone bartender, a particularly grumpy-
looking fellow who Merlin had never seen crack a smile in all the years he had been coming here,
was moving at the speed of a snail.

"How is it everyone knows who this Arthur Pendragon is but me?" Merlin had pouted at Will, the
alcohol making his world feel pleasantly fuzzy as he lifted his finger once again to get the
bartender's attention. The grubby bartender, as he always did, flatly ignored Merlin and went to
serve a particularly busty girl on the other end of the bar.

"Merlin, mate, you don't even know what's going on in your own head half the time," Will said
bluntly. Looking scandalised, Merlin opened his mouth to deny this terrible falsehood but
eventually just shrugged. Will had a point. "So, you're some Prince's skivvy then? Do you get to
wipe his royal arse for him? Make him breakfast? Give him a bear and tuck him in at night?"

Merlin snorted and tried to throw a peanut at Will's grinning head. His inebriated state made it plop
into the pint glass of the bloke snoozing on the bar behind them.

"For your information, smart arse, I don't know what my duties are," Merlin admitted. He found
that he didn't really care either. He had a job. He finally had a job. A part of him conceded it was
due to him foregoing an interview he would have undoubtedly bugged up but he concluded that
beggars couldn't be choosers. "So why do you know who Arthur Pendragon is?" Merlin asked
through overly-suspicious eyes, his face slightly pink from the three beers he had ingested. "Gaius
mentioned he was some sort of business prodigy and you know sod-all about business."

"Aye, that's true," Will agreed, not even trying to deny his ignorance as he nodded his head with
equanimity. "But I do know my supermodels and that lucky wanker has shafted all the good ones.
His adopted sister also happens to be the hottest woman to walk the face of the earth. This is
brilliant - you're my in into her pants!"

Morgana Le Fay, who was the face of the London fashion scene, was a name Merlin actually did
know. This, however, was mainly due to Will plastering her Victoria's Secret photoshoot all over
their wall when they were in college. Will had also kept another picture of the model under his
pillow but Merlin didn't want to know what he did with that.

"So I'm going to be working for a rich chauvinistic pig? Great!" Merlin said, pleasantly sarcastic as
he gave Will a pair of overly-enthusiastic thumbs ups. Will replied to this by mercilessly smacking
the back of Merlin's head.

"Ow!" Merlin yelped, looking harassed as he rubbed at his sore skull. "What the hell was that
for?!!"

"That's what you get for sounding like such a whiny little bitch," Will griped back, not even
slightly repentant. "Just take this job for the godsend it is, you ungrateful arse. If you're lucky, one
of the girls might get drunk enough to offer you a pity fuck. You know models, they're always getting trashed. Christ, it's like you've got a free pass into the knickers of the hottest women in the world."

Will paused to close his eyes and Merlin had a feeling he was imagining that very parade of hot, knickerless women.

Merlin snorted and threw another peanut at Will. This one bounced perfectly off his nose and onto the shoulder of the bartender, who had finally lumbered over to them. The grumpy-looking barkeep glared at the peanut then at Merlin, who sank down low into his bar stool with guilt.

"What the hell do you want?" the barman gruffed out, looking at their lack of breasts with severe dissatisfaction.

"Two Coronas and less lip," Will replied back just as brusquely, which made the man roll his eyes and slump off to get them. "I can see why we always come here. Brilliant staff, really. Service with a smile? It warms the cockles," Will said loudly, before turning back to Merlin and missing the middle finger the barman directed at him. "Seriously though, Mer, Arthur sodding Pendragon. This is the big time. He's a dickhead but I still want to be him when I grow up."

"You'll never grow up, Will," Merlin said cheerfully as their bottles were plonked unceremoniously in front of them.

Will just gave Merlin a hard glare.

"Just shut up, you great ninny, and hold up your drink," he commanded.

Smothering his laughter, Merlin lifted up his beer bottle.

"To my best mate Merlin," Will announced like a town crier, holding up his own bottle proudly, "for finally finding someone stupid enough to hire him."

"Hey!" Merlin interceded, trying to sound offended through his silly grin.

"And to his exceptionally handsome friend Will, who is going to soon be nailing," here he made a vulgar hip thrust against the bar that made a couple of girls in the corner giggle, "some Grade A hotties because of it."

"You wish!" Merlin laughed as their bottles clinked in cheers.

"Christ do I," Will admitted with a longing sigh before downing his beer, slamming the bottle on the bar and smacking his lips together loudly. "Now, you might as well start telling me in detail how many models you saw today. It's good I get a feel for how many hearts I'm going to break. Start with the fittest one and then work your way down. Ready? Go."

"See, this?" Merlin said, seriously as he pointed at Will around the head of his beer bottle. "This is why you don't have a girlfriend."

"Who needs a girlfriend I have a best friend who can get me drunk models?" Will returned as he waved that aside.

Merlin cocked his head.

"Drunk models?"
"Hey, I'm a realist," Will said, holding his hands up expansively. "Also, my success rates in pulling are highly improved when the other party imbibes a significant amount of alcohol while Barry White plays in the background. Ever since little Willy's little willy first popped his cherry all those years ago, it's been a trick that's never failed to get me laid."

"You're so full of crap and you know it. You never take advantage of drunk girls," Merlin scoffed but he couldn't stop himself from looking at his friend fondly. "You're far too noble. Remember a handsy Melanie Higgans, the Sixth Form ball and you taking her home and tucking her in with a story?"

"Oh shut up. I totally copped a feel when no one was looking," Will lied, his street-cred ruined. "Now, stop changing the subject and carry on telling me about these models I'm soon going to be sleeping with. It's good I get myself prepared."

Snorting as he took a swig of his beer, Merlin thought back on his day. Only one face came to mind.

"Sorry to disappoint you but the only model I saw today was a guy," Merlin replied. "And, from what I could tell, he was the only one there."

"Oh, don't tell me that!" Will moaned pitifully like a wounded animal. "I'm trying to live through you, Mer. Lie to me already. Wait, what's that? You walked by the ladies and saw Morgana Le Fay in her underwear? And her knickers were see-through and tiny? Pray, tell me more."

Merlin shook his head, amused.

"You're insane," he stated.

"No, I'm just horny," Will stated bluntly, knocking back his drink and finishing it with that one slug. "And I know I'm not the only one here gagging for a shagging. I know you haven't got your rocks off since Freya, which may I remind you, was months ago."

"Gee, thanks for reminding me," Merlin said dryly, who had actively spent the last four months trying to forget how badly that relationship had ended. Downing his drink, Merlin wondered if he could drown himself in it.

"Hey, no sad faces, this is supposed to be a celebration," Will tsked, taking the bottle away from Merlin. "Trust me, Mer, this job will be the answer both our blue balls have been asking for. I guarantee it. Oi, rubbish bar guy! Four tequila shots! It's not a real celebration unless you puke."

When Merlin woke up on his first day of work, he was convinced it was going to be a good day.

The sun was shining, his morning breath was minty fresh and he felt a buzzing under his skin that meant his magic was literally singing inside of him.

Even his rebellious belongings seemed to have understood the significance of today by behaving themselves for once.

His best shirt, which had a habit of curling up in a wrinkled ball in the corner, was lying pressed
and clean on the foot of his bed like a well-behaved pet.

His alarm clock hadn't jumped up and down on his face like it usually did either and his curtains,
which often pulled themselves open in the early morning to blind him vindictively with sunlight,
had remained firmly closed.

Even Merlin's shoes had appeared to have shined themselves for the occasion because they
gleamed as they marched over to him, standing to attention like soldiers awaiting instruction.

"At ease, boys," Merlin had said with a salute, wiggling his socked toes to prompt the shoes to slip
onto his feet. They soon did so with a pair of graceful pirouettes before lacing themselves up with
such expert-looking bows that Merlin was suitable impressed.

And his good fortune didn't end there.

His bus, which was never on time, decided show up just when Merlin needed it, a wayward
twenty-pound note on the street happily blew itself right into Merlin's path and the evil receptionist
at Pendragon Publications had been replaced by... well, a slightly less evil woman. She was still far
from pleasant, however, as she generally looked at Merlin like he was ridiculous but she at least
had the marginal kindness of showing him where to go (even if that had consisted of literally
pushing Merlin into one of the old fashioned lifts and barking out, "Get off at the ninth floor. Try
not to break anything.").

So he took her advice and when the lift doors pinged open on the ninth, he took a deep breath,
stepped off the lift and caught sight of the Camelot offices for the very first time.

Merlin's jaw then promptly decided to hit the ground.

The Camelot offices were as different from the reception downstairs as they could possibly be.
Where gold and marble and old-fashioned grandness had been the general look for Pendragon
Publications, Camelot was youthful, fresh and vibrant. Minimal and angular with dashes of the
outlandish in its furnishings, Camelot seemed to enjoy the more obscure choices of décor, from the
leopard-print unicorn by the toilets to the fluorescent pink suit of armour by a water cooler that
looked like a Zaha Hadid creation.

It also cheekily played on the heritage of its name by having a slick moat around the reception
desk, Ed Hardy-esque family crests on the wall and medieval-looking furniture that was covered
with modern upholstery.

Then there were the beautiful people, who were so strategically scattered about the office that they
seemed to be as much a part of interior design as the furniture was.

Merlin felt a strange sense of belonging as he practically floated down a circular glass hallway,
staring with admiration at the back covers of bestselling issues as they glinted back at him from
gold gilded frames.

It was amazing. Like the modern glass warren of a fashionista rabbit. Or a Gok Woned Bag End.
Either way, Merlin couldn't stop staring.

"Are you lost?" demanded the slight man sitting at Camelot's reception desk after Merlin's gawping
had moved from looking like appreciation to brain-addlement.

The nametag on the receptionist's desk indicated his name was 'George', and George, with his neat
haircut and a suit that looked like he pressed it in between meetings, sharply eyed Merlin like he
was clearly throwing off the feng shui of the place. Merlin barely noticed his judgmental gaze,
however, as he beamed at him enthusiastically and wrung George's hand before the other man could stop him.

"Hi, it's so nice to meet you. I'm Merlin, it's my first day today," Merlin said brightly. And then, because he was suddenly incapable of keeping his mouth shut, "I'm Arthur Pendragon's new assistant. It's a bit crazy because it sort of happened out of nowhere but I'm really quite excited about it all. I think it'll be a great learning experience for me and I can't wait to start. So... where do I start?"

George, who had looked like he was on the cusp of pulling out an anti-bacterial wipe from his colour-coded drawer, dropped the prim look of superiority to stare at Merlin, pole-axed.

"You're the new assistant?" he asked, looking a bit like how a football coach would look if he were given a prima ballerina for the next season instead of a striker.

Merlin smiled genially.

"That's me! So, do I have to fill in a contract or something?"

"Merlin! There you are!"

Gaius's familiar voice filled the air as the man himself exited a nearby meeting room that looked more like an art gallery than a place of business.

"You do realise that you're supposed to be registering at HR right now, don't you?" the elder man chided, his eyebrow at half-mast.

Merlin just continued to smile brightly.

"I'm supposed to be doing what now?" he asked cheerfully.

With a sigh that was more fond than exasperated (but only just), Gaius guided Merlin back to the lift and pressed a button. "Down in the basement, you'll want to talk to Geoffrey. And Merlin, whatever you do, don't rearrange his files; it may just be the last thing you do."

Merlin laughed at this until he realised Gaius wasn't smiling. He then coughed.

"Right, Geoffrey, touch his files and face certain death. Got it."

"Good," Gaius said firmly. He then let out a small smile. "Give me a ring when you're done and I can get you started. Arthur is back in the office later this afternoon so we have a lot to go over and very little time to do it. We'll start with the basics and then move on from there. Now off with you, Geoffrey loathes tardiness."

* ~ * ~ * ~ *

The Pendragon building, Merlin came to discover on his quest to find Geoffrey was like a city in terms of scale. With a sprawling maze of corridors spiralling from one end to the other, it was a never-ending marble circle that was confusing and insane and only seemed to lead a person to exactly where they originally started out.
This being the case, Merlin wasn't too surprised when he found himself lost just three minutes into his excursion. After all, he had confused himself in a closet before.

What Merlin was surprised by, however, was the disembodied voice that had suddenly said his name like an echoey supermarket attendant looking to price check a loose bit of veg.

Merlin.

Merlin spun around, his eyes scanning around the empty corridor wildly for the source of the voice. It had sounded faint yet as clear as day at the same time and, if Merlin didn't know any better, he could have sworn it was coming from inside his own head.

Merlin.

"Er, hello?" he said aloud to no one in particular, hoping he hadn't just lost his mind.

Looking at a generic painting of a fruit bowl ahead, he eyed a banana suspiciously.

Merlin.

Like the flip of a light switch or, more aptly, a magical command, Merlin's feet suddenly found themselves springing to life as though they were possessed. Then, with no warning whatsoever, they proceeded to march him down the corridor like a military soldier.

Glaring down at his traitorous shoes as they did an about-turn that was much smoother than anything Merlin had ever attempted with his own reflexes, Merlin felt betrayed. He should have known that their good behaviour from the morning had been too good to last.

He was taken down a further few flights of stairs and was marched by a large metal sculpture of what looked like a dragon (Merlin never quite knew with modern art) when Merlin's feet finally stopped abruptly with a screech of rubber.

Looking around, Merlin found himself standing outside a dark, rather grotty broom-cupboard that was trying unsuccessfully to pass itself off as an office. Peering into the darkness, Merlin cocked his head, looking at the tiny desk that had somehow wedged itself in and the dead light bulb that hung from the ceiling. Merlin then shook his head softly. And he thought his apartment was a fixer-upper.

And that was when the light spluttered and a pair of gleaming yellow eyes blinked back at Merlin from the darkness.

"Jesus!" Merlin gasped, clutching his heart as it threatened to jump out of his chest.

A bony, elderly man now sat behind the desk, his face craggy and aged and shrewdly put together as smoke curled around him from the cigarette in his hand. His unnatural eyes -- which reminded Merlin so much of his own when he was incanting a spell -- were knowing and almost mocking, as though this man knew something Merlin didn't. The man then smiled, his mouth curving in an almost reptilian way, before speaking aloud in the same voice Merlin had heard so clearly in his mind moments before.

"I knew you would return again, young warlock."

Magic pulsed through the air, making Merlin's skin tingle.

"Ex-cuse me?" Merlin said, his throat dry.
The old man just chuckled, amused. It made a rumbling sound that caused the sides of the broom cupboard to shake and goosebumps the size of golf balls to sprout out all over Merlin's body.

"My, how small you are," the man said grandly, ignoring Merlin's question by being even more confusing, "for such a great destiny,"

Merlin looked down at himself, feeling mildly affronted by these words. After all, he wasn't that skinny.

"I'm sorry, do we know each other?" Merlin asked instead, honestly unsure. There was something strangely familiar about those eyes.

"Oh, there's no need to play coy with me, boy," said the man, that infuriatingly perceptive smirk still clinging to his thin, clever mouth. "We have known each other for many centuries and countless incarnations. Let us not begin with silly denials. I am frankly getting too old for this."

Merlin briefly took this in. When he realised that it made absolutely no sense, he truthfully said, "I'm lost." Because he was, both mentally and physically.

The man didn't seem bothered by this fact.

"No, young warlock," he said, his teeth gleaming and momentarily looking dangerously sharp. "You are exactly where you are supposed to be."

Merlin stared at the man in stunned surprise, absolutely flummoxed.

"Why... why do you keep calling me that? 'Young warlock'?"

"I call you what you are," the man said plainly, the low light painting distorted shadows across his leathery skin. "And what you have always been."

Momentarily gobsmacked, Merlin looked back at the plaque on the door and jabbed at it with a thumb.

"Hold on a second, are you the caretaker?" he asked.

"You could say I constantly clean up many a Pendragon mess, yes," the man returned with a nod.

"Oh, are they really messy?" Merlin asked, worried, because he could barely clean up after himself, let alone a messy editor-in-chief.

The old man snickered around his cigarette for a second, smoke coming out of his nostrils.

"Oh, like you have no idea," he said amusedly. He then tilted his head, looking at Merlin consideringly. "Or maybe you do. After all, your life and young Pendragon's have always been intertwined. You are two sides of the same coin and always shall be, from the beginning of time to the end of all days."

"Right," Merlin said, smiling uneasily at the old codger's obviously senility and trying not to make it too obvious that he was backing away slowly. "That was lovely to know, thanks for the information. I'll be sure to write that down somewhere. Now, do you know where I can find Geoffrey Monmouth's office?"

"Do not mock me by taking this business lightly, boy!" boomed the man, making Merlin almost jump a foot in the air. "The fate of all of Albion rests in your hands! Why else do you think you
were gifted with your powers!"

Merlin gaped.

"My... my powers?"

The man let out a sigh that clearly said 'your previous incarnation wasn't nearly this slow.'

"Yes, Merlin," he said, his vivid eyes so penetrating that Merlin felt like his every secret was out there for the world to see. "Your magic."

"That's... that's crazy!" Merlin tittered with nervous hysteria, sounding a little crazy himself as he said it. "Magic doesn't exist."

"If it did not then neither of us would be here right now, would we?"

Merlin felt his mouth go dry. The twinkle in the old man's eye was observant and canny.

"Wait... us?"

"We are more alike than you think, young warlock. We are kin."

His eyes then proceeded to flash like fire and the pen on his desk leapt into life and began to tap dance around the table.

Merlin dropped heavily into the chair opposite and gaped, his knuckles white as they clutched his knees.

"Who... who are you?" Merlin breathed out in awe as the tap dancing pen began to salsa rather raunchily with an enthusiastic pencil sharpener.

"My name is Kilgharrah," said the man almost insouciantly, "and I have been waiting for you, Merlin, for a very long time."

"Me? Why? Why me?" Merlin questioned, fascinated as he leaned further forward to look at the shimmying pen, even going as far as to poke it to check it was real. With a tiny indignant huff, the pen turned and whacked itself solidly on his finger for his touchiness.

"Arthur is destined to do great things," Kilgharrah explained, "and you, Merlin, are destined to help him on his way to greatness. Without you, he will surely fail. Without your guidance, we will all be doomed."

Merlin just stared at the man, wide-eyed. All this dramatic apocalyptic talk was reminding Merlin of that crazy preacher in Oxford Circus who yelled hell and damnation down a megaphone and wore a 'Jesus loves you' t-shirt with skinny jeans.

"Arthur? My new boss Arthur?" Merlin questioned. "So, I'm destined to use my magic to help him publish a good skincare issue or something?"

"Your future promises something much bigger than this magazine, Merlin," said Kilgharrah, shaking his head condescendingly. "Together you and Arthur will be unstoppable. Together you will bring about the return of Albion."

"Albion?" Merlin repeated, the word tasting like magic as it tingled warmly against his tongue. He then blinked. "Wait, that strip club off Berwick Street?"
"Not everything is as it seems, young warlock," Kilgharrah said enigmatically. "Take care to remember that."

Merlin narrowed his eyes.

"Do you always speak like this? In riddles? Because it’s bloody frustrating."

"Yes, you always did think so." Kilgharrah chuckled, looking almost pleased as he looked at Merlin. He then raised his arms theatrically. "Now go! Go meet destiny. And remember, Merlin, you are Arthur's only hope."

"Right," Merlin said slowly. This magical caretaker was off his rocker. "I'll go... meet some destiny then. But first, Geoffrey's office-"

"Down the corridor and it's the second office on the right," Kilgharrah sighed in a very put upon way, as if this was way beyond his job description.

Merlin just grinned.

"Thanks," he said, ducking out, but not before Kilgharrah's parting words purred into his head.

"None of us can control our destiny, Merlin. Not even you."

* ~ * ~ * ~ *

As first days went, Merlin's had been pretty agreeable up until that point.

Sure he got yelled out of the room when he knocked over one of Geoffrey's pile of files and that magical caretaker was a bit of a creepy psychic that kept talking in his head but all things considered, the day wasn't so bad.

Merlin still had the good fortune of spending the morning with Gaius -- who he didn't get to spend nearly enough time with -- and he even got to take messages from a phone so fancy that he was pretty sure it could microwave a ready-meal while he placed a call.

He also got to spend the majority of the day in his new employer's fancily-decorated glass office, which had a slick en-suite and housed a walk-in wardrobe that was so large it could clothe everyone in the entire building. The office also happened to have the most comfortable couch in existence, which Merlin's backside had made a point of sitting on as often as possible.

In fact, Merlin's only real problem up until then had been the fact he kept accidentally walking into the ladies toilets because he couldn't understand the abstract signage.

So, other than the fact that he had been accosted by two eccentric old men and the majority of the females in the office thought he was a pervert, it had honestly been a pleasant day.

Which was the moment Arthur Pendragon had walked through the door and ruined everything.

"... You!” Merlin gasped with horror as the blond prat from the other day stared back at him, looking just as shocked and revolted as Merlin did himself.
He then went on to prove he still was a prat by rolling his eyes and groaning,

"Christ, what idiot do I have to fire for letting you into my office?"

Merlin opened his mouth, ready to smartly inform the man that this was his employer's office and that big, beefy security guys with no necks were on hand to haul him out when he really looked at him.

The blond man was dressed just as impeccably as he had been the last time Merlin had seen him but this time he wore a fitted black suit with a white Oxford that looked like an ensemble only the richest, most well-dressed of people would wear.

Like the editor-in-chief of a fashion magazine.

Merlin closed his mouth, put two and two together and wished his basic math was worse than it was. It didn't help that, now he looked around, there were actually framed pictures of this man all over the walls. He wondered how he hadn't noticed them before.

Sheepishly, he ran a hand through his dark hair, making it stick up everywhere.

"Bugger, you're Arthur Pendragon, aren't you?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"Of course I bloody am," Arthur snapped, sounding both offended and genuinely surprised that Merlin hadn't recognised him. "I'm bloody famous, I'll have you know. I'm in magazines."

Arthur then picked up a framed magazine cover that had been sitting on his desk (Egotistical knob-end, Merlin briefly thought) and shoved it at him to prove his point.

"See? Me. Magazine. Look!"

Merlin blinked as Men's Health was waggled under his nose and Arthur Pendragon's glossy printed nipples stared back at him from the front page. Despite himself, Merlin's eyes lingered a little over the oiled abs.

"Yes, well, I don't read fashion magazines," Merlin replied, batting away printed Arthur's six-pack to get back to the matter at hand.

"Clearly," the real Arthur said smoothly, giving Merlin another revolted once over before lovingly putting his photo back on the desk with a little stroke of the frame. "Now tell me what you're doing here before I call security."

"Actually," said Merlin rather perkily, pulling out his new blackberry with pizazz. "I can call security for you if you like. I'm your new assistant."

Arthur Pendragon opened his mouth. He then closed it and opened it again.

"I'm sorry, you're my what now?" he demanded.

"I'm your assistant," said Merlin again before extending his hand. "I'm Merlin. It's...um, nice to meet you. Again. Minus the portfolio. And the hurled insults. And the whole you being on the floor thing."

"Merlin. Honestly? Your name is actually Merlin?" Arthur said in a highly unimpressed voice. "Someone actually decided to name their child after a poncy wizard from the Dark Ages? How cruel could you be?"
"Were he here, I think the man would have preferred being called a warlock," Merlin interjected, used to the mockery. Arthur was nothing compared to the kids at Merlin's secondary school. "And I'll have you know that my mum is lovely. She says I was her magical little miracle. I think it's sweet."

Arthur just stared at him as though this reply confirmed all his greatest fears.

"Is this some joke someone put you up to?" Arthur suddenly demanded, looking highly cynical. "Morgana? Agravaine? My father? Granted, my father doesn't have a sense of humour but... well, this is obviously a prank."

"Er, no...? It's my name?" Merlin said, sounding a little unsure himself. "So... want me to give you your messages now? Okay, so you got two from a really nice guy called Leon -- who is your best friend apparently -- but you already know that, don't you? Then you got three from this crazy sobbing woman who I couldn't really understand at all so I hung up on her because she was giving me a headache. Then you- wait, what are you doing?"

Because Arthur had made a big show of sitting on the edge of his desk, placing his hands over his ears and screwing shut his eyes.

After a minute of this, Merlin tilted his head curiously and wondered if Arthur was having a conniption fit.

"Er, hello?" Merlin asked, hoping he was still in there somewhere.

"Quiet." Arthur snapped, eyes still shut. "You'll be gone when I open my eyes."

Merlin looked down at himself. From what he could tell, he was still very much there.

"I will?"

"I'm obviously imagining you. You're some sort of ghastly waking nightmare invading my thoughts. When I open my eyes, you'll be..." Arthur opened his eyes. Merlin just waved.

"...Bollocks."

"Come on, it's not so bad!" Merlin said, grinning about him as he puttered around the room and straightened things up. "I'm a quick learner! And I'm trustworthy, so no stealing post-its from me. Except maybe the hot pink lip-shaped ones. My mum loves those."

Arthur didn't seem to be listening, however. He just looked at Merlin with mounting horror and simply stated.

"I have a male assistant," with all the feeling of a person who had just announced they had facial haemorrhoids.

Merlin gave himself a once over before looking at Arthur like he was a remarkably slow child.

"I am a man, yes," he confirmed, mildly amused.

Arthur groaned dramatically and pinched the bridge of his nose so hard that he looked like he was trying to suffocate himself.

"My father did this, didn't he?" he grumbled.

"Made me a man?" Merlin asked bemusedly.
"No, you idiot!" Arthur yelled. "He hired you!"

Merlin just nodded, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"Yup," he said, beaming. "Word around the water cooler is that you can't keep it in your pants when breasts are within a hundred metre radius. So here I am, flat chest and a penis. Would you like some tea?"

Arthur gaped at him.

"Excuse me?"

"Or coffee but I'm much more of a tea pusher," Merlin admitted. He then pulled out a plate of slightly stale biscuits. "How about a digestive?"

Arthur looked thunderous.

"Get out."

"Oh." Merlin frowned. "Are you more of a custard cream man?"

"I SAID GET OUT!"

Dropping the plate, Merlin ducked the paperweight that was thrown at him and fumbled for the doorknob.

"Okay, okay, I'll get you a selection tin! M&S?"

"ARGH!" Arthur's battle cry shook the walls and Merlin only narrowly missed being decapitated by a flying letter opener as he scurried out the door.

Well, thought Merlin straightening his tie as he went back to his desk. That went better than expected.

"How was your first day, love?"

"My boss is violent womaniser who hates me for not being a girl and throws office utensils at me when he's not calling me names. Other than that, it was great. Pass the peas, Will."

Will just scoffed as he did, stuffing forkfuls of potatoes into his mouth with the speed of a person who feared they would disappear at any moment.

"Pfft, don't blame him. I'd throw shit at you, too," he said as he chewed his food open-mouthed, making Hunith grimace and hand him a handkerchief. Will duly ignored it. "He could have had a hot piece of eye candy bending over for him in short skirts but instead he gets your skinny arse in his face. Must be torture. I'd fire you on principle."

"William, no bad language or chauvinism at the table, thank you," Hunith warned in an even voice. Will looked thoroughly chastised.
"Yes, Hunith." he said, red-faced and obedient as he took her proffered hankie and ducked his gaze back to his carrots. Merlin tried not to grin.

"He doesn't really throw things at you does he, love?" Hunith asked, looking fretful as she stroked a motherly hand through his hair.

"It's okay, mum," Merlin placated. "I'm good at getting out the way. Besides, I could always..."

Merlin's eyes flashed gold briefly and the salt and pepper mills in the middle of the table suddenly came to life and started to do a rumba, shimmying their way up Will's arm until they got to his shoulder and jumped onto his head.

"Oi! Leave it out!" Will yelped but soon dissolved into laughter and a sneeze when the salt and pepper mills began turning by themselves and snowing all over him like Christmas.

"Merlin Emrys!" Hunith raised her voice but she was barely repressing a smile. "No using your gifts on William or your boss. Understood?"

Merlin's eyes flashed again and the mills returned back to their places, but not before the pepper floated over to him to season his roast.

"Okay, mum," Merlin said, smiling sweetly as he popped a carrot in his mouth. "I promise."

When Merlin met Camelot's seamstress on his second day, her bumbling awkwardness was so endearing that he nearly threw his arms around her in a fit of happiness.

Her name was Gwen Smith, she was a month younger than Merlin and she was so incredibly down-to-earth that Merlin seriously thought she had got lost and accidentally ended up in the wrong building.

Gwen minded the Closet -- a giant room that housed enough designer gear to clothe a stylish army -- and she took great pride in neatly organising the thousands of items under her care. From Louis Vuitton shoes to the haute couture Dior dresses used in old photoshoots, Gwen kept a sharp eye on all her inventory and made sure everything was accounted for, to the chagrin of many a thieving colleague.

Being as fashionable as comfortable knitwear, Merlin personally didn't understand everyone's fascination with the Closet (George was peculiarly obsessed with a brass belt in the corner and even Kilgharrah visited a pair of egg-shell shoes with longing) but Merlin could definitely see the appeal of its young minder.

Gwen didn't sneer at him, she didn't spontaneously prophesise convoluted destinies and she certainly didn't throw things at Merlin's head whenever he walked into the room (something Arthur
had taken to doing all day).

What she did do was smile when Merlin first stumbled into her department and she even helped
him up when his large feet sent him careering into a rack of asymmetric dresses.

"Oh my goodness, are you all right?" she had asked with genuine concern, steadying him away
from a spiked dress that Edward Scissorhands would have fallen head over shears for.

Merlin just beamed at her fluster, already partially in love himself.

"You just saved me from being skewered by a mental dress," he said gratefully before bowing
hommily. "I'm forever in your debt."

Gwen laughed, blushing prettily at his antics as she did.

"Well, getting blood out of designer clothes is a bit of a nightmare," she said but she was smiling
warmly in jest. She then tucked a wayward lock of curly hair behind an ear that was balancing a
pencil. "I'm Gwen."

"I'm Merlin," Merlin returned and then added, "but most people call me idiot."

"Oh no! I wouldn't say that!" Gwen gasped, horrified by the thought but Merlin just smiled at her
and waved it off.

"Oh, but Arthur most definitely would," he confirmed. He then gave her a pleasant smile and
pointed a finger at himself. "I'm his new assistant."

"Oh," said Gwen in a voice that clearly said 'my condolences'. Her good manners stopped her from
articulating it aloud, however, and she quickly changed the subject instead. "So, you're here to pick
up Arthur's outfit for the award show tonight?"

"On his orders, yes," said Merlin, unconsciously remembering said orders by rubbing his head
where Arthur had hit it with a copy of Cosmopolitan, as though hoping its fashion sense would
literally beat itself into Merlin's skull.

Nodding, Gwen rifled through one of her many rails of clothes until she pulled out a suit so slick
that it made the rented one Merlin had worn to Gaius' wedding look like one of Vicky Pollard's
pink tracksuits.

"Here it is," Gwen said almost reverently, smoothing down the rich material with the care of a new
mother. "It's a Tom Ford. He made it for Arthur himself."

"Oh," said Merlin, surprised as he reached over to touch the soft fabric. "I thought they only made
cars but this is lovely."

Gwen, whose forehead wrinkled with confusion, opened her mouth to say something but she
seemed to decide against it at the last minute. Instead, she just smiled a little indulgently at Merlin
as she zipped the suit into a dry cleaning bag.

"Anyway, I took in the waist by a couple of inches and worked a little on the hem of his trousers...
I mean, not that you care, of course. Why would you? It is a little of boring. Honestly, I don't even
know why I'm talking about it..."

Merlin smiled and stopped Gwen before all her backtracking gave her an injury.
"It looks amazing, I'm sure Arthur'll love it," Merlin cut in kindly, lying through his teeth as he did because Arthur seemed to hate everything on principle. Gwen appeared to brighten at his words, however, and passed over the suit hopefully.

"I hope so," she said, before fiddling with the measuring tape around her neck with the look of someone who wasn't wholly convinced. "I can never be sure with Arthur. He can be a bit--"

"Of a prat? A fussy bastard? An arrogant wanker?" Merlin finished promptly. He then lowered his voice conspiratorially and winked at her stunned face. "It's okay, Gwen, I've noticed it, too."

Gwen's clapped a hand over her mouth, making a sound that was torn between a snort of amusement and a hum of disapproval.

"You're terrible," she said, barely repressing her laughter.

"Now you're beginning to sound like Arthur!" Merlin returned, but he was grinning as he shifted the suit so it was hanging over his shoulder instead. "Anyway, I better move my arse. The longer I'm away, the bigger the item Arthur chucks at me gets. Another five minutes and it'll be the desk he lobs at my head. Seriously though, thanks for all the help."

"Anytime. Really," Gwen responded, her flush back in full force. She then lowered her eyes, looking a little bashful. "I'll... see you around?"

"Definitely," Merlin said pleasantly.

With one last smile and a wave goodbye, Merlin exited the room and walked down the corridor back to Arthur's office, suit in hand, a spring in his step and feeling remarkably proud of himself for managing to get his task completed relatively easily.

When he pushed open the door to Arthur's office, however, the sight he was greeted with made him drop the suit bag to the floor.

"Oh my god!" Merlin cried out, gaping in horror at the state of the room.

Because, frankly, it was a state.

Chairs were upturned, the blinds were broken and barely hanging on and balled-up bits of paper covered every available inch of the carpet. Magazines were ripped and scattered about the place, a bean bag and been ripped open with its stuffing splayed out like a Jack the Ripper parody and broken coffee cups seemed to dot all corners of the room. There even appeared to be ink stains dripping down the once sterile white walls as a busted lamp in the corner flickered and spluttered like a dying engine.

Merlin's hands flew to his mouth in shock at the damage.

"We've been robbed!" he wailed.

"Oh, of course we haven't, you dolt," Arthur's familiar patronising voice snapped back in retort. "Don't be such a girl, Merlin. I just couldn't find my keys. And is that my priceless suit on the floor?"

Merlin ignored the last question to swivel around to mouth wordlessly at where a pristine Arthur was lounging back on his desk chair. His feet were propped up on his upturned coffee table as he flicked idly through a magazine. Like a tsunami epicentre, the carnage seemed to form in rings around him.
"You couldn't find your keys," Merlin repeated, blinking stupidly.

"God, it's a miracle you can even walk and talk at the same time," Arthur muttered before sighing loudly, closing the magazine and declaring, "Yes, Merlin, my keys. But no need to panic. I found them in my pocket."

To prove this point, Arthur dangled said keys and jangled them towards Merlin.

Merlin replied to this by simply gawking at Arthur as though he had sprouted another prattish blond head beside the one he already had.

"... And that was worth destroying your entire office for?" he asked in disbelief, saying it aloud just so Arthur could appreciate the sheer insanity of the situation.

Arthur, apparently, couldn't.

"If my manservant weren't such a useless layabout, I wouldn't have to resort to finding my own things," he replied with a blasé shrug.

"I'm not your manservant, I'm your assistant," Merlin shot back, finding a dustpan and brush and moodily scooting down to sweep up some of the broken glass. "And heaven forbid you having to do things for yourself once and a while."

"Why would I go and do that when I have you, Merlin?" Arthur asked airily as he checked his watch. Swinging his designer-loafered feet to the ground, he then stood up and chucked the GQ he had been reading over his shoulder. It landed deftly in the ironically empty bin behind him with a little rattle. "Now," he announced self-importantly, marching over to pick up his suit from where it lay sadly at Merlin's feet. "I have to get to a very important event - which I am now late for because of your ineptitude and all your impertinent backtalk. I expect this place to be spotless by tomorrow morning before my ten o'clock with the department heads. No excuses."

"Tomorrow?" Merlin gaped at the unfairness of it all, dropping the dustpan in horror. "You can't be serious! Have you seen the state of this room? It'll take all night." He pointed specifically at where a phallic-looking doodle stared back at them from the wall and where a suit of armour was dressed in women's underwear.

Arthur mouth briefly twitched with amusement before he pulled a more serious expression.

"Working late comes with the territory," he said simply, trying to sound bored as he drawled lazily and studied his manicured cuticles. "If you don't like it, you know where the door is, Merlin."

Merlin looked around the room, from the smashed items on Arthur's desk to the random objects that Arthur had somehow miraculously stuck to the ceiling before shaking his head with amazement. Arthur's talent for destruction was almost impressive. He had obviously practised it on harassed nannies since birth.

Pointing accusingly at Arthur, Merlin narrowed his eyes.

"You did all this just because you want a hot female assistant, didn't you?" he asked cannily, giving Arthur a shrewd look. "You're just trying to drive me to quit so you can get one of your model shag buddies back."

"How astute of you, Merlin," Arthur replied dryly with that bored, elitist drawl of his again. "Despite the vacant expressions and that simpleton aura you appear to constantly emanate, you're much cleverer than you look."
"Thanks, I think," Merlin said, grinning as he hunkered down and carried on sweeping with his dustpan and brush. "Anyway, I might as well tell you now that this throwing-your-toys out-of-the-pram thing isn't going to work on me. Just ask my mum. I'm very persistent. This one time my friend Will dared me to put on a wig and sing the chorus of 'I'm Every Woman' in the middle of our local. I spent the rest of the night making my way through the complete works of Chaka Khan, getting hit on by some drunk geriatric who was blind in one eye and only stopping myself from moving onto The Best of Whitney Houston because it was last orders. I'm just impossible when I set my mind to something. Sorry."

Arthur stared at Merlin for a while, looking like he didn't quite know how to respond to that. He then eyed Merlin's hair and shuddered, as though he had just imagined Merlin in that wig and was now severely traumatised because of it.

"As fond as I am of hearing all about your cross-dressing adventures," Arthur replied in a voice that clearly said he was as fond of hearing them as he was listening to nails down a blackboard, "I recommend you stop. Right now. Before I have something else to share with my shrink. Now, stop your endless prattle and clean this place up. If I see the slightest bit of dirt by tomorrow morning, it's the stocks for you."

"Ha ha," Merlin said dryly as he moved to straighten up a sofa cushion and surprisingly found a pair of lacy black panties stuffed behind them. Holding them up with the tips of his forefinger and thumb, Merlin gawped at them before looking back at Arthur, who simply shrugged indolently.

"I had help looking for the keys," he supplied, his smirk so smug that it made Merlin want to slingshot the knickers at his stupid head.

"Now, chop chop," Arthur ordered again, this time clapping his hands obnoxiously, "there's a good slave."

Then slapping Merlin twice on the cheek with his open palm and an infuriating smirk on his face, Arthur sauntered out the door and slammed it shut behind him.

Turning back to the trashed room, Merlin let out a groan, especially when one of the blinds finally gave up its fight with gravity and crashed in a heap to the floor.

Merlin then tightened his jaw. There really was only one thing to do.

Turning the key to lock the door, Merlin resolutely pulled up his sleeves, flexed his arms and waggled his fingers like a conductor warming up before a performance. Merlin then cleared his throat.

"Right," he said determinedly, his eyes glowing and his fingers crackling with electricity, sending a frisson of magic through the room. Twirling his hand, a thin spoon of golden magic formed in mid-air before it proceeded to hop over to Arthur's desk and tap itself on the half-broken whiskey tumbler that sat there, like a father of the bride about to make his speech. "Er, excuse me, may I have your attention, please?"

As if on cue, every object in the room seemed to jump to attention at Merlin's voice, from the spluttering lamp that lay on its side like an injured war veteran, to Arthur's desk chair, which swivelled around so fast to face Merlin that anyone sitting in it would have received whiplash. Even the pencils on Arthur's desk had taken an interest in the proceedings because they all stood themselves up on their nibs, teetering on their lead points like tiptoeing neighbours peeking over next door's hedge.
Merlin waved awkwardly at them all.

"Um, hi. I'm Merlin. I'm Arthur's new assistant. I'm a boy for once so don't worry, desk appliances, I won't be throwing you lustily to the floor for passionate love-making on the desk and, couches, I certainly won't be writhing on you and making you feel uncomfortable. I just want to do a good job and I know you all do, too. I also know you can't enjoy the state that berk Arthur left you in so I'll make you a deal; if you help me out by cleaning yourselves up as much as you can, I promise to do the rest. So, if all displaced objects could kindly move back to where they were while all broken objects form a queue on the right, that would be smashing."

There was a stillness for a minute, with some objects looking at each other as though they were mutually wondering who this strange person was. The two staplers that had been glued to the ceiling, in particular, began to subtly open and shut, as though whispering to one another about what to do. And then, to Merlin's surprise, a particularly pitiful-looking object limped forward.

Merlin recognised it immediately as the paperweight Arthur had thrown at his head on his first day. It looked chipped and scraped and hobbled towards him like it had been through the wars.

Merlin grinned, leaning towards it.

"Hi, we've already met haven't we?" he said sheepishly. "Arthur sure has some aim, huh? Come on, pop up here, I'll put you right."

He then extended his hand.

The paperweight seemed to look at Merlin's hand a little mistrustfully, sniffing at it almost like a dog before finally deciding it liked what it smelled and hopping on.

Merlin cupped it his hand, his eyes glowing as he lifted it towards his mouth and whispered, “Ic hæle þina þrowunga.”

A gold glow immediately bloomed from the middle of the paperweight at this, curling through it like gold ink in water and spreading completely until the entire thing shone so brightly that the glare hurt to look at directly. In barely no time at all, the glow receded and the paperweight, looking energised in a way it had not moments before, jumped happily out of Merlin's hand and back onto the desk, glossy and whole once again.

There was silence as the room looked stunned by these proceedings. Then, before Merlin could blink, they all scurried in a disorderly queue at his feet as eager as Elvis fans, extending their mangled limbs and malfunctioning circuitry with animated hopefulness. It made Merlin feel like one of those faith healers on those Christian networks on telly.

He grinned.

"Okay," he said, flexing his fingers again, letting them spark with dramatic effect. "So, who's next?"

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To say Arthur was a bit surprised by his spotless office the next day was rather like saying Will was just a bit of a pervert.

Arthur gaped around the office, spluttering with incredulity and even went as far as to crouch by the once-defaced walls and squint at them from three inches away, looking for fresh paint.

Merlin bit the inside of his cheek to hide his smile.

"Is there a problem, Mr Pendragon?" he asked innocently.

"Yes!" Arthur blurted out in frustrated confusion. He then caught himself. "Er, I mean, no. Not really. I suppose this'll do. For an amateur. I mean.... it's not... I don't... how on earth did you..?"

"My mum always said a bit of elbow grease can clean up almost anything," said Merlin cheerily before helping a stunned Arthur ease out of his coat. "So the award ceremony went well? Did we win?"

Arthur continued to look suspiciously at the wall, as though it would sprout legs and crawl away from him at any given moment.

"Hmmm," Arthur hummed, barely listening as he placed his ear against the wall and knocked on it, listening for a new layer of plasterboard.

Merlin's cheek twitched as he hung the coat up.

"So did we win?" he asked again.

"Don't be stupid, Merlin, we never win," Arthur said, finally pushing himself away from the wall to glare at Merlin for his ignorance. "Nimueh wins every year."

"Nimueh?"

"Editor of Priestess magazine?" Arthur said in frustration. "Our biggest competitor? The ones who send over spies to steal every good idea we have? Jesus, how did you even get this job?"

"My good looks and undeniable charm," Merlin returned, unperturbed. "So, they're good then?"

The scathing look Arthur threw at him made Merlin whistle.

"Wow, that good, huh?" Merlin responded, grinning. "So, we've never beaten them at anything? That's sort of sad. But I guess as long as we make an effort, that's all that really counts. Second place is still a good place to be. Who needs awards anyway, right?"

"Merlin?" Arthur suddenly prompted.

"Yes?" Merlin replied happily.

"Shut up," Arthur snapped.

Moving to sit at his pristine desk, Arthur then eyed the objects on it with the same suspicion he had directed at the wall. Singling out an item by picking it up, Arthur frowned at it heavily before brandishing it at Merlin. It was his paperweight.

"Wasn't this broken yesterday?"

"Er. I got you a new one?" Merlin lied unconvincingly, trying to smile toothily. "Surprise?"
Arthur narrowed his eyes, the paperweight tight in his grasp.

"I bought this from a street market in Agra."

"Ah, well, you know the Internet. You can find anything you want with a little persistence," Merlin nattered a little nervously, straightening a picture frame as he did. The picture, like every other picture in the room, was of Arthur posing for some magazine shoot but this one had Arthur dressed in a toga and trying to look alluring while eating what looked like a pineapple. Merlin had to avert his eyes to keep himself from laughing at it. "Anyway, want a cup of tea? Or that expensive ferret-puke coffee you like?"

"It's weasel-regurgitated, you cretin. At least pretend you know what you're talking about," Arthur snapped before, to Merlin's displeasure, going back to focusing on the paperweight again. "So wait, you miraculously got this online? And got it delivered? Overnight?"

"Er, express delivery. Really fast couriers. Like Usain Bolt on wheels. Definitely recommending them on Gumtree," Merlin said, before grabbing a nearby file and placing it in front of Arthur to distract him. "I also took the liberty of printing this again since the last one was ripped. And charred. And by the looks if it, possibly doused with acid."

"Bleach actually," Arthur corrected with no shame at all before taking the bait and forgetting about the paperweight to leaf through the file. He then pulled a face. "And what the hell is this? The Mugler spread was last month's issue. This is about as useful to me as you are. Where is the blue folder with our current campaigns?"

"Blue folder?" Merlin repeated as he looked around the office, even going as far as to lift his shoe and check under it, just in case. "I scoured this place with a fine toothcomb yesterday. There is no blue folder. There's a green one here and weird vomit-coloured beige one in that drawer over there but no blue. Trust me."

"Trust you?" Arthur snorted, as though the idea was too ridiculous to warrant thinking about. "That's likely when you can barely dress yourself. God, you must be the worst punishment my father has ever inflicted on me and he used to force-feed me sprouts and wash my mouth out with soap." Expelling a loud breath, Arthur waved a hand, irritable. "I must have left the folder at home. Merlin, go to my apartment and get it. I need it for the inter-departmental meeting in fifty minutes. Well, go on then, don't gape at me like the idiot you are, mush!"

"So, you want me to go all the way to your place to pick it up for you?" Merlin repeated. "Like... now?"

Arthur groaned and looked up at the ceiling, as though asking God himself what he had done in a past life to be tortured like this.

"Yes, you useless, lazy excuse for an employee. I need it ASAP," Arthur snapped. "And make sure my driver takes you. You're an idiot and you'll only end up falling into a ditch or getting yourself lost. I need that file in my hand by ten o'clock. Do you hear me, Merlin? Ten. Now go. And brush your hair before you do. You look like a hobo."

"And you look like a gigantic arse," Merlin muttered under his breath as he grabbed his jacket from a nearby chair and angrily put his arms through it.

"What was that, Merlin?" Arthur asked dangerously.

"I said 'that window is made of glass',' Merlin lied, giving Arthur a wide, fake smile that neither of
them believed. Then ducking out before Arthur's flexing fingers could throw the newly-fixed paperweight at him, Merlin yelled, "See you in a bit, boss!" and sprinted to the lifts, just in case Arthur decided to throw long.

After finagling a ride from Arthur's brooding driver Myror (who had either been an MI6 agent or an assassin in his previous job) Merlin was thrown into the rather substantial backseat of a black limousine, where he spent the majority of the journey gaping at the opulence all around him and wondering how it was possible for anyone to be as spoilt as Arthur Pendragon was and not spontaneously combust with self-importance.

Then they pulled up outside Arthur's multi-million pound apartment and all Merlin wanted to do was return back to Camelot just so he could smack his employer around the head for being such a showy knucklehead.

Merlin had remembered reading about the Hyde Park apartments in the paper -- and remarking to Will even back then just how ridiculous he thought it was to spend that much on real estate without getting a garden -- but even that hadn't prepared him for how obscene an apartment block with a £140 million penthouse really was.

When the posh doormen weren't eyeing Merlin like he had pick-pocketed the keys, they were grim-faced and intimidating and were constantly radioing security like Merlin was a walking weapon of mass destruction on its way to the White House. The windows were all bullet-proofed, there were iris-scanners in the lifts and the occupants were either Arab Sheikhs, European billionaires or that bird who used to be in Neighbours.

And then there was the insanity of the decadence inside.

"Shut up, Merlin, it's not that over the top," Arthur said, rolling his eyes when Merlin returned with his arms flailing and told him as much.

"Not that over the top?" Merlin blurted out, almost choking on his own tongue as he did. "Arthur, your toilet is gold. Gold. You take a crap on a gold toilet. Made of gold! Why can't your arse just sit on porcelain like normal arses do? Is it too delicate? Does it get a rash if it touches anything that isn't the price of a small country? Because that must be hell on your love life."

"I'll have you know that my toilet is only partially gold!" Arthur defended, although he went a little pink at having to admit it. He then swiped at the blue file in Merlin's hand and looked remarkably put out. "Now, if you've had enough of discussing the sensitivity of my arse and how it affects the hundreds of women I sleep with on a regular basis, we can move on to other subjects. Namely, this list of chores I was kind enough to order George to draw up for you for the rest of the week."

Arthur then pulled out a colour-coded piece of paper that was more scroll than anything else before unrolling it so the bottom of the paper scraped against Merlin's shoes. Looking at the neat, tiny print that filled the entire thing from top to tail, Merlin went pale.

"You can't be serious," he whimpered, his stomach lurching at the thought of all that work.

"Well, we can't have you getting bored now, can we?" Arthur replied, his grin nothing short of pure evil as he turned back to the parchment and hummed cheerfully. "Now, let me see. Anything with a red star is a priority, blue stars are recurring tasks and gold..." Arthur's evil grin somehow defied physics by managing to curl itself into an even more devilish expression, "is whatever I want it to be. And would you look at that - that's almost everything on here! Scrubbing my floors, polishing my shirt buttons, cleaning out the kennels, picking out the raisins from my couscous... It just goes on and on and on."
Merlin gulped as about a hundred gold stars glinted back at him from the paper. For some reason, he felt like each and every one of them were laughing him.

Noticing his stricken expression, Arthur smiled with affability, his body language loose and friendly as he slapped a companionable hand to Merlin's shoulder.

"You know, I'll understand if it might all be a bit much. After all, it is a lot of work, Merlin. There's no shame in walking away. Not everyone is suited to the fashion industry. It's a cutthroat business. No one will think any less of you if you choose to leave. In fact, why don't I make it easier for you by letting you go now? I'll even forego your notice period, pay you for the rest of the month and write you a show-stopping reference. Let me just call Geoffrey to ready your letter of termination and-"

"No."

Arthur, who wasn't used to someone cutting him off mid-stride, blinked at Merlin's interruption as though he had just been slapped with a wet fish.

"No?" he repeated, seemingly stunned.

"No," Merlin confirmed and even nodded to hit the point home. "I'm staying." He then plucked the paper from Arthur's hand and skimmed through the substantial list of chores. Flashing Arthur a dazzling smile, he then clapped his hands and rubbed them eagerly together. "Right. First item on the agenda - 'Organise refreshments for the Wednesday morning meeting'. Dear me, I better get started on that to get everything ready before it starts! I'm thinking both still and spring water. Everyone likes a choice. Oh, and nibbles! God knows how many wars could have been prevented by providing a good packet of bourbons. Stay right there, I'll just go put a brew on."

Then rolling the list back up again until it was small enough to fit into his breast pocket, Merlin tucked it away and bounced across the room to head out the door.

His hand had only just wrapped around the doorknob, however, when Arthur's closed over it hard.

"Merlin," Arthur growled, his hand tightening so painfully over Merlin's that Merlin was sure he heard one of his phalanges crack. "Seeing that you're even thicker than I initially realised -- and believe me, that is a feat in itself -- allow me to spell this out for you in as easy a way as possible; quit. Hand in your notice. Skip the country. Moon my father to get yourself fired if you have to, I don't care but I want you gone. I'm giving you a chance to back out before I make things really unpleasant. Don't be an idiot. Take the opening and get out now. Trust me," and here he poked Merlin mercilessly in the chest, punctuating every word with a prod, "you. Can't. Handle. Me."

Merlin studied his employer, from the manicured finger that was currently poking him to the face that was wearing a pout Merlin had never seen on anyone who wasn't three-years-old.

Clearing his throat, Merlin tried not to laugh.

"With all due respect, sir," he said bowing his head with good-natured deference, "As attractive as your offer is, I think I'll pass. I'm starting to get the hang of things around here. So, whatever evil plot you've got cooked up, whether it involves me bungee-jumping down a ravine while wearing a thong or standing on my head for a day while whistling God Save the Queen, bring it on. I'm ready. Now if you'll excuse me, I have some refreshments to organise. See you at the meeting."

And with that, he pulled open the door, gave Arthur a crisp salute and walked out, leaving his employer red-faced and furious as his own door was slammed shut in his face.
The Wednesday morning meeting, Merlin soon came to realise as he poured out his thirtieth glass of water, was rather a big deal.

From what he could gather as he flitted about the room and offered around a plate of cakes that everyone looked scandalised by, it was a meeting that basically consisted of everyone sitting around a large round table and clapping Arthur on the back for merely existing.

Two types of person seemed to be in attendance; the heads of department -- who were all ruddy-faced, Oxbridge toffs who had probably never looked through a women's fashion magazine in their life -- and then the rest of the team, who were so exceptionally good-looking that Merlin wouldn't have been surprised if they had wandered in straight off the catwalk.

Arthur himself was firmly in the latter category, looking like the ultimate poster boy in his sharp suit and with his glossy blond hair shining like a halo over his head.

The irony that Arthur looked even remotely angelic wasn't lost on Merlin, who snorted so loudly at the thought that his scoff immediately caught Arthur's attention from across the table.

To say Arthur glared at him wouldn't have been quite accurate. He looked more like he was trying to disembowel Merlin with a look. Luckily for Merlin, before he could succeed, Arthur turned away and got to his feet to signal the start of the meeting.

Immediately, all paper shuffling and murmured whispers in the boardroom ceased, leaving Merlin to briefly wonder if Arthur had a bit of magic in him as well. Like his father, it appeared that Arthur had the unique ability to silence a room by just the strength of his presence. Unlike Uther Pendragon, however, the charming smile Arthur flashed at them all left half of the room sighing dreamily at him like lovesick teenagers. It made Merlin roll his eyes. These people obviously didn't know the prat very well.

"Thank you all for coming at such short notice. I understand that you're all working at full capacity for the upcoming issue and I truly do appreciate all the hard work," Arthur said, his smile disarming and his teeth looking ridiculously white against his tan. Nodding at a random girl who looked so pleased at the attention that Merlin thought she was about to pass out, Arthur then continued. "Now, I'm sure you all got the memo but I thought it best to tell you all in person about the changes taking place.

"This last month has been a very difficult one for Camelot, what with the public leak of our accounts and Catrina's tragic Botox accident, both bringing about changes to management at the top. Firstly, our heartfelt thoughts go out to Catrina and her family and we dearly hope that she soon recovers all feeling to her face in due course. Secondly, I can confirm that the person who leaked our confidential emails to Priestess magazine has been removed from the company indefinitely. This should hopefully put an end to this whole unpleasant affair and we can continue with business as usual.

"Now, as you all know, in Catrina's absence, my adopted sister Morgana was temporarily ushered in by the committee as Acting Editor and she did an admirable job on last month's issue. However,
seeing that Catrina is out of commission for the foreseeable future, the board has decided that I be
the one to take her place permanently as the new Editor-in-Chief of Camelot." Arthur then stopped
to look around the room, giving a sense of gravitas to his speech that Merlin tried not to be
impressed by. "It is with both a heavy heart and extreme humility that I accept this position and
although circumstances have not been ideal, I hope, with your help, to make the transition as
seamless as possible. I also want to take this opportunity to thank you all for your continued
support and best wishes. The gifts and flowers in particular have been most appreciated." Here
Arthur let out another annoyingly devastating grin. Several of the stoic-looking models and, to
Merlin's surprise, the occasional Oxbridge toff went pink and giggled at the acknowledgement.
"Together, I am sure we will carry on the Camelot legacy and make the next issue the best yet.
Now, I'm sure you've had more than enough of my voice today so I'm going to hand over to far
to more knowledgeable men than myself. First on the agenda is Geoffrey, who I believe has prepared
a few fascinating slides about the exciting new changes to our bonus scheme. Geoffrey? The floor
is yours."

Smoothly sitting himself back down on his seat like a prince, Arthur was immediately inundated
with 'Well done's and hearty claps on the shoulder from what seemed like everyone in the room
but Merlin. The beautiful girls mainly fluttered and fawned, the majority of the men stroked his
ego like it was a large dog and everybody else alternated between singing his praises or attempting
to covertly slip their phone numbers into the palm of his hand.

Looking up and across the crowd to catch Merlin's eye, Arthur pulled a fiercely smug expression,
arrogance exuding from every pore as if he was making a point of how fabulous he was. Merlin,
who thought all Arthur needed was a fabulous smack to the head, pointedly ignored him and turned
to listen to Geoffrey's bonus scheme talk, which unfortunately was not nearly as fascinating or
exciting as advertised.

Geoffrey talked for about a half hour, spoke in a dull sort of monotone that could have sent an
insomniac to sleep and spoke on subjects like fire drill regulations and expense account abuse that
were so dry that it was a wonder he hadn't bored himself to death. By the time he sat down for the
head of finance to drone on about share prices, Merlin realised this meeting was actually a slow
form of torture. Each talk merged into the next with equal amounts of blandness, full of numbers
and charts and terms like 'market reach' and 'content strategy' that were so dull they made Merlin
finally resign himself to eating the cream cakes he had brought to relieve his boredom

The toffs wanted to talk money in long-winded detail, the supermodel employees seemed to just sit
artistically on their chairs and pout their lips at Arthur while Arthur himself now just sat in the
midst of them all looking just as bored as Merlin was, his fingers held to his temple like a gun he
desperately wished would put him out of his misery.

It was an hour into the meeting when something interesting finally happened. And that something
interesting was Morgana Le Fay bursting into the room like a movie star and making everyone sit
up with attention.

Looking even better in the flesh than she did in print, Morgana -- who was wearing large
sunglasses and a tight white suit with nothing but skin underneath -- entered the room like she
owned it, her assistant at her heels. A tiny Dior handbag hung daintily off her wrist where, to
Merlin's surprise, a rather disgruntled white Chihuahua seemed to sitting and glowering at
everyone, a diamond collar around its scrawny neck. From the look on its face, it looked like the
dog had had better days.

"I'm not too late, am I?" Morgana asked the room at large casually, her intoxicating perfume
permeating the air.
Watching as she made her away across the boardroom, Merlin immediately did what any red-blooded male would have done in his position and that was to gawp at her breasts like they were the second coming and promptly drop his cake all the way down his front in his distraction.

Gaius, who was seated in the chair closest to Merlin, was unamused.

"Oh, honestly, Merlin, do try and put your tongue back in your mouth," he had reprimanded him in a low voice before dabbing at Merlin's cake-covered shirt with a handkerchief and ultimately making the stain worse. "She's one of your bosses, not a page-three girl in The Sun."

Merlin had tried to look contrite and apologise for his behaviour, he really had, but his tongue was too busy drooling in Morgana's general direction to bother with a response.

Neither Gaius nor his eyebrow were very impressed by this.

"Morgana, so nice of you to finally join us," Arthur spoke up dryly, glaring at his adopted sister as she sashayed her way towards a throne-like seat directly opposite Arthur's, the sound of her stilettos echoing around the large boardroom. Sitting herself down on the chair like royalty after her assistant had pulled it out and dusted it down for her, Morgana then placed her designer dog-bag on the table and slipped off her large Chanel sunglasses with the air of a Hollywood starlet.

Merlin almost whistled aloud. That entrance was smashing. If this was Strictly Come Dancing, he would have definitely given her a ten.

"Traffic at Piccadilly. Absolute nightmare. Poor Aithusa was sick everywhere," Morgana crooned as she idly stroked the Chihuahua’s bald head. Morgana's blood-red lips then stretched into a smile so charming that Merlin instantly found himself smiling stupidly back at her. "You understand, of course, dear brother."

Arthur stared at her with a bland expression, obviously immune to her wiles. Merlin, personally, just thought that he was pissed that she had stolen his thunder.

"Of course, dear sister, it's not like we spend our nights wishing Aithusa would get hit by a double-decker bus or fall out a top-storey building," Arthur returned, his jaw tight as he glared at the dog, who glared just as balefully back at him. Merlin sensed a bit of a history there. "Now if we can carry on with the meeting-"

"Oh, I see you started without me," Morgana cut in lightly, an underlying tone to her sweet voice. "How very unfortunate."

Arthur looked like he had sucked on the wrong side of a lemon.

"You're more than an hour late, Morgana," he reminded her in an uppity sort of voice he usually only reserved for Merlin. "We didn't have time to wait for you."

"Well, seeing that I'm the one who initially landed us the Lady Helen account, Arthur dearest," she said in a voice that was far too saccharine to be genuine, "I naturally made the assumption that you could wait for me. This is your first issue as editor, after all, darling, I was sure you'd appreciate my input given how much more experience I have than you do in the fashion industry."

Merlin looked between them curiously as the rest of the room shifted uneasily in their seats. There was definitely some power play going on here.

Arthur's fingers tightened around his pen so hard that Merlin was surprised it hadn't snapped into two and exploded ink all over the walls.
"Yes, Morgana," Arthur said through clenched teeth, as though it physically hurt him to actually agree with her. He then lifted his lips into what Merlin assumed was supposed to be one of his dazzling smiles but it looked more like a constipated show of teeth than anything else. "We're so pleased that we can always count on you and your endless sweet-talk to win those important accounts for us."

Morgana let out a tinkle of a laugh, waving a pale hand full of red, talon-like nails with modesty.

"Oh, it was hardly any trouble. In any case, you could have hardly done it, darling. Lady Helen completely despises you."

"She doesn't despise me!" Arthur scoffed loudly, as if the notion that anyone could dislike him was an impossibility.

Aithusa seemed to disagree wholeheartedly because she let out a ferocious yip of a bark at Arthur from Morgana's purse.

Merlin thought the dog had a point.

"Oh, Arthur, my sweet clueless baby brother," Morgana cooed, giving Arthur a sisterly sort of smile that looked like it should have been accompanied by a pinch of Arthur's cheeks. "You and I both know Lady Helen has never quite forgiven you since that summer in the country when you tried to murder her."

"I didn't try to murder her and you bloody well know it, that was an accident!" Arthur protested, going red at the accusation and looking desperately around the room to cement that this was a falsehood. "In any case, it's ridiculous we're still talking about this, I was only a child at the time. I can't believe she still holds that against me!"

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"Well, I'm afraid she does," Morgana said, her words contradicting her tone because if she was any more delighted she would be dancing on the table. "It's strange because she's always been such a lamb to me. She always invites me to dinner whenever she is in town. We even play duets together on the piano. She's a dear old friend, Isn't that so, Mordred?"

The pale man next to Morgana -- whose curls were impeccably coiffed and whose outfit was so perfectly colour co-ordinated with Morgana's -- let out a creepy little half-smirk at this.

"A dear old friend," he agreed, his blue eyes huge and unnerving in his face.

"Yes, 'old' being the operative word," Arthur muttered under his breath savagely. "Look, I don't care if you have sleepovers where you braid each other's hair every night and talk about boys, this account is really important for us so I want to personally oversee this. No exceptions."

Morgana's smirk subsided.

"Whatever you want, dear brother," she said tightly, her eyes glittering. "You are the editor, after all."

"Yes," said Arthur firmly, giving her a pointed look, "I am. Even if you are better at talking to her about her skincare routine or her brand new heels or how amazing she used to be in her soprano days."

"Mezzo-soprano," Merlin suddenly cut in, to the surprise of both himself and everyone else around the table. When silence followed his words, Merlin smiled sheepishly and scratched behind his ear. "Er, sorry. It's just... well, she's a mezzo-soprano. My mum has all her albums. She's got an
amazing voice. Lady Helen, that is, not my mum. My mum, bless her, sounds like a cat being
strangled when she sings in the shower. One time, the family next door phoned the police because
they thought someone in our flat was being murdered. I ended up getting handcuffed. It was kind of
funny really."

Laughing awkwardly, Merlin then coughed before lifting up his plate of half-eaten cake and
waggling it towards Arthur as a peace offering.

"Um, hungry?"

From the angry vein that was throbbing furiously in the middle of Arthur's forehead, Merlin
concluded that cake wasn't his dessert of choice.

In contrast, Morgana looked intrigued as she stared at Merlin with curiosity, her sharp green eyes
taking him in. Merlin, who had never had a woman this beautiful ever look at him with this much
interest, tried not to look like too much of an idiot as he smiled politely back.

"I see we have a new face with us. Arthur, aren't you going to introduce us?" she asked.

Arthur made a highly unenthusiastic noise.

"There's no need," he responded, alternating his glower between Merlin and Morgana, as though he
couldn't decide who to be angrier at. "He won't be staying with us for very long."

"Prat," Merlin automatically muttered under his breath.

Somehow managing to catch this from across the large table, Morgana widened her eyes and
looked like she was trying not to laugh.

"Indeed, that's a shame," she said, sounding genuine as she looked at Merlin with amused interest.
It made Merlin smile brilliantly at her in response.

"Merlin is my godson, Morgana," Gaius suddenly spoke up, his connection to Merlin a surprise to
Arthur if the pole-axed look on his face was any indication. "Uther asked for my recommendation
for a new employee and I couldn't praise Merlin highly enough." Gaius gave Merlin a fatherly
look, making him blush, before he turned his clever eyes to Arthur and raised the dreaded brow.

Arthur couldn't stop himself from shrinking under Gaius' gaze.

"Right," he coughed, swiftly averting his eyes. "Anyway, I think that's everything on the agenda.
Geoffrey, you'll follow up on those actions and we'll schedule ourselves a meeting with Valentino's
finance department to finalise the numbers on that raised I.O. So, seeing that nobody here has
anything else to add-

"Actually, I think now is a good time to talk about the Lady Helen's campaign," Morgana spoke up
while Mordred beside her seemed to be writing notes with one hand and combing the Chihuahua's
bald white head with a tiny hairbrush with the other. "It's the biggest ad buyout of the year and the
only paid layout editorial works on. It's funny because, looking at the agenda you sent out, you
didn't mention what our plan on it is at all. She's expecting us to come back to her with creative
ideas by Friday. My team and I have already come up with a series of concepts I know she'll love.
I'd be more than happy to send those on to her."

"Actually," said Arthur, puffing out his chest and looking rather resolute, "I've got a few ideas
myself."
"You?" Morgana replied with surprised amusement, so much emphasis in her voice that Merlin could practically hear the italics. "Oh, Arthur, you barely know the difference between a shoe and a handbag, how on earth are you going to manage? You've always been better at undressing women than dressing them, dearest. You know it's best to leave the creativity to me. However," she added when the returning look Arthur gave her could have spoiled fresh milk, "I'm more than happy to send you the ideas for approval first. We are a team after all. It's best we work together, don't you think? Which reminds me - Mordred," Morgana clicked her fingers, "the gift."

Putting the dog brush down with an efficiency that was military-like, Mordred then reached under the table and whipped out a large box that Merlin didn't even realise was under there.

Crisp-white and large enough to fit a large cat inside it, the box and its silver bow glinted with such lavishness that Merlin wouldn't have been surprised if the wrapping cost more than the present inside.

Reaching for the box with narrow-eyed mistrust, Arthur had the distinct look of a man cautiously accepting a ticking time bomb that could go off in his face at any given moment.

On opening the lid, however, and pulling out his present, Merlin thought the bomb would have been an infinitely better present.

Arthur blinked down at it, momentarily speechless.

"It's a peacock," he finally managed when he found his voice, a little stunned as he stared down at what had to be the gaudiest crystal statue that had ever had the misfortune of being made. Glittering and ornate in appearance, the garish shards of coloured glass in the peacock's tail reflected maliciously back at Arthur with the soul mission of blinding him with bad taste.

"Swarovski crystal," Morgana elaborated sweetly, as though giving the monstrosity a name would somehow make it better. "It's a welcome present for your first day. To congratulate you on the new position. I know, I know, I shouldn't have but what can I say, I saw it in a shop window and I just had to have it. It just reminded me of you."

"You shouldn't have," Arthur said, making a strangled sort of noise from his throat that sounded like he was trying to drown himself with his own saliva. "You really, really shouldn't have."

"Oh, I know but I couldn't help myself. It's not every day that your baby brother becomes your boss now, is it?" She got to her feet, her words hanging heavy in the air as she clapped her hands together briskly. "Well, I imagine that's everything on the agenda now, yes? Carlos, I'll book a meeting with your team about possible new hires and Lola, I'll include you in the call with our New York office about our new expansion initiative. Now, everyone, let's get back to work and try and make this issue our best. Our new editor needs us. Don't you, Arthur?"

If looks could kill, Morgana would have been peeling what was left of her splattered remains off the designer furniture. As it was, Arthur's twitching jaw somehow managed to grind out another one of those forced smiles. Merlin flinched. It was painful to watch.

"Thank you, Morgana," Arthur said with what looked like every bit of strength in his body. He then addressed the rest of the room but his eyes were still firmly fixed on his sister. "That's everything, everybody. Meeting adjourned."

Immediately, thirty sets of well-dressed feet sprinted their way out the door like a stampede of clothes horses, indicating all it needed to about the sheer tension bouncing around the boardroom.
 Appropriately, Arthur and Morgana were the last to leave, standing on either side of the huge table like two generals on an empty battlefield, facing each other down in the ultimate stare-off. From the soft sneer on Morgana's mouth, Merlin had a feeling that she was winning.

Shaking his head, Merlin eventually took his cake with him as he left them to continue their strange battle in private. Clearly, they both had issues.

"Gaius, what's going on with Arthur and Morgana?" Merlin candidly asked his godfather once he caught up with him further down the corridor, "I thought they were supposed to be adoptive siblings. They really don't seem very close - and when I say 'don't seem close' I really mean 'they want to murder each other and bury the body parts in their respective back gardens', don't they?"

Gaius sighed deeply and took off his half-moon spectacles, looking a little sad as he did.

"They were incredibly close once, back when they were children and even up until university. I suppose they grew apart with age. A shame really, they used to be as thick as thieves together."

"It looks like Morgana doesn't appreciate taking orders from Arthur. What does she do at the magazine exactly?"

"She's the Creative Director of the magazine, second to the editor now that she has been removed from her previous position. She was the interim editor of the magazine for a good few months and did extremely well in the job. Sales were up and publicity was at an all-time high, what with her position and connections in the industry. Everyone -- and I'm including myself in this -- believed that she would stay. Arthur's appointment caused a lot of controversy in the company when it was first announced. I imagine it's the reason she and Arthur are always at loggerheads. If the sibling rivalry wasn't enough, the fact that they both have very different ideas on how to run the magazine adds yet another point of contention to their relationship. Truth be told, I imagine Morgana is angrier at Uther than Arthur for giving Arthur the position of editor-in-chief over her in the first place. In any case, now she is back in her old role as head of the creative department, surrounded by those who stayed loyal to her when Arthur was ushered in."

"Like that creepy shadow always following her around, Morbid." Merlin nodded, stuffing a forkful of cake in his mouth and chewing thoughtfully.

Gaius looked disapprovingly at both Merlin's description and his eating habits.

"He is her assistant, Merlin and his name is Mordred. And if you keep eating your cake that fast you'll make yourself sick."

Merlin ignored the second part of Gaius' sentence.

"Mordred? I think I preferred creepy shadow," Merlin said honestly just as Arthur marched his way up the corridor. Face furious, he swept past without even acknowledging them before storming into his office and slamming the door shut behind him hard enough for the glass to rattle and a picture to dislodge from the wall and crash to the ground.

Raising an eyebrow, Merlin looked back at Gaius.

"I guess he was the first to blink," he deduced before sighing particularly unhappily and handing the empty plate to his godfather. "I suppose I better go and check on him. Throwing things at my head seems to cheer him up. If I'm lucky, I might just avoid getting concussion."

"Good luck," Gaius said, sounding like he really meant it. "And Merlin? Do try to duck."
"Thanks for the advice," Merlin said dryly, feeling like a man condemned to the gallows. Cautiously stepping into Arthur's office, Merlin immediately grabbed the nearest object to him (an FHM that had Arthur on the cover flexing a bicep and winking at the camera like an ass) and held it up to his face like a shield.

"Before you chuck something heavy at me, I just want to remind you that any further head injuries will only make me clumsier, which will ultimately make your level of service worse in the long-run."

"As if it could get any worse," Arthur muttered before grabbing the magazine from Merlin and snapping, "And stop pawing at that, you're getting your dirty fingerprints all over my abs." Both Arthur and Merlin paused at this, as though realising what he had just said. Arthur then shook his head and quickly changed the subject before he could dwell on it. "So, what's all this about you being Gaius' godson? You obviously didn't get his brains."

"And you obviously didn't get your sister's good looks," Merlin retorted. "Or her irrefutable charm."

"Adopted sister! We have no genes in common!" Arthur corrected vociferously, making his point almost a little too insistently as he slammed the magazine down on his desk. "And shut up, I'm miles better looking than her."

Merlin didn't bother to respond to this.

"So, this Lady Helen thing sounds exciting," he said instead. "My mum really does love her. Is it true that you tried to kill her when you were a baby? Because that's pretty impressive. You're like Damien in The Omen. He was a baby when he tried to murder people, too. Granted, he was the anti-Christ." Merlin then paused and tilted his head thoughtfully. "Which explains a lot about you actually."

"I didn't try to kill her, you moron, she just tripped over my rocking horse when I was five!" Arthur yelled heatedly, like a man who had argued this point for a lifetime and had never actually won the debate. "It's not my fault she fell down the stairs and broke her leg! It's not!"

"What was your rocking horse doing near the stairs?" Merlin asked.

Arthur opened his mouth and closed it just as quickly.

"Shut up."

"Because leaving your toys on the stairs is asking for trouble," Merlin enlightened him knowledgeably, sounding uncannily like his mother. "It causes accidents."

"I said 'shut up', Merlin," Arthur repeated, looking harangued. "Now stop blathering on and get me Morgana's creative department in here already. I want to know exactly what she has had them up to with this account. She's planning something, I know she is. She's trying to steal the company from under me. Undermining my authority in front of everybody. You saw how she was in there, commandeering my meeting. Hell, she's probably got a sniper trained on me right this second. I wouldn't put it past her."

Arthur then walked over to the blinds and looked suspiciously at a pigeon on a neighbouring roof, as though checking it wasn't concealing a weapon.

"Well, that's a bit extreme," Merlin noted aloud to himself. He then shrugged and started tidying the papers on Arthur's desk. "Look, I really think you're being a little Mel Gibson here.
'Conspiracy theory', that is, not crazed anti-Semite. She seemed perfectly lovely to me."

"That's because you're an idiot who was too busy staring at her chest to pay attention," Arthur reminded him with an extremely sour look. He then slapped Merlin's hands away from his paperwork. "Now stop making my desk even messier than it is and go book me a meeting with Morgana's team. If you insist on staying, you might as well do something useful while you do."

The creative department, Merlin discovered as he rounded them up, turned out to be a rather emaciated-looking group of people in black polo-necks who would probably have been chain smoking if they were allowed to in the building.

Huddled together like a skeletal group of vampires in fashionable eyewear, they were shielded from the sun in their windowless studio and occasionally clawed their nails in the air and hissed at a poor design when they were in the mood.

Morgana's second-in-command was a particularly attractive blonde woman called Morgause who applied enough kohl on her eyes to look like a panda and enough hairspray into her perfectly-styled waves to keep a tall building standing upright. She also gave Arthur such a look of loathing when she walked through the door of the meeting room that Merlin almost sidestepped away from him just in case any of that animosity got on him.

"Morgause," said Arthur, his voice curt but civil. "You look well."

"Arthur," said Morgause, pointedly not returning the compliment. "I assume you'd like to see the concepts we've drawn up? Would you rather we presented them before you take the document away to study it?"

Arthur had opted for the presentation. Merlin really wished he hadn't.

"Well... that was interesting," Merlin had said when they were back in Arthur's office, his head still reeling.

"Interesting?!" Arthur raved, balling up the print-out he was given and throwing it in rage. "It was a total farce! I know those weren't the final ideas. I'm being fobbed off! Morgana's keeping the good ideas herself to present to Lady Helen in private, I know it. She must have warned the team beforehand not to give me anything decent! I can't trust a single one of them!"

"Oh, I don't know," Merlin said, trying to be optimistic as picked up the discarded concept sheet from where Arthur had thrown it on the floor and skimmed through the ideas they were just presented. "I quite liked the armadillo idea. Everyone loves armadillos."

"No one likes armadillos, you plonker," Arthur retorted before frowning when Merlin pulled out a paper and pen. "And what the hell are you jotting down?"

"Every insult you throw at me," Merlin replied smartly. "They'll make a nice email to H.R. How do you spell 'supercilious prat' again?"

"S-H-U-T-U-P," Arthur spelled out instantly before throwing himself down on his swivel chair forcefully. Slapping a palm over his eyes, he then groaned. "God, this is a nightmare. I can't go back with these ideas, I'll be a laughing stock. I need people I can trust, not Morgana's coven of witches with their ulterior motives." Peeling his hand off his face, Arthur sat forward with a determined expression. As much as Merlin loathed to admit it, a resolute Arthur was a bit of a sight to behold. "Merlin, go through my contacts, call Leon and get him over here. Also, my Uncle Agravaine. He's worked in publishing long enough to know the ins and outs of campaigns like this.
Tell them I need them over here on the double. If Morgana wants a war, she's going to get one. And for God's sake, tuck your shirt in. If I'm going to amass an army, the least it'll be is well-dressed."

* ~ * ~ * ~ *

When Merlin briefly talked on the phone to a charming, well-spoken man called Leon on his first day, he didn't realise how wrong his first impression was. Leon wasn't just nice. He was a saint.

Auburn-haired and kind-natured, Leon was Arthur's best friend, advisor and personal bodyguard and seemed to be the polar opposite of Arthur in almost every respect. While Arthur swaggered around in tailored suits and had an ego that was the size of the solar system, Leon was comfortably dressed, softly spoken and so modest that Merlin honestly wondered if he had somehow been tricked into being Arthur's friend. His patience was unreal, which Merlin supposed that was a prerequisite for anyone who dealt with Arthur on a regular basis and didn't murder him in his sleep.

He may not have been as traditionally good-looking as Arthur was but he was so supremely noble that he literally shone with an inner attractiveness that made him incredibly appealing.

In short, he was the epitome of goodness. Why he was friends with Arthur was beyond Merlin. Maybe he was trying to save his soul. If he was, Merlin felt he ought to tell him not to bother trying.

"Actually, we grew up together," Leon shared an hour later as a sceptical-looking Merlin picked him up from reception. "We shared a room at Eton. Got up to all types of mischief."

"So you knew him when he was a kid?" Merlin asked, just imagining how horrid and obnoxious Arthur must have been as a child and finding himself actually sympathising with Uther Pendragon of all people.

"Oh, he wasn't that bad." Leon laughed, seeing the look on Merlin's face. "Don't get me wrong, he was a terror back then but he was always the one kid all the others gravitated towards and deferred to, and it wasn't just because of his father's name. He's a natural leader, always has been and I suppose even back then I knew this was someone I wanted to follow. We've remained close ever since."

"Did you lose a bet?" Merlin asked genuinely.

Leon schooled his expressions well but even Merlin could see that he looked like he was trying not to laugh.

"Actually, he saved me from a pack of bullies on my first day. One minute they were pounding on me, the next they were face down in the dirt and bawling like babies, all before I could get my bearings. Arthur's got a mean right hook."

"Don't I know it," Merlin said, wincing as he recalled the dozens of times that very arm had thrown something accurately at his head.

Leon smiled at him, kindly sympathetic.
"I know he may be a little overbearing at times but Arthur's a good man under all the bravado. The best man I know," he said earnestly

"And you're the best kind of friend. My best friend just tells people we're friends because he saw my ears and felt sorry for me," Merlin replied, smiling at Leon's good nature in awe and even shaking his head when Leon looked highly offended for Merlin's ears.

The man really was too good to be true.

Arthur's Uncle Agravaine, on the other hand, was decidedly not.

Ignoring Merlin completely as he burst into Arthur's office without invitation, he was in his early forties, sported a head of slicked back hair and wore a smile that would look very fitting on a snake. His words were seductive and smooth and gave the appearance of being well-intentioned but unlike Leon and his natural brand of goodness, Agravaine had an oily way of articulating himself to Arthur that rubbed Merlin up the wrong way.

During the unofficial war council, Agravaine drew up ambitious plans, suggested eye-popping extravagance and came up with ideas that seemed a little... well, ridiculous to Merlin. Leon had also looked politely hesitant when faced with the concepts -- one of which was to re-enact the sinking of the Titanic with a bikini shoot where scantily-clad models would cling sexily to flotsam while drowning -- but Arthur seemed to be drinking in his Uncle's words as if they were gospel.

"Perhaps it would be best if we steer away from anything that recreates traumatic events that led to mass-death," Leon said diplomatically, the voice of reason.

Agravaine waved a hand at this, as though reason was an inconsequential commodity in fashion.

"Controversy is this industry's best friend," he persisted forcefully with a palm to the table. Seeing Arthur's raised eyebrows, Agravaine instantly smoothed away the momentary crease between his eyebrows with a paternal, beseeching sort of smile. "Arthur," he charmed, reaching over to place a hand on his nephew's shoulder in a way that reminded Merlin of The Dog Whisperer, "you know I speak the truth. To compete with the Priestess magazines of the world, we have to think outside the box. I wouldn't steer you wrong. I only want the best for you. You're all that is left of my dear sister and her legacy so it is in my best interest for you to succeed. All the best campaigns have gone places that most other brands would think too fantastic to consider. Ideas that seem risky and extreme are usually the ones that help define an entire company. Ingenuity is key. Do you want Camelot to be as outdated as its name or do you want to usher in a new reign of innovation?"

"Because a playboy party while Celine Dion warbles 'My Heart Will Go On' is so innovative," Merlin found himself mumbling under his breath from the corner he had been standing in. He had been tasked with the vitally important job of staying silent while keeping everyone's glasses filled and he quickly closed his mouth after Arthur threw him a quick glare for his insolence.

Agravaine obviously hadn't heard because he continued to throw around some positively stupid concepts, making Merlin want to drown himself in the water jug he was holding rather than listen to anymore of his twaddle.

The meeting eventually came to a close with Agravaine steering Arthur towards re-enacting, rather randomly, the penultimate scene in the opera Madam Butterfly, which was one of the tamer ideas that had been bandied about.

Pleased with the decision, nephew and uncle shook hands and Merlin was left with the unpleasant task of escorting Agravaine out of the building, a job that was made even worse when Agravaine
turned out to be a bit of a letch who seemed to have a borderline incestuous attachment to Morgana, proven by the way he leered all over her and tried to feel her up when she walked past.

Arthur, of course, did not seem to notice any of this as he waved him out from his office cheerfully. Sometimes Merlin wondered if that ivory tower Arthur seemed to live in had any windows whatsoever. Agravaine was obviously a total sleaze.

"Hell, don't be too hard on him. If Morgana was my niece I'd probably want to shaft her too," Will had commented when Merlin had phoned him over lunch and complained to him about it. "She's bloody hot, relative or not."

"If I ever have teenage daughters, remind me to never let you babysit them," Merlin replied from the broom cupboard he had decided to hide himself within, sitting on an upturned bucket. "Seriously though, Will, you should have heard the ideas he came up with. They were completely ridiculous, not to mention completely wrong for Lady Helen. Mum made us listen to enough of her when we were kids, remember? I think the musical route is the way to go but they should have gone for something like My Fair Lady or even Les Mis. Lady Helen starred in the West End productions of both of them when she was younger and even her bloody clothes look like they're from an earlier era. I literally spent about an hour after the meeting coming up with my own ideas because just listening to Agravaine's dropped my IQ by about fifty points. He's trying to steer Arthur wrong. I don't know why but everything in me is telling me not to trust the guy. I can't explain it but it's as if my magic knows there's something about him that seems off."

"First, your knowledge in musicals is scaring the fuck out of me, we should go watch the new Stallone to sort this out. Second, maybe you have magic spidey-sense like Peter Parker and it's telling you not to trust the guy," Will reasoned as though this was a perfectly normal thing to have. "Hey, maybe you can see the future! That would be brilliant. Mer, try and 'sense' next week's lottery numbers. I need a new car."

"You don't even have an 'old' car, Will," Merlin reminded him.

"I'd have one if my selfish best mate would just give me the winning lottery numbers," Will replied sweetly.

"I'm not a crystal ball, you know. It's not like rubbing my head will give you luck. Anyway, we're getting off topic. Agravaine-"

"Jesus, Merlin, I don't know," Will huffed out so his irritable breath could be heard whooshing through the phone line. "Why do you even care? You said Pendragon was a dick. If this greasy uncle of his is trying to plot the brat's untimely demise, why should it bother you?"

One cannot escape their destiny, young Warlock...

Merlin frowned as the words reverberated around his head. That bloody caretaker. It was like having Obi-Wan Kenobi permanently take up residence in his brain. No doubt this was part of some grander plan to make Merlin look stupid. Sometimes he felt like the entire world was out to get him.

"Merlin!" a voice bellowed from outside the door, proving his point. It made Merlin sigh.

"I'll talk to you later, Will. Arthur's got his angry voice on. He'll start foaming at the mouth soon if I don't shift my arse."

"Yeah, yeah, run along to your master, little lapdog." Will chortled with amusement. "If you
manage to make it through the day in one piece, I'll see you at home."

"I'm not a lapdog!" Merlin cried out, highly disturbed as he imagined a tiny, disgruntled version of himself sitting in Arthur's man-bag like Aithusa. "I barely listen to him or do what I'm told. In fact, I might just stay here just to prove-"

"Merlin!"

"Shit! Talk later!" Merlin squeaked, disconnecting the call and scrabbling out of the broom closet at the same time. Standing on the other side of the door was Arthur, his face alternating between annoyed and suspicious as he narrowed his eyes and looked between the dusty cupboard and an even dustier Merlin. He then paused.

"Merlin, did you or did you not just come out of a closet?" Arthur asked, as though unsure of the answer himself.

"Um," Merlin said, scratching behind his ear. "I needed to make a call?"

"And that was the only place in the building that you found reception?" Arthur replied, looking blandly at the open cupboard, where a broken broom decided to fall over and lie sadly at his feet. Merlin decided to ignore the question.

"So we're doing a concept shoot set in post-war Japan for Lady Helen," Merlin said instead, trying to distract Arthur. "That makes perfect sense, even though Lady Helen's clothes don't even have the tiniest of Asian influences. Really, it's a great idea. Maybe we should get a couple of elephants in as well. And some Morris dancers. Just to add to the randomness of it all."

Given the angry smile Arthur threw at Merlin, the distraction seemed to have worked.

"If I thought you could comprehend creativity, Merlin, I'd ask your opinion. As it is, stick to things you're good at. Like... well, nothing." Arthur then turned to smack him in the arm much harder than necessary. "Leave this to us big boys."

"Big boys?" Merlin scoffed, rubbing at his now stinging bicep. "Big-heads more like. The most Lady Helen and Madame Butterfly have in common is that they're both women who have titles. Even a moron can see that we need something that's more her, something that makes you think of her brand as soon as you look at it. You know, I've actually doodled a whole bunch of other concepts in my notepad. You could use them for back up, in case this Madam Butterfly thing falls through. I think I left my notepad on your desk. Maybe you could have a look at those ideas tonight and-"

"Merlin," Arthur cut him off abruptly, holding up a halting hand that immediately made Merlin close his mouth, "let us get this abundantly clear now before your delusions of grandeur cause someone an injury. You are a dogsbody, not an advisor. You do what I say and have absolutely no input over creative. Christ knows how many minutes this company would last if a moron like you was tasked with coming up with all our ideas. We'd go bankrupt within the first hour. All you are paid to be is my manservant-"

"Assistant." Merlin cut in.

"Whatever," Arthur responded, barely bothered by the interruption as he waving a bored hand. "Now, assist me by not talking about other ideas and working on the one we have. I want you to get a message to our in-house studio downstairs and brief them on getting the equipment ready for tomorrow. I need them at their best, so that means Valiant behind the camera and Vivian in front of
it. They may both be utter nightmares to work with but they are two of the best on our books. Make sure they have my Uncle's number as the main point of contact - he knows the concept better than anyone and he has a knack for Art Direction. Given all our preparation, the shoot should go smoothly."

And true to Arthur's words, when the day after came to a close, everything had gone smoothly. Valiant may have been as big of a tosser as Arthur had predicted and the model Vivian did turn out to be a drama queen whose temper tantrums almost delayed things by a day but despite these setbacks, the shoot went surprisingly well. Merlin still thought the concept was as ridiculous as sunglasses on a cat but the photos were striking and well-shot and both Valiant and Vivian proved why they still got work on a regular basis, despite the fact their attitudes made screaming children in supermarkets seem reasonable.

The presentation to Lady Helen the following day, however, didn't go to plan.

The day had already started badly enough when a freak thunderstorm had suddenly hit London, soaking Merlin so thoroughly that he ended up squelching his way into work that morning, leaving little puddles on the marble floor in his wake. If that wasn't bad enough, a last minute job had been sent to the printers and couldn't be delivered in time so Merlin had had to sprint through the torrential rain to flag down a black cab, get to the printers, pick up the sealed prints himself and then jump back into another black cab while praying that the bag around the mounted pictures would save them from the elements.

By the time he returned to the office, dropped the pictures off with Leon and collected a tray of custard creams and a cup of tea for Arthur, Merlin thought that maybe the day could be salvaged. Unfortunately, when he bumped into a delighted-looking Mordred in the kitchen and discovered that Lady Helen's plane had not only landed unexpectedly early but that she would be arriving in ten minutes, everything had gone completely to shit.

"Arthur, breathe..." Merlin could hear Agravaine's slimy voice croon as Merlin walked through the door to his employer's office. "You need to relax."

"Relax?" Merlin could hear Arthur's voice snapping from behind his closed bathroom door in a tone that was as far from relaxed as could be. "This is a nightmare! The presentation is barely finished, the prints are still being organised and this ridiculous outfit you convinced me to wear is asphyxiating me! How can this get any worse?"

"Lady Helen and her people just arrived, Mr Pendragon," George's voice buzzed primly over the intercom from reception like a bad joke from fate itself.

A loud thump behind the bathroom door told Merlin that Arthur's had either passed out or had hit the door with frustration. Merlin really hoped it was the former. After all, the poor bathroom door was still recovering from the phallic graffiti Merlin had had to magic off it.

But Arthur hadn't fainted. A second later he had slammed open the door with the crazed look of someone who had either had too much coffee or not enough sleep. Looking at his employer's pale skin and the weird tick that kept going off in his face every so often, Merlin had a strong feeling it was a combination of both.

But it wasn’t Arthur's expression that was at the forefront of Merlin's mind. The honour for that went to Arthur's frankly ridiculous outfit, which was possibly the worst ensemble Merlin had ever seen in his life and he lived next door to a family of chavs who wore grills on their teeth.

Clapping a hand over his mouth, Merlin tried to muffle the burst of hysterical laughter bubbling in
his throat but he didn't succeed.

"What the... what the hell are you wearing?" Merlin sniggered with mirth, his shoulders shaking with amusement.

"Shut up, as if you're any authority on fashion," Arthur snapped although his red cheeks clearly signified their wholehearted agreement with Merlin.

Wearing a shiny patterned cravat, a matching waistcoat and a tweed hunting jacket that looked like Arthur had spent the afternoon shooting pheasants in a country manor somewhere, Arthur looked like nothing less than an 18th century spoiled dandy. Even his shoes couldn't save him but this was mainly because they were shiny and buckled and so fey that he might as well have been wearing a skirt.

Looking down at Arthur's trousers, Merlin snorted even louder and thought a skirt would have probably been more rugged.

"Why are you wearing long johns?" Merlin asked, snickering so much that he actually started to hiccough. "Are you cold? I can put the heating on if you want."

"They're jodhpurs!" Arthur corrected petulantly, looking harassed, "and they are from Lady Helen's new collection so if you laugh at them in front of her, I will hurt you in ways you cannot even begin to imagine." Arthur then pointed his finger so close to Merlin's face that he almost poked him in the eye, his lips pursed dangerously. "Do you understand?"

Merlin simply saluted in response.

"Yes sir, Captain Tightpants," he said, straight-faced. He then pulled out his phone and snapped a picture.

Luckily, Leon popped his head around the door before Arthur could take off a heeled shoe and beat Merlin about the head with it.

"Arthur, would you please hurry up?" Leon asked, his normally calm face anxious and his curly hair looking like he had run his hand through it at least a hundred times in the past minute. "We've left Lady Helen in reception and George keeps trying to confiscate her cigarette. He says smoking goes against building regulations. Last I checked, he was reading her the riot act and showing her lung cancer images on Google."

"Christ," Arthur groaned, downing the glass of water on his desk like a shot of whiskey. Quickly doing up his coat buttons -- and slapping Merlin's fingers away when they clumsily tried to help -- Arthur then grabbed his laptop.

"Don't worry, Arthur," Agravaine said smoothly as he slid an arm around his nephew's jittery shoulders. "It'll all be fine. I'm sure Lady Helen is a charming woman."

Unfortunately for them all, Agravaine was severely mistaken.

Lady Helen was not only not charming, she also happened to be a complete and utter witch.

Back when she was young and in her heyday, her angelic singing voice had complimented her looks perfectly. Now, however, she definitely had a face made for radio. Her hair was ashen and unremarkable, her haggard skin seemed to have been comprised entirely of wrinkles and she had this Olympus-sized mole on her face that could have given Krakatoa a run for its money. The icing on the cake, however, had to be the fact she was certifiably off her rocker, something Merlin had
soon suspected when she had started to carry a conversation with one of the potted plants beside George's desk. The fact this woman had a fashion collection made Merlin despair for humanity, but he had already realised the world was in pretty bad shape the first time he saw a hummer.

"Your father used to date her?" Merlin whispered to Arthur in horror as he stared at Lady Helen from the other side of the room, gaping as she hacked out a cough so strong it could have brought up a lung.

"Shut up, you idiot, I keep trying to forget that mental image," Arthur returned, shuddering with repressed childhood trauma as he did. "Look, just keep an eye out in case she does something crazy. She's as mad as a bloody hatter now - pulls out this weird voodoo doll and sticks pins in it when she's angry at someone, like she's trying to curse them. And for god's sake, if you do talk about her, try to keep your voice down. She's got the ears of a bat."

At that, Lady Helen suddenly turned to stare directly at Merlin, as though she had heard that. Merlin barely restrained himself from diving under the nearest table.

Arthur fiddled with his outfit, vainly hoping that rearranging it a little would help it look less stupid. When it didn't, he sighed with resignation.

"Right, how do I look?" he asked, rolling his shoulders and gearing himself up like a football player about jog onto the pitch.

Merlin looked him up and down.

"Like a posh pillock in a cravat," he replied promptly.

"Seriously," Arthur said aloud to no one in particular, shaking his head, "worst assistant ever."

Smoothing down his hair and straightening his back, Arthur then approached Lady Helen with a smile that looked used to overwhelming anyone in its path.

"Lady Helen," Arthur schmoozed as he grabbed a flute of champagne from a nearby tray and Merlin was amazed that Arthur could still manage to exude that much attractiveness in that bad an outfit, "how lovely to see you again, I see you have been keeping well."

The look Lady Helen gave both Arthur and the champagne flute he tried to offer her could have killed small children. Arthur's impressive smile drooped slightly.

The look Lady Helen gave both Arthur and the champagne flute he tried to offer her could have killed small children. Arthur's impressive smile drooped slightly.

"Yes, err... well," he said awkwardly, looking a little thrown by the hostility as Merlin quickly took the glass away before she threw it at him. Coughing, Arthur straightened his cravat and tried again. "Anyway, I hope you're looking forward to the presentation later on, we've all worked very hard on this project and I'm sure you'll love the final results."

Again, Lady Helen didn't reply but she honestly didn't need to. Her glare was enough to reduce most grown men to tears. Arthur was looking a little glassy-eyed himself until Morgana, resplendent in a red dress that accentuated her every curve, stepped in.

"Lady Helen! How wonderful to see you. I see you wore the pendant. Mordred assured me it would look exquisite on you and he was right, I'm so pleased. Ah, I see you're reacquainting yourself with Arthur. He was worried, the silly goose, that you would still be upset with him about that unfortunate stair incident but I knew it would be all forgotten."

Considering the fact that Lady Helen looked like she was trying to castrate Arthur with a look, Merlin didn't assume that bygones were bygones.
"Now, let me show you around the new studio," Morgana continued agreeably, linking arms with Lady Helen like old friends. "You'll love what we've done with the place. Arthur, you can set up without me, can't you?"

"I-" Arthur began but Morgana had already whisked Lady Helen away, her voice warm as she lead her out the room, regaling her with stories.

"Wow," said Merlin, watching as the two women disappeared out the door in gales of laughter, their happiness echoing off the walls of the hallway almost tauntingly back at them. Turning back to Arthur, Merlin let out a low whistle. "That woman really hates your guts, doesn't she?"

"Thank you, Merlin, I honestly hadn't noticed," Arthur said snippily, fiddling viciously at the cravat around his neck, which now looked like it was actively trying to strangle him. Considering that it was a Lady Helen creation, Merlin thought it made sense that even her clothes were out to get Arthur.

"Come on," Leon said evenly, ever the calming influence as he steered them all towards the boardroom. "Let's set up. She'll change her mind once she sees the shots."

True to Leon's words, Lady Helen did change her mind. Unfortunately, it wasn't for the better.

"Is this some sick joke?" Lady Helen demanded ten minutes later after Arthur had presented their concept with a flourish.

They were all seated in the boardroom -- from Morgana, Mordred and Gaius to all of Lady Helen's substantial team of advisers -- and Arthur, who Merlin thought had just presented pretty remarkably given how pants their idea was, looked politely puzzled in the face of Lady Helen's cold fury.

"I'm sorry?" Arthur asked, mildly flummoxed by the dismay in her voice but Lady Helen had already stood up and pointed a gnarled finger at him, radiating with so much anger that her frizzy hair was practically buzzing with electricity.

"Wasn't breaking my leg enough, boy? Or do you think it's funny to insult my marriage as well!?"

Arthur looked like he had been hit hard in the face as he physically staggered back a step.

"I-I'm sorry- your marriage?" he asked with panicky confusion, looking around the room wildly for back up. "Lady Helen, I assure you, we meant no insult at all-"

" 'No insult!'" Lady Helen roared, spit flying everywhere. She then suddenly dumped the contents of her handbag on the table, rummaged through it like a woman possessed and pulled out what looked like a dog's chew toy. "I curse you, Arthur Pendragon!" she said shrilly, looking completely out her mind as she vociferously started sticking pins in the doll. "An eye for an eye! A tooth for a tooth! A son for a son!" And with that, she threw the doll at Arthur's head and stormed out in an eccentric swirl of taffeta, her entourage scuttling after her like frightened mice. Merlin, who had seen the doll flying towards Arthur, tackled him to the ground before it could hit him in the face, feeling an odd sense of déjà vu as he did. Arthur being Arthur, however, was an ungrateful lout and yelled at him to get off him before thwapping him in the head and getting to his feet.

"What the- what in the hell just happened?!" Arthur finally demanded when he found his voice.

"Well..." Morgana said slowly, looking like she was trying her hardest not to smile smugly as she shared what could only be described as a conspiratorial look with Mordred, "you do realise that happened to Lady Helen, don't you?"
"What!?

"The Madam Butterfly story," Mordred continued, his large eyes twinkling as his crafty mouth tried to twitch itself neutral. "I mean, it is practically a reflection of her own life."

"You're telling me Lady Helen slit her throat after being left by her bigamist naval-officer husband?" Arthur said doubtfully and Merlin didn't blame him.

"No," Morgana elaborated, talking to him like he was small child in between tossing back her shiny waves of hair like a Pantene model, "but her husband walked out on her and shacked up with a girl half his age and in doing so left Lady Helen to raise her young son alone. She got depressed, tried to overdose on sleeping pills... honestly, Arthur, you didn't know? How did you miss all this?"

Arthur dropped his jaw, looking stunned before turning to his uncle. Agravaine put up his hands innocently.

"Arthur, I had no idea," he tried to assure him in an astonished tone that Merlin didn't buy for a moment. "I must have missed the scandal. I've been on the continent for years."

"Okay," said Arthur, trying not to hyperventilate as he paced the floor and ran his hand through his hair so it stuck up with static. "Okay. I can fix this. I can."

"Don't you think you've done enough?" Morgana asked, enough acidity in her voice to sizzle through even the thickest of skins. "Maybe if you had just put your pride on the shelf and asked for my help in the first place-

"You're trying to sabotage me!" Arthur thundered out, pointing an accusatory finger at Morgana, Mordred and then lastly at the snoozing Aithusa in Morgana's bag, who yawned loudly in her sleep. "You're all trying to make me look inept!"

"You're doing that all on your own, dear brother, you really don't need our help," Morgana returned, her eyes amused as she ran an emery board over her red nails.

"I hate to add to the animosity here," Agravaine said, worming his way into the conversation so greasily that Merlin could practically see the slime trail oozing behind him, "but it does seem like Morgana may be the right person for the job."

"No!" Arthur said, looking both resolute and desperate at the same time, "Just... just give me fifteen minutes, I can fix this. I can."

"Mr Pendragon," George's prim tones suddenly buzzed into the room, "your father is asking for an update of the meeting. Should I put him through?"

There was a hushed, anticipatory silence around the room as everyone watched Arthur to see what he would do. After a few seconds, he reached over and pressed the button on the intercom.

"Tell him the meeting got delayed," he told George. "I'll talk to him after it's done."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I don't think it is prudent for me to lie to Mr Pendrag-"

"Just do it, George!" Arthur snapped with irritation, immediately quieting the receptionist before he turned to Gaius. "Gaius, can you buy me some time? Amuse Lady Helen and her people until I'm ready to present again?"

"Do what you have to do, Arthur," Gaius responded loyally. "Just message me when you want us
back in the room."

Nodding, Arthur motioned quickly for both Leon and Agravaine to join him as he stood and headed for the door. Arthur then stopped in the doorway and turned back to the room. To Merlin's surprise, Arthur looked straight at him.

"Well, what are you waiting for, Merlin, a handwritten invitation? Come on, I need your bony arse."

Raising his eyebrows, Merlin followed his employer all the way to Arthur's office, curiously wondering how on earth Arthur could salvage this situation and why he insisted on Merlin accompanying him in the first place.

Merlin soon cottoned on, however, the moment he walked into Arthur's office and caught sight of his open notebook on Arthur's desk. Not only that but one of his doodles -- a particularly intricate one that Merlin had sketched of his Les Miserables inspired shoot -- had been blown up onto A2 foam board.

Looking at his work in stunned silence, Merlin then turned back to Arthur. It only took a few seconds for a large smile to overtake his face but when it did, it was almost impossible to get rid of it.

"You read my ideas," he said, beaming toothily.

"Christ knows why but yes, I did," Arthur admitted, sighing like he worried for his own sanity. "And the fact that most of your ideas weren't completely awful has shaken me to the core. I couldn't sleep all night."

"Oh stop, any more of these compliments and I'll get a big head," Merlin tried to say sarcastically but he was still grinning so nonsensically that the effect was lost. "So, this was what you asked me to pick up this morning?"

"The printers didn't have any available couriers since it was such a last minute job," Arthur explained.

"So you had to provide your own," Merlin finished as he shook his head, impressed with Arthur's foresight. "I don't get it... you said yourself you didn't want to focus on any more ideas."

"Indeed," Agravaine's reptilian tones chipped in, his eyes cool as he looked between Arthur and Merlin. "In fact, I was sure we decided unanimously to focus all our time on just the one concept."

"You're right, Uncle, we did," Arthur admitted, holding up his hands to accept the blame. "But then... I don't know, something in me told me that we might need a backup. Like a voice in the back of my head. And then I looked down at my desk and there was your notepad, Merlin, already open on this idea and it felt like-"

"Destiny?" Merlin finished, feeling a strange tingle across his skin that felt like fate itself was knocking at his door.

Regrettably, Arthur decided to scoff like a pig, ultimately ruining the magical moment.

"I wouldn't go that far but this idea... it's good, Merlin. Great even. So great, in fact, that I'm sure you probably lifted it from someone else. Nevertheless, I'd like to present it to Lady Helen before she walks out of here forever. With your permission, of course, if you'll give it."
Merlin pretended to mull over it for about a second before his silly grin escaped him again.

"Permission granted," he said, nodding.

"Right." Arthur nodded resolutely back at him before turning to the A2 sketch. A look of mild panic then crossed his face. "Fuck me, how the sod are we doing this?"

"Arthur, really, I must interject," Agravaine piped up again, looking more uneasy than Merlin had seen him thus far. "We can't just present this boy's doodles to such an important client. Look, I know for a fact that Morgana has an entire arsenal of fleshed-out concepts that she is ready to pitch at a moment's notice. I understand that you both have this rivalry at present but think of the company. Do you really want your first big decision at Camelot to be an unmitigated disaster?"

Watching Arthur expression turn from enthusiastic to resigned reminded Merlin remarkably of a child who was told they couldn't have dessert.

"You're right," Arthur mumbled, his entire body deflating as his shoulders drooped. "Morgana was right, I can't do this. She has more experience with these sorts of accounts. Just- just get her team to do the spread and have done with it."

Merlin didn't know if it was the defeatist attitude or Agravaine's self-satisfied smirk that did it. Either way, Merlin found himself stepping forward and speaking up before he had realised that he had done it.

"I thought you said you wanted to do this on your own," Merlin persisted, unable to stop himself from glaring at Agravaine and his oily smile as he did. "You know, to prove to yourself and your father and all your doubters that you're the right man for the job."

"Well I was kidding myself," Arthur returned petulantly, kicking his beanbag hard enough to make Merlin cringe and pray he didn't burst it at the seams again. "I mean, how am I even supposed to win Lady Helen's business when she won't deal with anyone but Morgana?"

"You'll dazzle her with a creative so good that it'll make Morgana's pale in comparison," Leon said encouragingly, stepping forward. It made Merlin grin at him.

"Yes, because that's easy," Arthur huffed dryly, his shoulders broad as he crossed his arms. "She positively hated our last idea."

"Well, that's because our last idea was stupid," Merlin said, getting a thrill of joy when Agravaine's back stiffened. "Leon agrees with me. Don't you, Leon?"

Leon, ever the diplomat, sat down, folded his hands in front of him and said in an even voice,

"I imagine it could have worked better for an edgier client."

"Arthur this is madness!" Agravaine suddenly burst out, both his voice and his expression a mix between frustrated and entreating. "Think about what you're doing! You could potentially ruin your good name -- my good name -- for nothing but a throwaway idea! I'm sorry but I cannot continue if
you insist on pursuing this. I have my reputation to maintain. In this business, your name is all you have and I'll be damned if I allow mine to get dragged through the dirt because of some assistant's," he briefly gave a Merlin a hateful once over that made even Merlin's toenails feel insecure, "pipe dream." Agravaine was red by the time he was finished as he huffed to the door with emotion and pulled it open. "Don't be a fool, Arthur. Think about what your father would do - what he expects of you. Do the sensible thing and hand this over to Morgana. I'll be in the meeting room when you come back to your senses."

And with that, Agravaine walked out the door.

"Well," said Merlin, watching as Agravaine stormed off down the hallway, bowling over a couple of skittery interns as he careered past them. "That was dramatic."

Arthur sighed after his Uncle a little sadly, a conflicted look on his face as he looked between the sketch and Agravaine's retreating back.

Arthur then groaned resignedly.

"Christ, I must be out of my mind," he said aloud to himself as he stepped forward against his better judgement. Then picking up the foam board, Arthur placed it on a nearby presentation easel to get a better look at it. "Okay, guys, we have one shot at this. Leon, you are scribe and Merlin... well, you better walk me through this creative. I need to make sure I present it perfectly. If we fuck this up, we're all out of a job so for god's sake, whatever you say, make it good."

So Merlin did. He explained how the theme of the shoot would be set on a French battlefield where an epic battle of the sexes would be about to commence - a battle where Lady Helen's women's military collection and her men's hunting one faced each other off in an ultimate war. The women would be holding vibrant banners and rifles and would be wearing towering white wigs with their faces streaked with dirt and make-up while the men would look grubby and bloody while they punched their fists in the air, their hunting dogs at their heels. It would be like a renaissance painting in style, a little over the top and slightly tongue-in-cheek but gloriously detailed and vibrant with colour.

"Huh," said Arthur when Merlin finally finished explaining, looking mildly taken aback as he shared a look with Leon. "Merlin, I must say, I think we may have just stumbled upon your one and only talent."

"Ha ha," Merlin responded dryly, but he silently appreciated the gesture nevertheless. That veiled insult from Arthur was as good as a compliment from anyone else. "So is that enough information for you to present this back to them?"

It turned out that it was and when Arthur walked back into the meeting room again, he was calm and focused and radiated a quiet intensity that exuded confidence. He apologised for the previous concept that had offended Lady Helen with genuine repentance, complimented his guest on her many accolades and even manage to slip in a couple of the few tolerable memories that had had of each other in the past.

By the time he had moved on to the concept, Merlin already knew Arthur had had it in the bag. It galled him to admit it -- and he would deny it passionately until his dying day -- but Arthur was, well, mesmerising to watch. Every word, every gesture he made was faultless, from the tenor of his voice to the frankly poetic language he used, which conjured images so vivid into Merlin's mind that he could almost reach out and touch them.

Merlin may have had magic brimming from his fingers but Arthur seemed to be magic itself.
"He's something, isn't he?" Leon murmured quietly from beside Merlin when he caught sight of the amazement on his face.

"He's incredible," Merlin breathed, not even pretending to be unaffected and he wasn't the only one. Almost everyone around the table seemed to be wearing a similar expression, from Gaius' look of proud approval to Lady Helen's advisors, who looked willing to give Arthur their first-borns if he had asked for them. Even Mordred looked slightly cross-eyed by his charisma, something Morgana soon rectified by elbowing him furiously in the ribs, fuming silently in her corner. She and Agravaine appeared to be the only people in the room not caught under his spell.

"So," Arthur said when he finally finished, clasping his hands behind his back as his eyes looked expectant and slightly nervous, "What do you think?"

Lady Helen paused for a moment and Merlin watched the wrinkled hand on her handbag like a hawk, just in case she went mental again and started chucking more voodoo dolls at Arthur's head. She didn't, however. Instead, she moved her hand to her lap, pursed her lips momentarily and bluntly said,

"You're not like your father."

"No," Arthur replied, looking a little disheartened and Merlin immediately sensed the self-doubt in his voice. "I'm afraid I'm not."

Lady Helen then got to her feet. Hobbling over to Arthur, she eyed him astutely, her face so close to his that his breath made the hairs on her warts rustle.

"You think you can get this done on time, boy?" Lady Helen demanded, her voice whip-like and sharp. Arthur, who looked rather amusing cowering down at a five foot tall elderly woman, nodded so animatedly that it was a wonder his head was still attached.

"Yes, yes! Of course, we can. I can safely assure you th-"

"That's enough," Lady Helen cut off his bluster abruptly but Merlin imagined that he saw a smile on her face, although it could have possibly just been a large wrinkle. She then beckoned for her assistants to stand, which they soon did as one of them placed Lady Helen's mink stole around her shoulder artistically. "Have your people talk to mine," Lady Helen said shortly.

And with that, she stalked off.

Watching Lady Helen's retreating back as she hobbled down the corridor with her entourage, Merlin waited until she was in the lifts and out of earshot when he brightly said,

"Well, that turned out better than expected."

Arthur was still gaping after Lady Helen like a fish out of water, mouthing dumbly in response to this before he eventually found his voice.

"She-" he managed croakily before swallowing hard and trying again. "She was actually nice to me for once."

"I imagine that was because the idea was good enough to win her over," Leon beamed, patting Merlin exuberantly on the back. "Well done!"

"Yes," came Morgana's voice from the other side of the table, sounding strained as she got to her stilettoed feet. She may have looked composed and her smile may have been perfectly rehearsed
but even a blind man could see that her mannerisms were stilted and false. "Congratulations, brother. Good work. I'm so pleased for you."

"Actually, surprising as it may seem, the praise for this one has to go to Merlin. It was entirely his idea," Arthur admitted unreservedly and Merlin's cheeks, which had grown warm with the attention, positively exploded with heat when Arthur clapped a hand on his shoulder. "We couldn't have done it without him."

"Really," Morgana said, pausing to look at Merlin with a new shrewd light in her pupils, her eyes running down him closely. "Well, well, well, it looks like we have a rising talent in the ranks."

"Indeed it does," came Agravaine's well-bred tones as he sidled over, his smile fixed in a way that did nothing to hide the bitterness behind it. "I must confess that I was sceptical but this is one of those rare occasions where it is nice to be mistaken. Truly, I'm delighted that it all worked out in the end."

"Oh, I can tell," Merlin couldn't stop himself replying cheekily back, his smile widening when Agravaine frowned in response.

"Well, I should be going," Morgana cut in, her hard smile focused solely on Merlin and so biting in execution that Merlin could practically feel it gnawing on his ribs. "What with this new supplement coming our way, my team and I have a lot of work to do. I'm sure we'll be seeing a lot more of you, Merlin. You've caught all of our attentions." She then took a step back, turned on her heel and barked, "Agravaine, a word."

"I don't think you've made a new friend there," Leon remarked from beside Merlin as they watched Morgana stalk off up the corridor with Agravaine and Mordred cowering behind her, her footfalls angry enough to leave a series of pencil-heel indentations in the marble.

"She did look like she wanted to strangle me slightly with my own intestines, didn't she?" Merlin replied, mildly concerned by the thought. After all, if anyone seemed capable of murdering someone with their own innards, it was Morgana.

"I, err... wouldn't worry about it," said Leon in a voice that didn't give Merlin any confidence at all. Obviously realising that his tone wasn't very comforting, Leon hurriedly rushed to assure, "I'm sure that Arthur wouldn't let her leave any lasting damage."

"Oh, I severely doubt that," Merlin replied. "He would probably help hold me down while she did it, right?" He then looked at Arthur to back up his point.

But Arthur didn't seem to be listening to their conversation. Instead, he was looking at Merlin curiously, as though he didn't quite know who he was.

"Where did you learn to draw like that?" he abruptly asked with both suspicion and awe, ignoring the previous conversation. "I didn't realise you had any natural talents. I'm still in shock at the discovery. It's terrifying really."

"That's because you think I'm useless," Merlin reminded him with a grin, just in case he had forgotten.

"True," Arthur conceded, proving he hadn't but there was a hint of a reciprocal smile ghosting over his mouth. It was soon gone however as he let out a cough, as though he had caught himself being far too amiable. "Anyway, take the rest of the afternoon to write up the idea and send it around to the team. I want that email in my inbox before I leave for the day, no exceptions. Oh, and make
"So tell me again what Lady Helen said," Gwen insisted as Merlin visited her in the Closet the following day. They were sitting on her red-lipped sofa as she hugged a pillow to her chest, looking as rapt with attention as any thespian's perfect audience. "Is it true she actually smiled? Does she have teeth? Because even Cosmopolitan can't confirm that."

"Sorry to break your heart but I didn't see teeth," Merlin said, laughing as Gwen's shoulders drooped with disappointment. "But I did see a weird oozing thing on her neck that could have possibly been an incubating jellyfish if you want to hear about that."

Gwen wrinkled her nose, looking endearing as her face switched between horrified and amused.

"I think I'll pass," she said, lifting her legs to sit cross-legged. "What I'd rather hear about is how you saved the day. Everyone has been talking about your idea. I even hear Morgana's on the war path because of it. It's impressive. Most people are here for a few months at least before Morgana is out to get them."

"Yeah, that's the 'not so good' part of the story," Merlin said, unconsciously placing a hand over his stomach in protection of his abdominal organs in case Morgana was lurking nearby. "But hopefully this means Arthur will stop trying to sabotage me out of the job. I mean, I'm sure he'd still prefer some tall, leggy blonde that will sleep with him between meetings but I think things are looking better for me. I mean, it's not like things can get any worse, right?"

"Wrong," said Arthur ten minutes later as he read through the email Merlin had written the previous day. "Wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong. Tell me, Merlin, is English your second language or were you raised by a pack of wolves? And what's taking you so long to get that gum off my shoe?"

Merlin, who was indeed peeling an extremely elastic bit of chewing gum from the underside of one of Arthur's Manolo Blahniks, sighed and simply said,

"You're still trying to get me to quit so you can get a hottie, aren't you?"

Arthur had simply smirked at this, which said all it needed to really.

"Anyway," Arthur said flippantly, as though his blatant scheme to sabotage Merlin was a perfectly
normal thing to share, "after you're done with the shoes, I need you to bring me a shortlist of models for the Lady Helen shoot. Go through the book, pick out your favourites and then send me on the names."

"Really?" Merlin said in surprise, getting a bit of chewing gum stuck to his trousers in his distraction. "That's... wow. You trust me to do that?"

"It's your concept, Merlin," Arthur said, not catching his eye as he idly picked at a bit of lint from his suit jacket, almost as if he was embarrassed to be nice. "Anyway, don't think you're special - I'm asking everyone to submit names."

"Oh," said Merlin, feeling a little disappointed, his heart sinking. "I thought that-

"That what, you had final pick?" Arthur remarked in incredulity, amused. "Why would I do something ridiculous like that?"

Opening his mouth, Merlin was poised to declare how unfair this was when he was interrupted by an insistent knock on the door which Arthur soon gestured for him to open because he was a lazy bastard who apparently couldn't even operate a doorknob without raising a sweat. Stomping to the door petulantly, Merlin pulled it open to reveal a mussed-looking George, who was immediately dragged forcibly into the room by the two large and very excitable wolf-dogs whose leads he was holding. The dogs barked ecstatically at being reunited with their master as they bounded towards Arthur, clearly leading George rather than the other way around.

"Ah, George, I trust they were no trouble," Arthur said, patting his dogs affectionately on their heads before clapping an exhausted George's back, who was almost knocked flat by the force of it.

"No... trouble... at... all, Mr... Pendragon," George said breathlessly, twigs and leaves in his hair, dirt on his face and wearing the distinct look of a man who had been dragged backwards through a park. He was wheezing heavily and seemed to have a limp in his left leg but he was still healthy enough to look at Arthur with eyes so googy that they were beginning to look cross-eyed. It made Merlin shake his head and wonder how many poor misguided souls Arthur had managed to dupe into thinking he wasn't a prick.

"Now, Merlin," Arthur said, breaking Merlin out of his thoughts with a proud, obnoxious sort of voice that a father would adopt if his child had just peed over someone he didn't like, "these killing machines are my dogs. Pendragons, this human fetching stick is Merlin. He'll be looking after you. Give him your best hello."

Arthur's smile faltered, however, when the dogs simply cocked their heads at Merlin appraisingly and made curious, whimpering little sounds. Their eyes were large and lamb-like as they sniffed the air around Merlin eagerly, as though they could smell his magic, their tails wagging cheerfully behind them. Arthur's lips had thinned as he looked annoyed by their besotted looks. "Galahad and Bors Pendragon, sic!"

The dogs immediately reacted to this but instead of attacking Merlin as Arthur had no doubt trained them to, they jumped up onto their hind legs and pawed lovingly all over Merlin, licking his face excitedly and barking with delight. Merlin laughed, falling with a thump! onto his bottom as he cooed at the furry canines that had now moved from pawing at him to trying to out-snuggle each other on his lap.

"Aww, aren't you two precious?" he babied, his voice overly childish just so he could see the vein in Arthur's forehead throb. When it did, Merlin grinned evilly before turning back to the excitable
"Yes, you are, yes, you are! Who are the pwetiest widdle doggies in the whole wide world? Come give Uncle Merlin a cuddle."

"Unhand my attack dogs this instant," Arthur spoke up, both himself and George looking rather appalled by the display. "This is not dignified."

"Attack dogs? More like snuggle dogs," Merlin corrected, before slapping his thighs to get them to clamour onto him, which they soon did eagerly. "Come on, who wants a treat? I still have some leftover bacon from breakfast. Who wants some bacon? Come on, first one who puts their paw up gets it."

"Merlin, stop that at once," Arthur interjected, as though this was spiralling wildly out of his control. "These are finely trained guard dogs, not Krufts poodles that jump hoops and weave between cones. They don't do tricks, do you, Pendragons?"

The dogs replied to this by woofing with happiness and handing Merlin their paws.

Merlin laughed with pure delight.

"Oh, you two can stay," he crooned, affectionately rubbing their fur coats. "Are you sure you guys are related to Arthur? You boys obviously got all the looks and the charm."

"Hilarious," Arthur said in a blank voice that clearly did not find it funny in the slightest. "And for the record, Galahad is a girl, not a boy, moron."

"Galahad?" Merlin repeated, making a face as he looked at the cheerful canine in sympathy. "That's a stupid name for a girl doggie. Especially one that is this adorable. You should call her something cute - like Fluffy. Or Snuggles. Oh yes, that's a good one. Snuggles Pendragon."

"Merlin?"

"Yes?"

"Shut up and feed my dogs."

"Yes, sir," Merlin said, ducking his head to hide his grin. Arthur really was too easy sometimes.

"And since you're all such good friends, you can be the one to give them a bath," Arthur ordered resentfully, obviously annoyed that the dogs were acting so shamelessly enamoured with someone else right in front of him. Apparently, he wasn't very used to being overlooked. "And after that, you can deal with Griffin. Being such a lover of animals, I'm sure you'll both getting along famously."

"Wait, Griffin? Who's Griffin?" Merlin asked as Arthur moved to walk out the door. Immediately, Bors, who had been animatedly licking at Merlin's face with adoration, made a distressed howl of a noise and zoomed off to hide behind one of Arthur's curtains, his furry knees knocking together. Even George, who had been watching Merlin's floor wrestling with the dogs with a scandalised expression, physically gulped at the mention of Griffin and actually looked at Merlin with a look of commiseration that he hadn't even bestowed on Merlin when he had fallen on his face right in front of his reception desk and given himself a nose bleed.

Merlin didn't take either of these reactions as a good sign.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about Griffin, Merlin," said Arthur cryptically after seeing Merlin's face pale, his nasty smile back in full force. "With your magical affinity with animals, I'm sure, when you meet, you two will get on like a house on fire."
And Arthur wasn't wrong. When Merlin finally met the elusive Griffin, it was a bit like a house fire.

It was life threatening, soul destroying, painful to exposed skin and felt very similar to what the conditions of hell would feel like.

"He's the devil!" Merlin declared aloud after spending a minute in Griffin's company, which was one minute too long. "He's actually the devil incarnate, brought back to earth solely to cause havoc and mayhem. He's a monster. We should lock him up now before he goes on a murder spree and has to be shot by the police in a standoff."

"He's a canary, Merlin. Stop being so ridiculous," Arthur had replied when a half-chewed Merlin had vehemently stated this. "Now stop all this nonsense and feed him, already. You're hurting his feelings."

Griffin proved how hurt his feelings were by squawking and swiping wildly at Merlin with his talons.

"Ow!" Merlin wailed, blood blooming on his scratched knuckles. "Look what your devil bird did!" he yelped, waving his mangled hand under Arthur's nose.

Clearly ignoring him, Arthur cooed as though Griffin had done something particularly precious.


"You give him a treat, you sadist," Merlin snapped, cradling his bloody hand and glaring at Arthur sourly. "I'm going to get this treated."

Merlin then stomped his way out, muttering darkly under his breath as Arthur's laughter and his entreaty of "oh, come on, Merlin, stop being such a girl's petticoat!" rang out behind him.

Marching right past the nurse's station and George's doughnut-shaped reception desk, Merlin didn't stop until he made his way to Gaius' office, stood himself in front of his godfather and sadly showed him his hand like a child who had been pushed by a playground bully.

Taking off his spectacles, Gaius took a deep breath.

"I'll get the first aid box," he said gently.

"I just don't understand it," Merlin told Gaius once he had been sat down, flinching as the elder man dabbed his bloody hand with antiseptic. "There's something not right about this bird. I'm usually really good with animals. Well, animals love me. A bit too much, if I'm honest. They always have. Did I tell you about that time a bear tried to sneak into my sleeping bag and cuddle my head?"

Gaius paused his ministrations to look at Merlin.

"I think I'll forego that story," he said but he looked mildly amused. Placing a plaster on the wound, he looked satisfied with his work and patted it gently. "There."

"Mum used to think it was my magic that attracted the animals to me," Merlin continued, watching Gaius work. Merlin then tilted his head to the side curiously. "Do you think that's true?"

"Well, ever since the beginning of time, sorcerers have often had animal familiars. Magic stems
from the very earth itself so it wouldn't be a stretch to imagine that animals are attuned to 
practitioners of magic. I have heard stories of some sorcerers being able to talk to and control 
animals in the times of old to do their bidding but for all we know those were myths. No one has 
ever been proven to have had the power to do that."

Merlin briefly thought about Archimedes, who was no doubt in his room right now and using TiVo 
to watch Eastenders and decided not to mention it.

Merlin got to his feet.

"I better head back," he said reluctantly. "I think Arthur still expects me to feed his deranged pet. 
Hopefully, that pound of flesh it took from my hand is enough to satisfy it for now. Thanks for the 
patch job, Gaius. I'll see you later."

"Merlin," Gaius called out just as Merlin placed his hand on the handle of the door. His forehead 
was lined and the arch of his brow looked a little more concerned than usual as he cautiously 
opened his mouth. "If you're right about this bird's unusual behaviour, it might be worth 
investigating. Keep an eye on it."

"I'll try to, if it doesn't try to peck it out before I can," Merlin said with honest concern. 
"Thankfully, Griffin is still in his cage in Arthur's office."

A high-pitched scream suddenly sounded from outside the room.

"Or not," Merlin amended, a bad feeling in his stomach as opened the door to see what was 
happening outside.

When he had past the reception moments before, everything had been as neat and pristine as 
always. Now, however, the place looked like Godzilla had popped in for a visit, destroyed 
everything in its path and then promptly left to find somewhere else to make a mess. People were 
scattered about the place, dramatically clutching their limbs where tiny, suspiciously bird-like 
scratches had grazed them and barely drawn blood. George was cowering and whimpering Hail 
Marys under his desk, Gwen was bravely attempting to bandage someone's arm with a nice 
pashmina like a war-time nurse and Leon was trying to console a couple of girls who were howling 
hysterically in the corner, one of whom was cradling the destroyed fake chignon in her hair like a 
lost limb.

In the middle of this strange battlefield sprinted in Arthur, his golden hair a mess and a runny glob 
of bird crap oozing down his shoulder as he brandished his tiny letter opener and swiped it through 
the air like a sword.

Looking at the ruin and destruction, Merlin could only come up with one explanation.

"Let me guess, Griffin?" he said dryly.

Spinning around to face the voice, Arthur spotted Merlin and immediately rounded on him like a 
crazy person.

"You!" he hissed, pointing the letter opener towards him like he was about to challenge him to a 
duel to the death. "You bloody idiot, this is all your fault! You let him escape!"

"Me?" Merlin said in surprise, pointing at himself before looking over his shoulder to check if 
Arthur was hollering like a madman at someone behind him. When only Gaius and his eyebrow 
looked back at him, Merlin turned back to Arthur, offended. "You can't blame me. All I did was 
get a chunk eaten out of me! I should be yelling at you, not the other way around. I could sue for
"You were already deformed, you complete and utter pillock!" Arthur thundered out. "Deformed in the brain! Only a mentally-subnormal dolt like you would do something like leave Griffin's cage open!"

"I didn't leave his cage open!" Merlin retorted although, when he thought about it, Arthur probably had a valid point. Merlin couldn't actually remember shutting Griffin's cage door behind him. He didn't mention this aloud, however. "And even if I did," he added, just in case this came back to bite him in the arse, "it's your fault for having an Alfred Hitchcock extra as a pet!"

Arthur let out a smile. It was a horribly pleasant grin that revealed his teeth and made Merlin nervous for a reason he couldn't explain. When Arthur suddenly grabbed him by the arm and angrily jerked him forward so their faces were an inch apart, however, Merlin got it.

"You will fix this, Merlin," Arthur warned him in a dangerously low voice, his hand tightening around Merlin's bicep and his proximity making Merlin, to his own horror, get a little aroused. "You will fix this, find my bird and get him back into his cage, understand me?"

"Ugh, fine!" Merlin relented, desperately trying to wriggle out of Arthur's grasp before he noticed the bulge in his trousers. It was the scratch on his hand, Merlin reasoned with himself. He had obviously contracted rabies or something from it and it had made his body go mental. "I'll go and risk my life trying to cage that beast, even though he's psychotic and I have no idea where he is!"

Another ear-piercing scream sounded at these words from the direction of the lifts, so convenient that Merlin blinked suspiciously and briefly wondered if his magic had gone rogue and was doing things on its own again.

He didn't have time to dwell on it, however.

Running towards the lifts, Merlin screeched to a halt just as the metal doors slid closed in front of him on their descent to the ground floor, briefly letting him catch sight of the interior. When he saw a furious elderly woman letting out a battle-cry, declare war on the crazed canary-shaped blur around her head and then begin to sock it repeatedly with her handbag, Merlin realised he really had seen it all.

Looking back at a dishevelled Arthur, Merlin momentarily blenched when he saw his shoulder of crap was beginning to congeal.

"I'll be right back," Merlin said. He then sprinted down the hallway, slammed open the door to the back stairs and flew down all nine flights until he got to the main Pendragon reception on the ground floor, where he almost collapsed to the floor with exhaustion. Trying to catch his breath as he stared in horror at the practically post-apocalyptic scene in front of him.

Papers were strewn everywhere, people were hiding under their chairs like an earthquake drill and a young child was bawling loudly in the middle of the room, holding a headless Barbie in her hand whose tragic demise was quite obviously avian related.

The big, burly security guards, who were built like professional wrestlers and usually dealt with angry drunks rather than fowls gone foul, looked comically bewildered by the situation as their lumbered attempts to hit the speeding bird with their nightsticks had resulted in them whacking each other like a bad Three Stooges sketch.
The only person who was having any luck was a handsome dark-haired man in a suit, who was successfully holding Griffin at bay and looking like a heroic knight protecting a beautiful princess, except for the fact that his shield was a chair and his princess was an old man with a hearing aid and a zimmerframe.

Merlin shook his head. Enough was enough.

Stepping forward, Merlin caught sight of where Griffin was now flying away with a mortified businessman's toupee and covertly lifted a palm, a spell on the tip of his tongue. As if he knew what Merlin was about to do, Griffin suddenly reared backwards in a flurry of yellow feathers, held Merlin's gaze with his own beady stare and, like a fugitive on the run, flew his way towards the nearest exit.

Merlin lowered his palm and briefly wondered if it would be better to just let the bird escape. His decision, however, was soon made when he saw that the tiny yellow canon-ball -- being the troublesome shit it was -- had decided to change its trajectory at the last second and was now careering straight towards the entrance, where Uther Pendragon himself had just entered the building.

Immediately panicking and throwing caution to the wind, Merlin swore and threw up his arm, a series of strange words flying from his words.

"Bregdan anweald gafeluc!"

It was like time itself had stopped and Merlin watched with bated breath as the handsome man who had been wielding the chair like a lion tamer made a death-defying jump in the air and actually caught Griffin in his fist a moment before the canary collided into Uther Pendragon's face.

"Yes!" Merlin whooped, running to the courageous stranger's side and beaming until he caught Uther's attention. Merlin then coughed and straightened up. "Mr Pendragon you look well," he said nodding primly, fully aware he himself was bandaged and dishevelled and had about six feathers in his hair. Uther just gave Merlin's outfit an unimpressed look, shook his head as though he wasn't going to attempt to understand how Merlin functioned on a daily basis and walked off. It was only once he was out of sight that Merlin let out the breath he was holding.

Turning to the stranger, Merlin's huge smile crept back onto his face.

"I'm sorry but that was brilliant! You just saved all our lives - especially mine. Now my employer won't castrate or sack me! You're a lifesaver."

The man -- who seemed to follow the pattern of this place by being a supremely perfect specimen of humanity -- looked half bemused, half amused.

"Oh, it was nothing, really," he said gallantly, looking down in befuddlement as a now calm Griffin stared solemnly back at him. "You all seemed to be having a rough time of it."

"Well, that's because that bird is the devil," Merlin elaborated candidly. The man's cheek twitched. "I'll keep that in mind," he said, smiling like he was trying not to laugh. He then extended the hand not holding Griffin, his perfect white teeth gleaming against his tan. "I'm Lance."

"Merlin," Merlin said, shaking his hand enthusiastically

"It's nice to meet you Merlin," said Lance, proving to be both handsome and well mannered. Merlin felt like introducing him to Arthur so the entitled twerp could learn a thing or two.
"Seriously though, that was a masterful catch," Merlin continued to praise. "A one in a million, really. Are you a cricket player? Because you should be."

"Well, I did have some help," Lance conceded before looking at Merlin with a significant look on his face. When Merlin looked at him with confusion, the man stepped forward and lowered his voice. "So, how did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Make the bird slow down?" Lance asked.

Merlin's smile immediately fell, his heart dropping to his stomach like a stone.

"I-I don't know what you-"

"I heard you," Lance persisted in a gentle voice, his face curious rather than shocked. "Was it magic?"

Merlin just stared at him, words failing him as his mouth worked like a goldfish.

"Bregdan an... That's a spell, isn't it?" Lance continued softly, his face serious.

Merlin felt his palms sweating and he had a horrible feeling he was going to be sick. He could practically feel the slap of Will's hand on the back of his head while his mother sobbed that she knew this day would come and Gaius' eyebrows shot so high that they literally walked off his face.

"... m-magic doesn't exist," Merlin feebly tried to insist.

"Oh, I don't know," Lance said, a meaningful look about him. "I spent a few years in Lagos and saw a couple of interesting things there."

Merlin panicked.

"Please, you can't tell anyone! Arthur can't find out, at least not now! If he does, I'm pretty sure I'll have fucked everything up and my destiny will never be fulfilled and I'll probably end up burning in fire and brimstone for the rest of eternity and-"

"Merlin!" Lance cut in before Merlin had a full meltdown in the middle of the lobby. "Please, calm down. I don't even know who this Arthur is but you can be assured of my secrecy. You have my word."

Merlin sagged against a nearby pillar with relief, his racing heart slowly calming down. The receptionist gave him a withering look, as though disapproving of his back unnecessarily sweating on the furnishings but Merlin ignored her to look back at Lance, still breathless from his earlier panic. He then angled his head as Lance's words came back to him.

"Wait, hold on a minute, did you just say that you've actually seen magic before?"

"Yes. Back in the village where I was an aid worker, they had a healer. A witch doctor, if you will. Initially, I thought the man was a fraud but when I contracted yellow fever... let's just say I wouldn't be standing here today without his potions. I owe him my life."

"Really?" Merlin breathed with wonder, just as amazed by this as he was when he first met Kilgharrah. He had always believed he was alone in his powers. "So, you don't think he was a Yuri Gellar-like charlatan who bends spoons?"
Lancelot let out a smile.

"Can you bend spoons?"

"Pretty easily, actually," Merlin divulged before looking at Lance and shaking his head. "Sorry, I just can't believe... I've just never met anyone who actually believes in magic. Well, anyone normal that is. You always get the odd crank who thinks David Blaine is the son of God but... Wait, you're not actually a crazy person in disguise, are you?" Merlin asked, comically narrowing his eyes with mock distrust as he looked over Lance's pressed suit and the slim folder he was holding. Instantly, he recognised the pristine image he was trying to present.

Merlin smiled.

"You came here for an interview, didn't you?" he said with understanding. After all, he had had -- and royally arsed up -- enough of them.

Lance nodded, looking a little green at the subject as he shakily ran a hand through his hair.

"Yes. Well, I just had one. Features editor for The Natural World," Lance replied, looking rather forlorn. "I didn't get it - apparently, I don't have enough experience."

"I'm sorry to hear that. So, you're a writer?" Merlin asked, looking at Lance's tanned and chiselled features and thinking what a loss that was for both fashion and pornography.

Lance nodded, his eyes lighting up immediately at the mention of his profession.

"I'm a Third World journalist."

"Third World journalist?" Merlin asked with interest. "Does that mean you report on world poverty?"

"Yes, among other things. Food production, environmental issues, socio-political stability, developmental problems... It was actually that trip to Nigeria as an aid worker that convinced me to pursue it as a career. I liked being on the ground, getting first-hand accounts from refugees displaced by genocide, child soldiers, even slave traders themselves. Just being there, seeing what never gets reported on in the West... it's humbling. You get to see both the worst and the best of humanity in situations like that."

"Wow," Merlin said, so impressed that he actually took a step back to marvel. Good-looking and self-sacrificing, Lance could make any man alive feel inadequate in comparison. Merlin himself was feeling slightly less secure than he did before he had met him. "You're amazing."

"Oh, I'm really not. Please don't be mistaken into thinking otherwise," Lance laughed self-deprecatingly, the bitter, defeated tone sounding particularly alien coming from him. "With no job and bills to pay, I'm at the point where I'm desperate for any job. Not that you need to hear this, of course. I'm sorry. I don't usually unload like this to people I've just met. It's just been a rough day, what with my landlord upping the rent and the interview going badly."

"And then a homicidal bird tried to kill you." Merlin added. Lance actually laughed at that.

"Yes, it's been an eventful few hours," he admitted. He then handed a calm Griffin over to Merlin, who now looked so relaxed that he could have been meditating. "Anyway, here is your bird. It was nice to meet you, Merlin. And again, your secret is safe with me."
"Lance, wait!" Merlin stopped him as Lance turned to leave, a brilliant idea suddenly forming inside his head. "How would you feel about working for Camelot?"

"The fashion magazine?" Lance said, befuddled. "I'm afraid I don't really know anything about fashion, Merlin."

"What about modelling?" Merlin pressed, unwilling to let this go. "I'm sure you must have had some experience with that."

Lance blushed, his modesty reminding Merlin of Arthur and how his employer had none whatsoever.

"Well, I did a little to get through university but-" Lance admitted.

"That's great!" Merlin said enthusiastically. "What would you say to an interview with the editor-in-chief? We're looking for models for this new campaign we're doing and you'd be perfect."

"I appreciate your belief in me Merlin but don't you need a portfolio-"

"I can help you with that," Merlin cut in brightly. "As Arthur's PA, I have the keys to the studio and my friend Gwen looks after the Closet. We could sneak into the studio during lunch and take shots for you in her clothes. Well, not her clothes, they wouldn't fit you, but the clothes in the Closet. They have suits by Ford, you know. All I need to do is email Arthur those pictures, tell him you're the person I recommend and he's bound to pick you."

"I-I wouldn't want to inconvenience your friends-"

"I owe you, Lance," Merlin insisted, feeling a strange pull towards this man that he couldn't explain. "You saved my skin. Let me repay the favour. Gwen won't mind! And Arthur isn't even my friend. I barely tolerate him! Now, let me just get this demon bird back into its cage, pick up Arthur's dogs and then we can get started. So what do you say?"

The hopeful look on Lance's face was all Merlin needed. Grinning, he clapped a friendly hand to Lance's shoulder.

"This is going to be brilliant. Trust me, Lance. This'll all work out. Now let me introduce you to Gwen. You'll positively love her."

The moment Merlin introduced Lance to Gwen seemed to be such a significant event that he was sure the world literally stopped turning. They clasped hands in what initially seemed like a greeting but as Merlin looked between their rather besotted looks, he had a feeling that it was a touch of reassurance to make sure the other person was real. Even the air between them seemed to be pulsing and Merlin almost found himself ducking the sparks that were crackling between them to avoid catching his hair on fire.

"Er, anyway," Merlin eventually cut in when he realised they were both a little too moon-brained to notice he was still there. "Lance really needs to make a good impression with Arthur - could you temporarily put him in something that even Arthur won't look down on? Er, Gwen? You there?"

Merlin then clicked his fingers in front of Gwen's face, which soon brought her out of her trance.

"Oh!" she said, removing her hand from Lance's and going pink in the process. "I.. yes, I think I can find something in here that Arthur would approve of but I would um, need to take your measurements," said Gwen, pulling at the tape measure around her neck and biting her lip with so much want that Merlin felt like a voyeur just standing there.
Lance lifted his arms by his sides with the speed of an Olympian, more 'take me now' than 'take my measurements' as his googly-eyes at Gwen made him look like he had concussion.

Shaking his head at their obvious attraction, Merlin watched as Gwen took Lance's measurements with relish and lingered on his inside leg for so long that Merlin was beginning to wonder if he should leave in case things escalated and they started to rip each other’s’ clothes off.

They didn't, however. When Gwen eventually got back on her feet, she was breathless and slightly confounded but she still had enough focus to grab a particularly slick suit from one of her many rails of clothes and hold it up to Lance.

"I think this one would be perfect. It's an Oscar de la Renta. It would look amazing with your complexion." Gwen then blushed violently again, as though embarrassed by her own behaviour. Seeing that Lance looked just as lovesick, Merlin thought she had nothing to worry about.

"That's great," Merlin cut in because Lance looked far too out of it to reply. Merlin then clapped a hand onto his shoulder to get his attention, trying not to laugh at the state of him. "Um, so Lance, how about you head to that changing room over there, get into the suit and then we'll sneak down to the studio for the shots, huh?"

Lance nodded dazedly in agreement and wandered off towards the curtained changing room Merlin was pointing at. In the state Lance was in, Merlin had a feeling that he would have happily walked into the fires of hell if Merlin had pointed at them instead.

Merlin shook his head again. He had never felt like more of a third wheel in his life.

"Wow," Gwen breathed out as Lance disappeared behind the curtain. "He's just... wow.

"I think he'd return the compliment," Merlin replied, a mischievous smile on his face as he lowered his voice conspiratorially. "Honestly Gwen, if he were any more smitten with you, he'd have thrown you over his shoulder like a caveman and carried you off to the nearest bedroom."

"Merlin!" Gwen squeaked, looking in the direction of the changing room Lance had disappeared into in case he had heard, her dark complexion doing nothing to hide her flush. "Stop that! He's just being polite."

"Funny, he wasn't being that polite to me," Merlin said in a teasing, singsong sort of voice, pulling at one of her corkscrew curls like a bratty younger brother. "But honestly, all joking aside, you should ask him out, Gwen. He'd jump at the chance to have dinner with you. Any man would."

"Don't you try to charm me, Merlin, I know your game," Gwen said, still a little mortified by the situation. "And what are you, a matchmaker now?"

"What can I say? I love love." Merlin smiled, holding up his hands in surrender. "It makes the world a better place."

"Does it now? Those sound remarkably like the words of a man in love. So, what about you, Cupid?"

"I don't think I'm really Lance's type but thanks for the encouragement, it's good for my confidence," Merlin taunted with a wink.

"Not that!" Gwen laughed. "I was talking about your love life."

"Non-existent, I afraid, since I broke up with my ex, Freya."
"Oh, I'm sorry," Gwen consoled, looking guilty she had brought it up. "I didn't know. I mean, not that you should have told me about it. That's not what I meant. It's not like we have to tell each other everything. We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to..."

"Breathe, Gwen," Merlin cut in, smiling at her sincerely. Her awkwardness really was one of her most endearing qualities. "It all right, I don't mind talking about it. As clichéd as it is, Freya and I just grew apart as people. We had so much in common at first. We were so alike, had the same problems, believed in the same causes. We loved each other but when I look back on it, we were never in love. I think I was more in love with the idea of her than Freya herself. It was then that I realised that there was no point trying to hold on to the relationship. Freya agreed."

"That's... that's actually really sad, Merlin," Gwen said with a sympathetic look, wringing hands that looked like they desperately wanted to comfort him in some way. "In any case, it's her loss. You're a catch. Really."

"That's sweet of you, lying like that to feed my bruised ego," Merlin teased before turning to the curtained stall and yelling, "Hey, Lance, are you all right? You've not passed out in there have you?"

"I think it's a little tight," Lance responded before pulling back the curtain and walking out of the cubicle looking like sin itself. The suit seemed to have been made for him as it clung to every single one of his ridiculously chiselled muscles like a glove. Already a tanned fellow, the stark contrast of the white shirt of the suit really brought out Lance's colour, making his features look more exotic than they had in the generic blue suit he had been wearing. Merlin shook his head. Looking like this, Lance could give any of the top models in the country a run for their money. "What do you think?" Lance asked Merlin with uncertainty, doing a little turn that revealed a backside that looked so snug that the trousers he was wearing looked like they had been sewed on.

"Are you kidding me? You couldn't look more the part if you tried!" Merlin said merrily, walking over to pat Lance on the back. "Very professional. What do you reckon, Gwen?"

Gwen simply responded by dropping the tape measure she had been fiddling with to the floor. Merlin had a feeling her knickers had figuratively fallen for Lance at that moment, too.

"Okay, I think in Gwen-world that means 'wow'," Merlin said, smothering a laugh as he turned back to Lance, who looked both bashful and ridiculously pleased about this. "Seriously, Lance, there is no way Arthur is going to say no. I guarantee it."

"No," said Arthur a few hours later.

Merlin, who had been talking Lance up impressively for the past twenty minutes while showing Arthur the pictures he had taken of him in the studio, stared blankly at his employer before saying, "What do you mean 'no'?"

"I mean no, nadda, not happening, thanks for playing but no prize this time," Arthur returned in an unmoved voice, barely looking at the pictures before throwing them aside and going back to pouring over the large series of photos on his desk. "Now go get me an espresso. I'll be up all night making the final selection for the shoot. And none of that coffee machine shit, Merlin. Go across the street to Monmouth and get me a litre of the good stuff."

Stepping closer to the desk to look at the pictures himself, all Merlin could see was a bunch of beefcakes pouting back at him. Merlin frowned, feeling personally affronted.
"Are you kidding me? Lance is much better than these posers. Did you even look at his pictures? He's the most ridiculously handsome man on the face of the planet. He's hotter than all of these clowns combined," Merlin protested. He then grabbed one of the pictures off the desk to prove his point before holding it in front of Arthur's face. "I mean, come on, this guy here has a mullet! A mullet, Arthur!"

"I'll have you know that that guy has done work for both Numero Homme and Cosmopolitan, even with that hairstyle. Hell, probably because of that hairstyle," Arthur responded tersely, looking strangely bad-tempered as he snatched the photo back and glared dourly at Merlin. "What has your 'oh so hot' boyfriend Lance done, other than have you fawn all over him like a clingy teenaged girl?"

"I'll have you know that Lance has done Vogue," Merlin lied bald-facedly, his mouth doing that thing when it talked before conferring with his brain. "And um, Grind. Yes, he's definitely posed for that. Oh, and he would have done Men's Health but only twats who want to show off their abs to make us normal guys feel inadequate do that."

Merlin then pointedly looked at Arthur's framed Men's Health cover where his oiled six-pack was glistening showily in the Caribbean sun. Arthur glowered at Merlin, crossing his arms over said chest and sidestepping in front of the photo with something that, on a normal person, would look a little like embarrassment.


"I am funny, I must admit," Merlin returned impishly.

"I wasn't talking about you, although I suppose that face and those ears are pretty funny." Arthur stopped to have a little chuckle at this. It made Merlin want to both headbutt him and ask his prick what on earth it had been thinking earlier. "No, I was referring to those blatant lies you just told me about your friend being Britain's Next Top Model."

"I'm not lying!" Merlin lied utterly and completely.

"Oh really?" Arthur said, not believing him in the slightest. "Well, then, Merlin, why don't you show me one of those magazines spreads of his so we can confirm it?"

"I will!" Merlin said.

"Good!" Arthur snapped.

"Fine!"

"Then do it!"

"I am, just wait for me to get it, you cock!" Merlin snapped back before storming out of Arthur's glass office, heading to his desk and grabbing his bag from his bottom drawer.

Reaching into his bag, Merlin's frantic hands brushed over the spine of a previous Camelot issue. Looking up to see Arthur watching him cannily, Merlin lowered his head so his eyes were hidden behind his curtain of hair and whispered “Ic us bísen hræð tán hwanon,” under his breath. Immediately, Merlin felt his magic flow through his fingers and across the magazine like golden tendrils, making the inside of his bag glow. The light soon receded after a few seconds and Merlin pulled it out, hoping his magic had done its job.

It had. Where the original magazine had had a picture of a girl posing in a pair of a skis on the front
cover, Merlin's magically altered one had Lance on the cover of Grind magazine, sitting on a
motorbike and looking particularly charismatic. Merlin grinned, puffing out his chest and feeling
rather impressed with himself as he walked back into Arthur's office and chucked the magazine in
front of him, right on top of the picture of mullet man himself.

"There you go, doubting Mustafa," Merlin said, feeling rather pleased with the situation as he
crossed his arms. "You can't say he doesn't look good there."

Arthur looked at the picture and frowned quietly, as though he was quickly trying to think of a new
and inventive reason not to hire Lance. Merlin sighed and wished Arthur wasn't so hell bent on
trying to spite him all the time. "Look, if you're not going to do it for me, could you at least do it
for Gwen? The two of them seem to really like each other and it would be nice to see her happy.
She's always working and the girls in finance were saying that she doesn't really go out as much
since her father died. I think it would be good for her to meet a nice guy."

Arthur blinked in surprise.

"Gwen? Wait a minute, he likes Gwen?" he said as if this changed everything. Which apparently it
did because Arthur soon straightened up and looked at Lance's photo with far less aggression than
he had just moments before. "All right, fine, if it'll shut you up, I'll put your friend on the books.
Give him a couple of trial runs to see if he's any good."

"Wait, really? Just like that?" Merlin said hopefully, not really understanding Arthur's change in
heart but happy to go along with it nevertheless. He obviously cared more about Gwen's happiness
than Merlin's.

"Just don't make me regret it," Arthur said before going back to the photos. Merlin stood there for a
few seconds, smiling about him so happily that Arthur soon snapped, "Oh, stop standing there
uselessly and just get out already. And get me my espresso. Your happiness is putting me off my
work."

"Yes, sir. Right away, sir. You are the best boss in the world, sir," Merlin said as he backed out the
door, beaming and pulling out his phone as he did.

He had to tell Lance the good news.

In the month Merlin had been at Camelot, he had discovered two things about Arthur Pendragon.

1) He was incapable of picking up after himself and 2) he was a demon sent from hell solely to
make Merlin miserable.

Merlin had naively imagined that his workload would improve after they had won the Lady Helen
account and then after he had found Lance for him -- who Arthur now loved and went drinking
with on a regular basis -- but instead of putting less on Merlin's plate, Arthur now seemed to keep him constantly at his beck and call. When he wasn't making outlandish demands ("Take my watch and stand in the rain for an hour. I want to see if it really is waterproof") and being the most ridiculously fussy person on the planet ("Merlin, de-seed my grapes. Pips mortally offend me"), he would move smoothly onto the next stage of his torture - pure and unadulterated abuse.

From insulting Merlin’s intellect to throwing the nearest available object at his head when Merlin misunderstood a command, Arthur Pendragon was a total and utter nightmare to work for. He never said please, said 'thank you' even less than that and seemed to get an inordinate amount of pleasure from watching Merlin struggle, lose his temper or fall spectacularly on his arse - which were three things he did frequently on a daily basis.

If Arthur wasn't tormenting him about his lack of love life ("Tell me, Merlin, are you a eunuch or a virgin? I can't quite decide...") or his ears ("Don't worry about the reception, Leon, we can get NASA's satellite's in range thanks to Merlin here), he was constantly sneering at Merlin's clothes and either ordered Merlin to walk five meters behind him so no one would think they knew each other or he sent him to the Closet to be dressed in something respectable by Gwen. Gwen, being a sweetheart, would try to find something nice and relatively understated for him but the muscular sizes always made Merlin look like he was draped in a sack.

"Only you could make Dolce and Gabbana look ridiculous," Arthur had snapped the first time it happened before clipping Merlin soundly behind the ear for his uselessness.

If that wasn't bad enough, Arthur was also the type of man who demanded staff availability at all hours of the day so, for the past month, Merlin found himself running constantly after his boss like a headless chicken.

From 6am wake up calls to ferrying Arthur around after drunken nights out like a taxi service, Merlin's tasks ranged from picking up Arthur's breakfast to dragging Arthur's deadweight up the stairs of his fancy apartment when he drank one too many. It wouldn't have been so bad but Arthur was an even bigger pain in the arse when he was inebriated and Merlin had spent many a night-off plying Arthur with water, praying he didn't get vomited on and ducking the objects the drunken idiot threw at his head for letting him drink so much.

To put it simply, Arthur Pendragon was nothing short of a tyrant in a Prada suit.

Unfortunately for Merlin, no one else could see this but him because Arthur was positively charming to everybody else.

He was the golden boy at charity events, with the uncanny ability to find the cutest child in the room for a photo opportunity whilst simultaneously adopting an abandoned litter of puppies from the RSPCA. At high society parties he was known to rub shoulders with the billionaires and have torrid flings with the it-girls, all while filling out the newest Vivienne Westwood better than anyone else in the room.

The gossip magazines breathily labelled him a playboy while Time Magazine placed him as one of their Top 30 under 30 to watch.

"I've even been voted Vogue's Most Eligible Bachelor for three years running," Arthur would remind Merlin with smug regularity, just in case he forgot. "Do you know what that means?"

"That they've cashed in your cheques?" Merlin would reply smartly back.

"No, you imbecile!" Arthur would bark out, usually accompanied by a hard smack on the back of
Merlin's head because of his impertinence. "It means I'm irresistible to women."

Had Arthur been anyone else, Merlin would have laughed at his claims and called him a delusional arse but, annoyingly, he really, really wasn't.

Women seemed to flock to Arthur Pendragon as though they were pigeons and he was a large, rather tasty-looking bit of breadcrumb.

They sort of swooned in a puddle at his Gucci-loafered feet, giggled at his stupid jokes and generally fell all over themselves trying to get both his attention and his clothes off at the same time.

It was a hard fact to ignore unfortunately and poor Merlin had somehow become a reluctant witness to Arthur's rather infamous sex life, which was as ridiculous as it was impressive.

From actresses and singers to the leggy supermodels who graced his front covers, Arthur Pendragon was -- simply put -- a total manwhore.

He bedded women like a person went through gum and picked models up off the runway like a starving man demolishing his way down the conveyor belt at Yo! Sushi. He also seemed to have a shameless sort of habit for exhibitionism, which Merlin himself discovered with some horror the first time he had accidentally walked in on one of Arthur's many sexcapades.

He had been at Pendragon for a week and had already been having a rotten morning of it, what with Arthur's campaign to make his life miserable consisting of insane errands such as, "Pick all the cabbage out of my coleslaw" to "Wash my floor. One of the dogs threw up caviar all over it."

So, reeking from a combination of half-digested fish eggs, bleach and cabbage, a sore Merlin had stomped down the circular hallway to Arthur's office with his vomit-covered mop and wore a petulant glare. Feeling both harried and extremely frustrated, he had then thrown open the door and opened his mouth to not only tell the privileged prat that his errands were done but that he was an evil bloody sadist.

And then he saw the naked lingerie model jiggling about on Arthur's equally naked lap like a cowgirl riding a mechanical bull.

Insults forgotten, Merlin's mouth dropped open in shock as the mop in his hand fell to the ground with a loud *squelch*!

"Merlin!" Arthur bellowed angrily, wearing nothing but a tie and a flush as he sat with his trousers around his ankles and the girl's large silicone breasts bouncing off his face.

Merlin just ogled him, ignoring the girl completely as Arthur’s muscles gleamed with sweat and his skin glowed with the sunlight streaming from the window. Gulping, Merlin’s brain then promptly proceeded to short circuit.

‘Oh,’ it briefly whimpered to his interested cock before it died. ‘I see what you were excited about there.’

Which, of course, was the moment that Arthur and his bad personality had to ruin the illusion.

"You idiot! What have I told you about knocking!??" Arthur demanded, furious but not so furious that he decided to stop thrusting.

Merlin had replied to this by letting out a squeak and running out the door, mortified by his body.
He was even more mortified by it when he saw the sight again four days later -- this time with a member of the Swedish Beach Volleyball team spread-eagled on the coffee table -- and he almost died of embarrassment a week after that when a pair of sisters --- who were doing questionable things to Arthur under his desk -- asked if Merlin wanted to join in.

By the fifth time, however, Merlin had forced himself to stop getting so affected by Arthur's raging libido and after the seventh, he merely smiled politely and offered Arthur's girl of the moment tea and refreshments.

"For heaven's sake, it's not a garden party, Merlin," Arthur would usually rebuke with a swipe but he always, without fail, took a custard cream in the process.

And then Sophia came along and everything went to hell.

The Sophia Problem, as Merlin liked to label it, started in a rather dramatic sense of fashion with a scream, a mugger and Arthur and Merlin being in the right place at the right time.

Arthur had been in the middle of his usual early morning jog and Merlin had been in his usual place lagging breathlessly behind him with a water bottle in one hand and holding a stitch in his side with the other when they had heard the scream.

The official story had Arthur saving the fair damsel and her elderly father by sprinting into the cobbled alley and scaring the mugger away with his prowess, bravery and shiny hair. In actuality, Merlin had just twisted his fingers in mid-air and given the balaclava-wearing thief a magical wedgie.

But Arthur hadn't noticed this. He had been too busy gawping at Sophia like a fish out of water before insisting he escort both Sophia and her father back to Pendragon Publications to recover from the shock.

"Merlin here will get you anything you require," he had promised them once he had ushered them into his office, his expression so lovesick that he looked like he had contracted that mental affliction that he insisted Merlin suffered from.

Merlin would have usually felt second-hand embarrassment at witnessing Arthur falling all over himself but it gave the warlock a sense of satisfaction that even the most experienced of lotharios could occasionally act like a complete and utter twat just by being caught out by a pretty face.

Sophia, unfortunately, seemed to find the brain-addled look attractive and smiled flirtatiously back at Arthur, batting her eyelashes an obscene amount and causing Merlin to mentally groan at having to return to his role as Arthur's post-coital tea lady and snack provider after he eventually caught them mid-romp.

This, however, didn't happen.

"I'm wooing Sophia," Arthur informed him when Merlin entered his office the following day with two cups of tea and a confused expression at finding Arthur alone.

"Oh," said Merlin, briefly scanning his eyes over the room and looking for a suitable hiding place for a naked woman before deciding, "She's hiding behind that plant pot, isn't she?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Merlin," Arthur snapped, snatching a cup of tea so violently from the tray that half of it landed with a *splat!* on his sheepskin rug. "Sophia's a lady. She's not one of those cheap tramps who sleep with men they've only just met. She's far too classy for that."
"Oh," said Merlin again, wondering when exactly hell had frozen over because Arthur always slept with people he had just met and never begrudged anyone else who did so either. Hearing him bad-mouthing debauchery was a bit like the Pope declaring all this God business was a bit far-fetched.

Merlin scratched his head.

"Err, that's nice," he said, eyeing Arthur cautiously and debating whether or not to check Arthur's temperature in case he was delirious from a fever. "You, um, must really like her.

"She's the one, Merlin," Arthur stated seriously, before flopping all over the Le Corbusier chaise that Merlin had once seen Arthur having Paris Hilton on. Arthur then hugged a pillow to his chest and sighed almost dreamily. "She's just not like anyone else I've ever met. We just have this connection, Merlin, it's primal and instinctual and... and sod it, I just can't think about anything else! Cancel all my appointments. I have to go see her."

"Arthur," Merlin said, trying not to sound too thrown by his behaviour as Arthur flounced into his walk-in wardrobe and started rifling through his clothes like a mole through earth, designer underwear flying in all directions. "Christopher Bailey is coming in today, remember? You've been planning this visit for ages."

"I said cancel everything! Burberry can wait! True love can't!" Arthur declared like a fairy-tale prince before ripping off his shirt so vociferously that he almost slapped himself in the face, a button pinging off Merlin's forehead.

"True love?!" Merlin spluttered, rubbing the red mark on his head as Arthur hummed tunelessly to himself and held two shirts up against his shirtless chest. "You only just met her yesterday!"

Arthur just waved him off like he didn't see the problem before drawing attention back to the shirts in his hands.

"The red or the white?"

Looking at his employer's chest, Merlin briefly thought Arthur looked better in the little he was wearing but saying it aloud would only give Arthur an even bigger head than he already had. His ego barely managed to squeeze through doorframes as it was.

"Um, I like them both," Merlin replied.

Arthur looked stricken.

"That means neither," he said before throwing them over his shoulder to join the mountain of unwanted clothes that were piling up on his desk.

Merlin felt both offended and mildly relieved. The Arthur he knew was still in there somewhere if he was discounting Merlin's fashion advice.

"Arthur," Merlin tried again, trying to talk in a soothing voice he only really reserved for spooked animals and children, "don't you think it's a bit unusual to be this smitten with a girl you've spent a total of twenty minutes with?"

"I know," Arthur nodded before sighing again, leaning against a mirrored wall heavily and clutching a hand to his heart like a Greek tragedy. "It's like fate brought us together."
"Yes, fate and a purse stealing kleptomaniac on Tottenham Court Road. You should invite him over for dinner sometime and thank him," Merlin agreed dryly as he picked a pair of Ralph Lauren pants off a lampshade. "Now, how about we go over the keynote presentation I spent all night working on?"

"What presentation?" Arthur's muffled voice returned, his head back in the recesses of the wardrobe. "And my god, why don't I have any clothes to wear?!"

Merlin ducked as Arthur threw a Versace jumper over his shoulder like it was a piece of trash. Whether it was the streaking colours flying past him or Arthur's insanity, Merlin felt a sudden headache come on.

"The Burberry presentation, Arthur," he tried to say patiently, grabbing Arthur's bare upper arms and steering him away from the wardrobe before he tore it off its hinges. "You wanted to go over it yesterday, remember?"

Arthur looked confused for a second before smiling rather stupidly and saying,

"I met Sophia yesterday."

"Oh good god," Merlin replied, wanting to hit Arthur over the head so badly that his hand twitched unconsciously towards the paperweight on his desk. "That's it, put your shirt on, we're going to see Gaius."

Merlin then tugged at Arthur to follow him out the door but Arthur, having the rather annoying trait of being built like a house, easily shoved him off.

"I'm not going to see Gaius, I want to see Sophia. I need to see Sophia," he said snottily. "Now bring my beloved to me at once. And go and buy me a ring while you're at it. I might as well do this properly."

"A ring?" Merlin tried not to splutter. "Arthur! You can't be seriously considering-"

"Marriage. And babies. And giving her half of everything I own, yes," Arthur reeled off in a faraway sort of voice, as though he were reciting some kind of cosmic checklist. "Oh, and I think a summer wedding would be grand. We'll runaway together and do it properly. It'll be romantic, eloping to prove our love, just the two of us. Oh, and you'd have to come along, too, I suppose. Someone has to carry the bags."

"Thanks," said Merlin dryly, shaking his head. Typical Arthur. Even when the idiot eloped he still took the help with him. Knowing Merlin's luck, Arthur would probably make Merlin carry him up the aisle to a waiting Sophia.


Merlin let his mouth hang open for a moment before he got a hold of himself. If he hadn't already concluded this was magic, it was irrefutable now.

"Arthur, you need to come with me to Gaius. You're not well."

"Don't be ridiculous, Merlin," Arthur scoffed arrogantly. "Does this look like the body of an unhealthy man?" Arthur then pointed at said golden body and Merlin briefly rolled his eyes, wanting to both thwap the arrogant idiot and spend the rest of the day staring at his torso. Merlin
could work out for a hundred years and his wiry, insolent body would still refuse to look like that.

Grabbing Arthur's arm and cursing the muscles under his hand for being so bloody perfectly defined, Merlin tried to get back to the matter at hand.

"Arthur, you stupid conceited clotpole," Merlin said through clenched teeth, amazed by his patience when all he wanted to do was wallop Arthur in the head, "you're not acting like yourself. I think maybe you've hit your head or eaten something funny-

"Are you doubting my love for Sophia?" Arthur squawked before grabbing the nearest available object -- which happened to be a wooden ruler -- and pointing it threateningly at Merlin as though he were wielding a sword. "I challenge you, sir! I challenge you!"

Merlin sighed, deciding enough was enough.

"Arthur, this is for your own good," he said regretfully before lifting his head and simply saying. "Sleep."

Arthur immediately crumpled onto the sheepskin rug.

Looking miserable, Merlin then pulled out his blackberry.

"Gaius?" he said, looking from the clothes bomb that was the wardrobe to where his half-naked, unconscious employer was lying at his feet. "Um... a little help here please?"

"Merlin, what have you done this time?" Gaius asked five minutes later as he stared down at Arthur's prone form on the floor.

"Gaius, it wasn't me!" Merlin cried out offended as Arthur snuggled into the sheepskin rug and dropped a kiss on it. "Okay, I mean, technically the sleeping spell was me but I had to stop him! He was behaving like a lunatic. Well, more of a lunatic than usual. He's been enchanted. I think it's a love spell of some sort. His eyes glowed red, Gaius. He's not in his proper mind."

To prove his point, Arthur murmured something remarkably graphic and started stroking the rug in a rather obscene manner.

Gaius' eyes bulged out and his hand twitched, as though it instinctively wanted to shield Merlin's innocent eyes from the torrid display.

"Explain from the beginning," Gaius said simply, so Merlin did, from the initial meeting with Sophia to Arthur's sexual abuse of carpet-ware.

"So he's under a spell, right? Sophia's done something to him? She has magic, too?"

"It would appear so."

"So what should I do?" Merlin replied, panicked. "Burberry are going to be here any minute now!"

"There is nothing else for it," Gaius said gravely with a type of gravitas that somehow made the situation seem even worse than it was. "You need to talk to the dragon."

"The dragon?"

"Kilgharrah," Gaius elaborated.

"Oh, the mental caretaker?" Merlin replied before nodding. That made sense, Kilgharrah had magic
himself. He might know a way to reverse Sophia's spell. Merlin then wrinkled his brow. "Wait - 1) you know Kilgharrah? And 2) you know that he has magic? Did he tell you that? And why did you just call him 'the dragon'? Is it because he smokes like a chimney and has a moody disposition?"

"I know you have a lot of questions, Merlin, but it is too long a story to get into right now. I promise I'll explain everything in due course but for now, you have to be quick and get to the basement. I'll watch over Arthur and make excuses for his absence if I need to."

Merlin looked down at Arthur, who was sleeping with a peaceful smile on his face as he snuffled the rug, looking far sweeter than he ever did when he was awake. Merlin supposed this was because Arthur couldn't yell insults at Merlin or throw things at his head when he was asleep. Despite himself, something softened a little inside Merlin.

"I can stay," he said gently to Gaius as Arthur let out a soft snore. "You go to Kilgharrah."

"I can't," Gaius said without argument.

Merlin looked up, surprised at the firmness in Gaius' voice.

"Why?"

"Because Kilgharrah won't listen to me," Gaius said simply, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. "You must be the one to go. But be wary, Merlin."

"Why? Because he talks in riddles and has his own agenda?"

"No, because he's as mad as a hatter."

"Oh, okay."

"And Merlin?"

"Yes, Gaius?"

"Run."

So Merlin did. He sprinted to the lifts, pelted down the ground floor stairs to the basement, threw open the caretaker's office doors dramatically and wailed.

"I need your help!"

Kilgharrah, who was reading a copy of Archie and Jughead and chuckling to himself, looked up at Merlin before sighing at the ceiling.

"I see some things don't change," he said to the light fixtures.

Merlin ignored this, throwing up his long arms and flailing like a windmill.

"Arthur is going to elope with Sophia!" he explained in a panicked voice. "You have to help me make him see sense! He's even changing his will, leaving everything to her - all his money, his share of Camelot, everything! She's going to murder him in his sleep and steal the company!"

An amused smile curved around Kilgharrah's mouth at Merlin's theatrics, as though he had missed this.

"Ah, the follies of youth," he said whimsically, sounding far too pleased. "Even a being as old as I
am can barely fathom the intricacies of the heart. I am afraid you've had a wasted journey, young warlock. You are the one destined to protect Arthur, not I."

"Oh, not this rubbish again," Merlin groaned as he collapsed into the seat opposite, barely stopping himself from smacking his head down on the table in frustration. "Look, you've got magic, right? You must know of a spell or something that can snap Arthur out of it. Can't you just wiggle your fingers and..." Merlin pulled a face and waved his hands like a bad magician performing a spell.

Kilgharrah looked highly amused by the demonstration.

"I'm afraid it's not so simple, young warlock," the old caretaker said, still smirking at Merlin like he was a rather curious novelty. "The magic of the Sidhe is powerful. Once they hold a creature in their thrall, there is next to nothing that can be done for them."

"So Sophia is a Sidhe? She-devil is more like it. Christ, even when he's not in his right mind, Arthur's still knows how to make my life hell," Merlin muttered before running a hand over his face and grumbling, "So, I suppose he's stuck like this forever then? Should I start designing wedding invitations?"

"Not quite. The situation may not be quite as dire as you imagine," said Kilgharrah with far more giddiness than Merlin thought was appropriate given the circumstances. All those years of being cooped up in a grotty broom cupboard must have made this drama seem like Christmas. "The only one who can truly remove the spell is the Sidhe herself. She must be the one to lift the spell, either by doing so willingly or by perishing so the magic dies with her. Unfortunately for you, the Sidhe are notorious for being impossible to sway once they have set their sights on their next victim. I'm afraid you only have the one option."

Merlin looked confused for a few seconds and opened his mouth to ask what the option was until it dawned on him with mounting horror. Gaping at Kilgharrah, he went pale.

"You cannot seriously be suggesting that I kill her."

"It is the only way," Kilgharrah said plainly with a mild shrug, as though he were simply talking about trimming his toenails. He waved a unconcerned hand. "I shouldn't worry about it too much, Merlin. She's not a particularly pleasant person. Nobody shall miss her save her father and he's a rather repugnant life form himself. Personally, I'd off them both. The world would be a better place without either of them."

"I don't care if she ritually kills bunny rabbits and wears their tails as earmuffs, I'm not killing her or her father!" Merlin cried out, staring at Kilgharrah like he was demented. "It's not right!"

"I don't see why not," Kilgharrah returned mildly, folding his hands and looking as calm as a Hindu cow.

Merlin spluttered in the face of his serenity, wondering for the hundredth time if Kilgharrah was out of his mind.

"Bypassing the fact it is illegal and morally wrong," Merlin explained like he was talking to someone who was mentally deficient, "you can't just go around murdering people willy-nilly just because they put a love spell on someone!"

"Would it help if I mentioned that she intends to drown Arthur in the lake of Avalon as a human sacrifice to her people?" Kilgharrah enquired.

"No! Well, yeah, okay, that helps slightly," Merlin reluctantly conceded, "but I still don't like it.
How do I make her willingly take the spell off without hurting her? Appeal to her humanity?"

"If you want the Once and Future King to be fish food at the bottom of the lake, go right ahead."

"Once and Future King?" Merlin asked in confusion before stopping himself, putting his hand up to halt Kilgharrah's reply and saying, "No, you know what? Don't bother explaining, I don't think I even want to know. Just tell me what I can do to fix this - something that doesn't involve death!"

"How about mild maiming?" Kilgharrah suggested. Merlin gave him a dark look that made Kilgharrah sigh morosely. "You used to be so much more bloodthirsty. Pity."

"What?" Merlin asked with confusion but Kilgharrah just waved a hand, as though that was another story for another time. He didn't say anything else however and when a minute past without a word, Merlin realised that Kilgharrah had actually given up the conversation and had gone back to his comic.

"Wait, so what... that's it?" Merlin demanded. "You're not going to give me any other way? You're just going to sit there and read comics?!"

Kilgharrah replied to this by turning a page.

Merlin wasn't sure if it was because he was angry with Sophia, worried over Arthur, frustrated at Kilgharrah or if it was a combination of all three. All he knew was that he was fine one minute and suddenly seeing red in the next. He felt his blood starting to tingle inside him and his fingertips sparking with golden electricity and before he knew what he had done, he threw back his head and roared out a language he had never heard before.

It rolled off his tongue naturally, more than anything else he had ever articulated in his life. English he had had to learn; it had an alphabet that Merlin had had to study and a set of grammatical rules that he had had to memorise. This dialect, on the other hand, flowed through him as though he was born knowing it, born to speak it, as easily as he breathed air into his lungs.

Kilgharrah abruptly sat up at Merlin's strange words, like someone had placed a metal rod down his spine. He then looked at Merlin almost deferentially before bowing his head.

"Very well, young warlock," he said obediently. "I will tell you how to save your prince."

"My prince? Well, that sounds heterosexual," Merlin said dryly before receiving a look from Kilgharrah that could only be described as 'stink-eye'. Looking sheepish, Merlin waved a hand. "Sorry. By all means, please, continue."

Looking a little put-off by the interruption, Kilgharrah sniffed rather snootily before continuing. Not for the first time did Merlin conclude that the old man was a bit of a diva.

"You must intercept this Sophia before she can be allowed to lead Arthur to the lake," Kilgharrah said with some ceremony, puffing out his chest as he did. "Managing to trick the Sidhe into entering a binding contract is the only way I see you resolving this without bloodshed, although keeping her alive will do you no favours in the long-run, Merlin. Above all else, the Sidhe care about self-preservation so if you will insist on being a pacifist about this, do at least try to sound threatening. Perhaps throw a fireball or two around. Attempt to singe a couple of eyebrows if you can, to solidify that you mean business."

"I'll... take your advice under consideration," Merlin said slowly, briefly thinking that Kilgharrah would have made a terrifying mob boss. "Anything else?"
Kilgharrah seemed to genuinely ponder on this question, tapping his gnarled finger to his chin.

"Other than the fact that you also need to eventually off the witch upstairs, I believe that's everything for now. There's this whole business with a sword in a lake but I won't trouble you with that just yet. That's a whole other chapter."

"Wait, witch upstairs?" Merlin asked, bewildered. "Are we still talking about Sophia?"

"No, young warlock," Kilgharrah said in an ostentatious voice that most stage actors would adopt when they got to the gritty bit of the play, "we are talking of Morgana Pendragon, the biggest threat to Arthur's future and solely responsible for bringing about Arthur's doom."

Merlin goggled at Kilgharrah, completely astounded by this declaration.

"Wait a second, you're trying to tell me that Morgana Le Fay is a witch? Morgana upstairs? Morgana with the tiny dog in her bag and a tendency to insult Arthur in public?"

"The witch must die," Kilgharrah said simply.

"Oh Christ, here we go again," Merlin groaned, dropping his head into his hands in despair. "You have a serious bloodlust problem, has anyone ever told you that? Are you sure you're not just some loopy serial killer? Am I your hapless accomplice? Because I'm beginning to have my doubts here. But you know what? I really don't have time for this. I need to get to Sophia and stop her."

"With a fireball?" Kilgharrah added gleefully.

"Fine, with a fireball, you crazed pyromaniac," Merlin relented, giving up and agreeing just to shut Kilgharrah up. "There's a spell in my book about conjuring them, all right? Does that make you happy?"

"Your book?"

"My magic book," Merlin said proudly. "Gaius gave it to me when I was sixteen. It's a family heirloom, apparently. It's ancient and the pages that aren't falling out smell funny but it's brilliant. It's taught me a lot. It helped me turn Will blue the other day. I mean, unintentionally of course but hey, fireballs can't be too hard, can they? Anyway, I better go track down Sophia. Wish me luck."

"Heaven help us all," Kilgharrah responded gravely as Merlin turned to walk away.

Somehow, these words didn't fill him with much confidence.

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Tracking down Sophia made Merlin feel like a bit of a stalker, especially when he tried to enlist help from anyone else. From interns to security guards, everyone seemed to think Merlin was trying to sabotage the relationship -- which, technically he was -- in order to keep Sophia for himself.

"For the last time," Merlin burst out when the fifth person he asked -- who happened to be George -- gave him a knowing look, "I just need to talk to her!"
"This really is unbecoming, Merlin," George said snootily, not believing him for a second as he scrubbed his hands vigorously with hand sanitiser. "I mean, really, we might all moon over Arthur and dream that he'll finally turn around and notice us watching him from behind our desk and yes, we may fantasise about him and his frankly sinful body and that tongue of his being as limber as a Chinese gymnast but you need to get over it, Merlin. Get a grip! You don't see me pining, do you?! It's not like I try and brush by him as often as I can and keep an Arthur diary about all our interactions and have a lock of his hair from when I followed him going to his barber..."

"George!" Merlin yelled, stopping the man before he over-shared anything else and creeped Merlin out any further. "Please, all I want to know is where Sophia is - nothing else."

George blinked, stunned out of his speech and now looking a little ashamed at how much he had revealed. Red-faced with embarrassment, he then straightened his back, sniffed loudly, steepled his fingers together and returned back to his usual prim demeanour with as much poise as he could.

"I believe you will find Miss Sophia in the boardroom, Mr Emrys. I spotted her entering a few minutes ago," he said professionally, his cheeks the colour of ketchup.

"Oh," said Merlin, wondering why he hadn't thought of looking in there before. He then nodded his thanks uncomfortably, turned and walked away as quickly as he could before the awkwardness between himself and George suffocated him.

True to George's word, Sophia was indeed in the boardroom and when Merlin entered, she was touching up her make-up in the full length mirrored wall. Relief flooded through Merlin as he ran in, shutting the door hastily behind him.

"Sophia, hi! Fancy meeting you in here! Um, look, can I talk to you for a minute?"

Applying her lip-gloss in the mirror with a sickly-sweet smile, Sophia barely looked at Merlin before carrying on.

"I don't see what you and I would have to talk about, Marlon, but I suppose, if you're quick. Arthur should be meeting me at any moment. Isn't he wonderful?"

Merlin, who knew for fact that Arthur was snoring away in his office, eyed her mistrustfully, covertly eyeing her back as though expecting to see a pair of Sidhe wings waving hello at him.

"Yeah, he's a real sweetheart. Where exactly do you think Arthur is?" he asked suspiciously and briefly checked under the desk as he did, just in case he found another one of her victims bound, gagged and seasoned under there with an apple in their mouth.

"He went to get me some flowers, wasn't that thoughtful?" she asked in a voice as sickly-sweet as treacle.

"Well, considering he's enchanted," Merlin returned, crossing his arms tetchily. "I don't reckon there was much thought involved."

Sophia paused, her fingers briefly frozen in mid-air before she coolly replaced the lid of her lip-gloss and turned to Merlin. There was a steely smile on her face.

"Enchanted?" she asked innocently. "Yes, I suppose that is one way of describing love."

"It's also a way of describing scheming Sidhe harpies who use magic to trap unsuspecting editors who think with their dicks instead of their brains," Merlin replied matter-of-factly. "Wouldn't you say, Sophia?"
It was like watching a mask literally slip off her face. From the overly sweet, naive victim to a psychotic devil woman in the blink of an eye, Merlin thought Sophia could have been the next Meryl Streep if she didn't exert all her time and effort trying to murder people.

Her eyes flashed red and she lifted up her hand threateningly.

Yelping, Merlin raised his hands like a person held by gunpoint.

"Whoa, now! Not so hasty! This doesn't need to get messy! We can make a compromise, yeah? You don't really want Arthur. I mean, he's a total prat and would probably be a really rubbish soul to absorb/vessel to fill/body to feast on etc. I mean, you want someone who is pure, right? Not some arsehole editor who shags anything with a pulse and gets distracted by the sight of his own reflection."

Sophia seemed to ignore his words, her red eyes burning like embers.

"Step back, peasant, the Once and Future King is mine."

The Once and Future King. Merlin frowned. He had heard that twice now. He filed it away in his head to come back to at a later date.

"Look, let me give you some advice," Merlin tried to say diplomatically. "This clingy, mildly-psychopathic thing you've got going on can be really off-putting to guys like Arthur. Men like him like women who are hard to get. Aloof, barely see him. Maybe if you took a trip to, I don't know, Siberia, that might help things. Absence makes the heart grow fonder! I'll just book you a ticket, you'll be there before you know it!"

Merlin moved over to the laptop but was winded by a force throwing him against the nearest wall, pinning him between Arthur's pineapple-eating toga picture and a framed photo of a winking Arthur sitting in a hot tub with an army of Victoria Secret models.

Merlin heaved a sigh. Sometimes he really didn't know why he bothered helping the buffoon. He was nothing but a magnet for trouble.

Letting out a huff of air, Merlin tried again.

"Okay, so I guess talking isn't going to work," he said with regret.

"You guess correctly," Sophia hissed as her eyes flashed again and immediately the bonds that were holding Merlin up against the wall tightened exponentially. "Once I harvest Arthur's corpse in the lake, I will once again be reunited with my Sidhe brethren. He will die gasping in his watery grave with no one to hear his screams while I am transported back to my people, far away from this cesspit of a land."

Rolling his eyes, Merlin decided he had had enough. He didn't understand lengthy villain expositions in Bond films and he certainly didn't appreciate them in reality. So he lifted up his chin and simply said,

"I'm really sorry about this," before letting his magic burst out of him like a bolt of lightning, hitting her square in the chest and throwing her with such force into the round table that her body literally took a chunk out of it. Immediately, Merlin felt his bonds disappear and he dropped down to the ground onto his feet. He then ran over to the sizzling body that lay coughing weakly in a burnt lump on the ground.

"Ow," said Sophia.
"Jesus, I didn't mean to hit you that hard, are you okay?" Merlin fussed, feeling awful as he tried to check her pulse. He then yelped as the skin he made contact with burnt his fingers like fire. "Shit! You're burning up. Like... literally barbecuing. Let me just conjure some water and-"

"You are Emrys," Sophia's croaky voice said in reverence, her eyes so large that they seemed to take up her entire face. "You have come back from the veil to reclaim the world."

"Well, I wouldn't go that far," Merlin said, feeling a little embarrassed by the reverie in her voice. "Mostly, I just get Arthur his tea and phone the women he shags throughout the week to break up with them for him. He doesn't know how to deal with crying women. Nor do I, truth be told."

Sophia just stared at him blankly, as though wondering if she had the wrong man. She then shook her head.

"Look, are you going to kill me now or later?" she demanded, as if Merlin's delay was inconvenient to her schedule. "Because, frankly, I'm not a fan of drawing these things out."

"I really didn't plan to kill you," Merlin answered truthfully. "I'm sort of a pacifist and I hate the sight of blood. If you could just promise me you'll leave Arthur alone, that really would be smashing."

"Sidhe do not bargain with warlocks," Sophia said loftily. "I either kill him or you kill me, that's how this works."

"I don't see why everything has to end with death." Merlin lamented. "Why can't we just get along?"

Sophia stared at Merlin, stunned.

"You're not at all how I expected Emrys," she said and Merlin wasn't sure if that was a compliment or not.

"Thanks, I think," Merlin replied. "Look, how about we make a pact?"

"A pact?" Sophia asked suspiciously, straining to crane a burnt eyebrow.

"Yes, a magical pact. You promise me you won't hurt Arthur and I promise to spare your life. I can even make it a contract that we both sign and have the words bound by magic so if either of us break our side of the deal, we get hit by a thunderbolt or something. Fireballs, hailstones the size of footballs, an avalanche of rotting fish, you name it. So what do you say?"

Sophia was quiet for a while, the sound of her sizzling skin the only noise in the room. It made Merlin feel slightly ill.

"You are a strange one, Emrys," Sophia eventually said but she offered Merlin her hand anyway, which had thankfully cooled down and he helped pull her up onto her smoking feet. Merlin then pulled out a piece of paper from the stack on the table and whispered a spell under his breath, watching as fresh gold ink gleamed back at him from the page as though written by an invisible hand.


"Thanks," he said before grabbing one of the eager pens on table — which were practically squealing ‘Pick me!’ as they jumped up and down -- and handing it over to her. "Now if you could just sign here and initial over here, I'll make sure to send you a copy."
"This really is the strangest transaction I've ever been party to," Sophia remarked aloud to herself but she signed anyway, embellishing the 'S' of her name like a movie star's autograph. Taking the paper, Merlin felt the magic within it hum underneath his fingers. "So is that everything?" Sophia asked impatiently, patting down her still smoking hair with as much majesty as she could. "Can I go now? Because there is this visiting Maharajah at the Indian embassy today and you've already denied me of one prince as it is."

"Wait, one last thing," Merlin said, looking apologetic as he side-stepped in front of her to stop her from leaving. Sophia let out a petulant huff and looked down at where her now broken watch had melded into her skin before tapping the face with impatience.

"Time is souls, Emrys," she returned cattily, drumming her heel on the floor.

"You called Arthur the Once and Future King," Merlin said, getting straight to the point. "Why is that?"

"Because that is who he is," she sighed, as if what she was explaining was something all school children knew. "He is the Once and Future King of legend just as you are Emrys. Where you find one, the other must follow, like two sides of the same coin. The coming of Arthur has been prophesised from the beginning of time, as has your everlasting life."

"You do realise that Emrys is just my surname, right?" Merlin said doubtfully.

Sophia just waved her hand, bored.

"Emrys is a title not a name, you fool. Emrys is the point to it all, the father of magic. He is the roots of the trees and the clouds in the sky. He commands nature at his whim and draws his powers from the earth itself." Sophia then paused to look over Merlin's scruffy shoes and wonky scarf. "I may be mistaken, however."

Coughing, Merlin straightened his neckerchief.

"Um, okay, thanks for that, I guess. Now if you'd remove that spell you put on Arthur, I think that'll be everything."

Rolling her eyes, Sophia raised a palm and mumbled a few words that made her eyes flash red again. Immediately, Merlin could feel the very air around him dropping its claustrophobic, potent fog.

"There, happy?" she asked. Merlin beamed.

"Ecstatic," he said brightly. "I'll have my owl Archimedes deliver your copy of the contract to you. I'd keep a couple of dead mice to hand when he does - he gets a little violent when he doesn't get rewarded with a treat. Now, I have to leave you I'm afraid. I left Arthur unconscious upstairs and the Burberry meeting should be starting..." Merlin looked at his watch, "... ten minutes ago. Bollocks!"

Barely giving Sophia a backwards glance, Merlin sprinted out the door and skidded his way towards Arthur's office, almost careering into Mordred as he rounded the corner and accidentally trod on one of his expensive shoes in the process.

"Whoops, sorry!" Merlin said as he past.

"You'll pay for that, Merlin!" Mordred yelled after his retreating back like an ancient promise.
"Send the bill to Arthur!" Merlin returned breathlessly over his shoulder, running so fast that he was wheezing by the time he got to Arthur's office. When he got there, Arthur was exactly where Merlin had left him, lying on the floor and curled up against his sheepskin rug like a large child with an overly luxurious security blanket.

Kneeling by Arthur's side, Merlin leaned over to check his breathing, leaned back when he heard its peaceful rhythm, shrugged and proceeded to slap him soundly, and rather satisfyingly, across the face.

"Ow! What the hell?!" Arthur squawked, grabbing his stinging cheek as his eyes snapped open, wide with astonishment and, Merlin immediately noted, without a single hint of red in them anymore. "What happened? I had a horrible nightmare. I dreamt I was getting married. It was awful." Arthur shuddered momentarily as though the thought of everlasting commitment was on par with lying in a vat of faeces before he paused to look around him. "I'm on the floor," he said. He then turned to look at Merlin, his eyes narrowed and suspicious and already full of blame. "Merlin, why am I on the floor?"

"Well, you see," Merlin began, pulling things out of the air in the vain hope something would stick, "um, the thing is. You... er, well... fainted."

Arthur stared.

"Ex-cuse me?" he demanded, his tone an equal measure of disbelief and disgust.

"You fainted," Merlin repeated with a firm nod, pleased with his lie as he watched Arthur's outrage. "It's probably all the stress from the Burberry meeting. I think you're just dehydrated. Want me to get you some water? We wouldn't want you swooning again. I had to catch you last time and you're not light. Anyway, let's get you up, shall we? We don't want dirt getting on your Fendi or Cavalli or whatever Italian designer you're wearing today."

Arthur looked green as Merlin helped get him to his feet.

"C-catch me?" Arthur stammered, his face contorting with dismay and his balance wobbling so badly that it looked like he might actually faint for real.

"Yeah." Merlin nodded, thoroughly enjoying this now as he put on an overly concerned face. "You made this sad whimper of a noise before you just slumped over, arse over feet. I was ever so worried. Lucky I was there really or who knows what would have - oof!" said Merlin because Arthur suddenly had him against the wall, his finger in Merlin's face again.

"You will not speak to anyone else about this, do you hear me?" Arthur ordered in a voice that brooked no argument. "Because if you do, I'll know and I'll find you, no matter where you run."

"You know, you should really consider getting some anger management. Has anyone ever told you that? You turn mental at the flick of the switch. It's a wonder you don't suffer from high blood pressure."

"Merlin..." Arthur said warningly

"Fine, fine, I won't tell anyone you swooned like damsel. Happy?" Merlin sighed like it was a chore before pulling out his blackberry from his pocket and checking it. "Anyway, if you've had enough of swinging your club around like a caveman, there are more pressing matters. While you were out, Burberry arrived. Gaius is entertaining them in his office right now so you'd better head over there. Here," Merlin reached around Arthur to get to his desk, pick up Arthur's MacBook and
hand it to him. "The presentation is on here and ready to go. Just follow the footnotes and everything should be fine. Oh, and one last thing." Merlin reached over to straighten Arthur's wonky tie, patting it down until he had it just right. "There," he said proudly before looking back up at Arthur. To his confusion, Arthur was giving him a strange, dazed sort of look. "What?" said Merlin, concerned by the slow blinks and hoping for his own sake that his spell hadn't given Arthur concussion or brain damage. Kilgharrah would never let him live it down.

Luckily for Merlin, Arthur soon shook out of it.

"Nothing," Arthur said, before slapping Merlin's fingers away from his tie. "Now stop your hen-pecking. I'm fine. I'll go sort out Burberry, you sort out the tea. But first, go find Gwen and get her to dress you in a jacket that doesn't make you look like you stole it off a Primark mannequin. I'll not have you embarrass me in front of Christopher Bailey." Arthur then wrinkled his nose. "And for god's sake, get her to put some cologne on you, too. You smell like burnt socks."

With that, Arthur strutted off up the corridor, leaving Merlin - who actually reeked from barbecued Sophia - to dwell on the fact that he had once again saved Arthur's skin and once again received no recognition for it whatsoever.

Grumbling under his breath, Merlin turned on his heel and stomped moodily to the Closet. He really was so unappreciated in his lifetime.

When a knackered Merlin got the call from Will on his way home from work, he assumed it was one of two things. Will was either phoning Merlin because he wanted something from the shops and was too lazy to get it himself or he had broken something again and had tried to put the blame on Archimedes.

To Merlin's surprise, however, neither of these guesses were accurate.

"Mer, get home," an agitated sounding Will said as soon as Merlin picked up. "There are some weird people in hoods outside the flat."

Merlin had been turning the corner into his street when he stopped dead at this.

"What? Like a gang?" he asked with concern. "Should I call the police?"

"No, like a bloody Lord of the Rings convention!" Will clarified, sounding harassed as the faint sound of group humming could be heard over the line. "They're standing around chanting and keep calling your mum the revered mother. I've had to run out twice with a broom to shoo them away from our bins. It's like dealing with a bunch of over-sized raccoons in cloaks. They keep trying to tell the future from your rubbish. They even got used coffee grounds all over the street! Anyway, Mer, just get home before I deck one, yeah? Oh, and get us a Cornetto while you're out. And a
vase. That bird of yours broke the one in the kitchen again."

"Archimedes did what?" Merlin questioned but Will had ignored this to yell,

"Oi! Stop sniffing that! Those are my old socks!" before hanging up and letting the line go dead. Staring at his phone, Merlin exhaled loudly, pocketed it and briefly wondered if he would ever know what it was like to have a normal life. Sadly for Merlin, he soon realised that he wouldn't when he walked up the remainder of his street and saw the cloaked commotion milling outside his front door like some sort of Jedi rock festival.

Through the crowd of robed people, Merlin spotted Will standing on the doorstep of the flat. Dressed in an open dressing gown, his Davey Crockett hat and a pair of Hunith's girliest flip-flops, Will was also holding a cricket bat and was red-faced and yelling at a man who was shrouded in a black robe like a bad Wes Craven film.

"Look, I've already told you, Gandalf, he's not here!" Will said angrily, waving the cricket bat around in what Merlin assumed was supposed to be a threatening manner. "Now clear off before I stick your wand where the sun doesn't- Merlin, thank Christ! Do a spell and make them disappear, would you?"

"Will!" Merlin hissed, appalled at his friend's lack of tact about his magic but the man in the hood just turned to Merlin in wonder, his old eyes lighting up with that familiar gold glow.

"Emrys!" the man gasped, his voice full of adoration and reverence. He then, to Merlin's dismay, proceeded to burst into tears and drop down to his knees in complete and utter worship, hugging Merlin's calves like an emotional child greeting their father after a long time apart. "My Lord! You have finally come back to us from the veil! We have waited so many years for your return-"

"Oi, you, get off him!" Will exclaimed, waving his bat again but Merlin held up his hand to halt his friend, almost losing his balance as the stranger hugged his knees even tighter.

"No, wait, Will, stop," Merlin said, flailing a little until he regained his balance. Merlin then looked down at the sobbing man at his feet, coughed and awkwardly patted him on the head consolingly. "Um, there, there. It's all okay now."

"Forgive me, my Lord, you are as kind and compassionate as always," the man sniffed into Merlin's knees, his hood dropping to reveal a bald head and a neck tattooed with what looked like a circlet of stars. "You have been gravely missed. The prophecies said that you would be reborn anew but seeing you in the flesh, alive and whole myself, it fills my heart with great joy."

"Oh Christ, here he goes again," Will groaned, rolling his eyes. "Look, mate, I already told you, Merlin isn't your dead pal reincarnated. Now, if you and your groupies could just go back to the monastery mental asylum you escaped from-"

"The Old Gods have spoken, Lord Emrys," the bald stranger said, looking up at Merlin as though Will had not spoken at all, his glittering eyes intense. "The tides will turn, a storm will come to pass and the future of England will change forever. Now, more than ever, will He need your counsel. Now, more than ever, will the Once and Future King need you at his side."

Merlin stared down at the man in shock, the words like a warm breath of magic whispering in his ear.

"Who- who are you?" Merlin breathed in wonder.

"A bunch of crazies in dresses, that's who," Will muttered.
"I am Alator, leader of the druids," the stranger said loudly enough to drown Will out, finally letting Merlin loose to rise grandly to his feet, "and we have foreseen your coming for many centuries, my Lord."

"Oh yeah?" Will cut into the conversation doubtfully, placing the bat casually over his shoulder. "If you 'foresaw' him for so long, why did you knock on every door on the street before you got to us, huh? Your cosmic GPS is shit."

"The future is sometimes cloudy," Alator tried to say serenely but Merlin could see he was rather embarrassed.

"Right," Merlin said, unsure what to do. He had never really had a cult following before and wasn't entirely sure what the protocol was. He paused and thought about what his mum would do. Only one idea came to mind. "Um, would you like to come in for a cup of tea?" he asked politely.

"Merlin!" Will yelled with disapproval. "What have I told you about letting mad people into the flat?"

"Like the time you let in those Spanish exchange students who wouldn't leave?" Merlin reminded him loftily.

"That was different - they were hot!" Will exclaimed in his defence before pointing at a druid who was clearly ninety years old, as though making his point.

"Will, we can't leave them out here," Merlin said patiently. "It's freezing and they're in those flowy robes. I bet the draft goes right up those."

"Christ does it," one of the druids in the back piped up. "I think my knackers are about to fall off."

"Well, then it's settled," Merlin said cheerily, leading them up to the front door of the flat and into the modestly sized kitchen/diner with Will complaining all the way. "I just bought a bag of twiglets. Let me just put them in a bowl to pass around. Oh, and Will, take everyone's tea requests, will you? I'll just put a brew on."

Will, who was looking at Alator as the man sat cross-legged on the vinyl floor and began meditating, ignored Merlin to tilt his head, looking intrigued by the druids despite himself.

"So, you lot know all about destiny and that bollocks then?" Will asked with both doubt and curiosity as he sat on the floor companionably beside Alator.

"More destiny than bollocks, young man," a tiny old woman whom Merlin had originally mistaken for a child piped up dryly. "But yes, that's the general idea."

"Well, what about mine then?" Will persisted. "What about my destiny?"

Alator, whose eyes were closed in meditation, cracked an eyelid open and looked at Will blankly.

"Your part in the coming events is inconsequential," he said in an ethereal voice.

"Oh, ta very much," Will returned.

"We thought you had died in the tree house when you were eight," Alator added almost spitefully before nibbling on a twiglet.

"No, wait, I stopped that from happening," Merlin said, suddenly feeling cold as he looked across
at Will, who looked a little pale himself.

This seemed to set the druids off again.

"Oh, the great Emrys! Changing the foretold - the only man who can change destiny!"

"Please stop that," Merlin said weakly at the druid who was now kissing one of his shoes. "Really, I think you've got the wrong person. My magic never listens to me. It's always doing bad things. Just yesterday I was trying to heal Archimedes after he had a tussle with one of those gangster pigeons that live on next door's windowsill. Instead of healing him, I ended up making him hiccough bubbles for the rest of the day. Even now, whenever I enter my bedroom, all I can smell is washing-up liquid."

"Your magic will be in tune with the one your destiny is entwined with," Alator explained gently. "You and Arthur are two halves of the same whole. Without one, the other will perish. Only together can you truly be yourselves."

"Well, that certainly sounds heterosexual," Will said brightly as Merlin tried not to worry how alike their words were to Kilgharrah's. "So, you lot have this Old Religion thing and think Merlin's your prophet?"

"Emrys is no messenger," a big hulking druid in the corner said in gravelly tones, so large that he barely fit into his robes or the flowery armchair he was sitting in. "Emrys is the point."

Will made a confused face, sharing a look with Merlin.

"To what?" he asked.

"Everything," the large druid finished simply, before taking a rather delicate sip of tea, his pinky sticking up to the ceiling.

"Oh," said Will, looking unconvinced and Merlin didn't blame him. After all, Will had seen Merlin dressed up like Ginger Spice one Halloween, so drunk off his face that both he and his union jack platform boots fell headfirst into the fountain at Trafalgar Square. Will cocked his head. "So Merlin's God?"

"Well, that might be going a little too far..." Alator conceded.

"So he's a saint? Like the Pope? Jesus, Merlin's the pope!"

Alator opened his mouth before closing it.

"We're getting off the point," he said. "The point is that Emrys and the Once and Future King have reunited once more."

"Arthur's not a king - he's a prat," Merlin said candidly. "And his socks smell like death."

"Maybe it's your destiny to change that," Will said in a serene voice.

Alator looked like he wanted to poke a twiglet into Will's eye. Merlin quickly cut in before he could.

"So your prophesies say that I'm what... supposed to save the world? Don't you think that's a little ambitious? We could at least start with one country and work our way around. Somewhere small. Like Gibraltar."
"I do not write the ancient texts. Lord Emrys," said Alator, looking at Merlin with sympathy. "I only interpret them and all writings speak of your coming bringing order and peace to the world. There will be great trials ahead, some of which I'm sure you've already encountered and some that will test you harder than you think. When all hope seems to be lost, remember who you are. Remember that you are Emrys, The Last Dragonlord and that you have friends you can call on at a moment's notice." Finishing his tea, Alator rose to his feet. "Well, we had better be off. We have to visit the person fated to destroy the universe now. We're hoping a little group singing might improve his temperament. Thank you for your hospitality, my Lord. I'm sure our next appointment won't go nearly as smoothly. I appreciate that this is quite a lot to take in so thank you again for taking the news so graciously."

"A lot to take in?!" Will exclaimed, looking annoyed on Merlin's behalf. "You lot just pop in unannounced to tell him he's a messiah -- which may I remind you usually ends with someone getting crucified or stoned with rocks -- and then you bugger off like everything is hunky-dory? You can't just go around putting heavy shit like this on people. It's not right."

"Will, it's okay," Merlin said, putting a hand on his friend's shoulder. "It's not like I haven't heard this before. Kilgharrah said something pretty similar. This might sound funny but it's actually nice to get it semi-confirmed."

"Semi-confirmed?" Will said with utter disbelief. "Mer, these people wear robes in broad daylight and treat you like you're the second coming - they are clearly out of their minds! I mean seriously, all this destiny and world peace shit? I know you're powerful, mate -- fuck, I wouldn't be standing here if it wasn't for you -- but this is some next level Superman shit. And anyway, I thought you said that caretaker was off his rocker too?"

"Oh, he is," Merlin confirmed. "But he does have his lucid periods. Look, Will, if I was you, I wouldn't believe it either, believe me but... I don't know. I really feel like there's something to all this. I can feel it in my bones, in my magic. It's like my powers know that there is more for us to do, more for us to accomplish together. All my life, I felt like this clumsy idiot. Always doing the wrong thing, my magic being more of a hindrance than a help. Now though... I don't know, ever since I got this job, it's been behaving itself. Doing what I ask it to do for once. It's just more focused. I'm more focused. I don't know why."


"Barking," Will muttered under his breath, shaking his head in disbelief as he took a step back. "You are all absolutely barmy."

"Even me?" Merlin asked quietly, feeling strangely sensitive as he looked up at Will through his eyelashes. Will, who had always been more of a brother to Merlin than a best friend, had always looked upon Merlin's magic as a rather brilliant perk. Now, however, his exasperated stare was making Merlin feel like a freak of nature.

Will took one look at his face to understand this.

"You great bloody woman," he scoffed before throwing an arm around Merlin's shoulders, shaking his head as he did. " Seriously, Mer, how on earth are you going to be the saviour of the fucking galaxy if you cry like a bitch every time your feelings are hurt?"

"Shut up," Merlin grumbled, pushing him off but smiling with relief as he did.

"No, I mean it," Will carried on, smirking. "I am honestly beginning to worry for the future of the
human race if they've put you in charge of fixing it. Oi, Alastair-"

"Alator."

"-yeah, whatever. Are you sure you've got the right guy? Because Chuck Norris is a much better choice. He can do kung fu and has a cool beard. Merlin, on the other hand, has funny ears and faints at the sight of blood."

"Emrys the Immortal has been the one prophesised in legend from the beginning of time," said Alator tersely as Merlin watched their exchange with amusement.

Will turned to Merlin and grinned, shrugging.

"Looks like we're all buggered," he said with a casual smile. Merlin smiled back but he had a feeling Will might just have a point.

If Merlin thought his first month had been hectic with Lady Helen's campaign and Sophia's murderous plan, it was nothing compared to the following months he spent at Camelot.

For the twenty-four years prior to this job, Merlin had seen no other magic but his own and had always longed to come across other magic users like himself. In the past three months, however, he had seen so many spells thrown about him that it was beginning to feel less novel. For some strange reason that Merlin couldn't really understand, Arthur was a magnet for magic. Whether it was an untrained warlock whose bitterness accidentally caused a curse or an ancient creature like Sophia who had a mission to turn Arthur into a sacrificial lamb, Merlin honestly didn't know how Arthur hadn't been murdered earlier. Some new and inventive type of peril seemed to befall him every other day and Merlin, of course, was the one who had to deal with it. From mischievous goblins and trolls in disguise to angry ex-husbands and vengeful women he had messed around, every magical creature and their mother seemed to be out to get Arthur.

Just last week, Merlin had had to deal with Valiant 'accidentally' leaving his mythical three-headed adder in Arthur's office after a disagreement between them. This had ended with Merlin decapitating a poisonous snake with Arthur's letter opener and getting absolutely no thanks from Arthur, who just made a face and told Merlin to throw the mutated thing away before it stained his rug. Shortly after this, diva fashion designer Sigun (real name: Cedric) had strutted into the scene. Dressed in a feathered outfit that made Lady Gaga look dressed down, he arrived with power brimming from his fingertips, ultimatums on his thin lips and one strange goal in mind - to get his frankly odd collection of peacock-feathered apparel on the front page of the next issue. After a small coup that had included holding a magicked Arthur to ransom, Merlin had once again found himself fighting Arthur's battles for him and going head-to-head with Sigun himself by setting his feathers on fire until the other man whimpered, promised not to bother Arthur again and pledged his ever-lasting allegiance to 'the mighty Emrys'.
"I'm not sure how much more of this I can take, Gaius," Merlin said breathlessly after two solid months of this, collapsing into a chair and allowing his godfather to tend to the gash on his cheek.

"What was it this time?" Gaius sighed sympathetically, dabbing a cotton pad to his injured cheek.

"Some freak monster called an Afanc," Merlin said glumly, feeling exhausted as he cradled his bruised ribs in his hands. "It decided to take up residence in our boiler room. Kilgharrah says it got formed from the condensation down there or something. Either way, it's dead now but this is driving me nuts, Gaius. Kilgharrah and Alator say it's my destiny to take care of Arthur but it's not like it's something easy like making sure he eats his greens. It's fighting crazy monsters and almost getting murdered every sodding week like some sci-fi sitcom! Not to mention that it's bloody hard to keep putting my life on the line for him when he treats me like I'm nothing but a useless waste of space."

"I know this is difficult now, Merlin, but one day he will see you for who you are," Gaius said kindly, his hand warm on Merlin's shoulder. "I know it may seem like it is an age away but the day will come when he will know everything you've done for him and be grateful to you for it."

Merlin didn't respond to this but that was mainly because he severely doubted it and didn't want to crap all over Gaius' optimism.

He was sure that nothing on earth would make Arthur grow to accept him as his PA.

And then the incident at the Maternity Worldwide ball happened and everything changed.

The incident -- like so many others in the past -- had started with yet another crazed person who was out to get Arthur but this one had targeted him at one of the many fundraisers he organised. This fundraiser in particular had been for Maternity Worldwide, a charity to save the lives of expectant mothers in developing countries and it was the charity that seemed to be closest to Arthur's heart.

"That's a bit of a strange one for you to support so passionately, considering," Merlin had said an hour before the fundraiser started as he watched Arthur do up the bow-tie of his tux in his office mirror. "It's not a well known charity and the category it falls in is pretty niche. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm impressed. It's a great cause and it's pretty damn noble of you to give it so much exposure. I always thought you were more of the 'Help a bachelor in need of a good shag' sort of donor."

"Glad to see that my staff think so highly of me," Arthur said dryly, folding one of the tie flaps over with the efficiently of a man who had done this a hundred times before.

"You know what I mean," Merlin persisted, ignoring Arthur's sass. "You're Mr Extravagance. Big, showy things appeal to you."

"No, they don't," Arthur returned, putting in a pair of diamond cufflinks as he said this.

Merlin burst into laughter at the irony.

"Says the man who just bought a massive crystal and uses it as a paperweight," Merlin said dryly, pointing at said ornate, glittering crystal on Arthur's desk to illustrate his point. "So honestly, why do you like this charity so much? Is it because it'll dupe poor unsuspecting women into thinking you're the sweet, sensitive type?"

"Don't you have work to do?" Arthur said in a prickly voice, changing the subject.
"Nope, done it all," Merlin said cheerfully, hoisting himself up onto Arthur's desk to sit on it before swinging his legs. "So, you're taking Morgana with you as your date? I'm guessing your father had something to do with that."

Arthur glared sourly at Merlin from the mirror, which said all it needed to really. Merlin stifled a laugh at his bad mood.

"I don't know why you're so grumpy about it. She's gorgeous and clever. Completely intimidating and terrifying to be in the same room with, of course, but you'll be the envy of every man in the place. I mean, I get that she's your adopted sister so it's probably sort of incestual to check her out but most other men would chop off a limb to have her on their arm."

"Well, then maybe you should find one of these morons and foist her on them instead," Arthur snapped, finishing his bow-tie with an angry tug that almost cut off his air.

Leon popped his head around the door.

"Arthur, the car is here. Morgana told me to tell you that if you don't get down there in the next minute, she's leaving without you."

Arthur muttered something darkly under his breath that sounded remarkably like a threat but it was too low for Merlin to catch. He definitely heard the words 'harpy' and 'fiery hell' however.

"Fine, fine, let's get this torture over and done with," Arthur said aloud, his tone betraying how little he was looking forward to this. "Come on, Leon, let's go before she tries to steal the fundraiser from me, too. Merlin, do try not to burn the office down in our absence."

"Well, there's my evening plans dashed," Merlin said wryly. "I was planning a bonfire in your office. I was going to use your ridiculous portraits as firewood and then I was going to dance naked around the flames while roasting marshmallows."

Arthur stared at him incredulously before turning back to an amused Leon.

"What did I tell you, Leon?" Arthur addressed his friend as they walked out the door and towards the lifts. "Worst manservant ever. Didn't I tell you he was the worst manservant ever?"

"Yes, Arthur," Leon returned dutifully with a barely-stifled smile as Merlin watched them walk into the lifts, the doors closing behind them. "You told me."

"It was his mother."

"Jesus!" Merlin gasped in surprise at the familiar voice that suddenly sounded behind him. "Christ, Gaius, for the sake of my heart and the dryness of my pants, warn me before you sneak up on me like that, would you? For a second, I thought you were one of the million monsters out to get Arthur. And- wait a minute, what was his mother?"

"The reason Arthur fights so strongly for this charity," Gaius elaborated, hands clasped in front of him. "The reason why this is the one cause he would genuinely do anything for. His mother died in childbirth. She died having Arthur. He never knew her."

"Bloody hell," Merlin breathed, his stomach churning with guilt as he thought back on their conversation. "No wonder he didn't want to talk about it! Why did no one tell me before? I was so insensitive. I completely put my foot in my mouth."

"You weren't to know, Merlin," Gaius soothed. "Neither Arthur nor his father talk of her. To Uther,
her memory brings up too much hurt and Arthur was trained as a child never to even speak Ygraine Pendragon's name aloud."

"Ygraine?" Merlin repeated, feeling strangely light-headed as the image of an attractive blonde woman wearing both Arthur's features and a medieval dress suddenly flashed into his head.

"Yes," Gaius confirmed, unaware of Merlin's vision as he sighed like a man reminiscing over sadder times. "A kind and gracious soul. She was a good influence on Uther. Love became him. It made him freer, happier. When she died, however, he closed himself off to everyone, even Arthur to an extent. His son is still the only thing that can touch Uther's heart, even now. Many people have tried to reach him and each and every one of them have failed."

"That's... really sad," Merlin said weakly as he sank into Arthur's desk chair, still trying to fathom what he had just seen and why he suddenly felt so much sorrow in his heart. As if to answer that question, the crystal paperweight on the desk beside him suddenly began to glow, as if brought to life by his thoughts. "Er, Gaius..." Merlin said hesitantly, not sure whether to lean forward to get a better look at it or to move as far away from it as possible in case it exploded, "... am I imagining things or is that crystal glowing?"

Gaius, looking confused himself, moved forward to study the crystal.

"Curious," he said, slipping on his half-moon glasses to examine the cut of the gem, his forehead lined. "Very curious, indeed."

"What's curious?" Merlin questioned with fascination, his chin tip on Gaius' shoulder as he peered closely at the luminescent crystal with his godfather. "Do you know what it is? Please tell me it's not radioactive."

"If I'm not mistaken, I believe it to be one of the lost crystals of old," Gaius said, still peering intently at the crystal. "I have heard stories of some crystals responding to those with magic but they are incredibly rare and can only be activated by the most powerful of warlocks. From what I understand, they have not been seen for centuries. For Arthur to acquire one by chance and then for someone as powerful as you to see it - the odds are astronomical. It can't be a mere coincidence."

"So what, you're saying this was fated to happen?" Merlin said doubtfully. "That I was destined to find this crystal and have it... what, glow at me like those crappy sticks they give to you on bonfire night?"

"This isn't just a glowing stone, Merlin," Gaius rebuked, using the same disappointed tone he had used on Merlin when Merlin was four and Gaius had found him chewing on a butterfly. "Legends say that these artefacts hold the secrets of life itself. According to my books, one look at a crystal like this can reveal the future."

"I don't know, Gaius, it all sounds a bit far-fetched to me," Merlin said, unconvinced as he prodded the crystal with the tip of his finger. "You sure there isn't a battery in there lighting it up?"

Gaius glared at Merlin balefully. That was all he needed to do to make Merlin crack.

"Fine!" Merlin caved in, reluctantly leaning towards the crystal. "I'll look at it but I honestly don't think anything will- oh," he said because almost as soon as he peered into the shining glass, a series of images played out in front of his eyes like snapshots capturing moments in time. He saw a party with beautiful women in expensive evening dresses and dapper men in tuxes. He saw a lone flute of champagne bubbling ominously as it was carried on a pristine silver tray towards a group of people. Then he saw Arthur, looking as annoyingly glorious as he always did, tetchily holding
court with Morgana as a redheaded waiter approached him.

"Would you like a drink, sir?" said the man to Arthur, his words crisp and professional as he extended the tray.

"God, yes," Arthur returned, taking the drink from the tray before, to Merlin's horror, tipping his head back and draining the entire thing in one go. Placing the flute back on the tray, Arthur smiled at the server and for a split-second Merlin had an optimistic hope that he was mistaken and that everything would be all right.

Then Arthur's smile faltered.

His eyes, which had been so bright just a moment ago, glazed over as he grabbed his throat and let out an awful choke of a noise. Before anyone could do anything, he collapsed bonelessly to the floor, unconscious and not breathing.

"No!" Merlin cried out hoarsely, the words wracked from his ribs like he had been screaming for hours. He stared at Arthur's dead body with a grief he had never felt before. "No, Arthur, wake up! Arthur! Arthur!"

"Merlin!" Gaius' concerned cry echoed like it was coming from a great distance away but the steadying hand on Merlin's back felt real, grounding him. "Merlin! Are you all right? What's wrong? What did you see? You were shouting."

"Arthur!" Merlin wheezed out, breathless and sweating as he wrenched himself away from the crystal as though he was tugging away from an almighty force. "I-I saw Arthur and he was dying, Gaius! He was dead! I have to get to the fundraiser. He'll die if I don't stop him from drinking from that glass!"

"Merlin, please, just calm down for a moment-"

"I can't!" Merlin responded heatedly, pulling his coat on with an urgency he had rarely let himself feel. "Every moment I waste is a moment closer to Arthur drinking from that glass!"

"I understand that but think for a second," Gaius tried to say placatingly, grabbing his godson by his forearms. "The fundraiser is on the other side of London. Even with the fastest cab, you might not get there in time."

"Gaius, I have to try," Merlin said, wiggling out of Gaius' grasp. "Weren't you the one who said that I was destined to see this crystal? This must be why! I have to go and I have to stop this from happening - I was meant to. While I'm gone, you have to try and ring Arthur's mobile, the venue, Morgana, whoever. See if you can warn him that way. I'll see you in a bit!"

Merlin then ran, Gaius' entreaties disappearing into the air behind him as he pelted out of the office, sprinted across to the lifts and frantically pressed the call button.

The lift arrived what seemed like an eon later with Merlin looking at his watch and wringing his hands with worry as he waited. Getting in it, Merlin furiously pressed the button to the ground floor repeatedly, hoping that the lift would understand his eagerness and step on it. When the doors closed behind him almost mockingly slow, Merlin groaned and kicked at a metal wall in frustration.

"God, this is going to take me forever. I need to get there now!" he snapped.

As soon as he said these words, the lift halted abruptly to a stop, braking so hard that Merlin
swayed dangerously off-balance. Another thud shook the entire lift from its very foundations and Merlin found himself lurching forward, only narrowly avoiding hitting his head on the doors as they suddenly opened. Flailing out the doors, Merlin was soon spewed out like a bad curry onto a marble floor. Then Merlin lifted his head.

"Holy shit," he said from where he lay on the ground, sure he was imagining things. Not only had Merlin somehow ended up in a large, extravagantly painted hall but this large, extravagantly painted hall just happened to be the one where he had seen the party in the crystal taking place. Glamorous people were dancing and socialising as tasteful banners and balloons hung vibrantly over their heads and read the words 'Maternity Worldwide'. Waiters who were dressed fancier than Merlin had ever dressed in his life flitted about the place carrying trays full of beautifully impractical entrees that looked more like miniature works of art than food. An orchestra was set up on the grand stage, playing rather mournful classical music that did nothing to lift the mood and everything to solidify just how blue-blooded the majority of the partygoers were.

Merlin gaped in utter astonishment as he stared at all like it was a dream.

The fundraiser. His magic had actually transported him to the fundraiser.

His magic, which usually made levitating his socks into the laundry hamper a bit of a chore, had somehow managed to take him to the destination he had been desperate to get to with barely a thought. In fact, this easy magic of his had been making a regular appearance ever since Merlin had joined Camelot and especially when Arthur had been in danger. Valiant and the snake, Sophia and the fireball, Cedric and his crazy plot for feather domination...

Merlin shook his head.

That destiny stuff that Alator and Kilgharrah kept going on about was impressive stuff.

"Er, sir, are you all right down there?" one of the waiters enquired as he looked down at Merlin quizzically. He was pimply, looked about sixteen and was probably there on work experience but he still managed to look better than Merlin did at that moment. Feeling incredibly underdressed in his scuffed shoes and rumpled shirt, Merlin got to his feet and smiled a little sheepishly at the boy.

"Er, yeah, sorry, lost a contact lens on the floor. You know how it is," Merlin said, wiping the dust off his knees before looking around the hall. "Say, you don't know where I can find Arthur Pendragon, do you? He's a blond chap. Well-dressed. Rude. Talks like royalty. Has an ego the size of a country. In fact, I'm sure he's offended you already. He's like that with people he's just met. To be honest, he's like that with people he's known for a while, too..." Merlin then spotted Arthur standing by the bar, glaring moodily across at Morgana just like he had in Merlin's vision. Merlin let out a sigh of relief, ready to walk over to Arthur and check on him until he saw a flash of red hair in the crowd. Heart thumping hard, Merlin barely gave his pimply new acquaintance a backwards glance as he pushed through the throngs of waltzing people on the dance floor to get across to Arthur as quickly as he could. He glanced up and just as he feared, the same red-headed waiter that had been in the crystal was bee-lining towards Arthur, carrying the poisoned flute of champagne. His mind on autopilot, Merlin could think of nothing else to do - he jumped dramatically in front of Arthur like a goalie saving a penalty, taking down about five people as he did.

"What on earth?!" Arthur spluttered, almost falling over himself as he grabbed the corpulent, tiara-wearing donor next to him before she teetered over in her heels. "Merlin?! What in the blazes is the meaning of this?! Have you lost your tiny mind?!"

"Arth-Arthur..." Merlin wheezed, trying to catch his breath as leaned forward and placed his hands
on his knees. "Don't... don't drink the champagne. It's poison!"

"Poison?!" the large woman in the tiara cried out, going purple in the face at Merlin's words as she righted her wonky tiara with a chubby hand. "I tell you, I will not stand for such slander! My family generously donated the refreshments for tonight. Refreshments that were supplied by our very own vineyard in France! I don't know who this upstart young man thinks he is but he has insulted not only myself but every Bayard who has ever given to this charity!"

"Lady Bayard," Arthur tried to soothe, holding up hands. "Really, he meant nothing by it. This is just my assistant, Merlin. He just gets just a little passionate when it comes to my safety. The boy is a little simple; he's got the mind of a child really. Another one of my lost causes. Please don't hold that against him or this cause. It was just an honest mistake. Isn't that right, Merlin?" Arthur then turned to Merlin and clapped a hand to his shoulder, his face looking amicable and kind but his eyes were so furious and his grip was so tight that Merlin gulped aloud.

Before he could answer, however, another voice cut in like a razor.

"Lady Bayard is right," Uther Pendragon said, walking out from behind Arthur like an illusionist because he appeared to come out of nowhere, "the boy has caused a great offence which can only be put right in one way." Uther then turned to the redhead waiter and motioned for him to step forward with an obnoxious click of his fingers. "You there, come here."

The waiter stepped forward, looking a little nervous at being the centre of attention. Picking up the flute of champagne from the tray, Uther beckoned the boy away to turn coldly towards Merlin. He then extended the glass towards him.

"Drink," said Uther.

"Father, come on now," Arthur cut in, looking a little uncertainly around him. "Merlin's behaviour may have been a tad rash but there's no need to show him up so publicly. This is just a misunderstanding. Here, I'll drink it..."

"No!" Merlin said hurriedly, snatchings up the glass as his natural instinct to protect Arthur kicked into gear. "I'll do it, it's fine, Arthur. Really."

Merlin then looked at Uther. How the older Pendragon didn't shatter all the glass in the room with his piercing stare, Merlin would never know.

Swallowing hard, Merlin wet his lips, took one last look at Arthur for courage and then tipped the entire glassful down his throat.

He had barely lowered his glass when he felt like something was awry. It was like an oozing blackness was filling him up from the inside and spreading through him like a cancer, eating away at every pumping blood cell in his body until nothing was left but cold numbness.

Merlin barely felt himself dropping the champagne flute but he heard a glass shatter from somewhere far away. He grasped at his throat. He couldn't breathe.

"Merlin?" Arthur said, his voice a distant echo as he grabbed at shoulders Merlin could not feel. Arthur's face was pale and frantic. "God, he was right. Someone call 999! Merlin, stay with me. Just stay with me, you self-sacrificing idiot! You really are such a fool sometimes! Why did you drink it when you knew it was poisoned?!"

Merlin smiled weakly at him and tried to respond, tried to tell him that it was all right and that it was worth it if it meant Arthur was safe but it was too late for that. He collapsed into Arthur's
arms, his employer's concerned face and comforting grip the last things Merlin was aware of as he fell into unconsciousness.

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When Merlin awoke, he was convinced that he was either dreaming or in heaven. He was in a blinding white room, surrounded by flowers and a messy-haired Arthur Pendragon was sleeping by his bedside in a ratty t-shirt and baggy jogging bottoms that had to either be a figment of Merlin's imagination or God deciding to cheer him up. Trying to sit up to get a better look at him, Merlin immediately felt such a burning throb blazing down his throat and chest that it made him wonder if this place could have possibly been hell instead.

"Ow, mother-loving ow," Merlin said, grimacing with pain as he put a palm to his stinging chest. He then froze when he spotted the IV in said hand. Holding his palm up to the light, Merlin looked confused. He was pretty sure that hadn't been there before. "Huh," he said to himself shortly. "That's a bit weird."

"Shut up, Merlin," Arthur grumbled from his corner of the room, half asleep. He then seemed to realise that Merlin was awake because Arthur lifted up his sleepy head, blinked at Merlin with blood-shot eyes and then bolted up off his seat, disoriented. "You're awake!"

"And you're perceptive," Merlin returned dryly before yelling, "Ow!" when Arthur smacked him on the shoulder. "What the hell, poison victim here!"

"You bloody idiot, what the hell did you think you were doing!?!" Arthur snapped before clipping him around the ear, causing Merlin to wail again. "You could have died!"

"I was trying to save your life, you ungrateful arse!" Merlin hollered back, holding his hands over his ears to protect them from any more of Arthur's abuse. "That's the last time I do anything for you! A nice 'thank you' would have been most peoples' response but no, not for Arthur fancy-pants Pendragon!"

"A 'thank you' for what?" Arthur snapped. "Giving me a heart attack? Making your mother cry?"

Merlin lowered this hands at that.

"My mum is here?" he asked, craning his neck to look around the room for her. Merlin then paused as he spotted a gold-plated vase and what looked like a very expensive piece of sculpture. "Um, Arthur. Where the hell are we?"

"The Harley Street Clinic," Arthur said, his anger visibly deflating as he sat back down. Looking exhausted, he ran a hand over both his eyes and his five o'clock shadow. "I got you admitted here as soon as you passed out."

"Harley Street?" Merlin said, confused. "The same Harley Street that's chock-a-block with posh plastic surgeries? Christ, you haven't got me a boob job, have you? I know you wanted a girl assistant but this might be going a little bit too far..."

"Shut up, Merlin," Arthur said, the bags under his eyes and the drained complexion of his skin
making him look more human than Merlin had ever seen him look. In the face of this rarity, Merlin dutifully closed his mouth. Arthur looked surprisingly pleased by this uncommon demonstration of obedience. "Anyway, now that I've got you to uncharacteristically shut your mouth, I'll fill you in on what you've missed. We called in the police and within the hour they found out who tried to poison me. It was Nimueh."

"Nimueh?" Merlin repeated, blinking at this in genuine astonishment. "The editor of Priestess magazine? I know you guys have a rivalry but that's going a little far, isn't it?"

"You obviously know nothing about the fashion industry," said Arthur, sounding more like his usual holier-than-thou self as he sniffed importantly. "The fact I haven't had my head and my hands chopped off mobster-style makes me almost a little disappointed in her. She could have at least made more of an effort. In any case, she's been hauled off to jail and has been charged with attempted murder, so there's that mystery solved. There is just one more part of this puzzle that doesn't make sense to me, however, and that, Merlin, is how you knew to warn me."

"Me?" Merlin squeaked in the face of Arthur's suspicious brow without the foggiest idea how he was going to explain this. "I... well, obviously I had a source."

"A source? Where? At Priestess magazine?" Arthur prompted, throwing questions at him like a prosecutor mid cross-examination. "Who was it?"

"Well, I um, I kind of promised to keep their name out of it, you know?" Merlin fabricated, hoping to God whatever the hell he was saying sounded plausible. "It was sort of like an anonymous tip. They didn't want the fallout to be traced back to them. Nimueh isn't exactly a good person to cross. She poisons people, you know."

"Yes, I heard that," Arthur returned dryly but he seemed to accept this story as he waved a hand and changed the subject. "Anyway, in case you were wondering, your mother should be back soon. She popped out for a moment to get a cup of coffee with Gaius. Trust you to wake up the one moment she isn't here - she's been at your side for days."

"... wait a moment, days?" Merlin repeated. "Hang on, how long was I out?"

"Three days, you inconsiderate arse," Arthur replied. "Gwen's been beside herself. Most of the flowers here are from her. The rest, funnily enough, are from Lady Bayard. I imagine it's because she feels a portion of guilt for the situation."

"Three days? Jesus," Merlin said, leaning back against the bedcovers before fingering one of the roses in the vase beside him. "On a pleasanter note though, I've never had this much female attention in my life. Looks like almost dying has its perks."

Merlin smiled broadly at his own words but this grin soon faded when faced with the green tinge spreading across Arthur's cheeks. Letting out a small exhale, Merlin wondered what it was about Arthur Pendragon that made him care so much.

Arthur was right. Merlin really was touched in the head.

"Now, why do I have a feeling that Lady Bayard isn't the only one feeling guilty about this?" Merlin asked, looking at Arthur as pointedly as he could through the gallon of morphine that had obviously been administered to him.

In the past, Merlin imagined Arthur would have scoffed at him and told him he was being delusional. Now, however, Arthur's usual bravado took a back seat.
"You... you drank poison for me." Arthur said, looking washed-out and shocked, as if the idea of someone doing something like that for him was unheard of. "My father told you to and despite the fact you knew it could kill you, you did it anyway. I honestly don't know if that makes you brave or stupid."

"Yeah, you're welcome." Merlin said weakly before letting out a hacking cough that shook his entire body. Arthur immediately grabbed a glass of water from Merlin’s tray of untouched food and placed it against Merlin's lips, placing a hand on the back of his dark head. When Merlin's coughs subsided, Merlin realised the hand on his head was stroking through his hair. It made him blush.

"Thanks," he croaked, suddenly bashful.

"I think I should be the one thanking you," Arthur says, still staring at Merlin in awe. "They said your heart stopped."

"Oh, I'm sure it was only for a few seconds," Merlin said, waving a blasé hand. "Takes longer to tie my shoelaces."

"With those clumsy hands of yours, I can well believe it," Arthur responded with a dry smile, his hand still brushing the back of Merlin's head and his eyes warm as they met Merlin's gaze. Merlin didn't even think about moving away. Honestly, Merlin could happily have stayed there all day.

"Merlin!" Hunith's voice rang out from the door, a relieved Gaius at her side. Arthur immediately stepped backwards, taking his warmth with him as Hunith hurried over and crushed Merlin into a bear hug that made him 'oomf!' "Oh, my boy. My sweet baby boy!" she wailed, tears pooling in her eyes. "I almost died of fright when I got the call from Gaius. I thought I lost you! And then they told me your heart stopped and I think mine stopped with it. Will has barely eaten for days."

"Will, not eating? It looks like I caused an early Christmas miracle," Merlin said, smiling faintly as he tried to catch Arthur's eye but Arthur was too busy studying his shoes intently, giving them their privacy. "So, um, where is Will?"

"He's just parking my car but don't you try to change the subject, young man, you scared the life out of us both," Hunith rebuked, her arms tightening around Merlin as she, much to Merlin's dismay, dropped a series of kisses on the top of his head. "Don't you ever do that to me again, Merlin!"

"Mum!" Merlin cried out, ducking from her grasp as his cheeks went bright red. "Stop that! And anyway, it's not like I got poisoned on purpose," Merlin muttered.

"I beg to differ," Arthur said bitterly under his breath before shaking Gaius' hand in greeting. "Now that you're both back, Gaius, I should really get back to work. There's a lot of damage control for me to manage. Hunith, it was lovely seeing you again. Merlin..." Arthur looked like he was going to say something but he seemed to change his mind at the last minute and said, "Get some rest," instead.

Merlin nodded, watching Arthur duck his unkempt blond self out the door while still managing to look better in a pair of shitty joggers than most men did in their best suits.

Merlin shook his head. It really wasn't fair.

"He is a terribly handsome young man, isn't he?" Hunith said once Arthur was out of earshot, as if she could read Merlin's thoughts. "And so charming, too. I can see why the girls at your office are
enamoured with him. You should have seen all the nurses hovering around him, pretending to read your chart. I'm sure that boy's broken more than enough hearts in his time."

"Yes," said Merlin, remembering the touch of Arthur's fingers on the back of his head and feeling his own heart ache slightly. "Yes, he has."

"And are you sure he's the same young man who threw a paperweight at your head?" Hunith continued, fluffing Merlin's pillow. "Because he seemed ever so attentive when you got ill. He was completely frantic, the poor thing. He was at your side almost as much as I was and insisted on paying for this lovely hospital. It's very fancy. They have hand towels and sofas in the toilets and Victoria Beckham is one of their celebrity patients. Apparently, she came in yesterday to have a bunion removed. It's all very exciting."

"Did you say that Arthur visited me a lot?" Merlin asked, trying not to sound as pleased about this as he was.

"Every hour he was able," Gaius answered, easing himself down onto the edge of Merlin's bed, his look fond. "It seems that you've worked that magic of yours and finally won him around."

"He really does seem to care about you," Hunith said, smiling gently as she patted a wayward lock of Merlin's hair down with affection. "It's nice that you two have become friends. He seems like a sweet boy."

Merlin scoffed at this.

"I'm his assistant, mum. We're not friends. He barely tolerates me. He's been dying to get rid of me ever since I started. To be honest, he's probably secretly pleased this put me out of commission for a few days."

"Don't say things like that, he likes you!" Hunith insisted. "I can tell by the way he is with you. I'm sure he's not like that with all his employees."

"He's not," Gaius said, giving Merlin a searching look that suddenly made Merlin feel nervous.

Luckily, a balloon-carrying Will chose just that exact moment to burst through the door and shriek, "Emrys the Motherfucking Immortal! Risen from the grave! You absolute legend!" before launching himself at Merlin and, much to Merlin's relief, completely changing the direction of the conversation.

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Recovering from the poisoning was surprisingly easier than Merlin had imagined. He had been convinced that he would need to take a week off, have his stomach pumped or at the very least have to regularly take those nasty charcoal tablets that absorbed poison. However, barely a day after he awoke, the doctor looked at him with utter befuddlement and declared he was healthy enough to be discharged.

"It's remarkable," said the medic, shaking his head as if Merlin was a wonder of science. "Your
liver hasn't been affected at all. No residual effects in the slightest. I've never seen such a clean bill of health."

"Oh, I treat my body like a temple," Merlin lied breezily. "You know, organic food, regular trips to the gym, pilates. So, I'm allowed to go back to work?"

"Merlin, sweetheart, you need to rest," Hunith said softly, her hand clasping Merlin's on top of the bed.

"Mum, I've been resting for four days now," Merlin argued. "My arse has actually gone numb from all this lying around. Doctor, I can leave, can't I?"

Looking like he wanted argue, the doctor opened his mouth, remembered with a dumbfounded look that there was nothing wrong with Merlin and then said,

"Yes, Mr Emrys, you may go," although he clearly said it against his better judgement.

Within a half hour, Merlin was back at home, showered, changed and being nipped affectionately by Archimedes, who had proudly recorded a series of terrible reality programs for him while he was unconscious.

Within the hour, Merlin was back in the Pendragon building, ready for work.

"Oh, Merlin, thank goodness!" Gwen had cried out the moment he had stepped into the office, throwing herself at him. Arms around his neck, her words were muffled against his shoulder. "I was so worried! Did you get my flowers? I can't believe what happened! It's like something out of an Agatha Christie novel. I can't believe someone would want to poison Arthur, it's just too horrible. And you! How did you even know about the plot? And then you drank it so Arthur wouldn't! You wonderfully brave moron! I could strangle you!"

"Hey!" Merlin protested but Gwen just waved this off to hug him even tighter.

"It's been mad here. The police came around to investigate everything. Did Arthur tell you that it was-"

"Nimueh?" Merlin finished her sentence. "Yeah, he told me. It's crazy. So what's happened to Priestess magazine now?"

"You didn't hear?" Gwen said, lowering her voice to pull Merlin into the doorway of an empty room. "Morgause defected while Arthur was distracted with the fallout over what happened to you. She is the new editor-and-chief of Priestess now and has taken half of Creative with her. It's been a madhouse around here, what with chunks of our team up and disappearing and all sorts of rumours flying about the place. Everyone is watching Morgana, waiting for her to leave too but she's been as cool as a cucumber, acting like she always has and wearing that poker face that no one can read."

Merlin whistled aloud. In just four days, all hell had broken loose. He supposed that this was what happened when he wasn't around to fix everything. Really, sometimes Merlin wondered how the building managed to stay upright without him.

Merlin looked around.

"Where is everyone?" he asked, looking at the unnaturally empty hallways.

"Helping Arthur with the photoshoot for next month's cover," Gwen explained. "What with his entire design department up and leaving, he's had to pull in everyone he can and is literally making
things up as he goes. He'll be so pleased you're back, you've always been the one he goes to for creative advice."

"Why didn't he tell me any of this when he visited me yesterday morning?" Merlin wondered aloud, feeling guilty that Arthur was fannying about after him when he had mass desertion on his hands.

"I'm sure he didn't want to worry you," Gwen said as they made their way to the Closet. Unlocking the door, Gwen rifled through one of her beautifully organised boxes before letting out a triumphant "Aha!" when she found a pair of diamond-studded sandals. "Right, let's go down to the studio. I only popped up to get one of the models a pair of flats from the Closet. Elena's lovely but she's ever so clumsy, bless her. She can't seem to walk in a pair of heels to save her life. She already tore down half the studio after a particularly spectacular fall, accidentally elbowing the photographer in the face in the process. He's only just stopped yelling about it but he's still got an ice pack on his eye. It's been manic without you. Arthur's pulling his hair out."

"Literally?" Merlin asked, imagining Arthur with sporadic bald patches about his head and becoming highly amused by the image. "Arthur loves his hair more than most people do their children. Satan's minions must be skiing in hell if he's tearing it out."

"Well, they're wearing balaclavas at the very least," Gwen replied with a droll smile before linking her arm through Merlin's. "Come on, I can't wait for Arthur to see you. He'll be so pleased you're back."

To say Arthur looked pleased to see Merlin when he walked into the studio was a slight overstatement. To own the truth, he looked more like he wanted to head-butt him in the face.

"What in the hell are you doing here?!" Arthur demanded as soon as he spotted Merlin, marching up to him in a thunderous fury. "You're supposed to be in the hospital, you twat."

"And you're supposed to have more hair on your head," Merlin said, pointing at a thinning tuft on the side of Arthur's hair. "But enough of that, you look a mess, have you eaten yet?"

"Go home, Merlin," Arthur said simply.

"Well, that's not happening," Merlin said insubordinately before seating a complaining Arthur down on a chair. "I'll get you a sandwich, you're useless when you're hungry. After that, we can talk about what's going on with all this."

"Merlin," Arthur said through clenched teeth but Merlin had already skipped away, saying his hellos to his colleagues as he made his way to the kitchen.

Humming as he constructed a sandwich that had taken him months to perfect (Arthur throwing it at his head the first dozen times after yelling "not enough salt!" having something to do with that), Merlin turned to head back to the main studio with his creation when he bumped into a familiar face.

He then gaped.

"Will?" he said in shock as his best friend looked cheerily back at him with a motorcycle helmet under one arm and an oddly wrapped packet under the other. "What are you- wait, how the hell did you get in?"

"Front door, of course," Will said. "Said I was a courier with a package for Merlin Emrys. They let me straight in. I always knew buying a helmet and leathers without the motorcycle would be a
good investment." Will then pointed at the packet he was carrying. "These are just socks."

Merlin shook his head. Will could have a decent career in crime if he just put his mind to it.

"Okay, Oceans One, what are you doing here?" Merlin asked, his arms crossed guardedly.

Will held up one finger.

"Firstly, I'm here to check up on you under your mum's orders and secondly," here Will held up another finger, "I'm trying to nail a model of course, you selfish bastard. Some best friend you are. I can't believe you've never even invited me around. Models, Merlin. Models in baby oil and lingerie. You've been holding out on me. Wait, is that a sandwich? Yum, give it here."

"Hey! Get your mouth off that, that's Arthur's!" Merlin cried out, smacking Will's head who wailed out an "Oi!" in injustice. "I'm sorry but you have no idea how much crap I had to go through to make it this way! He's the fussiest person on the planet! Do you know these jalapeños had to be hand-picked from a specific region of Mexico and then shipped over here?!"

"Sounds delicious," Will agreed before trying to get it back into his mouth again. Merlin ducked his jaws and held the sandwich over his head as a person would from a hungry dog, waving it from side to side. Unfortunately, the commotion was spotted by a passing Arthur.

"Merlin!" Arthur's familiar voice suddenly boomed from down the corridor. "I swear, it's bad enough you show up here but if those are my priceless jalapeños that you're sodding about with, I am going to demote you to toilet duty and make you spit polish every urinal in the building with your ton- oh." Arthur stopped mid-tirade to look at Will with mild confusion, as though surprised Merlin had enough people skills to actually converse with someone other than him. Will just looked back gormlessly, making Merlin deeply wish his best friend hadn't chosen the 'Good fucker' t-shirt he had decided to wear that morning. The silhouette on it of two people going at it doggy-style was just inappropriate. "I'm sorry," Arthur said, brow furrowed, "Are you here to deliver a package?"

"Er, no," Merlin cut in. "Actually this is-"

"Will," Will said, offering his hand and breaking out of his stupor to smile beatifically. "Merlin and I are together."

"Wait-what?" Merlin said, flummoxed but Will just waved his other hand nonchalantly.

"Oh, don't mind him, he's a bit shy. It's Arnold, right?"

Looking almost comical as he gaped like a fish, Arthur managed to close his mouth before the fly buzzing around his head got in.

"It's Arthur, actually," he said, his jaw tight as he stiffly took Will's hand. "I'm afraid Merlin has never mentioned you."

"Oh, we're very private people," Will informed him before winking at Merlin lasciviously and throwing his arm around him. "That's my Mer Mer, never one to brag."

"I see," Arthur said, turning to look at Merlin. He wasn't smiling. Merlin just stared back and gawped with horrified disbelief. He was going to murder Will.

“Arthur,” a drunk Agravaine suddenly cut through their conversation from across the room, red-faced and with his letchy arms around a pair of giggling, bikini-clad twins. “Come here would you,
Arthur looked back at his Uncle briefly, his jaw clenched tightly before he looked back at Merlin and Will. As an expert on Arthur’s many expressions, Merlin thought he could read any look on his face. Now, however, there was a look in his eyes that Merlin didn’t know what to make of.

“It was nice to meet you, William,” Arthur said curtly, nodding his head before ignoring Merlin completely and walking away to join his Uncle.

"You, too!” Will said, waving as primly as the queen until he let out a "Hey!” when Merlin grabbed him by the arm and yanked him into the nearest alcove. "Ow, watch it, would you, this jacket cost £40!"

"Screw the jacket!” Merlin exploded, his face furious. "Will, what the hell was that? Why would you even say that?! Everyone is going to think I'm gay now."

"I know. You're welcome by the way," Will said, heartily patting his back like he had done him a favour. "Models love gay men, Merlin. They get naked in front of them. I'm talking muffs-out kind of naked here. They think gay blokes are a challenge to turn. They'll be all over you like a rash - mark my words. What? Don't look at me like that, I did it for you! You need to get laid! You and I both do! Seriously am I the most amazing best friend or what?"

Merlin shut his gaping mouth.

"I'm going to murder you,” he said simply, raising his hand threateningly for a hex.

"Hey, hey, hey, there's no need for that! You'll be thanking me when you're balls-deep in some leggy lingerie model," Will pointed out, although he sensibly backed up and hid behind a column as he did.

Merlin winced at his words, lowering his hand.

"Christ, how are you even allowed out in polite society?" he asked candidly.

"Hey, the ladies can't get enough of me,” said the column.

"Yes, they're so dazzled by you that they run screaming in the opposite direction,” Merlin muttered, his anger dissolving as quickly as it had arrived.

"Hey, that only happened the once and that old lady was obviously touched in the- Crikey! It's Morgana Le Fay. Quick! On a scale of 1-10, how manly do I look right now?"

"Minus 5," Merlin said grumpily.

"Still manlier than you then. Excellent." Handing Merlin the package of socks, Will then winked. "Wish me luck."

"Wish you-? Will, you are not hitting on her at a photoshoot!"

"Don't get your knickers in a twist,” Will responded, running a hand down the creases on his obscene t-shirt to try and make himself more presentable. The irony of this was not lost on Merlin. "I'll be on my best behaviour." He then lifted up his hand and made the Vulcan 'live long and prosper' hand greeting. "Scout's honour."

"That wasn't even a Scout's sign,” Merlin tried to argue but Will had already drifted off towards
Morgana and had already started to say god knows what to her. Whatever it was he was yammering about, it kept making her dart her eyes over towards Merlin with a conniving look about her.

He had a bad feeling about this.

"Merlin? Merlin is that you?" a voice suddenly said from behind him.

Sure this day couldn't get any worse, Merlin turned around with resignation, ready to face yet another problem that he had to fix. When he caught sight of the speaker, however, he immediately repressed a laugh.

"Um, Lance? Is that you?" he jested in response because what had once been Lance now looked like a peacock had thrown up all over him. His face and torso were painted blue and green, his hair had been slicked back with gold paint and he had an arc of real peacock feathers attached to his backside, fanning behind him like a tail. Merlin bit the inside of his cheek. He looked like an extra from Avatar. "Let me guess," Merlin hazarded. "Sigun?"

"The man is a sadist," Lance replied honestly, answering Merlin's question with a disturbed look on his face. "The man put feathers in places feathers should never be placed, Merlin."

Merlin put a hand over his mouth to hide his smile. After all, friends didn't laugh at their friends' misfortunes, even if they did look like overgrown smurfs.

"I'm a little confused here, Lance," Merlin said, stifling his sniggers as best he could, "what exactly is the theme of this month's cover? I'm seeing lingerie models, girls in evening gowns, poor unsuspecting journalists dressed like Blue Man Group's drag queen cousin..."

"It's the five best designers this autumn, apparently," said Lance like he barely understood any of this himself. "I'm Sigun, the lingerie models are Calvin Klein, the evening dresses are Valentino, the poor girl who keeps falling over is representing a company with a name I can't even pronounce and we're still waiting for Essetir's model to get here. He should have been here an hour ago. Arthur's been pulling out his hair about it."

"Yeah, Gwen mentioned that," Merlin replied, looking around the floor in case he found tufts of blond hair blowing like tumbleweed across the floor. "I better go and check everything is all right with him. Oh, and I have to give him this sandwich before it gets to room temperature. He hates soggy jalapeños. See you in a bit, Lance."

Merlin then bee-lined towards where a stressed-looking Arthur was now standing with Agravaine and what seemed like a team of his advisors.

Merlin then stopped and raised his eyebrows as Arthur threw a nearby chair at a wall.

He had seen Arthur throw tantrums before -- tantrums so spectacular that spoiled brats around the country could come together and pay homage to his technique -- but the one he was currently throwing was putting the others that Merlin had seen previously to shame.

"What do you mean he's not available?!" Arthur squawked hysterically at a team of extremely stressed-looking people. "You told me he was late! You never mentioned that he just wasn't showing up!"

His young advisors, all of whom were dressed in a variety of trendy neon numbers and sporting similar asymmetric hairstyles, looked at each other nervously. A timid-looking man in the middle
eventually stepped forward, looking rather uneasy.

"We've tried his agent, sir but he doesn't seem to know where Cenred is either..."

Arthur's eye twitched. That was warning enough for Merlin to put the sandwich down and covertly move anything sharp away from Arthur's reach.

"Look, do we have time to get anyone else?" Merlin cut in, plonking himself down on the table before Arthur had a Hulk-like episode and flipped it over. "What about our model directory? I had to digitise that stupid folder so I know there are at least a hundred models in there who could do it. All they have to do is flick their hair and look moodily at a camera right? How hard can that be?"

Arthur just glared at Merlin.

"Shouldn't your boyfriend be taking you home?" he asked acidly.

"You have a boyfriend?" Agravaine cut in, looking like Christmas had come early.

"Smart move, Merlin!" someone else chimed in. "Being gay is totally in right now. Civil partnership on the cards?"

"Okay, okay, Will is not my boyfriend, he's just an idiot," Merlin said, lifting up his hands to stop this before it got out of hand. "And we're not talking about me, we're talking about the shoot. Here, we can use the studio laptop," he said, grabbing the computer from the next table before sitting down with it. "Now, let me just get on the network, open the directory database and... voila, we can find a replacement."

"It's not as easy as that, Merlin," Arthur snapped but he still slapped Merlin's hand away from the mouse and started clicking through the online portfolios himself. Scrolling through the profiles impatiently, Arthur commented aloud as he did, rejecting model after model so scathingly that he reminded Merlin of a blond Simon Cowell (minus the high-waisted trousers and the fake tan). "No, no, fat, no, in rehab, no, slept with his wife, no..."

"Wait!" Merlin cried out, slapping his hand down on top of Arthur's to stop him from going any further. "Wow, who is this?"

A dark-haired, rogueishly handsome man stared back at Merlin from the screen. The tones of his profile photograph were breath-taking and the set was spectacular but all Merlin could concentrate on were the subject's eyes, which were so mesmerising that they seemed to look straight into Merlin's soul. Even the man's mouth brimmed with life as a smirk tugged at his lips, playful and sultry as his oiled body shone back in invitation. Goosebumps washed over Merlin's body.

Arthur, however, looked at the picture and waved airily.

"Oh, that's just Gwaine," he said nonchalantly before moving his finger to click to the next page. Merlin immediately stopped him.

"He's amazing," Merlin said breathlessly.

Arthur scoffed, sounding remarkably like a sow at feeding time.

"He's also a drunken idiot who has slept with every model in the industry and is more trouble than he's worth."

"The difference, Merlin," Arthur huffed, saying Merlin's name like it was the ultimate insult, "is that my father has blacklisted him from working here after he punched a photographer in the face. He's a loose cannon."

"But he's perfect. And it says here that he's worked with Essetir in the past. We need him, Arthur."

Arthur frowned and if Merlin didn't know better, he would say Arthur was offended that his own perfection was being overlooked.

"We're here to find the face of the new issue, Merlin, not find you a husband."

"For the last time, I'm not interested in boyfriends or husbands," Merlin said petulantly but Arthur ignored this to carry on frantically looking, only briefly looking up from the screen to fix his eyes on Merlin and say,

"Go home, Merlin. Or, if you do insist on staying, do what you do best and do something about my sandwich, would you? The bread has gone all soggy."

"Yes, Arthur," Merlin said, letting out an exhale of frustration as he picked up the sandwich. Tempted to walk out and leave the ungrateful idiot to his own problems, Merlin turned around and was on his way back to the kitchen when his phone buzzed in his pocket with a routine calendar reminder.

His phone. The same phone that was connected to the Camelot network that the directory was on.

Merlin stopped mid-step, an idea forming in his head. First, he proceeded to bodily escort a reluctant Will out the building as he practically kicked and screamed his way out the exit. Next, he replaced Arthur's soggy slices of bread with two fresh ones and presented it beautifully back to him on a plate. And lastly, and most importantly, he pulled up the index of models on his phone, found Gwaine's profile again and in next to no time had made a note of both his telephone number and his address. Merlin then smiled. He had a feeling he had just found the answer to all their problems.

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The listed address Gwaine had provided turned out to be a rather ramshackle studio that was narrow and thin in dimension and claustrophobic in size, reminding Merlin of Kilgharrah's cramped little broom cupboard in the basement. It was also full to capacity with seemingly random items, from rails of clothing and photography equipment to cardboard boxes and crates of alcohol. A great many crates of alcohol.

If Merlin didn't know better, he could have sworn this studio doubled as a speakeasy during peak hours.

"Tigers, ladies, give me tigers, rawr!" the flamboyant photographer was encouraging, clawing at the air and wagging his eyebrows roguishly at the girls as he snapped. Even with the camera pressed to his face, Merlin recognised that glorious head of hair. The man gave the glossy hair extensions in Cheryl Cole's shampoo ads a run for their money.
"Er, hello? Sorry, are you Gwaine? We talked on the phone?" Merlin said, his voice reverberating around the small studio as he approached the man in question.

Gwaine, who somehow managed to be more attractive in the flesh than he was in print, was dressed in nothing but a pair of jeans, his feet bare and a tribal sort of necklace around his neck. The heavy stubble he was sporting made him look more rugged and edgy than the clean-shaven photos that Merlin had seen and he was -- most importantly -- shirtless and in possession of a body so perfect that Merlin wondered if the six-pack staring back at him had been painted on.

Merlin tried not to gawk but he knew it was a bit of a lost cause.

"Do you always take pictures with your shirt off?" he blurted out before he could stop himself.

Gwaine replied to this by flicking his curtain of glorious dark hair, smiling charmingly and dabbing his damp chest with a nearby towel.

"What can I say?" he said good-naturedly and Merlin could hear an Irish accent. "Photography gets me hot." He then threw the towel over his shoulder and winked at Merlin, who burst into a laugh at the blatant shamelessness.

Merlin liked him already.

"I'm Merlin," Merlin said extending his much rejected hand. Gwaine just smiled warmly and took it immediately.

"Good to meet you, Merlin," he said genuinely. He then looked over at Merlin with an accessing eye before pulling out his camera and snapping him.

Merlin let out a nervous laugh but held still, his cheeks going crimson at the attention.

"Um, what are you doing?" he asked warily.

"Capturing those cheekbones. You could cut glass with those beauties," Gwaine said, lowering the camera to grin wolfishly. "You sure you're from Pendragon? They only ever work with beef cakes with no necks and even tinier brains. You, however, are spectacular. How would you like to run away with me?"

Merlin laughed, shaking his head at Gwaine with wonder. Arthur was right. The man could charm the habit off a nun.

"Are you like this with everyone?" Merlin asked, his voice sounding far flirtier than he intended. He blamed it entirely on his hormones.

"Oh, only with really beautiful people," Gwaine returned suavely. Smiling, he then threw the towel off to the side to land on a sorry-looking sofa that was more stuffing than anything else. "So, Merlin-with-the-perfect-cheekbones, you called me about a job?"

"Yes, a modelling job," Merlin said, happy to get to the heart of the matter as both he and his cheekbones tried not to flush too much. "I saw your photos and your face is exactly what Camelot's newest issue needs."

"Ah," said Gwaine, taking a large swig from a tumbler containing an amber liquid that made his limbs relax and loosened his smile. "Sorry for the wasted trip, Merlin, but I don't do that anymore."

Merlin heart sank.
"But... your portfolio..." he began.

"Was blacklisted, kid, as was my career," Gwaine smiled easily, barely a hint of bitterness in his words as he let out a casual shrug. "Had a disagreement with a photographer. Artistic differences. He saw himself as a creative. I saw him as a lecherous twat who forced girls to shag him to get their break. But that's all in the past. As I always say, Merlin, onwards and upwards. See I'm a photographer now. Got a real talent for it, haven't I ladies?"

The models, who were in the middle of changing back into their regular clothes, paused long enough to look over at Gwaine with unbridled affection.

"Yes, Gwaine, even with the lens cap on," the blonde one on the left said, amused.

"Bugger, I knew I forgot something," Gwaine said cheerfully enough, clapping his hands together. "Oh well, practise makes perfect! Come on, Merlin, might as well snap you as you're here. What would you say about getting naked and posing on that bear skin rug for me? Too fast? Do I need to buy you dinner first? How about a drink?"

Gwaine then lifted his drink towards Merlin, who gagged at the smell, his eyes watering.

"What is that?! Paint thinner?" Merlin choked.

"On the rocks," Gwaine said pleasantly. He then took another sip before shaking it in front of Merlin's face, the overpowering waft nearly making Merlin pass out. "Want some?"

"No," said Merlin, getting a little frustrated as he pushed the drink aside. "I want you!"

"Excellent! My bedroom is right through this way..."

"No, not like that!" Merlin said hastily, trying not to dwell on if he subconsciously did mean it like that. "I mean for the shoot, you would be amazing. And it would be the perfect platform for a comeback for you!"

Gwaine wrinkled his nose.

"Look, Merlin, Uther Pendragon-"

"Isn't in charge anymore, Arthur is," Merlin persisted. "He's fair. He'll give you a chance."

Gwaine snorted at this.


"Oh, he is," Merlin confirmed. "And he's also a total prat who has the domestic skills of an ogre. But he's smart. And he knows talent when he sees it."

Gwaine tilted his head, eyeing Merlin's passion with a predatory little smile.

"Sure you don't want to wander into my bedroom with me for a few hours?" he asked again, almost pleadingly.

Merlin blushed.

"Raincheck," he said and then grabbed a nearby shirt and threw it at Gwaine. "Now come on. We need to get to the other side of London before the fancy photographer storms off. But first, we're going to get you a coffee and a shower - we need to sober you up."
When Merlin showed up at Camelot with an espresso-downing Gwaine in tow, the first thing Arthur did wasn't to say "Well done, Merlin!" or "You've saved the day, Merlin!" or even "You're the best assistant in the world, Merlin!"

Instead, he wrinkled his nose like he had a dead fish lodged up one of his nostrils and pompously said, "He reeks of what Starbucks would smell like if they started doing brothels."

Gwaine, who was within earshot, smiled pleasantly, said, "Nice to see you again, too, princess," and unhesitatingly gave Arthur the middle finger in reply.

Merlin groaned, pinched the bridge of his nose and tried to find a calm place where he didn't feel compelled to knock their heads together with magic.

"Yes, Arthur, that's why he needs to use your shower," Merlin said, trying to sound patient, "with your girly shower gel and your flowery shampoo."

"Ginseng is not flowery." Arthur huffed but Merlin ignored him and steered Gwaine towards Arthur's private cubicle.

"Straight down the corridor, towels are inside," he said perkily. Gwaine smirked, gave him a salute and disappeared through the sliding door, pulling off his shirt while he did.

Merlin watched him and his perfect body go, slightly cross-eyed before Arthur snapped his fingers in front of his eyes.

He didn't look amused.

"What did I tell you about him being impossible to work with?" he demanded. "Tell me, Merlin, do you purposely try to go against my direct orders or do you accidentally stumble into pissing me off?"

"Well, do you have a better idea?" Merlin shot back irritably. "No. Exactly. Now go downstairs and prep the photographer."

"Aren't you forgetting something, Merlin?" Arthur said, poking Merlin in the chest with a manicured finger.

Merlin blinked, trying to think back on the many ridiculous things on Arthur's to-do list. Depressingly, he was pretty sure he had done them all.

"I'm pretty sure I haven't," Merlin replied smartly.

"I give the orders." Arthur elaborated, pointing at himself and looking snippy. "Not you."

"Right, of course you do, sir. You're the boss." Merlin nodded before replying, barely a beat later, "Now go downstairs and get things organised. I'll sort out Gwaine."
Muttering something darkly under his breath that sounded remarkably like "Oh, I just bet you will", Arthur stomped off, looking petulant.

Five minutes later, Gwaine popped out of the shower, vigorously towelling his wet hair.

"So, are you two a couple?" he had asked.

"Huh?" replied Merlin intelligently.

"You and Lord Toffington there," Gwaine said, smiling indulgently at Merlin as the two of them headed down to the studio. "Because I'm not one to wreck a happy home here." Gwaine then tilted his head thoughtfully, shrugged and conceded through a rascally grin, "Okay, that's a complete lie because I totally am but Arthur seems like the angry, jealous, face-punching type and I'm really fond of my face."

"Wait, you think Arthur and I are...?" Merlin didn't finish the sentence. He wasn't sure he wanted to, especially since it made his heart thump much more than he wanted to examine. Feeling a blazing heat wash over him, Merlin let out a cough. "We're not. We're really not. We're both straight, especially Arthur."

Gwaine smirked at that, his eyes glittering far too knowingly for Merlin's liking.

"But not especially you?" he enquired, his voice low and interested as he waggled his eyebrows brazenly. Merlin couldn't help it, he laughed. Gwaine really was relentless. It was a rather endearing trait.

"This is us," Merlin said, purposely not answering Gwaine's question as he stopped outside the studio dressing room. "Ask for Gwen, she'll take you to make-up and get your wardrobe sorted."

"I'd prefer if you got me sorted," Gwaine said candidly, leaning close enough to back Merlin into the door.

"I'm sure you would," came Arthur's voice coolly from behind then, almost making Merlin jump out of his skin with his silent ninja-like footfalls. "But I'm afraid my useless manservant has more pressing things to deal with."

"Useless assistant," Merlin corrected Arthur immediately.

"At least you knew to keep the useless in there," Arthur said, his mouth quirking into a dry smile. The smile soon disappeared, however, as he looked back at Gwaine, the fondness on his face immediately shutting down. "It's just straight through those doors," Arthur said with forced civility, motioning Gwaine towards the dressing room entrance. "We'll call you when the photographer is ready."

Nodding at this, Gwaine took a moment to wink at Merlin before making his way through the doors with a rather spectacular swish of his hair. Merlin snorted out a laugh. Some people were just born to be in front of a camera.

Arthur, on the other hand, didn't seem to find Gwaine half as amusing as Merlin did.

"He better be good, Merlin," Arthur said like Merlin's head was on the line, his face more serious than Merlin had ever seen it. "Seriously, he better be good."

Luckily for Merlin, Gwaine really was.
Not only did he work the camera better than anyone Merlin had ever seen before but Gwaine just seemed to understand exactly what the photographer wanted. Some models had the right contacts and others were simply lucky enough to be highly-photogenic bastards but Gwaine gave off a star quality that just couldn't be bottled or taught. Merlin had thought that what he saw in those initial portrait shots of Gwaine were inspired but they paled in comparison to how Gwaine looked in the pictures for Essetir.

Essetir's style was heavy on the black leather, metal and guyliner, making Gwaine look like any S&M fan's wet dream. The photographer himself must have liked a bit of that because he kept getting distracted and constantly tried to rub oil into Gwaine's pecs, using 'lighting' and 'chest glare' as an excuse.

Even Arthur, who had taken a dislike to Gwaine for some reason that Merlin didn't understand, couldn't really fault the pictures or the man in them. He tried his hardest to, however, as he looked at one particular shot and snorted at Gwaine.

"You could give every fish in the sea a run for their money with the amount you pout," he said.

"It's a shame that fish aren't in the modelling industry then," Gwaine returned, unphased. "And in any case, those weren't pouts, my good man, I was actually blowing kisses at Merlin." Gwaine then grinned at Merlin who, blushing down to his toes, couldn't stop himself from grinning back.

Arthur frowned at this behaviour which made Merlin look up at the ceiling with a sigh. Arthur always frowned when people were being nice to him. It was like he disapproved of Merlin getting spoiled by kindness.

"Anyway," Arthur said loudly, as though raising his voice would completely drown out the previous conversation, "that should be you done for the day. I appreciate the fact that this was last minute so your pay will reflect that. Your time was much appreciated."

Gwaine looked curiously at Arthur, like he was an oddity or a puzzle that he just couldn't get his head around.

"You know," Gwaine said honestly, his eyes crinkling at the corners, "I remember you being a total prick the last time we met but it looks like the years have changed you. You're less like your father now. And before you get all butthurt about it, I meant that as a compliment."

"I don't get 'butthurt'," Arthur said pithily.

"Well, I wish I did more often," said Gwaine audaciously before turning to Merlin and grinning like a cat that had come across a large vat of cream. "Which reminds me... Merlin, you glorious creature, when will you ditch this clown and run away with me? Unlike this loser, I'd treat you like the king you are. I'd shower you with diamonds, give you all the chocolate you want..."

"Gwaine," Arthur said warningly. Gwaine just laughed and held up his hands amiably.

"All right, princess, don't get your knickers in a twist," he said, before turning to smile at Merlin, his eyes glittering with something that made the hair on the back of Merlin's neck stand on end. Gwaine then pulled out a business card from his pocket,

"In case you're peckish sometime."

"Peckish?" Merlin repeated, feeling a little hot in the face as Gwaine leaned a little too close for propriety.
"Lunch, dinner, coffee. Breakfast," here Gwaine winked and his fingers lingered on Merlin's as he handed the card over. " Seriously, call me any time, day or night. My door is always open for you, Merlin."

With that last suggestive comment, Gwaine gave them both a nod before turning and swaggering out the door, his hips moving with such supreme self-confidence that if anyone other than Gwaine had tried to walk like that, they would have looked ridiculous. Merlin stared after him, shaking his head in wonder. He had never met anyone like him before and he doubted he ever would again. He made Arthur look like a wallflower in comparison.

"Don't think you're special, Merlin, he's like that with everyone," Arthur said the moment Gwaine was out the door, his voice bitter as if he could hear Merlin making distinctions between them in his head.

Merlin's soft smile, which had been plastered on his face ever since Gwaine had stepped into the room, turned into a bemused frown as he looked at his boss.

"Huh?" he replied with confusion. "What do you mean?"

"I mean he flirts with anything with a pulse," Arthur said rather harshly. "If I were you, I wouldn't take his proposition seriously. I'm sure he's outside right now trying to work his charms on those stray dogs that keep riffling through our bins."

Merlin looked down at the number in his hand where Gwaine had underlined 'Call me, Magic Merlin' three times. Merlin then raised a brow at Arthur, looking at him doubtfully.

"Gwaine sounded pretty serious to me," Merlin said, feeling a little put off by the assuredness in Arthur's voice. He knew he wasn't perfect-looking like either Gwaine or Arthur but he wasn't so bad that he never got a come on every now and again.

Apparently, Arthur didn't believe this for a second.

"Don't be absurd, Merlin, he was obviously joking," Arthur said obnoxiously, the self-important tone in his voice so snooty and infuriating that Merlin found himself feeling highly offended.

"Why, because someone like him would never think of looking at someone like me unless it was for a laugh?" Merlin put forward as he narrowed his eyes dangerously, his magic swirling in a whirlwind of annoyance inside him.

"Don't be a moron, Merlin," Arthur said abrasively, waving a nonchalant hand that was clearly waving off Merlin's irritation like it was trivial. "Not only is he a model but he's constantly surrounded by beautiful people day in, day out. Why on earth do you think he'd look at you?"

Arthur's words were like a literal slap in the face, leaving Merlin blinking and red-faced as he physically recoiled. Arthur had obviously realised he had said the wrong thing because the look of superiority immediately fell off his face and he tried to back-track as quickly as an uninsured driver at the scene of an accident.

"I mean, I'm not saying that you're completely hideous. I'm sure some people are attracted to big ears. No one I know, of course, and definitely not me because I'm not blind but there might be someone desperate enough out there to consider-" he rabbited on, digging himself even further into a hole. Fuming, Merlin glared at Arthur so hard that his magic unconsciously jerked the champagne flute in his hand, causing the entire thing to spill across Arthur’s front and into his hair.

"What the-?!" Arthur cried out in confusion, horrified as £500 of Krug dripped foamily down his
forehead and splashed over a pair of suit trousers that were expensive enough to pay off the deficit of a third world country. "Good god, this is Chanel! Merlin, quick, get me a towel!"

But Merlin had already stormed off towards the studio changing rooms to vent at Gwen, a feeling of grim satisfaction bubbling in his stomach as he heard Arthur's wail.

Pushing open the door, Merlin's frustrations were on the tip of his tongue -- that Arthur was an ungrateful prat, that Merlin should quit, that some women (namely Hunith) said his ears gave him character -- when he realised not only that she wasn't alone but that she was having a heated discussion with a mysterious and handsome dark-skinned man that Merlin had never seen or heard about before.

This ignorance had smarted a little because when Merlin wasn't breaking his back doing Arthur's evil bidding, he would spend the rest of his free time with Gwen, gorging on the fatty snacks the stick insects in the office refused to eat and gossiping about the day-to-day scandal at Camelot, from Arthur's newest conquest, Morgana lying yet again about her real dress size and when exactly Gwen was going to pluck up the courage to ask Lance out.

They even occasionally ventured out of the office during lunch to sit on the steps of the clock tower at Seven Dials, cheerfully licking at 99s and talking about life. Their conversations were so easy, in fact, that if Merlin truly believed in that whole soul mates thing Kilgharrah kept rattling off about, he would have no doubt that Gwen was his. They had a way of understanding each other and finishing each other's' sentences that Merlin had only ever really had with Will. Gwen just seemed to get him and seemed to know his thoughts before he did. She really had grown into one of the best friends he had ever had.

So the fact that Merlin was watching a part of her life that he knew nothing about both piqued his curiosity and saddened him a little.

"Come on, Gwen," the stranger was saying, his voice smooth even when he was pleading. "I'm back for good this time. I promise."

"Don't make any more promises you can't keep, Elyan," Gwen said in a way that was intended to be sarcastic but ended up sounding so strained and bone-tired that it made Merlin instantly dislike this man simply for putting that tone in her voice. "I've had enough of those for a lifetime."

"Gwen, you know that's not fair," the man replied, wincing under her doubtful look. "I'm sorry I didn't contact you but it's not like I didn't want to. It was just never the right time."

"Right time?" Gwen suddenly said short-temperedly in a voice that Merlin would never usually associate with her. "Elyan, I didn't even know if you were alive or dead! If it wasn't some hare-brained scheme with you it would be yet another reckless adventure. Do you know that I prayed every night that I didn't get a policeman knocking at my door, telling me you were actually gone for good?"

"Gwen..." the man said, sounding pained as he reached a hand out towards her but Gwen simply recoiled, which was the moment she finally spotted Merlin.

"Oh, Merlin!" she said, looking embarrassed. "I didn't realise you were here - not that I thought you were spying -- you would never do that -- I just - oh dear, did you need me for something?"

"Yeah, but we can do it another time if it isn't convenient," Merlin said kindly before boldly stepping forward and extending his hand to Elyan, his eyes cool.
"Hi, I'm Merlin. I'm the PA of the editor-in-chief and a friend of Gwen's. You?"

"Oh, Elyan," Elyan said, a little thrown but perfectly amiable as he hesitantly shook his hand. He then looked across at Gwen, who purposely ignored him. "I'm Gwen's older brother."

"Oh," said Merlin, taken aback. He had suspected an old boyfriend. Merlin's frosty demeanour immediately thawed and he even returned a smile once he noticed that Elyan had his sister's kind eyes. After that, Merlin couldn't stop himself from genuinely shaking his hand. Gwen gave him a look that clearly said 'traitor'. "Nice to meet you, Elyan. Are you just visiting or do you live in London?"

"Visiting," said Gwen just as Elyan said, "I've just moved back."

"Oh," said Merlin, looking awkwardly between the siblings as Elyan scuffed his shoe on the floor and Gwen looked like she wanted to be anywhere but there. "Um, well, that's great! I'm sure Gwen would love to have you around more." When neither of them responded to this, Merlin coughed and quickly moved on. "So, Elyan, did a new job bring you back to London?"

"Actually, I'm looking for work," Elyan clarified, darting a hopeful look at Gwen but she was too busy staring pointedly at a blank wall, her arms crossed.

"Oh, really?" Merlin said enthusiastically. "What are the odds, huh? We actually have quite a few vacancies that have just popped up. I'm Arthur's assistant so he makes me type up the job descriptions. I should still have a bunch of them in my inbox. I'm sure he wouldn't mind if I let you peek at a few of them. I mean, I say that but Arthur is the kind of guy who minds when his tea isn't the perfect temperature. He's a bit of a diva. Makes Mariah Carey look undemanding in comparison." Merlin let out a laugh at this but his chuckle soon fizzled out into an uncomfortable cough at the look Gwen threw at him. "Or I could just shut my mouth and keep this to myself. Yup, that might work, too. Anyway, it was lovely meeting you, Elyan. I'll go now before I make an even bigger tit of myself."

"Merlin, wait," Gwen called after him as he headed for the door, reaching out to place a soft hand on his arm. She bit her lower lip, looking a little guilty. "I'm sorry. I owe you an explanation."

"You don't owe me anything, Gwen," Merlin assured her, patting the hand on his arm gently. "I obviously walked in on a private moment. I do that a lot. Just ask Arthur. I know most of his lady friends better than he does. Mind you, that's mainly because I actually ask them what their names are. Anyway, don't mind me, it's okay. We'll talk later."

"Hey, wait," Gwen said, as perceptive as always as she pulled him back to look at his face closely. "You look upset. What did Arthur do now?"

"Arthur was just Arthur, nothing new," Merlin assured, smiling wryly at how well she knew him. "Asking him not to be rude and insensitive is a bit like asking cats not to chase mice and politicians not to lie. It's all right. Anyway, I should probably go back before he fires my arse for walking out on him during a laundry emergency. Last I checked, he was sobbing over his soiled suit like it was a gunshot victim."

"Okay but we'll talk about this later," Gwen promised, her hand lingering on Merlin's for a moment before she let him go. Her face was both tender and concerned and it was enough to make Merlin truly smile at her, appreciative of her care and attention.

Merlin's reception from Arthur, on the other hand, was a lot less friendly.
"Where the hell did you go?!” Arthur demanded in his usual tone of self-importance when Merlin walked through the door of Arthur's office. Arthur was standing in his silk boxers, his wet trousers laid out on his desk and holding an iron in his hand like he had no idea what to do with it. He then shook it, making it rattle. "This stupid thing isn't working. It's obviously broken. Can you hear that? Something's come loose. You need to buy me a new one."

Still annoyed at Arthur, Merlin folded his arms over his chest, tried (and failed) to stop himself from ogling Arthur’s powerful thighs and simply said,

"You do realise that you need to plug it in for it to work, right?” He eyed the cable trail where it ended at Arthur's feet. "Because there's this marvellous thing called electricity that might help you out there."

Were Arthur someone less entitled, he would have had the good grace to look discomfited by this oversight. As it was, Arthur just scoffed at this logic and said, "Well that's just stupid, it should be cordless," before plonking it down on the table, collapsing into his chair and looking at Merlin expectantly. He then lifted a hand and motioned towards the desk. "Go on, then. Iron it for me. I've got a catwalk show to go to tonight and I need to look impeccable. After that, you can dress me. Let's hope you're better at that than you are at dressing yourself. Well, what are you gawking at?"

Because Merlin was gawking as he just stared at Arthur in amazement, alternating his gaze between Arthur's tanned legs to the pair of trousers laid out on the desk that Merlin noticed with satisfaction had the damp patch right on the crotch.

"Dress you?” Merlin repeated, unable to articulate just how disturbed he was by Arthur's laziness. "As in, pull up your trousers for you? You can't be serious."

"I know you can barely dress yourself but I've just had a manicure," Arthur drawled, lifting up his bare legs to place them on the desk before crossing them at the ankle. "So chop chop, get on with it."

"Sod off, you have your own hands, dress yourself," Merlin returned, crossing his arms defiantly.

"You know, you really are the worst employee in the entire world. You're lucky I'm charitable enough not to inflict you on anyone else. I should fire you, really. You hardly follow orders and on the rare occasion you do, you do it so badly that I would have been better off asking someone more capable of understanding what I mean, like a deaf mute."

"All part of my charm, Sire," Merlin simpered fakely, giving a mock bow.

"Sire?" Arthur repeated and Merlin could have sworn he saw a strange look in his eye before he shook his head and puffed his chest out importantly. "That sounds about right. I am royalty, after all."

"Distant royalty," Merlin amended because, unfortunately, that much was true. The Pendragons weren't directly in line to the throne but the family had enough royal blood in them to explain why Arthur was as spoiled as he was. They even had an estate somewhere in Hertfordshire where Arthur had grown up and Uther lived on the weekends. "Seriously, though, I'm dressing you now? Is this you still trying to make my life hell? Because I thought after the poison thing, you would stop trying to sabotage me out of this job."

Arthur snorted at this.

"Come on, don't be such a wet blanket, Merlin," he said apathetically. "You know I appreciated
"How do I know?" Merlin challenged tetchily. "From the way you boss me about? Throw things at my head? Don't appreciate anything I do? Tell me I'm too ugly to get legitimate attention from anyone?"

"Hey now, I never called you ugly-" Arthur tried to protest but Merlin had had enough.

"I don't expect us to be friends, Arthur. You're my boss and as we both know, I'm only here because I'm not a busty blonde you want to get your leg over but I thought we had got somewhere. But fine, if that's how you want things to be, fine. I'll continue to clean your dogs' shit and stay late at the office and spend my entire weekend breaking up with the girls you sleep with for you - who by the by either end up sobbing waterfalls or trying to claw my eyes out like it's my fault. Do you think I like having to go through that? Because all that goes way beyond my job description and you know it."

"God, it's like having a wife," Arthur groaned but he quickly carried on before Merlin could open his mouth and continue. "All right, fine! Fucking fine. I'll stop treating you like a slave, happy? Look, I'll even put my trousers on by myself, see?" Arthur then did, wincing slightly as the damp patch stuck wetly to his skin. "Ugh. See? I'm perfectly capable. Now stop glaring at me like I cancelled Christmas and go pick something out of my wardrobe that won't look too ridiculous on you. We're going out."

"Wait, what? What do you mean out?" Merlin said, his anger deflating slightly as he scratched his head, thrown. "But I haven't finished yelling at you yet."

"Yes, you have, you great bloody girl. We have a catwalk show to get to."

"We?"

"Congratulations, your speech just promoted you into my plus one. Be grateful, I was going to take this hot Indian model with legs up to my chin but instead of getting off, I'm getting you. Now stop yammering at me and get changed. We need to be out of here in fifteen minutes. Oh and Merlin?" Arthur had stopped outside his en-suite bathroom door to look at Merlin seriously. "The poison thing? That was... um, thanks."

Merlin stared. Hearing Arthur say thank you was a bit like witnessing one of the other miracles on earth, like water turning to wine or the fact Elizabeth Hurley had an acting career.

"You're welcome," said Merlin, pretty sure that somewhere in the world, a herd of pigs were oinking while flying across the moon. Merlin then smiled and felt his magic buzz pleasantly inside him as Arthur smiled back.

Maybe this joint destiny thing wasn't such a bad thing, after all.
True to his word, Arthur's menial list of tasks dramatically decreased. In the past, he used to insist that Merlin complete every chore on his gigantic list, from bathing his dogs to polishing every shoe in his wardrobe but now Arthur was being -- heaven forbid -- decent.

Not only did he seem to have weaned himself off throwing every available object at Merlin's person but even his insults had lost their cruel sting and now just came across as harmless jibes. 'Arseface' and 'Prathead' had somehow become almost affectionate nicknames and every morning without fail, Arthur would find a new and innovative way to describe Merlin's ears ('cinnamon swirls' had been by far the worst, especially since Arthur had been eating one at the time).

It wasn't all fun and games, however. Arthur being Arthur was still as high-maintenance as the most demanding WAG on the planet and continued to be a daily pain in Merlin's posterior.

When he wasn't being nearly murdered by the new monster of the week, the snakes in the grass in the company seemed to slowly be making their play for his throne. Morgana silently tried to sabotage day-to-day operations while Agravaine panted after her like a middle-aged puppy in heat and Mordred skulked about in dark corners being generally creepy.

Morgana's plans had initially started out small, like misplacing 'The Book' -- the mock-up of the magazine that was often treated like the bible -- or getting Agravaine to whisper his poisonous suggestions into Arthur's ear. Now, however, she had been quiet and Merlin was sure she was plotting something he couldn't prove. Even Arthur, who had once been so paranoid about Morgana that Merlin had caught him trying to sneak a hidden camera into the hibiscus in her office, had almost totally let his guard down.

So Merlin had waited, watching Morgana every free moment he had that didn't include fighting off giant scorpions (Monday) and stopping Arthur from dooming Camelot with a series of plagues after he pissed off a one night stand's vengeful warlock father (Wednesday through Friday).

To Merlin's surprise, though, Morgana did not end up being the next big problem. Instead, that honour went to one of Arthur's incredibly active community of fans.

It wasn't like Merlin didn't know early on that Arthur had admirers. After all, he already knew Arthur was the walking wet dream of the majority of the building (including himself, sadly enough) but after having to wade through sacks of his fan mail on a regular basis, Merlin had come to realise that there were a lot of very deluded people out there.

From marriage proposals and teddy bears to letters so pornographic that they made Merlin's ears go pink, Merlin had a strong suspicion that every quack in the country was violently in love with his employer.

So when the death threats starting coming through the post and ended up being so creepy in nature that they made the people before seem as mentally sound as the Dalai Lama, Merlin felt it was a cause for concern. By the time the third letter found its way to Arthur's desk and contained detailed descriptions of necrophilia, Merlin had really started to worry.

"Don't be such a girl, Merlin," Arthur said in response to his fears, which felt slightly hypocritical for him to say considering that he was the one preening and posing into a mirror as he said it. "I always get weird notes."
"Arthur, have you read any of these? This isn't just another one of your misguided fans who, for some reason, can't see that you're an arrogant twit. This person wants to make love to your dead eye sockets! Do you think that is normal behaviour?"

"I'll agree that some fans to get carried away..."

"Eye sockets, Arthur!" Merlin bellowed.

Sadly, Arthur being the oblivious idiot he was didn’t listen and had not only waved off Merlin's concerns but did so again when a fourth note came, as though a letter detailing frying parts of his anatomy and eating them wasn't worth worrying about.

When the fifth note included a Polaroid of Arthur's bedroom, Arthur finally started to take things seriously.

Leon, naturally, was furious Arthur hadn't mentioned the notes to him earlier.

"Arthur, what the hell. How could you have failed to notify me about this?" he demanded angrily.

"Leon, honestly, it seemed harmless enough," Arthur said, demonstrating how seriously he took the situation as he buffed his nails.

"Harmless? Arthur, they wanted to make love to your eye sockets!"

"I told you that was weird," Merlin cut in like a know-it-all.

Arthur took a moment to give him a remarkably potent scowl before turning back to Leon.

"Look, can you get your contacts to figure out who this is? I don't want the police involved unless it’s absolutely necessary."

"Arthur, this doesn't sound like your run of the mill fan girl," Leon said, his forehead lined with apprehension. "As your head of security, my main job is to keep you safe."

"I want to know how this bloke got into your bedroom," Merlin wondered aloud. "It's like Fort Knox getting into that place. They'd have to be James Bond to bypass all your fancy security crap. Maybe it's an ex? You don’t have any old MI6 girlfriends floating about, do you?"

"I've never invited anyone to my place," Arthur said simply.

"Wait," Merlin paused, taking in the implications of this, "as in no one? Ever? Not your father or even an old girlfriend?"

"I don't do girlfriends."

Merlin looked at Leon who just waved his hand, as though telling him not to bother trying to fathom the complexities of Arthur's love life.

"Arthur, this is serious," Leon said instead, sitting himself down and looking at his best friend with concern, "and with the Christmas holidays approaching, I'm not happy about you staying at your place by yourself. Clearly, if they broke in once then they could do it again. Also, these letters are bloody disturbing. They seem to know everything you do. It’s almost as though it’s someone who knows the ins and outs of your schedule."

Leon then sneaked a look at Merlin, who felt slightly affronted by the suspicion. Sure he appreciated Arthur's looks — he was only human, after all -- but mistaking him for someone who
Jeffrey Dahmer would swap recipe cards with was highly insulting.

Arthur had also noticed Leon's speculative glance because he soon grunted at it.

"Leon, Merlin wouldn't know how to break into a house even if he had the keys in one hand and the blueprints in the other," Arthur said. "Not to mention that he's all loved-up with his boyfriend."

"I already told you, Will isn't my boyfriend," Merlin interrupted but they both seemed to ignore him to carry on talking about him anyway.

"Arthur, I'm not accusing Merlin here but I'm just saying to be wary-" Leon continued doggedly.

"Leon," Arthur said in so firm a voice that even Uther Pendragon would have backed down, "we're not talking about this anymore so just drop it. I trust Merlin with my life. End of discussion."

Merlin blinked at Arthur with shock, both touched and pleasantly surprised. Leon, on the other hand, didn't look half as approving but he grudgingly let it go.

"Fine. But either way, Arthur, you'll need somewhere else to stay for the time being, to be safe."

"Leon, what do you expect me to do?" Arthur whined, going from editor-in-chief to pre-schooler in the blink of an eye. "Go to the house in Hertfordshire and put my life on hold? I have a job and a social life, you know. I need to be in London. I'll book a hotel if it worries you so much."

"Arthur, this person knows all about you. They might even be tracking your credit cards. No, you should lay low and stay with someone you trust. I'd let you stay with me but I've already booked my tickets to spend Christmas with my family in Greece. What about your father or your Uncle Agravaine?"

"Balls, must we get them involved in all this?" Arthur asked, rubbing his fingers over his temples as though he was trying to dispel a headache. "My father already bollocks me enough about how common my celebrity is and Agravaine couldn't do it even if I wanted him to - he's in Switzerland on his annual ski trip."

"Arthur, you're not giving me many options here," Leon said tiredly, his infinite patience showing a strain. "I hate to say it but under the circumstances, it looks like Morgana is your best choice."

"I'd rather flat-share with the stalker and let him fuck my eye sockets every morning than share with Morgana," Arthur responded without the slightest hesitation before clarifying, "In case that wasn't clear, Leon, that means 'no, I'm not staying with her or her demon dog'."

"Lovely," Leon responded before dropping himself down onto a chair in surrender. "Well, I've exhausted all other possibilities. I'd say stay with one of the women you keep on retainer but considering the fact that you shag them and never call them again, they're just as likely to murder you as this psycho is. Honestly, I'm at a loss. I don't know what else to suggest."

"No need to worry, Leon, I have an idea," said Arthur confidently. He then turned to Merlin and looked expectantly at him. Merlin's response to this was to immediately check behind him. When he saw nothing but a window and a sorry looking potted-plant that looked like it needed watering, realisation slowly set in.

"Wait, you want to stay with me?" Merlin said in disbelief, pointing at himself just to be sure Arthur wasn't really talking about the dying peace lily. "My flat barely has enough space in it for the people who live there, let alone manage to fit in your massive head. I mean, it's a wonder it even got into this room to be honest."
"Charming little shit, isn't he?" Arthur briefly remarked with amusement to Leon before turning back to Merlin and saying, "You have a floor, don't you?"

"Wow, you're willing to sleep on the floor?" Merlin asked, impressed as he entertained the notion that perhaps Arthur had matured.

Unfortunately, Arthur chose that moment to scoff, proving he hadn't matured in the slightest.

"Of course I'm not sleeping on the floor," Arthur said derisively, as if Merlin had been born backward. "Naturally I'll take your bed. I am a guest after all. The floor is for you."

"I haven't even said yes to this and you've already turfed me out of my bed and delegated me to my own floor!?" Merlin remarked, scandalised. "You, sir, are no gentleman."

"Tell me something I don't know," Arthur replied, his smile playful. He then looked at Leon. "What do you say, Leon, does this arrangement work?"

Leon tilted his shaggy head to the side thoughtfully.

"It might," he considered.

"Wait a minute, a moment ago, you almost accused me of being the stalker!" Merlin reminded Leon, just in case he suffered from short-term memory loss. "Now you're all about me taking him home with me? What if I am the guy, huh? What if I try to make pâté out of Arthur's liver or decide to wear his skull as a hat?"

Leon looked rather impressed by Merlin's imagination.

"Do you have the inclination to do either of those things?"

"Well, it depends on how much of a pain he's being but no, not generally. Blood makes me squeamish," Merlin admitted truthfully. A thought then occurred to him. "So wait, Arthur, does this mean we're spending Christmas together? Because I have no idea what you would like as a present. I'd get you another framed photo of yourself posing like tosser for your wall but there's no space to put it."

"As sweet as that gesture is," said Arthur, sarcasm dripping off his words, "there's no need to worry about presents. I don't do Christmas."

"Wait," Merlin said, pausing. "So, like.... not at all?"

"No," said Arthur indifferently, going back to buffing his nails.

"So no presents?"

"No."

"No Christmas tree?"

"They shed."

"No stockings?"

"Silk and only if they're on hot women."

"Wow," Merlin replied, honestly taken aback as he looked at Arthur in a whole different light. He
had always imagined him having ridiculously fancy Christmases at Pendragon manor, with a tree to rival the one in Trafalgar Square and a glazed boar large enough to feed a banquet. The fact he didn’t have any of that made Merlin almost feel sorry for him. "So, you really never celebrate it? How can that even be possible?"

"Have you met my father?" Arthur said like it was reason enough which, when Merlin thought about it, it sort of was. "He told me Father Christmas wasn't real on my fifth birthday."

"That sounds like your father," Merlin accepted. His face then fell. "That's really sad, Arthur."

Arthur waved this off.

"Oh, I suspected he was a fraud when the one at our local grotto got drunk, snagged his beard on a Christmas tree and then ruined the nativity scene by throwing up in Jesus' manger."

"I didn't mean Father Christmas -- although, granted, that is pretty depressing, too -- but I meant the fact you've never really looked forward to the holidays."

"Oh God," Arthur groaned, rolling his eyes, "you're not going to cry on me, are you? Leon, you don't have a tissue to hand, do you? Merlin's about to burst into tears."

"Shut up!" Merlin laughed, swiping at his arm and ducking when Arthur aimed a smack at him in return. "And stop trying to distract me. It's not right that you haven't had a traditional Christmas. It's a good thing you're coming over to stay at mine, now you can have a proper one. My mum is the best cook on earth. It'd do you good to eat normal food instead of takeaway pizzas and those greasy horsemeat donor kebabs you insist on ingesting on a daily basis."

"My body is a temple," Arthur responded, pointing at a bicep to prove his point. "But I suppose I could bring myself to socialise with you for good food, if I must. No Christmas carols though. Or paper hats. If I get a whiff of either one, I'm off."

"You know, it really is a wonder someone wants to kill you," Merlin returned sardonically. "No, really, your gratitude is so astounding that it beggars belief."

"Technically, they're don't want to kill me, they want to do sexy things with my handsome corpse," Arthur corrected before sighing in a put upon way. "I always knew being this naturally charming would be my downfall."

"Oh hell, where is this psycho?" Merlin groaned. "Forget inviting you over to mine, I'm going to find them and just give them your schedule."

"Ladies," Leon cut in, looking like he was trying not to laugh. "Can we get back to the order of business for a moment? Merlin, Arthur staying at yours isn't a problem?"

"Well, I need to talk to my mum about it first," Merlin admitted because nothing went on under Hunith’s roof without her say so, "but yeah, I'm pretty sure it'll be okay. For some reason, she thinks Arthur is darling. I'm sure this grave misunderstanding is because she only met him for a few minutes."

"I'll have you know that in that short period of time, your mother and I got on wonderfully," Arthur immediately retorted. "We especially bonded over our mutual disbelief that she managed to have you as a son."

"Seriously, are you two always like this?" Leon wondered in amazement, looking curiously between them. Merlin, who had been in the middle of sticking his tongue out at Arthur, rolled it
back into his mouth and looked at Leon innocently.

“Like what?” he asked.

Leon looked like he was going to say something but he seemed to hold his tongue at the last moment, his eyes trailing over them both like he knew a secret they didn't.

"Anyway," he said, letting out a cough, "that's that sorted. My flight is the morning after the Camelot Christmas party so I'll be shadowing you like a hawk until then."

"Sir Leon, the walking cock-block," Arthur said with grand acerbity. "Well, if you are going to be my bodyguard at the party, you can at least match my costume. I'm in red so go for the Head Knight look this time. Also, I'm taking that Brazilian model I met at the Agent Provocateur party so do try to piss off long enough for me to get my end away."

"I'm making no promises," Leon said staunchly, unmoved by Arthur in a way Merlin rarely saw. Other than Merlin himself, Leon seemed to be the only person who didn't put up with Arthur’s crap. "I'll take the costume suggestion under advisement, though."

"Wait a minute, costumes? Knights?" Merlin questioned as excitement filled his stomach. "Wait, this isn't fancy dress, is it?"

"It's tradition," Arthur said pompously. "Everyone has to dress up in Arthurian garb for the Christmas party."

"Really?" Merlin said eagerly, already looking forward to this as he beamed about him. He had a bit of a camp fondness for dressing up. "So you can wear anything you want as long as it fits the Camelot look and feel?"

"Yes but I wouldn't worry about you, Merlin," said Arthur, picking up a mug and drinking from it to hide the huge smile threatening to overtake his face, "I've already picked your outfit."

"Wait, what? I didn't agree to this!"

"It's tradition, Merlin," Arthur said, looking like all his dreams had come true. "The editor always chooses his manservant's-

"Assistant's." -outfit. it's how it's always been at Camelot. No need to look so horrified. I got you a good one. Very debonair. Aren't you excited?"

Merlin responded to this by groaning, dropping his head in his hands and honestly saying, "Oh dear lord, shoot me now."

The gleeful grin Arthur gave him in response to this did nothing to abate his fears.
"So, this is the infamous Camelot Christmas Party," said Merlin a few days later, staring at the gargantuan renaissance fair that had somehow filled itself into every available bit of space in the Camelot offices. Wooden food and drink stalls lined the hallways, performers juggled, a man playing a lute was crooning about and a giant Christmas tree sat in the middle of the reception, covered in medieval decorations from brave looking knights and fluttering damsels to candles and miniature presents. People from all walks of the company were there, packed down the circular hallways of Camelot in the most colourful and spectacular outfits Merlin had ever seen.

With Morgana looking stunning in an emerald green gown and debutante Lady Annis in a fur outfit that made her look like a fancy extra from Game of Thrones, it really was apparent that this was a party thrown by a fashion magazine. Even the Oxbridge toffs, one of whom was dressed like a bosomly maiden, had got into the spirit of things and were so relaxed in their surroundings that they had gone as far as to pelt some idiot who had accidentally got himself stuck in the prop stocks with mince pies.

Gwen smiled from beside Merlin as he watched the bustling scene with fascination, pretty ribbons twirled in her hair as she wore a simple lavender peasant's dress. Sipping from a steaming goblet of mulled wine, she definitely looked the part.

"Oh, you haven't seen the half of it," she said excitedly. "To the left you'll find the olde worlde food stalls. To the right you'll find the arena slash boardroom for the annual sword fighting competition -- which Arthur wins every year -- then there's the costume competition - something Uther Pendragon himself judges. There's the magical section, where you can get a fortune teller to read your palm and tell you about your future and there's also a fire-eater prancing about. Oh! And two people always get caught having sex in the toilets. It's tradition." Gwen then paused to breathe, her face flushed, before barrelling on. "So where's your outfit?"

"Arthur is bringing it," Merlin said with dread. Looking miserable, he sniffed pitifully enough for Gwen to pat him on the shoulder. "I'm pretty sure he's going to dress me like the back end of a girl donkey. Oh god, he is going to dress me up as the back end of a girl donkey. Quick, hit me with that punch ladle. He can't torture me if I'm in A&E."

Gwen tried to look sympathetic but Merlin could see her lips trying not quirk into a smile.

"Don't you think you might be overreacting slightly?" she asked mildly. "I mean, surely he'll put you in peasant garb like everyone else. We'll all look as silly as each other. It won't be that bad, you'll see. Everything will be fine."

"What the hell is that?!" Merlin squawked ten minutes later, realising everything was not fine when Arthur -- who looked annoyingly dashing donned like a prince in chain mail, a royal red cape and a thin gold circlet around his head -- waggled what looked like pile of red feathers at him.

"Your outfit, of course," Arthur said with so much glee that it looked like his smile might break his face in two. "Now go put it on, there's a good manservant."

"Assistant," Merlin corrected but he looked green as he took the feathers. "This is abuse. Making me dress like an idiot in the workplace is surely a HR violation."

"You always look like an idiot in the workplace so your argument is invalid," Arthur reminded him. "Now go put this on or you'll be wearing the dress I picked out for my date."

"You're the anti-Christ," Merlin moaned genuinely. "I bet you catch fire the minute you step foot
in a church."

"Mild sunburn at the most," Arthur responded, smiling sweetly. "Now get. And come back when you've changed, I have a lute for you to collect to go with your outfit."

"Sadistic bastard," Merlin muttered under his breath as he stomped his way into the nearest empty meeting room to put it on.

After much struggling and swearing and tights -- *tights* -- to wiggle into, Merlin put the red feathered hat on his head and looked at his reflection in the glass. Merlin then shuddered. If it wasn't bad enough that he was in this ridiculous hat, red tights and curled buckled shoes, he was also in a tasselled red cape that made him look like a walking Pendragon advert as the gold lion logo was gaudily emblazoned on his chest. The worst part of the outfit, however, had to be underneath the lion, where the word 'manservant' was stitched in gold, confirming to Merlin that Arthur had had this costume specially made for him for maximum embarrassment. This was even worse than his Ginger Spice costume and that time he had to wear platform shoes and a ginger wig.

"It's not that bad," Gwen had tried to console him when he walked out and he would have potentially believed her had Arthur not thrown back his head and burst into a series of guffaws when he saw him, slapping his thigh through tears of mirth and pointing at Merlin like he was the funniest thing he had ever seen in his life.

Gloving at him, Merlin honestly considered using his magic to drop Arthur's princely trousers when he saw the two familiar faces of Gwaine and Elyan walk through the door. Gwen, looking pale, immediately rushed over to pull her brother aside while Gwaine swaggered over like a swashbuckling pirate. It immediately made Merlin beam out a smile.

"Gwaine, you came!" Merlin said enthusiastically as Gwaine walked over in a form fitting outfit which included brown leather trousers and a billowing light shirt that was untied at the top for all-out man cleavage.

Arthur's good-humoured tears dried up almost immediately.

"And what are you supposed to be?" Arthur demanded of Gwaine, trying to look imperious in his prince's get-up as though he really was addressing a lowly subject. Amused by Arthur’s behaviour, Gwaine jabbed at himself with a thumb.

"I'm a drunken cad," he said, sounding proud about the fact.

"You didn't need the costume." Arthur said acidly.

Gwaine just winked in response. Arthur looked like he was about to have a coronary.

"So, Merlin," Gwaine said, ignoring Arthur to smoothly turn his full attention to Merlin instead. "I'm loving the hat. Bard?"

Merlin went as red as his outfit as he quickly swiped the hat off and patted down his ruffled hair.

"You don't need to lie, I know I look ridiculous," he said, glaring at Arthur for good measure who just smiled, grabbed a steaming goblet from a passing 'servant' and took a smug sip.

"Merlin, my dearest fellow, you know you never look ridiculous to me," Gwaine said genuinely, patting a hand on Merlin’s shoulder before looking deeply into Merlin’s eyes. “Quite the opposite in fact-"
"Well, it's been lovely to see you as always, Gwaine," Arthur cut in loudly, back in host-mode as he physically steered Gwaine away from Merlin by the shoulders. “Drinks are to the right. Food will be served after the tournament and there are more than enough drunk lushes here to tickle your fancy. Have a good night."

Giving them an impish grin, Gwaine made a flourish of a bow at Arthur.

“My liege,” he said impertinently before giving Merlin one last smile and heading straight towards the drinks stall.

Merlin frowned as Gwaine left.

"Why don't you ever let me talk to Gwaine?" he asked petulantly.

"Because he's a letch who'll lead you astray. I'm protecting your virtue here, fair maiden." Arthur then bowed mockingly like a prince would to a lady of the court. It made Merlin want to give him an unladylike kick in the shin.

"For the last time, I am not a virgin,” Merlin bit out, feeling cross. “Also, because it seems to keep escaping your notice, I am not a girl either, even if you do insist on dressing me in tights and feathers."

Arthur just ignored this and continued to smirk into his drink. His teasing eyes made Merlin feel oddly hot and bothered and made his magic flutter cartwheels inside his stomach. He briefly hoped it was indigestion but even Merlin couldn't fool himself into believing that. It was annoying really, how much sex appeal Arthur exuded. It made Merlin feel about as exciting as lumpy porridge in comparison.

"I'm just looking out for you, Merlin," Arthur said sweetly, pulling Merlin out of his thoughts. “You're so damn clueless that someone has to make sure you don't get yourself taken advantage of by the showy scoundrel."

“You're the one who invited Gwaine to the party so you can save the act, Arthur,” Merlin said cannily, knowing Arthur well enough to know when he truly disliked someone. “I also know that you've invited him to join the private round table meetings you're going to start next quarter for your closest advisors. You like Gwaine a lot more than you want to admit.”

Arthur didn’t try to deny it, which Merlin took as a victory.

"I'm just being a friend, Merlin,” Arthur said instead. “Friends tell friends when they hang around with bad influences."

"So we're friends now, are we?"

Arthur seemed to consider this as he tilted his head and looked at Merlin appraisingly, eyeing him up and down in a way that made Merlin want to shiver under his penetrating gaze.

"Perhaps,” Arthur finally admitted, shrugging. “If I wasn't your boss, I think we'd probably get on. That is, if you weren't such a nitwit half the time."

"At least I'm not a dollophead,” Merlin shot back immediately.

"A what?" Arthur exclaimed in bafflement.

"A dollop," said Merlin clearly, then, "head. A head that is made from a dollop. A dollop-shaped
Arthur opened his mouth, looking very close to laughing.

"There's no such word," he accused Merlin. "You just made that up."

"No, I didn't, it's in the dictionary. Look it up and you'll see a picture of your face in the definition."

"You cheeky little shit!" Arthur laughed.

"Arrogant arse!"

"Dumbo ears!"

"Clotpole!"

"That word doesn't exist either!" Arthur protested, clearly snickering now.

"I imagine I'm not interrupting anything?" Uther cut in, entering the conversation like a cold breeze that immediately froze both men to the spot. Uther, unsurprisingly, was dressed like a king, his outfit even more elaborate than Arthur's because it had added sashes and included a huge crown that looked like it was going to crush Uther's head under its weight at any moment. At his side was Arthur's tall Brazilian date; exotic, tanned, ludicrously beautiful and wearing a gorgeous red velvet gown with a plunging neckline that made her look like the perfect muse for artists everywhere. Merlin blinked up at her, wondering if he had ever felt more inadequate in his life.

Arthur's rare display of merriment immediately disappeared when confronted with his father as his face took on its professional sheen.

"Ah, father, I'm so glad to see you. I see you found Gabriela," he said, sounding a little sheepish faced with the fact that he had clearly been neglecting her.

"Yes, I found this poor young woman awkwardly circling the punch bowl while her date was clearly not paying her due attention." Uther returned. "I thought I instilled better manners in my son."

"I, um- I think I see Lance," Merlin suddenly said as he hastily backed away. He knew Arthur wouldn't want an audience to this. "I should go runawa- I mean, I should go and visit him. It was, err, lovely to see you, Mr Pendragon. Nice outfit, by the way. Very kingly." Uther eyed Merlin like he was a hair away from invoking his sovereign right to have him beheaded so Merlin quickly said, "Okay, bye!" and ran over to where a knightly Lance was drinking by the punch bowl.

"Merlin," said a distracted Lance when Merlin approached. He had been looking across the room at where Gwen seemed to be arguing with Elyan, a completely lovesick look on his face. Merlin just smiled at him. It was lucky he loved them both so much, otherwise their perfect star-crossed love would have been irritating.

"So, good Sir Knight, when are you going to ask for your lady's hand? And before you start to see green with envy, Elyan's her brother, not a suitor," said Merlin.

"She seems busy," said Lance and he wasn’t wrong. Whatever Gwen and Elyan were whispering furiously about looked like a big deal. Gwen then seemed to say one last angry retort before turning on her heel and storming off. Calling her name desperately, Elyan soon ran after her.

Merlin and Lance looked at each other.
"Yikes," said Merlin.

"Should we go after them do you think?" Lance asked uncertainly, still staring after the spot where Gwen had disappeared into the crowd, as though willing his lady back to him with his broody stare alone.

"I say leave them for now. They have a lot of unresolved issues," Merlin advised, looking a little sadly after his friend and hoping that they managed to work it out. "So you and Arthur seem to be best friends now. That's nice."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Lance said, as humble as always.

"Lance, after Leon, you were the first person he invited into his private round table club and he asked you to dress up as one of his knights," Merlin said with amusement, eyeing Lance's red and chainmail outfit and thinking that it suited him better than his actual clothes did. "Trust me, if he loved you any more, he would be down on one knee and proposing to you right now."

"Well, I wouldn't say we're as close as you two are but we've definitely become good friends," Lance replied as they picked up a couple of ales from the drinks stall. "We like a lot of the same things and we both enjoy playing football on the weekends. He's also a demon on a squash court. You know, he mentions you a lot when we're together. It's obvious he respects you a great deal."

"Respects me?" said Merlin in surprise as he choked midway through his ale, the thought filling him with a warmth that wasn't from the booze alone.

"Well, we always knew he was fond of you," said Lance, looking a little fondly at Merlin himself, "but the poisoning really did prove how much. Leon said he had never seen anything like it. Arthur even tried to give you mouth to mouth, despite the fact you still had the poison on your lips. Uther had to have him physically restrained."

"He did?" Merlin said, his mouth hanging open partially in wonder -- mainly in regret -- that that hadn't happened. Merlin then wet his lips, as though tasting a ghost of what might have been. "What else makes you think Arthur likes me?"

So Lance told him. While they finished their ales, grabbed some eggnog from a passing bar wench and amusedly watched the mini tourneys and performers, he told Merlin that Arthur thought Merlin's loyalty bordered on dimwittedness, that he was surprisingly efficient for a clumsy oaf and that he was incredibly creative when he wasn't falling on his arse about the place. As they circled the corridors of Camelot, Merlin raised a brow at his friend's words.

"Those sound more like insults than compliments," Merlin pointed out.

"Not with that look on his face they weren't."

"What look?"

"The one you're wearing right now," Lance said, smiling gently. For a moment Merlin worried that Lance had picked up on something but Gwaine chose that moment to barrel into them, looking utterly inebriated.

"Merlin, my old friend, how excellent to see you!" he said, throwing an arm around Merlin's shoulder and stumbling into him as he did. Merlin chuckled, holding Gwaine up before they both ended up tumbling to the ground.

"Lance, you've met Gwaine right?"
"At the photoshoot," Lance revealed, letting out a genuine smile as he shook Gwaine's hand. He had obviously left a far better impression on Lance than he had on Arthur. "I never got the chance to thank you for your advice. It's good to see you again." Lance then looked at Merlin to elaborate. "I got a bit of stage fright."

Gwaine waved his hand.

"He was a natural, all I did was tell him that. Stage fright on your first big shoot is tradition. Which reminds me," Gwaine then pulled out a sprig of mistletoe from his pocket and purposely waggled it over Merlin's head, wearing a shit-eating grin, "I'm all about tradition."

Merlin's cheeks went blotchy as Lance choked a laugh into his drink.

"Come on, Merlin," Gwaine cajoled, his voice one long whine before he stuck out his bottom lip like a sad toddler. "I've been a good boy all year."

"I don't believe that for a second," Merlin countered, still mortified but Gwaine's playfulness was infectious enough to make him smile weakly. "I bet you are totally on the naughty list."

"Naughty boys need love, too," Gwaine reasoned as puckered his lips like a goldfish and made loud kissy noises. "Come on, just one and I can die happy."

"Fine, but once and only on the cheek," Merlin said, pointing at Gwaine firmly and feeling rather like a stern schoolmistress. Gwaine put a hand over his heart.

"On my honour as a cad," he promised before leaning forward, grabbing Merlin's head with both hands and smacking a kiss so wet, loud and long on Merlin's cheek that it made him burst into laughter.

"G-Gwaine!" Merlin hiccoughed through sniggers as Gwaine clung to him like a limpet, his arms around Merlin’s shoulders and his lengthy kiss still going strong. Trying to squirm away, Merlin let out a spluttered shriek of amusement as their lips accidentally smashed together. "Mmmph!"

Merlin said in response but his laughter soon died away when he caught the look on Arthur’s face from over Gwaine’s shoulder. He looked outright disgusted.

Pulling away like he had been burnt, Merlin felt his face blistering with embarrassment at the scene they caused. Gwaine, proving there was a gentleman behind the façade, sheepishly rubbed his hand over the back of his neck and apologised.

"Shit, sorry about that, mate," he said looking genuinely repentant. "Might have got a little over-zealous there."

"It’s okay, Gwaine," Merlin said and it was. Everyone around them seemed to find it more amusing than anything else. Even Uther, who was wearing a stern expression, looked like he was trying not to laugh. Arthur was the only one who hadn’t been amused but as Merlin looked around to seek him out again, he couldn’t find him. He seemed to have disappeared into thin air.

“Come on," said Lance, gesturing over to where a series of mini tourneys were being held. "They’ve opened up the duel. How about I fight Gwaine for besmirching your honour, Merlin?"

Craning his neck and standing on his tiptoes still looking for Arthur, Merlin soon pulled himself back into the conversation with a distracted smile.

“Why am I always the woman?” he asked aloud but he was grinning as he led his friends to where the canteen had now been divided into a cluster of mini events.
The mini tourneys were a variety of one-on-one games which reminded Merlin of a strange sort of medieval mix of It’s a Knockout and Gladiators. There was even a duelling area with two elevated wooden platforms for the opponents to stand on while they hit each other repeatedly with large inflatable barbells until one of them was knocked off. At the moment, the champion of the game appeared to be another one of Arthur’s round table ‘knights’, Percy; a man mountain of a model who had the body of a Greek god and looked so criminally good in tight Calvin Klein pants that Merlin's brain had seriously ached when he had first been faced with his perfection. Now dressed, Percy wasn’t any the less impressive as he surveyed his territory because lying on the mat below were his former opponents, strewn about the place and moaning with agony like injured soldiers in a war hospital. Merlin blinked at the scene. Percy was lethal.

“Right, me next!” Gwaine insisted, ripping off his shirt with fanfare. Percy, not to be outdone, duly followed this by tearing off the sleeves of his outfit, which was doubly impressive because they were made out of metal links. Merlin just shook his head at the state of the both of them as they preened back at each other. It was like a Chippendale face off.

To Merlin’s surprise, though, they were both amazing. Even drunk off his head, Gwaine seemed to have co-ordination and power that Merlin couldn’t even manage when he was sober and Percy was a powerhouse of strength. Before long, there was a large circle around the combatants, cheering and goading them on, from a refereeing Gaius -- who was wearing blue robes and a very dubious white wig -- to a laughing Elyan, who was standing on a table and shouting tips at them both from the sidelines.

Eventually, Gwaine’s intoxication got the better of him because he soon lost balance and landed squarely on his bottom on the mat below. He looked breathless and pleased regardless of this, though.

“Ah well, good match,” he wheezed out through a grin, squinting up at Percy through one eye before saying. “What do you say, best of three?”

“You should have parried left!” Elyan yelled from his table.

“Okay, buddy, you’re going next!” Gwaine decided, pointing at him.

“This is brilliant!” Merlin shouted over the din at Lance as Elyan and Percy duelled even fiercer than the bout before. “I never realised this would be this fun! Are you going to sign up? I would but I’d be nothing but a streak of bloody matter if I went up against Percy.”

“ Toilet first, then victory,” said Lance before briefly cheering as Elyan hit Percy squarely in the chest, nearly dislodging him.

“Yeah, me too,” Merlin slurred slightly, feeling pleasantly buzzed. “Drank too much. Think I’m well and truly battered.”

“I think Gwaine is well and truly battered,” Lance corrected before pointing at where a shirtless Gwaine was lying flat out on the mat, snoring cheerfully through his black eye. “Hey Gwaine, you all right there?”

“Let’s leave sleeping beauty to it, he’s had a long night,” Merlin said, snickering as he pushed Lance through the crowd and then through the door to the men’s toilets, feeling happily tipsy and content with life.

Almost falling over his feet as he stumbled his way to the urinal, Merlin was just about to unzip when he heard the unmistakeable sound of moaning and thumping that was unquestionably two
people having sex in one of the stalls. Bursting into laughter, Merlin's sniggers turned into hiccoughs as he sidled over to Lance and tried to keep his voice down.

"Lance," Merlin stage-whispered dramatically. "Lance! Someone is getting it on in there. Gwen was right - someone always does get caught having sex in the toilets!"

"Uh, Gwen..."

"Yeah, Gwen," Merlin agreed, nodding animatedly before pausing to tilt his head. That breathy moan didn't sound like Lance. It sounded more like -

"Oh, Arthur..."

Merlin's grin froze on his face.

It couldn't be, he thought. Gwen wouldn't. Looking at how pale Lance had turned, however, it seemed that Gwen categorically would and was doing, right then and there. Merlin opened his mouth, found he had nothing to say and closed it again. There was a sick, acidic sensation bubbling in his stomach that he had a feeling had nothing to do with all the alcohol he had ingested.

Eventually shaking out of his stupor — which the loud, “Oh yes, harder!” may have had something to do with -- Merlin grabbed a rather horrified-looking Lance by the arm and tugged him towards the exit.

"Come on, no one needs to hear this," he said, trying to block out the sounds himself as yet another loud groan broadcasted itself from the stall.

With all his strength. Merlin managed to haul the stunned Lance to the door, hoping to lessen his emotional trauma by getting him as far away from the rutting pair as possible.

And then Mordred walked through the door.

"Mordred!" Merlin said gaily, his overly-large smile so wide that he looked slightly touched in the head as he launched himself forward and shook his hand. "So nice to see you! What are you doing here?"

Donned top to toe in a black bear pelt outfit that was probably made from an animal Mordred had vindictively shot himself, Mordred yanked his hand away with distaste. How he managed to give Merlin both a blank and a scathing look, Merlin didn't quite know but it was rather impressive.

"I need to use the facilities," Mordred said as if Merlin was a moron before trying to push past him.

Panicking, Merlin immediately sidestepped in front of him. If Mordred found out about Arthur and Gwen, the first person he would tell would be Morgana and she would undoubtedly use the knowledge to get both Arthur and Gwen in trouble, maybe even fired. Merlin couldn't let that happen so he lifted up his hand and placed it on the wall to block Mordred from getting in any further.

"Oh, no, no, you don't want to use the toilets," Merlin said, waving his other hand and trying to coat his words with enough magic to pull off some sort of Jedi mind trick.

Judging by Mordred’s face, this plan didn’t work.

"My bladder says I do," Mordred said, fleetingly looking at Merlin like he was mad as he tried to get past again but Merlin held firm.
"No, really, really, I wouldn't go in there if I were you."

Mordred narrowed his eyes suspiciously and angled his head to run a slow, probing look across the room.

"Why?" he asked cunningly, looking far too astute for Merlin’s liking.

"Because... because... er, Lance?" Merlin asked, at a loss as he desperately turned to his friend to come up with something.

Unfortunately for him, Lance was too busy staring at the stall door with such a severe amount of shock that it looked unlikely that he would ever close his mouth again.

Another groan sounded from the stall.

Mordred's eyebrows shot up.

"What was that?" he demanded, trying to get into the room again.

"Oh! That was just me, ugggh," Merlin groaned theatrically, colliding into Mordred as he clutched at his own stomach in faux pain. "Bad canapes. I threw up all over the place. Sprayed chunks everywhere. It was awful. Have you ever seen the Exorcist? Well, it was worse than that. Right, Lance?"

Still frozen in shock, Lance blinked.

"See?" Merlin said, as though this proved something. "You better go, you wouldn't want your fancy bearskin traveller outfit thing getting ruined, would you?" When Mordred looked down at his outfit with worry, Merlin knew he had him.

"I'll use the loo on the other side," Mordred finally yielded but he still looked at Merlin through narrowed, clever eyes and continued to do so as he walked backwards out the room. When the door closed shut behind Mordred, Merlin sighed in relief and locked it behind him so no one else could come in.

Merlin then turned with dread back to the closed stall door. From the sound of things -- or lack thereof -- it seemed as though Arthur and Gwen had finished.

Merlin let out a cough, wishing the floor would open up and swallow him whole.

"Um," he said out loud awkwardly, sure that Gwen was cowering with humiliation inside the stall at being overheard. "That was Mordred. Don’t worry, he didn’t see anything. I made sure he stayed out. Anyway, um, it’s been a nice party. We'll just... we’ll just wait outside and let you guys get – er, we’ll just wait outside."

Merlin then grabbed the still gaping Lance and pulled him outside, wishing he could erase both the sounds from his brain and this strange hollow pain from inside his chest.
“So you haven’t talked to Gwen since?” Will asked the day after, trying to get the whole story eagerly out of Merlin as he made himself comfortable with a bowl of popcorn.

"What was I going to say? What was he like on a scale of 1 to 10?” Merlin asked dryly, holding a cold compress to his hungover head. It was the day before Christmas Eve, officially the first day of the holidays and Merlin was already vowing never to drink again. He felt like death warmed up. "She was obviously upset from fighting with her brother, probably drank too much because of it and then randomly bumped into Arthur, who frankly just has to stand there doing nothing for someone to want to sleep with him. Getting caught in the act by her closest friend at work and the guy she's head over heels about was no doubt the last thing she wanted. Knowing Gwen like I do, she's probably hiding under her bed and vowing never to leave her house again."

"Man, Merlin, your workplace sounds brilliant," Will sighed, obviously ignoring Merlin's dramatic tale of heartbreak and humiliation as he looked starry-eyed. He then shook himself out of it. "So when is your boyfriend coming over anyway?"

"He's not my boyfriend!" Merlin said so violently that even Will blinked at his reaction. Merlin then coughed. "I mean, Arthur should be coming over within the hour. His stalker sent him a Christmas present apparently. A skinned cat. Arthur was not amused, especially because he's allergic to cats. He was sneezing down the phone at me all this morning complaining about it. He sounded a bit like Lloyd Grossman."

Will chortled at this.

“God, he really is a total ponce, isn’t he?” he said, shaking his head.

“Hey,” Merlin interjected immediately, his lips turning downwards into a frown. “Leave it out, okay? Arthur’s all right. Not to mention he’s my boss so no surprises from you while he’s staying with us. Don’t forget that you promised me you would be on your best behaviour around him.”

“I did? When did we have that conversation?”

“Will.”

“Fine, fine. Jesus, Merlin, get out my arse already,” Will said, grinning one of his infuriating ear to ear smiles. “I’ll be good. Promise. I’m even going out for lunch, just to give you two a bit of space.”

“Good,” Merlin nodded, hating himself slightly for how excited he was about this. “Anyway, I better go sit by the window and look out for him. He’ll be keeping a low profile.”

Which, according to Leon, Arthur was. Leon had told Arthur specifically to keep it low-key on his trip over and Merlin was sure that even an attention whore like Arthur could manage to blend into the background for just one trip if his life was in danger.

When Arthur pulled up outside Merlin's estate in a white sports car, however, Merlin knew he should have known better.

"What do you think?” Arthur asked when Merlin went out to meet him, puffing out his chest as though he had given birth to it himself. Merlin, who liked cars as much as the next man, stared at the curves of the Maserati with genuine appreciation before looking at Arthur and saying,

"It's too conspicuous, you bell end."
"That's the point, arse brain," Arthur returned. "You don't spend this much money on a car and have it fade into the background."

"Arthur, you have a psycho trying to murder you. You're supposed to be hiding out in my area. Don't you think you should be driving around in something that people in Ealdor would actually drive? Like a Skoda?"

"Don't use that word around me again," Arthur threatened, holding out a finger to highlight his seriousness. "And I'm not giving her back now. We've bonded. I've even given her a name, haven't I, Hengroen?" Arthur crooned, patting her bonnet. If Merlin didn't know better, he could have sworn that the car arched faithfully under his touch.

Looking closely at it, Merlin felt a certain familiarity tug at his chest but he couldn't say why. He also -- much to his own surprise -- discovered that there was someone else inside the car.

"What the- Myror?!" Merlin said in disbelief before turning and looking at Arthur like he was mad. "For god's sake, Arthur, you brought Myror with you? What part of laying low and telling no one you're here don't you get?"

"Well, you can't exactly expect me to drive myself," Arthur responded as if the idea of him doing anything for himself was absurd. "It's too hot for leather gloves and steering wheels chafe my hands."

"I'm going to remind you of this conversation every time you accuse me of being a girl," Merlin said honestly, going as far as pulling out his phone, writing a memo and putting his phone back in his pocket. "And for the record? I actually have a car we could have used."

"If you expect me to willingly get into some death trap vehicle with you of all people behind the wheel, your stupidity has reached new heights."

"Oh sod off, chafed hands, I'm a good driver," Merlin retorted before leaning down to talk to Myror and giving him an apologetic smile. "Hi, sorry for the inconvenience but we don't need you now, you can head back home if you want. Enjoy the rest of your holidays. Give Mrs Myror or little baby Myror a nice Christmas surprise."

Myror gave Merlin that blank glare he seemed to give everyone until Arthur huffed loudly and leaned down to the window, too, his warm shoulder bumping Merlin's.

"Do as he says, Myror. Just leave my things - Merlin can carry them up. Oh, and do try not to inform any homicidal stalkers where I am. Attaboy." Arthur then straightened up and looked at Merlin. "There," he said in a long-suffering tone. "Happy now, Merlin?"

"Jumping for joy," Merlin puffed out, tugging at Arthur's heavy Louis Vuitton trunk fruitlessly from the boot until Arthur sighed again like a martyr and pulled the thing out one-handed. "Honestly, Merlin, how have you survived this long? It's almost like an act. You can't really be this useless, can you?"

Glaring at Arthur, Merlin felt his magic flush through him, rushing through his muscles like a stream of water. He then reached over to pick up the trunk like it was filled with nothing but air.

Arthur looked suitably stunned.

"Come on, I'll show you up," Merlin said sunnily, "introduce you properly to my mum. For some reason, she's been looking forward to seeing you again."
Arthur lifted his head at this and a look crossed his face that Merlin didn't quite understand.

"Actually, I need to get something first," Arthur said thoughtfully, opening Hengroen's passenger seat door. "Number 17a, right? I'll meet you there in ten minutes. Myror, I'll direct you."

"Wait, where are you going?" Merlin questioned but Arthur had already shut the door and zoomed off before he could get a response.

True to his word, Arthur returned almost exactly ten minutes later with a prompt knock on the front door. Merlin grimaced as he heard his mother bustle to open it, knowing that it would be a disaster re-introducing Arthur to her because, if there was one thing he could be sure of, it was that Hunith Emrys would once again adore every inch of him.

And Merlin wasn't wrong.

"For you," Arthur charmed from where he stood on the doorstep of their apartment, holding the hugest bouquet of flowers for Hunith that Merlin had ever seen.

To Merlin’s astonishment, Arthur had changed into an especially sharp suit and his hair, his aviators and his teeth all shone back at Hunith like the ceramic tiles in a Cif commercial.

Merlin, who had been stowing Arthur's things away in a rather cramped wardrobe that Will's pants kept mistaking for an airing cupboard, looked more ridiculous than usual in comparison. His clothes were dusty and rumpled and he was emanating an odd smell that seemed to be combination of old lady and dead cat.

Wiping a smear of dust off a cheekbone, Merlin glared balefully as Hunith happily took the flowers, her eyes soft and warm as she inhaled them deeply. If he didn’t know better, Merlin could have sworn that Arthur was making the moves on his mother.

"Oh! They're beautiful. What a lovely gesture," Hunith said sincerely. "That's very kind of you, Arthur. Please come in."

"Oh, think nothing of it. It's the least I can do after your hospitality, Hunith," Arthur returned, his flirting in overdrive as he gave her a luminous smile. It made Merlin want to roll his eyes, poke the pillock in the head and tell him that sort of overly friendly smarm may work on everyone else but it wouldn't work on his mum.

When Hunith beamed back at Arthur and patted him fondly on the cheek, however, Merlin realised all hope was lost.

"You're a good boy," she said with maternal affection and Merlin had the mildly satisfying image of seeing Arthur flush, both uncomfortable and pleased, at her words. "Now come and sit at the table, lunch will be served in a moment. Merlin, dear, set the table, won't you?"

Merlin sighed. Even in his own house, he was still running around after Arthur.

"Yes, mum," he said dutifully, placing Arthur's place mat in front of him and glaring when Arthur smirked and stretched shamelessly at the situation, placing his arms behind his head like he was lounging in a hammock.

"Merlin, don't forget the coasters," Hunith called from the kitchen.

Arthur grinned hugely.
"Yes, Merlin, chop chop," he said, tapping the table top and looking as though he was having the time of his life. "And get me a still water while you're at it, will you, garçon? I'm ever so parched."

"Probably because you've had your head up your arse for the past year," Merlin muttered under his breath, surprised when Arthur snorted in amusement in return.

Looking at the genuine and unrestrained happiness on Arthur's face at that moment made Merlin realise how little Arthur actually laughed. It was sad and gave Merlin a weird urge to try and keep that look on Arthur's face as often as he could.

Merlin then groaned at his own brain. He was so smitten it was ridiculous.

“We’re having roast lamb, I hope you’re all right with that, Arthur,” Hunith said as she carried over what had to be the largest leg of lamb Merlin had ever seen in his life. He wasn’t sure how it had fit in the oven. He wasn’t even sure if it was lamb at all but, whatever it was, it smelled amazing. Compelled to look over at his mother, Merlin caught her eye mid-carve and smiled. She had clearly gone to a lot of effort.

“One of my favourites, Hunith, it looks wonderful,” Arthur said, sounding genuine as he leaned forward with appreciation. “Merlin always waxes lyrical about how magnificent your cooking is and it looks like I’m going to have to agree with him.”

“You’re agreeing with me?” Merlin said with exaggerated astonishment as he slipped into the seat beside Arthur and starting dishing him roast potatoes. “Mum, quick, call the police, some pod person is wearing Arthur’s skin.”

“Merlin, don’t tease our guest,” Hunith admonished gently, causing Arthur to grin contentedly and mouth, “Yes, Merlin, don’t tease me,” when Hunith’s back was turned. To make matters worse, Hunith fussed over Arthur like a favourite child throughout the entirety of the meal, cutting the primest bits of meat for him and giving him Merlin's potatoes when he exclaimed how tasty they were.

Puffing out his chest, Arthur lapped up the attention and smiled wickedly over at Merlin during dessert when Hunith gave him another slice of her famous apple pie.

"Stop looking so smug," Merlin hissed when his mother was out of earshot in the kitchen, “she loves me more."

"Debatable,” Arthur returned, looking almost sinful as he licked crumbs off his fork. “Hunith is no doubt a smart woman and wants to trade up.”

"I saw her first, hands off!"

Arthur just smirked at this. He then looked around the cramped kitchen/diner.

"So, this place is... nice."

Merlin rolled his eyes. He knew Arthur better than that.

"It's the size of your living room,” he pointed out, knowing this for a fact because he had counted the steps.

"Yes, but you've done a lot to maximise the space," Arthur tried again.

Merlin looked at the stacked bookshelves, the crammed photo frames mounted on the wall and the
poky little kitchen that couldn’t even fit a washing machine before turning back to raise a brow at Arthur.

Arthur knocked his elbow off the table in response.

"Shut up, cauliflower ears," Arthur snapped. “That’s the last time I try to be nice to you.”

"That was you being nice?” Merlin asked earnestly. “And I already told you, you’re not allowed to talk about my ears like that. I'll tell HR.”

"And I'll tell them I have a useless manservant who does nothing but make my life a misery.”

"Assistant,” Merlin corrected, just like he always did. “And for all your complaining, you still seem to keep me around."  

"What can I say, Merlin,” Arthur shrugged expansively, raising his arms. “You're like a venereal disease. Irritating and hard to get rid of.”

"Well, you would know, considering how many you've had - ow, you prat! That hurt!” Merlin cried out, grabbing the assaulted pink ear Arthur had just flicked at ruthlessly.

Arthur just smiled sweetly, looking the picture of innocence when Hunith walked back into the room with a tray of steaming hot mince pies.

"Anyone for extra dessert?"

"Oh, yes please!” said Arthur with delight, lifting up his plate eagerly.

"There goes another hole in the belt," Merlin muttered as he rubbed his ear, which earned him a poke in the ribs with Arthur’s fork.

Hunith smiled at them both indulgently.

“Merlin, dear, why don’t you show Arthur where he’ll be staying? Make sure he’s comfortable with where he’s sleeping?”

“Thank you again, Hunith,” said Arthur as he stood up, charging up the magnetism again as he gave her one of his devastating smiles. “I’m sure it’ll be perfect.” This magnetism was clearly not reserved for Merlin, however, because as soon as Merlin showed Arthur to his bedroom, Arthur made a face and simply said, "Good god, Merlin, you actually live in this mess?"

"Oh sod off," Merlin said, flipping Arthur off as he did, "Some of us aren't privileged enough to have a maid, a personal trainer, a chef, an arse wiper for when you're on the loo..."

"Ha ha," Arthur said dryly before picking up a discarded shirt from the unmade bed and holding it up between with his thumb and forefinger like it was a dirty nappy. He even wrinkled his nose. "Seriously though, I've never seen this much polyester in all my life. It's almost like a bomb exploded in the middle of Tesco's clothing department."

Merlin frowned, snatching his insulted shirt and holding it to his chest as a means to comfort it. The shirt subtly clung back.

"Shut up. I'll have you know that Tesco do nice flannels. Oh, and don't sit there -” Merlin warned as Arthur moved to sit on a nearby stool. Arse in the air, Arthur frowned, both him and his bottom used to getting their own way.
"Why the hell not?" he demanded with irritation.

"Because that's where Archimedes likes to perch. He gets very grumpy when someone tries to steal his seat," Merlin told him knowledgeably.

"Archi who?" Arthur asked with confusion. He then turned back to the seat, ready to ease himself down onto it when a shrill, squawk-like noise sounded and a beak jabbed itself into Arthur's right bum cheek. "Ow! What the actual fuck!" Arthur shrieked, spinning around and grabbing his assaulted arse to find a hooting bird sitting there imperially, flapping its wings. "Holy shit!" Arthur exclaimed, pointing at it in horror. "Where the sod did that bird come from? It wasn't there a second ago. What the fuck. Why do you have a fucking bird for?"

"For the record? That's my owl you just tried to sit on. And would you mind your language? I don't want you teaching him bad habits."

"Bad habits? How about teaching your flea-ridden pigeon there not to impale people in the sodding buttocks, how is that for a bad habit?" Arthur snapped. "And I'll talk how I like, you lunatic. He's an owl, not a parrot. He's not about to repeat my bad language back to me."

"He might," Merlin reasoned before holding out his arm for Archimedes to fly onto, grinning smugly when Arthur yelped and flailed his arms over his head in protection from the bird's flapping wings. When Archimedes landed gracefully with his talons digging into Merlin's arm, Merlin stroked his feathers fondly. "He's actually very smart," he informed Arthur proudly. "He can hoot the entire Doctor Who theme tune and he gets me my paper in the morning. He's only really learnt to steal The Sun, unfortunately, so the only news I get is about the Kardashians. I'm trying to train him up to the Independent but I think he likes the Made in Chelsea gossip. He's a bit of a fan of reality tv. Goes mental if I try to change the channel."

"A car-crash-tv-watching pet owl," Arthur said aloud, more to himself than Merlin, as though asking himself how on earth Merlin existed. "Only you would have a car-crash-tv-watching pet owl. I'm not even surprised." Perching on the end of the bed instead, Arthur then said, "Tell me I'm not sharing a room with that thing. And that I have a bed. I need a proper bed."

"Don't worry, Little Lord Fauntleroy, he's an owl. He'll be out hunting all night like owls do. And you're sitting on the bed you're having -- mine by the way -- so be grateful I didn't leave you in the dumpster outside. The hobos on our estate get very territorial about their skips."

"So, I'll be sleeping in your bed?" Arthur asked in a strange sort of voice Merlin couldn't quite place. Looking at him, Merlin nodded in response, his face feeling hot as he tried not to imagine Arthur under his sheets.

"Lord help me but yes," Merlin said, hoping he hadn’t gone too obvious a shade of fuchsia. “I can sleep on the floor. I can hardly give you Will's room because only Satan knows what dangerous things he's got locked up in there and I'm not turfing out my mum. I mean, she offered but her back plays up and the floor isn't great for."

"Don't be a nincompoop, Merlin. I'd never take your mother's room. I wouldn't hear of it. Her kindness letting me stay is more than enough. She's done more for me than anyone else would."

And just like that, Arthur could turn from prat to a prince in a blink of an eye.

Smiling at him, Merlin tried to tamp down the warm buzz in his chest.

"So, has Leon's contact worked out who your creepy stalker is yet?" he asked instead, sitting
companionably beside Arthur. "They've not sent you any more limericks about eating your organs, have they? Because I've not recovered from the last batch. I still can't look at sausages without feeling queasy."

"Leon's on the case, he said he'd update me if he had anything. I still find it ridiculous I have to go into hiding. I have a social life, you know. I have parties to go to. A week ago, I was this close to getting a date with Scarlett Johansson from my publicist. I'm probably too late now. Knowing my luck, she's probably gone and settled for that manwhore Jake Gyllenhaal. He'll shag anything."


"A strong wind could make you cry, you girl," Arthur said rudely before getting to his feet. "Right, I need to go to the loo. Please tell me it's not an outhouse or a chamberpot."

"This might be a surprise to you but even estates have indoor plumbing," Merlin said dryly. "The toilet's down the corridor and to the left. Oh, and the lights don't work so use the flashlight outside. It's a bit like going in a cave - just remember to aim for the toilet bowl and not hit your head on the lower shelf."

"Jesus, Merlin, I'm not a complete idiot," Arthur said with exasperation as he walked out the door. He then collided straight into Will in the hallway, who was wearing a pair of holey y-fronts that really weren't suitable for public view.

"William," Arthur said primly, looking at his state of undress with disapproval.

"Andrew," Will returned, eyeing Arthur's overly flashy attire right back before saying, "Are you going to a funeral or something?"

Merlin stuck his head around the hallway.

"Will, for the last time, would you put on some trousers?" he asked despairingly.

"Please, like you don't love seeing some of this," Will said, striking a pose and flexing his muscles in way that Merlin assumed was supposed to be sexy but only looked ridiculous. Will finally stopped when the doorbell rang, saving their eyes from any more of his posturing as he cried out, "Oh, that'll be my package!"

Arthur shook his head, watching as Will hurried off to collect the mail. From the squeak Merlin heard from the post woman at the door, he had a feeling Will hadn't bothered to put trousers on to greet her.

"Seriously, why are you sleeping with him again?" Arthur asked, baffled. "Because even you could do better, Merlin, and that's saying something."

"I already told you I'm not sleeping with him," Merlin said, although if he were, he could see how Arthur had a point. "He's my best friend."

"You live with him."

"And I live with my mother too. It's hardly a love-nest up in here," Merlin pointed out. "Will and I grew up together. My mother has taken care of him since we were kids when his father died during Gulf War manoeuvres in Iraq. He was a soldier. Anyway, after he died, my mum became Will’s official guardian. Will’s my brother in everything but blood. So, please, can we drop the boyfriend thing now?"
“Fine,” said Arthur, still not sounding convinced. Walking back into Merlin’s room, Arthur sat back down on the bed. Obviously, Will’s half-naked form had scared his pee away. “So what is there to do around here anyway?”

“Well, Leon has given me strict instructions not to let you leave the house so it’s either Monopoly or Scrabble for you,” Merlin said as he rummaged around underneath his bed. He then pulled out a dusty cardboard box and said excitedly. “Oooh, or Operation. Everyone likes a bit of that. I’m pretty sure I’ve got Connect Four and Battleship under here somewhere, too…”

“Scarlett Johanssen,” Arthur moaned with regret, talking to what looked like Merlin’s poster of Arsenal Football Club. “I could have been on a date with Scarlett Johanssen.”

“Trivial Pursuits? Guess Who?” Merlin continued, unable to hear Arthur with his head still under the bed. “Or how about Hungry Hungry Hippos? I think I still have a Buckaroo set down there somewhere but Archimedes got spooked this one time when the mule bucked and sort of pecked its legs off so I’m not sure it works anymore.”

“Satan’s scrotum, any of them. Just stop talking,” Arthur said, waving a hand at this in resignation before catching sight of something disturbing on Merlin’s desk. Dropping his jaw, Arthur gestured towards it in dismay.

“What the hell is that?” he asked, pointing at the pathetic-looking pink Christmas tree that was drooping under the weight of the one bauble hanging off it.

“Ooh that’s Rodney,” Merlin said, getting to his feet and wiping the dust off his knees as he looked fondly at the knackered little tree.

“Rodney?” Arthur repeated, wearing that face he wore when he was particularly unimpressed with something Merlin had done. “You named your Christmas tree Rodney?”

“Well, he's been with us since I was a kid,” Merlin explained like this was perfectly normal. "He's part of the family. It's only fitting he has a name. He's like the camp uncle I never had. His LED lights don't turn on anymore but he looked like the shit they worked. When I think about it, he's probably older than I am."

"Funny how that doesn't surprise me," Arthur replied, barely blinking when Rodney's bauble gave up its fight with gravity and smashed onto the ground. Arthur then looked at Merlin and raised a brow.

"Oh, shut your face," Merlin said defensively, stroking Rodney's plastic fir branches and then wincing when one of them fell off with his touch. "Anyway, you shouldn't judge poor Rodney. We couldn't ever really afford a decent tree. He's served us faithfully for all these years so you should show him more respect."

Shaking his head, Arthur looked at Merlin for about a minute, like he wasn't sure which planet he was from, before opening his mouth and honestly saying,

"This is going to be the most unconventional Christmas on the planet, isn't it?"

When Merlin shrugged and simply responded to this query with a "Probably", he was surprised to see that Arthur looked oddly pleased about this.

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Over the next few days, Merlin came to discover that Christmas with Arthur was not what he had
expected it to be.

Merlin wasn't entirely sure what he thought it would be like -- other than the fact they would argue constantly over every minute detail of it -- but he was sure it would once again be the Arthur Show, which would include Merlin running around behind him like he always did and probably even chopping up the food on his plate for him.

What Merlin didn't expect, though, was the amount of effort Arthur went into repaying Merlin's family for letting him stay, from buying the hugest turkey like a modern day Scrooge to the frankly ridiculous number of presents he left lying around the house. The biggest gesture of all, however, had to be what Merlin caught him, Elyan, Gwaine, Lance and Percy trying to sneak into his house on Christmas morning.

"What the hell is this?" Merlin said in surprise, woken up by the kerfuffle as he walked down the stairs in his flannel pyjamas and wondered if he was still asleep. Merlin then blinked dazedly at the scene, rubbed the sleep from his eyes, saw it hadn't changed anything and then hesitantly asked, "Is that a tree trying to break into my house?"

"Er, no?" Lance attempted to deny unconvincingly while holding said tree.

"You're dreaming!" Gwaine tried to add, waving his arms about in a strangely hypnotic motion that looked like a Mexican wave. "This is all just a dream."

"It is?" Merlin asked, genuinely unsure as he scratched his bedhead hair.

"Oh for fuck’s sake," Arthur huffed out, his bodyless head suddenly popping out from the middle of the tree as the twigs sticking out of his usually pristine hair made him look mad, "Merlin, go the hell upstairs and don't come down until I say so."

"But-"

"Up!" Arthur ordered in a voice that wouldn’t take no for an answer.

"This is my house, you know," Merlin mumbled but he turned around anyway to trudge back up the stairs but not before calling out over his shoulder, "Oh, and Merry Christmas, guys. Do any of you want a cuppa?"

"Green."

"Milk, one sugar."

"Earl Grey would be super."

"Oolong if you have it."

"Actually, you don't have coffee instead, do you?"

“Merlin, shut up and go upstairs,” said Arthur, shutting them all down effectively with just the tone of his voice. “And make sure to bring your mother down when I tell you to. This is more for her than you.”

“Well, that’s nice,” Merlin returned peevishly but he forgave Arthur’s rudeness the instant he came back down with Hunith an hour later and was greeted by the most impressive looking Christmas scene he had ever seen.
The huge fir tree the boys had been not so covertly dragging in stood tall in the corner of the living, lavish and beautiful as it grazed the ceiling and was bedecked with such fancy ornaments that Merlin could only imagine how much each of them had cost. Tacky decorations such as tinsel and gaudy gold stars didn’t get a look-in as decadent ribbons of gold and silver were placed artfully across the branches, complimenting the tasteful twinkling lights that wound around the tree. And then there were all the presents under the tree, accompanied by the roaring fireplace that Merlin had never got to work in all the years they had lived there.

Turning to Arthur, Merlin shook his head, beaming.

“God,” he said.

“Arthur, actually, but I suppose God is close enough,” Arthur returned, looking delightfully pleased with himself. Turning to Hunith, he looked a little like a hopeful child showing off what he had done at school that day. “I… um, I hope you don’t think I overstepped.”

Hunith didn’t disappoint him.

“Oh, Arthur, this is wonderful of you,” she said happily, tiptoeing to drop a kiss on his cheek that made his face go blotchy. “Absolutely marvellous. And boys,” here Hunith turned to the others, who were covered in pine needles and had the occasional bauble hanging off their ears, “you’ve done such a spectacular job that I hope you’ll stay for lunch. The turkey is big enough to feed an army. What do you say?”

They all enthusiastically said “Yes”, which is how Merlin soon found himself sitting at his cramped dinner table with the lot of them. Will and Gwaine seemed to hit it off immediately and were trying to out-gross each other with lewd tales that made the others roar with laughter while Percy put a paper hat on his head with dignity and Elyan read out a Christmas cracker joke that made Lance laugh purely because it was so bad. Arthur, who pressed close to Merlin’s side, seemed to just be drinking in the scene around him and looking happier than Merlin had ever seen him look before. It made Merlin smile softly at him, the warmth in his chest expanding.

“Thank you,” said Merlin when everyone had left, washing the dishes as he gave Arthur a sincere smile. “That was a really nice thing you did for my mum. Don’t get me wrong, we all love Rodney but Gladys here is spiffing.”

“Gladys?” Arthur responded, raising an eyebrow as he took the newly washed dishes from Merlin, towel-dried them efficiently and stacked them to the side. “You named the tree I got you Gladys?”

“Oh, she’s definitely a lady, look at her,” Merlin said, sticking out his chest as he took in her dazzling appearance with pride. “All spruced up and fancy and dressed-up better than most of the trees in department stores. She’s like the Helen Mirren of Christmas trees. The Dame Judy Dench of Christmas trees. She’s just all classy and stuff.”

Arthur laughed, towelling the last dish and setting it aside.

“You’re an idiot,” he said affectionately before looking at his watch, humming and pulling Merlin forward by the arm. “Right, come on, you useless waste of space, I’ve left your present in your room.”

“Wait, but you got the turkey and the tree,” Merlin interjected but he let Arthur pull him up the stairs to his bedroom anyway. “You don’t have to get me anything else. I sure as hell didn’t get you anything. I tried to think of something but a harem of supermodels was a little beyond my budget.”
“Do you want it or not, knobhead?” Arthur asked with amusement as he heaved open his trunk, rummaged around in it for a moment before pulling out a small, beautifully wrapped box. Arthur then proceeded to practically throw it at Merlin’s head, as though chucking it at him would make the whole thing less sentimental than it was. “Well, go on then, open it. We haven’t got all night.”

“You’re a bit of a prick, has anyone ever told you that?” Merlin asked conversationally as he tried to untie the box.

“You do, every day,” Arthur replied before laughing, “Jesus, Merlin, it’s a bow, not a Rubick’s cube. Trust you to get confused untying one.”

“You shouldn’t use Jesus’ name in vain on his birthday, you know. It’s just not polite,” Merlin said smartly as he finally managed to loosen the knot. Lifting the lid and moving the tissue paper aside, Merlin discovered an antique medallion gleaming back at him. It felt warm under his fingers as sparks of magic seemed to fly between his fingertips and the medallion, as though the heirloom had been waiting for him all this time. Lifting it up, Merlin then looked at Arthur quizzically. If Merlin didn’t know better, he would say Arthur looked embarrassed.

“It belonged to my mother,” Arthur clarified and Merlin widened his eyes, surprised, because Arthur never talked about his mother. “It bears her sigil. It always brought me luck. Being the clumsy idiot you are, you need more luck than I do.”

“Arthur,” Merlin said, his throat dry and his shoulders suddenly heavy with the magnitude of this as he tried to hand it back, “I can’t—”

“Just take it,” Arthur said, his voice firm as he reached over and closed Merlin’s fingers around the medallion. The heat of his hand on Merlin’s tingled from the tips of Merlin nails and spread down to his entire arm.

“I really appreciate it you know,” Arthur suddenly said, breaking the momentary silence.

Merlin looked down at where their hands were still clasped, wetting his dry mouth.

“Appreciate what?” he asked faintly as he watched the way Arthur’s thumb stroked down the seam of his hand, his touch like a lightning storm against his skin

“Everything you’ve done for me. Everything you’re doing for me right now,” Arthur elaborated, his eyes large and earnest as they met Merlin’s. He then let out a self-deprecating grin. “I mean, you’re a shitty host and your bed is highly uncomfortable and your owl is frankly demonic but I owe you a debt of thanks for letting me hide out here and for showing me that Christmas isn’t all about puking Father Christmases.”

Arthur then smiled at him softly, his mouth crooked and so damned mesmerising that Merlin couldn’t stop himself from smiling back. Something crossed over Arthur’s eyes, making the air charged and heavy and Merlin’s skin suddenly felt so sticky with want that he physically gulped, his heart pounding like a jackhammer behind his ribcage.

Their faces moved closer and Merlin suddenly — hysterically -- realised that this was the moment, that this is when it would finally happen.

And then he saw the knife whizzing through the air and heading right for the back of Arthur’s head.

Working off instinct, Merlin immediately jumped on top of Arthur so they both collapsed to the floor, watching as the knife embedded into the back of Merlin’s computer chair.
“Fuck, where did that come from?” Arthur asked, white-faced. “Is it the stalker?”

“Arthur, stay down and keep away from the windows!” Merlin scolded, going into instant bodyguard mode. “And call the police. Tell them we need someone over right away. Wait, I can see someone in the bushes outside. Stay here, okay? I’ll be back.”

“Are you mad?!” Arthur exclaimed hotly, grabbing Merlin by the arm. “What are you going to do, you’re only tiny! If anyone is going, it’s me.”

“I can handle myself, let go!”

“Like fuck you can!” Arthur argued heatedly. He looked a sight to behold when he was all pumped up and glowing with courage. “The same way you handled the poison by drinking it? Stop being such a self-sacrificing moron for a second and wait for the police!”

“He’ll get away by the time they get here!”

“So let me go instead! It’s my problem, not yours!”

“Arthur, I’m not going to let you die! Not again!”

“Again?” said Arthur, his face completely mystified. “What do you mean by again?”

Merlin closed his mouth, puzzled by his words himself. What did he mean by again?

Before he could think about it, however, the window was suddenly smashed from the outside and a dark figure lithely climbed itself into the room with the flexibility of an acrobat. Merlin immediately placed himself in front of Arthur protectively, raising a hand until he got a good look at who the intruder was. Letting out a huff, Merlin couldn’t stop himself from turning his head to glare at Arthur with a look that clearly said ‘I told you so’.

“Seriously, what did Leon and I tell you about lying low?” he demanded because none other than Myror himself had burst into the room, looking at Arthur with an absolutely besotted expression.

“Myror? Seriously?” Arthur said aloud, blinking at the unlikeliness of this before turning to Merlin and saying, “Wow. I really didn’t see that one coming.”

Myror took a step forward. Merlin immediately raised his hand even higher.

“Now, Myror, stay back, all right? I don’t want to hurt you,” Merlin said shakily. Merlin could practically hear Arthur rolling his eyes behind him before he grabbed Merlin by the scruff of his shirt and yanked him forcefully behind him instead.

“Okay, look, Myror, this doesn’t have to end unpleasantly,” Arthur said, charm oozing from every pore as he smiled that trademark smile again. “Sure you may have written a few frankly disturbing letters and probably did some pretty unspeakable things to my bedsheets but we can sort this out. This doesn’t have to end badly.” In response to this, Myror pulled out a carving knife larger than a femur, his smile blinding against his dark complexion. “Or not,” Arthur conceded, sounding like he was at a loss. Arthur then rubbed at the back of his neck and tried another tactic. “Right, um, well, I suppose you’ve got me now. Well done and all that. We should probably be off then.”

“Arthur!” Merlin rebuked, grabbing Arthur’s arm to wheel him around to face him. “Are you mad!?”

“Look, just stay here and make sure your mother and Will are safe, okay?” Arthur whispered out of
the corner of his mouth while nodding his head and trying to smile pleasantly at Myror at the same time. “I’m the one he wants.”

“No way, I’m not leaving you alone with this psycho,” Merlin replied without argument, watching as Myror licked his tongue over his teeth in a highly disconcerting fashion.

“Merlin-” Arthur ground out again, sounding angry now.

“Eye sockets, Arthur!”

“Look, I’m not having you or your family suffer because of my problem!”

“Now who’s the self-sacrificing idiot?!”

“Still you, you insolent moron!”

“Oh, you are such a wanker sometimes!”

“At least I’m not as thick as a plank!”

“You’re right, you’re thicker!”

“I’m sorry but can we hurry this up?” Myror suddenly cut in, breaking out of character to lift up his knife to interject. “I do have quite a lot to be getting on with, you know.”

“I’m sorry, are we keeping you from your murderous schedule?” Merlin asked sarcastically. “Because really, don’t let us keep you. If you have someone else to terrorise, please, I insist, go right ahead. We’ll be here waiting for you when you get back.”

Unfortunately for Merlin, these words seemed to set Myror off. It all happened in the blink of an eye. One minute Myror was smiling at Merlin with that strange, freaky little smile of his. The next, he had pulled back his hand and thrown what looked like a poisoned dart right into Arthur’s neck, making Arthur immediately crumple to the ground.

“No!” Merlin cried out, scrambling desperately to Arthur’s side to check his pulse. “Don’t be dead, don’t you dare be dead…”

“He’s not dead,” Myror said laconically, which Merlin confirmed himself with an overwhelming sense of relief when he felt the steady throb of Arthur’s heart beat back against his palm. Merlin then snapped his head up at Myror and was surprised by himself when he let out an animalistic growl. He had never felt so furious, so magically unstable, in all his life.

“What did you do to him?!” Merlin demanded, rising to his feet as his magic whipped around him like a whirlwind and made his hair slap against his face. As if prompted by his words, the loyal objects around Merlin’s room also suddenly sprang to life behind him, awakening from their inanimate forms like an undead army rising from the grave. All his shoes started walking menacingly towards Myror like a marching militia and his shirts and trousers rose up into the air to form bodyless soldiers, each one equipped with a different weapon, from umbrellas to coat hangers.

Myror had obviously noticed this because he immediately dropped the knife and took a step back, his eyes huge and frightened.

“Who- what are you?” he gasped out.
“I am Emrys,” Merlin’s voice boomed out before Merlin could even control it. It reverberated around the room and shook the curtains open with its force. In the back of his mind, Merlin really hoped it hadn’t woken up his mum. “And you have angered me, Myror.”

Myror fell to his knees.

“Lord Emrys,” he said with fear. “I didn’t realise- I never even thought-”

“Obviously. Now tell me what you did to Arthur and I’ll try not to flay you where you stand,” said Merlin, although he really wasn’t much of a flayer. Myror didn’t know this, however, so he revealed the plan in full, barely taking a breath as he did.

“So it’s just a tranquiliser dart?” Merlin confirmed, slumping back against one of his animated shirts in relief, who patted him consolingly on the shoulder with a sleeve. “No crazed love dart? No strain of rabies in there? No slow acting poison that will eventually paralyse him?”

“No,” said Myror, before quirking his head as though those suggestions were inspired ideas and he was disappointed he hadn't thought of them earlier.

"Thank fuck," said Merlin, exhaling out a deep breath. He then picked up his mobile from the bed, dialled 999 and brightly said, "Hi yes, police, please. Oh yes, hello there. A mad robber man with an earring and a knife just broke into my house. Please come soon before he kills us all. 7b Oakwood Court. Thanks."

Merlin then hung up and looked at Myror, pointing at him threateningly with the phone.

"Right, I’m going to walk you outside. The police will be here soon to pick you up and you're going to go with them without a fuss. And you're going to be quiet while we walk out - I don’t want you waking my mother up and upsetting her. Understood?"

"Yes, my Lord," said Myror and it appeared he was a man of his word because he proceeded to creep silently down the stairs of the house with Merlin and calmly sat on the wall outside for the police to arrive, offering Merlin some chewing gum while they waited.

By the time the police arrived and, with some befuddlement, escorted the rather calm man into the police van, it was three in the morning and Merlin was frankly exhausted. So, trudging his way back up the stairs, Merlin dismissed his animated objects with a wave of his hand so they slumped back into lifelessness, rubbed a heavy hand over his face and perched on the bed beside Arthur. Looking down at him, Merlin tried not to think of ridiculous Sleeping Beauty comparisons but it was Arthur's own fault for being so damn pretty.

"Arthur?” Merlin said through a yawn, trying to nudge him awake. “Arthur?” When a minute of this didn’t work, Merlin shrugged, briefly thought about stupid things like kissing him awake before going for his tried and tested approach and smacking Arthur as hard as he could across the face. "Oi, dickhead, are you awake or what!?"

"Jesus!” Arthur yelped as he sat up with a start, his eyes huge as he looked around frantically for what had woken him up. He then groaned and held a palm to his injured neck. "Ow, what the hell. What's going on? Why does my neck hurt? The last thing I remember is the window smashing and Myror... fuck! Myror!” Arthur exclaimed, jumping up onto his feet so fast that he overbalanced and fell right back onto the bed again on his arse. Merlin rolled his eyes.

"Calm down before you give yourself another injury, you git," Merlin scolded, holding Arthur's shoulder down before he tried to jump up again. "Myror's gone. The police took him away."
"I-! Wait, what?" Arthur stuttered. "When?"

"While you were out."

"Out?" Arthur repeated

"Yeah," Merlin said nodding, thinking about what the sensible thing to say would be before replying. "You fainted again."

Arthur paled.

"I did not."

"Yeah, I think it was the size of the knife that set you off this time," Merlin returned, enjoying the alarm on Arthur's face before the reality of the situation hit home. His smile drooped slightly. "You know what this means, don't you?"

"That I'm as much of a woman as you?" Arthur said, looking like he wanted to smother himself with the nearest pillow.

"No, it means you're safe now," Merlin said softly. "You can go back to your big fancy apartment again."

"Oh, yes, my place," said Arthur, as if he had forgotten that he actually lived there. If Merlin didn't know better, he would say Arthur sounded disappointed. "I suppose I should head back tomorrow."

"Right," said Merlin, barely stopping himself from throwing his arms around Arthur's waist and hysterically wailing 'Stay!' like the little girl Arthur always accused him of being. "Well, um. My mum will really miss you."

"She did make staying in close proximity to you all the more bearable," Arthur said. "Really, Merlin, are you sure you're not-"

"Adopted? Come on, Arthur, the comebacks are getting predictable now," Merlin returned with a warm smile.

"Yes, well, your face is predictable."

"What does that even mean?"

"No idea," Arthur replied, returning the smile. He then looked up at Merlin, worrying his lip a little before blurting out, "Look, Merlin, about before. I mean, that is, just before Myror threw that thing at me-"

"Arthur, it's okay, seriously," Merlin said, not wanting Arthur to feel guilty about the argument they had had before the dart had knocked Arthur out. "Don't worry about it, all right? It's forgotten."

"It's just that- wait, forgotten?" Arthur repeated. "As in- you want to forget about it?"

"Don't you?" Merlin asked with a laugh. "It was just a bit of momentary madness. Just happens sometimes when you spend too much time with someone. Forget about it, okay? It's water under the bridge. I mean, unless you don't think - I mean, we're still friends, right?"

"Friends?" Arthur repeated faintly. He then looked down for a moment, seemed to decide something in his head and then looked up, nodding his head once. "Of course. Right, yes. Friends."
Then barely a moment later, "I should get to sleep. I've a long day ahead of me tomorrow."

"Right, okay," Merlin said, not sure where the curt tone had come from. Before he could say anything, however, Arthur had walked into the bathroom and closed the door shut behind him, leaving Merlin with a gnawing feeling that he had missed something important.

Two weeks later, work started up again and for the first few days, it felt like all the progress Arthur and Merlin had made during the holidays had gone. Merlin didn't know why but Arthur was even more closed off than he had been before and talked to Merlin in a polite, stilted sort of way that included no insults to Merlin's person or any of the derogatory nicknames that had been a daily habit for them. In short, it was awful.

They also seemed to entirely gloss over the almost-kiss to such a degree that Merlin was now beginning to wonder if he had had a psychotic episode where he had just imagined the whole thing, which was entirely probable because he daydreamed about Arthur so often that he was beginning not to be able to discern the difference between reality and fantasy.

The only good thing about returning to work from Merlin's point of view was catching up with Gwen. They had texted each other the customary 'Merry Christmas' over the holidays but they hadn't really talked since the Christmas party when he and Lance had walked in on her and Arthur in the toilets. Nevertheless, the moment he walked into the Closet on his first day back and just looked at her, they ended up throwing their arms around each other immediately.

"Oh, Merlin, I feel so awful about the whole thing," Gwen had confessed as he took a seat beside her on the camp lip-shaped sofa in the Closet and held her hand. "It was so stupid of me. I had had this awful argument with Elyan because he got a job here as a freelance model -- which I should have just supported him about but I didn't because I'm an awful sister -- and I felt so guilty about it afterwards that I suppose I drank more than I should have. That is no excuse for what I did though. I feel like I betrayed you."

"Well, I'm not going to lie and say that I hadn't always hoped that you and Lance would get together," Merlin admitted truthfully, "but you've got nothing to apologise to me about, Gwen."

"Oh, Merlin, I don't mean betrayal over Lance," she said boldly. "I mean betrayal over Arthur."

"Arthur?" Merlin squeaked out because just his name made his insides go funny and his voice screech out with nerves. "Why would I-?" but the knowing look Gwen gave him said everything it needed to.

"It's okay, Merlin. I think I've known for a while," she said gently, patting his hand soothingly like Hunith did when he was upset. "You like him, don't you?"

"Me? Well, I- that is, I-"

"If it helps, I'm more than positive he's just as besotted with you, too," Gwen cut across him with a
warm smile.

"I'm not besotted!"

Gwen gave him a look. It was enough to make Merlin drop his head face down into her lap and groan.

"God, I'm so screwed," his voice muffled against her skirt. Gwen, being a dear, stroked his hair in sympathy.

"It's not such a bad thing, is it?" she asked positively. "Everyone in this office is half in love with him as it is. You're the only one that has a chance to actually tie him down." Merlin's eyes glazed.

"Into a relationship, Merlin," Gwen clarified with a pointed look and a tweak of his ear, looking like she was trying not to smile.

"Oh, right," Merlin nodded, pretending that he knew that even as the image stayed in his head and did a sexy little dance for him.

"Is it the sex?" Gwen suddenly asked. "Because I can, um, tell you that part is definitely not disappointing."

Merlin lifted up his head to look at her.

"Too soon?" she hazarded, biting her lip.

"Don't forget, Gwen, I've seen him shag -- literally seen him shag -- about a hundred women since I started this job. I'm in no doubt he's incredible." Merlin then paused and remembered Freya's rather strained smile after their first time and her little pat on his shoulder as she said, "Um, that was... interesting." Merlin gulped and sat up completely. "Okay, I'm sort of worried about the sex now."

"Crap, I'm sorry, just ignore me!" Gwen apologised fretfully. "I just wanted you to know that I think it's sweet. You and Arthur. You really work together. Not that it matters what I say, he'll probably ask you out before the day is out."

"I doubt it," said Merlin. "He's being... weird with me."

"Weird?"

"Ever since he stayed at mine, he's been sort of off. I mean, we were fine until Myror-" "-broke in and had to be taken away by the police?" Gwen finished. When Merlin looked at her in surprise, she smiled humorously. "The rumour mill around here is so good sometimes that it can predict things before they even happen. So what happened between you and Arthur before Myror?"

"I, well... I think we almost kissed- bloody hell, Gwen!" Merlin yelped because Gwen had let out a high-pitched screech of excitement at this. Slapping her hands over her mouth, she tried to look apologetic but she was too busy beaming.

"Sorry, please continue," she insisted, calming herself down as she primly placed her hands in her lap.

"Blimey, my ears are still ringing," Merlin commented before shaking his head like a dog with water in its ears. "Anyway, I'm pretty sure we almost kissed before Myror attacked him and interrupted us but I don't even know anymore. Maybe that's just how Arthur looks at people. Maybe he was leaning forward to tell me I had spinach in my teeth. I don't even know anymore. All
I know is that he can barely look at me now, like it was some embarrassing thing he had done when he was drunk, like wearing women's underwear or doing a striptease in the middle of the tube."

"... have you done either of those things when you were drunk?" Gwen asked, blinking at his analogies.

Merlin opened his mouth briefly before soon closing it shut.

"We're getting off the subject," Merlin said, neatly avoiding that topic. "The main point is that I'm worried that we've lost the friendship that we had before. Heck, for all I know, I could get fired for sexually harassing my boss."

"Oh Merlin, of course that won't happen!" Gwen said. "Even if Arthur despised you -- which he doesn't -- he couldn't afford to get rid of a potentially award winning concept man."

"Award winning?"

"You didn't hear? We got nominated for a Fashion Publishing Award for the Lady Helen shoot. Well, if we're honest now, you got nominated."

"Really? That's brilliant!" Merlin said enthusiastically, feeling thrilled as his face broke into a grin. He had never been nominated for anything before. His smile slowly faded when a thought hit him. "Arthur never said anything to me about it."

"Maybe he just forgot?"

"Yeah," said Merlin, feeling glum again as he dropped his head back on Gwen's lap. "Maybe."

"I'm sorry, is this a bad time?" a polite voice suddenly enquired at the door.

"Lance!" Gwen cried out before jumping to her feet, her sudden movement making Merlin fall with an "Oof!" to the floor. "I, um... welcome back! How was your holiday?"

"Yes, great. Thank you. And yours?" Lance asked, sounding uneasy as he stepped forward, reminding Merlin of one of those tortured and conflicted period drama heroes who made women swoon with their gallantry and tight breeches.

"Oh! Yes, um, mine was fine. Elyan and I thought we would have dinner together and that was nice. I mean, it got a bit hairy when he burnt the stuffing but it was all right because I had saved an extra batch of mixture just in case and- um, I'm rambling again, aren't I? Sorry."

"No please, don't apologise. I love hearing you ramble," Lance said with a bit of a lovesick look himself before clapping a hand over his mouth and correcting himself. "I mean, not that I think you ramble. I think you talk a perfect amount, really. I think... I think you're perfect, really."

"Oh," said Gwen, looking decidedly like she was about to jump him and rip his clothes off. Merlin realised that was his cue to leave.

"I should go," he said to no one in particular, peeling himself off the floor as he waved a hand to get their attention. When neither of them noticed him, Merlin coughed and got to his feet. "Um, okay, bye then," he said before walking out the door Lance had left open and closing it shut behind him. Merlin then pressed his ear to the door. Smirking when he heard what was unmistakably the sound of two people throwing themselves at each other with everything they had, Merlin took a step back, turned to head back to Arthur's office and left his friends to it.
'Where have you been?' was the reply Merlin had usually expected from Arthur when he took a while to return back to him. After all, in the past -- well, the period of history before the Myror situation -- Arthur used to get rather narked at Merlin when he disappeared from his side for an extended period of time. Now, though, when Merlin returned to him from the Closet, Arthur looked like he would have preferred it if Merlin had never returned at all.

Instead of upsetting Merlin, this just seemed to make him angry.

"So, I hear we got nominated for the Lady Helen shoot," said Merlin loudly enough to be heard in the next building as he crossed his arms, addressing Arthur directly. "That's nice."

Arthur was sitting behind his desk and working through piles of paperwork that he had never bothered tackling before briefly looking up.

"Yes, it's exciting," he said in a voice that sounded as uninterested as possible. He then pointed at his coffee table with his pen before returning back to his work. "I left the envelope with your invitations on the table there."

"Wait, invitations? As in, a pair?" repeated Merlin, surprised he had managed to snag one, let alone two. He knew how much it cost the company to pay for a table at an award show. He had booked enough of them for Arthur to know, after all. Picking up the envelope from the table, Merlin opened it and found his printed name gleaming back at him. He had never been important enough to warrant being addressed by name. He had only ever been an 'and guest' in the past. Arthur's guest. Merlin looked up at Arthur, feeling a little disappointed. "So, I'm not your plus one?"

"You came up with the concept, it's only fitting that you reap the rewards of its success. In any case, there's someone else I want to take."

"Oh," said Merlin, feeling like Morgana had stepped one of her pencil heels right through his chest. "Great. I mean, that's great. For you. I guess I'll ask Will then."

"Great," said Arthur tersely, "I'll see you then." Arthur then returned back to the paperwork he had been doing, not even lifting his head back up to Merlin as he said, "That'll be all, Merlin."

"Right, um, okay," said Merlin, not sure what to do with himself as he walked out because he had never been officially dismissed like that before.

Slinking back to his desk, Merlin sank down onto his chair and stared at his sleeping computer monitor for a while before grabbing his phone and dialling Gwen's extension. Unsurprisingly, it went straight to voicemail.

"Hey Gwen - oh, and hi to Lance there, too. Anyway, Gwen, if you could give me a call back when you're done, that would be great. I need a tux for the award show. A brilliant one. Oh, and if I could get you to try and sort out my shitty hair for the night, that would be amazing, too. Anyway, congrats, guys. It's about sodding time. Thanks."

Merlin then hung up to immediately dial Will.

"Hey," he said the moment Will picked up, "are you busy Friday night?"
Merlin had always assumed that the Fashion Publishing Awards were a big deal from the way people ‘oohed’ and ‘aahed’ over them but he never realised that they were the literal Oscars of their industry.

As soon as it became common knowledge that Merlin was going, everyone had started to share tales about previous years to prepare him, from the bitchy backstage goings ons to the all-out cat-fight on stage a few years back between Naomi Campbell and the model she had lost out to. Apparently, it had been such a big deal that Marc Jacobs had been inspired to make a handbag about it, Tom Ford filmed it artistically on his phone for inspiration for his next feature film and people maintained that Lagerfeld had been scandalised but it was impossible to tell with a face like his.

Gwen in particularly couldn't stop stressing the importance of the night, which she had proved on the evening in question by the artistic sculpture she seemed to be making out of Merlin’s hair with Brylcreem and frankly so much hairspray that Merlin made an apology to the ozone layer for any lasting effects.

"Don't you think this is a bit much?" Merlin had asked timidly as he sat still in his seat because Gwen mid-styling frightened him slightly.

"No, it's just about enough," Gwen said, giving his hair one last yank before taking a step back to survey her work. She then clasped her hands together, exceedingly proud of herself.

"Perfect," she said, looking like she had surprised even herself with how good she was. "Arthur won't be able to keep his hands off you."

"If you mean by hitting me around the head when we lose, I'll agree with you there. Luckily, I've got so much product in my hair that it's like I'm wearing a helmet. It'll bounce right off me."

"That was not what I meant and you know it," Gwen said with affection colouring her voice. "Now get out of here, Cinderella, and go dazzle your prince at the ball. Oh, and no losing those shoes at midnight. They're Louboutins and I need to have them back for the shoot on Monday."

"Yes, fairy godmother," Merlin returned, bowing at her respectfully. Gwen immediately curtsied back.

"Oh and Merlin?" Gwen called back as he turned to leave. "You look fantastic. Don't doubt it."

And Merlin didn't, especially when he entered Arthur's office and watched him double take the moment he took in Merlin's appearance.

"Merlin," Arthur said, blinking a little stupidly at Merlin outfit like it had rendered his brain useless. "You look... not ridiculous."

Distracted by the fact that Arthur looked so good in his tux that it actually hurt to look at him directly, Merlin proceeded to look down at himself instead.

"Er, thanks," Merlin said, genuinely taken aback by the compliment before a creeping grin slowly took over his face. "You know, that might just be the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

"Well, don't get used to it, you're still an idiot," Arthur quipped back, going a little red as he
dropped his gaze to his wrists and tried to adjust his cufflinks. Rolling his eyes as he watched Arthur make a pig's ear of it, Merlin gathered his courage to move forward and slapped his employer's fingers away to fasten them properly himself. For once, Arthur didn't complain. In fact, he stood in a rather rigid pose, as though he was afraid to move. "So," Arthur began stiffly, as Merlin let out a "ha!" of triumph when the platinum dragon slipped into place. "No William, then?"

"Well, I sent him an invitation but I'm not sure this kind of party is really Will's scene," Merlin admitted, imagining Will loudly insulting all the rich donors and making drunken passes at their wives. It was almost worth inviting him for entertainment's sake. Merlin must have been wearing a soft smile on his face because Arthur simply gave him a withering look.

Merlin coughed and released Arthur's cuffs, scratching behind his ear.

"So, remind me why it's mandatory to wear this monkey suit again?"

"Technically, you look more like a monkey in what you usually wear," Arthur bantered back.

"And we're back to insulting me again, that didn't take long," Merlin said morosely.

"It's not my fault you make it so easy," Arthur retorted but he was smiling despite himself, his lips quirked. It made Merlin's stomach flutter. This was the first time Arthur had really smiled at him since the Myror incident. He examined every detail of it and committed it to memory, just in case it was the last time it happened again.

"So, no Nimueh at the awards this year," Merlin said, trying to keep the mood light. "Maybe we'll win."

"We still have Morgause to beat," Arthur reminded him.

"Oh, she's not that scary," Merlin said resolutely before laughing at the look Arthur gave him. "Okay, she is kind of terrifying," Merlin admitted before pausing to note. "I also think her eyeliner is tattooed to her eyelids."

"Irrelevant but probably true."

Merlin smiled, suddenly feeling shy.

"So, um, are you meeting your date here?"

"My date?" Arthur said in confusion.

"You know, your plus one? You said you had someone special you wanted to take?"

Looking puzzled, Arthur opened his mouth to reply when there was a knock on the door and Arthur's plus one walked through the door.

"Arthur, apologies I'm late. I had a bit of a wardrobe malfunction."

"Lance?" Merlin said in surprise, gawking at his slick-looking, tuxedoed friend before and pointing at him to clarify, "Wait, so Lance is your date?"

"Date?" both Lance and Arthur said in surprise.

"You said you had someone in mind to take-"

"Lance worked on the final shoot, I thought it was only fitting to take him with me," Arthur said,
looking at Merlin like he was simple.

"Oh," said Merlin, his despondency about spending an evening with Arthur and some beautiful woman melting as quickly as sugar in a cup of hot tea. He let out a wide smile, sure he looked stupid but not caring in the slightest. "So, this isn't a date."

"Of course it isn't," Arthur snapped as Lance muttered,

"Well, I don't think Gwen would approve…"

"Brilliant, that's brilliant," Merlin said brightly before picking up his coat. "Right, we should head off, right? Don't want to be late!" Merlin then paused to look at Lance. "You were with Gwen just before coming here, weren't you?"

Lance's eyes grew round like a rabbit caught in the headlights.

"How did you guess?"

"Magic," Merlin said winking. He then turned to head out the door. "Also, your fly is undone."

By the time they made it to the Savoy, where the event was happening, Lance's flies were up, Arthur was looking entirely too edible for a man of flesh and blood and Merlin's hair had hardened to such a degree that he was sure it could cut glass. To Merlin's delight, he caught sight of Will as soon as he entered the reception.

"Will, you came! Where the hell did you get the tux from?"

"Gaius," Will explained, before giving Merlin a twirl that made him laugh with joy. "He actually showed up at the door, gave me the eyebrow, handed it over and basically told me not to get drunk and puke all over it. It's like he's psychic. I'm still sort of freaked out about it."

"Sounds like Gaius," Merlin admitted, before looking at Will with gratitude and saying. "I'm glad you came. I'm a lot more nervous than I thought I'd be. Although-

"Yes, yes, I know, don't be myself," Will finished. "I know the drill."

"I never said don't be yourself. Just try not to do anything to humiliate me completely."

"So, basically, don't be myself," Will said, grinning. "You always ruin my fun, Merlin. This is nice though." he said, looking around the room. "Very snazzy. So where's Arthur? Trying to present an award to himself?"

"No, but that's not a bad idea," Arthur remarked aloud as he walked up to them both from where he had been networking by the bar, Leon and Lance at his shoulders. He nodded at Will. "William. I see you've got your trousers on for once, I almost didn't recognise you."

"Well, I suppose if I saw me walking around trouserless all the time, I wouldn't look me in the face either," Will said before grabbing a flute of champagne from a nearby server, sipping it and then spitting it back into his glass. "Crikey, this is all a bit poncy, isn't it? I thought that was Appletiser. Pendragon, your family owns everyone in this room, right? You couldn't get us a beer, could you? Champagne makes me gassy."

Merlin looked around for the nearest wall to bang his head against as Arthur smiled a stilted, rictus little smile that was usually directed at pushy stakeholders or his father.
"I'll see what I can find," he said, his eye twitching so violently that Merlin watched it with
concern, ready to duck at the inevitable moment it popped out of his head.

"No, don't worry about it, I'll get his drink," Merlin cut in, putting a hand on Arthur's chest to stop
him before getting terribly affected by the strong thump of Arthur's heart against his fingertips.
Quickly dropping his hand before it did something inappropriate -- like slide its way down into
Arthur's trousers -- Merlin quickly headed over to the bar before he lost his cool completely.

"Get a grip," he muttered to himself.

"Are you talking to me?" a ridiculously tall woman asked from beside him, looking down her nose
from where she towered over him.

"No, I'm just talking to myself," Merlin confirmed miserably. "Don't mind me."

Grabbing the drinks once the bartender had placed them in front of him, Merlin turned and was just
about to head back to Will when he heard Arthur's voice drifting from the balcony behind him.

"What are you up to with Merlin?" Arthur asked.

Merlin froze briefly at hearing his own name and considered not eavesdropping for the shortest
millisecond in the history of time before ducking behind the balcony curtain to peek at the
shadowy figures of Arthur and, strangely enough, Gwaine bathed in moonlight. Merlin smiled
automatically. He didn't know Gwaine had even been invited and briefly lamented that he hadn't
checked the program to see if Gwaine was up for Model of the Year.

Gwaine was wearing his tuxedo casually with no bow and his top buttons undone and was lazily
leaning back against the edge of the balcony like a man with no fear. He was also looking at
Arthur with a mixture of both befuddlement and fond amusement.

"You couldn't repeat the question, could you?" Gwaine asked cheekily. "I couldn't quite catch it
under all the uppity in your voice, mate."

"Damn it, Gwaine, you heard me," Arthur replied through clenched teeth, looking a little strained,
as if it galled him to ask. "What is going on with you and Merlin? As his employer, I have a right to
know."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's not true," Gwaine replied. "But since I like you, I'll tell you anyway.
I'm courting him."

"Courting him?"

"Well, it's nicer than saying I'm trying to get into his pants but you get the general gist if it."

Arthur seemed to gape at Gwaine as if he couldn't quite believe the sheer shamelessness of him
before blurring out,

"I forbid it!"

"You forbid- excuse me?" Gwaine let out a bark of disbelief. "Arthur, come on, now."

"Workplace romances are a problem."

"You've screwed every woman in the company under the age of sixty. Even some over!"

"Yes, well, I'm an exceptional case," Arthur said mulishly.
"You know what I think?" Gwaine suddenly remarked, leaning back against the balcony rail to stare Arthur straight in the eye. "I think you're jealous."

"Jealous?" Arthur said. "I think all the alcohol you've consumed over the years has permanently addled your brain. Why would I be jealous over you?"

"Not me, princess. Merlin."

There was a pause for a moment which was soon broken by Arthur's blank voice saying,

"Merlin. You think I'm jealous over Merlin."

"I think you're so used to his world revolving around you that you can't stand seeing someone else getting his attention," Gwaine said brashly.

Arthur snorted so loudly he could have been mistaken for a farmyard animal.

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

"About as ridiculous as you trying to stop Merlin from dating?" Gwaine asked innocently, sipping on his drink.

"I'm trying to stop Merlin from dating you, Gwaine. There's a distinct difference."

"And why is that? Don't you think I'm a catch?" Gwaine asked sweetly.

"I think he's likely to catch something from you, yes," Arthur returned before letting out an exhale and running a hand through his hair, looking a little hassled. "Look, just… just leave him alone, okay? He doesn't need to be caught up in your drama."

"Says the most dramatic person on the planet," Gwaine said and Merlin had to agree with him there. "How many times has he saved your arse again?"

"I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself!" Arthur argued, which made the eavesdropping Merlin roll his eyes.

"Oh please, you can barely dress yourself in the morning without Merlin there to pick out your outfits and put them on for you."

"Now who is the one who sounds jealous?"

"That's because I am and I'm not afraid to admit it," Gwaine said simply. "You, on the other hand, would need a wrecking ball to break down that closet of yours before you ever step out of it."

"Wait one minute, are you trying to imply-"

"I'm not implying anything, your highness. I'm straight out telling you - you have a thing for Merlin."

"That's- that's absurd! Have you seen him? Why… why would I even-"

"Because he's gorgeous and has cheekbones you could slice granite with and is probably the most adorable person on the planet. And then there's his arse -- don't even try to tell me you haven't noticed it -- which is reason enough by itself. The question isn't why would you fancy him, it's why wouldn't you?"
"His... his ears," Arthur said weakly, sounding like he was grasping at straws.

Gwaine just sighed an exaggerated long-suffering sigh and put an arm around Arthur's shoulder.

"As much as I find you a pain in the arse, we're still friends so let me give you some advice, free of charge. Someone will eventually snap him up. Whether it's me, the apparently straight Will or heaven forbid, a woman. Do something about it Arthur, before it's too late." Gwaine then looked up and to Merlin's mortification, spotted him hiding behind the curtain. Looking at him curiously, Gwaine tilted his head and for a moment, Merlin feared that he would tell Arthur that Merlin had been listening. But Gwaine didn't. Instead, he turned back to Arthur and slapped him genially on the back. "Anyway, I better head off. See if I can catch Merlin on his lonesome. You should try to do the same, my prickly friend, or you'll end up regretting it."

Gwaine then exited the balcony and headed straight towards Merlin, making him swear as he squeezed himself into a tiny gap in the wall to avoid being seen by Arthur. Looking at him briefly as he passed, Gwaine let out a rasp of a laugh and shook his head at both Merlin and Arthur, as though they were both stupid and beyond his help.

"He's all yours, if you want him," Gwaine said suggestively, indicating towards where Arthur was still frowning on the balcony unhappily as though he was genuinely debating whether or not to jump off the edge. "You want him, don't you?"

Merlin replied to this by letting out a squeak and running away.

"There you are," said Will, finding him hiding behind a tapestry about a minute later and Merlin momentarily cursed him for knowing him so well. Will then cocked his head curiously before shrugging and sliding in beside him. "So," he said conversationally a few moments later, "why are we hiding here then?"

"I was hiding here before you bothered me."

"Well, they started to seat everyone and I couldn't exactly just park myself without you. That's just rude." Will then looked down at the beer still clutched in Merlin's hand and cheered. "Brilliant! You got me a Corona! I was dead parched." Taking a blissful sip, Will looked considerably much happier with life before turning back to Merlin. "So, are you actually going to tell me what's going on with you or are we going to stay here all night? Because honestly, mate, you're acting like a bit of weirdo right now."

"I'm not acting weird."

"We're hiding behind a tapestry," Will reminded him before sighing heavily, pushing the tapestry aside and pulling Merlin back into the open. "Look, is this about Arthur Pratdragon?"

"Arthur? No! Why would you say that! Of course not, why would I be worrying over Arthur?"

"Because you're acting like a loony, that's why. The only other time you acted this strange was when you and Freya snuck off to that--" Will then suddenly stopped to shriek out, "Oh my god!" at the top of his lungs before looking at Merlin with horror. "You're fucking Arthur Pendragon, aren't you? Holy shit, Merlin, a building full of hot women and you go for the only other bloke?"

Merlin's face went bright red as he grabbed Will by the elbow and tried to pull him back behind the tapestry before hissing,

"Would you keep your voice down?!"
"He's not even denying it!" Will called up to the ceiling, as though having an exasperated conversation with God. Pulling him frantically into a nearby chair, Merlin tried to ignore where Arthur was now standing across the room with Leon and Lance, watching them through narrowed eyes.

"There's nothing to deny. And don't you scoff at me!" Merlin snapped the moment Will did indeed scoff. "It's purely platonic."

"Your Prince Charming over there has been glaring at me the moment you touched my arm," Will stated matter-of-factly. "So yeah, not too platonic from where I'm standing, mate."

"Of course he hasn't been staring, don't be daft! Has he?" Merlin asked, looking painfully hopeful. Will just groaned and clicked his fingers in front Merlin's face like a hypnotist breaking a trance.

"Oi, head out the clouds, Dale Winton! We've got important shit to discuss. Namely, is this my fault?"

"What?"

"I am a pretty prime piece of meat here, Mer. Can't have been easy, growing up around this." Will gestured to himself before pointing particularly at his crotch. He then looked at Merlin seriously. "This turned you, didn't it?"

"Yes, Will," Merlin said in a blank voice. "Your mighty cock turned me gay."

"Aw, don't get all narky. If I liked dick, Mer, I'd definitely suck yours. No need to pine."

Will then grinned. Merlin, who had been agonising about telling Will about his feelings for Arthur, let out a breath he didn't even realise he had been holding, his heart feeling lighter.

"Git," he said fondly.

"Is that any way to speak to the man you love?" Will quipped back. Merlin punched him good-naturedly in the arm. "So, about you and prissy-pants Pendragon over there-"

"It's complicated," Merlin said gloomily, running a hand over his face.

"What's so complicated about sticking your tongue down his throat?"

"I see the Will Gendry art of seduction hasn't changed." Merlin laughed shakily, before resignation soon worked itself through every muscle in his body. "First of all, I don't even think he likes me like that. And second, he's my boss, Will."

"So?" Will demanded abruptly. "Merlin, as your best friend, I insist you sleep your way to the top. You'll get a pay rise and I can finally afford that hot tub I've always dreamed about. Also? Shagging your boss means you can role-play Disclosure on office furniture after everyone has left, which is always a plus. Man, Demi Moore is a hot milf."

"It's just," Merlin lowered his voice, every insecurity in his head rushing to the surface, "he's just so out of my league."

Merlin should have expected Will's hand to thump his head but it was still a surprise when it did.

"Ow!" he wailed. "What was that for?"

"You blind tosser, can that wanker start a fire with his mind?" Will defended him staunchly. "Can
he transport himself somewhere just by thinking about it? So he goes to the gym and slaps fake tan on his arse every week, what's so impressive about that?"

"That's not all!" Merlin cried out, offended on Arthur's behalf. "He's really smart, he just hides behind an arrogant, poster boy front. If you knew him, Will, you'd see that he's kind to his staff and he cares about the company more than he cares about himself and he's strangely diplomatic and he always tries to do the right thing. The way he appears in the papers and magazines... it's not him. He's just so terrified of not having his father's approval that he puts up this alter-ego to the world."

"Wow," said Will, blinking. "I see things clearly now."

Merlin nodded.

"Thank you."

"You're in love with him."

"What?!" Merlin squawked but Will overlooked his outrage.

"Oh, Arthur is so big and brave, he's such a knight in shining armour! He fought a dragon and saved a village from bandits!" Will mocked in a high falsetto, holding his hands together like a maiden and fluttering his eyelashes in a way that Merlin found highly disturbing.

“I don’t sound like that,” he argued back.


Merlin shrugged because he honestly didn't get it either. And then he caught Arthur's eye from across the room and like a donkey kick to the chest, it suddenly all made perfect sense.

Will gagged.

"Okay, I'm off. If I have to stand around and watch you two eye-fuck each other any longer, I'll end up chucking myself off that balcony over there. Go sort it out, Mer, before you end up dying of blue balls and I have to speak at your funeral. I'm crap at eulogies and don't like wearing black."

"Liar, you love wearing black."

"True. It brings out my eyes, doesn't it?" Will acknowledged. "Now stop being such a chicken-shit little pussy and go and woo lover boy already. There are loads of dark corners around this place you can sneak off to for a quick shag. I decided to pay attention just in case Morgana felt like slumming it. Speaking of, I'll see you at the table." Will then licked his palm, ran it through his hair and walked off to join the group following a passing Morgana, their eyes dazed and their arms outstretched like zombies who had found the ultimate piece of brain.

Merlin watched them go, letting out a morose little exhale. It seemed like everyone was in love.

"Merlin, over here!" Lance's voice called out over all the chattering voices. He was sitting by the table nearest the stage and was motioning for Merlin to join him and Arthur. Morgana had escaped her lumbering fans and was sitting on the other side of the table with Mordred, somehow managing to find the happy medium of sitting as far away from Arthur as possible and managing to eat her meal. Seeing Arthur's back stiffen at just the sound of Merlin's name made Merlin fall deeper into despair. Both Gwaine and Will had been wrong. Arthur really wasn't interested.
"Um, wow, good table. Best view in the house," Merlin commented, trying to remain chipper as he scanned the table for his allocated seat. Since fate apparently hated him, he found the fancy place card with his name on it sitting mockingly beside Arthur, as though a big practical joke was being played on him. Slipping down onto his seat, Merlin counted to ten in his head and prayed that a wormhole would suddenly appear beside him and suck him out of this dimension to save him from the awkwardness. When it didn't, he felt immensely disappointed.

It took a further ten minutes for the award show to begin and Merlin, who had always thought these things were terribly glamorous on television, soon realised that award shows, next to the Tellytubbies, were the most monotonous thing on the planet to witness. There seemed to be about a thousand categories and the format was generally the same for each and every one. A heavily botoxed ex-model would get introduced to give the award, they would totter on stage barely holding themselves together in an outfit at least a dress size too tight and then they would squint and fumble through reading out the winner because they had already got themselves completely sloshed on all the free champagne. By the time they had reached the fifteenth category, Merlin was losing the will to live. It didn't help that Arthur was sitting beside him and kept darting the odd considering look at him. He even opened his mouth a couple of times and looked like he was going to say something to him but he always seemed to change his mind at the last minute and lean back into his seat, looking annoyed at himself.

It was only when the clock struck midnight that Merlin sat up and actually cared about a category. It was the Male Model of the Year award and Merlin had double-checked the program to see that Gwaine was nominated. To present the award was infamous model Fabio himself, skin orange and his mane of blond hair as swishy as ever as he made his way onto the stage, told a joke that made no sense whatsoever to Merlin and then announced the nominees.

"And the Fashion Publishing Award for Male Model of the year goes to," said Fabio in his Italian accent before flicking back his hair just for the sake of it, "Gwaine!"

Merlin jumped to his feet in his exhilaration, beaming from ear to ear as he clapped so hard he was sure he had broken a couple of fingers.

Gwaine, who was seated at the table behind them, got to his feet and grinned about him with delight as he weaved his way around the Pendragon table towards the stage. Instead of heading straight there, however, Gwaine stopped at their table and, to Merlin's shock, grabbed Merlin by the sides of the face and planted a loud kiss on his mouth. He then disappeared up onto the stage as quickly as he had kissed him, making a speech that Merlin didn't catch because all he could hear were the flashes of hundreds of camera snapping him in a room quite literally filled with journalists.

"Yes, yes, that's my best friend," Will said to an enquiring woman from the next table. "Merlin Emrys. He's a big deal, you know."

"I need to go to the bathroom," Arthur suddenly said, getting to his feet as Gwaine made his way off the stage and the new category was in middle of being introduced.

"I- but what about the award?" Merlin asked, still blinking from the camera flashes as he turned to Arthur. "Our category is straight after this one. We might win."

"Well, if we do, why don't you ask Gwaine to pick it up in my place?" Arthur returned petulantly, throwing a rather frayed looking napkin down on the table. "I'm sure he'd be happy to oblige."

"Arthur-" Merlin tried to say, reaching for his arm but Arthur had already turned and stormed off towards the exit. Rolling his eyes like he was used to this, Leon necked his champagne and then
slipped his sunglasses back on.

"I'll see you in a bit, gentlemen," he said before hurrying after Arthur's retreating form.

"God, you two I swear," groaned Will as Merlin sank unhappily back into his chair. "When are you just going to shag and get all this tension over with? It's playing with everyone's nerves."

To Merlin's surprise, Lance, who had been steadily drinking and looking drunker by the second, nodded with agreement.

"He's right you know," he said. "It's painful to watch. We've even got money riding on it."

"You lot are betting on me and Arthur?" Merlin said, rounding on Lance, who he had expected better from.

"Well, it was Gwaine's idea," Lance pointed out as Gwaine himself made his way back through the crowd, looking thoroughly pleased with life as he clutched his award in his hand. Seeing Arthur's empty seat, he then shrugged, sat in it and reached over to drink Arthur's champagne before rethinking this and stopping. He had obviously remembered what had happened at the fundraiser.

"So Arthur's fucked off then?" Gwaine asked, popping a green bean from Arthur’s plate into his mouth

"He's gone to the bathroom." said Merlin dejectedly.

"And you're not sucking him off in the toilets right now because?"

"Gwaine!" Merlin scolded as Will groaned with disgust and threw a bread roll at him. Mordred, giving them all a disapproving glare, huffed and left the table, in case their lack of propriety was catching. "You lot do realise we're here for an award show right?"

As if prompted by his words, the presenter for the next award -- their award -- stepped up to the podium. The table immediately quietened down.

The presenter, Merlin was impressed to see, was none other than Naomi Campbell herself, who wore platforms taller than most small children and looked so unimpressed with the whole affair that Merlin wasn't too sure why she was even there in the first place.

"And the winner for Best Editorial Campaign is," she opened the envelope, almost slicing it in half with her nails, "the Lady Helen War of the Poses spread, Camelot, Pendragon Publications."

They all jumped up and embraced each other, Morgana in particularly looking absolutely ecstatic as she threw her arms around the nearest person to her who, to Will's delight, was himself. Morgana then, to Merlin's great surprise, turned to him and nodded her head towards the stage.

"Come on then. Arthur's buggered off so it's you and me."

Almost tripping over his feet, as she dragged him up by the hand, Merlin gawped at the award almost stupidly as the towering Naomi thrust it over to him indifferently.

"Thank you, Naomi, what a host," Morgana said into the microphone, giving the model a catty little smile that immediately told Merlin that Morgana had been the one whom Naomi had had that infamous catfight with. When Naomi narrowed her eyes and took a wobbling platform step closer, Merlin quickly took over before another brawl broke out.
"This is wonderful, brilliant. We really are very humbled by this award," he said as the crowd turned to each other in confusion, as though wondering what 'humbled' meant. "I'm accepting this on behalf of Arthur Pendragon, who I know will be delighted to hear that we won. Thank you to the committee, everyone who worked on it and most importantly, to Lady Helen and her amazing team for giving us the freedom and support to run with it. Thank you again!"

"Wow," said Morgana as they walked off the stage together and back towards their seats. Her face was genuinely astonished as she looked at Merlin with a respect he had never seen from her before. "I think we might make something of you after all."

Merlin just grinned at her as they approached their dancing table. Gwaine and Lance, who had been hugging and jumping on each other, clapped him on the back while Will swiped the award, bit into it to check it was gold, raised his thumb in approval and carried on jumping with them.

Merlin had been amused by their antics until he caught sight of Arthur's place holder on the table, his gold name gleaming back at Merlin.

Merlin's smile then promptly fell.

"I'll be right back," he said, snatching the award from Lance, who had been beginning to waltz with it.

"Wait, where are you going?" asked Gwaine who, to their server's horror, was now just downing the champagne on their table from the bottle. "It's time to celebrate!"

"Not before I find Arthur," Merlin insisted, the award clutched tightly in his hand. "No one deserves this more than he does."

"Good luck, mate!" said Will, still dancing and looking thrilled when Morgana joined in.

"Tell him congratulations from me!" Lance said.

"Oh, and remember to swallow!" Gwaine added cheerfully.

Arthur wasn't in the toilets when Merlin went looking for him and he wasn't at the bar either. Merlin had almost given up looking for him when he passed by a room that Merlin assumed was a conference meeting room and saw a familiar head of blond hair.

Arthur was sitting at a large empty table, leaning his head back so he was facing the ornate ceiling. Eyes closed with a look of contentment, he looked utterly relaxed.

Merlin raised a cautious eyebrow. Arthur only really looked that calm and happy when he was making Merlin's life miserable.

Merlin coughed awkwardly.

"Er, hello?"

Arthur nearly jumped a metre in the air, flailing uncharacteristically by elbowing a pencil off the table as he did.

"Holy shit! Merlin, what are you-" he looked guilty, like a schoolboy caught doing something particularly naughty.

"Well. Um, we won," Merlin said, gesturing towards the award in his hand, feeling nervous and
happy and suddenly brave. "And, as usual, you missed it, you dunce."

"Oh," said Arthur, blinking at the award in amazement. "That's… oh."

Merlin, who expected a better reply than that, sighed before looking down at the pencil, which had now rolled its way to Merlin's shoe.

"Let me pick that up for you."

"Oh no! It's not a problem!" Arthur said almost gaily, his eyes wide and little panicked. "I can do it!"

"You never pick up after yourself. Are you ill?" Merlin questioned, eyeing Arthur like he was an imposter.

"Perfectly well! Actually, wait, no, I feel ghastly. Merlin. Go across the road and get me some Lemsip, will you?"

"Um, all right. So you have the flu? Should I get you some tablets or some lozenges to suck on? Maybe you should just go home."

And then Merlin heard the sneeze sounding from under the table. Arthur froze like a statue.

"Is there-" Merlin swallowed, his throat suddenly dry, "is there someone under the table?"

"Of course not," Arthur insisted in what sounded like mortification as another sneeze went off.

Merlin didn't know what this crushing feeling in his chest was but he wouldn't have been surprised if it was his heart breaking.

Plastering on a smile that he knew looked pained, he tried to force himself to keep eye contact with Arthur.

"Arthur, it's not a big deal," he attempted to say light-heartedly, hating himself for the quiver in his voice. "I mean, let's be honest now, it's not like I haven't walked in on you doing worse-"

"Merlin, really, I can explain this," Arthur said, panicked and uncharacteristically clumsy as he tried to jump to his feet and do up his trousers at the same time, slipping on an overly-long trouser leg as he did. "I just, you said we were only friends and we- the way I feel about you-"

"Arthur, really, it's fine, you don't have to explain yourself to me," Merlin said, head spinning as he moved towards the door. He had a feeling he was going to vomit and he didn't want to do it on the expensive carpet. "Anyway, I should really go and check on something."

"Merlin, wait! Look, fuck, don't go. This- it's doesn't mean anything."

"Nothing?" a familiar and very male voice said just before the curly head of Mordred popped out from under the table. He then wiped his mouth across the back of his hand in a lazily suggestive fashion before smirking at Merlin. "Well, don't I feel special," he drawled.

If looks could kill, the look Arthur threw at Mordred would have hung, drawn and quartered him all at once but Merlin didn't see it. He had already pulled open the door and bolted out the room as fast as his legs could carry him.
Merlin wasn't sure how long he had been out walking for or where exactly he had gone. His feet found themselves wandering aimlessly with no destination in mind but with just one objective - to get as far away from Arthur and Mordred as possible.

His mind whirred with a million thoughts, crashing into each other like a storm inside his head.

*Mordred,* he had said to himself when his mind had the capacity to do so without short-circuiting at the mere thought of it. Where the hell had Mordred come from? Mordred didn't even like Arthur and Arthur had certainly never shown any affection for Morgana's assistant, who honestly looked too busy plotting world domination and creeping about creepily to have a sex life.

But Mordred did have a sex life, something Merlin could now vouch to after being rudely exposed to it.

And as for Arthur suddenly getting off with men... well, that part wasn't too much of a surprise considering all their sexual tension lately and then the almost-kiss they shared. What was a surprise -- what had hurt, really -- was that that man wasn't Merlin.

Merlin looked back at the award in his hand. He hadn't even noticed that he had taken it with him. He could just imagine Morgana tearing the place apart like a mad woman looking for it, especially because she had co-ordinated her dress that night rather confidently to go with that particular shade of gold.

Running his fingers over the inscription on the award, Merlin felt a hollow pit in his stomach where happiness had once filled. He had been so pleased when they first got it. After all, it had been his first project -- *his idea* -- and all the subsequent hard work that had followed had finally seemed worth it after getting his hands around this award. Now, though, the statue was just a reminder of something he would rather never think about again.

Before Merlin knew it, his feet had found themselves walking to Camelot, ready to give it back. Walking passed the night staff at the Pendragon reception, who were showing their usual diligence and hard work by snoring loudly in their seats, Merlin entered the lifts and took the familiar journey to the ninth floor.

The Camelot offices seemed hauntingly desolate as Merlin walked the corridors to Arthur's office and placed the award on his coffee table.

Merlin then walked to his own desk and sat at it numbly, pulling the bowtie of his tux free and staring at nothing in particular. After a minute of this, he suddenly came to a decision, booted up his computer and began to type.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"Fuck!" Merlin jumped as Kilgharrah, who was holding a mop and wearing a sleeping mask on his forehead, looked at him sombrely from the other side of Merlin's desk. "Would you not do that? And it's one in the morning, how can you possibly be on the clock now?"

"Running away will not solve your problems, young warlock," Kilgharrah continued, ignoring his questions to look at him with those shrewd yellow eyes.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Merlin sniffed before continuing to write.

"The letter of resignation that you are currently typing," Kilgharrah said, motioning towards the
computer with a nod of his head, "is not a wise decision."

"God, get out of my head already, would you?" Merlin snapped, his nerves raw. "And you know what? I'm tired of listening to you. What has listening to your crap ever done for me? I've spent a year running after him with your little voice in my ear telling me about some huge destiny and what do I get in return? Scorpion bites, days in a coma, homicidal maniacs breaking into my house-"

"A broken heart?" Kilgharrah hazarded frankly.

Merlin slumped back into his chair, the anger deflating out of him like a balloon.

"Why didn't you warn me?" he whimpered quietly, feeling pathetic.

"Warn you?" Kilgharrah enquired.

"That my life means nothing without him in it?" Merlin said in a choked voice.

"If I had told you that, would you have believed me?"

"I can't do this anymore," Merlin said, finishing the letter by typing his name and pressing print. "It hurts too much."

"And what about him?" Kilgharrah returned. "Without you, Arthur will surely be killed."

Merlin paused, thinking about this.

"Then I'll watch him from afar."

"Merlin-"

"No, listen to me," Merlin said, interrupting Kilgharrah for once. "I can keep tracking charms on him. Hell, I doubt very much that I'll ever be able to leave him alone even if I wanted to. He just doesn't have to know."

"You're making a mistake, Merlin," said Kilgharrah sadly, his glowing eyes losing some of their shine.

"It's my mistake to make," Merlin returned firmly, although his hands were shaking uncontrollably in his lap.

Kilgharrah looked troubled and seemed to be on the cusp of saying something else when Arthur suddenly ran through the door, his hair a mess and his clothes rumpled.

"Merlin! Thank fuck, there you are, I've been looking for you everywhere. Where did you- wait, what's this?" Arthur said suspiciously because Merlin chose that moment to walk over to the printer, take the freshly printed letter and hand it over to Arthur.

"It's my letter resignation," Merlin said, not watching as Kilgharrah shook his head and slinked away disapprovingly.

Arthur looked like he had been slapped hard across the face.

"... excuse me?"

"Arthur," Merlin began, taking in a deep inhale so he could get everything out in one breath, "I'd
like to thank you for the opportunity and for giving me a chance when so many other people
didn't."

"Merlin, don't do this," Arthur entreated, his voice taking on a pleading tone that Merlin had never
heard from him before. Closing his eyes briefly at the pain of it, Merlin tried to ignore it and
persevere.

"I have learned so much from this job and from you and I'll always be so grateful for it."

"Did you rehearse this?"


"Merlin, look," Arthur said beseechingly, "if this is about Mordred."

"It's about me, Arthur."

Arthur looked dumbfounded and fraught, like he didn’t know what to do before flatly saying,

"Well, I'm sorry but I don't accept your resignation."

Merlin dropped his jaw.

"What?"

"I said I don't accept your resignation," Arthur repeated stubbornly, looking more like his usual
exasperating self. "In case you've forgotten, you have a binding contract that promises Camelot one
month after your notice has been given. You can't just break it. Now stop talking this nonsense and
help me with the new Givenchy brief that came through. We have a lot of work to do so it might be
an all-nighter. I'll order dinner. The food at the award show was crap. I'll even order those
ridiculous jalapeño cheese things you like. Why you enjoy those things I'll never know."

"Arthur, you're not listening to me-" Merlin tried again.

"I won't make allowances with the pizza though," Arthur breezily continued, proving Merlin's
point entirely as he bypassed his words, "I'm getting you your own because I refuse to put
anchovies and pineapple in my mouth at the same time. It should be against the law."

"Fine then," said Merlin firmly, finally having enough as he glowered at Arthur and his pig-
headedness. "If you don’t want to listen to me then fine but understand this, Arthur - this is my
notice. In a month, I'll be gone."

Shutting down his computer, Merlin then walked out the door, ignoring Arthur's plea for him to
come back.

The next month was a complete reversal of Merlin's first one. During Merlin's first few weeks at
Camelot, Arthur had tried to sabotage him out of the job at every turn. Now, he was now throwing
everything including the kitchen sink at him to coerce him to stay. First came the substantial wads
of cash that Arthur just left on Merlin's desk as 'bonuses'. Then came the offers of promotions with
Arthur going as far as to offer him his own office and assistant. When the phase came along which
included Arthur actually complimenting him, Merlin knew things were really serious.

"He's trying to court you," Gwen said soppily, looking absolutely delighted by this. "It's romantic! I knew he couldn't bear to be without you. He'd be lost if you went. He wouldn't know what to do with himself."

"Yeah, well it's too little, too late," Merlin responded grumpily, stealing one of Gwen's chips from her plate and crunching it angrily as he imagined it was Arthur’s head. "And stop 'awwing' like he's precious. He's a bloody knobhead. He treated me like rubbish for months."

"Yes, but you didn't hand in your notice months ago - you did it when you caught him with Mordred," Gwen said, too astute for her own good.

"Thanks for reminding me, it's not like I've been trying to erase that out of my mind. My dog got hit by a car when I was a kid, shall we talk about that, too?"

"Don't you get sassy with me, Merlin," Gwen said, barely affected as she slapped his hand away when he tried to grab another chip. "Why can't you forgive him? It's not like you were dating. Granted, getting blown by Mordred was a terrible idea but the only one who suffered from that was Arthur. Personally, if I had a todger, I wouldn't trust it anywhere near Mordred's mouth. I'd be scared he'd bite it off."

"Gwen!" Merlin yelled out, wailing with horror as he slapped his hands over his poor ears. "What have I told you about spending too much time at the pub with the boys? I knew you'd pick up a potty mouth."

"Lance is a gentleman."

"Yes, but Gwaine is not," Merlin said. Gwen didn't deny it. Instead she leaned over to place a soft hand on Merlin’s shoulder. It made his heart feel hollow and empty.

"Look, Merlin, I know you were hurt by the Mordred thing but, well, look at me and Lance. He saw me with Arthur, after all-"

"-god, we're as incestual as Star Wars, aren't we?" Merlin said briefly before turning to Gwen and saying, "I know you're trying to help Gwen but you've never had any doubt about Lance's feelings for you. Me? I don't even know if he fancies me."

"Merlin, he's completely in love with you, how can you be the only one who can't see it?" Gwen said, sounding almost sad.

Merlin knew the reason why. It was because he was insecure and a coward but he didn’t say this aloud. Instead, he smiled at Gwen with as unaffected a smile as he could manage and said,

"Anyway, enough about me, tell me how your first official date with Lance went."

Gwen didn’t look too impressed with this blatant change of subject but being Gwen, she didn’t call him on it or push him to talk.

Gaius, on the other hand, was another matter. He just had to look at Merlin during one of their lunch dates and Merlin’s defences immediately crumbled.

“I’m such an idiot,” he mumbled into Gaius’ shoulder after his godfather, seeing his dejected expression, had pulled him into an embrace. “I got in too deep and have probably completely ruined that destiny everyone had such high hopes for.”
“Oh, Merlin,” Gaius sighed deeply before pulling back, his hands warm and grounding on Merlin’s arms. “My dear, dramatic boy. You don’t make things easy for yourself, do you?”

Merlin quirked out a forlorn smile at this.

“Have I ever?” he asked.

Gaius just shook his head, a mixture of affection and exasperation on his face.

“You know running from your problems is never the right option.”

“You’re beginning to sound like Kilgharrah,” Merlin grumbled.

“Don’t begrudge us old men our anecdotes, Merlin. When a man has lived as long as both Kilgharrah and I have, you learn a few useful lessons along the way,” Gaius said, his voice both wise and amused as he patted Merlin on the shoulder. “So, what exactly has Arthur said?”

“I think he’s in denial,” Merlin said honestly. “He either alternates between ignoring that I’m going completely to offering me the moon to get me to stay. And he’s being, well, nice. He actually tried to make me a cup of tea the other day. I mean, it was barely tea because Arthur’s never made one in his life before and screwed it up but the fact that he tried is messing with my mind. It’s unnerving. It’s like I’m working for a completely different person.”

“It sounds to me like he’s desperate for you to stay,” Gaius noted aloud, pointedly looking at Merlin over his half-moon spectacles.

“I know what you’re going to say and the answer is still no. I’m leaving,” Merlin said resolutely, knowing Gaius’ game. “My life is already completely tied up and invested in him. I need a clean break. It’s best for both of us.”

Gaius nodded his head but his eyes were thoughtful and he looked like he didn’t buy Merlin’s words for a moment. Merlin didn’t blame him. He didn’t really believe them himself.

"Before you say anything," Merlin said to Kilgharrah as he walked into his basement office on the morning of his last day, "I just wanted to say that it’s been emotional."

"That, my dear Merlin, it has," said Kilgharrah, giving him a cryptic smile. "But I believe I cannot give you a genuine goodbye without sharing a few truths first."

"Truths?" Merlin asked, his eyes narrowed suspiciously as he tried not to feel too wary. "Is this when you tell me you're actually my father?"

"Not quite," Kilgharrah said slowly, looking so perturbed by the thought of fathering Merlin that Merlin felt quite offended. "But I did know your father before he died. In fact, after you, he was probably the greatest friend I ever had."

"He was?" Merlin said, sure that he was gaping unattractively at Kilgharrah but he didn't care enough to stop. "Why didn't you ever say anything?"

"Because to tell you how I knew him is to reveal my true form to you."
"True form?" Merlin repeated. "Now I'm worried. Are you a Sidhe? Or an alien from a different planet? Or an Ogre? Is this like Shrek? I don't have to give you True Love's Kiss you, do I? Because that would make things awkward between us." Kilgharrah gave Merlin a look that was so wholly unimpressed that it made Merlin grin. He really would miss the old fart. "Okay, fine, don't tell me. Show me."

"Fine. But to do this, we need to go outside," Kilgharrah said. "Somewhere remote. If I transform in here... well, let's just say I'll make a mess and being the caretaker, I don't particularly like giving myself extra work."

"All right," Merlin said before going over to Kilgharrah and taking his sleeve. "Shall we say the Forest of Dean?"

Kilgharrah barely had time to nod his head in affirmation before they found themselves in the middle of a beautiful picnic spot with a giant lake to the right of them, disappearing into the horizon. In the distance, Merlin could just about make out a small island with a tower. Distracted by the familiarity of the view, Merlin found himself kneeling down to run his fingers through the blades of grass by the shore, the familiarity of it making every synapse in his brain flicker and pulse like they had been struck by lightning. So distracted was he, in fact, that he hadn't noticed that Kilgharrah had taken this time to transform into his true form.

"Ah," said Merlin weakly when he saw him, feeling a little lightheaded as he looked up at the thirty feet of scaly reptile peering down at him. "I suppose that's why they call you the dragon."

Kilgharrah bowed his head.

"So, you can shapeshift?" Merlin said, trying to wrap his brain around this new development.

"I couldn't always. Let's just say an old friend did a spell to make it easier for my visits to go unnoticed. There are only so many empty fields for a dragon to go to in modern Britain without terrifying the local population. I already caused a bit of a stir when I went for a dip in Loch Ness a few centuries back. People still haven't got over it."

Merlin stared, not only wondering why he wasn't screaming and jumping into the lake in terror but why this all felt so normal to him. Perhaps all the insane things he had had to do under Arthur's employ had mellowed him.

Kilgharrah chuckled, as though he could read his thoughts.

"I see, young warlock, that it's all beginning to come back to you."

"What is?"

"Why, your life before, of course. Completely obliterating over a thousand years is a mighty feat, even for someone as powerful as you."

"Come on, Kilgharrah, you know living that long is impossible," Merlin said with a laugh. "Even if it wasn't, I know that can't be right. I'm twenty-five. My mum has photos of me when I born in Whittington Hospital in Archway."

"No, young warlock," Kilgharrah said, shaking his head so gravely that Merlin’s amusement abated. "You have lived many lives, the most significant one of all being your life in Camelot almost fifteen hundred years ago. Arthur was King, you were his manservant and the return of Avalon was on the horizon. Unfortunately, the Witch’s war against Camelot and her accomplice’s blade ended Arthur’s life at Camlann before this dream could be realised. For centuries, you
waited for the return of the Once and Future King, lonely and inconsolable," Kilgharrah said, his voice matter-of-fact. "I would know because I was there, one of the few that was. Everyone else you loved eventually died around you, from your mother and Gaius to Queen Guinevere, all of whom you laid to rest at the lake. Combined with Arthur's death, it had all taken its toll on you. Perhaps that is why you remained at the lake and refused to return to Camelot, I do not know. What I do know is that a mere twenty-six years ago, when the prophets began to speak of a baby boy who was the reincarnation of Arthur Pendragon himself, you leapt into the lake."

Merlin’s eyes widened.

"I- I tried to kill myself?"

The dragon chuckled, amused by the notion.

"Kill yourself?" he said, as if the idea was absurd. "Merlin, you are made of magic. You cannot simply die. Have you never noticed your knack for cheating death? For coming out of all manner of dangerous situations practically unscathed? It was not because of Arthur's doctors that you survived the poison. You are Emrys. You cannot be killed but you can choose to be reborn anew and such is your power that everyone else returned with you. All the people that left an impression on you, from those you loved, like your mother and Gaius and your friend William to the creatures that caused you trouble, they all came back with you. Fate has ensured all your lives remained intertwined. It is no coincidence that these people either ended up at Camelot or close to you in some way. It is why you brought the Witch back, despite the trouble she caused."


"She was once a dear friend to you. I believe you blamed yourself for her betrayal."

Merlin stared at Kilgharrah in sheer bewilderment, trying to digest all this. It should have sounded ridiculous but for some reason, it all made perfect sense. Everything slotted into place.

"How is it that I don't remember any of this?" Merlin breathed.

"You were the most powerful sorcerer in the world, Merlin, you simply did not want yourself to. After all those years burdened by nothing but painful memories, I believe you felt like Arthur wasn't the only one who deserved a new start."

Merlin was silent for a moment as he deliberated on this. He then looked up at Kilgharrah’s, his great height straining his neck.

"Why are you telling me all this now?" Merlin questioned.

"Because you have never fulfilled your destiny, Merlin," Kilgharrah explained patiently. "You have never brought about the time of Avalon, where the magical and non-magical people of this country live in harmony. Not even when Arthur was Alexander and you were Hephaestion. The closest you ever got was when Arthur was King of Camelot and you were his sorcerer."

"King Arthur. Alexander the Great. I. This- oh god, I think I need to sit down," Merlin said faintly, dropping down on his arse as he took in the magnitude of Kilgharrah's words.

"Head between your knees, there we go," said Kilgharrah, barely fazed.

Merlin lifted his head, his face pale.

"I cannot believe you never told me any of this before, you giant withholder of truth, you," he said
accusingly, pointing at Kilgharrah with a quivering finger. "You sat on it for all this time."

"You swore me to secrecy," Kilgharrah said simply.

"That's great, put it all on me," Merlin said grumpily.

"Well, every time you returned, your previous incarnation made me promise not to reveal it all," Kilgharrah said in a 'so there' tone of voice, proving that even immortal beings could be childish.

"But you're revealing it to me now," Merlin reminded him.

"Because you've never been this close before," Kilgharrah said, his voice tinged with an excitement and yearning that Merlin didn't know Kilgharrah possessed. "Something would always hinder the process in the past, be it Morgana's war against Camelot or your early death when you were Hephaestion-"

"Wait, you just said I couldn’t die."

"When you became Emrys, you couldn’t," Kilgharrah illuminated. “Before Emrys, you had magic but you were still a mortal creature of flesh and blood. It was only when you were fathered by the Dragonlord Balinor that you achieved true immortality. This immortality was the reason why I was convinced — and still am -- that you could bring about Avalon. I can feel it in the air. It's the song that the trees are singing. I can feel the very earth under my feet trembling with the anticipation of it. Avalon is on the cusp of formation.”

"You know, I remember the last time I was in Camelot," Merlin said softly, pictures flooding through his brain as that impressive dam of magic he had built up began to crack and spew out memories at an almost overwhelming rate. "I remember all of it. Uther executing that poor man. Saving Gaius' life with magic. Arthur throwing knives at poor Morris. Morgana in that dress. Meeting Gwen while I was in the stocks," Merlin said in wonder before, laughing. "Mum and Will in Ealdor. Leon, Lancelot, Gwaine, Percival... Jesus, I really did bring them all back with me, didn't I?"

"All but Jesus," Kilgharrah said. "Even you aren't that powerful."

"So, Arthur and I really are destined then," Merlin said but it was not a question. He knew it. He could feel it inside his very soul.

"Even Aristotle once remarked that you were 'one soul abiding in two bodies'."

"Seriously," Merlin said weakly, not even sure how to address this information, "you're invoking Aristotle now to prove your point?"

"He thought you were cute together," Kilgharrah said smugly.

Merlin didn't know what to say to the absurdity of this so he didn't say anything at all. Instead he looked at Kilgharrah in a new light.

Kilgharrah the confidante in the dungeons under the citadel. Kilgharrah who set Camelot ablaze when Merlin had fulfilled his promise and released him. Kilgharrah who bid him adieu as he held Arthur's dead body in his arms. And Arthur, who had finally looked at him knowing who he really was, face full of love and trust as the life faded from his eyes.

Merlin swallowed hard. That wound had never healed. He doubted it ever would.
"Thank you for reminding me old friend," he said shakily, his gratitude beyond words.

Kilgharrah just bowed his head before saying quite clearly in Merlin's head.

* ~ * ~ * ~ *

Merlin was waiting in Arthur's office, not entirely sure what he was going to say to him when Morgana sidled in beside him, a huge pair of vintage sunglasses on her face and a mink stole wrapped her like she was a movie star from the 1950s.

Over the year Merlin had been there, he and Morgana had cheerfully ignored each other whenever they had happened to be in the same vicinity. Now, however, she not only looked directly at him but stared at him as though she had been purposely seeking him out. Looking at her, he was suddenly reminded of the Morgana who had donned armour and fought bandits for him in Ealdor, brave and beautiful.

"So I hear your leaving do is today," said Morgana, her gaze penetrating even through her sunglasses. "I have to say, you lasted a lot longer than I thought you would. The first time I saw you, I was convinced Arthur was going to fire you on the spot."

"Um, thanks?" Merlin said, unsure how to take that backhanded compliment.

"You're good for him, you know," she suddenly said, sounding almost reluctant to share the words of praise. "As much as it galls me to say it, you make him a better person. You always have, Emrys."

Merlin nodded at this in thanks before pausing and repeating her words back in his head.

"Wait, what do you mean by always?" Merlin asked astutely.

"I don't actually-" Morgana then blinked. "I don't think I meant to say that aloud. I- I occasionally have these dreams-"

"About being a witch?" Merlin said, throwing caution to the wind as he looked her intensely in the eye. "Leading an army? Fighting Arthur for the throne?"

Morgana stared at Merlin, wide-eyed and stunned.

"How… how on earth did you-?"

"I'm in these dreams, right? I have magic? Because those aren’t just dreams, Morgana," Merlin said. Looking around to check they were alone, he then took a deep breath and did something he never thought he would do - he used magic in front of a work colleague.

He extended his hand and watched Morgana's face as he wordlessly conjured a flame in the middle of his palm. Morgana watched, her face rapt with attention as the dancing yellow flames reflected back at Merlin from her eyes. She didn't look frightened or disbelieving. She looked teary-eyed and so relieved that Merlin could literally see the tension draining from her body.

"I thought I was the only one," she whispered, her knees on the cusp of buckling as she feebly
lowered herself down on the edge of Arthur’s desk.

"Oh, you're not, trust me. Not by a long shot,” Merlin said knowingly, delighted because he finally had found someone like him, someone who had felt just as alone as he had. He then proceeded to tell her all about the creatures he had faced, from Sophia and her Sidhe ways to Myror and his homicidal obsession with Arthur. Morgana drank it all in with fascination.

"I don't believe it," she said, shaking her head in wonder. "And that crotchedy caretaker who hates me and always hisses ‘witch’ at me when my back is turned? He's one, too?"

"I don't want to freak you out but he's actually a dragon,"

"Bloody hell. That's certainly something you don't hear every day," said Morgana before walking over to Arthur’s bar, pouring herself a whiskey and downing it in one shot. She then tilted her head, as though the alcohol had jogged a memory in her head. "Wait, didn’t you try to poison me once?"

"Um," said Merlin, not sure how to continue that sentence.

"You did!" Morgana gasped, pointing at Merlin accusingly with an exquisitely manicured hand. "You poisoned me with hemlock!"

"Okay, in my defence, I knew you wouldn't die,” Merlin said defensively, holding up his hands in admission. “Morgause would never let you. It was all a total misunderstanding anyway. I thought you were responsible for unleashing the Knights of Medhir."

Huffing, Morgana crossed her arms and looked irate for a moment before finally shrugging.

"Eh, I did stick a snake in your neck and try and have you murder Arthur,” she conceded.

"Yeah, you did,” Merlin said, rubbing his neck with the memory of it. “That still twinges every time I turn my head to the left, you know."

"Oh, you big baby, it does not," Morgana said, looking amused by this. "If you think that's bad, you don't want to know what I did to poor Gwaine."

"Yeah, death by torture right? I really wasn’t happy with you about that when I found out,” Merlin said lightly but he remembered the pain in his gut when he had heard the news like it was yesterday, “You know, I think he still holds a subconscious feeling of animosity towards you about that."

"Trust Gwaine to hold a grudge after fifteen hundred years," Morgana said. She then paused. "Wait, did you kill me?"

"Er, we're getting off the subject," Merlin said, not wanting to have to explain that part of the tale just yet in case she turned around and decided to kill him back. This Morgana might not be as dangerous with a sword or as adept with her magic but she terrified Merlin more than the other one ever had. "The thing is, I've been fighting all this time to bring magic back and, apparently, I'm close, although I have no idea how I'm going to do it. I need allies. I need you, Morgana."

"Allies? You're acting like we're locked in war again and may I remind you, last time we were, we weren’t exactly on the same side,” Morgana said deprecatorily and Merlin had a feeling some leftover hostility was still present in her voice.

“Exactly,” Merlin agreed, taking their dire history into account, “and look what happened then. We both lost. When you think about it, we were actually on the same side. We wanted to be accepted
for who we were, we both wanted magic to return. But something bad is coming. I don’t know what but even the druids have felt it when they scry. They send me emails about it constantly.”

“The druids?” Morgana asked with confusion.

"Oh, a group of magic users who follow me around and send me fanmail," Merlin explained casually before looking at her imploringly. "Morgana, I don’t know what’s coming and I know this all sounds a bit mad but we need to work together this time. I need, you, Arthur needs you. He's your blood, you grew up together, he loves you-"

"Look, Merlin, this is all a little much to take right now," Morgana said, lifting up her hand to stop Merlin from continuing. "I have about fifty things to do today and the rest of this to try and process."

"Morgana," Merlin tried to say but she just walked away, rubbing her temples as she did.

Watching her go, Merlin leaned back against the nearest wall and slid down listlessly until he was crouched on the floor. Kilgharrah was wrong, It really was best that he left. He had already dragged everyone into his destiny by bringing them back against their will. The least he could do was to go and set them free.

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"Camelot leaving parties have a tradition," Gwen had once explained to Merlin. "If the person is leaving under amicable circumstances, we usually make them wear that crown we keep in reception for the day. They also get a nice lunch and then after work, we go out for drinks at the local."

"And what if they're not leaving under amicable circumstances?" Merlin had asked, almost not wanting to know the answer.

"They usually sneak out the back door when no one is looking," Gwen confessed before looking at Merlin's sullen face and quickly saying, "Not that you'd have to! Everyone hated Catrina but she still got a cake and a card. I'm sure Arthur is organising something really nice for you, you'll see."

So, when the time came for Merlin's leaving party later that day, he resigned himself to maybe getting a candle in a cupcake, perhaps even a banner if he was lucky. What he actually got, however, was preposterous.

"What the-" Merlin gasped as he was led into the cavernous ballroom of the Pendragon building where the swankiest do on the planet seemed to be taking place. Everyone in the building seemed to be there, from board members and senior management to the lady who cleaned the filter from the coffee machine. Even Uther Pendragon was in attendance, looking imposing in his suit as he stared imperiously at a cupcake with Merlin's grinning face recreated on it with icing, clearly debating whether he really wanted to put it in his mouth.

Food and drink were abundance as a busy and efficient catering team whizzed around the room in fancy uniforms, offering canapés and topping up drinks with lightning speed. There was even a tribute band performing in the background, playing songs such as 'I Can't Stand Losing You' by the Police, 'Baby Come Back,' by UB40 and other songs of a similar vein.
"What is this?" Merlin said to the room at large, feeling perplexed when he caught sight of a highly unflattering billboard-sized photo of him printed with the words 'Merlin's Leaving Party (He'll regret it!) - 2013'.

"Surprise!" the crowd said back to him in unison while Gwaine threw rice at Merlin ceremonially, almost blinding him when a grain of it got in his eye.

"Gwaine, for goodness sake, boy, he's not getting married," Gaius rebuked as Elyan slapped Merlin on the back and cheerfully said,

"Merlin! Welcome to your goodbye party, mate. Here, have a drink. Gwaine made it himself. He calls it the Merlin Molotov. Hold your nose first though, it's potent enough to knock out a horse. Or Percy."

"Um, guys, this is lovely and everything but don't you think this is all a bit much?" Merlin said to his friends as he gave a fake smile and a cheery wave to the rest of the cheering crowd, who were safely out of earshot. "Agatha from accounting only got a book voucher and she worked here for fifteen years."

"Yes but no one really liked her. Also, she used to steal all the paperclips," Gwen revealed before dropping a kiss on his cheekbone in greeting and linking her arm with Lance's. "Anyway, Arthur was determined to make yours the best one yet. He even ignored Uther when he went a little crazy with the budget. He financed most of this himself. Except the band, of course. Leon offered to play himself, free of charge."

"Wait, that's Leon's band?" Merlin said, whirling around to see the surreal sight of Leon crooning 'Please Don't Leave Me' by Pink into a microphone while a drunk-looking Percy stood by the stage and swayed to the music while holding up a lighter. "I didn't know he could sing!"

"That's nothing," Arthur's voice suddenly sounded from behind him. "Wait until you hear his rendition of 'Big Spender'. He puts Dame Shirley to shame."

Spinning around so fast that he was sure he had given himself a permanent state of whiplash, Merlin tried to give Arthur a glare but this regrettably morphed into a downright leer due to Arthur looking entirely too edible in a tight red shirt than any person not made of chocolate had a right to.

"Arthur, are you insane?" Merlin said when he had finally stopped imagining licking him. "How much did all this set you back?"

"You're a valued employee Merlin. At Camelot, we look after our own," Arthur said, quite obviously avoiding the question before pulling out a leaflet from his pocket and handing it to Merlin. "Our pension package is so generous, in fact, that it has been featured in the Financial Times three fiscal years running. Look at this written testimonial from Martin here. Martin came to us from News International. In fact, I see him there by the punch bowl – Martin! Why don't you come over here and tell Merlin all about our packages and why Camelot is the right fit for him?"

"Good God, would you stop that?" Merlin groaned, pulling Arthur away from their amused friends before he embarrassed them both any further. Merlin then slapped the leaflet away as Arthur waggled it under his nose. "And put that away, would you? You sound like one of those infomercials that try and sell you liquid hair in a can."

"I'll stop if you stay," Arthur said, dropping his voice so only Merlin could hear that hint of desperation in his tone. He had been like this all week, what with him praising Merlin so loudly to colleagues that it was impossible not to overhear and his shameless QVC-like plugs for Camelot
products. He had even offered Merlin a free company car, making him feel like he was a game show contestant and Arthur was both the host with the sparkling white smile and the sexy assistant rolled into one.

"Arthur, look, it's not as easy as all that," Merlin tried to explain. "I just think it's best I go. For everyone. Do you understand?"

"A flat!" Arthur cried out, proving he didn't understand at all. "I can get you one if you want. Big enough for your mother and Will."

"Arthur, I don't want a flat," Merlin tried to say unwearyingly.

"Is it because of the way I treated you? Because I've stopped being a dick, you've noticed that right? I mean, it's taken all my bloody willpower and a couple of hypnotherapy sessions that I don't really think worked but I've stopped. And I already promised you a raise. What do you want, a six figure salary? All you have to do is ask."

"Arthur, for God's sake, this isn't about the job," Merlin said, getting frustrated.

"Then what the hell is it about!?!" Arthur demanded, finally losing his temper.

"It's about the fact I'm absolutely crazy about you, you complete and utter clotpole!" Merlin screamed out, his voice echoing around the large room and making every person in attendance turn to look at him in shock. Even Leon, who had just been getting to the juicy bit of Shakespeare Sister’s ‘Stay With Me’, croaked mid-warble and stared. Somewhere in the back of Merlin's mind, he could hysterically imagine a rolling tumbleweed blowing across the scene.

Arthur, who Merlin had always seen at least attempt to maintain a look of dignity in the hairiest of situations, looked absolutely flabbergasted. His jaw fell open at this confession, practically scraping the floor in his surprise and Merlin dropped his face in his hands, silently plotting revenge on his own brain for letting that one slip.

And then, just when he thought his life couldn't get any more screwed up, everything went to hell.

"Well, isn't that sweet," said a disingenuous female voice into the now silent room before the speaker showed herself, parting through the crowd like Moses did the Red Sea. A small army of men marched behind her, wearing Arab-chic better than an extra in The Mummy and co-ordinating their head-scarves like a particularly large boy band. Even their steps appeared to be in time like a well-choreographed dance troupe but Merlin could tell from the weapons they were carrying that they were more likely to cut heads than cut a rug.

"Nimueh," said Merlin, recognising the woman from his previous life and instinctively moving in front of Arthur as he did. Nimueh looked as other-worldly as she always had; pale, barefoot and in the same red dress Merlin had last seen her in. She was even wearing the same conniving smile on her mouth. Merlin's magic began to flutter impatiently inside him just looking at her again, as though it remembered the last time it had been unleashed at the Isle of the Blessed and was ready for a repeat performance. Merlin wet his mouth, steeling himself. "I thought you were in jail."

"You should know better than most, Emrys, that no mortal jail cell can hold me," said Nimueh grandly and Merlin could feel the magic pulsing off her in waves, making her skin glow like some sort of nuclear experiment. "You have fought bravely but you have lost the battle. Now step aside, Emrys. There is no need for us to be enemies. We are both creatures of the Old Religion, after all. We are just here for the king, not you."
"What the hell?" said Arthur, side-stepping Merlin to stare at Nimueh like she had lost her mind. "You're supposed to be locked up, you crazed poisoner. And what in the blazes is all this? Some sort of dinner theatre coup? Is this because we beat you at the awards? I appreciate that Camelot is a big deal but don't you think you've gone a little over the top with the fake army and camp declaration of war? Who does your PR again? Because, really, you should fire your agency. This is overkill."

"Do you actually think this is about this pointless magazine feud?" Nimueh spat out with venom, rounding on Arthur, who wisely took a step back in the face of her wrath. "No, this is about you, Arthur Pendragon and the damage you will do if you come to your full power. I was completely in ignorance for all these years, working on that pathetic little magazine as though it meant something. It wasn’t until I first met Morgause at Fashion Week that it all came back to me and I finally discovered who I was and who you really were. It was then that I realised that the Pendragons had to be stopped and that the Priestesses were the true restorers of Avalon, not some weak bloodline who had done nothing but persecute and murder our kind. So I did everything in my power to bring about your early death, from divulging your location to the Sidhe and every other angry creature I could find to poisoning your champagne and ensorcelling your driver. Unfortunately, none of these attempts succeeded." Nimueh paused here to share a tortured 'you just can't get the staff these days' look with the crowd. "It was then that I realised that not only was someone protecting you, but that Emrys himself had returned and was keeping you from harm. So here I am myself to finally do this properly. Emrys may have thwarted everything I have thrown at you thus far but even he cannot take on the entire immortal army."

Merlin stared at the fifty blank-faced men behind her.

"This is the entire immortal army?" he asked, slightly underwhelmed.

"The rest are outside," Nimueh explained rather mulishly, looking irritable that the hall wasn't big enough to accommodate them all. She then flicked back her sheet of dark hair imperiously. "Now hand him over and join me, Emrys. We are too valuable to each other to be enemies. Your power is stronger than it has ever been. I can help you channel that magic."

"Into a homicidal rage like you did?" Merlin questioned, firmly rooted to Arthur's side. "Thanks but no thanks. I'm a pacifist."

"Says the man who struck me with lightning and blew me into a million pieces," Nimueh reminded him curtly.

"That was in the past!" Merlin defended, mortified that she had to bring that up in front of company. "I'd never do that now! I didn't even know about my life before until this morning." Merlin then urgently turned to Arthur, who looked completely confused. "Seriously, Arthur, I can explain all this."

"Would you? Because I have absolutely no idea what is going on here," Arthur said honestly and the rest of his guests seemed to concur because they nodded animatedly at his words.

"Okay, well, you see, this all kind of starts about fifteen hundred years ago-" Merlin began.

"Fourteen hundred and seventy would probably be more accurate," Gaius butted in from behind him.

"Yes, thank you, Gaius, fourteen hundred and seventy," Merlin said before stopping, wheeling around to look at Gaius and saying, "Wait a minute, you knew?! I can’t believe you never said anything before-“
"ENOUGH!" Nimueh roared, obviously tired of this conversation as she looked both terrifying and beautiful at the same time. With her dark hair flying behind her like an ebony cape and her red lips shining like fresh blood, she looked remarkably like the front cover of one of her magazines, fan machine and everything. "There's already been enough talk and I have waited far too long for this moment. Prepare to die, Arthur Pendragon," she hissed, cupping her hands together to create a fireball so bright that it made one person in the crowd go "ooh, that's like that David Blaine street magic stuff."

When Nimueh raised a hand and sent the fireball careering towards Arthur, however, the curious whispers soon became screams of terror. Without even thinking about the consequences of revealing his magic, Merlin instinctively lifted up his hands to form a golden shield of magic in front of him, protecting both him and Arthur and making the fireball bounce off it and away from them. It impacted with a huge crash into the wall beside them, brickwork flying everywhere as the flames licked the edge of a Pendragon banner and made the whole thing instantly catch alight.

“What on earth!?” Arthur cried out in shock, jumping back away from Merlin with a combination of fear and disbelief.

“Um, yeah… there’s couple of things about me that I didn’t put in my CV,” Merlin admitted guiltily as he ran a hand through his hair. He then opened his mouth to try and begin to explain when the screams of the guests cut through their conversation.

Petrified by the destruction and the spreading fire, the majority of the party-goers began to run for the exit in droves but Nimueh had simply waved her hands elegantly through the air and locked the doors with a slam.

Only a few people had stood firm and not run and Merlin wasn’t overly surprised when he saw that every one of them were in his close-knit group of friends. The group had obviously recalled some semblance of their old lives because not only did they not look surprised by being faced with magic but they reacted like their past selves would have. Leon was holding his microphone stand threateningly like a sword. Percy had picked up a nearby table and looked like he was ready to lob it at someone’s head. Gwen was frantically trying to make weapons by tying cutlery together and passing them on to Lance and Elyan. Gaius was patching up an injured person who had been hit by the flying debris and Gwaine had necked a bottle of wine before smashing the bottom of the bottle against a wall and holding it like a weapon.

Affection swelled in Merlin’s chest. Things hadn't really changed that much at all.

Nimueh had obviously noticed this, too, because she gave Arthur a wicked smile.

"How quaint," she commented. "The Knights of Camelot fighting alongside their king once again. It would be sweet if you weren't all about to die."

Merlin looked over his shoulder at Arthur, ready to witness a look of further confusion on his face at her words but Arthur didn't look perplexed. He simply stared at Nimueh, his face as white as a sheet as slow realisation bled across his features.

"The cave. The spiders," Arthur said to Nimueh in a choked voice. To Merlin, it sounded like Arthur was purely mumbling nonsense but Nimueh was smirking like she understood every word.

"Remember it do you, little prince?" she taunted, looking pleased. "No matter, you won't remember much else once we're done with you."

Arthur did not look intimidated by these words. Instead, they only seemed to fill him with courage
as he stepped forward resolutely.

"Nimueh," Arthur suddenly said in an authoritative voice that sent chills down Merlin's spine. Arthur then straightened his posture and looked focused in a way that Merlin knew he hadn't seen for centuries. "Stop this. This feud is between us, let these people go."

"How noble you are, Arthur," Nimueh mocked, her voice almost child-like as she turned to look at the cowering Camelot employees by the door, who looked sooty and terrified. Her lips quirked with bitter satisfaction. "The brave monarch, ready to sacrifice himself for his people. Are you really foolish enough to think you can save them all?"

At her words, the immortal army behind her unsheathed their weapons in unison, fluid and deadly as swords still caked with the blood of previous victims were raised in the air.

"Pity. I expected so much more," Nimueh said coldly, sounding almost disappointed that Arthur hadn't presented her with more of a challenge before saying, "Goodbye, Arthur Pendragon."

Merlin’s magic crackled furiously at the presumption of these words. Arthur wasn’t going anywhere. Not ever again.

"I don't think so," Merlin replied darkly, finally throwing caution to the wind as he stepped forward resolutely. Raising his arms in the air, Merlin threw back his head and bellowed out a summoning spell that called all allies to his aid, his eyes flashing so blindingly with gold that he could see people shielding their faces from the glare. The result of his spell was soon obvious for everyone to see as puffs of smoke soon erupted around the room and people quite literally appeared out of them from thin air.

"What the fuck-?!" cried out Arthur as Cedric, who had obviously been in the middle of brushing his teeth, materialised in front of him. Arthur then let out a squeak -- Merlin vowed to remember this for later -- as Sophia, Myror, all twenty of Merlin's druids and every other magical being he had faced (and consequently, let live) appeared before them. The goblin that had torn apart Geoffrey’s office a few months back was there, still causing mayhem as it mooned a scandalised Lady Helen while Alvarr (Morgana’s clingy ex-boyfriend who had thought killing Uther was a good way to win her back) was comparing the size of his new staff with Sophia’s father's and Anhora's. Merlin could see them all dotted around the room, from the troll who had tried to marry Uther sitting in a literal shit-pile in the corner to Gaius' wife Alice, materialising by her husband's side. Before Merlin knew it, there were over two hundred magical beings standing there, waiting for his command. Even Archimedes had popped in for the show. Hooting superiorly as he flew over to Merlin’s shoulder, he then turned to Nimueh and moved his head from side to side at her in a strange sort of owl dance, as though he was trying to psyche her out.

With his army of reformed criminals behind him and the bird on his shoulder, Merlin suddenly felt a bit like a pirate captain. Merlin lifted his shoulders. He had always wanted to be pirate captain.

"What in the blazes is this?" Nimueh demanded as Edwin -- a phoney anti-wrinkle expert Merlin had busted after he tried to sneak poisonous insects into the Camelot building -- popped in beside her and gave her a wave.

"This is my army, Nimueh," said Merlin simply, holding up his arms.

"Am I still drunk?" Merlin could hear Gwaine ask Lance seriously.

“It looks like an army of misfits to me,” Nimueh commented casually but Merlin could see the apprehension in her eyes.
"Oh, not necessarily," came a cool voice as Morgana literally popped into the scene, barely hesitating as she made her way to Merlin's side. "You see, Nimueh, we're small but we have our charms."

Merlin couldn't help but beam at her.

"As fashionably late as ever, I see," he said warmly.

"Better late than never, I suppose," Morgana replied, a smile on her face but her eyes were shining with past regret. "And anyway, I have an appearance to maintain. Make-up to touch up, hair to get styled. Oh, and no outfit can be complete without a Cup of Life filled with blood by your side."

Morgana then lifted up the golden chalice she had been holding in her hands, the cup gleaming with promise in her hands.

Both Merlin and Nimueh looked stunned.

"Where did you get that?" Merlin asked in wonder.

"Let's just say Morgause has more loyalty to me then this old quack," Morgana said, waving a hand towards Nimueh like she was something particularly abhorrent. "Apparently, she's a shitty boss. She doesn't even pay overtime. And as for the hours-

"Morgana," Nimueh suddenly cut in as she stepped forward to appeal to Morgana, looking slightly thrown by recent events, "you are a Priestess. You are my sister-"

"I'm not your sister," Morgana said bluntly, lifting up a hand to stop Nimueh before she continued to speak any longer. "Arthur may be the most oblivious idiot that has ever walked the earth, but he is my real blood. Not you."

"I'm sorry but could someone please tell me what the hell is going on?" Arthur cut in, sounding sort of hysterical now.

"Not now, Arthur," Merlin and Morgana said in unison.

"No," Nimueh said, shaking her head, refusing to believe this was over as she took a step backwards and vibrated with fury. "I will not be defeated. Immortal army, attack!

At once, the army of men behind Nimueh let out a group battle cry and sprinted forward, swinging their swords ferociously. Shrugging coolly in the face of this, Morgana sighed delicately and turned the cup over, letting the blood inside it spill to the ground in a pool by her feet. Immediately, half the army slumped to the floor, stone dead. The other half stopped for a second, looked marginally concerned by their suddenly deceased brethren before shrugging and bellowing again for a second wind.

It was as if someone had lit a firecracker under Arthur because he went from gaping with slack-jawed amazement at the proceedings one minute to suddenly ripping the arms off his red shirt, grabbing a sword from a nearby suit of armour and bellowing, "On me!" and taking about ten of them down with one swing.

He was soon joined by the knights and the now loyal magical beings Merlin had summoned, who were attacking the immortal army using everything in their arsenal, from the druids, who were surprisingly good at Kung Fu as they backflipped around the place to Cedric, who was animating the gargoyles around the room and gleefully instructing them to bite off heads. Even Uther was caught in the foray, whacking the attacking soldiers repeatedly with his Armani loafers while Merlin caught sight of a fully Sidhe-transformed Sophia scratching her claws viciously across
It didn't take long for the soldiers to yield in the face of all this vigour but Nimueh wasn't nearly as compliant. She and Merlin duelled furiously, throwing fireballs and enormous bolts of lightning at each other with such spectacle that a ring of spectators soon formed around them, watching with complete awe. Arthur in particular had lowered his sword to watch Merlin in incredulity, barely recognising him.

"Set her head on fire!" Gwaine yelled from the sidelines, jumping up and down with excitement.

"Go for her left side, it's the weaker of the two!" Elyan advised helpfully.

"Just kill the bitch!" George had screamed from beside them, gnawing on his fingernails with anxiety.

But Merlin didn't do any of these things. Instead, an alarming feeling of serenity suddenly hit him with the speed of a freight train, making him lift his face to the ceiling and close his eyes like one would to the sun. Everything moved in slow motion as his senses suddenly shifted momentously, sharpening acutely enough to let him hear conversations from across the room and feel the burning pain in Lance's shoulder from where the fire had caught his shirt. Every magical cell in his body was singing like a bird inside him, soaring sweetly as they swept through him like a tide that refused to abate. Like a golden light growing in his chest, the tingle inside him spread through his bones and flowed to his throat like liquid honey before inducing him to quietly say in a voice he barely recognised,

"Stop."

And to everyone's surprise, especially Nimueh's, her body did indeed stop.

"What the- what is this?!" she had demanded with hysteria, her body frozen mid-spell and her lips barely moving as she spoke.

"Oh Mighty Emrys," the druids suddenly exploded into adoration before dropping to their knees en masse. "The legends about him are true!"

"Pssst, what legend?" Percy bent down from his towering height to ask the closest druid to him, who was kissing the floor in happiness. It was Gaius, however, who responded, looking at Merlin with tearful pride.

" 'Once the Dragonlord has fully unlocked his power, there is no magic that he cannot command'," he recited grandly. He then turned to the confused looking knights. "That includes the magic inside of her," he clarified.

Gaius' words were obviously ringing true because Nimueh's frozen eyes looked terrified.

"What are you going to do with her?" asked Lance quietly, Gwen by his side and looking equally concerned.

Merlin just looked at Nimueh, his expression unreadable. He then blinked his golden eyes and the curse that held her immediately let her go. She fell to the floor with the sudden release onto her hands and knees, catching her breath as she did, before lifting up her face and wearing a look so ugly that it looked unnatural.

"You'll... you'll pay for that Emrys!" she sneered in a winded voice, still on her knees as she threw up her hand to fire a spell. When nothing happened, the cruel look she was wearing was soon
overcome with one of sheer panic. "What have you- what have you done to my magic?"

"Oh, it's still there," Merlin said simply, brimming with power as he walked over to her and
crouched down beside her to look her in the eye. "But it won't work for you if you try to use it to
hurt people. If you raise your hand with ill-intent, your magic will not comply."

Nimueh's pale skin practically went transparent.

"No," she said in denial, shaking her head and scurrying backwards away from him. "You- you
can't do that. You can't stop me from... You can't just... Forberne! Ácwele!"

"Please stop," Merlin said gently in an almost kind voice. "You're just embarrassing yourself." He
then rose to his feet and turned to Leon. "You'd better call your friends at Scotland Yard and tell
them they're missing a prisoner."

Leon, however, was looking at Merlin with the same sort of reverence that the druids did.

"Jesus, Merlin," he said shaking his head before letting out an incredulous laugh. "You're... just,
wow. How did you manage to hide that for the past few millennia?"

"Um, practice," said Merlin, feeling a little embarrassed as he looked around the room where
everyone was gawping at him with amazement.

There was only one face he wanted to see.

"Arthur," he said softly, taking a step towards his employer as he dreaded his reaction.

Looking every inch the brave king, Arthur was covered in soot and sweat and had a bloody gash on
his arm. He then dropped the sword in his hand to the floor with a clatter and gaped at Merlin with
an absolutely stunned look on his face. Closing his mouth, he wet his dry lips.

"You- you just did magic," he said, looking remarkably calm considering the circumstances.
He then promptly proceeded to pass out.

Merlin's magic, being as enamoured with Arthur as it was, immediately conjured a rather splendid
emperor-sized four poster with silk sheets and nicely colour-coordinated pillows for him to land on.
Given the fact that Merlin's magic barely let him conjure a tent for himself, he momentarily
considered how unfair it was that it loved Arthur so much more than it loved him.

"Wow," said Morgana staring at her prone brother's fancy bed sheets. Reaching over to feel the
material, she looked at Merlin like he was a lost cause. "Egyptian cotton sateen? You're completely
batty about him, aren't you?"

"Can you blame him?" said Myror, giving Arthur such a hungry sort of look that Merlin
immediately lifted up his palms and gave him a look of molten gold that clearly said, 'I'm not afraid
to use this.' Myror, being relatively intelligent, immediately shut his mouth and looked at the
relatively unsexy light fixtures instead.

"So, does Arthur know?" Morgana asked Merlin, her eyes intense.

"Does Arthur know what?"

"What happened on Casualty last night - that you're in love with him, of course!" Morgana
exclaimed like he was a simpleton.
"I’m not in love with him! Who told you that?" Merlin tried to argue weakly.

"Everyone knows, Merlin," she told him matter-of-factly. "Everyone except you and Arthur, apparently. Men. I don't know how two of them manage to be in a relationship without a woman there to clarify things for them."

"Look, Morgana, you've got this all wrong," Merlin argued, the lies sounding hollow even to his own ears.

"Oh, have I?" Morgana responded before pointing at a waiter who was cowering under a table with his tray of entrees and saying, "you there, who is this man in love with?"

"Arthur Pendragon," the man said at once before shakily offering his tray and saying, "Would Madam like a canape?"

"Oh, yes please," she said, popping a salmon roll into her mouth. "Right, I'll see about sorting out the bill for all this damage. Meanwhile, you go take Arthur home."

"Home? What about the fall-out from all this?" Merlin said, rounding on her like she didn't understand the severity of the situation. "Morgana, everyone in this room saw magic happen tonight. As soon as they leave this building, they’re all going to go to the papers. After that, the government is going to pick me up, stick me in some hidden base and poke and prod me like some sort of Roswell experiment!"

"You’ve been watching too many History Channel conspiracy theories."

"Alex Mack, actually," Merlin corrected her. "But that doesn’t change the fact that I’m screwed."

"Oh, I really wouldn’t worry, Merlin," said Morgana like it was as much as an issue as having a bit of dandruff. "Your druid friends over there seem to have everything sorted."

"They what?" Merlin asked, turning to see the druids who, now that he noticed it, were all dressed in sunglasses and suits fit for the FBI. They seemed to be sitting people down in groups and asking them to look into the jewelled head of a large staff which let out a glowing, mesmerising light that soon rendered their faces slack. Merlin dropped his jaw. "Christ, they’re the Men in Black!"

"Secret service, actually, my Lord," said Alator, who had stealthily approached while Merlin had been watching, his hands clasped in front of him like a bald and imposing bouncer. "We’ve been keeping the magic a secret for generations."

"So you actually have a day job? I imagined you guys spent your time in your robes, communing with the forest."

"Oh, only on our days off," Alator confirmed. "They say the robes are a health hazard at work."

He looked a little sullen about that.

"So," said Merlin, trying to take all this in, "the secret service has been watching me all this time?"

"We try and keep an eye on all registered magic users but you, my Lord... we’re all huge fans of you. We even have a framed photo of you at work. Here, look, it’s the screensaver on my phone."

"Um, oh wow, thanks. That’s very flattering," said Merlin, a tiny bit creeped out by this. He then looked back at the crowd of party-goers, who seemed to have gone back to drinking and looking carefree again. "So, everything here is sorted?"
"Yes, but hopefully we won't have to do this for too much longer. Erasing people's memories, that is," Alator confided through a whisper, like it was a playground secret.

"Why not?" asked Merlin.

"Why, because Avalon is coming, my Lord," Alator said simply. "We're all very excited about it. By the by, we've been loving your work, Lord Emrys. It's inspired. The whole 'Stop' business in particular was very impressive."

Feeling embarrassed, Merlin didn't know what to say to this so he didn't reply to it at all. Instead he shook Alator's hand and thanked him for his help.

"Ah, my Lord, one last thing," Alator said as he and the druids turned to go. "Your Type 4D friends over there-"

"Type 4D?"

"Reincarnated persons who remember a past life," the giant druid added helpfully.

"-yes, anyway," Alator continued, "we decided to let them keep their memories, as a mark of respect to you. You brought them back, after all, I'm sure they factor into your plans."

Merlin, who had no plan whatsoever but didn't have the heart to tell them, tried to lift up his shoulders and nod wisely at this.

"Great, my plans, yes, excellent," Merlin said. "Thank you, Alator. You've done well." Merlin then paused as a terrifying thought hit him. "Wait, so Uther-"

"Oh, we wiped him good, don't worry, my Lord," the tiny elderly druid woman piped up. "He was enough trouble as it was the first time around."

"What about Arthur?" Merlin persisted. "When he wakes up, will he remember everything?"

"Naturally, my Lord, we would never wipe his mind," Alator said in a scandalised voice, like it was an act of not only treason but blasphemy. "He is the Once and Future King."

"Yes," Merlin said softly, looking across at the bed Arthur was lying in majestically, surrounded by all his friends. "He really is, isn't he?"

Recognising the devoted looks in the druids' eyes when he turned back to them, Merlin quickly made his exit before they starting kissing his shoes again. With one last handshake with Alator, he turned and headed over to where his friends were all congregated around Arthur's bed and obviously sharing stories.

Gaius noticed him approach and immediately pulled him into a loving hug.

"My boy," he said tenderly as Merlin melted into the embrace. "My dear, wonderful boy."

"Wonderful?" Gwaine scoffed from where he was lying next to Arthur, using the blond's stomach as a table for the tray of entrees he chewing his way through. "Merlin, you are bloody brilliant! I still can't believe you never told me about the magic though, you bloody secret keeper! Sir Lancelot here just admitted you told him! I had to die knowing you didn't trust me!"

Merlin let out a shudder of breath. So Gwaine really did remember everything. They all did. Looking around at the faces of all his friends, he suddenly didn't see the colleagues he had been
working with the last year but the knights and royalty that they were. Merlin then turned to Gwaine.

"Wait a minute, back in the past, you knew I had magic?"

"When that midget on the bridge called you Magic, I kind of figured it out, you know," Gwaine said, swallowing the five crab cakes he had stuffed in his mouth. "I know I'm always drunk off my arse but I'm not deaf."

"You shouldn't say 'midget'," Percy politically-corrected. "It's 'little person'."

"Sure thing, Sir Percival," Elyan teased with a shove as Leon cleared his throat reproachfully at them like the First Knight he was.

"So how is he?" Merlin asked, gesturing towards Arthur, who still looked completely out of it.

"Oh, he'll be fine," Gaius confirmed. "It's just the shock of everything really."

"So, he actually did faint this time," Merlin said, trying not to grin fondly but unable to stop himself. He would never let Arthur live this one down. His smile slowly faded when he caught Gwen's eye, however.

Gwen, who was one of his best friends and who had once not just been in love with Arthur but had been his queen. Merlin swallowed hard, a horrible feeling festering in his gut as he told himself it was best for everyone if he just stepped back and let them find their way back to each other.

But Gwen had obviously seen the anguish and self-sacrifice on his face because she soon pursed her lips resolutely, pointedly stood by Lance's side and took his hand, her eyes bright and fixed on Merlin. Her smile was soft and a little sad but approving as her eyes darted between Arthur and Merlin. Merlin let out the breath he hadn't even realised he had been holding.

"You know," said Gwen, clearing her throat. "I think it's been a rough day for everyone involved. Merlin, why don't you do what Morgana suggested and magic Arthur home? We'll help clean all this up. You've done more than enough."

Gwaine and Leon shared a secretive sort of grin that Merlin didn't quite understand but he nodded his head and agreed anyway. With one last affectionate pat from Gaius and a solid thump on the back from Percy that nearly sent him flying across the room, Merlin placed his hand on Arthur's arm, whispered a spell under his breath and watched as his friends and the giant hall around him melted away and reformed into the empty interior of Arthur's bedroom. Merlin then blinked down at the grand four-poster and the black silk sheets Arthur was now lying on. Apparently, Merlin's magic had decided to drop Arthur invitingly on his bed just to torture him.

Sitting beside Arthur on the bed, Merlin drank in his profile for a moment and tried not to feel like too much of a moon-eyed schoolgirl as he did but it was unavoidable when even Arthur's pillows seemed to compliment his complexion perfectly. Shaking himself out of it before he spent all day ogling him, Merlin heaved a sigh, placed a glowing hand over Arthur's chest and whispered an awakening spell under his breath.

Almost immediately, Arthur stirred awake and blinked open his eyes, his gaze unfocused and fuzzy until it finally rested on Merlin, who was hunched in on himself and looking horribly guilty.

"Um, hello," Merlin said, his lips curling into more of a grimace than a smile. "So I guess we should talk. I mean, unless you don't remember what just happened with Nimueh, in which case, we don't have to talk about anything at all! We could just sit here and play hangman or noughts
and crosses, what do you say?"

Still lying flat on his back, Arthur glared at him with the fire of a thousand suns, betrayal burning in his eyes. Merlin gulped.

"Okay, so I’m assuming that you do remember," Merlin guessed with a wince. "And I can understand that you're angry at me but I had a good reason for keeping it from you. I just- I just wanted to protect you, Arthur. Everything I do is to protect you, whether it’s drinking poison for you to saving you from crazed priestesses who want to murder you. I just need to look after you. You already have so much to worry about, what with your father and running the magazine and I didn't want to add another burden to your list and- and- and can you please say something before I drop dead of a heart attack?"

Arthur narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms, his lips pressed tight like an old fishwife. If Merlin wasn't so intimidated by his stare, he would have giggled.

"You lied to me, Merlin." Arthur said when he finally spoke. "You lied to me again."

"I know," Merlin said pitifully, feeling rubbish. "And I get why you're angry, Arthur, I do but- wait, again? Arthur, are you saying... I mean, do you actually remember that?"

"-that my manservant is a lying bloody sorcerer who tells lies?" Arthur finished with an arch of his eyebrow. "Yes, Merlin, you total buffoon, I do remember."

"Oh," said Merlin, for once not correcting Arthur for the manservant jibe because he had subconsciously been right the whole time. He then scratched his nose. "So, does this mean I'm fired then?"

"Fired? Merlin, we just came from your leaving do, you moron. You're the one who left first," Arthur snapped, although Merlin could hear a wounded bite to his voice that betrayed that he was still unhappy about this fact.

Merlin felt a turn in his stomach. He was unhappy about it, too.

Arthur suddenly lifted his head off the bed.

"What is that playing on my stereo?" he asked, sitting up and trying to sound superior but his bedhead was sticking up in every conceivable direction known to man and wasn't helping his cause. Merlin tried not to laugh at how ridiculously charming he looked when he heard the music, too, accompanied by Barry White's unmistakably velvety sex voice. Groaning aloud, Merlin slapped a hand to his forehead in realisation.

"I'm going to kill Will."

"I don't know," Arthur tried to say lightly, only just noticing the newly mounted mirrors on the ceiling and the cameras that were pointed at the bed. "Other than you, Leon is the only other person who has access to my place and all this sordid shit screams Gwaine to me."

Merlin shut his gaping mouth, finally understanding what Gwaine and Leon's grins had been about. He didn't know Leon had it in him.

"Will probably helped them set up the cameras. He works part-time at Jessops," Merlin said with betrayal, already planning the magical Chinese burn he was going to inflict on his best friend.

"You're telling me I had both Gwaine and Will in my flat at the same time and it's still standing? It
must be a miracle. Oh God, please don't tell me they shagged in my kitchen or something. I'm still traumatised by the wet spots Myror left about the place when he broke in."

"Okay, firstly, that is disgusting so thank you for putting that image in my head," Merlin said, rubbing his eyes to try and erase that from his mental eyeballs, "and secondly, considering that Will is the very definition of straight, I doubt even Gwaine's lustrous locks could get him to give it up."

"Straight?" Arthur questioned with misunderstanding, snapping his head back from where it had been studying the overhead mirrors with far too much interest. Flustered, Arthur then stumbled over his words. "But... but Will said you two were together!"

"He's also said that he founded Taco Bell and that he's distantly related to Reverend Desmond Tutu," Merlin said dryly, his eyebrow half-cocked. "I think that should tell you never to trust a word that Will says."

"So- so you're not actually gay?" Arthur said like this news changed everything. His words were so unmistakably heavy with disappointment -- so disheartened -- that they compelled Merlin to swallow hard, be brave and finally admit the undeniable fact that had been sitting in his chest for the past year. Hell, the past fourteen hundred and seventy years.

"Well, considering the fact I declared my love for you in front of the entire company, you stupid dollop head, I suppose I must be a little gay, mustn't I?" Merlin said, trying to sound casual but his heart was pounding so manically that he wouldn't be surprised if it burst out of his chest and hit Arthur in the face.

Arthur's eyes widened to the size of hubcaps.

"You're- you're in love with me? I...really?" he asked in a high, hopeful sort of voice. Arthur then seemed to hear himself because he quickly let out a cough and rolled his shoulders in a manly sort of way. "Well, I mean, yes, obviously, of course you’re in love with me. I'm hot, rich and powerful. Why wouldn't you want some of this?"

"Oi, you prick, you're supposed to say it back!" Merlin laughed as he aimed a smack at Arthur's chest, his smile so wide that he was sure that he looked like the lovesick fool he was. Easily catching Merlin's hand between both of his own, Arthur smiled just as foolishly back at him before shrugging and saying with fake nonchalance,

"I suppose you'll do."

"You suppose I'll- oh, you really are the biggest dollophead in exist-mmph!" Merlin squeaked because Arthur had swooped in like a bird of prey and caught his lips in one of those earth-shattering, mind-blowing, firework-exploding movie kisses that made Merlin, much to his own dismay, swoon.

In the tiny part of Merlin's mind that was still functioning, he realised that Arthur had not only not been lying about being the best kisser on earth but he had actually sold himself short. It was other-worldly how talented Arthur’s mouth was. From his lips, which consumed Merlin like a starving man, to the tongue that happily plundered Merlin’s mouth so obscenely that it was bound to be illegal in some countries, Arthur was completely and utterly unravelling him with just a kiss.

Merlin's magic, which always did the occasional somersault inside him when Arthur was in the vicinity, was downright bungee jumping inside him at that moment. He could feel it rushing just under the surface of his skin, as though hoping to feel even the slightest touch of Arthur's skin.
It flat out blinded him with gold when Arthur's greedy hands ran down Merlin's sides and made one of the cushions on the bed self-combust into an explosion of feathers when Arthur brazenly groped the front of Merlin’s trousers hard enough to make Merlin almost bite his own lip off.

"What the-?!" said Arthur in brief confusion, spitting out a feather.

"Just ignore it," Merlin said distractedly, pulling him back in and actually *gurgling* when Arthur bent his head to lick a stripe of sweat from Merlin’s throat.

"Merlin," Arthur groaned, peppering kisses up his neck and over his face and grinding so hard against him that Merlin saw stars. "If you don't get your clothes off right now, I'm going to fire you."

"I don't -- *oh fuck, god, yes, there again please* -- I don't work for you anymore, you prat," Merlin gasped, clutching at fistfuls of Arthur's hair like it was a life buoy keeping him afloat.

"Then I'm... Christ... I'm rehiring you," Arthur panted, licking his teeth.

"Okay," Merlin agreed wholeheartedly, pushing Arthur flat on his back on the bed and climbing on top of him eagerly. Arthur, who seemed to keep getting distracted fondling Merlin's arse, froze mid bottom-squeeze to pull away, his lips swollen and his eyes dark as he looked up at Merlin.

"Okay?" Arthur returned hopefully, his breath coming out in short bursts as his chest heaved. "You'll come back?"

"Yes, yes, I'll stay until hell freezes over and penguins are smart enough to start colonising the moon, now can we please talk about this after you're done fucking me into your fancy designer sheets?" Merlin pleaded, grabbing Arthur by the tie almost threateningly.

Arthur cocked his head, as though considering this.

"Okay," he agreed in less than a millisecond before flipping them over so he was on top and latching his mouth under Merlin's jaw. He then proceeded to suck a bruise so vociferously onto his pale skin that it made Merlin ache in places he didn't even know *could* ache.

"Fuck, Arthur," Merlin whimpered, his hands flexing uncontrollably in Arthur's hair as he wrapped his legs around his hips and pulled his head closer. "You're trying to kill me, aren't you? This is punishment for all the back talk, isn't it?"

"Shut the fuck up, you traitorous sodding sorceror, you," Arthur returned gruffly, roughly slipping a hand inside both Merlin's trousers and his underwear before pumping his fingers around him mercilessly. "Lying to me for years. Never even taking any credit. Telling me I fainted all those times when I didn't..."

"Ughhhth," Merlin said, arching off the bed, his magic shattering every lightbulb in the room.

"Throwing yourself in danger," Arthur continued fiercely, his fist pumping savagely as he bit into his collarbone, "scaring all the fucking prey away on a hunt, wearing those stupid bloody neckerchiefs..."

'I liked those neckerchiefs,' Merlin had tried to say but it came out like "Ughhhth" again as he threw back his head and caught sight of the erratic bedroom blinds from upside down, which were opening and closing so frantically by themselves that they were getting caught up in their own string. Panting, Merlin grabbed Arthur's clothed shoulder and furiously wished he was naked because from the few times he had walked in on Arthur and his many conquests, his body had been
such a sight to behold that Merlin's eyes had actually welled from taking in all that golden, chiselled loveliness in one go.

His magic had obviously agreed with him because barely a second after he had thought this, a whoosh of a noise sounded and a rather perplexed -- and now very nude -- Arthur looked down at himself, clearly wondering where his pants had gone. Arthur then looked up at him accusingly.

"You cheated!" he declared.

"Warlock," Merlin reminded him as he pointed at himself, cheerfully drinking in the view. His magic seemed to be enjoying it, too, because a wispy vine of it had escaped to wind its way around Arthur and generally feel him up like a pervert.

"Okay, okay, that's enough, stop. I said 'stop', you dirty harlot, he's mine," Merlin scolded, waving it away but not before it cheekily tweaked a nipple. Arthur, who seemed to have been enjoying himself, grinned down at Merlin wolfishly from where he was straddling him. Hair over his eyes and absolutely unabashed in his nudity, Arthur's skin glistened from the leftover trails of magic and his arousal bobbed impressively in front of Merlin's face. Gulping, Merlin simply gawped, hungrily eyeing him like he was banquet. He didn't know where to start.

Arthur clearly did, however.

"Come on, Merlin." He grinned showily before winking at Merlin. Lifting up his muscular arms to place them behind his head like a poser, Arthur then thrust his hips out like the cocky bastard he was. "Open your mouth for me, there's a good boy."

"You know, it's so nice being with such a romantic," Merlin said airily even as he shifted forward and placed his hands firmly on Arthur's arse, his lips watering with anticipation. "Roses, chocolates, declarations of undying affection... I get it all with you."

Merlin expected a cuff on the ear or even an affectionate tug on a lock of hair. What he got was Arthur lifting up his chin and looking down at him with such tenderness shining in his eyes that Merlin was momentarily winded.

"I do love you, you know," Arthur said without a trace of hesitation, brushing his fingertips over a cheekbone consideringly. "Even though you are a massive dollophead."

"That's my word," Merlin returned but he was smiling back with so much choked emotion that he had to turn his face away and bury it into the hand Arthur had placed on his cheek.

"That's my word," Arthur said gently, combing his hand through Merlin's dark hair with concern and looking suddenly serious as a frown appeared between his eyes. "Are you okay? Because we don't have to do anything if you- well, I mean, don't feel pressured to- if you're not ready to, I'm happy to-"

"Arthur?" Merlin said gently, cutting him off.

"Yes?"

"Shut up."

"Hey, that's my line!" Arthur complained and he would have argued further if Merlin hadn't chosen that moment to lean in and swallow down him from root to tip.

After that, Arthur's words went from breathless to downright unintelligible.
He instinctively grabbed Merlin's ears, his fingernails burying into them hard enough to leave crescent-shaped grooves as Merlin greedily tried to inhale every inch of him that he could. Deep-throating him to the point of almost choking himself, Merlin's head bobbed so animatedly that he was sure he had pulled muscles in both his neck and his cheek.

"Fuck," said Arthur in one of his more lucid periods. Hips slamming like a piston as he literally fucked Merlin's mouth with no abandon, he then yanked Merlin's head roughly up by the ears so their gazes locked. Merlin looked up at him hungrily as he mouthed over him, his eyes burning like fire as his magic literally swept itself up the insides of Arthur's thighs, making them almost buckle as they quivered uncontrollably. "Merlin- I'm- I'm not going to- last if you- if you keep- Oi!"

Arthur yelped with injustice because Merlin had said,

"Okay," and had pulled off, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Arthur, understandably, was livid.

"What the hell are you - you put that back in your mouth this instant or you're fired, mister!"

"You just said you weren't going to last," Merlin rationalised, feeling a strangely immense feeling of calm. He then rose up to his knees, his clothes literally melting off him and making his pale skin hum and glow with so much power that Arthur was momentarily distracted by it.

"Uh," said Arthur, looking a little stunned as he eyed Merlin like he would a God. He even lifted a shaking hand to touch him but then dropped it by his side, as though feeling unworthy. "Er... I mean... wait, what were we talking about again?" he asked, head blank.

"You said you weren't going to last," Merlin reminded him almost conversationally. He then pushed Arthur back down on the bed hard enough for the mattress to creak. "But I'm still nowhere near done with you."

Merlin's eyes then flashed and Arthur immediately found himself pinned to the bed, his arms held up against the headboard as though his wrists were tied with invisible bonds.

Arthur swallowed hard.

"Fuck," he croaked in an almost unrecognisable voice, so hard that his arousal was lying flat against his stomach.

Merlin replied to this with a predatory grin.

"Told you I wasn't a virgin," he said impishly before climbing happily on top of Arthur, his thighs on either side of his hips as he nuzzled his neck.

Arthur looked like he would have sold his first born at that moment just to get his hands on Merlin. Straining against his invisible bonds and trying desperately to get some sort of friction between their bodies, Arthur bucked wildly with frenzy. When Merlin tsked and slapped him on the backside for bad behaviour, he literally whimpered with need.

"Merlin, you fucking tease," Arthur groaned, sounding in pain as he tried to lever himself up again to claim a kiss. Taking pity on him, Merlin pressed a chaste, reverent peck on his mouth as he breathed Arthur in. He smelled like ridiculously expensive cologne and sweat and it was enough to make Merlin dizzy with want.

"Please tell me you have condoms and lube," he murmured against Arthur's mouth, rubbing their groins together pointedly.
"Hnnngh," Arthur replied between kisses.

"Is that a yes?" Merlin said fondly, licking the shell of Arthur's ear.

"On the... on the bedside table," Arthur moaned, breathing hard through his nose. "I got them just in case you- uhhhh."

"In case I ‘uhhh’ed, huh?" Merlin purred with amusement into his ear before idly lifting up his palm and levitating the items from the bedside table towards him. Arthur squirmed underneath him at this, making Merlin let out a large smile, his eyes still blazing from the spell.

"Is it me or do you get off on my powers?" Merlin teased, tearing the condom wrapper open with his teeth. He then handed it over to the translucent ribbons of magic dancing beside him, which soon wrapped themselves around Arthur's shaft like the coils of a snake and slid the condom on him as smoothly as a glove. Arthur moaned even louder at this, bending his spine back like a bowstring as they went to work, pooling at his crotch and running themselves over him worshipfully like the tongue of an attentive lover. Merlin drank in the scene, his mouth dry. He didn't realise his magic was so filthy. "I suppose that answers my question," he said to himself before popping off the cap to the lube and applying a copious amount of it to both Arthur and then himself, preparing himself so thoroughly with three of his own fingers that it made Arthur thrash against his magical restraints, almost breaking them completely. Breathing shallowly, Merlin leaned over to press his lips to Arthur's temple before dropping a kiss on his collarbone. "Ready, baby?"

"Call me baby again and I'll break your neck."

Merlin beamed happily at this response, as though it was everything he had ever wished for.

"Wanker," he said lovingly before biting his lip, guiding Arthur into him and lowering down until he sheathed him completely.

"Fuck," hissed Merlin.

"Fuck," Arthur replied, squeezing shut his eyes and dropping his head back down onto his pillow weakly, as though it was almost too much to bear. "Merlin... are... are you...?"

But Merlin couldn't hear him. He had sat himself up and thrown back his head, eyes open and blinding with light as he watched their joining in the mirror above. Arthur was lying prone with ecstasy on his face, his wrists shimmering from where they were being held as Merlin watched himself ride him slowly, palms flat on Arthur's stomach, his teeth grit hard and the burn ripping through his body like a forest fire.

Almost immediately, he noticed the magic slowly building from their coupling like a galaxy of stars, spinning a whirlwind around their naked bodies as though they were literally the centre of the universe. It was like a turbulent and stormy sea of colours, crashing phosphorescent waves against their bodies before wrapping them in a cocoon made of a million tiny threads of magic.

Merlin breathed deeply and could feel Arthur's lungs exhaling his breaths in response, as though they really were one body and one soul. He could feel Arthur pushing into him as though Merlin were Arthur himself and their hearts suddenly weren't just beating in tandem, they were one and the same.

Somewhere along the way, the binds on Arthur's wrists must have dissipated because he rose up to crush Merlin tightly against his body, his strong arms wrapped around him as he ravished his
mouth urgently and his hands slipped to the small of Merlin's back, continuing to urge the cant of his hips on. As Merlin started to move himself up and down with uncoordinated desperation and Arthur's thrusts started to get more and more erratic, the calming magic around them started to pop and fire off like firecrackers in the air, crackling and fizzing like the lit fuse of a bomb on the cusp of going off.

Perhaps it was because Merlin was so far gone -- so completely out of his mind with the sensations of what they were doing -- that he didn't notice that the magic around them had risen their joined bodies up into the air but when his head bumped the mirrored ceiling, Merlin just raised his hands, placed his palms flat onto the ceiling and used it to push himself down on Arthur with everything he had. This seemed to be their undoing because they soon let out a cry of mutual climax against each other's' mouths, the magic around them literally erupting into a huge explosion of fireworks, so forceful that it blew Arthur's belongings into the nearest wall and bathed both Arthur and Merlin in trailing streamers of light.

They slowly floated back down, almost feather-light in their descent as they softly continued to kiss each other like they still couldn't get enough of it. When they finally landed back to the bed, it was as though gravity had finally returned full force and Merlin immediately found himself collapsing bonelessly on top of Arthur, absolutely exhausted. The silk sheets felt cool and clingy and strangely alien against Merlin's shins as he tried to catch his breath, stars still exploding behind his eyelids as his head lolled against Arthur's shoulder.

Well, Merlin thought as his brain slowly tried to boot itself back up again. They were definitely doing that again.

"Wow," said Arthur, finally breaking the silence when he had caught his breath. He sounded deferential, like he had just witnessed a miracle on earth. "That was-"

"Yeah," Merlin agreed, yawning contentedly against his collarbone.

"No, but I mean, really. That was just. I can't even put into words how -"

"I know," Merlin concurred, wincing sorely as he lifted himself off of Arthur, who just lay there uselessly and watched Merlin in wonderment, sticky and sort of gross now. Shaking his head as he concluded that one way or another he would always be stuck sorting out Arthur's messes, Merlin drowsily waved a hand, cleaning them both off instantly. He then returned back to sprawling back on top of Arthur like a large cat, closing his eyes serenely.

"And did I just hallucinate or did we really just have levitation sex?" Arthur asked, still sounding like his world had been shaken to the core.

"Um, yeah, that wasn't intentional," Merlin said, popping an eye open and feeling a little overwhelmed himself by what just happened. "That's actually never happened before. I think it's because my magic fancies you so much. It keeps trying to grope you and show off to impress you."

"Well, everyone fancies me, why should your magic be any different?" Arthur smirked, expertly anticipating Merlin's tired swipe at him by grabbing his wrist and pulling him in for a kiss that was frankly so filthy that it made a porno look like a Disney cartoon. With one last lick across the seam of Merlin's lips, Arthur leaned back against the pillows and placed his arms behind his head, breathless and smug as he watched Merlin's eyes glaze over. "So, is the floating-in-mid-air thing going to happen every time we do it? Because my bed is feeling like a false economy here."

"Oh shut up," Merlin mumbled half-heartedly with an affectionate nip to Arthur's sweaty shoulder, which was suddenly exceedingly distracting. "You wouldn't know how to budget even if you were
Arthur wrinkled his nose, like he often did when terms like 'budget' were bandied about. Merlin grinned, propping his chin up on his crossed arms and looking down at Arthur with a soft expression.

"So I have a question," Merlin said suddenly, feeling a little shy as he drew circles over Arthur's heart. "When exactly did you stop trying to dump me for one of your usual hottie PAs?"

Arthur seemed to deliberate on this, indolently stroking his fingers over Merlin's bare hip.

"I suppose the moment I realised -- to my horror -- that you actually were one of those hottie PAs."

"How distressing for you," Merlin said dryly, stilling his finger and looking highly unimpressed.

"It was an upsetting discovery, yes," Arthur said seriously as he nodded his head, ignoring the sarcasm in Merlin's voice.

"Okay, so clarify things for me then; when exactly was this moment when you completely lost your sanity and found me attractive?" Merlin asked, trying to feel offended but, honestly, he had considered Arthur's interest either magic or madness himself.

Looking a little embarrassed, Arthur mumbled something under his breath.

"I'm sorry, I don't speak Wookiee," Merlin teased, poking him in the cheek and feeling an overwhelming surge of affection wash over him as Arthur pouted and softly bit his finger.

"I said 'the Lady Helen pitch', smartarse," Arthur responded, his cheeks going pink.

Merlin couldn't help it. He dropped his jaw.

"What?!" he gasped, his eyes round and stunned as he lifted up his head. "But- but you still made my life miserable after! In fact, you were even worse than you were before! The fussy lunches, the ridiculous tasks in the middle of the night, throwing objects at my head - Griffin!"

"Well, I couldn't exactly act like I liked you, could I?" Arthur said defensively, as though his actions were totally justified. "I was your employer. It would have been unseemly."

"But you slept with all those other girls!" Merlin protested, feeling rather affronted that Arthur hadn't made the effort with him.

"Exactly," Arthur said, like Merlin had just hit the nail on the head. "Girls. And you certainly weren't one of those. I didn't know what the hell was going on with me for those first few weeks. You were the first man I had ever had those feelings for and it scared me shitless. Not to mention that it was embarrassing as fuck. I was surrounded by male models on a daily basis but you were the one I was mooning over? I was appalled with my taste."

"Thank you," said Merlin.

"Oh shut up," Arthur grumbled before lifting up a hand to tweak at a damp curl at Merlin's nape. "Anyway, I thought if I could get you to quit that the feeling would go with you but then you had to go and be halfway competent and I grew to rely on you. I suppose I resigned myself to the possibility that all we had was a platonic relationship that wouldn't go anywhere. We were two straight men after all."
"And then Will pulled the gay card out of his arse," Merlin said with mounting realisation. Arthur snorted at that, especially given what he now knew.

"That was when I realised that it wasn't because we were straight, it was because you weren't interested."

"So you acted like an even bigger arse than usual," Merlin said, remembering Arthur's snide remarks every time Gwaine had flirted with him.

"I never said I wasn't petty," Arthur pointed out unashamedly, raising his hands. Merlin smiled, feeling it wobble a little on his lips as it all finally dawned on him.

"You were jealous," he said, trying not to feel delighted by this fact and failing horribly.

"Stop looking so pleased, I was obviously brain-addled," Arthur returned in an uppity voice, as though psychological problems explained everything. "You were nothing but elbows and knees."

"I'm still nothing but elbows and knees," Merlin reminded him, pointing at said elbows and knees to prove his point. Arms behind his head, Arthur shrugged with easy equanimity.

"Luckily, I've come to terms with that."

"And luckily, I've come to terms with the fact that you are a giant cabbage head," Merlin quipped back.

"So it looks like we're golden," Arthur replied, taking Merlin's hand and wearing a soft smile that Merlin couldn't stop himself responding to.

"So, the insults," Merlin persisted as Arthur raised his hand and began to nip at the tips of fingers. "Was all that just the burning lust you had for me?"

"You sound like a Jackie Collins novel," Arthur murmured around his thumb.

"The fact you know what a Jackie Collins novel sounds like should have tipped you off that you were at least partially gay," Merlin pointed out before giving Arthur his other hand to nibble at, which he soon did. "No but seriously, all this time, all the insults, was it all just an act?"

"Of course it wasn't an act, you moron," Arthur said without the slightest hesitation. "You're a bloody idiot almost all the time. For some God forsaken reason, I find that attractive."

"And for some God forsaken reason, I like arrogant prats who are mean to me. I must be a masochist."

"I'm happy to tie you up next time to see if you are."

"I'd be happy to let you." Merlin replied back snappily. They then grinned sappily at each other. "But what happened over Christmas?" Merlin asked, finally wanting to straighten this out. "We were fine one minute but the moment Myror attacked you-"

"With a tranquiliser dart that had nothing to do with me fainting, you bloody magic-wielding liar," Arthur cut in bitterly.

"-Yes, yes, would you get over that already? I totally saved your arse. Anyway, what was going on? You just suddenly stopped speaking to me."
“Are you kidding me?” Arthur said, giving Merlin that look he always gave him when he thought he was being particularly dim. "I tried to kiss you and you blew me off. That hurt my fragile ego."

“Fragile ego? Your ego has a stronger military defence than most countries. And wait, blew you off? No I didn’t!”

“Do you have a selective memory?” Arthur asked, raising himself up on his elbows so Merlin could appreciate how incredulous his gaze was. "When I tried to talk to you about the kiss — or lack thereof, thanks very much for that — you said it would be better if we remained friends."

Merlin stared at Arthur in confusion, who might as well have been talking in Greek considering how little Merlin understood him at that moment.

“I’m sorry, are you making up conversations now? I never said that! We didn’t even talk about the not-a-kiss! We just talked about the argument we had because of Myror. I wanted us to put it behind us.”

“Put it behind… Merlin, you idiot, I wasn’t talking about the argument, we always sodding argue!” Arthur snapped, thwapping him very unromantically across the head.

“Oh,” said Merlin with increasing comprehension, the thump on the skull obviously dislodging something. “You thought— you seriously thought I was rejecting you?”

“I was galled by your taste to be honest, I’m a catch,” Arthur said, clearly still smarting from the insult as he pouted.

Unable to stop himself from finding that look adorable, Merlin shuffled forwards until their bodies were aligned and pecked Arthur on the tip of his nose.

“Well, you do have all your own teeth, I suppose,” he sighed, as though settling for Arthur was a bit of a hardship. "And for some reason, my mother seems to like you.”

"I'm hot, too. And well hung," Arthur added to the list, his hands expertly kneading over Merlin's arse before he shifted against him suggestively. "Now, brace yourself. I'm going to kiss you again. Try not to pass out with bliss."

"Muppet," Merlin said warmly before happily letting his lips get claimed. Arthur’s mouth was like a revelation. It was heady and hot and so mind-meltingly addictive that Merlin was amazed there wasn’t a hotline dedicated to offering his old flames withdrawal counselling. He was intoxicating really and as Merlin was rolled willingly onto his back for an overwhelming taste of him, he wondered if it was possible for life to get any more perfect than this.

And then his stomach rumbled.

Snorting, Arthur reluctantly detached his tongue from Merlin's tonsils and looked down at him.

"Do you mind? I’m trying to get back inside your arse here and you’re fucking up my seduction.”

"Hey, it’s not my fault that I didn't get to eat anything at the leaving do," Merlin said in his stomach’s defence, patting it as though to say, ‘There, there’. "Nimueh crashed it before I could even get some nibbles."

"H'ordeuvres, you plebeian. But I suppose even sex slaves need food,” Arthur conceded, lazily caressing the leg Merlin had wrapped around his hip as his fingers trailed against the direction of the hair. “What do you want?”
"You're going to cook for me?" Merlin said, both amazed and mildly terrified because Arthur's cooking repertoire mainly consisted of toast, which he somehow always managed to turn into a congealed nuclear experiment.

"Don't be absurd, Merlin, of course I'm not going to cook," Arthur replied as though Merlin had asked him for a kidney. "But I get room service from the Mandarin next door. Just press '0' and ask them for whatever you want. After that, get your skinny arse back in bed. You're going to finish that blowjob you fucking teased me with if it's the last thing you do."

"Work, work, work," Merlin mock-mumbled before clambering over Arthur and reaching for where the poor phone had landed on the floor after their chaotic love-making.

After placing his order -- which wasn't helped at all by the fact that Arthur kept fondling Merlin while he tried to give the bemused lady on the other end his choice of pizza toppings -- both Merlin and his magic literally jumped on top of Arthur and attacked him. Grabbing him by a fistful of hair, Merlin had pulled Arthur's head back and had just got to sucking the juncture of his throat with more zeal than a vampire when the doorbell rang, making Merlin curse the rich for their impeccable service.

"I'll get it," Arthur smirked, throwing him off him cockily to get to his feet. Wrapping the black sheet around him, Arthur then flounced out the room to the front door but not before blowing Merlin an infuriating kiss over his shoulder.

Merlin shook his head. He really did love that arrogant moron.

Easing himself off the bed, Merlin stretched his aching muscles and was just about to consider foraging around the barely-used kitchen for cutlery when Arthur's confused voice floated to him from the front door.

"Er, Merlin. There's a bunch of grim reapers at the door looking for you."

"Grim reapers?" Merlin enquired, quickly slipping on a pair of Arthur's Star Wars pants as he walked outside.

Merlin then groaned as the druids waved back at him.

"Lord Emrys!" they said in unison, the one closest to Arthur bowing so emphatically that he was either a contortionist or someone who would soon be making an appointment with their osteopath. "How wonderful to see you again! And so much of you, too!"

Flushing, Merlin grabbed a nearby sofa cushion and placed it in front of his crotch while Arthur, who was holding the sheet around his waist with a surprising amount of dignity, sniffed and surveyed the crowd of people like an observing monarch.

"So, I'm assuming none of you lot have our pizza?" he hazarded dryly.

"They're not room service," Merlin said, stating the obvious before rounding on Alator with frustration. "Alator, what are you guys even doing here? It was all very nice being bowed to and revered and all that and I really appreciated all your help during the battle but even the messiah needs his privacy. I mean, hell, how did you even find me?!"

"We caught your scent," said Alator, which made Merlin blush and worry just how much debauchery and sex he reeked of. And then, to answer his question, the other druids piped up.

"All hail this day, the consummation has occurred!"
"The joining is completed!"

"The two halves have become a whole!"

Arthur's eyebrows shot up as Merlin dropped his head into his hands, the cushion falling with a flump to the floor.

"Er, Merlin? Who are these people?" Arthur asked in a light, friendly voice that had that underlying tone of 'Tell me now or I'll kill you'.

"Um... they're my fan club, kind of," Merlin explained.

"Fan club?" Arthur repeated, like the idea of anyone other than him finding Merlin charming was madness. "Why on earth- wait, let me guess, this is another magic thing, isn't it?"

Merlin shrugged, suddenly feeling nervous.

"Um, it's more like a destiny thing actually."

Arthur slanted his head, his eyes more curious than anything else.

"So we're destined?"

"From the beginning of time," one druid began.

"To the end of all days," another continued.

"Together, the Once and Future King and his warlock will change the history of the world," Alator finally finished with a flourish that proved that he had obviously had some prior theatrical training.

Arthur blinked slowly and Merlin cursed his lovesick brain for finding the expression cute, especially when coupled with his sex hair, which made Arthur's normally pristine hair-do like it had been dragged backwards through a bush.

"Once and Future King?" Arthur repeated.

"That's you," Alator explained helpfully. "What with being the reincarnation of King Arthur and everything. We've all been waiting for your return for centuries, Sire. It's good to finally see you. The water in the Lake of Avalon has done wonders for your skin."

Arthur gaped for a second before making a "Huh" sort of a sound, as though sleeping for centuries in a watery grave made perfect sense.

"You know, all this time, I thought all those medieval Master/Servant dreams I kept having of us was just pure sexual deviance," Arthur confided as an aside to Merlin. "Although why I thought watching you muck out the stables was supposed to be sexy I'll never know. Oh well, I suppose it could be worse. I could have been stuck with George."

"Heaven forbid," Merlin said loftily.

"Now, now, Merlin, no need to sulk," Arthur teased, before pulling a huffy Merlin towards him by the hand.

"I'm not sulking, you tosser," Merlin sulked but he went to Arthur anyway, hating himself a little for how susceptible he was to his charms. Arthur just grinned at him hugely as their chests bumped warmly, his happiness radiating off him in waves.
"Gentlemen, could you leave now, please?" Arthur asked the druids vaguely although his eyes were fixed solely on Merlin as he wrapped his arms around his hips. "The two halves need to become whole once more."

"Technically, Sire, you already are..." Alator tried to explain matter-of-factly but Arthur's glower cut him short.

The druid then turned to Merlin for confirmation, as if his word was really the one that counted. Merlin smiled, relaxing completely in Arthur's arms.

"It was lovely having you over, I'll call you guys if I need you again. Thanks for all the Kung Fu earlier by the way. That was inspired."

"Edith over here teaches martial arts on the weekend," Alator elaborated, pointing at the tiny elderly witch who bowed at Merlin with such vigour that he fretted about her hip. "Anyway, we'll leave you now, my Lord. And remember to be safe! Malcolm here once had an itch that went green for a month after he-"

"Okay, great, thanks, that's wonderful, bye!" Merlin said, loudly slamming the door in Alator's face before he could catch the entirety of that story, which was clearly going to scar him for life.

"Please tell me they're not going to show up every time we have sex," Arthur said once they made it back to the bedroom, wrapping his sheet around the both of them snugly.

"Don't think I can make any promises there," Merlin lamented, letting himself snuggle into their shared warmth. "They're a bunch of psychics. They kind of hang about outside my place to check up on me. I caught one of them in the bushes once, just watching me watch telly. He was even wearing camouflage paint on his face. Totally blended in with next door's hydrangeas."

"Well, there's nothing else for it then, you're just going to have to move in here," Arthur said, like this solved everything.

"... Wait, what?" Merlin stuttered out.

"It's far more secure," Arthur elaborated in a relaxed fashion, clearly trying to act like it wasn't a big deal. "It's too high for anyone to peek through the windows and you can put a spell up to make sure they stay outside. Besides, I need someone to put my clothes in order in the mornings. Not to mention all the free sex on tap."

"For the last time, I'm not a bloody sex slave, you mong," Merlin chided but he was looking at Arthur with soft eyes that completely gave him away. "And I'm also not your maid. I get enough of that at work."

"Don't be a nag, Merlin," Arthur said, drawing out his name as he tugged playfully at an earlobe with his teeth. "It's not like it’s hard for you to put things away."

"True," Merlin admitted, backing this up by flashing his eyes and sending a crumpled shirt on the floor flying onto a hanger.

"My God," said Arthur, staring at the shirt as it gave Merlin a quick salute before slumping back into lifelessness. "I'm sleeping with Mary Poppins."

"Sod off!" Merlin laughed, hitting him on the chest. "Although I reckon you could say that I’m practically perfect in every way."
Catching the hand that had hit him, Arthur held it against his beating heart and looked down at Merlin almost thoughtfully, his eyes lightly raking over his face.

"Yes," he said, unusually serious as the thumb of his other hand smoothed across Merlin’s cheekbone. "I suppose you are a bit, aren’t you?"

The warmth that spread from Merlin's chest made its way all to his cheeks, which flamed under Arthur's touch.

"That's just the love talking," Merlin said, feeling strangely bashful considering everything they had done.

"Yeah, that’s probably true," Arthur acknowledged, nodding his head in wholehearted agreement. "After all, they do say love is blind- ow!"

"You really are the biggest prat alive!" Merlin yelped, raining Arthur with a shower of smacks to the chest. Sniggering uncontrollably like a schoolboy as he tried to unsuccessfully duck out of the way, Arthur’s shoulders physically shook with mirth. "I don't even know why I bother with you. Ever since we met, it's been nothing but grief!"

"Grief? Me?" Arthur raised his voice, pointing at himself in incredulity as though Merlin clearly had a case of mistaken identity. "I think you'll find that you were the one who hit me with the portfolio."

"Ah, you deserved it," Merlin said, waving a nonchalant hand. "Besides, my portfolio did that by itself. It had PMS that day or something. Although, if you ask Alator, he'll give you this massive spiel about fate compelling it to bring us together."

"By bashing me to the floor?"

"Well, it worked, didn't it?"

Arthur paused, thinking back on the day they met as he lay back down and curled his arm behind his head.

"You know, I was on my way to Bali the day we met," he recollected.

"I heard. I saw," Merlin said. "I even remember the girl. Leggy, blonde, the polar opposite to me-"

"And weird as fuck," Arthur finished the sentence with a sardonic smile on his face. "She kept talking about her pet guinea pig. She even had a blog where she would write as him in the first person. 'Day 234 in the cage: rode on the wheel. Took a shit. A good time was had by all.' Absolutely barking. Honestly, I have no idea what I saw in her. I probably just stuck my tongue down her throat just to shut her the hell up."

"Is that why you kissed me?"

"You I kissed because I'd been wanting to since almost the moment I met you."

"Well, aren't you a charmer."

Arthur looked at him closely before grinning widely.

"You're blushing," he crowed with delight.

"Shut up, I am not," Merlin said, blushing even harder as he buried his hot face in Arthur’s
shoulder. It was ridiculously comfy and became even more so when Arthur’s strong arms wrapped around him. A niggling thought was playing on Merlin’s mind, however. “How do you think your father is going to react to all this?”

“You’re bringing up my father in bed? You really know how to set the mood. How about we mention Agravaine and Morgana, too? And we can’t forget Gaius…”

“Arthur,” Merlin pressed, knowing when Arthur was hedging a question. “Are you going to tell him?”

"Tomorrow," Arthur said, not looking forward to it in the slightest if the constipated look on his face was any indication. "I'll let him know tomorrow."

"And, um, what are you going to tell him exactly?" Merlin asked nervously, hoping that Arthur mentioned his name as little as possible because Uther terrified him more than Nimueh and her army combined.

"Well," Arthur said thoughtfully before looking down at Merlin and dropping a kiss on his mouth. "I have a pretty good idea."

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"So, I'm in love with Merlin."

Uther Pendragon, who had been reading his share prices in the Financial Times and tsking under his breath at their performance, looked up at his son’s dramatic entrance. He then considered what he said and furrowed his brow.

"I'm sorry, who?"

"Merlin," Arthur said quickly, as though doing so as fast as possible would hurt them both less. "My manse- er, I mean, my assistant."

Uther paused for a second and put the paper down.

"The one with the ears?" he said.

Arthur tried not to smile dotingly but that was mainly because he had come to realise that it made him look just as stupid as Merlin.

"Yes," he confirmed, schooling his face into a serious expression and lifting his shoulders proudly. "The one with the ears."

"That can't be possible, Arthur. He's a man," Uther said, addressing him like he was six years old again and asking where babies came from.

Arthur rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly.

"Yeah, apparently, that's not a deal breaker for me."

Sighing heavily, Uther slipped off his glasses and gave Arthur an exasperated look.
"For heaven's sake, Arthur. Must you bed absolutely everyone who takes that position? I feel could have hired you a one-eyed orangutan and you would still be here, telling me you want to run away with them."

Arthur didn't know whether to be more offended for himself for being accused of bestiality or Merlin for being compared to a visually-impaired ape.

"Father, that's not fair-" he tried to argue but Uther cut across him easily.

"Have you or have you not slept with every person who has ever taken that position?" Uther demanded.

Arthur winced. Merlin was right. Arthur really was a bit of a slapper.

"Yes, but-"

"So what reason have I to believe you won't leave this Marvin-"


"-for the next person you hire?" Uther finished sternly.

"He is the next person I'm hiring. I offered him his job back and he accepted. It's not just favouritism. He's the best assistant I've ever had."

Which, ironically enough, Merlin was. Not that Arthur would have ever told him that, of course. He wouldn't want Merlin knowing Arthur actually thought he was competent.

Uther still looked unconvinced.

"That is a high recommendation indeed for the boy who set fire to the canteen microwave by trying to boil an egg in it," he said coldly.

Arthur tried to stop his lips from twitching with amusement but it was a near impossibility when he recalled how Merlin had looked, singed and sooty and with bits of egg frying in his smoking hair. Uther seemed to be remembering the same image because his nose wrinkled, as though he could still smell it.

"In any case," Uther carried on. "it's highly unprofessional for you to carry on a relationship with a member of staff. People will accuse you of nepotism."

"The way they do with us?" Arthur returned bitterly.

Uther gave him a hard look that would have reduced most men to a gibbering mess.

"Exactly," he said bluntly. "And what's to say this boy isn't using you and won't sell your story to the papers?"

"Merlin?" Arthur said with dry disbelief, trying not to laugh at the notion. "He's the most unselfish person on the planet. He couldn't even plot a coup in a nursery class. When he's not crying over baby bunnies in David Attenborough documentaries, he's handing his ratty shirt over to the nearest charlatan within reach. He's ridiculous."

Arthur's voice trailed off with fondly.

Uther shuddered. Witnessing affection of any kind always gave him an acute form of indigestion.
"Arthur, please don't. If I wanted to see vacant expressions, I'd visit Donatella Versace and ask her to attempt to count to ten."

"Fair enough," Arthur agreed, hands clasped behind his back and his game-face back on. "So, am I completely disinherited or partially? Because the apartment in Hyde Park was mostly bought with my own money so I really think-"

"Why would you be disinherited?" Uther abruptly asked, looking confused.

Arthur responded to this with frankly more confusion and gaped at his father, wondering if Uther had gone senile in the short time they had been standing there.

"Well... because I'm in a gay scandal with my male assistant," Arthur said slowly, as though his enunciated speech would clarify things. "Oh, and because I've brought shame on the magazine with my raging sexuality," he added after, just to be clear.

"Arthur, Camelot sells fashion magazines," Uther said bluntly. "Everyone in our industry is gay. The only way you would bring shame is if you started wearing George by Asda." Uther then stared at Arthur shrewdly. "You're not are you?"

"Of course not!" Arthur remarked, feeling so highly offended for his Gucci suit that he placed a hand on his breast pocket to console it. "How could you ask me something like that?!"

"Isn't that what your assistant wears?" Uther replied simply.

"Father, Merlin isn't that bad!" Arthur lied bald-facedly, pointedly not remarking on the polyester Tesco shirts Merlin wore on a daily basis.

Uther just hummed.

"Hmm. In any case, I must say I'm surprised. You always seemed to enjoy the company women. Far too frequently, if truth be told. Why shouldn't I believe that this isn't just some sort of experimental phase?"

Arthur looked abashed at his father's critical eye.

"I do still like women," he admitted through a mumble, red-faced. "I just like Merlin more." 'Because I'm an idiot', he wanted to add but he realised that wouldn't help his case. "It's not a phase or this season's thing to be. He makes me feel like I should be a better person. Hell, he's made me into a far better person than I was before he came along. Not to mention that he's the only one who's ever really called me on my bullshit."


"Sorry," Arthur apologised, not really meaning it, "but he really is the only person who doesn't put up with my crap."

"Heaven knows you need that," Uther agreed before sighing again, rubbing his forehead and saying, "I still expect grandchildren."

Arthur beamed at his father.

"Merlin is trying to persuade Gwen to be a surrogate as I speak. I think he's using chocolate, so it should be in the bag," he confided brightly. "Although I should tell you, father, it'll be a good few years before I can handle another child - Merlin is bad enough as it is."
"God help us all, you must be serious about this boy. You actually planned for children."

"Well, I'm pretty sure I'm going to end up marrying the berk," Arthur shared with a shrug. "No one else would put up with him. Anyway, I thought you'd be pleased with my foresight. You're the one always lecturing me to be more organised."

"I never realised you were paying attention."

"To be honest, neither did I," Arthur replied truthfully, smiling hopefully at his father. Looking at his eager face, Uther came to the conclusion that this wasn’t going to go away.

"And there is nothing I can say to dissuade you from this decision?" Uther asked just in case, sounding mildly hopeful.

"No, sorry," Arthur apologised, shaking his head as he gave his father a grin. "It's pretty non-negotiable."

"Well," said Uther, looking like he was honestly lost for words before getting to his feet and, in a remarkably rare gesture, pulling his son in for a hug. "I suppose if you're happy, I can be indifferent."

"Thanks, dad," Arthur muttered into his shoulder, choking back the sentiment in his voice because Pendragons frankly didn't do that. "Anyway, I better head off. I left him alone in my office and who knows what he might destroy in my absence. He has a tendency to fall over his own feet."

"I'd noticed," Uther said dryly, letting him go but not before asking, "Arthur, before you leave, answer me truthfully - why now? Why this boy?"

Arthur hesitated for a moment, thinking about the best way to answer his father before simply going for honesty.

"He makes me happy," he said truthfully. "And there's also this whole coins and destiny thing but I won't bore you with that. Either way, it's a match made in... well, somewhere. I love him."

Uther looked at him judiciously for a moment before shrugging his shoulders, picking up his paper again and returning to studying his stocks.

"All right, well I suppose that is that. Be a good lad and close the door on your way out, would you?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you for your time," Arthur said, nodding his head respectfully but he was smiling as he walked to the door.

That was as close to a seal of approval from his father than he would ever get.

"I want you to meet Kilgharrah," Merlin said to Arthur the next day as he walked into Arthur's office. Merlin then remembered he could actually kiss him whenever he wanted to now so he leaned over the desk and promptly did so a little giddily.

"Kilgharrah?" Arthur asked in confusion when they pulled apart, looking rosier in the face than
"The thing is, he's not exactly a caretaker," Merlin said tentatively, trying to gauge Arthur's reaction as he nervously perched on the edge of his desk. "I mean, he is a caretaker because he cleans the place and complains about mildew and limescale enough but he's also... he's also kind of a dragon."

"Well, he does seem a grumpy sort," Arthur said, giving Merlin that, "but that's a little mean for you, Merlin. You don't usually insult anyone except me. I'm a little jealous here."

"I'm not insulting him, I'm trying to tell you that he's an actual fire-breathing dragon!" Merlin exclaimed, making wing movements with his arms like they were playing charades. "He's actually a pretty top bloke. I mean, he sort of went rogue once, laid a city to ruin and killed a bunch of people in the process but he was having a bad day. He had been imprisoned in a cave for decades, after all. Anyway, he's much more chilled out these days. He and Gaius do yoga together on the weekend."

"Come on, Merlin, do you really expect me to believe all that?" Arthur laughed. "Hell, the yoga is improbable enough! Dragons may have been around in the past but don't you think we would have noticed one mopping our floor? Is this because all the sex last night frazzled your brain? I admit, I have been told I'm pretty mind-blowing in the sack but I never really took it that seriously. Are you hallucinating now? Quick, how many fingers am I holding up?"

"None, you plum, you haven't even lifted up your hand," Merlin said before yanking Arthur out of his seat and saying determinedly. "Come on. We're going to see Kilgharrah so he can show you himself."

"Ah, young warlock," said Kilgharrah after they had marched downstairs to his rather sparse-looking office. "I had a feeling I would be seeing you again soon."

Looking particularly spindly dressed in his usual navy overalls and with his cigarette hanging out of his mouth, Merlin could see exactly why Arthur thought Merlin had lost his mind. Kilgharrah simply looked like the average ageing old man with a nicotine problem and a few misplaced marbles.

When Kilgharrah turned to look at them with his yellow eyes gleaming with accomplishment, Merlin could feel the power vibrating from him.

"I see the two halves have truly become a whole," Kilgharrah said with a knowing smirk that made Arthur roll his eyes and groan, "Does everyone know we had sex?"

Merlin just ignored this and turned back to Kilgharrah.

"Yeah, we shagged. It was magical. Sparks literally flew, yadda yadda yadda... now can you please do your 'Puff! I'm a Magic Dragon!' thing? Arthur knows about everything now except you. Look I'll even take us back to Avalon so you can shapeshift, see?"

"Merlin!" Arthur rebuked as Merlin clicked his fingers and magically popped the three of them into Avalon so fast that Arthur swayed with the force of it. Holding onto a nearby tree branch for balance, Arthur tried to catch his breath, his complexion almost green. "Jesus! Warn a person before you do that, would you?!"

Merlin shared a look with Kilgharrah that clearly said 'muggles'.
“Fine, I’m sorry,” he said, realising that it would be best to apologise to Arthur if he wanted sex in the near future but Arthur didn’t seem to be listening.

Instead, Arthur had drifted away from the tree he had been leaning against to examine the scenery around him in wonderment, like he had had stumbled into a long forgotten dream. The lake looked bluer than Merlin remembered and the trees shook with a breeze that felt more like a lover’s caress than a wind. Stepping forward, Arthur knelt by the shore and ran his hand over the smooth surface of the lake, the velvety water feeling strangely warm against his skin. Merlin could feel the history and the magic of the place reacting to Arthur’s touch as it suddenly circled around the both of them like a warm breath, as though welcoming home a pair of lost sons.

"This- this is where I died, isn’t it?" Arthur asked quietly, his voice barely audible as the rippling lake reflected in his eyes like memories.

"Technically, it's where you both died," said Kilgharrah, his powerful voice rustling the leaves on the trees.

Arthur furrowed his brow at this, still studying the shimmering water.

"Both died? What do you mean by- Fuck me! You’re a dragon!" he shouted because Kilgharrah had transformed silently while Arthur’s attention had been diverted, his huge, scaly body glittering a myriad of dark colours under the light of the sun.

"I told you," said Merlin, jerking his thumb casually at Kilgharrah as he loomed over them both like an impressive building.

"No but…. but he's- he's a dragon!" Arthur exclaimed, gesticulating towards him wildly in case Merlin hadn't noticed.

“I know, Arthur, I’m the one that pointed that out,” Merlin said patiently but Arthur had already yanked Merlin behind him protectively and yelled,

“Stay back, beast! Keep your distance or I’ll run you through!” He then groped blindly at his hip, hoping to pull out a sword but brandishing his iPhone instead.

“Sorry, Kilgharrah,” Merlin apologised to the dragon cheerily, taking the mobile from Arthur and placing it back in his pocket before he hurt himself. “You can take the knight out of Camelot but you can’t take Camelot out of the knight.” Merlin then looked at Kilgharrah hopefully. "So... we finally did it right, right? We went down the right path of our destiny?"

"It would appear so, young warlock," Kilgharrah admitted, quizzically amused by Merlin's eventual fist punch in the air.

Arthur, on the other hand, was still looking at Kilgharrah with his mouth open in astonishment.

Noticing Arthur's attention, Kilgharrah bowed his large head at him properly, no mockery in his solemn tones.

"I must say, your majesty, it really is an honour to finally make your acquaintance properly."

"You're… you're a dragon," Arthur said in response, having calmed down from his previous panic and now just looking like his mind was completely blown. "You're a caretaker and you're a dragon. My caretaker is a dragon."

Merlin snorted, rolling his eyes as he elapped a hand to Arthur's shoulder.
"Don't mind him, Kilgharrah, he's usually sharper than this. Not a lot, mind you, but he ordinarily does more than just state the obvious. Luckily, he has his good looks to fall back on."

"Indeed," Kilgharrah said, amused as he looked at Arthur as though he were a peculiarity.

"You used to clean our toilets," Arthur said, sounding confused, as though wondering how a dragon managed to hold a toilet brush with those claws.

Merlin shook his head as he looked at Arthur's utter bewilderment and had a sudden urge to kiss his gaping mouth. Then again, Merlin always had an urge to kiss Arthur whether his mouth was gaping or not.

Will was right; it really was embarrassing how smitten Merlin was with him.

"So anyway, now that we've potentially saved the world from certain doom and all, what do we do now?" Merlin asked Kilgharrah, ignoring Arthur as the blond crouched down by Kilgharrah’s swishing tail and just stared at it with fascination.

"Now?" Kilgharrah said, letting out a husky laugh that shook his large shoulders. "Now, young warlock, you live. I hear the Caribbean is pleasant at this time of year."

"That's not a bad shout actually," Arthur remarked, finally finding his voice again as he straightened up to his full height. "I have a beach house in Parrot Cay."

"Of course you do," Merlin said drolly.

"Shut up you idiot, most girls wet themselves when they hear I'm such a property tycoon."

"You don't actually call yourself, do you? Because that's pretty wanky."

"As much as I enjoy watching oddity of human courtship rituals," said Kilgharrah like he didn't understand them at all, "I must go."

"Go?" Merlin asked, his forehead lined as he removed his elbow from where it had nudged Arthur's ribs. "Wait, where are you going?"

"You don't need me anymore, Merlin," said Kilgharrah, his smile somehow managing to look soft even with those sharp teeth glinting back at them. "I was always here to act as a guide for you on this journey but little did I realise that you were the one who would teach me. I considered your compassion for humanity a weakness but in the end, it was this very trait that helped you rally so many creatures of magic together under one banner. You have reached your destination. My presence here is no longer necessary." Kilgharrah then lowered his entire body in the most reverent of bows. "It has been my pleasure to know you and serve you, Lord Emrys."

"Wait, so... I'll never see you again?" Merlin said, his voice overcome with emotion up despite himself.

Kilgharrah just continued to smile widely, looking as infuriatingly knowing as always.

"Oh, I'm sure our paths will cross again, Merlin, and much sooner than you think," Kilgharrah said like a promise before turning to Arthur and bowing to him in farewell as well. "Goodbye, King Arthur. When Albion approaches, answer her call." And with those parting words, Kilgharrah then spread his huge wings and lifted off the ground, graceful and powerful as he kicked up enough dust and wind for it to constitute as a small tornado.
Shielding his eyes with his hand, Merlin watched Kilgharrah rise majestically into the air, his wing span huge as he rose up passed the tops of the trees and soon got smaller and smaller until he disappeared completely into the sky. A bittersweet smile clung to Merlin’s face. He missed him already.

"Wow," said Arthur as he watched the sky as well. "That dragon is completely mental."

Merlin laughed.

"Yeah, he really is," he said warmly before turning back to Arthur. "What can I say? I can put up with a lot. I have a bit of a tyrant for a boss, you know."

“I heard that,” Arthur returned with a leer before jerking Merlin forward by the hand so their chests bumped. “I also hear he’s fit as f*ck.”

“Not going to deny that,” Merlin returned through a daft grin, everything going a little rose-tinted as Arthur dropped a kiss on the tip of his nose.

"The giant lizard made a good point though. I think we need a holiday." Merlin gave Arthur a dour look. "Fine, you need a holiday," Arthur amended. “I'm still inviting myself, however - you'll only get in trouble without me there to look after you. Not to mention you'll need me if you want me to fly us in my private jet."

"You are the reason I even get into trouble in the first place!" Merlin briefly laughed until Arthur's words fully registered. When they did, he literally took a staggered step backwards. "Wait a minute, did you just say you have a private jet that you can fly?"

"Told you I was a catch," Arthur said conceitedly, slithering down the hands he had placed on Merlin’s hips so they slid snugly into Merlin's back pockets. He then pushed their groins together, his smile wicked. "So, Caribbean?"

"What, as in now?" Merlin asked, a little out of breath.

"Yes, now, you dummy. What do you say?"

"Um, okay," said Merlin, his mind trying to catch up with how swiftly everything was happening. After months of their relationship sitting on a slow burn, the speed was a welcome change. "I mean, I'll need to pick up my passport and some stuff. And I'll have to tell my mum or she'll worry."

"Then do it," Arthur said, his smile brilliant enough to give the sun a run for its money. “I’ll inform my father so he can get Morgana to keep an eye over things in my absence. Now shift your arse. You're costing me tanning time here."

"Okay, okay, you vain idiot, I'll just go and pack a bag. Meet you back at the office?"

"Fine. I'll see you there. Oh and Merlin? Don't bother packing clothes. You really won't need them," Arthur said cockily, spinning around to walk away with a sassy exit when he realised he had absolutely no idea where they were. Turning back, he looked a little embarrassed. "Um, you can get us back home, right?"

Grinning, Merlin reached for his hand.

“Hold on a minute,” Arthur suddenly said with outrage as they both started to disappear, as though hit with a bout of clarity. “Was that the same dragon that destroyed Camelot?!"
When Uther Pendragon walked into Arthur’s round table meeting on Monday, the sight was so unexpected that it caused Leon to choke on a glass of water and Gwaine to almost fall backwards on the chair he had been teetering back on. Percy, proving that he was always good in a crisis, handed Leon a hankie with one large hand and easily grabbed the back of Gwaine’s chair with the other.

"Uther, this is a pleasant surprise," Gaius said, standing quickly and looking far more wary than pleased as he shared a concerned look with Gwen and the others. "We were just waiting for Arthur and Merlin to arrive before starting the meeting."

"This meeting has been cancelled until further notice," Uther said shortly before seating himself down on the Wassily chair before him like it was a throne. "It appears that Arthur, true to form, has run off with another assistant."

"Wait, assistant?" Gwaine asked, sounding hopeful as he sat up in his chair and beamed about him. "Merlin, right? He's run off with Merlin, hasn't he?"

"Indeed," Uther said loftily, briefly eyeing Gwaine's following whoop and slap on the knee with disapproval before turning to Gaius. "And don't pretend to look so surprised, Gaius, I assume you've known about them for quite some time."

Gaius clasped his fingers together in a gracious manner.

"I confess I had an inkling," he admitted before composedly collecting the winnings a groaning Elyan slid toward him.

"That's not fair, you had inside information," Elyan grumbled, slipping his now much lighter wallet back into his pocket.

"Being a sore loser is unbecoming, Elyan," Gaius returned briskly before cheerfully slipping the notes into his sleeve. He then turned back to Uther, his eyes genuinely concerned. "If you don't mind me saying, sir, you seem rather calm, considering the circumstances."

"Apparently, Arthur fancies himself in love," Uther said, sounding rather baffled by the entire affair, like he still didn't quite understand it himself. "I've only ever heard Arthur use that word twice before; once when waxing lyrical about his hair and then when he got that ridiculous car of his. This relationship appears to be a permanent fixture. He was willing to give up everything for the boy, including his inheritance. I never knew he could commit to anything except his fortnightly manicure. It's... oddly refreshing."

"Merlin is good for him. They're good for each other," Lance piped up before bowing his head at the stern look Uther threw at him. "Sir," he hastily added.

"Well," Uther said stiffly, sniffing as he surveyed the table imperially. "That remains to be seen. I trust, being that you are Arthur's most trusted advisors, that this conversation won't leave this room?"

Gwaine, who had obviously been texting Will to share the good news, hid his phone rather badly behind his back.
"You have our word," Leon assured Uther respectfully, flickering a sharp look at Gwaine that made the other man reluctantly pocket his phone.

"Good," Uther said firmly, rising to his feet like the sovereign he clearly was. "Now, excuse me. I have to relay this news to Morgana."

"Uther," Gaius suddenly spoke up, proving that he was still the only person in the world that could address Uther without wetting themselves with fear, "before you leave, can you tell us where they've run off to?"

"Honestly, I haven't the foggiest," Uther replied, looking like he didn't have the slightest compulsion of finding out either. "I can safely assume, however, that wherever it is, they will be virtually impossible to get a hold of. Now, I must go."

And with that, Uther walked imposingly out the door, leaving the others to silently stare after him, lost in their own thoughts.

“So,” said Gwaine, finally breaking the quiet around the table. “Is anyone else still terrified that he is going to have them flogged in the middle of the town square or is that just me?’

“It’s not just you,” everyone but Gaius chimed in.

“Thought so,” Gwaine said smoothly before sitting forward and grinning around the table. “So, pub?"

Fifteen minutes later, they were crammed into a booth at the Rising Sun and necking their fifth celebratory ‘To Arthur and Merlin!’ toast. Will, who Gwaine had called on the sly, was at the bar buying another round and was held up once again by arguing with the grumpy barman about something or other.

"You know, I really should have guessed about Arthur being gay earlier really," Leon slurred out, slightly drunk as he put an arm around Percy for balance. "Even back when he was king, he used to ask Gaius here for beauty lotions for his skin."

Gaius, who was sipping on a port, couldn’t deny this as he nodded in agreement, his wrinkled mouth straightening out into a smirk.

“Yes,” he said, amused by the memory. “I do remember recalling that it was curious how many more beauty treatments Arthur requested than both Guinevere and Morgana combined.”

“Vain bastard,” Leon said with a sniff, his voice so fond that he looked like he was going to burst into tears with pride at any moment. “Only idiot I know that exfoliates."

"Hey, there’s nothing wrong with exfoliating," said Elyan who, now that everyone noticed it, had marvellous skin. "And to be perfectly frank, I don't know how interested Arthur is in other men."

"That's right," Gwen agreed with her brother, slipping her arm into his affectionately as she bumped his shoulder. "He's Merlin-sexual."

"We're all Merlin-sexual," Gwaine piped up as he took a large gulp of Percy’s Guinness and got a slap on the hand from the big man for his presumption.

"Speak for yourself, ladies,” Will said, overhearing the conversation as he finally approached with a tray full of drinks, popped it on the table and grabbed himself a bottle of Corona, “I love that guy more than all of you combined but unless it's got tits, leave me out of it.”
"I see you're as charming as ever William," Morgana's drawl responded as the woman herself sashayed into the pub, looking as out of place in her backless evening dress as David Cameron at an Eminem concert. Will, who had eased himself beside Gaius, immediately sat up with attention as everyone else around the table groaned.

"What are you doing here, Morgana?" Gwaine demanded, looking sour as he loudly thunked Percy’s drink back on the table, who quickly claimed it back. "Shouldn't you be sacrificing kittens or drinking the blood of unicorns under a full moon?"

"Only on Tuesdays," Morgana quipped back smartly, before tilting her head, her cat-like eyes amused. "I'm surprised at you, Gwaine. Arthur and Merlin have forgiven me. I never thought you'd be one to hold a grudge. You don't usually commit to anything."

"You murdered me!" Gwaine said vociferously, pointing at her in accusation.

Morgana simply waved this off, as if it was a trivial detail.

"Oh, that was simply ages ago. I tortured Elyan here and rose Lancelot's dead corpse up from the grave and you don't see them complaining. You should learn to let things go. You'll get wrinkles." Morgana then turned to nod civilly at Gwen, who nodded back, a blossoming friendship already forming. "Anyway, are you ready to go? I have your outfit in the limo."

"You're going out with her?" Lance cut in, looking at his girlfriend in shock.

"Actually," said Will to everyone's surprise before downing his drink, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and getting to his feet, "she was talking to me."

Leon stared, Percy choked on his drink, Lance blinked repeatedly, Elyan raised his eyebrows and Gwaine was so stunned by the proceedings that he looked like he would never speak again.

Only Gwen and Gaius smiled knowingly.

"Well," said Lance in disbelief, looking rather poleaxed. "I can safely say I didn't see that one coming."

"Traitor," Gwaine grumbled in Will's direction.

"Oh hush, Gwaine," Elyan reprimanded. "I think Arthur and Merlin proved to us all that love can come from the most unexpected of places."

"Love?" Morgana said, wrinkling her nose with distaste as if Elyan had used a rude word in her presence. "I'm just using him for sex."

"Which I have no objections to," Will cut in, grinning like a smug idiot as he slipped his jacket on and offered Morgana his rumpled arm, "Shall we, milady?"

Morgana looked at it critically.

"Please tell me you washed first."

"I used soap and everything," Will responded before holding out his arms. "I'm happy to let you inspect if you don't believe me, though. Start with the crotch and work your way up. And don't worry about being gentle, you know I like it rough."

To everyone's shock, Morgana let out a laugh that sounded disturbingly like a flirty giggle.
"You are such a perverted little shit," she said, seeming horribly pleased about it as she took Will's arm. "Keep on like this and I'll let you do that illegal thing you wanted to do to me last night."

"Oh my god, my ears," Gwaine wailed as Percy patted his arm consolingly.

"Button it, L'oreal. This is payback for all those Merlin fantasies you kept oversharing with me. Oh, and for the record? Making me imagine my best friend in lingerie should be an arrestable offence," Will said bluntly before turning to Morgana to waggle his eyebrows at her. "Ready, you hot piece of arse?"

Morgana opened her mouth to respond when her phone started ringing from a clutch bag so tiny that it was miraculous a phone had managed to get in there in the first place. Pulling out the phone and looking extremely puzzled when she looked at the caller ID, Morgana shrugged and answered it in her usual haughty manner.

"Father, dearest," she said dryly, "to what do I owe this impromptu call? Are you planning another father/daughter day out? Because the suggestion with the egg and spoon race left me severely underwhelmed. What? No, I'm not watching the news, why?" Morgana's pale face went the colour of snow as she choked out in her posh voice, "Fuck me. Both of them? Does Arthur know yet? Oh, stop complaining, it's not like you've never heard me say the word 'fuck' before. No, of course I don't know where he is. Do you honestly think he'd tell me? So what, he's incommunicado? That's just typical of, Arthur. The world goes mad and he's on holiday, shagging his assistant. Oh don't be such a prude, Uther, you know they do that, don't you?"

"Oi mate," Percy called out to the scowling bartender as Morgana continued to argue with her father. "Put the telly on BBC news, will you?"

"Whatever it is, it can't be that big a deal, can it?" Gwen asked Lance, looking concerned as they watched the television fizzle onto the grave face of Huw Edwards.

And then they all read the scrolling headline on the bottom of the screen.

"Fuck," they all said in unison.

This, thought Merlin as he lay back on the warm sand and let the ocean nibble at his feet, was the life. With the hot sun beating down on him and a cool breeze washing over his sweaty skin, Merlin could do nothing but close his eyes and exhale deeply, his fists clenching in the sand beside him and his muscles relaxing as though they were made of liquid. This wasn’t just the stuff dreams were made of, this was a fantasy in itself. And then an annoyed voice sounded from between his legs and ruined the beautiful illusion.

“Merlin, I swear to God, if you are going to sleep on me while I suck you off, I am going to bite it off.”

“Shush,” said Merlin to the tetchy Arthur as he idly groped the back of Arthur’s blond head to push himself back into his mouth. “I’m almost there, there’s a good boy.”

“Mmmph,” Arthur said around his mouthful but he seemed to happily get back to it, especially if the way he was dry humping Merlin’s foot like there was no tomorrow was any indication.
It didn’t take either of them very long. It never really did.

“Arthur!” Merlin yelled into the air like a prayer, throwing back his head with his climax as the sea blew an enormous wave the size of a mountain over them. The arc of the wave then abruptly suspended itself in mid-air, as though Arthur and Merlin had quite literally stopped time and space in its tracks. The massive curve of water above them glowed a hundred different colours, like millions of tiny lights were lighting it up from the inside. Schools of fish moved inside the frozen wave like synchronised swimmers as the water slowly began to form itself into a new shape, a shape which included grand turrets and battlements and towers as high as the tallest trees.

Camelot, Merlin realised breathlessly as the earth stood still. *Avalon.*

He didn’t know how long he had been hazily watching it but soon both gravity and time had returned and the vision was lost as the wave dropped in a ferocious crash that engulfed them both like an avalanche of liquid.

“Fuck,” Arthur whimpered, head reeling and dripping wet as the now gentle wave abated and returned back to the ocean. Absolutely exhausted, Arthur placed his chin on Merlin’s hip and breathed raggedly, blinking the stars out of his vision. “How is it always so… always so… fuck.”

“Mmm,” agreed Merlin, useless to the world as he pulled Arthur up weakly for a kiss, which Arthur tiredly raised himself up to meet. Drinking in his lips with the thirst of a person who might never get a chance at this again, Arthur’s tongue was just getting warmed up when he stilled, his body freezing.

“Er, Merlin,” he said, trying to sound calm as hysteria tinged his voice, “I think the cast of *A Little Mermaid* are trying to watch us shag.”

“Ah,” said Merlin, trying not to snigger as a deluge of sea creatures popped their heads out of the water and slowly made their way over to the shore to watch them. One crab in particular had wiggled himself a space in the sand to sit down and spectate while a seal on the other side of the beach waddled onto the land and clapped its flippers, as though asking for an encore. Merlin turned to Arthur sheepishly. “So, funny story. Animals? They sort of love me. I never did tell you about my run-in with a bear, did I?”

“Yeah, let’s skip that tale for now,” Arthur said, reacting to the enamoured creatures of the deep pretty calmly considering how bizarre the situation was. He then got to his feet and extended his hand to pull Merlin up. “Come on, let’s get back to the house before *Finding Nemo* and friends here revolt and try and steal you from me. Hopefully my father has finally stopped ringing my mobile by now.”

"Yeah, about that... Arthur, don't you think you should answer his calls?” Merlin asked, sidestepping a penguin of all things as he walked up the steps of Arthur’s beach house. “He's been ringing non-stop for the past few hours, after all. Something might be wrong.” Merlin then paused outside the sliding glass door of the house to hear the unmistakeable sound of a phone still ringing. He raised an eyebrow at Arthur.

"Don't you look at me like that," Arthur said, pulling open the sliding door and grabbing a towel to wipe himself down. "I'm immune to your face."

"You're really not but it's cute that you think so," Merlin returned with affection before standing close enough to nudge his nose against Arthur's cheek. "Go on, answer it. I need a shower anyway. Sex on the beach might be fun but sand really does get in places it never should."
“It really does,” Arthur agreed before making a tortured face, picking up his ringing phone and easing himself down on the sofa. “Father, what a pleasant surprise, how wonderful to hear from you.”

Grinning at how disingenuous Arthur's tone was, Merlin moved passed him to make his way to the shower when Arthur grabbed him and pulled him onto his bare lap.

"Arthur!" he hissed, snickering as Arthur nibbled between his shoulder blades between words.

"Yes, sorry about that, father,” Arthur said, trying to sound professional as he ran his mouth over Merlin’s skin. “I left my mobile in the house and we were at the beach all day so I must have missed those- What? The news? No, we've not really had time to watch television what with all the -"

"Fucking," Merlin mouthed.

"- fun we're having here," Arthur said, smothering a laugh as he bit down on Merlin's shoulder. "Why, what's happened?" Stroking his hands down Merlin's flank, Arthur's nibbling had made its way to Merlin's neck when he suddenly stopped cold at his father's words. "W-what?" he choked out, pulling his mouth away from Merlin throat. "How did that- I don't understand-"

"Arthur?" Merlin questioned, concerned, but Arthur had already grabbed around Merlin for the remote control and switched on the television.

The headline made him drop both the phone and the remote with a crash.

"Oh holy god," Arthur said, white-faced.

"What?" Merlin asked in confusion, watching the breaking news headline showing a stormy seafront. Then he read the scrolling text under the frantic news reporter.

'Palace confirms that boat tragedy has claimed the lives of King Odin and the prince…'

A storm will pass and the future of England will change forever.

Merlin's jaw dropped as Alator’s words came swimming back to him. His predictions had actually been correct. It was like one of those crazy ‘The End is Nigh’ board-wearers actually managing to foretell the apocalypse.

"Arthur," Merlin said in a stupefied voice, trying to wrap his head around this as he moved to sit beside Arthur. Head swimming, his magic warred within him and fluttered with excitement, like it could sense a new beginning on the horizon. “Does-does this mean what I think it means?”

"My father is next in line to be king,” Arthur croaked, sounding like he had well and truly entered into one of the later stages of madness. “I'm second in line to the throne."

"Oh," said Merlin, keeping silent because he wasn’t sure what else to do other than burst into a hysterical bout of laughter that would eventually turn into tears. "So, once again you're..."

"A prince,” Arthur finished, looking like he was about to pass out.

"A prince," Merlin said, testing it out on his tongue as he tried to stop himself from freaking out completely. "Prince Arthur. Wow. It’s been a while since I got to say that. It feels right."

The healthy tan Arthur had been nurturing for the past few days seemed to ashen at Merlin's
"This can't be happening," Arthur said, getting to his feet, completely flabbergasted. "I mean, I wasn't even in contention to- our side of the family weren't even supposed to get a look in but somehow- how could they all be in the same place at the same time? The king and his heirs are supposed to be in different locations at all times in case something like this happens. It shouldn’t have even been possible."

"There was a wedding," Merlin said, reading the scrolling text under the news reporter. "And King Odin only really had his son. As his second cousin, it seems as though your father has the biggest claim to the throne."

“This can’t be happening,” Arthur said again, shaking his head with disbelief. “It’s lunacy, it’s impossible…”

*It’s fate,* Kilgharrah’s voice suddenly purred inside Merlin’s head

Merlin swallowed hard, his vision spinning like a kaleidoscope. And here he thought they had got through the hard part of their destiny.

Squeezing shut his eyes, Merlin pressed a couple of fingers against his temple and, despite the voice screaming at him to keep his mouth shut, addressed the pink elephant in the room.

"Arthur, look, I'll understand if we... if we call it a day."

"Huh?" said Arthur, still caught up in his thoughts as he turned to Merlin in bewilderment. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about us," Merlin clarified, ducking his head and feeling himself die a little inside with every word he was saying. "You're going to be royalty. The public will scrutinise everything you do. You're going to have to marry someone who can produce little Arthurs for you. How do you think people will react to a gay prince? A gay *king*?"

They looked at each other for a long moment, the only sound in the room coming from the television, which was now showing a montage of King Odin’s rule, like a macabre version of *This is Your Life.* Arthur then wet his lips and very clearly said,

"Shut up, Merlin."

"But Arthur-" Merlin tried to protest.

"I said shut up, you ass," Arthur scolded, not having any of it as he pulled Merlin back into his lap and grabbed his left hand, tracing the strip of skin on his finger where an engagement ring would sit like a promise. "Stop trying to be noble and unselfish and realise that you’re not getting rid of me that easily. They want kids? You have magic. You can probably zap them into existence if you want to. Not to mention," Arthur cut in when Merlin opened his mouth to refute that, "that we have both Gwen and Morgana on retainer if we need them. I'm not giving you up, so get used it. It's you and me, Merlin. It always has been. Whatever happens, we're in it together. You swore to me once that you would always stand by my side, no matter what life threw at us. Was all that just a lie?"

Merlin sniffed, eyes watering as he shook his head. Arthur was right, he really was such a girl sometimes.

"No, that wasn’t a lie. I'm here for as long as you want me, turnip head," Merlin said softly, burying his face in Arthur's blond hair. "You know that."
"Good," Arthur responded like a spoiled child who had got his way before lifting Merlin’s face up by the chin to graze a feather of a kiss against his mouth. The relief on Arthur’s face was obvious. "Because honestly, I don’t know if I can do this without you. Not only are you the only one who knows how my stuff is organised but you were always sort of nifty by my side. Not to mention that I know sod-all about being a prince nowadays. Maybe I’ll have them bring back tourneys and jousting. Either way, I'll need a good warlock ruling by my side, helping me uphold peace throughout the kingdom with his fancy schmancy powers.”

Kilgharrah didn’t even need to breathe ‘Avalon’ into Merlin’s ear for Merlin to see its foundations already beginning to form between them.

Swallowing hard, Merlin gave Arthur a shaky but sincere smile

"As long as you don't make me muck out your stables again or pick cabbage out of your coleslaw, I'm happy to be with you until the day I die," he said earnestly, tiny sparks fizzling between their joined fingers as he leaned in for a kiss.

Happily obliging, Arthur deftly caught his lips, somehow making a tongue stroke over the roof of Merlin's mouth the single most erotic thing on the planet.

"Fine, but I'm not making any promises about cancelling your chores," Arthur murmured against Merlin’s mouth, softly pulling Merlin's bottom lip with his teeth. "You're not a half-bad assistant."


"Whatever." Arthur smirked. He then pushed Merlin so forcefully back onto the couch that he lay flat on his back, the springs of the sofa creaking under the force of his weight. "Now shut up, try and obey your king and put that big mouth of yours to better use."

Grinning at this with a stupid amount of joy, Merlin pulled Arthur’s hips towards his face obediently, said "As you wish, Sire," and, for once in his life, did exactly as he was told.

Finis

End Notes

More art for this fic can be found here at my tumblr!

Works inspired by this ART: A Modern Manservant by mithborien

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